

THE
GIRL
ON THE
VAUDEVILLE
STAGE

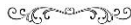
THE DANCER CHRONICLES

DEANNA CAMERON



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CHAPTER ONE



FOR A FULL HALF hour the stage manager sat on a stool near the footlights, his fingers curled on the hooked head of his cane as he silently watched the vaudeville players at morning rehearsal. Not a single word of correction or praise passed his lips, not even the typical complaint that a minute be cut from one bit or added to another. Harland Stanley was biding his time.

But now, as Pepper MacClair hunched against a white gazebo set piece with her knees pulled to her chest and the hem of her black cotton frock skimming the top edge of her boots, she watched the man pummel the heel of his steel-braced foot into the boards, not once, but three times in a brutal call for quiet.

In an instant, the music stopped, and the voices fell away. This was why they were here, the reason the scrawled note had been tacked to the call board telling performers and stagehands alike they were expected on the stage. No exceptions, no excuses. Even the wardrobe mistress was sitting upon a crate, tugging a needle and thread through a ripped seam on an extra-large pair of green plaid trousers.

Jimmy, the opening-act juggler, roused himself from beside the piano, the brim of his bowler clenched between his fidgety fingers. “Mr. Stanley, before you say anything about that *Variety* notice, I’d like to say in my defense that it was hardly raining plates upon the stage. It was one plate, sir, only one.”

The stage manager raised his palm. “I’m not concerned with your dropped plate, Mr. Jack.” He turned to Marvani, the magician. “Nor am I concerned with the dove that seemed to disappear beneath your cape until it escaped by way of your sleeve.” He turned to the Shorty Shakespeareans, a troupe of thespians measuring between three and four feet tall. “Neither will I remark upon certain forgotten lines from the *Midsummer* scene, except to say it was most unfortunate that these events—and others—were witnessed by the only critic to visit the Chance Theatre in well over a year. Shall we leave it at that?”

The stage filled with murmurs of shame and sheepish agreement.

Pepper watched her fellow players in disbelief before scrambling to her feet. “No,” she declared. “We shouldn’t leave it at that.”

She searched for a supportive nod from any quarter, but no one met her gaze. Except Stanley, who stared back with a hateful glare.

“I suppose you would prefer I make light of these errors? Or lie and say such mistakes don’t matter?”

“No, but what you might say... You could say...” She didn’t know what he should say, only that what he had said was frightfully unfair. The day the critic appeared had been an awful day at the theater. Another stagehand had quit, the third that month, and a ventriloquist with two weeks left to his contract had gotten himself arrested for disorderly conduct during the dinner break. The shuffling backstage had taken a toll, as Stanley was very much aware.

He smiled and watched her fluster.

“You could say the notice was undeserved,” she

blurted at last.

“Undeserved, Miss MacClair?”

“Yes, very much undeserved.” Fresh conviction swelled within her. “You could say it was untrue. That we are not a ‘band of vaudeville fools, misfits, and deviants.’” She was quoting the portion of the notice where the critic had poked fun with the phrase, alleging it to be more apt than *Vaudeville Stars, Marvels, and Delights*, the show’s title since the Chance Theatre had opened its doors sixteen years before.

Stanley pounded his cane like a gavel. “I will not be lectured to, Miss MacClair. Not by anyone, and certainly not by a seamstress.”

His words cut, but not as deeply as the muffled laughter behind her did. She shot a look over her shoulder and saw Beatrice Pennington’s froth of white-blond curls at the edge of the crimson curtain. Her dance partner was already dressed in their Dancing Dolls costume—the snug black bodice that covered little more than a corset and the black tulle skirt that dropped to the knee. Beside her, Trixie Small, the third and youngest member of their trio—a girl of a mere sixteen years—stared at the stage beneath her feet.

Pepper ignored them. “I am a dancer now, Mr. Stanley, and have been since the start of the season, as you well know.”

“Seamstress, chorus girl, it hardly makes a difference. May we move on to the business at hand?”

