

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

A Collection of Stories

by

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Part IV

Dispelling Dark Shadows

“It’s all a matter of perception,” postulated Glyn Adams. Sipping steaming brew from a ceramic mug at the rustic Collinsport Inn Coffee Shop, she added - under her breath - “and sex.”

The painfully thin, tawny-haired reporter, fresh from the Columbia School of Journalism in New York, on his first assignment for the Portland Sentinel, countered, “So, you’re saying what some people believe is good, others think is evil?”

“Oh, holy cow! Didn’t you study history as part of your undergrad courses? Look at World War II! That nutcase Hitler believed he was doing good for the people of Germany, while others called him out for the wholesale massacre of the Jews. The entire Korean debacle is based on the north believing communism is good, while the south understands, in its present form, how bad it is. I don’t even want to start with Vietnam...”

“Okay. I get it.” Sucking root beer through a straw, the brash rookie conceded the argument. “You were telling me how you got interested in this technology...”

“Right. My mother’s sister served in the 1950s as a nurse in a medical unit in Korea. Psychiatric cases, battle fatigue, traumatic head wounds and the like. This one soldier was admitted after he was discovered with his teeth sunk in the neck of a Chinese soldier.”

“Believed he was a vampire?”

“Correct. The kid was treated by Doctor Sidney Freeman - best in the business, Aunt Susan wrote in her diary. Problem was, while the physical manifestations of the vampirism diminished, the patient exhibited other forms of the ailment, according to the records I found.”

“What ‘other forms’?” pressed the reporter.

“Psychic vampirism.”

“What’s that?”

“Instead of sucking blood from their victims, they suck the very energy from a soul.”

He snorted, “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not at all,” Glyn growled. “My aunt grew emotionally dependent on this guy and, when the truce was signed and they were both discharged, she married him. By the time she was forty, she looked eighty, and died soon after her birthday, the withered husk of a former beauty.”

“That’s... incredible.”

“The man - I won’t call him my uncle, because he was a fiend - went on to victimize three other women before he was killed in a bar fight.”

“So, that’s your inspiration for pursuing...”

“Don’t you see? People need to be protected from every type of evil, *if* they believe in evil. Back in the days when people persecuted witches, they were subjected to curses and spells because they believed such hogwash to be a real threat.”

“But, they’re not?”

“Of course not! Thanks to shows like *Star Trek*, we’re really just beginning to explore the connection between energy and matter. What’s true is that all energy is neutral; people themselves determine if it will be used for positive or negative purposes.”

“Good or evil?”

Glyn nodded brunette curls before draining her mug. She rose; the reporter left his root beer unfinished to follow her into the murky June afternoon.

“Please, continue,” he urged as the slender, athletic figure strode toward a city park.

“You really want the details?”

“Definitely!”

“Fine, then.” She paused to watch children playing on a seesaw. “My aunt’s funeral was the first I ever attended. My mother was distraught, the only one to view the body before they closed the casket. That image has stayed with me ever since, a silent promise to make certain no one ever has to endure such an experience again.”

Scribbling in his notebook, the reporter raised his eyes to scan her determined mien. “And?”

“It was a circuitous road, reaching this point. I devoured every book I could find in university libraries, tracked down psychiatrists and neurologists, and filled hundreds of binders with formulae and theories. The result is this.”

Glyn flashed a black onyx ring with platinum band on her left middle finger.

“What’s so special about that?”

She chuckled. “It looks innocent enough, doesn’t it?” Removing it, she flicked a small lever beneath the stone.

The reporter felt himself shoved backward by unseen forces. His attempts to resist proved futile. “What the hell?”

“It’s a very effective, invisible shield, repelling both physical and psychic attacks.” Glyn switched off the device, tucking it in the pocket of her Levis.

“But, to generate that kind of power, the equipment would be... would fill a room, or an entire building!”

“I spent eight months in Japan, where they’ve mastered reducing the size of electrical components. Think of a transistor radio.”

Considering her description, the reporter finally accepted this premise as feasible, jotting more notes. “You’re continuing your experiments before bringing it to the market?”

“Precisely,” Glyn responded.

“In Collinsport, of all places? Who do you plan to use it on, the fish in the cannery?”

“Wow, you’re really deficient when it comes to all kinds of history, aren’t you?” she guffawed. “Don’t you dig up any background before doing an interview?”

He bristled. “Hey, I had two hours’ notice...”

“Forgive me.” This sincere apology preceded resuming their stroll. “The Collins family, founders of the village, has been plagued by a rash of inexplicable tragedies for two centuries. Rumors of werewolves, witches, vampires, along with unsolved murders, suicides, mysterious illnesses...”

“Sounds like a gothic novel.”

“That’s not far from the truth. You see, another theory I have: when such rumors gain traction within a community, the energy feeding them replicates... spawns a cycle that won’t be broken until the source is found and neutralized. The region becomes a hub for negativity to proliferate.”

The reporter shuddered. “How am I going to explain *that* to our readers?”

“Don’t try.” Pausing beside a sky blue Volkswagen Beetle, Glyn managed a faux grin. “I’ve enjoyed chatting with you.”

“But... you haven’t told me what you’re going to do!”

“Yes, I did, not ten seconds ago.”

As she dropped onto the tan bucket seat, started the air-cooled engine and shifted into gear, her companion mentally reviewed their conversation. Realization dawned as the aging vehicle sputtered to the nearest intersection and steered left.

The Great House of Collinwood rose from the countryside like a sleeping monster. Definite French influences in the Chateausque styling confirmed the Collins’ origins across the Atlantic; Glyn nursed little curiosity about the interior as the Beetle chugged along toward the dwelling known locally as the Old House.

Two-story stone columns lined all four sides of this somewhat smaller, white-walled domicile. An intricate balustrade on the roof gave the impression that occupants could hold open-air gatherings on warm summer evenings. Glyn,

however, noticed a male figure watching her from the semi-circular outcropping above the main entrance. By the time she'd removed her keys and alighted, however, he'd vanished.

Not unusual in this neck of the woods, she snickered to herself.

Rather than use the brass lion-shaped knocker on the double oak doors - especially since she wasn't expected - she toured the grounds at a leisurely pace. The gardens were relatively well tended, though in need of weeding. With a sigh, she lamented her own failed dream to become a botanist. She'd loved digging in her parents' backyard years earlier, tending roses, daylilies, daisies, herbs and vegetables.

Viewing the stately mansion from the rear, she couldn't see how anyone would want to live there alone. The studio apartment she leased in Boston proved sufficient for her comfort. A minimalist, she sort of understood why the Russians - after their revolution in 1917 - had moved multiple families into large homes previously occupied by the wealthy. Of course, those tactics went overboard, crowding people together like cattle in a rail car. People needed space to move, a modicum of privacy...

Roaming the empty corridors of a structure such as this would drive her mad, let alone the amount of dusting required to keep fixtures and decorations clean!

"What are you doing?" demanded a nasal tenor from behind her.

Glyn spun, recognizing the man who'd monitored her arrival. Up close, his features blended a harsh edge of the criminal class with an absolute cluelessness of the unschooled.

She replied, "Just walking."

"This is private property, not a park."

"Place looked deserted," she bluffed. "I thought no one would mind."

"Well, you're wrong. Now, get back in your car and go."

"I don't think so."

The sandy-maned, middle-aged stranger stiffened, as if stunned by this refusal. "If you don't..."

"If I don't, what will you do? Call the cops?"

"The owner won't tolerate such insolence!"

"Who *is* the owner?"

He hedged, averting his gaze.

"Oh, c'mon, Willie. No reason to fear."

He stammered, "How'd... you know my name?"

“Why, you’re famous! Caring for this place with unrivaled dedication, making sure no one disturbs... your master.”

“Who *are* you?”

“I’m Glyn Adams. Doctor Glyn Adams, if you want the title, too.”

If possible to deflate further, Willie’s shoulders slumped, his back stooped.

“Not another one.”

“Another what?” She was enjoying this banter.

“Fool doctor with crazy ideas...”

“Wanting to cure...”

“Right.”

“Don’t worry, Willie. I’m not some quack. I’m not even a physician, in the medical sense. I’m a scientist.”

He perked up a bit. “Then, what...”

“I don’t mean to insult you when I say you wouldn’t understand.” She squeezed his shoulder gently. “I just want to meet Barnabas.”

“He... doesn’t see people...”

“Not during the day, at any rate. I can wait ‘til sunset.”

Willie blocked her path toward the house, ineffectively. “He doesn’t like uninvited guests.”

“You won’t get in trouble. I guarantee it.”

As she brushed past, he dogged her steps meekly. “You don’t know him.”

Once inside, Glyn’s hazel orbs took a few moments to adjust to the darkness. Willie pulled up short behind her in the foyer, to prevent a collision. Then, he directed her to the drawing room, opening heavy curtains along the front windows, natural illumination for her surroundings.

“Make yourself at home, I guess,” rumbled the servant, withdrawing.

She did. Each piece of bric-a-brac, from cheap imitations to authentic porcelains, merited her inspection. Paintings were assessed for their artistic value, stroke technique and coloring. The furniture, nothing manufactured on an assembly line, reminded her of sets at home she was not allowed to touch except on holidays or special occasions.

She contemplated the descending sun, her stomach growling. She hadn’t eaten since breakfast, when she arrived in Collinsport and met reluctantly with the reporter. At least an hour to spare, she ventured into the bowels of this massive domicile.

The kitchen wasn’t used much, she determined, appliances left over from the 1800s. The cupboards held two boxes of cereal, which Willie must eat dry, as

no provisions had been made to keep milk cold. Peanut butter and a loaf of bread were the only other staples available.

After all, Barnabas Collins didn't eat real food.

For now.

Glyn swore that would change - permanently.

Finding a knife in a warped drawer beside the iron sink, she prepared a peanut butter sandwich and filled a wine glass with water from a clanking, burping tap.

"Didn't your mother teach you manners?" barked Willie, stumbling through the screen door with a load of firewood.

"She did, but I don't always heed them." She relieved him of his burden, dumping the logs in the firebox beside the stove. "You planning to cook me dinner?"

"Of course not!" he snapped. "These go..."

"Oh, that's right. Barnabas would always be cold, wouldn't he - even in summer?"

Willie bit his lip.

"He'll be up soon, won't he?"

"And, you really shouldn't be here."

Glyn studied him kindly. "Just think, Willie. If I can bring an end to this nonsense, you'll be free to live your own life."

He gulped. "I... would?"

Tempted to let him try on the ring, she resisted the urge. Willie's demeanor with the influence of Barnabas Collins removed might be too difficult to handle.

Besides, it would only be temporary. For the area to be cleared of this ominous cloud, the original perpetrator must be publicly exposed as a fraud.

Even if it meant creating scores of miniature electromagnets to operate identical rings for the entire population.

First, though, she would start with Barnabas.

As Willie toted his load into the parlor, Glyn waited near the staircase, then grasped her error. The house's occupant wouldn't descend from the upper floor, as if making a grand entrance in formal garb for a costume ball. He would climb from the basement, after sleeping the day in his coffin.

She wasn't going to search for *that* door.

In fact, she no more returned to the drawing room than the stern-visaged, dark haired tenant appeared on the threshold, attired in a navy blue double-breasted suit and carrying a silver wolf's-head cane.

"What's this?" resonated his distinguished baritone.

Willie dropped the last of the wood, cowering.

"It's not his fault," Glyn interspersed. "I'm a trespasser, and I know it."

"You were hurt on the grounds and came looking for aid?"

Her smile, white teeth flashing, softened his attitude.

"Then, this is just a casual call?"

"If you will permit me five minutes, I can explain," she assured her host.

Barnabas waved her to the antique maroon sofa, selecting a wing-backed armchair for himself. "That will be all, Willie."

Obediently, the servant departed.

"Now, what have you in mind? Are you some thrill-seeker, dared by fellow university students to breach the stronghold of the reclusive Collins?"

Her melodious titter brought a wry smile to his thin lips.

"Given how many times that has happened on these premises, the humor is lost on me."

She sobered instantly. "I'm sorry, Barnabas. I was laughing because of your reference to me being a student. I'm... well beyond that phase of my life."

"Were you forthcoming, however, you would purport that we are all students, our entire lives, and should always be open to learning."

"That's... true. And, very wise. To me, learning is like breathing."

"For one so young, *that* is very wise. The clock is ticking, Miss..."

Glyn introduced herself, including her qualifications from various institutions of higher education and medical facilities.

"Impressive credentials, though you aren't dressed as a professional."

"Clothes have nothing to do with intellect."

"Having dealt with persons of your ilk in the past, I see no need..."

She extracted the ring from her jeans and thrust it toward him. When he extended his arm to accept it, she noticed it matched the adornment he already wore.

"It is a copy..." he observed.

"No. It is entirely unique."

"You wish to sell it?"

"Not at all."

"Then, why should I be interested..."

"Words are... useless when trying to convey the gravity of this situation, Barnabas. I ask only that you put it on your finger."

"Why should I trust you, when other, reputedly ethical sorts have tried to dupe me?"

She offered no excuses, no justifications, braving his penetrating stare without flinching.

The ring fell onto his palm. He squinted at it briefly, rolling it back and forth.

“It seems quite common.”

“That’s the point. No one would guess such power existed in an object of that size.”

“Power?”

She inhaled. “Please, Barnabas.”

As the platinum band slid over the knuckle of his right index finger, the switch activated its shield. Glyn’s anticipation of his reaction stopped her breath.

For his part, Barnabas’ dark eyes widened, tremors claimed his limbs. His complexion darkened from a sickly pallor to a healthy, human tint.

“This is impossible!” he croaked, rising. “How could you know of my...”

“Condition?”

“To put it mildly.”

“Among other things, I’m a cousin to the late Burke Devlin.”

Barnabas hissed, “Devlin!”

“He wrote me about bizarre phenomena in Collinsport - and you, in particular, after he discovered your... secret. Piqued my curiosity.”

Still befuddled, her host persisted, “How can such a token lift a curse that has tormented me for nearly two hundred years?”

“Because, my friend, there is no curse. You only believed there was.”

“But... Angelique...”

“Your aberrant relationship with that woman is what caused her supposed incantations to become real for you - and others she victimized, I imagine. She proclaims herself a witch, which can be a tremendous annoyance, in and of itself. When other people buy into that hype, though, her machinations become reality.”

“So, you are saying, if others ignore her, all will be well again?”

“Basically.”

Willie exploded into the room at that moment, beaming like a thousand watt bulb. As Glyn suspected, Barnabas’s freedom had severed their paranormal bond, as well.

“I feel like a new man!” he exclaimed.

“Then, go and enjoy yourself,” advised Glyn.

Running uncertain fingers through his disheveled sandy mop, Willie silently consulted Barnabas. A mere blink affirmed the former’s release from years of unwilling servitude.

Alone once more, Barnabas raised Glyn from the cushions. “How can I repay you for this... this...”

Solemnly, she caressed his cheek. “The ordeal is not over quite yet. Angelique will, I fear, sense the break in her control over you. She will scour the countryside for you, try to do you harm.”

“With this, I will be able to put an end to her... her...”

“There is only one way *that* can be accomplished.”

“By killing her!” pledged Barnabas.

Glyn retorted, “No. She, too, can be saved, if only by force.”

“How?”

“She must be captured and confined in a place where no one gives credence to her feigned sorcery. With prolonged treatment by trained psychiatrists, her mindset will be altered, and she will be able to live as an ordinary human being once more.”

“The triumph of science over magic!”

“Magic is merely the manipulation of the gullible to believe something that isn’t true. Science reinforces the power of the brain to seek and find the truth.”

“What is the next step in this process, then?” queried Barnabas.

“We wait for Angelique.”

“Poor, misguided soul that she is.” He flexed his fingers. “Would you consider staying here until...”

“I’d sort of planned on it.”

His tone deepened. “I’ve known many women through the years, and you defy every stereotype of feminine propriety...”

“I know, I know. You’re accustomed to demure females in frilly dresses, afraid of spiders, mice and snakes, reliant on your masculine protection. I grew up with four older brothers. I didn’t have time to be a priss.”

“I... see.”

Audible grumbling from his midsection compelled her to restrain her glee.

He, too, found it funny. “Do you know how to cook?”

“Your larder is empty, I’m afraid.”

“Then, join me for dinner in the village.”

He offered her his arm; on her feet, she slid her hand through the crook.

Driving the Beetle along unfamiliar lanes, Glyn exhibited extreme care. Of the few restaurants on the main thoroughfare, most had already closed at that hour. The Blue Whale, however, offered both liquor and food, and teemed with life.

No one really noticed the couple enter, with raucous conversations, loud music from a jukebox and clouds of acrid smoke creating its own fog. The pair selected a wobbly round table with red and white checked linens in the corner, able to watch the crowds yet not be trampled by unsteady drunks.

A sheet of handwritten paper covered by a greasy plastic sheath served as the menu.

“Not gourmet fare, given this is your first time...” lamented Glyn.

Barnabas chuckled as he perused the options. “What *is* a hamburger?”

His companion described the combination of beef, bun and condiments.

“Disgusting!” he opined.

“Your last meal was probably a freshly-caught Maine lobster with real butter, parsley potatoes and vegetables. A lot healthier than we eat today.”

“Obviously.”

“We can drive down the coast, to see what else is open,” Glyn suggested.

“No, thank you. I’ll content myself with a bowl of soup.”

“That’s probably a good idea, since your stomach isn’t used to solid food.”

This exchange didn’t phase the plump, rumped, auburn-haired waitress who navigated through the throng to take their order. She brought their drinks without much delay - two draft beers - and when Barnabas took a swig and promptly spit the liquid in all directions, Glyn couldn’t repress a cackle.

“This tastes like horse piss!” he groaned.

“I grant you, ales of the eighteenth century were probably far more robust...”

“One tankard would probably land any of these - what’d you call them, bikers? - in the gutter!”

“I prefer chocolate milkshakes, myself.”

“Another obscure concoction.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Abruptly somber, he laid his hand atop hers. “Will I? Wearing this ring, will my life be normal? Will I live to a ripe old age and die in my sleep?”

“Naturally.”

“But, I’m almost 200 years old. Will I not decline rapidly and wilt like a rose in a drought?”

Glyn was not ready to admit she hadn’t considered the long-term impact of the ring on such an ancient subject. In the midst of the surrounding clamor, she heard a waltz reverberating.

“Finally!” she grinned.

“What?”

“Something we can dance to!”

She led a reluctant Barnabas onto the wood-planked section of the establishment that served couples slowly gyrating to the beat. A man of his era probably trained in the minuet, he handled the situation with aplomb.

More throbbing rock and roll resumed after the last strains of *Moon River* faded. As they resumed their seats, the waitress delivered their entrees: beef vegetable soup for Barnabas, and a 1/4 pound cheeseburger with onion rings for Glyn.

She took a huge, juicy bite as he toyed with his spoon.

“You okay?” she prodded.

“It... smells delicious.”

“If you want to try this, I’m game.”

“Let me concentrate on mine, for now.”

“Sure.”

He did risk tasting one of the onion rings, dipped in ketchup. As she studied his expression, her smile broadened.

“You find this amusing?” he remonstrated.

“I find it exciting. Knowing I was able to help a man recover his life...”

Not for long, unfortunately.

Hunger sated, Glyn really craved something chocolate - her sole weakness. They detoured en route to the Volkswagen, hoping to find an ice cream parlor or candy shop still serving customers.

Nearing the cove where yachts dropped anchor, Barnabas halted their progress to inhale the ocean’s fragrance - not as pleasant as he recalled. “There are odors on the breeze I do not recognize.”

“Gasoline, most likely, exhaust fumes from cars and boats, burning coal from the electric plant...”

“There used to be silence...”

Glyn squeezed his arm, admiring his wistful, elegant profile in the gloom. “I miss it, too.”

A tender yet firm hand slid around her waist; he kissed her with a degree of uncertainty.

She didn’t squirm, but did extricate herself from the embrace. “I... didn’t come here for...”

“I apologize if you are offended. I haven’t kissed a woman for the sake conveying genuine affection in a very long time.”

She subdued her temper. “I haven’t kissed any man, except my father, in ten years.”

Barnabas eyed her skeptically. “Someone with your innate beauty and intelligence...”

“I’ve been too busy working.”

“Ah, women aren’t meant to...”

