

SIN IN THE SECOND CITY



Karen Abbott



R A N D O M H O U S E

SIN IN THE SECOND CITY

MADAMS, MINISTERS, PLAYBOYS,
AND THE
BATTLE FOR AMERICA'S SOUL

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FOR LAURA DITTMAR, MY SCARLET SISTER

*Chicago, a gaudy circus beginning with
the two-bit whore in the alley crib.*

—THEODORE DREISER



State Street in Chicago, circa 1907.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE GIRLS WHO DISAPPEARED

In 1905, a woman named Katherine Filak said her first and final good-bye to the red-roofed cottages and soaring church spires of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and boarded a boat to America. Twenty-one years old and a devout Catholic, she prayed about what lay ahead: work as a domestic and abuse from strange neighborhood men, who tricked her into reciting English curse words. She raised six children, my grandmother among them, and experienced a heartbreak not uncommon to immigrants at the turn of the last century. A sibling who accompanied her on the trip from Europe ventured to Chicago and was never seen again.

This sibling's disappearance became her lone defining trait—my great-grandmother, I'm told, refused to speak of her—and over time I've imagined this lost relative's face, retraced unknown steps, filled in the blanks of her life by probing the city that might have taken it. Chicago in that year experienced a particularly brutal crime wave; not since a mild-mannered killer stalked the grounds of the 1893 World's Fair had its citizens experienced such fear. "A reign of terror is upon the city," declared the *Tribune*. "No city in time of peace ever held so high a place in the category of crime-ridden, terrorized, murder-breeding cities as is now held by Chicago."

The daily tallies of muggings, rapes, and homicides were troublesome enough, but a new threat—unfamiliar, and therefore especially menacing—prepared to creep through Chicago. Young girls stepped from trains into a city steeped in smoke and sin—a "stormy, husky, brawling" city, as Carl Sandburg so affectionately wrote—and vanished without warning or word. Stories abounded, growing more detailed and honed with each retelling. Predatory men met these girls at depots. They profess love at first sight, promised work and shelter and protection. Instead these girls were drugged, robbed of their virtue by professional rapists, and sold to Levee madams, and were dead within five years.

Most of the brothels in the city's thriving vice district were indeed wicked, block upon block of dingy, anonymous, twenty-five-cent cribs, but one, in remarkably short order, became as well known as Chicago itself. In these pages I tell the story of the Everleigh Club and its iconic madams, the libertine clients and bitter rivalries, and their battle to preserve the empire they so lovingly built. I want to stress that this is a work of nonfiction; every character I describe lived and breathed, if not necessarily thrived, on the Levee's mean streets. Anything that appears in quotation marks, dialogue, or otherwise, comes from a book, archival collection, article, journal, or government report.

Before opening their world-famous Club, the Everleigh sisters, too, were girls who disappeared, and they reconstructed their histories at a time when America was updating its own. To that end, this book is also about identity, both personal and collective, and the struggle inherent in deciding how much of the old should accompany us as we rush, headlong, into the new.

CAST OF CHARACTERS



THE MADAMS

MINNA EVERLEIGH: The outspoken co-proprietor of the Everleigh Club handled promotional efforts, managed the club's finances, and disciplined courtesans, and mingled in the parlors with her “boys.”

ADA EVERLEIGH: The quiet, elder Everleigh sister interviewed prospective courtesans, balanced the books, and was considered the brains of the operation.

VIC SHAW: The established queen of the Levee until the Everleighs' arrival resented the sisters' success and did everything in her power to ruin them.

ZOE MILLARD: A prominent madam in Vic Shaw's league who shared her dislike for the Everleigh sisters.

THE LORDS OF THE LEVEE

BATHHOUSE JOHN COUGHLIN: This powerful alderman of Chicago's First Ward ordered graft payments, threw an annual ball for denizens of the Levee, and wrote famously awful poetry.

HINKY DINK KENNA: Bathhouse John's diminutive, quiet First Ward partner, his shrewd political machinations kept Chicago's Democratic machine running smoothly and profitably.

IKE BLOOM: The clownish yet menacing owner of the notorious Freiberg's Dance Hall, he organized graft payments on behalf of the aldermen and was a frequent visitor to the Everleigh Club.

ED AND LOUIS WEISS: The Everleighs' neighbors on either side hatched several schemes to lure clients away from the Club—and ultimately became the sisters' greatest threat.

