

# **Witch in the White City**

By Nick Wisseman

Cover design by Lorenz Hideyoshi Ruwwe

While writing this story, I referred to a wonderfully detailed map of the Columbian Exposition. Unfortunately, that detail is too intricate to recreate here. For a digital version, see <https://www.nickwisseman.com/worldsfairmap> or search online for "Rand McNally & Co.'s New Indexed Miniature Guide Map of the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago, 1893."

# **Part I**

**Chicago: October 1893**

## Chapter One

On the third beat, Neva bent her hip bones.

It was more than a shimmy, although she'd become as adept at the *danse du ventre* as the other belly dancers in the Algerian Theatre. No, Neva was manipulating her marrow, accentuating her curves by picturing a spring breeze persuading bamboo shoots to suppleness. The alteration hurt. It always hurt. She wasn't made of rubber, and bones were still bones: they had to fracture before she could form them anew. But she barely noticed the pain. She was twenty-one now—almost twenty-two—and she'd been bending since childhood. It was a simple thing to enhance her movements without distorting them.

Simple and freeing.

“Colored trollop,” a female voice muttered to the left of the stage. The white women who came to the performances often made a show of disapproving. But the white men Neva could see in that morning's audience were either grinning in anticipation or straining not to do so. And today's first crowd was large. Not enough to fill the theatre's 1,500 seats, but close to it. The last weeks of the Columbian Exposition—the World's Fair to end all World's Fairs—were drawing huge numbers to every exhibit as people scrambled from across the globe to make sure they didn't miss the event of the century.

And every day, she dared them to go home disappointed.

“Wiggling whore!” snarled a matron in the fourth row as Neva slipped into a sequence of bouncing hip circles and rolled her head from side to side.

She smiled at the Southern sounding “lady.” Each customer in the theatre—be they man or woman—had come to the Algerian Dancers of Morocco expecting to see naked, jiggling flesh.

And while Neva's clothing was less revealing than the skimpy outfits Little Egypt gyrated beneath at the nearby Street in Cairo display, her jewel-toned skirt and veils weren't exactly modest. But the matron in the fourth row had bought her ticket knowing full well she'd likely be exposed to "indecentcy." Maybe she, like other protestors before her, felt her ten cents entitled her to make a scene out of principle. Neva didn't mind. It just made her dance harder.

The price of admission didn't cover whipping pennies at her, however.

"Dark temptress!" the matron hissed, her first coin hitting Neva squarely on her belly button—a surprisingly good shot. "Black beguiler!" The matron stood to launch her next missile, but Neva raised her head in time to see the second penny coming, catch it, and pocket it. She even incorporated the motion into a hip drop.

"Go back to Africa!" shrieked the matron, reaching for another coin. "Go back to the jungle and sully the White City no more!"

This time Neva hid her smile. The rest of the troupe was authentically Algerian, but she'd been born in Chicago. She was probably more American than this old biddy.

"Here, now!" called a bearded Columbian Guard, leaping from his seat to intercept the third penny. "Neva's done you no harm. Let her finish what you've paid for her to do."

She wasn't surprised he knew her name. He'd timed his breaks to coincide with her performances for weeks now.

"What she's doing is little better than prostitution!" the matron protested, scrabbling in her purse for more ammunition.

"And you paid her," the guard noted again, eliciting chuckles from nearby audience members. Even in his ridiculous uniform—light-blue sackcloth, white gloves, and a yellow-lined black cape—he was handsome. And Neva liked his accent, whatever it was. Dutch, maybe?

But she didn't give the time of day to men who stared at her.

He didn't know that, though. "Sit down, madam," he said to the matron in a low voice, "or I will escort you to an exhibit that better suits your *refined* sensibilities."

"No need," she huffed, turning to the elderly man on her left, who'd sunk several inches in his seat by this point. "Stanley, take me away from here. At once."

Stanley sank another inch, then collected himself and stood to offer his arm, only a smidge of resignation evident on his face. "My dear."

Much of the audience watched the pair until they left the theatre. But as soon as the door closed and the guard retook his seat, Neva signaled for Mohammed, her flutist, to blow faster into his bamboo reed pipe, and Islem, her percussionist, to accelerate the tempo he pounded on his goatskin drum. Once everyone's eyes returned to her, she transitioned into an undulating flamenco shimmy, expanding and contracting her hips a hint with each beat.

