

— AVENUE OF DREAMS • BOOK 3 —

The
INVENTION *of*
SARAH CUMMINGS

A NOVEL



OLIVIA
NEWPORT



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For Mark,
at my side all these years

1

The hat crooked its finger at Sarah Cummings.

The gesture was sophisticated. Seductive. Irresistible.

Sarah pushed open the shop's door for a better look from the inside of the display window. Under a flood of sunlight, the gold bead trim adorning a narrow crimson brim doubled as a prism, sending hues to chase and dance around the milliner's shop.

She did love that hat.

The classic oval shape of the crown and simplicity of design would make it versatile—worth every penny of the price. The coins in Sarah's purse were a long way from sufficient, though. She had not yet attempted to make a hat herself, but having mastered gowns and suits, she contemplated her next frontier unafraid. A hat would require such a small swatch of fabric. The attraction was all in the design and the trims, and she had a small trunk full of ribbons, beads, and buttons harvested from gowns over the last three years.

Considering the afternoon she had just experienced, Sarah felt she deserved an indulgence.

"Don't you just adore that hat?"

Sarah turned toward the voice. The eyes fastened on her were speckled—she was unsure what color to call them. Not quite blue. Not quite hazel. Certainly not green. But bright. And not tired at all. She had seen those eyes before. The not-quite-any color was

uncommon enough to be memorable. But they did not belong to anyone on Prairie Avenue that Sarah could remember.

“I’ve been marveling at that hat through the window for two weeks,” the young woman confided. “Even my mother agrees it’s exquisite, and we rarely agree about any matter of fashion. You should have seen us choosing gowns for a wedding we attended.”

And then Sarah knew. Florence Pullman’s wedding at the end of April. The immense parlor of the George Pullman home had been decked in green and gold, with vast wreaths of orchids and lilies of the valley cascading down the pillars. Florence had taken her vows in the bay window, wearing an opulent ivory satin gown. Sarah remembered the train cut on the bias. Mrs. Pullman had asked Flora Banning for the loan of her maids, including Sarah, to serve at the reception that lasted until midnight. More than two hundred people had been there for the gala and eaten from the five-tiered cake with the angel on top.

Including the owner of this pair of indescribable eyes. The voice rang familiar to Sarah now as well. She had heard this young woman’s laugh as she offered her the tray of finger foods and Johnny Hand’s orchestra played behind the screen of palms. Sarah smiled weakly and glanced back at the hat. Across the shop, a clerk perked up at the prospect of business. Sarah estimated the steps that would take her back to the sidewalk, out of range before the young woman with the laugh and eyes began to remember as well.

“Oh my goodness,” the woman exclaimed, placing a hand on Sarah’s forearm. “Were you planning to buy that hat? All this time I’ve spent gawking at it, I didn’t consider someone else might buy it before I made up my mind. I suppose I could ask the owner to make another just like it, but my mother would never abide that. It would be too much like buying clothes off the rack from Marshall Field.”

Sarah bristled. Her father had worked at Marshall Field—proudly. And Sarah had spent the better part of her afternoon trying to convince the manager of the ladies’ dress department

that she could sew a garment that matched anything on the rack. Certainly she was qualified to sell them. For the third time in a year, Sarah was denied a position for which she believed she had eminent qualifications. Her every application met with the response that the economic depression meant that the store had few open positions.

Withdrawing from the woman's unsolicited touch, Sarah smoothed her copper crepe skirt with one hand, confident no one could tell it had once been part of Flora Banning's Christmas ball gown. "It's true I have been admiring it," Sarah said, "but I'm not sure it's right for my wardrobe."

"Then I'd better snatch it up while I can." The young woman extended a hand. "I'm Lillie Wagner."

Sarah took the hand reflexively and met Lillie's eyes, innocent and devoid of any recognition. In their formal black-and-white service garb, the servants of Prairie Avenue were faceless. Why should Lillie Wagner remember Sarah Cummings?

"I'm Serena Cuthbert." The name sprang to Sarah in that moment, startling in its familiarity. "It's nice to meet you."

"Do you live nearby?" Lillie asked.

"Not too far," Sarah answered. That was true. Prairie Avenue was only a few blocks away from the Michigan Avenue shop, though she could hardly explain that she was a parlor maid for the Banning family across the street from the Pullmans. Lillie Wagner never would have spoken to Sarah if she suspected her employment status. Lillie probably would not even have spoken to her if Sarah had managed to wrangle a position at Marshall Field's store. Only her clothing suggested she would be a match for Lillie's social status.

