

CHAPTER 1

LOS ANGELES, FEBRUARY, 1908

Anna Blanc searched the officers' kitchen for her kipper tins, but her kipper tins were gone. "Biscuits," she swore under her breath. One of the cops was a thief. Now she wouldn't get breakfast. She rummaged and found a jar of honey. As no one was watching, she opened it and began to eat from it with a spoon.

The doorknob turned. Anna hid the honey jar behind her back.

Detective Joe Singer slipped in, crooning to himself. "Oh Lou Ann, make me a lucky man." He was the police chief's son and a delicious sight, especially given he was holding a dinner pail.

When Joe saw Anna, he quickly shut the door behind him. "Sherlock, I haven't seen you in days. I went to your apartment last night and you didn't answer." He crossed the room, ducked under her hat, and kissed her. "Mm. Honey sweet."

Anna pulled away. "You're going to get me evicted if my landlord sees you. He's already warned me. And someone's eaten my kippers," she said in despair, her stomach growling. "And if you want to see me, then quit the Chinatown Squad."

"I just did." He reached behind her back, took the honey jar out of her hands, and gave her a peanut butter sandwich from his dinner pail. She pulled back the wax paper and forced herself to take dainty bites.

"I threw pebbles at your bedroom window. You had to have known it was me." He took hold of her fingers. "Unless there's someone else who throws rocks at your window."

Anna slipped her hand from his and whispered, "Not here. I'll get fired. The mayor would love an excuse to get rid of me."

"Then where?"

"I don't know. I wanted to let you in. Maybe next time disguise yourself as a lady. The landlord can't object to a lady."

Joe cocked his head thoughtfully. "Hm."

The door opened again and Detective Wolf entered, looking slick and reeking of lavender aftershave. He flashed a pearly grin. "Good morning, honeybun. Young Joe."

Anna looked everywhere except at Joe, as if he wasn't there at all, as if she hadn't just been holding his hand. "Good morning Detective Wolf. I'm sorry I was late. I . . ." Anna had forgotten to make up an excuse for her tardiness, and sleeping in seemed like a paltry reason. "I . . . found some orphaned children in the street . . . I . . . instructed them in goodness and fed them Cracker Jacks. And I gave them my own clothes to wear. Even the boys." Then she kicked herself.

Wolf grinned. "I'm sure they were very grateful, Assistant Matron Blanc." Then he looked from Anna to Joe and back again. His face turned serious. "Don't let that boy get you fired. I like having you in the station."

Anna lifted her chin. "I don't know what you're talking about, Detective."

"I'm serious, Joe. If Matron Clemens or Captain Wells suspect you two are courting, honeybun is quits." Wolf poured himself a cup of coffee.

"We aren't courting. We don't have time," said Anna.

Joe shook his head. "I would never get her fired. Then I would never see her."

"Detective Snow said he saw you two spooning in the stables last summer. Told everybody. So, I told everybody Snow was just mad at Assistant Matron Blanc because she made him look like an ass. Some believed me. Some wanted to spoon with honeybun themselves. That's a precarious balance." Wolf stirred sugar into his coffee

and paused before departing. “So, for heaven’s sake, when you two leave, leave separately.”

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Joe and Wolf left first. Anna waited, wiping her sticky fingers. She smoothed her badly ironed skirt, shirtwaist, and mannish white tie—the hideous uniform of an LAPD police matron. She had accessorized that morning with a towering ostrich-feather hat. It barely coordinated but was the only element of her dress she could aesthetically stand behind.

She perched on the table where someone had been reading the *Los Angeles Herald*, and perused the society pages. Mrs. Hashbarger was hosting a costume ball to raise money for the opera. Several ladies she knew—ones younger than Anna’s twenty years—announced their engagements. Edgar Wright, her former fiancé, was spotted at the Huntington’s garden party along with the mayor, several bankers of her acquaintance, and their wives. Anna had not been invited. Of course not. She was disgraced. She frowned. The Huntingtons served the best foie gras.

