

1

“You look crackers tonight, darling,” Lord Farley said to Mona as they sped along Versailles Road at twenty-five miles per hour in Mona’s chauffeur-driven red and black Daimler. It was dark and the road was slippery with ice.

Mona smiled and answered, “Thank you, Robert. A lady always likes to be complimented, but in America the word ‘crackers’ has a negative connotation.”

Robert replied, “Then you look ravishing. How’s that?”

Mona nodded and took a sterling compact out of her purse in order to check her lipstick.

Robert gave Mona the once-over. She was wearing her sleeveless black velvet gown with the sweetheart neckline and elbow-length black gloves. The dress was accented by a long strand of pearls held together by a diamond clip. Her evening coat was a heavy, black brocade as the night was cold due to a winter storm several days before.

Mona glanced over at Robert, approving of his evening tux, black cape, and silver-handled walking stick. He also smelled divine. “You look mighty spiffy yourself.”

“Spiffy. That’s a new American term for me.”

“It means you look okay, bub.”

“Darling! You’re shivering.”

“I’m cold. I think I’m still recovering from our trek to the mountains.”

“It was a shame you missed your first Christmas and New Year’s Eve in Moon Manor only to be fighting for your life on Pine Mountain.”

“I was bored and wanted some adventure,” Mona laughed. “That’s what I got—only the joke was played on me.”

“A little too much adventure.”

Mona placed her hand over Robert’s. “The only thing I regret is that I put you in danger. I can never forgive myself for doing so. I should have checked out Rupert Hunt more thoroughly. I’m so sorry, Robert. Really.”

"I never liked the man, but I must say his scheme to kidnap you without you knowing it was devilishly clever. He got you to go along with his plan willingly."

"So you forgive me for hiring Rupert later?"

"I guess it takes a thief to catch a thief."

"He's already given Moon Enterprises good information on embezzling in our Butte, Montana office."

"Hiring him is not something I would have done, but things seem to have a way of working out for you, Mona."

"Yes, it's a brand new year and all that trouble is behind us. Roosevelt is fixing the country, and we are heading toward a brighter future."

Robert kissed the inside of Mona's wrist. "And our future as well."

Mona looked deeply into Robert's eyes. "To our future as well," she echoed before shivering again.

"Why aren't you wearing one of your grandmother's fur coats?"

"I hate wearing dead animal skins. It makes me feel—well, uneasy."

Lawrence Robert Emerton Dagobert Farley, Marquess of Gower, had noticed that Mona was slowly weeding her wardrobe of leather and furs. He had thought this new indulgence odd, but had said nothing. Instead, Robert was rather proud of Mona's compassion for animals. Pulling her close, he said, "Let me warm you. It is a chilly night."

Mona snuggled close to him, sighing contentedly.

"I see you are still not wearing my engagement ring."

"I shall wear it when we announce our betrothal and not before."

"Let's do it tonight."

"And spoil the evening for our hostess? I should say not. By the way, who exactly are our host and hostess tonight?"

Robert pulled out a linen paper invitation from his pocket. "Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Hopper."

"The Vanderbilt family?"

"A minor cousin with the name but none of the money. Cornelius goes by the name of Connie."

"Did you know that a centurion named Cornelius was directed by an angel to contact St. Peter? After he spoke with Peter, he converted to Christianity and is considered the first gentile convert. Here's another fun fact, Connie means wolf in old German."

"You know the oddest trivia."

Mona shrugged. "I guess I thought of it because there is a wolf moon tonight."

"A what?"

"A full moon in January is called a wolf moon. Don't ask me why. It just is."

Robert peered out of the car window at the sky. "It is a full moon. I didn't even notice. Looks like it's going to snow, too." He leaned back in the seat and put his arm around Mona.

"What else can you tell me about them?" Mona asked.

"The family did have money at one time, but Connie's father was a notorious gambler and frittered all the family's money away."

"Ooh, not good."

"I mean they are not poor by any means, but the family is not Vanderbilt rich anymore. They are just comfortable." Robert thought for a moment.

"Well, maybe scratching by. I've heard tales."

"They can't be too poor if they are throwing a big shindig tonight. Champagne costs money."

"Connie is throwing this bash for everyone to meet his new young wife. She has some money, which is why he can afford this bash."

"Go on."

"Her name is Elspeth Neferet Alden. Her father was Sir Jonathon Alden."

"The famous Egyptologist?"

"I knew that would impress you."

"Oh, my goodness. I can't wait to meet her and talk about her father's exploits."

Robert was delighted when Mona's yellow eyes lit up with excitement. She liked nothing better than to discuss the ancient world in the Near East. It was her passion.

The Daimler pulled up in front of a beige limestone mansion with its windows blazing with light as though a thousand candles had been lit. Jamison, Mona's chauffeur, opened the car door.