"I must try on that hat." Lillie gazed at it. "And you must give me your honest opinion of whether it flatters me."

The shop's clerk approached, and Lillie swished her skirts as she pivoted with a nod toward the hat in the window. A moment later, with the creation on her head, she moved to a mirror and motioned that Sarah should stand beside her. "What do you think?"

Sarah studied the image in the mirror. Lillie's round face featured strong cheekbones and high eyebrows under auburn hair. Sarah was sure the hair would hang to Lillie's waist if let loose. Her own common brown eyes were set wider than Sarah would have liked and her hair, while a satisfying ebony shade, was thinner than she wished.

Lillie adjusted the tilt of the hat. "You haven't said anything, Miss Cuthbert."

"It's lovely," Sarah answered honestly. "It suits you quite well."

Lillie lifted the hat from her head. "You should try it on too."

Sarah shook her head. "I've already decided against the purchase."

"Just try it on." Before Sarah could protest further, Lillie had perched the hat atop her careful coiffure.

"Serena Cuthbert, you look spectacular!" Lillie's eyes met Sarah's in the mirror. "The men must gobble you up at the balls."

Sarah stared at her own reflection. The hat did suit her. Eager eyes soaked up the details of design, memorizing rapidly where the seams were in the crown, the angle of the peak, the proportions of the brim. She removed the hat from her head and turned it in her hands a few times.

"You should have it," Lillie urged. "You were looking at it before I was."

"I wouldn't think of it." Sarah handed the hat back to Lillie. "It's not right for me. The color does not go with any of my suits."

Lillie laughed. "My mother would have a suit made to match the hat." She glanced at Sarah's skirt and blouse. "You must have a wonderful dressmaker."

"She is quite skilled." It had taken years of practice for Sarah to topstitch a collar with the precision of a sewing machine. If someone offered her a free machine, she was not sure she would take it.

"I would love to have your dressmaker's name," Lillie said. "We only moved to Chicago a few weeks ago, and while my mother has interviewed several dressmakers, she hasn't taken a fancy to one yet."

Sarah knew just when the Wagners had arrived in Chicago, right before the Pullman wedding at the end of April and right before Sarah had renewed her resolve to find employment outside the Banning household. How newcomers had squeaked onto the guest list she did not know. Sarah fanned herself with her fingers. “My goodness, it’s warm today.”

“It *is* the first of July,” Lillie observed.

“If it’s this warm now, what will August bring?” Sarah wondered. “I should be going. They’re about to close the shop anyway. It’s nearly six o’clock.”

“Then I’d better complete my purchase. I cannot take the chance of someone else drooling over my hat.”

“It was lovely to meet you.” Sarah moved toward the door.

“Oh, Miss Cuthbert, must you run off?” Lillie asked. “I was about to invite you to dinner. I’d like to get to know you better.”

“Dinner?”

“I suggest one of the hotels nearby,” Lillie said. “My parents will be going to a dinner party given by one of my father’s business associates, and I’ve already told Cook I would eat out. I’d love to have your company—unless your own family is expecting you.”

“No, my family is not expecting me,” Sarah said softly as the image of her parents’ simple twin grave markers wafted through her mind. Identical in size and shape, they also shared a final date. She had not been to see them for over a year.

“Are they attending a dinner party as well?” Lillie asked.

“They’re in Europe.” The words slipped out as if they had always been there in the truth column, waiting their turn to rise to the top and be spoken. “They just left last week, and I do not expect them back before New Year’s.” How easy it was to say that.

Lillie’s eyes widened. “Are you on your own, Serena?”

Sarah pulled a pair of short white gloves out of her bag. “My aunt checks in on me every now and then, but I insisted I didn’t want to be trouble for anyone. We closed up the house and I’ve taken a

small suite with just one servant.” Her room *was* small, and Mrs. Fletcher was the only other servant down the hall at the moment.

Lillie’s head bobbed with enthusiasm. “That sounds so practical. I’m twenty-one, but my parents treat me as if I were fourteen. They would never leave me on my own for half a year, but they do let me go out to dinner when they’re not going to be home. My father set up accounts at all the best places as soon as we moved here. Please say you’ll join me.”

