
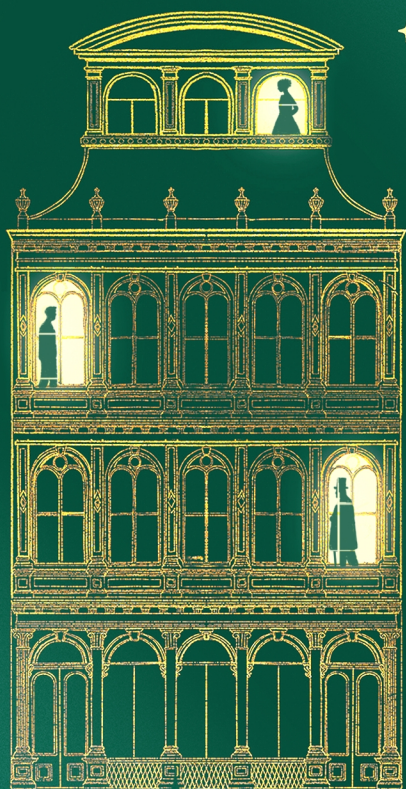




# MY FAIR FRAUDS



This season  
starts with  
a curtsy . . .  
and ends  
with a coup.



LEE KELLY AND  
JENNIFER THORNE



PRAISE FOR LEE KELLY & JENNIFER THORNE

*The Starlets*

“Pass the popcorn and settle in for a terrific time with this seamlessly crafted blend of historical fiction and old-school suspense.”

—*Library Journal*, Starred Review

“Kelly and Thorne follow up *The Antiquity Affair* with a spry and suspenseful crime novel set just after Hollywood’s golden age . . . Kelly and Thorne make a clichéd setup entirely their own, wringing surprising depth from Vivienne and Lottie’s mutual thawing without skimping on action or sumptuous descriptions of France and Italy. For movie buffs, this will be as welcome as a cool breeze on a hot day.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review

“Author duo Kelly and Thorne (*The Antiquity Affair*, 2023) return with a new historical thriller set in 1950s Hollywood . . . A fun, madcap romp through old Hollywood with an “enemies to besties” twist, this book will be a hit with fans of Taylor Jenkins Reid’s *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2019) and Ally Carter’s *The Blonde Identity* (2023).”

—*Booklist*

“The glamorous 1950s setting, the plot twists, the romp across Europe, the chemistry between Vivienne and Lottie, ambitious, at-odds movie starlets who must join forces to save the picture and their lives—everything about *The Starlets* is a sheer delight! This fast-paced caper from the writing duo of Kelly and Thorne is fresh, fun, and exactly the escape readers need right now.”

—Marie Bostwick, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Esme Cabill Fails Spectacularly*

“Kelly and Thorne are a phenomenal duo . . . two brilliant authors with boundless talent and a singularly remarkable voice.”

—Elle Cosimano, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Finlay Donovan series

“The glam of old Hollywood meets the empowerment vibe of *Barbie* in this fast-paced European adventure that turns on-screen rivals into off-screen allies. Energetic, funny, and loads of fun.”

—Lori Goldstein, author of *Love, Theodosia: A Novel of Theodosia Burr and Philip Hamilton*

“*The Starlets* captivates from the first sentence. Brimming with Old Hollywood glamour, a twisty plot, and feuding film stars navigating increasingly sticky situations, this atmospheric, engrossing caper is your next must-read!”

—Rachel Linden, bestselling author of *The Enlightenment of Bees* and *The Magic of Lemon Drop Pie*

“Lights! Camera! Action! Once again, Kelly and Thorne have created a heart-pounding story of non-stop adventure and irrepressible fun. In *The Starlets*, cinema icon Vivienne Rhodes and up-and-coming Lottie Lawrence join forces to save the day and steal the show. I enjoyed every moment of this 1950s glamorous adventure that whisked me from Hollywood to Italy, with a delightful stop in Monaco to visit America’s favorite Princess Grace, and back to Hollywood again with two leading ladies who know who they are and have the courage to chase what they want. A must-read!”

—Katherine Reay, bestselling author of *The Berlin Letters*

“*The Starlets* is the most fun I’ve had inside the pages of a book in a long time. The novel flips ‘friends to foe’ on its head, putting two competing actresses in the spotlight, transforming the starlets from adversaries to allies as they race across Europe to take down a kingpin. Shenanigans, quick thinking, and a cat-and-mouse game

ensue. A propulsive, page-turning romp perfect for book clubs.”

—Jenni L. Walsh, *USA TODAY* bestselling author

“Well-crafted and deliciously devourable, *The Starlets* tosses you onto a Hollywood movie set filled with everything you’d expect and want—glitz and glamor, love, jealousy, extravagance, jaunts across Europe . . . and murder! Plot twists abound when archrivals unite as real-life heroines who must save the day or all is lost, including their lives! A page-turning, exhilarating wild ride of a story that I devoured in a single weekend!”

—Jennifer Moorman, bestselling author of *The Magic All Around*

“Glamour. Danger. Adventure. Enemies to besties. Yes, please! This book has just the right touches of killer (pun intended) locations that our heroines get to zip around like an exploded champagne cork. Throw in some Hollywood touches, Esther Williams vibes, and this story is served like the perfect cocktail.”

—J’nell Ciesielski, author of *The Winged Tiara*

### *The Antiquity Affair*

“Authors Lee Kelly and Jennifer Thorne have written a rollicking tale replete with adventure, romance, mystery, and a sprinkle of the supernatural. *The Antiquity Affair* has been likened to Indiana Jones, and it’s an apt comparison, as both are rousing adventure stories complete with ancient mysteries, hidden tombs, harrowing mantraps and pitfalls, villains bent on world domination, and fabled relics of power . . . The authors neatly subvert the trope of swashbuckling men and their archeological treasure. A fast-paced and entertaining read that I hope is not the last from Kelly and Thorne.”

—Historical Novel Society

“What a thrilling adventure with sisters at the heart of it. When Tess and Lila take the reins—of horse and camel—their stories take off, brimming with cases of mistaken identities, cat-and-mouse chases, booby-trapped catacombs, first loves, encrypted clues, and a long-lost treasure that all want to get their hands on. A rousing, page-turning romp across Egypt!”

—Jenni L. Walsh, *USA TODAY* bestselling author

“A deliciously entertaining, swashbuckling adventure, *The Antiquity Affair* gives readers a mystery to unravel, romances to swoon over, and a sister story to tug at the heart. An absorbing, heart-pounding page-turner.”

