

A
Dangerous
LEGACY

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Chapter
ONE

**New York City
1903**

The amount of female attention her brother garnered never failed to amaze Lucy. Even when he was wearing grubby coveralls and carrying a sack of plumber's tools, girls flocked around Nick as though he were Casanova. Lucy watched from a few yards away as they waited for the streetcar after a long day at work.

Nick was fiercely intelligent, handsome, and had an easy laugh, but what would those girls do if they knew that anyone who befriended him would be targeted for complete and total ruin? Few people lingered for long once they drew her uncle's attention. She and Nick had been raised since birth to be on guard against underhanded attacks from Uncle Thomas, but it would take someone with a backbone of steel to stand alongside them once her uncle got wind of it.

To the outside world, Lucy and her brother looked like normal, hardworking people. Nick was employed by the Municipal Water Authority, and she worked as a telegraph operator for

the Associated Press. They didn't have much of a life outside of their jobs. The lawsuit consumed everything they had, for she and Nick were the only two people left standing to carry on the forty-year battle that had eroded their spirit, finances, and even their safety.

Lucy cut through the trio of girls flirting with her brother. "Nick, I need to speak with you."

His smile broadened when he saw her, and it didn't go unnoticed by his admirers.

One of the women sent Lucy a surly glare. "Who's she?"

"That's the girl I've adored from the moment I first clapped eyes on her," Nick said. "Of course, at the time she was a squalling infant and I was only three years old, but sisters can grow on you."

The girls pealed with laughter and swatted Nick on the shoulder. He didn't seem to mind, grinning down at them with a reckless smile that worked like a magnet on women. One of the girls even reached up to tug on a lock of the wild, dark hair he wore far too long.

"Nick?" Lucy pressed, a little less patient this time. "Can I speak with you? We've got a problem."

He must have noticed the tension in her voice, because he picked up his tools and followed her a few yards away. "What's going on?"

"I got word from Mr. Garzelli that a stranger was spotted poking around his building. I'm worried Uncle Thomas might have sent someone to sabotage the new valves. Mr. Garzelli has cut off water to the building until you can check it out."

Nick's mouth narrowed to a hard line. He'd spent the past two weekends installing pumps and an ingenious set of valves in a Lower East Side tenement building. It meant that two hundred people living on the upper floors could have water pumped up to their apartments for the first time. The valve had been

invented by their grandfather. Such an ordinary-looking piece of hardware, but one that was worth millions and had sparked decades of litigation. Not that the people living in the tenement cared about her family's bitter lawsuit. All they wanted was to stop lugging buckets of water up five flights of stairs every day.

The stranger sniffing around the tenement building worried Lucy. Their installation of those valves wasn't technically illegal, but if Uncle Thomas found out about it, he would make them pay. She wouldn't put it past him to have someone sabotage their work. Mr. Garzelli was probably right to cut off the pumps until Nick could verify it was safe.

"You want us to go over tonight?" Nick asked. It had been a long day for both of them, and the trip across town would take an hour each way, but they didn't have much choice.

"It would be best."

He nodded, his expression grim. "I get it, but I'd rather go to Uncle Thomas's fancy mansion and cut the water to *his* house. See how he likes it. See how he likes—"

"Stop," she said, laying a gentle hand on his sleeve. "Don't let him rattle you. We'll handle this, just like we've handled everything else over the years. We just need to keep our heads on straight."

An hour later, they were in the basement of a tenement in one of the worst sections of the city. Nick lay flat on his back, pointing his fancy new flashlight beneath a complicated system of valves and pumps, looking for signs of sabotage. Lucy sat on an upended bucket, handing over tools as requested and trying not to breathe too deeply. It smelled bad in this part of town, with grimy streets, overcrowded apartments, and very little running water flowing to the hundreds of residential buildings. Each time she visited this section of town, the stench penetrated her hair and clothes, making her wonder how anyone could bear to live here. At least the people lucky enough to live in this building

had running water thanks to Nick and her grandfather's valve. Everything about life for the people who lived here got better, cleaner, and healthier as soon as they had enough pressure to supply water to all eight floors.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs as Mr. Garzelli joined them. Nick slid out from beneath the valves and rolled into a sitting position.

"So someone has been sniffing around?" he asked.

Mr. Garzelli nodded. "He was a skinny guy. Old. Shifty-looking. One shoulder was twisted up almost like a hunchback. It was that weird shoulder that made me remember him. I've seen him around a couple of times before. My oldest boy caught him trying to get in through the basement window, and he ran off. And I saw him last weekend when you installed the valves."

Nick began putting his tools away. "It was a good idea to call me, but it doesn't look like there's been any harm done. You should probably get a better lock on that window, though."

"I know you've been in some kind of court business over those valves," Mr. Garzelli said. "You're not going to get in trouble for this, are you?"

She and Nick risked awakening a sleeping giant every time they installed her grandfather's invention in another of Manhattan's endless tenement buildings, but Nick shrugged and flashed an easygoing smile.

"I'm more afraid of my baby sister than I am of that lawsuit," he said.

"Miss Lucy?" Mr. Garzelli asked incredulously. "I don't believe it."

"You've never seen her when I burn dinner." Nick hefted his sack of tools over his shoulder. "Just don't blab to anyone about these valves. You can't exactly hide the fact that you've got hot and cold running water throughout the building, but no need to mention my name, right?"

“Okay, you got it, Nick,” Mr. Garzelli said with a hearty handshake.

