

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

A Collection of Stories

by

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Part III

The Volatile Virtuoso

“He’s doing *what?*” Glynis squealed into the phone.
She listened as the message was repeated.

“I’ll be right down.”

The ash blonde executive didn’t wait for the elevator; her legs still held enough life to propel her down three flights of stairs. When she burst into the recording studio’s control room, she leaned across the sound board to glare through thick plate glass.

Alone in the chamber beyond, Henry Schroeder blew riffs on a clarinet, other woodwinds, strings and horns propped on enough chairs to accommodate an orchestra.

“What set him off this time?” Glynis rumbled.

Dan Albom, the department head, replied, “The conductor wouldn’t comply with his directions on the tempo.”

Straightening and smoothing the skirt of her black wool business suit, Glynis shuddered. “It’s Gershwin, for Christ’s sake! How radical does he want to get?”

“Pretty radical. What we already heard doesn’t sound much like Gershwin.”

“All right, I’ll talk to him.”

She composed herself before venturing into the brightly lit room; Schroeder glanced up from his seat.

“So, you heard,” he sniffed.

“Look, Hank. You may be my sister’s brother-in-law, but I can’t cut you any slack when you piss off forty union musicians who believe the only way to resolve a dispute is to walk out on their contract.”

“I didn’t mean for that to happen, Glyn, but you’ll see I’m right about this. Besides” - he flashed a grin that angled his mouth upward at the right corner and showed straight teeth - “it’s given me a great idea.”

“What, pray tell?”

“I play the entire piece by myself.”

“A piano solo?” she grumbled. “No way. It’s been done too many times.”

“No, Glyn. I play each *part* myself. Violin, sax, bull fiddle, drums...”

She considered the shaggy, russet maned, bearded musician. Ever since her sister had married Gary Schroeder, this youngest sibling had come to her attention. He’d tagged along to family parties, displaying prodigious talent on a variety of instruments, mostly percussion. For him to mount such an ambitious project, when

she was simply humoring him by agreeing to produce his premiere track of Gershwin's *Concerto in F*...

Sinking on the folding chair beside him, her blue eyes met sparkling brown orbs. "You really think you could pull it off?"

He nodded.

"It would be a great marketing gimmick."

"I don't want it treated like a gimmick, Glyn. It'd be a true measure of my talent."

She patted his shoulder. "Sure, sure, Hank. When do you want to start?"

"Now."

"Now?" She rose. "What about practice?"

His expression, a mixture of disdain and pride, confirmed he wouldn't admit to needing any preparation.

"Okay. I'll have the boys set up."

Over the course of the next seven days, Schroeder proved himself a madman - an *inspired* madman. An impromptu audience gathered each morning in the sound booth, as he sat in the center of an otherwise empty studio, headphones covering his ears, performing each section of the master score to precision.

He'd started with the piano, then added the timpani, filling in with cymbals, trombone, cello, piccolo, trumpets and many others.

Glynis listened from her office as the piece fleshed itself out, impressed with the skill and emotion poured into each new segment. Sunday evening, the last fragments of the score in place, she invited Schroeder to dinner.

He refused. Slumped in the wing-backed leather armchair near her inlaid elm desk, she sensed his exhaustion.

"I think it'll be a best seller," Glynis proclaimed.

He rasped, "I want to do another."

"Another what?"

"One of my own compositions. Doesn't every recording need a 'B' side?"

"Not these days, with everything digital."

"Let me do it, anyway."

"What do you have in mind?" she queried.

His suggestion raised goosebumps of dread on her arms.

"Why not?" he countered her refusal.

"It's not music. It's..."

"Trash?"

"About as close as you can get," Glynis opined.

He glared at her. "It's an indictment of the current world situation."

“True.”

“Let me record it, anyway. If you really don’t like it, we won’t include it on the release.”

The potential for a tidy profit from his Gershwin on the horizon, she acquiesced - reluctantly. “It’ll be a closed studio, no spectators. That way, if it doesn’t work out, we can bury it...”

“You’re saying, you’ll mix it yourself?” Schroeder puzzled.

“Sure, why not? It’s how I got my start.”

Closed, and after regular working hours. Tuesday and Wednesday night, the sounds of city life inaudible through insulated walls, Glynis monitored input from the microphone as the middle-aged virtuoso laid down brass and percussion tracks. Louis Armstrong or Glenn Miller it wasn’t, but she saw a glimmer of potential in the raw discordance...

College students latched onto Schroeder’s *Schism* with astonishing enthusiasm, downloading it from internet music sites at sufficiently high rates to get it noticed by major radio stations. At a tad over six minutes, it merited frequent airplay, and Glynis read the email declaring it worthy of a platinum designation weeks later.

She called Schroeder to her office, a bucket of champagne iced on the sideboard for the celebration.

“You’re a hit,” she declared, raising her glass in toast.

He set aside the carbonated wine, not drinking. “Now, you have faith in me, because I’ve lined your pockets,” he scoffed.

“You’re benefitting from this, too,” Glynis retorted. “There’s a check on the blotter...”

“You think that’s why I went through such hell...”

“Hell?” Rather than crush the crystal in her fist, she perched it on the marble fireplace mantle. “I thought you loved what you do.”

He averted his gaze. “It’s pure torture, Glyn. Taking the pain of the world and transforming it into something... intangible...”

She clasped his hands. “I had no idea...”

“No, all those holidays when I sat across the dining room table from you, those jam sessions with your drunken cousins when I tried to get them to stick to a melody for more than five seconds... It took me cajoling Mia into asking a favor for you to really notice...”

Glynis feared the next, but he jerked free of her grasp and slid onto the bench of the Pleyel baby grand in the corner. What he played made her soul soar - a lilting throwback to the idealistic 1930s, yet not commercial in this modern era.

As the notes faded, she stood behind him. He spun and drew her onto his lap.

“Was that...” she stammered.

“For your ears only, to paraphrase Ian Fleming.”

He kissed her; she extricated herself from the embrace. She couldn't allow sentiment to distract her from the business at hand.

“Mia warned me you're hard-hearted,” Schroeder grunted en route to the door.

“Your next recording session is Monday,” Glynis announced. “Will you be ready?”

He halted. “I've got a stack of stuff waiting to be brought to life.”

“Good.”

As he vanished beyond the darkly-varnished panel, she dropped on the bench. Together, they could make a mark on the music scene, but she could never succumb to his off-beat charms.

While her heart pounded in her chest, she meandered to the full-length window and contemplated the sunset.

The stigma of a woman not being able to have a balanced existence - work and family - made her cringe. She'd been attracted to Schroeder since they'd stood as maid of honor and best man at Mia and Gary's wedding eight years earlier. She couldn't risk compromising his talent with churning emotions, especially if that little etude he'd played was any indication of the type of songs he'd create if they got romantically involved.

She had to think of the bottom line.

“Oh, to hell with that.”

As darkness fell, she turned to snatch her coat off the buttoned-leather chair. Her hand was caught by elegant digits: Schroeder had crept across the carpet, observed her interior turmoil.

“You talk to yourself a lot?” he quipped.

Mortified that she might've uttered secret thoughts aloud, she blushed.

“Ah, you're beautiful,” he drawled.

The next ten years netted Hank Schroeder, as produced by Glynis Lindstrom, eighteen multi-platinum recordings, and a dozen other golds. His performances as a guest with orchestras around the globe earned him rave reviews.

Glynis contented herself with remaining behind the scenes, preserving the professional standards, ensuring they saved enough for a peaceful retirement.

When Schroeder's plane crashed, hit by seagulls off the coast of Nova Scotia as it flew from a command performance in London, she didn't regret a minute, though her heart felt like it had been torn to shreds.

Activated through a panel on the desk, her personal sound system played the piece he'd composed for her, one final time.

She wept.

Spy Gone Rogue

The musicians - wearing their avant garde version of 1940s fashion, cigarettes jutting from their lips - clustered at the intersection, near the union hall door. The figure in black shuffled past, struggling to maintain a grip on the unwieldy cardboard box.

She heard their titters, their jokes. One dared another to offer assistance as the woman waited for the traffic signal.

Then, the reluctant baritone, "Let me take that, Sister."

Relieving herself of the burden, she flashed a winsome smile at the lanky, chestnut-crowned drummer, whose sticks stuck up from his baggy trouser hip pocket like a peacock's tail. "Thanks."

"Where are you going?"

The light turned green; she stepped off the concrete, thrusting a finger at a red brick storefront. "Just there. We're opening a soup kitchen..."

"In this neighborhood?" the man croaked.

She nodded her starched wimple, veil fluttering in the breeze. "You and your... friends will be more than welcome."

"Some of 'em need a decent meal, for sure, but... their language might offend people."

Untangling a key ring from the oversized rosary dangling from her tri-knotted white cord belt, she unlocked the door and held it wide for her unwitting assistant to set the load on a dusty table.

"When we're up and running, I owe you a cup of coffee," she beamed.

He tugged his forelock in salute. "I'll... look forward to it."

The glass panel closed, she snapped the deadbolt and watched him return to the dozen clearly berating their peer. She sighed. "Contact made."

That contact had been a long time in the planning. The U.S. government knew military secrets were being leaked to German agents in the country, and Delia Evans had been instrumental in fitting together the pieces of a very intricate puzzle. Musicians, usually 4F for the draft because of their drug use or flat feet, could mingle freely with patrons at clubs or dances, even the USO canteens frequented by soldiers and sailors. Casual remarks could thwart an entire campaign, and lead to countless unnecessary deaths.

Delia imagined Cy Richards hollowing out a drum stick, tucking in film negatives or documents and leaving it "accidentally" on a shelf or in a crevice for a foreign agent to spirit off to some hidden short wave radio.

Her associates at the OSS, the Office of Strategic Services, discounted her theory as nonsense. Relegated to the file room, she concocted this operation to not merely prove them wrong, but disrupt a flow of vital information.

Shuffling through dust and debris in the former bakery she'd rented at her own expense to monitor comings and goings at the American Federation of Musicians office, she stripped off the traditional head covering, her brunette curls drenched in sweat. The wool habit made her skin itch; she pulled on a lightweight summer frock and exited through the service door to the alley.

The next phase of her plan: auditioning brass, woodwinds and drummers for a fictitious house band at a new club opening downtown. She placed the call from a pay phone, scheduling the session for that afternoon in the city park.

From among the 50 who showed up, Delia arbitrarily selected groups of eight, instructing them to set up on the band shell stage and perform the music she'd acquired - mostly Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey numbers. None of them thought it odd that a woman would be making the final decision regarding their talent, except Cy Richards.

She'd heard him play many times over the course of her nine month investigation. On this occasion, he seemed to intentionally foul up the rhythms, as if distracted. Dismissing him after the first song, he descended the steps and crossed to the folding table on which she took notes.

"Those peepers are unmistakable," he declared. "Sister Mary Faker."

Feigning innocence would serve no purpose, Delia realized. Her cover had been blown through her own fault.

"Looks like rain, guys," she bluffed the other musicians. "We'll have to do this another time."

As the rabble dispersed, the agent feared for her life. Richards sank on a wooden chair beside her and, when she tried to make a break, restrained her with an iron grip.

"Now, we're going to walk like two old friends to that phony soup kitchen and have a little chat," Richards snarled.

Sunlight filtered through smudged display windows, Delia found herself on the floor, the nun's garb tossed on her lap, an undeniable accusation.

"So?" she hissed. "I was just doing my job."

"And incommoding me in mine."

She squinted at him. "What?"

He yanked a wallet from his trousers, flipping it open to a government-issued identification card.

From the OSS.

Cy Richards - real name: Barney Oglivie - worked in a different division than Delia, which is why their paths had never previously crossed. "I'm on the trail of the traitors, and you almost blew a year's labor!" he chided.

"I... didn't know."

He chuckled, his lips curving upward at the right corner. "There'd been rumors an agent had gone rogue, but your little stunt... even an idiot would've seen through *that!*" He kicked the black garments with the toe of his sneaker.

"What are you going to do?" she wondered.

"Send you back to D.C. on the next train."

"But..."

He lifted her by her shoulders and pressed her against the wall. "That is, after..."

"After?"

"I teach you just what can happen to little girls who play with fire."

She stumbled from the shop well past midnight, once again wearing the habit and veil. A taxi delivered her to the train station, and she slept the entire journey to the nation's capital.

No need to report to her superiors, she discovered. They'd already been notified what had transpired - at least, from a professional standpoint. Before 10:00 that Monday morning, Delia found herself once more in the OSS file room.

She would never defy orders again.

The Biographer

The chamber resembled a librarian's office, books stacked on every available inch of floor, piled on chairs, shelves, tables and the desk. A lone, barred window allowed dusty sunlight to illuminate the antiquated word processor on the blotter, a pad and pen beside it.

Agile fingers flew across the keyboard, paragraphs filling the screen. If Hilary despised anything about biographers: getting facts wrong and inserting personal opinions or ludicrous innuendo into their texts. She'd sworn, years earlier, to do justice to this work, to accurately present the tumultuous existence of a very unique - albeit flawed - man.

She'd immersed herself in his life, vicariously. Each of the tomes surrounding her dealt with him, or those who knew him. She verified every statement at least twice, her background as a journalist serving her well.

A knock disrupted her train of thought. "Damn!"

Rising, stretching cramped limbs, she almost danced through the maze of volumes, a choreographed routine preserving the established order.

When the door swung outward, a white-clad orderly held her dinner tray. "How's it going, professor?"

Hilary smirked. Dealing with these... idiots merely wasted her time. She stepped aside so he could unfold the legs on what amounted to a portable table, then withdraw.

"It's beef stew tonight," he announced.

She grunted a response as the bolt slanged shut, returning to the desk to finish the current chapter.

Life in an asylum.

Not for much longer.

After seven years laboring on this project, she estimated two more chapters would bring the story to a close. Her plan to vacate the premises had been devised mid-way through recounting an episode where her subject had also been confined with falsely diagnosed mental health concerns. If she couldn't learn from the best, why be alive?

The whole ordeal began when her son decided he required an infusion of wealth to finance his drug-skewed reality. He bribed a physician to report her as paranoid schizophrenic, isolating herself for months on end in the Manhattan townhome's upper room, neither eating nor sleeping, cranking out short stories and novels at an alarming rate.

The fruits of that labor, royalty checks deposited to her account on a regular basis, made his pampered upbringing possible.

The day they'd locked her inside, she hadn't uttered one syllable in protest; she grasped that raising her blood pressure, and the staff's ire, would find her medicated out of her skull, a vegetable.

She remained docile and compliant, earning the privilege of keeping books in her room. The word processor, a discard from an earlier age, could not be connected to the internet; she didn't mind.

Initially, she'd produced a handful of novellas, published in periodicals when her son noticed his resources dwindling. Then, her focus shifted to what she intended as her magnum opus.

The last sentence flickered on the screen that Saturday morning. Fortuitous, in that a reduced complement of attendants were scheduled on weekends, and her chances of escape increased exponentially.

The announcement for outdoor recreation blared over the loudspeakers. She tapped at her door, the small metal panel slid aside.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to go for a walk, please."

The single brown orb consulted a chart, then vanished. Moments later, Hilary detected a key scraping in the lock.

"This is a first," chirped a feisty young nurse. "What's up?"

"I need a break. A little fresh air."

"There's no reason you shouldn't," acknowledged the blonde. "Frankly, we wish you'd go out more often."

Hilary glanced around, confirming the sheet listing her instructions for the manuscript lay across the keyboard. She was well rid of this... hole.

She joined the procession of genuinely ill patients en route to the exit. She'd lost track of the seasons; spring flowers colored the lawns. Under the watchful eyes of four orderlies, she moved between garden beds, enjoying the scents, pausing to listen to birds twittering in the trees.

A stream flowed through the property, once a wealthy oil magnate's country estate. A foot bridge had been constructed to facilitate egress to the opposite bank. Chain link fencing, eight feet high, prevented residents of the facility from falling into the water from the shore, but the barrier ended at the bridge.

Hilary had been an excellent swimmer in her day. She waited for the inevitable distraction: a pair of aging malcontents wound up arguing over their chess game, drawing the staff's attention from their other charges. She slipped

over the metal railing and into the chill current, propelling herself upstream to freedom.

A sleepy village five miles from the asylum afforded an opportunity to shed her lightweight, striped pajamas, now soaked. The warming air encouraged women in homey cottages to hang their laundry out to dry, and selecting a flannel shirt and sweat pants without being seen proved simple.

Her canvas slippers, though squishing with moisture, drew no notice from the pedestrians on the main thoroughfare. She used her fingers as a comb to restore some order to her tangled curls, and wiped smudges of dirt from her cheeks with paper towels in the public restroom at a tiny park.

One dilemma behind her, another lay ahead: she possessed no cash, and to waltz into a branch of her bank and make a withdrawal would alert the authorities to her whereabouts.

What she didn't expect: being readily recognized.

"My God, you're Hilary Dunlop!" came the awed contralto near a fragrant bakery.

She muttered, "Shit!" That a portrait circulated on book jackets might foil her chances of a normal life hadn't occurred to her. She managed a wry smile as the cluster of women converged. "Nice to see you!"

One bonus from the mishap: they invited her to tea.

The cozy inn down the block provided a respite from her exertions, the idle chatter ignored as she devised a scheme to secure transportation to New York City.

Her reverie shattered by the approach of a uniformed official, Hilary grit her teeth and forced herself not to react. When the trim, chestnut-maned figure bent over a lithe brunette and kissed her cheek, the author relaxed.

"Ms. Dunlop, I'd like you to meet my brother, Kurt Rose," said the business-suited female. "He's our chief of police."

"Advantageous, having a cop in the family," Hilary drawled.

Rose circled the table, hand extended. Hilary accepted the gesture, fearing his strength, to no purpose. His grip most gentle, his brown eyes and tanned features captivated her.

"I've read all your books," he stated. "Marcie used to chew me out for stealing her magazines to read the short stories, too."

The waitress delivered the check in that instant, and a general scramble to depart separated them briefly. When Rose maneuvered within reach, he drew her aside.

"Have dinner with me."

Hilary demurred. "I'm just passing through. I don't have..."

"Don't worry about clothes. You can raid Marcie's closet. You're about the same size."

The arrangements made, Hilary accompanied the siblings to a stately mansion along a side street, where she showered and primped, a mauve evening gown and silver sandals transforming her from an asylum drudge.

A decidedly elegant French restaurant, sparsely populated for a weekend, provided Rose and Hilary a modicum of privacy for an in-depth conversation about her fiction. His insightful analysis of her plots amused her; she'd never taken the time to hear from her readers.

Over dessert and coffee, he leaned toward her, clasping her hand. "Word came over the radio that you... left Carlow without permission. There's an all points bulletin out on you."

She stiffened. "What are you going to do?"

"Nothing." He smiled, his lips angled upward at the right corner. "This last hour, you've proven to me you're no danger to society."

"You'll... let me go?"

"I'd... like to keep you here, to be honest," he confessed.

"Why?"

"So you can write in peace, without interference."

"At what price?"

"None."

Hilary squinted green eyes at him. "Again, why?"

"My father was an artist. Let's say, I understand the creative temperament that becomes obsessive at times."

She patted his sleeve. "Thanks, but..."

"Please, Hilary. You'll have complete anonymity..."

The laugh burst forth, drawing frowns from dignified waiters in the prep area.

"What's wrong?" Rose prodded.

"I thought I *had* complete anonymity, but old fame dies hard, as your sister and her friends demonstrated."

"No worries. You won't need to venture out unless you absolutely wish it. I promise to protect you."

"While violating your oath of office?" she challenged.

"My oath involves safeguarding the townspeople, and you pose no threat."

Rose escorted Hilary to his modest bungalow beneath a brilliant full moon, Together, they made up a double bed in the spare room, and he loaned her a pair of his pajamas.

“I’ll get you a laptop tomorrow,” he remarked.

“I... still worry about being hauled back to...” She shuddered, and he embraced her. “The next story I submit, my address...”

Tender digits raised her chin, moist with tears. “I need to tell you something.”

“What?” she sniffed.

