



A NOVEL

THE GIRL FROM THE PAPERS

JENNIFER L. WRIGHT

PRAISE FOR JENNIFER L. WRIGHT

“*The Girl from the Papers* is a daring and suspenseful read that paints an alluring portrait of the American outlaw in the public enemy era. Wright does a stellar job penning complex characters fighting for self-worth and identity in all the wrong places. This haunting tale is a poignant reminder that no matter how dark the path one chooses, redemption is possible if one simply turns around. Readers will be captivated from beginning to bittersweet end.”

AMANDA COX, Christy Award–winning author of *The Edge of Belonging* and *The Secret Keepers of Old Depot Grocery*

“Readers of suspenseful historical fiction rejoice! Jennifer L. Wright has written a fast-paced, sit-on-the-edge-of-your-seat story that will keep you up past your bedtime to find out what happens next. Even better, though, is the thread of inspiration Wright wove into *The Girl from the Papers*. Throughout Beatrice’s story we’re reminded that no matter what chaos enters our life, nothing can separate us from the love of God. Be sure to grab yourself a copy!”

SUSIE FINKBEINER, author of *The All-American*

“*The Girl from the Papers* is flat-out brilliant. If you’re looking for a gripping historical novel with nuanced and complicated characters, this is it. Jennifer L. Wright pulls no punches, nor does she take the easy road through a gritty story. For fans of unflinching fiction such as *The Nature of Fragile Things* by Susan Meissner.”

KATIE POWNER, author of *Where the Blue Sky Begins*

“Jennifer Wright ignites stories about women and girls with a passion, heart, and heat that can’t be extinguished. In *The Girl from the Papers*, Jenn plunges readers straight into a Bonnie and Clyde–inspired story to explore the dreams and drive

of a young girl struggling to break free from life's abuse and doldrums and become a high-flying star. But what will young Beatrice Carraway discover in the glare of the newspapers' spotlight? This story won't let go until its final pages surrender her life-changing truths with bold lessons for us all."

PATRICIA RAYBON, award-winning author of *All That Is Secret* and *I Told the Mountain to Move*

"Brimming with grit and beauty, *The Girl from the Papers* is a poignant study in human frailty and unending mercy. Set in the bleak days of the Depression, a young woman searches for a love that will heal her wounded heart in a story that is as hopeful as it is heartbreaking. *The Girl from the Papers* will remain in your thoughts long after the last tearstained page is turned."

STEPHANIE LANDSEM, author of *Code Name Edelweiss*

"Jennifer L. Wright brilliantly takes her readers on a journey of crime and passion, faith and surrender in her latest novel, *The Girl from the Papers*. From the first words of the brief yet intriguing prologue to the final heart-wrenching pages of this Great Depression era tale, Wright's extraordinary storytelling offers an intense, page-turning experience I will not soon forget. Bravo!"

MICHELLE SHOCKLEE, award-winning author of *Count the Nights by Stars* and *Under the Tulip Tree*

"Once again, Jennifer L. Wright sets the gold standard for vivid imagery and poignant descriptions. Inspired by the infamous exploits of Bonnie and Clyde, *The Girl from the Papers* is an edge-of-your-seat kind of read, both heartbreaking and hopeful. This book delivers the perfect balance of high-speed suspense and moments of profound introspection."

NAOMI STEPHENS, Carol Award-winning author of *Shadow among Sheaves*

“Sometimes what we want isn’t what’s best. It’s a truth Jennifer Wright explores in this story of a waitress–turned–infamous bank robber. Despite being West Texas dirt, Beatrice Carraway has always wanted to see her name in lights. Unfortunately notoriety as the Salacious Sheba drags her into the dark underworld of criminals willing to do anything for the next big score. A nod to Bonnie and Clyde, *The Girl from the Papers* is an insightful escapade about the importance of being known and loved anyway.”

JANYRE TROMP, author of *Shadows in the Mind’s Eye*

“This is historical fiction as it is meant to be told: a glimpse (based on true events) through the eyes of people caught up in the maelstrom of world events beyond their control.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *Come Down Somewhere*

“Intelligent and arresting. . . . In the moving historical novel *Come Down Somewhere*, a nuclear test has explosive consequences for a burgeoning friendship.”

FOREWORD REVIEWS

“[A] lovely debut. . . . Wright’s adept depiction of the times capture the grit of the Dust Bowl. Fans of Tracie Peterson should check this out.”

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *If It Rains*

“The treatment of historical events is gritty and unflinching, similar to other Dust Bowl fiction, like Susie Finkbeiner’s *Cup of Dust* and Kristin Hannah’s *Four Winds*. Character growth is the highlight of this novel.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL on *If It Rains*

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The Girl from the Papers

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The Girl from the Papers is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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PROLOGUE

NOW

My mama always told me I would live and die as a nobody.

Here at the end . . . I couldn't help but wish she'd been right.



