

*Twisted  
Early Stories*

by

**Eugenia Lucas**

## The Graveyard

On a day to day basis, Sylvia Askew dealt with a “normal” variety of customers for a women’s department: men searching for birthday and anniversary gifts; women needing new work clothes; children running in and out of the rotating display racks. On her breaks, she mingled with the “normal” shoppers in the mall, picking up the odd bargain from the competition. She didn’t earn much money, but she didn’t need much to survive. For all practical purposes, she enjoyed her life.

That is, until she met Gerald King. Quite by accident it happened, as she was leaving the mall after an eleven-hour shift. Sylvia had stopped to admire the puppies at the pet store and, turning, caught her purse on the corner of a bin filled with doggy treats. The contents of her purse spilled in all directions. She felt a total fool as she stooped, scrambling to retrieve her belongings.

Gerald King had stood, watching her for a moment. Sylvia never learned if his black boot pinned the wallet-size family portrait deliberately; nonetheless, she’d had to look all the way up at his smiling face to request his assistance.

“Excuse me, you’re standing on my property.”

King’s head tilted slightly right. “The floor is your property?”

“No, what’s under your boot.”

“The floor is under my boot,” he countered in a resounding baritone.

“So is my picture!”

Obligingly, King moved his foot. He continued to watch Sylvia reload her purse, which annoyed her further.

“What are you looking at?”

“You.”

“Why?” she challenged.

“Why not?”

Sylvia’s temper surpassed the boiling point. With her possessions intact, she straightened and gazed into Gerald King’s deep brown eyes. From this perspective, she felt a definite attraction for him.. His reddish-brown hair cascaded past his shoulders; he wore a mustache and goatee. A diamond stud hung in his left ear. Beyond the tantalizing musky scent, she sensed an aire of mystery about him. She loved a good mystery.

This assessment may have only taken a split second, but she felt like she’d been staring at him for an hour. His gaze never wavered, nor did he say a word throughout.

Realizing her rudeness, Sylvia lowered her eyes. "I'm... sorry I got angry at you. I've had a long day..."

"And you'll have an even longer night. Come."

He exerted no force when he grasped her hand, yet she allowed herself to be led from the pet store and toward the mall exit. In the parking lot, King unlocked the passenger door of a black '74 Corvette; she got in without a word of protest.

The car flew along dark country roads. After a time, Sylvia no longer knew in which direction they travelled or their location. Then, just as she believed they would never stop, King steered the Corvette off the main road. He slowed and stopped in the middle of an abandoned graveyard.

As he opened the door for her and offered his hand for her to alight, Sylvia recognized the place. Oddly enough, here in the middle of nowhere, most of her ancestors were buried. The last time she'd visited the site, her grandfather Askew had been laid to rest. In the daylight, there could be no more peaceful place. Even now, the smell of fresh-cut grass reached her nose. In the gloom, however, the trees appeared ominous and threatening. A chill wind made her shiver. She wondered why Gerald King had brought her...

"So, you know this place," he whispered.

"Yes."

"You are known *by* this place. Come."

Sylvia followed, reluctant because she didn't understand. "What do you mean, I'm *known* by this place?"

"The loved ones buried here asked me to bring you to them."

She stopped dead in her tracks. "What?"

"Trust me, Sylvia. Your grandmother, and her mother, and her father, have something to show you..."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The spirits of these and many others thrive here. All related to you. It was quite by chance I happened to be passing here one evening a few months back, when I sensed the ghostly activity. I stopped and listened, and they spoke to me of you. They've been watching you, and now it is time for them to reveal what they know..."

Sylvia sank against a worn monument. "Please, take me back to the mall," she pleaded.

"I can't do that. Look around you. Can't you see your family gathering?"

Stiffening, Sylvia scanned the rows of headstones, lit only by a dim half-moon. "I don't see anything."

"On your left, there's your grandmother Elizabeth."

She turned her head and felt an icy hand on her arm. The scent of roses overwhelmed her, like the toilet water her grandmother had used when alive. She flinched and let out a small shriek.

“There’s no need to be frightened, Sylvia. They mean you no harm.”

“They might not, but I’m not so sure about you!” Sylvia backed toward the Corvette. She hoped against hope King had left the keys in the ignition. If nothing else, she could lock herself inside, where he couldn’t reach her. If she had to wait until morning, until the caretaker showed up for work or whatever, so be it.

She tripped on a flat raised stone. Ethereal hands prevented her from falling, helped her regain her balance. She whirled to see two wispy figures smiling...

“Oh, my God!”

Gerald King stood beside her. “You see, they love you.”

“But, why?”

“Because you’re the last of the Askews. They know, unless you help them, their hopes will vanish.”

“Hopes? Hopes for what?”

“Eternal peace. You see, unless a member of their family restores the Askew estate to its rightful owners, your descendants are bound to wander this graveyard forever.”

Sylvia looked again at the spectres nearest her. “Restore the Askew estate? You mean, the old house down by the river...”

“Yes,” King concurred. “It seems your fifth great-grandfather obtained the land by cheating at a poker game. The farmer to whom it belonged killed himself rather than tell his wife. She and their children were sent to a pauper’s home.”

“I... don’t believe it.”

“Ask them. They have no reason to lie.”

Sylvia said nothing, instead closely watching the ghosts of her ancestors. One by one, they all nodded.

“Do you know the farmer’s name?” she asked her companion.

“No, but I suspect it would be in the city’s historical records.”

Feeling quite ridiculous, Sylvia addressed the assembled Askews. “I can’t make any guarantees, but I’ll see what I can do.”

That proved assurance enough for, one by one, the ghosts faded into the black night. When only she and Gerald King remained, Sylvia turned to him.

“Neat trick.”

“You honestly don’t believe?”

“Should I?”

No anger tinged King’s voice. “What can I do to impress upon you the seriousness of this situation?”

“Besides driving me back to the mall, nothing.” Sylvia moved toward the Corvette.

Gerald followed. “Do you know what it’s like to be trapped in the afterlife, unable to experience neither the peace of heaven nor the torture of hell?”

“No.”

“I wouldn’t have wasted my time searching for you, bringing you here, if I didn’t believe what your ancestors told me.”

“Fine, then you restore the estate to the farmer’s family.”

“I can’t. I’m not an Askew.”

Sylvia climbed into the passenger seat and waited. Gerald slid behind the wheel and started the engine. “I just hope you don’t regret this. Ghosts have a way of getting revenge.” With squealing tires, the car turned onto the asphalt.

In less than 24 hours, Sylvia’s life had gone from normal to bizarre, revenge enough in her eyes. Everywhere she went over the next few days - the grocery store, the library, work - she imagined her grandparents, great-grandparents and their forebears watching her. Worse yet, Gerald King *was* watching her. He seemingly haunted the women’s department. She would glimpse him, turn away for a moment, but he would be gone when she looked again.

By Friday, she’d had enough. As the sun rose over autumn-tinted trees, she drove to the graveyard and parked on the muddy track near the largest monument erected by her family. She walked across the dew-soaked grass and inspected the other head stones. Generation upon generation of Askews had been laid to rest in this remote earth. Sylvia had always wondered why - so far from the family estate, which she had only visited twice in her life. Still, the family held tightly to its traditions, thus they would be willing to pay to have the remains driven this distance.

Sylvia felt nothing as she walked between the rows. Had the night played tricks on her, or had she been the brunt of Gerald King’s cruel joke? Either way, she left the graveyard satisfied her life could resume its previous routine.

She soon learned how wrong she’d been. The eerie apparitions during work hours and on her daily rounds did not cease. By the end of the following week, she believed herself on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

That’s when Gerald King appeared at her apartment. Seeing him, she tried to slam the door in his face, but he slipped past her, as if a ghost himself.

“You’ve not accomplished much,” he observed.

"I'm too... busy to dwell on figments of my imagination."

"That attitude will only raise your ancestors' ire further. They are anxious to go to their well-deserved rest."

Sylvia bristled, holding the door open. "You started all this, you finish it."

"You know I can't do that. I am simply their messenger."

"I suspect you know more about this than you're saying, though. How did you ever *find* that graveyard, in the first place? It's not like it's in the middle of town, or even in the middle of *anywhere*. There aren't any houses within miles..."

"I know every graveyard within a hundred mile radius," King stated. "And every ghost. That particular graveyard overwhelmed me with its spectral activity, though. I've spent a lot of time there over the past year."

"You would've been better off spending time in a shrink's office. Get lost, will you?"

"Only after you promise to find the farmer's descendants and restore their stolen property."

Sylvia scowled. She'd always believed in keeping her word; she didn't give it lightly. If she gave it now, she would be obligated...

"All right, all right. Now, just leave me alone!"

Compliantly, King departed. Sylvia closed the door and locked the deadbolt. Then she sank on the sofa, shivering.

The next morning, she drove to the county seat, a rustic community where small businesses still thrived. In the town hall, she started with the county clerk.

Before noon, she had visited nearly every office - including the basement archives. She poured over dusty ledgers, the handwritten script on thick parchment faded from black to pale brown over the decades. Hours of research gained her few pieces of information: the farmer from whom her fifth great-grandfather had "stolen" the estate had been named Miles Betz. His wife and children had been sent to the county poorhouse after his death, but had disappeared within a month.

Sylvia did not envision herself as any sort of genealogist, especially when it came to tracking a family backward over two hundred years. To hire a professional would drain her bank account, and for what? She drove to work, a thousand thoughts swirling in her brain.

Those same thoughts plagued her dreams. She tossed and turned in her bed that night, praying those nagging ancestors would be quiet. She had no way of finding the "rightful owner" of the Askew estate. Wasn't it enough she had tried?

Evidently not. When Sylvia retrieved her morning paper, she read the headline "Graveyard Robbed" in terror. The listing of graves vandalized included Askews and Betzes, among others. Why would anyone want to destroy that long-forsaken spot? Sylvia puzzled.

Then, it struck her. What if Gerald King had done the deed himself? Who else even knew about the graveyard's location, except perhaps a few distant relatives of the occupants? Now that she wished to question him, she was certain he'd have gone into hiding.

It didn't matter much, once the phone started ringing. Sylvia learned more from the police and journalists than they did from her, as the sole remaining Askew: the contact for the Betz family was none other than Gerald King.

"Have you documented proof he is related to the Betz clan?" Sylvia asked a hoarse detective.

"According to the caretaker's log, his grandmother was Miriam Betz. She married Samuel King. Oddly enough, the King graves were untouched in the robbery, though the Betz graves on both sides were disturbed."

Sylvia had her answers. "It doesn't surprise me one bit. Thank you."

By the time she reached the graveyard after her shift at the department store, the sun had vanished beyond the horizon. The caretaker labored still, righting stones which appeared to have been upended by a four-wheel drive monster truck. The elderly man had lowered the desecrated coffins back into their plots and filled most of the holes. Sylvia found him, sipping from a jug of lemonade, leaning against her family's huge monument.

"This hasn't been pleasant for you," she observed.

"First time it's happened in forty years. Last time, some idiots had heard about one of the Askews being buried with ten gold bars lining the coffin. Dug up fifteen graves; never found the treasure."

"Has Gerald King been around today?"

"Gerald King is around *every* day. All he does is ask me questions about the ghosts."

"So, you know about the ghosts?"

"There aren't any ghosts, ma'am. Just myths."

Sylvia wanted to believe him, but she knew what she'd seen. "What do you know about the Betz family?"

"Oh, they're poor relatives of the Askews. Your great-great-grandfather, or even further back, married the widow Betz after her husband killed himself over a poker game. They're buried here and there, in between their rich cousins, wherever they'd fit."

"So, if they're relatives, then the old family estate..."

"They'd have a legal claim, if there were no Askews left." The caretaker hoisted his shovel over a stooped shoulder. "It's getting dark. I'll have to finish up here tomorrow."

"Just be careful."

Touching a finger to his forehead, the man moved toward a storage shed. Sylvia turned toward the deepening darkness, where she saw the rising spectres of her ancestors. The sound of tires on the muddy access road also reached her ears. She recognized Gerald King's Corvette.

"Here he comes," Sylvia spoke. "The question is: what do we do now?"

The ghosts answered her question by their actions. No more had King emerged from his car than he was swept by a forceful wind to the center of the graveyard. At the edge of a gaping hole, he teetered backward, held by ethereal hands.

"What the hell's going on here?" he bellowed.

"Your past has come back to haunt *you*, I think," Sylvia explained. "Shall I call you cousin?"

"How'd you know?"

"The spirits had more on their minds than revenge. They wanted the truth to be known. You hid a few important facts from me, including *why* my ancestors needed my intervention."

"You're..." As King was lowered toward the hole, words failed him.

"In your exploration of ghostly lore, you discovered the myth about the gold in great-uncle's coffin, and the stash hidden around the estate. You wanted it for yourself, so you made up the story about the estate being stolen from Miles Betz. In fact, he lost it in a *legitimate* poker game. After he killed himself, my great-great-grandfather married his widow and bought the estate back from the new owner, so she would be happy. The children of their union are my ancestors; the children she bore Miles are yours."

"All right, all right!" King hollered. "It's all true!"

The ghosts swept him away from the hole to stand directly in front of Sylvia. "Too bad there aren't any police around to witness your confession. You may still be charged with robbery and vandalism, when they learn you're responsible for all this damage."

"But, I didn't do this!" King panted.

"Sure, sure."

"I'm in no position to lie now, Sylvia! You've got to believe me!"

"If you didn't do it - with the obvious references to the connection between the Askew and Betz families - then who did?"

The glimmering wisps surrounding them brightened in intensity. A lone figure appeared at the back of the group and moved toward Sylvia, congealing into a recognizable form: her grandfather. Smelling his trademark Old Spice aftershave, Sylvia entertained no fear.

“We did this,” he declared. “We had to ensure hands stained with deceit did not soil our heritage. He knows nothing about us; he merely used our presence here in his attempt to cheat you. We retaliated in kind.”

“So, what do I do with him?” Sylvia asked.

At this the ghost fell silent and withdrew to stand beside his wife.

“I guess that means I make this decision on my own.”

King scoffed, “You can’t do anything legally...”

“Maybe not. I think, though, your memory of this fiasco, and periodic reminders from my ancestors, will keep you in line.”

Gerald King’s boldness swiftly returned. “Think again, little lady. They can’t touch me; neither can you.”

To prove him wrong, more hands than Sylvia could count seized King and suspended him over an even deeper hole than the first. As he screamed, they dropped him into the black pit. As if to embrace her, swirling images spiraled around Sylvia before dispersing to the four winds. In that brief moment, she felt more love than she had experienced at any family gathering in her life. With King’s desperate cries as background music, she walked to her car.

## The Cardinal's Spy

Though John H. Watson, M.D., may have disposed of a number of his accounts dealing with Sherlock Holmes to various people as keepsakes and so forth, I have come to believe that the following is the sole manuscript he wrote which he was later forced by parties involved to relinquish into their hands.

The parties involved happened to be Lucas Packer and Ian, Lord Gunther, brothers of my great-grandmother. How they coerced the British Government to back their claim to these pages, I don't know. A note dated October 14, 1893, attached to the parcel discovered in Grandma's attic trunk, instructed her to keep the papers in her possession, in the event they were needed as evidence in "the libel suit against the estate of that Masters woman."

Evidently, the suit never came to court, or was settled by other means. This preserved tale of Sherlock Holmes and the Cardinal's Spy sheds some light on my own family history, as well as the workings of the greatest detective mind of the 19th or any other century.

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"You were out extremely late last night, Watson," said Sherlock Holmes, lighting his pipe with a taper at the fireplace. I often wondered how he managed these mental gymnastics so early in the day. Besides this, his dressing gown hung open, and I noticed he still wore his formal attire from the previous evening's sojourn to Albert Hall.

"How the devil can you tell, when you've just come in yourself?" I countered, tossing my napkin atop an unfinished plate of boiled eggs, fried potatoes, toast and marmalade.

His smile mocked me. We had shared the flat at 221/B Baker Street for four years, and he expected me to employ his methods against him, but I still found it impossible.

"Observation, my dear fellow. Use your eyes. When I opened the front door not 20 minutes ago, I discovered a fresh boot mark marring the paint. You obviously had to force the door. Since it swells only after prolonged rain, and such a rain fell between the hours of 11:00 p.m. and 3:00 a.m., I determined you arrived home after 3:00 this morning."

Invariably, his explanations reeked of simplicity. I laughed.

"Where were you all night?" inquired Holmes, his curiosity barely masked by a polite tone.

"Playing billiards at the club. Old Forsythe and I got into a heated debate about some historical piece just published. *The Captain's Spy*, or something like

that. By a chap named Louis Anton. No one knows if it's fact or fiction, and it's caused the most scandalous uproar..."

"*The Cardinal's Spy*," Holmes interrupted me.

"What?"

"And the author's legal name is Louise Masters."

"How'd you know?" I challenged.

He extracted a folded sheet of parchment from his pocket and thrust it toward me. The address had been scrawled in a rush, that much I could tell, and the contents were a jumble of unrelated concepts. Or, so I thought.

Mr. Holmes (it ran),

I am not the type who holds with detectives, but I am desperate. Louise Masters, my mistress, is a writer known as Louis Anton. You may have heard of *A Highland Fling*; her monograph, *On the Excavation of Egyptian Pyramids*; or *The Cardinal's Spy*. Last night, about 10:00, I came inside from fetching a load of firewood and found her, shot through the head, in the kitchen. I had only been outdoors for ten minutes. The constables told me it was suicide.

This, I cannot believe. She possessed no copies of her own books, but I went into the drawing room a short time later and recognized a copy of *The Cardinal's Spy* lying open on the divan, with "Libelous Trash" written across page 103.

The police do not hold Miss Masters' death might be murder. They say no one could have broken into the flat and killed my mistress, but that she was hopelessly insane and killed herself.

I will call on you at 10:00 a.m., to give this time to reach you in the morning post. I am, sir, your respectful servant,

Godfrey Orlandini

Glancing up from the page, I saw Holmes had seated himself by the fire, puffing his pipe.

"Well?" said he.

"Well, the man has undeniably experienced a traumatic shock. I can't believe Louise Masters wrote *A Highland Fling* - that infamous romance - and such educated manuscripts as the others cited here."

"She did, old man, she did. I verified the fact with the publishers of those three volumes: Rowe, Cassiday and Myers. She used the pseudonym Louis Anton once before, as well, during her years at Oxford."

"What?" I roared. "She posed as a man to go through Oxford?"

"A very enterprising, courageous woman, in many respects, I think. She came down from Oxford in '83, but could secure no employment in her field, either as a teacher, tutor or librarian. So, she turned to writing."

"And where, pray tell, did you acquire this information?"

He grinned. "From Mr. Myers' confidential secretary."

I blamed my failure to grasp Holmes' already advanced investigation on my own lack of sleep. I rose from my place at the table and yawned.

"Yes, do get dressed, Watson. Mr. Orlandini is due shortly."

The doorbell rang while I was adjusting my socks, and I hurried to tie my shoes. Mrs. Hudson had ushered a slight, gray haired gentleman into our sitting room and was departing with the breakfast dishes. Godfrey Orlandini wore rumpled black trousers, coat and shirt; his tie hung askew. I noted his sickly mien, which confirmed my suspicion he had not slept for at least 36 hours.

"Miss Masters kept odd hours," he related when I commented on this and offered him the basket-chair. "She might wake one morning at 7:00, and not close an eye for 24 hours. Then, she'd require me to be up all night, having spent the day abed."

"Tell us about yesterday," said Holmes, tamping his pipe on the grate.

"Miss Masters roused you at what time?"

"The grandfather clock in the hall chimed 2:30 a.m. as I passed it. She hadn't retired after dismissing me the previous evening. I could tell by the look of her - I've been in her employ the past two years - some matter of grave importance preyed on her mind."

"Did she confide in you?" Holmes puzzled.

"No, though I later learned the cause of her trepidation. She left a letter from Ian, Lord Gunther, on her desk when she went to meet with her solicitor." The servant paused, uncertain. "Have you read *The Cardinal's Spy*?"

"No."

"Then, I guess I shall have to explain."

"Please do so, in a manner as detailed as possible."

Orlandini dabbed the corners of his mouth and bushy mustache with a sizable handkerchief. He cleared his throat. "Miss Masters spent weeks at the British Museum, down at Oxford, and on the Continent, researching the characters around which she built the plot of *The Cardinal's Spy*. The book spans the period 1605 to 1630, and takes place in France and England."

Holmes shifted in his chair. "What has this to do..."

"In order to be thorough, as you asked, Mr. Holmes, some background is necessary."

"Very well. Proceed."

