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—PATTI CALLAHAN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*

the
MASTER
CRAFTSMAN

A NOVEL

KELLI STUART



“*The Master Craftsman* is a fascinating treasure hunt, an atmospheric tale of the Russian Revolution, and a heart-thumping generational story: What more do you want? Kelli Stuart takes us inside the enthralling world of Fabergé while introducing us to deeply felt characters who must put everything on the line to discover the truth. Compelling, exhilarating, and richly imagined, *The Master Craftsman* is historical fiction at its best.”

Patti Callahan, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Becoming Mrs. Lewis*

“Artfully crafted and constructed, *The Master Craftsman* is the perfect blend of intrigue, suspense, history, and romance. This novel has it all! Lovers of transportive historical fiction will find all their delights met within these pages.”

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“Every so often I want to fall into a story that takes me on an adventure. One with twists and turns that I don’t expect and surprises that keep me engrossed. Kelli Stuart’s *The Master Craftsman* was such a book for me. This novel was a delightful escape from housework, a lovely distraction from daily tasks. More than once I completely lost track of time while reading and took a break only so I could Google pictures of St. Petersburg and the particular Fabergé eggs that Stuart described so well. Grab yourself a copy of this book, then buckle up for an escapade you won’t soon forget!”

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“With in-depth research and a passion for Russia’s unique culture, Stuart delivers a colorful and complex story that’s sure to delight. Part contemporary, part historical, part treasure hunt, part mystery . . . this book is unlike any you’ve ever read. Sit back and enjoy being transported to early-twentieth-century Russia where nothing is what it seems.”

Julie Cantrell, *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of *Perennials*

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St. Petersburg, Russia, 1917



He walked quickly down the narrow staircase, hand pressed against the cold wall to steady himself. On the last two steps, his foot slipped, and he went careening forward, catching himself just before falling. His hands trembled as he straightened and rushed into the next room. Glancing over his shoulder nervously, he ducked behind the counter and pulled back the rug upon which he'd spent countless hours standing. Beneath it, the wood panels showed only the slightest variation from the rest, expertly hidden, the attention to detail his most defining characteristic.

Slipping his fingertip beneath a slat of wood, he wiggled and pried until it released. The entire panel now sprung loose. He stared into the black space below and drew in a shaky breath. Lowering to his knees, he winced at the pain that nipped his joints, and reached his arm down into the hole. It was cool inside, but dry. He had made sure that the climate of this hidden space was perfect. His fingers brushed the metal box, and he wrapped his hand around it, pulling it up, then quickly replacing the floor panel so that it would be hidden to the untrained eye.

Covering the floor with the rug, he pushed to his feet, wishing that his back and knees would better cooperate.

“Did you get it?”

He gasped and spun around, still clutching the metal box between his hands. He looked in her eyes for a long moment, a thousand needs and instructions swirling through his mind.

“Yes,” he answered quietly.

Outside, a loud bang caused both of them to jump. She put her hand to her chest while he gripped the box even tighter.

“Not here,” she whispered.

“No.”

He juttied his chin toward the room in the back and the two ducked behind the curtain. They slid through the shadows until they reached the small desk next to the wall that faced the alley.

“Dust and shadows,” she murmured as they tucked themselves beneath the window.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s nothing,” she replied.

He set the box on the table and pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, mopping at his brow while she watched with tender eyes. He tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket with shaking hands, then slowly reached forward and unlocked the clasp on the box. Opening the top, he turned it toward the thin stream of light coming from the upper window. She drew in a long breath and let it out slowly.

“It’s stunning,” she whispered. She leaned forward, studying the detail, the intricacies, her face etched with awe.

“It is my masterpiece,” he said quietly.

“It is the finest you’ve created.” She paused, straightening back up. “Why did you do it?” she asked.

He held her gaze for a brief moment. “I’ve felt it all unravel-

ing for quite some time,” he finally answered, eyes misting over. Another loud bang on the streets followed by angry shouts cut him short. He shook his head. “There isn’t time to explain.” He looked into her eyes with an imploring stare. “They cannot find it now. If they do, they will destroy it and they *will* kill me.”

“I . . . I don’t understand,” she breathed. “Why? This looks so . . . ordinary.”

“You haven’t seen it all.”

“The surprise?”