Sarah pressed her lips together and mulled the offer. It was Wednesday, her day off, so whatever work awaited her at the Banning house would be there tomorrow. Besides, the Bannings had left to spend several weeks at their summer house in Lake Forest. The next few weeks in the heat of a Chicago summer were sure to be sluggish and the pace of work more forgiving than usual. Mrs. Fletcher, however, had been adamant she would bolt the doors of the house at eight-thirty and go upstairs to the servants’ quarters. She was not going to sit up half the night waiting for the parlor maid. Planning only to wander the shops and get something to eat if she got hungry, Sarah had promised to be home by eight-thirty.

“Please?” Lillie pleaded. “I know it’s only six o’clock and that’s like eating in the middle of the afternoon, but I didn’t have lunch. I wasn’t hungry then.”

Sarah fingered the cuff of her cream shirtwaist. The servants at the Banning house always ate dinner at six o’clock. Then Sarah would put on her whitest apron and help the butler serve the evening meal to the family promptly at eight. Lillie looked at her with such hopeful eyes, and Sarah admitted to herself that she was hungry.

“I’ll be delighted to have dinner with you.” What good were all the dresses she had made over the last three years if Sarah buckled now? This was her moment.

“I’m so pleased. May I call you Serena? I love your name. You’ll have to tell me how your parents ever came up with something so unusual.”

It had just popped into her head. "It was my grandmother's sister's name. I don't know where it came from before that."

"I suppose I sound pathetic," Lillie said. "I've met many people since we moved from Cincinnati, but they're all connected to my father's business somehow. My mother kept saying she was going to give a party so I could meet some young people, but she never did and here we are in July. Now she says we may as well wait until September."

"Many people do leave the city to escape the heat," Sarah acknowledged.

"How about you? Do you go away?"

"I was at the lake house the last two summers," Sarah said in all truthfulness. This year she had been selected to stay behind with Mrs. Fletcher, the cook, and look after the Banning mansion while the family was in Lake Forest.

"With your parents away, it's probably easier just to stay in the city," Lillie observed. "I don't blame you."

Sarah nodded. That was as good an explanation as any.

They moved to a small counter near the door and Lillie gave the clerk her mother's account information. A few minutes later, the hat was tied neatly in a box hanging from Lillie's slender fingers.

"My carriage is just outside," Lillie said. "Do you need to dismiss your driver?" They walked a few slow steps outside the shop.

Sarah shook her head. "I walked to the shops today. I was in need of some fresh air."

"That makes it easy. We can go in my carriage and I'll drop you at home later."

"I'm sure I can find a cab," Sarah said. "I don't want to take you out of your way."

"It's no problem. I live on lower Prairie Avenue, a few blocks from here. My parents had hoped to find a house farther north, but nothing suitable was on the market and Father did not want to build something new." Lillie leaned in close to Sarah. "The

George Pullmans live up near Eighteenth Street and they have quite a swanky house. Have you ever seen it?”

“A number of times,” Sarah answered.

“Oh, here’s my carriage.” Lillie laid her gloved hand in the driver’s palm and accepted his assistance.

When he turned and offered his hand to Sarah, she sucked in a slow breath and entered the carriage. Lillie murmured instructions to the driver and the carriage began moving north, toward downtown.

A few minutes later, they stepped out of the carriage in front of a hotel Sarah had only ever passed on foot, not daring to enter. Inside, the dining room was enclosed in glazed gray-marble walls. Waiters in stiff formal wear glided around offering every attention to detail with barely noticeable gestures. Lillie ordered a favorite meal for both of them. They ate their way through the soup, the fish, the meats, the vegetables, the salad, and dessert. Smiling and nodding and chatting, Sarah was more proud of herself by the moment, even as every detail of serving the same series of courses each evening at the Banning house jabbed at her thoughts. Three years ago, Charlotte, the kitchen and serving maid, had married and left her position, and Lina, the parlor maid, was lured away to work in another of the mansions of Prairie Avenue. Sarah’s duties expanded, and washing and peeling vegetables fell to Mary Catherine, the new scullery maid fresh from Dublin. Mrs. Fletcher had made a proficient cook of Sarah during her years in the kitchen. Sarah could glance at the food set before her and instantly reconstruct how it had been prepared. Years of laying tables three times a day readied her for the menagerie of silver and crystal before her.

