

1



THE HEM OF the dress was drenched in blood. I could only hope no one would notice.

"If a romantic afternoon listening to the Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl is in your plans, try this stunning gray worsted suit that will ensure his eyes are on YOU, not the stage. A nipped-in waist and mauve accents bring out the natural beauty that any lover—music lover, that is—will appreciate."

A graceful model strolled a platform in front of fifty Los Angeles ladies of leisure. Tremayne's fall fashion show brought them to the department store to lunch, browse, and with any luck, spend thousands. Every shopgirl had been pressed into service in the backstage frenzy of last-minute alterations. Some of us were better at it than others. Still bleeding from where a needle had pierced me, I pushed the next beauty forward and dragged myself clear of traffic.

"Or perhaps modern music is more your style. Then it's dinner and dancing at the Coconut Grove. Wearing this gown of midnight-blue satin you'll captivate any dance partner. Bell sleeves sway sensuously as you glide across the floor. And be sure to put your best foot forward in a pair of silver sandals."

Pure corn, but the patter played. The audience oohed appreciatively as the gorgeous strawberry blonde pirouetted. Even I couldn't see where my blood had stained the gown. With a curtsy to her imaginary partner, the model stepped behind the

curtain and fell into a chair next to where I was sucking the pad of my thumb.

"Good luck dancing in these. It's like wearing mousetraps." The strawberry blonde, my fellow Tremayne's employee Priscilla Louden, pried the offending shoes off her feet. I peered through a slit in the curtain as the announcer started her spiel.

"Back home after your fantasy evening, keep the romantic mood alive with an alluring gown and robe in blushing rose. A marabou collar adds just the right soft touch. Is that matching marabou on the pumps? Mais oui."

The statuesque brunette on display pressed her cheek into the feathers as if lost in memory. For one terrible moment I thought she was going to sneeze.

Priscilla, having changed into a simple blue dress, joined me at the curtain as the well-heeled matrons applauded politely. "Did it go over?"

"We won't know until they open their pocketbooks. Where's Mr. Valentine? We pull out all the stops and he misses the show."

The proceedings over, we started for the sales floor. Georgie, a stock boy, chased us down.

"Mr. Valentine needs to see you, Lil."

"Now? And it's Lillian."

"Right this minute. I've got Frank Buck orders to bring you back alive." He eyed Priscilla up and down. "Does your beautiful friend need company?"

"Aren't you a cute kid?" Priscilla said.

"Kid? I'm plenty grown already." Georgie puffed up his gangly physique, but all it did was awaken his cowlick.

"Any chance you'd tell Mr. Valentine you couldn't find me?"

"For fifty cents."

"See you later," I told Priscilla.

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EN ROUTE TO his office I pondered the possible meanings of a summons from Mr. Valentine. Heart sinking, I deduced it had to be the hat display.

Mr. Valentine ran Tremayne's second floor—millinery, foundation garments, and other mysteries of womanhood—like a retail Mussolini. He groomed every display, negligees arranged by shade, girdles by suction power, priciest hats out front. Two days earlier I'd seized the initiative, moving an inexpensive black toque to a position of prominence because it was a dead ringer for one Katherine Hepburn wore in *Stage Door*. It had been a hot seller ever since.

You can't argue with numbers, I'd tell Mr. Valentine, using one of his pet phrases in my defense. I built up a good head of steam as I charged across the floor, but I knew the outcome would be as predictable as a Gene Autry western. I'd state my case, then surrender gracefully. Jobs were tough to come by. I'd rather eat than be right.

I pushed open the door to the stockroom that doubled as Mr. Valentine's office, and any fight left in me drained away. For one thing, the boss looked more somber than angry, jowls drooping over his florid pink shirt. For another, he wasn't alone. With him were two men who didn't seem the type to frequent Ladies' Lingerie.

"Miss Frost. Thank you for coming. I'm sorry to call you back here."

A thank-you *and* an apology? This did not bode well.

Mr. Valentine mopped his brow with a monogrammed handkerchief, which he then waved toward his visitors. "These gentlemen are from the Los Angeles Police Department. They would like to talk to you." Spent, he dropped his considerable frame into a chair pushed against the shelves of hatboxes.

The taller of the two men stepped forward. The fedora held at his side had swept his hair back into a sleek dark brown V.

