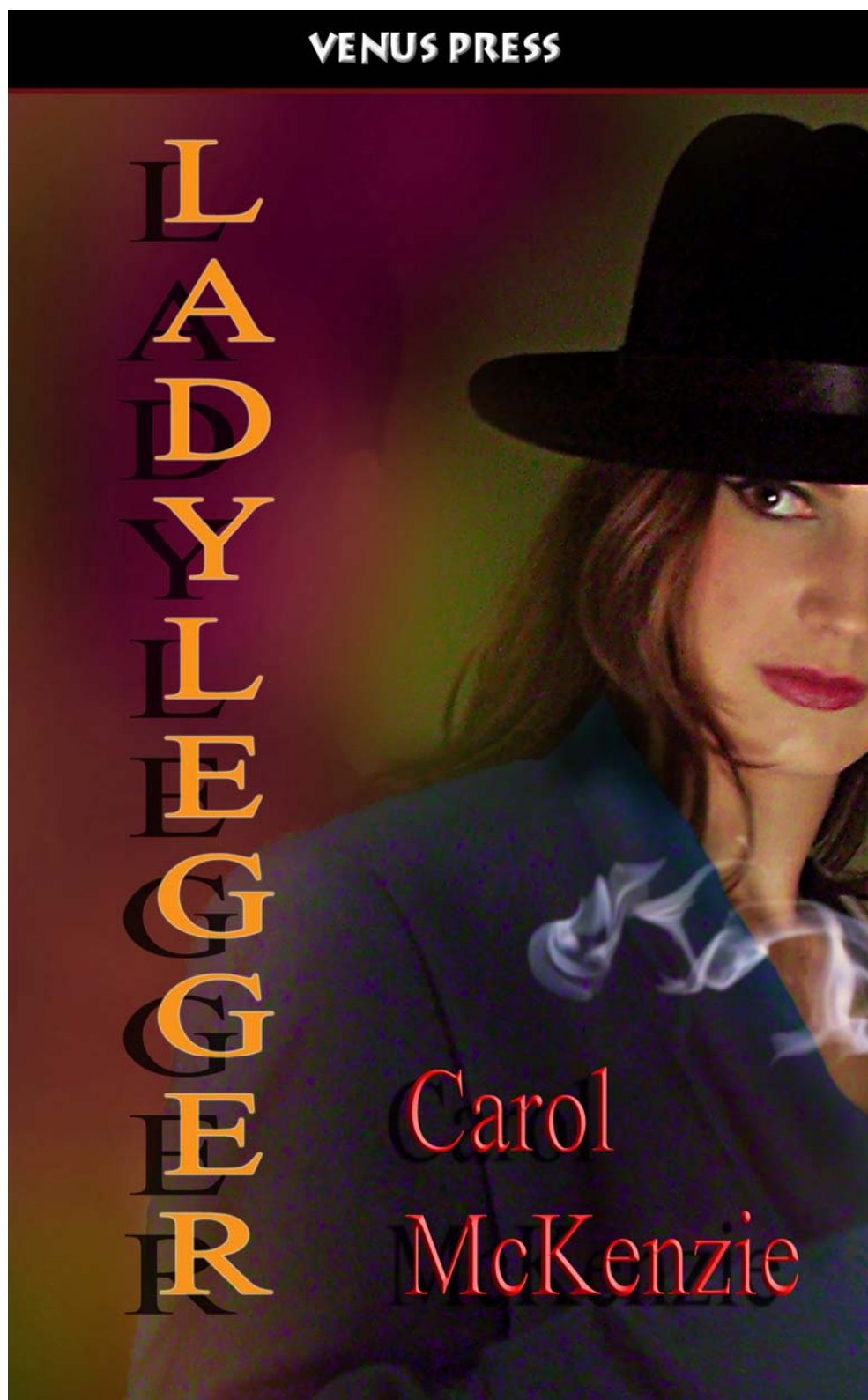


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Carol
McKenzie



Carol McKenzie

LADYLEGGER

BY

CAROL McKENZIE

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LADYLEGGER

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LADYLEGGER

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Carol McKenzie

Chapter One

Edith Thorpe didn't bother answering her cousin Ed, as she readied to leave her rural property near Ledford, Illinois. Besides, it just wasn't safe at home anymore. She stuffed her long raven hair up and under the wide brim of her hat and crossed the grassy yard toward her car. Ed walked by her side, it seemed, trying to talk some sense into her.

Refusing to listen, she paused near the car door, frowned up at him, and then checked to make sure the rifle she carried was loaded.

"This is the way it's going to be, Ed. Sorry."

"A women shouldn't be doin' what you're doin'. It's downright dangerous."

Amidst his pleas for her to stop bootlegging, Edith opened the passenger door then placed the gun's butt onto the floorboards. Considering him a royal pain in her backside, she leaned the stock onto the front edge of the passenger seat, propping it up so it would be ready to grab at a moment's notice. With a shove of her hand, she closed the door.

"I can take care of myself."

Determinedly, she rounded the Model-T as Ed looked her way, frowning. She had a lot to accomplish today and wanted to get an early start. One day soon, she'd have enough manpower so she didn't have to go alone to do the dirty work of collections and deliveries.

The wind rustled the Dutch elm branches overhead and she heard the creak and clank of the windmill. Only after she had the noisy car started, did she speak again.

"It's business. Stand back," she said, as she walked around the back end of her Model-T. "If you're up to no good, I suggest you stop. You'll get your fool neck broke—or worse—shot."

"I haven't the slightest what you're talkin' about," she lied, aggravated with him.

"Fine then." He raised a hand to his rumpled brow. "I don't see why you dress like that. Women don't wear trousers and men's hats. They'll be callin' you a bulldyke."

Why didn't he mind his own business?

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“Ed, you’re my last livin’ relative and I value what you say, but women can’t run fast in skirts and all that crap they wear. And who gives a damn what people say?”

Edith stopped at the motorcar’s door and looked over at Ed who stood on the opposite side of the car, a troubled look on his face. Maybe she had been too hard on him. She supposed she should give him a better explanation of why she was leaving so abruptly, but she didn’t want to tell him what she was up to...not yet at least. His sad look made her feel terrible inside. He was, after all, her last living relative and they’d shared her house for the last year or so. He lived with Edith because he had no living close family, just like her. They only had each other. He seemed more like a little brother than a cousin, in fact. She guessed she had a soft spot in her heart for him.

Yellow fever, white fever, infectious pneumonia, and a laundry list of other deadly diseases killed off their family. She remembered how painful it had been for Ed after the death of his mother. The bank took their home and he had nowhere to go, so she had taken him in. A hard lump formed at the base of her throat. Maybe it would be best to give Ed a jingle when she began making a lot of money. Surely, he could help out in some small way later on.

Now she needed to hire more men—a different, tougher breed—men who knew how to handle themselves when danger lurked. Men who carried weapons and weren’t afraid to use them. She had a few, but not enough to handle the expanding business. It meant that for now she had to do some of the collection work alone.

Her demeanor and tone of voice softened. “I’m sorry Ed, but I don’t cower to those preachers back east tellin’ women how they should and shouldn’t dress. If those men had to wear all those hot clothes...well, they just wouldn’t. That’s all I’m going to say on that subject. As far as I’m concerned, they can stick their ideas where the sun don’t shine!

He frowned and his dark bushy brows bunched together. “You don’t talk nor act like a twenty-nine year-old woman. None I know anyway.”

She’d had about enough chitchat. “That’s ‘cause I’m not like them.”

“You can say that again.” Ed threw up his hands. “Fine then. Hardheadedness runs in our family. I see it didn’t die out.”

She lost her soft tone, replacing it with one of aggravation. “Ed, do yourself a favor, go get a job somewhere.” She heaved a large frustrated sigh. “Maybe I’ll be back in a couple of days. I don’t know where I’m goin’ yet.”

After kicking the dust twice, scowling, she climbed into the automobile and drove away leaving a cloud of dust billowing and a frustrated cousin looking toward the back of her car.

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Edith shifted into high and sped down the dry road. Outside the driver's window below, weeds hissed and crickets chirped. She smelled the fertilizer on her neighbor's cornfield as she sped by.

Her cousin Ed had a motorcar and food; he'd be fine for a while. Oh God, she hated talking to him that way, but sometimes he didn't use common sense.

As she neared town, she noticed that storm clouds approached Ledford like a jazz band from hell. She wanted to get out of the country and onto the highway before the rain started coming down, making the roads muddy. Feeling a bit rushed, she realized that she had roadhouse owners to deliver to and whiskey to pick up.

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Chapter Two

Weeks faded into months, and Edith didn't do much except work. She did, however, make special effort to accompany her men when they were picking up whiskey at Lorene's farm. Lorene was one of her moonshine suppliers, and just the thought of her made Edith's heart leap with joy. She harbored feelings for the woman—primal urges that curled low in her belly, even though their conversations rarely veered from talk about bootlegging.

Driving down a back road in Saline County, Edith let her mind wander as trees and pastures whizzed by her car windows. She'd live in this area all her life because she loved it.

She considered her growing business and how far she had come with it. No longer was she poor. In fact, she now had more money than she knew what to do with. She didn't know how she would spend it, and considered stashing it in the First National Bank at Wolf Pointe. Edith felt proud at being a woman who was able to do a strong man's job. But the work was dangerous. Would she live long enough to enjoy or use her money?

She had hired a few men to help her deliver more whiskey to the roadhouses and speakeasies. Her men knew she was "different". She'd questioned them thoroughly on their feelings about her and her attire. They accepted her and how she dressed. Edith suspected that part of their acceptance was due to the large salary she paid them.

Being a ladylegger was a necessary evil, because men and women refused to quit drinking their liquor and gambling. Being American, they felt they were due those rights. Edith was just the woman to bring their vices to them. But damn it, if other gangsters weren't trying to kill her, other bootleggers were planning a hit.

Edith sure wasn't going to support Ed for the rest of his life. He was twenty years old and needed to learn responsibility. Some said he was shiftless and lazy; that he'd never amount to a hill of beans, but Edith didn't agree in saying things that extreme about him. After all, he had a good heart. Hopefully he would get a job soon and rise up out of his poverty.

Edith knew one thing for sure; Ed's mother would rise up out of her grave and haunt her if she gave him a job in the bootlegging business. Bootleggers, not her though, killed lawmen and lawmen killed bootleggers. In fact, she'd heard that in some Illinois, Missouri, and Kentucky counties, some of them had killed other bootleggers if they ventured into their territory. Everyday, the newspapers told gruesome Prohibition stories. Times were scary and there was no one to blame except the United States government and the screwed up laws they laid upon the citizens. They made Edith a rich woman though.

She sucked in a deep breath of fresh air as a storm threatened in the distance. As she continued to drive, for some unknown reason the hurtful recurring memory of a long ago moment seeped into her mind. Perhaps the emotional give and take in the yard with her cousin Ed had brought it on. She remembered a time when she was eleven or twelve and realized that she liked girls more than she liked boys.

Driving past the familiar street, she imagined her friend's face as she had seen it in the past, and shook her head, frowning. She came to a stop to let a horse drawn carriage pass, Edith remembered the pain she felt when her childhood best friend Kaye had withdrawn from her.

She remembered Kaye saying, "Come with me tonight, Edith. We can have some fun. John will be there. Dan wants to talk to me. Maybe you can talk to John. We can go for a stroll--"

Edith's mouth had dropped open in painful surprise. "No. That's all right," Edith had told Kaye as nonchalantly as possible. Edith remembered crossing her arms at her waist and stalking slowly away, sulking. She remembered her unexplainable feelings of love for Kaye, and how Kaye's feeling toward her had changed and she had gained interest in a boy named Dan.

With a frustrated sigh, she muttered to herself, "Oh well, such is life for women like me."

Edith pulled off the road onto a wheel-worn path that led around to the back of a big white house. It wasn't a house, really, but a roadhouse. The front porch looked like it was caving in, and on it a sign hung sideways with the words 'NO LOITERING--Violators Shot'. That sign alone sent alarm bells ringing in her head.

Maybe she was being too careful, but Edith didn't want to park in the front announcing to Saline County and the rest of the world that she was there and doing business—dealing illegal contraband whiskey. Southern Illinois jails were cold in the winter, hot in the summer, and the jailers didn't care much for women, especially ones

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like her. Not that any lawman in the county had the balls to arrest her. Hell, she had one or two paid off.

Edith stopped behind Jumpin' Jimmie's and parked under a large shade tree near an uncovered window. She cut the engine and looked around, feeling uneasy and not knowing why. When she saw nothing stir and no one approaching, she began putting up the passenger window of her car. When she first arrived at a joint, she became nervous because it would be a good time for a competitor to ambush her, wanting to take over her roadhouse.

A horse clopped past, pulling a carriage on the road out front, seizing her attention. The wind whistled in the treetops and caused Queen Anne's lace to undulate along a ditch nearby. Two men argued as they ambled toward their automobile, a hundred feet or so away. Thank God, they didn't seem to have an inkling of her or her cargo. Yes, soon she'd have enough men under her so no one, including her, would have to make pick-ups, collections, and deliveries alone.

She noticed that another motorcar occupied a space adjacent hers, under another shade tree. She was safe. A cornfield grew beyond that. No one in his or her right mind would want to tramp through the mud to get to her from that direction. Hopefully she'd hire some more firepower that day.

Satisfied it was safe enough to leave her vehicle, she slipped her silver flask into her shirt pocket.

The motorcar that had been parked nearby was new and probably belonged to the joint's owner, she surmised. Evidently, Jim's business boomed. Prohibition made bootlegging profitable, she thought, as she shifted around on the hard seat.

Edith hid her rifle and Colt under her coat, climbed out and stretched. After shutting the door, she crossed the yard, her boots swishing in the wet, thick grass. It was against her better judgment leaving the hootch and weapons in the car unguarded, but it had to be done that way until she hired some more help.

A wave of weariness settled inside her; it'd been a long night.

Smelling the scent of flowers, Edith ascended the wooden steps and rapped twice on the door, hearing the strum of banjo music inside. No one answered aggravating her, as she studied the bullet holes that riddled her fender.

Where the hell were they? "It's Edith Thorpe, dammit! Let me in!" Twice she rapped, each time harder than the last, then rolled her eyes, aggravated.

The door swung open an inch or two before it opened wide. She saw the bartender's scowling face. He removed a Cuban cigar from his thin lips and rasped,

“Hurry up I don’t have all day. Get your ass in here.” Abe Hallings wore his black hair in its usual style--parted down the middle and plastered flat to his head. Ugly as sin. A high riding white apron covered his big belly.

“Jim here?” Edith asked, stepping inside and closing the door.

He removed the cigar from his lips. “Yeah. He’s talkin’.” The bartender motioned with a tilt of the head. “Wait at the bar.”

Edith went into the barroom, took a seat, and waited. Smoke hung heavy in the air. She didn’t have all day either. She read the headlines and a couple of lines of smaller print of a Saint Louis newspaper--MORE GANGLAND VIOLENCE. Ace Baldwin is set free due to lack of evidence today as...

She continued reading while she waited. After lighting a Phillie, she ordered an ice-cold mug of draft. Hadn’t even eaten breakfast and ordered a beer.

Banjo Billie strummed and sang *Toot, Toot, Tootsie Goodbye* and the slot machines, clink-clink-clinked in the background. She looked around the drinking, card-playing room full of coal miners. Women, flappers actually, worked the crowd selling cigarettes, pitchers of beer, and giving them a smile and a kind word.