She wagged a warning finger. “Don’t go there, my friend. In this day and age, men who talk like that get slapped.”

His snicker surprised her. “That, and most any other reference to women’s duties, I’ll warrant.”

She echoed his laughter, the sound dying in her throat as a shadowy figure neared.

Her grip on Barnabas’ arm increased in strength, compelling him to shift his focus toward the oncoming interloper.

She wore a tailored business suit, color undetermined in the dimness. Blonde waves tumbled over narrow shoulders. When she raised her hands toward them, Glyn could see thin digits and long, manicured nails...

Ready to scratch out someone’s eyes.

“Angelique!” yowled Barnabas.

His ring generating its protective current, the self-proclaimed witch’s stream of incantations and expletives failed to subdue the man she’d lusted after since the late 1700s. Consequently, she aimed her conjurations at Glyn, aware Barnabas would put himself in danger to save an innocent bystander.

“Not today, bitch!” Glyn read Angelique’s intentions and rushed her. The tackle would have made any college football linebacker proud. With Angelique sprawled on the boards of the dock, Glyn leveled punches at her face until the skin resembled pulp and blood trickled from her gaping mouth.

Unconscious, Angelique didn’t feel herself being restrained by a gag and straightjacket, then loaded into an ambulance from a private mental institution near Boston.

Barnabas confronted Glyn, frantic. “You... were amazing!”

“Thanks,” she sniffed, brushing salty mud from her knees.

“Were... those men here the entire time?”

“They’ve been hanging loose at the inn the past few days. When I used the ladies’ room at the bar, I stopped to make a call. They’ve been following us for about a half hour.”

“So, you knew...”

“I guessed.”

Barnabas kissed her again, with greater passion. Glyn responded in kind.

Walking arm-in-arm to the Beetle, he puzzled, "What will you do, now you have saved me?"

"Haven't a clue. Just as you've finally found your salvation, so I've reached a goal I've pursued since I was a kid. You're free; I'm free..."

"Willie's free..." Barnabas entwined his fingers with hers. "Let's go somewhere we can really live..."

Sarcastically, she hinted, "What? Paris?"

"Rome would be an adventure."

"So would the North Pole."

"I want to explore the world with you, explore every inch of you, now that..."

"You're fully a man again?" she snorted.

"Fully alive."

"There's plenty of women who would gladly take you to their heart - and their bed - especially because of your commanding presence. Me? It's not... a priority."

"But, you have no pressing engagements..."

"I also have very little money. Researchers aren't in it for the wealth."

"The Collins fortune is at my disposal."

"I appreciate the gesture, Barnabas, but we're... not cut from the same cloth."

Their bittersweet parting - one last kiss when she deposited him at the Old House - left Glyn with a profound ache in her chest. From a scientific perspective, remaining with Barnabas to collect data on how he recovered from his ordeal, adapting to the late 20th century, would not be frowned upon by her peers.

She would definitely track Angelique's convalescence...

Except, that conniving woman managed to escape her captors before the ambulance crossed the border into Massachusetts.

When Glyn received this notification, she sighed in relief that Barnabas, continuing to wear the ring, would remain safe. Perhaps Angelique would try her tricks elsewhere.

The West Coast offered a plethora of victims for her particular brand of devious behavior.

The small, brown paper-wrapped parcel arrived at Glyn's Boston apartment via U.S. mail six months later. Unwrapping the box, she found the ring - a clutter of damaged components - along with a folded parchment on which a troubled hand had scrawled:

“My dearest Glyn - Having removed the ring to perform a morning’s ablutions, Angelique’s minions - who had been stalking me from a distance these many weeks - descended upon my chambers and destroyed it, as you see. To be honest, I’d tired of living as a modern man, and even contemplated suicide... So, I am again how you first encountered me. I thank you for trying.”

The flamboyant “B” confirmed her suspicions.

If she ever invented another earth-shattering device, her methodology would include the after effects of its implementation.

As for Barnabas... Collinsport would remain the center of tragedy, sparked by his family’s recurring misfortune.

Guitar Road

A vast majority of travelers prefer not to take risks on their journeys, foreign or domestic. Plans are made well in advance, with the biggest uncertainty what to order off a menu at the chosen restaurant.

Not so for Callie. She'd tired of her safe existence, driving two miles to work each day, laboring at a desk crunching numbers for the state's most respected accounting firm, returning home and watching classic films.

Always drawn to Ireland, she abruptly resigned her position at noon on a June Tuesday, notified her landlord she was breaking her lease, donated her car to a local charity, packed a small duffel with essentials and booked an Aer Lingus flight departing from O'Hare International, hopping on a train from the suburbs.

Landing the following morning after sleeping nearly eight hours, she rode the bus from Dublin Airport to the city's center, meandered in the vicinity of O'Connell Street until she located the train station. Arriving in Wicklow, she tucked her brunette mop under a Chicago Cubs ballcap and set off westward with a measured gait, without a map, watch, cell phone or any itinerary.

She passed the M11 highway, continuing down a winding country byway. The green fields, dotted with sheep, the hand-built stone walls filled her soul with a contentment she hadn't experienced in more than 50 years.

Quaint villages peppered the landscape, as well. In no hurry, she explored shops and lanes, admiring utilitarian housing and rustic pubs. When ominous clouds rolled across the sun, Callie didn't worry. She enjoyed walking in the rain, and the fabric of her pack was guaranteed waterproof.

This downpour exceeded her tolerance, however. Lightning, thunder and chill winds buffeted her, stinging cheeks and soaking skin through two layers. Her sneakers squished as she trudged onward, anxious to find another town where she could secure a warm, dry room for the night.

No such luck, of course. The woman credited Murphy's Law - everything had transpired smoothly to that point; something was bound to go wrong.

A roadside sign caught her eye, but sheets of water obscured the lettering. She navigated the gravel track through a stand of trees, which partially shielded her from the raging weather. Some distance ahead, she distinguished the vague outline of an imposing brick mansion.

Callie quickened her pace, not slowing until she reached a columned portico. Oddly, one of the heavy oak doors stood ajar - blown open by the storm? she puzzled.

So as not to ruin the marble flooring within, she hovered beneath the lintel, peering into the gloom. “Hello?” she called, an eerie echo reverberating around the chamber.

No response.

A futile attempt to shake excess moisture from her jacket and shoes preceded her entrance. She shouted more loudly, with no results.

As her eyes adjusted to the dimness, she observed ornate chairs and statues from an earlier era. On the walls... not artwork, but bizarre creatures suspended...

“May I help you?” came the deep, accented voice from behind her.

She spun, terrified. “I...”

Equally wet, the man’s longish, blond-streaked brown mane hung across a furrowed brow. The mustache and goatee reminded her of matted animal fur. His t-shirt and jeans clung to a trim frame. He kicked off soggy sandals and wiggled his grass-covered toes.

“Hell of a blow, eh?” he chuckled.

Callie presumed this to be a caretaker or servant. “I... hoped to beg shelter...”

“I’ll fetch you some towels.”

“Thanks.”

He slopped his way toward the rear of the structure, returning with a stack of fluffed terry cloth. He’d already wrapped one around his shoulders and over his head.

“What were you doing out there?” queried the uninvited visitor.

Straight white teeth – except for a gold lower molar – flashed when he grinned. “The hasp on one of the shutters snapped. I wanted to repair it before the whole thing broke loose.”

“I’m sure the owner is grateful.”

He squinted. “Excuse me?”

“Your boss. He’ll be glad you took such care of his property.”

“It’s my property.”

Callie gulped. “I’m... sorry. I thought...”

The smile reappeared. Taking her by the arm, he led her to a cozy parlor where a fire crackled on the grate.

“Make yourself comfortable. I’ll find something you can wear while your clothes dry.”

“Thanks, but...” As she unzipped her duffel, he vanished.

Laying a towel on the antique armchair, she settled near the fireplace. The heat thawed her bones, but the chill recurred when she glimpsed more of the strange wall hangings.

She rose, creeping cautiously toward them. If this house proved to be haunted, she wanted to be ready to bolt.

The crystal chandelier switched on, causing her to flinch. Her host stood on the threshold, scowling, dry except for his hair. She whipped around, discovering a collection of guitars decorating the room.

“You okay?” wondered the resident.

“Sure... I...” She shuffled to her seat. “You play all these?”

He offered her a thick navy blue monogrammed bathrobe. “At one time or another.”

“You a musician?”

“Obviously.” Retreating to the door, he added, “I’ll let you get changed.”

Stripping off the drenched garments reminded Callie of peeling a banana or an orange. As she stood, naked before the flames, the towel rubbed her flesh. She spurned the robe, groping through her bag for underwear, a tie-dyed henley and jeans.

While she waited, she examined the guitars - Fender Stratocasters, acoustic, classical, 12-string, flying V - by the dozens. She tried to imagine who would need such an assortment...

A knock preceded her host’s presentation of a tray bearing soda cans and tuna salad sandwiches. “I thought you might be hungry.”

“Famished, thanks.”

Huddled around the coffee table, they ate in silence. At one point, their eyes met and Callie averted her gaze self-consciously.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I... don’t know your name.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know yours, for that matter.”

“Yeah, for all you know, I might be a serial killer...”

“Out in the middle of nowhere, in the rain?”

“True.” Wiping her fingers on a paper napkin, she extended them. “I’m Callie Tobin.”

Firm digits grasped her palm. “Jack Heppler.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” He straightened. “There’s some chocolate cake in the kitchen, if you’re in the mood for dessert.”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“There’s a guest room at the top of the stairs...”

“Only one?” she snickered.

“The house was built for a family of ten, and twice as many servants. I bought it primarily to store my guitars.”

“There’s more?”

“Sure. C’mon.”

A grand tour of the dwelling overwhelmed Callie. Custom pieces occupied every inch of space in every room, except the kitchen and laundry. Heppler’s excuse for that: “Too much variation in temperature and humidity. Warps the wood.”

Estimating at least 400 instruments, Callie calculated the value in excess of a million dollars. “I hope you’re well insured.”

“You sound like an accountant,” he quipped.

“I... was.”

Brown orbs fastened on her lean features. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not at all. Two days ago, I was working for a CPA.”

“You get fired for embezzlement?”

She bristled. “Of course not! I opted for a radical change of scenery.”

“Sick of numbers?”

“Sick of the routine.”

“I dig. That’s why I’m here and not on tour. I needed a few months away from screaming fans and one night stands.”

Callie’s outfit in the dryer, they enjoyed mugs of steaming coffee as a rainbow arced across the east, the sun descending between breaks in the overcast.

“This is beautiful,” Callie remarked, expertly tended gardens stretching down a gentle incline behind the edifice.

“Beautiful, but expensive,” admitted Heppler. “And I’ve no head for figures.”

“Don’t you have a bookkeeper?”

“I did. Bilked me out of a fortune and left me owing some hefty taxes.”

She cringed. “I’m... sorry.”

“It’s my own fault. I’m too trusting...”

“A sad state of affairs, these days. Gives my profession a bad name and makes everyone suspicious.” She yawned and stretched.

“Tired?”

“Jet lag, I think.”

“Get to bed. We’ll talk in the morning.”

“What time is breakfast?”

He smirked. “Whenever you like.”

“Thanks.”

“When you’re on holiday, there should be no alarm clocks.”

“I’m not,” she countered.

“Then... what?”

“I plan to spend the rest of my life in Ireland.”

His mustache twitched. “What, just walking from place to place?”

“Enjoying the beauty.”

As she crawled into the carved four-poster bed ten minutes later, the canopy creating a tent-like atmosphere, Callie heard guitar riffs drift up from below.

Awake at first light, a brilliant dawn painting the sky with pastel hues, she reorganized her duffel and prepared to depart. Eggs, bacon and toast fortified her for the next leg of her journey; Heppler toyed with his food, preoccupied.

“What’s wrong?” Callie prodded between sips of orange juice.

“I’ve a proposition in mind, but I doubt you’d give it fair consideration.”

“Huh?”

“If I promised you could travel around Ireland to your heart’s content, using this as a base...”

“Wait a minute...”

“All expenses paid...”

“I have all the money I need to...”

“I want to hire you as my accountant.”

The glass suspended inches above the linen tablecloth, she blinked once, twice. “Are you serious?”

He nodded solemnly.

The prospect made her shiver. She’d accepted clients whose books defied logic, to put it lightly, spending months auditing and reconstructing ledgers before uncovering the true state of that business’ or individual’s finances...

“Do you have access to the records?” she finally sighed.

“The library computer...”

“Show me.”

Heppler ate while Callie scoured digital files, along with letters from the government detailing overdue tax penalties. Part of her repulsed by the mess, the challenge of rectifying the situation appealed to her ethical leanings.

“I’ll give you two weeks,” she announced, “at five thousand Euros per week.”

He didn’t hesitate. “Whatever you say.”

“After that, two days a week, while I travel the other five.”

“Quite reasonable.”

“I’ll educate you on how to read the financials, so you understand just what’s happening.”

“If... my brain is up to it.”

“And, when you’re on the road, I’ll send regular updates.”

His lips quivered. “Unless...”

“Unless, what?”

“You want to accompany me.”

“Where?”

“The next tour starts in September. We’ll hit Germany, Italy, Tokyo, then the States.”

“How long?”

“Ten weeks.”

She switched off the monitor. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

In the meantime, long days at the desk exhausted her. Bank documents confirmed the previous accountant had taken advantage of a flaw in the software, issuing himself checks, then falsifying the payments.

Callie had seen that tactic too many times, and even created a widely-distributed manual for corporations, to warn employers of the scam.

An unintentional musical background alleviated her tension. She quickly picked up on the singular tone of Heppler’s various instruments, awed by the repertoire of rock, jazz, classical and his own compositions.

Friday fortnight, she emerged from the library, agitation dissipated. Her employer wandered the garden, savoring the scent of roses.

“Finished?” he greeted.

She replied, “You’re liquid, at any rate.”

“How much?”

“Cash reserves will last a month or two.”

His eyes widened. “That’s all?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Is there anything we can do to recover...”

“I’ve already compiled a comprehensive report for the police to use in prosecuting the guy.”

“That’ll take months.”

“Years, probably.”

“And, until then?” Heppler groaned.

“That’s up to you.”

He paced uneven paving stones. “I’d hate to rely on the good will of patrons at the Wicklow pubs.”

“Eh?”

“Playing on weekends for tips.”

“That, I’d like to see,” sniffed Callie.

“You spent an evening in any of the pubs since you’ve been in country?”

“An hour or two, maybe.”

“It’ll be a treat for you, then.”

Not bothering to shed the ragged jeans and stained white tank top, he grabbed an acoustic from its stand in the dining room corner and marched out to a blue Volkswagen. He climbed behind the wheel - on the vehicle’s right side - leaving her mildly confused.

“This isn’t America,” he drawled.

With a shrug, she slid onto the passenger seat.

At the end of the curved drive, Heppler paused to assess oncoming traffic. Callie glanced at the road sign she’d been unable to read that stormy night seeming ages ago: “Guitar Road.”

A 20 minute drive brought them to the city, where an establishment was selected at random. Within, pints of stout and chatter abounded; Heppler joined a violin and Irish drum for an evening of lively music.

He came away with 50 Euros.

Callie noted the amount.

“It’s tax free, don’t you know?” he objected.

“Only if you want to get in more trouble.”

She departed on Monday tour the county on foot, refusing Heppler’s offer to use his other car: a rusty red Ford Fiesta.

“I’d be too scared, driving on the wrong side,” she admitted.

As summer passed, accounting duties light, she managed to promote some advertising work for her boss, scoring extra income, and spent her leisure time teaching herself to play a well-used guitar she’d discovered in the cellar’s workshop, waiting to be restrung.

The European leg of the schedule exposed her to the life of an itinerant musician - totally different than strolling the countryside at will. Strict timetables controlled the band’s activities, including charitable appearances, television interviews and photo shoots.

VIP meet-and-greets annoyed Callie no end. She lingered backstage, disgusted by the airheaded groupies who craved a moment’s attention from their

favorites. Heppler's personality altered amidst the clamoring throngs; she wondered if he could actually maintain his equilibrium while being roughly pawed and signing autographs.

That public persona included his attire. A white bandana tied atop two-toned hair, silver pendants visible through the unbuttoned denim shirt, baggy black trousers with a plethora of dangling chains hooked to the belt loops, hand-tooled leather boots... he reminded her of hippies from the 1960s.

Half way through Germany, she'd decided one tour would be sufficient when the accident occurred. Of the five man group, Heppler handled lead guitar, with a drummer, a bass guitarist, the singer/keyboardist and another guy playing rhythm guitar. The latter got drunk in Berlin after the show and stumbled off the sidewalk en route to the hotel.

Callie took the 6:00 a.m. phone call, a hospital attendant relating in broken English he'd been transported by ambulance, left ankle and right arm fractured.

She dropped the bomb over brunch. Hiring a replacement on short notice not an option, the remaining quartet debated how to deal with the emergency. Callie brewed a second pot of coffee in the kitchenette.

She nearly spilled the boiling liquid on Heppler's lap at his declaration, "Callie knows the set."

"You're kidding, right?" challenged the hungover drummer.

She retorted, "Sure, he is."

"Nope," Heppler asserted. "She's picked up the chords faster than anyone I've seen in years. Maybe one rehearsal, and she'll be ready to go."

"Go where?" Callie spat.

As three men silently considered the scenario, Heppler yanked the woman into a cluttered bedroom, closing the door.

"Callie, please," begged the baritone.

"What are you trying to do to me?"

"We're in a pinch."

"Like you were in a pinch back home, needing me to straighten out your finances before you were arrested for nonpayment of tax?"

"If we have to cancel the rest of the dates..."

Teeth clenched, she glowered at Heppler. Something boyish in his face, despite decades of hard living, nonetheless softened her heart.

"All right," she grumbled. "But, as soon as we're back in Ireland, I'm taking off - for good."

He embraced her gently. "You're beautiful when you're angry, and I don't believe a word. We get along too well together..."

She realized he spoke the truth, and resented it.

A tough afternoon session nearly bloodied her fingers, going over the songs twice. Heppler then dragged her to a thrift shop, selecting an armload of cast-offs to create a suitable costume.

That's what she considered it. A baggy red flannel shirt, distressed jeans and sneakers would help her blend into the general scheme of the performance. Heppler's own moth-eaten beige fedora concealed her short brunette mop and much of her face.

Callie equated that episode to the stress she'd endured waiting for the results of her CPA exam. Usually a morning person, she never got to bed before 1:00 a.m. and didn't sleep well. While the men snored through the days, she updated the books, content Heppler had rebuilt his cash reserves.

The concerts ultimately concluded, she didn't hang around while the crew disassembled the backdrop and loaded the G5 jet with equipment. She purchased a ticket on a commercial carrier, landing in Dublin the next afternoon.

She had her duffle slung over her shoulder and was hiking easily through County Cork when Heppler found her the following spring. He tried to block her path with the Volkswagen; she skirted the obstacle and continued on her way.

"Why won't you come back?" he hollered at her receding form.

Halting, she spun toward him. "Most of my life, I've been used by others, because I was very good at my job, while co-workers preferred to slack off and collected their unearned paychecks. I went against my better judgment to do you a favor, and you used me, too." She held her ground. "I really liked you, Jack, but you're just an opportunist, like so many. I deserve better."

As she marched away, he stared after her, cognizant any pledge to reform would go unheeded.

When she glanced over her shoulder minutes later, the blue compact had vanished.

She would never look back again.

Trippin'

There's a fine line when it comes to determining if what a patient reveals in the course of a therapy session is fact or fiction.

Even after practicing as a psychologist for 28 years, Belle still dealt with this challenge periodically.

Those who appeared for weekly appointments at the medical pavilion to discuss career tensions, family dysfunction or marital anxiety could be counted mostly on the side of fact - or, at least, how the individuals perceived those facts. Her Thursdays at the county jail, assessing accused criminals prior to court hearings, leaned in the other direction. Charged with anything from drug dealing to theft, child sex abuse to murder, her subjects wanted out of detention at any cost - including fooling her into reporting their stability and cooperative attitude to the judge.

Herbert Johnson left her wide-eyed and breathless after their first encounter. Middle-aged with dark brown hair, high cheekbones, tight lips and a narrow chin, his tale of being newly arrived in the 21st century, after decades in a sort of coma, being born in 1526 and a lover of England's Queen Elizabeth I, excited her with its intimate details of places and people he'd met. She initially considered him a deluded historian, so immersed in research of that period that he'd lost touch with reality.

