



L Y N N

A U S T I N

a novel

A P r o p e r
P u r s u i t

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P u r s u i t

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P u r s u i t


BETHANYHOUSE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

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*To my family
Ken, Joshua, Benjamin, Maya, and Vanessa
I love you all.*

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LYNN AUSTIN is a former teacher who now writes and speaks full time. Her unique voice and ability to portray compelling relationships have made Austin a favorite with readers and have garnered her wide acclaim, including five Christy Awards for her historical novels *Candle in the Darkness*, *Fire by Night*, *Hidden Places*, *A Proper Pursuit*, and *Until We Reach Home*.

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Chapter

1

Saturday, May 20, 1893

I couldn't imagine more shocking news.

I sat at Widow Maude O'Neill's dining room table and stared at my father as the overcooked mutton on my plate grew cold. I would have cried out in protest and begged him to reconsider, but as a recent graduate of Madame Beauchamps' School for Young Ladies, I'd learned that a proper young lady never caused a scene at the supper table, especially if she was a guest.

Father looked immensely pleased with himself. He leaned back in his chair, his hand thrust inside his suit coat as he played with his watch chain. Maude, dressed in widow's black for the last time, wore the phony smile that she reserved for my father and did her best to blush like a maiden. She had won a valuable prize in my father, John Jacob Hayes, and she knew it.

I glanced at her unpleasant children, Horace and Harriet, and knew by their smug expressions that my father's marriage proposal wasn't news to them. Maude had scrubbed their piggy pink faces so thoroughly it looked as though she had boiled them. I wished she had.

My father's smile faded as my silence lengthened. "Well, say something, Violet. Have you forgotten your manners?"

I looked down at my hands, folded primly in my lap. "No, Father. I haven't forgotten." Good manners prevented me from telling my father that he was a fool. Or from smacking the smile off Maude's pinched face.

"Congratulations, Father," I said in my sweetest voice. "And best wishes to you, Widow O'Neill." I had learned the proper responses from Madame Beauchamps: "*Never congratulate the bride; offer her your best wishes.*"

"Thank you, Violet," Maude replied. If her narrow rat face had whiskers, she would have preened them.

"We hope to be wed this coming fall," my father continued. "It will be a small, private affair at home with only a few relatives and guests in attendance."

"Excuse me, Father," I said politely, "but aren't you forgetting something?"

"What's that?"

"You already have a wife—my mother."

He cleared his throat. "Yes . . . well, perhaps I neglected to explain it to you, but the fact is, I've been free to marry for some time." He sawed off another rubbery morsel of mutton and chewed it vigorously, as if unaware that this second piece of news had shocked me even more than the first.

"Free to marry?" I echoed, careful to keep my tone mild. Young ladies never burst into tears in public.

“Yes. You were away at school, and I didn’t want to upset you with the news.”

I quietly wadded Maude’s damask napkin into a ball as I pondered his words. Why did people always tiptoe around me as if I reclined on a bed of violets that might be crushed beneath their feet? “*Poor, pitiful Violet. Her mother became ill, you know, when she was only nine. She’s an only child, always daydreaming. . . .*”

“When did Mother die?” I had to struggle against the lump in my throat.

“We’ll talk about it later, Violet.”

“Excuse me once again, Father, but I believe I should have been informed of her passing. You might have—”

He cleared his throat, interrupting me. “This is hardly the proper time to discuss the matter.” He nodded discreetly toward Horace and Harriet, who had stopped gnawing their mutton to gaze at me with their round piggy eyes. “I realize, now, that I should have explained everything to you ahead of time, and I apologize for that. But let’s not spoil Maude’s wonderful supper or this momentous occasion with details that can wait until we’re home, shall we?”

Evidently, my mother’s demise was a detail. I would have excused myself from the table in order to allow my tears to fall, but I was a guest in Widow O’Neill’s home. Leaving midmeal would be unspeakably rude. Weeping at the supper table would be rude as well. Besides, my tears were more for myself than for a mother I barely remembered. Even so, Father might have mentioned her death.

Maude lifted the platter of meat and offered it to my father. “Would you care for more, John?”

Maude had poisoned her first husband—I was certain of it. I had read about women like her in my favorite dime novels and pulp fiction magazines. My best friend, Ruth Schultz, smuggled copies of *True Crime Stories*, *The Illustrated Police News*, and *True Romance Stories* into our dormitory at Madame Beauchamps’ School for Young Ladies along with dime novels in bright orange jackets. We hid them beneath our mattresses so we could read them after lights-out. Of course, proper young ladies never read such trash—but Ruth and I did.

What would become of me after Maude poisoned my father the same way she had poisoned her first husband? Would she drive me from my home to beg for alms in the gutter? I pictured myself on a street corner as snow swirled around me, a tattered shawl clutched around my shivering shoulders, my gaunt hand outstretched in supplication. Then the image faded as I realized that I was much too old to beg for alms. As a pretty young woman of twenty years, a much worse fate awaited me: I would have to become a woman of the night! A warm blush spread across my cheeks at the prospect.