Edith noticed that a couple of the mouthy men needed their jaws boxed for saying smutty words to the women who were just trying to earn a living. One of those women she knew. Occasionally one of the men would raise their eyes and look Edith’s way. She stirred uneasily as they discussed her presence, thinking she didn’t know what they said as their coal-blackened fingers moved over the cards they had been dealt. They frowned her way then resumed playing cards. Edith would keep her mouth shut. Those men paid her bills. *Let them look*, she thought.

It was not even ten o’clock in the morning and some of the men appeared pie-eyed. Then again, their mornings were what average people would consider their nights, so they thought it was all right to drink beer. Most of the miners in the crowd had pulled all-night shifts. She guessed when they were underground no one could tell whether it was day or night.

She watched a barkeep pour a couple of mugs of iced down beer. A dirty sign read ‘BEER 5 Cents’, and ten bottles of locally stillled whiskey lined the back of the bar.

The legs screeched as Edith pulled the stool close to the bar and had the barkeep fill her shot glass with Canadian whiskey. Feeling a little guilty, she guessed she should drink the stuff the women on her route stillled, but she was used to drinking Canadian.

“How about another beer to go with the shot?” asked the bartender. “Jim might take a few more minutes.”

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It was too early. Against her better judgment, she said, “Why not? One more and that’s it for me.” Edith left her hat on and looked down while sipping her beer, not looking to cause any trouble.

Within ten minutes, Jim stood next to her and said, “Come on back to the office.”

Tired of waiting, she got off the stool and followed him behind the bar, through the opened doorway, and into a messy, dirty office. The room had old newspapers stacked on chairs; dust grayed almost everything in the small room. Jim closed the door behind them and motioned her to take a seat.

“I’ll stand if you don’t mind.”

“Whatever you think, ladylegger.”

The place looked like it hadn’t been cleaned in a year. Food had dried on empty plates and two or three day-old stale drinks littered a table. The room stunk of stale booze.

“Looks like this place needs a women’s touch,” Edith said, frowning as she drew a finger down a dusty window ledge.

“That’s one thing we don’t want too many of, women. No offense there, Edith.”

Edith did not flinch. “Right.” What a jerk!

It took a few minutes to get through the pleasantries before they got to the heart of the reason for her visit—money.

“How many cases of moonshine do you want me to deliver a week?”

“I wrote it down.” He looked under a pile of ledgers. “I want only the best shit you can get. Make sure whomever you get it from knows what the hell they’re doing when they still it. Down Cairo way, I heard tell of two or three dyin’ ‘cause the liquor they drank was cut with rat poison and the like. And green shit. I hate gettin’ a batch of that!”

Her patience with the man was wearing thin. Edith took a puff off the Phillie, trying to not display her shock.

His voice turned mean. “Edith, if you ever, I mean ever, bring me anything that’s not quality, you’d better run for the hills, ‘cause me and a few of the boys will be after your ass. I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if there would be a lynching.”

She let her heart settle down a little from the man’s thrashing comment before she would let him know a thing or two.

“It’s Jim, right?”

He glared at her. “Yeah.”

"First of all Jim," she said, giving him the evil eye, "I get my whiskey from good folk. A lot of 'em are women. In fact, a lot of 'em don't have much money." She began poking an extended finger onto his shirt. "But these women would never poison a soul. Got that? The stuff I peddle is in high demand. All the other joints like it. That's why I get top dollar. If you don't want it, just let me go on down the road and I'll peddle it elsewhere." Who did he think he was, anyway?

"Okay, okay. You don't have to get so uppity about it." After a pause, a look of surprise settled on his face. His voice warmed up a little. "You have any for me today?"

"Yeah, I do. But you've gotta talk nice or I'm on down the road."

"Edith, I'm sorry, but last week some joker sold me some green shit and it made more than a few folks sick. Surely you can understand."

Frowning, Edith walked to the door, tired of his false accusations. Either he wanted to do business or he didn't.

"Okay, so ladylegger, you want what we've agreed on?"

Edith turned and stated matter of fact, "Fifty-five dollars, firm."

"Okay. Damn. I'll have Willie boy bring it in here."

"Fine." Edith waited for Jim to get the money from a locked tin box that he'd stashed under a roll-top desk. She didn't want to show business owners any sign of weakness or fear even though at times she felt it.

Edith could tell by a few of the business owners' attitudes that she needed to begin carrying a derringer and knife hidden on her body. She'd made up her mind long ago that she would not hesitate to use them in self-defense. Didn't those do-gooders in Washington realize the mess they had created? Corruption and lawlessness was partly their fault.

Edith felt a hand close around her shoulder and heard a female's voice. She turned and squinted at one of the flappers who had been waiting on the men at the tables.

"I'd like a job. You know me, Edith. I'd be good help."

Her blonde hair was piled on top of her head into a Gibson. The young woman was slender, and wore a flashy red chemise that Edith admired. She chewed gum and winked at Edith, flirting.

"Sadie, I...no." No way did she, or would she ever have, any sort of romantic inclinations toward Sadie Kearns. Huh-uh. The feelings just were not there. Besides, dealings with Sadie Kearns meant trouble, spelled with a capital T.

Frowning, Sadie pointed over her shoulder at the tables of men. "I can't put up with their crap any more. I need a real job."

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Of all the things Sadie Kearns was, she was not a bootlegger.

"I don't think so. Not with me."

"Edith, I can shoot. My daddy taught me. I can hold my own. Me and you...we can..." She started, her tone dripping with innuendo.

Edith rolled her eyes and leaned back on the bar. "Look, Sadie..." Suddenly struck speechless, Edith raised the glass to her lips. She didn't think of Sadie that way. She was just a friend. "Doin' what I do isn't a fashion parade."

"I didn't think it was."

"Now go on back to work."

One of the miners yelled at Sadie, catching the two women's attention. "Sadie! Get my beer! Hurry it up!"

Jim emerged from the back room. "Sadie. You're on duty...you don't want to lose this job."

Sadie raised a hand to her forehead. "Aw, damn it. I need to get out of this joint."

"I can't help you." Edith took in her frown and forced a moment of guilt out of her mind. Sadie was not her problem. Edith drank the last of her beer and ambled toward the door. All she needed was a femme fatale tagging along. She'd be way more trouble than she was worth.

"Please, Edith. Don't be so heartless."

Heartless? Edith had been called a lot of things, but was never accused of heartlessness. She ignored the saloon hall woman. On her trek toward the back door, Edith grasped a toothpick and slipped it in the corner of her mouth.

"Later everyone." She had a load of whiskey to pick up at a lady's house on down the road and men to hire—a right-hand man.

* * *

A few days later, it sprinkled rain and a chill nipped the early morning air, so she had her new man Jack retrieve two umbrellas from the Lincoln. She and her heavily armed men climbed into the automobile and left the Carbondale Hotel. Fearing an ambush, she liked to be aware of her surroundings at all times. Edith looked in all directions, checking for unusual movement and threatening people even though that was Jack's job.

"Jack," she said to her new employee, whom she had already begun to trust. "To the warehouse." She had the driver take her and her four men into town.

Along a dark, lonely street in Marion, Illinois, she said, "Park here."

Jack pulled up to the curb. He braked, got out of the car, buttoned his suit jacket, and opened Edith's door. "There you go, Ma'am."

Everyone climbed out onto the wet sidewalk. Jack closed the doors. "You want me to go in, don't you?"

"Sure," said Edith. "Come on."

Six or so feet tall, having a head of silver hair at thirty-five years of age, Jack was strong; a good man to have on hand in case of emergencies.

They walked toward the rear of the dark brick building. Edith pulled the black collar of her sack suit up as the men slipped on hats, adjusted holsters, buttoned up, and strolled down the cobbled alleyway. They opened a heavy door and stepped into Edith's new whiskey distribution point--a warehouse.

"The bookkeeper expects us," said Edith. "A shipment via Chicago's due."

"It looks like you're gonna have a good business."

"I hope so."

They closed the umbrellas. Jack yanked a leather strap causing the heavy door to clank shut.

It'd be a good place for an ambush, Edith thought. "Light a couple of lamps." At night, the place gave her the creeps.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Through the murky garage, one of her warehouse men led them; their heels clicked on the concrete floors. Jack lit an oil lamp and pressed a finger to his ear.

"Shh." She raised one finger so everyone quieted.

"I thought I heard someone," Jack whispered.

Edith's heart about stopped; she silenced and reached for her derringer.

"A truck." Jack peered out the only front window, and said, "It's here. Right on time."

"Great."

"Come on." She motioned for the men to follow her.

Through the receiving area, Edith led the group. They entered a damp, dark area, which reeked of liquor. Barrels, bottles, and jugs occupied ceiling-high shelving units. Slot machines on skids took up a great deal of the room's floor space. Edith waited patiently, pulled out her pocket watch, and lit a Phillie.

"Jack, make sure we get all we ordered."

"I hear ya." Jack's lips twirled a toothpick, and he sat on a nearby barrel.

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Ernesto, one of her men, unfastened and lifted the garage door. Gasoline fumes stunk up the air as he directed the truck driver with hand motions. "Come on, come on. Stop." He spread a hand.

Relieved, Edith smiled, satisfied the truck had arrived. "Welcome to Southern Illinois, boys."

"I tell ya. I'm glad to be here." The man gave Edith a hard glare. "You're a woman."

"Shut up and get busy," she snapped, aggravated at his remark.

He looked down and went behind the truck. "What next?" he muttered.

Edith thought they all had better get used to her being a woman and taking orders from her.

Jack mumbled, "Don't pay that asshole any mind," as he inspected bullet holes on the fender, "Look here, Edith."

Curious, Edith crossed the room. "What?"

"Any problems with the law?" asked Edith, as she approached Jack wondering what he had to show her.

The driver looked down at her. "Nope, went straight through."

She looked down at the hole-ridden fender that Jack was running a finger across. "Bullet holes?" asked Edith.

The driver saw them too and said, "The time before last I got 'em."

"I see."

The garage door closed with another jolting bang and one of the men unlatched the back doors of the truck, climbed inside, and pulled out a case of whiskey. CANADIAN had been stamped on the crates. He handed one down to Jack.

"You're gettin' a hundred fifty cases. They told me to tell you not to despair, 'cause more's on the way."

Relieved, Edith lifted a sealed bottle from a crate. "This Canadian shit is the good stuff."

"The best." Men unloaded the liquor and arranged it onto the shelves. "I'm tired as hell," said the Chicago driver.

"Runnin' is hard work. I never sleep proper."

"It's dangerous. We deserve ever damn cent we get."

"Here ya go," said the driver.

Edith took the paper, held it near an oil lamp, and read it.

"They've got the amount wrote down." The driver fumbled with a valise and pulled out some more paperwork. "Amount due." He pointed to the figures.

"All right," Edith frowned. "The price went up, I see."

"You have us to blame, I guess. We told 'em we wanted more."

"Just fine." Edith pulled a money clip from her jacket pocket and counted bills into the man's hand. "There you go."

The driver folded the money and poked it into his wallet. He shoved the wallet into his pocket and slipped on a fedora on his head.

While the men loaded the whiskey onto shelves, Edith looked down tiredly and tapped the closed umbrella on a nearby barrel.

"EDITH!" shouted Jack. "Behind you!"

Edith whirled and was shocked to find that she peered down the barrel of a gun. Fear caused her to freeze on the spot.

"United States Treasury Agent, Bruce Perry." The man showed his shiny badge and gun under the light so all could see, as he stepped from the shadows.

Edith inwardly told herself to calm down, that it wasn't as bad as she feared because the man did not look too threatening. "What the..."

He approached Edith and commanded, "Stand back, now! Get those hands up, 'cause I ain't afraid to shoot."

Fine, just fine, thought Edith, as she rolled her eyes ceiling-ward. A Prohibition Agent.

The man motioned them to move together, and then paused. "I don't want to have to shoot anyone."

Feeling a surge of fearlessness, Edith sniffed then re-lit her cigar. "Can I smoke?" Acting bored, she exhaled smoke.

"I don't care."

"I was going to anyway."

"I didn't know women smoked cigars."

"This one does," Edith said, her eyes darted to the doorway as she raised her hands.

"Real good." The intruder glanced Jack's way then shifted his line of vision back to Edith. "Do what I said, miss."

"I need to go to the..." Smoke twirled out of her mouth.

"Shut up," he snapped. "You first." He pointed toward Jack.

"Me first? Doing what?"

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“Throw your weapon right here.” He touched a floor spot with the toe of his government issued shoe. He was perhaps five eight or five nine, wore a government issued uniform, and thick glasses. She didn’t think he looked like an agent. On a bad day, she could beat him in a game of arm wrestling. He looked more like a bookkeeper or a college professor than an agent.

Jack slowly followed orders. “There.”

“Where’d he come from?” asked one of the men out the side of his mouth.

“Oh, no. Please...” Edith darted a glance toward the office.

“I said shut up,” said the agent. He redirected his gaze toward the men who had arrived on the truck. “Your gun’s next. Put ‘em down here, too. Slowly, slowly.”

“There.”

The agent followed the same strategy with everyone. “Now, Miss Kingpin of Saline County, I’m going to bust every one of these beer barrels and whiskey bottles, and haul your asses to jail,” he said in a nah-nah-nah voice that aggravated the hell out of Edith.

“What’s that going to get you? A five dollar raise?”

“You’re a smart ass woman, I see.”

Edith noticed that behind the agent, William, the bookkeeper heard what was going on. He looked up from a ledger and took off his glasses. He pulled a pistol from his jacket pocket and cocked the trigger. He rose from the desk, sneaked to the doorway, and stared at the man’s back. William gazed at Edith and nodded.

Edith glimpsed the bookkeeper as he stalked the agent less than twenty feet away, hoping against all hope he’d end the short siege. If he did, he’d get a bonus. The situation made her nervous. There were too many weapons involved.

Fortunately, Agent Bruce Perry did not have the slightest idea the bookkeeper approached. William tiptoed forward, until the gun barrel almost touched the back of the Prohibition Agent’s head. In one fluid motion, he raised he gun high and brought it down on his head. The agent dropped to the floor with a thud. Out like a smoking candle.

Several minutes later, when he came to, Edith looked down at him and asked, “So why are you here? No lyin’ now.”

“I’m not talkin.”

“Maybe William will loosen your tongue,” threatened Edith, who sat on a stool as if she had all the time in the world. “I want to know all about why you’re here.”

After delivering a few more threats that reducing the greenhorn lawman to tears, he finally confessed.

“Washington is not after you.” He pointed at his pocket. “Can I get my handkerchief? I need to blow my nose.”

“Hurry up!” growled Jack.

Edith crossed her legs, feeling badly that she had to have Agent Perry knocked out. When he finished blowing his nose, he settled down a bit and looked Edith in the eye. “Washington is not after you. They’re after this Ace Baldwin...a thug out of Saint-Louis. They want him bad. But I don’t know why they sent me to check you out.”

“Ace who?” Where had she read or heard that name before?

“Baldwin. From Saint-Louis.”

“I heard that part.”

“He’s takin’ over a large part of the state’s whiskey sales. They expect him to take over this county...Saline County.”

“I don’t think so,” said Edith.

“You’re small fish to D.C. They want the head shark, ‘cause he’s bad news. He kills and rapes.”

“How much will you take to leave here and get your butt on back to Washington and tell them nothin’s going on here?”

He yanked his arm from Jack’s hold.

