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FORTUNE FAVOURS THE DEAD

Written by **Stephen Spotswood**

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FORTUNE FAVOURS THE DEAD

STEPHEN SPOTSWOOD



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To my father, Bob Spotswood,
who taught me to love a good mystery

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Very few of us are what we seem to be.
—Agatha Christie, *The Man in the Mist*

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WILLOWJEAN PARKER: The circus-trained right-hand woman of Lillian Pentecost. Learning the highs and lows of being a working detective.

LILLIAN PENTECOST: New York City's preeminent lady gumshoe. Not as steady on her feet as she used to be, but it's her steel trap of a mind you need to watch out for.

ALISTAIR COLLINS: Steel magnate and coldhearted patriarch. A little over a year ago he picked up a gun and put the final punctuation on his own life.

ABIGAIL COLLINS: Matriarch of the Collins family. Somebody ruined her Halloween party by bludgeoning her to death with a crystal ball.

REBECCA COLLINS: Daughter of Al and Abigail. Bold, beautiful, and more than just your average society girl.

RANDOLPH COLLINS: Rebecca's twin brother. Looking to take over where his father left off, and he figures that includes keeping his sister in line.

HARRISON WALLACE: Godfather to Rebecca and Randolph and acting CEO of Collins Steelworks and Manufacturing. Says he wants justice for Abigail, but that might just be lip service.

ARIEL BELESTRADE: Medium and spiritual advisor to the Upper East Side. Says she can speak with the dead, but is she leaving bodies in her wake?

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NEAL WATKINS: Former university wunderkind turned Ariel Belestrade's assistant. How close is he following in his employer's footsteps?

OLIVIA WATERHOUSE: Mild-mannered professor with a passion for the occult. Her obsession with Ariel Belestrade might go beyond the academic.

JOHN MEREDITH: Longtime plant manager and brawl-scarred bruiser. He has a chip on his shoulder and strong feelings about the Collins clan.

DORA SANFORD: The Collinses' longtime cook. More than willing to spill the beans.

JEREMY SANFORD: The Collinses' butler. Practicing the perfect poker face, he keeps the family secrets locked up tight.

ELEANOR CAMPBELL: Lillian Pentecost's cook and housekeeper. Loving, loyal, and not to be trifled with.

LIEUTENANT NATHAN LAZENBY: One of the NYPD's sharpest. Underestimate him at your own risk. Willing to give Pentecost and Parker just enough rope to hang the killer. Or themselves.

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CHAPTER 1

The first time I met Lillian Pentecost, I nearly caved her skull in with a piece of lead pipe.

I had scored a few shifts working guard duty at a building site on West Forty-second. A lot of the crew on Hart and Halloway's Traveling Circus and Sideshow picked up gigs like that whenever we rolled into a big city. Late-night and off-day gigs where we could clock in after a performance and get paid cash on the barrel.

There were more jobs like that available in those years. A lot of the men who'd usually have taken them were overseas hoping for a shot at Hitler. When you're desperate to fill a post, even a twenty-year-old cirky girl starts to look good.

Not that it required much of a résumé. It was a knucklehead job. Walk the fenced-in perimeter from eleven until dawn and keep an eye out for anyone slipping through the fence. If anyone did, I was supposed to ring a bell and shout and make a ruckus to drive them away. If they refused, I ran and found a cop.

At least that was what I was *supposed* to do. McCloskey—the site foreman, who was paying me—had other thoughts.

"You catch anyone slipping in, you give them a good clobber with this," he said, tugging at his greasy moustache. *This*

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was a two-foot length of lead pipe. "You do that, you get an extra dollar bonus. Gotta set an example."

Who I was setting an example for, I didn't know. I also didn't know what was around the site that would be worth stealing. Construction had just started, so it was basically a giant hole in the ground half the size of a city block. Some lumber, some pipe, a few tools, but nothing really worth pinching. This close to Times Square, I was more likely to get drunks looking for a place to sleep it off.

I expected to spend a handful of uneventful nights, collect a few bucks, and be done with my shift in time to run back to Brooklyn and help with the circus's matinee. I was also hoping to find some quiet time to devour the detective novel I'd picked up at the newsstand down the street. Maybe catch a few hours' sleep in some corner of the yard. On the road, solitary sleep—especially sleep without the rumble of trucks or the roar of the tigers prowling in their cage across the yard—was a rarity.

The first two nights, that was exactly how it went. It was actually kind of lonely. New York might be the city that never sleeps, but even those few blocks in the heart of Midtown took a catnap between two and five. Not much in the way of foot traffic, or at least little that could be heard through the seven-foot-high wooden fence surrounding the construction site. That half-block hole in the ground was eerily quiet.

So on the third night the creak of a board being pried away from the fence rang out like a bell.

Heart racing, I grabbed the piece of lead pipe and made my way around the edge of the pit. I was wearing dungarees and a denim shirt—soft fabrics that didn't make a sound. My boots had worn-thin soles, which didn't do any favors for my arches

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but meant I was able to slip like a shadow. I crept up on the figure crouched on its haunches at the edge of the pit.

