



*The*

METROPOLITAN  
AFFAIR

JOCELYN GREEN

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METROPOLITAN  
AFFAIR

BOOKS BY JOCELYN GREEN

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ON CENTRAL PARK

*The Metropolitan Affair*

THE WINDY CITY SAGA

*Veiled in Smoke*

*Shadows of the White City*

*Drawn by the Current*

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*The Mark of the King*

*A Refuge Assured*

*Between Two Shores*

On  
CENTRAL  
PARK  
1

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METROPOLITAN  
AFFAIR

JOCELYN GREEN



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*To Mindelynn  
Of course*

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have summoned you by name;  
you are mine.*

ISAIAH 43:1

## CHAPTER



MANHATTAN, NEW YORK CITY  
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 14, 1925

**D**ead people were easy to talk to. It was the living ones that often gave Lauren trouble. Even her father.  
No. Especially him.

Rolling her shoulders back, she headed toward the Central Park bench where he waited. At seventy years old, he'd diminished from the giant he'd been to her in childhood. And like the giants in her storybooks, her father had been just as fabled. Outsized in her heart and mind and not quite real.

Bridles jangled on a pair of horses pulling a carriage full of tourists. Lauren watched it pass, then crossed to the lawn spreading from the Egyptian obelisk erected by her employer, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Lawrence Westlake stood to greet her. "I wasn't sure you'd come."

She wouldn't stay long. "You said there was something specific you wanted to ask me?" She sat on the opposite end of the bench from him, near a barrel sprouting orange chrysanthemums. Behind the obelisk, trees flamed with autumn's glory beneath an azure sky.

He lowered himself to the bench. "There is. But first, how are you? How is your work?"

"Busy as ever. We're expecting another shipment of crates from

the team in the field any day now.” As assistant curator of Egyptian art, with the curator on an expedition, Lauren was doing the work of at least two people until the team’s return next spring.

“Anything exciting?” Lawrence’s eyes glinted. From a nearby pushcart, the smell of roasted pumpkin seeds and apple cider carried on the breeze.

After a quick glance at her watch, Lauren told him about the most recent mummy and coffin to arrive and felt herself relax. Lawrence Westlake might not have been the best father, but he’d been the one to instill in her a love for Egyptology. Aside from the curator, Albert Lythgoe, and the expedition director, Herbert Winlock, she couldn’t think of anyone else who might share her enthusiasm for the nuances of ancient Egyptian artifacts.

“I’m proud of you.” His smile brought a gentle tapping on the wall she’d built around her heart. Then he pulled a photograph from inside his jacket pocket. “Look what I found.”

Lauren took it and stared at the little girl in the photo, standing as close to the man beside her as he would allow. It had been taken twenty-seven years ago. She’d been five years old.

“How small you were,” Lawrence murmured. “Do you remember that day?”

“Of course.” She recalled every detail. Someone from a geographical society had come to their home to photograph Lawrence before one of his many trips. Lauren had pestered to be in one of the photos, and they’d finally appeased her. She’d wanted to sit on her father’s lap but hadn’t been brave enough to do more than hold his hand.

She fingered the torn corner of the image. “Do you remember *this* day?”

He frowned. “When you tore off the corner? It was an accident. Out of character for you since you were always so careful with your things. You treated everything as though it were in a museum even then.”

His expression held no hint that he remembered the circumstances. Lauren had been upset that he was leaving her behind again.

Lawrence had tucked the photograph into the front pocket of her dress, saying that she was to keep the picture close, and in that way, they'd always be together.

Lauren had ripped the photo when she yanked it out of her pocket and thrust it back at him. She didn't want a piece of paper. She wanted him.

"I'm going on another trip," Lawrence announced above chittering sparrows. "To the field. Come with me."

Snapping the photo into her handbag, she thought of the times he'd said this to her before. There was always a reason she couldn't or shouldn't come after all. But all she said was, "I thought you'd given up traveling."

"I tried. Staying in one place won't stick." A sigh gusted from him as he leaned back against the bench. "How long do I need to do penance for missing your mother's death?"

But it was the *life* he missed that bothered her most, both before and after her mother died. He didn't understand that or didn't want to.

"You had your aunt and uncle and your cousin," he said. "You and your mother left Chicago to spend every Christmas vacation with them. Staying there after your mother died was best for everyone."

