

# ONE

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*JUNE 1893*

SIX MEN IN STARCHED shirts and wool suits looked up from scarred wooden desks to stare at me. Almost in unison, their bushy eyebrows shot upward in surprise, registering the exact same astonishment one might expect if a spotted pink elephant had just sashayed into the room.

The odor of sweat, stuffiness, and stale cigar smoke weighted the air, as it had in every publishing office I'd visited in New York City. I wrinkled my nose and glanced yearningly toward a wall of sealed windows. Ignoring the desire to fling one of them open, I marched toward the man nearest the entrance. The one who sported a massive handlebar moustache waxed to a precise curl. Disregarding the other men, I counseled myself to remain composed. It couldn't be often a young woman strolled into a magazine publisher's office. Especially when she was accompanied by two nuns in the flowing black veils and robes of their order.

"Pardon me." I shifted my satchel from one arm to the other. "May I please speak to the editor in charge of art?"

The man shuffled the papers on his desk. “Did you arrange a meeting with Mr. Martin?”

“No, sir, I did not. But I have sketches to show him.”

“The boss doesn’t see anyone without an appointment.” The man returned to a pile of papers on his desk in obvious dismissal.

My mouth went dry and I had trouble swallowing. If only he’d give me a chance to prove myself. Periodicals and books needed good illustrators. I thought of Papa and Meemie. My brothers and sisters. I couldn’t afford to turn around and walk out the door. Moreover, I could do the job. I knew it. If someone would look at my work, the drawings would speak for themselves.

Acting as if I hadn’t a care in the world, I stepped to the chair near Mr. Moustache’s desk and perched on the edge of it. “I’ll wait until he *is* available.”

My two chaperones folded their arms in devout contemplation to watch the proceedings.

“Look here, Miss, our editor is an extremely busy man. You’re wasting your time and mine if you think he’ll see you without an appointment.”

I decided the truth would be a fitting rebuttal. “Time is one thing I have in abundance.”

Mr. Moustache’s voice nearly rattled the windows. “I’ve already told you what’s required for a meeting. You can’t simply walk in and expect—” He choked on whatever he intended to say next and coughed so violently he went red in the face.

I jumped up to scurry around the desk and help him, my satchel tumbling to the floor. I pounded on his back while the other men watched. Not one of them got up to assist, but thankfully, the man’s

sputtering slowed to a stop. Mr. Moustache removed a handkerchief from his breast pocket to wipe his face and blow his nose.

Ceasing my assault on him, I said, "Are you all right?"

He hadn't recovered breath enough to answer my question when the door behind us burst open. A stocky, gray-haired man with a cigar pushed to the side of his mouth stormed out.

"What in the devil is going on?"

Mr. Moustache regained his composure, along with his wretched attitude. "I'm sorry, Mr. Martin. I told this young lady you didn't see anyone without being scheduled, but she wouldn't listen."

The editor, swarthy and formidable, glared in my direction. I did not allow myself to wilt. His gaze bounced to Sister Bernice and Sister Therese before returning to me. "I suppose you're here for some worthy cause. If you're looking for a donation, you must submit a written request."

"I'm not after a donation. I've come on my own behalf. The sisters," I gestured toward the nuns, "are only here because of an arrangement made by my father. If you'll give me a few minutes of your time, I have sketches you might be interested in."

Sister Therese picked up my satchel from the floor and handed it to me.

Mr. Martin narrowed his eyes. "I am not in the habit of looking at unsolicited material."

"That's a shame," I smiled sweetly at him. "If you don't look, you'll never know what you're missing out on."

"You can set up a meeting with my assistant. If he likes what he sees, he'll let me know." The editor pivoted away.

My demure approach had not softened him in the least. I squared my shoulders. “But, sir, if you don’t look at my drawings, I’ll have to sell them elsewhere and you’ll miss the opportunity.”

This stopped him. He turned, chomping on his cigar as if eating a Delmonico steak. The crinkles near his mouth deepened.

“You are exceedingly presumptuous.” He crossed his arms, which made him look bigger and more cantankerous. “Very well. I may call myself a fool later, but my sainted mother would come back to haunt me if I turned out a girl who breezes into my office shadowed by two nuns. You have five minutes, but no longer, Miss—”

“O’Neill. My name is Rose O’Neill.” I stood a little taller and held up a hand to indicate Sister Bernice and Sister Therese should wait. Artwork clutched to my bosom, I followed Mr. Martin, and frantically searched my memory for the information I’d gleaned from studying back issues of his magazine.

