

Chapter 0
The Fool

Valerie Chill's morning at Hush Music Productions started at 9:30 in the morning. Her first order of business was to make coffee, check the mail, and prepare Mr. Hush's morning medication. When the office was in order she often paused to have a final morning cigarette before she went upstairs to wake Mr. Hush.

Mr. Hush had a respectable two-bedroom railroad on the floor above his office. He'd converted the second bedroom into a combination study and sitting area full of his books, his desk, his grandfather's British infantry sword, and the last of his mother's decorations, inherited upon her passing. Every morning Valerie unlocked the front door, marched through the apartment, and banged on the master bedroom until she heard some sign of life from Mr. Hush, be it a wordless roar to a string of furious cursing.

It was a Friday in March when Valerie unlocked the door to find Mr. Hush sitting in his study. She was wearing a grey suit and thinking about her next haircut. She preferred to cut a crisp figure then an elegant one, though she was known to slouch for the love of contradiction. Sliding cool down the street, knees first, inviting the stares. When she first looked into Hush's apartment she was too busy thinking of her own outfit to see anything outside of the ordinary sight of Hush's tidy kitchen, the bathroom, his little study and sitting area. Her eyes settled on Hush's back at the end of their trip around the room. He was hunched over the desk he'd pushed between two stuffed bookshelves, his threadbare smoking jacket stretched over his back. His white hair was still thick with pomade, but scratched and pulled into a mess all over his head. His eyes were red, his ashtray was full, and a half-full mug was pushed aside to make space for a glass, empty but for the smell of rancid beer. Bottles littered the floor around his feet. He turned around in his seat to stare at her through his thick, square frames, revealing an enormous hunting knife gripped in his hand.

"What does evil sound like?" He asked.

Valerie felt nothing. Ominous questions and brandished weaponry were standard for Mr. Hush, who took pride in operating his life outside common decency. Chill thought they were of like minds when she first started working for him. She now knew Mr. Hush was under the mistaken belief that misanthropy was a sign of genius.

She paused to think before answering. "Well, that strikes me as a philosophical question that intrudes on the intellectual assessment of the *nature* of evil, which few scholars can agree on--"

"No, no, no, no, no," he said, waving the knife over his head. "Not for high art, for shit popular music. I don't want boys with floppy hair to play a song on the telly that will answer any fundamental questions about the universe. It'd be a waste. This is for *children*, Chill, if you were directing a film about vampires, or werewolves, or something like that, what would it sound like right before the hero gets it?"

Chill shrugged. "I don't know, something with violins, maybe. Or organ music."

"Yes, yes, yes, violins, organ music. Something like the funeral march, something like Danse Macabre, none of which can be danced to on a Friday on a teen music night!"

"Danse Macabre's got it in the title," she pointed out, and he rewarded her by picking a book off a nearby shelf and chucking it at her. It whizzed past her knee and bounced off the

bulge in the wall slapped over the pipes in the bathroom. "Well, I never wanted to get up and dance during Dracula."

His face drew tight into a furious pucker. He stabbed the knife into the desk and stormed over to his record player. It was then she noticed that the cabinet was open and most of the records removed. Based on the crumpled pile of paper underneath, he'd added to his collection since she saw him at lunch the day before.

"Look," he said, slapping records face-up on the carpet. "What do you think of that? Screamin' Jay Hawkins, the man's whole routine is Halloween. Sheb Wooley, Purple People Eater, song of the fucking century. Cab Calloway; a classic, a mainstay. Half the blues boys put their whole careers into ghosts and devils and other such nonsense. People danced to their music by the truckload."

"So you want a blues man?" Chill asked, annoyed.

"No, the blues has been done," he said, and slapped the last handful of records down with a flourish. "They're in the past-- or worse, they're in the present. I'm not trying to catch up with a crowd, I want to be a step ahead. I want to lead the pack, Chill, I want the future to have my stamp."

He went to stand in front of the window, arms crossed behind his back, like a ratty Sherlock Holmes. She could tell that he'd composed a sort of St. Crispin speech, and that she was to be his test audience for the first rehearsal.

"I've had a vision," he said. Hush was prone to visions. Occasionally-- if he was deprived of sleep, or over-supplied in medication, they were ecstatic. His typical visions, which granted him the authority to voice his opinions on things like Valerie's romantic prospects or a musical group's profitability, seemed to only come when convenient and provided no theatrical value. "It first came to me in a dream several weeks ago; I was in a nightclub. I'm sure it was a nightclub, although I don't remember entering it, and I'm sure it was below ground, although I don't remember stairs. It was dark and full of smoke that felt powdery on the throat, like dry ice. Lights flashed in the thick of the smoke, and when it did, I could just make out shapes dancing around me. All the dancers were in black, and the music was--"

He trailed off, gesturing with his hand to some ephemeral quality.

