



The Chaperone

By Laura Moriarty

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A *New York Times* bestseller, *The Chaperone* is a captivating novel about the woman who chaperoned an irreverent Louise Brooks to New York City in the 1920s and the summer that would change them both.

Only a few years before becoming a famous silent-film star and an icon of her generation, a fifteen-year-old Louise Brooks leaves Wichita, Kansas, to study with the prestigious Denishawn School of Dancing in New York. Much to her annoyance, she is accompanied by a thirty-six-year-old chaperone, who is neither mother nor friend. Cora Carlisle, a complicated but traditional woman with her own reasons for making the trip, has no idea what she's in for. Young Louise, already stunningly beautiful and sporting her famous black bob with blunt bangs, is known for her arrogance and her lack of respect for convention. Ultimately, the five weeks they spend together will transform their lives forever.

For Cora, the city holds the promise of discovery that might answer the question at the core of her being, and even as she does her best to watch over Louise in this strange and bustling place she embarks on a mission of her own. And while what she finds isn't what she anticipated, she is liberated in a way she could not have imagined. Over the course of Cora's relationship with Louise, her eyes are opened to the promise of the twentieth century and a new understanding of the possibilities for being fully alive.

Drawing on the rich history of the 1920s, '30s, and beyond—from the orphan trains to Prohibition, flappers, and the onset of the Great Depression to the burgeoning movement for equal rights and new opportunities for women—Laura Moriarty's *The Chaperone* illustrates how rapidly everything, from fashion and hemlines to values and attitudes, was changing at this time and what a vast difference it all made for Louise Brooks, Cora Carlisle, and others like them.

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The Chaperone By Laura Moriarty Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #27309 in Books
- Brand: Brand: Riverhead Trade
- Published on: 2013-06-04
- Released on: 2013-06-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.00" h x .90" w x 5.10" l, .65 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 416 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"*The Chaperone* is the enthralling story of two women . . . and how their unlikely relationship changed their lives. . . . In this layered and inventive story, Moriarty raises profound questions about family, sexuality, history, and whether it is luck or will—or a sturdy combination of the two—that makes for a wonderful life."—*O, The Oprah Magazine*

"In her new novel, *The Chaperone*, Laura Moriarty treats this golden age with an evocative look at the early life of silent-film icon Louise Brooks, who in 1922 leaves Wichita, Kansas, for New York City in the company of 36-year-old chaperone, Cora Carlisle. . . . A mesmerizing take on women in this pivotal era."—*Vogue*

"With her shiny black bob and milky skin, Louise Brooks epitomized silent-film glamour. But in Laura Moriarty's engaging new novel *The Chaperone*, Brooks is just a hyper-precocious and bratty 15-year-old, and our protagonist, 36-year-old Cora Carlisle, has the not-easy mission of keeping the teenager virtuous while on a trip from their native Kansas to New York City. After a battle of wills, there's a sudden change of destiny for both women, with surprising and poignant results."—*Entertainment Weekly*

"Throughout *The Chaperone*, her fourth and best novel, Laura Moriarty mines first-rate fiction from the tension between a corrupting coastal media and the ideal of heart-of-America morality. . . . Brooks's may be the novel's marquee name, but the story's heart is Cora's. With much sharpness but great empathy, Moriarty lays bare the settled mindset of this stolid, somewhat fearful woman—and the new experiences that shake that mindset up."—*San Francisco Weekly*

"Film star Louise Brooks was a legend in her time, but the real lead of *The Chaperone* is Cora Carlisle, Brooks' 36-year-old chaperone for her first visit to New York City in 1922. As Cora struggles to tame Louise's free spirit, she finds herself moving past the safety of her own personal boundaries. In this fictional account of Cora and Louise's off-and-on relationship, Laura Moriarty writes with grace and compassion about life's infinite possibilities for change and, ultimately, happiness."—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"When silent film star Louise Brooks was a sexually provocative and headstrong 15-year-old from Kansas, she traveled with a chaperone to New York City to attend dance school. In this fascinating historical novel, her minder, Cora, struggles to keep her charge within the bounds of propriety but finds herself questioning the confines of her own life. Thorough Cora the world of early 20th-century America comes alive, and her personal triumphs become cause for celebration."—*People*

"Captivating and wise . . . In *The Chaperone*, Moriarty gives us a historically detailed and nuanced portrayal of the social upheaval that spilled into every corner of American life by 1922. . . . [An] inventive and lovely Jazz Age story."—*Washington Post*

"#1 Summer 2012 novel."—*The Christian Science Monitor*

"A fun romp."—*Good Housekeeping*

"Devour it."—*Marie Claire*

"The novel is captivating, and the last lines about Cora (you might think I'm giving everything away, but I'm not giving anything away—the story rolls through changes in terrain so subtle that it's like a train from

Wichita to New York and back) capsule it all, revealing the richness of the saga.”—*The Daily Beast*

"The Chaperone," an enchanting, luminous new novel by Laura Moriarty, fictionalizes the tale of the very real caretaker who accompanied a 15-year-old Louise Brooks on the first leg of her journey to silent-movie stardom. . . . Moriarty is a lovely writer, warm and wise."—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

"It is [Louise Brooks's] endearing and surprising companion Cora Carlisle—a sharply drawn creating—who is the heart and soul of this stirring story."—*Family Circle*

"Captivating and wise."—*Newsday*

"While Louise lends *The Chaperone* a dose of fire, the novel's heart is its heroine, who has a tougher time swimming in the seas of early-20th-century America than her ward does. As the story carries on, Moriarty's greatest strength proves to be her ability to seamlessly weave together Cora's present, future and colorful past."—*Time Out*

"Set to be the hit of the beach read season."—*Matchbook*

"The challenges of historical fiction are plentiful—how to freely imagine a person who really lived, how to impart modern sensibility to a bygone era, how to do your research without exactly showing your research. And yet, when this feat is achieved artfully (we're talking *Loving Frank* or *Arthur and George* artfully), it can transport a reader to another time and place. Laura Moriarty's new novel, *The Chaperone*, falls into this category."—*Bookpage*

"It's impossible not to be completely drawn in by *The Chaperone*. Laura Moriarty has delivered the richest and realest possible heroine in Cora Carlisle, a Wichita housewife who has her mind and heart blown wide open, and steps—with uncommon courage—into the fullness of her life. What a beautiful book. I loved every page."—Paula McLain, author of *The Paris Wife*

"What a charming, mesmerizing, transporting novel! The characters are so fully realized that I felt I was right there alongside them. A beautiful clarity marks both the style and structure of *The Chaperone*."—Sena Jeter Naslund, author of *Ahab's Wife* and *Adam & Eve*

"*The Chaperone* is the best kind of historical fiction, transporting you to another time and place, but even more importantly delivering a poignant story about people so real, you'll miss and remember them long after you close the book."—Jenna Blum, author of *Those Who Save Us* and *The Stormchasers*

About the Author

Laura Moriarty is the author of *The Center of Everything*, *The Rest of Her Life*, and *While I'm Falling*. She lives in Kansas.