Robert jumped out first and gave a hand to Mona, who stared at the mansion.

Mona commented, "This is bigger than Moon Mansion. Must cost a fortune for the upkeep."

"Now you see the need for this marriage."

"Oh," was all Mona could utter before the door was opened by the butler and Mona was whisked out of the cold.

2

Mona handed her wrap to a maid and then let Robert escort her into the ballroom. A live orchestra was playing the latest popular radio tunes, and the floor was alive with guests dancing the foxtrot, while older couples danced the black bottom and Charleston.

Robert and Mona stood in the receiving line and waited their turn to greet their hosts. Finally, Mona was presented to Cornelius Vanderbilt Hopper.

"It's a pleasure meeting you," Cornelius said. He kissed Mona's hand. "Everything they say about you is true. You are a beauty like the rarest orchid."

"Not half of what *they* say about me is accurate Mr. Hopper," Mona replied. She didn't know what to make of Hopper's flamboyant comments.

"I thought people were exaggerating about your hair, but it is truly platinum, without any benefit of color—and your eyes—a true yellow, more of a golden hue I would think."

Annoyed, Robert stepped in and held out his hand. "Good to see you again, Connie."

Shaking his hand, Hopper said, "Robert, how nice to see you. Are you here with this gorgeous creature?"

"Yes, I am, so mittens off."

"Speaking of gorgeous creatures, may I present my wife, Elspeth Neferet Alden Hopper."

Both Robert and Mona turned to the petite, dusky-skinned, dark-haired woman with black soulful eyes standing beside Hopper. Robert gave a little bow, but Mona was so smitten with admiration that she could barely find words to speak.

Mrs. Hopper was wearing a pleated, linen sheath adorned with a large Egyptian collar called a wesekh made of gold, turquoise, coral, onyx, and lapis lazuli. The woman's dark eyes were outlined in kohl like the ancient Egyptians.

The only difference in her makeup from that of an ancient woman was that Mrs. Hopper wore bright red lipstick.

For a second, Mona thought she was addressing Nefertiti. “Em hotep.”

Mrs. Hopper became animated and said, “li-wey. You speak ancient Egyptian?”

“Just a few lines I picked up when I was in Cairo. I am more familiar with Sumerian and Babylonian words. I must say I am so taken with your collar. It looks authentic.”

“My father made it from bits and pieces he found in the sand. He presented it to me on my eighteenth birthday.”

“Lucky girl,” Mona said, barely taking her eyes off the collar. Jewelry was a weakness of Mona’s.

“My dear, people are waiting,” Connie said to Elspeth.

“You’re right, Connie. Forgive me. Miss Moon, I hope we have a chance to speak again this evening.”

Mona said, “Please, we must. I am dying to talk about the Near East and your adventures excavating Queen Ahsetsedek’s tomb.”

Elspeth asked, “You know of my father’s work?”

“Who doesn’t know about John Alden and his famous find in the Valley of the Queens?” Mona said.

“Dear!” Connie said as though annoyed.

For a second, Elspeth’s eyes dampened but she nodded and smiled.

Robert led Mona over to a chair. “Happy?”

“I’m ecstatic, Robert. I’m so glad you made me come. Think of it—John Alden’s daughter. Oh, the stories she must have. I can’t wait to get her alone.”

“Are you up for a dance while you’re waiting?”

“Assuredly.”

Robert led Mona onto the dance floor where they did the foxtrot, a waltz, and another foxtrot until Mona begged off.

“It’s hot in this room, that’s for sure,” Robert said.

“I need to freshen up. Can you excuse me?”

“Don’t take too long. I see some captains of industry heading my way for some boring shop talk.”

“I promise.”

Mona gathered her clutch from the coat check maid and headed for the downstairs bathroom for the ladies, but it was too crowded, so she asked if she could use the upstairs one. The maid pointed to a powder room on the second

floor. Mona quickly bounded up the grand staircase and headed down a carpeted hallway. Passing one of the doors cracked open, she heard crying—a deep mournful crying. Standing at the door, Mona looked both ways, wondering what she should do. No one else was in the hallway. Crying was a private act and Mona didn't want to intrude, but crying also meant someone might need help. She knocked on the door and peeked in. Inside a spacious and luxurious bedroom, Elspeth sat on a chair holding her magnificent necklace.

“Elspeth, what is the matter?” Mona quickly closed the door, locked it, and went to the weeping bride.

“You shouldn't be in here.”

“You shouldn't be crying at your own party.” Mona dragged a chair close to Elspeth. “Now tell me. What is the matter?”

“Connie told me to change into something more conservative. He said my dress embarrassed him and looked like something a person would wear at Halloween.”

“You looked stunning. I love the collar. In fact, I have half a mind to steal it,” Mona teased.