She would have pressed him, forced him to admit the wrong, if she had not seen the message implicit in the expressions of those around her. The others wanted her to stop. Jimmy and Marvani. The dog trainer and the wardrobe mistress. Even the stagehands. She read the meaning in their dodged and downcast glances: If Stanley preferred to ignore the notice, they did as well. She plopped down against the fake gazebo’s step and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Thank you,” he said with false sincerity and turned to the others. “I have called you together to say that Mr. DeGraaf will not return this week as planned, and it is with deepest regrets that he has advised me his convalescence will extend indefinitely.”

Disappointment tinged the air. The sickness that had kept the theater’s owner away had seemed a blessing at first. A welcome reprieve from the old man’s booming Dutch curses and nightly rants. But now that the Chance had been left solely in Stanley’s tight-fisted charge, even Pepper was eager for DeGraaf’s return.

The marquee and playbills still read James P. DeGraaf Presents, but for the past five months it had been the stage manager filling the show’s slots, and he was doing it with one embarrassment after another.

Last week’s headliner had been the worst yet. The man sang Irish ballads so maudlin and morose that more than one patron fled mid-act with a hanky pressed to her nose. The singer had taken it as a source of pride, even crowed backstage about his “keen ability to stir the soul.” Pepper had to clasp her hands to keep from smacking him silly. Only an amateur called a bit that sent the audience fleeing from the seats a success, but if he didn’t know that yet, he likely never would. He was a lost cause, and as far as she was concerned, so was Stanley.

“So you are still in charge,” she said. “That is the big announcement?”

“No, Miss MacClair. Mr. DeGraaf’s son will be stepping in during the remainder of his father’s recovery.”

Robert DeGraaf was returning to the Chance? The old man had sent his son off to a Cambridge college on a sweltering September morning more than three years ago, and the younger DeGraaf had not stepped foot in the theater, even once, in all that time.

The boy hadn’t frequented the theater often, but the veterans knew him well enough. She could hear their whispers: “How can a young man reared in classrooms and

drawing rooms know anything about running a theater?”
“When has he ever showed an interest in his father’s business?” “What good can he possibly do?”

Pepper held her tongue. The complaints about Robert were not new, and they had never been fair. He could certainly do no worse than Stanley. She, for one, welcomed the change, and it had nothing to do with her feelings for the younger DeGraaf. Absolutely nothing at all. Robert had promised he would come back for her. No matter what anyone said, he was keeping his word.

“When is he expected?” She could see instantly that Stanley saw through her casual tone.

“Soon, Miss MacClair. I am sure it will be soon. Mrs. Basaraba, there is one more matter concerning Wardrobe.”

The woman looked up from the trousers in her lap and peered over the rim of her spectacles.

“The new headliner will need a gown for today’s performances.” He paused and pulled a watch from his vest pocket. “She should arrive within the hour.”

The wardrobe mistress’s eyes widened. “Impossible! I have three pairs of breeches to finish, and the trainer’s coat to mend.”

“We have no choice. Her trunk was damaged in transit. I’m sure you can manage something. You always do.” And with that, he maneuvered himself to his feet, gripped his cane, and dragged his lame leg back into the shadows of the wings.

The others drifted away as well. Pepper remained. She watched Mrs. Basaraba staring into her lap.

Pepper stood, tossed back the mass of chestnut curls she had roped into a loose braid, and approached the woman who had been her mother’s assistant before Bessie MacClair had died and for whom Pepper had worked as an assistant before Stanley gave her a second chance at the stage. “Mrs. B, let me help.”

The woman patted at the crown of thin black hair rolled into a halo around her head and released a sigh that

could have come from the very tips of her dainty brown boots. “No, *bubbeleh*, I think no. You have the show.”

Pepper settled onto the crate beside the woman, and with a friendly nudge said, “Curtain is an hour off yet. You might be surprised how much I can do in an hour.”