Whoever it was picked up a handful of dirt and let it sift through their fingers. I thought about yelling and trying to drive them off, but they were bigger than me. In their other hand they were brandishing what looked like a stick or cudgel—something heftier than my length of pipe at any rate. If I yelled and got rushed, I wasn't sure I'd be able to stay on my feet long enough to hit back.

I took one slow step after another. When I was only a short stride away I lifted the pipe above my head. I wondered what it would feel like when I brought it down. Could I finesse it so I just knocked them out? Detectives were always managing to do that in the dime novels. More likely, I'd crack their skull open like an egg. My stomach did the same kind of slow flip it performed when I watched the trapeze artists.

I still had the pipe raised above my head when the figure turned and looked at me.

"I'd prefer not to end my day with a concussion," she said with a voice even as a tightrope. The hefty guy I had been afraid would rush me was a woman. She was around the age my mother would have been with her hair done up tight in an intricate bun.

"You're not supposed to be here," I told her, managing to keep my vibrating heart out of my voice.

"That remains to be seen," she said. "Have you worked here long?"

"A few nights."

"Hmmm." There was disappointment in that murmur.

By all rights, I should have told her to scram. But for some reason, call it fate or boredom or an inborn pernicious streak,

I kept talking. "I think McCloskey—that's the site manager—only just started hiring night guards. I think he used to spend the night here sleeping in his shack so he could double dip. That's what some of the morning shift guys told me anyway."

"Better," she declared.

She stood slowly, using the cane in her left hand for leverage. She was tall and solidly built, wearing a tailored houndstooth suit that looked expensive and an ankle-length coat like the kind Blackheart Bart wore when he did his sharpshooter act.

"Is that his shack?" she asked, looking over at the small wooden structure a quarter turn around the pit.

I nodded.

"Show me, please."

By that point, it was clear to both of us there would be no clobbering, so I figured why not. Maybe it was because the alternative would have been ringing up the police, and I have a cultivated dislike of anyone with a badge.

I headed over to the shack in the corner of the yard. She followed a little behind, using the cane as she went. She wasn't limping so much as wobbling a little. I wasn't sure what was up with her, but the cane obviously wasn't for show.

McCloskey had called the shack his office, but I'd seen chicken coops built sturdier. We were never supposed to go inside, and besides, the door was locked. The mysterious woman took something from an inner pocket of her coat—a thin, bent piece of wire—and went to work on the padlock. After a minute of fumbling, I piped up, "You need to go at it from the bottom."

"How do you mean?"

I took the wire out of her hand and had the job done in ten seconds flat. I'd picked harder locks blindfolded. Literally.

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"You should get yourself some real picks if you're going to do this kind of thing regular," I told her.

In all the years after, I only ever saw her smile about three dozen times. She graced me with one then.

"I'll keep that in mind," she said.

The inside of the shack matched the outside. Dirty and jerry-built. There was a desk fashioned out of a couple discarded boards and some sawhorses. Papers were scattered haphazardly across it. On it were also a lantern and an army-issue field phone that someone had rigged so McCloskey could make calls without leaving to find a pay phone. The rest of the space was taken up by a narrow cot and a pile of dirty rags that on second glance were clothes.

My companion lit the lantern. The addition of light didn't do the cramped room any favors. I've seen monkey cages less filthy.

"Describe Mr. McCloskey," she said, fixing me with eyes the gray-blue of a winter sky.

"I don't know. Forty or so. Average, I guess."

She gave me a look I have come to refer to as her disappointed schoolmarm. "Average doesn't exist. Not when it comes to human beings. And don't guess unless circumstances force you to."

I was starting to regret not using the lead pipe.

"Okay," I said with a bit of a sneer. "About a foot taller than me, so figure six feet, give or take. About two hundred pounds—a lot of it fat, but there's some muscle under there. Like a roustabout who's taken to the bottle. From the patches on his trousers, I'd say he has two sets of clothes, neither of them more than three bucks combined. He's cheap but wants people to think he has flash."

"What made you determine that?" she asked.

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"From how much he's paying me. Also, he wouldn't spend two bits for a shave but dropped at least five for a gaff watch."

"A gaff?"

"A fake, a phony."

"How do you know it's fake?"

"No way is this guy buying gold."

There was something in her eyes then. The same look Mysterio got right before he sawed his lovely assistant in half.

"Do you have his phone number in case of emergencies?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure. But he said not to use it unless something's really gone sideways."

"Something has indeed gone sideways, Miss . . ."

"No Miss. Just Parker," I told her. "Willowjean Parker. Everyone calls me Will."

"Please call Mr. McCloskey, Will. Tell him there's an intruder and she won't leave. Tell him she's asking about a gold watch."

It was an easy call to make, since it was the truth. After I hung up, the woman—who still hadn't introduced herself, and don't think I wasn't a little annoyed at that lapse in basic manners—asked me how he'd sounded.

I told her he'd sounded normal at first—sleep drugged and annoyed. But when I mentioned the watch, a thread of something like panic had come into his voice. He said he'd be right over and not to let this woman go anywhere in the meantime.

She gave a small, satisfied nod, then sat down on the cot, back straight, gloved hands holding her cane across her lap. She closed her eyes, calm as my great-aunt Ida praying in church. She reminded me of pictures of Okie wives I'd seen in issues

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of *Life,* a weatherworn face waiting patiently for the coming storm.

