

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

A Collection of Stories

by

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Part V

The Stowaway

“Allo, mateloo.”

The Cockney-tinged contralto echoed through the hatch and along the passageway, causing the bosun to pop his head into the ward room. Lit by a single bulb, every shadow threatened to congeal into human form and lunge at him.

Maurice Reed being among two dozen manning the HMS Salisbury while the frigate traveled from an unsuccessful test cruise to Portsmouth for repairs, eerie bangs and random knocking raised goosebumps on his flesh as he meandered below decks.

This was the first time he'd heard an actual voice, though.

“Hello?” he whispered, the word reverberating around the chamber.

“Get me outta ‘ere.”

Oh, God, Reed gulped. A dead body, trapped behind the bulkhead... haunting the ship until its release.

A worker who'd helped construct the ship, killed in some tragic accident? he wondered.

“Where... are you?” he queried, baritone trembling.

“The bloody latch is stuck.”

Boots crossed the floor, the sound like gunfire. Reed hesitated, his fingers on the handle of the dish locker. “Here?”

“C'mon, mateloo. Let me out.”

The door swung wide, to reveal a baggy uniform-clad... woman!

“What the devil!” Reed swore.

Her reaction surprised him. “Cor, blimey!” The panel slammed shut.

A firm grip wrenched it open once more. “What are you doing here, young lady?”

Moist hazel eyes peered at him from beneath short brunette curls. “I...”

Restraining a sudden burst of anger, he placed his hands on her shoulders and eased her from the narrow confinement. “What happened to the captain's china?” he asked.

“John stuffed it in with the linens,” she confessed, stretching her limbs.

“To fit you?”

“‘e said it would only be for 30 minutes or so, until we left port.”

“You're saying, you've been stuck in here for six hours?”

“I guess so.”

Reed guided her toward the hatch. “Come with me.”

She resisted. “Where are you takin' me?”

“To see the captain.”

“Oh, no, please!” She pulled away and tried to dive under the table.

He caught her shirt before she could elude him. Or, better, the work shirt of whichever sailor had smuggled her on board.

Patience wearing thin, he righted her, meeting her gaze with a scowl.

“What’s your name?”

Barely audible: “Harriet Finch.”

“John Finch’s little sister?”

A nod.

“What the devil are you doing here?”

Before she could answer, her brother skidded along the passageway, clutching the hatch rim to stop himself. “Oh, shit!” he gasped, viewing the scene within.

“Indeed, Mr. Finch,” chided Reed. “What’s all this, then?”

The sailor stepped through the hatch. “It’s my sis, bosun.”

“That’s my understanding. Just what is she doing here?”

“Me mum got into one of her drunken tempers...”

“Your *mother*?” Reed stammered. “Doesn’t she live in Suffolk?”

“Aye, sir,” Finch confirmed.

The question erupted as a growl. “Are you saying Harriet has been aboard for *six weeks*?”

“Aye, sir.” The seaman grasped his sibling protectively around the shoulders. “When Hat showed up at the base, her back was covered in bruises and welts from the beating. I couldn’t leave her there, with nowhere to go...”

Reed’s grey orbs rolled toward the overhead. “How... did you hide her so long without being discovered?”

“Oh, the crew all knew...” Harriet let slip, quickly clapping fingers over her mouth.

“Did they now?” Reed snarled. “C’mon, both of you.”

The Finches preceded Reed up the ladder and onto the deck, Harriet pausing to suck in a lungful of fresh, salt-scented air. Their route to the bridge was blocked by the captain himself, bound for the ward room and a cup of tea.

“Reed?” Clarence Spring greeted. “Weren’t you inspecting the officers’ quarters?”

“Aye, sir. I... found this and felt I needed to report it directly.”

Spring scrutinized Harriet, a slight grin angling his mouth upward at the right corner. Actually a lieutenant commander, he retained his slender military

readiness and an off-color sense of humor. “A tart who didn’t make it ashore last night?”

The fist pummeled Spring’s face with lightning accuracy, and it wasn’t John Finch’s - a court-martial offense for a sailor. As the officer staggered backward, Harriet displayed no remorse.

“I’m no tart, you... you arrogant git.”

Spring glared at Reed. “My cabin. Now.”

Not that the former concerned himself whether sailors on duty had witnessed the assault. If the woman posed a danger to the ship’s smooth operation, however, she would need to be confined with some degree of comfort until they put into port.

John Finch accepted full responsibility for his sister’s presence and her ill-mannered behavior. Spring sent him off with a reprimand, Reed frowning near the desk.

“You may go, bosun.”

“Sir, don’t you need a record of your interview with... the lady?”

Harriet snapped, “Watch it, mateloo. I’ve already blacked one eye today; givin’ you one won’t make a bit of difference, innit?”

Reed bowed from the cramped cubicle.

“Sit down, please, Miss Finch,” Spring directed.

She squinted at him. “What’s your game, Cap?”

“I’ve heard rumblings about a stowaway for the past fortnight. I was wondering when you’d be found.”

“You... don’t care?” Her tone lost its harsh edge.

“If we were on patrol with the fleet, yes, I’d care a great deal. We’ll be docking tomorrow morning, though, so you can disembark without too much... fanfare.”

“What about John?”

“He’ll... be appropriately censured.”

“Meanin’ what?”

“A demotion in rank, probably, and loss of pay.”

Instantly, she dropped to her knees before him. “Oh, no, sir! Me mum would have all the more reason to get her dander up if I were responsible for...”

He lifted her to her feet. “You’re of age. Can’t you get a flat of your own?”

“Since the factory closed, there’s no jobs to be had, and with money so tight...”

Tears streamed from her eyes; Spring offered his starched handkerchief. She blew her nose noisily, bringing a chuckle to his lips.

He contemplated options. "Is it true you cooked that delicious steak and kidney pie Tuesday last?"

"I wanted to thank the crew for their kindness..."

"What if I arrange a job for you as cook in a restaurant?"

"You... would do that for me?"

"For you, and for a sailor who holds his family so dear."

Her impulsive embrace followed by a grateful kiss, Spring realized he could take advantage of the situation in most ungentlemanly fashion.

"You... can sleep in the cabin across the passage tonight," he instructed, freeing himself. "Once we're secure in port, I'll contact the restaurant owners. In the meantime, I'm sure the cook could use some help down in the galley."

Thus dismissed, Harriet gazed at him for a prolonged moment, then marched toward the ladder.

The reduced complement of the HMS Salisbury ate exceedingly well that night. The stowaway retired, exhausted, after the pots had been washed, the mattress on the executive officer's bunk much softer than the pile of duffels she'd been sleeping on for more than a month.

Waking in the wee hours, she glimpsed a shadow filling the hatch. "Trouble?" she drawled, groggy.

"No, you're safe." Spring's pleasant tenor. "Just a... bed check."

"C'mon, then, check the bed."

When the crew disembarked that Saturday afternoon, Mrs. Finch waited at the bottom of the gangplank, her anger well in evidence. Harriet discounted that emotion, hugging the rotund matron, smiling with glee.

"You better tell me you're getting married, my girl," scolded the woman. "Six weeks on a ship with those... men!"

Her son intervened. "No one touched her, Mum. I made sure of that."

Harriet's blush went unnoticed. So did the Britannia Royal Naval College gold class ring suspended on a delicate chain beneath her brother's work shirt.

Adrenaline Rush

Half the battle of surviving: an awareness of what gets you high.

That pretty much summarized Rory MacLeod's philosophy.

He'd long since reached an understanding that every human being is addicted to something: drugs, alcohol, food, sex, baking, jogging, money, cycling, reading, pottery - and on and on.

"It's a disease," he explained in silence of the night, staring up at the ceiling as the woman nestled beside him on the bed. "That rush of adrenaline is the only way to know you're really alive."

No sense wasting his breath - or his wisdom - on this bimbo, though. She'd never grasp why she spent her days roaming department stores, maxing out her credit cards on designer clothes and undergarments that augmented her breasts and smoothed her tummy so she could attract men who'd shower her with fur coats and diamond bracelets.

Those kinds of shallow addictions irritated Rory to his core. He vastly preferred a challenge - like engineering the perfect heist.

And, not merely the planning and execution of the deed, but the aftermath, when the media blasted details of the caper on radio, television and in the newspapers. Hunkered down in a safe house until the world moved on to other crises, even venturing down the block for a pack of smokes became an adventure.

Heart pounding in his chest, every muscle tingling as he trod the pavement, he couldn't ask for a better mental and physical stimulant.

Back when he got his start in the racket, a wiry kid from Glasgow's slums, he almost botched the score - twice. He'd relied upon his girlfriend to distract the shop owner while he stuffed transistor radios, wrist watches and calculators in his overcoat's hidden pockets and ducked out the service entrance. He hadn't counted on bumping into the janitor in the first instance, who might've identified him in a police line-up if his face hadn't been concealed by the hood of his sweat jacket, worn beneath the coat. In the second incident, the coat's lining ripped, nearly spilling the contents during his escape, and he looked quite the fool limping along holding his side as if suffering from appendicitis.

When he failed to give his accomplice an equal share of the profits, then tried to break up with her, she threatened to grass on him to the bottles - slang for cops. He'd been forced to manipulate her into falling for his best friend, just to get her out of his hair.

He learned not to divulge details of his business to females.

He also took greater care in his preparations for every job going forward. Any recruit for the scheme had to be recommended by an existing crew member. Rory kept dossiers on all his associates, suitable for blackmail if anyone failed to maintain strict confidentiality or bungled his role.

Rather than deal with fences, who took a substantial cut off the top for services rendered, Rory shifted his focus to what he termed “cash collection”. Illegal bookies were raided during peak football weekends, for instance. They knocked over casinos, race tracks, banks - without leaving a fingerprint or any evidence of their presence.

Of course, these successes took place in the early 1980s, before security cameras transmitted high definition images and alarm systems were connected to wireless communications.

The majority of Rory’s stalwarts opted for retirement in the late 90s, having amassed fortunes that would last them well into the new century. They also recognized the increasing risk to their chosen livelihood.

Rory considered the technological advances a gauntlet thrown at his feet, a dare to best a wily opponent. “If there’s no one to beat, you can’t compete,” he declared during the farewell party in December 1998, “If you can’t compete, you don’t exist.”

He discovered new ways to compete, without ever seeing the faces of those who hacked into computers around the globe, transferring funds from accounts to untraceable holding companies. He never rushed into a venture, always using three or four connections to verify pertinent data before the actual commands were typed on the keyboard. His network - well compensated - kept themselves apprised of every firewall update and algorithm revision to preclude the chance of their coding manipulations being traced to the source.

Sunlight through penthouse curtains roused him abruptly; he realized he’d fallen asleep in the midst of this reverie. He rose from the bed, showered and dressed in a conservative, tailored black suit with a navy blue tie which contrasted his longish white hair, leaving the sleeping redhead to find her own way home.

As he emerged from the high-rise, a distracted brunette collided with him, dropping the cell phone on which she’d been typing. Her eyes took in his frame and his height as she squatted to retrieve the now-cracked device; from behind aviator sunglasses, he glared at her.

“You should watch where you’re going,” he chided.

She straightened, growling, “And you shouldn’t just pop out of a doorway without looking at what’s coming toward you.”

His chauffeur held the Lincoln's rear door, engine idling. Rory strode toward the vehicle. "Be more careful in future."

"Fuck you!" She ducked beneath the driver's arm and dove onto the leather seat as the door closed. "You owe me for this!"

"Nonsense." Rory tugged the handle. "Get out."

Determined, she wedged herself against the upholstery, arms crossed. "Not until you make good for the damage you caused."

"I'll not argue with you. I'll have Danny call the cops, and you'll be arrested on an assault charge."

"Bullshit!" She flicked a switch that raised the privacy window between the front seat and the back. She leaned toward him, whispering, "You wouldn't want me to shop you to that lot."

Rory's brow furrowed; brown eyes squinted. "Who are you..."

She relaxed, kicking her stained sneakers atop his thighs. "Let's say: I'm an enterprising sort who wants a piece of your action."

His revolver tucked safely in his sock drawer - an unnecessary weight in its shoulder holster since his activities had gone online - he couldn't tangibly threaten this... this...

The Lincoln had merged with morning traffic. Rory grabbed her ankles and raised her feet over his head when the brakes squealed at a traffic light. Her head slammed against the window with enough force to stun her, giving him time to shed his belt and bind her hands.