Anna checked her wrist watch. Five minutes had passed, and Matron Clemens would be waiting for her. She slipped out onto the station floor. On the outside, Los Angeles Police Department’s Central Station had a sort of civic grandeur. Built of heavy granite blocks, it had multiple stories to accommodate the jail, receiving hospital, quarters for the matrons and surgeons, and stables in the basement. On the inside, it smelled of men, cigarette smoke, and despair.

Anna adored it.

She clipped upstairs to the women’s department. Ladies had their own steel cells and their own receiving hospital crowded on the second floor, kept separate from the men’s department, juvenile department, booking desks, and interrogation rooms below.

At the top of the stairs, Matron Clemens and Captain Wells

chatted in the corridor outside the windowless storeroom where Anna had her desk.

Matron Clemens had charge of all the police matrons at Central Station, which is to say, she had charge of Anna. The two women were responsible for:

1. The well-being and reform of every derelict woman and child in the city of Los Angeles;
2. Preventing every other woman and child from going astray;
3. Preventing future hoodlums from being born, and;
4. Generally dealing with “the girl problem.”

Anna’s employment was somewhat provisional given that she’d taken the job under false pretenses, did not meet the hiring criteria, and her tenure had been riddled with scandal. It was a holy miracle that she still had the job. But Captain Wells gave Anna special dispensation because she had solved four major crimes—five really, if you counted the headless Chinaman. Also, Anna was exceptionally nice to look at. Even so, she wouldn’t be allowed to rest on her laurels. Matron Clemens had made that perfectly clear.

The stress of it made Anna want to turn to the bottle, which she would not do because intemperance was unwise. Also, her whiskey bottle had spilled, and she lacked the funds to buy another.

Anna bobbed a curtsy to Matron Clemens and Captain Wells. Matron Clemens gave Anna a strange look, which Anna could not interpret. After entering the storeroom, she thought she might know why. A mammoth bouquet graced Anna’s desk. It was the size of a watermelon and stuck out in all directions with greenery and odd combinations of flowers. It was strangely beautiful, arranged in a crystal vase, and did not have a card. Anna’s stomach flipped.

She glanced up and spied Joe sauntering toward her through the storeroom door, scowling. The flowers, she deduced, were not from Joe.

Anna plopped down and began typewriting. As she wasn't much of a typewritist, she typewrote flapdoodle. Adflpwmccorejp;! She looked down, studiously consulting her ink blotter, and lowered her voice for Matron Clemens's sake. "I don't know who they're from, and I love only you."

"That's the second parade float you got this week."

"Yes, Detective Singer. It's not my fault at all. This time, I don't even know who's sending them. Men read about me in the papers and get ideas."

He looked concerned. "Do you like flowers?"

"No," she lied, and then whispered truthfully, "I like detectives."

This made him smile. He strolled around the desk, casually inspecting the flowers from all angles. "That's the weirdest bouquet I've ever seen."

"It's the thought that counts."

"What's this?" He fingered a frond of thick green leaves. "I've never seen this before."

"It's milkvetch."

"It's ugly."

"Yes, but it means something in flower language."

"What?"

"Flowers aren't just flowers. They stand for things. And milkvetch means . . ." Anna's eyes rolled to the ceiling. "Um . . . Your presence softens my pain."

"So, you soften this man's pain?"

"Not intentionally."

"What does this mean?" He touched a flower.

"That's clematis. It means mental beauty. He's very perceptive." Anna lifted a little white ball of flowers with her index finger. "And this is sweet alyssum—worth beyond beauty. He's not shallow."

"And this?"

"Cardamine. It stands for paternal error. He's got that right. This is bearded crepis, which signifies protection. I feel much safer now. Jonquil—he desires a return of affection. Not likely. Peruvian

heliotrope—devotion.” Anna widened her gray eyes. “That isn’t easy to get. It actually comes from Peru. He must be devoted. Volkamenia—may you be happy.”

“How could you possibly know all this?”

“We had a book in our library—*The Language of Flowers*. It had hundreds of flowers in it.”

“And you memorized it?”