* * *

A gust, unseasonably cool for the middle of April, caught Pepper as she emerged from Wanamaker’s department store, sending the hems of her plum velvet coat and the frock beneath flapping against her limbs. She beat down the unruly skirts, but judging from the disapproving glare of a passing matron, not before exposing a scandalous portion of the black-and-white ringed hose she had inherited from an old pirate act. “Oh, cheer up,” she muttered. “They’re only stockings.”

The old woman sniffed, pushed through the swinging door, and disappeared into the cavernous shopping emporium beyond.

“High hats.” Pepper fussed her garments back into place, then plunged the bag of sewing needles and new thread she’d purchased for the wardrobe mistress deep into her coat pocket. She pulled her black bowler low on her brow and set off for the vaudeville venue she called home.

It wasn’t far. She could already see the upper floors over the tops of the streetcars and horse-drawn carriages that choked this part of Broadway at East Ninth Street. From this distance, the Chance Theatre looked like its old self, as grand as it had been when she and her mother arrived on its doorstep, hungry and penniless, thirteen years earlier. Everything had glistened then: the crown of spires at the roofline, the oval windows that ringed the fifth floor like a string of pearls, the orderly arched windows along the third floor. She had gazed up that first day, grabbed hold of her mother’s coarse wool skirt, and

asked if it was a castle, this place where they were to live. Bessie MacClair had patted her daughter's hand and said, "No, lass, not a castle. Just a theater."

Her mother had been wrong about that. The Chance was not just a theater. It had been a glorious vaudeville theater that Mr. DeGraaf had built into one of the very best on Broadway.

But that had never meant much to her mother.

Pepper melted into the morning crowd, dodging the mucky puddles left from the overnight rain, the reeking residue of horses, and an erratic automobile whose top-hatted driver seemed to mistake the horn for the brake.

No, it was not a castle. But despite the debris collecting in its corners and the grime creeping into the crevices of its brick walls, despite the rust gnawing at the edges of the electrical sign that rose from the third floor to the fifth, it was still a theater. And once it pushed through this slump, it would be glorious again.

It could even happen today. A fresh bill, a fresh start. She squinted to make out the headliner's name spelled out in small electrical lights on the marquee above the main arch. Madame Bizet? She repeated it aloud—perhaps the sound would knock loose a memory. But no. Another unknown. Dangling beneath the lights, a hand-painted sign read: A Most Exquisite Talent. A Parisian Singing Sensation.

Pepper hoped so. The Chance needed a sensation. She glanced a block farther down Broadway. Already the door to the kinoscope parlor that had moved into the old cabinetmaker's store was propped open, taking in business. A flashing electrical sign read: Automatic Vaudeville.

"Hardly," she muttered. Coins dropping down a metal chute for a peek of flickering black-and-white photographs was not vaudeville. Everyone knew proper vaudeville was a stage with a curtain, with people and props and easel cards, with music and dancing and applause. It was the amusement that had flourished along this part of

Broadway before the circuits swallowed all but the hardest of independent theaters or muscled them into oblivion. All that was left was the rowdy music halls along the Bowery and the circuits' own lavish venues uptown, with little in between.

Mr. DeGraaf said it was only a matter of time before the tide turned. People would tire of paying a dollar, sometimes two, at the big-time stages. If the songs were good and the jokes funny, people would come, he would say, and that was what the theater delivered, five shows a day, six days a week.

Now that Robert would be in charge, she had no doubt better times were ahead, both for her and for the Chance.

She breathed in the earthy aroma of roasted peanuts and followed the scent to a vending cart parked in front of Abernathy's tavern. A grumbling in her stomach was reminding her she hadn't eaten before the meeting. She was about to pay her nickel for a bag when a fine carriage stopped beneath the theater's marquee. The ticket window wouldn't open for another half hour, yet the driver hopped down and pulled open the cabin door. Pepper ignored the aproned man shoving the paper bag of salted nuts at her and watched a gentleman in a black overcoat emerge from the carriage.

The sight stopped her cold. Though he was turned away, she knew that profile. The sharp angle of the cheek and upward tilt of the chin. That lean, athletic frame that had not changed so much in three years. It was Robert, she had no doubt.

