

**P.S. Thanks for the
Inspiration**

A Collection of Stories

by

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Part II

Romance of the Pink Panther

The list, written in white chalk on the rectangular slate board, had nothing to do with a police investigation. Nonetheless, Acting Chief Inspector Jacques Clouseau paced the carpet, periodically gazing at the precise script.

Only once, turning from the window, did he trip over the large world globe on its oak tripod. He recoiled, glancing at his hand which, the last time he'd touched the sphere, had wedged between the metal and the varnished frame.

He'd had Africa all over his left palm for a week.

The office door opened; Hercule LaJoy, Clouseau's assistant, entered without a word. He observed the scene, features neutral.

"Well?" Clouseau snapped.

"It's after six o'clock, Inspector."

"Acting *Chief* Inspector," he corrected.

LaJoy nodded. "Aren't you going home?"

"When I'm finished here. You don't need to stay."

"Thank you, Insp... Acting Chief Inspector."

Alone once more, Clouseau mouthed the points without sound.

One: Pink Panther diamond.

Though that priceless gem had been planted in his pocket during Sir Charles Lytton's trial, he had finally been able to convince prosecutors of the ruse and secure a release from prison.

Somehow, Commissioner Charles Dreyfus maintained Clouseau hadn't the skills to commit such a theft, another asset to resolving that dilemma.

Two: Simone.

Shortly after obtaining his liberty, the divorce from his wife - who'd been in league with Sir Charles - had been finalized. Clouseau had loved her, but she'd believed he would never uncover the affair, or the crimes.

Three: Maria Gambrelli.

Clouseau had cleared the young, blonde maid of murder charges, and thought they might engage in a romantic relationship. The explosion, engineered by Dreyfus, that killed the Ballons and other dysfunctional members of that household, upset her mental stability, and she'd entered a convent of cloistered nuns within weeks.

Four: Dreyfus.

Whatever had driven Clouseau's former superior to the asylum had opened a realm of possibilities for the inspector. When last he'd inquired, Dreyfus

remained in a padded cell, treatment for his violent obsession not really progressing.

Not a man to dwell over-long on the past, an eraser began vigorously obliterating the chalk, the board shifting on its pegs and slamming Clouseau in the knees. He leapt backward, stumbling over the edge of the desk, knocking the ink well, water carafe and a stack of files to the floor.

His instant reaction: hands to knife-strike position with a quiet, “Swine desk!”

Recovering quickly, he strode from the room, knowing Hercule would clear the mess in the morning.

En route to his flat, Clouseau stopped at the neighborhood grocer’s. A bottle of Bordeaux and a fresh baguette would be welcome additions to whatever main course Cato would be cooking for dinner.

A slender, sweet-faced young woman, brunette curls never really combed, greeted him from the counter. “How may I help you today, Inspector?”

“Acting *Chief* Inspector.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” She moved into the aisle. “What is your pleasure?”

She fetched the long loaf of bread, wrapped in brown paper, while he perused the wines. “Was my man Cato in today?” Clouseau asked.

“I have not seen him.”

“Then, perhaps I should also...”

He spun, colliding with her in the narrow space. Their attempts to side-step each other resembled a badly choreographed dance.

The girl steadied this customer before his flailing arms dislodged an entire shelf of more expensive vintages. She’d been warned by the manager, after all, that any damage Clouseau caused would be deducted from her already minuscule wages.

“Come, Monsieur, allow me to select ingredients for your evening meal,” she offered, leading him to an open area where he couldn’t break bottles or destroy displays.

“That is very kind of you.”

Cuts of beef, fresh asparagus and potatoes filled a paper sack. Searching blue eyes realized Clouseau would never make the trek to his apartment with the bread, the wine and the food intact.

Counting his change, she shouted to her colleague, “I’ll be back shortly.” Then, she grasped the two smaller bags and led her customer toward the street.

Not that she was angling for an invitation to dinner. Rumors about this official had piqued her curiosity, and she wanted to prove or disprove them for herself.

The pair rode to the third floor in a cramped elevator. As the wrought iron gate drew aside, Clouseau caught his trenchcoat sleeve on the inside handle, jerking his arm so the sack pitched forward. She caught it before the contents spilled in the corridor.

“You... are very agile,” he observed, black mustache twitching.

“I competed as a gymnast...”

“Ah! A gymnast! That explains it!” He struggled to extract a key ring from his trousers; she relieved him of his burden, fearing the worst.

They crossed the threshold without further incident. Handing Clouseau the parcels, he refused, brown orbs darting around the foyer.

“Wait here,” he instructed.

Adopting a fighting posture, Clouseau advanced slowly, swinging right toward the parlor, then left toward the dining room of the spacious flat. Once he’d made a complete circuit, he dropped his defenses and rejoined her.

“Cato must not be in,” he announced. “Thank you for your assistance, Mademoiselle...”

“Andi Bascombe.”

“Andi?”

“Short for Andrea.”

“Ah! Andrea! A very beautiful name for a very beautiful woman.”

“Merci, Inspector.”

“Acting *Chief* Inspector.” He preceded her to the kitchen. “If you wish, you may call me Jacques.”

That would definitely eliminate the repeated debate about his title, Andi chuckled silently.

“Merci, Jacques.”

“You are not... French?”

“No. American.”

“Then, what...”

“I’m studying art for a term at the Louvre as part of my university courses.”

No more had they placed their load on the counter than the broom cupboard popped open, Cato springing to attack.

Before the Asian servant made contact with his employer’s torso, Andi leveled him with an open-hand strike to his neck.

Clouseau's eyes widened. "That... was an excellent defense!"

Not even breathing hard, Andi grinned. "My father was an anthropologist. He spent many years in China, where he learned kung fu. He taught me."

Stirring on the tile, Cato was assisted to his feet by the pair. He favored Andi with a harsh glare as he resumed his domestic duties.

Clouseau waved his guest toward the parlor.

"I... must get back to the shop," she demurred.

"Will you come again?" he ventured.

"I'd... love to."

"Cato is really a marvelous cook. Dinner on Friday?"

No more had the words escaped his lips than his shoe missed the step and he pitched into her, his Romanesque nose plastered between her diminutive breasts. She barely prevented him from toppling her; he must outweigh her by 40 pounds, she surmised.

When he righted himself, inadvertently fondling her waist and backside, he wore a sheepish grin, lips angled upward at the right corner. "Pardon, Mademoiselle."

She snickered, caressing his cheek in parting. "I'll see you Friday."

Glancing over her shoulder as she waited for the lift, she saw him beneath the lintel, his elegant fingers resting where she'd stroked his skin.

A reprimand from her manager didn't faze Andi. She reasoned that she'd saved the crew time and money by ensuring Clouseau didn't wreak havoc on the premises.

For his part, the Sûreté detective devoured the contents of the platters Cato set before him, chiding the manservant for his performance during the earlier assault.

"If a mere slip of a girl can drop you with one blow, then I haven't taught you very well."

Dessert amounted to a strenuous session of shattering bric-a-brac and appliances as the men faced off, before Cato trudged to the sink to wash the dishes.

Clouseau slept well, waking early to contemplate preparations for the forthcoming date. A flurry of activity through the day distracted him from reviewing progress reports on investigations dealing with a rash of bank robberies, smuggling operations and an escaped mental patient.

Hercule had, indeed, cleaned the office, stewing at his desk across the hall. He wasn't really shocked when Commissioner Dreyfus cracked under the strain of

Clouseau's ineptitude; some days, he felt as if he wanted to kill this man so lauded by the country's leaders. If they only knew the truth...

When Cato arrived at the grocer's that afternoon, scowling at her, Andi made certain he purchased the supplies necessary for that night's meal. Thus, when Clouseau stopped on his way home, she could truthfully say he didn't need to buy anything.

Wednesday and Thursday passed in uneventful bliss for the college student. She'd popped into a dress shop to select a suitable frock - nothing too daring, nor too conservative. She preferred jeans and baggy shirts, more comfortable if she felt like cartwheeling through the park near her apartment on a whim, to the amusement of the local children.

The blue satin, calf-length ensemble highlighting her natural coloring, Andi entered the building as church bells tolled 7:00. She crossed her fingers and hoped for an accident-free encounter.

Clouseau, clad in a red velveteen smoking jacket with black lapels, welcomed her at the door. Cato delivered a bottle of champagne on a tray with two crystal goblets to them on the parlor's antique divan. To Andi's relief, her host allowed the servant to uncork and pour the carbonated liquid before bowing from the room.

She sensed Clouseau's nervousness as he raised the glass in salute. They sipped, smiling at the taste.

"Tell me more about your studies," Clouseau invited.

Andi hesitated. She didn't want the details of her life to spoil the mood.

"Please."

"As I mentioned, my dad was an anthropologist. While he traveled around the world on his expeditions, we lived in a suburb of Chicago. I took dance lessons as a kid, then switched to gymnastics. My coach thought I'd be a candidate for the Olympic team, until I broke my ankle during a regional competition."

"I'm sorry."

Clouseau leaned toward the bottle; Andi intercepted him, refilling both glasses.

"Merci."

She continued, "I'd always liked to draw and enrolled at Chicago's Art Institute. They offered this international study program... so, here I am!"

"Paris is honored to have such a beautiful young woman in the city," drawled Clouseau gallantly, offering a silent toast.

Cato announced dinner; Clouseau rose and offered Andi his arm. She slipped her hand through the crook and let him usher her into the dining room,

starched linens, candlesticks and polished silver on the table, red roses in three vases positioned around the chamber.

“Wow!” escaped Andi’s lips.

Sumptuous linguini and white sauce delighted her palate; she smiled at Cato, whose frown finally eased by the time he presented tiramisu for dessert.

The leisurely meal concluded with coffee in the parlor. “Unless you’d like more wine,” Clouseau hinted.

“No, thanks. I’ve got to keep my wits about me.”

“Why?”

She hadn’t expected the question. “You’re... a very handsome man, and I’ve heard about Frenchmen.”

Just as Clouseau laughed, a gunshot resounded through the open window.

The pair dove off the divan, plaster shattered by the projectile. Another five shots peppered the wall, Clouseau protectively shielding Andi from splinters and dust.

Cato assisted them once the noise ceased. Clouseau crept to the balcony, peering out into the night. Andi joined him there, glimpsing a light reflected from the structure opposite.

“Who would want to kill you?” she queried.

“Ah, someone is almost always trying to kill me,” he grunted. “Most recently, it was that lunatic Dreyfus.”

Andi bent to free the newspaper from beneath his slippers. “It may be Dreyfus again,” she declared, pointing to the three-column photo on the front page. “He’s escaped.”

A bullet shredded the sheet, and the couple dropped again to the carpet.

Crawling toward the exit, Andi felt one cartridge graze her shoulder, ruining the dress. She wouldn’t wait until the gendarmes apprehended this assailant...

“Don’t go!” Clouseau called, pinned behind a wing-backed armchair.

Sirens in the distance proclaimed the approach of the police. Andi raced down the stairs and into the chill night, crossing the pavement and forcing her way into the edifice she calculated as the source of the assault.

Not difficult to locate the culprit, muttering and cackling loudly to himself on the otherwise deserted level. Fortunately, Andi’s gymnastic training allowed her to steal across the boards without a sound; a round-house kick propelled the rifle into the corner and, when former Commissioner Charles Dreyfus whirled to view the intruder, a backhand blow dropped him in a heap, stunned senseless.

Clouseau was credited with the apprehension. He'd followed Andi and stood beside her when the cadre of uniformed officers charged the room.

As Dreyfus was lifted from piles of debris, he lunged toward Clouseau, only to be dragged away.

"My darling, that was very foolish of you..." the detective chided tenderly, arm around her waist.

Flustered momentarily by his expression of affection, Andi countered, "You were his intended quarry, so I knew he wouldn't..."

"Dreyfus is unhinged. There is no guessing his next... target."

"I suppose you're right."

"Come, a glass of wine will soothe your nerves."

He bumped into a discarded plank; the gendarme sergeant mistook the motion as intentional when he noticed Andi and Clouseau locked in an embrace, kissing.

The couple settled into a relatively calm routine of work - and study, for Andi - quiet dinners, concerts and strolls along the Seine. Both Cato and Hercule marveled at the impact the woman's influence had on Clouseau's clumsiness, relaxing their customary vigilance, albeit temporarily.

Andi reveled in the satisfaction that she'd been able to help this kind, ostensibly gentle man achieve a measure of equilibrium - physical and mental. When he held her in his arms, she felt safe from the troubles of the world. As the end of her term approached, she considered remaining in Paris.

She and Jacques were discussing that possibility on an April Saturday evening near the Cathedral de Notre Dame when the loud rapport flung her against him.

"Don't be frightened, my darling," he whispered. "It's just..."

His hand suddenly felt moist and, scrutinizing it, a sticky redness coated his fingers.

The man - not Dreyfus on this occasion - sprinted past, gendarmes converging from every direction. The satchel he carried dropped on the cement and burst open, 1,000 franc notes fluttered on the breeze.

"Swine robber!" Clouseau cursed.

The ambulance, summoned by one of the officers, arrived too late to save Andi. The bullet had penetrated her ribs and lodged in her heart.

A funeral service held in a tiny chapel near the Louvre before her body was shipped back to the States, Clouseau - in white trenchcoat, fumbling self-consciously with his hat - lingered in the narthex as Andi's fellow students paid their respects at the casket.

A handkerchief wiping tears from his eyes as he departed, the brass door knob caught on his belt and he bounced off the carved wood panels.

“Swine door!”

The Respectable Gentleman

Life in a small midwestern town, contrary to popular belief, defied description. Not everyone knew each other - or, at minimum, each other's business - and the crime rates weren't necessarily lower than in cities with 100,000 or more inhabitants.

A newcomer to this borough overlooking the Missouri River, Autumn had difficulty adjusting to practically everything: the middle school, the absence of her favorite snacks from the locally owned grocery store, the limited selection at the Main Street movie theatre. At 13, she felt like a caged animal.

She half-understood why her parents had relocated from Pennsylvania, but not completely. Her father had accepted the post of vice president of a multi-state bank, far more lucrative than his previous position as branch manager. The increased income allowed her mother to indulge a dream of selecting a sizable Victorian-style house, featuring a wrap-around porch, on a quiet brick street, refurbishing every room.

Both adults busy, and her older brothers grown and gone, that left Autumn to fend for herself most days.

The days weren't what bothered her, though. She could deal with snooty classmates and teachers who denigrated her opinions - based on a broader world view - as nonsensical. No extracurricular clubs caught her interest and, as for sports, forget it.

The nights... from the first occasion she settled on the window seat in her second floor corner room to watch the sunset, she became intrigued by the neighbor opposite. His dwelling almost twice the size, though of a similar architectural layout, painted white with blue trim, no lights burned behind sheer curtains. The lone occupant emerged as dusk faded, wearing a business suit and carrying a silver-knobbed cane. He strolled south to points unknown.

This same ritual occurred every evening. When Autumn began staying up to monitor when he returned, she discovered that, too, followed a specific pattern.

Two blocks north, just past the town's official boundary, a farmer raised chickens, horses and cows. The rooster crowed as dawn neared, without fail. Before that annoying alarm was repeated, the shadowy figure concluded his rounds at the same leisurely pace, mounted the steps, unlocked the door and secured it behind him.

Autumn never saw him at any other time.

A conscientious homeowner, nonetheless: on Thursday mornings, a professional landscaping crew mowed the yard, weeded the flower beds and used a string trimmer along the sidewalks.

Colder weather altered his routine only slightly. Over his suit, he wore a cashmere coat and expensive kid gloves protected his fingers. The amount of snow, or the icy wind chill impacted his circuit not at all.

She learned his name as the seasons progressed: Crazy Old John Herbert.

Except, he didn't look old to Autumn - not like her maternal grandfather, with his bald crown, or his white-haired paternal equivalent. This individual's neatly combed dark brown mop boasted not a strand of grey, his shoulders displayed no stoop, his gait without limp or weakness.

As for crazy, who could tell?

The reference clerk at the modest library loaned the teen a volume highlighting local history, in which the Herberts figured as one of the town founders more than a century prior.

Staring at a display of somber oil portraits on the conference room walls, Autumn's blue eyes widened. The original John Herbert's face matched his descendant's exactly. Flipping the pages, she hoped to study the family tree of that clan, but none was listed.

She inquired at the desk about marriage and birth records.

"Sorry, dearie," stated the buxom clerk. "They were lost when city hall burned in 1953."

"Would the museum have any information?" she asked.

"Back when the council voted to establish the museum, the Herberts were the only residents to oppose the move, refusing to donate to the cause. No mention is made of them within that facility."

Harsh, Autumn mused.

And so, the mystery persisted.

One sweltering July evening, she sat on the porch swing her mother had purchased, waiting for a hint of a breeze to cool the temperature. She heard a puppy barking, children giggling, and saw the tennis ball bounce into the street 100 yards along.

A car's engine raced as it whipped through the intersection, ignoring the stop sign.

Autumn swallowed hard, leapt up and sprinted to prevent a tragedy.

This flash of yellow - tank top and shorts - alerted the driver to the presence of pedestrians; brakes screeched on the brick surface. Before the front

bumper of the '67 Mustang struck her, she was whisked from its path by no less than John Herbert.

The pair flopped onto the lawn of a recently renovated dwelling, lungs heaving. Autumn recovered quickly, glancing around to see the children retrieving both ball and pet, scrambling through a picket fence gate. The red muscle car accelerated slowly, its owner shaken but unapologetic.

“What were you thinking, child?” Herbert scolded brusquely. “You might’ve been killed.”

She met his intense gaze, brown orbs appearing weirdly black in the gloom. “A reflex, I guess. Where I... lived before, I was playground monitor for the younger grades. I...”

Her limbs suddenly gelatinous, she collapsed in a faint.

Strong arms scooped her off the grass and transported her to the porch swing. Her eyelids fluttered as he reached for the doorbell.

“Don’t, please,” she gurgled. “I’ll be all right.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, Mr. Herbert.”

The lean face tilted to the right, jaw hard. “You know my name?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ve never been... properly introduced.”

Autumn didn’t know how to respond to what sounded like an accusation.

“You’ve... been spying on me?”

“Oh, no, sir!” She righted herself on the slats. “I see you leave sometimes... and come home in the morning.”

“What are you doing up so early?”

“The rooster...”

His tension eased, she noticed. “Yes, it is rather loud. Most people hereabout have grown accustomed to it.”

“I can sleep through train whistles and drag races, but not that.”

“You’re from the city?”

“Yes.”

He descended concrete steps. “Well, good evening.”

This odd departure puzzled the girl, but her nerves were too jumpy to do much more than stagger indoors and pour herself a large glass of chocolate milk.

Between oppressive heat and humidity, and lack of air conditioning, Autumn didn’t sleep more than ten minutes after that debacle. She perched herself near the open sash, a few degrees cooler, and saw John Herbert halt in his tracks and glare at her before he proceeded to his imposing domicile.

She didn't hide from his view, instead smiling and softly calling, "Good morning!"

From then on, she detected his furtive glances toward her window when he ventured out and, again, as he completed his circuit. His scowl cut into her heart more deeply than the insults hurled by students at school.

For her fifteenth birthday, her mother baked a chocolate cake - which Autumn ate alone, the celebration conflicting with a dinner party for bank personnel. On a whim, she sliced a chunk, placed it on a china plate and wrapped it in a paper napkin for the trip across the street.

A peace offering to Crazy Old John Herbert.

Her knock wasn't answered, though she knew he hadn't left yet. Concerned that, if he was as old as some believed, he might've fallen or hurt himself, she risked his wrath by jimmying the lock with her pocket knife.

Inside, she passed through foyer, parlor, drawing room, dining room and kitchen - totally unfurnished. Flipping a wall switch, nothing happened. She deposited the cake on a dust-covered counter and groped toward the front of the structure.

She ascended the creaking, curved staircase, a sliver penetrating her palm as she gripped the unvarnished banister. She yelped at the jagged laceration, stumbled and wrenched her ankle.

Ten minutes passed as she huddled on the step, miserable. A random act of kindness gone horribly wrong.

