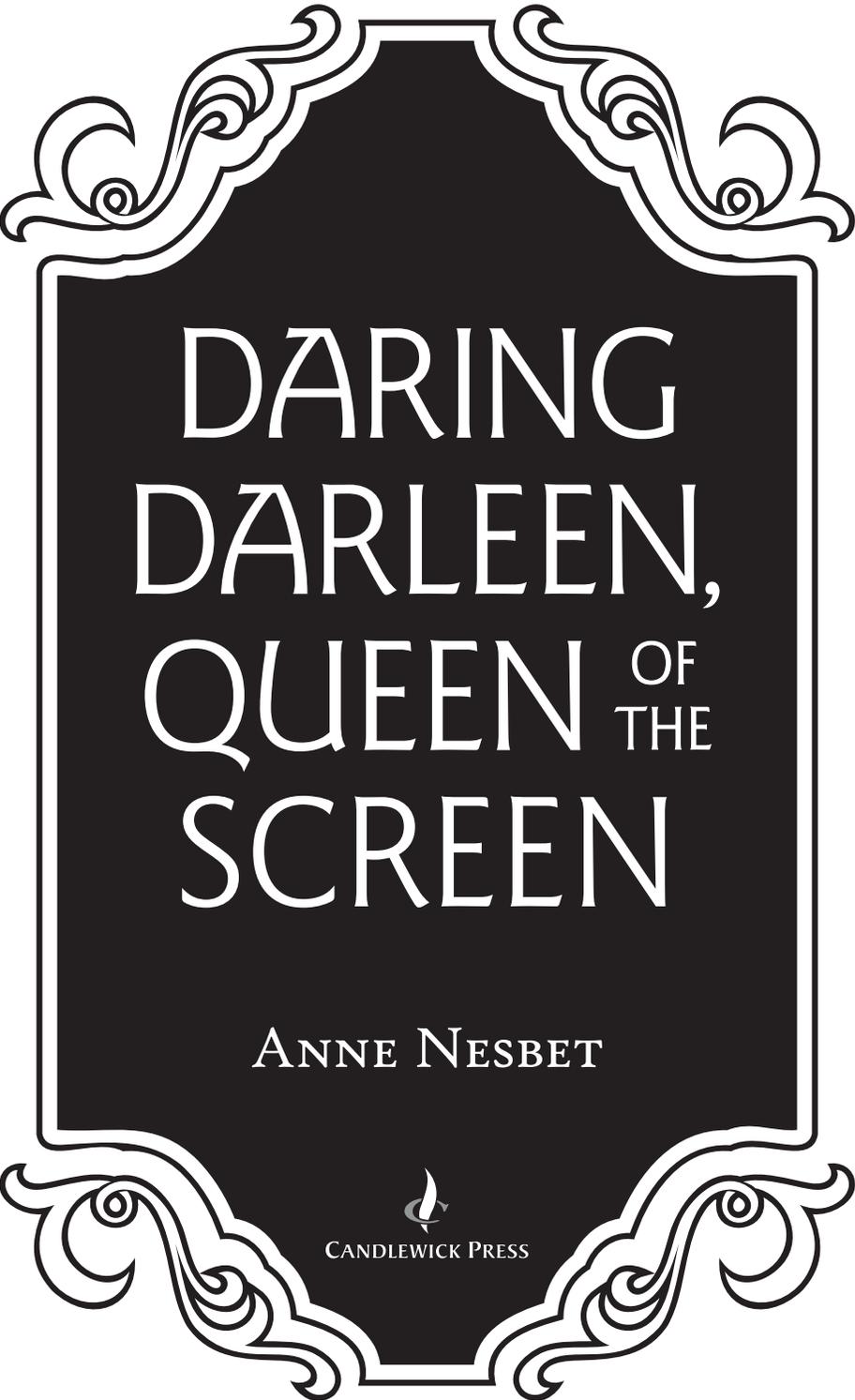




DARING
DARLEEN,
QUEEN OF
THE
SCREEN





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ANNE NESBET



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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For my friends who love their silent films
with a side of gelato





Chapter 1

Safe as Houses

Sometimes the real danger is not what you thought it would be at all. Real danger likes to curl itself up small and hide away just out of sight so that it can catch you by surprise.

Darleen had not yet had this insight at the time our story begins. She was busy dangling off the edge of a cliff, hundreds of feet above a wild river. What's more, her nose was prickling unpleasantly in the cold, and a masked villain was brandishing a knife and threatening to send her plummeting down into the churning waves below.

Under ordinary circumstances, that would be enough danger for anyone. But Darleen's circumstances were not in the least bit ordinary.

For instance: it was Darleen's own uncles who had just tied her up in those large and showy ropes and lowered her (feet first, thank goodness) right over the lip of the rocky cliffs, and while they did so, they had said incongruous things like "There you go, dear! Safe as houses!"

Safe as houses!

Perhaps not, thought Darleen.

She was twisting slightly as the rope shifted in the wind (not a pleasant feeling), so she kept catching glimpses of birds sailing above the shining river so very far below her dangling self, and then other glimpses, when the rope turned, of the crinkly rocks of the cliff only inches from her cold nose, and occasionally even third or fourth glimpses of redheaded Uncle Charlie with his megaphone, shouting directions from the out-jutting boulder where her Uncle Dan (whose hair was the color of his voice: a quiet brown) was cranking the little handle on the side of the great box on legs that was the moving-picture camera.

A camera makes everything it looks at un-ordinary! And yet Darleen had been doing something quite ordinary and everyday (for her) as she dangled from her rope: she had been worrying about her Papa.

Her Papa had made her a tasty bowl of oatmeal and jam that morning. "Strength for my chickee," he liked to say before long filming days. And he had tied a ribbon in her

hair with his clever, callused, loving hands. They had eaten their breakfast as they always did, seated at the scarred old table in the kitchen of their tiny house in Fort Lee, under the old photo of Papa and Mama and baby Darleen, all huddled together like birds in the happiest of nests, and her father had said what he always said before they went off to the Matchless studios, across the street (where once there had been cornfields, in Papa's farming years): "Feet on the ground, my darling Dar! Don't fly away!"

"Yes, Papa," she had promised, as she did every day. "Feet on the ground" was their family motto: Papa's heart had lost too much of itself already when Mama had flown away due to inflammation of the lungs.

Sometimes when Darleen was younger and shorter, she would pull a chair over to the kitchen wall and climb up to stare at that photograph of the Darlings taken so many years ago, in 1906 or 1907. The three of them were posed in front of scenery with palm trees painted on it, her Papa in a borrowed jacket and hat, her Mama in a stiff sort of dress, softened by bunches of lace around her throat, and a very happy, very small Darleen perched on a stool in front of them, holding on to her parents' hands. Darleen never spent much time staring at her younger self, who looked like a mound of ruffles topped off with an extra portion of light brown curls. It was the other two faces that called to her so: the one belonging to her

Papa, so young and so glad and so obviously trying *not to laugh* (because it would have blurred the photograph), and the face of her Mama, whose eyes were brimming with love and yet always seemed a little sad, too, as if she already knew that she would fly away one day and leave two hearts aching from the lack of her.

