

PROLOGUE

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I will never forget the first time I saw Mrs. Catherine “Kitty” Warren, sitting demurely in the empty grand saloon of the SS *Great Northern*. Of course, I knew of Mrs. Warren’s suspected criminal activity prior to 1902, in my capacity as a special agent of the Treasury Department; she was already quite notorious by then.

I had boarded the steamer at quarantine to take the declarations of passengers en route to the steamship pier. This was merely a courtesy, to speed the work of the deputy collector so that weary passengers were not overly delayed; I had no mandate to investigate smuggling or enforce fines. While the vessel was being tied up, I was informed that all the passengers, save one, had left the saloon in preparation for disembarkation.

The saloon seemed deserted except for a morose deckhand sweeping the tiled floor. Despite bright sunshine pouring through the domed skylights, I nearly missed the woman in a wingback chair. She had perfectly erect posture, her hands folded neatly in her lap—like a deer

standing stock still in the woods, she disappeared into the sumptuous surroundings.

I approached. "Pardon me," I said. "I am Special Agent Madden, of the United States Treasury Department. May I ask if you have made your declaration?"

With a serene smile, she said, "I am unfamiliar with the preliminaries, sir, and I find myself quite at a loss."

She was approximately thirty five years of age, conservatively dressed in a gown of gray satin and lace, her hair impeccably coiffed. Her features were too strong to be considered pretty, but her mien was pleasant. Her most striking attribute was, without doubt, her eyes: bright, clear, and sea green; I was impressed by the frankness and intelligence of her gaze. Her aspect conveyed a genial approval, as though she saw me as I most wished to be seen.

I noticed the brooch pinned to the shawl in her lap. It was shaped like a butterfly, with a body of black pearls and wings of concentric precious stones; rubies in the center, ringed by sapphires, emeralds, and an outermost layer of brilliant diamonds. "That is a spectacular piece," I said.

Her cheeks dimpled. "It's only glass, but pretty, isn't it?"

"I have never seen glass that looked so much like real stones," I said.

Mrs. Warren laughed and touched the back of my hand with gloved fingertips. "The French are so clever," she said.

"May I ask your name?"

"Mrs. Catherine Warren."

I was electrified. She was near legendary at Custom House for her jewel smuggling—and her ability to avoid our detection. "Are you expecting someone?" I asked, certain that she was waiting for an accomplice to help her sneak goods onshore.

"Oh, no," she said. "I am quite alone." She smoothed her skirt. "You seem very kind. Perhaps you could help me?"

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So as not to raise her guard, I went along with the pretense that she was unfamiliar with import rules. I described the tariffs in simple terms and conducted her to the deputy collector for her official declaration. I confess that I relished witnessing the end of her putative criminal career. I may even have been thinking about the credit I would bring to our department for nabbing her.

The collector looked seasoned and gruff, with his heavy brow and full white beard, and I was sure he would make a thorough inspection.

Mrs. Warren smiled with what, for all the world, appeared to be delight at the prospect of making her declaration. "I have received such expert counsel from this gracious gentleman," she said, placing her hand on my forearm. She spoke softly, forcing the collector to lean close.

"I understand that you wish to know about my new jewelry," she said. "But I am no aficionado. I have a few cheap pieces, my tiny vanities, worth nothing at all, really."

"Where is your luggage?" the collector asked.

"The porter has already taken my trunks for me."

"What did you buy during your stay in France?"

Mrs Warren looked to me, as though I knew. "So little that it is hardly worth mentioning." She shrugged her shoulders expressively, like a European. "Some linens for my own use. Old secondhand pearls that have not even been strung." Her laugh was charming, conveying both amiability and modesty. "I have listened carefully to Special Agent Madden here, who has advised me on the import rules, and I'm sure I have nothing of value to declare."

I fully expected the collector to scoff at her description of pearls as "secondhand." Yet to my astonishment, he thanked her and waved her on without further questions or comment. After waltzing through customs without paying a penny, Mrs. Warren raised a hand in adieu. Dumbstruck, I did not return the gesture.

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“Why didn’t you order a search of her trunks?” I demanded of the collector.

“A woman like that is harmless,” he said dismissively.