The little man was getting on her nerves. “Let him go, Jack.” Edith began counting money. “How much, greenhorn, for your silence?”

“Twenty.” He paused, obviously pondering the amount he’d just ask for. “Make that fifty.”

Edith gave him five tens then said, “You’re in a train wreck of trouble if I hear you do different.”

He held out his hand. “Just give me the money. I won’t say a word.”

“You know anything else?” Edith asked, withholding the money.

“Maybe I do and maybe I don’t.”

“You’d better tell me...” Edith nodded at Jack.

Jack took a step toward the man.

“Okay. Damn.” The man who now sweated profusely continued, “For twenty more dollars I’ll tell you somethin’ that might interest you.”

Edith rolled her eyes and clucked her tongue. She counted out twenty more dollars. “Talk, then.”

LADYLEGGER

“This Ace is goin’ to check other bootleggers businesses out before he took them over. He’s going to check you out too, and cause as much trouble as he can to make you want to get out. This has the government worried too.”

“Why?”

“Cause his gang will grow and gain more leverage.” He gave her a card. “Here. Telegraph this person in Washington when you get something on him. Remember, we’re not after you. We’re after Ace.”

“Wonderful.” Edith slapped his hand with the bills. “Get on out of here. Don’t come back and keep your mouth shut, hear?”

Could she trust him to keep his mouth shut? Edith doubted it, but she wasn’t into kidnapping or murder.

Chapter Three

On an early summer evening, Lorene raked gumballs in the yard. She looked out over her property, beyond the white two-story house with its wrap-around porch to the cornfield thinking she heard something.

Suddenly, from behind, a deep male voice said, "Lorene?"

Stark fear shivered through her. She was not alone! Lorene screamed then backed away, even though he stood at a distance of a hundred feet. No one ever came out her way except a very few people. This man looked like trouble. She brought a hand to her mouth, thinking she had to do something. Rumor had it that highwaymen roamed the area. Lorene ran to the tree where she had leaned her Remington then aimed at the man's forehead.

"Stop!" He pulled a gun and chuckled nastily.

"Hold it mister! I will shoot! Don't you know better than to come up on private property unannounced...specially in these parts?" She breathed in shallow quick breaths. Lorene held the Remington up, aimed, and steadily held the site's crosshair between his eyes.

Seemingly amused, he approached and stopped. The man stood fifty feet away, holding a gun on her.

She felt the color draining from her face. "Who are you anyway?"

He didn't answer and started taking more steps toward her. What should she do? Shoot? Her trigger finger tensed.

From what she could see, his eyes squinted with evil and the deep line of his jaw caused Lorene to think that he was a criminal—a bad one. Just by looking at him, she guessed he wouldn't think twice about killing her.

"You're spoofing," he said to her, giving her a hostile glare. "You couldn't kill a flea."

"I will do it," she countered icily.

LADYLEGGER

"I will pull this damned trigger before you do, and won't feel a damned bit bad. So like a nice woman, put down the weapon ...NOW! Toss it over here and I just may let you live."

The silence between them showed his determination to win out. Confused, her thoughts racing dangerously, she looked down the barrel of his steady gun, trembling. Lorene didn't want to get in a gun battle or die.

"I'm puttin' it down."

Hands up, she bent and dropped the weapon. "See?" she said, and shoved it away with the toe of her black-laced shoe.

Legs slightly apart, boots planted firmly, gun drawn, he wore a black suit, white shirt and tie. His lopsided grin disgusted her. A bit of tobacco juice trickled out the corner of his mouth. A little older than herself, she guessed him to be thirty-five or so. His blond hair was oily and he stood approximately five feet eleven inches tall. He was built like a brick wall. His teeth were jagged and stained. How long had it been since he bathed? She'd bet he was meaner and more cunning than a hungry wolf.

With an air of superiority, he said, "I was sent here to check your operation out."

"Why? By who, the law?"

Not answering, he looked her over making her feel naked, then laughed at her discomfort.

"I'm might glad I came."

In a calm, unmoved voice she asked, "Check me out. But will you aim the gun somewhere else?"

Perhaps she could outsmart him. How though? Immediately she ran her various weapons hiding places through her mind.

He lowered the barrel and placed the gun in the cuff of his holster. "Don't make me live to regret this." He walked to her side, grabbed her arm, and nudged her in the direction of the house. "Move it, lady."

She was in serious trouble. Relieved he had put away the gun; she lowered her voice and injected unfelt softness into the words. "Are you a lawman?"

"Yeah. Where is it?" His livid voice stayed constant and hateful. He didn't seem like a lawman.

"Where's what?"

"Playing coy, huh? The damned whiskey shed? You have one, cause I've drunk the whiskey that you still. Lightning, right? Lorene's on the label."

She played innocent. "You've just stopped at the wrong lady's house. I wouldn't do such a terrible thing. I farm. See?" She pointed at a horse. "There's other women with the first name of Lorene in these hills."

"You are the Lorene, the southern part of this here state equates with Lightning. Right?"

"No," she lied. "Someone tipped you off wrong."

"Yeah, yeah. Get goin'--to the house, woman." The smell of stale sweat wafted from his dirty shirt, sickening her.

"How much does someone pay you to do this? A week that is?"

"Forty dollars. Why?"

A lone derisive laugh left her lips. "Is it worth it?"

He pressed her forward. "I'll gag you if you don't shut up. I hate mouthy women."

"I'll give you twice your wage to forget this and walk away." She stalled, refusing to walk.

He pushed her every few steps toward the house, and didn't look once toward the whiskey-shed, much to her relief. She glimpsed the copse of Dutch elms, which hid the distillery.

"In the house," he said. "'Cause me and you need to talk. My bosses are going to come and take your little business over."

Minutes later, inside the house, he began asking questions.

"What are these?" he asked, pointing to the drawings on her desk.

"Drawings."

"You're an artist?"

"Drawing is my pastime. So?"

She stood near the table, her arms firmly folded at her waist, distraught. He leafed through a large pile of drawings. One at a time, he studied the charcoal-on-paper artwork.

"Who's this?"

He was making her nervous. "Father." She looked down.

"You make him look real. Almost."

Lorene rolled her eyes.

"He's dead, huh?" He leafed on past a drawing of her mother. "Is she your mother?"

"Yes."

LADYLEGGER

In a threatening manner, he moved toward her. What was he going to do? His hand rested on her elbow and she considered running from the house taking a chance on getting shot in the back.

The exploration didn't end. Much to her distaste, his finger ran up the side of her arm and up the side of her neck while she shivered in fear. He definitely was getting ideas. What would he do to her?

His voice gentled. "Now if you was to be a little nicer, maybe I'd consider letting you go."

She'd rather take her chances getting shot than be nice to him.

He laughed. "Do you know how bad it can get for you? Hmm? Do you, cutie pie?"

"No."

"You don't want to know either."

Lorene didn't doubt that.

His finger moved across her back giving her chills. In a feeble attempt to escape, if only for a short time, she asked, in a mustered-up sweet voice, "Care for some Lightning?"

"Hmm. Sounds mighty hospitable. I might not leave right away, and indulge in a snort of your whiskey."

She grinned. Fine, just fine. "It's upstairs," Lorene said. "I'll be right back." Did he believe her? "Wait right here, now."

She climbed the steps, turned, and gazed down at him. She crossed the hardwood floor and disappeared beyond the bedroom doorjamb.

Like a whirlwind, she scrounged through her underwear drawer and grabbed her daddy's old Colt 45. She had to shoot him before he shot her. Hands quaking, she dropped bullets into the chambers and clicked the cylinder closed.

Click. Click.

She tightened her grip on the loaded gun and slipped her finger onto the trigger. Slowly, she turned.

He leapt from the door onto her; his hands covered hers in a life and death struggle for the gun. She fought him hard and slapped him.

"You no good bastard."

"Oh, no you ain't, you little bi--"

Crack! A bullet pierced the ceiling.

“You no good...I hate your stinkin’ guts.” Tears stung her eyes as she pulled a lamp off the dresser and whacked him in the head. Glass shattered. Blood oozed down his forehead.

“You little...” He wrestled her onto the feather mattress, climbed on her, pushed her head down, and pressed the gun barrel to her ear. Breathlessly he said, “I thought you were going to be a good little girl. Guess I was wrong.”

“Go to hell,” she screamed and spat at him.

He wiped his bloody cheek with his sleeve then cocked the trigger. “We can make this easy or we can make this not so easy, little lady.”

Her voice lightened. “Let me up.” She took a deep breath when she felt his weight come off her. Feeling returned to her hands and arms. “I’ll do what you say.” Lorene rose, watching his every move and hurried back down the stairs with him following close behind.

He laughed smugly and seized the jug from the closet near the base of the stairs. “I’ve got you at a really bad advantage, I can see.” He latched onto her elbow with his free hand

She yanked her arm from his grasp.

“Get me a glass,” he ordered, pulling the cork from the moonshine jug.

She almost regained her composure and opened the cabinet door, pulled out a glass, and set it on the tabletop. “There.”

“Thanks.” Smiling, he poured a glassful, put the jug down, lifted the glass to his lips, and guzzled until it seeped out the corner of his lips. “Now that’s more like it. Ah.” He made a series of pained sounds. “Woo-wee. So this hootch here’s what they call Lightning?”

“I don’t make whiskey,” she lied.

“Sure you don’t,” he said nastily.

“Get in your car! Leave now!”

His laugh was maniacal, as though he saw someone coming. “I’ve got to leave you, dear.” He walked to the screen door and partially opened it.

At least he was going, she thought relieved.

He looked out toward the road then back at her, ogling her expression. “I see that I’m going to kill your bootlegger friend, Edith, today.”

“Why?” No one would kill her friend without Lorene giving a fight.

“Edith is a bad cookie, my boss’ want her killed.” He paused and looked around.

LADYLEGGER

Lorene saw Edith approaching the yard. She had to find a way to stop him from killing Edith. But how?

He raised a gun and aimed at her. "She's leaving this life."

"You're evil and rotten! No!" Lorene screamed behind him.

"Damned woman whiskey maker." He strode outside, turned, and aimed the gun at Lorene's head. "I think I'll kill you too. Right now, in fact," he said, and cocked the trigger.

In desperate fear, Lorene dropped to the porch.

Then she heard Edith's voice cut into the air. "Behind you, jerk."

He turned at the sound of the voice.

Edith smiled wickedly and cocked her head.

"Well, if it aint the female homo herself!" He aimed the Colt 45 and squeezed the trigger, intending to shoot Edith.

A bullet coming from somewhere else cracked. A red hole opened on his forehead. The man dropped into a lifeless pile onto the ground several feet away from Lorene.

Lorene screamed.

"It's okay, Lorene!" Edith said, rushing to her.

Red liquid pooled beneath the intruder's head.

Lorene gasped in horror. Edith didn't pull the trigger, did she? Who then had? Lorene saw movement out of the corner of her eye and looked across the yard.

The gunman placed his weapon in the cuff of his holster and ambled their way.

She sobbed. "Oh, my God, who are you?"

"Jack, Edith's driver. Don't feel bad," he told Lorene. Buttoning his jacket, he approached and stopped. He was more a murderer than the lawman, wasn't he?

Arms held tightly to her waist, Edith's arms wrapped tightly around her, Lorene cried.

"Low down dirty bastard," Edith said, taking Lorene into the circle of her arms. "You're okay now."

Jack walked around the body, stopped at the Colt 45, and kicked it away from the intruder's hand. "He won't hurt anyone now."

Edith said, "Lorene, I figured you were in trouble when I saw him in town. Someone told me who he was with--an Ace somebody."

Using the toe of her shoe, Edith pushed the corpse's head to one side and glimpsed the dead man's face.

Jack walked back to the Lincoln, drove it slowly up the lane, and stopped near the body. He climbed out.

“Do you have a shovel?” he asked calmly.

“Yes,” said Lorene who shook uncontrollably. She pointed toward a gray outbuilding.

“It’s hanging up to the left behind the door.”

“Where’s his car?” he asked Lorene.

“He didn’t have one.”

“It’s probably up the road. I’ll have to go get it.”

“OH,” she said in alarm.

“Maybe I’ll burn it.” He shook his head and, as he went to the barn, he muttered, “Thanks.”

“You okay?” asked Edith with concern gleaming in her eyes.

“I...I’m okay, I think.” At least the tears stopped flowing.

Edith swept the hair from Lorene’s face, and wiped her cheeks with a handkerchief that she had pulled out of her pocket. Being the object of Edith’s attention felt...good. With a finger to Lorene’s chin, Edith tilted Lorene’s face upward then pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

“Okay now?”

“Thank you for being here.”

“It’s no problem.” Edith quietly assured Lorene. “It’s all right. Shhh.”

Edith’s breath smelled lightly of mint and whiskey as she spoke. “It was the only thing we could’ve done,” she said, finger-combing Lorene’s hair while holding her in her warm, pleasant arms.

“Why don’t you go on inside and get settled down. I’ll help Jack.” Edith stopped for a second. “Lorene, that dead man...he’s a real bad guy out of Saint-Louis. Remember that. He was a killer, out to stop and take over your operation. He’s gone.”

“Will others come?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay.”

Lorene felt better. She nodded and went into the house. Edith’s words soothed her, and she trusted her.

“I’ll be back and we can talk.”

LADYLEGGER

Jack and Edith finished the job of burying the man's corpse on her property. Unnerved, Lorene jumped when Jack leaned inside the back door and peered Edith's way. He was not wearing his sack suit jacket and his sleeves were rolled up.

"If it's all right with you, Edith, I'll get some petrol, get rid of his motorcar, and come back in an hour or so. Unless you want to come..."

Edith's features scrunched. "I'll stay and visit...if that's okay with Lorene." Edith's questioning eyes turned toward Lorene.

Lorene, a bit curious, nodded, welcoming the company. "Oh sure. It's fine."

Strolling through the house, looking at the lithographs and pressing a few keys on the piano, Edith put her hat on the seat of a chair. After studying the contents of the étagère, Edith entered the kitchen, where Lorene, standing on tiptoe was reaching for a pitcher on the top shelf.

"Here," said Edith. "Let me get that."

She picked it off the shelf and handed it to Lorene.

"Thank you," Lorene said, embarrassed but thankful Edith got it down.

Lorene had never met a woman quite like Edith who was obviously a woman of lesbian persuasion; also an obviously commanding presence in any circle. When she was dressed and cleaned up wearing her usual sack suit, Lorene considered Edith style fearlessly provocative.

That moment though, Edith was not cleaned or dressed up. Fearless and openly defiant of the law, Edith attracted her, and she did not know why. Lorene had talked to her on several occasions. The times Edith had accompanied her men while picking up a load of Lorene's homemade whiskey, their meetings were strictly business. But an underlying current of some sensual unexplainable something passed between them that pulled down to Lorene's core. It was kind of like an unwelcome tension that twisted between them. In fact, in each new encounter the tension increased with a frightening intensity.

But today Edith's stay-over was different; it was not about business. What then was it about? It seemed so wrong to smile, since Jack had just killed a man. Lorene's heart ached over the spilling of blood. Lorene wanted to put all thoughts of the shooting out of her mind and focus on her growing interest in Edith.

Lorene glimpsed Edith's clothes then returned her line of vision to the pump handle, and began pumping water to rinse a spoon.

The shirt Edith wore sported dirt and bloodstains; the tail had pulled from under the waistband of her black baggy trousers.

