



A WINTER

at the

White Queen

Romance at the Gilded Age Resorts



DENISE WEIMER

A WINTER AT THE WHITE QUEEN

ROMANCE AT THE GILDED AGE RESORTS

BOOK ONE



DENISE WEIMER



CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Sneak Peek: A Summer at Sagamore](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Enter the Age of Wonder ...](#)

[Want more?](#)

PRAISE FOR A WINTER AT THE WHITE QUEEN

Mystery, magic, and a marvelous story make *A Winter at the White Queen* linger in your memory like the sweet scent of a tropical garden. Denise Weimer's skillful pen and vivid imagination bring the Gilded Age to life in the first Romance at the Gilded Age Resorts novella. Well done!

— SUSAN G MATHIS, AUTHOR OF THE THOUSAND ISLANDS
GILDED AGE SERIES

Dedicated to my author friend Jennifer Uhlarik, whose idea of a collection of romances set in Gilded Age resorts spurred this story into existence. She also let me sleep in her office on a very fun research trip to the Gulf Coast of Florida!

CHAPTER 1



JANUARY 1910
CENTRAL FLORIDA

Ellie Hastings didn't need to be as sly as the heroine in her favorite detective novel. Dora Myrl combined skill with beauty to achieve her objectives, but Ellie could rely on the invisible cloak of plainness.

She'd been sitting at a table in the train's dining car next to Lewis Thornton's for a full ten minutes, and he hadn't once looked up—not even when the waiter brought her tea. But perhaps that wasn't personal. Alternating his attention between his steak and a small book open at his right hand, the bachelor her aunt deemed a prime candidate for her daughter Ada also failed to acknowledge the curious glances of businessmen or tittering mamas with female offspring in tow.

Ellie stirred sugar into her teacup and drew a blank square of paper closer. She plucked her pencil out of the spine of the leather notebook where she kept observations of potential suitors for her cousin—loose-leaf, so she could organize them in order of preference. *Lewis Thornton*, she wrote.

Nibbling her lower lip, she studied the mechanical engineer from under her pale lashes. Tall and blonde, square-jawed, firm-lipped, Thornton bore himself like a man of the new century. Suave. Aristocratic. Confident. Aunt Florence had heard he'd made a fortune off some invention for the railroad. Florence had no idea what kind. She'd been snagged the moment a friend uttered the word *fortune*. And he didn't reside so far from Pittsburgh as to prevent the continuation of a courtship Lewis and Ada might begin during

Hotel Belleview's upcoming winter season.

Ellie scratched on her paper. *Pros: Handsome. Wealthy? Philadelphia.*

Surely, Ada couldn't dismiss *this* one on looks. Or style. His stiff collar and four-in-hand tie countenanced society's dictates enough to please Walter Hastings, while the gray-striped pants he'd paired with his black frock coat—popularly termed “mixed chevots”—should satisfy Ada's panache.

Traditional. Stylish.

Cons? None visible upon brief observation. She might be forced to talk to him. She could wait until he got up and make her departure at the same time, but the idea of employing her usual dropped-item tactic made a knot form in her stomach. She wasn't a brainless female. Why did she submit herself to such indignities? She firmed her lips. She knew well why. She clanked her spoon around in her tea, laid it on her saucer, and took a sip of the lukewarm brew.

The live oaks and palmettos crowding the edge of the railroad bed indicated they were still heading west, as they had since changing tracks at Trilby. But once they reached Tarpon Springs, the line would hug the coast of the Pinellas Peninsula. They'd arrive in Belleair, a three-hundred-acre tract a mile and a half from the town of Clearwater, later today. Aunt Florence expected a report on Thornton before they disembarked.

Ellie's hand shook as she returned her cup to its saucer. What did she care what another snobby *parti* thought of her? The highbrow man's response should quickly provide the sought-out information. After she helped match her picky cousin—at nineteen, the last of Walter and Florence's brood—she'd be free. Free to what? Find work as a governess or a teacher? She could never survive on the remnants of what Father had left her.

Perspiration dampened her skin beneath her white shirtwaist and corset. Whomever had installed the steam heat and electric lights in this car hadn't traveled to Florida. Thankfully, the man behind her appeared to be opening a window as he wrestled with the Venetian blinds in an attempt to access the window lock.

Thornton closed his book and laid his utensils across his plate. Ellie sat up straight, stacking her notes. Indeed, he withdrew his pocket watch from his jacket. But something on the inside of the lid rather than the timepiece's face captured his attention. His resulting smile produced dimples that loosened Ellie's grasp on her papers.

No, she most certainly couldn't speak to him.

The man behind her finally succeeded in cracking his window. A *woosh* of surprisingly cool air scooped Ellie's notes aloft. One flew straight toward Lewis Thornton. Ellie shot to her feet with a cry of dismay. It would be just her luck that the paper smacking Lewis Thornton in the face was her description of him.



With a billow of her navy skirt and floundering arms, the woman from the next table flew at Lewis a millisecond behind her papers. Simultaneously, he and she both grabbed the one that had struck his cheek before settling like a translucent moth on his collar. Lewis retained the firmer hold.

“Pardon me!” The exclamation came not from his female visitor but from the man who'd opened the window. Casting them an apologetic glance, he shut it and accepted the assistance of a dark-skinned porter in locking it.

“I'm so sorry.” Eyes downcast, the woman withdrew as pink stained her cheeks. Even as she tucked her hand behind her back, it appeared to attempt to defy her, twitching for the paper again.

Curiosity overcame him. Lewis flipped the paper and read aloud. “Alton Adler III. Pro: helps old ladies with their seats. Cons: chews hangnails, attached to mother's apron strings.” The apt description of the moon-faced son of a New York railroad tycoon stole a bark of a laugh.

But the unexpected intruder into his personal space appeared to relax, her shoulders lowering with the breath she released. Something about her rang familiar. The next moment, she lunged for another page on his table, then set to rather frantically collecting several others from the floor, the wobbling of her loose bun putting Lewis in mind of an unset vanilla pudding.

“Allow me to assist.” Lewis bent, but the young woman grabbed the last paper before he could. Her desperation elicited a chuckle. “My. What do you have there? Secrets of state?”

“Indeed not.” Her breathless voice, while soft, possessed a surprising husky edge.

As they both straightened, he got his first full view of her face. Her slight figure and flustered demeanor had caused him to deem her a harmless mouse, but those eyes...light aquamarine that stopped his heart. So unusual. Eyes

like the mirror to a soul. He'd trained himself to conceal his reactions, but his eyelids disobeyed with a startled blink.

"No?" He cocked his head, drawing up one side of his mouth. "Then you must be an author."

Those eyes of hers widened. "What makes you think so?"

Lewis gestured toward the papers she clutched at her waist. "You must be taking notes on us. Poor Alton doesn't sound as though he has enough backbone to be the villain. Dare I guess that role might have fallen to me?"

"Indeed, no, sir." Her pale skin flushed even more. "Then you are not an author?"

"I am not, although my father—"

"Your father...of course." He snapped his fingers. "Please forgive me, but now I recall why I recognize you."

"You—you do?" A pulse throbbed beneath the delicate skin of her neck.

"Yes. I held the door for you when you were boarding the train." She'd kept her head ducked in the same manner then, murmuring her thanks without looking at him—unlike most females intent on matchmaking during the winter social season.

"Oh. Oh, yes. Thank you."

As though he required some sort of extra acknowledgement. He much preferred her disregard, but he'd already spoken to her too long without making an introduction. "My name is Lewis Thornton...of Philadelphia. And you are Miss Hastings, of the Hastings Packaging family. Am I correct?"

As she tucked her papers into the belt of her skirt, her gaze raked him with a flicker of—what was it? Alarm? "You've heard of my family?"

"Naturally." Lewis extended his hand.

She slipped hers into his but frowned as he offered a brief bow, her attention fixed on his hand clasping hers. She jerked away as quickly as she could. What elicited her standoffishness? Shyness? No, although there was that too. Her abrupt withdrawal—the stiff back and slight pinch of pale pink lips—hinted at disapproval.

Lewis brushed aside a stirring of intrigue. An unlikely hap had forced an interaction he'd be wise to politely conclude. "Everyone in Pittsburgh is familiar with your distribution center there. People seem to love the canned pork. What's next, if I may ask?"

Her brows quirked. "Are you making sport of me, sir?"

The unexpected question rocked him back on his heels. "Making sport?"

Why would I?”

When she blinked rapidly and looked away, understanding dawned. Many big-city socialites snubbed those who'd built recent fortunes in practical industries. No doubt Miss Hastings had been served one too many a packaged meat quip.

Lewis stepped closer and gentled his voice. “I admired the way Hastings Packaging treated its workers during the Spanish-American War... guaranteeing their jobs. The plant enjoys an excellent reputation in our city.”

Miss Hastings chewed her lower lip a moment, her gaze rising to meet his. “Ham.”

“Pardon me?” A whiff of lilacs coming from her person momentarily distracted him.

“Ham is the next thing they're working on.” From her pursed lips and rapidly averted gaze, one would think she'd just confessed she'd forgotten to do one of her unmentionables.

“Ah.” Lewis infused relaxed enthusiasm into his voice. “Then the best is yet to come. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, however unconventionally, Miss Hastings.”

“And yours, Mr. Thornton.”

Collecting his hat from the chair nearby, he nodded and turned. A light touch on his sleeve drew him back.

Miss Hastings glanced toward the forward entrance of the train car. “If you would linger a moment, you can meet my family. They're arriving now and would be delighted to make your acquaintance.” Her words danced out, crowded together as though forced past a thick tongue. And she fairly cringed at her own request.

It was now Lewis who declined eye contact. Why was he disappointed? She'd probably been finagling a way to meet him from the moment she sat down at her table. Perchance, she'd even paid that man to open the window. He didn't have to look to know what was coming—a middle-aged man, chest puffed with his own importance, and a wife whose eyes glinted as though she beheld the Crown Jewels rather than yet another eligible bachelor.

“I'm afraid I must delay that pleasure, Miss Hastings. I'm already tardy for an appointment in the car behind us. Have a lovely holiday at the Hotel Bellevue.”

He hurried away before her relatives could swoop down on them—and before he could examine the shame that shuttered her remarkable eyes.

CHAPTER 2



“Ellie! Why did you let him get away?” Aunt Florence’s prodigious bosom—pushed forward by her old-fashioned, S-shaped corset—bumped Ellie’s arm as her husband and daughter crowded in beside her. Her gaze followed Lewis Thornton’s retreating figure with longing.

Ellie heaved a sigh. “I suppose I could have thrown myself into a faint at his feet.”

“Well, that would have delayed him long enough for introductions.”

“My apologies. I found myself out of tricks.” And that would be due as much to Lewis Thornton’s dimples as to her own reluctance. At her table, she slid her notes into her leather book.

“We don’t expect tricks and theatrics.” Uncle Walter spoke in a low voice as he seated his wife, then laid his hat on the table. “Your aunt got a bit overexcited.”

“It’s more than anyone else has accomplished.” Ada reassured Ellie with a light touch on her sleeve. Her berry-colored traveling dress trimmed in geometric black braid accentuated her statuesque figure, mahogany hair, and lively dark eyes. If Lewis was truly smart, he’d have lingered to catch a glimpse of Ada’s Gibson Girl perfection.

Looking up at Ellie, Florence tipped back the wide, silk-covered hat that matched her lavender suit. “Well? What did you learn?”

Ellie frowned. “Not much, I’m afraid.” The man was uncannily adept at asking questions.

“Why did he rush off, anyway?” Her aunt sniffed and brushed a wing of henna-dyed hair from her forehead. “It was positively rude. Did he think we were beneath him?”

Ellie tucked her notebook under her arm. “I didn’t get that impression. In fact, he’d heard of our family and spoke highly of our plant. He said he had an appointment in the car behind.”

Aunt Florence’s dark brow arched. “Behind? But all that’s back there is that mysterious black car with the gilded trim...and the baggage cars.”

“Ooh, a mystery.” Ada smirked. “Never fear, Mother. Our own intrepid lady detective shall unravel it.”

“Of course, she will, just as she did for Alice and Frederick. That is, if *you* will let her do her job.” Aunt Florence speared Ada with a pointed stare.

Ada declined to squirm, but Ellie’s stomach took up the challenge. It was use of the word *job* that soured on her. Yes, she’d discovered that Ada’s older sister’s beau possessed a penchant for gambling, making his younger brother a better match. And she’d...eh...*skillfully* overheard a girl Frederick was courting reveal her gold-digging motivations to a friend. But she’d conducted her investigations out of a desire to protect her cousins—as no one had protected her—not out of a debt owed her wealthier relations.

“Join us, and I’ll order tea sandwiches and sweetbreads,” Ada’s father offered, pulling out Ellie’s former chair.

“Thank you, but I do not have much appetite.”

“Nonsense. How are you to achieve the proper womanly proportions?” Aunt Florence waved her hand at Ellie’s thin physique.

“I’ll save my appetite for a fine dinner at the hotel. I’d like to rest a bit. I’ll return to our quarters.” The Hastings did not possess their own private car like some of the more elite families, but an hour alone in their compartments would be a luxury indeed.

“Very well.” Aunt Florence eyed her. “Rest now, for when we arrive, you should see if you can learn what Mr. Thornton is up to in that black car.”

“Mother,” Ada cried. “Is that any of our business?”

“It is if he’s engaged in something nefarious.”

“I wish you would let nature take its course. Everything will be resolved this season.” While Ada’s tone reassured her mother, her fingers squeezing Ellie’s elbow betrayed her anxiety.

“As it was last season, when you met that upstart, Jesse Bowen?” Aunt Florence didn’t spare her a glance. “You’re nineteen. This should be your last trip to Florida as a single woman, and you obviously need some guidance selecting suitors. Now please sit down, Ada.”

Ada’s chin lifted. “Thank you, but I believe I will accompany Ellie.”

Aunt Florence drew a breath to voice what was certain to be a protest, but Walter laid his hand on her arm. “Let them be, my dear. The girls are sure to have things to talk over, and I’d enjoy having tea, just the two of us.”

“Oh. Well.” Aunt Florence tittered. “In that case...” She flicked her fingers in their direction.

Ada drew Ellie into the next car. As they made their way up the narrow hallway beside private sleeping compartments, she spoke in a low hiss. “How can Mother be so dismissive of Jesse? She won’t even give him a chance.”

Ellie caught her lower lip between her teeth before answering. “You do have to admit, he has a bit of a reputation as a wild child.”

“Just because he drives a green Roadster? Oh, I hope he brings it to Florida again this season. I packed my motoring duster just in case.”

If a weakness for speedy cars was a sin, Lewis Thornton might be out of the running as well—judging from what Ellie deduced about the burn on his finger. “I also got the impression he’d buck his desk job at his father’s oil refining company at his first opportunity.”

“Not buck it. Move up from it. He’s got lots of ideas. He just needs to get them in front of Mr. Rockefeller.”

Jesse’s father Phillip’s company was part of John D. Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Trust, but only a small part in a huge network. How would the younger son of an underling ever get the ear of such an important man?

Ada glanced behind her in time to catch Ellie’s expression. The younger woman stopped, facing her. “He’s not a sluffer, Ellie. Or a ragger. I’m determined to show my parents this season that Jesse Bowen is a viable match for me, and I need your help to do it.”

“I’m not sure what I can do.” Ellie spread her hands. The boy scorcher would surely splutter out or speed ahead on his own merit.

“You can help divert Mother off Lewis Thornton’s scent.”

“You want me to find something unsavory on him.” That would require a more serious strike against him than owning a Roadster.

“Well...yes. Just as you did for my brother and sister.”

“Hmm.” She raised her finger to her chin. “He was looking at something in the lid of his pocket watch that made him very happy.”

“A likeness, you suspect?”

Ellie nodded. “It’s possible. It would explain his obvious disinterest in all the women around him.” And the abrupt way he’d excused himself the moment he’d suspected Ellie wanted to introduce her family. She cringed

even now to think that he'd believed she'd thrown herself at him. That she would be such a dolt as to dare.

"Perfect." Ada threaded her fingers together. "All you need to do is prove he has a love interest, and Mother will be forced to give him up."

Doubtful that it would prove that easy, but Ellie managed a weak smile. For Ada, whose kindness had earned her a place in her carefully guarded affections, she would try.



That the sparkling waters of the Gulf of Mexico were close, Lewis had no doubt. Though thus far, the tracks had laid far enough inland to deny passengers a glimpse of the ocean, herons waded in nearby marshlands, seagulls soared over small lakes, and deep green foliage displayed tropical flowers even during the coldest month of the year.

Lewis enjoyed the scenery from Giovanni Gaspachi's private car, along with a dinner cooked by the chef he shared with his friend. Once they arrived at Hotel Belleview, they would be busy overseeing the unloading of the car behind them, so best to eat now. Especially since he'd not been able to finish his meal in the dining car. Giovanni had teased him when he'd returned flustered.

"What mama waylaid you this time?"

"Not a mama." Lewis laid his coat across an upholstered chair and loosened his tie. "A young woman who sought to introduce me to her parents." She'd almost made him trust her, that Miss Hastings, with her gawkish approach.

Giovanni laughed and clapped, his almost-black eyes snapping. "They grow bolder daily."

"What about you? Where is your *amore*?" Lewis threw out his hands.

Giovanni made a blowing sound and smoothed his perfectly Brilliantined hair. "Who, me? I must build a life for the future Mrs. Gaspachi first. But you...I cannot wait to see the one who finally enchants you, *amico mio*."

Lewis shook his head. "Not a single experience in my life, save my parents' marriage, leads me to desire such a thing." He sat down on a vermillion bench built into the side of the car, and Giovanni's servant brought him a drink. "The only reasons I'm here are to ensure the success of your

show and Cora's happiness."

"Oh, she is out there, no doubt." Giovanni sipped his coffee, then sat back from the mahogany table to give Lewis a smug assessment. The savvy Italian's success had long ago dimmed the memories of the streets of South Philly. But that was exactly what Lewis had intended. Giovanni steepled his fingers. "The best magic of all would be for you to meet her at the White Queen on the Gulf."

"In that case, I'll be spending a lot of time motoring and taking Cora swimming."

Over dinner, Lewis redirected the conversation to details of Washington's Birthday Ball show his friend would perform for the hotel guests. He looked out the window when they stopped briefly in Clearwater. Though situated on an impressive bluff, the town itself wasn't much to look at—besides the bank, there were only a small collection of frame stores.

He didn't expect much of the hotel, either, despite its grandiose nickname, recently bestowed after founder Henry Plant's son Morton had it painted white and the roof recovered with green tiles. He would've preferred an invitation for Giovanni to Plant's more elegant Tampa Bay Hotel, but the general manager of Belleview had assured them his clientele was just as impressive. Henry Ford and Thomas Edison were frequent guests. The natural paradise of the Belleair complex, with its option to build outlying cottages, offered a greater appeal to many Northern elite who were worn down by harsh winters.

"I have to admire men like Henry Plant and Henry Flagler who had a vision for this tropical wilderness." Lewis finished his mouth-melting slice of tiramisu as the train huffed toward Belleair. "Plant opened the west coast and Flagler the east with their rail lines and resorts, and suddenly, everyone has to go to Florida for the winter."

Giovanni folded his napkin next to his perfectly clean plate—his appetite one holdover from childhood. "I'd far rather be here than vaudeville. And that's thanks to you, not Henry Plant."

"No, that's thanks to your own ingenuity and work ethic."

"There are hundreds of boys with ingenuity in the slums, but unless someone like you backs their dreams, they remain there." Tears glinted in the younger man's eyes.

Lewis gave Giovanni's shoulder a brief squeeze before returning his attention to the scenery. The streets of Belleair were graded and paved with

firm clay, the main boulevard lined with palms. In the center of town, a bicycle track encircled a small circular lake. On the eastern border, the shore of a larger lake served as the site for the waterworks and electric plant. The train approached the hotel through citrus groves.

The glint of the setting sun on the water drew Giovanni's notice. He leaned forward and pushed a curtain aside. "The Gulf, at last. And the White Queen."

The hotel presided over the eastern shore of Clearwater Bay and the barrier islands which bordered the Gulf of Mexico. The postcard Lewis had read about Belleview stated that it had been constructed in Swiss-chalet style of heart pine from Plant's Georgia estate and expanded twice since its 1897 opening. The east wing had brought the number of rooms to two hundred and ninety. A servants' dorm sat behind the hotel, while several members' cottages sprang up closer to the water.

A number of steam and sailing craft bobbed around a flag-topped boathouse at the end of a pier. The postcard had promised excursions to nearby Sand Key Island. But now the train was backing up on special siding in front of the south entrance.

Lewis reached for his coat. "My contact for the show said they would detach the baggage cars. We'll disembark and accompany them."

As the unloading began, Lewis and Giovanni directed stagehands and hotel workers in the careful transport of boxes and crates. The laborers moved their supplies from the special boxcar to handcarts on rails which ran down into the east basement.

A middle-aged head porter ushered them ahead of the load, out of the balmy air with its tang of salt, into the cool bowels of the hotel. "This portion of the basement houses the bakery and laundry, storage, and an ice pit." As they walked down the wide hall, he unhooked a key from his substantial ring and extended it to Lewis. "This will open the block of rooms I'm about to show you."

With a wave, Lewis deferred to Giovanni. "He will need access more often than I. I just wish to inspect the space first to ensure its privacy and climate. You understand the delicate and irreplaceable nature of our cargo."

"Of course." The porter bowed his head and gestured toward a door.

Lewis hesitated. A couple of workers came their way with canvas bags on their shoulders, and a maid in a dark, gored skirt, white blouse, and straw hat scurried past. No one paid them any mind.

The porter pointed to a heavy lock on the door. “The key goes to that, not a normal keyhole.”

“Very good, sir.” Giovanni strode into the room with the same confident stride he used on stage—lacking only the cape.

“Let me show you the little tricks we discussed.” The porter’s eyes sparkled.

A few minutes later, as the first handcart arrived, they cleared out of the way, well satisfied. The porter rubbed his hands together. “I only wish I could be in that ballroom the evening of the Washington Birthday Ball.”

Lewis smiled. “We’ll see what we can do about that.”

“Right.” Giovanni chuckled. “If we can’t make a little magic happen, what are we good for?”

The promise met with a wide grin. “Truly, that would be top-hole. Is there anything else you need, sirs?”

Lewis looked around. The same maid paused in the hallway nearby, checking a list, her face hidden by her hat. “I believe that should take care of us. We’ll oversee the unloading.”

The man bowed. “Very good, sir. I’ll be about if you change your mind.”

As he departed for other duties, Giovanni nudged Lewis’s elbow. “I will oversee the unloading. *You* must hurry upstairs to meet your sweetheart.”

Lewis chuckled. “I admit, I cannot wait to hold her again.”

The maid gave a gasp. When they glanced her way, she snapped her fingers in seeming exasperation, as though she had forgotten something, then took off in the opposite direction.

“What is she doing down here with all these men?” Perhaps he should follow to ensure the silly woman’s safety. Lewis had taken several steps in her direction when she turned a corner and he caught a glimpse of her profile. Miss Hastings?

CHAPTER 3



As Ellie entered the hotel dining room with Ada, Uncle Walter and Aunt Florence a few yards behind, Lewis Thornton was exiting. The engineer slowed as he spotted her, an enigmatic smile creeping over his face.

Her empty stomach pinched. Did he recognize her from the basement? Oh, munge. She'd had a first-class idea to swap hats with Maeve, their maid, but what good did it do when she couldn't keep a low profile? She hadn't expected the mysterious Italian man to immediately confirm her suspicions.

Her gaze fixed on the lapel of Lewis's smart black dinner jacket. She leaned close to whisper to Ada. "What did I tell you? Look at his boutonniere." A single man did not wear boutonnieres for no reason, and everyone could read the language of the flowers.

"A white daisy. Innocence and love."

"Innocence, indeed. Maybe your mother will believe me now."

Florence had dismissed the declaration Ellie had dropped the moment she returned to their rooms earlier—that Lewis had a sweetheart. Her response? Ada could hold her own with any woman. Ellie only needed to find out who the rival was. But she mustn't appear too curious.