“But that was Mrs. Kitty Warren, a known jewel smuggler!” I was almost sputtering.

“Not known to me,” he said, looking for other stragglers. Seeing none, he began to pack his bag.

“The one person you should have detained is her!”

The collector’s smile was condescending. “You are young,” he said. “It’s good to have enthusiasm for your work. But you will learn in time to pick out true suspects. The lady was no crook.”

After that first encounter, I took personal interest in this woman who had so long evaded us. We put Mrs. Warren under surveillance in Paris after discovering that she engaged the services of a jeweler on Rue de la Paix. Major Peterson, chief of the Paris office, made an arrangement with one of the shop’s employees. Whenever Mrs. Warren commissioned the jeweler to set precious stones or acquire rare jewels, the clerk would place her items in the display window, using a coded layout. Then one of our men would photograph the items and send images and descriptions back to New York.

In this manner, we developed a catalog of Mrs. Warren’s foreign jewelry acquisitions, which were many, all valued at princely sums. Customs inspectors studied the photographs in hope of recognizing the pieces when they were smuggled into America. There were sapphire rings and black pearl ropes, emerald necklaces and diamond bracelets, all of the highest quality. Unfortunately, detailed accounting was not enough—even when we were tipped off about her movements, she eluded us. She would not arrive on the steamer she had booked, or when her baggage was searched, nothing would be discovered. Then,

months or years later, a wealthy socialite at the opera would be spotted wearing one of the extravagances we had documented in what we called “Dragon Kitty’s Treasure Catalog.”

In 1905, just before Mrs. Warren’s financial schemes were exposed to the world, I was perusing an *Evening Telegram* and saw a photograph of her emerging from the Fifth Avenue Hotel in New York City. I marked the plainness of her features with some surprise; in my memory, she was a handsome woman. She wore an evening gown and fur stole, but what caught my attention was the elaborate diamond necklace encircling her throat. At its center: a heart-shaped stone of some twenty carats. Just the month before, I had seen that necklace in Dragon Kitty’s Treasure Catalog.

The photograph had been taken the previous night. It was already past suppertime, but I hastened to the hotel. I had even more motivation than before, having endured my colleagues’ ribbing about letting Mrs. Warren slip through my fingers.

The hotel clerk confirmed that Mrs. Warren was indeed still in residence and gave me her room number. I rapped smartly on the door, and a neat young woman in a black dress answered. She looked at me warily as I proffered my official card.

“What is it you want?” the maid asked, none too politely.

Her coldness heightened my suspicions. Serendipity had brought me near my quarry, and I could not miss my chance. Unobtrusively, I moved my foot into the doorframe, preventing the door from shutting on me. “Please convey my card to your mistress,” I said. “I am here on the business of the United States Treasury Department.”

The girl narrowed her eyes but moved aside to let me enter the foyer of the luxurious suite. She disappeared for a full five minutes before the woman herself appeared, clad in an exquisite silk kimono, holding my card. “To what do I owe the pleasure, good sir?” She gazed at me

levelly; the angles and planes of her face were exotic in the lamplight, the air tinged with jasmine perfume.

Unaccountably, I felt awkward and jittery, like a boy in a spelling match. In an exaggerated, languorous motion, she brushed curls back from her milky cheek. It was clear that she had no recollection of our prior meeting.

“I am with the Treasury Department, madam,” I said.

“This much I already knew.” She handed my card back nonchalantly. I pulled the *Evening Telegram* from my overcoat pocket; I had folded the paper so that the incriminating photograph faced outward. “I saw you in the society pages.”

“An admirer from the Treasury Department?” Mrs. Warren’s smile was conspiratorial.

“This necklace.” I tapped the page for emphasis. “We have reason to believe that you purchased it in Paris.”

“Oh, that thing.” She laughed. “Flashy, I suppose. I borrowed it from a jeweler. It is good advertising for them when my photo appears in the newspaper.”

“We have evidence that you bought it from a shop on Rue de la Paix.”

Her shrug was elegant. I could not help notice that her silk robe slipped minutely lower down her shoulder.

“I could search your rooms right now, madam, and if I found the necklace, you would be subject to heavy fines.”

