

CHAPTER ONE

The Club Cobra

Detroit, 1905

Stella downed her whiskey in one long swallow and grinned at her piano man. Twink was the best in the biz. Hands down. Why he wasted time in the boss's dump of a nightclub, she never asked, but he was on fire, caught up in her mood and having fun. They played a game of Follow the Leader. Either she'd start singing, and he'd follow, or he'd start playin

g and she'd catch the song. Twink tried to outshine her with his nimble fingers, but she wasn't having it. Her contralto voice had quite a range, and he wasn't eclipsing her tonight.

Stage left, Freddie and his sad bouquet of hot house carnations sat waiting, while Quinn and his infectious, dangerous smile sat stage right. Freddie and his flowers were happy with whatever they got. Quinn wasn't there for the music, only for the good time. And Twink, her piano man, he'd play all night long if he could. Some other gent at a dimly lit back table smoked a cigar and drank slowly, gauging by the frequency of the waiter's visits. All that remained was a group of three young fellas, probably college kids, who yucked it up and weren't listening. She didn't care. Without the boss guarding the joint, Stella Black could sing whatever she wanted.

She finished the last song of the night with a flirtatious lift of her scraggly boa and a back kick of her faded satin skirt. The gentleman in the shadows received a wide wink, whoever he was, and the college boys got her most charming smile.

"Don't forget Twink. He's a gem." She let them clap. Even the schoolboys paid attention and clapped, the sound small in the big, dark room with its peeling velvet wallpaper and beer-stained floor. She gave Twink a saucy curtsy, then strolled directly to the bar. Normally, she'd escape to the back, but her mood was high, and another whiskey would make it fly.

Stella waved two fingers at the bartender and settled on a creaking barstool. She wrapped the boa around her neck and pushed the feathers from her chin. Either Freddie or Quinn would pay for her drink, and both would be next to her in a moment. Dancing Jim, in his usual get-up of red arm garters and crooked bowtie, delivered a glass so full of Old Log Cabin some sloshed over the side when he placed it in front of her.

As she leaned forward to take a careful sip, a raspy voice behind her said, "Let me buy you that drink."

Stella turned slowly with a practiced smile, even though she wasn't feeling it inside. She supposed the college boys would stay at their table and the mysterious gent in the back would exit, but instead he stood in front of her, barely making five feet and with a dome so polished it

even shined in the flickering gas lights. Enormous dark eyebrows and a thick mustache made up for his lack of top hair. His carefully tailored pin-stripe suit suggested he had money, but an elaborate diamond stick pin and a heavy diamond pinky ring proved he did.

He extended a manicured hand. "Otto Rick, at your service."

She placed her hand, free of such silly items as diamonds, in his. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Rick," she replied as he kissed her hand.

"The pleasure is all mine, Mrs. Black. May I join you?"

Stella's gaze flitted to Freddie and Quinn, frozen a few feet away from her. A quick nudge of her chin sent them away.

Mr. Rick glanced at the two men and met her eyes with a knowing smirk. "I won't keep you long."

Stella turned to her whiskey, sipped it, and let him wait. After enough time to make clear her indifference, she gestured to the bar stool beside her. "Please."

A cream-colored card slid next to her whiskey. In silver ink, and with elaborate swirls, were the engraved words "Silver Cloud Lounge". Beneath it, in black print, it stated, "Otto Rick, Proprietor" and the address.

Everybody in the business knew the Silver Cloud. Only top-drawer singers and musicians worked there. The smart set of Detroit hung there. Stories, scandals, and intrigue happened weekly. Stella had never been there. She didn't have that kind of scratch to blow.

"You run the most famous nightclub in town," she said evenly, trying to sound suitably impressed without gushing.

"And I'd like you working there." He moved his cigar to his mouth and rapped the bar with his knuckles. "Bourbon, here."

Stella placed a hand on her breast and fingered the low-cut satin. "Twink and... me?"