"Scandalous," whispered a middle-aged man to her left, his eyes rapt as he shifted in his seat—no doubt to ease his erection. Neva smirked at him. Which only made him shift again and her stifle a laugh. Later in the day, there would probably be another "proposition" for her to consider. She'd lost track of how many she'd turned down over the past six months.

Leaning back, she lowered her head to the height of her knees and let her arms rise and fall as if they were being buoyed by onrushing waves. More men murmured; another woman left. No matter. There were still plenty in the crowd to please. And the next part of her act always—

Something small and hard bounced off her forehead.

At first, she thought the deadeye matron had returned to hurl more pennies. Or that another member of the audience had taken up her cause. But as Neva raised her head to its

normal level, a smile affixed to her face, she saw what had struck her: a cockroach. Upended on the stage floor, legs flailing in an attempt to right itself.

She suppressed a shudder. The “White City” of the Fair was far cleaner than the “Black City” of Chicago to the north, but the hundreds of thousands of daily visitors left an avalanche of trash in their wake. And despite the best efforts of the (mostly colored) custodial staff, pests abounded.

But not with such strange markings. As she raised the edges of her skirt to emphasize a series of languorous belly rolls, the cockroach managed to flip itself over, and she saw that its upper shell was festooned with two sickle shapes joined at the outermost part of their curves, as if a pair of crescent moons stood back-to-back. Their coloring was purple, and they ... gleamed.

So did the sickles on the next bug to fall, a millipede that bounced off the cockroach’s carapace, upending it again. The millipede landed on its many legs and crawled towards Neva, prompting her to use a Hagala walk to slide a few steps to her left.

No one in the audience seemed to have noticed the insects yet. Almost everyone’s focus remained on her, even when another bug—a fat worm?—dropped next to the first two. Was there a hole in the roof? Or were they congregating because last week a white woman had thrown rotten fruit at Meriem as she’d bowed at the end of her performance? Maybe one of the juicier pieces had splattered the rafters. The resulting mold might explain the purple markings.

Neva extended into another backbend, actively looking up this time to see if she could locate the source—there. Directly above where she’d been dancing a few moments ago: a score of insects clustered on a beam. All sporting glittering sickles and crawling over something pale. Only a portion of the object was visible, the rest obscured either by the bugs or the beam it rested on. But what she could see looked like ... the carefully manicured fingertips of a human hand.

“God preserve me,” Neva breathed, instinctively elevating out of the backbend and stepping into a set of Tunisian twists. Surely Augie, her twin brother, fellow performer, and dedicated prankster, was playing a trick on her by painting bugs and planting props. Or perhaps she was hallucinating. But on the stage, the cockroach still scabbled madly to right itself, and the millipede had begun chewing on the worm. Which, now that she looked closer, wasn’t a worm at all.

It was a thumb.

Neva wasn’t sure how she stifled her scream or maintained her steps. Yet no sound escaped her lips as she resumed her Hagala walk and edged to the left. Outwardly, she remained perfectly calm: unruffled, wholly engaged in her dance, giving no cause for alarm.

Until she rolled her head back and saw that the beam was *alive* now, glistening and pulsing with a thick coating of sickle-marked insects—praying mantises, slugs, dung beetles, hornets, moths, ants, and more—swarming over each other in their frenzy to form a writhing stalactite whose tip, at its current rate of growth, would reach her in seconds.

None of the winged bugs had taken flight yet. But several fell on her as she dove to the stage’s floor and rolled further left. And although Islem’s reed pipe faltered, and the Columbian Guard had a troubled look on his face, no one seemed to have registered anything other than the abrupt change to her movements. *Was* she hallucinating? Or was the hem of the raised curtain shielding the bugs from the audience’s view?

“A moment’s respite!” Neva called out as she ripped off one of her veils, flicked the insects on it to her right, and fled offstage to her left.

But the stalactite of bugs streamed across the rafter in pursuit. And as the music died and the crowd burred with discontent, the insects descended on her in a chattering, biting shower.



## Chapter Two

The bugs were everywhere, *went* everywhere, but Neva still didn't scream.

She didn't have time.

She had to stop the vermin from biting her, had to get them off, had to be *clean*. Her hands tore at her clothing, flinging off cockroaches and spiders and leeches, and her bones spasmed, working her body into ever-faster convulsions that shook loose the tiny invaders like droplets from a wet, wriggling dog.