"Thank you. The main character is a woman named Evelyn de Packe. Her mother is British, her father a Frenchman from the town of La Rochelle. That region was in turmoil during these years, because of ongoing religious tension between the Catholics and the Huguenots. Though of noble stock, Evelyn is forced into the streets as a young girl. She wanders from town to town, and nearly dies of starvation. A chance encounter with young Armand-Jean du Plessis de Richelieu in Lucon proves her salvation. He takes her to the bishop's palace, of which he is master, and nurses her back to health. There, she conceives his child."

"Is this fact or fiction?" I asked.

"It is for each to judge, now my mistress is dead. She alone knew. To continue: Richelieu refuses to accept Evelyn's child, of course, and exiles her to England. The child is born and left with an order of monks in Surrey. Evelyn takes refuge with her mother's relatives in London, and within the year is wed to Neville, the first Lord Gunther.

"Living near Dartmoor, their married life is quiet, uneventful. Lord Gunther dies without an heir in 1626, leaving Evelyn wealthy and well-propertied. She squanders everything on her now-grown son, and is threatened by the local magistrate with debtors' prison in summer, 1627."

Holmes leapt from his seat. "Enough, sir! You have made your point exceptionally clear. Ian, Lord Gunther, upon reading this libelous tripe defaming his family name, threatened to bring suit against your mistress."

"True, Mr. Holmes, but not the whole story. You see, Lady Gunther and her son fled to France to escape the magistrate. In Pont-de-la-Pierre, near the Channel, she met Richelieu and tried to blackmail him. Richelieu did pay Evelyn a substantial sum between the years 1627 and 1630, not only to compensate her for his rejection of his son, but because she performed invaluable services as his spy against the Huguenots and Prime Minister Buckingham in La Rochelle."

I asked, "How does Lady Gunther die?"

"Her son, who returned to England and usurped the title Lord Gunther, kills her in Paris as she is kneeling in the Cathedral to receive communion from Richelieu's hand. The lad went stark, raving mad soon after." Orlandini mopped his brow with the kerchief. "Whoever killed my mistress, Mr. Holmes,

feared descendants of Richelieu and Lord Gunther would cause an uproar which might endanger the peace between our countries."

"From what facts do you draw this conclusion?" Holmes queried in disbelief.

"A month prior to the book's release, Miss Masters' publisher, Mr. Rowe, notified her he had received communications from members of the royal household and the House of Lords, petitioning him to destroy the manuscript. Some high ranking official had chanced to see the original on Mr. Cassidy's desk, taking it upon himself to verify Miss Masters' research."

"You don't know the name of these officials?"

"No, sir," replied Orlandini.

Holmes' familiar expression of excitement, frustration and nervousness - his interest had been secured; he would brook no further delays - indicated to me I should manipulate our visitor out the door before an unprovoked outburst offended him.

"Thank you so much for coming, Mr. Orlandini," I said, moving toward the door.

Meekly, the servant followed. "Will Mr. Holmes be investigating, then?"

"Oh, yes. How may we contact you, if the need arises?"

"I shall remain at Miss Masters' flat until her belongings are disposed of: Number 23 River Street, Whitechapel."

I turned from the door to comment that Holmes had succeeded in further aggravating the distraught fellow, to be silenced by my friend's wide eyes and clenched fists.

"I am the greatest fool on the face of the earth, Watson!" Holmes exclaimed. "I listened to that person's lies and accepted them all as truth!"

"What the devil are you saying, old man? He wasn't lying..."

"You didn't see it, then?"

"See what?"

"The stray blonde hair visible beneath the wig. When Miss Masters arranged her almost perfect disguise, she could not see in the mirror her own hair had escaped its pins at the back of her neck." He chuckled mirthlessly. "Not that I condemn you, dear fellow. Only someone as adept in the art of deception as I would have noticed the flaw."

"What's her game?"

"She fears for her life. I have no doubt the rebuke from Parliament is a concern, as is the threat from Lord Gunther. She has committed a terrible blunder and hopes, by posing as deceased, to avoid a fatal confrontation."

"The pretense can't benefit her unless it receives publicity," I observed. "That would mean there would have to be a police report. No constable would falsify a report of that nature, which means..." The thought petrified me.

"Very good, Watson!" Holmes praised. "Miss Masters has provided the Whitechapel constabulary with a suitable corpse to be identified in her stead. Her plans were made in haste, however, and are bound to trigger some rather unpleasant repercussions. Get your coat; we need repair to that unsavory world along the Thames. Our client urgently requires protection!"

A hansom cab waited at the curb when I descended to the street. Holmes sat inside, impatient. No more had I climbed aboard, than the horse broke into a canter.

"Do you think this rush is well warranted?" I demanded.

"I do."

We spoke no more until the two-wheeler jostled to a halt within earshot of the river. Towering above us on both sides, abandoned warehouses added a menacing aura to our journey. Giving the Number 23, I determined, had been another of Louise Masters' falsehoods.

"No, the woman does maintain quarters here," Holmes corrected me, thrusting open the warped door of the warehouse on the south side of the lane. "What finer abode than a cheap one, renovated to suit one's eccentric, artistic tastes?"

The gloomy interior belied my companion's assertion. Water damaged boxes and shattered crates cluttered the ground floor. Up a flight of rickety stairs, though, lights burned in what might have once served as the supervisor's office. Shadows passed the glazed windows as we neared.

My foot was on the bottom step when a wooden chair crashed through the glass. Insistent fingers clutched my arm and dragged me beneath the stairs, away from the rain of dangerous shards, into the safety of a dark cupboard.

"Holmes, what has happened?"

"Uncle Ian is looking for the family tree," This was neither the answer I expected, nor that familiar voice.

"The Richelieu family tree?" I asked, suspecting I stood beside Louise Masters.

"The family tree proving the blood ties between the Gunthers, de Packes and Richelieu. It was supposed to be included as the frontispiece of *The Cardinal's Spy*, but was considered the ultimate indignity to the families chronicled. Every copy I gave Rowe was stolen or destroyed. The original, I'm happy to say, is well hidden."

"Is that why you need Holmes' aid? To protect some foolish piece of paper?"

"The truth must be told, Doctor."

"Why do you feel so strongly about this matter?"

"Because this mistreatment by men has plagued women throughout history. No woman should have to tolerate being spurned by any man once she bears his child." I heard her sob in the dimness. "It happened to my mother..."

Footsteps audible through the closed door terminated our conversation. Refined voices discussed their failure to find that "bloody drawing".

The cupboard door exploded outward. Louise Masters stepped into the dusty light before I could restrain her. She still wore the guise of Godfrey Orlandini; slender features were twisted in an unbecoming sneer.

"Well, Gunther," she directed at the retreating figures, "who's going to pay for all this damage?"

Attired in expensive morning clothes, his black hair thickly pomaded, the rotund nobleman whirled. "How dare you speak to me in that tone..."

Whether Miss Masters noticed the revolver wielded by Gunther's massive companion, I am unsure. Regardless, my position on the cupboard threshold prevented me from assisting her. The barrel was raised; the hammer cocked...

Gunther batted the weapon down. "Fool!" he hissed. "Killing this one will serve no purpose."

"How right you are. You'll never find the family tree if I die."

After a moment's thought, the gentleman signaled his attendant. "Bring him along. In a country setting, no one will hear his cries while we coax him to tell us where the drawing is."

Where Holmes had concealed himself during this interlude, I am not certain. He strode between Miss Masters and Lord Gunther at that moment, however, addressing the latter.

"If you desire to pursue this matter, Your Lordship, I suggest you do so through your solicitor."

"Who the devil are you?" Gunther bellowed.

"Sherlock Holmes."

"What is your business..."

"That is irrelevant to the matter at hand. What is relevant is that you would have allowed your supernumerary to kill this person, had he not been suppressing information you consider vital. You intended to remove him from these premises, without his consent, to obtain said information. Both are criminal offenses."

The revolver reappeared, aimed at Holmes' chest. All I could do is assert my presence, hoping Gunther's knowledge of an additional witness would dissuade him from his course of action. I stepped from the shadows.

"The wisest course would be for you to leave peaceably, Your Lordship," said I.

Muttering oaths most often heard among uneducated dockhands, Ian Gunther and his companion stalked from the building. Neither myself, Holmes nor Miss Masters dared move until the heavy door slammed shut.

I released the air I had unwittingly been holding in my lungs; Holmes dusted his hands on his trouser legs. Miss Masters threw her arms about his neck and kissed him - rather impulsively, I must say - on the lips.

"You saved my life!" she exclaimed, still embracing him. "Uncle Ian would have let that oaf break every bone in my body. Once he learned where I was keeping the family tree, he would have..." The awareness of her fate abruptly robbed her of consciousness. She slumped in Holmes' arms.

I checked Miss Masters pulse and respiration. "Just fainted," I diagnosed. "We'd better take her upstairs."

I would have offered to help my friend carry his burden up the steep flight, but the Jezail bullet encased in my flesh precluded any strain on my limbs. Thus, I led the way, clearing a path through the debris for a flustered Holmes to follow.

Miss Masters was deposited on a splendid Louis XIV divan, which I righted from its overturned position. Holmes' interest in the woman waned once she left his grasp; he directed his attention to the clutter around him. Bookshelves lining the west wall had been emptied, desk drawers upended; paintings had been slashed from their frames.

"Miss Masters does not live here," Holmes said, settling in a wooden rocking chair. "This is her studio. Her reputation exists solely in the persona of Louis Anton, her legitimate identity unknown."

"How can you deduce that, old man?" I prompted, waiting for my patient to awaken.

"All the correspondence from officials whom she has contacted for permission to perform research in their facilities - the British Museum, the Museum of Notre Dame in Paris - all are addressed to her masculine counterpart. Her stationery bears that moniker, as well."

"And the fact she doesn't live here?"

"There are no clothes in the wardrobe, only files containing research notes. No cooking facilities are evident, either. No, Watson, this is the apartment where Louise Masters lets her exceptional intellect have free reign. Nothing more."

"You call her lies and deception intelligence?" I scoffed.

"These volumes in Latin, Greek and French, dealing with history, mathematics and science, tell me hers is a brilliant mind. No true researcher would crowd his shelves with books which could not possibly be read.

"The one fact I did not establish," continued Holmes, "is her relationship with Lord Gunther."

I replied, "He is her paternal uncle."

Very seldom did I best my friend at his own game, but his pride shone when I supplied some trifle of information which escaped him. "How did you establish this connection?" he puzzled, smiling.

"Miss Masters confided to me how her mother had been abandoned by her father, in a manner similar to Evelyn de Packe's rebuff by Cardinal Richelieu. I believe her primary motive for writing *The Cardinal's Spy* was revenge against the Gunthers."

"There, you're mistaken," Louise Masters mumbled. I had turned away to converse with Holmes, and she had revived during this discussion. Practiced fingers removed the gray wig and mustache. Short yellow curls, thus freed, softened the lines of her face.

"Wherein lies our error?" asked Holmes.

"I wrote *The Cardinal's Spy* on a bet with Benjamin Myers. He insinuated I hadn't the talent to write a serious novel after the drivel I put into *A Highland Fling*."

"What about your monograph on the pyramids?" I wondered.

"That was written during my last year at Oxford. Myers published it, raising his wager to 3,000 quid if I came up with something truly original."

"Is that why your publishers ignored the government's censure regarding its printing? To recoup one partner's loss?"

"Doctor, Benjamin Myers is a businessman. He wouldn't have bet so much if he didn't think the manuscript would be worth double the amount."

Holmes stirred. "It is all well and good you profited in the exchange, but your choice of subject was a poor one. Risking one's personal safety is never wise."

Miss Masters laughed, a lyrical sound. "For all intents and purposes, I am dead."

"Madam, you played me for a fool!" snapped Holmes.

"Not true, my good sir. Last night, I was returning from a pub on the water front, when I encountered a prostitute dead in an alley not far from here. In her right hand, she held the revolver employed to end her own life. The

frightening thing: she resembled me to a fault. That was how I conceived the notion of a murder, implicating and discrediting Uncle Ian, with your assistance."

"You intend to continue this fraud?" Holmes prodded.

"Mr. Holmes, do you know what it's like to be hunted, day and night? I had three distinct identities: my legal one, Louis Anton, and Godfrey Orlandini. As Orlandini, I could travel as I choose, posing as a mere servant. Otherwise, I was constantly followed. Twice, I was fired upon in the Strand, of all places. I wanted to have done with it."

"That is perfectly understandable," said I.

"The method is not acceptable," Holmes objected.

Louise Masters sat up with no difficulty and glared at my friend. "I had no alternative."

"Then, I shall be compelled to disclose all I know of your ruse to the proper authorities."

Watching the woman's face, I was uncertain whether she would weep or curse. Blue eyes flashed; her lips quivered.

"Might I make a suggestion?" I asked.

"Please do, Doctor," came between clenched teeth.

"Let Holmes and myself act as your liaisons with Lord Gunther. We should be able to bring the matter to an equitable conclusion."

"You underestimate my uncle's tenacity, Doctor. And I don't think you grasp how zealously I believe this should be brought before the public eye."

"Miss Masters, I am not in the habit of insulting ladies," snarled Holmes. "In this case, I will make an exception. You may have an intellect equal to many men, but your naive perception of reality is nothing more than sheer ignorance!"

"Holmes!" I chided.

"Let him spout, Doctor. His pride is bruised. Like any other man, he would live my life for me, protect me. Well, I don't need protection, now the world thinks me dead."

"Let us go, Watson," said Holmes, rising.

I still sat beside Miss Masters on the divan, and slowly straightened. She patted my hand.

"Watson!"

"You go ahead, Holmes."

With a grunt, he departed the chamber. I listened as his footsteps receded down the stairs.

"Miss Masters," I implored. "You cannot destroy yourself this way. Do you realize, by feigning your own death, you will be silenced as though you truly

were in the grave? I am a bit of a writer myself, and I know what it is to ache for pen and paper."

"Ah, a romantic! What do you propose?"

"Let Holmes and I take Lord Gunther your promise, though you wish to keep the original Richelieu family tree, you will not include it in any future editions of *The Cardinal's Spy*. In return, we will request he cease his threats against you."

"It will never work."

"Why not?"

"Because there is a distinct lack of trust between Uncle Ian and myself. I would be hounded, albeit quietly, for the rest of my life."

Miss Masters' persistence was annoying, yet well-founded. After further consideration, I amended my initial suggestion: "With impartial parties involved - namely Holmes and myself - Lord Gunther can be made to believe any further infringement on your privacy will result in the immediate publication of the ignoble document."

"You would do this for me?"

"Yes."

Her hopeful gleam darkened. "Uncle Ian would also have to be told I shall remain in contact with you, say once every three days, so he doesn't try to kill me and dispose of my body, thinking himself safe."

"Marvelous idea." I bent over her graceful hand in parting. "We shall call upon Lord Gunther this afternoon."

Holmes awaited me outside the warehouse; the morning's fog had dispersed and sunlight warmed the spring air. We were compelled to walk some five blocks before sighting an available hansom cab.

"You discussed a very important matter in my absence," mused Holmes as we rounded the corner into an unpopulated lane of ramshackle boarding houses.

"I won Miss Masters to our cause. We shall take her terms to Lord Gunther yet today."

"*You* may take them hence," Holmes corrected. "I shall have no party in that woman's scheme."

"I trust Miss Masters' word."

"You have a generous heart where women are concerned, my dear fellow. You did not see the hatred burning this creature's soul. She will kill Ian Gunther and his brother, no matter what we do."

"What?"

"She would have shot her uncle in the warehouse, had there been no witnesses."

"Really, Holmes!"

"A loaded revolver was in the right pocket of her coat. I felt it when she embraced me."

"Holmes, we can't let her harm herself or Gunther. Think of the waste!"

"Why bemoan the waste of feminine pulchritude? The same can be had on any stage in the West End."

"Be that as it may, intellects which challenge your own are too rare."

One aspect of humanity Sherlock Holmes did respect was the capacity for knowledge. He shunned the plethora of dolts and the undereducated, who did little to better their lot in life; those brushes with genius, he relished.

"She will follow us to Gunther's, you understand," he stated.

"To what end?"

"I fear, my dear Watson, by extending your chivalry toward her, you have endangered our lives, also. What better way to eliminate all peril to her person and her profession than at the same place and time?"

Holmes composed a telegram to Ian Gunther as soon as we arrived in our flat, which Mrs. Hudson dispatched. He instructed me to be ready to leave for Kensington at 2:30 p.m., then locked himself in his bedroom.

Lacking the initiative to either eat or read the newspaper, I retrieved the copy of *The Cardinal's Spy* old Forsythe had loaned me and settled by the fire to gather what I could of our client's mental processes.

In my estimation, much of that work was fictional in nature - none of the records from the 17th century would have been so detailed. In the character Evelyn de Packe, I saw the charm and brilliance of her creator. I also determined the author's use of language and grammar were very unlike the style of any woman I had ever known.

Mrs. Hudson announced the arrival of our cab at precisely 2:30. Holmes emerged from his room, rested and clean shaven. He had shed his evening clothes in favor of a black frock coat and trousers.

"Be good enough to take your revolver, Watson," said he, gazing out the window.

"Do you think..."

"When our adversary has the temerity to pose as a cabbie on the very hansom we have hired, I have no doubts."

I crossed to him, studying the heavily cloaked cabman. "You've no proof it is Miss Masters," I declared.

"When we board the cab, I shan't tell the driver our destination. I put to you: the question will not arise."

Nothing I could think to say would have dissuaded my friend. His sharp tone made it very clear I alone held the blame if harm should befall us. I had never known him to go against his own judgement, however, so I consoled myself with the knowledge he recognized some merit in this excursion to the Gunther abode.

Holmes uttered not a word as he stepped into the hansom; I kept silent. The doors snapped closed, the cabbie's whip cracked, and the horse drew us into afternoon traffic. Though hoof beats, loud voices and other street noises would have prevented Louise Masters from hearing our conversation, neither Holmes nor I ventured to speak in that hour it took to reach Kensington. I patted my overcoat pocket as I alighted before the red brick dwelling. My service revolver had served me well in years past. I hoped it would not have to serve me now.

Ian, Lord Gunther, greeted us brusquely at the front door of the modest town house. We were ushered into a small drawing room, the stentorian decor of which indicated it was the man's private office.

"I must warn you, gentlemen, any interference in the matter of Louise Masters may bring about dire consequences," boomed Gunther.

I announced, "We do not wish to interfere, Your Lordship. We have come to resolve the matter."

"Do you know who she was, Doctor? Do you, Mr. Holmes?"

"I do, sir," replied my companion flatly. "As I know who you are."

Gunther's countenance reddened.

I interrupted, restating the purpose of our call, and outlining the terms to which our client had agreed.

"You're telling me that woman is alive?" He glowered at Holmes, who studied the wall paintings.

"Tell me, how can I agree to any proposal put forth by a woman who has faked her own death, Mr. Holmes?" Gunther snarled.

"I see little difference between that and any promise of yours to abide by her terms."

"You insult me, sir."

The shattering of a double window pane to my left distracted us. Louise Masters crashed to the carpet beside Gunther's desk, chest heaving, eyes wide in terror. I had not the opportunity to leave my chair before a yowling black pit bull soared over the ledge and lunged for her throat.

Holmes' cry, "Your revolver, Watson!" brought me to my senses. I extracted the weapon from my pocket and fired, striking the dog in the ribs. It fell with an ominous thud.

"That was my prize guard dog!" shrieked Gunther.

I couldn't stomach this insensitivity. "Damn your dog. Look at Miss Masters!"

As I bent to her, words gurgled in her blood-clogged esophagus. "Had I not waited to hear Mr. Holmes rise to the occasion, Gunther would be dead, instead of me."

She signaled me away; any ministrations I attempted would be in vain, thus I complied. Gunther watched the death scene, still mourning his lost dog.

The woman raised a pearl handled .22 calibre pistol, despite her awkward position on the floor, and fired. Holmes knocked the nobleman into the wall, himself catching the bullet in his left bicep. As my friend collapsed in a leather armchair, Miss Masters expired.

A grisled manservant burst through the drawing room door; I sent him for a constable. Holmes insisted we depart before this official arrived.

"Let Gunther tell his lies in peace."

The severity of Holmes' bullet wound necessitated a stop at St. Bart's, where my old friend Stamford accommodated me with the use of an unoccupied surgery. Two hours later, we returned to Baker Street, Holmes wearing my overcoat to protect the fresh bandages.

"You despised Gunther," I remonstrated that evening during supper, "yet you saved his life. Why?"

"Murder is never justified, no matter how repugnant the victim."

"At any rate, that's the last we'll hear of Louise Masters."

Holmes said nothing, but I saw the cloud pass over his drawn features.