He nodded. At the sound of glass breaking, he leaned forward and removed the treasure with the hands of a master. Beneath it was a bed of blood-red velvet. He tugged on a small string sticking out from beneath the fabric and pulled out the top to reveal a hidden compartment underneath. Two more objects lay nestled in the hollow space below. She leaned forward and gasped, her hand covering her mouth. Looking up, her eyes met his.

“Bloody Sunday,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry?”

His gaze glassed over as his mind wandered to that horrible morning when peaceful protestors were massacred on Nevsky Prospekt, St. Petersburg’s main street.

“I was there.” His words were a mist. He closed his eyes, trying in vain to chase away the images of the bodies and the sounds of the wailing. That was the moment when his allegiance had fissured. And this—he looked back down into the box that contained his secret—this had been his act of defiance.

“You have to take it,” he said. His voice was stronger now, more sure and determined. He resettled the top shelf, covering the rebellion, then gently laid the treasure onto the velvet. Closing the lid, he clicked it shut, the sound echoing off the

walls around them. “You must take it with you and go. And my dear girl . . .” He paused, searching her face. “You cannot tell a soul what you have until the time is right.”

She was quiet for a long moment. “I will do this for you,” she finally said.

The two held one another’s gaze. Outside, angry shouts grew louder. They were getting closer.

“The tsar has abdicated,” she whispered.

He nodded, then reached down and picked up the box that housed his masterpiece. He let the weight of it rest in his hands for the briefest of moments, like a father cradling his child for the last time.

“It’s only a matter of time before it all disappears,” he said. “All of the pieces, all of the beauty.”

He reached over and put the box in her hands. “But not this one.” He looked at her tenderly. “You must guard it well. It could be the only one left.”

The sound of shouting grew closer. She pulled the box to her chest and looked back at him, her eyes widening.

“What do I do with it?” she asked.

He shifted his stare back to the box. “This will be my legacy, but they aren’t ready for it now. I trust that you will know what to do when the time is right, and by that time I will be only a memory.”

She shook her head, blinking back tears. “What will you do?” she asked, eyes shining. She reached out and grabbed his hand.

“Don’t worry about me,” he replied. “I’ll be okay.” He pulled her hand to his chest and gave it a quick squeeze before turning her toward the back door. “You must leave now. Find a place to hide it until you can get out of the country.”

He looked around at the shop where he’d spent the last

years bent over his own worktable encouraging his employees and making his fortune.

“Not much longer now,” he said quietly.

“Thank you for trusting me,” she said, blinking back tears.

He nodded, leaning forward and placing a soft kiss on her cheek. “Until we meet again, my dear girl,” he said. “And, Alma . . .”

She looked up and met his steady gaze.

“Don’t ever forget the things I told you.”

He turned and walked quickly through the room, disappearing behind the curtain.




Alma heard him going back up the stairs to the flat he shared with his wife. His entire family was in danger now, angry rioters coming after anyone with a connection to the royal family.

She turned to the back door and flung it open, catching her breath as the icy wind smacked her in the face. Tucking the box beneath her coat and pulling it tight around her, she pushed out into the back alley. The metal burned against her chest, the weight of the secret thick. She would do what he asked. She would escape, and she would hide his masterpiece.

She turned the corner and ducked her head, pressing into the wind and walking quickly past the front of the shop on 24 Bolshaya Morskaya. The Gothic Revival façade of the building that had once been a source of pride now screamed of excess and begged to be targeted by the Bolsheviks. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the gray Finnish granite of the outside of the building, and she pushed past the display windows that had once gleamed invitingly, but which now sat dark and despondent.

The noise of the crowd swelled in the distance, and she looked down at the ground, walking as quickly as she could without breaking into a panicked run. She didn't look up when she passed the door she'd walked by a thousand times before, and she didn't see the wisps of snow falling over the sign hanging just above her head. The sign that read K. FABERGÉ.

Present Day

A light gray illustration of a plant with several flowers and leaves, positioned to the left of the first paragraph.

Ava dropped to her feet from the rope and put her hands on her hips, her chest heaving as sweat dripped off her forehead. She squatted down and rested her elbows on her knees.

“Nice workout.”

Ava looked up and nodded at Joe. She offered a fist bump to her workout partner and jutted her chin forward.

“You too,” she said. She pushed herself up and shook out her arms. “That was a lot harder than I thought it was going to be,” she added with a grimace.

