

Early version:

CHAPTER NINE: AUGUST 10, 1916

SIOUX CITY, IOWA

EARL rose from his chair to signal Emily as she entered the lobby of the Rutland Hotel, a woebegone four-story brick building at the intersection of Iowa and Fourth Streets, where he'd reserved a room. As he watched her walking briskly toward him, past the unmanned cigar stand stocked with no cigars, past a trio of milling, rough-whiskered men in sweat-stained hats and shapeless suits, and past a large brass spittoon and an enormous grandfather clock and a tall, dead fern standing sad and valiant in its pot, it seemed to Earl he was seeing an Emily he recognized, but who was also quite changed. There was something, a new vibrancy, coming off her.

The last time he'd seen her she was standing with him in a late-arriving rain, holding a closed umbrella, both of them wanting to imagine that the day could be washed away. And now here she was approaching, her beauty all afresh, in a royal-blue dress he remembered.

She reached him and they greeted one another awkwardly as she offered him her hand. Then they sat down in overstuffed chairs that showed similar stains, as if they'd been covered in the same extremely ugly fabric.

She said, "I trust your trip was easy."

"It was fine," Earl said. On the train from Waterloo, he'd looked out the window at the harvest-ready landscape and heard it, nagging as a shrew, asking him every few miles if he'd made up his mind.

She said, "The Illinois Central is usually quite reliable."

I trust . . . Usually quite reliable. Her words were as stiff as her posture in the chair, which told him she was as nervous as he was, and he felt the impulse to calm and reassure her. He didn't know what he might say, but he was pleased to feel this, and then he told himself he shouldn't be. There he was, caught again, wanting at the same time to draw her close and believing he needed to remember what she'd done.

He said, "It's the Land'o Corn Limited."

"What?"

"That's the name. The Land'o Corn Limited."

"Oh," Emily said. "I'd forgotten that, if I knew."

"Why do they call it the 'Limited'? Wouldn't it be better for business if they said *Unlimited*?"

He'd tried to make a joke to lighten things and he thought he couldn't possibly sound more stupid. But he saw that Emily was smiling and her smile didn't look false to him. Much broader than it usually was, but that was not the same as false.

He looked around the lobby. Its dimness had the quality of a sepia veneer. For the hours of the day when he wasn't playing baseball or fitfully sleeping, he'd been thinking about their seeing one another again, and yet he hadn't considered there would be a clumsy silence like the one now descending. As he'd imagined it, the two of them sitting together somewhere, just as they were now, Emily's sultry voice had been a calming, reassuring, uninterrupted sound. He badly needed one of them to speak and she didn't seem about to.

He cleared his throat. "How did you get here, from the farm?"

"I drove!" she said.

"You drove?"

"Daddy's taught me." She was suddenly lively, grateful as Earl saw her to have this to talk

about. She said her father had shown her how to set the spark and throttle, “He says I’ve got a safecracker’s touch,” and how to stand and position herself to turn the crank forcefully. She said it was true that no one knew the secrets of purchase and leverage as well as he did. “We started in the pasture so I wouldn’t run into anything. But I learned fast, if I might brag on myself just a little, and now I’m always looking for an excuse to drive here or into Hinton.” He watched her blush and she hurried to add, “I didn’t mean I thought of coming to see you as an excuse.”

“I didn’t think you did,” he said.

“Good,” she said, “because I didn’t.”

They continued in this way, cautious as litigants.

She said, “I was glad to get your letter and read that you were coming.” Her feeling certain he would had weakened as their days apart continued. She’d learned it’s what days do when you’re waiting, waiting – they follow each other, first one and then the next, as true as the tides and just as indifferent.

“I said I would,” Earl said.

“That you’d write to me, yes. But that’s all you promised.”

“Really? Is that right?”

She nodded. “That last day we talked, I was hoping you’d say you would be. Coming.”

“And I didn’t?”

“Say you would? No, you didn’t.” Again she smiled too broadly, her face like a mask whose expression was lighthearted.