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The

CHAPERONE

ALSO BY LAURA MORIARTY

The Center of Everything

The Rest of Her Life

While I'm Falling

The

CHAPERONE

Table of Contents

PART ONE

When lovely woman stoops to folly, she can always find someone to stoop with her but not always someone to lift her up again to the level where she belongs.

—“MR. GRUNDY” FOR *Atlantic Monthly*, 1920

It excited him, too, that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes.

—F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *The Great Gatsby*, 1925

There is no Garbo! There is no Dietrich! There is only Louise Brooks!

—HENRI LANGLOIS, 1955

ONE

The first time Cora heard the name Louise Brooks, she was parked outside the Wichita Library in a Model-T Ford, waiting for the rain to stop. If Cora had been alone, unencumbered, she might have made a dash across the lawn and up the library's stone steps, but she and her friend Viola Hammond had spent the morning going door-to-door in their neighborhood, collecting books for the new children's room, and the considerable fruits of their efforts were safe and dry in four crates in the backseat. The storm, they decided, would be a short one, and they couldn't risk the books getting wet.

And really, Cora thought, staring out into the rain, it wasn't as if she had anything else to do. Her boys were already gone for the summer, both of them working on a farm outside Winfield. In the fall, they would leave for college. Cora was still getting used to the quiet, and also the freedom, of this new era of her life. Now, long after Della left for the day, the house stayed clean, with no muddy footprints on the floor, and no records scattered around the phonograph. There were no squabbles over the car to mediate, no tennis matches at the club to cheer on, and no assigned essays to proofread and commend. The pantry and icebox actually stayed stocked with food without daily trips to the store. Today, with Alan at work, she had no reason to rush home at all.

“I'm glad we took your car and not ours,” Viola said, adjusting her hat, which was pretty, a puffed turban with an ostrich feather curling down from the crown. “People say closed cars are a luxury, but not on a day like this.”

Cora gave her what she hoped was a modest smile. Not only was the car covered, it had come with an electric starter. *Cranking cars, no business for a lady*, was how the ad went, though Alan had admitted he didn't miss cranking, either.

Viola turned, eyeing the books in the backseat. “People were generous,” she allowed. Viola was a decade older than Cora, her hair already gray at the temples, and she spoke with the authority of her added years.

“Mostly. You notice Myra Brooks didn’t even open her door.”

Cora hadn’t noticed. She’d been working the other side of the street. “Maybe she wasn’t home.”

“I heard the piano.” Viola’s eyes slid toward Cora. “She didn’t bother to stop playing when I knocked. I have to say, she’s very good.”

Lightning shot across the western sky, and though both women flinched, Cora, without thinking, smiled. She’d always loved these late-spring storms. They came on so fast, rolling in from the prairie on expanding columns of clouds, a welcome release from the day’s building heat. An hour before, when Cora and Viola were canvassing, the sun was hot in a blue sky. Now rain fell fast enough to slice green leaves from the big oak outside the library. The lilacs trembled and tossed.

“Don’t you think she’s a tiresome snob?”

Cora hesitated. She didn’t like to gossip, but she could hardly count Myra Brooks as a friend. And they’d been to how many suffrage meetings together? Had marched together in the street? Yet if she passed Myra today on Douglas Avenue, Cora wouldn’t get so much as a hello. Still, she never got the feeling that it was snobbery as much as Myra simply not registering her existence, and there was a chance it was nothing personal. Myra Brooks didn’t seem to look at anyone, Cora had noticed, not unless she was the one speaking, watching for the impression she made. And yet, of course, everyone looked at her. She was, perhaps, the most beautiful woman Cora had ever seen in person: she had pale skin, flawless, and large, dark eyes, and then all that thick, dark hair. She was certainly a talented speaker—her voice was never shrill, and her enunciations were clear. But everyone knew it was Myra’s looks that had made her a particularly good spokeswoman for the Movement, a nice antidote to the newspapers’ idea of what a suffragist looked like. And you could tell she was intelligent, cultured. She was supposed to know everything about music, the works of all the famous composers. She certainly knew how to charm. Once, when she was at the podium, she had looked down at Cora, right into her eyes, and smiled as if they were friends.

“I don’t really know her,” Cora said. She looked back out through the blurred windshield, at people ducking out from a streetcar, running for cover. Alan had taken a streetcar to work, so she could have the Ford.

“Then I’ll inform you. Myra Brooks is a tiresome snob.” Viola turned to Cora with a little smile, the ostrich plume grazing her chin. “I’ll give you the latest example: she just sent a note to the secretary of our club. Apparently, Madame Brooks is looking for someone to accompany one of her daughters to New York this summer. The older one, Louise, got into some prestigious dance school there, but she’s only fifteen. Myra actually wants one of *us* to go with her. For over a month!” Viola seemed pleasantly outraged, her cheeks rosy, her eyes bright. “I mean, really! I don’t know what she’s thinking. That we’re the help? That one of us will be her Irish nanny?” She frowned and shook her head. “Most of us have progressive husbands, but I can’t imagine any one of them would spare a wife for over a month so she could go to New York City, of all places. Myra herself is too busy to go. She has to lie around the house and play the piano.”

Cora pursed her lips. *New York*. She felt the old ache right away. “Well. I suppose she has other children to look after.”

“Oh, she does, but that’s not it. She doesn’t take care of them. They’re motherless, those children. Poor Louise goes to Sunday school by herself. The instructor is Edward Vincent, and he picks her up and takes her home every Sunday. I heard that right from his wife. Myra and Leonard are alleged Presbyterians, but you never see them at church, do you? They’re too sophisticated, you see. They don’t make the other children go, either.”

“That speaks well of the daughter, that she makes the effort to go on her own.” Cora cocked her head. “I wonder if I’ve ever seen her.”

“Louise? Oh, you would remember. She doesn’t look like anyone else. Her hair is black like Myra’s, but perfectly straight like an Oriental’s, and she wears it in a Buster Brown.” Viola gestured just below her ears. “She didn’t bob it. She had it cut like that when they moved here years ago. It’s too short and severe, a horrible look, in my opinion, not feminine at all. But even so, I have to say, she’s a very pretty girl. Prettier than her mother.” She smiled, leaning back in her seat. “There’s some justice in that, I think.”

Cora tried to picture this black-haired girl, more beautiful than her beautiful mother. Her gloved hand moved to the back of her own hair, which was dark, but not remarkably so. It certainly wasn’t perfectly straight, though it looked presentable, she hoped, pinned up under her straw hat. Cora had been told she had a kind, pleasant face, and that she was lucky to have good teeth. But that had never added up to striking beauty. And now she was thirty-six.

