

CHAPTER ONE

The gem lay in a black box lined with white velvet, the better to display the deep, rich red and the brilliant sparks of light flashing off the facets. It had been cut into a circular disc, almost two inches in diameter, and was set into a gold pendant, threaded on a string of pearls. How long the string was, Kathy couldn't say, as the rest of the necklace had been tucked under the velvet.

"Good heavens, Freddie," Kathy gasped. "You want me to wear that?"

"Yes," her husband said as he gently pulled the necklace from the box. "Well, it's what Grandfather wanted when he gave it to me."

"But, but, it's so huge." Kathy tried to gather her shocked wits together. "I mean, it's beautiful, but... I'm sorry, Freddie. I'd be terrified the string would break or that I'd lose it somehow. My God, it must be worth a king's ransom!"

"Not quite," said Freddie, still grinning. He had obviously anticipated his wife's reaction.

Kathy gazed at him as a rush of fondness filled her for her tall, lean, and incredibly wealthy husband. She seldom thought about him as being incredibly wealthy. However, every now and then, moments would come up and she would be startled by just what it meant to not only have more money than the U.S. Mint but to be included in Freddie's resulting social status.

This was one such moment. Kathy had been bathed, primped and puffed and was adorned in a beaded light green silk gown that complimented her brown eyes. Her neatly bobbed brown hair sported a jeweled and feathered band. Real diamond earrings

dropped from her ears.

Freddie removed the necklace from its box and gently slid the length of pearls over Kathy's head, then picked up the ruby pendant from where it dangled just above her full bosom.

"Blood red," he whispered. "Deep and rich, like the blood coursing through our veins, like our love for each other."

Kathy looked into Freddie's green eyes and felt herself melting. "Oh, Freddie."

He gently laid the ruby pendant against Kathy's chest. Virginia, the lady's maid, approached with a mirror, but Kathy waved her off.

"No, thank you," she said. "I don't want to look. I simply want to think about what you just said, Freddie. If I think about that, I'll be fine."

"Then come, my love, our chariot awaits."

Freddie, decked out in white tie and tails, his strawberry blond hair neatly parted in the middle and slicked down, offered his arm and Kathy took it.

Her eleven-year-old brother Gamaliel was in the foyer all but dancing with anticipation as the two emerged from the back of the apartment.

"Kathy! Don't you look swell!" he yelped with a grin.

His stocky frame was clothed in knickers, shirt, and coat, like a proper little gentleman. But having only lived with Freddie and Kathy for two short months, his behavior generally reflected his life as the Kansas farm boy he was. Freddie roughed up the brown hair, so like his sister's.

"Gam, please, no slang," sighed Kathy.

She looked up to see that Freddie's sister Honoria was waiting in the foyer with Honoria's roommate and friend, Ivy St. James. Honoria had her brother's tall, slender frame and greenish brown eyes, although her hair was brown and bobbed. Ivy was somewhat shorter and rounder than Honoria, with bright red hair. Honoria wore a yellow gown with beads and gathers

around the lowered waist, and a diamond hair band and earrings. Ivy was dressed in a lavender day dress with no jewelry whatsoever.

"I wish I was going," Gam sighed.

"I very much doubt that," Ivy said, in her deep, throaty voice. "They'll have to be terribly correct, whilst you and I are going to have ever so much fun."

"Mrs. Davies said he was to complete diagramming his sentences first," Freddie said, holding his hand out.

Letting out a sigh as deep and profound as a wishing well, Gam handed Freddie the copy of *The Wall Street Journal* he'd been trying to hide. Sliding the newspaper under his arm, Freddie snapped his fingers. Gam sighed again, pulled the pocket knife from his knickers and handed it to Freddie.

"If I catch you with it again, that's another two days without it," Freddie told him.

Ivy kissed Kathy's cheek, then Honoria's. "Do try to have fun, you three. It will make your mother so happy that she's finally able to present Kathy to her set."