Until he opened his mouth wide enough for her to spy the fangs.

They weren't implants or part of some cheesy Halloween costume. A quick jaunt for an x-ray at the dentist's office down the hall showed the cuspids to be rooted in his jaw like the remaining teeth.

Having refilled their coffee mugs from the Keurig in her well-lit suite, Belle felt herself on the brink of madness.

"What do you want of me?" she stammered.

A bass rumble: "I wish to be rid of this affliction which, if my studies are correct, is purely psychological."

"It looks pretty... physical to me."

"My mind long ago convinced my body that myth could become manifest."

He leaned forward, elbows resting on the knees of his tattered suit, cut to a style from the 1800s. "I must be done with it!"

"And how, exactly, do you see that happening?"

He snorted, "You're the doctor. You tell me."

She rose, circling her desk and staring through smudged glass overlooking the parking lot, brain scrambling to formulate some sort of response. Finally, she acknowledged, "I don't know."

"That's just great," he mocked, hoisting himself off the tan leather sofa. "You came highly recommended by the physicians at the hospital, and I've wasted all this time..."

"Time? If you've been honest with me, you have an eternity. Why are you worried about..."

The instantaneous transformation froze her blood. His entire body consumed by rage, he dug sinewy fingers into her arms, bellowing, "Do you have any clue what it's like to live this way? Cutting a swath across the globe, killing against my will, just to survive? Loathsome I am, and evil. You can mock me for that, but leave my pain alone!"

Immobilized, Belle observed green eyes flecked with gold blacken, his muscles stiffen. His throat let out a wowl that would have summoned every dog in a two mile radius, had they stood in an open field rather than a post-modern high-rise.

Sensing a shift beneath her feet, as if an earthquake opened a chasm in the carpet, the woman fought to free herself from Johnson's grasp. Bookshelves lining the walls, the artwork, the furniture seemed to melt, the commingled colors swirling about the pair. Her lungs gasped for air.

A split second later, Belle and Johnson fell apart, landing on a grassy knoll. He recovered his wits first, squatting beside her as she struggled to focus on overhanging tree branches and blue sky beyond.

"What the hell..." she croaked, allowing him to raise her to a sitting position.

His previously rigid features had softened to an almost contrite demeanor. "I'm so sorry. I never meant..."

"Where are we?"

"The road near Hatfield, in England."

She leapt upright. "What?"

"I sincerely apologize, doctor. Your mention of time angered me, because I knew I would never recover the years I missed after... my ailment gained control of me. As a consequence, I surmise we have traveled to the period immediately preceding..."

"You've got to be kidding!"

His head shook solemnly side to side.

"How do we get back?" she squealed.

“We don’t, I’m afraid.”

“Huh?”

“I’m fated to relive that torturous ordeal all over again...”

“And, what about me?”

“You will witness the deed that turned me into” - he spread his arms wide -
“this.”

She retreated three paces. “Not on your life, buddy. This is some drug-induced nightmare...”

An ornate coach drawn by four matched horses rattled toward them on the nearby dirt track. He smirked. “See? I’ve not deceived you.”

Belle sank on a toppled, rotting log, head buried in her hands. The wheels of the carriage spewed a cloud of dust as it passed; after she finished coughing, her lithe frame shuddered with sobs.

She felt him perch beside her, whispering soothing platitudes. Not an emotional sort by nature, she concentrated on her respiration, restoring her equilibrium in short order.

“Better?” he queried as she angled her face at the mid-day sun.

“Yes, thank you.”

“We’d best be off, then.”

“Off where?”

“To the familial estate.”

“Huh?” she puzzled.

“Less than a league - about a mile - along this road.” He supported her as she tested her knees, releasing her waist as she matched his gait.

The countryside’s beauty surpassed any landscape Belle had viewed in her own time, marred as they were by billboards, cookie-cutter houses or industrial complexes. Pastoral, she mused, with sheep and horses grazing on hillsides so green they defied description.

“You sure we’re not in Ireland?” she asked.

“Positive. Why?”

“This reminds me of County Kerry.”

“You’ve been there?”

“Every summer, on vacation.”

“Ah!”

They fell silent as Belle inhaled the fragrance of manure, wood smoke and baking bread.

“What is your name in this... era?” she eventually inquired.

“Herbert Johnson. I’ve never seen the need to change it.”

“You live on an estate?”

He thrust a nimble finger to the left. “That is our home.”

“You’re a servant?”

He bristled. “Oh, no. We’re distant cousins of the Seymours, quite wealthy in our own right.”

“Seymour?” Belle repeated. “How do I know that name?”

“Jane Seymour was married to King Henry the Eighth for a brief period, birthing his only son. Her brothers, Edward and Thomas, figured prominently in the reign of young King Edward.”

“Which is how you came to be noticed by Queen Elizabeth?”

“While she was still a princess, at a country ball...”

His wistful expression brought a smile to Belle’s lips. “A man in love, in any century...”

“You deride my affection, doctor?”

“Love is overrated. If a man and woman want to be together, let them be together. Love, marriage, the restrictions of religion...”

He halted, clamping his right hand over her mouth.

She brushed it away. “What’s the matter?”

“Be wary of your words. Many are those who’ve gone to the block for such treasonous opinions...”

Rolling her blue eyes, she chuckled. “Oh, right. No free speech here.”

“Precisely.”

Veering along a shady track, the pair neared a sprawling mansion in 16th century style.

Belle slowed, in awe. “You’re the firstborn son?”

“The only son.”

“Does a title go with this?”

“As in, a peerage?”

Tawny curls bobbed affirmatively.

“As I recall the history, an earldom will be bestowed on my father during Queen Elizabeth’s twenty-fifth jubilee of her reign.”

“Due to your... relationship with her?”

“Some thought it so.”

“How long... were you...”

“As they say in your day, on and off for three years.”

“You broke it off?”

“Not at all. I proposed marriage to her on six occasions, and she declined.”

“She loved another?”

“Indeed. More than one, if the rumors be true.”

Belle sneered. “History calls her the virgin queen.”

“History is wrong.”

They paused before the grand stone abode; Belle detected Johnson’s reluctance to approach the arched entrance.

“Your family will be pleased to see you,” she prompted

“I’ve mourned countless generations of my kin. To reopen those wounds...”

She laid a consoling hand on his sleeve, then gulped.

“What is it?” wondered Johnson.

“Our clothes. We’re in no... fit state to call on anyone!”

He appraised his near rags. “Very astute.” He drew her toward the walled garden. “Let us be off to the village, where the tailor can supply us with suitable garb.”

Belle dug in her hip pocket, extracting a wad of bills. “Using what for money? No one will accept this...”

“The cost can be charged to the family account.”

Not only a high-bodiced gown, hose and decidedly uncomfortable shoes, but leggings, tunic and cloak were tallied in the merchant’s ledger. The aging seamstress clucked facetiously at Belle’s shorn locks, summoning a buxom maid to arrange the disheveled mop into some semblance of acceptable coif.

The psychologist did not recognize herself in the primitive mirror prior to embarking with Johnson to his domicile.

“You are irritated about this situation?” he prodded.

“Not the situation, per se, but the cut of this... fashion.”

“I assure you, all proper ladies...”

“Then, they’re nuts.” Belle squirmed inside the cloth. “I’ve never understood the need for women to put themselves through such...”

“Hell?”

They laughed together and, only then did she glimpse Johnson’s perfectly normal teeth.

“So, what occurred... to make you...”

“Ah, ‘Tis a complicated tale.”

“I’m in no rush, obviously.”

He glared at her, flustered by her sarcasm. “The men who purported to be trained in medicine at present...”

“Were no better than amateur butchers.”

“So, you are familiar with their methods?”

“Some. Bleeding to release the evil humors, and similar balderdash.”

“Indeed. From my reading since being freed from confinement, if you will, I comprehend the ignorance of those quacks. When those wounded by pistol shot, for instance, suffered excessive blood loss, their attendants failed to see that stanching the flow led to healing, not the other way ‘round. So many died needlessly.”

“Agreed. But, what does that have to do with...”

“Patience, doctor. While hunting stag with my father and his brothers, I came between their flintlocks and their prey. Thinking it a minor injury, they waited until they bagged their quota to carry me home. By then, I was at death’s door. The town physician didn’t arrive for another three hours. I’d already resolved to live but, ever since, I’ve craved the blood of which I was robbed by this negligence.”

Pieces of Johnson’s dilemma began to fall into place for Belle. “That’s why you maintain your problem is psychological.”

“Precisely.”

“And, by returning here, now, you can avoid the accident that triggered your condition...”

“Though I’d secretly hoped such a feat was possible, I doubted time would cooperate.”

“By aggravating your temper, I sparked the phenomenon...”

“It seems so.”

Once again contemplating the imposing entrance to Johnson’s familial dwelling, neither had the opportunity to clutch the brass knocker. The left panel was wrenched open by a white-haired matron, who rushed into the errant visitor’s embrace.

“Herbert! How I’ve missed you!”

Clutching her to his chest, he drew a kerchief from his pocket to dry her tears of joy. “There, there, Mother. I wasn’t gone that long!”

“I’d lost count of the days, my son!” she retorted, stroking his cheek with palms calloused from manual labor. “You said you’d be in London for a week, not a month!”

Belle watched his eyes spark; instead of having to guess the date, he knew exactly the month and day.

Mistress Johnson separated from her son, sniffing self-consciously. She shifted her attention to Belle, clearly not impressed.

“Mother, may I introduce Doctor... um, Miss Belle Applegate.”

Disdain soured the feeble soprano. “Applegate?”

“We met... in the city.” Not a lie for Johnson.

“Your people are in service to one of the royal households?”

Belle recognized the insult, and bit her tongue. “No, ma’am. We’re... in shipping.”

“Smuggling?”

“Mother!” Johnson remonstrated.

“I’m sorry, my son, but she looks to be less than honorable...”

“I’m literate,” snapped Belle, “if that changes your opinion.”

“One of those who wishes the bible translated into English?” grumbled Mistress Johnson.

“I wouldn’t read it, if it was.” A snarky comment, but too late.

The matriarch spun toward the threshold, placing her diminutive digits atop Johnson’s forearm. “Son, we’ll go in now.”

He shrugged, leading his mother beneath the lintel, heavy wood doors slammed against Belle.

She’d dealt with rude on a far grander scale, though.

Besides, she enjoyed camping under the stars when her schedule permitted.

She hiked toward the village, removing the narrow shoes and treading barefoot, the absence of glass and trash on the road a plus. Descending a rise above the cluster of thatched hovels after an hour, she was overtaken by Johnson, reining his panting mare.

“I do apologize for my mother’s discourtesy.”

She continued walking. “No big deal.”

“You are welcome to join us for dinner...”

“And, what then?”

“You’ll have the finest room in the west wing.”

“I don’t want it. I want to get home.”

“I’m afraid that’s...”

“Impossible?”

“Yes.”

“You thought it impossible to travel into the past, yet here we are. Reversing the process shouldn’t be that difficult.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Maybe if I get really angry...”

“There’s nothing here to...”

“Wanna bet?”

“Doctor, I...”

“Oh, just shut up!” Doubling her pace, she lengthened the distance between them. This exertion, coupled with a rise in blood pressure, triggered a wave of dizziness and failure of her limbs.

She crumpled to the earth, agonizing over her weak heart. How could anyone explain her death 400 years before her birth?

Johnson scooped her up, rushing to his mount.

She refused his effort to lift her onto the saddle. “There’s nothing you can do.”

“Fetching a doctor would be pointless?” he quipped.

Her chuckle faded as the feeling of a knife stabbing her chest convulsed her.

“I’m so sorry,” stated Johnson.

Engulfed by a bizarre swirling of the surroundings, she murmured to his distorted image, “Just... don’t go hunting.”

Five minutes later, she awoke in her office - alone, wearing the silver-flecked hand-stitched frock.

A full month elapsed before she could wrap her head around what had transpired with Herbert Johnson. The fact that history had been altered by their adventure - if genuine and not merely a hallucination - inspired her to clear her calendar and book a flight to London.

She spent over a year researching 16th century inhabitants of the region near Hatfield, inspecting the charred ruins of the once-imposing mansion, ultimately led to a decrepit country church, where faded script logged the burial of Herbert Johnson in the ducal crypt on 18 April 1596.

The hunting accident had been averted; he’d married and sired three sons, the eldest of whom inherited the estate, abandoned after a fire in the mid-1800s.

A youngish minister, monitoring her perusal of the records, expressed his curiosity.

“I... knew a man from this area...” Belle replied.

“His name?”

Why not be honest? “Herbert Johnson.”

Thick eyebrows arched ominously.

“What’s wrong?”

The robust figure crossed to a dented filing cabinet, unlocking the top drawer. He extracted a parchment sealed by red wax embossed with a blurred crest. “Is your name Belle Applegate?”

A chill ran up her spine. “Yes.”

The folded square was placed on the table. “Then, this is for you.”

“But, how...”

Then, it struck her. Johnson knew she'd exist in this future, and had written her a message transcending an uncertain interval.

Gingerly, she freed the wax and smoothed the sheet. The date at the top read 4 July 1590 with two words beneath: “Thank you.”

The abrupt heart attack left her dead at the minister's feet.

The Addict and the Savior

Trudy didn't deny the problem that had plagued her for more than 50 years.

By some accounts hereditary – her mother had battled alcoholism until her death at age 62; her father chain-smoked cigarettes until he could no longer breathe on his own – her friends and family still laughed when she mentioned her particular addiction.

“It won't kill you,” her cousin admonished.

That aspect of the situation didn't matter to the soon-to-be retiree. The very fact not five minutes would pass through any given day without being tortured by an all-consuming ache, nor any night's dreams not be tainted by it: she'd convinced herself she could not live without chocolate.

On her circuit from the television studio to the county courthouse, even rushing to cover breaking news, she knew every source along the diverse routes for fudge, truffles, chocolate covered caramels, chocolate ice cream or chocolate cream-filled donuts.

Not that she consumed that sweet delight in every form. She refused fruit dipped in the thick syrup, and shunned coconut laced treats. If chocolate chips were included in cookies at the bakery, they could not be mixed with oatmeal or raisins.

A major anathema: dark chocolate.

“If it's healthy, why bother?” she proclaimed to casual inquirers.

The remainder of her diet included milk, meat and potatoes, mostly. She avoided starches like bread, and included rice only if enjoying Asian fare. Forget vegetables. Since her mother forced her to consume portions as a child, she'd banned them from her cupboards and freezer.

She, nonetheless, qualified as hardy. She'd gained weight over the years, granted, but rarely fell ill with cold, flu or other popular viruses. Pneumonia had knocked her flat a few times in her younger years but, since turning 40, she'd had no recurrence.

Her older brother questioned why she couldn't lead a normal life, despite her “difficulty.” She'd given up trying to explain it to him.

No differently than one addicted to alcohol always has the prospect of the next drink in mind, she constantly yearned for the next bite of chocolate.

Co-workers on the news crew joked she should get a hobby, or join a dating service, to distract her from this obsession. She'd tried a few of the former: baking – having six triple-chocolate cakes cooling simultaneously proved no

remedy, especially when she ate the bowl of home-made frosting before the knife could smooth it on the layers; writing poetry – all the verse involved the emotional sensations of tasting chocolate; photography – her camera’s memory card quickly filled with different angles of chocolate danishes, steaming mugs of hot cocoa, as if they were works of art.

As for the ridiculous game of social interaction, she realized no one would want to join her for dinner when she ordered dessert first.

Besides, though well educated on many topics, due to her broad range of coverage for the evening broadcasts, her conversation leaned toward... well...

Her cell phone rang, not waking her since she’d been staring at the ceiling thinking about the shipment of Kilwin’s fudge – the best in the world – due in her mailbox that morning. She would, of course, share a wee fraction of the five pounds with her producers and the technicians, but the surplus would be tucked in her drawer, lasting – maybe – two days.

“Yeah?” she mumbled once she’d swiped the smudged screen with enough force to connect the call.

“There’s been a massive pile-up on the interstate,” came the late shift news director’s nasal tenor. “A tractor-trailer and three motorcycles were involved.”

“Who’s got the camera?”

“Mike will meet you.”

“Cool.”

She was steering toward the outskirts in less than three minutes – jeans, t-shirt and sandals would suffice at that hour. Her media credentials were clipped to her satchel; unlike most modern journalists, she didn’t believe in merely recording an interview. She took notes.

For this disaster, she scribbled three full-sized pages. A light rain had created slick patches on the concrete pavement and, when a semi driver opted to slow down, the traffic behind him didn’t react in time.

Five ambulances, fire engines from six departments and police officers from multiple jurisdictions had both north and south lanes completely blocked. Media vans were staged a quart-mile away on the west shoulder, with reporters trying to grab officials as they hurried to and from the cluster of mangled metal.

Trudy stood off to the side, munching a 100 Grand bar, listening and observing. She’d learned – over four decades in the field – that the best quotes were random comments from witnesses and ordinary patrol cops.

Had she decided to walk straight through to the heart of the action, not one of the uniforms would’ve barred her access. They knew her well, and sheriffs from eight counties trusted her not to sensationalize the coverage.

A paramedic near one of the damaged Harleys eased its rider away from the mayhem with trite comments. “There’s nothing you can do. It’s totaled.”

“Had that bike since I learned to drive!” protested the owner with a tinge of southern drawl.

For the sort who tended to hang labels on those they encountered, he could have been described as utterly unconventional or, even, a bum. Lean and fit, long strands of bleached brownish hair hung from beneath a wide polka-dot bandana tied across his forehead and around the top of his cranium, as did three gold safety pins from piercings in his left ear. He wore black plastic-rimmed spectacles, perched on a straight nose. Grey flecked the shaggy mustache, soul patch and chin beard.

A red plaid flannel shirt hung open past his chest, with an assortment of silver chains and leather cords supporting ostentatious pendants; sleeves cuffed above the elbows revealed numerous tattoos on both arms. The jean jacket boasted a diagonal, frayed slit up the back, the sleeves removed with no consideration for neatness. His leather chaps – possibly the reason he’d sustained no major injuries in the collision – were zipped over scuffed, black, square-toed boots.

He settled on a tree stump - toying with a battered tan fedora, holes dotting the creases - instructed to wait until he could give a statement to the investigators. Propping the hat on his knee, he patted various pockets, scowling.

“Lose something?” Trudy queried, sidling toward him.

“My phone.”

She plucked hers from the shoulder bag. “Use mine.”

“Thanks.” He punched numbers then held the device to his ear. “Yeah, man, turn on the tube. It’s a real mess.”

Indeed, while most of the area’s affiliates were already offering their version of the ordeal to pre-dawn audiences, Trudy would wait until she could craft a story that wouldn’t need to be contradicted later in the day. That’s why Channel 8 boasted it had the best ratings of any other news programming.

Viewers knew they’d get it straight from her mouth, without embellishment or bias.

She might be a raging chocoholic, but she maintained her integrity.

The biker returned her cell with repeated gratitude. Then, she heard quiet strains from a harmonica.

Squinting in the gloom, she checked that all her apps were closed. The music persisted, an eerie commentary on the chaos before her.

“What the hell...”

The melody abruptly faded. “What?” muttered the biker.

“This is gonna sound crazy, but I thought I heard the old tune, ‘Train Kept Rollin’.”

“You did,” he chuckled. “It was me.”

She glared at his sheepish grin, mouth open in his fist. With a deep breath, she sank beside him.

He nudged her shoulder. “You’re not going nuts.”

“Oh, I’m way past that,” she quipped.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” Trudy straightened. “So, tell me what happened.”

At the rear of a line of vehicles with two buddies, headed home from an open air concert, he’d seen the disaster unfold. The motorcycles failed to avoid inclusion in the wreckage, thanks to an oily film on the road, exacerbated by the precipitation.

The trio had, at least, survived relatively unscathed. Another convoy of ambulances navigated toward an area cordoned off for triage of the wounded and, sadly, the dead.

One woman couldn’t stop screaming over the demise of her husband, who’d been driving their brand new SUV, returning from a visit with their grandchildren. Trudy felt a tug at her heart.

