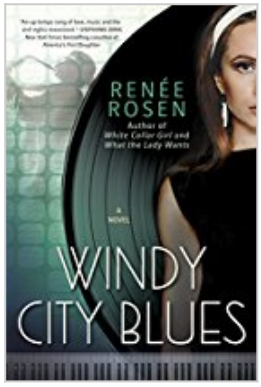

Windy City Blues

By Renée Rosen

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"The rise of the Chicago Blues scene fairly shimmers with verve and intensity, and the large, diverse cast of characters is indelibly portrayed with the perfect pitch of a true artist."
—Melanie Benjamin, New York Times bestselling author of *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*

Leeba Groski doesn't exactly fit in, but her love of music is not lost on her childhood friend and neighbor, Leonard Chess, who offers her a job at his new record company in Chicago. What starts as answering phones and filing becomes more than Leeba ever dreamed of, as she comes into her own as a songwriter and crosses paths with legendary performers like Chuck Berry and Etta James. But it's Red Dupree, a black blues guitarist from Louisiana, who captures her heart and changes her life.

Their relationship is unwelcome in segregated Chicago and they are shunned by Leeba's Orthodox Jewish family. Yet in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, Leeba and Red discover that, in times of struggle, music can bring people together.

READERS GUIDE INSIDE

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for *Windy City Blues*

"Renee Rosen's passion for her subject matter is evident in every single word of *Windy City Blues*. This novel about the rise of the Chicago Blues scene fairly shimmers with verve and intensity, and the large, diverse cast of characters is indelibly portrayed with the perfect pitch of a true artist."—Melanie Benjamin, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Swans of Fifth Avenue*

"An up-tempo song of love, music, and the Civil Rights movement."—Stephanie Dray, *New York Times* Bestselling co-author of *America's First Daughter*

"Bursting with the vitality of the new blues scene in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s."—Andrew Gross, author of *The One Man*

"Colorful personalities, fun cameos, and forbidden love light up Renee Rosen's immersive story, set deep in the heart of Chicago's blues scene. A vivid and thought-provoking tale that will have your toes tapping!"—Laura Kamoie, *New York Times* Bestselling co-author of *America's First Daughter*

"*Windy City Blues* captures the heartbeat of Chicago in guitar riffs and harmonica slides. An ode to diversity and love's enduring power to unite. A message we need to hear—and sing out— most especially in these times."—Sarah McCoy, *New York Times* and international bestselling author of *The Mapmaker's Children*

"Fast paced and impeccably researched...A timely, captivating love story that kept me reading long into the night."—Kristina McMorris, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Edge of Lost*

"With an expert hand, Rosen deftly defines the struggles facing whites, blacks, Jews and immigrants in a changing world that allowed music to bind them together in a heartbreaking yet triumphant song. I was mesmerized from the first page."—Laura Lane McNeal, author of *Dollbaby*

"Rosen captures the birth of Chicago blues from its shabby inception to its raucous success. She gives us a world of blacks and Jews, migrants and immigrants, musicians and their admirers. I was engrossed by this novel."—Mary Morris, author of *The Jazz Palace*

"Riveting reading, often heartbreaking, with moments of pure elation."—Shelley Noble, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Whisper Beach*

"*Windy City Blues* is a mesmerizing jazz ballad of a book, riffing easily between deeper themes of ambition, politics, business, love, and violence, but always returning to the central melody: the rock-solid love of an interracial couple standing shoulder to shoulder in the dual rise of the civil rights movement and the blues. They are destined to leave their mark on both in this splendid new tale from Renee Rosen!"—Kate Quinn, author of *The Alice Network*

"Vivid writing, compelling characters, and a rocking who's who of Chicago blues' legends make Renee Rosen's sweeping tale of forbidden love and civil rights an intoxicating read."—Alix Rickloff, author of *Secrets of Nanreath Hall*

"With *Windy City Blues*, her impeccably researched take on the rise of the Chicago Blues, Renee Rosen once again demonstrates her mastery of historical fiction. This is a lyrical, heartfelt and immersive tale that transports even as it entertains and enchants."—Jennifer Robson, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Moonlight Over Paris*

“For anyone who loves rock-and-roll and the blues, Rosen’s novel is perfection… Rosen skillfully weaves fact and fiction into her story of challenges, triumphs, music and political change. A not-to-be-missed novel that hits all the right notes.”—*RT* Book Review Top Pick

“Renee Rosen’s multi-layered, melodious story pulses with an exciting rhythm all its own as it brings the music scene of postwar Chicago to thrilling life. Seamlessly interweaving historical and fictional characters, Windy City Blues traces the changes in society over the 1950s and 60s, and the soundtrack that both affected and reflected it. At once gritty and tender, sweet and soulful, it is an unblinking look at America’s past and above all, a story of love for music, for each other, and for life.”—Sarah-Jane Stratford, author of *Radio Girls*

“Renée Rosen's *Windy City Blues* is a book as cool as the music that guides the story. But what brings the heat is the love between Jewish Leeba and African-American Red Dupree, as they navigate the explosive Chicago blues scene of the 50s and 60s, while trying to push past the forces intent on tearing them apart. The lyric beat of the era will pull you in to this meticulously researched novel, but the themes of race, identity and forbidden love make Rosen's story as timeless as a good tune.” —Karin Tanabe, author of *The Gilded Years*