While it may sound vain to call myself *pretty*, I had heard enough people use that adjective when describing me to convince myself that it must be true. My thick, curly hair was the color of strong coffee, my eyes just as dark. And even though Madame Beauchamps had referred to my complexion as a bit *swarthy* and had cautioned me to stay out of the sun lest I resemble *une paysanne*, she had also described me as *trés jolie*. A careful examination of my face in a hand mirror confirmed to me that I was, indeed, quite pretty.

“Would you like some more meat, Violet?” Maude offered the platter to me next, her teeth bared in a grin. What if she planned to poison me along with my father, so that Horace and Harriet could inherit our entire estate? I declined politely, then pushed away my dinner plate, my appetite suddenly gone. For all I knew, Maude may have begun the slow, poisonous process this very evening.

“I believe our news has upset you, Violet,” Maude said, her head tilted to one side in sympathy.

“We were so hoping that you would be happy for your father and me. And that we would all become one big family.” Horace and Harriet had laid down their forks as if waiting for me to graft them into the family tree with my butter knife. They would have a very long wait. I felt a greater kinship with the poor dead sheep on the serving platter than I did with them.

In the long silence that followed I heard a horse trotting up the street. If only it were a young, fair-haired lieutenant, newly arrived from the western Indian wars, riding to my rescue . . . *He had been gravely wounded by a native’s savage arrow, his uniform in bloody tatters, but his undying love for me had kept him alive, and now we would be reunited at last, and . . .*

The horse cantered past the house, followed by the unmistakable rumble of carriage wheels over the rutted street. Maybe it was a sign from Providence. Perhaps the passing carriage had been sent to tell me that I must run away from home at the first opportunity.

Did twenty-year-old women run away from home? And if so, how did they accomplish it? Did they tie their belongings in a shawl and sling the bundle over their shoulder? A steamer trunk would be much more convenient, considering how many belongings I possessed. The trunk I had taken to school with me would suffice, although I doubted if proper young ladies pushed their own steamer trunks through the streets. Madame Beauchamps had never specifically addressed the subject of proper etiquette when running away from home, but I was quite certain she would consider pushing one’s own trunk through the streets of Lockport, Illinois, unacceptable.

“Violet . . . Violet. . . ?” I looked up when I heard Father addressing me. “Daydreaming again,” I muttered. “Kindly pay attention, Violet. Mrs. O’Neill has asked you a question.”

“Oh, pardon me. Would you be kind enough to repeat it, Mrs. O’Neill?”

Maude’s smile may have appeared innocent to the untrained eye, but I thought I detected the proverbial “gleam of malice” as she said, “I understand that Herman Beckett has been courting you. He is such a fine young man, isn’t he?”

“Yes, ma’am. Mr. Beckett is certainly above reproach. But I would hardly regard our two Sunday afternoon outings to Dellwood Park as a courtship.”

I searched for a way to change the subject. It seemed obscene to discuss my own courtship so soon after hearing the shocking news about Maude and my father. Old people had no business courting, much less getting married. But Maude seemed determined to engage me in a verbal tennis match. I knew the rules of polite conversation, but I lacked the will to play.

“I happen to know that young Mr. Beckett is quite serious about your courtship,” Maude said, leaning closer. “I know his mother very well, and it seems that he is absolutely smitten by you.”

She had lobbed the ball into my court, but I let it lay there. If Herman Beckett was truly smitten with me, he hid the evidence well. I longed for a suitor who would gaze deeply into my eyes the way the heroes in Ruth’s romance stories always did. Someone who would kiss my ivory fingertips and whisper endearing words in my ear. The beau in one story had even nibbled on his beloved’s earlobe. That didn’t strike me as romantic at all, but perhaps my imagination had been tainted by an adventurous story I had read the same week that had featured cannibals.

“Herman comes from such a fine family,” Maude insisted.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You would be wise to encourage him before some other girl snatches him up.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I had no idea what else to say. I wished Madame Beauchamps had spent less time teaching me the proper way to consume a dinner roll—“*Delicately tear off one small morsel at a time, girls, and apply butter to each individual piece with your butter knife*”—and more time teaching me how to rid my life of scheming widows with romantic designs on my father. I had no heart for meaningless conversation after Father’s absurd news. I wished I were a child of nine or ten, like Horace and Harriet, who were expected to be seen and not heard.

After supper, good manners required me to play the piano for everyone’s enjoyment. Maude’s piano sounded as out of tune as a hurdy-gurdy, but I poured all of my sentiment into the music—and I had a great deal of sentiment that evening. If only a world-famous impresario would chance to walk down the street on his evening constitutional and hear my earnest performance and pound on Maude’s door declaring that my song had touched his very soul!