I thought about asking her what this was all about. Or at least her name. She had mine, after all. But I decided I didn't want to give her the satisfaction. So I stood there and waited with her.

After ten minutes of silence she suddenly opened her eyes and said, "I think it would be best, Will, if you were to leave out the Eighth Avenue exit. There is a station house about twelve blocks south."

"You want me to get the cops?"

"Ask them to call Lieutenant Nathan Lazenby. Tell them there's been a murder and that Lillian Pentecost says to come at once. Unless they wish to read about it in the *Times*."

I opened my mouth, but she flashed me a look that said it was no use arguing, so I dashed out and toward Eighth Avenue but stopped before I reached the gate.

Like I said, there's no love lost between me and authority figures, especially those who carry guns and billy clubs and aren't afraid to do some judicious clobbering of their own. Besides, what did this woman think would happen? I drop her name and a whole squad of dicks come running?

Lillian Pentecost. Who the hell did she think she was, anyway?

Instead, I quietly retraced my steps around the pit. Before I'd gotten back to the shack the shriek of old brakes on Forty-second Street announced McCloskey's arrival.

I hurried to the rear of the rickety structure and crouched down. The walls were thin and I could hear everything. I figured that worked in reverse, so I kept still and quiet.

There was the sound of footsteps double-timing it across hard dirt, then of the door creaking open.

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"Hey. Who are you? Where's the little carny?"

"I've sent Will away, Mr. McCloskey. I thought it best if we had this conversation in private."

"What conversation? What's the deal? Who are you?"

"I am Lillian Pentecost." There was a little inhale there. Apparently he recognized the name and wasn't too happy about it. "And the deal is that you are wearing a murdered man's watch."

"What are you talking about? That's a lie. I bought this watch. From a guy at a bar. Twenty bucks, it cost."

I shook my head. Apparently nobody'd taught him that adding too many details was the quickest way to foul a grift.

"The police will, of course, ask you which bar and the name of the man who supposedly sold you the watch and so forth and so on," Ms. Pentecost said. "But I think we can dispense with that. If for no other reason than no one would sell a Patek Philippe for twenty dollars."

"I don't know a Patty Phillip from nothing. This guy said he was hard up. Needed the cash." The whine that had crept into his voice advertised his guilt better than any Broadway marquee.

"Jonathan Markel was indeed in need of money, Mr. McCloskey. But not so badly as to barter with you."

"Who's Jonathan Markel?"

"The man you bludgeoned to death and from whose wrist you slipped that watch."

"Lady, you're crazy."

"Debatable. I've been accused of rampant narcissism, hysteria, deviancy, and a variety of delusional psychoses. But the dirt covering the back of Mr. Markel's suit coat was no delusion. Dirt that certainly did not come from the alley where his

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body was found. Nor were the grooves in his skull a delusion. Grooves that I feel confident will match the kind of lead pipe you instructed Will to employ on trespassers."

Even through the wall of the shack, I could hear McCloskey breathing. Heavy and panicked.

As Ms. Pentecost continued, she developed a hitch in her voice. Like her words were catching on something in her throat. I started to wonder just how calm this woman really was.

"I would have come upon you sooner, but . . . it was not until yesterday that I was able to examine the clothes Mr. Markel . . . was wearing that night. This construction site is one of only a . . . handful between his club and the alley where he was found. Perhaps there was no initial malevolence. Perhaps . . . after an evening of drinking, Mr. Markel sought a private spot to relieve himself and slipped through the gap in your fence. Mistaking him for a thief, you . . . hit him. A little . . . too hard, perhaps? An accident?"

"Yeah. . . . Yeah, an accident." It came out in a croaked whisper, like McCloskey was being squeezed. And the squeezer wasn't finished.

"But the second and . . . third strikes were certainly not accidents. Nor was it an accident that you stole his wallet and . . . watch. Or the subsequent covering up of the crime. These . . . were not accidents."

One of my legs took that moment to cramp. I shifted my crouch, careful to avoid crunching on loose gravel. When I got situated again, there was only silence inside the building. Then the hard click of a gun being cocked.

"Don't move, lady." The thread of panic in McCloskey's voice had swollen. I could practically hear the pistol shaking in his hand.

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"Mr. McCloskey, this pit you . . . find yourself in cannot be escaped by . . . digging deeper. The police have been notified. They are on their way . . . even as we speak."

This was delivered in a slightly chiding tenor, like she was informing a waitress that she'd ordered the tomato soup, not the minestrone.

Except she was wrong. The cavalry had definitely not been called.

I don't know what was said next, because I was busy slipping around to the front of the shack, every muscle tense as I waited for the impending crack of a gunshot. The door to the shack was open. I peered inside.

McCloskey had his back to me. He had a gun—an ugly, snub-nosed thing—pointed right at her head. I caught him midsentence.

"—supposed to be here. I come in, find this strange woman snooping around. Maybe you leap at me holding that pipe there. The one you say killed that guy."

Ms. Pentecost was sitting just as I'd left her, gloved hands still primly folded across the cane in her lap. I'd have been sweating buckets, but she didn't betray an ounce of fear. In fact, her eyes were bright with something not too far from joy.