“Rosen puts real characters on the stage and makes them sing and play for their lives. Racial conflict--black, white, Jewish--is front and center, making the struggles and triumphs as relevant to today's world as they were sixty years ago, strumming the same heartbreaking, soulful, all-too-human riff."—Sonja Yoerg, author of *All the Best People*

Praise for *White Collar Girl*

“An unforgettable novel about an ambitious woman’s struggle to break into the male dominated newspaper world of the 1950s.”—Sara Gruen, *New York Times* bestselling author of *At the Water’s Edge*

About the Author
Renee Rosen is the bestselling author of *White Collar Girl*, *What the Lady Wants*, *Dollface*, and the young adult novel, *Every Crooked Pot*. She lives in Chicago.

The blues had a baby and they named it rock ’n’ roll.

—McKinley Morganfield, a.k.a. Muddy Waters

Prologue

“Sweet Little Angel”

1933

She did her worshipping from the hood of a rusted-out Chevrolet in a junkyard on Twenty-ninth and State Street across from the church. Leeba Groski felt closer to God there than she ever did in a synagogue. It was a Sunday morning and she’d tagged along with the neighbor boys, Leonard and Phil Chess. They sat three in a row on the hood, their feet resting on the bumper while they listened to the gospel music pouring out of the church’s open door and windows. Even in Chicago’s August heat the piano music and voices gave Leeba goose bumps as she clapped and sang along to “Jesus Gave Me Water.” Leeba didn’t have a great voice, but when she sang you couldn’t hear her accent. If she could, she would have said everything in a song.

She was seven years old when her family arrived from Poland. The only English word she knew back then was okay. So everything was okay.

“How old are you?”

“Okay.”

“Where do you live?”

“Okay.”

“Stupid kike.”

“Okay.”

Now she was eleven, sitting in a junkyard singing without holding back, tapping her toes inside her hand-me-down shoes. Music so magical, it made her body move, her fingers snapping as effortlessly as her heart pumped, as her lungs took in air. As Leeba swayed to the music all else disappeared. Gone were the rows of decrepit autos, the chain-link fence, the scent of gasoline and the stench from the nearby stockyards. Even the empty liquor bottles and trodden trash on the ground vanished. All that existed in that moment was the music. She surrendered to it, letting it lift her up inside.

When the song ended, Leonard tapped her on the shoulder, offering her a Lucky Strike before cupping his hand around a match, blocking the wind while he lit his. He was sixteen and had been smoking for as long as Leeba could remember. Phil, four years younger and enamored of his big brother, patted down his flattop and reached for a cigarette of his own. Leeba contemplated trying one, until she became distracted by a young girl standing outside the church in a flowing white robe, the breeze catching her sleeves, billowing them up like angel wings. The young girl with skin the color of cocoa tilted her head toward the heavens and opened wide, singing “Move On Up a Little Higher.” The words boomed from her with a force that seemed to shoot forth from the earth and move through her. Leeba watched, listened, astonished. Was that coming from her?

“Motherfucker,” said Leonard, as that was his favorite word, suitable for any and all occasions and often employed as a term of endearment.

“Yeah, motherfucker,” said Phil, nodding. He liked that word, too, mostly because Leonard liked it so much.

When the song was over, the singing angel kicked a cluster of pebbles that sent dust across the lot before she

was summoned back inside the church.

“Boys, get back to work,” Mr. Chess called out in a thick Yiddish accent. He owned the junkyard and Leonard and Phil worked there in the summertime and on weekends. “Boys,” he called again. “We have lots to do.”

One by one they slid off the car hood, the brothers darting their cigarettes to the ground. The music in the church had stopped. There was no piano, no singers, just barking dogs, horns honking in the distance and the preacher delivering his sermon. The junkyard lost its sanctity and Leeba found herself back in a land of broken headlights and shattered windshields. Her friends had things to do, and Leeba was left with a long day to fill all by herself. Jacks, solitaire, her jump rope, a library book, the piano—she contemplated her substitute playmates.

Leeba left the brothers to stack tires and headed toward the bus, shuffling along in Cousin Eli’s shoes. They were a size too small for him and a size too big for her, but her mother wouldn’t spend the money for a new pair. Why, when those are perfectly good? Leeba polished and buffed them, but still they looked like boys’ shoes that didn’t fit. It was bad enough that she was taller than the other girls, taller than the boys, too. In the fifth grade she already stood five-four and she wasn’t done yet. Other mothers urged their children to stand up straight, shoulders back. But fearing her height would scare off the boys, Leeba’s mother never corrected her for slouching, her torso sunk in like a C. And even then she still towered over her classmates. Her father said her long legs were a fluke. Even the men in her family—on both sides—struggled to reach five-seven.

Twenty minutes later the bus dropped Leeba off in a section of Chicago called Lawndale. The Groskis lived over there on a shady, tree-lined street where everyone knew everyone else. Their house in the center of Karlov Avenue was a simple four-flat with a brick exterior. They had the first-floor apartment, three rooms for the four of them: Leeba’s parents, her younger sister, Golda, and her. Compared to how they’d lived in the shtetl, their village in Poland, this was a castle. Uncle Moishe, Aunt Sylvie and Cousin Eli had the apartment across the hall.