She hadn't said a thing about Mother, and still he argued, bringing up feelings and memories she'd rather leave buried. Was it any wonder she hadn't sought his company during the last four months he'd been living in Manhattan?

Wind teased a strand of hair from Lauren's chignon, and she tucked it behind her ear. "I don't want to do this today."

"It's time to make good on a promise I made to bring you with me."

A promise made and broken more than once. She was unwilling to argue with him anymore, and yet unable to agree.

"The only problem is, the board isn't convinced you ought to have a spot on the expedition team."

"Since I never asked for a spot, we're in perfect agreement." She plucked a petal from the chrysanthemums beside her.

"You're qualified to come. I know that, and you know that. But

you need to prove it to the board. You know, with publications, that sort of thing.”

Lauren stifled a dark laugh. She had proven herself to many people and institutions along the way to earning her doctorate in Egyptology and attaining this position at the Met. She most certainly did not need to prove anything for a role she hadn’t looked for.

“I have no time to impress some nameless board,” she began.

“Not nameless.” He cut her off, handing her a business card: *Lawrence A. Westlake, executive board, Napoleon Society*. A phone number and Manhattan PO Box followed.

She’d heard of the society but hadn’t known that her father was involved with it, let alone on the board. Still in a fledgling state, the organization was devoted to celebrating Egyptian history and culture, and was named for the man whose explorations in Egypt inspired so many others.

“Imagine what this could do for your career,” Lawrence said.

Lauren had gotten further in a career in Egyptology than most women could ever dream of. Still, she couldn’t deny the pull of the field.

“We’ve secured the perfect spot for our new office building and museum in Newport,” he went on.

“Newport? That’s a little out of the way, isn’t it?”

“It’s perfect!” he repeated. “New York already has the Met, and Boston has the Museum of Fine Arts. But Newport is where all those patrons spend the summers, and the Providence Athenaeum, a short drive from there, holds all twenty-three volumes of Napoleon’s *Description de l’Egypte*. It’s only fitting for the Napoleon Society to host a world-class collection nearby. I’ve been curating it for a few years now, and I expect it will be ready to open to the public in another two. Eighteen months if we’re lucky.”

“So this expedition is for that purpose?” she asked. “To discover and bring back artifacts for your new museum?”

“Precisely. We’ll have to do some maneuvering around the new regulations over there, but that won’t stop us. I’m inviting you to be part of that.”

She broke from his dancing gaze and watched the wind move through the trees. Beyond those, Manhattan's skyscrapers needled the sky. *Far* beyond that lay an ancient land she'd been to as a tourist and then later as a student, but never as a professional.

As much as she'd like to believe this opportunity would work out, that she could uncover history herself, she knew better than to hope.

"No, thank you." Rising, she looked down at the white-haired man who had so often broken her heart. "But best wishes as you go about your business."

She tried to ignore the hurt etched on his face. She refused to feel guilty for rejecting the offer before he had a chance to take it away.

As he walked her back to the Met, she tried to talk to him of something else—anything else. But the conversation fell flat.

Little wonder. Egyptology was all they had in common.

"One more thing." Lawrence extended an engraved invitation. "The Napoleon Society's fundraising gala will be November 21. Please come and hear more of what we're all about."

She took it, and he tipped his hat to her. "Thank you for meeting with me today. I am sorry, you know. And I am proud of you. I would recruit you to this expedition even if you weren't my daughter. You're good enough to be on the team, Dr. Westlake."

Lauren hated that she didn't believe him. She hated that she wished she could.



THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15, 1925

Humming a melody from Verdi's *La Traviata*, Joe Caravello emerged from the subway station into the mottled dark of predawn Lower Manhattan. The sky was a bruise, the sidewalk a series of cracks and broken pieces. He trod the final few blocks to work, eager to reach the place where his thoughts had been for more than an hour. Longer, if he counted thinking in his sleep.

At 240 Centre Street, the five-story granite and limestone police headquarters filled a wedge of land bordered by Grand, Centre, and Broome Streets. Streetlamps illuminated the columns and porticoes over the three arched doorways but failed to penetrate the shadows gathered in his mind.

The clock on the dome began chiming the five o'clock hour as he climbed the steps and entered. After passing through the marble reception room and into the detective bureau, he poured himself a cup of tar-black coffee and took it to his desk.