—Lori Anne Goldstein, author of *Love, Theodosia: A Novel of Theodosia Burr and Philip Hamilton*

ALSO BY LEE KELLY AND JENNIFER THORNE

*The Starlets*

*The Antiquity Affair*

HARPER  
MUSE



# MY FAIR FRAUDS

A NOVEL



LEE KELLY AND  
JENNIFER THORNE



HARPER MUSE

*My Fair Frauds*

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PRINCIPAL SHAREHOLDERS  
MANIFEST RAILS

(EST. MAY 1, 1870)

*One week after bankruptcy of Midwest Railroads. THIS  
will be the day.*

**Mr. Harold Peyton**

*Wife dead in childbirth. Son, Harold Junior.  
No other living relatives.*

*Angle: Venality*

**Mr. James Vandemeer**

*First wife deceased. Second wife, Olivia.  
One daughter, Mimi.*

*Angle: Vainglory*

**Mr. Sherman Witt**

*Died 1874. Widow, Iris Witt, retains shares.  
Children: Beau and Bonnie.*

*Angle: Capriciousness*

**Mr. Robert Ames**

*Wife, Pearl. Daughter, Arabella.*

*Angle: Validation*

**Mr. Brett Ogden**

*Wife, Priscilla. No legitimate children.  
As per sources, his reputation is unchanged.*

*Angle: Carnality*

PART I

# *The Pledge*



“Feed with mystery the human mind, which dearly  
loves mystery.”

—THE ESTEEMED MAGICIAN HARRY KELLAR

*THE NEW YORK HERALD*

Friday, November 9, 1883

TENSIONS ESCALATE IN GERMANIC KINGDOM  
OF WÜRTTEMBERG FOLLOWING RATIFICATION  
OF “TRIPLE ALLIANCE”

Calvin Archer, New York Office

The historic defensive “Triple Alliance” treaty between the German Empire, Italy, and Austria-Hungary, when initially proposed last year, was met with widespread resistance in the Kingdom of Württemberg, a resource-rich Germanic nation that has suffered both politically and economically since Reich unification. Opponents decried the treaty as overreaching and particularly unfair to Württemberg, and contended that ratification would surely sound the death knell for the southern state’s sovereignty.

King Charles I’s capitulation to the empire’s pressures to ratify subsequently spurred a growing nationalist movement within Württemberg’s borders, with key nobility rumored to be setting the stage for a resistance . . .

CHAPTER I

*In the Wings*

November 9, 1883

Coraline O'Malley—known as “Cora Mack” to her current troupe and company—stands at the ready as assistant stagehand, watching from behind the scenes as her aging boss, Prospero the Great, performs feat after feat of manufactured wonder for tonight’s enraptured audience. A parade of ghosts slinking through his labyrinth maze of onstage mirrors. A kaleidoscope of butterflies spiraling out from the floor and over the crowd. A tree growing in rapid time from a plot of dirt, a sprout unfurling and blooming into an orange plant taller than Prospero himself in a matter of minutes.

But the most confounding magic of the night, at least in Cora’s opinion, lies offstage: the wealthiest, most afternooned audience she has ever encountered currently seated in Mrs. Iris Witt’s two-hundred-guest-capacity private auditorium housed inside her palatial Madison Avenue home.

Incredibly, Prospero’s show is only one of the evening’s many diversions, a themed “Night of Illusions,” which seems intended to herald the arrival of November and another New

York social season. The Witts' foyer has been transformed into a circus, complete with fire-eaters. Their ballroom, a ribboned carousel of real live zebras and giraffes. Partygoers decked in costumed gowns riddled with brilliants, skirts swathed in lace, fascinators of gems and exotic feathers. Mrs. Witt's own peacock headpiece is so enormous that it blocks the views of the ill-fated dozens seated behind her.

Cora swallows. The sheer overwhelm, the excess, the unfairness of *so much* concentrated wealth in one room in one corner of one city—

*Just breathe*, she tells herself. *Breathe and reset the stage*. Jealousy won't get her back Long Creek Farm, after all—but picking this audience's gilded pockets postshow certainly might.

"Are you sure you can handle her?" Maeve, the show's lead stagehand, sidles breathlessly beside Cora. A hefty magnet—usually Cora's responsibility during performances—is balanced precariously across Maeve's back, further rounding the old woman's stooped shoulders. "Dinah can be a handful, ye know, so if you're having second thoughts—"

"Maeve, I'll never manage a raise if I can't master all the tricks," Cora says.

Maeve's crinkled lips pull into a worried frown. "Told ya, love, Prospero don't give raises."

"And I told you, I'm gonna be the exception." Cora sighs, hiding her frustration with an assuring smile. "I can handle her, honest. You can trust me." *Although, come to think of it, Dinah should certainly be out of the dressing rooms by now.*

"All right, love. Break a leg." Maeve flashes Cora a small smile before glancing at the stage. "That's my cue." Readjusting the large magnet across her shoulders like a donkey pole, Maeve hurries down the backstage stairs and into the trap

room.

Onstage, Prospero welcomes his latest volunteer. “Mr. Vanderbilt, would you consider yourself a man of great strength?”

The volunteer flexes his muscles, and the crowd laughs.

Prospero lifts a small box, opening the container for the audience to see. “You all bear witness, evidence that this box is empty.”

Cora peers around the backstage area, her concern beginning to mount. Dinah is a handful indeed. She has been Prospero’s assistant since the Grant administration and fashions herself a true star—dismissive of Cora and Maeve, generally abrasive, and habitually late. Cora considers dragging her out of the dressing rooms when a high-pitched voice sounds behind her.

“Well, don’t just stand there!” Dinah spins around in her glittering stage dress, giving Cora access to the unbuttoned back. “Hitch me up!”

Cora bites back choice words and jumps to, affixing the wooden plank to Dinah’s corset, just like Maeve showed her during dress rehearsal. If she can somehow prove to Prospero that she deserves to make as much as Maeve—maybe even work onstage alongside him, split the stage tricks with Dinah—well, she’ll be that much closer to getting back her home.

Onstage, meanwhile, Prospero has placed the empty box on a small table before him. “Mr. Vanderbilt, please, if you might lift the box . . . with your unparalleled vigor.”

The volunteer pulls on the trick box’s handle. It doesn’t budge, thanks to Maeve now standing sentinel with the magnet in the trap room below the stage. Mr. Vanderbilt mutters to himself, pulling, yanking, cursing, much to the crowd’s de-

light.

“That box must be made of steel!” he crows, returning to his seat. “I couldn’t lift it an inch!”

Onstage, Prospero smiles and bows. “And now, for my final demonstration!”

“Are you finished yet?” Dinah hisses. “Tonight needs to go perfect for this smart set! Why are *you* here anyway? Where on earth is Maeve?”

“She’s got the magnet downstairs,” Cora huffs, working fast. “Which leaves you to me. Not to worry, you’re in good hands, Maeve trusts me—”

“Her first mistake,” Dinah scoffs. “This is taking twice as long as it should—”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Prospero cries, “please welcome back my lovely assistant, Miss Dinah!”

Hearing her cue, Dinah attempts to hurry onstage, but Cora yanks her back into the curtains. “I’m not finished!”

Prospero laughs uneasily while the crowd titters. “Come, my darling Dinah, now don’t be shy!”

“Just hold still.” Hands shaking, Cora finally hooks the mechanical crane’s thin metal rod, meant to lift Dinah into the air on Prospero’s command, onto the plank’s clasp. She fumbles to cover it with Dinah’s dress buttons.