Joe snorted. “They always are.” He grinned. “If it’s not hard, then you aren’t doing it right.”

She smiled back. “Word.”

She walked to her bag, grabbed her towel, and mopped her face while offering reluctant fist bumps to everyone else in the class. She’d rather only talk with Joe, but it was an unwritten rule of CrossFit that you had to be best buds with the entire group of fitness buffs in each workout you attended. Ava much preferred anonymity.

Walking outside, she pulled her sunglasses from her bag and slid them on. The watch on her wrist buzzed, and she glanced down to see who was calling.

MOM

Ava reached into her bag and pulled out her phone and her keys at the same time. She hit the answer button.

“Hey, Mom,” she said, fumbling with her keys and dropping them. She cursed under her breath as they slid beneath the car.

“Ava?”

“Hang on,” Ava said, gingerly lowering on shaky legs to her knees.

“Ava?” Carol’s voice called again through the phone’s speaker.

“Coming!” Ava said, reaching under the car and grabbing her keys. She pushed back to her feet and put the phone against her ear. “Yes, hi, Mom.” She unlocked the front door and slid into her car. “I’m here.”

“Ava, honey.”

Ava paused, her key over the ignition. Her mom’s voice sounded tight.

“I’ve just heard some . . . news.”

“News?” Ava asked.

Carol took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Ava shook her head and started the car. It was her mother’s calling card to draw things out longer than necessary.

Ava’s car sputtered to life and the radio began blaring, causing her to jump and drop her phone again.

“Agh!” She hit the button to turn off the radio and grabbed her phone once more. “Sorry again.”

“Good grief, honey, are you okay?”

Ava snorted. “Define okay.”

“You didn’t get fired again, did you?”

“Uh, no, Mom,” Ava replied. “But thanks for the vote of confidence.” She glanced in the rearview mirror as she slowly backed out of her parking space. “And I didn’t get fired from my last job. I left willingly.”

“After you argued with your boss.”

“Didn’t you say you had news?” Ava asked.

A heavy pause lengthened between them. “It isn’t good news,” her mom said, her voice strained.

“Mom, you’re killing me. Can you just tell me why you called, please?”

“It’s about your father, Ava.”

Silence engulfed them both as Ava ingested her mom’s words.

“My father?”

“His sister sent me an email this morning. You remember your Aunt Sylvie? She met you when you were little. She came for dinner after Christmas when you were . . . oh, I don’t know. I guess you were nine or ten? Maybe you were seven. Anyway, she came and ate with us because she wanted to meet you, but . . .”

“Mom!” Ava threw up a hand in exasperation. “If I tell you that I do remember Aunt Sylvie, will you move on please?”

“Well, honey . . .” Her mom paused. “It seems your dad is dying.”

Ava slowed to a stop at a traffic light. She sat silent, watching as cars crossed the road in opposite directions. She hadn’t seen her father in ten years. She had been sixteen, and it was only the fifth or sixth time she’d ever been alone with him at all. Nick Laine wasn’t a man for commitments, and his understanding of fatherhood was extremely limited. On that final visit, he’d spent most of their morning together tinkering with his motorcycle

and avoiding eye contact with Ava. She told her mom later that day that she'd rather not go back to see him again.

"Ava?"

A car behind her honked its horn, and Ava jumped. She hit the gas pedal, her wheels spinning briefly before fishtailing her across the road.

"I'm here," she said.

"I'm sorry, honey," her mom said.

"Why? I hardly know the man."

"I know. But he's still your dad."

"No. He's my father. There's a difference."

It was silent for a moment before Carol continued. "In any case, I think it would be a good idea if you went to see him. We should both go together."

Ava hit her blinker and slowed as she rounded the corner toward her apartment. The Florida sun above dimmed as a gray cloud moved over, a typical afternoon storm rolling over the palm-lined road leading to her home.

"I don't know, Mom," Ava said with a sigh.

"Ava—"

"I know, I know. He's my father," she muttered.

"Well . . . yes. And he's the only link you have to that side of your heritage. There are things that you should ask—things you may want to know so you can tell your children someday."

"I'm not having children, remember," Ava said. There was a beat, and Ava could almost see her mother pinching the bridge of her nose—something she always did in an effort to control her frustration.

