Act 1:

We Meet

*(and it’s a doozy)*

New York City

1924

*1.*

There’s this joint on Christopher Street, a joint I’d know like the beat of my own heart, if I happened to have one. They used to call it the Christopher Club, and now it’s just Christopher’s. When you enter through a door in the basement of the grocery next door, you first smell the rotting vegetables and the cat piss, but never worry: all that stink clears up when the cigarettes and the liquor engulf you. And the music. The best jazz south of Ninety-Sixth Street. The bass player’s a good friend of mine. Bruno. I don’t know his last name; nobody does. We don’t deal in surnames unless absolutely necessary.

Now, I don’t inhabit the place every evening—I’m a working girl, you know, and I need my beauty sleep—but as I happen to live on the other side of said grocery, in a tiny room at the back of the fourth floor, I like to drop in from time to time, friendly-like, for a drink and a dance and a smoke and a gossip. As I’m doing now. Right there in the corner table—no, the other corner, next to the music—wearing a black dress and crimson lips and a head of strawberry hair. (The hair’s natural, the lips aren’t.) And that darling rosy-scrubbed black-and-white boy I’m flirting with, the one who’s taken the trouble to dress like a gentleman? That’s Billy Marshall, my latest. A Princeton boy. You know the type. He’s reading me this poem he’s written in my honor—a real sweetie pie, my Billy-boy—but I’m afraid I’m not listening. A man’s just walked through the door like a prizefighter looking for a prize, the kind of fellow who demands your immediate attention. Square shoulders, bony jaw. Plain gray suit, sharp felt hat. You know the type. The thing is, you don’t see him around a joint like this, a joint in the Village, long wooden bar and no chandelier, starving artists and starving artists’ models, queers and poets, Jews and Negroes, swank babies like Billy-boy descending southward in search of local color. We haven’t seen a gray suit around here since that stockbroker last year who lost his way back to the IRT station from a Bedford Street brothel on the down-low, if you know what I mean. Where he got the password, God knows. Anyway, this particular suit is cold sober, overcoat over his arm, nose as monochrome as the rest of him. Wouldn’t know a good time if it kissed him on the kisser and unbuttoned his starched white shirt.

Right away, I give the eyebrows to the owner, the man behind the bar—we call him Christopher, nobody knows his real name—and he gives the eyebrows right back, only more in the nature of a question mark. I cast the gaze back to the newcomer. Christopher makes this tiny nod and strolls down the bar, directly in the fellow’s line of sight, and braces two hands on the edge of the counter, like the knots of a terribly thick rope.

“Darling,” says Billy, “are you listening?”

“Of course I’m listening, sweetie. Go on.”

By now, the stranger has reached the bar, along a line right down the center of Christopher’s wingspan. He sets one foot on the rail and one elbow on the counter and he asks for something, I can’t hear what. Over the rim of his shoulder, Christopher’s eyebrows glide upward.

“You don’t like it.”

“I adore it! I think it’s awfully clever. And those rhymes. Why, you could have Bruno here set it to music.”

“It’s a *sonnet*, Gin, an English sonnet. Not a music hall song.”

“You can make a lot of bread from a music hall song.”

“Who cares about money?” He seizes my hand on the table. “I care about *you,* darling. I care about taking you away from all this.”

“And what if like *all this* just fine?”

“You’re too fine and good to be sitting here in this lousy dump. You deserve a better life, out in the country, where you don’t have to lift a finger, where you don’t have to spend eight hours a day in slavery to some lecherous banker, where you don’t have to think about anything so crass as—”

“You know something, Billy-boy? I generally find that people who say they don’t care about money are the exact same people who’ve never had to earn any.”

“You’re right. You’re quite right. And that’s what I want for—”

“Cherub,” I say kindly, returning his hand, “will you excuse me a moment? It seems my company is required at the bar.”

2.