Three years! Sarah had never meant to stay a day past her eighteenth birthday. That would have given her eighteen months in the employ of the Bannings—long enough to take a letter of reference with her. Now for a year and a half she had been applying for other positions, and no one seemed to think she could do anything but be in service.

By the time the seasoned roast beef was served, Serena Cuthbert had emerged fully formed with a past life far more scintillating than the orphan girl who had been put into domestic service at the age of sixteen and discovered her own talent with a needle and a cast-off ball gown. Lillie seemed to have no doubt that every word Sarah spoke was true.

Sarah felt as if she had stepped into her own skin for the first time, and she was not going back. This was too easy.

But where was Serena Cuthbert going to stash Sarah Cummings?

2

Sarah slipped through the female servants' entrance and bolted the door behind her.

In the kitchen a moment later, Mrs. Fletcher glimpsed the clock.

"Three minutes to spare," Sarah announced, breathless. After the meal she had lost valuable time graciously declining Lillie's insistent offer to deliver her home in an open carriage. Lillie's suggestion was reasonable, of course, but the whole evening would have been undone if Lillie had come to the corner of Eighteenth Street and Prairie Avenue and seen which entrance Sarah used to the Banning mansion. Fortunately, Sarah had found a streetcar easily and boarded it out of Lillie's view.

"I'm going on up." Mrs. Fletcher pulled herself out of the stuffed chair that always sat below the window. "It's about time I had a summer break instead of dragging up to the lake year after year. I don't know what made Mrs. Banning decide to hire a summer cook, but I'm grateful."

"It's my turn to make breakfast for Leo, isn't it?" Sarah asked. Mrs. Fletcher nodded.

"At least he always eats." Sarah laid her handbag on a counter. "I used to find it annoying to go to all the trouble to serve breakfast and hear Oliver say, 'I'm not hungry' or 'Just coffee, please.'"

"Well, Oliver's gone and married now. Lucy too. Richard will be gone to school soon enough."

Sarah was glad to be rid of the whole bunch.

"There's bacon in the icebox, and plenty of eggs," Mrs. Fletcher said. "Leo will be down at seven-thirty as usual."

"It must be the engineer in him that makes him so precise." Most of the household staff had journeyed up to Lake Forest to look after Flora and Samuel Banning and Richard for seven weeks. With Leo home and Samuel dropping in periodically to tend to his law practice, Mrs. Fletcher and Sarah had been left behind to keep them comfortable and the house running smoothly. Karl, an under-coachman, was around for odd jobs and Leo's minimal demands for transport.

Looking weary on her feet, Mrs. Fletcher gestured toward the kitchen table. "Another note came for you from Simon Tewell."

Sarah straightened her skirt.

"This is the third note he's sent," Mrs. Fletcher said. "What does he want?"

"So far he just says he wants to discuss something with me and asks would I come to St. Andrew's at my convenience."

Mrs. Fletcher scoffed as she pressed her gray hair back on her head. "He knows you're in service. There is no convenience."

"I'm certainly not going to spend my day off ferreting out his mysteries," Sarah said.

"With the family away now, you should have time to find out what he wants. Just let me know when you're going to be gone." Mrs. Fletcher shuffled toward the stairs leading up from the kitchen to the servants' quarters. "I'm going to bed. Make sure you put the lights out when you come up."

"Good night." Sarah listened as the older woman scaled the stairs with weary steps. Three years ago the two of them had regarded each other warily. Sarah was not any more content now with the thought of a life in service, but she no longer regarded Mrs. Fletcher as her captor. Finding a way out was just taking longer than she had hoped.

Tonight's dinner had been easier than Sarah ever imagined. Lillie Wagner needed a friend, and Serena Cuthbert was up to the challenge.

Sarah moved to the table and picked up the envelope, certain its contents would be the same as the previous two.

Simon Tewell had been the assistant director at St. Andrew's Orphanage during Sarah's later years there. She had liked him well enough—as much as she liked anyone at that place. In fact, he once had listened to her tearful rant about the injustice of having both her parents killed in an accident and being left alone, and never once had he told her it was the way of the world and she would just have to adjust. It had been three years since she'd left the orphanage and joined the domestic staff of the Bannings'. Lucy Banning Edwards held a more or less permanent volunteer position at the orphanage. When she came to family dinners, Lucy occasionally reported that Simon had asked after Sarah. Lucy had arranged Sarah's placement at the Bannings' in the first place. In Sarah's mind, though, that did not entitle Lucy to be making reports to the orphanage director. If Lucy wanted to do something to help her now, she should use her influence to find Sarah a new position with some dignity.

