



All for a Story
A NOVEL

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All for a Story

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MONKEY BUSINESS

"Hop On Over, Friends"

A funny thing happened the other day when this little Monkey was making her way down a certain street. Seems the heel of my shoe was broken clean off. And I was proudly sporting my brand-new pair of vermilion patent-leather pumps. Cost me more than a month's rent, these shoes did, and here I was having to hobble. (What does the wounded turkey do? Hobble, hobble!)

Now, some monkeys might do fine in the trees, but I prefer the dance floor of a hot jazz jungle. So, lucky for me, I found the perfect little place to make everything better. Sure, I had to make it past a couple of gorillas, but what do you expect? When paradise is waiting in the treetops, it's worth a little bit of a pat-down in the lower regions.

But let me tell you this: be sure to bring your bananas. Bunches of them. You know the old saying about how the cobbler's children have no shoes? Well, yours might not either after a trip to this little shop. Whatever they're using to tan the leather is quality stuff, but you'll need the kind of scratch that doesn't jingle. Of course that means you'll be toe-to-toe with the king of the jungle, sharing a watering hole with a few elected big cats. Maybe even a few donkeys and elephants.

With water this cool and jazz this hot, it's a sure bet this little Monkey will be swinging through the jungle vines and landing in this tree house again.

❧ CHAPTER I ❧

*I am really only myself when I'm somebody else whom I have
endowed with these wonderful qualities from my imagination.*

ZELDA FITZGERALD

WASHINGTON, DC, 1923

IT WAS JUST PAST DAWN when she hammered the final key on her portable typewriter, finishing up that week's installment of *Monkey Business*. Good thing, too, because the next sound to be heard above her percolating coffee was the familiar, timid knock followed by "Miss Bisbaine?" spoken in a voice not quite conquered by puberty.

Monica cinched the silk belt of her robe, not wanting to send the poor kid into some kind of preadolescent stroke, and opened the thin door of her small apartment to reveal Trevor Kelly shifting nervously from foot to foot.

"Perfect timing, as always," Monica said, stepping back to allow the boy ample space to walk in without touching her.

"Really?" Trevor looked around the room, obviously trying to avoid seeing both the unmade bed and the undressed tenant. "Because I thought I was running late."

"That's why you're perfect, love. I've just now finished. Coffee?"

“No, thank you.”

The boy had just turned fifteen and no doubt had been given the tale that the stuff would stunt his growth. She wanted to tell him his fears were unfounded; after all, he loomed a full head above her, but his bony shoulders and scrawny neck testified to a weight that barely topped a hundred pounds.

“Milk, then?” The moment she offered, she realized the chances of finding a clean glass in which to serve it were slim at best.

“Like I said, I’m running late. . . .”

“All right, all right.” He was a good kid, this one, but no sense of life. She shuffled over to her typewriter and lifted the foot to release the single sheet on the roller. “Let me give it one last read.”

She pulled up the window shade just enough to illuminate the page and let her eyes—still stinging from a late night of smoke and booze—skim the column, making sure she’d given enough clues to attract interested parties but not enough to expose them outright. Satisfied, she gave the piece over to her first reader.

“My guess is upstairs from some shoe repair shop?” Trevor’s wide eyes awaited her confirmation.

“Too easy?”

The kid scrunched his face, thinking. “Maybe instead of saying your shoe broke, something like, ‘I had a bit of a problem with my walking paws.’ Same number of letters.”

“Do monkeys have paws?”

“Do you pay for hooch with bananas?”

“You have a point.”

She grabbed a blue wax pencil from the cup on the table, drew a line through the sentence, and wrote Trevor’s suggestion in the margin, initialing the page with a flourish before handing it back. “Good job. We wouldn’t want anyone getting undue attention.”

“No, ma’am.” Trevor took the paper and placed it in a cardboard folder which he then tucked into the canvas messenger bag slung around his neck.

Meanwhile, Monica tried to look nonchalant as she riffled through her purse, then the little velvet drawstring bag on her bureau, and finally the preserves jar on her top kitchen shelf in a fruitless search for a nickel. Finding none, she offered a smile instead. “Sorry, kid. Double it next time?”

He shrugged. “That’s okay.”

“Just look extra puppy-dog pathetic when you hand it over to Mr. Moore.”

Trevor snorted, and Monica understood. He’d have as much chance getting a nickel from Mr. Moore as finding a cherry blossom in November.

Once he left, she shuffled down the hall to the common bathroom that served the tenants in the four single-room apartments on her floor. One benefit of keeping irregular hours came in having the place to herself at these crucial times. Mr. Davenport, a high school math teacher, had probably left before Trevor took the first step in the stairwell. Mrs. Kinship worked overnight as a janitress and was already tucked in bed. Finally, a girl named Anna. *Girl* might not be the best word, since she had to be nearly thirty, but she was soft and pale and quiet, eking out a modest living from her job in the back room of the public library. She kept precise hours, leaving the house at seven thirty every morning and returning at six fifteen every evening, Monday through Saturday. When she spoke, she spoke in whispers, and she scowled at those who didn’t follow suit.