You would never think that the woman with the sad and loving eyes had once been a dancer on tightropes in the circus! But she had! She had been Loveliest Luna Lightfoot (that's what the old posters said, rolled up in the corner of the broom closet), and she had come down from those high places to marry Papa and become Darleen's dear Mama and try to grow roses around their little farmhouse in Fort Lee. She had done that out of love: kept her feet on the ground.

And now only Darleen was left to stay true to that promise, and to keep the wounded pieces of her father's heart bound carefully together.

But it occurred to her now that this current business of dangling from a cliff did not seem much at all like keeping her feet on the ground. She didn't mind on her own behalf—to be honest, Darleen was tired of everything in her life being always “safe as houses”—but suddenly she found herself thinking, What would Papa say when he saw the pictures emerging from the chemical vats in his laboratory that evening or tomorrow? This was Episode

Six of *The Dangers of Darleen*, and her father, truth be told, hadn't much cared for any part of Episodes One through Five. He didn't even like her walking on the tops of trains or jumping from car to car. And that had really, truly been safe as houses compared with dangling above the Hudson River.

"Not quite the quiet cottage life we dream of, Darleeny," he liked to say. "But we'll get there when the money's a little better. We'll retire you from danger and smell the roses all day. That's the thought I cling to, that all this awful jumping about you're doing is merely *temporary*."

What would he think about cliffs and rivers?

"Uncle Charlie," she called out, but of course her voice was swallowed up right away by the breeze.

"Darleen, dear! *Darleen!*" Uncle Charlie had the megaphone to help his voice be as loud as it could possibly be. "Less chitchat and a little more struggle, please! And a hint of a sawing action from you, Mr. Lukes."

Darleen made an obedient show of wriggling in her ropes. "But Uncle Charlie, what about my Papa?" she started again.

"Oh, can we just dump her in the river and be done with it?" said the masked villain from above Darleen's head. That Jasper Lukes! He could be trusted to come up with something awful to say whether or not he was

playing the part of a villain. At the moment, Jasper Lukes was peering over the edge of the cliff and waving his dagger about for the camera. “Crying for her Papa! You know, this morning I woke up with a fine question in my head. Want to know what it was?”

“No, I do not,” said Darleen, gritting her teeth.

Darleen’s uncles had been looking after Jasper Lukes for years, ever since his no-good parents had tiptoed away. The Lukeses and the Darlings had been theater people together long ago, but then came the catastrophes, one after the other in quick succession, short scenes that belonged in a tragic melodrama with (joked Uncle Charlie—but poor Papa couldn’t even joke about it) a one-word title:

CURTAINS!

ACT ONE: The curtains catch fire one night! The Darlings’ theater, the Golden Bird, burns to the ground!

ACT TWO: But wait! The theater was insured! There is hope! The Golden Bird, phoenix-like, will be rebuilt and rise again!

ACT THREE: And then one morning, Mr. Lukes (father of Jasper) and the cashbox turn out to be missing. The insurance money—all the hope—as gone as gone!

EPILOGUE: Oh, there was much weeping and lamenting, especially by the actress who had wandered into town to take on the role of Mrs. Lukes a few years before and who was left behind with a golden-haired baby (Jasper) in her arms. She wept and lamented for a while — at least when she had an audience — and the Darlings tried to console her, and then one day she received a mysterious letter, addressed in handwriting oddly like that of old Lukes, and off she went, leaving young Jasper behind to be raised by the Darlings as best they could.

Perhaps it was understandable that a boy abandoned by two parents in a row might have a chip on his shoulder, but Jasper Lukes seemed to go out of his way to be mean. You wouldn't think so to look at him: with his golden hair and uniquely pointy little ears, Jasper Lukes, even now at seventeen, was “a faerie prince pulled right from a storybook picture.” That was Aunt Shirley's opinion but definitely not Darleen's. Aunt Shirley hadn't spent her whole childhood being teased, tripped, and tormented. Five years older than Dar, and he had never yet grown out of his basic meanness. Darleen's secret theory was that Jasper Lukes's heart must be as small and pointy as his ears.

At some point in childhood, golden-haired Jasper Lukes had scrambled right onto the stage and then, once the age of the moving pictures arrived, into the photo-plays. And still it seemed like he never missed a chance to poke a sharp word into Darleen's side.

"Well, I'll tell you, then," said Jasper Lukes now with a sneer. "The question was 'Why am I still playing second fiddle to this stupid little girl who can't even act?' Ooh, and look at this!" he added. "This fake blade has an actual edge on it after all!"

And he began to saw away at the rope for real.

He was trying to scare her now, of course, but all she felt was fury.

"Stop that, you!" she said to him, and her angry hands accidentally started working themselves out of the rope coils.

"LOOKS GOOD THERE, JASPER," bellowed the oblivious Uncle Charlie through his megaphone. "We'll add a close-in shot of the knife and rope later. But Darleen, could you give us MORE DRAMA, please? No need to dangle there like a grumpy sugar sack on a rope! Dangle like the Crown Princess Dahlia Louise of St. Benoix. Dangle like a princess posing as Daring Darleen!"

Because *that* was the story in the motion pictures they were making. A princess in disguise was brought to America by her exiled Royal Father, but trouble followed

them — oh, yes, it did! And the poor princess’s tragic circumstances had turned her (by Episode Two or Three) into the bravest of heroines, known across America as Daring Darleen.

That was one thing the real-life Darleen Darling and the fictional Crown Princess Dahlia Louise had in common: they both had to pretend to be Daring Darleen. The princess (being fictional) perhaps had a slightly easier time of it, thought Darleen as she dangled from her rope and listened to the venomous nonsense coming from Jasper Lukes above.

“Saint *Benoyks!*” Jasper was saying now. Darleen didn’t like it when he made fun of the way Uncle Charlie spoke. Jasper’s mother had had a fancified way of speaking, apparently, and Jasper had spent all these years waiting for his superior parents to come rescue him from the inferior Darlings.

Ben-wa or *Ben-oyks* — who cared? It wasn’t like the camera could hear what any of them might be saying. But that also meant Jasper Lukes could say whatever nasty things he wanted, because the camera could only see, not hear, and the uncles, who did have ears, were too far away to hear exactly what he was saying.

Uncle Dan cranked steadily, and sixteen times every second a little rectangle of film paused just long enough in front of the lens to have one frame’s worth of reflected

light hit it. It was “the picture leaving its fingerprint,” said Uncle Charlie, who had his poetical side, “leaving its fingerprint, over and over and over again.”

Jasper kept sawing away like the villain he was.

“Jasper, you’d better be careful with that knife!” Darleen said.

“Oh, is our Darleen scared?” said Jasper, and he paused from his sawing to give the knife a jaunty twirl. “Well, then, maybe you should thank me, don’t you think? Since maybe this will improve your performance. Your uncle’s right, you know: you’re just a tiresome sack of sugar on a rope, and that’s all you’ve ever been. I’m sure we’ve all had just about enough of Darling Darleen. I know I have.”