"Just you. I got a full band. You deserve an orchestra with that voice." The little man opened his billfold and sifted through a sizable stack of cash, then tossed a twenty at the Dancing Jim when he delivered the bourbon. Mr. Rick dismissed the bartender with a flutter of his fingers. "This is between the lady and I." Dancing Jim narrowed his eyes but retreated, and Otto Rick used the time to take a long swallow of his drink. His frank gaze came back to Stella. "I can make you famous. By the time I'm done, all of Detroit will talk about you. Probably all of Michigan." He glanced at the cracked back bar mirror and the meager liquor supply. "Why ever you're in this hole must be quite a story."

Hole? Stella frowned a little. Sure, the place stunk of spilt beer and a pile of burnt-out cigarettes, but in the four years she'd work there, it was home. Twink was home. He knew her moods, knew when whiskey was needed, knew every tune there was to know. She had a regular crowd of admirers. She got steady money. Almost enough to pay for her rented rooms with Jadwiga and her boy, Elliot. And yes, the floor could use a good polishing and the uniforms were frayed, but the lights were dim, anyway. A good hiding place. A secret spot where she could sing.

“Thank you for the offer. I’m so flattered, but Twink and I are two peas in a pod, you might say. We’re a team.”

Mr. Rick puckered a dark eyebrow. “I respect loyalty, but do you realize how much money you’ll make? How larger your audience? We have... *plans*.”

She moved the whiskey glass in small circles. She couldn’t help her curiosity, even if she should flat out refuse. “What sort of plans?”

He made a tight, pleased smile. “I see you as the main act, the center of it all. But right now, till you get your feet wet, you’d open. Why don’t you stop by and see the place? We have a proper stage, velvet curtains, plush seat, and the most expensive drinks. I have an extraordinary chef. You’ll be the centerpiece. The icing on the cake.” His diamond flashed as the hand holding the cigar opened. A cloud of smoke trailed his gesture. “Your voice is unforgettable. Someone—a person”—he again waved his fingers as if to dismiss the unknown person— “dogged me to come hear you. Now I understand why. What do you say?”

Stella drained the rest of her whiskey. She shouldn’t have had the last one. Her head wasn’t clear enough to hold him at bay. She smiled, taking in the small, clever eyes and the wide mouth with gleaming teeth. He had the stocky build of a boxer, and even if he was very short, he exuded the confidence of one who lived well... and was taller.

He stuck his cigar in his mouth and puffed. His eyes sparkled with good humor. “I don’t think I’ve convinced you, and it’s late, so I’ll leave my card. I believe in the morning, or more likely, in the afternoon when you awake, you’ll be more interested in my offer. Visit the Cloud.” He hopped off the bar stool and gave a sharp bow. “Good evening, Mrs. Black. You certainly are quite delicious.”

He snapped his fingers and a man in a gray uniform appeared from behind a side pillar. “Home,” Mr. Rick said, and headed toward the door while the man scurried after him. Stella picked up the card to rip it into tiny pieces, but a whisper inside her that said she was too good to stick around Sal’s rundown club made her slide it up her sleeve.

Freddie appeared on her left and Quinn on her right.

“You know who that was, don’t you?” Quinn asked.

“You’re not leaving us, are you, Stella?” Freddie said and laid the sad carnations next to her.

“He only wanted to buy me a drink.”

“He gave you his card,” Freddie said.

“Let *me* buy you a drink.” Quinn, the smoother of the two, ran his fingers up her arm.

“I’m going home.” She slid off the stool and grabbed the bar to steady herself. She had much too much to drink.

“Come on, old girl, you’re always up for one more,” said Quinn and wrapped her arm in his.

“No, my mood has changed,” she said with a definite slur. She tugged her arm from Quinn’s grasp and pulled the boa around her shoulders in a sudden fit of melancholy. She always drank too much. She always was too much. “I’m tired. I need to get home.”

“Let me help,” said Freddie.

“I don’t need help,” she snapped, hating her rudeness. Without fail, he hovered expecting her to do something for him, wanting something from her. She walked with careful steps up the stage stairs toward the back exit.