He shut the door and pointed me toward a seat in front of his cluttered desk. The springs of his chair squealed as he dropped into it. “I’m curious about something, Miss O’Neill. Exactly what kind of situation requires a holy escort?”

I decided to share the truth with him, even though it made Papa seem mistrustful and overprotective. “My father was worried about me wandering alone in the city. When arranging my board at the St. Regis Convent, he asked them to provide a chaperone.”

“Aren’t nuns supposed to be busy praying for people and doing good deeds? As bold as you appear to be, how do they have time to keep you out of trouble?”

“The sisters don’t mind. Truth be told, the younger women like a chance to explore the city. There’s a lot to see.”

“For the life of me I don’t understand why any father would allow his daughter to leave the security of her home for a life in New York City, a veritable haven for scoundrels. Doesn’t he want you to marry like a decent young lady?”

I bit back a waspish response to the implication as much as to the inquisition. “Papa believes women should have a career. He’s preached it to me and my sisters all our lives.”

“And your mother agrees with this philosophy?”

I suppressed a snort at how Meemie would respond to such a question. Patrick O’Neill, my affable Irish Papa, possessed good intentions but had limited interest in his occupation as a bookseller. He did, however, reign supreme at telling stories while he trekked his family from one location to another. Inspired by Thoreau, Papa was eager to find his own Walden’s Pond. If it weren’t for Meemie, we might have starved.

“My mother’s been employed on and off for as long as I can remember.”

“Sounds like your parents have an interesting arrangement. Well, now.” He rested his cigar in a tarnished silver tray. “Show me what you have.”

Opening my satchel, I pulled out a short stack of neatly wrapped drawings. “I brought sixty illustrations and sketches to New York a few weeks ago. Forty-nine are left.”

He examined the papers I handed him. My drawings featured men, women, young lovers, and youngsters, all similar to what I’d seen in the most popular magazines of the day. I could barely breathe as I watched his face for any change in expression, but he remained as inscrutable as a marble bust of Caesar. Twining my hands together in silence, I wished I had a window into his mind.

An eternity later, after he viewed the last drawing, he leaned back, and his chair opined with another squeak. “I can tell you haven’t had any formal training. Some of these drawings aren’t as refined as I’d like.”

“I haven’t been to art school, but I’m nineteen years old and I’ve been drawing since I was a child. I taught myself by copying figures from my father’s books.”

“I see.” His fingers tented. “Most of our illustrators have degrees from reputable art institutions.”

The answer I had rehearsed flowed off my tongue. “Creativity doesn’t require a teacher, and technique can be learned if the pupil is eager enough to study on her own.”

“My dear, this isn’t the place for a hobbyist. We have deadlines, and we don’t hire amateurs.”

“But I’m not an amateur. I’ve sold pieces to *The Great Divide* and to *Art in Dress*. I also contributed to the *Chicago Graphic*, all before I came to New York.”

He shook his head. “A few sales to smaller venues don’t make you a high-caliber professional.” He pushed the drawings toward me. “Why would a pretty young lady like yourself feel the need to compete with men in a cutthroat world like publishing?”

The past few weeks had discouraged and exhausted me. I’d been brushed off by nearly every editor I met. So far today, I’d visited half a dozen offices with no success. My feet hurt and my corset had been pulled so tight I couldn’t take a deep breath. I needed this job. In fact, to establish a career capable of supporting myself and my family, I could use as many jobs as I could obtain. Was it a mistake for my father and mother to gamble everything on the chance I’d succeed

in New York? The long, trying day summoned the advent of tears, but I blinked them away, calling on Meemie's unflappable stoicism.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr. Martin. My parents had no qualms about me traveling here. Nor did they once question my ability to make art a profession. They even believed in me enough to sell our family's cow and gave me the money to pursue my dream." Horrified by how pitiful the admission sounded, I hesitated a brief moment and then firmed my voice. "I am fully determined to be successful. If you don't buy my drawings, someone else will."

Mr. Martin regarded me impassively. "You said you brought sixty sketches to New York, and you have forty-nine left. I presume you've had sales?"

"I have."

"May I ask to whom?"

"Your competitors," I replied with satisfaction.

His chuckle astonished me. "Based on what I've seen of your tenacity, I wouldn't be a bit surprised. Miss O'Neill, these are quite interesting. Fresh and whimsical enough to appeal to our female readers. I'll take a few of your drawings, but only if corrections are made. You won't get top dollar. Advertising money has dropped because of the recession, and we'll have to gauge how your drawings go over. In the meantime, I suggest you investigate formal training to make your art more marketable in the future."

The cloud over my head lifted. Jubilantly, I shot to my feet and extended my hand. "Thank you, sir."