--Cold. Artificial, as if played on a host of alien instruments, or the sound of accidental collisions given melody. My surroundings seemed pedestrian in comparison. It was the music that haunted me into my waking moments."

She let him hold on to the dramatic tension of the moment before posing the next question on her mind; "Are you sure it wasn't a synthesizer?"

He slammed his fist against the window. "No, Chill, damn you! Do you think I haven't looked for the closest equivalent to that sound? There's some tantalizing element lying just outside my reach that I'm desperate to get ahold of."

"Something evil," she supplied.

"Oh, yes, quite," he agreed, nodding. "But no philosophers; I want evil as a costume, evil as a posture. Or-- no, no, no-- evil as a sort of artistic canon to draw from for one's own lexicon. Are you familiar with Aleister Crowley?"

"No."

"Oh. Pity," he said, reaching for the ornate cigarette case on the low center table. "He was very popular when I was your age, but I suppose he's fallen out of fashion. I wonder who's

stepped up to take his place on the world stage-- Chill, do a little digging and find someone who's sort of fashionably occult. I don't want to talk to any dingbats who believe they were molested by aliens, and I don't want a religious zealot anywhere near my office. Call the Masons on 18th street, see if they have any researchers to spare. No demon hunters, no true believers. Find some sort of-- I don't know, sexy devil worshipper."

Valerie nodded and left to take care of the office, half-expecting Hush to go to bed after unveiling his latest passion project. To her surprise, he was downstairs by 11 as usual, ready to take his meetings. His first one of the day was with a man from KTU 45 to collect his payment for playing one of Hush's acts, and the man who followed him was from a record label who wanted Hush to pay for the damage caused by another act. Hush met both of their demands with an uncharacteristic calm, serene in the face of a typically upsetting experience. Chill had seen him chase men out of his office on high-stress days, but today didn't seem to be one of them. She felt a fleeting appreciation that his moods were rarely based in reality.

Hush Productions was a small outfit. Hush himself did the lion's share of the audio recording work, with only the occasional freelance contractor for additional help. Distribution and advertising were, likewise, handled from Hush's office, with Chill to aid him when he was busy or tired. Her job was meant to stay in the realm of running records and documents to the post office or various broadcast centers around the city, contributing only a spare turn of phrase when the wheels of Hush's mind needed greasing. The office was in a strategic location to reach as many national broadcast stations as possible on a modest budget, and for that reason alone a handful of his acts secured national attention. However, the company was still a half-forgotten thought in the adolescent consciousness. Undiscovered musicians composed their new music for established labels like Columbia and RCA, and slowly trickled down the circuit from there. Next they submitted to Capitol and Paramount, then smaller labels like Liberty, new but polished labels like Monument and Scepter, and then finally the unknowns. In terms of prestige, Hush Productions could proudly say they were not a record label run out of a garage. They could boast of being a professional outfit with a unique, high-quality sound. Their acts were consistent, their recordings were made well. Hush had been in business for so long he could easily invite himself to industry functions and rub shoulders with far more prestigious members of his field, but the light of success had yet to touch him. All the better for Valerie Chill, who couldn't imagine how her life would improve with the addition of even more paperwork.

Occultists were not a group one could find in a phone book, nor were there any listings in the library when Chill called to check. She hung up when the librarian-- clearly alarmed-- pressed her for details. Fortunately, Chill had a subscription to *Terrible Tales Digest*, a magazine that ran horror and true crime tales, with back page ads full of novelty gags and horror-themed decor, such as cigarette boxes that grabbed back. There were also more exciting ads for things like *They Knew Too Much about Flying Saucers*, *Dianetics*, spirit mediums, and ominous ads reading CURIOUS ABOUT FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE? And UNVEIL THE MYSTERY!

Chill dismissed the flying saucer book first, next *Dianetics* (after calling the hotline and having the operator explain what it was), and the spirit mediums third. She was most disappointed by the spirit mediums, since they were the closest to being industry professionals, but though they knew how to read her palm, cards and tea leaves, none of them were aware of any fashionable occult scene, nor the existence of a Mr. Crowley. The ominous ads, with their images of candles and books, were promising but still fruitless. Many were for reading groups

and clubs that specialized in occult books. They were run by operators who read Aleister Crowley, but exhibited too much genuine enthusiasm. They did offer other leads to follow, and by midday she had a second batch of calls to make.

