

# Chapter 1

◀◀◀ *Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893* ▶▶▶

Every few minutes the beam of a giant arc light swept the roofline of the White City, cleaving the Illinois night sky to startle the grebes that rode the lake's dark swells. It lit the sleek undercut bow of Mr. Larsen's steam yacht *Valkyrie*, which rode at anchor, adding lustre to her varnished hull, and it reached Evelyn Ballantyre as she leant over the port rail, staring down at the jagged reflections. She began counting the seconds between each raking shaft. One, two three—and as the beam swept away again, she raised her head, following its course over the ripples to the pier a hundred yards away, where it lit the promenade with its booths and stands, shuttered now for the night, before rising again to illuminate the improbable cityscape of classical domes and colonnades, every roofline a string of stars.

*The White City . . .*

Briefly, the beam lit the aft deck where her father sat with Mr. Larsen, their host. They were elegant in evening dress, taking their ease under the yacht's striped awning until the evening's engagement should begin.

"Alright, my dear?" her father asked, lifting his head and looking across at her. She nodded briefly and turned back to the lake. She had sat with them earlier, then risen, excusing herself with a smile that neither man noticed, and drifted over to the rail to watch the extraordinary spectacle as the miracle of electricity transformed the scene on shore. Their conversation had been dom-

inated, as ever, by the day's newspapers with their daily accounts of bankruptcies and suicides, and she had found it tedious. How could there be *anything* new to say?

She frowned down at the toes of her sequined shoes. It was a new pair, and very fine they were, very costly, purchased during a brief shopping trip after disembarking in New York en route to Chicago. The sequins glittered as the arc light swung back, evoking a glamour that, as yet, had no substance.

*The White City.* Back in Scotland, when she first heard the name, it had conjured up an ethereal, mysterious place of great wonder, and looking across the shore now, she thought it lived up to expectations. But there had been nothing ethereal inside the noisy Machinery Hall, where they had squandered their morning, nor in the Mines and Mining Building that afternoon. Her father, inevitably, had been fascinated by both places, engrossed by what he saw, probing for information about costs and returns while she stood by with nothing to do but wait and study the extraordinary fashions of the few women there who, like her, attended their male companions.

Mr. Larsen had left a selection of souvenir guidebooks and programmes in the yacht's saloon, and she had browsed through them with a keen interest. "The world has come to Chicago," he told her with a smile, "so prepare to be amazed." She had browsed through the *Illustrated Guide to the World's Fair and Chicago* and *The World's Columbian Exposition*, which informed her that, quite apart from the main pavilions, there was a Japanese garden and a Chinese pagoda to see, a group of Esquimaux and a Red Indian encampment, as well as the well-publicised attractions of the Midway Plaisance. But her father had skimmed over those pages, focussing instead on the dullest of the exhibition halls, not for a moment considering what *she* might want to see.

Tomorrow, though, when the rest of their party arrived, she and

Clementina would leave the men to their machines and explore the wonders of the Woman's Building together. A whole building designed entirely by women, Mr. Larsen had told her, filled with the creations of women, lined with murals which celebrated the different spheres of womankind, and with exterior ornamentation, the work of a sculptress her own age.

She glanced again at her father as he sat there, complacent and urbane, and considered what *she* had to show for her nineteen years. Buried in the rural fastness of a Borders estate, miles from Edinburgh, she was left for weeks on end with only the dullest of companions, an occasional drawing master and an enfeebled tutor who taught her classics. Did her father ever consider her feelings, or her future? Did he simply assume that she would marry some neighbour's son, as Clementina had done, and live out her days on a similar estate, while the world passed her by?

The thought terrified her, the sheer relentless boredom of it.

And could he not see, for goodness' sake, that it was boredom, nothing more, which had led to the Incident?

She gazed down at the water again, seeing how the reflections fractured into zigzags as the raking light swept towards the *Valkyrie's* hull. A simple friendship, nothing more, born of loneliness and a deepening frustration—it had meant nothing! But the shock of her father's discovery had spurred him into action, and the outcome had left her more delighted than she would allow him to see. Nothing more had been said about it since that dreadful day when she had stood before him in his study and been asked to account for herself, but she knew that he watched her now with an unnerving intensity and a speculative eye.