“*Let her come with me,*” he would beg. “*Let me nourish her budding talent until it blooms and flowers!*” We would travel the world together, and I would perform before the crowned heads of Europe. Later we would be married, and—

“It’s time to go home, Violet.” My father stood beside the piano, holding my wrap.

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” I said dutifully as I rose from the piano stool. I scurried through the door as Maude lunged to embrace me.

“I would like to know where Mother is buried,” I said as soon as Father and I started walking up the hill toward our home. “I would like to visit her grave.”

“Listen, Violet—”

“I know that everyone considers me fragile and frail, someone who must be protected from every unpleasantness in life. But I’m no longer a schoolgirl, Father. I’m a woman.”

“Yes, I’m well aware of that.” His voice sounded flat and emotionless. The village streets were too dark for me to see his face and discern if he was grieving for my lost childhood or if I had angered him with my demands. I plowed forward.

“And you had no right to hide the news about Mother from me. I have every right to grieve and mourn her death, even if I haven’t seen her in years—”

“She isn’t dead, Violet.”

“I should have attended her funeral, at the very least, and ... w-what did you say?”

“Your mother isn’t dead.” He stopped, winded from the uphill climb.

I stared at him, stupefied. “Then how can you possibly marry Mrs. O’Neill?”

Father exhaled a long, slow sigh like a train releasing steam at the end of a weary journey. “Our marriage has been dissolved by the courts. Your mother and I are divorced.”

“But that’s so heartless! Marriage vows promise ‘in sickness and in health until death do you part. How could you even dream of abandoning Mother when she’s ill? That’s so cold and ... and cruel ... and—” He gripped my shoulders and gave them a gentle shake. “Stop the theatrics, Violet, and listen to me. Your mother was never ill. She left home of her own free will.”

“Never ill? Of course she was ill! She—”

He shook his head. “She hated her life with me, hated living in a small town like Lockport, hated

being tied down. So I let her go.”

“That means ... That means you lied to me?”

“You were a child. I thought at the time that it would be kinder to lie than to tell you the truth. But the fact of the matter is, she abandoned us.”

“I don’t believe you,” I said in a whisper. Then my voice grew louder and louder as my shock turned to anger. “If you admit that you lied eleven years ago, why should I believe anything you tell me now?”

“I’m sorry, Violet. I’ll show you the divorce papers when we get home, if you’d like, but I’m telling you the truth.”

I demanded to see them. We went straight into Father’s study the moment we arrived home, still wearing our cloaks. Father removed a sheaf of papers from his desk drawer. The top one bore the official seal of the State of Illinois, and I saw several sentences that all began with *Whereas*. Then I saw my mother’s name: Angeline Cepak Hayes. Beneath the printed type was her signature—bold, flamboyant.

Alive.

I remembered her then—the woman she had been long ago when I was very young, not the tired, sad woman who had gone away. Her dark, untamed hair, so like my own, had been a wild tangle of curls. I’d inherited my dark eyes from her as well. She had worn bright, silky clothing that had blazed with color, and I remembered how she had danced with me, lifting me into her arms and laughing as we whirled breathlessly around the parlor. She smelled like roses.

“I’m sorry, Violet,” Father said again. “I should have told you the truth years ago.”

I glimpsed a Chicago address beneath Mother’s name before Father whisked away the papers and stuffed them into the drawer. I stared at my father as if at a stranger as I struggled to grasp the truth.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I murmured.

He took a moment to reply, silently fingering his watch chain. When he spoke, his voice sounded hushed. “I’m sorry... . I think ... I think I always hoped she would come home to us again.”

I couldn't fall asleep that night. I had too much information to digest along with Maude's indigestible mutton. My stomach ached in protest.

Father's engagement to Widow O'Neill had shocked me badly. But to suddenly learn that my real mother hadn't been ill all these years but had abandoned us to live in Chicago—I couldn't comprehend it. My mother was a traitor, my father a traitor *and* a liar. Where did that leave me?

I had to stop Father's wedding, of course. I'd always thought of the two of us as happy, living a quiet, comfortable life in our home on the hill overlooking the canal in Lockport. We had Mrs. Hutchins to keep house for us and cook our meals—wasn't that enough for my father? How in the world could he expect me to share him with a stringy widow and her dreadful children, Homely and Horrid? I had decided I would secretly refer to Harriet and Horace by those more appropriate names. Yes, I must stop the wedding at all costs. But how?

I climbed out of bed and lit the gas lamp, then retrieved my journal from under my mattress and opened it to a clean page. I wrote *PREVENT FATHER'S MARRIAGE!!!* in bold letters across the top and underlined it three times, breaking the pencil point in the process. I found another pencil and numbered the page from one to ten.

What to do? What to do?

Perhaps with a little detective work I could prove that Maude had murdered her first husband and send her and her odious offspring to prison for the rest of their lives. Homely and Horrid had been accomplices—I was certain of it.