He guided her to the mattress, sitting beside her. “Last Monday, I received a call from the New York Attorney General’s office.”

She waited, puzzled.

“His team had been investigating the doctor who... filed the bogus documents on your condition for Medicare fraud. When confronted, he admitted to falsifying numerous files, having been bribed by family members of those confined in institutions around the state.”

Hilary’s eyes widened. “Are you saying...”

“A hearing was scheduled for early June. You would’ve been released...”

“You mean, I went to so much trouble for nothing?” she bumbled.

He nodded.

“Shit!”

“There’s more,” Rose noted. “Your son...”

“What about him?”

“He’d dead.”

She sobered. “How? When?”

“A heroin overdose. He was found in your old house, a letter from his attorney about the inquiry clutched in his fist. Knowing you’d be free must’ve... driven him to the edge.”

No remorse tinged her response. “Good riddance.”

“Does that mean you’ll stay?”

She caressed his cheek. “Kurt, you’re wonderful, and kind. There’ll be a lot to do in the wake of this... fiasco. Besides, I’ll need to retrieve the biography from those... boneheads at Carlow...”

“I’ll have it for you tomorrow.” He kissed her palm. “At least, be with me tonight.”

Her wan grin conveyed the refusal without words, though she added, “I haven’t been with a man since my husband died. My energy has been devoted to... other pursuits.”

Sleeping on an actual bed for the first time in years, Hilary tossed and turned, anger commingled with relief that she would no longer need to hide. Appearing at the kitchen's dinette table as the sun peeked through drawn shades, Kurt offered her a cup of coffee before he left for work.

"I hope to see you again," he pledged, kissing her lightly.

"You will. In print."

Six months later, the biography on the best seller list, hailed as "comprehensive" and "authoritative", and a novel newly published - featuring a woman, wrongly institutionalized, and the man who saved her - she held her only book signing on the front lawn of the town's police department, a pop-up awning shielding her from autumn sunlight.

The dedication page declared the plot inspired by Kurt Rose, to whom she presented an inscribed copy, and a grateful kiss.

Son of the Father

There is nothing worse in the world than watching someone die.

For those who serve as caretakers of patients enduring chemotherapy and other cancer treatments, I laud you. That horrible disease is brought on, mostly, through no fault of the individual.

When one who is greatly loved, however, indulges in behaviors that prompt his own premature death, those who observe the tragedy and - diligently - attempt to avert that demise are left with a gaping void in their soul, and limitless guilt, wondering if more could have been done to prevent...

Ah, well.

Such is my tale.

Being Maggie's younger sibling by 15 years - I'm what they call an "accident" - I barely remember her tumultuous teenage years. I served as ring bearer at her wedding to Bill Flowers before my seventh birthday. She gave birth to Henry two years later and, when our mother died - of a brain haemorrhage - she and Bill took me in, positioned more like the boy's big brother than an uncle.

Thus, I watched him grow, in size, if not maturity. Maggie spoiled King, as she nicknamed him, with Bill relegated to the background, working 60 hour weeks in an auto factory so the rent could be paid and food kept on the table.

King got his way in everything, a precursor to the instant gratification that so warps modern society. New toys, new clothes, trips to fairs and festivals... Maggie denied him nothing. Me, I made do with thrift store cast-offs and a public school education, since little in the way of an inheritance had been passed down from our parents.

Maggie enrolled King in an exclusive Catholic school and, when the habit and wimple-clad principal objected to his outrageous antics, she transferred him to a more expensive institution.

Not that he learned much.

When it came to homework and essays, he didn't have to ask Maggie more than once to have me complete them on his behalf. She would deliver the requisite books to my converted attic bedroom in short order. Doing this double duty irked me; as soon as I graduated high school, I enlisted in the Navy, fleeing that bizarre environment.

Rare though it was for me to visit my sister and her increasingly brattish offspring, I endured the odd holiday celebration, expected to bring the finest gifts from various ports of call, receiving nothing in return.

King sat beside his mother at the dining room table, a new addition since my years in the modest bungalow. When Maggie poured the wine, she filled the boy's glass to the rim.

He drank it in one gulp.

That was the start of it.

Fast forward to King receiving his diploma by the skin of his teeth - and substantial bribes so the teachers would record passing marks. He had been pursued by truant officers for frequent classroom absences, or consigned to the nurse's office with head-splitting hangovers due to the excessive consumption of whiskey and rum.

Maggie, oblivious to her son's escapades, did nothing to rectify the situation. Bill... well... he'd never earned King's respect, roundly ignored by his wife, as well.

Established in my own business across town, consulting on engineering projects and designing specialized equipment for construction firms, Maggie practically begged me to sign King on as an apprentice in the office.

"What can he do?" I demanded.

"He can..."

Yes, I tore into my sister for her maternal failures. "You can't think of one skill he's acquired, because he has none! You never ensured he could take care of himself as a grown man..."

"He doesn't need to. I'll always be there to take of him!"

She didn't understand her own shortcomings, nor those of her son.

When I rebuffed her request, she swore never to see me again, and I was fine with that arrangement.

She died two weeks later. A blood clot, formed through her lack of exercise and obesity, traveled from her leg to her heart.

Bill, at a complete loss in the house, occupied the adjacent grave in less than a month. The doctor told me he'd simply "faded away."

King parked himself on my doorstep, a rented box truck filled with his "vital" personal possessions, expecting me to pick up where Maggie left off.

"I suggest you spend a couple years in the Army," I advised.

"Are you kidding?"

"No."

"Mom left instructions in her will for you to set me up with an allowance..."

"If she'd bothered to save any money, I might do that. But, she bankrupted your father, and I'll not let you bankrupt me."

His sneer, the right corner of his mouth angled upward, reminded me of my own father, so long gone. King had inherited his nose, too - somewhat Romanesque - dark brown eyes and a wide forehead that tapered down his unshaven jaw to a narrow chin. His hair ran toward chestnut - no one would ever mistake us for relations, with my sandy mane, pug nose and full lips.

My sole advantage over King: height. I topped out at well over six feet; he never passed five-feet-six.

I towered over him and laid down the law.

His refusal merited him a door slammed in his face.

He ran up tabs at neighborhood bars, using my name as sponsor. When calls for payment began interrupting meetings with my clients, I informed the creditors they needed to collect from King himself.

Somehow, he managed to find another source to maintain his alcohol intake: women. He could exude a definite charm, I learned from one such who practically assaulted me in retaliation for my nephew's abuse of her person and her savings.

Anne might have been his redemption, if he'd stayed married to her long enough. Their beautiful son raised by a well-balanced mother, the child's father absented himself unless he needed a drink or cash.

Perhaps my failure to reign in King prompted my generosity toward Michael. I arranged for Anne to receive monthly supplements to her own income as a teacher, so she wouldn't have to worry about financial stability.

Still, before the lad's fourteenth birthday, he could be seen in his father's company about town, both carrying beer bottles, or smoking weed.

King did, for a time, gain employment at a local radio station as a disc jockey. A former school chum liked his off-beat sense of humor and slipped him into the 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. slot. He developed a cult following - night owls with bizarre tastes in music. It didn't last long, once the empty vodka bottles were found in the trash bin next to his microphone.

We passed each other on Main Street the afternoon of my fiftieth birthday. I didn't recognize him initially, he'd deteriorated so horribly. I offered him an early dinner; he declined.

A hospital administrator who'd contracted me for a renovation project phoned that weekend: King lay in the emergency room, dying.

He'd been found on a park bench near the river, breathing labored, deathly pale. The police had summoned an ambulance.

I held his hand as he expired; he never regained consciousness.

Michael arrived ten minutes later, himself drunk. Leading him out to the lobby, I determined to force the youth to pull himself from this pit of addiction...

Nothing Anne nor I tried - interventions and involuntary rehab - shook Michael free. She suffered a stroke before her fiftieth summer; I stood with her son at the graveside, hugged him as he wept.

For a brief moment, I believed he might find the straight and narrow. He'd enjoyed the education his father shunned, and had a bright future ahead, if he could let go of the bottle and the pills.

Michael came to live with me, a man with a lively wit and keen insights. I arranged for his participation in a 12-step group and regular counseling, and he thrived sufficiently to earn a masters degree in computer science.

Whatever caused him to fall off the wagon, I'll never know. He'd worked in my research department, creating software programs for niche markets when, one summer day, he just didn't show up.

The thirteenth anniversary of Henry "King" Flowers' death, Michael Henry Flowers collapsed from a heart attack while waiting to be interviewed with a major international conglomerate. The New York executive, who I'd met at conferences, reached me on my cell.

Traveling to the coast to retrieve the body, my heart broke. I'd lost everyone of my blood relatives because of some demented...

My marriage, at age 64, to a fine young woman gives me hope for the family's future, nonetheless. The child to whom she gives birth next spring will benefit from my wisdom and grow to be an intelligent, well grounded youngster.

The Channel

Eve Beatty initially noticed Charles MacLaine during their sophomore year at Montevideo High School. The feisty redhead laughed at his antics during geometry class, seeming to channel actors from classic films, reciting the dialogue so perfectly, she could close her hazel eyes and visualize those iconic faces.

Channel being the optimum word.

Eve realized, from an early age, that she could sense the presence of those who'd shed their earthly existence. She couldn't connect with them personally, however.

She suspected Charles - never "Chuck" - might be the missing link who could supply these wandering souls with a voice to express themselves to the living.

The point wasn't breached during the early days of their friendship. Eve started by sitting next to him in the cafeteria, watching him play euchre with buddies from the track team. Not that Charles engaged in sports. He kept the stats.

For his part, MacLaine didn't mind the twiggish female's close proximity, but didn't pay much attention to her, either.

He soon discovered she wasn't like the airheaded cheerleaders who gushed about hairstyles, make-up and clothes. Eve's mind plumbed metaphysical depths, and such intensity intrigued him.

That first seance, if it could be termed so, startled him. She'd convinced him to visit the city's historic cemetery on Halloween, while others in their class were pranking trick-or-treaters in the surrounding neighborhoods. She'd lingered outside a particular crypt - the Dolan family, early settlers in the region - then, he felt an unwelcome rush...

And remembered nothing until he awoke, propped against an ancient oak, around midnight.

"What the hell..." he rasped.

Eve dabbed his sweat-drenched chestnut hair with a handkerchief, kissing his cheeks enthusiastically. "You're marvelous!" she gushed.

While she never fully explained what transpired, the pair grew closer and, after graduation, moved into a tiny apartment on the north side. Eve leased space in a downtown office complex for her "work": a shop offering crystals, candles and books to the avant garde population, with the back room decorated as she thought suitable for seances (by appointment).

Charles earned a regular paycheck as a production assistant at the local public television station, until he *became* the news when a syndicated ghost

hunting team received a lead about spirits making themselves heard during Eve's gatherings.

He watched the videos they recorded, befuddled and, then, angry. Knowing the camera could catch even a whisper - while the lenses captured his reactions and the answers to rudely invasive questions - he waited until breakfast to confront Eve.

Coffee mugs steamed at the second-hand dinette table near the sun-drenched window; toast and jelly waited to be eaten. "You *used* me!" he raged.

"Shhh..." she warned. "These walls are thin."

"I don't care!" He shot off the wobbly chair, toppling it. "Do you know how I've laid awake nights, worried I was going mad? I couldn't figure out why I was blacking out so often, when I don't drink or do drugs! Now, thanks to this, I'll be a laughingstock!"

"No, you won't. People respect those with... unusual abilities."

"My ass!"

Eve struggled to address the issue without further offending Charles or, worse, prompting his departure. "You've done an inestimable service to those unable to help themselves. You've provided comfort to the living, and rest for their dead loved ones."

"At the expense of my... my..."

"What?" Eve prompted. "Your very self?"

"Yes!"

"You told me, years ago, you had no self. You attributed it to your mother's death in that tragic car accident, and finding solace in mimicking others to hide your own grief. You said you lost your identity..."

"Well, that's no reason to take advantage!"

She fell silent, sipping from the mug.

A few deep breaths preceded his return to the table. He clasped her free hand. "Eve, dear... I just wish you'd have told me what was going on. Do you know what it's like to feel... violated in this way?"

"Sure, I do. Every day, I walk along the street, assailed by those who want to be loosed from this world, but can't sever the bonds for whatever reason. They hound me constantly. Bringing you into the mix was the only way I could ease the pressure..."

Charles slumped on his seat. "I... never knew."

Eve's cell phone chirped. She wanted to ignore it, but the ringing persisted. She activated the speaker function. "Hello?"

The ghost hunters' producer spoke. "Can you meet us at the old Dolan mansion? There's been reports of a violent haunting..."

Both Eve and Charles had heard about patriarch Larry Dolan's mysterious death in the old stone estate on the west side. Their eyes met across the board.

"We'll be there in fifteen minutes," Charles replied.

An awareness of what occurred when other spirits were channeled into his body enabled the young man to retain a conscious control over the situation going forward. Dolan, for example, expressed emotions over being poisoned that could have destroyed the dwelling which the camera crew, hosts and production staff occupied.

That long-standing mystery solved, though the culprit had died decades prior, catapulted Eve and Charles to international stardom. A season with the ghost hunters who'd publicized their abilities led to their own cable series.

Across two decades, the pair never married, all the while sharing a penthouse overlooking New York's Central Park. Private interactions with displaced souls far outnumbered those made public on television screens and, when Eve succumbed to bone cancer at age 48, Charles passed within a day.

Their accumulated fortune created a foundation to aid the homeless, for - as their joint will noted - "More of those unfortunates find themselves also without a home beyond the grave and, in being provided shelter and food in life, they will be able to experience peace in death."

Running the Gauntlet

The invitation read like a plot for a Bruce Lee movie.

Your presence is requested,
and transportation will be provided,
for the first Gauntlet Challenge
to be held
Friday, April 10
on Catalina Island.

Ruby Knowles perused the embossed paper, examined the envelope. No return address, only a Los Angeles postmark identified the missive's possible origins.

The young woman, a third degree black belt in Okinawan Shorin Ryu karate and West Coast champion, had heard rumblings for months about a gathering of high ranking representatives of the major martial arts, but not to discuss methods of ensuring the integrity of training - as opposed to the hacks who roped in children just for the profits.

Matches would be real, no pads or protective gear, to determine the most effective form.

Who had the funding to coordinate such an event? Ruby puzzled. The cost of flying a dozen or more individuals to LAX, then loading them onto one of the ferries to Avalon, housing and feeding them...

And, what about this "gauntlet"? The mere definition of the word sent shudders up her spine. Would they be required to move through some pre-determined course, facing danger every step of the way?

"I think I'll pass," she declared to the aging sensei, Jerry Michalski.

He countered, "With your skills and instinct, you could easily win the ten mill, Ruby."

"What ten mill?"

A smaller, ridged card remained inside the envelope, instructions regarding the monetary prize concluding, "Please provide your full, legal name for proper tax reporting."

She chuckled, "So, it's all above board and legit?"

"Seems that way."

Ruby deliberated the remainder of that week whether to request vacation days from her job as a software programmer, or pitch the works in the trash. She

received a few phone calls, from friends and martial arts practitioners she'd met, wondering if she would be present.

"How'd you find out I was invited?" Ruby asked her cousin, who used Tae Kwon Do to maintain his sanity while living in New York City.

"There's a list circulating on the dark web. It's all very hush, hush."

"Not according to what..."

"For the Americans, it's no big deal. The organizer is bringing in foreigners, though, without going through the red tape of visas or passports..."

A United Nations employee, Walt would have access to such information.

"Then, I'm definitely not..."

"Damn, girl, you could win it, hands down."

Her self-confidence bolstered by the faith her sensei and family had in her abilities, Ruby let herself be swayed, finally sending the required text to R.S.V.P.

A booklet defining the rules and regulations for the tournament, along with details on her flight - via private aircraft - from San Francisco to Los Angeles, and ticket for the Catalina Express, arrived in the next day's mail.

Her heart skipped a beat when she glanced at the map, marking a seven mile route through the island's wilderness. "The contestant who successfully navigates the obstacles and reaches the finish in the shortest amount of time will be awarded the prize."

Gauntlet, indeed.

The morning of her departure, Ruby stuffed a gi in her backpack - not that she planned to wear it. She'd long since discovered that clothing does not the martial artist make. She'd defended herself in the alleys of the Market District more often in blue jeans and t-shirts than in the starched white uniform. Caught inadvertently in the middle of a gang dispute one windy night, she'd saved herself from being raped in skirt, blouse and high heels. The garments hadn't fared well, being discarded in the end, but she'd never worried about such minutiae.

A limousine shuttled her from Long Beach Airport to the ferry dock; within the hour, she alighted at Avalon. Checking in at the lavish Hotel Metropole, she recognized a few faces from previous international competitions lounging on a terrace overlooking the yacht-populated bay.

"We've got the place all to ourselves," declared Gene Packard, a Jujitsu instructor from Chicago.

Impressed, Ruby accepted the cane-backed armchair beside him. "Who's behind this..."

"Nobody knows for sure."

"Think you can win?" she chuckled.

The middle-aged accountant smirked. "I'll wipe the floor with y'all," identifying those who'd gained fame through Jujitsu, Korean Hapkido and Tae Kwon Do, Israeli Krav Maga, Brazilian Capoeira, Jeet Kune Do, Wing Chun and Kung Fu.

A waiter had taken her order for a tall orange juice when a stern, trim figure in white suit and gold tie marched through the lobby into the sunlight, clipboard in hand.

"You are Rudy Knowles?" he snarled.

"Ruby Knowles, yes."

The elongated, tanned face blanched. "Oh, dear, dear, dear."

"What's the problem?"

"No women are allowed at this event." He consulted his paperwork. "We have you listed as Rudy Knowles."

"A typo," she quipped. "No big deal."

"But, it *is* a big deal, Miss Knowles. The course has been specially designed to challenge the strength of men."

"Believe me, buddy, she's stronger than most guys I know," affirmed Packard, sipping his iced tea.

"That may well be, sir, but she must leave immediately."

Stretching out her legs, Ruby settled deep in her seat. "No."

"You... you can't... refuse!"

"I was legitimately invited, and I'm here. If your people made a mistake, it's not my fault."

"Oh, dear, dear, dear..."

Ruby's blue eyes met flustered brown orbs. "If you wish, call your boss and I'll speak with him myself."

"That's... impossible."

"If you can't get in touch with him, what he doesn't know won't hurt him," she reasoned. "Leave it at that."

Lips pressed together, angled upward at the right corner, he breathed, "I guess that's that, then."

A crystal goblet set beside her on the table, Ruby raised it toward him in salute. "Perfect."

As he retreated into the hotel, she burst out laughing. Packard joined in the merriment, clinking glasses with her.

"Brava, kiddo. Stand your ground."

The loudspeaker crackled, announcing the schedule for the following day had been posted near the elevators, a copy delivered to each room. Draining the beverage, Ruby excused herself, heading for the stairs.

A third floor suite smelled of fresh sea air, her backpack on the sofa.

Beside it, the russet-maned factotum mumbled to himself.

“What the hell...” she greeted, anger rising.

“I’m sorry, Miss Knowles. I didn’t want to create a scene downstairs, but there’s no way you’ll be allowed to participate in the gauntlet...”

“Who’s going to stop me, you?”

His timid demeanor transformed to defiance. “I could, you know.”

Ruby noticed, but discounted the ruse as sheer bravado. “Try it.”

A fierce onslaught caught her momentarily off guard; she managed to sidestep his lunge and duck beneath a round-house kick, her knife-blade strike contacting his neck and propelling him to the carpet. She swiftly knelt on his spine, twisting his left wrist until it pressed against his scapula.

“Who the hell are you?” she demanded.

“Let me up, and I’ll explain everything.”

“Swear!”

“On my sensei’s grave.”

Straightening, Ruby remained on the defensive as the man scrambled to his feet, smiling with genuine pleasure.

“I just wanted to see how determined you were,” he confessed, rotating his shoulder.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“Have a seat.”

She complied, reluctantly. He shuffled toward the French doors, contemplating the incoming ferry, inhaling deeply.

