April 25, 1838, Cincinnati, Ohio

When the steamboat *Moselle* blew apart just off its Cincinnati landing, I was sitting below deck in the ladies’ cabin, sewing tea leaves into little muslin bags and plotting revenge on my cousin Comfort for laughing at me during dinner.

I had many ways of getting back at her. Sometimes I put a few darts in her cuffs so that when her wrists swelled, which they always did when she was performing, she would have to cut the cloth later to get her arms out. Or I snipped her lace ties just a little, which kept her from pulling her corset as tightly as she liked; or I sewed a small pigeon feather into the back of one of her costumes so that when she walked across the stage the shaft scratched at her skin.

I was Comfort’s seamstress, dresser, and trunk packer. And a hundred other things as well. She was the Famous Comfort Vertue. That was her stage name.

But she was not famous, and she was not related to Lord and Lady Vertue of Suffolk, England, as she claimed at dinner. Comfort was nearly thirty but gave her age as my own, twenty-two. In the last six months, offers for ingénue roles had begun to dry up, but she was not yet willing to move on to stately matriarchs or widows, since those parts received second or third billing at best. Instead she booked us both tickets to St. Louis on the steamboat *Moselle* in search, as she put it, of new opportunities.
We had quarreled about it in Pittsburgh. I wanted to take an overland coach to New York, where there were more opportunities. But Comfort had had enough of New York.

“We haven’t enough money for that, Frog. Anyway, I’ve got an offer from the New Theatre in St. Louis. The director is putting together a company.”

She smiled at me. She was a very beautiful woman, my cousin, with bright, reddish-gold hair that I curled in rags for her every night, and clear blue eyes, and good teeth. Although her nose was ever so slightly crooked, it called attention to the cleft on her chin.

“A firm offer?” I asked.

She liked to say that she rescued me after my mother died, but that was not true. She recognized an opportunity is all. Like the opportunity she now saw in St. Louis. No one knew us there. She could be twenty-two and just starting out, instead of almost thirty and stumbling along. I would be who I always was: her dark-haired cousin who sewed for her and stayed well off the stage. I could be twenty-two also. Which I was.

On the afternoon the Moselle went down, we’d already been on board for six days and expected to be on it for six more. At dinner, Comfort and I sat at a large table near the center of the dining room with seven or eight other guests, all of us pulled up close to the white cloth with its small dots of gravy stains spattered over it, while men in white jackets brought out platters from the kitchen: broiled and fried chicken, breaded cod, cold ham, hot bread, pickled peaches, preserved cucumbers, and big ironstone bowls of steaming vegetables. The dining room smelled of roasted meat and turpentine, and there was a low but constant roar from the boilers, which we had to speak over. This was no problem for Comfort, a trained actress. One of the ladies at our table, Mrs. Flora Howard, a red-faced abolitionist—I
called her Florid Howard to myself—was someone we’d begun to eat all our meals with. She was telling us a funny story about a mule, and I suppose I must have been smiling, because another one of our party, Mr. Thaddeus Mason, an actor like Comfort, suddenly said, “Why, May! What a beautiful smile!”

I immediately felt self-conscious and pulled my lips together.

“Now see what you’ve done,” Mrs. Howard said. “I do believe I’ve never seen May’s teeth before.”

“The smile that is all the more entrancing because it’s so rare,” Thaddeus said in his poetry-reciting voice. Thaddeus was a shade shorter than average and wore his curly blond hair rather long, like a younger man. We knew him from the Third Street Theatre, where Comfort played opposite him for a month. Mrs. Flora Howard had been visiting her brother in Shippingport and now was going to visit another brother in Vevay. She was a heavyset woman who wore long ropes of pearls and silver chains every day over the drapery of her silk dresses. A great many yards of fabric went into each dress she wore, and I wondered if the cost alone wouldn’t induce her to slim down a bit; but Comfort told me that Mrs. Howard was a wealthy widow with a large, beautifully furnished house in Cincinnati—Comfort always seems to find out about such things—so perhaps she felt she could afford her weight.

Comfort tilted her head at Mrs. Howard and smiled her dimpled, childlike smile; she was used to being the one who received the attention and she didn’t like sharing it with me. Nor did I like taking any share, for that matter.

“You have a great deal of talent,” she said to Mrs. Howard, “if you can make my cousin smile. And if you can make her laugh, why, I’ll give you a dollar. I believe I’ve heard May laugh only twice in all of my life.”

An exaggeration. I dislike exaggerations.

“I laugh sometimes,” I said.