

The following is from the first chapter of *Soul Cavalcade*.

ESMÉ HAD TO GET the pants to fit. The pants? Yes, the pants. Everything else was perfect, but the slacks were too long—they dragged over the heels of her thick black shoes, scraped the ground, made her look sort of bumbling and tramplike. She put a blank grin on her face, then twirled her fingers like she was playing Charlie Chaplin. A quick smile to herself.

She'd had the idea right there on the lawn in front of FDL studios, and set right to work. The clothes had come from a secondhand shop on 10th Street, and as she regarded herself in the mirror now, she was impressed. The suit jacket fit her shoulders perfectly, and the open-collared BanLon shirt hung straight down with no telltale bulges (though the hospital tape she'd used on her breasts was a little itchy; she'd have to find something better). The sleek beaver fedora rode her forehead like she was Daddy Cool. (She had enough hairpins under it that if she walked past a big enough magnet, she'd glom right to it.) But the pants . . . the damn pants was draggin'.

On her way home she thought more about her hair. If her ploy worked, she'd have to cut it—yeah, she'd have to. She took a long, whistling breath. It wasn't that she was particularly vain, and it wasn't that her hair was that long, but she knew she couldn't get away with wearing a hat all the time. So the curls would have to go. Maybe a nice medium-short cut, keep a hint of style. . . . Well, she'd worry that if she passed her audition.

A long sigh. *If* she passed the audition. That's what she was worrying about when she got home and her mother greeted her with an "Esmé, look at you. What're you doin' in that suit? What're you got up as?"

"Nothing, Mom," Esmé said, walking through the well-swept hall. "Can you just help me with these pants?"

"I asked you a question."

"Oh, just something me and the girls are doin'. With our singing."

"The singing again?" Mrs. Hunter's beauty parlors often kept her late into the evening. She was home today after a doctor's appointment, nothing serious.

"I just thought you could trim the pants."

"For the singing?"

"Yes, Mom!" Esmé pouted.

"And not for the college applications like we talked about?"

"I'm working on that too."

"I let you go to that Chicago last year, and—"

"I know. I said I'd be applying." Esmé sighed. "And I will be."

"When?"

"Mom, you know I love singing. There's something I gotta do—"

"Wearing men's clothes?"

"Mom, please, are you going to help me, or do I have to go find some tailor with pins in his mouth?"

Mrs. Hunter was a big-fronted woman, with two chins now but the memories of being young and gorgeous. "Maybe you should put some pins in *your* mouth, see how you sing with that," she said. Esmé looked hard at her. Mrs. Hunter cocked her well-plucked right eyebrow. And like that both women cracked up.

The next morning Esmé woke powerfully unsure of herself. Me, a man? What am I thinking?

But the longer she noodled the notion around, the more she saw how great it could be—if she could pull it off. She was all charged up to run right back to FDL, but figured that she should wait a bit, practice her deception, and also give Bones Chapman more time to forget the girl who had just sung for him.

For a week she spent each afternoon in her new getup. She went to the movies and boldly used the Men's room, slipping carefully into a stall; nobody said a word. She went to a local batting cage and slapped around some balls; well, maybe she hit like a girl, but nobody called her on it.

But she truly didn't know she was ready till she went to the downtown Grand Ballroom, where in her deepest voice she asked a series of lovely ladies to dance; and though not all of them accepted, nobody stopped and shrieked, Who are you? What are you doing? No, arm in arm, she moved across the floor, all the time thinking, Oh, my God, this is going to work!

The next day she waited till her mother headed off to her main beauty shop, then bound her breasts and pulled on her man's suit, appreciating the way the cuffs rode the tasseled loafers she'd picked up at Thom McAnn's, clipped back her hair again, snapped the brim on her fedora, and headed on out.

It was Doris again at the reception desk, and Esmé approached her warily. The receptionist was chewing her pencil and dithering over more of the sheets of scrawled lines, but when she looked up at Esmé, there was a quick-glow smile on her face that went off at Esmé like a flashbulb.

"Hey, sugar," she said, eyebrows up. "I'm Doris. Can I help you?"

"I'm hear to see Mr. Chapman." Was her voice low enough? It was still unnatural to speak this way, and Esmé felt like she had big marbles rolling around in her mouth. "Mister Boooones [rattle, rattle] Chapman."

"Sure, handsome." Glance down at a large kid-skin-covered book. "Do you got an appointment?"

"I'm here to try out for the Cravattes. I heard Mr. Chapman's looking for a tenor."