“I’m Sid Nayland.”

“Bullshit. Sid died of a freak heart attack during a tournament ten years ago.”

“Yeah, I took a punk’s off-balance kick to my chest, and the broken rib was thought to have pierced my left ventricle. Fortunately, a good team of doctors was able to jump into action and resuscitate me.”

“The media never reported that...”

“Because I didn’t want my survival made public. I was, frankly, sick and tired of being hounded by the press on a myriad of fronts...”

“Your risky business ventures, your affairs with married women...”

Brown eyes flashed with disdain at that remark.

“Sorry,” Ruby muttered contritely.

“I never pursued those women. They wanted a share of my wealth, and bribed my servants for access to the house, creating compromising situations, the photographers’ telephoto lenses focused on the windows.”

“Blackmail?”

“To which I would not submit. The photos were published, and theirs were the lives ruined, with divorces, custody battles, and the like.”

She joined him on the balcony. “So, what have you been up to all this time?”

“Enjoying the fruits of my investments, and studying the many forms of martial arts.”

“Which is why you set up this...”

“Right. I want to see, first hand, how dedicated practitioners deal with... unpredictable situations.”

“Your gauntlet?”

His shaggy mop bobbed in affirmation.

“Why make a big deal of my presence?” Ruby prodded.

“A couple of the guys from Asia objected to competing against a female.”

“So, screw ‘em.”

“Precisely. If they feel threatened by the likes of you...”

She had his thumb between her fingers, ready to squeeze. “Meaning?”

Nayland’s adroit manipulation of her body into a twirling flip completely stunned her, though she rebounded off her knees instantly. Her fist came within a millimeter of his groin, retracting at the last second, her point made.

Nose-to-nose, he kissed her; when released, she leveled a backhand at his jaw.

He dodged the blow and wrestled her onto the king-sized mattress.

“I’m not here for horizontal gymnastics!” she squealed, hooking her foot around his knees and rolling him onto the floor.

Laughing, and panting, he sat upright. “What about a marriage proposal?”

Blue orbs rolled toward the ceiling. “Jesus!”

“Sure. If one of the guys wins, he gets ten million bucks. If you win, you get the jackpot!”

Sinking onto her elbow, she glared at him. “Why?”

“Because, you’re smart, beautiful, resourceful with uncompromising integrity, agile...”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve followed your rise, both in business and karate, for six years.”

“Mind explaining how?”

“Who do you think owns the tech outfit where you work, and financed Jerry Michalski’s school?”

“That’s ludicrous!”

“Not really. Before my... death, I lived in Marin County. Read about the high school matches you won, and your involvement in the program at U.C.S.F.”

Ruby bit her lip, averting her gaze.

“I’m sorry,” he grumbled. “I’ve embarrassed you.”

“No... I guess I’m... honored someone like you would take an interest in me.”

“You can be my voice, carry on the legacy I tried to start...” His cell phone buzzed; he hoisted himself onto the quilt. “Hello?”

She moved to the sitting room, grabbing her backpack. Unzipping the front pocket, she tucked a stray photo in the hip pocket of her jeans.

Only to have it removed by deft fingers.

“God, that’s old,” Nayland snickered at the military haircut, mustache and goatee, and cheesy aviator-style sunglasses. “Why on earth do you carry a photo of me?”

“Because, I followed your career, and hoped to achieve the balance you promoted in my own life.”

“Then, me wanting to marry you isn’t... such a stretch, is it, when we’ve been connected informally for so long.”

“I... suppose not.”

He strode toward the door. “Get some rest. I’ve got to check in the late arrivals and get ready for tomorrow.”

“See you in the morning.”

As he departed, his expression - one of absolute contentment - burned itself into her memory.

She felt a total idiot, though, the circumstances surreal in the extreme. She’d traveled to the island for a competition, and wound up engaged to a billionaire.

Shoving those ruminations to the back of her mind, she launched into a series of katas to soothe her nerves. A peaceful night’s sleep preceded her shower and light breakfast. She descended to the lobby in jeans, sneakers, a green tank top covered by a brown flannel shirt, met with cynical gazes from nine men.

“You’re not competing, after all?” queried Gene Packard.

“Of course, I am!”

“In *that*?”

Ruby sneered. "It's rough terrain, Gene. The bushes will shred your gi, snag your belt..."

The instructor acknowledged her logic. "I never thought of that."

He also, evidently, didn't consider the other obstacles along the trail: carefully positioned martial artists poised for attack.

"Shit, Sid," she hissed as she approached the starting line at 11:15. "You could've warned us."

"That would've negated the process of assessing which participants are properly trained to deal with the unexpected." Prior to sending her off, he whispered, "Good luck."

She took off at an easy jog, hurdling downed tree trunks and scraggly underbrush. Less than a half-mile along, reminiscent of Cato in the *Pink Panther* movies, a black-clad ninja leapt from his perch in a massive oak, swinging a bo staff.

Spinning away from the thrust, Ruby dove toward a gnarled branch, using it to counter the assault. She managed to swipe low, catching his ankles and landing him with a thud on the dirt.

He signaled her triumph, and she scurried along the gravel path.

The course boasted another twelve such ambushes, some bare-handed, others wielding kendo shinai sword, nunchucks, sais, tonfas, and even throwing stars. Ruby put each man down in short order, and not because they were instructed to go easy on her.

The championship trophy she'd earned hadn't been in a women's category. She'd petitioned to fight the men, and bested them - not with pure strength, but technique and cunning.

Her gift: predicting an opponent's tactics and avoiding or blocking them.

Finish line in sight, she knew her entire body would be sore for days after that much exertion. Her time: two hours, twelve minutes.

That evening, before the winner was announced, footage from hidden cameras showed the competitors at their best - and worst - in the one-on-one battles. Sid held Ruby's for last, to show the men how it should be done.

She received a standing ovation as Sid, in his flunky guise, presented the check. Only when the terrace had cleared did he enfold her in a tender embrace, sensitive to the aching muscles.

The couple remained on Catalina Island for a week after the others departed. Their wedding ceremony took place in a park near the Wrigley Memorial, Nayland's attorneys serving as witnesses.

It would take another decade before Ruby convinced Sid to emerge from seclusion, especially as their children approached school age. They still managed to live off the media's radar, their martial arts school in Sun Valley, Idaho, drawing the finest students to summer camps - the next generation of champions for what became the annual Running of the Gauntlet.

The Underwood Undertaking

The position of the buildings had come to represent a sort of tourist attraction over the decades.

Things like that can happen - inadvertently, I suppose - in small, remote towns.

The Underwood family built the stately Victorian-style dwelling at the intersection of then dirt Main Street and Oak Avenue in 1897. From the first, the sign in the yard prompted chuckles from passersby: Underwood Undertakers.

As traditional in that era, Jake and Cynthia lived upstairs with their four children. The business of death took place in ground level offices and parlors, including a modest horse stable for the animals that pulled an ornate wagon.

Times changed with the coming of automobiles, and advances in home amenities. Jake's eldest son, Mike, bought a motorized hearse in 1920 and demolished the stable in favor of a garage. His brother, Larry - not interested in joining the family trade - petitioned his father to finance his passion: plumbing and electrical supplies. Since the patriarch owned the entire block, he contracted the warehouse for Underwood Fixtures at First and Walnut.

No need to advertise, being the only such services in town. Yet, a popular high school English class assignment - for more than 50 years - involved devising creative slogans for both. The best, as recorded by the weekly *Chronicle* newspaper: "When you're going six feet under, better be Underwood," and, "See us when you're laying pipe."

In between the two structures, a more modern funeral home rose in the 1950s, leaving the third generation of Underwoods to occupy the original edifice without additional, silent "guests," as Rory joked.

That left a small patch in the middle of the U-shaped configuration; the courtyard became an unofficial park where, on summer Saturday evenings, Bill Underwood - Jake's great-great grandson - projected movies on the white painted cement block wall, for families to bring their lawn chairs and breathe fresh air.

When I was elected mayor in 1998, having lived in town my entire life, none of this smacked as odd, or illegal. Zoning ordinances weren't enforced, except where new construction transpired. Main Street remained an amalgamation of homes and shops, and no one seemed to care.

Besides that, crime was almost non-existent for our tiny community. I appointed the latest police chief in 2010; three officers, none of whom worked the night shift, patrolled the streets, alternating as dispatch, the most boring job in the world, according to town council meeting minutes. Stacks of paperback novels and

magazines cluttered the desk where the multi-line phone seldom rang, the swivel chair's occupant often kicked back with shoes resting on the blotter or asleep outright.

That changed abruptly when a cheese manufacturing company decided to buy the 10,000 acres Carl Hilton's forebears had farmed and erect a plant employing 950 people. A housing boom transformed the outskirts, overpriced subdivisions that dwarfed our modest residential neighborhoods with their bungalows and tri-levels. Residents who so enjoyed endless coffee of a morning in the cozy diners were displaced at their tables by "foreigners" - those relocated from other cities and states.

Then, the thefts began. In one week alone, Ben Underwood reported PVC piping gone from the loading dock, even after he installed a formerly unheard of alarm system and security cameras. His cousin, Rick, who'd assumed directorship of the funeral home, sent shudders through the police department when he rang to announce a corpse had been stolen from the embalming room.

The most recent town budget had increased the allotment for police due to the population explosion, so six officers were available to protect and serve 'round the clock. I volunteered, as well, for a turn on the stake-out team, with other council members slated to provide relief.

In my life, I'd never feared walking the lanes and alleys at night. The worst I'd ever encountered was a dog who'd gotten loose, or teenagers hunting for a quiet place to cuddle. That particular Thursday, I lingered in the shadows on the Underwood's deck, overlooking the courtyard and back doors of the adjacent buildings, goosebumps on my arms.

For sure, if thieves were on the prowl, they wouldn't haul their take out by the front, the town's staff presumed. But, why piping; why desecrate the dead?

Furthermore, eight-foot lengths of four-inch PVC weren't easily handled by a lone individual, nor was a 180 pound man. There had to be a team, with a vehicle, to get in and get out so easily.

Ruminating on these deductions, I started to doze. Then, I heard brakes grinding on Oak. I checked my watch: 2:37 a.m.

Darkness prevented me from identifying the vehicle; the city still cut electric to the downtown street lights at midnight as a power-saving measure. I waited, ears straining to hear the footsteps.

They were good, these guys. Rather than walk on the concrete, they kept to the grass, noise minimal. No flashlight illuminated their route; they must've known where they were going. When the motion-detector spot flashed on, they never flinched, and I saw ski masks covering four faces.

One pair jimmied the plumbing service door; their companions did likewise to the funeral home's overhead garage door. When they vanished inside, I punched a few keys on my cell phone, notifying dispatch to send the entire squad.

Hoping they weren't carrying weapons, I slipped inside the open bay, pulling the chain that lowered the heavy metal on its rollers. Then, I climbed on the hearse's hood, so they wouldn't trip over me with their load, and I would be less likely to be injured.

When they emerged through the side entrance, a black-bagged burden sagging between them, they halted in their tracks, presumably stunned by the closure.

"Hello, boys," I greeted.

The body hit the floor, and a mad scramble ensued to vacate the premises. In the confusion, I slid off the vintage Cadillac and pinned the smaller of the two against unfinished drywall.

Flipping the switch beside the door, I blinked momentarily against the brightness, but managed to yank off the miscreant's mask.

I blinked again. Brown, petrified eyes stared at me, framed by disheveled chestnut hair, thick mustache and beard, a Romanesque nose the centerpiece.

"Min?" he gasped, thin lips angled upward at the right corner.

"Seth?"

I released him, shifting my attention to his companion, attempting - in vain - to drag the lifeless form toward the exit.

"Glenn?" I speculated.

He abandoned the effort, straightening. "How'd..."

"Inside, both of you," I directed, signaling them across the threshold to a vacant office along the corridor.

They sank on comfortable leather chairs, much like those grieving a loved one come to make arrangements. I leaned on the inlaid elm desk.

"Now, what the hell is going on?" I demanded.

The brothers, whom I'd known since first grade, studied the Persian carpet beneath their Converse sneakers.

"Tell me, or tell the judge," I pressed.

Seth, the elder, caved first. "I want your promise, Min, that Glenn goes free, no charges filed."

"Rotten time to think of making a deal, dude. The cops'll be here any minute."

"Promise!"

"Okay."

“You know who’s in the body bag?” he puzzled.

“Not a clue.”

“My uncle Ken.”

Then, realization dawned. The previous theft involved Seth’s father.

“What’s the deal?”

Glenn interspersed, “Neither of them wanted a... regular send-off. We wanted to honor their wishes...”

“Then, why not tell ol’ man Underwood...” I muttered.

“He would’ve thought we’re nuts,” replied Seth.

“What...”

“A Viking ceremony, down on the river.”

The image, gleaned from old movies, appeared before my mind’s eye.

“You mean...”

“A flaming ship.”

It smacked of lunacy, definitely. “And the pipe?”

“To buoy up the raft...”

Though I didn’t possess formal training as an engineer, I could envision the hollow pipes, capped, serving as flotation devices beneath a wooden deck bearing two noble citizens on their final journey...

The Norvilles, twin brothers who’d run the soda fountain/candy shoppe, had died when an 18-wheeler turned in front of their restored 1968 Camaro on the highway access road the previous weekend. They were just eccentric enough...

A key turning in the deadbolt prompted immediate action. “Get lost, you idiots,” I chuckled.

They bolted out the back, stopping to retrieve their relative.

Oddly, our fire department received no calls about mysterious flames visible on the water that Saturday evening. I smoothed things over with the Underwoods, and the Norvilles paid - anonymously - for the supplies taken.

No one was happier than I to resume a placid existence in the town, where visitors cruised past the funeral home and plumbing supply, smiling at the seeming incongruity of the endeavors.

I would never forget, though, how closely they were aligned - at least, in one instance!

The Infiltrator

A glimpse at the draft memo on her division chief's desk sent Miranda flying up two flights to the director's office, stopping only long enough to retrieve the Birkenstock sandal she inadvertently lost on the stairs. The administrative assistant's attempt to prevent her access failed; she burst into the pristine chamber, interrupting a classified conference between bureau supervisors.

"What in hell..." a greying executive barked.

The woman inhaled slowly, trying to calm her respiration and heart rate.

"Sorry, boss."

Three other suits rose from leather armchairs and withdrew as Bill Nichols offered his apologies. "I'll just be a minute."

Once the door closed, he growled, "You're supposed to be on bereavement leave, Randie."

"I know, boss. Emma invited me to lunch, and I swung in to say hi to Rob..."

"Get to the point; I'm too busy for chit-chat."

"You can't put Lionel Majors on the Most Wanted List."

Nichols bolted off the cushion. "What?"

"If you make his status public, he'll disappear like a fart in the wind."

"How do you know?"

Randie grit her teeth. "You'd better sit down."

He spun toward full-length windows overlooking downtown Washington D.C. "I hate when you say that. It always means trouble."

"You know I always clean up my own messes."

"That's the only reason you're still on the payroll. Otherwise..." With a grunt, he settled once more behind the oak desk. "What haven't you told me this time?"

He didn't object when she strode across the carpet, hoisting herself onto the polished surface, legs in full lotus position. In the red flannel shirt and jeans, she resembled a hippy from the 1970s, mounting a sit-in protest.

"Don't get mad..."

"Oh, Christ."

"Lionel Majors is... in a relationship with my cousin."

"What?"

"Calm down, boss. I know I should've included that on my disclosure report... or, the last five, but it's no big deal..."

“He’s wanted for first degree murder, drug smuggling and grand theft auto,” Nichols scoffed. “But, to you, it’s no big deal?”

“First time I met him, he came to my wedding as Diana’s date. We partnered up for a polka at the reception; all I could tell you about him is that he’s a damned good dancer. Since then, I’ve only seen him the few times I’ve picked Di up for girls’ night out. He never said two words to me, until...”

“Until?”

Randie’s blue orbs studied her hands. “He’s phoned me every night this week, asking me out for dinner.”

“You mean, since...”

She nodded short sandy curls. “He came to Tad’s funeral, hugging me a little too affectionately, if you get my drift.”

“You think he’s... wanting to make a change?”

“When Di got me alone at the funeral, she told me she wants out. He’s broken her arm twice, blacked her eyes numerous times, dislocated her shoulder and her jaw...”

Nichols considered. “So, he’s bored with her, and has set his sights on you, and you want to take him down by yourself?”

“It’s the only way, and you know it. We haven’t been able to infiltrate his organization up to this point...”

“If your cover’s blown, you’ll end up dead.”

A resigned grin did nothing to transform features care-worn by the recent demise of her spouse in a tragic car wreck. “It wouldn’t be a huge loss, would it?”

Nichols leaned forward, enveloping her hands within his large paws. “You’re one of our finest agents, and I’d hate to lose you, in the line of duty or otherwise.”

“Thanks, boss.” She unfolded her legs and stretched. “Is it a go?”

“A go, with the highest security. No one is to know your status. As far as the department is concerned, you’re on extended bereavement leave ‘til further notice.”

“What if I need to make contact?”

“Give Diana my cell number. She can text me and we can meet... where?”

“He lives in a fancy joint on the Patapsco River up in Baltimore. There’s a coffee shop on the west side of Federal Park, within walking distance...”

“Fine.” He escorted her to the threshold. “Be careful, Randie. He’s a heartless bastard...”

“I’m no soft touch, myself.”

Nichols' wry smirk confirmed the statement's truth. "I never would've been able to jam a shiv in Oren Bolt's chest with a gun to my head."

"See ya soon, boss."

The dynamics of this operation sensitive, Randie didn't risk showing a glimmer of eagerness at Majors' attention. His phone calls amounted to little more than polite expressions of sympathy, with a suggestion that dinner at one of DC's finer restaurants would be a respite from her grief.

In a decade with the agency, she'd learned to ignore grief. She'd seen colleagues shot beside her, victims die while she pumped their chests to resuscitate them, criminals riddled with bullets as they resisted arrest. Her own husband's untimely death failed to faze her.

They'd - admittedly - grown apart after she told him, in no uncertain terms, she would not bear him any children while she worked in the nation's capital. "If something happens to me, it wouldn't be fair leaving you alone to raise the kid," she reasoned.

Separate bedrooms became the norm; they might see each other at breakfast twice a week, given their respective schedules.

To captivate Majors, she'd need to be sexy, clever, alert. He'd practically drooled over her black Maserati GranTurismo last time she took Di to lunch for her birthday; the pretense she'd inherited Tad's wealth - his family renowned for selling their tech start-up for a huge profit - an additional draw.

Little did Majors know, the bank would be foreclosing on her condo within six months.

For her part, moving to a branch in the Midwest, where life was more affordable, wouldn't bother her one bit - once she put Majors behind bars, or six feet under.

She actually preferred the latter option.

Her cell phone vibrated with the theme to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* as she swung into her assigned spot in the underground parking garage. Reception sketchy at that level, she snapped, "Hold on a minute," climbing the ramp to the street. "Hello?"

"Randie, you sound out of breath," came Majors' cultured baritone.

"Just got done running errands."

"Hungry?"

"Famished. I was going to throw a frozen pizza in the oven..."

"Not on your life, darlin'. I'm five minutes away. We're going on the town."

"I'm... not dressed for a night out," she countered.

“I’ll come up, you can pour me a drink, and then spruce yourself up.”

His antiquated attitude about women raised a caustic remark in her throat; she repressed the impulse. “I’ll be expecting you.”

She buzzed him into the building as she mixed martinis in a silver shaker. Trim, tuxedo-clad, tanned, brown eyes hidden behind ochre-tinted sunglasses, he tried to kiss her when she opened the door; she passed him a glass instead.

“I shouldn’t be more than ten minutes,” she pledged, aiming for the bedroom.

Majors glanced around the unpretentious flat. “Nice place. Why didn’t you ever invite Di and me over?”

“Too busy, most of the time. I couldn’t plan ahead, because I never knew what my schedule would be,” she called through the closed door.

“The trouble with working in health care.”

Her cover: an emergency room nurse.