"What the devil are you doing?" came the ominous rumble from above.

She bolted upright, her leg giving way.

Herbert caught her before she plunged down the flight. He lifted her onto the landing with very little effort, as if she weighed next to nothing.

"I could have you arrested for trespassing," he stated, unyielding digits around her forearm.

"I... It's my birthday. I brought you a piece of cake."

"What the devil for?"

Autumn's voice quivered. "It's... what neighbors do."

"Not around here." He eased his hold. "Around here, people leave each other alone."

"Is that what you want?"

"Indeed."

"Then, I'll go."

Except, she couldn't walk.

Herbert hoisted her off the worn carpet and carried her to the main level. He detected the flinch when he bumped her hand.

“What other injuries have you incurred?”

She swiveled her palm toward him.

How he could see the splinter without illumination amazed her. He led her, hobbling, to the bathroom, lighting a candle and digging a set of tweezers from a medicine chest above the cast iron sink.

He lowered her onto the toilet lid, expertly removing the shard of wood. Blood from the wound gushed onto Autumn’s jeans.

Herbert’s demeanor transformed, but she was too focused on her own pain to sense it.

Her parents were enjoying coffee in the living room when the teen arrived home well after 10:00, smiling broadly.

“Where have you been?” her mother demanded. “We thought you were asleep.”

Her father observed, “Why the gimp? You hurt yourself?”

“I had... a little accident,” Autumn explained. “Tripped on the curb.”

She folded the cuff of her jeans to show an expertly wrapped Ace bandage, and the gauze taped to her left palm.

“Who... took care of you?” queried her mother.

“Mr. Herbert.”

“That respectable gentleman across the street?”

Autumn’s sandy curls bobbed affirmatively.

“I’ll have to thank him when I see him.” Draining her cup, the woman stretched. “We’d better get to bed.”

“G’night, Mom.”

As the girl crawled beneath the sheets, her grin remained. She hadn’t shown her parents the puncture marks on her neck, concealed by her flannel shirt collar.

Nor would the couple realize how their daughter began sneaking out of the house each night to accompany the “respectable” undead town founder John Herbert on his nefarious jaunts.

Up from Under

“Captain, take a look at this.”

Lieutenant Sandy Carfax slid her chair away from the console, so the officer had a clear view of the scanner. A persistent blip on the screen indicated something moving around the complex’s perimeter fence.

Milo Bogart ran uncertain fingers along his earthtone-colored uniform collar. “Did you run a diagnostic on the equipment?”

“Yes, sir. As soon as it started.”

“And?”

“In perfect working order.”

“Damn!”

“There shouldn’t be any... living creatures out there.”

Bogart concurred. “Not since...”

The emaciated figure strode toward the door. He’d been anticipating his break, now he wouldn’t have a chance to enjoy what passed for a meal these days.

Not that he - or Sandy - remembered the taste of actual beef, chicken or pork. No one existing in what had once been designated “North America” did. Nuclear fallout from bombs detonated in the late 21st century had eradicated all livestock, and more than five billion humans on the planet.

Those first survivors, according to the records, had raided every distribution center and ate the contents of aluminum cans for the rest of their lives, until vegetation resumed its growth in remote areas, lesser affected by the radiation. As the population rebounded, so did some technology, powered by wind farms resurrected from those olden days.

“Send out a team to investigate,” came the major’s order, who preferred sketching landscapes to performing his - basically ceremonial - duties. With not enough people to comprise even one battalion, the prospect of war had long since faded into history.

Sergeant Jim Andrews and Sandy hiked from central control to the patchwork chain link stretch on the base’s north edge. Heat made their trek uncomfortable, another sad result of the war: even in Montana, the temperature never dipped below 70 degrees anymore.

Shirts drenched with sweat by the time they glimpsed the object of their search, neither was in the mood for polite small talk.

“Who are you?” Sandy yelled at the slight figure studying the fence.

His head, long dark hair pulled back into a pony tail, cocked slightly, as if he didn’t understand her.

Oddly - to her, anyway - he appeared quite well fed. Though his pale flesh contrasted greatly with their own sun-beaten hides, there could be no doubt he was human and not some mutant animal. He wore clothes unlike any the pair had previously seen except in magazines, remnants of that pre-bomb era: a baggy, bright orange shirt, tight fitting blue denim trousers and heavy black boots.

As Jim and Sandy neared, the man showed no signs of fear, only confusion.

“Who are you?” Jim demanded.

Lips moved, but no sound emerged.

“He obviously doesn’t speak the lingo,” Sandy ventured.

“Ling-o,” echoed a tentative tenor.

“He sounds... foreign,” remarked Jim.

Sandy mocked, “How would you know? You’ve spoken with, maybe, twenty people your entire life.”

“Not true. The school I attended as a kid had eighty students.”

“Fine, maybe a hundred people in your life. None from farther away than Helena.”

“Okay, okay.”

Through this exchange, the man squinted deep brown eyes at them.

Sandy took two steps nearer and scrutinized him from head to toe. “You think he could have wandered down from Canada?”

“Rumors are, there’s quite a few settlements north of the old border that never saw damage from the bombs. Back in the mountains; stuff like that.”

“That would explain the clothes, too. Dyed, factory made.”

“So, do we take him to the boss?” Jim puzzled.

“Sure.”

“What about radiation exposure?”

Sandy glanced at the indicator tag pinned to her shirt: still green. “He’s not giving off anything major. We’ll have the doc exam him later.”

She reached for the man’s arm; he recoiled.

“It’s okay. We’re not going to hurt you.”

More than the words, her smile must’ve convinced him to trust her. The trio moved at a leisurely pace toward the low, lead-lined, brick structures a half-mile within the fence.

“What’s this?” Bogart grunted when they crossed the main threshold.

Jim admitted, “No idea, Cap. He couldn’t answer our questions.”

“Put him in an isolation cell until he can be decontaminated and checked out.”

That meant instructing their captive to remove his garments, which Sandy left Jim to demonstrate.

The man refused in no uncertain terms.

“Talk to him, Sandy,” Jim pleaded. “He seems to like you.”

“I may be the first woman he’s seen in years,” acknowledged the lieutenant.

Which could lead to a horrible misunderstanding, if she wasn’t careful.

Insufficient power and resources available to restart steel factories which could create proper metal doors, Sandy gazed at the man through rough-hewn wooden slats. Within the cell, a three-legged stool and lumpy straw mattress provided limited amenities. A bucket held clean water, with a floor drain serving as toilet.

“You really don’t understand what I’m saying?” she spoke rhetorically.

Brown orbs considered her.

“If you are from Canada, you should speak the same language. Or, at least, that’s what the history books...”

“His-story.”

“Yes, history. Do you understand what history means?”

Thin lips curled in a grin.

She retreated a pace, suspicious. “You’re playing with me, aren’t you? You understand everything we’ve said...”

“Every-thing.”

Sandy couldn’t be positive whether he grasped the words or not. He might be mimicking select syllables that triggered something in his memory, or...

She grabbed a slate, used since the war as a substitute for paper - which could no longer be manufactured due to scarcity of trees. The brittle chalk broke three times before she could complete a simple map of the base.

“We are here,” she said, tapping the rectangle representing the building. “Where are you from?”

She offered him the chalk, he knocked it to the floor.

“Well, dammit, be that way!” the frustrated woman barked. “I’ll let the guards have you, and they won’t be gentle.”

The man visibly cowered against the far wall. “Guards.”

That reaction sparked a notion in Sandy’s brain. She left him there, winding her way through maze-like corridors to a little used room marked, “Library.”

Two shelves of books with stiff covers provided information on traditions of centuries past. A larger, flimsy volume contained maps of what had been the United States and its system of roads, and the Canadian provinces to the north.

Those maps highlighted significant landmarks, which Sandy had studied periodically during her years with the system. Yellowstone Park, for instance, had once taken up a good portion of northwest Wyoming and southwest Montana. Slowly reviewing multi-colored pages, she traced an erstwhile highway into Alberta, where a prison was labeled outside the city of Calgary.

“His DNA places his ancestors in the old Caribbean,” Jim announced when she returned to find the man huddled on the mattress in the corner, covered only by a tattered blanket.

“Dammit, Jim! You should have left him alone! Now, he won’t trust any of us!”

“What makes you think so?”

“Because, I’ve a feeling he’s been living in a prison up north and recently escaped.”

The sergeant scoffed, “That’s impossible. Even if his great-great-grandfather had been a convict in the old days - like so many of their race who crossed the border illegally - the prisons were destroyed...”

“That’s a hell of an assumption, Jim! Maybe, in places where the bombs didn’t hit, families took refuge in available buildings, or...”

“Or, what?”

“Those built underground.” The marking on the map had read, “Canadian Corrections - Subterranean.”

“Underground?” Jim guffawed. “You’re crazy. Who would build a prison underground?”

“I couldn’t say, having not been alive then. It might have been an experiment...”

“Ex-per-i-ment,” came the tenor from inside the cell.

Sandy ached for more books, especially about the former penal system. Nothing similar existed in this era, due to the lack of law enforcement and organized settlements numbering more than a few hundred citizens. Those living often took matters into their own hands, executing any who stole or committed what once had been considered crimes.

“Leave me alone with him,” Sandy instructed.

Jim objected, “Are you sure?”

“He won’t hurt me.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about.”

She shooed him from the wing, returning with the man’s clothes, which had been discarded in a pile outside the examination room.

“I’m sorry,” she oozed. “I didn’t know...”

He stammered, "Guards."

"I'm sorry. They won't come back." She settled on the floor, her face level with his. "Do you have a name?"

"Name?"

Another option: "Number?"

"Fifteen-zero-two."

That confirmed Sandy's intuition he'd come from a prison.

How to get him to tell her of his experience, though...

"Cell?" she asked.

"Level Six, west block, A-Nine."

She realized he spoke a dialect of English used behind bars. In the decades since the war, those who had been confined when world leaders simultaneously pushed their buttons, had created their own civilization.

Sandy struggled to recall terms used in that setting. "Chow?"

"Vegetable garden with grow lights."

That made sense. An underground facility provided its own food.

"Warden?"

"Thirteen-sixty-eight."

An inmate had served as warden? she mused.

"Parole?"

The concept elicited no response.

She switched tactics on a hunch. "Mother?"

"Twenty-four-zero-seven."

His mother had lived in the facility.

"Father?" she pressed.

"Nine-one-five."

Both parents.

As she walked from the cell back to her duty station, Sandy's mind swirled with possibilities. There'd be no way to prove her theories, but what if the subterranean prison had sustained minimum damage from the bombs, such as the staircases or elevator shafts being blocked, so no one could leave? Those trapped below the surface had developed their own lifestyle, using numbers instead of names, with one of their own designated as leader, or warden.

This particular individual had escaped that environment, or been allowed to leave - perhaps as a scout, to determine if life still thrived above.

After more than two centuries, perhaps they didn't realize people lived any other way, Sandy reasoned.

Her shift ended, she returned to the isolation cell with a book randomly selected from the library. "Can you read?" she queried.

"Books!" Excited, he rushed to her, snatching the volume and cradling it to his chest. He sat on the floor and flipped pages, furrows increasing on his brow.

"What's wrong?"

"Pictures?"

So, while he loved books, his reading level proved rudimentary, along with his verbal skills.

Getting to know the man and his origins would require time.

"You don't know if he's dangerous, or an idiot," Jim Andrews protested when she petitioned to move the captive to an apartment in the officers' quarters.

Captain Bogart, though, approved the request.

The apartment where the man moved was Sandy's own. She had two bedrooms, the spare formerly occupied by a young woman who - like so many - had developed an aggressive cancer which could not be treated.

Sandy tried her best to subdue irritation when Amigo, the moniker Jim had hung on him after seeing a Spanish advertisement in an old newspaper, broke dishes or wasted water in the shower. Each evening, she spent hours teaching him to speak, read and write; his quick mind picked up new concepts easily.

What amazed her even more was when he plucked a simple metal flute from the kitchen drawer and began playing intricate melodies.

"How..." she wondered.

"Music was how we stayed sane... below," Amigo explained. "I could read notes before I could read words."

Odd, Sandy thought, that no sheet music could currently be found on this plane of existence, where they'd had that treasure underground.

"That... belonged to my grandfather, from what I was told," she stated. "He died before I was born."

"I'm... sorry."

"Thanks."

After six weeks of effort, Sandy accompanied Amigo to Captain Bogart's office, where he was able to coherently detail life in the prison.

Undamaged shafts allowed for air circulation, while electrical power was supplied by - what he discovered when he reached sea level - a still-operational wind farm. As Sandy had guessed, elevator equipment and stairwells had been destroyed, with the descendants of the original inmates spending years with primitive picks and shovels digging and reinforcing an exit which measured over 150 meters.

Amigo had wandered for months, seeking another settlement. Sandy and Jim had been the first humans he encountered.

“I must return and tell my people...” he announced.

Sandy reasoned, “That will take ages. They probably think you’re dead...”

“Whether they do or not, it is my duty...”

“Then, let me go with you.”

Both Jim and Captain Bogart gaped at this offer.

“Why on earth would you want...” her superior muttered.

She replied, “To see what’s out there, to determine if life will ever resume...”

“You’re crazy,” Jim chided.

“Maybe so, but I’m also curious. The only way we’ll ever move forward is by... moving forward, instead of being satisfied with what’s here right now.”

“You’re right, of course,” Bogart agreed. “Requisition some supplies and plan to leave in the morning.”

“Thanks.”

The two men, along with other staff, monitored Sandy and Amigo as they departed, never to see either of them again.

That’s because, when the pair arrived near the former Calgary eight months later, they found a bustling settlement of Amigo’s associates, who’d followed him up from under and decided to establish a more normal mode of life.

Residing in houses of brick and stone that had remained mostly intact since the war, they enjoyed many luxuries those to the south had never experienced.

Instead of immediately adopting this trend, Sandy asked her companion to show her the subterranean structure where he’d spent his formative years. They descended into the bowels of the earth, where an impressive, efficient operation had been maintained within the concrete and steel cells.

Sandy hoped to trace the man’s ancestry through whatever records might have been preserved, especially after the DNA scan at the base showed his family had emigrated, at some point, from the Caribbean islands.

To no avail. The concept of birth certificates - even in a primitive form - had not been revived after the deaths of so many millions.

Amigo, once they returned above ground, convinced the warden - now titled “president” - that Sandy could serve as community teacher, especially with a library filled with books available on Main Street.

Marriage no longer recognized as an institution, Amigo and Sandy took up residence in a modest log bungalow they constructed together on the town’s edge, raising their family in pleasant ignorance of any turmoil elsewhere on the planet.

Taming the Prima Donna

Having a flexible schedule suited Allie's temperament perfectly. No set time to rise, eat, work, or even make a lap of the lush park near the old house... she couldn't have concocted a more idyllic existence if she'd rubbed a genie's lamp.

She'd inherited the quarry stone, columned edifice in the heart of the city from her maternal grandfather, debt free. Only one of the six bedrooms, the kitchen and den were used, though she relished days spent exploring the other spaces, discovering hidden passages and secret chambers dating to the 18th century.

Many of her finds inspired the tales she scripted for television series and films. The pseudonym Francine Tau appeared in the credits for these productions, earning her a substantial income, maintaining her anonymity in the local community.

She really didn't want outsiders knowing how she devised scenarios and dialogue, sitting up nights at the computer, typing furiously to assuage a never-ending blaze of creativity in her soul. All her neighbors saw, when they bothered to look, was a 30-something slender female in tie-dyed t-shirt, jeans and Birkenstock sandals, brunette tresses secured in a ponytail, whisking past their bay windows, hiking staff offsetting a slight limp.

St. Francis Park, so named after the huge statute of the Italian saint adorning the central fountain donated by a fraternal organization decades earlier, featured massive oak, walnut and pine trees, countless birds and squirrels, a band shell for summer concerts, and a playground for energetic children. On her daily rounds of the vast acreage, Allie soaked in the distinctive faces, the noise - a temporary respite from the perpetual churning of her brain cells.

There usually managed to be a chance phrase, nonetheless - uttered by a doting mother or senior citizen parked on a wrought iron bench - or a unique profile that caught her imagination and destroyed the transient peace, compelling her back to the computer.

That particular Saturday, the woman had finished her latest project. She reached the park as an impromptu flag football game between shirts and skins drew a crowd. A teen's punt lofted the ball into the air and, when Allie dodged the incoming projectile, she collided with the object of a chattering entourage, parading along the concrete path.

Strong hands caught her before she fell, and she gazed up at intense brown orbs studying her. Righting herself quickly, she apologized.

An eager sycophant had fetched the errant ball, presenting it to her.

“Oh, it’s not mine,” she stated.

The chestnut-maned dignitary’s vibrant baritone queried, “Your son’s?”

“Oh, no.” The sweaty captain of the shirts presented himself; she surrendered the pigskin. “The neighborhood kids.”

They stared at each other for a prolonged moment. Allie wouldn’t admit she recognized the singular features: Romanesque nose centered on the elongated face, thick brows, wide forehead tapering to a narrow chin. He portrayed a recurring character on a sit-com for which she wrote, despite his reputation as a difficult actor.

Her contract permitting cast approval for the episodes she penned, the production team begged her to reconsider including Pete Roberts, citing a fear the director would walk off the set at the first sign of trouble. Allie insisted, captivated by the performer’s ability to mimic accents and bury himself in a string of movie roles.

He played a con-artist, after all - albeit an inept one - needing those skills to make his lies believable.

“You’re okay, then?” came the voice through her reverie.

She retreated. “Sure. Thanks.”

As if she didn’t exist, the group pressed onward. Allie hesitated a moment, then followed from a discrete distance.

“I still don’t see why you’re so determined to find her, Pete,” a chunky, balding suit protested.

“Because, as long as I’m on the hook for this show, I want the part to have some substance!” Roberts growled.

“We don’t even know her real name...”

“Your flunkies at that computer lab traced the IP address from her emails to this area, didn’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Then, her name doesn’t matter.”

Callous bastard, Allie swore silently.

Resolved to teach Roberts a lesson in respect, she circled past the make-shift goalpost and ducked into a recessed doorway opposite her own domicile, waiting for the pack to emerge from the cross street.

“Lose the crew,” her contralto reverberated eerily from this vantage point.

Roberts’ eyes darted up and down the lane; his companions cowered.

“Lighten up, guys,” he admonished. “A hidden sound system.”

Allie made a buzzer noise. “Wrong!”

They froze.

“Like I said: lose the crew.”

After a pause, Roberts signaled the men and women away.

“Where... should we wait for you?” puzzled the suit.

“At the cars.”

Allie remained immobile until the last skirt vanished down the block. Her grin upon emerging from concealment rankled the actor.

“You!” he snarled. “What is this, some kind of trick?”

“Nope.” She traversed the pavement and unlocked a solid six-panel door. “Come in.”

Roberts ran elegant fingers through his dark mop before passing beneath the lintel into rose-scented dimness. “Is this... yours?”

“Good God, dude, are you that dull-witted?”

“Now, wait just a minute...”

She led him into a rustic den, bookshelves lining the walls packed with rare editions, antique furnishings coated with a thin layer of dust. “Park it, Pete.”

“You... know who I am?”

“Of course! And, conversely, you should know who I am.”

“But...”

She laughed outright. “You’ve been hunting for me most of the morning, I’d venture.”

“Francine Tau?”

The ponytail bobbed.

“You knew I was coming?” Roberts moved to a heavily-curtained window and drew aside the fabric, neatly manicured lawns stretching down a gentle incline.

“Not until we bumped into each other.”

“That... was an accident, wasn’t it?”

She rolled blue eyes heavenward. “Sit down.”

“What I have to say won’t take long.”

Allie clutched a handful of his tan silk shirt and steered him to a Louis XVI armchair. “Sit!”

“Jesus, woman! Why the hostility?”

“Because you want me to enlarge your part on the show, after the producers declined your request.” She perched on the polished oak desk. “It reminds me of a child asking his father for a toy and, when denied, he runs to ask his mother, hoping she’ll say yes.”

Roberts’ chin drooped.