Leonard and Phil Chess lived in the building next door on the second floor. Leeba’s mother was the only person who still referred to them by their Polish surname, Czyz. She called the parents Cryla and Yasel instead of Cecile and Joseph. They never corrected her, but the boys, Lejzor and Fizsel, were quick to remind her that they only answered to Leonard and Phil. The Chess family had come over in 1928, a year before the Groskis, but to Leeba they were true Chicagoans who had American names and ate hot dogs and spoke English, their accents beginning to fade as beautifully as a setting sun.

Leeba entered the small foyer to the building where the wallpaper curled away from the corner seam. The hallway smelled of boiled cabbage. Her mother was cooking again. Leeba wiped her big shoes on the welcome mat with Shalom running across the burlap in black Hebrew letters.

“Leeba, iz az ir?” her mother called out when she opened the front door.

Leeba saw the tips of her mother’s pink slippers poking out of the kitchen alcove. “Ya, Mama, ikh bin heym.”

Yiddish was the only language spoken in the Groski home because Leeba’s mother had never learned English. She claimed she had no use for it, whereas Leeba found it a necessity, even if confounding. When was a kernel something that got caught in your teeth and when was it an army officer? Words like choir, knife and gnat—even more puzzling. She wrestled with words in her diary, in the poems she wrote, in the little songs she made up. She mentally rehearsed each time she spoke, wanting only to sound American.

With the church music fresh in her head, Leeba went into the living room and sat at the piano. It was a secondhand upright with keys as yellowed as an old woman's teeth and an F key that stuck in humid weather. Her father had splurged on the piano after her teacher at Theodore Herzl Elementary realized Leeba could play by ear. If she heard a song enough times she could play it back note for note. How her fingers knew which keys to strike she didn't know, couldn't explain. From the age of ten Leeba had taken private lessons at the J.P.I., the Jewish People's Institute, on Douglas Boulevard. But even before that she had taught herself to play "Stormy Weather," "Sitting on Top of the World" and other songs she'd heard on the radio.

She got her talent from her father, who had played in a klezmer band back in their shtetl. He still held concerts at their Lawndale home, where neighbors—all of them from the Old World—gathered in their living room to drink schnapps from mismatched shot glasses while Leeba played the piano. Her father accompanied her on violin and Uncle Moishe on the clarinet. Leeba was the center of attention those nights, relishing the admiring looks, the praise, savoring every moment before the song ended and everyone's focus went elsewhere. She knew that this—being able to play like she did—was the one thing that made her special. It was the tradeoff God had given her for being born too tall and with the curls that some called "Jew hair."

While Leeba sat at the piano, the gospel music from earlier played inside her head as her fingers instinctively found the notes, sounding out the melody for "Jesus Gave Me Water." She played that song over and over until her mother called her to dinner, where the rest of the family was already seated at the table, waiting on her. The usual chatter while they ate was lost on Leeba, who still heard the music playing inside her head.

Afterward, she stood next to her mother at the kitchen sink, drying the dishes while her mother washed. Golda was in the living room listening to The Lone Ranger on the radio while her father sat at the table building a model airplane out of balsa wood, the smell of airplane glue heavy in the air. While he assembled the pieces, Leeba's mother complained about the schwartzes who had moved to Lawndale.

"It's the Glucks' fault," her mother said. "How could they have sold to Negroes?"

"What I don't understand," her father said, pressing two glued sections together, "is why they would want to live in this neighborhood to begin with."

Golda, aptly named for her golden hair, so silky smooth it captured the light in ways that Leeba's never would, came and stood in the doorway. "Does that mean the schwartzes will go to my school in the fall?"

"But you don't need to mix with them," her mother said. "You stick to your own kind. You, too," she said to Leeba as she tugged the dish towel off her shoulder. "I am so angry with those Glucks for putting us in this position."

"What position?" asked Leeba.

"Never mind. Dry." Her mother handed her another plate. "I still can't believe it. Schwartzes in Lawndale."

The next day Leeba walked down Fifteenth Street to see what all the fuss was about. After listening to her parents, she, too, wondered why a Negro family would want to live in the heart of a Jewish community, where synagogues and kosher butchers graced nearly every block. She turned down Kostner Avenue, a street lined with modest two-flats and factories.

When she arrived at the Glucks' old house, Leeba saw a cluster of young boys from the neighborhood up on their tiptoes, looking through the windows, hands cupped about their eyes, faces pressed to the glass. A peep show could not have been more captivating.

“Look at that radio.”

“They have a phonograph player, too.”

“Hey,” Leeba called to them from the sidewalk. “What do you think you’re doing?”

One boy grinned, big, toothy and proud. “We’re watching the schwartzes.”

“Get away from there.” Leeba ran up on the grass to shoo them off, knowing that she, too, had gone there to “watch the schwartzes.” It had seemed like an innocent adventure until those boys held up an ugly mirror. To cover her shame she posed as the protector, shouting louder this time, “Go on now. Get away from there. Leave these nice people alone.” As the words left her mouth she bought into her own posturing, feeling superior, even a bit virtuous.

But the boys were defiant and didn’t budge until they heard the jingle jangle of the Good Humor Man pedaling his bicycle truck down the block, his handlebar bells trilling. The boys raced toward the curb, circling around the cart, digging into their pockets for coins.