She’d paused to text Diana that she should pack her belongings, vacate Majors’ abode and grab the first train to points unknown for her own well being - with barely a chance to delete the message - when he invaded her privacy, whistling at her lacy undergarments.

“I suspected you had a great body,” he drawled, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist.

They never made it out to dinner.

Come morning, Majors showered and dressed while Randie lay abed, oddly satisfied at the turn of events.

“There’s a lovely café on the coast,” he shouted from the bathroom. “You up for brunch?”

“Sure.” She watched him button his cream silk shirt over a hirsute chest.

“Where’d you park, anyway?”

“My limo dropped me off. I figured we could use that sweet Maserati...”

“You want to drive it, don’t you?”

His chestnut mop bobbed affirmatively.

“If you’re a good boy, maybe,” she quipped.

Sinking on the mattress, he kissed her passionately. “I thought I’d already been a good boy.”

“A very good boy.”

His chuckle irked her; she stifled her reaction.

“Tad never...”

“Not for years,” Randie confessed.

“Then, proposing that you move in with me wouldn’t be totally out of place?”

“What about Di?”

“She’s tired of me and, to be honest, I’m tired of her.”

“You don’t just toss a woman in the trash like an old sock,” Randie grumped. “Especially not my cousin.”

“Oh, it’s not like that. Mutual agreement. Time to move on.”

“Bastard,” she hissed silently.

A huge part of being an agent involved acting, and Randie had mastered the technique. Her previous assignment, infiltrating the notorious Oren Bolt’s human trafficking ring, got her close enough to that glorified pimp, he would’ve been sentenced to life in a maximum security prison if another agent hadn’t tried to circumvent the operation and take credit for the capture.

Six pistols trained on her as Bolt demanded an explanation, she’d bent to smooth her fishnet hose, yanking an ice pick from her leather boot and impaling him on the blade.

His startled expression redoubled as flunkies’ bullets riddled his torso. She’d rolled beneath a table while a cadre of police converged on the mansion.

Handling Majors wouldn’t tax her energies too much; she could easily play the lonely widow.

Within weeks, however, Randie found herself confined to the Georgian-style stone mansion through the day, evenings spent letting Majors drive the Maserati to clubs and expensive restaurants. A veritable vacation from having to travel around the country, she used the isolation to gather evidence for his eventual conviction on a myriad of felony counts.

The trouble began when he took a dislike to her oatmeal. A ceramic bowl slung across the kitchen, lumpy sludge scorched her left arm. Failure to properly prepare his lunch, or make the bed resulted in beatings that raised welts on her back and bruises on her thighs.

He, nonetheless, joined her in bed every night, relieving his frustrations upon her exhausted frame. About that, at least, he never complained.

Five months elapsed and, periodically, Randie recognized cars idling on the road beyond massive wrought iron gates, sent most likely by Bill Nichols to ensure her continued existence, if not her safety.

Details of a huge influx of cocaine and heroin, via a private dock, along with recordings of meetings where assassinations of rivals were discussed, she’d tucked beneath the false bottom of her night stand drawer. A cheap cell she’d packed in the lining of her suitcase when she brought her clothes from the condo

transmitted the message to Diana that a raid should be planned for that night, while Majors took her dancing.

Well known at this particular club, he paid the bandleader to skip their regular set, opting for polkas, waltzes and foxtrots. Randie had, fortunately, worn low heels with her slinky, sequined red dress, so her feet wouldn't cause too much pain as he twirled her around the floor for almost an hour, non-stop.

Until his ringing phone brought him to a halt. Releasing her, he strode toward their table, stiffening, whirling to glare at her, lips angled upward at the right corner in a derisive sneer.

"Fuck!" she heard him mutter.

Rather than make a break for it, she awaited his accusations, the *She's Too Fat for Me* polka accompanying the exchange.

"You set me up, bitch."

"You abused Diana - and me - and will go away for a very, very long stretch, given the stash I've got on you."

He raised his hand to strike; she clutched his wrist and jerked, laying him out on the floor. She straddled the prone form; the pistol, loosed from its camouflage inside her bra, pointed at his petrified mien. "It's over, Lionel."

He reared, groping for his shoulder holster, thinking she could never pull the trigger.

She proved him wrong.

When Bill Nichols waylaid her near the Maserati three hours later, she grinned wearily. "I told you I'd get it done."

"We've seized the ship and its crew, and local authorities are in the process of apprehending the men from the recordings. Good work, Randie." He studied her wan countenance. "I think you need a vacation."

"Amen to that!" She crawled behind the steering wheel.

He bent to the open window. "When do I get a ride in this beauty?"

"When I get the reward for gutting Majors' organization, and pay off the loan!"

Engine roaring, she sped into the night, destination unknown.

Manor Intrigues

An innovative means to keep taxes current on the rustic, red brick manor, to be sure.

Charlotte, despite being confined mostly below stairs by her menial duties, knew what went on in the rooms above. She'd been privy to the tale that prompted the transformation of Lord Dewbury's estate into a... tourist attraction, with those tourists being mostly assigned to the nearby Royal Air Force installation and visiting dignitaries.

World War II had devastated England, of that there could be no doubt. The teenager recalled all too vividly the night His Lordship ordered the staff of his London townhouse - including herself - to the countryside, mere hours before that dwelling fell victim to a Nazi bomb.

Her father had long since traveled to the Continent as a member of His Majesty's 13th Signal Regiment, leaving her in the care of Mrs. Bascombe, the cook. Charlotte's mother had died giving birth to her, and Lord Dewbury, valuing his butler, allowed the young man to raise the child in his household.

Of the five footmen who abandoned their domestic posts in favor of military service, three - along with Charlotte's father - perished in the D-Day invasion. While the maids stepped up valiantly to cover the men's duties, there could be no denying, by 1945, the situation at Dewbury Manor could not be resolved in any ordinary fashion.

What prompted the aging, widowed nobleman to pursue this particular option, Charlotte could not fathom. She'd heard rumors at the servants' breakfast table how he'd been acquainted with Lili Gautier in a less than professional capacity before the war. She and her... women needed accommodations, as their establishment had been destroyed in the Blitz, and Dewbury opened his doors to them as a personal favor.

The staff resented their presence, and the extra work heaped upon them: serving champagne and hors d'oeuvres to "guests", washing and ironing sheets, and listening to music blaring into the wee hours.

Charlotte bore the brunt of the disruption to regular household operations. The senior maids dumped their unwanted chores on her. Her legs ached by the time she fell into bed past midnight, a fact in no way related to the injury she'd sustained during that chaotic flight from the city.

She'd scrambled to stuff her few possessions in a small case and, running toward the stairs, the strap had slipped and the contents spilled. She tripped on the landing and tumbled down the marble flight, fracturing her right tibia.

Ginny and Angela had carried her to the lorry but, by the time they reached the manor and a doctor could be summoned, Charlotte had gone into shock from the pain. The bone never properly set; she still walked with a distinct limp.

Lili Gautier, her plump figure visible within the sheer, lace-trimmed robe, yanked Charlotte's ponytail that Tuesday morning as she scrubbed pots in the scullery. "Where's my breakfast?" came the shrill contralto, its French accent feigned. "I've been ringing for hours."

The teen clenched her fists beneath the soapy water. "There's food in the larder, if you wish..."

"I'm no cook!" Jerking Charlotte from the sink, she shoved her toward the kitchen. "Prepare me two eggs, toast, marmalade and coffee."

"No."

The shriek reverberated around the spacious chamber. "What?" Gautier's palm aimed for the girl's face. "You little..."

A firm grip restrained fleshy digits. "What's all this, then?"

Charlotte had glimpsed this RAF officer on numerous occasions, usually passing him in the corridor on his way out as she delivered clean sheets. Bronze-tinged hair, neat mustache beneath a straight nose, square shoulders and trim figure puzzled her. He could attract any girl; why waste his money in a... a...

"This drudge refuses to fix me breakfast," Gautier squealed, trying to wrench free.

The cultured baritone soothed, "Now, madame, you wouldn't wish to get this young woman in trouble, would you?"

She sniffed imperiously.

"In a British domicile, each servant has specific chores. A scullery maid who dared touch the cook's utensils would earn herself a proper thrashin'."

"I don't care! I want..."

The major guided her to the door. "You want to be gettin' to your room, madame. I'll have somethin' sent up shortly."

Tossing her disheveled blonde mane angrily, the woman vanished.

Charlotte exhaled, slumping on a wooden stool. "Thank you, sir."

He focused intense brown orbs on her diminutive form. "Sorry about that, missy. Her type doesn't... have the best manners." He inspected the kitchen.

"Where's the cook?"

"It's market day. She and the maids left early to find the best fruits and vegetables..."

"Thinkin' the... guests would be sleepin' late?"

The brunette ponytail bobbed in affirmation.

“Are you the scullery maid?” he prodded.

“That, and other things.”

“I thought I’d noticed you making beds.” He sank on a stool beside her.

“What’s your name?”

“Charlotte, sir.”

“Just Charlotte?”

“Tinsdale.”

His elongated face beamed. “Daughter of the butler?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I was that sorry to hear about his death. He served bravely...”

She felt a tear wetting her cheek. “Thank you, sir.”

From his uniform trousers, a starched handkerchief appeared; his elegant fingers dabbed the moisture. Then, with a smile that angled upward at the right corner, he rose. “There, now. Better get back to work.”

She missed her footing as she straightened; strong arms prevented her from falling. “Thank you, sir.”

“You’re quite knackered, aren’t you?” he remarked, studying her countenance.

“We work long hours these days...” She bit her tongue.

“No need to feel guilty for telling the truth. I can imagine how tirin’ it can be, chasin’ after... that sort.”

The comment slipped out. “But, aren’t you that sort?”

His boisterous laugh startled her. “Oh, heavens, no, my girl! I’m Lord Dewbury’s nephew, Peter Robinson. I’ve been stoppin’ here while on temporary duty at the base.”

Charlotte blushed at her mistake. “I’m sorry, sir...”

“No need.” He considered briefly. “Here’s what you do. Leave those pots and pans and get yourself to bed. I’m orderin’ a day of rest...”

“Are you a doctor, sir?”

“No, just a man concerned about a... friend.”

“But, when Mrs. Bascombe...”

“Fret not, my girl. I’ll handle everythin’.” His kissed her lips lightly, then nudged her toward the servants’ hall. “Get along with you, sharpish.”

An awkward curtsey preceded her departure.

She slept like one dead until mid-afternoon. Rolling over on the narrow mattress, she opened blue eyes to see a vase of red roses atop the chest of drawers. The scent delighted her nostrils, her brain confused.

“You’ve an admirer,” scoffed Mrs. Bascombe when Charlotte crossed the kitchen threshold in clean black frock and crisp white cuffs.

“Who?”

“Major Robinson.”

Flustered by the cook’s derisive expression, the teen stammered, “I don’t...”

“Beware that one, child,” came the warning. “He’s fathered bastards across the British Isles, from what I’ve ‘eard, and gettin’ you in a family way won’t help your prospects, limited as they are.”

Charlotte could not formulate a response.

“Go on, now. The pots still need scrubbin’.”

Before she reached the scullery, Angela rushed in with a message. “You’re to see Madame Gautier immediately.”

“Me?”

“Lord Dewbury’s orders.”

Mrs. Bascombe shuddered. “What have you gotten yourself into, child? Your father would be rollin’ in his grave” - she made a hasty Sign of the Cross - “wherever he’s buried.”

Not bothering to shed her apron or comb her curls, Charlotte ascended to the main floor. She found Lili Gautier in the main parlor, still not properly dressed, sipping champagne from a crystal flute.

“You sent for me?” Charlotte rasped.

“No, but I have little choice in the matter,” snapped the former courtesan. “I have been requested to provide you with... suitable attire and training...”

“Training?” the teen echoed.

“Manners, deportment... seduction.”

Eyes wide, Charlotte retreated. “I’ll not become one of your... whores!”

Lili covered the distance between them in three long strides, the slap that had been preempted earlier in the day leaving a red impression on Charlotte’s jaw. “Bitch! As if I’d permit you to join the ranks of England’s best!” She towered above the servant, scowl revealing a gap between her front teeth. “Peter’s taken a liking to you, and wants to show you a kindness. He just... doesn’t want to be embarrassed by your low class behavior when he escorts you to dinner.”

“Me?”

“An odd duck, that. Could have his pick from the finest houses in the district, but he wants you.”

“Wants me for what?”

“How should I know? I don’t ask questions when the order is given, and you shouldn’t, either.”

So it happened: Charlotte was measured, fabrics sorted, designs created for an assortment of gowns. While she waited, Gautier’s tarts taught her the use of silverware, polite discourse, and ways to entice a man and secure his undying affection.

Robinson, given a week’s leave from his military duties, ensconced himself in the manor’s west wing, far from the nightly revels. He rang for Charlotte that Friday evening, a private dinner arranged.

“Are you testing me to see if...”

Garbed in a quilted velvet smoking jacket and black trousers, he cut a dashing figure. “No, my girl. I thought we should get better acquainted.”

He offered her wine; she refused.

“It will relax you.”

“Nothing will relax me; I’m too... nervous.”

“Why? I’ll not harm you.”

She burred, “Mrs. Bascombe said...”

“Yes, I have a notorious reputation,” he chuckled, holding her chair. “In this instance, my intentions are strictly honorable.”

She arranged her blue satin skirt on the gold upholstery. “Why?”

Seated opposite, he rang for the first course.

“Why would you treat me any different from...”

Robinson refrained from answering until Ginny, smirking, served their soup and withdrew. He leaned toward Charlotte, almost conspiratorially. “When I was twelve, and you were but a toddler, your father saved my life. I was spending the summer holiday in Scotland with Uncle Dew, and we’d gone to Loch Lomond for a picnic. I fell in the water, and Tinsdale left you with Aunt Jenny, jumped in and pulled me to shore. He resuscitated me and, though I was sick for weeks afterward, I was alive. I... owe him an eternal debt.”

Tossing the embroidered linen napkin on her plate, Charlotte stiffened. “I’ll not become a charity case, or an object of pity.”

“Calm yourself, Charlie.” He grinned. “Do you mind if I call you Charlie?”

She sighed. “No one ever has.”

“Your dad did, when you were small.”

“Really? I don’t remember.”

Robinson picked up his spoon and tested the broth. “Eat, Charlie.”

“I... my stomach is in knots...”

“No need.” He decided to distract her. “Tell me, have you been able to go to school since...”

“Mrs. Bascombe made sure I could read and write after Dad...”

“What else? Are you good at math?”

“I can do my ciphers well enough.”

“Art? Music?”

“No, sir.”

“Peter, please.”

“Oh, I couldn’t!”

Robinson moved his chair closer. His hands engulfed her calloused palms. “You’ll become accustomed to it, my dear, because you’re going to marry me.”

Her face blanched, and he suspected she might faint.

“Steady, Charlie!” he murmured.

Chest heaving, she groaned, “I told you, I’ll not be a charity case!”

His smile conveyed genuine tenderness.

“Why should you, a nobleman, lower yourself to... to... if not out of pity?”

“I’m not a nobleman, Charlie. I’m only related to Uncle Dew through marriage. My mum and Aunt Jenny were sisters. Our stock is... as common as yours.”

She squinted in disbelief. “You’re his sole heir.”

“To the manor, perhaps, not the title.”

A storm of emotions churning inside her, Charlotte abandoned the table for the French windows, a soft breeze wafting over the balcony. Robinson joined her there.

“Will things... remain the same when you are... master of the house?” she ventured.

“You mean, Madame Gautier?”

A minuscule nod.

“No. She’ll be... relocated.”

Charlotte exhaled audibly. “I still don’t understand why... you would want me... a cripple...”

“Your leg may be crippled, not your mind, not your soul. You deserve every beautiful experience life has to offer, after...”

She glanced at him; he contemplated the lawns bathed in dusky hues.

“After?” she prompted.

“After losing all you held dear.” He embraced her; she shivered - though with the chill air or sorrow, he couldn’t discern. “Let me court you properly, squire you about, shower you with gifts...”

“Why?” she mumbled into his shirt.

“I’ve already told you...”

Damp eyes met his smoldering brown orbs. “No, if you’ve already made your decision, and I don’t object, why should I have to return each day to the pots and the irons, then join you in the evening?” She let his handkerchief dry her skin. “In due course, I’ll be comfortable on your arm at dinners and parties but, for now, I’m content to remain in this house...”

“I still have a year of military service...”

“Don’t they allow married officers to live off base?” she postulated.

“I believe so.”

“Then, you’d be with me each night.”

His smile soothed her anxiety. “Starting tonight?”

“Hasn’t there been scandal enough within these walls?” she quipped.

“You’ll not go below stairs again, except to fetch your roses.” He smothered her mouth in a prolonged, passionate kiss. “We’ll be married as soon as the vicar can drive over from the village.”

The wedding, in the lush gardens, attended by Lord Dewbury and the servants, excluded Lili Gautier and her lot. Major and Mrs. Robinson set up housekeeping, without a staff, in Peter’s suite, thriving there for almost a decade before the old man passed in his sleep.

Evicted the day following Lord Dewbury’s funeral, Lili Gautier raised no fuss, using the vast savings she had acquired off the backs of her prostitutes to set up a high class brothel in Knightsbridge.

Charlotte gave birth to three daughters and a son, her limp not preventing her from chasing them about the lawns in games of tag or football, along with their father.

Integrity, Always

The 21st century technology boom has transformed the art - and science - of fortune telling. Tarot readings and psychic consultations can be had with the click of a mouse. For those who prefer to read their own futures in the cards, scores of decks are available with renderings ranging from mediaeval to abstract.

When Severin Blake got started in the 1960s, the concept smacked of simplicity. Those seeking advice would ring for an appointment, paying by the hour in hard cash. Mine was the pleasant voice they heard on the line, most days, while Sev maintained his integrity, always.

Integrity had nothing to do with this game, for me. The money we raked in proved as much. Clients found comfort not just in Sev's nonsensical droning, but in the flat's posh furnishings and muted wall colorings. Rather tall and spare, with longish hair gone prematurely white, he presented a wise father-figure, in touch with the invisible essence.

My job involved gathering information on whoever was scheduled to sit across the table from him at any given time. My suite of the Knightsbridge penthouse boasted an office where stacks of newspapers from around the world cluttered the floor, volumes of *Who's Who* filled the bookshelves and a Rolodex contained phone numbers to sources near and far.

Typed sheets were presented to Sev each morning at breakfast. Yes, I cooked for him, too. He preferred having only one person interact with him on a regular basis, to prevent distractions by outside influences.

He really believed in his power to see into the beyond.

I never tried to dissuade him; I liked living comfortably.

Sev enjoyed connections with a number of celebrities during those years when so many were exploring the true meaning of life through drugs, meditation and music. Rock stars, politicians, television and film actors came and went discreetly, filling our coffers with "special rates" ensuring their names would never be divulged to the media.

That decade secured my future, funds judiciously invested to last the rest of my life.

I should've hated myself for the myriad schemes I hatched back then, but, it was too much fun bilking such idiots of their money.

In only one instance did I refrain from violating a client's confidentiality.

J.P. Fields ascended to fame on radio at the BBC. He achieved success on the screen, as well. His young wife's tragic death at the hands of a street gang in 1961 spurred his search for a greater meaning to mortal existence. That first day I

opened the door for him, I had to forcibly maintain my composure at the wreck of a man who waited on the threshold.

With my behind-the-scenes assistance, Sev revitalized every facet of J.P.'s life. I contacted his agent, his publicist, producers and directors to glean information about upcoming projects. Decisions regarding his career would be crafted into remarkably insightful readings - cards, palm, what have you - to propel him from confusion to certainty.

J.P. visited the flat a minimum of three times per week, when he wasn't touring or traveling. Then, he'd phone. My supreme joy occurred when I would deliver the obligatory tea tray to the sitting room, and he would turn intense brown orbs upon me and smile, the right corner of his mouth angled upward.

"You know Gillian Tully?" Sev introduced me during their initial consultation.