“You’re fortunate to have been offered the contract, at all,” Allie continued. “Three of the sponsors threatened to pull their advertising if you were approached.”

“Why?”

“Because, in their words, you’re an arrogant git.”

“Then, how...”

She fastened her gaze on him. “Twenty years ago, I saw a movie the critics panned as absurd. The three roles you played, though... sparked a fury of inspiration that led to my first legitimate paycheck. I felt I owed you something.”

He reared off the cushion. “I’m not some charity case...”

“No, you’re a terribly flawed and eccentric soul, as close to a mirror of my own internal torture as I’ve encountered in this life.”

Two paces brought her nose-to-nose with him. He tried to brush her hand away when nimble digits reached inside his collar to expose the silver OM pendant on a filigree chain. She revealed an identical one beneath her t-shirt.

“Though we’ve both searched long and hard, neither of us has been successful in finding the peace we seek, because our... talents equate to a form of insanity no psychiatrist can cure without rendering us mental zombies.”

“Once one obsession fades, the next rears its ugly head...” he droned, the right corner of his mouth slanted upward.

“Amen, brother.”

He shook himself from the momentary trance, glaring at her serene countenance. “That doesn’t change the fact my scenes in the show are lame, at best.”

“It’s a sit-com, for Christ’s sake,” Allie sniffed. “You want me to create a drama with you as the star?”

“Sure.”

“It’d be impossible to sell to any network.”

“Because I’ve been labeled incorrigible?”

“To put it mildly.”

“What if I... pledge to be more cooperative...”

The idea sprang into Allie’s head like a spring tulip bursting from thawed earth. “Stay with me.”

Brown orbs squinted in disdain. “What?”

“Alone, we’re both lost to our respective foibles. Together... we can work to gain control of... that which plagues us.”

“You’re daft, woman.” He strode toward the door. “There are plenty of writers...”

“They won’t waste their precious resources on such a... hopeless cause,” Allie postulated.

He halted mid-stride, shoulders sagging. “A shrink once told me that delving to the core of my... aberrations would be like untangling an endless series of knots.”

“An assessment you’ve allowed to haunt you ever since.”

“Try as I might to be professional, the impulses... the need to alleviate this oppressive boredom... override my best intentions.”

His host chuckled. “So, you abandon your responsibilities, run out and buy the latest expensive car, some innovative bit of technology, or find a new playmate...”

The sigh might have been his soul weeping.

“Doesn’t help, does it?”

“No.”

She drew him back to the chair, kneeling before him. “Here’s what we’ll do. You call your agent, or whoever that goon was heading up your posse. Tell him you’ll be on a project retreat for the next three weeks, then ditch the cell. We’ll work on next season’s scripts and...”

“See where we end up?” he noted.

She smiled.

“My God, you’re lovely.”

They kissed briefly, before Allie gave her guest a tour of the house. She let him choose a bedroom; he selected hers.

“But, my clothes...” she muttered.

“No worries. We’ll be sharing the... accommodations.”

“That wasn’t part of the agreement...”

Roberts wondered, “Would it be so objectionable?”

Allie, on the spot, couldn’t lie. “No.”

“Then, that’s settled.”

Not that either spent much time beneath the quilts. A whirlwind of activity occupied every second: bantering ideas for 13 episodes, meditation sessions, hikes in the nearby national forest, dinners at upscale restaurants in the city’s theater district.

Roberts’ interiorized lessons Allie imparted: the intrinsic value of every human being, regardless of their social status, and how past trauma could warp the soul.

“I watched my mother drink herself to death,” the writer confessed one evening over tiramisu at an intimate Italian café. “My dad was so busy working to

keep the family business profitable, he didn't have time for me or my little brother. I craved attention more than anything..."

"Which the characters created for your stories provided?" he hinted.

"Precisely."

"For me, being in front of the cameras saved me. The adulation wasn't... genuine, I knew, but it filled a void my parents couldn't because of their dysfunction."

"Moving around so much as an army brat, you never had any real friends?" Allie pondered.

"Right." He raised her fingers to his lips. "God, it's good to talk honestly to someone, without having to hide because a mask of normalcy..."

"Amen, brother."

"I think.. I'll be able to resurrect my career after this..."

"I'm positive you will."

He extracted a blue velvet jeweler's box from inside his sport coat. "Only if you're with me, to keep me balanced."

"Oh, damn, Pete..."

He'd blindsided her with the five-carat diamond solitaire - a plot twist she hadn't foreseen. She grabbed the water goblet and swilled the contents, heart throbbing in her chest.

No way could she migrate to California and maintain this tenuous equilibrium she treasured. She wouldn't expect him to commute cross-country for the tapings, or whatever movie deals might be in the offing.

"You... don't want to?"

"Shit, dude, I've wanted to for 20 years!" she quipped. "It's just..."

He interrupted, "Hear me out."

"Okay."

"That old industrial complex on the south side can be picked up for a song. We buy it, invest in renovations, and start our own studio."

"You mean, stay here?"

"It would be better, psychologically, for both of us, don't you think?"

"Amen, brother." She scraped the last drops of coffee-laced dessert onto her spoon. "What about the sit-com?"

"This is supposed to be the final season, correct?"

"Yes."

"Then, we give those Hollywood yahoos what they want, and leave them behind."

He slipped the ring on her third finger as the waiter brought their check.

“One proviso to this deal,” Allie remarked as she slid onto the passenger seat of the vintage Rolls-Royce that Roberts had retained when his entourage departed.

“Anything, darling.”

“No connection is to be made between me and Francine Tau.”

“But...”

“I don’t need the publicity, or the disruption. My agent will continue to cut my deals...”

“You trust him?”

She giggled. “I should. He’s my little brother!”

The next morning’s *USA Today* featured a four-column photo - snapped by some elusive paparazzi, evidently - of the couple exiting the trattoria.

Nothing could prevent media crews from converging on the county courthouse that Monday, when Allie, in a simple white shirt-dress, and Roberts, wearing an open-collared blue shirt and khaki Dockers, were joined in wedlock by a justice of the peace.

They made the estate a haven of creativity, even hosting free summer theatricals in the park to encourage young talent.

Allie wrote a dozen screenplays over the course of 15 years, Roberts in starring roles, filmed on location and edited at their own facility. The couple garnered a plethora of awards, used as doorstops or garden ornaments.

The woman’s crowning achievement: Pete Roberts receiving international humanitarian honors and hailed as the most cooperative actor of the modern era.

She might still struggle - mutely - with her own obsessive, creative demons, but she had enabled another human being to rise from the ashes of his despair, finding love and balance.

The Dark Dozen

Magda had relied upon them for comfort and companionship these many years. Staunch allies, they'd stood beside her in the face of crises, large and small.

Periodically, she'd reflect on the old question, "If you were stranded on a deserted island, who would you want with you?"

Her answer, always, "All twelve."

She described their physical appearance using similar adjectives: black or dark brown - even bronzed - hair, sometimes wavy or curly, usually well groomed. Their features boasted a leanness mostly, tapered strong jaw lines, noses Roman and prominent, eyes of brown, blue, hazel or grey.

Yet, they didn't really look anything alike, nor were their personalities cut from the same cloth.

A loyal cohort, her private apostles, summoned or dismissed at will, loved consistently: John, Richard, George, Archie, Robert, Kevin, Oliver, Bill, James, Robin, Thomas and Johnny.

Whatever her whim of the day, the matching persona came to her, challenged her, joined in her adventures, embraced her against fear or pain, soothed her tears, caressed her, aroused her for the most erotic lovemaking known to humanity.

She cried out in the night, on the brink of orgasm, masterful kisses adding fuel to an unquenchable fire. Then, she would collapse on the mattress, sated, and sleep in absolute contentment.

Though she had no need to rise early to engage in manual labor or menial tasks, she would crawl from beneath the quilts before 8 a.m., enjoying a hot shower, and even hotter sex with whoever stepped into the frosted glass stall as the water pulsated against her skin.

Her back amply scrubbed by tantalizing fingers, her long auburn tresses shampooed and conditioned, she wrapped a lush terry robe around her lithe form before settling in front of the bay window to assess the weather.

The joys of being rich.

Not that the Dozen leached off her wealth. They were drawn to Magda as she was drawn to them... they might be equated to muses, inspiring her creativity - on paper, at the piano, on canvas.

She had, in fact, painted each of them. The strikingly accurate, elegant portraits hung between the bookshelves in her father's library. When that business magnate passed at 54 of a premature heart attack, she'd sold his Van Goghs and Rembrandts, replacing them with more appealing art.

Not that the servants preferred dusting one or the other. “I recognize them,” mused Jenny, a young blonde, as she held the rolling metal ladder for Lydia one bright summer day. “Weren’t they...”

That aging brunette grunted, “Yes, Miss Richter has some influential connections.”

Lydia never expressed any sort of positive emotion, Jenny noticed. The staff, for that matter, deemed themselves overworked after their mistress dismissed eight of the fourteen, leaving a cook and five maids to maintain an 18 bedroom mansion.

Even with the south wing closed off, and half the north wing locked, too many chores remained for so few hands.

The employees rarely saw their employer. She only went outdoors in late morning to stroll through overgrown gardens, no flowers having been planted in a decade. She didn’t heed the weeds or the downed branches from once-mighty oaks.

Of her father’s six classic cars, none remained. Magda hadn’t climbed behind the steering wheel since the accident that killed her little brother: a garbage truck failed to yield at a stop sign, slamming into the Rolls Royce shuttling him to elementary school.

While the servants appreciated the grocery deliveries - rather than having to shop themselves in the city 17 miles away - they spent an inordinate amount of time around the kitchen table discussing Magda’s aberrant behavior. She didn’t own a mobile phone, nonetheless kept up an audible stream of conversation with... who?

The land line never rang; no visitors begged admittance from the distant, rusted gate; no mail - not even junk ads - filled the mailbox on its bent post beside the main road.

They had no way of knowing Magda’s various bills - and their paychecks - were processed automatically by the bank, so she had no reason to distract herself from an idyllic existence.

That is, until a corpse was discovered on the front lawn.

Jenny had been hauling a bag of trash to the dumpster after dinner when she tripped over the frozen form. In the gloom, she thought it an exposed root - damage from the previous autumn’s storms. When she tried to kick it from her path, it didn’t feel like wood.

Flood lights activated, the entire staff ventured out in the pre-spring chill to view the oddity.

“He might’ve been here since winter,” remarked Ann, the rotund cook.

Sue, the upstairs maid, countered, "And no one reported him missing?"

"What do we do?" Jenny shivered.

Ann sighed, "Call the cops."

Five police cruisers, an ambulance and - eventually - a coroner's mini-van tore up the grass that night. The six women watched from a discreet distance, while Magda remained oblivious to the disturbance.

Clad in her father's tattered red dressing gown, she'd been playing poker with a few of her crew, chatting about the many games that renowned figure had hosted around that same green felt-topped table in the rustic, paneled den.

A brusque sergeant located her there, puzzled by the scene.

"Magdalene Richter?" he muttered.

She failed to respond until he placed a calloused hand on her shoulder.

"What the devil!" She leapt from the chair, scattering cards in the air.

"Sorry, ma'am, but we need you to make a statement..."

She squinted violet eyes at the uniformed official. "You hear this, guys? They want me to make a statement." She sniffed. "About what? The present economic stressors?"

Befuddled, the man recoiled. "No, ma'am. I... ah... the murdered man..."

"What murdered man?" she snapped, resuming her seat, gathering the cards to shuffle.

"Out in the yard. The coroner thinks he died about four months ago..."

"Too bad."

"You have no knowledge..."

"Of what?"

The sergeant seized her biceps and lifted her off the padded cushion. "Look, Miss Richter, you need to forget this... game. A crime's been committed, and we need to know what you know..."

"I don't know a damned thing," she scoffed. "Now, please, get out."

As the man withdrew, his suit-clad lieutenant marched along the corridor. "Well?" growled the latter.

"She's..." The subordinate's index finger made a twirling motion near his temple.

From the threshold, the detective observed Magda dealing a round of five card draw to nonexistent players, lively banter continuous.

"Who's she talking to?" he grumbled.

"I don't know."

"You know her history?"

The sergeant consulted his notebook. “Just what the servants told me. She’s lived here alone for more than 20 years, never goes out...”

“Richter Manufacturing dominated the state for nearly a century, before the old man suffered cardiac arrest when word leaked he’d knocked up his secretary. The daughter got a fat pay-day from the board when she sold her controlling interest...”

Magda spun on the chair. “One hundred five million, to be exact,” she declared.

Both men gulped. “Yes, ma’am.”

“What is it you want to know?”

“A man’s been murdered, ma’am,” stated the lieutenant.

“And?”

“We’d like you to take a look at the body, to see if you recognize him.”

Her lips pursed. “Very well.” She strode toward the main hall. “Come on, guys.”

With a horrified glance at his superior, the sergeant led her to the exit.

“Damn, it’s cold!” she shuddered beneath the columned portico, the robe insufficient against sub-freezing temperatures.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Who would be fool enough to get himself killed in such weather?”

The lieutenant shook his sandy head.

An ivory-hilted knife still protruding from the corpse’s chest didn’t faze Magda in the least. Features frozen in a hideous mask of shock, eyes stared at the cloudless night sky.

“Well?” prodded the sergeant.

“Well, what?”

“Do you know him?”

She appeared to consult those closest to her. “Nope, not a clue.”

“You don’t know how he came to be here?”

“Nope.”

“What about your... associates?” the lieutenant queried hesitantly.

“There’s a broken camera there to the right, just beyond the stiff’s reach. He’s probably some paparazzi buffoon out to score a candid photo.”

“Who would want to murder him?”

Her lips curled in a sheepish grin. “Since he was obviously trespassing on private property, it could be anyone.”

Without a backward glance, she retraced her steps to the house. The door secured behind her, she erupted in laughter as Johnny wiped the switchblade he’d

pulled from the half-thawed flesh on a handkerchief, folded it and tucked it in his pocket.

She favored him with a passionate kiss, then led the way up the curved marble staircase. “Time for bed, boys!”

On Maneuvers

It's not my habit to talk - or write - about my stretch in the military. Going to war was no picnic and, every time a film release purports to recall those days, I cringe.

Under the command of Major Denys Youngblood, our unit arrived in France after D-Day. We billeted in a bombed-out chateau on the outskirts of Orleans, claiming every available inch of floor that remained level.

Youngblood, of course, occupied the only intact rooms: the bedroom and a former parlor, which he used as his office.

What went on in the bedroom...

I didn't mean to be party to it, but I didn't really have a choice.

While training in England, I realized that I could mimic Youngblood's distinctive uppercrust accent, to the great amusement of the troops. It so happened I was delivering a set of "orders" via the camp's loudspeaker system one morning, when the rightful owner of that baritone sidled up behind my chair.

Rather than reprimand me, though, he swore me to secrecy.

That we resembled each other - physically and facially - added to my problems. Youngblood, ten years my senior, retained his jet black mane, combed from a left part; I combed mine from the right. Other than that, our brown eyes matched, the general elongated shape of our faces, and the size of our noses... his sole distinctive feature: an ample mustache.

And, a rather portly wife, who made her presence on the installation known with aggravating frequency.

It may be, for that reason, I sympathized with the old man when he lured pretty girls from the villages near our field maneuvers to his cot of a night. In France, though not under direct fire, Youngblood was required to maintain his authority 'round the clock. Dallying with a farm maid... well...

He presented me with the false mustache two days after we'd settled in this temporary barracks. "In the evenings, you'll stand in for me," he instructed.

How I wanted to protest! Yet, wearing his extra uniform, I could have a bit of fun, myself, and he'd never know.

Not so fun when the colonel or a stray general showed up to check our status. Calling the lads into formation for an impromptu inspection, I felt guilty as hell. These hot shots never saw through the ruse, however, and I could breathe in relief after they departed for their posh Paris digs.

One particular autumn evening, I sauntered into "my" office after lights out, lounging at the antique wooden desk and staring at the moon. Youngblood

hadn't fully secured the door to his bedroom, and I could hear the... gymnastics taxing the mattress springs within.

Curious, I crept to the gap and peered at the couple, illuminated by a lone candle on the night stand. Youngblood wore his shirt, unbuttoned, as he rode the lovely, naked blonde like a stallion.

Etiquette demanded I withdraw, but I formulated a plan in that instant...

Youngblood's women traditionally spent the night in the chamber, warmed by a fire on the grate if the temperature dipped below comfort level. They crept out at dawn, returning home before their fathers realized the absence and came hunting for the source of their offspring's defilement.

The blonde must've been careless, however, because her father stormed the chateau that morning, toting a loaded 19th century firearm, to Youngblood's chagrin.

"Tell him I'm not here," he ordered me, wearing my own togs as a corporal, as he fled the premises for parts unknown.

Once I successfully dissuaded the outraged elder from searching the ruins, I transcribed the man's statement, promising to forward the document to headquarters. He left, and I decided to don the major's spare uniform, the false mustache and cover for him in his absence.

That included a surreptitious circuit of the village, where the girl labored in a make-shift community garden. I signaled to her; she nodded understanding beyond the language barrier.

Her arrival after sunset elevated me to the ranks of the officers - for that one night, at any rate. We made love on the four-poster bed behind closed doors and slept, sated, until dawn.

When Major Youngblood reappeared - after a week of "staff meetings" - he swore off female companionship. Our unit received the missive to relocate near the German border three days later. Finally, we saw action, in which Youngblood perished by a sniper's bullet.

Once we were demobbed, I traveled across the Channel and wooed the girl in that little village. We were married 57 years before cancer separated us.

She was the one bright light for me in the darkness of that bloody war, thanks to a man who might've been my brother - if looks had anything to do with such relationships - but couldn't keep his trousers zipped.

Donut Holes

Trembling fingers laid coppers on the scratched counter; the wizened clerk scowled as he presented a waxed paper bag. She grasped it weakly, turning, only to be struck by a tall, dark figure rushing through the door.

Sweet delights, bought with her last pennies, exploded on the warped wood floor.

“I beg your pardon,” came the rich baritone.

She didn’t respond. She couldn’t respond. Her hope to relieve three days’ hunger lay before her, trampled. She let loose a piteous sob and collapsed.

Into the arms of Sherlock Holmes.

Clearly at a loss, the private consulting detective hoisted his burden, seeking a place to deposit her, or some manner of assistance.

Neither was forthcoming.

He shrugged.

Carrying her out to Baker Street, the French baguette he’d purchased awkwardly tucked inside his overcoat, he strode to 221B and mounted the stoop.

“Watson!” he yelled from the dim foyer.

The Afghan campaign veteran appeared on the landing above. “What is it, Holmes?”

His answer required no words. He limped down the stairs, inspecting the unconscious woman.

“What happened?” Watson inquired.

His flatmate grunted, “She fainted in the bakery.”

“Can you manage her as far as my bedroom?”

In response, Holmes ascended the flight and veered through the cluttered sitting room to Watson’s chamber, practically dropping his load on the mattress.

“Careful, man! She may be seriously hurt!” Watson warned.

In fact, while unfastening his unwitting patient’s black servant’s frock, the former Army doctor discovered the extent of the damage. He called Holmes into the room after his examination.

“Well?” queried the detective.

“Look at the bruises. She also has four cracked ribs, a dislocated left shoulder and a sprained right ankle.”

Eyelids fluttered, a disembodied tenor having reached her mind through a fog of agony. She stared up at two men, unfamiliar with her surroundings. An attempt to raise herself failed.

She squeaked, “Who...”

Watson provided the introductions.

“And, you are?” prompted Holmes.

“Phoebe... Sands.”

“Is it difficult to speak?” the doctor asked.

She nodded, and skilled digits evaluated her neck.

“Whoever did this may have tried to strangle her, as well,” came the conclusion.

“Were you assaulted on the street?” Holmes prodded.

The head, crowned by matted brunette tresses, shook horizontally.

“Who caused these injuries?”

“My... father.”

“The blighter!” Watson swore.

Holmes’ dark orbs silenced his companion. “Can you tell us why?”

“I... refused to marry the man he chose.”

Simple enough explanation.

