

Boston 1890

Without a thought about the stories in the newspapers or the whispers in the streets, Mary O'Mallory waved goodbye to her friends and watched as they faded into the night. The mixture of soot, moisture and cold air had blanketed South Boston in a thick fog that made the days feel like twilight and the nights like a damp, dark cellar. The light from gas lamps and the newer electrics struggled to pierce the veil. She could hear horse-drawn carriages just a few yards away but only infer their passing from the sound of the hooves and the dim light their gas lamps made as they passed.

On any other night, she would have taken the streetcar back to Dover House with her friends, but tonight she was waiting for Albert to walk her home. His ship had ported three days prior, and he'd promised to spend his time ashore wining and dining her and reminding her why she liked the lovable rogue.

She straightened the folds on the dress from home that she had changed into in the washroom. Working in Edwin's Abattoir was a dirty job, and she wanted to look her best for Albert. Not that he would have cared if she had specks of cow blood or pig fat in her hair or on her clothes. He'd spent the last three months on a whaling ship that reeked of rendered whale parts, which covered ship and crew alike in a thick black burnt whale oil that never washed off. Try as Albert did to look his best, his clothes and hair were always permeated with the stench. She'd grown to miss that smell in his absence. She'd even taken to using one of his pajama tops she'd promised to wash for him as a pillow case. (Which was as close as they had come to sharing a bed so far.) One more whaling run and he'd have saved enough for the two to marry, he'd promised.

She pulled her coat closer as a light rain began to fall. The damp collar tickled her neck. In the distance she could hear a train pulling out of South Station. The sound of carriages began to fade into the

distance. With the exception of Edwin's, most of the other businesses had closed up for the night. She could hear hurried footsteps on cobblestones across the street as someone ran home to get out of the rain.

"Oh, Albert," she said into the dark. She worried that he might not even see her on the corner in the thick fog. Or worse, that he'd run into one of his friends and lost track of time at some saloon by the wharf.

She'd walked home lots of times that late at night. But never when it was so dark out. It was an hour trip, twenty minutes if she caught the electric streetcar that ran up Arlington. But she'd waited too long and missed the last car. She decided to give Albert a little more time before she walked back home. This late and dark, it didn't make a difference, she thought.

She heard the sound of a mewling cat down an alley and then screeching as two cats got into a fight or got on with their lovemaking. Not a cat person, Mary could never tell the difference. Maybe both. She imagined for a moment that the female cat was chewing out the tomcat for leaving her by herself for so long in the dark. When he tried to make an amorous advance, she nipped him in the ear and let him have a piece of her mind.

Maybe she should nip Albert in the ear. She put the thought out of her mind. She'd spent enough time worrying late at night that he'd never make it back from the sea. She didn't want to push away something she wanted so much.

She heard the sound of a cat behind her, a long mewling sound that grew deeper. It was unsettling. Mary backed away from the street corner and stepped farther back on the sidewalk near the side of the building. She heard the cat again. This time the sound was closer and deeper.

She'd grown up with the usual superstitions about cats, taught by her grandmother who grew up in the hills of Ireland. Nonsense, she knew. But they still seemed like quasi-mystical animals to her. The

cat's meow turned into a growl. It was close by, but she couldn't tell what direction it came from.

The sound came again. This time it changed pitch and was coming straight toward her. She thought she could hear faint footsteps.

"Mmmmmmmmary," called out the sound.

Mary's breath came out in stunted gasps. She was about to run when she noticed a familiar smell.

"Marrrrrrry O'Mmmmalllorryyyy, ohhh how I love theeeee."

Mary swung her purse into the fog and felt it connect. There was a thud followed by a cackle.

"You horrible man!" she shouted through laughter.

"Oh don't you know it," said Albert's familiar voice with his impish lilt. "Still see you have no love for cats."

"Or you either!" she said as she gently pushed him away.

Albert stepped into view from the shadows with his broad grin and locks of dark hair poking out from under his cap. He kissed her on the cheek.

"Oh my," said Mary. "You're late."

"A thousand pardons, Miss O'Mallory. One of our mates didn't make it home last night, and we were checking the saloons to see if he'd been waylaid." He took her hand in his and began to walk down the street.

"I bet you did," she said as she placed her other hand on top of their joined pair. "Had a pint or two, I'm sure."

Albert slapped his pocket. "Only drank what I sang for. Saving my money for you."

He had a lovely voice and sang with a cheerfulness that could brighten a dark tavern or make even the most solemn choir song sound like a celebration. She'd met him at St. Anthony's, where he would sing at the occasional Mass. Although the congregation was a little more upscale than a shanty whaler like Albert was used to, the older ladies had welcomed his charm and voice and seemed not to mind his sooty clothes or slightly off-color sense of humor. He had a

good heart, a big smile and sang like a devilish angel, which was most welcome in the predominately Irish church.

He whistled as they walked along the sidewalk. He brought them to a stop on the corner and listened for carriages. There was no way to see one coming in the mist. She held his arm and leaned into his shoulder. She smelled his coat and smiled.

When they reached Flaherty Street, the whistling stopped.

"Well, I'll be," said Albert.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"I could swear" His voice trailed off.

"Albert?"

"God damn!" he screamed as he was yanked sideways and fell to the ground.

Mary kept hold of his hand. She looked down and saw his face look up at her from the fog. He'd gone completely pale. Paralyzed with panic, she didn't know what to do.

"Albert?" she screamed.

"Not here! Not here!" he shouted.

Albert's body was dragged away from her and into the fog. Mary tried to keep a tight grip on his hand.

"Albert! Albert! What's going on?" She pulled on his hand, trying to keep him from whatever was tearing him away.

Suddenly he was lifted to the height of Mary's shoulders. His eyes looked into hers, scared and desperate.

"Run Mary! RUN!" he screamed as his body was jerked into the darkness.

Mary's grip wasn't strong enough. His fingers slipped from her grasp, and he vanished into the fog.

From out in the darkness she heard him call out again, "Run away!"

Mary's legs didn't want to budge. She was still holding her hand into the darkness, staring at her white fingertips, trying to understand what had just happened.

"Albert!" she screamed. "Albert!"

Despite his warning, Mary refused to run away. Instead, she ran toward where he'd been pulled. She called out after him again. "Albert!"

All she could hear was the sound of her voice echoing. She reached the sidewalk across the street and tripped on the curb. Mary fell to the ground and stretched her arms out to try to find some sign of him. Her fingers only found moist brick.

"Albert!" she shouted between tear-filled sobs. "Albert!"