Edith raised a hand, looked down, and said, "You're looking at my clothes. Sorry, I'm filthy." She flashed a tentative smile.

Lorene swallowed with difficulty then said, "How rude of me. No, I'm sorry."

Edith raised a hand to her mussed hair. "It's all right, Lorene."

Her name on Edith's lips sounded ominous, thought Lorene.

"Mind if I get myself a glass?"

"Of...?"

Lorene looked at her with an unintentional blank stare. Edith pointed at the pump on the sink. "Water."

Lorene's heart about leaped out of her chest. "Oh...yes." She doubted that Edith was a woman with delicate scruples from what she'd heard in town and what she witnessed. But still...

"I've built up a thirst."

"Excuse me," said Lorene, vaguely aware that Edith's Lincoln with Jack behind the wheel, sped down the lane toward the main road. He had left his boss lady at Lorene's farm so Edith and she could be alone together...to visit. The idea intrigued Lorene, but she refused to let it show.

"Let me get you a glass." Lorene opened a cabinet, brought out a glass, and handed it to her.

"Damn, it's hot as Hades today, isn't it?"

"It is. Independence Day's next week, can you believe it? This year's flying by," said Lorene, busying herself rolling, softening lemons, while hiding her nervousness.

Edith pumped a glass of water at the sink then turned. She leaned back against the counter, watching Lorene's movement. "I'll drink another."

"Help yourself."

"Thanks." Lorene depicted an ease that she did not necessarily feel. She was surprised to find that Edith drank all of the water, but tried not to show it.

Edith put the glass down. "Thanks."

Lorene smiled with reservation. "You're welcome." She'd never met a woman who drank water as greedily as Edith had just done. Lorene located then placed the crystal pitcher onto the counter and began squeezing lemons.

"Is everything okay?" Edith asked, her gaze brushing Lorene's burning profile. "I mean with what happened..."

LADYLEGGER

Lorene's hands shook and she had a difficulty cutting the lemon. "I'm still a little shaky from that out there...but I'm sure I'll be fine." It had been the first shooting she'd ever witnessed.

"It had to be done, Lorene. That thug would have killed you or me and not have blinked an eye."

Lorene nodded aware that Edith was still regarding her quizzically. "Still thirsty?"

"Yeah. It's been a long time since I had lemonade."

"Sorry I don't have ice. They haven't come down this road with electricity yet."

"Without is fine." Edith paused thoughtfully, it seemed, having a lot more to say. "Lorene..."

"Yes?" she asked, as she dumped the sour lemon juice into the crystal pitcher. What would Edith Thorpe have to say to her?

"Excuse me," Lorene said, needing to get to the pump to add water into the pitcher, realizing that Edith's mouth was less than a few inches from her ear; their clothed bodies brushed. She felt the electric current sparking between them again.

"Oh no. Excuse me," said Edith with gentle politeness, flinching at the utter awkwardness of the moment. Slowly she moved away and stepped aside, letting Lorene have access to the pump.

"About the guy that Jack shot--" Edith stopped short of finishing her statement.

Raising the pump handle, Lorene stopped. "Yes?"

Edith raised her hands and let them drop to her thighs. "I don't know how to say this...but...you...no, we can't tell the Sheriff or anyone else about what happened here. He's...the Sheriff's...well, he's not on the up and up."

"The Sheriff isn't?" Lorene asked.

"No. He's paid off."

Lorene moved away holding the full pitcher. "That's scary, we can't even trust the law."

"It's a fact." Edith's gaze of interest stayed as Lorene carried the pitcher to another counter.

"Why isn't he?"

"Since Prohibition started all, well most anyway, some of the lawmen are on the take. 'Specially in these hills where a lot of whiskey is made."

"Really?" Lorene brought a canister out of the cabinet.

"Yeah."

"I won't tell anyone about what happened." The information concerned her. As she scooped sugar into the lemon water, she said, "Um, Edith." Leaning, Lorene reached for a wooden spoon and closed the drawer with her hip as Edith turned and leaned back, resting her hips on the counter. "If what you said is true, it's just like we don't have any law around here." She stirred the light yellow liquid.

"I know." Edith turned away and peered out the window, down the road, obviously deep in thought, perhaps worried. "It's not good. But that's how it is nowadays. It's the government's fault, all this chaos. The Volstead Act..." Edith turned back, smiling crookedly.

Lorene glimpsed Edith's shirt. "You want to clean up? I have some clean clothes that'd fit and..."

"That'd be great."

"Okay." She poured them each a glass of lemonade. "Hold on. You're in luck. I have water heating. Help yourself to another glass."

"I'll be floating soon," she said and laughed.

Lorene gave a tight, polite smile then traipsed into the next room and located the clothes. As she poked through a cedar chest, she spoke loudly so Lorene would hear.

"I suppose what happened today is called self-defense."

"Right. Don't feel badly. He would've killed us for no good reason. He was a murderous thug. We probably did society a favor. He's killed others; I just know he has."

"Yeah, you're right."

Lorene had already put water on to heat for her own bath, for after she had finished raking the yard. Making several trips, Lorene carried buckets of the heated water back and poured it into the claw foot tub.

"Let me help," Edith said.

Lorene turned and saw something flickering in Edith's eyes. But what? No matter what happened, Lorene had to hide her inner feelings. "Well, all right then. Just pump water into the bucket and I'll take it in yonder."

Lorene poured equal amounts of cold and hot water into the tub, filling it to within three-quarters full.

"I hope it will be the right temperature."

"It'll be fine," said Edith, seeming in disbelief Lorene had gone to so much trouble for her. When the tub was ready to bathe in, Lorene re-entered the kitchen and announced, "Edith, you can come back here and I can show you where the tub is."

"Okay. Thank you so much."

LADYLEGGER

“This way. You can go back here and you can pull the curtains around the tub.” Lorene grasped the fabric and pulled it, hiding the tub. “Like this.”

“This is nice of you, Lorene,” Edith said, her voice deep.

“I--uh, you helped me, remember?” asked Lorene, unable to hide her embarrassment and confusion. After all, a man had just been killed on her property.

“No.” Edith began unbuttoning her blouse.

“I do, I owe you.”

“No you don’t.”

Her nearness was overwhelming; Lorene had to leave the room. “I guess you need a towel and wash cloth.”

Lorene left to get a towel. When she returned, Edith stood before the tub bare-breasted. She leaned forward, immodestly pulling down her underwear as Lorene looked on, mesmerized. Edith had a scar on her upper left shoulder that caught Lorene’s attention first. Had she been shot? To make her presence known, Lorene cleared her throat and looked away...far, far away.

Edith made no move to cover herself. Lorene’s eyes roved from Edith to her clothes on the stool. Her long raven hair hung a bit past her shoulders when she stood straight. Her weight, Lorene guessed, was medium. Mesmerized, Lorene took in her body, the dark hair on her pubic mound; secretive longings began to stir, causing Lorene’s throat to constrict and her body to stiffen.

“What’s wrong, Lorene?”

“Oh, excuse me,” said Lorene turning, shaken to her very core, she averted her line of vision away...far away. She felt so silly; like a schoolchild, almost.

Edith laughed lightly as she stepped into the water. “It’s okay.”

“I’ll be out here if you need me.” Lorene’s heart fluttered as she hurried back to the kitchen where she cleaned up the lemonade mess, all the while thinking about what Edith had said.

A little while later, Edith emerged wearing Lorene’s daddy’s serge trousers and white shirt that had the sleeves rolled up above her elbows. She looked a sight, but Lorene didn’t say a word.

“They fit, sort of,” she said, and flashed Lorene a dazzling smile and a laugh.

“Sorry.” Lorene pointed toward the clothesline outside. “I washed your shirt. I was afraid to wash the suit.”

“That’s nice of you. I’m sorry I’m putting you out.”

"You're not. This is the most excitement I've had all year. It's good to have a visitor."

"Want to join me in the parlor?" asked Edith as she padded toward the door holding a glass of lemonade. "Let's get acquainted."

"All right."

"I'm not keeping you from anything, am I?" asked Edith.

"For heaven's sake, no."

After they were seated across from each other, an awkward silence felt between them during which Lorene smiled, she believed, like an idiot. Twice she looked over at Edith then bit her lip. Edith looked ten times better in person than the pictures Lorene saw in the newspaper even when she wore disheveled, dirty clothing.

"So do you have a beau?" asked Edith, as she stared into the glass of lemonade that she held. Her eyes rose to meet Lorene's line of vision.

"I had a husband once, but he died. But now, no suitors. It's just me."

"How did he die?"

"Of yellow fever, several years back. Several in my family got it and died. Let's see...I was twenty-five when he passed. I'm thirty now, so...hmm, five years ago. I don't know why I didn't get it, the fever."

A long pause followed. A look of solemnity displayed on Edith's face that pulled Lorene's heartstrings. "I'm sorry," she finally said. "That disease was bad."

"True. That's okay. Time heals hurts."

"I know."

"Ever since you started picking up my whiskey, I always wanted to sit down and talk to you. This is nice."

"It is, Lorene. I admire you for stillin' whiskey. It takes guts in these times."

"I have no choice. I have to buy food and supplies." After a lengthy pause Lorene said, "Can I ask you something?"

"Ask away. I'm in the mood to answer anything you ask."

"If I get too nosey...tell me. But, Edith, you're so interesting and I've seen your photograph in the local newspaper a couple of times."

"Aw, I don't know," Edith said in a suddenly shy tone.

"Do you pick up whiskey from others?"

"My men pick it up mostly. In the last six months, my business has grown by leaps and bounds. I have people, many women like you, and some men all over these

LADYLEGGER

hills who still whiskey. I have it coming in from Canada, the Caribbean, and Mexico, for three-dozen or so roadhouses. I have slot machines in the joints...and that's about all."

Shocked and a bit surprised, Lorene found herself at a loss for words.

Edith toyed with the doily that covered the arm of the sofa.

"This is so difficult to ask...I don't know how to ask it nicely."

"You're going to ask me about why I dress like a man and if I am like what they say."

Lorene's breath caught; suddenly she felt she'd been excessively nosey to ask such a private question. What was wrong with her? "I'm so sorry. Please don't answer it..."

"No, I want to tell you." Edith cut into her words. "Some stuff's true and some not. If you want to hear it, I'll be glad to oblige you."

"Tell me then."

"I dress like a man because it's impossible to do what I do in a dress and all those contraptions you ladies wear under your dresses. I especially don't like the preachers back east telling me how I should dress."

"It was none of my business."

"I want it to be."

Why would she want it to be, Lorene wondered.

"So ask me other things that are on your mind."

"Do you...No. Never mind."

"Ask me. Please, go ahead Lorene."

"I feel like such an ignorant schoolgirl. Do you...like..."

"Women?" asked Edith, finishing her statement.

Edith rolled her eyes and looked at the ceiling, then grinned Lorene's way. An awkward pause passed. "So, have you heard the gossip about the President of Wolf Pointe First National Bank came home and found his wife in bed with me?"

A long pause lapsed during which Lorene weighed her answer. Lorene refused to lie. "I heard it."

"It's true. That really happened. It was a mistake and..."

Lorene raised a spread hand. "It's okay. We all make mistakes. We're human." It was true, then, Edith liked women. "Have you killed a lot of men?"

"Only if they've raised a gun or a knife wantin' to kill me."

Lorene was very relieved Edith answered the question the way she had.

"May I ask you a question then?" Edith asked before she sipped some lemonade. She drew her legs under her on the sofa and leaned on the arm.

"Okay."

"Do you find me attractive?" Edith asked.

Lorene felt her face heating and she tried to stifle a smile. Her attraction showed; inwardly she cursed. Lorene could not answer. Why did every little emotion and thought show on her face, especially to a woman like Edith?

"You wonder what it would be like...two women, don't you?" asked Edith.

"Together?"

"Yes." Edith nodded slightly. "Is that what you're wonderin'?"

Lorene looked down, shyly. "Yes."

"It's good."

Tongue-tied, Lorene looked toward the window; the Lincoln drove toward the house. Behind it, the dust billowed.

"Here comes Jack," said Edith. "I guess you're saved from my questions this time around. I have to get into town." She smiled and walked toward the kitchen carrying her empty glass.

"I can take it."

"Thanks," said Edith, and handed the glass to Lorene. Their hands touched for a second or two; Lorene felt as if a magical current had just flowed between them as she walked Edith to the door.

Edith's eyes dropped to the piece of lace that flowed over Lorene's dress at her throat.

"Edith, do you have a place you call home?"

"I have one, but I'm never there. I live out of hotels and my Lincoln."

"Would you like to come by here sometime...to visit?"

"Yes, I'd like that," said Edith as she ran her finger up Lorene's sleeve.

"Okay. You're invited then."

They stood close; Lorene didn't move away. "I'll get your shirt off the line, Edith. Hopefully it's dry. If not, maybe you can hang the shirt on a chair, or something in your hotel room."

When Lorene brought her the shirt, Edith looked down at it and said thoughtfully, "Listen. I think that guy's gang won't send more men."

"I hope not."

"They won't know who killed him or where he even was."

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Lorene was silent for a moment then asked, "You sure?"

"Just in case, keep a gun handy."

"I have a Remington."

"I'd let you stay at my house," started Edith," but my cousin Ed, is there off and on..."

"Oh no, I won't put you out. I'll be fine."

"But it's not safe there, because there are men lookin' for me."

Lorene raised a hand, touched that Edith cared enough to offer her home. "I'll be okay. Honest."

"Take my derringer, Lorene. Keep it on you all the time. Promise?"

"I couldn't do that."

"I insist." She took it from her pocket and handed it to her. "I'll get myself another."

Lorene took the weapon and looked at it. "Well, okay."

"Come Sunday for dinner...noon, if you want."

"Dinner?" She walked out the door, stopped, and then turned. "Noon?"

Lorene smiled. "Yeah."

"Okay."

With that said, Edith strode toward the Lincoln and climbed in. Lorene couldn't hear what was said but she continued to watch. Jack turned the black, sleek car around and just before they drove down the lane, Edith waved and smiled before the motorcar sped away.

* * *

Jack drove Edith to the European Hotel in Harrisburg, where she cleaned up, rested, and changed clothes while a man stood guard by her door. By nine the next evening Jack, three of her men and she, were back on the road headed for Pandora's Box, outside Carbondale. While they were there, another of her cars delivered whiskey, counted the money that came from the slot machines and gave the owner his rightful take. She saw that everything seemed to be running smoothly and she was getting richer by the day. Edith took a handful of Phillies and put them in her pocket on her way out to the Lincoln.

After, they made three more stops to roadhouses. By midnight that evening, they were headed down a country road leaving Williamson County and entering Saline County.

Sitting in the back seat with Jack and two men occupying the front seat, they rode along a road that was sometimes hilly and wooded and sometimes flat with cornfields. Outside the grass swished, crickets chirped, and the smell of manure fertilizer blew inside the open car window. She raised a silver flask to her lips and took a thoughtful sip of Canadian whiskey.

“I’m lettin’ you off Sunday, Jack.”

“That’s fine. What’s up?”

“I’m goin’ to dinner with that lady, Lorene.”

“I’ll go see my folks,” said Jack.

“Take Monday off, too. If I need a driver I’ll get one of the other guys.”

Edith’s thoughts turned to Lorene. She sensed a sudden, dramatic change in Lorene and their relationship. Sadly enough, the shooting had brought them close. What the hell was going on? It made her more nervous than she’d ever been. So much so, she wanted to pull Lorene into her arms and tell her she cared for her, but it could scare her away. Edith didn’t want that. The heart wrenching truth was that Edith wanted Lorene more than she had ever wanted any woman.