Averting her eyes, she attempted to glide by, but Lewis removed his top hat and spoke. "Ah, Miss Hastings. And Miss Hastings, I presume?"

Ellie nodded. "Good evening, Mr. Thornton."

"How do you find the hotel? You seem the curious type. I wager you've already been over the place top to bottom." His gaze narrowed on her, and it was all she could do to keep her jaw clamped. "You know, it's good you have a sister to explore with. For safety."

"Actually, she's my—"

Ada slid a hand through her elbow and lightly pinched the tender skin above Ellie's glove. She chimed in sweetly. "Ellie, do make introductions."

Ellie stammered out both names. Before she could clarify her relation to Ada, her cousin turned to introduce her parents, who had drawn up behind them, Uncle Walter dignified and Aunt Florence pop-eyed.

Uncle Walter rubbed his bewhiskered chin. "Lewis Thornton. If I remember correctly, your father was a Philadelphia clockmaker, and your invention enabled the railroad to synchronize all their watches."

Lewis's eyes—a strange blue-gray, like a foggy morning—flashed wide for a moment. "That is correct, sir. Temperature-compensated balance wheels. My father's company is now one of their main suppliers."

"Ground-breaking. Quite impressive."

"Impressive, indeed." Aunt Florence tittered. "Have you already dined, sir?"

"I dined on the train. I was just seeing someone settled."

Who? He waved behind him—not toward the main dining room, with its French windows and elliptical fanlights offering a view of the gardens—but toward one of two private, connecting dining rooms.

Aunt Florence poked her full lower lip out. "Oh, a shame. We would have been delighted for you to join us, seeing as you are alone. Will you take a belated aperitif? Dessert?"

"Thank you. I'm afraid I have other business to attend to." He darted a glance at Ellie.

She lowered her lashes.

"Tea, then. Tomorrow." With a giggle that suggested Lewis had leapt into the air to click his heels together rather than standing there stiff as a stovepipe, Aunt Florence offered their suite number.

Oh, land sakes. Ellie stared at the floral print on the carpet.

"I am sorry." Lewis's lips barely moved. "I have a tea engagement already."

Uncle Walter cleared his throat. "Some other time, perhaps. We would love for you to regale us with tales of your inventions."

With a bow, Lewis bid them goodnight.

As soon as he was past, Aunt Florence smirked at Ada. "You see? It's just a matter of time now that he has laid eyes on you. Persistence will win the day."

When Ellie gaped at her, her aunt raised her eyebrows, juttred her nose in

the air, and sailed past on Uncle Walter's arm.

Ada let out a sigh. "She will not be denied."

Ellie turned on her. "You didn't even try. Are you interested in him, after all?"

"At his age?" Ada frowned and touched one of her ears, then the other.

"What is it?"

Ada's eyes widened, and she felt both sides of her head at once. "My earring!" When she removed her hands, Ellie could see the problem.

"The pearl has fallen off the right one."

"Oh, quick. Help me look."

Their frantic search of the carpet soon drew the attention of Uncle Walter, Aunt Florence, and the maitre'd.

Aunt Florence sighed in relief when the employee located the pearl near the door—but with a broken wire. "Take them off, Ada, and let Ellie run upstairs and fetch you another pair."

"Oh, Mother, Ellie doesn't have to do that."

"Nonsense. You look indecent with bare earlobes. It will only take a minute." Expecting obedience, Aunt Florence returned to the maitre'd's stand. With a regretful smile at Ellie, Uncle Walter followed his wife.

"I'm sorry." Ada placed the jewelry onto Ellie's extended palm. "If Gertrude isn't there, Adam can open the safe for you."

Ellie would rather deal with Uncle Walter's Irish valet over Aunt Florence's French maid any day, but with her luck, the proper and reclusive Gertrude would be taking her dinner in the suite with the company she preferred best—herself.

The rotunda's fourteen-foot ceilings with dark wooden crossbeams and the sweet musical strains of the resident orchestra had awed her upon their arrival, but now, with her stomach rumbling, she hurried toward the elevator rather than the Colonial-style, grand cypress stairway.

Just before she darted inside, a lithe figure mounted the steps. Thornton. Who was he meeting? If she could be certain he had a love interest, she might spare Ada a painful misdirection.

She and Aunt Florence agreed on one thing—the quicker they could find Ada's match, the better. This maneuvering, this plotting, this existence in the painful gray space between family and servant, needed to end. Then Ellie could figure out what to do with her life. Her prospects might be bleak, but they would be her own.

She waited until Thornton turned at the landing before following up the stairs. She would've expected his apartment to be on the first floor. The best suites boasted forty-by-forty-two windows. She recalled this fact because Aunt Florence had fretted that shouldn't the Hastings be first-floor quality? Uncle Walter had mollified her that their second-floor rooms possessed a balcony—plus the three electric lights, steam heat, and plush rugs of the suites.

Her heart hammered, and her breath came fast by the time she reached the third floor. She pressed her hand to her side. Why her unpopularly girlish figure needed a corset *and* the pneumatic bust form Aunt Florence was constantly pushing her to wear stymied her.

Thornton continued upward. The fourth floor? Weren't most rooms here rented out for nannies and servants?

She peeked around the corner as Thornton proceeded along the narrow hallway. He knocked at a door halfway down. It opened and he went inside. An arm appeared—a red silk sleeve flashed—and the door closed.

She straightened, frowning. Her fears Thornton had a sweetheart could be naïve. He might have a mistress. Surely, that would end Florence's plotting.

So why wasn't she more relieved? Instead, with an odd ache in her belly—probably just the gnawing hunger resolving into resignation—she returned to their rooms.

As Ellie let herself into the sitting room, voices drifted from within the women's compartments. Not surprising, since Florence and Ada had left half the contents of their wardrobes scattered about in the wake of the pressing crisis of what to wear their first night in the dining room. The maids were probably cleaning up. But what did make her catch her breath—that one voice was much deeper. Ellie crept toward the dressing room she shared with her aunt and cousin. Adam? In there? And Maeve...weeping?

"I dunna what to do. Ma needs me, but now that Pa can't work, they need my pay more." The maid's Irish lilt reached Ellie before sight of her did—her short, curvy form tucked against the tall valet's, his salt-and-pepper head resting atop her auburn pompadour.

Was no one above secrets and assignations? Ellie cleared her throat. "Excuse me."

Maeve jerked back, her glistening doe-brown eyes rounding while she dashed tears away, then righted her wobbling bun. "Miss Ellie!"

Adam dipped his chin. "Pardon us, but this isn't as it seems."

“No?” Her indignation had nothing to do with the fact that everyone but she seemed capable of finding love. Uncle Walter’s servants knew that romantic attachments with one another led to dismissal. She’d hate to see that happen to Adam and Maeve.

“Maeve received some bad news from home.”

The maid stepped forward. “I’m afraid I fell into quite a blue devil, Miss Ellie. Adam was trying to help me pull myself together.”

“What’s the matter? Something with your father?”

“His cancer has spread. I’m afraid he’s not long for this world.”

Ellie’s heart melted, and she touched Maeve’s arm. “I’m so sorry. I know—I know what that is like.” Why did her voice catch, as though it hadn’t been almost fifteen years?

“Yes, miss. I reckon you do.”

“I’m sure Mrs. Hastings would give you time off if your family needs you.” Although why Maeve hadn’t asked before leaving Pittsburgh, Ellie couldn’t fathom.

“Oh no.” The wide eyes returned, and Maeve shook her head rapidly. “I be sending every penny I make back to Ma and the little ones. They couldn’t do without it. So, Miss Ellie, you won’t say anything to Mrs. Hastings, will you? About that or...this?” She glanced at Adam.

Ellie looked between them, both faces pictures of innocence. Adam must be a dozen years Maeve’s senior—pressing middle age. He’d never been anything but circumspect. But a memory of the way his big hand had cradled Maeve’s head flashed. Did she trust her eyes—or her heart? She bit the inside of her lip. The servants deserved the benefit of the doubt. This time. She pulled the earrings out of her pocket and extended them to Maeve.

“I need another pair of pearls for Ada.”

“Oh my.” She took them. “We’ll have these fixed. Gertrude is on an errand for the missus, but Ad—Mr. Donovan—can open the safe.” At Maeve’s lapse, both her face and Adam’s turned red.

Adam crossed the floor, opened a cabinet, and twirled the combination for the black-and-gold strongbox inside. Then he stepped away, his manner begging a reprieve for composure. “I’ll give you ladies a moment. Call me when you are finished.”

When he left the dressing room, Maeve sorted through earring boxes while Ellie waited. “I’m glad he knew the combination.”

“Oh, it’s easy. It’s Ada’s birthday.”

Ellie straightened. "What?"

Maeve put her hand over her mouth. "You can see my tongue's come unhinged as well as my brain, Miss Ellie. I overheard Mrs. Hastings tell Gertrude. But I don't ever use it. Only Mr. Donovan and Gertrude do. I promise."

"Of course, Maeve." Ellie patted her arm. The girl looked ready to cry again. "Let's forget we discussed it...and everything."

"Thank you. You're always so kind, Miss Ellie. You must know I would never do anything to hurt your family."

Your family. Ellie pushed back the sting of that. "I know. What about that box?" She pointed to a black velvet square.

"Oh, no. These are the earrings that match the diamond necklace Mrs. Hastings brought to wear to the George Washington Birthday Ball." She sprung the lid and gazed at the dangling teardrops with open admiration. "Did you ever see anything so fine?"

"Only the necklace. Which is why we should close this safe as quickly as possible." Florence was notoriously proud of and protective of her jewels.

"Right you are." Maeve shut the box and reached for another. Finally, she handed Ellie two pearl studs. "These should do."

"They'll be perfect. Thank you." As Maeve pushed the door of the safe to, Ellie leaned closer. "Maeve?"

"Yes, miss?"

An old pain gripped Ellie's chest. "Be careful, will you? Even a man as trustworthy as Adam may prove to not be all he seems."

CHAPTER 4



“*T*his is ridiculous.” Ellie flapped the ankle-length linen duster she wore—Aunt Florence’s. “And I’m not wearing these.” She pulled the leather motoring goggles out of the pocket and shoved them toward Ada.

They stood under the carriage porch on the west end of the hotel, waiting for Lewis Thornton to bring his automobile around. His written invitation to take *Mr. Hasting’s young ladies* for a drive had arrived this morning. Aunt Florence had been so delighted she’d poohed any talk of boutonnieres and red silk sleeves. Uncle Walter and Aunt Florence now sat in Adirondack chairs nearby to wave them off.

Indeed, what had changed for Lewis Thornton between dinner last night and breakfast? Any amusement he had shown upon running into Ellie had soured the moment Aunt Florence pressed to further the acquaintance. Surely, more was afoot than the power of Aunt Florence’s will and a glimpse of Ada’s charms.

Ada pushed the goggles back. “*You’re* being ridiculous. You’re going to need these unless you want to lose your eyesight.”

Ellie made a soft blowing sound. How one managed to get the leather strap around one’s head while maintaining the fashionable low pompadour mystified her—although Ada, as usual, made it look easy. Her goggles already rested on her forehead, beneath her wide-brimmed, veiled hat.

Ada surveyed her with pursed lips. “I don’t know when I’ve seen you in such a mood.”

“And I don’t know why you and your mother won’t believe Lewis Thornton is already interested in someone.” The heavy clothing in the sultry Florida warmth was already sapping her normal reserve.

“I do believe it. But I don’t think it’s some mystery woman.” When Ellie stared at her, Ada rolled her eyes. “He’s interested in *you*.”

Ellie scoffed. “That is the most ridiculous notion yet.”

“It’s plain to see you intrigue him. Why do you think I let him believe we were sisters?”

She propped a hand on her hip. “If that is so, why are you motoring about with him while I serve as a backseat chaperone?”

Ada flattened her mouth, then leaned close. “Trust me, Ellie.”

With a loud rumble, a red touring REO with black metal fenders and a black soft top pulled up in front of them. Seated behind the wheel, Lewis Thornton lifted his leather cap from his head. “Good afternoon, ladies.” He bowed to Uncle Walter and Aunt Florence, who had risen and drew close to inspect the automobile. “Mr. and Mrs. Hastings.”

“Oh, look. It has a windshield.” Ellie tucked her goggles back into her pocket.

Ada shot her a glare but didn’t argue as a porter assisted her into the front seat. Then the young man opened the small door to the backseat and offered his hand to Ellie.

“This is a two-cylinder, isn’t it?” Uncle Walter asked Thornton.

“It is.” Thornton patted the side. “The engine rests under the seat here, while the radiator, water, and gas are under the hood.”

“I like the running board.”

“Yes. Much more practical than a Roadster.” Aunt Florence eyed the backseat as though she might climb in next to Ellie. “Sporty, yet practical for a family.”

Ada folded her hands in her lap and looked straight ahead.

“Yes, ma’am. I prefer being able to drive four passengers. I should have the ladies back for tea. I thought we’d drive up to Clearwater and back—give them a chance to see the area.”

“That’s fine, Mr. Thornton. Fine.” Aunt Florence chuckled and stepped back, tucking her hand in Uncle Walter’s arm.

Ellie braced herself as they jolted forward, circling past the terraced lawn that led down to the bay. Ladies with raised parasols and gentlemen in straw hats strolled out onto the pier, and small white sails and steamers dotted the aquamarine waves beyond the boathouse. The top of the touring car provided shade from the tropical sun, its rays stunning in intensity after the dreary Pennsylvania winter. And the breeze wasn’t bad, broken as it was by the

windshield and the occupants of the front seat. Ada was chattering on, thanking Thornton for the outing.

Would he explain his apparent change of heart?

Just before the bridge that led off hotel property, he pulled into a gravel lot.

Ellie leaned forward. “Why are we stopping?”

Thornton glanced over his shoulder. “There are shops and a museum in the lower level of the bridge, and a boardwalk along Corkscrew Creek. I thought you might wish to investigate on our way back. For now, we will be picking up another passenger.”

Ada gripped the edge of her seat and swiveled to scan the lot. A tall man with russet hair approached. “Jesse!” She scrambled down from the running board and flew into his arms.

Ellie covered her mouth and half muffled the slang that slipped out. “Oh, blimey.” This was what Ada had meant when she’d urged Ellie to trust her? “What will her mother say?”

“I think the point is for her mother not to know.”

“You’re in on this?”

Thornton laid an arm across the front seat as he looked back at her. “Mr. Bowen and I are members of the same gentlemen’s club in Philadelphia. He’s a good egg, a younger son who has yet to catch his break. We all need a break, don’t we?”

“I—I suppose so.” She would never dare to apply such a theory to herself—not only a woman, but the dreaded poor relation.

“When he came last evening asking for my help, I took pity on him. Besides, today’s outing served my purpose.”

Ellie’s brows rose. “Which is?”

“To better make your acquaintance.” Gracious. He had laugh lines around his eyes as well as his lips.

His smile deepened. “I’m afraid I’ve given you a poor impression.”

“Oh, you mean when you thought I, and then Ada, were after you?” Her hand flew to her mouth again. What about the man so unhinged her tongue?

His relaxed, hearty laugh made her jump. “Let’s just say I have a better understanding of your situation now.”

She narrowed her eyes, owning her sass this time. “Well, I still have questions.” If he thought he could carry on with a paramour on the fourth floor and charm her stockings off, he had another think coming.

“Good thing you’ll be joining me up here, Miss Hastings.”

She turned with lips parted as Jesse opened her door and extended his hand. “Miss Ellie? Nice to see you again.”

Ada giggled. “I told you to trust me. Jesse and I arranged everything last night.”

Ellie let out a breath and turned her head to one side. “If your mother finds out...”

“But you won’t tell her, will you?”

“Ada...”

“She won’t think to ask, not with Mr. Thornton motoring us around. Come on, Ellie. You promised to help me.” Her bright brown eyes pleaded until Ellie took Jesse’s hand and stepped down.

The deception unsettled her spirit, but what was she to do? Stalk back up the driveway and spill all to Aunt Florence? Since when had her aunt’s judgement proved sound? Perhaps Jesse Bowen deserved a break. Did Lewis Thornton?

She slid onto the front seat beside him, and he smiled at her—the open smile one gave an equal. Her heart seemed to come loose from her rib cage and go thudding down to her stomach. He must not know she was a pinch from penniless. Just on the off-chance Ada was right about him having any interest in her, she could at least absolve herself of subterfuge. If she scared him off, so be it. She didn’t want a man who kept a woman on the side. And she sure didn’t want to be that woman.

As Jesse helped Ada into the backseat, Ellie forced out her confession. “You might as well know, Ada and I aren’t sisters. We’re cousins.”

His smile didn’t dim. “Jesse told me. Don’t you have any goggles? You’re going to need them.”

Ellie produced the leather-framed glasses. When she merely sat there with them in her lap, Thornton took them and gestured to her hat.

“You’ll need to unpin it.”

She slid out her long hatpin. While she patted her sweat-smashed hair, he looped the strap around her head. From the backseat, Ada muffled a giggle.

Thornton secured the goggles. “There, now. We wouldn’t want anything to harm those amazing turquoise eyes.”

And that made any protest about how ridiculous she must look die on her lips.



*B*elleair's palm-lined boulevard gave way to the sandy road to Clearwater, and Lewis let the engine wind out to forty. Even with the glass, wind and road noise made conversation a challenge. Not that Miss Hastings tried. Behind them, Jesse and Ada Hastings exclaimed over heron and deer sightings and tried to get him to stop at an orange grove. Ellie sat with her hands in her lap and her face forward.

He'd gone from defensive when she'd attempted to introduce her family on the train, to amused and indignant when she'd spied on him in the basement, to sympathetic when Jesse described the pretentious aspirations of Walter and Florence Hastings.

He glanced over at her. "The notes about Alton Adler III make sense now. I only wish I could read what you'd written about me."

One corner of her mouth tugged up. "I'll never tell. I guess it doesn't matter now."

"Now that you know I'm an advocate for Mr. Bowen."

She started to speak, then hesitated. "I don't like being put in this position."

Conversation behind them silenced. Jesse leaned forward. "Miss Ellie, my intentions are honorable, as I intend to show Mr. Hastings."

She turned. "How, if I may ask?"

Before Jesse could shout an answer, Lewis nodded to the buildings ahead. "We're coming into Clearwater. I'll stop at the hardware store for some gas, and we can talk then."

But Jesse's voice swelled. "Why, that's just it—stopping at a hardware store for gas. What an inconvenient notion."

Ellie rubbed her ear. "Please, Mr. Bowen. Can we speak once Mr. Thornton stops the car?"

"Of course. Of course." With a nervous grin, he sat back and reached for Ada's hand.

Lewis pattered to a stop next to a faded green wagon. Its team pranced as his engine cut out with a bang.

Ellie wiped the outside of her goggles and peered over at the horses. "Poor things."

Lewis lifted his lenses to his cap. "Before long, automobiles will replace all wagons and carriages."

“And every town will have a filling station like the original one Standard Oil opened in Seattle—but not just for gasoline. Drive-in stations that offer tire repair, oil, and batteries,” Jesse declared. “That’s my vision, Miss Hastings. I just have to get Mr. Rockefeller to sign off on it.”

A young man in overalls hurried out of the hardware store. Tipping the brim of his cap, he asked, “Fill up?”

“Yes, please.” Lewis surveyed his passengers. The raccoon-like rings left by Ellie’s goggles threatened his composure. A ghostly figure in all her netting, Ada coughed. Lewis hitched his thumb over his shoulder. “I spied a drugstore on Cleveland Street. Shall we walk over for a soda while he gets the gas?”

“Oh, yes. I’m parched.” Ada pushed back her veil, and Jesse hurried to help her out.

Lewis came around for Ellie—as he found himself thinking of her, to differentiate between the Miss Hastings. When he offered his gloved hand, she hesitated a moment. Despite his assistance, she almost tripped when her duster tangled on the fender.

She slapped the material into submission. “Stupid coat.”

“It does rather swallow you whole.”

“It’s my aunt’s.”

Did she never go out motoring so as to require her own? Leading the way up the boardwalk, Lewis tucked her hand through his elbow rather than initiate another battle of will by proffering his arm. Whatever reservations Ellie harbored about Jesse, she made no secret of her distrust for himself.

He tilted his head toward her. “How long have you been with your aunt and uncle?”

She drew her lower lip up. “Half my life now.”

He had the good sense not to inquire further. “And Ada is their last child at home?”

Ellie nodded. “She is a good deal younger than me, but we are fast friends. So you see, I agree with her parents in wanting her to marry well.”

“Of course. And what will you do after?”

Her steps faltered, but two farmers stepping off the boardwalk to allow them to pass covered her vacillation. “I—I’m not sure yet.” She raised her pointed chin. “I assume I will take a post as a governess or teacher.”

“Have you taught before?”

“No, but my father saw that I was well-educated.” Defensiveness laced

the statement.

Assurances and answers to whatever questions she had for him would have to wait. They'd reached Matghett's Drug Store. The dim interior came as a relief, as did the cold bottles from the icebox. Lewis stuck with Coca-Cola, but the proprietor convinced the ladies to try Royal Crown Cola from Columbus, Georgia. Jesse had a ginger ale. Lewis selected a pack of Juicy Fruit gum to moisten their mouths on the ride back and laid out change while the owner removed their bottle caps.

"Welcome to sit out front as long as you like," he said. "And come back on Saturday. There's a pavilion down at the pier where we have a dance every week."

"Oh, that does sound fun." Ada tossed a hopeful glance at Jesse, then slid it over to Lewis.

If he couldn't get Ellie to warm up to him, these foursomes could become a challenge. But her reticence challenged him. "I'm available Saturday."

Jesse grinned. "It's a date. Well, not with you."

Ellie flushed.

Lewis held the door on the way out. "You look a bit warm still, Miss Hastings—Miss Ellie, I mean. May I call you Ellie?"

Ada giggled and answered for her. "That's a good idea, so I don't get confused."

Before Ellie had a chance to answer, Lewis indicated the bench. "Why don't we sit here to enjoy our drinks, and Jesse can tell us about this big idea of his. Would you like to take off your coat, Ellie?"

Her eyes widened, and she set her cola on the arm of the bench. "Yes, *Lewis*, I believe I will."

Settling beside Jesse, Ada clapped. "Isn't it nice, being on a first-name basis?"

When Ellie struggled, Lewis reached for the sleeve. "Allow me."

"Thank you, no. I've got it." Frowning, she finally wriggled out of the duster and sat in a huff beside Ada. She took a long swig of soda and pulled the bottle away with a popping sound.

Suppressing a smile, Lewis lowered himself beside her.

Jesse was back on the topic of the filling station. "I've written a letter to John Rockefeller Jr. proposing the opening of three such businesses in Pittsburgh."

"Overseen by Jesse, of course." Ada's fingers encircled his arm, and her

glistening face shone with pride. “He asked for an appointment in New York.”

Ellie crossed one dusty boot over the other. “When do you expect to hear back?”

“Well, I wrote a couple months ago, so...” Jesse squared his shoulders. “Any time now.”

Lewis wiped condensation from his Coca-Cola. “I have to say, I find that doubtful.”

Jesse’s stare froze on him. “Why? He’s the Rockefeller still involved in Standard Oil, not his father.”

“I hear from friends that involvement is minimal and will not last long. The government is coming for Standard Oil and any other big trusts.”

Ellie nodded. “I read that there are seven suits pending against Standard alone. They say it’s more than twenty times the size of its closest competitor.”

Lewis met her gaze. “That’s right.” He liked a woman who kept abreast of headlines.

Jesse reached for Ada’s hand. “That may be true, but even if the trust breaks up, it won’t threaten the Rockefeller fortune. If anything, they’ll get richer as they sell off shares.”

“Maybe, but the family would pull away from involvement. I don’t expect you’ll hear back from your letter.” He waited until Jesse’s head lowered. “But I may be able to help you.”

The younger man’s chin snapped up. “How?”

“I like your idea. I think my friend, William Mellon, will too.”

“William Mellon, the largest investor in Gulf Oil Corporation?”

Lewis nodded. “That’s right.”

Jesse sat up straight, his tone growing eager. “I knew he lived in Pittsburgh. I’ve just never met him. You’re friends?”

