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The
Magnolia
Palace

Chapter One

NEW YORK CITY, 1919

Lillian Carter stood half naked, one arm held up like a ballet dancer, the other hanging lightly down at her side, and calculated how long she could avoid paying rent while her landlord was in jail. If Mr. Watkins was released right away, she'd have to avoid him until she pulled together enough money to pay for the one-bedroom apartment she leased in the crumbling, five-story tenement building on Sixty-Fifth Street. Not an easy task when Mr. Watkins and his wife lived off the lobby on the first floor. On the bright side, the Watkins couple had shouted each other to pieces in a terrible fight earlier that morning, the screeching carrying on for a good forty-five minutes before silence finally reigned. Not long after, as she left for work, Lillian had passed the police as they tramped up the front steps. Maybe they'd keep the tiresome man for a few days this time, as a lesson. Not that she felt any sympathy for his bulldog of a wife. Mrs. Watkins had hated Lillian on sight, especially after she discovered what Lillian did for a living.

"Angelica, your drapery has fallen. Again."

Mr. Rossi waited, holding a boxwood shaper in one hand and a rag in the other. After six years of posing, Lillian had never quite gotten used to being called by her stage name, chosen by her mother, Kitty, to protect her family's reputation, which was a real laugh. As if they were the Astors or something. Lillian pulled the silk up over her shoulder so only one breast was exposed. The material was slippery and refused to stay in place.

Mr. Rossi was a quick worker, and the clay figure in front of him was nearly finished. This would probably be her last day on the job, and she'd only been posing for an hour. So far today, she'd made seventy-five cents. A little over one cent a minute. She kicked herself for not charging more. Kitty, before she died in February, had told her to demand no less than a dollar an hour, one of more than a dozen pieces of instruction she'd thrown out at Lillian between coughing fits, as if she were trying to fill up a lifetime of parental guidance before she went. Lillian should have written these things down, but she had been too busy making tea and fetching blankets, calling again and again for the doctor, who was too busy with other patients stricken by the Spanish flu to come.

"Angelica. Please."

The drapery had fallen. Again.

"It's cold in here, I'm afraid my shivering is making it fall. Could you light the fire?"

Mr. Rossi's bulging black eyes were punctuated by heavy brows, but any hint of menace was tempered by an unfortunately high-pitched voice. "I have nothing to light it with. It's the first of October, not cold at all."

"Well, you're wearing clothes."

"I'm sorry, Angelica. Do you need a break?"

He had been unrelentingly polite to her since she'd knocked on his studio door last week, asking if he needed a model. He'd let out a gasp,

recognizing her instantly, and she'd pushed her way inside and talked nonstop until he agreed to let her pose. Since he'd only recently taken over a studio in the popular Lincoln Arcade building on the Upper West Side, he hadn't had time to learn from the other, long-term tenants that she was, at the ripe age of twenty-one, washed up.

"No, I don't need a break. It's fine." She was lucky to have this job, she reminded herself, only her second since February, a lifetime in the New York art world.

But instead of continuing, Mr. Rossi wiped his hands on his apron and approached the model stand. "Can you angle yourself a little more?" He pushed his right hip forward slightly, as an example. "And twist like this."

Her body responded automatically, clicking into the desired position.

"Yes, that's better." But his face didn't register approval. She knew why. Her hips and legs no longer resembled the earlier statues he'd seen of her. The clean lines once heralded as the classical idea of perfection were now more padded, to put it gently. Since Kitty's death, she'd felt a consistent, gnawing hunger in her gut that would only be satiated with butterscotch candies and lemon meringue pie. Her skirts had hidden the ripples of fat at that first meeting. "Maybe let the cloth down, all the way over the legs."

Her face burned with embarrassment. The irony that she was upset to have to cover her body, when most women would be filled with shame to have to reveal it, made her let out a nervous giggle.

