

A Student of History

CHAPTER ONE

It started for the same reason that so many other things did then, because of my need for money. I was a graduate student in history at USC, two years past my final seminar, lost somewhere in an unwieldy dissertation whose end was still nowhere in sight. I'd met my friend Janet at a café near campus—she was moving to San Francisco the next week with her architect girlfriend—worrying aloud, as I often did, about how to stretch my funds for the month.

Janet's hazel eyes lit up and she leaned across the table. "I have a job for you, if you want it," she said.

I paused for a moment before I answered. Theoretically, I had it good. Besides the \$12,000 stipend I got from the university, I'd won a prestigious \$10,000 fellowship from a foundation that supported research in American history. This had freed me from having to work as a teaching assistant, which was—although no one said so—the only money-making effort that was sanctioned by our advisors, who believed that anything besides teaching or scholarship was beneath our intellectual station. But the truth was, it was hard to live in Los Angeles on twenty-two grand a year—hard not only practically, but also emotionally, when guys I'd gone to college with were making huge salaries in law or finance; and the Westside was crawling with twenty-six-year-old tech millionaires; and the real estate boom had pushed prices to dizzying heights, making those who couldn't afford to go along for the ride feel worthless and embarrassed. My small apartment ran me \$1,500 a month—a much harder nut to swallow after Chloe moved out— which left another three hundred and change for food, gas, car insurance, utilities, and anything else I needed to live. And unlike some of my classmates, I didn't have parents who could help.

"Well, what is it?" I asked finally, surprised by the eagerness I felt. It was like I'd suppressed pangs of hunger until an unexpected offer of food made me

realize how ravenous I was. The day before, I'd spent two hours going through my old books, trying to figure out what I could get for them on Craigslist or eBay, and whether it would be enough to make up the money I needed for rent.

"It's *my* job," said Janet, grinning. "With the lady in Bel Air. She just asked me to help her find a replacement."

I vaguely remembered that Janet had done some- thing, maybe secretarial, for some rich woman up in the hills. I hadn't paid attention because it was so far outside of my realm, and because Janet didn't really talk about her gig. She was in the history department too, but more cheerful and well-adjusted than any other graduate student I knew. Maybe that was why it wasn't surprising that she was leaving the USC orbit to complete her dissertation in a more glamorous locale. Her departure had been received with the mixture of wonder and envy that an escapee always elicits from those still trapped in the asylum. The fact that her dissertation—about some obscure counterrebellion movement during the French Revolution—seemed to be going well just made the rest of us more jealous.

"Well, what do you do?" I asked. Then, remembering my manners: "Thanks for thinking of me."

"It's typing, mostly," Janet answered, but her tone was so enthusiastic that she might have said *swimming with dolphins*. "Mrs. W— kept journals for decades, and she hired me to transcribe them. Over a thousand pages, all handwritten. I just got to page two hundred a couple of weeks ago."

"W—," I repeated. The name sounded familiar. I realized that I'd seen it on a building on campus. It might also have been on a wing at the Natural History Museum.

"Yes, Marion W—," Janet said, sipping her coffee. "She's in her seventies now."

"Is it the same W— as the science building?"

Janet nodded. "Yup, same one. Her family was prominent in the early days

of Los Angeles. Her grandfather came out to California in the late 1800s. He helped found a couple of the fancier suburbs, so she's actually one of the street people."

"The street people?" I said, picturing men in torn jackets on sidewalks during the Depression, holding tin cups out unsteadily to passersby.

"You know—Canfield, Whittier, Doheny, W—. The streets in Beverly Hills, which were named for the original families."

"Oh," I said, feeling utterly stupid. "How did you find her?"

"*She found me.* She asked the dean for a reference, and I guess he mentioned my name. She's really attached to USC—her family's had a seat on the board for three generations, and I have a feeling she still gives a lot of money. According to the dean, Mrs. W— wanted a history grad student specifically. She says we have a greater respect and understanding of how the world works than the flakes in the English department."

"Well, that's true," I agreed, trying to take this all in. A rich lady who'd kept a thousand-page journal by hand. This sounded about as exciting as watching a car get an oil change. Plus I didn't like the idea of what amounted to secretarial work. But the truth was I needed the money.

"You should totally do it, Rick," Janet said brightly. "The work is easy. Twenty-five dollars an hour, ten hours a week. It's not great, but it beats working in the dining hall, and the stories are kind of interesting. Only . . ." A shadow passed over her face, a single small cloud in her otherwise sunny demeanor.

"What?"

"Well, she's kind of *particular*. She keeps herself busy—she's involved with a couple of museums and hospitals, a fancy women's group. But she seems isolated just the same. Her husband died like forty years ago, and I'm not sure she sees her kids much. She's a strong personality, and yet there's something nice there too. I don't know. All that time alone . . . it's not good for any- one,

you know?”

I nodded absently, not really paying attention. In my mind, I was doing calculations. Twenty-five dollars times ten hours was two hundred and fifty a week, or another thousand a month. If I started next week, I could make my rent this month. And the work itself did sound easy—I was a fast typist, could read all kinds of writing from the work I’d done for my father’s business in high school. Sure, this woman’s life was totally foreign to me, but that might make it interesting. Maybe I’d learn something about LA history—I was, after all, an historian—although stupidly, with what I realize now was the particular arrogance of the overeducated and underemployed, I didn’t believe that there was anything the wealthy could teach me. This easy dismissal, this lack of openness to nuance and possibility, might have had something to do with why I wasn’t a better scholar. It definitely had something to do with my failure to hear the hitch in Janet’s voice, the warning about Mrs. W— being *particular*. Given Janet’s general optimism, I should have taken notice of her sudden concern. But I didn’t; all I thought about was my own burden being lifted.