She gave a brisk shake of the head. "I don't believe the police will accept that theory, Mr. McCloskey. They are frequently . . . obstinate, but rarely . . . stupid."

The cane looked sturdy enough—smooth black wood topped with a heavy brass handle. I thought maybe she was thinking of lashing out and surprising him with it. Except I'd had a cousin who got that kind of hitch in her voice. Had a limp, too, though hers was a lot worse. I suspected that leaping up and clubbing a man wasn't in Lillian Pentecost's repertoire.

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"Yeah, well—it'll be your word against mine," McCloskey sneered. "And you won't be doing any talking."

When I was questioned later—and boy did I get questioned—I said that I didn't think. I just reacted.

Except I did think. The circus kept me on because I had quick hands and an even quicker head. So I had a split-second, lightning-flash inner debate.

The voice in my head arguing the side of running away and letting what happened happen sounded a lot like Darla Delight. Dee-Dee was a former showgirl who did the books for the circus. Very practical woman. When Big Bob Halloway, the owner, would have his semiweekly brilliant idea for a new act, Darla was the one who would calculate the cost and put the kibosh on nine out of every ten brainstorms.

"Have to think about the costs," she'd say. "Especially the invisible ones. All those things that might not be on the bill but you end up paying in the long run. They'll come back and bite your ass."

The voice on the other side of my inner debate sounded a lot like my father. He never counted any cost. He just did what he wanted and damned who got hurt. That I listen to his voice more often than not is something I still wrestle with.

McCloskey muttered something I couldn't catch. Whatever it was caused Ms. Pentecost to lean forward on the cot, like a dog testing its leash.

"Who?" she said. "Who told you that?"

"Ah well," he muttered, more to himself than her. "In for a penny and all that." His arm straightened and his finger tightened on the trigger.

No more debate. I'd made my choice. I was already kneeling down, pulling up the leg of my trousers, and grabbing hold

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of the hilt of the knife I kept fastened to my calf in a leather sheath.

Long hours spent with Kalishenko in a hundred dust-choked fields between Boise and Brooklyn made what happened next almost too easy. I stood, and in the same motion brought the knife up and over my head in a long arc.

I remembered Kalishenko's words, delivered in a perpetually slurred Russian accent. "You do not throw the blade. You do not throw your arm. You throw your entire body forward. The trick is learning to let go at the precise moment."

I threw myself forward and let go at the precise moment.

The weighted blade hit home with a sickening thud. But instead of a pockmarked wooden target, it buried itself a full three inches into McCloskey's back. I'd learn later that only the very tip of the blade pierced his heart. It wasn't much. But it was enough.

The gun fell from his hand. Ms. Pentecost reached out with her cane and knocked it out of reach. McCloskey stumbled, clawing at the hilt sticking out of his back. Then he collapsed forward, his head clipping the edge of the cot. He gave a last, ugly gurgle before going still and silent.

Ms. Pentecost knelt by his body. I expected her to check for a pulse. Instead, her hands went to the watch. A few quick twists and the watch face popped open, revealing a small, hidden compartment. Whatever was inside disappeared into her hand, then the inner pocket of her coat, before she clicked the watch face closed.

"How do you feel?" she asked, standing.

"I don't know," I said. My hands were shaking and my breath was coming quick and shallow. It was a coin flip as to whether I was going to pass out.

"Can you walk?" she asked.

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I nodded.

"Good. I fear we will both . . . need to go to the station house."

"Do we have to?" I asked. "It's just I'm not too fond of cops."

She *almost* smiled again.

"They have their purposes. And they do . . . frown on the casual littering of bodies. But I will be with you."

We began the twelve-block walk through dead-of-night New York City, me keeping my pace slow, both to accommodate my new companion and because I was still feeling a little shaky. The buildings seemed taller, the streets narrower. Everything felt higher and darker and more dangerous.

Ms. Pentecost laid a hand on my shoulder. She kept it there most of the way to the station house. For some inexplicable reason, it made me feel better. Like she was passing on a little of whatever had kept her even and calm while staring down the barrel of a gun.

She didn't thank me for saving her life. Come to think of it, she never has. Though it could be argued she paid me back a hundredfold.

It wasn't until years later when somebody suggested I start writing all this down that I was reminded about those invisible costs. They ended up being higher than I would ever have thought possible. I've never really tallied them up, though. I guess in writing this I'll be forced to. I don't rightly know how the balance sheet will come out. In the red? Or in the black?

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CHAPTER 2

Ms. Pentecost's promise to stay by my side lasted all of about ten minutes after we got to the station. We were separated and I was taken to a windowless interview room, where I spent the next several hours being grilled by a rotating cast of intense, florid-faced men in cheap suits.

I thought about trying out some girlish charm, but I've never quite gotten the hang of it. Flirting was also out. I wasn't dressed for the part, and besides, I had no illusions about my looks. I inherited my father's puggish nose and muddy brown eyes, and the freckles I got from my mother tend to clump awkwardly across the tops of my cheeks.

So I opted for the almost-straight truth.

It started with a pair of sergeants who had me go through the events of the evening forward, backward, and inside-out. I gave them the lot, save for the trick watch, and that wasn't a load-bearing detail so it was easy enough to subtract.

