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Prove It On Me

Senior Paper

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By *Lillian Augspurger*

Thesis Director
Lori Horvitz

Thesis Advisor
Cynn Chadwick

Prove It On Me

A Novel by

Lillian Augspurger

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The following chapters constitute the beginning of a historical fiction crime novel set in 1928 New Orleans. After losing her job as a telephone operator, Marilyn “Skid” Calwell returns to her roots as a singer and male impersonator in the underground world of speakeasies. She quickly forms an attraction with the secretive bartender, Louise Patin. When Skid begins to pry into Louise’s past, she uncovers a history of deceit, theft, and treachery, as the Patin family estate has been taken from Louise by her brother-in-law, Warren Clairmont, who Louise believes is responsible for the death of her sister Michelle. Skid agrees to help Louise steal from Warren’s jewelry store on Victoria Street in an attempt to buy back the estate. When things go south, Louise is forced to leave Skid to the police, and Warren refuses to return the home. Louise breaks Skid out of jail, and together the two must find a way to take down Warren and get the estate back. All the while, their feelings for each other burn hotter than a shot of bathtub gin.

For Kinsey—my partner in crime, the cat’s pajamas, the bee’s knees.

CHAPTER 1

It was barely ten and already I felt like ripping the switchboard from the wall. I'd answered and transferred what must have been over a hundred calls, and by now the four words I'd uttered on repeat for weeks— "Number please. One moment"—had lost their bounce. More than once it bordered on the verge of flat-out shouting, as I struggled to be heard over the ruckus of the Raymond Telephone Exchange. Heels clacked back and forth on the wooden floor; wires clicked connected and unconnected from their sockets; "Number please" tumbled from the mouths of thirty twenty-something-year-old women in a dizzying chorus.

In the span of the ten seconds I'd spent speaking to and transferring a very upset businessman, three more lights had blinked to red life on my panel. Mrs. Aster's heavy tread paused behind my chair.

"You really have to work faster, Marilyn," she said. Then, to the girl next to me, "Take those calls for her."

I nodded, feeling my ears turning red as the girl leaned across me and unplugged one of the cords from my panel, then connected it to her own. I gripped the sleeve of my beige cotton dress, swallowed my anger, and turned to the red light of the waiting caller. It was glaring at me—as was Mrs. Aster, I was sure—and I answered.

“Number please,” I said, turning my face down to speak directly into the tube around my neck, and straining to hear the speaker’s response over the nonstop noise.

“CAN-7567.”

“I’m sorry?” I asked. The words were said in a rasp so low that I could barely understand what he said.

“Dammit woman, I said CAN-7567!”

“One moment,” I said, startled into motion and already swapping out the wires. I’d gotten in trouble for “eavesdropping” before. At first I hadn’t meant to; it wasn’t my fault that the caller had started talking about her steamy affair before I was able to hang up. And then, once I’d started to hear the story, I had to know how it ended. Mrs. Aster hadn’t caught me then, but she did eventually notice that other girls managed to connect at least fifty calls an hour compared to my meager thirty. Now, the urgency of the man’s tone, combined with the monotony of the morning, made me hesitate to hang up. I glanced over my shoulder; Mrs. Aster stood across the room, her back to me. I connected the call, and waited.

“Patin’s Dry Goods,” a woman’s voice answered. She sounded composed, controlled, and spoke with the slight lilt I’d come to associate, during my year in New Orleans, with the French Quarter. Made sense so far; the 3L4N had been for an address Canal Street close to the Faubourg Tremé.

“Patin, have you heard about the rain in Chicago?” my caller said.

“Sure have. Tell your Aunt Jenny she’s the cat’s pajamas.”

“Understood. Got ice and oyster fruit?”

“You know it.”

“I’ll ankle at five.”

And the call ended. Or at least it ended for me, for the iron fist of Mrs. Aster yanked off my headset, pulling more than a few short sandy hairs with it. I yelped—to the amusement of the girls down the line who had turned to watch—and stared up into the livid blue eyes of Mrs.

Aster.

“My office, Marilyn,” she said, the red lights reflecting in her eyes. “Now.”

“Hell,” I muttered, pushing my chair back from the desk and relishing the awful screech as it grated against the floor.

“What was that?” Mrs. Aster asked.

“Nothing. Ma’am.”

Feeling the eyes of twenty-nine other operators on the back of my head, I followed Mrs. Aster into her office and watched as she closed the door with a click that resonated of incoming dismissal.

“I’ve really tried to give you the benefit of the doubt,” Mrs. Aster said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “But your surly attitude, lackluster work ethic, and inability to refrain from eavesdropping are unacceptable.”

No matter how mind-numbingly boring it was to work for the RTE, I needed the \$6.25 it slipped into my pocket every Friday. And now, with the possibility of termination looming in the room like a smoke cloud, I prepared to grovel.

“You need me,” I said. “Lots of people in the city are looking for capable girls like me.”

“Considering that this branch is relatively new, yes. It is precisely for that reason that I was willing to overlook the fact that you were fired from your past two secretarial positions. Not to mention your time in the Atlanta Penitentiary.”

“I told you, those days are behind me,” I said, looking away. Of course she would bring that up now.

“Be that as it may,” she continued. “We here at the RTE hold our girls to an exceptionally high standard, and it’s become increasingly obvious to me over the past six months that you’re just not cut out for this. I’m afraid I’ll have to let you go.”

I might have protested more. I might have made myself into a charity case—started crying, spun a story about two sick babies—but I didn’t. Instead, I swept the speaking tube over my head and slammed it on the desk and, standing up to my full, unimpressive height, said, “Fine.”

Mrs. Aster nodded, then took out a box from the bottom drawer of her desk. She counted out \$1.25, which I took and jammed in the pocket of my dress.

“I trust you don’t need me to show you the door,” she said, folding her arms over her matronly chest.

Fuming, I entered the now-silent operating room of the RTE. Twenty-nine pairs of eyes glanced up from their switchboards and stared at me as I stood outside the door of Mrs. Aster’s office. Then, hearing the footsteps of Mrs. Aster behind me, the eyes turned back to their red lights and wires and speaking tubes, and the noise came rushing back. Knowing I’d most likely

never see the bunch of gossiping, giggling girls again, I raised my middle finger in farewell before stepping into the sunlight.

The bright morning stood in stark contrast to the dim, cool interior of the RTE and made me squint. Not even half-past ten, and already steam rose in tendrils from the sidewalks.

My stomach growled as I passed a street vendor selling beignets. It'd been nearly four hours since I'd eaten a piece of toast with jelly in my cramped room up at Mr. Mahan's apartments at Canal Street. And, I remembered with a jolt of panic, I still had to cough up my rent—nearly two weeks late. Mr. Mahan had posted a note on my door that morning that, unless I paid by the end of the next week, I was out.

Considering all this, and the fact that my reliable income had run dry for the foreseeable future, the smarter side of my brain told me I should avoid buying anything I didn't need. But I'd never been good at making decisions with my head instead of my stomach, so I gave the beignet man his five cents and bit into the ball of fried dough, powdered sugar dusting the collar of my dress. I walked until I reached a corner, where I waited for a streetcar to take me home to Mr. Mahan's, and thought about what I could do next.

What place would want a woman who'd spent six months in jail for indecency and Prohibition violations? Even if they managed to overlook that—like Mrs. Aster had—I'd exhausted my options for employment that weren't waitressing or chambermaid-ing. I'd worked for a few weeks at what seemed like every newspaper and legal firm in New Orleans since I'd arrived after leaving Atlanta. And now, having been fired from the RTE, I doubted any other telephone exchange would hire me—not that I wanted to return to the tedious work of an operator. Every time, my big mouth and penchant for getting myself in trouble only got me fired.

And that's when it hit me: if I couldn't get a job learning a new skill, why not fall back on my old talents? And, I thought with a grin, what better city to do that than this one?

I'd come to New Orleans after getting out of the Atlanta Penitentiary because I'd once heard one of my mother's rich, uptight friends call it a "quagmire of sin," and that sounded like a place I needed to be. In my time in the city, I'd grown used to its quirks and charms, knew most of the street names, the streetcar routes, which restaurants served the best po'boys. And, of course, I knew about Storyville.

Whether they approved or not, everyone in the city knew about the district, the temporary home of decriminalized prostitution, until the Navy figured it didn't need its sailors carrying syphilis along with perfumed letters onboard its ships. But while the red lights may not have shone as brightly as they did a decade ago—for they did still shine—cabarets and speakeasies rose to take their place. And that was the perfect place to pick up my life from where I'd left it in Atlanta.

When I first started working in speakeasies, unbeknownst to my family, I'd just been singing. It was only through a secret outing with a school friend that I first learned about the underground life of hooch-houses and performers. As soon as I walked in, I was hooked, and we snuck out of the rich neighborhood every week to go on Friday nights. Once—after I'd had one too many Bee's Knees—I'd stood up on a table and started to sing. I don't remember the night, but the next day my friend told me the owner of the place wanted to talk to me. Turned out he liked my voice and said there would be good money in it for me if I wanted to do it full time.

And so I stood, terrified, on the stage of an Atlanta speakeasy, and sang a few songs and realized that there was indeed good money to be made singing for a crowd of drunk people looking for a thrill.

But after a while the owner started to get new, better acts, and I did what any reasonable performer does: I adapted. I'd remembered the days before the War, when I'd read about the great impersonators of music halls and vaudevilles in England like Vesta Tilley and Ella Shields. And really, I'd thought at the time, how hard could it be to put on pants and a tie and walk around the stage like a man?

