

August 1922  
West Egg, NY



She held the gun the way a certain kind of careless man held his glass of whiskey. It was illegal, illicit. But, nonetheless, it was hers. She would do with it as she pleased, consequences be damned.

The gun made her hot, restless, wanting. Her heart pounded in her chest, a Nora Bayes song. The one playing that sweltering, innocent night when she saw him, years ago. *Get your gun. Get your gun.* She had her gun now.

He didn't see her at first, as he walked out of his house, toward the pool. Tall and slender, his naked flesh so pale it was as if he'd made it through the entire summer without letting even the smallest bit of sunlight touch him. *Nothing touched him.* Wasn't that what made Jay Gatsby so great?

He stepped toward the pool, that arrogant walk, that look on his face. That *knowing*. He had it all; he had everything. He'd *taken* everything. But then, just before his toe touched the water, he stopped suddenly, looked up, as if sensing her presence. He noticed her standing there, half behind the shrubbery, and he smiled.

“You’ve come,” he said, his voice thick with surprise. His eyes were on her face, not on her hand, not on the gun.

She raised her hand up higher, pointed the gun straight at his chest. And then somehow, from across the pool, he could suddenly feel it, her heat and her anger and her madness. It had been simmering for so long, and now it was boiling over. His face contorted. “What are you doing?” he spoke softly, slowly. He was working it out in his own mind. *Why? What? How?*

The distance between her gun and his heart was an easy shot. The trigger burned in the heat of the midday sun, as she closed one eye, aimed, squeezed. In an instant, the world exploded, the gun smoked. Her fingers shook and burned.

And then, all at once, his greatness flickered. He fell unevenly into the pool, water cascading into the sky like a choreographed dance of swans. Beautiful, unexpected. The cascade died off into limp waves, and she took a few steps closer. His pale flesh was sinking underwater now, ripped apart.

In front of her, the pool oozed red. And it was only then that she truly understood what she had done. *Who she had become.* She swallowed back a scream, the taste of bile rising up in her throat.

And then she turned away from the pool, and she ran.

# Daisy

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1917  
Louisville,  
Kentucky

Sometimes I think if I'd met Jay Gatsby later, say, after Daddy's and Rose's accident, I wouldn't have even noticed him at all. I think how everything, how the whole entire course of my life, and his, might have turned out differently.

Jay came into my life at a moment when I still believed that anything was possible. The war—and death—were somewhere so far away, out of my reach, that they might as well have not existed at all. I had everything and it never occurred to me that I could lose it all. Just like that.

It sounds silly to say it now, to remember how I was. To remember that careless, carefree girl. It sounds silly to say that Jay and I lived and died by chance, haphazard timing. That our paths crossed at the right time, in the right place.

Or maybe it was the wrong time, the wrong place.



“Daisy Fay!” Mother called for me up the stairs.

She had only one way of calling for me, whether she was angry,

or excited, or simply calling me to supper. No matter the reason, she called for me with my *full* name, her voice trilling like a snow goose.

This afternoon I knew she was calling because of Rose. I'd promised my younger sister I would go with her to take food to the poor. But it was the hottest hour of the hottest day of August, and after I'd eaten lunch, I'd come up to my room to lie down. It was hard to move off my bed now, much less think about walking ten blocks to the almshouse with Rose's heavy basket of food.

Unlike me, Rose was thinking about the war, and she'd started growing vegetables in a victory garden in our backyard. Every time she harvested something, she was immediately ready to give it away to help people less fortunate than us. At lunch she'd been going on about her peas.

"Daisy Fay!" Mother's voice again. The snow goose was louder.

"Coming," I called back, weakly.

I sighed, got out of bed, and swiped my hairbrush through my hair, setting each side behind my ears and in front of my shoulders. I grabbed my fan, and walked carefully down the steps, trying not to break into a sweat from the exertion.

Just as I'd expected, Rose and Mother sat at the dining table together, co-conspirators, Rose's heavy wicker basket sitting in front of them. When I entered the room, they both offered me a frown.

"Daise, what took you so long?" Rose exhaled.

"It's too hot, Rosie," I protested, fanning myself, causing a swirl of hot air to press against my face, making me flush.

"You promised," Rose said. She wasn't pouting exactly. Rose never pouted. Instead she turned her heart-shaped face in such a way that it was clear I'd disappointed her. She expected better from

me. Why, I didn't know, because I was acting the same way I always did. Petulant.

"Mother," I tried. "Don't you think it would be better if we go when the weather breaks instead? Next week, perhaps?"

Mother wasn't a bleeding heart like Rose, and God knows where Rose got it from, because Daddy certainly wasn't either. But Mother and Daddy *adored* Rose. Everyone adored Rose. I was the beautiful one, and she was the good one. That's not to say that Rose wasn't pretty in her own quiet way, too. But her beauty *was* her goodness. And the fact was, I loved her for that reason too. But not when it meant I had to suffer in the heat.

"Daisy Fay," Mother said. "Help your sister with that basket and stop complaining. You're not going to melt."

