

Chapter 18

New Year's Eve, December 31st, 1929

Fitzie and Aunt Clara flit around me, each one adding their own touch to my gown and hair. Great-grandmother Drummond's amethysts grace my neck and Aunt Clara's diamond studs are in my earlobes. I smooth the decorative, pleated "girdle" that wraps my hips, above the flared skirt. It ends in a flat bow in front and embellished with a purple sequined catch. The gown is gorgeous. I pull on purple satin, opera-length gloves that match the sequins and turn for their inspection. Fitzie nods and settles her long mink cape over my shoulders.

"There. You're beautiful." Through the shimmer of moisture in her eyes, love radiates.

I know better, but in this evening frock, I almost believe her. In vain, I try to subdue the butterflies in my stomach. The closer we get to seven o'clock, the more frenzied their Lindy Hop.

Aunt Clara hands me a beaded evening bag and we descend the stairs. The doorbell rings before we hit the second floor, and I hear Pearl welcome Boone. I pause, then continue my descent, Fitzie and Aunt Clara right behind me.

Boone comes into sight, and I catch my breath. He's wearing a tuxedo and looks movie-star handsome. David Divine has nothing on Boone Robertson. The butterflies move into a high-kicking Charleston.

"Hey, Boone."

At the sound of my voice, he turns. Everything stops and he stares at me. "Wow. Those are some glad rags. You're the hummingbird's wings."

He meant the dress, not you. "You clean up pretty good yourself."

He glances down and runs a hand over his pants. "I only hope there's no sawdust on me."

As usual, Boone makes us all laugh. Aunt Clara circles him and shakes her head. "You're clean," she signs.

I kiss them goodbye and we leave. Parked outside in the driveway is a shiny red and black Dodge. I snap my gaze to Boone. "Whose—?"

"Your carriage, Princess Cora."

"Is that yours?"

He laughs and opens the door for me. "No. I borrowed it."

“That must be some friend to lend you a brand, spanking new car.” I get in and settle myself. Once he’s in, I ask, “Whose is it?”

“Gavin Culver’s.”

My blood turns cold.

I do my best to keep my tone light. “*Senator Gavin Culver?*”

“Yeah.”

How is Boone that good of friends with a politician that the man lends him his new car? I pull Fitzie’s cape closer around me.

He flashes a grin at me. “Remember Thursday, when I knocked off early? I repaired a heirloom sideboard for the senator’s wife that he broke. When I happened to mention I was taking you to the Merchant for New Year’s Eve, he said I couldn’t take a pretty lady out in my old truck. So he lent me this.”

“How nice of him.” What is Boone now going to have to do for him? He may have fixed that sideboard, but I know politicians. They always want more.

Through the window, the rising moon’s waxing crescent peeks through the trees. The shine is off the evening. Maybe it’s for the best, except my heart doesn’t want to listen.

We pull up to the hotel. A valet opens my door and offers his hand. Boone comes around and tosses him the keys like he’s done this before. I pull my lips into a smile.

When we’re inside the lobby, Boone lifts Fitzie’s cape from my shoulders. His warm fingers send a shiver skittering down my arms and my traitorous heart thrills. He checks my cape and his top hat, tucking the receipts into his jacket pocket.

He holds out his elbow for me and escorts me to the dining room. Boone’s a perfect gentleman—so different from most of the men I’ve known. Still, I’m not sure where this is going. The business with that senator has me on edge.

The maitre’d shows us to our table, hands us the evening’s menu with a flourish, then bows and leaves. I study the menu card but see there’s no choices on it. It simply states what we’re having.

A nervous giggle threatens, but I subdue it, only allowing a slight smile. “He must have worked in New York at one time. He a carbon copy of the maitre’d at Delmonico’s.” I take a sip of water.

Boone glances around the dining room. “They’re really putting on the Ritz tonight, aren’t they?”