Mr. Hush went back to his apartment for lunch while Chill went to eat at a lunch counter across the street. The place was a tight fit, big enough for the chef and four patrons. Chill made sure to take her lunch early to be one of his first afternoon customers, and by the time she was done the place was usually overcrowded. People shouted in through the windows, over the heads of the four taken seats, and the phone rung with orders to place. At the end of her lunch hour Chill had to push her way out.

Valerie typically had the office to herself after lunch. There were never days when the meetings ran til closing, and Mr. Hush didn't bother coming back down if there was no one to see. He'd started his company at the delicate, green-topped secretary desk in the second bedroom of his apartment, and habit drew him back like a turtle into his shell. Without the lingering presence of Hush in his office, or any teenagers in starched collars squirming as nervously as if they were at the dentists', Chill could make herself fully at home.

She brought a coke up with her and swung her heels up on the desk, sipping from the cup with one hand while she made her second round of calls of the day. Her first call was to the Theosophy Society, where finally she felt as if she was on the right path. The secretary, in response to her questions, cried "Oh, you'd like a consultant," and transferred her to their Resources department. Unfortunately, the man in their office was offended by her proposal and informed her shortly that the Theosophy Society was directly opposed to any deliberate attempts to stall human enlightenment.

"Listen," Chill said, as if to an old friend. "The majority of humanity treats any pursuit that is unfamiliar to them as the territory of the Devil. Here at Hush Productions, our position is not to encourage discriminatory behavior, but to provide educational material through healthy, entertaining music programming--"

But he had hung up long ago. Next was the Theology Department at Columbia; they only laughed at her, but told her frankly that they were looking forward to whatever project Mr. Hush managed to create from his idea.

To her surprise, the Gnostic Society was very enthusiastic, but the more they talked, the more she came to realize that the man on the other end had his own ideas about the project. She pencilled him in anyway, thinking he of all people deserved to be chased by a man wielding a British infantry sword.

Chill's call was an enigma for the Freemasons. The phone was covered, indistinct voices spoke, and then she was transferred to another office, who covered the phone and spoke off the receiver after she made her inquiry. She passed through so many hands she made repeat visits to office telephones, until she lost her patience.

"Listen," she said. "If it's such a secret, why can't you let me off the phone?"

"Well, there's a question of whether a consultation is permitted under the tenants of Freemasonry," the final clerk said. "Why don't I take down your number and return your call after we've discussed it?"

Her final call was to a group called the Institute for Metaphysical Research, a lengthy but meaningless name.

“We see ourselves as the students of multiple disciplines,” the secretary explained, when she asked for further details. “The Institute’s mission is to unite humanity in the pursuit of unfettered knowledge.”

“And what makes you believe your group would be suited for the project?” Chill asked.

“Extravagant trappings inspire curiosity,” they replied. “To use your Aleister Crowley analogy, he certainly used bad press to its full advantage.”

Chill had gleaned enough of a vague outline of Crowley to recognize that this was the answer Mr. Hush was looking for. She set a time for a meeting and rewarded herself with an illicit shot of bourbon from Hush’s office. At 5:30 she locked the doors and walked across town to her therapists’ office.

The therapist was her mother’s idea. Mrs. Chill was worried about Valerie. She’d been worried every day since Valerie’s birth. Her mother chose to give birth under the sign of Scorpio, with the belief that Scorpio was both the perfect divine assistant for birthing and the best soil to nurture a powerful mind. Despite all her preparation her water broke just days before her due date, while the skies were still marred by the indecisive auspices of Libra. Mrs. Chill lay in the maternity ward, swollen, racked with contractions, her resolve unbroken. She’d made a choice to create the best circumstances for her child to enter the world under. The first gift she gave to Valerie was not life, but four more hours in the womb, teeth clenched and knees locked, her bloodshot eyes staring into nothingness as doctors and nurses all screamed for Valerie’s release. Despite the pain and the risk, Mrs. Chill held on until the stars changed guard and the strong, willful light of Scorpio shone down on Valerie’s infant skull.

Alas, the perfection she’d seen in the heavens percolated unfiltered to Earth, marred with flaws. As the years wore on Mrs. Chill came to realize that the gift of Scorpio was more of a curse than a blessing. Valerie didn’t take her mother’s advice easily, nor did they share the same goals for Valerie’s future. While Mrs. Chill hoped her daughter would go to college, get a degree, meet a man and settle down Valerie stole her father’s ties, ran away to New York, and became a homosexual. Mrs. Chill was deeply worried about the long-term effects those decisions would have on her daughter’s life, but a lifetime spent arguing made Valerie preternaturally disposed to winning debates and infuriatingly set against changing her mind. The Scorpio in her charts hung over her head like the stinger of an enormous insect, waiting to lash out at anyone foolish enough to fight her. Rather than risk her own mental health, Mrs. Chill paid for therapy sessions in the city. Valerie went because despite being stubborn, combative, and willful, she wasn’t ungrateful. In fact, she discovered that the experience was wonderfully enriching when she noticed the prescription pad on the doctor’s desk.