When she recovered her composure, she struggled against the restraints. "Let me go!"

"Tell me what you know, or I'll throw you under the wheels of a passing lorry."

"Son of a bitch!" she swore. "At least, sit me on the seat."

He lifted her by the armpits off the carpet onto hand-stitched cushions.

She rotated her neck, cringing with pain. "You're a right bloody wanker."

"I'm running out of patience..."

She wiped her nose on the sleeve of her denim jacket. "My name is Kate Henshaw. I used to work for Cy Duffy, the bookie your boys hit some while ago."

"There's no way..."

"Aye, Rory. There's no mistaking that wild head o' hair, even if you tried to cover it with a ski mask."

He swallowed his doubts. "Still, you can't prove anything..."

"Not then, but now..."

"Keep talking."

Kate tucked her legs into a half-lotus position, resting bound hands on her lap. “Gambling’s my thing. Football, horses, roulette, baccarat, poker. I make the rounds of the tracks and casinos, and I’ve noticed you and your squad casing some of the larger joints only days before news outlets reported the related thefts.”

Rory guessed how she got her high. “How deep are you in to the sharks?”

“Around eighty thousand.”

Her matter-of-fact tone bemused him. “You say that like it’s loose change.”

“In my family, it is.”

“Sorry?”

“My da has played the market since before I was born. That’s *his* thing. He took a thousand he inherited from his grandfather and netted millions with it in less than eighteen months. Still, he’s made it clear I have to fend for myself.” She smirked. “I know where he keeps the stash, and if you go for it, I want enough to square myself with the guys who want to break my legs.”

“I’ve... left that game behind,” Rory admitted.

“I know. You’re into... high tech shit.” Kate popped her knuckles. “I am, too. In fact, I have the IP addresses of five of your best hackers on a list that will be sent to the commissioner of the Glasgow police if anything suspicious happens to me.”

“How...”

She shifted her gaze toward the glass, watching pedestrians about their business on Argyle Street. “There’s an inherent vulnerability to using wi-fi, even when it’s password protected. The signals whizzing through the air can be intercepted and decoded by those who have the wherewithal...”

Angry digits seized her jacket and jerked her toward him. “You’re lying!”

Kate remained calm. “Ask your boys. If I’m just yanking your chain, you can write it off as a tasteless prank.” She raised her wrists, freed of the belt. “If I’m not, meet me at The Saracen Head tomorrow night, ten o’clock.”

“Why?”

Congestion stopped the Lincoln as it tried to cross the River Clyde. Kate flipped the door handle and stepped onto the street. She stuck her head through the gap. “My da leaves this afternoon for a holiday in Spain with my mother. Second honeymoon. Been together fifty years. You’ll have free access to as much dosh as you can carry.”

“I’ll have to get with the boys...”

“Just you, alone.”

“How can I be certain this isn’t a set-up?” The vehicle inched forward.

Kate released the metal panel. "Look behind you."

Through the rear window, Rory glimpsed two police cars. He glanced back at the woman, scowling.

"If I'd signaled them, you'd be on your way to twenty years or more."

The career criminal had no way of determining whether she was bluffing, and the presence of the constables was sheer coincidence.

"The Sarry, tomorrow at ten," he confirmed, pulling the door inward.

He spent the rest of the day wavering between moments of despondency wrought by carelessness on past jobs and the high of a good old-fashioned robbery with more than the usual corresponding risks.

Gloves - untouched since his crew had cleaned out the main bookie taking action on the British Open at St. Andrew's in 2005 - were dug from the recesses of his closet. His white hair a lot shorter these days, a black knitted cap would adequately cover his head. Black turtleneck, slacks and sneakers still fit. He checked the Smith & Wesson revolver and loaded six cartridges, tucking it into the shoulder holster.

The Saracen Head pub was bustling that Tuesday evening, but the din of rowdy conversations made the exchange between Rory and Kate less conspicuous. They each drained a pint of scrumpy and headed into the darkness.

"Where's your da's house?" Rory queried as they strolled east along Gallowgate Street.

"Kelvingrove."

"We're not walkin' all that way..."

"My Ford's around the corner."

"I don't..."

Kate punched his arm. "Think about it. If any of the neighbors notice, they'll assume I've come to check that the place is proper locked up, or water the plants."

Made sense, Rory mused.

He could barely see the structure's outline when they arrived, no lights of any kind illuminating the property. Gripping a sturdy backpack, dogging Kate's steps through the garden, he crossed the threshold after she unlocked the side door with her key.

A fixture near the stove reflected off pristine kitchen appliances, accompanied by a bizarre purring sound - not the refrigerator compressor.

Kate halted mid-stride. "Shit!"

"What?"

"The cat."

“A cat?” echoed Rory.

“Yeah, a rescue Mam picked up a few weeks ago. I forgot about it.”

“Well, it’s another excuse for you to be here. Feeding it.”

The animal rubbed against his leg in the gloom, expressing a definite hunger.

“It’s supposed to catch mice outside,” Kate stated.

“You think it got locked in?”

“Maybe.”

Continuing on, they passed through a dining room, library and parlor before climbing stone stairs to a balcony. The second room on the left was the master bedroom; Kate crept to the far wall, feeling along the wallpaper until she contacted the frame with the painting that concealed the safe.

“You know the combination?” Rory puzzled.

Using a miniature torch on her keychain, she illuminated a slip of paper tacked to the back of the picture.

Ten minutes later, they exited the dwelling. Rory estimated he’d stuffed over 200,000 pounds in the backpack, while Kate had jammed multiple bundles of 5,000 pounds in her denim jacket and jean pockets.

“Time to celebrate!” she tittered, practically dancing along the drive.

He gripped her sleeve. “Not so fast. You need to wait six weeks before any of those bills are circulated.”

“The sharks want their money now...”

“Make a small payment first, and they’ll wait for the rest.”

“You don’t know these blokes...”

“I probably do. Trust me.”

She spun toward him, her right hand grabbing Rory’s scrotum and squeezing, hard. “Just remember, if anything happens to me, the police get the info that could convict you...”

Despite searing anguish, he managed to extract the pistol from beneath his coat. Barrel leveled at her temple, the hammer cocked. “I have no qualms about snuffing you this minute if you don’t let go...”

The brunette recoiled; they drove to The Saracen Head in silence. Rory alighted from the compact with his haul and, no more had Kate shifted the Ford into gear and sputtered off, six constables surrounded him.

“That bitch!” he grunted.

Transported to Police Scotland headquarters, his best attempt to present a plausible alibi failed - miserably. A corporal assigned to the forensics unit paid

undue attention to Rory's trousers, kneeling beside him in the interrogation room and plucking strands from the fabric.

"What the hell?" inquired the prisoner.

The detective inspector seated opposite replied, "Cat hair."

"Sorry?"

"Cat hair. A DNA match will be proof you illegally gained entrance to the Henshaw residence and stole an as-yet-undisclosed amount of cash."

Kate had used him to steal from her own father, while he took the rap.

Must've given her quite a high, Rory concluded.

He spent every day of his extended sentence dreaming of revenge, a high in itself.

The Fine Line

Every Saturday for the past two months, from 9:00 to 11:00 pm, Stephanie Caldwell had occupied the shadowy corner booth, mostly hidden from view by a plank wood partition, sipping root beer, her hazel eyes focused on comings and goings at the bar.

During this weekly vigil, the sight of one particular patron roused a particular set of memories from the recesses of her brain, as well.

Stephanie had attended elementary and high school with Amy Fastbender, sharing many of the same classes. The two struck up a friendship due to their mutually troubled childhoods: Stephanie the daughter of a widowed Episcopal priest, Amy an orphan whose parents had died in a freak helicopter accident before her sixth birthday. The pair grew closer than most sisters, and keeping track whether Stephanie was spending the night at Amy's uncle's house, or vice versa became a chore.

That uncle, Victor Bramwell, exhibited a few eccentricities but, overall, treated the shy waif consigned to his care with tenderness. He stood a slender six feet tall which, to a kid of eight, equated to a giant. He combed his dark brown hair back over his forehead and, being naturally wavy, it created a sort of "poof" that made both youngsters laugh.

Stephanie considered the Bramwell estate her second home, a refuge when her overly-pious father went off on a tangent about the morals and failings of society. She and Victor, surnames so similar, invented their own unique greeting - not unlike those with singular hand gestures to signify gang affiliations.

Amidst the noise of the tavern, the dialogue echoed in her skull:

"Vic," she would start.

He used the nickname the third grade teacher had pinned on her for roughhousing with the boys. "Steve."

"Well."

"Well."

Just the inflection of that lone syllable could convey the trials of a day: joy, sorrow, curiosity, frustration, contentment.

A smile crept over her lips as she sucked on the straw in the tall, smudged glass. It hadn't struck her as odd 13 years ago when Bramwell provided a limousine for the two girls to attend their senior prom in style. Neither had bothered to secure a date; they abhorred the idea of gratuitous flirting just to rate an invitation from an athlete or illiterate hunk.

They'd enjoyed the evening in the venue overlooking the Pacific Ocean - one of the perks of living in a coastal city - and the live band. Stephanie's father objecting to her participation in any "after prom" gatherings, the teens were chauffeured back to Bramwell's, where he had hot chocolate and Rice Krispie treats waiting in the drawing room, a roaring fire creating plenty of atmosphere.

It had been 2:00 before the girls trudged up the curved, grand staircase to their rooms. More than ready for sleep, Stephanie had discarded her shoes and hose, struggling with the zipper on her slinky, deep purple sequined gown, when she heard the knock.

"Oh, get in here, Amy, and help me with this!" she'd beckoned.

Facing away from the door, she didn't realize Victor stood behind her until the spaghetti straps gave way and the dress fell to the floor, leaving her in lace-trimmed black panties.

Four hours of unbridled sex exhausted them. They slumbered side by side on the queen-sized four-poster bed when Amy breezed in at 9:30, Reverend Caldwell in tow.

"Steve, your dad's here to..."

The intruders halted in their tracks on the Persian carpet.

Stephanie's lids shot open. "Oh, shit!"

Bramwell handled the matter with aplomb. Without a second's hesitation, he retrieved his shimmering grey silk robe, embroidered with golden Asian dragons, tied it around his trim waist, approached the irate cleric and pledged to marry his daughter.

Stephanie had been allowed two minutes to dress before being dragged home and grounded from everything except school until an hour before the graduation ceremony. She discovered her father, prominent in the local community, had used his influence with the police chief to expedite her application to the police academy.

She received her diploma and was on a bus the next morning.

Amy had emailed her a few times from college, dropping out as a junior to wed an ambitious software engineer. She had three children; the family lived in Seattle.

Victor Bramwell never left the city, as his current presence among a flock of young ladies confirmed. Even in this light, she noticed he hadn't aged a day since that - Stephanie inhaled slowly - exhilarating experience.

Now, he was the object of her investigation.

She'd done well at the academy, graduating with top honors despite others in her squad boasting college degrees or military experience. Her first few years as

a patrol officer, capturing some high-profile fugitives from justice, netted her a spot in the detective division. She headed the department these days - not uncommon in a moderately sized metropolis.

Her father expressed his pride when she received her badge, speaking not another word to her, even on his deathbed the previous summer.

True to his *modus operandi*, Bramwell wore a navy blue pinstripe suit and nursed a martini, pretending to sip occasionally, never touching the green olive. Stephanie wondered if his long, nimble fingers managed to drop some date rape drug in the drinks of those closest...

He always left with at least three females. Within 24 hours, missing persons reports - anxious parents supplying photos matching the kissers of those seen with Bramwell - crossed her desk.

Not that she let the cases grow cold. Her team scoured alleys and dives on a rotation, with six of the victims located in flop houses within 12 hours of the respective notifications - dazed but physically unharmed - another four found wandering the city park five days after hooking up with Bramwell, entertaining no recollection of where they'd been in the interim.

Two washed up on the beach weeks later, drowned.

Stephanie really didn't want to arrest him on a murder rap, but enough was enough.

There!

Like a flock of unwitting pigeons, a trio of scantily-clad tittering college students excused themselves to the restroom. Bramwell opened his tooled leather wallet to pay the tab, a signal he'd concluded his selection of companions.

Stephanie left her root beer and sidled up beside him, leaning chafed elbows on the stained wood.

"Hello, Vic."

"Steve." His thrilling rumble had lost none of its resonance.

"Well."

"Well."

She read astonishment in his tone, and prodded, "What the hell are you up to these days?"

