

Chapter 1

New York, October 31st, 1929

Rumors fly around the Palace Theatre here in New York, and everywhere else with a Vaudeville stage. Normally, I don't pay attention to rumors, but I have high stakes in this one. My career teeters on it. I heard the first rumblings two years ago—Vaudeville is dying.

With one finger, I draw back the curtain a quarter inch and peek out at the audience. This stage is my favorite spot in the whole world, where make-up can turn even a plain Jane like me into a beautiful woman. Here, I'm Dixie Lynn, adored by audiences, a success, a star—not Cora Fitzgerald, a disappointment.

In the first row, Madame Dressler, my vocal coach, watches all my performances and takes notes. Aware of the rumors, she says to break into a Broadway revue I must perfect my singing voice. "Hard vork for expandink your vocal strength and range. Dat ees your tee-ket," she tells me every week. I'd rather be an ingenue—a leading lady. But Madame Dressler says I don't possess the required beauty. I need my voice.

As if I didn't already know that.

Nobody's certain from whence my other talent originated. The peculiar one. I don't think it's really a talent, just an ability, but as a four-year-old, I could make my dolls talk. By the time I was six, I could throw my voice across a room. I figured if I weren't a beauty, at least I could be entertaining. I can't begin to tell you how much fun that was. Mama and Aunt Clara thought it was funny when I'd frighten the servants and the senator half out of their wits. The senator had a different opinion.

With one more peek through the curtain at the full house, I signal "ready" to the stage manager and step into place in the center of the stage. I settle my ventriloquist dummy, Sugar, on the high round table beside me and smooth her dress. The annunciator bearing my name slides into its window at stage right.

The curtain rises.

A familiar thrill shivers through me. This is vaudeville's big time—the Keith-Albee Circuit. I throw a sparkling smile to the audience, whom I can no longer see for the bright footlights. As always, I cross my fingers inside my dummy's head. I guess I am as superstitious as my kin back on Sugar Hill.

"Sugar, Beau Wyatt is late. Do you happen to know anything about that?"

She shakes her head and denies any knowledge of his whereabouts. I know, of course. The stage hands have my other dummy beneath the table. I stick my foot under the edge of the cloth cover to make certain.

While I pretend to look for him, my hand inside Sugar guides her head to follow my every move. I proceed through the "dialogue" with her, and with the audience's first burst of laughter, my heart stops pounding in my ears. Here, on the circuit, I'm a star. They think I'm wonderful. Ahh, the magic of theatre, where one can be whom one is not.

After Sugar confesses she locked Beau Wyatt in his dressing room, she “sings” the first verse of her solo. I practice singing every single day and have perfected it so my lips never move at all. Not the teensiest bit. Madame says it is “amasink.”

When it’s time for the second verse, Beau Wyatt sings from underneath the table, and the audience gasps.

Theatre managers who preview my act swear I have another person hiding and demand I start over without the cloth. Most have never heard a ventriloquist throw their voice before—let alone one who’s female. My future is pretty much made ... unless the rumors are true. My stomach tightens.

Thankfully, the audience’s applause drowns out that horrid thought. I exit after an encore and three extra bows. In the wings, Mr. Keith greets me, enveloping my hand between his meaty fingers.

“They love you, my dear. Let’s discuss your contract, then you have a dinner date with David Divine.”

My brain has trouble wrapping around these two contradictions. One frightens me and the other thrills. I choose the second one.

“David Divine?” My heart flutters just thinking about him. He’s Broadway’s hottest actor. But me having dinner with him? I don’t think I’ll be able to eat. “I don’t understand.”

“His agent called my office. He wants to meet you. But first,” Mr. Keith puts his hand on my elbow, guiding me backstage, “you have a phone call. Take it at the stage manager’s desk, then come to my office.”

I walk in a daze. Who would be calling me here? My agent is traveling in Paris, so it can’t be him. With David Divine swimming in my head, I approach the stage manager. He drops the receiver into my hand, and I wrap my fingers around it but find him watching me. I turn my back until the stage door clicks shut.

“Hello?”