I wrote:

#1. Investigate Mr. O'Neill's death, then added: (Re-read The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Allan Pinkerton's detective book for inspiration.)

I spent the next ten minutes drumming the pencil against the page as I searched in vain for another idea.

When my head began to ache from thinking too hard, I turned off the lamp, climbed beneath the covers again with my journal and pencil, and pondered the second piece of shocking news I'd received: My mother had abandoned us.

For eleven years, I'd imagined Mother pining away in a stark sanitarium as she valiantly struggled to regain her health and come home to us. The scene always scintillated in dazzling light: *White hospital walls, white sheets, white-clad nurses, and Mother in the middle of it all, her skin as pale as alabaster, clothed in a frothy white nightgown. She kept a photograph of Father and me at her bedside, and she wept with longing whenever she gazed at it.*

Now, with three cold, blunt words, my father had shattered that ethereal image.

She abandoned us.

It couldn't be true. Why would Mother do such a thing? What was wrong with me that had made her decide to leave? I couldn't recall being a demanding or difficult child, but perhaps my memory was faulty.

I closed my eyes, trying to remember what life had been like before my mother left us. Days and days would go by when she wouldn't get out of bed—which surely meant that she was ill, didn't it? Father hired a young Swedish girl who barely spoke English to take care of me during that time, and Mrs. Hutchins had cooked and cleaned for us for as far back as I could recall. But I remembered crying one day and throwing a temper tantrum because it was Mrs. Hutchins' day off and I was hungry. I escaped from my Viking jailer and tugged on Mother's limp arm as I tried to rouse her from her lethargy, demanding that she get out of bed and fix me some lunch. What I really wanted was for her to get dressed in one of her rainbow-hued gypsy dresses and whirl around the parlor with me, laughing the way she used to do. Had my tantrum driven her away that day? I wished I knew.

In the wee hours of the morning, after covering my diary page with dark, impassioned doodles, I realized that if I found my mother I could solve both of my dilemmas at the same time. She would see that I was a young woman now, a graduate of Madame Beauchamps' School for Young Ladies and no longer prone to temper fits. Once I convinced her to come home, Father would have no reason to marry Murderous Maude. And if Mother still wouldn't come home, I could escape from my father's impending marriage by moving to Chicago to live with her.

But how in the world would I find her?

Getting permission to travel alone to Chicago would be my first hurdle. I would figure out how to find Mother once I arrived.

I remained in bed until eleven o'clock the next morning. When I finally did rise, I refused to write Maude a proper thank-you note for last night's dinner. I also refused to speak to my father for an entire day.

I was sitting alone in the parlor after supper, reading a proper, boring novel, when Herman Beckett came to call. Herman was an earnest young man of twenty-three and my only suitor, so far. I hadn't decided if I would allow the courtship to continue or not. Herman worked as a clerk for a shipping company, and on our first outing I made the mistake of asking him which commodities his company shipped and where he shipped them. His answer proved so long and boring that I actually dozed off for a moment. Madame B. would have poked me with her parasol for committing such a social *faux pas*.

"Good evening, Miss Hayes," Mr. Beckett said upon arriving at our door. He bowed as if his dark, dreary suit was too tight and might split at the seams. "I was taking my evening constitutional and thought I would pay you a visit. We could get to know one another a little better—that is, if you're free to accept callers."

If he hadn't explained his purpose, I would have guessed by his somber expression and sober attire that he was on his way to a wake rather than paying a social visit. I weighed the merits of my boring book against an hour spent with Herman and decided to invite him to come inside. Father came out of his study to chat with Herman while I fetched glasses of cider for Herman and me. My traitorous father could fetch his own cider.

When I returned, Father retreated into his study across the hall from the parlor, leaving both doors wide open, of course. It took only a few minutes of idle chitchat to discover that I had made a poor choice; Herman was even more boring than my book had been. I had to do something—and quickly—in order to stay conscious.

“If you could choose,” I asked him during a long, embarrassing pause in the conversation, “would you rather be a horse or a carriage?”

My friend Ruth and I used to entertain each other for hours debating questions such as this one, but Herman gripped his cider glass with both hands and bolted upright in his chair as if the fate of the world might depend on his reply.

“I-I don’t understand.”

“It’s a simple question. If you could choose, which one would you rather be? There are advantages and disadvantages to each, you see. A horse is alive and can fall in love with another horse and have baby horses—”

“Oh my! Miss Hayes!” His face turned a remarkable shade of red.

“A carriage can’t fall in love, but it has the advantage of traveling to exciting, faraway places and conveying interesting people— perhaps even royalty. So which would you choose?”

He gulped a mouthful of cider, as if stalling for time, then said, “I-I wouldn’t care to be either one.”

Herman didn’t get it. I would have to make the game simpler. “Okay, then. Would you rather be unbelievably handsome but poor, or enormously rich but disfigured?”