“Don’t let it get to you,” admonished the biker. “Otherwise, it’ll tear you apart.”

She grimaced, on her feet once more. “As a rule, I don’t. Can’t afford it in this job.”

“That’s your fourth Hershey bar in five minutes.”

That Trudy carried a stash in the stitched cloth bag might not confirm her addiction, but that she’d unwrapped and consumed the items without conscious thought did. “Bad habit,” she bluffed.

“Bullshit.”

“Okay, so what?”

“It’s not nutritious.” He rose, standing a couple inches taller than her.

“What say we get outta here?”

“Tempting, except... “No dice. I’ve got my work, and you still need to talk with the cops.”

“You addicted to work, as well as chocolate?”

“Probably,” she acknowledged.

“You need to dump both and experience life without the monkey on your back.”

She could concoct no viable response to that assertion. She imagined him, flying down the highway on his Harley, free as a bird. Conversely, she had a responsibility to the public...

As if he could read her thoughts, he chided, "Your only responsibility is to yourself," adding, "The truth is: we only have a limited lifespan, and nothing we do has any lasting significance. The clap-trap those cameras are transmitting through the TV screens will be forgotten years, months, even days from now. You need to dig inside yourself and touch what's authentic, leaving everything else in the dust."

"What, simply take off and do nothing?"

"Not nothing. Standing in the middle of a forest and enjoying birds singing is equally as vital as drudging away at a desk for pathetic wages - if not moreso. Being in harmony with nature promotes tranquility of body, mind and spirit. Can you say that of this... job?"

"Dude, lighten up!"

"No, you're the one who needs to lighten up. And, let go. The basis of every addiction is a state of discontent, a psychological need to escape. So, escape already. Ditch the shackles society uses to confine humanity in its own warped cage."

"Sounds... pretty draconian."

He thrust his fist in her direction, a red tattoo of the anarchy symbol above the knuckle of his middle right finger.

She burst out laughing.

"You think it's funny, but it's incredibly serious. Have you ever stopped to consider why people watch the news?"

"To keep up with events."

"Nope." He seized her biceps in a vice-like grip. "Human beings are driven to get in other people's business, because they aren't satisfied with their own existence. It's the same reason advertisers push products no one really needs. By buying hordes of material goods, people are led to believe they'll feel better about themselves. The only way to accomplish that is to let it all go and face the truth."

Trudy inhaled through clenched teeth, befuddled. "Wow."

"When you're done here, meet me at Danny's Café."

He timed the conclusion perfectly, approached by a clipboard-laden uniformed deputy. Trudy veered toward Mike, who'd been capturing B-roll for the segment, but not before she heard the biker identify himself: Charlie Christopher.

Taking a break while editing the footage for the noon broadcast, Trudy punched Charlie's name in a search engine on the mobile unit's laptop computer. The list that scrolled down the screen amazed her.

Heir to his father's meat packing conglomerate, he'd graduated summa cum laude from Yale with dual degrees in business and music. Stepping into a position as vice president of operations, he'd spent his weekends performing covers with a classic rock garage band in local bars, playing guitar, harmonica and singing back-up vocals.

He'd been photographed with a selection of prominent beauties from the entertainment and technology industries, rumored to be engaged twice, though never railroaded to the altar. Gossip columnists claimed he'd wheedled his way out of drug charges with sizable donations to local charities. During a surprise party for his fortieth birthday, he blew out the candles on the cake, flung it at his grandfather's portrait, insulted the guests *en masse* and exited dramatically on his Harley Davidson, middle finger raised.

Trudy felt a bit disjointed, sitting in a booth at the stone Methodist chapel converted into Danny's Café, chocolate shake complementing a bacon cheeseburger and fries, her own face on the television screen above the counter. Charlie ignored the reporting, though his companion strained to hear reactions of those riveted by the story.

"See what I mean?" he prodded.

"I suppose."

"But, you're not ready to chuck it in the trash."

She squirmed on the naugahyde seat. "I didn't say that. I mean, you've been roaming around for six years..."

"So, you couldn't resist using the technology..."

"I always verify my sources of information."

"Always?"

Her brunette ponytail bobbed.

"What about religion?"

"Gave that up ages ago. No sense to it."

"Well, that's a relief, anyway. If you recognize those tales are myths invented by confused, frightened civilizations seeking answers to natural phenomena, there's hope for you."

Sucking through the plastic straw, she paused. "Why are you bothering with me?"

"You've got potential." He bit a chunk off his chicken and bean burrito. "I share my insights with whoever's at hand, though. Some blow me off, others get that we should never fear truth."

"It's... not an easy truth."

"Same as giving up chocolate?"

“The very thought gives me the shivers.” She gazed out the window at a persistent drizzle. “I’m too old to make such a radical change.”

“Best to change now and enjoy what’s left of your life, than go to the grave always regretting what might have been.”

“That’s harsh.”

“Only if you’re afraid.”

The idea bouncing around Trudy’s head might be worth pursuing, she realized – without divulging it to Charlie. Recording whatever route she convinced him to take with a hand-held camera, she could create an expose that would rock the media – maybe even score a Pulitzer Prize.

“Take me with you,” she entreated.

He wagged a thumb at his mutilated bike. “I... don’t have transportation.”

“Then, I’ll drive.”

Brown eyes probed her soul through convex lenses. “You’ve got to promise to keep an open mind.”

“I always have an open mind,” she retorted. “I can’t tell people’s stories unless I’m willing to hear what they have to say, without judging them.”

“There’s hope for you, yet.”

Except, she wouldn’t leave the table until she’d devoured two slices of chocolate cheesecake.

She dropped Charlie at his buddy’s shack near the county junkyard and drove to the station. She located the news director in the control booth, where one of the boards had blown a circuit.

“Are you kidding?” came the irate reply to her proposal. “You’re our most reliable gal in the field, and you want to take off?”

“It’ll garner national – maybe even international – attention for all of us!” Trudy rationalized. “Maybe even wake up a few folks who’re stuck in a rut.”

“You mean, the politicians?”

“Politicians, business executives, who knows?”

He preceded her into a private office, tapping the keyboard to bring up her employee record. “You’ve got three weeks of vacation available. Do it on a trial basis, and see what develops.”

This attitude agitated her. “And, if it doesn’t work out, you’re not out any money, right?”

“Pretty much.”

She marched from the building ten minutes later, having pitched the contents of her desk drawers in a dented metal trash basket. She left the mini-cam on Mike’s desk with a farewell note.

A stop at the property management warehouse followed the packing of a small duffel, which she tossed in the Honda Civic's trunk. She surrendered her apartment keys and told the landlord to sell her furniture, or donate it to charity.

"What's your forwarding address?" asked the pert female.

"Hell if I know."

Waiting for Charlie while he consulted road atlases in the public library, she plucked a collection of candy wrappers from the center console and door pockets. Her hands trembled as she emptied the load into a waste bin at the nearest intersection.

"You don't have to give up chocolate entirely," he stated, fedora crushed atop the bandana, when she emerged from washing her hands in the restroom.

"Yeah, I think I do, if my goal is to accept who I am."

A full tank of gas, trousers stuffed with cash, the pair set off in search of that and other truths.

Trudy never felt the need to eat chocolate again.

From Rumor Sprung

Stopping the flow of gossip between tiny villages along Cornwall's western coast proved as futile as keeping trade ships afloat during vicious storms.

Veronica Ludlow discounted the rumors about her father and certain women of the town, heart aching on behalf of her bedridden mother. Yes, the merchant left daily at the crack of dawn and didn't return to his vast estate until nearly midnight, but that didn't mean...

Mention of not one but three illegitimate children sired - and secretly supported - by the squire drove the teen to the brink. She grimaced at the snickers, saw rag-tag urchins pointing as she traversed the cobbles on her regular errands. She longed to break those fingers and rip out their venomous tongues.

The pressure weighed heavily on her slender shoulders, in addition to the severe restrictions on a proper lady's behavior. Veronica had been chastised on numerous occasions for galloping astride in the saddle across open fields, while her peers donned elegant riding habits and never exceeded a trot. She frequently scuffled with her younger brothers, and had cut off her long brunette mane with sheep shearing scissors, much to the chagrin of her parents.

To relieve this constant anxiety, she'd stolen a set of 13-year-old Michael's breeches - he'd already surpassed her in height and girth - a shirt, frock coat and pair of boots. A mangled tri-corn hat crushed atop her curls, she hoisted herself from the second level window, guided her favorite bay mare from the stable, and set off cross-country beneath the full moon.

These interludes allowed her to breathe freely, hearing only leaves rustled by the wind and waves crashing against the rocky shore.

Mounting a rise overlooking treacherous cliffs, she reined the horse, awed by the reflection of light on the water far below. This peace... if only she could cork it in a bottle, enjoying it like fine brandy when the world stood against her.

A nervous whinny disrupted her reverie; Veronica glanced around for an errant animal. She glimpsed, instead, shadows of a couple rutting passionately behind a stand of bushes...

"Bloody hell!" she muttered, the oath reverberating on the breeze.

Motion interrupted, a balding head appeared between branches. "Ronnie?"

Her father!

Their eyes met for a scant second before she kicked the mare's flanks and steered toward home.

So, the tales were true! she lamented. Damn him for his cavalier treatment of the woman who'd devoted 20 years of her life to his foibles. Tears blinded her as she navigated uneven tracks, nearly being thrown twice.

Leaving the horse ungroomed and unfed in its stall, she slammed through the front door, not caring if she roused the servants or her siblings from their beds. She climbed narrow, warped stairs by twos, entering her mother's sick room with a flourish.

The ailing figure wheezed beneath heavy coverlets. She'd complained of cold for months, and no matter how hot the fire on the grate or the number of blankets, her limbs shivered.

Veronica bent to brush the fevered brow with a kiss, then squatted to grope beneath the bed for her grandfather's sabre in its tooled leather scabbard. The shame Merton Ludlow had brought on his house would end this night.

Paunchy and stooped from decades bent over the counter of his shop, the family patriarch stood at the base of the flight when she appeared on the landing.

"What are you about, child?" he demanded.

She snarled, "Justice for a wronged wife."

"You think you can best me with a blade?"

"Not you. This is for those trollops who ply men with wine and liquor, then drag them into the pit of sin!"

"I forbid it!"

"To hell with you!"

Calloused hands swiped at her arm as she descended; nimbly, she dodged.

"It's not what you think, Ronnie," he pleaded, blocking her egress.

She chortled, always amazed that he addressed her by a male derivative of her name, while chastising her for any semblance of less than feminine decorum.

"No, it's worse."

"I've not failed in my duties to you, your brothers or your mother," he asserted. "'Tis she who has denied me my rightful privileges."

"She's dying, you bastard!"

"Long before she fell ill, she locked her door against me."

"So, that's how you justify..."

"A man has needs, as you will soon learn."

Veronica recoiled. "What in bloody hell does that mean?"

"You're soon to be wed."

"Not if my intended were the King of England himself!" Clutching the sword, she shoved past him, sprinting through a cold drizzle into the gloom.

The mile journey to the settlement soaked her to the skin. Dripping tresses dangled over hazel eyes, obscuring her view as she sloshed through the mud, having tethered the horse to a hitching post near the tavern. She didn't need her sight to locate the den of iniquity, though, honing in on the bawdy conversations and loud music.

The blade heavy in her grip, she raised it to shoulder height upon approaching the ramshackle structure. If her presumption that men so occupied would have relinquished their own weapons, she entertained no fear for her own well being.

A trio of females clad only in undergarments and two obliging clients fell before her before she halted in her tracks at the sight of a gold-haired vixen sinking her teeth in the neck of a uniformed soldier, sprawled semi-conscious on a divan in the corner.

"Desist, lad!" cried the sheriff, who'd come on his regular patrol to enforce the curfew, pinning her arms to her sides. "You're under arrest for murder!"

"How can you call it murder, when these... creatures aren't human?" squealed Veronica.

"Calm yourself at once!"

Disobedience a strength rather than a flaw of her character, she stomped the man's boot and, when he leapt backward, leveled the sharpened steel at the bloody-fanged strumpet hissing over her victim. The head severed from its shoulders, Veronica shuddered as it bounced across the packed earth floor.

Her vomit turned the upswept coif a nasty shade of brown.

"What the devil..." grunted the sheriff.

His blood coated the sword before he could complete the oath.

Her chest heaving within the red-stained shirt and coat, the girl sank on a green velvet bench to recover her wits.

Not a quick process, to be sure. Surveying the surroundings, she doubted anyone would ever again wish to inhabit the dwelling.

Given what she'd witnessed, she determined to rid the town of any future danger, as well. She located an axe near the woodpile outside the rear door, using it rather than the sword to decapitate each of the deceased before taking her leave a quarter hour later with the wounded soldier in tow.

Unable to stand on his own, Veronica laid him across the saddle, holding the reins in one hand and his belt in the other as the mare plodded slowly north. At least, it had stopped raining, she mused, though a steady stream of water droplets would have washed some of the congealed muck from her garments.

She met Francis, her youngest brother, near the wrought iron fence dividing her mother's garden from the cow pasture.

"Where have you been, Ronnie?" scolded the 12-year-old. "Father is livid!"

Easing her passenger into his waiting grip, she dismounted. "So was I, believe me."

Supporting the visitor at the waist, the lad squinted at his sister. "You're filthy!"

"In a good cause."

"You fall in a puddle?"

"Something like that."

Passing under the lintel, Veronica felt no pity for the man slumped in a winged chair, snoring. Naturally, he would wake his sons and send them to search for her, while he remained warm and dry indoors.

Assisting Francis, the soldier was deposited on the bed in her father's room; she sent the boy for some clean linens to tear into bandages for the deep punctures in the man's neck.

Eyelids fluttered as he groaned, nearly tossing himself off the goose down mattress in agony. She seized his biceps and held fast.

"Let me go!" he cried, too weak to break her grip.

His nurse whispered, "Fear not. You're safe."

"No one is safe while they live!"

She placed her palm on his smooth brow. His skin clammy and cold, rather than feverish, she could not account for this delirium.

"Tell me what those harlots did to you," she murmured, leaning to his ear.

"They're witches, thriving on male blood for their rituals, their life." He wrenched sideways. "Those who insult them, or fail to pay the allotted price..."

Veronica straightened. That would explain why her father had his pick of the collection: he paid, and paid well. "If you knew this, why risk..."

"Stories among the field troops, in their cups, sounded too horrifying to be true. The loveliest ladies capable of satisfying the most wanton perversions, yet the devil's own..."

"And, once bitten, what becomes of the fool?"

Brown orbs widened in terror. "He walks the earth, neither dead nor alive..."

Francis delivered a stack of towels and a knife to cut the cloth. His sister folded one section into a pad, affixing it over the wounds with another strip, tied like a cravat across the stranger's Adam's apple.

"Be at ease, soldier. You'll soon be well."

He clutched at her sticky collar. "You should have let me die!"

"You were the sole innocent in the place. I'm not that heartless." Prying his fingers from the fabric, she managed to arrange him on the pillows just as Merton Ludlow staggered into the chamber.

"What's all this?" he spat.

"If you're in need of more sleep, do it in my room. This man needs constant attention."

"Now you bring deserters into my house and defy my instructions?"

"Let's say you have - had - mutual acquaintances, and he came out worse for the experience."

He caught the implication and sneered, twisting his features into a truly disgusting mask. "What type of marriage will you make, consorting with whoremongers?"

"I consort with you," she chided. "What's the difference?"

Raging, he stomped down the corridor.

"Good riddance," puffed his daughter.

Quietly, her patient remarked, "You're quite the spitfire, eh?"

"I have my reasons."

She managed to tug the quilt from under his legs and spread it atop his convulsing form. Francis had arranged kindling and logs in the stone fireplace, lighting a taper from the candle and igniting the wood in three places.

"Is there any soup left from dinner?" she queried.

The boy grumbled, "What am I, your fetch and carry?"

"I'll do your chores for the next week if you bring a bowl and a spoon."

"Promise?"

Her disheveled mop bobbed affirmatively.

"All right."

He scurried off; she called after him, "Make sure it's hot!"

She dozed in short order, the lateness of the hour catching up with her. A tug on her sleeve jolted her awake, the steaming concoction tantalizing her nostrils.

"Thanks, Francis," she drawled.

"Am I dismissed?"

"You are dismissed, young man."

He pecked her cheek before withdrawing. "I hope he'll get well."

Veronica echoed his sentiment, though doubtful. Legends of cursed beings haunting the Cornwall by-ways, preying on unsuspecting travelers, served to

discourage travel after sunset and frighten children into compliance at bedtime. She'd placed much stock in such idle chatter but, what if...

She plucked at his epaulet until he roused. "You should eat something."

"It smells delicious."

"Taste and see."

The spoon glided to his thin lips, and he slurped the contents. She wiped a trickle from his cheek with a napkin. He ingested half the portion before exhaustion bested him.

"Sleep," she advised. "I'll be right here if you require anything."

"Thank you, Master..."

She couldn't muffle the laugh.

"Have I offended you?" he puzzled.

"No, soldier." She glanced in the mirror fastened to the wardrobe opposite. What female would admit her identity in such ragged guise? "My name is Ronnie... er, Veronica Ludlow."

His jaw hardened. "You're... the lady of the house?"

"You may say that. My mother is... unable to tend to those duties at present."

"Ah!" A slight smile alleviated his stern expression.

"And, you are?"

"Major Bramwell Carlyle of His Majesty's personal guard."

This pronouncement flabbergasted the teen. "You're on leave, to be so far from the palace?"

"Aye. Visiting distant cousins in Truro."

"You must've been bored with their company, to find your way to the..."

"Please!" he objected. "Let's speak no more of that decadent abode."

"As you wish." She extinguished the candle in its brass sconce and reclined on the ornate couch where her father tended to toss his discarded trousers. "Good night."

Already snoring, he offered no reply.

The scream shot them both upright as dawn painted the eastern sky brilliant shades of pink and orange.

Beverly, the maid, stood over Veronica, gaping at her blood-encrusted attire. "Miss Ronnie, what on earth..."

How to explain to a servant less than a year older than herself the turmoil of the previous evening, especially without the details being spread miles in all directions by mid-day?

"There was... an accident," she bluffed.

“To say the least!” Blonde wisps escaping from beneath the starched and ruffled white cap, the sturdy frame raised Veronica off the cushions in a no-nonsense manner. “Get to your room and cast off those things, so I can burn them!”

The younger female complied, as far as changing into a more appropriate frock, but stuffed the soiled bundle in the chiffarobe’s bottom drawer, to be laundered on Beverly’s day off. Pouring water from the floral porcelain pitcher into the matching bowl, she scrubbed her face and hands, and massaged splotches of red from her curls with the aid of pleasantly scented soap.

This transformation sparked Carlyle’s “Who are you?” when she resumed her vigil, releasing Beverly to continue her tasks.

She didn’t dignify the question with a response. “Are you hungry?”

“You wouldn’t ask that if you spent any time around the barracks,” he quipped.

“I have three brothers. It’s probably quite similar.”

“Indeed.”

“Then, you’re ready for breakfast?”

“Please.”

Fresh eggs, bread warm from the brick oven, fried potatoes and a generous slab of ham filled the platter she presented to Carlyle, who consumed every bite. Veronica then assisted him from bed, accepting his braid-trimmed coat so he could perform his ablutions at the wash stand. He removed the impromptu bandage; she gasped at the absence of even a scar at the site of the injuries.

“How... do you feel?” she stammered.

“Excellent, and not just because of that enormous meal. There’s a strength, a vitality...”

He spun toward her, grinning broadly.

Where his cuspids should have been, two fangs protruded ominously.

“Bloody hell!”

He reached for her as she retreated. “What is it?”

“Your... teeth!”

Sidling to the wardrobe, he attempted to observe his reflection in the glass - except only his clothes were visible, not any bit of his flesh. He staggered backward, staring at his hands. A piteous baritone howled, “What has happened to me?”

Francis burst in at that moment, panicked. “Did you hear?”

Veronica glanced from Carlyle to her brother.

“Harper just brought word: some madman killed more than a dozen people last night - the sheriff, too - chopped their heads clean off!” burred the lad.

She swallowed hard. Whoever had instigated this rumor, there’d be no possible connection to her or the Ludlow family.

“Where?” Carlyle pressed.

“A... certain house we’re not supposed to know about,” Francis answered sheepishly.