It wasn't enough.

There were too many insects, and she was still coated in them, still *infested* ... when they fell away. Every single one. Dropped to the floor and scurried into the shadows as Neva caught her breath and the Columbian Guard sprinted up to her—he must have jumped on stage and followed her into the off-left wing.

“Are you all right?”

She didn't answer, but he seemed puzzled as to why she was breathing hard and wiping at her clothing. Had he really seen nothing?

Wahib, the Algerian troupe's worldly leader, hurried out of the changing room. His skin was as dark as the guard's was light—with a change of outfit, Wahib could have passed for one of the Fon warriors in the Dahomey Village exhibit. “Neva?” he asked gently.

She shook her head, eyes still scanning the floor, the walls, the ceiling. How could the bugs just be *gone*?

Wahib wrinkled his wrinkles, glanced at the guard, and turned around. “I'll get someone else on stage.”

“Wait.”

Wahib turned back to her, eyebrows raised.

What could she say that wouldn't sound hysterical? “There's something lodged in the rafters. Bugs are eating it. Part of it fell onstage. The bugs fell on me.”

“Ah.” He grabbed a broom. “I'll clean it up. You catch your breath.”

As Wahib stepped out to soothe the audience, the guard motioned toward a chair.

“Please. You look fagged.”

Neva stayed standing. She wanted to remain mobile. Just in case. “I'm fine.”

“Flaming hell, no you're not.” His eyes must have adjusted to the dimmer lighting backstage; he'd finally registered the bite marks. There weren't as many as Neva had thought at first—most of the bugs had merely crawled over and under her clothes—but she was still well-chewed.

The guard made as if to put his hand on her shoulder, but she flinched, and he withdrew his arm. “My apologies. But you need to see to that. I can have an ambulance brought around if you'd like. If you feel up to walking, though, I'd be happy to escort you to the Exposition Hospital. I'm sure Dr. Gentles would ...”

The guard trailed off as the back of Neva's right hand started to throb. Throb and *expand*. She wasn't doing anything with her bones. This was her skin reddening and rising, swelling into the shape she still saw when she closed her eyes: the shape of two adjoined crescents.

And now that she saw the combination on *her* flesh, she noticed that the resulting symbol looked vaguely like an insect in flight.

For a moment, the only sound was that of Mohammed and Islem playing in the theatre; they'd been filling the void with an energetic number that would have been exhausting to dance

to. But when another set of sickles rose rapidly on Neva's left hand, and two more popped up on the tops of her feet, the guard found his voice: "I'll send for a doctor to meet us at the Administration Building. We need to report this."

She stepped back from him. The concern in his green eyes seemed genuine, and his well-kept brown beard rounded his face in a way that gave him a trustworthy air, but she still didn't know him. "I need to find my brother."

"I'll have someone notify him." The guard looked set to take her hand, but he restrained himself. "Please. Those marks—"

Wahib strode back into the off-left wing, clutching something in his hand. "You'll want to see this." He opened his fingers to reveal a sixth digit, this one unattached and slightly bloody.

The thumb Neva had seen fall to the stage. So it *had* been real. It had all been real.

Which only made her want to see Augie more.

"The rest of it is above," Wahib said, placing the bloody digit in the guard's hand. "I'll lower the curtain so you can collect it."

"Right ..." The guard lifted the finger with two of his own. "Do you have a bag?"

"Neva?" asked Wahib instead of answering.

But she was already darting into the changing room, sprinting past a surprised Camelia—whose shift came next—and pounding out the theatre's back door and around to the front. Neva's eyes took a moment to adjust, but she already knew what she'd see: the Indian Bazaar, the Vienna Café, throngs of people, and the towering Ferris Wheel.

Augie was in his regular position next to the line for the Wheel, regaling the captive audience with stories of the delights they'd find in the neighboring Algerian and Tunisian Village. "The Wheel may be the first of its kind," he said in a spot-on imitation of President

Cleveland's timbre and tempo; her brother could twist his voice as adroitly as Neva could bend her bones, and when the country's leader had opened the Fair back in May, Augie had taken careful notes on how Cleveland spoke and acted. "But the attraction you'll remember forever is the dancing girls of the Algerian Theatre. Beautiful features? Certainly. Elegant dresses? Absolutely. But let's be frank: it's their hips you'll never forget. My god, those hips. When they're swaying to the hootchie-kootchie? Well, it'll make you feel positively presidential."

