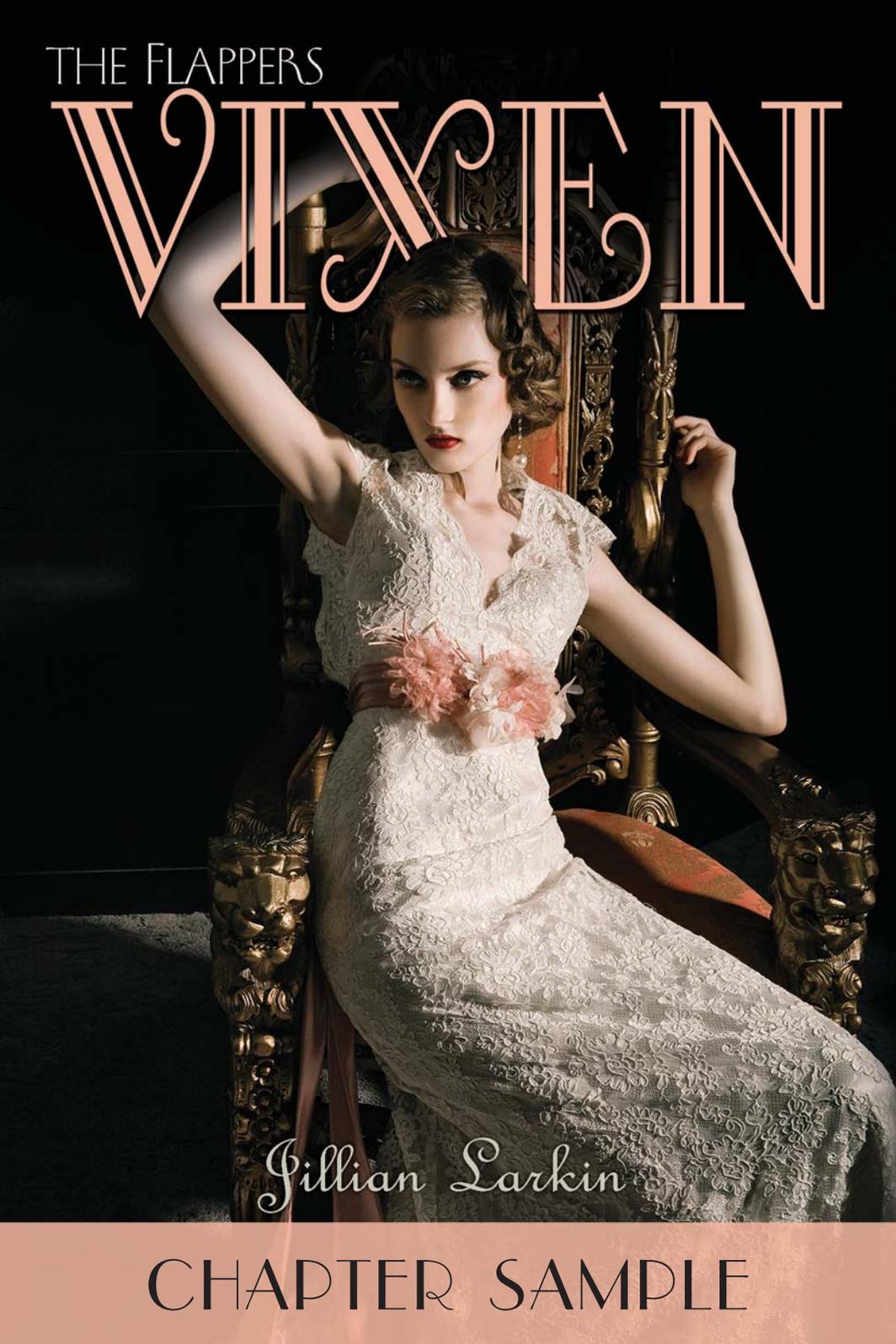


THE FLAPPERS

# VIXEN

A woman with dark, wavy hair and red lipstick is seated on an ornate, dark wood chair with gold-colored carvings. She is wearing a white, short-sleeved, lace dress with a fitted bodice and a full skirt. A wide, dark red sash is tied around her waist, adorned with a large, light pink floral arrangement. Her right arm is raised, and her left hand rests on the chair's armrest. The background is dark and moody.