“Have them get me a taxi, please,” she said to Dancing Jim and turned the corner to find her cloak in the cluttered backstage room.

Twink waited on a stool and stood when she entered. “You gonna do it? Take the job, the Silver Cloud. Guess that’s why he’s here.”

“You recognize him?” she said.

“Sure, I’ve been there twice asking for work. I need more time, more money.”

“You never said.”

He shrugged. “I would’ve found you a spot. Eventually.”

She shook her head, and the movement made her dizzy.

“Too much Log Cabin. You gotta watch it,” he said. “Did he ask about me? Or was it all you?”

She couldn’t look into his dark eyes.

“Don’t lie, now, after all we been through.”

“He wanted me, and I told him I wouldn’t go without you.” She grabbed his hand, a lovely, elegant hand with long fingers perfect for the piano. The contrast of how dark his skin was against hers struck her as beautiful. “We’re a team.”

“Girl, you are a fool.” He put his other hand on hers and squeezed. “You gotta take the job for your boy. For your life.”

“I don’t know. I’m too drunk to know.”

“Drunk or not, take it. You get in there and then I get in there. That’s how these things go. Danika, take it.”

“Don’t call me Danika. It’s Stella. Always Stella. And I don’t want to be famous.”

He put his hands on his hips and tilted his head in disbelief. “*Stella*, this is your chance.”

“I don’t care. I don’t.” Really, she didn’t. She wanted to remain hidden. She wanted to keep her head down.

Danika was the only parent standing on the snow packed road waiting for her child to come out of the school. When she left the tenement, she saw Elliot’s tiny footsteps exiting the back steps and Jadwiga’s larger footprints marring the snow, but they seemed to have returned. More steps with Elliot turning left away from school, but Danika had headed toward the school thinking he took a meandering route. Yet no children left the school. Not even the teacher.

Bewildered, Danika retraced her steps to follow Elliot's footprints toward the row of tenement houses, shivering all the while in her yellow shawl. She shuffled through the scuffed snow, trying to decipher the tracks, glancing around for anyone who could explain where the children were. Why the school was closed.

Her stomach burned from either too much whiskey the previous night or the reheated black coffee she slugged down before dressing to get Elliot. She was at the point of screaming his name, but if she started, it would admit he was missing, and she was the worst sort of mother. One who slept past lunch and didn't know where their child was. She had slept late, but it was only because of the silencing effect of the snow-covered street.

Danika plowed further down the sidewalk, regretting how little she knew the neighborhood. She went to work when everyone else finished their dinners and visited other flats. As it was, no women wanted to socialize with her. Everyone knew she was a nightclub singer.

She gave up and called his name. The sound of her voice seemed fragile in the cold compared to how rich it was when she sang at night.

"Elliot," she called louder, stronger. Her pace quickened to a trot. She called his name again.

A front door opened at a grayed tenement house, and there stood Elliot with an unsmiling woman dressed in the uniform of all Polish workers—a kerchief around her head and an apron across her faded clothing. Danika stopped, relieved to see him, yet surprised how at ease he was in another woman's house.

"Ma!" He waved and tried to run to her.

The woman grabbed him and said in Polish, "Wait. Your coat."

Danika raced up the step as the woman held open the coat and replied in the same language. "What happened?"

"Don't be mad, Ma," Elliot said.

The woman's solemn glance measured her, judged her. A pang of jealousy hit Danika as the woman buttoned Elliot's coat with an ease, as if she had done it before. She said, "Elliot came to visit my boy, Johnny." The woman straightened while her hand remained on Elliot's shoulder. "He walked all the way here, by himself. I made him lunch. Then the boys played in the snow."

"*Dziękuję*," Danika said stiffly. "Thank you very much." She drew her shawl tight, aware how underdressed she was, and took her son's hand. "We have to go home now, Elliot."

The woman's face softened. "Would you like to come in for tea? You must be freezing."

