

Chapter 1

A blonde vision in ice blue satin

BOOKER

September 24th, 1926

“Evening, Mr. Jameson.”

Jerking slightly at the unexpected voice at my car window, I look up in the middle of reaching for my folder of club-related papers on the passenger seat. The voice, of course, belongs to Benson, The Twilight Room doorman. I just this instant shut down the Packard 236 in a space he somehow always manages to keep clear for me in front of my club on this busy downtown Seattle street. I don’t know how he does it, but half the time he seems to materialize out of thin air. The man is a magician.

Seeing he has my attention, he opens my door. “It is good to have you back, sir,”

“Thanks.” I unfold from the car and allow him to close the door as well. But I have to tamp down the twitch it gives me to let someone else perform a task I can easily do for myself. “It’s good to be back.”

That’s a damn understatement. The headache I’ve been throwing aspirin at all day finally begins to unclench its vicious grip on my temples and forehead. We step beneath the black canopy of my speakeasy, *The Twilight Room* written in a pleasing bold gold arc across its front and along each side. The stylish awning stretches from the curb to the brick siding above the gleaming four-panel fir entry to the lounge. I wave Benson ahead of me—and don’t even mind when he wraps his white-gloved hand around the ornate knob and steps back to open the club door for me.

A jazzy rendition of *Manhattan* wafts out of the lounge on a wraith of smoke and its lush sound makes me grin: at Benson as I pass

him to enter my club and to myself. Hiring this five-piece band was one of the smarter moves I made this year. They sound better than many a full-sized orchestra.

I'm damn proud of my achievement here and, for the first time since leaving my parents' estate in Walla Walla this morning, my neck and shoulders lose the tension tying them in knots. My visit with Mother went well. She's always supported me in everything I've done. The one with Father? Well, that was about as productive as usual.

Clyde Jameson finds me a major disappointment. He has done so since I skipped college to fight in the Great War—the war to end *all* wars. I left home with a head full of patriotic fervor, but no true knowledge of the realities of warfare. The fact I returned home significantly changed from the malleable boy he remembered merely exacerbates his displeasure.

Despite Father's dissatisfaction, however, he persists in clinging to the belief I'm going to give up my speakeasy any day now and get a "real" job. In other words, join the family bank.

No chance in hell is *that* bushwa ever gonna happen.

Darkness clung like cobwebs to my mood during the interminable drive up from the southwest corner of the state. Shaking it off, I stride through my beloved lounge.

And finally start to feel like myself again.

When I put the Twilight Room together I opted to do it up swank, and it's drawn the money crowd. I had it decorated with women in mind. Most men will show up regardless of the décor, but let their women say *this* is the place to be seen and the fellas will shrug and take them there. So, I gave the ladies plush banquets and small, candlelit tables draped in crisp white linens.

As if to illustrate my thought, I see a dame cupping her hand around her escort's as he flicks the table lighter and holds it out. One of her bejeweled fingers strokes its cool marble surface while he lights her cigarette.

Tonight, as most nights, the club is packed with elegantly dressed men and women, most of whom greet me as I walk past. I smile, nod at everyone and toss off a greeting here and there. But I keep moving.

As I head for my table, the band segues from *Manhattan* into *The Charleston*. The Brasher Sisters, my hoofers Dot and Clara, swan onto the stage, then launch into the hip to the jive dance sensation that's been going strong for the past couple years. They shake their hips in their high-waisted satin shorts and shimmy the fringe on their skimpy tops. Flappers and their Jelly Beans desert the tables to crowd the dance floor fronting the small stage.

“Hi, Mistah Jaaame-es-son!”

The greeting has me searching among the crowded tables to my right, and I locate Sally, the cigarette girl. Not that I needed to see her to know who hailed me. Sally is a New Jersey girl who came to the Twilight Room by way of Los Angeles, where she had acted in several silent films. She'd just begun to make a minor name for herself when the talkies struck a death knell to her career. Sally has a voice that—well, it won't strip paint, exactly. But it sure as hell killed her future in the movies.

Seeing me looking her way, she leans forward to display her ample cleavage, flashes her big, sassy smile and wiggles her fingers in greeting. I return a salute. Then a customer hails her and I continue down to my table, situated where the back edge of the narrow, now jammed dance floor meets its northern counterpart. Before taking a seat, I nod at John behind the long, curved mahogany bar against the wall.