Edith remembered Lorene’s delicate hands as she squeezed the lemon. How Lorene’s generous breasts curved under the bodice of her dress. She loved Lorene’s blushing embarrassment and her charming innocence regarding the world outside her property.

Edith recalled her feminine voice and how Lorene suspiciously avoided eye contact when Edith put on the heat. To keep her hands off Lorene, Edith had contained them by crossing her arms at her waist. Lorene stilled whiskey; that showed she had guts and that attracted Edith. The thought of spending a night in Lorene’s bed set her head spinning. She had to put Lorene at ease before that happened. She wanted to spend time with Lorene. Make it a romantic time for her; she’d put a little music on the Victrola.

Edith had all the time in the world and she knew—call it women’s intuition—but Lorene desired her, too.

* * *

Sunday started off as what seemed a dreary day; then by the afternoon, the sun came out. They exchanged lingering glances as they shared a slow dinner of roast, potatoes, and carrots. Now, looking at Lorene, Edith daydreamed she was bathing naked with her instead of sitting across the room looking at her and sipping whiskey.

Edith’s men were due to return. Even so, she gathered strength, put her glass of whiskey down, crossed the carpet, and brought Lorene up from her chair and into her

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arms. She kissed her full on the mouth. It came as no surprise when Lorene returned the kiss and even slipped her arms around Edith's shoulders. It had been unplanned and surprised Edith as it perhaps had surprised Lorene.

"I knew this would happen," said Edith, drawing several blonde strands behind Lorene's ear.

"And just how did you know?"

After a soft kiss, she said, "I sensed it."

After what seemed a long soul searching pause, Lorene admitted, "I've asked myself that question a lot of times since...well, I've met you...I...I just don't know, Edith. I know that I am attracted to you. But I've never had an affair with..."

God, she was so beautiful. "Shh."

The sunshine seeping through the off-white sheers that hung behind the lace curtains made the parlor appear golden and glowing. No one, as usual was in the house, or on the property, that Edith knew of. Her men promised they'd return within a couple of hours. Lorene's smile impressed Edith; it was so white and perfect. Again, their lips met; Lorene's tongue slipped into Edith's mouth and found her tongue. It was the sweetest moment Edith could ever remember as she ran her fingertips up and down Lorene's clothed back.

The room twirled in the back of her mind and Lorene meld into Edith's arms, as they stood in the middle of the room oblivious to their surroundings, her mind only concentrating on lovely Lorene. Edith put her hands on each side of Lorene's waist and raised them to just under her breasts, until neither of them could endure it. By the way Lorene reacted to Edith's touches, Edith could tell that Lorene wanted more even as she heard the car came up the lane.

It was a moment that Edith carried with her out to the car and longer, for the rest of the week. Edith wanted more of Lorene...much more.

Now, as the scenery passed outside the car window, Edith drifted half in and half out of sleep, she dreamt that her hands, which were on Lorene's waist, moved down...down and around Lorene until they cupped Lorene's ass and brought her firmly to against her naked body. Edith moved her hands around to their front, between Lorene's upper thighs and up...until her fingertips slid into her pussy. She could almost feel her canal tightening over her fingers as she slipped them in and out of Lorene. Edith felt Lorene's heavy breasts pressing against her, moving almost lingering against her body, her desire electric.

A tire hit a bump and brought Edith out of the dream.

Carol McKenzie

She would have Lorene soon, though she wanted their first time to be extraordinarily sexy; a time they would both remember. She wanted to make sure Lorene was more than ready to receive her. Daydreaming was fine, but Edith was sure the real thing would be so much better.

Chapter Four

One evening almost three weeks later, Edith planned to deliver a case of whiskey and collect money, because all her men were busy or on the road delivering and picking up whiskey elsewhere. It seemed the more men she hired, the more men she needed. Just that week she'd been shot at three times. Three men had joined her business that day; Jack was among them. Again, her intuition told her that she could trust Jack, but she'd continue to keep up her defenses. In her business, it was hard to trust anyone.

They rode in her Lincoln over the rocky, bumpy southern Illinois back roads. She had wanted to stay at the office and study the books with William, but that evening, it was impossible.

"I need to hire more men. I can't be doin' all this shit that I'm doin. I have other business to tend," she complained to Jack. "There are the books, and people I need to talk to."

"If you think about it, Edith, that's good," said Jack, as he tamped a Chesterfield then put it between his lips. He scratched a wooden match to the sole of his shoe, held it to the end of his cigarette, and sucked until the end flared to a fiery red. Thoughtfully after exhaling, he said, "The next place may have some men who want to work."

The car's wheels bumped and jostled them as the driver idled over railroad tracks.

When they were back on the open road, "Pandora's huh?" she asked, then she brought out a flask, screwed off the lid, and sipped. She passed it to Jack. "Here. Take a sip."

He grasped the silver container and took a slug, his head dropped back.

Jack and Edith settled back in their seats while looking ahead through the windshield, past the two men in the front seat. He handed the decanter back to her and she slipped it into her jacket pocket.

The pungent odor of fertilized fields filled the car's interior. It was a refreshingly cool early summer night. Edith wedged her elbow on the window and gazed at the inky field that slid past. She pulled out a pocket watch and Jack struck a match, so she could read the time. The headlights of a car approached and passed.

“Thanks, Jack.”

It was nearly midnight and they had almost arrived at the moneymaker, Pandora’s Box.

Edith checked the chamber of her derringer. Call it women’s intuition, and she also had a good nose for trouble, but she could feel trouble awaited them. She couldn’t put her finger on what it was, but she knew it was coming.

Carrying on the conversation, Jack and she had dropped fifteen minutes ago, she added, “I need to find a place to operate out of. I think tomorrow I’ll go talk to the bank and see if they have an empty place for us. I’ll pay off the Sheriff. Or pay him more than Ace pays him. I thought it’d be nice to have an inn. Maybe hire a cook, put some tables in it and a card room where the men can relax and call home between trips. I’m sick of hotels and crappy food.” Her stomach felt like it was cramping.

“Sounds good.”

“I think I’ve got a stomach ache.”

Jack said, “It was prob’ly that joint we ate at for lunch.”

Luke looked back from the front passenger seat, removed the toothpick from his lip, and said out the side of his mouth, “We see something down in the ditch.”

“We’re comin’ up on it now,” said the driver. “Edith, do you want us to pull over?”

It set her defenses on high alert when something along a dark, deserted road caused her cars to stop. “Slow down, but keep your eyes open.”

Peering out the window, Edith saw a woman who was down, waving an arm. It looked like...the woman yelled for help.

Jack looked around. “Yeah. Be ready. You never know.”

Within a few seconds, the men had their firearms out, checking to see how many live rounds they had loaded and ready in their chambers. It looked like a good night for an ambush.

“For firepower you might want to think about investing in some Tommy guns.”

“I know.” This was one of those times Edith wished she owned machine guns.

Checking in all directions first, the men climbed out of the car onto the oiled road. The driver helped a woman out of the ditch. She seemed bleary-eyed and probably high on cocaine.

Jack leaned down and peered through the open window. “Damn, if it ain’t Sadie Kearns, the saloon hall girlie from Jumpin’ Jimmies.”

“What do you want us to do with her?” asked the driver.

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Edith sighed with frustration. "Let's take her home." After all, she'd known her for a couple of years.

"Where's your home?" Jack asked the wobbly blonde-haired woman as he led her toward the car.

The woman murmured incoherently.

"I know," said Edith. "Put her back here. Christ."

Everyone climbed into the Lincoln. They put their weapons back in their holsters and closed the doors. The men quieted while Edith questioned the young woman. "How'd you get in the ditch, for god sakes?"

"Huh?"

"Sadie, I asked you a question. How'd you end up in the damned drainage ditch?"

"My boyfriend...he put me there, I think," she said, her words running together. "Yeah. That's what happened."

"What kind of a boyfriend is he?" asked Edith. "And what the hell are you on anyway?"

Edith shoved her hand down into the pocket of her jacket, located a Phillie, and brought it out. "Sounds like you need to get a new boyfriend."

"Ace."

Her men looked at each other.

"Ace Baldwin?" asked Edith, surprised. "The wise guy?"

"Thaaaas him."

Sadie mumbled something unintelligible then passed out.

"Great. Just fuckin' wonderful," muttered Edith, remembering Agent Perry's ominous words. "Sounds like this Ace is checking things out, all right."

"Edith, you can't feel sorry for this one here. She can't seem to keep herself off the hootch n' coke."

Edith let out an elongated breath. "I know." Nevertheless, she did feel sorry. As messed up as she was, Sadie Kearns was her friend.

"Drive."

As the driver stepped on the gas pedal, the Lincoln holding its five occupants sped toward Sadie's parents' house. Edith's thoughts turned to the problem that had developed over the past couple of weeks—this guy named Ace. Already she couldn't stand him and he was a potential threat to her well-being. It was despicable the way he used women and tossed them in a ditch like they were garbage. She pointed at the third white house that had a porch on the right.

“Stop two houses up,” Edith told the driver.

“Right here?” asked the driver who pulled to the curb.

“Yeah. You three take her up on the porch, knock real hard and let’s get the hell out of here. I want to get business done at Pandora’s before morning.

* * *

The driver turned into a grassy area next to the Pandora’s Box, a lucrative roadhouse, and parked the Lincoln. Light spilled from the windows and tinted the porch, grass, and a tree trunk in the front yard, a dull yellow. Another car slowly passed and two more parked in the yard.

Inside, men yelled above the piano player. Edith recognized the sound of clinking coins on the tin pans. They noticed that two more Lincolns were parked nearby.

“Don’t park here. Park over there, behind that tree.” Two of the men climbed back into the car and followed her orders. Edith wanted to see who was in there and what was going on before they went inside. It always paid to be safe rather than sorry.

Jack climbed the steps, walked around the porch, and peeked into the window, finding a shocking discovery. When he returned to Edith’s side he said, “It’s Ace’s boys. I heard ‘em talking. They’re tellin’ the owner they’re gonna burn the place down unless they come around to Ace’s way of doin’ business.”

“What would they use?” asked Edith, while getting an idea.

“For what?” asked one of the men.

“To burn the place down?”

She had a glorious idea.

“More than likely petrol. Which they’d keep in their car,” Jack said, and strode toward the gangsters’ Lincolns. He broke into them, by cracking the window with a handgun. Jack raised a gas can. “And here it is,” he said when he neared Edith. “There’s another.”

Another man grabbed the second can and returned to the group.

“Give ‘em a dose of what they dish out.” Edith hated doing it, but it was the best way to stop the men inside without shedding blood. “Douse their cars good. Jack, you got a match?”

“Push ‘em out in the dirt and let ‘em burn. They’re not going to burn one of my joints down. Not tonight, not if I can help it.”

“Ace is going to be mad.”

“Let him,” Edith said, her tone stern. “We’ll run the bastard out of Saline County.”

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After the Saint-Louis visitors' cars were fully involved in flames, Edith and her gang climbed into her motorcar and sped away, celebrating their victory against the Ace Baldwin gang.

Jack seemed gloomier than the rest of the men.

"What's wrong?" asked Edith.

"I don't know how to tell you this."

Edith looked across the darkness of the back seat toward Jack. "Tell me what?"

"Your cousin, Ed, he was with them. It looked like he was workin' for Ace."

Shock and pain tightened in her body. "Oh no."

"He dressed like 'em and was right there, holding a gun on the owner."

"I hate hearing that," said Edith. She had wanted him to get a job, but not with Ace Baldwin! Why hadn't he asked her for a job? Now he worked for her competition! Sometimes Ed made ignorant mistakes.

Her thoughts returned to the previous Sunday she'd spent with Lorene; her mood lightened. "I'll be glad when Sunday rolls around," she said. "I think I'm ready for a day off."

* * *

Later at the European Hotel after Edith had fallen asleep, Jack banged on her door, startling her. "Hey, Edith. You wanna go talk to a salesman...a weapon's man?" He knocked again. "Edith, you awake?"

"Yeah. I'm getting up," she said groggily. She had to go check out his wares. The peddler sold knives, spears, bow, arrows, and Thompson sub-machine guns. He sold a lot of miscellaneous items, too—hot and legal items, for a hefty price, of course.

Edith desperately needed machine guns.

The alleyway was dark and dank. Once she stood behind the peddler's vehicle, Edith haggled with him while two of her heavily armed men stood back and watched. She stood firm on the price she wanted to pay for a lot of weapons. The price was considerably lower than the price he originally asked for. She hoped he needed the funds and held firm with her offer until finally he accepted. She saw other interesting bargains: potions, lotions, salves, and thick rubber tube things.

"What are these?" she asked when her men stood near the back of the hotel smoking and out of earshot.

"They're...private items."

"Oh really? Like what?"

His voice lowered. "They're cocks...rubber cocks."

Carol McKenzie

Baffled, she blinked. “Really?” Her voice lowered too, as she contained her surprise. “And how much would they be?” Hot damn!

“Three dollars for the pair.”

She didn’t care if they cost a hundred dollars each. “Don’t tell anyone I bought these or I’ll come after you.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“They’d better the hell be.”

Out behind European Hotel, under the dim light of a gas lamp, she counted bills into the man’s hand. She took the personal items under her arm. “You boys get the weapons and take them to the warehouse. I’m gettin’ some sleep.”

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Chapter Five

For their picnic, Lorene fried chicken, made potato salad, apple pie, baked beans, and homemade rolls. It was a perfect day. Along the banks of the Wabash River, under a tree and in a grassy area with a view, they ate, chattered, and dreamt of the future. They were alone with the exception of an armed guard who stood near the Lincoln on the road fifty or so feet up an embankment.

Lorene was happy to share her Sunday with Edith. She'd dressed casually in a cotton, blue calf-length dress, and wide-brimmed sunhat decorated with ribbon and flowers.

Edith wore a summer suit. Over her white shirt with rolled up sleeves, she wore a holster; the cuff held a loaded pistol, Lorene assumed. She couldn't help but smile at Edith's appearance, which was not amusing but...rather appealing in a sexy sort of way.

After they finished eating, Lorene sat against the tree relaxing while Edith lay down on her back on a blanket. Her head resting on Lorene's lap, they chatted the afternoon away getting to know each other.

"So Ed is your cousin and he lives at your house?"

"Yeah. I sort of adopted him. My family and his died off with that rash of diseases that came through about five years ago. He's like my little brother, I guess you could say."

"Do you want to do this forever...this gangster work you're doing?"

"To make a long story short, no. I want to get enough money squared away so I can start up a legit business...an inn maybe."

Edith's answer thoroughly impressed Lorene. She hated the thought of Edith putting her life on the line everyday. "That's good."

She liked the way Edith's eyes caught glints of sunshine that filtered through the dense foliage overhead when she looked up. Occasionally they sipped from Edith's flask. Lorene thought it was romantic sitting here like this with Edith.

Lorene was surprised to find that Edith was born Catholic but had rarely attended church. With passion, Edith relayed that she was angry with the church because of their ideas about how women should dress, talk, and act.

White fuzzies floated in the air and yellow butterflies danced over dandelions near Edith's shoes. The air was slightly scented with clover. It had been so long since Lorene had felt so incredibly alive.

"It is so beautiful out today."

"I think I heard thunder."

"Aw no," said Lorene.

"Yeah."