*Gillian Larkin*

CHAPTER SAMPLE

# ANYTHING GOES

1923. *The Jazz Age. Chicago.* At the center of it all are the bobbed-hair, cigarette-smoking, gin-guzzling “It” girls—flappers—who hike up their skirts and flaunt their newfound freedom.

Seventeen-year-old socialite *Gloria Carmody* dreams of being one of those girls, but her upstanding reputation keeps her hair long and her hemline longer. Newly engaged, her party days are over before they’ve even begun . . . or are they?

Gloria’s cousin, *Clara Knowles*, led the life of a flapper in New York City until an illicit affair led to disastrous consequences. Now she’s starting a new life in Chicago . . . but nothing can stop the past from coming back to haunt her.

*Lorraine Dyer* is Gloria’s best friend, but she’s tired of living in Gloria’s shadow. Fueled by jealousy, liquor, and unrequited lust, Lorraine sells her soul to the worst players in the Chicago mob scene.

# VIXEN

Book One in the sexy, dangerous, and ridiculously romantic new series, *THE FLAPPERS*.  
COMING DECEMBER 2010.



Keep reading for a sneak peek . . .

# PROLOGUE

She didn't feel like wearing a garter tonight. Her gold-beaded dress, cascading in waves of crystalline fringe, covered the intersection between her sheer stocking and bare thigh.

She slipped her right foot into one of her two-tone Mary Janes, her left foot into the other. The thin black straps went across her ankles, the silver buckles tightened with a pinch.

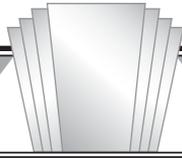
From the munitions strewn across her vanity, she carefully selected her weapons and placed them in a gold mesh evening bag: vamp-red kiss-proof lipstick, silver powder compact, tortoiseshell comb, ivory cigarette case.

She stared into the mirror. Everything was perfection: green eyes smoldering, cheekbones rouged and accented, lips outlined and plumped. Tonight, even her skin shimmered with something almost magical.

As she dabbed a final drop of perfume into the crease where her shiny bob skimmed her neck, she decided the garter would be necessary after all. Of course it would.

And then, before snapping her bag closed, she added the small black handgun.

Now she was ready.



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PART ONE

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# SPEAK EASY



“All life is just a progression toward,  
and then a recession from,  
one phrase—I love you.”

—F. Scott Fitzgerald (“The Off-Shore Pirate,”  
*The Saturday Evening Post*, 29 May 1920)



# GLORIA

They found the entrance exactly as instructed: just before the cracked sign for Malawer’s Funeral Parlor, between the tailor and the barbershop, through the rusted gate, eleven creaky steps below street level. After they’d knocked precisely three times, a tiny slit in the boarded-up door slid open.

“What’s the word, doll?” One dark eye blinked at them.

Gloria opened her mouth and froze. This was the moment she had practiced endlessly in front of her bedroom mirror: saying the secret password to be admitted into the hottest speakeasy in Chicago. So what if it was the first time she’d ever snuck out of her house, lied to her parents, or been in the city alone? Not to mention that her dress—which she’d bought only the day before—was so short that one gust of wind could turn her from flapper to flasher like *that*.

“Come on, I don’t got all night!” the Eye barked.

Sweat began to bead on her upper lip. She could almost feel it caking the layers of her meticulously applied makeup and cracking the surface of her finishing powder.

“Ouch!”

Marcus, her best friend—who’d taken on the role of accom-

plice/chaperone for the evening—jabbed her in the side. “Just say it already!”