Mrs. Warren tilted her head. “You have a warrant?”

If I’d had any doubt that she was expertly versed in the requirements of the law, it was erased. From her playful smile, it was apparent that she did not fear me. I fumed at the toothlessness of my office—I had no right to enter her rooms, and the police in New York did not take customs matters seriously. Our department relied on the honesty of good citizens, while dishonest lawbreakers made sport of defrauding the United States government.

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“I *will* obtain a warrant,” I said. “If I must spend the night in the corridor outside your door to be sure that you do not flee before I have obtained it, I will.”

Mrs. Warren looked amused. She touched my arm gently. “Never fear, Mr. Madden,” she said. She had registered the name on my card. “There is no need to guard my door; I won’t scurry off into the night.”

She treated me like a child who had said something absurd; I was shamed for my jealousy. I knew that someone of her notoriety would not go into hiding over a dispute about a necklace. Nevertheless, I resolved to obtain a warrant as soon as the judge was in his chambers. Either Mrs. Warren would produce the necklace, or I would find it in her suite. I had her cornered—she would not escape.

The hotel clerk let me use an unoccupied guest room that night, as I planned to go to the courthouse just after sunrise; it made little sense to travel home, to the upper part of Manhattan, so late in the evening.

I slept fitfully, fully dressed, awaiting my wake-up call at any moment. It was still dark when the bellboy knocked on my door. I jumped to my feet and splashed water on my face, tidying myself as much as I could without comb or razor.

I expected the lobby to be deserted at that hour, when dawn barely brightened the windows, and was taken aback to see none other than Mrs. Kitty Warren, perched on a settee.

“My dear Mr. Madden,” she said, clasping my fingers between her gloved hands. “It is a lovely morning.” She was different from the night before, with rosy cheeks, a brisk manner, and a scent like clean laundry. “I hoped we could take breakfast together.” She cocked an eyebrow at the surprise on my face. “You do recall our rendezvous?”

“Of course, madam,” I said, recovering myself. “But what of the diamond necklace?”

“Oh, I sent a boy to pick it up at the jeweler’s. The owner will open the shop early as a favor. Come, I have already ordered; I trust that eggs Benedict will please you? I took the liberty of requesting a side of caviar.”

Mrs. Warren removed her gloves and folded them neatly, tucking them into her bag. “You see, Mr. Madden, the European fashions are always ahead of ours, and my friend, Michael Younge—you may know his jewelry shop on Union Square West—he asks me to bring him new designs.”

She paused, and when I looked up from stirring my coffee, I glimpsed an expression of intense observation, like a raptor surveying its prey. The moment passed, and with a smile, she continued, “I don’t buy gems in Europe, you see. I gather all of the stones here in New York or, if Mr. Younge advises, Cleveland or Pittsburgh—it is important to match them carefully. I only bring them to Paris for settings. That’s all right, isn’t it? I do hope I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“According to the revised statutes,” I interrupted, “all merchandise taken from the United States and conveyed to foreign countries to be reconstructed is dutiable upon return at the regular rate of sixty percent.” Whether or not Mrs. Warren knew of this regulation—and she almost certainly did—she would be liable for import duties.

Mrs. Warren smiled at me, then leaned forward, speaking in confidence, though the dining room was deserted at that hour. “All I got from the French jewelers was advice, and surely we are not required to pay money for a few friendly words of guidance, maybe a drawing or two.”

A tow-headed boy rushed in, carrying a blue velvet box. He came straight to the table and plunked it down in front of Mrs. Warren, his expression like a retriever dog, worshipping its master.

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“Ah, Henry,” Mrs. Warren said. “Thank you so much for bringing this little bauble.” Oddly, she introduced me to the boy, saying, “This is Mr. Madden, a diligent and honorable employee of the government of our great country. Mr. Madden, this is Henry.”

The boy ducked his head, then drew himself up, puffing out his small chest. I was at first offended by this eccentric elevation of an errand boy, but when I saw what pride Henry took in the introduction, I grew magnanimous. “Nice to meet you,” I said, and offered my hand. He shook it with a soft, shy grip, then darted away again.

