



Book 2

# SPEAKEASY

*Keep the Secret*

A Time Travel Novel

ELYSE DOUGLAS

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BOOK TWO  
**KEEP THE SECRET**

A Time Travel Novel

by

Elyse Douglas

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*For Hazel and her many wonderful hats.*

*“It’s never too late to be whatever you want to be.”*

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

# SPEAKEASY

BOOK TWO

**KEEP THE SECRET**

# CHAPTER 1

Roxie Raines and Jake Kane stood nose-to-nose under a hot sun on Coney Island beach, fists on their hips, jaws thrust in a challenge.

Jake stared deeply into Roxie's eyes. "I see oceans and storms and wildness in those eyes, Roxie."

Roxie stared back, her eyes exploring. "Oh, yeah... well, in your eyes, I see jungles, dark caves, and rocky roads that lead to dead ends," she said, grinning mischievously. "And I like the possibility of what might happen in one of those dead ends, if you're hanging out waiting for me."

Roxie's blonde hair shined, her lips were full and red, her face lightly tanned, her eyes holding a playful curiosity.

"Oh yeah? Well, here's something. Come with me down one of those New York City back alleyways," Jake said, in a playful threat.

"No way. The jungles, maybe... Maybe a dead end or two, but never, not ever, the alleys, pal. I stay out of alleys ever since I found myself in one, one dark night, standing outside The Black Cat."

It was a Saturday in August, 1925, and they stood among a carpet of sunbathing bodies, under a drenching late-summer sun. The air shimmered, burned, and baked. Beach balls floated by, couples charged into the frothy surf, and seagulls sailed the currents of summer air, squealing, looking for beach snacks.

Roxie wore a yellow and white striped, one-piece swimsuit, and Jake sported royal blue trunks and a yellow and white striped tank top.

At twenty-six years old, Roxie was a slim, pretty, bobbed-haired blonde, whose large, dreamy blue eyes were intelligent and engaging. She had good cheekbones, luminous skin, and a shiny diamond stud in her left nostril, not typical or stylish in 1925, and neither was the flower tattoo on her upper right arm.



“I see sweat on your forehead, Roxie, and good girls aren’t supposed to sweat.”

“Who said I was good?”

“Not me.”

“You just did.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.”

“Why are you so beautiful, Roxie?”

“Why are you so pretty, Jake?”

“Pretty? Really?”

“Why not, pretty? And handsome, times two and a half.”

“I was never good at math.”

“So, you’re pretty handsome, Jake Kane, and I just bet all your school teachers passed you because you were so pretty.”

“Stop it with the pretty, already,” Jake said, pushing his nose even closer to hers. “What will my good-old partner, Charlie, say if he hears that kind of talk?”

“I bet he thinks you’re pretty, too,” Roxie said, grinning.

Jake grinned, too. “Funny girl.”

“Handsome guy.”

They kept staring, challenging the other to break the spell. They hardly blinked, and sweat trickled down their foreheads, running into their eyes.

“Are you hot?” Jake asked.

“Yep. You?”

“Yep. As hot as a two-dollar pistol.”

“I wish I had some sunscreen,” Roxie said.

“What’s that?”

“Never mind. It’s a thing from another place.”

“You speak in riddles and say strange things. I think it’s the Indiana girl in you.”

“And you love it.”

“Riddles and mysteries, Roxie.”

“Pretty and handsome, Jake.”

“Are you gonna look away first, Roxie?”

“Nope. I’m keeping my eyes on you, pal.”

“I’m getting sunburned. I feel the sting on my shoulders, and I’m not wearing my hat because you tossed it.”

“So, look away, Jake Kane, personal detective. Go for a swim.”

“Nope. You go first.”

“Never, Jake boy.”

“Don’t call me, Jake boy.”

“Okay, Jake boy.”

He grinned. “Beautiful you are, Roxie.”

“Pretty you be, Jake.”

“Can I kiss you?”

“If you can.”

“I can.”

“What about all these people?” Roxie asked. “What will they think of us kissing right here on Coney Island beach in front of kids, dogs, lovers, parents, and seagulls?”

“Don’t care what any of them think, except maybe the seagulls.”

“Then kiss me, Jake.”

Their noses mashed together as Jake lifted his chin, playfully puckering his lips. Roxie played along, mirroring him. Their lips brushed, and then their mouths melted into a kiss, and Roxie yielded to his exploring, flickering tongue. The kiss deepened and blossomed, their sweaty noses wet

against the other, and Roxie felt an electric jolt that warmed her to the depths of her soul.

After the kiss, Jake kept his eyes trained on hers, his bright with love. “You’re a woman to be loved, Roxie.”

“Yeah... and I can take all you can give me.”

“Now, can we go for a swim?” Jake asked, with a sigh.

“Too hot, pal of mine?”

“You bet I am. All over and under. You?”

“Totally. Yeah. Let’s go.”

Jake seized Roxie’s hand and yanked her away across the hot skillet of the sand, dodging sunbathers, leaping over beach blankets, and skittering past canvas beach chairs. They made a mad dash across the beach toward the tideline, the charging waves thundering in, foaming cold around their feet. They kicked high, stumbled, and dived in, bursting up, gasping for air, twisting, and tumbling back into the next breaking wave.

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That afternoon, they emerged from bathhouses fully dressed, Jake in white trousers, a blue shirt, and a straw boater hat. Roxie wore a blue and rose blouse that set off her blue eyes; high-waisted white pants; and a yellow, wide-brimmed hat, with a soft blue velvet band.

Relaxed and in love, they seemed to glide through the crowds as they roamed the boardwalk, arm in arm, laughing and touching, Jake toting a canvas bag that held their towels and swimsuits, and Roxie gently twirling a red parasol.

They drank foaming root beer, ate five-cent ‘red hot’ hotdogs at Nathan’s, and took a wild ride on the Thunderbolt roller coaster. They thrilled as it rose and plunged and went hurtling around tight-twisting turns, amid raised arms, bug-eyes, and screams.

They each paid ten cents for fifteen shots at a shooting gallery, and Jake scored thirteen and Roxie eleven. While Jake paraded about in a circle, arms held high in triumph, playfully gloating, Roxie threw her hands to her hips and stuck out her tongue.

“Showoff!”

He grabbed her, pulled her into his arms and kissed her, and when he pulled back, he grinned.

“Do you know that you have a very long tongue?”

Roxie winked at him. “And do you know, Jake Kane, that you have a very big mouth?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, shut up and kiss me with it.”

After another bold kiss, Roxie seized Jake’s hand and dragged him off to play Skee-ball, a game she’d never played. “It kind of looks like bowling, and I’m a good bowler,” she said.

They squeezed into the long line, with Roxie craning her neck, impatient, seeing the four lanes and watching intensely as gamers rolled the balls, cheered, clapped their hands, and shouted.

“I don’t figure you to be a bowler,” Jake said. “It’s a man’s sport, and it’s a pain in the neck. After every toss, you have to hang around while some kid resets the pins. And, anyway, Skee-ball is different.”

A calliope, a kind of steam-whistle organ, cranked out a tune, loud and shrill, near a circus tent. Roxie had to shout over it.

“Whatever, Jake. I want to try it, even if the line is long.”

“Okay,” Jake said. “While we wait, I’ll tell you where Coney Island got its name.”

Roxie turned to him. “Truth?”

“The absolute truth. Charlie told me, and you know Charlie is always reading something, and he has a mind like a steel

trap. So, here goes. The name Coney Island dates back to the 1600s, when the Dutch settled the New York area. According to Charlie's source, Coney Island is an English adaptation of some Dutch name which I don't remember and wouldn't be able to pronounce anyhow. So, whatever that Dutch name is, it roughly translates into Rabbit Island. And there you have it. Apparently, Coney Island used to be covered in rabbits."

When it was finally Roxie's turn to play the game, she grew tense with enthusiasm as she stepped up to the lane. She dropped a nickel into the metal slot and received nine, softball-size wooden balls. She quickly sized up the game by watching players on either side of her.

She had to roll a ball down the fourteen-foot alley to a "ball-hop," which resembled a little ski jump and actually did propel the ball into one of a series of bullseye rings at the end of the alley. The bullseye rings had progressively increased point values. The object of the game was to collect as many points as possible, so players tried to get their balls into the ringholes with the highest point values.

With Jake cheering her on, Roxie rubbed her hands together and went to work. Her first round was a bust, her points low. The second round was better, and the third was a triumph. She gained a top score and received a kewpie doll, whose large, open eyes and curled eyelashes were painted onto a full, smiling face. Roxie presented the doll to Jake with a bow and a kiss.

As the orange sun drifted low in the pastel sky, they rode the rickety Ferris wheel as it went rising and tipping in the soft, evening breeze. The lovers were dreamy and close, their eyes reflecting the colored lights, their mood romantic, and their kisses warm.

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They left Coney Island hand in hand, paid their nickel, and caught the crowded subway back to Manhattan, miraculously

finding a seat in the rear of the train. As the train rattled and swayed, Roxie rested her sleepy head on Jake's shoulder.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Jake asked.

"Jimmy..."

Jimmy was Jake's three-year-old son. Although Jimmy was not his biological son, Jake was raising him as his own. After Jimmy's mother died, shortly after Jimmy's birth, the boy had been living with Jake's mother.

"What about Jimmy?"

"I'm going to meet him and your mother for the first time tomorrow, at your sister Clare's house. That's what I was thinking."

"Don't be nervous. They'll love you."

"I'm not nervous... Okay, I am a little, but I keep thinking what you told me about your mother."

"And that was?"

"She wants you to get married."

Jake stared ahead. Straphangers stood above him, their bodies shifting with the motion of the train.

"Are we ready for marriage, Roxie?"

"I don't know. Are we? We might be. We could be. Maybe."

"Or maybe not, or should we, or can we?" Jake said. "And there we go again, playing tennis words," Jake added. "This and that, maybe and yes, and over the net and back to you. We've been playing this game for over a month now."

"We're good at it."

"But we have to make up our minds," Jake said.

"I guess... Yeah."

"I wish I could stop thinking about all the things that want to come between us," Jake said, looking at her.

Roxie sat up. "Like?"

“Well, for one thing, your singing, and for another, my job. And then, what about all the secrets you keep locked up, and you threw away the key? You say you’re going to tell me all about you and then you don’t. That’s not good for any marriage.”

Roxie looked away. “Okay, well, maybe I don’t want to get married.”

Jake massaged his tense forehead and Roxie fixed her tender eyes on him.

“Then, again, maybe I do.”

Jake shot her a look. “So, we’re back to the game again. That’s what I’m talking about. You’re on the fence about things. About us. Look, I’m not naïve, Roxie. Maybe you hit the road to seek your fortune, and you have a husband and a couple of kids waiting for you back home in Indiana, not that I’ve been looking for them and not that I want to.”

“I don’t, and I keep telling you that!”

“But you don’t tell me the truth, or at least all the truth.”

Roxie shifted her eyes away. “I will.”

“When?”

“When I can.”

Jake blew out a sigh. “And so, here we are, over a month after that fire at Club Pogo, where you would’ve died if I hadn’t found you, and we haven’t moved many pieces on the game board since, have we?”

Roxie softened her voice and fixed her tender eyes on him. “We love each other, Jake. We know that. That’s something, isn’t it? We know that for sure.”

“Do I?”

“You know you do.” She hesitated. “Don’t you?”

He nodded. “Yeah... But you want to sing, which means a lot of jokers will be hanging around offering you everything from big cars to big bucks to a big time. You’ve already got enough singing offers to last for months.”

“Of course I’m going to sing, Jake. That’s who I am.”

“So, what are we going to do if we get married, and if Jimmy needs a real home, and a real mother to stay home with him?”

Roxie felt heat rise in her cheeks. “Okay, I could say the same about you, couldn’t I? Jimmy needs his father to be home, too, doesn’t he? And what about your job? It’s dangerous, and right now, it’s real dangerous. I mean, look, you’ve just started an investigation into that woman’s murder...”

“Edith Lester...”

“Yes, Edith Lester, and you’ve received death threats from who knows who.”

Jake’s shoulders tightened. “I told you, Roxie, I had to take the case. I should have followed up when she first told me that her husband might kill her. I should have, but I didn’t. So, now I’ve got to.”

“But you don’t think her husband killed her, even though the cops do?”

“That’s right. No... Hal Lester did not kill his wife. He’s a gigolo, a bunko artist, and a thief, but he’s no killer. No, somebody else killed Mrs. Lester and they’re framing Hal for it.”

Roxie questioned him with her eyes. “What’s a bunko artist?”

“A con man.”

“Okay, so, where are the death threats coming from?”

“I don’t know, but risk goes with the job.”

“Okay, fine. So, me letting those jokers know I’m not interested in big cars, big bucks and a big time also goes with the job, Jake.”

The trapped heat in the subway car brought sweat, body odor and the urge to escalate the volatile conversation, but,



instead, Jake sought to change the subject. “You got sunburned. Your creamy skin is glowing.”

“You, too. Your nose is red.”

“So, let’s not argue.”

“Yeah, I don’t like it.”

“Me, either,” Jake said, touching her nose with a finger.

“Hey...,” she said with a little smile. “I had a great time today. It was an awesome day.”

“You with the word ‘awesome’ again.”

They stared at each other lovingly, as the subway went thundering down the tracks. But in her gut, Roxie felt a rising anxiety.

## CHAPTER 2

Whether or not Jake was ready, they were coming for lunch—Jimmy and Jake’s mother, Florence Kane. An anxious Jake had already left to pick them up at the train station, leaving Roxie and Clare to complete the luncheon preparations. Clare Kane had arranged to have the Sunday afternoon lunch catered from Mama Louisa’s Café, a neighborhood favorite, and since she and Jake knew the owner, Vito, he’d offered a generous discount and agreed to deliver the food promptly at 12:30 p.m.

All morning, Clare had fidgeted, fussed, and worried, while she and Roxie cleaned Clare’s brownstone from top to bottom, set the dining room table, fed the cats, washed the windows, and placed potpourris of rose and vanilla in every room, hoping to chase away the cigarette smoke and gin smells.

The tablecloth was a fine linen that Clare had purchased just for the occasion at Lord & Taylor, along with sparkling crystal glasses, fine China, and cutlery. In the center of the table, a rose-colored vase bloomed with a bouquet of lilies, chrysanthemums, roses, and gerbera daisies.

“Mother doesn’t approve of smoking or drinking,” Clare said to Roxie, as they folded the linen napkins and placed them next to the plates. “But I guess I’ve already told you that fifty times, haven’t I?”

“Only ten times,” Roxie joked.

“And when Mother sees the table setting, this is what she’s going to say.” And then Clare mimicked her mother, slumping a little, twisting up her lips in distaste and flicking a hand. Her voice was chirpy and scolding.

“Clare Kane, this is all too fancy for the likes of me. Why did you spend your hard-earned money on these silly fripperies? And why in heaven’s name did you have this food brought in from some outside restaurant, prepared by strangers, when you could have easily baked a chicken,

mashed some potatoes, and shucked some corn? My stars, I'll never understand you, will I?"

Roxie applauded, falling into laughter. "That was totally awesome, Clare! I love it!"

Clare lined up the forks and knives and adjusted the water glasses. "Mother seldom visits New York anymore. She thinks the city has changed, and not for the better. She thinks it's noisy, and it has wayward girls, 'scoundrels and rascals'—her words—and 'nogoodniks', again her word. She grew up at a different time, with different values, and maybe it was a better time and maybe those values weren't so bad."

Clare Kane was Jake's half-sister. She was tall and statuesque, with a narrow face made for drama, sometimes imposing, peering and solemn, and then soft, warm, and amused, as if there were a joke forming in the air and she was about to pull it down and perform.

She had perceptive, greenish/gray eyes, spoke in a smoky alto, and kept her copper hair in a bob with full bangs, a style which added to the drama of the woman, who often seemed like a Ziegfeld Follies' dancer, ready to emerge from the wings and sweep out onto center stage.

Clare's biological father had abandoned the family when Clare was a child, and when her mother divorced him and remarried a policeman, Mike Kane, Jake's father, he'd raised her as if she were his own, and she'd taken his last name, Kane.

During the Great War, Clare had briefly been married, but after her husband was killed in France, she'd decided to keep the name Kane, believing it to be a good name for an author. Clare made her living writing confessional pulp fiction stories and what she called "bizarre stories." Her writing appeared in such magazines as *Thrilling Love*, *Modern Romances*, *Weird Tales*, *Astounding Science Fiction*, and *Startling Stories*.

"Is this the first time Jimmy has been here?" Roxie asked.

"No, he and Mother came about a year ago, and they stayed for a week. Of course, as you know, I visit her and Jimmy at

least once a month upstate, and a few times, Jake and I have gone together for the weekend.”

“Jake showed me some photos of Jimmy,” Roxie said. “He’s a handsome kid. I love the photo of him wearing that sailor suit.”

“Jimmy is such a sweet boy, Roxie. You’ll love him. Mother has her prudish ways, for sure, but she’s a peach at heart, and she has raised Jimmy to be as good as gold. You’ll see.”

Clare stepped back, crossed her arms, and appraised the table settings. “What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful.”

Clare glanced over with warm gratitude. “I’m so happy you’re here. Thanks for not moving out.”

Roxie opened her mouth to say, *I can’t stay forever, Clare*, but she didn’t.

Glancing down at her watch, Clare winced, cursed, and began to pace. “Where are they? I hope Jake wasn’t late picking them up at the train station. Mother is always early, and she despises anyone being late.”

Clare wore a conservative blue and white day dress that fell well below the knee, with low matching heels and modest makeup.

Having consulted with Clare as to what she should wear, Roxie had chosen a mint green silk day dress with sleeves long enough to hide the tattoo of orange poppies and delicate leaves on her upper right arm. She’d finished the outfit with matching brocade shoes and a choker of pearls Clare had lent her.

“Is my nose too red?” Roxie asked.

Clare drifted over, examining it. “A bit. You might want to powder it a little more, but not too much. Mother will smell it. Were you and Jake at Coney Island all day yesterday?”

“Yeah, pretty much, and his nose is redder than mine.”

Roxie circled the table, pushing down nerves. “Do you think your mother will hate my diamond nose stud?”

“She’s read all about you in the newspapers. She knows. Mother always knows, even when she pretends she doesn’t.”

Roxie frowned. “Yeah... I should have figured that.”

“But she wants to meet you, so relax.”

“When you talked to her, did she say anything about me? I’m not fishing for a compliment or anything. I guess I’m just...”

Clare cut in. “... For all her prim, Victorian views, Mother is, surprisingly, not so judgmental. After all, she was married to a cop, and she was born in New York. After Mike was killed, she left the city because she didn’t want to walk the same streets they’d walked or eat in the same diners they’d been to. She got angry at the city, so she gave up her apartment and moved to their little weekend house upstate. She’s a good woman, though, Roxie. She’ll take you as you are, and I know she’ll love you... in her own way.”

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Five minutes later, Clare peered out between the front window curtains and glanced at her watch. “Dammit! It’s 12:15. They’re fifteen minutes late. I’m starting to get worried.”

Roxie wandered over, a thought hovering. “Clare, won’t Jimmy miss his grandmother if he lives here? I mean, she’s the only mother he’s ever known.”

Clare kept her eyes on the street. “I know, I know. I keep thinking the same thing and I know Jake has the same thoughts. First of all, I’m not all that sure Mother’s going to give Jimmy up. We’ll just have to see how this lunch goes. She’s not so happy that Jake is involved in this murder case, and I don’t think she’s all that happy that I’m seeing Hollis Dunbar.”

“Has she met him?” Roxie asked.

“No, but his mug has been in the papers. He’s rich, he has a big yacht, he’s been divorced twice, and he’s a Boston Red Sox fan. That’s five strikes, counting the two divorces and, in Mom’s world, he’s a swing and a miss, and he’s out.”

Roxie eased down on the sofa, her mind turning over a persistent, unpleasant thought. “Clare... I’ve been thinking about things. I mean, I’ve been thinking about Jake and Jimmy and me. And I’ve been thinking about Katy.”

Clare twisted around, her eyes narrowed. “Katy? His old girlfriend? That’s old business. That fling is over. Jake is definitely over Katy.”

Roxie shrugged a shoulder. “I’ve been thinking that maybe Jake and me should get a nice apartment somewhere uptown, and maybe I should stop being a singer and be a mother.”

Clare gave her a long look of consideration, and Roxie looked straight at her.

“I could do it, Clare. Why not? I could be like Dr. Harriet Hall and think of somebody else other than myself. Raising Jimmy, giving Jimmy a good home, and maybe having another child or two would be a good thing.”

“Good for who? Who are you trying to kid? How long do you think that little performance of yours would last? The marriage, I mean, and the role of playing the good stay-at-home mother? Roxie Raines, let me tell you something I’ve learned about life, and I have learned it the hard way about ten times over. You’ve got to be true to yourself or you are absolutely no good for anybody else. Unless giving up your music is something that you truly want to do deep in your soul, then don’t even think about it. The marriage won’t last, Jake will get all moody and dark, you’ll be miserable, and Jimmy will be the saddest kid you ever saw.”

Clare left the window and stepped over to the couch. “Roxie, you’ve got New York at your feet. You’ve seen the reporters hanging around, and I’ve been fighting off telephone calls from agents and producers, who are asking about your voice, which was all messed up from smoke inhalation when you almost died in that fire. But you’re ready now, and you

know what's coming. You'll be a big star on Broadway, in the speakeasies and in the pictures. We'll go see you in one of those lavish picture palaces off Times Square, and you'll have a career that lasts for decades."

Roxie got up and paced to the window and back.

"You can't fight who you are, Roxie. And get this, lightning only strikes once. If you miss it, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. So, stop worrying. This thing with Jimmy will work out."

Roxie looked down as if searching for answers, and suddenly, she glanced up, tempted to tell Clare everything—that she was from 2019, that she'd time traveled, and that the time travel doorway was just waiting for her in The Black Cat basement.

Clare waited for a response, sensing Roxie was withholding some deep truth, but at that moment, they heard car doors slam and both women bolted for the front windows.

"It's not them!" Clare shouted. "Where the hell are they?"

## CHAPTER 3

Jake sat behind the big, wooden steering wheel of his 1922 black Dodge touring sedan, navigating through busy Sunday traffic. His mother, 60-year-old Florence Kane, sat in the leather passenger seat, and Jimmy was perched on her lap, casting his wide, curious eyes about.

“See the traffic cop over there?” Jake pointed. “See him waving his hands? And see those traffic lights? They’re new, only a year or so old.”

Jimmy nodded. “Yeah. Lots of cars. I like cars. And I like flying machines, too.”

“They’re called airplanes, Jimmy,” Jake added. “And all these cars are out for a Sunday drive in New York City.”

“My stars, Jake,” Florence said, with a quick shake of her head. “There’s so much traffic now. And even the streetcars are crowded with people. Where are they all going on a Sunday? And so many signs advertising this and that. It just makes my head swim.”

“You haven’t been to the city in a while, Mom,” Jake said. “Things change fast in New York, as you know.”

“I don’t know how I stood it for so long. I’m happy to be in that house and quiet town, away from all this hubbub.”

Jimmy straightened up when he heard the clang of the trolley. “I like that!” he said. “I like that, Grandma. Can I ride on that?”

“Not today, Jimmy. We’re already late for our lunch with Clare.”

“Maybe later tonight,” Jake said. “We’ll take a ride on the trolley.”

“I don’t know if we’ll be staying,” Florence said flatly.

“I thought you were at least staying the night,” Jake said.



Florence had a broad, earthy face, with a heavy jaw, a prominent nose, and no-nonsense, dark blue eyes. “We’ll just have to see how it all goes, Jake. I told you that over the phone. I don’t know anything about this girl of yours, other than that she sings in those illegal speakeasies, she was running around with a no-good bootlegger, and she nearly got burned up in a fire.”

Jake braked to a stop at a red light. “I told you, Mom, Roxie’s a swell girl, and she wasn’t running around with Frankie Shay. She was trying to get away from him. And she’s smart and pretty and she’s from Indiana.”

“Coming from Indiana doesn’t mean any young woman is as wholesome as grandma’s apple pie. A pretty girl can be a curse that sweeps a foolish boatman out to crash against the rocks and drown.”

Jake gave his mother an exasperated glance. “I don’t even know what that means... Boat crashing against the rocks?”

Her eyes flashed blue and sharp. “Now don’t you play the dunce with me, Jake Kane, like you used to do when you were a little boy trying to get away with something. You know just what I’m talking about. This girl’s photo has been in every paper I’ve seen, and they talk about her tattoo and about some rock or stone stuck in the side of her nose. Well, I don’t even know what to say about a thing like that.”

“It’s a diamond stud, Mom.”

“Well, if young girls wear those kinds of things in Indiana, then it’s not a place I want to visit, and I certainly wouldn’t take Jimmy there.”

Jake placed both hands on top of the steering wheel and sighed. The light flashed green, and the traffic lunged ahead, horns tooting, sunlight glinting off the windshield.

Jimmy pointed at a Planter’s Peanuts billboard. “It’s so big, Daddy. I want some peanuts!”

Florence adjusted him on her lap. “You’ll be eating lunch soon enough, young man. You’re always wanting anything

that you see in a magazine or on a sign, just like your grandfather. He loved to eat.”

Traffic snarled and stalled, and Jake craned his head, trying to see what the holdup was.

Florence lowered her voice, her tone troubled. “And I’m worried about you, Jake, with this job you’ve taken on.”

“I’ll be fine, Mom. We’ve already talked about this at least ten times and it’s all talked out.”

“Well, I don’t want to sound like a carping mother, but when you told me you might go into the bond business, I was overjoyed.”

“That was Katy’s idea, not mine. I’m not the bond seller type, all crooked smiles, stiff-necked, and Brooks Brothers cleaned and pressed.”

“Katy seemed like a nice girl, Jake, and she’s from a good family. I don’t understand why you busted that relationship up, and before I even got to meet her.”

“Mom, please, let’s not go into this again. I don’t love Katy. We’ve broken up, and that’s that. And as I said, I’m not the bond selling kind of guy, any more than dad could have been.”

Florence’s expression darkened. “Your father could have joined his brother in the construction business, and he should have. I tried to tell him, over and over, but…” and then her voice dropped away into the murmur of traffic sounds.

This was one of those no-win, recurring conversations that most families had. The topic had been hashed and rehashed a hundred times and was full of regret, sadness, and anger. On this day, already ripe with tension and emotion, Jake refused the bait to defend his father’s choice.

Instead, he looked at Jimmy with a bright smile. “Aunt Clare bought you a present.”

Jimmy’s eyes widened. “I hope it’s an airplane.”

“It might be,” Jake said. “But it might not be.”

“He is crazy about airplanes,” Florence said, aware that Jake had changed the subject and relieved he’d done so. “You’ve already got two airplanes, Jimmy,” she added.

“Yeah, but I could have a whole bunch of them, couldn’t I?”

Jake glanced nervously at his watch, then ventured a look at the car beside him, and the male driver. Jake shouted, “Do you know what the holdup is?”

The balding, heavy man puffed on a pipe aggressively, obviously peeved. “Nope, I don’t, but I could walk faster, for crying out loud.”

“Clare’s not going to be happy,” Jake said. “The food is supposed to arrive at 12:30.”

“I don’t want to sound like a gripe,” Florence said grumbling, “but with those two women living there together, they could have prepared the lunch. Clare didn’t need to go out and hire a restaurant. Just throwing her money away, like always.”

“She wanted to do something special,” Jake said, in a soothing voice. “Something special for you.”

Florence nodded patiently. “I know, Jake. I just worry about Clare, that’s all. She tries to put on a strong face, but I’ve got to say, I think she’s still as fragile as an unhatched egg.”

“She’s okay.”

Florence’s gaze strayed to the traffic, and to the billboard signs, and to the flappers swinging their hips along the sidewalks. “I don’t know, Jake. Is this city really the place for Jimmy?”

Jake heard the doubt in her voice, just as he’d heard that same doubt on the phone a few days before. “Mom, Jimmy will love it here. Clare will read to him, Roxie will sing to him and teach him music... teach him how to play the piano. She plays like a champ. And I’ll take him to Yankees games to see Babe Ruth.”

Jake tapped Jimmy’s nose. “You’d like to see Babe Ruth, wouldn’t you, Jimmy?”

He lit up. “Yeah, Babe Ruth hitting home runs! Yeah.”

Jake continued. “And on weekends, we’ll go to Coney Island or to Central Park or to the zoo. You’ll love New York, won’t you, Jimmy? And we’ll eat lots of frankfurters.”

“Can we get on an airplane?” Jimmy asked, clapping his hands. “I want to fly over everyplace and wave at people.”

“No!” Florence said flatly. “You can play with airplanes, but you cannot ride in one.”

Jimmy pouted. “But I want to, Grandma.”

After a cacophony of blaring horns, a stern-looking traffic cop, astride a handsome, chestnut horse, went trotting along the curb, waving cars forward, shouting for them to move. Minutes later, the traffic knot loosened, and Jake swerved his car into the left lane and gunned the engine, heading downtown.

Ten minutes later, as he was about to turn onto West 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, Jake glanced into his rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of a car closing tightly on his rear bumper. He sensed danger. He smelled it.

“Mom! Hold Jimmy tight and brace an arm against the dashboard.”

Her face filled with alarm, but she obeyed, one arm tight around Jimmy, the other arm extended, hand clamped on the dashboard.

The on-coming car slammed into Jake’s rear bumper with a force that snapped Jake’s head forward. His hands were gripped on the steering wheel at ten o’clock and two o’clock. His eyes darted left and right, seeking an escape, but there was none. Parked cars occupied every space.

The rear car backed up and prepared for another attack, allowing time for Jake to reach for his shoulder holster and remove his .38 Smith & Wesson.

“Duck and hold tight!” Jake shouted, swerving left to avoid a terrified pedestrian.

When the attacking car rammed into Jake's car again, Jimmy screamed. The crack of a gunshot brought terror. Florence cried out, "Oh God!"

Another gunshot exploded. The bullet pierced the back windshield and slammed into the leather seat, inches from Florence's right shoulder.

Jake braked to a stop, pulling the emergency brake. He put a shoulder to his door and burst out, skittering away, taking cover behind a parked car, his .38 at the ready. The rogue car backed up, stopped, gears grinding, and readied for another charge.

Before the car could attack, Jake crouched, aimed, and squeezed off three shots. Two punctured the right and left front tires and the third pierced the windshield, shattering it. The car veered right and crashed into a parked car.

Jake had to get his mother and Jimmy out of there. He couldn't risk a head-on attack. Pulling a breath, he seized the moment and sprang for his car, piled inside, released the emergency brake, and gunned the engine, slamming the door as the car jumped ahead and gathered speed.

"Stay down!" he yelled, to his crouching mother and son.

Glancing into his rearview mirror, he saw the wrecked car, steam rising from its hood, shattered glass scattered along the street.

From the driver's side, a hulking man stumbled out of the car, staggered, and dropped to the pavement. From the passenger side, a second man emerged, swiftly leveling his gun, and fired after Jake's retreating auto.

With his jaw set and eyes afire, Jake ducked, throwing a protective arm across his mother and Jimmy, as the car raced away, its exhaust pipe puffing black smoke.

## CHAPTER 4

A few weeks later, in an early September rain, Roxie Raines and her friend, Dr. Harriet Hall, sat quietly in the backseat of a taxi as it bounced and veered through morning traffic, en route to Greenwich Village.

They glanced at each other with little grins.

“I have a vague idea what you’re up to,” Harriet said. “But you said you had two surprises for me.”

“Yeah, and if you guess one, I’m certain you won’t guess the other.”

“I love a good challenge,” Harriet said. She and Roxie had become friends several months ago, when they discovered that they’d both time traveled through The Black Cat basement portal. Harriet had traveled forward in time, from 1883 to 1920, while Roxie had travelled back in time, from 2019 to 1925.

“I got the idea a few days after... well, after Jake, his mother and Jimmy were involved in that shooting.”

Harriet turned serious. “I haven’t read any updates in the papers. Two articles said the attack surely had something to do with you. Some kind of revenge for Frankie Shay’s death.”

“I know, I know, and I hate that. Jake’s certain that’s not true. From what he told me, Frankie’s old pals and enemies are glad he’s gone, so I don’t think it’s about me, not that the newspapers care.”

“Those newspaper articles also said your public awaits you, pines for you, and wants you back on stage. Any stage. I loved the phrase ‘pines for you,’” Harriet said, with a little laugh.

Roxie didn’t say anything. She smoothed down the skirt of her below-the-knee, burgundy-and-cream-colored flapper dress, then readjusted her burgundy cloche hat, which rested low over her eyebrows, giving her a sexy, mysterious look.

Harriet continued. “And what about all the offers you’ve received from producers and nightclub owners, and from Broadway and vaudeville theater agents? Now that your voice has completely recovered from the fire and smoke inhalation, you’re ready to go... Or are you ready to go?” Harriet concluded, glancing at Roxie to see her reaction.

“Now that I’m not going to be Jimmy’s mother, you mean?”

“Not likely for a while, it would seem, right? What does Jake say?” Harriet asked.

Roxie met Harriet’s inquisitive stare. Harriet was thirty-eight years old, slender and attractive, with ruler-erect posture. She was the director of a women’s clinic and took her responsibilities seriously. She also dressed seriously, in a black skirt that touched her ankles, a conservative white blouse, and a trim, royal blue jacket, pinched at the waist. Her lush, black hair was piled high on her head in the softly swirled pompadour more reminiscent of the early 1900s than the 1920s, and her black, narrow-brimmed hat was perched left, again not especially 1920s style.

Roxie moved her head left and right. “Well... Jake won’t talk about it. He’s gotten all moody and angry, and I don’t blame him. Especially since his mother took Jimmy back upstate and told Jake he couldn’t be a real father until he changed jobs and met ‘the right kind of girl.’ So, now we know that I ain’t the right kind of girl for Jake, don’t we?”

“I don’t know about that, Roxie, but I can’t blame her after what happened. It must have been absolutely terrifying.”

“I don’t blame her either, and neither does Jake, and that’s why he’s... well, as we say in the twenty-first century, that’s why he’s all messed up and pissed off. He’s obsessed with finding out who’s after him and why. We’re not exactly having a lot of laughs right now.”

“You never said how you felt about his mother,” Harriet said.

Roxie shrugged. “We didn’t really get to talk much. When they finally got to Clare’s place, Mrs. Kane was a nervous

wreck and Jimmy was clinging to her, crying, and wouldn't let go. What a shit-show, pardon my future century slang. Clare was trying to look cool, but she was slipping into the kitchen every few minutes and throwing back some gin from her brand-new silver flask. Anyway, from what she said to Jake, his mother wasn't impressed by me. After she saw the stud in my nose, she didn't even look at me. She kept her eyes down. Nobody ate any of the lunch and, two hours later, Jake called one of his police buddies and a squad car escorted Jake, his mother and Jimmy back to the train station.

“After they left, Clare went to her room and passed out. I sat down at the piano and played a few songs from the future days, and I was depressed as hell.”

Harriet stared out the window, taking it all in. “And Jake still has no idea who shot at them?”

“He's sure it's connected to one of his old clients, Edith Lester, who was murdered, but he doesn't know who or why.”

“Have there been other death threats since then?”

“I don't know. Jake won't talk about it. In fact, I haven't seen him in three days. He calls and says he and Charlie are busy. I'm really worried about him. He's not scared, and I've never seen him scared, but he should be, shouldn't he? I mean, there's somebody out there who wants to kill him.”

Harriet didn't know what to say, so she stayed quiet.

Roxie sat with her arms crossed, staring out the taxi window, fogged up and beaded with rain. “Do you miss your own time, Harriet? I mean, where you came from?”

“No, I don't. I'm happy here. I have my work at the clinic, I have friends and I'm not trapped in a man's world of 1883. I'm free.”

“Will you ever get married?”

Harriet turned her eyes on Roxie. “What are we talking about here? What is truly on your mind?”

Roxie lowered her gaze. “I like living in this time, but it still doesn't feel like it's... how do I say this? *My* time. Sometimes



I wake up in the morning and I don't know where I am or who I am, and it takes me a few seconds before I remember. And then I get scared and confused and I think, what the hell am I doing here? Do you ever feel that?"

Harriet folded her hands in her lap and looked down at them. "About six months after I arrived here, in 1920, I did feel similar. I missed my father and mother so much. Both had died, Dad in 1912 and Mother in 1918. And I had friends I missed, one in Chicago and one in Boston, but I didn't dare seek them out. I knew they would have aged naturally—not skipping thirty-seven years by time traveling the way I did—so I was afraid to. What would I have said to them? One friend from medical school still lives here in New York, and I hope and pray we don't run into each other. She's getting up in years now, almost 70, but I'm only 38. I'd have to pretend I don't know her, and that would be difficult. Anyway, yes, I understand how you feel, but I wasn't the toast of New York, and I didn't fall in love."

Roxie sat up straighter, keeping her shoulders square. "Jake and I are in love, but we have some big mountains to climb before we can be together, and it seems like those mountains are getting bigger all the time."

Harriet eased back in her seat. "I don't know how to respond, Roxie. I don't believe I have ever been in love with a man. Well, no, that's not entirely true. I *know* I have never been in love because I have never wanted to live with a man and share my life with him. I wonder if I ever shall."

Roxie gave her a little smile. "Oh, you shall, Harriet," Roxie said, mocking the word 'shall.' "You will. I know it. You're so awesome, and I'm sure there's a dude out there who will fall head-over-heels for you."

Harriet mimicked Roxie's voice. "Well, whoever that dude is, I *hope* he will be awesome."

They laughed, enjoying their speech diversity.

Roxie leaned forward, pointing ahead. "There it is. Driver, pull over to the curb, please, across the street from The Black Cat."

The driver did so, braking to a stop.

“Can you wait for us?” Roxie asked. “We’ll just be a few minutes and then we’re going a little further downtown.”

The cab driver tapped the raised taxi meter flag and twisted around. “Yeah, sure. Why not?” Then he added, pointing to The Black Cat. “Do you know what? Not too many months ago, I had Frankie Shay himself in my cab, with two of his big goons. He said his private car broke down, and he was none too happy about it. Anyway, I told him he should catch the Orange Blossom Special out of Pennsylvania Station and go south to Miami and enjoy himself. I says, you’ve got the money for it. I tells him he should go to one of them Japanese tea garden parties at the Flamingo Hotel that some of the highfalutin dames was gabbing to me about.”

The taxi driver wore a tan uniform with a matching cap that had ACE TAXI embroidered across it. His face was leathery and thin, his eyes filled with defiant wisdom. “Do you know what he says to me? He says, ‘I ain’t goin’ nowhere, pal. I’ve got too many suckers waitin’ for me in The Black Cat, ready to dole out the greenbacks.’ Do you know what? Old Frankie Shay should have listened to me. Yeah. Now look where he is, dead and pushin’ ‘up a headstone that weighs a ton. Gone in a puff of smoke.”

Minutes later, Roxie and Harriet stood in front of The Black Cat speakeasy, their black umbrellas open, the sound of rain tapping on the tight fabric. They boarded the front door. There were warning signs, printed in bold red letters, on the entrance door and windows.

**WARNING!**

**CLOSED BY ORDER OF THE POLICE!**

**KEEP OUT!**

**VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED!**

**CALVIN SINCLAIR, POLICE COMMISSIONER**

“So, there it is, Roxie, closed and padlocked. How do you feel about it?”

“In a way, I miss the place,” Roxie said reflectively. “It wasn’t all bad. Just Frankie Shay. The rest was all good. Good audience. Good music. It’s where I met Jake.”

Roxie had first heard the news from Jake, that The Black Cat had been permanently closed, and then she’d read about it in the newspaper.

*The Black Cat, a popular club in Greenwich Village, was permanently closed today by order of the police commissioner, Calvin Sinclair. Sinclair stated that, “For too long, this establishment has been a hotbed of vice, gambling, and the unlawful sale of alcoholic spirits. After its owner, the well-known gangster, Frankie Shay, died in a fire at Club Pogo last July, The Black Cat has been the scene of blatant lawlessness, including murder, prostitution, and base corruption of all kinds. The Black Cat should have been closed long before now. This establishment, and others like it in New York City, are a disgrace to a lawful, moral, and peace-loving society.”*

Roxie let out a little laugh. “Did I tell you that I met Calvin Sinclair, the police commissioner?”

Harriet turned to her. “No, you didn’t.”

“He came to a couple of my performances at The Black Cat. After both shows, he sent me a private note, and it said something like, ‘I admire your performance and I admire you. Perhaps we could meet, discreetly? Please do me the honor of answering this note with a time and place.’”

Harriet lifted an eyebrow. “And did you answer?”

“No, of course not. I didn’t like the guy. There was something kind of creepy about him, and he had the eyes of a reptile. And even if I’d wanted to, Frankie would never have allowed it.”

“But he’s the police commissioner. You could have told him about your situation. That you were being held a prisoner by Frankie. He might have been able to help you.”

Roxie shook her head. “I thought about it for about thirty seconds. No way. He’s forty-something, he’s married, and he has two kids. It would have been a jump out of the frying pan

and into the fire. No way I wanted anything to do with that guy.”

Harriet nodded. “So, why did you bring him up?”

Roxie turned, giving Harriet a focused stare. “It’s why I asked you to take the morning off and have lunch with me at the Algonquin. After our next stop, I have something I want to run by you.”

“Oh, but you are so very dramatic, Roxie.” Harriet’s lively eyes sparkled. “I will definitely have to see you on stage. You’ve managed to intrigue me—but then again, you are an intriguing young woman. Isn’t that what all the entertainment columnists say? How mysterious and intriguing you are?”

Roxie laughed. “If they only knew, right?”

Harriet nodded with a wink. “Oh, yes. Well, anyway, do you plan to break into The Black Cat, dash off down into the basement and time travel back to 2019?”

Roxie flashed an enigmatic grin. “Well, you never know, do you? I’ve been thinking about it. I’ve dreamed about it. I’ve thought about going back to my own time, and maybe someday I will, but not today. Today, Harriet, I need your advice, and you’re the only one who can give it to me.”

Harriet batted her eyes playfully. “Well, don’t I feel the flattered one? All right, let’s get back into the cab so you can take me to our next surprising destination.”

## CHAPTER 5

As the taxi headed downtown, Roxie noticed the elevated railroad tracks which ran through Tribeca and led to the Hudson and Manhattan Railroad terminal on Church Street. Roxie knew that, in the future, this area would be razed to make way for the eastern end of the World Trade Center.

When the taxi turned on Cortlandt Street, Harriet stared at the sale signs for radios and radio repairs, with shops that featured hard-to-find tubes, condensers, and other radio essentials.

“And why are we on Cortlandt Street?” Harriet asked.

Roxie pointed ahead and leaned forward. “Driver, please pull over on Dey Street, the near corner.”

At the curb, Roxie paid the driver, and the ladies climbed out. A fine mist fell, and clouds shrouded the tall buildings in a ghostly haze.

“Do you ever intend to tell me where we’re going, Roxie?”

“It’s just over there, next to the flower shop and below the cigar shop.”

Harriet followed Roxie’s gaze to see a sign that read **Dey Street Salon**. “All right. Are we going to get our hair styled?”

Roxie shook her head. “Alma works there.”

Harriet straightened. “Alma Penny?”

Alma had been one of Frankie Shay’s girls and one of the first people Roxie had met after she’d time traveled. She and Harriet had helped Alma escape her life of poverty and abuse.

“Yes...” Roxie said. “I got to thinking about Alma the other day. She cut and styled my hair when I first arrived, and she did an expert job. She told me that being a hairdresser was the only thing she was really good at. So, I asked Jake about it, and how I could find her. He sent Charlie to the Red Nose, where Alma used to dance, and he asked some of the girls if

they knew where Alma was. One of the girls knew and, for a few bucks, she told Charlie.”

“Well, isn’t that something?” Harriet said. “It pays to know a detective.”

“Alma seemed to really like and trust you. I thought we’d check on her and make sure she’s okay.”

“That was kind of you, Roxie. Very thoughtful. Yes, let’s go see how she is faring.”

The Dey Street Salon was a narrow space with silver gray walls, a white ceiling, a wall of mirrors, four chairs and two odd-looking, chrome-plated, floor hair dryers.

When Roxie and Harriet entered the busy shop, a heavy, middle-aged, round-faced matron rose from behind a welcome desk, pulled a lit cigarette from her big lips, and greeted them with keen eyes over a tight, smiling mouth.

“Hello, ladies,” she said, in a surprising bass-baritone voice, a product of cigarettes and booze. “As you can see, we’re busy right now, but I’ll put you on our reservation list and you can sit right over there in our very comfortable chairs. I’ll call you before you know it.”

Roxie searched for Alma and was only half-listening to the stocky woman, whose cap of wavy hair was streaked with gray.

When Harriet smiled and told the woman that they were looking for Alma Penny, the matron’s tight smile fell, her double chin seemed to expand, and her expression turned wary.

“What do you want with her?” the matron asked gruffly.

Roxie spotted Alma at the same time Alma spotted Roxie, and Alma froze. She was blow-drying a middle-aged woman’s newly-styled bob with a hand-held dryer. Her face was fuller than the last time Roxie had seen her, and she was wearing a loose-fitting dress, probably in an attempt to hide the fact that she was pregnant.

Roxie waved and smiled enthusiastically.

“My girls don’t take breaks when they’re working,” the matron snapped. “You make your plans with Alma when she’s not working on my time.”

Harriet didn’t show offense. “I understand completely.”

But Roxie made her move, crossed the room, and went to Alma. She was ready to hug her, but Alma’s nervous eyes shifted, and her body language was closed off and said, “stay away.”

Roxie kept her voice low. “Hello, Alma. I won’t keep you from your work. I just wanted to say hello and see if you’re okay.”

“How did you find me?” Alma said, in a nervous whisper, turning her head aside toward Roxie, while she raked her fingers into her client’s damp hair, lifting it from the scalp and directing the flow of the dryer.

Roxie noticed that Alma’s client was leafing through a movie magazine that featured Charlie Chaplin and Marion Davies.

“It doesn’t matter. Are you okay?”

“I’ll lose my job if you hang around here,” Alma said acidly, over the hissing growl of the hairdryer. “I need this job, okay? And I don’t need you nosin’ around and messin’ things up for me.”

Alma’s client obviously didn’t hear Alma’s and Roxie’s low conversation. She glanced up, ready to share a tidbit from the magazine, raising her voice over the noise of the hairdryer. “Alma, did you know that Marion Davies really despised the stage-door-Johnnies, especially those from Yale?”

Alma forced an ingratiating smile. “No, Mrs. Mandrake, I didn’t.”

The 40s-something woman continued. “Well, listen to this. During one show starring Gaby Deslys, ‘rowdy undergraduates from Yale pelted Davies and other chorus dancers with tomatoes and rotten eggs,’ just because they didn’t like the show. Isn’t that awful?”

“Yes, Mrs. Mandrake. It is awful. So disrespectful. Those boys should know better. It’s not easy dancin’ up there night after night. I mean, those boys was educated, and had plenty of dough and everything.”

The client rattled on. “Of course, that was when Davies worked at the Ziegfeld Follies, before she met William Randolph Hearst and became a big picture star. And listen to this. ‘Hearst moved Davies with her mother and sisters into an elegant Manhattan townhouse at the corner of Riverside Drive and West 105th Street.’ It’s positively scandalous, and him married and all.”

Alma glanced coolly at Roxie and spoke from the side of her mouth. “I’m in the middle of it here. Please go.”

Roxie was surprised by Alma’s curt manner, but she kept her smile, nodding in resignation. “Okay, Alma. I’ll leave.”

Alma glanced to her left, saw Harriet, and glared. “What does *she* want? To pull me back into that damned clinic, with those do-gooders and rich dames, who smile like sugar while they look down their noses at you?”

“No, Alma. We just wanted to see you, that’s all. We just wanted to see if you’re okay.”

“Well, I’m spiffy, okay? Just spiffy. So, get out before Mrs. Spoggie kicks me out on my caboose and I’m back on the street with nothin’.”

Roxie lowered her head and returned to Harriet, who, with all her charm and patience, had not been able to appease the matron.

“I don’t like smart ones like you two coming around, trying to stir up trouble in my place.”

Harriet took Roxie’s arm and started for the door. “Good day to you, madam, and I’m sorry we came at the wrong time.”

Outside, as they searched for a taxi, Roxie told Harriet what Alma had said, and Harriet didn’t respond.

“I guess it was a bad idea,” Roxie said.



“It was a thoughtful gesture. I’m afraid Alma is not herself right now. But I think she’s a survivor. At least, I hope she is. Anyway, she knows where I am if she gets into trouble and needs help. Oh, there’s a taxi. Let’s get out of here.”

\*\*\*

Roxie and Harriet made their way to the Algonquin Hotel. They chose to eat in the Algonquin Oak Room, next to the lobby, instead of in the legendary Rose Room, where the famous Algonquin Round Table gathered in the 1920s. They were a group of journalists, authors, publicists, and actors who met daily to exchange witticisms and mischievous insults. Some of the famous members included Robert Benchley, Jane Grant, Ruth Hale, George S. Kaufman, Harpo Marx, Dorothy Parker, and Alexander Woollcott.

Roxie and Harriet sat at a quiet table, and both ordered the blue plate special, priced at \$1.65. It included broiled spring chicken, cauliflower with hollandaise, buttered beets, fried potatoes, and popovers.

“I’ve never eaten here,” Harriet said, looking around. “I like it.”

“Jake has brought me here a couple of times. By the way, it’s still here in 2019, and it is landmarked, which means some developer can’t knock it down and build yet another ugly high-rise that looks like a box and has concrete slats for balconies, and flat ugly windows.”

“It doesn’t sound to me as if you’re all that enamored of the twenty-first century,” Harriet said.

Roxie forked a buttered beet. “It has its cool parts, but it also has—and excuse my future New York slang—its shitty parts.” She didn’t look up as she talked. “I can’t get Alma off my mind. She looked so unhappy and tired. She must be six months pregnant by now.”

“She obviously wants to be independent, and for my part, I have to respect that.”

Roxie nodded. “Yeah, you’re right, of course. But I wish she could turn her life around. She’s smart, in her own way. She once told me that when the bob first became popular, four or five years ago, a lot of hairdressers refused to do it, and many didn’t know how to do it, since they’d used their shears only on long hair. She said that the flappers just walked off and headed to the local barbershops, and the barbers cut it that way, no problem. Alma jumped on any new hairstyle, and she figured it out. She’s one of those women who, if she had the money, could open her own shop and probably make a fortune.”

Harriet nodded in agreement. “I wish we could have talked about what she’s going to do with the baby.”

Roxie took a sip of water. “Like you said, Harriet, Alma’s a survivor.”

Harriet set her fork aside and sat up. “All right, now. Let’s get to it. What do you need my advice about?”

“Before we get into that, I want to ask you something.”

Harriet half-hooded her eyes. “Another delay. Okay, Roxie. What now?”

“Why do you dress the way you do?”

Harriet sat back, stifling a hint of defensiveness. “Because I like it. I’m comfortable in these clothes.”

“But you’re really pretty, you know, and you have a killer figure, and great, thick hair, and nice cheek bones. I mean, I’ve seen men look at you. So why not, well, be a little more current in your fashion?”

Harriet pursed her lips and folded her hands on the table. “Because I don’t feel comfortable in those dresses. I’m still a woman from the nineteenth century. I also don’t like women smoking, drinking, rouging their cheeks and their knees, and hanging all over men in public. It embarrasses me. I know I sound like a prude to you, but I can’t help it. That’s who I am.”

Roxie shrugged. “Well, I drink and use makeup, and I kiss Jake on the street, sometimes, when I can’t help myself because the guy is just so hot and sexy.”

Harriet shut her eyes for a moment, as if to hide her disapproval, and when she reopened them, she didn't look at Roxie. "You're different, Roxie. You come from the future and, from what you've told me, women do many worse things than the women in this time."

A smile formed at the corners of Roxie's mouth. "I like you, Harriet. I like who you are and what you are."

Harriet leaned back. "And I like you. But now, I think you should tell me why you asked me to lunch." She glanced at her watch. "I have to get back to the clinic soon."

Roxie lowered her fork and leaned forward in her chair. "I have a crazy idea."

"I'm listening."

"I want to buy, own, and operate... are you ready for this? The Black Cat."

Harriet's wide, disbelieving eyes searched Roxie's face, looking for a joke. She saw none.

"Roxie..." she stopped and tried again. "Roxie... I don't think that's a good idea, and I don't even think it's possible."

Roxie straightened her spine. "Harriet, in a short amount of time, I've met a lot of people. Wealthy, influential people, and many of them said they'd help me. Not only do I think it's possible, but I'm also determined to do it, one way or the other. Why not? It's always been a dream of mine to own a place. Why not The Black Cat? I think it would be cool. And we know what's down in the basement, don't we?"

Harriet blinked rapidly as she stared down at the linen tablecloth, seeking words. "Have you talked to Jake about this?"

"Not yet."

Harriet's face clouded over, and she lifted a hand, then let it drop. "Roxie... You know firsthand what a corrupt and ugly business those places are. Gangsters and cutthroats own those places, and since Frankie Shay was killed and that other fellow..."

Roxie cut in, “Luigi Degrassi.”

“Yes, anyway, since then, the police have shut down other clubs, like the El Fey Club on West 48<sup>th</sup> Street, and the 300 Club was raided by the police just last week. The newspaper article I read said they seized bottles of liquor and arrested two dancers for ‘violation of the section of the penal code forbidding suggestive dances.’ Don’t look at me that way. Yes, I do read those articles now because of you. And...”

Roxie tried to break in, but Harriet threw up a hand to stop her. “I’m not finished! I don’t know if you have heard this, but the Assistant U.S. Attorney General ordered raids on speakeasy clubs throughout New York, largely because of The Black Cat, the El Pogo and you, Roxie Raines. Yes, you and your rise to stardom, your association with Frankie Shay and Luigi Degrassi. That entire crooked business and violent deaths were front-page news in many U.S. papers, and it makes New York look very lax, very bad and very corrupt.”

Roxie lifted a severe eyebrow. “Are you finished?”

“Yes, I am. On second thought, no, I’m not. Why don’t you take advantage of all you’ve built up? You could perform on Broadway—your own show. What about that picture-making man who said he wanted to make a picture with you? There are so many ways you could go, besides singing in some illegal and dangerous nightclub.”

“One problem with that, Harriet. I’ve always wanted my own club. It’s always been a dream. Why be in someone else’s show, or movie, or sing at someone else’s club? Why can’t I be the owner, the operator, and the star? I don’t have to sell booze, Harriet. I can charge for the entertainment, and I can call the place Roxie’s!”

Harriet lifted her troubled eyes. “I see it in your expression, Roxie. Something’s going on.”

“Yes... This guy named Jules Morgan got in touch with me last week. Do you know him?”

“No...”

Roxie grew animated. “He owns a club or two in Miami, one in Chicago, and he owns The Ginger Jam over on West 46<sup>th</sup> Street. Guess who dances there? Ruby Keeler and Barbara Stanwyck.”

Harriet stared blankly.

“Oh, that’s right, you don’t know them. You will. Keeler and Stanwyck become big stars in the future. Anyway, now get this—and I’m sorry if I’m hyperventilating. Jules Morgan wants me to be the only singer at The Ginger Jam, and he’s going to pay me \$40,000.”

Harriet froze, and her mouth dropped, then formed an O. “That is utterly astounding. Could you make that much money starring in a Broadway music revue?”

“No. None of the other offers I’ve received came even close to that, including the Ziegfeld Follies. I did some quick math, since I’m good at math, and I figure that \$40,000 now, in 1925, is the equivalent of about a half-million bucks in 2019, give or take a few thousand on either side, depending on inflation and whatever. Anyway, with that kind of money, I can help Alma buy her own salon, nothing too fancy at first. I can help you and the clinic, and I can put some money down on The Black Cat.”

Roxie sat back, grinning with satisfaction. “Not bad, right? Like pretty awesome, right? Since I’m not going to be a mother just yet, I might as well go for it and make as much money as I can.”

Harriet gave Roxie a long, significant look. “Roxie... you really have to think about this. You have to be careful. Very careful. You don’t want to fall into the same trap with Jules Morgan that you did with Frankie Shay. These men pay you all this money and then they feel as though they own you. You’ve already been through this.”