“You trying to make me look bad?” Dinah shrills. “Think you’re gonna steal my spot?”

“Stop squirming—”

“I know your type, always plotting and scheming. Don’t think I know about your own act, little thief. If I had my way, we’d have left you in Charleston.”

“You’re ready, *go!*”

Dinah disentangles herself from Cora, strutting onstage to

more applause.

Prospero's finale, his showstopping "levitating woman," brings down the house.

Cora watches the trick with detached, dread-filled certainty.

"*Little thief.*" Forget a raise. She might have just lost her job, and her own home, for good.



"Did you tell her?" Cora demands, cornering Maeve in their makeshift prop room after the show, Prospero and Dinah both having retreated to this evening's dressing quarters, a series of ornate parlors right off the Witts' private theater.

Maeve cocks her head. "Tell who what, love?"

"Dinah!" Cora blinks back tears. "My methods are flawless. There's no possible way she could have caught on, unless you specifically ratted me out."

"I . . . I had no choice!" Maeve's sunken cheeks flush. "Dinah was going through your things one day and—"

"My things?"

"Found a stack of cash and didn't understand how you came into so much money, given what you get paid is . . . well, you know." Maeve clears her throat. "She accused you of far worse vices, Cora. I was only defendin' your honor."

"Hell's bells, Maeve." Cora flops onto a trick box. *Just breathe.* "She's going to tell Prospero. She's going to have me fired."

"No, Cora, no." Maeve hurries toward her. "There's nothing to worry about. I told her I'd handle it, on my honor, set you straight." Maeve takes Cora's hands. "Dinah promised she

wouldn't tell the boss—not unless you do it again, anyway. I swear, everything's going to be right as rain.”

Cora shakes her head. “Listen, Maeve, you really don't understand . . .” How can Cora possibly explain that at three dollars a week, without her subsidized earnings, her unique style of sleight of hand—pickpocketing, purse-lifting, sneak thievery, all conducted discreetly on select patrons after the show—she might be Maeve's age before she can take back Long Creek Farm? A lifelong dupe, just like her father. Forever a pawn in a smarter player's game.

Maeve keeps staring at her, looking about to cry herself.

“All right.” Cora sighs. “Yes, fine. I'll stop the filching, Maeve. Honest.”

A cacophony of impatient knocks sounds from the door before Prospero thrusts it open. The magician is now dressed in a clean, crisp white shirt, his face freshly painted, his haughty showman veneer still firmly affixed. “Our hostess desires some parlor tricks. Come. Out we go.”

Cora and Maeve follow their boss, Dinah, and the rest of their crew past the temporary dressing rooms. They soon reach the main artery of the stately home: a long marble hall awash with sculptures, decorative armor, and massive oil paintings, where black-clad waiters are busy bussing champagne and canapes through Mrs. Witt's crowd of glamorous party guests, the warm light from her three giant tiered crystal chandeliers coating the entire scene with a dreamlike glitter.

“*The smart set*,” Dinah had called them. For once, Cora must agree. The “haves” of this country versus her current company of “have-nots.” *By dint of what?* she wonders. Inordinate family wealth hailing back to the *Mayflower*? Else gained through merciless business practices or duping easy marks—like those

Ross & Calhoun bank lenders, preying on her father's financial ignorance. What shiny American victors they are, with their fancy balls and private shows and homes large as city blocks.

Cora feels the whole world slipping from her fingers as she trails her troupe into the festive melee. What if she never rises above her current station, playing backstage lackey to a troupe of fools? What is she to do now if she can't pickpocket on the road? Cora needs *three thousand dollars* more to approach the bank with a credible offer for Long Creek Farm, and that's assuming no one else offers first. Absent thieving, that kind of money will take her twenty years to put together.

Twenty. Years.

"Pardon me, kind friends, please do excuse us."

Cora watches as a bearded, stout gentleman with a cane expertly threads a tall blonde woman through the crowd. The lady on his arm is pretty, dressed to the nines, if a little bit somber in her choice of deep blue velvet. Middle, possibly late twenties, and appearing quite faint.

"Dear duchess," the man says, "perhaps some air might do you good?"

The blonde woman shakes her head, as if to clear it. "Just a bit taxed from all the excitement, is all," she says in a harsh, thick accent Cora can't quite place.

Mrs. Witt slides between the pair, a superior tilt to her chin. "I cannot imagine the House of Württemberg throwing parties like this, hmm? Allow yourself some respite, duchess. In my sitting room. Ableton!" Mrs. Witt beckons one of her footmen standing ready in the wings.

The bearded man nods in gratitude, steering his female companion out of the fray as a portly middle-aged woman

and a mousy-looking young lady sidle beside their hostess.

“Mrs. Witt, do you really think it proper for the duchess to retire alone with Mr. McAllister?” Frowning, the larger woman glances at her younger intimate—her daughter, Cora assumes. The pair have the same dishwater brown hair, the same narrow-set eyes. “Arabella and I find it quite concerning that the duchess is without family or friends on these shores looking out for her well-being, and thus we consider it our duty—”

“You have no duties yet, Pearl.” Mrs. Witt rolls her eyes. “Now stop angling for the Württemberg crown and let me see to my party.” She waves above the crowd, clearly annoyed. “Mr. Prospero? Mr. Prospero, come here!”

Mrs. Witt summons the performer forward, eyeing the man like a new toy she longs to break. “My ball cannot be complete unless you share the methods behind your tricks. I command you to do so at once.”

“Ah, but what is magic if not the keeping of guarded secrets.” Prospero smiles grandly, deflecting. He drops his voice to a stage whisper. “And if I may say, madame, I do believe you’re keeping secrets of your own.”

Prospero steps forward, trailing his fingers across Mrs. Witt’s monstrous headpiece. A moment later, a dove bursts forth from the bloom of feathers and soars toward the chandeliers.

The surrounding partygoers gasp, erupting into another round of applause.

“I wish the whole dratted thing would fly away.” Mrs. Witt adjusts the piece with a groan. “We do what we must for *la mode*, but this headdress is a true cross to bear.”

A team of harried-looking footmen rush forward to assist.

From the edges of the gathered crowd, Cora watches as the servants remove Mrs. Witt's dwarfing headpiece—carefully withdrawing, one by one, a series of ornate pins holding it in place. Four pins, to be precise. Each pin a shaped helix of at least two dozen diamonds.

One footman holds out a silver tray while the other lays the pins down in a perfect row.

Cora creeps through the crowd, angling for a better look. The pins are delicate, the bases sparkling silver, and the diamonds are of a significant size—half a carat each, maybe more.

*Good God, how much could one possibly fetch for a set like that?*

She watches the footmen head down the hall with the head-dress and tray, her mind fully racing now. Is this a gift from above, a stroke of incredible luck, right when she needs it? She doesn't have a professional's eye for jewelry, admittedly—her family's treasures were of the cereal and corn variety—but she can appreciate the finer things, always has, and taken as a set, those pins must be worth at least a few thousand. More than enough to walk away from the show forever, cash out, and finally take back her family's land.