Mr. Rossi regarded her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, just a little tired. My landlords got into a rousing fight early this morning. I didn't get much sleep."

"I'm sorry to hear it." He blinked a couple of times, as if he wanted to say something more, before going back to the clay study. The silence

of the studio, which usually lulled her into a kind of trance, instead haunted her today.

She put a hand to her head. The exhaustion of the past several months weighed down on her. “You know, I might take a break, if you don’t mind.”

Mr. Rossi dropped the tool on the table beside him with a loud clatter. “Very well.” He lit a cigarette but didn’t move from the spot, as if ready to begin again right away.

“Perhaps I could have a quick coffee?” she asked.

He didn’t answer but retreated to the small kitchenette in the back. All of the studios in the Lincoln Arcade featured the latest modern conveniences, drawing Greenwich Village artists and sculptors uptown in recent years, and creating a new Bohemia hailed as the “Sixty-Seventh Street Studio District.” Kitty had predicted the northward trend early and rented an apartment west of Broadway, which meant they were constantly running into potential employers, at the post office or the grocer’s. Lillian would have preferred a duplex at the recently constructed Hotel des Artistes building, with its high ceilings and gothic splendor, but Kitty had dismissed it as too expensive. With the way Lillian’s bank account had dropped precipitously over the past several months, she was grateful for the decision.

Then again, if they hadn’t been living in Mr. Watkins’s dumpy building, crowded in with all the other tenants, maybe her mother wouldn’t have gotten sick.

Mr. Rossi came back carrying two cups of coffee and handed her one. She stepped down from the model stand and reclined in a practiced move on one of several sofas that were scattered at odd angles around the space. She recognized the shabby pink one.

“You got that from Lukeman, right?”

Mr. Rossi studied it, confused. “I suppose. When I first set up here,

I found a number of castoffs in the basement. Lukeman's studio is two floors up, so I wouldn't be surprised."

"I posed on that sofa for *Memory*." She waited for his reaction.

"Which is that one?"

For goodness' sake. "The *Titanic* memorial? In memory of Ida and Isidor Straus?"

Mr. Rossi gave a vigorous nod. "Of course. I've heard of it but never seen it. I haven't been here long, you see. There's a lot of the city that I haven't visited yet."

She'd enjoyed modeling for Lukeman, even though the position had been a challenge, lying across the couch sideways, one leg dangling over the edge. Before they'd started, the sculptor and Kitty had talked about how important the memorial was, commemorating the wealthy couple who had died together on the *Titanic* after the wife gave up her seat in the lifeboat to her maid, choosing instead to die with her husband. They'd been last seen sitting on deck chairs together as the ship sank into the icy waters. The completed statue, Lukeman explained, would stare down at a reflecting pool, and as she posed, Lillian lost herself in imagining the joy of the couple's love, the sadness of their terrible demise. The result was one of her finest portrayals, of which she was most proud.

And Mr. Rossi hadn't even seen it.

"It's beautiful," she said. "A true work of art."

"Whenever you're ready, I'd like to begin again."

She'd only taken a couple of sips. "Do you mind if I finish my coffee first?"

"Look, Angelica. We've already taken two breaks."

"What are you saying? That I'm stalling?" She had been, of course. Every fifteen minutes was another eighteen cents.

His mustache twitched as he crossed his arms.

He'd been warned. The other sculptors must have told him, after he'd already booked her for the job, that she was yesterday's news, no longer the darling of Bohemia.

Maybe if he saw *Memory*, he'd soften and truly appreciate all that she'd accomplished. "I suggest, Mr. Rossi, if you have the time, that you take one morning off and view it. It's not far uptown, on West End and 106th Street."

"I don't have time to take a morning off. I have to work, I have commissions to fulfill."

"Oh, now, I've been working steadily for years, and trust me, you can always ask for more time. Artists are often accommodated by their patrons that way."

"Right. I hear you're an old hand. How many years have you been at this?"

"I began when I was fifteen."