“Jules is not Frankie, Harriet. I met him. Clare came with me. He’s got a girlfriend, and he wants nothing from me except for me to bring in the high rollers and make him money. That’s it.”

Harriet's face held concern. She tried to smile, but it failed.

## CHAPTER 6

When Roxie entered Kilburn Link's spacious office, the fat-necked man had a dead cigar pasted to his lips. For a heavy, florid-faced man, he jumped to his feet with surprising agility. He rounded his desk and went to her in a rush, pulling the cigar from his mouth, a hand extended, a broad smile revealing tobacco-stained teeth.

"Miss Roxie Raines, I am indeed delighted to see you again!" he said with loud enthusiasm, and an eager, greedy focus in his eyes.

Link was a talent agent who had lobbied to represent Roxie ever since he'd first seen her perform for Frankie Shay.

Roxie forced a smile. "It's nice to see you again, Mr. Link."

He waved a finger. "No Mr. Link, Roxie. Just call me Link."

He indicated toward a red, art déco chair that was shaped like a seashell, near his broad oak desk. "Now, you just sit yourself down here and be as comfortable as you can be. I've got your contract right here on my desk and all you have to do is to sign it."

Roxie sat down, glancing around the office at the polished wood floors and the art déco styled lamps and furniture. One wall was covered with black-and-white photographs of singers, actors, and dancers; an opposite wall displayed oil paintings of New York theaters and Times Square nightscapes.

Tall, partially curtained windows provided a grand view of the impressive Hotel Astor across Broadway on 44<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> Streets. It was famous for its numerous restaurants and lounges, and for a spectacular roof garden that Roxie had visited with Jake two weeks before.

Link settled into the chair behind his desk, piled with papers, newspapers, and leaning stacks of black-and-white photos of actors and singers. His oval amber ashtray was surprisingly clean, his office tidy, the off-white paint job fresh.

Link's tweed suit was tight, his vest strained the buttons, and the diamond on his pinky finger dazzled.

"Yes, well, this is truly a pleasure, Roxie. Truly it is. Thank you for stopping by."

Roxie wore a maroon chiffon dress with a tiered skirt, a white cloche hat with a maroon bow, and one-inch heels. Her makeup was conservative, without rouge on her cheeks, and her lipstick was a light cherry red.

Roxie got right down to business. "I didn't know you'd recommended me to Jules Morgan, Link," Roxie said. "He didn't tell me when we first met."

"Well, maybe he didn't think it mattered on that first get-to-know-each-other meeting. The main thing is that I was certain you'd be the perfect fit for The Ginger Jam, so I called him and told him about you. I had called you several times, but you never returned my calls."

Roxie wanted to say that she hadn't returned his calls because she didn't want to have anything to do with him after Frankie Shay's death, but she didn't. "Well, I was... you know, still recovering from the fire."

Link's grin crinkled up his eyes. "Of course, you were, Roxie. Of course, and it was the right thing to do. Rest and recovery is just what you needed after that unfortunate business with Frankie and the fire at El Pogo. Poor Frankie met his untimely end, and I am sorry for it, and God rest his soul. Yes, indeed, sorry I am for the man, but now life must go on."

Link placed his cigar in the ashtray, folded his hands and leaned forward. "Are you recovered, Roxie? Completely recovered?"

"Yes."

Link's face grew wide with pleasure. "Well, I'm just as happy as a circus clown to hear it. All right, so when I contacted Jules and told him about you and reminded him of all the glowing newspaper articles about you, and all the rave reviews, you should have heard him, Roxie. Jules is a man



who comes to the point. He doesn't beat about the bush. When he feels the knife-point of a good deal, he doesn't sit on it. He jumps, and to his credit, he did jump. He was absolutely convinced that you were the perfect singer for his place. So, I put together a deal, and a good and profitable deal it is, if I say so myself. Isn't that so, Roxie?"

Roxie nodded. "It's a lot of money..."

Link pointed at her. "It's what the market will bear, and Jules Morgan recognizes true value and the smell of a good deal. Do you know what Fanny Brice was paid when she first started out at the Ziegfeld Follies? Ziegfeld signed her for two years—at \$75 a week, then \$100."

Roxie knew that Fanny Brice was portrayed by Barbara Streisand in the 1968 movie *Funny Girl*.

"Did you know that, Roxie?"

"No, I didn't."

"So, aren't the terms of your contract favorable to you? And the money? The money should set you up pretty, I do believe. Perhaps you'll live in the gold suite at the Plaza, with a gold piano, gold furniture, and gold taffeta draperies. You'll have a maid, fine food and wine, a spiffy new car, and a chauffeur, and money in the bank for many rainy days. You'll have any rich beau you wish, and brag about your jewelry box, filled with sets of necklaces, earrings and bracelets. You'll drink champagne at The Plaza Hotel, outside on the 'champagne porch,' as they call it, with all the city swells, wearing your latest fur coat. And, if that isn't all to beat the band, there will be more money where that came from, as long as Kilburn Link is driving this roadster. And let's not forget the radio, Roxie. It's taking off like one of those buzzing airplanes flying around, and I want to be sure that you become a big part of it. Now, all these things aren't so bad, are they, Roxie?"

"And you get ten percent?" Roxie asked pointedly.

Link leaned back in his chair with an innocent expression and a spread of his chubby hands. "Yes, of course, Roxie. It's standard in all my contracts. There are talent scouts and agents

who take fifteen, but not Kilburn Link. No ma'am. I'm not greedy, just a man happy in his work and happy to keep performers doing what they do: entertaining the public and bringing in the high rollers for the club owners and theater producers. That's the happy-go-get-them job for Kilburn Link."

Roxie fidgeted with her purse. "I just didn't know about it, that's all... I didn't know that you had set it up with Jules Morgan."

Link stood up, making a face of apology. "Well, forgive me and forgive Jules, Roxie. Truth be told, we should have made it clear to you right from the start. You're damn right about that, and I'll be the first to admit it."

Roxie knew Link was full of it. She knew he'd purposefully kept it from her, and he'd surely told Jules not to say anything about it, at least until after Roxie had learned about the \$40,000. Who in their right mind would turn down that much money?

Surely Link knew that Roxie would never have agreed to Link being her agent, so he'd worked fast before another agent clinched some deal with another club owner, with the Ziegfeld Follies or with a Broadway revue. Link had made a deal with Jules that Roxie couldn't refuse. Forty thousand dollars for six months' work was a small fortune, especially when the average yearly U.S. income was only about \$3,800.

Link reached for his cigar. "Now, is there anything contained in this contract you're about to sign that you're not clear about or comfortable with, Roxie? I want you to be completely satisfied and certain about this. Now that you've read over the contract with your lawyer, is there anything you'd like to alter?"

Roxie stared down. The truth was, her lawyer had said it was a standard contract and a surprisingly outstanding deal. "Frankly," he'd said, "you'd be crazy not to sign this."

Then why was she hesitating? Why had she spent a near sleepless night thinking about it? For one thing, there was Jake. She hadn't told him. She'd wanted to, but he'd been

completely preoccupied with the murder case of Edith Lester. The other reason she hadn't told him? The money. Jake was a 1920s man, and in the 1920s, women did not make more money than their man did, and she'd be making more money in six months than Jake would probably make in ten years. When she did tell him, what would he say? What would he do?

"Roxie?" Link asked, his eyes narrowed. "If something's not right, then I'll make it right. You just say the word, and old Link will change any phrase, line, or word. I'll even ask for more money if that's what you want."

Roxie lifted her eyes and shook her head. "No, the money's fine. The contract is fine. I'll sign it."

Link's grin of satisfaction rose to his twinkling eyes. "Very good, Roxie. Very good. Now that we've settled that, there's only one more little thing I want to add."

Roxie stiffened.

"No, no, Roxie, it's nothing unpleasant or underhanded, I assure you. Quite the contrary. Once you sign that contract before you, I'm going to call Jules Morgan and tell him. Do you know what he's going to do? He's going to take out full-page ads in *The New York Herald*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Graphic*, *The Daily News* and William Randolph Hearst's *Daily Mirror*. Now, if that doesn't give you a thrill, then listen to this. Are you ready? I called Charlie Chaplin and told him about you."

Roxie nearly shot out of her chair. "Charlie Chaplin?!"

Link laughed, bobbing his head. "Yes, yes, I know Charlie quite well. I told him about you, and guess what? He's coming to your opening night—whenever you and Jules decide when that will be—as long as he's in town, of course, and not out in Hollywood making a picture. That's where his studio is, you know."

Link grinned proudly from ear to ear, his hands spread wide. "Now, tell me if Kilburn Link doesn't make things happen for

his people. This is the start of a whole new life for you, Roxie. A life you've never dreamed possible."

Roxie was at a loss for words, staring in blind wonder. She felt as though she'd fallen back into a dreamlike state, like when she'd first stumbled through that basement door and found herself in 1925. So much had happened in just a few months.

Roxie picked up the pen and signed the contract. Link rose, his face and chest broad with delight. "Done and done, Roxie. You're on your way!"

Roxie set the pen aside and stared out the windows.

"Roxie... I don't see the smile I've been expecting. Is something the matter? Something you want to tell me?"

Roxie didn't look at him. "I've heard that speakeasies are being closed all over town. Won't they close The Ginger Jam, too?"

Link released a belly laugh. "Don't you worry your pretty head about that, Roxie. Let me tell you a little something about what's going on around this city. Do you know what the politicians tell me while we're sharing a beer or two at some speakeasy? They say, 'We make the laws in the daytime and break them at night.' No, don't worry about that, Roxie. The coppers have to make the rounds, of course, and do their job for the newspapers and the daytime politicians. So, that's what they do. But let me share the other side of the coin. There are rumors, so called, that the Yale Club right here in New York City has a 14-year supply of booze in its basement. And did you know that the owner of one of the most popular speakeasies in our fair city, Chumley's, was told by the police that, in the event of a raid on the premises, they should empty people out of the Bedford Street door because the police will always enter through the Pamela Court entrance?"

Link saw amusement in Roxie's eyes, and he winked at her.

"Jules Morgan knows the right people, and many of those right people are willing, ready, and eager to see you on The

Ginger Jam's stage and hear you sing. There ain't nothing gonna go wrong. I promise you."

He rubbed his index finger and thumb together. "I've paid the pipers, Roxie, so you can sing."

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As Roxie left Link's office and strolled down the long hallway to the bank of elevators, she should have felt ecstatic. But she didn't. Something in her gut told her that, despite her good fortune, everything was not going to come up roses.

And she was meeting Jake for dinner. She'd have to tell him her good news, wouldn't she? And Jake's murder case would surely come up. How could it not? Roxie had made up her mind that she was going to tell Jake that it scared her to death; he could be killed! Maybe she would even tell him that Clare was scared, too, and so was Jake's mother, although he already knew that because Clare had been very vocal about it.

Roxie was going to ask Jake, calmly, if he would drop the case and go back to what he was doing before Edith Lester's murder. He had been much happier, and so had she, when Jake was just a personal detective who handled marital complaints for wealthy and unhappy women. Not that Roxie liked Jake playing personal detective to unhappy women, but, as she'd say in 2019, "Whatever."

Outside, strolling in a cool wind on West 45<sup>th</sup> Street, Roxie saw an organ grinder at work, cranking out a lovely Italian tune. Dropping a quarter into his tin cup, she smiled at him, with his white, bushy mustache and his friendly, contented face. She'd need to recreate that smile when she faced Jake at dinner.

## CHAPTER 7

“It’s personal, Charlie, and you know it,” Jake said, strongly. “They took a shot at my mother and my son.”

“I don’t know nothin’ for sure, Jake,” Charlie said, as they stood next to a street cart on 41<sup>st</sup> Street. Both held frankfurters packed in a bun with onions and mustard. Charlie’s was mostly eaten, Jake’s was hardly touched.

Charlie was a short, muscled, broad man, with a bit of a paunch, a flat nose, and a seasoned face that had seen its share of fights. Having once been a professional boxer, Charlie had street smarts, a head for numbers, and a good memory for facts he read in a variety of newspapers every day.

“Eat!” Charlie demanded, as he glanced about, studying the crowds for any sign of a threat. “You ain’t been eatin’ that much, and it’s not good for you. What’s the matter with you, not eating so much? That’s what I’m saying about you lately. You ain’t yourself.”

“Don’t start that again, Charlie. I’m as much myself as anybody is...” And then Jake realized the stupidity of his words, so he scratched his head and shrugged a shoulder. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“Okay, so I get it about your mother and little Jimmy. I get that, Jake, and I don’t blame you none about being sore and wantin’ to crack some heads together, but you’re letting it eat away at you. You’re letting it cloud your head and you’re hittin’ the whiskey too much.”

Jake glared at Charlie. “Maybe it’s time you minded your own business.”

Charlie lifted a defiant chin, not backing down. “You *are* my business, Jake, and I don’t give a good gambler’s damn if you don’t like what I’m sayin’. I ain’t got much of anything or anyone else but you, pal, so don’t say you ain’t none of my business, okay?”

Jake's eyes softened on his old friend, but he didn't say anything. He took a bite out of the frankfurter and chewed thoughtfully.

Charlie continued. "So, I says to myself this morning when I got out of bed, why ain't we going nowhere with this investigation, Jake? We know what's-what around this town and we know a thing or two about finding things out. So why don't we even know who those goons were who rear-ended you and took a shot at you and your family? When you shattered the windshield of the car, and that driver fell out of the car onto the street, was he dead or not? We don't know. And then the car's gone by the time the coppers get there to investigate. So, all this stuff is what I'm thinking about while I'm shaving this morning."

"We've been all through this, Charlie. It's old stuff, molding away."

"Yeah, but if it ain't got us anywhere, I say we keep hashin' it out together until something shakes loose. That's what I'm sayin'."

Jake took another bite and spoke with his mouth open. "Okay, okay... I can't think straight."

"And who's been sending those threatening notes to you, the letters cut out from newsprint? That's a chicken thing, Jake. How many now? Three? That's somebody who ain't got the guts to even write down their own words in their own way."

Jake swallowed. "Or maybe it's just smoke and mirrors, which is what I say it is."

"Shooting real bullets at your car ain't smoke and mirrors, Jake. Who were they? We don't know. So, I says, something just don't smell right. I'm maybe starting to think that all this business has nothin' to do with Edith Lester's murder. I think maybe it's about something else. Maybe it's something or someone from your past, and I don't like sayin' this, Jake, but maybe it has something to do with Roxie."

Jake took another bite, then licked the mustard from his lips. He looked at his half-eaten frankfurter and nodded darkly. “Yeah, I thought about that, too. I mean, the Roxie angle. But I don’t think so. There’s no motive. No reason. Frankie Shay is dead, and nobody cares that he’s dead, so I don’t think it’s got anything to do with Roxie. The threatening notes started when I told Hal Lester I’d take the case and find out who killed his wife. That ended up in the papers and, two days later, that first note shows up at the office. I keep going over that note in my head. I repeat it like it’s some witch’s spell or something. ‘Drop the case or else. The rich dame isn’t worth it. No, it’s not about Roxie. It’s Lester, I’m sure of it.’”

Charlie shook his head in frustration. “Let’s walk, Jake. It’s cold for September, and my rheumatism is kickin’ up in my leg.”

They ambled along the crowded Times Square streets and neither spoke until Jake had finished his frankfurter.

Jake wiped his mouth with his handkerchief and looked skyward into the overcast clouds. “I’m thinking I’m going after this thing all wrong, Charlie. You’re right about my head being cloudy, just like those clouds up there blocking the sun. I haven’t been thinking so good. My head’s been full of worry about Jimmy and my mother, and about Roxie.”

“Roxie’s okay, Jake. She’s a good kid. You know that, and you’re crazy about her. I’m crazy about her, too. She shoots straight about things. You know where she stands, and she hasn’t let all this star stuff go to her head.”

Jake shook his head. “Something’s wrong, Charlie. I can feel it. I keep feeling she’s holding out on me about something, or maybe a lot of things, and that’s what keeps me up nights. I’m beginning to think she’s snuggling up to that rich millionaire, Reginald Matlin.”

“She ain’t that kind of dame, Jake. You know that. She don’t go for those knucklehead millionaires.”

Jake moved his lips back and forth, feeling the jealousy rise. “Maybe she doesn’t, and maybe she does. Most of the dolls in the theater have sugar daddies paying for this, and paying for



that, and we know what the ‘that’ is. Look at those Ziegfeld girls. They’ve got the furs and the diamonds and the knee-length dresses that don’t come from catalogs.”

“Stop it, Jake. Roxie ain’t like that. There you go, gettin’ all steamed up over nothin’.”

“Well, maybe it’s something, and maybe it isn’t something. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Clare would know, wouldn’t she? Since they live together.”

“Yeah, well, maybe Clare’s keeping her mouth shut.”

Charlie blew out a breath. “Yeah, right, and no dice. Like Clare has ever kept her big trap shut. No, Jake, I say stop it with the jealousy and let’s get our eyes on the ball.”

Jake looked ahead toward 46<sup>th</sup> Street and he spotted Sam, the shoeshine boy. “Hey, there’s Sam, and I need a shine. You could use one, too.”

“Nah, Jake, that kid don’t like me none.”

“Stop it, Charlie. He likes you fine. You’ve got what they call, these days, ‘a complex.’”

Jake drifted over to Sam, who had one foot resting on his six-inch-high wooden shoeshine stand. Sam was eleven years old, wore old shoes, patched knickerbockers, a shabby white shirt with suspenders, and a frayed jacket. On the side of his shoebox was painted, in white letters, PERSONAL SHOESHINE 10 CENTS.

“Hey there, Sam,” Jake said, drawing up, with Charlie holding back. “How’s business?”

Sam touched the brim of his flat cap. “I’ve got big ears, Jake.”

Surprised by the comment, Jake stepped closer. “What was that?”

Sam’s eyes shifted left and right, and he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I said, I’ve got big ears.”

Jake ran a hand across his mouth. “Okay, I need a shine, please.”

Without another word, Sam went to work.

He crouched to his knees, and Jake lifted his right foot and placed it on the stand. Sam added a dab of polish onto his polishing cloth and rubbed the shoe vigorously.

“My sister reads me the paper sometimes, Jake.”

“She should teach you to read.”

“I ain’t got no time for that. I’ve got to work and, anyway, she’s a girl and she’s younger than me. Do you know what I’m getting at here?”

Jake nodded in disappointment. “Yeah, I got it.”

Sam reached for a brush and buffed the entire shoe with quick, side-to-side movements. “So, here’s the dope, Jake. A couple of coppers stopped by yesterday for a shine and so I hears them talking. I always keep a sharp eye, but I don’t really look, Jake. I don’t look at people because maybe they won’t like my face, like some roughs who live on my block. Or maybe they’ve got the evil eye or something, or maybe they think I’m listening in to something I ain’t supposed to hear. I think you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, Sam, I know.”

“But my ears ain’t so small. You see how they stick out, just like my old man’s ears, not that I see the piker all that much, and maybe that’s okay by me. Anyway, the coppers are all dressed up nice. Suits with stripes. One’s double-breasted. Not pricy. See? They’re copper-pay suits.”

“I see, Sam.”

“So, when I hear the name Lester, I pretend I don’t hear. I snap out my polishing rag and I buff front, back, sides, like I’m doing right now. And I listen, Jake.”

“I like your ears, Sam,” Jake said.

“You and nobody else,” Sam said, sourly. “I had to fight for these ears, Jake. You know how it goes with the guys with big mouths and big fists, who call me ‘flapper ears’? So, I remember the name Lester because my sister reads me the papers, and I hear your name, and I tell her I know you, and I

tell her to keep reading. So, I hear you're doing a murder case.”

Sam finished the right foot and started on the left.

“I'm listening, Sam.”

“So, then I heard one of the Copper Suits say your name.”

“And you kept on working on the shoes?” Jake asked.

“My head was down, Jake, but my ears were up, like a rabbit's. The copper lowered his voice, but I heard him all right. He said, ‘they’, and I heard, ‘they’. The copper said they were going to make you go away. Those were the words, Jake.”

Sam glanced up. “I've been lookin' for you since then. I lost the card you gave me, or I would have found your office.”

Jake straightened up, his eyes dark and cold. “That's okay, Sam. What else did they say?”

“The other copper said...” and Sam paused, glancing about. “He was whispering, Jake, and even my big ears didn't hear everything. But I heard, for sure, something about how the last guys bungled it.”

Jake nodded, waiting until Sam had completed his work, his mind racing. When Sam rose, Jake reached into his trouser pocket, removed a silver dollar, and placed it in Sam's outstretched hand.

Flabbergasted, Sam stared down at it. When he looked up, his eyes narrowed, first with curiosity and then with suspicion. “What's with the silver, Jake? It's heavy in my hand.”

“That's good for nearly four gallons of gasoline.”

“I ain't got no motorcar, Jake.”

“So, buy yourself some new shoes or something.”

Charlie drifted over demurely. Sam clasped his hand into a fist and stared Charlie down.

Sam's face turned bitter, and he nodded toward Charlie with his chin. “What does *he* want, Jake?”

Charlie shoved his hands into his pockets. “I don’t want nothin’, pal, okay? No shoe shine. Nothin’.”

Sam looked at Charlie with a scowl, and then he slid his gaze back to Jake, his expression mild. “Jake... there’s one more thing about it.”

Jake waited.

“When they was walkin’ away, I heard one of them say, ‘Lester’s a dead man.’”

Charlie shot Jake a startled glance.

Jake stared hard at Sam. “Did you get any names?”

Sam shook his head in disappointment. “No dice.”

“Okay, Sam. Thanks. And thanks for the shine. Your shines are the best in the city.”

Sam straightened his shoulders. “Thanks for the silver, Jake. Maybe I’ll spring for a pack of Lucky Strikes.”

Jake shrugged. “Buy some new shoes. It might help business if your shoes are new and shined up.”

Sam’s forehead lifted, and he pushed his cap back, taking to the suggestion. “I like it, Jake. I like the way you put things. All business.”

Jake and Charlie moved through the stream of pedestrian traffic, alert and worried.

“We’ve got to get down to the jail at 240 Center Street, Charlie, and keep Hal Lester alive. I’ve got to talk to him again. He’s been holding out on us.”

“But why?”

“He wants to stay alive.”

“What’s going on, Jake? What happened back there with Sam?”

“I’m convinced all this business is about Edith Lester. We’ve got to start from scratch and forget everything we think we know. There are good cops, Charlie, and there are bad.

Maybe Hal Lester knows something that could get him killed.  
We've got to hurry."

## CHAPTER 8

Lieutenant Frank Blaine faced Jake and Charlie in the hallway of the Centre Street jail. The top of his big, balding head was shiny under the harsh lights, and the graying fringe of hair around his dome had recently been cut. Blaine was a short, grumpy man, who smoked too much and drank too much coffee, which made him edgy and just waiting to be annoyed. His eyebrows were surprisingly bushy, his eyes frosty, his dark suit a tight fit, and his trousers had long lost their crease.

“What are you talking about, Jake?” Blaine said, a lit Chesterfield cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth.

“I just told you. I have a tip that Hal Lester is going to be rubbed out,” Jake replied.

Blaine jerked the cigarette from his lips, turning to spit a piece of tobacco from his mouth. “You and your tips, Jake. Who’d you get it from this time? Some chorus line floozie Hal Lester danced the Charleston with, until they dropped into a rented Waldorf Astoria bed?”

“Hey, it ain’t like that,” Charlie threw in.

“And what the hell do you know about anything, Charlie?” Blaine snapped. “You guys ain’t come up with nothing because there’s nothing to come up with. Lester killed his wife. End of story. And don’t start in with reminding me about that car that took a shot at you a few days back. You’re in a lousy business, Jake. Didn’t you tell me that the last time, when you and Roxie Raines dodged bullets from Frankie Shay’s goons? Didn’t you say that snooping on back-alley husbands might get fatal, and that it goes with the territory?”

Jake’s face tightened, as he fought to keep his emotions in check. “Look, Lieutenant, what are you doing down here, anyway? Your home’s the Fifth Precinct, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, and now Lester’s my case. I didn’t ask for it, and I didn’t want it and I don’t want it, and I don’t want you and

Charlie making things complicated for me. I've got enough paperwork as it is."

Jake glanced down the hallway. "He's my client, Lieutenant, and I've got the right to talk to him. You and I both know that. I stopped by to play friendly and polite-like, but I'm going to see Hal Lester. I have a tip that his life is in danger, and it could be an inside job, if you know what I mean, and I know you know exactly what I mean."

Blaine glared at Jake but didn't speak.

Jake continued. "All I'm saying is, if something does happen to Lester, and if anybody hears that I warned you, then you're going to have to worry about a lot more than just catching up on your paperwork."

Blaine's eyes hardened. "Are you threatening me, Jake?"

"You know I'm right... You may know a lot more about this than I do, but Hal Lester had three solid alibies. He just so happened to be at the Waldorf in one of those rented beds with a Follies girl when Mrs. Lester was strangled. I know you read his statement, and the girl's statement, and the front desk clerk's statement, and the statement from the room service waiter, who knew Hal from previous visits."

Blaine dropped his cigarette on the floor and crushed it out with the toe of his shoe. He looked at Jake with a penetrating stare that held a chilly warning.

"Jake... you got yourself into a situation once, back in the day. You went against some of your own. Okay, so I got that. Some others did, too. This is bigger than that, and I'm telling you this because I don't want to see you get over your head and get busted up. You've got a nice girl, you've got a kid and a mother and a sister. Clare's a first-rate dame in my book, Jake. I think you know what I'm saying."

Jake hooded his eyes and made a tight fist. He was about to speak when Blaine jumped in.

"Don't be a sucker, Jake," he said, indicating with his chin near the jail. "That bum ain't worth it. Neither was the Lester dame. Not this time. Last time, yeah. Not this time, Jake."

Jake lowered his eyes, his voice low with accusation. “So, it goes up that far, huh? Not just a detective or a copper walking the beat. Okay, Blaine... Yeah, I get it. Now, I want to go see Hal Lester.”

Lieutenant Blaine shook his head and sighed. “You’re a bigger dope than I thought you were, Jake. You just aren’t too smart, are you?”

Jake put his icy stare on him. “No, and Charlie here ain’t so smart either, are you, Charlie?”

Charlie lifted his shoulders and let them fall. “I’m as smart as I needs to be to keep breathing.”

Blaine looked toward the door that led to the jails. “Go ahead, boys. I laid it out for you like nobody else is going to do. It won’t happen again.”

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Dressed in gray and white striped pants and shirt, Hal Lester was pacing his cell when Jake and Charlie were let in by the mournful-face jailer, whose taut face and grim eyes suggested gloom and doom.

Once Jake and Charlie were locked inside, Hal Lester rushed to Jake, anxious, scared and hopeful.

“Any news?” he asked, his left eye twitching.

“No, not yet,” Jake said.

Hal was as handsome as any matinee idol, and more handsome than most. His thick black hair had grown long, his eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep, and he was wan and jumpy.

“I don’t get it,” he said, fighting panic. “My alibis check out, don’t they? I was straight with the cops. I was straight with the papers. I’ve been straight with you, Jake. I keep telling them I didn’t do it. I’m not a killer. I couldn’t strangle anybody, and I certainly couldn’t have strangled Edith. Okay,



so maybe I've been a rat, but that doesn't make me a killer, does it?"

The cell contained one single bed, a toilet, a metal sink, a metal desk, a stool, and one high window with steel bars.

Hal pushed both trembling hands through his carelessly combed hair. "I tell you, I didn't do it! And now I see in the papers that I'm going to Sing Sing, and I'll fry in the chair. I didn't do it," he cried, dropping down on the edge of the bed and placing his head in his hands.

Jake and Charlie exchanged glances and Jake eased down on the metal stool. "Hal, come on, pull yourself together. Crying about it doesn't get us anywhere."

Hal slowly removed his hands, his eyes wet with tears. "I told you... I've got money socked away. I can pay you whatever you want. Why haven't you found anything? Why?"

Jake ignored him. "Come clean, Hal. Tell me everything."

"I've told you everything. Twice, over and over."

"So, tell me again, because maybe you left something out. Most people always leave things out. They see a thing only one way; from only one angle. I want you to tell me again, starting from the beginning, and come at it from a different way."

Hal squeezed his eyes tightly shut. "I don't know. I just don't know. I can't see it in any different way."

Charlie stood above the two men. He took a small step forward. "Lester, the night Edith was killed, you said the two of you had had a fight, and you threw things at each other."

"Yes, yes. I told you. She said I was a no-good bastard. She said she shouldn't have married me. She said she could get any man she wanted, and how did she end up with me?"

"Okay, okay," Charlie said. "But did she go after other men?"

Jake looked at Charlie and nodded. "Think about it, Hal. Did Edith Lester go out with other men?"

“I don’t know. I was always out... I know I’m no good. I know I took her money, but I didn’t kill her.”

Jake rose. “Think, Hal, and stop whining! Did you ever see any evidence of another man being in the house? Think! Look at it from another perspective. In your mind, roam the house and look at the ashtrays. Study the kitchen, and the bedroom, and look for more than one cocktail glass. Close your eyes and picture it.”

Hal shook his head. “I didn’t care, you see. I didn’t care if Edith saw other men. Don’t you get it? That’s what made her fly off into rages. I didn’t care, and I didn’t look for any evidence.”

Jake massaged his forehead. “Okay, what about her friends? Did you ever see or talk with her friends?”

“No! They hated me. All of them...” And then Hal stopped, a memory lighting up his eyes. “Wait a minute. There was Miriam... Yes, what the hell was her last name?”

“Think, Hal!” Jake said.

“It was Miriam... Miriam Lippincott! Yes, that’s it. Edith told her everything. She said they were like sisters.”

Jake licked his lips. “Do you have an address?”

“No, no... She hated me more than the others. Whenever she came over, she refused to see me.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll find her,” Jake said.

“Is she a rich dame, too?” Charlie asked.

“Loaded. Her father is Cecil Caulwell, the mining mogul. She married a guy who owns some kind of trading company in lower Manhattan, near the seaport. He got drunk one day at Edith’s and told me he was importing sugar and coffee from the Dutch East Indies.”

“Okay, Hal,” Jake said. “We’ll check on it.”

Jake paused, considering the words he was about to say. “Hal... stay close to your cell. Don’t let anybody in here. I

don't care who they are. If the guard starts to let them in, scream your head off."

Hal shot up, his face filled with alarm. "What are you saying? What's that about?"

"Nothing, nothing at all. It's just standard, that's all. I just want you to be careful. Let no one in here, and if they let you out in the yard, stay close to the guards. Don't stray."

Hal trembled, his eyes leaking tears. "I don't like it, Jake. I don't like any of it. I'm innocent and they want to kill me. You've got to help me. You're all I've got. I'm at the end of my rope!"

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Outside, as they searched for a taxi, Jake glanced at Charlie, who reached into his pocket for a stick of chewing gum.

"I don't like that two-timing gigolo, Charlie."

"I don't like him either," Charlie said, unwrapping a piece of chewing gum and shoving it into his mouth. "He blubbers too much."

Charlie offered Jake a stick of gum, but he refused.

Jake pocketed his hands. "I've seen guilty men lie, and I've seen innocent men lie, and I can tell you one hundred percent that Hal Lester isn't lying. He's on the level."

Charlie spotted a taxi, and he waved at it. "Jake... Are we in over our heads with this police business?"

"Yeah, Charlie. Maybe."

"Is Lester worth it?"

"Hal Lester didn't kill his wife, Charlie, and like him or not, I don't like it when some poor sucker takes the rap for a gold-watch, top hat, wise guy, who thinks he can get away with murder."

Charlie glanced about, his eyes searching for any possible threat. “Maybe you should move in with me till all this blows over, Jake?”

Jake grinned dramatically. “Charlie... I didn’t know you cared.”

“Oh, shut up, Jake.”

In the cab moving uptown, Charlie glanced over. “You said you’re meeting Roxie for dinner?”

“Yeah... She wants to talk.”

Charlie frowned. “I don’t like it when dames want to talk. They always have something to say.”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

“Are you and Roxie going to get married?”

“Don’t know.”

“Is she going to move in with you?”

“Don’t know.”

“Is Roxie gonna stay with Clare?”

“Don’t know.”

“You don’t know much, Jake. That’s not like you.”

Jake stared out his window as they passed a trolley and a horse cab. “You’re right, Charlie. I don’t know nothing.”

“You be careful tonight, Jake. Keep your eyes sharp and don’t let some mug get the jump on you.”

## CHAPTER 9

Roxie and Jake sat on a park bench a block away from Mike King's Restaurant. It had cooled down; there were broken, gray clouds and an occasional spattering of rain. Roxie was wrapped in her brown wool/velour coat, wearing a fashionable burgundy cloche hat. Jake's suit was trim, his fedora tipped left, and a brown scarf wrapped his neck.

They were supposed to have had dinner at King's, but neither was hungry, so they left, strolled, and found themselves on a bench in Gramercy Park.

A gray squirrel clambered down a tree and skittered over, lifting up on his back legs, begging.

"Cute squirrel," Roxie said.

"Chatty," Jake replied.

Roxie smiled at it. "What do you think he's saying?"

"Could be a she, you know. I mean, how do you know, and how can you tell?"

"Yeah, never thought about that. It could be a she. I think I see some lipstick on the lower lip."

"Wants food," Jake said. "They always want food. We should have given him our table at Kings."

Roxie chuckled. "Yeah... he would have loved the bread basket. I saw a peanut vendor out on the street. Why don't you spend a nickel and go buy him—or her—some peanuts?"

Jake gave her a lazy grin. "I have a better idea. How about I give *him* the nickel and he can go buy his own peanuts?"

Roxie laughed. "Funny, Jake."

"I like it when you laugh."

"Me, too, when I'm with you," she said, looping her arm into his and drawing him close. "You've been so distant lately," she added.

“You, too.”

Roxie looked at him. “Things on my mind, I guess.”

“You said we were going to talk over dinner.”

“Yeah, I know,” Roxie said.

“So, are we going to talk?” Jake asked, touching her nose with a finger.

“Haven’t had any dinner. Maybe we should buy some peanuts. I’m suddenly hungry.”

“All right. And then I’ll toss a couple to he or she squirrel, and all will be right with the world.”

They strolled the sidewalk, glancing about, each one waiting for the other to start the conversation. The peanuts were warm, the night noisy with traffic. A green and tan double-decker bus passed by, and a pack of kids darted around, squealing, playing tag.

Jake cracked open a shell and tossed the nuts into his mouth. “We ain’t talking,” he said, munching. He offered the open bag to Roxie, but she shook her head.

“I told you about Jules Morgan, right?”

“Yes, you did, Miss Raines, but you used scant words.”

“Scant? That’s a weird word.”

“My father liked that word. He’d say things like, ‘We have scant money. We have scant beer in the icebox. We have scant coal’ and... well, you get the idea.”

“Jules Morgan is going to pay me forty thousand dollars.”

Jake stopped, almost choking on a peanut. He coughed.

Roxie halted, turning to him. “Sorry... I just thought I’d come out with it.”

Jake coughed again, cleared his throat, and finally looked at the two peanuts in his hand. “Well, now... That’s a lot of peanuts.”

Roxie examined his eyes, his face, his posture—and she couldn’t read him. “So, what are you thinking?”

“I just said what I’m thinking, and there’s nothing scant about forty thousand dollars. That’s a lot of nuts. Many nuts. A great, big handful of nuts. A squirrel family of five could live on those nuts for years.”

“Are you upset?”

“Is that for a year? I mean the forty thousand bucks?”

“... Six months.”

Jake’s eyes opened fully and when he spoke, he stretched the words out, as if he were speaking in slow motion. “S i x... m o n t h s... a t f o r t y thou... sand dol... lars?”

“Yes...”

In a frown of absorption, Jake looked away toward the street, staring at nothing for a while as he mechanically cracked open a few shells. Then, with a little shake of his head, he lobbed the nuts into his mouth, but a few dropped to the ground and rolled away.

“Say something, Jake.”

He looked at her, and she saw his eyes were tired, and some of the light had gone out of them.

“Don’t be upset, Jake. It’s just money.”

“Just money? Forty thousand big ones for six months, just money? No, I don’t think so, Roxie. The ‘just money’, just doesn’t fit here. Forty thousand is some big mazuma!”

“What does mazuma mean?”

“Lots of money. A pot-of-gold-at-the-end-of-the-rainbow money. California goldmine money. That’s enough money to give Charlie a stroke, so don’t tell him.”

Roxie spoke fast, as if to distract him from the amount. “We can buy a place, Jake. I can help Harriet and the clinic, and I can help Alma start a hair salon.”

“Well, yeah, I get it. With that kind of dough, you can start your own bank.”

“Don’t sound that way, Jake.”

“What way?”

“I don’t know, cynical or something. Look, when I finish the contract, we can travel—get away for a month or more. Go to Europe. Whatever.”

Jake offered Roxie the bag with the last peanut inside. When she shook it off, he removed the peanut, crushed the bag in his hand and tossed it into a trash can. He didn’t crack the shell, and he didn’t look at Roxie. He seemed to be in a kind of trance.

“So, say something, Jake.”

“There’ll be more thousands after that, Roxie. Lots more. This is just the beginning.”

Roxie lowered her chin. “That’s what Kilburn Link said. Turns out, he set the whole thing up, but I didn’t know it. He acted as my agent without my even hiring him.”

“Well, my hat off to him. I don’t like him or trust him, but if he can get you that kind of lettuce, you’ve got to salute him.”

“I don’t like him either. And maybe I don’t trust him.”

Jake cracked open the peanut shell, leaned his head back and dropped the nuts into his mouth. “I’m happy for you, Roxie,” Jake said, chewing.

“Then why won’t you look at me? Why are you pulling away from me?”

“Because I’m tired, and I’ve had a mean day, and maybe I’m feeling a little mean right now because the world just flipped on me. Maybe I’m upside down, and maybe I need some time to think before I can flip back over.”

Roxie reached for his hand and held it. “I’ve been thinking, Jake.”

“I just bet you have.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t be sarcastic.”

His gaze softened on her. “Roxie... I am happy for you, and you deserve it. You’ve got a rare spark about you, and a keen voice. And when you’re on that stage, nobody can look away



from you, because you grab all the attention and hold it. Yes, you deserve the money.”

“But?”

“But I know what’s coming. You’ll be in demand with every newspaper reporter and every magazine editor in the city, and in rehearsals for weeks. You’ll be tense and preoccupied, and that Frenchie portrait painter, whoever he is, will tell Clare again that he wants to paint you. You’ll be mobbed by fans and by jokers asking you to marry them. You’re going to be the hottest thing this town has seen in a long time.”

Roxie waited for the hammer to come down. On Jake’s face, she saw a sudden blandness of expression, as if he was ready to leave. “Yeah... so?”

Jake shrugged. “So, I’m going to be busy, too. I’m not going to be sitting around on my thumbs, you know. I’ve got a murder case heating up.”

“Don’t do it!” Roxie blurted out. “Drop that case, Jake, and go back to doing what you were doing before Edith Lester was killed.”

He stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets, and his chin jutted out in a challenge. “Why?”

“Why? Because I don’t want you to end up dead! Because I love you and, yes, I’m going to be busy, but that doesn’t mean I won’t make time for you. For us. Of course I will.”

He rocked on his heels and stared beyond her, his eyes unfocused, as if he’d shut them off. “I’ve got to think about things, Roxie, and I need time.”

“What time? Think about what things?” Roxie said, dread filling her chest.

He still didn’t look at her. “I just think we should slow everything down and take some time... Some time apart to think about all this... all this new business. And since Mom and Jimmy returned upstate, my head’s been all fogged up and I can’t think straight. I can’t take on anything else right now.”

“Take what on? We’re together. What do you have to take on? All that’s different is that I’m going to be making forty grand.”

Roxie moved closer, facing him, but he still refused to look at her. “Jake, you’ve got it all backwards. In a relationship, people are honest with each other, and they work together. They don’t separate and try to figure everything out alone. You’ll never figure everything out by yourself in this wacky, crazy world. I can tell you that for sure. That much I know.”

He finally looked at her, his eyes drilling into her. “All right, Roxie Raines, if that’s the way it is, then tell me all your mysteries. All the mysteries you’ve been holding inside and keeping from me ever since we met. If we’re supposed to work together, then fine. Let’s start right here and now. Finally, right now, tell me who the hell you really are and where you came from. No more lies. No more deflecting my questions. No more silence. Just tell me.”

Roxie stilled, swallowed, and pondered. She started to speak, stopped, then tried again. “Jake... there’s so much I need to say but...”

“But you won’t say it, will you? And there it is.”

“I will, Jake. I will. I promise.”

“No, no, Roxie. No more ‘I will’. No more stalling. You tell me everything now, or I walk away because, as you just said, in a relationship, we’re honest with each other and we work together. So, this is it. Let’s put all our cards on the table. It’s now or never.”

Roxie tamped down a swirl of emotion, and her stomach clenched, and her breath staggered. “Jake... I... I’m...” she faltered. “It just sounds so... silly.”

“I’m waiting, silly or not.”

Roxie inhaled and blew it out, bracing herself. “Okay, here it is. I’m from another time. I came from another time.”

Jake pressed his lips together, pulled his hands from his pockets, and placed them on his hips. “What was that?”

Another time? What does that mean, you're from another time?"

Roxie let out another shaky breath and tried again. "Don't freak out on me, Jake, just listen." She steadied her voice, squared her shoulders, and opened her mouth. "I time traveled from 2019."

Jake leaned his head forward, put a finger in his ear, wiggled it, and tilted his head, unsure of what he'd just heard. "How's that? What did you say?"

"I said, I time traveled from 2019. I'm from the twenty-first century."

Jake stared, first with confusion, then with reluctance, then, finally, with grave concern. "The twenty-first century? You... you come from... What year did you say?"

"I'm from 2019."

His chest expanded with a deep breath before he let it out slowly, looking up into the sky. A brisk, cold wind gusted around them, and Roxie turned her head away from a swirl of dust.

Jake tossed a glance over his shoulder, as if he didn't know what was going on. When he faced Roxie again, a cheeky smile pulled at his lips. "Well, Roxie, I've got to hand it to you. I don't think even Clare could have come up with a hare-brained answer like that, with all those crazy stories she sends to those jazzy magazines."

Roxie bristled. "You don't believe me, do you!?"

He laughed. "Of course, I don't believe you! What kind of hickory nut do you think I am? The twenty-first century?" he said, shaking his head. "What kind of thing is that to say?"

"But it's the truth, Jake. I swear it is the truth!"

Jake looked at her with suspicious disapproval. "Do you know what, Roxie? You are undoubtedly the dizziest dame..."

She jumped in. "... Don't say that! I'm not dizzy and I'm not, I repeat, not a dame! I'm a woman!"

He held up a hand to calm her. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry. All I’m saying is I don’t know what you’re all about, and I guess you just don’t want me to know. Okay, fine. I accept it. I just feel upside down. I don’t know, maybe it’s the day I had, maybe I’m hungry, and maybe I’m just tired of trying to pry the truth out of you. I’ve got too much going on in my life right now to try to make sense of you, or anything about who the real you is.”

Roxie’s eyes darted about, feeling the magical air draining out of their relationship, and it angered her. “So, you want to split up then, Jake? Is that what you’re saying?”

Jake felt weighed down by gravity, as if strong hands were pulling on his ankles. “I don’t know, Roxie. Maybe I just need some time to clear the cobwebs from my head. I mean, you say these wild things, and I don’t know where I am, or what the hell I should do or say.”

He wouldn’t look at her. “Look, you’ve got things to do... so, maybe it’s best that we let things cool down for a while.”

Roxie toed at the sidewalk. “So now I’ve got to worry about you, but not see you. I’ve got to wake up every day and think about you and hope somebody hasn’t shot you.”

Jake started off and Roxie followed him. He searched his mind for the right answer, then stopped abruptly, whirling to her. “Roxie, the man’s innocent. Hal Lester is innocent, and I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t try to stop the bastards who want to send him to the electric chair. And, anyway, whoever the murderer is, he’s got clout and connections in this town. Now they know what I know, and believe me, even if I walked away, they’d still come after me. That’s the way it works.”

A jolt of desperation propelled Roxie forward. She wrapped him in her arms, her head against his chest. Slowly, he embraced her.

“I don’t want to lose you, Jake. I can’t. I love you and I’ve never loved like this.”

Jake smelled her perfumed hair and sighed at the feel of her, at the woman of her.

“The truth, Roxie, I don’t want anything to happen to you. I know you remember what happened when old Frankie Shay slung some bullets at us. I’m not going to let that happen again on this case.”

She pulled back. “Stop it, Jake. Stop making excuses. At least be honest and tell me you’re pissed off because I’m making all that money.”

He shook his head. “Not an excuse, and I suppose ‘pissed-off’ means angry?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a new one I’ve never heard.”

“Jake, look at me.”

“I’m looking, Roxie Raines, and you look like a flapper I’d like to romp with.”

“So, romp already. Let’s go romp right now. Who’s stopping you?”

“Roxie, listen to me. I’m going to keep my head down and lie low for a while, until I can find out who killed Hal Lester. We’ll split for a while, until this whole thing is over.”

Roxie backed out of his arms, angry. “Thus sayeth Lord Jake Kane?”

“Yeah... That’s right.”

Roxie blew out a sigh. “Okay, then, the hell with you.”

She turned on her heel and went striding away. He called after her, but she flagged down a cab, ducked inside and was gone.

## CHAPTER 10

Two weeks later, Roxie strolled into The Ginger Jam club, ready to rehearse for her opening night performance, which was scheduled for Saturday, November 7, 1925.

Styled in moods of gold and black, The Ginger Jam also featured richly embellished diamond-shaped floor designs, accentuated by gleaming silver accents. It was Jules' idea to arrange several rows of circular black marble tables, and gold and black wicker chairs, around the stage. On the periphery of the room were plush sofas and comfy chairs of deep yellows, reds, and greens.

Jules Morgan had also designed the black and gold L-shaped bar, with brass railings and footrests, and every bar stool seat had a comfortable, black leather cushion.

The prominent stage featured luxurious gold carpeting and a glossy black grand piano, and it was large enough for a five-piece orchestra.

Roxie loved the broad stage and the sliding black curtain, highlighted by small, red diamond shapes and shimmering golden sequins. She also loved that she was working with Benny Stamp again, the pianist she'd worked with at El Pogo before the fire.

Benny was lanky and loose-limbed, with a lean, cheerful face. He wore a plug hat that he never removed, except when he dropped into bed at night. Instead of a cigarette stuck between his lips, he sucked on lollipops, mostly cherry flavored. When he played the piano, there was very little tension in his playing, and his big hands caressed the keyboard as if it were a lover he was wedded to.

Even Kilburn Link thought Benny was the best, and he'd heard them all. He'd once told Roxie, "Benny Stamp plays the best ivory box in this town. I made sure you got the best."

Roxie and Benny spent the afternoon rehearsing, reviving old songs, creating new arrangements, and introducing new

songs, such as the 1922 song *Second Hand Rose*, which Fanny Brice had made popular. They also worked on *Some Sunny Day*, recorded by Marion Harris.

Owner Jules Morgan was scheduled to appear later in the day, having spent two weeks at his Miami club, paying off local politicians, buying new land, and negotiating employee issues, which meant firing some and hiring others in their place.

Meanwhile, Roxie's publicity ads were already being splashed on the covers of magazines and in newspapers, creating an electric buzz similar to that of a new Broadway show.

An artist's illustration of Roxie was featured on the cover of *Night Out Magazine*. She was depicted in a yellow and gray cloche hat, with rouged cheeks and puckered, cherry-red lips. There was a lonely, startled look in her eyes, suggestive of a sexy vulnerability. Clare didn't like it and told Roxie so. "It doesn't look like you at all," she said with disgust.

An illustration on the cover of *Smart Set Magazine* revealed a saucy Roxie, hatless, with a messy bob, shiny red button lips and smoldering eyes, staring off into the distance as if beckoning to a lover.

Roxie's favorite illustration graced the cover of *Vanity Fair*. She was wearing a red glittering flapper dress and a cute, white cloche hat with a red band. Her arms were outstretched, and she was singing while tiptoe-dancing across the heads of four handsome men, who reached up for her.

Newspapers featured headlines such as:

**The Season is Saved! Roxie Raines  
Returns!**

**We're Just Wild about Roxie!**

**Roxie Rides Again!**

# **Race For Those Roxie Raines Tickets!**

## **Roxie Raines Will Reign Supreme at The Ginger Jam!**

During a break in rehearsals, Roxie sat slouched in a chair, sipping a cup of coffee, perusing several newspapers. She'd grown fond of snapping them open and leafing through them, placing them on the table and peering down at them while she held her cup of coffee. In a short time, she'd grown accustomed to doing without her cell phone and its constant stream of digital news and social media. She didn't miss her phone or her laptop. Without them, she felt more focused and present, not being jerked away by texts and emails every few seconds, and not being entrapped by the twenty-four-hour news cycle, shouting for attention.

But did she miss shopping online? Yes! Did she miss *Googling* topics for instant news and info? Absolutely.

They crammed the entertainment sections in 1925 newspapers with ads for dining, exotic nightclubs, ballroom dancing, Broadway and vaudeville shows, and silent films. There was nothing in the twenty-first century that could compare with the festive promise and lurid excitement of a night on the town, with so many venues to choose from.

Without streaming, wide smart TVs, and videogames, 1920s New York was a thriving, bustling, extraverted party town, the likes of which Roxie had never seen and couldn't have imagined.

And she, Roxie Raines, was a part of it, and she still pinched herself occasionally, sure she must be dreaming the whole thing. But there it was, her name bold and present in headlines in every entertainment section of nearly all the New York newspapers. And her face was plastered on wooden construction site fences and on magazine covers at newsstands, and on a soaring billboard in Times Square.



While she drained the last of her coffee, Roxie leaned back and shut her eyes, listening to Benny playing the piano, meandering through a romantic ballad, his chords lush and smooth like chocolate.

Roxie thought of Jake, and she missed him terribly. Clare called him every few days, and Roxie had spoken to him briefly during one of those calls, but he'd been distant and distracted.

"Are you keeping your head low?" Roxie had asked.

"Yeah... How are rehearsals?"

"Good."

"Every time I walk past a newsstand, I see your face on a magazine cover. You look good."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Charlie reads me the articles about you in the newspapers."

"Did you read that article in *The Sun* that said when I was only fourteen, I sold newspapers on Main Street in my Indiana hometown to help support my poor, sick mother?"

"No, I missed that one."

After an awkward pause, Roxie said. "I miss you, Jake."

"Yeah, me too."

"Why don't you come over?"

"Can't risk it for you and Clare."

Roxie sighed into the phone, and it made a whooshing sound. "How's the case going?"

"The woman I need to talk to is in Europe with her husband. They won't be back for a while. I sent her two wires. No answer. That's how it's going. I've got nothing and time's running out."

"Wires? You mean, telegrams?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, Jake."

“It’s one of those cases. The Assistant D.A. is building his case against Hal Lester. It’s mostly circumstantial, but I suspect there’s been tampered evidence, you know, things planted in all the right places in Edith’s suite, to prove his guilt.”

“How’s Charlie?”

“You know Charlie. He’s jumpy. Looking over both our shoulders.”

“Good... Be careful, Jake. Get this thing over with, so I can see you.”

“Yeah... By the way, *did* you sell newspapers on Main Street in Indiana to help your poor, sick mother?”

“No,” and then before she thought about it, Roxie said, “I sold stuff on *eBay*, though.”

“What’s *eBay*?”

Roxie winced at her mistake. “Oh, it was... you know, just a local department store.”

“I’ll be there on your opening night,” Jake said. “But you won’t see me.”

“I don’t like this, Jake. Finish it, and then come back to me.”

Roxie snapped out of her daydream memory when she heard a deep voice above, and her eyes popped open. Standing over her was Jules Morgan, The Ginger Jam’s owner.

Jules Morgan was a tall man of forty-five, solidly built and immaculately groomed, with slicked back, black hair, and a freshly pressed, grey, pin-striped suit and a blue tie. Having been in Miami, he boasted a smooth tan, which brought out the blue in his bluish/gray eyes. His voice was deep with authority, his manner polite, his humor deficient.

“Miss Raines... Pardon me if I startled you.”

Roxie sat up straight. “No, no, Mr. Morgan. I was just resting. We’ve been in rehearsal all afternoon.”

He pointed to a chair across from her. “May I join you?”

“Yes, of course.”

Jules sat, ready for business. “The publicity is going well. We are sold out for the next two months. After that, we’ll decide which direction we want to go. Link told me you have received radio offers, endorsement opportunities from several companies, and a possible silent picture role with Lillian Gish.”

Roxie’s eyes opened wide. “Lillian Gish? He didn’t tell me that.”

“I just spoke with him. We both think it’s a capital opportunity.”

“Will I have to go to Hollywood?” Roxie asked.

“Oh, no, no. It will be at the Talmadge Studio, at East 48th Street. If they don’t use that one, they use the one on East 14th Street.”

Roxie felt a little dizzy just thinking about it.

“Which brings me to my next item of business, Miss Raines. I think it would be good for publicity if you were seen with certain men who are popular in society and whose faces show up frequently in the gossip columns. Specifically, I’m thinking of Archibald Wells. We could easily arrange a date for the two of you, so you can be photographed together.”

Roxie blinked. “I’m sorry. Who?”

“The rich playboy, Archie Wells. I’m sure you’ve heard of him. He steps out with many of the big stars, and it will greatly boost your celebrity and visibility. Your fans will love it, because Archie is the apple of many a flapper’s eyes these days. After a few nights out, it would also be advantageous to your career, and to my businesses, if you announced that you and Archie are, as they say, ‘an item.’”

Jules said it with such a chilly detachment that, at first, Roxie thought he was joking. But then she saw it wasn’t a joke. The man was as serious as death.

Roxie’s mind whirled and she couldn’t find a thought, form a question, or build an argument against the ridiculous

suggestion.

Jules continued on in a straight, matter-of-fact manner. “Oh, and Link said he spoke to Charlie Chaplin, and he will definitely be attending opening night. And he will be escorting Gloria Swanson. I also understand that Cecil B. DeMille expressed an interest in coming. We’ll see. I’m sure you saw his picture, *The Ten Commandments*?”

Roxie blinked once, then twice. “I... I... don’t think I did.”

“Well, no matter. If he shows up, tell him you loved it. He’s building a big name for himself, and maybe we can use him down the line.”

Roxie’s mind was beginning to clear when Jules stood up.

“All right, Miss Raines. Carry on with your rehearsals. I’ll have Archie Wells call you here at the club and arrange a time for you two to hit the town together.”

Roxie pushed up. “... Mr. Morgan, I... well... I want to...”

He cut her off. “... You don’t need to thank me, Miss Raines. It’s business. Oh, and by the way, I want you to move out from wherever you are and move into the Prasada Hotel, at 65<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Park West. Everything’s arranged. I’ve booked a suite for you. We have to show the world that you not only sing and look like a star, but you also live like one.”

Roxie opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“All right, then, Miss Raines. If you have questions, contact my secretary, Mrs. Burgess, and she’ll help you, or she’ll contact me. You have a good afternoon.”

And then he turned and was gone.

Roxie turned as cold as ice.

## CHAPTER 11

“Well, I’ll be a great big, fat, drunken bunny, wrapped in a raccoon coat,” Clare said, as she stood in the center of Roxie’s extravagant living room suite.

Nearly breathless and with a sweep of her hands, Clare indicated toward the place. “This is... This is... Well, I don’t know what the hell it is, other than it’s got the look and smell of money, success, wild parties, and hooch nights written all over it.”

Roxie eased down on the piano bench at the white concert grand piano and played a rich variety of jazz chords that turned Clare’s head.

“I love that sound, Roxie. It makes me want to find a man and kiss him all over.”

After performing a glissando, a fast slide across several keys on the keyboard, Roxie said, “The piano has just been tuned, and it’s brand new. I think everything in this place is brand new.”

Clare slid out of her raccoon coat, tossed it on the sofa, and turned in a circle. “It’s Christmas, New Year’s and the Fourth of July all laid out in a bed of roses, with fireworks. All you need now is Rudolph Valentino, and since I read that he’s coming to your opening night, you might get him, too.”