Now, having decided I would either succeed in a cabaret as a singer and impersonator, or end up exactly where I was this morning, stuck in a job I hated, I spent the rest of the day shopping. I'd certainly need a new wardrobe I was to make a living with my old job, and if I ended up working in a boring job again, at least I'd have a nice suit. And it was, I thought as I turned and admired myself in the mirror of a men's tailoring shop, a very, very nice suit.

I'd chosen a creamy off-white two-piece with a new, crisp white shirt. The fabric was light and cool, and would be perfect for the smothering heat of both the New Orleans summer and the cramped, smoky rooms of most of the cabarets. To provide a pop of color, I'd also purchased a red tie. It cost almost three months' wages from the RTE, but I'd already convinced myself it would be worth it. I carried my purchase out of the store, wrapped carefully in its brown paper, and hopped on the streetcar for the Canal Street route to take me close to Storyville.

By the time I'd finished my shopping and tailoring and arrived at Canal Street, it was already past three, and the sounds of the afternoon were in full swing. Cars honked, people talked

and laughed, a band played the blues on a street corner. As I approached Storyville, the number of bands increased, and the smell of food became less pervasive. Gradually the buildings grew more polished, with more wrought iron balconies, and I knew I was in the French Quarter. There were more people here too, a blend of locals and the many tourists who came to hear jazz and see the city's Spanish moss and wrought iron balconies. They came to buy cheap, "genuine voodoo curios" from dim shops that smelled like incense and smoke; to eat gumbo until their stomachs rebelled; and, of course, to visit Storyville.

Clutching my package to my chest, I made my way along the crowded sidewalks, looking at the signs of various cabarets. During the day, many stayed open to host jazz and blues performers, featuring the more daring acts at night. I'd almost reached the end of Canal Street when something caught my eye: a sign hanging in the window of a small building that read, "Patin's Dry Goods."

Was it just that morning that I'd been sitting at my switchboard at the RTE, listening in on their conversation? Looking back now, it seemed familiar. I'd heard phrases almost exactly like the first two when I worked in Atlanta, the cryptic words that came from the mouths of men in suits and women with feathered headbands outside the back-alley door of the speakeasy. Though the language had changed since my time working about a year ago, it was just familiar enough to give me hope. The part about ice and oyster fruit, however, was nonsense to me. Suppose, though, that this really was a speakeasy, and suppose they needed a new act.... And so, need for a job and curiosity triumphing over my common sense, I entered the store.

The bell that rang above my head made me jump, and a man who was sweeping the floor looked up and smiled.

“Can I help you find something?” he asked.

I froze. What could I say, that I was snooping around because I’d listened in on a coded phone call? Instead, I asked, “Is Patin here?”

The man shook his head. “No, Louise has stepped out at the moment. Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?”

And then, in a rush of desperation, I said the phrase I'd heard that morning that started it all. "Have you heard about the rain in Chicago?"

The man's expression changed. Where before he'd been giving the same deal-with-a-customer smile that I'd fixed on my face at the RTE, he now seemed wary.

"Come back at five. Unless you need to speak to Louise in person?"

"Yes," I said, feeling my heart hammering in my chest, and trying to sound confident. "Came for the ice and oyster fruit."

The man nodded. "Wait here."

He disappeared into a back room. From where I stood, I could hear what sounded like a door opening, then closing again with a thud. Then the muffled sound of footsteps until there was silence. After a few minutes I heard them approach, then the door creaked open. The man appeared in front of me, and beckoned me to follow him. I did as he asked, growing more hopeful by the second, and would have fallen straight through the open trapdoor had he not caught me.

"Watch your step," he said. "Louise is waiting for you."

And with that, he left me staring at the gaping hole in the floor, where a flight of wooden steps led down, down into a pool of softly glowing light.

As I descended, the air grew damp and cool. I reached the bottom, looked around, and gasped.

As I'd guessed, I stood in a speakeasy, but one far more beautiful than any I'd performed in in Atlanta. In stark contrast to the store upstairs, this room was polished and glowing. Light bounced and rippled off a row of mirrors behind the mahogany bar. A neat line of wooden stools sat in front of the bar, and rows and rows of bottles of all shapes and sizes stood on a shelf

behind it. The floor was stone, but covered in patches by beautiful rugs. There were about a dozen tables around the edges of the room, each with glasses overturned and ready. In the middle a large space had been cleared for dancing underneath the green glass lights. At the far end of the room was a stage with a microphone; a painted wooden sign above it read “The Green Palace.” And behind the bar was a woman, who looked up from polishing a glass, and smiled. Remembering to close my mouth, I sat on one of the stools, set the package containing my new suit on the counter, and asked, “What can a girl get to drink around here?”

Without missing a beat, the woman said, “You name it, I have it—but you seem like a tall glass of water yourself.”

Aside from the compliment—which was probably just a trick to get a tip, I knew it well—I was struck by her voice, for it was the same voice I’d heard on the phone.

“Name your drink,” she said. “I was told this was urgent?”

Now I fully took her in to realize just who I might be dealing with. She was tall and slim—taller and slimmer than me, and her long black hair was pinned in a bun at the nape of her light brown neck. Her eyes in the green light seemed almost gold. From what I could see of her outfit, she wore a white button-up blouse with a loose striped gray and green tie. And now, she leaned forward on the bar with the assured grace and ease of a cat.

“How about a French 75?” I asked.

Louise nodded and turned to pull bottles from the wall. While her back was turned, I frantically began thinking of what I would tell her; I couldn’t tell her the truth, that I’d eavesdropped on her coded conversation and was curious and stupid enough to come and investigate. But looking around the speakeasy, a plan had begun to take root in my mind.

She began mixing the gin and champagne, and then looked up at me.

“What can I call you?” she asked, passing the glass across the bar. I took a sip, relishing the kick from which it got its name.

“The name’s Marilyn Calwell, but you can call me Skid,” I said, “And I’m here to make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

Louise leaned once more on the bar. “Oh really?” She was smiling, but it seemed like the same smile a cat would give as she eyed up a mouse.

“Yeah,” I continued. “This sort of classy joint needs a classy act to go with it, and I’ve got just the thing.”

“I’m all booked at the moment,” she said. “I could give you the names of a few other places to try, if you’re looking for work.”

“And what acts do you have?”

“Got a few singers and a jazz quartet.”

“Nothing original, then?” I asked, slipping into the groove of negotiating. I took another sip of my drink, and noted with satisfaction that Louise’s eyes had narrowed.

“What do you mean, ‘nothing original?’”

“Just what I said. Any old hole in the wall has singers and a jazz quartet. Just walking down the street today I counted about twenty. What you need is an act that will keep a crowd coming in. And the crowds I draw are crowds that will be sure to tip a beautiful woman like yourself a little extra.” I polished off my drink and let that sink in.

Louise looked from me to the package on the counter. “What’s in there?”

“You have a place where a girl can freshen up?”

Louise nodded. “Dressing room with a sink beside the stage; will that work?”

I nodded. “Give me five minutes, and I’ll show you what’s in here, and why you need me.”

And with that, I slid an extra quarter across the bar to Louise. Heart pounding, I walked to the changing room, and hoped that Skid Calwell would make a good enough impression to sing on the stage of the Green Palace.

CHAPTER 2

I emerged from the cramped dressing room to find Louise deep in conversation with a man I hadn't seen before. He was taller than Louise, and larger as well. His white linen suit and the sheen on his combed back russet hair shone in the low light. He was nearly whispering, but the gestures he made with his boater hat emphasized his words. Neither he nor Louise looked up when I entered.

This was far from the first impression I'd imagined. I'd stood in front of the glistening mirror in the dressing room and pulled a few faces, first donning an air of nonchalance, then a debonair smile, trying to determine which would have a better effect. I'd imagined Louise's face when I entered. Her jaw wouldn't drop—she seemed far too smooth for that—but the widening of her eyes would be enough. The thought made me blush, and I spent another full minute staring at the mirror, waiting for the pink to fade from my cheeks and the tips of my ears.

Hopes sagging, I began making my way across the room to them. About ten steps away, I could make out a few sentences of their conversation.

“That was a dumb move,” the man said, and I froze at his familiar rasp. It was the same man who’d called that morning.

“I figured you’d sent someone else,” Louise said. “Look, it was just a mistake.”

“Didn’t I tell you I’d come in person?”

“Plans change,” Louise shrugged. “Let me take ca—”

She was cut off by the man’s hand raising, indicating her to stop, and she turned to see me lingering by the corner of the bar.

“There you are. Miss Calwell,” she said with a smile. “I’d like you to meet my friend Len.”

Len stepped forward and extended his hand. I took it; it was course, with tobacco stains around the fingernails. “Calwell, huh? You new in town?”

“Not exactly, no,” I said.

“Louise was just telling me you have an act. I’ve never heard of it.” The menacing tone that had caught my attention that morning seemed to bubble under the surface of his seemingly harmless words, and I took a step back.

“I haven’t performed in New Orleans before,” I said, my words coming out in a rush. “I used to sing in Atlanta, but until this morning I’d been working as a telephone operator.”

At this Len looked at Louise, who looked away. Turning back to me, he said, “Telephone operator? That’s quite a stretch from a performer.”

“It’s a long story, one I’m sure you don’t have time for,” I said, feeling my heart thudding faster.

“Right...what branch were you operating for?”

“The RTE.”