“My own girls are threatening to cut their hair,” Viola said with a sigh. “Foolish. This bobbing business is just a craze. When it’s over, everyone who followed the lemmings over the cliff will need years to grow their hair out. A lot of people won’t hire girls with bobbed hair. I try to warn them, but they won’t listen. They just laugh at me. And they have their own language, their own secret code for them and their friends. Do you know what Ethel called me the other day? She called me a *wurp*. That’s not a real word. But when I tell them that, they laugh.”

“They’re just trying to rattle you,” Cora said with a smile. “And I’m sure they won’t really bob their hair.” Really, it seemed unlikely. The magazines were full of short-haired girls, but in Wichita, bobs were still a rarity. “I do think it looks good on some girls,” Cora said shyly. “Short hair, I mean. And it must feel cooler, and lighter. Just think—you could throw all your hairpins away.”

Viola looked at her, eyebrows raised.

“Don’t worry. I won’t do it.” Cora again touched the back of her neck. “I might if I were younger.”

The rain was coming down faster, rapping hard on the roof of the car.

Viola crossed her arms. “Well, if my girls do cut their hair, I can tell you now, it won’t be so they can throw away hairpins. They’ll do it to be provocative. To *look* provocative. That’s what passes for fashion these days. That’s what young people are all about now.” She sounded suddenly stricken, more confused than indignant. “I don’t understand it, Cora. I raised them to have propriety. But both of them are suddenly obsessed with showing the world their knees. They roll their skirts up after they leave the house. I can tell by the waistbands. I know they defy me. They roll their stockings down, too.” She gazed out into the rain, lines branching beneath her eyes. “What I don’t know is why, what’s going on in their little heads, why they don’t care about the message they’re sending. When I was young, I never felt the need to show the general public my knees.” She shook her head. “Those two cause me more grief than all four of my boys. I envy you, Cora. You’re lucky to only have sons.”

Maybe, Cora thought. She did love the very maleness of the twins, their robust health and confidence, their practical taste in clothing, their easy reconciliations after heated quarrels. Earle was smaller and quieter than Howard, but even he seemed capable of forgetting all worries when he held a racquet or a bat. She loved that they had both wanted to work on a farm, seeing it as an adventure in country living and physical labor, though she also worried they had no idea how much labor they’d signed on for. And she knew she *had* been lucky with her sons, and not just in the way that Viola meant. The Hendersons next door had a son just four years older than the twins, but those few years had made all the difference—Stuart Henderson had been killed in early 1918, fighting in France. Four years later, Cora was still stunned. For her, Stuart Henderson would always be a gangly adolescent, smiling and waving from his bike at her own boys, who were small then, still in short pants. Really, being lucky with sons seemed a matter of timing.

But whatever Viola said, Cora thought she might have fared just as well with daughters. She would have

been good with girls, perhaps, using the right combination of instruction and understanding. Maybe Viola was just going about it the wrong way.

“I’m telling you, Cora. Something is wrong with this new generation. They don’t care about anything important. When we were young, we wanted the vote. We wanted social reform. Girls today just want to... walk around practically naked so they can be stared at. It’s as if they have no other calling.”

Cora could hardly disagree. It really was shocking, how much skin girls were showing these days. And she wasn’t some old prude or Mrs. Grundy; she was fairly sure she wasn’t a *wurp*, though she didn’t know what that meant, either. Cora had been pleased when the hemlines moved up to nine inches from the ankle. Some leg showed, true, but that change seemed sensible: no more skirts trailing in the mud and bringing typhoid or who knows what into the house. And calf length was far preferable to the ridiculous hobble skirts that she herself had stumbled around in, all for the sake of fashion, not so long ago. Still, girls were now sporting skirts so short that their knees showed every time the wind blew, and there was no practical reason for that. Viola was right: a girl who wore a skirt that short just wanted to be looked at, and looked at *in that way*. Cora had even seen a few women her own age showing their knees, right here in Wichita, and really, in her opinion, these half-naked matrons looked especially vulgar.

Viola looked at her brightly. “That’s one of the reasons I’m joining the Klan.”

Cora turned. “What?”

“The Klan. Ku Klux. They sent a representative to the club last week. I wish you would have been there, Cora. They’re very interested in women joining up, holding positions.”

“I’m sure they are,” Cora murmured. “We vote.”

“Don’t be a cynic. They were much more specific than that. They know that there are serious women’s issues at hand, and that women need to be in the fight.” The ostrich feather bobbed as she spoke. “They’re against all this modernization, all these outside influences on our youth. They’re interested in racial purity, of course, but they’re just as interested in teaching personal purity for young women. We do need to keep our race pure, and Good Lord, we need to keep it going. My brother-in-law says a veritable takeover is coming, and it’s all being planned in the basement of the Vatican. That’s the real reason Catholics have so many children, you know, and meanwhile, our people have one or two or none at...”

Viola trailed off. She rolled her lips in. It took Cora a moment to understand.

“I’m sorry,” Viola said. “I didn’t mean you. Your situation is different.”

Cora waved her off. The twins were what she had. But both she and Viola were silent for a while, and there was only the tapping rain.

“In any case,” Viola said finally, “I think it would be good for the girls. Good, moral people to mix with.”

Cora swallowed, feeling short of breath. She had been wearing a corset day in, day out, for so many years that she rarely registered it as a discomfort. It seemed a part of her body. But in moments of distress, such as now, she was aware of her constricted rib cage. She would have to choose her words carefully. She could not come across as personally concerned.

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice breezy, not betraying her in any way. “Oh, Viola. The Klan? They wear those white gowns, those hoods with the spooky eyeholes.” She fluttered her gloved hands. “And they have wizards and grand wizards, and bonfires.” Even as she smiled, she glanced into Viola’s small blue eyes, analyzing what she saw there. She had to consider her options, her best route to success. Viola was older, but

Cora was richer. She would capitalize on that.

“It just seems a little... common.” She shrugged, apologetic.

Viola cocked her head. “But lots of people are—”

“Exactly.” Cora smiled again. She had chosen the right word, precisely. It was as if they were shopping at the Innes Department Store together, and Cora had shown disdain for an ugly china pattern. She already knew, with certainty, Viola would reconsider.

When the rain let up, they slid out and carried the crates in, sidestepping puddles, each woman making two trips. Inside, waiting for the librarian, they chatted about other things. They flipped through a pristine copy of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, and smiled at the illustrations. They stopped at the Lassen Hotel for tea, and then Cora drove Viola home.

So many years later, this easy ride home with Viola would be the part of the story where Cora, in the telling, would momentarily lose the regard of a grandniece she adored. This grandniece, who at seventeen, incidentally, wore her hair much longer than her mother preferred, would be frustrated to the point of tears that in 1961 she was not yet old enough to join the freedom riders in the South. She often admonished Cora for using the word “colored,” but she generally showed her more patience than she did her own parents, understanding that her aunt Cora was not a hateful person, just an old woman with tainted language.

But that patience was tested when she heard about Viola. Cora’s grandniece couldn’t comprehend why her great-aunt would remain friends with a woman who even *considered* being part of the Klan. Did she not know what they did to people? Her grandniece would look at Cora with scorn, and with forsaken, teary eyes. Had she been unaware of their cowardly crimes? Their murders of innocent people?