Beneath it blue eyes coolly appraised me. "Miss Frost, I'm Detective Morrow. This is Detective Hansen."

His reedy partner, resting his haunches on a step stool, nodded in my direction. He then returned his gaze to the boxes of brassieres opposite him, seemingly staggered by what they represented.

"What can I do for you?" I'd once stolen a licorice wheel on a dare, but that was back in New York when I was eight. It seemed unlikely that Mrs. Fishbein at the candy store had the resources to track me down sixteen years later and three thousand miles away.

"I believe you know Ruby Carroll," Detective Morrow said.

Ruby. The person I knew in Los Angeles most likely to land in trouble.

"Yes," I said. "We used to room together."

The stockroom door swung inward and Miss Baker, an older saleslady with posture worthy of West Point, entered clutching an order slip. She stopped short at the sight of Hansen, then turned and noticed the rest of the party.

"Not right now, Miss Baker," Mr. Valentine said.

"I only need to see if we have the Mesdames Choice No-Bones Corset, large." With desperation she added, "It's for Doris Pangborne."

Mr. Valentine made a shooing gesture with his pocket square. Poor Miss Baker about-faced and went to meet her fate. Asking Doris Pangborne to wait was like trying to flag down the *Super Chief*, futile and life-threatening.

Detective Morrow turned to Mr. Valentine. "Any chance you could let Miss Frost sit down, maybe keep people out?"

"Certainly." Mr. Valentine hoisted himself out of the chair and held it for me, then fixed the door with a vigilant Rin Tin Tin stare.

"You can watch better from the other side," Hansen said, his

voice a dry twang. He ushered Mr. Valentine out of the room then resumed his perch on the step stool.

"When was the last time you spoke to Ruby?" Detective Morrow prompted.

"It's been at least six months. I catch a glimpse of her sometimes when I visit the girls at Mrs. Lindros's place."

"Six months. You two didn't stay close."

"We weren't exactly friends by the time I left."

Hansen leaned forward. "What were you then?"

"I couldn't say. We had a fight before I moved out."

"A fight?"

"Not twelve rounds or anything. We argued."

"About what?"

"The typical things girls argue about. Odds and ends going missing, leaving the place a mess. With the two of us in that tiny room, I'm surprised we put up with each other as long as we did."

"Close quarters. I understand." Detective Morrow smiled as he said it, and I felt absurdly grateful.

"Can you tell me what this is about? Is Ruby in some kind of trouble?"

Detective Morrow glanced at the floor. He was about to speak when Hansen piped up. "She's dead. That's a kind of trouble."

I saw the dirty look Detective Morrow fired at his partner, then the storeroom swam a little. *I'm crying*, I thought. Then I heard Ruby's voice in my head. *Good thing you didn't wear mascara, mermaid. It'll be easier to fix your face later.*

The next thing I knew Detective Morrow was kneeling beside me, offering his handkerchief. "I'm sorry, Miss Frost. Take all the time you need."

"What happened to her?"

"She was found in an alley not far from Mrs. Lindros's boardinghouse. She'd been shot."

"Shot? She—she wasn't the Alley Angel, was she?"

Hansen was standing over me now, too. "Why do you think that?"

"I read about it in yesterday's newspaper. I know the store where the body was found. I still live in the neighborhood. I thought, 'I hope that's not anyone I know.' I even thought . . ."

Detective Morrow finished the sentence when I faltered. "That it could have been you." After a pause he said, "Yes, Miss Frost. I'm afraid that was Ruby Carroll."

There'd be no stopping the tears this time. I dabbed them away and held out Detective Morrow's handkerchief. Instead of taking it, he pressed it against my punctured thumb. "Keep it. You shared a room with Ruby. We're hoping you can tell us about her."

I nodded several times too many, still struggling to accept what Detective Morrow had told me.

Stay calm, mermaid. Look 'em in the eye and tell 'em what they want to hear. It's the only way to get by in this town.

I shouldn't have been surprised it was Ruby's advice that came back to me. She wouldn't have been jolted by news like this. At the boardinghouse we liked to pretend we were tough. You have to when you're facing the world on your own. But Ruby didn't need to fake it. She'd earned her wisdom the hard way. She was the McCoy.

And now she was gone.