“And why’d you leave?” he asked, pulling out a cigarette. The flare of the match reflected in his brown eyes.

“Too boring for me.” By now I’d started to fidget with the button on my left sleeve. Why all the questions?

“I bet you heard lots of interesting things,” Len said. “Lots of people with loose lips, you know?”

“I never listened in,” I said. “Not with Mrs. Aster breathing down our necks.”

“Never listen in, but didn’t you ever just happen to hear a secret or two, if someone started talking before you’d hung up? I’m sure it happened at least once.” Len exhaled a cloud of smoke, and I coughed.

“Listen,” I said, once I’d collected myself. “I’m not sure what you want me to say. I’m just here because I need a job.”

Len glanced sideways at Louise. The tension between us simmered hotter than the end of Len’s cigarette. After a few seconds, Louise smiled at me.

“And I’d very much like to see your act, Miss Calwell. Why don’t you show us what you’ve got?”

The anxiety I’d felt during my first performance came crashing over me like a wave as I walked to the stage. In the dimly lit room, the ends of Len’s and Louise’s cigarettes glowed and glared like amber eyes.

“Gentlemen, and—ladies,” I said, turning to Louise and giving a slight bow. “The name’s Skid Calwell. I’ve been awfully down on my luck lately—why, just this morning I lost my job,

and with this damn Prohibition on, a fella can't even drown his sorrows! But I'll tell you the worst part..." I streamlined into my song, Ma Rainey's "Prove It On Me Blues."

Went out last night, had a great big fight,

Everything seemed to go on wrong.

I looked up, to my surprise

The gal I was with was gone.

I began a slow sway in time with the song, willing my body to move as fluidly as the nearby river. So far, neither Len nor Louise seemed impressed. Len examined his fingernails. Smoke curled from Louise's mouth in tendrils, and she sighed and glanced away. *Well, I decided, I'll just have to make them interested.*

As I continued to sing, I worked my fingers through the knot in my tie, feeling the silk smooth and petal-soft against my palm. With a practiced nonchalance, I tossed it to Louise; she caught it, and sat up a little straighter. This reaction spurred me on. Now that I had her attention, I popped the single button of my suit jacket through its hole, feeling its slight resistance, then the slide of it against my shirt. When it was off, I slung it over my shoulder, and stepped off the stage.

Len arched a brow. Louise's eyes widened slightly as I walked up to her and circled her chair, letting my fingers trail along its back. My fingertips brushed her shoulders; a frisson ran through her. Leaning close to her ear, I murmured the next line of the song. *They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me,*

Sure got to prove it on me.

Before I filled the circle I'd made around her chair, I swung a leg over her own, and dropped onto her lap. She gasped, and the hand holding her cigarette went slack. I grinned, trailing a finger down her neck, pulling away her collar to reveal the smooth, bare skin beneath. I leaned close so my lips almost touched hers. Beneath me, I felt her legs tense as her lips parted...I pushed her away.

I raised my hands to the top button of my shirt, but then took her hand in my own. Guiding it to my buttons, I watched as, with trembling fingers, she slipped first one, then another through the holes. When she reached the last button, I slipped my shirt off my shoulders. Len gave a low whistle; Louise's eyes were wider than they'd been since I'd entered the Green Palace. I rose and strutted over to Len, who reached out. I swatted his hand away, wagging a finger. He leaned back, shaking his head, chuckling under his breath. When I reached Louise, I leaned close, putting my hands on the back of her chair. As she leaned forward, I leaned back, daring her to touch. She exhaled deeply, the want in her eyes searing hotter than a flame.

Reaching the end of my song, and realizing I'd entertained everyone in the room far more than was necessary to land myself a new job, I returned to the stage and finished singing. The silent room felt as tense and pressing as the air outside before a storm, that moment of stillness before the skies open and gush torrents of rain. Quickly, I put my shirt back on.

"Well?" I asked. My voice sounded more clipped than I wanted it to.

Len side-eyed Louise. Louise stared at me, arms crossed, one hand obscuring her mouth, the other bunching around my tie.

"Well, Louise?" Len asked.

Louise nodded slowly. "Yes, I think we can find a place for you, Miss—should I call you Calwell, or...?"

“Skid is fine.”

“Skid, then. Your act is certainly a stand-out, as promised. I think all we need to discuss now is the matter of your starting date. And pay, of course.”

My head was spinning—from the news, or the gin, or the thrill, I wasn’t sure. Instead of saying anything I nodded, and stepped off the stage to take a seat at their table.

“When can you start?” Louise asked.

“As soon as you have space for me,” I said. “Like I told you, it’s not like I have anything else to do.”

She nodded. “In three nights then? We’ll need to have you practice with the band, of course—I think our pianist would give your act a little something extra, make it really, really shine.”

“Fine by me.”

“Swell. I pay \$1.50 an hour.”

I leaned back. “An act like mine is worth \$2.50, but for you, I’ll make an exception. What about \$2.00?”

She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “Done. Now, do you have a place to stay?”

“I have a place up Canal Street, for now,” I said, remembering the late rent, and now regretting the beignet, the new suit, and the drink.

Louise frowned. “For now?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll figure something out,” I said, giving a shrug and a smile.

She thought for a moment. Len looked at her and twitched an eyebrow.

“Well,” she said. “If you needed, I live real close by, in the French Quarter. I’ve got an extra room you could rent, let’s say, at five dollars a month?”

“Five dollars?” I asked, trying to hide my skepticism. On one hand, she may have genuinely wanted to help someone who she thought would draw a crowd. On the other hand, five dollars was a third of what I was paying at Canal Street, for a room that was almost certainly not as nice as what Louise was offering.

She nodded. “Sure. If you end up being a draw for this place, then I’ll be getting enough from you as it is. I’m sure Len wouldn’t mind moving your things,” she added with a smirk. I looked from her to Len—who was staring at my chest—and I drew my shirt closer around me.

“Then it’s a deal,” I said.

She smiled. “That’s berries. We can start moving your things tomorrow morning, if that works for you.”

The next morning, as she’d promised, Len and another guy showed up at my door, equipped with a black car to move everything. The bed, table, and dresser belonged to Mr. Mahan, so all my things fit easily into my carpetbag, purse, and a box Louise had given me (she’d glued paper over the sides to conceal the labels advertising “Mystic’s Curiously Exotic Imperial Gin.”) There was my postcard of Gladys Bentley in her white tuxedo (the impersonator and singer I wished I could be); an overpriced jar of something that was supposedly sage and salt to banish ghosts (bought after my first night alone in the creaky old apartment building); a brass lamp with a bunch of beaded fringe around the edges (kept off, since one time the fringe had started to smoke, but which looked classy as hell.) I’d considered leaving these relics of my old life behind, since I was surely moving on to bigger and better, but the small bottles, papers, and

jars hardly took up much room, and the thought of Len struggling to carry the lamp downstairs was a good one. It didn't disappoint.

We loaded everything into the car and drove to Louise's place on Dumaine Street, the most beautiful house I'd ever seen. It had been painted a sort of sunset orange, with turquoise shutters and doors. Like many of the other houses in the Quarter, it had a wrought-iron balcony and several window boxes. It was only two floors, and sandwiched between a bright yellow house and a deep crimson one, but its quaint narrow frame and vibrant color made me grin. "Louise said your room is the one up on the left," Len said, lighting a cigarette as the other man unloaded my things onto the sidewalk.

I looked up to the window of the room in question, already imagining where I'd put everything, wondering if I'd try my hand at growing something on the balcony.

The door opened to reveal Louise, barefoot, folding a deep blue housecoat around herself. A mauve nightgown peeked out from beneath it. Her dark hair fell in a plait over her shoulder. Blushing, I looked away.

"Glad you made it so early," she said. "I was getting ready for work, but I can help you settle in before I go."

The house's cool interior, especially in comparison to the humidity outside, made my head spin. And not only that—the inside of the house was even more beautiful than the outside. Light glinted off the polished black and white tiled floors. The walls of each room were painted different color, some in shades I'd never seen before. Off to the right seemed to be a sort of parlor painted light green, with a divan, and an upright piano, and a gramophone. Ahead of me was a hallway and a flight of stairs.

“Head on up,” Louise called behind me. “Your room is on the left.”

I did as she instructed, and gasped. The room was certainly bigger than what I’d been staying in at Mr. Mahan’s. It was painted a pale blue, with white accents on the ceiling and baseboards. The windows had been thrown open, and rays of light danced across the wooden floor. To my right was a dresser, with a small standing mirror on top of it. Across from it was the bed; it was small and narrow, but had been neatly made up in deep blue and white sheets. A small, round table and two chairs sat next to the window.

Louise came up behind me, carrying my box of oddities, and set it down beside my carpetbag.

“Is it alright?” she asked. “I know it’s a bit small, but—”

“It’s swell,” I smiled. “Thanks.”

“I’m glad to hear it. The girls’ room is just down the hall if you need it. Kitchen is downstairs—just make sure you turn off the stove. I need to get ready to go now, but what do you say to coming over to practice with our pianist at, say, five o’ clock? I can have someone pick you up if you don’t want to walk.”

“I don’t mind walking,” I said, still reeling from the luxury of the place.

She turned to the door, then looked over her shoulder at me. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a roommate. To be honest, I’m really excited you’re here, Skid.”

