

The Seduction
OF MOXIE

by
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PROLOGUE

The night that 1930 fizzled out and 1931 roared in, Moxie Valette stood singing in a chintzy speakeasy in Fayetteville, Nebraska, with a faraway look in her eyes that made her appear as if she was dreaming of something more. The room was thick with the haze of stale cigarette smoke as she sang “Bootlegger’s Rag” with more vim than most of the drunken spectators would have anticipated.

A glass of ice and jorum of skee,
Drag your heeler to the speakeasy!
Bring your scratch, shake a leg.
Gold digger, sugar daddy, vamp, and yegg.
There’s no time to lollygag.
Everybody wants to do the bootlegger’s rag!

Sitting in the back of this somewhat dilapidated, unmarked establishment known to locals as Fat Philly Red’s, Cotton McCann watched the performer with considerable interest. He rested his chin in the palm of his left hand while he chewed on his cigar and contemplated her level of talent.

She was blond, though not in an artificial way. Show business had far too many peroxide blondes already, he thought. No, this one had a more natural look. Like Garbo, but without that exotic quality. Like a corn-fed, fresh-faced Constance Bennett. This girl was attractive, but somehow unusual. Sexy, yet wholesome and approachable. He inhaled deeply from his cigar and motioned to the waitress with his other hand.

“You need a refill, mister?” the curvy matron called to him over the music and the din of the crowd.

“I’d rather talk to that singer,” he answered, straining to be heard. “What’s her name again?”

“Moxie. But she don’t usually spend her time bumpin’ gums with the customers.”

“And would a little jack maybe get me an introduction?” He held up two folded dollar bills between his index and middle fingers.

The waitress’s eyes flashed, and she quickly snatched the money and slipped it into her ample cleavage. “I’ll see what I can do. I can’t guarantee you too much more than that. That kid’s a straight arrow. But I’ll make sure she stops by after her last number.” She winked and disappeared back into the crowd.

Luckily for Cotton, very little about Fat Philly Red’s homemade gin compelled him to actually finish the one he had ordered nearly an hour earlier. He had patronized more than his share of these clip joints in the last eight months, and in that time he had never tasted liquor quite this lousy. He held the glass to his nose and sniffed it again, to remind himself exactly how noxious it was. The smell suggested that its distillers had somehow managed to blend sulphur, animal feces, and kerosene. “Holy cats,” he muttered, setting it back down on the table and pushing the glass away. He made a mental note to neither smell nor swallow the foul venom again, no matter how thirsty he became.

“Leave it if you’re fond of your liver.” The singer stood by his table, her left hand propped defiantly on her hip. She looked amused. “I hear that you got something to say.” The timbre of her voice was melodic, but the tone was feisty. This girl obviously was no shrinking violet.

“You must be Moxie,” he said, her name now an epiphany to him. He politely stood and gestured for her to sit, scrutinizing her again, this time from much closer. She was a striking combination of light hair and dark, smoky eyes. Her lips were full, what the flappers would call bee-stung, and her cheeks were round and pink. He reevaluated his earlier assessment. This girl didn’t look like anyone he could think of, and she was mesmeric.

She eyed him appraisingly. He was clearly an out-of-towner. He absolutely radiated the city with his fancy brown suit and dark mustache. She guessed him to be around forty, and he carried the paunch that only

a life of leisure could afford. Curious, she decided to see what he had to say and pulled up a chair. “But I don’t know your name.”

“Cotton McCann. Can I assume from your comment that you’re not interested in me buying you a drink?” He nodded to the glass in front of him.

“You can. You can also assume that I’m not a five-cent whore, if that was going to be your next question.” She spoke nonchalantly, intent on setting the boundaries clearly and early in the conversation.

He frowned and took another puff of his cigar. “You’ve got me all wrong. I’m looking for talent. I’m an impresario of sorts.”

“Then what the hell are you doing in this jerkwater town, in this crummy speakeo?”

“I’m on my way from Los Angeles to New York City.” He stroked his mustache with his thumb and index finger. “My last act cut out on me just as she was on the verge of her big break.”

“Cut out on you how?”

“She married some mook and settled down.” He tried unsuccessfully to keep the anger out of his voice. “She could have been the next Jeanette MacDonald.”

“Is that so?”

The buxom waitress reappeared and set an open bottle of Dr. Pepper in front of Moxie. “Here you go, sweetie.”

“Thanks, Ruby.” She eagerly took a sip and motioned for Cotton to continue as Ruby slipped back into the raucous crowd.

“How old are you?”

She brushed her wavy bangs out of her eyes with the back of her hand. “Twenty-two.”

Cotton reached into his jacket pocket and removed a business card. “Look, I know you have no reason to trust me.”

She picked up the card, printed on stiff, cream-colored stock. It read:

COTTON G. MCCANN
PROFESSIONAL ENTERTAINMENT AGENT
TWELVE YEARS EXPERIENCE

“You reprint these every year?” She took another sip of Dr. Pepper.

