

JASMINE GOWER

Moonshine

CHAPTER 1

Skyline lights hovered in the hazy city night, glowing motes that lit the horizon. In another town, the glow of street lamps and apartment windows would have shone like stars, but here in Ashland's Soot City, they fragmented and blurred, filtered through a volcanic smog. It was a new frontier, Ashland – old enough for paved roads and brick towers, but still a land of young ideals. A land of immigrants and their vagabond descendants, settled in a terrain of lava beds and dusty woods that had only just become habitable again within the past two centuries. The volcanoes were quieter now, expected not to spew their fury again for another couple hundred thousand years or so, and people needed a place to start fresh.

She was second-generation, which is about as old as blood comes in Ashland. Her grandparents – both sets – arrived on boats from an older world, one of warm farmlands and vineyards. She and her parents had been born in the dust, into this place that was supposed to be different from the rigid traditions of her grandparents' homeland, but some things couldn't be changed with anything so simple as building an entirely new society up from clay.

She watched the skyline from the club's balcony, a glass of wine in hand and two enamored couples either side. She came alone to celebrate, and although it wasn't traditional for girls such as herself to wander about fancy clubs alone, she wasn't a girl of tradition. Not in that sense, at least. The Modern Girl phenomenon had completely swept up the young ladies of Soot City, and she embraced the archetype tighter than anyone she knew. Her classes at the women's college had been full of young women in narrow dresses and short haircuts, but even most of them wouldn't walk the streets alone at night. She did, but it wasn't all brazenness and sociopolitical statement. She simply didn't have a single friend to her name with whom she could celebrate, and she wasn't about to sit on her good news while she read magazines in her apartment in the rickety southwest district.

So, she went to a club, alone. At least there was wine, and patrons to stare at her bright yellow, low-waist dress. She was the very picture of a Modern Girl – slender of frame; her short, tight curls coifed with a shiny pomade; heeled dance shoes dressing either foot; and her dark skin complemented by the contrast of daisy yellow, so vibrant as though it was part of her identity. Which she supposed it was.

Daisy Dell. She didn't choose her name, but it helped with the image – people found the alliteration peppy yet commanding. Not that she needed it. Strangers stared at her like she walked right off a magazine cover, including at least one member of each devoted, adoring couple to her either side. She might have had the makings to be a model, but that's not what she had gone to college for. Granted, she hadn't gone to college to become a typist, either, yet there she was, drinking alone to celebrate the obtainment of an entry level desk job.

She supposed it was a mixed victory.

“Lovely night.” She rolled her eyes at the line as a man tried to sidle up next to her, having to nudge one of the couples aside a bit. He was an older man, a salt-and-pepper type, and even just in conversation their age difference was almost scandalous. Handsome, but overdressed for the venue in a black tuxedo, and bespectacled, which was very much *not* in the fashion those days – undoubtedly something of an issue for the vision-impaired. She had to admire his nonchalance in approaching someone so significantly younger, dressed bright as the sun and drinking alone like she was contemplating revenge. They both knew the odds that she would go home with him, so she didn't worry that politely engaging him would confuse him on her intentions.

“Indeed, it is.”

“A shame about the smog, though. I hate how it covers up all those glittering lights.”

She shrugged. “I like it. The way the lights blur against the shadows of the skyscrapers, it looks like a watercolor painting. And seeing the whole city filtered through ash – it strikes a sense of national pride, don't you think?”

The man laughed – the same sort of belly laugh that her father had, and it was only then that she began to feel personally uncomfortable with the combination of their age difference and any flirtatious undertones to their mild conversation. “Yes, I suppose it does.” Their brief talk faltered after that, and just as the silence had nearly stretched into that awkward zone, some of the man's friends called at him from behind, and he politely excused himself to rejoin them. That was about the extent of sharing her celebration that night.

But it didn't matter. Part of being a Modern Girl meant being self-sufficient. Thanks to Daisy's mother and the woman's three childless brothers saving up the girl's whole life to pay for her education, she had gotten through college without having to break her back like other

young women, Modern and Old-Fashioned alike. But Daisy was her own, grown self now, and she had rent to pay.