This time his reply came quickly. “I’d rather be myself, thank you.” He frowned in a way that made his bushy black eyebrows meet in the middle, forming one long caterpillar-like eyebrow. I wanted to point out that the frown was quite unbecoming, but the resemblance to a caterpillar reminded me of another one of Ruth’s favorite questions.

“What’s the most disgusting thing you’ve ever eaten, Mr. Beckett? I hear that in some countries people eat things like insects and dogs and cats. Would you sample one if given the opportunity?”

“No.”

“What if you were *starving*? Or if you were a missionary to a pagan country and they offered caterpillars to you, and you had to accept them in order to be polite? What if your missionary endeavors would suffer if you didn’t eat one?”

“I hardly think—”

“At Madame Beauchamps’ school she once served snails because she wanted us to learn what the special fork was used for and how to handle it properly. Madame is from France, you see, and snails are a delicacy over there. As soon as Madame tugged one from its shell my friend Ruth gagged at the sight of the slimy thing and had to leave the table. None of the other girls wanted to eat one, but I removed my snail from the shell with great ease and gulped it right down. It wasn’t so bad. The only thing I could taste was the garlic butter. The snail was so slippery that it slid right down—”

“Please, Miss Hayes.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m beginning to feel quite ill.”

I refused to give up. “So what was the most ... *adventuresome* ... thing you’ve ever eaten?” His mouth hung open, but no sound came out. “How about buffalo, Mr. Beckett? Would you eat a buffalo steak? They serve them out west, you know.”

Herman didn’t reply. He obviously had no imagination at all. I could see that a lifetime with him would be uneventful and predictable. Surprises would fall into the same category as typhoid fever:

something to be avoided at all costs. I felt grateful to have discovered this truth about Herman now rather than after I'd consented to marry him. I would sooner become a spinster than spend a lifetime with a boring, unimaginative man.

Had that been the reason my mother had left us? My father could be boring and pedantic too. "*She hated her life with me,*" my father had said, "*hated living in such a small town.*" Had the monotony so wearied her that she simply had to leave? But then why not take me with her? "*She hated being tied down,*" Father had said. That must have included me. I must have tied her down.

"Miss Hayes?" Herman was staring at me as if I had devoured an entire bucketful of snails.

"I'd much rather eat buffalo," I told him, "than dine on—" I nearly slipped and mentioned Maude O'Neill's mutton, which had been as tough and tasteless as horsehide—not that I've ever tasted horsehide, mind you. But just in time, I recalled Maude's friendship with Herman's mother. I remembered the plans I had outlined in my journal last night to investigate her husband's death and decided to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"That reminds me, Herman. I understand that we have a mutual acquaintance, Maude O'Neill?"

"Why, yes. My family knows her very well."

"It's so tragic that she was widowed at such a young age, isn't it? I was away at school when her husband died, so I'm not sure I ever heard the cause of his demise."

"It was most unfortunate, I'm sorry to say. He tumbled down the cellar stairs and struck his head."

Ah ha! Just as I thought! Murderous Maude had pushed him! Homely and Horrid had probably strewn objects in his path to aggravate his fall, and greased the handrail for good measure. I masked my glee with what I hoped was a look of horror.

"How perfectly awful for Mrs. O'Neill! I hope she wasn't home at the time."

"I'm afraid she was. She sent poor little Harriet to fetch Dr. Bigelow, but he arrived too late."

Probably *hours* too late—and only after Maude had caved in his skull with a sledgehammer for good measure. I was deep in thought, pondering these highly suspicious circumstances, when Herman cleared his throat again.

"Did I mention that I'm going to Chicago to see the World's Columbian Exposition?"

"Really? When?" I handled the abrupt change in topics with finesse, taking care not to reveal the fact that I was investigating Mr. O'Neill's murder.

"I plan to go next month, when the weather warms up a bit."

Herman blathered on and on about the fair's architectural marvels and educational wonders until, once again, his monotone began to induce a hypnotic stupor. My eyes watered from stifling yawns.

"Are you and your father planning to visit the fair, Miss Hayes?"

His question gave me a brilliant idea: I could use the Exposition as an excuse to travel to Chicago and find my mother! I would begin badgering my father to go immediately.

As soon as Herman finished his cider—I didn't offer him a refill—and I'd closed the front door behind him, I turned to my father, who had ambled out to the foyer to bid Herman good-night.

"Herman is going to Chicago to visit the Exposition this summer. I would very much like to go as well."

"It so happens I've planned a trip to Chicago. I thought that we all could go."

“All of us? You don’t mean Maude and her children?”

“Well, yes—”

“Father, please—no! I don’t want to go with them. I’m a grown woman, not a child like Homely and Horrid.” I didn’t realize that I had used my secret names for them until I saw Father’s shocked expression.

“Violet! I’m surprised at you.”

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“It’s unlike you to be cruel, Violet. Are you ... might you be ... a bit jealous of them?”