"Nothing special."

"You weren't such a... ladies' man back when."

"How would you know?"

"Touché. I was just a self-centered teenager."

No response.

Staring at a ceiling-high wall mirror and the distorted reflection of her Seattle Seahawks jersey and jeans, she shuddered that Bramwell's image wasn't visible. She wrote it off to shelves of liquor bottles blocking her vision.

The gaggle of entranced preppies returned, eager for the next leg of their adventure. Depositing a generous tip in the bill-crammed brandy snifter, he whisked them toward the exit.

Stephanie squinted at Bramwell's absolutely unenthused expression when he glanced in her direction before the metal door bounced shut.

"How much do I owe you, Mike?" she asked the bartender.

"Skip it, Steve. Pleasure to serve those who protect and serve."

Making a mental note to treat this former shot-putting champion to dinner in the near future, she maintained a casual stride into the sweltering July night.

The only thing she really despised about living on the coast: constant humidity.

Perspiration trickled down her spine before she reached the intersection of 12th and Main. Walking had always been Bramwell's preferred mode of transportation; he didn't possess a driver's license. When Amy wanted to learn to drive, Reverend Caldwell had done the honors - knocking a decade off his life expectancy, Stephanie chuckled, when coupled with her own mishaps behind the wheel of the beat-up Ford Taurus.

Unlike some small towns, the city never enjoyed any level of overnight silence. Train whistles pierced the air; pick-ups lacking mufflers roared away from traffic signals, as if to prove the owner's manhood. Music blared from nearby establishments, creating a cacophony of discordant styles.

Stephanie honed in on the distinctive giggles of Bramwell's latest entourage. She bore south, gait rapid. West of 13th Street, deserted factories were no place for a woman to be caught defenseless.

A shriek reverberated between brick walls. The detective's blood froze in her veins.

She'd learned the importance of pacing herself while keeping stats for the high school boys track team, especially on long-distance runs. Maybe a block ahead, she sprinted full speed to overtake whatever attacker had frightened his victim.

Too late.

Sprawled over a row of aluminum trash cans, the blonde's neck had been snapped. Stephanie wrenched her cell from her jean pocket and called for an ambulance and backup.

She couldn't linger at the site, though. Footsteps ahead, in no rush, warranted her attention.

No streetlights penetrated this darkness; city maintenance crews didn't bother to replace burnt-out bulbs in the neighborhood - a cash saving measure, despite rampant criminal activity. Stephanie groped through the alley on instinct. Even in grade school, she'd shot craps and played tag with boys from the "wrong side of the tracks" - her father's phrasing - in this forbidden zone.

A rustling, indicating a struggle and clothes being torn, quickened her motion. A body crashed into a dumpster, landing on the gravel with a thud.

She dodged the swish of arms reaching for her. An animalistic growl preceded the culprit's flight, sirens converging from all directions.

Paramedics could do nothing for either girl. What happened to the third remained a mystery for the moment. Within an hour, portable floodlights illuminated each scene, the county coroner petrified by his initial examination.

"What is it, Doc?" Stephanie puzzled when he recoiled from the second corpse.

"Not only was she raped and strangled, but the guy tried to make it look like suicide."

"Huh?"

He raised a limp arm into the glare, showing his companion where a sharp object had sliced along the artery above the wrist, causing profuse bleeding.

Except, no puddle of blood wet the ground.

"What the hell?" she muttered.

The first cadaver had received similar treatment, chunky bracelets concealing the wound.

The detective speculated, "Were the incisions made post-mortem?"

"From what you told me, he didn't have a chance." The doctor continued his assessment. "It's almost as if..."

When he didn't finish the sentence, Stephanie pressed, "What?"

"It's as if their blood was drained before he killed them."

She pitched against a slime-encrusted security fence, repressing a sudden urge to vomit. A few deep breaths calmed her stomach; she straightened. "Unless he had some type of high-suction vacuum, how could he..."

The coroner shrugged. "It's your job to figure that out."

"Bullshit!" she retorted. "I don't have the medical training to determine why neither of these girls bled out, yet they're a few quarts low. I'm concerned with the who, not the how."

"Have it your way."

Fifty yards to her left, beyond a yellow police cordon, reporters and videographers were shouting to the newly arrived police chief. Clearly, that official had been roused from bed; her uniform shirt was buttoned crooked and she wore two different color socks.

“Sorry, Helen,” her subordinate grumbled when she neared.

Only a slight grogginess marred the discrete contralto. “Is it the guy you’ve been surveilling?”

“I’m not a hundred percent positive. These are two of the gals he escorted from Scarlito’s, but I was too far behind to witness the attacks first-hand.”

“You know where he lives?”

Reddish curls bobbed affirmatively.

“Bring him in for questioning.”

“Without a warrant?”

“I want his statement on tape before dawn.”

“Right.”

Stephanie left Helen McGrane to deal with the press, a type of chaos she did not relish. The trek to her Chevy cruiser allowed muscles to unkink, her mind swirling with uncertainty about how to convince Victor Bramwell to accompany her to police headquarters without actually placing him in custody.

Doubts raged about his guilt. He’d never struck her as violent; practically living at his house with Amy, she’d never heard him raise his voice or lash out in anger.

A detour to the office gave her an opportunity to review files on the slew of women involved in these incidents. Records from mandatory emergency room visits - and the autopsy reports from those who’d drowned - failed to mention fresh cuts on their wrists, while detailing other scars, scrapes, bruises and even oversized twin mosquito bites over their clavicles.

Stephanie buried her head in her hands, confused. None of this made any sense.

The duty clerk brought her stale coffee from the break room; it didn’t reinvigorate her, just soured her tongue.

Tossing the cup in the rusted metal trash basket on her way out, liquid sprayed the wall and floor, reminding her of a missing piece of evidence.

Clouds obscuring a waxing crescent moon, she parked on the circular drive near Bramwell’s domicile, alighting to contemplate the massive structure shrouded in gloom. She envisioned eight Doric columns supporting the limestone portico, the oak double doors with wolf’s head brass knockers, and an interior suited to bygone generations.

Before she closed the gap, he appeared beneath the lintel.

“Vic.”

“Steve.”

“Well.”

“Well.”

This time, his voice implied a question; he motioned her to enter.

She went no farther than the mosaic floored foyer, scrutinizing his suit for any stains. “I’d suggest you get dressed, but you haven’t even kicked off your loafers.”

“Are we going somewhere?”

“Downtown.”

He chuckled, never a pleasant sound to her ears. “Sounds like dialogue from a bad cop show.”

“It is what it is.”

“What do you think happened tonight?”

“Two young women were murdered.”

Firm hands seized her sleeves, brown orbs smoldering. “You, who know me so well, have the gall to presume...”

“Don’t pull that crap on me.” She jerked from his grip. “You left the bar with them. You walked along Main Street with them. Less than ten minutes later, they were dead.”

“They could’ve been killed by any of a thousand or more miscreants in this den of iniquity...”

“As my father used to refer to the city, yeah, yeah.” She relaxed her jaw. “Just explain to me why every ounce of blood was sucked from their bodies...”

“What, you think there’s some sort of vampire running loose?”

“No, it’s you, Vic.”

He bristled. “You’re out of your mind.”

“I thought so, myself, for about a minute and a half. Except, I remember Amy having a scar on her left arm similar to those on the stiffs.”

“She tried to commit suicide after her parents died in the chopper accident.”

She grunted. “Kids who cut themselves do so horizontally. Only someone wanting to bleed out fast would slice the artery up the arm. Or, someone with knowledge of anatomy.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“You tutored both Amy and me prior to the anatomy test in our sophomore biology class, don’t you remember?”

“You’re grasping at straws.”

She turned her back to him, on a hunch. “You, who know me so well, dare to accuse me of being anything less than thorough?” She focused on a colorful hanging tapestry hiding cracked stones. “With the other girls, you had plenty of time to satisfy your hunger, the wounds below the collar-line - instead of on the neck - dismissed as inconsequential. Tonight, you knew I’d be on your tail, so you had to work fast.”

“Try proving *that* in a court of law.”

“It’ll be a challenge, for sure.” She sighed, the madonna and infant on the weaving a reminder of what she’d missed. “There’s something else, though: the morning after the prom, when my dad caught us in bed, would you have honestly married me, if he hadn’t hauled me home?”

“You would’ve saved me from a fate worse than death,” he replied with a hint of tenderness, then clutched her biceps and yanked her toward him.

In a flash, she’d stomped his right foot, knocking him off balance, then whirled to rake his high cheekbones with a double-fisted backhand. He shattered a Louis XVI armchair before thumping his cranium against the wall, landing in a heap.

She had Bramwell’s wrists cuffed and a make-shift bandage stuck over the jagged gash on his forehead before a dozen Ford Interceptors arrived. He sat in the drawing room, where she’d so enjoyed the warmth of the fireplace - and the company - many years prior.

“They won’t be able to hold me, you know,” he warned from the green velvet sofa.

“That’s up to them. I’ve done my duty.”

“Your conscience is clear?”

“Pretty much.”

He snarled, “You still dream about that night, don’t you?”

“Coupled with nightmares of how you’ve lured at least a score of women for... for...”

“You wonder why I never added you to their number?”

Facing the dusty mantle, she nodded with clenched teeth.

Bramwell rose, uniformed officers bursting through the entrance. His breath tickled her neck as he hovered over her shoulder. “You were the one utterly liberated, pure soul I met in this berg. The rest were no better than whores. With you by my side, I could’ve suppressed the compulsion that’s plagued me for centuries.”

“You really believe that?”

“I know it to be fact.”

“You aren’t really Amy’s uncle, eh?”

“Of course, I am. Seven generations removed.”

She spun toward him; he planted a fiery kiss on her lips before a pair of burly corporals ushered him outdoors.

“You know, any judge worth his salt will dismiss the charges once that little... impropriety becomes public,” declared the beefy shift sergeant from the threshold.

“Well, it better not.” Stephanie brushed past him. “I didn’t instigate it, and I didn’t prolong it.”

“You didn’t slap his face, either,” snickered her comrade.

“What, and complicate the prosecution with an excessive force complaint?”

Lamps extinguished and doors locked, they watched from the step as the SUVs maneuvered from their gridlock. Bramwell’s parting scowl through the tinted rear window imprinted on her psyche.

She expressed only slight shock when the dispatcher broadcast over the radio a quarter hour later how the rookie delivering the prisoner to the county jail died when his vehicle lost control on the rural highway and struck a tree.

Bramwell vanished in the aftermath without a trace.

Though the temptation to search for him recurred on a periodic basis, Stephanie resisted the urge.

She resigned from the force within the year, a lone cold case unresolved. She took up residence in the mansion - a contingency clause Bramwell had long since filed with his lawyer in the event of his disappearance for more than six months.

The woman’s former co-workers and high school classmates rarely saw her after that. She never married.

But the sex was unrivaled.

Had anyone paused on the grounds in the dark of night, they might’ve heard a quiet exchange through the master bedroom’s open sash:

“Vic.”

“Steve.”

“Well.”

A sated, “Well.”

Secrets of the Music

The last thing Angel expected to hear wafting toward her over wind-whipped Scottish terrain near the North Sea: a banjo.

Bluegrass, country, old timey - whatever it was called in Nashville - the melody reached her ears and, oddly, soothed her jangled nerves. Her trek of the rugged coastline had exhausted her; she'd been hoping for three hours to find a village where she could rest, but no settlement presented itself.

Had the trim brunette wandered into some fairy wasteland?

Over another pile of eroded rocks - God, the plethora of volcanic remnants she'd scaled over the past three weeks! - revealed a modest shack near the cliff, asymmetrical stones fit neatly together beneath a slanted tin roof. Smoke spiraled from the crumbling chimney. On a covered porch supported by timber columns, bathed in shadows, sat a musician picking the strings of his chosen instrument, content in his solitude.

Angel pondered disturbing his idyll. Her grumbling stomach convinced her to close the distance. Perhaps he could direct her to food and lodgings for the night.

As she approached, thick clouds overhead shifted, a shaft of sunlight brightening the landscape. What she glimpsed in that moment caused her to shudder and miss a step on the packed dirt track.

Pointed snake-skin boots, stained jeans, an unbuttoned moth-eaten tweed jacket, cable-knit sweater with large holes, a lion's mane of wild and curly multi-colored hair with a matching, ample beard: red tints, bleached strands, black and grey. When he glanced up, his brown eyes bored through her like a laser, thick fingers ceased their movement on the fretless neck.