Mrs. Chill chose the doctor from a list in the phone book. She’d never met him in person, though she’d called ahead to speak with him. The doctor was a man in his late thirties with sandy hair and sandy suits that helped him blend into the rich mustard yellow of his office furniture like a desert animal. He asked about Valerie’s eating and sleeping habits in every session, and solved each problem with another prescription. When she complained of sleeplessness, he prescribed a sleep aid-- of increased weight, water retention pills.

“And how has your anxiety fared?” The man asked, innocently. She took a deep breath. The framing device that guaranteed her access to Librium was that she suffered from fits of anxiety, provoked by delusions of assault. She’d toyed with fabricating a tangible assault, but

decided at the last minute that the facade would be too much of a strain to maintain. She was more a liar for the sake of circumstances than an avowed fabricator.

"Doctor," she began slowly. The structure of her latest batch of issues was formed over lunch and fleshed out on the walk over. "I hate to give you bad news. I feel as if I have fewer bouts of anxiety, but the fear is still there. It's always present. It feels like a gun held to my temple. When I walk down the street I know that I'm in danger, but when I look for a threat there's never one in sight. The medicine helps me clear my mind but it doesn't eradicate the thoughts-- it's like letting the steam out of a hot bath."

The doctor nodded, his forefinger pressed to his lip. "Of course-- in this analogy, the bath is the source of your anxiety, and the vapors are simply the symptom. A complete cure for your disease won't come from medication alone but a combination of it with talk therapy. I've mentioned before that we can have you placed on disability, if you would prefer. It would relieve you of some of your responsibilities, which might help--"

She shook her head. "No, no. Thank you, but I want to be independent."

Chill had a cousin who lived on mental disability. She knew from experience that she would always need more than she received. Better to leave the benefits for someone with no where else to turn.

Her psychiatrist made a note in his pad. Anxiety was easy; everyone had some. All she needed to do was pitch her everyday fears in a different tone. She turned half-forgotten observations into full-blown paranoid fantasies. For example, her wardrobe was big enough to fit an adult man; all she had to do was mention that detail. When she caught her reflection in her own window late at night, a little sauced, she amped up her reaction from a jolt to a whole new fantasy about someone breaking in through the window. She'd already had a few teenagers, bold with inexperience, force open her window and climb in. They were mean and aggressive, but like wild animals were easy to scare off with loud noises. For her therapist she played up the experience as a constant threat, a paranoid obsession. With little experimentation, she managed to turn her own outfits into another extension of her neurosis.

"You know, I can't help but feel as if these help me blend in," she plucked at her sleeve in imitation of a great-aunt with a legitimate nervous disorder. "Ugly women get just as many stares as pretty women, but a man can go anywhere in the city without being noticed."

"But you aren't a man,"

"It doesn't matter; I just don't want anyone to look at me."

When she began these sessions she told the doctor that she bought her clothes in the woman's department, just as she did with police officers. This was true. Shopping in the men's section was hard at her height for anything more substantial than an illicit, easily tailored treat. Like the police, the doctor didn't care much about the details. Her receipts and explanations were, for him, another manifestation of self-delusion. It was obvious that there was some reason for her erratic behavior by the way he pressed her for details, directing her stories with questions and insights. Valerie could tell he was looking for something. When he fell silent she assumed he'd lost the trail. It took several weeks before they both found the answer they were looking for. Valerie, while rambling, brought up a half-forgotten incident from high school. A girl told Chill she looked like a neanderthal in a dress and Valerie beat her like a drum. Yes, she was suspended; yes, she was made to clean gym equipment as penance, and no, not a single soul took Valerie's side in the matter, but she didn't care. Justice was served. Of course, she told the

doctor that as soon as the girl said it Valerie sat down and cried like a baby. The doctor fidgeted excitedly in his seat as she talked, crossing his legs and switching his pen from side to side.

"Were you ever criticised for wearing women's clothing before?" He asked, and at last, they had their hook. From then on, Valerie switched between describing her clothes as a defense from women and a defense from men. No one in her high school had ever seen her in suits, which freed her from their imaginary abuse. And why worry about being a woman on her own if she looked like a short man at a glance? Once she had her angle, it was easy to build up. The doctor was enthralled with every performance. He volunteered details as she swooned. Not only was she afraid of abuse, but she was terrified of rejection. At least when men looked away from her it was because they had mistaken her for a man. When the hysteria in the office reached a fever pitch, he brought it back to his prescription pad and wrote Chill a new dosage. By the time she left, she felt as wrung out and worn as if she'd gotten real therapy.

