

# *The Image of Illusion*

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Floriana Nowak

Tuesday, July 25, 1923

Manhattan, New York

Flora balanced the half-finished painting against her hip and slid her key into the doorknob of her apartment. Then she froze, fear trickling through her like an icy glass of water on a hot summer day. The door was already unlocked, and a tiny crack between the doorway cast a sliver of light into the room. She was sure she'd locked it before leaving to meet Mrs. Gordon, one of her patrons, to discuss her commissioned portrait.

With two fingers she pushed the door open a few more inches and gasped when she saw the interior. There was no doubt her apartment had been ransacked. Taking a deep breath, she slipped inside to see the full extent of the damage. Her easel had been knocked to the ground, paintbrushes scattered across the room, and her sketchbooks lay torn apart on the floor. In the middle of the mess, lay a newspaper article. It wasn't hers. She read the title, and a sickening feeling rose inside her middle. "Lawyer defends Manhattan's most Notorious Pickpocket turned Murderer." Jakob didn't need a reminder that he was defending Liam Malone. Her brother had enough on his plate without getting attacked by the press. He was doing the dirty work no one else wanted to do, saying even someone like Malone deserved legal representation.

Someone hadn't just broken in, they'd been looking for something. And she knew what it was. She tossed the canvas and newspaper on the sofa and ran to the bedroom. Nausea rose inside her as she saw the faded mustard yellow curtains in a heap next to the window. She reached up and felt along the window, until her finger snagged in the gap between the wall and window frame. It had to be there. If it wasn't, there would be consequences that wouldn't just affect her.

Relief flooded through her as paper touched her skin. She pulled out the cream-colored envelope and opened it. Nothing was inside. Panic shattered through her newfound relief.

She slid the envelope back in its hiding spot and rehung the curtains, trying to calm her racing heart. She turned to the bed, when a piece of paper on the floor caught her eye.

In a sloppy script, a single sentence was smeared across it. The words chilled her to her core. This wasn't just an attack to discourage her brother, this was worse.

And this time, she couldn't go to her brother with her problems. But she could seek out her brother's most trusted friend.

Throwing the paper back on the bed, she dashed to the phone Jakob had installed in case of emergencies. And she was glad he did. Her fingers trembled as the operator transferred her call.

"New York Tribune." Flora recognized the cheerful secretary's voice before she even gave her name. "This is Eleanor speaking. What can I do for you?"

"Eleanor?" She clenched the receiver harder in a wasted effort to keep her fingers from shaking.

"I need to speak to Nik."

"Florie!" Flora pulled back as Eleanor's squeal pierced through the line. "I hoped you'd call! How's my favorite artist?"

"I'd love to talk, Eleanor." She forced the words, hoping to ease the secretary's disappointment.

But chatting with Eleanor was usually full of personal questions and hard-to-keep-up-with stories, which at the moment, was the least appealing. "But I need to discuss something with Nikolas."

"Ooooh, are you going somewhere with him?"

She rolled her eyes. "No, Eleanor. Sorry to disappoint you."

“Aww Florie!” The secretary babbled on about how wonderful Nik was, handsome, intelligent,... the list of Nik’s wonderful qualities went on. Nikolas also doused out political fires when it came to Jakob’s work. But he was a reporter. Reporters and journalists knew how to ask questions that got them answers and search different angles, which was why she needed him, but also the reason she disliked them. And he was her best choice, since she didn’t want the police involved.

“Eleanor.”

The secretary didn’t answer, just kept prattling into the receiver.

“Eleanor!”

“What?”

“Just get Nik.”

“Oh. Right!” She heard a click as Eleanor hung up.

She blew out a breath, trying to force the anxiety out of her. Seconds later, the line crackled to life, followed by Nik’s smooth baritone voice. “Hello Floriana.” He greeted her, using her given name. “It’s odd for you to call me at all, especially this early, so there must be a problem. The question is, what is it?”

“Can you come to my apartment?” She winced at the desperation in her voice.

“Reporters don’t make house calls unless there’s action.”

“There’s been action, Nik. Someone’s broken in.”

“In your apartment?”

“Yes.”

“Why haven’t you called the police?”

*I don’t trust them.* She cleared her throat. “They wouldn’t do a thing about it.”

“Was anything stolen?” He asked. “Anything valuable?”

“I don’t think so.” She lied. There was no way she was going to tell him what was stolen over the phone.