She was on the verge of calling out when another man alighted from the carriage. The elder DeGraaf? No. This man was trim and silver-haired, certainly not the corpulent Dutchman with the wide halo of frizzy dark hair.

Who was it then?

The two men disappeared into the theater.

"Peanuts, miss?" The vendor shook the bag at her again. She waved him off and hurried toward the theater's

main door, pausing only briefly at a skinny flight of metal stairs climbing the building's north wall to the fifth story. That was where she should be headed. She knew Mrs. Basaraba was waiting for the sewing notions.

But there had to be a few extra minutes to greet Robert. Just a smidgen of time to see those tender green eyes, like springtime leaves, and that sweet boyish smile.

With an eager hand, she pushed open the main door and peered into the Scarlet Room—that was what they called the lobby, for it was all red carpet and red walls, and sagging red-cushioned benches next to feeble potted palms where patrons might rest before ascending one of the staircases to the balcony above.

She scanned the shadowy alcoves, where two swinging doors opened to the auditorium and another off to the side led to the one-aisle bar that sold whiskey, gin, and sherry to thirsty customers. There was no sign of Robert nor his companion. She didn't see a soul.

She set off toward the auditorium. Halfway across the floor, she stopped. Voices. Too close for a rehearsal on the stage. A light seeped from beneath Mr. DeGraaf's closed office door.

Robert was there.

At once she was standing at the threshold. Only a two-inch width of walnut stood between them. Quickly, she pulled her hat from her head, held it between her teeth by the stinky brim, and coiled up her braid. With one hand holding her mass of curls, she pulled the bowler over it with the other. A pinch on her cheeks and a bite on her lips for color. She raised her hand to rap on the wood, but stopped. He was speaking, and she let that soft tenor wrap around her once again like the cozy wool blanket they had shared on the roof, so inviting and warm. Just to hear it again after all this time.

But there was the other voice. Older and deeper, with a slightly nasal tinge. She tried to place it.

"I rather expected to be meeting with your father,"

Robert's companion said.

"I assure you, Mr. Ziegfeld..."

The name paralyzed her. Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr.? The name appeared in the papers and journals so often he seemed more legend than man, more idea than real flesh, blood, and bone. The whole wide spectrum of the theatrical world seemed to fit within the contours of that name: the Broadway hits and the flops, the fame and misfortunes, the romances and scandals. Even those who turned up their noses at Ziegfeld's arrogance and near-constant courting of the press never disputed the effectiveness of his methods. With his guidance, Anna Held had become a shining light on Broadway, starring for months now in his own musical hit, *A Parisian Model*, uptown.

And here he was. On the other side of this door. She leaned in another inch.

"So you are taking over, are you?" Ziegfeld was saying. "The change, I must say, is long overdue. I remember grand productions here at the Chance. *Vaudeville Stars, Marvels, and Delights* was a magnificent spectacle indeed when I booked Eugen Sandow's strongman act through here in ninety-four, fresh from his success in Chicago. He shared a bill with that other World's Fair act, that little Egyptian belly dancer. But the years, I'm afraid, have not been kind to your father's theater."

Pepper stiffened. Who was he to criticize?

"It's true, Mr. Ziegfeld, but I have plans to change that. Which brings me to the reason I asked you here today. I understand you are developing a new show."

"Good news has a way of traveling, doesn't it? What exactly have you heard, my boy?"

"That it is to be a summer show?"

"It's Anna's idea, really. Something light and fun between the regular seasons. We're calling it the *Follies of 1907*."

"If you don't mind me saying, I have also heard you

were to put it up at the New York Theatre, in the rooftop garden, but that you might have run into a bit of trouble on that front.”

There was a pause, then, “Yes, Mr. DeGraaf, you are correct. Klaw and Erlanger begged for the production and made every promise imaginable to get it. But now that it’s time to make good on those promises, I find they are not so forthcoming. I have begun to consider alternative venues, discreetly of course.”

What was Robert getting at? He knew the Chance could not accommodate Ziegfeld’s production. The theater was home to one show, and one show alone: *Vaudeville Stars, Marvels, and Delights*. The players changed, but the show remained constant.