"Ye be trespassin'," he growled.

She stammered, "I'm... sorry. I'm... rather lost."

He noticed the guitar case slung over her shoulder and his gruff demeanor softened, she noticed. "Ye play?"

"I've been... working my way around the country performing in pubs and on street corners."

"Ach, buskers can be arrested if they dinnae ha' a permit in some places."

"I've learned that."

Setting his banjo across his chair, he vanished inside the cabin for a moment, fetching a rough-hewn wooden bench. "Ha' a seat, lass."

"Thanks." Just being able to take the strain off her legs for a few minutes would be a relief. "Where's the nearest town?"

“Ach, there’s nae a thing close. Ye’ll ha’ t’ stay ‘til mornin’.”

That prospect knotted Angel’s stomach. Her tension eased, though, when her host reclaimed the banjo, launching into a familiar tune. Removing her guitar from its case, she joined in, matching his prowess when he signaled her to solo.

“Brilliant!” he praised at the end. “Ye are a professional?”

“I’ve... toured with a few bands back in the States.”

“Ye are lookin’ for a new gig?”

Angel bit her lower lip. “No... not exactly.”

“Escapin’ from the grind?”

Her brunette mop bounced when she nodded.

“Ach, I ken yer dilemma. Someone so young and lovely, hangin’ with the boys...” He tenderly caressed the vellum head of the vintage instrument. “Did one o’ ‘em get yet pregnant?”

Angel felt herself blush. “Oh, no. Nothing like that.”

“Good.” He rose and moved toward the open door. “Come inside, lass. ‘Tis gettin’ chilly.”

Chilly wasn’t the word, the woman mused. The temperature was downright sub-freezing. Her sweat jacket did nothing to protect her from the cold, nor did her sneakers and wet socks.

A fire crackled within a stone arch on the west wall; she gravitated toward it to thaw her weary bones. A bottle of Talisker Single Malt Scotch appeared on the unvarnished table with two glasses.

“Ye need a drink to warm yerself,” came the heavily accented baritone.

“I... don’t...”

More than a hint of incredulity tinged his voice. “Ye ha’ been hangin’ in the pubs, but ye dinnae drink?”

“I stick to tonic water.”

“A waste!” He filled a tumbler and drained it in one gulp. “I ha’ a bit o’ stew left over from midday. Would ye like a bowl?”

“That would be... lovely,” she conceded. Though stews could contain anything and everything in these parts, she was too hungry to care.

He suspended a cast iron pot on a hook above the grate, stirring it with a steel spoon before settling on creaky rocking chair. “Tell me aboot yerself.”

“There’s not much to tell, really.”

“From whence do ye hail?”

“Cincinnati, Ohio.”

“Ach, is that near New York?”

“Not really.”

“And, yer people?”

“I’m a mix of Irish, Scottish and Italian.”

“What be yer name?” he pressed.

“Angel.” She averted her gaze when she glimpsed how earnestly he glared at her in the firelight. “Angel Zottola.” Best to shift the conversation’s focus.

“What’s yours?”

“Will. William Connolly.”

“Why do you live in such a desolate...”

“A choice. Like ye wi’ yer bands, I tired o’ life in Glasgow, so I fled.”

Floor boards groaned as he strode toward a set of crooked shelves, fetching plates and cutlery. In that moment, Angel glanced around the open chamber - there had to be an outhouse, given the lack of indoor plumbing - and noted the double bed and cluttered desk against the opposite wall, a shotgun propped in the corner beside it. Four large knives on hooks appeared not to have been cleaned since the last time they prepared some wild animal for cooking.

She distracted herself by running scales on her guitar, adjusting the tuning before placing it in the case beside her.

“Ye play well,” Connolly stated, setting the table. “Did ye teach yerself, or ha’ lessons as a bairn?”

“I taught myself some chords as a kid, then studied under a very talented artist for a few years.”

“Classical, or rock ‘n roll?”

“Both.”

He bent over the fire and scooped generous portions of meat and vegetables onto the plates. “After we eat, will ye regale me wi’ a tune or two?”

“Always happy to earn my room and board.”

They ate in silence, Connolly shoveling bites of the meal into his maw like one starved. Gravy dripped down his beard, spoiling Angel’s appetite. She managed a few bites before setting aside her fork.

“If ye are nae gonna finish that, gi’ it t’ me,” directed Connolly.

She shoved the plate toward him; it was clean in a matter of seconds.

This bear of a man deposited the dirty dishes in a sink fed by a hand pump, squirting water all over as he washed hands and face. Angel had returned to the fire, launching into a song so she wouldn’t have to consider her predicament.

She had what critics at the outdoor concerts called “a nice little voice.” She tried to mimic songs she’d heard in Edinburgh and Inverness; Connolly joined in with his banjo and put her to shame.

With no signal for her cell phone, Angel could only confirm the time as 10:00 when they ended their jam session. She secured the guitar in its case, stood up and stretched, looking around for a place to crash.

“I ha’ just the one bed,” Connolly informed her. “But ‘tis big enough for two.”

Angel swallowed hard. “If you have an extra blanket, I can sleep on the floor.”

“Nae, nae, lass. I’m harmless.”

Harmless, hell.

A thin mattress placed atop a rickety wooden frame was supported by taut ropes - thus the wish to “sleep tight” from centuries past, Angel realized. She had no more dozed off, fully clothed except for her damp socks and sneakers still drying near the fire, than a rustling in the cabin roused her. A candle held in his left hand, Connolly’s right clutched one of the blood-encrusted knives dangerously close to her face.

She barely dodged the stabbing motion that propelled the blade into a goose feather pillow.

“What the fuck!” she shrieked, rolling into a crouch beside the bed.

“Ye are the divil, come from Sodom and Gomorrah t’ drag me t’ hell!” He lunged over the mattress, swiping at her. She retreated, bumping into the desk. Remembering what she’d seen earlier in the evening, desperate fingers groped along the wall, seizing the shotgun. She swung blindly...

She felt the weapon’s butt make contact with something solid, heard Connolly yelp. He flopped on the bed, the candle dropping on the quilt, igniting the fabric.

Instinctively, Angel beat out the flames with her palms, scorching the flesh. She collapsed on the floor, in pain and utterly confused, falling asleep against the stones until sunrise illuminated the scene.

Will Connolly lay, dead, brown orbs open and seeming to gaze at the rafters overhead. Angel’s blow had caved in the left side of his skull.

She never would’ve guessed she possessed that degree of strength.

But, panic will out, sometimes.

Her breathing shallow, she struggled to recall television series like Columbo, where criminals left obvious clues that resulted in their capture. First, she used a towel hung next to the sink to wipe her fingerprints off the shotgun, laying the weapon beside Connolly’s body. She replaced the dishes on the shelves, leaving the pot of now-burnt stew on its hook over the ashes in the fireplace, and the bloody knife where it had fallen at Connolly’s feet.

An innate curiosity prompted the woman to search through Connolly's possessions, including the piles of paperwork on the desk. Stacked under a bible open to the Book of Proverbs, chapter 5 - with the passages underlined in red, "For the lips of an immoral woman are as sweet as honey, and her mouth is smoother than oil. But in the end she is as bitter as poison, as dangerous as a double-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps lead straight to the grave" - clippings torn from the Aberdeen newspaper warned readers of lunatic William Connolly's escape from a Glasgow psychiatric hospital, describing him as a "52-year-old, musically talented, charming, psychopathic religious zealot." He'd killed three women in the wake of various public concerts, when each sneaked aboard his tour bus and into his bed.

He judged them harlots and subject to immediate chastisement, according to the quoted court transcript. Ruled insane, he was sentenced to permanent confinement, vanishing during a shower period through a ceiling-high window - with no witnesses able to explain how he scaled the wall.

The date of the reports: 14 years earlier.

He'd lived in this wilderness all that time? puzzled Angel.

She availed herself of the ramshackle outhouse near a treacherous cliff then, guitar slung over her shoulder, she took one last look around the cabin. Connolly had deemed it a waste that she didn't drink; she lamented such skill with a banjo was wasted on a madman.

They could've made beautiful music together - healing their own wounds, perhaps, and the anguish of those who heard them.

Tracking the Truth

Twin wizards.

A gift to the waitress who offered home-made turtle soup and a cot to the weary traveler along his route through Spring Hill, Kansas.

“God, he was handsome,” Adele mused while sipping coffee in the well-worn booth near the diner’s front window.

Her companion prodded, “How so?”

“Salt-and-pepper hair tied back in a ponytail. Slim, but solidly built. Brown eyes that seemed to suck you in and consume you. Droopy mustache, not much of a beard... one of those little - what do they call it? - soul patches. And, tattoos. Lots of tattoos. Arms, legs, chest, back...”

“So, he just walked in and sat down?”

“Like any other customer, on a stool at the counter.”

“Then, why...”

Adele shrugged. “I don’t know. Just something about him.”

“And, nine months later...”

She nodded her greying brunette mop, resigned.

“They were ordinary boys, at first?”

“Sure. Cute, mischievous, little chatterboxes.”

“Identical?”

“To begin with. Through third grade, their teachers couldn’t tell them apart, so they’d switch places sometimes, just for fun. I got a few phone calls from the principal...”

“What happened, then?”

“Jack had a growth spurt. Shot up six inches in a year.”

“Simon didn’t?”

Refilling her ceramic mug from the carafe, Adele smirked. “The only thing I could figure is that Jack drank a lot of milk. Loved it. First two items on my weekly grocery list: milk and Nestle’s Quik.”

“Simon didn’t share Jack’s love for it?”

“He preferred fruit juices. I never kept soda in the house. I wanted them to be healthy, if nothing else. By age 12, Jack stood a head taller than Simon.”

“Simon never caught up?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“They don’t keep in touch?”

“When they turned 18, and decided not to go to college, I turned them loose on the world. Told them if I hadn’t taught them what they needed to know to survive by then, they’d have to learn it elsewhere.”

“They don’t visit?”

Adele snorted. “There’s no reason to come back to this hole.”

“Not even for Mother’s Day?”

“Last time we were together on Mother’s Day, we went paintballing. I came home with bruises all over.” She noticed the suspiciously arched eyebrow. “They did, too. A chance for us to get revenge for the pain, trouble and... whatever we inflicted on each other all those years.”

“They never displayed any unusual... abilities?”

Draining the steaming brew, Adele rose. “They were intelligent, book smart. Jack earned varsity letters for football and track. Simon enjoyed the chess club.”

“They worked here with you?”

“Weekends and summers. It’s not like we ever get really busy, so far off the beaten track.” Reaching for the empty platter - the customer having devoured bacon, eggs, toast and hash browns - Adele slid it into a grey bus tub. “I’ve got to get back to work.”

“I... appreciate your honesty.”

“What happened... happened. We should never fear the truth.”

Extracting a wallet, the \$20 was tucked into Adele’s calloused hand before departing. “Too bad so many people do just that.”

From the cash register, the waitress watched this curious individual climb into a 1968 baby blue Ford Mustang and cruise west along Main Street.

A cell phone connected the reporter to her editor in New York.

“Well?” barked the baritone through the speaker.

“She hasn’t seen them in years. Other than confirming they had an... unconventional upbringing, she doesn’t know a thing.”

“That smells fishy.”

“I sensed she wasn’t lying.”

The guffaw nearly deafened her. “No, she just bares her soul to every stranger who walks in the joint.”

“She’s a trusting soul. I don’t think she would’ve... done the deed with the old wizard if she wasn’t.”

“I suppose they haven’t crossed paths either?”

“Vanished off the face of the earth, for all she knows. But then, being 500 years old, he just might’ve.”

“You still think...”

“I don’t think; I know.”

Derision dripped from the editor’s voice. “How can you know so much about a man you never met, and two others who have wreaked havoc on the planet?”

She didn’t reply. She couldn’t tell this cynic the twins’ father had pulled a similar stunt with her mother in a New Mexico desert outpost two years after their conception.

Since earning her journalism degree at Indiana University, where she’d grown up with her grandparents after their daughter died in childbirth, she’d spent her free time researching the elusive being who’d cut a swath across the country in the late 1970s, ostensibly a hobo who exhibited no special qualities.

Two decades along, she still didn’t know his name. Her mother hadn’t provided it to the hospital for the birth certificate - if he’d even told her. She kept no diary where it might have been scribbled after their passionate night together.

Adele hadn’t revealed it, either.