She filled her prescription, cashed her check, and had a simple meal at home before getting dressed to go out.

She stopped by Chumley's first, to say hello to a friend working the bar and to circulate among all the people hoping to look literary and dashing. Valerie felt quite literary and dashing herself. A young woman at one end of the bar slipped off the arm of the man she was with, embroiled in a conversation with another man, to sit next to Chill. She lit the woman's cigarette and flirted lightly, but when she pressed too hard the girl bit her lip and went back to her original seat.

Next, Chill went to Julius'. Julius's was full of stuffy queers who were equal parts pretentious and paranoid, intensely cliquey and unapproachable. The bar wasn't very busy but the barkeep was determined not to meet her eyes. When she did finally flag him down he only filled her glass most of the way before turning back to his conversation.

In desperation she walked down to the river to try her luck at a third and final bar, and there she ran into a group of friends celebrating the birthday of someone she barely knew. The night was a success from then on.

They began by dancing around the jukebox like teenagers until word got around that there was a real band playing at a place up the street. All together they packed up and headed out, all jumping and hollering with late-night bravado. The place with the band was a coffee shop in the mornings and an independent theatre at night. The stage was barely four inches off the ground, but it had a spotlight and good enough acoustics to hear the music from down the block. Unfortunately, when they arrived the venue was so far past capacity that they could barely squeeze in through the door. The party spilled out into the street, leaving them no choice but to dance among the cars to music from invisible performers. The old people watched from their stoops and their windows in silent judgement of their revelry. When the dancing lost its appeal they went to a beat bar where a friend was working. The friend poured birthday shots for the party full of cheap, sour whiskey. They commissioned a table for the group and sat around it, feeding nickels into the jukebox for the rest of the night.

"Do any of these songs strike you as possessing an evil quality?" Chill asked. Different members of the group responded with equal parts amusement and scandal, and in the wake of their outbursts she calmly explained Hush's latest deconstruction of the pop genre. This prompted a rousing conversation that ambled enthusiastically around music, the many genres

within pop, high and low culture, Black contributions to white industries, the nature of evil and the nature of spectacle.

By four in the morning the party was losing steam. They were all fatigued, hungry and drunk. As people split up to find food, Chill heard herself saying “Well, best be going,” but the room was spinning too fast for her to get out of her seat. It was better for her to wait to sober up then stumble home in her condition, ripe for mugging or worse, arrest. At last she was alone at the bar and struggling to finish a glass of water when a man sat next to her at the bar.

“Alright then, Chill?” he grunted. Even unable to focus her eyes on the blurry figure in front of her the voice, mannerisms, and the thick white hair were all she needed to recognize Mr. Hush.

“I’m alright. How’re you, Mr. Hush? You’re out late.”

He scoffed. “I’ve been out like a light since lunchtime. It’s too hard on these old bones to pull an all-nighter. What about you, Chill? What are you doing alone? You’ve usually got a harem by now.”

She shook her head. “Too drunk to go home.”

He answered with a hearty burst of laughter and thumped her hard on the back. “So much for buying you a drink, then. Terrible night; since when is it empty at a time like this?” --he turned to shout over his shoulder-- “We’re closer to *sunset* than *sunrise*!”

“A fucking disgrace,” he grumbled, as the bar booed him. “Back in the war, we’d go without sleep for a week, and we’d only be sober on Thursday,”

“How long does it take for psychosis to set in?” Chill asked, innocently.

He took a sip from his drink and smacked his lips, releasing the syrupy scent of grenadine. “It takes about two weeks, for your information. Christ, Chill, is this how you want to spend your Friday night, listening to old men at the pub talk about the war?”

Chill sat up in her seat and very carefully shrugged her shoulders, making sure not to sway the entire time. “You started this conversation, Mr. Hush.”

“Always so recalcitrant. You make it seem as if there wasn’t a single thought in that manicured little head of yours.” He tapped her forehead. She slapped his hand away and rose, shakily from her seat.

“I’ll remind you that you weren’t invited to sit here.” She said with clenched teeth. She was too drunk to properly filter her words through the veneer of respectability she used around him.

“Sit down, Chill, there’s no reason to cause a scene. You should know by now how much I value your intelligence,” he answered with his usual dismissive sneer. He took out his cigarette case, removed one and offered it to Valerie as a peace offering. “I value it too much to pretend to not have seen you when I came in. Surely we can agree to have some sort of familiarity with one another?”

She took a cigarette and lit it with a pack of bar matches. “Sure.”

“Very good. By the way, you wouldn’t happen to have your pill case on you, would you? I’m afraid I left my medication back at home.”