“Then I’ll be as plain as I can,” Robert said. “I would like you to consider the Chance Theatre.”

Ziegfeld was speaking again, but the thrumming in her ears blocked the sound. Consider the Chance? It was impossible. It had to be a mistake. Sure, the theater was in a slump, but the show wasn’t the problem. Robert had to see that.

Her cheeks flushed. The floor beneath her lurched and swayed, and she leaned against the door to steady herself.

By the time she realized the door wasn’t latched, it was too late. She had pushed it, not hard, but enough to send it gaping into the office and to leave her standing, exposed, facing the wall of framed publicity photographs stacked in four long, tidy rows behind DeGraaf’s giant mahogany desk. Actors, acrobats, and ventriloquists; animal trainers, magicians, and trapeze artists. They all stared down as if from a vaudeville Valhalla. But it wasn’t their frozen smiles that made her want to crawl into the fibers of the Oriental rug beneath her. It was the horrified look on Robert’s face.

“Pepper MacClair?”

She forced her gaze to meet his, though every part of her ached to turn and run. This was hardly the reunion she had envisioned. She wanted him to see she was a woman

now, a full eighteen years old. And a dancer, a bona fide performer, just as she always told him she would be.

She didn't want him to see her like this, bumbling and awkward, a disgrace with no care for proper decorum.

Yet here she was, and she had to make the best of it. She would pretend she hadn't heard this conversation. She lifted her chin and forced a smile. "Hello, Robert," she said with a cheerfulness spun from the thin shreds of dignity she had left. "I thought I heard your voice. I hope I'm not interrupting."

Ziegfeld was mostly hidden from her in one of the leather chairs arranged in front of the desk, but she heard him chuckle.

Robert, however, appeared too shocked to be amused. Yet it was not the question in those wide, gaping eyes that made her look away. It was simply the sight of that finely angled jaw, the line of that smooth cheek, the blond hair swept back from his brow. It had been so long since she had looked upon him, but the years had not changed him so much. Despite the new sharpness to his face, he was still her handsome, beloved Robert.

"This is a private meeting, Miss MacClair."

Ziegfeld seemed of a different mind. The man was on his feet, rocking on his heels, watching her.

She took his measure. Forty, he appeared, perhaps older, and shorter than Robert, a bit softer around the middle. There was nothing soft in his expression, however. He seemed a typical, well-bred man of business. Tailored tweed suit, crisp white collar, simple diamond pin punched through a striped cravat. His dark hair was gray at the edges and coaxed back with pomade from a wide, smooth forehead. He had a skinny, rigid chin and thin lips that appeared incapable of a smile. But it was those eyes. Deep, dark orbs, under sharply arched brows that stared at her as if she were a thing to be studied. To be judged. She didn't like it, and she didn't like him.

"I heard voices. I thought..." She looked away. She

could not bear to say what she thought.

Robert tried to speak, but Ziegfeld stopped him. "What abysmal manners you have, young man." He approached Pepper. "My dear," he said to her, his voice false with warmth and comfort, "allow me to apologize on his behalf." His glance slid from her hesitant smile down the front of her, taking note, it would seem, of each rise and fall of the curves beneath her coat. Then he bowed, as a gentleman would. "My friends call me Flo. And I gather you are Pepper MacClair. Would I be correct in assuming you are a performer at this establishment?"

His scrutiny left her feeling exposed despite her well-fastened coat. "I dance in the deuce act," she said, more to Robert than Ziegfeld. "In the Dancing Dolls trio." If Robert had not been aware of this development, he knew it now. She was pleased to see the glint of surprise in his eyes. Did he know anything that had happened since he'd left? Did he know about her mother?

"I have heard interesting things about your Dolls," Ziegfeld was saying. "Your employer, much like myself, understands the universal appeal of music enhanced by feminine beauty."

Robert was on his feet and rounding the desk. "The dancing girls are a house act that has certainly had its advantages from a business standpoint."