Roxie’s gaze wandered the room. “It is awesome, isn’t it?”

“Awesome? Oh, yeah, it certainly is awesome, all right. I would say, spectacularly awesome! Are we going to have a big party here, or what? Oh, by the way, speaking of parties. Right after you moved out, I finally found this joker of a bootlegger who delivers ten-gallon cans of pure grain alcohol. So, I made gin by adding some juniper oil, and then I shook it like the dickens, stirred it, and stored it for over thirty-six hours. Then I poured in distilled water.”

“Is that safe?”

“Oh, yeah, Roxie. It kicks like a horse, though. Okay, so a few days after that, I had this party. Well, some rat squealed on me and my gin, and a day later, some ugly, rodent-faced guy knocks on my door and gives me a grand jury subpoena for violating the National Prohibition Act.”

Roxie pushed up. “What did you do?”

Clare’s grin was naughty. “I know a guy who knows a guy who works with a guy who fixed the whole thing.”

Clare frowned. “I had to dump the gin though, and you know that hurt.”

Roxie went to Clare and gave her a little hug. “I worry about you sometimes.”

“No need for that, Roxie. I’m a jazzy dame with a lot of luck—and some good friends—for when things go wrong.”

Nearly two weeks after Jules Morgan told her to move, Roxie was moved into the Prasada Hotel, a beautiful Beaux-Arts building at 65<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Park West. It had a central open courtyard, a lobby domed with shimmery stained glass, and spacious suites. Jules Morgan’s secretary, Mrs. Dorothy Burgess, told Roxie that Jules sprang for the first three months. After that, the rent would be easily affordable with the money she was earning.

Her living room was thirty feet long, painted in a soft green, with a bank of windows offering glorious views of Central Park. The thick, white carpet was heaven to walk barefoot on, and fresh flowers were delivered every day.

The art déco furniture beguiled and excited Roxie, and the white marble bar was eight feet long. The hotel stocked the bar with juice, soda and elegant cocktail glasses, and hanging on the wall behind the bar was a striking, square, pink-and-silver framed mirror.

Roxie’s bedroom featured soft primrose papered walls, padded window seats and an upright piano. The four-poster canopy bed was firm, the two opulent chests of drawers had oval mirrors and there was a bookshelf stocked with recent hardback novels, including F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great*

*Gatsby*. Roxie was thrilled by the large, walk-in closet and tall windows that revealed the distant New York skyline, a spectacular view, any time, day or night.

The bathroom was golden, with white and gold tiles, two porcelain sinks with gold fixtures, and a deep clawfoot tub. It had metal shelves stacked with thick, soft towels, and two cabinets filled with exotic creams, bath salts and scented soaps.

There was a one-of-a-kind dining room, painted silver and yellow, with elaborate crown molding, a chrome and glass dining table that could sit ten, and corner cabinets filled with fine china.

Roxie thought she'd died and gone to heaven.

Clare continued, turning in a circle, wide-eyed, while Roxie left the piano and moved to the windows. She looked out on the autumn treetops of Central Park, dusted in golden sunlight, and her eyes rested on the rolling meadows of green lawns and meandering paths. At night, the park lights cast romantic bowls of golden light on the paths, and she often stood for long minutes, watching the trembling, purple shadows where lovers strolled.

A dream couldn't have been more perfect, and her imagination could have never stretched the possibility of her living in such a stupendous reality, which continued to expand in mystery and wonder as the days unfolded.

Clare crossed her arms. "My head is spinning like a wheel, Roxie, and I haven't had one drop of hooch. I hate it that you've moved out, but seeing this place, well, I would have said 'Goodbye, tootsie' and not thought twice about it."

Roxie turned to her with a sudden idea. "Clare, why don't you move in?"

"What?"

"Yeah, there are three bedrooms. Plenty of room. Move in with me!"

"Oh, God, no. I'd feel like a, I don't know, a poor relative from the wrong side of the tracks."

“Then come and write here. Bring your typewriter and write.” Roxie flung a hand out toward the windows. “Just look at that view of Central Park.”

Clare perked up with new interest, chewing on a fingernail. “Hum... Write? Well, now...”

She strolled toward the windows, put her hands on her hips and gazed out. “My, my, my, won’t you look at that million-dollar view. Who wouldn’t be inspired to write *You’re Lonely when You’re Dead?*”

Clare turned to Roxie with a grin. “That’s my latest story, almost complete, and ready for *Mystery Magazine*. But I sold a story last week to *Women’s Confidential Magazine*. Are you ready for it? It’s called ‘I’ll Get Mine.’ Subtitled: ‘She Loved Money, Men, and Max.’”

Roxie’s eyes lit up. “You could write your stories here and finish your novel, *Broadway Virgin*.”

Clare made a sour face. “I finished it, and so far, two publishers have turned it down, the bastards. They said it needs work.”

“So, polish it up. Rewrite it, whatever, but do it here. It will be so cool to be together. Totally.”

Clare regarded Roxie dubiously. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m dead serious.”

A light blinked on in Clare’s head. “Hey, that’s good, Roxie!”

“What?”

“Dead Serious. I like it! Yeah. I like it a lot! Dead Serious. It’s a great title for a story for *True Crime Magazine*.”

“But doesn’t the story have to be true if the magazine’s name is *True Crime Magazine*?” Roxie asked.

Clare flicked a hand. “Oh, hell no. Not at all, as long as it’s a good story. Do you know what the editor of that magazine said to me once, while he backed me into a corner and kissed me? ‘Never ruin a good story by telling the truth.’”



Seized by an idea, Clare swept away and paced, deep in thought, bringing a fist to her mouth, eyes narrowed in thought. “Yeah... I can see it. It will be about an accountant, a boring, serious, straight-backed guy, who wears Brooks Brothers suits and maybe lives with his mother in Scarsdale. Yeah... He’s the steady, Sunday-school-teacher sort. Reliable. You know the type.”

Clare stalked back and forth, fired up by the idea. “Yeah, so anyway, boring accountant falls for a new secretary, a no-good, good-looking, gold-digging tramp, who fleeces him, takes him for everything he’s got and then dumps him. He gets all burned up when he finds out she’s been two-timing him and playing him for a sucker with the handsome boss. Accountant blows his top and strangles her.”

Clare spun around in a burst of joy. “Yeah... I like it! Dead Serious... It’s genius, Roxie!”

“So, do it, Clare! Pack some things, bring your typewriter, and start writing. It will be awesome to stay together.”

Clare yanked off her red cloche hat and slung it onto the couch. “Yeah! I’ll do it, Roxie. We’ll have a helluva time. Now play something on that brand new piano, so I can dance.”

Roxie launched into the Fats Waller song, *Ain’t Misbehavin’*. It wouldn’t be written until 1943, but Clare didn’t know that. Roxie had never dared play it in public, not wanting to explain where the song came from, but for Clare in the private suite, who cared? And who would ever know?

Roxie’s hands danced and thumped across the keyboard, her right hand playing solo lines in octaves, her left finding broken rhythms and fat chords as she fell into Fats Waller’s style of jumping stride.

Clare kicked off her shoes and went shimmying across the living room, her arms swinging, her legs kicking, her face stretched in joy. “Go, Roxie. I love it!”

As the music bounced, Clare stepped backwards then forwards, kicking her legs out to the side, her laughter high, her body gyrating, her feet finding new moves.

Roxie finished the song with a thunder of chords and a dramatic glissando. She turned to see Clare, her face red hot, her body loose, dropping with an exhausted sigh onto the wide sofa.

“Holy mother of mine, that nearly did me in!” Clare exclaimed.

Roxie rose, left the piano, and moved to the couch. “That was some wild dancing, Clare.”

Clare was huffing and puffing, fanning her face. “And you’ll never see that again, because the next time, I’ll drop dead from a heart attack.”

Roxie sank down next to her, crossing her arms, her expression turning serious. “Clare... I have to talk to you.”

## CHAPTER 12

“What a serious puss you’ve got there, Roxie,” Clare said. “We were having so much fun. Where did that face come from?”

Roxie huffed out a sigh. “What am I going to do about Jake? He hasn’t called me, and when I call him, he’s not there or he won’t answer.”

Clare had a quick answer. “He’s not there because he’s not at his place, because I told him to get the hell out of there. A couple of goons, or bad cops, or whoever, busted in and really gave the place a once-over.”

Roxie swung around to face Clare. “Nobody told me that. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was going to, but... I didn’t. Jake told me not to. He said you’d get crazy.”

“Yeah... Crazy is right! Why did they do it?”

“Who knows? To scare him. Maybe they would have shot him if he’d been there.”

Roxie sprang up. “Shot him!? Why in the hell doesn’t he stop this thing? Where is he?”

“I don’t know. He and Charlie are together someplace, but I don’t know where and he won’t tell me. He doesn’t call that much anymore. Mother says he calls her every day to ask about her and Jimmy. I think he’s worried about them, too.”

“Dammit, Clare! Why doesn’t he just drop that case? It’s not worth it! Why is he doing this?”

Clare sat up, reached for her purse, opened it and grabbed her pack of cigarettes. She turned to Roxie. “Do you mind?”

Roxie did mind, but it was 1925, and it was Clare. “No... Go ahead.”

Clare lit her cigarette and smoked quietly while she pondered Roxie’s question. “I could give you three or four reasons why Jake is doing what he’s doing, but none of it

matters. He's not going to stop until he gets some answers. The woman he wants to talk to is due back from Europe any day now, so maybe when he gets some answers, he'll cool down some."

Roxie stared up at the ceiling. "What's he going to think when he sees me out with Archie Wells?"

"He won't like it. He may drop you flat, but you already know that, and, anyway, he won't drop you flat because he's wild about you."

Roxie's mouth sagged. "Yeah, I know that, but after I told him about the money, I think he's just looking for an excuse. I wouldn't be surprised if he went back to Katy Price."

"Not as long as he stays a detective."

"She'd take him back, Clare. I know it. She's the type. She wants to reform him."

"So, you're going out with Archie tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I told Jules I didn't want to."

"And he said?"

"He's a cold guy, Clare. I mean, he's not like Frankie Shay or anything... He's not threatening, and he's smart and educated, but he's just all hard business. He says it's just for publicity, and I'm his investment."

"His investment?" Clare said, glancing over.

"Yeah. He didn't say it with any kind of threat, but I certainly got the meaning, and that meaning was, 'I've paid a fortune for you and now you do what I say.'"

Clare smoked thoughtfully. "Well, yes, you are living here in this gorgeous suite, with a private car and a wardrobe from Fifth Avenue, and he is paying a fortune."

Roxie licked her lips and eased back down on the sofa. "This is why I want my own club, so I don't have to be anyone's investment."

Clare crushed out her cigarette in the ashtray. "Well, after a few more of those big paydays, maybe you *will* be able to buy

your own place.”

Roxie kept her eyes on Clare. “What am I going to do about Jake?”

Clare gave her a frank look. “Don’t give up on him. He loves you, so don’t give up, no matter what happens. All this will pass, and when the dust finally settles, you two will get back together. I know it.”

Roxie drummed her fingers on her knee. “You said you’ve heard of this Archie dude?”

“Dude?”

“Yeah, you know. Guy. Celebrity. You said you’ve read about him?”

“Of course, I’ve read about him. His mug is always in the gossip columns. He’s a rich playboy, who only hangs out with the super-rich and the super famous. He’s always got some starlet or heiress on his arm. You’ll definitely get the publicity. How did he sound on the phone?”

“He was, I don’t know, kind of goofy. He talked a lot about himself. I got the impression that he thinks I’m not really in his class. I bet Jules Morgan paid him to take me out.”

Clare stood up. “I can’t even imagine your problems, Roxie. My life seems so simple and boring compared to yours.”

“That’s why you need to move in here,” Roxie said. “Anyway, I need a friend.”

“That’s sweet, Roxie. I’m pleased you think of me as a friend.”

Roxie stood. “Of course, I do. And, by the way, how is Hollis Dunbar? You haven’t mentioned him lately.”

Clare looked down at the carpet. “After the thing with Mother and Jimmy... I mean, after I knew I wasn’t going to be looking after Jimmy, well... You know, Hollis isn’t really my type. And then I went to a party and... I met a guy. You know how it goes with me and my guys. I wouldn’t tell anybody else, Roxie, but I woke up with him somewhere. He’s ten

years younger than me and he says he thinks I'm grand. I'm going to see him again."

Clare snatched up her hat, grabbed her coat and started for the door, calling back over her shoulder. "Good luck with Archie tomorrow. I'll be back with my typewriter. Soon!"

When Clare was gone, Roxie turned and ambled over to the windows, gazing out at the tops of the Central Park trees, glittering brown, red, and gold.

"Is this the life I want to live?" she said aloud, aware of her fluctuating emotions. High one minute, confused and anxious the next.

"Well... If it all goes to hell, there's always The Black Cat basement. But will the light take me home?"

## CHAPTER 13

Archie Wells sat behind the wheel of his 1925 Minerva AB Convertible Roadster, wearing racing goggles, and a long, lightweight linen duster, or traveling coat. The sports car had a beige leather interior, a polished aluminum bonnet, a red carriage, and yellow-rimmed tires. It had been assembled in Antwerp, Belgium and delivered to Archie in New York. He'd rushed down to the New York Harbor docks, anxiously waiting for it to be offloaded, feeling like a new father, passing out cigars to friends who'd gone with him.

Archie had to have a Minerva. It had been an absolute must. After all, members of the royal houses of Belgium, Romania, Thailand and India drove Minervas, as well as other people of nobility, not to mention movie stars, and even Henry Ford.

Roxie Raines sat next to him as they traveled down Fifth Avenue on an unusually warm, sunny, autumn day. The traffic was heavy, rolling five abreast, motorcars shimmering with rich enamel, dropping off impatient shoppers, who hurried into stores, their faces anxious with anticipation.

"Don't you just love this city, Roxie?" Archie asked, with fresh-faced enthusiasm. "Look at the crowds, going this way and that, buying this thing, that thing and the other thing. I just love things, Roxie, don't you?"

"You didn't say where we're going, Archie," Roxie said, not caught up in his materialistic, boyish fervor.

"It's a surprise, doll. But trust me, you'll love it. Hey, look at those people over there looking at us, Roxie. Looking at my roadster is what they're looking at. Ain't it a gas when people give you those google-eyed, jealous stares? Don't you just love it? I love it, Roxie!"

Archie waved and shouted, "Hello, suckers! Eat your hearts out. I bet you couldn't even spring \$260 for a Model T Ford!"

Roxie turned away, rolling her eyes. It was going to be a long afternoon and night. In a short time, Roxie had sized him

up. Archie Wells was a conceited, white-toothed, frat-boy type with slicked-back chestnut hair. He sported a five o'clock shadow, seemed to have all the answers, and was fatuously content with his silly, frothy personality.

Inside his conceited head, he surely saw himself as a real-life movie star who, riding the Old West astride his trusty steed, raised lots of dust and flashed his gleaming pearly whites at the camera. During the fadeout and **The End**, he stood in a halo of glory, having killed off the bad guys and received the adoring love and devotion of 'the girl'.

"Will it be too rude if I ask you what you do for a living?" Roxie asked as they weaved through traffic, Archie downshifting and tapping his horn for the right of way.

"Work? Roxie, I don't work. I have a father who does all that and he doesn't want me around because he says I'd just get in the way."

Roxie wasn't surprised. "What does he do?"

Archie lifted his chin proudly. "Old dad of mine is a rumrunner, Roxie. The most famous on the East Coast. He was a very enterprising former merchant sailor, who lost his Jacksonville, Florida motorboat transport business to onshore buses in 1920. So, when a guy with cash in hand offered him the chance to smuggle hooch, old dad jumped at it."

"So, he's a bootlegger?" Roxie asked.

"One of the best, if not THE best. He started hauling Great Britain-made liquor from Nassau harbor in the Bahamas right up to the East Coast. When the heat was on in 1923, he moved up north to St. Pierre Island and sailed out from there. Now, let me tell you something you don't know, and many in this town and along the East Coast don't know. My old man can store 5,000 cases of liquor on his schooner, more than anybody else. And the cases are special—not those wooden ones. No, they're much lighter. They consist of six paper-covered bottles stacked in a pyramid, covered in straw, and tied into a burlap sack. Now tell me if that isn't smart and clever."

Roxie nodded. "Yeah, I guess so."



“That’s my old dad. Smart and sharp as they come. These days, he’s installed a machine gun on the deck just in case he has to deal with go-through guys. He can be good, Roxie, and he can be tough. Hey, who knows, maybe you’ll meet him. He loves music. Maybe I’ll bring him to The Ginger Jam on your opening night.”

Roxie’s smile was thin.

Later, after they’d left Manhattan and were speeding along a dusty road, Roxie waved the dust away and coughed. “Come on, Archie, tell me where we’re going.”

“Okay, okay, nag, nag, nag. If you must know, we’re going to the North Shore of Long Island. It should take us forty-five minutes, or maybe less, to get there. Just twenty miles away.”

“What’s on the North Shore?”

“Manhasset Bay, for one, and estates with tennis courts and swimming pools for another, and Victorian houses overlooking the Bay, and they’re a feast for the eyes, Roxie. I just love them! But we’re going to the Great Neck Estates.”

“Why? Who lives there?”

Archie glanced over, his shiny white teeth sparkling in the sun. “We are going to visit the Fitzgeralds.”

Roxie stared blankly. “Who?”

Archie’s face fell. “Oh, come on, Roxie, you must know Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. Surely? Please say you do, or I’ll be wounded beyond repair.”

Roxie jerked erect. “You mean F. Scott Fitzgerald, the writer?”

The shine returned to Archie’s wide, self-satisfied smile. “The one and only. Hey, Roxie, I know all the right people, and all the right people know me and want me around. Sometimes I end up at penthouse parties, and I don’t know who invited me, who the hostess is, or how I got there. But the Fitzgeralds are socially in demand these days and, you know as well as I do, that won’t last long, because nothing in this

town lasts long. Drunk today and dead tomorrow. Isn't that what the soldiers used to say?"

Roxie sat speechless, processing the news. F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*, a book she'd read at least twice—and she'd seen the movie, the latest Gatsby movie—latest for her time—made in 2013, starring Leonardo DiCaprio.

Archie blabbered on. "I've heard Scott drinks like a fish and is often out on his feet, if you know what I mean, and he and Zelda have screaming brawls, but what the hell? That just adds to the fun, doesn't it? And anyway, I know Zelda, and she's a real gas—all party girl, laughs and cocktails. She has wonderful hair, and she is as gabby and outspoken as they come. So, they're throwing a bash, and Zelda invited me. When I told her I was bringing you, she squealed with laughs. I had to jerk the phone from my ear because it hurt. Anyway, they have a piano, and she wants you to sing!"

As the car went roaring along the two-lane road, Roxie's throat tightened at the thought of singing for Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. Fantasy seemed reality and reality fantasy.

The road connecting Manhattan and Great Neck was dotted with gas stations, mountainous ash and garbage heaps, and peeling billboards. It had a surprisingly rustic and industrial terrain that Roxie found unkempt and unpleasant.

When Archie turned off Middle Neck Road and drove through an autumn leafy maze of twisting lanes, he was as excited as a kid with a new teddy bear.

"There it is!" Archie yelled, pointing.

Roxie glanced ahead to see a cream stucco house that sat high on a triangular corner lot. It had a charming, red-tiled roof and a circular driveway, packed with cars. A massive pine tree towered over the front lawn. Trimmed hedges and a white bird fountain made the place look welcoming.

"Great Neck has more celebrities living here than live in Times Square, and someone is always throwing a bash, Roxie. I love it! Don't you just love it? So many Broadway types

stroll Little Neck Road, and I know most of them, and they all think I'm swell, too. They just love having me at their parties."

Roxie turned her face away so he wouldn't see her apathetic expression.

"You should buy a house here, Roxie. I figure a maid, a cook, a yard man and a masseuse would only cost you about six hundred a month. And then you've got your country club membership and maybe a smart-looking motorcar, maybe a second-hand Rolls Royce. Of course, you'd have to spring for hooch for the parties. So maybe it only costs you a grand or more for the month. But you'd love it, Roxie. You'd just love it!"

Roxie figured that six hundred a month was about six thousand in 2019. And forget the hooch parties and the used Rolls Royce. No thank you, Archie Wells. She loved her new suite in Manhattan, even if it didn't have air-conditioning.

Archie whipped the car into the driveway, parked, and shut off the engine. Leaning toward her, he removed his goggles and lowered his voice to a furtive whisper. "Don't repeat this, Roxie, but I heard that Scott only made \$28,000 last year. Not bad for a writer, I guess you'd say, but I don't see them lasting long out here, making that kind of money. You have to have at least \$100,000 to live here in grand style."

Roxie had heard enough. "Okay, Archie, let's go inside."

"Oh, and Roxie, one more thing. There will be a Hearst photographer and a reporter waiting for you inside."

Roxie's eyes jumped to his. "What?"

"You know, from the *New York Daily Mirror*. Jules sent a photographer to snap some photos of us, and a reporter to ask you some questions. Didn't he tell you?"

"No, he didn't tell me, and I wish he had."

"Well, you'll love it, and I know Zelda will love it. She loves gabbing to reporters, and they just love her. Do you know what Dorothy Parker said about the Fitzgeralds?"

"No."

Archie painted the words with a sweep of his hand. “They look as though they had just stepped out of the sun.”

Roxie’s eyes filled with nervous anticipation. What in the world was she about to walk into?

## CHAPTER 14

Archie led the way, wearing a chocolate brown suit and vest, a blue striped shirt and matching tie. Roxie wore a stunning, black and silver, beaded, three-quarter sleeve flapper dress, with a rhinestone-studded leaf headband and two-inch matching heels. She followed Archie along the Fitzgeralds' stone walkway, up the stairs, onto the porch, and through the open door.

Inside, the living room was heaving and animated, with noisy chatter and swirling cigarette smoke. A cocktail glass was in every hand, a cigarette or cigar in the other. As the corner radio belched out a jumpy two-step rag, two women danced, a few men watched, a woman cackled at her man's joke and the room had a tipsy, whirling quality to it that made Roxie a little dizzy.

The women's dresses were flapper style, in colors of bottle green, sky blue, sun bright yellow, pink and red. The men wore outfits that Roxie focused on; she was never bored by the fashion of the time. Some were dressed in form-fitting suit jackets with gently sloped shoulders, others in tailored suits, or sweaters and wide pants, or jumpers. Many wore caps.

As Roxie took a breath, a cameraman lunged forward, squatted, aimed, and snapped a photo of her and Archie, he flashing his matinee idol smile. When Zelda spotted the couple, she waved, squealing out her delight. Roxie shyly raised a hand in greeting.

In an instant, Zelda picked her way through the crowd and hurried over, a cocktail in hand.

She spread her arms, grinning at Archie. "And there you are! Archie what's-his-name!" she cried, then turned her cheek left and right, waiting for a brotherly kiss.

Frowning, he kissed her cheeks and then stepped back, removing his hat, gently insulted.

“The last name is Wells, Zelda. My name is Archie Wells. Everybody knows my name. Archie Wells.”

“Well, of course it is, lover,” Zelda said, distracted, turning her full attention to Roxie, beaming. “And there you are, Roxie Raines. I’ve seen your pretty, full-bloom face on the cover of every magazine in town, and I’m insanely jealous, and I’m crazy happy you’ve come!”

Roxie noted Zelda’s own pretty face, the peach glow of her skin, and the honey-colored hair, bobbed around her ears. There was a mischievous twinkle in her eyes that Roxie liked, and Zelda’s petulant bow mouth revealed a playful confidence. Though she wasn’t tall, her effervescence, fast talk and grand gestures made her larger than life. And it was impossible not to notice Zelda’s platinum and diamond wristwatch and her striking, canary-yellow fringed dress.

Zelda looked Roxie up and down. “Look at you! You shine and twinkle at the same time, like a thousand stars, and like the noonday sun. You are all bright light on a champagne fizzy day!”

Zelda’s hand jutted out. “I’m Zelda, the wife and incomparable muse of the famous and the infamous F. Scott Fitzgerald, the F standing for Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald. Isn’t that terribly patriotic, Roxie?”

Roxie, nearly overwhelmed by the full wattage of Zelda’s personality, took Zelda’s hand and they shook in a genteel way. “I’m Roxie. Thanks for inviting me.”

“In the future, don’t wait for an invite, Roxie,” Zelda said. “Every bash-of-a-party we throw, at any time in the future, you are hereby automatically and enthusiastically invited to, by Zelda Zayre Fitzgerald herself.”

Zelda offered a little curtsy and put a hand to her heart, holding her cocktail precariously. “I am a lady from Montgomery, Alabama, a city where nothing has happened since the Civil War, and where there is no building taller than ten stories, and those are two good reasons why I fled the place. But they have recently written about me in the New York newspapers. As one reporter wrote, ‘Zelda Fitzgerald is

known for her beauty and high spirits, and her husband, F. Scott Fitzgerald, dubbed her *the first American flapper.*”

“And so you are,” Archie tossed in. “You are the flapper of flappers,” he continued effusively.

Zelda ignored him. “Roxie, forgive my wearing a yellow dress in October, but I can’t help feeling like spring today and so I wore a spring yellow dress, and I don’t care a hoot for anyone who might find offense. Now, right now, this very minute, you must have my lemon cooler because it is a warm autumn day and, anyway, it’s my own cocktail creation, and I think you’ll be mad about it. It’s three-parts gin, one-part water with a little lemon juice.”

Archie spoke up. “Can I have one, too, Zelda?”

Zelda didn’t look at him but flicked a hand. “Go get them, Archie, and don’t stay away too long. I’ll just bet you that Roxie is parched after that dusty drive from Manhattan.”

“Didn’t you hire waiters, Zelda?” Archie asked, glancing about.

“If we did, I don’t know where they’ve gone to. Be a dear, Archie, and play the bartender *and* the waiter. As you always like to say, ‘You’ll love it!’”

Sulking, Archie withdrew, elbowing his way through the swaying, boisterous crowd.

“Let’s go look for Scott. He’s just dying to meet you,” Zelda said, as she took Roxie’s arm and led her into the crowd, pointing out her guests.

“See over there, Roxie?” Zelda said. “That’s Cherry Valentine, one of the best ‘whoopie’ girls around. She says she’s only thirty, but I don’t believe it. Thirty-five, I say. Nobody knows where her money comes from, and she’s mad about cocaine, and she has some kind of fancy accent that nobody, and I mean nobody living, knows what it is, and none of her men seem to care.”

Cherry caught Zelda’s eyes, and she sashayed over, dressed in a very straight and slim red and black fringed dress, and a beaded, silver headpiece. In one hand, she artfully held a silver

cup filled with gin, and in the other was a black, diamond-studded cigarette holder with an unlit cigarette, waiting for a light. Her cheek bones were pointed, her moist lips were red, her figure boyish, her jewelry expensive.

“Hello, Cherry, you girl all in red, as always,” Zelda said.

“I’m wearing a silver headband, my dear Zelda, and not my usual red turban hat.”

“And you glitter like sunlight on water, Cherry,” Zelda concluded. “Now, meet Roxie Raines. Isn’t she just grand?”

Cherry’s sulking mouth twisted into a smile, and when she spoke, her voice was low and smoky. “And here you are, THE Roxie Raines, the cat’s meow with nine lives, who survived the dreadful fire that destroyed El Pogo and finished off the loveable Frankie Shay.”

Roxie stared, unsure how to respond, noticing that Cherry’s dark blue eyes were glassy and vague.

Cherry held her smile. “Joking, my darling Roxie. Joking about Frankie-the-Bootlegger Shay, who slapped more people around than Jack Dempsey. I am not joking about your surviving that awful fire. If I had a free hand, I’d offer you mine, and you would no doubt kiss it like a proper loyal subject would kiss the hand of a queen.”

Again, Roxie didn’t know what to say. Cherry’s accent was strange: a little British, a little French, and maybe a little Russian.

Cherry gave a little head bow. “It is so fine to meet you, at last, after attending not one, but two, performances at The Black Cat, and seeing your face gracing nearly every single magazine cover in Gotham. And I just adore that diamond thing on the side of your nose.”

Just then, the photographer moved in and snapped more photos. Zelda posed, all smiles. Cherry glared at him, and Roxie looked startled.

“Go ahead, pal,” Zelda said. “Snap, snap away.”



And then F. Scott Fitzgerald himself suddenly appeared, all smiles and dancing eyes. “And here I am, Zelda! I was waiting and pining for you, you first American Flapper.”

Zelda giggled, twisting about, posing for the photographer. “Ain’t I though?” She faced the photographer. “Now go get that ginned-up reporter you work with and tell him Roxie Raines is here!”

The photographer, a thin, sober-faced man of thirty, craned his neck, searching.

Zelda seized Scott’s arm and tugged him to Roxie. “Here she is, Scott. Roxie Raines.”

Scott’s eyes widened on Roxie. “Well, what a thing to happen to a writer who hasn’t written a decent sentence in two days! Roxie... Roxie... Yes... But wait!”

He stopped, dramatically placing the back of his hand to his forehead, eyes squeezed shut, struggling to recall a quote. “Let me see now. I always remember a good newspaper quote.” When his eyes popped open, his face lit up, and he pointed at Roxie. “Yes, I remember now! *The New York Sun* headline. They called you ‘The newest and fetchingest cat’s whiskers in the spangled city of today.’”

Zelda clapped enthusiastically, and Cherry puffed on her cigarette mouthpiece holder. The cigarette was still not lit, but she didn’t notice, blowing clear air toward the ceiling, unaware.

Roxie swallowed hard as she looked into F. Scott Fitzgerald’s face. Her first impression was a surprise. He was about five feet eight inches tall, but she’d always pictured him to be much taller. She thought his features were as pretty as a girl’s, and he seemed younger than his twenty-nine years. He’d just celebrated his birthday with a big bash, or so Archie had told her. As Roxie took in Scott’s golden, brown-colored hair, parted in the center, and his light green eyes, searching and intelligent, she felt a dream-like quality about the moment, and another startling reminder that she was truly living in 1925.

Zelda said, "I'm so glad you're meeting Scott now, Roxie, before he gets all gassed up and does cartwheels across the front lawn."

Scott laughed. "Remember the Biltmore, Zelda, when you did cartwheels down the hallway and slammed into that room service waiter who was carrying a tray filled with cocktails?"

Zelda's laughter floated out and filled the room, as her adoring eyes fixed on Scott's, and she drew him closer. "Oh, Roxie, when I first met Scott, I thought that angel's wings were lifting him off the ground."

Scott gave her a peck on the lips. "And you, my dearest wife, have a springtime response to everything."

Cherry nodded toward the other side of the room. "Oh, look, Scott. There's the writer Sherwood Anderson, wearing a silk necktie, and it's not stylish anymore, is it?"

Scott frowned. "Hey, who invited him?"

"I think I did, Scott," Zelda said, making an exaggerated face of apology. "I think I was drunk."

Cherry shook her head. "And do you know what he said about your writing, Scott?"

"Of course, I know what he said. 'A light-weight writer of trivial subjects.' I should go over and box his ears," Scott said.

The Hearst reporter, Gus Markham, suddenly appeared, pen and pad at the ready, his bloodshot eyes focusing on Zelda, then Roxie and then Scott. "Hey, the gang's all here!" he bellowed. "This is swell!"

He was a narrow-faced man with beady eyes, a skinny neck, and a pointed nose. "Hey, Zelda, how does it feel to be the heroine of Scott's novels?"

She flicked a hand. "Oh, what a bore of a question. Such a man's question. What's your name?"

"Gus Markham, the best damned reporter in Gotham, bow-legged to beat the band, with the shiniest shoes in Great Neck. See?!" He hitched up a leg to show off his shoes.

Zelda laughed, greatly entertained. “I like you, Gus. Ask away. Anything you want to know—but wait a minute. Look at your tie. It’s all askew. You know, Gus,” she said, handing Scott her half-drunk glass and straightening Gus’s tie, “it is the loose ends with which men hang themselves.”

Archie approached, irritation on his face as he struggled through the crowd, two lemon cooler cocktails held aloft.

“Finally!” Zelda called out. “Roxie has nearly fainted from thirst.”

“Well, it wasn’t easy,” Archie protested.

“You would not be able to earn a living as a waiter, Archie,” Zelda said, snatching one of the cocktails from Archie and handing it off to Roxie. “You’re too slow.”

Gus grinned at Zelda. Scott returned Zelda’s glass to her waiting hand, and she took a sip.

“And what would you do, Zelda, if you had to earn your own living?” Gus asked, ready to jot down her words.

Zelda’s smile was broad, her expression confident. “Before I married Scott, I studied ballet, and I was highly praised in Montgomery for my dancing, so I could be a Follies dancer. If not a dancer, then a film actress.”

“Perhaps you could sing, like Roxie Raines,” Archie said.

Zelda turned to Roxie and smiled. “No one can sing like Roxie Raines, Archie. Roxie sings, not only with her voice, but also with her whole heart. And nobody has measured, not even the poets, how much a heart can hold, isn’t that right, Roxie?”

Impressed, Scott applauded. “Bravo, Zelda, the flapper poet.”

While Gus scribbled down his own shorthand symbols, capturing the moment on paper, the photographer snapped photos.

Roxie smiled her appreciation. “That was really cool, Zelda. Thank you.”

Zelda's laughter bubbled out. "Cool? I love that, Roxie! Cool. Yes!" And then she turned to Scott. "You've got to use the word 'cool' in your next short story, darling boy."

Scott lifted his glass in a toast. "I will, and you should be a writer, Zelda."

"I *am* a writer, Scott, or have you conveniently forgotten that I wrote "Eulogy on the Flapper," and it was published in *Metropolitan Magazine*?"

Scott put a dramatic hand to his heart. "And how could I forget, when you remind me three times a week?"

Zelda turned to Roxie. "Did you read it, Roxie?"

"No, I'm sorry... I wasn't in town then."

"Well, never you mind. I'm going to quote the best part, whether or not Scott likes it, so let us leave Scott and company, while Archie here fetches me another cocktail."

Archie opened his mouth to protest, but Zelda had seized Roxie's arm and they were off to the center of the room, Zelda nudging people aside.

Scott watched, amused, as Zelda raised her hands and shouted down the crowd.

"All right, all you friends and freeloaders! Be quiet! I'm going to quote a section of my article that was published in *Metropolitan Magazine* in 1922. Yes, ladies and beaus, I have memorized it because I keep it handy and, after all, I wrote it, didn't I?"

The crowd hushed, someone switched off the radio, and Zelda cleared her voice.

"Get on with it, Zelda!" Scott called.

With a dramatic flair, Zelda lifted her proud head, her expression filled with the brightness of the presentation to come.

"The Flapper awoke from her lethargy of sub-deb-ism, bobbed her hair, put on her choicest pair of earrings and a great deal of audacity and rouge, and went into the battle. She

flirted because it was fun to flirt, and wore a one-piece bathing suit, because she had a good figure. She was conscious that the things she did were the things she had always wanted to do. Mothers disapproved of their sons taking the Flapper to dances, to teas, to swim and most of all to heart.”

The reading concluded, Zelda took the gracious bow of a ballerina, amidst applause and “Bravos!”

Zelda’s voice boomed out, her voice clear, her hands gesturing toward Roxie. “All right, everyone, pipe down! Roxie Raines is going to sing for us!”

The room erupted with cheers, whistles, and applause.

“So, clear a path to the piano and get yourselves another cocktail, because Roxie Raines is going to sing to us, just as if it were New Year’s Eve in the middle of Times Square.”

Roxie’s smile was demur, her expression calm, her performance nerves rising. While the applause continued, she turned her head to the right. It was a feeling, a nudge, an intuition, as if someone had just tapped her on the shoulder.

When she saw him, she froze to the spot. It was Jake! Jake stood by the front door, gazing at her with a warm, radiant smile, and it instantly melted her, as it always did.

## CHAPTER 15

Roxie wanted to rush to Jake, but Zelda had her by the arm, tugging her toward the piano.

“Sit down and play, Roxie. Play something for us sap-headed rummies so we can swoon and sway.”

Amid loud applause, Roxie eased herself down on the piano bench and raised her hands above the keyboard for dramatic effect. With a playful grin to tease the crowd, and a sexy wink to Jake, she said, “This boogie-woogie song is called *My Man Hot*, and I wrote it!”

Her hands came down fast, and she launched into a bouncing boogie-woogie, her left hand on the base, crawling across the keys, building the mood, the pace, and the rhythm. At the perfect moment, her right hand landed in a crash of a chord, then jumped through octaves and trills, as she steam-trained the boogie-woogie’s driving rhythms and percussive treble notes.

The room jumped to life, with foot-tapping, improvisational dancing, whistles, and hand clapping. Every person in the room loosened and wiggled, while dancers shifted and kicked. Zelda grabbed Scott, and they twirled and pranced, intoxicated by Roxie’s rhythm and color, just like the rest of the group, who were already high and tipsy.

Roxie rocked and jived, feeling the music beat through her, watching Cherry Valentine and Archie gyrate around the floor, hands waving. Cherry was shaking so hard that Roxie thought she’d shake her dress off.

Jake looked on with a wide grin, feeling the music dance in his bones and nudge him forward, closer to Roxie. He’d tried to stay away from her, but how could he? She was always a sexy surprise, a talented original, and he was hungry for her kisses, her moves and her body.

Roxie spiced up the music, well aware that the boogie-woogie had been the foundation of rock and roll, which

wouldn't be born until the 1950s. With her head bobbing, her legs bouncing, and her face stretched in ecstasy, she let her hands flit across the piano keys, roughing up the music in sharp, bright licks that sent happy shock waves through the crowd.

Dancers whirled, and flappers clapped, their shoulders alive and moving, as Roxie's thumping baseline thundered off the walls.

And then it was time to sing. Her voice was high, strong, and crying.

*“You know my man, he ain't so right for me... Yeah!*

*I said, you know my man, he ain't no good for me.*

*But he's hot lookin' and his kisses, they set me free.*

*He's got no money, he's got no fame.*

*He's got no car, don't like his name.*

*He takes my money and stays out late.*

*He plays the ponies, and he's put on weight.*

*I said, you know my man, he ain't no good for me.*

*But my man's hot lookin' and his kisses done set me free.”*

Roxie kept the music swinging, playing double octaves, double bass, and double beats, playing an ascending walking riff of C E F G, until the music came to a thrilling stop.

Zelda's explosive shriek of delight was nearly swallowed up by the whistles, rowdy applause, and cries of “More! Encore! More!”

Before the applause faded, Roxie broke into the 1925 song, *When My Sugar Walks Down the Street*, her voice all spice and jazzy.

*“When my sugar walks down the street,*

*All the little birdies go tweet, tweet, tweet.*

*And in the evening when the sun goes down,  
It's never dark when he's around."*

Guests wiped sweat from their faces and replenished themselves with gin and beer, and then flung themselves into a delirious anarchy of shouts and dancing, the floor shaking, the room heaving.

The song ended in a rousing climax, and the dancing ceased in weary, staggering steps.

Roxie jumped to her feet, accepting the accolades of applause, while exhausted dancers dropped into the nearest chairs, their chests heaving, their open mouths puffing air, their hands fanning their faces.

Roxie took the opportunity to cross the room to Jake, who waited, still applauding her as she drew up.

"Roxie Raines, there's no other way to say it. You sparkle."

She offered a little curtsy. "Thank you, sir, but now I have to ask, since it's been on my mind when I saw you walk in. How did you know I was here?"

Jake scratched his cheek. "I just happen to have a sister with big ears and a big mouth who tells me things. She told me you were going to a party."

"But I didn't tell Clare where the party was because I didn't know where Archie was taking me. So, how did you know I was here?"

"I'm a detective, Roxie," he said, pointing to his head. "Do you think nobody's home up here? Clare told me who your date was, so I followed him to you, and you to here. His car is very easy for any joker to follow, you know."

Roxie gave him a wide, pleasing smile. "Well... how about that? Ain't that just the nicest thing, Jake Kane? Now I have to ask, why?"

"Why did I follow you? You have to ask?"



“Yeah. You haven’t called me. You obviously don’t want to see me, and suddenly you’re driving all over hell and half of Russia to get to me.”

Jake’s eyebrows lifted. “Hell, and what? What did you say?”

“Haven’t you ever heard that expression?”

“No... Did you say hell and half of Russia?”

“Yeah. It’s a common expression where I come from.”

Jake rolled his eyes. “No, I’m not going to ask you where you come from, because I know you’ll just lie.”

Roxie bristled. “That’s bullshit! I told you the truth, but you didn’t believe me.”

“That’s right. I don’t believe you come from... some future time. I’m not a palooka, Roxie.”

Roxie put her fists on her hips. “And a palooka is?”

“Stupid.”

“So now you’re here and we’re arguing again,” Roxie said.

“I’m not.”

“Are too.”

“Nope!”

“Yep!”

Jake licked his lips and Roxie shook her head in exasperation.

“Okay, Roxie, let’s drop this whole thing and start again.”

“Fine with me.”

He tried a smile. “It’s good to see you.”

“You, too.”

“Okay, fine.”

“Okay, so fine. So, what happens now?” Roxie asked.

Jake stared at her, wanting to pull her into his arms and kiss her. “You look beautiful, Roxie.”

“You’re pretty, Jake.”

“Don’t call me pretty.”

“Have you spoken to the lady who was in Europe?”

“Quick change of subject, Roxie.”

“Yeah... I think I’m mad at you.”

“Don’t be.”

Roxie ignored his words and pressed on. “So, have you spoken to her?”

“Not exactly.”

“And is your client still alive?”

“Yes, and that worries me.”

“I don’t get that. Because?”

“Because I wonder if my sources are correct.”

“Who are your sources?”

“One is a shoeshine boy named Sam.”

Roxie’s head drew back. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, and he’s got friends who have elephant ears. But then I think maybe they’re being played for suckers.”

“By whom?” Roxie asked.

“Well, there you go. Not sure. I did manage to get Hal Lester into a private cell, thanks to an old friend on the police force. But my friend will retire soon, so then I don’t know.”

Roxie stared at him with concern. “You are being careful, aren’t you?”

“Yes... And when Mrs. Lippincott returns, maybe I’ll have some answers and I can get Hal Lester out on bail. The court keeps saying he’s a high risk for flight.”

“Are you working on any other cases?”

“Two. Charlie’s doing most of the leg work and, by the way, he told me to tell you hello.”

Roxie smiled. “And how is Charlie?”

“Charlie’s okay. He’s been spending a lot of his time at Maxie’s. She owns and runs a juice joint downtown, and they get along. But enough about all that. Clare says your new suite is real grand.”

“It’s grand, and it’s big, and I wish you’d come and see it, and me.”

“Places like that make me nervous. I’m afraid the house dick will toss me out on my can.”

“He won’t, and I won’t, but I might give you a toss into my big bed.”

Jake lowered his sexy eyes on her. “Are you strong enough for that?”

Roxie crossed her arms, lifting her chin. “Try me.”

“I like the challenge.”

“Clare said you moved,” Roxie said, keeping her eyes on him.

“Yeah, and it’s a secret until all this blows over.”

“I could come and see you until it blows over.”

Jake ran a hand across his face, his eyes sharpening on her. “Hey, what can I say, Roxie? I miss you.”

“You don’t have to.”

He pocketed his hands. “So, what are we going to do about us? By the way, that song you wrote... I just want to say, for the record, that I have a car, I have gained no weight, and do you really hate my name?”

Roxie laughed. “No, I love your name, and name rhymes with fame.”

Jake took a step closer to Roxie. “I don’t like meeting at your place or at mine. Where can we meet... halfway?”

Roxie opened her mouth to answer when Cherry Valentine drifted over, her lusty eyes fixed on Jake, a yellow-colored cocktail in her hand.

“And who are you?” she asked Jake, ignoring Roxie.

## CHAPTER 16

Jake quickly appraised Cherry Valentine: wealthy, spoiled, and scared to death of boredom; an attractive woman who never knew what she wanted, even after she got it.

“The name is Jake Kane,” Jake said, with a little bow of his head.

Roxie’s eyes narrowed on Cherry, who kept her sultry eyes on Jake.

“You impress me, Mr. Kane,” Cherry said. “I’d say you’re an athlete. Perhaps a baseball player?”

“I wanted to be. Wanted to play outfield for the Yankees.”

“And what stopped you? I believe, Mr. Jake Kane, that you could achieve anything you put your mind and your body to.”

Roxie inched closer to Jake, becoming territorial, but Cherry pretended not to notice.

Roxie said, “Mr. Kane is a detective.”

Cherry’s forehead lifted, and her smile and eyes oozed with new pleasure. “Really? A detective. Well, I do like that, yes, oh, yes, I do. By the way, Jake, I am Cherry Valentine,” she said, extending her free hand.

Jake took her hand, feeling the soft skin, noticing the long red nails polished to perfection. He lowered his chin in speculation. “I suspect, Miss Valentine, that you know all the wrong people and all the best hooch joints.”

Cherry liked the compliment. “And you would be right, Jake Kane. And to illustrate, there I was, just two nights ago, at the Sweet Lemon, with many of the wrong people. Do you know what happened? The place got raided by these burly cops who kicked down the doors. Waiters screamed and started flinging bottles out the windows. Women fainted on the tables, men crawled under them, and I ended up departing arm in arm with a head waiter towards the waiting patrol wagons. If it hadn’t been for the charming and debonair Mr. Densmore,

who paid off the cops, right then and there, I'd have spent the night in jail. Instead, I parked myself at Mr. Densmore's Hotel suite at the Netherland on Fifth Avenue and 59<sup>th</sup> Street and drank champagne and danced till dawn. Now, isn't that romantic?"

Zelda popped over, elbowing Cherry aside and said, "Well, I say that gin and love make a powerful cocktail, Roxie, and I say let's have plenty of both."

Then Scott moved in, and Roxie introduced Jake to the Fitzgeralds. Scott swayed, glassy-eyed and obviously drunk, looking Jake over. "Have you read any of my books?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not," Jake said. "About all I ever read is the sports section, and maybe a scandal page or two."

"You're a wise man, Mr. Kane. Very wise, indeed."

"Jake is a detective," Cherry interjected, standing next to Zelda. "Isn't that exciting?"

"Did we invite you?" Scott asked.

"Of course, we invited him, Scott," Zelda said. "He's in love with Roxie and she's in love with him. Can't you see it in their eyes? It's as obvious as the nose on your face."

Cherry frowned, and Scott lifted his head, ready to make a statement. "Well, let me tell you something about Zelda and me, Jake the detective. We met and slipped briskly into an intimacy from which we have never recovered."

Zelda lifted on tiptoes and kissed him on the lips. "And that's why I love you, Scott, because your words are spun from golden sunlight, and they will make us very rich."

"And if we don't get rich, Zelda?" Scott asked. "After all, writing is hard work."

"Oh, Scott. Why should life be work when we can all borrow? Let's think only of today and not worry about tomorrow." And then she laughed, high and girlish.

Scott fixed his glazed eyes on Roxie and Jake. "Your love is going to crash sooner or later. They all do, you know."

“Oh, shut up, Scott,” Zelda said, her laughter gone. “Now you’re spoiling everything. Why do you always want to spoil everything?”

“No, no,” Scott insisted. “I’ll tell you what’s going to do it, Jake. Here are the tell-tale signs that a romantic crash is about to happen: bridge parties, fashion shows and garden parties. Then there are department store charge accounts that will break you like ice cracking under foot in the middle of a frozen Minnesota lake in the dead of winter. And then there are canvas bras to flatten their chests and washing machines instead of washboards and hand-cranked wringers, and the radio instead of people like Roxie Raines here, singing at the piano.”

Zelda shook her head in disgust. “You’re drunk and you’re not making any sense, Scott.”

Roxie was about to grab Jake by the elbow and tug them both out of there when Archie Wells blundered over, drunk and irritable.

“Hey, what’s going on over here? Where did you run off to, Roxie? You came with me, you know. You’re my date, and I didn’t even get a little kiss after your performance. I think I deserve a kiss for bringing you here, so you could sing for all these swell people. Don’t I deserve a kiss?”

“No,” Roxie said, flatly.

Archie went into full pout mode. “I don’t think I like your attitude, Roxie.”

Suspecting trouble, the photographer darted in, snapping photos. Reporter Gus Markham was fast on the photographer’s heels, his pen scratching away across the page.

Zelda looped her arm in Archie’s and was about to pull him away, but he yanked his arm free and marched up to Jake, his shoulders tight, his mouth tight, his face tight.

“I’m Archie Wells, the guy who brought Roxie, if you didn’t know. Who are you, pal?” he asked, with a threatening smirk.

Jake's grin was pleasant. "Just a guy who didn't want the Pittsburgh Pirates to win the World Series."

Archie's face slackened with confusion. "What? What was that?"

"Yeah, I had a bet on the Senators, and I lost good money."

Archie snorted. "I don't give a damn about the World Series! Are you trying to take Roxie away from me? I've been watching you two and I don't like the way you've been looking at her. She came with me, you know, and I say she goes back with me."

Jake spread his hands. "All I'm saying, Archie, is that the Senators' outfielder, Goose Goslin, said that the fog stopped him from clearly seeing the infield during the last three innings of the game. And do you know what else he said? He claimed that the Series-winning hit was actually a foul ball. So, I said to myself, maybe the Senators could have actually won that game and maybe they would have won the Series." Jake shrugged. "So, maybe I got shafted. That's all I'm saying."

Archie's face reddened. "What's the matter with you? Are you crackers or something?"

"And Archie, did you know that those errors by the Senators' shortstop, Roger Peckinpaugh, in both the seventh and eighth innings, led to four unearned runs? Let me tell you, Archie, old sport, that gave me heartburn, and I had to take a Bromo Seltzer."

Roxie's grin widened.

Flustered, Archie was all gestures and energy. "I say you're all wet, see? That's what I say," he said, putting a fist to one hip. "Yeah, that's what I say, and what are you going to do about it?"

"Did you bet on the Pirates, Archie?" Jake said, holding his cheeky grin. "Is that why you're so happy today?"

Archie exploded into rage. "I didn't bet on anybody, anywhere, at any time! You're playing me for a sap, and I'll knock your block off!"



Archie took a swing at Jake, and Zelda and Cherry lurched back with screams. Roxie skipped left, watching as Jake easily blocked Archie's attack. Archie threw a punch to Jake's face and, again, Jake slapped it away.

The dizzy, inebriated living room crowd wobbled over, circling the men, shouting, fists pumping, cheering them on, overjoyed to have new entertainment.

One man, with a big cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth, said, "Aren't Zelda's parties the best?"

A thin, attractive woman dressed in brown and white, with a dainty yellow bow in her hair, aggressively elbowed her way to the front and shouted, "Give him a good biff across the chin! Step forward, you dumb palooka, and give him the inward cut!"

Archie was heaving out breath and snorting like an angry bull. He pressed his attack, swinging wildly left, then right, his feet unsteady, his body struggling for balance.

Dancing to his left and then to his right, Jake deflected Archie's roundhouse swings, the grin never leaving his face. Archie staggered backwards, saw Cherry's glass in her hand, grabbed it and threw it at Jake's head.

The crowd let out a roar of approval. Jake ducked.

"Fast ball, high and outside!" he shouted. "Ball one!"

The crowd cheered again, and somebody called out, "Throw a strike, Archie Boy!"

Among the deafening cries, Archie grabbed Zelda's cocktail glass and flung it. Again, Jake dodged it, and the glass smashed, shattering against the wall.

"Spitball, low and inside! Ball Two!" Jake yelled, over the deafening shouts.

"Give it up, Archie!" Scott shouted.

"Stop it, Archie!" Zelda screamed.

The woman in brown barked, "Don't just stand there, Archie. Give him a haymaker!"

With eyes bulging, lips curled, face slick with sweat, and fists clenched, Archie charged Jake like a defensive end about to sack the quarterback.

Jake timed the moment perfectly and leaped away. Archie couldn't stop his momentum, and he glanced off the side of an easy chair, tripped over his own feet and plowed into the wall, shoulder and head first.

The crowd went silent, watching rapt, as Archie dropped to the floor in a thud, out cold.

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A half-hour later, Archie was lying on the sofa, his eyes open, an icepack on his head and a thermometer sticking from his mouth. Dr. Hazleton lived two houses down, and Zelda had summoned and escorted him into the room and promptly slapped a Lemon Cooler into the doctor's anxious hand.

"I should have invited you, Dr. Hazelton," Zelda said, with puckered, sorrowful lips. "But I forget who I invited, and I always assume the word will get around the street."

"Well, merciful heavens, Zelda," the doctor said, shaking his balding head, "Your parties are just so wild that a sixty-year-old heart like mine can't pump fast enough to keep up with you."

Being a nervous and fussy man, Dr. Hazelton waved everyone aside while he sipped his cocktail and examined Archie Wells.

Jake and Roxie hovered near the piano, while the crowd drifted away outside or into the kitchen to make more drinks. Being hungry after his altercation, Jake ate two finger sandwiches, ham and cheese and ham and cucumber, while Roxie sipped her cocktail.

"Archie banged his head pretty good against that wall," she said.

Jake swallowed the last of his sandwich. “Yeah, and it’s that wall I’m concerned about. The Doc should be examining *that* and not Archie. I suspect Archie’s thick mug is just fine. Look, he’s sitting up now and Zelda’s pouring coffee down his throat. He’s fine.”

Roxie looked at Jake. “You didn’t even get in one punch.”

“Didn’t need to. Archie did all the work. I wish Charlie could have seen me. He’d have been real proud.”

Zelda left Archie and drifted over to Roxie and Jake, folding her arms across her chest with a sigh, glancing back at him. “He’s going to be all right. Dr. Hazelton said he hit more shoulder than head.”

“Too bad,” Jake said. “Might have knocked some sense into him.”

Zelda didn’t hide her giggle. “Still, you’d better go back to the city with Archie, Roxie.”

Roxie snapped her a look. “Are you serious?”

Zelda nodded toward the reporter. “You know how nasty those rag writers can be. They’ll say you started the fight, and then the next thing you know, you’ll be Roxie, the two-timing, back-stabbing flapper from Philly.”

“Indiana,” Roxie said.

“It will be Philly because it sounds better. And then they’ll use the worst photo of the bunch, so you’ll look like the Ape Man in that picture *The Blind Bargain*. Trust me, Roxie. The things they’ve said about Scott and me would make you cry. Anyway, you have a big show coming up and you don’t need negative press, do you?”

Roxie cursed.

“Can Archie drive?” Jake asked, as he watched him push to his unsteady feet, the doctor standing by watching him.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine. He’s got enough coffee in him to float a battleship,” Zelda said.

Roxie and Jake exchanged a disappointed glance, and Zelda noticed.

“Hey, you two love birds, when Archie drops you off, Roxie, you and Jake can hook up and have a swell time.”

“Maybe you should drive his car,” Jake offered.

“I don’t know how to drive that thing,” Roxie said. “I never learned how to drive a stick shift.”

Zelda and Jake considered that.

“What else is there except a stick shift?” Jake asked.

Roxie scratched her left ear, not sure when the first automatic transmissions were available for cars. “Ever heard of automatic transmissions?”

Jake screwed up his lips in thought. Zelda’s forehead creased.

Jake shook his head. “No.”

Zelda said, “Where did you say you come from? Indiana?”

“Yes, a small town called Warsaw,” Roxie said, with a shrug. “We have them there.”

“You have lots of things in Indiana that nobody else seems to have, and never heard of,” Jake said. “I’m going to have to go for a visit.”

Roxie glanced away.

Jake’s puzzled glance dissolved into concern. “All right, Roxie, you go back with Archie, and I’ll follow you, just to make sure you’re all right.”

“Don’t let him see you,” Zelda said. “He’s still pretty sore at you and, if I were you, I’d leave now and wait for them down the road a-ways.”

After Zelda was gone and while Archie stared at Jake with new hatred, Jake faced Roxie.

“When and where can we meet?”

“My place?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think I was followed here, but you never know.”

“Just come, Jake. Just do it.”

Grudgingly, Jake agreed, giving Roxie a final smile and warm glance as he crossed the room and left the house.

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Archie’s AB Convertible Roadster raced across the two-lane road, bending around curves, spewing dust, tires squealing. He wasn’t wearing his duster or his goggles, and his eyes were squeezed into angry slits.