Leeba was still on the lawn when the front door swung open and the newest resident of Lawndale stepped out on the porch. She recognized her right away: the singing angel from the gospel church. She was about Leeba’s age and even prettier up close, with fine, delicate features, her hair every bit as curly as Leeba’s.

A woman came out on the porch behind her, barefoot and dressed in a floral housecoat, her wiry hair pulled back in a plain gray kerchief. She started toward the steps, her toes teetering over the edge, her brown skin cracked white around her heels.

“Mama, go on back in the house.”

The woman was already on the first step.

“Go on now, Mama. Back inside.”

That time she listened and moments later Leeba saw her hovering near the window, watching.

“Don’t mind her,” said the angel. “She get like this sometimes.” The girl pointed to the children gathered around the man in the white uniform. “Who’s that?”

“The Good Humor Man.”

She crinkled up her forehead, confused. It occurred to Leeba that this girl had never seen a Good Humor Man in whatever neighborhood she came from.

“He’s selling ice cream.”

“How much do it cost?”

“A nickel.”

The angel turned and disappeared inside the house, closing the door behind her. Leeba felt ashamed, trespassing on this girl’s lawn. She headed toward the curb where the boys were licking and slurping as their ice creams melted, dripping onto the pavement. Leeba had no money to spend on something like that. She had no extra money, period. Her weekly allowance had been cut back to a quarter since the Depression and

she'd already spent her money the day before on 78s of Bing Crosby and Duke Ellington at the used record store.

She was about to head for home when the front door opened again and the girl came running down the lawn.

"Can I have one of them ice creams?" She handed the Good Humor Man a dime and turned to Leeba. "Ain't you having none?"

"I don't have any money."

The girl looked at the change resting in her palm and handed Leeba the nickel. "Well, here—"

Leeba hesitated. It seemed like such a grand gesture and she felt undeserving, especially given her motives for being there that day.

"Go on now, go get yourself an ice cream. You pay me back later."

The girls sat side by side on the curb and while they ate their treats Leeba said that she'd heard her outside her church the day before.

"How'd you learn to sing like that anyway?" asked Leeba.

The girl shrugged. "Just born to me, I guess." She looked down and Leeba worried about her cousin's shoes until the girl glanced up, indifferent, as if she hadn't noticed.

After they'd finished their ice cream Leeba brought her new friend, Aileen Booker, home so she could repay her for the ice cream.

As they came through the doorway Leeba's mother stepped out of the kitchen. "Vas iz das?" she asked, running her hands down the front of her apron, her eyes narrowing on Aileen.

Leeba explained about the ice cream and her mother shook her head, muttering as she went to the Maxwell House canister on the counter where she kept spare change.

"Is she mad?" Aileen whispered so softly she practically mouthed the words.

"Oh, don't worry. She can't understand you. She doesn't speak English."

"Oh." Aileen paused for a moment. "Well, then, what do she speak?"

"Yiddish."

Aileen made a face.

"Polish," said Leeba, which didn't appear to be much more of an explanation.

Leeba's mother fished a nickel from the canister and handed it to Leeba. "Give this to her and don't take money from her again. You understand?"

Leeba knew by her mother's tone that she was in trouble for something. She just didn't know what.

"Now send her on her way," her mother said. "She doesn't belong here."

But Leeba didn't want to send Aileen away. Other than the Chess brothers, Leeba didn't have any friends, let alone a girl friend her age. Leeba never fit in at school, teased because of her height, her accent, her hair, the schmatehs her mother made her wear. Aileen hadn't flinched at any of that—not even her shoes—and that alone won Leeba's unconditional devotion.

Later that night while Golda slept, hogging the covers on her side of the bed, Leeba listened to her parents through the thin walls.

"What can we do about it, Freyda?" her father was saying. "You want she should have friends and now she does."

"But a colored one?"

Leeba heard the bedsprings squeak and the thud of her father's heavy feet hitting the floorboards. "We can't tell her not to play with the girl."

"But you didn't see her. She's dark. We can't have Leeba running around with her."

Knowing that her mother didn't approve of Aileen made this budding friendship all the more appealing to Leeba. Defiance was her weapon, the only way she could retaliate against her mother favoring Golda. For Golda there was money for shoes. For Golda there was everything. She was the family beauty, the child to hang one's hopes on, not the tall, gangly daughter with the wild curls. Leeba reached under the bed for her notebook and pencil and scribbled the start of a poem in the dark: A nickel for a friend / A small price to pay . . .

"We have to put a stop to this," her mother was saying, making Leeba pause her pencil. "What will people say?"

"It's not so geferlech, not the end of the world. Would you rather she run around with the Chess brothers the rest of her life?"

Book One

1947–1950

Chapter Two

"Fishin' Pole"

Leonard

Leonard parked his beat-to-shit Buick at the corner of Cottage Grove and Pershing on Chicago's South Side. He walked down the broken sidewalk cluttered with the previous night's empty pints and beer bottles.

"Morning, ladies." With a tip of his hat Leonard greeted the whores who worked that block.

“We been waiting for you, sugar,” said one of the girls, running a finger down her cleavage.

“Not today, girls. Not today.”