Valerie fished around in her pocket until she found her pill box, a tiny steel trap with speed lines dragged over the finish. She removed one Librium and laid it on a coaster. “Got a new batch today, 50 ccs stronger than before.”

Hush popped the pill into his mouth and washed it down with another sip. “Same price?”

“As always. Consistency is key.”

“I agree, it’s a good business model,” Hush said, counting out a few bills. “Give me five for the road, won’t you? It pairs well with my other prescriptions.”

Chill carefully counted out the last five pills in her box and laid them out on a napkin, which Hush wrapped up and shoved deep into his pocket.

He cleared his throat and adjusted his jacket as he tucked it away. “Now, Chill, while we’re keeping you sober and awake, we delve into the question of whether you’ve seen anyone my age in tonight,”

“It’s getting a little late for the old timers,” Chill said, turning to face the bar.

Hush made a guttural noise of disapproval. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times that my generation is made of a different material--”

They were cut short by the sight of the door to the bar standing ajar, the unmistakable silhouette of a police officer standing in the moonlight. As he entered, another followed behind him, then four more.

Valerie’s exhaustion disappeared; her eyesight sharpened. The sight of that peaked cap sobered her faster than Dexedrine. Hush’s lips pulled back in a stark grimace, baring his straight white teeth. Slowly, he turned back to the bar and finished his drink. “Fuck.”

A final officer, this time in a white shirt, shut the door behind his platoon. “This is a raid. Everyone stay in your seats and get out your identification.”

As patrons got out wallets, the police fanned out. Some stood by tables, while three went into the back to sweep the storage room. One returned with a man just as he stepped out of the bathroom, still hurriedly buttoning his fly. As the white shirt moved to the first table by the door, Valerie watched one man’s expression change. He stared unblinking at the officer, lips pressing tight into a pucker. The white shirt held out his hand, and everyone seated at the table presented their card, except for the man with pursed lips, who hesitated.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he asked. “We have rights.”

The officer paused very briefly with a look of mild disappointment on his face. “Yes sir, you do have rights. We’re only doing a routine sweep of the neighborhood. It *is* the witching hour after all, sir, and we all have to do our part to keep our city safe.”

He examined the IDs one by one, but paused as he handed them back. “That’s one hell of a ring you’ve got there. That a man’s ring?”

The combative man’s hand twitched, then curled in a fist. “Of course it is.”

The cop looked at the ID in his hand. “Old woman at the Hotel Earle called the station to report a break-in. Said some of her jewelry was missing.”

The combative man didn’t answer. The cop looked up and cocked his head, as if he was asking a question.

“It’s a class ring.” The man said, at last. The cop touched his hat and returned the ID.

Chill and Hush sat in frozen silence at the bar, waiting for the white shirt to judge each patron. They heard a cry and a scuffle as someone was dragged out of the bar, then the voice of the cop floated up to silence the murmuring unease.

“We’re only looking for probable cause; if you cooperate, you can go on with your night.”

“Lying bastards,” Hush muttered through clenched teeth. “Bloodthirsty little sadists. Impotent, conniving little rats--”

“What’s that?” The cop asked as he approached Hush’s side with soft, unhurried footsteps. Hush fell mercifully silent, but Chill could feel the rage steaming off him and see the slight tremble in his hand on the glass. Chill’s mind was racing; she’d once evaded arrest by pretending to be asleep, but it was too late for that. Too late to slip out the back door, too late to push her way out. Damn, she was a fool; why hadn’t she ordered a car after the party ended? After all the Librium she’d sold there was plenty of cash to pay a driver, but no; she’d wanted to walk. The river was beautiful and the night, though not warm, was still.

“IDs?” The cop asked, as Valerie mooned over the beauty of a walk through the cold night. Hush looked up from his drink, jaw jutted, then pushed back his stool and stood up.

“Absolutely not,” he snapped, accent shifted slightly to a place where it rolled more smoothly. The picture of British indignation. “What’s the meaning of this? Are men not permitted to sit in the pub past midnight in this country?”

The cop laughed. “Not at queer bars.”

“A queer-- !?” Hush affected total disgust. “I don’t see any of that.”

“No?” The cop asked, almost mockingly. “Let’s see those cards, boys.”

“Excuse me, officer, but I happen to be ending the night with my *wife!*” Hush shouted, and pulled Chill to his chest. Chill was forced to look the white shirt in the eye for the first time that night. His face was round, wrinkled, but he might have been a handsome man when he was young. There was still a magnetic quality to his large, bright eyes ringed with merry laugh lines. They were crinkling as he looked at Chill, but paused to dart over her face. His eyebrows rose and his smile fell, then smiled again, this time even wider. He burst out laughing.