The sun had already set by the time Lucy and Nick returned to Greenwich Village. They lived on the fourth floor of a brown-stone walk-up that had once been a prestigious building but had fallen on hard times in recent decades. Much like her own family.

She twisted the key in the lock to the apartment, stepped inside the darkened interior, and immediately knew something was wrong. Her nose twitched. Cigarette smoke?

That was odd. No one should have been in the apartment today. Their mother had moved to Boston after their father’s death almost a year ago, and they no longer had money for servants.

When her eyes adjusted to the dim interior, she scanned the room, looking for anything out of place. Nick’s half-assembled pumping valves lay scattered across the dining table, their mother’s leggy orchids lined the windowsill, and books were crammed into every vacant table space and cubby. Their once-fine furnishings had witnessed several generations of use and no longer had any pretensions of grandeur, but everything had the comfort of a much-loved blanket. Their family had once been happy here.

“You weren’t home today, were you?” she asked.

Nick strode inside and tossed his sack of tools onto the sofa with a thud. “Nope. Why?”

“Don’t you smell cigarette smoke?”

He paused to sniff the air, then shrugged. “The lady who lives upstairs smokes like a freight train. It’s probably coming through the ventilation pipes.”

“Are you sure about that?” Nick was a plumber, not an expert on ventilation, but he seemed unconcerned.

“I’m not *that* paranoid,” he said as he headed to the kitchen sink to scrub his hands.

He might not mind the faint acrid scent, but it was worrisome. Everything looked precisely as she'd left it, but her skin still prickled with the hunch that someone had been in their apartment while they were gone.

She took a deep breath and wished her father were here. He had been the rock on which their family depended, but toward the end of his life, she'd sensed he was losing hope. She'd often caught him standing before the window, staring down at the street below with bleak eyes, as if the demons were finally catching up with him. The week before he died, she'd arrived home from the office early one day and caught him staring at a paper clenched in his hand, his face carrying a sickly pallor. She flew to his side and asked what was wrong, and he startled. That was the first time she saw pure, undiluted fear on her father's face.

He had stuffed the paper into a maroon satchel and denied anything was wrong, but she knew he was lying. His hands had been trembling as he locked the satchel in his desk drawer.

After he died, she went in search of that satchel, but it was nowhere to be found. She and Nick turned the apartment inside out in search of it. They even pried up the floorboards in the kitchen, where they hid the only treasure left to their family. The treasure was still there, but no sign of the satchel. She never did find it, and Lucy couldn't help but think that it somehow contributed to her father's death the following week. He'd always had a weak heart, and whatever was in that maroon satchel had petrified him.

Lucy heated a can of baked beans for their supper. She and Nick alternated kitchen duties, and it was always a simple affair. After ten hours of staffing a telegraph station, she didn't need anything fancy. All she cared about was easy.

It didn't take long to wolf down the meal, and she volunteered to clean up afterward while Nick flopped on their worn sofa and paged through the day's mail. They both worked long hours,

but she spent hers at a desk while Nick performed physically demanding labor deep beneath the city streets as he helped install the massive underground pumps that kept freshwater moving in and out of the city.

Water flowed from the tap as she rinsed the cooking pot. Even though they lived on the fourth floor, their grandfather's valves in the building's basement supplied the perfect amount of water pressure to their apartment. They lived in a clean, respectable building with an excellent supply of water, but only a few miles away, the city teemed with over a million people crammed into tenements without proper plumbing. At least there was one more building in the city that now had running water.

She flashed a smile of accomplishment Nick's way and noticed him staring at the floor, his shoulders slumped as he held a letter in his hands.

"What's wrong?" she asked, turning off the tap.

"This is from our lawyer. Uncle Thomas is after us again." She stiffened. "What is he claiming this time?"

"He's accusing us of acting in bad faith. They want the judge to throw our case out."

"Bad faith" could mean almost anything, but there was only one truly underhanded thing she and Nick had been doing, and it was the sole reason they'd been able to stay ahead of Thomas Drake's swarm of lawyers all these years.

She set down the dish towel, holding her breath. "You don't think he knows, do you?"

"If he does, we're done for."

Lucy sighed and nodded, wandering to the worn dining table, exhaustion setting in as she plopped into a chair. It was getting hard to keep fighting Uncle Thomas and his family, who lived like European royalty at their mansion in upstate New York. The Saratoga Drakes had been using the fortune from her grandfather's invention to launch legal salvos at the

Manhattan Drakes for decades. Lucy had no proof yet, but she sensed the Saratoga Drakes might have somehow been behind her father's death. The doctor said it was a heart attack, but Lucy couldn't be certain.

Was the lawsuit worth it? Her gaze tracked to the faucet. How easily most people took clean water for granted, but she never did. Neither did Mr. Garzelli or the rest of his two hundred tenants.

Yes. The lawsuit was worth it, even if it meant she became a spinster and had to fear the scent of cigarette smoke leaking through her apartment's ventilation system. She had an obligation to her father and grandfather to keep fighting the Saratoga Drakes. Her uncle had a fortune, an army of lawyers, and three rounds of lower court decisions on his side. Most importantly, he had no soul, and that let him fight with the single-minded zeal of a jackal.

But she and Nick had a weapon the Saratoga Drakes knew nothing about. For two years it had served to keep them one step ahead of her uncle and all his scheming. It was a risky weapon that could land her and Nick in jail, but with luck, it would also finally turn the tide in the Manhattan Drakes' favor.