Yes, Cora would say, but in the end, Viola never joined. Only because she was a snob, her grandniece would counter. Not because the Klan was repugnant. It was a different time, was all Cora could say, defending her old friend, who would be long since dead by then. (Cancer. She’d started smoking after her daughters picked it up.) Consider the numbers, Cora would try. That rainy day with Viola was in the summer of 1922, when the Klan was six thousand strong in the city limits—and Wichita only held maybe eighty thousand souls in total. That wasn’t unusual for the time. The Klan was growing in many towns, in many states. Were people just stupider then? Meaner? Maybe, Cora allowed. But it was foolish to assume that had you lived in that time, you wouldn’t be guilty of the same ignorance, unable to reason your way out. Cora herself had only escaped that particular stupidity because of her special circumstance. Other confusions had held her longer.

There’s plenty of stupidity now, the grandniece said, and I know it for what it is. True, Cora conceded, and I’m proud of you for that. But maybe there’s some more, and you don’t know it’s there. Do you know what I’m saying? Honey? To someone who grows up by the stockyards, that smell just smells like air. You don’t know what a younger person might someday think of you, and whatever stench we still breathe in without noticing. Listen to me, honey. Please. I’m old now, and this is something I’ve learned.

After she dropped Viola off, Cora drove back downtown and parked on Douglas, just outside Alan’s office. No one looked twice at her as she climbed down from the car. Just two years earlier, one of the most discussed events of the annual Wheat Show was the Parade of Lady Drivers. Even then, the organizers had no trouble finding almost twenty women anxious to display their competence behind the wheels of various cars. Cora had driven the fifth car in the line, Alan sitting proudly beside her.

She had to push hard on the big door to his office, and when she finally managed to open it, she saw and felt why. The big window in the front room was open to the rain-cooled breeze, and a huge electric fan was pointed right at her. On her left, two girls she didn’t know sat typing. Alan’s secretary stood behind another desk, using both hands to turn the crank on a rotary duplicating machine. When she noticed Cora, she

stopped.

“Oh, Mrs. Carlisle! It’s nice to see you!”

Cora was aware of a pause in the typing, the typists looking up, taking her in. She was not surprised by their scrutiny. Her husband was a handsome man. Cora smiled at the girls. Both were young, and one was pretty. Neither posed any threat.

“Let me tell him you’re here,” his secretary said. She wore an ink-stained apron over her dress.

“Oh no,” Cora said, glancing at her watch. “Please don’t bother him. It’s almost five. I’ll just wait.”

But the door to Alan’s office opened. He stuck his head out and smiled. “Darling! I thought I heard your voice. What a lovely surprise!”

He was already walking toward her, arms outstretched, a sight to behold, really, tall and trim in his three-piece suit. He was twelve years older than Cora, but his dark brown hair was still full. She glanced at the typists just long enough to see she had their full attention, as if she were the heroine in a silent film. Alan leaned down to kiss her cheek, smelling faintly of a cigar. She thought she heard someone sigh.

“You’re damp,” he said, using two fingers to touch the brim of her hat. His tone was lightly scolding.

“It’s just sprinkling now, but it might start up again.” She spoke in a low voice. “I stopped by to see if you wanted a ride home. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

It was no bother, he assured her. He introduced her to the typists, praising their skills even as he gently steered her back to his office, his hand on the back of her waist. There were some fellows he wanted her to meet, he said, some new clients from the oil and gas company. Three men stood when she entered, and she greeted them all politely, trying to memorize faces and names. They were pleased to meet her, one said: her husband had spoken so highly of her. Cora feigned surprise, her smile so practiced it seemed real.

And then it was five o’clock, time to go. Alan shook hands with the men, put on his hat, took his umbrella from the stand, and jokingly apologized for having to catch his ride home in a hurry. The men smiled at him, at her. Someone suggested a future get-together. His wife could call Cora to see what would be a good evening. “That would be lovely,” she said.

When they got outside, the rain had indeed grown more serious. He offered to bring the car around to the front, but she insisted she would be fine if he shared his umbrella. They ran to the car together, huddled close, heads lowered. He held open her door and gave her his arm as she climbed up into the passenger seat, his umbrella over her head until she was safe inside.

In the car, they were still friendly, though the air between them was always different when they were alone. She told him about the library and the children’s room, and he congratulated her on her good deed. She said she hadn’t been home for most of the day. She would have to warm up some soup for supper, but she had been to the market, and she could make a good salad, and there was bread. A light supper would be fine with him, he said. It wasn’t the same, sitting down for a big meal now that the boys were gone, and yet they better get used to it. If they had a quick meal, he added, the two of them could go to a movie later, and see whatever was playing. Cora agreed, pleased with the idea. Hers was the only husband she knew of who would go see anything with her, who had actually sat through *The Sheik* without rolling his eyes at Valentino. She was lucky in that way. She was lucky in many ways.

Still, she cleared her throat.

“Alan. Do you know Leonard Brooks?”

She waited for his nod, though she already knew the answer. Alan knew all the other lawyers in town.

“Well,” she said, “his eldest daughter got into a dance school in New York. He and his wife would like a married woman to chaperone her. For the month of July, and some of August.” She rubbed her lips together. “I think I’ll go.”

She glanced at him only briefly, seeing his surprise, before she turned back to her window. They were already close to home, moving down the tree-lined streets, past their neighbors’ pretty houses and neat lawns. There was much that she would miss while she was away: club meetings and ladies’ teas, the summer picnic in the Flint Hills. She would likely miss the birth of a friend’s fourth child, which was unfortunate, as she was to be the child’s godmother. She would miss her friends, and of course, she would miss Alan. And these familiar streets. But her world would still be here when she returned, and this was her chance to go.

Alan was silent until he pulled in front of the house. When he did speak, his voice was quiet, careful. “When did you decide this?”

“Today.” She took off her glove and touched a fingertip to the glass, tracing a raindrop’s path. “Don’t worry. I’ll come back. It’s just a little adventure. It’s like the twins, going to the farm. I’ll be back before they leave for school.”

She looked up at the house, lovely even in the rain, though far too big for them. It was a house built—and bought—for a large family, but given the way things turned out, they’d never used the third floor for anything but a playroom, and then for storage. Still, even now that the twins had moved out, neither she nor Alan wanted to sell. They both still loved the quiet neighborhood, and they loved the house, how majestic it looked from the street with its wraparound porch and pointed turret. They reasoned that it would be nice for the twins to be able to come home to a familiar place. They’d kept their rooms as the boys had left them, their beds made, their old books on the shelves, the better to lure them home for summers and holiday breaks.

“New York City?” Alan asked.

She nodded.

“Any reason in particular you want to go there?”

She turned, taking in his warm eyes, his cleft, clean-shaven chin. She had been just a girl when she first saw his face. Nineteen years they had lived together. He knew the particular reason.

“I might do some digging,” she said.

