

THE
GIRL
ON THE
MIDWAY
STAGE

THE DANCER CHRONICLES

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CHAPTER ONE

Dora Chambers entered the Egyptian Theatre behind the crowd of gritty laborers and pale office clerks, the older gentlemen and boys barely of an age to shave. The masculine scents of their hair pomade and Ivory-soaped skin mingled with the fragrance of the tendrils of smoke curling from brass burners set along the stage. She raised her handkerchief to her nose.

“Are you sure you’re up to this, dear?” Agnes Richmond placed a grandmotherly hand on Dora’s shoulder and leaned closer to be heard over the high-pitched whine of a horn.

“Of course she’s up to it,” muttered Geraldine Forrest as the three settled along the back of the standing-room gallery behind the rows of filled seats. She brushed at the sleeves of her tailored wool jacket and, for the third time since they’d arrived, adjusted the wide-brimmed hat sitting atop her sweep of golden hair. “I’m sure she’d do anything to keep her new husband happy.”

“Yes, of course,” the older woman said. “You must have felt exactly the same about Mr. Forrest, God rest his soul.” She took Dora’s gloved hands in her own. “It doesn’t appear those women intend to follow through with their threat after all. It’s quite a relief, really. I understand their concern, but frankly, the Columbian Exposition hardly needs the trouble.”

A commotion at the entrance interrupted her, and the shoulder-to-shoulder crowd in the cavernous hall pressed back, nearly sweeping Dora off her feet. When she righted herself, a stream of women in black wool frocks and simple hats had cleaved its way down the main aisle and toward the stage. Each held a sign in her grip with letters still dripping with wet paint: “Send the foreign filth home,” “Propriety before profits,” and “Close the belly dance theater now.” Their shouting drowned out the music until it stopped altogether.

“Move back, dear, out of the way now.” Mrs. Richmond urged Dora toward the rear of the gallery, though everyone around them pushed toward the door.

Dora followed instructions and huddled with Mrs. Richmond and Mrs. Forrest at the back of the emptying theater. Perspiration dampened Dora’s forehead and two droplets slid down the crevice of her back where the corset was pulled the tightest. She dabbed at the trickle but couldn’t reach it through the layers of linen and whalebone, cotton and wool.

On the stage, she saw several dancers huddled together as well.

“That’s enough. That’s enough now. Clear out.” A uniformed man pushed his way inside and waved his hands over his head in a call for order. Behind him stood another dozen uniformed men, poised to act.

“We won’t leave until this den of vice is closed down,” cried a dour, elderly woman who emerged from the pack to stare down the officer. “We will not allow it to defile our city any longer!”

“You’ve been warned, madam. We’ll arrest anyone who disrupts this theater’s lawful operation.”

“Is it lawful for these women to flaunt themselves in this vulgar manner? Is it lawful for these men to witness this obscene display?” The woman adjusted the glasses on her nose in a way that made her look down on the officer though he towered over her.

“Not for me to say, ma’am. Grievances should be taken up with the Fair directors. Now, you and your sisters here have two minutes to disperse.” He made a show of pulling out his pocket watch and checking its face.

The grim-faced woman turned to the stage, where the dancers still stood against the back wall. “You have not heard the last of this,” she hollered. “We will rid this Fair of your filth.” Then she turned and with a swipe of her hand signaled her fellow protesters to follow her out.

The officers followed behind, leaving only the performers, Dora, Mrs. Richmond, and Mrs. Forrest.

“That was the Society for the Suppression of Vice?” Dora asked, tucking a stray strand of her black hair behind her ear beneath her straw boater and gripping her parasol more tightly, still unaccustomed to its constant presence. “It’s just a group of ladies. What harm could they possibly do?”

“Never underestimate a group of ladies, my dear,” Mrs. Richmond admonished. “Take our Board of Lady Managers. The directors themselves put their trust in us to sort out this mess, and I for one am proud to say it is our Lady Managers’ privilege to contribute to the Fair’s success. Remember, if this World’s Fair succeeds, Chicago succeeds. The opportunities will be endless.”

“Chicago is full of opportunities, isn’t it?” Dora liked the sound of it. It’s what

Charles had said on their wedding day two months ago in New Orleans, when she'd packed her dresses and twenty years of memories into a steamer trunk, ready to start a new life eight hundred miles away. "The past is irrelevant in Chicago," he'd whispered in her ear as they stood at the steamship bow, waving to strangers and feeling the rumble of the engine choke smoke into the sky as it prepared to leave the only home she'd ever known.

Mrs. Forrest craned her neck to see out the open door. "I believe I saw Mrs. Sheffield and Mrs. Loomis."

"Where, dear?" Mrs. Richmond searched in the same direction. "I should say hello."

"I'm sure that isn't necessary." Mrs. Forrest smiled demurely. "Let me convey the tidings for you. You and Mrs. Chambers don't really require my assistance here, do you?"