"I don't believe that."

Ava turned the car off and leaned her head back, staring at the stairwell that led up to her second-floor apartment.

“Why do you want to go see him, Mom?” she asked. “He left us, remember? He left you alone to raise me. Why do you care about him?”

There was no answer at first. Ava could picture her mother staring off in the distance the way she did when she was trying to formulate a thought. Where Ava was quick and impulsive with her words, her mother was careful and deliberate—a quality Ava appreciated, even if it drove her crazy.

“I loved him, Ava,” she finally answered.

“Right, Mom. Loved. Past tense. But this is the present.”

“We had a child together. My love for him now is different, but . . . well . . .” She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I can’t let him die without at least thanking him for giving me you.”

Ava shook her head and blinked back tears that pricked at her eyes. “Well, when you put it that way,” she mumbled.

She shoved open her door and stepped outside just as thunder began rolling from the sky—a low, steady rumble that grew in intensity as it pushed over her head.

“Fine, I’ll go with you,” she said, tucking her phone between her ear and shoulder as she reached in the car for her bag.

“That’s my girl.”

Ava heard her mother’s satisfied smile in her reply. She rolled her eyes as she slammed the car door, then rushed to her apartment stairwell, dashing upstairs just before the sky opened up and a sheet of rain dropped from above.

“I have to go, Mom,” she said. “I have to get ready for work.”

“So, you promise you haven’t lost your job?”

“Mother!”

“Okay, okay. I’ll email Sylvie and tell her we’d like to stop by and see him on Saturday morning.”

“Fine.” Ava drew in a breath. “Love you, Mom.”

“I love you, honey,” Carol replied gently.

Ava unlocked her door and pushed into her apartment. She dropped her keys on the entry table and kicked off her shoes, then padded to the kitchen. She yanked open the refrigerator and sighed. There were a couple of apples, some soggy spinach that needed to be tossed, a jar of peanut butter, and an empty carton of milk.

After grabbing an apple, Ava shut the fridge and turned around, leaning back against the countertop.

“So, Nick is dying,” she murmured. She let the thought sink in for a little while, trying to dissect how she felt about it. She’d given up on the idea of having a dad a long time ago. She hadn’t even missed him. But now, with the knowledge that he’d soon be permanently gone, she felt a new emotion swelling inside her chest.

Pushing away from the counter, Ava walked to her closet and pulled down a box from the shelf. She wiped the layer of dust from the top and sat on the floor, took the lid off the box, and sifted through the contents inside.

She pulled out a news article that she’d found when she was thirteen. She’d paid fifty cents to have the local librarian print it for her on their computer so that her mom wouldn’t know what she’d been looking for.

“Oh, are you researching treasure hunts?” the librarian had asked her, and Ava had nodded, because in a way she was doing just that—only she was really researching a specific treasure hunter named Nick Laine.

She’d discovered her father’s infamous treasure hunts quite by accident. She’d been snooping around in her mom’s dresser, looking for a pair of socks, when she saw a letter her father wrote

to her mom explaining how sorry he was that he'd had to leave her and Ava, but he needed to find what he was looking for.

Treasure hunting is my passion, Carol, the letter read. It's what I do. I can't be the guy that stays home and provides for his family. I'm not that guy. I wanted to be him, but I just couldn't.

The letter led Ava to the library the next day to search the internet for the father she'd seen only a few times in her life. She held up the news article and read the headline.

TREASURE HUNTER NICK LAINE UNCOVERS
ANCIENT AZTEC ARTIFACTS

Beneath the article was a picture of her dad standing proudly at the top of a large hill, crumbled ruins behind him. He had one booted foot up on a stone and his hands on his hips, a wide grin spread across his handsome face. Ava had never seen her dad look like that—happy and relaxed. Every time she had seen him, his eyes flitted from side to side nervously, and he rarely smiled.

She dropped the article and pulled out another, this time hailing her father's accidental discovery of an emerald mine in Zambia. The one below that showed her father standing in front of the Smithsonian, the headline announcing an upcoming presentation by the famous Nick Laine detailing all his many adventures in seeking out lost treasures.

Ava leaned back against the wall and thought about all the dreams she'd had in her teens of someday reconnecting with her dad and joining him on his famous expeditions around the world. Together, they'd become an unstoppable force in treasure hunting.

