

**FORTUNE
FAVOURS
THE
DEAD**

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**STEPHEN
SPOTSWOOD**



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

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

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?

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 knuckle-head 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*

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

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.

“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.

“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

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.

“Hey. Who are you? Where’s the little carnny?”

“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

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.

“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.

“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

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.

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?