"Aren't I, though?" But it was too hot to argue. I sighed and picked up the heavy basket, then held my other hand out for my sister. "Come on," I said, wearily. "There's a party tonight at the Wrights' house, and we're not going to miss it. We'll have to be back in time to freshen up."

Rose laughed weakly. She hadn't attended half the parties I had this summer. She liked to blame it on the polio that had nearly killed her last summer and left her with a slight limp, but we both knew it wasn't that at all. Rose was well now, thank god. But Rose no more liked parties than I liked going to feed the poor. We balanced each other out that way. The good one and the pretty one. That's how all of Louisville knew the Fay sisters back then.

it really Was too hot to walk, and as Rose and I stepped out on the street I wished I could take Daddy's Roadster. The problem was, Mother didn't know I knew how to operate it.

*If there's two things I want you to know before you get married,* Daddy told me, *it's how to drive an automobile and how to shoot a gun.* He'd taught me to do both by the time I was Rose's age. But it was with the understanding that Mother should never know about either one.

Now Daddy was off in Chicago on business, and his Roadster was sitting idle, parked out front. Rose and I walked past it and made it only two blocks before she looked like she truly was melting. Her limp grew more noticeable when she was tired, and I hated seeing her have so much trouble. Hated remembering the way we worried about her so last summer. What would the pretty one be like without the good one? Vapid and useless. Vain and sour. I hated even the very idea of myself without her.

"Rose, we really could take this food when the heat breaks," I said gently.

Rose shook her head and kept walking, taking all her effort to go faster, push ahead of me. I had to skip to catch up to her.

"Would you ladies like a ride?" I'd been so focused on Rose and her trouble that I hadn't noticed a shiny black car had pulled up next to us, that a soldier sat behind the wheel calling out to us.

Camp Taylor had opened in Louisville in June and this summer there'd been soldiers all over town: men in uniforms walking across the Big Four Bridge, driving down Main Street and through our very fashionable neighborhood in the Southern Extension. They'd show up in groups to our Saturday night parties and sometimes they'd ask me to dance. I did not yet see these men as warriors. I did not picture them traveling across the great wide ocean some-time soon to fight, and to die. They were simply handsome men, flirting with me. I had no qualms with that.

"Well? Can I help you out?" the soldier asked again.

My hair was limp against my forehead, and I put Rose's basket down for a second and made a futile attempt to fluff it with my fingers, before picking the basket back up, turning, and offering the soldier a smile. I knew some of the ladies who had tea with Mother on Thursday afternoons hated that our little Louisville was now being *overrun* by *common men in uniform*. But truly, I had yet to find one downfall to it.

"No, thank you," Rose said just as I said, "Yes, that would be grand." Rose turned to me and frowned.

"Come on," I said to her. "It's hot, and this nice soldier is offering."

That was enough for him to get out of the car, walk around, and take the basket from my hand. Our fingertips touched, and I looked up at him. He was tall with short blond hair and a pale, clean-shaven face. I had the strangest urge to touch him, to reach up and run my fingers across his silken cheek. But I restrained myself.

"I'm Daisy Fay," I said, clasping my twitchy fingers together. "And this is my sister, Rose."

"Jay Gatsby," he said, holding my gaze for a second before turning to smile at Rose. He had bright green eyes. The kind of eyes that would catch you, even across the room in a crowded party.

"Thank you for stopping, Jay Gatsby," I said. My voice caught just the slightest bit on his full name, my tongue feeling out the sound of it. It wasn't a familiar name. It definitely wasn't a Louisville name. I wondered where he was from, what his daddy did.

"You think I see the prettiest girls in all of Louisville needing a ride and I'm not going to stop?" he was saying now, as he opened the passenger door and motioned for us to get in. Rose didn't move, so I got in first. She sighed and finally slid in next to me.

"Don't go kissing him, just because he's giving us a ride," Rose

whispered, as Jay walked back around to the driver's seat. She sounded like more of a snow goose than Mother.

"I won't kiss him *because* of the ride," I whispered back. "I'll do it because he's handsome. Did you notice his eyes?" Rose shook her head, not because she didn't notice, but because she found me incorrigible. In an adorable way, of course.

Jay got back in the car, put his hands on the steering wheel, and suddenly I was close enough to him that I felt the length of his leg against my own. I didn't move away, toward Rose. Instead I touched his arm gently and thanked him again for the ride. "We were so lucky to run into you," I said.

"Daisy Fay," he said softly. "I think I was the lucky one."

"Mr Gatsby, are you following me?" I'd spotted him across the crowded room at Marcy Hillet's party—he was walking toward the door, and I'd run to catch up with him before he disappeared from me again. Now, I stood before him, out of breath.

Exactly one week had passed since he'd driven me and Rose to the almshouse, then insisted on waiting and driving us back home. And tonight I saw those bright green eyes across the dance floor, stunning and hypnotic from afar, as I knew they'd be. I'd been looking for them, for him, ever since I got out of his car a week ago. I had not been able to stop thinking about him, the easy sound of his voice, the solid weight of his body, and the green pools of his eyes. The truth was, if I'd known exactly where to find him, I might've been the one following him.