"Of course. I am in awe of all of your past likenesses. You were an inspiration to so many." His gaze drifted to her hips.

Past tense. *Were*.

He sighed. "Why don't we stop for today? You look tired."

"No, I'm fine. Really." She headed back to the stand, tripping on the drapery. She recovered quickly and climbed up, waiting for instruction. She couldn't lose this job. If she lost it, she wouldn't have enough for groceries, never mind rent.

"It's not right, I'm afraid. I can pay you for your time, of course, but I may need to step back and rethink this piece."

"Please, Mr. Rossi. I'm sorry." She was trying not to beg. If Kitty were here, they'd all be laughing together, her mother flattering him about his thick mustache and strong hands, teasing him as he blushed.

She wanted her mother so badly right now. In the weeks after Kitty's death, the job offers had come in one after another as the news had

spread and the artists had reached out in support, making sure Lillian was all right. But in those cold, dark days, she'd been unable to leave the apartment other than to fetch the bare necessities. She'd lain on the lumpy sofa covered by a quilt, sometimes sleeping, sometimes staring up at the cracked ceiling, and ignored every entreaty. Without her mother to smooth out life's rough edges, Lillian had faltered, wallowing in her sadness in a way that Kitty would never have tolerated, which only made her sadder. After years of blaming her mother for being too controlling and protective, including the raging fight they'd had right before she'd fallen ill, Lillian's ceaseless, brittle ennui was proof that she was lost without her.

She wished more than anything to be able to once again witness the infinite ways her mother used to drive her batty: the tinny laugh, the way she hummed under her breath as she dried the dishes. To have one last look at the almond-colored eyes—a mirror of her own—but edged with a spiderweb of wrinkles. Together, they'd made a remarkable team. Watching her mother unravel over the course of her illness, from a force to be reckoned with to a frail, childlike creature, clutching at Lillian's wrist and whimpering in pain, had been her undoing.

Unable to force one more appointment from Mr. Rossi, Lillian headed to the luncheonette across the street from her building. She was starving, craving a bowl of potato soup and a slice of pie. Her mother would never have allowed such decadence.

But just this one time wouldn't hurt. She'd be more careful tomorrow, and eat only a tin of sardines. Today, after the way she'd been treated by Mr. Rossi, she deserved a little something special.

A gaggle of policemen stood across the street, arrayed on the steps of her building. Odd that they were still there. Perhaps Mr. Watkins had had another go at Mrs. Watkins. If so, Lillian could hold up her rent check for a good long time while he sat in jail. This might work out perfectly. Mother always said Lillian had marvelous luck, from being

plucked from the chorus line to becoming muse to the greatest artists of this century.

And Mother was never wrong.



Her belly full but her change purse nearly empty, Lillian dawdled in the stairwell of her apartment building, trying to get a glimpse inside Mr. Watkins's apartment on the first floor. Lillian raised one eyebrow at Mrs. Brown—the building's unofficial gossipmonger, who lived next door to the Watkinses and was peering out of a crack in her door—but got nothing in return other than a quick shake of the head and pursed lips.

A police officer emerged from the Watkinses' apartment, leaving the door open behind him. At first, Lillian wondered when the Watkinses had gotten such a deep-red rug, almost scarlet, before realizing it was some kind of dried liquid, not a new runner.

Blood.

Another policeman stepped to the door to shut it, but not before Lillian caught sight of a woman's bloody hand, the fingers gently, almost daintily, curled in.

She backed away, bracing herself on the banister for support, and dashed up the two flights to her landing. Inside the apartment, the soup roiling in her gut, she filled a glass with water and sat down at the tiny table in the kitchen. For all his bluster, Mr. Watkins hadn't seemed like the sort to murder his wife. They'd argue, sure, but usually it was Mrs. Watkins who had the higher volume, drowning him out with a terrible squawk.