Shifting against the annoying grate of any kind of cloth against velvet, Daisy struggled to keep herself from rising from the chair and peeking into the parlor from where she could hear raised voices. The maid had told her to wait in the plush front foyer, that Mr Sparrick would be with her in a moment. She heard someone shouting Sparrick's name in the parlor and a gravelly voice shouting back, and she politely busied herself with rearranging her legs, trying not to kick the parcel tucked under the chair.

She had only been on her new job a few days before Mr Swarz assigned her this task. Daisy had been hired as a typist, someone to keep Mr Swarz's business records and transcripts and write letters on his behalf, what with his injured right hand. She had expected that her position would involve some other miscellaneous secretarial tasks, but that day Mr Swarz had asked her to make three direct deliveries to his clients.

Mr Sparrick was the first on that list, who would be receiving the heavy envelope labeled "STRIPES MANAGEMENT, INC." on the front and a small wooden box full of unknown goods, both of which sat in Daisy's lap. The envelope and accompanying bottle of wine for Miss Cadwell sat under the chair, along with a much smaller envelope that just had "Pasternack" scrawled in Mr Swarz's handwriting on its exterior. It was all very confidential, or so Mr Swarz had insisted, and he had told Daisy to not allow his clients to so much as know about the existence of the others' packages. Everything was sealed in boxes or paper and clearly labeled, so his demand seemed unnecessary, but Daisy did her best to follow orders, hoping that Mr Sparrick wouldn't notice the other envelopes and the wine bottle tucked behind her legs.

The parlor door slammed open, striking the wall of the foyer with a smack loud and sudden enough that Daisy hopped to her feet. In stormed a pretty, round-faced woman in a white dress – a little older than Daisy, but with a similar Modern Girl fashion sensibility. She charged into the room with reddened cheeks, appearing not to notice the young woman waiting there with a stack of papers and small crate awkwardly clutched in her arms.

"Don't you even talk to me, Robby. *Don't you even.*"

“Linda!” A disheveled man with light skin and sandy hair stumbled out after her. He wore a wrinkled, white suit that emphasized the purple bags under his eyes. Sparrick, Daisy assumed.

Linda whirled on him. “Robby! *Robby*. Will you listen – *will you listen to me right now, Robby?* Can you do that, can you listen to me for a moment?” Despite her demands to be heard, she didn’t seem to be saying much.

Robby Sparrick showed appropriate remorse, regardless. “Linda, darling, I’ll fix it, I promise. I–” But he noticed Daisy standing there, alert and startled as a puppy playing guard dog. “Oh, you, ah, you’re with them, aren’t you? The Stripes?”

“*Robby!*” But Sparrick wasn’t quick enough to return his attention to the lady, and she stomped off and out the front door in a great show of infantilism. Daisy might have been more embarrassed for her if not for the fact that Mr Sparrick’s own apparent maturity level seemed to call for a tantrum of that variety. He watched Linda go, gaping mutely after her, before hastily trying to pat his hair into place and turning back to Daisy.

“My apologies. You have my delivery?” But Linda wasn’t the only one upset with Sparrick, it seemed.

“You even paying attention to me, you rat?” A burly, bearded man wearing a suit as fine as Sparrick’s and much better kept charged out of the parlor as well, clubbing Sparrick on the back of the skull with a fist. Daisy quick-stepped back, sliding one of her hands over the other where it gripped the envelope to rub nervously at the silver ring on her left middle finger.

She didn’t want to get involved – she certainly didn’t want to unleash the power within the little ring, not while she was on the job – but she’d prefer not to get her bones broken in the crossfires. Had Mr Swarz known what kind of shady character Mr Sparrick was? Had he expected that his new assistant would be placed in such danger? Daisy could imagine that some cruel men might find sport in tormenting their new employees in such a way, but such a cruel man would also have to possess a sense of humor, which she was certain Mr Swarz did *not*.

She didn’t need to use that secret weapon resting unsuspecting on her finger, as it turned out. Sparrick regained his balance quickly after the stagger and spun to face the larger man. His upright posture and smarmy drawl betrayed the fakery in his pretend calm and good-naturedness when he answered. “Whitcomb, yes! Of course. As I told Linda, I’ll take care of it.” Whitcomb

scowled – “I don’t trust your lying weasel smile,” the expression said – but Sparrick gestured to Daisy. “But, please, let’s not fuss over business in front of a guest.”