Augie's audience laughed, but when he saw Neva, he cocked his head—he knew she was supposed to be onstage. She beckoned to him, and he switched to his normal voice to conclude his pitch: "And with that enticement, kind sirs and gentle ladies, I leave you to enjoy the *second* greatest attraction of the Exposition, with hopes you'll soon experience the first."

Several visitors promised they would, and Augie waved his thanks as he left the line and took Neva's hand, his palm fitting to hers almost exactly; they weren't identical twins, but they had the same lithe build and caramel coloring.

"What happened to your face?" he asked in a protective tone, so soft it was barely audible over the cries of other street performers, camels braying from the Street in Cairo complex, a lion roaring over at Hagenbeck's Animal Show, and the Fair's thousand other sounds. His fingers brushed the rash on the back of her hand, causing Neva to flinch. "Sorry. What is that?"

She pulled her hand away and turned it over for him to see.

His eyes widened. The rash had purpled in the few minutes since it appeared, but it was still distinguishable as two adjoined, unnatural sickle shapes. For once in his life, Augie was speechless.

"Bugs," Neva whispered, displaying the mark on her other hand. "Hundreds of them. They fell on me while I was dancing, then disappeared as fast as they came. I can still feel them."

She glanced down to be sure nothing was creeping toward her. But there were no insects in sight. Just feet and trash.

“God in Heaven.” Augie bit his lip as he studied the rashes. “And they did *that*? Those look like brands.”

She nodded. The thought had occurred to her as well; their mother had been a slave before the Civil War.

Augie took Neva’s hand again, careful not to touch the rash. “Let’s get you tended. I’ll have Wahib call a doctor while I find some balm. Then I’ll see about getting the theatre scoured for pests. This is unacceptable.”

“Neva!”

She recognized the voice without turning around: it was the guard’s. “Augie, that man coming toward us ...”

“The Columbian Guard?”

“He found me after the bugs. He wants me to report this to Administration.”

“Why?”

“... There was something else on stage.”

The guard approached, breathing easily despite his brisk jog; admission to the Columbian Guard was contingent on meeting strict physical requirements. A small pouch dangled from his right hand. “Neva, please hear me out.”

She tried not to look at the bag as tourists streamed around them.

“I know you’re hurt. I know you’re frightened—”

“She’s fine now,” Augie interrupted, letting go of Neva’s palm so he could put his arm around her shoulder.

The guard glanced at him. “You’re her brother?”

“Yes.”

“Then you should know she’s in terrible danger. Those marks on her hands ...” Despite the surrounding din, the guard lowered his voice. “People are dying with them.”

Neva couldn’t help herself: her eyes went to the pouch.

Augie snorted. “Come off it.”

“Five bodies in eight days. It’s no jest.”

“In the Fair?”

“On the grounds and in Chicago.”

Augie snorted again. “We’d have heard something.”

“Not likely. Director Burnham and Mayor Harrison want it kept as quiet as possible. I’m risking my post by telling you.”

“So we’re supposed to just take your word?”

Neva held her hand out toward the pouch. “May I see?”

The guard blinked. “Are you sure?”

“It’s proof, isn’t it?”

He hesitated, then offered her the pouch. “Just a peek. Don’t take it out.”

Neva nodded and opened the pouch in such a way that only she and Augie could glimpse what lay inside: the thumb, the four-fingered hand, and on the back of the hand, a rash in the form of two adjoined crescents.

Augie pulled back in shock. “Is that ...?”

“Part of the fifth victim,” the guard said flatly. “Or the fourth—neither was intact when we found them.”

“It was on the stage,” Neva whispered as she returned the pouch. “In the rafters.”

“Of course, this could also mean there’s a sixth victim. They’re coming fast.”

Augie blanched. “God in Heaven.”

The guard closed the pouch, then motioned to the Fair’s center. “We’ll have to search the theatre, but first I really must insist that you come to the main guard station in Administration. Commandant Rice is leading the investigation from there, and we can talk to him about what you saw and how to secure your safety.”

Neva opened her mouth to agree, but her stomach started throbbing.

“She’s not going alone,” Augie said as she pressed her hands to her belly. “I’m coming too.”

“Of course,” the guard replied.

“Let me just fetch my things.” He pointed at the Ferris Wheel—his bag of props still lay next to the line.

“Hurry,” Neva whispered, pressing harder against her navel.