“Business acquaintances. If you’d like, I can arrange an introduction.”

“That would be swell.” Jesse ran his hand through his sweaty auburn hair, making the ends stick up so that he looked like a tousled boy. “Would there be any way...you might consider writing him from here?”

“I could do that.” Lewis shrugged and sipped his syrupy drink. “But we might receive quicker results if we invited him to a golf match.”

Jesse shot to his feet. “You mean—he’s here?”

Lewis chuckled. The younger man’s enthusiasm reminded him of his

own, back when he'd burned with ideas about how to change the world. "Staying just down the hall from me."

"A golf match. A more casual tack. It could work." He ruffled his hair again, taking a couple steps on the boardwalk, then turning back. "I hate to approach a competitor, but if what you say about Rockefeller is true..."

"I honestly believe Mellon is your best bet."

Jesse offered his hand to help Ada rise, then encircled her waist with his arm. "I'm in your debt, sir. I'd do anything to get her father to consider me." No one could doubt the devotion in his eyes. It could almost make Lewis believe in love again.

CHAPTER 5



“*I*t was kind of you—the way you offered to help Mr. Bowen.”

Something about Ellie’s expression brought back a memory, only Lewis couldn’t quite place it. Approval. No, belief. Belief in him. That was what came to mind as she smiled at him in the museum in the lower level of the Roman-arched carriage bridge that led onto Hotel Belleview’s grounds.

She cocked her head. “Why are you looking at me that way?”

“Which way is that?”

“Particularly...”—she shifted her own gaze away—“intensely.”

Lewis rotated his cap in his hands. “You remind me of someone—you have, since we met.”

“Oh? Who?” “I wish I could remember. I fault the threatening stare of the alligator behind you for my discombobulation.”

She didn’t even turn around before breaking into laughter. “He is an ugly fellow, although the children seem fascinated by him.” She moved aside to allow a set of boy and girl twins to drag their apologetic mother closer to the stuffed specimen which had been posed in a painted river with a backdrop of potted palms. “I’ll be just as happy if he’s the only one I see this trip.”

He’d have to bring Cora here. It might prove an acceptable indoor amusement if she’d gotten sunburned frolicking on the beach this morning. “Agreed, but I must admit, I’m intrigued by the steamboat excursions up the local rivers.”

“That might be nice...viewing the wildlife from the safety of a boat. I’m not sure how I’d make time for it, though.” Ellie grimaced as they moved along to a display of raccoons in some plaster trees. “I’m afraid Ada is keen to swim and golf and take the bicycle trails—and basically do all the athletic

things for which I lack the required skill.”

“Oh, I doubt that.” Lewis refrained from assessing her slender form, which looked plenty lithe to him. “But if you’d like, I can let you know if I sign up for an excursion.”

“That would be very kind of you.” Her gloved fingers moved along the top of her reticule. “I’m sure Ada and Jesse would jump at the opportunity.”

Going without Ada and Jesse seemed much more appealing—an unexpected fact that momentarily robbed Lewis of a response.

“Why did you do it?” Ellie’s light aquamarine eyes drew him back to the present. When he merely stared, she prompted. “Offer to help him?”

“Ah, yes.” He cleared his throat. “Let’s just say someone once helped me at a pivotal moment. One small but well-placed gesture has the potential to change another’s life.”

“It must be satisfying to wield that kind of influence.” Her soft reply almost got lost in the loud guffaws of a passing group of adolescents.

“Do you not believe that we all do?”

“Once, I did.” The corners of her mouth danced upward. “I like that you do.”

He smiled. “Does that mean you’ve resolved your doubts about me?”

Ellie pushed a strand of damp blonde-brown hair from her cheek. “Who said I had doubts?”

“Your reserved manner spoke loudly enough. But then, I suppose you are accustomed to looking for the worst in gentlemen.”

Her eyebrows flew up as though he’d pushed a button.

Lewis extended his hand, placating. “As Ada’s companion, of course.”

“Oh.”

“It was clear that her mother had appointed you as her doorkeeper of sorts.”

She resumed walking, taking a moment to study a stuffed bald eagle on its perch. “Hers and her siblings’ before her.”

“If Jesse can raise himself from his humble clerking position, perhaps the search will be over—although, I admit, I’m still curious as to where I fell down.”

She blinked rapidly at him. “Skulking around the basement where the workers were unloading nefarious cargo? Wearing tokens of affection which proclaim someone’s love for you? And then...disappearing into rooms on the fourth floor...” She turned away, her cheeks going crimson.

“You followed me to the fourth floor?” Lewis couldn’t restrain his indignation—more that he’d failed to notice her tailing him than that she’d had the audacity to do so. Again.

She shrugged as she inspected a pelican depicted in a marshy area. “I must be thorough to earn my keep as the Hastings family detective.”

A slight, raw edge to what was meant to be a humorous statement checked Lewis’s ire. Then he caught a glint of moisture in her eyes, and his heart went soft. Had someone dashed her own hopes? If so, they shared a commonality too premature to reveal. “Does the meat empire invite such avaricious types, then?”

“Apparently.” She scoffed.

He stepped closer, lowering his tone. “My dealings in both the basement and the attic were with a business acquaintance.”

“But—” She caught her lower lip between her teeth, looking away.

“But what?”

“I saw...a red sleeve.” Her face returned to a similar color.

Lewis chuckled. “He’s very flamboyant in his choice of loungewear.”

Her eyebrows hit her goggles again. “If you say so. I fear to inquire what sort of business this might be...although I might suspect.” She pressed two fingers over her lips.

He couldn’t wait to hear this. “Do tell.”

Ellie’s eyes rounded with a delight that made Lewis’s heart race. Did she have any idea how fetching enthusiasm made her? “I think...he’s one of those firework artists.”

He chortled. “Just how much did you overhear in the basement?”

“That the supplies were delicate and irreplaceable, and everyone knows the hotel makes the farewell ball unforgettable. So am I right?”

“Would you be dreadfully disappointed if I said no?”

She stopped bouncing and her face fell. “I think I might. Nothing is more magical than fireworks.”

The irony of her words nearly sucked the air from between them, especially when he leaned closer and asked, “You like magic, Ellie?”

Nope. Not all the air was gone. Her gasp consumed the rest.

He touched her sleeve. “Forgive me. I was trying to ask permission earlier—”

“Pop-py!” The delighted squeal stole their focus moments before a nine-year-old body in a summer sailing dress thudded against him.

Lewis's arms closed around Cora before the reality of her appearance registered. The flushed-face nanny huffed up right on her heels.

"Poppy Lewy! I told Nurse we might find you here."

Knowing Cora's unusual name for him coupled with the nature of her arrival would rock Ellie, Lewis took in her stunned countenance before responding. "But you I did not expect to see. You're supposed to be collecting seashells with that little girl you met at breakfast."

"We did." Cora spoke with breathless enthusiasm. "Ever so many. All shapes and sizes. I'll show you when you come back to our rooms. But then Emily wanted to swim and Nurse wouldn't let me."

The plump, middle-aged employee raised both hands. "A body my age has got no business prancin' about in glorified undergarments. I told her she'd have to wait until you could go in with her."

Lewis turned a frown on the woman he paid well to suffer just such indignities, but Ellie's stiffened posture necessitated that he produce an immediate explanation. "Miss Hastings, I'm afraid you've stumbled on another of my secrets." One he had not been ready to reveal quite yet. "Well, not a secret exactly, but a part of my life I prefer to keep private. Meet my ward and niece, Cora Garrett."

"Your w—oh. My." Ellie blew out a little breath.

"Yes. The giver of those tokens of affection you observed."

"I—I see." And her tone suggested she did...now.

Lewis drew Cora forward by the hand. "Cora, say hello to my new friend, Miss Ellie Hastings."

Cora obliged with a charming smile. "Hello."

"Hello." Ellie squatted down and extended her hand to shake Cora's. "Aren't you a regular little Heidi, with your braids and freckles?"

"That's exactly what Uncle Lewy says all the time!"

"But you call him...Poppy?" Her frown returned, questioning this time, as she stood.

"Your ward? How did we not know that you had a ward?" Ada drew up behind them with a big stick of saltwater taffy and a grinning Jesse, rescuing Lewis from an awkward explanation. Ada pierced her cousin with a pointed stare that suggested she found Ellie's detective skills lacking.

Lewis slid his cap into his duster pocket. No use attempting to explain away this part of his life now. "Cora lives most of the year with my parents, but I often take her on my travels. As my legal ward, she is my

responsibility...and the biggest joy of my life.” He squeezed the child’s shoulder and briefly sought Ellie’s gaze. It was fixed on Cora, her expression unreadable.

His niece waited long enough for Lewis to make introductions before asking Ada about her candy. “Where did you get that?”

“In the gift shop just back there.” Ada tilted her head, and her hat wobbled as she stepped in front of Ellie.

“What flavor is it?”

Ada widened her eyes. “Strawberry.”

“My favorite!” Cora pulled on Lewis’s hand. “Can we go get some? Please?”

“No need.” Ada bent and offered the candy stick to his niece. “You can have mine. I haven’t bit off it yet.”

Cora’s slack expression and leaning posture suggested she would dive into a vat of the sticky, sweet mess if given the opportunity. “Oh, but don’t you want it?”

Ada held up a paper bag. “Jesse got me two.”

Would the girl wait for his permission? Pride warmed Lewis from head to toe when Cora sought his gaze. He nodded, and she took the treat, bit into it, and closed her eyes in bliss.

Lewis touched the top of her silky nutmeg-colored hair. “What do you say to Miss Hastings?”

Her brown eyes popped open. “Thank you!”

“You’re most welcome.” Ada straightened with a smile, bumping into Ellie, who stepped back, looking a bit uncomfortable. “What does one come to the beach for but swimming and saltwater taffy?”

Cora snuck a wry glance at her nanny. “Well, at least I’ve gotten one of those now.”

“I haven’t been to the beach yet, either, and it’s plenty warm enough to swim.” Ada beamed. “What do you all say we skip teatime and go right now?”

Cora hopped up and down, grabbing Lewis’s arm. “Huzzah! Can we? Can we, Poppy?”

He shrugged. A good swim would wash the grit off him and drain the energy out of Cora before bedtime. “I’m game. How about everyone else?”

Murmurs of ascent followed. Had Lewis imagined Ellie’s reticence? How would she react now that she knew he came with what other women had

viewed as baggage? The smile she offered him was but a shadow of her earlier ones, and she headed for the exit with a single-mindedness that made his heart sink.

CHAPTER 6



This was exactly why Ellie hadn't wanted to go to the beach. She sat under the tent between Nurse McMullan, who maintained her dignity in her linen dress and hat, and Lewis, his strong form all too apparent in his striped bathing shirt and shorts, clutching her long bathing coat over her own suit while Ada romped with Cora.

Cora held to a rope attached to an offshore buoy with one hand and Ada's hand with the other. Jesse kept a firm grip on Ada while she made a game of jumping the waves. Her shrieks and peals of giggles drew even Lewis's gaze. And why wouldn't they? Ada looked adorable—curvy in all the right places—in her lilac taffeta blouse, knickerbockers, and short skirt, trimmed in black braid, with matching stockings. Even the cork-soled sandals she'd kicked off under the tent laced with lilac cord.

"Do you not wish to go in with them?" Lewis eyed Ellie in a way that asked why she was suffering under her hot coat.

"Not yet." Not ever, if she could help it. Next to Ada, she would resemble a drowning crow in her conservative black mohair ensemble. Ellie made a show of folding bologna around an olive and popping it into her mouth.

Lewis had somehow arranged a picnic before their hurried departure from the boathouse. Some people swam in the freshwater spring—uniquely positioned in the saltwater bay—that supplied the hotel's drinking water, but for a true beach experience, they'd steamed a mile and a half out to Sand Key Island. A bathing pavilion between the lush undergrowth and palms and the jewel-toned sea offered amenities and privacy for changing, and tents dotted the strip of white sand, sheltering beachgoers from the late-afternoon sun.

Lewis squinted toward the shore. "This is good for Cora. She seems to be

having fun, don't you think?"

To Ellie, Cora appeared to be clinging rather tightly to the rope, but she refrained from saying so. Instead, she suggested, "Don't let me stop you from joining them." If Lewis left, she could take off the infernal coat. "I'm sure Cora would like you to play with her."

"In good time." He chuckled low. "Miss Ada seems to be doing a good job of it."

"Yes." Ellie's midsection tightened. "Miss Ada is very fun."

Lewis turned to study her. "I'm thankful for a few minutes to visit with you."

"Oh." She drew a circle in the sand next to her blanket. "I doubt you'll find my company particularly diverting."

"On the contrary. I can't rest until I'm assured of your good opinion."

She whisked a glance at him. "What do you care for that?"

"A great deal, I promise you. Don't we all share a desire to be rightly known?" Lewis reached into the hamper for a slice of ham and laid it out on a piece of cornbread.

"I suppose." While the question speared an answering longing in her own heart, her brain puzzled. Once Lewis was no longer needed to excuse Ada's outings with Jesse, he would surely have nothing else to do with them. He was merely providing a favor to a friend. Wasn't he?

"Well, so far, you've labeled me a womanizer with questionable business dealings. I'd like to be sure I'm cleared of your charges." He took a bite of his sandwich without looking at her.

"Of the first? Yes." Although the red sleeve still intrigued her. When he stared at her with his mouth agape, she giggled. "You never told me what you were doing with dangerous cargo in the basement."

"I'm afraid I'm sworn to silence."

"By whom?"

"By the hotel." Lewis finished the ham and cornbread in another bite.

She sat back, propped on one hand, and asked only half teasingly, "Are you running drugs and munitions out of the Gulf?"

"With my nine-year-old niece as cover? Assuredly. You've discovered the secret source of my fortune." He licked his fingers and matched her posture but reclined on both elbows.

Obviously, she was getting nowhere with this line of questioning. For now. She tried another. "Why does she call you Poppy?"

Lewis's face straightened, and he sat up, scrubbing a hand over his eyes. "I imagine it's because she misses having a father. I'm the closest thing she has. My parents are good to her but rather strict. She spends too much time alone there."

Ellie crossed her ankles. At least they looked shapely in her black hose. "Have you thought of having her come live with you?"

"I have, but until I wed..." When Lewis's sentence trailed off, a dart of surprise pierced Ellie's chest. So he did not intend bachelorhood for life? "My mother at least provides a woman's guidance for her."

"Was she a child of your brother or your sister?"

"My sister."

"And she is...no longer..." As Lewis's face tightened at Ellie's bumbling questioning, she shot her hand out to touch his arm. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried." At the feel of his muscular forearm covered in light hairs, she quickly withdrew. She found the brush of starched linens much less disconcerting. "I was only attempting to better grasp her situation."

"It's all right, though your curiosity surprises me."

She couldn't resist a tiny snort. "Have you not found me of a curious nature thus far?"

Lewis laughed. "When you were acting as a spy for your aunt, yes. But I received the impression when your cousin suggested this outing that it might not please you."

She stared at him. Had he read her that well?

"Cora," he prompted her, an edge to his tone. "Many single adults find children an inconvenience."

"Oh! Oh no." Ellie sat up, heat washing her face that he'd thought she considered herself above taking notice of his ward. "It was not the company, but the destination that evoked any displeasure you sensed. I'm less enamored of the wind and sand and heat than Ada and other goodtime girls." She folded her hands in her lap. "I suppose that makes me a stick in the mud."

After a moment of silence, Lewis said, "I would rather a good conversation any day...which I think we're having."

She darted a sideways glance his direction, breath catching. "Indeed, we are."

He met her eyes squarely. "Cora's mother is gone from this world. Her story is one I keep private. At least...for now."

She nodded, releasing her breath. Too much sudden intimacy with this man and she might liquefy like the jellyfish Cora had sighted upon their arrival. “I understand. I have stories like that as well.” Such as her own.

Lewis eyed her with open curiosity. “And you have no siblings?”

She shrugged. “There is only me. My father was the younger brother of Ada’s father. My mother was the daughter of a politician. They married young, and my grandfather, who is now also deceased, got my father a job in Washington. He set aside his dreams of being a writer to raise his family, but my mother died of illness when I was only four.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” The space between his brows creased. “So you spent your first few years in the capital?”

“Yes. I don’t remember it much.”

“I went there once, when I was an adolescent. It was when I first invented...”

Shadows and scuffing sand caused him to trail off. Three dripping forms hurtled into the tent. Cora threw herself on Lewis.

Ellie handed him a blanket to wrap her in.

“My! That was invigorating.” Breathless and laughing, Ada toweled off. Her stylish handkerchief kept her mounds of dark hair perfectly in place even when she patted it dry. “I can’t believe you two just sat here the whole time.”

Ellie straightened a bit. “We were enjoying the picnic.” She peeked at Lewis. “And a talk.”

As he smiled at Ellie, Ada’s brows rose, but she refrained from comment.

Cora eyed the basket. “I’m hungry.”

“Would you like me to make you a plate?” Ellie lifted the lid, and Cora scooted forward to peer in at the contents.

“Yes, please.”

Lewis frowned. “Nurse can do that.”

“I’ve got it.” Ellie was already selecting the items Cora pointed to. She winked at the girl. “I also saved you a ginger ale.”

“Oh, thank you!” Cora took the bottle Ellie unwrapped, and Lewis found an opener for the cap. Within minutes, she was drinking and eating with gusto. “I like your friends, Poppy. I’m glad you finally found some girls to make friends with.”

Ellie joined Ada in light laughter. “We’re glad to get to know you, too, Cora.”

Cora turned to wind her finger around the hem of Ada’s skirt. “I want a

suit like Ada's."

"That's so sweet." Ada grinned over her shoulder, snuggled up next to Jesse.

Lewis chuckled. "I'll have to see what I can do."

Ellie touched the coral design on the top of Cora's light-gray silk blouse. "I personally like your shells."

"Thank you." Cora smiled and abruptly pillowed her head on Ellie's lap. "I'm tired. The wind makes my ears hurt. I'm ready to go back to my room and read."

"You like reading?" When Cora gave a firm nod, Ellie responded with a big smile. "Me too. What kind of stories do you like?"

"When I was little, Uncle Lewy read me *The Jungle Book*, but now that I'm older, I like *Anne of Green Gables* and *Anne of Avonlea*."

"Oh, I love Anne Shirley and Diana Barry! I even love mean old Mrs. Lynde. I think she has a good heart."

Cora giggled, and Ellie twined her fingers with Cora's. Despite her assurance to Lewis, she hadn't spent much time around children. It came as a bit of a surprise that she had anything in common with one. "You must read quite well if you're up to Lucy Montgomery's novels."

Lewis beamed their way. "She's very advanced for her age."

Cora giggled. "Is that what you read, too, Miss Ellie?" She smoothed her finger over Ellie's nails.

"I like mysteries best. I haven't read *Anne of Avonlea* yet, but I would like to."

"You can borrow it when I'm done."

"Why, thank you, Cora."

Lewis drew one knee up and cocked his head Ellie's direction. "Was *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* to your liking?"

"Yes, but more so books with female detectives—Dora Myrl, Lois Cayley, and Loveday Brooke, who was actually created by a woman author, Catherine Louisa Pirkis."

"Naturally." Despite the cynicism in the word, Lewis's expression was warm.

"They're quite good. I can only wish I could write that well."

"You're writing?" His eyebrow rose.

Ellie flushed. Shrugged. "I've tried my hand at a few tales, but for some reason, what keeps coming to me is a children's story. Maybe because that's

what my father wrote.”

Cora’s wide brown eyes stared up at her. “What’s your book about?”

If only Lewis weren’t observing her so intently. She smoothed back a strand of his niece’s wet hair and tried to block him out as she answered. “It’s about a plain bird that doesn’t fit in with its brightly plumed family.”

Still she felt that intense gaze.

“That’s sad.” Cora stroked her hand. “You need a happy ending.”

“Yes, I’ve been trying to think of one.”

Cora blinked. “I know. The plain bird finds another bird that looks like it does, and they start a new family.”

“I like that idea very much.”

In the oblivious way children possess, Cora abruptly pushed aside Ellie’s coat. “I wanna see your suit.”

Ellie attempted to let her have a peek without revealing anything to Lewis. “It’s not very exciting. It’s just black.”

“But it has hot pink trim. That’s cute. I want you to wade with me.” Cora sat up.

“Oh, I’m afraid I’m not very good at jumping waves.”

“I don’t want to jump waves. I want to look for shells. But you have to take your coat off because you can find the best ones as they wash up and the water goes back out.”

Ellie stiffened and looked around.

Ada smirked at her. “Well, go on, Ellie.”

She couldn’t let the child down when Cora was trying so hard to bond with her. Who would know better than she what being an orphan felt like? That longing for closeness and affirmation. Sucking in a breath, she rose and followed the girl to the edge of the tent. She was just about to shed her coat when Lewis called out, “Can I come too?”

“Sure, Poppy.” Cora trotted toward the shore. “Come on, Ellie.”

“Wait for us,” Lewis warned her.

Ellie cringed as he came up behind her, but his hands on her shoulders were gentle, and his smile as he folded her coat was kind. His brief touch on her back ushered her forward.

“Look!” Cora held up a shell. “I found a curly one!”

Ellie soon forgot herself in the hunt for specimens. The water cooled her feet and ankles, and the breeze fanned her flushed cheeks. As she bent to search the shallows and came up with a piece of coral, Lewis captured the

little oil-skinned cap she'd pinned above her bun before it could blow away.

"I think this is fairly pointless." With a chuckle, he tucked it into the waistband of his shorts.

"Thank you. Yes, I could've used more hairpins."

"Or less."

Gooseflesh rippled Ellie's arms. She tried to meet his eyes to rule out flirtation, but a strand of hair whipped into her face. "Ugh. My hands are full of shells."

He stepped closer and slid the errant lock behind her ear. "How's that?"

Better, only she couldn't answer because his nearness stole her breath.

"Your hair is very pretty. It's always been covered by a hat."

Surely, she'd misheard. No one admired her shade of blonde-brown these days.

Cora darted between them, holding up another find. "Look. A heart-shaped shell, like a butterfly."

Ellie welcomed the distraction. "That's my favorite kind."

"Then you can have it."

Lewis took the shell from Cora and inspected it. "Very nice. See here where the two parts join?" He pointed. "It's very delicate there. You should probably take it back to the tent so it doesn't get broken."

"Right. Because it wouldn't be so special if it didn't have both parts."

Was that her? Half a shell? Having her heart broken had demolished any hopes of marriage. Lacking a fortune, beauty, and now youth, what did she have to offer? Besides, she found most men, from the uneducated to the upper crust, self-centered—if not as duplicitous as Will Howell. But Lewis Thornton was not what she had expected.

Ridiculous. Even if Lewis might eventually marry and provide a mother figure for Cora, she most assuredly would not be it.

A horn from the dock drew their notice.

Lewis looked toward the steamer. "It must be time to return to the hotel."

"Yay! I can get a bath." Cora went frolicking toward the tent.

Lewis laughed. "She's an unusual child."

"I like her very much."

"And it's clear she likes you too. Would you not mind much...seeing her again?"

"Mind?" Ellie tried to contain the surge of joy that rose from her middle.

"It would make my time here ever so much better."

“I’m glad. The female companionship will do her good.” Lewis’s smile, complete with dimples and laugh lines, rivaled the setting sun. He offered his hand to help her back to shore, and she struggled to breathe past the sudden swelling in her throat.

She couldn’t—wouldn’t—consider how spending more time with Cora’s guardian made her feel.

CHAPTER 7



Ellie was attempting to identify a specimen of aster in the pine woods just past Belleview's citrus groves when the memory of Lewis's incomparable smile made her slap her hand over her heart and straighten. What in the world was wrong with her? She'd been doing this all day. She'd specifically cried off on Ada's bicycle ride with Cora to avoid seeing him or any reminder of him, yet his face kept popping up in every flower and pinecone. You'd think she was sixteen and he was the first boy who'd smiled at her.

She stuck her nose back in her field guide. Yes, most assuredly, climbing aster vine.

If she wanted to set her story in the tropics, she really must get her facts straight.