Whitcomb took a look at Daisy – spindly, wide-eyed, and sportily dressed, she was the classic, pretty image of a free-spirited but otherwise harmless young woman. He huffed, disarmed by her carefully crafted self-presentation, but shot a brief glare back at Sparrick. “*Business* is something we’ll be doing less of if these problems persist.” Heading toward the door with a tip of his hat to Daisy, he stormed out as mutely as he could manage after such an altercation. Sparrick, for his part, huffed a heavy sigh, his posture wilting as the air escaped him.

“Blazing embers, what a relief that you showed up.” He straightened, repeating that phony cheer that he tried to wield against Whitcomb, eyeing the envelope in Daisy’s hands. The intensity of his stare highlighted the red veins streaking through the whites of his eyes. All in all, it was quite a hungry look for some simple papers.

Daisy did her own part to wear a happy face for the exchange, smiling and holding out the envelope and box. “Yes, sir. Straight from Mr Swarz himself.”

Sparrick snatched the delivery from her, but paused and squinted at something beyond her. Worried that he might be trying to peek at the other deliveries stored under the chair, she dropped her hands to hang in front of her, lightly touching the silver bracelet on one wrist with the other hand. That ring wasn’t the only secret weapon she possessed, or even the only one she had worn for the outing. Daisy didn’t often go out without at least a few of her grandmother’s old trinkets, tacked on like jewelry. Most of it *was* jewelry, though outdated or gaudy, but the eclectic nature of the look only reinforced her aesthetic – fashionable, but sentimental enough to cling to family heirlooms, and maybe even too new into money to afford better. Not that she was even as into money as her lavender sun dress, sheer neck scarf, and polished white shoes suggested.

Daisy focused less on the look of the bracelet in that moment, though, and more on the power within it. She knew where that power had come from, and she sometimes shuddered to think about it, but Grandma Sparrow’s shady dealings from long before Daisy’s birth were the old woman’s own burden, not her granddaughter’s.

She felt a flare of heat – just a little thing, no warmer than walking by a sunbeam sneaking through a curtained window – and Sparrick blinked. She hoped that whatever made his eyes so bloodshot was affecting the quality of his vision, too, and that he would dismiss whatever

he had seen as his imagination. There was nothing more embarrassing than getting caught in the middle of doing magic.

Sparrick shrugged, trying to adjust the way his jacket settled on his shoulders, seeming content to ignore the thing that had a moment ago so caught his eye. “Well, Mr Swarz is a lifesaver. As are you.” He then squinted at her. “*You’re* not the regular boy,” he said, as though just realizing this.

She widened her smile. “No, sir. I’m new to the office.”

“Ah, well.” And he glanced down at his delivery, apparently grown bored with their exchange. It was just as well, because Daisy had two more deliveries to make. Once he returned to his parlor (no goodbye offered to her), she squatted by the chair and touched her bracelet. There was a shimmer, and the awkwardly distorted shadows that had formed there cleared, exposing the remaining packages where she had left them. She did not understand Mr Swarz’s insistence on secrecy at all – did he expect that Sparrick would have tried to steal the other packages if he’d seen them, even with Daisy just right there? – but she was determined to impress at her new job.

She was determined to impress, in general.

Hurrying back from Sparrick’s fancy house to the street, Daisy strolled through a mild haze of silver ashfall on her way to her next destination. This time she did use the ring and its repellent spell – not to fend off possible attackers, of course, but to keep the soot off her shiny shoes. Magic was more practical as a utility than a weapon, she had always thought. She never understood why the mundanes feared it and its wielders as much as they did. In a place called Soot City, in the nation of Ashland, it was a wonder that they didn’t practically worship magicians for their potential to manage the volcanic weather. Granted, the volcanoes had been tame for centuries now, and the ashfall was no longer uninhabitable – that would rather complicate the presence of a city there, of course – or even unbearable. Some days it was just worse off than others, same as weather anywhere else.