The soldier’s eyes met those of his hostess, who surreptitiously signaled for silence.

The 12-year-old verbalized typical boyish morbidity. “Can I go into town to see the bodies?”

“Ask father,” came the suggestion.

“He’s not here.”

“Then he can’t refuse.”

“Thanks.”

Excited feet rushed to retrieve his shoes.

Veronica tittered before sobering once more. “Now, where were we?”

“Can you, please, tell me what happened to me?”

“You told me yourself, last night. The women of that... establishment... bound you to walk with the undead.”

“But, I never died! Wouldn’t I have to die before I could be raised as one undead?”

“Frankly, Major, there’s no logic to this situation. And, because the proponents of those black arts have, themselves, met their demise, there’s no one to consult about reversing the process.”

“Damn!”

“My advice, since you’ve seemingly regained your health, would be to continue about your business as usual.”

“That’s ridiculous! What if someone should... should...”

She caught the implication. “Keep your mouth closed, and avoid mirrors.”

“So, you banish me to the unknown?” he lamented.

“Not at all. Though my guilt in this instance is nil, I will do what I can to remedy the situation.” She moved to smooth the bedding. “Return here on the morrow and, with luck, I’ll have devised a solution.”

“You’re so flippant, when this is serious...”

She dropped a slight curtsey. “My apologies, Major.”

Her sincerity convinced him of her good intentions. He bent to kiss her hand as Merton Ludlow shuffled past the open door.

“None of that, now! None of that!” he warned.

With a shrug, Carlyle departed.

She watched from the portico as he rode south on a borrowed horse, her mind churning with uncertainty about who to confer with regarding his problem. Those thoughts dissipated, however, when she met Beverly in the kitchen.

“Your mother was calling for you,” the maid stated, an untouched tray of soft foods deposited on the table.

“She took nothing?”

“Not even a sip of water for the last two days.”

No stranger to death - from untreatable diseases, stabbings, drownings, mining accidents - Veronica recognized the signs. Anne Ludlow’s flesh had taken on a translucent quality, prompted by dehydration and starvation. A bluish tint already colored the edges of her mouth. Her lungs fought for air.

“Mother?” she hailed, pulling a wooden chair next to her pillow.

The woman tried to speak, no sound forthcoming.

“It’s all right, Mother.” Her daughter scooped up her frail digits. “You’ll be well soon.”

The grey-crowned head shook feebly.

“Was there something you wanted to tell me?”

A palsied finger thrust toward the tall chest.

“What is it you want?”

In the absence of further guidance, Veronica rifled each drawer, filled with undergarments, hosiery and hair adornments from when Anne had been a young and lovely bride.

The bottom drawer contained a metal box wrapped in a moth-eaten shawl. Veronica held it high enough for Anne to see. “Is this what you want?”

A minuscule nod.

Seated again beside the ailing matriarch, Veronica pried open the rusted lid. Her jaw gaped at the contents: a huge ruby set in a wide gold band and matching ear bobs.

“Yours,” Anne squeaked. “Don’t let... Merton... sell...”

The mystery fell into place. Veronica recalled her grandmother, long since in the grave, relating how she surrendered her own family jewels as a dowry so Merton Ludlow would deem Anne a worthy spouse. The elder complained how Merton had sold most of the pieces, in spite of his own wealth, to gamble on the horses. Anne had hidden the remaining jewels to entrust them to her own daughter.

“Your... inheritance.”

Veronica felt tears wetting her nose. “Mother, I...”

“I... am sorry... I couldn't...”

The death rattle caused a chill to run up Veronica's spine.

After months of unspeakable anguish, Anne had gone to her rest.

Veronica carried the box to her room and tucked it under her mattress.

Then, she trudged to the kitchen. “Beverly, where's Francis?”

“He refused his lessons again. He's in the barn.”

“Playing with the rabbits?”

“Of course.”

Instead of studying, or feeding the cows... but then, she should've handled that task, having promised to do his chores.

She was in no mood to deal with that matter. “Tell him to run to town for the undertaker.”

The maid sucked air through clenched teeth. “She's...”

“Aye.”

“And, Master Merton?”

“He'll learn of it in due course.”

“Where will you be?”

Veronica whisked out the door. “Thinking.”

If preventing her brain from exploding could be deemed thinking.

In less than 24 hours, a world she'd considered beyond her reach had opened to her. A tranquil - albeit dull - cycle that included marriage, children and obeying a potentially tyrannical husband vanished from her horizon. The modest fortune raised from exquisite gems would give her the wherewithal to travel as she pleased to destinations of her choosing, whether her father consented or not.

The predicament of Major Bramwell Carlyle presented its own opportunity. Her upbringing not overtly religious, she'd never troubled herself with oddities like witchcraft, curses or demons. To explore the machinations employed by such practitioners, and devise means to thwart their efforts to control the innocent, the gullible... what a noble cause!

First things first, she reminded herself. Sources of knowledge about the darker arts weren't as plentiful as selecting cloth at the dressmaker's.

She gazed at whitecaps lashing the beach at the cliff's base. A thatched hut nestled in a cleft of the rocks triggered vague memories...

Widow Poulson!

Eccentric at worst, demented at best, the grizzled oldster had survived local uprisings, poverty, famine and wholesale revolution. She wheeled an old cart to the annual spring festival, selling dried herbs, sea salt and bitter tonics.

Spray from the waves made the descent a slippery excursion; Veronica plucked a sturdy branch from a pile of driftwood to use on the return climb.

“Hoy, there! What’re ye about?” cackled the crone from a slanted door frame.

As a child, the girl had feared her; she hadn’t aged a day, as if she’d been born ancient. Stringy white strands tumbled from a torn green bandanna, her teeth blackened from smoking a pipe - her husband’s legacy, no doubt.

“Hello, Mistress Poulson! How are you?” The attempt to sound casual failed miserably.

“Who are ye, to know m’name?”

“Veronica Ludlow.”

Rheumy eyes squinted. “The one they call Ronnie hereabouts?”

“Aye.”

“Ye’ve crossed paths with the devil since last we met, ain’t ye?”

She’d made the right choice.

The widow’s tone altered, mystically. “The blood remains on your hands, though righteous your intent.”

“I’m not worried about going to hell.”

“Ach, there’s no such place! Hell is of our own making.”

“Aye,” Veronica concurred.

“What seek ye here?”

She gulped. “One of those... spawn of Satan you mentioned... brought harm to a man...”

“The soldier subjected to the devil’s kiss, rescued from the massacre?”

“Aye.”

“Ye love this man?”

“I hardly know him.”

“Ye feel remorse for...”

“Not at all.”

“Good for ye!” That hideous laugh curdled Veronica’s blood.

“Is there a cure for... his affliction?” she pressed.

“Ye are willing to trade your life for his?”

Hazel eyes bulged with consternation. “I... hope that won’t be required.”

A wry chuckle. “’Tisn’t. Just testing your pluck.”

The teen exhaled gratefully.

Toddling along the wet sand, Widow Poulson muttered incoherently. Her visitor followed, unsure if the trek was motivated by deliberation or

absent-mindedness. When the unshod, misshapen feet stopped, the two almost collided.

“So long as the lad has not physically died, the danger is minimal,” the hermit sputtered. “With that vermin destroyed, he won’t fall under their thrall a second time, correct?”

“Aye.”

“His essence should be fully restored in a fortnight. If not, bring him to me.”

“But, what if he isn’t here in a fortnight? He’s on furlough, visiting relatives...”

“The furlough must be extended. He canna resume his official duties while he’s... in this condition.”

Good to know the damage wasn’t permanent, Veronica mused, but how could she convince him to remain in Cornwall...

“Thank you most kindly, Widow Poulson. How many I repay your generosity?”

An abhorrent smile flashed in the sunlight. “I could’ve blended a special tea, or insisted you dig a specific shell from the rocks as a talisman, but I’m not dishonest with kin. Tell your father, that wily skunk, to cease cheating his customers. He’s a disgrace to the family name!”

Stepping gingerly on the path winding up the cliff face, Veronica mulled over this strange request. She’d never heard mention of the Poulsons being related to the Ludlows. Still, her mother had kept records of births and deaths in the large bible on a shelf in her morning room...

The girl had learned to read by browsing the pages after new entries were made, the ink left to dry.

She arrived home as the undertaker’s wagon trundled down the drive, its cargo discretely covered with a black shroud. Veronica choked back a sob.

Merton Ludlow had not closed his shop, a sign of mourning.

One less argument, the girl sniffed, bypassing the kitchen for the dusty east-lit chamber.

Anne hadn’t sat at the desk for six months. In the center drawer, a red-bound volume contained personal reflections - her diary. Veronica couldn’t bear to read about years of heartbreak the woman endured. She swept the papers off the blotter into the side drawer; plenty of time to sort through the remnants of a life in the weeks to come.

The illustrated scriptures, hand decorated by diligent Benedictine monks in their Scottish abbey and shipped the length of England, was heavier than she

remembered. The Ludlow ancestry began on the inside cover with Jeremiah, born in 1642. Of his three children, one died as an infant, the second was exiled as an indentured servant to the Colonies after being convicted of horse theft. The third, Joshua, married and sired a son, who married and raised twins on the very ground where Veronica stood. James served honorably in the British Army, dying in France. John wed a local barmaid and, though disowned, his son - Merton's father - made amends by single-handedly saving a Royal Navy cargo of one million pounds gold from scurvy pirates. He restored the Ludlow's honor as a decorated hero with the rank of commodore.

John's daughter, in the meantime, was pledged to William Poulson, who died rescuing workers from a cave-in at his tin mine.

Widow Poulson. Merton's aunt.

Who better to criticize her nephew's unscrupulous practices?

Another mystery eliminated.

And, an affirmation that Veronica could trust her great-aunt's judgment regarding Major Bramwell Carlyle.

Lack of proper sleep taxed her energies as the afternoon wore on; she retired, leaving Beverly to feed her brothers and send them to their own beds. Her dream amounted to no more than floating in a barren wasteland - no sound, no illumination, no movement, no companionship.

Like being dead.

Waking at sunrise, she wondered if that's what Carlyle's eternity would be, if he failed to recover from the harlot's assault.

A tapping signaled Beverly delivering breakfast.

Or, not.

"There's a gentleman to see you," announced the maid.

"Major Carlyle?"

"Yes'm."

"Offer him some tea. I'll be with him shortly."

"Yes'm."

Having seen her at her worst - in her brother's blood-splattered clothes - she didn't bother to select anything fancy from the chiffarobe. She breezed into the drawing room in a simple blue frock, cut from the same pattern as Beverly's black garment.

Carlyle rose from the wooden bench, wearing a civilian grey frock coat, starched white shirt with a mauve silk cravat, brown breeches and black leather boots. "Good morning, Miss Ludlow."

“Bloody hell, Major. We’ve been through life-threatening danger together. You can address me as Ronnie.”

“It doesn’t suit you,” he protested mildly.

“If you saw me up a tree with my brothers, you’d change your mind.”

“Indeed.” He resumed his seat. “I understand condolences are in order.”

“You are most kind. It’s a relief my mother’s suffering has finally ended.”

“As I hope mine will, soon.” He sipped tea from a china cup. “I know other priorities may have distracted you, but have you any news for me?”

“I fulfilled my pledge,” Veronica proclaimed. “A single bite, I have been assured, has neither fatal nor permanent effects. You should recover by month’s end.”

“I’m due on duty in London Tuesday week!”

“Is there any way you can delay?”

“No chance.”

“Eight days. You should be sufficiently well...”

“You can’t guarantee that!”

“No, I can’t.” She used the iron poker to revive dying embers on the grate. “This dilemma should deter you from... similar situations in future.”

His narrow chin drooped, emphasizing the high cheekbones and aquiline nose. “We all make mistakes.”

“It is not for me to forgive you. That is a matter for a priest, if you believe in such things. You must learn from this experience, in order not to repeat it.”

“I have, I swear.”

“Then, be on your way. I’ll warrant your reflection should be restored by Sunday, and the fangs... well, you can keep your mouth shut until they vanish.”

Draining his cup, he straightened, towering over her. “I suppose I should thank you.”

“You aren’t sure?”

“If my commanding officer learns of this... indiscretion...”

“Be wise. Be silent.”

Abruptly, brown orbs flashed with inspiration. He grasped her wrists.

“What is it?” she queried, startled by this less than gallant conduct.

“If I sent word to my regiment that I’d married, I’d be allowed an additional week’s furlough...”

“You’ve lost your mind!”

“On the contrary. You made it clear you’re more than ready to escape this... isolated domain. You would have a flat in the city, mingle with polite society...”

“That’s not what I want!”

“An arrangement to our mutual benefit, then. We wed; once healed, I report to my command and quietly file for an annulment.”

“You would compromise my virtue for a...”

He drew her close. “You can’t say you’re not attracted to me. You wouldn’t have spared my life while inflicting so much carnage, if you...”

She squirmed free. “You misinterpret my...”

The kiss was interrupted by Merton Ludlow, anticipating the mid-day meal. “You, again?” he roared. “Take your hands off my daughter!”

Carlyle whirled, undaunted. “Mr. Ludlow, I wish Ronnie’s hand in marriage.”

“I would expect no less, after taking such liberties!”

Veronica bristled. “Father, I...”

“Hush, child! You’ll do as I say, to preserve the reputation of this family!”

“What reputation?” she countered. “According to Aunt Poulson, you’ve caused most of the family’s scandal.”

“How dare you!”

“I dare much, now that mother is at rest and I’ve no reason to remain under this roof!”

Carlyle extended his hand, presuming she had consented to their betrothal.

She recoiled. “No, I’m not going with you, either. I don’t relish being tied to tarnished goods.”

He stiffened at the insult.

“When - or if, I should say - I wed, the man will be my match in all things, including integrity. You... have none, Major, and I am no whore to be taken to your bed, then discarded when it’s convenient.”

Both men rendered speechless by her brashness, she’d marched half-way to the stables before either moved to pursue her.

She rode, aimlessly, around the countryside until dusk. Merton had returned to his shop, and she didn’t care about Bramwell Carlyle’s activities. Shinnying up a rope and over the windowsill to retrieve the jewels from beneath her mattress, she galloped into the night, leaving behind an onerous existence.

A flat in London would be hers and hers alone. She became a fixture at the British Library, an authority on the occult, and a proponent of a unique form of medicine - curing those victimized by the “spawn of the devil” - that would’ve made her great-aunt proud.

Relative Madness

"I remained too much inside my head and ended up losing my mind."

- Edgar Allan Poe

To what level of madness might one descend - or ascend, depending on perspective - without impacting the daily routine?

Cheryl Winslow had puzzled over this dilemma since her fingers first pecked out a few words on her father's Smith-Corona manual typewriter, more than 50 years previous. She didn't want to calculate how many pages, single-spaced, she'd filled across the decades with plots flowing non-stop from her soul like Chicago's Buckingham Fountain.

Nor did she relish explaining this obsessive creativity to those whose minds lacked a basic understanding of how inspiration could grip her entire being, an all-consuming disease, driving her past ordinary exhaustion in the quest to finish the latest tales.

She could sympathize with stories she'd read of Edgar Allan Poe, whose portrait she'd tacked - among others - to the plaster above her desk. She did, conversely, refuse to imbibe alcohol or drugs to alleviate the manic overload wreaking havoc within her skull, as had the 19th century creator of detective fiction and other literary forms. Attempts to dull or silence the dialogue swirling through her brain actually worsened the enervating anguish endured in the course of spewing paragraphs onto paper or, with the development of technology, a computer screen.

The yearning to get "wasted" did recur on a frequent basis. She longed for some manner of respite - even five minutes' worth - to ease the incessant pounding of her heart, enabling her to close her eyes in blessed, undisturbed slumber.

To no avail.

The situation might have been less taxing on mind, body and soul had she created light romances or children's fare. The inescapable pall that enveloped her prevented such pursuits in favor of terrifying suspense, blood-curdling mysteries and violent science fiction set in alternate planes.

This particular winter's eve, snowflakes drifting in the wind beyond icy glass panes, Cheryl bent at her desk, lanky brunette mop dangling over her nose. She brushed the strands aside, aggravated at having hacked off waist-length tresses in a fit of tormented rage two weeks earlier. No longer of sufficient length to tie in a ponytail, she ached to rip out the mop by the roots, but hadn't the strength left in her hands.

“Make it stop!” she wept. “Please, make it stop!”

Not that she directed the petition to some omniscient deity; she’d long since forsaken any religious practices or spiritual beliefs. Nor was it intended to be heard by her neighbors in the senior high rise overlooking Lake Michigan. The walls, she’d ensured upon signing the lease, included dense insulation to prevent even loud music from penetrating into adjacent units.

Unless, that is, the neighbor was already inside Cheryl’s apartment.

The abrupt commencement of a neck massage tensed her muscles, instead of relaxing them. She jolted off the battered tan chair, whirling on the intruder in a burgundy turtleneck and black Dockers: Jon Pollack.

“Oh, damn!” she gasped. “How’d you get in?”

Tall, lean, a dark mane greying at the temples, Pollack smirked. “You forgot to lock the door after you checked the mail, I suspect.”

She plopped on the split cushion, facing the monitor. “You’re probably right.”

Once again, gentle digits kneaded her painfully thin shoulders within the baggy Sammy Sosa number 21 Cubs jersey.

“That’s... nice, Jon,” the writer murmured.

“It still won’t serve to free you from Poe Mode, though.”

Cheryl bristled. “You know I don’t like that term.”

“What else should I call it, when I’ve spent a half-hour washing the dishes overflowing your kitchen sink, cleaning moldy leftovers from the fridge and starting a load of laundry? Sometimes, I think you’d be better off in an institution instead of... of...”

“Careening along a course of self-destruction?”

“So, you agree?”

“Of course, I don’t!” She slammed the desk with both fists. “This is my *life!*”

Pollack knelt beside her. “But, it doesn’t have to be.”

“What? You expect some kind of radical transformation, at my age?”

“How many times must I tell you: you’ve got to be more disciplined. Write for a couple hours, then take a break and eat a proper meal, take a walk along the Lakefront Trail, or grab a nap.”

“I... try.” Tears streamed down her cheeks, dripping on the keyboard as her head sagged. “It’s... impossible, once I get started...”

“You’ve lost twenty pounds in less than a month! One of these days, this unchecked... lunacy is going to kill you. ”

Cheryl snorted derisively. “I don’t know why it hasn’t, already.”

Concluding his ministrations, Pollack reached across the keyboard and switched off the computer.

“What the hell!” came the shriek.

“We’re going out. A tasty dinner and a movie, to start.”

“I...”

“No arguments.” Pollack crossed to the closet, freeing a faded parka from its hanger and tossing it to Cheryl. “Put this on.”

She realized her untenable position and shrugged acquiescence. A brief detour into his apartment to fetch a camelhair overcoat preceded their descent in the elevator.

The Windy City lived up to its name, a biting easterly breeze chilling their cheeks within minutes of emerging from the building. Pollack hailed a cab, but the first three passing were occupied. The fourth swung to the curb, splashing muddy water toward them; they retreated before slacks and footwear could be splattered.

Once settled on the rear seat, Pollack provided an address to the driver.

“Where are we going?” Cheryl queried. “I can’t be gone all night.”

“You’ll be gone as long as it takes to rest yourself.”

“You know how I get, Jon. The longer I’m away, the more agitated I become. I won’t be good company, in any sense.”

“Force yourself. You’ve gotten into such a rut, you don’t know how to dig yourself out.” He glanced sideways at his companion. “Or, you simply don’t want to.”

“Probably the latter,” she admitted.

Traffic grew more congested as the taxi moved through the Loop. An accident snarled the intersection of State and Randolph, so the pair decided to pay the fare and walk to their destination.

Sidewalks equally crowded, Pollack veered into an alley with Cheryl in tow.

“What’s this?” she demanded.

“A shortcut to the next block.”

“Are you nuts? It’s so dark, I can’t see my hand in front of my face! Who knows what - or who - might be ahead?”

“Oh, you’re paranoid,” Pollack quipped.

“Better paranoid than dead.”

Yanked by the arm into the shadows, Cheryl heard the crash of trash bins and felt Pollack fall. Totally blind, she bent to feel for his prone form.

Instead, her fingertips contacted dry brick.

Not the surface of a Chicago alley.