Now, before you go forming any ill opinions of me, let me assure you I’ve never taken a cold dime from Billy the Kid. A drink or two, maybe, but no kale. I don’t allow any gentleman to pay for the privilege of my company. I’ve seen too many girls get into hot water that way, and anyway Billy’s such a sweet fellow. We met a few weeks ago at some uptown party or another—I think Julie Schuyler introduced us, she’s a friend of mine, if you can call it that—and he looked at me and I looked at him, and he had this lovely sheepish clean-eared handsomeness, this scrubbed jaw and pink cheek and full lower lip, this brown eye just waiting for a match to set it smoldering. Lean, straight shoulders and new skin, his shirt front as white and flat as pure marble, his head tilted forward and his mouth cracked open, his pink tongue fumbling for a greeting. I said, *Hello there, I’m Gin*, and he said, *I’m Billy,* and I said, *Pleased to meet you, Billy the Kid,* emphasis on the *pleased*, and he just blushed into his blond, curling hair and I fell in love. I took his hand and we danced a bit, and then we went out into the cold Manhattan morning and kissed right there on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Sixty-First Street, while the frozen braches of Central Park scratched against the nearby wind, and his lips were exactly as soft and warm as I feared. Later, he asked me if my name was really Gin, and I said no, it was Geneva, but people called me Ginger because of my hair, and Ginger became Gin. His face showed relief. I guess he was afraid I might be a drunk.

3.

Unlike Billy—that tall, slender sapling, full of promise—the stranger at the bar is a live oak. Limbs thick, neck like a trunk. Ears planted on each side of his head. His shorn dark hair puts me in mind of a pelt. Next to his elbow, atop the plain black overcoat, his hat contains the perfect curves of a Fifth Avenue haberdashery, the kind that charges you a mint and sends you out a gentleman. Next to his other elbow sits a glass of sweet milk, straight up.

“Evening, Gin.” Christopher nods to the stranger. “Fellow was asking for you.”

I point to the milk. “Make it two, will you?”

Christopher turns away, and I hold out my hand. “Ginger Kelly. I couldn’t help admiring your shoulders. Do you swing from trees?”

“Not since I was ten.” (Voice like a bass drum, beaten by a knotted rope.)

“Crush coconuts between your bare palms?”

“That depends on what you mean by coconuts.” He takes my hand. “Oliver Anson.”

“What a civilized-sounding name. Irish?”

“English.”

“My mistake.”

The milk lands on the counter. Christopher adds a look that asks whether I require any assistance, and I return a look that says *Keep an eye on Billy for me, will you?* I lift my glass. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

Clink.

Drink.

The band starts a new piece, drawling, full of blues. Bruno’s bass thrums up and down. The milk is ice-cold and creamy and pure on the tongue, the taste of childhood, and as I study Anson’s face over the rim of the glass, I consider the contrast between his genteel clothes and his rocky, tanned face. His eyes, almost without color. I can usually take down the measure of a man at first glance—it’s a talent of mine, the way some folks can whip up a soufflé or paint someone’s face—but this one isn’t adding up. A cop doesn’t have the dough to dress like that. A gangster doesn’t have the taste. Anyway, he’s young. Not as young as Billy, but younger than I thought. The few lines on his face are new and kind of faint, as if sketched by a needle. I set down the milk.

“Tell me something, Mr. Anson. Just how did you come to know my name and whereabouts?”

“Does it matter?”

“It might. A girl making her way in the big city can’t be too careful.”

“I quite agree.”

“And you can’t trust a living soul, I’ve found. Always some do-gooder skulking around, you know, the vice patrol, looking to catch a girl out on the town for the crime of having a good time.”

“You think I’m some kind of bull?”

“Now, what kind of question is that? We’re just standing here, drinking our milk like good little boys and girls. Nothing wrong with that.”

He glances at Billy and back again. “Is he yours?”

“Maybe he is and maybe he isn’t. I don’t believe that’s any of your business.”

“I think he’s about to make it my business.”

So Billy storms up, flushed to the temples, neck pink against his white collar, and inserts himself between me and Anson. Demands to know what the devil he thinks he’s doing. They’re the exact same height, maybe six feet and a hair of the dog, but I believe Billy weighs about half as much. Anson replies to this perfectly legitimate question with the polite tolerance you might lay on a stale doughnut. Says something about having a private word with me.

“Well, you *can’t* have a private word with her.”

“Can’t I?”

“No. Miss Kelly has *nothing* to do withyou, nothing at all. She’s *entirely* above your notice, as far above as a girl could *possibly* be.”

“I see.” Mr. Anson finishes his milk, lays a dollar bill on the counter. Collects his hat and his overcoat. Nods to me in such a way that you could almost call it a bow. “A pleasure, Miss Kelly.”

“All mine, Mr. Anson.”

He walks away, leaving that whole dollar bill unchanged on the counter, straight up the steps and out the door, and Billy turns to me, all bright and crackly with triumph, the dear young thing.