“I’m not *darling*,” said Darleen through her teeth, “not anymore,” but still she flinched a little. Did he think it had been easy, being dumped into a flour barrel at the age of six? Or spreading strawberry jam all over her face? Or tucking four squirmy kittens into a cradle? And having to do all those things under the constant instructions of a director, a cameraman, grown-up actors, and all the rest of an exceedingly theatrical (and bossy) family? But it wasn’t anything to be ashamed of, she knew. Those *Darling Darleen* pictures had saved the studio. They had! Money came rolling in; the cashbox was happy again. The Matchless studios grew and expanded. That was worth a lot of silliness with strawberry jam.

Anyway, she hadn't been Darling Darleen for ages now. Expanding the new studio had put them back into debt, and Darleen was too big now to be properly darling. What to do, then, to bring in some money again? Chases, plunges, trains, and villains—that's what the public wanted these days. The year 1914 would surely go down in history (said all the uncles) as the age of the adventure serial: a new episode every week, and tension galore! So Darleen had lost her *l*—she'd gone right from *Darling* to *Daring*—and everyone at Matchless was hoping that the people who came to watch the photoplays week after week would be happy with the change, even if her Papa was going gray from worry.

“Say whatever you want, *Darling Darleen*; we all know the truth,” said the unpleasant Jasper Lukes, still working away with his knife. Darleen could see some of the little strands springing up like little stalks of hay where the blade had already sliced them in half. “You'll never amount to anything, really. You're not an *actress*—not really—you're just *pretending* to act. And what's more . . .”

Pretending to act! thought Darleen. What did that even mean? Of course she was pretending to act. Wasn't that what acting was all about? That was her job!

But meanwhile, Jasper Lukes was actually sawing away at the actual rope.

“Jasper, stop! Uncle Charlie! THE ROPE!” Darleen shouted, wishing she had the megaphone in one of her now-almost-freed-up hands. Uncle Charlie waved encouragingly.

“And what’s more,” said Jasper Lukes again. “What’s more, I tell you, I’m better than all of this. When my parents come back—”

And then they were interrupted by a noise that seemed out of place: the engine of a motorcar that was driving (or so it sounded) almost right up to the edge of the cliff. Darleen’s eyes were naturally fixed on that wounded stretch of rope above her. She had her hands completely loose now, and she began to kick her feet free of the coils.

The door of the motorcar slammed shut. Darleen could hear what sounded like steps—heavy, quick, excited steps—punctuated by shouts. Aunt Shirley, business manager of Matchless studios, was saying something about . . . the newspaper?

“Now, Shirley,” said Uncle Charlie, but the rope had twisted again, so he was out of Darleen’s limited vision. “Can’t you see this is a delicate moment? Keep cranking, Dan!”

Aunt Shirley’s laugh fell on Darleen’s ears like a jagged waterfall, pouring right over the edge of that cliff. Aunt Shirley had never had any respect for delicate moments. She was always exploding onto photoplay sets, bearing

news of one kind or another or asking how much that last shipment of film stock had cost.

“It’s lunchtime. Aren’t you people done yet? We’re in the newspaper! Oh, look at you hanging there, Darleen! My goodness, that’s almost too exciting! But is it quite safe, with just that rickety platform underneath you? And, oh, Jasper Lukes, watch what you’re doing with that knife!”

That was when everything happened, more or less all at once.

Jasper Lukes stood up in disgust and said, “You know what? I’ve had enough of you all. I should up and quit! See how you’d like *that!*” And just to add drama to the point he was making, he tossed his knife (the pretend knife with the very real edge) over the cliff, where it swooshed by Darleen’s almost-frozen nose and banged onto the safety platform below.

Jasper Lukes was always threatening to quit and then breaking things. That was irritating, but usually mendable.

The problem this time was that the entire safety platform, hit by that one little knife flung from not all that far above, shuddered, groaned, and began to sag. Not so much “safe as houses” after all!

Darleen had already kicked her feet free. She was not exactly thinking now. She was swinging herself right up to the cliff and reaching out with her hands and her feet.

There were friendly cracks in the rock, thank goodness. And her arms were strong. She clung to that cliff like a barnacle — a nimble, exultant barnacle!

She felt something tumble down her back now. That was the rope actually breaking and springing away from the cliff. Darleen, exultant barnacle, had no attention to spare for that rope. Let it fall!

Far away, the uncles were shouting. Farther away than that, a bird cried out in the wind, and then that very wind came ruffling through Darleen's hair and awoke something wild in her spirit that she had not known was there. She had found a new crack for the toes of her left foot and a good rock up a bit higher for her right hand, and she did not stop moving even then, because climbing up a cliff with the wind cheering you on and your heart unfurling inside you is something that must be done in a glorious rush, all at once. She was not acting: she just *was*, and her muscles pulled her up and up again, and the river glittered far below her and her spirit rejoiced, and a moment later she was hauling herself over the top of the cliff, where Aunt Shirley, pale as a sheet, babbled with horror as she hauled her away from the cliff's edge: "Oh, Darleen, oh, Darleen, what an accident! Goodness! But you're safe now. Don't be afraid, don't be afraid, don't be afraid." And meanwhile the uncles were scrambling over from their camera ledge.

And that was when Darleen realized the terrible truth: *she had not been afraid*. She had been *alive*. And she was still more or less *alive* now as she lay panting there on the top of the cliff, though the feeling was already fading.

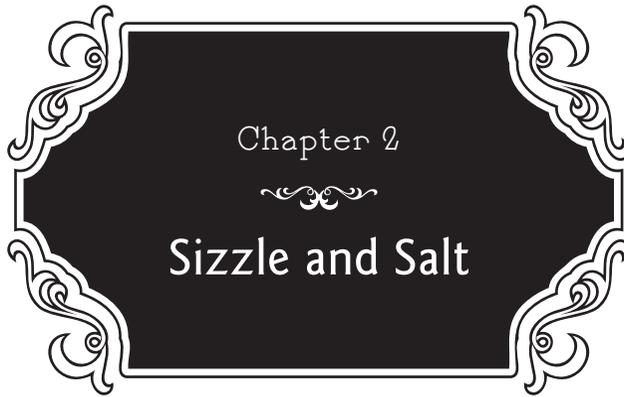
There was a force in her that must have been coiled up very tight, just waiting for a moment like this to spring free and unfold. A terrible, powerful, untamable force that did not want to keep its feet on the ground. What danger could be more dangerous than that?

A force like that might make a person suddenly start clambering up perilous rocks or balancing on tightropes; it might make a person break all the promises she had ever made to the person she loved most: That she would be careful. That she would stay safe.

Oh, Papa! thought Darleen, and terror on his behalf filled her so suddenly that every one of her limbs started shaking.

Cliffs and trains and bridges are dangers that stay politely outside us, after all. But when danger wells up *inside*, there is no place safe to hide, is there?

And the danger facing Darleen was worse than any broken rope or runaway train. The danger was this: she might be like her Mama after all.



Chapter 2

Sizzle and Salt

Ham and eggs, apple pie, and hot, bitter coffee. That was the meal they always had after filming on the Palisades. And they always had it at the same place too. Alongside the road in Coytesville was an inn called Rambo's, an unpretentious sort of establishment with a porch in front and a single gable raising its eyebrow at the goings-on in the dirt road outside. All the photoplay people went to Rambo's. Sometimes they even made movies there when they needed a set for a Wild West shoot-out or something.