The last time Mr. Watkins had come to collect the rent, she'd invited him into the apartment in order to speak out of the earshot of the other tenants. He'd taken his time looking around, as if assessing how much

he could raise the rent for a new tenant. Hers was one of the smaller apartments in the building, with only one bedroom, where she and her mother had slept. Two windows looked out on the dreary courtyard in the back, the black metal of the fire escape glinting in the late-summer sun. A galley kitchen served as the entryway, the table and chairs tucked in an alcove to one side, and the living area wasn't much larger. Mr. Watkins eventually turned his attention to Lillian, offering up a sympathetic sigh. "Your mother was a lively woman, now, wasn't she?"

A strange phrase, Lillian had thought. *A lively woman.*

Alive.

Not anymore. And she'd begun to cry.

Once the tears came, she didn't try to hold them back, half crying for her mother and half hoping that by doing so she might buy some time and goodwill. He'd put a hand on her upper back, then let it move to the nape of her neck, squeezing gently. "I'm sorry to upset you," he'd said. "But maybe there's a way I can help."

He'd asked her to meet him in his apartment in one month's time, when Mrs. Watkins would be away visiting her sister. The implications were clear. Horrified, Lillian fretted about what to do.

Days before, she'd finally come out of her stupor after receiving the first of two letters from a Hollywood producer that she hoped might change everything and had finally galvanized her into action. She'd accepted the first modeling job that she could—one that her mother would never have approved of—and soon after secured the session with Mr. Rossi. The two jobs combined gave her a modicum of hope that it was only a matter of time before she'd be able to pay off her back rent. So she'd written a note to Mr. Watkins that was mildly flirtatious yet postponed the "rendezvous" until her work schedule cleared up, hoping that would appease him without getting her tossed onto the streets.

But now, if Mrs. Watkins was dead and Mr. Watkins the murderer, she might be able to live here for free until the entire mess was sorted

out. Kitty would have admonished her for thinking only of herself when a woman had been killed, but she would have silently made the same assessment. A knock on the door interrupted Lillian's thoughts. She rose to answer it.

"May I come in?" The police officer addressing her had ginger-colored hair and a matching mustache. A couple of curls slowly sprang back to life after he removed his hat and tucked it under his arm.

Once inside, the policeman cleared his throat. "The other tenants mentioned that you're Angelica." He glanced at Lillian's chest and blushed. "Sorry, Miss Carter, I mean."

A couple of years ago, a reporter had written an article about Lillian's Grecian attributes, coveted by sculptors and artists for their classical nature and symmetry, in particular her well-formed breasts and the dimples on the small of her lower back. Renown had quickly followed, and the policeman's reaction was typical of anyone who learned who she was, comparing the Angelica standing before them with the many creations around the city that were photographed for the article, from the barely clad *Three Graces* at the Hotel Astor (she portrayed all three, of course) to the golden-nippled, laurel-crowned *Civic Fame* at the apex of the Municipal Building.

She couldn't help but bask in his attention a little. Especially after Mr. Rossi's disappointed reaction earlier. "I am Angelica, yes," she answered.

He was about to speak when an older policeman showed up in the doorway.

"I'll take over." The older man barely glanced her way. "Miss Angelica Carter?" He consulted a small notebook and made a checkmark on it before she'd even answered.

"Yes." She sat down at the kitchen table and placed her hands in her lap. During the course of her modeling career, having dealt with dozens of capricious artists, she'd learned to pick up small cues from the curtest

of commands. This police officer wished to dominate both her and the younger man. If her mother were here (if only her mother were here), Kitty would have done all the talking, as Lillian placated the man with a single look. She knew exactly the one. Chin down, eyes up, projecting a demure naughtiness that always worked like a charm to quash the mercurial temperament of whatever artist she was posing for.

“Is there something wrong with your neck?” the older police officer asked.

It clearly wasn't working this time.

“I have some questions for you, Miss Carter. How well did you know Mrs. Watkins?”