"At least we ate."

Edith picked a long weed and held it between her lips.

"Do you work tomorrow?"

"It's off to Rising Sun, Illinois for me tomorrow."

"You work most days, don't you?"

"I do."

Lorene reached out and drew Edith's hair behind her ear. "You're an interesting woman."

"I'm not," said Lorene.

"To me you are."

Lorene laughed lightly. "I wish I had one-tenth the excitement you had in your life."

"Once you lived this way, you'd want to switch back right quick." Edith pulled a long-stemmed weed. "I get these urges," she wagged her head, "...to live a normal life."

"I guess it'd be hard."

"It is, at times. Maybe even a might dangerous. I guess there are times I'm a might lonely too. And while I'm on this subject with you..." after a thoughtful pause, "I want to ask you something."

"Sure, Edith."

"I know you've heard others call me things..."

"Call you names?"

"Yeah."

"I don't pay any attention. You are what you are and--"

"Like 'lezzie' and 'bulldike'."

Silence.

LADYLEGGER

“You have, haven’t you?”

“Edith...”

“It’s true,” she said with brutal frankness.

“I know.”

“And you *still* want to see me?”

Lorene’s smile was steady and determined. “I do.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

The wind picked up, a roll of thunder rumbled and large raindrops pelted them.

“Hurry,” said Edith hopping to her feet. “Let’s get back! We’ll get soaked to the bone!”

Once they arrived at Lorene’s door, sheltered by the roof, the driver waiting in the car, Edith leaned in, held her shoulders, and pressed a kiss to Lorene’s forehead, cheek and then to her lips. Long and intoxicating. Soft, slow and laced with love, drugging Lorene.

Abruptly Edith pulled away. “I’ll see you next week. How about Saturday night? Are you busy?”

“All right.”

“Do you like to go to the picture show?”

“I’d love to see Rudolph.”

“Valentino?” Edith asked in a surprised tone.

“You remind me of him.”

Edith blinked, surprised, obviously touched by Lorene’s compliment.

* * *

The next Saturday night, Edith had the driver-combination-guard wait. Nervously, as the Lincoln idled, Edith strode up to Lorene’s door. She smoothed her suit, took off her hat, and checked the flowers to make sure they had arrived undamaged. Softly Edith knocked then the door opened.

“Hello.”

“Hi.” Lorene gently grasped Edith’s lower arms and coaxed her into the dark kitchen. “They’re beautiful,” said Lorene when Edith handed her the flowers.

“Actually, they’re just wild flowers.”

“They’re lovely.”

“I picked them along the way.”

“Let me put them in water.”

As Edith watched, Lorene located a crystal vase, pumped water into it, then put the flowers inside and placed the vase onto the middle of the kitchen table.

“So lovely.” Lorene looked at Edith, smiling. “Hold on, I have to get my handbag.”

“There’s no hurry.”

“What time does it start?”

“Seven. We’ve got an hour.”

Lorene approached. Impressed with her blithe appearance and feminine ways, Edith offered her arm and within minutes, they were sitting side by side in the dark warmth of the movie house, watching black and white flickering moving pictures.

Edith peered over and noticed that Lorene was moved to tears when Rudolph Valentino declared his love to the beautiful, wide-eyed woman in the privacy of his tent on the desert. Discreetly, Edith slipped her hand over Lorene’s and gave it a slight squeeze, wanting to show her without words that she cared and was just as attracted to her as the star was to the starlet in the movie.

They arrived back at Lorene’s house about eleven when Lorene said, “If you want, you can stay and sleep downstairs. There’s no need for you to go back to a dreary hotel. The sofa’s comfortable. I can bring you down a blanket and sheet.”

After they shared a lingering kiss, Edith left her at the front door saying, “I’ll tell the driver to go on back to town.”

Lorene felt secure while with Edith. After she had dressed in her nightgown, she carried a blanket, sheet, and pillow into the sitting parlor where Edith waited.

The room was Lorene’s favorite one in the house, with its red and yellow flowered rug, dark red, heavy draperies, and heavy-legged furniture. It smelled of fragrant roses and she heard the grandfather’s deep tick-tocking that punctuated the short silence.

Lorene offered a quick smile. “I brought you a night shirt.”

“I don’t wear clothes when I sleep.”

Lorene blinked and smiled. “You don’t?”

“No.” Edith took the sheet, placed it on the seat of the sofa, and plopped down. “Sit down with me for a while.”

Lorene lit an oil lamp and turned the wick down until the light was low. “Okay.”

“You looked nice this evening.”

“Thanks.” Lorene grew sleepy and her eyelids began to close. “I’d like to ask you something.”

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“Shoot.”

“No, maybe I shouldn’t.”

“Nothing embarrasses me. Ask it.”

Lorene took a deep breath to build up her nerve to ask what was on her mind. “How can women please women...in bed?”

Edith didn’t answer right away; she seemed to be thinking the question over carefully. “Lean against me.” Edith took Lorene’s hand.

Lorene closed her eyes and rested her head on Edith’s shoulder as they sat in the dimly lit sitting parlor. “This nightgown shows my too big bust size.”

“I don’t think they’re too big.”

“I think they get bigger before my monthly. Bigger and sore.”

“That happens. But your breasts are not too big.”

“Sometimes when no one is here, I go around the house wearing no underwear under my usual clothes. ‘Specially before my monthly starts. You know what I mean? So I’ll be more comfortable.”

“Your period...is it due?” asked Edith, as she ran a finger over the back of Lorene’s hand.

“In a week or so.”

Edith hesitated, but Lorene did not know why.

“Want me to make them feel better?”

The idea of Edith tending her breasts peaked her attention and stirred her imagination. “How?”

Edith waved her hands. “Raise your arms.”

In a slow and deliberate manner, Edith pulled the muslin gown over Lorene’s head and placed it aside. Her line of vision fell upon Lorene’s ample breasts. Immediately, Lorene recognized the pang of sexual arousal pulling deep in her belly.

“They’re beautiful.” Leaning over her, Edith fluffed the pillow behind Lorene. “Now lay back.”

Lorene, a bit nervous about being nude in front to Edith, did as she requested then relaxed.

“This should help.” Edith raised her index finger to Lorene’s temple. Lightly she drew an invisible line over each of Lorene’s closed eyelids and down to her mouth.

“That’s it. Keep them closed. Relax.” Over and over again, she ran her finger over Lorene’s closed eyes. “That’s it. Relax.” The finger moved down Lorene’s temple and cheek. Several times Edith’s finger crossed the width of her lips then ran down to the

valley between her breasts. Down her finger went to her belly button and back up and onto the swell of one breast.

Lorene felt the scratch of Edith's suit pants on her skin as Edith sat on the sofa's edge. Lorene scooted closer to the back of the sofa so Edith would have more room. Vaguely Lorene was aware that she was not wearing a stitch of clothes, but she didn't care.

Edith's voice was low and soothing. "Your breasts need this kind of attention. They need this 'specially when they're freed of those damned contraptions.'" Edith began drawing circles around the pebbly area that surrounded the hardening rose-colored nipples then pulled them, causing them to stand.

Her hands cupped Lorene's breasts; it felt exhilarating. Not long after, Lorene began noticing a change in her breathing pattern.

"Keep your eyes closed."

Edith pressed her breasts between them as she moved her body over Lorene's and kissed her, Edith's tongue probing. Lorene's breasts felt good and so did the rest of her body. Edith moved down on Lorene's body giving each of her breasts special attention by licking and nipping her sensitive nipples.

Edith stopped and lifted her mouth from a rigid nipple. "You taste good," she said, and blew, cooling it, causing Lorene to shiver with delight, loving every millisecond of Edith's cure. Her hand traveled to the smooth area below Lorene's belly button and onto the mat of hair at the apex of her thighs. "And your body tempts me to go on."

Lorene's heavy breasts rose and fell as her breath quickened. Proudly she let Edith feast her eyes and didn't try to cover her nakedness. With anticipation, Lorene awaited Edith's continuing touches. It was when Edith stopped that Lorene opened her eyes and realized that Edith had fallen asleep beside her on the couch, fully dressed.

As the clock struck three, someone pounded on Lorene's door.

"Edith!" It was Jack's voice. "Come out! We've got trouble."

Edith awoke and sat up straight. "I have to go, Lorene." She pressed a kiss to Lorene's lips. "I'll come over in a few days. Something is going on. Work. Remember that I care about you...a lot."

With that, she located all her things and hurried out the door.

Lorene pulled the blanket up over her body, she knew that love, and a life with Edith was plausible. She, in fact, wanted to let it happen. Closing her eyes, she fell asleep, smiling.

* * *

LADYLEGGER

A little before eleven the next night, Lorene heard a car door close and peeked out the open window. Light from the full moon confirmed her suspicion as to who the visitor was. The silhouetted figure who approached was Edith. It was the first time she had driven there unescorted. What was going on?

“It’s me, Lorene!” She sounded upset. Very upset, in fact.

Wearing nothing but a muslin gown, Lorene rushed downstairs and to the door. “Just a minute,” she said unlocking the door. She pulled it open and stared at Edith in blank confusion.

Edith’s shoulders shook because of her sobs. “Those bastards from Saint-Louis!”

Lorene grasped her hand, looked down the dark lane, and then pulled her inside. “Edith. Come inside. Please.” Lorene crossed the room, took two candles from a drawer, put them on holders, and lit them.

“I cannot understand why they did it!” she cried out with scorn.

“Did what?” asked Lorene, looking crossed to her distraught friend. Her blurry eyes searched Edith’s wretched, tear-streaked face. Looking at her, feeling disoriented from being brought out of a deep sleep, Lorene wondered what she should do to console her.

“They’ve killed Sadie and my cousin Ed. Two very innocent people! Sadie was a friend—and Ed, dear Ed. They executed the both of them and threw them in the river. As if they were garbage. I’ll kill those bastards!”

“How do you know? Maybe it isn’t so.”

“It happened. A farmer saw it happen. He’s one of my stillers, he saw it happen, and he told me! He got their bodies.”

“The Sheriff. Tell him.”

“He’s one of their monkeys, Lorene.”

“You’re in danger. I don’t want you to get killed, Edith.”

“No one knows I’m here. I just need to be with you tonight.”

Lorene had never seen such agony in anyone’s eyes.

“I’ll hunt him down. I’ll—I don’t know--”

“Is there anything I can do?”

Edith’s lips parted a little, their faces neared and their lips joined. She shuddered when she felt Lorene’s tongue slide across hers and they became locked in a passionate kiss. The action electrified Edith’s desire that now surged through her veins. She needed Lorene even as her painful grief ached inside her.

As though a dam had burst, Edith eased Lorene onto the tabletop and stood between her legs. She reached for the hem of her muslin nightgown and shoved it up to above her Y, while they were still kissing. Edith looked down, noticing Lorene's beautiful cunt, her mouth watered in want of tasting it.

Edith's eyes rose to Lorene face and their eyes locked. "I want you Edith."

"I want you so much Lorene, but you have to be sure."

"Oh Lordy, I am so sure, you wouldn't believe it. I want your tongue in my pussy."

She didn't have to ask twice. Edith grasped her just under the bend in her knees and pulled her to the edge of the table. She knelt and lowered her mouth to Lorene's sex; Lorene was now hers. The first touch of her tongue caused Lorene's breath to catch. Subsequent licks and nips caused Lorene's body to twitch in obvious want--a tremendous upheaval.

Using two fingers of one hand, Edith spread her glistening folds, baring her nub to her exploiting tongue.

"You're wet," Edith lowered her voice and whispered, "I think I am too."

"It's like my body is on fire."

Edith blew on her throbbing clit then flicked her tongue across it, knowing the havoc she was wreaking on Lorene's body.

As though in pain, Lorene cried out, "Oh Lord, Edith!"

Surging ecstasy washed over Edith as she tended her lover.

Teasing her, Edith stopped and looked at Lorene. "Do you want me to stop?"

"Please go ahead! I need it!"

Edith knew the contact of her tongue again could easily drive Lorene over the edge into a climax. Edith felt her own climax building, needing release. She slid two fingers into Lorene and stroked her long and slow. Her fingers moistened with Lorene's love juice. Edith picked up the pace, brining her closer to the edge.

"You like this, don't ya babe?"

"I do," moaned Lorene.

Edith positioned her for better access, probed with her tongue into her tight ass, and ran a wet path up to the fat lips of her pussy. She drew her pointed tongue along the slit then stopped. As her lover struggled to hold still, Edith sucked her clit.

Lorene's hands descended and grasped Edith's head at each temple as Edith supped. Lorene moaned and purred her pleasure above as Edith slid her tongue into Lorene's canal and meted out hard and needy in and out strokes. When the rolling

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shudders of Lorene's climax began, Edith picked up the intensity of her tongue strokes. Lorene's body stiffened and she convulsed; her body arched against Edith's mouth.

Her crescendo subsided, but Edith stayed with her until all movement ceased then slowly withdrew her tongue.

She rose and looked down at her amazing lover.

"You *are* so beautiful," said Edith wanting more, She reached for and grasped Lorene's hands. "Let's go to the bedroom. Want to?"

"Okay," she said, sliding her bottom off the table. Her muslin gown dropped down her slight figure as she stood facing Edith. "I'll put out the candles first," she said, as she crossed the room toward the source of flickering lights.

"I should have brought the cocks."

"The what?" she asked, as she leaned and blew out the first candle.

A deep chuckle left Edith's lips. She'd just bet Lorene thought she meant roosters. Since their relationship had gone to the climaxing stage, she believed she should bring up the next touchy subject. "The cocks. I should have brought them."

Lorene looked at Edith in confusion then blew out the second candle and joined Edith at the base of the stairs. Before they went up, Edith said, "I bought these two cocks...as in men's dicks. We can use them to please one another. You'll see."

"Oh yeah? Bring them next time," she said then grasped Lorene's arm and gave it a squeeze, "I've never heard of those before."

When they started up the stairs toward the bedchamber, Edith said, "I'd heard of them, but I'd not seen them."

* * *

Edith, still grieving, stood near the window and peered out into the moonlit yard.

Lorene approached Edith from behind, wrapped her arms around her waist, and whispered, "I'm so sorry."

Edith cleared her throat. "It's all right. I'll be fine."

"Nothing hurts worse than the death of friends or loved ones."

A gentle breeze flowed inside from the open window, the treetops outside swayed with a rustling sound. "I need you, Lorene."

Edith turned her way and they kissed. And it was so good; she felt it deep into her core. Edith wiped away her own tears as she looked into the shadows of Lorene's sparkling eyes. She, too, was hurting over Edith's loss. It was amazing at how much caring she felt flowing between them. Again they kissed and their tongues found their way into the depths of each other's mouth, exploring. The caresses continued. Lorene

pressed Edith's derriere so that Edith and she were meld together. The probing kisses intensified.

"Come," murmured Edith, as she led Lorene to the bed and had her sit on the edge of the feather mattress. She took off her weaponry, metal flask, and gun belt and deposited them on the bureau.

"This is for you, darling."

Edith pulled the lacy curtains aside so the full moon would enter the room and bathe it in silvery light. Edith began undressing in an appealing and provocative way as she slipped out of her jacket, unbuttoned her shirt, and placed them on a nearby chair. She smoothed her hands over her breasts and cupped them. She pinched the nipples then slid her hands down her taut flat stomach onto her pubic mound, enticing her already willing lover.