“I had nothing better to do. I wasn’t allowed to do anything.”

“What’s this then?” He pointed to a star of dark green leaves.

Anna squinted in thought. “Woodbine? I can’t recall.” She crossed her arms. “Are you here to hound me about flowers?”

“Nope. There’s a kid we need you to track down. He’s truant for one, and he’s the leader of a shoplifting ring. His name’s Eliel Villalobos, and he hangs out at Chutes Park. I’ve heard he picks people’s pockets during the Civil War reenactment. He recently pawned the mayor’s watch.”

This wasn’t all bad news. At least Anna got to go to Chutes Park.

“What does he look like?”

“Like an angel. He’s ten.” Joe handed Anna a mugshot.

The child did indeed look like an angel. Anna wasn’t fooled by his wide eyes and rosebud lips. She took the photograph. “I always get my man.”

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Mr. Melvin, the clerk, received all deliveries at Central Station. He was a small, timid man with bad skin and a tiny mouth that made him look like a turtle. When Anna spoke to him, she never stood too close lest he retract into his shell. She liked him very much. Also, he was crucial for getting to the bottom of the flowers.

Anna approached him smiling and all but shouted so that everyone could hear. “Good morning Mr. Melvin. Who brought in the flowers for the patients in the receiving hospital? Was it the ladies of the Temperance League again?”

“Yes, Assistant Matron Blanc, the Temperance League,” he said in a remarkably loud voice, given that he was Mr. Melvin.

“How kind.” She softened her voice and leaned near him. “Who was it really?”

“The same man as before,” he whispered, leaning away from her, looking down at his papers, never meeting her eye. “He wore diamond cufflinks.”

“Hm.” Anna wrinkled her forehead. “And the . . . delivery man? He wouldn’t leave a name?”

“No.”

“Please tell the Temperance League to stop sending me flowers.” As Anna did like flowers, she added, “Unless he really feels he must.” Upon further reflection, she amended, “Though, I don’t like them nearly so much as whiskey.”

“I will tell the ladies.”

“Thank you, Mr. Melvin.” Anna smiled at the top of his head. He was looking at his shoes.

Anna spent the afternoon at Chutes Park, riding the roller coaster and merry-go-round, and visiting the seal pond and monkey circus. She watched the Civil War reenactment intently, but Eliel Villalobos was nowhere to be found.

§

The next day, Anna found a bottle of very fine Canadian whiskey in her desk drawer tied with a gillyflower, which stood for “bounds of affection,” and it made her heartbeat quicken. The gift bore no card. She didn’t think Joe could afford such benzene; it was her father’s brand. It came, of course, from the flower talker. She hadn’t really thought he would give her whiskey, though she was very glad he did as whiskey was more healthful than bouquets since it could be used medicinally.

Once again, she sought out Mr. Melvin to confirm. Before she’d even said hello, he’d whispered to his typewriter, “He brought more

flowers, but I told him what you said, so he took them away and brought the whiskey. I thought it best not to leave it on your desk. Should I discourage him?”

“Yes,” said Anna, shaking her head “no.” “As a police matron, I’m not allowed to court. And I’m certainly not allowed to drink whiskey even though I might want to very, very much.”

“I’ll give him the message, then.”

“Thank you,” said Anna.

It was Thursday. Though she had half a city to control or reform, her first priority was Eliel Villalobos and Chutes Park. She had not yet ridden the giant boat water slide. She stepped out onto First Street, which rushed like a river of people, horses, and machines. She paused to pet Bob and Dollie, two white horses hitched to a police wagon. There were a dozen LAPD bicycles parked out front, two Indian motorcycles, one ambulance, and one black-and-white police car with a gold star. None of them served her transportation purposes. Cycling was difficult in her uniform skirt, and the police chief would die of apoplexy if a woman were to drive their precious police car. The ambulance went but eight miles per hour, had no brakes, and required a passenger to help bring it to a halt.