Parking at a rest stop along Interstate 70, she flipped through the photos she’d snapped with her cell’s high resolution camera in the diner: faded high school graduation portraits of her half-brothers, hung on the wall with their classmates from that by-gone period. Dark, wavy hair, topping slender features with intense brown eyes, straight noses, pleasant smiles showing perfect teeth - handsome, yet ordinary.

What had turned them into domestic terrorists of epic proportions?

Exiting the Mustang to stretch her limbs, she suspected the discovery of their... previously latent potential had overwhelmed their common sense. Guys were like that sometimes, acting on impulse and ignoring the consequences.

Maybe the twins had watched too many superhero movies, where destruction wrought battling the villains never really merited attention. So what, if hundreds of vehicles were crushed while chasing a flame-throwing lunatic? Or, buildings decimated by airborne monsters?

Like those comic book characters, had they gone to ground in some remote hideaway, their own version of the Batcave?

She should be able to sense their whereabouts, given their bond of blood. Her early morning premonition about the ferris wheel at Chicago’s Navy Pier falling into Lake Michigan a month earlier - fortunately, with no one aboard - had been confirmed on the same evening’s news. The baseball game between the Milwaukee Brewers and Los Angeles Dodgers had been disrupted four days later

by spontaneous explosions in the outfield between innings, forcing an evacuation of the venue.

Incidents continued to make headlines in a circuit running westward to Washington State, south through Oregon and California, then eastward through southern climes. They crossed the line when the mission church at Sky City on the Acoma Pueblo exploded, injuring hundreds gathered for feast day celebrations.

News conferences with police at the various scenes proved frustrating, no answers forthcoming regarding the cause of these tragedies. They seemed entirely random to law enforcement authorities.

Her personal investigation compared security footage from truck stops within a five mile radius of the sites. A high-profile red Ferrari visible on the day of each disaster became a common thread. Colleagues at the magazine adept with photo enhancement software managed to zoom in on the license plate from one screen shot. The Pennsylvania registration was traced to Simon Whitmore.

The twins had last made their presence known in Arlington, Virginia. The Tomb of the Unknown erupted like a volcano, scorching tourists and killing the military guard.

Then, things went silent. Eight months elapsed... nothing.

Insurance companies forced to pay death benefits and property loss claims howled at local and national agencies' failure to apprehend the culprits. Media lost interest, including her own periodical, leaving her to save up every minute of vacation, holiday or comp time to press onward.

She was due back in New York on Monday and, while the Mustang enjoyed hitting speeds above 100 mph, she doubted the highway patrol would appreciate having to give chase.

The stroll around the picnic area's perimeter soothed her muscles, cramped from long distance driving. She veered toward the log cabin-style structure to use the restroom, uncertain of her next destination.

Not that she need worry. Emerging from double glass doors, she squinted at approaching figures silhouetted within a blinding glare, ankle-length dusters fluttering behind them like capes.

She glanced at her wristwatch: 3:18 pm. No way the sun should be setting - unless the twins wanted to heighten the dramatic impact of their arrival.

"Nice entrance, boys!" she hailed, unfazed.

"So, you're Diana," rumbled Simon from a distance of ten yards.

She grunted. "Lose the special effects, for Pete's sake."

As the light resumed a normal intensity, SUVs and recreational vehicles raced from the parking lot to escape impending doom. Semi drivers cowered in their cabs, using CB radios to warn off other rigs.

“You’ve been looking for us,” Jack smirked, an unpleasant contortion of otherwise attractive features.

“Yeah, you been cowering in fear?”

Simon sniffed. “We’ve brought the country to its knees, in fear of *us*.”

“And that makes you better men how?” she challenged. “A bullet will still take you down, like any other human being.”

“You plan to shoot us?”

“I shouldn’t have to; you know better. I’ve talked with your mom...”

Their brown eyes widened simultaneously. “You did?”

“Of course. Not two hours ago. She’s... quite upset.”

“You... didn’t tell her?” queried Jack.

“I didn’t have to. A mother knows what her children are capable of, even when they’re in their forties. She blames herself.”

“It’s not... her fault.”

“Of course, it isn’t. The first time you realized you could move objects with your mind, you set out to push our inheritance to the max.”

Simon bristled. “You have it, too?”

“I’ve consciously chosen not to use it.”

“Why not? You could *be* anything, *have* anything...”

“I don’t *want* anything. Just a simple life, telling people’s stories.”

“How foolish!” scoffed Jack.

“That’s the difference between us.” She sidled toward the Mustang, adding under her breath, “And why I’ll be the last one standing.”

What could be compared to special effects from a *Star Wars* movie - arcs of high energy plasma fired at an ethereal target - bolts of electricity shot from her fingertips toward the pair. A flick of their wrists deflected the attack, torching nearby trees and shattering a picnic shelter.

Jack bellowed, “Is that all you’ve got?”

Their joint counter-offensive slammed her against the Mustang; the dent would cost hundreds to repair, she lamented.

Seconds before it melted into a puddle of boiling metal.

“Shit!”

“You don’t know what you’re up against, Sis!” Simon mocked.

She retorted, “Two overgrown five-year-olds!”

Her brain processing defensive options, she felt a presence behind her. A cursory glance raised a lump in her throat.

A salt-and-pepper mane framed a face very similar to those opposite. Though at least four decades since he'd bedded Adele Whitmore, he looked no older than 50.

"Use the trucks," he advised quietly.

"Use the trucks for what?" she croaked.

"Crush them."

"I will not!"

"If you don't, I will."

"But, why? There must be a way to convince them..."

"The power has warped their souls. They no longer want to use what I gave them for good. They're bound to indulge every whim..."

"What about me? Will I end up that way?"

"You prefer your simple life."

A dual electrical charge raged toward them. The wizard blocked its impact and reversed it toward the source.

Jack and Simon dove behind a line of yew bushes. A utility pole severed behind them, toppling into the parking lot.

"Are you out of your mind?" Jack yowled, peeking between smoldering branches.

Their father countered, "Ask yourself that!"

Simon gradually righted himself. "Why have the mojo, if we can't use it?"

"Use it, yes, but wisely, sparingly, to save lives, not end them."

"Where's the fun in that?" Jack puzzled.

Diana's teeth clenched. "Idiots!"

"You know, this could go on indefinitely," her father whispered.

"Why did you... do it in the first place?"

"You mean, help your mother and Adele get pregnant?"

"Uh-huh."

He leaned against a raised stone planter filled with petunias. "I can't live forever..."

"All evidence to the contrary."

"Hush, child."

She lowered her gaze.

"The need for... our presence through human history is... incontrovertible. I thought my progeny would... step up to protect humanity from its own... short-sightedness."

“So much for the best laid plans.”

He sneered, “There’s another solution to this stalemate: you can... steal their inheritance for yourself.”

“Leaving them nothing?”

“Fully human.”

“And, the harm they caused?”

“The authorities will assign appropriate punishment.”

“Oh, that’s cruel,” Diana snickered.

“No more cruel than they have been.”

“True.” She scrutinized her half-brothers. “How is it done?”

“Like siphoning gas.”

She’d performed that act a number of times, the Mustang’s fuel gage having ceased functioning years prior.

Jack and Simon were gearing up for another salvo when their younger sibling blindsided them. What felt like a vacuum sucking the marrow from their bones drove them to their knees.

“What have you done?” Simon moaned.

The wizard remonstrated. “Straightened you out.”

“But, you can’t!” protested Jack. “There’s no reason to go on living without...”

Diana silently consulted her father, who shook his head solemnly.

“No, you’ll live - and, hopefully, learn - like every other human on the planet,” she declared.

Jack whined, “That’s not fair!”

“Life ain’t fair. Deal with it.”

Earning herself a squeeze around the shoulders from the elder wizard, she focused on the molten classic she’d prized for decades. He vanished as she exerted every ounce of her newly acquired faculties to resurrect the muscle car, in mint condition.

Jack and Simon joined her, impressed.

“I never tried that,” muttered the latter.

His brother added, “You’re aware we have no need of... that kind of transportation.”

“I know,” Diana stated. “But, I like it.”

She dug a key ring from her jeans and opened the driver’s side door. The men lingered near the rear quarter panel.

“Something to say?” she asked.

Sheepishly, Jack ventured, “Could you... give us a ride?”

“Where to?” she chuckled, waving them toward the passenger side.

“Wherever you’re going.” Simon flopped on the rear seat. “It’ll be good to get to know our sister.”

Jack hissed, “Suck up.”

The trio laughed together as Diana steered toward New York, uncertain about how - or if - she’d ever become the wizard her father intended her to be.

She doubted it.

Living simply had definite advantages.

Dichotomy

Perhaps the gloom beyond her window prompted the morbid reflections that August Saturday. Or, the fact her birthday fell ten days hence might have spurred the musings.

It didn't matter, her brain attempting to wade through a morass of rationalizations and excuses.

More than 80% of her life had been spent pursuing balance - often at the expense of honesty - in body, mind and soul.

Fortunately, she encountered little difficulty being both an author of fiction (using a pseudonym due to her ex-in-laws' disapproval of her subject matter) and a hard-nosed journalist. The story-telling skills she'd acquired in her youth, after all, lent themselves well to both engaging and informing subscribers of the newspapers and periodicals that printed her articles.

Only a handful - if that - read her yarns, posted on a free website. She labored over the characters and plots blending suspense, adventure, comedy and romance not for money, but because she enjoyed the challenge. Years later, she revisited tales she'd forgotten creating, thrilled to discover the climax anew (and correct any overlooked typographical errors).

Other aspects presented more tenuous predicaments, primarily her employment with religious nonprofit organizations - mostly Catholic - while being a staunch atheist. She could promote the charitable endeavors and ministries with photos and eloquent narratives, but did not hold with their reliance, from time immemorial, on a God who had been humanized to fit certain factions' skewed interpretations or politics. When obligated to attend communal prayer events, her mind wandered to pending project deadlines or weekend plans.

Oddly, along those same lines, while ignoring the existence of an omnipotent deity, her daily routine blended the virtues of simplicity with moderation garnered from her ongoing studies of Franciscan and Benedictine spirituality.

Had any of her acquaintances - she counted few as actual friends - realized the truth about her lack of faith, she might have been compelled to return to a job in the public sector, despising the blatant greed and pervasive corruption.

She tended to call out those faults openly, joking that her totem animal was a skunk. She gave reign to unrivaled bluntness, yet could be quite kind and generous in most situations. If she believed in anything: all human beings deserved respect.

Her distinctive blend of creativity and logic caused its own set of issues, especially considering her obsessive tendencies. Once started on a fictional endeavor, she remained awake - tortured - by dialogue and descriptions until the last word was typed on the computer screen. To this end, she'd sought solace in alcohol - once staying drunk for an entire month - though she didn't like herself when intoxicated: excessively extroverted and uninhibited. She had gained control over those cravings, imbibing on rare occasions as she aged, yet a conscious decision to buy and break the seal on a bottle remained a frequent temptation.

Another temptation to which she regularly succumbed: work. Never required to labor more than 40 hours a week - often less - she clocked 60 or more hours over the course of seven days. Being on salary, her "bank" of comp time numbered in the dozens - even hundreds - of hours, never expended unless she was forced to take the time off or lose it. She refused to leave projects incomplete and, in those odd moments when a lull in her duties left her desk uncluttered, she found it impossible to feign looking busy - a technique some other employees had mastered.

Relationships with men formed its own dichotomy. She'd long since concluded the majority of males never "grow up" - they merely grow older, maintaining the maturity of a five-year-old in a sandbox. Yet, she found both inspiration for her novels and romantic satisfaction in some rugged, dark types' caresses and kisses.

Living on the monastery grounds to facilitate immediate availability during retreats or special events, the cloistered nuns who currently supplied her wages would have been scandalized to learn what transpired in her cottage any given evening.

"Enough, already!" she muttered, hoisting herself from the recliner as the sun peeked through thick clouds. Trudging to the laundry room with an overfilled basket, she determined to be content with who she was and how she behaved, and to hell with everyone else.

How many times had she told her four sons - now grown - that those who insulted or bullied them were the ones with the problem, and they should be true to their convictions? She'd endured 27 years with an overbearing, alcoholic, abusive mother before being freed of her constant criticisms by cancer. That woman, bent on achieving wealth and prestige, had done little more than berate her daughter's dreams of being published - even burning a stack of diligently-typed manuscripts in a drunken rage. This offspring recognized the futility of amassing material possessions and the false flattery of society matrons, and rejected these priorities.