Gloria inhaled sharply: It was now or never. “Ish Kabibble?”

“Wrong. Now *scram!*”

And just like that, the Eye disappeared.

Gloria glared at Marcus. “You have *got* to be kidding me.”

“It was ‘Ish Kabibble’ the last time I was here!” he said. Steps below the street, the bluish night softened the harsh angles of his golden-boy features—his sharp cheekbones and jaw, the habitual smirk he wore—and made him look infallible. Trustworthy. Swoony, even.

Gloria could see why girls threw themselves at him, of course, but her own relationship with Marcus was three parts brother-sister to one part sexual tension—a healthy, balanced equation for any male-female friendship.

“You’ve been here a total of . . . wait, let me count—one . . . one. Once. Right, *one time*, Marcus. And that was merely because you *paid* your own older brother to take you.”

“Well, at least I’ve actually *been* inside,” Marcus said, crossing his arms with a sigh. “Let me take you home, okay?”

Home? A few miles away by car, only it felt more like a few thousand. Her father’s gleaming Mercedes—sneaked from the garage after his driver went to bed—beckoned to her from beneath the streetlight. Maybe she *should* just return to the quiet, safe, *boring* tree-lined Astor Street that she knew so well. She could make it into bed scot-free by one a.m. and even fit in a few flash cards before her European history exam tomorrow. But wasn’t that exactly what people always expected her to do? Make the safe, good-girl choice?

No, she couldn’t leave now, not when she was one door away from carrying out the first and only rebellious act of her entire life. She was already here. She just had to get inside.

Gloria pounded on the door again.

The slit opened up a crack. “You again? You got a choice chassis, kid, but if you don’t go home to your daddy’s this second, I’ll call security—”

“*Wait.* All I ask is one single clue.” She pouted her brightly painted strawberry lips because, well, pouting always worked in the movies. “If I get it on the first try, we’re in. If not, we disappear.”

The Eye squinted menacingly. “Does this look like some kinda party guessing game to you?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Gloria said coolly. She could hear the band inside begin to play, its jazzy rhythms spilling out onto the street in muted tones. “I don’t go to parties. And I save my games for men.”

The Eye glanced at Marcus. “This one’s a real bearcat, ain’t she?”

“*Glo?* A bearcat? Ha!” Marcus said, laughing out loud.

“Fine.” The Eye rolled. “Here’s your clue: It’s a dirty deed you look too young to do.”

Marcus jumped in. “That’s easy, it’s—”

“The girl’s got to get it, or I shut this door in your face forever!”

The phrase was on the tip of Gloria’s tongue. Oh yes, her best friend, Lorraine, had written it in a note during biology yesterday: “Oh my gawd—Welda, my lab partner, was just suspended . . . she was caught in the bathroom during last wknd’s dance with the CAPTAIN of the football team giving her a good—”

“*Barney-mugging.*” Gloria whispered huskily. Then she blushed, embarrassed to have said out loud the dirtiest term she knew for sex.

The Eye’s slit closed and the door opened. “Welcome to the Green Mill.”



It was as if she had walked right into the rebel side of heaven.

A dense cloud of smoke hung near the ceiling of the windowless room—everyone seemed to be holding a lit cigarette. The smoke was shot through with dazzling flashes of light from the stage, and from the sequined dresses and the crystal flutes of champagne. At the front of the room, a mahogany bar overflowed with debonair men in suits and tuxedos, nursing tumblers of amber liquid and puffing thick cigars. And in the plush green booths along the walls were more men, shifty-eyed and menacing even as they chewed on hamburgers and slapped down cards.