BIG JIM COLOSIMO: A prominent First Ward henchman and brothel keeper, Big Jim was the predecessor to Al Capone. He was also a close friend of the Everleigh sisters despite the fact that he ran an interstate white slavery ring.

MAURICE VAN BEVER: Influential French brothel keeper and Big Jim's partner in the white slavery ring.

THE MINISTERS

ERNEST BELL: A reverend who opened his Midnight Mission in 1904, he preached against segregated vice districts and held nightly open-air sermons outside the Everleigh Club.

MELBOURNE BOYNTON: The pastor of the Lexington Avenue Baptist Church and one of Bell's main "saints" helped to escalate the war against the Levee district.

DEAN SUMNER: Head of the flock at the Episcopal Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul and chairman of the Chicago Vice Commission.

THE POLITICIANS

CLIFFORD ROE: The young, ambitious Chicago state's attorney used a note tossed from a brothel window to launch America's obsession with white slavery—and his own career.

EDWIN SIMS: The U.S. district attorney in Chicago entered the fray by raiding French brothels in the Levee and persuaded the federal government to take action.

JAMES R. MANN: A U.S. congressman and sponsor of the White Slave Traffic Act, otherwise known as the Mann Act.

MAYOR EDWARD DUNNE: Chicago's Democratic mayor from 1905 to 1907, Dunne faced the public's growing anxiety about dance halls, nickel theaters, saloons, and the "social evil."

MAYOR FRED BUSSE: Dunne's successor, a Republican who served from 1907 to 1911, was sympathetic to saloon keepers, and was eager to stay on good terms with Hinky Dink and Bathhouse John.

MAYOR CARTER HARRISON II: The son of Chicago's favorite mayor, Harrison, a Democrat, succeeded Busse in 1911 and planned to protect the Levee district—a task that proved more difficult than he expected.



Minna Everleigh



Ada Everleigh.

PROLOGUE

ANGELS OF THE LINE

1905

As soon as the bullet pierced Marshall Field Jr.—the only son and heir of Marshall Field, founder of the splendid department store, the man who famously said, “Give the lady what she wants”—Chicago made the story even bigger than it really was. Amplifying things, good or bad, was what Chicago did best.

In the days following November 22, 1905, rumors about the shooting spun through the city’s streets. The fruit cart vendors whispered to the newsboys who shouted to the hansom drivers who murmured to the society women who were overheard by servants who gossiped with bartenders who bantered with pimps and whores and drunks. Did they hear the wound was just like the one that killed President McKinley? Tore through his abdomen, caught a corner of the liver, grazed the stomach, and skidded to a halt outside the spinal cord—lucky for Marshall Junior. He was in his bedroom at the Prairie Avenue mansion, home alone with his son and the hired help, when a hollow boom split the air. A cry followed, thin and drawn out like taffy.

The family nurse and the butler scaled the stairs in flying jumps and found him slumped in a chair, his wan face seeking cover in the curve of his shoulder. Goodness, the blood—it was everywhere. Veinirings across his shirt, fissuring down the wall. His automatic revolver came to rest on the tip of his shoe. He tried to straighten, treaded the air as if it were a lolling wave. “I shot myself,” Marshall Junior said. “Accidentally.”

But it couldn’t have been an accident. Who really believed that Field dropped his gun, and that the trigger could slam an armchair with sufficient force to explode a cartridge? A reporter at the *Chicago Daily News* said it was impossible—he took an identical, unloaded revolver and hurled it several times to the floor. Not once did the thing go off. Marshall Junior must have pointed the gun at himself; that was the only way. And a suicide attempt made sense. He had suffered a nervous breakdown the year prior, in 1904—this act could be a decisive sequel.

No, what *really* happened was sadder than suicide, more pitiful than a nervous breakdown: Field had sneaked off to the Levee district for a tryst at the Everleigh Club. So what if he was married, the father of three—he had money and status and power, and men with those things always went to the Everleigh Club. A prostitute shot him, maybe in the Gold Room or the Japanese Parlor or beneath the glass chandeliers suspended like stalactites from the ceiling. Later, as the sun deserted the sky and the streets gripped the fog, those Scarlet Sisters, Minna and Ada Everleigh, ordered his unconscious body smuggled out and planted in his home.

Those Scarlet Sisters heard all about their alleged hand in the incident, how they stood idly by while one of their harlots blasted the poor man, then directed the covert removal of his bloody body.

“We are a funeral parlor,” Ada Everleigh said, “instead of a resort.”