Their silence returned, as awkward as before, and again they looked around at everything but one another. Emily had vowed she wouldn’t tell him how unhappy she’d been. She knew

she had no right to, and who would want to hear it, but as she sat in the very ugly chair and heard the air's beating quiet she was feeling greatly tempted to describe for him how she'd felt, what her life had been these weeks. *I walk around dropping things and bumping into things. I forget to eat. I feel like I'm watching myself from somewhere outside my body.*

There was no one else with whom she'd think to talk about it. Only Earl would know just how to hear her speaking of her mournful days. She had made him miserable and she'd made herself miserable too. The same person had caused them both the same despair and shouldn't that somehow join them, bond them, ally them more than ever? *Momma asks me if I'm ill, but of course she knows, the way she always does.* She looked down at the dark folds of her skirt and picked at lint that wasn't there. She knew the feelings rising in her would be words on her lips if she didn't say something else right now. *I lie awake and berate myself because I'm not brave enough to follow you.*

"You wrote that you wanted to come so we could talk."

Earl was flustered. From the moment he'd seen her entering the hotel, he'd been feeling what he wanted was to listen to *her* talk. "You go ahead."

She took a deep breath and once more scanned the lobby. She saw that the rough-whiskered men had moved to chairs near the hotel's darkly varnished double doors. All three of them were drinking from silver flasks that occasionally reflected, with winks of light, the sun shining through the large front windows. She heard their crude laughter, hacking, phlegmy, whiskey laughs, and she envied how little it mattered to them, the way they sounded to the world. She said, "I'm sorry if this sounds too . . . *rational*, but I've been trying to think things through every which way."

“Okay,” Earl said. *How like her*, he thought, *‘every which way.’ Weren’t there only two ways? With her or without her? Here, this life, or not?*

“That night, when you were so angry, telling me what Daddy said, I realized how much I’d been thinking about our future.”

Earl said, “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong with that, except, I hadn’t known how frightened I was.”

Earl’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Of what?”

Again she was studying the folds of her royal-blue skirt. “The uncertainty.”

“The uncertainty?”

She nodded slightly. “Where we’d be living year to year. How often you’d be gone. What work you could find when your season was finished if you couldn’t say for sure where we’d be the next year.” She lifted her eyes to see if he was paying attention as closely as she wanted him to be. It seemed he was. “I remember you saying you and Daddy at least agreed nothing in life was guaranteed. But *that* life. It seems to me . . . *so* full of risk.”

Earl shook his head. “He just said what he said to soften me up.”

She pressed her lips together. Knowing her father’s tactics, she thought Earl might be right. She lowered her eyes again. “I’ve been thinking these weeks, about us being married, and that we’d settle, eventually, into a day-to-dayness, a sameness.” Once more she looked up at Earl for his reaction. “I don’t know how long it would be before that happened, but I’m sure it would.”

“Why would that be so bad?”

“It wouldn’t! That’s what I’m saying. I’ve loved thinking of us that way.” She thought she saw his face become open for a moment. “What are *you* thinking?”

About her feeling fearful, uncertain of “that life”. It was so far from what he felt, he hadn’t dreamed she might be. And about their life together settling into a sameness, which, he had to say, sounded deeply, seriously wonderful. “Just, all of it,” he said.

She heard the rough-whiskered men once more. Their talk had softened. The sound of their voices drifting back was like a lowing. Emily heard it as theatrical, the chorus whispering its comments from the wings, and it moved her to say, “I’m beating around the bush.”

“What?”

“It sounds so selfish.”

“What does?”

“Never mind ‘sounds’. It *is* so selfish, and I hate myself for it. But –”

“Just say it, Emily.” He smiled; he couldn’t help it; he loved it when her earnestness made her sound a little scatter-brained. He sensed emotion moving in his chest as a breathing contradiction – the threat of his feelings turning solely into affection.

She said, “I’m afraid you’d give so much to baseball that . . . you couldn’t give *us* enough.” She couldn’t bring herself to say *give me*. But how many times over the past month had she thought of the day she’d watched from the grandstands and sensed, from the way his body moved, that he was someone who didn’t need her? One night she’d dreamed of a boy, tall and thin, climbing a massive oak, laughing melodically as if singing his abandon, finding footholds where there were none, climbing up and up, disappearing into the scalloped canopy, ignoring her pleas to be careful, to hold on, to go slowly, to climb down.