Augie gave her a concerned look.

Grimacing, she lowered her hands so he could see the sickle shapes rising on either side of her belly button, the shapes she’d been trying in vain to keep down. “I need to go.”

The guard drew a breath in through his teeth; a passerby raised her eyebrows and hurried on.

Augie stared at the marks a second longer before darting towards the Ferris Wheel. “I’ll be right back,” he called over his shoulder.

Neva watched him until the guard doffed his cap, revealing a matted tangle of brown curls. “I’m Wiley.”

She studied him for a moment. He *seemed* decent enough, despite his many hours of staring at her. “Thank you, Wiley.”

“It’s nothing. Your English is excellent, by the way.”

“I’m not Algerian.”

“Ja? I thought—”

A scream preempted Wiley’s next question.

Neva turned in time to see a man faint to the ground as a woman—the screamer—tried to pull him away from something. They were near the line for the Ferris Wheel. Was it Augie?

No. As the crowd parted around the pair, it became clear they were reacting to a second swarm of crescent-marked insects, this one already dispersing. In their wake, the bugs left lines of ooze, a drizzle of blood, and a lonely prop bag.

Augie was gone.



## Chapter Three

Neva rushed to the still-shrieking woman, whose thin frame was draped in a blue dress.

“What did you see?”

The woman stopped screaming and started whimpering. Her man lay unresponsive, mere inches from the remaining cluster of insects. The rest were burrowing, flying, or crawling away in all directions, causing the crowd to recoil in fascinated horror and murmur about the “shiny marks” on the pests’ backs, as if they were another exhibit.

“Ma’am, listen to me. Did you see a colored man about my height, dressed in a fashion similar to mine?” Neva looked at the crowd. “Did anyone? He was performing here not five minutes ago.”

No one said anything. The woman continued whimpering. Neva gripped her by the shoulders to give her a gentle shake.

Only then did anyone respond.

“Here, now!” someone called.

“Did that Negress just *accost* her?” someone else asked.

“Move along please, everyone,” Wiley ordered as he strode to Neva’s side. “The Columbian Guard will handle this.”

No one budged, except for a lanky fellow wearing a stylish hat. “Sergeant?” he asked, stepping forward.

Wiley nodded to him. “Slashing timing, Private Pierce. Can you see to the gawkers?”

Pierce tipped his hat, took out a badge, and started ushering tourists toward the Moorish Palace, recommending its hall of mirrors and “hideously life-like” wax museum.

“Plainclothesman,” Wiley explained to Neva. “Part of the Fair’s Secret Service.” He turned to the white woman. “My apologies for the misunderstanding, but Neva here was bitten by pests such as those.” He motioned at the ground, where a few cockroaches and ants lingered. “She’s worried her brother was similarly beset.”

The woman regarded Wiley, the wildness receding from her eyes. Then she lurched forward and began stomping the last insects. Not until they were all dead or fled did she draw a response to Neva’s initial question. “I saw no Negro. Just vermin flooding over my Abram.”

Wiley considered the man. “Did they bite him?”

The woman knelt next to her husband and ran her hands over his exposed skin. “It doesn’t appear so ...” She rose and tapped her cheekbones, where the puncture marks on Neva were particularly thick. “They seem to enjoy muddier blood. You’ll deal with her impudence?”

Wiley coughed but said only, “We’re on our way to the central guard station now. I’m sorry about the fright.”

The woman gave him a nod of thanks, shot a searing look Neva’s way, and crouched beside Abram again, cooing softly in his ear as she stroked his hair. Pierce reappeared in time to see her reach out and crush a stray ant, tears streaming down her face.

“Would you like me to report this, sir?” he asked Wiley. “Or would you prefer to?”

“I’ll escort the dancer to Administration. Call an ambulance for this fellow and see to him and his wife. The boys in Station M can give you a hand.”

“Yes, sir.” Pierce lowered to say something gentle sounding to the woman, then jogged to the guard station by the Old Vienna complex.

Neva felt Wiley tap her on the shoulder, but she didn’t stop scanning the passing crowd, spinning like a slow-moving top as she looked in all directions.

“Neva ...”

“We have to find Augie.”

Wiley pursed his lips. “He’s gone.”

“But he’s hurt. You saw the blood. And he wouldn’t just leave me. Something happened to him.”

“Perhaps, but—Neva!”

