

## Chapter Two



Evangeline jumped at the sudden sound of what she assumed was her father's fist smacking against the dining room table. Her foot hovered over the next step as she paused in her descent. It would work more in her favor to find out what had riled her father before walking blindly into a bad situation. It wasn't eavesdropping. It was self-preservation.

"As if we don't have enough problems from the Birger and Shelton gangs and the Klan. Now we have to import trouble from Chicago."

His angry voice traveled to Evangeline on the stairs without any problems. Her mother's voice was more controlled. Evangeline shut her eyes to concentrate on the quiet words but still struggled to hear her response.

"Now, there's no need for you to get riled up. Madeline Thompson told me Mr. Birger is perfectly respectable. Why, he even helped one of her neighbors who was down on his luck. Does that sound like a man bent on causing trouble to you?"

Her father growled. "Madeline Thompson is a ninny. Her know-it-all husband is nothing more than a grocer gathering gossip from all the other ninnies in town." His tone softened. To Evangeline's ears, it sounded placating and not at all sincere.

“Trust me, darling. Our neighbors, no matter how well-meaning, are not worth listening to on matters of gangs or bootlegging. As a judge for the county, I believe I am a trifle more qualified to discourse on such matters. I assure you, Mr. Birger is indeed a less-than-savory individual, and he’s not the only one.”

Mother’s defeated sigh floated up the stairs despite the weight it carried. “Yes, dear. I apologize. I didn’t mean to question your authority on the matter. Now, what’s this you were saying about trouble from other areas?”

Father’s voice dropped, and Evangeline gingerly tip-toed a few steps closer, careful to avoid creaky spots that would alert her parents to her presence.

“I shouldn’t bother you with such things. Forgive me, Mabel. You don’t need your pretty head filled with the worries I carry home from work. Besides, they aren’t subjects meant to serve as fodder for your bridge club.”

“I would never divulge such information as carelessly as that.”

At least the wall separating Evangeline and her parents prevented them from seeing her doubtful frown that would earn their ire. Despite knowing her mother was in the next room with her hand fluttering to her chest in dramatic offense at her father’s suggestion, Evangeline had been home during several bridge club meetings. While she never joined the ladies at the table, she’d listened to her mother commit that exact offense on numerous occasions. However, her father’s next words confirmed the success of her mother’s pretended offense.

“Don’t be offended, dear.” His voice was sweet, if not downright patronizing. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I know you wouldn’t mean to gossip about such matters. I believe at times, it simply slips out into conversation. But I must remember you are not as cotton-headed as some of the other wives in this town. You’re educated, and due to my position in the government, you already know more of what’s going on than most women.”

“There. You see. You can share with me. What kind of trouble

has arrived at the doorstep of our town? And what can be done about it?"

"It's nothing to be alarmed at, I'm sure. We've had a couple new arrivals to town who hail from the Chicago area. The Dunne brothers."

Her mother's gasp covered her own. Dunne. It couldn't be. Her stomach grew queasy as she replayed their conversation in her mind. Brendan Dunne. She was sure he'd said his name was Brendan Dunne.

Paper rustled as Evangeline assumed her father laid the newspaper aside. "It's a name well-known in certain less-savory circles in Chicago."

"You don't mean they're involved with gangs? Or are they bootleggers? That's all we need. More bootleggers."

"Gangs. Bootleggers. There's no difference. I suppose you have some smalltime bootleggers who work on their own, but the ones you have to worry about are those with the numbers to make threats and the means to carry them out."

"You're afraid a new gang is moving into Harrisburg?"

"No. Not a new gang. I believe a merger of sorts may be in the making. Apparently, the family patriarch sent his boys down here because the oldest one has landed himself in too much trouble back home. The youngest has been charged with keeping him out of mischief. But rumor has it they've already visited Shady Rest a time or two. Whether or not their family follows, these two may be falling in with the Birger gang."

Evangeline covered her groan by clearing her throat. Time for getting information was over. Really, she shouldn't have waited that long, but curiosity had gotten the better of her.

She continued down the stairs as if she'd not been standing like a statue for the past five minutes.

Turning into the dining room she pasted on what she hoped was a believable smile. "Good morning, Mother. Father."

She took her seat at the table and reached for the teapot to fill her cup. As she spooned sugar into the steeping tea, her thoughts

swirled around her newfound knowledge regarding Brendan. He was sweet. An old-fashioned gentleman in an age of pompous dandies. Part of a mob family. Could it be true? As her mother said, even Mr. Birger presented himself as an upstanding citizen.

Evangeline was pulled from her thoughts by the sharp tone in her mother's voice. "Pardon me. I think I missed the question."

Her father chortled. "I'd say so. What is so interesting that has you wool gathering through breakfast and unable to answer your mother?"

Side-stepping her father's inquiry, Evangeline blinked at her mother. "Yes, Mother?"

"I was telling your father about Dorothy's escapades yesterday, and I asked if you have plans to see her again today. I really think you should distance yourself from the girl. She isn't the type of person you need to associate with."

Evangeline forced a deep breath and a sip of tea before replying. "I personally don't think that's a very Christian attitude to take. Dot and I have been friends since childhood. Yes, she's making bad choices. Yes, she knows better, but so do I. We can be friends without me making those same mistakes. One day, I hope she listens to reason and grows up. Until then, I don't think abandonment will solve anything."

She steeled herself against the coming disagreement. Her mother's open mouth snapped shut before she could retort as her father placed his hand over hers on the table. While continuing his silent reassuring, he turned to Evangeline. She refused to look away from his probing gaze. After several seconds, a slight curve turned the corners of his lips up.

"I believe you are right, Evangeline. Dorothy could learn a lot from you. You're a level-headed young lady. I trust you will not allow her to lead you down a destructive path."

His emphasis on the final sentence left Evangeline feeling his warning. It was not to be mistaken as a statement of belief that her moral compass would remain true. A slight narrowing of his

eyes confirmed her suspicions. Evangeline raised her chin only enough to signal her acceptance of his challenge.

She smiled. "Of course not, Father."

He stood and crossed to her mother, placing a kiss on the top of her head. "Very well. I will see my ladies tonight at dinner."

The front door closed as her father left, and Evangeline drank her tea in the remaining silence. She could feel her mother's eyes on her but refused to give in to the urge to look up. After her father sided with her, it would only encourage another barrage of reprimands regarding her choice of friends, and that was the last thing she wanted. There were more important things to think about—like Brendan Dunne.

Evangeline's shoulders relaxed as her mother finally made her way from the dining room. She wasn't naïve enough to think bootlegging was an enterprise enjoyed by only the dirt poor or the filthy rich. Even though Harrisburg lacked the ostentatiousness of the big cities that Dot was drawn to, there were plenty of men and women enjoying the rebellion against prohibition laws. It wasn't unusual to see a man who frequented the speakeasy on Friday night sitting in the front pew on Sunday. And bootlegging was a lucrative business, especially if you were the one in control. Gang activity was the next natural progression.

Evangeline's stomach knotted as she considered the possibility that the handsome man who'd helped her home in the rain was involved in less-than-legal activities. Her father said the younger brother was sent to watch out for an older brother who'd gotten in trouble with the law.

But which brother was Brendan?