A few doors down, a man looking like he’d slept in his clothes smiled on the sly and mumbled, “Got a girl and a boy, Leonard. A girl and a boy.”

One meant cocaine, the other was heroin, but Leonard never remembered which was which. “Not today, man. Not today.”

Leonard crossed the street, pulled a key from his pocket and undid the padlock on the Macomba Lounge. He threw open the door and flipped on the lights. What a shithole. A long narrow room with a bar on one side, booths on the other, some crappy tables near the bandstand, a rib-pit kitchen in the way back. The place reeked of smoke and booze. The janitor hadn’t come by yet so the joint was full of empty glasses, beer and whiskey bottles, overflowing ashtrays and cigarette butts floating in a sea of spilled liquor on the bar.

Leonard was picking through the slop when Phil showed up, the brim of his hat shading his eyes, first cigar of the day already clamped in the corner of his mouth. Phil was shorter and stockier, but no doubt they were brothers. Same light brown hair, same prominent nose and high forehead.

“I gotta put an order in this morning,” Leonard said to him. “We’re down to two cases of Old Crow and one of Old Grand-Dad.”

“Better have ’em bring over some more gin and vodka, too.”

Leonard and Phil had opened the nightclub a little over a year before, after Phil came home from the war. Leonard would have joined the army, too, if it weren’t for his heart. They 4-F’d him—not fit to serve because of a weak valve. Bullshit—he could have done it. He’d been running a liquor store down on South State Street and that took plenty of guts, too. Leonard had seen it all there: shoplifters, drunken brawls, holdups. Once he knew Phil was on his way home from the war, Leonard had sold Cut-Rate Liquor and got his ass out of there. Opening the nightclub seemed like a step up. They’d found a run-down restaurant in the heart of the Black Belt—Chicago’s Negro neighborhood—but that didn’t bother Leonard or Phil. Their father’s junkyard had been in a colored neighborhood and, besides, property was cheaper in that part of town.

“Did you check under the stools yet?” Phil asked.

“Not yet.”

Phil propped his cigar in his mouth and flipped the first bar stool upside down, looking for drugs. The dealers kept their cocaine, heroin, uppers and downers taped under the stools in case the cops showed up and frisked them. Problem was that usually by closing time some of the dealers were so strung out they’d forget to take their drugs with them. Checking the bar stools had become as much a part of opening up as turning on the lights.

“Bingo.” Phil held up a package of powder. He went down the bar and checked the rest. They were clean, so he went to the john in the back and flushed it. Phil didn’t want that shit lying around. Neither did Leonard, but it came with the territory.

The other clubs closed down around two a.m., but that was when the Macomba was just getting going. They booked a lot of good acts and word got around. Other musicians came in after their gigs at other clubs. As far

as Leonard was concerned, as long as people were coming through the door, they'd keep the Macomba open till dawn. Even if it meant shelling out a few twenties to make the cops look the other way.

The club was doing all right, but it wasn't bringing in the kind of dough Leonard wanted. And he wanted a whole lot of dough. Back when he was nineteen and so in love he couldn't see straight, he'd wanted to marry Shirley Adams, but her father said Leonard would never amount to anything and made her break it off. That changed everything for Leonard and sent him on a quest. He could thank Shirley's father for his drive, his ambition. Even now, more than ten years later, when he was married to Revetta with three kids, he still had this need to prove himself. He wasn't going to let anyone think of him as a loser ever again.

Leonard looked around the room and thought about how much he'd come to hate the goddamn nightclub business. The hours were long; the crowd was rough and raunchy. He wanted out, and since he'd gotten Phil into this mess, he had to get him out, too.

Leonard always kept his ears open, which was how he'd found out about Evelyn Aron and Aristocrat Records. She was a Jewish broad who'd started a record company with her husband's money. The label was struggling and Leonard saw an opportunity. He'd been holding off, waiting for the right moment to approach her, and looking around the decrepit club, he decided now was the time. He reached for the telephone behind the bar and pulled a matchbook from his breast pocket. After he lit a cigarette he looked at the telephone number scribbled inside the cover. Two more puffs and he picked up the phone and dialed.

"Got an act down here you gotta come see," he said.

"Who is this?" Evelyn Aron asked.

"Leonard Chess. I got a club—the Macomba Lounge. Maybe you heard of it?"

"No."

"If you're in the record business, lady, you gotta know about us."

"Who did you say you were?"

"Leonard. Leonard Chess. I gotta—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Chess, but I really have to—"

"Wait. Don't hang up." Leonard drew down hard on his Lucky Strike. "You gotta come see this kid playin' here tonight. I guarantee you ain't seen nothin' like him."

"And what's so special about this kid, Mr. Chess?"

"He's gonna be a star."

Tom Archia was a sax player and singer who was starting to make a name for himself. People came into the club asking where they could buy his records. Leonard wanted to record him before someone else did. He saw recording Archia as his way out of the nightclub, and if Evelyn Aron came along with the deal, then so be it.

Later that night Evelyn Aron walked into the Macomba. Leonard took one look and knew it had to be her. She was the only white woman in the joint and she was wearing the largest goddamn diamond ring he'd ever seen, along with a fancy-schmancy dress that probably cost more than his customers made in a month. She

was pretty, though, a redhead with alabaster skin, not a single freckle. She was about Leonard's age, maybe a few years younger—late twenties, he figured. The regulars were sizing her up and she had a glazed, uneasy look in her eyes that told him she was scared, and when he went over and introduced himself she seemed both relieved and shocked.