“Well now, I’ve seen everything!” He crowed and turned, laughing, to two of his officers. “Take ‘em both.”

“*What!?*” Hush roared. “This is an outrage! *I want your badge!*”

“You’ll get it, buddy,” the officer said, wiping his eyes. “Hoo-ee.”

The officers closed in around them while Hush continued to shout. He shook one officer’s hand off his shoulder, and in response they grabbed both Chill and Hush and slammed them into the bar, knocking the wind from them. Chill’s legs were tangled in the bar stool as they dragged her out. They threw her into the back of the wagon along with five others, all staring sullenly down at their feet. The only sound inside the wagon were the quiet gasps of tears as one man cried.

They pushed Hush in by the shoulders while his legs thrashed wildly around the heads of the other prisoners. His face was red, and strings of froth stretched and champed between his teeth. With one final push, he landed on the floor of the drunk wagon, still snarling and gnashing his teeth.

“Bastards!” he screamed. The last of his affected accent was gone. “Bastards! I’ll make sure you regret this till your last dying day! You will *pay* for this!”

“If you keep that up, they’ll book you for resisting arrest,” Chill said.

“You coward, are you afraid of these petty tyrants and their paper-thin excuses? No country is free if a man can be arrested simply for having a drink. Were we violent? Were we disruptive? Were we disturbing anyone?”

He paused. His eyes darted around the paddywagon as if looking for something. In a frustrated burst of energy his jutted his jaw forward, his eyes wild.

“Well?” He snapped. The other members of the wagon realized he was speaking to them and made a half-hearted sound of assent. “Help me up, Chill.”

“With what? I’m cuffed as well,”

He cursed incomprehensibly through the jawful of spittle, rolled over and got up on his knees. With a grunt of effort, he pushed himself up and onto the seat next to her. “There we are. Bastards tried to steal my pin while they were pushing me around. Thieves! They must be desperate to make an arrest if we were picked from the lot; imagine arresting people at a bar minding their own business. The most intoxicated person was you, and you’ve already sobered.”

“You can’t be serious,” Chill said, struggling to keep her anger under control.

“No, I’m not so naive, thank you very much,” Hush snapped back, looming over her as much as he could with his hands behind his back. “I’m thinking of our next move, or are you so resigned to a weekend in the Tombs with an early Monday morning trial to chase it down? Now, you are young, and alone in this world, so I don’t expect you to have any sort of legal representation, but that can be a boon for us both. If we push our initial alibi at the station, my lawyer can get us both out by tomorrow morning. Six hours isn’t a bad turn-around, is it?”

“No,” Chill answered, barely listening. If she stayed quiet, her time in holding was only as long as it took her arresting officer to finish his paperwork, but that strategy was destroyed by Hush’s belligerent defiance. In fact, if Hush insisted on treating her like his wife, they might force her to wait for the officer to have a full night’s rest as an extra dollop of punishment. “If you’re determined to pursue that lousy lie, then how do you intend to prove we’re married? I don’t have a ring or your last name.”

“Oh, fine, we’re engaged. Good enough for you?”

“Must we be?” she asked, but before he could answer, the wagon jolted to a halt and the back door opened. The officers lead them out one by one onto the cobblestone lane under the enormous monolith of 100 Centre street. The holding center looked like Dracula’s castle under the purple night sky, far from the cherry trees sticking out of the segmented stone courtyard at the visitor’s entrance. The van was parked around back, in front of a rolling metal gate two stories high with a sloping tar driveway.

The officers lead them down, separating the men from the women into two distinct columns. These columns were severed again by a fork in the cold, concrete hallway, which left Valerie with a sense of distinct relief. This was familiar territory for her; this was a routine she could follow. The officers led the women into a processing room, where they took their pictures, their fingerprints, and noted their distinctive features. Then after a complicated, winding path through underground tunnels, they took them upstairs to the women’s holding cell and locked them in.

“Hungry?” A female corrections officer asked. The few who cared answered yes, and an hour later she brought them peanut butter sandwiches with milk to wash it down. Chill was fully sobered by the light fare. An engagement was a messy thing to lie about, no lawyer would agree to such an aggressive tactic. He’d talk Hush out of it and leave Chill alone to work through her own arrest in peace. She stretched out on her patch of floor and went to sleep.

100 Centre street’s holding cells weren’t comfortable; they were monotonous. They were rounded tiled walls over a concrete cell, illuminated by low orange lights. There were no windows, and full darkness never fell. Time was suspended, and it was that weightlessness that

allowed Chill the peace of mind to sleep. She wouldn't miss anything in her dreams. She was only nudged awake once by a cellmate to alert her of the presence of the police.

"Want to make your phone call?" The officer asked.