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Never would I have suspected such a thing possible in this day and age. Over a year has passed since the bizarre events recorded here were resolved, and yet, it might have been yesterday. My friend, Sherlock Holmes, was this morning summoned to Downing Street, and has returned in the company of Ian Gunther and a solemn, pale man introduced as Lucas Packer.

This trio presented me with a document signed by the Prime Minister, ordering me to surrender all records I possess mentioning Louise Masters. I am also forbidden from making public any recreated account of the same.

I shall always maintain there was a deeper significance to that lady's death than a conflict over a nobleman's family tree. I fear we shall never know the truth.

Holmes has just responded to my inquiry with the word, "Politics."

## An Island Adventure

From her seat at the open air bar, Gina Quinn watched a ten-foot skiff - *Princeton* painted in white letters - cut through the moonlit waters. Bloody Mary in hand, she crossed the warm sands and caught the rope its occupant threw her.

Gina had spoken to Charlie Walters often at the Tahiti-Rama beach bar, overlooking Guam's Tumon Bay. White trousers and a baggy denim shirt gave him the image of a true beach bum, in contrast to those clad in tropical shorts and tank tops. Tilted at a rakish angle, a mock-captain's hat covered most of his disheveled, greyish black hair. Dark whiskers added to the scruffy appearance. Still, he exuded a certain carefree masculinity...

"Tie it tight, kid," came the resonant baritone. "I don't want this baby to drift away."

Gina chuckled, "In the Navy, they teach us how to tie super tight knots."

"I'll never get used to that."

"What?"

"Women in the Navy." Double checking her work, the tall, trim figure then sauntered toward the bar. "Give me a double whiskey, Mitch. And give the kid a refill."

Gina started to speak...

"That is, if you're really old enough to drink."

Those nearest, the majority Navy, laughed at this. As a first class petty officer, Gina could be no less than 25 years old. She did, however, look younger in jeans and a tie-dyed T-shirt, with her curly brown hair and freckled cheeks.

The burly, tanned bartender served their drinks. Walters emptied his in one gulp, slamming the glass on the varnished wood surface. "Let's try that again."

Mitch raised the Jim Beam bottle to pour; a sudden burst of loud music startled him. The liquor spilled and overflowed on the plank floor. "What the hell..."

It was Gina's turn to laugh. "My cell." She activated the phone clipped to her woven belt. A static-ridden voice declared, "Gina, there's been another robbery. Report back to base ASAP."

"Another robbery?" Mitch echoed.

"There's been a series of burglaries at the Naval Station and nearby villages. Nothing valuable. Canned food, toilet paper, office supplies, gasoline. That kind of thing."

"Probably some Japanese soldier holed up in the mountains since the war," Walters remarked.

"I'll give you ten to one you're wrong."

"I'll take that bet." He turned from the bar, thrusting his fists deep in his pockets. "Problem is, how to collect?"

Gina mimicked his gesture. "Don't you trust me?"

"Never trust a drinking buddy, kid. You'll come up empty every time."

"I'll prove you wrong again, at no extra charge. Come on."

Clutching his sleeve, the shore patrol petty officer drew her companion away from the hanging paper lanterns, through the dark parking lot. She unlocked the passenger door of a white Suzuki Samurai.

"You don't expect to get me on base," Walters said.

"They won't even stop me at the gate."

In a cloud of sand, the four-wheel drive squealed onto the road southbound. Even though the speed limit signs read 35 m.p.h., Gina had no reservations about pushing the vehicle past 60.

Charlie quipped, "You must have money to burn."

"What makes you say that?"

"I know a few cops who'd throw the book at you for this."

"No cop would dare. They know the car."

"You've covered all the angles, haven't you?"

"Look, Mr. Walters, I worked hard to get where I am. I spent six years as an electronics technician, playing with radio transmitters. I switched to Master-at-Arms when I reenlisted, because I like working with people. Earning the respect and confidence of my superiors has been the most difficult part."

"Are you one of these career sailors?"

"Nope. My discharge papers will be ready in January. I've got a standing offer from the San Diego police department to join their detective force. A lot better than staying in this hole another two years."

"You're speaking about my home, kid. Be a little less sarcastic."

Braking around a sharp curve, Gina down-shifted. "There's no excitement here, is all I'm saying."

"I had my fill of excitement back in Boston, teaching. Then in Frisco, Honolulu, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Manila. The best thing ever happened was that DC-10's emergency landing here. I picked up the *Harvard* and left my troubles on shore."

"What did you teach?"

"Philosophy."

"That's really weird," Gina commented.

"What is?"

She avoided an explanation. A third class petty officer at the Naval Station's main gate waved her through without hesitation. Despite the starlit gloom, she steered between rows of cement block structures to the security shack, headlights off.

"Should I wait?" Walters queried when she leapt from the vehicle.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're more an expert on this island than anyone we've got. I've just volunteered you as our unofficial consultant."

The shore patrol office teemed with on-duty and off-duty personnel. Around a conference table, those able to see viewed a map of the island, burglary sights marked in red.

"There's a pattern here," declared Lieutenant Commander Steve Dominiack. "It's our job to figure out that pattern and catch this s.o.b. before he strikes again. We're the laughing stock of the entire Pacific fleet right now."

Gina got a brief glance at the print before blond Jeff Tackett nudged her out. She tugged Charlie to the fringe of the gathering. "All the locations are along the coast. How 'bout if you and I go for a boat ride?"

"What exactly do you hope to find?"

"I'll know when I see it."

With unmistakable reluctance, Walters accompanied Gina to the car. Following the 15 minute drive north, they stopped for one last drink at Tahiti-Rama before boarding the *Princeton*. An eight horsepower outboard propelled them around the point.

Cruising the edge of the coral reef, Gina made notes on a small pad with a pencil stub.

"Very professional," Walters scoffed.

"I may do things ass-backward sometimes, but I get the job done." She scanned the waters concealing the Piti bomb holes - site of a World War II battle. "What's that?" she wondered, pointing to a towering figure on shore.

"That, my dear, is a palm tree."

"Are you sure? It looks like Quasimodo."

"Things look different from this perspective."

"More suspicious, you mean."

She saw his white teeth flash a smile. "For a cop, maybe. The most suspicious thing I've seen in 12 years is a snapping turtle stuck on a rock after the tide went out."

They moved on, Gina scrutinizing the shoreline, Walters navigating the shallows. He slowed the Johnson motor as they approached a majestic cabin cruiser.

"What the hell..."

"A pit stop. I've a pair of binoculars on board. They might help you find whatever it is you're looking for."

Dejected, Gina swung onto the rope ladder and climbed to the main deck. "At this point, I don't know. It seemed obvious a little while ago the thief was coming ashore in a small boat, stealing provisions, and escaping the same way."

"Impossible. Anyone who tried to use a motor would be heard, for one thing."

"Not an electric motor," the woman countered as Walters preceded her to the bridge.

"A plastic prop would be torn to shreds on that coral. It's too shallow to do anything except row."

"And rowing's too slow."

Walters patted her shoulder. "Now it's getting through. I'm afraid you've wasted your time, kid."

"I've wasted yours, too. Sorry."

"Forget it. It'll be nice to have a guest aboard for the night."

Gina froze in her tracks. "What?"

"You don't expect me to waste more time taking you back to Tumon tonight? It's past midnight."

"But..."

"None of that. There's a spare bunk below, and you can wear my extra pajamas. Come on, now, and have a drink."

"You're out of your ever-lovin' mind..."

"Take off your badge, kid. I'm only trying to be hospitable."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Gina muttered.

Walters turned from the cupboard, fingers gripping a vodka bottle. "Do you mind explaining that statement?"

"I... er, I..." Perspiration formed on Gina's temples. "I don't think I'll get much sleep."

A thick salt and pepper eyebrow shot up; brown orbs twinkled. "Flattery will get you everywhere." He grabbed her hand, pulled her close.

"Now, wait a minute..."

Walters released her. "I'm just kidding. Why is a woman bred to think every man who gets her alone wants her body? Come on, I'll show you where you can crash."

In a cluttered cabin, the moon shining through two portholes, Gina reclined on a lumpy mattress, her brain reeling. A chief petty officer, an air traffic

controller at Guam International Airport, and a lieutenant (j.g.) were among her steadier boyfriends, in an unsteady sort of way. Though of differing personalities, these three were all good looking and athletic. She entertained no fears about them, but then, they were aware of the pistol strapped to her ankle.

She'd never been concerned about making herself attractive to men, though more than one over the years noted her "cuteness". She had kissed men and been kissed - what made her so leery of Charlie Walters?

Because once, he had been a gentleman, she mused. He knows how to treat a woman like a woman.

Nerves on edge, Gina left the cabin to pace the weathered wood deck. Walters observed her frustrated deliberations from his chaise lounge on the fore deck. Timing her movements, he rose and approached her from behind.

A smart about-face brought her nose to nose with the *Harvard's* owner. She recoiled. "Jesus Christ."

"No. Charlie Walters." His grin fading, he asked, "How old are you, kid?"

"I'm 31."

"Then, you're really not a kid, are you?"

"Of course not."

"In that case, you've no reason to be scared."

Gina swallowed hard. "What... do you mean?"

"Your emotions are all churned up. You're upset..."

How much did he know? she puzzled. Did he know his rugged features intrigued her, that her flesh still tingled from where he'd touched her hours ago? "I... Oh, what the hell. I have to know."

Standing on tip-toe, she kissed his whisker-framed mouth. He tasted of scotch. When she drew away, strong arms encompassed her waist.

"Where are you going?"

"I found out what I wanted to find out."

"Which was?" Walters prompted.

"How it feels to kiss an... older man."

"Well, if it's an experiment you're conducting, the proper input is required."

His lips assaulted hers with burning intensity. Gina couldn't escape, couldn't resist. The shock wave tore through her frame, jarring every fiber of her being.

Abruptly, Walters freed her. Except for a strange glint in his eyes, she saw no sign the embrace had affected him, while she labored to catch her breath.

"It's almost 4:00," he announced. "You'll look like a zombie, if you don't take a bit of a nap before we leave."

"You expect me to sleep after that?"

"Those who participate in experiments should, of necessity, remain objective about the results."

She smirked at his biting tone. "The only thing I'm objective about is my work. Besides, no scientist would stand by and watch his lab explode after he poured too much nitro glicerine into the test tube."

"Very true. Go on, wash up. I'll fry some eggs and bacon for breakfast. The sun'll be up soon."

The gathering dawn transformed threatening black water into brilliant blue, which was reflected off the *Harvard's* white fiberglass hull. In this light, Gina inspected the craft. The sloppiness of the cabins, jumble of charts on the bridge and upheaval in the galley declared its owner's true character.

Charlie stood over a gas stove, eggs sizzling in a cast iron skillet, humming to himself. The delightful smell made his guest's mouth water. Flustered by the chaos of the previous evening, she'd forgotten to eat dinner.

"Wheat or white toast?" Walters inquired, favoring her with a delightful grin.

Gina looked hard and blinked twice. He'd shaved!

"What's the matter? Your eyes playing tricks on you?"

"I don't..." her hand caressed his cheek, "think so."

He trapped her fingers and kissed her palm. "I shave on Wednesday and Saturday."

"Today's Thursday."

"Oh?" The eggs slid from the skillet onto paper plates, where crisp bacon waited. Tray in hand, he led her from the galley to the aft deck. They saw Guam come to life while they ate.

"Where do you live on base?" Walters asked between bites.

"At the B.E.Q. Why?"

"How would you like to share this heap with me?"

Gina's jaw fell.

"On an experimental basis, of course," he added. "You're a sharp kid. I like that. A good combination, brains and wit. It's been a long time since I've had anyone around with whom I could exercise my grey cells."

"I... don't know what to say."

"Say yes. Please. It's not like I'm asking you to share my bed. You can fix up the spare bunk room any way you like. I'm a good cook, too. You'll get better meals here than in your mess hall or at any restaurant."

"But, why?"

Walters grinned and shrugged his broad shoulders. "We'd better get going."

From the moment she stepped off the *Princeton* at Tumon Bay, Gina reasoned, pondered, debated and puzzled. Driving to base, she almost ran off a road she'd travelled hundreds of times. She changed clothes so fast, her white uniform shirt ended up inside-out. She paid little attention to the watch reports she read at her desk in the security shack, or the paperwork she signed. All the time, she realized, less than a mile away - as the crow flies - the *Harvard* sat at anchor, its owner sunning himself. What a life!

Lieutenant Commander Steve Dominiack - short, wiry, redheaded - entered her office just before noon. It took Gina a few seconds before she snapped to attention.

"Sit down, Gina. The reason I'm here is because I've been told you spend a lot of time at the beach bars."

"I never drink more than two Bloody Marys a night, sir."

"I'm glad of that. Late last night, Jeff came in with the best lead we've gotten so far on these burglaries. A couple yeomen, snorkeling around Piti, saw a guy come ashore, then head back out ten minutes before we received the phone call from the mess hall about the theft."

"Come ashore? What, walking?"

"He must've swam part of the way. They said he wore a black diving suit, carrying fins and some kind of water-proof duffle bag."

"Oh, that's ridiculous."

"I don't think so, Gina," the security officer retorted. "One of the yeomen recognized the guy's face but didn't know his name. Seen him around the beach bars."

"Sir, there must be 20, 25 people I see time and time again at Tahiti-Rama and other places. Should I bring each one in for questioning?"

Dominiack's lean face settled in a scowl. "No, I suppose not. I do want you out every night from now on, eyes and ears open. This guy has got to be stopped."

On her lunch break, Gina drove to the Navy Exchange and bought an inflatable raft. At 4:00, she strolled to the barracks, stuffing jeans and a couple blouses into a Navy sports bag. From the far end of the submarine pier, she paddled out to the *Harvard*.

"Ahoy!" she shouted at the quiet craft minutes later.

A ruffled, greying head popped through the engine room hatch. "Ahoy, yourself!" Charlie lowered the rope ladder over the side and pulled Gina aboard,

securing her raft to the anchor chain. "If I'd known what time you got through for the day, I would've met you on shore."

"I didn't know myself, and I've got to go back. I just wanted to tell you, while I planned to accept your offer, I'll be working nights until we capture that thief."

"No clues yet?"

"Oh, we've got a vague description. The bastard swims ashore!"

Walters smiled. "By the tone of your voice, you're tired and hungry. Dinner's almost ready, if you have time..."

"If I got to the bar before 7:30, it'd look suspicious. I'd love a bite to eat."

They ate sirloin steak, corn on the cob, baked potatoes and fresh green salad in the open air. Gina had never felt so relaxed, nor enjoyed the conversation so much.

"You certainly live well," she remarked. "I don't suppose it would surprise me if you told me you were the heir to a banking fortune, or something."

"I worked for what I have. I believe happiness is more important than the almighty dollar. And I've never been happier than right here and now."

"Who's flattering who?" Gina chuckled.

"I'm serious. I feel younger than I have in years. If I could hold a tune, I'd be singing."

"If any other man told me that, I'd laugh in his face. Somehow, I can believe you."

"Too bad you have to go. I cleaned all my junk out of the bunk room; there're fresh sheets on your bed. You need a good night's rest."

"I can sleep tomorrow. How 'bout running me up to Tahiti-Rama?"

"Sure."

They carried the dishes back to the galley. Walking the length of the cruiser, Walters slid his arm around Gina's shoulders. She didn't flinch. They boarded the *Princeton* and got under way.

At the beach, Gina stepped onto the wet sand, pulling the bow line toward the nearest palm tree. Walters tugged her back.

"Aren't you coming with me?"

"You've got work to do. I'll swing by later." He freed the rope from her hand, leaned forward and kissed her cheek. "Be careful."

Gina caught an earful from Mitch the bartender when she settled on a bamboo stool. "I can tell by that silly grin you're up to no good," the young islander concluded.

"We're just friends. Mind your own business, okay?"

He served her Bloody Mary. "Keeping up on the latest gossip is part of the profession. I can't help it. All I can say is: don't fall for him. He's old enough to be your father."

Gina was half-asleep when Charlie returned. Discreet inquiries among the bar's regulars failed to turn up information about the thief's diving equipment. She stumbled into the boat, stretched out atop the live wells and contemplated the stars as Walters piloted her to the *Harvard*.

"Come up with any leads?"

"Nothing. I figure, if the guy knows he was seen, he'll lay low for awhile."

After a ten hour nap in the bunk room, Gina learned how wrong she had been. At the security shack, an exasperated Steve Dominiack informed her the Sheraton Hotel restaurant - not 100 yards from Tahiti-Rama - had been robbed at 9:00 Thursday night.

"What was taken?" the first class petty officer queried.

"Huge quantities of pork chops, hamburger, steak, lobster, eggs, bacon, 50 pounds of potatoes, and five loaves of bread."

"It sounds like some native trying to feed his family."

"I don't care if it's Rear Admiral Harrington stocking up for a Saturday night party. We've got to catch him."

"Well, tonight I'll be off shore with a spotlight and binoculars. If the thief's in the water, I'll see him."

When Gina returned to the *Harvard*, Charlie had lunch on the table. Shedding her uniform in favor of a lightweight green jumpsuit, she sat down to spaghetti and meatballs. That was when she noticed the flatware. The Naval Station mess hall used an identical style.

Mid-afternoon, while Walters dozed on the chaise lounge, she searched the galley cupboards, the pantry and the battery-powered refrigerator. Cans, bottles, jars and boxes lined the shelves, and the freezer overflowed with meat wrapped in white paper. Untraceable items, no doubt grocery store bought.

Mounting the bridge ladder, she rifled the drawers of the chart cabinet. Boxes of black pens, marked "Property of the U.S. Government", and notepads of various sizes bearing the Navy's insignia presented undeniable proof.

Charlie Walters awoke with the barrel of a 9mm Beretta in his face. He batted it aside. "That's not funny, Gina."

"You're under arrest." It took every effort not to cry or crack a smile at the absurdity of the situation. "Get up."

He straightened, clamping both hands on her shoulders. "I know what you're thinking, but I bought all that stuff off Miguel Babauta, in Santa Rita. I

didn't steal it. Don't ruin what we might have between us by causing me any trouble."

"I told you: the only thing I'm objective about is my work. As far as I'm concerned, if you didn't actually steal the stuff, then you've received stolen goods. Either way, I've got to turn you in."

He kissed her. The passion transmitted from his lips to hers almost melted her resolve, but not quite. She hooked his left ankle with her shoe, knocking him onto the deck.

"Don't do that again," she warned. "Now, get up and get moving."

"You're as guilty as I am, you know."

"There, you're wrong. Haven't you ever heard of undercover cops getting propositioned by prostitutes, or buying drugs from back alley dealers? Well, I set it up so I could gather the necessary evidence against you, which included the food." She hadn't known... She wished she'd never known...

Walters remained confident as Gina steered the *Princeton* toward the Naval Station pier. She escorted him to the security shack, where Steve Dominiack took the prisoner into official custody.

"Empty your pockets," Walters was instructed.

Gina watched as he extracted a collection of oddities from trouser and shirt pockets: clam shells, bottle caps, corks, rubber bands... Charlie called her over when he discovered two quarters and a crumpled dollar bill.

"Here, this is yours."

She refused the money. "What do you mean?"

"The bet, remember? Ten to one whether a Jap soldier from the hills was stealing the goods."

"Forget it."

A grinning Jeff Tackett paraded through the door then, black diving suit slung over one arm.

"Where'd you find it?" Dominiack asked.

"On the *Harvard*, below deck in the bunk room closet."

Gina glared at Charlie. He would've framed her...

"Escort him to the brig, Petty Officer Quinn," the lieutenant commander ordered.

She gulped, "Yes, sir."

Walters marched beside her across the base. Standing outside the military jail, he murmured, "No one would ever catch us if we ran. The *Harvard's* equipped for a round-the-world cruise..."

"Thank God, I didn't have time to fall in love with you," Gina hissed.

"Didn't you?"

The Officer of the Day opened the door on the couple, locked in a desperate embrace. He cleared his throat. Gina retreated, shame-faced.

She lingered as Walters entered the cement block building. Before the door shut, he glanced over his shoulder. She heard, "Wait for me."

"I will!" escaped her lips.

## Head to Head

"Tragedy Strikes Chicago Suburbs." Debra Sparks wouldn't have paid attention to the oversized print, except this made the fourth report in one month of more than 20 individuals, living within a 30-mile radius, dropping dead at 10:30 p.m. (Central Time).

The brunette publicist read how Cook County's coroners had failed to connect the cerebral hemorrhages to a common cause. She tossed the Los Angeles *Times* across the breakfast table at Will Powers. He caught the roll, simultaneously draining his coffee mug. She made a mental note to remind him about his wrinkles and paunch. The fate of an aging rock star involved both a physical and mental regression of ten or fifteen years before a concert, to satisfy a screaming crowd for 90 minutes. Reality had a nasty way of taking revenge the next day.

