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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

PART ONE

When lovely woman stoops to folly, she can always find someone to stoop with her but not always someone to lift her up again to the level where she belongs.

– 'MR GRUNDY' FOR *Atlantic Monthly*, 1920

It excited him, too, that many men had already loved Daisy – it increased her value in his eyes.

– F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *The Great Gatsby*, 1925

There is no Garbo! There is no Dietrich! There is only Louise Brooks!

– HENRI LANGLOIS, 1955

One

The first time Cora heard the name Louise Brooks, she was parked outside the Wichita Library in a Model-T Ford, waiting for the rain to stop. If Cora had been alone, unencumbered, she might have made a dash across the lawn and up the library's stone steps, but she and her friend Viola Hammond had spent the morning going door-to-door in their neighborhood, collecting books for the new children's room, and the considerable fruits of their efforts were safe and dry in four crates in the backseat. The storm, they decided, would be a short one, and they couldn't risk the books getting wet.

And really, Cora thought, staring out into the rain, it wasn't as if she had anything else to do. Her boys were already gone for the summer, both of them working on a farm outside Winfield. In the fall, they would leave for college. Cora was still getting used to the quiet, and also the freedom, of this new era of her life. Now, long after Della left for the day, the house stayed clean, with no muddy footprints on the floor, and no records scattered around the phonograph. There were no squabbles over the car to mediate, no tennis matches at the club to cheer on, and no assigned essays to proofread and commend. The pantry and icebox actually stayed stocked with food without daily trips to the store. Today, with Alan at work, she had no reason to rush home at all.

'I'm glad we took your car and not ours,' Viola said, adjusting her hat, which was pretty, a puffed turban with an ostrich feather curling down from the crown. 'People say closed cars are a luxury, but not on a day like this.'

Cora gave her what she hoped was a modest smile. Not only was the car covered, it had come with an electric starter. *Cranking cars, no business for a lady*, was how the ad went, though Alan had admitted he didn't miss cranking, either.

Viola turned, eyeing the books in the backseat. 'People were generous,' she allowed. Viola was a decade older than Cora, her hair already gray at the temples, and she spoke with the authority of her added years. 'Mostly. You notice Myra Brooks didn't even open her door.'

Cora hadn't noticed. She'd been working the other side of the street. 'Maybe she wasn't home.'

'I heard the piano.' Viola's eyes slid toward Cora. 'She didn't bother to stop playing when I knocked. I have to say, she's very good.'

Lightning shot across the western sky, and though both women flinched, Cora, without thinking, smiled. She'd always loved these late-spring storms. They came on so fast, rolling in from the prairie on expanding columns of clouds, a welcome release from the day's building heat. An hour before, when Cora and Viola were canvassing, the sun was hot in a blue sky. Now rain fell fast enough to slice green leaves from the big oak outside the library. The lilacs trembled and tossed.

'Don't you think she's a tiresome snob?'

Cora hesitated. She didn't like to gossip, but she could hardly count Myra Brooks as a friend. And they'd been to

how many suffrage meetings together? Had marched together in the street? Yet if she passed Myra today on Douglas Avenue, Cora wouldn't get so much as a hello. Still, she never got the feeling that it was snobbery as much as Myra simply not registering her existence, and there was a chance it was nothing personal. Myra Brooks didn't seem to look at anyone, Cora had noticed, not unless she was the one speaking, watching for the impression she made. And yet, of course, everyone looked at her. She was, perhaps, the most beautiful woman Cora had ever seen in person: she had pale skin, flawless, and large, dark eyes, and then all that thick, dark hair. She was certainly a talented speaker – her voice was never shrill, and her enunciations were clear. But everyone knew it was Myra's looks that had made her a particularly good spokeswoman for the Movement, a nice antidote to the newspapers' idea of what a suffragist looked like. And you could tell she was intelligent, cultured. She was supposed to know everything about music, the works of all the famous composers. She certainly knew how to charm. Once, when she was at the podium, she had looked down at Cora, right into her eyes, and smiled as if they were friends.

'I don't really know her,' Cora said. She looked back out through the blurred windshield, at people ducking out from a streetcar, running for cover. Alan had taken a streetcar to work, so she could have the Ford.