He laughed. "You thought I was a Negro, didn't you?" People always thought that after talking to him on the phone first. When Leonard arrived from Poland he was only eleven and didn't speak English. Growing up, he was always around colored people—hanging out with them at his father's junkyard and on the fringe of Lawndale where a few Negro families lived. White, colored, Leonard didn't care. He wanted to fit in and not sound like an immigrant. He studied the way people talked, mimicking their phrasing, picking up the slang, so that over time, even though he still spoke Yiddish, Leonard Chess sounded more like a Southern Negro than a Polish Jew.

"Admit it. You did think I was colored, didn't you?"

"No, no, no." Evelyn's cheeks were beginning to match her hair color.

"C'mon, relax." He laughed.

She didn't. He'd heard that she was one of those uppity German Jews, the kind that looked down on those who came over from Eastern Europe. He reminded himself that he didn't have to like her—this was business. So he got her a drink and showed her to a table near the stage. He noticed that at some point she had turned her wedding ring around so no one would be tempted by the stone.

It was showtime and the boys took to the bandstand, where Archia's shiny brass saxophone rested in the stand, waiting for him. He had a drummer, bass player and piano player with him. They opened with a number called "Jam for Sam." Bouncy as hell. Halfway through, Leonard saw the sweat beading up on Tom's forehead and spit bubbling up from his mouthpiece. The piano player was on his feet, his ass hovering a good six inches above the bench, fingers flying up and down the keyboard, while the drummer circled the skins with his brushes. The guy on the upright bass leaned in, his ear close to the fingerboard before he straightened up and spun it around real fast on the tail spike. The crowd loved it, dancing in their chairs, shoulders shimmying, fingers snapping. Leonard glanced at Evelyn to gauge her reaction. She was right in there with the rest of them, nodding, her fingertips tapping out the beat.

There was a burst of applause as Archia moved into the next number, singing about his "fishing pole." He was making eyes at the women who were swooning near the bandstand and each time he talked about his "long, long pole," Leonard saw Evelyn Aron blush.

Tom Archia was still singing when Leonard went over to her table, pulled out a chair and flipped it around to sit sailor style. "So what do ya say, Evelyn? You wanna partner up and make a record?"

"With you?" She looked amused and took a cigarette out of her gold case, waiting for Leonard to offer her a light. "Why on earth would I partner with you?"

"Because it's the smart thing to do."

"How so?" She shot a stream of smoke toward the ceiling. If she was still nervous she was doing a hell of a job of hiding it just then.

"Take a look around this club," said Leonard. "You see all these people in here? They love race music, but nobody's putting out records for them. That's where you and me come in."

“No, thank you, Mr. Chess.”

“What, you gonna keep recording the Sherman Hayes Orchestra and that polka player?”

She took a puff off her cigarette and shook her head as if he didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Let me tell you somethin’, lady. Your label, Aristocrat, is going down the tubes. It’s a goddamn joke.”

“Then why, Mr. Chess, would you waste your time with my failing label?”

“Because I can help you. You’ve already shelled out the dough for a license with the musicians’ union and you’re set up. The problem is you’re recording the wrong music. I can turn your label around.”

“And do you know anything about making records?”

“No. But you’ll teach me.”

“Just like that, huh?” She stubbed out her cigarette. “Thank you for the offer, Mr. Chess, but I think I’ll pass.”

With that she stood up and walked out of the club.

Leonard thought he’d blown it, until one night a few weeks later Evelyn Aron came back to the Macomba Lounge.

“Would you look at that?” Leonard nudged Phil, watching her flit in like she was a regular. Not a hint of hesitation as she marched up to the bar.

“Hello, Leonard. Nice to see you again.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“I saw that Tom Archia was playing here again tonight. I thought I’d come give another listen. You don’t have any objections, do you?”

“Be my guest. I’ll even buy you a drink.”

She ordered a dry martini and turned her back to Leonard while she leaned against the bar and watched Tom Archia and His All Stars perform. Leonard was trying to get a bead on Evelyn when two thugs up front started shoving each other back and forth.

Here we go again.

Before Big Gene, the doorman, could step in and break it up, Leonard saw one guy reach in his pocket and pull out a penknife, the overhead spotlights bouncing off its shiny edge. The band played through it while several women screamed, grabbed their pocketbooks and headed for the door. Plenty of men left, too. The first knife fight of the evening and half the place cleared out. But Archia and his boys were still performing. Leonard would have expected Miss Prim and Proper to flee, but damn if Evelyn Aron didn’t stick around, even ordered another drink.

The bouncer got rid of the fighters and when the band finished their last set Evelyn waltzed up to Archia with her business card and was out the door before Leonard could confront her. When Leonard asked Archia

what Evelyn wanted, Archia snapped the latches shut on his sax case and said, “She’s gonna record ‘Fishin’ Pole.’”

The next morning Leonard went down to the Aristocrat office—if you could call it an office. It was a small space adjacent to a paint store on South Phillips Avenue that Evelyn’s husband owned. The room was cluttered with boxes of pressed records and stacks of Billboard and Cash Box magazines. And while the front of the building reeked of paint, all Leonard could smell as he headed toward the back was Evelyn’s perfume.