“Well! I sure as hell showed *him*, didn’t I?”

4.

The powder room at the back of Christopher’s isn’t much to speak of, and I’ve seen a crapper or two in my time. I mean, it’s a basement of a basement. What are you going to do? There’s about enough room to swing a cat, if you’re the kind of damned brute who swings cats, and your cat belongs to a pygmy tribe. The tiles are black and white, the mirror’s chipped, the sink bears the stains of a thousand furtive cigarettes. The toilet’s liable to flush you down whole, if you’re not careful. In the corner, there’s a narrow ventilation shaft—I use the term loosely—leading to the stinking back garden of the next-door grocery, and I am presently contemplating said shaft as a means of possible escape. Not from poor Billy, whose bravery in the face of Tarzan has just about melted down the sides of that empty cavity in my chest, but from the nearby army of New York’s finest who, I feel certain, await only a flicker of Tarzan’s eyelashes to storm the building in thunderbolts of moral righteousness. Now, if I stand on the toilet, the pig might just fly. I’ve got the figure for it, thanks to poverty and cigarettes. On the other hand, who wants to die in a ventilation shaft?

You may be surprised to hear this, but when I first arrived on Manhattan island two years ago, wearing my heart on my sleeve and ten additional pounds around my hips, I had never once sipped the nectar of juniper nor breathed the leaf of tobacco. It’s true! My dear mother had scraped and saved to send me to a nice Catholic school fifty miles away, and I’ll be damned if those nuns didn’t have their wicked way with me. A year of college didn’t improve matters, what with the Wagnerian dorm mother and the scarcity of men. So there I stood in the middle of Pennsylvania Station, in a hat and a sweet pink coat, clutching the tiny valise that contained my all, just like every starlet who’s ever set foot in her land of dreams, and I thought I had made a terrible mistake, that I would never belong in this sea of stink and vice, this hive of determined bees lining their cells with honey. And then I tasted the *honey*, honey, and I started to understand what New York City was all about. Hallelujah. I started to glimpse my place in the hive, how each tiny insect contributed her mite of pollen, how grand it was to live in a hive like this at all, even if your cell measured one inch square and lacked proper ventilation, even if you had to pawn your favorite shoes each month to pay the milkman for a quart of milk, even if—well, you get the idea. The point of Manhattan is that you occupy a cell in the hive at all. That you belong. That you have your seat at the Christopher Club bar, and that seat, if you’re clever, can propel you from a typing pool downtown to a swank party uptown to the front of a camera in a tatty Village studio, so any man with a nickel in his pocket can admire the tilt of your tits.

And I’ll be damned if I’m ready to give up my seat just yet.

I set one foot on the seat of the toilet. Brace my hand on the wall. Hoist my bones upward, upward to the hole in the ceiling, fill my lungs with the reek of sewage, and then, of course, comes the exact second the boots clamor down the hallway and the door flies open, and the powder room fills with gentlemen in blue suits and billy clubs, unamused by my predicament.

5.

About those nuns.

Maybe I was a little unfair, a moment ago. There’s nothing like a good convent education, as I often tell my gentlemen friends, and even my lady ones. Your knuckles may suffer and your knees may burn, but the poetry and the multiplication tables are yours for eternity. Along with the guilt, but who doesn’t need a little shame from time to time, to keep her on the straight and narrow? Anyway, there was this one sister, Sister Esme, who loved me best, and to prove it she rapped my knuckles the hardest and sent me to penitence the longest. When I turned seventeen, she called me into her office—about as inviting as a Assyrian tomb—and gave me a beautiful Bible, in which she had painstakingly marked all the passages she thought relevant to my character, such as it was. You can imagine. She told me that of all the girls who had filtered through her classroom, I was the most unruly, the smartest-mouthed, the least tractable, the most irreligious and argumentative, and she fully expected to hear great things from me. She also said (assuming a terribly serious mien) that she had only one piece of advice for me, which was this: I owed confession only to God. Not to my fellow man, not to my instructors, not *even* to my parents (this accompanied by a significant slant to the eyebrows). And most especially (her voice grew passionate) not to any person, howsoever persuasive, howsoever threatening, belonging to the judiciary branch of the government, whether local, state or federal. My conscience belonged to my Maker, and to Him alone. Did I understand?

