

The New Neighbor

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Chester lay on his stomach on the floor of his apartment, staring through the gap underneath his door. His tail stuck up like an antenna. The door of the apartment across from him was open. Schmidt, Chester's porcine landlord, carried box after box into the open apartment.

The last tenant of the apartment across from Chester's had moved a week ago to live with an ailing family member. Since then, when he wasn't out working, Chester had his attention to the vacated room. He loved new tenants. The rest of the tenants refused to buy any of his goods, but a new tenant could be persuaded. Claws clacked against the floor and Chester pressed his ear to his door. He sniffed the air, but couldn't place the scent among the smell of the other tenants, rust, and mildew. Fur shed from his tail onto his head and he brushed it off himself.

"That the last of them?" The throaty voice was Schmidt. Even through the door, Chester could hear the pig panting.

"Yeah, that's it." The voice was a gravely and a bit low, but undoubtedly feminine.

Keys jingled. "Rent's \$17 a month due the first day of each month. Don't be late."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

“And ignore the weasel across from you. He’s like a fly you can’t swat. Or a stinkbug. Let me know if he gives you any trouble.” Chester could imagine Schmidt flexing, his gut pushing his stained shirt up.

The door across the hall squeaked. “I can handle myself.” The door clunked shut and Schmidt’s thick footsteps faded away.

Chester straightened his bowtie as he stood up. Schmidt may have damaged his reputation, but Chester wasn’t going to let a few bad words taint this new tenant’s opinion of him. He’d stop by for a visit and show the new tenant what a dependable and trustworthy weasel he could be. He stepped out of his room, cleared his throat, and knocked on the door across from him.

The door opened. A brown squirrel leaned against the doorframe, a cigarette smoldering in a long cigarette holder. She was young, probably early twenties. Her blue dress was sleeveless and cut just below her knee. She was too young and skinny to be his type, but Chester’s his gaze lingered an extra moment on her brown calves.

The squirrel blew cigarette smoke into his face. “Eyes up here, neighbor.”

Chester wrinkled his nose, but threw on his best smile. He lifted his top hat off his head and his round ears perked up. “Chester Q. Frink. You must be the new neighbor.”

“Well, I sure ain’t the old one,” the squirrel said as she fingered her pearl necklace with her free paw. He bushy tail swung softly. “So do you want something?”

“Just making sure you’re settling in okay,” Chester said. He craned his neck and leaned forward, trying to see into her apartment. One could tell a lot about a

person from what they own or don't own. Her apartment wasn't much different from his. A naked mattress sat on the bed against the back wall near the window overlooking the street. Rusty cookware leaned against the left wall while the door to the toilet was on the right. A puddle of boxes sat in the middle of the room. "Need help unpacking, Miss ... ?"

"Evelyn," the squirrel said, now her turn to wrinkle her nose. "First name, not last. And no, I don't need you and your stink in here."

Chester stood on his tiptoes. The mouth of something shiny and metallic stuck out from one of the boxes. "Is that a phonograph?"

The squirrel smiled and her ears perked. "Sure is. I've got some records in a couple of those boxes. I've got Duke, Louis, Bix—"

"No mister in the picture?" Chester said as he glanced again at the twin mattress. Most of the rooms were designed for single occupancy, but it wasn't uncommon for a couple or even an extended family to cram themselves into one room.

Evelyn's smile vanished and her tail jolted and whirled. "No. You got anymore questions or can I get on with my life?" She slammed the door.

Chester frowned at the door as if Evelyn could see through it. There were already enough rude tenants living in the apartment, but Chester would have to make due with the information he collected. He'd keep his eye out for discarded jazz records or old instruments. With that in mind, he grabbed his briefcase from his room and left the apartment.

Chester didn't return his apartment until the moon was high in the sky and there was a noticeable nip in the early April air. His briefcase, much to his annoyance, was heavier than it was when he left. Although he managed to make a couple small sales, he hadn't found anything jazz related for Evelyn. Still, he was making progress on his newest venture. He hauled his briefcase onto his bed and opened it. He pulled out half a dozen stout empty bottles. A couple of them didn't have caps, so the weasel would have to find some old corks as stoppers. Old onions sat on a bed of wilted flowers on the other side of the briefcase. He didn't want to spend any money, so he dug through the garbage of a flower shop and a grocery store to find his supplies. Fresh ingredients would have been better, but he had to make do with what he could get.