He snags a glass, drops in a couple of ice cubes and pours a generous splash of single malt. Putting the drink on a tray, he hails Millie, who serves this side of the room.

A moment later she dips to set it on a coaster in front of me. Dips equals tips and Millie knows how to keep male customers happy.

“Thanks, doll.” I toss a clam on her tray.

Flashing me a smile, she tucks the dollar in some mysterious pocket inside her outfit, one that no doubt snuggles up against her magnificent breasts. I swallow a smile even as I give myself a mental pat on the back for hiring busty women in direct contrast to the current fad for straight silhouettes. It was a deliberate decision on my part, because for all the new emancipation of women, it's the men patronizing my club who still foot nine-tenths of the bills.

“Thank *you*, boss,” she coos, interrupting my thoughts. “You're the berries!”

Moments later the band wraps up *The Charleston*. Dot and Clara trot off stage and the flappers and their boys abandon the dance floor, fast-talking as they reclaim their tables.

The band leader carries a large round microphone on a stand to the front of the stage. After arranging it several feet this side of the piano, he bends into it.

“And noow, ladies and gentlemen, *fresh* from the Tropics Lounge in Spokane, Washington, the songbird you have all been waiting to hear. Please give a *big* round of applause to Miss! LO-la! Baaaaker!”

The audience's applause is polite rather than enthusiastic, but breaths all over the room are sharply inhaled when a blonde vision in ice blue satin rises up through the floor. I watch in satisfaction, my

focus more on the mechanics of the lift than my new singer. It's true I made sure to get here in time to hear her, since for the first time since opening the lounge I wasn't involved in the hiring. But we have tested the elevated platform over and over again and had to work out several kinks. This is the first act to actually use it. No one else west of the Mississippi has anything like it, so to say I think it's pretty damn fine...

Well, hugely, ironically understated of me, that is.

A spotlight suddenly picks out my new singer and I stare, forgetting all about the hidden lift.

Damn. The woman is stunning. An honest-to-God tomatah. Leo, my manager, told me as much, but the photos that came with her bio weren't the best quality.

Seeing her in the flesh, I can honestly say they were nowhere close to doing her justice. Her hair is a blond so pale as to be damn near white. The only other person I have ever seen remain a tow-head beyond childhood without resorting to bleach was Lena Bjornstad back in high school.

A ghostly rush of a once all-too familiar mixture of lust and anger hits me and I straighten in my seat. Whoa. Haven't felt *that* in a long, long time. Can't say I'm happy to feel it now. And having learned long ago not to dwell on things I don't have a chance in hell of changing, I shake it off.

Clearly this is not Lena. As my first and-fine, to date *only* – love, she will always have a permanent place in my memory. But she had a totally different body type than the woman onstage. Lena had been boyishly slender and small breasted, with damn little extra flesh on her bones. She had had, in fact, the type of lean body that's all the rage right now.

This Lola dame has breasts and hips and a tiny waist, all lovingly delineated by the blue satin flowing over her curves and clinging faithfully to the dips and hollows.

Which I am still in the midst of admiring when she opens her mouth and draws my attention in a completely different manner.

"Who's sorry now?" she sings in a low, throaty contralto, making me realize my piano player launched an intro while I was obliviously staring. The rest of the band is also playing, but softly, to avoid stepping on that amazing voice. *"Who's sorry now?"*

The vivacious chatter behind me fades away. Lola's version of Isham Jones' popular song is slower, and bluesy in a manner more often heard in the colored clubs. And it is clearly grabbing the lounge's attention.

"Whose heart is ach...ing, for...breaking each vow?"

Then there's the way it affects me—like a warm hand stroking down my chest, over the ridges of my abdomen—and down to my—.

I straighten in my seat. I don't even try, however, to bite back my awareness. Because I haven't felt this for quite some time: this let's-buy-the-woman-a-drink-and-see-where-it-leads spark of interest.

Trouble is, though, I have this ironclad rule. I get my sex away from the club and never, but never, mess with the help. I can't say it has ever been a hardship. Then again, I have never felt this sort of temptation.

And I shed the rule like a snake its skin and stride over to the bar. As I listen to her finish up the first song and launch into *Careless Love Blues*, I have John refresh my scotch and make me a champagne cocktail for the club's new canary. And smile slightly as I think, *What the hell*. Accepting the drinks a moment later, I turn away.

Some rules are just made to be broken.