The way she said my name caused my heart to flutter; and I could only nod. When she closed the door, I could’ve kicked myself; barely five minutes into living with her, and already I was letting myself swoon over her like a dumb kid. But then, was that part of why I’d taken her offer in the first place? Sure the low rent was a definite draw, but so was the landlord. I spent the rest of the day pinning up posters and folding clothes, then wandering from room to room, getting adjusted to my new lodgings. At first, I was surprised at how she could afford such a

classy place. Every room had charm and elegance, with simple details to make it seem roomier than it was. The kitchen, for instance, had been painted light yellow, and only two pictures hung on the wall: a bowl of fruit, and an advertisement for Coq au Vin in a nearby restaurant. The whole house was charming in its simplicity. When I thought about it, I realized it wasn't so much of a surprise after all. A woman like Louise, with her polished Creole-French and mastery of English as well surely came from at least some money, and her running a successful speakeasy couldn't have hurt her at all. I guessed her parents had passed—why else would she need to find a job?—and that she had inherited at least a medium amount. Or maybe, like me, she'd done it all for the sheer thrill of it. Either way, she had money, but was smart enough not to showcase it with flashy baubles on every counter, or framed pictures on every wall.

I looked in every room save one. The room at the end of the upstairs hall was locked when I tried to go in. I assumed this meant that it was Louise's room. For a moment I considered trying to pick the lock with a hairpin, the way I'd seen detectives do in the pictures. But, in the end, I decided against it.

That evening I made my way to the Green Palace, my costume under my arm. The neighborhood was certainly different at night than it had been in the light of day. The bands still played, but their songs were bawdier, and the red lights and marquis lights had been switched on. Men leaned in the shadows of buildings, distinguished only by the lights of their cigarettes; when they caught my eye, they smiled and nodded, then turned and walked down the street. Though the business of the district was an open secret, some still guarded their anonymity.

Louise was waiting for me behind the bar. "I was wondering when you'd get here," she smiled. "Need a drink before you start?"

“How about you surprise me afterwards,” I said, and she laughed.

“I like someone adventurous. Go ahead and get changed. Rob is warming up at the piano now. Meet him when you’re ready.”

After singing the same song about eight times, Rob trying out varying riffs and pauses, and telling me to go back a line, and Louise telling me to try taking off my tie at another part, and so on and so forth for about an hour, I was starting to reconsider the whole thing. The last time I’d done an act it had been with a pianist who usually improvised with whatever I sang, and I hadn’t had someone to coach me or give suggestions. But after running through it again and again, with Louise coaxing both of us into cooperation—because Rob looked just about as ready as I was to call the whole thing off—I had to admit the act was a hell of a lot better than it had been before I started. I was rewarded with a smile and a hearty round of applause from Louise for my troubles, and she brandished a Mary Pickford as I sat at the bar.

“They’ll love it,” she said, and her amber eyes glinted with enthusiasm. “They’ll eat it up.”

And they did. As promised, I started two nights later, and nearly everyone was on their feet when I finished. The next night, there were more people, and Louise had to bring in extra chairs after the first full week I performed. I started varying my act, adding some new songs. Every night, I waited until Louise had finished cleaning and closing up, and then we walked back together to her house on Dumaine Street, where we’d talk late into the night, eating a midnight dinner at her kitchen table. For a while, my life seemed as calm as it could be for someone of my profession.

Little did I know.

CHAPTER 3

Nearly a month after moving in with Louise I still knew little about her that didn't pertain to the Green Palace. We rarely talked about our pasts, instead preferring business chat or neutral topics like the pictures. On a few occasions I tried to prompt her to talk about her family, but she always changed the subject, and I figured that was that.

One morning in late July, I woke to find Louise gone. I thought nothing of it at first—I was used to her leaving for the Green Palace first thing in the morning. However, when I looked down the hall, I saw that she'd left the door to her room ajar.

Just as she'd refused to share much personal information with me, she'd also never shown me her room. Sometimes I'd glimpse the light green walls and white curtains—and then

she would step into the hall, closing the door quickly behind her, as if there was something in it that would emerge with her if she wasn't careful.

Now, with a surge of excitement, I pushed the door open. Much like the rest of the house—and Louise herself—this room was simple, clean, and elegant. The hardwood bed with its gauzy white canopy over the pressed white sheets; the white wicker dressing table, with the tubes and jars of makeup in a neat array before the mirror. I opened the closet; here, too, everything seemed to have its proper place. A lamp stood on the table beside the bed; a closed book—*Paradise Lost*—sat beside it. No pictures smiled from the walls; no letters waited to be read on the tables.

In crossing the threshold, I felt I had crossed some other boundary with it. It made me simultaneously thrilled and excited. I crossed to the window and peeked through the curtains, looking down the street for her familiar gait. The grandfather clock in the foyer chimed a quarter to ten. Surely Louise wouldn't be home until one or later. I turned to the dressing table, and opened the drawer.

I don't know what I expected to find. Letters from a previous lover; photographs of her parents; a record of bills paid. Nothing scandalous or devastating, just the details of her life that I'd never learned, that she'd never shared with me. At first, I found a neat pile of stockings and slips. They all seemed well-worn, but the satin was good quality and soft against my fingers. Blushing, I put them aside.

At the bottom of the drawer was a wooden box, which I set on the floor in front of me. To my frustration, I saw a tiny keyhole just beneath the upper lip of the lid. Locked. What could she have that was so private that she felt she had to keep it in a locked box, buried beneath a mound of unmentionables?

Rifling through the other desk drawers yielded no keys, but a few old letters. One began “My dearest Louise,” but the rest was in French and therefore nonsense to me. I’d tried to pick up the language from a book after moving to the city, but I could only say “Hello” and “Can I have a drink.” At the time I figured those would be the two most important phrases I’d need; now, I wished I knew enough to at least read a few lines. I noted, however, that it was dated about a decade ago and signed—to my happiness and chagrin—from someone named Vera.

I turned to the closet, reaching in the pockets of her skirts, shaking out her shoes. A few crumpled streetcar passes, some loose coins, a few hairpins bent beyond recognition, but no key, and no clue as to its location. I opened the drawer of the bedside table and found nothing still. Finally, I turned to the book. In the films I’d seen gangsters hide guns in hollowed out books. Surely Louise wouldn’t be that cliché. I opened the book and could have laughed—she was. A small portion of it had been hollowed out, a rectangle in the center of the page about the size of a pack of matches, containing a small, silver key. I tried it in the lock of the box and was greeted by the satisfying click of success. I lifted the lid.

Inside lay a thin stack of papers and photographs tied with a frayed pink ribbon. The first was a faded sepia photograph of a house—more like a mansion. Four people stood on the front lawn: a man and a woman, and in front of them two girls. The man had dark skin and wore a light suit with a straw hat. One hand was perched on the shoulder of the girl in front of him; the other held a cigar. His groomed mustache seemed to lift with his slight smile, and he stared at me from the photograph with a confidence that must have come from wealth and family. The woman beside him had one hand on his arm, and one hand on the shoulder of the girl in front of her. She was rounder than Louise, and paler. Her dark hair was swept high off her head in a chignon; the

lace collar of her white summer dress mounted to her chin. The girl in front of the man was shorter than the one beside her, and resembled her mother more closely than her father, with her sturdy frame. The other girl, I had guessed by now, was young Louise.

Even then, she was willowy; her legs, which stuck out from the bottom of her dress, seemed to lack the knobiness of young girls' legs. Her head was held high, and she smiled with closed lips. Her hair had been braided into two plaits, which fell over her shoulders. She clutched her sister's hand. On the back of the photograph was the inscription, *Claude Patin, with wife Maria-Helena, and children Louise Hélène (age 10) and Michelle Claudine (age 7). 1910.*

I looked at the picture for several more moments, questions bubbling to the surface of my mind. What happened to the rest of Louise's family? Were they still living? If so, why had she left? And if not, why did she no longer live in her family's old home? She was clearly the older sibling, so it followed that the house should belong to her. Was this even in New Orleans? I set it aside and continued to search the box.

The next items were letters, dated from 1920 to 1925. All were to Louise from Michelle, and I assumed this was the same Michelle in the photograph, Louise's sister. Unfortunately, these, like the old love letters, were in French, and I kept looking.

The last item in the box was a legal document. I alternated between skimming and fighting to understand the legal jargon. One line near the bottom of the page caught my eye:

The court rules that legal ownership of the property formerly owned by MICHELLE CLAUDINE PATIN is transferred to WARREN CLAIRMONT.

While this answered one question—why Louise no longer lived in the family home—it raised entirely new ones. Who was this Warren Clairmont? How was he related to the Patins, if at all? And why did Michelle inherit first, if Louise was the older sister?

The sound of the door opening downstairs made me jump. I heard someone approach the bottom of the stairs, and I scrambled to put everything back in the box. How had the letters been organized? My hands jittered as I shuffled the papers back in order. I opened the drawer to put the box back inside, but by then it was too late. The door creaked open wider, and Louise stood, staring. At first she was too stunned to say anything. I saw her hands clench at her sides.

“And what exactly are you doing?” she asked, her voice quiet.

I’m sure I was a sight—still half-asleep, dressed in my drawers and shirtsleeves, sitting on her floor surrounded by letters and photographs. I searched for an explanation, an old lie—I *was looking for matches*—and came up empty-handed, but started anyway.

“I—”

“Leave,” she said, standing aside. Light from the hall spilled in. I stood, face burning, and left.

As soon as I stepped into the hall, she slammed the door behind her. From inside, I could hear the rustling of papers, the opening and closing of drawers. Despite my embarrassment, I was confused. It was just after ten; why had she come back so early?