I let my gaze travel to the other diners, while more continue to spill into the room, everyone is dressed to the nines. “It’s pretty swell. I haven’t been in here since I was a kid, maybe five years old. Fitzie brought me here for lunch. I insisted I was grown up enough to go to the restroom by myself, but I got lost. In an upstairs hallway, I had the fire scared out of me when I saw something. I was later told it was the hotel ghost.”

Boone doesn’t laugh at me like I thought he might. Before he can comment, the waiter arrives with our first course. While we eat, Boone keeps telling me more stories, making me laugh often. I’m beginning to relax again and feel comfortable in our friendship. Maybe I overreacted to his relationship with Senator Culver. After all, he builds furniture for Atlanta’s wealthy families. Of course he’d rub shoulders with a few politicians. It’s natural.

That reinstates my good mood and the dessert of Baked Alaska competes the restoration. One by one, band members enter and take their places on the raised platform. I’m ready for the music and some dancing. My toes already want to tap, even to the band’s warming up exercises.

Boone lays his napkin on his empty dessert plate. “Will you excuse me for a moment? I need to make use of the men’s room.”

“Certainly.” I turn my attention back to the band. There are—I do a quick count—twenty chairs, so it’s a good size group. I don’t know the name. Maybe it’s a new local group starting out.

“Well, well, look who’s here. How did you ever wrangle an invitation to this?”

I know that voice. It’s Alice Farnham. “I could ask the same of you, Alice, but I better bred than that.”

“I’m meeting my date here.” She stares pointedly at Boone’s empty chair. “At least I have one. He should be here now.” She turns and sweeps across the room and disappears past the maitre’d’s podium.

Whoever her date is, it seems odd to meet here, but what do I know. Boone is taking his time. I crane my neck to see the dining room foyer.

“Excuse me, are you alone?” A mustachioed man with dark hair slicked back stands next to Boone’s chair.

“Oh, you startled me. No, I’m not alone.”

He raises one eyebrow. “Oh, I don’t see anyone.” He pulls out Boone’s chair and sits. He leans one elbow on the table, rests his chin on his fist and stares at me.

“My date is in the restroom. Who are you?” Where is Boone? Where’s the waiter?

“I’m Walter Teague. You’ve heard of me?”

“I’m sorry I haven’t.”

“Ahh, well, you should. I’m Bona Allen’s nephew.”

“And?”

“I know who you are. You’re Dixie Lynn.”

Where is Boone? I lean to the side to see around Walter, if that’s really his name. I wish—ah, there he is. But what—?

Walter turns his head, sees what I do, cringes, then jumps up and leaves.

My attention isn’t on him, though. It’s on Boone and Alice Farnham on his arm. What is she doing with him?

Without a glance to our table, Boone grins, leans toward Alice. Is he kissing her?

I start to rise, but quickly sink back into my chair, with my jaw slack. Though it’s humiliating, I’m unable to take my eyes off them. Like picking at a scab, I watch Boone pull her hand through his arm and with their heads intimately together, he guides her to a table where a man rises and shakes his hand. He gestures to a chair. First, Boone solicitously seats Alice, and leaning over her shoulder, he whispers in her ear, making her giggle. Then he sits beside her. Close beside her.

The scene before me blurs and I turn away. What am I to do? I can’t stay here. The waiter approaches. His expression tells me he has seen and pities me. “May I take your dishes?”

Stand tall. Rise above this. I hold my head high, lay my napkin on the table, and nod. I rise and exit the dining room, fighting against tears. In the doorway as I turn the corner, I catch a glimpse of their table. Boone hasn’t taken his eyes from his new date.

The coat check girl thankfully remembers me since I don’t have the claim ticket and hands over Fizzie’s cape. I have no idea what I can do except walk home. I only know I can’t stay here. The doorman opens the door and I run out into the night.

Forging my way through the woods is better than remaining at the hotel. I don’t know why Boone deserted me like that, but never again will I discount warning bells. He’s just like the senator.