'Then I'll inform you. Myra Brooks is a tiresome snob.' Viola turned to Cora with a little smile, the ostrich plume grazing her chin. 'I'll give you the latest example: she just sent a note to the secretary of our club. Apparently, Madame Brooks is looking for someone to accompany

one of her daughters to New York this summer. The older one, Louise, got into some prestigious dance school there, but she's only fifteen. Myra actually wants one of *us* to go with her. For over a month!' Viola seemed pleasantly outraged, her cheeks rosy, her eyes bright. 'I mean, really! I don't know what she's thinking. That we're the help? That one of us will be her Irish nanny?' She frowned and shook her head. 'Most of us have progressive husbands, but I can't imagine any one of them would spare a wife for over a month so she could go to New York City, of all places. Myra herself is too busy to go. She has to lie around the house and play the piano.'

Cora pursed her lips. *New York*. She felt the old ache right away. 'Well. I suppose she has other children to look after.'

'Oh, she does, but that's not it. She doesn't take care of them. They're motherless, those children. Poor Louise goes to Sunday school by herself. The instructor is Edward Vincent, and he picks her up and takes her home every Sunday. I heard that right from his wife. Myra and Leonard are alleged Presbyterians, but you never see them at church, do you? They're too sophisticated, you see. They don't make the other children go, either.'

'That speaks well of the daughter, that she makes the effort to go on her own.' Cora cocked her head. 'I wonder if I've ever seen her.'

'Louise? Oh, you would remember. She doesn't look like anyone else. Her hair is black like Myra's, but perfectly straight like an Oriental's, and she wears it in a Buster Brown.' Viola gestured just below her ears. 'She didn't bob it. She had it cut like that when they moved here years

ago. It's too short and severe, a horrible look, in my opinion, not feminine at all. But even so, I have to say, she's a very pretty girl. Prettier than her mother.' She smiled, leaning back in her seat. 'There's some justice in that, I think.'

Cora tried to picture this black-haired girl, more beautiful than her beautiful mother. Her gloved hand moved to the back of her own hair, which was dark, but not remarkably so. It certainly wasn't perfectly straight, though it looked presentable, she hoped, pinned up under her straw hat. Cora had been told she had a kind, pleasant face, and that she was lucky to have good teeth. But that had never added up to striking beauty. And now she was thirty-six.

'My own girls are threatening to cut their hair,' Viola said with a sigh. 'Foolish. This bobbing business is just a craze. When it's over, everyone who followed the lemmings over the cliff will need years to grow their hair out. A lot of people won't hire girls with bobbed hair. I try to warn them, but they won't listen. They just laugh at me. And they have their own language, their own secret code for them and their friends. Do you know what Ethel called me the other day? She called me a *wurp*. That's not a real word. But when I tell them that, they laugh.'

'They're just trying to rattle you,' Cora said with a smile. 'And I'm sure they won't really bob their hair.' Really, it seemed unlikely. The magazines were full of short-haired girls, but in Wichita, bobs were still a rarity. 'I do think it looks good on some girls,' Cora said shyly. 'Short hair, I mean. And it must feel cooler, and lighter. Just think – you could throw all your hairpins away.'

Viola looked at her, eyebrows raised.

'Don't worry. I won't do it.' Cora again touched the back of her neck. 'I might if I were younger.'

The rain was coming down faster, rapping hard on the roof of the car.

Viola crossed her arms. 'Well, if my girls do cut their hair, I can tell you now, it won't be so they can throw away hairpins. They'll do it to be provocative. To *look* provocative. That's what passes for fashion these days. That's what young people are all about now.' She sounded suddenly stricken, more confused than indignant. 'I don't understand it, Cora. I raised them to have propriety. But both of them are suddenly obsessed with showing the world their knees. They roll their skirts up after they leave the house. I can tell by the waistbands. I know they defy me. They roll their stockings down, too.' She gazed out into the rain, lines branching beneath her eyes. 'What I don't know is why, what's going on in their little heads, why they don't care about the message they're sending. When I was young, I never felt the need to show the general public my knees.' She shook her head. 'Those two cause me more grief than all four of my boys. I envy you, Cora. You're lucky to only have sons.'