The senior Mrs. Little had been trying to arrange a formal reception for her new daughter-in-law ever since she'd found out that Kathy was married to Freddie. That had happened late the previous October, but November proved to be too soon, and December became awkward because of the holidays and the fact that Freddie had brought Kathy's parents and siblings to New York City so that Kathy's mother could visit her brothers and sisters, who all lived in the city.

So, the reception had originally been scheduled for late January, but Freddie's grandfather had taken a bad fall early in the month, his health had failed and he'd passed away two days before the reception was to have happened. The reception had therefore been put off again to early March and since there had been no further complications, it looked as though Gloria Derby Little was finally going to get her wish. Kathy was nervous enough about the party without the

addition of a pre-party meeting with her father-in-law, but Freddie's father had asked to see him immediately before the event and Freddie was apprehensive enough about the conference to ask Kathy and Honoria to be there, as well.

"I'm sure everything will be all right," Freddie said, aiming a quick glance at his wife and sister. "Now, ladies, it is high time we left. Thank you, Ivy, for staying with Gam."

"My pleasure, darlings," Ivy said with a wink at Gam.

Kathy was quite sure it would be a pleasure for Ivy. Both she and Gam had a most disturbing love for mischief. Not the serious kind, but Kathy doubted that Gam's sentences would be diagrammed by the end of the evening.

The ride over to the mansion near 59th and Madison was quiet. Honoria asked Freddie and Kathy how their new publishing company was doing. Kathy wished she hadn't asked but said that it was going well and chose not to elaborate. Freddie didn't say much, either. Kathy asked Honoria about how well her new magazine was doing, but Honoria said only that it was doing well enough and did not say more. What no one in the car mentioned was the coming conference to which Freddie had been summoned.

The chauffeur let the three out on the circular drive behind the mansion. It was adjacent to the formal entrance that led into the mansion's ballroom. Briggeman, the slightly stooped butler, had a footman take the outerwear from the three, then showed them down the hall to the game room.

The room's walls were cluttered with stuffed heads of lions and bears and a huge rhinoceros. Glass-fronted cases displayed a collection of all manner of guns. A large billiards table filled most of one half of the room, and several leather chairs and end tables were scattered about the other half, near a wall with a dart board hanging on it. Frederick Gordon Little,

now Senior, was standing next to the billiards table polishing a small rifle when Freddie, Honoria, and Kathy entered.

"Father, we're here, as you asked," Freddie said.

The elder Little looked up from his gun, then frowned at the two women. He was tall and fair-haired, although Kathy suspected that in his younger days, his hair had been redder. He looked quite dapper in his white tie and tails, but the angry glare on his face marred his appearance.

"What are they doing here?" he asked Freddie, nodding at Kathy and Honoria.

"I asked them," Freddie said, tightly. "Now, what do you wish to discuss?"

Mr. Little, Senior, put the gun down on the edge of the billiards table, dropped the cloth next to it, then picked up a crystal tumbler presumably filled with whiskey. The liquid was amber and Kathy seriously doubted it was tea.

"We need to call a shareholders meeting," Mr. Little said.

"We could, but it wouldn't do any good," Freddie said. "Until Grandfather's will has finished probate, no one has enough shares for a quorum to make a vote valid."

Kathy watched as Freddie's father pursed his lips in anger. Even though Mr. Little held the chairmanship of the family textile business that fueled their wealth, Freddie had not only been made executor of his grandfather's will, he was to receive all of his grandfather's shares of the business. The few remaining shares were spread out among several of Freddie's great-uncles, uncles, and cousins. Mr. Little's normally bombastic temperament had not been sweetened by the terms of his father's will and the fact that his son would soon hold the controlling interest in the business.

Mr. Little moved around a chair and set his drink down on a nearby occasional table with a thud. Kathy

started to walk toward Freddie, thought better of it, and ended up next to the billiards table and the gun. Idly, she looked down and saw that the long, dark muzzle was filigreed with gold.