“Cora? Oh sugar, I hate to have to be the one to tell you this, but ... well, I suppose the best way is to just come out with it. Are you sitting down, child?”

“Miss Hattie, is that you?” My childhood best friend’s mama. Why would she be calling me? “Is Glenice Jo all right?” I’d heard about her husband dying during their honeymoon. Such a tragedy.

“Yes, darlin’, she’s fine. It’s not her I’m calling about. Cora, it’s your father. The senator’s dead, sugar, and your mama needs you to come home.”

Various emotions swirl around me, but deep sorrow is not one of them. For that alone, I mourn.

My jaw tightens and I squeeze the words through gritted teeth. “What happened?”

“I’m sorry to say he hung himself in the front parlor. He used a ladder to put the rope over a beam and ... oh, you don’t need details now.”

He's always hated that room, ever since my mama—or Fizzie as everyone including me calls her—redecorated it and removed his prized moose head. “I can't say I'm surprised. That he chose to do it there, I mean. It was pay-back for the moose.”

“Oh, Cora, I'm so sorry. But she needs you. Can you come?”

Though she can't see me, I nod. “Of course, I will. Thank you for calling me, Miss Hattie. Tell her I should arrive in Buford—uh, hang on.” From the stage manager's desk, I dig out a train schedule. He always keeps one for some actor or another who's always having to catch a train to somewhere. “It looks like I can be there tomorrow evening around dusk.”

“I'll have the preacher pick you up.”

After saying goodbye, I find Mr. Keith and explain the situation. His frown isn't too pronounced, which gives me hope.

“My condolences on your father, Cora. This stock market crash has effected so many.” He folds his hands over the contract. “I'll hold this for your return.” At least he still wants me back. That's a good sign. I hope. “Will you have dinner with David before you leave?”

Though it rings of disrespect, there has never been any love lost between the senator and me. He hardly knew I was alive, except when he wanted a whipping boy.

“Yes, I will.”

Mr. Keith cocks his head to one side as if considering. Then his mustache dances on a smile. “Wonderful. I'll have my driver take you. Give me your key. While you're at dinner, my driver will fetch your bags. When you're done, he will drop you at the station.”

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Women should never allow themselves to fantasize about men. Sure as sunrise, when they do they'll be in for a disappointment. And David Divine is a big one. I only remain at the table because of the excellent steak in front of me. I cut off a bite and savor it, while he tells yet another boring story about himself.

When I finish eating, I look for a break—any break. Does this man ever breathe? How can I wedge a word in sideways between his? They're stacked one on top of the other.

I finally interrupt him. “My, my, you've led a fascinating life, David. But I must excuse myself. I have a train to catch.” I rise, picking up my clutch purse and gloves. “Thank you for dinner.” Not waiting for his response, I skedaddle past a waiter bearing a dessert tray. Ooh, a *creme brûlée* would be heaven. I keep moving, though. It's not worth another five minutes with that egotist.

At the station, I call Fizzie to reassure her I am on my way. “There's only one train leaving and it's in the wee hours of morning, so I'll be home tomorrow, late afternoon.”

A new, childlike quality in her voice makes me fear our relationship has somehow flipped, and I am now caring for her.

And my career? I see it slipping away. But I'm speculating. Perhaps with a little luck, when I get home, I'll find her capable of living as a widow and able to manage her affairs. Yes. I'll concentrate on that.

I find my seat on the train, and after a fitful sleep, I watch the scenery slide past the window, mostly farmland. Small houses. Nothing like the house I'm going home to. My father, a state senator, cultivated the impression he was larger than life. One of the reasons he was always after more money. There was never enough. Money buys power.

"It's the people's perspective of you that counts, Cora," he'd say on the rare occasion he spoke to me, usually in criticism. I never measured up to his ideal of beauty—or anything else for that matter. Trying to count on my fingers the number of times I'd see him in any given month, my memory fails after my middle finger.

How does one mourn someone they barely knew?

Finally, at four-forty-seven, the train pulls into Buford. I'm back home in Georgia for the first time in six-and-a-half years. I settle my cloche on my head—my favorite one with the three feathers on the right side—and gather my pocketbook and coat. Evenings are cold in late October—not as frigid as New York, but chilly to say the least.

