

MANHATTAN

GOthic



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# PART ONE



She was a story, at first. A woman, too of course, as beautiful a one as I had seen in a long time. But I had my priorities, and I needed a book idea, not a love affair.

Actually, that night I hadn't expected to find either. Eve Lukas had invited me to come by late, to be, I suspected, a shot-in-the-arm to a dinner party in its dying gasps. She hadn't put it that way, but I was familiar with Eve's strategies.

I arrived at eleven. When I stopped in the entrance hall and glanced into the living room at the guests sitting over their snifters of brandy, I saw, for the most part, faces that were familiar, but familiar to me only from previous evenings there. I felt a slight sinking feeling; this wasn't the most upbeat crowd around.

They were Eve's oldest friends and, life being what it was, most of them had experienced recent bad fortune. The radical professor had lost his chair, the South American diplomat his government, the painter his dealer, the interior decorator her marriage, and they bore the marks of these losses, creased into their faces. As a group, they managed to be cheerful enough, but their brightness was like that of the Abstract Expressionist canvases which, along with Eve's photographs, adorned the walls. It was the leftover brightness of vanished, irreclaimable excitement.

So it was only natural that my gaze went directly to the one young, unlined face in the living room—though it would have caught my attention anywhere. It wasn't a New York face, an American face, or even a twentieth-century face. It was the countenance of a dream-drugged maiden in a pre-Raphaelite painting, framed in thick coils of chestnut hair, the skin pale and porcelain smooth, the large eyes dark and haunted. Those eyes were fixed on me now with peculiar intensity.

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I smiled tentatively across the distance, but was soon distracted as Eve came and greeted me with a kiss. At Eve's place, coats went into the bedroom, and that was where I headed. Eve followed me in and closed the door partway behind her. I laid my coat on the bed and then turned to her, wondering what she was up to. A bit of flirtation? I wouldn't have objected. Eve was a fine-looking woman, and the passage of time had not diminished her sensuality. Her curly hair, I noticed, was tinted a bolder red, and the hostess gown she was wearing had a transparency that revealed, with unabashed preciseness, the outline of her curvaceous body.

But Eve, it turned out, simply wanted to pass on a piece of information to me. "The Contessa wants to meet you," she said.

"The Contessa?" I echoed in a puzzled tone, even though I was sure this had to be that beautiful, unearthly young woman.

"Mirella," she said. "Mirella Ludovisi."

"Oh." If Eve hadn't invoked the title first—an odd bit of snobbery in someone who had once considered herself a Trotskyite—I would have realized who the young woman was at once. I knew of her; as a name, anyway, a figure in a tragic occurrence that had taken place some months back.

"You mean, the girl... with Tobias Walling?"

"She's the one," Eve said.

"Where has she been since his death?"

"New York, mostly. She's just starting to go out again. She asked to meet you. I couldn't fit you into dinner. So..." She shrugged, as if she needed to say nothing more to explain my presence there.

"If I'd known, I would have come earlier. She's stunning."

"Yes, isn't she?" Eve said, her tone flat and strangely non-committal.

"Why *does* she want to meet me?" I asked.

"You'll have to ask Mirella," she said, and left the bedroom.

I lingered to comb my hair, which had been whipped about by the wind on Riverside Drive. It gave me a few moments to adjust to this development. It was flattering, certainly, but also somewhat surprising. While I was at that point an available male, I wasn't, as far as I knew, an unusually desirable one; presentable enough, perhaps,

but not the dashing type who received perfumed letters. As a published novelist, I was sometimes given attention by very young women with literary inclinations—naive English-major types, fresh from college. But I would hardly seem to justify the interest of a stylish Italian aristocrat.

Tobias Walling had been more appropriate for her: a distinguished Middle Eastern scholar, a millionaire, a name on the letterhead for almost any good liberal cause, and a civilized lover of all things antique. It would have been a good match—if the marriage had ever actually taken place.

I had heard the story—the bare facts, anyway, which were as much as anyone seemed to know. Walling was about to marry Mirella Ludovisi; the wedding was only weeks away. He went to stay with her at her family home, a palazzo in Ferrara. One morning he was found dead in his bed.

A heart attack, the obituaries said. For all those who knew him—and I, too, was slightly acquainted with him—the news was shocking and totally unexpected. Tobias Walling was only forty-eight years old, and seemingly in perfect health.

A rich American's sudden death in a palazzo. A dark-haired, pale-skinned countess who evoked a vanished world of cool marble and rustling silk. It sounded like pure Henry James.

And now that same bereaved beauty had expressed an interest in getting to know *me*. It was intriguing, and I was no less curious than old Henry himself would have been. With my hair in place, the knot of my necktie straightened, I went out to pay my respects.

Mirella Ludovisi was sitting in an armchair at one end of the couch. The corner of the couch nearest her was unoccupied and I settled into it.

“I’m Carl Hopkins,” I said.