Unlike her mother, she selected clothes to be comfortable, not fashionable. A \$25 World War II Army overcoat bought at a flea market had served her for years, along with a battered black fedora. Jeans or sweats, t-shirts or hoodies made the most sense. She barely complied with office mandates for "business casual".

Ideals of "happiness" never ranked high in her estimation, "contentment" being a more realistic goal.

Still...

She grasped that life, at its very essence, had no point. That knowledge spoiled every activity, every aspiration. Human beings - no differently than animals - were born, existed and died, and even those lucky enough to leave a "legacy" in their wake would be forgotten when Mother Nature wiped the species from the face of the planet.

A certain quote she'd read in a biography of British "hellraisers" resonated with her philosophy. Oliver Reed had pointed out how actor Richard Burton was drinking the night before he died, and Reed himself hoped to have the courage to drink himself to death - which he did in 1999. Her version involved a lone, genuine addiction: chocolate. She'd told more than one person how, if diagnosed with diabetes, she would shun insulin injections - despising needles - and joyfully eat mounds of chocolate until she expired.

Not that any sort of afterlife colored her outlook. If she accepted any truth, it was a rather universal consciousness, connecting all living things, sort of like Star Wars' "Force".

She didn't want a funeral, her opinion of that industry's tactics less than complimentary. Being cremated or composted and returning to the earth without contaminating the soil appealed to her.

Removing the combined load of towels, undergarments, shirts, slacks and socks from the dryer an hour later, she - as so many times previously - resolved to muddle through each day as best she could. If she reached retirement age, she could cast off at least some of the duplicity that plagued her existence, and find a quiet corner of the world - probably Ireland - to live in peace.

For the moment... two powerful hands slid around her waist from behind, and insistent lips kissed the nape of her neck. Her passion for life as a whole might be jaded, but she reveled in this intense, albeit fleeting, pleasure.

Long Kept Secrets

Standing before the massive black wrought iron gate, Jude shuddered. The paved drive beyond wound through an orchard of apple and pear trees, still dormant after the long winter. Bare branches permitted a rather skewed view of the mansion a quarter-mile distant.

Hoisting her camera bag on her left shoulder, the journalist presumed some gate attendant would greet her. She hollered twice and, when no one appeared, she raised the latch with a deafening squeak and pushed the panel inward, hinges grating.

With all that noise, she half expected dogs to converge on the site and tear her to shreds.

She paused before commencing her trek: silence.

Comforted by the lack of barking or alarms, she breathed air scented by the Radcliffe family distillery built over the western hills. Producing whiskey and cider had netted the clan their wealth through the 19th and early 20th centuries – to what end?

Jude didn't have to consult her notes. She'd grown up in Radcliffe, Michigan, in the "thumb" region of a mitten-shaped state, and had been Magda Radcliffe's classmate when the tragedy occurred.

Francis Radcliffe, the last male heir to the fortune, had forsaken the privilege afforded him by his bank account, serving as an Army officer during World War II. He died in France on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Upon receipt of the traditional telegram from the U.S. President, Edith Radcliffe, his wife of ten years, had suffered a fatal cerebral hemorrhage, collapsing in the Great Hall as the servants scrambled to provide assistance.

The nearest hospital a three hour drive, there'd been no hope.

Jude had read newspaper accounts at the time and, again, in anticipation of this assignment. Magda, 9 years old on that day, had been ordered to the nursery by the family lawyer, Simon Vale. The maid misunderstood his instructions and locked the child in that chamber filled with toys and games.

Intelligent and accustomed to playing alone, Magda occupied herself with an imaginary tea party and a book of fairy tales. When a sudden storm knocked out the electricity, though, she was left in the dark with no candles or flashlight.

On the domicile's top floor, her frightened screams could not be heard by the officials on ground level, tending her mother.

Past midnight, Vale accompanied the butler to check on Magda – the other staff having retired. What the pair discovered chilled their souls.

Hands bloodied from pounding on the door, fingernails torn from scratching at the knob, the girl had gone into shock.

She remained catatonic and unresponsive for two years.

The entire town turned out for Edith and Francis' double funeral, though the Army officer's body had actually been interred in France. More tears were shed over Magda's health than her dead parents.

The estate's assets allowed for the girl to be tended by private nurses without needing to transfer her to a hospital. Easy duty, Jude surmised, checking the pulse of an immobile, unconscious patient in the morning and evening.

Her physical recovery was briefly updated in a society page announcement of her thirteenth birthday. After that, nothing.

Jude remembered Magda as sweet, generous, though somewhat snooty when she didn't get her way. She wore expensive clothes that matched from the hat and coat to the socks and shoes, while the other youngsters made do with hand-me-downs from older siblings. Her governess ensured her blonde curls were perfectly coifed in the style of Shirley Temple, often mussed during games of kickball or tag on the playground.

Magda had invited Jude to the mansion on numerous occasions, but Jude accepted only once. The weird echoes when she walked through the rooms, the lofty ceilings and valuable antiques made the visitor extremely nervous, fearing she might scuff the tile or break a priceless trinket.

They'd played army with dozens of stuffed animals, the bears and lions defeating the rabbits and cats. They'd watched a crew of men picking apples from the upstairs balcony, before enjoying cookies and milk in the kitchen.

Jude never saw Magda's parents.

"They travel a lot," her hostess had explained.

For a poor child from a working-class family to pity a rich kid...

Her ruminations were disrupted as she approached the stone edifice. Ivy clung to the walls, obscuring some of the windows in what must've been unoccupied wings. A single light burned on the second floor.

Jude felt her heart in her throat as she gripped the polished bronze knocker secured to an oaken panel 15 feet tall. She tapped it tentatively against a matching plate. Doubting anyone heard the summons, she repeated the gesture more briskly.

She'd waited over a minute and was reaching for the heavy ring again when the door slid inward a few inches.

"May I help you?" rumbled a cultured baritone, its owner barely visible.

"I'm here to see Magdalene Radcliffe."

"Miss Radcliffe receives no visitors."

As the wood reversed course, Jude debated fingers or foot, choosing the latter. She rammed the leather shoe in the gap, grimacing as the pressure squeezed her toes. “I made the appointment with her lawyer, Simon Vale.”

“Mr. Vale is dead.”

“Simon Vale, Junior.”

The door opened, allowing each to view the other. Watery blue eyes scrutinized Jude’s lithe form within the floral print silk blouse and black slacks. She, in turn, assessed the slightly stooped, grey suited, balding butler.

“Your name?” he inquired.

“Jude, er, Judith Thompson.”

Stepping aside, he signaled her to enter. “Come in, Miss Thompson.”

Her “Thank you,” reverberated around the Great Hall, just as she remembered. She shivered.

A shuffling gait moved toward an aperture on the left: the library. “If you’ll wait here, Mr. Vale will join you shortly.”

“And, your name?” she called before he vanished.

“Perkins, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Perkins.”

Too agitated to sit, Jude crossed to ceiling-high bookshelves, perusing titles of ornately bound first editions. If the Radcliffe fortune petered out, she mused, they could recoup their losses by selling these gold-embossed tomes.

Ten minutes passed before Simon Vale the younger passed beneath the lintel. An inch or two taller than herself, he sported a longish black mane, combed back from his forehead. Wide set brown eyes, a straight nose and full lips reminded her of someone she’d recently seen, though she couldn’t recall whom.

His white shirt unbuttoned at the collar, he’d shed his tie and sport coat elsewhere. She presumed they would match his navy pinstriped trousers.

“Miss Thompson?”

“Yes.”

He neared, hand extended, an emerald and gold monogram ring prominent. She clasped his fingers firmly, impressed by his strength.

“A pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

Waving her to the French provincial sofa, he waited until she dropped on the cushions, then settled on a matching chair across the carved coffee table.

“This is quite awkward,” he lamented, “but I’m afraid you won’t be able to interview Magda today.”

“Why not? When we spoke on the phone, you said...”

“I know, and I thought she would be willing. When I broached the subject with her, however, she adamantly refused.”

“Did you remind her we were in the same class at school?”

“She... doesn't remember those days. Her... condition...”

“It's been 25 years since...”

“Effects of the unique trauma she experienced do not lessen with time. Mentally, she remains nine years old, trapped in a dark room without means of escape.”

“How horrible!” Jude gasped.

“Indeed. The household staff does their best to maintain an atmosphere of calm, doing nothing to disturb her...”

“They've remained faithful all these years?”

“Some left, but were not replaced. The others are well paid for their dedication.”

The reporter drew a notepad from her camera bag. “And, they are?”

“Perkins, the butler, who you've met.”

She scribbled the name on a blank page.

“Garcia, the gardener, and Zielinski, the cook.”

“That's all?” she stated, incredulous.

“With only the kitchen, Magda's bedroom and my office being used, there's no need for additional people disrupting her routine.”

“And, what is that routine?”

“She rises at eight, eats breakfast, takes a walk around the garden, rests. Lunch is served at noon, she naps through the afternoon, eats dinner at six, watches an old movie if she feels up to it, then retires at nine.”

“Not much of a life.”

“You must understand, Miss Thompson, her extended coma caused her to be severely malnourished when she finally regained consciousness. Medical care after the war didn't... provide for such an unusual situation.”

“In other words, she lacks the basic energy of a woman her physical age.”

“Precisely.”

“Sad.”

“I agree.”

“She never leaves the property, even to see a doctor?”

“The doctor comes here, though there's little that can be done, as I said.”

“Specialists? The University of Michigan at Ann Arbor has an incredible research program...”

“We’ve even contacted the Mayo Clinic. Magda will... be as she is until the day she dies.”

Jude closed the notepad. “What a pathetic future for a girl who enjoyed school so much...”

“School.”

The tremulous soprano voice drifted into the room like a weak breeze. Both Jude and Vale pivoted toward the sound.

Magda Radcliffe, wrapped in a delicately embroidered yellow silk robe, hovered on the threshold. Jude marveled at her hair, pulled in a simple ponytail, and pale features.

“Simon?” the heiress queried. “What’s going on?”

He strode toward her. “Nothing, my dear.”

“I’ve.... been searching high and low for you.”

“I told you I wouldn’t be gone long.”

“Five minutes is too long.”

She slid her arms around his waist and favored him with an ardent kiss. Jude swallowed hard. No nine year old mentality, this.

She pretended to study the Swiss mantle clock during the interlude, checking her wrist watch twice before her peripheral vision detected their separation. When she turned, Vale’s sheepish mien betrayed his embarrassment, while Magda beamed.

“Forgive my... behavior,” she tittered. “I’m very possessive of Simon, and very jealous.”

Jude forced a grin. “No need to be, Maggie.”

Magda’s bizarre reaction to that name, as if a flood of memories washed over her and she was drowning in them, caused Jude to recoil. Vale tried to steer his charge to the nearest chair; she resisted, lurching toward the visitor.

“Jude!”

The women hugged enthusiastically.

“Where have you been?” Magda prodded. “Mrs. Carson will report you for truancy!”

Jude glanced over Magda’s shoulder at Vale, who shrugged hopelessly.

“I’ve been... away. My grandmother’s, in California.”

“How is she?”

“Well,” Jude bluffed. “But, I’m glad to be home.”

“I know your parents must’ve missed you, but you’re staying here with me! It’ll be a regular slumber party!”

“If you... insist.”

Magda whirled to her lawyer. “Simon, fetch Perkins! Tell him to make up the guest room!”

Vale glared at Jude, shaking his head to encourage her refusal.

That gesture kindled the reporter’s suspicions.

“Come, let’s get some cookies and milk in the kitchen!” suggested Magda.

Jude wondered, “Chocolate chip?”

“Zielinski baked some fresh yesterday!”

The friends exited the library, leaving Vale stewing in his anger.

An expensively upgraded kitchen met with Jude’s approval. Stainless steel appliances had replaced pre-war models – within the past five years, she estimated. Zielinski, however, was absent.

Magda commandeered glasses from a china cupboard and a carton of milk from the refrigerator. She directed Jude to fetch the fat friar cookie jar from the shelf above the knife rack.

They sat at what must’ve been the servants’ dining table and gorged themselves on the soft, chewy delights. Eventually, the cook presented himself, starched white apron tied at the waist over jeans and a Michigan State sweatshirt. A matching ball cap covered much of his sandy mop, and thick spectacles distorted his green eyes.

“Apologies, Miss Magdalene,” he drawled with a distinctly European inflection.