Anger and humiliation fuel my steps, while tears cool my face. I swipe at them with my knuckles. I admit Boone hasn't declared any feelings for me, and I'm nothing more than a friend-who'll-do-in-a-pinch-date. But to treat even a friend like that is unacceptable. He's not worth tears.

So why is my heart breaking?

Following a straight line through the woods from the hotel, it's only about a two-and-a-half-mile hike to home. I'm thankful there hasn't been any rain, but my shoes—dancing slippers, really—will be ruined all the same. Men aren't worth this. Silly me, thinking I'd found one who was different.

Like a spectre, the senator's words dog me. *Men don't fall for girls who look like you.*

Lights flicker through the trees. My heartbeat kicks up a moment. But it's only Harvey and Ollie Bailey's house. That means I'm closer to home than I realized. It's a good thing because it's really cold, approaching freezing. My breath frosts when I exhale. I pick up my pace.

Thirty minutes later, I reach our driveway. The instant I see the lights in the windows, I break into a run. Instead of going in the front door though, I head to the kitchen entrance. I don't want to talk to Fizzie or Aunt Clara. And it's late enough that Pearl should be in her room too, reading or listening to her radio.

I turn the doorknob slowly and push open the door, stopping just before the hinge squeaks. Pearl isn't in the kitchen. Radio music in the front parlor rivals laughter on a comedy show from Pearl's room. Nobody will hear me sneaking up the stairs.

In my bedroom, I undress and slip under the covers. I no longer want to welcome in the New Year. I only hope it brings happier days than this past one. Under the covers, I allow my tears to flow again. My wounded heart needs their release.

On Friday, Boone will be here. He has about two weeks of work left to do. He and the Hortons will have to do it without my help.

What will I do? I hate confrontation. How can I be civil when I want to slap him? But I can't hide forever.

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New Year's Day, January 1st, 1930

I have no appetite for breakfast. A piece of toast and coffee are all I can manage. With a sigh, I finish relaying the events of last night. Reliving it is horrid. Heat climbs up my neck and into my cheeks.

Fitzie's brows draw together. "Why didn't you just ask him?"

The question gobsmacks me. "What? Follow him and Alice over to their table like some fishwife? No thank you. He doesn't owe me an explanation."

Aunt Clara's left eyebrow raises. She doesn't agree. Her hands move languidly. "Oh, but he does. As a gentleman."

"It would be too humiliating. As it is, Alice will probably spread it all over town."

Fitzie reaches across the corner of the table and squeezes my hand. "I do understand your reluctance." She turns her gaze to my aunt. "I can't count the times I had to raise my chin and stare down public humiliation. It's to be avoided if at all possible."

Aunt Clara's mouth pulls into a flat line. Her toast buttered, she sets down her knife. "I remember," she sighs. "And your grace always stopped the wagging tongues." She shakes her head. "I'm truly surprised at Boone."

I cover my face again, but I can't block the memory of it. "I've never been so embarrassed and humiliated in my life." Another memory rises like a ghost from its grave. I lower my hands. "Well, I guess I was. Once. By the senator in front of his cronies."

Fitzie scowls. "That was the night he broke your second ventriloquist's puppet. The proper one I bought for you."

I shake off the memory and take a sip of coffee. "Anyway, I can't imagine what confronting Boone would solve. It's not like we have a relationship or anything."

"But as a friend, to go off and leave you like that? I can't understand how he thought you were to get home." Aunt Clara's hands fly. "Or if you did. It's unacceptable. In fact, he's not welcome here until he apologizes and gives you a satisfactory explanation. Jimmy can finish the project. There's not that much to be done anyway."

My relief is palatable and leaves me weak with gratitude. Then I realize it would be wrong. "I appreciate that, Aunt Clara, however, we contracted Boone to do the work. You know the old saying, 'Two wrongs don't make a right.' I will manage to stay out of the way. Now—" I rise and lay my napkin beside my plate. "I'm going to call Glenice Jo."