Anna headed off to the trolley stop. The cool morning mist seeped through her sleeves, but she ignored it. She had already passed Second Street, when she decided to turn back to retrieve her coat. From one block down, she saw a man leaving through the front doors of Central Station. He was young, overtly wealthy, uncommonly handsome, and possibly Spanish or Italian. Something at his wrist caught the March sun and sparkled—a diamond cuff link.

He was, she deduced, the flower talker—her whiskey man. He’d returned.

Anna watched from across the busy street. This man had gone to great lengths to communicate with Anna—perhaps all the way to Peru. It was imperative that she immediately . . . she did not

know what. She knelt and picked up a rock, reached into her purse, wrapped her fine linen handkerchief into a ball around the stone, and took aim. She threw her handkerchief across the road, thus signaling she was amenable to contact. Not because she needed another beau. No. Two beaus would cause a fist fight and Anna quite liked Joe's nose the way it was. She simply felt curious. Was he a botanist? Did he speak Spanish?

The wad caught her secret admirer square in his jaw and sent him stumbling back a step. His eyes widened in surprise. The wrapped stone bounced off and landed in the gutter. He bent to pick it up and glanced about perplexed, rubbing his jaw. Anna yelled across the street. "My stars, I must have dropped my handkerchief."

The handsome man didn't hear her. By the time Anna managed to cross the busy street, the whiskey man was gone, and her handkerchief lay trampled in the mud.

She shrugged. It didn't really matter to Anna. No matter how rich and handsome he was, her future was not with the whiskey man. After several misstarts, Anna finally had love in her life, just like a Valentine's card. Well, perhaps not *just* like a Valentine's card. There was nothing quaint or charming about the way she felt toward Joe Singer. She wanted to eat him.

She swished through the station doors, casting a sideways glance in the direction of Joe's desk, the place her eyes inevitably wandered. There he sprawled, scribbling in a notebook and sucking on a peppermint. Her pulse thump thumped.

Anna waited for Joe to look up, but when he did, he glowered, no doubt still angry about the flowers. He wasn't being fair. She had no control over admirers. She couldn't help that God had made her beautiful.

But Anna was a professional and did not glower back. She sent him her most matronly smile, which she feared only thinly veiled her true sentiments—that she wanted to know what he looked like naked. She licked her lip.

His frown vaporized, and a crooked grin stole across his face.

Anna waited five minutes in the officer's kitchen before Joe stole in and locked the door.

Anna whispered, "Don't lock the door, it's suspicious." She unlocked it.

"Why do we have to wait to get married? Marry me this afternoon. I want you now."

"Have me now."

He locked the door.

Anna unlocked it. "No. What if Snow is watching? Tonight, I'll leave my window open. But you must be prepared to move my things if my landlord catches you. I'd have to find another place to coop."

"We'd get married and I'd move you into my apartment."

"My things wouldn't fit. And besides, it's too soon. I need time. Months at least. Years maybe. I will marry you, but I've only just secured my independence. I can't simply give it up."

"I told you, Anna. I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to do."

He looked so sincere and so delicious, she almost believed him. Almost. It wasn't that she didn't trust Joe Singer. He never deliberately lied. It's just that men were so accustomed to bossing women, they no longer even noticed.

"Oh, I want to." She took his hand and played with his fingers.

Joe leaned over and locked the door.

Anna unlocked it.

He took a deep breath. "I have an idea. You're searching for that kid, Eliel Villalobos. You've searched Chutes Park, right?"

"Right."

"Why don't you search the regular parks. I myself am going to Griffith Park. We've had a tip that the men who robbed the bank in Boyle Heights were hiding out there."

Griffith Park comprised three thousand acres of mountainous wilderness squished between Los Feliz and Glendale. It had once

belonged to a wealthy rancher, Don Antonio Feliz, and should have gone to his niece, Petronilla, upon his demise, but due to some shenanigans with a false will, she got nothing. Luckily, she was able to curse the land, dropping dead on the spot, thus sealing the curse with her own blood. People had been dying ever since. The last owner, Griffith J. Griffith, had donated it to the city to get it off his hands and avoid the chain of misfortune, ruination, and death. Regrettably for Griffith, it didn't work. Cursed or no, it was a perfect place for hiking or hiding.