Facts, not schoolgirl imaginings—such as the notion that Lewis had not minded when she'd grabbed his arm during the ghost story the steamboat captain told last night. Ada and Jesse had begged them to stay for the last boat, to send Cora back with her nurse so they could join in the bonfire on the beach.

The Roman punch—a mixture of raspberry syrup, lemon and orange juice, Curacao, brandy, and Jamaican rum—had flowed as freely as the songs and tall tales. The captain had ended the evening by riveting them all with the true story of a young bride who had fallen to her death from her third-story window after the hotel's grand opening ball, still wearing her bridal gown and diamond necklace. The woman's apparition was said to appear to modern guests. Ellie had clung to Lewis before she realized what she was doing. But when she'd apologized and started to pull away, he'd caught her arm and

held it through his.

Fact—he'd done so in the general spirit of camaraderie, not attraction. Because men like him did not flirt with plain and penniless spinsters.

Ellie hiked back up the creek bed, breathing deeply of the scents of pine and saltwater. She had to pause once or twice to disengage her skirts from the saw palmettos and to create rough sketches of bottlebrush, holly, and jacarandas. She'd just made her way back to the path when she spied it—an indigo bunting. She stopped and opened her field guide.

The shrill ring of a bicycle bell made her leap to the shoulder of the trail. "For Pete's sake!"

The oblivious adventurers had scared the bird to a higher branch of a farther tree. And then arms wrapped around Ellie's waist, almost toppling her into the ditch.

"I was hoping we'd find you!" She looked down into shining brown eyes. "Cora? You startled me." Ellie glanced behind her. "And Ada and...Jesse?" He wasn't supposed to be here. Ada had assured Lewis the bicycle outing would be girl time.

Jesse lifted his cap from his head. "Just so happened I was passing by when these lovely ladies were renting their wheels. I didn't feel comfortable, them setting out on their own."

"You'll get no agreement from Ellie." Ada swiped her hair back under her jaunty hat. "She's the model for female independence and the only woman I know who'd choose traipsing around alone in the Florida wilds to any amusement a resort can offer."

Jesse frowned. "It really isn't safe, Miss Ellie."

"Pawsh." Ellie waved her hand. It might not be safe for Ada. It was perfectly safe for her, though they were kind to pretend otherwise.

"What *are* you doing out here?" Cora wanted to know.

"Research for my book." She looked over her shoulder and pointed. "See up there? It's the bird I want to write about, the indigo bunting."

Cora squinted in the direction she indicated, then snorted. "That's not indigo. Indigo is blue. That bird is brown."

"Right. It could be a male or a female. The males turn bright blue in the summer."

"And the girl bird stays brown?"

Ellie nodded.

"Well, that's hardly fair."

Ellie couldn't agree more. "Would you like to see if we can get closer?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Ellie." Cora pushed her bicycle to Ada so she could take hold of the handlebars.

Ada pursed her lips. "We're supposed to be on a ride, not bird watching."

"Just for a moment, please, Miss Ada?"

Cora's pleading tone made Ada toss her head but comply. She whispered to Jesse as Ellie and Cora crept closer to the bunting.

"I can't believe that bird changes colors," Cora hissed.

Ellie showed her the depiction that proved it would be so, then moved her finger to the listing below. "If you think that's amazing, look at these painted buntings."

Cora pointed to the male pictured. "It looks like a rainbow—yellow, green, blue, and orange!"

Ellie held her finger to her lips to remind the girl to keep her voice down, then whispered back. "Even the female is green on top with a yellow breast."

"So only the female indigo bunting is always just brown."

"That's right. Darker brown on top than on bottom." Two tones of dull.

Cora frowned. "Why didn't God make her pretty?" She gazed up at the bird on the branch above them. Suddenly, it broke forth with *sweet-sweet-chew-chew-sweet-sweet*. Cora's face lit up. "Oh, but her song is beautiful!"

"Do you think this would be a good species to use in my story, then?"

"Yes. That very one. We'll call her Brownie. Let's draw her."

Ellie opened her notebook and extracted her pencil. "I'll do my best."

Cora raised an eyebrow as she studied Ellie's renderings of the local flora on the facing page. "Did you do those?"

"Yes. They're not very good. I'll have to hire an illustrator, but between my sketches and the field guide, that should give him something to work from."

"You already have someone to draw pictures in your book?"

"Well...no." She hadn't thought that far ahead.

"I can do it!" Cora held out her hands.

Ellie hesitated, then relinquished her drawing materials. Couldn't be much worse than her own scribbles. Cora squatted down, and her pencil moved rapidly over the paper. Back on the path, Ada let out a sigh gusty enough to blow the bunting away. Ellie held up her finger.

A moment later, Cora stood back up and returned her notebook and pencil. Ellie's jaw dropped. She'd expected a child's heavy, simplistic

strokes. Instead, lightly drawn lines realistically captured the bird's soft feathers and bright eye.

"It would be much better if I had my colored pencils."

"Cora...this is amazing."

The girl beamed. "Drawing is my favorite thing, even more than reading. Grandmother says I do it way too much."

"I hardly think so. Would...would you be willing to make some sketches for me of birds and flowers and trees and such?"

"For your book?" Cora's exclamation succeeded where Ada's sigh had failed in sending the bird skyward, and Ellie led Cora back toward the path.

"Well, yes."

Cora grabbed her hand and swung it. "You mean, I could work with you?"

"Possibly. We could plan specific drawings once I write the whole story, but for now, I could give you my notes and my field guide and see what you come up with. Would your uncle allow that?"

"You bet, he will!" Cora spun under Ellie's arm, then did a little dance on the sandy path.

Ada pushed Cora's bicycle toward her. "What's all this about?"

"Miss Ellie's going to let me illustrate her book!"

"Oh, she is, is she?" A speculative gleam lit Ada's eyes as she surveyed Ellie.

Ellie refused to meet her gaze. "We'll see. But for now, you should finish your ride. I'll meet you back at the hotel."

Cora mounted her seat and placed her feet on the pedals. "Let's go slowly so you can walk along with us. Maybe we'll see some other birds."

"Oh, goody." Ada rolled her eyes.

They completed a start-and-stop half mile with Cora pointing out every bird and flower that might possibly be of interest. As they approached the place where the bicycle path crossed the carriage road, Cora rode ahead, Jesse and Ada giggling side by side, and Ellie trailing, finishing some notes. Under the last of the shade, Jesse and Ada drew up for him to right her hat.

"Miss Ellie! I see a painted bunting!" Cora pointed ahead as she called over her shoulder. She stood up on her pedals.

"Wait, Cora!"

The girl darted out of sight, but the scream and the screech of metal that followed made Ellie drop her notebook and race forward faster than Jesse and

Ada could leap off their bicycles. The bright Florida sun shone cheerily on a heart-stopping scene—Cora’s bicycle bent in half by the fender of a red Roadster, her limp form in the arms of a strange man on the far side of the road, and his leg bent at an unnatural angle.



Lewis pulled the sheet up to Cora’s chin as Nurse McMullan departed with the medicine bottle and empty tumbler. “That should help you sleep, darling.”

Cora grasped his hand. “I keep seeing the automobile coming at me, Poppy.”

“I know, my sweet.” He fought to keep his tone soothing even as anger simmered. Why had Jesse intruded on Ada’s ride with Cora, distracting her? He couldn’t decide which to blame.

According to Ellie, the Hastings shared no such hesitations. The moment word of the accident reached them, their wrath had fallen on Jesse’s head. Ellie had described Ada’s weeping and theatrics as Florence declared she was not to see the young man again.

“We can just be thankful God placed that young gardener there at the right moment.” He’d been watchful where Ada had not. And it had cost him dearly.

Cora blinked at him, owlish in the first throes of the mild sedative. “Did God want him to get hurt instead of me?”

Lewis frowned. Every day, something reminded him how much he lacked parenting skills. But he wasn’t supposed to be a parent. His sister was supposed to be here. Instead, she’d been used and discarded like so much trash. “God didn’t want anyone to get hurt. He lets people make choices, and sometimes we make bad ones.”

“Was it because he was a servant? That’s why he got hurt instead of me?”

“No. No!” Lewis smoothed her hair. The nature of her questioning reached into his chest and plucked up unease. Where did she get such ideas? “He got hurt because he was brave. He protected someone more vulnerable than himself.”

“Vulner...able...”

Lewis kissed Cora’s forehead as her eyelids sagged. “Stop thinking, little

brain.”

Her eyes flashed open, and she smiled. “Grandmother says I’m just like you.”

“Pity you, then.” He chuckled as he rose and adjusted the covers.

But she whimpered as he turned off the light, even though sunshine still illuminated the edges of the curtains. “I want Ellie.”

Did she know that very person was waiting in the attached sitting room? He could hear her pacing and praying. At least, he assumed that was what her muttering was. “You need to sleep. You’ve had a shock.”

“Please...I want Ellie first. She’s going to give me her notes. I want them here when I wake up.”

“I can get them for you.”

“Ellie...”

If he could’ve resisted the pitiful tone, the hand outstretched on the coverlet would’ve undone him, anyway. How had his niece gotten so attached to the older Miss Hastings so quickly?

With a sigh, Lewis went to the door and opened it. Her ridiculously large netted hat askew, Ellie whirled and affixed him with her bright aquamarine eyes.

He offered a faint smile. “We’ve given her something to help her sleep, but she’s asking for you. She said something about...notes?”

Ellie snatched up a couple of small volumes from the end table and rushed toward him. But she paused on the threshold, whispering. “Are you certain she’s all right?”

“Nurse McMullan inspected her from head to toe and swears she is no worse for wear. The woman has actual nursing training. It seems the young gardener took the brunt of the fall.”

She shuddered. “And the impact. Do you think he will be okay?”

Why was she asking him? She’d been there—he hadn’t. He’d only almost lost his heart and his lunch when a porter summoned him to the carriage porch. There he’d taken a sobbing Cora into his arms as they loaded the stoic-faced hero onto a stretcher and into a delivery vehicle for the ride to Ocala or Orlando. “If he survives the drive. His leg was broken pretty badly.”

Ellie shook her head. “There should be a hospital closer.” She brushed past him and went to bend over the small form on the twin bed. “How are you feeling, my sweet?”

“Sleepy. Did you see the in-igo buntin’?”

Ellie clasped Cora's hand as Lewis drew closer. "I didn't even look. I was so worried about you."

"I'm worried about the nice man who saved me."

"Me too. Shall we say a prayer for him?"

Cora nodded, and Ellie bowed her head and asked God to protect and heal the brave servant who'd sacrificed himself to keep Cora from harm. After the prayer, Ellie smiled at his niece. "You know that is what God does for us. He loves us so much that He sent his son, Jesus, to die in our place."

"Poppy told me about that."

Lewis caught his breath as Ellie glanced back at him, her eyes shining. That she cared enough about his niece to take this opening to share her faith—that she shared *his* faith—washed him in warmth. He balled his hands in his pockets.

"We'll talk more after you've rested. For now, here are the notes." Ellie laid the small volumes on Cora's bedside table. "Brownie will be waiting for you to bring her to life."

Cora smiled before closing her eyes.

Ellie squeezed her hand, then straightened.

Lewis escorted her from the room and quietly closed the door.

Inches away, she turned to him, blinking back tears. "I can't help feeling this is my fault. If I hadn't offered for her to do the drawings for my book, she never would've darted across the road to see that silly bird."

"Is *that* what happened?" Lewis had been wracking his brain trying to figure out what would make his normally obedient niece race ahead of her guardians.

Ellie hung her head. "I'm afraid so. I'm very bad with children, Lewis."

She'd just said his name. It wrapped around his heart and squeezed. He lifted her chin with his finger and almost laughed at her furrowed brow. "No worse than I am. And from what I've witnessed, not bad at all. I've never seen Cora take to anyone the way she's taken to you."

"Maybe that's because I know what it feels like to be alone." Her statement breathless, she searched his eyes.

"As do I."

"You do?"

He shifted. "I have my parents, and now Cora, but I've had my share of heartache."

She swallowed, and her throat worked as though another of her pointed

questions worked its way up, but she came out with, “You’re not angry at me, then?”

He shook his head. “Cora told me you were walking well behind. It wasn’t your responsibility to watch her.”

“But I should—”

Lewis placed his finger over her lips, and her eyes widened. “Thank you for coming by and waiting, Ellie. I’m deeply touched that you care about my niece.”

When he withdrew his finger, she stepped away, lowering her lashes. “Then you won’t mind if she helps me with the book?”

“I think it will be just what she needs.”

A nervous little laugh escaped as Ellie pulled on her gloves. “Then I suppose we will be seeing more of each other, even though we no longer need to chaperone Ada and Jesse.”

“I’m very sorry for them but not at all disappointed that our acquaintance is not at an end.”

Was he wrong, or did her answering look reveal a shared relief before she nodded and hurried out of the room?

CHAPTER 8



Lewis watched Florence Hastings and her women’s club biddies ignore Ellie through a breakfast of fruit, grape nuts, and boiled fish with potatoes—three courses too long. None of them spied him, seated behind a potted palm. But his fist clenched at the way not a single woman had spoken to or even looked at Ellie—and her aunt had done nothing to correct the slight.

Finally, he tossed his napkin and whisked around the corner, executing an abrupt bow as eyes rounded under preposterous hats. Ellie’s shoulders snapped back.

“Why, Mr. Thornton, we did not see you there!” Florence was the first to speak. “How is your dear Cora this morning?”

“She is well, but I ordered her breakfast in bed and insisted she rest until noon.” He cut his gaze to Ellie, who offered a faltering smile.

Florence pressed her palm to her ample bosom. “Very wise. I can’t tell you how badly we feel that Cora was almost injured on my Ada’s watch. I can only hope we are not the object of your loathing now, Mr. Thornton.”

“Of course not, Mrs. Hastings. Cora knows better than to cross a road without her chaperones.”

“We mustn’t place blame on the poor child. To be fair, someone who should not have been there created a distraction.” Florence’s forehead wrinkled. When Lewis did not rise to her bait, she sighed, then reached for her teacup. “Nevertheless, Ada is also abed, prostrate with shame.”

More likely, with grief. But Lewis gave a dismissive wave. “Tell her Cora is fine. I only wish I could say the same of the young gardener.”

“Oh yes.” Florence returned her cup to its saucer. “Have you had an

update?”

“Only that he made it to the hospital. But the break was bad enough that, well...” Lewis took in the bevy of dismayed expressions. “They are not sure of the outcome yet.” He didn’t need to elaborate. Everyone knew that severe injuries to limbs all too often resulted in amputation. “Should it not end well, I will help in every way I can.”

Florence thudded the table. “If Nellie Plant was here, I would give the diamond necklace I brought to wear to the ball to start a local hospital fund.”

Ellie ventured softly, “Why...do you need Nellie Plant?”

“She is the chairwoman of our women’s club. We could never initiate such an ambitious fundraising drive without her authorization.”

“I disagree.” A silver-haired lady with a bluebird on her hat spoke up. “I’ve heard Nellie say more than once how strongly she believes the Pinellas Peninsula needs a medical facility. Wouldn’t she be delighted if she returned from her adventures on the *Iolanda* to learn we’d undertaken such an effort in her absence?”

Murmurs of ascent followed her suggestion.

Morton and Nellie Plant were touring Japan, China, India, and the Mediterranean on their yacht, the second largest in the world. Florence had obviously banked on Nellie’s absence to void her offer, for a look of horror flashed across her face.

Lewis smiled at her. “Mrs. Hastings, it seems you must step into Mrs. Plant’s shoes.”

Florence uttered a nervous laugh. “That may be beyond me.”

“Nonsense.” A plump blonde in a white dress patted her arm. “You should chair our committee. We’ll help you get the word out that everyone should bring donations to the ball.”

Florence spluttered.

Ellie folded her napkin. “It’s a tremendous idea, Aunt Florence. Maybe they’ll even name the hospital after you.”

“Why...yes...” Her face softening, Florence smoothed her hair.

Ellie rose. “And now I must check on Ada. Perhaps Mr. Thornton would be willing to escort me.”

Lewis gave a slight bow. “It would be my pleasure. Might I impose on you to also make a brief call on my niece?”

“Your niece?” Florence’s head swiveled. “Why ever would you need her to do that?”

“Your niece has graciously enlisted mine in a project of an artistic nature, Mrs. Hastings. Have a good day, ladies.” Lewis offered his arm to Ellie, ending the conversation with those at the table—although he took no small pleasure in their curious and aghast expressions. He lowered his voice as they swept away. “She’s been drawing all morning. She cannot wait to show her sketches.”

Ellie’s eyes lit. “I cannot wait to see them. Thank you for rescuing me. I might have crawled under the table if I had to endure one more moment of conversation about cosmetics and chiropody.”

“What even is chiropody?”

“A practice focused on the care of the feet, not only massage but the removal of any...unpleasant features.” When Lewis turned a grimace her way, she laughed. “They say sore feet hasten old age and diseased feet cause hair to gray.”

He let out a breath and shook his head. “What foolishness will the idle rich dream up next?”

Ellie paused in the sparsely furnished lobby. “Is there no foolishness that you find diverting, Mr. Thornton? Or are all your endeavors practical?”

“What insightful questions.” He laughed to cover his surprise and purchase a moment to consider—would Ellie’s curious nature extend to his side interest? Or would she find it wasteful, foolish, or—worse yet—unnatural, as too many others had?

She cocked her head. “Is it? Insightful?”

He patted her hand. “I do enjoy making some inventions that delight and surprise.”

“Such as?”

“Maybe I’ll show you sometime.” He resumed their walk toward the stairs. He was a coward when it came to things that really held meaning for him. “Is Ada truly as troubled as your aunt made out?”

“Yes. She feels horrible. Not just about Cora but about Jesse. I’m afraid she might really love him, Lewis.”

“I’m glad we’re back to first names.”

Ellie’s face reddened, her gaze on the steps. “She asked me to get a message to him. I think she wants to meet up, but I don’t believe the answer lies in continued subterfuge.”

“I agree. It’s time for a direct approach. Tell her I’ve arranged the golf match. In a few days, Jesse will have the opportunity to present his idea to

Mr. Mellon.”

“Oh, that will help her so much.” Ellie bestowed a smile so grateful it almost melted his knees. “And just in time too. Her birthday is tomorrow. It’s a big one.” Twenty? The youngest Hastings couldn’t be twenty-five yet. “I’ve been wracking my brain, trying to think what would cheer her up.”

An idea stopped Lewis on the first-floor landing—a way to assure the Hastings, especially Ada, he bore them no ill will while also testing how much of his true self he could show to Ellie.

“What is it?”

He turned to her. “You remember that business acquaintance of mine on the fourth floor?”

“The mystery...er...man?” She raised a brow.

“Yes. I would like to bring him to meet Ada and any friends she can gather for tea time tomorrow in her sitting room. Can you arrange that?”

“Well, yes, but why?”

“I think he can bring a smile to her face. And hopefully, yours.”

She shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

“Just tell her it’s a birthday surprise.”



The Great Gaspachi. Ellie couldn’t believe she’d been such a poor detective. It all made sense as the mysterious Italian man she’d glimpsed in the basement—clad in a black vest and red silk shirt, the sleeve of which she’d glimpsed on the fourth floor—delighted Ada and her friends with magic tricks. They’d all been sworn to secrecy—although Ellie suspected the men were well aware that a bit of rumor swirling around the hotel would serve to increase anticipation.

As Lewis aided the magician through a number of card, ball, and bunny-in-the-hat tricks, Ellie burned with questions. Was he Gaspachi’s financier? Friend? Was there more to it?

Just when she thought the man could not get more intriguing...

“Is anyone ready for tea?”

Eager murmurs greeted Gaspachi’s unexpected question.

Lewis pushed a teacart in from the dressing room, complete with porcelain cups—which he distributed—and a covered object. Gaspachi

whisked the cloth away.

“Allow me to serve you, ladies. This teapot is designed to anticipate the needs of young women of fashion. Merely ask for the type of tea you desire, and my teapot will oblige.” He moved toward Ada. “What type of tea would you like, milady?”

She tittered a moment, glancing at Ellie. “Jasmine?”

“Jasmine, it is.” With calm confidence, Gaspachi tilted the spout above her cup and released a stream of steaming amber liquid. When she stared at it, he waved his other hand. “Go, ahead, miss. Try it. Let me know if it is to your satisfaction.”

Ada sipped, paused, and then a broad smile spread over her face. “It’s the best jasmine tea I’ve ever tasted!”

“Aha! I told you my teapot was obliging. Who is next?” Gaspachi’s gaze fell on Ellie. She tried to wave him off, but he approached. “What will the birthday girl’s cousin have?”

“Um...Early Grey?” Ellie held out her cup, and it was filled with darker liquid than Ada’s. Consternation furrowed her brows when she tasted her request. “How do you do that?”

“By the power of your suggestion, Miss Hastings.” Gaspachi winked before moving on.

Ellie stared at Lewis, but he merely raised his eyebrows.

Aunt Florence approached him, murmuring loud enough for Ellie to hear. “What a treat for Ada that you knew the magician performing for the ball. Your gesture of kindness is noted...and taken to heart.” Her voice deepened on the last, and her gaze strayed to Ada, who was selecting pastries from the tray Maeve brought around.

Ellie’s stomach tightened. With Jesse out of the way, Aunt Florence again honed in on Lewis. Just why had he suggested this event, anyway? Was there credence to Aunt Florence’s assumption?

Gaspachi interrupted the chatter with a sharp clap. “I have one final treat for you before I bid you goodbye.”

A hushed expectation settled as Lewis brought in another cart, this one bearing a small tree in a box planter, an orange on one side and a silver vial on the other.

Gaspachi bowed before Ada. “Miss Hastings, would you sacrifice your handkerchief?”

“Why...yes.” She pulled it out of her pocket and gave it to the magician.

Balling the cloth, he smashed it with both hands until it appeared to grow smaller and smaller. He then picked up the orange and passed the handkerchief through it. Gasps sounded when it disappeared.

Gaspachi pressed the orange between his hands, making it smaller also, as though it reversed its age. When he opened his hands, he showed them a fine powder. Lewis brought him the silver vial. Gaspachi poured the powder into it, then added a splash of what he told them was alcohol from a flask kept in his pocket. Lewis lit the mixture on fire, and Gaspachi set the vial beneath the planter. As the fumes from the blue flame rose, blossoms appeared on the tree.

Ellie sat forward. When Gaspachi waved his wand over the tree and the blossoms turned into oranges, she gasped with the others. The objection leapt off her tongue before she could catch it. "Those cannot be real."

"I assure you, they are very real, Miss Hastings." Gaspachi plucked one and tossed it to her, the next to Ada.

Ellie closed her hands around the soft flesh of the fruit. She used her nail to peel back a bit of the skin. "It's real."

"But I am not finished. I believe Miss Ada Hastings is still lacking a handkerchief." Gaspachi waved his wand again, and the last orange at the top of the tree split into four parts. A folded square of white cloth emerged.

Ada jumped up. "My handkerchief!"

Gaspachi bowed. "Do come and retrieve it." When she got closer, Ellie overheard his whisper. "I believe there's a message inside for you."

Her lips parted, but she responded to his secretive tone by clasping the handkerchief close. Only when she returned to her seat did she open it, leaning toward Ellie. Indeed, a small slip of paper was folded inside.

"What does it say?" Ellie whispered.

Ada opened the note to reveal bold, slanting script. *Do not give up hope. True love shall prevail.* Her eyes glowed. "It's Jesse's handwriting."

Ellie glanced to Lewis, who smiled at her. Her heart flooded with warmth. He knew. He wasn't angling for Ada. He was helping her reunite with her beau.

CHAPTER 9



When Lewis returned from securing the orange tree table in the dressing room, the young ladies crowded around Giovanni to pet his long-eared bunny, but Ellie was not among them. If she'd retreated to her bedroom, he'd have no chance of gauging her reaction to the afternoon's entertainment. But then he caught a movement on the balcony. Ellie sat on a wicker chaise, her white lawn dress draping her extended legs, in her hands, a thick book.

He crossed to the French doors and went out to join her. "What are you doing out here?"

She shrugged and made a move to sit up. "Just taking a moment after all the excitement."

"Don't get up on my account." Lewis waved, and she resettled her skirt around her legs. "May I join you?"