I wandered downstairs. Ever since I’d started working at the Green Palace at night, I’d been unsure of how to pass my days. When I worked at the RTE I imagined I’d spend them shopping at the best stores or eating at cafés. On my first day alone, I’d gone to sit at a café for a few hours, and quickly grew bored. Shopping proved equally uninteresting, and I’d realized how lonely I was. Aside from Louise, I didn’t really know many people at the Green Palace, and she was usually gone all day anyway. Len stopped by fairly often, but I wasn’t about to talk to him more than I had to. And though Rob the pianist was nice, he tended to keep to himself.

Sometimes I sat in my room and played cards, or worked on my impersonations, or napped.

Now, with Louise shut up in her room, I walked to the parlor and took down a book from the shelf, *The Great Gatsby*. I got through the first two pages, then set it down with a sigh, unable to take my mind off Louise.

What must she think of me now? I'd snooped in her things and clearly made her angry. I began thinking of what I could do to make it up to her, when I heard the upstairs door open, then close. She came downstairs. If she saw me, she didn't acknowledge me, for she went straight to the door and into the street. I waited until I heard the click of the lock, then went upstairs. Despite everything that had just happened, I tried the door to her room. Now it was locked.

I felt pretty rotten after that, too rotten to just sit around her house all day, the locked door upstairs like a bruise that I would keep pressing, so I dressed in my linen summer suit and left the house. An unusual chill had swept into the city overnight. At the café where I ate breakfast I heard folks talking about a storm blowing up from the Gulf. The brisk winds disturbing the languid summer were the forerunners of what would be buckets of rain. While I was grateful for the temporary escape from the heat and humidity, most of the locals were starting to worry.

I spent the rest of the day in the best cabarets, watching shows and thinking of my own act, and drinking. By the time I showed up that night at the Green Palace, I was already about half-seas over. I dressed for my act—a white summer suit, like the one Len so often wore, with a bamboo cane and a straw boater—and headed to the bar where I usually joked and chatted with customers before performing.

“Think you'll flood?” the woman sitting next to me asked Louise. Her pearl bracelet glinted in the low green light.

Louise looked up at her from the counter she'd been cleaning. "Hasn't happened yet, so I hope not." She gave a tight-lipped smile, then looked back down.

She was still avoiding looking at me. When she saw me start to come to the bar after getting dressed, she'd practically run to refill someone's drink—something she'd never done before. Now, I wanted to apologize and ask her more about what was in the box—because clearly it was something important—but was dissuaded since we were in the presence of so many strangers.

Realizing it was almost time for my act, I headed backstage.

The clarinet, bass, and trombone of the band ended on a joyous note, to the applause of the audience. The singer looked over her shoulder, saw that I was standing ready backstage, and turned back to the audience.

"Sheiks and Shebas," she said. "It's the moment we know you've all been waiting for! Are you ready for a good time?"

A jumbled "Yes!" rose from the audience. The singer laughed.

"I think I understood that! Let's hear it for that cake-eater you know and love—in both senses of the word, ladies—the incomparable Skid Calwell!"

As I strutted onstage, the audience whistled and cheered.

"No need to worry about this weather—I'm still bringing the heat," I said. A chorus of laughter from the room. "Is it hot enough for you yet?"

I took off my hat and tossed it to a girl in the front row, who turned to the woman next to her and giggled. Running a hand through my hair, I crossed to the other side of the stage.

“What would you say if I told you I’m a happily taken man?” I asked. “Do you want to hear about her?”

The crowd clapped, and I began to sing Clarence Williams’ “Everybody Loves My Baby.”

Yeah, everybody loves my baby

But my baby don't love nobody but me, nobody but me...

I took in the room as I began my dance, picking out which girl I would throw my tie to, which one I would invite to unbutton my shirt, and giving winks to some here and there. Most of the regulars were in the crowd; the gossipers at the bar, the giggling ones who always came to see me at their table in the front, the university girls who sat in the middle of the room. I looked to the back corner, and my eyes lingered there.

Len sat at the back table, cigarette in one hand and cocktail in the other. This wasn’t unusual; Len was practically a fixture of the Green Palace, hanging in the back corner in a cloud of smoke and vitriol. The strange thing happened when he stood and walked to the bar, which was empty for the moment. He sat and slid his glass across the counter. This, too, was still normal. But when Louise returned Len’s drink to him, I thought I caught a glint in the bottom of the glass.

I turned back to the crowd and threw my tie to one of the university girls. Her friends laughed and prodded her, and she threw the tie around her neck in her victory. I continued to sing and dance—I’d sung the song so many times I could do it almost without thinking. As I unbuttoned my jacket, I glanced back at the corner. Len’s hand obscured the bottom of the glass. Whatever I saw—if it was anything, for it may have been the reflection of a necklace or pin in the dim light—was now invisible to me.

The rest of my act passed uneventfully. I breezed through the other two songs, took my bows and collected my various items of clothing from the crowd, and was about to return to the dressing room, but was stopped by the sound of voices. The band was still onstage, and they were the only other ones who were allowed in the room. I was about to go in and tell whoever was in there that they needed to leave, when I heard one of the speakers, and almost gasped. “Warren’s given us too much time already,” Louise said, her voice strained. “He’s not going to be happy that you only sold half the goods.”

“And I already told you, the buyers are getting nervous with the recent raids. It’s harder to sell than it used to be.” This was Len, and I shivered. I’d recognize his angry rasp anywhere.

“Bullshit,” Louise said. “It was never a problem when Michelle was doing your job.” “Well, I’m not Michelle, am I? And I’m telling you, if Warren wants the whole stock sold, he’s going to need to wait a few more days.”

I was about to go in, when the door slammed open, knocking me back. Louise stormed out, not even pausing to apologize, but shooting me a look of ice over her shoulder. Len stomped out after her, not bothering to catch up. I watched him breeze up the stairs as Louise stalked back to the bar.

Louise continued to not speak to me for the rest of the evening. When I returned from the dressing room, I drank until I was ossified, and the rest is a blur. I remember struggling to recall where I’d heard the name Warren. I remember a woman I didn’t know, asking about a lost bracelet. I remember the rain, pouring down in ropes, when Louise and I emerged from the

Green Palace, obscuring the streetlights like a veil. And I remember sitting with Louise in her green parlor while she smoked her nightly cigarette.

“So who’s Warren?” I asked, my voice thick with gin.

Louise glanced sideways at me. “Who?”

“I heard you talking with Len,” I said. “And he’ll never be as good as I am.”

Louise turned to face me now. “What are you talking about?”

The room had started to waver, and my head felt like it would split open. “He won’t be a good act like I am, so you can just...you can just tell him to go home.”

“Are you alright?” Louise’s eyes narrowed and searched my face.

“Who is he?” I blew away a strand of hair that had fallen in front of my eyes.

“Skid, he’s nobody,” Louise said, leaning back and closing her eyes.

“Well then if he’s nobody you should tell me who he is.”

“Why do you care?” Louise opened one eye; a divot had formed between her eyebrows.

“I bet he’s your beau.”

“You’re drunk,” Louise said, and stood. “Come on, let’s get you to bed.”

I stood. The world spun giddily and I pitched forward. Louise must have anticipated this, for she caught me, and draped one of my arms around her shoulders. I could feel her muscles beneath her white cotton shirt. Slowly, leaning against her—more than I really needed to—we made our way up the stairs to my bedroom. She plopped me down on the bed, then knelt and removed my shoes. When she had finished, she sat down beside me.

“My head hurts,” I said, falling back against the pillow.

Louise frowned, left, and reappeared a moment later, holding two small pills.

“Sit up and take these.”

“What is it?” I wrinkled my nose.

“Aspirin.” She pulled me to sit and handed me first one pill, then the other.

“So... Warren.” I said, once I’d swallowed the second.

“Christ,” Louise said. “Why the hell are you so interested in my stupid brother-in-law?”

She realized what she’d said the second it was out of her mouth and swore.

“Your brother-in-law?” I asked.

Louise nodded. “Yeah. Now go to sleep, will you?”

When she left, I turned the information over in my head, struggling through the gin to make sense of it all. Unable to draw a conclusion, I fell asleep almost instantly.

I awoke the next day at noon. My headache from the night before may have gone, but a new one had taken its place. Still dressed in my suit, which stank of smoke and sweat, I worked up my strength, and shuffled out of the bedroom and down the hall to draw a bath.

I watched the stream of cool water run into the claw-foot tub until it was nearly full, and shivered as I leaned back against the cold porcelain. As I stared at the patterns formed by the stucco ceiling, I tried, once again, to connect everything I’d learned about Louise from the day before.

And that’s when it hit me. I remembered the legal document I’d found in Louise’s room, with the name Warren Clairmont. Suppose it was the same Warren that Louise was talking about? It all made sense; if he was Louise’s brother-in-law, married to her sister Michelle, of course he would inherit the house first, with Louise being unmarried. But it still left the question, why did she not live in the house, and what were the mysterious “goods” she’d been talking about with Len? And, thinking of Len, what was in the glass?

I drained the tub and rose, donned my linen day suit, and decided to go apologize to Louise for my antics the day before.

Though I'd been working at the Green Palace for a while now, the difference in the room's atmosphere during the day still shocked me. There was a quietness, a stillness to it that made it seem like just any other building. It was as if, when the jazz quartet left for the night, and the dancing stopped, they took the spirit of the building with them. Now, only the ghost of the night remained.