“You’re sure that’s for the best?”

“I can speak with Della in the morning about coming in earlier, or staying later. Or both.” She smiled. “If anything, you’ll gain weight. She’s a far better cook than I am.”

“Cora.” He shook his head. “You know that’s not what I’m asking.”

She turned away, her hand on the door. That was the end of the discussion. She’d made up her mind to go, and as they both understood very well, for them, that was all there was to it.

TWO

The Brookses lived on North Topeka Street, close enough to Cora's house that the walk might have taken another woman less than a quarter of an hour. But it took Cora much longer because, as had long been her habit, every time she heard the motor of a passing car, she lifted her parasol to see if it might be anyone she knew. If a friend or a friend of Alan's was kind enough to stop to ask if she needed a ride or to comment on the lovely June morning, she was happy to stay and chat for a few minutes. She appreciated neighborliness, especially in this little city that still seemed so big to her after all these years. On this morning, however, she turned down all offers for rides, and would only say that she was on her way to meet a friend.

Still, she reached her destination on time, having left the house early to allow for diversions, and it was eleven o'clock exactly when the Brooks home came into view. Even painted a dull gray, it was a difficult edifice to miss. On a block of large houses, it was easily the largest, all three stories stretching more than halfway to the back alley; really, it seemed overgrown, too big for its average-sized plot. All the front windows were open to the breeze, except for one with a jagged crack across the frame, perhaps too fragile to lift. The surrounding lawn was freshly mown, and several lilac bushes, still in bloom, framed the shaded limestone porch. When Cora made her way up the steps, a bumblebee circled her twice before losing interest and buzzing away.

Myra opened the door with a smile, and Cora was at once reminded of and surprised by her hostess's relative smallness. Cora was just shy of average height herself, and she wasn't used to looking down at another grown woman, but she had at least four inches on Myra. She didn't think of Myra as being short—she hardly appeared short when at a podium, and she had the low speaking voice of a taller woman. Despite her tiny frame, Cora had never heard anyone describe Myra Brooks as "cute" or "adorable" or even "pretty." She was called "beautiful" or "captivating" or "appealing." Today, even Myra's pale neck appeared long, rising up from a white silk blouse with a flat collar, and her skirt, with its nipped waist and demure hemline just above her ankles, made her body seem longer, too. One dark strand of hair, escaped from a twist in back, hung down almost to her shoulder.

"Cora. So good to see you." Her voice was soothing, melodious, and almost convincing. On the telephone, she'd pretended to know who Cora was. Now she clasped Cora's free hand and took her parasol with the other. "You walked? In this heat? That's impressive. I wilt in this sun, I swear."

"It's only a few blocks," Cora said, though her back felt damp with sweat. She fished her handkerchief out of her purse and dabbed at her forehead. Myra waited, looking, on closer inspection, a little frazzled herself. The pearl buttons of her blouse had been buttoned incorrectly, leaving an extra hole at her throat and an extra pearl at the bottom.

"Please come sit. I can get you some lemonade. Or some tea? And I apologize for the condition of the house." She shook her head, turning away. "Our girl usually comes at nine, but for some reason, no sign of her today. Of course she doesn't have a telephone." She threw her hands in the air and sighed. "Nothing to do but wait."

Cora nodded, empathetic, though she always tried to clean as best she could before Della even arrived, not wanting to leave a bad impression, to have Della go home and tell her people what a slob her white employer was. As she followed Myra into the parlor, it became clear that her hostess was not burdened by this kind of worry. The room itself was lovely, spacious and full of light, with a breeze drifting in from two large windows. But there was clutter everywhere. On the floor, in no discernible design, lay a spoon, a fountain pen, a badminton racquet, a shoe horn, and also a naked doll with one blue eye missing. Farther on, not quite under a lovely brocaded settee, a pair of soiled socks lay next to an open-faced copy of *Candide*. Cora pretended not to notice the socks, and she tried to breathe through her mouth. Despite the open windows, the distinct smell of burnt bread permeated the air.

Myra sighed. "I've been upstairs working all morning. I'm giving a talk on Wagner next week." She stooped

to pick up the spoon, the doll, and the racquet. “The children are driving me crazy. They’re not even supposed to be in the parlor. I’m really so embarrassed. I’ll be right back. Tea? You’d like tea, you said? Or lemonade?”

Cora took a moment to answer. She had expected perfection, rooms as lovely as Myra herself. “Lemonade is fine.”

Myra moved through a pocket door, pulling it closed behind her. Cora stood where she was, wondering if she should kick the dirty socks under the settee. After a moment of hesitation, she did, and then, pleased with the result, surveyed the room again. Books, she noticed, were everywhere. *Latin Made Simple* rested on the window seat, a frayed green ribbon of a bookmark fluttering in the breeze. A small stack of books sat on the center table. She took a step closer, peering at the titles. *The Poems of Goethe. An Artist in Corfu. The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. The Origin of Species.* Under an upholstered chair, like a waiting footrest, crouched *The Collected Works of Shakespeare.*

Quick feet descended a creaking staircase, and a moment later, a curly-haired child of maybe seven wandered in from the hallway, using a spoon to eat what appeared to be chocolate icing out of a teacup. The chocolate was smeared against her pale cheeks, the front of her shirt, and the tip of her nose. She startled when she noticed Cora.

“Hello,” Cora said in her gentlest voice. “I’m Mrs. Carlisle. I’m a friend of your mother. I’m just here waiting for her.”

The girl swallowed another spoonful of chocolate. “Where is she?”

Cora nodded at the closed pocket door. “In there, I think.”

The door slid open. Myra glided back into the parlor, a glass of lemonade in each hand. Her smile faded when she saw the girl.

“Darling, what are you eating?” Her voice remained low and soft, though she handed Cora both of the lemonades so she could take the teacup and spoon from the girl. She looked into the cup and scowled. “June. This is not an acceptable lunch. I don’t think I need to tell you that. Go to the bathroom and wash your face, and then go find Theo.”

“He’s playing badminton with himself,” said the girl. “He said he didn’t want a partner.”

“Nonsense. I just found the other racquet where he was not supposed to leave it, and now it’s by the back door. After you wash up, go get it, and then go outside and find Theo. Mother has company. That will be all.”

With that, Myra turned to Cora, her smile restored, and took back one of the lemonades. Her blouse, Cora noticed, was now buttoned correctly. “Please,” she said, gesturing to the upholstered chair.

“I’m so impressed with all these books,” Cora said. As she sat, she was careful not to kick the Shakespeare beneath her chair.

“Oh.” Myra rolled her eyes. “The children leave those lying about. They can’t keep them in the library because of Leonard’s law books. That side of the house is actually sinking because he keeps so many, and they’re heavy.” She saw Cora’s smile and shook her head. “No. Really. The foundation has slipped fourteen inches. That’s why the windows are cracking. And he won’t get rid of one book.”