Mrs. Warren opened the box. There was a letter written on thick, cream-colored paper inside, which she handed to me. It was from Younge and Co., signed by Mr. Michael Younge himself. The letter attested that the necklace had been assembled in the United States from gems purchased within our national borders.

“It is really lovely,” Mrs. Warren said, tilting the box up so that the light through the windows sparkled on the diamonds’ many facets. She snapped the box shut and handed it to me. “If you like, you may return this to Mr. Younge yourself.”

I had no riposte. It all appeared to be perfectly legal, though I knew it was not. “I must beg your leave,” I said. I had failed in my duty and was unable to stomach taking breakfast.

Mrs. Warren stood, smiling. “I’m sorry you can’t stay. It was such a pleasure, Mr. Madden,” she said. “I admire the work that you do.”

God help me, I smiled in return. “The pleasure was mine, madam,” I said, like a fool. A part of me actually meant it. When I looked into her luminous eyes, I almost believed her to be innocent. I wanted her to be innocent. I could scarcely have guessed then that smuggling was the least of her crimes.

CHAPTER 1

Scratching her shin with a calloused heel, Fanny pushed the tip of her pencil across the slate with concentration. A bulbous upper case *B* was followed by six cramped letters, spidery and backward-slanting, barely legible in the feeble light of the shack's only window. She leaned down to peer at a scrap of paper by her elbow, then methodically wrote the same name again, immediately below the first; the pencil made the faintest squeak. With the slate in one hand and the paper in the other, she held them nearer the window, appraising her work. She still hadn't managed to make a perfect replica of the signature.

Ignoring the rain that hammered against cracked panes and leaked across the rough pinewood sill, Fanny set the tablet down and wrote the letters again, then again. When her pencil bumped against the bottom of the frame on the downstroke, she wiped away the dusty script with a rag and started over at the top.

Cold seeped into Fanny's bones; stillness stiffened her limbs. The gray light hadn't noticeably dimmed, but she could feel dusk gathering in the woods, like wolves converging. Soon, Father and the boys would be back from partridge hunting, expecting their supper. She stood and

glanced outside, through the warped glass. A thick, gnarled branch of the apple tree took up most of the view; withered brown leaves, battered by rain, still clung to its underside. She had told her father that the tree needed to be cut back to keep the rats off the roof and out of the loft, but he never listened.

Fanny hid her slate and the scrap of paper in the dusty, cobwebbed gap behind the storage chest. She knelt by the hearth, tucking a wayward strand of tangled hair back under her kerchief. Beside the woodpile was a whiskey barrel filled with kindling; she grabbed a handful, and as she blew on the embers, she dropped in dried grasses and twigs, little nibbles to coax the fire back to life. Before she left home, Fanny's sister had given advice about housekeeping. It was important, Betsy said, to have the water boiling before Father got home with partridges. She had looked earnestly into Fanny's eyes as she made her point, making sure that she understood.

Fanny fed sticks to the licking flames, and when those caught fire, spruce logs. A nutty fragrance and snapping filled the air as sap pockets cracked open. She hauled the blackened pot filled with water from the hearth to hang it by a thick hook over the fire, her arms trembling under the weight, heat burning her hands. Betsy had made it look easy, but then she had been full grown, nearly five years older and several stone heavier than Fanny. With a curse, Fanny lifted the pot higher, the water sloshing erratically. Just as she thought she might drop it, the iron handle slid onto the hook with a clang. Fanny snatched her hands back and pressed them to the cool stone of the mantel. Next time she would hang the pot first, then fill it with water.

Fanny set a chipped enameled bowl on the table next to a burlap bag, from which she scooped out a pile of bush beans. The tips of the long-stored legumes had gone soft, and some were slimy; they smelled of must and rot.

The wind picked up, driving rain under the door and through the broken window. Fanny chewed on her lip as she shelled the beans, throwing seeds into the bowl with a *thuck, thuck* that was drowned out by a sudden downpour thundering on the roof.

Just as the rain lessened, there came shouts in the distance, then the pounding of boots on the porch. The door was flung wide. Fanny's brothers jostled each other, laughing and hooting; the smaller one, John, shook his head like a wet dog, spraying water in every direction.