“Certainly not! They’re children and I’m a grown woman—and that’s the point I’m trying to make, don’t you see? Maude spoke last evening as if we will all settle down and become one happy family, but her expectations aren’t realistic. I won’t be linking hands with her little urchins as we skip through the Exposition with a picnic basket. I would much rather see the fair with companions who are my own age.”

“I understand. But it’s out of the question for you to accompany Mr. Beckett without a chaperone.”

“What about Grandmother? Why couldn’t I spend a few weeks in Chicago visiting with her?” The idea came to me in a flash of genius. My father could hardly argue that his own mother was an unfit chaperone. Grandmother kept quite busy working for several charitable causes, so I was certain that I could slip away from her for a few hours to search for my mother once I was in Chicago.

“I don’t think that’s wise, Violet. Your grandmother doesn’t need the added responsibility of watching over you. She has enough to deal with as it is, with her sisters.”

“But I wouldn’t be any trouble at all. There’s plenty of room for me in that huge old house. Please, Father? Grandmother is always inviting me to come and stay with her every time she writes. Why won’t you ever let me go?”

Father paused as if carefully phrasing his reply. “You’re a very ... impressionable ... young lady. I fear that the Howell sisters would have a disruptive influence on you.”

His words intrigued me. Here was another mystery to solve. How could my devout grandmother and her three aging sisters possibly have a bad influence on me? I was more determined than ever to go—just to find out. I chose my next words with care.

“You began courting Widow O’Neill while I was away at school and never breathed a word of it to me. Instead, you’ve sprung the news of your engagement on me without any warning and without even asking for my opinion on the matter. Next, I discover that you’ve been lying to me about Mother for more than ten years, telling me that she’s ill when it seems she isn’t ill at all. Taking all of this into consideration, one might say that you’ve been extremely unfair to me. And faced with such lies and betrayals, one might simply decide to leave home unannounced—and without a chaperone.” I had delivered a threat without raising my voice. Madame Beauchamps would have approved.

“I never intended to hurt you, Violet, I thought that—”

“Then you might show your remorse by treating me as a grown woman instead of a child. I’m merely asking to take a brief trip away from home to see the World’s Columbian Exposition. Perhaps the time away will help me accustom myself to the new state of affairs here at home. And I’ll be in the company of your own mother during that time.”

“That’s what worries me,” he mumbled.

“Why? What’s wrong with Grandmother?”

He gazed into the distance, slowly shaking his head. His eyes wore the vacant gaze of a stuffed elk.

“Father, why is it that we so rarely see Grandmother when she lives a mere train ride away in Chicago?”

“It’s complicated, Violet... .” Father groped for the comfort of his watch chain, as if reaching for a weapon to defend himself.

I refused to back down. “May I travel to Chicago to visit with her or not?” He opened the watchcase and stared at the dial before snapping it closed again. I was quite certain that he couldn’t have said what time it was.

“Let me think about it, Violet.”

“Very well.” I turned and glided regally up the stairs. “I will write a letter to Grandmother while I await your reply.”

Monday, June 5, 1893

I settled onto the stiff, velvety train seat, adjusting my skirts before waving a curt good-bye to my father, who stood outside on the platform. Then I turned my back on him. Maude O’Neill and her ill-behaved brats had accompanied us to the train station, and I had no wish to gaze upon them for another moment. She was not my mother and never would be. Homely and Horrid, who had entertained themselves by making ugly faces and rude noises at the other passengers, would never be my siblings. All in all, my send-off had been nearly unendurable. Maude talked on and on about Herman Beckett until I wanted to scream—in spite of everything I’d learned in school about proper manners.

“Mr. Beckett will be so lonely without you,” she’d insisted. “I understand Mr. Beckett is eager to accompany you to the fair ...” *Mr. Beckett this ... and Mr. Beckett that!* If she had mentioned how “smitten” he was with me one more time I would have lost control and smitten her.

I had managed to hold my tongue by imagining what my real mother would be like, and how she would handle my courtship to a bore like Herman Beckett. I convinced myself that any gentleman Mother picked out for me would be infinitely more exciting than Herman.

The more Maude had hovered over me, the more determined I became to find my real mother—even if it was the last thing I ever did. Once I found her, I would convince her to come back to Lockport to live with Father and me. Wouldn’t Maude O’Neill be surprised when she invited herself to my welcome home reception and met the *real* Mrs. John Jacob Hayes?

Of course, I hadn’t told Father that I intended to find my mother or he never would have allowed me to go to Chicago. I didn’t inform Grandmother of my true plans either.

I wiggled in place, trying to make myself comfortable on the hard train seat, willing the whistle to blow and the train to hurry up and steam out of the station. I sensed Father’s worried gaze on me through the window, and I feared that at any moment he would change his mind and charge onto the train to yank me off. It had required prodigious efforts of persuasion on my part before he allowed the trip in the first place. And he had nearly postponed it when no one could be found to accompany me on the train.