All she has to do is follow those footmen, wait for the right time, and swipe the whole lot.

As Prospero pulls a deck of cards from inside his lapel for his next parlor trick, Cora inches farther backward. Ignoring Maeve, who is also standing on the crowd's fringes and currently giving Cora a *very* pointed, bug-eyed stare. Although Cora is just being paranoid—there is no way the older stagehand could possibly sense what she is planning. Besides, Maeve has left her no other choice; without thieving on the road, Cora's future is as empty as Prospero's trick box.

As the crowd shifts, closing in for a better view of Prospero, Cora seizes her moment, slipping away from the commotion, retracing the steps of the footmen. Behind the scenes all night, and dressed in black herself, no one should mistake a young stagehand for anything but additional hired help for the evening's festivities.

Cora rounds the hall into another narrow corridor.

A wrinkled woman in an apron stops her short.

"Ah, finally. My kingdom for a free hand!" The woman thrusts a heavy box into Cora's chest. *A sewing kit?* "Run this to Adelaide, girl."

Cora pastes on a manic smile. "Right. Adelaide." She nods across the corridor. "Saw her go that way—"

The servant thrusts her chin in the direction from which Cora came. "Thataway! Guest has a tear, yes, yes. It's a parade of fashion emergencies. Out you go—"

"To Mrs. Witt's quarters?"

"Ha, are you mad? She'll be in the guest room upstairs." The woman all but shoves Cora back into the hall.

*All right, Cora, reset. Time for a new plan.*

She returns to the marble hallway, then stealthily crosses over into the empty theater. Once inside the space, she spies a luxurious velvet shawl discarded on a seat. Perfect. She nabs the piece and heads backstage for Dinah's dressing room.

After closing the door, Cora hastily exchanges her black shirtwaist and skirt for one of the assistant's gaudy, floor-length gowns. As a final embellishment, Cora opens the sewing kit she's been saddled with and, with a few swift stitches, secures one of Prospero's black silk scarves into a waistband that matches the shawl.

Next, she helps herself to Dinah's mess of rouges and pow-

ders stacked on an end table, then tugs down her hair and, with a couple deft moves, retwists it into a piled tousle of curls.

Cora studies herself in the room's opulent mirror.

"Not quite Madison Avenue. But it'll do."

She hurries onto the stage, stopping for a moment to look out at the empty theater, imagining, for just a moment, those elusive spotlights finally shining on *her*.

In another life, perhaps. In this one, Cora is running out of time.

After leaving the theater via the far entrance, she enters the main hall on its opposite end. From there, she walks swiftly into the Witts' grand foyer, holding her head high, as if she owns the place. Disregarding the quizzical tone of a butler asking if she's lost.

"Just taking a break from the festivities," Cora says airily. "These events can be so demanding, do you not agree?"

"Yes, madame, but if I could—"

Ignoring him, she glides headlong past, rounding another hall peppered with marble busts and tapestries. Mrs. Witt's dressing rooms must be somewhere in this expansive maze.

The hall soon dead-ends, and Cora makes the swift decision to turn left, and . . . Voilà. She's rewarded with the sight of the two footmen and a lady's maid now holding the feathered headpiece and tray of pins, the lot of them idling and chatting down the other end.

Cora tucks herself into an alcove, waiting, watching as the servants share a quiet joke. The footmen finally disappear into a doorway on the right as the maid takes the bounty, passing two rooms before turning into the third door on the left.

Cora hangs back for one heartbeat, two . . . and then sneaks

in behind her.

Mrs. Witt's private quarters.

The room is dark, but Cora can still see enough that pure envy closes around her, stifling, like a spell box. Such luxury, extravagance. Excess. A canopy bed, damask patterned walls, a sitting room, a moonlit vanity, and an elevated dressing stage.

She retreats into the shadows, feeling even more determined now.

The lady's maid carefully lifts each diamond pin from the tray and places them one by one inside a jewelry box on the vanity, then crosses the room and lays the feathered headpiece down like a sleepy child into a long velvet box at the foot of the bed.

Finally, the maid returns to the hall, shutting the door with a satisfying *click*.

*Showtime.*

Cora hurries toward the vanity and opens the box, lifting one of the pins for inspection. The delicate, intricate piece glimmers like a promise under the tall casement window's swath of moonlight. Twenty-four beautiful diamonds.

She swallows a triumphant squeal. No more waking up in one city and falling asleep the following night on the way to the next. No more toiling away in the shadows for her weekly pittance or slinking through the vaudeville crowds, always on the prowl like a famished hyena.

Cora conjures the image of her old clapboard farmhouse, the endless stretch of wheat, the way the sun glints off the winding creek at sunrise. Then, even more satisfying, she pictures the stunned, defeated faces of those avaricious lenders when she walks into their offices and slaps a stack of bills on the table.

Coraline O'Malley, victorious. Nobody's fool.

Invigorated by her fantasies, she affixes the pins inside her skirts.

When she attempts the door, however, she finds it locked.

*Good God, nothing is ever easy.*

Slightly panicking, Cora surveys the whole of the room, her gaze soon falling on a second door—this one narrow and latched—on the adjacent wall beyond the sitting room.

Her body wilts in relief. Another way out.

It's hard to tell where the pocket door leads as Cora inches it open, given that the adjoining room is dimly lit. Another sitting room, perhaps? A parlor? Regardless, Cora slides through, emerging in a narrow space between two tall bookshelves. But just as she's about to lunge for the door . . .

She realizes she is not alone.

"I'd say that was a success, dear duchess," a male voice quietly crows. "If a brief one."

Cora presses her back against the wall. There are two people here, in fact—the bearded man with the cane and the pretty European noblewoman with ice-blonde hair.

*Damn it all.* Maybe Cora won't be noticed, wedged between these high shelves. Safer here, in any case, than utterly exposed in the middle of the hostess's bedroom.

She'll simply have to wait them out.

From her shielded vantage, Cora watches the man stride, cane-assisted, across the room. He makes himself right at home with the drinks cabinet, where a decanted bottle of sherry waits to be poured.

"I'm not taking unnecessary risks, Ward," the woman answers in a low, flat American accent—a very different elocution than she had used earlier during the party, Cora notes.

“Time’s a’ticking,” says the man—Ward? “We don’t set this in motion soon and we might forfeit half the season.”

He hands his companion a glass of sherry.

The woman swirls it before sipping, scowling a little, as if in deep thought, while Ward sits back down with a contented sigh.

“And we can’t risk letting this play into the summer, Alice,” Ward says. “Only so long before word gets out about secret mines.”

Cora’s heart ticks like a metronome. *Forfeit the season? Secret mines?*

How . . . fascinating.

Also . . . none of her concern!