In warm weather the guests sat at tables outside under the big tree, but they were now only a couple of weeks on the sunny side of a month of blizzards, and Darleen couldn't stop trembling, so Aunt Shirley shepherded them

all indoors, even Jasper, whose face, far from remorseful, was one big sulk.

“What got into you there, Jasper?” said Uncle Charlie as they took off their coats and settled into their chairs. “You went and ruined one of my ropes.”

Jasper scowled.

And Darleen indulged in a fiery thought for a moment: *He almost ruined a whole lot more than a rope!*

“There, there, now, Charlie,” said Aunt Shirley. “Accidents do get people upset. Don’t be riling the poor boy. He had the wrong knife! That would upset anyone, wouldn’t it?”

Jasper scowled some more.

As for Darleen, her teeth went for another round of chattering. Wasn’t that just like Aunt Shirley to be fretting on behalf of the boy who had almost sent Dar plummeting to a watery grave?

Anyway, it smelled of sizzle and salt inside Rambo’s, and that was a comfort.

“Busy day today out there, was it?” said the waitress as she slapped down their plates, and then she took a second look at Darleen and shook her head. “You look chilled right to the bone, honey. Isn’t your family treating you right?”

Everybody here knew the Darlings of Fort Lee; the Matchless studios were basically a Darling

extended-family operation. The Darlings had been show people and theater people, way back in the past century. And then in the nineties, Darleen's Papa, who was a genius with machines and chemicals, had gotten a job helping Mr. Dickson (Thomas Edison's assistant) down at Edison's laboratory when they were making the first moving pictures out in the backyard in a funny tanklike studio called the Black Maria.

One of those first pictures had been of Darleen's Mama, fluttering her silky robes against the black velvet — she had come down from her tightropes and high places to let the camera capture the miracle of her — and that had changed the world, if by *the world* you meant not only the history of moving photography but also the lives of Loveliest Luna and the young handyman Bill Darling, falling in love as the Black Maria swiveled around to capture the sun.

They moved to the little farmhouse in Fort Lee to live a different kind of story, a story in which engineers and tightrope dancers turn into people who live quietly in cottages, have a sweet little baby girl, and *keep their feet on the ground*. . . .

But then the Golden Bird Theatre burned down over in the big city of New York, and the rest of the family — all those theatrical but homeless Darlings — decided to join their brother in Fort Lee and move right on into the

moving pictures, and Papa's quiet dreams were swallowed up again by chemicals and clever bits of machinery, and the little farm became instead a great barn of glass in which photoplays grew instead of corn or beans.

"Temporarily!" he said sometimes, with mournfulness around the edges of his words. "We'll get back to our roses one day, Darleeny, see if we don't. When the money's a little better . . ."

But that's one thing farms and photoplay studios have in common, seems like: the money is never much better. There is always new machinery to buy and pressure to expand and grow. But building huge glass "barns" so that you can shoot your photoplays in any weather is even more expensive than building the ordinary wooden kind. Matchless was always desperately short of money.

And the Darlings' dreams were always one plot twist away from coming to nothing again.

Darleen thought about cliff-hangers and shivered again.

"You all right there, young lady?" asked the waitress.

Jasper made a scoffing noise down where he was sitting, but Darleen took care not to look his way.

"I'm fine, thank you," said Darleen. That was acting. She wasn't actually fine at all.

She kept remembering what it had felt like, having that wild force of a feeling spread its wings in her.

I will be so careful, she promised herself (and her Papa). I will be careful forevermore. I won't go near cliffs. Or steep places.

She would push that feeling into a squished little ball and push that ball into the corner of her soul and never trust herself again. That's all.

"Eat up, now," said Aunt Shirley briskly. She lifted her fork to demonstrate how it was done. "Nothing like ham and eggs after you've had a bit of a shock."

"Mmm," agreed Uncle Charlie. He smacked his lips. "Say, what was that newspaper business you were so excited about, Shirley?"

"Oh, my, yes," said Aunt Shirley. "I've got it right here. Darleen, I know you think you don't like it, but drink some of this good coffee. Coffee is medicinal. It will warm you right up."

Aunt Shirley unfolded the newspaper. Darleen caught glimpses of headlines about troubles in Europe, troubles in Mexico, flooding in Russia, "The Richest Twelve-Year-Old Girl in the World?" (not about Darleen Darling, clearly!), and a dog show where dogs worth fifteen thousand dollars would be competing for ribbons.

"No, no, no — oh, here it is!" said Aunt Shirley, pointing to a column on the lower-right-hand side.

"NEW STRAND THEATRE TO OPEN APRIL 11," shouted the top headline, and then right underneath: "Full Programme Planned in Modern Wonder Theatre."

Aunt Shirley read the list aloud: “Programme will boast a full orchestra with twenty-seven musicians, short subjects, opera stars, the latest episode of the new serial sensation *The Dangers of Darleen*—’ There we are! There we are! Let’s see now—no, that’s all. Next bit is all about the featured drama they’ll show after intermission. Never mind that now.”

Down at the grumpy end of the table, Jasper stabbed a piece of ham. Darleen kept her eyes on her aunt.

“What’s the film, Aunt Shirley?” she said by way of ignoring Jasper more thoroughly.

“The new Kathlyn Williams photoplay, *The Spoilers*, set in the wilds of Alaska, apparently. But who cares about that? The main thing is our picture will be there too—*before* intermission! Darleen, darling, what a thrill this is! And I’ve had the most brilliant idea for making the most of it! Want to hear, all of you?”

“Spill it, Shirl,” said Uncle Charlie.

“Yes?” said Darleen with some suspicion. Darleen knew to be cautious when Aunt Shirley had her plotting face on.

Jasper made some sort of scoffing and complaining sound—*mmmmph*—but Aunt Shirley had already set down her fork.

“Well! Guess what? It’s because of all the things you see in the paper that I had this idea. People follow things in

the paper, don't they? Like the horrible snows we just had, or murder trials, or that old Mrs. Berryman dying and her fortune going to the poor-little-rich-girl orphan granddaughter and suchlike. So that gave me this idea, see —”

They were all beginning to stare at Aunt Shirley. Even Jasper had stopped chewing for a moment.

Uncle Charlie banged his spoon against his cup.

“All right, now, Shirley! Better get to the point. What's this ‘idea’ you're talking around?”

Aunt Shirley added a couple lumps of sugar to her coffee and stirred it happily with her spoon.

“What I'm saying is, *let's get our girl kidnapped!* It would raise *such* a lovely fuss!”

“WHAT?” said Uncle Dan, in what Darleen could tell was spoken in capital letters.

Jasper, down at his end of the table, laughed out loud for a moment and then stabbed another piece of ham. “Kidnapped!” he said, as if the thought made him happy.