The first thing I notice when I descend the steps is the acrid odor in the air. *The tannery*. I'd forgotten that particular smell. Like the Low Country has pluff mud, Buford has the tannery. Residents become used to it, since most everyone works at the tannery. But in the years I've been gone, I forgot. I wrinkle my nose and breathe through my mouth.

Unlike New York's Penn Station, the Buford one is small with a wooden platform. A few cars rattle past me over the cobblestones paving Main Street. There's even a horse drawn wagon tied to an old wooden rail. Compared to New York City, Buford is definitely behind the times. Way behind. Still, there's something about being home that makes me step out of my shoes and wiggle my toes, despite the chilly air. I've missed walking barefoot.

"Cora?"

I turn at my name and my heart trips. Standing before me is the crush of every girl who attended Buford High School—Boone Robertson. I can't believe he remembers me. Light brown hair and hazel eyes, his greener than most, and a strong jawline—he's hardly changed. The left corner of his mouth raises. While the smile is a bit cheeky, his lips are oh-so-kissable. My face grows warm.

I hold out my hand. "Boone, it's been years." A tickle in the back of my throat robs my voice. I have to cough to clear it. "Pardon me. It's nice to see you. Why are you here? Meeting someone?"

His large hands engulf mine and at his touch, a spark zips up my arm. I'd better watch myself around him. Falling in love isn't part of my plan. A romance is fine, as long as my heart isn't involved. Men aren't trustworthy. I should know. The senator paved that road.

No man will ever be interested in you, Cora. Don't set your hopes high. Barely dead twenty-four hours and he's haunting me. They say if you listen carefully on a moonless night, the trees on Sugar Hill whisper. Some believe it's ghosts, crying for mercy. That's why our porch ceilings are painted haint blue—to keep the spirits away. The senator's ghost doesn't deserve mercy.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m here for you. Your aunt sent a note asking me to get you, when the preacher got called away. I told her I’d be honored.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Honored? My, my. The Boone I remember wasn’t so gallant.” I can’t help teasing him. Back in high school, he never noticed me—or any other girl, for that matter. He was all jock—baseball hero stuff.

To his credit, he blushes. “Sixteen-year-old boys are stupid. You gotta give them a little grace.” He tips the porter and picks up my bags. “Is this all?”

“My trunk will arrive in a couple of days, so that’s it.”

I slip my shoes back on my feet and follow him to his truck. It’s an old Model T pickup with wooden sides on the bed. On the door is stenciled “Robertson’s Fine Furniture Makers.”

I eye him curiously. “You’re a carpenter? That takes some talent.” Oops. “Wait.” I frown at my *faux pas*. “That didn’t come out right.”

His laugh fills the evening air. “You thought all I could do was play ball, right?”

My face grows warm again. I hate the way my whole face turns red when I embarrass myself. Even my ears glow. “I—uh, I guess I’m guilty as charged.”

I climb in the truck, tucking my skirt beneath my knees. He lopes to the front and cranks the engine, then joins me in the cab.

“I apprenticed with Amos Calhoun when I got out of high school. He never married, so when he passed away without any children, he left me the shop.”

“That was a lucky break for you. Do you still play baseball? If I remember right, you were really good.” We girls, the Dilly Club, watched every game back then. We all loved baseball, especially the players. There were five of us girls in our little club. I can’t wait to see them again.

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “Yeah, I play with some guys on a couple of local teams.”

He puts the truck in gear and we cruise—as well as a Model T can—out of the parking lot. The town looks like it hasn’t changed yet is different at the same time. The old wooden sidewalk is still there—and still giving splinters to barefoot kids, I imagine. I count at least eight barber shops, almost more than there are people, which is new, but the post office isn’t any different from the day I left. I’ll bet the same wanted posters are still up.

We leave the shops behind and come to the Bona Allen Tannery, with its brick buildings still festooned for last night’s trick-or-treaters. They always give out candy to the children. It was my favorite place to go on Halloween when I was a kid. But something’s different. No, wait, it’s not the tannery—the Shoe Fac—no. The *Chrome* Factory, where they make the stuff they use at the tannery. I twist in my seat to look back at it.