Eventually the set of sergeants was replaced by a detective who looked so wet behind the ears I'm surprised they let him carry a gun. He had me go through the night's events again, this time with a little more focus on everything Ms. Pentecost said about this Jonathan Markel.

Again, I gave him the lot minus one.

After an hour, I got promoted again. Another detective—

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this one sporting a face as hard and cold as a chunk of granite, with a gray and black beard that tumbled wildly down to his Windsor knot. He was a veteran cop, or at least I assumed as much from his age, his demeanor, and the way the baby detective scraped and bowed on his way out of the door. It turns out this bearded giant—he easily cracked six feet—was Lieutenant Lazenby, the detective Ms. Pentecost had name-dropped. If I was under the impression they were friends, he quickly disabused me of that.

"How much is Pentecost paying you?"

"When did she set you up with that job?"

"Did Pentecost plant the gun, or did she make you do it?"

"Who's her client?"

"Did she tell you who really murdered Markel? You let us in on that, and we'll get the district attorney to cut you a deal."

And a lot more along those lines.

I imagine for anyone who hasn't had a nose-to-nose with the law this could all seem terrifying. As it happens, being part of a traveling circus that on occasion skirted if not outright trampled civil ordinances, I had long experience sitting in police stations, being pushed around by a grab bag of state troopers and small-town sheriffs. To be honest, those hick sheriffs scared me a lot more than any of these city dicks.

If Lazenby was expecting to knock me off my story, he was out of luck. Eventually he realized as much, and I was given a statement to sign. After reading through it and making sure nothing had been inserted, I did.

"Willowjean Parker? That a real name?" he asked after I added my John Hancock.

"You think if I'm going to forge a moniker I'd stick myself with Willowjean?" I said, trying a charming grin on for size. Apparently it didn't fit.

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"I don't know if I believe a word of this," he said, holding up the statement. "I don't know if the DA will either. My men and I will be confirming the details. In the meantime, if you think of anything you want to add, you let me know."

"Sure," I said. "What number can I reach you at?"

It was his turn to grin. Then he promptly ordered me taken down to the holding cells.

At first the guard was going to put me in the men's section, but I popped off my cap to reveal my mop of red curls and he quickly hustled me to the other side of the building and the smaller, and fractionally cleaner, women's section.

I spent the next three days in that cell with little contact other than the guards. The only exception was early that first morning when I was joined by a trio of girls who got busted at a Chinatown whorehouse. Apparently the owner had missed a payment to a judge and the girls were paying the price. They mistook me for someone in the same line and gave me the name and number of their employer. They explained to me that there was a market for girls who can pass as boys and vice versa. Nothing I hadn't long ago learned.

Anyhow, I spent a handful of hours learning the ins and outs of the world's oldest profession as it's practiced on the higher end in New York City. By lunchtime, the girls had gotten bailed and I was left alone, save for the bedbugs, which were present in unseen thousands. I scored an old newspaper off a guard and put it down on top of the mattress, hoping to put a barrier between me and the vermin. Still, I figured everything I was wearing would have to be scrubbed, scoured, or outright burned when I got back to Hart and Halloway.

If I got back.

The circus was set to leave in three days and I hadn't heard word one about what was going to happen to me.

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Funny thing, it wasn't the possibility of getting pegged for murder that preyed most on my mind. It was the look in Lazenby's eyes when I told him Willowjean Parker was my real name. Because it wasn't.

Willowjean was legit enough. Yeah, it wasn't the most common name, but my mother had given it to me and I couldn't bring myself to throw it away. But I'd tossed my last name as soon as I joined the circus. Parker had been stolen from a character in an issue of *Black Mask*.

I kept telling myself that tracking down my kin was a hundred-to-one shot. And, besides, what harm could it do? I was a grown woman now. Not the scared little girl who ran away from home all those years ago.

But sitting in that cell, my anxieties bred fast, and like with the bedbugs, scratching only made it worse. I spent the second night alone. The only light was from a dim bulb far down the corridor. The bravado I'd managed to conjure up and wear like a shield drained away. I pictured the cell door opening and my father stepping in, his face red, leather belt wrapped tight around his fist.

Found you.

I squeezed my eyes tight until I was finally able to toss myself into a fitful sleep.

A little before noon on the third day, the cell door slid open. But no one stepped in. Instead, I was ushered out and escorted upstairs to a different interview room. This one was their deluxe model. It had a window and chairs that didn't wobble. I was only left alone there for half an hour this time before the door burst open and Dee-Dee barreled in, an avalanche of red-dyed bouffant and jacked-up bosom.

"Will, baby, I've been so worried." She rushed to hug me but I held her off.

"Better not," I told her. "Not before I've been deloused."

She settled for blowing me a kiss and took a seat across from me at the little interview table.

"What's going on, Dee-Dee? I've been flying blind for three days."

"I'm not sure, honey. I gather the cops have been nailing down details on this Markel murder. But it looks like a sure thing McCloskey killed him. At least that's what it says in the papers."

"It's in the papers?"

"Front page for two days running," Dee-Dee said, smiling. "All about how McCloskey might have done things like this before and nobody suspected. How this Pentecost woman did what the police couldn't. Anyhow, they're springing you later this afternoon."