“So, you ran away?”

“Yes,” she gurgled.

“She should be taken to hospital,” Holmes stated. “Watson, make the arrangements.”

“Nonsense! There could be internal injuries. She might not tolerate the journey to Bart’s.”

“You will treat her here?”

“Yes, old man.”

Doubtful, Sherlock Holmes sighed. “Just keep her out from under foot.”

“She won’t be moving from this bed for some time,” Watson assured him.

Indeed, the doctor’s tender ministrations made Phoebe more comfortable, and she slept through the day. Roused after sunset by the odor of pungent tobacco, a memory wound its way to her conscious and she jolted upright with a shriek.

The trim, knowledgeable physician eased her onto the pillows. “Bad dream?”

She nodded, her expression confirming unrelenting pain.

“Best you not talk, at least for a day or two, until your vocal cords heal.”

He sank on the mattress’ edge. “I hate to tell you this, but I’m going to have to realign your dislocated shoulder before complications set in. It’s going to hurt quite a bit.”

“As... you wish.”

He crossed to the door. “Holmes! I’ll need your help.”

Briar pipe clenched between his teeth, the detective shuffled across the carpet. "Well?"

"You're going to need to hold her very still, while I pop the socket into place."

Fear claimed Phoebe's sunken green eyes. Holmes seemed no happier about the prospect, and she determined to be brave. Yet, when Watson exerted firm pressure on her limb, she couldn't prevent herself from screaming.

Withdrawing a few paces, both men rubbed their ears. "It's done, Miss Sands," Watson soothed. "A few more days rest, a bit to eat, and you'll be right as rain."

Holmes retreated into the sitting room as Watson tucked the quilt around Phoebe's throat and lowered the gas.

She listened to their conversation through the closed door.

"Have you discovered anything about her?" Watson wondered.

"She's the only daughter of a Cornwall peer. I have it on good authority she was set to marry the son of a neighboring nobleman - land deeds being part of the marriage contract - but reneged less than a week before the match could be consummated."

"So, she told us the truth."

"Yes."

"Then, once she's well enough to leave..."

"Her father will drag her back and force the union."

"Is he that low?" Watson puzzled.

"He's... that far in debt."

"Ah!"

Phoebe fell asleep, tears at the cruelty of men streaming down her sallow cheeks.

The next morning - she couldn't recall what day it was - Phoebe awoke to find a stout, pleasant woman keeping vigil on a straight-backed chair beside the bed. A tray of tea and broth rested on the side table.

"Ah, lassie, are ye ready t'eat?" the housekeeper hinted.

Phoebe nodded.

Warm liquid spooned into her mouth eased a raging hunger. When the bowl was empty, dishes were restored to the silver tray and the woman rose.

"I'll bring lunch later," she promised. "Ye will have your strength back in no time."

Phoebe relaxed as Sherlock Holmes entered the room. "Thank you, Mrs. Hudson," he snarled. Shifting his focus to the bed, he sniffed, "Feeling better?"

“Every inch... hurts,” she replied with difficulty.

His mien betrayed skepticism.

She challenged, “Have you never experienced such agony?”

“I...” A memory invaded his staid demeanor. He sank on the chair. “I took a bad tumble on the stairs when I was seven,” his whispered. “Courtesy of my brothers. I was laid up for weeks.”

His vulnerability evident, she reached for his hand. He raised her fingers to his lips.

The severe muscle spasm shot her off the pillows and into his arms, her face horribly contorted. Holmes found himself embracing her, not from affection, but to prevent her from falling to the floor.

He held her as she wept and twitched, his tattered dressing gown dampened by salty moisture. Minutes passed and, once her nervous system calmed itself, she raised her head and tried to smile.

“I’m... so sorry,” escaped her throat.

“No need for apologies,” Holmes croaked, his aquiline nose inches from hers. “It... wasn’t of your own doing.”

The kiss, however, was deliberate. In that moment of shared anguish, they sought comfort from each other in a burst of passion.

Watson interrupted the scene with a faux cough. From the threshold, he witnessed Holmes pitch backward off the chair and Phoebe nearly land on the boards.

The men restored her to her place, leaving her to stare at the ceiling, emotions in turmoil.

“So, pray tell, what happened in there?” Watson demanded once settled in his favorite armchair near the sitting room fireplace.

Holmes took up his violin, tuning the strings absently. “The child needed to be comforted.”

“What I saw went far beyond the standard definition of lending comfort to the ill.”

The detective slammed his bow on the window sill. “No harm has been done.”

“How much will you wager on that?”

The discussion shifted when Mrs. Hudson escorted Scotland Yard’s Inspector Lestrade from the corridor.

“Mr. Holmes, I’ve come to inquire about the young lady you... encountered yesterday,” the official stated.

“With what intent?”

“We’ve received a missing person report from Lord Bascombe in Cornwall, and it so happens, the owner of the bakery down the street informed the beat constable about an incident where a young lady matching Lord Bascombe’s description fainted in his shop... We’re hoping the matters are linked.”

Holmes’ left eyebrow arched. “Very astute, Lestrade.”

No other information supplied, the visitor wrung his hands.

“Did Lord Bascombe also report that he had beaten his daughter to the point of death?” Watson intervened.

“No...”

“Come with me.” The pair entered the bedroom, Phoebe asleep. Watson discreetly showed Lestrade the greenish-yellow splotches on her arms and legs, adding details of the other injuries as they returned to the sitting room.

“Outrageous!” Lestrade grumbled.

“The man should be arrested for assault,” Holmes advised.

“Not likely, since he’s a peer of the realm.”

“Peer be damned! The law applies to all, and no one should be allowed to inflict such harm on another without facing the consequences.”

“I fully agree, Mr. Holmes, except...”

“Be on your way, then. If Lord Bascombe wishes to retrieve his daughter, let him come, and I will thrash him myself.”

Lestrade departed as Mrs. Hudson brought Phoebe’s luncheon tray.

Watson held the door for the housekeeper, both stunned to find the patient on her feet, struggling to drape a blanket around her frail form.

“Miss Sands! You shouldn’t be up!” Watson admonished.

“I... can’t stay in bed. I can’t... put you in danger, after your kindness...”

“Nonsense, girl!” protested Mrs. Hudson. “Get back under the covers at once!”

She refused. “Where are my clothes?”

“In the dustbin. They were beyond washing...”

“Then... I am lost.” Phoebe sank on the wooden chair, weeping into her hands.

Watson knelt beside her. “We’ll find you something to wear...” He crossed to the wardrobe and selected a shirt and trousers.

“Doctor, no!” Mrs. Hudson cried. “She can’t go about clad in your discards!”

Tentative hands snatched the garments and drew them to her chest. “These will... make it possible for me to pass unnoticed...”

Holmes hovered beneath the lintel. “You heard?”

“That my father is hunting for me? Yes.”

“Where will you go?”

She paused. “If I had the fare, I’d take the boat-train to Paris. I have friends from school studying art...”

The detective shooed the others from the room. He led Phoebe to the bed, towering above her. “Miss Sands, I can’t permit you to leave until you have fully healed.”

“If I stay, my father... will kill you.”

“He would not be the first to try, nor the last, most likely.”

She raised moist eyes to his stony face. “It was never my intent...”

Observation his forte, Holmes realized she had made her decision, and nothing would dissuade her. “Dress then, and I’ll accompany you to Victoria.”

Despite Watson’s recriminations, Sherlock Holmes and Phoebe Sands set out in mid-afternoon along Baker Street. As they passed the bakery, he drew her into the shop.

“What...” she breathed.

The clerk filled a waxed paper bag with six donut holes and exchanged it for a few coppers. Holmes wrapped Phoebe’s fingers around the package.

“I owe you these,” he murmured with a minuscule grin.

On the platform at the train station, he presented her with a ticket and 100 pounds to finance her escape. He did not resist when she stood on tip-toe and lightly kissed him.

Then, she was gone.

Holmes and Watson spent a quiet evening reading the *London Times*, neither mentioning the young woman nor their plans for the coming days.

Watson knew better, having noticed Holmes run his finger pensively across his lips more than once between puffs on his briar.

The detective had comforted their unwitting guest but, in an incalculable way, she had done likewise for him.

There, and Back Again

They met on the decrepit pier at Imperial Beach, California, that spring of 1978.

Francie enjoyed strolling out of an evening nearly 1,500 feet over the Pacific Ocean, watching surfers try to catch a wave, old men lower lobster traps into the water and kids fishing.

Of course, every 100 feet or so, other less savory types offered marijuana or acid for a price, wary of undercover police.

Francie - 16, daughter of a U.S. Navy chief petty officer - had never experimented with drugs. She didn't see the need, enjoying life as she encountered it while moving from city to city as her father was transferred between duty stations.

They lived just a block from the beach in a modest two-bedroom apartment, rather empty at present with the U.S.S. Breckinridge out to sea on maneuvers and her mother visiting relatives in St. Louis.

Francie stayed behind to continue attending school, hoping to finish her junior year in the same building, for once.

Ash blonde with an almost boyish physique, she didn't bother getting interested in boys. "There's no future in it," she told her mother when the subject of the prom came up at dinner in March. "I'd start dating, just get to know the guy, and we'd be gone again."

"You can still have fun while it lasts," objected the greying, buxom matron.

The teen returned to her homework, wondering why her parents didn't understand her.

Leaning over the warped railing on the pier's far end, sun setting over white-capped waves, she deliberated on that puzzle anew. Quite a number of her classmates at Mar Vista High School were military brats, but even they didn't abide with her pragmatic attitude. They smoked when able to sneak cigarettes from their parents, or convince older kids to buy packs for them at the convenience store, drank when they could smuggle a bottle out of the house, and consorted freely with the opposite sex, especially on weekends at the drive-in theater near the interstate highway.

Once she graduated, her life would be her own and she could put down roots in one place.

With a heavy sigh, she attempted to kick a pebble off the slats into the water, instead ramming her sandaled toes against the rail post. She swore, twirling and bouncing from the spasms of pain rushing up her leg.

Colliding with the Hawaiian shirt and cutoff short-clad, barefoot, chestnut-maned figure.

He caught her as she toppled over the wood, holding her shoulders until she regained her balance.

“That’s gotta hurt,” he observed in a delightful baritone, blood trickling from the scrape across her foot.

“Yeah.” A few deep breaths calmed her. “Sorry about that.”

“No big deal.”

“You come to watch the sunset?”

“When I can.”

“Me, too.”

He scrutinized her with intense brown orbs. “There’s plenty of room for both of us.”

“Cool.”

They contemplated the horizon for a few minutes, then he spoke, the right corner of his mouth angled upward. “You may want to get that looked at before long.”

“No need.”

“Your big toe is already bruising. It may be broken.”

“I’ve had worse.”

“You won’t be walking before long.”

In her heart, she knew he was right. Every muscle throbbed with agony, but she didn’t want to miss those last rays of sunlight and the pastel-hued sky.

“Stubborn, aren’t you?” he quipped.

“I guess.”

“You live around here?”

“The first building behind the shops.”

“Okay, then. When you’re ready, I’ll help you home.”

“Thanks.”

They fell silent once more, Francie not really concerned that - come dark - she’d be heading back to the apartment with a total stranger.

“I’m Frances Stone, by the way,” she muttered.

“Pete Meadows.”

“You at San Diego State?”

“Nope. I skipped college and have been running a little bakery down Coronado Avenue the past six years called Peace, Love and Brownies.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Not many... upstanding citizens have. Being open from ten at night until four in the morning, we cater to a more... esoteric crowd.”

“Meaning what?” she prodded.

“Stoners, mostly.”

Francie squinted at his Romanesque nose and elongated, tanned face. A silver Om pendant lay on his hirsute chest, visible beneath the unbuttoned shirt.

“What, they come in after they’ve smoked a joint and they’re hungry?”

“Pretty much.”

“Do you...”

“What, take a puff now and again?”

Her curls bobbed tentatively.

“Sure. It’s great for relaxing and opening the mind. Acid is even better.”

“Shit, dude!”

“Why so uptight, kid? There’s more to life than what those gorgeous hazel eyes can see. You should stop by sometime and listen to the conversation.”

“I’m in bed by 9:30, usually.”

Nightfall enveloping them, though dim lights burned along the pier to illumine their path to the beach, Meadows’ strong right arm supported Francie at the waist while she hobbled along. Her moans - despite attempts to muffle them - so annoyed him, he finally hoisted her up and carried her the rest of the way, including up narrow cement stairs to the second floor apartment.

She wrestled in the pocket of her jeans for her key; he confiscated it and freed the deadbolt, setting her down on the opposite side of the threshold.

“Let me know what night you’d like to come to the shop. I can arrange to have you picked up...” Meadows grinned conspiratorially.

Francie snorted, “You want to get me grounded until I’m 21?”

“Your age doesn’t matter.”

“It might, to the cops.”

“Not to me, even if you’re jail bait.”

“Which I am, and my dad’s in the Navy.”

His eyes twinkled. “Then, you *do* need to escape, even for a few hours.” He stepped inside, forcing her backward, and grabbed a pen off the desk beside the door, offering it and his bare forearm to her. “Write down your number, and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“No.”

“I dig.” He retreated along the balcony. “I’ve got your name and your address, so I can find you in the book.”

The steel panel swung closed as she snarled, “Shit!”

When the phone rang at 5:00 a.m, she dreaded staggering to the living room to answer the summons. Trembling fingers plucked the instrument from its cradle.

Her mother's voice greeted her. "Are you okay, dear?"

"Sure, Mom."

"You sound... upset."

"No, just tired."

"Haven't you been getting to bed early?"

"Sure I have, but it is two hours earlier here than in St. Louis."

The woman giggled. "Oh, I forgot."

The exchange ended, and Francie slumped on the green plaid sofa, soon snoring. A soft knocking roused her past 8:00 - good thing it was Saturday, and no school.

Pete Meadows looked quite respectable in red polo shirt, blue slacks and polished black loafers. A pair of tinted, wire-rimmed shades obscured his eyes.

She didn't care if they were bloodshot. "What do you want?"

"I came to get your parents' permission to take you to breakfast."

"They're... not here," she confessed.

"Oh, early risers?"

"No. They're out of town."

His left eyebrow arched. "You didn't tell me..."

"You didn't ask."

"Ah. True. Would you like to..."

"No, thanks."

"Why not? You need to eat."

"How old are you, Pete?" she queried.

"I'll be 28 next week."

"I'm 16. Why don't you pick on somebody your own age?"

"Because the gals my age only want one thing. They're not interested in... exploring their inner potential."

"What makes you think I am?"

"You enjoy sunsets."

She rolled her eyes, the situation hopeless.

"Go on, get dressed," he insisted. "I'll wait."

"Breakfast, then you take a hike. I don't want you hanging around. My dad would pitch a fit..."

"When is he due back?"

“Next week,” she lied. She had no idea when the Breckinridge would dock at the Naval Station beneath the San Diego Bay Bridge.

“Good. Then we have a few days to...”

Francie leaned against the door to close it, but he easily applied counter pressure and slipped inside.

“Do you think I’m some kind of weirdo, wanting to suck you into a world of drugs and sex?” he pondered.

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know.” She jerked the knob inward, bumping her sore foot. Stifling a scream, she hissed, “Just get out!”

Meadows scooped her off the gold shag carpet and delivered her to the bathroom, positioning her on the edge of the bathtub. Lifting her heel onto the toilet lid, he scowled at the severe discoloration.

“You need to get to the hospital,” he advised.

She whimpered at the prospect. He squatted beside her, wrapping her in a gentle embrace. She wept on his shirt, body wracked with sobs.

Adamant rapping on the door drew him away; Francie made a grab to restrain him but missed, toppling on the tile with an agonized yowl.

White-haired Stella Przybysz, arthritic knuckles poised to pound again on the wood, recoiled when Meadows presented himself.

“Who are you?” she squawked.

“No offense, ma’am, but what business is it of yours?”

“I heard Francie scream...”

“She broke her toe - and possibly other bones - last night. I’m taking her to the hospital.”

Stella moved to enter the apartment; Meadows blocked her access.

“I’m responsible for Francie while her folks are away...”

“I appreciate that, but I’ve got the situation well in hand.”

“I don’t know you, and I can’t trust...”

Francie limped across the living room. “It’s okay, Stell. He’s... cool.”

Meadows smirked, the right corner of his mouth angled upward. “Now, if you’ll excuse us...”

Stella stepped aside, monitoring Francie as she hopped down the stairs, Meadows ahead of her to catch her if she fell.

“I’ll call your mother!” the woman stated.

The teen whipped around so fast, she pitched toward the concrete, saved by agile hands. “Don’t, please! I’ll be fine.”

“When will you be home?”

“I have no idea. You know how long it can take in the emergency room.”

“Call me if you’ll be gone past dinner time.”

“Okay, Stell. Thanks.”

Meadows gingerly guided Francie onto the passenger seat of his 1967 red Mustang before crawling behind the steering wheel.

“Sweet ride,” she praised.

“My dad’s, until he died of cancer.”

“I’m sorry.”

The closest hospital north on I-5 in Chula Vista, the waiting room was jammed with children nursing sports injuries, car accident victims and two elders with flu symptoms. The admissions clerk estimated three hours before Francie would be seen by a doctor.

“Get me the hell out of here,” she grumbled.

Meadows remonstrated, “Are you sure?”

“Definitely.”

“You want me to drive you home?”

A tear trickled down her cheek. “No. I don’t want to be alone.”

“I’m sure Stella would be happy to sit with you,” he chuckled.

“And give me the third degree about why a man was in the apartment when my parents told me not to have friends over? No, thanks.”

“My place?”

“Is it quiet?”

“This time of day, sure.”

In fact, enshrined on the floor above Peace, Love and Brownies, constant traffic along Coronado Avenue could hardly be heard. Meadows deposited Francie on his unmade double bed, propping her swollen appendage on a pile of psychedelic pillows.

“This used to be a recording studio,” he explained. “Industrial strength insulation. How’s that?”

“Better.”

He deliberated briefly. “I don’t think ice will help at this late stage, but it might numb the pain.”

“Don’t you have any aspirin?”

“What I have will not only numb the pain, it’ll make you forget what day it is.”

“Never mind,” she interrupted.

“Here’s the deal: you agree to stay put until we can get that looked at, and I’ll fetch you anything your heart desires.”

“Even a chocolate sundae?”

“Large, if you like.”

“I can live with that, but how will you get me treated?”

“I know a couple nurses, and more than a few paramedics...”

Francie cringed. “I don’t want to know the details.”

“You want something to eat?”

“You got any peanut butter?”

He laughed, leaving the room to return with a cracked china plate bearing a sandwich cut into quarters and a tumbler of milk.

Her turn to snicker. “I thought your sort went in for that vegan crap.”

“Not me.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Would you like sloppy joes for dinner?”

“Depends on how you make the sauce.”

“My own secret recipe,” he grinned.

Before she finished the impromptu lunch, her eyelids drooped, torment draining her energy reserves.

She slept until dusk. The aroma of freshly baked pastries wafted up from the shop below; she dared not risk hopping to the staircase.

As if he sensed her consciousness, Meadows appeared beneath the lintel, wiping his hands on a tea towel. The blue apron slung over his shoulders resembled an abstract painting made with flour dust and chocolate syrup.

“How you feeling?” he asked.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

He provided the necessary assistance, closing the door to allow her some privacy. When he heard the toilet flush, he lingered until she called his name, then restored her to the mattress.

“How’s the soreness?”

“Worse, dammit.”

“A gal I know will be stopping by when her shift ends. She’ll give you a once over.”

“Thanks, Pete. You’re going to a lot of trouble...”

“The world would be a better place if more people cared about one another.”

Francie shifted her weight, unable to get comfortable. “I’ve seen movies where lines like that are a prelude to the couple jumping in bed together.”

“Even if I’d considered that, you’re in no condition for the horizontal mambo.”

“And having no experience in that... arena...”

“You’ve never...”

“Sweet 16 and never been kissed.”

His response startled her. “Good for you.”

Dozing fitfully, she ate little of the tasty sloppy joes he served, and felt nothing of the examination registered nurse Kate Guilfoyle performed.