"We're going to contest the will," Mr. Little said, looking out over the room.

"I agree it was not fair for Grandfather to leave me everything, but you still have the chairmanship of the company," Freddie said, clearly trying to hang onto his patience. "You have no grounds."

"There is undue influence," Mr. Little said, stiffly, still not looking at the others in the room.

"That's ridiculous," snapped Honoria. "The will was dated August 1925. Freddie spent hardly any time at all with him that year."

Kathy tried to swallow a sudden rush of guilt. She and Freddie had met in early December 1924. Since then, Freddie had spent a good deal of time with her, especially after they had married in July of 1925. They'd managed to keep the marriage a secret until the following October. Having their relationship made public had fortunately meant Freddie had more time to spend with his grandfather, especially after the old man's fall.

Mr. Little looked at his daughter as if he was surprised she existed, then glared at her. "I'll thank you to stay out of this."

Honoria began to protest, but Freddie held up his hand.

"You said we," Freddie said to his father. "Who else is involved?"

"Your Uncle Stephen, Uncle Thomas, and Great-Uncle Albert," Mr. Little said.

"Aunt Thelma's husband, Aunt Miranda's husband and Grandfather's younger brother," Honoria whispered to Kathy, who knew hardly any of Freddie's extended family.

"I see," said Freddie. "Well. Is there anything else you have to say, sir?"

"That is all." Mr. Little held himself up straight, then glanced over at Kathy. His face began to turn red and he pointed at her necklace. "Where did you get that ruby?"

Kathy stepped back in shock.

"I gave it to her," Freddie said. "She's my wife and entitled to it."

"How did you get it out of probate?" Mr. Little sputtered.

"Grandfather gave it to me before he died," Freddie said quietly. "It was not part of the estate." Freddie turned and offered his arms to Kathy and Honoria. "Ladies? We'll speak again later, Father."

Honoria was trembling with fury as they stepped into the empty ballroom.

"The utter nerve of him," she snapped. "So, the four horsemen are riding again. How dare they?"

"They are trying to act in the family's best interests," Freddie said calmly, although Kathy could see that he didn't believe it.

"It wasn't bad enough they forced Grandfather to retire from the chairmanship in favor of Father," said Honoria

"They didn't force him," Freddie said. "There was no way they could have. Grandfather had controlling interest and was not about to give it up."

"I don't understand," said Kathy.

"In April of Twenty-Four," explained Freddie. "Uncle Stephen, Uncle Thomas, Great-Uncle Albert, and Father all got together and suggested that since Grandfather was almost eighty-five, it was time to let Father take his turn at running the business."

"They ganged up on him, is what they did," Honoria said. "From the way Aunt Thelma tells it, the four of them all but laid hands on Grandfather to get what they wanted. And you know what a hulking brute Uncle Thomas is."

"Still, it was Grandfather's choice to retire," Freddie said. "Even if all the family had voted to

have him retire, Grandfather still owned over seventy percent of the shares. They couldn't outvote him."

"But they could hurt him," Honoria sniffed. "And I'm sure they threatened to. I'd watch your back around all of them, Freddie."

"Darlings!" Gloria appeared at the other end of the empty ballroom, smiling broadly. Though not as tall as her children and considerably stouter, she was an imposing figure, nonetheless, and generally utterly confident in her bearing as a woman of society. Decked out in a steel blue ballgown and diamonds and sapphires, she looked even more regal than usual. "You came early."

"Yes," said Freddie. But Kathy could see that while he was genuinely glad to see his mother, he was not happy about the timing of their arrival.

Gloria frowned. "Oh, dear. You spoke to your father, didn't you?"

"Did you know what he had planned?" Honoria asked as she kissed her mother's cheek.

Gloria kissed Freddie then Kathy. "It was about him and your uncles contesting the will, wasn't it? I'm sorry he's being so unpleasant, darlings."

"What did he tell you about it?" Freddie asked.

