

"This book is more meticulously choreographed than a chorus line.
It all pays off." —Chelsea Cain, *The New York Times Book Review*



THE
WIFE

THE
MAID

AND THE
MISTRESS

ARIEL LAWHON

The
WIFE,
the
MAID,
and the
MISTRESS



ARIEL LAWHON



DOUBLEDAY

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For Marybeth, I owe you one.

And for Ashley, I owe you everything else.

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Author's Note

Acknowledgments

A Note About the Author

CLUB ABBEY

GREENWICH VILLAGE, AUGUST 6, 1969



There is, in the city's sun-blistered canyons of concrete, a storied section known as Greenwich Village. And into it on August 6, this tall, stately woman walks, utterly disregarding the heat, on pilgrimage out of the past. She isn't alone. She is accompanied by a ghost. Her name is Stella Crate

—Oscar Fraley, preface to *The Empty Robe*



We begin in a bar. We will end here as well, but that is more than you need to know at the moment. For now, a woman sits in a corner booth waiting to give her confession. But her party is late, and without an audience, she looks small and alone, like an invalid in a church pew. It's not so easy for her, this truth telling, and she strains against it. A single strand of pearls, brittle and yellowed with age, rests against the flat plane of her chest. She rolls them between her fingers as though counting the beads on a rosary. Stella Crater has avoided this confession for thirty-nine years. The same number of years she has been coming to this bar.

At one time, this meeting would have been a spectacle, splashed across the headlines of every paper in New York: WIFE OF MISSING JUDGE MEETS WITH LEAD INVESTIGATOR, TELLS ALL! But the days of front-page articles, interviews, and accusations are over, filed away in some distant archives. Tonight her stage is empty.

Stella looks at her watch. Nine-fifteen.

Club Abbey, once a speakeasy during the Jazz Age, is now another relic in Greenwich Village, peddling its former glory through the tourist guides. It sits one floor below street level, dark and subdued. The pine floors are scuffed. Black-and-white photos line the walls. An aging jukebox has long since replaced the jazz quartet. The only remnant is Stan, the bartender. He was fifteen when hired by the notorious gangster Owney Madden to sweep the floors at closing. Owney took a liking to the kid, as did the showgirls, and Stan's been behind the bar ever since. He's never missed Stella's ritual. His part is small, but he plays it well.

Two lowball glasses. Twelve cubes of ice split between them. Whiskey on the rocks. Stella arranges napkins on her table and sets the glasses down. Her eyes are slick with a watery film—the harbinger of age and death.

“Good to see you again, Mrs. Crater.”

Stella swats him away with an emaciated hand, and he hangs back to watch, drying glasses with a dish towel. It's the same thing every year: she sits alone in her booth for a few minutes, and then he brings the drinks. Straight whiskey, the way her husband liked it. She raises one glass, saluting the empty place across from her, and say, “Good luck, Joe, wherever you are.” Stella will take her time with the drink, letting it burn, drawing out the moment until there's nothing left in her glass. That is when she'll rise and walk out, leaving the other drink untouched.

Except tonight she does none of these things.

Fifteen minutes she sits there, rubbing the rim of her glass. Stan has no script for what to do next, and he stares at her, confused. He doesn't see the doors swing open or the old gentleman enter. Doesn't see the trench coat or the faded gray fedora. Sees none of it until Detective Jude Simon slides into the booth across from Stella.

She lays her palm on the table, inches from a pack of cigarettes, and sits up straighter. The booth is hard against her back, walnut planks pressing against the knobs of her spine. “You're late.”

“Stella.” Jude touches the brim of his hat in greeting. He takes stock of her shriveled body. Tips his head to the side. “It's been years.”

“You were here the first time—makes sense that you’d be here the last.” Stella lifts her glass and takes a sip of whiskey. Shudders. “Call it a deathbed confession.”

Jude surveys the room through the weary smoke. The regular Wednesday night crowd—few women, mostly men—scattered around in groups of two and three drinking longnecks and griping about the stock market. “This isn’t exactly a church, and I’m not much of a priest,” he says.

“Priest. Detective. What’s the difference? You both love a good confession.”

His shoulders twitch—a doubter’s shrug. “I’m retired.”

Stella draws a cigarette from the pack and props it between her lips.

She looks at him expectantly.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a tarnished silver lighter. Something like a smile crosses his face and then melts away. He stares at it, cupped there in his palm, before striking it with his thumb. Jude used to be handsome, decades ago when Stella first met him, and the traces are still there in the square line of his jaw and the steel-blue eyes. But now he looks tired and sad. A bit wilted. It takes three tries before a weak flame sputters from the lighter. Perhaps his hand trembles as he holds it toward her, or it could be a trick of the light.