Elspeth looked at Mona through thick, tear-stained eyelashes. “I wore it to honor my father. Did you really like my outfit?”

“My dear, your dress was fascinating and quite wonderful. Who cares what Connie says?”

“I don't want to make my husband angry.”

“Okay, change then, but no more tears. Don't let those people downstairs see you cry, and when you go back down, tell everyone you tore the hem of your linen dress while dancing.” Mona went over to a wall, which was lined with mirrors. “Is this your closet?”

Elspeth nodded.

Mona threw open all the mirrored doors to Elspeth's wardrobe. “Let's find the most seductive gown you have.”

“Connie wants me to wear something conservative.”

“Listen, my dear, if you give in to ridiculous demands now, your husband won't give you a moment's peace. You will never be your own woman. Understand?”

Elspeth wiped away a tear. “It's true what they say about you.”

“What's that?” Mona asked, rummaging through the closet.

"That you are different. A leopard among house cats."

"Do they? That's rather nice, don't you think? I like leopards. I recently had a bout with a mountain panther."

"Who won?"

Mona laughed. "It was a draw." She pulled a low-cut red chiffon dress from the closet. "This will do nicely. Wear this."

"Oh, no. I can't. It's too risqué."

"You'll wear it or you'll be under your husband's thumb the rest of your life. Now, we need some jewelry. Do you have a necklace to set off that dress?"

"I have a diamond choker."

"Do you have something that will plunge into your cleavage?"

Elspeth's hands fluttered a bit. "I have a ruby and diamond pin that can change into a necklace."

"Sounds perfect." Mona threw the dress at Elspeth. "Put it on." She went over to Elspeth's vanity and rummaged through her jewelry box finding the pin and then a heavy chain for it. Mona clasped the necklace around Elspeth neck. "Looks lovely. Now we need to fix your makeup." Mona dusted Elspeth's face with powder and redid her lipstick with a brighter shade of red.

"I hope Connie likes this dress."

"He probably won't. He'll make a fuss after the party."

"I don't want that."

"It doesn't matter what dress you select. He will deem it inappropriate. Don't you understand?"

"What do you mean?"

Mona looked Elspeth directly in the eyes. "You know exactly what I mean." She grabbed one of Elspeth's arms. "Where did you get that bruise?"

Elspeth pulled her arm away. "I fell."

"Sure you did."

"It was an accident."

"Sure it was."

Elspeth looked away. "I have no friends or family here. It's terribly frightening being alone in a strange place without anyone to talk with."

"Then you must come to tea tomorrow at Moon Manor. I know what it is like to be alone in new surroundings. Tell Connie I'm having a hen party so you can meet more ladies in the community. Will you come?"

"That's awfully sweet of you, but you needn't bother with me. We don't know each other and—I don't want to be a nuisance."

"I have tea at four o'clock. Be there."

"Will you walk down with me? I don't want to face Connie in this dress alone."

"Of course. I need to use the powder room first though. Nature calls." Mona strode off to the bathroom and after refreshing herself, checking her outfit, and putting on more lipstick, she entered Elspeth's bedroom only to find her gone.

"She left without me," Mona said to herself. She hurried to the grand staircase where she discovered Connie berating Elspeth on the stair landing. Elspeth was looking down at her feet and anxiously twisting a handkerchief between two sweaty palms.

"My goodness," Mona called out from above. "You've changed into another dress, Elspeth." She hurried down the steps and twirled Elspeth around. "It's a stunner, dear. Don't you think so, Mr. Hopper, I mean, Connie?" Mona didn't give him time to answer. "Come on, Elspeth. You'll simply bowl people over. I know a lot of women here tonight who will want a gander at your necklace. Ruby, isn't it? From India? Two stunning necklaces in one night. You put us all to shame."

Mona turned to Connie. "You must be so proud. Your wife is surely going to be the social butterfly of the season. Come Elspeth. You must show this dress off. Will you excuse us, Connie—or would you like the honor of escorting your wife?"

Connie's face flushed red and was so overcome with anger, he couldn't sputter any reply to Mona, nor would he have if he could have found the words. He realized she was toying with him, so all he could do was to take his wife's arm and guide her down the stairs into the ballroom. Connie wouldn't dare offend Mona, as she was too powerful.

"Don't forget tea tomorrow at four, Elspeth. Ladies only. I insist," Mona called after her. Smiling, Mona glided down the staircase into the arms of Robert.

Robert asked, "Why do you look so pleased with yourself?"

"I just bullied a bully."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Tell me about it in the car. Ready to skip this popsicle stand?"

"Most assuredly."

"I'll grab our coats. You say goodbye to our hosts."

Mona shook her head. "I really think we can forget that part of the evening."

Robert laughed. "What did you do, darling?"