"Yes!" I pounded the table with a triumphant fist. "I have never been more happy to go back to my lumpy little cot next to the tiger cage."

Dee-Dee frowned. It was a look she usually reserved for Big Bob when he had a particularly expensive brainstorm.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," she said. "This Pentecost lady came by the grounds yesterday. Sat in Big Bob's trailer for an hour lobbing questions at him."

"About what?"

"About you. Seems she has a business proposition."

I leaned back in my chair, suddenly wary. "What kind of proposition?"

"Some kind of job. Something long-term. Bob said she wasn't specific. She convinced him she's on the level, though. He said you should listen to her."

"Bob wants me out?"

She reached across the table and took my hand.

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"It's not like that. He just thinks it's in your best interests. I gotta say I agree."

"What are you talking about, Dee?" The circus was the be-all, end-all, alpha and omega for Bob and Dee-Dee. I couldn't imagine either of them siding against life under the big top.

"Here's the deal, sweetie. Traveling shows are on their way out. Audiences are thin on the ground. More competition from amusement parks. The smaller circuses are getting gobbled up by the big ones. You know the story. And it's only gonna get worse. Better to go out on your own terms than get handed a pink slip."

I'd spent the last five years eating, sleeping, breathing the circus. Leaving would be like giving up oxygen.

"I'm not saying you have to take the offer," Dee-Dee told me. "I'm just saying listen to her. Weigh the pros and cons with as clear an eye as you can."

She stood up.

"Now, I don't care what you're infested with, I want a hug."

She wrapped her arms around me and did her best to crack a rib.

"You end up saying yes, and it turns out this Pentecost broad has a screw loose or maybe she's one of those types with a secret twist, you come running back. Got it?"

"Got it, Dee."

"Love you, Will. You watch yourself." With that, she walked out.

A few minutes later, a guard I hadn't seen before escorted me from the interview room, down a maze of halls, and out a back door. A jet-black Cadillac sedan was waiting for me. The driver was an older woman whose bulk barely fit behind the wheel. She looked like the love child of a sideshow strongman and a warden at a women's prison.

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"You the one calls herself Will Parker?" she asked, her Scottish accent scouring off a layer of skin.

"I'm the one calls myself that."

"I'm to take you to Ms. Pentecost," she brogued. "In the back with you. I've put down a sheet. No telling what you picked up after three days in that hellhole."

I got in the back, careful to keep from touching any uncovered surface. I was taken on a bumpy, swerving course, with my driver slamming on the brakes whenever a pedestrian even glanced her way. We headed across the Brooklyn Bridge and into one of the nicer neighborhoods of that particular borough.

The car stopped in front of a three-story brownstone separated on either side from its neighbors by narrow, gated alleys. The woman escorted me inside, then down a short hallway lined with padded benches. I went past what looked like a well-apportioned office and up a flight of stairs to the second floor, where she took me to a small bedroom with an attached bath. A pile of clothes I recognized as my own was sitting folded on the bed.

"Ms. Pentecost took the liberty of retrieving some of your things. There's soap and whatnot in the bathroom. Wash up good and when you're done Ms. Pentecost will see you down in her office. You leave what you're wearing in the bathroom and I'll see everything gets a good washing."

"I think your best bet is a good burning."

She gave a snort I figured for her version of a chuckle, then left me to my bathing.

This was the first time I'd ever had use of a proper shower. I turned the spigots to scalding and stayed under there until the hot water finally gave up the ghost. I spent a few minutes brushing out my hair, which had gotten marvelously knotted after three days tucked under my cap. Then I slipped into my

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clean clothes—another blue denim work shirt, my second-best boots, and a pair of brown corduroy overalls I'd bought off the rack in the boys' section and that fit like a glove. Not exactly attire for a job interview if that was what this was, but it would have to do.

I made my way downstairs and into the office I'd passed on my way in. It was surprisingly large and must have taken up half of the first floor. Massive bookshelves ran the length of two of the walls. They were packed to bursting with the kinds of books that tended toward leather-bound and likely boring. I preferred the kind that came with paper covers and lurid pictures of gun-toting molls. To be honest, I still do.

Where there weren't bookshelves, the walls were done in wallpaper—a pleasant shade of yellow with tiny blue poppies. There was a massive oak desk at the far end and a smaller one with a typewriter against the wall to the right. The room was illuminated by standing lamps stationed in the corners, as well as a pair of lamps with frosted green shades on each desk.

Above the big desk was an oil painting as wide as I was tall of a gnarled tree standing in the middle of an empty, yellow field. I thought it was an ominous kind of picture to have looming over your shoulder.

Arranged in a loose semicircle was a collection of armchairs upholstered in the same light yellow as the wallpaper. The chairs looked practical rather than decorative, and their arrangement suggested regular gatherings of people whose attention was focused on whoever was planted in the seat of honor.

I sat in the largest of these chairs and waited. A small, ornate clock mounted on the wall ticked away the minutes.

Staring up at the painting I noticed a detail I hadn't before—a woman in a cornflower-blue dress sitting cross-legged in the

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shade of the tree. I was leaning forward for a closer look when the door opened and Ms. Pentecost strode in.