He smiled. “This is the first year I’ve had them. I didn’t think about that when I placed the order.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, I’m sure you’re skeptical, not knowing me from Adam. But I’m telling you that you’ve got something special, kid. Something I haven’t seen in months. And believe me, I’ve been looking.”

“What exactly are you proposing?”

“Tomorrow I’m taking the Burlington to Chicago, and from there, the Twentieth Century Limited the rest of the way to New York City. I’ve been hoping to find a talented singer or dancer who’d make the rest of the trip with me.”

Moxie’s mind reeled at the mention of what was probably the most plush and renowned passenger train in the world, but she remained dubious. After all, men tended to lie. “Make the trip with you...and then what?”

“I need a new talent to sell, and New York’s the place to make it happen. Surely you want to play bigger and better clubs than this one.”

She looked around at the congested dive she’d been working in for the past four months. It was dirty and smelled, as did most of the clientele. Cotton was right about the fact that Fat Philly Red’s was a horrible job to settle for. The prospect of performing for high society—hell, for people who didn’t have dirt under their fingernails—tempted her.

“You probably have a father or husband to consult first. I understand that.”

“Actually, I don’t have either.”

His brow furrowed. “Well, you have some family, don’t you?”

“No, it’s just me these days. The decision’s all mine.”

Cotton’s face took on a serious expression. “Then what do you have to lose?”

CHAPTER ONE

New York City

June 6, 1931, 10:00 p.m.

The portly emcee nimbly slicked back his thinning hair and grabbed the large microphone before him. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, a sweet little Midwestern dish who’s been bringing the house down here at the Luna Lounge for the last few weeks—Miss Moxie Valette.”

The crowd cheered as Moxie appeared on the stage and the pianist began to play the introduction to Cole Porter’s “What Is This Thing Called Love?”

“Hot damn!” Violet sputtered as she focused on the singer before her. “Get a load of that tomato.”

Her companion Wil looked toward the stage at the front of the club as she slipped another Chesterfield into her cigarette holder. “My goodness,” she remarked wryly, looking for matches. “She *is* a tasty muffin. Are you falling in love for, what, the ninth time today?”

“Don’t exaggerate,” Violet said. “This is only the fourth time since breakfast.”

Moxie began to sing the lyrics slowly, her sultry tones quickening Violet’s pulse. While Wil’s ribbing was well deserved, Violet had to admit this blonde was affecting her more than the occasional waitress or cigarette girl that she might find attractive and flirt with. She was spellbound.

“Hey, sister,” Wil said, poking her with her elbow. “You got apoplexy? Have you swallowed your tongue?”

“No. I was imagining her swallowing my tongue.” She grinned.

“And I have to say it was working for me.” The gorgeous blonde in the shimmering, deep blue gown seemed contradictory—while her young face conveyed purity and virtue, her deep voice exuded a carnal sensuality that made Violet’s temperature rise.

“Well, as they say, the fifth time’s the charm. We’ll just have to get her over here to meet you. After all, it is your night.”

“It’s your night too,” Violet countered, taking a piece of bread from the wicker basket on the table and tearing off a bite-sized piece that she offered to the small, russet-colored terrier in her lap. He sniffed it warily before devouring it.

Wil laughed. “Don’t worry, I plan to get mine tonight too, doll.” She called the waiter over, flailing her arm eagerly. “Darling,” she said with a broad, insincere smile. “We need a bottle of whatever you have that’s sparkling.”

“I’m sure something can be arranged,” the young man replied.

The Luna Lounge was, after all, one of the most successful speakeasies in the city of New York. It catered to those with money, and for a healthy percentage of the earnings, revenueurs happily looked the other way. In fact, the Luna hadn’t been raided once in the seven years it had been in business, thanks to the dependable and irrefutable efficacy of the bribery of public officials.

“What’s your name, handsome?” Wil asked the waiter, her hand brushing the top of his in a way that was too casual to be inadvertent.

“Fred.” He blushed slightly.

“Fred, darling,” she said. “Do you think you could send the canary over our way when her set is done? We’d like to extend our compliments.”

He seemed petrified of her advances, but nodded rapidly.

“And bring a shot of whatever she drinks too,” Violet added. “Let her know it’s on us.”

Again the waiter nodded, then slipped away into the crowd.

“Look at you,” Wil joked, “buying the lady a drink. Very smooth, Vi.”

She wiggled her eyebrows. “Well, if I’m going to become a big star, I need to learn how to make time with all the hot numbers, right?”

“Stick with me, kid. I’ll show you everything I know.”

“I’ll settle just for what you can remember,” Violet said. “Got your eyes on the waiter, do you?”

Wil took a drag on the delicate tip of her cigarette holder. “Fred? Oh, we’re old friends. He understands me in ways no other man can.”

“You know he’s queer, right?”

Wil exhaled in frustration. “Fuck, another one?”

“Afraid so, sister.”