"Stop it!" Fanny snapped, wiping droplets from her face with the frayed sleeve of her dress. "Take your boots off, both of you! You're tracking mud."

John tossed his soaking glove at her; it struck her shoulder, leaving a damp patch, then fell to the floor.

"Here you go," Billy said, laying a brace of fat partridges on the table. His wobbly adolescent voice broke on the word *go*, shifting to a higher register, which made John snicker. Billy paid him no heed; though he was bigger than his younger brother, he lacked John's appetite for battle.

The door opened again. John hushed, and Fanny went back to shelling beans, glancing at her father from the corner of her eye, trying to divine his mood. Daniel was a tall, sinewy man with a ruined face; he had lost an eye in a bar fight, and his left cheek was knotted with scar from an accident with a harrow. He leaned against the doorframe, pulling off his boots; the cold rain blew in around him. Fanny shivered.

When Daniel stepped forward to set down his rifle, water dripping off his crooked nose, Billy quietly closed the door behind him.

"What about supper?" Daniel said. His flat tone gave nothing away.

"Ready soon." Fanny kept working; she heard the rustles and clunks of her father and the boys shedding their outerwear. With chapped fingers, she tore open the fibrous pods, hastily digging out seeds. "I'll pour you a dram of whiskey."

The blow to the side of her head was hard enough to make her stagger.

"I'll get it," her father said. "Seems you're too busy."

A brief, bright flare of anger obscured Fanny's sight, but she returned to her task as though nothing had happened. Her temple throbbed, and she tasted blood where she had bit her tongue.

John snorted. He stood dripping by the fire, his feet spread wide in the posture of a grown man, taking in the spectacle with a smile.

Daniel picked up a dusty jug from the shelf and hefted it, weighing its contents. "Girl!" He barked, a guttural report. It wasn't as threatening as when he drew the syllable out, savoring it. But it wasn't good, either. "You were supposed to go up the creek for more whiskey!"

"There's plenty there." Fanny drew up her shoulders; the back of her neck felt naked, a snail unable to retract into its shell.

Billy cleared his throat and made a humming sound, his prelude to speech when he hadn't yet thought of what to say. He was gentle, always the peacemaker. God only knew how he ended up in their family; Fanny wasn't sure he would survive it.

"Snow's coming soon," Billy said finally. "We should kill that pig."

Daniel grunted. He filled a cup with the amber liquid and drank it down in long gulps.

The water over the fire burbled and spat. Fanny grabbed the partridges by their legs and plunged them into the pot. She wasn't careful enough, and a wave splashed over the edge, sizzling on the hearth. Fanny flinched as flying drops burned the underside of her forearm, but she didn't let go of the wizened claws. *Just a minute in boiling water*, her sister had said. *Then the feathers come off easy*.

John crowded the fireplace, standing too close behind Fanny, getting in her way. Though he was a year younger, he had grown taller

than Fanny and was feeling his oats. She pulled the birds straight up by their feet, letting hot water stream back into the pot. "Move," she said to John.

John came even closer, taunting her. It took effort to hold the wet birds high, arms extended over the steaming pot; she could feel pricks of sweat beading on her forehead. The partridges were pathetic things, their feathers plastered to their little pink bodies. Fanny could hear her brother's raspy breath, felt it stirring the hairs at the nape of her neck. Swiftly, she lifted her foot and smashed her bare heel into John's toes. He yelped and hopped back.

"You little bitch," he said, in a perfect imitation of his father.

Fanny turned her head slowly, saw his raised fist. She allowed the full force of her fury to flood her expression.

John glanced away. He lowered his skinny arm and picked at a scab on his chin, as though that was what he had intended to do all along. "You'd better get supper ready, little bitch," he hissed. He slouched over to Billy, who was drying the rifle with a rag.

When the partridges stopped steaming, Fanny sank to the floor to pluck them. She crossed her legs, tucking her dirty feet under her skirt. It was hard to see what she was doing; the window had become a black square in the wall, dully reflecting flickers of fire. "We might light a candle, Father," she said.

"I'm not made of money." Daniel was on his second or third cup, and his words came out rounder, fuzzy-edged. He sat in the shadows; Fanny could make out little more than the silhouette of his slumped shoulders and bent head. "You just hurry up," he said. "Seems your sister didn't teach you too good."

