

## Kansas City, Missouri, 1926

Charlotte felt the woman's scrutiny like heat from a flame too close to her skin. She forced herself not to flinch away from it; flinching, she'd learned, only invited more trouble.

"And you've never waitressed before?" Miss Steele said lightly, as if to counterpoise the obvious fact that she was making far more important assessments. Charlotte could practically see the cogs turning behind the woman's benevolent façade.

"No, I ... well, I worked at a milliner's shop, and I served people. But not food."

A hat shop. Even now it was hard to believe. That was not the life he'd described, the life he'd promised. But becoming a shop girl was the least of it. Promises had fallen like autumn leaves on the Boston Common, hadn't they?

"That's just fine. We prefer girls without prior experience. They tend to have fewer bad habits to correct."

"Bad habits?" Charlotte was certain that if she'd had any—which she doubted—they'd been trained out of her at the highly esteemed Winsor School for Girls. *A Sound Mind in a Sound Body* was their motto, and she'd taken it very much to heart. Until lately.

"Like serving a beverage without a tray, or wearing an apron with a spot on it," Miss Steele explained. "Or smiling a little too long at a customer."

"Flirting."

"Exactly."

Miss Steele was the head of personnel for Fred Harvey, and she wore the confidence of her position plainly but without condescension. Charlotte had never heard of a woman achieving

so high an appointment in such a large company and assumed that Miss Steele was a member of the extended Harvey family. Either that or she knew things that they preferred to remain private.

*Keep your friends close and your enemies closer*, her father often said when he'd returned from a particularly trying day at his shipping company. She'd been living out the "enemies closer" part of that adage for far too long now.

"I don't flirt." This seemed important to say. In the last two years, Charlotte had become a keen observer of what to say—and, more importantly, what not to say—at any given moment.

"I'm glad to hear that." Miss Steele studied her face, particularly her right eye. She glanced down at Charlotte's left hand, the one that had, until an hour ago, worn a gold band.

"You're not married?"

"No."

Sometimes you had to fib. That was important, too. Charlotte fought the urge to touch the tender skin under her eye. She had waited a week for the swelling to go down and the car-tire-black to fade to jaundice-yellow.

"And there's nothing keeping you from traveling far from home?"

"Oh, no. Not at all." Charlotte almost laughed. *Quite the opposite.*

Miss Steele pursed her lips and looked out the window. The office was on the second floor of Union Station in Kansas City, Missouri, and a cold March rain speckled the panes, obscuring the train yard and the city beyond. Charlotte curled her toes in her best black patent leather pumps with the champagne-colored bows. Well, the bows were gone now; one had come off, and she couldn't go around with one bow, so she'd torn the other from its spot and tucked it

away. For what purpose she couldn't say. A reminder of better times, perhaps, or the abysmal depth of her own stubborn foolishness.

The woman leveled a meaningful gaze. "Miss Turner, I feel I must ask about your eye. You seem to have received a blow of some kind."

*I was reaching for a book on a high shelf at the library, and it just leapt out at me!* She'd say it with a self-deprecating chuckle.

But sometimes you had to tell the truth, which Miss Steele seemed to intuit anyway.

"Yes," Charlotte said. "And if you give me a job, the bruise will fade. If you don't, it will simply be renewed."

Billie had heard that the famous Fred Harvey food was the best in the West, but the biscuit tasted like a mouthful of flour straight from the sack.

"Now, eat that," said her mother. The remnants of Lorna MacTavish's Scottish brogue came out when she was tired or worried. Today she was both. "We can't have you fainting away up there. You're looking awfully peely wally."

"You have it." Billie pushed the plate down the lunch counter in Union Station. "Or save it for the ride back."

"We'll be splitting it, if you don't pull yourself together."

Billie blinked the tears back from her pale lashes. "I don't want to go," she whispered.

"Och, dinnae fash, now," murmured Lorna to her eldest child. "There's a whole big world out there! I never got to see it, but now you will."

“Who’ll help with the kids and the washing? Who’ll get dinner on when the mending’s due for the Suttons?” Billie fingered tears out of the hollows under her eyes. “Not Malcolm.”

“Your father works hard, and don’t call him by his given name, cheeky,” Lorna scoffed. “You want to go and haul bricks for ten hours and then fetch dinner for nine squalling bairns?”

“Maw, I don’t want to leave them. I ... I don’t want to leave you.”

She had only seen her mother cry once, after her toddling sister Sorcha had fallen into the great wash barrel and drowned. Lorna smiled hard, but the tears trickled down her face nonetheless. She put her knobby hand on Billie’s, the fingers softer than rough work should’ve allowed. “You’ll have your chance to see new places and have an adventure! You’ll earn good money, and then you’ll come back to me, and we’ll all be together.”

“Don’t make me go ...”

A sob broke out of the woman’s chest. “If I had any choice in the matter, lass, you’d never leave my side.”

Copyright © 2025 by Juliette Fay

Gallery Books an Imprint of Simon & Schuster, LLC