"Man, this is weird," Will muttered, scanning the front page. "Check my blotter. I think on these same days, at the same time, I felt something like a knife go straight through my head."

"And you wrote it down?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Debra grunted. "You forget to pencil in appointments with your agent, recording sessions and interviews. This, you remember."

"Get real, Debs. Have you ever felt a knife split your skull? If you had, you'd write it down, too."

"Whatever it is, must be powerful vibes," Craig Barany remarked, carrying in a platter of eggs and bacon from the kitchen.

Debra glared at the scruffy blond. He fit a New Yorker's impression of California beach bums. She didn't like the way Will let him hang around - even if the singer had been responsible for the car wreck which crushed this guitarist's fingers.

"Heavy duty vibes," agreed Will.

Over the next two weeks, concern about Chicago's tragedies dwindled on the West Coast, while public outcry in the Midwest increased. Victims averaged 27 years of age, none older than 35. Debra made a point to check Will's desk calendar after each reported incident; she saw a fresh doodling of a knife each time.

May 14th, she arrived to find Will in bed, ice pack balanced atop his matted bronze hair. Rings beneath his bloodshot blue eyes betrayed lack of sleep.

"Again?" she queried.

"It's getting worse, Debs. Last night, Yvonne and me had dinner downtown, and when I looked over at the juke box, I saw an old woman coming at me with that knife. She drove it into my temple..." Debra observed sweat trickle down his sideburns. Craig tossed him a towel from the master bath. "God, the pain was too real to be just a hallucination."

"Those people in Chicago aren't dying from hallucinations," commented the 36-year-old, "unless somebody laced the water supply with LSD." She reached for the ice pack; he slapped her hand.

"You know what this means?"

"Will, I never know what *you* mean."

"I'm going to Chicago."

"Are you crazy? You're doing Letterman next week, the Today Show, then we go on tour. You begged me to schedule Chicago in December, so you could be home for Christmas." She took a deep breath. "If I didn't know better, I'd think Craig and you spent the night drinking. Calm down, for Christ's sake."

Powers tried to sit up, in vain. "Who works for who here? How many people have to croak before you get the point?"

"What point?"

"That the bitch wants me."

"What on earth..."

Craig emerged from the bathroom, cleaning supplies in hand. "Don't be so dense, Sparkie. Haven't you ever felt like you're being watched? Or somebody was talking about you when you were in the next room? The bitch *wants* him, only she's too cheap to use the phone."

Debra sank on the mattress, gazing out the window. She waited to speak until she regained her composure. "You've got two choices, Will: either you dump this drugged up psycho, or I'll leave you to the lawyers who feast on broken contracts."

"If I do this tour," Will growled through clenched teeth, "you're going to be with me 24 hours a day, and share every ounce of my pain. Maybe then you'll believe me!"

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Accounts of those afflicted by the abrupt hemorrhages began to pop up in Iowa, Missouri, Ohio, and elsewhere as weeks passed. "'Proponents of spirituality have presented the possibility of cosmic interference due to a disturbance in the Milky Way,'" Debra read aloud in the Houston Astrodome's dressing room. "I'm not surprised that fool refused to give his name."

"What *do* you believe in, Debs?" Will retorted.

"The power of one man to make 30,000 people stand up and dance, like they'll be doing an hour from now."

He spun from the mirror, his make-up incomplete. "Did I ever tell you about a girl I knew in school?"

"I thought you skipped school a lot."

"Get *serious*, will you? In grade school, this girl - what was her name? - she had curly black hair and green eyes." For a moment, he seemed lost. Debra checked her watch. Just 7:00. The next instant, he continued, "Anyway, she could move chairs."

"Who can't?"

"Without lifting a finger? Debs, she had the *gift*. She could read the teacher's *mind*. She and I used to hang around the Loop, and she'd blow people away starting and stopping the engines of parked cars. Wild shit."

Debra eyed him.

He turned and studied her reflection. "What's wrong?"

"I read an article once, in my dad's medical journal, about an experiment using telepathy to establish contact between two people three blocks apart. Every egg between the two locations exploded. I thought it just so much bull..."

"You're telling me someone's trying to contact me, and killing people in the process?"

"Their brains are boiling like egg yolks, according to the coroners."

Will deliberated for a moment in silence. "When do we make Chicago?"

"Two weeks."

"That's another couple hundred people. You'd better fly up there tomorrow. My mom has scrapbooks of old class pictures. Tell her about that girl. She'll know who you mean. I'll fly Craig in from L.A. to help you find her. Maybe she can help figure out what's going on."

Will drove a reluctant Debra to George Bush Intercontinental Airport early Sunday morning. He hadn't told her how, the closer they traveled to Chicago, the clearer that woman's face appeared in his mind.

Debra related a setback when she called his hotel late that night. All the scrapbooks had been destroyed in a freak accident. Flames from the furnace gas line had shot across the basement and consumed the box in which the mementoes were stored.

"When?"

"Last New Year's."

"The first deaths were reported two days later," Will recalled. "Damn..."

"Tomorrow, Mom and I are going to your old school. Hopefully, they'll let us search their files."

"I'll lay odds those are ashes, too. What about Craig?"

"I locked him in a closet."

Powers' concerts in Atlanta, Orlando and Washington, D.C., were sold out, and horrendous failures. Plagued by that mystifying image of a gray haired woman wielding a glimmering blade, he had little energy to give his audiences.

The tour bus arrived at Chicago's Drake Hotel on December 18th. The Windy City wore a blanket of dirty snow, well trampled by protesters marching along Michigan Avenue. They carried signs demanding the mayor's emergency task force reveal the cause of the mounting death toll.

Debra met Will at the registration desk. She noticed his furrowed brow and sunken eyes.

"Anything new?" he muttered.

"Oprah interviewed families of seven victims yesterday. The mayor is quaking in his boots."

"Have you *found* her?"

"Don't get so uptight. Mom remembered the name of your third grade teacher. The wiry old broad still lives in Oakbrook. We went to see her Tuesday."

Powers waited for the rest. "Well?"

Debra tugged him toward the elevator. She'd glimpsed the gathering onlookers, hunting their pockets for pens, and realized her boss couldn't cope with the pressure at the moment.

One fleet-footed teen squeezed between the closing doors. Her adoring manner reminded the publicist of how Mary Magdalene was painted seeing Christ after the Resurrection. Debra swallowed a laugh.

"Mr. Powers," gasped the girl. "Can I... would you..."

He accepted the pen from trembling fingers and cracked his first smile in days. "I'm afraid I don't have any paper..."

"Oh, sign it right here!" She whirled and offered her shoulder.

Obliging, he scrawled his name on the navy blue sweat shirt.

"You can't see it too well," he apologized.

"Who cares? I'll know it's there!"

The doors hissed apart on the fifth floor, and the teenager rushed out.

Debra pressed another button, and they continued upward.

"You're a quick thinker," Will praised, leaning against the vibrating wall.

"Not quick enough."

"I don't give a damn about those groupies. What did you and Mom find out?"

"Her name is Lauren Ritter."

The couple soon sat opposite each other on double beds in Suite 925.  
"What else?" he urged.

"You expecting a miracle? Finding one 42-year-old woman in a city this size will take time."

"Start by the river," declared Craig, unzipping his parka in the doorway.  
Debra smirked; Will shrugged.

Three days of searching netted the trio only sore feet and throbbing skulls. The night before the Soldiers Field concert, it snowed. Debra feared ticket holders would not risk the driving conditions, especially in light of the bad reviews given Powers' recent performances.

Will left the Drake before sunrise. He remembered a row of warehouses near 35th Street, where he and his friends had used rats for target practice. Of the structures which had not been demolished, one was boarded up. Two still looked occupied.

Striding down the alley between these buildings, a semi's headlights blinded him. On instinct, he pressed against the bricks as the vehicle rumbled past, its driver yelling obscenities. When the exhaust fumes cleared, Will plodded toward an open dock.

Ceiling fixtures provided little illumination for the interior. As Powers crept down a side aisle, not wide enough for a fork lift, the overhead door rattled shut behind him.

That ominous thud chilled his blood. Trapped, like the rats he knew made their homes in the walls.

"Nice of you to come, Willie," came a pleasant female voice from above.  
"It's been a long, long time."

"Lauren? Dammit, woman, where are you?"

"The foreman's office."

He felt himself rising off the concrete; over the top of well-stocked metal racks, he saw stairs leading to a glass room.

"Put me down!"

"We used to dream of flying, didn't we? Back then, I didn't have the focus I have now..."

"Who else do you know has the gift?" shouted Will.

"Gift? You make it sound like a bottle of perfume bought at the drug store."

"Who?"

Lauren cackled, "No one, fool."

"You mean, you're responsible..."

"Is it my fault some skulls aren't as thick as others?"

His tone softened. "Please, Lauren, put me down."

She complied and listened as he wound through the maze of shelving and mounted the stairs.

Once springy black hair had gone gray and limp; her slender frame had deteriorated into mere bones. Powers' face betrayed his repulsion.

"Pretty awful, isn't it? You never wanted to sleep with me in high school, because I didn't measure up to the sluts you chased. Cancer's had its way with me these past months, and I'll be lucky to see another new year."

"What's that got to do with..." demanded the rocker.

"Nothing, I suppose. My knowledge of *your* death is why I brought you here. I've been trying to prepare you..."

"Brought me? By killing so many?"

She guffawed. "Surplus population. Every one of them will be replaced by the year 2020."

"What about their grieving families? Parents, kids? Have you no heart?"

"Not anymore. Bad enough you brought you girlfriends to my house for a cheap meal. When you signed with that two-bit agent and left without saying good-bye, I forgave you. But, killing my sister was the last straw."

"Your sister? What the hell..."

"Your concert in Minneapolis, two summers ago. Ginny got trampled by the crowd rushing at a red leather jacket you'd thrown."

"Oh, my God." Will tried to muster an explanation, an excuse, all the time aware she read each thought.

"You're right," she confirmed. "You always wished I'd stay out of your head. There's not much I can do about that. Like I can't do much about you dying at your concert tonight."

"What?"

"The crowd will rush from the stands and mob you on stage. Sure, beef up security; it won't do any good. I won't be at peace until you choke on your own microphone."

He stood, silent, dumbfounded.

"Poetic justice, eh?" hissed Lauren.

"Driving them to it will be no less than murder."

"I won't have a do a thing. You know how your audiences behave. They go berserk at the slightest provocation. As someone who could've made you a class act - I begged you not to listen to that mercenary bastard of an agent - it serves you right."

"What do you mean, you could've made me..."

"When we graduated high school, I laid the world at your feet." She circled the metal desk. From the top step, she proceeded past the railing into mid-air. "Look at me, Will Powers. I can bend minds as easily as I bend a steel girder. How do you think I run this operation alone?" Boxes and crates leapt from the shelves and soared toward the loading dock. "You could have been one for the history books, but you settled for being a flash in the pan."

"Why tell me this now?" he bellowed.

Her tone grew harsher. "Because, I want you to beg me to save your life."

"Don't you just hate swelled heads?" quipped Craig Barany, scaling the side of a rack at the far end of the building.

"Who dares..."

Will's raised fist shook in triumph. "Go for it, Craig!"

"What do you think he can do, Willie?" Lauren challenged. "Only the unknown is a threat to me..."

"If all else fails, baffle 'em with bullshit," countered Craig.

The woman shifted her concentration to this irreverent interloper. "Willie may die tonight, but you'll be in hell first."

"Careful, Lauren! He's been a drug addict, a drunk, and a student of Buddhism!"

The two men roared with laughter.

Lauren settled on a nearby shelf. She strained her resources to humble Craig: explode his skull, bury him beneath a ton of crates... Nothing.

"What have you done?" she shrieked.

"I am the unknown," replied Barany in a quiet tone.

Powers had already sprinted to safety through the narrow door beside the dock. Craig leapt off the rack and joined him at the rented Thunderbird, idling in the alley. They drove back to The Drake, smiling, silent.

Debra was glad to see Will relax that afternoon; even Craig could be tolerated after the story they'd told her. Local evening news broadcast Lauren Ritter's surrender when police raided her warehouse. The skies had cleared, and people converged on Soldiers' Field to see the man responsible for ending the telepath's bizarre reign of terror.

Will gave his all for that performance. The heat generated in the stadium from the frenetic dancing and shrieking could have powered Chicago for a week.

He saw the rush too late during his fourth encore. They attacked him like vultures in the desert, and the hand-held mic shot down his throat...

## As the Grim Reaper...

A versatile actor with a perverted sense of humor, Gene Portnoy had been the prize of community theatre for over five years. I trusted him to step into any role at any time in any of my productions and give the character successful life. I considered him the greatest asset of the troupe.

Gene had another side to him, though, which I discovered early in our acquaintance. I overheard one of the girls in the cast of *Brigadoon* call him a “thief of hearts”. Something in his deep brown eyes and sideways grin tempted them; his friendly personality won them. At the time, I wondered how he kept the long line of conquests from interfering with his work, his theatre and his very active social life.

I later learned he did not merely steal these girls’ hearts, he stole their souls. He attempted to do the same to me, unintentionally, but I had too many other things on my mind to take his overtures seriously. He converted these impressionable young women, assembling them into a coven of witches, for which he acted as priest.

Born and raised a “good Catholic”, as Gene always joked with me, I couldn’t see how Wicca merited any following at all. But then, some seekers find use in the philosophy of doing as one wills, as long as no one is harmed. It is hard for them to understand that the action of one merits an equal and opposite reaction by others, thus someone along the line is always ultimately harmed.

Still, Gene exercised phenomenal control over the lives of his women. He had a charismatic power in that regard. A few times, I followed them after rehearsal. These young women would submit to ritual sex without blinking an eye, and participated in cemetery meetings at midnight. I received complaints from many parents because of their daughters’ irregular hours - they blamed me for prolonging rehearsals. I did not feel it necessary to explain the truth to these less-than-watchful - or worse, gullible - adults. Nor did I feel compelled to exile Gene from the theatre company. His activities after the final curtain had no bearing on me.

My opinions in this instance were also tempered by the fact I had known a devout Wiccan during high school. Nancy and I used to talk about her faith; she truly believed in the spells, candles and magick she had learned from books and others in the underground coven existing during the late 70s. I would stand back and laugh at her, just as I laughed at Gene now.

I didn’t laugh, however, when Gene caused the leads of the female version of *The Odd Couple* to be late on opening night. It didn’t matter to me it was

Halloween, which Wiccans celebrate as a holy day. It took all my willpower not to chew him to pieces before the curtain opened. In my heart, I swore revenge...

And Nancy proved to be my revenge. She had outgrown many of the Wiccan beliefs by the time she graduated from college - with a degree in theatre, of all things. While I stayed home and nurtured the local talent, she got a break in New York and worked her way up to directing off-Broadway revivals of "darker" plays.

The night before *The Odd Couple* closed, I invited Gene to a late dinner, being certain beforehand no Wiccan festival was listed on the calendar. As we sat at Agostino's, getting drunk and eating pasta, we talked of past productions and upcoming projects.

"I've got plans for you," I told him as I waited for my cannelloni.

"It sounds like you're sending me to Siberia."

"Close, but not quite."

"What do you mean?"

I loved to watch his expressions. Even moreso, I loved when he downed shot after shot of Tequila like water, an unmistakable sign he had no idea what was coming next. I'd seen him quite ill once or twice from doing that. It gave me intense pleasure seeing him pale and flat on his back - he deserved it after corrupting those young innocents.

"I've got a gig for you in New York."

Those brown eyes widened. His lips twitched. He didn't know whether to smile or laugh at the joke.

"No joke, man. A friend of mine needs a talented actor for her latest production. She's springing for your plane fare. You're due there Monday morning."

"You're kidding, aren't you?"

"I don't kid about professional theatre, man." I reached in my purse and pulled out the airline ticket. "I ask only one thing: the first time you do Leno, I expect to hear my name."

I didn't hear anything from him for five minutes while he contemplated the ticket and the news. We finished our dessert in silence. I paid the check and drove him back to the theatre to pick up his car.

The rest I learned when Gene called me Monday night from Greenwich Village. Nancy had rented him a studio apartment in a building catering to artists; he'd fit right in, and probably (so I thought) gather quite a coven in no time at all.

"I walked into the theatre," he told me. "There weren't too many people around. I introduced myself to one woman, a big brunette. She was just the cleaning lady. She showed me to Nancy's office. I knocked, and she opened the

door. Why didn't you tell me she looked like a football player with long blonde hair?"

"I haven't seen her in ten years. She's changed," I replied, trying not to laugh.

"Anyway, I introduced myself to her. She didn't seem to care. I told her I was a friend of yours, and you'd recommended me... She acted as if she didn't know what I was talking about. She stared at me for the longest time. I thought to myself, 'This isn't good.' Then, she smiled."

I waited, but I guess he was trying to keep me in suspense. "What did she say?"

"She told me, 'I can use you as the Grim Reaper.'"

In the privacy of my own room, I covered the mouthpiece of the phone and shouted in triumph. Nancy had done just what I asked of her. She had completely humiliated this "thief of souls". I figured, when he returned to town, he would be a chastened man and act accordingly.

Another surprise remained. "I took the role," he concluded in no uncertain terms.

It was I who felt silent, then. The theatre troupe would never be the same; that much I knew. Still, the girls would be safe. Like any youngster exposed to the darker side of life, they would return to their parents' care and their fundamental beliefs over time. Though with a twist, I'd had my revenge.

## A Man of Few Words

Martina Cassle, rookie journalist, ached for her own by-line. Covering the bar tent during Notre Dame's annual alumni weekend didn't rate such an honor. When she recognized Jeremiah Trelawn, however, her hopes escalated.

The erstwhile lawyer/professor, who had disappeared from the scholastic limelight a decade earlier, lived somewhere in the Rocky Mountains and traveled only once every five years: to his alma mater's reunion. Somewhat eccentric, incredibly wealthy, Trelawn granted interviews to no one. Just a quote from him would make Marti's name.

She trailed the slight, balding figure to the North Dining Hall for lunch, to the Joyce Center for a workout, then toward Dillon Hall. A crowd of reporters converged on her prey as he passed the Law School. These vultures were eager to question any of the famous personages who numbered themselves among the alumni.

Marti circled behind the group; she knew Trelawn wouldn't acknowledge them. She observed veteran journalists withdraw en masse, subjected to an expressionless, yet penetrating stare. Her blood chilled, even at that distance. She turned away to regain her composure. When her feet shifted 180 degrees, she collided unceremoniously with Jeremiah Trelawn.

Her notebook and pen went flying in opposite directions. Trelawn recoiled, his smile almost embarrassed.

"Class of '88?" he queried in a crisp tenor.

Stooping to retrieve the tools of her trade, Marti had to think fast. If he believed her an alumna... "How'd you know?"

"By your age and... coordination."

"I was so caught up looking at the statue of Fr. Sorin, I didn't watch where I was going," she lied.

"Not much special about that statue. You probably walked past it 10,000 times during your years here."

"But once, on a Saturday night, when the moon was full..."

Trelawn's white eyebrows arched, and he nodded.

"Are you going to the dinner tonight?" Marti asked.

"I prefer to eat alone."

"Too bad. I wanted to go, but I don't have anyone to sit with. Not many of my classmates came this year."

"I'm afraid I can't help you there. Good afternoon."

He stepped around her; she grabbed his sport coat sleeve. "What year did you graduate?"

"I earned my law degree in '72."

"Back when they only taught boys."

"That's right."

"What's your name?" she persisted, hunting for an angle.

Trelawn told her.

"I'm Marti Cassle. Would you think me terribly rude if I invited you for a cup of coffee later? Say, around 10:30, in LaFortune?"

"I don't think..."

Marti shrugged. "I don't see why you came, then, if you're just going to stay in your room."

"It's not that. A few of my classmates and I are getting together for a card game at Stanford Hall."

"Poker?"

"Yes."

"Who would've thought," the young woman muttered to herself. "Maybe I'll see you 'round."

They parted company, Marti's brain reeling. What an article for Sunday's paper, if she could eavesdrop on that poker game!

While her fellow members of the press corps gleaned tidbits of human interest at Friday evening's banquet, a lone brunette in jeans and a Notre Dame sweatshirt staked out the main entrance of Keenan-Stanford Hall. It wouldn't be hard to recognize Jeremiah Trelawn in the darkness - his smooth dome edged by close-cropped white hair would reflect the moonlight.

