

Chapter 1: Suffragette

Swampoodle Grounds, Washington, D. C., May 4, 1887.

Eloise Strong, at twenty-four, knew that her time was precious. She must obtain a recommendation from her lover, Marshal Owens, or she would never be admitted to law school. As she pushed and shoved her way through the crowds assembled at the ball park, her eyes focused on him, the tall red-haired gentleman standing near the Nationals' bench.

The Washington team was playing the Detroit Wolverines, who were in first place, so the stands were filled with a raucous assortment of cheering men. There was only one man Eloise wanted to see, and she was almost up to him when she felt a hand pulling on her left arm.

"Miss? Where do you think you're going?" A tall bearded man, in a maroon frock coat and striped britches, whose breath smelled of onion and garlic, was scowling down at her. He wore a black bowler with a scarlet cobra badge on the front. This meant he was one of the toughs who protected the illegal gambling going on amongst the mostly male spectators. Eloise assumed he was a gangster of some kind.

"I must talk to this gentleman," she said, pointing toward Marshal, who was now turning toward her, a confused look on his face under his brown gentleman's derby with the tiny pheasant feather in the band. Her lover was wearing brown corduroy trousers, and a matching topcoat, with a green velvet vest and a mink collar. He tugged at his reddish-brown, walrus mustache, which Eloise knew was a signal that he was quite irritated.

"What are you doing here?"

Marshal's fifty-five years showed in his wrinkled forehead and crow's feet, as he frowned at her. Eloise wondered why white men aged faster.

"May we talk?"

She took his arm. He had always been easy to persuade, from the first time she ushered him into the upper bedrooms of the Oyster Glen Restaurant on Massachusetts, where she worked.

They walked toward the Refreshment Tents, over by the first base side of the field.

Eloise knew Marshal was an Appellate Court Judge. He had never kept his professional life secret from her, and this was the main reason she was there. She had a unique chance to enroll in Harvard Law School, as its first Negro woman, but she needed his

recommendation to allow her to bypass the usual scrutiny. Marshal had often remarked upon her astute legal mind, and he had encouraged her education, even if it had started late.

As they strolled into the shade of the tents, she could smell the odors of popped corn, oysters on the half shell, and grilled chicken and frankfurters.

“We had a guest speaker in Mrs. Terrell’s class today. He plays in the International League for the Newark club. Moses Fleetwood Walker. Do you know him?”

She wanted to get Marshal in a good mood, and she knew he loved baseball.

“Yes. I do. There are still a few Negroes playing in that league. That will all be changing, however, at the end of this season.”

He took out one of his Cuban cigars from the breast pocket of his top coat, bit off the end, and spat it onto the sawdust. The deep tone of Marshal’s voice sounded negative as he lit his smoke and began to puff.

“The owners have informed us they will be preventing any race-mixing on teams beginning next season. Except for a few star players, who shall be grandfathered with old contracts, no new Negro will be allowed to play.”

Eloise reached into her blue handbag and rummaged around for something. When she found it, she turned to face him. She watched, as his deep blue, privileged Welsh eyes roamed freely over her body.

She wore the new powder blue dress from Paris, with its tiny straw hat and blue satin band, and the matching handbag with silver clasps. He bought it for her on their anniversary. It had been a passionate relationship of fifteen months, filled with clandestine meetings in various hotels around Washington, but they had never, until that moment, been seen together in public.

“Mr. Walker will want to know that. He seemed to be optimistic about the future of our race in baseball. The sport, he said, was one of the few fields of endeavor where performance mattered more than birth privilege.” She saw him smile, so she continued. “Except, he said, many of the white Southern boys seem to enjoy sliding into his catcher position at home plate with their metal cleats brandished like Confederate swords.”

Marshal reached out to touch Eloise on her slender, alabaster nose, and moved down to caress his index finger on her equally thin pink lips. “Your genetics, thank goodness, allow you to mix rather

well with the public.” He reached around her head and grasped a lock of her tight black curls. “Except for your hair, which has also been grandfathered in, it seems.”

“Has the Attorney General summoned you yet? The *Post* had an editorial by President Cleveland about why he chose you for the Supreme Court. Mrs. Terrell read it to our class. I was so proud of you!”

She brought her right hand out of the handbag and thrust it inside the crook of his left forearm, holding it there, her brown eyes gazing up at his face.

“What was it you wanted to ask?” Marshal gently took her arm away, and it fell limply to her side. “Honestly, my dear, it’s rather reckless of us to be seen out here.” He swiveled his head, from side-to-side, searching for anyone he recognized in the crowd.

“Why dangerous? You’re known to be one of Washington’s most available bachelors. You said I was equal to any woman you’ve ever met, in both intelligence and beauty.”