Chester took off his hat and jacket, the stench of the day's garbage wafting from them, and hung them on the bedpost. He pulled out a spoon and filled a bowl part of the way with bathwater.

Two dull thuds knocked against his door and Chester's tail shot up. The bowl slipped out of his paws and splashed onto the floor. His door slowly creaked open.

Evelyn leaned against the doorframe, her empty cigarette holder hanging next to her two front teeth. "Didn't think you'd be up. Burning the midnight oil?"

"Hey, don't just barge in," Chester said, drying his wet foot paws on the mattress.

"What's the matter Chet?" Evelyn said as she walked in. "You got a problem with folks knocking on your door? Ain't that your bread and butter?"

"*My* bread and butter," Chester muttered. "And my name's Chester."

“Well, the door was open.” Evelyn sauntered over to the bed and flopped down on her back beside the weasel. Her tail hung limp off the side of the bed, the tip brushing the floor. Chester scooted to the other side of the bed and his tail wrapped around his waist tightly. A lick of fur poked out of her blue cap and the scent of alcohol and cigarettes lingered on her. “Chet’s quicker. Chester sounds like a perv who plays with someone’s chest.” The squirrel giggled until she snorted, which made her giggle even more. She rummaged through her tassel purse until she produced a silver cigarette case. A capital “E” sat in the middle of it. “A gift from an old flame. You got a match?”

“I don’t want your smoke in here.” Chester snatched the cigarette holder from her mouth. “What do you want? It’s late.”

“Does a lady need a reason to say hello to a friend?” she said, a coy smile on her lips. Her long legs were open.

Chester looked away, but couldn’t help but take a couple more glances and a discreet sniff. It could have been the cigarettes and booze, but he couldn’t pick up a scent of arousal coming from the squirrel.

Evelyn snatched the cigarette holder from Chester and smacked him in the nose with it. “Look, but don’t touch. Touching’s for the folks with money, which you don’t have because you live in this dump.”

The weasel rubbed his nose and his ears flattened. “You’re not my type anyway.” He grabbed the bowl from the floor. “Now will you leave? I’ve got work to do.”

“What’s this for even?” Evelyn said as she picked up a wilted daisy. “Seems like a gift for a lousy date.”

“When I’m finished with it,” Chester said as he grinned and snatched the flower from her, “it’ll be a great date gift. It really will. You see, I had to deal with a bad stink last month and I was wishing for something to smell good.”

“What, did you forget to bathe?” Evelyn asked. She giggled, sliding off the edge of the bed onto the floor.

Chester glared at her, his ears folded against his head again. “No. I decided it was time to create my own perfume, like Chanel No. 5, but better.”

Evelyn reached up and grabbed one of the onions. “This is going to be perfume?”

Chester glanced away and rubbed the back of his neck. “I like fried onions. They smell good.”

“Onions?” Evelyn said. She tossed the onion at him, but it sailed right and landed on the floor.

“It’ll work,” Chester said. Loose neck fur snowed onto his mattress. “Really, it will. Now let me work.”

“Fine, be a stiff,” Evelyn said as she grabbed the bedpost and pulled herself up. “But stiff folks break. They work hard, but then they put all this pressure on themselves until they’re broken. Relax a little.” She backed into the stool and fell on her rear.

“Looks like you’re relaxed enough for the both of us,” Chester said as Evelyn laughed. He turned away from her, but glanced back. “Need help?”

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Evelyn said as she stood.

"Good," Chester said. He tilted his head to the door. "Goodbye." Even after she left, the scent of her cigarettes hung in the air. He scooted closer to the window, hoping for a breeze to roll through.

Chester avoided Evelyn the best he could for the next week, though it wasn't hard to do so. Even as he came and went from the apartment, he picked up the squirrel's living pattern. Bleary-eyed from the previous night's partying, she would leave her apartment each morning for what he overheard to be a job as a shoe sales clerk at a department store. She would return in the afternoon, lock herself in her room, and blast jazz from her phonograph. The other tenants rarely complained. Those who did learned she'd just turn the music up. After the sun went down, she'd emerge from her room, decked out in an ever-rotating garb of short dresses and pearls, and would return either sometime past midnight or not until the following morning.

Chester was sewing the top of his top hat back together when someone stomped up the stairs to the third floor. The weasel set his hat aside and peeked out the door.