He displayed old-school manners, rising and kissing my hand. I fear I blushed to the roots of my blonde head.

"Beautiful day, innit?" I muttered, tongue-tied, letting my Cockney origins have sway.

"There's a bit of a George Raft in 'ere," he countered in a pleasant baritone. "Would you mind closin' the window?"

"Not at all."

"Ta."

I dreamed about him that night, sleeping on the king-sized mattress beside Sev. As the months passed, he started arriving a quarter-hour early, chatting me up as he lounged in the parlor. My skin tingled each time he raised my fingers to his lips, despite an awareness of his hidden demons.

Yes, I eavesdropped on his sessions, where he unloaded to Sev like a priest-confessor.

J.P. ached for someone to steer him through the morass of stardom. He'd never had much in the way of education, didn't understand the fine print of contracts, could be easily plied with new cars or popular gadgets into making bad decisions. He qualified - in my book - as one of the millions of men who'd grown older, but hadn't grown up.

I decided my particular skills would be perfect to meet this challenge. Admittedly a morning type, I ventured out that Tuesday after Sev's late sessions, finding J.P. at a hot spot he liked to frequent. He didn't recognize me in my "finer" attire; seeing me in slacks and simple blouses around the flat, the slinky sequined mini-skirt and low-cut top confounded him.

“What have you done to yourself?” he rasped, buying me a gin and tonic at the bar.

“Nothin’ special.” A lie, surely.

“You look lovely.”

“Ta.”

“Look, I’m with someone, but give me a few...”

He unloaded his date on a total stranger, and whisked me out to his Rolls-Royce. The chauffeur drove us to a country house north of London, where we engaged in... well...

I served him breakfast the next morning, which impressed him.

“No woman I’ve... They just don’t believe in performing the homely duties.”

“I’ve been fending for myself since I was a kid. It’s second nature to me.”

Within a week, I’d insinuated myself into his daily routine, while neglecting none of my responsibilities with Sev. J.P. tended toward sloppiness, except with his cars, and I whipped the eight-bedroom domicile into shape, catching up on laundry that had piled up over months.

“Don’t you have any servants?” I asked one evening over a dinner of steak-and-kidney pie.

“They walked out on me. Thought I was a tyrant when I expected them to handle the simplest tasks.”

I recalled that debacle, a maid grassing to the papers about J.P.’s unusual regimen.

Tea had been prepared for Sev’s newest client that afternoon; I snatched up the phone when it rang.

“Marry me.” J.P.’s voice, absolutely serious.

“Can I call you back in five minutes?”

“It only takes a second to say yes.”

My stomach knotted. Indeed, he had a body that tantalized me, and a face cameras loved. I knew the difference between love and lust... if we became man and wife, he’d be a project for the rest of my days...

“Yes,” I whispered, dropping the handset onto its cradle and whisking the silver tray into the sitting room.

He delivered the engagement ring prior to his afternoon session with Sev who, oddly, didn’t notice it on my finger when I toted in a stack of reports for his review that evening.

“You know he’s dying,” declared my boss with a solemnity befitting an undertaker.

“What do you mean, dying?”

“I’ve seen it in the cards.”

The laughter burst from my throat, unbidden. “You’re taking yourself too seriously, Sev.”

“He’ll be gone in six months, tops.”

That tore it for me.

Less than five minutes passed before I departed the flat, thinking forever.

J.P. and I wed at the registrar’s office on Saturday. The ironic aspect of the situation: he continued visiting Sev, who couldn’t provide sensible advice without my... sources. J.P. started doubting himself, and nothing I could do would dispel the cloud of despair.

He tried searching out a new connection with the intangible, but the methods others employed mirrored mine. Finally, a chill autumn night, I lay beside my husband on the pillows, and confessed how the scam operated.

Livid, I sensed his blood pressure rise, along with the timbre of his baritone. He railed against all practitioners, cut off in mid-sentence when he slumped on the mattress, clutching his chest.

Sev had been correct, for once. J.P. Fields died of a massive heart attack, age 39, six months after we’d exchanged vows.

I inherited his cars, his house, his wealth, but I could never shake the knowledge that, if he’d been able to keep faith in the silly fortune tellers, he might still be alive today.

Galatea's Revenge

Ellen maneuvered through the crowd departing Dublin's Smock Alley Theatre after the final curtain call - if it could be termed as such.

This theatre boasted an atypical stage: at floor level, the audience seated on long benches positioned like risers on three sides.

If she'd been exercising her function as a critic, she would've blasted the performance of *Pygmalion* as amateurish, at best.

Ill fitting costumes were the least of the issues the middle-aged woman had with the production. Pulled from a thrift store, no one had bothered to size them properly. Henry Higgins' vest didn't even reach the top of his trousers; he couldn't have buttoned the tweed jacket if he tried.

The actors hadn't rehearsed sufficiently; no chemistry existed between the leads as they waited for each other to recite their lines, rather than engaging in spritely dialogue.

Emerging into the chill air, Ellen stormed toward Temple Bar; she badly needed a drink.

Sandi pursued her, catching her up outside the Bull and Frog. "Damn it, I'm sorry for getting you so upset," mourned her long-time friend. "I thought a night out..."

"It's not your fault," rumbled the stern contralto. "Your intentions were good."

Settled at a small table in the midst of a boisterous crush, Ellen gulped her Jameson.

"You'll make yourself sick," Sandi warned, sipping her Guinness.

"I'm already sick." She slammed the shot glass on stained wood. "How can anyone sit through a story of men bullying a woman, just to win a wager?"

"It's a classic."

"Bernard Shaw was a misogynist!"

"Then, so was Shakespeare, and every other male playwright to this very day."

Ellen signaled the waiter to bring her a refill. "You're saying a woman can't stand equal to a man on all fronts?"

"Not on stage."

"How much if I prove you wrong?"

"A thousand."

A delicate hand stretched across the board, grasped by Sandi's calloused fingers.

“What time frame?” asked the latter.

“Eh?”

“Six months?”

“What, to write a script and have it produced?” Ellen queried.

“Correct.”

“It might take a year or more.”

“Then, there has to be another way.”

“For instance?”

Sandi grinned. “Real life.”

The shot glass paused within inches of Ellen’s lips. “You’re daft.”

“What about one of the guys in the newsroom?”

“Not in a million years.”

Sandi twirled on her chair, scanning the wall above the bar, adorned with autographed photos of renowned patrons. She pointed at the second row end.

“What about him?”

Ellen had good cause to down the whiskey. Granted, she’d known Brendan West for years, sat in the stalls at the Abbey Theatre reviewing his directorial efforts...

He’d gone on record as despising her, accusing her of ignorance and prejudice toward innovative techniques.

She thought him arrogant, despite his enduring good looks.

“Raise the stakes to ten thousand, and I’ll give it a go,” she stated.

Though Sandi blanched at the amount, her friend knew she could afford it - married to a prominent government official. “Three months?” she ventured.

Ellen nodded tousled ash blonde curls. “If we’re still together 90 days from today, equal partners, you’ll pay be in cold, hard cash.”

“And, if you part company prior to that, I’ll expect the same.”

Again, they sealed the bargain with a handshake.

En route to the door, Ellen threw a 50 Euro note on the bar.

Into the wee hours, she lay abed in her flat near St. Stephen’s Green, staring at the ceiling, pondering how to wheedle her way into West’s good graces...

As it turned out, she wasted eight hours that might’ve otherwise been devoted to sleep.

She approached the Abbey Theatre’s glass facade Thursday mid-morning, her jeans and flannel shirt a deliberately casual choice, meant to put West at his ease. Dodging pedestrians intent on their own business, she missed her footing and

collided with the object of her errand, deep in conversation with a lithe production assistant.

West, instinctively, caught Ellen's arms to prevent her falling. He muttered a lame excuse about being more careful in future before their eyes met.

His magnificent brown orbs, set above a Romanesque nose and thin lips which angled upward at the right corner, framed by a wavy chestnut mane - grey flecks at the sideburns - the wide forehead tapering along the bearded jaw to a narrow chin, flashed curiosity then disdain in a split second. He released her, wiping his hands on the back of his pinstriped suit, seemingly cleansing them of some lethal toxin.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he snapped.

She restrained a caustic retort. "I need a word, if you have a moment."

"I'm in meetings until 3:30."

"I'll come back then."

"I can only spare five minutes."

"That'll be fine."

He strode away, resuming his discussion without skipping a beat. Ellen leaned against a square post, contemplating the wisdom of this bet. Calling it off, Sandi would gloat endlessly about her failure, and her bank account would be the worse for her cowardice.

She trekked back to the office, sorting through mail and the upcoming entertainment schedule, while her coworkers created an almost deafening clamor on their phones.

From the time she started as a journalist, Ellen opted for the late shift, specifically to avoid the noise in the open chamber that served as a haven for both dedicated and casual reporters alike. She'd been offered promotion to an editorial post more than once in ten years, refusing so as not to disturb her virtual independence and integrity.

She'd graduated with a degree in music and theater from Trinity College, minoring in media. Her prospects on stage limited - a vivid scar along her right cheek from a childhood bicycle accident ruined her once-perfect features - and her talent as a pianist mediocre, at best, she blended her studies to become a critic of those claiming superior skills in the field.

She viewed it her duty to encourage the orchestras, rock bands and actors to improve themselves, sometimes with a bluntness her subjects found offensive. Directors and conductors also felt her wrath, when their whims toward modernity or controversy for the sake of controversy spoiled what might have been a pleasant audience experience.

“The Scourge of Dublin’s Nightlife” became her moniker.

Frankly, she reveled in it.

Ellen well could’ve taken unfair advantage of such notoriety. Perks - from prime seating at upscale restaurants to anonymous “gifts” of an extravagant nature, flights to Paris or the Riviera and discreetly delivered envelopes of cash - were summarily rejected. A favorable review could not be bought, at any price.

Lunch at Eddie Rocket’s on O’Connell Street didn’t ease the knots in her stomach. Something about the cooks not wearing protective gloves as they touched the food... But, she liked the chocolate milkshakes.

Good thing she wasn’t the food critic.

She swung in to Christ Church Cathedral, listening to the famous choir rehearse new arrangements. The quiet interior of the massive structure calmed her nerves, though she frequently glanced at her wristwatch.

The Abbey’s receptionist glanced at Ellen skeptically when she entered the theater lobby at precisely 3:30.

“Mr. West isn’t out of his meeting yet,” the buxom, brunette matron responded to the claim of an appointment.

Ellen managed a smile. “I’ll wait.”

And, wait she did, until past 4:00, browsing displays of old posters and photos of the original building.

If West was playing with her, forcing the delay...

Then, the wager was already lost.

The cadre of executive types that emerged from the staircase at 4:15 signaled her mistake. Their briefcases heavy with reports, she guessed, none of them wore expressions of satisfaction.

West and the redhead brought up the rear. His countenance pinched from the strain of a marathon session, Ellen suspected he’d be in no mood to hear an outlandish proposal.

Unless...

The assistant glided across the tile to a door marked, “Private,” leaving West and Ellen nose-to-nose.

“I need a drink,” grumbled the former.

“C’mon, then.”

They strolled together to The Metropolitan Bar, a block away. Two double whiskeys later, they glared at each other.

“What’s on your mind?” West began.

“First, tell me about the meeting.”

“Off the record?”

She raised her right hand in pledge. "Promise."

"Our former bookkeeper siphoned off more than a hundred thousand of the theater's funds, then took a bunk to the Continent."

Ellen repressed a grin, recalling West's London origins. "Shit!"

"It's not likely our insurance carrier will cover the loss, because said bookkeeper also cancelled our annual audit the last two years. The executive director, who tendered his resignation during the session, admitted his failure to request the monthly accounting reports, or follow up on the audits."

"Do you think the two colluded in the crime?" she pressed.

"The Garda are investigating. Anything is possible."

"Damn, Brendan. I'm sorry." Ellen ordered another round of drinks. "What's going to happen?"

"We carry on as best we can. The plan is to take out a bank loan, but in the current financial climate, it isn't likely we'd be approved."

"Even with the long success of the place?"

West mustered a crooked smirk. "Our house has been half empty for every performance over the last year."

"Damn!"

The drinks arrived; the pair clinked glasses and downed the liquid in one gulp.

West's elegant fingers ran through his disheveled mop. "I don't know what we're going to do..."

"I do."

He raised those intense brown eyes. "Eh?"

"Take me on."

"Are you barmy?" he snorted.

"Not at all." She leaned toward him, conspiratorially. "Let me mount a marketing campaign for you, to draw in more tourists, as well as locals."

"But, we've tried that..."

"Not the way I'd do it. Scrap the experimental scripts, the untested newcomers - for a season, at least. Hold auditions for talented amateurs, who'll work without pay, just for the experience. Hit the universities up for available interns. Go with shows that people enjoy seeing: nothing heavy, comedies, musicals."

"That's goes against the Abbey's established protocols..."

"Protocols that puts off ordinary folk who like to laugh at something familiar."

West deliberated, brow furrowed. "It might work."

“If, after one season, the theater hasn’t recouped most of its losses, you can kick me to the curb.”

“You’d leave the paper?” he demanded.

“No. This would be... voluntary. I have my mornings free, as it is.”

“You’d take instructions from me?”

“What, they’ve made you interim executive director?”

He nodded.

“Be that as it may, my answer is no. We’re equals, you and I, working together.”

She expected skepticism, and he complied. “Why don’t I trust you?”

How to answer?

“You’ve an ulterior motive,” he persisted.

“My only motive is to save the theater and, maybe, make it possible to write a good review once in awhile!”

“I... guess you’ve got a job.”

They shook on the deal. Ellen paid the tab and they returned to the Abbey, where the receptionist squinted at them.

“Gwyneth, Miss Curtis is to have full access to the facility going forward,” West stated.

“What!”

“We’re working on a project, and she will need to use the computers and equipment.”

The woman gulped visibly. “Yes, Mr. West.”

Before she left the building, Ellen had four extra keys on her metal ring, and a song in her heart.

She and Brendan spent long hours poring over ideas in the ensuing weeks. They generated press releases and posters for the revised season, with three American favorites and two British standards set to run, ticket prices reduced. Audition dates were posted on the Abbey’s website, and internship applications filled the main email’s inbox.

By mid-September, half-way through her wager with Sandi, Ellen could lounge in the Abbey’s office, content with their progress.

She relished her time with West, neither requiring any display of affection or feigned sense of commitment. They were two intelligent human beings using their experience to resolve a sticky problem.

Grabbing a bite at Eddie Rocket’s one Thursday, West scrutinized her youthful mien across the booth with unusual intentness.

“What’s on your mind?” she queried.

“You.”

“Why?”

“None of the amateurs we’ve auditioned for *Educating Rita* are capable of carrying the piece. With your background...”

“Bren, I *watch* the plays. I don’t participate in them.”

“Nobody will watch this play, if we don’t get the right gal...”

“You’re exaggerating.”

West bristled. “No, I’m not.” He extracted a folded sheet of newsprint from his jeans, flattening it on the table.

A review of her appearance in that same play during her college years.

“You probably wouldn’t even need a script...” he hinted.

“No.” She rose as the server delivered their hamburgers, then changed her mind, settling on the torn cushion.

They ate in silence. The premise of the bet was to not allow West to bully her into acquiescing to a task she loathed. They were equals and allowing him to be her director in a play would violate that arrangement.

“Then, the only thing I can do is bring in a professional, which will void our agreement with the actors’ union,” West concluded on their way out the door.

“Let me have a look at the girls,” Ellen offered.

“It’ll be a waste of your time.”

“But, it’s my time, and I might see something you missed.”

She didn’t; he’d been correct in his assessment of the inability of these 20-somethings to maintain the necessary energy for a two-person play.

She lamented selecting it.

“Who’ve you got for the professor?” she inquired that Monday morning.

“One of the lads from *Arsenic and Old Lace*.”

She shuddered. “Those are running back-to-back. He’ll be worn out...”

“Then, you want to call another audition?”

“No.” The mischievous smile flustered West. “You do it.”

“I... haven’t trod the boards since...”

“It’s the only way I’ll do it.”

The pressure on them both, she felt justified in agreeing to his request.

Opening night, in mid-November, Sandi and her husband sat front row center on red upholstered seats, and led the standing ovation at the play’s conclusion.

Visiting the star dressing room, her friend presented a Gucci bag, stuffed with cash. “Damn you, Ellen,” she chuckled. “I never thought you’d pull it off.”

The pair embraced.

“Neither did I.”

West waded through the throng, a small bouquet of violets his token of esteem. “I would rather die than say this to the Scourge of Dublin’s Nightlife: you’re an incredible woman.”

“No, Bren,” Ellen corrected. “We’re two human beings, who pooled our skills to save the theater!”

He withdrew, and she felt not a twinge of regret.

She had proven Bernard Shaw wrong. Pygmalion, according to ancient legend, may have created Galatea to be the perfect woman, but that didn’t mean subservient and docile.

Any man who bullied women the way Henry Higgins did deserved to have slippers shied at his head, or worse.

Consequences of an Impulse

Why the *hell* we got married, I cannot fathom to this day.

Were we high? Admittedly, Lou - Professor Louis Friedline to his colleagues at Cal Tech - enjoyed a relaxing toke on the merry green weed after a long day's research, and I shared a puff off the badly-rolled joints once in awhile.

This... this... defied any logical explanation.

Lou had been running rocket fuel experiments in the refurbished barn on his parents' old farm east of Covina for a decade, avoiding the Vietnam draft because his theories might morph into military applications. The only other structures on that 150 acres: a two-bedroom bungalow the couple built after World War II, and a massive chicken coop, since renovated into a utility shed.

He wasn't much to look at: gangly after losing nearly 100 pounds of "baby fat," as he described it; prematurely white hair pulled into a tight ponytail framed an elongated face. Oval wire-rimmed specs sat on a prominent nose; thin lips angled upward at the right corner when he spoke.

I'd joined him as graduate assistant three years prior, intrigued by his notion that space travel could be environmentally efficient, if certain components were combined.

We worked side-by-side from 8:00 to 5:00, then I'd cook dinner while he labored until well after sunset. A man driven, he barely slept - though, when he did, he snored like a buzz saw. I could hear him through the house's thin walls.

Leisure activities didn't enter into his schedule, beyond the occasional marijuana break. He didn't partake of regular tobacco products, didn't imbibe alcoholic beverages, didn't even like chocolate - to which I'm addicted. The only periodicals he read, stacked haphazardly in the living room, were scientific and mechanical journals. No television occupied the wheeled stand in the far corner, not that we could receive a transmission signal this far from the city. The same for radio.

At least, we had a phone.

Recalling those days, perhaps that annoying device, its shrill ring audible through every room and even outdoors, prompted our mad sojourn to Las Vegas.

A hot evening in June, we'd been analyzing results from the latest test, which left a sizable crater in a field still dotted with corn stalk stubs. Lou trekked from the barn to the house when the bloody instrument started up a third time in quick succession.

"Must be important," he mumbled, leaving me with piles of statistics to sort.

Five minutes later, I stepped out for a breath of air and noticed him tossing a duffel in the back seat of his silver '67 Chevy Impala.

"What's up?" I shouted.

"Pack some clothes. We've got to get goin'." When he was frustrated, a hint of his Cockney origins tinted his baritone.

"Why?"

"It's... a surprise."

The drive to Nevada up Interstate 15 took three hours, Lou's foot heavy on the accelerator the entire distance.

"What's the rush?" I asked repeatedly, receiving no response.

Night didn't exist in this gambling mecca, the Strip lit with thousands - nay, millions - of bulbs at all hours. We didn't bother checking into a hotel, but braked at the first wedding chapel he sighted.

Confused and tired, I climbed from the leather passenger seat. Lou met me on the sidewalk, flashing a blue velvet jeweler's box.

The 24 karat gold band nestled within shocked me awake. "What the hell?"

"Marry me, darlin'."

"You're off your nut!"

Rather than argue, we strolled down the block to a 24-hour diner, ordering coffee.

Lou attempted, clumsily, to explain that he'd been in love with me for months, and hadn't known how to express his emotions. I sensed something off about his diatribe...