"Detective Caravello?" A lanky figure approached. His sleeves were a half inch too short. Must be fresh out of the Police Academy on the fourth floor. "Oscar McCormick." He shook Joe's hand with a firm grip. "We're neighbors now, so I thought I'd introduce myself." He jerked a thumb toward the desk across from Joe's. Up until two weeks ago, it had been Connor's.

"I heard about what happened with Connor Boyle," McCormick added.

"Yeah." Joe took another gulp of coffee, not minding the scald on the way down. "Not surprised."

"Right. Well, I'm real sorry things went down that way, and I wanted to tell you that straight off, but we don't have to talk about it again."

"Smart." Joe wasn't cutting the kid any slack, and he felt a twinge of guilt. If the new hire had come a month ago, Joe would have taken him for an espresso at Ferrara's. Ever curious, Joe would have asked for his story, what made him want to join the NYPD, and what his goals were on the force. He would have shared his own insights about the job and been the unofficial one-man welcoming committee. At thirty-five years old, Joe was a veteran, and if he could set an example for young officers, it might help them withstand corrupting influences.

What a joke. Joe couldn't even keep his own friend on the straight and narrow.

The young man shifted. "And I have no reason to believe what

they're saying about you, either. I never judge a man based on rumor."

Joe studied McCormick's face, which had turned a ruddy shade to match his hair. "And those rumors are?" He figured he knew them all, but it wouldn't hurt to be sure.

"Oh, uh, just that you could have sprung Boyle from jail with your testimony but decided not to."

"I told the truth in my statement. That's it." Connor's story was that he thought the man Joe had been handcuffing during a speak-easy raid had a gun. Connor claimed he needed to neutralize the threat. The truth was that Wade Martin had been unarmed and already neutralized.

"Well, they say bullets were flying that night, and the one that killed Martin could have easily come from some other miscreant. If you'd kept quiet, maybe Boyle would still be free. They say you ought to have been more loyal to your friend."

"I'm loyal to the oath I took when I swore to serve and protect this city. My friend shot an unarmed man I had already subdued. Is anyone saying that Boyle simply shouldn't have taken the shot?"

McCormick kicked at the foot of Joe's desk, sending his coffee sloshing. "Well, me, for one. I say that."

With a nod of acknowledgment, Joe wiped up the coffee spill with a napkin, then tossed the sodden wad into a nearby waste bin. If the kid had scruples, Joe could only pray he held on to them longer than Connor had. The man he'd shot left behind a young widow about to give birth to a fatherless child.

That senseless killing never should have happened.

Aware McCormick still stood there, Joe felt his mouth twitch at one corner in his best attempt to stop scowling. "Welcome to the force."

McCormick excused himself, and just in time. Joe had an appointment to keep.

At the doorway to his boss's office, he cleared his throat. "Inspector Murphy? I'm ready if you are."

After shoving a stack of files aside, the inspector in charge of investigations motioned Joe inside and gestured to the chair across from his desk.

Joe sat. “This isn’t working,” he began. He’d called this meeting and saw no sense in not getting straight to the point.

Murphy’s blond eyebrows knit together. “After you tell me exactly what you’re referring to, you’d better have a solution to propose.”

Of course he did. Joe hadn’t come here to whine. “Sir, every time we raid a speakeasy and padlock the door, violence breaks out, people get hurt, and five more speakeasies pop up within the week anyhow. I’m sure you read the commissioner’s annual reports.” In one year alone, the NYPD made ten thousand arrests on Prohibition-related charges. Only two hundred thirty-nine of those accused were convicted. Three thousand cases were dismissed, and the seven thousand remaining cases languished in the enormous backlog overwhelming state courts.

“Is this about Boyle?” Murphy’s grey eyes narrowed.

Joe had expected that question. “It’s not about what happened that night. But that does serve as one more example of the risks we take and the little reward we gain—if any—with these raids. We aren’t succeeding in shutting down the illegal sale of alcohol. We’re only moving it around.”

In truth, he’d been disillusioned about Prohibition enforcement almost since the Volstead Act went into effect more than five years ago. “This entire bootlegging underworld is a Hydra. Cut down one outfit and another one takes its place almost immediately. We’re chasing our tails. Spinning our wheels. Pick your own metaphor, but you know what I mean.”

Murphy folded his arms over his barrel chest. “Are you getting to the part where you tell me how to solve the problem of Prohibition in Manhattan?”