Her younger sister, Minna, gave a blunt, trumpet-burst laugh. Ada parsed her words as if they were in limited supply, but damned if she didn't load each one before it left her mouth.

The Chicago rumor mill operated as predictably as the Everleighs' regular clients; no matter how gossip began, or where it twisted and turned, it ended up, invariably, at the doorstep of 2131–2133 South Dearborn Street. Nonsense, every bit of it. The sisters had decided long ago to permit no stain of blood or otherwise, on their house.

Neither would the Everleighs add their own voices to the din. Discretion paid—but also had its price.

Even Chicago's newspapers kept their distance from the speculation for fear that Marshall Field & Company would pull his advertising dollars. He certainly wouldn't appreciate reports that his son, currently lying in critical condition at Mercy Hospital, had visited a whorehouse, even one as dignified as the Everleigh Club. Still, journalists staked out the sisters all week, trying to score something—anything—that would be safe to print. Minna and Ada waited in the front parlor, expecting yet another newsman.

All thirty Everleigh Club harlots remained upstairs in their boudoirs, preparing for the night ahead, running razors under their arms, down and between their legs—clients didn't have a smooth woman at home. They packed themselves with sponges, made certain they had enough douche, checked cabinets for the little black pills that, along with three days of hot baths, usually “brought a girl around” from any unwanted condition. They yanked and tied one another's corsets, buttoned up gowns made of slippery silk, unrolled black stockings over long legs. Hair was wound tight with pins or left to fall in tousled waves, depending on the preference of their regulars. A dab of gasoline—the newest fad in perfume, if you couldn't afford an automobile—behind the ears, across the wrists and ankles, between the breasts. Eyes rimmed in black and lashes painted, standing stiffer than the prongs of a fork. Each courtesan had a name chosen by her peers. Once she entered this life—the life—she discarded all remnants of the one she'd left behind.

Minna navigated the silk couches, the easy chairs, and the grand piano, the statues of Greek goddesses peering through exotic palms, the bronze effigies of Cupid and Psyche, the imported rug that swallowed footsteps. She had an odd walk, a sort of caterpillar bend and hump, pause and catwalk up, as the poet Edgar Lee Masters, a friend and frequent client, described it. She came to rest before a wide-paneled window and swallowed, her throat squeezing behind a brooch of diamonds thick as a clenched fist. Holding back the curtain, she surveyed Dearborn Street.

Arc lamps stretched up and out, unfurling bold ribbons of light. The air was thick and yellow, as if the varnish manufacturer on the next block had slathered his product across the sky. Visibility was reduced to the next street, or the next corner, or sometimes just the next step. No matter: Minna didn't have to see the Levee district to know what it was up to.

Panders, an underworld term that served as both verb and noun, were outfitted in dandy ties and jaunty hats, lurking in corners and alleys. Eugene Hustion and his wife, Lottie, the “King and Queen of the Cokies,” weighed thirty pounds of cocaine and half as much morphine. Soon their salesmen would make the rounds. Funny thing was, Minna knew, Lottie was a college graduate who spoke five languages, and in her spare time composed music and painted portraits.

Down the street, at the House of All Nations, johns lined up at the \$2 and \$5 entrances—too bad the suckers didn’t know that the same girls worked both sides. Blind men cranked hurdy-gurdies, spinning tangled reams of melody. The air reeked of sweat and blood and swine entrails, drifting up from the Union Stock Yards just a few blocks southwest. Mickey Finn hawked his eponymous “Special” at his Dearborn Street bar. Merry Widdo Kiddo, the famous peep-show girl, warmed up her booth, breasts twirling like pinwheels behind the glass. Levee piano players—“professors,” they were called—cracked their knuckles before plucking out the hiccuped notes of ragtime.

Minna watched a figure turn the corner of 21st Street onto Dearborn and waited for the solemn going of the bell. She patted the dark, frizzed coil of hair at the nape of her neck and reached for the door. From knuckle to wrist to elbow, waist to bodice to neck, she was ablaze in jewels. Diamonds played with the parlor light, tossing tiny rainbows against the wall.

“How *is* my boy?” she said, her customary greeting for every caller.

The boy this time was Frank Carson of the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, a once respected newspaper that had declined in recent years. Minna invited him inside with a slow-motion sweep of her arm. He was no stranger to the Everleigh Club; every reporter in the city knew its phone number, Calumet 412, by heart.