En route to the car, he'd pulled out a joint and lit up, passing it to me.

Yeah, we *were* high when we entered the glass storefront, where a plump, tipsy matron slurred a welcome and presented paperwork on a rusted clipboard.

The officiating minister, his southern accent rendering the ceremony barely comprehensible, had us out the door in less than ten minutes, with just a perfunctory kiss to display our affection. I fell asleep in the Chevy, waking when we pulled onto the cracked cement driveway as dawn shown over the mountains to the east.

In lieu of a honeymoon, we ate bacon and eggs for breakfast, returning to the barn and the incomplete data.

What I initially believed to have been some hallucination or wild dream transformed into a nightmare before mid-morning.

A cadre of black Fords converged on the property at precisely 10:00. Curiosity spun me toward the iron-barred window; Lou immediately restrained me.

"Act natural," he warned.

“Why?”

“Trust me.”

Glancing at my left hand, the gold band encircled my third finger. I’d actually married this eccentric...

The massive rolling door trundled aside, black-suited figures swarming the premises. They didn’t bother to remove their Ray-Ban sunglasses, drawing pistols from shoulder holsters.

Blood rushed from my head; fainting would serve no practical purpose, so I gripped the edge of the lab table.

“Louis Friedline?” barked one of the clones.

“Yes?”

“F.B.I., Professor. We have a search warrant...”

“A search warrant?” I echoed, clapping my hand over my mouth when Lou scowled at me.

My husband offered no protest. “Help yourselves.”

Rifling desk drawers and tossing papers on the floor, they made a right mess of the most recent six months’ work. Not finding what they sought, I suppose, they moved to the house, then fixed their attention on the chicken coop.

Noontime found the agents hauling a weighty object toward their vehicles: my grandmother’s cedar chest.

“What in hell do you want with that?” I confronted them. “That’s my personal property!”

“Then, you’re under arrest, ma’am,” declared what must’ve been the senior official, detaching handcuffs from his belt and securing them around my skinny wrists.

Lou did nothing to stop them, lingering near the barn, a sheepish grin contorting his features.

A drive into Los Angeles, where I was confined in a stark interrogation room without food or water, crushed my spirit. I noticed the sun setting through a window high in the concrete block wall before I saw another face - and, definitely, not friendly.

“You are Melody Innes?” the man snarled, his close-cropped ebony mane reminding me of my father’s Army boot camp portrait.

“Melody Friedline,” I corrected.

“Eh?” He consulted a manila file he’d laid on the metal table. “I don’t see...”

“We were married yesterday.”

His expression soured. “I see.”

“What do you see?” I shifted on the uncomfortable chair, badly in need of a bathroom. “Why should it matter if Lou and I...”

“Because a wife cannot testify against her husband, and vice versa.”

“Who’s going to testify about anything?”

“The federal prosecutor...”

“Now, wait just a minute! What charges have been brought...”

A yellow and black canister, similar to those used in cameras, plopped on the surface. “Do you know what this is?”

“Not a clue.”

“It was found in that cedar chest you claim to own.”

I tasted blood when I bit my lip.

“There were a dozen or more like it, cleverly concealed beneath a false bottom...”

“And, you think I had something to do with it?”

A toothy smirk made me shudder. “Oh, we know you didn’t. We know your husband...”

“What... are they supposed to be?”

“Top secret schematics of weapons set to put an end to the Vietnam conflict.”

“Where would Lou...”

“He’s a double agent, stealing information from our Defense Department and selling it to the highest bidder.”

“Nonsense! He’s never been gone for more than a few hours, grocery shopping and running errands!”

“Which is when he meets his contacts.”

“Oh, shit!”

A clammy hand patted my arm. “Now, now, Mrs. Friedline, don’t trouble yourself. We’d like to offer you a deal...”

That “deal” would send me back to Lou, and any incriminating evidence about his activities would be reported to F.B.I. field operatives.

The chuckle burst from my throat. “No.”

“Surely, you’re not in love with him?”

“I respect him as a researcher. Isn’t that enough?”

“Even if his ‘research’ causes the deaths of innocents by the thousands?”

“I’d rather be locked up here than betray him.”

“So be it.”

Except, I never reached my cell. A sprightly female appeared on the threshold, signaling the man to join her in the corridor. Their hushed tones prevented me from determining the context of the exchange.

I guessed it had to be about me.

Within moments, I was escorted to a utilitarian office, where three executives - wearing custom tailored suits of blue and brown shades - stared me down.

“Please, have a seat, Mrs. Friedline,” greeted the eldest, distinguished by grey at his temples.

The well-cushioned armchair suited me better than straight-backed metal, goosebumps on my forearms confirming I was no less nervous.

“We’re sorry to inform you...”

I sensed it before he spoke: Lou was dead.

By his own hand.

An explosion in the barn had gone awry, not only eradicating every scrap of his research and, presumably, proof of his illegal activities, but ending his life.

Released from custody and left to plan a closed-casket funeral with what remnants of flesh and bone could be readily extracted from the rubble, I had no means to prove the identity of the brass-trimmed box’s contents. In the 1970s, DNA testing wasn’t available, and scientific methods had yet to achieve standards common in the 21st century.

Notification arrived via registered mail before month’s end: the photographic canisters had contained nothing more than images of flowers, wildlife and - strangely - me, taken unawares as I pattered among the test tubes and engine models.

The agency’s lack of evidence against Lou enabled me to inherit his modest savings. I took a year to recover my bearings, living in the bungalow and rummaging through planks, beams and roofing shingles heaped where the makeshift lab had once stood.

Nothing incriminating came to light as each piece was loaded on a rented dump truck, periodically hauled to the landfill.

Only when I cleaned out the kitchen cupboards did I chance to open an oatmeal container, thinking the contents spoiled. There, amongst almost petrified flakes, a folded scrap of paper held a final message in Lou’s precise block lettering:

“My love, I’m sorry for putting you through this. When I realized my experiments would fail, I did what I could to end the wars that have plagued the world for eons. I failed there, too.”

Strips of microfilm sealed inside a plastic bag, to which the note was taped, were dropped at the F.B.I. office before I headed east in the Impala, a new identity ensuring I could live anonymously, peacefully. The wedding ring served as a constant reminder to never trust another soul, even in the small Midwest town where I covered community events for the weekly newspaper.

When I opened the front door of my townhouse one sunny June morning in 1993, bound for a walking trail along the river, I nearly suffered a stroke from shock. On the stoop hovered a dashing figure: groomed white mane, navy blue business suit accenting squared shoulders... brown eyes I recognized instantly above that distinctive nose.

“Lou!”

He hurried me inside and secured the deadbolt. Then, he planted a kiss on my lips that, frankly, I’d anticipated 20 years earlier.

Retreating when he came up for air, I glared at him. “I thought...”

“Yes, I know, darlin’, and I’m so sorry for puttin’ you through such torture.” His baritone had lost none of its resonance, or its hint of Cockney. “Could I trouble you for a cup of coffee?”

Settled at the cramped kitchen’s dinette table, he sipped steaming brew before launching into an overdue explanation.

He’d been under contract to NASA, via Cal Tech, when he was approached by the C.I.A. to infiltrate a spy ring, smuggling weapon designs to communist countries. “The phone call, right before we left for Vegas, tipped me off that an unreliable informant had falsely reported my status to the F.B.I. I had to protect you, and my contacts...”

He scooped up my hand, planting his lips on the ring. “I really did love you then, darlin’, but proposin’ marriage in the literal sense would’ve drawn you into a web of deceit and danger.”

“Where have you been all these years?” I queried, pulling from his grasp.

“Perfectin’ my fuel formula, and workin’ for the agency.”

“Why come here, now?”

“It took me this long to trace your whereabouts, especially since I didn’t know what name you’d been given. I have a new name, too, since I retired.”

“Retired?”

“With the change in the political climate, the Berlin Wall and so forth, my contacts lost their contacts, and my activities were deemed redundant, so they turned me loose.”

“What’s the new name?” I wondered.

“Roy Barclay.”

With the substantial bonus he received for his service to the government, and a pension, he'd purchased a 200 acre cattle farm near the county line. "We can really be married now," he pledged.

"Mrs. Ron Barclay." The sound appealed to me. "Teresa Barclay."
His eyes flashed.

"C'mon," I urged, rising. "I know the justice of the peace."

The Upper Hand

The scuffed pine desk on which Lucinda perched, yoga-style, came from the very junkyard where her firm consigned truckloads of recyclable materials on a daily basis. One candle lit the musty chamber; she waited - not too patiently - for dusk.

On any other late summer evening, she would've already been asleep.

She tended to be an early riser, a habit since her father incorporated her into the family business after her older brother died in a motorcycle accident. Prior to that, the old man professed such endeavors unsuited to a genteel woman.

This misogynistic patriarch without additional offspring, she'd eventually inherited the fleet of trucks, excavators, cranes and accessories used in removing unwanted buildings from the city's landscape. Competitive rates scored a full calendar of projects, primarily because the contract signed by government officials or private parties granted her the rights to any items discovered on the property.

That included a five-carat diamond ring wedged in a sewer drain at a former vaudeville theatre, a stolen Van Gogh hidden in the closet of a thief's attic hideout, and a set of first-edition Dickens in a file cabinet forgotten by library staff.

Her clients - mostly - didn't resent these finds, eager for construction to commence on the lots.

The gold proved an enormous source of contention, however.

St. Paul's Lutheran Church a landmark dating from the 1700s, its fate came as a result of an improperly installed exhaust fan above the toilet in a converted supply cupboard. An electrical short ignited stacks of paper towels, the whole structure engulfed like kindling.

Carmichael Demolition won the bid to dismantle the stone facade - the sole section to remain intact - haul away the rubble and level the ground.

Within the cornerstone, a metal-lined trunk filled with gold bars, valued at over ten million dollars in the current market.

Insurance investigators, attorneys and the media converged on Lucinda's cluttered office. She maintained little concern about the origins of the stash; legally, it would be divided between the crew who'd lent their time and talents to the job.

Court filings cited supposed precedents for denying her claim of ownership; a judge ordered the gold be held at the First National Bank until the parties concerned could present their arguments.

Abruptly, the rest of Lucinda's contracts evaporated, cancellation notices accompanied by payments of "penalties" from the clients - cheaper than losing out on another such treasure.

She swore revenge, and it would be sweet, because no one knew about the oddity unearthed under the church's lower foundation, positioned not six feet from where she sat.

The excavator bucket had struck the object with a dull thud the previous Thursday, too close to the shift's end to pursue further. The crew dispersed; Lucinda scrambled down to where piles of shattered beams and twisted metal had been shoved to one side, peering into the chasm.

"Shit!"

She seized a shovel left by scavengers she paid piece-work to pull copper, iron, aluminum, tin, doors, ceiling tile and other materials from the wreckage. Widening the gap, then scraping dirt off the surface, she swallowed hard at the undamaged, ancient coffin.

A filigreed silver crucifix was tacked to the lid, atop a folded parchment sealed with red wax and stamped with an indistinguishable design. She loosened rusted nails with the claw hammer from her tool belt and gingerly tugged the paper from beneath the relic.

Settled on a chunk of limestone, she pried apart the wax and opened the document. The handwriting reminded her of copies she'd seen of the Declaration of Independence on a trip to Philadelphia years prior. The date at the top read "August 15, 1742".

Lucinda shuddered, the breeze suddenly cold.

"To any who dare disturb this grave: be warned!" the missive began. "The creature within is no human, but a servant of Satan, who has murdered innocent men, women and children, and will do so again, if liberated.

"May the church that rises here make amends for the destruction he has wrought."

No signature offered any clue as to the author.

Recalling history lessons about the Salem witch trials and Spanish Inquisition, the business owner surmised a mob of paranoid citizens had judged the coffin's occupant guilty of charges that, in the modern era, would no longer be considered crimes. They'd sentenced him to hang, or worse. The authorities added these absurd "protections" so the superstitious wouldn't hound them with reports of ethereal sightings.

She checked her wrist watch: 6:42. Sunset on such a July evening occurred around 9:00. She could peek inside before heading home, then notify the police in the morning.

Separating planks that had been exposed to saturated soil, groundhogs and opossums, and who could guess what else, might violate the ethics of archeologists and archivists, but Lucinda didn't care. The crowbar she carried, as a rule, wrenched the top from the sides, tumbling off without hinges to hold it.

Her expectations of a skeleton in deteriorated period clothing clinging to remnants of hair and flesh failed to materialize. The cadaver stretched in the unlined box - or, better, jammed, as the box lacked sufficient length for his more than six feet in height - hadn't decomposed in the least. Dark, wavy hair swept back over a smooth forehead crowned heavy eyebrows, a straight nose, high cheekbones, thin lips and a narrow chin. Long fingers appeared to be no more than middle aged.

On a hunch, Lucinda tucked the crucifix in her tan coveralls and - quite the tom-boy in her day and stronger than many of her crew - hoisted the body from its confinement, toting it like a sack of potatoes on her shoulder up the steep incline to street level. She eased it onto the rear seat of her king cab Dodge Ram, paused to lock the temporary trailer and secure the chain link gate.

An attached garage shielded the next transfer to the bungalow where she'd grown up. She laid the unconscious form on the guest room bed - once her parents' domain. Poised at the foot of the queen mattress, she watched the sky progress through pastel hues to cloudless night.

If classic movies could be trusted - how much bona fide research, after all, had been done involving the undead? - vampires made a habit of taking control of mortals with a variety of tactics. Having the jump on this stiff, though, she would bind *him* to her will.

Eyelids fluttered open as the last shaft of light vanished beyond the window sash. Lucinda anticipated the grinding of joints after being immobile for an extended period, but he righted himself with amazing agility.

"Where am I, and who are you?" he rumbled with an elegant accent.

She raised the crucifix from her lap. "I'm the person who saved you from your lonely fate, and you will do as I say in all things." She hardened her jaw.

"Swear it."

"If it be justified..."

"After nearly 300 years, I'd say it's justified."

"Agreed." He'd barely flinched at the sight of the religious article. "I so swear."

She rose, placing the blessed object on the walnut chest of drawers, his reflection absent from the mirror. "What was your crime?"

"Given your response to my presence, I fear you already know."

"Why didn't they drive a stake through your heart and be done?"

"No one mustered the courage to perform the deed." He scrutinized his strange surroundings. "Once again, I ask: where am I?"

Lucinda detailed his situation. They conversed into the wee hours, for that matter, with Daniel Marquist highlighting how he'd come to be in this predicament through no fault of his own.

His hostess appreciated the sincerity and willingness to accept responsibility for his actions.

"What is your... usual routine?" she ventured as dawn glistened in the east.

"Routine?"

"It is... rumored your sort cannot survive daylight, and must rest in a coffin that contains soil from your home country."

"What utter balderdash!" he guffawed, a lyrical noise. "More lies circulated by petrified ministers to keep their flocks on the straight and narrow."

"Then..."

"I sleep when I'm tired, eat when I'm hungry - just like you."

"And... the blood?"

"If you do not drink water, what happens to you?" he countered.

"I'd die."

"Blood, for me, is like water for you. It cannot be helped."

"So, you'll..."

"Admittedly, I take my victims in darkness, to not risk exposure. In that time past, I labored through the day as a printer's assistant."

Lucinda's green orbs widened. "Really?"

He nodded solemnly.

"Well, I never." She preceded him to the kitchen, describing the function of the stainless steel appliances, then cooked him bacon, eggs and toast for breakfast, with a tall glass of orange juice.

"Make yourself at home," she instructed before heading out the door. "I advise you to stay indoors, until I can show you around town and... familiarize you with recent developments."

"As you will."

Marquist's indoctrination into 21st century living occupied Lucinda's next few evenings, until legal briefs began arriving via certified mail.

Her guest had moved to the basement, adding insulation to muffle the sounds of passing cars, train whistles and boom boxes, which prevented him from sleeping. Regardless of dispelling her notions about vampire lore, he still slept most days and meandered the much-quieter metropolis, moon overhead.

News reports of missing or murdered women increased, but Marquist ensured no connection could be established between those incidents and his gracious, if eccentric, benefactor.

Eccentric, as in keeping vigil atop a wobbly desk until he awoke that Friday.

“What’s wrong?” he greeted, kicking off the multi-colored quilt to reveal a trim form clad in striped boxers and a Three Dog Night t-shirt.

“I’ve got a mission for you.”

“What sort of mission?”

She drew a crumpled list from her jeans and presented it. He recited eleven names aloud.

“You need me to bring these people here for a meeting?”

“No.” He stood, his eyes level with hers. “These are your next...”

He didn’t require her to utter the command. “How have they wronged you?”

“If you get bored, read the stack of papers on the living room coffee table.”

“I already have. You... will lose everything?”

Tawny curls bobbed affirmatively.

“As you will.”

He strode toward the stairs; she grasped his muscular arm. “It’s got to look accidental or... dispose of them where they won’t be found.”

“As you will.”

With glee, Lucinda watched the local Saturday morning news: the city council president had died of a heart attack hours earlier. Marquist arrived at the house while she washed the breakfast dishes, a puzzled expression marring his stern features.

“Any problems?” she prodded.

“None, strangely enough.”

“How so?”

“I went to the first dwelling specified, where the door was unlocked. Inside, I heard running water. When I opened the bathroom door, the woman had just stepped from the shower. My presence must have frightened her, and she collapsed in a puddle on the floor.”

“Brilliant!”

The fifth mysterious death/disappearance of a public figure in three weeks rated national media attention. Speculation about organized crime involvement brought a chuckle to Lucinda's lips. Marquist, beside her on the tattered blue sofa, did not comprehend her levity.

"You rejoice in their deaths?" he pondered.

"Of course, just as they relished dragging my name through the mud, even when I did nothing exceeding the scope of the contract they were bound to honor. The justice I could not be guaranteed in court has been meted out, thanks to you!"

"And, the rest..."

"They are complicit and must also be punished."

"So you might again pursue your chosen livelihood?"

"So I can regain the fortune that is rightfully mine."

"When this task is complete, what then?"

"I'll be free."

"And, myself?"

Lucinda sobered. "What?"

"Shall I ever be free?"

"From the day I restored you to... life, besides obtaining your pledge to serve me, how have you been denied your freedom?"

"I grant, you are a most obliging hostess, making few demands of me, but that oath dangles like a sword over my head. I beg you to release me from it."

She detected desperation in his tone. "If I do, will your teeth not sink themselves immediately into my neck?"

"My respect for what you hope to accomplish would preclude that, even if I don't necessarily agree with your methods."

"You should have learned, Dan, that the pursuit of justice now is as problematic as in your day. Those with power feed on honest souls trying to eke out a simple living."

"Not an inch of progress in three centuries, more's the pity."

She leaned her cheek on his shoulder. "Amen."

His arm encircling her shoulders, he listened as the anchor droned on the television screen and Lucinda snored quietly.

Lovely in her own distinctive way, he could make a life with her, but for his... ailment. Mulling over his prospects, he determined that - once this obligation was discharged - he would seek his pleasure elsewhere in this technologically advanced world.

An insistent pounding on the front door roused Lucinda from her nap. She signaled Marquist to the stairs, straightening her rumpled shirt and jeans before drawing aside the paisley curtains.

Two uniformed city patrol officers fidgeted on the stoop.

“May I help you?” she hailed.

“Miss Carmichael?” responded the blond, solemn sergeant.

“Yes.”

“Will you come with us?”

“Not unless you tell me why.”

“There are some questions that need answers.”

“About what, exactly?”

The beefy red-haired corporal sniffed. “Haven’t you read the news? Five people with whom you’ve had professional relationships are dead or missing.”

“Just because I’m acquainted with them doesn’t mean...”

“Please, ma’am,” coaxed the sergeant.

Best to get it over with, Lucinda mused. “Oh, all right.”

Slipping on her Birkenstock sandals, she trailed them to the sidewalk. The sergeant opened the modified white Chevy Impala’s rear door.

“I’ll drive my own, if you don’t mind,” she objected.

“It’s customary...”