“No problem, Zielinski. We found what we wanted.”

He sidled toward the stove. “Very well, Miss. Will there be two for dinner this evening?”

“Three, I guess.”

Jude squinted at her old classmate.

“You, me, and Simon.”

“Does he live here?” asked the reporter, quickly biting her tongue.

“When he’s in town.”

“He travels?”

“His firm’s main office is in Detroit. He drives down there periodically.”

Another irregularity, Jude registered. When she’d phoned Vale the previous Friday, his secretary had revealed the practice was limited to matters involving Radcliffe Enterprises, their location: Radcliffe Township.

Jude resolved to get Vale alone and thoroughly grill him. She and Magda might no longer be close as in days gone by, but that didn’t mean she’d permit her to be victimized by unscrupulous sorts.

Between sips of milk, Magda piped, “Zielinski, have you seen Perkins?”

“Yes, Miss. He was making up the bed in the room next to yours for the... slumber party.”

“Good.” She drained her glass.

Jude did likewise, licking the last chocolate from her lips.

“Let me show you the gardens.”

“I’d love it,” the guest agreed.

Back through the Great Hall and out French doors, they wandered between rose beds, just beginning to sprout, multi-colored tulips and daffodils. Jude noticed an abundance of weeds, outrageous if a gardener remained on retainer.

That individual meandered in their general direction, wheelbarrow filled with implements and fertilizer sacks. A bushy black mustache and scraggy chin-beard didn’t seem to fit the narrowness of his face. Wire-rimmed oval sunglasses – despite ample clouds – hid his eyes. He touched the brim of his straw hat when Magda hailed him.

“Looks good, Garcia,” she praised.

He replied in a heavy accent, “Gracias, Senorita.”

“Do you think we’ll have a good crop of apples and pears this year?”

“If the late freeze did not damage the buds.”

Magda tugged Jude toward the gazebo. “Zielinski makes the best apple pies!”

They rested on a white wooden bench built into the structure’s framework, gazing at rolling hills in need of mowing.

“Maggie,” Jude ventured. “How are you, really?”

“Frankly, I always seem to be tired. I don’t get much done. Dad would be really angry about the late homework assignments and lost book reports. Good thing the phone is out of order. If the teachers could call...”

If she didn’t realize her parents were dead... no wonder Vale could manipulate her so easily.

And, what about these other servants? Paid for lounging around until she presented herself, then acting busy?

They’d disconnected the phone, so she’d have no contact with the real world?

“Do you still play Go Fish?” Jude hinted.

“Of course! I’m the champ!”

“Let’s go, then.”

They strolled to the mansion, afternoon sun glimmering off tall windows. The peaceful image did little to assuage the tightness in Jude’s chest.

Three rounds of Go Fish in the nursery – still occupied by piles of stuffed animals and toys suited to a pre-teen – left Magda flushed and exhausted. Jude accompanied her to the bed, tucking the quilt to her chin as she dozed.

A partially empty tumbler on the night stand merited inspection. No strange odor to the liquid, no powdery residue that might indicate Vale had been drugging his employer.

Still...

She descended the curved marble staircase, poking her head in each room until she found Vale reclining on a divan in what had been Edith Radcliffe's morning room.

Jude secured the door against chance interruptions as Vale shot upright.

"What's the idea?" he objected.

"I could ask you the same. What have you done to Maggie?"

He relaxed. "Cared for her in the best way possible."

"You mean, cared for yourself and your... cronies."

"Cronies?"

"The lazy gardener, inept cook and useless butler. Living off her money, and giving nothing in return except lies."

Vale chuckled. "You didn't notice, did you?"

"Notice what?"

"Please, sit." He patted the cushion beside him. "I don't bite."

"I wouldn't believe you, if you swore on a bible."

"Please."

She complied reluctantly, never shifting her eyes from his face.

"You must swear none of what I divulge will be included in your..."

"No way."

"You have no choice. The truth would... endanger Magda's future."

"You're over-dramatizing the circumstances."

He didn't budge.

"Oh, all right," she conceded.

His mouth pursed momentarily, then relaxed. "When Magda's parents died, I was 19, a college sophomore. My father took charge of the estate, and I helped with the upkeep on my breaks and summer vacation."

"You mean, the servant shortage existed even then?"

"Magda's condition didn't warrant a governess, and the maid blamed for locking her in her room quit in disgrace. Mrs. Radcliffe's maid also resigned, as did Mr. Radcliffe's valet. With no one needing elaborate meals prepared, the kitchen staff accepted positions elsewhere."

Jude acknowledged, "Makes sense."

"A hired nurse provided physical therapy for Magda once she... regained her wherewithal. Her muscles had atrophied during the ordeal. It took eight months before she could stand on her own, and another year before she could walk without support. By the time she was fully functional, I'd graduated law school."

"And, you came to live here?"

"Oh, no. Dad had been so focused on Radcliffe business, he'd lost his other clients. I tried to reestablish the practice, but it was too late."

"What did you do?"

"I became Perkins."

Jude blinked twice and shook her head, as if to clear a brain fog. "You did *what*?"

"Perkins was older than dirt, even when I was a kid. He served three generations of Radcliffes. Died in his sleep on Labor Day, of all things. Magda had grown accustomed to him bringing her fresh flowers from the garden each afternoon. Dad thought it best not to... interrupt that routine. So, I shaved my head, applied a bald pate with white hair on the side, and walked with a stoop."

"You mean..."

He nodded. "The man who answered the door was... me."

"But, Magda must've seen through the disguise!"

"That's just it." He leaned forward and scooped up Jude's hands. "Magda can barely see."

Jude leapt off the divan. "That's ridiculous! She recognized me from across the library!"

"She recognized your voice," Vale soothed, drawing her down. "Some long lost memory was triggered..."

"Then, Zielinski... Garcia..."

"The reason there's new appliances is because the valve on the old gas stove malfunctioned, and Zielinski received third degree burns over sixty percent of his body when the oven exploded. His medical treatment was even more painful than Magda's, and he opted not to resume his duties. Lives in Florida with his wife and seven children, on a generous pension from the estate."

"You became him and... learned to bake cookies?"

"Now, you're catching on."

"Can I take a stab and say Garcia was deported when his work visa expired?"

"Oh, no. He's an American citizen. He just tired of tending a garden no one really appreciated. He still lives in town."

“So, you’ve become an actor, as well as legal advisor?”

“When Dad’s lung cancer took him, I didn’t have much choice. Magda would’ve been institutionalized – albeit in a very posh, private facility – and lose any chance she had for a normal life.” He exhaled, a sad smile warping his features. “Hell, I’ve even had to impersonate my own father. I couldn’t tell Magda he’d died.”

“Does Magda’s normal life include you being...” Jude rolled hazel eyes toward the textured ceiling.

“That is, probably, the one authentic part of my life here. Before all the... deception started, when I was home from school, I’d walk Magda around the property so she’d get some fresh air and exercise. I loved her, but knew nothing could ever come of it. She fell in love with me, I later discovered. In those moments we’re together as... us, she’s surprisingly mature and balanced. Then, the glow fades and she becomes a child again.”

“So, it’s not you just playing on her emotions.”

“No. I’m trying to keep her safe, content...”

Jude ruminated briefly. “But, if she never sees anyone except you...”

“I understand her moods, her challenges. Others would... say things that upset her, disrupt her schedule. Even moving the toys can trigger an outburst.”

“She... didn’t seem to mind me being here.”

“Which utterly amazes me. How long do you plan to stay?”

“I’m due back in Grand Rapids tomorrow.”

“Would you consider extending your visit?”

“To what end?”

Vale sighed. “I may have been wrong to isolate her. If she can interact socially with an old friend, it might mean there’s been a change...”

“You want to see if this initial... enthusiasm lasts?”

“Yes, please.”

“Not to mention, it would ease your burden considerably.”

“It would eliminate some of the... quick changes, to be sure.”

“We’ll give it a week, then.” She rose. “I’ll need to notify my editor. Maggie believes the phones don’t work?”

“The house phones were disconnected once the servants left. There’s one in my office you can use.”

Moving toward the door, Jude turned. “Where do you sleep?”

“In the servants’ quarters.”

“Is that when you’re supposed to be working in Detroit?”

He bristled. “If you’re implying I’ve shared Magda’s bed...”

“No offense meant. You’re obviously an attentive and solicitous caretaker. I commend you for that.”

The trio ate a simple dinner of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches that evening. Jude’s accounts of her travels to interview the famous and the infamous prompted Magda’s invitation for a prolonged vacation.

As the days progressed, Jude coaxed Magda from her ordinary routine. The gardener’s shed housed bicycles in reasonably good repair; they pumped up the tires and rode around the estate.

Magda slept for six hours after that exertion, a smile lighting her delicate features.

A taxi fetched them on Thursday for a jaunt into town. Magda hadn’t seen Main Street for decades; fortunately, not much had changed in the remote community. They patronized the soda fountain at Murphy’s Drugs, browsed in Hansen’s Dress Shoppe and knelt for a prayer at the Episcopal church.

Magda didn’t notice the residents’ sideways glances, all strangers warranting wary inspection.

Following a dinner of Chinese take-out, Magda laughing in delight as she fiddled clumsily with the chopsticks, Jude retired to the library to read while Vale escorted his employer upstairs.

He joined the guest in short order.

“What, no... romantic tete-a-tete?” Jude mocked.

“She... made me promise to beg you to stay on, permanently.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“You’d be well paid for your companionship.”

Jude squirmed on the sofa. “If I stayed, it would be because I value Maggie as a friend, not for money.”

“She’s blossomed in the past few days. I blame myself for impeding her recovery...”

“You were trying to protect her. There’s a strength in her, though, that will ultimately transcend her perceived fragility...”

“Then what?” He glowered at the dormant fireplace. “How do we reintroduce her to society, to modern culture? She’s unaccustomed to...”

Jude crept up behind him, squeezing his shoulder. “One step at a time.”

Vale swiveled his neck and kissed the graceful digits. “Please stay. For me, as much as for Magda.”

The embrace and kiss mutually passionate, they parted abruptly when a high-pitched gasp reached their ears.

Magda - clad in a pale blue flannel nightgown, blonde tresses tousled - retreated from the doorway and scurried up the marble steps. Vale rushed after her, Jude on his heels.

They caught her near the top, preventing her flight while speaking in even tones. She would not be calmed, shrieking how they'd betrayed her trust.

"Get out! Both of you! Leave now!"

As she wriggled against their grasp, blood rushed to her cheeks. Her words became indistinguishable syllables and, suddenly, her entire body went limp.

The couple eased her onto the carpeted landing.

"Oh, God!" Vale hissed. "It's a repeat of that night..."

"You mean..."

"Yes. As she banged on the nursery door to be let out, she grew more and more livid, until she fell into shock and became catatonic."

Magda's violet orbs stared vacantly past them.

"Call the doctor!" Jude urged.

Vale squatted beside the prone form, checking for a pulse. "She's dead."

"It's... my fault..." Jude slumped against the banister, stunned.

He confronted her. "No, it's mine. I precipitated..."

Both contemplated the corpse.

"It's for the best," The lawyer finally stated, leading Jude to ground level. "Her quality of life..."

"At least, she enjoyed the last few days."

"Indeed, thanks to you."

The county coroner arrived well past midnight. Vale and Jude waited for the body to be transported to the morgue before navigating to the kitchen as dawn lit the eastern sky for... milk and cookies.

"What happens next?" Jude puzzled between bites.

"I can ditch the wigs."

The reporter found no humor in this, and Vale immediately sobered.

"The estate will be sold, with the proceeds donated to select charities, according to Francis' will."

"Didn't Maggie have a will?"

"She couldn't be affirmed as being of sound mind so, no."

"Is one of the charities a mental health organization, at least?"

"Would veterans' care foundations count?"

"I suppose. Especially if they help the wounded returning from service in Viet Nam."

"I'll make sure of it."

By sunrise, Jude was ready to vacate the premises. Vale procrastinated at length.

“Too much of your life spent here?” she postulated.

“I don’t want to lose you.”

“Once you’ve wrapped up details here, I’ll still be in Grand Rapids.”

He deliberated. “They’ve got some pretty good legal firms in the city.”

“Or, you could become a deputy prosecutor.”

“I’ve no stomach for criminal cases. Nor even family law. I’ll stick with business clients.”

Their departure further delayed by an impromptu detour into the library, a quarter hour elapsed before they rearranged their clothing and locked the front door.