"No. Thank you. We have to go." She turned away before the woman could say more and hurried Elliot off the porch.

"Are you mad, Ma?" Elliot asked loudly in English as she tugged him along.

"No, no, hush now. Let's get home." But she was mad. Mad at herself for sleeping so late. Mad at Jadwiga for not leaving a note saying there was no school when she wrote notes

about every single other worthless piece of news. Mad at the kind woman who saw so clearly what a second-rate mother she was. And mad at Elliot for leaving the house without permission.

She rushed him along, her fingers and face numb, her socks wet in her worn boots. When they entered the back of the house, she nudged him straight to the warmth of the wood-burning stove. She set him on the kitchen stool and squatted to pull off his boots.

“Your socks are dry?” she said as she squeezed his feet.

“Mrs. Bosco gave me a new pair.”

Danika let out a groan.

“Don’t worry, Ma, my old ones are here in my pocket.”

“Good, good. We will wash these and return them. Mrs. Bosco is a very nice woman.”

Danika tugged off his jacket. “Are you wet anywhere? Are you cold? Why did you leave?” She grabbed his little shoulders, her hands trembling from pent up anger and fear. “Look at me, Elliot. You can’t do that. You can’t leave the house telling no one. You could freeze out there. I didn’t know where you were. I woke up, and you weren’t here.” She wanted to shake sense into him, had to stop herself from doing it. “You understand? You understand?”

“Ma! I sat for hours and hours and hours.”

“Wake me. Never leave without telling me.” She pulled him off the stool and into her arms. She whispered in his hair, “Never leave me, Elliot.”

“Aunt Jadwiga told me to let you sleep,” he mumbled, smothered in her tight hug.

“Wake me from now on.” She kissed him on the forehead. “Wake me.”

A tap on the kitchen door separated them. She told him to stay by the stove and she went to answer the door. A boy in a fur cap and wool jacket with reddened cheeks stood in the doorway.

“You Danika Czarnecki? I gotta message for you from Jadwiga... Gorski, I think,” he paused. “She says she’s got a broke arm and won’t be home till tomorrow. That’s it.”

“Wait.” A blast of cold air rushed through the door and made her shiver. “Come in. Tell me more.”

She ushered the boy to stand by the stove. He eyed the morning coffee that still sat in a pan. Elliot waved at him. The kid waved back. She poured him a cup without asking and handed it to the boy. He held the cup in both mitten-covered hands and slowly sipped.

“Tell me more, please.”

“She’s at St. Mary’s Hospital. Can’t leave till tomorrow, she said. She asked me to come tell ya.” He sniffed at the coffee. “Guess it happened at the cigar factory. It didn’t look good. She’s white as a ghost.” Then took a long swallow of the coffee. “Been sitting awhile, hasn’t it?” He finished the drink. “Best be off.” The kid set the mug down and waited.

Danika realized he was waiting for money. She hastened for her coin bag while her mind worked over the information. She wanted to see Jadwiga but couldn’t leave Elliot and didn’t want to take him to the hospital, either.

“She said she’d be all right.” He smiled at the two bits she gave him.

“Would you take a message for me? It’s only three blocks over. I’ll give you two more to go there. If you give the message to a man name Sal, I’m sure he’ll tip you as well.”

“Sure, doll,” the boy said with a smirk.

Danika frowned at him; the kid only smiled back.

She quickly wrote and folded the note. “Give this to Sal, or at least Dancing Jim, at the Cobra. You know where it’s at?”

The boy went on his way, and Danika settled in to make dinner for Elliot. To her disappointment, the tin larder had but a small chunk of bacon, and some wrinkled potatoes sat on the shelf. She dared to take one of the four eggs, thinking Jadwiga had plans for them.

Danika carefully sharpened the knife to cut the side of bacon, knowing Jadwiga might complain if she cut unevenly. She fried the bacon and potatoes, scrambled the egg, and called Elliot to the small kitchen table than normally held three.