Well, naturally I didn’t. My God, I was only seventeen! I had so little experience of the world outside the walls of that school. But—in the usual way of childhood advice—Sister Esme’s words return to me with new meaning as I slouch upon a metal bench in my cell at the XX Precinct, cheek by miserable jowl with the other female patrons of the Christopher Club that January midnight.

Now, I don’t mean to startle you, but I’ve never landed in the pokey until tonight, though you might say the visit’s overdue. I guess the place is about what I expected. We’re a tawdry lot, sunk into nervy, silent boredom. Dotty’s chewing her nails, Muriel’s worrying a loop of sequins on her sleeve, such as it is. One girl, gaunt and ravishing, leans cross-armed against the damp concrete wall, staring right through the bars to the tomato-faced policeman on the chair outside. She’s too beautiful for him, and he knows it. Looking everywhere but her. I don’t know her name, but I’ve seen her around. She’s wearing a shimmering silver dress, ending in a fringe, and her arms are white and bare and cold. Someone once told me she was Christopher’s girl, and I guess it might be true. Nobody ever bothers her for a smoke and a dance, for example. She sits by herself most nights at the end of the bar, staying up past bedtime, sipping cocktail after cocktail, trailing a neverending cigarette from her neverending fingers, disguising the color of her eyes behind ribbons of smoldering kohl. The kohl’s now smudged, but the smolder remains. Liable to ignite the poor cop’s tomato head any second. She gave her name as Millicent Merriweather—I pay close attention to these details, see—but then none of us told the booking rookie our genuine monikers. Where’s the fun in that? And I’ll be damned if this vamp is a Millie.

There’s a clock on the wall, above Tomato-Head’s cap. A damned slow clock, if you ask me. For the past half an hour, I’ve amused myself in priming my nerves for every twitch of the minute hand, moving us sixty seconds further into the morning, and each time I’m early. Each time I teeter on the brink, unable to breathe, thinking *Now!* and *Now!* and *Now!* until finally the stinking hand moves. As amusements go, it’s a real gas. Millie the Vamp turns her head and regards me from the corner of one pitying eye. I shrug and resume my study. By the time three o’clock jumps on my spinal cord without any kind of notice from our hosts, without any sign at all that anyone’s left alive in the rest of the Precinct XX station house, I’ve had it. I call out to Tomato-Head.

“I don’t guess a girl could bum a cigarette, if she asks nicely?”

He makes this startling movement. Clutches his cap. Turns from tomato to raspberry.

“No? I guess rules are rules.” I lift my hands and stretch, an act that creates an interesting effect on my décolletage, don’t you know. “I don’t mean to be a nuisance, officer, but I do have a breakfast appointment I’d rather not miss. And this fellow happens to prefer me scrubbed up and smiling, if you know what I mean.”

Tomato-Head looks to the ceiling for relief.

“Now, don’t be embarrassed. We’re just a bunch of girls, here, the nicest girls in the world. It’s a shame, the way they turn honest girls into criminals these days, don’t you think?”

“Oh, shut your flapper, Gin,” Dotty says crossly. “It ain’t his fault.”

“No, of course not. Poor little dear. He’s just doing his job. Why, I’ll bet he’s seen the inside of a juice joint or two himself, when he’s not on duty. He doesn’t look like teetotal to me, no sir. He looks like the kind of fellow who enjoys a nice time on the town, likes to make a little whoopee—”

“Says you.”

“Don’t you think? A friendly-faced cop like that? I’ll bet he’s on our side.”

“Him?”

“Sure. Because why? Because it’s the first time the joint’s been raided, isn’t it? And Christopher’s been around since the start of the Dark Ages. So—”

“Oh, give it up.”

“So I say there’s a rat. A rat in the house. Somebody squealed, didn’t they? Hmm, officer?”

Tomato-Head chews his lips and looks ashamed.

“You see? Someone ratted Christopher out. I’ll bet it’s someone on the inside, too. I’ll bet—”

Millie turns so fast, her fringed hem takes a minute to catch up. “Be quiet, Ginger, for God’s sake. You don’t know a thing.”

In all the excitement, my legs have come uncrossed. I sit back against the wall and lift the right pole back over the left. Slide my arms back together over my cold chest. Bounce my shoe a little. Bounce, bounce. “Seems I’m right, then. The question is who.”

She narrows her eyes until they just about disappear between the charcoal rims. Turns away and says, into thin air, “No. The question is whom.”

“La de da. Someone’s got an education.”

“So do you, Ginger. I’m just not ashamed to show it.”