Running her digits in a semi-circle, nothing felt familiar. Teeth grit, she wanted to scream, but didn't dare for fear of attracting something... undesirable.

A few deep breaths accompanied her rising; she glimpsed a glimmer of light ahead. "If you're playing with me, Jon..." she whispered, moving forward.

The alley ended in a scene reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz*, to Cheryl's mind. Just as Dorothy had opened the sepia-toned door following the cyclone onto a vividly-colored Munchkinland, she stepped from utter blackness onto a bustling day-lit lane populated by quaintly dressed pedestrians, horse-drawn carriages and gas street lamps.

She halted in her tracks, convinced she'd come unhinged. "What the hell..."

At the nearest intersection, a sign read, "Baltimore Street." A youth waved some manner of periodical - not as large as a newspaper, as Cheryl knew them - soliciting sales. She strolled in his direction, her jeans, parka and sneakers garnering critical glances from passersby.

Even the paperboy reacted oddly when he spun toward her, cries dying in his throat. His shock permitted her time to peruse the front page fluttering in his grip: *Baltimore Sun*, September 29, 1849. A small headline in the far right column announced, "E.A. Poe returns to city."

The woman swallowed hard. "Shit!"

"Ma'am?" muttered the lad.

"Sorry, kid," she replied, partially recovering her composure. "It's nothing to do with you."

"Are you... all right?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Your... clothes. Your hair."

Scanning those nearest - women with ample locks fastened in buns or swept atop their heads, wearing corsets and long skirts, men in stiff collars with cravats and frock coats - she then studied her own garments. "This is taking Poe Mode to extremes," she hissed. Then, louder, "I... fell in the water, and these were the only dry things available."

"Oh, another drunk," grumbled the teen dismissively, resuming his sales pitch.

Offended and confused, Cheryl peered at low red brick edifices on the corners, three of them taverns. If this already world-weary boy frequented the location, he'd probably seen his share of intoxicated sorts, staggering out the doors of an evening, tripping on uneven pavement into puddles of murky rainwater, or - worse - human excrement and their own vomit.

Sun obscured by smoke from factory chimneys, the pubs had yet to open for business. The occupant of the fourth structure, however, attracted a plentiful queue interested in free lunchtime fare. The Baltimore Temperance Society, Cheryl presumed, drew in those recovering from hangovers and coaxed them into pledging sobriety with plates of food and uplifting harangues.

“Don’t succumb to *that* temptation,” a cultured baritone advised from behind her. “I’d rather starve than let my ears be assailed by such... insincere tripe.”

Her neck swiveled tentatively toward the voice, dreading what she might see.

Indeed, almost touching her left shoulder, a scant three inches taller, unkempt ebony mane flopping across his forehead, stood the ghastly pale, stubble-chinned Edgar Allan Poe, minus his signature mustache, clad in a rumpled black suit of the era, soiled green cravat knotted loosely at the throat. Cheryl recognized him from the Ultima Thule daguerreotype, taken after he’d attempted suicide the previous year, a copy of which adorned her wall.

“If I had to guess, I’d say you were starving this very moment,” she postulated.

“You’re quite... perceptive.” His gray orbs never shifted from the opposite side of the street. “I’ve not eaten since I left Richmond two days ago.”

“C’mon, then. I’ll buy you lunch.”

“Ma’am?”

“Sorry,” Cheryl sighed. “I’m not accustomed to... nineteenth century lingo.”

“Nor proper nineteenth century accouterments, evidently.”

“I don’t wear dresses...”

Poe waited for her to complete the sentence. When she didn’t, he prompted, “Where do you hail from, then, if they don’t require...”

“Not so much a ‘where’ as a ‘when,’ Mr. Poe.”

“Ah, a madwoman of indeterminate origin!” he mocked.

“Precisely.”

Whether Cheryl’s strange outfit or Poe’s notoriety, a crowd began to gather around the pair, eavesdropping on their converse.

“Are you familiar with this city?” Poe inquired.

“Not in the slightest. You?”

“I was born here.”

Somehow, Cheryl recalled the untruth of that statement: Poe being born in Boston, but adopting Baltimore as his birthplace. She let the matter slide.

“Have you sufficient funds to purchase suitable garments?” he pressed. She felt her hip pocket, realizing the cash stuffed there wouldn’t be accepted in this milieu. “Nope.”

“Then, we’ll make other arrangements.”

Slipping his arm through hers, Poe guided the Midwesterner along Calvert Street. Nestled among wind-blown trash, crates and clutter, between a tailor’s shop and a bakery, a pawn broker displayed cloaks, jewelry and oddities in the window.

“Why here?” Cheryl puzzled.

“The price of my clothes will buy yours.”

“I can’t let you do that!”

“If you persist in meandering through the streets in those... rags, you’ll be arrested for vagrancy, or public indecency.”

He tugged her through the entrance, conducting the transaction as she watched from beside a rack of outrageous ladies’ hats. In exchange for his coat, high-collared shirt, trousers and shoes, he received a ratty shirt, ill-fitting patched leggings and straw hat. Cheryl was shuffled into the work room, where she donned what amounted to a housemaid’s black uniform.

“I look ludicrous,” she objected, emerging from the structure.

Poe quipped, “And I don’t?”

“I doubt you’d be recognized in those... habiliments.”

“Preferable, at this juncture.”

He seized her hand, dropping a few coins on her palm. “These should keep you for a few days until you... find your people.”

“My people?”

“Have you no relatives in the city?”

“No. I’m here... entirely by accident.”

“You boarded the wrong ship?”

“No, I...”

A brusque growl interrupted, “I’ll take those!”

Poe recoiled as Cheryl twirled toward a disheveled, filthy behemoth in dockhand’s garb and a stained bowler, wielding a glinting meat cleaver. Rather than relinquish the money, she clenched her fist and hid it behind her back.

“Don’t think I won’t cut you, same as your fella, there,” the thief threatened, swinging his weapon toward her face.

“I live in Chicago, asshole,” she retorted. “I’ve dealt with far worse than you.”

Stunned by her defiance, the man hesitated a mere second. That gave his victim the opportunity to stomp solidly on his right foot and, when the butcher's implement clattered on the ground, to knee him in the groin. He pitched sideways and sank among the detritus, moaning in agony.

She snatched the cleaver and aimed it briefly at the cowering robber, before chucking it with sufficient strength to wedge the blade into the bricks above his head.

Poe's eyes wide, he allowed Cheryl to lead him toward the main thoroughfare. He stammered, "That was..."

"Not very lady-like, I know. I could explain, but you wouldn't..."

As they navigated along Pratt Street to Charles Street, he patted her arm. "I've authored the most fanciful stories, my dear. Any tale you tell me, I'll believe."

She smirked. "Even if I confess I live more than a hundred seventy years in the future?"

Halting abruptly, his countenance transformed from melancholy to bemused, courtesy of a feeble smile. "I've perpetrated some hoaxes in my time, but this..."

"It's no hoax, Mr. Poe." Cheryl urged him forward, a modest eatery across the street. "We'll discuss it over lunch."

Seated on rickety chairs at a small wooden table, concealed from the main dining room by a folding screen, Cheryl and Poe nursed plates of fatty roast beef, diced boiled potatoes and mugs of apple cider.

"But, if you come from the twenty-first century, my dear, you'd know *my* future," Poe rationalized.

"Of course, I do."

"Then, reveal your secrets."

Cheryl felt herself at a loss. In her own quest after inspiration for dozens - hundreds - of short stories, novels, poems and plays, she'd read biographies of many 19th century British and American authors, Poe included. She knew he had less than ten days to live, dying under a cloud of mystery on October 7, 1849. In less than a week, he'd be found - incoherent - and taken to the hospital.

"You're known for influencing a number of genres in the realm of fiction," she acknowledged. "Detective stories..."

"Ratiocination, you mean?"

"Yup. Gothic horror... though the movies spoil many of the thrills."

"Movies?"

"Short for moving pictures. It's... difficult to explain."

“How do these... movies ruin my narratives?”

“Those who adapt them... take liberties, sometimes adding elements of humor and romance.”

“Ah, just like the literary pirates who plagiarize my stories, or reprint them without permission.”

“Something like that.”

“Pity.” Poe leaned on the chair; Cheryl heard wood crack and feared the seat might shatter. “I... haven’t the means to fight them.”

“Have you the means to secure lodgings for the night?” she prodded.

“Every penny in my possession, I’ve entrusted to you.”

“Gallant that may be, but you’ll need it more than I.”

“You intend to return to your own time?”

She chuckled. “I... haven’t the means.”

“Then, how will you survive?”

“I’m... a writer.”

“A kindred literary spirit, your madness interspersed with long intervals of horrible sanity.”

“You can say that again.”

Poe scowled at the strange utterance. “It’s... hereditary, you know.”

“Wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Both my older brother and younger sister shared my talent for the pen, though without public success.”

“I seem to recall, your brother died young,” hinted Cheryl.

“Sadly, yes. My sister still lives, though not without her own measure of shame.”

“Shame?”

Poe poked the potatoes with his fork. “She... bore a child out of wedlock some years ago. Few know of it.”

“Being a single parent isn’t...”

“She was forced by her foster parents to surrender the infant to an orphanage.”

“How cruel!”

“Yes, regret plagues her still.”

Cheryl could relate to such emotions. “My great-great-great-grandmother was abandoned as a child and raised in an orphanage.”

“Such institutions should be banned. They warp the youngsters’ creativity and curiosity.”

“Fortunately, in my day, they are practically non-existent.”

"I'm glad of that." Poe cleared his plate and placed his utensils atop it. "Where was your beleaguered ancestor reared?"

"Richmond, Virginia."

The napkin paused inches from Poe's mouth. "What... was her name?"

"Rose... er, Rosalie Brown."

Poe's somber mien brightened for a fleeting moment.

"What is it?" queried Cheryl.

"The orphanage to which my illegitimate niece was consigned tended to select given names based on their parentage, and surnames from a rotation of colors: Black, White, Greene, and so forth."

She blinked. "Are you implying..."

"I may be your great-great-great-uncle."

Silence reigned for a prolonged stretch, broken only by the mumblings of patrons beyond the thinly constructed barrier.

Poe surveyed his glass. "I hope this will not lead you to seek solace in the bottle."

"No. I keep my head clear, the better to relish my craft's unique form of torture."

For Cheryl, though, a blood connection to Edgar Allan Poe answered a lot of questions she'd unsuccessfully pondered through her lifetime.

"I may be able to arrange introductions to a number of publishers," Poe offered.

In what time history afforded him? she mused. "That would be... most kind."

"Come."

Cheryl laid what appeared to be a dollar coin on the table as they made for the exit. The afternoon well advanced, a chill breeze whisked in from the harbor - mild, compared to Chicago's harsh winds. Poe, nonetheless, shivered.

"I'll not forgive myself for letting you hock your coat," she lamented. "You'll catch your..." She bit her tongue to prevent herself from finishing the cliché.

"I am already quite ill," remarked Poe. "I think I've not fully recovered since the death of my wife, two years ago."

"Yet, you've proposed marriage to two other women in the interim..."

He bristled. "Is that public knowledge?"

"In my day, it is."

"I am viewed as being... indiscreet?"

"Impulsive, perhaps," Cheryl contended. "A bit... of an opportunist."

“Eh?”

“You pursued women with access to substantial holdings.”

“Only to fund the magazine I wished to publish.”

“*The Stylus*?”

“You... know of my prospectus?”

“Not a line. Your biographers...”

“Treat me shabbily?”

“Some. They say you were hounded by a black dog of melancholy most of your life... An affliction similar to my own interior turmoil.”

“What do they record of my... death?”

She gulped, slowing her pace. “Mr. Poe... Uncle Edgar, if I may... we have a rule - albeit promulgated in science fiction of my day - that telling someone his future risks... changing the future of all.”

“Then, I shan’t speak of it again. Stay with me, until I depart for Philadelphia two days hence...”

Aware Poe would not leave Baltimore, Cheryl agreed to his request. She needed a place to think, as it was, to devise a way to return to her present.

Another coin secured them a room in a dingy wharf-side hotel for the night. Poe, visibly exhausted and weak, ignored the tenets of chivalry and flopped on the lumpy mattress, soon snoring as his companion sat on a worn rocking chair beside the window, listening to the night life so different from Michigan Avenue or the Navy Pier. No cars, no trains, no neon lights flashing... angry voices and horses dragging carts along rutted lanes lulled her to sleep.

Troubled dreams of Jon Pollack, shouting her name through the mist of decades, roused her at dawn. The unfamiliar chamber defied explanation until her muddled brain grasped this predicament; Poe had vacated the bed. Indoor plumbing not yet standard, she accepted the need to use a chamber pot peeking from beneath the warped frame.

When Poe failed to reappear, Cheryl contemplated if he’d launched on the last alcoholic binge so many suspected brought about his ultimate demise. Poking her head into the corridor, she glimpsed him descending stairs from the roof.

“Just taking in the crisp morning air,” he explained, thin lips curved in a grin.

“Good for you.”

“When we lived in Fordham, I had only to step out my front door...”

“How ‘bout some breakfast?”

“Our little... allotment should be about spent.”

“Then, it’s my turn to pawn my clothes.”

“You... cannot!”

“I have a sneaking suspicion, if I redeem my outfit and return to the alley where I... arrived yesterday, I may be able to pass once more into my own time.”

“And, if not?”

“Then, I’ll live out my life here.”

“Enduring a misery worse than I ever experienced.”

“I don’t know. It might be fun.”

“Impoverished and friendless? Your definition of fun eludes me.”

At her insistence, Poe guided her to the Calvert Street shop, where trading the simple dress for jeans, parka and Cubs jersey netted the pair a few more coins. They purchased pastries at the neighboring bakery, sitting on a pier while sailors filed off a newly arrived ship.

“This has been a delightful respite, my dear,” asserted Poe, wiping crumbs from his fingers. “I shall loathe your absence in the days to come.”

Cheryl exhaled pensively. “I... consider it a rare privilege being able to make your acquaintance, Uncle Edgar.” She added the afterthought, “Though I won’t ever be able to tell anyone about it.”

“You might... pen a short story about this encounter. While telling the truth, your readers will believe it only fiction, the inverse of when I wrote fiction and people believed it to be true.”

“I suppose so.”

They rose, making their way toward Baltimore Street, where the lad selling the *Sun* added his loud tenor to the clamor of humanity.

“It is here we part,” announced Cheryl.

“Allow me to... escort you to the portal.”

“I don’t... know if it’s a portal, per se, or a pit. I wouldn’t want you to be caught...”

Poe’s gray orbs beamed with excitement. “Oh, what an adventure that would be!”

“Oh, what a mess it would cause!” she countered.

She could not prevent the man, who she noticed involuntarily shivered at odd intervals, from accompanying her along the block. Finally, she stopped and faced him.

“Uncle Edgar, I want you to turn around now, walk away and don’t look back,” she instructed in a firm tone.

He squinted.

“Please.”

Quivering fingers scooped up her slender digits. “We shan’t meet again, I fear.”

Unruly brunette curls bobbed in affirmation.

“Then, take this memento of our... friendship.”

From his trouser pocket, he extracted a folded length of cheap paper and pressed it into her fist. He leaned forward, kissed her cheek lightly, then hurried along the sidewalk. She waited as he dodged couples and businessmen, crossing to the far corner and vanishing into the tavern.

“Shit!” she cursed, realizing he would take refuge in alcohol because of her, contributing to his death.

She deliberately resisted the urge to roust him from that liquored haze. If she intervened, altering Poe’s history, how would that impact her own future?

If she even *had* a future.

Tucking the sheet in her jeans, she ventured into the eerily dark alley, despite dismal daylight overhead. She steadied her respiration in the hope of diminishing her fear - a useless endeavor. Before progressing 50 feet, panic consumed her and she set her jaw against the screams welling in her lungs.

If she reached the other end of the passage and still found herself in Baltimore...

A shaft of light cut through the gloom; she scuttled toward it. Bricks beneath her feet smoothed to asphalt. She kicked an aluminum trash can, stumbling into a warm surface.

Flesh and blood.

“Jon?” she whispered.

Her neighbor replied, “Cheryl?”

Unyielding arms wrapped her in an embrace; lips assailed her mouth with a passion borne of relief.

“Enough!” she protested, wriggling from his grasp.

Pollack retraced the route to State Street with Cheryl in tow. “I must’ve knocked myself out when I tripped and fell,” he sputtered. “When I couldn’t find you, I feared you’d been mugged, abducted or... worse.”

She remained silent. The dinner and a movie idea abandoned, they hailed a cab and returned to their respective apartments - though Cheryl got the distinct impression Pollack would’ve preferred to spend the night with her.

Securing the deadbolt after he assisted her across the threshold, she switched on the living room lamp and collapsed on the sofa. She dug out Poe’s gift, gently straightening the fragment and perusing the cramped cursive.

Poe scholars would sell their souls to read the tender lines of affection blended with deep remorse at his wasted opportunities, scribbled on a lonely rooftop: the last poem that anguished genius wrote in his life, the date - September 30, 1849 - smeared beneath his signature.

She resolved to keep this treasure secret, the sole proof her journey through time hadn't been a hallucination or a dream. The composition carefully tucked between pages of an outdated encyclopedia, she booted up her computer, opened the latest unfinished manuscript, and began typing.

Any mention of the ordeal would merit a diagnosis of insanity - as might the hours, days, weeks spent producing story after story - but Cheryl could commiserate with Poe at how intermittent flashes of sanity could be far, far more taxing on body, mind and soul.

A wee comfort, the revelation of her heritage and cause of her incessant plunges into Poe Mode, though she couldn't publicly claim a blood connection. Come dawn, she stepped onto the balcony, breathing in the brisk air while the sky swirled with pastel hues over Lake Michigan.

Poe had cherished simple pleasures in the midst of madness. She would take his wisdom to heart.

The Priest, the Vampire and the Virgin

The Seattle police chief's report to the City Council prompted the unanimous passing of a daily 8:00 pm curfew that April Monday, which business owners immediately protested.

They really didn't care that the number of missing persons' cases had skyrocketed in recent weeks, none of the women ranging in age from 18 to 32 - who'd vanished from the area near Pike Place Market - yet to be located. They cared about their income, paying their employees, finances only recently improved since the Covid-19 lockdowns had devastated their establishments.

The council members wouldn't budge, however. These restrictions gave rise to a new generation of "speak-easies" - especially in the bowels of buildings with hidden entrances on the shorefront - ignored by the few cops who actually enforced after-hours activities.

Other officers had been reassigned from their regular duties to search for the missing women. Clues were few in the cases: friends, bartenders or random witnesses described each individual's last sighting as being in one of many night spots, chatting with a trim man about six feet in height, featuring short, dark curly hair, wearing a skin-tight t-shirt, jeans and black biker-style leather boots.

Not much use in that.

At one tense Thursday morning briefing, a corporal postulated the women were being kidnaped and shipped across the Pacific to be trafficked in Asia or India. A team was assigned to monitor private aircraft flying from Sea-Tac and other regional airports, while more were detailed to the port to search outgoing freighters and yachts.

The squad that handled calls from anxious family members continued to be overwhelmed by their inability to provide concrete answers to hundreds of inquiries. Budgetary constraints on the department, however, prevented hiring additional personnel to staff the switchboard.

Attendance at religious services increased, troubled believers kneeling in prayer for a quick resolution to this crisis. The old gossips club - unofficial chapters at every church - ceased their critiques of attendees' clothing or the quality of the sermon, allowing Christian kindness to be practiced in a genuine manner during weekly donut socials or scripture studies.

At St. Anselm's parish, these elders didn't even bother to question the presence of a cassock-clad new priest. No mention had been made of his arrival in the Sunday bulletin, nor from the pulpit. No welcome reception introduced him to

the congregation. He took over direction of the hand-picked schola, boasting a rich baritone that lilted from the choir loft during weekend Masses.

Those who did interact with him noticed a haughtiness to his demeanor, not unusual in this era when seminarians were convinced even prior to ordination of their superiority to the laity. The pastor dismissed inquiries about his origins, saying only the archbishop had approved the posting.

Jaye Tobin bristled at not receiving forthright answers to her questions. Daughter of the parish accountant, she spent her summers home from the University of Portland answering phones and filing donation receipts in the rectory offices. The mysterious priest barely acknowledged her that June afternoon as they almost collided in the corridor near the first floor bathroom. He received no calls on the land line - though that wasn't terribly unusual with everyone carrying a cell phone in their pockets - and no personal visitors.