"Of course."

He settled on a matching rocker. "Quite pleasant out here."

The balmy breeze lifted a strand of hair from Ellie's pompadour. Pushing it back, she grimaced. "Much quieter."

"Did you not enjoy the show?" Lewis fairly held his breath.

"Oh, I did. Although, at first, I admit, I had my reservations."

"Such as?"

"I would not be a fan of conjuring or beheadings."

Lewis laughed, although he'd faced these objections before. "Neither are we—which is why we made it clear when the hotel wanted to book Giovanni that anything sensational or dark would not be a part of his show. He's mainly a children's magician, visiting not only fairs but hospitals and

orphanages. He even sets up a show in the Philadelphia slums.”

She turned her head to the side. “You seem proud of him.”

“I am. It takes great skill to accomplish what he does with merely sleight of hand and...mechanics.”

Her gaze narrowed on him. “You are more than his financier, are you not?”

Lewis hesitated. “I am also his friend.”

“How did you meet?”

He laughed. “When he attempted to steal my billfold.”

“No.” Ellie’s mouth hung open.

“Indeed.” Lewis scooted back into his chair and rocked. “I was in my teens and he but a boy, an orphan living on the streets of South Philly.”

“Did you call the police?”

“No. I took him home with me and demanded he show me how he did it. He had many a trick up his sleeve to survive. My parents took him in, schooled him, and helped redirect his talents.”

“That was very good of them...and you. And these...*mechanics*.” Her eyes glowed with curiosity. “You are the inventor behind his shows, aren’t you?”

Lewis rubbed his hands together, his midsection aswirl. “You have pulled back the curtain, Miss Ellie.”

“Why?” She didn’t sound incredulous—merely mystified.

“Why not? It’s the age of wonder. The telephone, radiophone, and telautograph. The automobile. Flying machines! The kinetoscope, vitascope, and phantoscope create moving pictures on film.” Lewis sat forward, unable to disguise his enthusiasm. “My company produces its share of practical inventions. These bring efficiency, order to our lives. But what I create for Giovanni and the children brings wonder...joy...hope. It opens young minds to what may seem impossible.”

Her grip tightened on her book. “Will you show me?”

Surprise and pleasure escaped on a puff of breath. “Show you the inventions?”

“Yes. I want to see what you are so passionate about.”

“It’s not the invention, but what it produces. What it makes possible.”

“So will you?”

Her reaction was better than anticipated, but... “As with any magician, Giovanni is very protective of his secrets.”

Ellie's brows rose. "Are they not also your secrets? You don't have to show me everything, just one or two of your most special creations."

Lewis rubbed his jaw. "Is not the suspension of belief wherein the pleasure lies?"

"The pleasure lies in the knowing."

A woman after his own heart. He tapped his lips with his finger.

Her eyes twinkled. "The Great Gaspachi wouldn't have to know, though."

He affected a shocked gasp. "Miss Hastings, are you encouraging subterfuge?"

She snickered. "I should think you of all people would see where it is occasionally beneficial."

A warm laugh bubbled up. "Fine. Come to the east basement. You know where it is." He shot her a wry glance, then consulted his watch. "Be there at eight o'clock, and I will let you in." She smiled and drew a breath, but he held up a finger. "If, that is, you will tell me what's so fascinating about your book as to draw you from your cousin's birthday party."

"Oh." Ellie looked at the book, then held it against her chest, almost reverently. "Next to the Bible, this book is most precious to me—although it wouldn't take much to draw me away from any party."

"You don't like parties?"

"I don't like the way people act at them—as though they're participating in a competition to be most clever, most amusing, and most attractive. I'm afraid I fall short at all of those." Her lids hooded her eyes.

Lewis's heart squeezed. "I don't agree. I found your enthusiasm just now very attractive." There. He'd said it. His pulse pounded as Ellie's gaze swept up. Might as well reveal his hand, especially when her expression begged confirmation. "I also find your honesty very refreshing in a world where so much is not as it seems." She radiated a beauty from within, making him question his conclusions about women.

"Including you, sir." Ellie's admission was whisper-soft.

"Then we have much to learn about each other. Will you tell me about this precious book of yours?"

She puffed a little breath and relaxed her hold on the spine, extending the volume to him. "These are my father's stories which I compiled and had published after his death. I was looking through them again in hopes that they will inspire my own story."

Lewis took the book and read the title aloud. "*Tall Tales from the Patent*

Office.” His eyes shot up to hers. “Your father worked at the U.S. Patent Office—in Washington, D.C.?”

“Yes. Remember, I told you I was born there?”

He flipped open the title page. “Blake Hastings. Blake Hastings...” He refrained from tapping his head in an attempt to jog his sluggish memory. It couldn’t be. Couldn’t. “Would there be any way...no, I cannot ask...”

“Ask what? Pray, do ask.” Ellie leaned forward.

He closed the volume. “Would there be any way you would allow me to borrow this for a couple of days? Cora has been asking me to read to her at night, and I must admit, *Anne of Avonlea* is not my forte. She and I would both value your father’s writing.” He wasn’t ready to tell her all yet, not until he knew whether his suspicion was accurate, but this was one of those moments a bit of subterfuge might prove beneficial.

He didn’t expect the light laugh she sat back with. “Of course.”

“Of course?”

“Yes. You may take it. I have several copies.”

“Oh.” Lewis released his breath. “That makes me feel better about asking.”

“I would love for Cora to hear Father’s stories. Besides, it seems only fair—you agreed to show me something special to you, so I should compensate by doing likewise. Don’t you think?”

Her intimate smile turned his insides to that new-fangled cream of wheat. Increasingly, he realized the most special thing might be sitting right before him. And his tie to her might go back farther than either of them had suspected.



Lewis and Giovanni were loading the orange table into the hotel’s enclosed cart when the dressing room door flew open. Giovanni leapt to secure the cover around the contraption while Lewis turned to face Walter Hastings.

The man tugged his silk vest. “I just wanted to thank you again, gentlemen, for a delightful show. Mrs. Hastings is happy. Ada is happy. Your thoughtfulness meant so much to her.” The meaningful smile Walter bestowed on Lewis suggested he shared his wife’s renewed matchmaking

hopes. “If today’s show was any indication, we can anticipate an unforgettable performance at the ball.”

“That is my intention, sir.” Giovanni bowed, almost apologetic. “Although I am still working on my *piece de resistance*.”

Lewis gaped at him. “You haven’t decided on your closing act?”

“Eh.” The magician made a weighing gesture. “I’ve been considering my options. But today...today I had an idea. An epiphany. One with which you, sir, could help me.” He fixed Walter with his magnetizing stare.

“I?” Walter laid his hand on his own chest.

Giovanni dropped his tone to a conspiratorial whisper. “The jewelry drive for the hospital is a cause close to my heart, since I often perform at hospitals. I have heard of your wife’s stunning necklace and her selfless offer to donate it. I can only think of one thing that would inspire more giving.”

“What is that?” Walter whispered back.

“If this necklace”—Giovanni snapped his fingers and Walter jumped—“disappeared.”

Walter’s eyes bulged. “At the ball?”

“Before the ball. Imagine the alarm, the indignation.” Giovanni flexed a dark brow. “The righteous rush to contribute. And then, of course, it would show back up, magically, the night of the gala.” He opened his hands, smirking enigmatically.

“Ah...” Walter rubbed his chin and rocked back on his heels, staring at Giovanni.

Lewis restrained a laugh. This was why his friend made such a great showman—not just his sleight of hand, but the mesmerizing power of his personality. He could get anyone to believe anything. A little nudge from Lewis wouldn’t hurt either. “I must say, the necklace would make a stunning centerpiece for the show.”

Walter barked a little laugh as he backed toward the exit. “My wife would have my head on a platter if I just *gave* the necklace to you. Too bad you can’t do real magic and get inside that safe.” The challenge in his tone and the glance he cast toward the black-and-gold box in the corner was unmistakable.

CHAPTER 10



“Do you know what this is?” Lewis held the oil lamp up to a contraption he’d uncovered. When he’d attempted to show Ellie the intricacies of the mechanism beneath the orange tree, they’d discovered that the electric bulbs in the basement lacked the necessary brightness.

Ellie stood back and put her hands on her hips. “A small wooden box on top of a larger wooden box on top of a wooden tripod?”

“Ah, but what do you suppose is inside the wooden boxes?” The light flickered off Lewis’s white silk evening cravat and vest and sparked a challenge in his eyes.

She folded her arms, taking her inspiration from the orange tree. “A mechanized bouquet of flowers?”

He shook his head. “Something far more wonderful. The ability to capture life—and replay it.”

Ellie sucked in a breath. “A kinetoscope?”

“A cinématographe.” Lewis opened the main box to reveal a crank and a variety of strange mechanisms. “Patterned after Edison’s invention, yes, but meant by the Lumière brothers to show films to a wider audience than a single person at a kinetoscope parlor. This machine functions as a camera, a developer, and a projector.”

“How?” Ellie gasped.

Lewis pointed out different parts—an eccentric cam, claws, a frame, and a winding ramp—and explained their functions. That Ellie could grasp only part of what he was saying both frustrated and intrigued her. But the way Lewis’s passion and proximity drew her attention to his eyes and lips rather than the gears and parts really made her brain spin out of her head—a place

she decidedly did not like it.

She forced herself to focus. “But how do film and magic intersect?”

“The possibilities are limitless. Professional magician Georges Méliès was the first to pioneer in this area. When the Lumières would not sell him a cinématographe, he purchased a British animatograph and reversed its mechanical principles. He’s been making hundreds of films on his property. Stop-motion photography allows him to add or remove something from a scene, allowing objects—”

“To appear and disappear.” Ellie brightened.

“Or transform.” His face glowing, Lewis separated his hands with a sweeping gesture—missing only a theatrical puff of smoke.

“Will this be part of the show at the ball, then?”

“You’ll have to wait and—”

A knock on the locked door interrupted him. Ellie flushed from head to toe. Lewis’s invitation had given her not a moment of concern on account of his reputation, but hers would be ruined if they were discovered alone together in such a spot. He held out his hand, urging her to stay back while he went to answer the knock.

He cracked the door open. “Yes?”

The voice of a messenger boy piped up, and a hand with a paper pushed through the opening. “From Nurse McMullan.”

“Thank you.” Lewis read the note, then fished in his pocket for a coin. “Tell her I will be right there.”

As soon as their privacy was restored, Ellie stepped forward. “Is everything all right?”

Lewis returned to close up and recover the camera. “Cora’s had a nightmare.”

“Oh no. About the accident?”

“Likely. She’s asking to finish the story from your father’s book that we started last night.” Lewis cut a pointed glance at her.

“Oh. Of course. I can return to my room.”

“No...she’s asking for *you* to read it.”

“Me?” Ellie’s hand fluttered to the chest of her beaded navy evening dress.

“That’s what the note said.” Lewis shrugged and gave her a sheepish smile. “Do you mind too much?”

That if someone saw her going into Lewis Thornton’s rooms at night, she

might as well pin a scarlet letter to her chest? Or that if she didn't, she'd disappoint a most beguiling, child-sized version of herself? Hard choice, that. She smiled back. "Not at all."

Lewis checked that the hall was clear before extinguishing the lamp and locking up. "Are you the only one with a key? Since, naturally, The Great Gaspachi would have no need of a key." Ellie chuckled.

"Naturally. The head porter also has one. That way, he can let the necessary workers in leading up to the show. We travel with our own crew of stagehands."

"That makes sense. But something else doesn't." She balled her fist as she followed him down the hall.

He glanced back. "What's that?"

"It's clear that you love this part of your life, yet you're so secretive about it. Why?"

Lewis didn't reply at first as they mounted the stairs. "Let's just say that not everyone reacts as you have."

A sudden suspicion stunned her. "Were you testing me with the birthday show?"

His lopsided, fleeting grin jogged her heartrate. "Perhaps partially."

He cared enough for her opinion to matter? That notion attracted examination about as much as a seven-foot python, so she redirected. "If something brings such wonder and joy to others, shouldn't you be proud of your part in it? Just be yourself, and don't worry about the naysayers."

"Sage advice, but easier spoken than heeded." Lewis drew her to his side. "Besides, couldn't I say the same of you?"

Her face warmed. "Some of us don't have the luxury of taking risks from a position of power."

"I don't know. Good opinion can be just as quickly lost as gained."

She couldn't argue with that. Ellie breathed easier when they emerged onto the hotel's main floor—a good opportunity for a change of topic. "Which story are you reading to Cora?"

"The first one...about Ridge Torn." His gaze—not lightening in the way she'd hoped for—measured her reaction.

"Oh, the boy genius whose invention synchronized all the clocks in the world and who traveled globally implementing his device. That one was always my favorite."

"Why was that?"

She laughed and flushed again. “Oh, a silly, personal reason, really.”

“Do tell.” Lewis paused outside the suite he’d taken her to the evening of the accident, and again yesterday morning, when Cora’s bird sketches had delighted her.

Clearly, he wasn’t opening the door until she answered. Ellie flipped her hand down. “Father always told me that only a man like this Ridge Torn, someone who shared my intense curiosity and sharp eye for detail, would make a proper match for me.”

“Did he, now?”

“It’s quite embarrassing, seeing as how, well...” She lost her thought when she intersected his intense gaze.

What was Lewis waiting for, with that strange smirk dancing among his laugh lines? It made her stomach feel as though a million carbonated bubbles fizzled inside.

The door flew open. Nurse McMullan’s head poked out. “There you are!” She fairly pulled Ellie inside, tugging her through the sitting room toward a bedroom. “She won’t settle until Miss Ellie tucks her in.”

Lewis followed, chuckling.

“Ellie!” Sitting up under her coverlet with the book of *Tall Tales* on her lap, Cora flung her arms open.

Ellie bent to hug the child, then sat beside her. She smoothed the tousled braids. “What’s this I hear about bad dreams?”

Cora leaned her head on Ellie’s shoulder. “I keep seeing the car coming at me, and I startle awake.”

“Oh no! Well, Jesus would want you to sleep peacefully, and we got good news from the hospital today that the gardener will recover just fine. So why don’t we say a prayer that Jesus takes away your fears?” Ellie glanced up, her heart skipping a beat as Lewis seated himself at the end of the bed. His nod affirmed her more than any words.

“Okay, but first, can you finish the story?” Cora opened the pages to the place marked with a ribbon and plunked the book on Ellie’s lap. “We were just to the part where Ridge went to Russia.”

“Very well.” Ellie focused on the spot indicated by Cora’s finger. “After Ridge set all the watches in Russia, the emperor could lay tracks from Moscow to the frozen wilds of Siberia on the Pacific Ocean. Then he decided he would connect the railway to China. To express his gratitude to the young clockmaker, he gifted him with a precious box made of amber from the Baltic

Sea. The first place Ridge went when he returned to Washington was to the Patent Office where it had all started. He placed the amber box on the desk of the man who had approved his invention..." Ellie's voice dwindled as something clicked into place in her mind. Lewis watched her steadily. It couldn't be...

He took the book, read the last few sentences, and laid it on the table. "And that concludes the adventures of the young Ridge Torn."

"Aw..." Cora's protest trailed off when Lewis tweaked her nose.

"Time for bed." He lifted the covers.

"First, Ellie has to pray."

"Oh...yes." Ellie collected her thoughts and folded her hands. "Dear Jesus, as...amazing as the words of this story are, they lack the power of your Word. The psalmist tells us that he sought the Lord, and you heard him and delivered him from all his fears. Please do that for Cora tonight. May your angels guard her, that she might sleep peacefully. Amen."

"Amen," Lewis echoed.

Ellie bent to kiss Cora's head, but the girl grasped her arm. "Will you stay a while?"

When she hesitated, Lewis answered. "Perhaps Miss Ellie will sit with me on the balcony until you fall asleep."

Her chest squeezing, Ellie nodded.

Again Cora stopped her from rising. "I have to tell you something."

Ellie fought amusement at the girl's dramatic whisper. "What's that?"

"I was wrong about the ending to your story."

"Oh?"

Cora nodded, her braids sliding over the pillow. "The brown indigo bunting shouldn't look for a whole other species of bird to make its family."

"Why not?" Ellie held Cora's small hand.

"Because even though they might look alike, they wouldn't be alike inside." She tapped her chest. "If God made the bright-blue indigo bunting to be the plain brown bunting's mate, who is she to argue?"

Ellie couldn't speak past the sudden lump in her throat. She patted Cora's head. "You are a very smart girl."

Cora beamed, then spoke as she turned to her side. "Besides, she's pretty in her own way, and no other bird has a sweeter voice."

Lewis kissed Cora and turned off the lamp, then followed Ellie into the sitting room, where Nurse McMullan sat with her knitting. They passed

through the open door to the balcony.

“Can you still hear me?” Cora’s faint question made them laugh.

“Yes,” Lewis called back. “We can hear you. Now goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

“She’s a peach.” Ellie shook her head, then rested a hand on the railing. “It’s beautiful out here.”

Faint lights twinkled between the hotel and the bay, where a soft golden glow remained on the horizon. The first stars began to appear in the velvet dome of sky. Lewis stood beside her, his presence a palpable force even when Nurse placed an oil lamp on the table behind them before retreating.

“Do you know now why I wanted to borrow your book?” His low question made her heart flutter.

Her fingers tightened on the railing. “I can’t believe it, but...you knew my father?”

Lewis nodded. “My father brought me to Washington when I was in my teens. We presented my design for temperature-compensated balance wheels for watches to Mr. Blake Hastings. He was amazed, supportive, but the next day, I returned and asked him to withdraw my application.”

“Why?”

“There was a small flaw. I needed to make an adjustment.”

“But then, how...”

“I received a letter in the mail not long after. The patent had been granted. Your father learned someone else with an inferior design was applying, so he put mine through.”

Ellie gasped. “I can’t believe he did that.”

“His letter said he never doubted the credibility of my design. And he was right. I had already made the adjustment, and with the patent in hand, was able to approach the railroad.”

“So you really are Ridge Torn.”

“I sometimes went by the nickname Ridge as a boy. Ridgely is my middle name.”

Her breath choked off when she recalled her admission earlier in the hallway, and she raised her hand to her throat. “I promise, I had no idea.”

“And I had no idea your father had made me the subject of one of his stories.”

“I’m sorry, Lewis. It never occurred to me to seek permissions. And Father always used fictional names for his characters.”

“I’m not upset, Ellie.” Lewis reached for her hand. “If your father hadn’t believed in me, my life would be very different. It all seems like fate now, that you and I would meet like this.”

She couldn’t breathe, standing so close to him that she could smell his spicy scent, feel his warmth. The last time a man had gazed at her like that...

Alarm bells began to peal in her head.

“You’ve been so kind to Cora—and now to find out we already share this connection. Your father insisted I owed him nothing, but I’ve always felt a debt I wanted to repay. That I might be able to at least express my thankfulness to you...” He drew her hand to his chest. “Ellie, will you attend the ball with me?”

The breath left her in a rush. He wanted to discharge his debt to her father by taking his poor, spinster daughter to a dance? The same shame washed her as the moment she’d caught her supposed beau, Will Howell, riffling through her uncle’s desk. Ellie pulled away and stepped back. “If my father said you owed him nothing, then you owe nothing to me. Please, consider yourself freed of any obligation to my family.”

“That’s not all it is, Ellie.”

The sudden weight might make her chest cave in. Will had used almost those same words. She’d never be made a fool of like that again. “It’s been my pleasure to learn about your inventions and get to know Cora. There’s no need to make anything else of our friendship than that.” Ellie backed up, looking away from Lewis’s stunned expression. “I’ll...save you a dance at the ball.” She headed for the door as fast as her feet could carry her.

CHAPTER 11



“‘I’ll save you a dance.’ ‘*I’ll save you a dance?*’” Lewis snapped down the newspaper he’d been pretending to read while the shoeshine boys worked at his and Giovanni’s feet. Giovanni was notoriously particular about the condition of his Italian leather boots. Lewis stared at him even while his outburst provoked curious looks from several passersby in the lobby. “Can you believe that is what she said? When I was in the process of pouring my heart out?”

Giovanni met Lewis’s eyes over his notebook—the one in which he kept careful records about his performances. “Were you pouring out your heart? Or your gratefulness to her father? Because from what you have told me—”

“Does it matter? It’s all tied together. I think I even said something inane about destiny or fate.” Lewis huffed at his own naiveté.

“Still, she could have taken your invitation as discharging a duty.” Giovanni resorted to a tone of exaggerated patience. “Don’t take this wrong, but at times, the benevolent manner you sometimes assume can imply that you are doing someone a favor.”

“How could that be the case when I made it clear her father did *me* the favor? No.” Lewis shook his head. “I thought Ellie was different because of the way she acted with Cora, but the first time I indicated romantic interest, she fled.” He raised the *Wall Street Journal* again.

Giovanni sighed. He tapped his pencil against his notebook.

“What?”

“It is hard for you to see, never having come from a position of disadvantage...” Giovanni’s hesitant prelude hooked Lewis.

“To see what?”

“When a person has long been overlooked, cast aside, treated second class, one comes to expect that is always the attitude of one’s betters.”

“But Ellie is my equal in birth, intelligence, and education.” Even as he said it, his gut twisted.

Giovani firmed his lips. “Perhaps, yet in every other way, society considers her beneath you. Maybe *she* considers herself beneath you.”

The swish of brushes on leather and the pungent scent of polish filled the silence. Memories of Lewis’s own ire at Ellie’s mistreatment by family and friends resurfaced.

“I tried to tell her, Gi, there was more to my invitation.”

“Then you must try again. And with better words.”

Lewis folded his paper and stared unseeingly at the people in the lobby. Did he dare assume Ellie’s rejection the night before wasn’t a rejection of him and Cora, but that it stemmed from her own insecurities? Hadn’t he made his pleasure in their continued acquaintance plain?

Suddenly, he sat up straight. “There she is.” His gaze fixed on Ellie and Ada as they crossed the lobby toward the west lounge. As if Ellie heard him, she looked over her shoulder, met his eyes for a fraction of a second, and then tugged Ada through the French doors.

Giovani gestured. “Well, go.”

He hesitated. He’d never before chased after a woman.

“The ball is in two days. Go!” Giovanni nearly shoved him.

Lewis pulled his leg away from the shoeshine boy and, handing him a bill, hop-skipped down from the elevated chair. The women had disappeared by the time he made it to the lounge. A quick scan of the long narrow room with its floral wallpaper and glazed windows overlooking the veranda revealed only Ada, seated in a wicker chair near the white radiator. His heart sank, but she acknowledged him with a welcoming smile as he requested to sit next to her.

“Of course. I’m sorry, you just missed Ellie. She had to powder her nose.”

“She’s avoiding me, isn’t she?”

Ada picked at her lace-trimmed sailor collar. “Why, I don’t—”

“Miss Ada, I usually find that directness, while humbling, serves best.”

She sighed. “She has some notion that you asked her to the ball out of a sense of charity.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“So you do like her?” Ada brightened.

“I have never met a woman who shares my curiosities in life, nor one who has treated Cora so well. Yet I seem to have offended her in some way.” Sitting on the edge of his chair, Lewis opened his hands.

“Broken hearts search hard for offense, Mr. Thornton.”

“Broken hearts?” He cocked his head.

“This is just between us, but there was once a man who pretended to court Ellie only to spy on my father. Turns out, he was employed by a competitor.” Ada’s mouth twisted as the arrow of her words pierced Lewis’s chest. “Ever since, Ellie has worn her suspicions on her sleeve. She is convinced everyone scorns her as the poor relation. If she thinks your interest in her could be explained in any other way...”

“Ah.” So Giovanni had been right, but it went further than he’d believed. And much closer to home. “Do you think you might convince her to give me a chance?”

Ada smiled and leaned forward. “I will try, but you must be persistent.”

“And so must you.”

“Pardon me?” She raised a dark brow.

“I have news for you.” Lewis scooted closer so that he could whisper in her ear. “The golfing match went as planned. Jesse charmed Mr. Mellon and impressed him with his plans for full-service gasoline stations. Mellon asked for him to submit the details in writing.”

Ada sucked in a breath. “So he will meet with him?”