Roxie held on to both sides of her seat, her knuckles white, her mouth fixed into a grimace.

“Slow down, Archie!”

His expression was hard, his lips fixed in a snarl. “I don’t like being played for a sucker! Nobody plays me for a sucker, not you and not Jules Morgan.”

“Nobody played you for a sucker, Archie. You’re the one who started that fight.”

He swerved left, just missing an ugly pothole, and Roxie swayed with the motion, her face hot.

“Slow down! You’re going to get us both killed!”

Archie’s laugh was bitter, his eyes shining with hatred. “Well, I’m getting mine, dollface. You can bet on that. You owe me, and I’m getting mine.”

She shot him an incredulous glance. “What? What the hell are you talking about?”

“You heard me.”

Roxie’s face flamed, her heart raced. “I’m not going anywhere with you, Archie.”

“I’ll take you, all right, and you’ll be the better for it. No woman has ever said Archie Wells couldn’t deliver on the

goods.”

“Stop the car! Stop it now, Archie!”

His laugh was menacing as he boosted the accelerator. “I know a quiet little place not too far from here where you and I can have a lot of fun. And don’t think you can get away from me. I can run fast, slap hard, and take you down like a scared rabbit. And the more you fight, the more I’ll love it.”

Roxie felt the rise of panic; beads of sweat popped out on her forehead. She twisted around to see if Jake’s car was following, but it wasn’t there. They were alone on the road. A back road, Archie had said. A shortcut.

“Nobody’s coming to your rescue, flapper girl. No car can out-run this baby, so forget about that and start thinking about how you’re gonna make Archie a happy man.”

Roxie glanced to her right, measuring distance and speed, judging her chances of survival if she shoved open the door and jumped out. But the car was traveling too fast. She’d never survive it.

The road leveled out, and Archie gave the engine another boost. Trees, shrubs, and mounds of coal cinders whizzed by, and then the road dropped away, and there were more dips and turns under a sky of popcorn clouds.

As Roxie saw it, she had but one choice and it wasn’t a good one. She’d have to attack. If Archie turned into a secluded area, she’d be trapped. With his athletic body, he could outrun her, and he was muscular and fit. She wouldn’t be able to fight him off.

Her one option could get her killed, but she would not let this crazy bastard take her! Who knew what he might do? He might even kill her.

“We’re not far now, Roxie,” Archie said, with a flash of his white teeth, his grin ugly with purpose. “Just a couple miles away under those trees, where nobody will see us, not even your smart detective friend, if he happens to come by.”

Roxie swallowed away a lump that nearly choked her, and she gave him a feverish, burning stare. Something in the set of

her head and the stiffness of her neck said, “No! Fight!” It was now or never. She cocked an arm, sucked in a breath and, with the sharpest point of her elbow, she struck him, jamming him hard into his ribs.

His body tensed in pain, and he screamed in shock. The Roadster put its back end into the left shoulder, and then onto the right shoulder. Roxie didn't wait. She struck him again. The breath burst from Archie's mouth, and his hands flew off the steering wheel, as he struggled to deflect Roxie's next attack, another hard jab into his ribs.

The back end of the car came around and there was a skid and a shriek of rubber. The Roadster missed the next curve, and the car went careening out of control, leaving the road, bouncing and bucking.

With no seatbelt, Roxie held on for dear life. Archie grabbed and fought the steering wheel, leaning away from Roxie, anticipating another attack. With painful determination, he whipped the car around and headed back to the road, the wheels grabbing the pavement just as Roxie regained her balance and struck him again. Her hard elbow cracked a rib, and he howled like a wounded animal.

In a loud, screeching burn of rubber, the car skidded off the road, jumped into a ravine, bounced, and flipped, hurling Roxie and Archie from the car.

Roxie's last thought was, *If I'm killed, will I return to 2019?*

# CHAPTER 17

The next morning, headlines shouted the news:

**ROXIE RAINES' CLOSE CALL IN CAR  
CRASH!**

**ROXIE RAINES NARROWLY ESCAPES  
DEATH WHEN AUTO LOOPS-THE-LOOP!**

**ROXIE RAINES INJURED WHEN CAR  
TURTLES!**

**ROXIE RAINES, THE 9-LIVES-SINGING-  
FLAPPER, SURVIVES DEATH AGAIN!**

**PLAYBOY ARCHIE WELLS DEAD IN CAR  
FLIP!**

**ARCHIE WELLS, SOCIETY PLAYBOY,  
BREAKS NECK IN CAR UPSET!**

Roxie lay quiet, her head deep in the pillow. Dr. Harriet Hall stood on the right side of the bed and Jake on the left. No one spoke for a time.

When Jake had discovered Archie's upturned car and found Archie dead and Roxie alive but unconscious, he'd swept her up into his arms, carried her to his car, laid her down in the backseat and raced back to the city to the East Side Children and Women's Clinic. By the time they'd arrived, Roxie was awake and complaining of a sore shoulder and twisted ankle.

Inside the clinic, while Harriet found Roxie a bed and examined her, Jake called the police. Roxie had told Jake and



Harriet what had happened, and then she'd turned away in tears.

Miraculously, Roxie had survived with only some bruises, a jammed shoulder and a twisted ankle.

When Jake couldn't take the silence any longer, he drew closer to Roxie's bed, reached a hand to her forehead and checked for a fever.

"I'm fine, Jake," Roxie said. "I'm fine. I shouldn't be, after what happened to Archie."

"It wasn't your fault, Roxie," Harriet said. "You had every right to protect yourself."

"And you were damned lucky you didn't break *your* neck. I was only a mile or so behind. I would have stopped him."

Roxie stared up at the ceiling. "I didn't see you. I looked."

"He had a fast car. Mine's not built for speed. Anyway, if anybody's to blame, it's me. I should have never let you leave with him. When I told Charlie, he said I should be horsewhipped."

Roxie rolled her head toward him. "I was the one who let Zelda talk me into it because I didn't want the bad press. So, no, it's my fault for being such a stupid, selfish bitch, excuse my modern slang."

Harriet glared at them both. "Will you both stop blaming yourselves? Mr. Wells was driving too fast, and he was about to do... heaven only knows, and heaven would want no part of it."

Roxie shut her eyes. "Well... here I am again, back in the clinic. I'm getting to be your best patient."

"Certainly, the most famous one," Harriet said. "And, as sad as it is that you're here and that Mr. Wells is dead, we are receiving stacks of donations for the Clinic, thanks to you."

Roxie's eyes opened. "Really? Well... I guess that's the one positive thing."

Harriet continued. “And, once again, reporters are trying to swarm the place, and you’ve seen the headlines. Your popularity continues to grow.”

Roxie heaved out a sigh. “Jules Morgan wanted publicity, didn’t he? Well, I guess he got it.”

“Yes, and Mr. Morgan has made it clear to me that he wants you out of here as soon as possible and admitted into a...” Harriet made air quotes with her fingers, “‘*real*’ hospital.”

“I’m staying right here!” Roxie declared.

Harriet looked at Jake. “Thanks to Mr. Kane, we’ve managed to keep out the reporters, the police and Mr. Jules Morgan. None would have listened to me, a lowly female doctor, but Mr. Kane can be very persuasive.”

Roxie put her eyes on him and flashed him a grateful grin. “Thanks again, once again, for saving my life.”

“You already said that about ten times.”

“So, maybe I’ll say it ten more times,” she snapped, feeling a swift frustration and anger. “So, how do I keep getting myself into these kinds of sick situations? What’s the matter with me, anyway?”

“Nothing is the matter with you, Roxie,” Harriet said.

“But like I said,” Jake broke in, “don’t tell the cops everything you know. Just say Archie was driving too fast, had drunk too much booze, and then leave it at that.”

“Oh, you mean, leave out the part about how I killed him?” Roxie said sarcastically.

“Stop that!” Jake said. “The cops and Jules Morgan will be in here soon. I can’t hold them off any longer. The cops have already taken statements from the people at Zelda’s party, including Zelda, and they all said Archie was tight as a hatband, and he’d been in a fight with me.”

Roxie looked up at him. “But you didn’t even hit him. Not once.”

“I told the cops that, but, of course, being cops, and because many of them know me, they don’t believe it. I don’t think they believed Zelda, Scott, or Cherry either. But there it is. Let’s leave it where it is and not complicate things. Okay, Roxie?”

Roxie looked at Harriet. “When can I get out of here?”

“Maybe tomorrow,” Harriet said. “You’re doing fine, but another night’s rest, away from all the chaos out there, will do you good.”

Roxie tugged the sheet up to her chin. “If my head’s on right, I think I have an opening night show in a few days, right?”

Jake nodded. “Old Jules told me he’s selling standing room tickets only in the back of the place for over five bucks, more than a Broadway show ticket, and he’s sold out for the next four months, with tickets going fast. He’s as happy as a guy can be, who almost lost his star, his meal ticket, and his shirt, pardon my cynicism.”

Roxie considered that as she did some quick math in her head. A dozen eggs costs 47 cents, a pound of round steak costs 40 cents, and a meal at a diner was 70 cents. It costs 15 cents to see a movie, and four bucks or more to get a bob haircut. Jules was definitely making good money.

Roxie tossed back the sheet, revealing her white hospital gown and wrapped right ankle. She swung her feet off the bed and onto the floor.

“What are you doing?” Harriet asked, holding up her hands.

“I’m getting out of this bed. I don’t want Jules or the cops to see me lying here like I’m half dead.”

“Might be better if they do, Roxie,” Jake said. “Especially the cops. Maybe they won’t ask you so many questions if they think you’re not up to it.”

Roxie pushed up, wincing a little at the pain in her ankle, and Jake offered an arm.

“I want to walk a little and then sit,” Roxie said. “Didn’t you say walking on it was good?” Roxie asked Harriet.

“Yes, but don’t overdo it. Just a little at first,” Harriet responded.

Using Jake for support, Roxie hobbled across the small room, paused, and started back to the bed. “Some hot romance we’re having,” she said. “I always seem to be in the damned hospital.”

“We’re all right,” Jake said. “Just a little bad timing.”

Roxie stopped and looked at him soberly. “It makes me sick, Jake, to think Archie’s dead. I didn’t want to kill him. Really. I just wanted to get out of the car.”

Roxie eased back down on the edge of the bed, lowering her head.

“I know you didn’t want him to break his neck,” Jake said, in a soft, consoling voice. “But, again, he brought it on himself.”

Roxie’s chin quivered, but she refused to cry. “It’s just so depressing... the whole thing is just so... totally messed up.”

Harriet moved closer. “After the police are gone, I’m going to give you a sedative so you can sleep.”

“I don’t want any more sedatives, Harriet. Let Jules and the cops in so I can get this over with.”

Jake’s and Harriet’s eyes met, and they both nodded.

“All right,” Harriet said. “Why don’t you prop yourself up with those pillows?”

Jake placed the pillows behind her back and Roxie sat up, while Harriet covered her with the sheet and a woolen blanket.

“Ready?” Jake asked.

“Sure.”

“By the way, you know the cops,” Jake said. “It’s Lieutenant Frank Blaine and Sergeant Joe Hanlon.”

“Those two again?”

Jake nodded. “They won’t let me stay, so keep your answers simple. No off-the-cuff guilt talk and don’t volunteer anything, okay?”

Roxie nodded.

Harriet left the room, soon returning with a very concerned and somber Jules Morgan, who wore a stylish, pinstriped suit and dark blue tie. By his side, briefcase in hand, was Jules’s tall, stiff-backed lawyer, wearing black. His tight gray hair, small, suspicious eyes, and grim expression reminded Roxie of an undertaker in a Hollywood movie.

The detectives shuffled into Roxie’s room with their fedoras in their hands. Lieutenant Blaine approached Roxie with a detached, emotionless gaze, his suit too tight and his balding head large for his short, broad body. Sergeant Joe Hanlon moved forward, thin as before, his face showing plenty of freckles, and his shiny red hair expertly combed, parted on the right side. He displayed his usual complex expression of apathy and frustration.

Jules was beside Roxie’s bed in an instant. “Dr. Hall has given me a detailed account of your condition, Miss Raines. How are you feeling?”

She shrugged. “I’m okay. Just a little sore.”

Jules glanced around the small, windowless room, with rising displeasure. “Well, that’s fine. Fine. We need to get you out of this box and into a real hospital.”

“I don’t want to move. I like it here. Harriet’s a skilled doctor and she’s my friend.”

Jules gave a little shake of his head. “Well, you’ll be released tomorrow, so I suppose it won’t matter if you stay here one more day. I’ve hired a personal nurse, and she’ll be waiting when you arrive home.”

Lieutenant Blaine cleared his throat. “Mr. Morgan, with Miss Raines’ permission, we’d like to start our questioning. It shouldn’t take long.”

Jules glanced at them with annoyance, then nodded to his lawyer. “This is my lawyer, Albert Windcrest. I’m sure you understand,” Jules said, in an authoritative tone. “If there is a question that might be the slightest bit insinuating or incriminating, Miss Raines will not answer.”

Blaine half-hooded his eyes, and Hanlon stared down at his shoes so no one would see his disdain for Jules and his lawyer.

Blaine looked at Jake. “Beat it, Jake. We’ve already got your statement.”

“I might just suddenly remember something else,” Jake said, lightly. “You know how it is.”

Blaine indicated with his chin toward the door. “That’s what I’m afraid of. Go.”

When Jake and Harriet had gone, Jules and Albert stood on the left side of Roxie’s bed and the cops on the right, adversaries facing off.

Blaine asked about Zelda’s party, who was there and how much she’d had to drink. Albert Windcrest blocked Roxie’s answers, so Blaine fired off questions about Archie, what he was drinking and how much. Roxie said she didn’t know how many cocktails he had consumed, but by the time he started the fight with Jake, he was slurring his words and his eyes were glassy.

“Did Jake start the fight, Miss Raines?” Blaine asked.

“No... Archie did.”

“Why?”

“I think he was jealous of me talking to Jake.”

“Did you want to make him jealous?” Hanlon slipped in.

“Don’t answer that, Miss Raines,” Mr. Windcrest said.

“Why didn’t you return to Manhattan with Jake?” Hanlon continued.

“Because I’d come with Archie.”

“Did you know Jake was coming to the party?” Blaine asked.

“No, I didn’t.”

Hanlon looked directly at Jules. “So, you went with Mr. Wells, you flirted with Jake...”

“Don’t answer that,” Windcrest said. “Miss Raines said she was talking to Mr. Kane, not flirting with him.”

“Okay, fine,” Hanlon said. “Archie starts the fight with Jake. Did Jake hit Mr. Wells, and if so, where?”

“No. Jake didn’t hit him.”

“No?” Hanlon said, with a raised eyebrow.

“No. Archie was drunk, and Jake ducked his punches.”

Blaine scratched the end of his nose as he formed his next question. “So, Jake didn’t even throw one punch? Not one?”

Roxie looked straight ahead. “No. Not one.”

Jules spoke up. “Is that all, detectives?”

Blaine’s eyes narrowed. “No, it’s not all,” he said, curtly, turning his full attention to Roxie. “Miss Raines, Mr. Wells’ autopsy revealed two large bruises on his right side and one cracked rib. Would you know how he received those bruises?”

Roxie was about to open her mouth to speak when Jules butted in. “What are you suggesting, Lieutenant?”

“I’m not suggesting anything. I’m just asking questions, Mr. Morgan.”

Jules’ voice had a bite to it. “Well, enough is enough. It’s obvious how Archie Wells received those injuries, Lieutenant. He was thrown from his speeding car and Roxie was also nearly killed. Now, I think she’s answered all your questions thoroughly and completely. Will there be anything else?”

Lieutenant Blaine had mean eyes over a smiling mouth. “No, sir, Mr. Morgan. I think that will just about do it.”

Jules stayed in the room after everyone else had gone, and he stood at the end of Roxie’s bed, giving her an intense stare.

She couldn't read him, and she wondered if anyone could. When he smiled, she couldn't tell if it was a pleasant smile, an unhappy smile, or a calculated one.

“Miss Raines... At the club, the calls for you never stop. Flowers are delivered every hour on the hour—mostly roses from male admirers, but there are also some from women. You've received telegrams, and Charlie Chaplin called. He wants you in his next picture. I've also received several excellent photos taken of you at the Fitzgeralds' party, which I will release to the newspapers and magazines right away.”

He moved from the foot of the bed to the right of the bed, his hands loose in his pockets. His smile dropped into a puny frown. “I'm sorry for Archie. I liked him, but he almost got you killed, and he killed himself because of his fool-hardy and devil-may-care actions.”

And then, to Roxie's great surprise, Jules offered her a little bow. “I apologize, Miss Raines, for arranging your outing together. That was foolish of me. No, that was reckless of me, and I do not consider myself to be a reckless man. I can assure you that it will not happen again.”

Roxie stared down at the bed. “I shouldn't have left the party with him. I should have gone with Jake.”

“Perhaps.”

Roxie lifted her eyes. “Has anyone heard from Archie's father?”

Jules locked his hands behind his back. “I spoke with Mr. Wells. He wanted to come here. He was understandably upset. We talked, and that was that.”

The sad depth of Roxie's eyes urged him to continue.

“I told Mr. Wells the truth, as Jake told it to me. Mr. Wells and I know some of the same people, and we've done some small business in the past. I told him you had nothing to do with what happened to his son, and I made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that you are not to be contacted, in any way and at any time, by anyone.”



Roxie crossed her arms and looked away. “Do I need to be looking over my shoulder?”

“No, Miss Raines. Mr. Wells will not trouble you. Ever. That’s a promise.”

Roxie’s voice was a whisper. “I’m sorry for the man.”

Jules cleared his voice. “About Jake Kane. Do you think he is the... well, how do I say this? Perhaps he’s also putting your life in danger.”

Roxie swung her gaze at him. “What do you mean?”

“I know, Miss Raines. I know that Mr. Kane is involved with something that is way over his head. What I’m about to say may upset you, but I’m saying it for your own good. If Mr. Kane doesn’t stop the investigation into the murder of Edith Lester, I’m afraid that something unfortunate might happen to him.”

Fear sucked the color from her face, and then she became remote and unreachable.

“Miss Raines... I don’t want you around him when that happens.”

## CHAPTER 18

Personal Detective Jake Kane sat in his office, his feet propped on his desk. He doodled on a notepad while grappling with his problems and wrestling with his emotions.

His partner, Charlie Stokes, stood by the window, staring down at the tangled traffic in Times Square. He'd just finished reading his third newspaper of the day and tossed it into the wire wastepaper basket.

Jake's office was small, square, and neat, with a maple desk and two brown leather bankers' chairs positioned before it. The glossy parquet floor added an old-school quality. The walls were newly painted gray and white, and three wooden file cabinets needed varnish and a new filing system. The one black-and-white photograph hanging perfectly straight on the wall was of the stern-faced Yankees' second baseman, Aaron Ward, bedecked in full uniform and ball cap.

"I don't like it, Jake," Charlie said.

"When was the last time you liked anything, Charlie?"

"Why is the dame coming here, when she told you over the phone two days ago that she didn't want to talk to you, and that she didn't want you calling her, ever? I don't get that, and I don't like it. It don't smell right."

"Did I tell you my theory?"

"Yeah, but your theories are always changing. One hour it's this and the next hour it's that. How do I know which one to swing at when you're always moving them around?"

"Okay, fair enough. This hour I have another one."

Charlie moved away from the windows and dropped heavily in a chair facing Jake's desk. "Jake, I don't even like her name. What kind of dame has a name like Lippincott?"

"Miriam Lippincott does. Anyway, it's a fine name. A good name for a dame with dough."

Charlie raised his nervous eyes. “So, what’s your theory now?”

Jake dropped his feet to the floor, tossed his doodling pad on his desk, and straightened up. “Here it is. She’s scared.”

“That’s it?”

“Ain’t that enough?”

“No, Jake, that ain’t enough. We’ve got our necks stuck out a mile long on this cockamamie case and I say, who ain’t scared? Hell, I’m scared. I’ve been lookin’ over my shoulder for a couple of months now, and I’m gettin’ a big crick in my neck.”

Jake leaned forward, placed his folded hands on the desk, and looked at his partner with affection. “Why do you have such a thick head, Charlie? Huh? Why? I keep telling you to dump me, and this case. Get away from me and move on to something else.”

“And if my head’s thick, Jake, then yours has got rocks in it. You’ve got no good reason to hold on to this case. You hardly knew that Lester woman and Hal Lester ain’t worth it.”

Jake breathed in a patient breath. “Charlie, how many times do we have to keep beating our gums over this? I told you why, and you know why. The same bad cops that had my old partner killed, I’m positive, are the same bad cops that are involved in this. And, anyway, I’m not letting anybody get away with trying to kill my mother and Jimmy. No. They took a shot at us, Charlie. They took a shot to scare me off, but they could have killed Jimmy and my mother.”

Charlie turned his weary gaze toward the side wall. “It’s a helluva thing, Jake, this business we’re in. Maybe we should have opened up a hooch joint.”

Jake leaned back. “Last night I remembered something Edith Lester said the first time she came to the office.”

Charlie’s interest grew. “Yeah, like what?”

“I asked her how she’d found me, and she said something like, ‘Let’s just say a friend with the police mentioned you at a

party.' Do you remember that?"

"Yeah, I remember now that you mention it. Did she ever say who that person was?"

"No, she didn't, and I didn't ask, and I should have asked."

"She probably wouldn't have leveled with you, anyway."

"Maybe not, but I should have followed up on it. Her money dazzled me, Charlie, and I didn't do the back work I should have done. So, now she's dead, and we're walking in circles."

A knock jerked them both to attention. Charlie leaped up, went to the door and opened it. A thin, young woman stepped inside, glancing around, as Charlie closed the door behind them.

Jake was on his feet, puzzled. This was not Miriam Lippincott. A new client? No, he didn't think so. Moving from around his desk, Jake approached the young woman, who looked him up and down.

"Hello... Miss?" Jake said.

She was thin and feminine, and if she wasn't a beauty, she possessed a sexy allure, with soft white skin, hazel eyes, and a full, pink mouth. Her clothes were expensive: a raccoon coat, a brown velvet cloche hat with a purple band hiding what was surely bobbed hair with waves, and an impressive diamond ring. An engagement ring?

Jake stepped back and indicated toward one of the two chairs. "Please sit down... Miss."

She studied the two men, more Jake than Charlie, then moved to the chair and sat.

"I shouldn't be here," she said, in a smooth feminine voice, then pursed her lips.

"Can I get you anything?" Jake asked. "Coffee? Tea?"

She shook her head, opened her purse, and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. Her hands trembled as she placed the cigarette between her lips, and Jake flicked his lighter and lit it for her.

“Mom doesn’t like me smoking. She thinks it makes a girl look vampy, but I guess I don’t care what she thinks.”

Jake glanced up at Charlie, who shrugged, his big eyes filled with questions.

“And who is your mother?” Jake asked, moving back around his desk and easing down in his chair. “And if it’s not too much trouble, who are you?”

The girl dropped the pack of cigarettes into her purse and smoked with distraction, her eyes flitting about. “I don’t know why I came. I shouldn’t have.”

“Why did you?” Jake asked, pleasantly, but growing impatient.

“I’m Stella Lippincott. Call me Stella.”

Jake took a ten-beat to process that information. “Okay...” he said. “Hello, Stella. I’m Jake, and the big guy over there is my partner, Charlie Stokes.”

She acknowledged Charlie with a quick smile and a nod, and turned back to Jake, her eyes coming up slowly. “Do you see this raccoon coat?”

“Yes, it’s very nice. Very stylish.”

“She bought it for me.”

“And she would be?”

“Edith Lester.”

Jake’s eyes opened fully. “Oh, I see. She was a friend?”

“A friend of my mother’s. I’m soon to be Mrs. Stella Lippincott Crenshaw. That’s why I shouldn’t be here, but I had to come. If Warren, that’s my fiancé, knew I was here, and if my mother knew I was here, let me tell you, they’d both blow their tops. Warren’s a banker and he’s a nice sort, but a stuffed shirt, too. And he’s always nosing around in my life and in my business. This is 1925, not 1900. And do you know what? I’d rather have fun and live till I’m forty than be bored and live till I’m eighty.”

Jake let that comment go by like a high, outside fastball. “Okay, fine. I’m glad you came, Stella,” Jake said evenly. “So, it was you and not your mother who called me?”

“No, she called, and I listened in on the other line. But we sound alike. Same type of voice and all, but that’s about all we have in common. She’s boring and I like to have fun.”

“So, you heard your mother tell me not to call her again, and you were on the line somewhere else in the house?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“All right. How can I help you, Stella?”

Her voice boomed out, her eyes suddenly bold. “You can stop trying to protect that bum, Hal Lester. That’s how you can help!”

Jake was still, watching Stella’s eyes flood with tears. She lowered her head and reached into her purse for a hankie.

Jake and Charlie traded another glance, each intrigued. Jake waited for Stella to recover from the emotion, his eyes never leaving her face.

Stella took a drag on her cigarette and blew a cloud toward the ceiling. “Edith wanted a daughter, but for whatever reason, she couldn’t have children, so I became a daughter to her. She spoiled me, and she bought me beautiful things, and she was so kind to me and listened to me, and never, not ever, had a mean thing to say, even when I was mean and nasty. Mom was jealous, of course, but Mom and I don’t get along so well most of the time.”

“How did you first find out about me?” Jake asked.

Stella leaned forward and screwed out her cigarette in Jake’s desk ashtray. After blotting her eyes with the hankie, she lifted her head, putting on a brave face. “Two men came. Right after my mother and father returned from Europe and my father was away on business, these two big, ugly men came. They told me to scram, so I did, but only to the nearest bedroom where I could hear everything they said, or almost everything they said.”

Charlie wandered toward the windows, troubled. Jake gently tapped a finger on his desk, waiting.

“Well, those two big baboons told mom she was never to talk to you—never to take a telephone call from you and never to meet you at any time or anywhere. They said you were last week’s bad news. A penny-ante Woolworth detective.”

Charlie’s mouth twitched. Jake stayed composed. “Go on.”

“So those goons said if she did talk to you, they’d make sure she was sorry. And then they said that I looked so innocent and sweet. Those were the words they said. They said it would be a shame if something happened to me. It made me scared and sick, but it also burned me up. I wished I was a man so I could go out there and fight them.”

“I bet your mother was scared.”

“You bet she was. Who wouldn’t be?”

Stella readjusted herself in the chair and continued. “Edith talked about you a couple of times when we had lunch together. She said you were dependable, a man of honor. She said you were one of the few men in this world she could trust. That’s why I called you and why I came.”

Charlie adjusted his tie and resettled his shoulders.

Jake maintained strong eye contact with Stella, trying to read the depths of her. “Did you and Edith speak often?”

“Yes.”

“So, you think Hal Lester killed Edith?”

Stella’s lips tightened and the fire in her eyes revealed a woman who didn’t mind a good fight. “Yeah, he killed her! I hate him. I don’t know why she married him, and I told her that.”

“How did Mrs. Lester respond when you told her?”

“She smiled at me. She never got angry with me. Never. I wish she had been my mother. Anyway, she said she was a foolish woman who liked to have a young, handsome man around.”

Stella shaped her face into repugnance. “Hal got fresh with me once, you know, and started pawing me up and coming at me with his lips.”

Charlie stiffened. “That no-good rat! I never liked that mug.”

Jake shot him a look and Charlie turned back toward the windows.

“Did Edith know that Hal made a pass at you?” Jake asked.

“Of course she didn’t know. I never told her, but I told Hal to go straight to hell and I slapped him. He slapped me back and brought the blood. So, I picked up an ashtray and threw it at him—conked him on the side of his swelled head and he went running off like a scared mouse. He killed Edith all right and I hope he gets fried in the chair. So, stop trying to help the guy. Nobody else killed Edith but Hal, and you can bet on that.”

“And you know that for sure because...?” Jake asked.

“Because I overheard them have a big fight, and he said he was going to kill her.”

“Did you tell the police that?”

“No, I’m telling *you*.”

“How many days, after you heard them arguing, was Edith murdered?” Charlie asked.

She turned to him. “Two days. He did it, all right.”

Jake scratched his cheek. “Hal has three solid alibies, people who swore under oath that they were with him when Edith was murdered. One was a dame... a woman he was with at the time the murder was committed, so said the coroner.”

“I don’t care what anybody says. I say he killed her, and he should go to the chair for it.”

Jake picked up a pencil and looked at it. “About that argument between Edith and Hal. What was it about?”

“Edith said she was sick of him, and she was going to dump him—toss him out on his can without a nickel. He said she



was two-timing him and if he caught her with the guy, he'd kill them both. You know, that kind of thing.”

“Was Edith going around with another guy?” Charlie asked.

Stella shrugged, looked away, and sniffed. “No, he just said that because he was mad as hell. Edith was true-blue to Hal—and look at what he did to her. He killed her.”

Jake leaned forward. “You’re absolutely sure about that? Because there are witnesses who testified that Mrs. Lester was seeing someone else.”

Stella turned indignant. “Well, I don’t know who those witnesses are, but they’re lying. All of them. That’s all I can say about that.”

Jake eased back, watching Stella’s gaze shift and her hands twist. He had a feeling about the girl, and it wasn’t a good feeling.

“Edith told me lots of things. Sometimes she’d say Hal was a bum through and through. But then she’d say, ‘These awful things are not for your pretty, innocent ears.’”

Stella blew out a frustrated sigh. “Edith thought I was the cat’s pajamas, you know? Innocent, she called me. Okay, so maybe I’m not so innocent, like she thought, and the way everyone thinks.”

Jake stood up, noticing that Stella’s mood had shifted. Why had she added that last bit of information? It was the first thing she’d said that seemed honest. “Who’s everyone, Stella?”

She turned peevish. “How do I know who everyone is? Anyone and everyone. That’s all.”

Jake pocketed his hands, hearing a flat note in Stella’s little song. “Okay, Stella, what are we talking about here?”

“Edith, of course. So, I came to tell you to stop trying to pin Edith’s murder on somebody else. It’s not right. Hal did it, so let him fry for it.”

“And what if I say, I don’t think Hal did it?” Jake challenged.

Stella shot up, stuffing the damp hankie back into her purse. “Then you’re not too smart, are you?” she snapped. “Either of you. I’m telling you, Hal Lester killed Edith, okay? And I know.”

The room went quiet, only the sounds of tooting horns outside in Times Square.

Jake lowered himself back into his chair, his eyes keen on Stella.

She glanced back at the door. “Okay, so I’m leaving. That’s all I have to say about it.”

“Thanks for coming, Stella. Charlie and I will think about all you said.”

She clutched her purse tightly, lifting her chin in a final declaration. “Hal did it, all right. He did!” Then she walked out, letting the door slam behind her.

Long after Stella had left the office, and long after she’d taken the elevator down to the lobby, Charlie and Jake were still in silence, Jake at his desk and Charlie by the windows. When Charlie finally turned to Jake, a faint line of anxiety showed in between his eyebrows.

“That doll’s hiding something, Jake. She ain’t on the level.”

Jake’s stare was fixed in the distance. “Yeah, I hear you. Her performance lacked one thing. Conviction. She was too self-conscious and too confident that she wasn’t self-conscious. She’d rehearsed her little performance, but it didn’t hold up.”

Charlie said, “I think you have an idea or two who Edith Lester was playing footsie with, don’t you?”

“Yeah. On a tip from Sam the shoeshine boy, I talked to a bartender and a cocktail waitress at the Pearl Club on 51<sup>st</sup> Street. They said Edith Lester went there often and sat in a dark corner with a guy. They described the guy she met a few times. I’m sure it was Calvin Sinclair.”

Charlie strolled toward Jake’s desk and slumped down in one of the chairs. “What do we do now?”

“Follow Stella. I know where she lives.”

“How’s that gonna help?”

“I don’t know, but I have a feeling.”

“Sinclair is connected, Jake.”

“Yeah, I know, but I also know that some cops I used to work with aren’t so happy with how things are going downtown. Prohibition is making everybody corrupt, and rich, and the good cops are caught in between, like always.”

“This ain’t gonna be so easy, Jake.”

“Yeah, and it already hasn’t been so easy. And speaking of not gonna be easy, there’s Roxie.”

“So how *is* Roxie?”

“Better. It’s been over a week since the accident and her ankle’s okay, but she’s different.”

“Different how?”

“She’s got the lowdowns, Charlie. Archie’s death hit her hard, and she’s been alone. Clare told me she only leaves the suite to rehearse at the club, then she returns home and goes to her room. When I called a couple of times, she said she didn’t feel like talking. She said she had things to think about. And then she said something strange. She said, ‘In my time, you’re already dead. In this time, how can I fall in love with a dead man?’”

“You can never figure a dame, Jake. They’ve got secrets hiding in every part of their brains.”

The two looked at each other, and Jake said, “Put on your best suit, Charlie. All the swells and the stars will be at The Ginger Jam tonight, and so will we.”

## CHAPTER 19

Outside The Ginger Jam on Roxie's opening night, beefy men in tuxedos kept the crowds behind velvet ropes, and cops on horseback patrolled the street. Shiny limousines paused at the curb and uniformed chauffeurs opened back doors. A picture star, wrapped in furs, emerged from one.

From a burgundy limo behind hers, a Broadway headliner threw a wave and a shiny grin at the cheering crowd. From yet another black lacquered limo, a politician appeared with a jeweled lady on his arm, he adorned in top hat, tails, white gloves, and a cane.

On the street, strangers grabbed strangers to see if they could get tickets for the hottest show of the year, featuring "Roxie Raines, the 9-Lives Singing Cat's Meow." People were desperate to be a part of the glamorous, shimmering elite, but there were no tickets available, at any price.

Inside The Ginger Jam, the stylish, the wealthy, and the famous were crammed into the softly lit club, all anxiously waiting for Roxie to appear on stage.

Her photo, illustrations and advertisements had been displayed in magazines and newspapers, and she had been featured conspicuously on a Times Square Billboard. Times Square crowds couldn't help but gaze up at Roxie wearing a flashy emerald flapper dress, glossy red shoes, and a sequined headband and veil. She was soaring coquettishly on a red velvet swing, holding a red cocktail, kicking high into the air, her smile breezy and seductive.

When City Hall received telephone complaints about the red cocktail, since prohibition was in full swing, they advised the callers that the cocktail held only "tomato juice."

The anxious Ginger Jam crowd smoked, and gabbed, and sipped juice spiked with gin. Many turned their impatient gazes toward the stage curtain, with its small red diamond

shapes and shimmering golden sequins, their impatience rising.

“It’s time,” a chic flapper said to her tuxedoed beau.

Seated at a table nearby, another flapper commented to her portly politician companion. “Where is she?” Wearing a coral-colored, paisley flapper fringe dress and feather sequined cap, she twisted about, looking for someone in charge to complain to. “Where’s the manager of this joint?”

Charlie Chaplin had a table stage-side with his actress wife, Lita Gray, as did the handsome, famous movie actor, Rudolph Valentino, and his wife, the celebrated costume designer, Natacha Rambova.

Jules Morgan, looking dapper and polished, stood near the crowded bar, awaiting Roxie’s performance with trepidation and anticipation. His hands were uncharacteristically clammy. He’d never been in this particular kind of situation before, and it held unknown complications, pitfalls, and possible triumphs.

But it wasn’t so different from racing his three-year-old thoroughbred horse, Rich Resolute, who was boarded and trained in Kentucky. Rich had won the Preakness last May by a margin of 4.5 lengths, for a total payout of \$50,000, but the odds had been against the horse, and the win had been a complete surprise.

Would Jules’ gamble on the mysterious Roxie Raines, with her infamous tattoo and diamond nose stud, pay off, or was she just a flash in the pan, the flash having already flashed? Would the crowd turn on her because of the sensational publicity regarding Archie Wells’ death?

Recently, negative articles had appeared about Roxie and her association with three men who had all ended up dead: Frankie Shay, Luigi Degrassi and Archie Wells. Two of the more vicious articles had the headlines “**Roxie Raines a Man Killer?**” and “**Roxie Raines, a Killer Diller Cat with a Deadly Meow.**”

Jules had seen the sting of hurt in Roxie’s eyes when he had visited her at her suite. She had been remote and depressed,

and he'd kept the full-time nurse and a security guard outside her door to ensure Roxie wouldn't bolt back to Indiana, or wherever it was she came from.

Twice, she'd left her suite, and he'd had her followed. When the gumshoe reported that both times Roxie had traveled to the old Frankie Shay speakeasy, The Black Cat, and stood outside the door staring, Jules grew curious and uneasy. Would the riding-high flapper even be able to perform?

The seven-piece band was on the stage, ready and waiting. Behind the piano, Benny Stamp, hatless and without the cherry sucker in his mouth, was waiting for the word from Roxie to start the overture. Why was she stalling?

Jake, Clare, Harriet, and Charlie had a table in the rear of the room near the back wall. It wasn't an ideal spot, and a round support column partly obstructed their vision, but it was better than standing room. Roxie had lobbied for them to have a table stage-side, but Jules had flatly refused, saying that many VIPs came first.

The ceiling fans whirled, swirling the cigarette smoke into ghostly clouds, and despite the cool November wind outside, the humidity in the room made the place feel like a sweltering August night.

"It's after eight o'clock," Clare said. "She's late. I hope she's all right. She just hasn't been herself lately."

"And she hasn't called me back," Harriet said. "I've been worried about her."

Charlie sipped his tomato juice and gin. "I've got the jitters just being here with all these high rollers. And look at Charlie Chaplin over there. He don't look like himself, without his twirling cane, hat, and big shoes. He's all spiffed up and with no mustache."

Jake glanced around, agitated. "Roxie hasn't been right since that car crash. She doesn't want to see me because she said, 'I'll just get you killed like the others.' I told her that was crazy talk, but she wouldn't listen to me."

Harriet looked at him and said, “Jake, she’s been in two violent situations within a few months, and the reporters are hanging around outside, and her agent and Mr. Morgan are constantly calling her. She feels the pressure, and who wouldn’t?”

“Yeah,” Clare said, with a sigh. “The other day at breakfast Roxie said, ‘Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it, and then maybe you’ll wish you were back home, sipping wine and watching reruns of *Downton Abbey*.’ I had no idea what she was talking about.”

Kilburn Link wandered over to their table, and he was noticeably worried. He pulled the half-smoked cigar from his mouth, then spoke to Jake. “Maybe I should go backstage and see what’s going on. What do you think, Jake?”

“No, I don’t think so. Roxie will come out when she’s ready.”

Both men noticed when Jules pushed away from the bar and started for the stage.

“Looks like he’s going to check on her,” Kilburn said. “The kid ain’t been right since she was out with Archie. Maybe something got shook loose.”

At that moment, Benny Stamp struck a full, rich chord on the piano, and the drummer crashed a symbol. The room stilled and went silent, and Jules backtracked, left the stage, and returned to the bar, his hands moving in his trouser pockets.

Benny Stamp shot up, left the piano, and moved center stage into the full flood of a spotlight. His grin was wide and eager; his eyes round with enthusiasm; his trim tuxedo, red carnation, and gleaming black hair drew the focus of the room.

“Ladies and gentlemen... Tonight, on The Ginger Jam stage, you are about to see and hear the girl all the guys are carrying a torch for, and all the girls think is swell and swanky. Now the waiting is over! So, without further ado, it’s time for

your cat treat. I'm talking about THE one, and THE only, cat's meow with nine lives, MISS ROXIE RAINES!"

With an explosion of deafening applause, the curtain parted, and red, white, and gold spotlights flashed on, lighting up the dangling, glittering crystals.

The band blasted into a raucous romp and Roxie sashayed onto The Ginger Jam stage, wearing red heels, a red sparkling sequined dress with a black fringe, and a dramatic red feather headpiece.

As the applause swelled, Roxie struck a hipshot pose, peering out into the room with an expression of mischief, vulnerability, and sexy allure.

"Hello, New York City in 1925!" she yelled. "I love you all!"

As the applause thundered, Roxie launched into her first song, *Swanee*, a song published by George Gershwin in 1919 and made popular by Al Jolson.

Roxie stepped toward the surrounding tables, leaned over, and started the song, pitching her voice out with raw singing power.

*"Swanee, how I love ya, how I love ya, my dear old Swanee!"*

As the audience clapped and beamed, Roxie went strutting across the stage, flinging a hand left, then right, her energy high and strong. And just as the song began kicking up, she launched herself next to the piano. With her head bobbing, her fingers snapping and her shoulders moving, she and Benny bounced music ideas off one another, first a jumping high note, then a cascade of improvisations that took the song to new heights.

During the last verse, Roxie dipped into a Satchmo-like Louis Armstrong voice, unrestrained and free. And even though Louis Armstrong wasn't as famous then as he'd become, he was playing in clubs and recording records in Chicago. The Ginger Jam crowd loved it, some jumping to their feet, some singing along.



Roxie slid into her next song as the applause was fading. With a silky, smooth sound, and with only piano accompaniment, she began singing the Irving Berlin song, *You'd Be Surprised*.

*“Johnny was bashful and shy. Nobody understood why.*

*Mary loved him, all the other girls passed him by.*

*He's not so good in a crowd,*

*But when you get him alone,*

*You'd be surprised.*

*He isn't much at a dance,*

*But then when he takes you home*

*You'd be surprised.”*

Roxie caressed the first verse as if a lover were standing beside her. There was laughter and nodding heads. Alert gazes followed as she drifted from one side of the stage to the other, her face aglow, her eyes dreamy, her smile gleaming and ardent.

The second verse crashed in with brassy horns, jazzy saxophones, a driving bass, fast drums, and Roxie's belting vocal. She shook her hips and did a Mick Jagger strut as the room rocked and swayed. There were electrifying moments when Roxie glanced out into the crowd, believing she was performing at a rock concert in 2019, and not at a speakeasy in Roaring Twenties, New York.

In an unexpected move, Benny shot up, left the piano, and Roxie moved in. She sang and danced while tickling the ivories with quick licks, then hitching a leg and striking a note first with a left heel, and then with a right.

A stunned crowd leapt to their feet, staring, mouths open, while Roxie leapt up on top of the piano bench and squatted, something she'd seen Lady Gaga do. Her nimble, ringed, flashing fingers went riding up and down the keyboard, while Benny stepped to center stage. For the last verse, he belted out a high, ragged tenor, while Roxie jammed at the piano, and the duo fell into a bouncy, jazzy duet that brought down the house.

Women fell into frenzied cheers, the men whistled, and Harriet and Charlie stared bug-eyed, shocked to see a Roxie Raines they'd never seen and couldn't have imagined.

Clare shimmied and jived, and Jake stared at Roxie, newly surprised by her kinetic energy and inventive genius.

Roxie's performance continued on with power, force and provocative moves and lyrics. It was further boosted by glowing, mood-setting lighting, knockout costumes, dazzling headpieces, and lavish furs.

After a quick change, Roxie returned to the stage for her final song. She pranced across the stage in a pink cape with a matching pink skirt, worn over a form-fitted, black velvet bodice. She sang *My Man Hot*, the same boogie-woogie song she'd performed at the Fitzgeralds' party.

*“He takes my money and stays out late.*

*He plays the ponies, and he's put on weight.*

*I said, you know my man, he ain't no good for me.*

*But my man's hot lookin' and his kisses done set me free.”*

Roxie's last soaring high note, with an exquisite vibrato, jolted the roaring crowd to a standing ovation that didn't subside until she held up her hands and said, “Thank you, New York! Thank you for the best night of my life! I love you!”

The applause sounded like the ocean at high tide, waves crashing onto shore. Bouquets of flowers appeared, and roses were tossed on stage. Roaring men waved wads of cash and asked Roxie to marry them. A woman fainted, and Jules motioned for the bouncers. They swarmed Roxie and hurried her off the stage, amidst shouts of “Encore! Encore!”

The celebration and tumult were all around him, but Jake didn't feel like celebrating. He had the sinking feeling that he might never see Roxie again. He watched Charlie Chaplin being escorted from his seat near the stage to the back room, where Roxie's triumphant party was to be held.

Jake had not been invited. Roxie had told him, sadly. “Jules only wants the stars and high rollers. But I’ll see you after. Come to my suite after.”

As the crowd buzzed and surged toward the bar, and as Clare, Harriet and Charlie discussed the performance, still high on the energy, Jake left the table, edged his way through the room and stepped out into the chilly night.

He needed to walk the streets of his favorite city and think about his crazy life and his problems, which seemed to have no resolution. He had to think about his mother and Jimmy and Roxie. He also needed to think about the man he’d seen at The Ginger Jam, a man who’d caught his eye and smiled at him. It was Calvin Sinclair. Jake had not smiled back, being filled with blackness and dread.

As Jake moved off into the night, he was sure he was being followed.

## CHAPTER 20

Weeks passed, and Roxie seldom left her suite except to perform her nightly shows at The Ginger Jam. She had one show Monday through Thursday, but two on Friday and Saturday. Thankfully, she had Sunday night off. As November turned into December, she took occasional strolls along a meandering Central Park path after a fresh snowfall, or on a cold, sun-bright day when kids romped about in the playground and squirrels skittered about, looking for buried acorns.

Visitors came and went, from a gracious Charlie Chaplin, enthusiastic about making a picture with her, to her wily agent and promoter, Kilburn Link.

The portrait painter, Claude Dubois, also came by twice a week to work on Roxie's portrait, the one that would eventually end up on the Speakeasy basement wall in 2019. Clare had urged Roxie to begin the portrait, and Jules put up the money, then insisted that the high-energy, chain-smoking, goatee-bearded artist begin at once.

"When it's finished, Roxie," Jules had said, proudly, "I'm going to hang it in The Ginger Jam for all to see, on the opposite wall from the portrait of my thoroughbred, Rich Resolute."

As she stood next to the piano in her living room, posing for Mr. Dubois, her mind flittered about, seeking answers to her many weird questions. Was her life fact or fiction? Had she been destined from birth to enter that Speakeasy basement, see that portrait, and then time travel? Could she return to the basement and time travel back home and would everything she'd accomplished and experienced be erased?

After months of living in 1925, becoming famous and notorious, there were times when Roxie wanted to believe that she was lost in an elaborate dream, but she couldn't make the thought stick. Her Roaring Twenties reality was as real as anything she'd experience in the twenty-first century, and, in

some ways, it was even more real. There was a raw energy about the 1920s that was simply unique and thrilling.

But it also had its complexities and challenges. Fame was a kind of narcotic, flinging her to highs she could have never imagined, but fame was also a coiled snake, ready to strike. Although most of her reviews were favorable, some were not, and some of the gossip columnists had turned on her, because doing so sold more papers. Although she had given several interviews to magazines and newspapers, because Kilburn Link had set them up, most of the interviewers completely replaced or twisted her answers into brash, one-line quips, sassy comments, and suggestive phrases.

Jules had told her that letters flooded into the club, the bulk of them being positive, but some were nasty, others threatening.

*“Your performance is nothing but a sex love feast!”* stated one letter. *“Shame on you!”*

Another said, *“You can sing, yes! You can dress up like a tramp, yes! And you’re going straight to hell!”*

Still another read, *“Thousands of girls will go wrong in this terrible decade, and many will be ruined by your despicable example.”*

Roxie was grateful there was no social media, but there were a lot of newspapers which published a lot of letters they’d received about her. Luckily, most were positive and supportive.

But she had become the target of some scandalous and false magazine articles. One notable magazine published an article that proclaimed she was to blame for the fact that many women were seeking divorces. The headline asked the question:

## **ARE FLAPPERS LIKE ROXIE RAINES**

### **DESTROYING THE SANCTITY OF MARRIAGE?**

*The divorce rate is steadily climbing at a never-before-seen, shocking rate, and many believe it is being instigated by*

*flappers with loose morals, like the celebrated singer/pianist Roxie Raines, currently performing at The Ginger Jam.*

*Young wives want to emulate her, get a tattoo and nose stud, wear flashy, expensive clothes, drink gin and smoke in public. They long to live the dangerous and desultory life that Roxie Raines seems to crave.*

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For several weeks, Roxie and Jake had not seen each other, and she'd found it increasingly infuriating and depressing. He'd refused to see her, telling her that he was being followed and that she might be harmed. "It's just too dangerous right now, Roxie. Please understand that."

She understood it, but she didn't like it. And then Clare had left to live upstate with her mother, who had fallen ill and nearly died, and Jake was spending all of his free time up there as well.

But on Saturday, December 19, Roxie arrived home from the club after 1 a.m. About a half hour later, to her worried surprise, she heard a knock on the front door, and she crept over to ask who it was. It was Jake! He stood before her, looking weary and contrite. They stared at each other, neither saying a word nor moving. Finally, he held up a paper bag.

"Bagels with butter."

Sitting at the kitchen bar stools, they drank orange juice and munched bagels, but said little. The bagels were warm, soft, and tasty, the butter sweet. And then Jake moved in close to her and they kissed, a wonderful, buttery kiss, their first kiss in weeks. He swept her up into his arms and took her to bed.

The next morning, Jake was asleep in Roxie's bed, his soft breath a loud whisper in the quiet room. Dawn light leaked in from under the heavy draperies, and the clock ticking into morning said it was after seven.

Roxie didn't hear church bells or murmuring traffic sounds. She didn't hear sirens or helicopters beating overhead; she certainly didn't hear airplanes on their final approach into LaGuardia Airport. There was no LaGuardia in 1925 and she didn't know when it was to be built, probably in the 1930s. It was a quiet Sunday morning, and she cherished it.

Roxie lay on her back, looking up at the ceiling, in a bed that still seemed strange to her. Why did it seem borrowed, as did the suite? Why did her life seem tenuous, like a feather drifting in the wind, except when Jake was around?

Roxie sat up, still naked, her back against the blue cushioned headboard, the sheet at her waist. She had the thrilling sense of safety while lying next to Jake in the peace of morning, away from the noise of her harried life, away from her harassing thoughts of time travel and her worried thoughts about the future.

Jake stirred, made a low, masculine sound, like a stirring animal from a forest sleep, and then he slowly opened his eyes. Fluttering, they found her face, looking down at him.

"Good morning," he said in a low, scratchy voice. "And don't you look bewitching, all naked, as lovely as any goddess in any museum."

In his eyes, there was love and admiration. *How awesome*, Roxie thought. She was Jake's first thought in the morning as he startled out of sleep. How nice. To be loved like that in any time or any place.

"Hey there, big guy," she said, with a warm smile.

The muted light brought intimacy, and, in that light, with his black shadow of beard, bare broad shoulders, hairy chest and morning, masculine scent, she felt her body temperature rise and her heart thrum.

"What time is it?" Jake asked.

"After seven."

"You didn't sleep much. You must be tired," Jake said.

She ignored his comment and questioned him with her sleepy eyes. “Was last night... today... the start of what will be the style of our new relationship?”

“Style?”

“Yeah, you know. How we’re going to define it. Hit and miss? Now and then? Maybe, and maybe not? Here today, and what about tomorrow?”

Jake closed his eyes. “Isn’t that the way it’s always been? I’m not awake yet, and you’re starting off the inning with a lot of fast balls.”

“I wanted you to stay away,” Roxie said frankly.

“So, I did, for many reasons, and we know all the reasons.”

Roxie continued. “It’s too much, you know. I mean, what I do, and what you do, and your guilt about Jimmy.”

Jake’s eyes opened, and he rubbed them. “Yeah, and it’s too much with you and the high rollers, and your face on every damned magazine I pass by in the street, and on billboards, and all the money, and all the millionaires who throw themselves at your feet, begging you to marry them.”

Roxie crossed her arms across her bare breasts and lowered her eyes on him. “I don’t like it, Jake. I love the singing and the performing, but the rest of it is, frankly, a pain in the ass. Fame ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. Everybody wants something from you, and they grab you, and pull at you, and bullshit you.”

Jake lifted on an elbow and touched her lips with a finger. “How you do sparkle up there on that stage.”

Roxie took his hand and kissed it. “I’ll take this, Jake. Whatever this is, and however we want to define it or not define it, I’ll take it. And I’m glad you showed up at my door.”

“I took a chance. I missed you, and Charlie was getting sick of me moping around.”

“How’s your mother? Clare called a couple of days ago and said she was still in bed.”



“Yeah... the doctor thinks it’s a flu or something and it’s not good for her heart. She’s coughing a lot, and she and Clare aren’t getting along so well.”

“I was going to call you,” Roxie said. “I was going to ask about her... but then Clare called.”

Roxie started to speak, hesitated, then tried again. “We should be together, Jake, and we both know it. We just have to figure it out. It started out so simple, and then it got all messed up and complicated.”

Jake looked away. “I read that you went out with Charlie Chaplin.”

Roxie sighed. “Come on, Jake. It was just business. He’s married, and he’s writing a part for me in one of his movies.”

“The photo of you both looked cozy,” Jake said. “You were very close together in that restaurant.”

Roxie turned from him. “I didn’t think you were so jealous.”

“And you went out with that blockhead, Reginald Matlin.”

Irritated, Roxie yanked the sheet up to her neck. “We weren’t alone. We were with a group, okay? Jules wanted the publicity, and he does pay me.”

“The papers said you were going to marry Matlin.”

“Bullshit, Jake! The papers make it up. You know that. And I know Clare told you that, and you know I wouldn’t marry him in a hundred years. I don’t even like him.”

“But he has asked you to marry him, hasn’t he? They’ve quoted him twice, saying, ‘She’ll come around, eventually.’”

“Oh, and you’re reading that kind of trash now?”

“No, but Charlie reads them all and then he tells me, even when I don’t want him to.”

“Yes, Reginald has asked me to marry him, and I’ve said no, three times... Four times, and I will never come around, and even if I did, his rich father and Victorian, by-the-book mother

would never let it happen. He's a spoiled boy who is used to having everything he wants, anytime he wants it."

"You mean, like Archie Wells?" Jake asked, acidly.

Roxie glared at him, her eyes burning. "That's a shitty thing to say, Jake."

Jake lowered his elbow, grabbed and plumped his pillow, then lay back, resting his head, staring up at the ceiling. "I'm sorry. You're right. That was a rotten thing to say, and I shouldn't have said it. My only defense is that I was never the jealous type until you came along."

"Don't blame me, Jake."

He gave her a swift glance. "Of course, I blame you. I blame you for being the perfect woman for me. I blame you for being beautiful and a little crazy. You're everything in a woman I didn't know I wanted and could never have imagined. You're the woman the poets are always writing about, but those jokers never get it right, because they never met you."

Roxie's heart melted and her eyes softened. "Damn, Jake. How do you do that? Turn things around like that so I get all hot inside, and I want to climb all over you."

"So, what are we going to do, Roxie?"

"I guess we keep going until we can see things clearer."

He nodded and Roxie slid down, resting her head in the crook of his arm. "Clare is worried about your mother, but she said Jimmy's doing well."

Jake shut his eyes as if to shut out the world. "Yeah... But things have to change. Mom's not so strong anymore, and Jimmy can be a handful. Clare's going to stay up there for a while. I guess she told you."

"Yeah... and she told me not to marry you."

He lifted up, eyes open, searching her face. "What?"

"I asked her. I said, 'Should I marry Jake?' And she said no."

He stared. “Why would she say that?”

Roxie’s grin was playful, and she winked at him. “Gotcha, didn’t I?”

Jake’s mouth twisted up. “Well, you little...”

Roxie threw up a hand. “Don’t say it!”

Jake was close, naked, sexy, and available, so Roxie took advantage. She reached for him and played with him. They rolled across the bed, and she mounted him, their lips close, breathing hot.

“Hey there, sexy,” she said, with a girlish grin. “You’ve got something I want, and from the feel of you, you want me, too. Lie back now and enjoy the ride, Mr. Personal Detective. I’ll take it from here.”

## CHAPTER 21

Later that same morning, about eleven o'clock, Roxie and Jake sat in an automat on West 47<sup>th</sup> Street. The surroundings resembled those of a Parisian bistro, with marble countertops and floors; red-padded, wrought-iron chairs; and plenty of polished chrome. There were rows and rows of windowed compartments that resembled glass-fronted post office boxes, but instead of mail, they each housed one of dozens of menu items which could be purchased by inserting the right coin in a coin box near the little glass door. Coffee cups were stacked on a table, and coffee could be poured from silver dolphin spouts sourced in Italy.