The girl heard only distorted snippets of the consultation beyond the cracked door.

“She’s in bad shape, Pete. There are at least three toes broken, and possibly some of the metatarsals. She needs an x-ray to be sure. You should’ve left her at the hospital.”

“I’ll take her back in the morning, after...”

“I can watch the shop while you drive her over...”

“Thanks, Kate, but she’s resting quietly...”

The woman, ebony tresses flowing to her slender waist, cursed aloud.

“You’re planning to get her high, so she’ll forget...”

“You don’t approve...”

“The docs will shoot her full of morphine; that’ll get her high enough.”

“And addicted. One hit of acid won’t...”

Gripping the doorframe with white knuckles, Francie rasped, “Won’t do what?”

“Get back to bed!”

“Kate, get me out of here.” She lurched forward. “I thought I could trust this... this...”

Navigating the stairs took 15 minutes, Meadows protesting that he’d been joking. Crawling into Kate’s white Volkswagen Beetle, Francie saw him divert into the shop, customers gathered at the entrance.

The last she saw him, he was plucking donuts from a display case.

She spent four days in the hospital, damage to her foot requiring surgery, a knee-high plaster cast, and six weeks’ recovery on crutches. Within a month of being relieved of that burden, she and her parents moved to Norfolk, Virginia.

Twenty years later, Francie Stone had survived an abusive marriage to a career sailor, killed in a car wreck with their only child. She still limped on her right foot, the broken bones never properly healed. She worked for a Chicago marketing firm as a graphic designer, having settled in the city after being ousted from base housing at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, 40 miles north.

She’d had no real home in her 36 years, and felt no affection for the glass-walled apartment she leased above Lake Shore Drive.

Grey strands mingled with her russet curls; she'd earned them. She'd maintained her trim frame, walking each morning along the beach.

That particular summer Tuesday, she wished she'd packed on the pounds, like her mother before an untimely death from ovarian cancer.

"Francie?"

The baritone rang familiar in her ears; she slowed her pace, eyes darting along the sandy expanse for the source.

Pete Meadows' brown orbs could not be mistaken, coupled with that Romanesque nose. His longish chestnut hair had whitened, he sported a salt-and-pepper beard, and the floral print shirt, jeans and Birkenstocks heralded him still the unrepentant hippie.

"What the hell?" she greeted suspiciously.

"How are you?"

"As well as can be expected. You?"

"I read about your husband and son. I'm sorry."

"No need." When he rose, she retreated six feet. "You living around here?"

"I inherited my uncle's record studio on the south side shortly after you ran out on me." The right edge of his mouth still angled upward when he spoke. "Been here for ages."

"Good for you." She spun toward the water line.

He caught her arm. "I've never forgotten..."

"What? That you wanted to drug me?"

"I was horsing around, dammit! I had a kid sister once. She drowned while surfing near the Imperial Beach pier. I wouldn't have let anything bad happen..."

"Is that why you were out there? Mourning her..."

"That night was the third anniversary of her death. When you hurt yourself, I saw it as a way to make up for not being able to save her..."

Meadows had no reason to lie to her after so long. "When my dad got wind of your stunt from Stella, our neighbor, it took every ounce of strength for me to stop him coming 'round your bakery and killing you."

"I suppose I should thank you, then."

"What's this all about, anyway? Some perverse need for reconciliation?"

He grinned weakly. "Can we start over? A nice dinner, good conversation... Really get to know each other?"

"Why?"

"Because there's something about you I find intriguing. Then, and now."

"You still puff the merry green weed?" she chuckled.

"Once in awhile."

“Not around me.”

He raised his right hand, pledging, “Promise.”

Both independent, self-sufficient and balanced in their respective lifestyles, the pair grew to enjoy each other’s company through that autumn and winter. Intimate meals, leisurely jaunts through Grant Park, classic rock concerts and premieres of bands Meadows discovered erased the old memories that had caused Francie recurring angst.

In a private ceremony, they wed the following June, reveling in a love borne of friendship, raising two children to view the world as a place to grow and learn each and every day.

The Candymaker

Offers.

A lot of offers.

Carlie Jackson had received dozens of offers over the years, to sell franchises of her candy shop, or sell her recipes.

She'd refused every one.

Continuing her father's legacy as the finest candymaker in the American Midwest, she was content to use the best ingredients while producing chocolates that melted in customers' mouths.

The shop - located on the corner of Ash and Main in DeWitt, Iowa, for more than 50 years - garnered national attention after a renowned New York journalist had been stranded with a punctured radiator on the nearby highway. He'd spent his time sampling local fare as the damage was repaired, his review of Carlie's creations going viral on the internet.

Phone calls drove the woman nuts in the days that followed. She repeatedly explained she didn't ship her chocolates, nor did she have a website.

DeWitt became a stopping point for those traveling east or west on Interstate 80, as well as north or south on highway 61. Carlie's sales tripled, her landlord offering to renovate the vacant space next door to double her square footage.

She refused that offer, too.

One offer she didn't refuse: installing a security system.

After finding the lock jimmied on the alley door one night, and the padlock on the supply cupboard wrenched off, she realized it wasn't the money these thieves sought, but her secrets.

Carlie employed two young mothers to tend the shop, their children in school, freeing her to concoct tempting treats in the industrial-style kitchen. When both abruptly fell ill, she suspected foul play, bringing in an off-duty sheriff's deputy rather than selecting replacements from the stream of candidates who mysteriously began applying for positions.

Three months of bizarre mishaps aggravated her blood pressure. Finally, she decided to lay a trap.

In simple, small-town fashion, she hung a sign on the front door, declaring the shop would be closed from July 1-7 for a family wedding in Cedar Rapids.

Anyone wishing to steal her recipes had plenty of notice.

Living in an apartment converted from storage space above the business, Carlie pretended to leave town that Friday evening. After dark, she doubled back

and parked the Toyota Camry in her brother's garage, sneaking into the shop through an unlocked window accessible via the fire escape.

Each night, she lay in wait, her father's 12-gauge shotgun across her lap.

Tiring duty, to be sure. Even sleeping through the day didn't seem to refresh her, but she wanted an end to the disruption of her life once and for all.

That Wednesday, she sipped a cup of strong coffee in the kitchen, the sole illumination a bulb above the sink. When the handle of the alley door rattled, she retreated into the shadows.

Whoever the perpetrator was, he wasn't being very discreet, Carlie quickly grasped. A crowbar jerked the steel-reinforced panel from its frame and it crashed against the wall.

The silhouette stepped over the threshold and moved toward the office, violating that locked door, as well.

Readying the shotgun, Carlie made to follow, when a second figure appeared, back-lit by a street lamp.

The first intruder must've heard the newcomer. He bolted from the office, rushing toward the exit.

Carlie raised the gun's barrel and yelled, "Stop!"

The men collided and, when the shot reverberated through the building, one collapsed on the tile.

The other escaped.

Switching on the lights, the candymaker discovered she'd shot the deputy sheriff full in the chest.

He was already dead.

Carlie dialed 9-1-1 and summoned both police and ambulance. The rest of her night was spent giving statements and mopping up blood.

"Most likely, no charges will be filed," stated DeWitt's police chief. "That'll be up to the district attorney, though."

The Iowa State Police and FBI got involved in the matter, since a law enforcement officer had been killed, and the likelihood the real culprit had used a vehicle stolen in Illinois made the matter a federal crime.

Carlie was grilled *ad infinitum* by a series of flunkies over the course of five days. The candy shop remained closed, cordoned off as a crime scene.

Stuart McFarland arrived on the sixth day, an FBI special agent from Chicago placed in charge of the investigation. Initially, he apologized to Carlie for the delay.

"I had to testify at a murder trial and couldn't get away," he announced, meandering around the kitchen like a puppy sniffing for food.

He reminded Carlie of a sheepdog, for that matter. Longish, light brown hair kept flopping over his forehead when he looked down, causing him to constantly brush it aside. He had a sturdy physique and, oddly, wore his shirt tail untucked beneath his sport coat.

Without perusing reports filed by local or state underlings, he reconstructed the incident using evidence still in place.

“You used double-aught buckshot, correct?” he declared after inspecting the plaster near the shattered alley door.

“That’s right.”

“The man who escaped must’ve been hit, then.”

“I couldn’t tell.”

“The nearest hospital...”

“Is in Clinton, about 20 miles east.”

“Ah, yes. I came through there on the way. We’ll contact them to see if anyone fitting the description of the fugitive sought treatment for his wounds.”

“There... isn’t a description. I never saw his face, because it was dark.”

“Height and weight, at least?”

“He was about six inches taller than Deputy Terrell and reminded me of a football lineman.”

“That’s something, at any rate.” McFarland peered into the office. “He was searching for a safe?”

“There isn’t one,” Carlie replied.

“Then... what...”

“My candy recipes.”

The agent glared at her. “Your *what*?”

“Yeah, I know. It sounds like a twisted version of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Thanks to some uninvited publicity a few months ago, I’ve been targeted...”

“By who?”

“Hell if I know. Isn’t that why you’re here?”

McFarland smirked. “You might say that.” He rifled the receipts and other papers on the battered green metal desk. “So, where do you keep these recipes, if not in a safe?”

Carlie tapped her temple.

“You’ve got them memorized?”

“Since I was a kid, helping my dad. Nothing really special, to be frank, which is why I find these ridiculous attempts so laughable.”

“It’s not laughable when a man is dead.”

Carlie sobered. "True."

"I would've said 'an innocent man' but I can't be positive that Deputy Terrell was innocent in this matter."

"Are you kidding?"

"Not at all. I had a bit of time on my hands waiting to testify, so I pulled up his record - or, what there is of it. He's lived in DeWitt for ten years. Before that, nothing."

"Meaning?"

"He took considerable pains to cover his past."

"Is there any way..."

McFarland's expression brightened. "Oh, yes. You see, it *is* possible to alter one's fingerprints - which Terrell must've done, because records of his application to the sheriff's department don't match any in our database. It's not so easy to alter a person's dental records, even if teeth are extracted or damaged."

"What about having them all pulled and replaced with dentures?" Carlie puzzled.

"Terrell didn't have your evident resourcefulness. I managed to trace him to a prison in northwest Texas, where he served time in the 1990s for grand theft, assault and manslaughter. He escaped in the back of a vending machine delivery truck and, supposedly, vanished off the face of the earth."

"What name did he use then?"

"Carlyle Jackson, Junior."

Carlie froze, speechless.

"What's wrong?"

"My father's favorite uncle was Carlyle Jackson, Senior. I was named after him, as a matter of fact. His son - who I never met - disappeared from his platoon during Operation Desert Storm in Iraq and was presumed dead."

"He deserted his post, actually, securing phony travel orders and flying back to the States. When Military Police attempted to apprehend him at the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, he stole a car, led eight law enforcement agencies on a 150-mile chase, pistol whipped one of the officers who trapped him in a warehouse, and beat a forklift driver to death with a two-by-four."

"Shit! That means he could've been in league with..."

McFarland silenced her with a fleshy hand. "Possibly, but not likely. He's kept his nose clean for a decade..."

"Unless the other guy caught up with him and blackmailed him, threatening to expose his true identity," Carlie countered.

"Or, if Jackson knew of your blood ties, he might've been protecting you."

Either scenario sounded feasible. McFarland completed his inspection of the crime scene, signing off on a sheet which would allow the shop to reopen the next day.

“That is, if you want to resume business, after...” he hinted.

“Of course, I do. Making chocolates is my life.”

“You’re not the least bit traumatized by the incident?”

“What a stupid question! I’m used to pulling myself up by my own boot-straps, and if Terrell... er, Jackson was in the wrong place at the wrong time, it’s not my fault.”

En route to the door, McFarland advised, “We’ll be in touch if we find the real burglar.”

Brilliant summer sun cast shadows on the exit and, unintentionally, Carlie’s eyes followed the FBI agent past the portal.

She gasped, paused to consider, then grabbed her cell phone.

Her call clarified a suspicion that had plagued her since McFarland arrived. The other detectives had been clean-cut and professional, while McFarland had a slovenly appearance. He’d never flashed his badge, either...

On a hunch, she pursued him from the shop, catching him at the diner three doors south. Slipping into a booth on the opposite wall, his back to her, Carlie watched patiently, sipping coffee, until he reached down, moved aside the right half of his sportcoat, and raised his shirt tail to scratch at a large gauze bandage wrapped around his mid-section.

She picked up the cup and saucer and strolled nonchalantly toward his table, though her heart raced.

“So, now that you know the recipes aren’t in writing, what’s your plan?” she grunted.

Blue orbs widened as he lowered a section of club sandwich to its plate. He shifted off his chair, tripping over her extended left foot and falling flat on the linoleum.

Carlie unceremoniously sat on his spine, keeping him pinned. “Call the cops!” she yelled to the waitress.

The police chief and three officers the candymaker knew well responded, placing McFarland in handcuffs and leading him outdoors.

On the sidewalk, Carlie confronted him. “You knew a little too much about my cousin,” she drawled. “So I did a little checking on *you*. You’re the head of security for a Chicago outfit wanting to expand its line of chocolates. You concocted this scheme with good ol’ Junior, after other attempts to get your stooges hired failed. Impersonating an FBI agent - a felony offense that will put

you behind bars for years - was your last effort to get me to reveal where the recipes were stashed. You hadn't factored in my own memory."

"You're right, you... you..." McFarland tried to lunge at her, restrained by strong arms.

"So, not only you, but your bosses will be indicted, for industrial espionage *and* murder."

"Not murder! You shot him!"

"But, he wouldn't have been there if you hadn't convinced him his reformed life would be ruined once you spilled the beans."

McFarland spit at Carlie; she dodged the blob of liquid. Skilled hands thrust him roughly into the back of the patrol car.

The last she saw of him - until the trial where he sat at the defense table with six other executives - was his scowl and sheepdog-style hair dangling over his face.

That publicity, however, only made matters worse for Carlie's business. News media converged on DeWitt, seeking interviews with anyone who would comment on the shop, its owner, and the crime.

Within two months, Carlie agreed to expand into the adjacent space, performing comprehensive background checks on the eight people she hired to staff the counter.

Still, she refused to divulge any of the recipes locked inside her skull, remaining the region's premiere chocolatier.

His Brother's Wife

The sky blue stationery lay on the laminate-surfaced metal dinette table, one paragraph of upright script befuddling.

Rev. Woodbridge's brown eyes scanned the message for the third time. "John," it read, "Should anything happen to me, take care of my wife." No signature, as such, just that swooping "T."

Saturday mornings, the pastor of St. Augustine's Church in Cootehill, County Cavan, liked to enjoy a cup of coffee after breakfast, sorting - undisturbed - through less important mail from the previous week. This particular missive he'd mistaken for an Easter greeting card, given the size and shape of the envelope.

He couldn't recall exactly what day it had been delivered in the post, couldn't imagine what his brother, Tom, expected to transpire.

Sipping from the white ceramic mug, John wondered if this were another of Tom's cruel pranks - one reason the two men hadn't seen each other in over a decade.

He set the sheet aside. There was no return address on the envelope, only a London postmark. Trying to trace the elusive adventurer would be a waste of his very limited time.

As if to emphasize that point, the doorbell chimed.

John shuffled to the vicarage's foyer, bright colors of stained glass glowing in the sunlight. Checking that the belt on his orange terry robe remained tied, he drew the tarnished brass knob inward, to see a lithe woman on the columned porch, a cabby unloading luggage at the curb.

"May I help..."

The salutation died in his throat when the caller's green eyes widened and her knees buckled. She dropped, unconscious, on the welcome mat.

Puzzled, John squatted beside her, joined by the driver of the grey taxi.

"Who is she?" the cleric asked.

"According to her credit card, she's Marian Woodbridge."

John sucked air through grit teeth.

His sister-in-law.

"Help me carry her into the house."

The elder hesitated.

"It's all right. There's ten in it for you."

The prospect of an additional 10 Euros dissolved any doubts the man had about lifting Marian's legs, while John led the way gripping her shoulders. When they deposited her on the parlor sofa, she moaned softly.

John scrambled up carpeted stairs to fetch his wallet, paid the cabby and sent him on his way. Then, he stood on the threshold, contemplating the newcomer.

Russet tresses fanned around her head on the pillow. A pert nose and pink-rouged lips rested between high cheekbones, very feminine, though offset by the untucked red flannel shirt, baggy blue jeans and stained sneakers.

She didn't look malnourished, so why had she fainted?

Eyelids accented by delicate lashes fluttered open. "Where..." came the quiet contralto.

"You're safe."

She strained to focus on her host, then bolted upright. "Oh, my God!"

"What is it? What's wrong?" John pressed.

"You're... you're..."

He waited as she strained to control her excitement.

"Tom never told me you were identical twins!"

She swayed on the cushions; John sank beside her and grasped her shoulders. "Calm yourself, my dear. Tom never told anyone. Even as kids, he liked to shock people when they saw us together for the first time."

Marian managed a weak grin. "He did have a wicked sense of humor."

"Can I get you a cup of tea, or coffee?" John offered.

"Water, please."

"Coming right up."

The pastor felt her eyes upon him as he left the room to fill a tumbler at the kitchen sink. Careful not to spill the contents, he turned to see her beneath the lintel, assessing the outdated appliances.

Liquid sloshed on the tile.

"This reminds me of movies from the 1940s," Marian quipped. "How do you make do?"

"I'm not much of a cook, so it doesn't matter." He plucked a tea towel off its hook, dropped it and used his foot to soak up the puddle.

She sat at the table, moving stacks of mail aside. "Is this okay?"

"If you're more comfortable."

"We never used the good furniture, except on holidays," she noted.

"That harkens back to our mother. Tom and I destroyed two end tables and a recliner before she banned us from that part of the house where guests were welcome."

He noticed her brow furrow. Presenting the glass, he sank on the chair opposite. "Tell me what happened."

“I don’t know, really,” Marian began. “Tom and I got married on the fly six years ago. His wit, intelligence and good looks attracted me like a magnet. No one ever made me laugh so hard.”

Tears trickled from her eyes. John patted her hand.

“Thing is: he was never home much. He told me he was in sales, but I suspected that wasn’t the case by the way he commented on news reports about certain events. Like he had inside information, or something.” She dug a lace-trimmed handkerchief from her jeans and blew her nose. “Then, when the letter came on Tuesday...”

“What letter?”

“Hand delivered by a bloke in black suit and dark glasses, like some spy thriller. ‘If you’re reading this, my darling, I won’t be coming back because I’ve met my fate across the sea. My brother will see you’re taken care of.’”

John stiffened. “So, he knew he was going to die?”

“Sounds like it.”

“Did you check with his friends or co-workers?”

“As for friends, a few of our neighbors in Enfield would join us on rare occasions for cocktails and cards, but beyond that...”

“You’ve no children?” the cleric queried.

“I... had cancer when I was young, and the radiation treatment...”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She inhaled slowly. “I guess it’s for the best.”

“In my profession, I’m supposed to preach about God’s will and all that, but this is too... too...”

“You know, except for the way you comb your hair, you look exactly like him. Even to the way your lip angles upward at the right corner when you speak.”

The abrupt change of topic stunned John. “He was left handed, though, and I’m not.”

“Really?”

He nodded.

“You have a bit more grey at the temples...”

That observation compelled him to avert his gaze from the woman’s searching orbs. “I’m being a horrible host,” he babbled. “Would you like to rest? The spare room is made up...”

“Yes, I think I’m past exhaustion. The past few days have taken their toll.”

Collecting her suitcases, John led her to the second level, the bedroom at the back of the dwelling, overlooking dormant gardens.

“Are those roses on the trellis?” Marian inquired.

“I haven’t the faintest. I’ve been here three years and have never gone out to look.”

“Why?”

“I don’t have a green thumb...”

“Would you mind if I...” She blushed at her presumption, augmenting her natural beauty. “That is, if you’d planned to invite me to stay.”

“You’re my brother’s widow. Anything I can do, just ask.”

She hugged him, and wept anew. Reluctantly, John cradled her in his arms until the sobs subsided, his robe soaked.

“I’m sorry, Reverend...”