“What I'm saying is, people simply *love* a good story, don't they? That's how people are. That's why they like *The Dangers of Darleen*. And that's why they like the newspapers so well. Good stories! And so we should give them one they can really feast on. Daring Darleen goes to the opening of the Strand — and gets herself *kidnapped!*”

Uncle Charlie set down his fork so that the tines were resting against his slab of ham. It was rare for

Uncle Charlie to set down his fork midmeal, especially at Rambo's.

"Kidnapped? Our Darleen?" he said. "You mean, in the photoplay or for real?"

"What's the difference, really?" said Aunt Shirley. "Isn't it just the most beautiful plan? In the previous episode, she can receive a mysterious invitation to the opening of the Strand. And then our real-life Darleen will show up at the real-life Strand and get herself *kidnapped* while Dan cranks his camera, yes. And the news will go into the *papers*, won't it? Maybe even right into the Pictorial Section of the *Times*, next to all the visiting princesses and blizzard pictures? See how lovely? So in real life, they'll all be reading the newspapers and worrying about Darleen, and meanwhile, the whole story of it — the kidnapping, the escape — that gets worked into Episode — Wait, what'll we be up to by then?"

She counted on her fingers.

"Nine! Episode Nine: *Daring Darleen, Kidnapped by the Wicked Whatsits!*"

"Salamanders," said Uncle Dan, who remembered the details of things even though he didn't do much chattering about them. In the story their moving pictures were telling, the Salamanders were the mysterious masked villains chasing after the Crown Princess Dahlia Louise and the exiled King.

“Exactly,” said Aunt Shirley. “Kidnapped! All week long in the newspapers — little bits, you know, that we feed the readers now and again — and then, guess who will come to see the picture the next week, to see how our Darleen manages to escape?”

She tapped her spoon against her saucer: “EV-RY-BO-DY, that’s who. It’s gold. It’s a simply golden idea, you have to admit. And we really need the money, if you don’t mind me reminding us all of that fact.”

There was a silent moment then while they all digested Aunt Shirley’s golden idea. Uncle Charlie actually went back to chewing on his slice of ham, because he believed thinking worked better on a happy stomach.

He took two bites, and then he said, “Very clever, Shirl! A sort of real kidnapping at the Strand! I like it!” And then he took two more.

“But Shirley,” said Uncle Dan. “The police. Won’t they maybe get confused?”

That was a pretty long sentence for Uncle Dan. Aunt Shirley gave him a warm and confident smile.

“We will *inform* the police, don’t you worry,” said Aunt Shirley. “They’ll know to stay away from the Strand that evening — or at least not to worry about kidnappings going on under the bright lights! Jasper, please pass the toast down this way, won’t you, dear?”

“Oh, please, *please*, have her kidnapped for real,” said

Jasper, and he made a face that Darleen saw only out of the corner of her eye.

Darleen's stomach was doing puzzled little flips and twirls.

"Aunt Shirley—" she said, but then she was interrupted by the arrival of wedges of the famous Rambo's apple pie.

"What, dear? You feeling better now?" said Aunt Shirley.

No. But how could she even begin to explain? She had been dangling from a cliff on a rope — that had been fine. And then the awful Jasper had accidentally (right? accidentally? — anything else was surely too terrible, even for Jasper Lukes) cut her rope, and a new feeling had spread its wings inside her and sent her scrambling in joy up that bit of cliff, when any normal person would have been weeping from fright. And now they wanted to have her kidnapped, at least sort of. And that would make anyone's insides feel a little peculiar, wouldn't it?

Everything today seemed to be leading somewhere she was sure she shouldn't be going: into danger.

Her adventure on the cliff had changed something. Had woken something up in her. Even with the tangy sweetness of apple pie on her tongue, Darleen was no longer entirely sure that she was *real*. She thought maybe she was more like the shell of an egg that might be shattered

into pieces by that strange something new trying to spread its wings inside her.

So that was already about a thousand tangled worries. Darleen settled for the one everyone at that table would surely understand:

“But what will my Papa say?” she whispered.

Well, he said no, of course. At first, anyway. Uncle Charlie and Aunt Shirley spent a few hours talking him around in the kitchen of the little house where Darleen and her father lived, and Darleen’s part of the conspiracy was not to let slip any part of the truth about what had happened that morning on the Palisades cliff.

“No need to trouble your Papa about what’s past and done, now, is there?” Aunt Shirley had said on their way back to the studio in Fort Lee. “Accidents are accidents. The important thing is, nothing bad actually happened.”

Maybe nothing happened, thought Darleen with some discomfort. But even unspoken, that felt to her like a lie.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” said her Papa to his siblings. “Let Darleen be *kidnapped*? But that’s *illegal*. That’s a *crime*!” They were all stubborn people, each in his or her own particular way, so he had already made that point a couple of times, and they had already repeated what they thought was a clear and rational explanation of the kidnapping plan.

But Papa didn't like Darleen being put in any kind of danger. And being an honest and cautious type of person, he really, really, really didn't like things that seemed like they might be breaking the law.

"Not *really* kidnapped! Just for publicity, Bill," they said patiently. "You know how important publicity is these days. This isn't the nineteenth century anymore. This is nineteen fourteen!"

Darleen's Papa was sitting under the old photograph on the wall, and the contrast between his wrinkled, worried head and the smaller, happier version of himself in the picture made Darleen feel sad and guilty both, so she tried watching her fingers make patterns on the red-checked tablecloth instead.

"What I don't understand is, you say it's for the photoplay story, but then you say they'll be kidnapping Darleen herself at the new theater. Is it just a play you're talking about, or is it real?"

That was a question Darleen kept finding herself wrestling with, too, so she looked up to see what her uncle or aunt might have to say about it.

"But now, that's the new way of things, Bill," said Uncle Charlie. "Blurring the boundary lines, don't you know, between the story and what's real. Seems that people like it when the characters they see in the photoplays come out into the world and show how they're real people

too. Makes the photoplays realer for them. Makes the people come back and back again. *Half real* is real good for business, seems like.”

Darleen’s Papa was shaking his head.

“What’s a half-real kidnapping? Sounds risky to me, doing that right out there in the world, where people will be confused. We don’t want Darleen in half-real danger. I don’t even like having her in pretend danger! And messing with the law is worse than jumping off trains, seems like to me.”

Darleen thought about the cliff that morning, and the broken rope, and how far from make-believe the dangers in photoplays sometimes turned out to be, and she bent her head over the tablecloth again, organizing her right hand so that all the fingers were resting on white squares, and her thumb was on a red square. Then she moved her fingers over to the neighboring squares, walking them from white to red. And then back again. It calmed the guilty thump of her heart a little.

Aunt Shirley didn’t seem to feel guilty at all, though. She just laughed.

“Oh, Bill! It’s just going to be acting. All pretend. And the police will be in on the joke, don’t you worry. Nothing dangerous about it at all.”

And that was how they talked him into saying something like yes.

When they had left, Darleen went over and perched on his knee for a while, like in the old days, when she was littler, with her arm around his worried neck.

“Are you really all right with this, Darleeny?” said her father. “Seems like they keep asking more and more of you. I guess I liked it better when you were still in those frilly dresses and throwing flour around in front of the camera.”