Stella tips her cigarette into the flame, and the end glows orange. “You would be here tonight even if I hadn’t asked you to come.” Her eyes shift toward the bar, where Stella pretends not to eavesdrop. “You have your sources.”

“Maybe.” Jude hangs his fedora on a peg beside the booth and pulls a pad and pen from his coat pocket. He waits for her to speak.

Stella lured him here with the promise of a story—the real version this time. He has been like a duck after bread crumbs for thirty-nine years. Pecking. Relentless. Gobbling up every scrap she leaves for him. Yet the truth is not something she will rush tonight. He will get one morsel at a time.

Stella Crater picked her poison a long time ago—unfiltered Camels—and she takes a long drag now, sizing up her pet duck. Her cheeks collapse into the sharp angles of her face, and she holds the smoke in her lungs for several long seconds before blowing it from between her teeth. Oh, she’ll tell Detective Simon a story all right.

Chapter One

BELGRADE LAKES, MAINE, SATURDAY, AUGUST 2, 1930

STELLA slept with the windows thrown open that summer, a breeze blowing back the curtains. The sounds of nature lulled her to sleep: frogs croaking in the shallow water beneath her window, the hum of a dragonfly outside the rusted screen, the call of a loon across the lake. She lay there, with one arm thrown across her face in resistance to the burgeoning sunlight, when she heard the Cadillac crunch up the long gravel driveway.

Joe.

Stella sat up and threw her legs over the edge of the bed, toes resting against the cold floorboards. She pushed a tangle of pale curls away from her eyes with a fine-boned hand. Yawned. Then grabbed a blue cotton shift from the floor and pulled it over her tan shoulder. She hadn't expected her husband to come—hadn't wanted him to—but there was no mistaking the familiar rumble of that engine. She went out to meet him wearing yesterday's dress and a contrived grin.

"You're back."

Joseph Crater leaned out the open window and drew her in for a kiss. "Drove all night. We beat the Bar Harbor Express by an hour!" He clapped their chauffeur on the back. "We'll have to paint a racing stripe down the side of this old thing."

Stella pulled the car door open and saw two things at once: he'd brought her flowers—white peonies, her favorite—and he wasn't wearing his wedding band. Again. The sight of that naked finger stripped the grin from her face.

Joe climbed out and reached for her with one arm, but she took a small step backward and looked at his pants pocket. The imprint of his ring pressed round against his cotton trousers. The question that surfaced was not the one she really wanted to ask. "Did you have a pleasant trip?"

He nodded.

"Where did you go?"

Joe's answer was cautious. "Atlantic City. With William Klein."

Her voice was even, almost carefree. "Just the two of you?" Joe hesitated long enough for her to rephrase the question. "Were you and William alone?"

He glanced at Fred Kahler, stiff behind the wheel, eyes downcast, and responded with a single sharp word. "*Stell.*"

It took a moment to find her breath. All that fresh air and she couldn't pull a stitch of it into her lungs. "Must you be so *flagrant* about it?"

"We'll talk about this later."

Stella heard the warning in his voice, but didn't care. She rose up onto the balls of her feet, the gravel digging into her bare skin, as anger ripped through her voice. "We have *nothing* to talk about!"

His eyes went small and dark.

Stella grabbed the car door and, with a rage that startled them both, slammed it shut, crushing Joe's hand in the frame. She heard the crunch before he screamed, and when he

yanked his hand away, two fingers were bloody and mangled.

STELLA waited for Joe on the deck of the Salt House. It was Belgrade Lake only fine-dining establishment, and they'd been late, thanks to his difficulty dressing with one hand. She had refused to help him.

Joe hadn't yelled at her after the incident. Hadn't called her names or lifted a hand to strike her. All he said was, "I'll need your help with this mess." Almost polite. Then he soaked his hand in the kitchen sink and waited for her to gather ointment and gauze. She had wrapped the bandage tighter than necessary, angered anew by his cavalier attitude and the way he expected her to accept that a man of his position would have a mistress. As though some skirt on Broadway was the same thing as a membership in the City Club.

By the time they arrived at the restaurant, he'd created a plausible fiction for his injury. "Had a beastly run-in with a Studebaker," Joe explained to their waiter, wiggling his fingers for effect. "Damn thing tried to eat my hand for lunch." And then, shortly after being seated, he excused himself to make a phone call.

Stella ordered their meal from a menu of summer fare: grilled fish, steaks, roasted vegetables, and fruit. A pleasant breeze rolled off the lake, rocking the Chinese lanterns that were strung around the deck. The red-and-yellow globes sent dancing spheres of amber across the linen tablecloths. Only a handful of the tables were occupied, and the diners leaned close over the candles, lost in conversation or in silence as they enjoyed the view. The longer she waited for Joe to return, the more they sent sympathetic glances her way.