I stop at my table to sweep up my folder and tuck it under my arm before making my way backstage. After dropping the paperwork in my office, I head back to wait for my newest hire to finish her set.

She exits the stage a few minutes later, walking in my direction with a slow swivel of her hips that has me hearing a mental *Boom, bumpa boom, bumpa boom* drumbeat. My throat goes dry and I knock back my scotch. Jesus. The woman is even more magnetic at close range. That body—it jiggles subtly with every step she takes. And those eyes—those *lips*.

A niggle of unease itches along my spine when I look at her eyes and lips. Because, I'm reminded again of—

No. I square my shoulders. The thought itching at my brain is just wrong. But there is something uncomfortably familiar about the dark-rimmed blue of Lola's eyes and the lush Cupid's bow lips. Not the vibrant red color of the latter, but their shape.

Then my common sense catches up with me and I thrust the notion aside. I didn't just fall off the turnip truck. Clearly, I'm seeing ghosts where none exist. I step into the singer's path.

"Lola," I say, amused with myself at the way my voice deepens. I offer her the champagne cocktail, abandoning my own glass on a nearby prop table. "My name is Booker Jameson. I own—"

The palm of her hand is a blur as it flashes with lightning speed toward my face. I dodge too slowly and it catches me across the cheek with enough force to turn my head. Stunned, I rear back. "What the—?"

She leans into me, looking fiercer than a mama bear even though the top of her head barely clears my shoulder. She cuts me off with fiery disdain. "I know *exactly* who you are, Mr. Jameson." Snatching

the flute I'm still mindlessly holding out to her, she tosses back the champagne in a couple of large gulps, then thrusts the fragile empty back at me. I automatically grab it when she shows every indication of grinding its crystal edge into my chest.

Then she does the impossible and maneuvers her face even closer to mine, a neat trick for a woman half a foot shorter than I. "You're the man who left me to face the consequences of *our*—not mine, Buster, *our*—actions alone. The man who promised he would never forget me, who swore he would write faithfully until he could come back for me."

She takes a step back and her eyes lose their fire, her voice changes from lava-hot to ice cold. "In other words, a damn liar." Then she turns on her heel and struts away.

Leaving me blinking at her departing back. "Fuck," I whisper—a word I once reserved for the trenches, and lately, for conversations with other fellas when no women are present. A second later, as the truth I had instinctively known but convinced myself I did not sink in, I say with a little more volume, "Fuck!" Then, "Jeez-us, hell." I watch the swing of her satin hem disappear around a corner. And feel a wave of something that feels surprisingly like...happiness.

"Lena?"

CHAPTER 2

In the Biblical sense, you could say

LENA

"Of all the speakeasies, in all the world," I seethe as I hoof it as fast as I can through the backstage area toward my dressing room, "I had to sign a contract with the one owned by that dirty lowdown RAT?"

All right, I kind of yelled that last part. But I'd been so thrilled about moving to Seattle. It was a big step up from Spokane and seemed absolute perfect at the time. I'd considered it the smart move of an honest-to-God businesswoman along her chosen career path.

I sure hadn't had a clue Booker Jameson owned the joint. And even if I had, it never would have occurred to me he wouldn't even have the first idea who I was!

Rage and a bitter sense of betrayal thunders through my blood. So insulted am I—and so preoccupied with that bounder's ability to make my blood boil with caustic ire—I dismiss the interested looks cast my way by the two-man stage crew. The curious female dancer stretching over her long, shapely leg propped atop a work bench, however, makes a stronger impression. Perhaps because she watches me with such big-eyed, non-judgmental interest. But then her gaze drops along with the forehead she presses against her shin.

And I give my shoulder an impatient hitch. Of *course* I'm more aware of her. I just watched her and her sister on stage before my Twilight Room debut.

I draw in deep, calming breaths, but a fat lot of good they do me. I am so darn livid I can barely see straight.

And I'm *hurt*.

I hate to admit that last part. And in truth, the heart-stomping pain coming back to haunt me is a mere phantom of the agony it once was. So how the heck can I ache over something that's no longer even there?

It reminds me of Billy Wilson, back in Walla Walla. He used to marvel over the pain in the leg he'd lost in the war. A pain he felt in the long bones of the calf and foot that had been *amputated*.

No doubt this is something like that.