"I'll tell you about it at your house in front of a roaring fire with hot chocolate."

"Will you stay the night?"

"And give the servants something to gossip about? No way, but I might be convinced to see the wolf moon sink behind the horizon."

"I'll take what I can get." Robert rushed off to gather their coats. With the promise of a little snogging, Robert couldn't wait to get Mona to his house. And there was Mona's encounter. Robert could only guess what had occurred.

Hmm—what could Mona possibly have instigated now?

3

Robert was nibbling Mona's earlobe.

"What can you tell me about Connie Hopper?" she asked.

"How can you think about Connie when I'm doing this?" Robert nuzzled Mona's neck.

"Feels lovely."

"More the response I was hoping for, woman. Now turn around so I can give you a proper snog. Let's swap some saliva."

After kissing for a while, Mona came up for air. "How well do you know Hopper?"

"You still thinking about that man? If you are going to think about another man while I'm trying to seduce you, what chance do we have?"

"Don't sulk, Robert. You know how my mind works. There's a puzzle concerning Espeth and Connie. My mind can't turn off. It keeps racing."

Robert reached for a cigarette and lit it.

"I wish you wouldn't smoke, Robert."

"I smoke out of frustration, Mona. It's due to you."

"The sooner you tell me the sooner we can get back to necking."

“Oh, well, then.” Robert stubbed out his cigarette and took a sip of his coffee while Mona took a drink of her hot chocolate spiked with a touch of liqueur. He didn’t know how she could stand the combination. Robert did know that he couldn’t touch liquor for a year in order to get Mona to marry him. He also knew Mona deliberately tempted him by drinking alcohol in front of him. She was a devil. “I don’t know him very well. He’s quite a bit older than I. We’re not in business or anything like that.”

“How do you know him?”

“I guess the Bluegrass social circuit. Love of horse racing, that sort of thing.”

“What do people say about him?”

Robert shrugged. “Not much, I’m afraid. Connie’s always been very low key. No scandals of any sort. He has reasonably good manners. Knows which fork to use at a dinner party and never discusses politics or religion with anyone. Never gossips about anyone. Never been seen in the female servants’ quarters after midnight. He’s one dull boy if you ask me.”

“Unlike you.”

“Definitely unlike me.”

“Hmm.”

“Why this interest in Connie Hopper? Did he do something to you? Shall I fight him in a duel at dawn?”

“I was just wondering.”

“Wondering what?”

“Why a young woman like Elspeth, who is British and has her own money, would marry a much older man who is American and basically broke?”

“You once called the British snobs of the worst kind.”

“I did?”

“Yes, you did and you’re quite right. Elspeth doesn’t have the right breeding credentials for a brilliant upper class British marriage.”

Mona looked flummoxed. “She’s John Alden’s daughter, the greatest Egyptologist who ever lived. He discovered Queen Ahsetsedek IV’s tomb intact.”

“John Alden was born in an East London slum from an unmarried working girl, if you know what I mean.”

“I see where this is going. I guess it doesn’t matter that Alden elevated himself from the ‘gutter’ and worked his way to a Ph.D. from Oxford.”

“I never mentioned the word gutter.”

"But that's what you meant."

"I'm trying to tell you why Elspeth married whom she did if you let me finish."

"Sorry."

"John Alden was a cockney who went on to achieve many wonderful things, but then he marries an Egyptian native, which resulted in Elspeth."

"I see what you're saying. The noses of the blue bloods across the pond were bent out of shape, and they wouldn't let Elspeth play with their sons."

"Exactly. Both classism and racism played into the scenario."

"Well, boy of mine. What are *they* going to say about me when we marry?"

"My British *friends* are going to insult you behind your back, but they will be polite to your face. You're too rich for them to offend, and they can't afford to be rude because they figure that in twenty years they'll palm one of their worthless offspring onto one of our offspring. That's the way it will be."

"Why should I marry you?"

"Because you love me and no matter what, we are going to do what we want to do—similar to what your parents did. They crossed social lines to be married, didn't they?"

"Oh, how can I refuse you, Robert, when you make such sense? Yes, my father lost the Moon inheritance because he married my mother."

"Were they happy, Babycakes?"

"They loved each other very much. It hurt my father to lose his inheritance, but he loved my mother too much to let her go. Yes, Robert, they were fortunate because they realized money can't bring happiness. Love does."

"Money can sure keep wolves away from the door, though," Robert teased. On a more serious note, he said, "We'll be okay, Mona. Trust me. No one will ever hurt you if I can help it."

"Promise?"

Robert took his index finger and crossed his heart. "Hope to die."

Mona snuggled closer to Robert on the couch. "We'll be happy, won't we?"

"No one will touch us," Robert promised.

Little did Robert know when he uttered those words that he would be proven wrong.

Trouble was fast approaching.