The meal arrived with wine and bread, and Stella shifted candles and silverware to make room for the ample dinner. She waited until their server departed with his tray before taking a long drink of merlot. Steam rose from the pan-seared trout with lemon-caper sauce on her plate, and she wondered what sort of mood Joe would be in when he finished his call.

Minutes later, the door banged open on loose hinges, and Stella forced a smile as Joe strode toward the table, shoulders rounded forward like an ox. It was a look Stella knew well. Fury and determination and arrogance.

He yanked his chair away from the table with his good hand. "I'm leaving in the morning."

"Why?"

"I have to go back to the city tomorrow. Straighten a few things out. I'll be back on Thursday, in plenty of time for your birthday."

"But—"

"Don't snivel. It doesn't become you." Joe unfolded the crisp black napkin and spread it over his lap. "You shouldn't have waited. Food's getting cold."

STELLA stayed in bed when Joe pushed back the covers at six the next morning. She stayed there while he bathed—the water turning on with a groan of rusty pipes—and when his toothbrush tapped against the sink. Stella stayed curled around her pillow when he rattled through the dresser and yanked his clothes from the closet. Didn't move when he nudged her shoulder or when he cursed or when he brushed dry lips against her temple—a rote farewell—his freshly shaved chin rubbing against her cheek. Not until she heard his footsteps on the stairs did she open her eyes. And only when the Cadillac roared to life outside did she sit up. Four steps brought her to the window. She wiped his kiss from her

temple. "Goodbye."

The last Stella Crater ever saw of her husband was a glimpse of his shirt collar through the rear window as Fred eased the Cadillac down the gravel driveway.

Chapter Two

ORCHARD STREET, LOWER EAST SIDE, MONDAY, AUGUST 4, 1930

MARIA and Jude lay in a breathless tangle, watching the sky lighten to the color of ash outside their bedroom window. *Wanton*, he called her, throwing an arm above his head and dragging air deep into his lungs.

Maria pressed closer. "Our marriage is doomed to fail."

Jude tugged at her earlobe with his teeth and buried his face in her hair, inhaling the scent of lemon peel and lavender. "Why's that?"

"We are totally incompatible."

"You've been saying that for years."

Maria's father considered Jude profane, and her mother interceded daily for his inevitable visit to purgatory, but their different religious beliefs—or his lack thereof—had never been an issue for them. Despite the fact that she'd chosen an agnostic husband over her parents' objections.

"When the baby comes, we'll fight."

Jude moved the sheet away, exposing her flat stomach. He circled her navel with the tip of one finger and then placed his palm on her belly. The hope in her copper-penny eyes was too much for him. He turned away.

"We never fight."

"But we will. Because I *will* be pregnant. One day."

"When is your appointment?"

"Fourteen days." She breathed the words against his skin.

"And you think this doctor can help?"

"It's a start."

In the distance they could hear the rumble of the El where Park Row met the Bowery. Jude groaned and pushed the sheet away.

"Don't." Her breath was warm against his neck.

"I have to."

"You should stay."

"Tell that to the sergeant."

Maria curled into him and wrapped her leg around his. His pulse throbbed against her thigh. "I could convince you."

"You could convince the pope to take a mistress."

"Don't say that." Her hands flew over her chest in the sign of the cross. She grabbed her rosary—pale blue beads on a silver chain—from the bedside table and slipped it around her neck. It hung between the swell of her breasts, carnal and reverent.

"It's true. If Pius the Eleventh saw you right now, he'd reconsider his vow of celibacy." Jude sat up, reluctant. "I could lose my job."

"Is that such a bad thing?" She regretted the words as soon as they were out. A shadow crossed his face, and Maria crawled toward him. She slid her hand along his thigh and offered a coy smile. "Consider the alternative," she whispered.

Jude laughed and dropped back to his elbows. "You're wicked."

"Stay there."

Maria leaned over the bed and reached for something underneath. The heavy silver croc around her neck clanked against the floor as she stretched farther, balanced precariously on her hips. She could feel the heat of his gaze on her spine, could almost sense its caress in the small of her back. Finally, she felt the square edge of the box she'd stashed the night before.

"For you, *Detective*." She handed him the small brown package.

Jude took the gift and peered at the hastily tied string. "Is that my shoelace?"

"We were out of ribbon."

"What's the occasion?"

"I wanted to give it to you back in March, when you got the promotion." She smiled embarrassed. "It took a while to save up."

Too excited to wait for her husband, Maria ripped off the paper and held up a cigarette lighter.

He took it and flipped the lid. A bright orange flame leapt up.

She pointed to the side. "Your initials."

The letters J.S. were engraved across the metal in script and filled with black patina. Jude ran a thumb across them.