At 9:17, he appeared from the south and approached the dorm. She followed him indoors, flopping onto a blue corduroy sofa in the first floor lounge.

He knocked at the rector's office; the door opened. A chorus of drunken voices greeted the latecomer.

She also heard someone announce, "Zack had to go home. His kid had some kind of attack. It'll be no fun playing with just four of us."

"Where's Pete?" Trelawn wondered.

"He didn't make it this year. Had to fly to Berlin on business."

"Run upstairs and grab somebody," suggested another participant.

Two men emerged from the office; Marti leapt off her seat and strode away from them down the hall.

"Excuse me."

She ignored the voice.

"Excuse me, please!" That was Trelawn.

The hand on her shoulder could not be denied. "You talking to me?"

"Well, Miss Cassle, what are you doing here?"

"Visiting a friend on the Keenan side," she lied again. "Aren't you supposed to be playing poker?"

"We're short a man. Do you know anyone who might want to join us?"

"Depends on the stakes."

"Five card stud. No limit," stated Trelawn's companion.

"Sounds interesting."

The two men glanced at each other. The ebony-headed stranger seized her hand. "You'll do."

So it happened Marti didn't have to eavesdrop on Jeremiah Trelawn's conversation with Steve Whitney, M.D., Fr. Hank Frederickson, and Benji Gooch, a C.P.A. She sat in the middle of the raucous banter. These four discarded their inhibitions and gossiped worse than some women Marti had encountered.

The game broke up when the beer cooler had been emptied - at 3:00 a.m. Marti bid the group farewell and hurried through the door of the connected dormitories, winnings of \$20 in her pocket. She jogged through humid June heat to where her car waited.

She left the South Bend *Tribune* office at 8:00 a.m. Saturday, a 2,400 word feature ready for her editor's review. The man who rarely spoke had provided her with too many quotes to include in an article of even that length.

Eight hours' sleep fortified her for an evening listening to speeches and attending a formal dance. Jeremiah Trelawn did not make an appearance at either function. Marti didn't know if she could've kept a straight face had she met him.

The phone call at 7:06 a.m. Sunday disturbed her exhausted slumber. The *Tribune* dispatcher warned her someone would soon be at her door; one of the delivery drivers had told the angry man the street name, and that her customized blue Firebird was always parked in front of the house.

"Thanks," she grumbled before slamming down the receiver. Trelawn had a reputation for being brutal...

A sheer robe failed to conceal her pink satin gown. She washed her face and brushed her curly hair. From the living room window, she saw a Ford Bronco squeal to a halt inches from her car's rear bumper.

The door opened before the former professor's knuckles touched the wood. "Good morning, Mr. Trelawn."

"What's good about it?" He stormed over the threshold, tossing a folded newspaper on a glass-and-brass coffee table. His face bore that characteristic,

expressionless cast as he snarled, "You misrepresented yourself to me, and circulated details of my life never meant for publication."

Marti picked up the paper, straightened it. She held not the *South Bend Tribune*, but the *New York Times*. Her mock calmness erupted in a jubilant smile. "The Associated Press carried the story!" What a coup!

"You disgust me," Trelawn retorted.

"Why? From what you said Friday night, you're proud of your professional accomplishments. Why shouldn't I be proud of mine?"

"I never took advantage of other people's weaknesses to better myself."

The young woman sank on a flower-print armchair. "All you've done here is give Notre Dame and the Rocky Mountain Tourist Commission a little free publicity."

"I retired from teaching and the practice of law because I got fed up with words." Trelawn's fists clenched. "Imagine, trying to convince a jury, in the most eloquent terms, of one man's innocence. More futile still, think how often I had to harangue a class of 200 party animals about the value of the American judicial system. I swore I'd never again waste my breath..."

"Up in those mountains, you're not contributing to the improvement of the world situation."

"That's not for you to judge."

Marti's smile returned. "I heard you and Fr. Frederickson whispering between hands at the card table. You're telling me you've learned the power of prayer in your self-styled solitude?"

A calloused hand stopped inches from her cheek. Her mouth hardened in a thin line.

"For a long time, I respected you," she murmured. "I thought anyone with the guts to abandon a lucrative career while so many gave in to greed must be respected. I see now you did it out of cowardice. Please, go."

Trelawn didn't move. "I'm not such a coward I can't ruin you."

"You sound like a little boy who's lost his security blanket."

The senselessness of further argument compelled Trelawn to make a silent retreat. Once the door closed, Marti snatched up the copy of the *New York Times* and hugged it to her. Nothing he could do would eclipse this first success.

Even if she never wrote again, she'd earned her by-line, and her name would be known around the world!

Then, she glimpsed him on the sidewalk, studying her through the picture window. Her involuntary shiver brought a wry smile to his lips. She could not suppress a twinge of conscience.

Again, he walked in without knocking. His smallness framed in the doorway, the rising sun cast him in a luminescent glow.

"I owe you an apology," he said.

Marti relaxed. "I'm glad you understand."

"If you take my advice, you won't make a habit of falsifying your intentions. You could wind up being sued."

"Can I call on you to defend me?"

The door snapped shut; she watched the Bronco pull away from the curb. She envied his individuality, his wisdom. Nonetheless, she preferred the thrill of the chase, and seeing her name in print. She wanted to taste the fame and fortune he had known, no matter the cost.

## Reckless Abandon

Whether Suzanne worked at the library reference desk or the check out counter, most people noticed her pleasant smile and helpful attitude. Few commented on the small round blue, red and gold pin she wore everyday on the collar of her blouse. Even fewer realized she was a nun.

In a society where exploring religious experience had become trendy, nuns were still seen as an antiquated form of observing one's faith. After a tumultuous youth, Suzanne had opted for a career-oriented community of nuns, in which she didn't merely pray, but worked in the commercial sector and earned a weekly paycheck. She experienced a blend of social interaction with 70 women who lived in the monastery, and a distinct independence. The best of both worlds, it seemed.

The secrets of her past were respected, as well. In the beginning, she had revealed the truth to three nuns, and not a word of judgment had been uttered. For all practical purposes, she had become a new woman. The pin with its cross and Latin motto signified that.

As the long line at the check out counter split between the three employees, Suzanne chatted with a mother and her youngsters, then a couple with a stack of videos. At the conclusion of the latter transaction, she hopped off her stool and crossed behind the counter to the cash register, giving the young man his change. She returned to her place and spun on the stool toward the next patron. Unashamedly, he laid a copy of *The Metaphysics of Sex* before her. She bit back a smirk, glancing up to greet the man. Then, her eyes widened.

"I knew I could get your attention," the shaggy blond figure hissed.

Suzanne found herself whispering. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to get you."

"Why?"

"I've got a few deals in the works, and I need your talents."

"No." Suzanne could say nothing else, her throat constricted with fear.

"There's ten grand in it for you."

"Ten grand?"

"For three days' work."

"Man, you're crazy." Suzanne glanced over his shoulder at the long line.

"Have you got a library card or not?"

"In Seattle, I do."

"Then, get lost. I've got work to do."

As she reached to reclaim the book, he pinned her slender hand beneath his calloused fingers. "I'll be waiting outside when you get off. We can talk more freely then."

Suzanne swallowed hard and watched him saunter toward the exit. She'd not seen Tim Harmon in ten years; he hadn't changed a bit. Considering, though, how could the devil enfleshed, a hard core drug addict/pimp change? It took a moment for her to shake off the effect of his words before she refreshed her smile for the next patron.

Even in the old days, Suzanne had entertained no fear of Tim, or the danger he constantly placed in her path. She saw no reason for it to be different now. As 9:00 chimed and the library building emptied, she punched out on the time clock and moved along the rear corridor toward the employee entrance.

Outside, a warm breeze blew. The temperature change aggravated Suzanne, after the coolness of the air conditioned indoors. The parking lot appeared deserted, but she fully expected Tim to slip out from around a corner, or materialize as if from nowhere. Such behavior had been his trademark for years, and had kept him beyond police reach more than once.

"You were the best in your day," came his coarse tenor from behind as she unlocked the drivers' door of her Ford Escort. "A guy I know - wealthy business man from back east - came to my office last week."

"Since when have you had an office? Don't you mean the back room of your dad's bar?" Suzanne scoffed.

"Hey, things have happened since you ran out on me. A few of my girls got in with the high stakes clients and I've moved up in the world."

"That's a favorable recommendation." Suzanne tried to pull open the car door. Tim slammed it shut, nearly crushing her fingers.

"It should be. Anyway, this friend of mine saw that old poster on my wall - your naked version of that famous Betty Grable pose. He expressed an interest."

"Okay, so he's interested. Any of your other girls could keep him happy."

"If he'd stayed on the coast, sure. But he's here, in Indy, for a convention. He wants to meet you."

"No."

Tim smiled. Suzanne noticed he'd had his teeth fixed. "How do you think your bosses would react if they knew the truth about you?" he snarled.

"Tell them. I don't care."

Her attitude annoyed Tim. She'd always known her attitude annoyed him. "Look, he's sitting over there in my Caddy. Just come over and say hi."

“You toss me five hundred, and I’ll say hi.”

Tim’s green eyes widened this time. “Five hundred...”

“You don’t expect me to do it for free, do you?”

Grumbling to himself, Tim reached for his back pocket and pulled out a money clip holding hundred dollar bills. He counted five and slapped them into Suzanne’s palm.

“Let’s go,” she said.

The Caddy was actually a brand new Cadillac limousine. Tim’s “friend” sat behind the tinted windows in the rear. Tim had obviously been playing chauffeur. He opened the rear door and ushered Suzanne inside. The door closed.

Two side lights failed to illuminate the car’s interior. The occupant reclined in the shadows, though Suzanne detected the tantalizing scent of musk.

“You *are* beautiful,” a cultured baritone voice remarked.

“Thank you.”

“I’m looking forward to you showing me this delightful city.”

“I’m afraid I won’t have time...”

At that moment, Tim slid onto the drivers’ seat and hit the door locks.

The limousine pulled away from the curb before Suzanne could react.

Years of living monastic life and practicing self-control prevented Suzanne from directing a stream of four-letter expletives at her former pimp. He’d trapped her - the same way he had trapped her when, at age 19, he had picked her up at a college bar in Seattle. He’d kept her trapped for three years then. He’d told her three days, this time. She knew, though, she couldn’t trust him.

With a resigned deep breath, she settled back on the plush seat. The wealthy conventioner slid closer and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“You all right?”

“I...”

“If you’re not hungry, we can skip dinner and go back to the hotel...”

Reality set in suddenly for Suzanne. She turned to her companion. Her protest died, unspoken, as she felt an instant attraction to the deep brown eyes, wavy dark hair and broad shoulders. “I... think I need a drink.”

Tim drove them to a high-rise hotel on Keystone. A valet opened the limousine door; Suzanne and the man alighted. Tim rolled down the front passenger side window. “I’ll see you in three days, Susie,” he sneered.

She shot him a murderous glance as she passed through the double glass doors.

The elegant suite of rooms on the sixteenth floor could have accommodated a dozen people comfortably. Besides a pit group and living room fixtures, the other room held a king size bed. Suzanne bit her lip.

“I’ll call for room service,” the man stated. “Will champagne do?”

“I’d prefer white wine, if you don’t mind.”

“Anything you wish, my dear.”

Anything I *wish*? echoed in her head. I wish I could get out of here...

The man removed his tuxedo jacket and loosened his tie. He stood in the doorway between the two rooms and watched Suzanne pretend to admire the framed prints on the walls.

“There’s no need to be nervous.”

“If you understood my situation, you’d grasp why I’m nervous. But I know you’re not interested.”

“There, you’re right. Why don’t you make yourself comfortable?”

What choice do I have? she thought. Well, there’s the door. It’s not like this guy’s got me under a gun...

But, if Tim tracks me down, he’ll kill me.

Suzanne tossed her purse on the coffee table and unbuttoned her blouse. She no longer wore the lace-trimmed teddies, garter belts and fish-net hose of those long-gone days. On a practical level, her undergarments consisted of a white nylon slip, bra, panties and hose.

He didn’t seem to mind. After the wine arrived, he poured her a glass, from which she drank deeply. Instrumental music played on some unseen stereo. She knew what he expected; still, reluctance froze her.

“Let go,” he muttered, leading her to the sofa. He ran gentle fingers along her cheek and neck. It was the first time in years any man had touched her. Her nerves rejected the sensation. She rose.

“I’m... sorry,” she breathed.

“Tim told me you were the best at what you do. If the money’s not enough...”

“It’s not the money.”

He stood behind her and caressed her shoulders. Old memories flooded her brain, of behavior to which no nun would ever publicly admit. She couldn’t deny that she had often enjoyed being with men whose rather risque preferences earned her a small fortune. She used to enjoy the sex act itself, in its many forms. She’d been without for nearly ten years...

An oddly familiar tingling spread through her body, silencing her thoughts. If trapped, what animal would not make the best of the confinement? she reasoned.

He turned her to face him. His deep brown eyes burned with surprising intensity. She sensed that this man did not merely want to have sex with her; he wanted to lay claim to her soul. He kissed her - lightly the first time, then almost viciously. Suzanne responded with equal fervor.

His hands ran down her cheeks, along her neck and over her breasts as his tongue invaded her mouth. She felt her slip and bra fall away, as if in a dream, and she didn't care. Her temperature rose; she had regressed to the days when, two or three times a day, she gave pleasure to men for a price.

Nimble fingers unbuttoned his shirt. Beneath the starched white cotton, dark ringlets of hair covered his chest. His clothes had concealed a body past its prime, but nonetheless inviting. She freed him of his trousers, and they sank, as one, onto the pit group.

Suzanne soon learned the reason Tim chose her for this client. His tastes went far beyond risqué. Somehow, he had learned the most savage mating rituals of remote African tribes - things she had only read about years before in Tim's collection of sex manuals. She didn't mind when he bit her shoulders, ribs and legs. She suspected he would leave bruises, but who would see?

The things he asked of her might have sounded demeaning to ordinary women, but Suzanne had performed most of the acts on numerous occasions. It didn't matter that she was violating sacred vows... Nothing mattered but the fierce pleasure she felt as they satisfied each other.

Her mind wandered momentarily to her religious obligations. A decade earlier, she had passed through the portals of a monastery, hoping for a new life. She had endured training - both at the college and monastic level - about the importance of prayer and balance in life. She thought she could withstand any temptation...

He was staring at her face as he finally mounted her. Suzanne glimpsed a strange fire in his eyes. She blinked twice, hoping it was an illusion brought on by the passion of their togetherness. The fire grew brighter. Fear tightened her lungs.

“Who are you?” she cried.

“You’re a little late in asking, aren’t you?” he chuckled.

“I... didn’t care before.”

“Why should you care now?”

The feeling of him inside her, filling her with his essence, supplanted her train of thought. She hadn’t experienced an orgasm in so long, since high school, in fact. Now, she couldn’t stop. She listened to herself moan and tried to bite back the screams...

“Tell me,” he persisted. “Why do you care now?”

She couldn't answer.

“All you care about is how you feel, isn't it?”

Suzanne felt herself beginning to hyperventilate as her muscles twitched violently with every thrust.

“You feel fantastic right now, don't you?”

“Yes,” she managed to gasp.

“Over the course of the next three days, I will make you pregnant. How do you feel about that?”

“I...”

“You don't care, do you?” he continued, his voice a soothing mantra.

“All you care about is feeling like a woman again.”

“How... do you know all this?”

“I know everything about you. You've been living a lie these past few years, acting like a nun inside those walls, but subconsciously seducing every man you meet. Including your own priest.”

Her mind so boggled by physical ecstasy, she couldn't deny this truth. There had been a time, during her year of formation, when she had worked with the monastery chaplain on a research paper. Their closeness had bred more than mutual professionalism. They had come too close, and he had been reassigned a month later.

“You just love it, don't you? The others of your ilk don't worry so much about their clothes, their make-up, their hair. But you leave that building every single day, hoping to catch a man. Well, now you've caught one. And I'm more than you ever could have hoped for.”

“Who are you?” she pleaded.

He spoke no more, himself reaching climax. In the afterglow, they lay together on the cushions, and he kissed her softly a few more times. Then, he rose and went into the bedroom. By the time she gathered her clothes, he had fallen asleep in the bed.

Still entertaining that unfathomable fear, Suzanne opted to sleep on the pit group. She snuggled under a quilted afghan, but did not get much rest. Dreams of devils warring with angels kept waking her. She tried to dispel a weird suspicion...

As the sun rose over the horizon, he came to her again. His touch gently roused her and, before long, the intensity returned. For nearly two hours, he kept her at the brink of orgasm, finally achieving satiation at the exact same moment.

He ordered breakfast from room service but, for lunch, he led her into the other room and ravaged her on the huge bed.

She slept again after this prolonged intimacy; this time, she merited the sleep of one intoxicated. There could be no dreams, however disturbing, to stir her.

He did, though, for a gourmet dinner. Starving from exertion, she ate with gusto. Then, they returned to the bedroom.

They did not speak. Suzanne was afraid of what more she might learn of this man. She didn't mind that he treated her like a whore. She was getting paid good money, after all - if Tim, indeed, kept his word.

In the middle of that night, she woke to the sound of bells ringing, as if Christmas. Later, she would credit her internal bells signaling a dramatic change. According to his prophecy, Suzanne had conceived.

The next morning, he departed without a word. She lay naked in the bed, comfortable and content. She didn't know if she could return to the monastery and ever feel the same about her lifestyle there. She still enjoyed men too much...

A loud knocking forced her out of bed. She wrapped one of the hotel robes around her and tied it. Tim breezed in when she opened the door.

"Well, well. Another satisfied customer," he announced.

"So, where's the money?"

"He said that you should get five grand now, and the other five grand when the baby's born." Tim passed her a stuffed plain white envelope.

Suzanne exhaled loudly as she accepted the payment. "Who was he, Tim?"

"An old friend of mine. I told you."

"How old?"

"Give or take a century, three or four thousand years."

Never in her life had she fainted, and she wasn't about to now, in front of this pimp. She seized the back of the nearest chair. "Oh, my God..."

"Not quite." Laughing, Tim left the suite.

Depression and confusion engulfed Suzanne, leaving her only one way out of a damnable situation. She dropped the envelope on the carpet.

The next morning, friends of the monastery noticed a small paragraph in the newspaper describing how one of the nuns had accidentally killed herself by running her Ford Escort in a closed garage. Not even Suzanne's closest confidants realized the act had been deliberate suicide.

Mourners at the funeral commented quietly among themselves about the shaggy individual who sat in the last row and kept bursting into laughter.

## The Ideal Man

Irate and disheveled, the fiery brunette burst through the stage door of the new Globe Theatre, disregarding a brawny security guard.

"I'm sorry, no visitors are allowed," he yelled after her.

"I'm a doctor!" she exclaimed, emerging from the wings into a spotlight. "Dr. Frankenstein!"

Barry Flynn froze in mid-limp, robed as Richard III. "Leslie?"

"That's right," the woman snarled. "Tell me why, Barry. Just tell me, why?"

"Take ten, everybody," Flynn directed. No one moved. "Go on, get lost!"

The lean, sandy-haired figure sank on a bench, waiting for actors and actresses in mediaeval garb to file off-stage. "I've changed, Leslie. When I walked out on you five years ago, I had a decision to make - either die, like I should have, or make the best of being Barry Flynn. I'm a star here, because of how you programmed me, and I've found contentment with a fantastic woman."

Something burst inside Leslie; Barry saw it. Before he could react, she had snatched a prop spear and flung it at him. It lodged in his chest.

She hovered above the bloody heap while he executed a death scene worthy of Shakespeare's warped British monarch. She never considered the consequences of her actions.

When two police robots apprehended her, she let her rage fly. "What the hell are you doing? This isn't murder, it's a scientific experiment! He's not human, he's a computer. I can prove it!"

Leslie was dragged, bellowing, from the theatre. No amount of persuasion during the course of the investigation convinced the authorities she was telling the truth. The judge at her preliminary hearing ordered the suspect to be evaluated at Klingerman Psychiatric Hospital in Toronto.

Prior to interviewing the patient, Henry Balfour, M.D., Ph.D., researched her case. Records and files were air-mailed from the United States to speed the process, but the volume of material itself delayed matters a week.

The 1999 edition of *Who's Who in America* included a brief biography of Leslie Featherstone, M.D., acclaiming her as a respected proponent in the field of artificial intelligence, the youngest female to ever graduate Harvard Medical School. By age 23, she had completed her residency at Johns Hopkins, and had held the position of Abbott County (Kansas) coroner since 1996.