And moving among all the men, flitting about in glittering flashes: flappers. As carefree and glamorous as if they'd been ripped straight out of a glossy fashion spread in *Vogue* or the set of some extravagant Hollywood movie. They were everywhere. Lazily dallying, dangling long cigarettes between their jeweled fingers, showing off their Charleston moves on the dance floor, and flirting shamelessly—all pouty lips and cocktails. With their fiery red boas draped over their bare shoulders, peacock feathers shooting out of silver headdresses, oxblood lipstick painted in perfect bows, and strand upon strand of creamy pearls, sequins, and rhinestones, they looked like exotic birds. And there was so much *skin*. More exposed skin than Gloria had even seen at the beach.

She had never felt so out of place. At Laurelton Girls Prep, she was the president of the Honor Society, an example for the rest of the girls. But here, Gloria was that poorly dressed, unwashed foreign exchange student from wherever—Arkansas, maybe—whom nobody bothered to eat lunch with. Her peach chiffon sleeveless dress, with its delicate lace on the shoulder and billowing skirt, had looked positively flapperesque in the store yesterday. Now it not only looked entirely too long, too plain, but *pink*, of all colors, in this dim lighting!

She felt like a Victorian. Surely the worst kind of person you could possibly look like.

She tried to locate Marcus—at least he could give her some consoling compliment he didn't really mean—but he was nowhere in sight.

A tuxedoed waiter passed with a tray of mismatched teacups, coffee mugs, and glasses. “Do you have any water, by any chance?” she shouted over the music.

He handed her a teacup, and she drank down the clear liquid in a single gulp. It wasn't until after she swallowed that a sharp burning sensation flooded her throat. She wheezed, and tears leaked from her eyes. Then she remembered why a spot like the Green Mill existed in the first place: so that people could drink. *Illegally*. She had been fourteen when the Prohibition began, so she'd never had alcohol and didn't know what she was missing. Now that she'd had her first drink—it tasted like a bottle of her ancient grandmother's perfume—she couldn't imagine why anyone would miss it in the first place.

Until about two minutes later, when it hit her. Hard.

Everything began to spin: the twirling dancers and swishing glasses and dazzling dresses. Gloria stood paralyzed at the edge of the dance floor, not knowing quite what to do with herself. Feeling and looking like she did, she certainly couldn't join the Charleston-crazed flappers, no matter how much she wanted to. She watched them enviously, their lithe bodies gyrating with blissful abandon in an almost reckless loss of control.

Gloria swayed to the melody, trying to memorize the steps. Suddenly, she had the strange sensation that someone was watching her. From the direction of the tiny stage. It was filled by a group of black musicians accompanying the vocalist, who looked stunning in a skintight sequined scarlet dress. Gloria skimmed her eyes across the band: drummer, bass, trumpet, saxophone . . .

His fingers never strayed from the keys, but the pianist was staring at her. Under the bright stage lights, his face seemed to glow with its own radiance. There was something sensual in the way he played, his entire body rocking back and forth, following his roving hands. His fingers hit the keys like hot flashes of lightning, never striking a note the same way twice.

As much as she wanted to, she couldn't look away. When he stopped playing, a flock of girls pressed in around her, blocking her view. Gloria elbowed her way toward the front of the crowd.

"You spilled my drink!" one girl shrieked, holding her mug out in front of her as if it were a ticking bomb. Lustrous strands of pearls were haphazardly wrapped around the girl's swanlike neck.

Gloria suddenly felt like a gawky ugly duckling. "I'm really sorry, I was just trying to find my friend—"

"Do you even know *who* you're apologizing to?" asked another flapper, who was wearing enough black kohl eyeliner to scare a raccoon. "You just spilled Maude Cortineaus' martini. You're lucky if she doesn't claw your face off right this second."

Gloria had heard this name before. Allegedly, Maude had dropped out of school during her junior year and become the unofficial flapper queen of the Chicago speakeasy set. She looked the part—like a porcelain doll, in an opalescent taffeta dress that hugged her curveless body, and a jet-black sequined headband as a dramatic contrast to her wispy blond bob.