Carson saw precisely what the Everleighs wished him to see, and knew what they wished him to know. Both sisters had a prim, close-lipped smile, genuine but guarded, as if a full-on grin risked conveying complexities best left unmined. The younger one, Minna, was the talker. She spoke clipped, staccato sentences, shooting words from her mouth—it was so *good* to see her boy, it had been far too long since his last visit, he should stop by more often. She broke occasionally for a frenetic drag of a gold-tipped, perfumed cigarette. Ada stood next to her sister, quiet. Her eyes were darker, her hair lighter, her figure fuller. Her hands were wind-chill cold.

Frank Carson knew they ran a clean place with clean girls; their house doctor never forged their reports. He knew that Sunday was “Beau Night” at the Everleigh Club, when girls were permitted to see their sweethearts, to accept flowers and hold hands, to experience all the thrills of dating as if they lived in homes. He knew there had been a shooting at the Club two years earlier, an unfortunate incident that was no fault of the sisters’. He knew the Everleighs brought a bit of decency to a profession rife with shame.

He knew Prince Henry of Prussia had visited the Club three years earlier and sipped champagne from a courtesan’s shoe. He knew they had the ear and respect of the most powerful men not only in the Levee district, but in the entire city: Big Jim Colosimo, Ike Bloom, Bathhouse John, and Hink Dink Kenna. He’d heard they’d come up from Virginia or Kentucky or a farm someplace in Indiana—Minna insisted that their southern accents were part of an act. They’d been married, the story went,

vicious, violent men. He knew a fellow Chicago journalist, Jack Lait, declared the sisters were “pleasure what Christ was to Christianity.”

What the reporter didn't know was how avidly the sisters, generally speaking, disliked his gender.

Minna took charge, ordering her boy to please sit and make himself comfortable. Yes—on that silken divan. She and Ada settled across from him. Edmund, the butler, appeared with a flute of champagne which Carson downed in one zealous gulp. Minna signaled to keep the bubbly coming.

Carson asked what they knew he would ask. If Marshall Field Jr. had indeed ventured into the Levitt on the night before he was shot, where else would a man of his stature go but to the Everleigh Club?

Minna and Ada smiled but said nothing.

Had Field, as one nurse alleged, been pierced by a paper knife and not a bullet?

The sisters replied that they had no idea.

If the Everleighs really had no involvement in or knowledge of the tragedy, why not dispel the rumors and just say so?

Edmund arrived on cue, offered their guest another drink. Carson, like all the others, left with a giddy champagne buzz but no story.

But Marshall Field Jr. wasn't dead yet, not in any sense of the word.

Chicago was changing. Every day it awoke a new city. Its leading citizens no longer recognized it as the place that had raised them.

The stream of immigration that flowed in the 1890s became a deluge during the first decade of the new century. More arrived every day from Italy and Germany, France and China, Russia and Greece, bringing with them their odd customs and habits, their peculiar religions and strange tongues. They joined the thousands that had descended during the 1893 World's Fair, disreputable men and women who stayed long after the Ferris wheel was dismantled and Buffalo Bill skipped town. Together they and other interlopers built their own cities within the city, block after block of gambling parlors and opium dens and brothels where inmates dangled bare breasts from windows and did unspeakable things with animals. What depravity went on inside a dive named the Bucket of Blood? Did a street called Blood and Bug Row belong in a town like Chicago?

The horrors were spreading to respectable neighborhoods and solid homes. Young women were no longer content to sit with suitors on front porches or in parlors. Ten months earlier, in January 1905, a teenage girl from a good family guzzled a mug of chloroform and died on the floor of 33rd Street at the American Dance Hall. There were whispers about syndicates of evil men, foreign men, who lured girls to the city, drugged and raped them at “clearinghouses,” and sold them for \$50 to enterprising

madams.

Advertisements in newspapers seeking secretaries and clerks and leads for musical production were best read skeptically. The taxi driver could deliver a girl straight to evil's door. The nickels at the theaters were moral suicide. Not even the ice-cream parlors were safe. If things continued as they were, the Levee district would corner Chicago and swallow it whole, this fine, proud city that wielded its triumphs like a scepter and wore its reputation like a crown. Surely the rest of America would not be far behind.

The Marshall Field Jr. shooting was a seismic boom with aftershocks that rattled the Everleigh Club. The sisters would be hit from both sides, the law and the outlaws, two diametrically opposed groups who disdained them for precisely the same reason. The Club was the gleaming symbol of the Levee district, shining too brightly on those who operated best in the dark.