Sarah had not been back to the orphanage even one time. Why should she go there? She wanted a future, not reminders of her past. Wasn't the point to get children out of the orphanage and on their own? Wasn't that why she had gone into service in the first place? Going back to St. Andrew's was movement in the wrong direction.

"This was not supposed to be my life," Sarah murmured to the empty room. "My father was a department manager for Marshall Field. We had a home. He wanted more for me than this."

Her parents had been killed instantly in a traffic accident. Sarah had been at school in the middle of an arithmetic lesson. The question that had haunted Sarah every day since her parents' death was why her father had not made sure she was provided for. He'd filled

her full of dreams that shattered with his death, his only legacy an empty bank account and an untraceable family tree.

Serena Cuthbert, that's what Sarah wanted—and not just for a random, serendipitous evening. Serena Cuthbert did not come from an orphanage dormitory or sleep in a servant's narrow attic room. She did not cook and serve meals and sweep floors. If she liked a hat, she bought it. If she wanted a gown, she had it made from fresh, unspoiled textiles direct from New York. Sarah's own father would have been proud of Serena Cuthbert.

Sarah picked up Simon Tewell's envelope with its tidy handwriting but did not break the seal. She would take it upstairs and put it with the others, unpersuaded she had any reason to go back to that place.



Lillie flopped onto her bed, tummy first, feet up in the air. The quilt was new, the appliqued rose and leaf pattern commissioned by her mother to match the freshly installed wallpaper. In a few minutes Lillie would send for her ladies' maid to help her undress, but for now she wanted only to savor the evening. How fortunate that she had been in the milliner's shop at the same time as Serena Cuthbert. She and her mother had taken tea a few times with the wives of her father's business associates, but Serena was the first young woman Lillie had met in Chicago who she felt might be a true friend.

With the thought of Serena at her side, Lillie dreaded the upcoming Fourth of July celebration a little less. Serena had accepted the invitation to celebrate with the Wagners readily enough. With the Cuthberts in Europe, Serena would not have her family's traditional party on the pier at the lake house. Serena's description of the Cuthbert gala did make it sound fun, though. Next year Serena would invite Lillie to celebrate with her family, perhaps even in Lake Forest. For the time being, Serena was free to make

whatever plans she wished for the holiday. She had said she would be delighted to go meet the Wagners at Jackson Park.

Paul Gunnison would be there, of course. Until she moved to Chicago in April, Lillie had not seen Paul in ten years. She had been a child, and he a teenager with no particular interest in the wide-eyed, round-faced little girl whose eyes trailed his movements when their families socialized. And when his family moved to Chicago to launch the Midwest branch of the candy-making business, he faded from Lillie's mind. Lillie and Paul had barely recognized each other the first time they met again in Chicago, but the spark was instant. Paul had called on Lillie four times already. Of course, he stayed only fifteen minutes each time, because to stay any longer would be rude, but Lillie felt the way he looked at her now and the attentiveness he offered even in those brief interludes. She was sure Paul planned to speak to her father and ask permission to escort Lillie formally.

She was going to need some new gowns if she were going to be seen on the arm of Paul Gunnison. Lillie slapped her own face in chastisement for neglecting to get the name of Serena's dressmaker. Though Serena had worn only a simple skirt and shirtwaist, Lillie could appreciate the attention to detail in every tuck and topstitch. The garments draped Serena's frame perfectly.

Lillie sat up straight on the bed. Bradley Townsend was also going to be at the Fourth of July party. She would have to make sure he was formally introduced to Serena. Though she hardly knew him and he seemed nice enough, Lillie had no interest in Brad herself. He was sure to appreciate the pleasant bearing and conversation of someone like Serena. After all, they both had spent considerable time in France, and Serena's parents were there now. They were sure to find common ground.

Lillie had offered to have her coachman see Serena home tonight, but her new friend had refused. Lillie supposed it was part of Serena's determination not to be a bother to people and to learn some

independence. It did seem rather exciting to think of navigating around Chicago alone. Serena could get into a cab and go anywhere she wanted. No one told her where she ought not to go or decided on a destination without even consulting her. Lillie lolled on her back, pleasantly imagining such delicious independence.

She heard Moira's familiar soft knock on her bedroom door and bid her enter.

"Shall I turn down your bed now, miss?"