School evaluations overflowed with high grades and praise for Leslie's surgical skill. Her superior intellect hampered her bedside manner, however; she found it difficult to relate to the sick and dying. In an assessment of a particularly traumatic case, she wrote: "Why don't these people make use of their own mental assets to aid in their cure?" After a rotation in the morgue, she had requested permanent duty with the "stiffs".

A Kansas State Police report, submitted as part of her hometown background investigation of the murder, recorded she had kept a dead body preserved in a meat locker during the years 1998-2013.

Affadavits from Leslie's neighbors in the one-horse town of Elkhart, Kansas, cited her as everything from "different" to "downright insane". Her extensive vocabulary did not impress these farmers, nor did her tailored tweed business suits. She managed to offend just about everyone. And, while most of her childhood friends were married with families before their 25th summer, she spent her evenings and weekends alone in her lab.

"Who was the man you killed?" Dr. Balfour inquired during his first session with the slender, hospital-gowned patient.

A confident contralto replied, "Barry Flynn."

"Why did you kill him?"

"Because I have discovered the only ideal man is a dead one."

Balfour scribbled the statement on his notepad. "What do you mean, 'ideal man'?"

"You're a man of medicine," she countered, "but are you a man of foresight? To be blunt: haven't you ever wished to create perfect life, not merely save the lives of countless imperfect beings?"

"Genetic engineering, you mean?"

"No. Electro-organic engineering."

The graying psychiatrist stared.

"You already know who I am by the looks of your desk," she persisted. "And you may be one of the few who can appreciate what I've done. Lord, there were times when I regretted not accepting one of the endowments which would have taken me to Chicago, New York or San Diego. I always eased my fears with a glance into the deep-freeze: no one would've understood my work, no matter where I lived."

"Your work as a coroner?"

"Cutting up stiffs provided a modest income, also unprotesting volunteers for my research. Through them, I found the means to create the ideal man."

"You believe Barry Flynn to be this 'ideal man'?"

"I thought so, at first. Back in '98, a young man died in a car accident near Elkhart, my hometown. Damage to his body was minimal: a shard of the windshield had pierced his heart. By chance, I was driving along the same country road that stormy afternoon, and discovered the wreck. Handsome features and his athlete's physique were too good for me to pass up. I had already jerry-rigged some cryogenic equipment, and used it to preserve the corpse within hours."

"What was the young man's name?" Balfour queried, pen poised above his paper.

"Why should I care about that? Who he had been didn't matter to me. Who he was to become, now *that* was more important. For years, I struggled to create a computerized brain, one which would duplicate every human function, including the spontaneous behavior unique to organic brain cells. Each bodily function, from twitching the right pinky to digesting ice cream, I studied and recorded as algebraic formulae. I hoped to transfer these to a computer program, stored on a miniature circuit board, implanted in his skull."

So, Dr. Leslie Featherstone had developed her version of the ideal man, Henry Balfour later mused. It was too soon to conclude whether genius had driven her insane or if her idea of truth was, indeed, reality.

According to the statements of those interviewed by the Kansas police, one person had known the purpose of the woman's activities in the Town Hall's basement autopsy rooms. Jim Tolen, Leslie's assistant, had witnessed her experiments with brain tissue extracted from the dead, hooked up to an electric impulse generator in the morgue's converted stock room.

From the address given, Balfour acquired Tolen's phone number. The call to Springfield, Missouri, was answered by a machine. That night, though, this key element in the assessment of Leslie Featherstone returned the call to the Toronto asylum.

"That lunatic swore me to secrecy," Tolen lamented during the review of his involvement with the former coroner. "She threatened to tell the mayor about my affair with his wife.

"I called her Frankenstein," Jim continued. "She said to me, nice as you please, 'What if I told you my maternal great-grandfather was a Frankenstein?' Well, I couldn't take anymore of her crap, so I walked out."

"Did you ever see her again?" Balfour asked.

"Living in Elkhart, a person couldn't help run into his enemies now and again. I even had a drink with her and the stiff one night. I've got to admit, I sort of envied her, but how she went about it..."

The psychiatrist interrupted, "Did Dr. Featherstone keep a log of her experiments, or any written account of her research?"

"If she did, she kept 'em at home. I never saw anything like that at the office."

Henry Balfour thanked Tolen and broke the connection. He realized, to get an objective picture of the physician in the midst of her research, he would have to go back more than five years. In her present state of mind, that would be impossible. He thought his efforts at a standstill until, two days later, his secretary placed a second package from Kansas on his desk.

"We cleaned out her house," Detective Steve Kline wrote. "Thought you might be able to use these."

Leather-bound volumes filled with neat, upright script lay at Balfour's fingertips: Leslie Featherstone's journals.

Each entry in detail, conversations had been recorded verbatim. The pages read like a science fiction novel.

Early in 2013, at 44 years of age, Leslie had commissioned a computer manufacturer in Jacksonville, Florida to assemble a special circuit board. A week following its delivery on May 19, Dr. Featherstone performed delicate surgery on the half-thawed brain of her human guinea pig. The process of connecting every nerve to its color-coded wiring took 12 hours.

The surgeon kept vigil at her desk in the morgue during the wee hours of that Thursday morning, waiting for ten pints of B-positive blood to revitalize the young man. At 6:30 a.m., sheets rustling across the room roused her from a sound sleep.

She studied well-formed hands flexing. When she approached the gurney, her patient's head turned. "Hullo," came the resonant baritone.

It took a moment for Leslie to find her tongue. Years of effort stretched, alive, articulate. She had pinched her arm to assure herself it wasn't just a dream.

"Is anything wrong?" this resurrected individual queried.

"No. At least, I hope not. Welcome to the 21st Century."

Leslie assisted him to a sitting position, explaining how, as a physician, she wished to examine him. She proceeded to listen to his heart and lungs, check his pulse, temperature and reflexes, ears, nose and throat. For all practical purposes, he was a 27-year-old man. And, he was hers!

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Leslie Featherstone. What's yours?"

"I..."

His hesitation confirmed all memory of his past life had been obliterated by the computer program. "Sorry," she apologized. "It's Barry Flynn, isn't it?"

"Right," he agreed.

Leslie had glanced at her watch. One of the notebooks strewn around contained an outline of the tests Barry would need to be given to detect any malfunctions. Not here, though. It was too dangerous. No autopsies were scheduled, so the coroner decided to take a vacation day.

She had tossed Barry the jeans worn in his accident, and a clean T-shirt. "Get dressed. I'll meet you out front," she directed. In her office, she scribbled a note to her new assistant - after the fiasco with Jim Tolen, she allowed them to stay less than six months - and dug through her drawers for the misplaced journal. Trembling fingers grasping it, she joined Barry in the lab.

"Where're we going?"

"Home." A flicker of awareness in his eyes made her smile.

Barry prepared Leslie's favorite breakfast in the kitchen of a roomy bungalow off Elkhart's Main Street. He shared the meal, after which she had monitored his digestion. Normal.

In her den, he selected a Louis L'Amour novel and read the first chapter aloud. His comprehension proved extraordinary, the woman logged, but his Eastern accent confounded her.

Making conversation as they drove to the museum in Kansas City, she derived satisfaction from his grasp of art, music, history, English and science. Females flirted with him wherever they went. Leslie didn't let jealousy obscure her impartial observation. Barry would never favor anyone besides herself with more than polite interest.

Confronting her with these facts, Henry Balfour requested an explanation of Leslie's desire to have a man pay so much attention to her.

"For the first time in my life, I knew the meaning of fulfillment," came her reply. "Here was an equal to my own superior mind. We could talk for hours about a thousand different subjects. Barry's capacity for original thought verified the thoroughness of his programming. Every newspaper or book he read, whatever he heard or saw was stored and cross-referenced automatically. The prospect of mental stagnation horrified me, so I ensured my creation would never cease learning."

"Why did you choose the name Barry Flynn?"

Balfour heard her laugh this one time. "My father's name was Barry, and I always liked Errol Flynn. He behaved like a perfect gentleman - one bred in the tradition of early 20th Century. I often forgot he was an animated corpse."

Leslie's journals described how she couldn't forget, though, Elkhart's population of 1,200-plus brooked no strangers. In Los Angeles or Philadelphia - with their overcrowding, solar-powered public transportation, automated offices

and robot police - no one would have noticed Barry. Everyone in this remote settlement knew of his presence no more had he opened his eyes.

Not that the coroner had intended to make him a recluse, or hide him from public view. Her pride in this accomplishment made her flaunt him before the earthy inhabitants of the county seat. His manners, sense of chivalry and honor made the farmers appear all the more backward. They, on the other hand, didn't appreciate having their lifestyle ridiculed.

A snide remark, overheard during a stop at the butcher's, shattered Leslie's ambition of enlightening these primitives. Young Zack Marshall had tried to make a joke of his suspicions some of the bodies placed in Leslie's charge wound up among the ground chuck and pig hocks. Leslie rose to her own defense; every stiff had seen proper Christian burial, albeit somewhat delayed. The confrontation ended with Barry's solid right cross to Zack's jaw.

"You didn't like when he asserted his manhood?" Balfour prodded during their third session that week.

"After that mess with Zack, I had to be careful," she confessed. "If I would act the least bit insulted, the offender wound up bruised or bloodied. With practice, I could receive the crudest snub - and this happened often - with a grin."

"Did you program him to be so temperamental?"

"Thank you, Doctor."

"For what?"

"For referring to it as 'programming'. At least, I know you believe me now."

"That's all right."

Leslie's smile faded. "Anyway, I don't know the origins of Barry's hair-trigger temper, or his accent. He also displayed a flair for off-beat humor which stunned me at times. During one of our periodic chess games, we heard a tapping on the front door. Barry refused to let me answer it, since I hadn't made my move.

"'It's a woodpecker,' he'd said.

"I slid my queen forward. Before I could get up, though, Barry's knight took the piece.

"'Check,' he warned.

"Thus endangered, I returned to the game. The knock was repeated.

"My king sought protection behind a pawn. 'Really, Barry, I've got to see who it is...'

"He shot back, 'Check.'"

"Well, I was torn between the door and the board. Frustrated, Barry crossed the living room and yanked it open. George Olsen, our redheaded mayor, stood on the porch.

"See,' Barry had grunted, 'I told you it was a woodpecker.'"

Balfour tried, in vain, to muffle his laughter. It didn't appear this patient had many humorous tendencies, nor that she would trouble to endow her creation with them.

The journals recounted how, some evenings, Barry escorted his creator to the Tower Road Inn. The hostess would seat them in a corner booth, where a half-litre of Pink Chablis waited. Over the top of her menu one night, Leslie had sighted Jim Tolen at the bar. He glared at her through bloodshot orbs, a double whiskey in hand. The coroner seized Barry's slender fingers.

"What's wrong?" he had wondered.

"Nothing... yet."

A demure blonde waitress had taken their order; as she turned toward the kitchen, she collided with Tolen. Profuse apologies accompanied a swift side-step, permitting Leslie's former assistant access to the table.

"Well, well, Dr. Frankenstein. Feeding your monster?"

"For Christ's sake, Jim. Not now."

The plump, unemployed drunk had slid onto the cushion beside her. "Why not now? Your little experiment worked, but you can't tell anyone about it, eh? They'd cut him into a million pieces to find out how you did it. You don't want that, do you?"

Barry had grabbed Leslie's arm. "What's he talking about?"

"Better for you not to know, Barry."

"I do know he's upsetting you. Should I..."

Tolen guffawed. "You? I'd like to see you try."

"Barry, don't," Leslie had warned. "I don't want any more trouble."

"Okay."

"That's rich, Dr. Frankenstein," Jim bellowed. "You've created a coward."

"I've created a man who knows how to handle himself," she had retorted.

The waitress had delivered the couple's meal; Tolen didn't take the hint. He directed the girl to bring him another drink.

"What is it you want?" Leslie inquired, between bites of juicy sirloin.

"Maybe 50 grand, maybe 100."

"Are you out of your mind?"

Jim had gulped the whiskey. "I don't think so. It'd be a nice grub stake to start me in New York, or Europe."

"Leslie..." Barry tried to interrupt.

"Shush, Barry. Look, Jim, I don't have that kind of dough. I wouldn't even know how to get it."

"That's not my problem. It's not my problem if word gets around you played strange games with all those stiffies, either."

Flynn leapt to his feet. "Get out, sir!" A stony expression betrayed his comprehension of the attempted blackmail. "Out, before I teach you the fate of extortionists."

Tolen's confidence evaporated during this outburst. He may have outweighed the taller man; nonetheless, the strength of sobriety favored his opponent. "I'll be seeing you," he had muttered, abandoning the booth and the Inn.

"Good riddance," Leslie scoffed.

The couple's stroll to their bungalow had passed in tense silence. Mounting the porch steps, Barry slipped between Leslie's key and the door.

"You've got to tell me," he urged.

"Tell you what?"

"Why that man called you Dr. Frankenstein and me... the monster."

Leslie had circled the house to the kitchen door. Again, Barry cut her off. "What's going on?"

"I'm getting pneumonia, is what's going on! Get out of my way..."

"Not until you tell me the truth."

Leslie focused brown eyes on that exquisite face. "You're put together from spare parts, all right? Spare computer parts."

He had laughed so hard, she feared he might rupture a connector. With a sweeping bow, he opened the door for her, following her across the threshold.

"The topic of Barry's humanity might never again have been raised, except the sheriff and his arthritic snoop of a wife passed by as we were going inside," Leslie revealed the next day. "I heard her cry 'Scandalous!' as they walked on. Good old Andy, tries to see the good side of everyone, says to her, 'She may have offered him a cup of coffee...'"

"Naturally, within 24 hours, the event had grown to catastrophic proportions. 'Not only is Leslie Featherstone friends with this stranger,' ran across the phone lines and through the beauty shops, 'but he lives under her roof and sleeps in her bed!' Those geriatric busy-bodies, guardians of upright moral conduct, were appalled, to put it lightly."

"That's when the petition surfaced?" Balfour prompted.

"Right. It was delivered to my office on a sunny Friday afternoon. One look at the 426 names scrawled below a call to remove me from my 'trusted' position convinced me I should've taken the day off.

"He was my friend, not my lover," Dr. Featherstone moaned, "My confidant, not my seducer. These idiots were living in the dark ages..."

Still, the strain drove Leslie Featherstone to murder, Balfour concluded. Electro-organic engineering notwithstanding, there were factors of Barry Flynn's personality she could not account for and could not control.

Flynn's sympathetic suggestion they leave Elkhart was recorded in the journal, with Leslie's response:

"I suppose we could, but I grew up in this stinkin' dust-bowl. I worked my ass off to straighten out this department; would you believe they never filed autopsy reports before I was hired? This is my *job!*"

"It's a job you can do anywhere. Think about it, Leslie. Could you be at peace with yourself, knowing your neighbors think you're notorious?"

A wry smile had betrayed her opinion of his statement.

"Now, wait a minute..."

"Why shouldn't I be notorious?" she stormed. "I *am* notorious! I'm living with the most intelligent, handsome man on earth, and I'm proud of it! Why, I think the old hens are jealous!"

"You're being irrational, Leslie."

"I'm being human. It is a unique trait of *homo sapiens* to let pride overrule common sense, at which point they tell their critics to screw off!"

"Oh, you wouldn't do that..."

"Wouldn't I?" Her lab coat fell to the floor. She had bolted for the door, rushing through the ancient Town Hall to Main Street. Cupping her hands around her lips, she hollered, "Screw off, Elkhart!"

Barry had stood on the top step, watching the reaction of those in the square. Most of the women gaped; the men grinned in silent approval.

Leslie had grabbed Barry's shirt collar and kissed him before she waltzed back through the entrance.

"That was a very foolish thing to do," Flynn had remonstrated.

"From now on, I plan to do a lot of foolish things. After all, I created you to..."

"Created me? What the hell are you talking about?"

Leslie swallowed hard. "Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Don't lie to me!" A vice-like grip had prevented her from slipping down the corridor.

"I didn't lie when I told you about the spare parts. You chose not to believe me."

"You mean..."

Leslie had nodded.

"Then, I'm not really Barry Flynn."

"True."

"Who am I?" he prodded.

"I... don't know."

Barry slumped against the faded plaster wall. "Dr. Frankenstein, behold your monster!"

"Oh, come on. You should be glad you're alive. So what if I took 15 years to do it - I did save your life!"

"I'd rather be dead than be your own personal automaton."

"I don't claim to own you!" Leslie had protested.

"Then, I can walk if I want to?"

"Sure."

He had. Leslie didn't dare pursue him. She had muttered a prayer she would find him at home later.

He'd been home, all right, but only to pack his clothes and steal her 1998 Ford pick-up. She had cursed him, cursed herself, cursed the townspeople who would gloat over the alleged broken romance...

"Barry became a success up in Stratford, doing Shakespeare at their yearly festival," Leslie stated, depression evident during the sessions on the seventh and eighth days. She knew the judge would make his ruling the following Monday. "His build, voice, profile and phenomenal memory placed him in great demand. I found out on my 49th birthday - almost a month ago - when a fellow Harvard alumnus sent me a copy of *Hamlet*, illustrated with photos from the previous season's production, in which Barry had played the lead.

"What could I do? Barry had used me, like so many men use women. I had educated him, made him all he was, and he left me. I abandoned a murder victim's autopsy, innards exposed on the gurney, borrowed the department Chevy mini-van, and drove to Kansas City. From there I flew to Canada."

The confrontation between Leslie and the director of the Shakespeare festival was detailed in the Stratford police report.

"Is Mr. Flynn such a recluse his old friends cannot visit him?" Leslie had demanded.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I have to respect Barry's wishes."

The intercom had buzzed. The secretary had announced, "Sorry to interrupt, sir, but Mr. Flynn is calling. He says the lighting isn't right, and the technicians refuse to cooperate."

Leslie had smirked at the balding figure behind his mahogany desk and departed. The murder had taken place less than a quarter hour later.

"Are you insane, Dr. Featherstone?" Dr. Balfour asked at the close of Sunday's interview.

"You know the answer to that, Henry," she retorted lightly. "If I say 'No,' it means I am; if I say 'Yes,' it means I'm as sane as you. I've learned over the years: sane people are often more dangerous than the insane."

"I've reached the same conclusion. Let me put it to you this way: now that you've had time to think about it, would you repeat your research in the field of electro-organics?"

"Definitely."

"If the results were the same, would you react in the same manner?"

Leslie didn't answer.

"Do you want to go to prison?" the psychiatrist persisted.

"That's like asking a cow if it would eat sirloin."

"You know your choices. You'll either spend the rest of your life in this institution or in a maximum security lock-up. The judge will believe you're insane, if I tell him you are."

"Do you believe it?" she challenged.

Balfour could not answer.

Dr. Leslie Featherstone, M.D., spent 17 years confined to the psych ward of Toronto's Klingleman Hospital. The staff held her in great esteem because of her advanced diagnostic faculties, and often consulted her on complex cases, though they never quite trusted her.

## A Brush With Genius

Marya's eyes leapt off the notebook page. Had she heard what her ears registered? She elbowed the young man to her right. "What did he say?"

"He said, 'Julius Caesar actually died after being run over by Marc Antony's chariot on the Via Appia.'"

All eyes focused on the lecture hall's podium; the bronze-maned professor of ancient history cracked a smile. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't asleep."

The 147 college juniors breathed a simultaneous sigh of relief.

"I will tell you: I'm not here to have my words transcribed into your notebooks. If such was the case, I could mass produce these binder pages, distribute them, and save my vocal cords. No, the purpose of studying history is to obtain a comprehensive picture of mankind's repeated mistakes so we won't screw up our future."

He scanned five tiers of astonished faces. "This isn't going to be a glorified high school course, focused on names and dates. By semester's end, you'll consider the Trojans friends, the Spartans drinking buddies, and the Romans your roommates."

That first lecture continued; Marya Holland sat, enthralled like the others present. Her past two years at State University, she'd despised the excessive use of notebooks which most instructors required. Here stood a man who knew what it meant to teach. She flipped through her backpack to find her schedule. His name would not again be forgotten: Cameron Willis.

In fact, as she strolled back to the Quad with Peggy and Ruth, she remembered previously hearing the name.

"He's ancient, himself," Ruth commented, brushing a wisp of black hair off her forehead. "Over 40."

Peggy let the wind have control of her auburn tresses. "It takes chutzpah to buck the system, whatever your age."

"He's not bucking the system," asserted Marya. "He's molding it into something totally new." Then, she knew why Willis' name was familiar: his novel about an idealistic country bumpkin's exploits as a high school teacher in the city had influenced her decision to leave the Minnesota wilderness in pursuit of an education.

She found the book buried in her desk that evening. It had been published seven years earlier, while the Oxford graduate held a position at USC. Marya promised herself to obtain his autograph before Christmas break.