“Why does the Chrome Factory look newer than the other buildings?”

Boone sticks his arm out the window, signaling a turn. “Because it is. The old building burned down almost two years ago. They rebuilt it.”

In my mind’s eye, I can see the crowds gathering to watch the fire. That’s big excitement in a small town. We pass the drug store, where as a kid I’d buy penny candy.

“Tell me about you, Cora. Everyone is pretty much in awe of your celebrity.”

I hope he isn't teasing, but he appears sincere. I fidget on the seat. “How do you know about me? I changed my name in New York.”

“Your mother made sure we all knew.”

He didn't roll his eyes, but I wonder what Fitzie said. “Well, thank you, but it's not as glamorous as people might think. It took me a lot of hard work to make vaudeville's big circuit.”

That's not quite the truth. Within a year of arriving in New York, I was a star and on the best circuit. But it makes me sound like a conceited diva, and I've always disliked those who think too highly of themselves.

Boone nods and signals another turn. “I remember the first time I ever heard you throw your voice. You must have been in the fourth grade. I was two years ahead of you. We were all outside, eating dinner, and some girl—can't remember her name—started taunting you. You stared at her all innocent like, then ‘something’ in the tree behind her began to moan and howl like a banshee. She screamed and skedaddled, while you stood there with a big grin on your face.”

Laughter bubbles up at the memory. “Alice Farnham. That was her name. She said, ‘Y'all think you're were so hotsy-totsy. Well, you ain't so dilly.’ That was the start of our Dilly Club, which we named in her honor.” I laugh, but my throat tickles again, making me cough. “Excuse me.” A small alarm bell rings in my head. I need to watch this. My voice is my livelihood. “How is Glenice Jo? Do you see her? Her husband's death was such a shock.”

“I think she's doing fine. She doesn't talk much about it. They were married just that one week.”

I lower my gaze, clasping my hands in my lap. “Did he really fall off a mountain?”

Boone's grin seems rather irreverent. He glances at me. “He did, and he sang all the way to the bottom. It seems he partook of a mountain still he stumbled onto. Not knowing its potency, he drank until he was stinkin' drunk. At least he didn't realize what was happening. He didn't suffer or anything.”

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. “Poor Glenice Jo. Can you imagine such a thing?”

He shakes his head. We turn onto the state road toward Cumming.

“It's not dirt anymore. When did they pave it?”

“Started a couple of years ago. They'll have it completed all the way from Rome to Lawrenceville by June. Changed the name again, too. Now it's State Road 19.”

“I wish they'd land on one that sticks. It gets confusing.”

Boone laughs at that and turns into the Sugar Hill Militia District, and I'm caught up in memories. Granny Holtzclaw told me Sugar Hill got its name long before the War of Northern Aggression, when a wagon carrying a load of sugar broke a wheel and the bags fell out, spilling their contents on the hill. She says people called it “the hill where the sugar spilled,” until somewhere along the line, it was shortened to Sugar Hill. I love it, with its dirt roads and farmlands.

One more turn and we're on Level Creek Road. Half a mile down is my driveway. Home. The huge two-story white clapboard house rises from a small knoll at the back of the property. It's a Southern gem, perfectly befitting a senator, surrounded by azaleas and rhododendron. Two gigantic, ancient oak trees stand sentinel at each corner of the house. There's a wide veranda on the second floor, held up with four pillars and broad steps lead up to the front door. Given the memories that reside here, I shouldn't love it, but I do.

The truck engine shudders to a stop. Boone comes around, opens my door and I scramble out. Before I take two steps, the front door flies open and Fitzie runs out, arms stretched wide. Adorned in pink silk lounging pajamas, trimmed with lace and a matching floral chiffon robe, my mama is still the bee's knees.

"Cora, my beautiful sugar-pie!"

She reaches out, pulls me into her arms, and bursts into tears. Her grief catches me by surprise. There's never been any love lost between her and the senator, as far as I know. Had things changed after I left?