He raised her chin level to his. “None of that, now. None of that. I’m simply John to you.”

“Is it true,” she sniffed. “Is it true that you’re John Thomas, and he was Thomas John?”

“A joke on our dad’s part.”

She sank on the double mattress. “Must’ve been some family growing up.”

“Aye, that it was.”

“Your Irish accent is delightful.”

“Yours is more...”

“Brummie,” she acknowledged. “I never could determine Tom’s. He seemed to change it at the drop of a hat.”

“A born mimic, that one. He had all the talent, for that matter.”

“And you got the splendid smile and peace-filled heart.”

He chuckled, “It comes with the collar.” Bending to kiss her forehead, he withdrew.

In his room at the front, he shed his pajamas, showered and dressed in non-clerical t-shirt and sweats. His other Saturday routine involved cleaning the vicarage and, perhaps, a bit of fishing on the nearby Annalee River.

Marian’s presence wouldn’t disrupt that.

Then again, so accustomed to living alone, John couldn’t be sure having another resident in the house wouldn’t create intolerable turmoil.

Even sooner than he expected.

While he scrubbed the bathtub that afternoon, he could hear the clear soprano serenading birds outdoors. He had to open the frosted glass window to see her pulling weeds from weather-beaten flower boxes she’d hauled from the porch into the sunlight.

Without gloves.

John realized her palms would soon be blistered, and he had no first aid kit to treat the wounds.

She washed at the kitchen sink as he cooked a pot of spaghetti for supper. No nail brush handy, earthy residue remained on her skin after three attempts to eradicate it.

So raw her flesh, in fact, she flinched when he passed her the tea towel.

He bent to retrieve the embroidered fabric, tenderly dabbing stray droplets. Moist green orbs met his brown eyes.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you,” he apologized.

“It’s not your fault.” She twisted toward the counter. “This whole... debacle is so ludicrous!”

“Tom’s death?”

“That, and the letters... if he knew he might be in danger, why didn’t he confide in me?”

Firm hands on her biceps, John muttered, “I don’t know, to be honest. Tom... did as he pleased, even when we were young. He always managed to get himself out of trouble, too. I wasn’t so lucky.”

“I don’t feel very lucky, this minute,” Marian lamented. “I thought I’d married a life partner, and look at me!”

“You’re beautiful,” slipped off John’s tongue before he could restrain himself.

Marian turned and, face-to-face with her brother-in-law, she kissed him lightly.

Whatever emotion spurred his reaction, John didn’t debate in that instant. He clutched her at the waist and their mouths devoured each other...

They separated, chests heaving and pulses racing, and stared at each other.

“I’m... sorry,” John muttered. “I never should have taken advantage...”

Marian whistled. “I’m not. Tom never kissed me like that.”

“I’ve... never kissed anyone like that.”

“You mean, you’ve never had a girlfriend?”

The disheveled head shook side-to-side.

“But, you’re incredibly handsome, John! The grey in your dark hair adds a distinguished air to that long, sad face...”

“Sad?”

She considered. “What about ‘serious’?”

“I’ll accept that.”

Entwining her fingers through his, she pressed them to her cheek. “So, what now?”

“I... don’t know.” Pasta boiled onto the stove top. “Dinner?”

They ate in silence, periodically glancing up from their plates, then quickly down again. As he cleared away the dishes, John remarked, “There’s a passage in Matthew’s Gospel about a man marrying his brother’s widow...”

“That was two thousand years ago. Wouldn’t it cause a horrendous scandal today?”

The pastor chuckled. “In some ways, it might alleviate a bit of tension among my congregation. The old women are always pointing out eligible young females after Sunday services... I think they want me to get married.”

“Are you saying...”

“If you’re to remain under my roof, it might not be such a bad idea.”

“Oh, John! I never would’ve suspected you to be so sentimental!” Marian murmured. “You’re a dear!”

“We’ll have to take time to consider the... implications,” he continued, running water over the pile of silverware and glasses. “Everything will need to be quite proper.”

“You’re saying, no... jumping in bed before we...”

He concentrated on the suds. “Correct.”

“I’m fine with that, John. It’ll take time for me to get over... this...”

Ascending the stairs later, the couple paused on the landing to embrace before retiring in their respective bedrooms.

His door closed, John tried to clear the fog from his brain, the prospect of a future shared with a marvelous woman...

He slept well, delivering a rousing sermon during the Sunday morning service. After a late brunch, the pair settled in the parlor to watch a rugby match, both cheering the Irish team, though they ended up losing.

Marian concocted a tasty meal from leftovers in the refrigerator that evening, only to have the chocolate layer cake interrupted by banging on the front door. John laid aside his linen napkin to investigate.

Camel hair overcoat buttoned against the evening chill, the caller squinted at John, backlit by the foyer’s wall sconces. “Excuse me, but I have a puncture, and my mobile’s battery is dead. Could I...”

Waved inside, the man shivered as he scrutinized the interior. “I’m sorry to disturb your dinner...”

“No trouble at all. The phone is in my den.” John pointed to the left.

“Thanks.” Highly polished black boots took two steps forward, then spun. “It is Tom, isn’t it? Tom Woodbridge?”

Marian, observing the scene from the dining room, flung a plate at the intruder, striking him above the right ear. He crumpled on the boards.

“What the...” John gasped.

Grasping the pastor’s arm, Marian dragged him toward the kitchen.

“Quick, we’ve got to get out of here.”

“But, why...”

“Don’t you see? He thought you were Tom.”

“What has that got to do...”

“If they’re looking for Tom here, that means they followed me in order to find him.”

“Who followed you?”

“How should I know?” Marian moaned.

John halted their progress, firmly planting his stockinged feet. “I think you *do* know. What’s this all about?”

Gunshots provided a startling answer.

As windows shattered and projectiles lodged in the plaster, Marian leapt into John’s embrace. He groped for the cellar door knob, yanking her down dark steps into the musty chamber, securing the entrance with a metal bar fitted into the framework.

John perched Marian atop a lopsided crate. “Tell me everything.”

She didn’t respond until her heart ceased pounding. “About a month ago,” she whispered, “I got the feeling I was being shadowed to and from our house. Never the same person twice, but always... there.”

“Okay. Go on.”

“At least once a day, the phone would ring, with someone asking for Tom. When I’d tell the caller he was away for work, they’d say, ‘No, he’s not.’ Almost as if they were trying to make me suspicious, hoping I’d check on him.”

“Did you?”

“No. It was then I realized I had no place to start. He had a mobile, but left it home when he traveled. I didn’t know his code, so I couldn’t check who he’d been ringing...”

“What brought you here, really?”

“Like I said: Tom’s letter.”

“Delivered by some unknown person...”

Marian shuddered. “God, I’ve been so stupid!”

“Shhh,” he warned. “No, you haven’t. You reacted no differently than any wife, thinking her husband dead.”

“What do you mean?”

“They - whoever they are - intercepted Tom’s letter, from the postman, probably. They read it and, believing it a cipher, thought you’d lead them to him. Not knowing I’m Tom’s twin, they presumed...”

“But, why?”

The tell-tale sirens of Garda vehicles drowned out their exchange. A cadre of footsteps rattling the rafters, the pair risked emerging from their concealment.

“Reverend Woodbridge, are you all right?” the uniformed sergeant demanded when he confronted them.

“Yes, Padraig,” John replied.

Marian squeaked, “Did you catch any of the men...”

“Only the one in the hall, ma’am.”

The pastor puzzled, “Did he have any explanation...”

“No, and he probably won’t.”

Both John and Marian recognized that voice, gazing past the Garda at Tom, smirking from the doorway.

“What the devil?” John barked.

Tom traversed the hall, clasping John’s digits enthusiastically. “Sorry, brother. It couldn’t be helped. My cover was blown by a double agent, and this was the only way I could devise to thwart the crew who wanted me dead.”

John’s left fist connected with Tom’s jaw, slamming the latter into the cupboard. Then, he gently ushered Marian into the parlor. “You’re more than welcome to remain here after... after...”

“That’s kind of you, John.”

“No man should deliberately put his wife in danger... I always suspected that git had a heartless streak...”

Tom staggered in and propped himself against the desk. “Don’t you see, national security was at risk?”

“To hell with national security!” John countered. “This lovely woman...”

Garda officers making their exit with the prisoner, Tom shot the deadbolt before resuming the discussion, nose-to-nose with his twin.

Marian, from a vantage point on the sofa, couldn’t repress her laughter. Had she not learned the truth within the past 36 hours, the mirrored profiles might have driven her to a nervous breakdown.

“You’re in love with her!” Tom postulated.

“What would be wrong with that, since we both thought you dead, you blighter!” roared John. “She’s a beautiful, sensitive woman...”

“And, you’re a priest!”

“The Church of Ireland allows their clerics to wed.”

Tom blinked. “Really?”

“Yes, you dolt. But, then, you never cared about religion.”

“With Mom Jewish and Dad Church of England? It was too confusing, so...”

Marian stepped between them. “If an atheist can pose a question...”

John deferred to her. “Of course.”

“How’d you end up here?”

“To get away from... him, mostly, I came over to study at Trinity College. I found my faith and continued through the seminary.”

She squeezed his forearm. “Good for you.”

“Did he turn you into an atheist?” John prodded.

Tom supplied, “We were both... jaded when we met.”

“It’s never too late to rectify that.”

“After meeting you, I might think about it,” Marian stated. She kissed his cheek, then allowed Tom to lead her to the foyer.

John accompanied them. “If this jackeen ever does kick the bucket, my house is yours.”

He watched from the porch as they slid onto the rear seat of the Garda supervisor’s vehicle. Then, Tom alighted, jogging up the walk. “She forgot her cases.”

The brothers carted the load from the bedroom to the car’s boot. Their hug expressed genuine affection, then the car vanished into the darkness.

John’s single thought as he mounted the steps: what a sermon this tale would make!

The Sheriff's Solution

Residents of Yeats didn't need a newspaper to confirm the gruesome murders plaguing their small Midwestern town.

Yeats County Sheriff Dina Gold didn't need elected officials on her neck about solving the crimes. She'd been investigating since the first body was found in the county landfill six weeks earlier - her own teenaged cousin.

Five more corpses had been discovered in the last month, none of them killed on site, but moved from where their throats had been slit and hearts cut out, discarded like unwanted garbage.

Dina acknowledged that, when she ran for sheriff after her uncle retired from the post three years earlier, she hadn't expected anything so heinous. Yes, she'd taken forensic courses at the state college, but this... defied textbooks and written exams. She would've rather contented herself with arresting the occasional drunk driver, or citing speeders along Main Street.

She'd grown up in Yeats and, while the population of 1,243 had its share of eccentric characters, none ever displayed tendencies toward violence.

Except, perhaps, after the weekly high school football game, if the home team lost.

The town boasted restaurants featuring home cooking, two taverns, a bakery, grocery store, the Horizons club - a fraternal organization tasked with preserving local history and lands - a shuttered plow factory and, beyond the collection of modest houses, corn fields, dairy and pig farms.

That May Tuesday morning, Dina stood behind her lopsided metal desk in the two-room structure on Second Avenue, sipping coffee as she stared out the window. More than anything, she wanted to ignore her father's incessant harangue...

She turned to the man, fit for his age and grey at the temples. "Dad, please. For one, I'm hamstrung by the state coroner's office. Until I have the autopsy reports..."

"By this time, Ted would've had a noose 'round the murderers' necks," Quincy Gold persisted.

"Uncle Ted believed in... frontier justice, and that doesn't work in today's world. I've got to follow the law."

"You've got to *enforce* the law!"

"I know, Dad. I know."

"Get on with it, then, before somebody else gets killed."

She drained the ceramic mug. "I will, if you go on home."

Quincy's face flushed with embarrassment at this scolding from his daughter. "Fine."

He may have left angry; Dina could deal with such emotions later. She grabbed her keys and headed for the police cruiser - purchased from a surplus sale at the state capital - parked at the curb.

Clutching for the door handle, she stopped abruptly.

"Everything okay, Dee?" called Gene Nichols, loading open bins with fresh fruits and vegetables across the street.

"Yeah, just peachy."

Or, not. Her father had mentioned "murderers" - plural - in their discussion.

Could more than one person be involved in these horrendous crimes?

She leaned against the Crown Victoria's hood, focused on nothing in particular, brain cells churning. None of the victims, all teenagers, weighed more than 150 pounds, so one man - relatively strong - could have dumped the bodies after... or, two smaller individuals working together...

"Dammit," she swore quietly, finally sliding behind the wheel.

En route to the Yeats Junior-Senior High complex, built after she'd graduated from the dilapidated brick edifice on Sixth Avenue, Dina noticed activity at the Horizons building - odd for that hour.

Of course, the club rented out their meeting room for weddings and private parties, and the unmarked panel truck might be delivering foodstuffs for such an occasion.

Or...

The cruiser veered down the alley and parked a block over. She alighted and strolled across the neatly-manicured lawn.

Out-of-state plates on the vehicle augmented her suspicions. Not that the club stored high-tech equipment beyond a sound system and big screen television, but the members were known to have impromptu poker tournaments to fund various projects...

"Good morning, guys," she hailed as a pair of trim young men exited through the kitchen, buckets and bottles of chemicals in tow. "Spring cleaning?"

"The water heater burst," stammered one, throwing the supplies into the truck.

"Really? I hadn't heard."

"Overnight. Barney called us to get here on the double."

Horizons' president, Barney Orr, liked to stay on top of things. The premises having no alarm system, though, how would he have known...

Unless he'd been there when it happened.

On a Monday?

Dina chuckled to herself; she'd come to suspect everyone since pinning on the badge. Totally innocent activities around Yeats she now viewed with eyes searching for improprieties.

She could also blame the stacks of mystery novels she'd read as a kid, or classic film noirs on cable channels.

As she retreated, she glanced over her shoulder, nonetheless. Dripping from the plastic handles, not clear liquid, but pinkish...

Someone could've spilled ketchup...

Or cut themselves making the repairs.

Or...

Reaching the car, she snatched the microphone off the radio set.

"Where have you been?" squealed Wendy, the dispatcher/secretary, through the speaker.

"Checking out a couple characters."

"Well, another body's been found at Ulney's farm."

"Shit!"

Lights flashing, though loathe to disrupt the town's idyll with the blaring siren, Dina raced north to the homestead where Matt Ulney's family had planted crops for more than a century.

Auburn-haired Lizzie Ulney cowered inside the screen door with three youngsters; balding Matt met the sheriff on the porch and guided her to the barbed wire fence surrounding a goat pen. Suspended from one of the wooden posts by a bloody shirt collar, the mutilated body of Nash Kirkley, star quarterback.

Son of Yeats' mayor.

"Do me a favor, Matt," she instructed. "Go and call the coroner."

"I..."

"Please!"

"Okay."

The man trudged toward the red clapboard farmhouse, leaving Dina to rifle the corpse's shirt and jean pockets - nothing, not even loose change or keys - and examine his limbs.

The blood had congealed, yet dew coated his clothing, leading her to believe he'd been placed there in the wee hours. Indentations around his wrists raised the likelihood he'd been bound with rope or handcuffs prior to...

No skin or hair beneath his fingernails, he hadn't struggled.

Who would allow themselves to be killed willingly?

Dina had read about hazing incidents at the university, where frat house pledges were forced to imbibe excessive amounts of alcohol, or bound and gagged and led through a maze, or beaten.

This didn't smack of such hijinks. A viciousness prompted these murders.

The amount of blood warranted a trail of droplets somewhere, Dina surmised. She scanned the dirt and gravel: nothing.

Wherever the killing occurred, the mess left behind...

The woman stiffened.

Matt approached from the house. "The coroner will be here as soon as he finishes breakfast."

Green eyes rolled skyward. Not that speed mattered at this point, Dina mused.

"Where were you last night, Matt?" she queried.

"At the club."

"Poker?"

A slight hesitation. "Business meeting."

"Were you there when the water heater blew?"

"What?" The farmer's expression confirmed the declaration came as a complete surprise.

"Who else was at the meeting?"

"Barney, Gene, Sam, Wills..."

"Not my dad?" Dina pressed.

Silence.

"Strange to have a business meeting without the club treasurer."

"He... told Barney he wasn't feeling well."

The sheriff forced a laugh. "Mom's meatloaf, probably."

"Right."

That clinched it. Somehow, Horizons was involved in this debacle...

She waited two hours for the coroner, who spent until noon snapping photos and drawing diagrams. He estimated the time of death as 10:00 the previous night.

"Any updates on the reports from the previous deaths?" Dina puzzled after Kirkley was loaded into the minivan.

"You haven't received them?" countered the white-haired elder.

"Nope."

"Odd. Each one was overnighted as soon as it was completed."

"Do you have them?"

"Sure. The state emails me copies."

“Forward them to me, would you?” She moved toward the cruiser. “Can you summarize them from memory?”

He squinted, as if forcing his brain to function. “The two girls were pregnant.”

Dina blanched. “What?”

“Just a few weeks, but unmistakable. The guys... nothing abnormal beyond the wounds. No drugs, no alcohol...”

“Shit!”

On the drive to her office, Dina deliberated whether Frank Toohey, the postman - and a member of Horizons - would have diverted the priority mail envelopes to prevent her from completing her investigation.

The fish stunk from the head down, she griped mutely.

She would gut it, that very night.

“Dad,” she spoke into the phone that afternoon, having perused autopsy reports on her computer. “Are the guys going to be at the club tonight?”

“Some of them,” Quincy replied.

“Get that phone chain started, on the pretext of a membership meeting or something. I want every last member there.”

“What’s up, girl?”

“Trust me, Dad. It’s important.”

She disconnected, to find the door open and a man watching her from the threshold, the right corner of his mouth angled upward.

“May I help you?” she asked.

A resonant baritone raised goosebumps on her arms. “I heard about the girl sheriff and wanted to see for myself.”

Dina bit her lip and inhaled slowly. “You new in town?”

“Stan Fowler’s brother-in-law.”

“Ah, visiting?”

He nodded the chestnut-framed head. Round wire-rimmed spectacles rested on a Romanesque nose, brown eyes intense. A wide forehead tapered along a stubbly jaw line to a narrow chin. He wore a tight-fitting navy polo shirt, relaxed-fit Levis and square-toed black leather boots.

On instinct, Dina circled the desk and extended her hand. He clasped it firmly, dirt caked beneath his fingernails. His right middle finger bore a Yeats High class ring.

“What year?” she wondered.

“Before you were born,” he quipped.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

He bid her farewell and departed; she monitored his ambling gait along Main Street until he entered the bakery.

That ring didn't have sufficient wear to be more than a year or two old, much less 30.

If circumstances weren't weird enough, they got stranger as evening progressed. Pedestrians vanished from the sidewalks long before sunset. The bell tolled ominously from the town's lone church tower, windows lit, women and children streaming inside for an unscheduled prayer service.

Dina lingered on the corner of Main and First, sensing almost tangible tension.

Anticipation spurred her to arrive early at Horizons; she resisted the impulse and made her circuit of shops, checking the locks to ensure against vandalism.

Fowler's in-law lounged on a park bench, two squirrels fighting ten feet up an oak trunk the only noise.

“Amy will be waiting dinner for you,” Dina stated in passing.

“No dinner tonight. More important matters in the offing.”

She plopped beside him on peeling wood slats. “You know, when we met earlier, you didn't mention your name.”

That crooked smile intrigued her. “Harold Bishop.”

The lie would remain unexposed - for the moment. Dina had known Stan Fowler's wife since childhood, and her maiden name wasn't Bishop. Stan himself had no sisters...

“Have a nice evening, Mr. Bishop,” she mumbled, continuing toward the club.

“Oh, I will.”

She felt him dogging her as she cut through the alley between the dry goods store and the florist shop. Unfastening the strap on her holster, she spun to face him. “Something I can do for you?”

“You're doing plenty, as it is.”

“How so?”

“Watching that tight ass wiggling... very inspiring.”

The recollection flooded her brain: a federal wanted poster featuring a younger version of this... deviant, his crooked grin distinctive.