“You and I both know that’s a problem that can’t be solved completely. All I’m asking is that we try a different angle.” Joe drew in a breath. “Egyptian art and forgeries.”

“You’re kidding.” Murphy’s expression suspended between amusement and the very opposite.

“Ever since King Tut’s tomb was opened a few years ago, there’s been a demand for all things Egypt. And since the Egyptian government closed off the exportation of antiquities, the demand for forgeries has gone up. Forgery is another form of money laundering, just like bootlegging.”

“And you have proof this is happening?” The inspector lit a Chesterfield and sent a plume of smoke into the air.

“I have no proof that someone is going to get robbed tonight, but you and I both know it’ll happen. Crime happens all the time, including forgeries, whether we’re savvy to it or not.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Okay, how’s this: two days ago, the antique dealer Reuben Feinstein made a call about his property getting egged. I went over there to check things out, and when I chatted with him, he mentioned that the restoration side of his dealership is slowing down because the specific supplies he needs are out of stock all over the tri-state area. I spent most of yesterday visiting his suppliers. Feinstein was right. Gold, turquoise, a certain kind of black paint—all consistent with Egyptian art—are in high demand.” He paused to let Murphy absorb that.

“I couldn’t get a list of his customers without a warrant,” Joe continued, “but it doesn’t take much math to put two and two together here. My gut tells me that if we find those involved in making or dealing forgeries, we’ll find criminals who are guilty of other crimes. Racketeering, trafficking, and Prohibition violations. One crime leads to another.”

The inspector tapped ash into a tray. “Even if what you say is true, you’re forgetting one problem. Where are the victims, Caravello? When is the last time someone came to us to report that their artifact was forged?”

“I’m well aware of that dilemma. If it’s a good enough forgery, they won’t even know it’s not genuine. If it’s obviously fake, they

wouldn't have acquired it in the first place. Or if they figure out it's fake after the purchase, they may be too embarrassed to report that they've been duped. That's why we go looking. You've told me yourself that purely reactive policing is bad policing. Here's a chance to be proactive."

Murphy took a deep breath, but Joe wasn't done speaking yet.

"Remember the oyster shell?" he asked. When Murphy didn't respond, Joe went on. "You read my report. When I was handcuffing Martin, I noticed he held a gilded oyster shell dripping with gin. There was an Egyptian carving on the inside of it. When I asked him about it, he claimed that Boyle had dropped it into his drink before the raid. Why? What does that shell have to do with anything?"

"It's not your job to find out. That's up to the investigators assigned to that case."

"But there's a connection there. And that's not all. I've been looking around at some art dealerships and antique stores. There's an undercurrent of Egyptian art flowing through Manhattan, and it's cloaked in secrecy. I'm telling you, it's worth looking into. Something is going on."

Murphy pinched the bridge of his nose. "I can't possibly sell this to the public, you know. Nor can I get funding from the Board of Aldermen or the Board of Estimates for this. More resources for murder investigations? Sure. Armed robberies? You bet. But to look into crimes that haven't even been reported . . ." He took a long drag and exhaled. "We've known each other a long time."

Joe nodded.

"So I know you have an appreciation for art that most cops on the force do not. I also know you have a thing about fakes. It's personal for you. Can you deny it?"

"Sir?"

"Scams. No one likes them, but you have more reason than most to crusade against them. I get that."

"This has nothing to do with my father, Inspector. It's a proactive

avenue of investigation we haven't tried yet. What we've tried so far isn't working."

"You said that already."

"It bears repeating."

Murphy's mouth slanted in what Joe hoped was resignation.

"I wouldn't come to you with this proposal if I wasn't willing to do the work myself," Joe pressed.

A beat passed, and then another. The inspector blinked. "You're qualified to tell a fake from the real thing?"

"I know who is."

## CHAPTER



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16, 1925

**T**extbooks and translations sprawled over Lauren's desk, topped by a reproduction paperweight she'd picked up from the sales desk: a twelve-inch-tall statue of Hatshepsut, female pharaoh from the eighteenth dynasty. She tipped her mug, only to find a shallow swirl peppered with leftover grounds.

"Knock, knock." Only Anita Young, Lauren's assistant, entered that way. It had begun because her hands were often full, but even when she was perfectly capable of rapping her knuckles on the door or its frame, she preferred to speak her arrival.