"You heard right." Doris lit up even brighter. "Tha's all we're hearing 'round here, gotta fill out the Cravattes. Got the tour comin' up, gotta fill out the Cravattes." A lingering appraising glance. "You sing good as you look?"

Esmé laughed. Hey, this was easy. A smile. "Hope so."

"Well, let me buzz Mr. Bones and we'll all find out."

Doris pointed Esmé to the same seat next to the big potted plant. Like the time before, beautiful men and women walked through the foyer, dressed to the bloody nines, laughing, chuckling, humming under their breaths. As before, this place, the FDL lobby, seemed to buzz with all the excitement Esmé could imagine.

She was so lost to her own swimmingly grand thoughts that she didn't notice Doris beckoning to her.

"Sir." The unexpected word went right past Esmé. "*Sir!*" A loud bark that broke through Esmé's reverie. "Mr. Chapman is ready for you now."

Esmé got up, and Doris briskly waved her to the thick, mysterious door. "By the way," the receptionist said, "what's your name?"

"Esss—" Esmé bit her tongue. God! She hadn't thought of a name. Quick, quick. "Um, Eddie—Edward."

"Edward what?"

She'd used her real full name the day before and figured that saying "Hunter" might raise more questions than she wanted. She thought of her real father's name, Days, and that's what came out.

"O.K., Eddie Days, good luck."

"So, it's Eddie?" Bones Chapman was waiting right inside the door for her. "Hi, I'm Bones." He stuck out his thick hand, grasped Esmé's with a meaty, all-encompassing tight grip. She tried to give her firmest squeeze back, then held his eyes for a second, then a second longer, waiting for him to . . . but no, there was no trace of recognition or anything else out of the usual. "Sorry to keep you waiting, son."

"No problem," Esmé said in her low, rolling-marbles voice.

"Well, I'm pretty busy—you can imagine—but I can give you as much time as you need to audition. O.K.?"

"Absolutely."

"Good. Here, let me take your hat." Chapman reached out to her—

Esmé heard her breath get sucked in. "If you don't mind, I'm more, um, comfortable with it on." She touched the smooth beaver pelt. "All right?"

"Like Frankie, eh?" Bones shrugged. "No problem. Come on, right this way."

Esmé in her suit and her loafers followed Bones along a corridor, left, right, then into a small room dominated by a large walnut desk and a tall-backed leather chair. "This is my office," Bones said. "Thought I'd just hear your voice in here. O.K.?"

Esmé felt her hands shake. She was nervous as could be, but she knew she had a fine voice—well, a fine women's voice—but she'd told Chapman on the way here that she sang high for a man, and he said cheerfully that that was just what the Cravattes needed, which Esmé of course knew but didn't let on. So here they were. "You want me just to sing?"

"Just to hear the quality of your voice, Eddie," Bones said. "You know, I'm not great shakes as a singer, that's why I got into this end of the business, but I can carry a tune." In truth Chapman had been a member of the Four Clubs, an early '50s vocal group that didn't make it out of the '78 era. "I'll lay down a bottom, you just come on up over it. O.K.?"

Esmé—Eddie—nodded. Chapman started right in with some doo-woppy *shoo-be-dooos*, *shoo-beee-deeeees*, which Esmé recognized as from *In the Still of the Night*, and on the perfect beat she came in with the verse. Her voice warbled nervously for a second, then, like a boat just launched, righted itself. Chapman's *shoo-be-doo-bees* were smooth as silken seas, and Esmé sailed right above them.

"Nice," Bones said, and there was true appreciation in his voice. "You been singing long? How come I haven't heard of you, Mr. Eddie Days?"

"I did a little work in Chicago," Esmé said, which wasn't quite true. "Not so much here."

"You from the Windy City?"

She shook her head. "No, no, Detroit born and raised."

Bones smiled. "That's the way we like 'em. Here, let's go with another song. New one we're working on, called *Let the Doorbell Ring*. Wanna see how fast you pick it up."

Esmé raised her large eyes.

"It's a genuine test, Eddie, but this is a *real* audition, and I got me a real situation with the Cravattes. A *real* situation." He moved around the desk until he stood right in front of Esmé. "O.K., let's go."