"It's okay, beauts," Maude cooed, handing her glass to the mousiest-looking girl in the group. She fingered a lock of Gloria's hair. "But Rapunzel here better let down her hair somewhere else next time. Somewhere far, far away. *Tu comprends?*"

"Oh no!" Gloria's hands shot to her head. The inconspicuous French twist—which she'd obsessively secured with only a million

bobby pins—had come undone, and her long, wavy locks were loose. As she glanced around the circle, she realized that each and every one of the girls was bobbed. Blond or brunette, straight or crimped, it didn't matter—their hair was cut short. She might as well have showed up wearing her plaid school uniform and called it a night.

Humiliated, she ducked toward the back of the club and the only refuge: the powder room. En route, she had to pass through a group of men at the far end of the wraparound bar. As Gloria took a step closer, she saw that these were no ordinary men. Blue pin-striped suits, tilted-up fedoras, clouds of cigar smoke: These were most definitely gangsters.

She recognized one of the men from the tabloids. Carlito Macharelli, the son of one of the mobsters who owned the place. With his bronzed skin and oiled black hair, he looked almost exotic beside his two chubby friends.

Gloria met his steady gaze and felt a damp chill creep over her. She almost thought he was about to say something.

In the powder room, Gloria gazed into the mirror. Her reflection looked faraway and blurry. *This is what drunk must feel like*, she realized. She found a few bobby pins in the bottom of her purse and pinned her hair back as tightly as she could. She would have to hold her head like a statue for the rest of the night, but it would do. Then she readjusted her breast-flattening bandeau bra—essential for achieving that boyish flapper figure, but it was cutting off the circulation of her upper body—and fixed the smudge of kohl that had started to bleed onto her cheeks. Now she was ready. Or at least, as ready as she could be.

Fighting the surging tide of the crowd, Gloria stumbled to the bar, grabbing on to an empty stool as if it were a life raft. She closed her eyes, relieved. The only thing calming her was the feathery tranquil-

ity of the band's song, wafting through the room like a sad summer breeze:

*The world is hungry for a little bit of love,  
As the days go by,  
Someone is longing for a pleasant little smile  
As you pass him by.*

*Some heart is aching, some heart is breaking,  
Some weary soul must droop and die;  
The world is hungry for a little bit of love,  
Even you and I.*

The singer's buttermilk alto sank deep into Gloria's skin. The song was one of her favorites. Gloria's voice lessons were strictly limited to operatic arias, but whenever her mother wasn't home, she turned on the family's brand-new radio and sang along with the latest popular tunes. Even though she'd only performed publicly for school events and the occasional society party, Gloria was overcome with a fierce longing, wishing it were *her* up there instead, soaking up the spotlight's beam.

"Hey, no sleeping allowed at my bar!"

Gloria's eyes shot open. The bartender was leaning over the long mahogany counter, his face inches from her own. "And beauts are no exception to that rule."

Something about his wild shock of hair, the shade of a dull penny, against the crisp white tuxedo made him seem more like a cartoon character than a real person; strangely, she felt she could trust him. "I wasn't sleeping, I was listening." She forced a half-smile.

“In that case, there’s no *dry* listening allowed at my bar.” He tapped the bar like a drum. “What’ll it be?”

“Um, how ’bout a . . .” Gloria hesitated. What did a proper flapper ask for in a bar? She was used to ordering a cream soda at the movies. Besides, hadn’t that one accidental drink been enough? Gloria gave the bartender an apologetic smile. “I just came here for the music.”

“That right?” He mopped at the bar with a rag. “If you enjoy the music so much, tell me the name of that singer, and your drink is on the house.”

Gloria’s stomach churned. After the eyelock she’d had with the pianist, she couldn’t bring herself to look at the stage again, though she could hear the sharply struck notes from the piano rising above the clamor of the crowd.

“I’m Leif, by the way. But everyone calls me . . . Leif,” he said, raising his chin.