Behind her, she heard him laugh at some remark of Mr. Larsen's and raised her head to look again towards the enchanted shore. He watched her, yes, but he saw nothing.

The two men talked of visiting the Electricity Building to-

morrow morning, before George and Clementina's train arrived, and Mr. Larsen had chuckled at her expression. "But we will see the Midway Plaisance too, my dear, I assure you, and Mr. Ferris's great wheel. Will we take a ride, do you think? Have you courage enough?" She had returned him a tight smile. Did he consider her a child to be placated by a promised treat?

The giant wheel was visible now above the rooftops, lit by a double row of sparkling lights, an extraordinary sight, and she felt another stab of impatience for the evening to begin. But *still* they talked . . . What more could be said? There were financial and political catastrophes exploding around them, she had been told, and yet the two men appeared to be calm, so she could only assume that they had suffered no great losses. So why the endless debate?

"It won't be long now, my dear, I promise you," Mr. Larsen called across to her. "Keep a lookout. The Wizard said to watch for the magic."

Mr. Larsen was a banker, one of a very small number of her father's business associates who visited Ballantyre House, crossing the Atlantic regularly once a year in pursuit of the bank's business, and Evelyn liked him. He was a genial man, generous of spirit and proportions, and he would discuss books and paintings with her, seeking her opinions, exploring her tastes. But invariably, as she struggled to express views half-formed or ideas newly considered, her father would take him away to spend hours closeted in his study, or out on the terrace with their papers and cigars, locked in endless discussion. *Thick as thieves*, she once heard the housekeeper remark as she sent afternoon tea out to them.

Not thieves. Oh *no*. She looked back out across the lake's gun-metal surface as the familiar sickening sensation churned her insides. Her father was respected throughout the county, a

magistrate who upheld the law, dealing out the Queen's justice to thieves.

And poachers . . .

Quickly she shifted her gaze to the yachts moored close by and began counting their bowsprits—anything for a distraction. Eighteen, nineteen—there must be twenty of them, which, Mr. Larsen said, had formed a flotilla from the New York Yacht Club. And now they rode there, pulling at their warps, tethered like restless thoroughbreds, magnificently *en fête*, dressed over all with bunting and flags, as sleek as their owners. Glossy paintwork bounced the light to brass deck rails and fittings, scattering it across varnished decks, while the aroma of expensive cigars wafted across the water towards her. Perhaps the same anxious conversations were being repeated there too, punctuated by demands to liveried servants who hid concerns about unpaid salaries behind an unctuous servility.

“Now what is the lovely Evelyn thinking, I wonder?”

She was familiar with the banker's avuncular gallantry, which was offered with a sparkling eye and traces of the singsong accent of his native Aalborg as he joined her at the rail. She smiled slightly and shook her head.

From the corner of her eye she could see her father, still seated, drawing on his cigar, watching her through narrowed eyes. Was he asking himself the same question—

“I'm trying to make sense of it all,” she said—and that would be the answer she would give him too, if he ever troubled to ask.

“Ah. The *sense* of it—”

Well-bred laughter floated across the water from the other yachts, and Evelyn gestured towards them. “Where's the panic and the collapse you describe? The desperation—”

Mr. Larsen grasped the rail and looked gravely across the row of lifting bowsprits to the largest yacht, the *Morgan-le-Fey*, which

rode complacently in their midst. It had led the flotilla through the Erie Canal and belonged to the Wizard, he had told her, who would be their host for the evening.

“There’s panic in the heart of every man out there, young lady,” he said eventually, then pulled out and consulted a pocket watch, its heavy gold chain stretched tight across his corpulent chest, adding, “except in whatever organ provides that function in the Wizard.”

She heard her father laugh. “And I don’t see panic in the eyes of Niels Larsen either, thank God,” he remarked, tipping his head back and blowing blue cigar smoke into the night sky before rising to join them.