She’d darted to the prop bag. Snatching it up, she scanned the crowd again and ... saw only strangers. There was no sign of Augie or any indication of where he’d gone.

Wiley put his whole hand on her shoulder this time. “We can leave a message for him at the theatre, but we have to go to Administration. Please. For your own safety.”

Neva considered bending her shoulder blade away from Wiley’s grip, but a pulsing warmth on her back suggested the formation of another rash. Another mark; another brand.

Damn him, but Wiley was right.

Taking a last look around, she nodded at him and headed into the theatre. After entrusting Wahib with the prop bag and a message for Augie and concealing her rashes with gloves, shoes, and a jacket, she let the guard guide her to his superiors.

It was a long walk.

The distance was only part of it. The Algerian and Tunisian Village lay near the far end of the Midway Plaisance, the Fair’s mile-long strip of amusements. As she and Wiley passed the rest—the German Village, the Javanese Settlement, the South Sea and Samoan Islander encampments, and on and on—persuaders called to her from almost every exhibit. But they weren’t imploring her to enter: they knew her well from months of mingling after the Midway closed at eleven each night.

They also knew Augie—several asked after him. Neva just waved in response; it was a relief when she and Wiley finally entered the Fair proper.

Six hundred acres of marvels opened before them: lavish buildings from foreign countries and every state in the union, specialty structures like the Aquarium and the Moving Sidewalk, and over sixty-five thousand exhibits about anything and everything. Lake Michigan provided the perfect backdrop to the east, and the grounds were further enhanced by the canals Frederick Olmstead, the Fair's landscape architect, had ordered dredged for the occasion. Poetically placed foliage and inspiring statues completed the enchanting vista.

But Neva had already seen it all. She'd worked her way through the exhibits during her Sundays off. With Augie. Where *was* he?

The sound of crying turned her head: a boy of no more than ten leaned against the Women's Building, sniffing and casting about with anxious eyes.

Just as she was.

"Are you lost?" she asked, crouching down.

He clamped his mouth shut, perhaps reluctant to speak to a colored stranger.

"Neva," Wiley began, "I thought you were in a—"

"Hush. Where are your parents?"

The boy's lips trembled. "I can't find my ma!"

Neva took his hand. "I'm looking for someone too. What's your ma's name?"

"Rena Barrot."

"And yours?"

"Dob. I mean, Robert. But everyone calls me Dob."

She forced herself to smile. “And I’m Genevieve, but everyone calls me Neva. Don’t worry, Dob. We’ll find your ma.” She turned to Wiley. “Won’t we?”

He cleared his throat. “Where did you last see her?”

“In the big building.”

“Manufactures and Liberal Arts?”

Dob nodded. “By the Clock Tower.” He yanked an intricately patterned white handkerchief from his pocket but fumbled and dropped the cloth before he could blow his nose.

“Here,” Neva said, picking the handkerchief up by a corner and avoiding the rest—its colorful tessellations showed signs of heavy use that morning. “It’s a beautiful design.”

The boy accepted the handkerchief gratefully and blew his nose. “Thanks. My ma made it.”

Wiley gave Neva a skeptical look. “Manufactures is the largest structure in history; we’ll never find her there. Our best bet is to drop him at the daycare in the Children’s Building, then leave a note at Administration, in case his mother tries the Information Center first. And any guard she asks will tell her to go to the daycare. This happens a few times a week, but all the wayward little ones have been claimed so far.”

Neva grit her teeth. She’d much rather help Dob look for his mother—while searching for Augie at the same time—but her rashes still throbbed, and Wiley was right. Again, damn him.

“I have to do something first,” she told Dob, “so we’re going to take you to a safe place where you can play. But I’ll come see you after, all right? And we’ll make sure you find your ma.”

His soft little “All right” nearly broke her heart.

“I intend to keep that promise,” she informed Wiley after they’d checked Dob into the daycare. “To find his mother while we look for Augie. I expect you to do the same.”

“Certainly. Once we’re finished at Administration.”

“Thank you. Can we go through the island?”

Wiley swept his arm before him, indicating she should lead the way.

In front of the Horticulture Building, they crossed one of the delicately curved bridges that connected the main grounds to the Wooded Island Olmstead had raised in his Central Lagoon. Meant as a respite for weary visitors, the island was filled with trees and flowers, empty of any structure save the peaceful Japanese Ho-o-den gracing the northern end. Even with the leaves thinned by the lateness of the season, the mini-oasis was still Neva’s favorite part of the Fair.