Gloria forced a little laugh.

“How come I don’t recognize you?”

“Because,” she confessed, “it’s my first time here.”

“A virgin!”

“No! I said it’s my first time *here*.”

“Right. A virgin.”

“Just because I’m new doesn’t mean I’m a virgin!” she said, raising her voice as the blasting music came to a sudden halt.

A roar of laughter rose from the crowd. Gloria felt her face grow hot. Would people notice if she crawled underneath the bar stool? She couldn’t have felt more humiliated.

“You just earned yourself that free drink,” Leif said, chuckling. “Though you should know, for next time, that her name is Carmen

Diablo. And her accompanist is the best piano player this side of the Mississippi: Jerome Johnson. They say he's the next Jelly Roll Morton."

"Jerome Johnson," she repeated to herself. "I knew that."

"Sure you did. So, what'll it be?"

"She'll have a dirty martini." The voice, filled with cigar smoke and Southern privilege, came from behind her. She turned. He was startlingly handsome, with slick salt-and-pepper hair and eager eyes.

"So confident for a man who knows nothing of my taste," she said, keeping her eyes glued to Leif as he stirred and stirred and stirred her martini. After a minute, he strained the liquid from the shaker into a mug, added a spear of olives, and slid it across the bar.

As she picked up her drink, Gloria caught the man glaring strangely at her hand. "Would you like the first sip?" she asked, thinking maybe that was polite in speakeasies.

He frowned. "I think that privilege has been reserved for somebody else."

Then she caught the focus of his gaze and felt the blood drain from her cheeks. On her left hand sat an enormous diamond and platinum engagement ring. She had forgotten she was wearing it! But even worse, she had forgotten she was engaged. And if her fiancé, Sebastian Grey, saw her now, the engagement would be called off. Immediately.

Bastian.

Gloria took a huge gulp of her martini, wincing as the strong, salty liquid slid down her throat. Getting sloshed wouldn't change the fact that Bastian was a proclaimed leader of the Prohibition's "Dry Camp." Or that he condemned speakeasies and all they represented: flappers ("floozyies"), bootleg liquor ("Satan's H<sub>2</sub>O"), black jazz ("voodoo tom-tom witchery"), and yes, Barney-mugging (well, Glo-

ria and Bastian avoided this topic altogether).

Of course, none of this had really mattered before tonight. She had always overlooked Bastian's conservative values because he was at the top of the "B List"—the unofficial ranking of Chicago's most eligible bachelors. (The formula was high-level calculus. Among the variables were  $x$  = wealth,  $y$  = industry,  $a$  = estates,  $b$  = family,  $c$  = swooniness,  $d$  = education, and  $q$  = size of his [ego, trust fund, etc.].) Bastian was also a blue-blooded import from the British royal family (how distant in relation, nobody really knew), and therefore about as close as one could get to Chicago aristocracy.

But, Gloria rationalized, she had six months before her diamond turned from promise to vow. She twisted off her ring and slipped it into her purse with an uncomfortable laugh.

Salt-and-Pepper gave her newly bare hand a squeeze. "I know what'll look better between those little fingers of yours." From the inside of his blazer, he retrieved a silver cigarette case, which he flashed open like a traveling salesman.

She was actually starting to enjoy this new role—alluring flapper—so why stop now? "Okay, butt me," Gloria said as he planted a cigarette between her lips, torching the end with a sleek silver lighter. She inhaled deeply. Her throat burned and she coughed uncontrollably.

"Whoa, easy does it there," he said, gently patting her back. "Cough any louder and your fiancé will hear you." Gloria smiled weakly. "You know what they call a woman who smokes?"

"A (*cough*) hussy?"

"I was going to say a smoke-eater. It's nicer."

"What if I'm (*cough*) not such a nice (*cough*) girl (*cough cough*)?"

"You can't fool me. You're the nicest girl in this joint. Cash or check?"