"Absolutely nothing," Gloria said with a ladylike snort. "I had to find out from your Aunt Thelma. She's got some nastiness up her sleeve, the old witch. I wouldn't have invited her and Stephen or the rest of them if I couldn't have avoided it. I do so want this to be a warm welcome for our dear little Kathy."

Gloria suddenly stepped back, looking at Kathy's chest in wonder.

"The ruby," she said, then stopped.

"Yes," said Freddie. "Grandfather gave it to me before he passed. He said it was her turn to wear it."

"Of course, it is," Gloria said, slowly recovering herself. "Actually, it's perfect. You should be wearing it, my dear. It deserves to be shown off. And you deserve to show it." She paused and took Kathy's hands in her.

"I mean that."

Gloria's warmth for her daughter-in-law had surprised everyone, including Gloria. But Kathy had found herself genuinely liking the society matron and the two were becoming fast friends, perhaps even closer than Gloria was to her own children. So, once more, Kathy smiled and promised herself that she would not let herself be intimidated by New York's famed Four Hundred.

It was not an easy task. As the guests filed past in the receiving line, the men in white tie and tails, the women in a rainbow of colors covered with glittering beads and real gems, Kathy felt overwhelmed once again. Later, after the guests had arrived and she had been released from the line, she noticed many of the women furtively glancing at her waistline. Kathy did not doubt that they were speculating about when the first Little grandchild would arrive. At least, she told herself, she would have the last laugh. Not only was there no grandchild on the way, but there wouldn't likely be one if her luck held. Not that Freddie was much help that way. She smiled as she remembered the night before.

"Well, you look happy," said a man's voice next to her.

Kathy turned. The man was of medium height, but round as a ball, balding with fat lips.

"I'm sorry?" Kathy said.

"Your smile," he said. "You look happy."

There was something vaguely smarmy about the way he said it. Between that and what Kathy had been smiling about, she felt herself growing hot and flustered.

"It's, um, nothing," Kathy stammered. "Mr.... um... I'm so terribly sorry. There have been so many people."

"Everyone knows me. Miles Johnson." The man held out his pudgy hands. "Owner of First National Bank of New York. King of banking and finance."

Which Kathy suddenly realized meant that he was not a member of the Social Register. People of that caste seldom, if ever, referred to their wealth or how they got it. Mr. Johnson, it appeared, was what Mrs. Little would refer to disdainfully as a "nouveau," or someone who had only recently acquired his wealth, and by recently, that meant within the past two generations. It also occurred to Kathy that she had seen photographs of Mr. Johnson in some of the trashier newspapers she'd seen on the subway. He'd married Lovey, a girl young enough to be his granddaughter, and their stormy marriage provided all manner of steamy speculation for the tabloids. Kathy had seen several other nouveau but somewhat less notorious businessmen and their wives sprinkled through the crowd and suspected that her father-in-law was behind the invitations. Mr. Little often boasted of how democratic he was and loved showing off how many businessmen he counted as his friends.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Johnson," Kathy said.

"Good to meet you, Mrs. Little." He grinned and pointed at the gem on her necklace. "That there is some rock you're wearing." He leaned forward. "You know, I was supposed to buy that from old Fred over there." He jerked his thumb in the direction of Freddie's father. "I could still offer you something for it."

"This is a family heirloom, Mr. Johnson," Kathy replied. "It is not for sale."

"That's what Fred said." Mr. Johnson sniggered. "I'll find a way. I always get what I want."

"I'm sure you do," Kathy said. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

Kathy pushed away through the people. It was surprisingly warm and crowded in the ballroom now that it was filled. A band was playing jazz softly at one end, while couples stiffly danced. Waiters circulated with champagne and hors-d'oeuvres, and a dinner buffet had been set up in the opposite part of the room.

"Hello, darling," said an older woman. She was tall and slender, with reddish-white hair piled on top of her head and pinned there with diamonds and emeralds to match the rest of her parure and flowing light green dress.