Ziegfeld paid him no attention. "Young lady," he was saying, "I wonder if your obvious talents"—again his eyes roamed over her in a way that made her arms stiffen around herself—"may be underutilized here. I have a promising opportunity on the horizon that you may find interesting."

Robert forced a laugh and came up alongside Ziegfeld. "I see the rumors are true. Always scouting for fresh talent, hm? Miss MacClair, please don't let us keep you from whatever it was you were doing. Good-bye now."

Before she could say anything, before she could warn him to veer from this devastating mistake, he had pushed

her back over the threshold and closed the door. She was still staring at the swirls in the wood grain, waiting for the shock of being so abruptly dispatched to fade and suppressing the urge to barge back in, when she heard the street door.

“Hey there, doll.”

It was Em Charmagne, the woman who operated the theater’s ticket window, though anyone meeting her for the first time might be surprised to learn she was a woman at all, dressed as she was in a man’s gray wool suit with her pale brown hair clipped short beneath her bowler and an unlit cigar clenched in her teeth. It was her favorite manly prop next to the silver-handled cane she hooked over her arm while she flipped through her ring of keys for the one that would open the box office door.

“You haven’t seen the programs, have you? The printer’s boy usually leaves the box out front.” Em glanced around. “Or has Stanley cut those, too, to save a few pennies? I expect one of these days he’ll decide it’s cheaper to keep the doors locked instead of rolling out a show no one wants to see.”

“You don’t mean that.” Pepper knew Em loved the place. She had taken her Uptown Joe impersonation act from New York all the way to San Francisco and back at least a dozen times before retiring, but she always returned to the Chance. and now, when she had her own townhouse on Fourth Street and could spend her time any way she pleased, she still showed up six days out of seven to work the theater’s ticket window for a pittance, and would probably show up on Sundays, too, if Mr. DeGraaf had skirted the city’s ban on live acts by offering a program of moving pictures, as other theater owners did.

Still, Pepper hoped the comment had not penetrated the office door.

Em noticed her concern. “What are you doing up here anyway? And why do you keep eying the office?”

“Robert DeGraaf is in there,” she whispered, and was

about to explain the whole miserable ordeal when Em's frown stopped her. It had been a long time since they had discussed Robert, and Pepper was quickly remembering why.

"You need to forget about Robert DeGraaf," the woman said in a way that made it clear the young man's return was no surprise, although she had not attended Stanley's meeting. His "no exceptions" rule always made an exception for Em.

The woman removed her hat and hung it from the hook behind her door. "You should be worried about yourself. You can't let Stanley catch you down here and out of costume this close to curtain. You don't want to start the week off with another quarrel."

"We've already quarreled. At the all-hands meeting this morning."

Em had disappeared within her closet of a room, but called out, "What was it this time?"

"The meeting or the quarrel?"

Em reappeared in the doorway. She had removed her cane and her coat. The cigar remained. "Either. Both."

Pepper filled Em in on what Stanley had said about Robert's new role. "But then, you probably know all about that." She waited in vain for Em to disagree. Pepper wondered how much more Em knew.

"And the quarrel?"

Pepper kicked the carpet. "It was that *Variety* notice. Stanley was so..." There was no reason to elaborate. She knew better than to expect sympathy from Em when it came to Stanley. "It isn't important." She pulled the bag of notions from her coat pocket and stared at them. "I need to get these to Mrs. B. Stanley told her the headliner needs a gown, and the woman hasn't even arrived yet."

Em closed her eyes and shook her head. "Oh, Stanley, when will you learn? Say, if you're going that way, will you tell him about the programs? I want to get the cash drawer sorted before I open."

“Missing programs, sure,” Pepper said, walking backward toward the auditorium doors.

Inside, she sailed down the red-carpeted aisle at a dead run, passing the empty rows of worn cushioned seats and hardly noticing the members of the Shorty Shakespeareans congregated onstage for a dress rehearsal:

“Nay, if Cupid have not spent all his quiver in Venice, Thou wilt quake for this shortly...”