There’s just the littlest emphasis on the word *Ginger*, which those of you born with fire in your hair will recognize. I consider the back of Millie’s neck, and the exact tender spot I’d stick a needle, if she were one of those voodoo dolls they sell in seedy little Harlem shops. Behind my shoulders, the wall is cold and rough and damp, and the air smells of mildew. Our guard yanks a packet of cheap cigarettes from his breast pocket and starts a smoke. The brief illumination of the match scorches my eyes. Three-oh-four. Tick tock. As the familiar scent of tobacco drifts across my teeth, the eyelids start to droop. The vision of Millie’s pale, smooth neck starts to blur. Not ashamed to show it, Ginger. Not ashamed, Ginger. *Ginger.* *GINGER!*

An elbow cracks my ribs.

“Ginger! Jesus! Wake up, will you?”

I straighten off somebody’s shoulder. Adjust my jaw. Blink my eyes. Test my bones for doneness. You know how it is.

“Ginger Kelly?” A man’s voice, a man from Brooklyn or someplace.

“I’m afraid I don’t know anyone by that name.”

“Tell that to the judge,” Brooklyn replies, and the next thing I know the keys jingle jangle, the cell clangs open, the handcuffs go snap around my wrists, and let me tell you, when a girl hears that much metal rattling around in her neighborhood, she’d better start sending up every prayer the nuns ever taught her, sister, because the devil’s at the door and the Lord don’t care.

6.

My thoughts turn to Billy as this uniformed meathead drags me down the corridor, past this cell and that cell, contents murky and unknown. I wonder where they put the poor boy, whether they let him off because he’s a Marshall, whether he’s frantic about me now. Of course he is. That’s the kind of fellow he is. Dear Billy-boy. I guess I shouldn’t feel this kind of regret; after all, I didn’t exactly lead him blindfolded down the path of debauchery. Debauchery found him before I did. That first kiss wasn’t his first, and he knew one end of a martini glass from another. Still. But for me, he might have spent the evening in the convivial atmosphere of his eating club, idly debating such innocent matters as the blackballing of unsuitable freshers and the prospects of the Tiger baseball team for the season upcoming, instead of getting himself arrested for consumption of Gin.

But no lovesick voice wails my name—either real or assumed—as I stumble past the cages of the Precinct XX station house, and when we reach the stairs at the end of the corridor I conclude I’m simply *sola, perduta, abbandonatta*. The old story. The stairs lead rightward up to the booking desk, but Officer Brooklyn turns left instead, opening a metal door with a metal key, and the sharp garbage breath of a late January alleyway strikes my senses like a billy-club.

“Say! What’s the big idea?” I demand, but Brooklyn takes no notice, just tightens his paw around my bare upper arm and hauls me up the steps to alley level, where a black sedan rattles and coughs next to the sidewalk, rear door open, exhaust clouding the atmosphere in a great gasoline fog.

And you’ll forgive me for hoping that the dear, familiar head of my Billy-boy pops free from the smoke of that back seat—the final death of my native optimism is still some weeks away—but there’s only room for two on the leather bench, and Brooklyn, pushing me inside, clambers in right behind me. *Go*, he grunts, and the tires squeal and the car lurches from the curb, and my forehead hits the front seat, and nobody says *Sorry* or even *You all right?* Nobody offers me a cigarette or an overcoat. We just zigzag down the frozen, bitter streets of the Village, straightening out at Fourteenth Street, while my teeth chatter and my brain aches, and a thousand smart remarks rise to my lips. I bite them all back, of course, because for one thing I can tell Officer Brooklyn hasn’t got the intellect to appreciate them, and for another—well, anyway. I merely observe aloud that we seem to be headed to the Hudson River piers—obvious enough—and Brooklyn grunts something or other that might mean *Yes* or else *Shut your yap*, and silence reoccupies the cab, except for the hum of the engine and the steam of our breath. I sit back and make myself small against the cold. When we slam to a stop outside a rusty tenement on Tenth Avenue and Twenty-Second Street, I permit myself a tick of triumph. You can hear the shouts of the stevedores, the busy clang of ocean liners obtaining coal and stores. If I’m not mistaken, those three black-tipped funnels over there, finding the moon above the triangular tips of the Chelsea docks, belong to the great RMS *Majestic* herself. Bound for England tomorrow morning. Lucky bitch.