“Well, this is certainly a surprise.” Evelyn looked up from her desk as he stormed through the doorway.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Can I help you with something, Leonard?”

He was frosted and if she’d been a man he would have thrown her up against the wall. “What are you gonna do with Archia after you record him, huh? You think you’re gonna sell a Tom Archia record? You think your rich country club friends are gonna listen to race music? Huh, do you?”

Evelyn didn’t say anything. He saw a faint vertical line form between her eyebrows.

“No white record store is gonna sell a Tom Archia record,” he said. “Nobody you know is gonna listen to ‘Fishin’ Pole’ on their radio or put it in their jukeboxes. Now, I happen to know the people who can sell a Tom Archia record and I know the motherfuckers who wanna buy it, too.”

Evelyn splayed her hands flat down on the desk as if admiring that colossal ring. He noticed a raspberry rash coming up on her neck. She raised her eyes. “Very well, Leonard. What is it that you want?”

What did he want? He wanted to buy his wife a ring as big as Evelyn’s. He wanted to get his brother out of that godforsaken club. He didn’t want anyone like Shirley’s father to ever call him a loser again. “I want a cut of the action,” he said. “I wanna be a record man.”

Two weeks later, after the Tom Archia records were pressed, Leonard stood next to Evelyn in her office while she flipped through a clipboard of papers. “I’ve done some research,” she said. “And I’ve drawn up a list of accounts for you.”

Leonard read along over her shoulder, running his hand back through his hair. This was bullshit.

“Now, here are the distributors who sell to jukeboxes,” she said, trailing a red fingernail down the page. “Here’s a list of record stores and—”

“Let me handle this, would you?”

Evelyn dropped the clipboard to her side and jutted out her hip. “And how exactly are you going to handle it? Do you have a list?”

“I don’t need a goddamn list. You want this record to sell? Then let me take it to the people who can sell the motherfucker.”

“I absolutely hate it when you use that kind of language with me.”

“I know you do.”

She clamped her jaw shut. She was seething.

“Look,” said Leonard, “there’s a market for Archia. So let me go out there and make something happen.”

“You are so cocksure of yourself, aren’t you?”

He had to admit that yeah—hell yes, he was sure of himself. He didn’t know where this confidence came from. He was no more qualified to sell a record than she was—in fact, she was a hell of a lot more qualified than him. But he had a gut feeling he could do this. “You can’t afford to blow this chance, Evelyn. Now just let me sell the goddamn record.”

“Okay, fine. We’ll try it your way.”

Leonard brushed past her, loaded up his trunk with Archia’s “Fishin’ Pole” and took off in his bucket of bolts. He had salvaged the Buick from his father’s junkyard, put a few bucks into the engine and got the thing running. It looked like hell with its cracked leather seats, stuffing popping up through the corners. The ashtray was overflowing and the windows needed washing. But it was temporary. He promised himself that one day he’d own a new Cadillac and he’d keep it in mint condition.

Leonard was still steaming over Evelyn as he drove deep into the city’s South Side. He didn’t like her and she didn’t like him, but they needed each other. He tuned the radio dial to WGES, one of the only stations that devoted a little airtime each day to race music. The Dozier Boys were playing and Leonard snapped his fingers to the beat. Now, that was Negro music. White people didn’t get it. And for sure Evelyn didn’t.

Leonard understood that when Negroes came up from the South it was no different from when he arrived from Poland. The Negroes came by train, and his family by ship, but it was the same thing. The Jews in their shtetls were just like the coloreds on their plantations. When Leonard heard guys from the South describe their sharecropper shacks, he thought they sounded like his home back in Motele—three rooms, no heat, no hot water, no electricity. His father had brought them to America seeking a better life. It was the same for the Negroes coming north. Only life wasn’t always easier in Chicago, whether you were a Negro or a Jew. White America didn’t want either one of them here, which was why Leonard felt more comfortable with coloreds than with most white people. Evelyn Aron, Miss Hoity-Toity, would never understand. She’d been born in this country. She’d told him that her family had come over from Germany sixty years ago. She didn’t know what it meant to arrive in a new city, let alone a new country, kiss your old life good-bye—no matter how shitty it was—and start over.

That was what he was thinking that day as he headed down Cottage Grove and into the ghetto, where people were sitting in the doorways of their tenement houses, the women fanning themselves, the children playing in the water shooting out of an opened fire hydrant. There was gospel and swing music blaring from radios set on the cement steps and on the window ledges. Leonard pulled up to the curb alongside a stretch of storefronts and opened the trunk. He grabbed a stack of records and went into Decker’s Drugstore on the corner.

The uneven floorboards squeaked beneath his feet as Leonard swaggered in. The sweet smell of tobacco and something spicy hung in the air. Decker was a short, husky black man standing behind the cash register, reading the Defender—the Negro newspaper. Leonard saw the headline: “Call to End Segregation in Armed Forces.”

Decker looked up and let the paper slump. He had a matchstick dangling from his mouth. “Whatchu doin’ down here, Leonard?”