CHAPTER ONE

THEN
NOVEMBER 1919

My earliest memories are of sequins. Sequins and bruises. But the sequins came first.

Growing up in the small West Texas town of Wingate, color was a rarity. Shades of brown and yellow stretched for miles around our gray town, the lone reprieve the soft green of grass or pale purple of wildflowers that sometimes sprouted in the spring—but only if the rains came. And the rains rarely came.

So I had to rely on my sequins.

My mother said it was my father's idea to start me on the pageant scene. He put my name down for my first beautiful baby contest in 1911 because, in his words, "there weren't nothing or no one more beautiful than our Bea." And he must have been right—I

won my first trophy at only five months old. And then I just kept on winning them.

In fact, it's hard to remember a time I *wasn't* onstage. I have hazy memories of pageants and shows when I was little: my mother's tight smile behind the scenes and my father's watery eyes in the audience, before his death in 1914 (an unfortunate alignment of my father, a frayed rope, and a pallet of bricks on a construction site in Pumphrey—a gruesome blessing, according to Mama, that perhaps saved him from an even worse fate in the fields of France a few short years later). But it's after his death that my recollection really comes into its own—and what it recollects is the limelight.

“And now, here's Little Miss Beatrice Carraway of Wingate, Texas, performing ‘Alabama Jubilee!’”

“Look at her go, folks! I've never seen a four-year-old who could tap that way!”

“Truly, the face of an angel. Miss Beatrice Carraway, Little Miss Firecracker of 1916.”

With my little sister, Eleanor, in tow, it was a constant flurry of dresses and dances, performances and preening, rouge and road trips. We traveled all over Runnels County, and when that got too small, we traveled even farther. To Sweetwater and Abilene, San Angelo and Odessa. Even to Dallas, the mother of all cities (at least in my childish mind), where we stayed with my nana and grandpop, who had a house across the Trinity River. From their upstairs window, I could see the downtown skyscrapers glinting in the sunlight, a sparkle in the world matched only by my sequins and trophies. It couldn't have been a coincidence.

For nine straight years, the universe revolved around me—my shows, my schedule, even my money, without which my widowed mother would not have been able to keep my sister and me fed and clothed. I was a blossom in a garden of weeds, a star whose light

kept the darkness of my father's death away, a savior to my family and a gift to the world.

Until one day when I just . . . *wasn't* anymore.

"Mama!" I scowled at my reflection in the mirror as I scrutinized my cheeks. They were too pale; the cheap rouge my mother had purchased just wasn't cutting it the way the good stuff used to. "I need the Mary Garden face powder! This Mennen stuff makes my eyes look like dirty bathwater. They are *supposed* to look like the sky." I batted my lashes at myself for emphasis as I waited for her response.

Nothing.

"Mama!" I yelled again.

But the house only popped and creaked with the late-fall winds.

Blowing an irritated snort out of my nose, I smoothed my blonde waves before making my way from my bedroom and into the hall. The putrid scent of something burning assaulted me. My toes curled over the threadbare rug, which barely insulated them from the cold hardwood beneath, as I followed the smell to the small kitchen at the rear of the house.

My five-year-old sister stared at me from the far side of the table, her bare feet swinging over the yellowed linoleum, an uneasy smile on her face.

"Eleanor," I said slowly. "Where's Mama?"

She shrugged.

"El, what—?" My question broke off as I saw smoke billowing from a pot on the stove, blacker than the iron range itself. I let out a yelp and ran toward it, barely remembering to grab a towel to protect my hand before yanking the crock off the flame. Coughing, I threw the smoldering pan into the sink, pulling open the back door with one hand while shooing out the smoke with the other. My eyes and nostrils burned with the stench.

Eleanor sat at the table, mouth still twisted in a nervous smile. Her dark eyes—she'd gotten our father's instead of our mother's, like me—gazed at the small puffs of smoke wafting from the pot.

I scraped my tongue with my teeth, trying to remove the taste of char from my mouth. "El, were you trying to cook?"

She shook her head.

I looked into the pan, the blackened remains of *something* stuck to the sides and bottom in one unrecognizable clump. "What is this?"

Eleanor pointed to the counter, where a box of oats stood open.

"Oatmeal? Is this oatmeal?"

She nodded.

"Was Mama cooking you oatmeal?"

A nod.

"Then where is she now?"

At that moment, the door to the side bedroom flew open, and my mother burst forth from its depths. Well, a version of my mother, at least.

It was the smell that got to me first. More overpowering than Eleanor's neglected breakfast. Not lye and dirt and yesterday's dinner, but flowers and a hint of musk. The woman before me had bright-blond hair pulled back at the sides and deep-blue eyes set against long black lashes. But where my mother was normally plain and—dare I say—frumpy, this woman's complexion was smooth, her lips glossy, her figure not hidden beneath a shapeless, well-worn dress. No, this woman's dress was blue muslin and formfitting, calves lengthened and accentuated above new leather heels. To top it all off, her cheeks were pink and rosy—a rosiness that could only be achieved with the Mary Garden face powder I was told we could no longer afford.