“Unless you’re keen to clean up my vomit, don’t say another word.”

“Eh?” squinted the corporal.

“I get car sick.”

“Ah!”

A hasty consultation between the pair rectified the issue. “We’ll meet you downtown,” acknowledged the sergeant.

“Thanks.”

At least, she wasn’t held in an interrogation room, where cameras recorded every twitch and expletive. She was introduced to the detective squad on duty, offered coffee and cookies and a chance to catch updates on college basketball scores.

The phrasing of their queries reminded her of a carefully scripted television drama. Grasping at straws, probably due to pressure from their superiors, she could offer no insights into the crimes.

Dismissed after 1:00 am, she drove west on Foundation Drive before veering onto the side street. Parking at the curb, she sensed an ominous presence and, switching on the lights as she cracked the side door, she gasped at the mess.

“Damned cops!” she spat. They’d cajoled her from the premises, then engaged in a warrantless search, disguising it as burglary.

Their wasted effort, with nothing incriminating in her possession.

She halted near the bedroom. “Shit!” Retracing her steps to the stairs, she descended the rough wood. Nothing remained intact: clothes emptied from the drawers and closet, desk ransacked, sheets and blankets dumped on the cement floor.

More names to add to her list, Lucinda resolved.

Or, had Daniel Marquist already...

Her cell phone chirped in its holster on her belt. She didn’t recognize the number, but swiped left. “Hello?”

“Miss Carmichael, who lives with you?”

She recognized the detective captain’s nasal tenor. “Nobody. Why?”

“A selection of men’s clothing, a bed with clean sheets...”

“The clothes were my brother’s” - no lie. “My dad never got rid of them, and I’ve haven’t bothered...”

“What about the bed?”

“It’s a guest room, kept ready in case any of my employees need a place to crash.”

“Why would they...”

She croaked, “You ever have a major argument with your wife?”

No reply.

She hung up. “Idiots.”

A modicum of order had been restored before Marquist delivered meat, egg and potato burritos for breakfast.

“You know what happened?” wondered Lucinda.

“I ducked out the bathroom window as they jimmied the deadbolt.”

“You been out all night?”

“I watched them toss the place before heading north.”

Family members didn’t report their loved ones missing until the weekend, believing the targeted politicians had traveled to a three-day conference in the state capital.

One final name remained on the list the first of the following month. With the lawsuits against her dropped due to the plaintiffs’ failure to appear at scheduled hearings, she entertained merciful inclinations as she retrieved the trunk and its contents from a bank manager flanked by two armed guards.

Every employee who'd been on the payroll when the bottom fell out gathered at Carmichael Demolition headquarters that wintry Friday. After taxes, they would each still net a tidy nest egg.

Marquist hovered beside the owner as she wrote the last check for cash.

"Your cut?" he droned.

"No. Yours."

"But, you know I can't..."

"I'll do the leg work. Meet me at the house in an hour, with your things packed."

He grunted. "I can do without those hand-me-downs, if you don't mind."

"Hey, with this wad, you can buy yourself Armani, if you like."

"You're officially voiding my promise to you?"

"Not just yet. I'm no fool."

Indeed, Lucinda hadn't a doubt what would transpire once she verbalized the compulsory phrase. She closed the office safe, twirling the tumblers, activated the alarm system and drove to the branch where a hesitant teller verified the signature with her boss before counting stacks of \$100 bills into a canvas backpack.

Frigid digits slid an envelope addressed to the district attorney in a blue mailbox on the corner before heading home.

She and Marquist enjoyed salad, pasta and chianti for dinner, repressing her titters at his nervous palsy a challenge. They washed and dried the dishes; she retired to her bedroom.

"Wait a minute..." he tracked her. "Weren't you going to..."

She emerged, a voluminous tie-dyed caftan cinched at the waist. "A last request."

His brown eyes rolled toward the ceiling. "Will you never be satisfied?"

"You've shown incredible forbearance - and restraint - which I admire, Dan. A kiss is traditional when parting..."

"That's all?" he chortled.

He bent and planted his lips on hers with a degree of passion neither could have predicted.

Lucinda, winded, slumped against the wall, face flushed. "Wow, if I'd have known it would be like that..."

"No kidding." Marquist's respiration gradually resumed its normal rate.

"And, now?"

Ceremoniously, she balanced her stance and cleared her throat. "I free you of your promise."

With lightning reflexes, he clutched her biceps, fangs bared, and yanked her toward him. A second before he pierced her carotid, she extracted a whittled stake from within her sleeve and jammed the point between his ribs - strength acquired from decades of heavy lifting reinforced by pure adrenaline.

She'd achieved her goal: amply compensating her loyal staff to ensure their future security, but she still refused to let Marquist best her.

Her shriek muffled by his agonized roar, they toppled together in a heap on the carpet, blood splattered on notarized documents strewn hither and yon.

That Sunday's front page - and every national news outlet - covered the murderous scheme of Daniel Marquist's great-great-grandson to avenge himself on the descendants of those who'd buried his ancestor alive 280 years earlier.

Lucinda Carmichael got the last laugh: honored as the hero who rid the town of a serial killer. The backpack full of money funded a park bearing her name on the site of the old church.

Wife, Pro Tem

A ringing telephone: not what Penny Gittins expected at 3:00 a.m.
The salutation, also, smacked of incongruity.
“I need a wife.”

The young woman, though groggy, recognized that thin baritone; she’d known Sir Denis Nayland Smith since childhood. While assistant commissioner of Scotland Yard, he’d ensured her father’s promotion from beat constable to inspector. Having no family of his own, she well remembered sharing the dinner table with “Uncle Denis” at many a Christmas and Easter.

He’d also secured her a position in the stenographic pool at MI6, when he eventually transferred to that agency, and she’d graduated with top honors from secondary school.

“Are you wishing me to find...” Penny stammered.

“No, my dear. You.”

“I don’t...”

“Meet me at Victoria in two hours.”

Disconnected, she sat on the mattress’ edge, staring at the primitive instrument.

If it was Victoria Station, then she needed to pack a case for a journey... where?

Dawn had yet to peek over the horizon when the black taxi rumbled to a stop. She paid the driver and toted a battered green leather valise into the bustling, brightly lit structure.

Abruptly, she was seized from behind and steered into a small office adjacent to the main lobby. She shrugged off the bobby, straightening her grey wool overcoat.

Nayland Smith rose, wraith-like, from a straight-backed wooden chair opposite the station master’s desk. “Thank you for coming, my dear.”

“I’m only here out of curiosity, Uncle... um, Sir Denis.” This, possibly, professional situation merited his formal title.

“And, I appreciate your cooperation.” He signaled the constable to withdraw and waved Penny to a seat matching his own, leaning forward in a confidential pose. “You are a credit to your father’s service. I was sorry to learn of his death.”

“He knew the risks of infiltrating... underworld elements. I thought you would have attended the funeral.”

“I was... indisposed.”

He offered no further explanation; she requested none, knowing much of his work - even beyond retirement - to be top secret.

"I need you to be my wife for the next month," he continued with that quiet strength. "We're scheduled to leave on the boat-train shortly, then proceed to Marseilles, where we'll board a ship for Cairo, the Suez Canal and points east."

"Why... can't you go alone?"

"Because my presence would be too conspicuous. A married couple, however..."

"Ah, I see," Penny grinned.

"Indeed. Together, we may freely stroll the decks as we observe the object of this investigation."

"Who is..."

"Fah Lo Suee, the daughter of Dr. Fu Manchu."

Penny swallowed hard. She'd heard Nayland Smith's tales of his arch-enemy over the years and, in due course, the woman who surpassed the Asian criminal in treachery. "Isn't she rather... old these days?"

"A grandmother, from my understanding, but no less a threat to humanity."

For that matter, gazing at her companion, he must've been upward of 80: white wisps on his cranium, brown eyes a watery version of himself in his prime, a thick salt-and-pepper mustache beneath the prominent nose, with lips that angled upward at the right corner as he spoke. His shoulders hunched slightly; the once-sturdy frame had weakened.

"I'll have to notify my supervisor," Penny hinted.

"No need. You have been placed on a leave of absence, due to emergency surgery for appendicitis."

So, this hadn't been a spur-of-the-moment deal, she realized. "How long..."

"We've had Fah Lo Suee under constant observation for an extended period. When our operatives reported this planned trip, I requested a consort more in keeping with my... present mien. Unfortunately, she passed last night of a brain haemorrhage."

"Then, shouldn't I pose as your daughter, not your spouse?"

"No. That would be too... transparent a ruse." He straightened; she heard joints crack. Gnarled digits slipped a plain gold band on her third finger, left hand. "Meet me on the platform in ten minutes."

He shuffled through a door into a dim chamber; she retreated to the lobby, locating the directory. High heels made her jog to the platform beside an eight-carriage conveyance difficult, billowing steam indicating an imminent departure.

At least, she'd be traveling first class, according to the ticket Nayland Smith had tucked in her pocket. Whistles piercing the morning fog, she settled in a wood paneled compartment as the engine lurched forward, her faux-husband nowhere in sight.

Worried she'd boarded the wrong train, or mistook the carriage designation, she considered seeking out a conductor when the glass panel slid sideways. Glancing up, she studied the bronze haired, slender gentleman in tweed jacket, black slacks and leather boots.

"Ah, there you are, my dear!" came the enthusiastic greeting.

Not bothering to scan the passageway for eavesdroppers, he secured the door and sank on the upholstered bench across from her.

"Do I know you?" Penny queried, suspicious that her involvement in the caper had already been compromised.

"Indeed," he chuckled, right corner of his mouth angled. "I'm your groom."

She gazed at him, blinking repeatedly as if to dispel a nightmare. Gradually, she acknowledged that the somber brown orbs, distinguished nose and broad forehead belonged to Nayland Smith.

Yet, simultaneously, she could detect no evidence his features had been altered by theatrical make-up or any known method of disguise.

"Sir Denis, what..."

He raised a warning finger to his lips. "Shhhh. I'm just Denis, or 'darling', if you prefer."

"Denis, how did you..."

Agile limbs transferred him beside her. "You must swear to never reveal my secret."

She nodded tousled strawberry blonde curls.

No more had his narrative concluded, than he pulled her into an amorous embrace, drawling, "Si-Fan."

She glimpsed a fi "More than a hundred years ago, Fu Manchu discovered an *elixir vitae*, which he uses to preserve his youth. He is, I believe, well beyond two centuries old. When last we crossed paths, because he respected me as an honorable adversary, he gifted me with a supply of the potion. I seldom use it; the transformation is rather jarring but, in this instance, now I'm so close to shattering his organization, I thought it propitious to rejuvenate myself as a proper escort for one as lovely as yourself."

No more had his narrative concluded, than he pulled her into an amorous embrace, drawling, "Si-Fan."

She glimpsed a figure scrutinizing them through the window, presuming Nayland Smith's surprisingly experienced kiss a diversion.

He released her in due course, apologizing for his ungentlemanly conduct. Hoping her respiration would recover a slower rate soon enough, Penny acknowledged the declaration with flushed cheeks.

"The Si-Fan are on the train?" she murmured

"With Fah Lo Suee bound for the Middle East, yes." He tapped the back of his hand. "They bear a tattoo proclaiming their allegiance."

A shiver ran through her diminutive frame - delight or fear, she couldn't distinguish.

Smith settled on the cushions. "Now we've been duly inspected, we can relax until we board the ferry at Dover."

He roused his companion at the terminal; such confidence did she feel in his presence, she'd dozed with her head resting on his shoulder. They made quite a show of having a porter haul their cases to the boat, Penny's arm through his, chatting sweet nothings in his ear now and again.

They stood at the railing on the upper deck during the choppy crossing, hand in hand, seemingly watching the whitecaps. "Whatever you do," Smith warned, "don't get sick!"

"Not a chance," Penny assured him. "Dad used to take me fishing every weekend. I'm used to the water."

Once again surveilled by Si-Fan operatives, tattoo unhidden, she wondered where Fah Lo Suee had settled for the voyage.

Night had fallen by the time the couple reached Paris. The Marseilles train not scheduled until morning, they stopped at the George V, an overwhelming experience for Penny.

"It's supposed to be our honeymoon," Smith noted, "so I convinced the powers-that-be to spare no expense."

They consumed a sumptuous dinner at a sidewalk café, then strolled along the Seine before retiring in their lush suite. Off early to the Gare du Nord, Smith nudged Penny to glance right as the stooped, grey-haired Fah Lo Suee's entourage boarded a private car.

"What is her destination?" the pretend wife ventured.

"Her father's stronghold in the Himalayas."

"Why?"

"She is facing death, according to my sources. She's already suffered one heart attack, and fears another. If she can acquire her father's *elixir vitae*, not only will she survive, but he will die, leaving her in control of his vast criminal empire."

Another transfer of luggage to the ship transporting them along the Mediterranean coastline and through the Suez Canal to Bombay, Penny noticed Smith's increased nervousness.

"Are you all right?" she muttered.

He slipped his arm around her waist and kissed her cheek. "One of the dacoits has been assigned specifically to us."

"How can you tell?" She paused to adjust the Windsor knot on his tie, then pecked his lips - which prompted a smile of genuine affection.

"They are adept at remaining inconspicuous, for the most part, but I've grown accustomed to such shadows over the past fifty years."

"What should we do?"

"Nothing more than we are."

In their stateroom, a floral arrangement awaited, along with their bags. Smith aborted Penny's effort to retrieve the card, drawing her toward the double bed.

"Aren't they... from you?" she quivered.

"No. Nor are they from any of my colleagues. That type of expense is deemed... excessive."

"Fah Lo Suee?"

"Very possibly, and likely poisonous."

"Roses?"

"No, but those other, smaller blossoms... Get too close, and never wake up."

"Is she that diabolical?"

"She learned from the most devious teacher extant."

"Fu Manchu?"

Smith's scowl provided the answer.

Unfounded concerns, however. A steward swept through the open door, carrying a bucket of champagne, grinning ear-to-ear. "Compliments of the captain!" he announced.

"Is this... customary?" Smith countered.

"For newlyweds, indeed! Felicitations!"

Alone once more, he secured the lock. "I still don't like it."

"Denis, you're... frightening me," Penny admitted, sinking on the mattress. "Do you really suspect Fah Lo Suee wants to kill us?"

"Unlike her father, who never violates a promise, Fah Lo Suee eschews honor. She kills indiscriminately - innocent or guilty - to satisfy her own whims."

"My God!"

For a moment, he fell silent. He gazed through the full-length window at the bustling pier. "If *you* were to approach her..."

"Me!"

"Casually, a flustered bride seeking advice from an older woman..."

"What, just waltz up and plop beside her on a deck chair?"

"Precisely."

"Won't she remain in her cabin, where she's safe?"

"Once we embark, she'll feel no threat to her, except by those aboard. In her current depleted condition, fresh air will be vital."

Penny exhaled slowly. "As you wish."

"Tomorrow morning, you will insinuate yourself into her good graces, and see what can be learned."

"Flustered, indeed!" she snickered.

The idea of sharing a bed with Nayland Smith - or any man - hadn't occurred to the young stenographer. While they ate dinner, the bed had been turned down, and Penny gulped at the prospect.

"I would offer to stretch out on the divan, except our present situation demands authenticity," the MI6 operative explained, retiring to the bathroom, shedding his tuxedo and donning brown striped pajamas.

A modest white, lace-trimmed nightgown belied her status as a bride - or, affirmed it, especially since her timidity would soon come into play. They lay between the sheets, both staring at the ceiling, as the craft rolled gently with the waves.

"Why did you never marry, Denis?" she queried in the wee hours.

"No time."

"You were never... tempted?"

She heard his lyrical chuckle. "I didn't say that."

"Ah, some international spy determined to draw out your secrets with her allure?"

"Nothing so dramatic. A simple country lass from a Highland farm. When I was posted to Burma, however, her father would not allow her to await my return."

Penny felt a tear trickle along her cheek. "Sad."

"For the best, I think. I would've been a poor mate for any woman. I'm too... inconsiderate of others' feelings."

Unable to formulate a response, she let the conversation lag. Smith's snoring confirmed, in part, his unsuitability as a spouse.

Fah Lo Suee, elegantly attired in Harrod's best mauve frilled blouse and pleated sky-blue skirt, grey hair upswept in European style, sat on a deck chair mid-morning, an open book on her lap. Penny, clad in a sleeveless floral-print frock, commenced the scene, scripted by Smith over breakfast in their stateroom: a handkerchief to her eyes, she scurried from the ship's interior, along the deck to a position at the rail where the aging criminal couldn't miss her display of feigned emotion.

When no reaction was forthcoming, Penny feared her subterfuge had been exposed. Nonetheless remaining in character, she dabbed her face one last time, whirling to find Fah Lo Suee approaching.

"It is not the British custom to purport such anguish publicly," the clipped contralto pronounced. "What troubles you, child?"

"My husband..."

The disdain could not be mistaken. "Ah, men!" Delicate arms rested on varnished oak. "Did he beat you?"

"Oh, no! He... last night... our honeymoon..."

Dark, piercing eyes focused on Penny. "You are newly married?"

Her curls bobbed in a halting fashion.

"Your mother should have warned you..."

"My mother's dead."

"Then, may I speak her part?"

"That would be... kind of you."

"Leave the man before you become little more than a slave of his vanity."

Not what Penny anticipated. "I... don't..."

"Men are naught but selfish children in an adult body. My father's example should have soured me on the idea of wedlock, but I went ahead and married not once, but twice. Both men are now dead through their own... foolishness."

The faux-bride wondered if Fah Lo Suee meant she had murdered them.

Smith emerged from the salon at that moment, red polo shirt clinging to his youthful musculature, khaki trousers highlighting his trimness, aviator-style sunglasses hiding his eyes.

Penny recovered her composure. "I must be off."

Fah Lo Suee glanced at the object of her companion's change in demeanor. "I would swear... No, it couldn't be."

"I'm sorry?" Penny prodded.

"I thought I'd seen this man before, but the individual he favors would be in his dotage by now."

“There you are, my dear!” Smith hailed, intercepting Penny. He wrapped his arm around her waist and planted a kiss on her cheek. “It’s almost time for luncheon.”

“Will you excuse us?” Penny directed to Fah Lo Suee.

“Indeed, child.” She retraced her steps to the deck chair. “Consider what I said.”

Arm in arm, the couple ambled toward the bow, not speaking until they paused to observe a passing freighter.

“It comes as no surprise she despises the male sex,” Smith grumbled after Penny recounted their exchange. “Fu treated her shabbily, and from what I’ve gleaned about her two husbands...”

“So, what next?”

“At least, you’ve made her acquaintance. She obviously views you as an innocent, and may, at this moment, be devising a scheme to free you from my clutches.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“I could be killed by the most inane method, from a poisoned cup of tea to a scorpion in the shower.”

“Oh, my God!” Penny’s fear, this time, was real.

“Don’t be alarmed, my dear. Fu and his ilk have tried on multiple occasions to bring about my demise, always failing.”

“But, I can’t be responsible for...”

“We are under orders, you and I,” he drawled, hoping to ease her apprehension. “We will deal with what is to come in true British fashion.”

His arm protectively encompassing her shoulders, he held her close as a chill breeze swept across the deck.

Penny refused to again appear on deck until the ship reached the Suez Canal at Port Said, and then, only briefly. As the craft moved along the 120 mile artificial waterway, she huddled on the stateroom bed, flinching at each unfamiliar noise.

Nayland Smith circulated among the passengers, eventually joining an organized bridge tournament in the small salon. In such a public setting, he knew Fah Lo Suee would make no move against him.

Fu’s daughter, instead, located the newlywed’s cabin, tapping lightly on the door. When Penny didn’t respond, she made her entrance - the knob unlocked.

“I haven’t seen you for days,” oozed the sultry voice as she seated herself at the foot of the mattress. “I was concerned for your well being.”

“I’m... sea sick, I think,” Penny bluffed. “Dizzy, nauseous...”

“There is a simple remedy for that ailment,” announced the visitor. “Are you able to walk?”