“And how exactly do you know this? You’ve seen him at your local chapter meetings, have you?”

Violet nodded. “Yup, he usually brings the crullers.”

“Damn, it! The tight pants should have tipped me off.”

“That, and maybe the way he sashayed to and from our table.”

Violet turned to direct her attention back to Moxie. She was now performing an upbeat jazzy number that Violet hadn’t heard before, and Moxie’s hips swayed seductively as she sang about not being able to get enough of her man. Both the tune, as well as the way Moxie sang it, captivated Violet.

“Julian!” Wil called merrily.

Violet turned to see Wil’s friend arriving at their table. He was a large, rather effeminate man, wearing a brown suit about a half size too small. The buttons of his jacket seemed to strain in anguish to stay secured. His dark hair was combed straight back, and his mustache was razor thin. Cordially, he kissed Wil on the cheek, then stretched over the table to offer Violet the same salutation.

“How are you, Violet?” he asked, sitting across from her. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

“Thanks, Julian. It’s good to see you.” She smiled brightly.

“Are you ready for a night of nonstop sin and depravity?” Wil asked him.

“Why else would I have agreed to meet you, darling?” He took a piece of stale bread from the basket.

Fred appeared with a bottle of champagne, two glasses, and a stainless-steel bucket for it to chill in. “Here you are, ladies.” He set the bucket down and began to open the bottle. “Will you be needing a third glass?”

“Fred,” Wil said, “you’re always so considerate. That’s why I love you so.” She turned to Julian magnanimously. “What did you want to drink, darling?”

“I’ll take a gin rickey, Fred.”

“Very good, sir.” The waiter pushed the cork out of the bottle with his thumbs, and it finally burst out with a jubilant pop.

“Music to my ears,” Wil remarked happily as Fred began to pour the champagne.

“Does it remind you of your cherry?” Violet raised her newly filled glass.

“I think you overestimate Wil’s memory,” Julian added. “Wasn’t that back during the Trojan War?”

Fred accidentally dropped the open bottle into the bucket, nervously verified that no harm was done, and then darted away again.

“Fred and I are in love,” Wil explained to Julian. “We’re going to be married.”

Julian casually pulled a pack of Lucky Strikes from his jacket pocket. “You don’t mind that he’s queer?”

“I told you,” Violet said, pointing her index finger decisively.

“We plan to have one of those open marriages,” Wil said. “Provided that he never stops bringing me whatever I ask for, I can look past his preference for men.”

“How progressive,” Violet commented.



After Moxie’s set ended, Fred approached her backstage and touched her shoulder lightly. “Swell show.”

She smiled at the compliment as she dabbed her face with a handkerchief. “Thanks. That’s always nice to hear.”

“Well, then you might like to hear this as well. Table nine would like you to stop by. They told me to bring whatever you wanted to drink too.”

Moxie’s gratification quickly evaporated. “Hmm. Did the offer seem seedy?”

He laughed. “It’s probably a lot of things. But I don’t think any of them are seedy.”

At one time, Moxie tried to be gracious when strange men fawned over her, and certainly since she had been in New York, that type of attention had only increased. But she had recently made up her mind that she couldn’t bear such social contrivances anymore. She had been

hit on by old geezers, married men, and even one fellow so inebriated that he had actually pissed himself and failed to notice it. Fortuitously for him, Moxie had been there to bring his condition to his attention.

While she supposed these advances were all intended to be complimentary, it was hard to feel gratitude under the circumstances. Perhaps this admirer would signal her turning luck. After all, Cotton had been telling her that was due to happen any day.

“All right, Fred. You’ve piqued my curiosity. Table nine, you said?”

He nodded.

“Just bring my usual drink.”

“You got it.” He headed back over to the bar.

Checking her face in the mirror, she ran her hands through her wavy blond hair and tossed the damp handkerchief down with the rest of her things.

As she approached table nine, she was suddenly uncertain. Two glamorous-looking women, a plump man, and a small dog sat there—certainly not what she had expected. As she got closer, she observed that the woman with the dog was watching her intently. The woman’s straight black hair was cut in a bob, a bit like Louise Brooks’s, but her eyes were incredibly light, almost gray. The combination was striking. Her elegant evening gown was sea green, and her features were soft and lovely.

The other woman at the table was pretty in a different way—red-haired and animated—and though Moxie could not make out what she was saying, her voice carried as if she were either a drunk or a madwoman. She was dressed like a member of high society, but clearly not born into it. Her boisterous and gregarious manners gave her away. The gentleman at the table seemed more reserved, and he had noticed her approach by now as well.

Moxie stopped at the table and cleared her throat as the loud redheaded woman was in the middle of a sentence.

“...and I told him, ‘Darling, you need to get that away from my vagina’—oh, hello there,” she said, suddenly noticing her.

Moxie was stunned, wondering what the beginning of that story could possibly have entailed. “Um, hello. I may have been given the wrong table number.”