A nimble-fingered cashier, wearing rubber tips, dispensed change through the recessed dishes of her glass-enclosed booth, her skilled technique having been learned from many hours on the job.

While Roxie scooped up scrambled eggs, Jake hungrily munched a mouthful of buttermilk pancakes, reaching for his coffee cup to help swallow them down.

"I wish we had automats where I come from. I love this place, and the food tastes so good," Roxie said. "Why does it taste so good?"

Jake leaned in. "This is not generally known, but behind the scenes, invisible kitchen elves quickly refill empty compartments like magic. And during the Christmas season, which is now, they sprinkle magical gold dust on everything."

Roxie screwed up her lips in mock irritation. "Yeah, right. Very funny."

"Do you know what my mother says about these places? She says, eating in a decent restaurant is becoming a thing of the past. The young folk of today are in too much of a hurry to dance, or ride, or drink bad gin, instead of sitting down like decent folk to have a decent meal."

Roxie reached for her coffee cup and looked at him. “You’ll be at your mother’s for Christmas, right?”

“Yes, and I want you to come with me.”

“No.”

“No? Why?”

“Your mother doesn’t approve of me, Jake. To be brutally honest, she doesn’t like me.”

“That’s not true.”

“It *is* true, and you know it. Clare is honest with me. Your mother has read the papers and those magazine articles about me. She thinks I’m a vamp, which is what some of the articles call me.”

“She doesn’t know you, Roxie. You just need to spend some time with her.”

“Not for Christmas. I don’t want to spoil everything.”

“Then what will you do?”

“I have one show on Christmas Eve, and two the day after Christmas. I’ll have a late Christmas Eve dinner with Jules and his girlfriend, and I’ll spend Christmas day with Harriet. She’s invited some friends over. Benny Stamp and the boys invited me to hang out with them on Christmas night, but I probably won’t go. I’ll just go home and sleep. Still, it was nice of them to invite me.”

Jake tossed his napkin down and sat back. “I don’t like it. We should be together on Christmas, of all days.”

“I’m not going to spoil your mother’s Christmas, especially since she’s trying to recover from the flu. No way. But you have to be there. It’ll be okay. I’ll be fine.”

Jake sipped his coffee. “I’ll call you, and I’ll miss you.”

She smiled. “Ditto, and I’ll take that call.”

“By the way, have you met Jules’ girlfriend?” Jake asked.

“Twice. He keeps her quiet, in the background.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know and haven’t asked. None of my business.”

“Do you like her?”

“Sure. She’s nice enough.”

“What’s her name?”

“Pixie Lark.”

Jake’s eyes widened. “Pixie Lark? Are you serious?”

“I know. She’s not the type you’d match with Jules, but Pixie it is. She’s a petite, bobbed-haired redhead, younger than me, with a soft voice, smart green eyes and a slim figure. They get along. I see it in their eyes. Jules likes her a lot, and she touches him whenever she can.”

“Well, good for them. Who would have thought of Jules with a Pixie?”

With her eggs eaten, Roxie shifted in her chair and faced Jake squarely. “I’ve been waiting to ask you.”

He glanced up uneasily. “I think I know.”

“You haven’t said anything about Hal Lester, and I’ve read that his trial starts next month. Have you dropped the case?”

Someone dropped a plate, and it shattered on the floor. The room grew noisy and active, as a white-uniformed man hurried over with a broom and dustpan, promptly sweeping up the broken pieces.

Roxie returned her attention to Jake. “So?”

“It’s called a strategic retreat. Things were getting too hot for me, and a little too dangerous, so I pulled back and let things cool down.”

“But you haven’t dropped the case?”

He shook his head. “No.” And then he waited for her reaction.

She blinked, her expression cool. “I guess I was hoping you had.”

Jake pushed his empty plate aside. His gaze captured, then held hers. “I know who did it, Roxie. I know who killed Edith

Lester. I don't have all the facts yet, but I'll soon have them. I've got some feelers out. Some connections."

A flash of fear crossed Roxie's face, but she stayed silent.

Jake continued. "It's another reason I pulled back. These things take time. Anyway, I needed time to sniff around some more, and to let the mug think I was scared off."

"I don't understand."

Jake inclined forward. "I know the guy, and he knows me. I'm not stupid—or at least not *that* stupid. They were following me, waiting for the right time to rub me out, but it wouldn't look so good if I ended up dead, with me representing Lester. You're hot in the papers right now, and I am connected to you, so they pulled back. And they believe they've gotten to all the right people, and shut them up with threats and payoffs.

"Does the killer know... that you know?"

"Maybe. Probably. He's connected, has an important job in the city, and he feels safe. Even smug. He was at your opening night in November. I saw him there, and he saw me."

Roxie swallowed. "Who is it?"

Jake slowly shook his head. "No, Roxie. Charlie and me are about to spring our trap and I don't want you anywhere around when we do."

Roxie breathed in, absorbing a wave of dread. She composed herself, folded her hands on the marble tabletop, and focused her eyes on him. "I can't lose you, Jake. I just can't. I know I shouldn't ask, but I don't care. I'm going to ask anyway... One more time and for the last time, don't do it. Just drop this thing. I've read in the papers that Hal Lester has a good attorney, and he says he'll be able to prove that Lester didn't kill his wife. So, let him prove it. You don't have to keep going on this."

Roxie saw a powerful force in Jake's eyes. "They've already paid him off, Roxie, and I know the judge and they've paid him off as well. I've been trying to do some back-of-the-room deals to get the judge thrown off the case. He's as

crooked as they come. And that shyster lawyer will talk a good game, but he'll lose the case, and Hal Lester will go to the electric chair."

Roxie let Jake's words settle and then she turned her gaze to the windows, where people strolled by. "Okay, that's it, then. I'll never ask you again. You do what you have to do. I'm certainly not going to be like Katy and ask you to go into the bond business."

He opened his hands. "And? So?"

She faced him. "And what?"

"Do we keep seeing each other?"

"After last night and this morning, you have to ask?" Roxie said firmly. "I love you, Jake. Of course, I have to see you and be with you. No matter what happens. Haven't we realized that by now?"

He reached for her hand and held it, lowering his voice. "I'll be all right. Don't worry. I'm going to get him, and I'll be okay."

Roxie turned her face from him.

"Hey, come on, Roxie, don't do that. Don't pout. Clare tells me your portrait is almost finished."

His words were unexpectedly jarring. It struck her that the finished portrait might hold some mysterious significance. Roxie had never been especially superstitious, but perhaps the painting's conclusion was a kind of musical downbeat, suggesting it was the beginning of the end for her 1925 adventure. It was an irrational thought, but wasn't her entire time travel journey irrational?

"You don't look very happy about it," Jake said, noticing her troubled expression.

Roxie gazed toward the windows to see snow drifting across the glass. "Look, it's snowing. Maybe we'll have a white Christmas."

Jake followed her gaze, and to their astonishment, the front door opened, and Nash Corbin entered the automat. His



expression was as dark and brooding as it was the first time Roxie had seen him standing in the rain on that Greenwich Village Street corner in 2019.

## CHAPTER 22

Nash Corbin stood inside the automat, his shoulders slumped into a loose-fitting overcoat. His face was shadowed, and snow dusted the crown of his gray fedora. He removed his hat, his face lost in heaviness. As he started for the wall of coin-operated cubbies that contained hot food, he spotted Roxie and Jake, and he froze on the spot.

His eyes fastened on Roxie, and his look strangled her thoughts. Jake narrowed his eyes on the man, waiting, speculating about what Nash would do.

To Roxie, it was as if the past, present, and future had collided, and she couldn't make any sense of it.

Nash's face was rigid as he started toward them, stopping a few feet away. He jammed one hand deep into his shabby, uncreased trouser pocket, the other hand gripped tight on the brim of his hat.

There was the hustle and hum of people around them, the ring of the cash register and the rattle of dishes, but no one seemed interested in Nash, Roxie or Jake.

When Nash spoke, his voice was low and scraping, as if he hadn't used it in a while. "Why, lookee who we have here. Another Clara Bow star, huh? Except you sing like a birdie and beat the piano keys with your feet, or so I read in the papers."

Roxie didn't speak.

With a little grin, Jake said, "Merry Christmas, Nash."

Nash's eyes jumped to Jake, and they held hatred. "I bet you're surprised I busted out, aren't you, pal?"

"Good for you. How's your brother?"

Nash snorted. "He can go to hell, and so can you!"

"He was just trying to help," Jake said.

Nash grunted out a curse, putting his ice-cold stare on Roxie. “I’m gonna tell them about you, future girl. I’ll tell them everything and then some. You can bet I will. I’ve already talked to one reporter, and there are more out there just waiting to hear my story about you, and I’ll tell them everything, sister. You can count on that, and you can take it to the bank, where you stash all that dough you’ve been making.”

Jake looked at Roxie, then back at Nash. “And what will you tell them, Nash?”

Roxie cut in, ready to call his bluff. “Tell them whatever you want. Tell them the whole truth, and guess what? You’ll end up back in that sanatorium and, this time, they won’t let you out.”

Nash’s face lost some of its snide confidence. “Oh, yeah? Well, we’ll just see about that, won’t we? You see, I was doing some thinking while I was in that looney bin, and I says to myself, maybe I’ll even show some reporters what’s in that basement. Don’t you think that seeing is believing, Flapper Girl? Won’t that turn a few heads in this town?”

He stood up a little straighter, with a slanted smirk. “Maybe it’s time old Nash Corbin got his face plastered all over the newspapers, Flapper. Yeah, maybe I’ll be in the dough for a change, and the hell with you and everybody else.”

When Nash turned and shambled away, Roxie felt Jake’s eyes on her, but she didn’t look at him. She was frantically processing Nash’s threat, and in her wild, burning mind, she knew he meant every word he’d said.

“What the hell was that all about?” Jake asked. “Your shoulders are tense, like you’re holding your breath.”

Roxie breathed out, staring across the room, shaken by the thought that the world would discover a time doorway in The Black Cat basement. She almost laughed at the absurdity of it, but she didn’t laugh. Nash’s threat was serious. If some ambitious reporter discovered the doorway, how would the world respond? Roxie couldn’t imagine it. It would be as if a UFO from Mars landed in Times Square, and little green men emerged.

Harriet came to mind. She'd know what to do! Yes! Roxie had to see Harriet. It couldn't wait!

"Roxie?" Jake asked. "What did Nash mean when he called you future girl?"

Roxie groped, searching for words, and then she lied. "It means he thinks my singing and fashion style are going to be the wave of the future."

"Okay, so what's in the basement he was talking about, and where is this basement?"

Roxie shrugged. "How should I know? He's crazy, and he doesn't know what he's saying."

Jake looked at her carefully. "Okay, so we're back to this, are we? I ask you a simple question, but you won't answer it. I thought maybe after last night we had moved beyond all this shadowy stuff."

Roxie didn't reply. She pushed up. "Let's get out of here. I don't want to be anywhere near that crazy man."

Outside, as snow drifted in a soft wind, Roxie and Jake strolled without speaking, both sensing that something unnamable was about to shift. Roxie stopped, and she began to shake. Seeing Nash Corbin had unnerved her more than she'd thought. He'd brought it all back: the nightmare of time travel and Frankie Shay, her shooting-star fame that was both exciting and unnerving, her relationship with Jake and the fear that it was about to come crashing down on top of her.

Roxie shook all over as if she had a fever and chills.

Jake stopped, turning to her. "Roxie, what is it? What's the matter?"

She cried out. "I just don't know if I can hold it all together anymore."

"Hold what together? I don't understand you. I don't know what you're trying to say. You're always speaking in riddles and I..."

Her voice rose into his and she cut him off. "I have to go, Jake. I have to go back."

“Back? Back where?”

“I have to be alone. I have to think, and I need to be alone.”

Without another word, Roxie ducked her head and set off into the snowfall, as Jake watched helplessly, confused, and troubled.

He pocketed his hands and hunched his shoulders against the wind. “Who are you, Roxie?”

## CHAPTER 23

“No one will believe him, Roxie,” Harriet said.

“But what if they do?” Roxie asked, as she paced Harriet’s living room.

Seated on her emerald green sofa, Harriet folded her arms. “He’s just spent months in a sanitorium, and his own brother believes he’s unbalanced. No reasonable, respectable, intelligent reporter is going to waste his time listening to that poor, suffering man.”

Roxie moved toward the fireplace, staring into the crackling flames. “I just got so freaked out when I saw him. It shook loose so many thoughts and emotions.”

“Roxie, I think it’s time to be completely honest with Jake and tell him the truth. He loves you. How much longer can you go on like this?”

Roxie faced Harriet. “I did tell him, Harriet, and he thought I was nuts! He didn’t believe any of it. Wouldn’t *you* think I was out of my mind if you hadn’t gone through that time doorway in 1883 and landed here in the 1920s? Nobody’s going to believe it unless Nash Corbin gets somebody down there and shows them.”

Harriet lowered her arms and her gaze. “You just left Jake?”

“Yes... I left him just standing there, and it seems one of us is always walking away and then we don’t see each other for who knows when. It’s a mess. We’re a mess. Up and down. Down and up. Upside down. I hate it.”

Harriet leaned back and looked up at the ceiling, deep in thought. “And you know for certain The Black Cat is still padlocked, and no one has bought it?”

“No, not yet. Some of Frankie Shay’s money and property are still tied up in court.”

“Well, then, Mr. Corbin won’t be able to get to the basement, even if he could convince some reporter.”

“I’d bet that if Nash wants to get into that basement, he’ll find a way. He’ll just break a window or a door lock and enter. Nothing will stop him.”

The room fell into silence.

Roxie backed away from the mantel and sat in one of two parlor chairs in front of the hearth. They were upholstered with a pale-gold fabric, tufted in a scallop shell shape, and they matched the Persian carpet beautifully. The entire room was decorated with taste and style, and every mantel figurine, doily, lamp, and pillow was neatly placed and arranged.

“Maybe I should set the place on fire and burn it down,” Roxie said, with a dark grin.

Harriet looked at her doubtfully. “That’s hardly a solution. And the basement would still be there.”

“Well, we have to do something, Harriet. We can’t just hang around and wait for Nash to act.”

“Maybe we can talk to him.”

Roxie narrowed her eyes, staring cynically. “What? Talk to him? To that guy? No way. He’s not going to listen.”

Harriet lifted her hands and dropped them into her lap. “Well then, I’m out of ideas.”

Roxie sat forward, a thought taking shape. “Maybe Charlie can help us.”

“Are you serious? Are you going to tell him about the time doorway?”

“No, no, of course not,” Roxie said, suddenly on her feet again and pacing. “I’ll tell him Nash is threatening me, or something like that. I’ll calmly ask for his advice and see what he says.”

Roxie stopped, looking at Harriet, gauging her reaction. “Well, what do you think?”

Harriet nibbled on her lower lip. “I don’t know, Roxie. We don’t want Nash to get hurt.”

“No, of course not. I’ll tell Charlie that.”

“I don’t see how he can help. What’s he going to do?”

“I don’t know, but we don’t have anything else, do we? I mean nothing. Zip. Charlie’s got more experience about these things than we do. He’ll have some ideas. What have we got to lose?”

“What if he tells Jake?” Harriet asked.

“I’ll tell him not to. I’ll tell him that Jake has too much to worry about already.”

Harriet stared back at her, not ready to agree. “And what if something goes wrong and Nash gets hurt?”

“I’m just going to ask Charlie, that’s all, and I’ll stress that I don’t want Nash to get hurt. I’ll just talk to him. We have to do something.”

Harriet rose, releasing a heavy sigh. “Sometimes I wish I’d never seen that doorway. But if I hadn’t swept through it, I’d be dead.”

Roxie jerked a nod. “So, it’s a go?”

Harriet’s mouth tightened, and she tapped her right toe a few times, and then her left. “All right. All right, but I hope I don’t live to regret this.”

Roxie straightened, the decision made. “I’ll call Charlie right now. Can I use your phone?”

Harriet hesitated, then looked toward the stairs. “Use the one upstairs in my bedroom. I have friends coming soon, and I do not want them to hear you.”

“I love you, Harriet,” Roxie said, turning toward the stairs.

Harriet’s face relaxed into a smile. “And you, my dear Roxie, are a constant surprise. I think you’re enjoying this little intrigue, aren’t you?”

Roxie shook her head. “No, I’m not. Nash Corbin scares the hell out of me.”

“All right. Go make the call.”



Roxie's heels attacked the stairs as she went thundering up to the second floor.

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It was an old bookstore on the Lower East Side. Roxie opened the door and a little bell above "jangled" as she entered. The place smelled musty, the lights were dim, and her feet creaked under the sloped wooden floors.

Against all the walls were tall, wooden bookshelves stuffed with old dusty books and magazines. Ladders attached to guard rails led to upper racks and then to a loft that featured science and art books.

Seated behind the wooden counter, a sullen, pudgy-faced man, wearing wire spectacles, didn't raise his eyes from his book when Roxie drew up to him and uttered the password, "Church on Sunday."

She was led to a six-foot bookshelf that swung away from the wall, revealing a secret door and an inside hallway that was all curves and shadows. From the ceiling, a naked pull-string lightbulb made staticky noise, flicking off and on.

Down a squeaky flight of stairs was Maxie's speakeasy, crowded, cloudy with smoke, and smelling of stale beer, cigarette smoke and body odor. The amber lights cast an eerie glow on ladies who sipped gin from cups, and on flappers sitting at tables, smoking, giggling, and snuggled in dark corners with their spiffy-dressed men.

Standing men, holding glasses of beer in one hand, narrowed their eyes as they flung darts at a dartboard that had MAXIE'S printed across its bullseye in bold black letters.

Roxie strolled along the black-and-white-tiled floor, noticing the exposed brick walls and the use of wooden beer barrels as tables. Sitting at the far corner of the bar was Charlie Stokes, hunched over a half-drunk glass of beer. As Roxie approached, the heavy, round faced, amble-bosomed woman standing behind the bar, gave her the stink eye.

All the wooden barstools were taken, but one—the one next to Charlie—and he patted it.

“Have a seat, Roxie. I kept the stool free for you.”

Roxie sat, greeting him with a little smile. “Thanks. How are you, Charlie?”

“I ain’t doin’ so bad for an old, beat-up boxer.”

Charlie looked at the barmaid, who sized Roxie up, her expression guarded.

“Maxie, this is Roxie,” Charlie said. “Roxie, this is Maxie. She owns the joint.”

Maxie said, “Yeah, I know who you are, all right. Who ain’t seen you in the papers?”

“Roxie’s okay, Maxie. She’s not all puffed up, or nothin’ like that.”

With her bar rag, Maxie gave the space in front of Roxie a swipe. “No doubt, the jokers will be comin’ over, wantin’ your autograph.”

“I hope not,” Roxie said.

“I’ll keep them away, Roxie,” Charlie said, squaring his shoulders. “Don’t you worry about that.”

Maxie’s face tightened up. “And no fighting, Charlie. Not in my place.”

Charlie lifted his hands. “Who said anything about fighting, Maxie?”

Maxie showed little warmth as she fixed her frosty gaze on Roxie. “What’s it gonna be, sister?”

“I don’t know. Just a beer, I guess.”

Maxie moved away toward a mounted oak barrel with a brass spigot and grabbed a glass, muttering an insult under her breath.

Charlie turned toward Roxie. “Don’t take Maxie the wrong way. She’s a right dame. She ain’t had an easy life, and like an

old dog who's been kicked around, she might snap at you before she takes to you."

Roxie glanced at Maxie. "I don't think that will be any time soon."

"Don't worry about it. You're with me, so it's okay."

Maxie set the glass of foaming beer down in front of Roxie, staring at her with chilly, dark eyes. "So, what are you coming to see Charlie about? He left for the night, then came back. Said he got a call from a friend. You must be the friend. Then he comes back for another beer."

Charlie smiled pleasantly at Maxie. "I don't know what Roxie wants, Maxie, but don't you worry about it. I've talked to you about Roxie, and you know about her. She's a friend of mine. She's Jake's girl."

Maxie's eyes remained cool. "It's Sunday night, Charlie. What's a hotsy-totsy dame coming out to talk to a mug like you on a Sunday night? And why is her nose blinking at me in the light?"

Charlie kept his smile, but it began to strain at the corners. "It's a diamond stud, Maxie. That's all."

"Oh yeah? Diamond, huh? Well, I ain't convinced about it."

Charlie held up a placating hand. "Maxie, relax. Okay? Don't get your dander up. There's no need for that."

"There might be a need, and then again, maybe there ain't no need. That's what I think about it. I've been watchin' people for a long time, Charlie, and you don't really know the beating heart of another soul. I've seen people plot and plan, scheme and lie. I've seen into the very depths of their black souls and out the other side, and I tell you, there ain't nobody breathing who's strictly on the level. Do you get my meaning, Charlie?"

Weary from the talk, Charlie rubbed his forehead with two fingers. "Yeah, Maxie, I..."

She cut him off. "... Now you and Jake already have your hands full, you two sneaking around the city streets like cats

on the prowl, where you shouldn't be sneaking. There are too many backstabbers out there who've got their fists full of dirty money and dirty business."

Maxie straightened up, her jaw set, her summation complete. "Now, that's what I've got to say about it."

Charlie moved his lips in exasperation. "Maxie, don't keep goin' on about it, okay? Jake and me, well, we know what we're about all right. It ain't like we've never dealt with sewer-rats before. Now, let me and Roxie have our little talk, won't you?"

Maxie gave the bar a final belligerent swipe with the rag. "Well, I'll be closing down in a half hour. So, let whatever needs to be said, let it be said by then. You promised me some things tonight, Charlie, and I'll be taking you up on those promises."

Charlie turned from Roxie, lowering his voice. "Don't you worry about nothing, Maxie. We'll get our business done faster than you can say Jack Ketch."

Maxie sniffed, wiggled her nose, tightened her mouth and moved off, a bar rag in hand, her red print dress clean, her white apron spotted with beer and booze.

Roxie raised her eyebrows. "Wow... She's very protective of you, Charlie. Have you been seeing her for a while?"

"Over a year. She's got a good heart in her chest, Roxie, and she knows how to treat a bum like me. Cooks me food, brings me beer and... well, she keeps me warm in the winter. She has a set of swell rooms across the street from me. It's a peach of a thing for an old puncher like me."

Roxie glanced around. "Does this place ever get raided? I mean, it's not exactly The Ginger Jam or The Black Cat, but it's cozy. I like it."

"Maxie knows who to pay, all right. But if there's a hit, or a raid, it's easy to make a quick getaway through one of two exits. The best one is just behind the dart board over there."

Roxie took a gulp of her beer, unbuttoned her woolen coat, and removed her cloche hat, setting it on the bar, finger-

combing her hair.

“Okay, Roxie, shoot,” Charlie said. “You’ve got me as curious as a mouse in a cat house.”

On the way down in the taxi, Roxie had planned her approach. Of course, she couldn’t tell Charlie the truth about Nash and time travel, but she could pull “the crazy” card, sure Charlie would help.

Charlie scooted his stool closer as Roxie began explaining that Nash had threatened her and that she was frightened he might hurt her. Charlie’s eyes expanded in angry concern as she described what had happened earlier that day at the automat with Jake.

Charlie reacted as she’d hoped. “They never should have let that bum back on the streets. He’s a looney.”

In a near whisper, and with animated urgency, Roxie asked if he could help. “I don’t want him to get hurt or anything, but I thought maybe you might have some ideas about, I don’t know, getting him out of town or something. I can pay whatever.”

Charlie’s slouching shoulders straightened, and his forehead lifted in concern. “What do you mean by ‘out of town,’ Roxie?”

Roxie shrugged. “I don’t know. The guy scares me. If he has to leave town, like I said, I can give him money so he can start his life again somewhere else, and I don’t have to worry about him. Can you help me?”

Charlie ran a hand across his mouth as he considered her words, his experienced street-smart mind already going to work. “Does Jake know about this?”

“No, and I don’t want him to.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s got too many things on his plate as it is. No, I won’t tell him.”

Charlie put his attention on his half-drunk beer. He picked up his glass, looked at it, then drank it down.

“Can you help me, Charlie?”

Charlie turned and answered her, his right fingers wiggling as if itching to get started. “I can make the mug go away, and he won’t get hurt—at least, the chances are he won’t. There are always some risks with this kind of thing.”

Roxie’s eyes lit up. “But you think you can help me?”

“Yeah... of course, I can help you.”

“What will you do?”

Charlie shook his head. “I ain’t gonna say and I don’t want you to ask me, okay? It’s best that way.”

Roxie’s eyes lowered. “Okay.”

“Now, about the money. I will need some for the overall operation.”

Roxie’s hopeful eyes returned to his. “I’ll pay you anything you want, Charlie. Just name it.”

He made an ugly face. “Stop it. I don’t take no money for this. It’s for the jokers I’ll need to hire, and it won’t hurt if Nash has some dough in his pockets when it’s all over. That way, maybe he don’t feel so sore about it, if you know what I mean?”

Roxie sighed and smiled her gratitude. “Thanks, Charlie. I knew I could count on you.”

“Of course, you can count on me. If you ever need anything, anything at all, you just let old Charlie know and he’ll fix it for you.”

Roxie seized his hand and squeezed it. “Thanks, Charlie.”

Charlie brought a thumbnail to his lips, thinking. “So, I’ll sniff around and be in touch.”

From the other end of the bar, Maxie noticed the joined hands. She half-hooded her eyes in jealousy and breezed over like a chorus line dancer, her hard eyes narrowed. “So, what’s going on over here?”

“Nothing, Maxie,” Charlie said, waving her down with a hand. “Just calm yourself down, woman. We’ve just finished our business.”

“*I’ll* say you’re finished. I’m closing, all right, and I want that floosy flapper out of my place!”

## CHAPTER 24

Wearing overcoats with fedoras tugged low over their foreheads, Jake and Charlie sat parked in Jake's sedan, outside the East Side brownstone where Stella Lippincott lived. For days, they'd taken turns shadowing her. Jake was certain she was involved in something directly related to Edith Lester's murder. Since his meeting with her at his office, he'd called Stella three times, but she'd never answered.

As morning lengthened toward afternoon, Jake sat behind the steering wheel, with Charlie beside him, watching snow flurries drift and melt on the hood of the car.

"Jake, we're wasting our time," Charlie said, slouching. "What are we doing here?"

Jake kept his eyes focused on the brownstone stairs that led up to the oak door. "She's up to something, Charlie. I know it. I feel it."

"You and nobody else. She's just another flapper, too young to know what the hell she's doing, and out lookin' for happy times."

"I think she knows exactly what she's doing."

So, they sat there, waiting, and Jake let his thoughts wander. It was Monday, December 28, and he'd spent Christmas with his mother, Clare and Jimmy. It had been cheerful enough. His mother had not completely recovered from a bout of the flu, but she was better. And Clare had been in a festive mood, delighted that her book, *Broadway Virgin*, had finally found a publisher.

Of course, their mother didn't approve of such "low literature," but when Clare said, "It keeps the wolf from many doors, including your own," Mrs. Kane snapped her mouth shut. She was, in the end, a practical woman.

Jimmy was growing and turning handsome. He was smart and had the cunning of a fox, although his grandmother was always a step or two ahead of him, at least for now.



When Jake thought of Roxie, his emotions, his memories and his vision were all blurred and out of focus. They had talked only once since their last meeting, and the conversation had left him feeling puzzled, as usual.

Roxie had spoken emphatically. “No, Jake, I can’t see you now. I’m... well, I’m involved in some things.”

“What things other than the things you’re always involved with?” Jake shot back crisply.

“Can we meet for New Year’s Eve? After my show? I have New Year’s Day off. We can spend the whole day in bed... or doing whatever.”

He’d almost said, “Yes.” But he hadn’t. Instead, he’d said, “I don’t know.”

After one of those long, chilly pauses, Roxie had said, “I’ll tell you everything, Jake. I know you’re mad at me, and maybe you should be, but maybe I should be mad at you, too, because you don’t believe what I already told you.”

“All right, already, with all this ring around the Roxie. Just tell me the truth, and I’ll believe you,” Jake said.

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll show you.”

“Show me what?”

“I’ll show you what happened to me at The Black Cat.”

“I know what happened to you.”

“No, you don’t. At least, not all of it.”

“God help me.”

“On New Year’s Day, the start of 1926, I’ll show you everything, and then you’ll have to believe me.”

“Okay, fine... whatever you say. So, I read in the papers once again that you have a thing going with Charlie Chaplin.”

“It’s bullshit, Jake! It’s *not true*. Charlie... Chaplin, that is, is really pissed off, and he called that paper and he’s threatening to sue them. His wife is really upset and now she’s

demanding that he *not* put me in his movie and forbidding him to see me! I'm sure you read that, too."

"Charlie did, and then I did."

"So, drop it, Jake. I'm more than a little pissed off about it myself. Anyway, please come to my show on New Year's Eve and let's be together. I'll prove to you that everything I told you was the truth, including the future thing."

"Don't start with that, Roxie, because you sound like Nash Corbin, and I don't even want to think of the man."

"Forget about Nash Corbin. I've heard he had to leave town."

"Leave town for where?" Jake asked.

"I don't know. It's just something I heard."

"From who?"

"Too many questions, Jake."

"Too many secrets, Roxie. And here we go again!"

"Come to my show on New Year's Eve?"

"Dammit! Yes, I'll be there. How the hell can I stay away from you? How?"

Her voice caressed the words. "I don't want you to stay away, Jake."

"Okay, Roxie Raines. All day in bed on New Year's Day sounds good to me."

"I've stocked up on champagne."

"I'll run out for bagels."

"With plenty of butter?"

"Always."

"Love you, Jake. You're so pretty."

"Don't call me pretty, dollface Roxie."

"Don't call me dollface."

"See you New Year's Eve."

“I’m purring, Jake.”

“I hear it.”

“Bye, Jake Kane.”

When Stella Lippincott emerged from the brownstone, she was wrapped in her racoon coat, wearing a black cloche hat with a red band. She looked skyward to check the weather, and she held out a hand to catch snow flurries. Charlie turned his head away and Jake slumped down.

Stella descended the stairs, turned, and walked west, glancing back over her shoulder, obviously looking for a taxi.

Jake started the engine, left the curb and crept forward, careful to keep a safe distance. Near Third Avenue, a checker cab appeared, and Stella waved it down. Jake followed.

“She’s going shopping again, Jake,” Charlie said, covering his mouth with a yawn. “This kid shops more than any dame in town.”

Jake kept his eyes on the cab as they weaved in and out of traffic. On East 63rd Street, the cab pulled to the curb in front of a 20-story hotel, and Jake tapped the brakes and double-parked a few car-lengths back, near a coal truck making a delivery.

“What’s this place?” Charlie asked, glancing about.

“The Mercury Hotel.”

“New and pricy-looking,” Charlie said.

“Yeah... for high rollers. Built in 1921.”

They watched as Stella exited the cab and walked briskly toward the front door, where a blue-and-gold-uniformed doorman had the double-glass chrome doors open, flashing a big smile.

“She ain’t come here before, Jake.”

“No, and her fiancé, Warren, works downtown and lives downtown.”

“What’s she up to?” Charlie asked, staring up at the hotel.

Jake made a U-turn, found a parking place across the street, and wiggled in. He shut off the engine and opened his door. “Stay here. I’m going to talk to the doorman.”

“I’ll come with you...”

“No, Charlie. I’m going to smile a lot and play the Rockefeller bit. One’s good. Two might scare him off. Keep a sharp eye.”

With a frown, and pushing back his hat, Charlie sighed. “My ass is tired of sitting here, Jake.”

Jake crossed the street and started for the hotel front door. The doorman looked him up and down and blocked his way.

Jake’s smile was broad. “Good afternoon, sir. I’m Thomas Rockefeller,” he lied. “Thomas John Rockefeller,” he stressed. The famous last name often had a way of opening doors.

“And who will you be seeing?” the tall, square-jawed, wary doorman asked.

“The young woman who entered a short time ago. She’s my niece. Her name is Stella Lippincott.”

Hearing Stella’s name relaxed the doorman’s face. “Yes... How can I help you?”

Jake glanced about, then lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. “I wonder if you can tell me who she’s here to see?” Jake winked. “It’s a family thing. You know how it is these days with the young girls and the press. It’s about my sister and Stella’s mother.”

The doorman thought about it, while Jake pulled five dollars from his pocket. “It’s a money thing, if you know what I mean? We Rockefellers are...” Jake looked toward the heavens, “... well, we have to be concerned about money and scandal. I’m sure you understand.”

The doorman stared hard at the five-dollar bill, and then he licked his lips. When Jake pulled another five, the doorman’s eyes brightened with avarice.

Jake’s grin was friendly. “You’ll be doing the Rockefeller family a big favor.”

The doorman's eyes shifted. His voice dropped to a quiet bass baritone. "She went to see a man named Sinclair."

Jake's smile faded. "Calvin Sinclair?"

The doorman nodded and snatched the two five-dollar bills from Jake's fingers, quickly stuffing them into his pocket. "That's all I can say," he concluded, standing at attention, staring off toward the street as if Jake weren't there.

"Have they met here before?"

The doorman didn't move. "No... first time. Mr. Sinclair gave me her name. Told me to let her in. That's it. I've got to go back inside."

Jake's smile returned. "Thank you, sir. The family is forever in your debt."

When Jake slid behind the steering wheel of the car and slammed the door, Charlie saw fire in his eyes.

"What happened?"

"Our girl, Stella, is dancing the foxtrot and doing the tango with Sinclair."

Charlie went rigid with surprise. "What?"

"I knew something wasn't right."

"What do we do?"

"We wait for them. I want to see them together with my own eyes."

"I don't get it, Jake. So, she came to see us, trying to convince us that Hal killed Edith Lester, because she's shackin' with Sinclair?"

"I think it's more than that, Charlie, and it's starting to make some sense. My best guess about this little tangled-up trio is this: Sinclair starts seeing Edith Lester, but then he meets the young, flirty, bored flapper want-to-be, Stella. She has hot bloomers, and she goes after Sinclair. It isn't long before Edith discovers Sinclair and Stella are playing her for a sucker. You can imagine that she ain't so happy about it. First, Hal betrays her, and now Sinclair and Stella are dancing the night away

and finding new beds all over town. And Stella's like a daughter to her."

Charlie ran a hand along his jaw. "Yeah, I get it, Jake. Edith must have been busted up inside and mad as hell, so she threatens Sinclair, wanting blood. Maybe she threatens to tell his wife or go to the papers."

Jake faced Charlie. "I've heard Sinclair has his dirty hands in a big bootleg syndicate. Maybe Edith knew about it and threatened him with that, too. Anyway, you can bet Edith put up a fight. So, Sinclair kills her—probably an accident—but he kills her, all right. Stella figures it out, but she's too hot for Sinclair, plus his money and his gifts, to shed more than a handful of tears. Maybe he lied to her and told her Hal killed Edith, and Stella believes him because she wants to believe him."

Charlie shook his head. "It's the old story, ain't it, Jake? Young doll goes for an older man, the bigshot, for the money, for the thrills and maybe because she's a little bit like Sinclair."

"Yeah, that's about right, and I'd bet she was the one who wrote those threatening notes, clipping words from the newspaper. I'd also bet that Sinclair put her up to it, and she probably got a giggling thrill sending them out. Then she comes and sees us and lays on the big eyes and the big lies."

Charlie removed his hat, ran a hand across his thin hair, and shook his head. "What now, Jake?"

"We wait for them, and we see what happens."

"They could be in there a while, Jake."

"I don't think so... Sinclair is a busy man, and he's never been a patient man."

An hour later, Calvin Sinclair left the hotel, clearly tipping the doorman as he exited, offering a cheery smile. Twenty steps behind Sinclair came Stella Lippincott, with a pert expression and a breezy walk, as if she owned the world.

Jake and Charlie stayed low, their vision unobstructed. They watched as the doorman flagged down a taxi and held the

door, as Stella, and then Sinclair, stooped inside.

“Smart guy,” Jake said. “He doesn’t hit the same hotel twice. He’s bold, too.”

“Yeah, well, ain’t nobody going to stop him, are they? Not with his connections.”

Jake rammed the car into gear and started off after them, keeping a careful distance behind. As they crossed Central Park to the West Side, Jake’s face tightened with new purpose.

“Where are you going, Sinclair, and why is the doll baby tagging along?” Charlie asked.

When Sinclair’s taxi turned on Broadway and started downtown, Jake glanced at Charlie.

“When I was still a cop, we all knew that Calvin liked the French cuff white shirts, the polished leather shoes, and the swank cuff links with his initials on them. And he had a drinking problem, and maybe he still does. And he never minded stepping out with the dames, leaving the wife back home with the kiddies.”

Charlie stared gloomily out the window at the snow flurries and the wet streets and the snarling traffic. He pondered the events from the night before. Two of his old boxing pals had nabbed Nash from outside his local gin joint when he’d come stumbling out. Charlie had paid the bartender to slip Nash a light Mickey Finn, a combination of chloral hydrate and alcohol that made Nash drunk and loopy.

Nash had been easy to find. Charlie had shadowed Nash’s brother, Barnaby, the guy who worked at a pawnshop. It took only two days before the man led Charlie to his wayward brother’s shabby, one-room boarding house on Pike Street. The rest was easy.

The night before, on December 27, Charlie and his pals had tossed Nash into the backseat of a car, raced down to South Street Seaport, hogtied him, and then, as had been prearranged with Captain Meyer, they’d bundled him onto the merchant steamship *Josephine*, bound for South America’s Montevideo, the largest city in Uruguay.

Roxie had met Charlie the day before and given him the cash that he'd used to pay his friends and the captain of the *Josephine*, with enough left over to stuff a wad into Nash Corbin's socks and pants pockets, which he would discover when he awoke at sea.

Charlie hoped the stupid mug would start a new life in Uruguay and not try to hop a ship back to New York. If he did, Charlie would have to shanghai him again, this time to China. He would do it for Roxie because he wanted her to be safe, and he wanted Jake and Roxie to get married and stop fooling around, arguing all the time.

As they came to West 44<sup>th</sup> and Twelfth Avenue, Jake saw Sinclair's cab pull over. Jake slowed down and angled toward the curb behind two parked cars and a delivery truck, its cab loaded, covered, and tied down by a dark tarpaulin.

"Look at that, Charlie," Jake said, craning his neck. "Look at the gray, faded warehouse over there that looks like it's about to keel over. I bet you the place is filled with bootleg hooch from who knows where. And I'll also bet that the truck is filled with booze, ready for delivery. We just hit the jackpot! That warehouse is where Sinclair is going, to check on his hooch with his new girlfriend."

Charlie glanced at it, worried. "There ain't much around here but more broken-down warehouses. There are lots of places for goons to hide. What's our next move?"

Jake gave it a minute's thought, as he watched Sinclair and Stella emerge from the cab and start for the side door entrance to the warehouse.

"I'm going in," Jake said, giving a slight tug on the brim of his fedora.

"What!? Why?"

"If there's hooch in there, I'm going to find out, and then we're going to call Lieutenant Blaine and get him down here before Sinclair leaves."

Charlie snapped him a look. "Are you nuts?"



“I’ve got to go in, Charlie. I’ve got to get him, and I’ll get him where it will hurt him the most: in the left-hand pocket.”

“You’re like the crazy captain who went chasing after the big, white whale.”

Jake gave him a quick and narrow look of confusion. “The what?”

“You don’t read enough, Jake. I read the comic book, and I’ll lend it to you... The title is *Moby Dick*.”

## CHAPTER 25

Just before closing the car door, Jake leaned back in. “Keep a sharp eye, Charlie. If I’m not back in fifteen minutes, call Lieutenant Blaine.”

Charlie opened his mouth to protest, but it was too late. The door closed, and Jake set off across the broken sidewalk toward the rickety-looking warehouse, with its grimy cracked windows and rust streaks from faulty drainpipes.

“This is lovely,” Jake said sarcastically, as he approached the gray steel door. “Great place for a crime.”

He reached for the cold doorknob, twisted, and nudged it open a few inches, listening, hearing the distant murmur of voices. He shimmied in, gently closing the door, and stood, allowing his eyes to adjust.

The sprawling interior was dim with shadows and smelled of mold, dust and mice. He stepped gingerly, and when broken glass crackled under his feet, he froze, wincing, still as a statue. From a broken skylight high above, a trickle of snow drizzled down. There was a haunting echo of dripping water, and pigeons went flapping overhead, their wings loud in the eerie space.

Jake waited. Listened. The voices continued, and Jake released a trapped breath. With squinting effort, he allowed his eyes to adapt to the murky darkness, as vague shapes took the form of wooden crates, barrels and cardboard boxes, all stacked against the wall to his left. He peered into the distance and saw rows of wooden crates and barrels near what appeared to be a loading dock.

Jake had to confirm it. As sure as he was that the crates contained bootleg hooch, what if he was wrong and they were packed with shoes or women’s lingerie?

Taking short steps, holding his breath, Jake crept toward the wall, careful to keep to the deepest shadows. He ran his hand over an oak, hand-tubed beer barrel, one of perhaps fifty.

Stacked behind them were wooden crates, packed with bottles of clear alcohol, and further back were crates of bourbon whiskey, some choice stuff, with a big **O** stamped on the side, whatever that meant. And there were cases of scotch, which would, of course, be watered down, as would the bourbon.

Quietly browsing the goods, Jake also saw fancier stuff, and that surprised him. He figured a lot of these products came from Cuba and Rum Row, which was a line of ships loaded with liquor anchored beyond the maritime limit of the United States. There were crates of good scotch and rare, high-priced cordials, which brought top prices.

Jake knew from his cop buddies that for bigtime bootleggers like Sinclair and his partners, distribution was the big challenge. So, they found dozens of reliable “little guys” to do the work. They worked on commission, as agents, and they made a lot of dough, helping the big guys dispose of the goods, both to speakeasies and to the rich, who had secret hooch rooms in their grand houses.

Some of those goods were also sold to uptown swells, who had “apartment barrooms.” There were two apartments on the top floor. One apartment was fitted up expensively, where invited guests gathered, and the other apartment was used for the hooch and money transactions.

And there were private cellar barrooms as well, and deliveries made to specific churches, and to old gothic graveyards, the booze packed in caskets. Bootlegging was a large and profitable business, and Sinclair was no doubt raking in the cash, and his agents were making thousands a week.

For obvious reasons, the goods to be distributed could not be kept in any one place for long, for fear of being discovered. Jake had gotten lucky when he followed Stella to Sinclair, and Sinclair to this broken-down, out-of-the-way distribution warehouse.

Jake allowed a self-satisfied grin. It was time to leave and call Lieutenant Blaine. If Jake couldn't get Sinclair for Edith Lester's murder, then he could nail him for being a part of a well-organized syndicate selling illegal booze. And even if

Sinclair escaped, the raid on the warehouse would hurt his bottom line and not make him too popular with his associates.

As Jake turned to leave, he heard a deep voice. Sinclair's voice.

"Jake... Yes, I do believe it is Jake Kane."

Jake jerked to his left, his eyes squinting, his pulse shooting up.

Sinclair stood about thirty feet away, mostly in shadow. Next to him was a woman, Stella Lippincott.

"Calvin Sinclair?" Jake asked, keeping his voice under control. "Fancy finding you here."

Jake took two steps toward him.

"That's enough, Jake. No closer."

Jake stopped, his eyes shifting left and right, searching the space for bad guys. He didn't see anyone, not even a silhouette.

Jake got a better look at Sinclair as the man stepped into a shaft of gray light, regarding Jake with utter superiority. He was imposing in his cashmere overcoat, and hatless, revealing his receding hair, tightly combed and parted. His was a face with too many sharp angles to be handsome, and too self-satisfied to be liked.

Jake saw Calvin flick a lighter and light a cigarette. It glowed orange. Stella didn't move.

"I thought you had a head on your shoulders, Jake."

"I suppose I could say the same about you, Calvin," Jake said, spreading his hands. "I mean, selling hooch on the side... What's the matter, don't they pay you enough downtown?"

Calvin smoked. "What are you doing here, Jake? Snooping around where you shouldn't be?"

"And once again, I could ask you the same question, Calvin, or should I say, Police Commissioner Sinclair? It's not a very nice place, is it? Not the kind of class joint you normally hang

out in. And there's a whole lot of illegal hooch about. I find that—for lack of a better word—fascinating.”

Stella spoke up, her voice low and harsh. “Why are you talking to him, Calvin? Do something.”

“Pipe down, Stella,” Sinclair barked.

“How nice to see you again, Stella,” Jake said, vigilant, watching and stalling for time. “Now, let's see... Yeah, the last time I saw you, you were all busted up over your good friend Edith Lester.”

“Shut up about it, okay?” Stella snarled. “You're not so smart coming here. In fact, you're not so smart, period!”

Jake shrugged. “So, I figure that Edith found out about you two, and she wasn't happy about it, especially since Mr. Sinclair here was making whoopie with her, too. Isn't that right, Calvin? So, she threatened you. Said she was going to expose the affair. Splash it all over the papers and, I'm just guessing here, that she was also going to cut her little adopted daughter out of her very substantial will, wasn't she, Stella?”

“I said, shut up about it!” Stella demanded.

“Go to the office!” Calvin ordered.

But Stella didn't move. She crossed her arms and lifted her chin in defiance.

Jake grinned, but the sweat was building on his forehead and under his armpits. He hoped Charlie was calling Blaine. “So, you send Stella to my office, Sinclair, to convince me that it was, after all, Hal Lester who killed his wife. You'll pardon me for saying so, or not pardon me, Calvin, because I don't give a damn either way, but I think that was, well, stupid.”

Calvin stiffened.

Jake continued, knowing his time was running out, his nervous eyes searching the shadows. “I'd love to know the sordid details,” Jake continued casually, “but I'm guessing this isn't the time or place, right? So, maybe we could all meet, real friendly like, and talk about it at the Pearl Club, where you and Edith met several times, or so says the bartender and a

cocktail waitress. They're going to the D.A. with what they saw."

"Shoot him!" Stella yelled. "Do it! Shoot him!"

"I said go to the office, Stella. Go! Now!"

Stella sidestepped his reaching hand, holding her ground.

"Okay, Mr. Sinclair," Jake said. "We've both got a big problem. My partner, Charlie, is calling Lieutenant Blaine right now to tell him I'm here with you, and you have to figure out a way to rub me out without anybody knowing about it. And can you really trust Stella here, and her big mouth?"

Stella spat the words out. "You son of a bitch!"

Jake felt sweat run down his back, despite the cold. His revolver waited anxiously in his shoulder holster, and he was itching to reach for it.

"I'm disappointed in you, Jake," Sinclair said. "This is so bush league."

The dripping water at the end of the room seemed to grow louder in the lengthening silence.

"Not that I care so much either way, Sinclair, but being the chief cop around this town, you may know that there are laws against peddling illegal hooch. And I've got to admit, this place and your operation are very impressive."

Sinclair sighed. "Jake, there are all kinds and classes in the bootleg business, and most of what we sell is the genuine article. The public has a demand and I supply that demand. And do you know what, Jake? I have never run across a man in my life who refused to take a drink because it was against the law, and I have never met a man who thought I was a crook, just because I'm part of a business that people want."

"It's still against the law, Police Commissioner Sinclair, as is murder, and you did take an oath to uphold the law."

"And you're boring me, Jake."

Jake took a step forward, his eyes moving, probing the corners and what might be hiding behind any of the many steel

beams holding up the sagging structure. He saw no one. “As I said, Sinclair, Charlie is right outside, and the cops are on their way.”

Jake waited for Calvin’s response, but his words fell into the silent, cold air.

“You’ve got a son, Jake. Why did you do this? Risk your life for nothing? You know as well as I do that I’ll never get prosecuted for selling booze.”

“Yeah, I have a son, and a couple of your goons took a shot at him and my mother a while back.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“Yeah, and I still believe in Santa Claus. And let’s see how the newspaper boys feel about your being prosecuted. You know, they love a good story, even if it ain’t always true, but might be true.”

Calvin dropped his cigarette and crushed it out with the toe of his shoe. “All right, Jake, I have to go now, and so do you. Goodbye, Jake.”

Jake saw two shadows looming out of the darkness. He was going to have to shoot it out and make a run for it.

Jake considered a diversion. “Hal didn’t kill Edith, Stella, and you know it. Can you live with this Big Shot killer knowing that? Did you care about Edith at all? Were you bouncing around in bed with Sinclair, knowing that Edith thought of you as a trusted daughter? So lovely and so innocent?”

“Shut up!” Stella yelled, and before Sinclair could stop her, she jerked away from him, pulling a .22-calibre pistol from her purse. She took a step toward Jake, aimed, and fired. The bullet whizzed by Jake’s left ear, and he dived for cover as Stella fired again.

Calvin slapped Stella’s pistol hand up, and the crack of the third shot went wild toward the ceiling.

Jake was crouched on the floor behind a steel beam, his revolver in his hand, ready for battle.

## CHAPTER 26

A shot rang out. Then another—loud—like a cannon shot in the open space, echoing. Crouched behind a support beam, Jake swiftly sized up the lethal scene. Two men fired at him, one from behind a wooden beer barrel to his left, the other behind a steel beam straight ahead.

Jake leveled his gun at the beer barrel and fired. Beer burst out in an arching stream. Jake put a second bullet in the barrel, higher. It exploded into a geyser, spraying the hidden man. Surprised, he leapt back, and Jake shot him, the man tumbling back onto the concrete floor, dead.

The second shooter squeezed off two shots. One dinged off the beam above Jake's head and nicked the shoulder of his overcoat.

As his attacker fired again, Jake sprang away, dropped and rolled into the shadows, bullets ringing off the steel beams around him. Taking cover behind an overturned wheelbarrow, Jake ducked as bullets rang off metal and thudded into the walls. Jake braced himself and was about to lean out and fire when he heard Stella shout, "Kill him! Kill the bastard!"

Jake ducked for cover as shots ricocheted off the wheelbarrow, into the walls, and then skipped across the floor.

Stella screamed. A fierce animal scream. Had she been hit?

With wild eyes, Jake glanced about. He was trapped, with nowhere to go. Just then, on his right, he saw a shadow, crouching, coming for him.

Jake whirled and fired. The shadow wilted, but two shots zinged in, one above his head, the other knocking off his hat. Jake jumped up and sprang toward the exit door. Two shots whispered close, and Jake hit the deck, jamming his knee.

Cursing, but his body alert, he swung his gaze left and right, his hand tight on the grip. Bullets boomed in the cavernous warehouse. Jake was a dead duck if he stayed where he was. Stooping, his knee throbbing, he made a dash to the far wall,



where stacked wooden crates would provide cover. He darted left and right, taking evasive action, as he learned to do in the war, while bullets sang all around him.

Jake dived behind the crates, recovered, sat up and waited, his revolver poised. From there, it was about thirty feet to the exit door, and he eyed the door longingly. It was so close.

Crouched behind a stack of crates, Jake dragged in a much-needed breath. Movement to Jake's left pushed him to action. He spun and fired as a bullet just missed his head, shattering bottles, the booze spilling out, gurgling. His bullet hit the mark, and the figure cried out, crumpled, and dropped in a heap.

Scratching footsteps approached, and the POP, POP of gunfire seemed to come from everywhere, bullets ricocheting. Jake was hopelessly outnumbered. He'd have to run for the side door, using the steel beams for cover. If that didn't work, he'd make a last stand and hope for the best.

All at once, the gunfire stopped. He heard the scream of a police siren in the distance. Were they coming for him? Relief flooded in, giving him hope.

Keeping his back flat against the side of the crates, he ventured a look. He saw four shadowed men, one on his right, two on his left and one crouched low, all waiting, obviously pausing to size up the situation. He could hear them thinking. Was that the police? Was Jake hit? Dead? Waiting? Should we get out of here?

And then Jake saw a man turn and bolt off into the shadows. Good. Three left.

Jake strategized. They were going to rush him, and he had little time to think about it. He could get one, maybe two, but the odds of taking out the third were slim, and his six-shot revolver was out of ammo.

Staying calm, his hand found extra bullets in his overcoat pocket. He popped out the cylinder, dropped the only four bullets he had into the chambers, snapped it back in place, and prepared to make a stand. It wouldn't be the first time. During

the war, he'd had to attack a German machine gun nest in a tree line on a hill. Three of his men had been killed, and he'd been wounded.

At that moment, the steel door flew open, and Charlie burst in, gun at the ready. "Jake!"

"Three to your left, Charlie! Get down!"

Gunfire erupted, and the echo made it impossible to know who was firing at whom. Charlie hit the floor as a hail of bullets assailed him. Jake seized the moment. He darted out, aimed, and took out the man on his left. Then Jake dived, rolled to his right and came up on elbows, squeezing off another shot. The attacker keeled over and collapsed.

Jake saw Charlie fire at a charging man, who fired back. When the man was hit, he grabbed his chest and dropped. Was Charlie hit?

Jake yelled out. "Charlie!"

"On your left, Jake! Look out!"

Jake spun around, but it was too late. A big man dived at him before Jake could squeeze off a shot. The hit was so hard it rattled Jake's teeth and dimmed his vision. His .38 went clambering away. The big man pinned Jake to the floor, his leather gloved hands around his neck, squeezing, cutting off air supply. Jake clawed at the hands around his throat, fighting for breath. The man was strong, and he had a fierce, fatal strength. If Jake didn't act fast, he was a dead man.

Summoning all his power, Jake made two fists with thumbs exposed. He jerked up his arms and jammed his thumbs into the attacker's eyes. One thumb hit the target, gouging into an eye socket. His attacker jerked back, and his ear-piercing cry ripped from his throat, reverberating through the warehouse, scattering birds.

Jake didn't wait. He kicked backward, twisted, and jerked free. Before the man recovered, Jake, on his ass, braced his arms on the floor, hitched a foot, and with the full force of his heel, he kicked the yelling man hard in the groin. Another

chilling scream erupted from the man's lips, which cursed and twisted in pain.

On his knees, Jake cocked a fist and drove it into the guy's face. Another punch snapped his head left, and the man reeled. Jumping to his feet, Jake finished the man with a kick to the face that threw him onto his back, out cold.

Jake snapped back to deadly reality, ready to fight, hot white breath puffing from his open mouth. But there was no fight. Only Silence. Dead silence. No gunfire. No movement. All the bad guys were down or had fled.

“Charlie?”

No sound.

Making tight fists, and breathing hard through his nose, Jake glanced right, and he saw Stella lying on her back against the wall, her arms splayed out, legs crossed. At her side in seconds, he dropped to his knees, seeking a wound in the hazy light. Placing two fingers at her neck for a pulse, he found one. He sighed, confused, then searched again. This time, he saw a trickle of blood at her temple. He jerked off her hat, flung it away and frantically searched for the bullet entry, but there was none. When he raked a strand of damp hair from the wound, he saw the bullet had grazed her left temple, knocking her unconscious.

Jake's wide, turbulent gaze shot toward the exit door. What about Charlie?

The close screaming of a police siren jarred him, and Jake pushed up and hurried over to the exit door. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Charlie, fifteen feet away. He was lying on his side, to the right of the door, blood pooling from beneath his chest.

Jake darted over, skidding on his knees to Charlie's body. He gently turned him on his back, and, in the open-door light, he pulled up an eyelid and saw that the pupil was constricted. Jake swiftly opened Charlie's overcoat and suit coat, then ripped the buttons from his white shirt, frantically searching for a wound. His breath stopped when he found it. A bullet

had struck close to his heart. Praying, Jake felt for a pulse. It was there, but it was faint.

Screaming sirens filled the air, and Jake knew he had precious little time to get Charlie to a hospital, or he'd die. Jake went to work, removed a clean handkerchief from his breast pocket, and applied pressure to the wound to stop the bleeding. He had to stop the bleeding if Charlie was going to live.

“Stay with me, Charlie! Stay with me, now. You're gonna be all right. Help's on the way.”

## CHAPTER 27

Roxie hurried down the freshly waxed, third-floor hallway of the Mt. Sinai Hospital. She passed the nurses' station and headed toward room 308, where Charlie Stokes lay close to death. It was nearly seven o'clock on the evening of December 28. Clare had called Roxie from upstate New York immediately after she'd spoken to a distraught Jake.

"Jake said Charlie was in the operating room for over two hours," Clare had said. "They removed the bullet, but he's lost a lot of blood and the bullet was lodged close to his heart. The doctors are also concerned about infection."