“What do you think I can do about it, Flora?”

She sighed, thinking about her answer.

“Nevermind.” He must have heard her through the line. “I’ll come check things out for you. I’m on break right now.”

“Thank you, Nik. I owe you.”

“No you don’t. You’re Jakob’s sister.”

The line clicked before she could say another word.

“Woah.” Nik let out a low whistle as he took in the sight of her apartment. “You didn’t tell me it was this bad.”

“I went to meet Mrs. Gordon, one of my patrons, and came home to this.” She watched him as he examined the wreckage. He bent over her easel, a lock of raven black hair falling over his eyes.

“The mess isn’t what concerns me, Nik.” She led him into her bedroom and handed him the article. She held back the slip of paper, unsure how to explain to him what she had been hiding in the wall.

“Oh no.” His hand clenched around the article, crinkling the corner. “I wrote an article countering this one, but it won’t be circulated until tomorrow. Whoever trashed your apartment wanted to mess with you to get to your brother, that’s for sure.”

“That’s not all.” She blew out a breath, fighting to keep her voice level. “They were looking for-for *something*.” She held out the note. She never should have thought it a good idea to take her own reference photos for paintings.

She watched him as he read the words, confusion clouding his slate gray eyes. “*I know you have it? What is that supposed to mean?*”

She didn’t answer, directing her gaze out the window.

“Flora.” Nik’s voice demanded. “You know exactly what this message is referring to, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Care to enlighten me?” He crossed his arms, sending her a stern glare.

“I’m in possession of evidence that would prove Liam Malone guilty of murder.”

Nik’s jaw went slack as he stared at her. “Say that again.”

“You know how Jakob’s main statement said that Malone was nowhere near where Jackson Clark was murdered? And that nobody witnessed him there? Well, Malone was standing right next to Becker’s Cafe the same evening.” The classic cafe played two roles: Harmless restaurant during the day, speakeasy in the basement by night. And it was where Jackson Clark was found dead. And she could prove it. With a single shot from her Kodak.

“Don’t tell me you saw him.” Nik raked a hand through his hair.

“Worse. I had a photo.” She stepped toward the window and slid her fingers into the crack, sliding out the envelope. “I had no clue it was him when I took the snapshot. “He looked so...so serene and calm leaning against the brick wall of the cafe, smoking a cigar. It wasn’t until I had the photo developed that I realized who it was.”

“So you have a photo of Malone? The person who broke in must have known you were in possession of it.”

She nodded, shoving a tendril of blonde hair behind her ear.

“Why didn’t you give it to the police?”

“Think about it, Nik. You know how many policemen are paid off to keep quiet about speakeasies. They wouldn’t expose themselves by admitting they witnessed Clark’s murder inside Becker’s basement. Especially if they’re paid *well*.”

“True. And if *you* testified against Jakob’s strongest point, he would lose the case and be humiliated even further.” The truth Nik spoke pierced through her.

“It would hurt him too much, Nik. You know that. And his family.” She couldn’t stop seeing Jakob’s wife and children every time she thought about the photo. They wouldn’t only be even more humiliated by the press, they could lose everything. “I only planned on hiding it until the trial was over.”

“Because if Malone was proven innocent, and Jakob won,” Nik counted them off on his fingers.

“Then you appeared with the evidence, he’d be taken to prison without a second thought to Jakob’s job as the best lawyer in Manhattan.”

“Exactly.” No one else would be hurt that way. But her photo wasn’t safely hidden anymore. “I couldn’t run to Jakob with this problem.” She could have laughed at her words. This was more than a mere *problem*.

“So you dragged me into it.” Nik stated. “Because you want my help finding who broke in and stole the photo.”

“Yes.”

“Alright. But I think you should contact the police. I know a few of the officers who wouldn’t touch a bottle of liquor.”

“I’d rather not. Don’t trust them.” She slipped back to the main room of the apartment. “And for the record, I don’t care for reporters and journalists either. They ask too many questions.”

She righted the easel and slid her latest painting and reference photo back onto it.

“Ouch.” Nik appeared next to her. “Well, I actually like getting answers better than asking questions, Flora. I’ll see what I can dig up. Might take me a day or two, though.”

As long as I have the image back by Friday, when the trial resumes.”

“We’ll try.” He moved toward the door, pausing when he reached for the doorknob. “Are you sure you should stay here?”