Her head felt filled with smoke. Which one meant *cheek* and which meant *lips*? “Check?”

He pecked her on the cheek and disappeared into the crowd. Gloria pretended to smoke her cigarette as she surveyed the room. Scantily clad girls chatted with men in every corner, exchanging witty repartee over drinks, over song, over nothing. The Flapper Way was all about style, the way a hand moved or a chin was thrown back in laughter or a girl sipped a drink with a dark smile and a sidelong glance at her date. It was about looking into someone else’s eyes and letting the hot jazz say what words did not. Could not.

Gloria left her drink and drifted toward a dark corner, trying to catch her breath and collect her thoughts. She wished she could find Marcus. She wished she could crawl into her own bed—

Wait. What was wrong with her? This should have been the best night of her life—she had consumed illegal drinks in a notorious speakeasy! Flirted with a highly unsuitable man! Smoked! (Well, sort of.) But still she couldn’t shake the feeling of being an outsider. She would be shunned by her parents and Bastian if they found out, and yet she had also been shunned by Maude and the very flapper girls she so desperately wanted to be like. If only her best friend, Lorraine, were here—she would know exactly what to do and how to act.

Suddenly, Gloria felt a wave of body heat beside her. She didn’t dare turn around, but she didn’t need to. Somehow, she knew exactly who it was.

Holding a cigarette were those same strong dark fingers that had darted out to sting the piano keys. Up close, he smelled of sweet tobacco and Brilliantine. How she wanted to take those hands, press them into her cheeks, and . . .

What had gotten into her? This was a strange man she was think-

ing about. A black man. She was white; she was engaged; she was—

“Why weren’t you dancing?”

She was startled by his earthy, rich baritone voice. “What?”

“My music not good enough for you to dance to?”

“No! I mean, your music is”—her heart was beating so loudly, pulsing through her entire body, that she wondered if he could feel it in the sliver of space that separated them. “I’ve never heard anything like it.”

As she met his soulful eyes, she wanted to—needed to—say something else (only what?), but the sudden impact of a heavy hand on her back sent her wheeling around.

“Glo, where the heck have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you!”

“Marcus?”

He examined her critically as if he hadn’t seen her in years. “Are you sozzled?”

Before she had a chance to turn around again, Gloria knew Jerome Johnson was gone. Back into his underground world of blues and booze, leaving her to face the only person in that room who knew who Gloria *really* was: president of the Honor Society, varsity tennis player, debutante daughter of Beatrice and Lowell Carmody. Good-girl, private-school-virginal, soon-to-be-married Gloria Carmody.

“I’m ready to go home,” she muttered, pulling Marcus in the direction of the door.

“What the hell happened to you?” he asked, stopping to examine her again. “You seem . . . different.”

“Oh, please, you left me for something like five minutes.” But truthfully, she knew it might as well have been a lifetime. Something *was* different about her, something terrifying and transcendent, but she couldn’t say what.

As they made their way across the dance floor, she spotted *him* again out of the corner of her eye. Jerome. He was at the edge of the stage, his arm around the waist of a gorgeous black girl in what looked like a silver negligee. They were laughing, and the girl enthusiastically planted a kiss on his cheek.

Gloria couldn't bear to watch for another second. She pushed her way through the hordes of flappers and waiters, past the booths of gangsters, past Leif at the bar, past the goon at the door, who smirked as though amused. She tumbled outside and inhaled hungrily, filling her lungs with the crisp autumn air.

But even as she climbed the steps back to the street, the faint cascade of the first notes followed—"All Alone," a tune that Gloria knew well. She found herself humming along as Marcus draped her coat over her shoulders. The melancholy music warmed the night air, and she could tell that something had begun to shift inside her, something unstoppable. Her life felt brighter now, more valuable than before. Even the piano seemed to be playing just for her.

Find out what happens next when  
**VIXEN**  
goes on sale in December 2010!

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