

*16 July 1901, Cheyenne*

She pulled on her white lace gloves, willing her thundering heart to calm before it announced her arrival to the entire city of Cheyenne. The train coughed, the engine rocking ever so slightly as it came to a halt. The whistle blew, high and echoing against the station's red brick. The other passengers rose, collecting their things as they prepared for disembarkation. Selah sat still, breathing steadily as she watched the porters on the platform mosey toward the train, ready to take suitcases and bags. The train nearly empty, Selah stood, straightening her hat, smoothing her skirt. The fumes of hot metal and grease greeted her on the platform. She paused, taking in the grand depot building; the station had not existed in this fashion when she'd last stood here fifteen years ago. How easily the familiar becomes unfamiliar in absence.

When she left Cheyenne, the city had been hardly more than a hovel, a stopover on journeys to places more interesting, a watering hole in the desert. When she left Cheyenne, she was hardly more than a bumpkin in rough linen and cheap calico clothes. When she left Cheyenne, she had no inclination she'd return.

Selah slipped the strap of her closed parasol over her wrist and stepped to a ticket window. The man at the counter dropped his head as she approached, his focus intent on the papers at hand. Selah cleared her throat and waited. He continued with the papers. She sighed, relenting that he would not acknowledge her first. "When is the next coach north?" she asked.

The clerk at last lifted his eyes, peering over his spectacles. "Depends where you're headed."

"Little Bear."

"Two days," said the clerk.

"And how much?"

He blinked, taking in the lace on her hat, the rich burgundy of her dress, her sleek white gloves, her face. The price he gave was astronomical—she herself could see prices on the chalkboard behind him: fifty cents. He asked for two dollars and fifty cents. Selah composed herself. This was not the time to make a scene. She reached into her purse, careful to hide its contents. What was two dollars to this lady in her finery? She imagined the clerk was thinking. He wasn't wrong. She had a whole twenty-five, and more back home, but she couldn't spend frivolously forever, not now she was solely responsible for her expenses. Already she had given up so much just to be comfortable without penny pinching. She handed over the money. The clerk stamped her ticket. She was due change, but he made no move to make it. She took her ticket. Two and a half dollars had gotten her a ticket away from home; two and a half to return.

“There's a boarding house just past 19th on Capitol,” the clerk said, turning back to his papers without any effort to direct her further. But she didn't need it. Once, she knew these streets well, and she assumed the layout of the city had not changed in the time she'd been away. So many Western cities had laid out grids long before buildings were erected, Cheyenne was no different. So much hope in the West for expansion, for civilization to make its way to the rough and tumble places once notorious for lawlessness. Where once had stood a dusty gathering of clapboard edifices now were packed dirt streets lined with solid brick facilities. The old territory days were over; Wyoming had embraced its statehood.

*How civilized it seems.* Buggies bumped by kicking up hot dust. Squinting against the unfettered sun, Selah oriented toward 16th street, where she knew the Inter Ocean Hotel stood. Selah of the past had walked past its doors, but now she entered them, brushing the dust from her skirt. The concierge gawked, tilted his head in curiosity. “Miss Balden's is still a few blocks down,” he said.

“I’m not looking for Miss Balden’s,” said Selah, placing her purse on the counter. “I need a room for two nights.”

“Miss, we’re a *fine* establishment, and our rates—”

Selah opened her purse, allowing him to glimpse the cash within. “Yes, I’m aware,” she said. “That’s why I’ve chosen it.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t be more comfortable elsewhere, Miss?”

Selah wearied a sigh. “Sir, I have met the very owner of this establishment, and I can assure you I will be plenty comfortable.”

“You’ve met Mr. Ford?”

“Haven’t you?”

“Not quite,” the concierge said after some hesitation. It wasn’t surprising, considering Barney Ford lived in Denver and likely never had to travel up to Cheyenne himself.

“Well, he and I have a certain *kinship* between us,” she emphasized, hoping the concierge would get the hint. But his blank stare told her he did not. How much more could she imply that his employer was a Negro without coming right out and saying it? He was likely to disbelieve her, anyway. A Negro owning a hotel that catered to whites? Preposterous! Everything about Selah, from her dress to her skin to the cadence of her voice, said she was *not from around here*. So how could *she* possibly know Mr. Ford? Holding back yet another sigh, Selah handed the concierge a five-dollar bill.

He straightened his back and slipped the money into his waistcoat. “We have several vacancies that should suit your needs, Miss...?”

She had not used her given name in a long while. This trip was meant to be quiet, somber. Would anyone recognize her and approach? Had enough time passed she’d been

forgotten? Selah paused far longer than acceptable; whatever name she gave now would seem false. “Thwaite,” she answered. “Miss Selah Thwaite.”

A lobby boy was sent to collect her trunk from the station, and Selah was guided up to her room. She had half a mind to spend her time waiting there, ordering food in-house and occupying herself with books. But she was drawn to the window to look down the passersby below, searching for familiar figures. She was not made to sit in a single room all day. She pulled on again her hat and gloves despite the summer heat and took to the streets. Her promenade revealed precisely how much the city had grown: two new churches, a mansion, a handful of large houses, a splattering of shops and even more modest homes. The capitol building had been merely a foundation when she’d left, and now the completed dome gleamed in the sun.