They were probably asking questions of all the tenants. She would be as helpful as possible. “As well as any other tenant, I suppose. She was my landlord's wife. They fought, often. I'm so sorry it's come to this.”

“To what?”

“That she's, you know, dead.”

“We haven't released that information yet. How do you know that?”

“I saw, as I walked up the stairs,” she stammered. “The door was open. There was a hand.”

He scribbled something in his notebook.

She cocked her head, trying to see what he'd written. “Also, sir, you spoke of her in the past tense, just now. You said, ‘How well did you know Mrs. Watkins?’”

“Well, aren't you a smart one?” He didn't mean it as a compliment. “How well do you know *Mr.* Watkins? You can assume by that question that he's alive. Maybe you'll be happy to hear that.”

“Happy?” Now she was confused.

“Answer my question.”

“He's my landlord.”

“Nothing more than that?”

“No. What do you mean?”

“We found a note to Mr. Watkins from you in the pocket of Mrs. Watkins’s dressing gown. I assume you’re the only ‘Angelica’ in the building.”

Lillian’s stomach contracted, as if she’d been punched hard in the gut. She should have never written that note, should have put Mr. Watkins off in person. His wife must have found it and confronted him in a rage. Lillian tried to keep the panic out of her voice. “A note? My rent was due, so it was probably about that. Mr. Watkins was giving me time to raise it. You see, my mother died earlier this year, and ever since it’s been difficult.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” His face remained unchanged, cold. “So you’ve been living here alone since your mother died?”

“Yes.”

He glanced over at the door to the bedroom. “It appears that you and Mr. Watkins were arranging a rendezvous in the coming weeks. Did the two of you enjoy an intimate relationship?”

He was twisting the contents of the note around—that was not what she’d meant at all.

“Intimate?” In her horror, she almost laughed at the image of tubby Mr. Watkins in bed but caught herself. “No. Never.”

“Also, this was found in his desk.” The policeman reached into his pocket and pulled out a magazine clipping of some kind.

She recognized the black-and-white photograph immediately. In it, she wore a bathing costume, black, and had her hands lifted behind her head, like she was sunbathing at Coney Island, even though it had been taken on the roof of the Lincoln Arcade building. Her arms were bare, her legs exposed from mid-thigh down. The ad, hawking the latest in bathing costumes, had run in the back of a magazine. Kitty had never permitted Lillian to do photography sessions for ads—she considered it unseemly—but when one of the lesser-known photographers had approached Lillian in the lobby of the Lincoln Arcade building that first

day she'd gone out seeking work, the lure of a quick paycheck had been too tempting to pass up.

Mr. Watkins must have seen it in one of his wife's magazines and cut it out. The thought of him staring down at it, studying the lines of her shoulders and the curves of her knees, made her feel sick all over again.

"I don't know why he'd have that."

"If this is some kind of love triangle, and you had any knowledge that Mr. Watkins was going to murder his wife, it's better for you to tell me now."

A love triangle? How could she prove that something *didn't* exist? "There's nothing." Even to her own ears, the denial came across as feeble.

"We'll need to bring you in to ask you some more questions."

The earlier excitement of a few months rent-free evaporated. This man was headed in the entirely wrong direction. "I'm just a tenant, like all the other tenants. Mr. Watkins imagined things in his head, probably. I never gave any impression that I was interested in him."

He patted the pocket of his jacket. "The note tells me otherwise."

"I was just trying to put him off politely, it's simply a misunderstanding."

"The other tenants tell me you are an artists' model. I imagine you come upon a number of similar misunderstandings in your line of work."

She drew back. "There's nothing sordid about my line of work. I'm no different from you, earning a day's wage."

"I highly doubt that."

She had to figure out a way to reach him, to show that she wasn't a low-class pocket twister. "I'm going to be a film actress as well."

The police officer raised his eyebrows, impressed in spite of himself. Silent films were all the rage these days. "Hollywood?"