Fitzie may have held her head high in the face of the senator's humiliating behavior, but I'm not married to Boone. And Alice Farnham is not one to leave things alone. She hates me and will rub my face in it all over town.

You can't compare with a beauty like Alice.

I pick up the phone, hoping Blanche isn't on duty, and tap the switch hook.

"Good morning. With whom may I connect you?"

Thank you. "Happy New Year, Florence. Give me Glenice Jo, please."

"Thank you, Cora, dear. Happy New Year to you and your family, too."

A moment later, Glenice Jo answers the phone.

"Hey, I need some advice."

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Glenice Jo's pacing, from the door of her bedroom to the window to her dressing table and back, is making me dizzy. If she unleashes her temper on Boone now, like she did when she thought he made me fall in the creek, she'll scorch his eyebrows. It almost makes me feel sorry for him. I've never seen her so angry.

She stops in the center of the room, arms akimbo. "Never in my life have I heard of a man being so rude, so uncaring, so ...so ... He's a brute. He ought to be horsewhipped."

Her fierce loyalty soothes my wounded pride. She's even madder than I am.

"I have to know what he was thinking. If he wants to be—" She bites her lip and glances at me.

"Wants to be what?"

Glenice Jo shakes her head. "Never mind, it's not important. But I *have* to know he was thinking." She starts pacing again then plops on the bed next to me. She tilts her head and peers at me. "Alice Farnham?"

I snort. "Yeah. I mean, she's pretty but has such a nasty temperament."

Glenice Jo jumps up. "I'm going to call him and ask him. Point blank."

She bolts from the room, and I'm hot on her heels. "Glenice Jo, please, no." My poor pride can't take any more humiliation.

I skid to a stop at their phone nook in the hallway.

She holds up a hand to stop me. "Thank you, Blanche." Tap tap tap. Glenice Jo's impatient toe-tapping matches my stomach's clenching. "Cora, we have to find out. I'll do—oh,

hello Boone. I've got a question for you. Why did you ditch Cora last night?" She jerks the ear piece away from her head.

Through it, I hear a storm of words, but they're hard to make out. Heaven's to Betsy, what's it about? I move closer to Glenice Jo, but she turns her back.

"What? Hogwash."

"What?" My whisper is harsh. "What did he say?"

Glenice Jo's eyes widen then narrow. "Tell me exactly what happened. And don't you lie to me, mister, or I'll find out. And if I do, your reputation will be in shreds." She holds up her hand, signaling me to wait. I pace.

"Wait." Glenice Jo wiggles her finger for me. I stop pacing and join her. She holds the ear piece so we both can hear.

"Go ahead, Boone. Tell me what happened."

"Okay, the evening started out nice enough. After we ate, I had to use the restroom. When I came out, Alice Farnham walked toward me and said she hated to be the one to tell me, but she felt I deserved to know. Cora had invited Walter Teague to meet her here."

"What?"

Glenice Jo claps her hand over my mouth. "And you believed her? She's a known liar."

"What was I to think? I looked at Cora and there he was, draped over the table, all googly-eyed."

I wildly shake my head. "I didn't!" I whisper. "I'd never met him before."

Glenice Jo turned red. "What you should have done was go over to see what was actually happening. She didn't know him from Adam."

"That's not what Alice told me. She said Cora has had her eye on Walter for a long time."

Glenice Jo snorts. "She never even met the man. Didn't know he existed until last night. And as soon as you appeared with Alice, he spilt. It's as plain as it can be. It was a set-up." She tilts her head, spearing me with one of those knowing looks. "Boone, you were hornswoggled. I highly suggest you hotfoot it over to Cora's," she shoos me toward the door, "and explain it to her. Alice took you *both* for a ride."

Glenice Jo hangs up. "Skedaddle home, Cora. He'll be over directly. And then we'll see who likes whom."