With all these emotions racing along my nerves, in my heart, in my *head*, I'm not paying attention to my surroundings. In a hurry to reach the privacy of my dressing room, I dodge around the electrician's big spool of cable in the corridor. When a woman suddenly steps into the hall, I am simply too close to stop on a dime.

I barrel smack into her.

Grabbing each other's arms, we perform an awkward little shuffle to keep from careening off the narrow hallway walls or ending up in a heap on the floor. "Botheration!" I snap when my right foot skids.

At least I manage to catch myself. And looking into the pretty face of the other dancer in the sister duo, I suck in my ire, my frustration, and exhale a deep breath.

Then grab a hold of all the runaway emotions coursing through me like balls in the pinball machine they had in the place before last where I sang. "I am so sorry. Are you all right?"

"Oh, pos-i-lute-ly, doll. Me and Clara have done more damage rehearsin' our act." A hint of Southern drawl adds softness to the modern slang, and she flashes a big smile. "I'm Dot Brasher."

"Lena Bjornstad," I reply. Then shrug. "Or Lola Baker, if you'd rather not deal with trying to keep real names straight from the stage ones."

"Oh, heck, girl, me and my sis have good memories, so what's a coupla names between new friends? Nice to meetcha, Lena."

The other Brasher sibling glides to a halt beside us. "I'm Clara," she says, clearly having heard the introductions. "Dot's sister."

"I know. I watched your act before my set. And, oh my goodness, you two were *darb*! Where I grew up we weren't allowed to dance, so I never learned. I do so admire those who can."

"You weren't allowed to *dance*?" Clara stares at me as if I'd said I wasn't allowed to breathe. "Why, that is just plain wicked! Where on earth did you grow up—in Hell?" She flashes a saucy smile. "Hell, Michigan, of course."

"Of course," I agree and grin back. "But it was closer to the interpretation most people think of when they hear 'hell'—I grew up in the Blood of Christ Foundling Home in Walla Walla. That's down south of here, Walla Walla is. Well, I guess so is the other place—" I make myself stop talking for a moment. "Sorry. I'm babbling. The B of C is owned and run by a rather fundamentalist church."

I wave that aside. "I sure adore watching people who do know how to dance, though. And I have *never* seen anyone quite like you two." For the first time since coming face-to-face with Booker, a genuine smile tugs at my lips. "Not to mention my fascination with how identical you look."

And how! Dot and Clara have the exact same short, shiny brown bob, big golden-brown eyes, prominent cheekbones and, of course, long, lean dancer's bodies. "I have never met twins before."

"You still haven't, doll—I'm thirteen months older than Sis. They just breed 'em true on Ma's side of the family." Clara's laugh is bawdy and infectious. "Heck, Dot and me know all the players and *still* it's tough telling who's who among all the cousins at the Rowland family reunions."

She opens a nearby door and stands aside, gesturing me to precede her into the room. "C'mon in. Feel free to help yourself to the flask over there. And do tell what led you to slappin' Mr. Jameson."

Dot's jaw drops. "She slapped *Mr. Jameson*?"

"Right across the kisser," Clara says. "You shoulda seen it, Dot. He said something I couldn't hear and offered her a glass of champagne, and she whacked him but good, drank the champagne, then swanned away. It was the cat's meow!"

Stunned into silence by the recitation of the altercation, I follow them into a dressing room that is perhaps a tiniest bit larger than the oversized closet I call my own. Clara closes the door behind us and gives me a level look, raising one eyebrow. "Can't say how smart it was to hit the man who signs your paychecks, though."

Still feeling raw and used, I open my mouth to tell the Brasher sisters exactly why I hit Mr. Booker Almighty Jameson. But Dot jumps into the conversation before I get a word out.

"He gave you *champagne*?" She stares at me as if I'm the It Girl, Miss Clara Bow, herself. "Wow. We've seen a lotta Janes try to snag his attention since we've been here. But I can state with God's honor truth I have never seen Mr. J buy any of them a drink." She glances at Clara. "Have you?"

"Huh-uh. He doesn't mingle with the likes of us. Oh, he's always respectful and he's charmin' as can be with the clients. But the man isn't all flash and strut like most of the speakeasy owners we've worked for. He's more Joe Brooks. And I've never seen him flirt with the high hat women or the flappers who frequent the joint, either."

"More Joe Brooks," I repeat and snort like a blue ribbon winner at the county fair. Appalled, I slap a hand over my mouth. *That* was less than elegant, for pity's sake.