"Do you like it?"

Jude cupped the lighter in the palm of his hand. It was warm against his skin. "I love it."

"Then what's wrong?" She tapped the sudden crease between his eyebrows.

"You shouldn't have to work two jobs. It's not right."

She pulled away to better see his face. "You know Smithson won't hire a woman tailor full time—too big of a hit to his pride. So I'll keep the housework for now. Besides, we need the money. Rent just went up."

"Not *again*?"

"The notice came in the mail yesterday."

Jude sat up and stretched. He looked like a kitten, tongue curled and back arched. She laughed.

"Not so fast." Maria caught him off balance and tipped him back onto the mattress. She pinned him down with her hands and knees and kissed him with the deep warmth known only to seasoned lovers. He didn't resist.

MARIA slipped through the entrance of 40 Fifth Avenue and paused to catch her breath. She twisted her watch around her thin wrist and noted the time. Eight-thirty. She winced and rushed toward the elevator. Her lust and Jude's shoelaces had made them both late for work, but she could always blame the incessant construction-induced traffic along Fifth Avenue. There were over seven hundred buildings under construction in Manhattan that year, turning her well-laid route into a maze of cracked concrete and cordoned-off streets. It seemed every building, cellar, subway, and foundation was undergoing some sort of alteration to make room for the relentless swell of people. The air was a broken symphony of shovels, rock drills, jackhammers, and cranes pecking, breaking, and thundering New York City into the twentieth century.

Maria wiped a bead of sweat from her upper lip and leaned against the cool wall of the

elevator as it rose to the fifth floor. Her uniform, a black rayon dress with lace collar and cuffs, stuck against her back with the humidity and chafed her skin. She fished for the keys to apartment 508 inside her purse, thankful that the owners were on vacation in Maine and wouldn't know she was late.

She let herself into the apartment and eased the door shut. Four times the size of the efficiency she shared with Jude, the Craters' home spread before her, wood floors and cream-colored walls dotted with oil paintings in gilded frames. The living room was anchored by a stone fireplace with a stained mantel and a painting that cost more than she made in six months. Mrs. Crater had beamed the day they won the Monet at auction, confiding that it would be worth a small fortune in a few years—not that they hadn't parted with a decent sum, mind you, but it was a luxury now that Mr. Crater had his seat on the bench. She had shown Maria the signature in the bottom right-hand corner, insisted she trace it with her fingertip to *feel* his name on the painting. They both knew it was the closest Maria would ever come to a Monet.

The rest of the apartment was compact. A small kitchen and dining room were off to the side, an empty pewter fruit bowl and place settings for six on the table. Vacant elegance. Maria stood in the entry and inhaled the smells of oiled furniture and floor wax. The heavy must of velvet drapes. One day she hoped to have a home as lovely. Jude's promotion brought them a step closer, but the reality was that even if he made sergeant in a few years they would never be able to afford something like this. She pushed aside a swell of envy and got to work.

The Craters kept the cleaning supplies beneath the cabinet in the guest bathroom, and she was about to collect them when she heard the Victrola playing softly in the master bedroom. Mr. Crater often left it on—a habit that irritated Mrs. Crater to no end—and must have forgotten to turn it off when he left for Maine on Friday evening.

Maria pushed open the dark wood door that led from the living room into the master bedroom. It was furnished, as was the rest of the apartment, thoughtfully and expensively. Sturdy walnut furniture. Red-and-cream bedclothes. Curtains puddled on the floor.

But stretched across the bed was a naked woman, twenty years younger than Mrs. Crater and a great deal more buxom. She and Maria stared at each other for one horrified second. The woman screamed and hurried to cover herself as Joseph Crater emerged from the bathroom, dripping wet, a towel around his waist. Maria gasped an apology and shut the door. She stood, paralyzed, listening to the tumult in the other room.

"The maid," Crater said.

A whisper. "What is she doing here?"

"Cleaning, obviously." He tripped over something. Cursed. "I forgot to tell her not to come."

"You *forgot*?"

"Stay here."

Maria looked at the front door, wondering if she could grab her purse and leave before he came out. Mr. Crater charged from the bedroom, holding on to his towel with one hand. Barrel chest. Pasty skin. And behind him, the woman, pushed up against the headboard with the bedspread yanked up to her chin. The look on her face was desperate and ashamed. Pleading. Maria shifted her gaze to the floor. She backed up as Mr. Crater strode toward her.

"I'm so sorry. I thought you were in Maine. That's what you said Friday, that you'd be gone." The words tumbled out, and she was afraid to meet his furious gaze.

"Get out!" He pointed at the front door.

Gladly. She stumbled backward, eyes still on the floor.