"Exactly. This time next year I'll probably be in pictures. I have letters here to prove it." She got up and rummaged through the pile of bills and papers on the sideboard. "Here. A producer wants to meet me, for

an audition for his next film. So you see, I had no need to mess about with Mr. Watkins. I'm a career girl."

He studied the top letter, written on letterhead from the movie studio. Lillian knew the most important sentence by heart: *It would be my pleasure to speak with you about a role in my next venture, if you ever find yourself in sunny Southern California.*

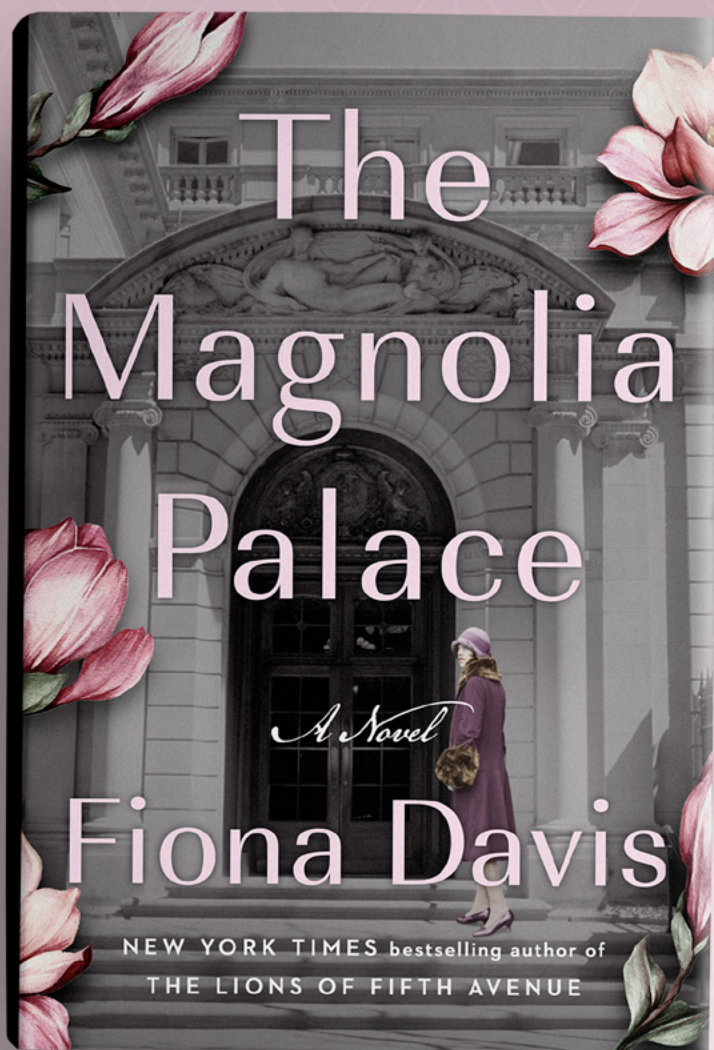
"You wanna go to California and get famous?" He handed it back to her. "Well, in the meantime, you'll have to settle for *infamous*, caught up in a scandal like this. Your Hollywood letter doesn't prove anything, other than the fact that you've got a lot of pen pals. We'll still need you to come down to the station."

She needed time to think. "May I freshen up first?"

He gave a reluctant nod, and she turned and walked into the bedroom, shutting the door with a quiet click behind her.

The papers would go mad with the story of the murder. Throw "Angelica" into the mix, and the legitimate reputation that she was trying to rebuild would be ruined. Never mind it might scuttle any interest from the film producer.

There was no time to waste. She grabbed a change of clothes and stuffed them into a leather duffel bag. The producer's letters she tucked at the very bottom, taking care that they didn't wrinkle. As quietly as she could, she opened the window—the wood frame squeaked with age—and ducked out onto the fire escape. In a flash, she was gone.



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