“A woman needs a gentleman to watch over her,” he’d fussed. “Her husband or father or brother . . .”

“What for?” I had asked him. “I can watch out for myself well enough.”

“It just isn’t right. Who will handle your trunk and so forth? And what if there’s a problem? You wouldn’t know what to do.”

“I know everything I need to know. I’ll board the train in Lockport, sit in my seat—watched over by a very competent conductor—and get off at Union Depot, where Grandmother will be waiting for me. What could go wrong? Besides, the world is on the brink of a brand-new era, Father. We’re about to

enter the twentieth century, and young ladies are being allowed a bit more freedom. After all, I am twenty years old.”

I'm not sure if I truly convinced him or if I simply wore him out. Either way, I was pleased when he'd finally consented and purchased my train ticket. I was slightly less pleased when he agreed to Herman Beckett's request to meet me in Chicago later in the month so he could take me to see the Columbian Exposition, accompanied by his married sister. I doubted if I ever could convince a man as unimaginative as Herman to help me find my mother. Besides, Herman's mother was Maude's friend and they were certain to gossip about my activities in Chicago.

At last the train lurched forward and began to move. I risked a final glance out of the window and saw Maude cheerily waving her handkerchief as if I were a soldier leaving for the battlefield. Father looked very worried and sorry he had ever agreed to let me go. Little Horrid stuck out his tongue at me. I resisted the temptation to return the gesture.

As soon as the beige limestone train station was out of sight, I heaved a sigh of relief. Madame Beauchamps would have been appalled.

I was leaving Lockport, Illinois, behind and speeding toward Chicago. I felt like pinching myself to see if I was dreaming. I was riding the train into the city—alone! For the first time in my life I felt like an adult. I closed my eyes and imagined that I was running away. I had already decided that if I couldn't prevent Father's wedding, I wouldn't return home. After all, Father had lied to me—all these years!

It didn't take long for the view of flat, monotonous prairie land to bore me. I wondered if God had run out of ideas after creating the mountain ranges and the mighty Mississippi River and had nodded off when He was supposed to be designing the middle portion of America. Was Illinois the result of an unfortunate catnap? Or perhaps, in a gesture of beneficence, the Almighty had delegated the task to a less imaginative underling. If so, I hoped the underling had been fired for his lack of creativity.

As I continued to gaze at the uninspiring terrain, I tried to think of it as a symbol of the larger journey on which I had embarked. Our literature teacher had labored to interest us in things like symbolism and similes, but I confess such imagery bored me when compared to the graphic, lurid details I read about in Ruth's *Illustrated Police News*. But maybe it would help to think of my journey as symbolic: I was leaving my boring life behind along with the terrain and embarking on an exciting new life in Chicago.

To be honest, my stomach churned quite unpleasantly whenever I thought about what might lie ahead. Many of those shocking *True Crime Stories* I used to read had taken place in cities like Chicago, and I was keenly aware of the dangers that might await a young woman such as myself.

Eventually I grew tired of trying to dredge up symbolism from a boring view and I pulled a book from my satchel, settling back to read. I had barely begun the first chapter when I felt the train's momentum begin to slow, and a few minutes later we made a brief stop at the train station in Lemont. The village held little interest for me, but I spotted an intriguing traveling salesman—more commonly referred to as a drummer—waiting to board the train with his suitcase full of wares. I guessed his age to be about the same as Herman Beckett's, but the similarities began and ended right there. Herman dressed like an undertaker's assistant, while this man's unbecoming suit was as garish as a circus clown's, sewn from cheesy plaid material that sagged at the knees and had been worn to a shine on the elbows and rump.

I would have described him as good-looking if his smile wasn't so phony or his hair so slicked-back

with Macassar oil that it reflected light. I watched him climb aboard and search for his seat, and he seemed to have absorbed the greasy oil through his scalp until it lubricated him from within. His movements were so smooth that he glided when he walked, as if his bones were as pliable as cheese. A dime novel would have described him as “a slippery character.”

I thought him wonderfully dangerous! Everyone warned innocent girls such as myself to stay far away from unsavory men like him. In fact, he was exactly the type of man that my father had worried about when I’d embarked on this trip. In short, the drummer fascinated me.

His restless eyes roved all around the passenger car as if searching for a hidden compartment or a clue to a mystery, and I saw his gaze slide over me a few times, lingering a trifle too long to be proper. I immediately looked away, pretending to read, but I confess that my heart raced with excitement.

He spoke in a very loud voice to the conductor and the other passengers—who seemed reluctant to converse with him. He laughed much too loudly. Once the train resumed its journey, he couldn’t seem to settle down, stirring restlessly as if unable to sit still, crossing and uncrossing his legs. He opened his newspaper and began to read, making such a racket that the rustling pages sounded like a forest fire. He finally put the crumpled pages down again. He shifted the position of his sample case three times, opening it briefly to glance inside before stowing it beneath his seat again. At length, he removed a cigar from inside his jacket and left the coach.