He stood to grasp my fingers. "I like the way you use humor in your sketches tempered with a touch of pity. Keep that angle."

"I will, and I promise you won't be sorry you took a chance on me."

“I hope you’re right, Miss O’Neill.”

Mr. Martin pulled six sketches from the stack. He placed a pen and a pot of ink on the table and stood over me to watch as I added the revisions he pointed out. I shaded the side of a man’s face. Added a curved feather to a hat. Inserted a curl drooping down on a woman’s forehead. I wasn’t certain if he really wanted the changes or rather sought assurance I was the one who had created the drawings in the first place. Once I’d completed everything to his satisfaction, he ordered his clerk to issue a check.

I stashed the money in my satchel and breezed from Mr. Martin’s office, my step light. Sisters Therese and Bernice trailed behind. The seductive zing of brokering a deal, no matter how minuscule, made me forget the way my corset poked and my boots pinched.

Outdoors, a bustle of activity drew my attention. Why sit in a cramped hansom cab when I had the possibilities of New York all around me?

“Mademoiselle sold more pretty pictures?” Sister Therese spoke much better English than Sister Bernice, although life in France had left her pronunciation heavily accented.

“Yes. It’s turned out to be a wonderful day. Thank you both for coming along. I’m not used to navigating such a busy place.”

“Our pleasure,” Sister Therese responded. “The temperature for today is perfect, no?”

“It is, and that’s what’s best about June. Do you mind if we walk for a while? I’d love to explore.”

She bobbed her head in agreement, and we continued along in companionable silence while I drank in the sights. In the Midwest where I grew up, birds roosted in trees. Here, flocks of pigeons pecked at the sidewalk in a constant hunt for crumbs. Hot pretzels



and sausages sold by vendors competed with the stench of manure left behind in the street where horses pulled hansom cabs. The odd mixture of scents required an iron will to keep from pressing a handkerchief against my nose. A messenger boy wheeled past us on his bicycle, and the pigeons scattered in a whirlwind of wings.

Everywhere I looked, people busied themselves. Two bootblacks waited for customers. Rag pickers sorted through piles of garbage. Urchins around the same age as my younger sisters and brothers loaded their arms with newspapers. Their voices rang out the day's headlines as they maneuvered against each other for a sale.

Passersby stumped around us on the sidewalk, and tidbits of conversation caught my ear. Many spoke in fascinating languages I didn't recognize. I took note of each face, marking a creased forehead or anxious mouth—expressions I could capture in future drawings.

And, oh, the buildings. An architectural feast for the eye. They were taller than any tree I'd ever seen. Sister Therese, who studied newspapers to improve her grammar, told me the tallest properties got their nickname—skyscrapers—because they appeared to touch the heavens. When I mentioned how tiresome it must be climbing to the top, she explained they had a lift called an elevator.

"It carries people up and down," she said. Right away, I resolved to test one for myself as soon as I could manage.

Yet of all the grand buildings, only St. Patrick's Cathedral stopped me in my tracks. Intricate scrollwork adorning Gothic glory would have awed Meemie, who had converted to Catholicism after she married Papa. How she'd love to attend Mass in such an incredible setting. If my hands were free, I'd have hugged myself. No other place had ever brought my senses so fully alive. New York City must

truly be the center of the universe. A place where even the impossible seemed possible.

On the cab ride back to St. Regis, enthusiasm intoxicated me. I scurried through the tall wooden doors toward my room, and caught the faint spicy scent of incense, ever-present at the convent. Over the past week, I'd achieved my first victories. Small to be sure, but they were a start. I marveled at the money in my hand. Me, selling my art in a cosmopolitan city like New York. It seemed nothing short of miraculous.

In my childhood, we had to sit on stacks of Papa's books because we couldn't afford to buy chairs. Our clothes were patched again and again, which never bothered me until my first day at a Catholic school offering us free tuition. I'd been anxious in a room filled with strangers, yet I had drummed up my courage and introduced myself to a group of girls, each one wearing a starched and spotless dress. They viewed me up and down, settling on my right shoe, from which the sole had come loose. The prettiest girl pointed at my foot and tittered. The others followed her lead, while I slunk to another room where I could cry.

Wincing at the painful memory, I set up my easel to start another sketch. I pictured a boy leaning against a brick building. A newsboy, like ones I'd seen earlier in the day.

First thing in the morning, I intended to cash my checks, and from there, walk to the post office. I would tuck most of my earnings into an envelope bound for Papa and Meemie. The funds would supplement Papa's minuscule revenue from his book sales and help pay the bills.

I meant to prove my parents' confidence in my dream to make something of myself hadn't been misplaced.