She’s hiding on her person a collection of stolen, hopefully exorbitantly expensive diamond pins. Whoever these people are, if they catch her, they’ll no doubt rat her out to Mrs. Witt. She’ll not only lose the score, but she’ll also lose the farm and likely her job, low-paying as it is. Perhaps she could even wind up in jail.

Cora focuses her entire being on willing their departure. *Leave, you wretched interlopers!*

“An excellent point,” says the duchess—or Alice, as this Ward fellow just called her. “And four of the five families are now at play, thanks to this social outing, so you were right about that as well.”

“As to the fifth . . .” Ward strokes his impressively pointed beard. “Are you dead set on Peyton? We could—”

“Peyton is nonnegotiable.” The tall woman’s voice has gone stiff. “He’s the worst of them.”

“As well as the most intractable,” Ward mutters. “I laid the groundwork with his business manager, but no dice. Si-

las posed the proposition, told him about the mines. Peyton shut him right down: 'Not interested.' I fear he'll need a more subtle form of persuasion, but I'm unsure as to how to achieve that without an actual tête-à-tête. And like I said, Alice, the man's a veritable hermit. No one other than Silas—and I mean *no* one—has seen him for years."

"We'll simply have to find a way to draw him out." Alice sits up straighter, eyes sharpening. "Perhaps we could approach him at his ch—"

"Church? What *church*?" Ward laughs. "The man's the devil himself, as you said. What use has he got for God? He hardly lets his own son see the light of day anymore."

"His son. *There*—that's an angle. The son has got to be, what? Twenty-three by now?" Alice paces the room, thinking. Cora feels her own heart pounding.

"Twenty-two, I believe," Ward answers quickly. "Now, what are you pondering, Alice? That the younger Peyton might be lured into—"

"Forget it. It won't work." The woman sighs. "He's too young."

"You are very beautiful." On the bearded man's lips, it feels more like a clinical observation than a flirtation. "And twenty-eight is hardly elderly."

"How kind," Alice says with a sardonic glint in her eye. "But I'm afraid you have more faith in my charms than I do. Twenty-eight may not be elderly, but it is decidedly spinsterish, not exactly the prime attraction for a young man. Even if it were, playing him off Ogden would risk losing them both." The woman waves her hand, exasperated. "It's not worth muddling over tonight. I'll find a way to drag Peyton out of his house and into our trap. Within months, he'll be left with-

out a rag to wipe his forehead.”

Cora flattens herself against the shelves. A magic trick would really prove opportune right now. She’s learned quite a bit about deception from watching Prospero’s acts, but an escape stunt remains far outside her current capabilities. Her mind free-falls through increasingly outlandish possibilities: Could she fold herself in half, stuff herself between the books?

“And we’ll be filthy too,” Ward chuckles. “Filthy rich!”

“Precisely.” Alice nods in a way that suggests punctuating the end of the conversation. “The plan is in place. The throughline of it, at least. All that’s left are mere details.”

Cora closes her eyes, shifts her legs, which are starting to turn numb from remaining in place so long. Praying for reprieve, until finally, *finally*, those prayers are answered.

She hears the door to the main sitting room open and close. *They’ve left.*

Cora bursts toward the door.

And collides straight into the waiting duchess.

*Leave Them Wanting More*

Isn't this an interesting magic trick?" Alice says in a decidedly German intonation, gripping the younger woman's elbow. "Levitating into our hostess's private quarters. I don't suppose you've received a personal invitation."

"Whereas you got yourself a plum one," the girl answers, a smart tilt to her chin and a smirk playing on her Gibson Girl lips. "You can drop the accent, by the way. You may have others fooled, but I just heard plenty to suggest where you're really from. And it sure as heck isn't Europe. Unless Upstate New York got annexed sometime in the past few years and I didn't know about it?"

Alice's grip loosens ever so slightly. *Upstate New York*. This girl has a good ear. Too good.

"Aren't you the clever one," Alice retorts dryly, dropping the accent as requested. The girl rocks back onto her heels like a precocious child who's just won a spelling bee. "You're not the one I took you for, are you? The magician's assistant, up there on the stage. But surely you're not an invited guest. And in any case, I can't let you waltz out of here with that."

She nods to the side of the girl's long skirt that she's clearly gripping with the fingers of one hand. The girl feigns bewil-

derment, but that hand doesn't budge.

"Don't know what you mean," the girl says. "I was just relieving myself, if you must know, in cleaner facilities than that dank little cupboard in the servants' wing. There. You got me. Haul me off to toilet jail!"

She tries to saunter off, but Alice blocks the way, arms crossed, unimpressed. "Go on. Let's see it."

The girl's eyes flit here and there, as if to assess whether a physical scrap might get her out of this one. Alice is tall, over five feet nine inches, and of a slim but formidable build. Even so, she knows it's her expression of absolute intractable marble that manages to dislodge the younger woman's confidence.

The girl sighs in capitulation. Immodestly she digs into the skirts of her gaudy dress, her hand emerging with four slim diamond pins. Iris Witt was wearing them earlier, wasn't she, to affix that horrendous headdress? It's a score so obvious that Alice nearly laughs aloud at the foolishness of Iris making such a show of removing them from her head.

If this girl successfully absconds with the jewels, she'd create a ruckus that would, as a best-case scenario, merely distract from the impact of Alice's own introduction into society; at worst, she'd put these grandees on their guard for the rest of the season. Unacceptable.

The easiest way to stop this little thief currently rests in a discretely sewn pocket in Alice's gown—the derringer pistol she never leaves the house without. But perhaps there's a more delicate way to approach this.

"They're fakes," Alice says with a pitying cock of her chin.

The girl's eyes widen with surprise, but only for a blink. She's suspicious now, as well she might be. "How can you—"

"Watch." Alice leans close to the piled pins, enjoying the

sight of the girl flinching, then breathes hot air into her hand. “See all this fog? The stones caught and held the humidity. Diamonds don’t do that. This is crystal.”

The girl shuffles back with a scowl, having a look on her own. “I don’t see any fog.”

“It takes a practiced eye, especially in this light.” Alice raises her eyebrows. “It occurs to me that instead of giving you trade secrets, I ought rather to turn you over to the police. This sneak-and-grab routine appears to be a well-honed trick.”

“You? Turn *me* over?” The girl laughs. “I’ll be out that window and gone before you can even shout ‘thief.’”

As if to test that theory, she edges closer to the far wall.

*Good, Alice thinks, the conversation has moved on from the gemstones.*

“An escape artist, are you?” Alice blinks. “I must have missed that part of the act. I’ll have to ask the magician for your name.”

“He doesn’t know my real name,” the girl volleys back, chin lifting again—more with pride than defiance, Alice thinks. “But I know your fake one. And if all goes south for me and I wind up in custody, I’m sure the boys in blue would love to hear what I have to say about the upstanding member of European aristocracy who blew the whistle on me. Makes for *quite* an interesting story.”

They watch each other for another moment in tense silence.