“I couldn’t keep being little Darling Darleen forever, Papa. You know that. Maybe people will really start coming to see *The Dangers of Darleen* in droves — by the millions — if we get the publicity they’re talking about. Maybe we’ll have money to mend the porch stairs and fix the roof and get you cozy slippers that aren’t falling apart.”

(Her father’s slippers looked like they had been chewed on by kittens and then left in the sun to fade, but Papa didn’t mind it. He was opposed to spending money on “nonsense,” which meant anything for himself.)

“If you’re safe, I don’t care one single whit about porches or roofs or slippers,” said her Papa. “And I’m sure that’s all your Mama ever wanted too: for you to be safe. *Feet on the ground*, Darleen. Remember that, if they start trying to kidnap you every second Tuesday.”

Feet on the ground. Feet on the ground.

Oh, dear.

It had been such a long day, with too much surprise and guilt in it.

When Darleen lay down on her comfortably lumpy little bed tucked under the eaves upstairs, her eyes couldn't help wandering to the window, where a bright wedge of moon glittered, rising above the glass roof of the Matchless studios, right there across the road. Maybe it was the moon's fault, then, that Darleen found herself trapped in the dream that had haunted her for as long as she could remember:

She was always looking out a window in this dream. She was always very small. And she was looking out the window because something — an angel or a bird or a butterfly — was dancing on the roof ridge that stretched outside her window, moonlight rippling across its supple, magical, fragile wings. Oh, how her whole heart filled with longing for the magical, fragile dancing creature, and for the creature's beautiful dance! And then the feeling in the dream would shift, every time, and her longing became fear. She would reach out her arms, but her mouth could make no sound, and the dancer spread its lovely wings and flew away.



Chapter 3

The Only Sprig
at the Strand

Anyone might have expected there would be a great clan of young Darlings by the year 1914, considering that Darleen had not just a Papa (Bill Darling) but two uncles (Charlie Darling, who directed the pictures for the Matchless studios, and Dan Darling, who ran the camera) and one aunt (Shirley Darling, who managed the business side for Matchless). But that's not how it had all worked out. As Uncle Charlie liked to say, Darleen was the only sprig on the family tree.

She tried to live up to the responsibilities of being the Only Sprig, but sometimes—like for instance now, as she bumpity-bumped down Ninth Avenue on the El, her

uncles on one side of her and Aunt Shirley on the other, all talking business as if they didn't even notice the wonder of being on a train that flew (noisily) past the upper windows of what must be eleventy thousand tall buildings in a row — sometimes, Darleen keenly felt the lack of fellow sprigs (whether cousins, brothers, or sisters) who would understand how extremely thrilled she felt right now, who might clasp her hands in their own and grin with her and maybe even squeak right out loud with delight on the curves. *An elevated train!* That was basically as wonderful as riding the Big Scenic roller coaster at Palisades Amusement Park, but nobody in this car on this Saturday afternoon seemed to notice. The other passengers looked bored or annoyed. Aunt Shirley was nattering on and on about how much newspaper coverage the opening of the Strand was likely to get, and her uncles (balancing camera and suchlike between their knees) were talking about lighting. Darleen tried not to be resentful, but she felt very alone in her appreciation of the rattle-bang magic of New York City.

“I hope the searchlight will do,” said Uncle Dan.

“You'll make it do, Dan,” said Uncle Charlie. “And what an achievement it will be — a night scene *actually filmed at night!*”

Darleen had already heard every syllable of this discussion many times: the Strand Theatre had lights at its

entrance, of course, but that wasn't the sort of bright light you needed to capture an image on a filmstrip. Over at the Matchless studios, they pretty much never filmed anything at night. They filmed during the day and tinted the nighttime scenes blue so the audience would understand that the burglars were creeping around at midnight, not at noon.

But Uncle Dan liked a challenge. And that was why he was lugging along a big black box with a light in it. He would use what the Strand had to offer by way of lighting and add a spotlight of his own into the mix.

"It'll depend on you, then, Darleen," said Uncle Charlie, and Darleen jumped a little on her bench because, up to this point, they had seemed perfectly happy to talk about technical details forever, without needing to bring any reference to her into the discussion. "You'll have to be sure to go right into the spot where the light is brightest."

"When the evil kidnappers appear," said Darleen.

"Goodness, child," said Aunt Shirley. "No need to sound so gloomy about it. It's going to be a great scene for Episode Nine, even if Jasper's not part of it, poor fellow."

Jasper was in another one of his moods; he was off somewhere today on "personal business," whatever that might mean. Darleen tried not to let Aunt Shirley see how happy she was that Jasper would *not* be part of anything today.

“Well, anyway,” said Aunt Shirley. “At least we can all be relieved that your poor father decided to stay at home tonight. He seems to be worrying himself into a state about this whole thing. I’m sure he thinks the police will be carting us all off in their wagons, even though I’ve told him a thousand times that we’ve got all that covered. The police will stay well away! I declare, if Dan and Charlie hadn’t calmed him down with descriptions of the wonders of the new Strand Theatre and its ceiling with special holes poked all through it and its suffering lighting, I’m sure none of us would be here now —”

“Self-suffusing,” said Uncle Dan. “Not ‘suffering.’ *Semi-direct, self-suffusing lighting.*”

Aunt Shirley made a shrugging motion that conveyed how little concerned she was with the actual details of the Strand’s lighting system.

“Anyway, dear Darleen, you’ll be safely kidnapped and home again in Fort Lee before the rest of us even get there, so Bill will have no reason to worry a single extra moment, and you can tell him all about the lights and the ceiling and whatever all else he wants to hear about. Which we know won’t be the movies themselves, bless his dear, machine-oriented heart.”

(*Bump!-bump!-bumpity!-squeak!*: those were the comments of the Elevated Line.)

Darleen certainly didn't mean to complain, but a small sigh did escape her then.

"I just wish I could see a *little* bit of Alaska," she said, as the train threw her against her aunt and then back against Uncle Dan.

That was her bitterest regret: they were having her kidnapped during the first half of the program (they wanted to get some shots of the crowd entering the theater, but they didn't want that crowd blocking the shot of the kidnapping), and that meant she would miss the Kathlyn Williams picture. It seemed a tragic waste to Darleen to be coming all the way across the Hudson to New York City only to miss seeing Kathlyn Williams in Alaska.

"Not a single snowflake," said Aunt Shirley, who could sometimes be awfully heartless. "And don't look sad. Think about your poor Uncle Dan, who won't even get to peek inside! He'll be out with his camera the whole time, waiting for you. He won't even get to see the *self-suffering* lights or anything."

"Hmm," said Uncle Dan pointedly about the lights, but he didn't bother to say more than that.

And then they were at their station, and it was time to get off the train.

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Time passed strangely—very slowly and very fast both at once—and before Darleen knew it, Aunt Shirley and Uncle Charlie were shepherding her through the lobby, which was filled to bursting with what Aunt Shirley called “the very cream of New York society.” If people were milk, thought Darleen, then this was a milky flood. So many mothers and daughters in nice dresses and fancy coats, and more spilling in every second through the front doors. It did look like everyone who was anyone would be coming to the Strand tonight.

