

## I: NIGHT INTO NIGHT

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1929

Trapped by a smooth ceiling of clouds, the light from the city brightened the night. As a result, the incoming storm seemed a gentle, well-meaning visitor. The snow had been falling silently for an hour, hushing the streets. Nineteen-thirty was twenty minutes away; a crisp, newly minted decade awaited with a desperate hope. Sadly, the snowfall, which had turned Newark into a pristine etching by Currier and Ives would soon become corrupted by black and yellow filth from cars, vagabond dogs, and uncaring citizens. By dawn this enchanted fairyland would have turned back into New Jersey.

Inside the Hi Hat Club, Vilma Chambers and her husband, Franklin, sat on uncomfortable wooden chairs beside an unstable table draped with a beer-ringed tablecloth and took in their fellow revelers. Well-heeled society couples like themselves were shouting greetings across tables, bumping into furniture on their way to the dance floor, and spilling drinks as they displayed all of the sophistication of a roomful of squealing kindergärtners who needed their naps. The smartly dressed hoodlums who ran the place, the harried force of elderly, overworked waiters, and the grinning barmaids scurrying amongst the bobbing patrons seemed delighted to be in the presence of debauched respectability.

A handsome woman with perfect, translucent skin, Vilma was a good match for her husband, Franklin Chambers, who possessed a chiseled, aristocratic face that made him appear far more intelligent than he actually was.

Taking a sip from her weak drink, Vilma struggled to conceal her feelings of amusement and disgust as she watched Franklin pretend that he barely knew a pale-skinned cocktail waitress who'd appeared at their table and whose cheeks, both fore and aft, were her most striking features. As he droned on in a deep, soothing voice, Franklin pressed several bills into the

waitress's hand, allowing his index finger to slide gently along the edge of her palm. The waitress, in turn, looked wearily past Franklin to a smiling Vilma, who was sitting just out of her husband's range of vision. Vilma blew the waitress a slow, silent kiss. The waitress winked back. Then she purred, "Thanks, honey," to Franklin, and sauntered off. Sensing an awkward moment, Franklin raised a cocktail to his lips, hiding his flushing face behind the tinkling, amber glass. Such a clumsy evasion would have annoyed Vilma several years ago when she was still trying to decide whether or not Franklin was a jerk. Now that she knew beyond any doubt that he was one, his pompous idiocy was almost sweet, and it left her free to also cheat, but without guilt. Cheating was easy for Vilma. She dressed more smartly than anyone in New Jersey and, at forty, she'd grown into herself well. She had confidence, poise, and she knew how to get her way.

At the next booth, a large man sat alone, drumming on his tabletop and pretending that he wasn't sitting in a smoky speakeasy. At least, that's how it appeared to Vilma. At six-foot-four with a cherubic face, close-cropped blond hair, and a plaid suit a size too small, the fellow resembled an over sized Boy Scout. The Boy Scout motto of "be prepared" was failing him, and the poor man's movements were executed with a deliberateness meant to indicate to other patrons that he was here on serious business and was not joining them in their depravity. Beneath this pose, Vilma could tell something else: the poor guy was worried as hell. Suppressing a belch, the large man took hold of the glass of murky beer that he'd been obliged to order, and contemplated it, as if wondering if a higher power would chastise him for taking a sip. On his behalf, Vilma downed a slug of her own emaciated gin rickey.

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The bartender was obviously too intelligent to be working at the Hi Hat Club, Cuthbert W. Swinerson thought as he tried to find a comfortable position on the lumpy bar stool. True, the man's tanned, muscular forearms suggested a life dedicated to labor,

and the tattoo implied something other than an ongoing semester at Princeton, but there was promise in the dark eyes, a look of both resentment and hurt that suggested a more sensitive soul.

At fifty, Cuthbert, pale, admittedly goose-faced and reedy, was no longer able to offer the provocative beauty that had opened so many doors in the past. But he still had his wit, his intellect, and his extraordinary knowledge - not to mention his compassion. Besides, in the darkness of taverns like this one, he could still pass for thirty-eight or thirty-nine. Few men could offer so much.

Maybe the lad had a longing for any small sign that the world wasn't filled with base, thuggish oafs, that even in such a place as this a kindred spirit might exist. "Ah, 'tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in this petty pace to the last syllable of recorded time," Cuthbert murmured wistfully as the young bartender placed a highball in front of him. The lad stared at him, his head cocked to one side like a dog's.

"Macbeth'," Cuthbert cooed.

The bartender's lush eyebrows came together with puzzlement.

"Shakespeare," Cuthbert added, hopefully.

"Oh, yeah, him," the bartender said, returning to his duties.

There was no point in kidding himself, the bartender had no interest in an older gentleman and never would. But it was New Years. Cuthbert took the last ten-dollar bill from his wallet and left it on the bar.

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A fat man clutching a pocket watch in his hand rushed onto the stage and the music in the speakeasy abruptly stopped. He resembled a swarthy version of Thomas Nast's satire of the white rabbit in "Alice In Wonderland." As the fat man began counting down, the band's drummers played a boisterous, imprecise drum roll: "Twelve, eleven, ten, nine,..."