Monica closed herself inside and sent a silent apology to Mrs. Kinship as the pipes groaned before the onslaught of water. She added a generous amount of sweet-scented bath salts before

climbing into the tub, where she ducked her head under the spigot, hoping to wash away the pounding in her head.

When she got back to her room, she set a new pot of coffee to percolate on the electric hot plate and rummaged through her wardrobe and select piles of clothing on the floor to put together an outfit appropriate for the day, finding a relatively clean pair of thick cotton stockings, a long wool skirt, and an argyle sweater. With a pair of sturdy brown shoes she could pass as a college girl, maybe, albeit without the usual accompanying vivacity.

After dragging a large canvas bag from beneath her bed, she began to stuff it with as many garments as she could gather off the floor, draped over the chair, and piled on the foot of the bed. Mr. Varnos would scowl at her, but it was his policy to charge by the bag; she was just clever enough to take advantage.

Barely able to move under the weight of her laundry, Monica lugged herself and the bag down the three flights of back stairs in order to avoid her landlord's office parlor. A bitter wind whipped her face when she turned the corner from the alley to the street. Had it been this cold last night? She couldn't remember. The last bit of warmth from her single cup of coffee disappeared with the mist of her breath. Luckily, Varnos's Laundry was only half a block away, just in time to rescue her with its steamy, soap-scented warmth as she staggered through the door.

"My, it's like heaven in here," she said, trying not to grunt too loudly as she heaved the bag onto the counter.

Mr. Varnos, his thick, black brows joined together in his displeasure, did nothing to assist her. Instead, he stepped back, arms folded across his barreled chest, and stared Monica down.

"New policy," he said and cocked his head toward a neat-looking hand-lettered sign on the wall. "No more bag. By pound now."

"A nickel a pound? Mr. Varnos, that's robbery!"

“Is business.”

“Well, not very good business if you ask me,” Monica said, trying to regain some of her lost ground through charm. “Why, I’m only ninety-eight pounds myself. You could wash all of me and I’d owe you less than a fin.”

Perhaps the line would have worked better were she not bundled head to toe in her favorite knit cap and sturdy gray wool coat, because Mr. Varnos—still frowning—grabbed her bag with effortless resolve and set it on a large scale. The red needle came to a bouncing halt just shy of twenty-two pounds.

A dollar and a dime.

Monica’s smile froze. “That’s not so much.”

Wordlessly, Mr. Varnos scribbled on a little pad, tearing a ticket-size slip from the bottom and handing it over.

“Pick up Tuesday.”

“Tuesday,” she affirmed, wishing spring would get here a little sooner. Her clothes would be lighter. And if the grumbling in her stomach was any indication, so would she.

A dozen more steps against the biting wind, and she ducked into Sobek’s Deli and Bakery, asking the plump, dimpled Mrs. Sobek for two *kolache*—on account.

Mrs. Sobek responded with her hand on her ample hip in a pose of mock disapproval.

“On account of what?”

“On account of my boss hasn’t even paid me a compliment for the past couple of weeks.”

It was a routine they’d mastered, a fair exchange of food for cleverness, exhibited with Mrs. Sobek’s dropping the warm pastries in a white, wax-lined bag.

“I know you’re too skinny, even under that coat. Come back later today for some nice soup.” She winked. “On account.”

"I will." It was an oft-repeated invitation, and even when Monica had a pocketful of nickels to pay, Mrs. Sobek would wave her off, claiming it was the scrapings from the bottom of the pot, about to be thrown out anyway.

The warmth of the meat and pastry filled her as she made her way to the most important destination of the morning. She was finishing the last bite and stuffing the empty bag into her coat pocket when she came up to the enormous glass window of Capitol Bank and Loan. She studied herself in the reflection, the *o* in *Loan* sitting like a halo above her head. She yanked off her hat and ran her fingers through her hair, licking them to tame the static. Inside, the place smelled like wax and wood and money, and she instantly regretted not wearing the little fox-fur collar on top of her coat. At least it had a friendly face.

"How may we help you?" The man at the reception desk, Harmon Peel, was thin and old, the latter explaining why—after more than a dozen visits to the institution—he seemed to have never seen her before.

"I'm here to see Mr. Bentworth," she said, signing the ledger.

Peel took a slip of paper, asked Monica's name—twice—wrote it on the slip, and sent a well-dressed page with the missive. Minutes later she followed that same page through the lobby and into the office of J. Everett Bentworth, the man she had grown up calling "Uncle Ev."