She was dressed as she had been three nights ago—three-piece suit that was definitely tailored for a woman, complete with a red silk four-in-hand tie. Illuminated by the room's warm lamplight, I could make out details I hadn't before. She was forty-five, maybe a little younger. She had thick cheekbones that rode high enough they threatened to intrude onto her eyes, a wide mouth, and a too-sharp chin. All of it set around a nose that wasn't quite a hook but had aspirations.

Her hair was the kind of dark chestnut most women get out of a bottle, but I was pretty sure hers was natural. A streak of iron gray traveled up from the center of her deeply lined brow and lost itself in the labyrinth of her braided bun. She carried her cane but barely leaned on it.

"I trust you've had the opportunity to wash," she said, planting herself in the leather swivel chair behind her desk.

"I have, thanks."

"Have you eaten?"

"Nothing since what they brought me for dinner yesterday," I told her. "Bologna and cheese. At least I think it was bologna. I didn't look too close."

She scrunched up her nose in disgust.

"Mrs. Campbell is fixing lunch now," she said. "Cornish hen. In this house we like our meat identifiable."

"Sounds good to me." An understatement. After three days of jail food and five years of circus chow, Cornish hen sounded more like a fantasy than a meal.

"Other than the de facto starvation, I hope your treatment by the police was not too egregious."

I'd never encountered the words "de facto" and "egregious" in casual conversation, but I managed to translate.

"There was a lot of shouting, finger-pointing, and calling me a dirty, rotten liar," I said. "But they kept their billy clubs tucked away."

She nodded. "Good. I apologize for the delay in your release. There were bureaucratic snags, or at least that's what my attorney was told."

"Yeah, I think they were hoping I'd crack and tell them you planned the whole thing. Whatever 'the whole thing' was."

Her hand came up like she was swatting away a fly. "The police sometimes have fancies. They have not learned the lesson that correlation does not equal causation."

My inner translator failed. "What's that again?"

"Just because they find me embroiled in the unraveling of a crime, it does not mean that I'm responsible for the crime. Quite the contrary. Though in this case, they have at least half a point, as my arrival did directly lead to Mr. McCloskey's death."

I considered that logic for a couple beats. "A guy like that, someone who bashes a man's brains in for his watch and wallet, he's gonna end up in jail or in the ground eventually. No fault of yours."

A slow, satisfied nod. "A very pragmatic philosophy. Perhaps a little too grimly optimistic."

"Okay, yeah. Right," I said, making like I knew what she meant. "So . . . what's the pitch?"

"The pitch?"

"Dee-Dee said you had an offer. That I should give it a long think before brushing you off."

"What do you know about me and my work?" she asked.

You've got to take something into account. The previous five years of my life had been spent crisscrossing a big swath of the country, cooped up in trailers and truck beds, and pursuing a rather unique education. That education definitely did

not include the regular consumption of New York's newspapers.

If you're thinking: How could this girl not know who Lillian Pentecost is? The most famous woman detective in the city and possibly the country. The woman who tracked down the murderer of Earl Rockefeller. Who discovered the identity of the Brooklyn Butcher. Who Eleanor Roosevelt herself turned to when someone tried to put the squeeze on.

All I can say is this: I can pick a lock blindfolded, walk a wire twenty feet in the air without a net, and wrestle a man twice my size into submission. How about you?

To her I said, "All I know about your game is what I picked up from the police. You're some kind of private dick."

"A private investigator, yes."

"And people pay you to solve things the police have miffed."

"I generally take cases the police have been unable to solve or, for whatever reason, are unwilling to invest time and effort in."

"Like this guy Markel?"

"That was unusual. Markel was an acquaintance, so there was a personal element."

She glanced away at that. Not quite a tell, but close. I noted for the first time that there was something off with one of her eyes—the left one. It wasn't quite the same shade of gray-blue as the right. It looked just a little flat—like it was reflecting the light differently. I'd find out later that it was made of glass. She'd had several made over the years and none had managed to get the color quite right.

"So what's this got to do with me?" I asked.

"As you might have noticed, I have certain physical limitations."

"Yeah, I picked that up. Sclerosis, right?"

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"Multiple sclerosis. That's very perceptive."

"I had a cousin. She was a lot worse off than you, though." That was an understatement. Last I saw her, Laura had been spending more time in her bed than on her feet.

Ms. P nodded grimly. "Yes, I'm told by my physicians that my symptoms are progressing slower than most." She shot a baleful look at the cane propped against her desk. "However, they *are* progressing."

A glimmer of what could have been rage flickered in her good eye. She took a deep breath and a long exhale and the glimmer was extinguished.

"My profession is a stressful one, and can be physically and mentally taxing. Unfortunately, these things exacerbate my condition. This means I find myself frequently too exhausted to answer letters, arrange interviews, and otherwise deal with the more mundane aspects of my job. Mrs. Campbell is an excellent cook and housekeeper, but her skills otherwise are limited. And, to be frank, her imagination has long-ingrained limits."

"So you want to hire me to be, what?" I asked. "A secretary? Because I can't type and I don't own any pencil skirts."