Evelyn hustled into her room and slipped into her room. She didn't bother shutting her door. The squirrel peeked out onto the street through a blanket she had hung as a makeshift curtain. After a few seconds, she grabbed a folded piece of paper from her purse, struck a match, and let the flame climb its way up the paper.

Evelyn tossed the burning paper into the trashcan and sat down on her bed. No matter how much she stroked her tail, the fur wouldn't stop standing. "Damn it."

"Weather's been getting warmer," Chester said from his doorway. She gasped, but he continued. "What's with the fire?"

Evelyn grabbed her purse. "You'll make someone's tail go gray if you sneak up on them like that." She picked out her cigarette case and lit a cigarette.

"Your door was open," Chester said. He leaned against the door, trying to imitate the way Evelyn had done it a week ago.

"Congrats, you're eyes work," Evelyn said. She took a long drag and exhaled smoke as she walked to her door. "Now go jump off a bridge. I have to find a new job."

Chester chuckled and straightened his bowtie. "That's the beauty of being your own boss. No one can fire you."

"I quit," Evelyn said before she pushed him out of the doorway and slammed the door. A few seconds later, jazz blared from her phonograph. The beat seemed quicker than previous tunes from her phonograph, like a great parade was marching through, carrying her somewhere else.

The next morning was the day before garbage day, a day that kept Chester busy. He needed more bottles, especially ones that still had caps or some sort of stopper. Chester located a large dumpster behind a row of stores in the commercial district and hopped in.

Between flies and the swamp of rotting food soaking the dumpster, Chester was able to dig out some usable bottles, though he wished he had more room in his suitcase. There were worn stuffed animals with missing appendages, candlestick telephones with missing earpieces, shoes with scuffs and holes, and busted car wheels. It was a smorgasbord of sellable goods. All of these could be usable if someone would take a moment to fix them. He pulled a cat stuffed animal from the pile. Most of the cat was black cloth, but its tummy and face were white stained with murky yellow garbage soup. Fluff stuck out from its waist where its right leg should have been. He patted the stuffed animal on the head and tossed it back into the dumpster. Most items needed a good polish and some stitching, but others, like the candlestick phone to his right, would probably never work again. Chester would have to use some creative wording and half-truths to sell something like that, but it wouldn't be the first time he'd made such a sale. With his suitcase full, Chester climbed out of the dumpster, brushed off as much of the garbage from his clothes and fur as he could, and headed home to drop off his new goods.

Not long after leaving the alleyway, the fur on the back of his neck stood up. A hulking shadow brushed at his foot paws. Chester sniffed. Four days without a bath and a few dumpster dives didn't help him attract people. Some of the nicer dressed folks on the sidewalk hugged the sides of the sidewalk. They could have been avoiding whoever was behind him, but no one would stick so close to the weasel without a reason to do so. He made a mental note to take a bath that night.

"Good morning to you, sir!" Chester said as he turned. The grizzly that was following him stopped and perked his ears. Chester lifted his top hat off his head.

“Chester Q. Frink, Salesweasel. Can I interest you in something today? I’ve got everything you need and then some.”

You see any squirrels lately?” the grizzly asked, his snout scrunched up.

“Bound to be hundreds in this city,” Chester said, pulling his smile further and tugging on his collar. He opened his briefcase. “Could I interest you in a bottle?”

“Allow me to be more specific,” the grizzly said. He lifted one paw out of his pocket and lifted the side of his coat. The handle of a knife peeked out from his waistband. He pointed to an apartment complex in front of them. “Is there a squirrel in there?”

“Probably,” Chester said as he shrugged.

The grizzly pointed to the apartment at the end of the block. “How about that one?”

“Probably,” Chester repeated.

The bear pointed to the apartment across the street, Chester’s apartment. “And in there?”

Chester chuckled as his tail wrapped around his leg. “Nope, I doubt that.”

“Well ain’t that strange,” the bear said in mock surprise. “I swore you said there’s bound to be hundreds of squirrels in this city.” He grasped the handle of his knife. “Tell me, weasel, why don’t I believe you?” He leaned toward Chester. “This squirrel is nothing but trouble. Let me make the trouble go away, or do you want to cause more trouble?”