“But the money to build the Exposition,” Evelyn insisted, “and these yachts, and the clothes, and the jewels— Where did the money come from, and where did it go?”

“That, my dear,” replied the banker, “is what they are asking themselves.”

And then, without warning, the quiet of the evening was torn apart by a mighty whoosh and the gunfire-crackle of fireworks as a dozen rockets shot into the sky from the bow of the *Morgan-le-Fey*, blazing trails of light through the blackness. An appreciative sigh spread across the water, and those who had languished on aft decks rose as if called to worship, and within minutes the first of the launches set out.

“The supplicants go to entreat, and the hungry to feast . . .” her father murmured beside her, but panic was choking her senses. At the first salvo she had gone rigid, gripping the deck rail, her eyes screwed shut, her heart had stalled, but it now began to race and her breath came in shallow pants. She forced her eyes open again and stared out across the water, fighting a rising nausea and focussing on the dark shapes of the launches as they cut through the yachts’ reflections, heading for the *Morgan-le-Fey*. And as the

night sky exploded with starbursts and rockets, the air grew heavy with the smell of cordite.

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She still felt shaken half an hour later when she was handed up out of the launch onto the deck of the *Morgan-le-Fey*, flinching as the last of the rockets blazed above her. They were amongst the last guests to arrive, doubtless gaining some mysterious advantage thereby, and the deck of the yacht was already thronged with people. The party goers were stylish, sleek and burnished like their vessels, and were putting on a fine show. Few of them were under forty, Evelyn decided, as she watched them mingling beneath the swaying shadows cast by rows of Chinese lanterns strung between mastheads, accepting drinks and exotic delicacies from servants who glided along the decks to serve them. And in the midst of them all a tall, broad-shouldered man was holding court. He caught sight of their party and beckoned them forward with a lordly gesture.

So this was the Wizard—

His real name was Jeremiah Merlin and he ran a powerful banking empire, Mr. Larsen had explained to her. “A financial wizard of legendary status.”

“Ha!” her father had retorted. “As Beelzebub is legendary, I suppose. And his name’s a travesty.”

“How so?” she had asked.

“The merlin is known as the dove falcon, my dear, but Jeb is more of a vulture, picking over the carcasses.”

Larsen had laughed. “You’ll keep that view to yourself tonight, my friend.”

“If I must.”

And so it had been all civility and good breeding as their host greeted them. “Your first trip to America?” he asked her, touching

her hand briefly and turning back to her father before she could reply. "I hear your name mentioned a great deal these days, Mr. Ballantyre—" He let the sentence hang there, to become a question. "There are rumours—" he prompted, his eyes, heavy lidded, shifting between the two men. Her father blandly remarked on the splendour of the yacht by way of response, a deflection which clearly displeased their host.

"Rumours, Niels?" she heard him murmur as they moved away, their place taken swiftly by a thin, anxious-looking man.

"There are always rumours, my friend." Mr. Larsen took her arm and guided them to a space beside the rail where a dark-skinned servant brought them drinks. Evelyn looked about her, at the almost theatrical swirl of people and lights, and he smiled at her expression. "Extraordinary, isn't it? Two hundred and ten feet of white pine deck, mahogany fittings and yards of gleaming brass. Schooner rigged, of course"—he glanced up at the masts—"although I've yet to see her under sail for more than half an hour; Jeb prefers a twelve-knot cruising speed and knows his engine can outstrip us all. Ten staterooms, I'm told, six bathrooms, a billiard room, a music room, library, and a deck large enough to hold a small orchestra, and still have room for dancing." He raised his cocktail glass to the light and showed her the etched design of a magician's wand under an arc of stars, above the shield of the New York Yacht Club. He took a slow drink, looking at her father over the rim. "You'll have to watch him, Charles."

"I will."

"Not a grain of compassion."

"I'm rather depending upon that." Evelyn looked up his quiet words and saw that he was watching Mr. Merlin, who had brushed aside the supplicant who had taken their place, and was shaking another's hand. "His father was a butcher from Carlisle. Did you

know?" And he turned back to lean over the rail in contemplation of the lake water.