Pepper recognized the lines from *Much Ado About Nothing*. The diminutive Don Pedro’s voice rang out clear to the rafters and ended with an emphasis of the final word in a labored yet vain attempt to milk laughs.

By the time the stagehands were restaging for the next scene, Pepper was climbing the half flight of steps to the stage, her heels knocking hard against the wood. She searched for Stanley, but the stool he kept behind the stage-left curtain sat empty.

“Looking for someone?”

She whipped around. A long, lean man in overalls and a white cotton shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbow, emerged from behind a castle window set piece. Not such an odd place for the theater’s properties master to be, yet the sight of Gregory Creighton gave her a start.

She met the awkward moment the way she usually did: with sarcasm. “Is that you, Creighton? I hardly recognize you under all that hair.”

It wasn’t true, of course. She would know that low rumble of a voice anywhere. But she had been nagging him on the subject for nearly a month. His sable locks had been neglected so long they coiled around his ears beneath his flat cap and had to be pushed across his brow or they covered his black pebble eyes. She had offered to cut his hair herself, as she had when they were children, when he was the old prop master’s apprentice and she roamed the corridors while her mother stitched costumes on the fifth floor. That seemed so long ago now, and she hadn’t been surprised when he had refused. “I was looking for Stanley,

if you must know.”

Gregory made the final push that put the set piece on its mark and slapped his hands together to brush off the dust. “He left for Grand Central a while ago but said he’d be back by curtain.”

The train station? The man could not even manage a flight of stairs without complaining. “What’s he doing there?”

“Collecting the headliner.” Gregory sneered—at her or Stanley, it wasn’t clear.

“That Madame Bizet must be something to reduce him to errand boy. Pretty, I assume?”

Gregory shrugged. It was impossible to discern whether he didn’t know or didn’t care. That ubiquitous frown, that cynical stare. She was so used to it now, she hardly remembered the boisterous boy he had been, the one who’d played hide-and-seek with her in the passageways and storage rooms for hours at a time. But then, they both had changed, hadn’t they? And he was still steadfast in his way, and as dependable as they came. That was why, despite everything, she still trusted him, even if he wouldn’t say the same of her.

When he spoke again, his voice was low so it didn’t disrupt the half-size thespians’ rehearsal. “You didn’t come to stir up more trouble with Stanley, did you? I think you managed quite enough this morning. Unless you’re planning to run off to the Hippodrome like Bart and the rest.”

“That’s where they’re going?”

The Hippodrome was a grand theater that had opened two years before at the corner of Forty-third and Sixth. A monstrosity, really, with a stage so vast it could contain a complete battle reenactment—soldiers, horses, and props. The theater had spread the word about its opening with the usual advertisements, but it had also sent its actors into the streets in costume to talk up the show and hand out souvenir playbills.

She had heard rumors it was the Hippodrome poaching the Chance's stagehands, but backstage gossip couldn't be trusted. Gregory, however, never passed idle words.

"I'm not looking for trouble, Mr. Creighton, and I'm not looking to hire on at the Hippodrome, or anywhere else for that matter."

Gregory dipped his head in a nod. "Then perhaps you should get upstairs and into your costume before Stanley shows up. Or I expect you'll find trouble whether you're looking for it or not."

"Let him rant. He's not in charge anymore. Robert DeGraaf is." And once she told Robert how Stanley had been running things, maybe they could finally be done with that man for good.

"Sure," Gregory said. "If the little prince ever turns up..."

"He's already here. I saw him."

Gregory stared hard at his apprentice. The young man was crawling on his hands and knees along the row of footlights, stopping at each one to check the wires.

"Go back to that last one, Matty. Wiggle it, make sure the connection is good."

Matty grunted but did as he was told.

Without looking at her, Gregory said, "You saw Robert DeGraaf here?"

"In his father's office. He's there now."

She couldn't say anything, because Frankie, the theater's piano player, cut between them on his way to the stage. He tipped his chin in greeting. Showtime was near. Everything else would have to wait.

She went to the door that opened onto the stairwell, then turned back. She had nearly forgotten why she had come backstage at all.