Events managed to place obstacles in the path of this resolve. Homework from other courses jammed her backpack; she didn't have room for the thick hardback. She noticed, too, how the students' opinion of Willis changed - by the end of September, only 91 students appeared for his thrice-weekly lectures.

Marya overrode her natural timidity and inhibitions in mid-October, prior to fall break. She skipped English Lit Thursday morning and headed for Richmond Hall. On the third floor, she knocked at an open door; he sat, gazing past his computer monitor at a magnificent view of the lake.

"What is it?" Willis snapped.

"If it's a bad time, Professor, I can come back."

"No, no. What can I do for you?"

Marya felt awkward rummaging in the canvas bag. The zipper stuck on the fabric and, jerking it, the contents spilled on the carpet.

This 20-year-old sandy blond expected him to rebuke her. Instead, he joined her on the floor, gathering textbooks and looseleaf sheets. As she reloaded the backpack, he examined the copy of *Wishes for a Fool*.

"Is this why you're here?" he queried, tone quieter.

She nodded.

"Rather beat up. Did you buy it second hand?"

"Oh, no! I've... read it so many times..."

"I'm flattered. The reviewers lambasted the narrative for supposed unrealistic generalizations about rural life."

"I lived in the country, and I know that's not true. I wish I could do half what you did on those pages, and what you're doing in our history class."

"You could."

Marya smirked. "How? You've got genius on your side. It's evident in everything you do. I'm not the least bit creative."

"Don't envy my faults unless you're certain you're ready to emulate them," warned the bronze-haired instructor.

"I can't help it. All my life, I've wanted people to notice me. I'm cursed by ordinariness, though. I'll never do anything noteworthy."

"My advice to you: be glad you're ordinary. Do your best with the assets you possess. Now, what do you want me to do with this?" His rich baritone bit through her.

"I... wanted you to autograph it."

Blue eyes flashed. Marya scrambled to her feet. She tried to snatch the book from him, but he held tight.

“I’m sorry,” came his apology. “Today has been just... get me a pen, okay?”

From the cluttered desk, the student fetched Willis a well-chewed Papermate. He flipped open the cloth cover and scrawled more than his name on the title page. Then, he placed the volume into her perspiring hands.

“Don’t read it until you’re back at the dorm.”

“Thanks, Professor.”

Marya left the office, heart uplifted, brain reeling. As she jogged to the Quad, she consigned Willis’ terseness to the bad days all humans experience. Three messages had been taped to her door; she ripped them off, hurried inside and shot the bolt. She dumped her backpack on the unmade bed, seized the book and read:

Misery loves company;  
despair has many friends.  
To taste this “genius”, you may know both.  
Possible, yes, but a sad end.

What did the block-printed words above the scrawled “Cam Willis” mean? The knot in Marya’s stomach told her she already understood. Still...

It meant going back and asking him.

For a week, she enjoyed the brilliant hues of a Midwestern autumn with Peggy and Ruth. These two vivacious young women caught their companion too often lost in thought. A one stanza poem had transformed Marya’s soul into a swirling morass of uncertainty, and the beauty she saw on all sides only reminded her of how much she ached for what he offered...

“I want it.” Bright and early the following Monday, she stood on Willis’ threshold, book in hand.

“You want what?”

“This.” The volume shook at him. “I don’t care about the misery or the despair - I’ve got to have your genius.”

“Whatever gave you the impression I consider myself a genius? I’m just a man who employs an unusual method to teach his bored students.”

Marya moved closer, desperate. “You *know* something, dammit, and you’re hoarding the secret like a kid with candy.”

“Okay, okay. No reason to get hysterical. How do you want it: straight up or diluted?”

“Meaning what?”

“Oh, young one, you’re unprepared for this...”

“I *am* prepared! Give it to me straight up.”

No shimmering lights, no magic incantation - Marya didn’t realize anything had transpired until a host of strange ideas filled her consciousness.

“How restful,” Willis said, though it reached her in a fog.

“What is?”

“Letting you take over. You don’t think much, do you?”

“I... what happened?”

“We’ve swapped intellectual faculties,” the professor explained. “What you consider my ‘genius’ belongs to you now.”

Marya protested, “But, I’m still me.”

“Of course. Personalities are a part which cannot be transferred. Come with me.”

“Where’re we going?”

“I’ve a class to teach.”

Marya halted. “So?”

“My knowledge in your skull means you’re the guest lecturer for today.”

Because Marya remained essentially Marya, she panicked at this suggestion. “I’m not a teacher.”

“Look, young one, you’ve got less than five minutes to make peace with those electrical impulses exciting your grey cells, or you’ll make us both look like asses.”

Together, they descended two flights of stairs into a hall jammed with freshmen.

“I don’t understand how...”

“Why worry, when it’s done? You’re the genius now. Get used to it.”

This in an undertone, he addressed the class. “Ladies and gentlemen, we are honored to have with us our country’s foremost authority on American Indians before 1500. She will guide you through Chapters 14 and 15 in your text, then answer any pertinent questions. May I present Miss Marya Holland.”

Through an unenthusiastic welcome, Marya glared at Cameron Willis. He led her to the ambo and whispered, “The lecture is titled, ‘Primitive Indians’. Take a deep breath and let genius do its thing.”

Her mouth opened on cue, and she launched into a humorous, yet in depth account of Indian life prior to their corruption by European settlers. She listened to her own words - or rather, Willis’ words - in awe.

Questions were fielded with ease and grace. Hearty applause accompanied her to the exit when the session ended. The professor followed her along the corridor.

“There, now. How’d that feel?”

“Awful,” whimpered Marya.

“You’ll adjust. Maybe in a month or two...”

“A month? I don’t want to be a human encyclopedia for a month!”

Willis detained her. “What did you think being a genius meant? It’s no less than storing so much knowledge you feel at times your head will burst. You’ll soon learn to control it.”

“I don’t want to control it. I want things the way they were.”

“No can do, young one. You made up your own mind - unhappy with who you were, ready to take it straight up. Make the best of it.”

Distraught, confused, she broke from his grasp and ran. Cameron Willis returned to his office, his afternoon free, certain Marya would adjust better if left to herself. Besides, the record of everything she experienced would be there for him to analyze when he tired of the game.

Awareness of this special gift frightened Marya. Every nerve tingled under the influence. Her contorted features terrified Peggy as they passed each other in the Quad lobby.

“Hey, are you okay?”

Marya stared blankly at her friend.

“You’re still going out to dinner with us, aren’t you?”

“With who?”

“Me and Jake, Ruth and Larry.”

“You expect me to eat like this?”

Peggy watched Marya retreat into her room. Whatever was wrong, something had to be done.

Sitting on her bed, pondering the teeming campus beyond the window, Marya felt herself being devoured by perverse, defiant forces. She blamed herself. She devised a way to lessen the tension: attending a conference that evening on mediaeval architecture.

She licked her lips. Bizarre craving, architecture. All lines and angles, she’d not entertained an interest in the subject before... Nonetheless, at 7:00, she sat in the front row of Wright Auditorium, waiting for Professor Dimitri Trusov to speak.

Every statement this architect made resurrected visions of historical edifices. Had Cam Willis traveled the ends of the earth? Marya wondered. Sheer willpower enabled her to gradually subdue these mental images.

The 20-year-old doubted she could survive more than a day or two in this condition. Especially when the ancient history instructor cornered her Tuesday morning: “Miss Holland, why don’t you take us through Caesar’s exploits in the Middle East?”

Peggy and Ruth, along with their classmates, couldn’t believe what issued forth during that hour. Marya might have eaten Willis’ notes - same inflection, same wit, same philosophy linking generations, running in circles *ad infinitum*.

Following this trauma, the junior sought respite at Mascots, a darkly-lit tavern located on the university’s perimeter. Big screen televisions and no cover-charge compensated for the tacky decor; the place attracted students who lacked transportation elsewhere, like Marya.

Unaccustomed to liquor, four tall glasses of chablis took their toll on her empty stomach. Still, she didn’t surrender the barstool, sworn to obliterate relentless voices inside her skull.

Her friends worried when she didn’t return to the Quad for three days. Peggy convinced Ruth not to call Marya’s parents, while she had difficulty not revealing her suspicions to the dorm rector.

“We’ve got to tell somebody,” Ruth pleaded Friday morning.

“There’s only one person we can trust.”

Ancient History 302 proved a fiasco. Cam Willis straddled the podium, spouting inanities. He finally dismissed the handful of students who hadn’t walked out on his nonsense after the first half-hour.

Peggy and Ruth approached him as he doodled in his binder.

“Where is she, Professor?” barked the redhead.

“How should I know? She might be in San Francisco at the Greek Archeology and History Conference I was supposed to attend this weekend. She could be anywhere. Why are you asking me?”

“Because she disappeared right after you embarrassed her on Tuesday.”

Willis’ tone denoted no sympathy. “Be assured, no matter where she is, that ‘genius’ will keep her out of danger. I’m not so sure about myself.”

“You sound drunk,” Ruth commented.

“Odd. I haven’t touched a drop.”

Peggy winked at her companion. Together, the pair hoisted Willis off the seat. They escorted him from the lecture hall but, recognizing the Dean between themselves and the exit, they abandoned their plans to force his cooperation.

Willis chuckled at their hasty departure. His foreboding that Marya had somehow gone wrong deepened, nonetheless. Her share of intellect gave little indication of how the young woman behaved in time of crisis. He wandered the grounds, passing the Quad more than once, afraid of calling attention to himself if he went inside. Finally, his wristwatch alarm reminded him of a tutoring session.

The professor discovered Marya pacing outside his office. Sighting him, she froze; a resolute grip on narrow shoulders propelled her across the threshold ahead of him. Her ghostly pallor and clenched teeth startled him. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“I... can’t...”

“So, you feel it necessary to make a nuisance of yourself?”

Peggy and Ruth crashed through the door. Willis glared at their sheepish grins.

“Here come the Keystone Kops.”

Ruth bristled at the insult. “Something very weird’s going on, and we have a right to know what. But, first, let Marya go.”

“Gladly,” oozed Willis. He lowered his hands.

Sobbing, Marya sank to her knees. “Let me *go!*”

Peggy and Ruth waited for Willis to respond. During that tense interval, his frown transformed into a guilty smirk.

“Leave, you two.”

Peggy insisted, “Not until we know...”

“It’s none of your business.”

He backed them into the corridor; the door slammed. Immediately, ears jockeyed for position against the wood panel. They heard Willis cross the carpet.

He raised Marya by the waist. “C’mon, young one, where’s your spine? When I was your age, I’d already been published in three prestigious journals.”

“I don’t want to be a genius. Let me go, please.”

He brought her face level to his. “Have you learned anything?”

“I... learned to think... before I speak, and... if I make the best... of what I have... that’s better than being a genius.”

“And *that* wisdom is worth more than any amount of intellect.” He sat her in a leather armchair. “Now, relax.”

Marya propped her elbows on her thighs and rested her throbbing head on her palms. A few slow breaths calmed her.

“Better?” Willis ventured.

She nodded.

“In that case, I’ve got to get back to work. Your brain has a lot of potential, but it’s too undisciplined for what I need done.”

En route to the door, Marya spun. “How did you do that?”

“Another thing you should remember: when you ask questions of the wrong people, you may not like the answers.”

She emerged from the office, joining Peggy and Ruth a short distance away, feigning innocence.

“What’d he do in there?” prodded Ruth.

“Nothing I can explain. It’s over, though. I promise.”

The three young women sidled toward the stairs.

“Marya...” Peggy began.

“Don’t, okay? Just come with me.”

“Where?”

“The Dean’s office. I’m changing my major.”

“Huh? You were so enthused about being a teacher,” noted Ruth.

“Anything. Absolutely anything but that. I never want to set foot in front of a class again.”

Wind-blown snowflakes contributed to the campus’ festive atmosphere as the trio marched toward the Administration Building.

## Working Can Be Murder

Beth pulled the red hand truck from behind the staircase and, again, that creepy feeling rattled her. A week had passed since the murder, still the warehouse manager sensed an evil presence in the building. Didn't a criminal always return to the scene of his crime?

At night, her dreams were filled with the image: Keith dangling from the loft railing, a length of steel banding around his neck. She'd only been gone an hour for lunch...

Odd, there'd been no indications of a struggle. Nothing had been stolen, not even the \$700-plus in the cash drawer. What motive could the murderer have for killing her good-natured, handsome young assistant?

She shuddered, wheeling a stack of electric motors from the dock to their rack. "Maybe I should've taken a few days off, like the boss suggested," she told herself aloud. Silently, though, she knew her frustration would only have increased if she hung around the house while Marty worked all day.

Having lived together for five years, there were occasions when familiarity created tension between them, but not this time. The feisty ex-welterweight boxer had stood beside her at the funeral home and during the grave side service, while Keith's family glared at her.

Not that they suspected her of the crime. At 120 pounds, Beth was lucky to haul a quarter-horsepower compressor alone. Keith had been hired to provide the muscle she lacked. No animosity existed between them in the 18 months they'd worked side by side. In fact, they may have grown too close...

Marty stopped by the warehouse that noon. Suit and tie camouflaged his athletic build. Lean features and flashing blue eyes made his appeal as an insurance salesman greater than some of the cocky college dropouts. At present, his thin lips were set in a frown.

"You look exhausted, Beth," he observed.

"I never realized how much Keith did... and how hard it is to function on two hours' sleep."

"What you need is a hot meal and a neck massage."

She smirked. "What I *need* is to get those five compressors skidded up for the Toledo delivery." She brightened. "Wanna do me a favor?"

Beth had Marty out of his sport coat, shirt sleeves rolled above the elbows, in seconds. She didn't care if her blue jeans and grey uniform shirt contacted the soiled cardboard cartons, but noticed Marty gingerly handling his share of the load.

"Why don't you run up to the loft and grab the banding?" she suggested.

Marty studied her tanned visage. “You’ll have to use the shrink-wrap.”

“Why?”

“There’s no banding left.”

“Okay.” Beth strode to the front counter. A roll of plastic sat on the shelf. Reaching for it, she felt her stomach knot.

“Marty?” she called to the dock.

“What, baby?”

“Neither of us has been up to the loft since the murder. How do you know there’s no banding?”

She heard his footsteps approach. “One of the cops showed me the empty spool.”

Every nerve on edge, Beth glanced around for a weapon. There were plenty of jugs and parts on display that she could throw, but how far could she run in the warehouse?

“You... weren’t here while the cops were investigating,” she stammered.

Marty appeared between two rows of furnaces. His mouth twisted, deep set eyes smoldering, her fears swelled.

“You’re so damned smart,” came through clenched teeth. “But too stupid to realize I’d find out you went to that cheap motel with Keith while I was at the Orlando convention. You know I’m a jealous man.”

Desperate, Beth pitched a fist-sized motor at him. He dodged it; she darted down the aisle.

“The back door’s locked, and your keys are in the office!” Marty reminded her, chuckling. “I thought it was simple, killing that fool. Get him upstairs to look for your old files, knock him out with a wrench - it was a cinch. But this, this is going to be fun!”

Heart pounding like a trip hammer, Beth stood near a stack of air conditioners and tried to organize her jumbled thoughts. One on one, Marty held the advantage. A ten-foot length of copper tubing would force him to keep his distance, but wouldn’t disable him...

Think fast, think, think...

The acidity level of those cleaning solutions might slow him down, but it could do the same to her, if it splashed the wrong way.

Then, she remembered. One afternoon the previous summer, she and Keith had killed a few hours aiming 72-inch charging hoses at empty refrigerant cylinders against the wall. If she could wrap one around Marty’s legs with equal skill...

He turned the corner, fan belt in hand. “Won’t this make a pretty suicide? The cops will think you killed your lover then, filled with remorse, killed yourself.”

The hose flew at him, a wobbly airborne snake. It made contact right at the knees; he pitched forward, breaking his nose on the concrete floor.

With Marty stunned, Beth had time to snatch fiberglass shipping tape from the supply cabinet and bind his wrists and ankles. This done, she collapsed on a nearby stool and seized the phone.

After she notified the police, she dialed the corporate office in Louisville, breathing hard. "Steve? This is Beth. I'm taking you up on that vacation, starting right now. I'm going to drive until I run out of gas, and I don't know when - or if - I'll be back."

## The Last Adventure

She awoke, same as any other morning, and trudged down the corridor to the spacious, elegant bathroom. Anew, she marveled at the wonders of indoor plumbing. After turning on the water in the oblong marble tub, she shifted her attention to the mirror. That was when, for the first time, Marli noticed grey accenting her jet black hair.

At 39, the widow didn't feel old. Twenty years of chasing four active sons had kept her spirit youthful. Time was catching up with her, nonetheless, just as she planned to break free of the palatial mansion, wealth and obligations which her husband's title had thrust upon her.

"No!" she snapped at the still-slender reflection. "I'm going to live before I die!"

A hot bath failed to soothe Marli's anger. Waist-length tresses washed, she pinned them into a bun at the nape of her neck, ignored the maid's selection of a mauve hooped creation and extracted a plain black frock from the wardrobe's recesses.

She was struggling to lace the bodice when the prim blonde servant snatched the whale bone from her grip.

"Your Grace! What are you doing?"

Marli spun. "If you ever call me that - if *anyone* calls me that - again, I swear I'll cut out the offender's tongue. I've had enough of being the Duchess of Ablington."

"But, Your... but, Madame, what about..."

"What about what? My 'charities'? Give the old witches everything. Have Richardson sell the estate, if they want to bleed me dry. I don't *care!*"

Marli stormed from the chamber. Polished black riding boots marched down the magnificent curved staircase and traversed the ornate entrance hall. She passed the butler, his mouth agape, and slammed the door before he could grasp the knob.

She led the Duke's prize Arabian from its stall denying the stable boy his legitimate right to saddle the horse. Fifteen minutes later, at full gallop, she left the confines of Ablington, with no intention of returning.

South along unfamiliar, rocky Cornwall coastline, one idea held priority in Marli's brain: whatever port she reached, she would board the first outbound ship. Even the thought of remaining in England nauseated her.

As the sun rose higher, the woman slowed her mount's pace. They came upon a broad river emptying into the sea; Marli steered the stallion upstream, to water him where the current ran pure.

She alighted while her horse drank, and brushed grains of sand from her skirt. She climbed onto a boulder jutting from the river bed, pausing to appreciate the spring bursting forth on all sides.

Two strong arms seized her from behind. Marli screamed. Another rough looking individual grabbed her flailing legs, and she was carried into the underbrush.

"Trim and strong," the man holding her torso growled. "She'll bring a good price in Jamaica."

"Twice as much 'cause she's fair of feature," agreed his companion.

Marli hadn't given up the fight. "What the devil..."

A filthy hand stuffed a sweat-drenched blue kerchief in her mouth. The rogues dumped her into a longboat beached further upstream, to be joined by three more scoundrels, packs loaded with provisions. Then Marli understood: pirates.

"Ye was right, Benjy," chuckled one with three fingers on his left hand. "That inn on the main road made for good pickin's."

"Aye, we've enough to last the crew for two weeks."

The third robber barked, "Who's the wench?"

"Found her nosin' around," Benjy replied. "We cin sell her for a profit, I figgur."

"Cap'll have somethin' t'say 'bout that," countered Three Fingers. "Ye know he don't abide wimmin on board the *Hurricane*."

"That land lubbin' fool, he ain't one of us. I's always said we should slit his throat and run the *Hurricane* our way."

"But, he's made us rich, Benjy," retorted his partner, busy tying Marli's wrists and ankles. "In Jamaica, we'll live like kings."

"Enough!" ordered Three Fingers. "Let's shove off. Cap wanted us back 'fore high tide."

Four pairs of work-toughened arms rowed the craft into open water. Marli experienced a wave of seasickness during the jaunt across choppy whitecaps. She dared not move from her position in the bow, guarded by the swarthy, bearded Benjy.

Within an hour, Marli and the stolen supplies had been awkwardly hoisted onto the deck of the four-masted *Hurricane*. Despite her dizziness, the woman counted no more than 13 men on deck. What did such a small crew hope to accomplish against the well-armed ships of His Majesty, or of Spain?

A rich baritone declared, "I send you ashore for food, and you bring me back a whore?"

Benjy whirled toward the stern. He began to speak...

"None of your excuses, Ben Banner." Attired in a red silk shirt, black trousers and leather boots, this noble figure descended a ladder and approached parcels of mutton, beef, potatoes, flour, carrots, eggs and preserves. "And a whore in mourning, yet. Have you lost your wits, man?"

"She ain't no whore, Cap. It's my guess she's a maid for some gentry."

Tall, middle-aged, bronze haired and blue eyed, this malodorous captain studied Marli. The makeshift gag was jerked from between her teeth. "Is that right, woman? Are you a servant?"