"Of course not. I'm sure Mrs. Chambers and I can manage. There's no reason we all must endure this dreadful business."

"I knew you'd understand." The woman air-kissed Mrs. Richmond, ignored Dora, and made her way down the crowded aisle.

Dora noted the snub as she watched the woman leave. She leaned in to Mrs. Richmond. "Have I offended her?"

"Don't mind Mrs. Forrest. It takes her a while to warm up to new people. I was surprised she asked to join us. It really isn't like her." She pulled up the timepiece that hung from a chain around her neck. "The next performance will be getting under way soon, but I want to have a few words with the Egyptians first." She looked around the theater. "That must be the manager." She pointed to a man walking toward them from the door.

He was tall, with broad shoulders, a lean waist, and blue-black hair that fell in thick waves to his shoulders like a soft shroud against the hard angles of his cheeks. Dora guessed he was Egyptian, for he wore the typical white tunic over narrow pants and had the same bronze skin as the performers on the stage. He regarded her with eyes like polished obsidian stones.

"You must be Mr. Hossam Farouk, the man in charge here?" Mrs. Richmond stiffly extended her hand in greeting and introduced herself, emphasizing her title as vice president of the Board of Lady Managers.

"I am Hossam Farouk," he replied. He took the proffered hand and lifted it to his lips. "But I would hesitate to say I am in charge." His accent turned the words into a melody.

"Surely you're being modest. Mr. Sol Bloom himself has told me you're the man to see. I'm sure you're familiar with Mr. Bloom?"

"By reputation." He crossed his strong arms over his chest and stretched his six-

foot frame to its full height.

Who in Chicago didn't know Sol Bloom by reputation? Even Dora had read stories of the young entrepreneur from San Francisco. He'd been recruited by the Fair's directors to turn the Midway Plaisance from what had been conceived as a collection of anthropological exhibits into a carnival of profitable amusements to help recoup the Fair's staggering building costs. The games, the rides, the animals, the alehouses, even the dancers were added largely by his orchestration. Some claimed he even coined the name "belly dancers" to titillate the public and sell more tickets.

"In light of today's events, we were hoping we might have a word with the dancers, if that's convenient," Mrs. Richmond said.

He bowed. "We are always willing to accommodate Lady Managers." His chin lifted to a proud angle. "Please, excuse me, and I will see what I can do."

He went to the stage and the dancers, who had been watching the conference, quickly gathered around him. They exchanged words and flashed quick glances at Dora and Mrs. Richmond. The one who had been performing just before the interruption took a step back and folded her arms over her chest. She was the smallest of the troupe, but carried herself with a confidence that contradicted her size. She shook her head and the other dancers did the same. The man rubbed his face with his palm, shot another glance at Dora and Mrs. Richmond, and continued his speech.

"I'd say Mr. Farouk might be right. That little one looks like the boss around here," Mrs. Richmond said under her breath. "A spitfire, for sure."

The small dancer inclined her head and relaxed her stance. She turned to the others, said something, and they all nodded. Then all those dark eyes turned toward Dora and Mrs. Richmond.

When they neared, it was the little dancer who spoke first. "You have something to say to us?"

These performers were known by so many names: belly dancers, muscle dancers, posture dancers, dancing girls. Dora had seen them in newspaper etchings alongside stories about the shows, but the images hardly captured the exotic women in front of her.

The one who spoke couldn't have been older than Dora's own twenty years. She was outfitted in a short crimson vest that stretched taut across her bosom and left her abdomen uncovered, except by a blouse that fit as snug as a stocking and exposed her collarbone and too much of her upper limbs. She clearly wore no corset, which alone could cause a scandal. Her skirt lacked proper length, revealing far more of her bow-tipped slippers than the rules of modesty should allow.

The other adornments—a belt of tassel-tipped ribbons dangling to her knees, a profusion of beads and stringed coins roped about her chest, coils of metal bracelets wrapped around her wrists, even the loose dark hair hanging down her back—hardly

concealed any more of her form.

The other dancers wore similar costumes of varying colors—cobalt, marigold, persimmon, and plum. And like Mr. Farouk, this little dancer spoke English with an accent that gave her speech a rhythm nearly as exotic as their desert music.

Mrs. Richmond jutted her chin. “If it is convenient.”

The dancer shrugged.

Dora gaped. These dancers surely had no idea who the Lady Managers were.

“We won’t keep you long, Miss...” Mrs. Richmond said. A swollen blood vessel cut an angry path along her temple.

“My name is Amina Mahomet,” the dancer replied. “Shall we sit?”

Mrs. Richmond scanned the uneven rows of empty wooden chairs. In the haste to leave, the audience had left behind discarded tickets, crumpled programs, and stray kernels of molasses-covered popcorn that no one seemed inclined to retrieve. “This will not take long.”