Alice shrugs, motioning to Mrs. Witt’s bedroom door. “Put those fakes back where you found them and no harm done. If you heard as much as you claim to, then you’ll understand why I can’t have any kind of scandal arising while I’m here.”

“Yes, that’s all *crystal* clear,” the girl says, spinning the pin with a smirk. “Go on, then. I’ll put them back. Deal’s a deal.”

Alice shakes her head. "I think I'd prefer the evidence of my own eyes."

"Touchy, touchy."

Alice watches the girl sulkily glide back through the pocket door and into Mrs. Witt's dressing chambers, placing the pins back inside the lacquered jewelry box, shutting its compartment up tight with visible reluctance.

*She's got a restless mind, Alice observes. For her, it's as much about winning as the winnings themselves.*

She can certainly relate to that.

"We square?" the girl whispers as she slides the pocket door shut behind her.

"Indeed," Alice answers, with her German cadence back in place. "I wish you better luck in the future than what you've found tonight. And here's something more for your trouble."

She hands the thief a shiny coin.

"A fiver?" The girl squints. "I'd think my silence was worth something more like—"

"Don't press your luck."

The thief sinks like a tethered balloon, the bare regret in her expression making Alice wonder if she was right in her assessment of the girl—perhaps she really does need the money. But then, with a blink, the girl slides smartly away, turning the coin over in her hand with a neat spin to make it disappear. A well-practiced act. She's underutilized in that troupe of hers.

With perfected wariness, Alice watches the girl sidle out of the sitting room and back down the hall.

She lingers for a minute before rejoining the party, where Ward waits inside the games room with a group of male chums, all laughing at some quip she suspects she should be glad she hasn't heard. Ward straightens smartly and hastens

from the room at the sight of her.

“Shall we away, Your Grace?” he offers. “I’m sure this has all been taxing.”

“And I have some correspondence to reply to,” Alice says quietly.

“To your brother, no doubt,” Mrs. Witt loudly whispers, faux-conspiratorial as she takes Alice’s arm in the corridor. “Tell me, is it really true that Prince Wilhelm’s been corresponding with Arabella Ames, that little mouse? If he’s looking for an American debutante, surely he can do better. Not that I’m offering up my Bonnie. She’s got more suitors that she can juggle at the moment.”

Alice affects a disarmed laugh at this crude performance. She must make Iris Witt believe that her particular brand of boastful vulgarity is a balm to the duchess’s troubled mind.

“I’m afraid I’m writing back on more somber matters,” Alice answers. “There have been raids by our supposed allies at our nation’s southern border . . . But I really must say no more. I’m sure all your fine guests are beyond reproach, but I cannot risk any wisp of information reaching the ears of our Austrian oppressors.”

Her eyes dip low before rising through the game room’s doorway to meet the gathered men’s curious and appreciative glances—in particular, Brett Ogden’s arrogant gaze. He cuts the handsomest figure at this party, even in middle age, but he wears his beauty like a threat. Alice takes pains to fight off a shudder at his curling smile, especially while her sharp-eyed hostess is also watching.

“The truth is, I always reply promptly to my brother so that he will not worry about me.” Alice laughs softly. “It is ironic, is it not, given the state of affairs in Württemberg and my safety

here, but oh, he does fret, thinking of me alone on foreign shores. Thanks to your aid, dear Mrs. Witt, I'll have much needed artillery funds to convey to the resistance along with my letter. And your continued prayers for Württemberg's freedom will help us greatly."

"And now let us allow the duchess some rest." Ward turns to Mrs. Witt with a gallant bow and a wink. "A triumph, as always, dear Iris. I'll be sure to say as much to *Mrs. Astor*."

At that promise, Mrs. Witt draws a deep, exultant breath. No one in this sphere, not even one so apparently disaffected as their hostess, is immune to the power the name "Mrs. Astor" carries.

With that adieu duly delivered, Ward and Alice turn together to sweep down the grand corridor and out of the party, knowing all eyes will remain fixed upon them until they step out of the front doorway, into their carriage, and away.

Inside the lacquered car, Alice's shoulders drop. Her breath steadies. A postmortem drink at Ward's and then back to her own home, and sleep. Nearly done tonight.

It's a relatively brief ride south to the McAllisters' town-home on Thirty-First Street, offering just enough time for Alice's mind to wander, to adjust as needed, to plan further, but as Ward keeps up a monologue of wry observations for most of the ride, mainly recounting the series of events that led to Mrs. Witt's falling-out with Mrs. Astor a month prior, Alice's musings haven't slipped dangerously into the realm of needless anxieties.

Ward's right. This evening went well. She achieved what she needed to, stepping alluringly onto the public stage and then away again, letting the gossip that will inevitably ensue in her absence do much of the work for her.

The only glitch came at the end. That girl, the magician's assistant, or so Alice assumes.

But that was resolved neatly enough. Didn't even have to use her gun. Five dollars is far less than those pins were worth, even if they had been crystal, but as far as a trouble-free bounty goes for someone of that chit's station, it's nothing to sneeze at.

Neither, for that matter, is the five-hundred-dollar banknote Mr. Ogden passed her earlier in the evening while whispering a declaration of admiration into her ear.

"For your own troubles," he'd breathed. "You mustn't neglect yourself, duchess. You are *far* too beautiful to bury yourself in worry."

She'd had to fight the urge to scrub the humidity of his breath from her ear, along with the memory of a dinner party long ago, that same ever-so-handsome Mr. Ogden sliding his hand over her mother's wrist, murmuring into her ear. Her own mother, fighting to hide her horror, for the sake of propriety.

Brett Ogden may well prove the easiest of the five marks.

Alice recites their names in a loop as she steps from the carriage onto the night-damp street and up the stoop into Ward's home.

"Allow me a moment to loosen my tie," Ward drawls, motioning Alice toward the sitting room while he trots upstairs, tugging a bell string as he passes, to rouse some poor housemaid or other.

Ward's wife is also abed, but Alice doubts he'll wake her. She may not have even realized he'd been out to a ball tonight. All social invitations include Sarah, but she always declines, due to her ill health and borderline agoraphobia. Alice

herself has only met the wan woman once in these past few months of her business acquaintance with Ward McAllister, and came away with the impression of an actress who had been assigned the role of “Wife” but not been given any lines to memorize. They have three grown children, Alice recalls, spotting their childhood portraits in oil hanging upon a wall in triptych. Clearly they had some degree of rapport before Sarah’s convalescence, but even so, Mrs. McAllister feels akin to so many other aspects of Ward’s life—his Southern grandiosity, his “working farm” in Newport, his highly placed social intimates—all a matter of well-thought-out conspicuousness and clever misdirection. Distractions from his bevy of male companions and, perhaps more importantly, his perpetually strained finances.

As predicted, a maid appears in the sitting room doorway, hastily dressed, her hair still ruffled from bed beneath her white cap. Alice is too exhausted to sympathize with her at the moment.

“A glass of claret before you see to the fire,” she says, retaining her royal hauteur and Germanic accent.

The servants have more power than most people realize. And goodness, do they talk.