“You realize how much you’re asking?”

She nodded. “I watched you play, remember, and I listened to you talk –”

“I mean what you’re asking *yourself* to do. Sure, there’s what *I’d* be giving up, which is pretty much everything.” He saw the color leave her face. He was sorry to see how sharply this had stung her and surprised to recognize how much he’d wanted it to. He said, “Your idea that you could be satisfied here, which means you could make *me* satisfied, and *that* would mean I wouldn’t miss it.” Hearing himself, what he’d just described and the sequence necessary, he looked a little incredulous.

“You’d miss it terribly,” she said. “I know that. I’m talking about something else.”

“What then?”

“How much better a wife I’d be to you. Better here than there.” She added, almost shyly, “And a better mother too.”

Better here than there. The words sounded vague to him; as if she were trying to hurry past the hard facts of what she wanted for them. “Better here than there. Well, I know where ‘here’ is. Where’s ‘there’?”

Her smile was dolorous. “I don’t *know* where ‘there’ is. That’s what I mean, what I was trying to say. And neither do you. How *could* you?”

They both started as the heavy office door behind the registration desk banged open. Emily turned and peered around the side of her high-backed chair and Earl leaned forward in his to see two hotel clerks emerge and maneuver a large Victrola past the desk into the lobby. They were dressed in dark blue uniforms with fake brass buttons, and epaulettes that lay like long tongues on their shoulders. They looked like Gilbert and Sullivan commandants. They set the Victrola down on a walnut table in the middle of the room and stepped back and nodded to one another. One of them hurried back into the office while the other adjusted the Victrola’s giant-lily horn. He stepped forward, his little head was shaped

like a squirrel's, and loudly announced to Earl and Emily and the three rough-whiskered men up front, "Starting today, the Rutland is proud to feature Victrola recordings every afternoon in the lobby, from three o'clock in the p.m. until the dinner hour of six, compliments of the management."

There was silence and then one of the rough-whiskered men shouted, "They got no one to sell you a cigar, and they got no cigars to sell you if they did. But by God you can listen to the phonograph from three p.m to six!"

One of the other men shouted, "When word gets out, they'll be turning them away by the tens!" They all laughed their ragged, whiskey laughs.

The squirrel-headed clerk looked not a little frightened. He hurried back, around the desk, into the office and closed the door.

Earl and Emily traded uncomplicated grins. They were desperately glad they could agree on something safe.

She waited, then said, "I know you'll be losing something either way. Don't think I don't see that. And if you decide . . . if you decide you can't, my heart will break right in two. Snap! I'll feel something that emphatic happen inside me. I'm sure I will."

The two hotel clerks opened the office door again and, glancing to the front of the lobby, crept like burglars around the desk. The little squirrel-headed man was holding a stack of recordings. They moved toward the Victrola, watchful of the three rough-whiskered men, who'd gone silent again, their attentions turned to the vital business of their flasks.

The squirrel-headed clerk began cranking the Victrola while his partner swung the playing arm over and lowered the needle and after some bars of introduction a tenor voice began to sing "They Didn't Believe Me".

Emily watched the clerks as they retreated, then narrowed her eyes to take Earl in more sharply. His cowlick against the back of his chair looked to her like blades of new grass sprouting. Her voice when she continued was a stump orator's, pushing to be heard over the recording. "But I have to think at some point I'd start to heal. My heart would. With scars, deep ones. I can't imagine how long it would take."

She took a very deep breath and exhaled, sputtering air, as if she'd been holding it under water. She took another one that was as deep, and this time let it out quietly. "And so would you, heal. *Your* heart. I know it would." She looked at Earl. "That's assuming it would need to."

Earl watched her sit back in her chair and turn so that her gaze settled on the tall, dead fern. He hadn't realized he was tremulous, a tiny palsy all through him, until he saw that she was trembling slightly, too, and it showed him how much she'd risked just now.

The tenor sang that the woman he loved had chosen him from all those in the world she could have had.