"Come on in."

Anita's black bob grazed her jawline as she nodded toward the small plant wilting on the corner of the desk. "I'm curious why you even bother, Dr. Westlake. You're clearly not trying to keep it alive. It's only gathering dust."

"Oh, I barely even notice that thing anymore. It was a gift from my cousin. Elsa works in the American Museum of Natural History and insists I ought to have something living in my office. Other than me." She wiped one fleshy leaf with her fingertip, then dumped the last swirl from her mug into the pot. "Drink up, little one."

Anita snorted. "The living is not your specialty. But the long dead

is all the rage anyway. Speaking of which, the new shipment is here, and Mr. Klein is done unpacking. Want to go see?”

Lauren left her chair before Anita finished asking.

Together, they headed to the receiving room designated for their department, and Lauren thrilled at the sight of crates and lids and sawdust. After Egypt’s declaration of independence from Britain, which came eight months before Tut’s tomb was discovered, archaeologists hadn’t been sending as much back to their home countries as they used to. A revised agreement with the Egyptian government meant most of it stayed there. Nationalist pride surged among the Egyptians, and they were taking much more interest in preserving and celebrating their rich and noble history. Whatever Albert Lythgoe and Herbert Winlock sent back to the Met was granted by special agreement.

Pulling on a pair of white cotton gloves, Lauren lifted an alabaster lotus flower from a nest of wrappings. As she finished unwinding linen from the object’s base, sand sifted between her fingers. She rolled the grains between her forefinger and thumb and imagined brushing the sand away from the object for the first time, after discovering it herself.

Anita turned toward approaching footsteps. “Good afternoon, Mr. Robinson,” she called out as the Met’s director strolled through the door.

“Ladies.” He nodded, his hair and mustache the color of moonlight on the desert. “All is intact from this shipment so far, I hope? As intact as the pieces were before they shipped, at least.”

Lauren brushed the sand from her hands. “We’ve only just begun here, but Mr. Klein didn’t say otherwise.”

“Who?”

“The registrar,” she reminded him. Fred Klein was the most unassuming man she’d ever met, always shying away from attention and meticulous about details. He was well-suited to his job of carefully unpacking every single object that arrived.

“Ah yes, yes, of course. Well, that’s something, I suppose.” The crescents beneath his eyes held more than their usual share of cares.

“Did you need to speak to me, sir, or were you just checking up on the delivery?” Lauren asked.

“I’ve had a meeting with the Morettis. You remember Ray and his wife, Christina?”

“Of course.” They were longtime patrons of the Met, and more generous in their financial support than most. “Their donation to the Egyptian department helped fund the current expedition.”

Mr. Robinson winced. “Right. I’m afraid they think we aren’t sufficiently grateful. Mr. Moretti came today with an offer to give the Met a portion of his collection, but with the caveat that all of his items be grouped together, and the room in which they are housed be named for him.”

Anita released a low whistle. “That’s nervy.”

A smile cracked the placid planes of Mr. Robinson’s face. “Previous directors have gone along with such strings-attached proposals, but I won’t. I explained the museum can’t meet those stipulations since the exhibits change routinely, and we need flexibility with how we use the space. Mr. Moretti rescinded his offer to donate his items altogether. He may choose to withdraw his financial support, as well.”

He looked pointedly at Lauren, though she had no idea what she had to do with the situation. “We can’t afford to lose any more support. We certainly can’t afford bad press, or even the appearance that the Met is exclusive or discriminatory. Given the Morettis’ interest in Egyptology, it would go a long way if you could make some kind of overture to them.”

A ridge formed between Lauren’s brows. “I’m no donor relations expert, Mr. Robinson.”

“You don’t need to be. Just be yourself.”

Anita gestured to the sawdust-packed crates. “Dr. Westlake is most herself when surrounded by inanimate objects. The older the better.”

Mr. Robinson's mustache twitched. "If you want your department to be as robust as possible, you'll find a way to steer the Met back into Ray Moretti's good graces. Don't underestimate yourself."

"Why would she do that when you're doing it so well for her?" Anita muttered so quietly that only Lauren could hear.

"I know you don't like conflict," Mr. Robinson said, "which is why you're so good at making it go away. You should have listed soothing egos as a skill on your résumé."