Cora tried to think of some mild complaint she could make about Alan, just to show understanding. But she

couldn't think of anything comparable. Alan, too, had many law books, but if the foundation started slipping under their weight, she was sure he would part with a few.

They looked at each other. It seemed to Cora that Myra should start.

"Beautiful girl," Cora said, nodding to the pocket door through which June had disappeared.

"Thank you. Wait till you see Louise."

Cora stared.

Myra took in her expression and shrugged. "You haven't yet, I take it. I'm sorry. I'm just being frank. I feel I must be, given the nature of the... mission for which you've volunteered." She looked at Cora skeptically. "You should know that you'll be chaperoning a girl who is not only exceptionally pretty, but also very willful."

Cora was again taken aback. Apparently, no conversation was necessary: Myra had already decided that Cora was a suitable chaperone. Cora had expected eventual approval and even gratitude, but she had also expected that Myra would ask a few questions first, some pretense of an interview.

"I've heard she's quite pretty," Cora said.

"What else have you heard?"

Cora straightened.

"Oh! I don't mean anything horrendous!" Myra leaned forward and gave Cora's arm a reassuring pat. She had big hands for such a small woman, her fingers narrow and long. "I didn't mean to alarm you. I only... I imagine you have many friends in town." She leaned back, crossing her ankles. "I wondered if you'd spoken with, for example, Alice Campbell?"

Cora shook her head. The lemonade was too tart to sip. She had to work not to pucker her mouth.

"Oh. Well. Alice Campbell teaches dance and elocution at the Wichita College of Music." Myra said this last phrase as if it were laughable, a joke in and of itself. "Louise studied with her for a few years. They butted heads, so to speak. Mrs. Campbell found her"—she glanced out one of the big windows, as if searching for the exact words—"spoiled, bad-tempered, and insulting. There were other adjectives, I recall. At any rate, she dismissed Louise from all classes."

Cora frowned. She was going to New York. She'd already decided. If she backed out now, she might never go. Yet this information did complicate her idea of what kind of trip lay in store.

"I won't say any of those things aren't true of Louise," Myra continued, setting her glass on the table. "Or at least, they're true on occasion." She smiled. "I dare say I know how difficult she can be better than anyone. But what I also know is that as hard as Louise can be on others, she's always hardest on herself." She made a dismissive gesture with one hand. "She has an artistic temperament. And honestly, she's already far more talented than Mrs. Campbell ever will be, and she has been for some time. She realized it while still a pupil. That was really the problem."

Something heavy thumped the floor over their heads. A male voice called out, "Idiot!" Cora's gaze moved upward. Myra appeared to hear nothing.

"Are you saying she'll be... unruly?" Cora asked.

“No. On the contrary. I want to allay your fears. You see, whatever Louise’s temperament, you’ll have far more leverage than anyone has ever had with her, myself included. You’re her ticket to New York, and she knows it. Once you get there, you’ll continue to have enormous leverage, because if you decide to come home, she has to come home, too. Her father has already made that clear.”

Somewhere above them, glass shattered. That was quickly followed by a feminine, but guttural, shout. Again, Cora looked at the ceiling, and then at her hostess’s untroubled face.

“So with you,” Myra continued, “our little lion should be as docile as a lamb. She knows how hard I worked to get her father to agree to let her go, and she won’t jeopardize the result. Studying under Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis will be an enormous opportunity for her. You’re familiar with Denishawn?”

This last question seemed an afterthought, a question that didn’t really need an answer. Cora almost nodded before realizing she should be honest and shake her head.

Myra appeared confused. “You don’t know the Denishawn Dance Company?”

Cora shook her head again.

“Well. They’re the most innovative dance company in the nation. Didn’t you see them when they came through last November? At the Crawford?”

Cora, irritated now, shook her head again. She recalled, vaguely, advertisements for a dancing group, but neither she nor Alan had been interested. Myra gazed back at her under slightly furrowed brows. Clearly, an opinion had been formed.

“You missed something, then. Ted Shawn and Martha Graham were the leads, and they were sensational. There was none of the tripe we usually get out here in the hinterlands.” She gazed out the front window, frowning. “Denishawn does modern dance that is truly modern, artistic. Their choreography owes something to Isadora Duncan, but not entirely. They themselves are innovative. And they’re the best.” She paused, looking down at her own hands. “I’m really so happy for Louise.”

Cora heard a distinct slap, and another scream that could have been attributed to an injured party of either gender. She cleared her throat, pointing at the ceiling. “Shouldn’t we... investigate?”

Myra gazed at the ceiling. “No need,” she muttered, smoothing her skirt. “You can be sure—she’ll come to us.”

Footsteps moved down a staircase, even quicker and lighter than June’s. “MOTHER!”

Myra gave no answer.

“MOTHER!”

“We’re in here, darling,” Myra called out. “In the parlor. Being civilized.”

A girl appeared in the doorway, her right hand pressed against her left shoulder, her dark eyes glassy with tears. Cora had no doubt she was looking at Louise: even crying, the skin around her eyes puffed with rage, she was strikingly beautiful. She was short and small like her mother, with the same pale skin and heart-shaped face, the same dark eyes and dark hair. But her jaw was firmer, and her cheeks were still as cherubic as young June’s. Framing all this was the remarkable black hair, shiny and straight and cropped just below her ears, the ends tapering forward on both sides as if forming arrows to her full lips. A smooth curtain of thick bangs stopped abruptly above her brows. Viola was right. For all her resemblance to her mother, really,

this girl looked like no one else.

“Martin hit me,” she said.

“Hit?” Myra asked. “Or slapped? After years of living with you both, I suppose I can hear the difference, even a floor away.”

“It left a mark!” Louise moved her hand and lifted the sleeve of her cream-colored frock to reveal a patch of skin that was not only red, but beginning to bruise along the top. Cora gasped. Louise looked at her, but only for a moment.

“He’s bigger than I am. He’s older. And he was in my room, reading my diary! How can you tolerate that level of insolence from him?” She pointed to her arm. “And violence?”

Myra smirked, clearly amused by the drama of the girl’s words. But to Cora, both questions seemed legitimate. The mark on the girl’s arm was ugly. If this Martin person was older than Louise, he must be close to the age of the twins, and she couldn’t imagine either Howard or Earle striking a younger girl, or any girl for that matter. They simply wouldn’t do it. And if one of them lost his head and did, he would have to answer to both Cora and Alan, who would take such an incident far more seriously than the still-smirking woman seated across from her now.

“Your brother’s insolence and violence won’t be your problem much longer,” Myra said, stifling a yawn. “And you can keep your precious diary safe in New York, thanks to this woman here. Louise, I’d like you to meet Cora Carlisle.”

The girl looked at Cora. She said nothing, but the expression on her face was a clear mix of revulsion and forbearance. Cora couldn’t imagine what about her might invite such feelings. She’d taken care to look nice for this visit. She was wearing a modest but fashionable dress, and even a long strand of beads. She was certainly dressed as nicely as Myra. But there was no mistaking the contempt in the girl’s eyes. It was the way a child looked at the broccoli that must be eaten before dessert, the room that must be cleaned before playtime. It was a gaze of dread, made all the more punishing by the girl’s youth and beauty, her pale skin and pouting lips. Cora felt herself blushing. She had not been the subject of this sort of condescension in years.