Maybe, Cora thought. She did love the very maleness of the twins, their robust health and confidence, their practical taste in clothing, their easy reconciliations after heated quarrels. Earle was smaller and quieter than Howard, but even he seemed capable of forgetting all worries when he held a racquet or a bat. She loved that they had both wanted to work on a farm, seeing it as an adventure in country living and physical labor, though she

also worried they had no idea how much labor they'd signed on for. And she knew she *had* been lucky with her sons, and not just in the way that Viola meant. The Hendersons next door had a son just four years older than the twins, but those few years had made all the difference – Stuart Henderson had been killed in early 1918, fighting in France. Four years later, Cora was still stunned. For her, Stuart Henderson would always be a gangly adolescent, smiling and waving from his bike at her own boys, who were small then, still in short pants. Really, being lucky with sons seemed a matter of timing.

But whatever Viola said, Cora thought she might have fared just as well with daughters. She would have been good with girls, perhaps, using the right combination of instruction and understanding. Maybe Viola was just going about it the wrong way.

'I'm telling you, Cora. Something is wrong with this new generation. They don't care about anything important. When we were young, we wanted the vote. We wanted social reform. Girls today just want to . . . walk around practically naked so they can be stared at. It's as if they have no other calling.'

Cora could hardly disagree. It really was shocking, how much skin girls were showing these days. And she wasn't some old prude or Mrs Grundy; she was fairly sure she wasn't a *wurp*, though she didn't know what that meant, either. Cora had been pleased when the hemlines moved up to nine inches from the ankle. Some leg showed, true, but that change seemed sensible: no more skirts trailing in the mud and bringing typhoid or who knows what into the house. And calf length was far preferable to the ridiculous

hobble skirts that she herself had stumbled around in, all for the sake of fashion, not so long ago. Still, girls were now sporting skirts so short that their knees showed every time the wind blew, and there was no practical reason for that. Viola was right: a girl who wore a skirt that short just wanted to be looked at, and looked at *in that way*. Cora had even seen a few women her own age showing their knees, right here in Wichita, and really, in her opinion, these half-naked matrons looked especially vulgar.

Viola looked at her brightly. 'That's one of the reasons I'm joining the Klan.'

Cora turned. 'What?'

'The Klan. Ku Klux. They sent a representative to the club last week. I wish you would have been there, Cora. They're very interested in women joining up, holding positions.'

'I'm sure they are,' Cora murmured. 'We vote.'

'Don't be a cynic. They were much more specific than that. They know that there are serious women's issues at hand, and that women need to be in the fight.' The ostrich feather bobbed as she spoke. 'They're against all this modernization, all these outside influences on our youth. They're interested in racial purity, of course, but they're just as interested in teaching personal purity for young women. We do need to keep our race pure, and Good Lord, we need to keep it going. My brother-in-law says a veritable takeover is coming, and it's all being planned in the basement of the Vatican. That's the real reason Catholics have so many children, you know, and meanwhile, our people have one or two or none at . . .'

Viola trailed off. She rolled her lips in. It took Cora a moment to understand.

'I'm sorry,' Viola said. 'I didn't mean you. Your situation is different.'

Cora waved her off. The twins were what she had. But both she and Viola were silent for a while, and there was only the tapping rain.

'In any case,' Viola said finally, 'I think it would be good for the girls. Good, moral people to mix with.'

Cora swallowed, feeling short of breath. She had been wearing a corset day in, day out, for so many years that she rarely registered it as a discomfort. It seemed a part of her body. But in moments of distress, such as now, she was aware of her constricted rib cage. She would have to choose her words carefully. She could not come across as personally concerned.

'I don't know,' she said, her voice breezy, not betraying her in any way. 'Oh, Viola. The Klan? They wear those white gowns, those hoods with the spooky eyeholes.' She fluttered her gloved hands. 'And they have wizards and grand wizards, and bonfires.' Even as she smiled, she glanced into Viola's small blue eyes, analyzing what she saw there. She had to consider her options, her best route to success. Viola was older, but Cora was richer. She would capitalize on that.

'It just seems a little . . . common.' She shrugged, apologetic.

Viola cocked her head. 'But lots of people are –'

'Exactly.' Cora smiled again. She had chosen the right word, precisely. It was as if they were shopping at the

Innes Department Store together, and Cora had shown disdain for an ugly china pattern. She already knew, with certainty, Viola would reconsider.