"Daisy Fay," he said now. A smile erupted across his face, and he leaned down and kissed my hand. His lips lingered for a thrilling moment. And then he clasped my fingers. "I've been hoping to

run into you again.” *Hoping?* Not exactly following me, or, even making an effort to find me.

“Funny,” I said. “I’ve been hoping you’d stop by all week to say hello.” When he’d dropped me and Rose off at our house last week, that was how he’d left things. *Maybe I’ll stop by and say hello sometime.* But then days had passed, he hadn’t stopped by, and I’d wondered if I’d imagined that moment of connection I’d felt between the two of us in his car.

“I did stop by!” he said now, shouting to be heard above the din of the crowd and the loud swell of the dance music. “I asked your father to let you know. Didn’t he tell you?”

I shook my head. Daddy had just returned on Tuesday from Chicago, and leave it to him to wreak havoc on my social life the moment he got back. Daddy didn’t much care for me hanging around with soldiers; as Daddy said, they were unrefined men, hiding behind their uniforms. If I was going to hang around with a man, let it be a Louisville society man, from a good family, at least. Daddy didn’t care that I found those men dreadfully boring. I had no interest in hearing about their hunting trips or their whiskey, which seemed to be all the *finest young men* in Louisville had to talk about.

“Would you like to take a walk?” Jay asked, interrupting my thoughts. It was nearly September and the air had finally cooled tonight. But the sounds of gaiety and laughter from the party had been interspersed with distant claps of thunder all night.

“Now?” I laughed. “But it’s going to storm.”

He pulled me toward the front door anyway, and I let him lead me outside. It was loud and stifling hot inside the party and my best friend, Jordan, had gotten a headache and had already gone home early. I was happy to get out of there, with Jay. The night air

was damp, thick with the impending storm, and I shivered, imagining being caught in the rain, holding on to him for warmth. That thought was tempered only briefly by the thought of the look on Daddy's face if I were to come home a soaking wet mess. But right now, it was still dry and cool, and Jay took my arm, and we walked.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Jay said, breaking our silence after a little while. I nodded. "I actually was following you." I leaned in closer to him, held tighter to his arm, waiting for him to explain. "I asked around at camp about you, asked if anyone knew where you might be tonight."

"My social schedule is that transparent, I suppose," I said. "All of Camp Taylor knows my comings and goings, hmm?"

"This was the best party in town tonight, I heard," he said. "And where else would Daisy Fay be?" He spoke matter-of-factly, not teasing.

"Where else indeed?" I murmured. "The best party in town, and yet we've left it, you and I."

"I like it out here alone with you better." He squeezed my hand lightly. A warmth coursed my entire arm, and I squeezed his hand back.

We crossed the street, holding hands as we walked, heading in the opposite direction of my house, toward the river. Thunder rumbled closer; it shook the ground, but neither of us made a move to turn back.

There had been other soldiers this summer, ones I'd danced with, flirted with, two I'd even kissed whose full names escaped me now. But there was something about Jay Gatsby that felt different. It might have been the way he'd looked at me at the crowded party, the way he had looked at me the other day in his car. As if he could

see past my blue silk dress and perfectly coiffed hair, see beyond all that. *See me.*

Deep down, the truth was I wanted to be more than a pretty girl. I wanted to be someone who mattered, but I hadn't quite figured out how yet. I wanted to be someone who didn't have to go to the best party in town, because maybe there were other, more interesting things I wanted to do. But how could Jay see this in me, when no one else ever had?

"Tell me about yourself, Jay Gatsby. I want to know you," I said now.

"There's not much to tell," he said, shrugging.

"I doubt that," I said.

We were almost at the river, and we stopped walking and turned to face each other at that spot right by the banks where Rose and I used to chase fireflies at dusk when we were little girls. A flash of lightning illuminated the sky now, and for a second, I could see Jay's face brightly, clearly. There was an intensity in his eyes, his expression, that told a different story: he'd seen and experienced things I couldn't even begin to fathom. It wasn't only that he was older than me, but also that he had already lived a whole entire lifetime outside of Louisville.

"Come on," I said. "Tell me something. One thing."

"I love the water," he finally said. "I had a friend who used to take me sailing on Lake Superior. Being out there, it makes you realize how great the whole wide world is. And I'd feel like I could do anything when I was out there. Be anyone. I'm always searching for that feeling on land . . . But I can never quite get back there."

I thought about Jay, lying out on a boat in a great big expanse of blue, in a place where the water meets the sky, and I smiled at him.

The first slow drop of rain hit my cheek, and Jay rested his hand on my face. I leaned closer to him. The rain came harder, but I didn't move.

"The thing is," he said, softly. "The way I feel out on the water? I'm feeling that right now. Here with you."

"Oh, Jay." My voice broke a little on his name. "That might be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

"I don't have anything to offer you, Daisy," he said, his lips inches from my own, the rain falling harder, pounding in my ears.

So he didn't have money, or a family name we recognized. But I wasn't Daddy. That didn't mean anything to me. I was eighteen, and I wanted for nothing. "I don't care about that," I said.

"You should turn and walk away from me," he murmured. "Don't look back."

I stood so close to him that when I spoke again, my words tumbled into his mouth: "Stop talking, Jay Gatsby, and kiss me."