I narrowed my eyes, but my mother brushed past me like I

wasn't even there and grabbed the smoking pan with a shout. "Eleanor! Eleanor, honey, I'm so sorry! I completely forgot this was still on the stove."

My sister gave a small shrug, averting her eyes. I, on the other hand, cleared my throat.

"I'll make you something else. Let me see what we have . . ." She began rummaging through our meager pantry, completely oblivious to my tapping foot. "No . . . no, there's no time for . . . but maybe I could—"

I cleared my throat again.

"—break into our summer preserves. I believe I still have some strawberry rhubarb from Mrs. Moore's garden. I was saving it for—"

I cleared my throat *again*, this time with as much sass as I could muster. Which was a lot.

My mother finally sighed, a deep and aggravated exhale from which anyone else would have shrunk back. "What is it, Beatrice?"

"You almost burned down the house."

"Oh, stop it."

"You did. *And* you're wearing *my* rouge. I thought you said we couldn't afford it anymore."

"We can't."

"Then how come you have it? *I'm* the one who's going onstage, not you. If anyone in this family is going to wear it, it needs to be me." I glanced at the clock above the doorframe. "And I need it now because we're going to be late. It's an hour and a half to Big Spring. You know I have a preshow ritual, and I hate to be rushed."

My mother turned her back and continued to rummage inside the pantry. "We're not going to Big Spring."

"What?"

"I said we're not going to Big Spring."

I glanced at Eleanor, but my sister was busy poking the burnt remains of her breakfast.

“What do you mean we’re not going? It’s the Harvest Pageant, and I—”

“And you came in fifth last year. And third the year before that.”

I stuck out my chin, pretending her words didn’t land like a punch. “It . . . it was a fluke,” I stammered. “But I have a new routine. I—”

“Bea—”

“I’ve learned all the words to ‘Poor Butterfly’ and some real swell taps to—”

“Beatrice.”

“—go along with it. You’ve only seen me in practice, but boy, once I get that dress on—the one with the red sequins, remember? From the Fourth of July pag—”

“Enough, Beatrice!” The shrillness of my mother’s voice was a knife through my plea, and when she spun around to look at me, there was a redness in her cheeks that had nothing to do with the coveted rouge. “We won’t be reusing your Fourth of July dress because you didn’t win that pageant either. Or the one before that. Or the one before that. You haven’t placed first in over a year or in the top five in six months. You’ve grown out of your cuteness, and your childish talents aren’t enough to take you to the next level of the circuitry.”

I recoiled as if physically struck. But Mama wasn’t finished yet.

“Your father may have thought the sun rose and set on you, but he’s gone. Dead. And we cannot afford to keep traveling around for a losing routine. If you haven’t noticed, we are barely keeping things together as it is now. We are not going to Big Spring, and

we will not be going to another pageant or show from here on out. So enough, Beatrice. We are *done*.”

The silence that punctuated the end of her tirade was thick, obscene even. Pride wrestled both anger and sadness within my nine-year-old chest. No, I hadn't been winning lately; I would give her that. But that didn't mean I *couldn't*. I just needed another chance. A *good* chance, with the right dress and the right song and the right face powder. I was Beatrice Carraway, after all.

The star. The showgirl.

And what was a showgirl without her show?

“Mama—”

“Beatrice.” My mother closed her eyes. Her hands reached up to rub them, then stopped as if she'd remembered her makeup. “I've said my piece. It's done. Decided.”

Heat flushed up my neck. My lips twisted into a ferocious pout. “What about me?” I snapped. “Don't I get a say in it?”

With another dramatic sigh, she lifted Eleanor from her spot at the table. “Once you start making money rather than draining it, then you can have a say. Now go get dressed. Both of you. Something nice. Maybe they'll have something for you two to eat at church.”

“Church?” We'd never gone to church a day in our lives. “I ain't going to no church.”

“You will if you want to avoid a tanned backside.”

I clenched my jaw. I wanted to scream at her. To stomp and kick and break things until she saw how stupid she was being. I wanted to force her into that car by sheer stubborn willpower and make her drive me to Big Spring so I could prove her wrong. My entire body twitched with a building tantrum.

My mother held my gaze, her steely eyes steadfast and

unflinching. Daring me. On her hip, my sister dipped her chin to her chest, refusing to look at either of us.

Eleanor. The sight of my sister's dark-brown locks hanging over her face—hiding her when she could not be hidden—deflated my rage as only she could.

I took a deep breath. I would not shriek. I would not rave. Not now. But not for my mother's sake. No. Because the only thing I cared about more than pageants was my sister.

I shot daggers in my mother's direction before retreating down the hallway.

"Scowl all you want," she called after me. And then, quieter: "You're not enough to save this family anymore. Now it's my turn."

I held my head high, pretending not to hear. Pretending it didn't hurt. No matter what my mother said, I could still put on a show.