“Hey, you crazy motherfucker you,” said Leonard with a handshake and a smile. He knew Decker from the Macomba. The guy loved the music they played at the club. After shooting the breeze Leonard said, “You sell records in here, don’t you?”

“Depends on the record.”

“Well, do me a favor and take a listen to this—” He held out the record to Decker.

“‘Fishin’ Pole,’ huh?”

“Just give it a listen.”

Leonard followed Decker to the back of the store where there was box of 78s with a sign that read: “79¢ Each, 3 for $2.25.” There was a record player on the counter where customers could listen before they bought. Decker set the record on the turntable, swung the tonearm across and lowered the needle. “Fishin’ Pole” with all its sexual innuendo filled the drugstore while Leonard made his pitch.

“That’s Tom Archia you’re listening to. You’ve probably seen him at the Macomba.”

Decker pulled the matchstick from his mouth and said, “Leonard, since when you in the record business? And the race record business at that?”

“You know me—the only color that matters is green. Now listen right here—” He cupped his hand to his ear as Archia sang about how he was gonna put his long pole in real, real deep.

Decker laughed. “Okay. All right. Give me a dozen and let me see what I can do.”

“A dozen? You can do better than that.”

Decker ended up with three dozen records and a money-back guarantee if they didn’t sell. Evelyn wouldn’t like that, but she knew that was how the majors did it, too. Labels like RCA Victor, Capitol and even the independents like Atlantic did everything on consignment. A record store could take five hundred copies, sell one and return the other four hundred and ninety-nine. God knew, he hadn’t made the rules—but that was the way this game was played.

After Decker’s, Leonard drove to the next stop and with more records from the trunk he went inside a barbershop. The whole place smelled of talcum powder and aftershave. The barber also knew Leonard from the Macomba, but he wasn’t biting.

“Yes, I play music in my shop,” he said to Leonard. “But no, I don’t sell it and I don’t want to sell it. And I don’t want to play that particular song in here.”

It went on like that, going in and out of stores. He also met with distributors who sold records for jukeboxes on the South Side. Some took a few dozen copies, others only one or two. By the end of the day Leonard had managed to clear out a couple hundred records.

But there was one more stop he had to make. He got back in his car and headed to Washington Boulevard where they broadcast WGES. They called this station the International House of Air. They had something for everyone: the Italians, the Irish, Poles, the Lithuanians and the Negroes. And when it came to race music the one they all tuned in to hear was Al Benson, the Old Swingmaster.

With a copy of “Fishin’ Pole” in his hand Leonard found Al Benson in the booth, sitting before a

microphone with two turntables, one on either side of him. He'd just finished playing "Old Man River" by the Ravens and broke in for a commercial message: "It's your Old Swingmaster here, Al Benson, from Chicago's great South Side . . ." He went on to advertise a dry cleaner's, then put on the next record. When the red light flashed off, he motioned for Leonard to come inside the booth.

"Hey there, motherfucker—how ya been?" Leonard gave Benson a hug. Benson, like the others, was a regular at the Macomba. "Got something for you," he said. "I want you to give it a listen. Give it some play."

Benson put another record on for his audience to buy more time while he listened to the Archia record. He leaned back in his chair with his arms folded, his toe tapping.

"It's good, Leonard," he said as he removed the 78, put it back in its sleeve and handed it to Leonard. "But I've got half a dozen tunes sounding just like it. And without that business about sticking his pole in places."

That was when Leonard reached into his pocket, put a twenty-dollar bill in the cardboard sleeve and passed it back to Benson. "Try listening now."

Benson gave him a nod and returned to his program. That was it. Nothing more was said, but not five minutes later, Leonard was back in his Buick, heading toward Cottage Grove, when he heard Benson come over the radio saying, "This is your Old Swingmaster, Al Benson, with a brand-new one from Chicago's own Tom Archia. Give a listen to 'Fishin' Pole.'"

That was all it took. A little face time and a twenty-dollar bill and "Fishin' Pole" was on its way.

Leonard knew that if the song was taking off in Chicago, it would go through the roof down South. So he hopped in his Buick and went to radio stations and record stores in Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. He got "Fishin' Pole" on the air and in stores and jukeboxes all across the South. Within a month, it became Aristocrat's first success, selling seventy-five hundred copies.

The day "Fishin' Pole" showed up on Billboard's Jukebox Race Records list, hitting at number seventy-three, Leonard rushed into the Aristocrat office flapping the magazine in his hand. "Did you see this? Did you?" He plopped the magazine down on Evelyn's desk and pointed to the list. "Take a look at that."

"I see." She pressed her fingertips to her temples. "That—that's great."

"That's it? That's all you got to say?"

She looked up and he saw that she'd been crying and he didn't know what to do, what to say. He'd never seen her like that before.

She closed the magazine. "Charles and I are getting divorced," she said matter-of-factly as she plucked a tissue from her desk and dabbed her eyes.

Now Leonard really didn't know what to say. He felt badly for her, but the two of them had been at each other's throats from day one, so for him to suddenly turn into Mr. Compassionate felt phony as hell.

She cleared her throat, fisted up her tissue and pitched it in the wastebasket. "So, I suppose this makes you happy."

He was taken aback. "Why the hell would I be happy that your marriage is over?"

"Let's face it, we both know I can't do this alone. I need a partner. So here's your chance to buy out Charles

and come on board.”

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