Though nearly the same height, he outweighed her by 40 pounds and, when he pinned her to the bricks, smothering her mouth with kisses, she could barely move.

Like any human, though, he had to come up for air and, easing his grip slightly, she hooked her left foot around his leg and jerked him off balance.

He slammed into a row of aluminum trash cans, toppling them.

Dina had no intention of running from this convicted - and escaped - felon. Handcuffs at the ready, she trapped his right wrist, twisting it until those grubby digits touched his shoulder blade.

He yowled in anguish.

“All right, Harry. What’s your game?” she hissed in his ear.

He rasped, “Just... enjoying the scenery.”

“Bullshit.” She slammed his nose against the wall. “You’re supposed to waylay me from reaching the club...”

“That’s not the half of it.”

Deft fingers secured the manacles before she twirled him outward.

“Explain.”

“No.”

“Fine. We’ll have this out in public.”

Bishop reacted as if relishing that prospect. He accompanied Dina willingly to the street, crossing the pavement and entering the starkly decorated hall.

Waiting in formation - by seniority, Dina guessed - 37 Horizons members, including her father, wore defiant masks.

The sheriff threw Bishop at Barney Orr’s feet. “You’ve got five minutes to cough up the details, before the state police arrive with vans to haul your cans to jail.”

“You’re bluffing,” growled Gene Nichols.

“Try me.”

Quincy Gold stepped forward. “Daughter, you can’t...”

“You’re a bunch of murderers!”

“We didn’t...” Orr responded, pointing at Bishop. “He’s the one...”

“He may have performed the deeds, sick bastard that he is, but you sanctioned his actions!”

Grumbling from the ranks.

“My theory would be that you’re trying to... maintain the moral order in town, disposing of boys and girls who have engaged in promiscuous behavior. But, being inherent cowards, you contracted with this” - she nudged Bishop with her shoe - “to do your dirty work.”

“You have no proof!” Orr declared.

Dina chuckled facetiously. “I saw the cleaning crew this morning, Barney. A few simple forensic tests would detect blood residue on the floor...”

Frightened feet shuffled toward the side door.

The pistol fired a warning shot into the plaster over their heads, freezing the men in their tracks.

“If word got out about this, your wives would crack your skulls with their rolling pins,” Dina proclaimed. “It would destroy the town’s economy if you were imprisoned...”

Quincy approached. “What do you propose?”

The woman moved toward a stack of folding chairs, selecting one and positioning it in their midst. From the seat, she scrutinized the lot. “If we make this joker the scapegoat, he’d spill the beans as part of a plea bargain, then you’d all be on the hook.”

“Agreed,” concurred Stan Fowler.

Frank Toohey grunted, “Somebody’s got to take the fall.”

“You should have thought of that before you appointed yourselves judge and jury,” Dina chided.

“We could draw straws,” suggested Quincy.

“Oh, Dad, please!”

Orr supplied, “He’s killed while escaping your custody.”

“Or” - she glared down at the obstinate prisoner - “while trying to rape me.”

Grins along the line, and nods of approval.

“You’re pathetic,” Dina spat. “The other condition: Horizons is disbanded, effective immediately.”

Orr stretched out his plump paw; Dina brushed it aside, bending to hoist Bishop off the boards and steer him from the structure.

“You’ll need to find yourselves a new sheriff, too,” were her parting words before the double doors slammed.

In the darkness, Dina ushered Harry Bishop to her office, where a cell converted from a walk-in closet held a narrow bed. She shoved him inside, securing the lock.

“You lied to them?” he muttered.

“Nope.”

“You’re going to kill me?”

She sat at the desk, typing furiously on the keyboard until the computer screen flashed with the information she sought.

“Damn, dude!” she gasped, reading the tiny font. “You’re a real lunatic!”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She leaned back on the chair, shoes propped on the desk. “To think, I almost considered...”

“What?”

When she didn’t answer, he rattled the iron bars with strength sufficient to wrench hinges loose from the concrete wall.

Dina didn’t flinch when he strode toward her. Calloused fingers aimed for the cruiser’s keys, then retracted.

“You want it, don’t you?” he smirked, glasses sliding down his nose.

She shrugged.

Powerful hands yanked her upright, trapping her in an unyielding embrace. He pressed his mouth atop hers, a sensation she’d not experienced in ages.

The gunshot drove him backward; he crumpled in a heap against the filing cabinet.

Dina Gold unfastened the badge from her uniform shirt, laid it on the blotter beside the revolver and left the building, the town and the state.

The Hamilton Effect

Emerging from the Richard Rodgers Theatre that sunny afternoon, Francois Abellard brushed a stray tear from his cheek. Most girls in the school group dabbed their eyes with tissues, as well, so he didn't feel quite so self-conscious.

The high schoolers from Manhattan's LaSalle Academy had attended a special performance of the musical *Hamilton*, funded by grants from various nonprofit organizations which would bring a total of 20,000 youngsters to the production.

Conveyed via hip-hop and other styles, the history lesson of the Broadway triumph prompted a myriad of thoughts for the teen, an exchange student from the hurricane-ravaged island of Haiti.

Hamilton's modest origins in the Caribbean, a hurricane directly impacting his future, mirrored Abellard's own in many ways. Over a decade of hurricanes had trashed most of his country and its schools, and he'd been fortunate to be offered a chance to study in New York, given his own exceptional grades and creativity.

As a line of yellow buses pulled into traffic on West 46th Street, Francois stared out the window at passing buildings.

Classmate Brenda Wilson flopped on the seat beside him. "Wasn't that fantastic, Frank?" she gushed.

"Definitely."

"It made me want to dance, sing..."

"I'm worried about how I can help my people out of their difficulties," he countered.

"You always seem to focus on that. Can't you lighten up a bit?"

His countenance whipped toward the girl. "How can I 'lighten up' as you say? I'm here, living in comfort, while my family and friends struggle with no electricity and little food."

"We're your friends, too, Frank." Dejected, Brenda returned to the front of the vehicle.

Abellard's entire experience in New York had, indeed, been colored by his privileged status. He lived with the Musgraves in a renovated brownstone, ate well - if simply - three times every day, and had more than enough clothes in the closet of his own bedroom.

His parents, according to their last letter, were still working to replace the roof on their damaged shack.

Francois suffered frequent pangs of guilt, wishing he could bring everyone he loved to New York to share his good fortune.

The U.S. immigration policy would not allow that.

A nation built by immigrants, as *Hamilton* emphasized, no longer welcomed immigrants so freely, the boy realized.

In the following days, English, math and history instructors peppered their curriculum with notes taken from the musical. Studying the poetry of hip-hop was offset by a review of the national banking system.

Student assignments gave them an opportunity to compose their own lyrics, and research details about the first Treasury Secretary's life which weren't included in the stage presentation.

Deep into reading about Hamilton's youth in the Caribbean, Francois ignored the knock on his door that Saturday afternoon.

Mrs. Musgrave poked her head inside, waving a large manila envelope. "Mail for you, Frank," she announced.

Her sweetness could not be faulted, he admitted, though her timing often interrupted his concentration, as now.

"Thanks." He rolled the desk chair closer and accepted the missive. He knew she would wait until he opened it, and his curiosity was aroused by the return address: a foundation in Boston.

The letter clipped to brochures about Boston College offered him a full-ride academic scholarship to that prestigious university, based on his standardized test performance and in class.

"Damn!" he swore, tossing aside the paperwork.

Mrs. Musgrave scowled. "What's wrong, dear?"

"They offer me thousands of dollars to attend their school, when that money could feed and house my family for ten years!"

"But, with a proper education, you could support your family far longer than that," the woman reasoned.

"You may be right, but the people of Haiti need help now, not years from now. Many of them can work to support themselves, if the businesses receive the assistance they need to reopen and their customers can rebuild their homes."

"I see your point, but there's nothing..."

Francois shot upright. "There *has* to be something I can do! Alexander Hamilton fought for what he believed. I must do the same."

Clearing his desk with a swipe of angered hands, fists pounded the surface. Mrs. Musgrave withdrew from the chamber, concerned but powerless to soothe his angst.

Casting aside the required homework, Abellard used the laptop computer in the Musgraves' living room to gather contact information for local, state and national politicians. He commenced a program of emails, phone calls and personal meetings, using every spare moment to intercede for his island.

Just as Alexander Hamilton encountered resistance to his plans, so Francois received polite refusals and contrived excuses to deny his request for assistance. Even the foundation that offered him the scholarship declined to convert those funds into aid for Haiti, based on "accounting restrictions" according to their reply to his inquiry.

One elected official had the effrontery to claim the United States had done more than its share to assist Haiti in the wake of the devastation. "If Haitians want to enjoy their lives, they should relocate somewhere hurricanes do not strike so frequently," came the voice through the phone.

"Would you tell the people of Florida the same?" Francois retorted before he could restrain himself.

The line went dead.

Through April, May and early June, Francois pressed for even a small positive response. Nonprofit organizations were too mired in overhead and their own projects to make an impact, and private citizens were distracted by their own pet charities.

"Whatever happened to brother caring for brother?" Francois lamented to Brenda during a rehearsal for commencement a warm Friday morning.

"It's no different than in Hamilton's day," she stated. "Those who profess to be Christians - or whatever religion - can find convenient ways to ignore the poor and needy, while still attending Sunday services and pretending to be pious. That's why I told my folks I wouldn't go to church with them anymore. Makes me sick."

Francois packed his duffel bag that evening with the minimum essentials, telling the Musgraves to sell the rest of his clothes and donate the money to a worthy cause. Their objections to him missing graduation were dismissed as inconsequential, citing Hamilton's lack of formal education.

Before he boarded the freighter on which he'd work his way home, reports of a rash of bank robberies were already being broadcast.

"You've got a heavy load there, lad," remarked the captain as Francois mounted the gangway.

"Nothing I can't handle."

Weeks later, a flurry of construction commenced on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince, with dwellings refurbished and shop shelves filled with supplies. That

particular neighborhood shared their surplus with others in a cascade effect and, while not bringing true prosperity, allowed many families to survive and thrive.

Francois Abellard's parents never asked about the cash he delivered upon his return. He did not attend college, but joined the crews working to rebuild Haiti on more solid foundations.

The Giggers

If pop filters hadn't been in place, the microphones would have been ruined - listeners possibly deafened - when we busted out laughing.

That we did so with amazing frequency, though, was the reason our morning radio show had grown from a local effort, based in Milwaukee, to a nationally syndicated phenomenon.

Growing up in England might have contributed to our popularity, bringing the British off-color sense of humor with us when our parents, retired employees of the American Embassy in London, returned to the home of their birth.

Jeffrey, spelled Geoffrey by more than one of his primary school teachers, the eldest, excelled on the stage, even earning a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts prior to being transplanted across the Atlantic. His exceptional good looks - longish chestnut mane combed from a left part, wide forehead tapering along his jawline to a narrow chin, Romanesque nose, sparkling brown eyes and thick brows, thin physique - drew women to him like a magnet.

The second son, Gray, established his reputation by being a class clown. As a child, he also tended to shed his trousers while in the house, earning him the name "Starkers." Though Jeffrey, nicknamed Golden Bollocks for his incredible luck, never surpassed 5'8", Gray lagged behind by four inches even at age 20. An unruly russet mop rarely stayed combed, his nose overly large for his face, his body gangly.

Then, there was me: Angie. I'd grown up considering the boys my brothers, but I was an adopted foster child. My parents had been friends of the Millers, working in various embassy departments until my ol' man had been promoted to undersecretary of something and transferred to Berlin.

They'd been traveling via train to make arrangements for the move when an avalanche derailed the cars, killing all aboard. I'd been three at the time.

To the boys, I was always "the kid."

Still, I could make them laugh as hard as they did me. Mr. Miller - Dad, as I came to call him - shot video of us cutting up while we were supposed to be doing chores or homework of an evening. He'd be trying to restrain his outbursts so hard, the camera would shake uncontrollably.

Jeffrey decided, when we returned to the States, to attend the University of Wisconsin - I haven't the slightest idea why. Gray and I moved into a two bedroom apartment with him, and I secured a job at the classic rock radio station as front desk receptionist.

By chance, I was playing a recording of we three horsing around when the programming manager chanced to pass. He stopped to listen and asked me who the act was. When I told him, he invited us to audition for the new morning show being launched, since the previous A.M. disc jockey had accepted a position in Los Angeles.

The rest, as they say, is history. G.B. (Jeffrey - Golden Bollocks), Starkers and the Kid took to the air December 1, completely ignoring the preponderance of Christmas music and having a grand ol' time in our glass paneled studio.

Fan mail poured in; somehow, I was consigned to open and read the letters. Our response, sadly, was mass printed from the computer with scanned signatures, the new receptionist tasked with stuffing and addressing envelopes.

Within six months, we'd gone national. Promoters contacted us about a live tour; by consensus, we refused. It had never been our intention to become famous. We simply liked having fun. Getting paid for it a decided perk, Jeffrey still pursued his acting with community theatre troupes; Gray used his artistic talents to write children's books in his off hours.

Me? I became a bona fide workaholic. Though we could finally afford a staff to handle publicity and fan mail, I continued to spend the hours of 3:00 to 6:00 each day compiling an outline of our topics for the next day's show.

Not that we didn't regularly go "off script" if the fancy struck us. Some of the exchanges bordered on the disgusting, to my chagrin. At least, we'd trained ourselves to avoid swear words, keeping the FCC off our necks.

We'd purchased a converted brownstone in downtown Milwaukee, each occupying our own floor to allow some measure of privacy. Preferring to retire early, I would be dozing on my pillows when Gray, upstairs, would slam onto his bed with whatever female he'd lured home. I knew Jeffrey behaved in similar fashion by the stray hosiery or discarded bras I'd find when rousting him out in the wee hours for the drive across town.

Coffee in plentiful supply on the triangular desk where boom mics hung above our well-padded seats - three hours sitting required a level of comfort - we sometimes only had to glance at each other to start giggling. The audience loved this aspect of the broadcast; they could laugh at us while we laughed at ourselves.

In our third season on-air, the title was amended to "The Gigglers - starring G.B., Starkers and the Kid." By our sixth year, we were simply "The Gigglers."

That we never tired of each other's company, nor engaged in any serious arguments, pleased our producers. Yes, offers came in for solo gigs; Jeffrey had gained a reputation for his use of various British accents and his performances on the stage, bringing him to the attention of Hollywood directors. Gray's artwork

branched out to include political cartoons and a comic strip featuring us as caricatures - "The Gigglers."

For my part, I contented myself catching an occasional classic movie on cable, or driving my sweet red 1966 Mustang at top speed along deserted country roads.

That autumn day Jeffrey announced he would be proposing marriage to his red haired, lithe, bubble-brained girlfriend, everything changed.

Not that he intended to leave the show, or even add his wife to the mix.

In my heart of hearts, I realized in the wake of that declaration that I'd been in love with him for 23 years.

He was, after all, not my blood. He'd shown me kindness when I'd been utterly alone. Nights when I'd awaken from bad dreams, he would come into my room and comfort me by - of course - making me laugh. He had been, and remained, the ideal consort.

"We need to talk," I told him before he left for the theatre, a dress rehearsal scheduled for his latest play.

He kissed me on the forehead. "Meet you for dinner after?"

"I'll be near death at that hour."

"Then, lunch after the show."

In the interim, my chest ached and a flock of butterflies fought for an escape from my stomach.

What I never expected: Gray tapped at my door just past 10:00, wrapped in his plaid bathrobe, a sheepish grin twisting his features.

"Everything okay?" I wondered.

"I've been thinking."

Always a dangerous prospect, I chuckled inwardly. "About what?"

"If Jeff is going to be getting married, that clears the way for you and me..."

I felt myself squinting in the dimness of the lone bedside lamp. "You and me... what?"

"I've loved you for years, Ang. You know that."

Not the appropriate time to giggle, but it couldn't be helped. Gray was... a piece of work, a truly creative, eccentric soul. Trying to constrain him within the bonds of matrimony would annihilate his spirit.

"There's... no way..." I stammered, at a loss for words.

He sank on the edge of the mattress. "I never said anything before, because Jeff had mentioned he might..."

"Might what?"

“He bought a ring two years ago, but never found the right moment... Now, it’s a moot point.”

“Shit!” I scrambled from beneath the quilt and stormed up two flights of stairs.

Shoving wide the door without knocking, I interrupted the hirsute Jeffrey in his striped blue boxers, waiting for the water in the shower stall to heat up.

“What the hell!” he roared.

“Why didn’t you ever muster up the courage to propose to *me*?” I demanded.

Stunned, he cranked off the faucet. “I... didn’t think you’d have me.”

Not so much a guffaw as an effort to prevent myself from choking at the ridiculousness of the situation, I punched the plaster, making a sizable dent. Blood poured from my knuckles, and I let fly a stream of unladylike expletives.

Gray, watching from the threshold, fetched a tea towel from the kitchenette in lieu of bandages. “Are you sure you want to do this?” he whispered, tying the cloth awkwardly around my hand.

Over his shoulder, I growled at Jeffrey, “We’ve lived in close quarters for more than two decades! What warped logic makes you think I wouldn’t...”

“You... never made the slightest gesture in that direction,” he babbled.

“Idiot!” Three strides brought me nose-to-nose with him. I seized his biceps and planted a kiss on his lips that he couldn’t mistake for sisterly affection. “Is that what you mean by a gesture?”

I saw him swallow his Adam’s apple. “That... helps.”

Gray’s sheep-dog blue eyes, though, smoldered when I turned. It struck me that, were I to engage in a romance with Jeffrey, Gray would be mortally wounded, and our professional relationship would be irreparably damaged, not to mention our personal bonds.

“Oh, forget it!” I grunted, making a hasty exit.

The next morning, G.B. and Starkers hit the airwaves alone, a dismal failure without my steadying influence and copious prompts. I caught a flight to San Francisco that afternoon, living off my savings until depleted, then hiring on as a clerk at a delightful Fisherman’s Wharf shop called “Chocolate Heaven”.

I enjoyed a modicum of peace, but I haven’t giggled since...

A Dancer's House

Green-hued spotlights followed two figures across the stage, the backdrop a 50s-era campus quad.

"There's no way on earth I'll be able to stand behind that podium during the debate and verbalize even one coherent thought!" the slim blonde lamented. "My tongue feels like it's tied in knots!"

Her slender companion clutched her arm, halting her progress. "This is no time to get nervous, kid. Remember your exercises."

The girl took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. "Moses supposes his toeses are roses..."

"Moses supposes erroneously," the ebony-mopped college letterman joined his voice to hers, and they continued, "Moses, he knowses his toeses aren't roses, as Moses supposes his toeses to be."

A brassy, amateur orchestra struck up the tune, and the couple launched into a song and dance copied precisely from the film *Singin' in the Rain*.

G.K. Donen, a black fedora pulled low over his brow, observed the scene from behind the high school auditorium's last row of seats. He noticed the boy stumble a couple times, but the girl...

He flipped through the programme to find her name: Sal Lockwood. Ironic, since the character she emulated had been named Don Lockwood.

A standing ovation brought the show to a standstill when the music faded. From the wings, Donen noticed the director, an old college chum, signal the pair to reprise the dance as an encore.

They didn't just repeat the same moves, but built upon them for an even more tremendous finale.

Had they planned this, or merely improvised? Donen wondered, backing from the chamber and slipping down the corridor toward the science labs that doubled as dressing rooms.

Someone backstage had thrown Sal a towel; she wiped perspiration from her face and hands as her partner escorted her through the door.

She nearly collided with Donen, scrutinizing the intruder's somber mien beneath the wide brim.

"Parents can pick up their kids after the final curtain," she instructed.

He grunted. "I need a word."

"I don't know you."

The teen boy attempted to draw Sal away; Donen broke his hold. "Hey, what's the big idea?" the pubescent tenor protested.