Edith walked over to Lorene and helped her out of her gown, rounded the bed then pulled the covers down. She climbed onto her side of the bed and laid her head down on a feather pillow where Lorene joined her.

Naked, they lay on their sides for a while, facing each other. In thoughtful silence, they watched each other's glistening eyes and the dancing shadows that were caused by windblown leaves undulate on the walls and ceilings.

"Are you going to be okay?" asked Lorene as she ran her hand up and down Edith's lower arm.

"Time'll pass and I'll be back to normal I guess. I'll miss Ed and Sadie."

"Sadie?"

"She was just a friend. Believe me, she was not a lover. She had problems...lots of them, I guess you could say."

"That's sad."

With a ragged sigh, Edith agreed. "Yeah it is."

Edith brought Lorene's hand to her own breasts showing her taut nipples--and how erect and ready they were. "This is just a smidgeon of what you do to me. I cannot begin to tell you how you make my pussy go wet, even when you're not around."

Edith reached down and played with Lorene's clitoris, making it erect, arousing herself in the process. It electrified Edith to hear a moan of anticipation come from Lorene's lips.

"It'll be all right, baby," breathed Lorene as Edith still toyed with her clitoris. "I'm going to take care of you this very difficult night." She sucked in air when Edith hit a highly sensitive area.

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"I'm glad you care. Touch me, Lorene." Edith guided her hand down between her own legs.

After a slight hesitation, Lorene ran her finger up and down the slit of Edith's pussy. Edith spread herself wide for Lorene's exploration.

"Mmm, that's it." Edith grew restless with a myriad of emotions and needs. "I want your mouth on me, Lorene."

"Want me to go down on you like you did me?" she asked as she kissed her way down Edith's body.

"Ohh, baby, yessss."

Lorene's wet tongue circled Edith's belly button. Down, Lorene licked and nipped her way between Edith's thighs where she licked, bit, and nuzzled much the same way Edith had earlier done to her, driving Edith nearly insane. Lorene positioned herself better between Edith's legs, leaned then licked and sucked the soft skin between her upper thighs. "You taste so good. I could eat you up."

More widely than before, Edith spread her legs to give Lorene better access. Teasingly, Lorene slipped the tip of her tongue between the lips and pulled it out. She did it several times then stopped, noting the havoc she was wreaking on Edith body, whose hips now rose from the bed.

Lorene slipped her fingers into Edith's pussy and began stroking her in earnest.

"You're making me hot baby," Edith said, her voice steeped with desire.

Edith's arousal rose to fever pitch as Lorene explored, probed, and orally stimulated her body. At the point of climax, Edith cried out Lorene's name and groaned in ecstasy, as Lorene sucked on her clitoris like it was a stick of peppermint candy. Rippling waves of sensation washed over Edith as she peaked, breathing in quick shallow pants.

Lorene's mouth left Edith's pussy. She shifted and moved up the bed where she plopped down beside Edith who was still experiencing the after effects of her climax. When Lorene pressed forward, breast-to-breast to kiss her, Edith groaned against Lorene's mouth.

"God, you are sweet," said Edith, after the kiss. She drew Lorene into her arms.

"Did I do okay?"

A lone laugh left Edith's lips. "You'll never know how well you did. It was wonderful."

Reclining in relief and satisfaction, they stared into the blackness.

Normalcy and grief returned as Edith heard the clock ticking downstairs and tree limbs scratching the side of the house.

“I’ve got to find a guy from Washington. An agent...” Edith said into the quiet darkness.

“I don’t under--” Loren lifted her head.

“Once this agent told me that he wanted to bring this monster Ace Baldwin from Saint-Louis, down. That if I ever found out anything about him that would convict him, to let this agent know. He said he wasn’t interested in me because I was a little fish. He or they wanted Ace.”

“Since you can’t go to the Sheriff, then go to the man from Washington.”

Edith snuggled Lorene close. “That’s what I’m going to do. There’s enough evidence to take him down. Live witnesses. Ed and Sadie need justice.”

Chapter Six

Two days after the funerals, Edith went into the telegraph office in Jackson County and sent a telegram to the address that Agent Bruce Perry had given her that night in her warehouse. The address was located in Washington D.C., Edith decided tell the law regardless of whether they decided to handle the problem or they did not. After she gave the attendant the address, she passed a note under the iron bars of the cage that read:

Agent Bruce Perry told me to contact you if I ever heard enough evidence to convict Ace Baldwin. Stop. I have that evidence. Stop.... Farmer, Arthur Branson saw him kill. Stop. Contact me through Jumpin' Jimmies Roadhouse in Saline County. Stop.

Edith Thorpe of Harrisburg, Illinois.

She didn't expect the federal government to send help, but she had to try, because the murder of two innocent people should not go unpunished. Agent Bruce Perry was correct in saying that Ace Baldwin was an evil man, a murderer. Edith believed her crimes paled in comparison to Ace's crimes.

Two nights later, she rode in her Lincoln with her men around the square in downtown Harrisburg. Many businesses were closed. The early evening air smelled of the approaching rainstorm.

Three of her men accompanied her. Jack sat on the back driver's side, beside her. Quietly, Edith discussed business with Jack while in route to a farm near Shawneetown to pick up a couple of cases of whiskey.

They hadn't passed the city limits when the driver broke in to their conversation.

"Uh, I hate to bother you, boss, but we're being followed." He peered into the mirror. "Yep, we are being followed for sure."

"Christ," Edith muttered. Her idea of building and running an inn sounded better with each passing day.

The driver said, "That car. The front end...I know whose it belongs to."

Jack turned in his seat and peered back. "Well, if it ain't Ace Baldwin in person. He's in the lead car."

"Now how in hell do you know who it is?" asked Edith.

“He’s always in the lead car of his little batch of cars when he comes to southern Illinois. Yes sir--ee.” He stretched and turned his head when they turned a corner. “There are two cars that I can see. Usually he goes around with eight men total for protection.”

“This is just fine and dandy. Get the fuck ready.” Would this be her men and her end?

She didn’t have a machine gun with her, but her men had brought theirs. She had a pistol, a stiletto strapped to her leg and a derringer. She checked to make sure the firearms were loaded and ready to fire. They were out numbered; her men and she did not have a chance. It’d be like a turkey shoot. She thought of her love, Lorene. There was so much she wanted to say and do with her. She was going to take her to Chicago on the train one day soon.

Edith looked back and viewed the expensive cars. The men readied their machine guns and pistols. She came to a major decision as the cars behind neared their bumper. She decided that if she lived through the afternoon, she would quit the bootlegging business. Life and living was more important than the acquisition of money, and besides, she had plenty of money already.

“Who in the hell--?” asked Jack.

What was Jack talking about? She looked down a side street and saw three drab green motorcars.

“G-men!”

“It’s the United States Treasury, complete with agents.”

“Thank God!” shouted Edith.

“Ace had us so damned outnumbered it was unbelievable.”

“Keep driving. Ace’s bunch sees them.” Jack and the men laughed.

The green motorcars gave Ace’s vehicles chase. With three cars following, guns blazing, Ace’s two cars quit following Edith’s Lincoln, turned down a side street, and stopped. They shot at the Treasury Agents.

“Edith, want me to turn back so we can go see the fireworks. I won’t get to close. Us men might want to walk down and see what we can see.”

“You guys are nosey.”

“Come with us.”

Relieved Ace would be brought to justice, Edith said, “I’ll stay here.” She still grieved over the two murders.

Agent Bruce Perry meant it when he said his G-men and he would come and take out Ace Baldwin. She would have to thank Agent Perry in person afterward.

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The driver parked. The men climbed out leaving their machine guns behind in the motorcar with Edith. She lit a Phillie, her mind drifting. She remembered telling Lorene that she would stop by later. It wouldn't be too soon.

She could hear shots being fired down the street and looked out the window.

A man rose from a row of bushes across the street. He gazed toward the shooting then ran in the opposite direction. She recognized his face—Ace.

“Shit!” she cried out.

She'd recognize his face anywhere since she'd seen it in the newspaper several times. She ducked. Not wanting the SOB to escape, she went after him, carrying a Colt, leaving the car door open behind her.

“Ace, you're mine now.”

“You lesbian bitch, you'll die tryin'!”

Down the street, Edith chased him. He fired at her once, twice, then three times. It was not until he passed the last house in town that she lifted her pistol and aimed, straightened her arm, made sure she had him in her sites, and fired, hitting him in the arm.

He shot again at her; the bullet barely missed her head and hit a light pole. She fell over a barrel.

“Stop you bastard!” she screamed while getting to her feet.

Edith saw him disappear in a cornfield that was shoulder high. She ran after him. He darted through the field, down one row and then another, but she stayed in pursuit.

They turned down a row of corn at the same time and froze in place. Simultaneously they took aim and fired. His shot missed but hers hit him in the chest. He crumpled dead onto the dark soil between cornrows.

His gun drawn, Agent Perry came up behind her, shoving his gun into his holster.

“There he is, Agent Perry.”

“Good work,” he said. “Now go on. I don't want you mixed up in this.”

“You aren't going to arrest me?”

“Hell no. The U.S. needs good people like you taking care of people's vices. We don't need trash like Ace.”

“Okay,” she said with relief.

“I got who I wanted. Get goin'. You're free.”

Chapter Seven

Vaguely Lorene heard the motor of a car, but could not awaken. As if frozen in slumber, she was unable to escape from the warmth of sleep. She found that opening her eyes for more than a fraction of a second was difficult.

Moonbeams filtered through the lacy curtains bathing the bed and carpet. Did she see a flash of lightning? Smelling sheets that had hung out in the afternoon sun and breeze, she turned onto her tummy and returned to dark nothingness.

She felt the covers slide down her bare body and a finger gliding along the curve of her back and up to her shoulder. How much time had elapsed since she heard the approaching car? She did not know. The feather mattress depressed under someone's weight, as the person lay down. Lorene turned onto her side facing the silhouetted person, ripping herself from sleep.

"Edith?"

"Mmm-hmm?"

"Are you feeling better?"

"Much. Especially since Ace Baldwin's dead."

"I'm so glad. Now your friend and Cousin Ed can rest in peace." A rush of warmth, caring and need all rolled into one went through her.

"Miss me?" Edith asked, as her rough clothes brushed Lorene's sensitive nipples. Lorene felt cold metal touching her belly.

"I always miss you when you're gone." Lorene lightly kissed Edith's mouth.

"Me too."

"Burr. That's cold." Lorene brought her hand to the piece of metal. "What is that?"

"My derringer. I have a stiletto hidden on me too."

"Where?" The thought that Edith was heavily armed frightened Lorene.

"I keep the gun under my waistband. The stiletto is on my leg."

"Yeah?"

"To be safe...for protection. These are dangerous times, baby."

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"Maybe you should quit."

"I'm thinking about it."

"Let me go with you tonight."

"Huh-uh."

She wrapped her hands around Edith's shoulders. "Edith--"

"I mean it. No." Effectively, she changed the subject.

"I missed you," cooed Edith, raising her upper body a little, so Lorene could fluff her pillow.

"So, how long have you been here?"

"I just rolled in. I cleaned up downstairs, clothes, and all. Didn't you hear me?"

"No. I slept through it."

"Livin' out here in the middle of nowhere, maybe you should lock your doors."

"No, one hardly drives all the way out here, except you."

"There's bums on the railroad one mile that way." Edith pointed toward the tracks a quarter of a mile west. "There's highwaymen and you know how bad they are. Hell. You should lock up."

"I've got a Remington, here. For just in case."

"Good. Keep it handy. Shoot first and ask questions later."

"I know, I know." She sighed. "Okay, I'll lock up."

"I need to wash my hair, but I'll do that later in the hotel in Rising Sun."

For a moment, Lorene said nothing while trying to shake her grogginess. *What time was it?*

Lying alongside her, Edith nestled to Lorene's curves. A nasal-quality chuckle left Lorene's lips. Loveable and so delectable.

Edith's fingers toyed with the ringlets at Lorene's Y as Lorene gathered her in an endless kiss that she didn't want to end.

But it ended too soon, and she asked, "You've come for a load of whiskey, right?"

"Yeah. I can't stay. That okay?"

"Aw Edith, I wish you could stay longer," Lorene said, disappointment edged her voice.

"I know." Edith pressed a finger to Lorene's pouting lips. "I haven't slept for two days."

"Poor baby. You can sleep here."

"I know I can."

“What time is it?” asked Lorene, as she drew a finger lightly down Edith’s temple.

“Midnight...well, one maybe. Hell, who cares? Come here woman. Give me somethin’ to go on ‘til I can see you again.”

As if hungry for Edith’s touch, Lorene’s nipples positively peaked at the idea of Edith touching them.

Edith raised a hand to Lorene’s long hair and drew several strands behind her ear then ran her fingertip over Lorene’s pouty lower lip. Their lips brushed as Edith’s hands contacted her collarbones at each side, then moved over the smooth skin between the valley of Lorene’s breasts, making Lorene’s breath catch in her throat and causing her arousal to mount to a fever pitch.

Lorene could envision Edith in full color, her tantalizing good looks. With features dark and boyish, a voice low for a woman, Edith turned more than a few heads. Tall, slender, her small breasts uplifted and often went unrestrained under men’s shirts and jackets. Upon seeing her at night, Lorene supposed many people did not know she was a woman.

Lorene smelled whiskey on Edith’s breath and cigar smoke on her shirt. “Are you drinking again?”

A telling silence followed.

“And you’re smoking?” Lorene clucked her tongue. “Those things are dangerous, too. At the very least they’re not good for you, Edith.”

“I know, Lorene.”

Lorene sucked in a deep breath when Edith scooted down and took one of Lorene’s heavy breasts into her hand then lowered her mouth onto its tip. All thoughts left her mind, as a sexual tug speared deep into her core. It continued until it was difficult for her to hold still. Her pussy ached, waiting for Edith’s next touch.

Edith reached behind Lorene, cupped the fullness of Lorene’s hips, and pulled her closer. She caught Lorene’s nipple between her teeth and tickled it by nibbling it with her wet tongue. Lorene sucked in a deep breath and turned onto her back, letting her have her way. Edith paid equal attention to each of her breasts. She lightly bit then blew on the wet ends, cooling and soothing, causing Lorene’s breath to hitch with ecstasy.

“You like this?”

“Don’t stop.” Lorene made a little humming noise in her throat.

Her voice so seductive and raspy, she said, “I need to taste you before I go.”

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Edith unleashed a guttural laugh as she positioned herself between Lorene's spread legs.

It was such a poignant, magical, perhaps forbidden way to be with Edith. Edith would never know how much Lorene loved her doing wicked nothings to her.

Down her mid-section, Edith ran her lips and wet tongue on Lorene's soft skin. Lorene unleashed a shudder that followed a little cry. The swollen lips of Lorene's pussy parted in obvious anticipation of Edith's mouth. Edith could sense Lorene's desperation as she raised her bottom so that Edith's tongue would hurry to find her bud. It was a hot adoring moment Edith would remember for a long time, if not forever.

Edith drew circles on Lorene's belly with her tongue leaving a trail, causing Lorene's skin to quiver with anticipation. Several times, Edith ran a finger up and down the puffy cleft of Lorene's pussy while simultaneously licking the soft skin on Lorene's lower abdomen and sensitive inner thighs. She licked from her rosette down the slit of her pussy with long lingering strokes.

Blood surged through Lorene's veins. Tears filled her eyes when Edith's fingertips spread her pussy's lips. In and out, over and over again, she ran her fingers, until Lorene cried out, "Oh my God, Edith!" Failing to hold still, Lorene fought the instinct to move.