"Monkey . . ." He was up and out from behind the desk, drawing out the final syllable of the nickname for as long as it took to draw her into his arms. "What a nice surprise."

"Hello, Everett." The *Uncle* had been dropped when she'd turned sixteen, in deference to her sense of maturity. "You're looking well."

In fact, he looked exactly as he always had, though his hair

was being overtaken by the gray that had always been present in a salt-and-pepper way. His upper lip receded to reveal a row of perfect teeth, and if she ever saw him wearing anything other than a navy-blue pin-striped suit, she probably wouldn't recognize him at all.

"As are you," he said, though when he held her at arm's length, his scrutiny said otherwise. "What brings you here? I wasn't expecting you for another couple of weeks."

"I'm a bit surprised myself." She swallowed hard. No choice but to go forward. "I was wondering, Everett, if there was any possibility I could get an advance on my next allowance." The statement made her feel like a child, and it didn't help that the chair he'd offered her was so deep that, if she sat far enough back, her feet did not touch the floor. So she remained on its edge, her toes tipped in the thick burgundy carpet while Everett settled himself in his own rich leather seat.

"Hmmm . . ." He opened a file drawer beneath his desk and brought out a folder. He needn't share the contents; Monica knew exactly what was in there. Her father's will, leaving everything to her mother, and her mother's will, leaving everything to no one. Well, that wasn't exactly true. She left quite a bit to the hospital that had given Dad such excellent care in his final days, and to her own army of nurses and maids, and to the League of Women Voters in honor of her own days as an ardent suffragette. But to her one daughter and only child? Nothing, save a modest trust fund and the monies from her liquidated assets.

"The terms of your mother's will are quite clear," Everett said, studying the papers. "One hundred dollars on the second Wednesday of every month. There's no other account for me to draw on for an exception."

"Really?" Monica steeled her toes and gestured wide about

her. “There’s nowhere in this great institution that could make for an exception?”

“Is there something in particular that you need, my dear?”

His voice was low and cultured, making her ever more aware of the thickness of her own Baltimore accent. Who would have guessed that she’d ever been exposed to wealth?

“Well, in case you hadn’t noticed, it’s a bit cold out there, and I read a fascinating article about how food and a roof go a long way in preventing death by hypothermia. I thought I’d test the theory.”

Everett’s thin moustache—completely given over to gray—twitched. “I’m sure you exaggerate.”

“Try me. If I don’t show up, send a search party with brandy to my apartment over on Fourteenth Street. I’ll be the little blue girl in the corner.”

“One hundred dollars a month is quite generous, you know. Many people—even entire families—live on much less.”

“They don’t have as many shoes to support as I do.” He looked unconvinced, so she pressed on. “It’s part of my job—you know, dressing up and looking good.”

One eyebrow, three shades darker than the moustache, arched high. “And what exactly is this *job* of yours again?”

If she didn’t think she’d fall out of the chair, she would have kicked herself. Her anonymity was important. Not every speak-easy in town enjoyed the spotlight of the *Monkey Business* column, and if word ever got out that she was the *Monkey* herself, she’d never get another lead. But it was easy to see where Everett’s mind was going with her last comment, and at this moment it seemed far more important to rescue her reputation—such as it was.

“I write a column for the *Capitol Chatter*. You might not know it—more of a tabloid than a newspaper. Anyway, I go places,

clubs and parties and restaurants and such. Some of them public. Others—” she lowered her voice—“more on the private side, if you know what I mean. And then I write about it. What I did, who I saw. People kind of go around with me, vicarious-like.”

As she spoke, a slow smile stretched under Everett’s moustache, and the indulgent twinkle she remembered from childhood crept into his eyes.

“You’re the Monkey behind Monkey Business?”

She twisted in her chair, seeing that no one was passing by the open door. Satisfied, she turned back.

“You read the *Capitol Chatter*?”

His face dropped back into aloofness. “My wife is a regular subscriber.”

“Really? We don’t have too many of those.”

“Don’t they pay you?”

She smiled wryly. “By the word. And my boss is pretty stingy with those, too.”

“If your mother knew—”

“She’d die.” She didn’t feel the slightest pain at the joke. What affection she’d ever felt for her mother had long since callused into nothing more than an acknowledgment of lineage. They’d only spoken with each other a dozen times between the end of the Great War and the end of her life last spring.

“She loved you very much, you know,” Everett said with a banker’s measure of affection.

“So she disinherited me?”

“Legally, no. She left you a generous sum. And you’ll receive the proceeds of the Baltimore house, should a buyer ever be found.”

“Doled out in drips and drabs until I’m thirty.”

“And then you’ll have it all.”

“Not the Georgetown house.” She unhooked her toes from the floor and let her feet swing listlessly above the roses in the carpet.

“She only had your best interest at heart. I know she worried you might attract the wrong sort of man—one who would love you only for your money.”