“In private,” Donen stated, nodding Sal along the fluorescent-lit hall.
She shrugged at her classmate and accompanied the middle-aged visitor 20 yards along the tile. “Well?”
“How long have you been a dancer?”
“Nearly 15 years.”
“And you’re how old?”
“Not that it’s any of your business, but I turn 18 on Tuesday.”
“You want a career on Broadway?”
Sal sneered, “I’m not stupid enough to hope for the impossible.”
Donen introduced himself.
She recognized the moniker: famed director and producer of musicals.
“Why in hell are you even here?”
“Mike Wilson and I did a run in summer stock years ago. He’s so impressed with your talent, he invited me to come.”
A stray trickle of moisture dampened Sal’s cheek anew. She dabbed it self-consciously. “I’ll... have to thank him.”
“Indeed.” Donen turned toward the exit. “After the show, I’ll be waiting.”
Sal could barely concentrate on her last routine, heart thumping in her chest through the entire second act. The chorus members and leads shed their costumes in favor of street clothes and a cast party, while she stared in the bathroom mirror, cold cream marring her fresh features.
“Me?” she kept repeating. “Why me?”
Finally, she realized how long she’d dawdled when the lights flickered. The janitor yelled through the door, “C’mon kids! Time to lock up!”
Her blue flannel shirt mis-buttoned and coat slung over her shoulder, she shoved the panic bar on the steel panel, emerging into the chill, moonless night. A silver Cadillac limousine idled at the curb.
“Holy cow!” she gasped as Donen stepped from the rear seat. She crawled onto the leather beside him. “Where are we going?”
“Your new home.”
She stiffened. “What?”
“Don’t worry. I’ve already discussed it with your parents.”
“And they agreed?” Sal gulped.
“Why wouldn’t they? A full scholarship...”
Nearly an hour’s journey took the pair west to Lake Geneva, the vehicle turning onto a paved concrete drive leading up a steep incline.

The house at the crest of the hill stunned Sal motionless. The chauffeur couldn't close the door because she remained with one foot on the ground, gaping at the log edifice.

"C'mon, Miss Lockwood," Donen urged.

"I..."

"It's just my summer place."

"But, it's not summer."

He chuckled, leading her beneath the arched portico.

Her befuddlement increased exponentially. They entered between floors, climbing two sets of carpeted stairs to the top level. The walls facing the lake, glistening with reflections of stray lights, were ceiling-high glass opening onto a balcony longer than most theater stages. Opposite, mirrors and a barre confirmed the studio's purpose, along with the polished pine boards.

"Just... for dancing?" she sputtered.

He nodded a well-groomed greying head.

Below, a massive stone fireplace warmed a paneled living room against the crisp air, with rustic furnishings and a bedroom at each end. Two lower stories contained a kitchen and dining room facing the waterfront, then an underground recording studio with more equipment than some radio stations.

Sal sank on the bottom step. "Judas Priest!"

"Basic, but functional," Donen commented. "Get a good night's sleep. We start in the morning."

"Start what?"

"Your training."

"What kind of training?"

"I'm going to drill you until your feet bleed, but you'll be ready for the auditions come fall."

"What about graduation?"

"You've already graduated."

"I..."

He lifted her upright. "It's a meaningless piece of paper. Don't worry about it."

She ascended the stairs, butterflies of doubt fluttering in her stomach. To be yanked from everything familiar for a chance to perform in New York...

Would the pain be worth it?

And, pain there was. Donen a perfectionist, he would show her a choreographed number, then expect her to mimic it instantly. When she didn't, she

found herself on the receiving end of a tirade of vitriol that brought tears to her eyes.

Nor did the lean elder apologize after the fact. He would leave her with the music looping on the sound system, to stretch at the barre, shuffle around the floor in high-heeled tap shoes - when she'd been used to flats - and execute the complicated sequences.

When she watched her reflection in the mirrors, muscles tensed. If she focused on the vista opposite, however, a peace invaded her soul and she connected with the syncopated rhythms blasting through the speakers.

In rare moments of leisure she stole during the day, she used her cell phone to search Donen's name on the internet: he'd sponsored and/or trained five of the six highest paid stars on Broadway, each of whom credited him with instilling in them an unrivaled sense of discipline.

Sal wasn't sure she wanted that kind of discipline.

"You don't know what you want," Donen scoffed one evening, hovering over her shoulder as she scribbled in her diary near the fireplace.

She moaned, "I thought I did, 'til you came along."

"What, precisely, was that?"

"The senior prom, commencement, a summer job to earn coin before leaving for the University of Wisconsin..."

"A waste of time and money." He squatted beside the armchair. "Why spend four years studying subjects you'll never use, when Juilliard will mold you into the consummate artiste?"

"I danced for fun." She squinted blue eyes at him. "I never thought it would be a form of torture."

"Don't you want to have a career that you also enjoy, instead of drudging in an office for a paycheck?"

"I..."

"Go to bed," he commanded.

"It's only 8:00."

"Go to bed, or go home. The choice is yours."

She shot off the seat. "None of this has been my choice! Some kind of underhanded deal..."

"Not at all. Equate what happened to you with scouts recruiting the school's varsity quarterback to Notre Dame..."

"Our quarterback sucked," she spat.

"You know what I mean."

Sal sighed. "I suppose so."

“We’ve got a long day tomorrow, so get some sleep.”

“Longer than normal?”

“We fly to New York first thing.”

“From O’Hare?”

“No. Private plane.”

She glanced at him with new respect, grasping the extent of his wealth, before retiring to a chamber decorated with autographed photos of stage and screen stars.

The flight east didn’t limit her to watching clouds pass. Most of the main cabin had been refitted to accommodate dance rehearsals and, once they soared at 15,000 feet, Donen unbuckled his belt.

“Do you know how to polka?”

“Sure. My mom’s family is Polish.”

One click of a remote started the song, and he took Sal in his arms, whirling her around the floor. Not merely the standard four-count pattern, he threw in twirls, reverses and variations that left her breathless.

Only her father had danced at that speed at countless weddings they’d attended during her adolescence.

“We’ll work on that,” Donen grumbled, settling at a desk to study a script.

“What’s up with this, anyway?” panted Sal from a swivel chair.

“I’m debating whether you should take a gap year.”

“A gap year? From what?”

“The Juilliard audition.”

“But... all these weeks...”

“This trip is to finalize details for a new show, set to open in September. I want you to star.”

She swallowed her heart. “Star?”

“The other gals with the stamina to handle the grind are already committed to other projects.”

“Mr. Donen, I... where would I live? What would I...”

He rose, towering six inches above her. “Don’t worry about any of those minor details. I’ve got everything well in hand.”

“But... I don’t want someone else taking care of my life for me. I want to do it on my own.”

Brown eyes flashed with fleeting anger, then esteem. “You’re right, of course. I’ve seen far too many talented youngsters crippled by overprotective managers or parents, and look what I’ve done to you!” He considered. “Today, I have meetings, and you can spend the time sightseeing with my secretary, if that’s

okay, so you don't get lost or mugged. Tomorrow, we'll have auditions and, if you can hold your own against the more seasoned prospects, we'll sign the contracts and you can have a week to find your own place and get settled."

"That'll... be fine." Sal pitched sideways, jolted by momentary turbulence. When she recovered her balance, she grit her teeth. "How am I expected to repay you for your... kindness?"

He chuckled. "You've read those tabloid reports about me taking unfair advantage of my proteges. I'll give you their phone numbers and you can ask them yourself. None of it's true. My reward comes from introducing vibrant talent to the world, bringing the public a bit of joy."

She cocked her blonde head. "Really?"

He kissed her forehead. "Really."

The music resumed, and they matched the polka beat until the pilot announced the Cessna's descent.

Gadgets

Ricky Gates was my first school-girl crush. Classmates in kindergarten at Coquillard Elementary School, we vied for teacher's pet honors as top students.

He far outstripped me, nonetheless - an absolute genius. I prided myself that I could devour Sherlock Holmes stories and unabridged novels by Alexandre Dumas, but he was already designing and building useful gadgets, robots and steam engines. The day he kissed me on the playground after our team won an impromptu soccer game, I swore to never wash my face again.

Within a year, he'd been transferred to an accelerated program, graduating high school *summa cum laude* at age 11. I missed him so much when he left for MIT on a full scholarship. He'd been the only kid with whom I could converse intelligently.

His parting gift: a copy of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*. He'd inscribed the singular blue metallic bookmark, "To my one love; I'll come back for you someday."

I didn't hold him to that promise, but I did hold onto the book through junior high, high school and college. Settled in Pittsburgh as a communications specialist for Duquesne University, the volume held a prominent position on a shelf beside my desk in the cramped efficiency apartment south of the Allegheny River.

Over the course of 20 years, I hadn't thought much about Ricky, enjoying my share of romances, definitely more mature in nature than the childlike tenderness he and I had shared. None of those men impressed me enough, however, to accept the periodic offers of marriage.

I gradually fell into a dull routine similar to my coworkers, and the majority of human beings. The daily commute via public transportation took longer, but cost less than owning and insuring a car. I lived two blocks from a supermarket, so my cupboards were always full.

Pedestrian traffic could be as frustrating as the vehicular type, being jostled during the walk to and from the bus stop, dodging mothers with baby strollers or joggers distracted by music blaring through ear buds. Faces passed in a blur; I didn't have time to notice the haggard expressions or eyes glued to smartphones.

Maybe that's why I didn't detect the figure garbed in black who pursued me along Railroad Street on a sultry summer Friday afternoon.

Up the elevator to my apartment, I dumped my briefcase beside the dinette table and collapsed on the tan leather sofa, not bothering to kick off my shoes. A can of soda would have quenched my thirst, but I hadn't the energy to walk ten feet to the refrigerator.

The knock roused me from dozing; I was tempted to pretend I wasn't home. A second, more insistent rapping motivated me enough to move.

What happened next makes me shudder to this day.

I pulled open the door on a man of medium height, trim, head crowned by wavy chestnut hair, a wide forehead tapering to a narrow chin. Brown eyes behind ochre tinted, wire-rimmed spectacles bored into me like a drill above the distinguished, Romanesque nose. He smiled, his lips angling upward at the right corner.

His two paces forward compelled me to reverse course. He kicked the panel closed with a booted foot, seized my shoulders and pulled me into a passionate embrace.

I can only equate the kiss to a crate of fireworks lit by accident, spraying sparks in all directions on Independence Day. Nor did I have the strength to resist this assault.

Finally, he released me, and I dropped, a lead weight on the recliner, staring. He gazed down at me, his grin reflecting a satisfaction I didn't grasp.

"I've waited years for that," he declared in a rich baritone.

A niggling sensation at the nape of my neck prevented me from threatening to call the police.

"You're just as beautiful as the last time I saw you through the van window," he continued.

I stammered a thanks, wracking my brain for a memory...

He knelt before me on the worn shag carpet, encompassing my hands within his elegant fingers. "I was really afraid some egghead would've taken you out of circulation by now, but the absence of a ring..."

For lack of a better option, I rose. "Would you like a drink?"

"Never acquired a taste for it." Sliding onto the sofa, he drew me onto his lap, planting his lips firmly on mine. "This is the taste I've missed."

At this rate, we'd be stretched on the bed before dusk if I didn't bring the fiasco to a halt. Roughly, I shoved him away.

"Who the hell are you?" I squealed.

In response, he straightened, crossed to the desk and pulled *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* from its perch. He flipped pages and extracted the bookmark, waving it playfully.

"Ricky?" I croaked.

He chuckled, presenting me the flat metal, which I detected was interwoven with circuitry. "I thought you might've ditched it."

"What's that got to do with..."

“It was an early version of a tracking device I’ve since perfected for... military use.”

“You mean, you traced me by the book?”

Replacing it at the beginning of *The Sign of Four*, he laid the volume on the desk. “I told you I’d come for you.”

Befuddled, I slumped against the wall.

“We’ll fly to Vegas and be married on Friday...” he announced.

“You can’t be serious!”

“Very much so, my darling. I swore, once I earned my first million, I’d make you my bride.”

“Million? How?”

“Plural, actually. Inventing useful little gadgets for the highest bidder.”

Strong arms around my waist, his heat ignited flames within my soul I could neither quench nor ignore.

“Ricky... please!” I protested when I was able to catch my breath.

Banging on the door separated us. I straightened my disheveled ivory blouse and grey slacks, unsuccessful in slowing the pounding in my chest. On the threshold, my nosy neighbor - an elderly grandmother - scowled.

“I got a call from Jean downstairs about some suspicious looking man following you home,” she burred. “Is everything okay?”

“Perfectly fine, Mrs. Nolan.”

She tried to peek past the gap, but Ricky had sidled beyond her view. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“I will, and thanks.”

Ricky and I laughed simultaneously once the deadbolt clicked. “You’d better get packed,” he advised.

Calmer, I led him to the metal and glass dinette, positioning him on one end, myself on the other, beyond his reach. “Ricky, there’s no way I can drop everything...”

“There’s no way ordinary working stiffs can abandon their dull existence for the ultimate adventure,” he countered. “You’re not ordinary, by any means, and crave the unknown as much as I do.”

He spoke the truth, as if he’d been my constant companion since childhood. My hesitance stemmed from enforced conformity, a condition I despised with every fiber of my being.

Traversing the floor to full-length windows, I contemplated the river. He came up behind me, his breath caressing my ear.

“There’s so much more to life than this - especially for those of us who have touched genius.”

Arguing would prove futile, I knew. The argument would be with my own self, in fact.

The word lifted a long-standing burden from my soul.

“Yes.”

The Pharmacist's Mate

Vivian parked her black Mini Cooper in a designated spot on Third Street, alighting in the pre-dawn glow. At the intersection with Oak Avenue, a construction crew unloaded equipment from the yellow panel truck emblazoned with the city's seal.

Traffic would be snarled today, thanks to the detour, the woman mused as she unlocked the aging brick edifice's service door.

Agile fingers reached through the crack, flipping a wall switch. Fluorescent ceiling fixtures hummed to life. Deactivating the alarm system required far less than the allotted 30 seconds; only the presence of controlled substances required such technology. In this sad excuse for a metropolis, thieves didn't bother with the declining Main Street enterprises.

High priority for the fourth-generation owner of Sheridan Pharmacy and Sweets: a pot of coffee. She navigated narrow aisles of over-the-counter pain killers, toothpaste and decongestants to the soda fountain, pulling a canister of aromatic beans from below the counter.

Low on filters, she noticed, scooping a large portion of South American Robusta into the grinder. Retrieving the clean glass decanter from the dish rack, she glanced up at the figure seated on the center stool.

"Good morning!" he greeted in a slightly accented baritone.

Trim form attired in a paisley long-sleeve shirt and jeans, a mop of wavy jet black hair crowned the wide forehead that tapered along a tanned jawline to a narrow chin. Penetrating brown eyes beneath thick brows, partly obscured by tinted oval wire-rimmed spectacles, gazed at her, the Romanesque nose casting a shadow on thin lips angled upward at the right corner in a pleasant grin.

Viv's heart skipped a beat. "Did I forget to lock the front door last night?" she wondered aloud.

"No."

"Then, how..." Water overran the pot, and she concentrated momentarily on the faucet and mopping up the excess. "We don't open until nine o'clock."

"I thought we could enjoy a cup of coffee together."

Pouring liquid into the reservoir, she added the grounds and activated the machine. Wiping delicate hands on a fresh tea towel, she stared at this customer. A vague memory stirred. "I've seen you before."

"But you don't remember where?"

Sandy tresses nodded. Not an image of flesh and blood did her mind's eye conjure, but a rendering in charcoal...

“Just a sec!” She scurried toward the barrier that divided a restricted area from the rest of the structure. Hurdling the bolted waist-high gate, she rummaged in a cupboard behind shelves of pills and syrups, extracting a spiral-bound sketchbook, edges tattered.

Most of the pages were filled with Brian Sheridan’s doodlings, scratched in pencil during lulls in business over the four decades he ran the pharmacy. His granddaughter had spent many similar lulls perusing the rough artwork the past seven years. She flipped thick sheets until she located the object of her search: a decidedly professional portrait of the man who, that very minute, waited for his coffee! Scrawled in the patriarch’s hand below the slightly smudged shirt collar: “Jules.”

She carried the book forward, holding it up for him to see.

“Ol’ Brian was a hell of an artist,” he remarked.

Viv declared, “It’s dated 1974.”

“Why does that upset you?”

“Because you look exactly the same...”

“Most people would consider that a fortunate happenstance.”

The coffee maker signaled completion of its cycle with a shrill tone. Setting the sketchbook on the laminate surface, Viv pulled two ceramic mugs from a rack and filled them. She presented one to this enigma. “Cream or sugar?”

“Black is fine,” he replied, studying the drawing. “I don’t think he got my mouth quite right.”

Viv sipped the brew; her body welcomed the caffeine with a burst of energy. “I’ve got a lot to do before...”

“Take a moment and come, watch the sunrise with me,” countered Jules, tucking the book under his arm.

“I...”

He extended elegant digits, and she groaned. If it speeded the process of being rid of him, so she could get on with her day...

The deadbolt on the glass entryway had, indeed, been secured, leading Viv to question anew how this intruder had gained access to the shop. Stepping into the chill May air, she turned east, her view blocked by the city courthouse.

“No, over here,” came Jules’ voice, urging her farther along the thoroughfare.

She edged in that direction and, no more had she reached the wrought iron bench placed at the bus stop in memory of some former dignitary, a horrendous explosion rocked the entire downtown district.

Shards of glass, wood splinters, roof shingles and chunks of brick rained upon the pair. Yanked beneath the bench for protection, Viv watched as her family's livelihood vanished in shafts of fire.

"What the hell..." she squealed, trying to wrestle free of a powerful grip. Jules warned, "Not yet!"

"Are you telling me you knew this was going to happen?" she raged.

"Calm yourself, my dear."

"What kind of a lunatic are you? Sneak into my place and plant a bomb..."

"It wasn't a bomb," he assured her. "The construction crew..."

Sirens drowned out his explanation. The debris storm diminished; she crawled through the wreckage and straightened. "Oh, my God..."

She jogged toward the intersection, squinted against lingering dust clouds at the mutilated truck and melted concrete where once there'd been a sidewalk. A fire engine had already reached the scene, housed only two blocks away.

"They hit a gas main," Viv murmured.

"Correct."

She faced Jules, barely an inch separating their noses. "But, how..."

"Come, sit."

"I don't want to sit!" she wept. "This is a disaster!"

Gentle pressure steered her toward the bench, lowering her on slats he'd brushed clean. A crisply folded linen handkerchief provided a means to dab her tears.

"I knew about this accident because..."

She raised her head, glaring at him. "Because?"

"Because I've been associated with your family for generations."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"I was your great-grandfather's guardian angel."

Viv took a moment to swallow her heart. "You're out of your mind!"

"Why do you think your grandfather had a chance to draw me all those years ago?"

She couldn't find the words to express her doubt.

"After your grandmother... lost her youngest son in childbirth, I spent a week with Brian, preventing him from committing suicide before she came home from hospital. Sketching me after dinner one evening proved a kind of therapy..."

"Shit!"

"Your noble forebears implored me to protect you..."

"If that's the case, what about the pharmacy?"

"It can always be rebuilt." Jules presented the sketchbook to her. "This..."

Trembling hands clutched it to her chest. “Will always be proof of your existence.”

Police converged on the neighborhood, hunting for survivors; the angel made to depart.

She seized his sleeve. “You can’t go yet!”

“I must. My presence would... create unintended consequences.”

Viv surveyed the rubble of historic structures. “I can pretty much write off my car,” she acknowledged. “We can walk to my apartment. I, at least, owe you a cup of coffee.”

That beatific smile, albeit cock-eyed, eased the tension. “I’d really love an authentic Green River, like Brian used to make.”

“I grew up on them,” she chuckled. “I’ve got all the fixin’s in my kitchen.”

Hands clasped, they strolled half a mile past twisted steel girders, beheaded mannequins, mangled asphalt and rebar, Viv entranced by his tales of her family’s history.

When they clinked tumblers filled with fizzing green soda, she choked, “Thank you.”

“You are most definitely welcome,” Jules responded. “They’re counting on you to do great things, you know.”

He beamed at the lime and lemon taste of Viv’s concoction; his physical manifestation dissipated as the crystal dangling from the bay window, catching a shaft of sunlight, burst into millions of tiny rainbows.