The rest of the evening was a deadening succession of polite encounters with business associates of Mr. Larsen's. To her surprise, many of them knew her father, or at least recognised his name, and she was impressed by the deference and respect they showed him, while he, urbane and assured as ever, politely introduced her to them, his hand under her elbow. And with the same fixed smile she repeated the same answers to the same questions, and found them almost invariably ignored.

At one point a small round man shot across the deck to join them. "Ballantyre! What the devil brings you here?" A large diamond on his little finger caught the lantern light.

"Fraser. Your servant," he said, and presented the man to Evelyn as another business associate, originally from Perth, with whom he shared common interests on both sides of the Atlantic.

Evelyn found herself briefly under scrutiny, before being asked again if this was her first visit to America, then he too turned back to her father. "What did you say brings you here, Charles?"

"I didn't."

The little man chuckled, looking shrewdly at Mr. Larsen, then back at her father. "There are rumours, you know."

"I've just been told there are always rumours," her father replied.

The little man searched his face again and then turned back to Evelyn. "I last saw your Papa in an Edinburgh boardroom, young lady, with a bunch of hardened Calvinists who believe that the abuse and neglect of orphans achieves their redemption." He swung back to her father. "How did that matter resolve itself in the end? Did the governors suspend the warden?"

"He'll stand trial for the boy's murder."

Her father's face had hardened and the little man whistled.

“Will he, by God! I thought they’d find a way to cover the whole thing up.”

“They tried.”

Evelyn looked across at her father and felt that familiar flutter of confusion and pain. The world thought well of Charles Ballantyre, seeing in him a man of unshakable integrity, a champion of penal reform, a generous benefactor who used his money and his influence to further just causes. This much she knew.

She dropped her eyes to avoid his.

Once, she too had thought well of him—

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Things used to be so different between them, easy with understanding, and bound by an unquestioning love. As a child she would kneel on the cushioned seat in the window of the music room at Ballantyre House, palms pressed to breath-steamed glass, and watch for him on days when he was due back. And seeing him, she would run out onto the gravelled drive, curls a-tumble, and he would dismount to sweep her off her feet, crushing her to him, or better still, he would lift her up in front of him, her short legs straddling Zeus, the great black stallion, as he held her tight. Later they would quarter the estate, stopping to talk to the lodge keepers or to the farmers, who would answer his enquiries in tones of respect and liking. And later still they would stroll together along the riverbank, through the scented evening, she skipping ahead or walking beside him, her hand in his. They would stop to watch the fish rise to kiss the water’s surface, and his eye would gleam in anticipation of the next day’s sport, pointing out the riffles which might hold promise. And as the heron lifted from the reeds to flap slowly homeward he would talk to her—describing how other children lived, how many went to bed hungry, had no schooling, no chance in the world, explaining that money and influence were

a privilege and should be used to bring hope, and she would listen and nod, striving to understand the complexities of a world from which his devotion protected her.

And sometimes she would ask him about James Douglas—

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The little Scotsman soon made his excuses, and as they watched him stroll off down the deck and inveigle himself into another group of guests, Mr. Larsen quietly remarked, "Testing the water," and her father nodded.

"What do you mean?" she asked, frustrated by their habit of communicating by glances and cryptic phrases, which left her in ignorance.

"Not now, my dear," her father murmured and turned aside, tapping his cigar into an ashtray marked with the yacht's insignia. Mr. Larsen did not hear him, however, and explained in a low voice that there had been a strike at the factory Fraser owned in upper New York state, and several strikers had been badly beaten. One subsequently died, and the incident had caused a political furore; Fraser's inhuman work practises had been exposed, and his handling of the matter was widely condemned.

She watched as the little man successfully infiltrated himself into the centre of the group. "He seems to have been forgiven," she remarked.

"Appearances deceive, my dear," her father murmured, following the direction of her gaze. "And memories are long."

"Could he not have prevented it?" The man was now slapping another on the back and laughing rather loudly.