No one recognized Darleen, at least not at first. She wasn't in her Daring Darleen get-up of simple white blouse and rugged skirt, perfect for jumping off trains; under her spring coat, she was dressed like all the other twelve-year-old girls in the theater. No one would suspect a girl in a “stylish dress of batiste and Swiss embroidery, trimmed with washable lace in tasty design” (to quote Sears, Roebuck and Company)—a girl dressed in something ordered from a catalogue for the bargain price of \$1.55—of being either a princess or a photoplay star famous for her feats of derring-do. But then again, an exiled and fictional princess with Daring Darleen as her secret identity would not have worn her crime-fighting clothes to the theater! At the end of Episode Eight, Crown Princess Dahlia Louise had received a mysterious invitation to the opening of the Strand, with hints that

she might learn something about the whereabouts of her missing Royal Father. It was only now that Darleen realized she would have to do stunts in this slightly flouncy dress all week unless the episode had a change of clothing worked into its story. Botheration!

And then she saw that a young boy had stopped right in front of her and was staring at her hard. Darleen shook the worried thoughts out of her head and tried to smile like a completely ordinary person of twelve.

“Why, hello, there,” she said when the staring didn’t stop.

“You know, you look a lot like —” said the child.

“Come along now, Edward!” called a woman who seemed likely to be young Edward’s mother.

“Aren’t you —” said the child.

“Shh,” said Darleen, putting a finger to her lips. “What if there are wicked Salamanders hidden in these crowds?”

“Oh!” said the boy, and he ran off to follow his mother.

Shirley was already taking Darleen’s hand to guide her inside.

“Well, here we are. Time for us to enter the palace,” said Aunt Shirley. “And it had better be a palace! A million dollars it cost them to fit out this place, that’s what the newspapers said. I surely hope they know what they’re about.”

(Aunt Shirley, apart from her inability to see the true nature of Jasper Lukes, was a very practical sort of person.)

The Darlings joined the crowds and pushed through the lobby doors into the center of that palace.

It was really like stepping into a castle in fairyland. The seats swept all the way across the great space of the theater, and the whole place glowed gently, like the inside of the largest, pearliest oyster shell the universe ever made.

“Oh!” said Darleen, won over immediately. “Oh, Aunt Shirley! It’s *magic!*”

“Now, Darleen,” said Uncle Charlie, but he was smiling. “What would your father say to that? What we’ve got here is a triumph of architecture and science. And on Bill’s behalf, we mustn’t forget to admire the ceiling!”

For a respectful moment, the three of them looked up at the ceiling, which Darleen’s Papa had read all about and thought deserved some admiring.

Apparently it was dotted with secret little holes to help with the circulation of the air. Secret little holes are hard to see, of course, but the dome was as lovely as you could wish, and on the walls were many decorations in the sort of tasteful colors only the most sophisticated fairies prefer: old rose, French gray, and gold. And then there was the stage itself, which was magnificent and large.

A red velvet curtain hung from a gilded arch decorated with plaster characters, and above that arch, there was a symbolic sort of mural, of people in flowing robes waving their hands in the air gracefully. What that had to do with photoplays, Darleen had no idea. They looked dreamy and floaty, like people who had been mesmerized into thinking they were clouds on a spring day.

“And actual, real fountains!” said Aunt Shirley with a sigh of pleasure. “How beautiful it all is! I don’t believe actual, real Italy could be a smidgen nicer!”

Indeed, three little fountains sparkled there, in front of the place where the conductor would probably stand. The fountains had special lights focused only on them (Uncle Charlie pointed out) to help with that sparkle.

The Darlings were seated to one side, near the front, so that Darleen could sneak away at the proper moment. Uncle Charlie saw Aunt Shirley and Darleen settled in their seats and then slipped back out through the crowds. His place, he always felt, was at the side of Uncle Dan so that Uncle Dan wouldn’t lack Uncle Charlie’s firm opinions and suggestions. Uncle Dan was photographing the people pushing their way into the theater now.

When the audience was settled in their seats, the lights all dimmed together, as if twilight had come to the fairy-tale land.

“Isn’t that nice,” whispered Aunt Shirley.

The little real fountains in the pretend garden still twinkled away in the gloom. There was an expectant hush in the crowd. And then the curtains parted, and the audience could see a stage set up within that larger stage. And the center of that stage was what must be the screen, behind yet another curtain, with the grandest columns on either side.

The newspapers had promised that the projection and the music would all be first-rate, and they certainly were. When the second set of curtains opened and the screen lit up with an enormous waving flag, the orchestra, tucked behind fake hedges, only a short distance from where Darleen was sitting, broke right into a rousing edition of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and Darleen’s heart jumped around from the sheer thrill of it.

Darleen would be able to experience only about fifteen minutes’ worth of the show, so she was determined to enjoy every bit of that time just as much as she could.

Twenty-seven musicians, the papers had said. Imagine the expense of that! But the sound was glorious. The crowd applauded with so much enthusiasm that the theater seemed just simply awash in sound.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” said a man who came out onto the stage in a fancy suit. “We are so pleased that you could join us tonight for this world-historical first-ever programme at our new Strand Theatre. Tonight

we celebrate the opening of the most luxurious and well-appointed dedicated picture palace in New York City! And now, to help introduce a larger audience to America's newest junior crime-fighting princess, here's a special behind-the-scenes glimpse at the glamorous life of DARING DARLEEN!"

To be mentioned like that on such a grand occasion! Darleen wasn't a blushing sort of person, but she did feel the heat rising in her cheeks. She was actually a little relieved when Aunt Shirley squeezed her hand and said, "Almost time, dear."

Past the artificial bushes and the orchestra, some titles appeared:

"AMERICA'S BABY
GROWS UP
IN FRONT OF THE
MOVING PICTURE CAMERA."

They showed a little bit of one of the *Darling Darleen* episodes now, the one where she made a whole complicated machine out of dolls and tin soldiers and blocks, just to get herself out of her crib so she could play with the kittens downstairs. Dar groaned, but at least it was funny, and the crowd was in the mood for it. (Though did they have to laugh so *loud*?)

"WE LOVED HER THEN!"

said the screen. Then it offered a picture of Darling

Darleen in those awful frills and laces. Dar tried to cover her eyes, but her aunt had a firm hold of her hand.

“Weren’t you sweet?” murmured Aunt Shirley into Darleen’s ear. Dar groaned again.

“AND NOW THAT SHE HAS GONE

FROM *DARLING* TO *DARING*

WE LOVE HER STILL!”

And there she was! Her own self, dangling from that awful cliff. She squinted critically at the screen and thought she had done a passable job of “dangling like a princess” while Uncle Dan cranked away. And then, after another shot, in which smiling Darleen, in her sensible crime-fighting costume (dark, practical skirt and white shirtwaist) was introduced, there was the title card for the series:

“OUR OWN *DARING DARLEEN*,

SERIAL QUEEN . . .

DARING STAR OF . . .

THE DANGERS OF DARLEEN!”

“Ahhh!” said Aunt Shirley.

