

ENGLISH • CHAPTER 1 LEAD MAGNET

Roaring Twenties Time Traveler

A Secrets & Prohibition Romance Novel set in the Golden Age of Jazz

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The Portal in the Rain

A driving autumn squall lashed the brick walls of the South Loop, turning the concrete beneath Maya Lin's soaked heels into slick mirrors of neon reflection. Rain drove sideways off the elevated train tracks, drumming a chaotic rhythm against iron pillars and rusted fire escapes. Clutched tightly inside the deep pocket of her tailored wool coat, the tarnished rose-brass pocket watch inherited from her historian grandmother radiated an unnatural, feverish heat. Its cracked crystal face vibrated beneath her thumb, the delicate gears humming with a high-pitched static that seemed to pull the moisture right out of the chilling October air. Seeking refuge from the deluge, Maya ducked into a recessed threshold marked by a sagging wooden bulkhead door, its warped oak frame swollen with age. When her fingers found the wrought-iron latch, the world around her lost its gravity; a sudden, gut-wrenching drop in barometric pressure caused the air to taste sharply of copper, and the rotting wood yielded with a sickening sound of torn suction.

Falling forward into darkness, her shoes missed the anticipated concrete landing, meeting instead a steep flight of damp stone risers that felt completely alien. Maya caught herself against a masonry wall rough with calcified mortar, her knuckles scraping against coarse limestone blocks that wept cold cellar moisture. Her smartphone, shoved into her coat pocket alongside the vibrating relic, flickered once with a blinding flare of white before dying completely, its lithium battery permanently inert. Silence enveloped her, heavy and thick with the smell of damp earth, seasoned white oak casks, and unrefined sulfur matches. As she pulled the brass heirloom from her pocket, she observed the tiny second hand twitching erratically in reverse against the celestial engraving on its casing. The low rumble of modern traffic had evaporated, replaced by an unsettling, subterranean stillness punctuated only by water dripping steadily into a floor trench.

Above the damp chill, a distinct vibration traveled through the timber joists spanning the cellar ceiling. It was not the mechanical drone of modern ventilation, but the acoustic resonance of live instrumentation: a muted cornet biting sharply into a syncopated cadence, underpinned by the buoyant stride of an acoustic upright bass and a ragtime piano. The music possessed an unfiltered, raw velocity that pulled at Maya's trained ear. Straightening her damp coat and smoothing down her shoulder-length dark hair, which she hastily gathered into a faux-bob against the nape of her neck, she followed the rising crescendo toward a narrow doorway at the far end of the subterranean corridor. A faint stripe of amber illumination traced the uneven perimeter of the portal, accompanied by the muffled murmur of clinking glassware and collective laughter.

Stepping through the threshold, Maya found herself standing on the periphery of a bustling, subterranean cavern carved from yellowed brick and arches of raw timber. Thick wreaths of blue-gray tobacco smoke hung in layered strata beneath the vaulted ceiling, catching the warm glow of low-wattage amber sconces. The air carried the biting perfume of illegal Canadian rye whiskey, French gardenia water, and damp wool. Men in sharp double-breasted suits with wide lapels sat around polished walnut tables, their fedoras resting near cut-crystal coupe glasses, while women with drop-waist silk frocks and tightly pinned finger waves leaned in close over whispered conversations. There were no digital screens, no modern fixtures, and no electric hums; every single surface spoke of handmade joinery and clandestine purpose. A hand-painted sign near the service pantry bore an elegant cursive script: The Velvet Cellar.

Disorientation struck Maya with the force of a physical blow, leaving her chest tight as she surveyed the impossibly authentic panorama. Her modern garments, while vintage in aesthetic, lacked the heavy hand-stitched tailoring worn by the patrons, and her five-foot-six frame felt intensely exposed against the masonry archway. Near the back of the bandstand, a small service hallway offered a sliver of refuge between towering stacks of wooden crates stamped with faded Canadian export stencils. Stepping back into the deeper shadows to steady her trembling hands, she leaned her head against a vertical support beam, watching the house band conclude their brassy number with a flourish of brushes against calfskin snare drums. The world around her was not a theatrical set; the grit beneath her shoes, the scent of parched coal dust, and the biting reality of the storm leaking through high ground-level grates confirmed an impossible truth. She was stranded in the autumn of 1924.