“And that won’t happen when I’m thirty?”

“I suppose by then it might be the only thing that would get you a man at all.”

He smiled, inviting her to join him, both of them knowing that must have been exactly what Mom had been thinking when she drafted the document. Monica’s boyfriend, Charlie, had no idea about the money or her father’s wartime profits that had generated it. Sometimes, though, she wondered if he might not feel differently about her if he knew. Differently enough to leave his wife. Perhaps she’d tell him on her thirtieth birthday. That was just over nine years away. Not quite a decade. She might have to send him a telegram.

“Let me do this,” Everett said, pulling a wallet from the breast pocket of his jacket. “A personal loan. From me to you. Would ten dollars help?”

Ten dollars would indeed help. It would be half the rent—enough to sate her landlord for the next few days—or enough to buy the adorable brown velvet hat she’d seen in the window at Marcel’s, or to buy a nice steak dinner at a place where she might get a lead on a new club. How to choose? Still, she should put up a bit of a fight.

“Oh, I couldn’t.” Her feet swung free, alternating. “I wouldn’t want to be beholden.” Besides, Charlie was good for a steak dinner every now and then.

“Not at all. I would consider it fair trade for just a bit of your expertise.”

He said *expertise* in such a way as to still her feet. “Look, I don’t know what you think—”

“Mona and I have an important anniversary coming up. Twenty years of wedded bliss, and I’d like to take her someplace . . . festive.”

He said *festive* with the same conspiratorial air as *expertise*, and Monica responded with a wink. “I have just the place.” She fished around in her purse until she found the yellow card. Approaching Everett’s desk, she asked for a pen, turned the card over, and drew a comic-looking little monkey—with exaggerated eyelashes and a long string of beads—on the back. The same sketch appeared at the top of her weekly column. She held it by the corner and blew the ink dry before giving it to Everett.

“Shoe repair shop on East Sixteenth. Upstairs. Drinks are expensive, but strong. And the music was perfect for dancing.”

“And this’ll get us in?” He seemed somewhere between skeptical and amused.

“Worked for me. But take my advice. Dress like you’re headed for an evening at the Carlyle. This place is classy. And not so much chatter at the door. If they ask where you got the card, tell ’em you got it from Miss Monkey Business herself, but zippo on my name.”

“Mona will be thrilled,” he said, placing two bills in her hand and folding it within his own.

“And don’t tell her, either. Please, Everett. If word gets out and they know me at the doors, I’ll never get back in. And if I never get back in, I won’t have a job.”

“It is a secret safe with me.” He walked around to the front of his desk to offer a familial escort out of the office. “And you know, you can always come to me in your time of need. I’d hate to find you starving in the street like some rag straight out of Dickens.”

"I'd hate that too." Despite the air of business behind their transaction, she gave him a brief hug—right in the doorway—and ignored the curious looks of all as she made her way back through the lobby.

The wind was just as sharp and cold as it had been before her visit to the bank, but it seemed to have lost its bite. She hummed "Ain't We Got Fun?" not so quietly, turning every third step or so into a jazzy backward kick. Safe again from the wolves that hounded her. She might just chip in fifty cents to the coal fund of her boardinghouse and spend the rest of the day in the big parlor downstairs, snug in a warm room under one of Mrs. Grayson's famous quilts. There was a new story niggling at the corner of her brain. Something about a banker and his wife celebrating their anniversary at a speakeasy. She would call it something like "A Night on the Town" or "The Ten-Dollar Ticket," and it would begin with the wife finding a mysterious yellow card in her husband's wallet, and she's immediately suspicious, thinking he's stepping out with another woman. . . .

Her thoughts carried her all the way through Mrs. Grayson's cozy parlor and up the steps to her own apartment, where she came to a sharp, startled stop at the sight of a familiar form crumpled in the doorway.

"Trevor?"

At her voice, the boy lifted his head from where it had been buried in his arms. His eyes were red, ruining any chance of hiding the fact that he'd been crying the tears he seemed now determined to fight.

"Oh, Miss Bisbaine. Have you heard?"

"Obviously not." She held out a hand to help him up, trying not to lose her own balance in the process. "Did the offices burn down or something?"

“Worse than that. It’s Mr. Moore.”

Mr. Moore. Her boss. Editor in chief and owner of *Capitol Chatter*. A small man with a bald pate fringed with hair the same length, volume, and consistency as his eyebrows. Constantly trudging, troll-like, through the tiny third-floor offices, leaving a trail of ashes from his perpetual cigar as he chomped and moaned about the lack of decent violence and vice in this hick town. He was fond of saying—daily, loudly—that all the real corruption was up there on Capitol Hill, and he was stuck with a bunch of hacks too stupid to know it and a load of readers too stupid to care.

“Did he drop dead yet?”

Trevor’s eyes grew to saucers. “Who told you?”