But for now. The tenement. That’s my real concern, because Officer Brooklyn is opening the door and dragging me across the seat to the crumbling sidewalk outside, and those sallow brick walls aren’t looking any more inviting on second glance. An old saloon occupies the ground floor, windows all boarded up, and a few piles of hardened gray slush decorate the flagstones outside. My pretty shoes slide right out from under me. I don’t think Brooklyn even notices; he just carries my weight on the slab of his right arm as I glissade across the granite. Behind us sounds the imperative whistle-chug of a New York Central steam engine, hauling freight up the middle of Tenth Avenue. He doesn’t notice that, either. Just bangs on the door next to the boarded-up saloon until it opens.

“Oh, no,” I say. “Not on your life.”

Brooklyn turns his head at last. He’s not a pretty fellow, our Brooklyn, all jaw and no forehead, eyes like a pair of walnuts begging for a nutcracker. Shoulders about to burst from a plain uniform-type navy overcoat. The raw color of his nose and cheeks suggests either excessive cold or excessive whiskey, though you can’t rule out both. Or even possibly some kind of emotion. Those walnut eyes goggle almost out of his skull, and who can blame him? I’m about half his size, a third his weight. My hands are cuffed at the back, and I can’t feel my toes.

“I bite, you know,” I add.

Brooklyn shakes his head and pulls me through the doorway. A sign flashes by, one of those brass plaques, sort of tarnished, but you don’t stop to read plaques when someone’s hauling you into a tenement to commit God only knows what foul crimes on your person. Your mind spins, your stomach lurches. Your eyes fasten instead on inconsequential details, like the rough woolen texture of Brooklyn’s sleeve, and the overlapping pattern of scuffs on his brown shoes, and the worn-out sway in the center of each step, right where your foot goes, and the cold, moldy smell of the joint. You think, dammit, this might be my last sight on earth, why can’t I find something beautiful? As if it matters. And all those taxis and fancy private automobiles will be lining up in the dawn smoke, one by one, to disgorge humanity onto the gangplanks of the goddamned *Majestic*, and no one will notice the item in the newspapers the next day, about a woman found dead in a Tenth Avenue tenement: some kind of prostitute, the detectives believe, and from the state of the corpse she must have put up a good fight.

Because I will, by God. Put up a good fight. I’m putting up a fight right now, kicking and biting, deboning my limbs such that I slither momentarily from the shelf of Brooklyn’s arm, only to be scooped up again and hauled into oblivion. But there’s nothing to bite except wool and glove, nothing to kick that actually notices it’s been kicked. We swing around the landing and up another flight, and I’m breathless now, panting and jabbering, while the stained walls slide past, the color of misery, lurid bare electric bulbs, linoleum hallway, door thrown open by muscular hand, Gin thrown inside, toe catching on edge of Oriental rug, crash splat. Voice like a hurricane. “What the devil, Bulow? She’s not a sack of grain.”

“She’s a damned hellcat. Bit my cheek.”

“I expect you deserved it.”

Have you ever donned a narrow dress and metal handcuffs, laid yourself out flat on a beery Oriental rug, and then tried to rise? Well. It’s not as easy as it sounds, believe me. All the dignity of an eel on a hook. Still. I’ve just about got my knees under me when a pair of hands clamps around the joints of my shoulders and lifts me straight into the air and back down on my feet. Spins me around, demands a key from Brooklyn. Brooklyn delivers, though his face suggests he’d rather swallow it whole. Seems he’s right, I did bite his cheek. What do you know. Fresh, new blood trickles to his jaw. The handcuffs loosen. Brooklyn steps back and folds his arms across his three-foot chest. I hate to boast, but he does look sort of mauled. Nasty scratch on the side of his neck. I stretch my wrists and wriggle my nerveless fingers and turn to face his boss, whose face bears down on mine like a mountainside. Not that I’m the kind of girl who backs down from mountains. Not me.

I tap his chin with a schoolmarm finger.

“Tarzan. I had a hunch you were up to no good.”

7.

The first thing Tarzan does is return to his desk and press some kind of button. Then he rests one haunch on the desk, folds his hands together, and asks me if I want coffee. I say why not. Door opens, feminine voice makes inquiry. Coffee for Miss Kelly, please. Door closes. No word from Brooklyn; maybe he’s left.

Tarzan gestures stage left. “Please sit down, Miss Kelly. I expect you’re exhausted.”

“No, thanks. I’d rather stand.”