Bones clapped his hands, then sang the melody to the new song: "*Baby, fall into my arms / I'm right*

here before you. . .” He did it slow and not as high as the song was supposed to be—even as he sang, he kept pointing up with his thumbs—but to her joy, Esmé knew just where the tune was going and got it right away. It was a natural melody, and it felt smooth and soulful to her. She let Chapman’s first go-round pass by, then joined him note for note on the second, and waved him silent halfway through the verse. There she was, in the office of the head of Fleur-de-Lys Records, singing a cappella, her voice as naked as if she’d just left the bath, and that’s how she felt: shimmery, wet, sleek as a seal. She nailed those notes, spiked ’em, and came back for more. Chapman moved back, sitting on the edge of his desk, and Esmé sang and sang. “What’s the second verse?” she stage-whispered instead of catching her breath, and as Bones spoke the words to her, she immediately dropped them onto the notes now so vivid to her she could see them hanging in the air like bright slashes of color. Same thing with the third and final verse, and she knew she’d aced it. Bones didn’t say a word, just looked at her with a curious, sharp smile. Finally, almost imperceptible, a tiny nod, then: “Come on, Eddie, right this way.”

Back along the corridor, then down to the basement, to the two heavy quilted-Naugahyde-covered doors. Over there was the room she and her friends had auditioned in the day before, but this time they went left, into Studio 1.

Esmé was holding her breath. The room was so full she couldn’t take in everything at once. There were large hanging speakers and wall baffles, music stands and boom microphones. But what filled up the room were the people. There was the whole band from the day before, big-shouldered drummer, zoot-suited electric bassist, a guitarist, a piano guy with long, be-ringed digits in front of a chipped-wood upright, and even a small string section, two violas and a violin, each guy hipster cool, little beatnik goatees on their chins, more than one wearing a fedora just like Esmé’s as well as dark glasses. They were all smoking like crazy, and now she was in the middle of the fog. When she got to the center of the room she found a big-bulbed microphone on a stand, and arrayed around it the three Cravattes: tall, bearded Mitch Williams, sloe-eyed Otis Handler, and the shorter Robert Warwick, focused and intense behind his black-rimmed glasses.

Esmé finally let her breath out. “All this was here while you were auditioning me?”

“Nothing less,” Bones said with a smile. Then: “Actually, we’ve been rehearsing that new song *Let the Doorbell Ring*, getting ready to put it on tape. You came at just the right time.”

She shook her head. No, it was way too much to take in at once. She stood aside and heard Bones say, distantly, as if he were speaking in a wind tunnel, “Guys, this is Eddie Days—and he just might make ours. I just heard him upstairs, and he’s got a sweet, sweet voice. Just what we need up top, I think. Mitch, move over, let him in to stand next to you.”

Esmé, who was supposed to move, just stood there. The room swirled and tilted and fun-housed like mad.

“Eddie?” She blinked. “Eddie?”

“Um, yeah?”

“You’re right there next to Mitch,” Bones said. Then: “You don’t know the guys yet, do you? Eddie, this is Mitch Williams, he’s the sport of the group, right Mitch? The sportin’ man.” Mitch Williams had a hand large as a baseball glove, and it swallowed up Esmé’s, as well as half her wrist. Up close he had cloudy, unsettled eyes, but his smile through his black beard was large, friendly, sound.

“And this here is Otis Handler. We call him Oat. He’s the lovah man in the Cravattes. The lov-aah-aah man, even though he went and got himself married.” Bones guffawed. “Still, it’s a good thing you ain’t a chickie, he’d be all over you.”

Otis blushed but still lifted an eyebrow in a gesture that said, *I won't admit it, but you know it's true.*

"And then we got our little genius here, Mr. Robert Warwick. Robert here wants to write songs and produce 'em, right, Robert?" Robert Warwick looked down, his gaze avoiding Esmé's. "Oh, yes, he's also a shy boy. Right, Robert? Likes to hide behind his big black specs." Esmé felt the tension between Chapman and Warwick. The boy might be shy, she could tell, but he wasn't any kind of pushover. Keeping his head down, Robert lifted his brow enough for his striking hazel eyes to look up; he gave Esmé a gentle handshake.

"A pleasure," Esmé said loudly. She was coming back to herself. As astonishing as it was to be here right in the Fleur-de-Lys studios, with the Cravattes and a cooking band, she quickly was understanding that in idle moments and daydreams she'd been just here a thousand times before, and she was beginning to feel more and more at home.

"So let's get to work," Bones said, moving to a small glass-windowed control room off the studio. "Eddie's a quick study. I got him up on *Doorbell* upstairs. Eddie, this is an Otis Handler lead, he's got the bedroom voice to put it over, but I want you to find a harmony with the other guys. Then on that final line of the verse, "*So let the door . . . bell . . . ring,*" you double Otis up an octave. I want it to float, guys—" Bones fluttered his fingers lightly over his bull-like head—"butterfly, but-ter-fly."