“They were the Angels of the Line,” wrote journalist Charles Washburn, twenty-five years after the war over the Levee, “and, as angels, hated and persecuted.”

But on that fall night, as Minna Everleigh watched the reporter disappear into the murk of Dearborn Street, she did not fret about what trouble might come, or who would be behind it. She and Ada had work to do: keep books, prepare the courtesans, and greet their boys, watching each man admire the seesaw sway of a girl's rear as he followed her up the stairs. Would he like a warm bath, or something scrumptious from the Pullman Buffet, or a favor far too naughty to say aloud?

They ran the most successful—and respected—whorehouse in America and had no reason, yet, to believe that would ever change.

PART ONE

**THE
SCARLET SISTERS
EVERLEIGH**

1899–1905

STRIPED SKUNK AND WILD ONIONS



South Dearborn Street. (The Everleigh Club is at near right.)

*An amusing city, Chicago, any way you look at it. I'm
afraid we are in for the time of our lives.*

—THE EVERLEIGH SISTERS

In the winter of 1899, a train clattered toward Chicago, fat coils of smoke whipping the sky. Minnie and Ada Everleigh sat together in a Pullman Palace car, sipping wine served by porters wearing white jackets and gloves. Velvet curtains framed the windows, and thick rugs absorbed the curved heels of their boots. The sisters checked their reflections in bevel-edged French mirrors, reclined on Marshall Field's most luxurious bedsheets, ate in a dining car where woodcock and prairie chicken were presented on tables set with Belgian linen and expensive English china. The train, lit entirely by electricity, was fitted with a new contraption—"vestibules," accordion-shaped passageways that connected the cars, shutting out the fumes and wind. The air inside their car hung heavy and whisper-quiet, but the sisters were restless, giddy with plans: They would build upon what they had learned from madams in Omaha, Nebraska, and create the finest brothel in history.

Their grandiose scheme could be expected in an era when consumers, whether seeking a car or a company for the night, were becoming royalty. The world was, for the first time, a market where every need could be met, every idea coaxed to fruition. Two brothers named Wright were experimenting with the idea of human flight. Druggists stocked \$1 bottles of Hibbard's Herb Extract, a "wonderful cure" that soothed "itching, burning, and smarting" and cured "Female Weakness." *McClure Magazine* marveled at how Marconi's wireless sent messages "at will through space." The country's first major automobile show would take place on New Year's Day. The economy fine-tuned itself as mass production replaced craft production—an admirable feat, but the precise inverse of what the Everleigh sisters had in mind. A man would pay and pay well to feel as though each of his part

considered alone, was greater than his total.

Obsession with self-fulfillment began to mold the national ethos, a concept Theodore Dreiser explored in his soon-to-be-published *Sister Carrie*. Country girl Carrie Meeber, walking past posh Chicago department stores, feels keenly her “individual shortcomings of dress and that shadowy manner which she thought must hang about her and make clear to all who and what she was.”

Chicago in particular had taken municipal confidence to new levels; the blustery talk of civic leaders—and not Chicago’s weather—had inspired the “Windy City” moniker. Eight years before *New York Sun* editor Charles Dana popularized the nickname during the battle to host the 1893 World Columbian Exposition, it appeared in the *Cleveland Gazette*, headlining an article about Chicago politics.

The city’s boosters had always been more persuasive than most. After the Great Fire of 1871, propagandist William Bross traveled to New York. “Go to Chicago now!” he commanded. “Young men, hurry there! Old men, send your sons! Women, send your husbands! You will never again have such a chance to make money!” His prediction that Chicago would have a population of 1 million by 1900 came true ten years earlier, and by the time the Everleighs arrived, nearly 1.7 million people called the city home. Visitors were equally impressed by the city’s tireless ambition. “She outgrows her prophecies faster than she can make them,” Mark Twain wrote of Chicago. “She is always novelty; for she is never the Chicago you saw when you passed through the last time.”

The Everleighs vowed to continue this perfectionism and constant reinvention, a nineteenth-century amalgamation of Martha Stewart and Madonna. Over dinner in the Pullman car, the sisters concocted back-stories for themselves suffused with glamour and drama. They were southern debutantes from outside of Louisville, Kentucky, with a wealthy lawyer father, a doting mother, and finishing school pedigrees. After marrying two men—make them brothers—who turned brutish and physically abusive, the sisters escaped and ran far away, ending up in Omaha, Nebraska. Their entrée into the madam business was a fortuitous accident, two proper Victorian ladies who decided that creating a fantasy for others was better than pretending to live in one.