“Very good, miss,” the maid replies, swallowing down a yawn.

Alice resettles her gaze on the tired woman. “Just leave us the bottle when you’re finished. I shouldn’t expect we’ll need anything else.”

After the maid gratefully retreats, Alice sips her heady wine, basking in solitude on the settee, listening to the fire crackling back to life, along with her own habitual recitation:

*Ogden. Vandemeer. Ames. Witt. Peyton.*

Ogden, that cut-rate Don Juan. Vandemeer, that overgrown child, who must always be fastest, first, best. Ames, who hates that he's new money. Witt, the merry widow with her vicious, ever-changing whims. And Harold Peyton Sr., the ringleader, the mastermind, the one who put it all in motion, and therefore the true worst of them.

All five of them complicit. Those fine families. Their up-standing reputations built on rotten foundations.

And her own family, their greatest victim.

Alice sips her claret, taking in Ward's modest sitting room with its charmingly chintzy furniture. Still larger than any room in Alice's current home, though her apartments a few blocks uptown are certainly respectable enough for the exiled duchess she purports to be. Lolling her head against the back of the settee, she recalls the first bolt-hole she landed upon returning to the city, a small hostelry run by a woman of exquisite confidence, who didn't bat a single eye to see Alice step out day after day in the very same elegant gown (indeed, the only one she owned). When she'd given her landlady her final rent payment and announced she'd be moving on, she was greeted with a knowing wink and a "well done, my dear" that made an unaccustomed smile rise to Alice's own lips.

She thinks now also of the places she lived before that. The indistinguishable stream of lodgings in out-of-the-way corners of Montreal, one to the next, so she'd never get way-laid or caught. Before that, the years upon years squandered in that ancient, claptrap, falling-down mansion-turned-boardinghouse in Poughkeepsie. The single room she shared with her mother and, for a time, before he made his escape, her little brother. And the baby, of course. So very briefly.

She remembers the shuddering sobs of her mother from

the other side of the tin bed, shaking the thin mattress night after night. The swarms of flies in the summer and the chill of winter seeping in through the cracks in the ill-fitted window frames. And all around them, the sounds of other boarders, wracked with coughs, or barreling drunken laughter, or singing softly to children who were born hale and healthy, unlike her own little sister, who barely was.

And though she's not in the habit of training her mind back that far, now Alice remembers her sitting room on Madison Avenue. Her nanny holding her by the hand as she greeted the grown-ups in their glittering gowns and smoking jackets, the sweet smell of pipe smoke filling the room. Her mother rosy-cheeked then, eyes bright and innocent. Her father with his straight smile and white teeth and bristled mustache.

Alice stands, inhaling deeply. Her pulse roars in her temples as she grips the stem of her glass.

"Your Grace?"

Alice stifles a flinch as she turns to see the housemaid standing in the doorway, looking bewildered. "I believe you may have a visitor."

CHAPTER 3

*Loose Ends*

Compared to the grandeur of the Witt home on Madison Avenue, Ward McAllister's residence is modest, a narrow, three-floor townhome on Thirty-First Street, although Cora supposes there is a certain unmistakable care and pride in its keeping, the set of rosebushes encased inside the wrought iron fence, the potted plants lining the stoop.

She steels herself with a fortifying breath, watching the home from a ways down the block. She can see movement through its front window. A maid, perhaps, or butler. Given that she followed Alice and Ward here by carriage—having spent the bulk of Alice's measly five-dollar payoff on this trip—she knows they're inside too. Scheming, no doubt.

Cora understood why the fake duchess shooed her away a few hours ago, concluding "no harm done," or however she'd put it. Meaning no harm done to *her*. There was loads of harm done on Cora's end. Her score was foiled, and now with Dinah on her scent, her days are numbered with the show—unless Cora keeps her word to Maeve and stops her side hustle, but that means Long Creek Farm is as good as gone. There's also the undeniable fact that Cora will never again meet a fake duchess, or rather, a woman so astute at playing a fake duchess

that she had a party of hundreds fooled.

This woman might prove a bigger score than thousands of sneak-and-grab jobs, as she called them. And Cora cannot let her slip away.

Before losing her nerve, Cora approaches the house, passing a well-dressed couple stepping out from another carriage on the corner, laughing, cheeks flushing in the cold November night, Manhattan showing no signs of slowing down, although it must be nearly five a.m. by now, the sun threatening to rise over the distant glimmering East River. There is something intriguing about city life, Cora will admit. The frenetic pace, bustling hustle, high society and all their elaborate social rituals. And yet she's made an oath to herself, signed her name in blood: Long Creek Farm will be hers again. It fully consumes her, nearly all she can think about, since Ross & Calhoun swept in, like a storm cloud on the Great Plains, blotting out the sun.

She'd—*they'd*—lost the farm almost eighteen months ago, to be exact, though the money troubles started long before that. Long Creek Farm was getting pinched on all sides by overproduction and skyrocketing distribution prices, thanks to the railroad tycoons. The boll weevil plagues of '81 only added insult to injury. And it was just her and her father, besides the temporary hands he'd bring on during the season—her mother, dying of a fever when she was just a baby, and her wayward older brother, not suited for farm life, long since scrambling for the West and the promise of striking it rich.

A couple of neighbors looking to round out funding for a new grain elevator started pressuring her father, telling him he had to “mechanize production” on the farm or risk falling behind. “Industry is the future of this country,” she'd hear

them argue at night in their kitchen, hard-pressing him over round after round of whiskey.

Then came the meetings with the men from Topeka in their dark suits with their sham smiles, offering loans at obscenely high interest rates. Cora could smell a noxious scheme afoot, strong as manure, but Da kept shrugging her off, telling her he knew what he was doing—he'd taken care of her all his life, after all; he wasn't about to start kowtowing to her hang-ups now. With the loans from Ross & Calhoun, Da purchased three John Doe plows, reapers, and that share in the grain elevator, all with his own farmland pledged as collateral.

In a matter of months, it all went up in smoke, Cora watching like a patron at a magic show—shocked, disbelieving, powerless to do anything to stop the spectacle. Despite the new machinery, they couldn't keep up with the larger Topeka competitors and fell behind on payments. Da defaulted on the first, then the second, and third, until Ross & Calhoun Loans swept in and seized their home straight out from under them.

Out of money, no land, Da became a tenant farmer, bringing Cora along to help with grunt work in the stables and kitchens. She watched him grow smaller and smaller all winter, ground down by labor and despair, 'til he eventually succumbed to whooping cough that following spring.

“Can't trust no one anymore.” Da's dying words. “Whole country's full of cheats.”

From Cora's vantage, though, that wasn't wholly true. There were confidence men and their marks, weren't there? Schemers and dupes, the whole country polarized right down the middle. There were people like Da, the over-trustful, hapless fools with targets on their backs, and then there were people

out on the hunt to make theirs: bankmen, railroad magnates, folks like those crooked politicians in Tammany Hall. The fancy set too, like Mrs. Witt at the party, wealth wielded as a weapon, determined to take down whoever, pay whatever, in order to preserve their reign.