“I’ll be fine.” She inspected her painting for damage, an oceanic view she’d almost finished of the water lapping along the shores of the Hudson River. Painting would be a good distraction in the meantime.

“Good day, then.” He replaced his threadbare bowler atop his head and swung open the door.

“Call if you need me.” The door clicked shut behind him.



Wednesday July 26, 1923

Flora sat back with a sigh of satisfaction with her painting. Drumming her fingers on her legs she stared at her work. Hopefully Mrs. Gordan would be satisfied with this one. One of her colleagues had asked about the artwork inside the Gordan house and wanted to see what else the artist had to offer. Mrs. Gordon mentioned the client lived along the shore of the Hudson, so she hoped this would be perfect.

She checked the chatelaine watch pinned to her shirtwaist. *Twelve o'clock*. Jakob would be coming to go to lunch with her any moment. She didn't want to waste time not looking for whoever had taken the photo, but Nik hadn't called with any information yet. And if she canceled on Jakob, he'd know something was wrong. Seconds later the doorbell rang. Scrambling off the floor, she wiped her hands on her paint splattered smock and turned the doorknob.

"Hello Flora." Jakob stood in the doorway, shuffling through a stack of papers in his arm and simultaneously yanking on his collar. "I can't go to lunch today. I've got a lot of work to do, but I wanted to stop and see how you were."

"Oh Jakob." She sighed. "Is there anything I can do?"

Well, if you really want to, you could drop these off to Nik at the *Tribune*." He held out a thick file.

"I suppose I could." She tucked the file to her chest. She could also ask if he'd found anything.

"What does Nik need them for?"

“Fact-checking an article he wrote for correct legal jargon.” Jakob tugged at his collar again.

“Thanks Flora. He tipped his hat. I better go.” She watched her brother hurry back down the street before untying her smock and bounding down the steps.

Within a half hour, she was standing in front of the *Tribune* building, the tall spire looming a few hundred feet above her. She pulled open the heavily ornamented door, and saw Eleanor’s look of surprise at the front desk. “Florie!” She squealed. “What brings you here?”

A group of journalists in crisp vests and shoes so polished she could see her reflection in them sent her and Eleanor disgusted glares. “Eleanor-”

“Oh!” She gasped. “You’re here to see Nik!”

“No, I’m here to deliver files from my brother to Nik.” She stepped toward the hallway, filled with doors leading to individual offices. “I’ll stop at your desk on my way out.”

Before she could dash to Nik’s office, Eleanor pulled her back by her sleeve. “At least fix your hair!” She began tucking rebellious curls back into Flora’s chignon. She felt the eyes of the journalists boring into her back. “It’s alright Eleanor. Nik won’t care.”

“Oh phooey.” Eleanor waved a hand as if swatting an imaginary fly. “Go on, then.” Without knocking, Flora slipped into Nik’s office.

“Hello there, Floriana.” He looked up from his typewriter with a surprised smile. “Are those from Jakob?” He tucked his pencil behind his ear and gestured to the file in her arms.

“Yes, they are.” She placed them on the corner of his desk.

“Perfect.” He flipped open the cover and began to leaf through them.

“Did you discover anything?”

“Not yet.” A frown replaced his smile. “I’ve spoken to quite a few people, and some of your neighbors. None of them knew anything about someone breaking into your apartment.”

She sighed, her hope deflating. “Thanks for doing this anyway, Nik.”

“I’m sorry, Flora.” He offered a half-hearted smile. “I’ll keep searching. Give Jakob my thanks for those files.”

“I will.” She stepped back into the hall to see Eleanor standing by the doorway. “Eleanor!”

“Oh Flora, that was the most boring conversation I’ve ever heard.”

Frustration flared inside her. “Eleanor, that was a private discussion.”

“Well, the part about someone breaking into your apartment wasn’t boring, it was alarming. What’s that about?” She placed her fists on her hips, pulling the lavender fabric of her skirt tighter around her slim waist.

“Don’t mention that to anyone.”

Eleanor batted a hand. “Oh, you know me, Flora. I won’t tell a soul.”

Knowing Eleanor, every soul in Manhattan would know within the hour.

Not wanting to endure any more questions from the nosy secretary, she hurried outside the Tribune and onto the sidewalk, feeling the hot concrete through the soles of her boots. The summer heat was enough to melt a glacier.