"Don't come back until Thursday when I'm gone, you understand?"

"Yes."

"One word of this to my wife and you're fired."

"Of course."

Mr. Crater leaned in, his voice hoarse with anger. "You know what I did for your husband? I will take it all away if you don't keep your stupid mouth shut."

Maria couldn't look at him for fear the hatred would be evident on her face, but she gave a quick nod and blinked hard.

"It's not her fault. She was just doing her job." His mistress now stood in the doorway, hair mussed, eyes large, and ample curves hidden by the bedclothes. Maria startled at the protective note in her voice.

Mr. Crater shifted his gaze between the two. "Stay out of this."

Maria grabbed her purse from the side table.

"You won't say anything? Please?" she said in a stage whisper, and took a step toward Maria. *Don't start trouble with him,* the look said. *Please go.*

Mr. Crater had hired Maria three years earlier as a gift to his wife. She cleaned their home and cooked their meals and ran their errands. Mr. Crater signed her paychecks and gave her a small Christmas bonus every year. He had once pinched her bottom when his wife wasn't home. Maria felt no loyalty to him and didn't care to guard his secrets. But there was a depth of sadness in the girl's hazel eyes that she could not turn from. An unspoken agreement had passed between them.

"I have nothing to tell," she said, and left the apartment, locking the door behind her.

FIFTH AVENUE, SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1930

"Thank you, Mr. Crater!"

"For?"

"Putting a good word in for Jude with Commissioner Mulrooney. He's got an interview with the detective bureau next week."

He glanced up from his paper, impassive.

Maria twisted the cleaning rag in her hands and shot an uncertain look at Mrs. Crater. "If he gets the promotion, he'll finally get off the vice squad. We want to start a family, and that's a hard job for a father to have."

"I do wonder," Mr. Crater said, rising from the table with a sneer, "how the daughter of a Spanish immigrant managed to snag one of New York's finest. It's an odd match, don't you think?" He folded the newspaper in half, tossed it on the table, and retreated to the bedroom to dress for work.

Maria busied herself with his dirty breakfast dishes so Stella wouldn't see the shame spread across her cheeks.

"Ignore him," Mrs. Crater said. "He's all piss and vinegar because his own promotion looks a bit tentative right now."

“He’s right.” Maria swallowed. “I married above myself.”

Mrs. Crater placed a cool hand on the back of Maria’s neck. She patted. “Your husband obviously a wise man. Look at you, lovely thing!”

“I’m a maid.”

“You,” she said, “are smart enough to know that a woman is only as good as her husband. The better off he is, the better off you are. Many women don’t understand that.”

Maria turned and peered at her. “You convinced Mr. Crater, didn’t you?”

“He’s never been good at telling me no.” Her eyes crinkled at the corners. “I’ll listen to the back channel and see how things go for Jude. How’s that?”

“Back channel?”

“The political wives, dear. Chances are, I’ll know something before Joe.”

Maria smiled, bright and grateful. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“We’re in this together. Where would women be if we didn’t look out for one another?” She returned to the living room, where her novel waited, cracked open at the spine.

“Mrs. Crater?”

“Yes?”

“Jude would be furious if he ever found out I did this. He wants to succeed on his own merit. Not on favors. Certainly not those begged by his wife.”

Mrs. Crater spread her skirt across the couch with a flourish. “Well, that’s silly. Everything in this city is based on favors. In one way or another.”

MARIA opened the door to Smithson Tailors and reached up to steady the bell. To her left, she could see the city’s newest structure, a monolith dubbed the Empire State Building, dwarf the skyline. The papers said it would be a mind-boggling 102 stories when finished. Construction began less than six months ago, and already the building was fifty-five stories high. Over three thousand workers were employed full-time. Maria could not imagine anyone wanting to be that high above the ground.

Donald Smithson glanced up in his office. Tapped his watch. “Your appointment will be here in five minutes,” he said.

Maria nodded and wove her way through the bolts of fabric in the showroom, gray wool and brown tweed, pinstriped cotton and, most popular during the brick-oven summer months, linen.

She took her sewing bag to a small alcove set into the front window. When she’d inherited the job from her father, she had no intention of becoming the store display. It happened by accident. With square footage in high demand on Fifth Avenue, Smithson could not expand as he’d wished, at least not without securing a second mortgage. So he set his new tailor in the window behind a small desk until space could be made for her in the back with the other. But he soon found an increase in foot traffic as people stopped to watch her nimble fingers work a needle with rapier accuracy. Once settled into her space, she became a living advertisement for the quality offered by Smithson Tailors.