As Roxie approached Charlie's room, she saw Jake standing outside the door, leaning back against the wall, his head down, his hat in his hand.

Easing her pace, Roxie drew up to him quietly. "I'm so sorry, Jake."

Jake didn't lift his head, and he didn't speak.

"Is there anything I can do?"

He shook his head, then said, "Pray? I don't know. Do you pray? I don't. But I've been praying. The doctors won't let me in. Said Charlie needs to rest."

"Clare called me."

"I figured."

"I heard it on the news," Roxie said.

"Yeah, well, the newspaper boys didn't waste any time either. It's in the evening edition. I saw a headline. '*Gunfight at the OK Carriage Warehouse.*' I didn't know that's what it was called, and it's not so funny."

"I didn't read it. I couldn't. It's awful about Charlie, Jake. I just can't believe it."

Jake finally lifted his weary, sad eyes and straightened up. "It's all my fault. I was a sap. A fool, and now Charlie's in

there about to slam the big door, and that Lippincott dame is still unconscious at the Hightower Hospital, nearly shot through the head. And for what?"

Jake hooded his eyes and made a tight fist. "Calvin Sinclair bolted, and I almost had him."

"Calvin Sinclair?" Roxie asked, not understanding.

Jake's seething eyes drilled into her. "Yeah. He killed Edith Lester. I found a warehouse full of hooch that Sinclair and his syndicate are distributing. Anyway, it all went wrong when that stupid dame pulled her .22 and tried to shoot me in the head."

Roxie kept her stunned expression under control. "Your neck is bruised."

Jake touched it with a finger. "Yeah, one of Sinclair's pals gave me a neck brace before I knocked him cold."

"What now, Jake? What will you do?"

"Do? I've got a date downtown with Lieutenant Blaine and Sergeant Hanlon. You remember them? They have lots of questions."

"What will you tell them?" Roxie asked.

"They already know four men are dead, two are wounded and Charlie's in there. Their heads are spinning because they've got a warehouse full of bootleg hooch worth a million or more. And then that crazy, blonde Lippincott dame I told you about, who got hit by a stray bullet, has a future husband and parents with a lot of money, and lots of questions. What am I going to say?"

Jake stared with cold purpose. "I'm going to tell the cops everything I know and let the chips fly where they will. Sinclair got away, but if they search the warehouse and put the squeeze on Sinclair's wounded goons, they might be able to put the heat on him. But I don't know where the cops stand with Sinclair, because he's still the boss, and they've got bills, homes, wives, and kids."

Roxie struggled to form a question. “Jake... with Charlie lying in there, shouldn’t you, I don’t know, have protection? If Calvin Sinclair knows you’re about to talk, won’t he try to stop you?”

Jake’s eyes held malice. “I don’t think so. Not now, anyway. Not after what happened today. If he’s smart, and he is, he’s going to lie low and see if the wheels of justice might finally start to roll toward him.”

“Can I go with you?”

“No!” he said, sharply. “Get out of here and go home. And stay away from me. I’m bad luck.”

“Don’t do that, Jake. Don’t push me away. We’ve had too much of that.”

“It’s for your own good. You’ve had enough of your own bad luck. You don’t need a piece of mine.”

He glanced at his watch. “I’m late. I should be there by now. They only gave me a couple of hours.”

He glanced at her. “Thanks for coming, but don’t hang around. Things are going good for you right now. Keep it that way.”

And then he left her, his hat in his hand, his head down, his steps slow.

Roxie hovered outside Charlie’s room for a time, feeling a sinking despair. What would happen to Jake if Charlie died?

At the nurses’ station, Roxie approached a sallow, middle-aged nurse, who glanced up over black-rimmed glasses. “Yes?”

Roxie cleared her throat. “I’m a friend of Charlie Stokes’, in room 308. I guess... Well, I guess I just want to know if the doctors think he’s going to be all right.”

The nurse’s face opened in compassionate friendliness. “We’ll know more in a day or so. Perhaps in a few hours. We can always hope and pray, can’t we?”

“Yes... thank you.”

Roxie stood despondently at the elevator. When the doors opened, Maxie stepped out, and her cold eyes locked onto Roxie.

“What are you doing here?” she asked bitterly.

Roxie was startled by her tone. “I came to see Charlie.”

Maxie’s lips twisted up in disgust, and she spit her words out between clenched teeth. “You and your kind is what got him shot up like that. Stay away from him, hear? Just stay away from him!”

Maxie went striding away, her feet heavy on the tile floor, her head held high, as if to fortify herself for what she was about to face.

Outside in the darkness, Roxie wandered the streets, watching snow flurries drift by the streetlights, dusting the roofs of cars and sidewalks. She felt sick about Charlie. He had a heart of gold, and she’d always be grateful to him for convincing Jake to help free her from Frankie Shay’s hotel, where she’d been held a prisoner. And Charlie had helped her again when he’d taken care of Nash Corbin.

Needing a mental escape, Roxie allowed her thoughts to ramble back to the time when she performed in clubs in 2019, a completely different world in every way.

With a smile, she remembered the busy rooms that smelled of burgers and beer, when people sang along and called out requests. Some wanted to hear old-school rock, some show tunes, others Motown, ’90s rap, and Taylor Swift. In many ways, she realized how fun it had been, even if she hadn’t made a lot of money or had her image in newspapers and magazines.

A streetcar rattled by, and a stray cat went darting by her feet. Roxie fell into a dark mood, just like that, as if she’d just crashed from a sugar rush. Maybe it was because of Charlie, or because she was losing Jake. Maybe her life in the Roaring Twenties was just too fast and chaotic.



In the last few months, no matter how many times she'd told herself she wasn't isolated and alone, that she'd made friends and a life for herself in the 1920s, that she'd found the big, gold pot at the end of the rainbow, she had to admit that she often felt a nagging discomfort. It was the old, "out of time and out of place" feeling, as if she'd been abducted by a UFO and rocketed off to an alien planet. But why?

As cars streamed along the damp streets, and people flowed around her, the answer came to her in increments, like large file downloads to a computer. Every day, she had to live a lie, pretending she didn't know the future; didn't know about computers and technology; didn't know that jet airplanes flew across the oceans and around the world in hours.

These people didn't know about Elvis Presley or Michael Jackson or Dusty Springfield. They didn't know about the miracle of modern medicine, and that astronauts had landed on the moon, that a woman was running for President, that Starbucks made over twenty kinds of frappuccinos, and that Harry Potter was a great wizard, although not on the same level as Snape.

Roxie knew an economic depression was coming, that another world war would kill millions, and that nuclear bombs would threaten to destroy the world.

Okay, so what? The difference between living in the past and living in one's own time was simple: in the past, you knew the future. In your own time, you didn't.

And, yes, Roxie did miss her parents, her grandparents, her brother and her friends, something she seldom admitted, though they remained in the back of her mind, very much alive and well, despite her living in the 1920s.

But the risk of entering The Black Cat basement and time traveling home had seemed too great, too frightening, and too reckless. Maybe she wasn't so frightened now. Maybe it was an option she should seriously consider.

That night in bed, Roxie swam in her sheets, turning and rolling and fighting off nightmares of running down dark alleys, being pursued by Frankie Shay and Archie Wells. She

kept screaming for Jake to help her, but he was nowhere around.

The ringing phone woke her at dawn. She flung an arm toward the night table and grabbed the white receiver. "Hello?"

"It's Clare, Roxie," she said, her voice miserable. "Sorry for the bad news I'm about to throw at you, but I'm just going to get it all out in one punch, so brace yourself. Jake's in jail and Charlie's taken a turn for the worse. Infection has set in. I talked to one of his doctors this morning. They gave him an anti-tetanus serum to help prevent tetanus, but it hasn't worked."

Roxie kicked off the quilt and swung her feet to the floor. "Oh, God, Clare! Charlie can't die."

"I know. Jake will go to pieces. I'm still upstate. I'm leaving on the 9:10 train, and I'm going to post Jake's bail and then we'll go see Charlie."

"And why is Jake in jail?"

"He wouldn't talk about it."

"I'll meet you," Roxie said, standing, running a hand through her messy hair.

"No, Roxie. Jake is too tangled up right now. I'm sorry. He doesn't want to see you."

"But why, Clare? What have I done?"

"Nothing! Absolutely nothing. It's Jake. He's not himself. I haven't heard him like this since after the war. Since his cop partner was killed and he hit the skids."

Roxie heard the note of alarm in Clare's voice. "Clare... I can't just sit here. I've got to do something."

"There's nothing you can do. He's all busted up about Charlie. Really busted up, Roxie, and he's talking crazy, like he's going to find Sinclair and blow his brains out."

Roxie dropped her head with a sigh. "Okay, well, I'm going to the hospital, and he can't stop me from going. I've got to be

there.”

Clare’s voice fell into a resigned whisper. “Okay, Roxie. I’ll see you there.”

After Roxie hung up the phone, she sat on the edge of the bed, numb and weepy. She was certain that if Charlie had twenty-first century care, he’d survive. A thought from the night before came back to her. *These people don’t know about the miracle of modern medicine.*

As she dressed, an idea struck, and she hurried to the living room phone and called Harriet.

“Harriet, it’s Roxie.”

“I was going to call you in an hour or so. I’ve seen the morning papers. It’s terrible. Jake was lucky he wasn’t killed.”

“I know, I know. But his best friend and partner is close to death. It’s awful. I can’t explain everything, but I’ve got this crazy idea and I want to run it by you.”

“That’s why I was going to call *you*, Roxie.”

“What?”

“I know you. At least, I’m fairly sure I know how you think. The papers said Charlie Stokes is dying from a gunshot wound.”

“Yes... Harriet, I was thinking...”

Harriet jumped in. “I know what you’re thinking, but I don’t advise it.”

“I told you about medicine in 2019. I told you about antibiotics. They could knock that infection out in a few days, and Charlie would survive.”

“Roxie... You’re talking as if all you have to do is hop on a trolley and travel downtown to the nearest druggist. We’ve talked about this so many times. There are no guarantees as to what might happen to you or where you might end up. It could be the past or further into the future. You could even be killed. We just don’t know enough about that time doorway.”

“Don’t forget what happened to Nash Corbin,” Roxie said. “He traveled from 1925 forward to 2019, and when he decided to return to his own time, he entered that time doorway, and he returned here to 1925, not to some other time. So, the time thing seems to be somewhat predictable. Where you leave from, you return.”

“There’s no guarantee. Do you know what science is, Roxie? It’s the systematic study of the physical and natural world through observation and *repeated* experimentation. One person’s experience does not constitute certainty.”

After a pause, Roxie said, “Harriet... That time doorway is not natural. It’s unnatural. It’s supernatural.”

“All right, Roxie, I’ll grant you that. All the more reason to consider your decision very carefully.”

Roxie switched the phone from her left ear to her right. “I’ve been thinking that I want to go back, anyway. It’s been on my mind for a while. My life here is, I don’t know, good in some ways, but just nuts and out of my control in others. I wake up every day and I wonder what the hell’s going to happen next.”

“I still say it’s too dangerous. And, anyway, I’m going to be selfish and say that I will miss you like the dickens if you go.”

“If I can save Charlie, it will be worth it.”

“That is, if you survive and, if once there, you decide to come back. Have you forgotten one important thing?”

“And that is?”

“If you do safely return to 2019, Charlie, Jake and I will all be dead, and we’ll have been dead for a long time. Dead and long forgotten. More importantly, Charlie will have died long ago, regardless of whether he survives the gunshot wound or not.”

Roxie eased down in the chair as she let Harriet’s words settle. “I guess I knew that, but then again, I hadn’t thought of it that way. But I won’t have forgotten you, any of you, and I can spend as much time as I need in the future before I come

back, because, when I do return, you'll all be here, alive and well."

Harriet spoke firmly. "Roxie, you'll be traveling to the future and then back to the past. Two trips. That's a big gamble. And do you really want to leave Jake Kane? You've told me, many times, that he's the love of your life."

"Yeah, well, he may be, but it just hasn't worked out for us. Something always seems to get in the way, and with all the stuff that's happened to me, I'm starting to wonder if maybe the universe is giving me a hint: maybe I shouldn't be here."

"Then why are you here?"

Roxie stood up. "I don't know, Harriet, but for now, if I can go and return with antibiotics and save Charlie's life, then maybe Jake will pull out of the funk he's in, and we can restart our relationship."

After another long silence, Roxie said, "Harriet, will you come with me to The Black Cat? Will you see me off?"

"I don't know."

"You could come with me, you know. It might be fun."

Harriet's voice was loud. "What!?"

"We'll hold hands and jump into the time doorway together, so we don't get separated, so that wherever we end up, we'll have each other. I'd love it if you came. Then you wouldn't have to miss me, and I wouldn't have to miss you."

Roxie waited, her foot tapping. "Harriet?"

"I do not have the wild recklessness you have, Roxie. As much as I'd like to say I have all the courage in the world, when I think about passing back through that time doorway, my heart nearly stops. I just can't do it. I can't risk ending up back in 1883, or in some other backward time. I can't."

"Okay... But will you meet me at The Black Cat and see me off?"

## CHAPTER 28

Early Tuesday night, December 29, they stood on the rough cement floor in the dark Black Cat basement, Harriet and Roxie sweeping their flashlight beams over the room. They were about ten feet from the rock wall, where the pulsing dot of blue light was obscured by empty beer barrels and boxes packed with glassware and bar tools. Tables and chairs were shoved against the walls.

Now that she was about to take the plunge into the time doorway, Roxie reconsidered her motives, memories, and instincts, while Harriet stood close, her side glances wary.

The ladies had entered The Black Cat with surprising ease, since Roxie knew the layout of the place. After dark, they'd crept into the alley, Roxie toting a small suitcase filled with undies, a change of clothes, toiletries, three *Baby Ruth* chocolate bars and a small box of *Corn Flakes*, the food being a last-minute decision. Harriet had said, "You never know where you might land. At least you'll have something to munch on if you end up out in the middle of nowhere."

Both women were skittish and alert, Harriet wishing she'd stayed home, Roxie remembering, with a rising nausea, the night she had first landed in 1925, scared and exhausted.

Roxie had found the women's restroom window, and, with a rag and a rock, she'd tapped, cracked, and broken enough glass until the window was clear. She found an old wooden milk carton to stand on and then boosted herself up and in, stepping down onto a closed toilet.

Flashlight in hand, Roxie found her way to the back door and unlocked it. Harriet scampered in, carrying the suitcase, closing the door fast behind her.

As they stood in the basement, facing the wall, Harriet said, "This place brings back memories. All bad. It's so different from when I was last here."

Roxie cast her eyes about. “Yeah, it gives me the creeps. I hope Frankie Shay’s ghost doesn’t suddenly pop out.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Harriet said, shivering.

Roxie turned to Harriet with a nervous air of finality. “Well, I guess I might as well go.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes and no, like everything in my life.”

“We can just walk away.”

“No. I’m going,” Roxie said, facing Harriet, the flashlight beam making her face look eerie. “Now, you have the key to my suite, and you have the combination to the safe? Right?”

“Yes, Roxie.”

“Well, all my money’s in there.”

“Yes, I know. I promise not to go on a spending spree at Wanamaker’s.”

“And you’ll go see Alma and offer her the money to start her own place?”

Mildly impatient, Harriet sighed. “Yes, Roxie. We’ve been through all this. I’m a very responsible person, so don’t worry. You have enough to worry about.”

“I should have gone to see her myself,” Roxie said. “It’s just that there was too much going on.”

“Do you have the jewelry and the silver dollars?”

Roxie patted the left pocket of her slim cashmere coat. “Yes. Right here.”

“Those pearls should bring a handsome price, and the silver dollars will surely have appreciated in the future, assuming you end up there.”

“Don’t say that. I’m going back home to 2019.”

“So, I guess this means that you’re not going to purchase The Black Cat and call it Roxie’s?” Harriet asked.

Roxie shrugged a shoulder. “Not right now, anyway. Maybe never? We’ll see.”

The air was stale and sticky, and the room smelled of bad plumbing. Harriet held her nose and made a face. “Okay, it smells foul down here. Let’s move some barrels and boxes and get you on your way.”

For the next ten minutes, they worked with a gasping effort, the barrels heavy, the boxes bulky. When the final box was shoved away from the wall, they saw it—the tiny pulsating light—and they stilled, their flashlights lowered, both women staring in anxious wonder.

“It’s smaller than I remember,” Roxie said. “If you didn’t know it was there, you might not even see it.”

“Yes, it is just a dot of a thing. But there it is, just like in a dream.”

Roxie’s palms were sweaty, her throat tight. “Yeah, well, my whole life has been like a dream. Maybe it’s time to return to reality.”

Harriet looked at her and smiled. “Roxie, my friend, you have had outrageous early success, with all its consequent experiences. I hope your absence will give you a better perspective, so that when you return, life won’t be so tumultuous for you. And, I assume I don’t have to say it, but I do hope you will return.”

Roxie surged forward and wrapped Harriet in an embrace. “I’m going to miss you.”

“As I will miss you. Don’t stay away too long and, as my father used to say, ‘Godspeed.’”

Roxie stood before her chosen destiny, the protruding rock and the blue, pulsing light, waiting. It seemed aware and alive, and it was mesmerizing.

For her time travel, Roxie wore a modest, royal blue dress, one-inch black heels, and a stylish winter coat. A string of pearls, a diamond pendant and a gold ring were placed inside a red velvet purse with a drawstring, secured by a buttoned left



pocket. She'd kept her 1920s hairstyle and her makeup light. She'd decided against wearing a hat.

Roxie lifted her suitcase and then, with her free hand, she reached, halted, reached again, and touched the rock. With a sharp intake of breath, Roxie ran a gentle finger over the flickering light and waited, blinking, anticipating.

Harriet took several steps back, not wanting to risk being sucked into the doorway when it opened.

Suddenly, in a great explosion, Roxie was engulfed by shooting rays and sparks of blue and yellow light. Harriet watched in astonishment as swirling clouds burst out and dragged across the ceiling, shrouding boxes and furniture, coming her way. Coming her way, as if long, stretching arms were reaching for her!

She stumbled backwards, twisting away toward the stairs, intent on escape, as she glanced back over her shoulder, scanning the approaching veil of clouds.

Bounding up the stairs, Harriet burst through the upper door, lurched forward, and tripped on something, spilling, hands-first, to the hard, wooden floor. She gasped for breath, rolled onto her back and sat up to see a storm of flashing lights, like fifty flashbulbs, in a crackle of static.

She gathered her strength, crawled to the door and, with a leg, kicked the basement door shut, the slam loud in her ears.

Minutes later, her chest was still heaving. Brushing her forearm against her sweaty brow, she looked one last time at the closed door before struggling to her feet and blundering to a chair, dropping down heavily.

What had happened? What was all that light and those threatening clouds? She hadn't experienced it during her time travel journey, and Roxie hadn't mentioned it either. Harriet took in several breaths and got up, wanting to flee the forbidding space.

Leaving through the back door, and closing it securely, Harriet hurried across the damp cobblestoned alleyway in

lengthening strides, the night air feeling hostile, her emotions a burning knot in her stomach.

On Charles Street, suddenly exhausted, Harriet paused under a streetlamp, leaning against it. She blinked hard, trying to shake off immobilizing fear, as the rumble of traffic deadened her ears.

A man approached and saw her. Concerned, he drifted over, removing his hat. "Pardon me, madam, but are you in need of assistance?"

Harriet wanted to say, "No," but she didn't. Instead, she said, "Yes, I believe I do need some help. I'm not feeling so well."

He offered her his arm. "Please take hold of my arm and I'll support you."

Harriet carefully stepped away from the streetlamp and linked her trembling arm in his, something she'd never done in her life: allow a perfect stranger to touch her.

"Is there someplace where I can escort you? Perhaps you require a taxi?"

For the first time, Harriet ventured a look at this man, who had such a pleasant, deep voice. He was older than his voice suggested, perhaps in his early fifties. His was a kind face, with refined features, soft, concerned eyes, and salt-and-pepper curly hair, parted on the left. If he wasn't overly handsome, he was appealing in a gentlemanly way, a courteous and respectful way that was disarming.

"I suppose it would be best if I found a taxi," Harriet said.

"Well, then, we shall find you one, but you still appear to be somewhat unsteady. Perhaps some tea or coffee might buck you up? There is a little café just up the street, and it's quite cheerful, and I know the owner. Does that sound agreeable to you?"

Harriet had just met the man on the street, and she had no intention of going anywhere with him. It was quite out of the question. But to her surprise, she heard herself say, "Yes, a cup of coffee does sound good. Thank you."

“Perhaps I should introduce myself,” he said, with a gentle smile. “I am Raymond Belair, and I am an attorney, and my office is not too far from here, just over there,” he pointed, “... on Waverly Place.”

Harriet averted her eyes. “I’m Harriet Hall, and I’m a doctor.”

Raymond didn’t hide his surprise. “A doctor?”

“Yes. I work at the East Side Children and Women’s Clinic.”

To Harriet’s surprise, his face revealed admiration. “Well, what a fine and marvelous thing, Miss Hall, or is it Mrs. Hall?”

Harriet stared ahead. “It is Miss Hall.”

“Well, then, Miss Hall, shall we have our coffee, which I hope will help you regain your strength?”

It was a clean and cozy café called Sevilla, featuring an orange and yellow color scheme, with glossy wooden tables and comfortable wicker chairs.

After they’d stored their coats and hats on a wooden rack near the entrance, the owner, Alejandro, appeared. He greeted Raymond with a hardy handshake and toothy smile, kissed Harriet on either cheek, then sat them at a table near the picture window with a good view of the street.

Alejandro was a stocky, lively man, with thinning long hair, gray bushy eyebrows, beautiful olive skin and a lovely smile.

When Raymond ordered two coffees, Alejandro’s eyebrows creased, and he frowned. “Oh, my friend, you cannot have just the coffee, can you? You must, yes, you must have more than just the coffee, Raymond, my friend, especially when you come with this lovely lady. You must have my own seafood paella, some croquetas, and some of my warm olive bread. Oh, yes, and you must have some...” and then Alejandro glanced around his lively café as he lowered his voice to a whisper, “... Red wine. Then, my good friends, and only then, will I give you permission to have the coffee.”

When Alejandro moved away, he relayed the order to the busy, buxom young waitress with midnight black hair, and she went to work.

Raymond lifted his hands. “Well, I hope you’re hungry.”

Harriet nodded, folding her shaking hands and looking down at them. “Yes, well, how can we refuse such a generous offer?”

“Alejandro is very passionate about his café, as you can see. We were lucky to get a table.”

Harriet looked around. “As you said, it is a cheerful place.”

“Feeling better?” Raymond asked.

Her gaze was direct for a moment, sizing Raymond up anew, and then she looked away. “Yes, I think I am feeling better, thank you.”

“Not to pry, but I suppose you had a bit of a start? You seemed about to faint.”

Harriet thought, *A bit of a start? What an understatement.* The questions were still swirling around inside her. What had happened to Roxie? Had she survived that dramatic ordeal? Had she returned to her own time?

Harriet’s smile was small. “Perhaps I needed something to eat. In any event, thank you, Mr. Belair, for your assistance. You’re very kind.”

“It’s not every day that a man gets to rescue a damsel in distress.”

She gave him an uncomfortable glance. “Are you married, Mr. Belair?”

His eyes held reflection, his smile serene. “I was. My wife, Jenny, passed away nine months ago.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear it.”

“We had many good and happy years together. We met in school when we were but fifteen years old. Isn’t that something?”

Harriet swallowed a breath, touched by his obvious love of his wife. “Yes, that is quite something. You must have loved her deeply.”

He turned toward the window, seeing the reflection of the restaurant in the glass. “It has been an adjustment, after being a married man for so many good years.”

“Do you have any children, Mr. Belair?”

He hesitated before answering. “We had a little girl. She died of the fever at five years old.”

Harriet’s face fell into sorrow. “Oh... That must have been... difficult.”

Raymond returned his gaze to her, a soft sorrow in his eyes. “Jenny and I struggled for a time. It was not easy, but then our love changed and grew in new ways. The world, and its ways, is a mystery, is it not, Miss Hall?”

Harriet nodded.

Raymond changed the mood, a smile forming. “Have you been married, Miss Hall?”

“No... No, I never have been.”

“As a doctor, you must be busy, and, of course, it must have taken many years for you to achieve your training.”

“Yes. I haven’t had the time to... well, to...” Harriet let the sentence drop. “I haven’t been as fortunate as you and your wife, Mr. Belair. It must be a comfort and a blessing to have that kind of union.”

Raymond smiled. “Yes, Miss Hall, and I miss it. I fear I am not a loner, a man who enjoys solitude, at least not too much solitude, and I’ve had a lot of that lately.”

Harriet’s muscles relaxed, her mind softened, and the tension in her stomach melted away. Raymond had a gentlemanly charisma, and his charm was a combination of consideration and confidence. Her attraction to him was immediate and extraordinary. She felt a girlish thrill and a sexual rush, and heat flushed her cheeks.

What a night it had been. What an incomparable, strange, and wonderful night. Raymond Belair was a man she wanted to get to know and spend time with and, perhaps—since it was the 1920s and not the 1880s—perhaps she even wanted to kiss him, though they'd just met on the street.

Perhaps she wanted him to touch her and hold her and tell her he'd been waiting for her to come along, so he could always say, "And, there you were, Harriet, waiting for me under that streetlamp."

Harriet stared at Raymond, uncharacteristically, and her eyes were full of dreaming. Yes, she definitely wanted to kiss the man. Wouldn't Roxie be proud? What would she say?

Harriet heard Roxie's voice in her head. "Well, it's about time, Harriet. What have you been waiting for? And now, how about we go shopping and buy you some new and stylish clothes?"

And with that thought, Harriet missed Roxie, and she wondered if she'd ever see her again.

## CHAPTER 29

Darkness. A solid wall of darkness. Can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face darkness. And silence. Ringing silence that hurt Roxie's ears. She heard her heartbeat, all right. A tom-tom beating in her chest, in her ears, in the room. *Her* heartbeat. The room's heartbeat. Inside a tomb of a beating heart is what came to mind.

"Where?" Roxie forced out, her throat constricted by a vice grip of anxiety. "Where. Am. I?"

She didn't have the flashlight. Her feet were in spasm. Her legs felt rubbery. Her head throbbed.

"Where am I?" Roxie repeated, wanting to move but unable to take a step. Not one single step.

Her nose twitched. What was that smell? Wet cardboard? Damp bricks? The musty smell of mold and mildew?

"Basement?" Roxie whispered. "Move... Take a step. Move something."

She moved her fingers. They were fine. She raised and lowered her shoulders. Good. She gently moved her right foot. Numbness and tingling, the old pins and needles. Same feeling in the left.

Forcing her left foot forward, she nearly toppled over, her head swimming, and she quickly righted herself, her arms floating out from her sides, finding balance. "Whoa... Steady... Steady, Roxie. Take it easy."

Minutes later, still standing in the same spot, Roxie's eyes adjusted and probed the darkness. The room was jam-packed with boxes piled high, and there were stacked tables and chairs. It was the same room she'd just left in 1925, and yet, it wasn't the same room. The boxes and furniture were in different areas. The smells were different. So?

"Where am I?" Roxie repeated.

With a sharp jolt of memory, she recalled her suitcase, and she cast her eyes about, searching for it. Twisting left and right, bending toward the wall, she looked and groped for it, but it wasn't there.

“Why?” Roxie cried out. “What happened?”

Minutes later, she gave up. For whatever reason, the suitcase hadn't time traveled with her. Resigned, she swallowed, squared her shoulders and, with slow, shuffling steps, she began crabbing her way along the sides of boxes, edging around tables, gingerly making her way toward what she hoped was the door that led out of the room and into a hallway. The Speakeasy hallway of 2019, she hoped, and not The Black Cat hallway of 1925. But why had she landed in the basement and not in the alley, as she'd done in 1925? Whatever.

She forgot to breathe several times, making her light-headed, and she was already loopy and disoriented and completely freaked out.

“So, breathe, Roxie,” she told herself aloud. “God, it smells down here. Got to get out.”

Roxie swayed a little as she finally reached the closed door. She prayed it wasn't locked and, as she reached for the doorknob, she was keenly aware that if she had returned to 2019, the painting of herself in 1925 should still be hanging on the wall. She turned to look, but stacked boxes covered the wall.

She felt weird. She felt scared. She felt excited, and maybe a part of her felt as though she'd made a big mistake in coming back.

Roxie twisted the doorknob and gave it a little tug. She grinned with satisfaction when it creaked open, then frowned when, staring into the hallway, more darkness faced her. She swung her hopeful gaze right where the stairs led up to the Speakeasy lounge, where she'd performed in 2019, before her time travel journey to 1925. The light switch was at the top of those stairs.



Gaining strength, Roxie ventured out into the hallway, feeling her way along the right wall until she came to the stairs. Why was she breathing so hard? Scared? Yeah.

First one foot, then another, finding the wooden railing; her right hand grasped it and she pulled herself up the last five steps to the landing. The doorway to the lounge was closed. Why were the doors closed and no lights on? She found the light switch and flipped it on. Nothing. No lights. And the place was cold. She hadn't noticed it before now, because her body was still hot and perspiring from the whirl and the toss of the wind and clouds.

The door to the lounge opened easily and, through a part in the curtains that enclosed the picture window, came an eerie glow from an outside streetlamp. In the ghostly light, an empty room and an empty bar stared back at her. There were no barstools, no booze bottles on the back bar shelves and, except for two flush banquettes against a side wall, there was no furniture whatsoever. Roxie felt a twitchy prick of discomfort.

"Hello?" she said, hearing her voice drop into the silence.

Why she'd said "Hello," she didn't know. Just to hear something. The silence seemed a threat, a warning. Moving deeper into the room, Roxie glanced left toward the stage. There was no piano, the photographs on the walls were gone, and Roxie's light-headedness turned to nausea. Something was wrong. All wrong.

Needing to rest, Roxie eased down on the edge of the stage and sat, staring, scratching her head, scratching her cheek, unable to shake a creeping unease.

A thousand questions clanged in her head, demanding attention. Where? When? How long? Her parents? What year? In a sudden, frantic motion, a hand went to the left pocket of her slim, cashmere coat. She fumbled with the button, opened it, and tugged out the velvet pouch that held the jewelry and silver dollars. Opening the drawstring, she reached inside and removed the pearls. They were fine. The gold ring was there, too, and so was the diamond pendant and the silver dollars and half dollars. All there. All had survived the jolt of time travel.

She had the grim feeling that she was going to need them, and fast.

Lifting to her feet, Roxie stepped to the bar, looking for a telephone. It was there. She circled the bar, slipped behind it, and reached for the phone, lifting the modern receiver to her ear. Nothing. Silence. It was dead.

Okay, fine. What did she know for sure? The place was closed, and everything was shut off. It was night, and she hadn't heard anyone pass outside on the sidewalk, hadn't heard any traffic sounds, and she stood there feeling helpless and stupid.

“Get out. Go!” she said aloud, and then she crossed the room to the front door and stopped. There was a metal grate covering the entrance, and it was locked from the outside. Undaunted, Roxie pivoted, her legs still shaky, and started for the exit door in the back of the smaller of the two rooms. It led to an alley, the same alley that she'd found herself standing in, way back in 1925. Another world. Another lifetime.

Standing at the exit door, Roxie heaved in a breath, reached for the lock above the doorknob, and released the heavy, metallic bolt—a jolting sound in the graveyard-quiet room. She grabbed the doorknob, praying the door wasn't alarmed, and then tugged it open.

There was no alarm, and Roxie exhaled as she stepped outside, ensuring the door wasn't locked, then shut it securely behind her. In the spooky light and silence of the alley, Roxie glanced about, her wide eyes not lingering on a rat that went scurrying along the other side, vanishing into the darkness.

In a chilly wind, she steadied herself, tucked her chin and started off toward Charles Street, feeling like she was the only person alive in the entire world.

With some relief, she saw parked cars. Modern cars! An SUV never looked so good! And there was a parked New York City yellow taxi! She was home! She'd made it!

And then, just like that, came a tightness of grief. Jake was gone. Harriet was gone. Clare and Charlie and Alma, all gone.

Roxie cast looks up and down the street. Where was everybody? There were no moving cars and, glancing up into the sky, she saw there were no airplanes flying over. She was home, or was she? Her skin goose-pimpled.

She turned right to glimpse the building, and she saw the dark overhead sign, SPEAKEASY. Her eyes lowered to the metal grate that had a piece of paper taped to it. With a sinking sense of dread, she wandered over, her eyes running over the typed message.

**BECAUSE OF COVID-19 WE ARE CLOSED!**  
**THANK YOU FOR YOUR PATRONAGE**  
**WE HOPE TO OPEN IN THE FALL**

Roxie's eyes expanded on it as she struggled to comprehend, to make sense of the word COVID-19. What the hell was COVID-19? It sounded like some breakfast cereal, like *Product 19*. She stepped back, massaging her forehead with a hand. When she heard footsteps, she whirled about to see a woman across the street, hurrying along, dressed in a leather jacket and ski cap. Roxie started across the street after her, her legs regaining strength.

“Excuse me!” Roxie called.

The startled woman stopped, turning to face Roxie, looking her up and down. Roxie saw she wore a white mask that covered her nose and mouth. Roxie stopped in her tracks.

“What is it?” the woman asked. “Don't come any closer. Where's your mask?”

“Mask?”

“Yes! You should be wearing a mask.”

“I'm... I guess I'm lost or something. What's happened?”

“What do you mean, what's happened? COVID-19 happened. The whole city has shut down and you're required to wear a mask!”

“COVID...? I guess I don't know what that is.”

The woman's eyes narrowed. “Are you drunk?”

“No. No. I've been out of town.”

“I don't care where you've been. If you don't know what's going on, then you're just crazy, okay? It's all over the world. Put on a mask!”

The woman whipped around and hurried off.

With a hard swallow, Roxie pondered the woman's words, “It's all over the world.”

What was going on and where had she ended up? Feeling a burst of alarm, she walked briskly toward the SUV, stopped at the rear, and looked at the license plate.

She stared, and she stared, until her brain locked up. The license number was EVF-3674. The year was 2020!

The screaming sound of an ambulance went racing down the street, shattering the silence, and Roxie felt her body fill with ice-cold terror.

## CHAPTER 30

Almost darkness, then a glow. There was quiet, as just below the surface of the sea. Roxie lay in a fetal position for warmth, her head propped on a folded scarf, she'd found the night before. Her eyes were stuck together by sleep and exhaustion; she had a cramp in her right foot; and she was cold. Her eyes slitted open, straining to focus. Where was she?

A donut! Yes, how she longed for a donut. Had she just dreamed that? A chocolate cream donut with sprinkles. And coffee! Hot coffee with a bit of sugar and half-and-half. And two scrambled eggs with turkey sausage and hash browns. But coffee. Yes, definitely coffee!

Where was she?

Roxie shook awake in a delirium of hunger and disorientation, familiar names and dates running away from her mind like mischievous kids. Phone numbers were scrambled, as were addresses and dates and ages. There it was! The taste of a kiss. Whose kiss was it? The lyrics of a song from the *Windmills of Your Mind* circled in her head.

Roxie sat up and put a hand to a cavernous yawn. Then she raised and lowered her arms, rolled her shoulders and turned her neck from side to side. At last, her blinking eyes cleared and focused.

“Oh. My. God!” she exclaimed, in a miserable whisper. “It’s true. Totally true!”

She’d spent the night on the Speakeasy stage. The same stage she’d performed on in 2019 before she’d chased Nash Corbin down to the basement and entered that time doorway. And she was in the same space, near the same spot where she’d performed at The Black Cat in 1925.

Roxie fended off the impulse to stand up and scream her head off. Her reality had been ruptured and distorted. It had tipped and swerved like an out-of-control roller coaster ride through an amusement park mad house.

The night before, after she'd spoken to the frightened woman and seen the SUV 2020 license plate, Roxie had returned to the Speakeasy backdoor and slipped inside.

Exhausted and battling a towering fear, she had dropped on the stage and fallen fast asleep, afraid to wish or hope that she would ever find any kind of normalcy.

Hunger was a clear and present problem. She stood, left the stage, rounded the bar, and searched the turned-off refrigerator for any kind of food. What did she find? Two plastic bottles of water, and a big jar of mixed bar nuts. How long had they been there?

Roxie eagerly grabbed a bottle of water and the jar of bar nuts. She straightened, shut the fridge door, and spotted a battery-powered, digital calendar clock to the right of the point-of-sale cash register, and her eyes widened on the blinking green letters. It read, 4-25-2020, 7:24 A.M.

Roxie's eyes remained glued to the clock, her mind spinning. She'd first time traveled in August 2019 or eight months before, assuming the clock was correct. So, in only eight months, according to the woman she'd spoken to, and the note she'd read on Speakeasy's metal grate, the entire world was caught in the grip of some awful event, called COVID-19.

Minutes later, Roxie sat perched on the bar, facing the room, lost in thought, an open bottle of water on one side, the jar of nuts on the other. As she tossed nuts into her mouth, grateful they weren't stale, she chewed thoughtfully, gently swinging her legs, her mind grinding out questions.

Why had the time doorway sent her eight months ahead in time? And was this world, the world she'd returned to, the same world as the one she'd left? She let her mind roam free and speculate. Had she returned to her past "real world" or was she in an alternative reality, some science fiction dystopian world?

Making a mental list, she determined the first thing she had to do was call her friend, Tracie Lang, who had lived on West 18<sup>th</sup> Street in 2019. Roxie needed a place to stay, food to eat

and a change of undies and clothes, since the suitcase hadn't time traveled with her. Tracie's place was close by, and she could walk there.

Next, Roxie had to call her parents. They would freak out, of course, since she'd vanished eight months before, but call them she must. Her father was a dentist—a very skilled and successful dentist—and he could prescribe antibiotics, assuming she planned to return to 1925. Assuming she was living in the “right” world. Assuming she wasn't completely out of her mind.

As Roxie tipped back the bottle and drained the last of the water, she heard someone clear their voice. Startled, Roxie twisted toward the sound, nearly spitting out the water, jumping off the bar.

“I'm so sorry I frightened you,” the elderly woman said.

Roxie's heart pounded as she gawked at the white-haired woman with her stooped shoulders and watery, baggy eyes.

“I didn't know how to approach you,” the woman continued, in a surprisingly lilting voice. It was younger than her appearance. She stood barely five feet tall, wearing a classic blue print dress, a white sweater draped about her shoulders, and dark pumps. Although her face had a web of lines and the pale skin of old age, her eyes had a playful sparkle in them.

Roxie sought words, and then she recalled a conversation she'd had with Roy Thomas, the Speakeasy Manager, the night of her first performance, a conversation which now seemed to have occurred decades ago.

*“Do you own this place, Roy?”*

*“No way. The owner's an old woman, and the building has been in her family for years. It was closed for a long time, and she lived alone here. A couple of years ago, she opened it again and hired me.”*

*“Does she ever come in?”*

*“Rarely. She stays pretty much to herself. I've heard that she's the great-granddaughter of some guy who used to own a*

*bar here in the 1920s or 30s, but she's never talked to me about it."*

Roxie was about to blurt out an apology when a big, lumbering black cat crept into the room, looking her over with wide green eyes.

"Don't mind him," the woman said. "That's Rocky. He's got silence and speed, and he keeps the place mouse-free."

Roxie stared at the cat, sure he was the same cat who'd probably been chasing the mouse that raced across her shoes in 2019, sending her tumbling into the time doorway.

"I hope I didn't scare you," Roxie finally said.

"When I heard noises down here, I was about to call the police, but I thought I should check the place out first, in case old Rocky here was knocking things around."

Roxie gave the cat another glance. "I slept here last night, but I didn't see Rocky. I didn't have any place else to go, but I'm leaving. I have a girlfriend who lives on 18<sup>th</sup> Street, not too far from the Joyce Theatre."

The woman tilted her head to the side, taking Roxie in fully. "I can't say I've been expecting you, but then again, I can't say I'm surprised, either."

"I'm sorry?" Roxie said, as she ran a hand across the nape of her neck. "What was that?"

"Forgive me, my dear, but you see, you gave me quite a start as well."

Roxie waited for more.

The woman clasped her hands before her. "Would you like to join me upstairs for some breakfast? I'm sure you must be hungry, and those bar nuts won't sustain you for very long."

"Do you own this place?" Roxie asked.

"Yes... I was the owner when you performed here last year, before the pandemic."

"Pandemic?"



“Yes.” The woman smiled, and Roxie got the vague suspicion that she knew something about Roxie’s time travel. “You see, there is a very contagious virus going around. It’s called COVID-19, and many people here in New York, and in the rest of the world, are getting sick and dying.”

Roxie’s acute attention stayed focused on the woman. “I am... Well, I’m feeling very weird right now and, frankly, my brain is tired from trying to make sense of everything.”

“I don’t doubt it. Please, let’s go upstairs and have some breakfast. It will do you good.”

But Roxie still didn’t move. “Who are you? I mean, excuse me, I’m Roxie Raines.”

The woman’s smile held secrets. “Yes, I know,” and her words seemed to crackle in the air. “Please take a few deep breaths, Roxie, and then I’ll tell you who I am.”

“Okay...” and then Roxie did so, staring more deeply at the woman, as another siren went racing by outside.

“I’m Judith Alison Kane Reeves.”

Roxie’s eyes fluttered. “What was that? Did you say Kane?”

“Yes. Kane Reeves. I was married to Walter R. Reeves for over twenty-five years. But let me come to the point, Roxie. I’m Jimmy Kane’s daughter.”

Roxie was motionless, staring, her mind grasping for reality. “... Jimmy? You said, Jimmy?”

“Yes, Jake’s son, Jimmy Kane.”

Roxie’s eyes shifted away from Judith’s as she processed the astounding information. Her head pounded, and her blood swum around. “Jimmy Kane? Your father?”

“Yes. We can continue this conversation upstairs, Roxie, if that is all right. My legs aren’t as strong as they used to be, and I think you could use a tip of brandy in your mug of coffee.”

Roxie’s eyes closed as her mental circuits jammed. “Yes, I think... Yes, I do need to sit, or eat, or drink, or something.”

## CHAPTER 31

The roomy, one-bedroom apartment had an aqua and gray color scheme, with a large sectional sofa, matching chairs, blonde wooden floors with throw rugs, and two tall windows that looked down onto Charles Street. Striking color portraits of 1920s women hung on the walls, and the artist had captured the beauty, elegance, styles and textures of the period.

Roxie and Mrs. Reeves sat on comfortable stools at a six-foot gray marble breakfast bar that separated the living area from the kitchen.

“How’s the coffee?” Mrs. Reeves asked.

Roxie smiled her pleasure. “Awesome. The brandy’s not bad, either.”

“Well, help yourself to the fruit, cheese, and bagels. I had them delivered from the deli up the street. They’re one of the few places open these days. Only essential businesses, so the governor said. Liquor stores, of course, and pharmacies, delis, and grocery stores.”

Roxie had many questions, but she needed time to space out and let her nerves settle before she could form them.

“Do you go out?”

“No, not at my age. I’m seventy-six years old. If I caught COVID, I could die. It is a dreadful, deadly virus.”

Deep in thought, Roxie reached for a bagel and a knife. She dug the knife into a tub of cream cheese and scooped some. “I was going to fly home to Indiana to see my parents.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to wait for that. The airports are closed.”

The news about the pandemic seemed a nightmare to Roxie; hard to believe. How could so much have happened in such a short time?

After Roxie slathered the cream cheese on the toasted bagel, she took a bite and chewed thoughtfully. She was trying hard to fit herself back into the twenty-first century world, but she felt floaty, like a complete stranger. The world she'd returned to was not the world she'd left. This was a dystopian world, a world she'd read about in novels and seen in movies, a world of death and fear.

Roxie stared absently for a moment and then said, "I suppose you must know all about the past and what happened? I mean, you must know about Jake and me, and Charlie, and Harriet, right?"

Mrs. Reeves held the mug of coffee to her lips, but she didn't drink. "It was I who hung your portrait in the basement. For several years, it was hanging right over there with the other 1920s paintings."

"Why is it in the basement?"

"So you would see it when you were supposed to see it, when you went after that man."

"Nash Corbin?"

"Yes..."

Roxie took a gulp of her coffee, wanting to jolt her brain into overdrive. "So, wait a minute. You knew I'd come? You knew that Roy Thomas would hire me, and I would sing at Speakeasy?"

Mrs. Reeves smiled reservedly as her eyes wandered the room. "Yes, and no, and I don't want to seem irritatingly evasive. It's just that time can be changed in the past just as it is changed from moment to moment in the present, by the choices we make now. But the chances were that you'd show up, and you did."

"Okay, my head is like, I don't know, all messed up, and I'm using the words messed up instead of the word I really want to use."

Mrs. Reeves pursed her lips, searching for words. "Let me try to explain it the best way I can, at least as far as I understand it, allowing for the fact that I could be wrong."

History contains events that happened in the past, and we, in the present, learn about them, right? But if someone time travels to the past, let's say a hundred years, and changes something with enough significance that it is documented, then that event will simply be what happened. In the present, now, it will be a historical fact, the natural course of events. A person reading about the change a hundred years later won't know that the historical fact had been changed by the time traveler."

Roxie leaned back, her mug in hand. "Okay, so you're saying that if I time travel back to 1938 and somehow find a way to kill Hitler, then all of history will be changed? Maybe World War II doesn't happen, and all the people that were killed would not be killed, etc.?"

"Yes, and the world would be a very different place, with an entirely different series of events. Anyone reading or listening to history now would know that history to be the actual history. Who would question it? It happened. You killed Hitler."

"But wait a minute," Roxie said, leaning forward. "I remember reading about the grandfather paradox when I was in college. It's the idea that if a person travels to a time before their grandfather had children, and kills him, it would make their own birth impossible."

Mrs. Reeves lowered her coffee mug, fixing her eyes on Roxie. "I had many time travel conversations with my brother, Mike. He was a scientist; a research biologist who worked for several pharmaceutical companies. He said, if some laws of physics are considered probabilistic, and not precisely determined, then for someone like you, a time traveler, it opens up the possibility of multiple outcomes, and some may not be contradictory at all. He also believed in worm holes, that lead from past to future, and future to past."

Roxie shook her head. "Did he know about the time travel doorway in the basement?"

"No, my mother didn't want him to know. She only told me about it. 'The fewer people who know, the better,' she said."

“I don’t know, Mrs. Reeves. I’m not good at thinking about this kind of thing, and I’m certainly not any kind of expert in time travel theory. I know nothing about the physics of time travel and the only reason I believe in it is because I’ve experienced it. So, for me, time travel exists, but I have no idea how it works, any more than I know what consciousness is or how this entire universe came into existence.”

Mrs. Reeves nodded. “The only reason I brought it up is that it concerns you and your choices here and now.”

Roxie’s brows knitted together. “You know what happens in the past,” she said pointedly. “Right?”

“Yes... the past that you just left. THAT past. But if you return, one simple choice could change everything, and history will be changed, no matter how small or large that change might be. That’s why I’m not going to tell you what I know about the past. You might change it.”

Roxie blinked slowly and her smile was faint. “Have you time traveled?”

“No.”

“Never?”

“No.”

“Did anyone else from the past ever come through, like Nash Corbin?”

“Yes. A woman from 1910, who stayed and didn’t return. And a man from 1898, who was drunk. Unfortunately, he was hit by a car and killed not far from here.”

The phone rang, suspending the moment, and Mrs. Reeves went to answer it. Roxie had nearly finished her bagel by the time Mrs. Reeves returned to her stool.

“That was the daughter of an old friend... My friend is in the hospital, and I’m frightened for her. She has COVID and they’re going to put her on a respirator.”

“I’m sorry.”

Mrs. Reeves put a hand to her forehead. “I hardly know the world anymore. It’s changing so fast, and I’m feeling so vulnerable and left behind.”

She stared at Roxie for a long, uncomfortable minute. “What’s it like... stepping through that time doorway?”

Roxie thought about it. “It’s both scary and cool. I flew about in the wind, and I felt connected to the wind somehow. It seemed to hold me or protect me, while at the same time all these lights swam around me and passed through me, and I felt like I was a prism. It’s pretty wild. And then I just fell asleep, and the first time, I woke up standing in the alley outside in 1925. This time, I woke up in your basement in 2020.”

Mrs. Reeves put a hand over her heart. “Heavens! It would probably give me a heart attack.”

Roxie asked the question that had been on her mind ever since she’d arrived. “Mrs. Reeves, when I vanished in 2019, what happened? Did the police search for me? Did you hear from my parents?”

Mrs. Reeves reached for a slice of apple and nibbled on it, hesitating.

## CHAPTER 32

Mrs. Reeves chewed the apple and swallowed. “When Roy and Jeff couldn’t find you anywhere in the place, and your purse and cell phone were still on the bar, they rushed upstairs and knocked on my door. But what could I tell them? How could I tell anyone the truth?”

Mrs. Reeves turned somber. “We called the police, and filed a missing person’s report, and the police searched for you. They contacted your friends and family, checked your social media, and spoke to me, Roy, and Jeff. And, yes, your parents came, and, as you can imagine, they were quite upset.”

Roxie’s eyes widened. “You met them?”

“Yes.”

Roxie glanced away, letting yet one more unreal moment sink in. “Of course, they would have come. Of course, they were frantic. Oh my God, what a messed-up thing.”

A moment later, Roxie looked directly at Mrs. Reeves. “But did you know? Did you know what had happened to me?”

“Yes.”

Roxie gave her a quizzical look. “Okay... so you’re Jimmy Kane’s daughter. Roy thought you were the great granddaughter of someone who owned this place.”

“He was wrong. Simply put, my father willed it to my mother, who willed it to me. For now, let’s leave it at that.”

Roxie sought to untangle the dates, people, and years that tumbled about in her head. “So, I guess I have to ask...” Roxie stopped, wrestling to come up with the right words. “Was I there? Did you meet me... I mean, in the past?”

Judith eased back, smiling. “In that past, yes. Yes... we met when I was a little girl.”

Roxie stared with anxious reluctance. Did she really want to know more? Yes, and no. Another siren screamed by outside

and broke the spell, and Roxie bit her lip to keep from cursing. It was all too much—too crazy—and she'd known a lot of crazy in the last few months.

Roxie set her nearly empty mug of coffee on the counter, the brandy giving her a buzz she didn't need. She needed a clear head. She needed to bang her head against a wall. She needed someone to slap her awake.

Twisting around, Roxie left the stool and crossed the room to the windows. Through the parted, blue/gray curtains, she stared down at the street, a street she'd walked on in 2019. That same quiet street in 1925 was filled with crowds of people, who stood behind velvet ropes, pushing to get into The Black Cat to see her perform. It was the same street where Jake had held and kissed her. And then her brain locked up. She'd come to the end of all thought.

Judith said, "The space downstairs went through a number of incarnations. It has been a specialty clothing shop, an antiques store, a coffee house in the 1960s, a neighborhood bar and then Speakeasy. Walter, my husband, was a clever man, a Wall Street broker, and I worked for an insurance company. We didn't live here then. After he died, I sold our house upstate, and our condo on the Upper East Side, and I moved here. But for many years, we rented this apartment, and I had the basement area—where the light is—bricked up, so no one would see it."

As Roxie listened, another ambulance siren shrieked, and she pressed her hands to her ears. "There are so many ambulances. They're driving me crazy!"

"It's been going on night and day," Mrs. Reeves said. "The hospitals are full, and no one has any idea when it's all going to end. They're trying to come up with a vaccine, but who knows how long that will take."

Roxie turned. "Did your husband know about the basement?"

"No. I never told him."



Mrs. Reeves left the breakfast bar and moved into the living room. As she did, she gazed at the black marble mantel, where a color family photograph sat in an ornate silver frame. “That’s my husband and son.”

Roxie wandered over, studying the photo. Her husband was a refined-looking man with friendly eyes. Her son’s face was youthful, but his eyes held a gentle melancholy.

“My son, Grant, struggled with drug abuse, I’m afraid,” Mrs. Reeves said. “We tried everything to help... He died at forty-two.”

“I’m sorry,” Roxie said. “That must have been difficult.”

Judith forced a smile, as she indicated toward the breakfast bar, lightening the mood. “Have you had enough to eat, Roxie?”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll help you clean up.”

“Oh, no. I don’t mind. It will give me something to do. I used to have a maid come in three times a week, but COVID took care of that. I don’t know how people are going to weather this, so many of them being sick or out of work.”

Roxie settled in the nearest chair, her head clearing. “So obviously, you’ve seen the light, the blue light in the basement rock wall?”

“Yes, I’ve seen it. It’s a small light on the underside of a protruding rock. It’s not so easy to see and, I have to say, when I first saw it, it scared the living daylights out of me.”

“Did you touch it?”

“No... I have never had the courage.”

Roxie’s eyes flickered with questions. “Can you tell me this... What happened after I vanished in 1925? I mean, how did people react?”

Mrs. Reeves gathered up the dishes and took them to the sink. Roxie left the chair and went to help, but she was told to relax. So, while Mrs. Reeves wiped the breakfast bar clean, Roxie straightened the stools.

“My mother showed me some old newspaper clippings and magazine covers of you,” Mrs. Reeves said. “You were quite the star. You dazzled all of New York. After you went missing, the police, the public, the newspaper reporters, and even kids looked all over for you. After about a month, the search was finally called off, and it was presumed that you had been murdered and your body buried someplace where it would never be found. I recall one particular newspaper article. It said something like, ‘Roxie Raines, the cat’s meow with nine lives, is missing and presumed dead. Her one-of-a-kind spark has dimmed, and many in New York miss her.’”

Roxie leaned back against the breakfast bar and pressed a finger to her lips, remembering the dazzling lights of The Black Cat and The Ginger Jam. She recalled the ecstatic faces, the shouts for “more”, the dancing, the clouds of smoke and the jiving music of Benny Stamp and his band. And she recalled Jake staring at her with his sexy, beckoning eyes, and she remembered the smell of him, the strength of him, and the taste of his mouth.

Roxie let out a little sigh of pleasure and smiled wistfully. “I had one helluva time.”

While Mrs. Reeves loaded the dishwasher, Roxie stared out at nothing. “So, I disappeared in 2019, and I vanished in 1925. I don’t know where the hell I am or where I belong. I escaped from one dreamworld into another. My parents think I’m dead in 2019. Jake thinks I’m dead in 1925, and I’m living in a pandemic in some dystopian world I don’t even know anymore.”

Mrs. Reeves gave her a compassionate glance. “One world to live in is difficult enough. I can’t imagine living in two.”

“What should I do? Stay here, or try to go back? If I call my parents, what can I tell them? And if I decide to go back to 1925, they’ll be devastated all over again when I disappear. I can’t call any of my friends, because they think I’m dead, and I can’t go anywhere, because there’s a pandemic—and I have no place to go, anyway.”

After the kitchen was clean, Roxie paced the living room, feeling the tension in her gut like a coiled spring. Mrs. Reeves eased down on the sofa and folded her hands. “You can stay here with me, Roxie, for as long as you like. For now, you should rest, get plenty of sleep, and when you’re strong, then you can make your decision.”

Roxie glanced at Mrs. Reeves for a swift, fearful moment and then looked away. “I try not to, but I keep thinking about it, you know?”

“About what?”

“That you know what happened in the past. You know what happened to us all, don’t you?”

Mrs. Reeves’s voice was feathery light. “Yes, Roxie, but that past is gone, at least from where we are. If you go back, who knows what you might change and how things might turn out.”

“Then I guess you also know why I came—to get antibiotics so I can save Charlie’s life. But then, maybe I came back because I was curious, too. My success happened so fast, and it was so... exhausting, but it was fun, and it was so damn exciting, but it was so overwhelming and unreal.”

Roxie looked at Mrs. Reeves, her eyes beseeching. “Will you please tell me what happened to them all?”

Mrs. Reeves shook her head. “No, Roxie. Not unless you decide to stay and not go back.”

*Should I go back?* Roxie thought.

“If you decide to return to 1925, I can call my doctor. He’s an old friend. Since I can’t go for an office visit, I can make a Zoom request for antibiotics for an illness I feel coming on,” she said with a wink. “I’m sure he’ll prescribe them.”