Eloise recalled their long embraces and his frequent promises of adoration. Now, however, something had changed in his eyes. It was as if their long talks together had meant nothing.

Her lover bent forward, cupped his right hand up to his mouth, and whispered. She could feel the spray from his lips upon her cheeks. “I shall be on the highest court in the land. I cannot be seen with a bastard and former slave. Your outward appearance means nothing to those in my social circle. It is your breeding that matters. Just like your friend, Fleetwood Walker. There can be no more contracts with the major leagues, no matter how well you both play the game.”

Her right hand, once more, reached down into her handbag. As her gaze riveted onto his, she could envision Moses Walker’s face, as it superimposed over this stranger, this imposter lover.

Walker’s lean, dark, and intelligent face, with flaring, wide nostrils, sensitive and bountiful lips, spoke the words she remembered. His father was a physician, a respected medical doctor. Eloise could hear his carefully enunciated speech coming from beneath that perfectly groomed mustache. What he had spoken in class now made this white man’s swollen pink jowls and ugly scowl seem ludicrous in the bright sunshine.

Social inequality means that in all the relations that exist between man and man he is to be measured and taken not according to his natural fitness and qualification, but that blind and relentless rule, which accords certain pursuits and certain privileges to origin

or birth.

When she finally spoke, her words sounded hollow and without passion.

“I can be accepted into Harvard Law School, where you graduated, Marshal. I simply need a single letter of recommendation. That’s what Mr. Terrell told me. He, too, graduated from Harvard, and he believes I can be the first Negro woman to attend. Won’t you allow me this chance? Doesn’t our love, for all these months, mean anything to you?”

When Marshal began to lecture her, Eloise began to fantasize. She had done this many times before in her life. After the Civil War, in Virginia, she was eight years old, working in the plantation tobacco fields as an emancipated slave and sharecropper. A white man came riding up on a black horse and addressed all of the workers, telling them they could live free and get free schooling in the nation’s capital. She had dreamed then, along with the others, and so they made the journey across the Potomac and into the city. She had no other hope, as her mother had died during child birth, the year before, and her father, and former master, Patrick Sloan Wolsey, sold his property and moved to Texas, the last location of the Confederacy, before the war ended.

“. . . and I can no longer see you. My responsibilities are to this great nation of ours, and my reputation is at stake . . .”

Marshal’s voice continued to drone, on and on, just the way Mr. and Mrs. Terrell’s voices had done, promising her that she could rise up, and become educated, in order to demonstrate to those powerful elite that freedom extended to those who advanced through hard work and study. Her sympathetic tears agreed with the fantasies of her elders, and they flooded her mind, blotting-out the reality of her daily life. She did work hard, she studied hard, and she improved her lot, even though she had to do it by selling her body to the prominent politicians who frequented the restaurant where she worked as a waitress.

“. . . Attorney General Garland chose me because I was independent. I cannot become encumbered with the likes . . .”

Eloise tightened her grip on the object inside her handbag. The Preparatory High School for Negroes was also selling her a dream. She was the only one of those from the plantation who had tested high enough to gain entrance. Even so, she had to become a prostitute to earn sufficient money to stay in school. And now, the biggest fantasy of all had come into her life: the idea that she, a half-Negro and half-woman, could gain access to the most prestigious

university in the world. All she needed was a single, signed letter from a white judge. The key to her future, the gentleman standing in front of her, lecturing her, telling her about the reality of this nation's collective dream, had become, for her, an existential nightmare.

He was now smiling, reaching out once more, to touch her lips with his white forefinger, and she fantasized about the painting on the wall of the Sistine Chapel she had seen in one of her textbooks. It was created by the Italian artist, Michelangelo, and the metaphor now seemed very prophetic to her. The naked white man, Adam, was reaching out to touch the white-bearded, white God's finger. And she, a woman who was also white, but in color only, was now being touched by a man who was her new master. But she had this master in her web.

Her eyes moved down to Marshal's chest. The dagger inside her handbag was released from its feminine lair, so she dropped the bag, and she thrust its silver blade, glinting wildly in the sunlight, into this Man-god's heart-of-no-heart. She kept her unwavering fist around the dagger's black handle, as he bled all over her forearm, and it was her turn to smile.

She could feel the last pulsations of his heart's dark chambers, vibrating on the dagger's handle, as the masculine crowd around her circled the falling man, who was now on his knees. She bent over with him, as he collapsed backward onto the sawdust, writhing in pain like a serpent, his derby rolling away. She kept her right hand glued upon the hilt of the dagger, until Marshal made his final, gasping argument on this Earth, to the gathered throng of sportsmen and gawkers encircling him.

"Why, Eloise? You are now doomed."