To tether her fraying nerves, Maya did the only thing that had ever kept her grounded during moments of sheer panic: she hummed. Drawing air deep into her lungs, she let loose a low, resonant vocal run, a modern neo-soul scale laced with microtonal blues inflections that slid cleanly between the standard minor third and fifth intervals. The melody was liquid and complex, entirely foreign to the bright, rigid phrasing of the early jazz era echoing through the room. Her warm olive throat vibrated with the descending run, ending on an unresolved, sultry seventh that drifted softly down the timber-paneled corridor toward the private administrative offices tucked behind the cold storage lockers.

“That is a peculiar tune for a wet night in the Loop,” a measured voice remarked from the gloom behind the crates.

Maya spun around, her shoulder brushing against a stacked crate of rye, to find a tall figure emerging from the private alcove. Standing six feet and one inch, Julian Vance possessed a formidable presence that towered over her by seven full inches, forcing her gaze upward to meet a pair of piercing, steel-gray eyes. His dark blond hair was neatly parted and slicked back with pomade, framing a chiseled jaw that remained utterly impassive. Dressed in a tailored charcoal wool suit with a silk pocket square tucked precisely into his breast pocket, he carried himself with the rigid economy of motion born of trench warfare. In his right hand, he held a dented sterling silver flask bearing a faint military division insignia, though he made no move to drink from it. His gaze dropped briefly to her damp coat, taking in the unusual cut of her collar before fixing squarely on her upturned face.

“I was looking for shelter from the downpour,” Maya said, her voice steady despite the adrenaline surging through her veins. She kept her fingers wrapped around the brass watch inside her pocket, ensuring the metal remained concealed. “I didn’t mean to trespass in your back hall.”

Julian studied her for several long seconds, his expression an impenetrable mask that revealed nothing of his thoughts. He did not step forward, nor did his guarded demeanor soften, but his eyes narrowed slightly as if cataloging an anomaly that did not belong on his ledger. “The weather outside is sour, but wandering past the service entrance is a poor way to stay dry. The alley door is meant to be bolted from the inside. How did you get down those stairs, Miss?”

“The latch was loose,” she replied smoothly, holding his austere gaze without flinching. “And the music was loud enough to carry through the bricks. I sing for my supper back where I come from, so when I hear a cornet in B-flat, my feet usually follow.”

A flicker of calculating interest passed through Julian’s gray eyes, though his stoic jaw remained set and his voice retained its formal, low-pitched cadence. “A singer. That explains the notes you were dropping into the dust just now. They sounded less like Chicago and more like something that hasn’t been written down yet.” He glanced past her toward the bustling main room, where the house pianist was currently flipping through worn sheets of ragtime compositions. “You have wet shoes and no escort, Miss, both of which attract unwanted attention in a cellar like this.”

Before Maya could reply, the velvet drapery dividing the service corridor from the performance stage parted, revealing a slender woman with lively auburn curls and sharp, assessing brown eyes. Clara Delancey looked between Julian and the unfamiliar stranger, her fingers lingering on the silver charm bracelet jingling at her wrist as she took in Maya's soaked coat and unmistakable composure.

"Mr. Vance," Clara said briskly, nodding toward the bandstand. "The room is getting restless between sets, and the boys need someone who can carry a tune in three-four time before the midnight crowd starts demanding their coats." Her gaze shifted directly to Maya, widening with curiosity at the stranger's striking posture. "Who is your guest?"

Julian slowly pocketed the silver flask inside his vest, his eyes never truly leaving Maya's face as an unreadable calculation settled over his features. "A traveler with a peculiar scale in her throat, Clara. She claims she sings for her supper. Let us find out if her talent matches the boldness of her entrance."

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