Roxie stared out the window. “I don’t know what to do.”

Mrs. Reeves rose and went to her, taking her hand, holding it gently. “Give it a few days. You can’t go anywhere anyway. Give it some time, and it will come to you. You’ll know what to do.”

## CHAPTER 33

Four days later, the birdsong was loud, but the streets were eerily quiet. Roxie and Mrs. Reeves wandered the West Greenwich Village neighborhood, enjoying an early morning, April breeze that cooled their masked faces. White clumps of clouds slid lazily across the blue sky, driving shadows over the streets and skyscrapers, and trees were showing green buds.

The ladies strolled past nine Greek revival houses built in 1838 and Mrs. Reeves remarked, “What a different New York City it must have been in those days.”

Roxie gave her a nod and a smile, as they paused for a moment to examine the landmarked buildings.

“Yesterday,” Mrs. Reeves said, “I read something online while I was scrolling through my cell phone, and I thought of you. It was a quote by Robert Orben. He said, ‘Time flies. It’s up to you to be the navigator.’”

“I like it,” Roxie said, as they began walking again. “Who is Robert Orben?”

“I didn’t know either. I looked him up. He’s a professional comedy writer and magician.”

“I wonder if he ever time traveled,” Roxie said, with a laugh. “All I can say about that is, time flies both ways and in the middle, and that’s why, literally, I don’t know whether I’m coming or going.”

“You just need more time. It’s only been four days.”

“Well, it’s super cool that Amazon is still doing deliveries, and miracle of miracles, the jeans, jacket, sweatshirt, the undies, and tops all fit. Much easier and faster than shopping in 1925.”

Mrs. Reeves presented her face to a shaft of sunlight. “It’s a lovely spring morning, isn’t it, Roxie? But I do despise wearing these masks, even though I know it’s for the best. We

shouldn't even be out walking, but I can't stay locked away in the house all day. I feel like a prisoner."

Roxie adjusted her mask over her nose. "I never would have believed it. All this virus stuff. Workers at the market and pharmacy seem so nervous, and nobody wanted to talk or even look at me. It's really freaky."

"Is that helping you to make up your mind? The state of the world right now?"

Roxie shrugged. "Yes, and no. I mean, maybe this will all end soon. I keep looking at your phone, and I almost grab it and call my parents, and then I stop. I'm just, I don't know, stuck. I can't make up my mind."

Roxie looked into Mrs. Reeves's eyes, and she didn't see pity. She saw empathy and understanding.

"Do you like living alone, Mrs. Reeves?"

"I've told you several times, Roxie, you can call me Judith."

"I know... It's just that you seem like a Mrs. Reeves to me. You have class and intelligence... and maybe you seem wise."

Mrs. Reeves blurted out a laugh. "Wise? Me? Oh, I have blundered around in the dark for years. When my husband, Walter, died, I was so lost and lonely. And after Grant's death a few years later, I was angry at everything, tied up with grief and regret. Well... that's when I simplified my life. I sold our properties, donated clothes and furnishings, and moved into that one-bedroom apartment above Speakeasy."

"Why didn't you sell it? Speakeasy?"

Mrs. Reeves pointed into the distance. "See that 16-story, modern, glass building?"

Roxie searched and found it, seeing sunlight glint off the glass. "Yes... They've been putting up a lot of those in the last few years."

Mrs. Reeves nodded. "Thirty apartments, with large terraces, and Hudson River views. There are floor-to-ceiling windows and there's a fifty-foot pool, a screening room, a bike room, a garden off the lobby, and a private wine cellar."

“Wow! I can’t imagine the price.”

“I still keep my real estate ear to the ground, and I have some old friends who keep me informed. Are you ready for the numbers? \$7.95 million to \$44 million price range.”

Roxie’s mouth fell open as she gawked at the building. “No way!”

Mrs. Reeves’s gaze was stuck in the distance. “Yes, Roxie, it is a different world from the one I grew up in. But, I suppose, during this lockdown, those spacious rooms with a lovely view must be comfortable.”

They turned around and started back to Mrs. Reeves’s house as an ambulance once again shattered the silence, speeding along the quiet streets.

“I didn’t sell the building and Speakeasy for two reasons,” Mrs. Reeves said. “One, I thought you just might show up and, two, after Grant’s death, I entertained the thought that I might just go down into that basement and see where that time travel door would take me.”

Roxie glanced over.

“As we know, I didn’t, because I was just too scared, and maybe I didn’t want to begin again in some other time. And, if I got there and didn’t like it and I changed my mind, there’s no guarantee that doorway would send me back.”

They walked in silence for a time, Roxie’s head down and Mrs. Reeves deep in thought.

It was Roxie who broke the silence, just as they were approaching Speakeasy. “Mrs. Reeves, if I decide not to go back, you will tell me what happened to them all, right? To Jake, and Harriet and Charlie, and your father?”

Mrs. Reeves hesitated in the doorway. “Yes.”

Just before they went inside, a white SUV passed, its windows closed, loud rock music thumping inside, sounding like thunder as it retreated.

“Someone’s defiant,” Roxie said.

Roxie spent the rest of the day reading, watching a movie and pacing, while Mrs. Reeves chatted with friends, caught up on emails, baked oatmeal cookies, and napped.

That night for dinner, they ordered Italian food from a local restaurant that had stayed open, but only for takeout. While Mrs. Reeves twirled linguine in pomodoro sauce with her fork, Roxie sliced into her chicken parmigiana, allowing herself to savor the smells. “This is so good! And I love the garlic bread.”

“And we’re making the dinner authentic with Chianti,” Mrs. Reeves said. “I don’t know how long that bottle has been sitting around here, but it still tastes good. Somebody gave it to me for Christmas or my birthday.”

Suddenly, Roxie sat up with a little gasp of memory. “Wait a minute! I’m twenty-seven years old. My birthday was on February 24. I completely forgot!”

Mrs. Reeves lit up, reached for her wine glass, and raised it in a toast. “Belated happy birthday, Roxie!”

Their glasses chimed and Roxie’s laugh was merry. “I can’t believe I forgot. In 1925, Jake said he was going to throw me a big party. But, of course, that’s before everything went to hell and Charlie got shot.”

Roxie’s mood shifted and her shoulders dropped. “Damn... Jake and me, we just couldn’t seem to get it together.”

“Do you miss him?” Mrs. Reeves asked.

“Oh yeah.”

Roxie shut her eyes and leaned her head back, pleasure spreading across her face. “Every moment, every touch, every sound of his voice, every scent.”

When Roxie’s eyes opened, they were far away and a little dreamy. “Jake Kane is the kind of guy that just makes me squirm inside because he so damned hot. And he has this great body, but he’s not a show-off or anything. He’s natural and real. And he’s smart, and tough, and sensitive all at the same time, and I know that sounds pathetic and impossible. He makes me crazy sometimes because he’s so stubborn, but I

love that about him, too. And he has sparkling eyes, and this kind of energy—like animal energy—and that just pulls me in every time, even when I don't want it to pull me in. I mean, there's just something about men in the 1920s. They're really masculine. I mean, when Jake takes me, he really takes me."

Roxie awakened from her sexy memories. "Oh, sorry, I'm saying too much."

Mrs. Reeves sipped her wine, her playful eyes resting on Roxie. "So, I guess you don't really miss him or love him all that much?"

Roxie grinned, feeling a deep-reaching homesickness for her life in 1925. "Yeah, well, I've been trying to push him out of my mind."

Mrs. Reeves enjoyed the buzz of the wine, the escape from life, and she was enjoying Roxie's youth and warmth.

Roxie picked up her glass and swirled the wine. "And I miss performing. It was such fun singing in those clubs. Such a high."

Roxie looked at Mrs. Reeves, and in a level voice, she said, "But I guess you know all about it, don't you?"

Mrs. Reeves shrugged with an enigmatic smile. "Maybe, and maybe not."

Roxie stared at the ruby red wine. "I don't know. Things just got all mixed up when Archie Wells died. And then Jake took this dangerous case, and then Charlie got shot."

A moment later, Roxie looked at Mrs. Reeves. "I do miss them all. In many ways, they all feel like family."

Mrs. Reeves eased back and wiped her lips with her napkin. "So, now you've, literally, had some distance from your life in 1925. That's a good thing, isn't it?"

Roxie nodded. "How long do you think this pandemic will last?"

"No one knows. It could be years before someone comes up with a vaccine. Until then, I suspect most of the world will be shut down and many lives in danger."



In bed that night, Roxie didn't sleep well. It was time to get off the fence and decide. What more was there to think about? Roaring Twenties New York seemed surreal, a distant place remembered as a dream, fading more every hour. And there was the frightening question: when she stepped into the time doorway, would she return to 1925 or travel to some other time, where she'd have to start all over again?

The next morning, Mrs. Reeves found Roxie sitting at the breakfast bar, sipping coffee, munching on an oatmeal cookie. She was fully dressed in jeans, a blue sweatshirt and red sneakers. Her hair was mussed and damp from a shower, and when she turned to face Mrs. Reeves, she straightened her back and lifted her chin.

“Good morning,” Roxie said, firmly. “I’ve made up my mind.”

Mrs. Reeves waited.

“I’m going back—or at least I’m going to try to get back.”

Mrs. Reeves’s face fell a little. “Oh... Well, I thought you might. Shall I be honest? I’d hoped you’d stay. It’s been so nice having you around. I realized how lonely I’ve become, especially now, with this pandemic.”

Roxie slid off the stool, standing tall, her eyes clear. “Come with me.”

Mrs. Reeves’s heart took a startled plunge.

“Don’t think about it so much, Mrs. Reeves. Look at it this way. You’re alone and you’re living in a nightmare. As you’ve said at least three times, if you catch COVID at your age, it could kill you, and it might be years before things get back to normal, if they ever do. I suspect things will never be the same. I’ve been watching TV and everything I see and hear is just crazy. I don’t know this world anymore. Frankly, it’s just plain frightening. So, I’m going back, and I want you to come with me. Back there, I have a large suite with plenty of rooms. The 1920s are also a crazy world, Mrs. Reeves, but it’s a helluva lot more fun. And you’ve got to see Coney Island in

the 1920s. As they say back then, it's a real gas. Will you come with me?"

Mrs. Reeves searched Roxie's face, her lips tight, her eyes blinking once, twice, three times.

"Roxie, don't you see the utter madness of it? If we're lucky enough to time travel back to 1925, my father will be three years old. It's too fantastic. Too incomprehensible."

"We won't tell anyone who you are. We'll make up a story. I'm great at making up stories. I'll say you're a good friend of my mother's, from Indiana."

"But what if we end up somewhere else, in another time?"

"If that happens, then we'll be together, and that won't be so bad, will it? We'll both just have to begin again, wherever that will be. And you won't be alone. Think of it as going on a great adventure."

"At my age, Roxie, I'm not sure I'm ready for another adventure. And what about my medications?"

"Bring all that you have and, when we get to the 1920s, we'll talk to Harriet. She's a doctor who runs a children and women's clinic. She treats a lot of older women and knows all about herbs and things, and alternative medicine.

Their eyes met and held.

"What do you say, Mrs. Reeves? Take a risk and start a brand-new life in a brand-new world?"

Mrs. Reeves ran a trembling hand across her lips. "I just don't know... I can't imagine it," she said, as she turned toward the windows, staring out, pondering the possibility. "Oh, for crying out loud. What would Walter have said about all this?"

"Your husband is gone, Mrs. Reeves, and you have a chance to start a brand-new life in an exciting world where there's no pandemic."

Mrs. Reeves licked her lower lip. "Can I really do it?"

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Three days later, Roxie and Mrs. Reeves were in the basement, standing before the rock wall and the small, pulsating light.

“I’m scared, Roxie,” Mrs. Reeves said. “I am so very frightened. My knees are knocking together.”

“Yeah, well, my heart’s beating so hard it hurts,” Roxie added. “So, we’re both scared and we’re both wondering if we’re out of our minds.”

Mrs. Reeves looked around nervously. “I hope my husband’s nephew doesn’t sell the place, but he probably will, and that will be the end of Speakeasy. At least he loves cats, and he took Rocky. I’m going to miss that old cat.”

“And he thinks you’re moving to Canada? You did tell me that, didn’t you? My mind’s been so, I don’t know, preoccupied.”

“Yes, to live with a friend’s daughter, who’s a doctor. He thought it was a good idea for me to not continue living alone. I guess when he finds out I’m not there, well... It won’t matter, since I’ll be somewhere else, hopefully in another time.”

Roxie drew in a breath. “Okay, well, we’re dressed for the 1920s, we’ve packed our bags, we have Charlie’s antibiotics, and we have our jewels, just in case we end up in some other God- forsaken place.”

Roxie and Mrs. Reeves exchanged tentative glances. “Are we ready?” Roxie asked.

During the final moment, just before the time travel door opened, Mrs. Reeves’s eyebrows furrowed, and she had the sudden thought that she wouldn’t survive the ordeal.

Roxie’s thoughts were on Jake, Clare, Harriet and Charlie, and when the doorway burst open, she grabbed Mrs. Reeves’s trembling hand and, in a great leap of faith, they went plunging into the opening. A gust of cold wind blew across

them, encircled them, then flung them off, into a howling swirl of blue light.

## CHAPTER 34

Jake Kane's gaze shot past the good-looking dame who was giving him the once-over, and then the twice-over. His eyes lingered on the gold-gleaming art déco lobby, busy with foot traffic, and where a troll-looking house dick studied him with dark suspicion.

Jake stood before a bank of elevators next to a flapper, as his mind took bets on what was to come. He wore a new straw hat that he'd paid the \$1.75 sale price for. His new, white flannel trousers, for which he'd paid \$7.50, were comfortable, and the blue, double-breasted club jacket, complete with white shirt and gold tie, made him feel just the ticket, not that he knew what the ticket was for. Maybe the flapper who stared at him did.

The doors hissed open. He removed his hat and stepped back, to allow the flapper to enter, as well as a short, stubby man with pouchy eyes, double chin, and oval head. The elevator boy's eyes flicked over the doll, and then up in down the doll, with impressive, practiced speed.

The stubby man took in the fine-looking young woman, who was decked out in a slim, spring green and pink dress, a tight-fitting white cloche hat, and an impressive pair of emerald earrings. The entire package and her aloof expression seemed to say, "Look all you want, you dope, but don't even think about touching the goods."

The doors closed, and Jake could feel the flapper's eyes on him. They were nice eyes. They said something like, "You might have something I like." And then, in a side-glance, he noticed she twisted a big, fat, diamond ring on her left hand. Had he read her wrong? No, it was the times. The time of the beautiful fools and the love-lost saps, like himself.

When the stubby man exited onto the fourth floor, Jake and the flapper were alone with the elevator operator, rising to upper floors.

“Aren’t you the fellow who was with Roxie Raines a while back?” the flapper asked.

Jake didn’t look at her. “No.”

“Okay... Well, from the newspapers, I thought you looked like him, that’s all. Anyway, I’m here to see a lawyer about my divorce,” she said, smoothly, in a cultivated accent.

Jake nodded.

“I’ve got pictures of him with another woman, the bum.”

The elevator boy kept his eyes focused ahead, but Jake knew the kid’s big ears were wide open because, well, *his* were also wide open. She was a good-looking doll, and her patter was provocative.

Jake wondered who his gumshoe competition was, because if she had photos of her husband doing the horizontal tango with another dame, only a gumshoe doing domestics could produce those. But he decided not to ask. Instead, he said, “In New York, a divorce is only possible if one party admits adultery.” He wasn’t sure why he’d said it.

“So, what are you, some kind of expert?”

Jake shrugged.

Pride flushed her cheeks. “Like I said, I’ve got pictures. And if that doesn’t work, I’ll obtain a legal separation, claiming cruelty. Do you know what my bum of a husband often says to me? ‘Don’t be a goof.’”

Jake licked his upper lip. “He may file a counter-claim of abandonment.”

“My lawyer says I have a good case.”

“Good for you,” Jake finally said.

“My husband said I only married him to take advantage of alimony. He’s fifty-one, he has a peacock-blue Rolls Royce, and he takes me on \$1000 a day shopping trips,” she boasted.

“Then why divorce him?” Jake asked, as the elevator doors swished open.

“I don’t like being called a goof, and I don’t like sharing the goods with some other dame. And I don’t like it that he keeps an African goose in our bedroom. If it was up to me, we’d eat that goose for dinner, and I’d have a good appetite for it.”

Jake arched an eyebrow, as she swept out and turned to face him. “And that’s all I have to say about it!”

“I’m sure I’ll read all about it in the papers,” Jake said, offering a little head bow. “Good luck.”

She was frowning at him as the elevator doors closed.

The next floor up, Jake left the elevator and started down a golden, carpeted hallway, passing modern art paintings on either side of the walls. He came to an attractive desk with an attractive, bobbed-haired redhead seated behind it, a phone in her hand, her voice filled with soprano courtesy.

When she hung up, Jake introduced himself and told her whom he was to see.

“Yes, Mr. Emery is waiting for you, Mr. Kane.”

She escorted Jake along a short hallway to a closed door that had a golden plaque screwed on it.

### **Edward Emery, Attorney at Law**

Jake entered a spacious office designed in gold and black, with accents of red. Edward’s desk was L-shaped; it was built to be impressive, and it was. A gold and black sofa fronted a bank of windows that looked out over the city, and the floor plants rose, tall and elegant. Two floor-to-ceiling bookshelves contained legal books and journals, and the black leather club chairs spaced about the office were soft and deep.

Edward rose from his desk and circled it, meeting Jake with a broad grin and an outstretched hand. He was in his late forties, with dark red hair combed back tight to his head, revealing cool, shrewd, deep green eyes behind horn-rimmed spectacles. He was about Jake’s height, and there was a splash of freckles on his nose and cheeks. The dark pinstriped suit fit him to perfection, and a burgundy silk scarf blossomed from his breast pocket.

After the secretary retreated, closing the door, the two men shook hands firmly.

“Jake Kane, it is good to meet you,” Edward said, in a booming baritone that would easily fill any courtroom. “Please have a seat, and let’s get straight to business.”

Jake had done his homework. Edward Emery had started his career as an assistant district attorney in the New York County District Attorney’s Office, where he’d served for five years. During that time, he’d tried several high-profile homicide cases to verdict. Then he’d been involved in criminal defense matters, arguing appeals in both state and federal courts.

In 1919, he’d started his own firm, which specialized in high-profile criminal cases. Mr. Emery was the leading partner. He was also a rising star in New York politics, and Jake suspected that this was the reason for their meeting.

After the men were seated, Edward offered Jake a cigar, which he declined, as well as a cigarette, which Jake also declined.

Edward Emery folded his hands on his desk and put his eyes on Jake, exploring, taking the measure of the man. Jake did the same, concluding that Emery was a man who’d seen many a criminal and adversary in court, as well as many cops, both good and bad.

“I’ve seen your records, Jake. Your police record is impressive. Your war record is quite admirable. I didn’t serve in the war. I bet you haven’t noticed my limp.”

Jake *had* noticed it when Edward rounded his desk to shake hands, but he decided to lie, feeling certain the man was sensitive about it. Emery had a prideful shine about him and, no doubt, a granite ego to go along with it.

“No, I didn’t notice.”

“I fell out of a tree when I was a kid, trying to build a treehouse. Anyway, down I went and broke the thing in several places. Left leg, it was. The pain was bad and the infection worse. Nearly took me out. But I survived and, like Teddy Roosevelt himself, I built my strength back up so that



most people don't even notice it. I'm strong and I'm fit. Unfortunately, my fitness wasn't good enough for the war doctors. They flunked me three times. But enough about that, and on to the reason I asked you to come. Are you sure I can't get you anything?"

"No, thanks," Jake said, observing a fervor in Edward's eyes that suggested he had something to prove. Jake had seen that same fervor in Army officers, politicians, baseball players and bootleggers. At one time, he'd even seen it in Charlie Stokes, back in his boxing days.

"I'm sure you've read about me in the papers, that I want to run for mayor?"

Jake nodded.

"I'll be blunt. I'm obtaining money and support. The governor and I have spoken several times."

Jake kept his mind open, not ready to speculate.

Edward sat up straight, his eyes clear. "Since last December, I've been following your case with interest."

"It can't be that interesting to follow," Jake said.

"I disagree. That business at the warehouse helped provoke an investigation into Calvin Sinclair, by State Senator Samuel Fowler and the New York State Legislature. So far, or so I've heard, they've found some pretty damning evidence. By the way, you shouldn't have done jail time for that warehouse shoot-out."

"Sinclair has friends. I was lucky I didn't get rubbed out."

"But you had a good lawyer, and you have good friends, too."

"Yeah, good friends, reporters on my side, and a good lawyer, Raymond Belair. Have you heard of him?"

"Yeah. Good man."

"Anyway, a month in the slammer for assault and battery wasn't so bad," Jake said. "I got some much-needed sleep. But

Sinclair wasn't happy about it, and I hear he's still not happy about it, so I keep looking over my shoulder.”

“Don't worry about Sinclair. His time is running out. They'll get him.”

Edward cleared his voice and shifted the conversation. “Jake, can I be direct?”

Jake lifted a hand, indicating in the affirmative, and nodded.

Edward released his folded hands. “I've got a big question to ask you. One that could completely change your life and the life of your little boy.”

Jake stared with suspicion and reluctance.

## CHAPTER 35

Edward Emery fixed his direct gaze on Jake. “At that warehouse, you single-handedly did what nobody else would have dared to do. Even though there are many men who have responsible leadership positions in this city and had absolute knowledge of Sinclair’s illegal affairs, they did nothing. You went up against one of the most powerful men in New York, and that took guts.”

Jake looked down, unable to release the inner darkness that rose whenever he thought of Charlie. “I didn’t do it alone. Charlie Stokes was there, and he saved my life.”

Edward nodded. “Of course, Jake. Of course, and I’m sorry...”

“So, if I had the choice to do it all over again, maybe I wouldn’t. Charlie tried to stop me, and maybe I should have listened to him.”

“I understand, Jake, but I think you *would* do it over again because that’s the kind of man you are. You don’t run from a fight. And Sinclair wasn’t so happy losing all that hooch. It cost him more than a million, and his partners aren’t too happy with him. At least, that’s what I’ve heard. Sinclair’s getting hammered on all sides right now, and it couldn’t happen to a more deserving guy.”

Jake looked at Edward and their eyes connected. “So, why am I here, Mr. Emery?”

“Jake, three of the men found dead in the warehouse were former cops. The man you bested in the fist fight is a thug, now dead. Did you know that?”

“I thought he was in the slammer.”

“He’s dead because he ratted on Sinclair for a deal he made with the D.A. for a lesser sentence. But Sinclair’s men got him. Knife in the heart. Anyway, his testimony into the inner workings of Sinclair’s syndicate was revealing. Sinclair is

peddling more than just bootlegged hooch. Add prostitution and gambling to his tab.”

Jake nodded. “No surprise.”

“I guess you know that Stella Lippincott is in a sanatorium upstate, not talking, not moving, not doing much of anything except staring.”

“Yeah, I heard. The lead was flying pretty good, and she didn’t duck. I wish a bullet would have found Sinclair.”

“Yeah, well, anyway, Stella’s father has some influence, and he’s furious, blaming the cops, and blaming you. The mother’s nearly out of her mind, and the fiancé is shooting his mouth off with the reporters.”

Jake pulled gently on the end of his nose. “Why doesn’t the father blame Sinclair?”

“You’re an easy target, and Sinclair’s still got money to pay off reporters. But most of the news boys wrote good things about you.”

“And I wish they hadn’t. They put a target on my back.”

Emery inhaled a breath. “It’s a miracle Hal Lester dodged the death sentence, Jake, and he has you to thank for that.”

“I didn’t do him any favors, and I still don’t like the guy.”

“Judge Moore knew your father, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“And he liked your father, and he likes you, and he’s one of the few judges downtown who’s not on the take. Didn’t you pull some strings to get him to sit on that case?”

“Strings? Me? No. I’ve got no strings to pull. All I did was call in some favors to a couple of hungry reporters who wrote those articles about Judge Browstow, and his connections to Sinclair’s alleged bootleg syndicate. They did the work and, okay, they were good articles, and so Sinclair’s bribes went away, and Judge Browstow did, too, because he knows the heat is on Sinclair. Judge Moore knew what was going on, all

right, and he gave me a wink and a nod. And he didn't take any guff from the prosecutor."

"That's my point, Jake. Judge Moore allowed Hal Lester's eyewitnesses to testify, and he threw out all that planted evidence. Browstow wouldn't have. So, the case against him didn't hold water, and Lester walked."

"Yeah, he walked all the way to France, and I told him to stay there."

Edward nodded, turned, moved toward the windows, locked his hands behind his back, and stared out. "Mayor John Mason and Police Commissioner Calvin Sinclair have to go, Jake, and we're only weeks away from a grand jury indictment. We know they work hand in hand. The graft is rampant. The money from our recent tax increase isn't going into public improvement projects. It's going to pay the salaries of fake employees. Add to that the construction kickbacks and the real estate deals, and we've got the two men squarely in our sights. It won't be long now. And I can tell you that all the corruption will stop when I'm elected."

Jake raised his eyes. "Good speech. I'll vote for you. You must be twisting the knife pretty good," Jake said. "When they're indicted, I guess you'll announce your candidacy for mayor?"

Edward turned. "When the time comes, yes. The deputy mayor is a drunk and a weakling. I'll defeat him easily, along with anyone else who has the guts to mount a campaign against me."

"Good for you."

"And one more thing I think you'll appreciate, Jake. Last January, it was discovered that, for months, someone has been tapping the telephone trunk which leads into the switchboard at the Prohibition Headquarters. We've got proof that Sinclair was paid to let it happen. The grand jury is going to learn that bootleggers have been listening to all the conversations of prohibition officials and enforcement police, and what do you know? Speakeasy owners were receiving mysterious 'tips' to let them know who was about to get raided. As I said,

someone ratted on Sinclair, and there's documentation. You're about to get your revenge, Jake."

"He'll still get away with murder."

"You'll never get him on that, and you know it."

Jake opened and closed his hand. "Maybe."

"Okay, Jake, now for the reason I asked you here." Edward pointed directly at him. "You, Jake Kane, would make a great Police Commissioner. You're experienced, respected and likeable. So, here it is, all the cards on the table. If I'm in, and I will be, make no mistake about it, I want you to be my Police Commissioner."

Jake sat still, as Emery's words bounced around in his head. He hadn't seen that coming.

"What do you say, Jake? We'll make a great team, we'll clean up this town, and New York City will be the better for it."

Jake look down at his hands and shrugged loosely. "I'll have to think about it."

"Of course, Jake. Of course. Take all the time you need."

Jake rose and, just as he turned to leave, Edward said, "I'm sorry to hear about your mother. I heard she passed away two months ago."

Jake turned to face him. "Yes. Her heart gave out."

"And your boy? Is he all right?"

"Yeah. He's living with my sister, and so am I. He's doing okay, but of course, he misses his grandmother."

Edward pushed away from his desk, another question waiting on his lips. "Pardon the personal question, but have you heard from Roxie Raines? Anything at all? I read an article about her now and then. She still sells lots of newspapers and magazines."

Jake kept his arms at his sides, his straw hat gripped in his right hand. "No. Nothing. Not a word, no matter what those news boys write."

“So, nothing turned up in Indiana?”

“Nothing...”

“Again, Jake. I’m sorry to hear it. But you will let me know about your decision... soon, I hope?”

“Yeah... I’ll be in touch and thanks for the offer.”

Downstairs in the lobby, Jake paused at the circular newsstand and his eyes traveled over the many magazines and newspapers. He saw five magazine covers with Roxie’s face on them, some photos, some illustrations. Since her disappearance, she was still a top seller. Jake’s gaze landed on one newspaper headline.

### **ROXIE RAINES SPOTTED IN PARIS!**

He didn’t pick it up. He’d seen so many headlines about Roxie in the last six months, and they were all fiction. No one knew where Roxie was or what had happened to her.

### **Roxie Seen in Argentina!**

### **Where is the Mysterious Roxie Raines?**

*“Roxie hopped a steamer through the Panama Canal and is in California, rumored to be making ‘a talking picture!’”*

### **Roxie Raines “Living the Life” with Millionaire Husband Roscoe Worthington.**

### **Roxie Raines’ SECRET LIFE!**

### **Roxie Raines’ Detective Beau Stays Mum. Police Investigate!**

At West 50<sup>th</sup> Street, Jake entered the subway station, dropped a nickel into the subway turnstile, passed through, and waited on the platform for the downtown train. Pocketing his hands with a lowered head, he had the sickening feeling he’d never see Roxie again.

## CHAPTER 36

The world revolved around them, then twisted into odd angles. Their feet sank through layers of thundering purple clouds, past a white circular moon. They rose, sailed, reached, and finally settled onto solid earth, scared and exhausted.

The tension in Roxie's shoulders eased when she turned to see Judith Reeves standing next to her, straight and still as a statue. Her scared eyes were big and round, her mouth was open, and her wide-brim floppy hat was lopsided on her head.

It was night, and they stood on damp cobblestones in an alley, and Roxie's suitcase was beside her, but Mrs. Reeves's suitcase was nowhere in sight.

Roxie inhaled a sharp gasp of air as her wild eyes cast about, seeking reality. They were in the same alley as the first time Roxie had time traveled in 1925. She was sure of that. But was it the same time? Had they time traveled back to December 1925?

It took several swallows and deep breaths before Roxie could hear and was able to speak. "Mrs. Reeves... Are you all right?"

Her voice was a tight whisper. "I think so."

Mrs. Reeves's chin tilted downward, and her eyes dared to explore her surroundings. "What's happened? Where is this?"

"I think we're in the alley next to Speakeasy."

And then there was the murmur of voices coming from somewhere, but Roxie was too disoriented to place it.

"Can you walk?" Roxie asked.

"I'm not sure," Mrs. Reeves said. "I'm feeling rather dizzy."

Roxie lifted her suitcase and gently took Mrs. Reeves's arm. "I've got you. Lean against me if you need to. Let's try to get out of this alley and onto the street. We need to find out where we are."



As they slowly advanced toward Charles Street, pale moonlight lit up puddles, car horns tooted in the distance, and a baby bawled from an upper window.

They emerged from the alley onto the street, and Roxie noticed the night air was humid and warm, not a winter night. She glanced right, toward what should have been the narrow, red brick building with its black awning, large plate-glass window, and sign above that read SPEAKEASY.

But it wasn't Speakeasy. The green-lighted sign read CLUB DIXON.

Roxie saw Mrs. Reeves's chest rise with a quick inhalation of breath. "Oh... What has happened?"

Roxie lowered her suitcase and sought to calm Mrs. Reeves, though her heart was pumping fast. "It's okay, Mrs. Reeves. It's all cool."

Roxie cast her eyes to the street, seeing parked 1920s cars. "Wait here!" Roxie said, and then she hurried to the curb, to the rear of the nearest car, and checked the gold license plate. It read **NY 1926**.

Roxie glanced up, thinking, confused. She turned. Mrs. Reeves was teetering, about to faint. Roxie rushed to her, grabbing her arm. "It's okay, Mrs. Reeves. I've got you!"

"Where am I? What's happening?"

The license plate hadn't convinced Roxie it was 1926. She needed confirmation. Maybe it was just her swimming, foggy head. How could it be 1926?

Roxie glanced up the street. "There's someone coming, Mrs. Reeves. Hang on."

As the man approached, Roxie held fast to Mrs. Reeves's arm, waving a hand. "Excuse me, sir!"

A middle-aged man, wearing a hat, suit, and unbuttoned tan raincoat, glanced over and stopped under the glow of a streetlight, squinting at Roxie. "What is it?"

Roxie's tone was tentative. "Sir, can you please tell us the date?"

After a peevish blink, he looked at them more closely, and then his expression softened. “Do you need help? Is the lady all right?”

Roxie seized on that. “Actually, she’s not feeling well... My friend here is confused. She doesn’t believe me. Can you please tell her the date?”

He looked squarely at Mrs. Reeves. “It’s June 16, 1926.”

Roxie’s mouth tightened. She had no voice. Her thoughts stopped.

And then the man was gone.

Mrs. Reeves’s eyes filled with stormy confusion before they went vacant. Roxie sensed she was about to faint.

“No, no, no, no, Mrs. Reeves. Stay with me,” Roxie said, using both hands and all her strength to keep the woman on her feet. “It’s okay. No problem. It’s cool. Stay with me. Take deep breaths. Breathe.”

Autos drove by—1920s autos—and as Mrs. Reeves watched them pass, she made little cries of fear.

Roxie glanced about, seeking help. She had to get Mrs. Reeves somewhere so she could rest. Roxie tossed a glance toward Club Dixon and shrugged. There was nothing else around that was open.

“Okay, Mrs. Reeves, we’re going into that club so you can sit.”

Making no complaint, Mrs. Reeves nodded. Roxie lifted her suitcase and, grasping Mrs. Reeves’s arm and supporting her, they made their way to the front door. Lowering the suitcase, but holding fast to Mrs. Reeves, Roxie reached for the doorknob and turned it. The door didn’t budge. A second try also failed.

When the door opened a foot, a round-faced man with a sinister, thin mustache and aggressive eyes stared out. “Yeah?”

“Can we come in, please? My friend needs to rest for a while.”

The man scowled. “Got a card?”

“A what?”

“A card? An ID card? Are you a member?”

“No, we just want to...”

The door slammed shut.

“What a son-of-a...” Roxie snapped, then stopped, not wanting to offend Mrs. Reeves’s ears.

As they turned back to the street, Mrs. Reeves said, “I’ll be all right, Roxie. Don’t make a fuss. Let’s find a taxi and go... well, I don’t know... where?”

For a moment, Roxie weighed her next words in silence. “It’s been six months since I was here. I don’t even know if I have a place to live.”

Roxie dug a hand into her jacket pocket and drew out two silver dollars and one-half dollar that she’d taken with her to 2020.

A 1920s yellow taxi came into view, its cowl headlights gleaming bright, its roof-mounted vacancy light aglow.

Roxie’s hand shot up, waving. “I’ve got one!” she called, relieved.

The taxi pulled to the curb and Roxie escorted Mrs. Reeves inside, then snatched up her suitcase, shoved it in and swung onto the seat, closing the door.

“Where to?” the uniformed driver asked, peering at them through his rearview mirror.

Roxie had already made up her mind. “56 West 27<sup>th</sup> Street.”

As the taxi lurched away from the curb and started off, Mrs. Reeves ran her hand along the upholstery and soft leather seat. Her eyes took in the taxi, the scenery, and the people on the sidewalks, dressed in the 1920s fashion. The men wore pinstriped, plaid or checkered suits with vests, and either neckties or bow ties. Every man wore a hat: a fedora, a straw hat, or a flat cap. Women had short hair under cloche hats, with loose dresses, and hemlines that rose above the knee.

“I don’t believe it,” Mrs. Reeves said, her eyes filled with wonder. “I just don’t believe it.”

Roxie removed her hat, ruffled her hand through her wavy hair, and then spoke softly so the driver couldn’t hear her. “It won’t seem real for a while. And then, a little later, the world in the future won’t seem real. And then you’ll wonder, what the hell *is* real?”

Mrs. Reeves thought about that. “Where are we going?”

Roxie smiled. “To see my friend, Dr. Harriet Hall.”

Mrs. Reeves nodded slowly, reflectively.

Roxie sat up, her thoughts suddenly flooded by images of Jake, and she felt little tremors of delight at the thought of seeing him again. She visualized him standing before her with narrowed, scolding eyes, and she heard him say, “So, you’re going to lie to me again, aren’t you, Roxie Raines, and say you’ve been in Indiana?”

Mrs. Reeves leaned her head back.

“How are you feeling?” Roxie asked.

“As if I’m in a dream. Can you believe it, Roxie? My father is three years old.”

Roxie shut her eyes, exhaustion settling over her like a fog. “Yeah, I thought about that, and I don’t have any answers.”

In spite of herself, Judith Reeves smiled, and then she blurted out a laugh. “I bet he won’t recognize me!”

It was the fatigue that started them both laughing.

“It’s not so funny,” Mrs. Reeves said. “It’s absolutely absurd, and we shouldn’t be laughing.”

Roxie’s eyes opened. “I know,” she said, trying to suppress her giggles. But she couldn’t, and they both let out a merry ring of laughter, while the cab driver flicked them wary glances in his rearview mirror.

The cab pulled to the curb of Harriet’s brownstone, and Roxie paid the driver and exited with Mrs. Reeves behind.

Roxie grabbed her suitcase and pointed. “Harriet owns an apartment on the first two floors. At least I hope she still does.”

They started up the steps to the front door and Roxie thought of Charlie, feeling a downward pull of sadness. Six months had passed, so the antibiotics she’d brought for him were probably too late. If the infection had spread, he had surely died.

Roxie lifted the bold knocker and let it drop. “I’m trying not to be excited,” Roxie said. “But it’s awesome to be back.”

Judith gave her a side glance. “I wish I hadn’t put off my knee-replacement surgery. I suppose it’s too late now.”

The door opened and Harriet Hall appeared. Her face lit up with joy, her voice a ring of delight. “Roxie! Roxie Raines! You’re back!”

They fell into a warm embrace, while Mrs. Reeves looked on, feeling magically displaced, feeling as though she were an actress in a play and didn’t know her lines.

Roxie stepped back and examined Harriet’s hair and attire. Her hair was bobbed, giving her a youthful look, and she wore a lovely, slip-over frock with touches of jade green and gold, falling just below the knees, revealing a stunning figure that Roxie had never seen. Harriet had undergone a complete transformation, and she looked beautiful.

Before Roxie could comment, Harriet turned to Mrs. Reeves. “And who is this, Roxie?”

“Oh, yes, this is Judith Reeves,” Roxie said, with a beaming smile. “She saved my life.”

Harriet’s eyes sparkled with warmth as she reached out a hand. “Hello, Mrs. Reeves. I’m so pleased to meet you. Please come in.”

Mrs. Reeves looked from one to the other. “Please call me Judith from now on. I insist.”

Twenty minutes later, Roxie and Judith sat on the parlor sofa, weary and grateful for the bread, cheese and sliced pound

cake Harriet had brought from the kitchen, along with three cups of freshly made coffee. While they snacked, Roxie explained everything that had happened, her face animated, her hands busy, her voice eager. Harriet was leaning forward, hanging on every word.

When Roxie explained that Judith was Jake's son's daughter, Harriet stared down at the plates of mostly eaten food, working to steady her galloping mind. After she'd composed herself, she lifted her kind eyes to Judith.

"From the sound of it, Judith," Harriet said, "I believe you did the right thing in leaving the future. And you'll have plenty of friends here, and none of them need to know who you truly are or where you came from. If you wish, it will be our secret."

Judith thought about that. "Roxie told me about your time travel journey, and she said you are happy here."

"Yes. Very happy, and you will be, too. All you both need is a good night's sleep and you'll be as good as new in the morning."

"I *am* very tired," Judith said.

Harriet rose and clasped her hands together. "Then I'll show you your room and you can prepare for bed."

Roxie remained in the parlor while Harriet and Judith left the room. Glancing about, she noticed, on the mantel, a framed, black-and-white photo of a man she'd never seen. She rose to examine it. He was distinguished, appearing to be in his early fifties, with clear, intelligent eyes, a thin, attractive face, and a warm, generous smile.

"Judith is going straight to bed," Harriet said, returning to the parlor.

Gently startled, Roxie spun around.

"What do you think of the photograph?"

"By the way, you look awesome. Really beautiful. I wouldn't have recognized you."

Harriet curtsied, her grin girlish. "Thank you."

Harriet locked her hands behind her back, and her smile was coy. “It’s a nice face, isn’t it? The face in the photograph. It’s a good face, even handsome, don’t you think?”

Roxie nodded. “... Yes. And he is?”

Harriet lifted her chin, her eyes twinkling with happiness. “His name is Raymond Belair, and we’re going to be married next month.”

Roxie’s mouth dropped. “Oh. My. God. Stop!”

## CHAPTER 37

Roxie and Harriet remained in the parlor for another hour, while Harriet caught Roxie up on how she and Raymond had met, and how their relationship had blossomed.

“We just seemed to... what’s the expression? Click. Yes, we were so comfortable with each other right from the start.”

“And you met him the night I left for the future, outside The Black Cat?”

“Yes, that very same night. Can you believe it? If you hadn’t gone, I never would have met Raymond. Isn’t that something? Isn’t the universe mysterious?”

Roxie reached for a slice of pound cake and placed it on her plate. “Well, dang-a-lang, how about that?”

“Yes, and I love him, Roxie,” Harriet said, with a lavish smile, gushing like a teenager. “I do love him so much, and he loves me. I didn’t know love could be so... well, so beautiful and right. I’m delighted you’re going to be here for the wedding.”

“Wow... And I’ve only been gone for six months.”

“And get this, Roxie. Raymond was Jake’s attorney.”

“What!? His...”

Harriet broke in. “... It’s a long story, and I know you’re tired.”

“Not that tired. Tell me.”

Harriet angled her body on the sofa to face Roxie. “You remember how Jake was involved in that shooting, and Charlie was...”

“What about Charlie, Harriet?” Roxie interrupted. “That’s the main reason I returned to the future, you know.”

“Well, the good news is, he’s alive.”

“I can’t believe it! What happened?”



“I don’t know. His girlfriend, Maxie, who owns that speakeasy downtown, marched into his room and ordered him to get better, and to forget about dying. Every single day, she went to see him, pointed a finger in his face and demanded he improve. Well, by the grace of God or by the will of Maxie, Charlie did improve.”

“So, he’s up and around? He’s back to his old self, and he and Jake are together again?”

Harriet shook her head. “No... He’s living with Maxie, and she hired a nurse to look after him when she’s working. Charlie is not entirely well. He’s weak, and he’s lost a lot of weight. I’m not certain that he’s infection-free, but Maxie won’t let me, or any other doctor, examine him. She’s loyal, and she obviously loves Charlie, but she’s an ignorant woman as well, with her own rules and superstitions.”

Roxie stared, thinking, dreading her next question. “And Jake? How is Jake?”

“As I was saying, Raymond, who is a very respected attorney, took Jake’s case after that warehouse shooting. He had been charged with manslaughter and assault and battery, for punching two policemen who tried to handcuff him. Raymond was able to get the manslaughter case dismissed on lack of evidence and self-defense, but Jake spent a month in jail for assault and battery.”

Roxie set her plate with the uneaten pound cake on the coffee table and stood up. She moved to the mantel, ambled across the room, and then returned to the sofa, where Harriet waited, her hands folded.

“And how *is* he? How is Jake?”

“His mother passed away. Jimmy is living with Clare, and Jake has moved in with them.”

Roxie scratched an eyebrow and frowned. “Six months and the whole world has changed. The future world is a mess, and now, so is this one.”

After pacing the room again, Roxie stopped and lowered her head, staring down at the carpet. “I suppose he’s mad at me...”

written me off?”

Harriet rose. “He didn’t know what happened to you. He was frantic. He searched everywhere for you, and he had some of his old Army buddies looking as well. Two of them even went to Indiana to look for you. He said you once told him you were from northern Indiana, a town called Warsaw.”

Roxie’s shoulders sagged. “Yeah... Yeah, I told him.”

Roxie’s troubled gaze lingered on Harriet’s face. “I thought I’d return to the same time I left. I didn’t know it would be six months later.”

Harriet let out a sigh. “I wanted to tell him the truth, but I didn’t know how. And then, when you didn’t return, I thought maybe you never would, or that something had happened to prevent you from returning. I didn’t know what to do.”

“So, you didn’t tell him about the time doorway?”

“No...”

“So, he thinks I just ran out on him or that I was murdered or something?”

“After he was released from jail, Raymond and I visited him at Clare’s place. I stammered around, trying to come up with some way to tell him, but I couldn’t. Raymond and Clare were sitting there. What could I say? Finally, I told him I didn’t think you were dead, and that you might return someday.”

Roxie lifted her anxious eyes. “And what did he do?”

“... He left the room.”

Roxie lowered her head and stared at the floor. Her voice was low. “What’s he doing? Is he working?”

“I haven’t spoken to him since that night, but I heard from Clare that he’s lost interest in his business, with Charlie being sick and all. But he hasn’t given up on bringing that police commissioner to justice.”

“What happened to Hal Lester?”

“It’s a long story, so I’ll give you the short version. Jake worked it so that a clean judge presided over the case, and Hal

Lester was acquitted because of lack of evidence. He moved to France.”

Roxie sank down into the closest chair. “Okay, I’m like... I don’t know... I’m like losing it,” she said, placing her face in her hands.

“I might as well tell you everything, Roxie.”

The hands fell from Roxie’s pained face, and she sighed audibly. “Okay, let me have it.”

“Clare told me that Jake and Katy Price have been out together a couple of times. She said he was thinking about going to work for Katy’s father in the bond business.”

They sat for a time in a moody silence.

“I guess you don’t have any booze in the house?” Roxie asked.

“No, I don’t.”

Roxie took in a breath and blew it out. “Okay, fine. Do I still have my suite?”

“No, Jules Morgan canceled the lease two months after you left, but I have all your things in the basement, and I have the money I took from your safe, over five thousand dollars, so you don’t have to worry about money. And when Jake spoke to your agent, Mr. Link told him that you have a lot of uncashed checks for magazine covers, as well as royalty checks for the soap and cosmetic ads you did before you left. He was also frustrated because he was still getting a lot of radio, theatre and club offers for you.”

Harriet took a sip of her coffee, then attempted a lighter tone. “Evidently, Mr. Link thought you had run off with some rich tycoon and would return when, as he called it, ‘the affair’ had burned itself out. He said, ‘All the dizzy dolls go crazy like that when they hit the bigtime.’”

Roxie pushed up and started pacing again. “Holy shit, what a mess!” she said, bringing a fist to her tight mouth. “And I bet Jules Morgan will have me tossed into jail for breach of contract?”

“No, he won’t. He died from a heart attack two months ago in Kentucky at his horse farm. The Ginger Jam is closed.”

Roxie stilled, her mind reeling.

“I know this is all a shock,” Harriet said. “I threw everything at you and maybe I shouldn’t have. I was going to wait until tomorrow but...” her voice faded away.

Roxie dropped back down into the chair, her eyes shifting, her face pale. “It’s okay. I’d rather have it all at once and get it over with, not that I know what the hell I’m going to do about any of it.”

Harriet looked at her uneasily. “Roxie... When the public learns you’re back, you’ll have lots of offers. Your face still appears on all the top magazine covers, and there are plenty of newspaper articles being written about you. You’re a great mystery, and whenever I read letters to the editor, there are always some from women who write things like ‘Roxie will return. No doubt about it. She’s the cat’s meow with nine lives and she’s got at least six left.’”

There was a sleepiness in Roxie’s eyes, and a blank, weary look. “And what about Alma and her hair salon? Did you go see her and offer her the money?”

“I did. She wouldn’t take it. She said it was charity and she wouldn’t take charity.”

“But you told her it was a loan, right?”

“Yes, but she wouldn’t take the money.”

“How did she look?”

“Pregnant and tired. I went to see her again a little over a month ago, but she’s left that salon and I don’t know where she is. The proprietor said the baby had been born, and she was glad Alma left. Unfortunately, the woman wasn’t very helpful or kind.”

Roxie lifted her hands in helplessness, shaking her head. “Should I have come back? I don’t know.”

## CHAPTER 38

For most of that night, sleep deserted Roxie. In the morning, she felt a groggy, nauseous dread. But she was determined to get up and go see Jake at his office, to face whatever she had to face. She had to see him before it was too late—if it wasn't already too late. She felt a fever of restlessness when she thought of Katy Price being back in the picture, and this time, Roxie was sure the woman would put up a monumental fight to keep Jake.

Roxie maneuvered off the upstairs sofa, struggled to her feet, and weaved her way along the narrow hallway to the bathroom, feeling woozy and hot. Reasoning that her punished body had to be the result of time travel, she resisted the temptation to do an about-face, return to the sofa, and go back to sleep. Inside the bathroom, she leaned over the sink and splashed cold water on her face several times.

Thoughts flew through her brain like flung arrows, seeking an elusive target. What would she say to Jake? How could she justify leaving him? How could she convince him that she loved him, and wanted to marry him? How could she tell him the truth, because if she didn't tell him the truth, she'd lose him, for certain.

A mostly cold shower helped. Pinching her cheeks helped. Styling her hair and applying light makeup helped the outside, but inside, Roxie's stomach flipped and flopped, her head ached, her eyes were small, bleary, and bloodshot.

She found Judith in one of Harriet's floral house robes, hunched at the kitchen table over a cup of coffee and a piece of toast, staring into the empty air.

The night before, Roxie and Harriet had pulled some of Roxie's clothes from the trunk in the basement where Harriet had stored them. The forest green, multi-layered ruffle dress Roxie wore had a fitted waist and fell below her knees. Her black leather shoes had low heels and round toes, more conservative than flashy.

What Roxie really wanted to wear to Jake's office were red athletic shorts and a matching tank top, to show off her toned body, but, of course, there was no such attire available—and, anyway, Jake would think she was either out of her mind or trying too hard.

“How are you feeling, Mrs. Reeves?”

Judith lifted her tired eyes. “Please, Roxie... call me Judith. You're making me sound very old, and, right now, I feel very old. Very, very old. My eyes and my brain are having great difficulty returning to the land of the living in this land of 1926.”

“So, I guess you didn't sleep so well?”

“On the contrary. I slept better than I've slept in years. It was the waking up that nearly did me in. The waking up and realizing that I truly was living in the 1920s. I feel as though I have one doozy of a hang-over.”

Roxie drifted over and settled down into the chair opposite her. “I'm not feeling so great myself. I forgot how time traveling makes you feel; like you've been tossed into a washing machine with rocks in it.”

Judith reached for a note and handed it to Roxie. “Harriet left us a note. I guess she left early. There are plenty of things to eat in the cupboards, and the refrigerator is full.”

“I don't think I can eat,” Roxie said.

Judith's gaze dropped, then came back up. “I'm not sure I thought about all this time traveling in any detail. Most of me didn't think it was real and it wouldn't work. What am I going to do? Where am I to go?”

Roxie reached a hand, took hers and warmed up her voice. “Don't worry, Judith. You'll live with me. We'll go back to the Prasada Hotel over on 65th Street. You'll have your own rooms. The hotel is close to Central Park, and you can take a car anywhere you want. And you'll meet new friends. It will take time to adjust, but once you do, I think you'll love it here.”

Judith spoke in a low tone. “I keep thinking about my husband, Walter, and what he would think about all this. I keep thinking that he isn’t even born yet, and neither am I.”

“Judith, don’t think about it too much or, believe me, it will drive you crazy. We’re here, right now, and that’s all that matters. Way out in the future... well, it doesn’t exist. It’s not there and we’re not there.”

“But our memories are there, Roxie. And all our knowledge about the future is there. None of it has been erased. I don’t know why, but I thought it might have been erased. Strange that I thought that, but it’s just so disconcerting, isn’t it?”

Roxie stood up. “You should sleep. That’s the best thing. Get lots of sleep, and in a few days, your body and your mind will adjust, and you’ll be okay.”

Roxie left Harriet’s apartment, caught a taxi, and started toward Times Square and Jake’s office. She stared out the window at a sunny Thursday morning, watching merchants carrying leather-bound cases of their wares, fashionably dressed women leaving department stores with their weighed-down porters, and people hovering around food carts.

Traffic was heavy and slow. A sleek gray limousine was to her left; on her right, a yellow roadster shimmered in the bright sun; and up ahead, two checker taxi cabs battled for a lane, their horns beeping.

The sidewalks were lively, the fashion eye-catching and appealing. As her cab approached Times Square, Roxie’s eyes lit on the vaudeville and Broadway theater marquees. These and the clang of a trolley lifted her spirits. She loved the trolleys, and the fruit and flower sellers, and the newsboys calling out the headlines of the day. There was nothing like it in the future—none of the romance of sound, color and fashion and, she had to admit, she was happy to be back, even with all the problems that awaited.

Roxie left the cab at Fortieth Street, wanting to walk off her nerves before she arrived at Jake’s fourth floor office in a seven-story brick building on West Forty-Second Street. Glancing to her right, she recalled an alleyway that exited onto

Forty-Third Street, so she took it, not wanting to be recognized before she was ready.

She stepped along the cobblestones, glancing up at the tall, brick buildings on either side. Drying clothes fluttered on lines between buildings; metal trash cans were stuffed with crumpled newspapers, soot-stained rags, and food scraps; and twice she had to dance away from dog poop.

On Forty-Third Street, Roxie exited the alley, pulled her cloche hat low over her brow, and merged into the flow of pedestrian traffic. She ducked her head and headed for Forty-Second Street, edging toward the curb, her eyes watchful.

When she passed the Times Square Diner that occupied the ground floor of Jake's office building, she cut across the sidewalk, reached for the glass door's chrome handle and stepped into the lobby, walking briskly to the elevator.

Choosing not to greet the uniformed man behind the lobby desk, she pressed the metal circle to call the elevator and waited, breathing in a wave of angst.

The scrape of metal and the rattle of cable alerted her to the approaching elevator. The doors groaned open, and there was Madison, the same white-haired, African-American elevator operator she'd met several times before.

When his bored-with-the-routine eyes opened on her in recognition, they widened, and he stiffened. Before he could speak her name, Roxie scurried into the cab and swiftly held a finger to her lips, uttering a "Shhhhh."

The overhead light sizzled, the cage door closed, and the elevator door creaked shut.

Roxie smiled and then whispered, "Hello, Madison. How are you?"

He scratched his head and narrowed his eyes on her. "Well, I guess you ain't dead like some of those papers said you was."

"No, I'm not. I just had to leave town kind of fast."



Madison pressed number 4, and the cab ascended, wobbling and squeaking.

“Is Jake in his office?”

“Yeah, he’s there all right.”

“Is he alone?”

“No...”

Roxie winced. “Is he with Katy Price?”

“No... It’s some biggity-big, with a sharp suit, a sharp tie, and a sharp don’t-you-look-at-me-in-the-eye, evil eye. He didn’t look none too happy as I took him up there.”

Roxie cursed under her breath. “What should I do?” she said aloud.

“Does Jake know you’re back?”

Roxie’s lips tightened and she shook her head.

“Well, then, I’d say you’re about to give him a good, old-fashioned upset.”

The elevator door opened, and the tension bracing Roxie’s shoulders was giving her a headache.

“You mind yourself now, Roxie,” Madison said. “Jake ain’t had it so good lately.”

Roxie hesitated and almost didn’t step out.

“Are you going back down?” Madison asked, as he tugged on the brass button of his blue uniformed jacket.

Roxie stepped out. How many times in the last few months had she tempted destiny? What were a few more steps?

The elevator door closed, and after it had grumbled down and out of sight, Roxie stood where she’d exited.

Working hard to look calm and at ease, she ventured down the hallway until she came to Jake’s office door, looking affectionately at the gold-leaf lettering on the frosted glass.

JAKE KANE

PERSONAL DETECTIVE

Roxie heard voices. Male voices. She recognized Jake's. It was calm, but forceful. The other voice rose and fell and sounded threatening.

She squared her shoulders and rapped gently on the glass. Dead silence. Heart pounding. Sweat on the back of her neck and on her forehead.

The door swung open and there he was: the pretty, the adorable, the handsome, the stunned, the confused, the concerned, the angry, Jake Kane.

Her smile was immediate, excitement dancing in her eyes.

## CHAPTER 39

They stared at each other; the silence charged. In truth, it was Roxie who stared, and Jake who glared.

“Hello, Big Guy,” Roxie said, wide-eyed and hopeful. “Happy to see me?”

“YOU!” he said, as if uttering a curse. “You have the gall to show up here now?” he said acidly, in a scowl of righteous anger, his nostrils flaring.

Roxie held her stance and her stare. “Yep. I have gall. Lots of gall, I guess.”

He slammed the door in her face.

She hadn’t expected that. Not at all. Not from Jake. She would have never believed it, and the more she stood there thinking about the insult, the angrier she got. Her eyes sparked with sudden wrath, and she raised a fist and thudded it on the wooden frame of the door.

The room was silent. She waited. More silence. She pounded on the door. The door opened and Jake stood in all his height, glory and anger, his hot eyes boring into her.