Louise sat at a table close to the stage, cigarette smoldering in an ashtray beside her, one hand to her temple as she reviewed the books from the night before. I sat down beside her.

"Hey," I said.

She looked up, and gave the slightest of smiles. "How's the head?"

I gave a short laugh. "I've had worse. Sorry for all the shit I pulled yesterday."

She shrugged. "Don't sweat it. Will you be alright to perform tonight?"

I nodded. "I've danced through more than one hangover. Turns out dollar bills are a great cure."

Silence, like the smoke, curled between us as Louise turned back to her bookkeeping.

"Listen," I said at last. "I really am sorry I poked around in your room. What do you say to a day out on the town together? It's on me."

She thought about it for a moment, the back of her pen between her teeth. At last she set it down and stood.

"Let me make a quick call," she said, and disappeared up the stairs, leaving me to sit with the ghosts of the night before in the silent room.

CHAPTER 4

Louise was not long upstairs. Before long I heard the creak of the trapdoor, and she returned, smiling.

“You ever been to Antoine’s?” she asked. I shook my head. “Well, they’ll have a table ready for us in thirty minutes.”

“Are you serious?” I asked, barely able to contain my amazement. “How did you swing a last-minute reservation?”

“Let’s just say I have a few dependable friends.” She gave me a wink, and all my guilt vanished. Leave it to Louise to be able to clear a table at one of the most popular restaurants for

us. And so, bubbling with the excitement of spending a day with Louise and dining at one of the classiest places in the city, we left the Green Palace.

A wave of humidity enveloped us as we stepped into the street. By the time we'd walked a block up Dumaine, the front of my shirt was damp with sweat. Louise had pulled a fan out of her purse. We passed brass bands playing under the shade of awnings, blues singers with hats on the ground in front of them, artists set up in plazas, sketching families of tourists, instructing the children to hold that smile for just one more second. Jewelry, sunhats, and dresses hung in nearly every window. Looking down the street was like looking at a rainbow, houses and stores painted in orange, pink, and turquoise. Despite the beautiful chaos, the whole place stank of sweat, food, and trash, its stench only made worse by the heat of the day and the unbearable humidity brought by the storm.

"I used to live near here," Louise said as we stood in front of St. Louis Cathedral.

I waited for her to say more. Seeing that wasn't about to, I asked, "Why did you leave?"

She looked at me, her eyes stern. "It's complicated."

We continued onto St. Louis Street, until finally we stood in front of Antoine's. The building's first two stories were painted sea-foam green around the brass-handled mahogany doors. It wouldn't have stood apart from the rest of the Quarter if it didn't have the painted wooden sign "ANTOINE'S RESTAURANT" hanging above the entirety of the first floor. I followed Louise into the building, where a maître d' stood ready to escort us to our table.

"Mlle Patin," he said, and then broke into a string of French, and I had no idea what they said. Louise laughed and said something back. Eventually, the man noticed me as well, and I heard Louise mention the name "Skid Calwell." I smiled and waved, hoping it was appropriate to the

conversation. The man gave a half bow to me, then took Louise's arm and ushered her to our table, leaving me trailing along behind them.

My jaw could've hit the floor when I saw the dining room. All the walls were painted white, which made it appear much larger and more open than it was. Sunlight shone through the open windows to glint on the gas-lit chandeliers. Two fans turned slowly on either side of a chandelier. The maître d' brought us to a table directly under one of them, and I almost cried from happiness. We sat at the table, and a tuxedoed waiter soon appeared to fill two glasses of clear, sparkling water. I gulped mine down before Louise's glass was full.

"What are you thinking of getting?" Louise asked, not looking up from her own menu. "Oh, I don't know," I said, attempting to sound casual—for the menu was, to my dismay, almost entirely in French. "Whatever you're getting, probably."

She paused, and then looked up at me. "You don't speak French, do you?"

"Was it that obvious?"

She laughed. "Let me help you. What are you hungry for?"

"Anything with meat," I said. "I feel like I'm about to pass out."

"Alright, do you like seafood? I usually always start out with the Oysters Rockefeller."

I wrinkled my nose. "I've never had an oyster. I don't think I'd like them."

"You can have some of mine if you decide to try them. What about chicken?" She took my menu and pointed at a word. "This word, *poulet*, is chicken."

"And what's this one? Cham—pig—non?" I struggled, squinting at the page, as if that would suddenly make it make sense.

Louise laughed, though not unkindly. “*Champignon*,” she said, and the word sounded much more fluid, almost graceful, from her lips. “Mushrooms. So that first one is chicken in a mushroom sauce, on rice.”

“I’ll take it,” I said, closing my menu and leaning back. “I don’t think I have the mind in this heat to learn much more.”

“Then I’ll have to teach you another time,” she said with a smile. “You can’t live in this city and not speak French.”

“Have you always spoken it?” I asked, taking another sip of water.

She nodded. “I was born in New Orleans. Both of my parents were Creoles too, so they’d always grown up speaking it. Maman spoke Spanish as well, but she never taught me.” She ordered our food, then asked, “What about you?”

“What do you mean, ‘What about me?’” I said, at once incredulous that she’d willingly told me something about her past, and reluctant to talk about my own history.

“Where were you born?”

“Atlanta,” I said, shifting in my seat. Talking about those days always made my stomach turn.

“And your parents, do they still live there?” she asked. A china plate of ice, atop which sat six fat oysters, was set in front of her.

I shrugged. “Don’t know, don’t much care. Last I saw of them was my daddy’s boot kicking me out the door.” Changing the subject, I pointed to an oyster. “Can I try one of those? I’m starving.”

I looked away from her face; there was a strange mix of sympathy and sadness in it, and I couldn’t take it. She reached across the table and dropped an oyster on my plate. It was still on a

shell, and topped with a brown sauce. I picked it up and tipped the oyster into my mouth. After I'd adjusted to its cold sliminess, I smiled. The sauce, a blend of vegetables, butter, and bread crumbs, was delicious.

The rest of the meal was equally enjoyable. At one point, I mentioned offhandedly that everything would taste even better with a glass of champagne to go with it. She motioned to a passing waiter, who returned not five minutes later with a white coffee mug, which she handed to me. I looked at the contents and grinned, then took a sip of the best champagne I'd ever tasted.

"How'd you get this?" I asked.

"It's a mystery to me," she said with a wink.

We spent the rest of the meal talking about trivial things; the act, new drinks Louise was thinking about serving at the Palace, the latest songs and films. Every so often she would pause our conversation and rise from her seat to compliment some woman on her dress, embracing her as if she were an old friend, or shaking hands with some gentleman. To me, it seemed as if she knew everyone in the city, and the roots of her name ran deep.

After sharing a peach melba for dessert, we slowly made our way back to the Green Palace. We still had close to two hours before Louise would open for the night, which made about four until I would run my first act, so we took our time to stop and listen to some bands, duck in some shops, and enjoy the occasional breeze of evening air off the river.

We arrived back at the Green Palace about half an hour before opening. I dressed for the night and sat at the bar, where Louise was taking inventory. When she saw me, she stopped what she was doing, and came around the counter to sit next to me.

"I feel like I've been unfair to you," she said. "It's only natural you'd be curious about my family, living with me and all, and me being so secretive about my past."

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” I said. “It’s your business.”

“I feel like you might understand though. We have similar situations, you see.” She took a deep breath, and continued. “My sister Michelle married a man named Warren Clairmont. My parents died shortly after, but the inheritance passed directly to Michelle since she married first, according to Papa’s wishes. I received a small sum, but that was it. After Michelle died, Warren inherited the house, and asked me to leave. And that’s why I don’t live at Chênes.”

I had nothing to say, aside from, “Oh.”

She gave a short laugh. “He’s a real pill. But things are alright here, and with the money you’re raking in for us, who knows? Maybe I’ll be able to buy the place back from him someday.”

I said nothing. We both knew that it was bushwa.

“Here,” she said, fishing in her pocket. “To apologize for everything.” She drew out a ring and held it out to me. It was silver, with an emerald in the middle of two diamonds.

Stunned, I asked, “Where’d you get this?”

She shrugged. “Found it when I was going through my room earlier. I never wear it anymore, and thought you might like it.”

“Like it?” I asked, already reaching out for it. “It’s beautiful.”

She smiled, and took my hand. “It was a little big on me, but it might fit on your smallest finger—there.”

She slipped it onto the smallest finger of my left hand. I held it out and turned it, watching it gleam even greener in the light.

“Thanks,” I said, but she’d returned to taking stock, and the conversation was over.

I performed that night as usual, but a question kept gnawing at the back of my mind. Clearly there was more to Warren than she’d told me—what were the goods? My first thought

had been the hooch we drank at the Palace, but that wouldn't explain why Len hadn't been able to sell them. No one in the city gave a damn about Prohibition; we called it the Big Easy for a reason. So what was it? And then, what had happened to her sister, Michelle? And why had Len taken her place? I turned these questions over and over in my mind like a stone.

As I danced on the stage, I looked over the crowd and wondered who I might ask for more information on Louise and her past. However, I'd never seen any of them speak to her aside from the customary greeting and to ask for a drink. She seemed, like me, to have few friends despite her fame.

Just as I was about to give up, I realized there was someone else who I might talk to. In fact, once I saw him, I wondered why I hadn't thought of it in the first place.