Then I square my shoulders, along with the so called chip Matron

Davidson used to insist I carry on them. What do I care if I made a little-okay, loud-farm noise? I'm not elegant. I may play at it onstage, but that's as far as it goes. I drop my hand to my side. "Absolutely-his clothes are impeccable. Always were. But then he *is* the only son of the richest man in the town where I grew up."

The Brasher sisters squeal like they're riding one of the big wooden roller coasters at a same fair my pig noise came from. "Oh my gosh." Dot stares at me with big eyes. "So, you *did* know him before?"

In the Biblical sense, one could say. Not that I do. It's one among many facts and feelings buried deep in my Midnight File. I learned young at the Blood of Christ to keep my secrets secret. There was very little privacy, so I built my mental Midnight File. I envision it as a golden box with a strong lock, positioned deep in a closed room somewhere in the back of my mind. This is where I keep my most persistent emotions-the one's I simply cannot shake. I mentally sort through them in the dead of the night when all around me are asleep.

So, I don't say now what I'm thinking-not aloud at least. I can't control the way it whispers in my brain. "We have...history," I admit. Not, now that I've cooled down, I'm prepared to go into details about it with these women I have only just met. I do add honestly, however, "I had no idea he owned this lounge."

Had I, you could take it to the bank I never would have signed the contract. I am darn near one hundred percent certain of this.

"Didn't you talk to him when he hired you?"

"He didn't-a man named Leo Stone caught my act at the Tropics Lounge in Spokane. He bought me a cocktail after my show, and during our conversation he somehow talked me around to informing him my contract with the Tropics was coming up for renewal. Then he came back the following night and made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

I would never say this out loud, but I would have signed for far less money, just for the opportunity to play a larger, more sophisticated venue in a larger, more sophisticated city.

Clara's cheeks suddenly turn pink. "Leo is Mr. Jameson's manager." I can't tell for sure, but the careful neutrality of her voice makes me wonder if perhaps she, too, knows a little something about sharing a less than swell history with the wrong man.

Or heck, maybe she just thinks the manager is a sheik. Like Booker-especially this new version Booker-Leo's a very manly fella.

In any event, Clara clams up once the words leave her mouth, so I find myself filling the drawn-out silence when it edges into awkward territory. "I didn't learn that until today," I confess. "Before I got here, my dealings were all with Mr. Stone, including signing the

contract. Mr. Jameson wasn't even mentioned until I walked into the manager's office when I arrived here this evening."

The name had given me a jolt—I can't deny it. Aloud, however, I merely say, "I had no reason to connect the name with the Jamesons I knew back in Walla Walla."

Dot gives me a look. "How well, exactly, *did* you know him back in your home town?"

I hesitate, then say honestly, "I guess you could say he was my first love." My only love, actually. But that's a fact I feel no compulsion to share.

Those feelings turned to dust a long time ago, anyhow.

"Ooh, now you're on the trolley!" Clara twirls a hand, a clear invitation to keep talking. "Feel free to share the details."

"There isn't much to share. We went to the same high school, but he was two years ahead of me. And we attended different churches. Walla Walla isn't all that large, yet it's sizable enough we likely never would have crossed paths. But his mother hired some of the girls from the foundling home to serve at a party they hosted. I was assigned to the kitchen and Booker escaped there in order to avoid both his father, who never failed to lecture his expectations for his son, and an older woman who'd latched onto Booker. She, apparently, was a non-stop talker whom, from everything he said about her, sounded like she'd feel right at home at the Blood of Christ. Apparently, she, too, believed having too much fun puts us firmly on the path to hell."

Annd... not really pertinent, so I wave aside the aside. "Anyway, he chatted me up easy as could be, and since, according to Matron Davidson, I've never had a decent grasp on my proper place in life, I chatted right back." One of my hands involuntarily rises to splay atop the swell of my breast over my racing heart. "And, *oh*, he was interesting! Plus, he made me laugh." Like I had *never* laughed before that evening. I feel my smile stretch into a wide, lopsided smile. "There wasn't a whole lot of laughter at the Blood of Christ."

"And they couldn't see that might be a result when they hung a name like *that* on a home for orphaned kids?" Clara murmurs dryly. "Because, it doesn't exactly trip cheerily off the tongue."

I can't help myself, I laugh and then laugh harder still when the two sisters join in. "Oh, my," I say once we finally get our giggles under control. "I have a feeling knowing you two is going to be very, very good for me."