Without thinking, Fanny tossed a handful of feathers into the fire, where they sent up a thick smoke and foul odor.

John coughed. "That stinks like dogshit!"

Fanny glanced quickly to where her father sat; he was still hunched over his whiskey. To John, she said, "Since when's your nose so delicate? You smell worse." Fanny was embarrassed by her mistake, but wasn't going to show it.

"You're not just too stupid for school. You're too stupid to live."

John's accusation was a jab at a fresh wound. School had been the only bright spot in Fanny's life, and John knew it. The teacher had said that she was the smartest student she had ever taught, and had Fanny been a boy, she might have gone to college.

Fanny tried to shake the clinging wet down from her fingers, then gave up and wiped her hands on her skirt. She went back to plucking, depositing the feathers in a neat pile on the floor. When she was done, she laid the floppy, naked partridges side by side on the hearth. The room was silent except for her father's sighs and the crackling fire. The rain had stopped. Billy and John were sitting idle, waiting to be fed. Fanny gathered up the large pile of feathers in two hands and dumped it into the fire. She watched the thick black smoke billow and coil up the chimney. She held her breath against the stench.

The kick to her back forced the air from her lungs. Later, a deep purple bruise would bloom over her bony spine.

"Stupid bitch," her father said, coughing.

Moving fluidly, as though she felt nothing, Fanny got up and threaded the birds onto the spit. She went back to shelling beans.

"We should kill that pig," Billy said. "When it comes the first of sleighing, we'll be glad of salt pork." He made a little humming noise.

After supper, the room was illuminated by little more than cloud-veiled moonlight from the window. Daniel hauled himself unsteadily up the ladder to the loft. Within minutes, he was snoring. John climbed up next, once he was sure that his father was asleep.

“That was a good feed,” Billy said. He cracked his knuckles.

The fire had died to glowing embers and starved orange flames that flicked like snake tongues; Fanny could scarcely make out her brother’s face, hovering beside her. She scrubbed a greasy plate in a tub of tepid water. “Goodnight, Billy,” she said.

“Goodnight.” He sounded relieved to be dismissed. The rungs of the ladder groaned under his feet.

Fanny stacked the plates, wet and still slick with fat despite her efforts, then took the dish tub outside to empty it. She had to rest the metal bottom of the tub on her sore hip bone; she wasn’t strong enough to carry it with her arms alone. She slid on a pair of soggy, oversized boots, probably her father’s, though she couldn’t tell in the darkness, and kicked open the door.

The meadow was drab in gray light cast by the moon. Bats darted erratically; there came a doleful hoot of an owl, then silence. The rain barrel was full to the brim, but the sloping ground had shed most of its water into the creek. Fanny set down the tub and tipped it up, letting the contents slosh into the drainage ditch that surrounded their shack. Shadowy crabgrass bent under the greasy deluge, then slowly picked itself back up. She looked to the hulking black woods. There was nothing beyond the boundaries of their property but more poor farmers, immigrants who had fled the Old World in hope of taming the Canadian wilderness. They squatted in shanties on jagged clearings, scraping what they could from the earth, plagued by ravenous black flies and mosquitoes during the good months, deadly cold and hunger during the bad. Her father, like all the farmers, pretended that dirt held a better future, that one day they would be more than frightened animals in a hostile wilderness, scurrying outside just long enough to drag provisions into their squalid holes. Pretending that each day was building

a future and not just staving off death until the dirt claimed them, inevitably, indifferently.

Fanny was tired, and there was a sharp smell of winter in the night air, but she was reluctant to go back inside. She leaned against the splintered doorframe and pictured her sister on the train to Cleveland, a new hat perched on her head, gloved hands clasped in her lap.

Betsy, ever the obedient daughter, hadn't even yearned to escape. She had seemed content with the burdens of housework, the company of her few friends, the prospect of eventually becoming a mother herself. It was Fanny who obsessed about leaving, the way a famished man dreams of food. And yet, Betsy had left. And she was here.

She picked up the empty tub and looked in the direction of the distant train station. The wall of the forest was pitch-black; it swallowed the feeble light of the moon and gave nothing back.