“They’ve set a date when they return to Pittsburgh for Jesse to present before Mellon’s board.”

Ada’s squeal and impulsive hug nearly knocked Lewis from his chair. When she withdrew, he patted her hand. “Jesse also plans to ask for an audience with your father, to update him on his future plans and request that he escort you to the ball.”

Her hand flew over her mouth, her eyes rounding. “Oh, Mr. Thornton.”

Lewis chuckled. “You’d best soften him up. And divert your mother when Jesse calls.”

“I will. Thank you. Thank you so much.” She grabbed his hand with both of hers and squeezed.

“You have Jesse’s determination to thank. I was only a conduit.” Glancing around to ensure their exchange had not drawn undue attention, his gaze snagged on a slight form standing in the doorway.

Ellie held her hand to her heart before turning and darting away—misunderstanding, yet again.



“Ellie, will you please wait up? It’s not as though we aren’t going to the same place.”

Ellie didn’t break her stride down the second-floor corridor for her cousin’s pleading tone. “Yes, but I’m going to get there first.”

“Will you let me explain? It’s not how it appeared.”

“Boy, have I heard that before.”

“Wait.” Ada snatched her arm. “Lewis is not Will. And he was not flirting with me. He was telling me Jesse got an audience with Mellon and plans to try again with Father.”

Ellie turned and searched Ada’s face, finding only genuineness. “That’s wonderful.”

“Yes. Thanks to Lewis. Will you hear him out? I believe his intentions for you are as sincere as Jesse’s for me.”

“Let’s be honest, Ada. The odds might be against Jesse, but with leverage from Mellon, he stands a chance. I don’t have any ace up my sleeve. There is no reason Lewis would hold genuine interest in me. He’s just unaccustomed to not getting what he wants.”

“Really?” Ada’s look of profound sadness brought back the sense of shame. “Do you think so poorly of yourself, truly? Because that is not what Lewis says he sees. You think I’m a match for him. I’m not. I’m not smart enough, interesting enough. But you are.”

“No, you’re not, if you think *smart* is enough to satisfy such a man.” Ellie regretted the words the minute they left her mouth. The light fading from Ada’s eyes indicated they’d found their mark. “Ada, I’m—”

A scream from inside the Hastings suite tore through Ellie’s apology. Ada turned and hurtled toward the door. Ellie tumbled into the sitting room after her. Aunt Florence stood in the dressing room, Gertrude beside her, the safe open.

“Mother, what is it?” Ada demanded.

Aunt Florence turned a mottled face toward them. “My necklace—I was going to wear it to dinner tonight to invite donations for the hospital fund. It’s

gone!”

Adam and Maeve hurried into the small chamber, though Maeve slunk back against the hanging clothes.

“Are you certain?” The valet bent over the safe, searching inside. “I just saw it in here. Perhaps it was merely moved.”

“I know what is and isn’t in that safe.” Gertrude elevated her nose.

Adam retreated, his complexion going white.

“You just saw it, did you?” Aunt Florence narrowed her eyes. “When was that?”

“A couple days ago...maybe a few.”

“A few, now, hmm? And yet, only the two of you have the combination.” Aunt Florence looked between Adam and Gertrude.

Maeve snuck a glance in Ellie’s direction, but Ellie clamped down on her lower lip. She wouldn’t throw the girl to the wolf that way—at least, not yet.

“Ellie?”

She jumped. “Yes, aunt?”

Aunt Florence gestured her closer. Her hand latched onto Ellie’s arm. “Your detective skills are needed again. I want you to question everyone who’s had access to this room over the past week, even those who are not supposed to have the combination. You will get to the bottom of this, and this necklace *will* be found. Do you understand?”

As usual, did she have a choice but to comply? “Yes ma’am.”

Ellie refused to meet Maeve’s terrified gaze. Given what Ellie knew, she might be the obvious suspect, but Aunt Florence’s directive had brought about another, equally unsettling possibility. Someone else had accessed the dressing room during the past week...someone who might not even need a combination.

CHAPTER 12



Later that day, Ellie knocked on the door of the room she shared with Ada before entering—just in case she might already be changing for dinner. Seated at her dresser, when Ada saw it was her, she turned back to her cosmetics. Her lack of greeting confirmed she still smarted from Ellie’s careless comment in the hallway.

Ellie clutched her notebook to her bodice and spoke hesitantly. “I’ve been working on my interview questions. May I run them by you?”

Ada lifted a shoulder. “I suppose.” She dabbed a puff holding rice powder over her face while Ellie read through her list.

“What do you think?”

“I don’t expect any of them to squeeze truth out of the guilty party.”

“Neither do I, but having the same questions allows me to compare reactions during the interviews.” Ellie sat on the edge of her bed. “With whom should I begin?”

Ada sighed and dipped her finger into a pot of balm tinted with crushed geraniums, then applied the mixture to her lips. “Father has gone to the hotel manager. His detective will likely have more success.”

Ellie closed her notebook. “You think I missed too much about Lewis.”

“Certainly, you did. We should dress for dinner.” Ada’s short tone announced no desire for communication. She rose and inspected the gown hanging on the armoire. “Where is Maeve?”

“Ada, I was wrong about Lewis, and it was you, not me, with the discernment to see his fine qualities. I’m sorry for what I said earlier.”

Ada turned to her with her hands on her hips. “So now I’m smart enough to recognize a good man but not to know that man cares for you?”

Ellie shook her head. “Maybe he does in some way, but it wouldn’t outlast the season. I’ve been a companion for Cora, but that doesn’t mean he finds me matrimonial material. He’ll go back to Philadelphia and forget about me.”

“Not if you make yourself unforgettable.”

“And how am I to do that?”

“Go to the ball with him. We’ll make you beautiful, Ellie, and when you show him how you really feel, he’ll make his intentions clear.”

“Oh, Ada.” Ellie blinked and allowed her shoulders to droop. “You think everyone can exude your charm and find success. But I’m not you. I look like a child playing dress-up in a ballgown. I’m a terrible dancer. And I have no idea how to flirt.”

Ada held up a finger. “One of those things, I can fix.” She started riffling through her dresses.

“No, stop, Ada. I appreciate your good intentions, but—”

A knock sounded on the door, and Maeve called out, “I have your gloves from the shop, Miss Ada.”

“Come in.”

Maeve breezed in. “I’m sorry it took me so long. The whole hotel’s abuzz with talk of the missus’s missing necklace. I couldn’t get checked out for several women gossiping with the clerk.”

Ada waved her over. “Help me, Maeve. Where is that silk champagne gown with the turquoise beaded trim?”

Maeve laid the new gloves on the dresser. “Oh, I have it in the dressing room to see if I can alter it. You said it was too small for you.”

“And so it is. You’re going to alter it for Ellie.”

Maeve gasped. “That new Egyptian style will be perfect on her. And the beads are just the color of her eyes.” She whisked into the adjoining room and returned with the dress in question—a sophisticated creation Ellie could never pull off.

“Oh, no...no.” Ellie waved her hands. She completed the sentence she’d started before Maeve’s return. “I’d just make a munge of things and they would end as humiliatingly as with Will.”

“You must put that in the past.” Ada approached, holding the dress in front of Ellie as she turned her to the mirror.

“Land sakes.” Maeve’s hand fluttered to her chest.

Ellie’s reflection momentarily struck her silent. Ada was correct—the hue

of the gown lent her an ethereal appearance, and its sleek, simple lines and charcoal-colored embroidery suited her serious demeanor. The bodice's soft tucking into the empire waist and draped portions to either side might even give her a bosom.

"See?" Ada made no effort to hide her triumph. "Lewis will come to claim his dance and never let you go."

Maeve clasped her hands together. "Mr. Thornton? Oh, any woman in this hotel would be merry as a grig to be his partner, especially after what he did today."

"What did he do?" Ellie gently pushed the dress away.

"Why, he just unfurled a banner in the rotunda stating that if anyone found the necklace before the ball, he'll match the worth with his own donation. He might as well have kicked over an anthill. Folks are looking high and low. It gives me hope that someone will actually find it."

Ellie veiled her eyes as her unease swelled.

"What is it?" Ada asked.

"I don't want to believe this, but doesn't this seem like the perfect publicity stunt?"

Maeve gasped. "You think Mr. Thornton stole the diamonds?"

"Maybe not stole. Borrowed. With Gaspachi." But wasn't taking something for even a short length of time, for a good purpose, if not criminal, equally lacking in integrity? If it were true, her estimation couldn't help but fall—lower than when she'd thought him a womanizer.

"Then you must ask him, Ellie." Ada laid the Egyptian gown on the bed.

"Your mother did say everyone who accessed the dressing room should be questioned, but I can't bear to face him after I ran off—not once, but twice."

"He will forgive you, and he will tell you the truth."

"Will he? If the success of his friend's show is at stake?" Lewis had said Giovanni was a children's magician. Perhaps this booking offered his ticket to greater things.

"I hope he did take the necklace. The missus is dead set it was me or Adam." Maeve flipped around Ada's dinner gown and started unbuttoning the back.

Ada doffed the satin robe she wore over her undergarments. "Why would Mother think it was you, Maeve? Only Adam and Gertrude have the combination."

Maeve sucked in her lower lip and gazed at Ellie.

Ada turned to Ellie. "What?"

Ellie sighed.

"You can tell her, Miss Ellie." Maeve removed the dress from the hanger. "Mrs. Hastings already learned that me da has fallen too ill to work. Gertrude found out and told her, busybody that she is. The missus thinks I have motive, but she doesn't realize I know the combination to the safe."

When Ada's mouth fell open, Ellie grimaced. "The night I came up to get your pearl earrings, Maeve fetched them for me."

"What did you just say?" The imperious voice coming from the open door to the dressing room froze them all. Aunt Florence had entered from her own chambers and now stood staring at them with gleaming eyes. She drew closer, honing in on the maid. "You opened the safe yourself?"

"No ma'am!" Maeve still stood with Ada's dress extended. Ada took it and quickly dropped it over her head while the maid stammered, "I—I never did that."

Ellie stepped forward. "Adam opened it for us."

Aunt Florence's gaze cut into her. "And stayed with you the whole time?"

"He...er..." She hesitated too long.

"Go and fetch him." When Ellie stood there with her hands clasped and her throat closed up, Aunt Florence bellowed, "Now!"

Heart hammering, Ellie stumbled through the dressing room. She found the valet in the main bedchamber, laying out her uncle's accessories. When they returned to Aunt Florence, she addressed the solemn manservant.

"It has come to my attention that on at least one occasion, you have opened the safe for Maeve. Did you leave her unaccompanied with my jewels?"

"No ma'am." Adam's gaze never wavered. "Miss Ellie was with her."

When Aunt Florence glanced her way, Ellie nodded. "We saw the box for your diamond necklace but did not open it. I believe you said the box is now gone as well."

Aunt Florence drew herself up. "And yet, with such carelessness among my staff, any of them could have opened the safe. The necklace could have been taken at any time."

"We didn't, ma'am. We swear it." Maeve intertwined her fingers under her chin.

"I suppose you expect me to take your word for that, while you've known

the combination all along.” Aunt Florence pulled her shoulders back.

Adam moved in front of Maeve. “I take full responsibility for stepping away when I should have remained, but Maeve has never opened the safe.”

“So you think...or say.” Florence measured the two of them with sharp eyes—too sharp.

Maeve ducked her head. “Adam never knew I learned the combination, ma’am.”

“Mother, I think we should take their word. None of the servants have ever been anything but honest.” Someone had clasped the buttons at the back of Ada’s dress. She opened her hand. “If you’re going to doubt them, you should question your own maid.”

“Gertrude has no reason to steal from me. Neither has she ever kept anything from me. I can’t say the same for these two, which is why they will both be on probation until we return to Pittsburgh. We will reassess the matter at that time.” Nose in the air, Florence preceded Adam from the room. He didn’t leave before giving Maeve a reassuring glance.

She wiped tears from her cheeks. “I didn’t do anything wrong, Miss Ada, Miss Ellie. Please believe me. I can’t lose this job.”

Ellie clasped her arm. “Don’t worry, Maeve. I will find out the truth.” Even if it meant turning her investigation in a direction she dreaded.



Ellie’s spirits lifted as she climbed the grand staircase two days later, the afternoon of the ball. Despite questioning half a dozen people, her investigation had turned up no more than the hotel detective’s, but she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so valued.

This morning, she’d left Maeve sewing. The girl had whispered that she wanted Ellie to have a chance at love just as she had. Adam had proposed and promised to take care of her no matter what happened with their employment. Ada overflowed with goodwill because Jesse had called on her father and obtained permission to escort her to the ball. And Aunt Florence had announced that she’d made Ellie an appointment at the chiropody parlor—because every woman over twenty-five needed one occasionally. Rather than take offense at the aspersion on her age, Ellie had accepted the rare gift with gratitude. Despite her disparaging words to Lewis on the subject, it had been

nice to have her feet soaked, massaged, rubbed with a pumice stone, and her nails trimmed.

So when she opened the door to their apartments and her shoe brushed an envelope on the floor, and that envelope bore her name in masculine handwriting, her heart leapt. She tore the flap open. Sure enough, the missive was signed by Lewis. *Ellie, please meet me in the tea garden at five to discuss my invitation to the ball.* She clasped the note to her chest.

Should she talk with him? Could Ada be right? Her cousin asserted that Lewis would do nothing to risk Ellie's good opinion. Even the detective believed the thief to be someone outside their immediate circle.

"El-lie?"

The tremor in Aunt Florence's voice brought Ellie to her bedroom at a dash. She braced herself in the doorframe with a breathless laugh, for the reason Aunt Florence's voice sounded odd became clear. Her aunt sat in a wingchair, a towel on her head and another around her neck. Gertrude stood over her with the Hydro-Vacu, massaging her face with the Depurator. "Oh, aunt. I thought you were ill."

Aunt Florence pushed the machine aside. "Give us a moment, Gertrude."

"But, ma'am, we only have ten more minutes until the henna processes."

"Yes, yes." Aunt Florence waved her away. "Come back when it's time."

When the maid retreated to the dressing room with pinched lips, Ellie approached her aunt. "Where is Ada?"

"Having a late luncheon and a stroll with Mr. Bowen. I sent Maeve to chaperone."

"Oh, that's lovely."

"Yes, well, we haven't much time." Florence's brusque tone indicated she'd yet to fully accept her defeat in this particular arena. "Did you learn anything about the necklace?"

"Unfortunately, no. The hotel detective is questioning the employees who work on this floor. I sat in on several interviews—to no avail." When her aunt's expression fell, Ellie touched her shoulder. "Don't worry. I have another idea to follow up on."

"Oh? What's that?"

Ellie twisted her hands. Should she lead Aunt Florence down this path before she knew more? Her aunt's eyes bored into her, so she continued. "Well...you know Mr. Thornton and Gaspachi were in the dressing room for quite some time last week."

Aunt Florence scoffed. “And indeed, Mr. Thornton’s financial state makes him a prime candidate.”

“Not for that reason, but...perhaps not Mr. Thornton but Gaspachi took the necklace. For the performance.” She waited until her aunt’s brows raised and comprehension dawned. In fact, it had been Ada who suggested this possibility—one which Ellie longed to embrace. “I’m going to meet Mr. Thornton and see if he’ll take me to Gaspachi.” Her voice firmed as she made the decision. Her sleuthing had gotten her nowhere. Simple and direct might constitute the best approach.

“Why wouldn’t he have just asked to borrow the necklace?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll do my utmost to find out.”

“Very well.” Aunt Florence dabbed excess cream from her face with the edge of her towel. “I never thought it would come down to the day before the ball without any answers, but it’s not for lack of effort on your part. How was your chiropody appointment?”

Ellie smiled. “Wonderful. Thank you so much.”

Aunt Florence flicked her hand. “Don’t mention it. You’ve run all over this hotel and talked to so many people, you needed it.”

“Indeed, I could dance the two-step all night now.” Ellie rocked back and wiggled her toes in her shoes.

“There will be no need for that.”

“Pardon me?” She must’ve misheard her aunt’s abrupt pronouncement.

“The ball—I know you don’t want to go, and I’ve told Ada and Maeve they should leave off any foolishness about it. I had Maeve stop altering that dress.”

A sinking sensation took Ellie by surprise. “But...why?”

Aunt Florence leaned forward with an impatient sigh. “Ellie, we can pardon them for being silly girls, but you and I, we have the wisdom of years, do we not? So we may speak candidly?”

“Of course.” Ellie stiffened. Her aunt’s candid speech normally required emotional armor.

“Lewis Thornton is the most eligible man in this hotel, yet he’s never indicated any interest in a woman. If Ada could not turn his head, are we to suppose...?” Running a finger over her eyelid, she let her question dangle, hooking into Ellie’s midsection. “I’ve not protested your friendship with his niece for the child’s benefit, especially after our little near-incident, but for us to imagine there is more to the liaison, well...”

“Is it so impossible he might find my company interesting?” Ellie pushed the supposition past stiff lips.

“Interesting for what?” Florence’s eyes snapped to hers.

Ellie’s mouth fell open. “You think Lewis Thornton means to debauch me?”

Florence waved her hand, looking away. “Really, Ellie, must you use such vulgar terms? Perhaps he’s considering engaging you as a governess. Whatever the man is seeking, we would be wise to assume it’s not an engagement.”

“And why is that?”

“Thornton is a businessman. He seeks transactions that benefit him. Don’t look at me like that. I’m trying to protect you. I wouldn’t think I’d have to say so after all we went through before.”

Ellie’s heart thudded, and heat swept up from her collar. “Is it so impossible for you to believe those of us not on your social strata might find love? Ada supports me. She believes Lewis is sincere. And Maeve—why, she was working on my dress so that I could attend the ball even though you’ve jeopardized her own future happiness. It will serve you right if she finds love despite you...and me too!” She balled her hands into fists. “I’m going to that ball even if I have to wear my bathing costume. And now, I’m going to meet Lewis Thornton and learn the truth.” All of it. She headed for the door.

“Ellie, do not bring shame upon this family again.”

Ellie glanced over her shoulder. “Don’t worry, Aunt. You’ve already done that.” She had to wade through it as she walked away.

CHAPTER 13



Ellie paced the terraced lawn west of the hotel, attempting to cool her emotions with the bay breeze. Peace remained elusive. The sound of a bowling ball scattering pins and cheering carried from the bowling alley in the basement, and a couple of chattering girls wheeled their bicycles past, bound for the adjacent shop. Seagulls cawed overhead.

She sought refuge in the Japanese Garden. Quiet closed around her, and a stone bench by a koi pond beckoned. Ellie leaned over to track the progress of the bright orange and yellow fish among the lily pads, but their frantic movement mirrored her thoughts, and the musical *chu-wee* of a snowy plover in a cedar tree brought to mind her bird story, now beautifully illustrated but still lacking an ending.

Was Aunt Florence right? Did Lewis look on her as a mere diversion? A potential employee? Either of those possibilities would crush her—even if he had nothing to do with the necklace’s disappearance. Did she have the courage to look him in the eye and ask the questions she had for him? She had half an hour before their meeting. Ellie prayed for guidance.

As she returned to the walkway, a familiar figure caught her eye—the head porter who’d accompanied Lewis and Giovanni to their storage rooms the day they’d arrived. He headed east, the same direction she was bound, so she trailed him at a distance. When he turned into the entrance between the west and east basements, Ellie hesitated. Hadn’t Lewis told her the man had a master key? That he would use it to allow stagehands to access the equipment rooms before the performance? On impulse, she followed.

An employee pushing a handcart joined the porter. Talking and gesturing, they made their way to Gaspachi’s storage rooms. The porter held the door

while the younger man entered, then left it ajar. Ellie paused behind a laundry cart.

A moment later, the porter reappeared. He called back inside, “Call me when you finish unloading.” Without glancing toward Ellie, he departed in the opposite direction.

She sidled up to the door and peeked inside. Things had changed since she’d last been inside—the film camera moved, crates and boxes unpacked. A chair sat near the door, a false bottom extended. Next to it, an electromagnet lay on a wheeled cart. Along the wall, birds and bunnies teetered and hopped in open cages. But there was no sign of the employee. He must be in the innermost room. She could take a quick look around and be out before he finished unpacking that massive handcart. If she found nothing, she could meet Lewis in the tea garden.

Reassured by whistling and thumping from the opposite direction, she moved into a smaller side room—and stopped upon sighting a scuffed brown safe on a table. Ellie clamped her hand over her mouth. Could it be? She hurried over and examined the numbered dial.

Could Lewis have learned the combination of the Hastings safe? In case this was the same, she tried Ada’s birthday—right, left, right to the matching numerals—then tugged on the door. It didn’t budge. This was silly. Cora’s birthday? The girl had proudly told Ellie the date she’d turn ten. Ellie spun the dial. Nothing. She’d told Cora her birthday and even whispered the horrible truth that she’d be thirty on the next one. Surely, Cora wouldn’t have told Lewis, and surely, he wouldn’t use...

In the midst of her entering the combination, a lock clicked. Not the one on the safe. A louder sound that came from near the hallway. Ellie hurried to peek into the main room—now dark and empty. As was the larger inner room. She ran to the exit. Her heart plummeted as though it had been sucked down by Aunt Florence’s Hydro-Vacu. The door wouldn’t open.



*H*alf past five, in the tea garden, Lewis checked his watch. Where was Ellie? Would she stand him up? He should’ve written a better explanation on his note. Of course, a woman of her dignity would be insulted by such an abrupt summons—as though she was a servant, just the way her

aunt treated her. He should've gone in person, with a big bouquet of flowers. No. A nosegay for the ball—an apple blossom. *I prefer you above all.*

But did she prefer him? Maybe he'd been right, and Ellie valued her independence over commitment, especially with a child involved. Or maybe that false suitor had crushed her trust beyond repair. Either way, he needed to speak with her face to face. To learn the truth. He deserved the truth. So did Cora, who had worn down his patience the last few days by asking about Ellie nonstop.

Ada had assured him Ellie would see him, but they were running out of time. Another few minutes, and he'd have to leave for the dinner Giovanni was holding for the workers.



At six, in the basement, Ellie wiped tears from her face. Where was everyone? Why weren't workers constantly in and out of Gaspachi's storage, preparing for the show? And while surely employees passed in the hall, the massive door, thick walls, and clunking from the nearby laundry must drown out her calls.

Well. Someone would come eventually. And meanwhile, she ought to try again to crack open that safe. She got up from the chair with the false bottom and returned to the side room—where the safe door now stood open. She gasped. Her birthday combination must've worked.

Ellie hurried forward. Her stomach sank as she approached...for inside the safe lay a single box. One she recognized. And inside that box, a velvet bag containing Florence's necklace. The diamonds winked on her palm in the dim electric light.

Her breath wheezed out slow and painful. So she had been right. The Great Gaspachi had taken the necklace, and if it was here and not in Giovanni's room, Lewis must know. He knew everything in this place.

Not if she could help it. She might just have an ace up her sleeve, after all.

Ellie slid the bag containing the necklace into the top of her padded corset—finally, the stupid thing proved of some use—and returned the box to the safe. She closed the door and spun the dial. Then she set about doing what she was best at...investigating. As far as she knew, there was only one way in

and out of here, but this was a magician's lair, wasn't it? If chairs could have false bottoms, if obliging kettles could pour any kind of tea and mechanical orange trees could produce real fruit, couldn't there be a hidden exit?

She searched the walls, moving boxes and wedging herself behind furniture when necessary—to no avail. But a series of gears and cranks appeared to operate some sort of dumbwaiter in the far corner of the innermost room. Ellie turned the smallest crank, watching for an elevator to raise or lower in the wooden frame. What she did not expect was for a portion of the wooden ceiling to descend from above.



An hour later, Ellie found the Egyptian dress hanging on the armoire, clearly altered, but no Maeve in sight. In fact, the silence of the apartment indicated the family had gone to dinner without her. Not surprising, considering how long it had taken her to affect her escape from the magician's storage room. She brushed another line of dust from her gored skirt and poked her head into her aunt and uncle's bedroom.

Gertrude looked up from arranging Aunt Florence's cosmetics. "And just where have you gallivanted off to?"

"Never mind that. Where is Maeve?"