Outside the speakeasy, the drum roll could be faintly heard by a handful of shivering derelicts. As it ended, the sounds of "Auld Lang Syne" took over and drifted lazily into the street.

Snow was coming down hard as the singing, and music from the accompanying band, was drowned out by yells, hoots, and whistles punctuated a muted ocean's roar of applause.

Then, suddenly, silence.

Several minutes passed. The yelling began again, but now it was frenzied, animalistic. Above these frantic sounds was a woman's piercing scream. Many disparate voices joined in, creating a siren wail of fear.

Detective Lieutenant Jack Luggly arrived on the scene within fifteen minutes, accompanied by three big Lincoln touring cars. Parked in front of the snow-drenched speakeasy, the Lincolns, with high canvas tops that arched down to narrow windshields, resembled a gathering of conspiring hunchbacks.

New Year's eve was made for trouble, Luggly thought as he climbed out of a Lincoln and his shoe slogged into the snow. Though he had been given the evening off, he'd expected to be called back to work. In fact, every December thirty-first he sat at home drinking and spoiling for a fight, as he waited for the call that *always* came. It was no surprise that something had occurred at the Hi Hat Club, what did surprise him was that the police had been summoned by a tall, haughty-looking woman, Vilma Chambers by name, who'd used a pay phone in defiance of the speakeasy's policy about not contacting the law under any circumstances. Her oversight could be excused this time; she was a rich dame, well known in town, and apparently her husband was dead.

Hubby wasn't alone: as Luggly entered the heart of the speak, he could see that four other men were scattered about the room in various manners of being deceased. *Five total*. That was a hell of a lot more than he had expected. At least, they were nice and neat; they could all be drunks passed out at their tables, save for one poor gent who was sprawled back in a chair with his open mouth pointed toward the ceiling as if trolling for flies.

Taking a closer look, Luggly confirmed that the bodies were all unmarked, bloodless and still, with no signs of violence. Yet, the speakeasy's clientèle were behaving in a way that didn't match the almost pastoral crime scene. Several of the women present were hysterical. The men were worse, downright

spooky, half staring, glassy-eyed, into space, the rest with their heads buried in their hands as muffled sobs emanated from somewhere between their knees.

“Happy New Year,” Officer Thomas O’Hare said quietly as he came up to Luggly. O’Hare was young and bright; he wouldn’t be low man on the totem pole for long.

“What gives?” Luggly asked.

“You tell me.”

“Come on, I can see that five guys are dead. I hate to say it, but as bodies go, those guys look great.”

“I know,” O’Hare agreed, absently. “But something sure got to these folks.”

From the bowels of the bar came a woman’s mournful wail.

“Here, want to show you something.” Grim-faced, O’Hare led Luggly deep into the bar.

As they made their way through countless, silent, seated patrons Luggly tensed. Ahead, in the shadows, “Waxy” O’Reilly could be seen perched on a bar stool, his shoulders hunched as he wrung his giant, liver-spotted hands. O’Reilly was a legend in Newark. An enforcer for the Irish gangs, he’d never been arrested for the thirty odd killings everyone knew he had committed. O’Reilly was rumored to favor meat hooks and he liked to find new spots in which to insert or attach them. His nickname came from the time he’d bitten off an opponent’s ear in a fight. Rather than spitting out the repulsive lump of bloody pulp and cartilage, O’Reilly had chewed it up and swallowed it, wax and all.

As he got closer to the feared enforcer, Luggly felt an irrational, primal kind of fear, the kind that comes when a tiny door opens for a moment to show you that life isn’t what you think; it’s a place beyond your comprehension, devoid of compassion or forgiveness. It’s like blinking, and seeing in that blink that you are standing at the base of a four hundred-foot tall tidal wave. The hard jolt to Luggly’s universe was caused by something that, in all his days, he had never expected to see: the dim light revealed that Waxy O’Reilly was weeping.

Even with his service revolver close at hand, Luggly felt uneasy being so close to the huge man. "Mr. O'Reilly," he said, softly, "care to tell me what happened here?"

There was no reply; O'Reilly was off in the world of the tidal wave.

Wearily, Luggly rubbed the back of his head, the instinctive action reminding him that he was usually in bed at this hour. He jogged his head toward O'Hare. "I don't get it. What happened in this dump?" O'Hare shrugged, and Luggly turned back to face the big Irishman. "Hey, O'Reilly. What went on here?"

The enforcer was in no mood to be bothered.

Luggly took a breath and set his mouth in a hard line. "I asked you a question, Mr. O'Reilly."

Slowly, O'Reilly's big head rose. The enforcer's eyes were moist and swollen. His mouth, formed in a natural sneer, trembled slightly. The emotions contained inside O'Reilly were normally foreign to Luggly; like looking into the unblinking face of a shark – but tonight was different, tonight he was human. "If I told you what happened here," O'Reilly said in a deep, phlegmy voice, "in a million years, you'd never believe it. Sweet Jesus," he gulped. "Oh, sweet Jesus." Tears rolled out of the enforcer's unblinking eyes, slid down his doughy cheeks and dripped onto the lapel of his woolen greatcoat.

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