The tease drew a smile, but he was right. Her dislike of conflict made it hard for Lauren to push back against him now. "Anita and I are already swamped. We've got to sort all Mr. Lythgoe is sending back from the field and get ready for the spring exhibition, too. Next year, I'll ask him to switch places." She kept her tone light, but she wasn't joking. She'd worked here six years and hadn't once been included on an expedition.

Mr. Robinson's mouth firmed into a tight line. "Oh no, you are right where you belong, Miss Westlake. We need you right here."

The words cinched like a fetter around her chest.

Barely covering a huff, Anita broke in. "*Dr.* Westlake, shall we get on with cataloging these priceless artifacts that only you can understand?"

Mr. Robinson took his leave, and Anita indulged in a gigantic roll of her eyes.

Resigned to the task he'd left with her, Lauren turned her attention to an inscribed coffin and the mummy inside. "Hello, Hetsumina," she breathed, in awe of how well preserved everything was. "We've been waiting for you. What do you want to tell me?" Several moments passed while she inspected the hieroglyphs.

"Not that it bothers me, but you're doing that thing again," Anita said.

Lauren lifted a shoulder. "Habit."

"Sure, I get it. I chew the end of my pencil. You talk to mummies." Her blue eyes danced with good humor.

“Oh, come on. It’s not like I’m conducting a séance. I know they can’t hear me. It’s my way of thinking out loud as I look for clues among the inscriptions, the amulets buried with them, their jewelry and textiles. If you knew how to listen, they’d talk to you, too.”

Anita gave an exaggerated shudder worthy of Charlie Chaplin. “Pass.”

Lauren laughed, unperturbed, and went back to inspecting Hetsumina. “Well, she’s easier to work with than most people around here.”

“Aha, you mean mummies don’t need their egos soothed, and they don’t make unreasonable demands of your time or disturb your inner peace.”

“Now you’re on the trolley.” Lauren smiled. “They don’t fight. They don’t make promises, and they certainly don’t break them. Mummies don’t lie.”



There was no way around it. Joe needed an expert in Egyptology, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art employed the best.

“You may be able to catch her if you hurry.” The woman at the information desk hung up the phone and pointed through the Great Hall toward the rear exit of the building. “Her assistant says she just left.”

Thanking her, Joe hustled through a labyrinth of classical sculptures, then through a hall of decorative arts. Upon pushing out of the double doors, he paused at the top of the stone steps and scanned until he spotted her. She crossed the lane and took a left turn on one of Central Park’s countless paths.

He ran down the stairs and darted after her.

“Dr. Westlake!” he called.

Halting, she pivoted. Shadows draped the brim of her hat and fell over the contours of her face. He wasn’t surprised to see that she hadn’t followed the trend of bobbing hair and wore hers in a thick knot at the nape of her neck. “Joe Caravello, is that you?”

Out of habit, he showed her his wallet ID and badge.

She trotted toward him, radiant, and grasped his hand in both of hers. "Please tell me I didn't hear you call me Dr. Westlake. We go back much further than that."

Joe wasn't sure how he'd expected her to respond to this surprise meeting, but he hadn't expected this. "Yes, we do," he admitted, disoriented by her warmth. "But that was a long time ago."

"It's so good to see you again." Her voice had softened to velvet. The gloaming called out every detail of her face, from the dark lashes framing sparkling blue eyes to the subtle cleft of her chin. "I see you've followed in your hero's footsteps. Well done, Joe. I knew you could do it."

He took a step back, hoping to clear his head if he wasn't so near her. Inspector Murphy was right that Joe had an interest in art most cops didn't share. What Murphy didn't know was that Lauren Westlake had been the one to introduce him to it. That was a lifetime ago, before they'd pursued their separate careers and lost touch.

Joe hadn't come here with any hope of resurrecting what they'd had before. He was here on a mission. "Actually, my work is why I'm here."

"Oh. Yes, of course. How can I help?" A flush entered her cheeks, and he hoped it was from the cold, not from the embarrassment of learning this wasn't a social call. She resumed walking.

He kept pace with her. "I need your expertise, if you don't mind. I need you to tell me if a particular piece is fake or genuine."

"Egyptian, I assume?"

"Allegedly."

She led him deeper into the park. Good grief, would she have taken this route without him? Didn't she realize this wasn't a safe place for women alone after dark?

"Do you have the object with you?"

"It's locked away as evidence, but I have photographs."