“You’re certain?”

“Quite. Is this your office? I love what you’ve done with the place. All those padded armchairs and Old Masters. And that thrilling modern wallpaper! Or have you got a leak?”

“It’s a place of employment, not a parlor.”

“Oh, *employment*! I’m glad you mentioned it. What exactly *is* your line of work, Mr. Tarzan?”

“My name is Anson.”

“Mr. Anson.”

“And my job, put simply, is to intercept the illegal transportation and sale of intoxicating liquors.”

“Good Lord. You’re a Revenue agent.”

He shrugs.

“Well, that’s a relief. I can confidently say that you’ve got the wrong girl, Agent Anson. I’m more in the consumption line, if you know what I mean. Transportation and sale is not my concern.”

“Not at the moment, maybe,” he says, “but it will be.”

“Now, see. That’s just exactly what I didn’t want you to say.”

“Your choice, of course. But I do hope you’ll help us. Good, here’s the coffee.”

Thank God for the pause that ensues. Allows me to haul in my breath, corral the runaway gallop of my heartbeat. Wipe my palms on my sequins while everyone’s turned to the poor young secretary in the navy suit and cream blouse who carries in the coffee on an old enamel tray, the kind your parents might have brought out to entertain callers in a more civilized age. As it turns out, Brooklyn hasn’t left the room, after all. He’s taken a chair near the door, a poor spindly thing that shudders under his weight. (The chair, I mean, not the door.) I take my cup—cream, one lump—and carry it to the seat I refused earlier, which looks as if it were bought cheap from the shuttered saloon downstairs.

“Are you cold, Miss Kelly?” Anson asks, as the door closes behind the minion.

“Not at all.”

“You look blue.”

“I’m just mad.”

He removes his jacket, walks around behind me, swings the old thing over my shoulders. I consider shrugging it off, just on principle, but a jacket like that trumps any principle you care to own. Wholesome silk lining, sensuous warmth, scent of shaving soap. Is there anything more delicious than a gentleman’s wool coat cloaked around your shoulders? Even when the gentleman’s not yours.

“Why are you angry?” he asks, returning to the desk.

“Let me count the ways.”

He casts a cool look in Brooklyn’s direction. “I apologize for my methods.”

“As you should. I’m bruised all over. I’d show you where, if I weren’t a lady.”

“But aside from the physical harm—”

“Oh, aside from little old *that*—”

“—I had no choice. I couldn’t just ask you to come of your own free will. You wouldn’t have agreed, for one thing, and frankly I needed a little of what the financiers call leverage.”

“Leverage?”

He places a thumb next to the corner of his mouth and brushes away an imaginary something-or-other. “Mr. Marshall.”

“*Billy!* What have you done with Billy?”

“He’s not in any danger. Not at the moment, anyway.”

“You’ve got no right. He’s as innocent as a lamb.”

“A lamb. And you, Miss Kelly? Are you innocent as a lamb?”

“I have the feeling you already know the answer to that. I’m as innocent as the next girl, I guess.”

Anson gives the ceiling some mature consideration.

“Now, see here, Mr. Anson. We both know you’ve got no business persecuting a working girl like me for taking a sip or two of this and that. I’m not the crook. It’s those gangsters out there on the Lincoln Highway in the middle of the night, it’s that hillbilly with a dozen stills blowing off the roof of his barn—”

*Snap*, go the fingers of Anson’s right hand. “Is that so, Miss Kelly? *Hillbillies*? What do you know about hillbillies?”

I could swear the light bulb flickers in its socket above my head. But maybe it’s just the light bulb going off inside my head, the *Jesus Mary, Gin, you dumb cluck!* hollering up from my unconscious mind: the head that needs shrinking, everybody says. Too late now. Outside the window, New York lies nice and quiet, the dark night speckled with various pinpricks of human activity, of people not giving a damn what happens here in this room at this particular hour of the twenty-four. A few feet away, Anson’s marble face stares and stares, no expression whatsoever, calm as you please.

Just a word. But what a word. *Hillbillies,* Miss Kelly. What do you know about hillbillies?

“Nothing,” I lie.

“Nothing at all?”

“Nope.”

“Because you sounded, just now, like a woman who knows something.”

“I’m a working girl, Mr. Anson. A New York working girl. I get my news like everyone else. The morning paper. You can learn a lot about the world from the morning paper, but it doesn’t mean you know one single smidge more than the next girl.”