She stood quickly, extending her hand. “Hello,” she said, smiling, her eyes locked onto the girl’s. The height difference, she decided, would be a help. “It’s nice to meet you. I hope we’re in for a wonderful trip.”

“Nice to meet you,” the girl stammered. She wasn’t half as smooth a liar as her mother. She gave Cora’s hand a limp shake and then cradled her sore arm again.

“I’m sorry about your arm. It looks as if it hurts.”

It was only the truth, but she’d said it kindly, and it was as if she had turned an invisible key. The lovely eyes filled with tears again, and seemed to take Cora in anew.

“Thank you,” she said. “It does hurt.”

“She’s never heard of Denishawn,” Myra said. She remained seated, smiling up at her daughter, expectant. Cora felt the first risings of strong dislike.

“You’ve never heard of Denishawn?” Louise, too, seemed confused.

“No,” Cora said. She hoped that if she were clear on this, they would perhaps stop asking.

The girl and her mother exchanged looks. They stared up at Cora with matching dark eyes, looking more alike than before.

“Why are you going then?” Myra asked in a pleasant voice, though her smile seemed unpleasant. “What draws you to New York?”

Cora swallowed. She should have anticipated the question, and prepared an answer. Vague associations with New York City floated through her mind: The Statue of Liberty. Immigrants. Bootleggers. Tenement squalor. Broadway.

“I love good theater,” she said.

Louise gasped. Her smile was nothing like her mother’s—her pleasure was as sincere as her earlier scorn. “Well then! You’re not so bad after all!”

Cora wasn’t sure what to make of this.

“I think live theater is the snake’s hips. I want to go to all the Broadway shows.”

Cora nodded amiably. She didn’t mind theater.

Myra tilted her head at Cora. “Funny. I don’t think I’ve ever noticed you at plays here in town.”

Cora worked to recall any play she had seen in the last five years. Nothing. She preferred the movies, seeing the faces up close. She didn’t mind reading along.

“She didn’t say she liked *local* theater, Mother.” Louise turned back to Cora. “You mean quality theater, don’t you? I don’t blame you at all. It’s a dreadful scene around here, just like with dance. I can’t wait to see a real show.”

“Nor I,” Cora said. She and Louise smiled at each other. She supposed she would like Broadway well enough.

“Louise dear,” Myra said, though she kept her gaze on Cora, “I’m so glad you two will be chummy. But Mrs. Carlisle and I have a few more things we need to discuss.”

Louise looked at her mother, and then at Cora, as if hoping to discern what, exactly, would be the subject of the discussion. When no sign was given, she shrugged and turned to go. As she passed the center table, she picked up the book from the top of the stack without looking at its title. She looked back over her shoulder. “See you in July,” she called out. She waved with the hand that held the book, and gave Cora the quickest of winks.

• • •

Myra filled her in on the particulars: she and Louise would be staying in an apartment building near Riverside Drive that Denishawn had recommended. Leonard had already purchased their train tickets and paid in full for the apartment, although, Myra cautioned, it would probably be better to let Louise think he was paying rent by the week. Cora would be in charge of the spending money; he would give her at least a week’s worth when he saw them off at the station, and he would wire the rest at her request. The funds were hardly endless, but she needn’t be especially frugal: they wanted Louise to experience New York, or at least some of it. Museums. Theater. Restaurants. Really, any wholesome entertainment would be fine.

Watching Myra tell her all this, Cora softened a bit. Perhaps all the Denishawn snobbery obscured jealousy,

or simple maternal worry. Perhaps Myra wished that she could be the one to accompany Louise. It couldn't be easy, sending your daughter off with a mere acquaintance. And Myra had taken the trouble to arrange a chaperone, to require one. Obviously, she cared. Perhaps she was just worried, as any mother might be.

So when it was time to go, and she and Myra were standing in the cavernous entryway, Cora summoned her courage. "I want you to know," she told Myra, slouching a bit so she wouldn't feel so tall, "that I appreciate you telling me about that dance instructor, the one Louise didn't get along with. But really, it seems to me that your daughter is a lovely young woman. I heard she even goes to my church."

"She used to," Myra said flatly.

"Oh. Well. In any case, I want you to know, you needn't feel anxious about the trip. I know I talked about going to plays, but I assure you, I'll take my primary responsibility seriously. I'm sure Louise is a decent girl, but I'll be sure to keep her safe."

Myra lifted her brows, smiling as if Cora had said something funny. "Leonard insisted on a chaperone," she said, opening the door to the sunlight and heat. She shielded her eyes with the flat of her palm, though her smile remained unchanged. "Finding you was his idea. I just want her to go."

THREE

Union Station was, perhaps, the most elegant building in Wichita. It was still relatively new, built just a few years before the war, its front entrance adorned with granite columns and arched windows more than twenty feet high. Inside, it was all one grand space, and on this bright July morning, long slants of sunlight fell across the marble floor. People holding tickets and suitcases walked purposefully between shadow and light, their footfalls and chatter echoing. Cora and Alan, along with Leonard Brooks, sat on one of the wooden benches on the perimeter. The high-backed bench looked and felt like a church pew, and Cora sat very straight, occasionally looking up at the large clock positioned high on a wall. Louise had left to use the ladies' room over twenty minutes ago.

"You'll take the Santa Fe as far as Chicago," Alan said, looking down at Cora's ticket. "You'll have two hours to change trains, which is plenty of time. But you should probably find your connection right away." He gave her a meaningful look, using a handkerchief to wipe his brow. "Chicago's station can be overwhelming."

Cora managed a nod, her gloved hands clasped tightly in her lap. She was seventeen when she first arrived in Wichita, literally right off the farm, her train pulling into the old depot, which was so much smaller and less impressive than this new one. Yet at the time, she had been both thrilled and anxious at the sight of so many people and so much movement, and all the fashionable women with corseted figures wearing belted skirts and high-collared shirtwaists. To Cora, even now, Wichita was the big city. Alan had grown up here, taking the crowds and the bustle for granted, and he'd been to law conferences all over the country. Now he was telling her that even he could be overwhelmed by Chicago's Union Station, which she would be navigating early tomorrow, so she could get on another train to an even larger city, all with her young charge in tow.

"That's if your train arrives on time." Leonard Brooks leaned back and pulled a pocket watch from his vest, ignoring the clocks on the column. "This strike could go on all summer. Harding needs to step in."