Instead of going back home, she found herself walking towards Becker’s. Maybe if she revisited the place she’d taken the picture, it was a possibility she would remember if anyone saw her click the shutter. That might be a step in the right direction.

Approaching the brick building, she positioned herself at the angle she’d taken the picture. She could envision Malone leaning against the wall, puffing on a cigar, his cloche hat pulled down, shielding his eyes from the sun.

“Thinking about somethin’?” A scratchy voice said from behind her, making her jump.

She turned to see...*Malone?* A gasp escaped her and she jumped back.

Malone’s brows shot up, disappearing behind the brim of his hat, the same one he’d been wearing in the photo. “Recognize me, don’t ya?”

Instinct told her to run, but her feet felt like blocks of lead. Malone was supposed to be locked up. How had he escaped?

He reached out and wrapped his hand around her upper arm like a vice. “Come with me.”

“No!” She jerked back, but it only caused him to dig his fingers harder into her flesh.

“That was an order, not a question. You don’t get a choice.” He dragged her toward the backside of Becker’s. She looked around frantically for someone, anyone who could help her, but oddly, there wasn’t a person in sight. She tried to scream, but her throat closed up in panic.

A cylindrical piece of cold metal jammed between her shoulder blades, and her insides knotted themselves together as she realized what it was. *A gun.*

Malone knocked on the wall. A back door, covered in brick to match the exterior, opened. “Right this way, Miss Nowak.” A man with a polish accent grinned, exposing teeth as yellow as his hair. Chills raced through her at his use of her surname.

Malone pushed her through the doorway, and she stumbled down a set of concrete steps. The room was dimly lit, and larger than her apartment, filled with rickety tables and chairs, shelves filled with liquor bottles, and a piano. The other man shoved her into a chair and pulled a long piece of rope from his pocket.

“If you’d only destroyed that photo, you wouldn’t be here.” Malone snatched the rope from his hand.

“I wasn’t going to let you get away with murder.” Her voice shook as he wrapped the rope around her waist and tied it behind the chair, looping it around her wrists and knotting it again. Malone laughed, a harsh, vibrating sound. “I was going to get away with it no matter what, but my brother wouldn’t have if you showed up with that photo.”

Confusion sunk into her bones. *His brother?*

“Nobody knows Liam Malone has a twin brother, apparently. Liam may be a professional pickpocket, but he hasn’t got the brains to commit murder.” He reached for a corked bottle and opened it, gulping half of it and handing the rest to his blond-haired comrad. *Malone has a twin brother.* She hadn’t photographed Malone, she’d photographed his brother.

“Well, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to tell ya the whole story, since you’ll be shipped off to who-knows-where by nightfall, little lady.” He removed his hat and tossed it on the table. “That little secretary friend saw you take that photo of me, and being the gentleman I am, I offered to pick the lock on your apartment door and find the photo. All she thinks is that I’m helping her bring justice to her cousin’s murderer. Fool woman never even recognized me.” He chuckled. Understanding dawned on her. *Jackson Clark was Eleanor’s cousin.* That was why Eleanor had been so curious about her apartment being robbed. She wasn’t interested in setting her up on a rendezvous with Nik, she’d wanted to shed light on her cousin’s killer. It had all been a facade. But Eleanor had been under a mirage of her own. She’d enlisted the help of Clark’s murderer to find an image of himself.

“And of course, when she called me to say you’d just left the *Tribune* building after an interesting conversation with a journalist, I couldn’t help but locate you. And it was easier than I thought.”

He wasn't completely wrong, it would have been easy. But he didn't know she still had the palette knife she had used when painting earlier. And it had a sharp edge, sharp enough to cut through the rope when she got a chance.

Malone's brother reached for another bottle off the shelf, while the other man pulled something from his vest pocket. It was her picture. He laid it on the table in front of her. "I betcha regret taking that, eh?" He smirked.

"No." She lied, forcing her voice to be steady. "It was a perfect angle, really."

"Huh!" The man snorted. "Look at this, Marshall! Little lady actin' all tough."

Pretending to ignore his comment, she asked, "Why did you kill Jackson Clark, anyways?"

Marshall Malone staggered back toward her. Apparently, the whiskey was starting to take effect.

"He owed me money." And since I own this fine business establishment, it was easy to take him out." He waved the gun in front of her, then set it on the table, the tip facing her. "Let my *friend* be a warning to you."