He took advantage of her attention to the fern to look at her from head to toe, her lustrous hair to her soft black boots. He'd loved her and yearned for her and been badly wounded by her. He'd traveled here across the top of Iowa on the Land'o Corn Limited of the usually quite reliable Illinois Central line, listening to the hectoring landscape and banking on his belief that she would tell him, judicial as Solomon, what she thought was best for him no matter what it meant for her. But for the first time since he'd known her, she couldn't offer him clear advice. It was as if she were saying, candidly, *Look at me, my limitations. Here's what I can't do.* And saying, too, that she had faith in both their hearts; that they would heal. Much the worse for wear, scabbed and halting, they would heal.

An excitement ran through him. He didn't understand it but he felt strengthened even so.

She continued to avoid his eyes. He guessed she was thinking he was making his decision and her looking away was as near as she could get to leaving him alone to think things through. He imagined her staring at that God-awful fern for the rest of time unless he spoke to her.

She was thinking instead how to say she'd discovered this past month an essential thing about the world, at least the world she believed she could prosper in. It was her need to know its borders. And that a life of close horizons could be a chance, an invitation to grow and grow within them. This had come to feel like a thing that could be true, and not just an effort to put the best face on a failure. Which was the charge she'd made against herself when she'd first returned.

As she sat there, appearing to study the remarkable deadness of the fern, she couldn't imagine how she might put this to Earl. It was another of her theories, which she heard in her mind sounding hopelessly precious, and how to make it come to life for him, in some way that could help them?

The song had finished some time ago and the lobby was sounding with the static of the needle plowing the end grooves. Finally, the little squirrel-headed clerk emerged and came around from behind the registration desk and bent down to change the recording. Through the urgency of Emily's voice describing her heart going *snap!*, Earl had been aware of the song's insistent beat. And thinking, who couldn't dance at least passably to *that?*

"Wait," he said to the clerk.

"Sir?"

"Don't change it."

The clerk gave Earl a quick nod of approval, the gesture of a waiter telling you you've ordered well. He said, "'They Didn't Believe Me.' The most popular song in all of America in 1915." He cranked the crank and reset the needle and as he hurried away the song began again.

"Emily?"

She turned back to him, and he was startled by how beautiful she was. Through their idyllic summer this had often happened, his being freshly taken with her beauty when she turned her face to him. She was composed, no longer trembling. He saw that tears filmed her eyes and made them glisten, alive as stars in this grimy hotel lobby.

He reached for her hands, then stood, and she rose with him from her chair. He led her to the middle of the lobby where there was all the room they needed and she moved into his arms.

As they began to dance he asked, "Where were you?"

"When?"

"Just now. Before I said your name."

She only shook her head and asked him to hold her more tightly and they were silent, moving nearly in place, until she said into his chest, "At night, I love to stand on the porch and trace the constellations."

"Of course," Earl said.

"I always have."

"Who doesn't?"

"I'm no good at it. I can never trace the bull. I can never find the sword."

"What made you think of that?"

"I have to remember. To tell myself some things will still be there."

"I don't know you mean."

In a breathy echo of a voice, nostalgia already in it: "Things I've always loved to do . . . If you say, 'no', I can still stand on the porch and not find Taurus and Orion."

Earl nodded, his chin lightly brushing the top of her head. He looked to the front of the lobby where the three rough-whiskered men were passed out in their chairs. They were utterly still; their faces blank as legumes. Their chests rose and fell.

She lightly moved her hand back and forth over his shoulder blades. "That sounds truly odd, I know. Does it make *any* sense?"

"Yes," Earl said. "Truly, it oddly does." He was teasing her now, but he understood, for he'd reasoned in just this way himself. And hard as he'd tried, he hadn't been able to feel his life would be enough if he said, 'no' to what she wanted. When he put it that way to himself, it was what he wanted too.

His eyes went again to the comatose men. Their smiles were seraphic. They were babes in a nursery in need of baths and shaves. "They Didn't Believe Me" was a lullaby. He thought, *Why doesn't it do that to him, the booze?* He thought, *Why couldn't it turn him dumb and quiet? Or just quiet. Dumb, he doesn't need the booze.*

But, he considered, if it had, if it did, he, Earl, might have still been there. Or not have left in time to find her, their lives crossing as they had. He would not have been here, dancing with this woman who took solace in the thought of looking vainly for Orion.