"He was in Leith receiving honours for his work in the slums," he replied, his tone dry.

"And returned here to newspapers crying *hypocrite*," Mr. Larsen added.

The word crackled in the air and she caught her father's swift glance at her before dropping her eyes to her lap, and she began playing with her buttoned glove. But it hung there between them like a poison gas, evoking that dreadful scene in her father's study back in Edinburgh.

→◉ *A month earlier* ◉←

"And who was the woman *you* were with?" Pink-faced, she had tried attack as a means of defence.

"That does not concern you."

"Not someone you'd think of bringing home to tea?"

"No, shrew." His eye had gleamed momentarily. "But then I'm not a nineteen-year-old girl with a reputation to lose, prey to any sort of chancer. And it isn't my conduct . . ."

"A chancer? Patrick was not after money!"

"He was, my dear. One way or another."

"No!"

He had stood opposite her, the oak desk dividing them, grim faced and sardonic, but resentment had made her reckless. "And I suppose your friend was not? After money." His eyebrows had shot up and she had sensed an advantage. "It's the *hypocrisy*, Papa."

It was as if she had struck him. He had blanched, his face rigid, and there had followed an awful silence while they stared at each other across an abyss that was wider than either wanted to acknowledge. Then his features had twisted in an odd expression. "Yes, but I'm beyond redemption. You, child, are not."

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The evening on the yacht ended with a concert held, she decided, so that Mr. Merlin could substantiate the claim that his deck could

accommodate an orchestra. She said as much in low tones to Mr. Larsen, who chuckled and squeezed her hand while the voluptuous strains of a Strauss waltz filled the air. Some couples were dancing—how extraordinary, she thought, that these expensive-looking people could dance and laugh while, if what Mr. Larsen had told her was true, their fortunes were vanishing into smoke. Was it all a charade, and, if so, to what purpose? Defiance or delusion? Or did they feel protected against disaster, here at the Wizard's court.

Her father had abandoned them some time ago but she glimpsed him now, in the shadows of a bulkhead, talking to their host. He was half-hidden from view, and so did not see the manservant who approached, bearing a silver salver. He addressed Mr. Larsen.

"A telegram, sir, for Mr. Ballantyre, sent over from the *Valkyrie*."

Her father rejoined them a moment later, and Mr. Larsen gestured to the telegram. He took it up, read it, frowned, and then passed it to Mr. Larsen, who absorbed the contents and silently passed it back.

She felt a quiver of fear as their eyes met and held. "What is it, Papa?"

"Just business, my dear," he replied softly, before reading it again, and then folding it thoughtfully, sharpening the crease between forefinger and thumb, his gaze unfocussed. A moment later, when the music stopped, he leant forward to address Mr. Larsen. "We *must* find the man before someone else does. There's too much at stake."

"But where to look—?"

"Kershaw will find him, if anyone can."

"And you trust him?"

"Best agent I ever had."

Evelyn listened as they began to discuss contracts and agreements, mineral rights, and claim registration—understanding not a word of it.

"I don't like it," her father concluded, his face hawkish and grim. "And I smell a swindle."

And so the evening was ruined, and all Evelyn could do was listen in dismay as they arranged matters between them. Business, man's work. And on the launch back to the *Valkyrie* she knew she had been forgotten. There was an early train, she heard Mr. Larsen tell her father, which would take Charles to a port from where he could pick up a lake steamer and arrive in Port Arthur a few days ahead of the yacht in order to assess for himself how matters stood.

She stepped out of the launch, tight lipped, and turned to go below, and only then did her father seem to become aware of her. He caught her arm, pulling her round to face him and lifted her chin with a forefinger.

"It can't be helped, my dear," he said, demanding eye contact.

"Can't it?"

He pulled a wry face. "No—"

Mr. Larsen looked on sympathetically. "We'll manage just as well without him, I promise you, and I can spoil you without fear of paternal censure. And besides, your friends arrive in the morning."

"And once Clementina is here you won't care a bit—" She gave him a smile that was not a smile, released her arm from his grip, and went below.