“Have a free bottle!” Chester said. He grabbed one of the bottles and chucked it at the bear’s foot paw. It didn’t shatter, but the bear dropped the knife and held his

wounded foot paw, hopping about and swearing. Chester dashed across the street, narrowly avoiding a passing automobile, and slipped into the apartment complex. He didn't stop running until he was up the two flights of stairs and in front of his door on the third floor. As he reached for his key, Evelyn's door opened.

"You son of a bitch!" the squirrel said. She grabbed Chester by the collar and dragged him into her room. She tossed him onto the floor and kicked the door shut. "What was that all about?"

Chester picked his hat up and dusted it off. "I've got a rough sketch, but I think I need you to paint the picture."

Evelyn grabbed her cigarette holder and her matches. "I should start charging you for every one of these I smoke. I haven't smoked this much since my last year at home." She lit her cigarette and took a long drag. Her tail grew still, lowering slightly. "Congratulations, you're officially dragged into my mess."

Chester sat up and placed his chin on his paw. "Yeah, some honor. So why's that bear looking for squirrels?"

Evelyn sat down on her bed and her tail wrapped around her hip. "It's not him I'm worried about. It's his boss." She pushed the makeshift curtain a little to peek out at the street. "You ever try something new, like some food you've never heard of?"

The weasel patted his stomach. "Don't mention food."

"Phillip was my snack for a while," Evelyn said as she released the curtain. "He was a bit of a dandy, but he knew where all the best speakeasies were and he gave me a few shiny trinkets." She rubbed her paw over her cigarette case. "But

having the same snack again and again, it loses its flavor, so I dumped him.” She took a drag and exhaled through her nose. “I knew he went through girls as fast as I go through men, but I guess he wanted to be the one to end it. His goons trashed my old place, so I moved out here. Then he left a letter at my workplace saying he’s got his eye on me.” She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray and flicked the butt at Chester. “And thanks to you, now he knows where I live.”

“So what do you want me to do?” Chester asked as he picked the cigarette butt off his jacket. “Help you pack your bags and find a new place?”

Evelyn shook her head. “He’ll just find me again. I need to show him it’s over between us.” She sauntered over to Chester, ran her finger up his chest, and grabbed him by his bowtie. “And honey, you’re my ticket out of this mess. We’re going to pay Phillip a visit.”

Chester grabbed her paw. “I don’t feel like this is a ‘we’ kind of thing. No, it’s more of a ‘you’ situation.”

The squirrel released him and held a fist to her mouth. “Then I guess I should tell Schmidt the bad news.”

“What bad news?” Chester asked as his ears perked.

“That when I came home, I found you snooping around in my room,” Evelyn said in a rough imitation of a southern belle. She fanned herself with her paw. “And you were going through my undergarments. The dirty ones!”

“I never did that!” Chester shouted as he stood. His tail whizzed about, shedding loose fur onto the floor.

Evelyn smiled, her tail swishing slowly. "Yes, but who's Schmidt going to side with? The young squirrel who's got him drooling or a weasel who's chronically late on rent and potentially an underpants-stealing pervert?"

"The grizzly was right," Chester grumbled, his ears folded forward. "You are trouble."

The squirrel pulled the weasel to her door. "Get yourself ready. You and I are going to a little soiree tonight. First order of business," she wrinkled her nose. "Take a bath or three. Then put on your nice clothes and meet me here at eight."

Chester looked himself over. "These are my clothes."

"Oh god," Evelyn said as she examined the stitched patch on Chester's trousers. "These are your nice clothes?"

"These are my *clothes*," Chester said as he glared at her.

Evelyn sighed and pushed him out the door. "This is going to be more work than I thought."

Chester patted his damp fur as he and Evelyn walked down the sidewalk. Without his briefcase and his typical layer of grime, the weasel might as well been naked as far as he was concerned. He had no intention of joining Evelyn at wherever they were heading to and he only bathed because he wanted to. He had neglected to lock his door and the squirrel barged in again. Thankfully, Chester was dressed by then and was packing the last of his perfume into his briefcase to sell the next morning. After a few minutes arguing over the weasel's scruffy appearance, she

reminded Chester that she was still blackmailing him. He had no choice but to join her.

"I wish you'd have let me take a pair of scissors to that mess of fur," Evelyn said as she toyed with her string of pearls. "You're like Sasquatch's scrawny cousin."

The weasel ran his fingers along one of his long whiskers. "There's nothing wrong with my fur. So, are you going to tell me what this plan is or are going to just walk until the sun rises?"