"More an assistant than secretary," she said. "While you would handle the day-to-day business of running the office, you would not be confined to it. As you discovered the other night, a certain amount of legwork is required, though rarely does it result in bloodshed. As for the office-management portion of the job, I feel confident you can learn to type. From what Mr. Halloway told me, you have a sharp mind and are proficient at picking up new skills quickly.

"And as for the dress code," she continued, "I see no reason you cannot wear what you wish within the confines of propriety. I prefer suits, myself. I've found the abundance of pockets to be quite useful. In exchange, you'd be provided room and

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board, as well as expenses for any training I'd require of you. You would also be given a salary, paid every two weeks."

She quoted a number that nearly sent my poker face packing. Just one of those checks would be more cash than I'd ever had in hand in my life. Still, in order to cash that check, I'd have to cut ties with everything I'd known since I left home. My friends. My family. My world. To come work for a woman I barely knew.

"Why me?" I asked. "If this is because of what I did the other night, you could slip me a few bucks now and call it even. There's got to be better people you could get. People who actually know how to do the things you want done."

She took a full ten seconds to respond. She doesn't like to be scattershot with her words, and has a tendency to make people wait while she sits stone-faced, mulling over an answer.

"You might be correct," she finally said. "But I've learned to trust my instincts. Seeing firsthand your powers of observation and of action, and hearing about your particular set of skills and your capacity to learn, I think you might be exactly who I'm looking for."

Basically, yeah, there were better people for the job, but I could catch up. The deal sounded good, but not quite too good to be true. Still, there was the thing with the watch. I just couldn't let it go.

"I appreciate the offer," I said. "But I've got to ask . . . Are you a spy or something? There aren't many lines I won't hopscotch over, but signing on with a Nazi is definitely one of them."

She arched an inquisitive eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

"The thing with the trick watch. Didn't seem like the kind of piece you'd hide blow in. And gems are out. You'd want to

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hide those in something people wouldn't want to steal. I figured it was some kind of message."

Her look confirmed that was exactly what it was.

"Don't worry," I said. "I didn't tip that to the cops. I figured what they didn't know couldn't hurt me. But I don't want that coming back to bite me, you know?"

Another long silence.

"I am not a spy, Nazi or otherwise. Nor was Mr. Markel," she said. "Though there was a message contained in the watch, it was of a personal nature."

"Oh."

She shook her head. "Not that kind of personal."

I wasn't sure I believed that but let it go.

"Did it have anything to do with what McCloskey said at the end?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"He said something I didn't catch. You got all excited. Asked him, 'Who told you that?' "

She gave me a look I couldn't decipher. Like she'd just realized she wasn't quite sure what breed of dog she'd brought home from the pound. She took a deep breath and twisted her fingers together, a rare nervous habit.

"If you were to take this position, I would bring you into my confidence in nearly all of my investigations. To do otherwise would be impractical. But you would have to be resigned to the fact that I won't share everything with you. There are certain cases—ones I have been engaged in for several years, and which involve an element of danger—that I am unwilling to expose you to. Do you understand?"

"Sure," I said. "Every performer I ever worked with held something back. Usually their best gag."

"Gag?"

"Gag. Trick. Gimmick."

She nodded approvingly at the analogy.

"I understand it's an offer that requires a certain leap of faith," she said. "I cannot promise that you will be happy. Happiness is, I've found, an elusive thing. But I think I can promise you will find the work interesting."

"Do I have to answer right now?"

"Of course not. Please take the day." She came out from around her desk and retrieved a package from a side table. "While I was leaving the circus grounds I was stopped by a Mr. Kalishenko. He asked that I give you this."

She handed me the package. It was heavy and small, wrapped in brown paper and twine and with a sealed envelope taped to one side.

"I'll be in the kitchen seeing about lunch."

When she was gone, I opened the envelope. I'd never seen Kalishenko's handwriting, but it was exactly as I'd imagined—cramped and elegant but somehow slurred. No Russian accent, but I couldn't help but read it in one.

My dear Will,

You told me once that you consider the circus your chosen family. I think you know, having left my family behind in the steppes, that I feel much the same way. But for the young, families should not be things you cling to. They should be something that helps propel you to new heights. The trick, you see, is knowing when to let go.

Your friend forever,

Valentin Kalishenko, Dancer of Blades, Master of Fire, Last and Final Heir of Rasputin

PS: I heard that the commissariat would not return your blade. I hope you will find these a suitable replacement. I also hope you will never have to use them in such a manner again. However, hopes are fragile and the world is hard. You should walk into it prepared.

I unwrapped the package and found not one but a whole set of throwing knives. Unlike the one I'd left in McCloskey's back, each of these had a wooden handle, worn smooth with oil and long use. These were some of Kalishenko's originals—taken with him from Russia when he fled the fallout of the revolution. They were the best going-away present I could have imagined.

Then it hit me. He assumed I really was going away. In his mind, I'd already said yes.

For the first time in years, I started to cry. Just for a moment. Then it passed and I wiped my tears away. I put the letter and the knives on the smaller desk.

My desk now, I figured.

The first time I left home, I ran as fast as I could. This time, I needed a little shove. But there's no sense arguing with an heir to Rasputin.

I walked into the kitchen to see what was cooking.

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