After Louise left the next morning for the Palace, I dressed as well and left for the strip of cabarets in Storyville. I wasn't sure which one I'd find Len in, but I knew that he hung around this area during the day before coming to his customary back table at the Palace at night. I could smell it in the fug of cigarette smoke and cheap perfume that he always brought with him. So I started at one of the places I knew best, and worked my way down the line until I stood outside a place called Bourbon Burt's Cabaret on Bienville Street.

Walking in reminded me of my days at the RTE, with the cloud of talc and scent descending on me as I took a seat at the back table and looked for Len. So far he was nowhere to be seen, and I ordered a Bee's Knees to pass the time. A series of bands and singers took the stage; they were good enough, I supposed. Nothing like my act, for sure.

I passed what must have been an hour waiting for Len. The time seemed to ooze by like the honey in my drink. I began to doubt the bartenders of the last places I'd been to; what if they

hadn't been honest with me? And, why should they—a strange woman looking for a shady man who was one of their best customers, whose side did I imagine they'd take? I was about to give up, when the door opened, and Len walked in.

He took a table near the back, not far from mine. I picked up my drink and walked over to join him.

“Len,” I said, trying to conceal the tremor in my voice.

He spun around. “Calwell, what are you doing here?” His eyes darted around the room. “Easy,” I said. “Louise sent me to get any goods you have left. Warren is getting antsy.” My own words sounded distant, as if someone else was saying them, and I called on all my experience as a performer to not break into a sweat, or start panicking.

Len's eyes narrowed. “Did she now?”

I nodded. “Yeah, Warren wants anything you weren't able to sell.”

Looking around again, Len stood, and motioned for me to follow. I followed him through the dimly lit cabaret to a side door that led into a cramped alley. Squinting in the light, I leaned against the side of the building, trying my best to look cool and collected. Like Louise. “No offense or nothing, Calwell, but how do I know you're not just trying to take the goods for yourself?” he asked, striking a match and lighting a cigarette.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I said, my heart now pounding something fierce. “I imagine Warren won't be to happy if he hears you weren't eager to hand it over.”

“And why couldn't Louise come get these herself? Or have me come over, like usual?” he asked.

I felt like I had been flung into the middle of the Mississippi, with no life preserver and no sight of the shore, and Len was the current. My mind raced to come up with something.

“She doesn’t trust the telephones anymore,” I said, and knew instantly how feeble it sounded.

“Really?” Len asked.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “What you said when I got hired—about eavesdropping operators and all that—made her suspicious. She figures it’s safest to do this in person for now. But you know she’s tied down at the Palace all day, so it was more convenient to send me.”

I watched him take a drag of his gasper and think about it. For my part, I thought it was a pretty good recovery.

“Alright,” he said, and I restrained myself from sighing. “But first you have to tell me exactly what Louise told you.”

I nearly froze. Then I remembered the conversation I’d heard on the phone, and figured I’d try a variant of it. If that didn’t work—well, the alley wasn’t too big, and I might be able to run past Len if I was fast enough.

“She said to tell you, ‘Give Skid any unsold oyster fruit.’”

He gave me one last narrowed-eyed look, then opened his jacket. Inside was a pocket he’d sewn in. He dipped his hand in, and drew out a tobacco tin. I didn’t dare open it in front of him in case he saw my expression and could tell I’d been lying the whole time. Instead, I nodded, and slipped it into my pocket.

“And if Warren has a problem with that,” Len said. “You tell him and Louise that I did what I could. It’s getting real tough, not easy like it used to be.”

He turned to go back into the cabaret, but I stopped him.

“Since we’re working together now, I’m curious—what’s your deal in all this?”

He looked back at me over his shoulder. “What do you mean?”

“How do you know Louise and Warren?”

Len sighed. “Look, it’s a long story. If Warren wants those, you’d better get them to him fast.”

“You sound afraid of him,” I said.

“Everyone in their right mind is scared of Warren,” he said, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

“At least everyone knows not to cross him. Sometimes Louise doesn’t remember that.”

I wanted to ask him more, but now I hesitated. How much could I get away with before he got suspicious? Finally, I said, “How did you and Louise meet?”

“You sure are nosy,” he said, then sighed. “What the hell. I liked her kid sister. Of course her parents didn’t approve; I’m not Creole like they were.” He spat into the red dirt beneath our feet.

“How’d you meet then?” I asked.

“At a speakeasy, back in ‘20. For all the Patin girls pretended to be so above it all, they were rebels just like the rest of us.” Remembering, he laughed softly. “And for all that she pretended to be such a bearcat, she was scared to even take a sip of giggle water. Was convinced the cops would show up as soon as it touched her lips.”

I tried to picture what Michelle must have looked like, but all I could think of was what she looked like in the old photograph: young, light, and soft. Not made for the speakeasies or bathtub gin.

“And how did she meet Warren?” I asked.

“Some society ball,” he said. “Big money, but new money. You can bet that Louise didn’t trust him because of it,” he laughed.

“And her parents?”

He shrugged. “Who can say? They died not too long before the wedding. Typhus, I think, or influenza? Can’t remember. Either way, it was too late for Michelle. She was just a kid in love. Not even Louise could talk her out of it.” “Why didn’t you trust him?” I asked.

“At first I just didn’t like him, for obvious reasons. I had no reason not to trust him; thought Louise was just being paranoid. As for the rest though…” he trailed off. “You’ll have to ask her.”

With that, he went back inside, leaving me in the alley.

Once I was sure I was alone, I took the tin out of my pocket, looked inside, and nearly gasped.

The most beautiful pearls I’d ever seen lay inside, nestled in a handkerchief so they didn’t rattle or scuff. *Oyster fruit.*

I returned to Louise’s place and lined up the pearls on my bed. There were twenty of them total, each with two tiny holes. And in that moment, it made sense.

The woman with the lost bracelet. The glint at the bottom of the glass. The bent hairpins in Louise’s room. The ice and oyster fruit. The hugs and handshakes at Antoine’s, and the ring she gave me after. And how many women, during my time at the Green Palace, had claimed to have lost a ring, or a bracelet, or a gem from their headband?

At first I didn't know what I'd do with this information now that I had it. I wasn't about to turn Louise in, since her livelihood made mine possible. But it seemed like too good of a situation to not profit on. I put the pearls back in the tin, and I went to the Palace.

Louise looked up and smiled when I walked downstairs.

"Wasn't expecting to see you here so early," she said.

Anxiety rose in me like a wave. Now that I was here, I wasn't sure how to confront her with everything I'd discovered. And what if she denied everything? It was hardly the same as negotiating with her for a job had been. Instead of saying anything, I put the tin on the counter.

Louise opened it and arched an eyebrow, but the color had drained from her cheeks.

"And what are these?" she asked.

"Figured Warren would be wanting them. Len gave them to me."

Her eyes narrowed. "And why would he do a thing like that?"

She'd trapped me, as I suspected she might. "That's beside the point," I said, hoping she wouldn't notice. "The point is that I know what you're really up to. Ice and oyster fruit."

Recognition bloomed in her eyes. "You knew from the start, didn't you?" she asked softly.

I shook my head. "I heard the words on the first day, after I got fired from the RTE and needed a job. I recognized your password from Atlanta—we used to use stuff like that all the time. Aunt Jenny and cat's pajamas, I mean."

"And the rest?"

"I didn't put that together until today. Thought it was strange, sure, but I didn't know about the jewel fencing until I persuaded Len to give me the oyster fruit this morning."

She leaned on the counter and reached for a pearl, twirling it between her fingers. “And what else gave it away?”

“I heard you a few nights ago, when I heard you talking about Warren with Len. And then there was the bracelet.”

She laughed. “I’d hoped were too drunk to remember that, after I heard you raving about Warren that night. Your damn curiosity.”

We sat in silence for a few moments. Then, she asked, “Well, now what?”

“Now, I want in.”

Her eyes widened. Then she laughed. “C’mon, be serious.”

“I am,” I said. “You’re clearly getting good money from this. If I help you, I want a cut.” “That’s up to Warren,” she said. “He’s the one making good money.”

“You don’t keep any of it?”

She sighed. “We made a deal, a while back. If I can make \$70,000 for him, he’ll give me back Chênes. He gets the money and any goods we haven’t sold by then, I get the house, we go our separate ways.”

My jaw dropped. “\$70,000?”

She nodded. “Easier said than done. Even though I can slip bracelets and rings better than other people, that’s a lot of dough. I’ve barely made a dent in the two years I’ve been working for him.”

“All the more reason to let me in,” I said. “Look at my act. Do you have any idea how easy it would be for me to slip jewelry off people while I’m on their laps?”

This made her laugh, a genuine laugh, one that I’d rarely heard before.

“I’ll have to ask Len and Warren what they think, of course,” she said. “But as far as I’m concerned, you have the nerve for it, and I think you can be in.”

“You’re sure you have to ask Len?” After the stunt I’d pulled with him, I didn’t much like the thought of working with him.

“It’ll be fine,” Louise assured me. “And whatever you did to Len serves him right, for all the fuss he made when you first came here.”

CHAPTER 5

Louise had her answer from Warren the next morning: I was in. He trusted her judgment enough, since she was the one doing the actual stealing. She told Len that we’d be working together—officially—after she told me, and called a meeting of the three of us at the Green

Palace to go over everything.

“Dyke,” Len snarled as he mixed himself a dry martini.

“Piker,” I shot back.

“Easy,” Louise said to both of us. “We work as a team or not at all.”

Len slouched back over to our table and sat. I sipped my French 75. Louise sat with her hands folded.

“Now Skid, have you ever stolen anything?” she asked.

I shook my head.