Chill blinked. The heavy fuzz of a hangover was just beginning to bear its weight on her. She knew she ought to make a call, but to who? Her parents couldn't offer anything more than their disappointment. Hush was in another cell somewhere in the building. Her friends might know a lawyer who could help, but there was always a chance they wouldn't, which would spoil her one phone call. Anyway, she'd had good experiences with public defenders in the past. They were all badly overworked, but they were idealists, which made them good-natured under the heavy layer of burnout. They were easy to take a joke, eager to share a cigarette. There was the small problem of her status as a repeat offender, but surely she could prove she was on the road to recovery if she brought up her therapist. She'd call him, but alas, no matter what godless hour it was, it was still Saturday.

She swallowed away some of the thickness in her throat. No point wasting an opportunity, she thought. "I think I will, actually."

They brought her to the phone outside the cell, where she called a friend to use her spare key to get Chill some fresh clothes, and ask around for advice. Then they put her back in the cell to sleep.

There was no bail because there was no charge. There was no charge because there was no arrest record, and there was no arrest record because the officer in the white shirt, the sergeant in charge of the raid on the bar, went home to shower and sleep before coming back to work. In that time, Chill changed into a fresh set of clothes, laid down on the floor of the cell and went back to sleep. She had a cheese sandwich instead of peanut butter for breakfast, argued with her cell mates about which was better, agreed neither was good, then a final peanut butter sandwich for lunch. For a change of pace she chose cheese for dinner, but regretted it deeply. They all had another cigarette before she drifted off to sleep.

Another day passed the same way. Two of the girls got into a fight at dawn, one of them sinking her hand deep into the high bouffant of the other to pull the rat straight off her head. The other girl screamed as if she were stabbed. She threw punches from the waist, landing blow after blow in the first one's stomach as she planted her feet to pull. The other women in the cell were shouting for them to calm down, walk away, hit her again and get her eyes. A crush of officers swarmed the cell door, bursting in to tear the two women apart. Their screams echoed all the way down the tiled halls as they were dragged out.

By then, the record was written and the charges drawn, though Chill didn't know that. She didn't know anything when the corrections officer called her name and unlocked the cell, nor when they led her out of the holding cells and down the stairs. Rather than inform her of her status, their decision, even of what day and time it was, they brought her to the front of the precinct and walked off. The first pink rays of dawn peeking out over the short row of brick buildings behind the precinct were the only thing she had to greet her.

"Chill!" A voice shouted, and she turned to find Mr. Hush on the other side of the lobby. His suit was badly ruffled, his glasses hung crooked on his nose, and his eye was starting to swell, but he looked highly pleased with himself as he stood in the lobby with a man his age who looked so tired and worn he resembled a melting wax statue.

"Might not have managed to get us out in six hours, but I'll have you know this gentleman here has effectively erased our charges."

He gave the man a firm thump on the back. The man didn't move or otherwise acknowledge the accolades, but turned to the officer and spoke in a deep, sonorous British accent.

"That'll do, thank you officer," the dead eyed old man turned to Chill, next. "If you have your property voucher, we can collect your things at the clerk's window. There shouldn't be a queue today."

The Librium and the money were all gone, though Chill's pillbox and Hush's cigarette case were still present. It was revealed that Hush was armed when he was arrested, and his concealed revolver was missing from his personal property.

"It was licensed!" He roared. "My old service revolver, which I've carried every day since it was issued to me in 1939-- gone! I have all my paperwork at home, fully certified by New York State, which permits me the right to carry a concealed firearm on my person. I want you to check again in the locker, otherwise I'm liable to sue the arresting officer. I felt him tugging on my lapel, I made sure he listed the gun among my private property. I have my lady- friend here as a witness, and I *will* sue!"

"Got a cigarette?" Chill asked Hush's lawyer. He tapped his pack until one single cigarette stood up in the pack, and offered it to her. She lit it and inhaled the strong flavor of unfiltered tobacco. The saltpeter taste immediately made her light-headed, loose strands of dried leaf falling out of the end moistened with her saliva. She looked up at the bright blue sky over Chinatown as they listened to Hush kick up a fuss inside the tiny clerk's office. Chill had reached the point where nothing mattered more than getting home; not her missing money, nor her assorted other affects. The sight of her keys alone were a greater relief than any chemical release. "Think the office will be open?"

"Not today," the lawyer said in his deep, rich voice. "When we spoke earlier he seemed most enthusiastic about having a bath."

"A bath," she repeated, rolling the sound around her tongue. "That sounds like a fine idea. I ought to get going. You'll make sure he doesn't kick up any fresh hell, won't you?"

"Naturally." The lawyer said. Chill nodded, slung her jacket over her shoulders, and began the journey home.