The faux-bride propped herself on one elbow. “I... guess.”

“Then, come.”

In short order, Penny had been enshrined in a sumptuous suite, the decor definitely of Asian origin, unlike the other quarters. She puzzled whether Fah Lo Suee had brought the accouterments with her on the voyage, or might she own the ship itself?

She would ask Smith once she finished partaking of delicacies set before her, guaranteed by her hostess to soothe her upset stomach.

And, Penny realized after she became irresistibly drowsy, drugged.

The MI6 agent entered his accommodations in late afternoon, having been eliminated from the competition through his assigned partner’s incompetence. Not finding Penny where he’d left her, he began a thorough search of all decks, worry betraying his age.

The captain and his crew members refused to answer any questions beyond their speed and destination, or acknowledge the presence of the mysterious Fah Lo Suee. Only by prowling passageways at a snail’s pace did he trace her whereabouts.

He pounded on the wood panel, portraying the irate husband. A black-clad servant offered admittance, Fah Lo Suee positioned on a carved quasi-throne in the lush sitting room.

“I’ve come for my wife.”

“She is safe,” responded the woman.

“She belongs in our cabin, not here.”

Though ravaged by the decades, Fah Lo Suee still bore a commanding presence when she ascended from her seat. “She belongs in London, plying her trade - whatever it is. And you, grandson - or, perhaps, great-grandson - of Sir Denis Nayland Smith, shall be dead before we reach the Red Sea.”

Her miscalculation amused Smith, his grin angled upward at the right corner. “Having no offspring to bear their own children, you see the original.”

When her jaw dropped, he allowed himself a wry chuckle.

“The *elixir vitae*?” Fah Lo Suee gasped.

A minuscule inclination of his head confirmed her supposition.

“How dare my father share it with you, and deny me!”

“I earned his respect through many adversarial encounters,” Smith remarked. “You, on the other hand...”

Lacquered fingernails scraped his cheek, blood trickling from the wounds.

“You shall be food for the sharks in the Indian Ocean!” Fah Lo Suee hissed.

Nightfall descended on Smith and Penny, chained to the bulkhead of a dank cargo hold. A lone bulb provided faint illumination, and the erstwhile stenographer awoke to the sound of her father’s friend debating options with himself.

“Yes... yes... that may be a viable route of escape...” he droned. “The snag will be lowering a lifeboat without detection...”

“Denis?” she whimpered, stretching feebly toward him.

“Ah, my dear. I’m so glad.”

She could barely distinguish his outline, his fingers inches from her own, impeded by the shackles.

“I offer my humblest apologies for drawing you into this untenable situation,” he whispered. “It was not my intention to place you in harm’s way.”

“I knew the peril,” rasped Penny, mouth parched.

“If you can provide me with a hairpin, I may be able to pick these locks...”

An antiquated notion, she giggled. “Would a safety pin do?”

“Perfect!”

Accessing the implement that held her bra strap together after the clasp broke proved a challenge requiring the dexterity of a gymnast or yogi. When the bent metal bounced to the floor, she wanted to weep.

The attempt to retrieve the pin with her shoe failed, as another foot kicked it beyond her reach.

“No need, child,” hissed an Asian accented bass.

Penny cowered against the damp bulkhead.

Smith whipped toward the voice. “Fu?”

“Indeed, Nayland.” A key clanked in a lock. “You’re looking well. Have you exhausted your supply of *elixir vitae*?”

“Not yet.”

“Nor have I.”

Smith squirmed. “Fah Lo Suee thinks you’re in the Himalayas.”

“As I wish her to believe.”

Penny heard a snap, which echoed around the empty chamber, followed by Smith’s relieved sigh. Then, she felt deft digits working to free her wrist.

The men continued their conversation.

“You boarded at Port Said?” Smith queried.

“I’ve been aboard since Marseilles, Nayland. My daughter may own this craft, but a few of her crew are loyal to me.”

“And, you intend to thwart her plans?”

“What I intend is of no consequence to you, or this lovely creature.” Penny sensed, more than saw, a lean figure beside her. “I would take her to wife, if she wasn’t already pledged to you.”

Penny opened her mouth; Smith’s palm on her lips silenced her.

“What will you do with us?”

“You shall go ashore, according to the escape you devised,” replied Fu Manchu. “When next our paths cross, I may not be so... merciful.”

Smith’s firm grip guided Penny through the dimness to a hatch; she would take the silhouette of dark hair, a prominent nose and white teeth grinning to her grave. The fugitives skulked toward a ladder, climbing to the main deck and emerging into balmy air. Both filled their lungs with the freshness, leaning momentarily on the rail.

Penny couldn’t restrain her levity at Smith’s filthy clothes. Then, she glanced down, seeing her own disheveled garments.

“We do look a sight,” Smith concurred. “C’mon.”

She clutched his arm. “If we leave now, you may never catch Fu Manchu...”

“If we don’t leave, we’ll both be dead by sunrise. Your father, rest his soul, would never forgive me.”

“I don’t understand how Fah Lo Suee saw through our ploy.”

“It’s my fault, entirely. That female devil incarnate has seen me on numerous occasions in the past. Her memory of my bearing, my features...” Smith lowered a small dinghy - not an actual lifeboat, but one possibly used by the crew to row back and forth on errands - and assisted Penny down the thick rope. “This is how she smuggled drugs and contraband,” he observed, grasping an oar and pushing against the riveted steel. “Using the guise of a cruise ship, she could pass, unimpeded, through every inspection.”

“What did she have planned for us?” Penny shivered on the narrow wooden slat.

“A swim in the ocean.”

“But, I don’t...”

She felt his lips on her cheek. “I know, my dear. A poor jest.”

Realization dawned for the young woman. “Oh!”

A bright moon shone on the nearby Saudi Arabian shore. Together, they rowed away from the propeller’s wake, pausing to watch the hulking craft glide southward.

The fiery explosion that created a minor tsunami as they approached the sand startled the pair.

“What happened?” Penny snorted.

“Three score innocent people just perished.”

“But, why?”

“It happens thus when Fu Manchu and Fah Lo Suee meet: one tries to kill the other, without a care for the those who die as a result.”

“Do you think Fu survived?”

“The wisdom he has acquired over many years gives him a distinct advantage over Fah Lo Suee’s somewhat emotion-driven, impulsive intrigues. She has yet to best him.”

Penny whined, “You could have arrested him.”

“There’ll be another time, another place...”

A trek on foot to Jeddah, Smith and Penny were provided with lodging, food and, within a fortnight, transportation back to London. Before she ducked into a taxi at Victoria Station, Penny removed the gold band from her finger.

“Keep it, my dear,” Smith advised, smiling as he kissed her gently. “There’s no kinder, more understanding wife in the British Isles, and I may have reason to call upon you again.”

Tau Rosa

The college students who discovered the half-dressed, mutilated corpse that April Saturday on a cliff above Canyon de Chelly in northwestern Arizona understandably lost their enthusiasm for their immersion trip to the Navajo Nation.

They, at least, were allowed to return to the Catholic mission at Chinle. Their chaperone, Franciscan Sister Marianne Ogden, wasn't so lucky.

She remained, lingering on the periphery of law enforcement vehicles and ambulances while officials snapped photos from every possible angle and forensics experts collected samples of cloth, dirt and partially masticated flesh.

"Looks like he was wearing gym shorts and a t-shirt," Marianne overheard at one point.

Red shorts, to be precise, and a Moody Blues concert t-shirt, she reflected. Clifford Dahl liked to drive to the canyon around 5 a.m. for a jog; sometimes Marianne heard his Subaru Forester crunching gravel as she brewed a pot of coffee in her single-wide trailer across the compound.

When the priest didn't return Tuesday morning, she initially presumed he'd been summoned to the bishop's office in Gallup, New Mexico, for a meeting, or gone on one of his periodic "retreats" to the wilderness, his tent and camping gear thrown in the car on the spur of the moment.

A welcome respite, his absence from the office. She didn't need to walk on eggshells for fear of incurring his wrath.

That Dahl could be verbally and psychologically abusive toward her and other staff members wasn't a secret. Navajo parishioners at the small church had witnessed his tirades and, occasionally, been targets for his insults, along with those who had devoted decades of their lives to serving on the Reservation.

Numerous phone calls and letters about Dahl had been addressed to the bishop, a traditionalist who required the Mass be chanted from start to finish in Gregorian style, alienating many Native Americans. He never so much as responded to any of the grievances, despite the Church's mandated rules on investigating such accusations.

It wasn't sex abuse of a child, so the financial status of the diocese wasn't threatened by a potential lawsuit.

"We all have complaints in our files," Dahl had boasted to Marianne over dinner one evening. "Nothing ever happens with them."

Well, something had happened now.

The coroner, his white shirt drenched with perspiration, gold-striped tie askew, squatted beside the body. “He may have tripped and cracked his skull on a rock.”

Not likely, Marianne countered silently on this level stretch of trail.

“What about being attacked and hit on the head with a rock?” puzzled the sheriff’s deputy in charge of the scene.

The coroner grunted, “Strange place to attack someone.”

Unless the assailant knew his victim would pass that way at a certain time each morning, Marianne mused, before involuntarily shuddering.

And, not from a chill breeze.

The authorities didn’t ask her to identify the deceased; she couldn’t have done so positively with his face mangled by whatever animal had decided he’d make a good meal. They could use dental records or DNA samples...

“You’re free to go, Sister,” announced the deputy as he approached his vehicle, touching the brim of his hat in salute. “Sorry about all this.”

“It’s not your fault,” she replied, goosebumps on her arms an indicator she might know whose fault it was.

Hiking the distance to the mission’s rusted Chevy mini-van, she reached inside the insulated cooler for a bottle of water. She poured the liquid over her head, unconcerned that her blouse and jeans also got wet.

She didn’t care that moisture soaked the front seat when she slid behind the steering wheel. The mid-day heat would dry everything in short order.

Rather than return to the remote outpost where the students were probably packing their bags, Marianne drove toward Gallup. She’d planned to do the weekly grocery shopping even before this... unscheduled interruption.

Once her cell phone had a strong signal, she punched a contact.

A masculine voice cracked through the speaker. “Hey, kid, what’s up?”

“Cliff’s dead, Pete.”

“What? How?”

The woman related the tale, cruising south along the four-lane road formerly known as U.S. 666.

“Sounds like a fitting end,” Pete Ogden remarked.

“I know, but... where are you?”

“Connecticut, why?”

“You done any traveling this week?”

“Only to New York City and back. You’re not seriously thinking...”

Marianne dismissed the idea. “It’s just, I remember you threatening him after I told you about his... behavior.”

“The autopsy will probably show he fell and clunked his noggin. Good riddance to bad rubbish.”

“You’re right. And the bishop will give a sickening homily at the funeral on all his supposed virtues.”

“Wear ear plugs.”

She managed a chuckle. “Good idea, Pete. See you soon.”

“I hope so, kid.”

The call disconnected; she turned into the Safeway parking lot.

She didn’t dial the number for the Franciscan motherhouse until she’d unpacked the Chevy and consigned meat packages to the freezer two hours later. Knowing the leadership team would pull her from the mission - especially since the diocese had announced the previous summer, once Dahl retired, they would not replace him due to the ongoing shortage of priests - she had tried to devise viable alternatives that would allow her to remain among the people she’d grown to love, and who respected her efforts to alleviate their burdens of poverty, substandard education and medical services, and addiction.

“We’ll book your ticket for Tuesday,” came the first councilor’s directive. “The bishop has already emailed that the mission will close by month’s end.”

“That’s outrageous!” Marianne protested - not the flight, but the closure. “Where will the people go on such short notice?”

“That is not your concern.”

“Damn straight, it is!” Being younger in the religious life - only 60 years old, whereas many in her community still ministered in their 70s, 80s and 90s - she didn’t hesitate to speak her mind, having never been subjected to the harsh requirement of absolute obedience prior to the Second Vatican Council.

The information a temporary administrator would arrive at the mission in time for Sunday Mass did not soothe her dismay. The Navajo who did attend weekly services had come to rely on her willingness to lay a festive spread - sometimes a family’s only decent meal for the week. She provided supplies from the food pantry, so they could take home boxes of cereal, ramen noodles, and canned chili, if nothing else had been donated.

She had no idea what to tell them...

The bishop relieved her of that responsibility, his decidedly callous letter being read from the pulpit by a hunched, palsied retiree who could barely navigate the sanctuary steps.

Marianne stuffed her limited collection of clothes - mostly suited to working in the desert dust - into a worn duffel bag Pete had gifted to her when he’d been discharged from the Army after Operation Desert Storm. When she

hoisted it onto her shoulder at the Albuquerque airport, she laughed at the lack of weight.

She'd learned Franciscan simplicity well over the years.

Being stopped at the TSA checkpoint didn't faze her, until she was escorted into a private office where state police waited.

"What's going on?" she queried.

The trim, young sergeant declared, "Sorry, Sister, but you left Arizona without permission, and we've a warrant for your arrest."

"Permission? I have permission from my superiors..."

"Not that kind of permission. Weren't you told by the officers at the crime scene..."

"Crime scene?"

"Clifford Dahl was murdered."

Marianne sank on the nearest chair.

"Given your... reports to the diocese and evident hatred of the man, you have the most likely motive..."

Handcuffs appeared.

"But, I was with the kids who found the body..." she whimpered.

"A common tactic in such cases, to deflect suspicion."

"I was with them from Sunday evening through Saturday..."

The man hesitated. "You have witnesses to that effect?"

"Sure! They arrived Sunday afternoon, we had a cookout, set up their accommodations in the guest hogans..."

"You slept in the same facilities?"

"Well, no, I..."

The second officer unlatched the shackles. "You could have sneaked out and returned..."

She squirmed from his reach. "The drive to Canyon de Chelly takes over an hour! And, walking to where Cliff died another 30 minutes. That means I would have been gone more than three hours, and the kids were up at 6:30, about the same time Cliff would've just started his run!"

The pair excused themselves, leaving one TSA agent to guard her. When they returned, she was waved toward the door. "But, you must remain at the mission until this matter is resolved."

"I... can't. The bishop is closing..."

"Then, you'll have to stay elsewhere on the Reservation."

The door burst inward at that moment, two men in black Armani suits on the threshold.

Marianne recognized the shorter: wavy bronze mane parted on the left, framing intense brown eyes, a Romanesque nose and thin lips angled upward at the right corner.

She scrambled into his embrace. "Pete! What are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you, as always," he snickered, kissing her cheek.

His companion, introduced as a prominent attorney, served a writ removing Marianne from the officers' jurisdiction. "Should you have need of her, she will be available at her brother's home in Stamford."

"But, I'm flying to Indianapolis..." Marianne objected.

Pete squeezed her shoulder. "No. It's all arranged."

Arranged, indeed! Boarding a Learjet Liberty, parked in a private hangar away from the airport terminal, Marianne settled into a comfortable seat opposite Pete.

"Is this yours?" she wondered.

"Borrowed from a friend."

"But, why?"

"After you called Saturday, I had an inkling what might happen. You were a thorn in the bishop's side, and this was his chance to throw you under the bus."

"Good thing I had the kids for an alibi."

He contemplated her sandy ponytail, weathered features and thin build.

"Good thing you have me."

"I know that. I've always known that."

The aircraft raced down the runway, lifting eastward into the cloudless sky.

"Even now that your religious community is ready to dismiss you?"

She spun from the window. "What?"

"From what I've gathered, the bishop has filed a counter-complaint against you, citing insubordination, heresy, and other religious clap-trap. He proposed excommunication if you continue to minister."

"Shit!"

"That's why you're coming home with me. You'll be away from this... drama, and can rest."

"But, all those people who'll have to go without..."

"That's for the bishop to handle."

"But, he *won't* handle it!"

"Then, he'll be the one going to hell."

Marianne glared at the man. "We shouldn't judge..."

"Oh, c'mon, kid. Ever since Mom and Dad died, I've made sure you were safe and well..."

A bit of turbulence jolted them off the cushions as they penetrated high clouds.

The distraction enough to jar Marianne's thoughts, she clenched her teeth. "Pete... if the cops check the flight logs..."

"They'll find nothing unusual," he assured her.

"But, you just admitted..."

"I did no such thing, kid." He accepted a bottle of Pelegrino from the perky blonde attendant. "In all these years, you've never figured it out, have you?"

"Figured out what?"

"That I love you."

"Of course, you do. You're my brother."

"In name, but not blood."

Her knuckles whitened as she grasped the armrests. "Eh?"

"Your mom went to high school with mine," Pete stated.

"My mom?" Marianne echoed. "What the hell..."

"Let me finish. When your mom asked my mom to be your godmother, it was seen as a great honor - and responsibility. Your mom and dad died in a freak boating accident when you were six months old and, both of them being only children, there was no one else to take care of you. My mom didn't want to see you placed in foster care, so she and Dad agreed to adopt you."

"Why didn't they ever tell me?"

"They didn't see the need."

"Why didn't you..."

"Because I didn't want you to resent me for the way I felt..."

"Why would I..."

Pete sighed. "When you were small, you were just an annoyance, as any sister is to a big brother. As you grew, you became a very lovely young lady: smart, witty... When I finally gathered the courage to tell you the truth on your eighteenth birthday, you dashed my hopes with your announcement about entering the convent."

"Is that why you never married?"

"I never found anyone who could match you."

Unresolved emotions resurrected for Marianne with this news. Pete had inherited his parents' wealth upon their own untimely deaths from cancer and ALS, respectively. He'd made donations to the Franciscans as leverage to secure the young Sister prime posts in the years after she'd professed her vows. Tiring of the need to schmooze with the public, she'd responded to an ad on a Catholic job board and practically sneaked off to the Reservation without telling him.

“When those hypocrites who call themselves leaders cut you loose, I still want to marry you,” he interrupted her reverie.

“They won’t cut me loose,” she remarked.

“For five mil, they will.”

Her green orbs widened. “You wouldn’t...”

“It’s been in negotiations for some time. Sister what’s-her-face, the president, called me months ago, when she received the bishop’s letter. Asked if I could take you off their hands, for a price.”

“The new hospital wing?”

He nodded.

“Dammit!” Her fist slammed the leather. “Who did you pay to kill Cliff, to force the mission closure and accelerate my dispensation?”

No response.

“Oh, God, Pete. Did you really do it yourself?”

“He should’ve never been ordained in the first place. A history of psychological instability, confirmed by reports of animal abuse during his childhood and violence toward his teachers, should have disqualified him. The bishop, though, feared the continuing shortage of men to stand at the altar, so he made an exception if Cliff would get regular counseling... which he didn’t. He didn’t see anything wrong with treating lay people, especially women and those of other cultures, like dirt.”

“And the bishop buried the facts, dreading his own exposure for enabling such men to wear the collar...” Marianne concluded.

“I could’ve gotten a two-for-one deal...”

“Eh?”

“Cliff had incriminating photos of the bishop and a couple altar boys, from back in the ‘70s...”

“Shit!” She stiffened. “What happened to them?”

“I’m sure the cops have them by now, if they went to the mission and searched Cliff’s room. Tucked under the desk blotter...”

“So, they’ll suspect the bishop had Cliff murdered to shut him up?”

“A reasonable assumption, don’t you think?”

“But, that means an innocent man will go to prison...”

“No, one guilty man is dead, and another will be where he belongs: behind bars.”

“That’s not... justice in the truest sense.”

“No, it’s justice in the concrete sense.”

Indeed, by the time the Lear landed in Connecticut, national news outlets were reporting the discovery of the Gallup bishop's misconduct - evidence turned over to the police by the Navajo landlady who'd been renting Dahl a house far more comfortable than the lodgings available at the mission. The Vatican had already called for a thorough, independent investigation of the diocese's activities, while the suspected murderer languished in jail.

Disenchanted by the whole ordeal, Marianne signed documents delivered by Fedex from the motherhouse, sanctioning her removal from the community.

She agreed to reside in Pete's extravagant Victorian mansion, deserving a bit of comfort after years of privation and abuse. The notion of becoming his wife, however, faded; too long had she considered him a brother to take him as a lover.