Edith's tongue slipped into Lorene's clenching hole and supped; it wreaked havoc on Lorene's system, causing her pussy to spasm. Lorene moaned and turned her head aside. Her eyes fluttered for a second or two. Waves of erotic sensation washed over Lorene.

A deep sigh of obvious bliss left Edith's lips.

Normalcy returned as they heard a noise outside and raised their heads.

"Darn it!" Edith swore.

"What?" asked Lorene.

"It's my men. I have to go."

Edith crawled up on the bed beside Lorene, her scratchy attire dragging on her delicate skin. She took Edith in her arms and kissed her fully on her damp forehead.

"I wish I could stay and we could do some more of this," Edith said, pushing Lorene's hair back from her face.

Disappointment weighted Lorene's mood and voice. "I know. But work is important."

"I know," Edith said, her tone sad, though it brightened when she changed the subject. "I'm bringing you something next time I come over."

“For me?” asked Lorene, pleased.

“Yeah, a present for you. Actually, I have them already. I just need to bring them over. There are two. Um...I think I already told you about them.”

Lorene laughed. A moment later she asked, “What are they?”

“A present for the bedchamber.” Edith laughed. “I’ll bring them over in a couple of days.”

Surprised, Lorene gasped. “Come on. What are they? Oh yes...you said you had two cocks!”

“Yesssss.” Edith laughed aloud. “They’re hard as hell to get.”

Lorene inserted her hands into Edith’s hair, behind each temple and pulled her head close. “My precious, even if it’s only for a few minutes, I’m so glad you stopped by.”

Their lips touched, but before they parted, Lorene plunged her tongue beyond Edith’s teeth and tasted herself on Edith’s tongue. Their goodnight kiss was intimate and erotic that lasted for several moments.

They heard several male voices joking down in the yard. She felt Edith’s back stiffen. Work called.

“Goodnight sweetie. I’ll grab the load of whiskey and move on.”

Lorene’s heart sank; she sensed Edith’s desire to stay the night but knew she had to leave.

The kisses ended, Lorene laid her head back on the pillow and closed her eyes. Edith gently pulled from Lorene’s arms then stood over her and ran a finger down her upper arm. “I’ll be back about noon Sunday, love.”

“Noon, huh? I’ll fix us some dinner.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Sleep well, love.”

Lightning flashed outside the window. “It’s going to rain.”

“Looks like I’d better hurry.” Edith went to the door. “I don’t want to get stuck.”

“Be careful, Edith. See you soon.”

Chapter Eight

The next Sunday Edith went to Lorene's house. After a full dinner, hand in hand they climbed the stairs. Edith carried the sack. No one, not even her men knew she was visiting Lorene that day. The men were in town, taking a day off at the hotel. Somehow, though it was difficult, she shoved the grief far to the back of her mind and focused on the here and now. She couldn't bring her cousin and Sadie Kearns back. It had been a grievous past several days in which she seldom laughed.

"Come here," she told Lorene once they climbed the stairs, nearing the landing.

"Are you okay?" asked Lorene.

"I'm fine."

"Is there something I can do to--"

"There's one thing."

"Mmm. I know what you mean."

Edith would forever equate the smell of flowers with her love of Lorene she thought, as they entered the rose scented bedchamber. In full daylight, they planned to make love!

Edith leaned and tossed the sack onto the crocheted bedspread, then shed her weaponry onto the bureau. Black, white, and grey lithographs of people—men and women—peered at them from across the room.

"Who are they?" Edith asked, pointing at the ornately framed pictures.

"They are my dearly departed relatives."

Edith scrunched her brows, troubled.

"You don't like them?"

Edith wanted privacy. "It's not that...they're looking this way."

Lorene laughed. "Okay, I'll fix it." Lorene turned the pictures around so they faced the wall or took them down.

Edith had waited all week to be with Lorene again and the moment had finally arrived. As they stood face-to-face, Edith lifted her foot and tapped the bedroom door

closed. Daylight penetrated the lacy curtains across the room and lit up the rug in bright colors.

“There’s something wicked about doing this in full daylight.”

“I know.” They chuckled softly.

Edith pressed a few kisses to Lorene’s waiting lips and said, “You smell delicious enough to eat.”

“Delicious? Me? What is in the sack...Mm, I like the ‘eat’ part.”

“You’ll soon see, babe,” said Edith. “I’ve got so many delicious plans for you. I want to see that pretty pink pussy of yours”

“Mmm. So come ahead.”

Edith laughed. She even loved the mint taste of Lorene’s tooth powder.

Edith liked it when Lorene’s breath hitched as her strong fingers slipped under her dress, into her underwear. Edith pushed until her fingers found Lorene’s crotch. She loved the texture of the hair on Lorene’s pussy. Edith pushed the white garment down her smooth ivory legs. Still standing, Edith’s strong fingers slipped between the swollen lips of Lorene’s sopping pussy and stroked her until she panted and was drenched with her own juices. Short of making her come, Edith slowed to a stop.

“Oh God, Edith.”

Her heart about beating out of her chest, Edith realized she was living her dream that very moment, fucking Lorene. “You’re beautiful and wet...”

“Hot for you.”

Edith removed her fingers from Lorene’s slit and ran her palms up Lorene’s curves, relishing every inch they traveled. Lorene was better than chocolate, and Edith loved chocolate. Passion radiated down to Edith’s core; the need to fuck her gnawed deep within her soul.

There, standing in the well-lit bedroom, Edith’s dark eyes softened, her head tilted. Edith’s eyes feasted as she unbuttoned the front of Lorene’s dress. Lorene was so feminine. She continued undressing her until she stood before Edith nude. Lorene’s full, newly unfettered breasts were uplifted, her nipples light brown. Edith would tend them in short order.

Pleasure showed in Lorene’s expression as Edith’s nimble fingers, massaged her hot flesh, turning Lorene on more and more with each passing second. God, Edith loved doing that more than breathing itself. Edith would comply with Lorene’s minutest of wishes to make the experience more pleasurable for her.

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More, she wanted more of Lorene...much more, not just sex, but was it possible? A guttural chuckle erupted from deep within Edith; her own arousal grew, raw and explosive. Desire overwhelmed Edith and caused her breathing to quicken and her pussy to contract. Her need to please Lorene increased. Tonight, she would please Lorene using the cock.

Bordering on what seemed greediness Edith's lips devoured Lorene's then moved down feathering kisses along the curve of her throat, onto her ample breasts. Enjoying Edith's touch, Lorene closed her eyes. Edith pulled the combs and hairpins from Lorene's hair and spreading her fingers, finger-combing Lorene's hair so it tumbled down to her ivory shoulders.

Edith lowered and knelt before Lorene, her mouth level to her pussy.

"My beautiful goddess."

"You make me feel so good."

"I will make it real good for you tonight."

Edith spread her labia with her fingers and moved her mouth to Lorene's swollen aching clit. She sucked it between her lips, flicking at it with her tongue. The sweet, tangy flavor of her nectar filled her mouth. Edith loved that taste, she lapped at her, tracing a path to her slit and the honeyed nectar seeping from her.

Lorene moaned, her hips undulated; her head fell back as she parted her legs. Her hands fisted in Edith's hair as fire lanced through her, curling into a tight, hot, pulsing need deep within her.

Suddenly, Edith stopped and Lorene whimpered at the loss.

"Shh, baby, we just started. Get on the bed."

As Lorene watched, Edith unwrapped the phallus, licked the end, and ran her tongue up its thick length. "You want it?"

"I do." Lorene moaned lightly as she settled back onto the softness of the feather bed, spread her legs, and peered into Edith's eyes, leaving her no doubt as to her need.

Lorene panted unable to speak, her body wet with sweat.

Edith ran the phallus up Lorene's leg and stopped on her bare upper thigh. "I bought this for you."

Lorene's body was wet with sweat. "Give it to me. Please...."

Edith didn't need to be asked twice. She put the cock down and undressed for Lorene, making her actions sexy as Lorene stared longingly on. When she was completely naked, Edith slipped her hand down over her pubic mound and slid her fingers into her crotch, enticing Lorene by masturbating. She cupped, squeezed, and

jiggled her own small perky breasts as she moved her fingers in and out of her wet cunt, pulling an orgasm from herself as Lorene let her own fingers play with her nipples.

Edith climbed onto the bed, and got on her knees between Lorene's spread legs.

"I'm sooo hot for you," said Edith in a soft whisper. "And you have the most beautiful breasts in the entire world."

She raised and licked the head of the phallic gift, along the underside then ran the tip of it over her own lips and breasts, that old familiar twitching excited Edith and she could sense that it was having the same effect on Lorene. She couldn't wait to fuck Lorene's throbbing cunt with the cock, but she'd maintain control, wanting to tease her.

"You want it, babe?"

"Yes."

As Edith ran the cock over her eager lover's inner thighs, she emptied her mind of work and the entire previous week, then filled it with loving thoughts of Lorene. The next few moments were just for her lover.

Edith bent over Lorene as though she worshipped a goddess. She massaged her bush with her free hand as she held the phallus with the other. Lorene's enchanting scent drove her on. She lowered onto Lorene until they lay flesh-to-flesh. She licked sensuously around Lorene's nipples as their tummies pressed and moved against each other adapting and enjoying the feel of each other's body.

Edith caught a rosy nipple between her lips, tugged, and nibbled lightly. She drew her lips and tongue down and between Lorene's ivory breasts, loving every inch on which she fed. Down on her body, Edith traveled, to Lorene's belly button where she drew quivering wet rings.

The series of touches promised Lorene that more, much more was to follow, causing Lorene's flesh to quiver in expectation, much to Edith's delight. Edith's lips and tongue departed Lorene's navel and moved down and through the hair on her mound.

Lorene's womanhood splayed open for their pleasure, Edith ran the tip of her tongue up and down her hair-dappled cleft, administering caresses, and circling her pulsing, swollen clitoris with the tip of her tongue. Beyond the inner and outer lips, Edith plunged her tongue, lapping and sucking, drawing a quiet orgasm from Lorene, giving her an inkling of the bigger more moving climax that lay just ahead.

Lorene cried out as if in agony when Edith sucked her clit into her mouth and brushed it with her teeth until Lorene's breathing changed to heavy gasping. She ran her finger lightly around her anus then slipped the finger inside, the sphincter spasmed and drew her finger in.

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“Oh yeahhhh, oh Edith, I never knew anything could feel this good...”

Edith withdrew her hands and mouth, letting Lorene teeter on the brink of another climax, then moved her palm over Lorene’s pussy; her skin twitched in obvious need.

“You taste so sweet.”

Edith pressed the head of the cock into her. “You think you’d like this, babe?” she asked, her own sex screaming for release. “You want it?” she asked and pushed a little more of the cock inside.

Lorene’s mouth opened wide in shock, but no words left her lips. Her hips rose off the bed, she sucked air, making a hissing sound. When she was able to speak Lorene said, “Yessss, fuck me with it. Please, NOW!” Lorene reached up, cupped her own soft, compliant mounds, and pinched her erect nipples, which glistened with Edith’s saliva in the afternoon light.

“I love you,” Lorene whispered.

“Even if I’m a woman?” Edith asked, toying with her a bit, dragging out their experience.

“Yes, even if you are a woman. I...love...only you--”

Edith had needed to hear Lorene’s admission again. Taken up with the heat of her own lust, she thrust the cock deep in Lorene. Mercilessly, Edith moved the cock in and out of Lorene’s juicy, clenching cunt. Lorene’s breasts bounced with each thrust.

Lorene cried aloud, tears streamed down her cheeks. Edith made sure she moved the cock against Lorene’s clitoris while working her up to fever pitch, bringing her closer to climax. In response, Lorene panted and bucked her sweat-slicked body, urging Edith to continue.

Approaching the pinnacle, desperate for release, Lorene’s body stiffened. She arched against the cock, the soles of her feet pressing into the feather mattress, as a powerful climax surged through her. Lorene rocked and writhed in rhythm; she moaned and soon gasped in ecstatic release crying out Edith’s name. Every fiber in her body seemed to react; spasms took control and wracked her. Her juice wet the skin and hair all around her pussy and washed down her inner thighs.

Edith watched and felt her own insides contracting.

Once Lorene quieted to a whimper, Edith pulled the cock from her and licked her pussy; moved and amazed by the effect she had on her lover. She knew her turn would be coming soon, perhaps within the next hour or so. But this time had been to bring pleasure to her lover.

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Edith moved up Lorene's body, kissed her mouth, then pulled her body spooking her.

"My life has not been the same since you came into it," Lorene murmured sleepy.

"Mine either. I want us to go on and on."

"We will, Edith."

* * *

Later that night, as Edith stood at the front door ready to leave, a smile twisted on her lips.

Lorene gave her a puzzled look. It seemed to Lorene that Edith was hiding something, but what? "What's on your mind, Edith?" Lorene asked as she left the room for a moment.

"Nothing."

Carrying the sack, Lorene walked toward Edith. "I'm going to miss you. When will I see you again?"

"Next Sunday."

"I wish it would be sooner."

"Soon we'll be together more often."

"Is that why you're sulking? Because you have to leave?"

She nodded and looked down. "Yeah."

"You say that like you're changing some plans. Are you?"

"I am," Edith said with certainty.

"It's your work?" asked Lorene hopefully, as she smoothed Edith's long dark hair back.

"Yep."

"What made you change your mind?" asked Lorene handing her the sack.

Edith nodded toward the sack that Lorene held. "Can you keep that here, the sack?"

"Sure." After a thoughtful pause she asked, "Well?"

Swallowing hard, Edith spoke with asperity. "People that were close to me got killed." Her eyes filled with tears. "Maybe that was part my fault."

Lorene reached and squeezed her lower arm, lovingly. "Don't be so hard on yourself."

Edith brought out a kerchief and daubed her eyes. "I've come close to death more times than I can count. Then there is you." Edith's gaze bore into Lorene. "So, after the

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first of the month, I'm turning my business over to Jack and I'm going straight. My bootleggin' days will be over. How's that sound to you, Lorene?" Edith asked.

The Lincoln approached from down the lane, idling toward the house; Jack was right on time.

"That's wonderful!"

"We can see each other more often. I plan to use the money I've accumulated to build a new inn. You can quit stilling whiskey and help me run it if you want." She shrugged, wrapped her arms around Lorene, and gave her a hug. "At least it'll be legal."

"I *love* that idea...just like I do you." Lorene shivered with happiness and huddled close to her lover. She leaned and kissed her full, sensuous lips. Edith was so daring and unsophisticated, and darn it the woman stole her heart. To hell with what people thought. Besides, no one would have to know about their relationship. It was none of their business anyway.

"I'm very glad to hear this. It's great news. I'll love to help you run the place." Lorene had never once thought about having a woman as her lover until she'd met Edith. Love and lust seemed to occur simultaneously when they had met. Her feelings for Edith raged more each time she saw her.

"I love you too, babe. Will you be my girl?" Edith asked before she crossed the yard in route to the waiting Lincoln.

"Now and always."

Carol McKenzie

About the Author

Carol McKenzie is a free spirited woman who enjoys quilting, sewing, and oil and watercolor painting. She attended a university and received a Bachelor of Arts degree as an adult student. She loves dogs and is raising a rambunctious puppy who walks across her keyboard when she tries to write. As you may have guessed, Carol's favorite new past time is writing. Recently she began writing romantic erotica and is loving it.

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