"I thought you'd be used to walking," Evelyn said. Despite her joking, her tail was wrapped tightly around her and her ears were perked up, though only one was turned toward Chester. She glanced at a passing truck. "My dates usually have some sort of automobile." She stopped and tightened the weasel's bowtie. "We're almost there. Just try not to stand out." She ran her hand over the patchwork on Chester's top hat. "Well, not to stand out too much."

Twenty minutes later, Evelyn pulled Chester into an alleyway next to The Brick House, an old diner. A Clydesdale leaning next to a door glanced down at them, his gaze lingering on the weasel. "Password?"

"Blind pig," Evelyn said as she bat her eyelashes. She slipped her arm around Chester's. His tail bristled as her tail brushed against his. The Clydesdale opened the door for Chester and Evelyn and the two walked down the stairs.

After the Clydesdale shut the door behind them, Chester tugged his arm free. "What's with this whole touchy feely business?"

Evelyn yanked him toward her, almost causing the weasel to trip down the stairs. "Remember what I said, dear. Just try not to stand out."

“Dear?” Chester repeated as the squirrel linked arms with him again.

Evelyn opened the door at the bottom of the stairs. The wail and strum of jazz sailed through the air. Thirsty men with loosened ties and unbuttoned shirts and ladies dressed in bright fringed dresses surrounded the long wooden bar. The jazz band was situated in the back corner of the room with the piano front and center on the stage. The piano player, a dark-furred sea otter, wiggled his webbed paws over keys. One of his fingers wacked what seemed to be the wrong note, but he banged on that same wrong key until it was part of the song. He smiled at the crowd and they whistled and cheered.

Chester wished he had his briefcase of goods with him. Drunk customers would buy anything if he could hold their attention long enough.

Evelyn’s eyes lit up and her tail loosened from her legs. “Golly, it’s been a while since I’ve heard Sam Licks tickle those ivories.” She pulled Chester toward the center of the room where couples danced to the tune.

Chester dug his heels into the floor. “What are you doing?”

“*We’re* going to cut a rug,” Evelyn said as she tugged harder.

Chester glanced at the door and wondered how long it’d take him to run back to the apartment. “I’m not built to cut rugs.” Once the two were at the center of the dance floor, the squirrel released him.

“Dancing’s for everybody,” Evelyn said. She swayed her hips, her foot paws stepping to the clang of Sam Lick’s beat. It was then Chester noticed she had worn a yellow fringed dress to match his jacket. She was like a lightning bolt, quick and demanding to be seen.

Chester planted his feet to the floor and his ears folded. "I never agreed to this."

"Oh come now," Evelyn said, holding her arms out to him. "Just step to the beat." Chester stepped out and planted his foot on hers. "Ow!" the squirrel said. She smacked him in the nose. "Don't step on mine, you nimrod!"

"Be more specific next time," Chester said as he rubbed his nose. He turned and walked into the waiting grizzly. The weasel jumped back.

"Evelyn," the grizzly said. His smile flashed his sharp teeth. "I didn't think we'd be seeing you so soon."

The squirrel crossed her arms. "I was hoping to hear more of Sam and his Honeybees. Let's skip the chit chat, Bart." She wrapped her arm around Chester. "Let's go see Phillip."

Bart, the grizzly, led the two to a door in the back of the room near the bar. Inside, Sam's music was muffled, but still present. The room was sparsely adored, with only a circular table, a few chairs, and a bookcase, though they all seemed to be carved from some sort of bright wood. It served to contrast the dusty brick walls of the room. A coyote stood by a black and white mouse, who sat at the back end of a round table. The mouse's beady eyes lit up as he stood. "Evelyn, my dear, you've come!" He walked over to her, grabbed her paw, and kissed it. He held a polished revolver in his paw. "It's been nothing but agony without you here. The music isn't as sweet and company is so dull." He scratched his forehead with the muzzle of the revolver. "Why, even my work has seemed fruitless without you." His eyes narrowed as he caught a glimpse of Chester. "Who's that?"

Evelyn pulled Chester close to her. "Phillip, I've found someone who's better for me. This is my boyfriend and we're in love."

Before Chester could protest, Evelyn pressed her lips against his. It had been a while since Chester had kissed someone, but he did the best he could to go along. He wasn't sure what to do with her probing tongue or how to navigate around her front teeth, but before long, she released him.