“Go away! I’m busy. Can’t you see I’m busy? I’ve got nothing to say to you!”

Over Jake’s shoulder, Roxie saw a well-dressed, 30s-something man, who smelled of money and privilege. He stared at her with harsh, cold eyes.

“May we get on with this?” the man said sharply.

Jake still didn’t budge. “I can’t talk now. Go!”

From the man’s nasty tone and from their expressions, Roxie read the caustic scene.

“All right, Jake,” she said, backing down. “I’ll go. If you want to see me, I’m staying with Harriet for a few days.”

Jake closed the door.

Feeling humiliated, Roxie left, starting for the elevator, then hesitated. The confrontation continued, the men's muffled voices spilling out into the hallway. Roxie decided to take the stairs, not wanting to explain her failure to Madison.

She pivoted, walking to the heavy fire door that opened onto the white marble stairs. Descending to the second floor, she stopped, waiting, thinking. On impulse, Roxie bounded back up the stairs to the fourth floor, exited the stairwell, and crept out into the hallway. She heard the voices from inside Jake's office, as she flattened her back against the wall and eased toward Jake's door, her ears straining to listen.

"I'll say it again, Mr. Kane. Since she told you I was her fiancé, why didn't you come to me when you knew Stella was obviously involved in something way over her head? I could have saved her from all this... This entire..." his frustrated voice dropped away. He began anew.

"... Stella has lost her mind, Mr. Kane. She just sits up there in that sanitarium and stares. I don't think she even knows me. I wish she would say something to me—shout at me, curse me, anything, or just tell me to go away—but she won't talk to me."

"And I'm truly sorry for her, and for you, Mr. Crenshaw," Jake said.

"I don't need your damn pity!" Crenshaw snapped. "My lovely bride-to-be may never come back to me, and I can't bear the thought of it. Why didn't you come to me, Mr. Kane? Why didn't you call her parents and tell them she had visited you? We could have saved her."

"And as I've already said, Mr. Crenshaw, when Stella came to my office, I had no idea she was seeing Calvin Sinclair, and even if I had, I doubt that she would have listened to me."

"But when you saw them together, why didn't you confront her? Why didn't you contact me or her parents?"

"Because time was short, Mr. Crenshaw, and I had a job to do."

“A job?!” Mr. Crenshaw shouted. “Stella’s life was at stake. She was in danger, and you knew it.”

“She put herself in danger, and she pulled her pistol and fired at my head! Twice! Okay? So, Mr. Crenshaw, my life was at stake, too, and my partner got shot saving my life. Anyway, it’s been six months. If you’ve been so angry with me, why have you waited until now to pay me this little visit?”

Warren Crenshaw’s voice boomed out. “Because Stella has started shouting your name! Your name and nobody else’s! Not mine! Not her father’s or mother’s names, but your name, Jake Kane! For the love of God, I don’t know why.”

Jake was silent. The room was silent.

Just then, Roxie saw Joe, the fourth-floor tabby cat, come lumbering by. From across the hall, he gave her a “don’t bother me” stare and padded off with an air of regal indifference.

Warren Crenshaw’s voice broke with emotion. “Why hasn’t Stella said *my* name? I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of it. Why would she have been with a guy like Calvin Sinclair? I just don’t understand.”

A moment later, Jake spoke in a soft voice. “I hope Stella improves soon, Mr. Crenshaw.”

Roxie sensed that the conversation was over. She hurried back to the stairway door and yanked it open, ducking inside, just as Warren Crenshaw left Jake’s office, shambling toward the elevator.

Roxie waited until the elevator descended before leaving the stairwell, starting back to Jake’s door.

Inhaling a quick breath, Roxie grabbed the doorknob, twisted it, and opened the door. She stepped into the office quickly, closing the door behind her, leaning back against it.

Jake was seated at his desk, in his small, square, and tidy office. Something lingered in the air, not visible, not definable. Their gazes held.

Jake folded his hands on the desktop, squeezing his hands into a tight fist. His hard face revealed insult, and there was a low, hot fire in his eyes. “What do you want, Roxie?”

His withering gaze was loosening her courage. “I can see you hate me. Okay, I understand, but I want you to understand what happened and why I did what I did.”

“I don’t care anymore, Roxie. I don’t give a damn what you did or didn’t do. I don’t give a damn if you went to California through the Panama Canal or if you went home to nurse your poor, sick, dying mother. I don’t give a damn if you were kidnapped by pirates and marooned on a desert island for six months. I don’t give a damn if you married a millionaire and now you’re one of the richest women in the world. Do you understand me? I don’t give a damn anymore.”

The power of his words wounded her, and she shriveled a little, her shoulders dropping, her heart dropping, her spirit dropping, her voice dropping. “Okay... Well, I guess I know how you feel. No doubt about that.”

Roxie, usually good with words, had no words. She looked down and away. “Okay, I guess I should go then.”

When Jake didn’t respond, she turned and reached for the doorknob, then paused before opening it. She pivoted, facing him, and suddenly inspired, she took two steps forward.

“Hey, do you know what, Jake? Do you know what my father used to say to my mother when they argued? He used to say relationships are like baseball.”

Jake perked up at the word ‘baseball’.

“Yeah, that’s right, baseball. He said, you could be pitching a perfect game in the last game of the World Series, and all the fans and all the players think you’re the greatest thing since corn flakes. Then, in the bottom of the ninth inning, you’re up only one run, and there are two on and two out. You throw a slow-hanging curve, and the batter knocks it out of the park. Now, you’re the biggest jerk who ever lived. One bad pitch. That’s all it takes, and everybody thinks you’re a loser.”

Roxie held up a finger. “Just one bad pitch. One slow-hanging curve instead of a fastball, high and outside.”

Jake didn't move as he stared at her.

“Okay, so I vanished for six months. I threw one bad pitch. Just one. Does that make me, I don't know, the worse dame you've ever known? Am I really so bad?”

Jake still didn't move.

Roxie snaked a hand into her purse and removed an amber pill box with the antibiotics in them. She stepped forward and set it down on his desk.

“That's for Charlie. I know Maxie will never let me get close to him, but I'm sure you can. Those pills might help him... Help him get back to the way he was. Tell him to take one pill, two times a day, until they're gone. I went to get them for him, and I got, well, things happened, and I didn't get back when I'd hoped to. I'm sorry, Jake. I didn't know I'd be gone for so long. I would have told you. And I would have told Jules. I wouldn't have just walked out like that. I'm not that kind of girl, and I think you know it.”

Jake kept his cool eyes on her for a time before they strayed to the pill container. “What are those?”

“They're called antibiotics. They help to kill infection. Harriet thinks Charlie could still have some lingering infection in his body and that's why he isn't improving.”

Jake raised his eyes to her. “I'm not going to ask where you got them because I don't give a damn. But where did you get them?”

After a strained silence, Roxie said, “Jake, if you want to know where I went and what happened to me, you'll have to come with me so I can show you.”

Jake shook his head, irritation returning to his eyes. “No.”

“Okay. Fine. Then, that's that.”

Jake rose, throwing his fists to his hips. “Yes, that's that, Roxie, and please don't ever come here again.”

Roxie shouldn't have said it, but the words flew out of her mouth. "Why? Because Katy might be here, and it wouldn't be cool?"

Jake's nod was brisk. "Yes! Yes, for one thing. Yes. Right. Katy and I are seeing each other again."

Roxie wanted to disarm him and cool down the conversation. She also wanted him to know that she was genuinely sorry for what had happened to him. "I'm sorry to hear about your mother. Harriet told me."

Jake flicked a hand. "Yeah, well, okay. Thanks. Anyway, Katy might be here and, besides all that, it's my place of business, okay? I mean, you just vanish for six months—poof—gone, and then you just burst in here when I'm in the middle of something, and you just... Just come in here, swinging your hips, flashing your big blue eyes, and then your mouth is all dolled up and your, I don't know, your face is all dolled up, and pretty the way it is, and you expect me to just jump like some dumb mug in love and say something like, 'Hey, everything is just fine and good. Just wonderful!' Well, I'm not going to say that. Do you know what? I spent night after night searching the damn streets for you, asking every cop I knew, and every Army buddy I knew, to help me find you. I'm frantic, thinking you were kidnapped, or dead, or lying hurt in some back street where Calvin's men had beaten you up, or worse. I mean, Goddamnit, Roxie, I said to myself, she just wouldn't walk out on me like that! That's not Roxie! She wouldn't do that. So, I searched everywhere and sent two buddies to Indiana searching for you, because I had to know what I'd done for you to walk out on me like that. I had to know what the hell happened to you, dead or alive."

The room fell into a new, uncertain silence.

Jake lowered his hands to his sides, his wounded eyes searching hers. "So, what do you want from me, Roxie? What!? What do you want me to say? What do you want me to do? I've got my boy, Jimmy, now, and Katy will make a good wife and mother. When I didn't find you, I moved on, okay? That's what I did, because you left me with nothing! That's what people do, they move on."



Roxie couldn't look at him. She tried to come up with rational explanations, but her mind was a blank. There was so much to say, and yet nothing to say. He wouldn't believe the unbelievable truth. She'd time traveled. Would she believe it if the situation were reversed? No.

With her brow furrowed in a frown, Roxie took a step back. "I'm sorry, Jake. I'm like, really sorry. I won't try to see you again, but I want you to know that, even though everything got all screwed up, I love you. I can't help what happened, and I can't help it that I love you."

With that, Roxie turned and moved to the door. She opened it, desperately hoping to hear Jake's voice asking her to stay. He spoke up, but his words felt like punches to her heart.

"Our timing was always off, Roxie. We tried, but we just couldn't make it work, could we? Good luck."

Still, Roxie couldn't leave.

"Oh, and by the way," Jake said. "Maybe I would have liked your father. Yeah, probably. The baseball thing was good."

Outside, she quietly closed the door, walked a few feet toward the elevator and then stopped, resting her back against the wall, trying to rescue herself from despair. She forced herself to take deep breaths. Her empty stomach growled, and she felt faint. She lowered her head and let the conversation with Jake replay several times in her mind, the painful effect of his words hitting her anew with each repetition.

Finally, like a person emerging from shock, she lifted her head, straightened her posture, and stared at the opposite wall.

*Okay*, she thought, *what do I do now?* She had to face facts. The world she'd left in December was gone. In six months, everything had changed. She could either stay here and try again or find that time travel doorway and take a chance she'd return to 2020.

But what about Judith? Didn't she owe it to Judith to stay? And what about herself? Didn't she owe it to herself to stay? The stage lights, the singing, the band, the loud applause, all waiting.

She pressed the button for the elevator. She'd have to see Kilburn Link right away. It was something she dreaded with every bone in her body, but he should know she was back before the newspaper boys caught up with her.

She'd have to let Jake go and begin again. Yes, once again, begin again, without the only man she'd ever truly loved. Would she let him go? Could she let him go?

## CHAPTER 40

Two weeks later, Roxie and Judith were comfortably settled in a small but luxurious suite at the Prasada Hotel. In the face of all that had happened, the women were more resilient than they would have believed, although Roxie kept her broken heart a secret, daring not to let herself dwell on Jake and Katy.

So, Roxie over-smiled, over-laughed, over-drunk champagne, and over-did most things, including buying herself a brand-new grand piano, and so many clothes, shoes, and hats for Judith that she begged her to stop.

“How will I ever pay you back?” she asked, overwhelmed, seated on the sofa, opening yet another box that had been delivered that morning.

Roxie sat at her piano, improvising melodies. “You paid me back when you came with me, Judith. Right now, with Jake and me split, Charlie sick and trapped by his girlfriend, Clare busy with Jimmy, and Harriet spending most of her time with her fiancé, I’d be alone.”

“You’re definitely not alone, Roxie. I am absolutely stunned at how popular you are. Your face is on every magazine. In every newspaper, there’s some article about you, and on the radio this morning, two stations advertised your upcoming new show. You truly are a star.”

“Yeah, it’s crazy, isn’t it? In 2020, I’m nothing, and the world is shut down with a pandemic. Here, the town rocks day and night, and I can’t even go outside without someone wanting my autograph.”

Roxie glanced at Judith as she lifted the lid on a red box, parted the white tissue paper and held up a new, yellow and green evening dress.

“Oh, my, look at this,” Judith said, happily.

“Do you like it?” Roxie asked.

“I love it! I’ve never had anything like it.”

“I saw it yesterday after rehearsals and I thought it would look perfect on you.”

Judith went to her room to try it on, and when the phone rang, Roxie left the piano to answer it.

“Hello? And no, I’m not giving any more interviews until after my show tomorrow night.”

“Hello there, Roxie girl, it’s Charlie. Charlie Stokes.”

Roxie straightened up, beaming. “Charlie! Wahoo! Charlie, it’s so good to hear your voice. How are you?”

“Well, I ain’t been the best and I ain’t been the worst, but I’m feelin’ better than I’ve felt in a long time. I’ve even been to Maxie’s and had a few beers.”

“I’m so happy to hear it, Charlie. That’s awesome!”

Charlie laughed. “Yeah, awesome! I ain’t heard nobody say that word since the last time you said it.”

“I want to see you, Charlie. I’ve missed you.”

“Well, ain’t that a nice thing to say to an old, beat-up fighter.”

“You’re not old, and you’re not beat up. Come to my show tomorrow night, Charlie. I’ll get you a front table and all the food you can eat. I’ll even sing a song just for you.”

“Hey, you’re singing at Billy Rose’s place. That’s top drawer, highfalutin company, Roxie, but then you always was first class, kid.”

“So come, Charlie. Please. I need an old friend in the audience.”

After a brief pause, Charlie said, “I don’t know, Roxie. Maxie don’t let me get out so much, you know.”

“Come on, Charlie. Show her who’s boss.”

“... Yeah, I’ll try. I’ll try to make it.”

“I’ll leave a ticket for you at the front hostess stand, so don’t disappoint me.”

“You’re a bigger star than ever, since you came back.”

“Yeah... Well, how’s Jake?”

“That’s the reason I called. He gave me some pills a while back and said you got them for me. Two days after I took four of them, I felt better. And then, after a few more days, I felt even better, and I was able to get up and walk around. And I felt like eating again and drinking a beer again. It was like a miracle or something. What were in those pills?”

“A secret formula from my hometown.”

“It certainly did the trick. When I finally told Maxie about them, she grabbed the container and nearly flushed them down the toilet. I stopped her at the last minute. I told her they were helping me. I told her to stay out of it with me and you.”

“Oh boy. What did she say?”

“She took a swing at me.”

“And?”

“I blocked it, and when she took another swing at me and I blocked that one, too, I think she was finally convinced I was feeling better.”

Roxie laughed. “You made my day, Charlie. I’m so glad you called.”

Charlie’s voice softened. “So how are you, Roxie? Tell your old pal Charlie how you really are, because I know you. We’re old pals, you and me, and you know I care about you and would do anything for you.”

Roxie eased down on the piano bench, lowering her voice. “Did you ever hear anything about Nash Corbin?”

Charlie’s voice turned serious. “When I was sick and lying in that bed, and I thought I was going to meet my maker, I got to thinking about things. I thought about all the human wishes, and the hopes, and the misery. I thought about all the hurts I’d caused, and maybe I didn’t like myself so much.”

Roxie’s voice was soothing. “Come on, Charlie, you’re one of the good guys. Don’t get all down on yourself. You’ll make

me get depressed and I just, almost, nearly, yanked myself up and out of that dark hole.”

“All I’m saying, Roxie, is that I heard from the captain of the *Josephine*. He said old Nash Corbin woke up mad as hell. He said he was going to come back and kill you and me. He told the captain that. When he found all that money, he got a little bit happier, but not much.”

Roxie shifted the phone receiver from one ear to the other. “So, what happened?”

“The crazy mug got drunker than a monkey, and during a storm off South America, he fell overboard. He never had a chance. They never found him.”

Roxie sagged, sighing heavily into the phone. “Oh... Oh. I’m so sorry. I didn’t want that.”

“Okay, Roxie, so maybe I don’t feel so good about that, and maybe I don’t feel so good about myself for what I’d done to poor Nash. I mean, he was a bum and all, but...”

Roxie cut in. “It was me, Charlie, not you. I’m the one to blame, not you. But I didn’t want him to die. I thought he’d have a good life down there with the money... I’m sorry.”

Judith entered the room wearing her new dress, and when Roxie looked at her, she forced a smile and a bright tone. “It looks beautiful, Judith.”

“I’m wearing it to your performance tomorrow night,” Judith said, turning and leaving the room.

“I have a friend staying with me, Charlie. She’s cool. I’m real glad she’s here.”

Charlie cleared his throat. “I’ve been reading all about you. Those newspaper headlines are real killers. Roxie Revives. Roxie Resurrected to Meow Another Day. Roxie Returns and the City Revels.”

“Yeah, pretty wild, huh?”

“They want you more than ever, so the newsboys say.”

“But not Jake.”

Charlie blew a hissing breath into the phone. “He don’t know nothing about what he wants, Roxie. He was all broken up when you left like that.”

“It wasn’t on purpose. I tried to tell him that.”

“Well, Jake’s got his pride. A man’s got his pride, you know, and you just can’t go around and step on it like you did. You knocked the stuffing out of him. I’m sorry I’m saying it, but that’s the way we mugs are, Roxie. We’ve got feelings, even if we don’t know what those feelings are or what to do with them.”

“Okay, Charlie... Okay. Look, how is he?”

“He ain’t so good since he saw you. He met me at Maxie’s last night, and when he saw me up and around, tossing back a couple of beers, and laughing and tossing darts, he got all mad in my face and started shouting at me. He said I should have told him I was feeling better and that the pills you gave me helped. He said I should have come back to the office if I was feeling so good.”

“What did you say?”

“I said, ‘I’m coming back to the office.’ I said, ‘What the hell do you think I asked you to come down here for? To show you how good I am, thanks to Roxie Raines.’ And then I told him he should dump Katy, again, like he did before, and go get you.”

“Okay, then, what did he do?”

“He threw a punch at me.”

“Oh... Seems you’re getting a lot of punches lately.”

“Yeah, well, I slapped it away and told him to settle down or I was going to deck him. He did settle down. Then he slaps me hard on the shoulder and says, ‘I’ll see you at the office next Monday morning, after the Fourth of July. It will be like the old days.’ So, I says, ‘Okay.’ Then I says, ‘What’s going on with Calvin Sinclair?’”

Roxie stood up. “What did he say?”

“Jake said not to worry. He said Sinclair’s about to be indicted. That was it. You know Jake. Anyway, he’s heading up to his mother’s house to finish up some business with the real estate guy. He’s selling it, you know. He says it has too many memories, and he wants to let go of them. Hey, look, I’ve got to go. Maxie is giving me the evil-eye once-over. Keep that table open for me, okay? And have a great show! I’ll get there one way or the other. Oh, and by the way, thanks for the pills. I think you saved my life.”

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After hanging up with Charlie, Roxie turned to the window, crossed her arms, and stared out over the shimmering summer green of Central Park. Florence Ziegfeld of the Ziegfeld Follies would be at her show, as would Ruby Keeler, Clara Bow, William Randolph Hearst, Charlie Chaplin, and a few lesser-known millionaires. Three of them had proposed marriage, one in a letter and one over the telephone. Another had proposed through her agent, Kilburn Link.

It would be a big night—the biggest of her career—and after her performance would come the movie offers, the radio show offers, book deals, advertising deals, magazine spreads and probably more marriage proposals—from wealthy men, famous men, and some crazy men.

What had Kilburn Link said to her the other day when she’d visited him at his office? “In a year, Roxie, you’re going to be one of the richest flappers in the country.”

But it was Jake Kane she wanted to see in the audience tomorrow night, and the only offer she truly wanted was from Jake Kane. She wanted to hear him say he loved her and wanted to marry her, the sooner the better. Jake Kane had invaded her, her body, her mind, and her soul.

Roxie gazed at her faint reflection in the window. Who was she? She was a nothing in the twenty-first century, and a big, bright, sparkling star in Roaring Twenties, New York. But at her core, she was the same person in both times, wasn’t she?



No. She was different after time traveling, and after her success, and after she'd met Harriet and Clare, Charlie, and Judith. She had been reborn, and she liked the new person she had become. And, for the first time in her life, she had fallen in love—truly in love. She was in love with the stubborn, handsome and wonderful personal detective, Jake Kane.

It was Jake who had mended her dark moods and her secret insecurity with his humor, his tender touch, his sharp mind, and his plain old manhood that took her to blissful heights she'd never known before. Trusting him was easy and natural. Loving him was as simple as breathing, a simple inhalation and exhalation, like repeating a mantra. Jake on the in-breath, and Jake on the out-breath.

As she was about to leave the windows, she stopped and played back something in her mind that Charlie had said on the phone. It was about Jake, and it gave her the slimmest glimmer of hope.

Jake had told Charlie, "I'll see you back at the office next Monday morning, after the Fourth of July. It will be like the old days."

Did that sound like a guy who was about to go into the bond business?

Roxie moved to the gilded round mirror and stared, thinking, swelling with love for Jake.

"Hey, Jake, I've got some news for you, my hot, lover man. You ain't the type of guy who could ever go into the bond business. And you ain't never going to have a better woman for you than me, and you know it."

"Who are you talking to?" Judith asked, searching the room.

Roxie spun around, her cheeks flushing pink, her grin innocent. "Just practicing for my show, Judith. Gotta practice, you know."

Judith lifted an eyebrow. "Well, I'm looking forward to meeting this Jake Kane fellow."

## CHAPTER 41

Jake's thoughts were on the house. The old house. The house he'd spent seventeen years of his life in—on-and-off—and where he and his father had built a porch and a new addition, had upgraded the bathroom, and had dug flower and vegetable gardens.

Although the family had lived in a Manhattan apartment when Jake was a kid, since Manhattan was where his cop father worked, the family often withdrew to this modest house on weekends and holidays. And since Clare was his father's adopted child, his father had stated in his will that Jake should inherit the house after his mother's death.

Until lately, he'd struggled to decide: should he keep it as a rental, or just sell the thing and be done with it? He'd finally decided to sell it and put the money in the bank for Jimmy. With that money, Jimmy would be able to attend the best New York private schools, dress in the best clothes, and go to summer camp with the upper crust kids.

And then Jimmy would go to college and get a good education. He'd make something of himself, and he'd never want for anything. That was the primary reason Jake was selling the house. That and the fact that his mother had counseled him to do so, just before she'd passed away.

"Use the money wisely, Jake, for yourself and for Jimmy. That boy's as smart as a whip and as handsome as a little boy can be, so he deserves the best chances."

Jake drove his 1922 black Dodge sedan in abundant morning sunshine along a winding, two-lane road. The pungent smells of earth, fertilizer and fresh cut grass blew in from the open window, and he smiled at the good memories they carried. He was in the country only ten miles from the house and he wondered if he'd ever drive the road again. Probably not. Why would he? He was closing the door on that part of his life and opening a new door for Jimmy.

“You need to get married now, Jake,” his mother had said, pale, wheezing and coughing as she said it, as if she were already a ghost come back from the dead to haunt him.

“I will,” Jake said, obediently.

“Katy is a nice girl, Jake. She sent me a card and some flowers. Did you see them?”

“Yes, Mom, I saw them. Yes, she’s nice and she’s thoughtful.”

“Jimmy must have a good mother. It’s so important for a little child.”

His mother’s death had hit Jake hard. She’d been healthy most of her life, and his dad had predicted she’d live to be a hundred. Uprooted was the word that had come to him as he stood by her gravesite on the misty day she was buried. Losing his mother just didn’t seem natural. Clare had bawled her eyes out.

The neighbors had brought food, fried chicken, baked ham, cooked vegetables, pies, and cakes. All the food sat on the table—a nice spread—thanks to Clare, who had a respectful, artistic touch about many things, except her own life. But she seemed to move on, coping with the loss of their mother. But was he doing any better? He didn’t think so, and he’d been a no-good bum since the war. Nothing had come to nothing.

A day before she died, his mother had reached for his hand, hers shaking and covered with a map of blue veins. “I don’t judge you, Jake,” she’d said. “You must know that.”

He’d lowered his head, not looking at the hired nurse who lingered near the doorway. She was middle-aged, competent, and kind. After she’d left the room, Jake’s mother continued.

“That awful war hurt you, Jake. I know that.”

“I’m okay. A man can’t keep blaming his life on the world and other people,” he’d said, hoping it added some comfort.

“You do the work you need to do, Jake,” she concluded, closing her eyes. “You keep your business. Well... you always were a lone wolf, but you get Jimmy a good mother... Hear?”

Two hours before she died, his mother awoke from the depths of sleep and smiled at him. A sweet smile. A smile that only a mother can give, filled with love and understanding.

“Take care of your sister, Jake. She’s... not so strong. Not like us.”

His eyes welled up then, and his voice was soft with grief. “Don’t you worry about anything, Mom. I’ll keep it all together. You go with the angels now... No more pain. Go with the angels.”

Jake’s car went winding through a patch of overhanging trees and, on the other side, he saw a distant silver silo and a red tractor crawling across a furrowed field. He drove by an orchard, a pasture, and a woodland that rose up to a forested mountainside, where two crows dipped and sailed.

The whine of the engine and the high, stringy clouds snaking to the horizon made him drowsy, and he nearly fell asleep.

And then he thought of her, Roxie, and he snapped awake. His blood should have run cold, but it didn’t. It ran hot. The woman made him crazy. She made him confused. She made him want to see a doctor about a headache he could feel coming on. Telling her to go away was the smartest thing he’d ever done. Of course it was. Look what happened to the men she got tied up with. They all ended up dead. Even Jules Morgan dropped dead of a heart attack. Jake half-expected to hear that Kilburn Link had dropped dead of some damned thing. What was her problem or, more accurately, what was it about her that killed men?

Except Charlie. Charlie got better. Why did he get better? Pills. Those pills Roxie brought from somewhere, and it was that somewhere that made him want to bang his head against the steering wheel.

For six months, she was gone! She’d walked away from everything: from The Ginger Jam, from her suite, from her career and from him. What the hell was the matter with the woman?

Yes, telling Roxie to go was the smartest thing he'd ever done. He should have done it a long time ago. Six months is a long time; an eternity when you don't know if a person is alive or dead. And then when does she show up? At his office, when he's having a fiery conversation with Stella's fiancé, Warren Crenshaw. She just suddenly pops into his office like nothing ever happened and, just like that, Jake forgot his entire train of thought.

Jake glanced into his rearview mirror and saw a spark of sunlight glancing off the hood and windshield of a car that was closing in fast. Jake's senses snapped to the moment, eyes alert. It was just a feeling—a feeling of danger—and he'd had many of those over the last few months.

The trailing car was a dark sedan, and it was gaining on him on the desolate back road, a shortcut Jake often took to the house. The car drew close, with no intention of passing. Jake hated being trapped in a car. If it was a gang of men with machine guns, he was a dead man.

With his right foot, he buried the accelerator; his engine growled, and the car jumped ahead. The car behind lunged after him, matching his speed.

Jake's mind sought solutions. Driving fast over this roller coaster road, a road long in need of repairs, he spotted a dirt road ahead. He gritted his teeth, tightened his grip on the steering wheel, and glanced into his rearview mirror. At the last moment, he whipped his car left, skidded, and fish-tailed onto the dirt road, his back tires spitting gravel, a dust cloud rising in its wake.

Fighting for calm, as sweat formed above his upper lip, Jake checked his rearview mirror and cursed. The pursuing car managed the turn, and it was barreling ahead, giving chase, and he was obviously its prey.

Jake's heart rate ticked up as he bounced and ramped along the punishing road, not sure where the thing led. Ahead was a line of trees, rolling hills beyond that, one hill folding into another. He twisted his head around. The car was still there, and it was closing in.

Jake didn't hear the shot. A bullet slammed through the back and front windshields, not shattering them, but the bullet hole was ugly. Jake ducked his head, expecting another, and he wasn't disappointed. At least two bullets ripped into the seat to his right. On reflex, he yanked the steering wheel left and nearly jumped off the road into a shallow ravine, barely recovering.

"Stupid!" Jake shouted to himself. Turning onto the lone, dusty, rocky road had been a mistake. He was a sitting duck.

It was odd that at that perilous moment, Jake thought of Roxie. He saw her sexy, vulnerable smile and her dreamy blue eyes. He heard her say, "I'm the woman for you, Jake, and you know it!"

A bullet, zinging by his left ear, snapped him out of it. One more bullet drilled another hole into his windshield. And then he thought, *Will I be the next dead guy on Roxie Raines' dead man list? No, I've got to stay alive for Jimmy!*

Jake's car went racing off the dirt road, swerved right onto another paved road, and shot off for the distant hills. Of course, the deadly car giving chase followed.

Anger suddenly replaced fear, and Jake did a crazy thing. He'd gained enough wiggle room to turn and attack. He slowed down, whipped the steering wheel about and, burning rubber, he did a 180 in the center of the two-lane road.

Surprised by the action, the on-coming car slammed on his brakes at the same time Jake gunned his engine and charged it. Jake braced for the collision.

Just before impact, Jake saw the lone driver's hat was pulled low over his forehead, his eyes wide in stunned fright. It was Calvin Sinclair!

Jake thought. *Now **you're** a sitting duck.*

Jake's heavy Dodge slammed into the right front of Sinclair's car in a cacophony of shattering glass, scraping steel and hissing steam.

Jake's last thoughts were, *I love you, Jimmy, and will Roxie miss me when I'm dead?*

## CHAPTER 42

Inside Billy Rose's nightclub, the sound of the packed audience was a low, continuous murmur, like the distant rise and fall of the sea. They waited in fidgety impatience for the shimmering, golden curtain to rise, and for the notorious and mysterious Roxie Raines to sweep out onto the stage and dazzle them, just as she'd done in the past.

The wealthy, tuxedoed bachelors sat proudly erect, smoking, and stealing sips from silver flasks. The sassy flappers and their above-the-knee dresses tantalized the men, but the girls' aloof expressions, bobbed hair, and rouged cheeks were only a temporary distraction. The main event was the fetching, sexy and enticing Roxie Raines. She was the reason for the men's pricey tuxedos, their clean-shaven faces and flat-combed, short hair, brilliantined to a high gloss.

Elegant women wore lavish evening gowns, sparkling diamonds and rubies, and they leaned close to their corpulent, rich husbands, who talked business while the women whispered gossip and scandal to friends.

If the room wasn't as large as The Ginger Jam, and not as elegant as The Black Cat, it possessed an old-world charm, with its rose-colored walls, polished brass railings and muted, tawny-colored lamps. There were gilded framed mirrors and oil paintings, depicting scenes of gay-90s New York, and opulent, Victorian styled vases, overflowing with fresh, scented roses.

Benny Stamp sat behind the piano, a cherry sucker in his mouth. He pulled it, licked at it, then whistled distractedly through his teeth, feeling the tension build in him like an oncoming summer storm.

He'd just seen Roxie in her dressing room. She was dressed in a shimmering emerald gown, and ready for the performance, her peacock feather, golden headband a standout. But she was nervous and pacing. Jake's sister, Clare, had telephoned that afternoon, and told Roxie that the upstate

police had called to say Jake had been involved in an auto accident near his mother's house. When Roxie had begged for details, Clare had said she didn't have any and she couldn't leave Jimmy alone, so Charlie was on his way upstate. He said he'd call when he learned something. But Charlie hadn't called. No one had called.

Benny had tried to calm Roxie with a joke or two, but it hadn't worked.

At one point, Roxie stopped pacing, staring at him with big, frightened eyes. "If anything happened to Jake, then that's it. I'm done in this time. I'm getting the hell out of here and I'll never come back."

So, it was eight o'clock and Benny waited behind the curtain, seated at his piano, along with six other musicians, their collective eyes focused stage left, where Roxie was past due to appear.

Harriet Hall, Judith Reeves, and Raymond Belair sat at a table close to the stage, making small talk and sipping ginger ales, while around them flasks appeared, people tipping gin into sodas and juice.

Billy Rose stood near the stage, glancing at his watch, measuring the seconds, his lips moving, making curses. He was an energized, diminutive man. When he attended Broadway shows, he always booked four seats: one for himself, one for his date, and two seats in front of those, so he'd have an unobstructed view.

Billy liked Roxie, but he'd taken a chance on her. Look what she'd done to Jules Morgan, walking out on him like that.

The day before he'd hired her, he'd pointed a stern finger at her and said, "So, maybe it was you, doll, who gave Jules that heart attack. Do you know what I'm saying? I don't want that kind of heart attack, okay? I'm too young for it. You ain't gonna do that to me, are you, Roxie Raines?"

She'd held up a hand and taken an oath. "No, Mr. Rose. No heart attack. Promise."



So, where the hell was she? It was after eight o'clock, and the crowd was getting antsy. He was getting antsy. His stomach soured, and he felt as though some little fighter was throwing punches at his heart.

At ten minutes after eight, the crowd at Billy Rose's club was getting loud. A guy at the bar was thudding his fist on it and calling out. "Where is Roxie Raines? Where the hell is Roxie Raines?"

At that moment, the stage curtains parted, and Benny Stamp stood stage center in the full flood of a spotlight.

The room fell into silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen. The time has come! Are you ready!?"

A deafening shout of "Yes!" bounced off the walls of the club.

Benny continued. "Tonight, Billy Rose is proud and excited to bring you the biggest singing star of our time. If you thought she was gone, you're wrong! If you thought she'd vanished so she could work and polish her show, you're right! So tonight, Roxie Raines, the Cat's Meow with a Hundred Lives, is here! Please put your hands together for the one and the only Roxie Raines!"

The stage went dark, and the room fell into a hush. A cymbal crash and then a drum roll that seemed to go on forever ended in a final crash of cymbals. Then came the wailing cry of a muted trumpet, filling the room with an eager, sensual longing.

Dazzling lights flashed on, and Roxie Raines stood center stage, hipshot, with her head back, her eyes far out over the room. And then a sigh like the wind went through the crowd.

"Hello, New York!" Roxie shouted. "Hello, you beautiful people! Roxie Raines loves you and I want you to know it. I'm back!"

The room exploded into thunderous applause as Benny Stamp and the orchestra launched into a lush, jazzy tune, with a punchy trumpet, a whining clarinet, and a driving bass line.

Benny Stamp went to work, having learned his craft at the flying-fingers school of piano playing.

Over her shoulder, Roxie flicked him a feisty grin, and then she jumped in, singing another of her own compositions, *Don't Go, You Big Bad Man*. Her voice was rough and raw, like a roaring lioness, running up and down the scale, the broken rhythms sharp and thrilling.

Men's heads were thrust forward, eyes hot, as they looked her up and down, caught in the aura of her breathy sensuality. Women radiated awe and jealousy, and Judith Reeves's eyes crinkled and focused, stunned by Roxie's magnetism and singing talent. Judith was certain that, given the right exposure, Roxie could have also become a singing star in the twenty-first century.

As the show progressed, Roxie added different qualities to her voice: a haunting, sexual vulnerability to the love ballads; to the up-tempo songs, she turned on the juice with high staccato scat-singing, similar to Ella Fitzgerald's style; and then came earthy, low tones that brought a sense of intimate longing.

Roxie's last pure note hung in the air, and everything in the room momentarily stopped, as if suspended in time. Then Roxie saw him near the front door! She'd know his shape, his body, his essence anywhere. It was Jake, standing next to Charlie!

The crowd jumped to its feet in a fury of applause, with cries of "More! Encore!"

Jake lifted his hands and applauded, a smile forming.

Roxie gave him a quick nod, went striding across the stage, turned her back to the audience and waited, her hand high over her head, fingers snapping, her left leg pulsing. Benny and the orchestra slammed into Roxie's encore, her original song, *My Man Hot*.

*"You know my man, he ain't so right for me... Yeah!*

*I said, you know my man, he ain't no good for me.*

*But he's hot lookin' and his kisses they set me free.*

The eager crowd's eyes were on Roxie, and the crowd was already thickening around the stage when Roxie slung off the last note and it went soaring out into the room.

Billy Rose called in his steely-eyed, muscled security, and just before the crowd rushed the stage, security circled Roxie and led her off into the stage wings. Still, the crowd shouted, "More! Marry me, Roxie! Sing another, Roxie!"

Roxie's dressing room was crammed with roses, bottles of champagne, and telegrams from suitors, admirers, and both motion picture and Broadway stars. There was even a telegram from the mayor himself, John Mason.

Billy Rose entered, all smiles and gushing words. Kilburn Link picked his way through the security guards and pushed into Roxie's dressing room, his grin big, his cigar big, and his plans for Roxie growing big in his flashing eyes.

"What a performance!" Link shouted. "That was your best ever, doll. You wowed them like I've never seen before, Roxie Raines! It was your very best! None better in this town, I tell you. Right, Billy?"

Billy had his thumbs stuck inside his bright red vest pockets, and he was rocking on his heels, his proud expression expanding. "You said it, Link. This kid's got it and then some!"

Roxie pulled off her peacock headband and spun to face the men. "I want to see Jake. He's out there and I've got to see him!"

Billy and Link exchanged glances.

Speaking his words slowly through fat lips, Link said, "I thought that affair was on the rocks. Burned itself out."

Roxie shook her head. "No! Never burned out! He was in a car accident this morning, and I have to see him. Can you have somebody get him and bring him in?"

Billy nodded. “Okay, Roxie, but don’t forget, we’ve got a press party and then an opening night party at the Algonquin. Everybody who is anybody wants to meet you, Roxie. And don’t forget Chaplin. He’s got a picture waiting for you.”

Roxie ignored that. “I want to see Jake. Alone.”

Both men nodded and Billy stepped aside to let Link exit the room first.

Roxie bent over and breathed. She was still high from the show, her heart thumping, her throat dry.

She straightened, turned, and found a bottle of champagne in a silver wine bucket. She removed the foil and the wire cage, twisted, and stood back as the cork exploded and shot across the room like a rocket, a stream of foam trailing behind.

Her empty water glass was handy on her dressing table. She splashed some champagne into it and gulped it down, soothed by the tickling bubbles. After another generous swallow, she waited, then jammed the champagne bottle back inside the wine bucket.

Outside, voices were spirited and loud. She stood in the middle of the room, her nose assaulted by the rose scent, and stared hard at the door, her heart thudding through her chest. Would he come? Was he all right? He had smiled at her, hadn’t he? He had come to her performance, hadn’t he?

A light knock on the door startled her. She moved toward it, holding her breath. “Yes?”

“It’s Jake, Roxie. I’ve got security all around me.”

Roxie yanked the door open, and despite her nerves, doubts and fears, just seeing him, she was calmed. “Hello, Jake.”

His smile was tender. “Hello, Roxie.”

She grabbed his arm, tugged him inside, and closed and locked the door.

“Holy smoke, look at all these roses. I feel like I’m at a funeral,” Jake said.

“Are you okay?” Roxie asked, standing back, examining him. “Clare said you were in an accident.”

Jake looked at her fully. “Yeah, I’ll tell you all about it later. I got lucky. I think you brought me luck. I was thinking about you when it happened.”

Roxie sighed. “That phone call scared the crap out of me. I thought I’d lost you.”

“Yeah, well, I thought I’d lost you, too. Dammit, Roxie Raines, look at you and how beautiful you are.”

He took her hand and pulled her forward, kissing her hard on the lips.

After they broke the kiss, Roxie whispered into his ear. “Take me, Jake. Take me now. I’ve got to have you.”

He drew back, probing the depths of her glowing, blue eyes. “Here? Now?”

“I love you, Jake. I can’t help it. I do. Make love to me. Now.”

He glanced back toward the door, where the murmur of voices rose and fell.

“I locked it. We’ll hide in the roses,” Roxie said, with a slow, sultry wink.

“Don’t roses have thorns?”

Roxie brushed his lips with hers. “Yeah... so what? We have a thorny relationship, don’t we?”

“Clever girl,” he said, his hands finding her breasts, his mouth covering hers.

In full embrace, Jake said, “You make me crazy, Roxie.”

“Good.”

“Please don’t leave me again.”

“I won’t. Never. Promise.”

Their kisses grew urgent, hot, their tongues exploring.

“By the way, Katy dumped me for a millionaire. Can you believe it?”

Roxie’s smile was deliciously sexy. “That’s really good. So now you can marry me,” she said, removing his tie.

“A little pushy, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but you already know that.”

“Isn’t the man supposed to ask?”

“So, ask already,” Roxie said, nibbling his lips, her hand sliding down his thigh, finding his bulge. “I’m getting older by the minute, waiting for you to ask.”

“Marry me, Roxie Raines?”

Her whisper was hot. “Oh yeah, you bet I will, and then we’re going to live happily ever after, pretty Jake.”

“Don’t call me pretty,” Jake said, running a hand through her lush hair, bending to give her another kiss.

# EPILOGUE

The *New York Evening Post* blasted out the headline,

## **NINE LIVES STAR SINGER ROXIE RAINES MARRIED!**

*“At 10 a.m. on Saturday, November 20, 1926, in a secret ceremony witnessed by only a handful of invited guests Roxie Raines, Gotham’s own Cat’s Meow, married New York Private Detective Jake Kane.*

*“In keeping with the glamorous trend of the day, Mrs. Roxie Raines Kane did not wear a laced-up corset gown of yesteryear. Hers was a blue and gold, shimmering, ornate shift dress with a drop waist, which fell well above the knee. The length allowed plenty of leg to be seen, and a striking pair of blue velvet strap heels accentuated the look. Her gleaming blonde hair was styled in finger waves, her choker of pearls dazzled, and her white fur collar wrap-coat was a standout.*

*“The handsome couple drew the eyes of an army of reporters and swarming, eager crowds as they swept out of the Methodist church on West 12th Street. Mrs. Kane’s smile was all sunshine as she waved and threw kisses, before she and her husband ducked into a waiting limousine. They vanished into the morning mist on their way to their honeymoon ship, which will take them through the Panama Canal and onto sun-kissed California, where Roxie is scheduled to make a motion picture with the great Charlie Chaplin.”*

Roxie and Jake Kane had a luxurious, first-class stateroom, with cherry wood paneling, a private bath with gold fixtures, and a porthole. The towels were thick and soft, the soap had *USS Tennessee* engraved on it in green letters, and the queen-size bed was firm.

The first few days they spent hiding away in their stateroom, making love, ordering meals in, and making plans

for the future, she giddy, he silly, and both laughing like teenagers in love.

As the days passed, they strolled the Promenade Deck in an abundance of light and warm, moving air. After the steamship passed through the Panama locks, they spent hours in deck chairs reading, wandering the decks, and leaning against the rails, gazing out at the smooth, azure sea, mesmerized by the shimmering water, soft, white clouds and blue sky.

After dinner, an orchestra played foxtrots and ballads, and Roxie and Jake danced until the wee hours, suspended in time, and deeply in love. Some passengers recognized Roxie, but except for the occasional request for an autograph, she was left alone.

One night on the dancefloor, Jake was in a champagne mood, and he'd surprised her, twirling her about like a ballerina. She laughed her way round the floor, dipping and swaying and singing to the music, drawing applause from the orchestra and other guests.

When the ship sailed into the Port of Los Angeles on sunlit waves, Roxie and Jake stood on the crowded deck with the others, the afternoon sun glaring in their eyes.

"There it is, Roxie," Jake said. "Our new home, at least for a while."

Roxie looked at him. "I wonder for how long?"

"Why do your eyes look a little gloomy?"

"I want to put the past behind us. Did you read the morning paper, fresh off the wire?"

"Yeah, I read it on deck when you were putting on your makeup."

"Then you saw that Calvin Sinclair was found guilty of corruption and attempted murder?"

"Yeah, I saw it, and I'm glad we're not in New York. Reporters would be climbing all over us. Anyway, old Sinclair will appeal, but it won't stick, not with all the evidence they



have on him. He'll probably get ten to fifteen years and be out in eight."

Roxie linked her arm in his and drew him close as three blasts from the ship's whistle announced their arrival.

"I know you don't want to talk about it, Jake, but when you drove your car into Calvin's car back in July, did you want to kill him? I guess it all came back when I read the article this morning."

Jake looked at her. "I've said it all before, haven't I, even on the witness stand?"

"You said you wanted to stop him from shooting you."

"Yeah, that's right. Hence, the attempted murder charge. The bullets the cops found in my front seat matched Sinclair's gun. I didn't need to shoot my mouth off and say any more than that. Sinclair was knocked cold after I slammed into him. Did I want to shoot him?"

Jake shook his head. "Couldn't do it."

Roxie kissed him. "And that's another reason I love you."

Another blast of the boat whistle turned them back to the pier. Roxie stared down at the heaving crowds that had crowded onto the dock, hands and handkerchiefs waving, welcoming the arriving passengers. She waved and smiled broadly, even though she didn't know anybody.

"Maybe I shouldn't say this, Jake, but if you had killed him, we wouldn't have to worry about him, or some of his so-called buddies, coming after you."

Jake squeezed her arm. "Don't worry your head about it. Where Calvin Sinclair's going, there will be more than a few guys he put in there, and they'll be waiting for him."

"And I know I've already asked fifty times, but are you sure you don't regret not taking the Police Commissioner's job?"

"No. I told you. I hate politics. I'd go crackers in a month. And don't forget, that's another reason Katy dumped me. She said she could never marry a man who lacked ambition."

Roxie's eyes flamed. "You didn't tell me that."

"No, because I knew you'd get steamed."

"What's the matter with her? You risked your life to save a man's life, Charlie got shot, and you got Calvin Sinclair put in jail, one of the most corrupt men in the city. I'd like to slap her."

"It's okay. She got her millionaire, and I got you, Roxie Raines Kane, star of stage and soon-to-be-star of screen. Katy is very jealous."

"Good."

After two more blasts of the boat whistle, Roxie faced Jake, shaking off irritation. "Okay, enough about Katy. What do you think Clare, Judith, and Jimmy are doing right now?"

"I'd say they're having one helluva good time in our grand new suite. Clare's probably banging on the piano and writing one of her racy novels, while the phonograph is playing some jazzy tune. How she can hear herself write, I'll never know. Anyway, Judith is crocheting, about to play bridge with her friends across the hall, and Jimmy is romping about the rooms chasing the cats. And, I must say that Jimmy has really taken to Judith, like she's another grandmother, and I couldn't be happier. It's almost as if she was part of the family or something."

Roxie smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, and she worships him."

"Go figure."

Roxie stared into the distance. "I hope Harriet and Raymond are still happy after nearly four months of marriage."

"They'll be just fine. I've never seen two people more in love."

"Except for us, Jake Kane."

He grinned. "Yeah, you said it. Except for us."

Roxie thrust her face close to his. "And we won't fight much, will we?"

"Yeah, probably."

“And we won’t get jealous of each other, will we? You, with me hanging out with the men movie stars, and me, with you and those hot L.A. broads, who’ll find you irresistibly handsome?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“But we’ll make it, won’t we, Jake? You and me? We’ll make it, won’t we?”

He mashed his nose into hers. “Yeah, Roxie Raines, we’ll make it all right.”

A minute later, Roxie spotted a waiting limousine just beyond the docks with a driver holding up a sign reading **Charlie Chaplin Studios**.

“There it is!” Roxie shouted, pointing, excitement ringing in her voice.

Jake nodded. “I heard that Chaplin built the studio in 1917, for about \$35,000. I also heard he prefers New York to Hollywood.”

Roxie turned to him, worried. “I know I keep asking, but you won’t get bored while I’m working, will you, Jake?”

“No... and I’ll tell you why. I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?”

“Yep. I’ve been waiting for the right time to tell you. Now is the time.”

He opened his mouth, just as another burp of a whistle blast covered his words.

“What!?” Roxie yelled.

Jake moved his mouth close to her ear. “Charlie’s on his way. He’ll be here in two days.”

Roxie jerked her head back. “What? What about Maxie?”

“She was... well, as he put it, ‘too hands on.’ She was strangling him.”

“But what are you two going to do?”

Jake gave her a winning smile. “I got a six-thousand-dollar bonus from Hal Lester, a thank you for saving his life. I shared it with Charlie, and we decided to set up shop in L.A. He has an old boxing buddy here in the detective business. He says there’s a lot of work just waiting for us.”

Roxie crossed her arms, giving him a look.

“What’s that look for?”

Roxie tilted her head, grinning. “You didn’t tell me about the six thousand from Hal Lester.”

“Like I said. It was a surprise. I don’t want you to get bored with me.”

“Okay, fine. Now, I have a surprise of my own.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah... In one week, Clare, Judith and Jimmy will be on a train coming to live with us in our big, new house, complete with a swimming pool and tennis courts.”

Jake crossed his arms, tilting his head, thinking about it. “I thought we decided they’d come in a month.”

“We did, but I knew you felt guilty about leaving Jimmy.”

“Yeah, well, I *was* feeling guilty, and I miss him.”

“So?”

Jake’s grin was broad. “So, I love it. One big, happy family in green and sunny California.”

Roxie blew out a sigh. “Okay. Cool. I’m relieved. I wasn’t sure how you’d feel. Anyway, when I told Judith, she was so happy she looked ten years younger, and Clare pulled me aside and asked if I could get her in the movies.”

Jake shook his head. “God help us.”

Roxie laughed. “I think she’d be a great actress, Jake. I’m going to ask Charlie C if he can find a part for her. Why not? And if he doesn’t like her acting, maybe he’ll want to film one of her stories or books. You never know.”

The warm wind that washed over them smelled of the sea and orange blossoms, and in the clear, golden distance, lush green hills beckoned, and everything seemed grand, and possible and fantastic.

Jake turned, taking it all in. “Well, there it is, Roxie,” he said, as the ship docked and dock workers appeared, scampering about, securing the lines. The waiting crowd below surged forward, their faces bright with anticipation.

With a grand gesture, Jake indicated toward the big, wide California world before them. “Hollywood awaits Roxie Raines.”

She gave him a beam of a smile that drew him to a kiss, another magical kiss that never ceased to excite her. Moments later, they watched the gangplank being lowered, and anxious passengers waited to disembark.

Roxie felt a wild mixture of things: love for Jake, excitement for what was to come, and an emotional roller-coaster-ride of dreams and old memories.

For only a few seconds, she felt as though she were dangling in time and, if she fell, she’d wake up in 2019, back in the West Village, performing at Speakeasy.

The sun warmed her face, Jake held her close, and Charlie Chaplin was waiting for her in his shiny limousine, ready to whisk her off to make a movie in this strange, new, and incredible Hollywood land of the 1920s.

# THANK YOU!

Thank you for taking the time to read *Speakeasy Book Two, Keep The Secret*. If you enjoyed it, please consider telling your friends or posting a short review. Word of mouth is an author's best friend, and it is much appreciated.

Thank you,

Elyse Douglas

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# Editorial Reviews

THE LOST MATA HARI RING – A Time Travel Novel

by Elyse Douglas

“This book is hard to put down! It is pitch-perfect and hits all the right notes. It is the best book I have read in a while!

5 Stars!”

—Bound4Escape Blog and Reviews

“The characters are well defined, and the scenes easily visualized. It is a poignant, bitter-sweet emotionally charged read.”

5-Stars!

—Rockin’ Book Reviews

“This book captivated me to the end!”

—StoryBook Reviews

“A captivating adventure...”

—Community Bookstop

“...Putting *The Lost Mata Hari Ring* down for any length of time proved to be impossible.”

—Lisa’s Writopia

“I found myself drawn into the story and holding my breath to see what would happen next...”

—Blog: A Room Without Books is Empty



## Editorial Reviews

### THE CHRISTMAS TOWN – A Time Travel Novel by Elyse Douglas

“*The Christmas Town* is a beautifully written story. It draws you in from the first page, and fully engages you up until the very last. The story is funny, happy, and magical. The characters are all likable and very well-rounded. This is a great book to read during the holiday season, and a delightful read during any time of the year.”

—Bauman Book Reviews

“I would love to see this book become another one of those beloved Christmas film traditions, to be treasured over the years! The characters are loveable; the settings vivid. Period details are believable. A delightful read at any time of year! Don't miss this novel!”

—A Night's Dream of Books

## Editorial Reviews

### THE SUMMER LETTERS – A Novel by Elyse Douglas

“A perfect summer read!”

—Fiction Addiction

“In Elyse Douglas' novel *The Summer Letters*, the characters' emotions, their drives, passions and memories are all so expertly woven; we get a taste of what life was like for veterans, women, small town folk, and all those people we think have lived too long to remember (but they never really forget, do they?).

I couldn't stop reading, not for a moment. Such an amazing read. Flawless.”

5 Stars!

—Anteria Writes Blog - To Dream, To Write, To Live

“A wonderful, beautiful love story that I absolutely enjoyed reading.”

5 Stars!

—Books, Dreams, Life - Blog

“The Summer Letters is a fabulous choice for the beach or cottage this year, so you can live and breathe the same feelings and smells as the characters in this wonderful story.”

# Books In This Series

## *SPEAKEASY SERIES*

IN 2019, A WEST VILLAGE NIGHTCLUB SINGER, ROXIE RAINES, stumbles through a secret basement doorway into the past and finds herself in Roaring Twenties, New York, with all its dangers, secrets, excitement, and romance.

### **SPEAKEASY BOOK ONE**

In 2019, struggling West Village singer Roxie Raines stumbles through a basement doorway and time slips back to New York's raucous Roaring Twenties.

While she dazzles the speakeasy crowds with her "modern sound," she gets trapped in the dangerous web of Frankie Shay, an evil club owner. She struggles to escape his control and return to the basement doorway that sent her to 1925.

When she meets the handsome detective, Jake Kane, it's love at first sight, but Jake has a secret past, and her own time travel secret makes him suspicious.

Roaring Twenties New York comes alive with flappers, gangsters, romance, and speakeasies, and Roxie's stunning rise to stardom could come with the price of losing both the man she loves and her own life.

## Books By This Author

### **TIME VISITOR A Time Travel Novel**

In 1944 a Squadron of Navy Planes Disappears off the Florida Coast. One Lands in 2005... In Ohio.

### **TIME ZONE A Time Travel Novel**

Mary McLane Carson has two lives and two loves. She has time travel mysteries she can't understand, and secrets she can never tell.

In 2015, Pilot Mary McLane Carson struggles with a left engine fire. Her airplane plunges through a strange flash of light, crash-landing into a Kansas field. She wakes up, alone, in December 1942, being cared for by the handsome, Dr. Thomas Fleming.

### **THE CHRISTMAS EVE SERIES**

In an antique shop, Eve finds an old lantern with a dusty letter hidden inside. It's dated 1885, and her name is written on it. The Series begins...

### **The Summer Diary - A Novel**

After her best friend dies in a plane crash, Keri discovers that she had a secret lover — Keri sets out to find him. When Keri finally reaches Ryan, could she unexpectedly find a new chance at happiness?

## About The Author

### **Elyse Douglas**



Elyse Douglas is the pen name for the married writing team Elyse Parmentier and Douglas Pennington. Elyse has enjoyed careers as an English teacher, an actress, and a speech-language pathologist.

She and her husband, Douglas Pennington, have completed many novels, including “The Other Side of Summer,” “Time Zone,” “The Christmas Eve Series,” “Time Change,” “Time Stranger,” “The Summer Diary”, and “The Christmas Diary Series.”

They live in New York City, with their marvelous cat, Sir Eaton, who loves opera, the “Endeavor” detective series, and bit of cognac on a chilly winter night.

## Praise For Author

*“A thrilling time travel romance set in 1920’s New York City. ‘Speakeasy,’ by Elyse Douglas is already my book of the year.*

*Five out of five jazzy stars for this one!”*

*- My Tangled Skeins Book Reviews*

*“The Christmas Eve Letter is a wonderful time travel book and one of my favorite books of the year!”*

*- The Book Return Blog*

*“I zapped through reading this book in only a couple of days! It is both captivating and provocative.*

*DARING SUMMER challenged my idea of an average romantic suspense novel. It truly shook up the genre and turned it on its head. I will be thinking about this one for a while.”*

*- Bound4Escape Blog —5 out of 5 stars!*

*“A wonderful, beautiful love story that I absolutely enjoyed!”*

*5 Stars!*

*- Books, Dreams, Life - Blog*

*“Book 3 - THE CHRISTMAS EVE SECRET! So exciting! Oh, and that ending! It melted my cold heart! I loved it!”*

*5 Stars!*

*- Carole Rae’s Book Reviews*