“So remarkable,” Wiley said as they stepped off the bridge, his words ruining the tranquility before she had a chance to absorb it. “To think that all this was built in two years, on a swamp. And a mere two decades after Chicago rebuilt itself from the Great Fire ... like a phoenix rising from the ashes and giving birth to an even more beautiful child.” He glanced at her, probably to gauge her reaction to his imagery.

But Neva just watched an electric launch hum past a gondola in the lagoon. Each vessel carried two ostentatiously blissful tourists.

“I meant it when I said your English was excellent. You speak more eloquently than half the guard.”

Men—they never took the first hint. “You mean I talk pretty for a Negro?”

“I meant it as a compliment.”

“I was fortunate enough to receive a white girl’s education. Your English sounds odd.”

Wiley chuckled. “You didn’t mean that as a compliment.”

She shrugged and kept walking.

“You’re probably hearing vestiges of Afrikaans. I’m from the South Africa Republic originally.”

“So you’re a bore?”

“A *Boer*, yes. I emigrated after we won our war for freedom.”

“I see.”

“I fought in it—the war.”

“Bravely, I’m sure. Did you kill many Zulus?”

He laughed, but it sounded strained. “Just Brits.”

Neva reminded herself that this man was doing his best to help her. “I’m sorry ... I’m not usually this prickly.”

“Please—no need to apologize. I know you must be frightened and worried about your brother. The Guard isn’t without its flaws, but Commandant Rice is a good man; he led men at Gettysburg. He’ll see you’re protected.”

She suppressed the urge to remove her gloves and pick at the rashes on her hands. “Then let’s go meet him.”

A few silent minutes later, they crossed the island’s southern bridge, passed between the Mines and Electricity Buildings, and emerged into the Court of Honor. Its focal point was another small lake: the Grand Basin, flanked by the majestic Columbian Fountain on the west end and the 65-foot-tall Statue of the Republic on the east. Just beyond the statue, on the shore of Lake Michigan, rose the Peristyle, an elevated promenade whose supporting columns lent a Greco-Roman feel to each sunrise.

The Court of Honor's immense buildings continued the theme. Their architecture varied in particulars. But except for Transportation, they were unified by a neoclassical style highlighted by a white coloring that reflected the lake in the morning and sunsets in the evening. This combination of style and size caused many first-time visitors, invariably dressed in their finest clothes, to adopt a somber manner as they moved about the Court—the heart of the White City. On their way to the domed Administration Building, Neva noted a gentleman with wet eyes. His tears of wonder weren't unusual.

“Oh, hello, Wiley,” the receptionist at the Columbian Guard pavilion said in a throaty voice when they approached the front desk.

He tipped his cap. “Morning, Cassie. Is Commandant Rice in? This woman has information concerning the matter of the ‘purple tattoos.’”

“Oh,” Cassie said again, much less flirtatiously. “He's in room two with Mr. Bonfield. Just a moment.”

As the receptionist knocked on the door to one of the backrooms and conducted a whispered exchange with someone inside, Neva studied Wiley: he seemed vaguely displeased. Was it the presence of this Bonfield fellow? Or Cassie's greeting?

“They'll see you now,” she said, returning to her desk. “Through there.” She gestured to the backroom.

Inside waited three old men. The oldest wore a mustache and a frown; with a start, Neva recognized him from the papers as Mr. *John* Bonfield, Chicago's Police Inspector during the infamous riot between anarchists and police some years back in Haymarket Square. The second man had a military air that suggested he was Commandant Rice. The third was completely unremarkable—perhaps one of the plainclothesmen?



“Sergeant,” Rice said to Wiley as he and Neva entered. “Close the door, if you please.”

He did so briskly and then stood next to her, opposite the table the three older men sat behind.

“What do you have to report about the tattoos?”

Wiley nodded at Neva, who hesitated before removing her gloves. “She has them, sir. They were brought on by the bites of insects.”

The three other men stood to get a better look. Rice swore, and Bonfield bellowed, but the plainclothesman asked the first question: “What type of insect?”

Wiley motioned for Neva to answer.

“All kinds,” she murmured, slipping her glove back on. “A swarm of them. Marked with these sickle shapes on their backs.”

“You saw this?” Bonfield asked Wiley.