He was a small but intense-looking man, his eyes more black than brown, his hair as dark as Louise's and Myra's. He wasn't much taller than either one, but he, too, gave the impression of being at least average height. He had a long, pointed nose and a habit of staring off into nothing in a way that implied deep thought. Leonard Brooks had an excellent mind, according to Alan, with a solid chance of an appointment to the bench. He did seem obsessed with his work, Cora noticed. Moments after he'd cut a path across the station with a suitcase in each hand, Louise keeping stride beside him, he'd tried to strike up a conversation with

Alan about a recent ruling on property taxes. Only after Alan cleared his throat and gave Cora a long look had Mr. Brooks seemed to recall that his business at hand was with her. Once focused, he was gracious, saying how pleased he and Myra were that Cora was taking on Louise. But now he was going on about the railroad strike, even though his daughter, who had yet to return from her exceedingly long trip to the ladies' room, was about to embark on her first real journey from home.

"It's an interesting debate," he said, looking up at Alan. "The workers have the right to strike, but reliable transport seems a right of the people."

"I'm going to check on Louise," Cora said, her voice as smooth as she could make it. She didn't want to give the impression that she was uncertain of the girl's whereabouts before they even boarded the train. But she was getting worried, and she could hardly come up with another reason for going after her. Cora herself had just returned from the ladies' room when Louise decided she needed to go. Now, as Cora made her way across the station, her low heels clicking on the marble, it occurred to her that the girl may have purposefully staggered their excursions.

That suspicion seemed more likely after she turned a corner around a shoeshine and found Louise leaning against a wall and drinking a Coca-Cola right out of the bottle. A tall boy in a dapper coat and flat-brimmed hat stood beside her, one arm against the wall, the better to turn toward Louise and get a better view, which he was clearly enjoying.

"Louise. There you are."

They both straightened. Louise moved the bottle away from her mouth. The boy, Cora saw now, was actually a young man, in his late twenties at least, blond stubble on his chin. His light eyes took in Cora with an expression of utter disappointment.

Cora looked at Louise. "I worried you'd gotten lost," she said, and then regretted it, the obvious lie.

Louise nodded. Without another look in the man's direction, she walked quickly toward Cora. She was wearing an ivory calf-length dress with a Peter Pan collar, no hat, and very high heels, so high, in fact, that her head was almost level with Cora's. She smiled, but her dark eyes were trained on Cora's face, clearly trying to read it. "*Are you going to make trouble?*" she seemed to ask. "*Right from the start? When we could get along so well?*"

"He's just an old friend from school."

Cora gave no response. It seemed far more likely that in less than half an hour, Louise had met a perfect stranger, perhaps from out of town, and let him buy her a pop. But there was no way to know for certain, and it seemed unwise to start an argument she could not prove.

"We should get back," she said amiably. "We'll be boarding soon."

"Would you like a sip?" Louise tipped the bottle toward her.

Cora shook her head. When they got to New York, there would be no more questions of previous acquaintance, and she would be in a better position to explain to Louise the hazards—to her person and to her reputation—of allowing a strange man to buy her anything. She was a child, Cora remembered. Innocent. *Motherless*, Viola had said. She probably longed for guidance. The girl had gone to Sunday school, and by her own volition, for goodness' sakes. She simply needed attention and instruction. As soon as they got on the train, Cora planned to provide her with both.

She said goodbye to Alan on the platform. The sky was too bright for her to look up at him, so she gazed at

her hands, held in his. They'd spent time apart before. When the boys were small, she'd taken them to visit his sister and her children in Lawrence while he stayed in Wichita to work. But she'd never been gone for over a month. And she'd never gone so far.

"Your trunk was checked," he said. "It should be delivered the night you arrive. But you'll let me know if you need anything." He spoke in a low voice, perhaps not wanting to imply to Leonard Brooks that there might be some need he had overlooked. "Don't hesitate," he added. "Anything at all."

She nodded, and, sensing his face moving down and toward her, held up her cheek for him to kiss. Over his shoulder, she saw Louise brazenly watching, her hand flat under the straight bangs. Their eyes met. The girl's eyes narrowed. Cora looked away.

"Now I want you to mind Mrs. Carlisle," Leonard Brooks was saying, primarily to Louise, but loud enough for Cora and Alan to hear. He bobbed forward on his toes, his thumbs hooked on his suspenders. In heels, his daughter was taller than he was. "I trust I'll only get reports of your hard work and good behavior."

Louise lowered her head and gazed down at him, holding her small travel bag behind her back. "You will, Daddy. I promise." She could look so youthful, Cora thought, so girlish. But only sometimes. And the trick seemed to be in her command.

Her father wiped his brow, squinting past her to the waiting train. "With what that school is charging, I expect that when you come back, you'll be the best dancer in Wichita."

Cora and Alan smiled. But Louise only looked at him and blinked. She appeared momentarily at a loss for words, wounded even, her beautiful pout pronounced. She aged before Cora's eyes, her gaze wizened as she lowered her chin.

"Don't be stupid. I already am."

She softened the words, as much as they could be softened, with an afterthought of a smile. To Cora's surprise, Leonard Brooks seemed only amused at his daughter's condescension. Either that, or he couldn't be bothered to give what seemed the necessary reprimand. Cora herself would have put a check on such rudeness. But it wasn't her place. Not yet.

Of course in just a few years, Cora would better understand Louise's annoyance with her father's ignorance: being the best dancer in Wichita was hardly the end of her ambition. In just a few years, they would be reading about her in magazines, about her films, about her wild social life. She would receive over two thousand pieces of fan mail a week, and women all over the country would be trying to copy her hair. Before the decade was out, she would be famous on two continents. By then, if Leonard Brooks wanted to see his eldest daughter dance and dazzle, he would have to pay at a theater like everyone else, and gaze up at a thirty-foot screen.

On the train, they had their own open section, Cora's double seat facing Louise's. The windows had drawn curtains made of the same maroon velvet as the seats, and overhead, they each had a small reading lamp. They wouldn't need berths until they got to Chicago, so no partitions separated the sections. Normally, Cora liked the openness of day cars, but on this particular trip, she felt wary. Before they even left the station, a man from across the aisle, who appeared about Cora's age, asked if he could help lower their top window. The man had not, Cora noticed, offered to lower the window of the two elderly women in the section directly behind them—and he addressed Louise directly. Cora quickly answered for her: telling him she would let him know if and when their window needed lowering. Her tone was polite but firm, and her real message was clear: she was the guard at the gate.

If Louise was distressed by her sequestering, she didn't show it. The brightness of her face seemed both

irrepressible and general, directed at no one in particular. No matter where she looked—at the ceiling of the car, at the other passengers, at her view from the trestle over Douglas Avenue—her glee was obvious, and, it seemed, as private as if she were alone. She did not speak to Cora, but as the gears of the train whinnied and clicked, she smiled, her fingers drumming on her lap. She tapped her toes. When the whistle finally blew and the train lurched forward, she tilted her chin up, closed her eyes, and exhaled with a sigh.

“It is exciting,” Cora ventured. The boys had loved train trips when they were small, and even when they were older. They’d both insisted on sitting by the window, watching for puffs of steam, and for years, it seemed, on every journey, she’d had to ask the conductor if they could visit the engine.

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