"Hello, Aunt Miranda," Kathy said after a second's fumbling for the name of Freddie's aunt.

"I see you're wearing the family ruby." Aunt Miranda's smile was as warm as a snake's. "It's so good seeing it again."

Kathy covered the gem with her hand and flushed. "I'm glad you think so."

Aunt Miranda smiled and moved on. Kathy began to realize that several of the women in the crowd were also gazing at her necklace. One woman, in particular, a Mrs. Everett Lewton, had smiled when she and her husband had been presented in the receiving line. As Kathy turned to take a glass of champagne from a passing waiter, she noticed Mrs. Lewton scowling at her chest once again.

Kathy sipped her champagne and wondered if she should try to strike up a conversation with somebody. The women seemed disinclined to chat with her, although they were polite. The men ignored her, beyond the occasional request for a dance, which she refused.

Her high heels were making her feet ache, so she left her glass on the first available side table and headed through the hallway to the drawing room in the hopes of finding someplace to sit. The doors to the room were wide open and before Kathy could enter, she heard the strident voice of Aunt Thelma Coates coming from inside.

"You don't know the half of it," she was saying.

Kathy slipped to the hallway side of the door and continued to listen.

"Fred is quite worried about all three of them," Aunt Thelma said. "Stephen finally did the right thing and hired a private detective to find out about her antecedents. I mean, she's obviously quite unsuitable,

and that ridiculous story about her father being a landowner in Kansas. He's a farmer!"

There was a fluttering of shocked female voices and Kathy sighed. Aunt Thelma was talking about her father, who was a farmer in Hays, Kansas.

"And that's not even the worst of it," Aunt Thelma continued. "Freddie was convicted of murder last summer. How he escaped, I have no idea."

"He was let go because he was completely innocent and fully exonerated as such," Kathy said, wheeling into the room.

Four women had gathered around Aunt Thelma, a tall willowy woman with a sour face and wrinkled neck poking up out of her diamond collar necklace. She was dressed in a deep burgundy gown which made her flushed face even redder.

"You!" snapped Aunt Thelma. "You were spying on us."

"No," said Kathy. "I was walking this way and overheard you. And you know nothing about what happened last summer. So what if my father is a farmer? He's a decent and kind man, which is more than I can say for you."

"See?" Aunt Thelma addressed her companions. "Completely unstable. What more proof do you need?"

"Oh, is that going to be your strategy for taking over?" Kathy folded her arms across her chest. "Trying to prove that Freddie is unstable? I wish you luck."

She turned and left the room. Heading back to the ballroom, she looked for Honoria or Freddie. She saw Freddie near the buffet. Someone stopped her to chat with her and Kathy nodded pleasantly, still looking for her sister-in-law. Honoria, however, was absent, as was Gloria. Kathy made another circuit of the ballroom, trying to avoid conversations and mostly succeeding. The door leading out to the circular drive was open and the air was nice and cool rather than frigid. Kathy got a glass of champagne and headed outside.

The drive was mostly empty. The guests had all

arrived and were inside, and their cars were parked elsewhere. Lamps lined the wall of the mansion, and other lamps on poles lit up the driveway. At the top of the drive, one wing of the mansion, the conservatory, stood perpendicular to the main building. It was only one story and the roof was a terrace with a cement balustrade ringing it. Gloria's room opened onto the terrace, as did her husband's room.

Kathy had been standing there long enough to finish her wine when she heard raised voices coming from the conservatory. Below the balustrade, Mr. Little strode out of the conservatory through one of several windowed doors.

"You're not getting what you want this time," Mr. Little said over his shoulder to someone inside the conservatory. His voice echoed in the empty driveway. "As for that tart—" He stopped and turned back and looked up at the terrace. "What are you doing up there?"

Kathy thought she saw some movement on the terrace, but then suddenly, there was a shot and then another and Freddie's father jerked and crumpled onto his back, the bright red blood on his shirt front glistening in the outside lights.