Maria’s real genius, however—and the reason she’d secured a position in the all-male establishment—was her dual talents as both cutter and stitcher, a rare combination on Savoy Row, much less in New York City. Though she could never explain it, Maria could *feel* the fabric. Not only the texture and the thread count beneath the pads of her fingers, but the

proclivity of the material itself, whether it wanted to bunch or snag, whether it would hang well on a particular frame. A natural intuition allowed her to make adjustments in a pattern for a client with a pronounced stoop, a paunch, a barrel chest, a limp, or some other physical quirk that wasn't taken into account by standard measurements. The warp and weft of fabric softened beneath her touch, like strings for a cellist. Her chalk lines were light and fluid, almost a language of her own, a dot here for buttonholes, a line there for slanted pockets, a streak to allow for extra material that would form the inlay. Nuanced as her cutting skills were, it was in her stitching that Smithson made his real profit. She produced no less than five thousand stitches per suit—she counted—every one equal in size. A straighter hem and tighter seam could not be found in Manhattan. Smithson knew this, of course, and monopolized her abilities for himself. Yet he would not give her the dignity of a full-time position—and therefore the salary that would accompany it—or a referral that would send her to a competitor.

Donald Smithson stuck his head out from his office. “This client is priority, Maria. I expect you to behave accordingly.”

Maria forced herself to respond with a smile. “Of course.” *Priority*, she knew, meant wealthy beyond the normal standards of their clientele. It meant a man willing to buy five or more suits at one time. It meant a level of flattery by Smithson that would nauseate any human with a shred of dignity.

“I suggested he use one of our more *experienced* tailors, but he insisted on you. Requested you by name, as a matter of fact.”

Smithson pulled a tin of Altoids from his pocket. He placed one mint on the tip of his tongue and drew it in with a grimace, straightened his tie, then said, “Get the fitting room ready. And unlock the humidor. Top shelf.”

Maria grabbed her sewing bag and inspected the contents: measuring tape, pins, cushioned chalk, pinking shears, scissors, and needles in three different sizes. Then she made her way across the showroom and through a side door. What expense her employer spared in her work area he made up for in here. Heavy green carpet covered the floor and the dark paneled walls were adorned every eight feet with a mannequin dressed in the latest menswear. Between each mannequin was a mirror almost seven feet tall, self-admiration available from all angles. In the middle of the room, a round mahogany platform was positioned directly beneath the chandelier. Two leather chairs rested off to the side, an end table between them. Tiffany lamps in masculine shades of blue, yellow, and green and a gold ashtray completed the opulent decor. Along the back wall sat the built-in humidor. Maria unlocked the door and swung them open, revealing a generous display of cigars behind a glass case. Her fingers trembled slightly, nerves still on edge from finding *that* woman in Mr. Crater's bed. She closed her hands into fists and took a deep breath before she slid the glass open and pulled out the top shelf. The Cubans—Romeo y Julieta being Smithson's preferred brand. He paid extra for the personalized silver band embossed with the company logo, but he never smoked them himself. She made sure they were straight and that the cigar clipper was clean and polished.

Panatelas, she called them, the saboteurs of fabric. “Can't get the smell out of wool,” Maria had complained to Jude more times than she could count. “Ruins a suit every time.”

She unloaded her sewing bag and set the contents on the edge of the platform. Even in the

she was orderly. Pins placed in a perfect swirl around the red cushion. Tape folded in eighth. Scissors laid out neatly. As she finished, the door swished open behind her. She took a quick breath and turned to see the wide eyes and cleft chin of her client.

“Maria, this is Owney Madden. Owney, Maria Simon.”

He swaggered the five steps between them, grabbed her hand, and rattled out his greeting in an almost incomprehensible Liverpool accent. “Your reputation precedes you.”

Coming from one of the city’s most notorious gangsters, the comment could easily be applied to him as well. “Mr. Madden.” A quick nod and Maria lowered her eyes.

“Have we met before?” His studied her face. “You look familiar.”

“No. I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“It must be the name, then. I hear you’re the best tailor in the city.” He paused. “Seamstress? What exactly are you?”

Maria caught the waver in her voice and forced it back. “*Costurera*. There is no English equivalent. *Tailor* will do just fine.”

“Are you as good as they say?”

She answered the question as honestly as she could without sounding arrogant. “Yes.”

Owney looked at Smithson. “I like her.”

A bored smile. “Her talents are unrivaled.”

Heat crept up Maria’s face as Owney’s eyes traveled down her body and paused at her breasts. “I’m sure they are.”

Smithson leaned forward eagerly, clipboard in hand. “How can we serve you today, Mr. Madden?”

The Liverpool accent, derogatorily referred to as Scouse by most, sounded to Maria in untrained ears like the bastard child of Ireland and England, and though she’d often heard it mocked, Owney was the first person she’d ever met who had one. She tipped her head to the side, intrigued and slightly unnerved. Given his reputation, the accent only made him appear that much more sinister.