*He owned Becker's?* She hadn't expected that. But she hadn't expected her current situation either. She clenched her sweaty palms, unsure if she was furious with her captor or terrified of him. Likely both.

By the time the third bottle of liquor shattered to the floor, Marshall Malone was slumped over the piano in the corner of the room. Slowly, she pulled her wrist toward the pocket of her skirt. The rope cinched tighter around her middle, rubbing against her ribcage. She continued tugging until she could feel the handle of the knife. She kept her eyes on the blond man to make sure he didn't see what she was trying to accomplish. His eyelids had drifted shut before Marshall Malone had blacked out.

After sawing at it for what felt like hours, she smiled when the tension of the rope loosened. Easing her shaking body forward off the chair and sliding the photo and gun off the table, she crept toward the door, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She turned the doorknob gently, wincing when it squeaked. She slipped outside, gulping in the fresh evening air. It was almost dusk. *How long was I inside there?* Straightening, she stepped around the side of the building. A hand clamped around her shoulder. She screamed, kicking against her attacker. A shiny five-point star was pinned to the man's chest. She grasped it and ripped it off his shirt, tearing the fabric. With her other hand, she jammed the stock of the gun into his shoulder. He released her, and she fell backwards onto the grass.

“Easy, Flora!” A shout came from across the street. She looked up to see Nik running toward her dodging a streetcar. “He’s on our side.”

She looked up to see a handsome, sandy-haired officer. Then she glanced down at the badge in her hand. “Sorry.”

“That’s alright. I was due for a new uniform anyways.”

He laughed, offering her a hand and pulling her upright. “I’m Jack Addison, private detective for the Manhattan Police Department.”

“Behind you!” Nik shouted as Jack narrowly missed a hit from Marshall Malone. Her scream must have woken the men up from their drunken stupor.

The blond man ran towards Nik, and Nik didn’t stop. Jack shoved her back to the ground just as Marshall Malone swung another drunken punch. Pain seared through her right elbow as it took the brunt of her fall, and she cried out. She rolled onto her back to glimpse Nik pinning Malone’s counterpart to the ground.

Sirens blared, and moments later another officer ran toward them, grabbing Malone's collar and thrusting him against the brick building as Jack snapped handcuffs onto his wrists. Her breath came in swallow spurts as she watched the officers and Nik shove her captors into the police cruiser. She pushed herself up, pain searing through her arm as she clutched it against her chest. A gray blur filled the edges of her vision.

"Flora." She blinked. Nik stood over her. "Are you alright?" Concern filled his eyes.

"I think my arm is broken."

"Oh no." Jack groaned from behind Nik. "Did I do that?"

"It'll be fine." She blew out a breath.

Nik turned to Jack and muttered something about getting the doctor, then turned back to her.

"Eleanor followed you to Becker's and saw Malone confront you. She came back to the office and confessed everything, including listening in on our phone calls and conversations." He grimaced. "And against your wishes, I called Jack."

She was glad Nik had, or things might have turned out differently. "Eleanor doesn't know everything." She handed Nik the photo from her pocket and quickly filled him in on everything she'd witnessed the last few hours.

When she finished, Nik sighed and shook his head, closing the notepad he'd jotted everything she'd said down on. "You should go home after the doctor sets your arm and get some rest. I can call Jakob and explain."

"No, I'd better tell him myself." He needed to hear it from her. "Thank you, Nik."

He smiled. "No, thank you. This'll make quite the headline for the *Tribune*." He winked.



Friday July 29, 1923

Flora opened the door with her uninjured arm to see Jakob standing on the front steps.

“Come on in.”

She wiped her paint covered fingers on her smock and stepped back. The day before, she’d spent hours at the police department with Nik, Jack, and her brother piecing together the complicated web of information and evidence that proved Marshall Malone guilty, with enough evidence to send him straight behind prison bars, while his brother was sent home with minor fines for petty theft.

“I still can’t believe my sister caught a murderer behind my back.” Jakob jested, but the look in his eyes was serious. “No more of that. It’s much too dangerous.”

“I don’t plan on it. Even if I did, I’d have a hard time. She pointed to her sling-bound arm. “At least I can keep painting since I’m left handed.”

“I came to see if you were up for making up the lunch I skipped the other day.”

“That would be lovely.” She smiled and pulled the strings of her smock loose, just as the doorbell rang again. And this time it was Nik, holding up a newspaper titled “Local Artist Uncovers the Truth Behind the Malone Trial.”