They sat across from each other in the dimming light of evening, the street extra quiet due to the heavy snow. Danika realized it was the first evening she had spent alone with Elliot for ages; she couldn’t remember the last. She memorized him at that moment, admired his shock of curling golden hair, his long brown eyelashes, and rosy cheeks. He was often mistaken as Jadwiga’s child. Not a single feature of his reflected in her. She pushed around her food as she always did, waiting to see if he had enough before she started, but they both had plenty of food without Jadwiga. She set her fork down and crossed herself. While she gloated in the happiness of having her son alone, Jadwiga suffered in the hospital.

They finished the last of their supper when a sharp knock came at the kitchen door. Her first thought was that the boy returned with a message, but his knock had been hesitant and from a smaller fist. The knock came again, more insistent. She jerked up from the chair. A problem at the hospital, no doubt.

She was wrong. It was her boss, Sal, his too full lips pinched together in a hard line. She kept her hand on the doorknob, taken aback that he knew where she lived. They hadn’t lit the oil lamp yet. How he knew which door worried her, especially since they were the back tenants of a house split into four flats. She was sorry that she hadn’t been quicker to think before opening the door.

He didn’t wait for an invitation but pushed past her into the room. “You gotta come to the club, Stella.”

Danika shot a glance at Elliot, hoping he didn’t notice her boss using her work name, but Elliot was busy staring at Sal with wide eyes and a straight back.

“I.. I can’t, Sal. Didn’t you get the note? My roommate, you see, her arm...” She backed away from him, not liking his scowl. Sal was a large man, and she’d witnessed plenty of times how he could grab a fella with one beefy arm and toss them out without breaking a sweat. He never touched her, but a big man with a temper, was always someone to keep one eye on, especially someone as small as her.

He glanced at Elliot. “That your kid? So, he really does exist.” He slowly took his leather gloves off and stuffed them in each cashmere coat pocket. “I’ll wait for you to get dressed.”

“He... he can’t be left here alone.”

Sal gave an indifferent shrug. “Then bring him. He can sit at the bar.”

“I don’t want to.”

Elliot jumped off his chair and stood next to her with balled fists. “Ma can’t go. Didn’t you hear her, mister?”

She hoped Sal would laugh since he had a big, blustery sort of humor, but he didn’t break a smile.

“You might need a little lesson in manners, kid.” He took a step toward Elliot.

“Elliot!” Danika pulled her son toward her. She said more calmly, “Elliot, get ready for bed. I’ll be there in a moment. Please.”

She shoved him toward their shared bedroom. When he made the door, she turned to face her boss. “Sal, please, I’m in a bad spot here. He’s too young to go out now. It’s too cold. He has school.”

Her boss unbuttoned his beige coat and folded it neatly across the kitchen chair. He removed his fedora, sat it on the table, and ran a large hand across his slick, dark hair. Later, she thought it was stupid of her not to see it all as a warning.

“Don’t feed me all this horseshit, Stella. I know Otto Rick was coaxing you to his club, and you’re gonna slither away with two more weeks of work you owe me. That ain’t gonna happen.”

“*Slither?*” The word offended her. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m not going to the Silver Cloud.” She paused to catch her breath, her anger building at the insult. She had been loyal to him. She was loyal. Yeah, he had given her an advance to buy a new jacket and boots for her boy, but she had every intention of paying it back. “And I’m not going with you tonight.”

Her anger swelled. She brought him so much business. He was the snake. After all her years at the Cobra. After showing up to work even when Elliot got sick, and she so badly wanted to stay home and care for him. Instead, Jadwiga was the one who comforted her boy. So much so that he still looked to *Ciocia* Jadwiga whenever he was sick or tired. She did all that for his dump of a nightclub, his hole, as Otto Rick rightly called it. He didn’t see any of that, see her loyalty.

The blood in her head pounded in her temples. She had never, ever said it to anyone, but she said it to him in a low voice so Elliot wouldn’t hear. “Screw you, Sal.”