“I need a new fall and winter wardrobe. The latest styles. Top-notch, hear?”

“Of course.” Smithson practically trembled with joy. “Why don’t we look at our newest trends? Maria, go get the fabric. Bring the hand-finished wool. Chocolate and charcoal. The merino wool.” He paused to think. “In navy and black. The gray tweed. And the vicuña.”

Maria parted her lips to speak but then pressed them together again. She nodded and walked toward the door.

“What were you going to say?” Owney asked.

“Nothing.”

“Yes, you were. Go ahead.”

Maria avoided Smithson’s gaze and debated for a moment before she said, “The vicuña doesn’t hang well. Especially in winter. And I doubt it would suit a man such as yourself.” She cleared her throat. “It’s a bit effeminate.”

Owney looked from Smithson to Maria and grinned. “What would you recommend?”

“A classic English wool would drape better across your shoulders.” The suit he had on looked worse for the wear, wrinkled and stretched. Typical of cotton. Certainly not up to his standards of craftsmanship.

Smithson stepped forward with a little cough. “She does know her fabrics.” A sharp glance

in her direction. "Fetch them. Would you?"

"Yes, sir."

"But leave the vicuña."

Maria nodded and left the fitting room. Vicuñas, like llamas, had long woolen strands that were wonderful for weaving but terrible for holding shape. Smithson knew this but did not care. The fabric was rare, so he could charge three times as much as for standard sheep wool. She'd worked with it on a number of occasions and resented its defiance. It fought against her as she sewed, bunching beneath the thread. It took a great deal of tension on the stitch and patience on her part to make vicuña cooperate.

Glad for the chance to escape, Maria went to the showroom, running her fingers over the bolts as she searched. She collected all the samples that Smithson requested, in various colors and also grabbed three shades of satin for the lining to save herself a trip later. He would ask for it. She was certain of that.

She slid back into the fitting room, holding the door open with one foot, while the men discussed the latest fashion in men's suits. Owney held a newly lit cigar between thumb and forefinger, puffing out small bursts of smoke.

"There she is," Smithson said. "Let's get your measurements."

She set the fabric bolts on one of the leather chairs and stepped up behind Owney on the platform. "Jacket, please." He shrugged out of it and she laid it aside. "Stand still if you can. The more accurate your measurements, the better the fit."

"I heard you go more on sight and feel than numbers."

His words came so quickly that she had to sort through each syllable after the fact, disentangling them from one another. "The numbers never lie, Mr. Madden."

"Well, feel free to look and touch all you like regardless."

Maria turned her face away to hide the furious blush that swept across her cheeks. Smithson tapped his elbows quickly. "Arms up."

As Owney raised his arms above his head, she wrapped the tape around his chest. Smithson recorded the measurements on the order form as Maria called them out. "Chest, forty-three inches." She stretched the tape between her fingers and stood back. Owney was well muscled but not lean. "Make that forty-four. He'll want the extra room for movement. He's broad through the torso."

"Was that a compliment? Or a complaint?"

Maria placed her first and second fingers on the protruding bone at the top of his spine and did her best to ignore the innuendo. "Chin down, please—your sleeves are next." She set one end of the tape against the bone and ran the rest over his shoulder, down his arm, and all the way to his wrist, then added another inch for the shirt cuff. "Sleeve, thirty-three inches."

Owney raised his arms again as Maria stepped in front and brought the tape around his waist. He tried to catch her glance, but she did not look at him. "Waist, thirty-six."

There were few things more awkward in her experience than measuring a man's inseam. The near groping aside, her position—kneeling at crotch level—was compromising. It was a rare client who did not squirm beneath her touch or make an off-color remark. Owney did neither. He stood, hands on his hips, searching her face with a curious expression.

"How did you end up here? Aren't most of your kind sewing scraps down in the garment district?"

Her embarrassment was replaced with a sudden anger, and Maria clenched her jaw to suppress a sharp retort. As though there were much difference between his kind or her limey or grasa. They'd all crossed the Atlantic the same way, penniless and desperate. At least she'd been born on this continent. Owney clearly had not. He couldn't have acquired a dialect like that anywhere but the docks in Merseyside. Maria sniffed, unwilling to dignify him with a response.

"She replaced her father when he went blind," Smithson explained when the silence stretched on longer than was comfortable. "An unconventional arrangement, to be sure, but there is no doubting her abilities."

Maria sat back on her heels and looked up at Owney Madden. "Inseam, thirty-four."

"Sure you measured that right?"

She didn't blink. "I was generous."

"Maria!" Donald Smithson stepped forward.