The dancer went to a chair, turned to face Mrs. Richmond, stepped out of her low-heeled slippers, and sat. A handful of the others did the same. The rest moved to stand behind them. Mr. Farouk receded to the background, watching but no longer taking part. He stood by, more like a guard than a manager.

Dora couldn’t help but stare at him—and when she noticed that he was watching her, she glanced away and forced herself not to look in his direction again.

Mrs. Richmond, however, paid no attention to the man. She focused on the unladylike display in front of her. The seated women hunched forward or propped their feet on adjacent chairs. Those who stood thrust out their hips to the side or leaned on the backs of chairs.

“It pains me to be the bearer of bad news,” Mrs. Richmond said at last, when it was clear no one else would begin the conversation, “but the Fair directors have requested the Lady Managers’ assistance with this matter of the protesters. They find it quite disturbing.”

Amina pulled a foot up to her lap and massaged the arch.

“When you arrived,” Mrs. Richmond continued, “we discussed expectations. Do you recall that conversation?”

Nothing but blank stares on the dancers’ faces.

“Any of you?” The strain in Mrs. Richmond’s voice raised it an octave, maybe two.

“The others speak almost no English,” Amina said. “You may direct your questions to me.”

“Then do you recall that conversation?”

Amina lifted her shoulders in assent.

Mrs. Richmond touched the bulging blood vessel at her temple. Her lips

twitched. “We discussed proper conduct and attire. So I am disappointed to learn our guidelines have been ignored.” She met Amina’s gaze squarely. “This cannot continue. The directors have instructed us to resolve the situation, as we are best suited to deal with such sensitive, feminine issues.”

“What of the other dancers?” Amina took one of the ribbons hanging from her waist and ran her finger down its length. “There are many along the Midway: the Jerusalem woman who dances with a sword in the Moorish Palace, or the handkerchief dancers and the Ouled Nail women in their veils and silver jewelry who stand and tremble upon the stage in the Algerian Theatre.”

A new bloom of rage spread over Mrs. Richmond’s face. “The protesters cite the Egyptian dancers as their concern.”

Amina crossed her arms.

“It is my hope,” Mrs. Richmond continued, “and I hope it is yours as well, that we can remedy this situation ourselves. If we cannot, I will be forced to tell the directors you will not cooperate.”

Amina’s glance slid from Mrs. Richmond to Dora, and made Dora shift uneasily.

“I do not presume to know the directors’ minds,” Mrs. Richmond added, “but I would expect the consequences to be severe. Perhaps a fine, but I’m sure a complete forfeiture of the troupe’s wages might also be considered.”

Amina’s jaw twitched. She studied the floor beneath her as if reading a secret language in the swirls and knots of the wood’s grain. “At our last meeting, you said we should not allow our virtue to be compromised. I can assure you, we have not.”

Mrs. Richmond’s fists clenched at her sides. Dora studied a bare wall.

“Then you deny any impropriety?” The older woman’s voice rose, shrill and thin.

“What impropriety could there be? It is only a dance.”

“It is a matter of common decency,” Mrs. Richmond stammered.

“Are you referring to your decency or mine?”

Mrs. Richmond ignored the challenge. “As you do not even see fit to wear proper undergarments, I must insist that you choose your outer clothing more wisely.”

Amina glanced down at her stomach and to the folds of her crimson skirt. “Now you want to punish us because we do not wear corsets?”

Mrs. Richmond pressed her temple again. “Young lady, please consider this a warning. From this point forward, you and the other dancers must cover yourselves more appropriately. Veils and something more substantial than what you are wearing today would be a good start. Lewd and salacious movements also will constitute a breach. And to be sure these rules are enforced, Mrs. Chambers”—she glanced at Dora—“is, as of this moment, appointed board liaison to this establishment. If there are any violations, she will report them directly to me.”

Dora stared in horror at Amina and the other dancers. A liaison? She couldn’t

return to this wretched theater. It was no place for a proper lady, and especially not one trying to establish her place on the Board of Lady Managers. Her cheeks burned and her heart raced.

“Mrs. Chambers?” Mrs. Richmond turned to her, a pleading look in her eyes. “You can begin your duties promptly?”

Dora choked out a “Yes, of course.”

Mrs. Richmond turned a steely gaze on Amina. “Please be sure to share with your colleagues what we have discussed and what has been agreed. And just so we are clear, the Board of Lady Managers has assured the Fair directors that this nonsense will stop. One way or another.”

Then, in a swish of skirts and petticoats, she turned and marched toward the door.

Dora stood paralyzed. This wasn’t happening. Surely there must be someone else for the job. And why was this little dancer looking at her that way?

Amina had risen when Mrs. Richmond departed and was now staring at Dora. She cocked her head to the side. “You’re not like the other Lady Manager, are you?” Her voice was calm, far too calm for someone who had just argued with one of the most powerful women in Chicago.

Dora clutched the lace at her throat. “I am a Lady Manager,” she said and hurried to the door.

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