His fist connected with her cheek before she could react. She yelped like a kicked dog as she crashed against the wall. Pain seared her cheek and radiated through her shoulder. Her hand flew up to her face and felt wet. The thick haze of shock made her limbs unsteady.

“You. Ungrateful. Bitch.” He lifted his fist again.

Her bowels turned liquid, and for a hair’s breadth, she had the horrifying thought she may shit her whites in front of him, but just as quickly her body held up and her mind turned to escape. She couldn’t involve Elliot. Even if she called for him, they couldn’t get around Sal and

out their only door. Her eyes darted around the room. The two unwashed plates. The empty coffee pan. The knife on the cutting board. The small chunk of bacon. The bacon.

Jadwiga wouldn't forgive her if she didn't put back the bacon.

Sal rushed toward her. She lunged for the knife and flailed it at him.

He lurched back. Danika heard a hysterical panting and realized she made the pitiful noises. She quieted, fearful that Elliot would hear. Sal's eyes narrowed at her, and he clenched both fists. Her hand tightened on the knife and held steady and true, until she met his eyes, eyes that had so often held laughter, but were bulging with rage.

Her breath caught in her throat. If he won, she might not see Elliot grow, and the worst part, she never told him about his father. Or, if she won, Sal might die, and she would be in prison forever. The pain in her cheek made her eye twitch. She couldn't breathe, but she waved the knife again, because Elliot was there waiting in the bedroom.

"Get out of my home." Her voice was one she didn't recognize. The sound came from deep within her, the growl of a beast she didn't know lived inside. Her gaze marked the chipped abalone button on his striped shirt. She'd drive the knife there if he made a move. She had one chance only. "Get out... or I'll kill you and cut you to pieces... and feed you to the neighbor's dog... every day... bit by bit."

He lifted his eyebrows, laughed without humor, and waited.

The knife wavered in her hand. She forced it to steady. *I will kill him. I will kill him. I will kill him.*

He must have seen her crazed desperateness because he lowered his fists and took a slow step back. As if ending a social visit, he casually reached for his coat. "We're not done here," he said. "We'll even this out another day. Just you wait."

He backed toward the door and slipped through. Danika ran to slide the bolt, then sank to the cold plank floor and leaned against the door. Her face throbbed, her body shook. Her hand came away slick with blood, and she stared dumbly at the red on her fingers. She pressed her wounded cheek against the cold door to hear any footsteps in the snow and waited for the trembling to pass. Finally, when satisfied he wouldn't be standing outside in such blustering weather, she forced herself up on wobbly legs and opened the door cautiously to make an ice pack of snow.

Danika told Elliot she slipped on the icy wood steps outside and tucked him into bed. He stared at her with frightened eyes but didn't argue. She had wanted to read to him, to sit and watch him fall asleep, but she was too afraid to leave the door unguarded. She left him with a kiss on his forehead. Wrapped in a quilt, she spent her night huddled against the door with the kitchen knife on the floor at her left and her secret bottle of whiskey on her right. She knew she shouldn't drink, but her body and mind worked at such a furious rate, she craved the numbing effect of alcohol.

The next day, Jadwiga came home with her right arm plastered in white, matching the paleness of her face. Jadwiga wouldn't be able to help pay the bills for a while, and Danika refused to go to the Cobra with a swollen face.

Three days later, the swelling left Danika's cheek, and she dabbed powder to cover the jagged seam along her cheekbone. She braided her hair into a high bun with small, loose braid looping along her face, hoping it'd distract from her cut cheek and applied eyeliner made from crushed coal and water to accent her eyes and take attention away from her beaky nose. She added rouge to her full lips, though her teeth had been described as "horse teeth" as a child. Even if she was greatly flawed, when she walked into a room, men turned their heads. That much she had learned.

She added her wide-brimmed hat and a heavy veil to hide her makeup and slogged through the snow to the Woodward Avenue trolley and the Silver Cloud Lounge.

Her boy needed to be fed, and Sal needed to be paid back before she got another visit. And Stella, Stella needed to refill her whiskey supply.