Preternaturally savvy about the importance of marketing and image, the sisters also lied about their ages. Ada, thirty-five, would pass for twenty-three; and Minna, thirty-three, became twenty-one again.



During the previous year, 1898, when the Everleighs decided to move their burgeoning careers from madams from Omaha to a busier town, they scoured red-light districts across the country in search of the best fit. In these waning days of the Victorian era, every significant American city, along with many smaller ones, had a designated neighborhood where prostitution, though technically illegal, was practiced openly; “segregation” was a term that referred primarily to sex rather than race. Here madams were free to indulge sexually without sullyng their homes or offending the fragile sensibilities of their wives.

“Respectable women, it was held,” the *Chicago Tribune* mused years later in an article that compared the Everleighs with Al Capone, “were safer from rape and other crimes if open prostitution was maintained and ordered as an outlet for the lusts of men.”

But the Everleighs had their own notions of prostitution and its role in society. In a good resort they reasoned, one free from the sorrier aspects of the trade, a harlot was more than an unwitting conduit for virtue. An employee in a business, she was an investment and should be treated as such, receiving nutritious meals, a thorough education, expert medical care, and generous wages. In the house, a courtesan would make a living as viable as—and more lucrative than—those earned by the thousands of young girls seeking work in cities as stenographers and sweatshop seamstresses, department store clerks and domestics. The sisters wanted to uplift the profession, remove its stigma and stigma, argue that a girl can’t lose her social standing if she stands level with those poised to judge her.

Traveling to major and minor cities alike, the sisters gathered ideas and consulted with each locale’s most prominent madams. They sought a distinguished town with class and style that lacked a preeminent parlor house. Theirs would be “the most celebrated banging shop in the world,” although clients, naturally, would never hear such language.

“Frisco Tessie” Wall, in San Francisco’s Barbary Coast, ran a decent business but was too old-school, in the sisters’ opinion; and Nell Kimball, with her philosophical musings, was downright depressing. Like many madams, Kimball kept someone on staff to “work over” her courtesans if they got out of line. “A drunk is no good as a whore,” she advised. “You can’t hide her breath, and she doesn’t do her work in style. Hookers are mean but sentimental. They cry over dogs, kittens, kid novels, sad songs. I never cared much for a girl who came to work in a house because it was fun for her. There was a screw loose somewheres.”

Walking the district, the sisters noticed that the harlots of each bordello, from Tessie’s place to the lowest “cow yard,” kept business cards on hand and distributed them at every opportunity. Most featured, simply, the name of a girl and the house to which she belonged, but some women chose to be infinitely more descriptive:

BIG MATILDA
THREE HUNDRED POUNDS OF BLACK PASSION
HOURS: ALL HOURS
RATES: 50C EACH: THREE FOR ONE DOLLAR

The sisters threw away the cards and shook their heads. They believed in advertising, but also subtlety.

On to New Orleans. The famed Storyville district offered Belle Anderson’s mirrored rooms and expert dancers, and Madam Lulu White’s opulent bordello on the corner of Basin and Bienville streets. The city’s Blue Book, a catalog that listed every house, its specialties and “stock,” offered

kind description of White's establishment:

“Nowhere in this country will you find a more popular personage than Madame White, who is noted as being the handsomest octoroon in America...her mansion possesses some of the most costly oil paintings in the Southern country. Her mirror parlor is also a dream. There's always something new at Lulu White's that will interest you. 'Good time' is her motto.”

A lively place, New Orleans, but the district overall wasn't to their liking—did they really want to operate up the street from a hall called the Funky Butt?

St. Louis was tolerable, but Babe Connors, a revered black madam who ran a brothel called The Palace, monopolized the city. In her house, the great Polish artist Ignace Paderewski once sat down at the piano, and a cadre of Republican politicians wrote their national platform. A large woman with a round, rambling body, she had a smile that gripped her face. Her teeth, the Everleighs were delighted to discover, were inlaid with diamonds. Tacky but fabulous. Madam Connors took Belle Anderson's mirror innovations one step further, installing an entire floor of reflective glass in her parlor. Minna made a mental note—wherever they settled, mirrored rooms would definitely be part of the décor.