"I am *not*," she answered. "For God's sake, let me go."

"If I find no practical use for you, I will that. What's your name?"

Force of habit almost revealed her title. She'd heard rumors how, as nobility, these pirates would hold her for ransom. Better for them to think her a commoner. "My name is Marlina Ellis. I'm a seamstress, in Abington."

A rumble passed through the assembled crew. Their captain silenced them with a scowl. "A seamstress, eh? Handy with a needle. You could earn your passage to the West Indies by making each of the men a new set of clothes. We've a hold full of fine material, but these clumsy louts are barely able to mend torn sails now and again."

Marli almost surrendered to her fate. Still, a glimmer of hope brought a smile to her lips. "If I'm to transform these bilge rats into gentlemen, I'll need a clean place to work, and lots of space."

"Aye, 'tis true," the captain affirmed. "You may make over the first mate's cabin any way you see fit."

"And where will he sleep?"

Benjy guffawed, "In Davy Jones' locker, he sleeps even now!"

The laughter resounded while Marli's wrists and ankles were cut loose. Massaging the rope burns, she followed Three Fingers below. The cabin he showed her held few furnishings and reeked of mold. Sunlight shone through large windows, a valuable amenity. The *Hurricane* sailed from English waters even before she had a chance to air the narrow bunk's bedsheets.

Bolts of silk, lace, wool and satin were delivered to this work room by unkempt deck hands.

"Damn your eyes," grumbled Marli. "Do you want to soil the cloth? Next time, wash yourselves before touching it."

Chastened yet resentful, the four withdrew. The captain appeared on the threshold a short time later.

“I am to be your guinea pig,” he announced. “The men are fearful of having themselves measured by a lady. If I survive, they will know all is well.”

“So, they can dismember a man, steal his money and rape his daughter, but they can’t let me touch them?”

“Seldom are the girls they see half as beautiful as you. That’s why they’re reluctant.”

“Oh, never mind. Find me paper and pen, then we can get started.”

Marli compiled a list of each man’s measurements over the course of the next two days, and their preference of five designs she offered them. What names! Blind Mack, Knobby Sol (Three Fingers), Will the Scar, Tattoo (she learned why as she drew the tape around his chest), Wooden Harris (he’d carved himself a very realistic oak leg), and more. Each refused to divulge the captain’s name.

The widow stayed busy throughout the voyage, too busy to care about the crew’s activities. She lost track of the days; her eyes tired of treading needles and staring at folds of material. Her sole relief from this monotony proved to be random assaults the ship made on other vessels they overtook on the Atlantic.

The captain submitted himself to a fitting one blustery evening after supper. He smelled of wine and garlic. Marli hadn’t eaten all day, and the scent tantalized her.

“Does the entire crew dine so well?” she asked, helping him into a lace-cuffed shirt.

“Fortunately, no.”

She echoed, “Fortunately?”

“If the men didn’t feel that twinge of hunger, a constant thirst for rum, they wouldn’t see the need to attack the merchant craft so aggressively.”

“There, you’re mistaken, Captain. Pirates do what they do to satisfy their blood lust.”

“Forgive me, Mistress...”

“I’ll forgive you not, sir. Don’t you think I’ve been talking to your crew as I pin and sew? Not only to ease their nervousness, but to learn why...”

“Don’t put them too much at ease. Once they feel they can take liberties, you’ll not be able to stop them.”

Marli had his sword from its scabbard and at his throat before he could retreat. “I raised four sons, you scurvy knave, so I know the use of arms. If any man touches me, he won’t live to wear this finery in Port Royal.”

The cutlass twirled in mid-air, the hilt offered to its owner. The captain batted it to the floor, grabbed Marli's shoulders and pulled her close. He kissed her hard.

She stomped his foot with her boot heel; he released her. "Do you want to be first to die?" she demanded.

"What do you think will happen when you go on the auction block? Some wealthy, goutish drunkard will buy you, and treat you little better than a whore, if not as an out-and-out slave. If you resist, he'll have your head severed from that sweet neck."

Marli thought her heart had stopped. In that instant, she wished she'd never left Ablington. She knew she would never again see her home or her sons.

Her courage broken, the captain drew her into a gentle embrace. "Surely, you didn't think you'd be set free when we landed? Isn't all life a slavery of sorts? You were married, subject to your husband's whims, tied to your sons. The pennies you earned sewing barely kept you fed in your widowhood. What worse kind of slavery is there?"

She raised her face almost level to his tanned countenance, her tone defiant. "I never had to work. I had servants at my beck and call..."

"A seamstress..." he chortled, "with servants?"

"I am the Duchess of Ablington, you dog. Born and bred in London, daughter of the Earl of Brinsdale."

The pirate scrutinized her. "Somehow, I believe you. When we reach Jamaica, I shall send my terms of ransom to your people."

"You mean..."

"I mean, henceforth you are my prisoner."

Enraged, she cleared the worktable with one deft sweep. "Then, I'll not sew so much as a button on a pair of breeches."

The captain quit the room, unconcerned. When Benjy discovered the situation, however - coming for a fitting at the end of his watch - he spread the tragic news to his mates at once.

They didn't bother to knock on the door, instead rushing the cabin before their leader could protest.

"Have you men gone daft?" the captain bellowed. "She's a duchess, worth more in ransom than her price at any auction!"

"We want our clothes!" barked Knobby. "What good is it to be rich, if we don't look like gents?"

His comrades chorused, "Aye!"

"What do you expect me to do? Free her?"

A discontented murmur ran its course. Will the Scar voiced his idea:  
 “Name the ransom. We’ll pay it!”  
 “Balderdash! How would you benefit by...”  
 “We’d have our clothes!” they cried.  
 A dagger lodged in the middle of the chart the captain had been studying.  
 “Name the ransom,” Benjy threatened.  
 “All right, all right! Consider her freed.”  
 A hearty cheer filled the cabin.  
 “And may you rot in hell in that blasted finery!” cursed the captain.  
 The *Hurricane*’s arrival in Jamaica was delayed 24 hours - the craft lay off shore until Marli had finished the last man’s ensemble. Once the ship docked at Port Royal, the crew strode down the gangplank, looking for all the world like genteel passengers disembarking from a pleasure trip.  
 Marli watched the scene, amusement commingled with fear. She waited on deck for the captain to fetch her, yet he stood, gazing out to sea through his glass. She finally took the initiative. “Well, aren’t you going to bind my hands and drag me off to the slave auction?”  
 “I set you free, and I’m a man of my word. Be gone with you.”  
 Excitement rising, Marli hurried to the gangplank. Uncertainty halted her progress. “Tell me one thing before I go.”  
 He scanned the horizon. “What?”  
 “Who are you?”  
 “In England, I’m known as Nathan Fitzgibbon.”  
 This distinguished name Marli had heard many times; he’d been knighted for his triumphs in battle during the war.  
 “On the high seas,” he concluded, “they call me Blood Red Gibson.”  
 The widow also recognized this moniker. As a pirate, Gibson had made his reputation by ruthless pillaging and merciless destruction. Survivors of one attack recounted how he ordered all the men on their ravaged ship hanged, and set the woman and children afloat in longboats with no provisions.  
 Her knees suddenly weak, Marli plodded to the pier. She was surprised to see a familiar face below.  
 “Mother, what are you doing here?”  
 “I might ask the same of you, Andrew,” remarked the woman.  
 “I came over to smooth out some diplomatic tangles caused by pirates flying the Union Jack.”  
 “I wish you luck.”

Andrew chattered on, “Did you come to Jamaica for a reason? You’ll stay with me, of course. Life here is truly an adventure. We can enjoy ourselves and return to England, say, in three weeks.”

“Adventure? Enjoyment?” A sarcastic edge deepened her voice. “I’ve had enough of that! I’m going home on the next ship.”

Taking her third son’s arm, Marli allowed him to lead her through the crowd. She never looked back.

## As All Things Grow

School was dismissed early that Friday, supposedly a reward for good behavior. Miss Rodgers - the teacher of the one-room facility - had received word her father was dying in Montreal, but hadn't wished to upset her students.

Nine-year-old Erin benefitted, whatever the reason. She grabbed her home-made fishing pole and tramped down to the swollen creek, intent on catching dinner for the "family".

Barefoot, the gangly child splashed cold water with her toes, temporarily discouraging her prey. The closest she came to a bath, this occasional wetting. Erin liked nature - especially spring days such as this. She liked to swim, really, but seldom had the chance: chores in the livery stable kept her too busy outside of school.

When a canoe rounded the bend to the east, the youngster pulled in her line and retreated behind a willow tree. Most of the men inhabiting this backwoods settlement were old and care-worn, bald, overweight. Those of lesser years, like Erin's father, had gone off to war and never returned. Yet, here was a lean specimen of no more than 25 years, bearing a full head of sandy hair, and the face of an angel.

Another unusual aspect of the stranger's appearance: his clothes. He wore a cap and jacket of animal skins, which hung open to reveal a thick knitted sweater and stained jeans. Surprisingly, he was clean shaven; all the stories Erin had heard about trappers mentioned illiterate, toothless creatures whose beards hung to their waists.

Curious, the girl watched his sturdy wood craft float past, then followed it toward the village. From a discreet distance, she observed the man's progress along the main thoroughfare - from the barber's to the general store, the tavern, the post office. In his scuffed leather boots, he strode from building to building with a confident, lengthy gait.

His demeanor so impressed Erin, she forgot to watch her footing at one point. As the visitor emerged from the local house of ill repute, she backed into an alley, and stepped on a cat's tail. The animal yowled; the child jumped and ran, screaming, into the path of an oncoming buckboard.

She realized her danger when the hastily reined horse whinnied and reared in protest not three feet from her. A pair of strong arms abruptly snatched her from beneath flailing hooves and carried her to the opposite side of the dusty road.

Released, Erin collapsed on the butcher's plank steps. She buried her delicate face in trembling hands and broke into tears.

“No need for that, now,” soothed a deep, unfamiliar voice. A gentle hand stroked her curly brunette head. “You’re safe, and that’s what’s important.”

It took almost five minutes for Erin’s sobs to subside. She glanced up, chest still heaving, at the stranger’s spectacular countenance. She gasped.

He laughed. “What’s the matter? No need to be afraid. I did just save your life.”

“I...” A wave of conflicting emotions - embarrassment, fear, relief, confusion - cascaded over her. She scrambled to her feet and ran.

That evening, by the light of a full moon, Erin watched from the concealment of the aged willow as the stranger paddled upstream. Somehow, she knew she would not forget him.

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Erin’s tenth birthday, October 19th, passed unheralded by those closest to her - Aunt Elizabeth Kendall and her snobbish son, Peter. The youngster was shuffling through the alley between the hotel and the undertaker’s, however, when she glimpsed the stranger eying her from Doc Hawthorne’s stoop. She froze at his approach.

“Timid little thing, aren’t you?” he chuckled, noticing her frightened expression. “You don’t remember me, I take it.”

Dumbly, she nodded.

“Well, do you think, having saved your life once, I would do you harm now?”

She croaked, “No.”

From behind his back, he produced a bouquet of late blooming wildflowers. “Happy birthday.”

“How...”

“I asked Dr. Hawthorne about you. He knows everyone in these parts. I described your fishing pole, and he knew who I meant.” Tenderly, he closed her fingers around the cut stems. “I know it must be hard for you to live so far away from all the nice things in life. But, you’re a young lady now. You can make the world beautiful wherever you are. Promise me you’ll try.”

What could she do except gaze into his smoldering brown eyes? “I... promise.”

He patted her head. “Take care, Erin. I’ll see you in the spring.”

He trod along the street; given a moment’s thought, she scurried after him and tugged his sleeve. “What’s your name?” she bubbled.

“John.”

“John what?”

“Barrington.”

She stopped; he kept walking. “Thanks, Mr. Barrington,” she called.

Then, he was gone. Erin stared at the flowers, hugged them to her. No one had done anything so sweet since her long-dead mother had sewn a frilly pink Sunday dress for her.

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The following April, John Barrington arrived in town early a cloudy Thursday. He happened to pass the livery stable while Peter Kendall was scolding his young cousin for not properly feeding the horses. Barrington heard a slap and a shriek. He crossed the straw-covered threshold into the gloom, catching Erin as she fled the unjust punishment.

Peter, at 18, may have outweighed John, but the trapper’s bearing dissuaded the stable owner from challenging him. Barrington led Erin into feeble daylight, appalled by her ragged clothes and filthy skin.

“How long has this been going on?” he demanded.

Rubbing her reddened cheek, the girl muttered, “They haven’t let me in the house for a week.”

He steered her toward the barber’s, where a bath could be had for a price; she balked at the suggestion. No female had ever set foot in that structure...

“I can go for a swim,” she said.

“The water’s too cold.”

She wrenched from his grasp and sprinted into the woods. With a shrug, he turned his attention to the general store. Half an hour later, Erin’s tattered belongings had vanished from the shore of the creek, replaced by a towel, comb, and a pretty red gingham dress.

Barrington waited for the child on the path to the village. He bought her breakfast at the tavern, despite the bartender’s protests about her age. They devoured heaping portions of ham and eggs, toast and jam; John regaled Erin with humorous stories about the world beyond this isolated settlement.

She laughed at his jokes, which pleased him. “I can take you away from here,” he remarked. “Downstream, there’s a huge city. I know a couple who would love to care for a delightful girl like you.”

Erin shook her head. “I’ve got to stay. In a few years, my father’s money and his house will be mine. Everything will be all right, then.”

“Are you positive?”

“Yes.”

“As you wish,” Barrington conceded. “I’ll tell Dr. Hawthorne to keep an eye on you. He knows how to get word to me in an emergency. I’ll tell your cousin the same thing. If he ever lays a hand on you again...”

“Don’t worry about me, Mr. Barrington. I can take care of myself.”

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And so it went, these visits: twice every year. John Barrington watched Erin grow into a lovely young woman. He bought her clothes and trinkets when his pelts brought a good price, and picked her flowers if times were hard. He was glad to learn that Aunt Elizabeth died, but it distressed him Peter remained a sanctimonious tyrant.

Erin lived for these fleeting spring and autumn days. She never would have understood her attachment to Barrington was actually love of the deepest kind. She just knew being with him made her happy, and his absence depressed her.

A little grey at the temples, a little stouter as the seasons passed, John had promised to help Erin celebrate her seventeenth birthday. She spent the entire day beneath the creekside willow, in vain. By nightfall, she feared for him and pitied herself. Ignoring her duties at the livery stable, she made her way to the landing and cajoled Lindsay Andrews into loaning her one of his skiffs.

“You don’t honestly plan to fish in the dark?” puzzled the old salt.

Erin retorted, “Never lose hope,” and off she went.

Her muscles unaccustomed to rowing, progress upstream was slow. Surging adrenaline prevented her from dozing, though she had been awake since 5:00 a.m. Well past midnight, she veered toward shore to rest.

There she discovered shards of wood washed on the grassy bank. It looked like someone had hacked apart a boat with an axe, or a tool of equal sharpness. Abandoning the leaky craft, Erin shuffled along the creek, gathering each chunk she could see. They came from the same source...

She heard the rapids without knowing what the sound meant. Hiking further, she spied the white water reflecting brilliant moonlight, awed by its beauty. Perching herself on a low, flat rock, she fell asleep.

Warm sunlight roused her the next morning. She was cold and wet from the river’s spray. Sitting up, she saw remnants of a canoe wedged between a jagged stone and the slab which had served as her bed. There could be no doubt of its owner.

“John Barrington!” she hollered.

The sole reply: a brisk north wind rustling fallen leaves.

Erin retraced her steps from this rock to her boat. No sign of Barrington could she find. She did discover that the water from the rapids forked in two

directions sixty yards after the current calmed. The creek in which she had fished all those years was merely a branch of a much larger river.

And John Barrington could be washed ashore anywhere on the opposite bank.

What choice did she have? Yanking off shoes and stockings, she waded through the current, past trees lining a narrow promontory dividing the water's course. Erin was uncertain if she possessed the necessary strength to swim the broad expanse which stretched before her.

Again, she shouted, "John Barrington!"

Receiving no response, she plopped on the muddy slope to think. It might be easier to retrieve the skiff and paddle around... but hadn't too much time already been wasted?

She rose, dejected, and hung her stockings on a low branch. That was when she caught sight of a length of white yarn tangled in a thicket.

The yarn was unbroken, leading Erin through some thorny overgrowth to a fallen oak. Barrington floated face up in the pool created by the rotting trunk.

Sharp rocks on the river bed ravaged her unshod feet; Erin didn't care. She tugged John's arms, until his soaked frame rested on dry ground. Desperately, she laid her left ear on his chest, trying to detect a heartbeat. Something faint - was that it?

Barrington was raised to a sitting position, which Erin hoped would help him cough up any brackish water and start breathing again. She supported him around his shoulders; nothing happened.

The girl tried to remember what Peter had done when Aunt Elizabeth had fallen in a pond years ago and nearly drowned. He'd cleared the mud blocking her windpipe, then placed his mouth over hers and blown air into her lungs.

Erin checked John's mouth: empty. She laid him on the grass and, inhaling deeply, mimicking Peter's technique. On her third attempt, Barrington's eyes shot open. He bolted upright. His first tentative breath was followed by a gut-wrenching vomit.

This crisis over, Erin extracted an oversized kerchief from her skirt pocket and wiped John's face and hands.

Weakly, he grinned. "I missed your birthday. I'm sorry."

"The best present is knowing that you're all right."

"Those damned rapids got me. Gone down them twenty, thirty times; I thought I knew their tricks. One of the big rocks must've shifted..."

Tears welled in Erin's eyes. She grasped how this man - her protector and friend for so long - could have died. She turned away and let the sobs come.

Barrington inched beside her, took her chin in his calloused right hand. “Wait a minute, here. No reason to cry. I’m alive, remember? You saved *my* life, this time. That makes us even.”

“What if I’d been too late?” whimpered the teen. “You would’ve died.”

“But I didn’t. Stop this, Erin, and look at me.”

She found it difficult to regain her control. John drew her close and caressed her damp brunette curls. He kissed her forehead.

“It’s nice to know someone worries about me,” he chuckled.

“All I do... is worry about you...” sputtered Erin. “I only see you twice a year; the rest of the time, I wonder if a bear’s mauled you, if you have enough food and warm clothes...”

“I worry about you, too,” Barrington confided. “I want you to be happy, more than anything else, and it bothers me I can’t visit more often to make sure you are.”

“Why can’t you?”

“I live far up the mountain, and trapping keeps me busy year ‘round.”

Erin shifted to a kneeling position, green eyes bright. “You don’t have to be a trapper.”

“I’ve been a trapper for 20 years. The mountain is my home.”

“Next year, I’ll inherit my father’s property. Couldn’t you make that house your home?”

Struggling to conceal his emotions, John raised her slender hand to his lips. “I’d only be in your way. You see, I’m not much good at anything except trapping.”

“I can’t go back without you, John.”

Thick eyebrows arched questioningly.

“Peter will denounce me for being gone, unchaperoned, an entire night.”

“If that bothers you so much...” Barrington shuddered at the course of his own thoughts. “Come to the mountain with me.”

“Wouldn’t I be in *your* way?”

“My cabin’s small, but we could build a larger one next spring. You’re not afraid of hard work, so it wouldn’t take long.”

Erin’s gaze shifted to the sparkling river. John recognized a shadow of doubt clouding her angelic features.

“Can’t you believe I want to marry you?” he whispered.

Her face whipped left. The couple sat nose to nose. John embraced her, kissed her. Erin had never understood this was what she was waiting for; it now seemed a dream come true. His lips, so hot against hers, sent tremors through

each and every nerve. She couldn't hold him tightly enough, didn't ever want to let him go.

Barrington was startled and pleased by her reaction to his proposal. For the longest time, he hadn't permitted himself to be touched by other human beings. Then, this innocent child had stumbled into his life. He had loved her in the role of big brother those early years, but as her figure matured, so had his affection for her. Now his equal in intelligence and willingness to work, loving nature, yet timid and quiet, he knew he loved her as a man should love a woman.

Finally, their mouths parted, allowing them to breathe. They continued to hold each other, arms entwined.

"We can have the village preacher perform the ceremony," John asserted. Erin giggled. "Peter will be furious."

"With my ring on your finger, he best keep quiet. Where's your boat?"

"Downstream. Are you strong enough to walk that far?"

Barrington nodded his still dripping head.

Erin stood, and helped John to his feet. Her hand held his arm as she stared up at his weathered visage. "Kiss me once more," she murmured.

He raised her chin. "I love you, Erin." His lips brushed hers, and they were on their way.