I wondered if his unease was caused by a guilty conscience. What crime might he have committed to make him so unsettled? Murder? I must try to look for bloodstains beneath his fingernails when he returned. Theft? It seemed unlikely since he’d boarded the train with no luggage except his sample case. But diamonds were small—might he be a jewel thief?

Ten minutes later the drummer returned from the smoking car, bringing the aroma of cigars with him. I made the mistake of watching him glide down the aisle, and when he saw me he nodded in an overly familiar way. His manners were exceedingly improper and much too forward. His smile was what Madame Beauchamps had called a “candelabra grin.”

“Never overdo your enthusiasm, girls, especially with members of the opposite sex. A slender taper of light is all that one needs to send forth. Be mysterious and enigmatic.” Ruth and I had practiced our enigmatic smiles in front of a mirror every night until we could no longer suppress our giggles.

I quickly looked away from the salesman’s frank gaze, but once again, a thrill of excitement shivered through me. His crime must be adultery. He had what the romance novels referred to as “charisma.” He probably knocked on weak-willed women’s doors with his suitcase full of samples and sidled his way into their parlors ... and their affections.

I didn’t dare look up again. Instead, I rummaged through my satchel, pretending to search for something, and spotted my mother’s address. I had tiptoed into Father’s office while he was at work and found the divorce papers, then carefully copied down the address printed beneath Mother’s signature. Tears filled my eyes at the memory of her flamboyant signature. It wasn’t the handwriting of an invalid, but of a woman who was very much alive. And healthy enough to be a mother to me.

“She abandoned us,” my father had said. The more I pondered the truth of her desertion, the smaller and more worthless I felt. No one discarded a treasure, did they? Only worthless things were left behind. Before I could stop them, my tears began to fall.

“Are you in distress, miss?”

I looked up to find the drummer hovering in the aisle beside my seat. My heart began to race,

outpacing the train.

“I—I seem to have something in my eye,” I lied, quickly applying my handkerchief. Lies must be a family trait.

“Want me to have a look and see if I can fish it out?”

“Um ... no, thank you.” The last thing I needed was a mysterious man gazing deeply into my eyes. I stole a quick glance at his face and saw that his eyes were as flashy as the rest of him, their color such a bright, clear shade of blue that they made me thirsty.

“My name’s Silas—Silas McClure.” He held out his hand for me to shake, evidently unaware that a gentleman always waited for a lady to offer her hand first—if at all. I couldn’t be rude and leave it hanging in midair, so I briefly grasped his fingertips for a dainty shake.

“Violet Hayes.” I hated my name the moment I spoke it. *Violet*. It sounded old-fashioned and as limp as velvet. I longed for a more dramatic name and decided that I would change it when I arrived in Chicago. I would introduce myself as Athena or Artemesia or maybe Anastasia. “How do you do, Mr. McClure?”

“I do just fine... . Say, don’t tell me, let me guess—I’ll wager you’re going to Chicago to see the fair. Am I right?”

“Um ... yes. Are you going as well?”

“I’ve already seen it—three times, in fact. But I’m going again, first chance I get.” He propped one foot on the seat that faced mine and folded his arms on his raised knee. “The fair is really swell. I could give you some pointers—what to see and what’s a waste of time—if you want me to.”

Before I could reply, he dropped his leg and slid into the seat facing me, perching on the very edge so that our knees were practically touching. His manners were outrageous! I imagined Madame Beauchamps flapping her hands as if shooing away pigeons and saying, “*No, no, no, Miss Hayes! You must never, never accept advances from such a creature.*” Anyone unsavory was a *creature* to Madame B.

But in the next moment, I found myself wondering whether to believe Madame or not. If my father had lied to me my entire life, why should I obey anything else I’d been taught? Anger swelled inside me, making it difficult to speak. I had felt it growing in strength since the night I’d first learned about Maude and about my mother, slowly rising and expanding like bread dough in a warming oven. The more I thought about the wedding, the deplorable stepchildren, and my father’s lies, the more I wanted to punch something the way Mrs. Hutchins punched the rising bread dough so she could shape it into loaves.

The safe cocoon in which I’d been wrapped all my life suddenly felt suffocating. Madame had taught me to be a proper young lady, demure and sedate, but beneath the surface I longed to fly as freely as a butterfly, to do something bold and daring. I scooped up my satchel and placed it on my lap to make room for Mr. McClure on the seat beside me. I even patted the cushion lightly, beckoning him to sit there.

“I would love to hear all about the fair. But please, tell me all about yourself first, Mr. McClure.”

“Well, I’m a drummer, as you can probably guess,” he said, dropping into the seat. “I sell Dr. Dean’s Blood Builder—a nutritive tonic.”

“Is it really made from *blood*?”

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