When the rain let up, they slid out and carried the crates in, side-stepping puddles, each woman making two trips. Inside, waiting for the librarian, they chatted about other things. They flipped through a pristine copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, and smiled at the illustrations. They stopped at the Lassen Hotel for tea, and then Cora drove Viola home.

So many years later, this easy ride home with Viola would be the part of the story where Cora, in the telling, would momentarily lose the regard of a grandniece she adored. This grandniece, who at seventeen, incidentally, wore her hair much longer than her mother preferred, would be frustrated to the point of tears that in 1961 she was not yet old enough to join the freedom riders in the South. She often admonished Cora for using the word 'colored', but she generally showed her more patience than she did her own parents, understanding that her aunt Cora was not a hateful person, just an old woman with tainted language.

But that patience was tested when she heard about Viola. Cora's grandniece couldn't comprehend why her great-aunt would remain friends with a woman who even *considered* being part of the Klan. Did she not know what they did to people? Her grandniece would look at Cora with scorn, and with forsaken, teary eyes. Had she been unaware of their cowardly crimes? Their murders of innocent people?

Yes, Cora would say, but in the end, Viola never joined. Only because she was a snob, her grandniece would counter. Not because the Klan was repugnant. It was a different time, was all Cora could say, defending her old friend, who would be long since dead by then. (Cancer. She'd started smoking after her daughters picked it up.) Consider the numbers, Cora would try. That rainy day with Viola was in the summer of 1922, when the Klan was six thousand strong in the city limits – and Wichita only held maybe eighty thousand souls in total. That wasn't unusual for the time. The Klan was growing in many towns, in many states. Were people just stupider then? Meaner? Maybe, Cora allowed. But it was foolish to assume that had you lived in that time, you wouldn't be guilty of the same ignorance, unable to reason your way out. Cora herself had only escaped that particular stupidity because of her special circumstance. Other confusions had held her longer.

There's plenty of stupidity now, the grandniece said, and I know it for what it is. True, Cora conceded, and I'm proud of you for that. But maybe there's some more, and you don't know it's there. Do you know what I'm saying? Honey? To someone who grows up by the stockyards, that smell just smells like air. You don't know what a younger person might someday think of you, and whatever stench we still breathe in without noticing. Listen to me, honey. Please. I'm old now, and this is something I've learned.

After she dropped Viola off, Cora drove back downtown and parked on Douglas, just outside Alan's office. No one looked twice at her as she climbed down from the car. Just

two years earlier, one of the most discussed events of the annual Wheat Show was the Parade of Lady Drivers. Even then, the organizers had no trouble finding almost twenty women anxious to display their competence behind the wheels of various cars. Cora had driven the fifth car in the line, Alan sitting proudly beside her.

She had to push hard on the big door to his office, and when she finally managed to open it, she saw and felt why. The big window in the front room was open to the rain-cooled breeze, and a huge electric fan was pointed right at her. On her left, two girls she didn't know sat typing. Alan's secretary stood behind another desk, using both hands to turn the crank on a rotary duplicating machine. When she noticed Cora, she stopped.

'Oh, Mrs Carlisle! It's nice to see you!'

Cora was aware of a pause in the typing, the typists looking up, taking her in. She was not surprised by their scrutiny. Her husband was a handsome man. Cora smiled at the girls. Both were young, and one was pretty. Neither posed any threat.

'Let me tell him you're here,' his secretary said. She wore an ink-stained apron over her dress.

'Oh no,' Cora said, glancing at her watch. 'Please don't bother him. It's almost five. I'll just wait.'

But the door to Alan's office opened. He stuck his head out and smiled. 'Darling! I thought I heard your voice. What a lovely surprise!'

He was already walking toward her, arms outstretched, a sight to behold, really, tall and trim in his three-piece suit. He was twelve years older than Cora, but his dark brown hair was still full. She glanced at the typists just

long enough to see she had their full attention, as if she were the heroine in a silent film. Alan leaned down to kiss her cheek, smelling faintly of a cigar. She thought she heard someone sigh.

'You're damp,' he said, using two fingers to touch the brim of her hat. His tone was lightly scolding.