New York City, with its hectic Tenderloin district, was marvelous, but Madam Rosie Hertz, the so-called godmother for prostitutes in the city, had already cornered the elite clientele, running several sporting houses on the Lower East Side while living on a moneyed block in Brooklyn. Rose Hickock dominated Philadelphia, “Lucky” Warren ruled Cincinnati, and Annie Chambers claimed Kansas City. Minnie Stevens in Boston and Belle Stewart in Pittsburgh had plenty of “wick dipping” going on, but the saying went, but their districts, too, were well below Everleigh standards.

Washington, D.C., with its bustling “Division,” was a possibility. During the Civil War, John Wilkes Booth was a reputed regular in the district, favoring a sporting house on Ohio Avenue. The sisters checked into the Willard Hotel and looked up Cleo Maitland. This madam was an old-time one they'd heard, and could offer some sound advice.

Madam Maitland operated in a brick row house on D Street, posing as a landlady, with several girls living with her as female “boarders.” She welcomed the Everleighs inside her brothel, kissing their cheeks with dry, puckered lips. Her face was a topographic map, intricately rumped and lined, but she sat spryly and alert while Minna talked. They'd finished their research, Minna explained, but had yet to find an appropriate city, one with plenty of wealthy men but no superior houses.

The madam had the answer. Chicago, Illinois! she said. An abundance of millionaires, a well-protected red-light district, and not one dominant brothel; the city's best madam, Carrie Watson, had retired to the suburbs a few years earlier. Madam Maitland even knew of the perfect building: two adjoining three-story mansions with fifty rooms, built for \$125,000 just before the World Columbian Exposition. The brothel's current proprietor, Effie Hankins, wanted to retire and had told Madam Maitland to keep an eye out for a possible buyer.

“See Effie,” the old madam urged, escorting the sisters out. “She'll listen.”

The engine bell began its raucous clamor, and the train windows offered a brilliantly vile panoram
slaughterhouses, steel mills, factories, silos, coal piles that doused the sky with black. “She-caw-g
She-caw-go!” the brakeman called, and the train sputtered to a stop beneath a long roof made of gla
and steel. A porter took the sisters’ gloved hands in his and helped them down the stairs, where
hansom cab waited. Dodging insulated ice wagons, streetcars, and droves of private carriages, th
Everleighs’ hansom pulled up to 2131–2133 South Dearborn Street.

The imposing stone mansion boasted two mahogany staircases that spiraled gently upward. Bro
windows dotted the façade, greedily inhaling the light, topped by strips of molding curved lik
haughty frowns. The place stood like a peacock amid pigeons.

Madam Hankins welcomed the sisters inside and told them to take their time, look around. Minn
could see the brothel needed work—the 2133 side wasn’t yet habitable, and both buildings wou
benefit from plusher rugs, fresh paint, art, statues, books, and mirrors, of course—but it was *right*. Th
feel of that staircase under her palm, so solid and heavy, was like gripping a piece of permanence.

“It’s home to me and all I have,” Madam Hankins said, poking teary eyes with a handkerchief. “F
fifty-five thousand dollars it is yours even though I hate to part with it.” She turned, tucked tw
fingers inside her mouth, and blew a shrill whistle. “Come, girls,” she called, “let my guests see ho
nice you look.”

Her harlots obliged, heels scuffing the floor as they trudged into a listless single file. The scent
cheap perfume soaked the parlor. Flesh bulged in all the wrong places. And their faces... Three wor
registered in Minna’s mind: sloppy, uncouth, hardened. These harlots simply wouldn’t do—not for th
prices she and Ada planned to charge. With all due respect to Madam Hankins, these girls looked as
they’d logged more miles than the Chicago Limited.

“Thanks,” Minna said, and Madam Hankins shooed the harlots away. “How much for the rent?”

“Five hundred a month...not high when you consider there are two buildings.”

They struck a deal. The sisters advanced \$20,000 and agreed to pay the remaining \$35,000 with
half a year, plus the subsequent \$500 monthly fee.

“We have catered only to the best people,” Madam Hankins insisted, shaking each sister’s hand.

“Oh, yeah,” Minna replied, voice rimmed with sarcasm.

She felt Ada’s elbow poke her side, a clear warning to watch what she said. She knew Ada worrie
that her candor would one day bring them trouble.

The Everleighs took long carriage rides through their new city, peering from behind dark curtain
knees touching. Chicago was a city of superlatives, at once both spectacular and foul. Nativ

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