"There's better light by the castle, especially since the Weather Bureau took it over as a weather station," she said. "It's on my way home, up ahead. Let's take a look there."

The Belvedere was a miniature castle atop a huge rock outcrop, complete with pavilions, terraces, and the best view of the park. The path curved, and they followed it up the stone stairs. Joe stayed several paces behind her, yet close enough to catch her if she were to stumble in those heels. Her hips twisted as she climbed.

He dropped his gaze to her ankles instead, until they reached a gazebo type of structure. Lauren stood in silhouette against a sunset over Central Park, and for a heartbeat, Joe forgot what year it was.

They'd been here before, the two of them. She'd been eighteen, and he twenty years old. Something squeezed in Joe's chest for the lovestruck, naïve young man he'd been. This was where he'd thought he would finally kiss her.

This was where she'd told him she was leaving for college, and that she might never come back.

Joe wondered if she remembered.

"Here we are again." Lauren's smile was wistful, and he had his answer. "Shall we sit?" She approached the nearest bench, which was dotted with evidence that pigeons had made themselves at home here recently.

Joe shrugged out of his jacket and spread it over the seat for her. "Please."

With thanks, she lowered herself. Sitting beside her, he withdrew a few photographs, taken from different angles, of the gilded oyster shell Wade Martin had been holding the night Connor had shot him.

With astonishing speed and confidence, she pronounced it a fake.

"You're sure?" he asked.

"Positive. This is a pendant for a necklace. You see this hole at the top? A genuine piece would have two holes, not one. That's how they strung pendants so they would lay flat."

Joe didn't know what this meant for Connor's case, but as Murphy had pointed out, it wasn't his to begin with. All he could do was pass the information along and let others decide what to do with it.

It did, however, confirm his hunch that Lauren's expertise would

be invaluable. He slipped the photographs back into his pocket. “I wish I could do that. It would make my job a whole lot easier.”

“You can.” Her lips tilted in the same lopsided smile she’d given him thousands of times before. He beat back the memories and focused on the task at hand. “All you need to do,” she was saying, “is study Egyptology since childhood, earn a degree from the University of Chicago, and study abroad, not only in Egypt but also in Germany since they have the best translations and dictionaries of hieroglyphs—which means, by the way, you’ll have to learn to read the German language, too.”

He sat back against the bench. “Trying to impress me?” She’d practically recited her résumé, almost as if proving herself. He supposed she’d had to do a lot of that, working among men who may not believe that behind that beautiful face, a brilliant mind could spar with them—and win.

She colored.

“I was impressed even before all that, you know,” he reminded her. “Listen, I’m looking into Egyptian forgeries. I have a hunch they’ve been flowing through Manhattan along with King Tut fever. But to find the forgers, I first have to find the forgeries and work backward. Would you contact private collectors you know to see if they have acquired anything new—so to speak—recently? And if they have, would you be willing to sleuth out real from fake?”

“You want me to be a consultant for the NYPD?”

“I do.”

“Aren’t your consultants usually men?”

“You’re the one I want,” Joe said. “That is, you’re the best, and I need the best. I wish I could pay you, but this will have to be pro bono. We have zero appropriated funds for this.”

She waved a hand. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll do it. Thank you for believing that I can. It will be a service to our patrons and to the Met itself in the cases where the patrons have promised to bequest their acquisitions to the museum. Better to root out the forgeries before they ever enter our building.”

“Exactly.” He was glad she saw it that way. He figured that being a police consultant would be a boon to her résumé, too. “If you need me to talk to your boss to get the time off work for official police business, I can do that.”

“I’m already overwhelmed at work. I’ll have to help with your investigation after museum hours.”

That changed things. He’d imagined her conducting these meetings in broad daylight. “Walk me through what you’re thinking.”

“I’ll go in the evenings.” She said this as if it were a perfectly reasonable solution.

But the evenings were dark. It was barely past six right now, and night had already fallen. “Alone?” Disapproval made his voice rough.

She cocked her head, the whites of her eyes gleaming. “Who is it that you don’t trust? Is it me, the collectors, or the people I may meet along the way?”

From the second highest point in Central Park, Joe looked out over the oasis. City lights twinkled in the deepening darkness. More than two million souls lived in Manhattan alone, and nearly six million when counting all five boroughs of New York City. “I don’t trust anybody,” he said at last. It was a lesson he’d learned too often, and too late.