She nearly skipped down the quiet streets of the northwest quadrant. This was the old money of Soot City, and they did a decent job of keeping undesirables out, except those like Daisy who hid behind pretty faces and middle class educations so as not to seem entirely unappealing. There was no sign of the homeless or ill or non-human – no one who could be recognized immediately as Not Belonging. It created an eerie emptiness in the neighborhood,

and she was the only one walking outside past all the fancy, compact houses and under all the finely manicured trees lining the sidewalk. It was shameful that the city paid people to trim those young, narrow trees while entire streets in Daisy's neighborhood were nonfunctional for how many potholes spotted them, but she enjoyed the illusion of serenity while she was there. If the rich went to so much trouble to maintain such facades, she might as well revel in the prettiness of their falsehoods before the day was done and she returned to the bleaker, grimy southwest quadrant.

Her next stop was about seven blocks over. The house was much like the last. Clean, whitewashed walls (only slightly smudged by the ashfall) tucked between matching residencies on either side, all with imposing bay windows. Daisy suspected it had a similar foyer, too – velvet-cushioned chairs, gaudy curtains that didn't match the wallpaper, and polished hardwood floors – but she never did get to see the inside. When she knocked, a frazzled middle-aged woman answered. She could have been Mr Sparrick's twin for mannerisms, half leaning against the doorframe as she squinted at Daisy.

"You. I know what *you're* about." She smiled even as her words accused. Miss Cadwell. The woman reached out toward Daisy's face, snaking her finger like she was going to poke Daisy on the nose, though her arm couldn't quite extend that far without removing herself from the doorframe that supported her. "You're not the usual girl, though."

"No, ma'am, but I was sent by Mr Swarz. Your package." She handed forward the second envelope and the bottle of wine. It was easier to hide what remained of her deliveries this time – the little note was tucked between her dress and shift. If Cadwell noticed any odd angles in the folds of Daisy's clothes, she didn't say anything about it. She seemed fairly intent on the wine, seeming to have recently come off a completely different bottle. Daisy wasn't sure why a document management office would bother sending wine to one of their clients, especially not if it exacerbated an already apparent problem, so she decided to politely assume that it was only Miss Cadwell's birthday.

Lucky for Daisy, Cadwell appeared happy enough with her packages to make no further comment on Daisy filling in for whoever usually made the deliveries, nor did she invite her in to see the disaster of a debauched, upper-middle class life that she led. She simply bid Daisy a good day, still beaming like a drunken fool, and shut the door to keep wafts of ashfall from griming up her entryway.

Only one delivery left, then, and this one took her out of the northwest district.

Northeast wasn't as fancy, but there were efforts to get it there. Most of its class came from new money – the children and grandchildren of immigrants who came to Ashland with only pennies, people who were ambitious and innovative and lucky enough to build their own fortunes in this newborn society. Lucrative nightclubs and restaurants set up in the slums to save a buck on property costs, and wealthy patrons flocked to these locations to enjoy that rustic feeling of downtrodden neighborhoods. There were still shambling shacks out in those reaches, in the neighborhoods around where Daisy had grown up. Oddly, the address she had for her final delivery was in one such area, and not for some luxury loft above a new theater, as she expected – quite the variation from Mr Swarz's other clients.

She took the streetcar most of the way there, but needed to make her way on foot for about ten blocks into the residential area. Hopping off at the station, she was distracted by a demonstration taking place in one of the new, gentrified parks that had been built where probably little more than a pile of worn tires had previously occupied.

Soapboxers.

It was a clever location, right off the streetcar stop in a neighborhood where the high class with too much to lose collided with the poor with too much to fear. Hardly a surprise that the topic du jour was people just like Daisy. Magicians were all that the huffy, so-called moderates of Ashland quaked in fear over for the past few decades. It didn't always used to be like that. Magic, alongside ogre technology and industrialism, had probably built half the city less than a hundred years ago. She wasn't sure what had happened to cause the general population to demonize magicians as a collective, but general populations did love to have enemies, she supposed.

A flicker of masochism hit her, and she decided to stop and listen to the sheltered, middle class homebodies preach about the evil of her secret ways. Not that there wasn't a price to be paid for magic, but she was fairly certain these fearmongers didn't even know about that bit. They mostly pulled nonsense out of their own asses, as bigots tended to do. And while they imagined silly things like frantic dances and songs played on flutes made of human bones and magic powered by sex (because *of course* these puritans were fixated on the notion of sex), they never considered the laws of conservation or the traditions of their ancestors or even the reality

that humans were not the only creatures with a command of magic. But Daisy supposed none of that was quite scandalous enough to scream about on a street corner.