The perky blonde didn't see herself as a social butterfly, but when a group of high school friends arranged an impromptu reunion for dinner and a movie in early July, she readily accepted. The notion of spending an entire paycheck on such an outing didn't concern her; Washington state had an outrageous cost of living, and she'd grown up with high prices for everything from candy bars to hamburgers.

Her wallet containing only \$20 after enjoying a Caesar salad and Coke, prior to a Marvel film with popcorn, she agreed to a farewell drink at a dive near the Space Needle. The half-dozen acted like freshmen sneaking out of their dorm, keeping to the shadows beneath the elevated monorail to elude prying eyes.

In the wake of imposed regulations, the owner had installed thick layers of insulation to mute the sound of the band, while allowing the customers to enjoy music and dancing. Huddled around a corner table, the chums ordered a pitcher of beer as a solid drum beat vibrated their chairs.

Dim lights from the back-lit stage made it almost impossible to see anything but vague silhouettes gyrating to a cross between rock-n-roll and jazz. By the time a second pitcher was delivered, Jaye shifted her attention to the line of bodies at the bar, her glass untouched.

She'd never liked the taste of beer.

A psychology major, she enjoyed observing random behaviors, guessing at personality traits by body language and facial expressions. From short and rotund gents eager for affection to conniving prostitutes, alcoholics intent only on their liquor intake and testosterone-fueled jocks, she felt a smile lift the edges of her lips.

Until she recognized him, poised beneath a wall sconce at the far end of the curved wood fixture.

The priest had shed his cassock, but those sad green eyes were unmistakable above the straight nose and hardened jaw.

Except, he appeared rather animated, a cluster of women vying for his attention.

Yes, Jaye admitted silently, without the baggy black floor-length garment, he did merit female admiration.

His vow of celibacy precluded...

Not that such a promise had stopped other priests from seeking sexual companionship through the centuries, she knew.

The entire scenario struck her as odd, nonetheless.

He didn't notice her studying him as an hour elapsed. Her friends drained a third pitcher before deciding to return to their parents' homes - hopefully not getting arrested for violating curfew.

Shushing each others' giggles, they didn't detect Jaye's absence en route to their vehicles. She'd ducked into a recessed doorway, blue orbs aimed at the shadowed tavern exit.

Well past midnight, the priest - or, was he? - emerged into the humid night, his arm encircling a buxom redhead. They strolled past Jaye without a care, and she tracked them at a discrete distance to a fashionable apartment tower three blocks north.

What happened within didn't require much imagination on Jaye's part. She saw lights on the third floor shortly after the couple entered, then flickering as if from a fireplace - for atmosphere and not heat, surely - and images projected against shades drawn over full-length windows.

The man departed within 30 minutes, supposedly bound for the parish rectory. Jaye's task complete, she paralleled his route, her car parked in the garage near the church.

She halted, however, catching sight of a furtive, wraith-like figure skulking on the sidewalk opposite. Concealed behind a traffic signal pole, she observed his movements, opening the door of the very structure where the priest had enjoyed his tryst.

Jaye retraced her path, veering across the pavement to inspect the supposedly secure door. Jiggling the handle, it was closed and locked. Visible on the foyer's mosaic tile, a wooden wedge - potentially used to keep the door ajar until...

The shriek reverberated down the block, chilling her blood.

Even before sirens echoed between the skyscrapers, undoubtedly responding to scores of emergency calls, Jaye heard panicked footfalls approach. She dodged the glass panel as it flung outward, the man bursting through with a sheet-wrapped bundle hoisted on his shoulder.

Tempted to flee herself, Jaye summoned her courage and waited until the police converged on the site.

Uniforms and plain-clothes detectives besieged her with questions. She directed investigators to the apartment where she'd seen the lights; they reported back that, beyond a natural gas-fueled fire burning on the grate, no signs of a struggle were visible, the occupant absent.

"No blood?" Jaye countered.

A lieutenant shook his close-cropped head.

"Then, he just knocked her out," she reasoned.

He pressed, "Are you positive he hauled out a body?"

"It resembled a large sack of potatoes."

"Which way did he run?"

She thrust her finger east.

Within moments, four cruisers sped off in that direction.

"We'll need you to come to the station to give a full account..." a sergeant declared.

She interrupted. "There's more."

"How so?"

Jaye explained how the priest had deliberately impeded the door from latching, providing the assailant access.

"Where is this guy?" demanded the detective captain.

"He lives at St. Anselm's."

"How do you know?"

"I work there."

"You know him?"

"Not in the least. He's very... reclusive."

A hand signal dispersed a cadre of subordinates to their vehicles. He escorted her to his Ford Interceptor. "You'll ride with me."

"Thanks," she breathed.

"Huh?"

"Saves me having to walk."

The pin-stripe suited official didn't pursue the matter, climbing behind the wheel and starting the engine.

Men at every entrance and window of the historic rectory, Jaye remained at the curb while the captain and two patrol officers pounded on the door. She felt sorry for the elderly pastor, Martin Killackey, who groggily responded to the summons in his red terry bathrobe.

“We have reason to believe the other priest who lives here may be involved in an assault that look place less than a half-hour ago,” declared the detective.

“Nonsense!” the bald cleric objected. “He’s been in bed since nine o’clock!”

A confident contralto retorted, “I’m sorry, Father, but that’s not true.”

Squinting, Killackey recognized the girl. “Jaye? What on earth?”

“I saw him at a pub tonight,” she stated. “I watched him leave with a woman and walk to her apartment. I saw him leave alone, after...”

“Nonsense!” repeated the pastor.

A patrolmen eased him backward at the detective’s behest. “I’m sorry, Father. We must search the premises.”

“The chief will hear about this!” came the feeble tenor.

“I’m sure he already has.”

Jaye waited until the men filed across the threshold, then diverted to a chain link fence between the dwelling and the church. She shinnied over the barrier, feeling along moist bricks to a hatch formerly used for coal deliveries. Iron hinges squeaked as she eased the thick metal rectangle outward, lowering herself down a grimy chute.

She’d grown up playing in the building, and knew every nook and cranny - cubbies suitable for hiding.

“Hey!” she whispered.

“How in hell...” That singular baritone.

“Here’s the deal, dude. Tell me everything, or I shout to the cops.”

“You’ve got nothing on me.”

“I’ve got everything, neatly gift-wrapped. I saw it all.”

“You... did?”

“You’ve got less than five minutes.”

She heard him clear his throat. “You’re lying.”

“Try me,” she snorted.

A match struck, the half-burnt taper in a tarnished brass candelabra on a wobbly end table illumined his taut features as he cowered on a battered divan against the old boiler. “I want a lawyer.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t want the publicity, either, from what I figure.”

“What are you, a fed?”

“The feds aren’t involved - yet.”

Air escaped through grit teeth. “All right, all right. But, you swear you won’t reveal any of this?”

“Are you kidding?” she grunted.

He launched into a tale that, had she recounted it to the authorities, would’ve prompted a stint in a mental institution. His real name: Barney Johnson. He’d been a CIA operative in eastern Europe until the previous December, when his cover was blown by a woman with whom he’d grown intimate. The agency, having contacts in the Seattle area, arranged for him to assume a fresh identity as a priest, with the proviso he not preside at any actual sacramental events.

“So, why didn’t you stay under wraps?” queried Jaye.

“It felt like prison, that’s why. It started with a night out once a week or so, then accelerated...”

“What about the girls?”

“What about them? There’s nothing wrong with a bit of fantastic sex.”

“I... wouldn’t know.”

“You’re joking.” He rose, stretching. “A good looking piece like you? Saving yourself for marriage?”

“That’s neither here nor there. What happened to the girls after...”

“Oh, that.” His tone denoted a disturbing nonchalance.

She prodded, “Well?”

“I had a unique arrangement with a contact in Germany. He shared sensitive information he gathered on his nightly rounds, and I... supplied him with sources for his own... He followed me here...”

“Huh?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Better make it quick, then. Time’s running out.”

He growled. “I agreed to help him... if he agreed to keep mum about me.”

“Help him? How?”

“He has a specific need...”

Jaye bristled. “Stop with the riddles!”

“He’s a vampire, all right?” She detected reticence in his voice. “Or, thinks he is. He made it possible for me to have my fill of women without causing scandal to the Church, while he had his fill...”

“Of their blood?” The idea horrified her.

She glimpsed his nod.

“What did he do with them... after?”

“Disposed of them in places they’d not be found.”

“You bastard!”

Johnson chuckled, “I suppose I am.”

A vice-like grip on her biceps foiled her attempted escape; he glared at her and she felt the heat of his lean form through her spaghetti top and cut-off jeans.

“You gonna rat on me?” he hissed.

“Not if you tell me where your... friend hangs out.”

“At night, he roams free. Days, he crashes here.”

“Holy cow! You’ve been harboring him...”

“Why not? Everyone’s scared of the basement.”

No wonder, Jaye sniffed. “Get lost,” she instructed him, waving him toward the chute. “And don’t come back.”

He scrambled up the ramp; she listened as he labored to climb the fence. Cops seized him as he dropped noisily on the cement.

With dawn nearing, Jaye rummaged around the basement for a suitable weapon. Crowbars, screwdrivers and wrenches wouldn’t suffice for this task, she reasoned. Her fingers extracted a thick wooden dowel from a pile of detritus beneath a discarded set of cabinets; a utility knife went to work whittling a point on one end.

A shaft of sunlight peeked through smudged glass just as she heard stealthy footsteps outside. The hatch opened and a body slid to the floor.

From the folklore she’d informally studied, Jaye realized vampires possessed a type of night-vision, so she flipped the switch on the Maglite from the cluttered workbench at the exact moment his feet hit the concrete. The improvised stake targeted the blinded creature’s chest, impaling him before he could deflect the blow.

With a hideous wowl, he expired, his physical being reduced to dust in a matter of seconds, mingling with the rest of the dirt on this neglected lower level.

Jaye made her exit via the interior stairs, the rectory now silent after the police had completed their interrogation and reports in the wee hours. Fr. Killackey had retired to his bed on this sultry Saturday morning; he would never know what had transpired below, saving women from future danger.

She couldn’t even consign the deed to the confessional - was it a sin to kill someone who was, technically, already dead?

As for Barney Johnson: the case never progressed beyond his temporary incarceration. Charges were not filed and, once the CIA reclaimed him from local custody, his records vanished.

Jaye gleaned that tidbit through a member of the archbishop’s staff, who glimpsed a page from a redacted file being shredded at the pastoral center a few

months later. If Johnson pursued his carnal appetites elsewhere, the college student did not get wind of it.

The people of Seattle returned to more routine problems: dealing with the vast homeless population, frequent protests and rampant property crime.

Connected

In the course of many casual conversations, and even her reading, Sue had heard about people's "a-ha" moments. She didn't envy them these insights into life; she'd had one of her own, many years prior.

She referred to it as that "Oh, shit!" moment.

It destroyed her previous conceptions about human existence.

She'd garnered straight As in high school, graduating *cum laude* with a 3.45 GPA, only because she'd flunked a ceramics elective taken on a whim. Sick of the rigors of academic pursuits, she took a part-time job at the local newspaper delivering ad copy - in that pre-internet era - spending the remaining daylight hours in the local library, poring over tomes about world religions.

Her first realization after this independent study: all belief systems were bunk, a way to manipulate gullible humans who needed someone - or something - to blame for their lot.

She never set foot in a church again.

The Buddhist philosophy - not what, centuries later, had been twisted into its own set of doctrines - appealed to her. Siddhartha Gautama had, after sitting under a bodhi tree for 40 days and watching life progress without him, realized that nothing human beings do means anything. Trying to give it purpose just promotes suffering.

A fine sentiment, but not very practical - given the need for money to provide food, clothing and shelter. The evolution of humanity involved advances in technology, accumulated wealth and exercise of power.

Sue wanted none of it.

Nor did she desire what modern society considered "love". She'd experimented with relationships and enjoyed the physical sensations, much like lions or horses in the wild. The notion that cohabiting with another person gave an individual a sense of completion or fulfillment, however, turned her stomach.

Even the leisure past-times of her acquaintances annoyed her. Hanging out at a bar, spending money on liquor to dull one's senses... what a waste!

Sports competitions fostered the need for battle, a domesticated form of war. As she gradually became a detached observer of these activities, she knew she could never tell another soul; they'd send her to a shrink who, also, would not be able to comprehend her deductions.

She simply wanted to sit in a corner and let her life proceed, unimpeded. A Buddhist monastery three hours from her home offered meditation retreats, but meditation did nothing more than kill time. Touted as leading to "enlightenment",

these gatherings were, once again, about financing the operations and buildings of the sponsoring entity.

Sue passed each day with a tight lump in her chest. She no longer felt comfortable, whether working at her office desk, shopping in the grocery store, or watching children play in the park. She ached for that nugget of truth that had escaped her...

Huge flakes of snow falling on a January night distracted her from her troubled musings. The world sort of quieted itself during such events, which she appreciated. Slippery streets forced cars to decrease their speed; people couldn't rush from place to place, as usual.

She zipped on a parka and insulated boots and ventured outdoors, sloshing to the nearby city park. She took up a position in the middle of the deteriorated basketball court, white coating the grass, the tree limbs and man-made surfaces.

She took a few deep breaths, chill air setting her lungs a-tingle. She extended her arms, ungloved fingers sensing each unique hexagon as it landed on her palm. She grasped this was as existence should be...

Then, it happened.

Afterward, her brain could not conceive a verbal explanation; words did not suffice to describe the incident. She'd been tangibly jarred, her body shaken like a leaf in a driving wind. Her soul had been ripped from its physical shell, cleansed and restored.

Nothing would ever be the same for her.

Sue equated that profound instant with tales of revered mystics - they'd failed to adequately record their experiences, instead using feeble analogies and comparisons. She continued with her everyday routine, fully cognizant of each task's futility, yearning to again connect with the universal energies - permanently.

That she lacked the means to convince others of this truth; their minds closed to the possibilities, they would have to drastically change their perspective before glimpsing a fraction of this transformation. She treated everyone with respect and dignity, but could no longer find it in herself to engage in idle chatter or weekend outings, so her "friends" drifted away.

Sitting alone in her studio apartment did not bother her. Life - all life - was nothing more than a waiting game. Once born, a creature's destiny was to die, whether a plant that fed the hungry, a human who discovered a cure for cancer... as the old saying advised, "You can't take it with you."

Sue wished to take nothing of the earth with her; being enveloped by the universe made all else moot.

The Priory Secret

The Benedictine Priory of St. Mechtild treated visitors to an unrivaled view of the Pacific Ocean, a peaceful alternative to the cacophony of southern California's Del Mar Thoroughbred Club, a mere two miles inland.

Built in Spanish style, the 15-bedroom mansion had been donated to the Sisters who'd operated Genevieve Finster's alma mater in North Dakota when that oil-wealthy widow died in 1970. Seeing an opportunity for growth, before the mass exodus of women religious reached its peak after the Second Vatican Council, the midwestern monastery had sent twelve nuns to set up a foundation in the coastal town.

Over the course of a half-century, not one candidate had ever applied for acceptance with the community.

Thus, it fell to Franciscan Sister Constancia Murphy - employed by the Diocese of San Diego - to finalize the particulars of the property sale, after the final four nuns succumbed to a virulently contagious bacterial infection during the Octave of Christmas.

One of the guests at Christmas Eve Mass had shared this unwitting gift, himself dying on New Year's Eve.

Degreed in real estate and nonprofit law, Constancia didn't mind these assignments - all too frequent as the years passed and religious communities either divested themselves of unsustainable buildings, or closed their doors entirely. She relished digging through what others left behind, a sort of treasure hunt through the former occupants' psychology.

Just months prior, she'd discovered an original Madonna and infant painting in a disused chapel, which professional art appraisers valued at over \$1 million.

If the monks had known, they might not have been so eager to abandon their long-time home, she'd chuckled after perusing the auction documents.

Not that she had any use for money, or antiques. She'd always considered her absolute detachment from material possessions, places - even people - a unique quirk. Not a result of joining a Franciscan congregation, either, but a trait inherent to her personality from childhood.

Attending family funerals, she never felt the grief her mother, aunts or cousins displayed. She considered viewing the deceased, the rosary, Mass and convoy in limousines to the cemetery an incredible waste of time. Even the meal afterward only served as a justification for mourners to get drunk in the middle of the day.

After she'd professed vows of obedience, chastity and poverty, every summer, while some of the 324 sisters remaining in the American province dreaded the superior's announcement about changes to their sponsored ministries and associated personnel transfers, Constanica efficiently moved from place to place as directed, stuffing the bare necessities in a backpack.

She'd been in San Diego for six years - a record - following a shift among those too young to move into the leased retirement facility to obtain wage-paying employment in the public sector. Her studio apartment near the Chancery contained a twin bed, desk, chair and kitchenette.

As she stood beneath the priory's arched portico, the painfully thin brunette recalled how one Franciscan friar had inquired, among his interview questions for a development position with their retreat center, what she needed to survive.

"A bed and a bathroom," she'd replied.

She could've skipped the bed, too, if not for her temperamental sciatica.

Not that she was endorsed extreme self-denial - like the stories promulgated about St. Francis of Assisi, which she suspected were seriously exaggerated. The ideal of fussing with extraneous "stuff" or worrying about maintenance on computer-infused appliances did not appeal to her in the least.

Case in point: inserting the key into the deadbolt on the priory's steel-reinforced front door, the tumblers refused to comply. Returning to the dark blue Honda Civic, she popped the trunk and groped through a tool chest for a small can of WD-40. A few squirts and some patient wiggling finally loosed the stubborn mechanism.

The hinges creaked as she shoved the panel inward with her shoulder. Inside, pastel hues of the setting sun illuminated intricate mosaic foyer flooring, tall windows in the parlors on either side and the far wall of what had once been an elegant ballroom - used by the Sisters as a chapel - offsetting the need for electricity.

Chairs arranged in two sets of 16 along a center aisle remained in the worship space, along with matching hand-made oak altar and ambo. Constanica tugged a small notebook from the back pocket of her jeans, jotting memos.

Tasked with inspecting every room, compiling an inventory of possessions, she admired the skilled workmanship of the cararra marble and crafted wood fireplace mantles, the dining room table - moved in, possibly, before the original construction had been completed, given its size - and the kitchen cupboards.

The plumbing needed immediate attention; the water heater in the utility room leaked, causing extensive damage to the subflooring.

A comprehensive list of titles populating the built-in shelves in the Sisters' library/music room could be performed by the used book dealer scheduled to arrive the next morning. The grand piano needed tuning, her fingers plunking random ivory keys as she cringed at the dissonance.

Lengthening shadows precluding further assessment of her surroundings, Constanca shuffled toward the foyer. When she collided with a soft, large obstacle on the parlor threshold, she recoiled and let fly a few colorful expletives.

"Such language," scolded a resonant baritone.

She countered, "Who the hell are you?"

"The night watchman."

"Since when?" From what she could distinguish in the gloom, he wore no uniform, carried no flashlight.

"Since Jenny's day."

Her pulse gradually slowed. "Jenny? Jenny who?"

"Jenny Finster."

"Are you kidding? She died nearly 50 years ago!"

"Her will contained the proviso that I be allowed to stay on, employed by the Sisters, until I chose to retire or... well..."

Such stipulations weren't uncommon with some older donors, Constanca realized. Still, even if this guy had been a teenager when Mrs. Finster expired, he'd be at or over retirement age.

She groped for a switch, to shed light on the matter. Being more familiar with the structure, he flipped a toggle situated behind a protective cap. A crystal chandelier hummed, the old-style flame-shaped bulbs requiring 30 seconds to reach their full wattage.

Not a good idea, she determined, her throat constricting. His well-trimmed ebony mop, parted deep on the left, boasted not a strand of grey. Stern yet gaunt features centered on a straight nose over thin lips; square shoulders and three-piece brown suit smacked of an era earlier than even the 70s.

"What's your name?" she pressed.

"Jonathan Quint."

"You say you lived here when Mrs. Finster was alive?"

"My dad was her chauffeur. We had an apartment over the garage."

"I didn't..."