Head lowered as she strolled, she pulled the veil down from her hat. No one on the street batted an eye. However, many of the facilities, she remembered, had had their reservations about Negro folk. *That* surely had stayed the same over the years. Cheyenne was a hub, and all sorts stopped as they crossed the country. Perhaps they did not stay as long as Selah intended to, perhaps some never left the train and so did not attempt to frequent the establishments along the main streets of the city. Nevertheless, Selah entered one of the new eateries and hoped she would not be turned away.

In a futile attempt to coax a breeze, the door had been propped open, so Selah slipped right in, collapsing her parasol and rolling up her veil. She caught some eyes—whether they were more curious about the color of her skin or the quality of her dress, she couldn’t say. The juxtaposition of both, probably. She was not turned away, but the waiter seated her at a table tucked in the back of the cafe. She could kill for something iced, but sure they’d charge

exorbitantly for such a luxury, even if they had it. “Coffee please,” she requested, and it was brought without fuss.

She read Chesnut’s *House Behind the Cedars* while her beverage cooled. Most of the other patrons turned their attention back to themselves, but Selah felt an unwavering gaze; a sense she’d come to know intimately in her time. Her whole profession hinged on captivating people’s attention. She had to know when she had it and when she did not. *Look at me, see me, know me, be enchanted by me.* In the early days, she had relished it, to be noticed, to be seen with eyes that lost themselves. But now, here, she just wanted to go unnoticed. She resisted looking up, searching for the eyes in the room. Until a shadow fell across her table.

Two young ladies dressed in lavender and peach ensembles hovered like excited bumblebees. “It *is* you,” said the one in lavender.

“We’ve seen you four times in Denver,” said Peach.

“You are so *entrancing* on stage,” said Lavender. “So many people always try to get to you after the show—”

“We thought we’d never get to meet you face-to-face.”

If only they knew just how many more her crowds used to swell. The Denver crowds these days were a pittance in comparison. Selah smiled graciously. The smile she had practiced and perfected in the thirty-four years of her life. *Always let them see you smiling. Never show you’re unimpressed, underwhelmed, inconvenienced, or utterly misanthropic.* The excitement of these two girls drew the attention of the other guests, who began to whisper to each other, leaning to get a glimpse, no doubt wondering if they could recognize her too. Selah assessed the faces for any recognition on her end; she couldn’t be sure. People changed so much sometimes. She needed to get these girls on their way and she on hers before anyone else came forward.

“Oh, you are absolutely stunning up close!” squealed Lavender. “I wouldn’t have thought your eyes would be so light. What color would you say they were?” She asked her companion.

“Honey,” answered Peach. “Deep, golden honey.”

“Oh and the way you sing your tale about Egypt, about what...*happened* to you—”

Lavender’s eyes flicked to Selah’s covered legs. “It nearly brings me to tears every time.” Were they aware she was not really Egyptian? She had never seen Egypt. The true story of the scars on her body bore had nothing to do with a pagan ritual. Her persona had been made up for the sake of story. Selah doubted the two girls had clocked the fabrication. Verity was not generally at the forefront of her audience’s mind. They wanted the facade, the sensational.

“And the way you dance, how those gowns flow!” Peace said, her voice low. The pair released a sighing giggle, and Selah understood why. The costumes she wore as Hadaji the Enchantress would be considered improper—*risqué* even—out of context. But Selah’s alter ego was an exotic beauty, an ignorant pagan, thus her thin, flowing attire could be justified as anthropological.

“If only we could be half as exotic and enchanting as you,” said Lavender, and Selah felt for their wish, for both were rather plain. How could she tell them she envied their innocuousness.

They buzzed with anticipation waiting for her response. “And,” Selah said, measured, even. “What brings you ladies to Cheyenne?”

“We’re here for the summer,” said Peach, nearly bursting.

“We’re away in Denver during the year.”

They made no move to leave and fiddled with items tucked into their hands. “Have you a token you’d like autographed?” Selah asked.

The girls smiled broadly, a boon to their plainness, and presented her with a ticket stub and a flier from their last attendance. The flier captured the likeness of Selah's alter ego, complete in thickly lined eyes and demure gaze. She might have thought it silly they'd carry such trinkets on their person for so long if she wasn't didn't carry a pen with her for occasions such as this. She never imagined she'd have need of it in Cheyenne. She had avoided the city with intention, even though the opera house and reach out to her company several times. She had lied to her manager and said she could not return to Cheyenne for fear of crossing paths with a violent past lover. He had been privy to a few of her past lovers, violent and not, and agreed he would only make her get as close as Laramie.

Selah extracted her pen and scrawled her stage name on their commemorative goods. The girls left and no sooner had they parted, the waiter approached. "We've noticed you're trying to read, Miss," he said. "If we had known you had intended to do so, we would have seated you nearer the window for better light. If you would prefer—"

"Thank you, but I have finished my coffee and now wish to leave."

The waiter's face slipped just a second. "Well, yes Miss. And do visit again. We shall have a perfect table at your service."

Selah had no intention of returning. "I shall keep your gracious offer under consideration." She gathered her things and made for the door, the patrons watching as she walked by. At the door, Selah stepped aside to make room for a plainly-dressed woman about her own age. They locked eyes. Skin flushing and stomach dropped, Selah sharply turned face, but it was already too late.