She stood amongst the crowd next to a short woman in a tan men's trench coat, listening to the screeching of the seven soapboxers, one whose voice rose above the rest. A tall, pale man shouted over his companions and the crowd of gawkers that hovered around them. "These wizards are corruptors! They brew their poison and infect our neighbors – good, innocent people – and turn them raving and wild, with the minds of beasts! They have taken over our businesses and temples and universities to drain us of our hard-earned money and hoard it for their nefarious ends!"

Unimpressive, as far as fearmongering went. Basic, bland. No rhythm to his frantic shouting. People loved rhythm – that's the way to go when looking to captivate an audience. He could have at least waved his arms around a little, give the performance a bit of urgency.

Daisy glanced at the woman next to her. "Ash and embers! Maybe if they shout a little louder they can be heard up in the high heavens. What do you suppose? Think these magicians are as bad as they say?"

The woman – short, a little stocky, probably of Gao or Pheje descent with dark ochre skin and shiny black hair cut to her chin – shrugged with one shoulder, too apathetic to bother with two. "Mana's already outlawed. Not sure what these protesters think magicians are gonna do. They probably have to go to enough trouble to get their own that they won't waste any poisoning their 'good, innocent' neighbors."

Mana was the blue fluid magicians typically used to fuel their powers, drinking dosages after casting spells to replenish energy. "The brew of the gods," it was called by some less conservative than the soapboxers before them. While magic itself was not technically illegal by Ashland or city law, the production, sale, and possession of mana was. The stuff apparently kicked the metabolism into overdrive, and so long as practicing magicians kept themselves well-fed, the thick potion allowed them to keep their bodies balanced. But it was addictive, from what Daisy understood, and non-mages could get manic highs off it, having no lost energies to be replaced. Daisy didn't need it for her own style of magic, but she had heard even a small dosage of mana ran for a hefty fee, and this woman was probably right that Ashlanders did not need to be concerned about magicians or addicts sharing too much of it with innocent mundanes.

Daisy was tickled with an urge for mischief. “What about their magic, though? I’ve heard that some of those spells require blood sacrifice.”

“And *I’ve* heard that magicians are trying to create a spell that allows them to eat the sun. Most things that one hears about magic are more shit than what goes in my toilet.”

Daisy laughed, but the woman beside her was quiet and dour. The stranger ignored the soapboxers to watch the light, smoky specks of ash drift downward and back up on the city’s gentle but flustered every-which-way breeze. “It must be handy, I assume,” the other woman said. “Magic. And some people, you know, they just need a little more. The game of survival doesn’t start everyone out with the same resources, after all. Everyone does what they do to get by. It’s not that magicians are so bad – we’re just all animals.” She tore her dark gaze away from the atmosphere to lock eyes with Daisy. “That’s how I see it, anyhow.”

“Very philosophical.” Daisy didn’t mean for it to sound sarcastic, although the other woman turned away from her again. She wondered if the stranger had, like Daisy herself, more than just a passing interest in magic. But that was too dangerous a question to ask, for the both of them and for too many reasons. Instead, Daisy left the stranger to her lofty musings, returning to her task for Mr Swarz. The woman would understand – Daisy only did what she did to get by, abrupt and impolite goodbyes included.

Moving away from the intersection of posh and drab to the out-and-out slums of northeast, Daisy located the rickety townhouse that her final delivery was destined for. It was a sizable building – bigger than an apartment, certainly – but the paint was peeling down the outside walls, and only one of the four front single-paned windows was without a massive, spiderwebbed crack in it. Packed all along down either side were other townhouses of matching quality, stretching in a line both directions until either corner of the street. She knocked on a door that had “307” nailed in wooden letters at eye level, pulling out the envelope labeled “Pasternack” as she heard heavy, uneven footfalls approach. When the door flung open, she took an instinctive step back while the home’s occupant staggered to lean against the frame.

