

The
GREAT
BRAVURA
A Novel

by **JILL DEARMAN**



SHE WRITES PRESS

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Shadow of a Doubt
New Year's Day 1948, New York City
Bravura

She's got to be alive. And if she's not, brother, well, then you're looking at a dead woman.

I know you newspapermen and you sob sisters, too, are itching to write a headline like "Magician Can't Escape Final Act: The Death Chair." Besides, it's been just about twenty years since New York State sentenced a woman to death. Nice idea to ring in the new year with another one, don't you think? Ruth Snyder. Sing Sing, 1928. She lured her corset-salesman lover into helping her knock off her husband, and they both went to the electric chair for it. She was an icy murderess. Me, however, I'm innocent—of killing Susie, at least. My God. She was my partner, my best friend!

Okay, sure, we had some nights of glory, some howls with the hounds, but I can't say I was ever in love with her. Didn't stop me from using her, though, when I needed her.

You see, my problem is that I've always loved women too much. That much I'll admit. I just can't resist their scent: like baker's sugar mixed with fresh-cut flowers. Each one different, the way each blossom in the garden has its own special fragrance. There's something about a woman—her velvety skin, her soft hair. It's magic. It's better than magic. Susie, however, was the one woman I was immune to, and the one woman who'd do anything for me. What did I do to her?

“Let’s go. They’re ready for you,” the matron said, pushing the door open and nudging me forward.

The assault of flashbulbs nearly made me trip as I stepped up to the podium, but the violence upon my eyes felt like nothing compared with the alarming questions those reporters began to shoot at me.

“Bravura! Is it true you killed Susie? How did you do it?”

“I did not kill her!”

“Well, then how did she disappear?”

“Is it a hoax? Have you orchestrated all this for publicity?”

“Of course not. I would never . . .”

“Is she dead or alive?”

“I don’t know. I wish I did. . . . I hope . . .”

“Do you practice black magic?”

“No! I’m a performer—that’s all!”

“Your assistant disappears during a magic trick—that’s more than just performing. What happened to her?”

“I tell you, I don’t know! I’m as shocked as the rest of you.”

“What about your father, Señor Bravura? He was a well-known con man. . . .”

“I am *nothing* like my father!”

“Did Lena kill Susie for you?”

At that I stood stone-faced. I could not answer. I would not speak of Lena. I let them snap their blasted bulbs and felt the powder float up into my nostrils, my eyes. I could either remain stoic or fall down weeping. Newspapers don’t respond to nuance. But no . . . I couldn’t just stand there. I had to fight for my own life, didn’t I? I put up my hand and looked out over the sea of fedoras.

“If you’re a regular Joe, you’d say all evidence points to foul play. That’s what the police think; that’s why they’re holding me. I mean, if Susie were here, that’s what *she* would think. Or maybe you believe in magic—I mean *real* magic—and you can imagine her here one moment, gone the next, without a rational explanation.

That's what Lena believes. So what do I believe: that there's a reasonable answer for anything, or that there is such a thing as *real* magic? Well, there's the rub, fellas. I don't know what I believe in. I wish I did.

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