Anna squinted. "That robbery was weeks ago. Surely the bank robbers are gone by now."

"Yeah, but what if they've come back? I'm obliged to be thorough. Like I said, I'm going all by myself. And I was thinking, truants hang out in parks. Why don't you go search the park all by yourself? There's a particular spot I know about, very secluded, which would be a perfect spot to look, all by ourselves."

"Oh," said Anna, her heart beating faster. "Oh, yes."

"Tell Matron Clemens . . ." He locked the door, leaned in, and kissed her slow and peppermint sweet. "Tell her finding truants takes time. Tell her you'll be gone for hours."

§

Anna freshened up before leaving to hunt for truants alone with Joe Singer. When she bounded down the stairs, her mouth salty from brushing her teeth, matron Clemens intercepted her. "May I have a moment, Anna?"

Anna took a sharp, shallow breath, fearing she was in trouble for something she hadn't even done yet. Matron Clemens strode upstairs, into her office, the embodiment of authority, Anna in her wake. Anna quickly concocted a story about how she hadn't gone to Griffith Park to make love to an officer, which felt like a lie, though at present it was entirely true. Then another chilling thought crossed her mind. What if Snow had seen them going into the kitchen alone?

Matron Clemens looked stiff and cool, in contrast with her cozy office. The place resembled a grandmother's parlor. An afghan draped across the back of a blue settee. A giant needlepoint of a shepherd, which some poor woman must have gone blind producing, hung framed on the wall. Doilies melted on the furniture like snowflakes. All it lacked was a piano for singalongs.

Of course Matron Clemens's office would be homey. The lady worked most of the time. The station was her home, though she had ten children somewhere in a house on Hill Street, cared for by a relative. If one had to have ten children, it was a sensible way of dealing with the problem.

Matron Clemens closed the door, indicating for Anna to sit in a rocking chair. Anna did as commanded. The superintendent's face was unreadable, her voice matter of fact. "When you were hired, Detective Wolf somehow got the impression you were married."

Anna laughed mechanically. "Yes. Isn't that a strange misunderstanding? I don't know how he would have gotten that impression." She held her breath. She knew very well how Wolf had gotten that impression. Anna had lied.

"I suppose Wolf made a mistake," said Matron Clemens.

"An easy mistake to make. I look very married." Anna arranged her face matrimonially—that is, she tried to look grown-up, haggard, and a bit sour.

"It's preferable to have a married woman, Assistant Matron Blanc—someone who's world-wise, so to speak. Captain Wells has allowed you to stay because you've proven yourself useful. But, in response, the police commission has imposed a set of rules, which apply to unmarried police matrons."

"In other words, they apply only to me."

"That's right." Matron Clemens paced in a circle. "I opposed them, for the record, but I have no say." Her lips tilted down, and she extended a piece of paper for Anna to take.

Anna read aloud. "Do not leave town without permission. Do not keep company with men. Be home between the hours of

8 p.m. and 6 a.m.” Anna glanced up, wide-eyed. “But I’m often still working . . . Do not smoke or imbibe. Do not loiter around ice cream shops, dance halls, or skating rinks? That’s where the bad girls are. How can I reform them if I can’t go where they go? Do not dress in bright colors? Do not dye your hair? Do not wear any dress more than two inches above the ankle? Do not get into a carriage or auto with any man except your father or brother? I don’t have a brother. And you know my father has disowned me. So, am I not to ride in cars and carriages? I can’t take a cab?”

“I don’t have time to monitor your activities, Assistant Matron Blanc. You are primarily responsible for patrolling yourself, but the men are watching. I will trust you to do the right thing.” Her superintendent looked at Anna blankly.

Anna nodded, unsure whether Matron Clemens thought the right thing was to obey the rules or ignore them. Thankfully, patrolling the more secluded corners of Griffith Park all by herself was not explicitly on the list. And matrons were allowed to keep company with officers for police purposes. And who knows. She and Joe might actually find a criminal. Or a truant.