“I can’t believe I wasted all those years without you,” she imagined him telling her as the two of them stood at the mouth of a cave, preparing to hike deep into its belly and unearth its secrets.

Ava would lie awake at night imagining all the places she’d finally get to see, an itch for exploration working its way into her heart. She and her mom never went anywhere besides a yearly trip to see her grandparents in Miami, and one time her mom managed to save up enough money to take her to a little cabin in the Smoky Mountains during spring break. But the weather was unseasonably cold while they were there, and as Floridians they were unprepared to handle it, so they mostly sat by the fire and tried to stay warm.

Ava wanted to travel, to see the world and discover new people and places. But she’d long given up on that dream. She let it go around the time she realized that Nick Laine was never going to change, and he was never going to invite her to be a part of his team. Still, as she stared at the articles she’d read so many times, she felt that familiar stirring wiggle its way back in. The longing for adventure was always there, bubbling beneath the surface, tempting her to let down her guard and tap into it.

She glanced back into the box. At the bottom, beneath all the news clippings, was a picture of her and her dad together. It was the only picture she had of the two of them. She was about two years old, and the photo was taken shortly before he left. Ava sat in her dad’s lap, a large grin splitting wide her face. Her wispy blond hair had been pulled into two crooked pigtails, and she clutched under her arm a stuffed giraffe that her mom told her Nick had brought back from one of his business trips. Nick had his arms around her waist, and he was looking at the camera with a small smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Ava studied the picture closely. “Why did you leave?”

She dropped the photo back in the box, stood up, and pushed the box into place on top of the closet shelf. She glanced at her watch and winced, running to the bathroom to shower quickly. She hadn’t lost her job yet, but her boss had told her that if she showed up late one more time, she’d have to start looking for new employment.

Ten minutes later, Ava dashed out the door, hair dripping wet and still trying to tuck her white shirt into her black pants as she yanked open her car door. With a twenty-five-minute drive to her job at a restaurant in Tampa’s Hyde Park Village, she was cutting it close. She slid into the seat, jammed the key in the ignition and turned it. Nothing. She turned again and let out a frustrated growl as the engine sputtered and coughed but wouldn’t turn over. She pumped the gas pedal a few times and turned the key again, this time the car making only a few clicking noises. She banged her fist on the steering wheel, then leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes.

A tap on the window startled her. Ava yelped and turned.

“Hey, sorry!”

She shoved open the door and shook her head as her neighbor Zak stepped back. Ava stood up and slammed the door behind her.

“You okay?” he asked. His jet-black hair was slicked to the side as though he were ready to have a school yearbook photo taken. Tall and lanky, Zak made up for his lack of girth in personality. His bright blue collared shirt was tucked into a pair of slim khaki pants that only made him look like a skinny Clark Kent. Zak pushed his thick-rimmed glasses up on his face and smiled.

“I’m fine,” Ava muttered.

“You don’t look fine,” Zak said. “You look frustrated.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I am.” She kicked the side of her car. “Stupid car won’t start, which means I can’t get to work, which means I’m probably getting fired today. So that’s awesome.”

“I can take you to work,” Zak said.

“No, you don’t have to do that. It’s totally out of your way.”

“No, it isn’t. I’m working from home today, so I have the time. Let me help you.”

Ava considered his offer for a moment. It was no secret that Zak had a crush on her. Their apartments were right next door to one another, which offered a lot of opportunity for interaction. Their complex was forever throwing mixers and parties where she and Zak would make small talk. Several times, they’d joined up with a few of their neighbors to volunteer at the local homeless shelter, where Ava noticed Zak had an especially endearing way of conversing with people who were struggling with the hardships of life. His attention hadn’t bothered her at first. Zak was quirky and funny in his own strange kind of way, and Ava had enjoyed talking with him, until it became apparent that he enjoyed talking with her for different reasons. Eventually, the attention began to annoy her, and she had purposely been putting distance between the two of them, but Zak wasn’t easily swayed. He’d made it quite clear that he would like nothing more than to spend quality time with her. He was sweet, and he could definitely pass as handsome with a little bit of work, but not wanting to lead him on, Ava had turned him down as gently as she possibly could several times.

She glanced at her watch and then sighed. “I guess if it’s not too much trouble, that would be fine,” she finally answered.

Zak grinned. “Splendid!”