"In her room on the fourth floor, I'd suppose." The maid went back to her business with a smirk that aroused Ellie's suspicion.

Ellie whisked back into her bedroom. She placed the dress and some supplies into a valise and hurried for the stairs. At the door she knew to be Maeve's, she knocked. "Maeve, it's Ellie."

The door cracked open, and a puffy and blotched face peered out.

"Whatever has happened? Do let me in." After the girl stepped back for her to enter, Ellie hesitated before placing her bag on one of two narrow metal-framed beds. "Is this Gertrude's?"

"It would be, but she prefers a cot in the dressing room to the servants' quarters."

Ellie turned to embrace Maeve. "Why are you up here, crying?"

"Oh, Miss Ellie. After you left, the missus called me and Adam in for questioning again. Only this time, it ended far worse."

"Then I have something that will set your mind at ease." Ellie reached

into her bosom and pulled out the velvet bag.

Maeve gasped, grabbed it, and peered inside. “Oh, law. It’s truly the necklace. Where did you find it?”

“In The Great Gaspachi’s storeroom—which required many gymnastic attempts to escape, I might add.”

“You got shut in there? We all wondered where you were.”

“For a bit.” Ellie rubbed the leg which had begun to smart during her dash to the fourth story. She’d landed poorly on it as she leapt onto the portion of the stage floor she’d cranked within range of a climb to regions above.

Maeve’s eyes, liquid pools of compassion, met hers. “Oh, Miss Ellie. So it was Mr. Thornton?”

Ellie took the necklace and returned it to the bag. “I have to believe he was involved. I’ll know the truth soon enough, but I need you to help me dress for the ball.”

But Maeve shook her head. “I dare not return to your room.”

“Gertrude acted strangely, so I brought everything here.” Ellie indicated the valise. “But why should you be worried if I have proof of your innocence?”

“Because that’s not why your aunt dismissed me.”

“Dismissed you?” Ellie could barely get the words out. “Why?”

“Because of Adam. She forced us to admit our feelings for each other. Said she wouldn’t have a sordid affair going on beneath her very nose. We’re to leave on tomorrow morning’s train.”

“But how did she know?”

“I think…” Maeve dropped her gaze. “I think it was something you said to her.”

Ellie searched her memory of her last conversation with Aunt Florence. She’d been so flustered by her aunt’s insinuations about Lewis that she could scarcely recall what might have given a clue about Maeve and Adam. “I don’t know what it was, Maeve. If I did, I promise, it was not intentional. I would never—”

Maeve clasped her hand. “I know, Miss Ellie. It’s not your fault.”

“But I feel horrible. I must set this to right. And I intend to.” Ellie focused on Maeve. “I have a plan. Will you help me?”



“Where is she?” Lewis searched the crowded ballroom for the umpteenth time before turning to his companions. “Is she coming?”

On Jesse’s arm, Ada gave him a compassionate smile. “I’m sorry, Lewis. I don’t know. As I told you, when I returned from dinner, the dress was gone, so Ellie must’ve been there, but I never saw her.”

“Where would she wear a ballgown if not here?”

“Hopefully, she will come. She’s been more than a bit mysterious lately.”

She couldn’t have said it better. With every evasion, Lewis’s frustration mounted.

The dance master announced, “*La Contre Danse*.” The orchestra played an introduction.

“Do you mind if we join in, old chap?” Jesse peered around Ada, hopeful.

“Of course not. Go ahead.” Lewis waved his hand. After this dance, he’d have to go backstage, anyway. The hour approached eleven, the start of the show.

He grabbed a drink from the refreshment table as couples faced couples in lengthwise sets—forming a perfect opening to the door the moment a figure in beige silk appeared. Lewis lowered his goblet.

Ellie. But could it be?

The chandelier reflected off waves of golden hair, unbound like a girl’s but woven with turquoise ribbon. Beneath a short fur stole, beads of the same shade accented the gown—a gown which perfectly draped her slender figure. She looked like an elven enchantress, a spirit from another realm.

The couples two-stepped, obscuring his vision, then marched. Lewis lurched into motion, heading for the door. By the time the dancers performed a *moulinet*, Ellie had disappeared. Where was she? There—in the foyer. Pacing the carpet, her hands clasped.

Lewis stopped in front of her. “I’ve been hoping you’d come.” When she raised her wide eyes to him, the breath left his chest. He found enough to speak one word. “Beautiful.”

She laughed, but the sound held an edge that raked his nerves.

“I’m serious.”

“And I don’t know why I’m here.” She turned to go.

“Ellie!” His cry stopped her as surely as if he’d grabbed her arm—thankfully, since that would’ve been his next move. “I waited for you in the tea garden. Why didn’t you come?”

“I was unavoidably detained.”

“I’m sorry for that, because I’ve wanted to talk to you ever since I invited you to the ball.” He took a step closer. “I got the sense that you doubted my sincerity. Or that you questioned my reasons. I didn’t express myself well that night. Ellie, I was asking you not out of appreciation for your father, but rather, for you.”

She ducked her head. “That’s what Ada said.”

“She related what I told her. Why have you avoided me?”

Still she wouldn’t meet his eyes. “There were things I was uncertain of.”

“Then come with me now, and we will clear them all up. But first, I need to ask you to make good on your promise of a dance—and not just any dance. The Belleview waltz. I need a partner to dance it on stage with me.”

“On stage?” She gasped.

“Yes. It’s the first act of the magic show. Do you trust me?” He imbued his gaze with all the sincerity he could muster.

She stared back a moment. “If I go in there with you, I will contradict my aunt’s wishes.”

Lewis couldn’t suppress a smile. “That seems a very good reason indeed.” He extended his arm.

She took it with a sly look. Lewis’s hopes soared. After this waltz, after the magic show, he would tell her everything.

As he escorted her through the crowd, the music ended and dancers parted, making way with curious murmurs. The electric lights extinguished, and a collective gasp went up. The gas lamps along the front illuminated the steps. A spotlight found them as they moved to center stage.

Lewis took Ellie’s hand but stepped apart from her as he raised his voice to address the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m Lewis Thornton of Philadelphia, and tonight my lovely partner, Miss Ellie Hastings, will help me begin the evening’s entertainment by dancing the historic Belleview Waltz.”

Oohs, ahs, and a smattering of applause followed. From the periphery, a stout form in burgundy silk placed her hands on her hips. No matter. He’d soon have the woman eating out of his hand.

“Why am *I* up here, you may ask? Someone dear to me recently told me that I should be myself”—he dared to glance at Ellie—“so tonight I am sharing a secret love of mine.” Now he didn’t dare look at her. “I’m also introducing the man who will bring you an unforgettable evening—my friend, The Great Gaspachi.” Lewis lifted his arm. Confused gazes followed

its trajectory.

In a cloud of smoke, Giovanni, in his signature scarlet and black, descended from the ceiling on invisible wires. Even Ellie sucked in her breath.

As his feet touched the floor, Giovanni removed his top hat and held it with his wand under his arm. He bowed. “Good evening, Hotel Belleview. The benevolence of Lewis Thornton enables me to bring you an evening of magic. As he said, he is more than my patron. He is a dear friend.” He smiled at Lewis. “But first, the Belleview waltz.” He backed to the edge of the stage.

Lewis turned to Ellie, making a frame with his arms. “Shall we?”

“With only several hundred people watching? Naturally.” Her face was the shade of alabaster, but as the music began, she moved with him.

He kept his steps measured and slow, his hands firm. He half feared she’d disappear. “I have missed you. So has Cora.”

Her gaze flashed up to him, eyes wide.

“After this, we must talk.”

“Yes. We must.” Her lips—full and pink—firmed. How would they feel beneath his?

A flash of light and exclamations from the audience forced Lewis’s attention to Giovanni’s first illusion. A ghost couple in dated clothing had appeared, waltzing on the far side of the stage. Members of the audience closest to the front retreated with murmurs and stares.

Giovanni appeared to guide the couple with his wand. “The Belleview Waltz brings the past to life—this young couple, only just married, from the hotel’s opening season. Do you recognize this tragic lady by her wedding gown? By the jewels at her neck?” He waved his wand, and Ellie stopped dancing as she stared at the glint off what appeared to be diamonds. “Who has heard of her tragic end? Fallen, three stories down, to her death.” He threw his hands up, and the couple disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Ellie tried to pull away, but Lewis held her fast. She would soon catch the gist of the trick, but—

The smoke cleared, and the stage was empty. It wasn’t supposed to be empty. Giovanni faced Lewis, horror etched in his every line. A young stagehand gestured from the wings. Lewis hurried to the spot where the necklace was supposed to raise through the floor.

The worker hissed. “It’s gone!”

Murmurs rode through the crowd.

“Are you looking for this?” Ellie came up behind him, and when he turned, she unfastened her fur stole. She removed it to display glittering jewels.

Florence’s cry could be heard throughout the ballroom. “My necklace!” Rushing forward, she almost fell in her haste to mount the steps.

Ellie went to meet her, unclasping the jewels and placing them in her hand. “I told you I would find it, aunt.”

No amplification was needed for her voice. Expressions rapt, silent with expectation, the ball-goers crowded at the foot of the stage. They were getting a show, but it wasn’t the one intended. Giovanni gestured rather frantically from the hip, but Lewis remained frozen in place. How had Ellie gotten into the storeroom—into the very safe—without either of their help?

Florence voiced his question. “Where did you find it?”

Ellie raised an eyebrow as she glanced at Giovanni, who abruptly tucked his hand behind his back. “Let’s just say I used the same tactics as The Great Gaspachi.”

Lewis addressed the audience in what he hoped was a convincing tone. “The necklace was meant to appear on stage, but it seems Miss Hastings had a trick of her own.”

“Indeed.” The look she sent him could be the second act—slicing him in two.

People began to murmur and whisper.

Florence held up the necklace for them to admire. “Nevertheless, my dear, you made good on your promise. And now, everyone can do likewise. I believe we have some baskets in the back, if our committee members will circulate among the crowd.” She tittered as her beautifully-gowned friends followed her instructions, divesting themselves of their jewels and placing them in the baskets for the hospital drive. “This is wonderful. We are in your debt, Ellie.”

“Really?” Ellie cocked her head.

“Who knows whether that charlatan intended to produce the necklace or not.” She aimed a glare at Giovanni. “I’ve half a mind to have him arrested. So...yes. Thank you.”

“If you really mean that, aunt, you can dispatch your debt by reinstating Adam and Maeve. Obviously, they had nothing to do with the theft, and whomever made it a crime for servants to fall in love? Only controlling masters.” Her brow drew down. “And who allowed all this to happen in the

first place?” When Ellie swung toward him, her fury nearly took Lewis’s breath. “Only those who think nothing about them.” Her voice broke.

She was right. He hadn’t considered how his elevation of Giovanni might cost others. “Ellie, it will all be made right. Your uncle—” He attempted to touch her arm, but she shrugged away.

“I believe you have a check to write, sir.”

Lewis withdrew a rectangular paper from his vest pocket. “You mean this check? Ellie, I’d intended to make the donation all along.”

“And that makes it right?” Ellie looked between him and Florence. “I leave you to clean up the messes you both have made. You are peers, after all. I find I would prefer the company of the servants.”

“Ellie, please—”

Lifting the train of her skirt, she hurried down the steps. Lewis followed, but the crowd closed around her, and he lost her in the crush of people he’d worked so hard to entertain.

CHAPTER 14



The next morning, the fourth floor's gable eaves filtered much of the light. The bed next to Ellie was empty and made. She'd overslept—no surprise since, after talking to Maeve and ignoring Ada's knocking, she'd laid awake into the wee hours, searching for clarity about Lewis. She'd finally deduced that she'd rather work as a governess and die a spinster than marry a man who shared her aunt's blindness to the rights of others. Finally, she and Maeve had prayed together, putting their lives in God's hands.

But hadn't Maeve said she and Adam were to leave on the morning train? She swung her legs out of bed only to breathe a sigh of relief when she spied the maid's accoutrements on the dresser. There was nothing for it—she couldn't hide up here forever. Her ballgown hung in the closet next to Maeve's uniforms. She'd have to borrow a white blouse and black skirt.

She'd washed, dressed, and braided her hair when someone knocked. "Maeve?"

Instead, a well-dressed party of three loomed in the narrow hallway—Uncle Walter, Aunt Florence, and Lewis. Her aunt stepped forward. "May we have an audience, Ellie?"

However she felt about them, they were still her family. "You may, but I don't see why Mr. Thornton should."

Walter cleared his throat. "Hear us out, Ellie, and then you'll understand."

She opened the door wider. Ellie took a seat on one bed and Aunt Florence on the other. The men stood, Lewis remaining closest to the door he closed.

Holding his hat, her uncle took the lead. "After you left last night, everything was explained. The first thing you should know is that I was in on

the plan for Gaspachi to take the necklace.”

“What?” Ellie glanced at Lewis.

Uncle Walter nodded. “It was Giovanni’s idea, but Lewis and I agreed the mystery would drive donations. I allowed them to extract the necklace from the safe the afternoon of Ada’s party.”

“But Aunt Florence—”

“Was not to know. She’s a terrible actress.”

So Lewis hadn’t hoodwinked her family. “Did no one consider there might be casualties of your entertainment?”

Aunt Florence scooted forward. “Maeve and Adam have been reinstated. I can see where at times I might be a bit hasty. A bit careless with my authority.”

Uncle Walter frowned at his wife. “She had not even spoken to me about it. Nor does she have the oversight to fire my valet. I would not have let them be sent away.”

“And their engagement?”

He gave a somber smile. “As soon as I learned of it, I gave my blessing.”

Lewis moved closer, speaking at last. “I share your aunt’s chagrin. It never occurred to me that your servants would be blamed, but it should have. As a gesture of my conciliation, I’ve offered to fund their wedding trip. Now I need to ask your pardon.”

“We all do.” Aunt Florence threaded her gloved fingers together. “Ada lectured me last night. She made me see how inconsiderately I’ve also treated you. I...should not have said the things I did, well...about...” Her gaze snuck to Lewis and back, bringing heat to Ellie’s face. “Will you forgive me?”

Ellie resisted the urge to flop back on the bed in astonished fugue. This was everything she’d wanted.

“We all love you, Ellie.” Uncle Walter’s choked admission brought a burn to her eyes. She *had* wanted more.

All? She chanced a glance at Lewis, but the tears filling her eyes prevented her from seeing him properly. God had delivered more than she’d prayed for. “Of course, I forgive.”

“Thank you, my dear.” Aunt Florence rose, and she and Uncle Walter hugged Ellie. “Now can we please leave this cramped compartment? Come back to our rooms and dress properly.”

Well, she should expect only so much alteration in one day.

Nudging his wife, Uncle Walter harrumphed. “My dear, I believe Mr.

Thornton would like to speak with Ellie alone first.”

“I would, if Miss Ellie is agreeable.” Lewis studied her, his expression giving nothing away.

He’d exonerated himself where the necklace and the servants were concerned. Whatever else he wanted to say deserved to be heard. She nodded.

Aunt Florence stiffened. “Very well. But put on one of Maeve’s hats, Ellie.”

“Yes, aunt.” She did as requested, and they all exited into the hallway.

At the top of the stairs, Lewis offered his arm. She rested her fingers on his sleeve, but they trembled. Would she finally know the truth of his feelings?

Aunt Florence spoke over her shoulder as they descended the steps. “Everyone was impressed by your cleverness last night, dear. Some are convinced it was all part of the show. Others are speculating as to how you found the necklace and stymied a magician.”

“That’s what I would like to know too.” Lewis paused on the second-floor landing. Her aunt and uncle drew closer.

“I was going to meet you in the tea garden, but I was conflicted. I didn’t know your involvement. I saw the head porter going into the basement, and I followed him. I snuck into the storage rooms while a worker unloaded a cart, but as I was trying to open the safe, they unknowingly locked me in.”

“Locked in!” Aunt Florence fanned herself. “What a terror.”

Ellie nodded. “At first. But then I realized my attempts to get into the safe had been successful. I found the necklace. I knew someone would return at some point, so I didn’t panic. Instead, I ended up locating the trap doors to the ballroom’s stage floor. I was able to position the largest one halfway up and climb out.”

Lewis’s face lit with wonder. “And you found the corresponding cranks in the wings so we wouldn’t know you’d been there.”

“Exactly.”

Aunt Florence shook her head. “Well, you might find you’re something of a celebrity now. Your exploits prompted generous giving to the hospital fund.”

“But you missed an amazing magic show.” Lewis placed his hand atop hers, measuring her reaction.

She met his eyes. “I’m very sorry for that. I had been looking forward to it.”

“There’s always next time. The Great Gaspachi seeks to improve with every performance.” Lewis winked.

“Come, my dear.” Uncle Walter pulled his wife away with him. “We’ll see these young people later.”

Lewis held Ellie’s gaze. “Walk with me on the terrace? Cora and her nurse are down by the bay. She wants to see you.”

“And I want to see her.” Ellie spoke past the lump in her throat. She descended to the lobby on Lewis’s arm. “I’ll miss her when we are cities apart. We’ll have to confer, you know, on the publication of our book.”

“Is it finished?”

“I confess, I don’t know the ending yet.”

Lewis held the door to the veranda. His deep voice murmured in her ear as she passed. “I believe Cora already gave it to you.”

Ellie wrung her hands as they moved along the oyster-shell path. “I’m not certain that ending makes sense. Would the bright-blue bunting even recognize that the plain brown one was the same species?”

He drew her arm through his again. “Oh, I think they would know.”

“How?”

Drawing her behind a lattice covered with a climbing vine and shaded by several tall palms, Lewis tugged their entwined hands to his chest. “You know in *here*. Don’t you?”

She couldn’t deny it in word or look. “But what an unequal union, the one bringing all the assets.”

A chuckle rumbled beneath her palm, and he lifted his hand to smooth her hair. “The brown bunting sells herself far too short. She has everything he needs and had given up on finding.”

Ellie couldn’t meet his eyes. Her lungs struggled to grasp oxygen as though she were part of the famous magician Houdini’s underwater act.

“Do you not know the assets you bring, Ellie Hastings?” Lewis’s sudden frontal assault demanded her attention. “Besides compassion and grace and intelligence and curiosity and beauty—” He hushed her when she made a sound of protest. “Yes, beauty. You bring what no other woman has brought. Love for Cora.”

“Cora?” Ellie’s heart started thudding. Was this all about his niece? Did he mean to offer her employment, after all?

Lewis folded her hands between his. “Ada told me about your false suitor. I’ve experienced my share of betrayal, too, Ellie. First, through my

sister. You remember I told you I keep her story private?”

Ellie nodded.

“Without our knowledge, she became involved with a rake, eloped, and got herself with child.” His throat bobbed. “The scoundrel disappeared when she died having the baby.”

“Cora,” she breathed. How could anyone abandon their own child?

“Yes. Then there was my own near-miss. I was steps away from the altar when I learned my fiancée had no heart for my niece...my child. For she *is* my child.”

“Truly, you had as much cause for caution as I did.”

“Which is why I avoided women seeking prestige and standing—why I avoided you to begin with. Then there’s the matter of my side interest. Many think it odd, if not downright embarrassing. You found it fascinating.”

Ellie dipped her chin. “Your inventions spark so many wild ideas in my head.”

“You see?” Lewis squeezed her hands. “I could use a bright assistant to help me delight and inspire a new generation of children—much as your father’s stories have. But that individual would have to live and work very closely with me. If only I could think of someone...” The teasing fragment of a sentence couldn’t quite allay her fears.

She refused to put words in his mouth, so she reiterated exactly what she’d heard him say. “Thus, you find yourself in need of a governess and a clerk.”

“I find myself in need of a *wife*.”

She swayed in the Gulf breeze, closing her eyes. “Are—are you...you aren’t...”

“I’m asking permission to court you, Ellie. When the time is right, I will go to your uncle and make you a proper proposal. That is, if you are interested in the position.”

Ellie opened her eyes as the sun broke over the top of the hotel, brilliant and blinding, throwing Lewis’s intense gray eyes and dancing smile into shadow. “Do I need a reference, sir?”

“No. As far as I’m concerned, you’re the only candidate suitable. But I would take a kiss, if you’d permit that liberty.”

“Under the...” She cleared her throat. “Under the circumstances, I will allow a brief peck to indicate my acceptance of your...of your...” She lost her grasp on words as Lewis drew near. When his lips touched hers, her

whole body went hot and limp. She forgot about any passersby, forgot about brief. Pressing her mouth to his, she rose on her tiptoes and lifted her arms around his neck.

Lewis's open hand at her waist pressed her closer, his lips tasting hers like the hummingbirds sampling the tropical flowers on the nearby lattice.

The blast of a boat horn snapped Ellie into propriety. She stepped back and covered her mouth. "Oh my." How had she behaved so wantonly?

But Lewis exhibited no dismay. He cupped her cheek with his hand and looked at her with such longing her knees quavered. "Just found another qualification."

A fine mist of tears obscured her vision. "That was my first kiss." And yet it had pleased him?

His eyes went wide, then he leaned down and tickled her lips with his. His breath fanned her face. "I can guarantee, it won't be your last."

Joy stole any clever remarks. Dragging in a shuddering breath, Ellie laid her hands against Lewis's chest and her cheek on his shoulder. He stroked her back.

"I'm falling in love with you, Ellie Hastings."

"And I love you, Lewis Thornton." There. She'd said it. She'd exposed her heart and gone farther than he had, and she wasn't afraid. She'd found a safe place. She leaned back and he beamed at her.

He'd just started to lower his head when a shrill cry pierced the muted sounds of the morning. "Poppy! Ellie!"

Ellie turned as a small figure in a sailor dress skipped ahead of one in dour gray. "Cora!" Her heart expanded with more love than she'd ever thought possible.

Lewis chucked her chin. "Shall we tell her?"

She nodded and opened her arms to embrace the unexpected gifts bestowed by a winter at the White Queen.

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A Summer at Sagamore
By Lisa M. Prysock

Chapter 1

It was June, and the world smelled of roses. The sunshine was like powdered gold over the grassy hillside.

— MAUD HART LOVELACE

JUNE OF 1907

At the beginning of every summer, Abby thought the world lay at her feet. Anything could happen in the span of three months—seldom lasting long enough—but always months filled with bliss, wonder, and escape. From aboard the Sagamore steamboat, Abigail Rose Greenwood reveled in the views of natural beauty surrounding them in the wilds of what comprised only a mere glimpse of the millions of acres known as the Adirondack Park. She found herself speechless at the unfolding glory, unlike her travel companions as they stood alongside the upper deck's rails. The ship plowed steadily forward, cutting a path through blue-green waves and pristine waters splashing below them, the gale making her feel alive with anticipation as they neared their destination.

"I can't wait to see the Sagamore Resort." Abby's younger sister Catherine stretched out her arms over the railing to embrace the wind blowing her brunette curls around her shoulders, her brown eyes wide and bright. Seventeen, she glowed with apparent excitement about the adventure.

"Patience, my dear. We will arrive at Green Island in a few minutes. Enjoy the fresh air and the boat ride, girls." Her face alight, wisps of Grandmother's silver and white hair wafted in the breeze around her face. She had coifed her silvery hair into a smooth knot beneath the stylish hat pinned firmly to her head, leaving Abby wondering how many pins kept her hat from blowing away into the wind and waves. Except for her cane and silvery hair, who would take Fanny Wiltshire for a wealthy widow in her

seventies? She hardly had any wrinkles or creases in her smooth complexion. Abby and Catherine had inherited her brown eyes, and dark hair from their father, but their cousin had inherited Grandmother's once golden-brown hair.

"It was kind of your friend to recommend such a popular refuge for this year's summer excursion, Gran." Cousin Elizabeth, two years younger than Abby at nineteen, looked pretty as a picture holding onto her hat beneath its layers of tulle, her golden-brown wavy hair streaming away from her face in the wind, blue eyes shining. "And I cannot wait to see the Sagamore either." A mischievous grin appeared on her face which she only shared with her cousins when Grandmother turned her attention toward the tree line along the banks of Lake George.

"Yes, it was." Gran nodded absentmindedly, focused on the view.

Abby knew her cousin's grin had more to do with finding a handsome beau from among the gentlemen who would surely also be found spending the summer months in the rugged luxury awaiting them at the fashionable resort.