She meant, *What a success!* Aunt Shirley had her mathematical look on at that moment: the look of someone who was adding up the nearly three thousand people seated in that audience and imagining them all flowing back, week after week, to see Daring Darleen triumph over set after set of celluloid obstacles.

“AND NOW, EPISODE EIGHT:

DARLEEN ON THE EDGE.”

Aunt Shirley checked her watch and clucked her tongue.

“And that’s that. Off you go, now, Darleen,” she said. “Look for Danny, and you can’t go wrong. Oh, and here’s your prop, so make sure the camera sees you have it.”

Her prop was a note with a fancy wax blob on it that was supposed to be the secret seal of the Order of the Black Salamander. When they filmed a close-up version, the note would surely say something like “COME TO THE THEATRE ENTRANCE IF YOU WOULD LEARN SOMETHING OF THE WHEREABOUTS OF YOUR ROYAL FATHER. SIGNED, AN ANONYMOUS FRIEND,” but for now Aunt Shirley had simply scrawled on it, “Smooth as silk and nary a tangle!”— which was her all-purpose good-luck phrase.

It is tempting to blame Aunt Shirley’s good wish for somehow having gotten itself mixed up and reversed on its way up to the clouds, because two things were soon to become very clear about this little kidnapping caper:

Unsuspecting Darleen was at this very moment walking into a most treacherous tangle, and nothing— nothing at all— would end up going “smooth as silk.”



Chapter 4

Kidnapped!

The idea was that Darleen would emerge from the theater, spot Uncle Dan behind the camera, make a show of consulting the note in her hand, and then look around for a suspicious-looking fellow and his suspicious-looking automobile.

But in fact, as soon as she stepped through the theater's main doors, everything began to go awry.

First of all, Uncle Dan's camera was there, and the lights were blazing, but her uncles were nowhere to be seen. Darleen looked around in consternation. Had they gotten the timing wrong somehow? Should she just stand

around until Uncle Dan appeared? A single episode of *The Dangers of Darleen* used two reels of film and lasted about thirty minutes. That meant there wasn't much time to waste. Soon enough, Episode Eight would end, and the crowd would swell through these doors at intermission, ruining all possible shots.

And just as she was thinking these grumpy thoughts, two things happened:

A man in an ill-fitting jacket came slithering out the theater doors (*slithering* was the word! Darleen had never seen a human being who moved so very like a snake!) and glanced around wildly. He looked like someone who had just lost something terribly important and was sure he would soon be in heaps of trouble. But before Darleen could finish imagining her list of things this man might have lost (a champion poodle? his wife's emerald brooch?), a hulking black motorcar squealed around the corner and stopped abruptly, right in front of the theater.

The worried man leaped forward as if he had been expecting this car and yanked its front door open.

"Couldn't find the girl!" he cried, and then there was a stream of angry shouting from the driver, who wanted the side-winding man to *shut up*, to *not be an idiot*, to *stop leaving everything for him, the driver, to do*, and to *hurry up and get in out of those lights*.

The side-winding man, still confused, tried to peer

into the back of the car. He was being very slow about opening that door.

Oh, bother, thought Darleen. *Does everyone in this world have to be so screamingly incompetent all the time?*

And then she glanced left, and there was Uncle Dan, racing back to his camera, followed by Uncle Charlie. “Something came up at the side entrance!” Uncle Charlie seemed to be saying. But then he saw what was happening here and changed his comments to “Go, go!”

Maybe the scene could still be saved, then. Darleen hurried up to that side-winding man as fast as she could manage while still pretending to be anxiously looking at her note. She practically had to bump into him to get his attention, however. What an amateur this actor was proving to be! She did that thing of pretending to pull away while he turned and gaped at her, his right hand on the open motorcar door, and his eyes darting from Darleen to the cameraman behind her. Incompetent beginner! Even the silliest extras knew better than to cast wild-eyed looks at the camera — or to freeze in front of it.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, be quick!” Darleen hissed at him, trying to maintain a terrified expression for Uncle Dan’s camera. “You’re supposed to get that door open and *push me in!* Or move out of the way, at least!”

Thank goodness moving-picture cameras could not record the words anyone said!

It had started badly, but the stunt turned out remarkably well. The side-winding man opened the back door, and Darleen managed to tumble into the car quite as if he had pushed her himself—just as another hulking black automobile squealed up behind them. What was that about? Darleen didn't remember a second car being part of the plan.

There was a lot of shouting. Uncle Charlie shouted, and the men jumping out of the second car shouted, and the driver of *this* car spat some very harsh words at the incompetent side-winding man, who was still just standing there, gaping at the door.

That was when the sidewinder *finally* woke up. He slammed the back door behind Darleen, jumped into the front seat, and slammed that door, too. The fancy motorcar lurched forward and away, as if it were the only thing in this whole sorry crew that had remembered all its lines.

The driver and the side-winding man kept shouting at each other in the front of the car. As well they might, considering how they had mangled this entire operation. Still, the driver seemed to be courting another kind of disaster, to be driving so fast while carrying on an argument with the sidewinder sitting next to him. Darleen was trying to think of some way to address the issue tactfully—because she knew that “Slow down” almost

never actually worked, when addressed to an overheated driver — when something bumped into her feet.

Something moving! At her feet!

She took a closer look: there was a large lump wriggling on the dim floor of the motorcar — a roughly human-shaped lump with a large burlap sack over its head and with feet wearing a pair of shoes made from what looked like good leather.

Darleen gasped. What else had these amateurs gotten wrong? But before her mind could form another coherent thought, her hands were already pulling the burlap sack off the lump's head, and her arms were hauling the lump up from the floor to the seat of the motorcar.

“Oh, no!” said the lump and Darleen, both at the same time.

Because the lump was not merely a lump. It was a girl!

This girl, whoever she was, seemed to be about the same size as Darleen. In the gloom it was hard to tell what she looked like exactly, but her voice was pleasant, and her dress gave a general rustling impression of elegance. In the colorless flicker of light and shadow from the street-lights, she looked, to tell the truth, almost like a character in a photoplay.

This girl was looking at Darleen with as much distress as Darleen herself felt.

“My heavens, you poor thing,” said the girl. “What have these wretched criminals done now?”

Considering that the mysterious girl had just emerged from confinement in a burlap sack, her worries about Darleen seemed very generous — indeed, almost out of place. And the full horror of this situation was beginning to dawn on Darleen.

“What they’ve done is — they’ve made a mistake!” she found herself saying. “Oh, how awful, I’m so sorry. We have to tell them — we have to stop this motorcar — to take you back. Hey, misters!”

And she was so horrified that she leaned right up to interrupt the arguing men in the front seat as the car lurched its way uptown, but before she could say another word, the girl put a warning hand on her arm.

“Oh, do be cautious! I’m afraid they’re dangerous, desperate men. The driver has a firearm. I saw it! And then he put the sack over my head —”

“A firearm? That’s got to be a prop,” said Darleen, feeling oddly short of oxygen.

“A prop? You mean, a theatrical property? Only for the stage? No, I don’t think so,” said the other girl. “I’m afraid I recognize the make from sad experience in the West.”

What? thought Darleen. And that *what* went very deep indeed, through layer after layer of Darleen’s mind and soul.