The band dropped into the down beat, and Mitch Williams and Robert Warwick, the tall cup of cocoa and the squat mug of intense java, swooped up to a mike and lay down a floor of *ooob-ooobhs*. Esmé, sensing her cue, stepped up a few seconds later and joined them. This was of course the first time she'd sung with the real-life Cravattes, and she was curious how her voice—her male voice—would blend with theirs. After a half-hesitant warble, it fit perfectly—honey down a jar. She wasn't the only one curious. She saw Bones eyeing her closely, and not the least, her new groupmates, Mitch, Robert, and Otis, hanging back for the lead to kick in. The way she read their faces, they weren't ready to commit themselves yet, but they weren't scorning her; no, far from it, and as she rode the ups and downs of the *ooohing* background with them, she felt herself fit tighter and tighter. It's like she knew where they were going, no, even easier than that, it was like they were a big truck on the highway and she was simply caught, confidently and gracefully, in their slipstream.

Otis Handler stepped to his own mike, the strings swelling behind his entrance, and lay down into the verse: "*Baby, baby, you gotta fall into my arms / Here I stand, I'm right here before you / I'm right, right, right here fo-ooo-orrrr you / So let the . . . door . . . bell . . . ring.*"

And, yes, Esmé was there with him on the final line, doubling Otis easily, the wispy curl atop his low smoky voice, and they both held that word *riiiiiinnng* until the violins swept in and carried the harmony away.

Esmé felt tingles, yes she did, up and down her neck, even along her arms. This was . . . better than the Darlingettes. This was the big time, real musicians, real music. She was thrilled.

Verse two, then a string-section bridge, during which the three other Cravattes fell into dance moves—step forward, step back, spin, bow, then as one step forward again—that Esmé could only stand back and admire. These boys had it, cool as ice, but smoking! But she had it too, and she felt in her hips the same moves they were making a moment after they made them. This was going to work out! This was where she was meant to be, in the mother-jumpin' Cravattes. How amazing was that? But Esmé wasn't going to question it; there was too much music to be made.

Bones liked that first take, didn't much like the second, and kept them at it through seventeen more till he said, "That first one was the freshest, let's go with that one—no, let's take it again tomorrow.

Eddie, you'll have a chance to sleep on it all, right? I saw you moving there, you're gettin' in the groove." Bones stood, clapped his hands. "O.K., everyone, back here first thing tomorrow morning. And don't forget, the Soul Cavalcade rolls in two weeks. That's two short weeks. Got it?"

Nods all around Esmé. She was thinking, Soul Cavalcade?

"So you'll be ready?" Bones said to Esmé.

"You mean I'm—"

"Yeah, you're in. Congratulations."

"Well—" Before she could say anything, the three other Cravattes came up and shook her hand vigorously. She was overjoyed, of course, but confused in more ways than she could understand.

"The Soul Cavalcade?" she finally said.

"Bus tour," Robert Warwick said, standing next to her. "Bones is sending the whole lot of us out on tour."

"On a—"

"Big bus. We did a short one a year ago, but now we're hitting half the country. It's an—" up went his eyebrows "—experience."

"Yeah?" What Esmé was thinking was, On a bus? Where we'll all be living together, higgledy-piggledy? A sigh. Could she conceal her true identity? Could she keep making it with the group? And then at least one pleasant question: Would *Doorbell* be a hit?

It was as if Robert read her mind. "That's why Bones is working us so hard. He wants *Let the Doorbell Ring* on the charts by then, so we can perform behind it."

"I guess."

"It's a lot at you, isn't it?" This Robert Warwick had a way about him, a way he seemed to understand her without her doing anything or him even half trying. Like he really could read her . . . well, at least some of her. She made a note: *He* was the one who could blow her masquerade.

"It's my dream," she said, even deeper than she'd been speaking—nerves. "Man." That last word sounded phony even to her ears; false jivey. She'd have to watch it. She understood now she could comport herself in her masquerade almost naturally, but if she became self-conscious, well, this Robert Warwick would be all over that.

As he was now. "Yeah, maaaannnn," he said, then laughed. Esmé blushed, took a deep, anxious breath and held it. But all Warwick said was, "Hey, Eddie, see you tomorrow. We'll nail *Doorbell* then, right?"