While Elizabeth turned away from the railing and scanned the other passengers aboard the steamboat—Abby guessed to catch the eye of a well-dressed gentleman or admirer—she turned her thoughts to the previous leg of their journey. Early that morning, they'd embarked on a train from New York City to upstate New York. The scenery had captured Abby's attention from the start as tall buildings disappeared from the horizon, yielding to countryside thick with lush meadows, picturesque farms, and tree-covered mountains. Once they'd transferred to the steamboat, the farther they traveled, the more the mountain and lake views stunned her into silence, stealing her breath away, filling her with the wonder and awe of God's creation. On top of these magnificent delights, the small passenger vessel carried them past glorious mansion after mansion, a long line of impressive summer homes along the western side of Lake George.

"Girls, you are now viewing what has been dubbed *Millionaire's Row* on Lake George," Grandmother informed them as they feasted on the sights.

The grand line of mansions situated against the magnificent splendor of nature seemed intoxicating enough, but then Green Island came into view and the steamship glided to a stop, anchoring at a dock called Bolton's Landing.

"We are here at last," Catherine breathed as she caught sight of something and standing up taller, craned to see something on their right. "I cannot wait to attend the dances, swim in the glorious new bathing pool, and try out the

tennis court.”

Abby squinted to see what held her sister’s attention. Ah! Of course. A group of teen boys about her age gathered on the docks, preparing to row some small boats somewhere, perhaps fishing for the day.

“Don’t forget picnics and horseback riding.” Elizabeth elbowed Abby and nodded toward a trio of finely dressed gentlemen looking toward the ship from the landing, awaiting someone’s arrival maybe. When a crew member on a lower deck tossed them a bundle of newspapers and one of them caught it, Abby realized why they waited.

“My, aren’t they handsome?” Elizabeth whispered, opening her parasol since the ship had anchored.

“Indeed.” She smiled, turning her attention to steal her first glimpse at the Sagamore Resort. Nestled in the trees, the impressive resort had evaded them until now. It didn’t disappoint, standing atop the island like a proud king, welcoming its visitors. She could hardly wait to take in the view from land.

Among a steady stream of disembarking passengers, Abby and her family became separated. Lugging her typewriter case in one hand, she stepped onto the island ahead of them with a mixture of relief, apprehension, and hope. Not even the heaviness of her typewriter could diminish the experience. Breathing in the fresh air, she inhaled the smell of tall pines and wild bergamot mingled with the scent of nasturtium, roses, foxglove, and asters in the well-tended flowerbeds. Yes, this was definitely an improvement over New York City—and even over their home city, Cincinnati. As much as she’d enjoyed having Grandmother indulge and spoil them with purchases of the latest fashions and accoutrements needed to greet summer with confidence, she’d thrive in the wilderness—well, from the security of the comforts of Sagamore. Although Green Island didn’t hold quite the same appeal as many of their previous destinations in Europe, it offered an attraction of another kind. This island playground tucked in a rustic, hidden paradise warmly extended safe harbor and inspiration.

Cousin Elizabeth caught up to Abby. “This certainly is a better view than the industrial side of downtown Los Angeles last summer, though I will cherish the friends we made and all we learned on Azusa Street. What a difference the Sagamore will be from the mission.” She sighed while tugging a glove more securely over her wrist.

“Indeed. Azusa transformed us all like a Red Sea, defining moment. I think Sagamore will carry us into our promised-land destiny,” Abby

remarked while men from the steamship's sparse crew hoisted trunks, loading them onto a horse-drawn cart. She wished she could trust one of them with her typewriter, but she did not dare. "This reminds me of Portugal, of our seaside lodgings on the cliffs, except these waters are far more pristine, and we're more secluded."

Elizabeth placed her hands on her hips. "I guess it does remind me of Portugal."

Catherine caught up to them next, breathless with anticipation, Gran a few steps behind. "Just look at the bathing pool! We are in heaven. I do wonder which balcony and windows are ours. Did you request a villa or a suite facing Lake George, Grandmama?" Her big brown eyes and vivacious smile reflected her excitement as she twirled her open parasol around against her shoulder.

Grandmother paused beside them and peered up at the main house, leaning heavily on her cane. "Of course, I did. Not a villa, but a balcony suite in the main house so we don't have to hike back and forth to the dining rooms. You don't think me a reckless fool, do you?" Grandmother glanced at her youngest granddaughter, Catherine, and then at Abby. "Abigail would find the manager and bargain away our valuables until we had the very best view available."

Abby laughed, remembering a few occasions when Gran had called upon her to use her kind manners of persuasion. "I am ready upon your command to argue with the front desk clerk if anything is found unsuitable or lacking. I can't imagine that here, however."

"You are my only grandchild who can argue in French or Italian equally well," Gran marveled.

Elizabeth stepped forward, leading the way on the path up the hill, holding onto her hat as she gazed at the resort. "Let's not dawdle lest they give our suite away to someone else. Shall we, ladies?"

"We shall." Abby nodded and resumed lugging her typewriter case uphill, following behind her cousin. "I think we shall be very happy here, Grandmother."

"I do hope so, girls," Gran stepped in beside Elizabeth. "It's not my grand estate in Marietta overlooking the Ohio River, but the view is marvelous. Catherine, you'll room with your sister since you are accustomed to the writing contraption, and Elizabeth, you shall room with me. We'll share a private sitting room between the bedrooms, and the suite has our own powder

room with a bathing tub. I'm famished, ready for tea, unpacking, and then a lie-down as soon as we are properly settled. I will ask the clerk to send tea for four to our suite."

"Yes, Grandmother. The arrangements will be splendid. I'm delighted to share a room with my sister again." Catherine stuck her tongue out at Abby as they trudged along behind Elizabeth and Gran.

Abby rolled her eyes at her younger sister's customary antics. Did she detect a slight sigh escape Elizabeth? No one liked to sleep with Grandmother. She sometimes snored like a locomotive, talked in her sleep, and required assistance with all sorts of errands and tasks.

"Let's go inside, and for heaven's sake, don't stick your tongue out anymore. It's vulgar," Abby whispered. Nearing the entrance, she couldn't help but notice an attractive, fashionably dressed gentleman standing off to one side of the front porch, observing the arriving guests, surrounded by a flock of ladies gushing over him. He had stared at them as they'd trudged uphill while she'd lugged the heavy typewriter. A true gentleman would have stepped away from them and offered to assist her, but he hadn't stepped away from the three ladies buzzing about him.

Catherine shrugged. "But it annoys you, and I must keep up with my reputation."

"Shall we call a truce for the summer?" Abby proposed, unable to avoid the view of the man's figure in his white summer suit. Tall and dashing, with dark hair parted to one side, he studied them with amusement in his blue eyes as he leaned against a pillar on the front porch. One of the ladies in the flock rearranged his tie while another tucked her arm around his elbow. He had attractive crow's feet in the corners of his eyes, a broad chest span, and a well-developed, muscular build. He might be twenty-seven or twenty-eight. She guessed she could understand why he drew the ladies to his side, but couldn't he see she could use a little help? The bellhops, busy assisting other passengers, hadn't seen them approaching the front doors yet, but the man staring at them certainly had.

"Truce," Catherine agreed, reluctance in her voice, snapping Abby's attention back to how she would get the heavy typewriter across the porch and inside to their suite.

The fellow had likely overheard their conversation since he'd hardly taken his eyes off them as they'd progressed onto the porch. Looking away as heat warmed her cheeks, she hoped he wouldn't see her blush.

Did he like her brown eyes? But didn't almost every heroine in novels have blue eyes? She aimed to write her heroines with brown eyes. In any case, Abby chided herself. What did she know of him to care, other than his handsome looks? He seemed arrogant and intrusive, the way he grinned at her as if he knew all her secrets. Couldn't the gentleman pause from tending the flock of socialites to open the door for them?

Why did he stand there gawking at arriving guests, anyway? She averted her eyes, patting her brunette updo to make sure all remained in place as a bellhop appeared and held the door open. They entered the main foyer, allowing her to sweep past handsome stranger before she collapsed from the weight of her typewriter. She figured it weighed nearly a fifth of her body weight. She could hardly wait to find their suite and forget the rake.



Once they'd taken the elevator, explored their lodgings, reveled in the view, and more bellhops delivered their trunks, Gran busied herself with unpacking in her bedroom while waiting on their tea. The girls ended up in the room Catherine would share with Abby, Elizabeth filing in last. Closing the door, their cousin fell against it and sighed with a dreamy look on her face.

Catherine flung herself across one of the double beds and then Elizabeth fell across the other while Abby used her foot to push her typewriter case toward the desk beneath the window. Since she would need a rest before lifting it onto the desk, she perched on the end of the bed and released a long sigh. They had arrived at last.

"Did you see how many handsome gentlemen are swarming the foyer, the front lawn, and the drawing room?" Elizabeth clasped her hands to her heart, glee in her voice. "Everywhere I look, there are more."

Catherine rolled over onto her stomach and released a groan. "How shall we ever narrow our choices down to only one?"

Abby chuckled, catching the pillow Catherine tossed in her direction. She collapsed on it from her perch and now lay on her side, facing her sister and cousin. Mission accomplished, having lugged her precious typing machine this far, she could now relax and unpack. Her boy-crazy companions however, had other matters in mind.

Elizabeth rolled over to her side, facing Abby and Catherine. A sobering

look came over her face, but then a coy smile appeared as she entwined a curl, wrapping it around and around one of her fingers. “You know the rules. One week. We each have one week to decide on whom we shall place our deepest affection and unswerving devotion for the summer, apart from the Lord, that is. He must remain first in our hearts, of course. I do hope to find a fellow worthy of my affection. Maybe someone of means and wealth, I hope.”

Bravo, Elizabeth—except for the part about finding a man of means and wealth. Money didn’t amount to everything. Elizabeth would always be Abby’s cantankerous cousin, but their experience at Azusa appeared to have wrought some change to the storekeeper’s daughter who only a year ago had struggled with holding onto faith, let alone a mention of the Lord.

“I know the other rule, only if we reserve the right at the time of choosing may we change our mind and choose a different beau to adore if we have misgivings, unless some other beau we like chooses one among us.” Catherine rolled over onto her back stared at the ceiling, her hands folding over her abdomen. “So many choices and so little time. I must have counted at least a dozen boys of my age and we’ve only been here five minutes.”

“I would begin by eliminating the boys who are too short. That will leave you with less to concern yourself about. You can focus on their inner qualities such as kindness and integrity, and well ... other things.” Elizabeth mused, causing the three of them to burst into laughter. Gran would soon hear them carrying on and knock on the door, insisting one of them pour tea, another fetch her slippers, and one bring her favorite wrap to her side. Then she would persuade them to tell her of their summer plans and fall into a pleasant rest immediately after.

Abby couldn’t deny the fact her heart blossomed with the hope something wonderful could happen in the months ahead. She’d set her mind on finishing her manuscript, embracing the carefree lifestyle of summertime, and exploring Green Island. Nothing but the pursuit of these three things entered her mind, though Catherine and Elizabeth longed for romance. No, indeed. Abby would spend her life as a writer. Since her ideal husband only existed in romantic novels, she’d long ago decided against the institution of marriage. What if she ended up married to someone who didn’t treat her with kindness or worse, someone who clipped her wings? Perhaps an attractive rake who wouldn’t lift a finger to open doors or help her with a heavy typewriter, for instance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



North Georgia native Denise Weimer has authored a dozen traditionally published novels and a number of novellas—historical and contemporary romance, romantic suspense, and time slip. Having served three years as managing editor for Lighthouse Publishing of the Carolinas’ two historical imprints, as well as a freelance editor, she’s helped other authors reach their publishing dreams. A wife and mother of two daughters, Denise always pauses for coffee, chocolate, and old houses. Online reviews make the difference for authors in being published again! Please visit Denise at <https://www.deniseweimerbooks.com>, and she’d also love to connect on social media.

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Special appreciation is also due to the staff at the Belleview Inn, the Tampa Bay Hotel, and the Henry B. Plant Museum on the University of Tampa campus. I would also like to thank my beta readers, Karen Utter Jennings, Gretchen Elm, and Johnnie Steinberg, and the wonderful authors who provided endorsements.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I hope you enjoyed this whimsical foray into 1910 Florida. *A Winter at the White Queen* has been among my most delightful stories to write. Even though I aimed for the lighthearted—even the humorous—the story couches some deeper truths about the insecurities many of us battle. But first, a bit of real history for those who like to check out the facts.

Connecticut native Henry B. Plant (1819-1899) spent most of his life in Georgia, my home state, managing a freight-shipping business. The Plant Investment Company included railroad lines, hotels, property, and telegraph and steamship lines. Plant's railroad system connected central and western Florida to the nation's population centers, while Henry Flagler opened up the eastern coast at a time when Gilded Age elite were looking for new playgrounds.

While Plant's most famous and luxurious hotel was the Tampa Bay, which opened in 1891, the Hotel Belleview boasted its own claim to fame. Originally four-hundred-thousand square feet, it was the largest occupied wood-frame structure in its day. Its two-hundred-and-ninety acres also allowed for the development of cottages for wealthy patrons.

Upon his death in 1899, Plant's son, Morton, took over the hotel management, painting it white and changing the roof tiles from red to green, earning the nickname, "The White Queen on the Gulf." Additions were made in 1904 and by 1910. Morton also added an Olympic-sized swimming pool adorned in Italian tile and two eighteen-hole golf courses.

In 1918, the hotel was sold to John McEntee Bowman, founder of the Biltmore hotel chain. It became known as the Belleview-Biltmore in the 1920s. The hotel closed in 2009 and stood neglected until demolition for the

building on condominiums began in 2015. A portion of the 1897 structure was saved and relocated to its current foundation, where it now welcomes guests as The Belleview Inn, a luxurious boutique hotel.

I chose to set *A Winter at the White Queen* at the height of Belleview's glory, right after it became known by its new name. What an intriguing age it was, just before WWI, when the old ways and the old money battled with new ideas and inventions that changed the way people lived. The preoccupation with magic in this period—and our hero, Lewis Thornton, by extension—offers a perfect snapshot of that juxtaposition. Lewis delights in turning his curiosity and observations of facts into wonder, joy, and entertainment. Due to her hurts in life, Ellie's curiosity has dissolved into disdain and suspicion of her “betters,” but her compassion triumphs. I hope the theme of my story resonated with you. Under the glimmering wealth and strict hierarchy of the Gilded Age remained God's truth—that each person has equal value and rights, even those society deems second class.

My novels and novellas span the Colonial era through the contemporary, ranging from lighthearted to serious and spiritual, and are mostly set in Georgia. If you would like to learn more, please visit [My website](#).

I would love to connect with you on social media or through my author newsletter.

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And please, if you enjoyed *A Winter at the White Queen*, consider leaving a review online. Reviews help publishers know that my stories deserve to reach my wonderful readers. May God bless you!

ENTER THE AGE OF WONDER ...

I like to think of the time period between the Gilded Age and WWI as the Age of Wonder. New ideas and inventions swept society in waves while those who wanted to preserve the old ways tried in vain to hold back the tide. Opportunity and advancement flowed as railroads and communications linked America's coasts, motorcars allowed individual freedom of travel, and companies flourished following Reconstruction.

My goal was to capture this excitement and promise in *A Winter at the White Queen*. You follow my heroine, Ellie, and her uncle and his family for their fashionable winter 1910 season at the Hotel Belleview in Clearwater, Florida. Ellie is more than “the poor relation companion” to her younger cousin Ava. She's also a trusted friend, and like the heroines in her female detective novels, a budding sleuth—sniffing out promising matrimonial candidates for Ava at the bequest of Aunt Florence. Little does she expect to stumble into her own romance—and a mystery surrounding a certain intriguing entrepreneur.

Ellie Hastings is tired of playing social gatekeeper—and poor-relation companion—to her Gibson Girl of a cousin. But her aunt insists Ellie lift her nose out of her detective novel long enough to help gauge the eligibility of bachelors during the winter social season at Florida's Hotel Belleview. She finds plenty that's mysterious about the suave, aloof Philadelphia inventor, Lewis Thornton. Why does he keep sneaking around the hotel? Does he have a secret sweetheart? And what is his connection to the evasive Mr. Gaspachi, slated to perform at Washington's Birthday Ball?

Ellie's comical sleuthing ought to put Lewis out, but the diffident way her family treats her smashes a hole in his normal reserve. But when Florence

Hastings' diamond necklace goes missing, Ellie's keen mind threatens to uncover not only Lewis's secrets, but give him back hope for love.

Lewis's work allowed me to sprinkle *White Queen* with clever inventions that spark Ellie's curious nature. Among them are:

Temperature-compensated balance wheels, which Lewis invented as a teen. The backstory of how he sold his invention to the railroad, allowing them to synchronize all their watches, provides an unexpected link to uncover between Lewis and Ellie.

The cinématographe, patterned after Thomas Edison's kinetoscope but intended by the Lumière brothers to show films to a wider audience. Used in the show at Washington's Birthday Ball to end the season, the cinématographe aids in the culmination of the mystery of Florence's missing diamond necklace.

The magical orange tree, which not only blossomed but appeared to grow actual oranges, was a real mechanical invention featured at Ava's birthday party by The Great Gaspachi.

The Hydro-Vacu. I couldn't resist including this titter-worthy, real-life machine, used, of course, by the appearance-conscious Aunt Florence. After applying a bleaching cold cream or "tissue food" to ensure plump cheeks, the massaging "Depurator" was rotated slowly over the face. How long until *that* idea makes a comeback?

As fun and whimsical as *A Winter at the White Queen* may be, our characters have some real growth to do ... if they can get past the social expectations and masks, the suspicions and past hurts. I hope they brightened your winter days by joining them at the White Queen.

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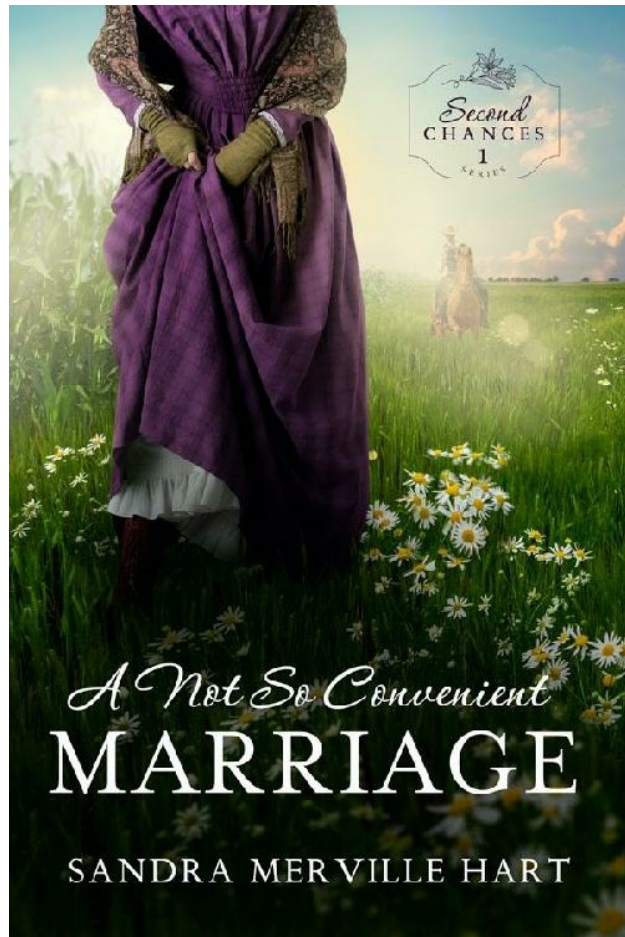
A Counterfeit Betrothal by Denise Weimer

A frontier scout, a healing widow, and a desperate fight for peace.

At the farthest Georgia outpost this side of hostile Creek Territory in 1813, Jared Lockridge serves his country as a scout to redeem his father's botched heritage. If he can help secure peace against Indians allied to the British, he can bring his betrothed to the home he's building and open his cabinetry shop. Then he comes across a burning cabin and a traumatized woman just

widowed by a fatal shot.

Freed from a cruel marriage, Esther Andrews agrees to winter at the Lockridge homestead to help Jared's pregnant sister-in-law. Lame in one foot, Esther has always known she is secondhand goods, but the gentle carpenter-turned-scout draws her heart with as much skill as he creates furniture from wood. His family's love offers hope even as violence erupts along the frontier—and Jared's investigation into local incidents brings danger to their doorstep. Yet how could Esther ever hope a loyal man like Jared would choose her over a fine lady?



A Not So Convenient Marriage by Sandra Merville Hart

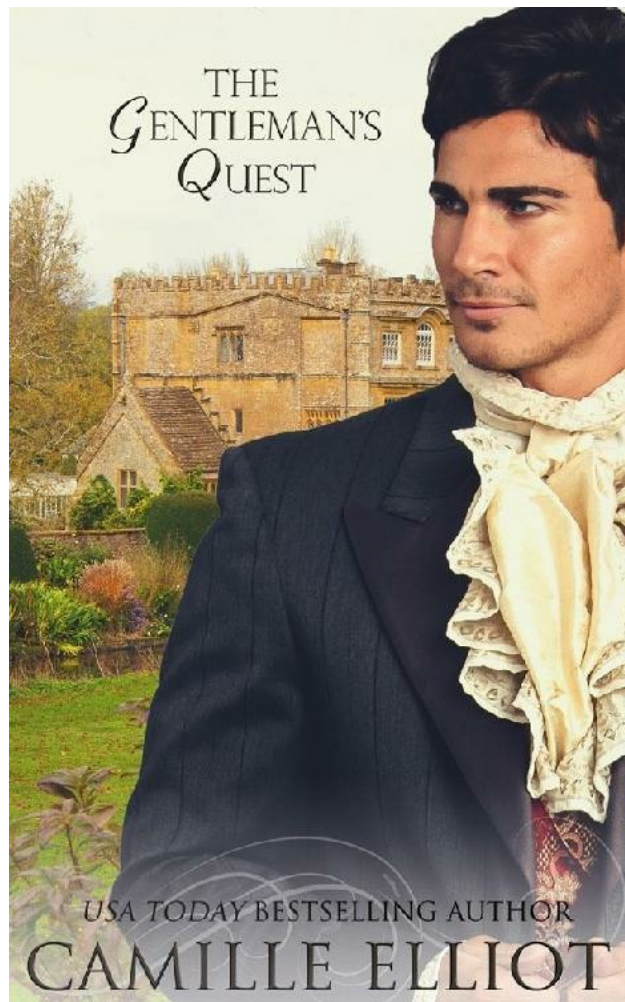
A spinster teacher...a grieving widower...a marriage of convenience and a second chance with the man she's always loved.

When Samuel Walker proposes a marriage of convenience to Rose Hatfield soon after the death of his wife, she knows he doesn't love her. *She's* loved *him* since their school days. Those long-suppressed feelings spring to life as she marries him. She must sell her childhood home, quit her teaching job, and move to a new city.

Marrying Rose is harder than Samuel expected, especially with the shadow of his deceased wife everywhere in his life. And he has two young children to consider. Peter and Emma need a mother's love, but they also need to hold close the memories of their real mother as they grieve her loss.

Life as Samuel's wife is nothing like Rose hoped, and even the townspeople, who loved his first wife, make Rose feel like an outsider. The work of the farm draws the two of them closer, giving hope that they might one day become a happy family. Until the dream shatters, and the life Rose craves tumbles down around them. Only God can put these pieces back together, but the outcome may not look anything like she planned.





The Gentleman's Quest by Camille Elliot

Honoraria Dunbar wouldn't mind being a spinster if she weren't left at the mercies of her mean-spirited uncle. The only way to escape his begrudging care? Marriage to a lecherous widower. Then Christopher Creager appears—and everything changes.

Christopher hasn't let himself go near his best friend's sister since Stephen's death. But when there's a murder on his property—and he's the prime suspect—he has no choice. She may hold the key to proving his innocence. But he never expects the feelings that hit him when he sees her again—any more than he expects her asking to join him on his quest! But if he says yes to her, will he be putting another person he loves in danger?

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Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, Kings James Version.

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