'It's just sprinkling now, but it might start up again.' She spoke in a low voice. 'I stopped by to see if you wanted a ride home. I didn't mean to interrupt.'

It was no bother, he assured her. He introduced her to the typists, praising their skills even as he gently steered her back to his office, his hand on the back of her waist. There were some fellows he wanted her to meet, he said, some new clients from the oil and gas company. Three men stood when she entered, and she greeted them all politely, trying to memorize faces and names. They were pleased to meet her, one said: her husband had spoken so highly of her. Cora feigned surprise, her smile so practiced it seemed real.

And then it was five o'clock, time to go. Alan shook hands with the men, put on his hat, took his umbrella from the stand, and jokingly apologized for having to catch his ride home in a hurry. The men smiled at him, at her. Someone suggested a future get-together. His wife could call Cora to see what would be a good evening. 'That would be lovely,' she said.

When they got outside, the rain had indeed grown more serious. He offered to bring the car around to the front, but she insisted she would be fine if he shared his umbrella. They ran to the car together, huddled close, heads lowered. He held open her door and gave her his

arm as she climbed up into the passenger seat, his umbrella over her head until she was safe inside.

In the car, they were still friendly, though the air between them was always different when they were alone. She told him about the library and the children's room, and he congratulated her on her good deed. She said she hadn't been home for most of the day. She would have to warm up some soup for supper, but she had been to the market, and she could make a good salad, and there was bread. A light supper would be fine with him, he said. It wasn't the same, sitting down for a big meal now that the boys were gone, and yet they better get used to it. If they had a quick meal, he added, the two of them could go to a movie later, and see whatever was playing. Cora agreed, pleased with the idea. Hers was the only husband she knew of who would go see anything with her, who had actually sat through *The Sheik* without rolling his eyes at Valentino. She was lucky in that way. She was lucky in many ways.

Still, she cleared her throat.

'Alan. Do you know Leonard Brooks?'

She waited for his nod, though she already knew the answer. Alan knew all the other lawyers in town.

'Well,' she said, 'his eldest daughter got into a dance school in New York. He and his wife would like a married woman to chaperone her. For the month of July, and some of August.' She rubbed her lips together. 'I think I'll go.'

She glanced at him only briefly, seeing his surprise, before she turned back to her window. They were already close to home, moving down the tree-lined streets, past their neighbors' pretty houses and neat lawns. There was

much that she would miss while she was away: club meetings and ladies' teas, the summer picnic in the Flint Hills. She would likely miss the birth of a friend's fourth child, which was unfortunate, as she was to be the child's godmother. She would miss her friends, and of course, she would miss Alan. And these familiar streets. But her world would still be here when she returned, and this was her chance to go.

Alan was silent until he pulled in front of the house. When he did speak, his voice was quiet, careful. 'When did you decide this?'

'Today.' She took off her glove and touched a fingertip to the glass, tracing a raindrop's path. 'Don't worry. I'll come back. It's just a little adventure. It's like the twins, going to the farm. I'll be back before they leave for school.'

She looked up at the house, lovely even in the rain, though far too big for them. It was a house built – and bought – for a large family, but given the way things turned out, they'd never used the third floor for anything but a playroom, and then for storage. Still, even now that the twins had moved out, neither she nor Alan wanted to sell. They both still loved the quiet neighborhood, and they loved the house, how majestic it looked from the street with its wraparound porch and pointed turret. They reasoned that it would be nice for the twins to be able to come home to a familiar place. They'd kept their rooms as the boys had left them, their beds made, their old books on the shelves, the better to lure them home for summers and holiday breaks.

'New York City?' Alan asked.

She nodded.

'Any reason in particular you want to go there?'

She turned, taking in his warm eyes, his cleft, clean-shaven chin. She had been just a girl when she first saw his face. Nineteen years they had lived together. He knew the particular reason.

'I might do some digging,' she said.

'You're sure that's for the best?'

'I can speak with Della in the morning about coming in earlier, or staying later. Or both.' She smiled. 'If anything, you'll gain weight. She's a far better cook than I am.'

'Cora.' He shook his head. 'You know that's not what I'm asking.'

She turned away, her hand on the door. That was the end of the discussion. She'd made up her mind to go, and as they both understood very well, for them, that was all there was to it.