"When the Sisters took to using it for their candle making enterprise, well... it burned down in the nineties."

"I see." His intense brown eyes mesmerized her. "Where do you live now?"

"In the old master bedroom."

The implication startled her. "Huh?"

"After the old gals passed, it was vacant, so I figured no one would mind."

"And before that?"

"Jenny's butler and cook - a married couple - shared a suite off the kitchen before they sought positions upstate. It served my purpose."

She'd been through that room, draped with cobwebs and devoid of furnishings. Rather than confront him on the lie, she ached to get back to the city, a quick dinner and good night's sleep - not to mention catching up on mid-day and evening prayer.

"Well, if you're accustomed to keeping the place secure, I won't stop you," she declared. "You should start making other arrangements, though. Once the place is sold, the new owners won't look kindly on a squatter."

"Is that the plan?"

"Yes. The diocese paid the Benedictines a generous sum for the property and will, before year's end, list it on the market."

He took two strides forward; she matched his gait, only backward, keeping her distance.

"Sad to think I'll lose my home after so many years."

"That's the issue with ownership," she retorted. "It's about who holds the paperwork."

His smirk conveyed mixed emotions. "Haven't you ever felt you really belonged to a specific place, never wanting to leave?"

"Nope."

"I pity you. Everyone needs a place to settle, to put down roots."

"It might be fine for some, but not me." Constancia calculated the best way around Quint, but he countered her movements to block the exit. "I'll be going now."

"You haven't told me your name."

"Constancia."

Thick eyebrows arched.

"Murphy."

He grunted, trying to repress a laugh.

"You find that funny?" she snapped.

"Mother Italian, Father Irish?"

Brunette curls bobbed affirmatively.

"Your friends call you Connie?"

"They know better than to try."

His formal bow impressed and confused her. "I wouldn't skip a syllable of it, myself. Constancia."

A weird echo when he spoke the name sent a shiver up her spine.

"Actually, it's *Sister* Constancia." She ducked past him. "Good night, Mr. Quint."

One advantage to working so late: the lawyer didn't need to worry about rush hour traffic on I-5. Again, however, some visitor to the apartment complex had parked in her designated spot, so she had to locate a vacant space and walk the extra distance on legs already worn from climbing stairs and poking through closets.

Up early on Friday, she typed her report on the priory and emailed it to her supervisor, who exercised authority over the diocese's real estate holdings. She'd just snatched her keys off the desk when her cell phone chirped in her jean pocket.

She intended to ignore the device, to no avail.

"Hello?" she sighed, continuing outdoors.

Anger tinged the male voice on the other end. "Are you serious?"

"Not always, but most of the time."

"Some vagrant has been living at the priory since the Sisters died?"

"No, Stan. Since *before* the Sisters died." Glare from the sunrise blinded her momentarily as she stumbled off the curb. "I really wish you'd read my emails completely before going off half-cocked."

"Sorry, Sister, but the paragraph jumped off the page like a kangaroo."

Constancia snickered; Stan Brockhurst had spent a semester studying in Australia, and the references remained in his vocabulary.

"I know it's odd, but he's been informed the priory will be listed soon and he'll need to vacate the premises."

"Old geezer, is he?"

"Remarkably, no."

"What do you mean by that?"

"He must be in his sixties, given what he told me, but he doesn't look a day over 35."

Stan snorted, a bizarre noise over the connection. "The Sisters' prayers must've kept him young."

Quint's uncharacteristically smooth visage before her eyes, Constancia replied absently, "Maybe."

Tossing the phone on the passenger seat, she aimed the Honda north - beating gridlock by leaving at 6:00. Not only the book dealer, but both carpet

cleaning and maid services were due on the property to eradicate six months' buildup of grime.

Strolling the perimeter, she decided to contact a landscaping company, too.

No sign of Quint on the grounds or inside the walls. She found a somewhat reliable lawn chair in a small shed near a stand of palm trees, flipped it open and tried to relax while waiting for the laborers to fulfill their contracts.

Ample shade shielded her from the June swelter; she'd stopped at a convenience store en route to purchase a gallon of lemonade and a ham and cheese submarine sandwich, knowing she'd have no other source of mid-day sustenance. With the din of domestic machinery, she wondered why Quint hadn't wakened and presented himself.

But, then, some people could sleep through thunderstorms, earthquakes...

An expert on first editions meandered through the library's French doors, scanning the area until he sighted her. Legal pad in hand, the Guns 'n Roses t-shirt and cut-off clad scholar didn't mind the dust coating his tawny mop, though he sneezed frequently.

"Well?" she hailed as he approached.

"Be advised, it's only a rough estimate - there are some volumes I'll have to research - but I'd say six hundred grand at auction."

"Jesus!"

"Most were Mrs. Finster's collection, but an assortment of the religious titles are also quite valuable."

"That'll feed a lot of hungry families," Constanca asserted.

"Less my commission, of course."

"Which you usually donate back to the cause."

He shrugged. "It's the least I can do."

"Thanks, Terry."

Clasping hands briefly, he trekked across the unkempt garden.

Leaning forward, she rested her chin on her hands. The library alone would cover what the diocese had paid for this 37 acres high on the bluff. She would, technically, see ten percent of that, but she funneled those payments into social justice ministries of her community back east.

The cleaners knocked off promptly at 5:00, announcing two more days would be required to finish the project. A house so vast, she understood and appreciated their attention to detail.

She did a walk-through of the areas they'd already tackled, mentally itemizing discrepancies like stains on upholstery or dents where chairs had bumped the plaster.

The painters would be in next week to give the interior a fresh coat.

Being on the clock 12 hours at a go tapped her strength, she couldn't deny. Back in her 20s, she didn't care but now... her body didn't tolerate such exertion too well.

A tour to ensure the windows and exterior doors were locked brought her up to the master bedroom. On the northeast corner, open panes allowed a cross breeze to dispel dust motes floating above the king-size four-poster mahogany bed - another treasure undoubtedly left by Genevieve Finster.

Constancia expected to find Jonathan Quint sprawled on the mattress, possibly snoring.

Nothing.

Closer inspection confirmed no one had disturbed the lace and satin coverlet in many years.

"What the hell?" she muttered aloud.

"You looking for me?"

The Franciscan nearly jumped out of her skin, and she swore her heart stopped momentarily.

Quint's lips wore a minuscule grin as he hovered beneath the lintel, impeccably attired in a black pinstriped suit. "Good evening."

"Where have you been all day?"

"Sleeping, naturally."

"May I ask where? The droning of so much equipment could've woke the dead..."

Brown orbs flashed, warning her off the topic.

She fastened the east window's latch and strode toward the threshold.

"Everything's as it should be, so you should have a quiet night."

"Thanks."

Suddenly, Constancia wanted to flee the priory - permanently. Something wasn't right about any of this...

Behind the wheel of the Honda, she contemplated the ivy-encrusted facade before turning the ignition key. No lights burned within, yet she glimpsed Quint moving through the ground floor rooms at a leisurely pace.

No food in the refrigerator or pantry, what did he eat during his shift? Had he a private stash in his room?

What room?

He indicated he'd occupied the old servant's quarters during the Sisters' tenure, then the master bedroom. She couldn't corroborate either story. The ruins

of the erstwhile garage had long since been removed, and no other outbuildings existed beyond the tiny tool shed.

Such a relief to have the weekend off. She could forget this mystery...

Cognizant, on the drive to San Diego, she wouldn't forget.

After a troubled night, plagued with weird nightmares, Constancia rose at her regular time - sleeping in not an option, even on holidays. Rather than business casual, she grabbed a "Pace e Bene" t-shirt from her closet to go with her jeans and sneakers.

Stopping first to fill the gas tank, she navigated a nearly deserted interstate, more populated near the Del Mar racetrack with a full schedule of events that Saturday.

When she alighted from the sedan, dawn had barely broken through clouds threatening rain. Near the priory's portico, a mound bathed in shadows - not there when she'd departed - puzzled her. She circled warily, then perceived the fly-besieged eyes and snout of a fox.

Dead.

Attacked by animal or animals unknown, from the look of its neck, fur and flesh mangled and bloody.

Quint could haul the carcass to the dumpster before his shift ended, she determined.

Freeing the deadbolt, she reminded herself the hinges needed oiling. In the foyer, she shouted, "Quint! Jonathan Quint!"

From the recesses of the dwelling, she detected, "Be with you in a minute!"

Rather than wait, she tracked the sound up the stairs and toward one of the eight ornate bathrooms. In full view, Quint stood at the oval porcelain sink, washing hands and face. When he straightened, she caught sight of a strange phenomenon in the gold-framed mirror: his clothes reflected, but not his head nor his exposed appendages.

She imagined a store mannequin, magically animated, or a decapitated robot on auto-pilot.

"Holy Mother of God!" she shrieked, knees instantly gelatinous.

Quint yanked a towel off the rack to dry his skin and, as she collapsed on the terrazzo, she spied blood on the terry cloth.

A stream of invectives continued, her brain unable to process the scene.

"Damn, damn, damn!"

When the man - if he, indeed, qualified as human - squatted near her, she scabbled away like a crab.

“Please, Sister,” he pleaded soothingly. “Please. I can explain.” Then, more forcefully: “Constancia!”

All muscle function ceased, and she plopped on hallway’s varnished boards. He dropped to her level with an agility belying his supposed age.

“Breathe,” he instructed, demonstrating proper inhalation and exhalation.

She mimicked his respiration, color inching into her cheeks.

“What the hell is going on?” she eventually sputtered.

She tried to rise, limbs still unsteady. Quint caught her before she face-planted, supporting her at the waist.

“Let go,” she directed.

“Not until you’ve recovered.”

“I’m... perfectly okay.” She batted away the long fingers. “You’ve got a lot of explaining to do, Mister.”

“Shall we be comfortable in the process?” he suggested, guiding her to a section of blank wall.

Curious, she didn’t object.

Nimble digits slid down a concealed seam, Constancia distinguished a “pop” and a secret door swung open.

“You’re kidding!” she gulped.

He led the way, flipping on an overhead lamp. “Not at all. Mr. Finster used this for... his periodic outings.”

“Outings?” she repeated.

“He liked the ladies, shall we say.”

“Oh, I get it.”

A circular stone staircase ended in an elegant, windowless cellar, with an exit that once connected to the garage, Quint related.

Constancia no longer listened. In the center of the chamber, on an emerald and sapphire accented limestone bier, stood an open casket, complete with brass handles and mauve satin lining.

“What the fuck!”

Immediately, she clamped a hand over her mouth. She hadn’t uttered that word for more years than she could count.

“Easy now,” murmured Quint.

Calm wasn’t an option, even after she made the Sign of the Cross. “What is this, the set from a bad movie?”

“You already know the answer.”

A series of deep breaths failed to lessen the throbbing in her chest. “You’re a vampire?”

He nodded.

“But, they exist only in novels and... scripts!”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“How’d you... how’d you...” Her tongue failing, she gestured at her throat.

“It’s Mrs. Finster’s fault.”

“What?”

He motioned her to a Victorian-style maroon velvet sofa. “Why do you think she bequeathed this place to the Benedictines?”

“Generosity is the typical motivation.”

“Not at all. She did it to redeem her soul after years of dabbling in the occult.”

Ludicrous, Constancia mused.

“With her husband dead in a horrendous car crash, she set out to indulge her every whim. The way he’d treated her, I wasn’t surprised.” He sank on the cushion beside her. “She converted this room to use in ridiculous rituals, inviting all sorts of nuts to join her.”

Fingers wriggled in the air. “Did she ever...”

“Conjure anything?” He grunted in disdain. “Only once.”

“What happened?”

“It was August 14, 1969. Dad and I planned on driving down to register me for my final year of law school, after dropping Mrs. Finster at her hairdresser’s. He sent me to fetch her, but when my knock must’ve broken her concentration. I opened the door and caught the full impact of the spell she’d been attempting.”

“Turning you into... this?” Highly improbable, in Constancia’s estimation.

“When I told Dad what she’d done, he keeled over from a heart attack. She died two months later, riddled with guilt. While cleaning out the drawers in her desk, I found her journals. She’d wanted to live forever, to be young and beautiful, in order to get her - belated - revenge on the old man. As a vampire, she would’ve enjoyed eternal life, and never aged another second.”

“She... bought the casket?”

“No. I did, with the pittance she left me - out of remorse - in her will. She made me swear to never feed on humans, and keep the Sisters who might take up residence safe from any... residual effects of her workings.”

“So, the fox out front...”

“I need blood to survive. What can I say?”

“You’ve dealt with this... since then?”

“I have no choice.” Quint stared at the light visible beneath the warped exterior door. “I must rest.”

“Wait a minute!” Constancia gripped his sleeve. “If it was a spell that wrought this change, logically there must be a counter-spell.”

His melancholy features clouded. “I never thought I’d hear a devout Catholic verbalize such a concept.”

“You... never told the Sisters who lived here?”

“Other than the prioress, I never interacted with them.”

“Did she know?”

Thin lips pursed. “I think she suspected, but she never mentioned it.”

“It’s the Benedictine tradition of extending hospitality to everyone.”

“But, you’re not...”

“No. I’m Franciscan.” She raised her left hand, where a gold ring emblazoned with a cross encircled her third finger.

Quint recoiled.

“No way!” gasped Constancia.

He retreated to the opposite side of the casket. “Sadly, yes. Whatever forces caused my transformation, exposure to the sacred causes unendurable anguish.”

An impersonal compassion for his situation eased her tension. “And your lack of a reflection in the mirror? In the movies, they erase the whole image. Seeing your suit without your body that way...”

He sneered, white teeth gleaming. “Fact is: the clothes have nothing to do with the physical affliction, so why wouldn’t you see them, and not me?”

“True.” Ironically, a fortune could be made by exposing a genuine vampire to those directors who made their living producing such drivel. If she cared anything for money... but she didn’t. “Look. Let me do some research. Talk to a few...”

“No, you mustn’t!”

“Confidentiality will be maintained, I promise. If there’s a way to restore you, I’ll find it.”

He glanced at the ceiling. “Before they sell the place?”

“I can stall long enough so they don’t list it with the realtors until your... problem is solved.”

“It could be solved with a stake through the heart,” he quipped.

“If you were a... willing vampire, rather than a reluctant one, I’d take you up on that.” She skirted the casket toward the stairs. “Let’s try my way first.”

“When do you think you’ll...”

“I’ve got today and tomorrow before I need to be here Monday with the cleaning crew. I should have a few answers by then.”

On a hunch, the woman detoured into the priory’s library before taking her leave, browsing the shelves. If, as the book dealer had intimated, many of the tomes previously belonged to Mrs. Finster, the necessary information might be gleaned without consulting any of the priests or professors she had in mind, further preserving the priory’s secret.

Amazing the Benedictine Sisters hadn’t culled many of the books from the collection. More pious sorts would have been scandalized by the *Necronomicon*, the *Spells of Cagliostro*, John Dee’s Enochian translation and Aleister Crowley’s biography.

Tucked inside a supposed hard cover edition of the *Satanic Bible*, Genevieve’s own diary dropped at Constancia’s feet.

As Quint slept below, she righted the piano bench, which had been perched atop the Steinway. Not exactly comfortable for her spine, she ignored the muscle spasms, poring over each page of precise penmanship.

Eight years of experimentation - for lack of a better term - had focused on revitalizing the widow’s physiognomy and suspending normal aging. At the bottom of each sheet, in an exasperated scrawl, “Failed!”

Until the entry for August 14, 1969.

The formula included a dead bat laid on a freshly-washed glass dish, a sterilized - and “blessed” - carving knife, and an incantation with some gibberish language spoken while Genevieve cut a gash in her right palm then sprinkled droplets on the bat.

Utter nonsense.

The recorded comment after that fiasco: “To my shame, Jonathan bore the brunt of my efforts. He will remain young while I wither!”

Constancia noticed another scribble in the margins, a reference to the book from whence the lunacy originated. Rifling the covers, she latched onto the *Witch’s Compendium* and squinted in the dimness at the table of contents.

Page 149 had been ripped from the binding.

“Shit!”

Published in 1932, a copy of the book might be available from the San Diego library system, the University of San Diego - she doubted that, it being a Catholic institution - or San Diego State. If not, inter-library loan could track down the title...

She drew her cell from her jean pocket. If the *Anarchist's Cookbook* had been uploaded on the internet, why not this?

Reading on the small screen a pain, she enlarged the type and scrolled through recipes for love potions, directions to create charms for protection during wartime, diagrams of tarot card readings, and lists of attributes for various crystals.

In the chapter on personal transformation, the entry in question was accentuated with a double-asterisked warning in bold and italic text: "If this spell is successfully cast, it can only be reversed by immersing a consecrated medal of St. Michael in the commingled blood of the victim and a virgin, placing it over the victim's heart before the fluid hardens."

The religious burbled, "Holy cow!"

A St. Michael medallion posed no challenge. One tucked into her backpack by an elderly Sister the day she left for southern California hung on a silver filigree chain from the Honda's rear view mirror. She had definite qualms about slicing her skin to extract some blood; getting a sufficient amount from Quint while he slumbered probably wouldn't waken him.

Constancia salvaged a blue ceramic bowl from the kitchen cupboard, washed it and scrounged in the sacristy - Mrs. Finster's morning room - for a bottle of holy water left from the last Easter vigil held in the chapel. She sprinkled a blessing over that and a utility knife from the tool shed.

A quarter hour elapsed while she ran her fingertips over the darkly stained corridor wall, trying to activate the latch to the secret passage. Gaining access, the ceiling fixture lit her path; she arranged the supplies on a wobbly coffee table, then added two half-burnt candles for atmosphere.

That others of her faith would call for her excommunication if they witnessed this deed didn't faze her. As with every task, this needed to be done and her innate disregard for reputation or propriety cleared the path to its completion.

Raising the casket lid presented its own obstacle, however, curdling the very blood she planned to use in the ritual. Within, Quint slept no differently than any other man - from what she recalled of her father's habits - but that did little to mitigate the perspiration cascading from her temples.

First, she loosened the red-flecked blue tie and unbuttoned his collar. Tucking the bowl between the soft padding and his hip, she unfolded his right arm from across his chest and pierced the flesh, suspending it over the container. She did likewise with her own hand, a tricky feat, especially when she flinched, splattering droplets over the fabric, Quint's suit and her jeans.

The concoction bubbled and steamed, boiling without aid of a heat source. She dipped the molded sterling silver in the mixture, let the excess liquid drip off, then tucked the disk between his shirt and his heart.

Stan Brockhurst would have described Quint's leap from the casket "like a kangaroo." In fact, he slammed his forehead against the partially-open lid, grimacing.

"What... happened?" he hissed.

"I found the answer sooner rather than later."

Brown eyes took a few moments to recognize her. "You mean..."

She smiled in silence.

"How can I thank you?"

"No need." She held him upright, his agility already diminished. "You'll want to dispose of this... stuff before the sale goes through, and find less... morbid accommodations."

His hair already streaked with grey, his grip on her fingers faltered, knuckles gnarled with arthritis.

Constancia's pinched mien revealed her astonishment.

"Don't give it a second thought," Quint assured her. "I'm 77 years old. I still have a bit of money put aside from my inheritance, so I'll get by."

Tempted to offer additional assistance, she resisted the notion. Gathering up the remnants of the invocation, she allowed him to tear off a length of satin and gently bandage her wound. He did the same for himself; she tied the knot when his digits balked.

"Before you go," he ventured.

She halted near the stairs. "Yes?"

His stride retained much of its dignity. "May I?"

The kiss he planted on her mouth denoted more than gratitude. Being denied the company of other human beings for five decades, he could be forgiven for expressing a passion for living he might never recapture.

She politely extricated herself from the embrace, leaving him to his own resources. No pride in the deed nor pity for his future taxed her conscience; she felt not the slightest bond with the man.

Perhaps for the best.

Monday morning, arriving to open the priory for the cleaning crew, she discovered a drastically aged Jonathan Quint on the master bedroom's four-poster, dead.

She punched up the number of the county coroner on her phone, notified the authorities and descended the stairs to direct the contracted teams in their refurbishment.

Less than two weeks after uploading the posting to the internet, the Priory of St. Mechtild sold to a British tycoon for \$7.5 million. Quint's demise amounted to a footnote in the official documents - a terse, detached paragraph composed by Sister Constanca Murphy.