“Not the ones that assaulted her, sir. But I witnessed a later incident. And the evidence is on her skin.”

“Clearly,” Rice said, peering at the bite marks peppering Neva’s face and neck. “What other incident?”

“Her brother was attacked as well, a few minutes later.”

“Augie Freeman,” Neva added quickly. “Now he’s missing.”

Bonfield nodded absently and gestured at the pouch Wiley still held, away from his body and clutched only by thumb and forefinger. “Did you catch some of the bugs?”

“No. But this was in the Algerian Theatre, above the stage.” He slid the pouch across the table.

Rice looked inside, swore, and passed the pouch to Bonfield, who swore louder and handed it to the plainclothesman. Frowning, he pulled the drawstring tight. “Perhaps they’re inducing the insects somehow,” he said after a moment, leaning back in his chair. “Using some sort of strange chemistry that frenzies the vermin and reacts with their venom to form the rash.”

Wiley furrowed his brow. “They?”

The plainclothesman didn’t reply, but Bonfield did: “This is Miles Copeland, Pinkerton detective and our liaison with the Chicago Police Department.”

Was it Neva’s imagination, or had Wiley grown tenser? True, the Pinkerton National Detective Agency had devolved into something of a mercenary outfit. But wouldn’t its experience with providing security only help in this situation?

Oblivious, Bonfield continued: “I know Miles well. Good man. He’s been helping me oversee the Secret Service. We suspect the White Chapel Club of—”

“John,” Rice interrupted, glancing significantly at Neva.

Bonfield grunted. “Pardon.” He turned to her and frowned, as if she were a servant and he’d only now remembered her presence. “Miss—I’m sorry, Sergeant, what was her name?”

“Neva Freeman, sir.”

“Miss Freeman, I hope we can count on your discretion as we investigate this matter. With Chicago Day so near, we can’t have unfounded rumors causing a panic.”

Rice nodded. “Extremely important for the financial wellbeing of the Fair.”

“Right. Now: can we rely on your cooperation?” Bonfield gave Neva the look white men of his age always seemed to give her, the gaze that presupposed a certain response: a simple

“Yes, sir, as you wish.”

Unless she was dancing—they looked at her differently then. And she was tempted to break into a shimmy now. If nothing else, drawing the inspector’s attention to her hips might wrongfoot his superior attitude. But she settled for a question: “The White Chapel Club?”

Bonfield stiffened.

Copeland just rolled his eyes. “You’ve already stepped in it—might as well explain the mess ... The White Chapel Club is fascinated with all manner of ghoulishness: they’ve filled their meeting space with coffins, skulls, and murder weapons from actual killings.”

“In short,” Rice said, “they’re fools. Can you guess why they’re named as they are?”

Neva shrugged.

“Because of Leather Apron,” Wiley put in.

Copeland tapped the table. “That’s right: he did his work in London’s White Chapel district. And we have reason to believe our Chicago boys have stopped playing costume and started reenacting the real thing.” He glanced at Neva, perhaps to gauge her reaction.

“Unless,” Bonfield said, almost gleefully, “it’s the Apron himself, crossed the pond to visit the Fair. They never caught him, you know.”

Rice glared at Bonfield before turning to Neva. “Either way, those marks make you a target.”

Copeland tapped the table again. “She’ll need to be watched.”

“Sir,” Wiley said, stepping forward. “I’d be happy to volunteer.”

Bonfield looked set to protest, but Rice murmured something about “The publicity if things go further awry.” Eventually, the older man agreed to the “expense of a protective detail for a colored girl.”

“Excuse me,” Neva cut in, now that everyone had finished deciding her fate as if she were no older than little Dob. “What about my brother?”

Bonfield blinked at her. “Ah, right. We’ll put his name about. Augie Freeman, was it?”

“Yes. Thank you.” It was probably the best she could hope for from a white policeman. “Who’s Leather Apron?”

Now Bonfield scowled. “How could you not ... But then, I suppose you don’t read the papers.”

Neva swallowed her retort—she read them enough to know Governor Altgeld had recently blamed Bonfield for the chaos at Haymarket, the ensuing farce of a trial, and the resulting hanging of several anarchists. But he plainly wouldn’t believe a Negro capable of such literacy.

“Leather Apron,” Wiley began before clearing his throat.

She raised an eyebrow.

He paused another moment before the words came out: “Well, he’s better known as Jack the Ripper.”