It had seemed like fate when Prospero rolled into town last June, one of the many traveling vaudeville acts at the local Shawnee Circus & Fair. Cora had watched the magician's show of fire, lights, and illusions, rapt. Prospero was a professional grifter of the highest order. A man who could stand on-stage and fool scores of patrons every show. Cora had already started thieving alone on the streets of Topeka, a purse here, a pocket watch there, hoping to cobble together enough to buy back her land—come out on top after all—but she had so much to learn, and so far to go. Here was someone who could help her. She approached Maeve and the backstage crew after the performance, gushing with compliments, and they introduced her to Prospero. Cora left with the troupe for Lincoln, Nebraska, the very next morning.

But Prospero, the show, the road, it's all a dead end now, what with Cora stuck backstage making three crummy dollars a week and Dinah threatening to have her sacked if she tries crooking more.

This fake duchess, however, could very well be Cora's solution.

Her ticket to greener pastures, in more ways than one.

With new resolve, Cora taps the bronze knocker against Mr. McAllister's door. She knows it's far past the appropriate time to call, but Cora can't afford to wait. It's right now or joining the troupe on their way to Providence, Rhode Island—first stop on a lifetime journey to Nowhere Fast.

She knocks again.

A bone-weary-looking housekeeper finally answers.

“Yes, miss.”

“I’m here to see the duchess . . .” Cora blanks, trying to recall if she actually heard the sham name of the woman in the library, landing on “Duchess Lady Alice.”

An arched eyebrow tells Cora she guessed wrong. “Is the duchess expecting you?”

Cora smiles. “In her own way, most likely.”

The housekeeper gives a curt nod and retreats into the house, not inviting her in. Cora resists the urge to bite her nails, resting her gaze on the McAllisters’ small but lovely fenced garden beside the stoop.

“Grand Duchess Marie Charlotte Gabriella of Württemberg will be with you in a moment,” the housekeeper announces behind her with a barely contained sigh.

She leads Cora into a modest parlor with a striped settee, matching armchairs, and a crackling fireplace. “Please. Make yourself comfortable.”

*Comfortable.* What a tall order. Cora settles for perching on the edge of a chair.

“What on earth are you doing here?”

Cora leaps to her feet at that voice, then internally curses herself for her jumpiness.

She spins to take her first long look in the light at her mark, who must have been lurking in here all along. The Grand Duchess Marie or Alice or whoever she truly is has perhaps ten years on her. She really is a beautiful woman, although hard-looking, with a long, straight nose and that severe, pale hair—although, who knows, her entire face might soften when she smiles. Cora has yet to see a smile and cannot quite

imagine one, but she can see how the woman can get away with claiming nobility. There's a timelessness to her appearance, a weariness too, as if she carries the weight of many generations.

"I'm here to talk to you," Cora says. "I didn't feel we were quite done with our earlier discussion."

"We most certainly were," Alice says.

Cora spies the home's owner, Mr. Ward McAllister, lingering in the hall, now dressed rather informally in a maroon smoking jacket and slippers. "Your, ah, Grace? If I may—"

"You may not," the fake duchess says. "I'll handle this myself, Mr. McAllister."

The man gives a ceremonious bow, then brightens as he spots the decanted wine.

"In that case, I shall take my nightcap in the study."

He plods languidly between them, swirls the rust red wine inside the crystal decanter, then with one more smirk, glides out of sight.

"Nice place he's got here," Cora says wistfully once his slippered footsteps have retreated.

"Yes. But again, why are you in it?"

"I remember what you said." Cora sweeps forward. "And I understand that we *could* let sleeping dogs lie or whatever."

"It seems you *don't* remember what I—"

"The thing is," Cora charges onward, "I believe we can help each other."

Her Fake Grace lets out a thunderclap of a laugh.

Cora persists. "I think I could learn quite a bit from you. You see, a turn of unfortunate circumstances led me to Prospero's employ in the first place, and try as I might to flourish under his tutelage, I feel stymied, stuck rather, and I don't

necessarily see a way out . . . which is why I had found myself in Mrs. Witt's chambers in the first place. But then when I fell upon you, I just . . . I truly feel like fate had a reason for bringing us together."

The duchess's face remains blank, carved of stone.

Cora feels dizzy but refuses to relent. "I only mean to say that I have plans to . . . well, I suppose I have lofty goals, but there's a divide between what I know and what I need to know in order to make them happen, which is why I could really stand to benefit from a mentor. A real one. Prospero the Great hardly qualified, and I think—"

"I think it's past time for you to go."

But Cora isn't stopping now, not after practicing her speech at least ten times on the carriage ride here. Obviously she was prepared for friction. She knew this woman was not just going to throw open her arms and say, *Yes, of course, I've always desired a mangy mutt as a protégé.*

Cora has to go all in or else it's all for naught.

She takes a step closer, drops her voice. "See, the thing is, I believe I can do far more damage with the information I gleaned tonight than you can with the hypothetical crime you claim you saw committed. And anyway, I'm a puff of smoke, a nonentity. Prospero doesn't even know my real name. Besides, no one cares about a sly act from the likes of some nobody like me. Not a princess or duchess or . . . whatever you're pretending to be. And I have a feeling whatever prize is at the end of this, it's a big one. One you're not about to jeopardize."

Only Alice's brow betrays her. One crinkle between the eyes.

"Prospero's troupe leaves for Providence soon. Another private show, of which I'm sure he'll pocket all the proceeds, but

this time I very much hope I won't be part of the act." Cora hands the woman the calling card she's prepared by hand. "I go by Cora Mack. I'm staying with the troupe at the Hopper House, near the river. We're scheduled to depart at five o'clock sharp tomorrow evening. You can send a servant or a messenger or come yourself, however you like. But if I don't hear from you by the time I'm expected to load up and out, I'll assume I need to resort to my contingency plan."

The duchess arches a brow. "And what is that?"

"I'll be forced to alert Mrs. Witt that she was not hosting royalty but rather an outright fraud."

The woman laughs again. "Who in their right mind would believe a magician's stagehand over Ward McAllister?"

"I'm not sure Iris Witt *is* entirely in her right mind," Cora notes.

A glimmer of a smile sparks in Alice's eyes. Enough to give Cora hope that this might possibly work and keep going.

"From what I've experienced of your world, its access feels quite . . . tenuous. All it might take is a shadow of doubt. A wrinkle ruins an entire dress, as they say. Just think about it." Cora smooths her own skirt, partly to avoid the reaction on Alice's face, then nods curtly. "I can see myself out."

It's only when she's stepped out into the rising sun, emerging to pierce the brisk New York morning, that she gasps, residual fear seeping out of her as she hurries down the McAllisters' steps, a rogue tear running down her cheek.

Oh yes, she could learn loads from that woman. An entire trade. Enough to get her farm back and maybe a brand-new life to boot.

Here's hoping she gets the chance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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