Much like Sparrick and Cadwell, he was pasty and apparently inebriated to some degree. To match the condition of his residence, he was not nearly as fancy – smudged pants and an oversized stained shirt hung from his medium frame. He squinted at her, his pose and expression almost identical to Cadwell’s earlier. Were all of Mr Swarz’s clients drunken slob half-blinded by brandy? It seemed so contrary to Mr Swarz’s own prim, prickly manner.

“What d’ya want?” the man asked. He mumbled a bit, which Daisy might have mistaken for a side effect of his condition if not for the way he pronounced his vowels, all as a half-formed “uh” sound. It was apparently his accent, some holdover from whatever northern country his parents or grandparents had hailed.

Daisy held forth the letter, putting on a smile she was too weary for. It was nice to stretch her legs on the job, but if she had to run around dealing with this sort to accomplish a light exercise, she wasn’t sure it was worth it. “I was sent by Mr Andre Swarz to deliver this to you, sir.”

The man – Pasternack, she assumed – relaxed, his scowl melting into something not only more neutral but also lucid-seeming. There was a vividness to his eyes that had been hidden under all the squinting. “Swarz? What’s this about?” He pushed himself off the doorframe to take the envelope and open it. Pulling out a note and discarding its shell on the doorstep, he unfolded it and scanned its contents twice before bursting out in rough laughter.

“Oh, hell and brimstone, can you believe this? Look at this!” He waved Daisy closer to read the note, and she resigned herself to humoring him. Stepping closer and glancing over his shoulder, she read:

Pasternack,

It is imperative you return to work by tomorrow. Any further truancy, barring medical emergency, will result in termination.

I’m not kidding.

Swarz

The man laughed again as Daisy pulled away, looking him over. This wasn’t a client – he was one of her coworkers. He smirked at her as he crumpled up the note in his calloused hands. “Listen to that! ‘Imperative.’ Ha! Thinks he can scare me with his big dictionary words.” He gave the note a firm squeeze, and she could hear the light crinkle of paper under his rough laborer’s grip. “He had you running errands today, didn’t he? Got you hauling documents and secret gifts up to the fancy-pantses out in northwest?”

Daisy felt inclined to smile back, sincerely this time, finally feeling that she no longer had to put up a polite front. Clients were one thing, but she could be casual around a coworker, so long as Mr Swarz wasn’t there to be a crotchety raincloud about it. “How did you know?”

Pasternack dropped the note and hooked a thumb proudly toward himself. “That’s my job, most days. Course, I’ve been playing hooky the past week. Guess not no more, huh?” His smile shrunk – not disappearing, just mellowing – and he held out a friendly hand. “Vicks Pasternack. I work in the warehouse. You must be the new desk lady. That cranky bastard Swarz got you down yet?”

Vicks might have been the very picture of a ne’er-do-well, the kind of caricature on posters put up by groups like those uppity protesters she had seen by the streetcar stop, but his easy attitude was charming in its own right, and he was upfront and friendly with her. Daisy saw no reason not to be candid as she took his hand.

“Of course not. Mr Swarz might be a bit stiff, but he’s been polite and friendly with me. A better boss than I’m likely to get bussing tables or tending bars, I’m sure.”

Vicks threw back his head and laughed. “Damned if that isn’t the nicest thing I did hear anyone ever say about that snarling housecat. He’s just a hotheaded piece of work with me.” Vicks rolled his shoulders, and that light in his eyes took on a mischievous glint. “But if you got such nice things to say ’bout working for Swarz, then I guess I’m feeling pretty inspired to haul my ass back there, too. You can tell him I said that – he’ll be real impressed. Not a lot that can convince me to go to work on my own accord.” Of course, Daisy had just seen that Mr Swarz had threatened to fire Vicks for his extended absence, but she only smiled again in response.

Vicks chuckled and clapped her on the shoulder. Being a stylish Modern Girl had its advantages, but physical strength wasn’t one of them, and she staggered under the friendly but rough pat. “Well, then. I guess I’ll see you at work tomorrow. What’s your name, again?”

Daisy righted herself and adjusted her dress so the folds fell straight and clean. Prim and sporty, just like on the magazines. “I’m Daisy. Daisy Dell.”

Vicks smirked. “Well, welcome to the crew, Daze.” She was sure the grin was supposed to be friendly, and perhaps it was only that the ordeals of her day had set her on edge, but she couldn’t help the thought that there was something wolfish about his smile.