“I’m Mirella,” she said.

She regarded me gravely. Her gaze was steady and somewhat unsettling, and it kept me from continuing in the usual glib, small-talk way. I said nothing further, simply sitting there, smiling at her, and waiting for her to break the silence.

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“You’re happy,” she said.

“Happy?” In my own opinion, I was miserable. But perhaps she knew something I didn’t.

“Yes, happy,” Mirella repeated. “You seem happy. Life is good for you, is it not?”

This wasn’t the time to beat my breast. So I replied, “Things could be worse, I guess.”

Now, at least, she smiled, as if it pleased her to hear her estimate of my well-being confirmed. In a way her smile was sadder than her solemn look. It was a contained smile: the corners of her mouth barely moved, and her eyes didn’t crinkle, didn’t change at all, but remained wide-open, stark as the eyes of a prophetess.

“And is life a little better for *you* now?” I asked.

“It will be,” Mirella said. “There will be felicity soon, I am sure of it.”

She had answered promptly. But then she looked at me questioningly, as if she was uncertain as to what I had actually meant. “Do you know why I’m wearing black?”

It hadn’t struck me that she was “wearing black” as such, since her dress didn’t suggest mourning, but, rather, was a chic, Chanel-type black. The neckline curved gracefully to reveal the beginning curve of her bosom. “Yes, I know,” I answered.

“This is my last night for black. I have some very pretty dresses, in all the nicest colors. It will be spring in a few days. It’s time for me to wear them.”

“You probably should have worn them long before this,” I said. “You’re too young and attractive to live in mourning.”

Mirella was silent again, but her eyes didn’t stray from my face. She seemed to be searching for hidden implications in my casual flattery. “Did you know Toby?” she asked finally.

“Only slightly,” I replied. “But enough to find him very impressive.”

“Yes,” she said, “He was clever.”

It seemed an odd way to put it. “Brilliant” perhaps or “scholarly.” But “clever” was not an adjective one would normally have applied to the idealistic, romantic Tobias Walling.

But then, I reminded myself, English wasn't her native tongue, though it was easy to overlook this with her, since she spoke it flawlessly, with only a slight accent. It was her occasional peculiar choice of a word—*felicity*, for instance—that revealed that she wasn't totally at home in the language.

"He was one of the most erudite men I've ever met," I said.

She nodded. "I learned so much from him," she said.

So far she had said nothing to resolve the mystery of why she had supposedly wanted to meet me. I tried going at it more directly. "By the way," I asked, "have we seen each other before?"

"No," she said, "I don't think so."

"I wondered. You seemed to recognize me when I came in."

"Oh, I *know* you, yes," Mirella said softly, leaning closer to me. "I recognized you from your picture. On your book."

So *that* was it. She was a reader. I had been so caught up with my image of her as a Henry James princess, wandering through marble halls, that it hadn't occurred to me she might be a bored, urban woman who whiled away her evenings reading sexy commercial novels.

I knew she had to be referring to the sexy one, the most recent of my books, not the four more literary works that had preceded it. When people said "your book" it was the one they meant. It had reached a fairly wide readership, whereas my others had been well-kept secrets.

I adopted my wry, self-deprecatory stance. "I'm amazed you could recognize me from that photograph. It gave me all the warmth and charm of a zombie."

She didn't seem to know how to take this. "You didn't choose it?"

"My editor did. I think, in his heart of hearts, he hates me."

"But it captures something about you," Mirella said, "truly it does." The knowing gleam in her eye made me a little nervous. What on earth had she perceived in that ghastly photo? But then she added, with a touch of flirtatiousness, "Of course, now that I see you, I realize you're much better-looking."

"Thank you. I hope you liked the book," I said, an author outrageously fishing for a compliment.

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“I liked it very much. After I read it, I knew I must meet you.”

“Well, now we’ve met.”

“Yes. And now that we’ve met,” she said, rising, “I’m afraid I must go.”

I was dismayed by the swiftness of it. Was I such a disappointment?

I rose quickly. “Already?” I asked.

“It’s late.” She was taller than I had realized. Now that she was standing, and raised on high heels, her gaze was almost level with mine. “I would have gone long before this. But I was waiting for you to arrive. To see if you would be as I had imagined.”

“Am I?”

“You are.”

Once again, as with her comment on my author photograph, I was made to feel a little uneasy. How would she have imagined the author of my raunchy and somewhat cynical book?

“But you can’t really know,” I said. We’ve hardly had a chance to talk.”

“Oh, we’ll talk,” Mirella said quietly, meaningfully. “But not now. Later. When we can be alone.”

“May I call you?”

“I’ll call.”

“You promise?”

“You can be sure of it. You see,” she added, “I want to discuss something with you.”

I opened my mouth to ask “What?” but before I could get it out she was gone, vanished in a fluid movement that took her around the turning of the wall and out of sight.