"Em says the programs are missing up front. Any idea where they might be?"

Gregory shook his head. "But I'll see they're found." He tipped back his cap. "Will there be anything else, Miss

MacClair?”

As the door closed behind her, she called over her shoulder: “Yes, Mr. Creighton. You still need to trim your hair.”

* * *

“Are we going to the hardware store? Or are you going to stand there gaping after Miss MacClair instead?”

Gregory didn’t have to turn around to know it was Matty Platt standing behind him. No one else spoke to him that way. No one else dared. The boy hadn’t been around long enough to know better. He seemed to figure people found those casual Oklahoma Territory manners charming, but Gregory, for one, had grown weary of them.

Not that Matty noticed. The boy used his thumbnail to scratch muck from an electricity gauge’s glass cover, then swiped a rag over the board of levers, knobs, and dials that controlled the stage and house lights before turning around to meet Gregory’s glare.

“I’m not gaping. Just concerned.”

“About Miss MacClair? Hardly seems necessary.” Matty stuffed the dirty rag into his back pocket and rubbed his hands against his trousers.

On the stage, the tiny Shakespearean actors were finishing their rehearsal. The dog trainer was standing by, corralling his seven dachshunds for a final run-through on one side of the stage while Alfred and Edwards, wearing just their plaid trousers, suspenders, and undershirts, volleyed jokes back and forth on the other.

“Never seen anybody stand up to Mr. Stanley like that,” Matty added. “Did you see the way she stared him down? I thought she’d burn him through with those blue flame eyes of hers. She sure is something, if you ask me.”

Yes, she sure was something. “Stanley doesn’t worry me.”

“Oh?”

He had Matty’s full attention now. Gregory shook his

head. This wasn't a conversation he wanted to have with a sixteen-year-old boy. "Have you seen Robert DeGraaf in the building?" Already he regretted the question.

"You're worried about the new boss? What's he got to do with Miss MacClair?"

"Nothing. No one said he did." *And it will go better for him if he keeps it that way.* He stepped back to avoid a dachshund fleeing from the stage. The dog was running through the wings as fast as his three-inch legs could carry him, with his trainer in hot pursuit. Matty, the comedians, the midgets, the stagehands—each man had stopped what he'd been doing to root for the animal, who was easily outpacing his lumbering trainer.

This wasn't going to end well. Gregory knew it as well as he knew the flickering footlight third from the left would need replacing by the end of the night, and that the rigger who was working the ropes had shown up drunk again. There was a time even a whiff of alcohol would get a man branded unreliable and tossed out the stage door with his last paycheck. But not now. These days, the Chance needed every man it could get.

Gregory tapped Matty on the shoulder to break him away from Old Jake, a lanky black stagehand with a thin cloud of salt-and-pepper hair who was taking bets on the outcome of the trainer-versus-dog race. "There's a list of supplies we need on the prop room desk. Get it and meet me outside."

Matty grudgingly obeyed and headed down the wide passageway.

The dog ran by again. Gregory, his patience wearing thin, pulled Old Jake aside. "When the trainer corrals that thing, remind him it's his job to clean up after his animals. The magician stepped in a pile this morning and screamed at Matty for half an hour. It's in the contract that cleanup is the trainer's job. If he cannot manage it, tell him I'll make sure whatever we pick up ends up in the pocket of whatever I find in his dressing room."

“Done.” The glint in Old Jake’s eyes said it would be a pleasure.

“Matty and I should be back by intermission. You’re in charge while I’m gone.”

Old Jake jerked his chin down, at once recognizing and thanking Gregory for the responsibility.

Gregory glanced again at the stagehand still grappling with the ropes. He saw his concern mirrored in Old Jake’s expression. “And keep an eye on Laszlo.” He made the request, though he knew it wasn’t necessary. Old Jake had seen what Gregory had seen, and he would have done it without instruction. That was the way it was at the Chance. They looked out for each other.

“Thanks, old man,” Gregory said. More unnecessary words, but he wanted to say them just the same.