Phillip placed his free paw on the table. His large ears drooped and his tail lay limp on the floor. "Is this really what you want?"

The squirrel glanced at the revolver and then at Chester. "Yes."

Phillip lowered himself into one of the chairs around the table and held his head in his paws.

"Boss?" Bart asked.

"Take them out back," Phillip said as he stared at the table. "Kill the weasel and make her watch."

"Whoa! Come on now!" Chester said as he tried to wrestle away from Bart. "Can't we talk this out, Phil?"

Phillip fired his revolver and the bullet sunk into the wall behind Chester. The music stopped and a few patrons in the other room shrieked.

Evelyn, restrained by one of the other guards, a coyote, craned her neck toward Chester. "He prefers Phillip."

"Cut out his tongue!" the mouse said as he trembled. "Then kill him." He stood up and chuckled, slipping the revolver into his waistband. "Oh dear, looks like I've

got to get the party started again.” He threw a smile back onto his face, brushed sweat from his paws onto his jacket, and hurried out of the room.

Bart slid a bookcase aside, revealing a secret door. “Both of you get moving!” The coyote and the grizzly both pulled their guns and Bart opened the door. Chester and Evelyn did as they were told and entered the passageway.

“That was your plan?” Chester said as he squinted through the darkness. The lanterns in the tunnel provided just enough to see a couple feet in front of him. “To kiss me in front of your scorned lover?”

“I thought he’d pity me for being with someone so poor,” Evelyn said.

Chester stuck his nose in the air. “You’d be lucky to have someone like me. At least when you kiss me, it’s not like breathing in an ashtray.” The air smelled like dusty coins, which made the fur on the back of Chester’s neck stand.

Evelyn scoffed. “Kissing you was like licking the inside of a trashcan. I thought you bathed before coming here.” She glanced over at Bart. “By the way, you can go ahead and cut his tongue out now.”

Bart laughed and slapped Chester in the back. “What did I tell you? Trouble, isn’t she?” As the group arrived at the end of the tunnel, Bart kicked Chester in the back of the knee and the weasel toppled over. The grizzly pulled the knife from his pocket. “Let’s finish what we started earlier, shall we?” He looked back at the coyote. “You got her?”

The coyote wrapped his arm around Evelyn’s neck. “She’s not going anywhere.”

Evelyn glanced at the coyote's gun. "I'll watch, okay? I actually want you two to shut that weasel up."

"The coyote placed his mouth by her ear. "Then why are you shaking?"

Chester scrambled back. "Don't I get any last wo—" Bart grabbed Chester's tongue and Evelyn screamed. The weasel pulled a bottle from his coat pocket and squeezed the pump. The grizzly yelped as the liquid soaked his face and ran down into his eyes. Chester slammed the bottle over Bart's head and the bear slumped over.

The coyote wrinkled his nose as the stench of onions filled the tunnel. As he aimed his gun at Chester, Evelyn bit down on his arm. The coyote dropped his gun. After unwrapping herself from the coyote's grip, Evelyn kicked him between the legs. The coyote toppled over in the fetal position, his tail curled tightly around himself. He didn't have much time to whimper before Evelyn grabbed his gun and slammed the butt of it against the back of his head.

Evelyn yanked her cap off and held it over her nose and mouth. "Forget perfume. Call the army. They could use this for chemical warfare."

Chester pulled his hat off and joined the squirrel as they jogged out of the tunnel. "Okay, so the perfume needs a little work. There's no shame in trial and error. The important thing is that you told me not to bring anything, but my perfume saved us. Imagine what I could have done with a full briefcase." He glanced at the gun. "What are you going to do with that?"

"What do you think?" Evelyn said, walking a bit ahead of him.

Chester grabbed her by the shoulder. "Let's just get out of here. Maybe there's another secret tunnel."

"And then what?" Evelyn said as she slapped his paw away. "Go back to wondering when Phillip will come after me again?"

As Evelyn reached for the handle of the door to Phillip's back room, Chester stepped in front of her. "Phillip's a killer. We're the type of folks who slide through and get out when trouble stirs up. Murder will stick to you no matter what."

Evelyn pushed him aside. Her paw trembled on the door handle before she opened the door and stomped into the back room. She grabbed her purse and pulled out a cigarette. Keeping her eye on the door, she lit the cigarette and took a long drag. She exhaled, a smile on her face. "There. No more shaking." Evelyn opened the door to the main floor of the speakeasy. Chester, not wanting to wait for Bart and the coyote to return, followed her.