“Wow, great find, Louise,” Len said, rolling his eyes.

“Can it, Len,” she said. “You’re the big mouth that told her everything.” Len had no defense, and Louise continued. “I’ve thought about it, and I think it will be a little harder than we first anticipated, Skid. While it’s true your targets will be distracted with your...” she blushed.

“She means your bubs,” Len said. Louise’s blush deepened.

“Yes, thank you, Len. What I was trying to say is, other people will be watching you. So it might be best to go for the easy targets—bracelets, rings, open pocketbooks—though I usually don’t go for pocketbooks. Warren likes gems better, and they get more money anyway.”

She pushed her chair away from the table, and held her wrist out to show me a bracelet. “Now, say you’re in the middle of your act. Try to take the bracelet without me or Len noticing.”

I blushed. It had been one thing to sit on her lap when I was auditioning, before I really knew her. Now, having lived with her for nearly a month, and grown more attracted to her with each passing day, it felt quite different. Nevertheless, I sat, placing my hands on her shoulders. Len whistled. Louise ignored him.

“Alright,” she said. “Now slowly drop your hand to my wrist—slowly, I said. And do something with your other hand to distract me.”

I raised my hand to run my fingertips along her cheek. Her eyes held mine. Slowly, my other hand drifted to her back, then down to her wrist.

“I’m not distracted,” she said.

Feeling my frustration rise, I ran a hand through her hair.

“Too obvious,” Len said.

“What should I do, then?” I asked, crossing my arms.

“You have to surprise me,” Louise said. “Do something unexpected! Something that will distract the rest of the room too.”

I searched my mind for something that would work. I tried placing a hand on her thigh, pulling the collar of her shirt; both were met with disapproval. Finally, I did the only thing it seemed I hadn’t tried yet.

I kissed her.

Her lips were soft, and I registered the moment of tense surprise before she relaxed into the kiss. My other hand reached to her wrist and unhooked the bracelet. When I had it, I stood, and waved it triumphantly.

Louise’s eyes opened. Len’s eyes darted between the two of us, his expression a toss-up between mirth and his usual scowl.

“Well?” I asked. I took a sip of my drink, then pressed it to my flushed cheek.

Louise nodded. “Yes, yes I think something like that would work. Len? What do you think?”

“Fooled me,” he said. “It’s certainly a hell of a distraction. But this’ll be no picnic in a room full of witnesses. Someone’s bound to notice.”

Louise thought for a moment. “Not if we have two distractions at once. Skid can pick a target, and I’ll sweep around her at the same time. Then I hand everything to you at the bar later.”

“Isn’t that a little complicated?” I asked.

Louise shrugged. “I agree it’d be simpler to just do sweeps, but that’s what I’ve been doing and it’s still not enough to pay off Warren, unless I want to get back to Chênes when I’m eighty.”

Len nodded. “Calwell distracts, you catch some extra and take some of the eyes away. It’s perfect.”

I rarely heard Len so excited. I wasn’t sure if I liked it, but I had to admit he was right. By then it was mid-afternoon, and Louise needed to start preparing for opening.

“You’ll start tonight,” she said to me.

The confidence in her voice made my stomach flip. “So soon?” I asked.

“Relax,” she said, placing a hand on mine. “Just remember what we taught you and you’ll be fine.”

“But if you get caught,” Len said. “Remember that we don’t know you.”

That night was the first in a long time that I’d been nervous. There were always preperformance jitters, but not like this since I’d been in Atlanta. My leg bounced as I sat at the bar, knocking back the last of my French 75 and wishing for another.

“Can you quit it?” Louise said under her breath. “You’re practically shaking the whole room.”

“I can’t help it,” I said, looking around. The crowd looked larger than usual. Eyes everywhere, it seemed impossible to take something without someone noticing.

“Think of this morning,” Louise said, noticing my grip and taking my glass from me before I broke it. “You’re a pro. You’re Skid Calwell, remember?”

I looked into her eyes. They gleamed in the green light, and I could almost see the reflection of jewels glinting in them. *She needs you*, I thought, and tried to put on a debonair smile.

“Right,” I said. “Skid Calwell.” I hopped down from the stool and headed backstage. As usual, I waited in the wings for the quartet to finish their song, then nodded to the singer, who introduced me. On this night, however, her words were drowned out by the pounding of my heart. I strutted onstage and tried my best to act natural. While I began my song (“Prove It On Me Blues” again; that one seemed to be the most popular) I looked in the crowd for a suitable target. I scanned the back of the room; mostly gamblers. At the bar were the gossipers—but the bar stools made them inconvenient targets for me anyway. Finally, I turned my attention to the front of the room, where the rich girls sat. I looked down the line, until I spotted one.

She might have been a few years younger than me, glamorous, and clearly rich. A sapphire bracelet gleamed on her wrist. I gave her a wink before loosening my tie and tossing it to her. She gave a coy smile and caught it. From the bar, Louise’s eyes met mine, and she began putting drinks on a tray.

I sang a little longer, then stepped off the stage and made my way to the woman. She looked at the women around her with an expression of lofty surprise. She did not, however, protest when I circled her chair and dropped on her lap. Her friends laughed and whistled, and I put my arms around her neck. Louise made her way through the crowd with her tray of drinks,

leaning between the women around me and my target to set the full glasses on the tables. In the already chaotic room, I leaned in and kissed the woman, to the raucous cheers of the crowd, my heart pounding so loud I worried the woman would hear. While her eyes were closed, I reached one hand to her cheek, and the other to her wrist. With a movement so deft I surprised even myself, I slipped off the bracelet. Louise, bent to retrieve a napkin she'd dropped, took my contraband as she rose and slipped it into the pocket of her apron. By the time I'd returned to the stage with a last wink at the woman, Louise had made her way back to the bar.

I finished my song, nervous at every second that my target would realize what had happened and make a scene. When my act finished without interruption, it took all the control I had not to run backstage. When I returned to the bar, Louise mixed me a drink. Before handing it over, she raised the glass—a barely-perceptible motion—and gave me the slightest of smiles.

The routine went on like that for a few weeks: I'd perform, take a ring or bracelet in the process, and hand off whatever I got to Louise. After closing she'd give the contraband to Len to sell. I assumed nothing else would change, but one night, after Louise and I got home from the Green Palace, she pulled me aside in her parlor.

“Skid,” she said, toying with one of the buttons on her sleeve. “I have a favor to ask you.”

“Alright, shoot.” It had been a fruitful night, and my spirits were still high.

“I’ve been looking over the accounts, and even with you working with me and Len, we’re still not making enough to pay back Warren.” She lowered her head into her hands and sighed.

“It’s time to make a move.”

I leaned back on the settee. “You still haven’t told me much about Warren. So he has the house. So what? You have the Palace now, and this classy place!”

“You don’t understand,” she said. “I don’t own the Palace. Warren does, and I just run it for him. I was only able to buy this place by selling some of my mother’s best jewels to him before he made me leave Chênes. And there’s Michelle.”

I remembered what Len had said in the alley after giving me the pearls, that I’d have to ask Louise for more information on Michelle. Now, I waited for her to say more, but she changed the subject.

“I’ve already talked about all this with Len, and he’s in,” she said. She’d sat up now and was tapping the low, checkered coffee table with her pen. “We just need one more person.”

“You still haven’t told me what you need me to do,” I said.

She sat up, and looked at me. “We’re going to rob Warren’s jewelry store on Victoria Street. In a week from tonight.”

I nearly laughed. It sounded melodramatic, not to mention crazy—breaking into a villainous relative’s store in the dead of night to steal jewels in order to win back an estate. “Horsefeathers,” I said. “Why would you need me for something like that? If you’re trying to buy back the house, why risk getting on his bad side like that?”

“Len and I’ve been planning it for a few weeks now,” she said, looking a little put out. “As Warren’s fence, he knows all the ins and outs of the place—what door we should use, where the best pieces are kept, the whole job. I can get us in and get the goods, Len can be the muscle, if we need it, and our get-away driver. And you can keep watch at the back door, and signal if anything goes wrong.”

“So I just stand there?” I asked. Now it was my turn to be put out; she’d made it sound so exciting that now it seemed lousy to stand by the door and whistle if I heard a cat.

“A look-out, and also a distraction, if we need it,” she said, leaning forward and taking my hand. “This would be the biggest role you ever had—pretending to be a vagrant, or drunk, or lost—anything to keep the attention from us on the inside, if we needed it.”

“And say—just say—that I took you up on this crazy scheme. What’s in it for me?”

“A fair cut. Say, a quarter of what’s left, after we pay Warren?”

I thought about it. On one hand, it still sounded risky, and I didn’t much like the thought of going to jail for a second time. And this would be much more serious than the last time, for sure. On the other hand, I was already making more money than I’d ever made in my life by working with Louise on the inside of their little ring. If we did something big like this burglary, imagine how much more I’d get, from just one night! And, of course, there was Louise. I remembered the way I’d kissed her, and how proud she’d seemed when I’d stolen the bracelet. And she’d been so kind to me ever since I started working at the Palace, it seemed like a shame to not repay her in some way.

“A third,” I said at last, tilting my chin up, “and I’m in.”

She thought about it. I could almost see the calculations inside her head—a third of the cut after the \$70,000 was paid off, and then another cut gone to Len, surely. Was I really worth all that?

Finally, she looked me in the eyes, and said, “Done. I’ll let Len know as soon as I can, and we can start planning this more as a group tomorrow.”

And it began.