Owney laughed, a deep sort of thing that left no doubt as to his humor. "It's my fault. I provoked her. Just wanted to see if she'd bite back." He grinned. "Nice sharp teeth on the one." He stepped off the platform and grabbed his jacket from the chair. "Now, why don't we talk style?"

"I think what you want"—Smithson walked Owney to the nearest mannequin—"is the London drape cut. Or the London drape, as they call it on Savile Row. It has a softer silhouette. Extra fabric in the shoulders for movement, and a narrowed waist. We have found this style to greatly enhance a man's figure."

Maria laid out the fabric bolts on the platform and stepped aside, waiting.

"What do you think?" Owney asked, looking over his shoulder at her. "You're the expert. Or so I've been told."

"And what friend referred our services, Mr. Madden? I'd like the opportunity to write and thank him." Smithson made a note on the corner of his clipboard.

"Simon Rifkind, an attorney downtown." He prodded Maria again, undeterred by Smithson. "Go on."

Simon Rifkind. The toothy, obnoxious associate of Mr. Crater's. It made sense that the three of them would run together. Maria kept her voice steady, nonchalant. "I think the London drape looks pompous. I prefer a simple double-breasted suit with a waistcoat and a strong, bold tie in an accentuating color. A matching fabric square in the breast pocket for evenings. Classic. Nothing showy."

Smithson forced a laugh. "Leave it to a woman to try and get out of hard labor. The London drape requires more craftsmanship than the double-breasted. Why don't we look at those fabrics?" He cupped Maria's elbow in his palm and bent closer. "What's wrong with you?"

"He asked my opinion."

"Your *opinion* is irrelevant." Smithson released her and stepped away. "Thank you for your help, Mrs. Simon. I will take it from here. I put some piecework at your station."

She placed her sewing materials back in her bag and gave Owney a courteous nod. "Mr. Madden."

"A pleasure to meet you."

Again, she thought as she turned away. Maria had the distinct impression that he watched

her backside as she left the room. In the last few hours, Maria had found Joseph Crater bed with a woman half his age and herself measuring the inseam of one of New York City's most reviled gangsters. She was overcome with a sudden need to wash her hands. After a quick trip to the restroom, she returned to her work area and dropped into her seat. She scrubbed her face in her hands. *What have I gotten myself into?*

Chapter Three

CLUB ABBEY, WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, 1930

RITZI and Crater sat at a small table in a corner of Club Abbey and listened to the jazz quartet. She slipped one shoe off under the table and rubbed a blister on the side of her big toe. Rehearsal ran long that afternoon and her feet ached, but she hid it with a smile. Crater couldn't stop looking at her. Couldn't stop touching her.

"Where is she?" Ritzi asked, looking at his wedding ring. "This wife of yours?"

"In Maine, at our lake house. She spends summers there."

She brought her bare foot up the front of Crater's leg. "That must be nice. A vacation home. You should take me there sometime."

He caught her gaze, still on the ring, and spun it around his finger. "I can take it off if it bothers you."

"Doesn't make a difference, I suppose."

He slid the ring off and put it in his pocket.

The room smelled of pipe smoke and wood polish and anise. Area rugs and lamps with red shades were scattered around the bar. Warm. Seductive. Flickering candles cast halos of soft light across the center of each table. Young couples lounged close together, arms draped over shoulders and hands resting on thighs. The nuzzle of a neck. A brazen kiss. On the other side of the room, Owey Madden sat in his corner booth. He nodded at Ritzi and continued to study Crater. She shifted a little closer to the judge.

The bartender arrived at their table, a fresh-faced young man with red hair and a wrinkled apron. He still looked to be in his teens. "What'll you have?"

"Bring her an absinthe," Crater said. "And one for me as well."

Although Joseph Crater always imbibed in the evening—straight whiskey on the rocks being his drink of choice—this was the first time he ordered absinthe. Perhaps he was feeling a bit cosmopolitan, or maybe just giving in to the trend. It arrived several minutes later on an elaborate silver tray with two reservoir glasses, slotted silver spoons, a bowl of sugar cubes and a carafe of ice water. The bartender set the paraphernalia on the table and was about to slip away when Crater asked, "What's your name, kid?"

"Stan."

Crater tucked a dollar bill into his hand and said, "Keep them coming."

"Sure thing, mister." He stuffed the money in his pocket and went back to the bar.

"I don't want to drink tonight," Ritzi said.

Crater dismissed her with a glance. "I don't care."

Fine, then. Ritzi lifted her glass and would have taken a swig had Crater not grabbed her wrist.

"Easy. You'll be on the floor in two minutes if you take it like that." He took the glass from her and held it up to the candle. "Let me educate you."

"By *educate*, you mean corrupt."

"Semantics."

Crater lifted a sugar cube from the bowl and set it on the slotted spoon. He rested the

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