The piano sat alone on the stage, a nest of cigarette butts still smoldering in the ashtray. Some of the chairs lay on their side. Phillip sat at the bar with his head down and his ears flat. He clutched a half-finished glass of some sort of clear alcohol. His ears perked up and swiveled toward Chester and Evelyn as they approached, but he kept his head down. "I couldn't get them to stay. The party's over."

"You could say that," Evelyn said, her cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth.

Phillip spun around in his seat and smiled. The grin stayed on his face even as Evelyn pointed the gun at him. "It'll all be better tomorrow, Evelyn. We'll have a full house, good music, and plenty of alcohol."

“I thought you knew me better, Phillip,” Evelyn said. She grabbed her gun with both paws. “I’m more of a ‘now’ kind of gal.”

“See how much trouble she is?” Chester said as he stepped forward and tugged on his collar. His ears lay back against his head. “She’s not worth the hassle. Really, she’s not. So how about we all leave and nobody get’s shot? She doesn’t want to shoot anyone.”

“Don’t be putting words in my mouth,” Evelyn said, her tail uncurling around her and whirling. She blew smoke from her nose. “You want out? The door’s on your left.”

Chester glanced back and for between the squirrel and the mouse. Why did Evelyn have to wonder into his apartment like they were old friends? Customers weren’t supposed to do that and he only had to be friendly with customers, not be their friend. Yet here he was in a speakeasy with a customer, who’s pulled a gun on an obsessive ex lover. Is this too far to go for a sale? Did he somehow become friends with this girl almost half his age? Chester shook his head. A friend would have no choice but to stay, but Evelyn was just a customer and a neighbor. Chester adjusted his hat. “Fine.” He walked to the staircase leading to the alleyway. He gripped the railing, but his legs felt like jelly. The gun fired, followed closely by five more rounds. His tail shot up. “Evelyn!” Chester shouted as he ran back into the room.

The gun hung limp at Evelyn’s side as she panted. A trail of ash broke off from her cigarette.

Phillip picked his head up and looked over his white suit. Broken glass bottles littered the shelves behind him as alcohol dribbled onto the cement floor.

Evelyn plucked the cigarette from her mouth and flicked it. The cigarette landed on the other side of the bar in the puddle of booze. The bar erupted into a wall of flames in a matter of seconds. Phillip squeaked. He grabbed his coat and beat it against the fire.

“Let’s call it a night,” Chester said as he yanked Evelyn out of the room and up the stairs.

By the time the two slowed to a walk to catch their breath, they were ten blocks away. A fire truck whizzed past them in the direction of the speakeasy. Neither of the two said a word as they walked back to the apartment, pausing momentarily for Evelyn to toss the gun into a trashcan.

As Chester and Evelyn walked down the hall of the third floor of the apartment building, Evelyn grabbed Chester. “Hold up a second, okay?” She reached into her purse and pulled out a five-dollar bill.

Chester pushed her paw away. “I don’t accept handouts. I really don’t.”

“I’m paying you back,” Evelyn said as she shoved the money into Chester’s coat pocket and patted it. “You lost inventory back at the party. I thought I should pay for it.”

Chester placed his paw over his pocket. “I didn’t even get to do my pitch.” Chester straightened his bowtie, adjusting his hat, and cleared his throat. “I appreciate your business, Miss. I look forward to selling you goods in the future.”

“That was a one-time sale,” Evelyn said, grinning. “I smelled that perfume. If that’s like any other products you have, keep them.” She opened her door. “I hope you’re not expecting a good night kiss. Our little relationship was a one-time deal too.”

“Thank God for that,” Chester said as he opened his door. “I don’t think I could handle another one of your jealous lovers.”

“Go to bed, Chester,” Evelyn said. “You earned it.” She shut her door.

Chester closed his door. He pulled out the five-dollar bill. All that digging through trashcans, mashing up onions, and playing boyfriend and he didn’t even have a third of his rent to show for it. Still, money is money, and as long as Phillip didn’t show up again, it was worth it. Chester kissed the five-dollar bill and shoved it under his mattress. He stripped off his hat, jacket, tie, glasses, and spats, and sat on his bed. A slow trumpet tune crooned from Evelyn’s phonograph. He closed his eyes and let the music rock him to sleep.