Jude’s article recounting Magdalene Radcliffe’s tragic fate ran in the Grand Rapids *Courier*, to be picked up by the New York *Times* and shared over the wire services. She won a Pulitzer Prize for in-depth reporting, having already transitioned from journalism to public relations with Dooley, Keeler and Vale, Attorneys-at-Law.

Married to the junior partner, her advocacy to provide adequate medical and psychological treatment for trauma victims merited an appointment first to a governor’s special commission, then a post at the National Institutes of Health in Washington, D.C., while her husband served at the Capitol as a U.S. Senator.

Changing Times

Tammy stood before the mosaic of Jesus with outstretched arms, the eyes seeming to gaze south across the quad past the football stadium. An impressive piece of art, surely, but not as impressive as the collection of books within the 14-story library that it adorned.

She fully expected the contents of those volumes to boggle her mind. She hadn't picked up an actual book in years - another sign of the changing times. When she'd attended college in the 1990s, hardbacks and paperbacks were the only way to study.

Nearly 30 years later, most materials were found online.

Still, the feel of a text in her hands provided strange comfort...

Just as the feel of a VHS tape or DVD disc had given a concreteness to her work.

No more.

A livelihood that had scored her a modest fortune had vanished like a fart in the wind, thanks to digital technology. Anyone could record videos on their cell phones these days, and transfer them to the internet where - paid or unpaid - they could be viewed by all and sundry without any need to visit (now defunct) video stores with the back room restricted to those over 18.

An entrepreneur at heart, Tammy had identified a need in her freshman year at a college in the Chicago suburbs and taken the initiative. Her dorm-mates needed money to feed their various habits: drugs, drink, cars, clothes. They enjoyed having sex with their boyfriends - or girlfriends - and the concept of earning money for their efforts appealed to them.

Tammy became a producer of high-quality pornography.

Leaving the academic realm at the end of that first semester, she bought an old warehouse in Des Plaines and transformed it into a proper film studio. Her classmates continued to provide their acting services, and as subsequent undergrads found themselves short of cash, new faces filled the video screen.

Breezing through the library's automatic doors, the woman removed her Chicago Cubs ball cap, running nervous fingers through short brunette curls. By all accounts, 15 years was a good run for a niche business. Sales dwindling, she'd sold the property to a developer - who planned to raze the structure and build a strip mall - breaking even on that deal.

She decided to pursue a different initiative: the degree she never earned decades prior.

Only, this time, it wouldn't be a liberal arts diploma from some nondescript state-funded public institution. Her masters degree in business administration would bear the logo of the University of Notre Dame.

Fall classes began on Wednesday and, by then, she'd familiarized herself with the ever-expanding campus. Notre Dame had clout with the neighboring city of South Bend, Indiana, given the university was the largest employer in the region. Entire streets had been moved to accommodate construction projects. Their athletic teams brought millions in tourist dollars to hotels, restaurants and attractions, so no one really complained.

"Maybe someone should," she commented to herself after browsing the latest edition of the *South Bend Tribune* in the library's reading room. Reports of an uptick in burglaries and two overnight murders on the West Side concerned her. The police chief warned women not to go out alone after dark.

If the university was, as claimed, a conscientious community partner, why didn't they spend some of their billions on programs that reduced crime?

Never one to raise a fuss, Tammy planned to maintain a low profile on campus. She stood out among the crowd of youngsters, as it was, due to her age. In passing on the quad or in the dining hall, she often heard, "Hi-ya, professor," as she was mistaken for an instructor.

There could be no mistaking her Medieval History instructor for a student, to be sure. Noah MacBain's shoulder-length wavy white mane, matching bushy mustache and beard proclaimed him a leftover hippie, even without the tie-dyed t-shirt beneath a tweed jacket with black slacks and square-toed boots. A large silver skull encircled his right middle finger, pointing to his own personal history as a biker.

The studded black leather bandana suspended on a coat rack behind his utilitarian office desk confirmed her theory.

She discovered that evidence three weeks into September, when she was summoned to the private chamber after receiving an unsatisfactory grade on the previous day's pop quiz.

"Why are you here?" MacBain demanded as she settled on a lime green molded plastic chair.

She smirked. "Hell if I know. *You* sent for me..."

"What I mean is: why is the lead producer and chief executive of T-n-T Productions sitting in the lecture hall like any ordinary freshman?"

Tammy bristled. "How'd you..."

"You must not remember. We met once."

"Sorry, I..."

“I was in Vegas in 1996 on summer break. You were part of a... rather exclusive conference at the MGM Grand. I wandered in by mistake and you asked if I had any acting experience.”

The woman searched her memory, coming up empty. She'd met so many wanna-be stars...

“I never got a chance to show you what a force I could be in front of the camera.”

MacBain might have intended the statement to be humorous, but his baritone conveyed a darker emotion. When he abruptly rose, Tammy also left her seat and backed toward the door.

Brown orbs afire, lips pressed together in a scowl, his tall, lean frame pinned her against the panel. Deft fingers ripped open her navy blue collared blouse, exposing perky breasts. He growled, “Those were the days when a man could tell a woman she was hot and he wanted to fuck her brains out without facing a damned harassment lawsuit.” His right hand lifted her denim skirt. “He could rip off her knickers and finger her twat until she was so wet she begged for the cock.”

MacBain's actions mimicked this less than dignified description. His mouth assaulted her nipples as powerful mitts held fast to her hips. He thrust himself into her with no little force, raising her feet off the floorboards.

Though she'd viewed intercourse many times as part of a film's rushes - playful, sensual, rough - Tammy had rarely engaged in that pastime herself. Some of the aspiring performers offered to “audition” for her personally; she always declined. This man violated current trends of political correctness and common decency, sending shockwaves through every cell of her being.

Three rings on her right hand raked his face when he finally released her, leaving his cheek bleeding from jagged gashes, whiskers dripping red.

He didn't apologize, instead sedately raising his Dockers, zipping and buttoning them. “I'll record your passing mark in the computer,” he stated flatly, returning to his desk.

“Fuck my grades!” stormed Tammy. “What gives you the right...”

“You won't say a word, will you? If you do, your less-than-stellar past will be splashed across the front page of not only the local paper, but national rags.”

“So, it's blackmail?”

“That's such a distasteful term.” He smiled within his facial hair. “Call it ‘mutual cooperation.’”

“Bullshit!” Fumbling to close her blouse, buttons torn from the fabric, she stooped to pluck her mangled lace-trimmed underwear off the polished wood and

stuffed them in her skirt pocket. Palsied digits could not grip the brass knob; she punched the wood and collapsed against the wall, sobbing.

MacBain spun his chair toward the window. "I have one question for you: what did T-n-T stand for?"

Tammy struggled to regain her composure, forcing her lungs to slow their breathing and her heart to stop thumping against her ribs. She gasped, "Tits and Testosterone."

"Ah, I thought it was your initials: Tammy Nadine Tomlinson."

Once the student's muscles regained a bit of strength, she straightened and stumbled across the threshold.

A slow gait propelled her from the building to the distant parking lot. She flopped behind the steering wheel of her red Ferrari Testarossa, tears streaming down her chin - a bizarre combination of anger and satisfaction.

No man had ever brought her to orgasm before.

She despised herself for wanting more.

Freshmen of a traditional age would have notified their parents, the police, school officials of this unprofessional behavior on MacBain's part. He would have been immediately terminated from his position, arrested and jailed.

Tammy devised a more ingenious method of revenge as she sped along the four-lane state highway, Chicago-bound.

To avoid being caught transgressing against university policy on fraternization between students and professors, MacBain insisted on pursuing a relationship with Tammy at her off-campus duplex, where he could freely come and go without being recognized. He would park his Harley Davidson Fat Boy motorcycle two blocks away, skulk along the alley and enter by the back door.

Tammy marveled at his endurance; on a single Friday night, he took her eight times, leaving both exhausted so they slept most of Saturday, then repeated the cycle into Sunday.

Once MacBain tired of the exertion, he simply dressed and left. When his libido once more required her companionship, he would signal her during class, and she would leave an extra key under the welcome mat that evening.

The week after Thanksgiving and before finals, MacBain needed a break from grading papers. He arrived at the townhouse shortly after sunset, and sated himself repeatedly with the former porn producer.

He never complimented her slender frame, but his grunts and moans indicated his pleasure with what he saw beneath him, what he felt when he maneuvered her on top, or banged her from behind.

The delivery he received that Thursday morning via special messenger brought a different kind of noise from his throat.

An oversized yellow sticky note fastened to the DVD case declared in a neat script, “Don’t ever threaten me again, or your ‘less-than-stellar past will be splashed across the front page of not only the local paper, but national rags.’ From now on, keep your trousers zipped.”

MacBain was tempted to flunk Tammy, though she scored 100% on her exam. He grasped that the consequences of such a gesture would be fatal to his livelihood.

With a 4.0 GPA after the first semester, Tammy chucked the idea of earning a degree. Instead, she sold the night-vision video camera she’d hidden in the chest of drawers to capture their horizontal gymnastics - along with her other furniture - used her savings to buy a house in the Bahamas and spent the rest of her days lying in the sun.

The Cool Article

She'd applied to the police department because of him.

Their history dated back two decades, from the first time her father - petty thief, and a lousy one, at that - had been caught red-handed with stolen jewels from the neighborhood pawn shop and arrested.

William Powell, newly detailed to the detective division that May, exhibited the decency to not handcuff the miscreant in front of the toddler, instead treating him as a business acquaintance bound for a drink at the pub down the block.

The official had no choice, however, when it came to leaving the extremely pregnant Mrs. Lloyd and little flaxen-haired Myrna on their own, without a source of income.

What would've been the girl's younger brother died in the charity hospital delivery room, his mother seriously malnourished. Powell located Myrna, cowering in the garage - alone - weeping in desperation. He'd taken her to his home, fed and consoled her until she could be reunited with her ailing parent.

Why Powell adopted a rather paternal attitude toward her, Myrna never quite understood. Ralph Lloyd in and out of jail throughout her formative years, as if the building had a revolving door, maybe it was for the best that one man with regular habits, a steady paycheck and a modicum of sophistication played a major role in her adolescence.

Especially after her mother died only days after her thirteenth birthday. Three subsequent miscarriages and undiagnosed bone cancer had taken their toll on that frail woman.

This, on the heels of Ralph's felony drug smuggling conviction, left the teenager without adult supervision. She might've ended up being trafficked by one of the pimps who scouted the junior high parking lot for likely prospects, had not Powell made a point to pick her up each afternoon.

She lived with her grandmother, until that elder's dementia forced her into a nursing home. Strangely, Powell absented himself from Myrna for almost a year for inexplicable reasons; the girl later learned he'd been fighting stage four lung cancer.

He defied doctor's orders one wintry Tuesday, rising from his hospice bed and driving 350 miles to the exclusive boarding academy. Summoning her from chemistry class to the principal's office, he gently delivered the news of Ralph Lloyd's death in federal prison, caught between rival gangs and stabbed with a home-made knife.

Powell never let on how ill and weak he felt, a guardian angel standing beside her at the funeral. No tears shed for the creature whose ashes filled a rectangular wooden urn, Myrna studied her companion's taut features, grey creeping upward from his sideburns.

Whether pure adrenaline or an outright miracle, Powell recovered his health to a degree that the judge charged with determining the fate of orphaned children agreed to let him serve as the 16-year-old's foster father. He resumed his duties on the force, and the pair lived quietly.

That didn't prevent rumors from circulating about their "real" relationship, especially among her classmates when a new academic semester began at the public high school.

Myrna wrote the insults and innuendo off to jealousy. Powell a fine specimen, even at age 45, the jocks and geeks with product-stiffened manes and six-pack abs couldn't compare to his tall, lean physique and absolute coolness of composure.

He seldom swore, displayed extraordinary compassion and an off-beat sense of humor, along with exceptional intelligence and deductive reasoning.

Each night, the pair would sit and talk in the spartan living room until the wee hours - Myrna not caring the lack of sleep might impact her scholastic performance. She learned more by listening to his stories of solving cases than any book could teach her.

As part of a work-study program those final months as a senior, she was selected to shadow a rotation of patrol officers, impressing them with her observational skills and rational thinking. Responding to a domestic violence call on a Friday afternoon, when the battered wife recanted her accusations, Myrna found the baseball bat that had bloodied her face and broken her left arm ditched by the defiant husband behind the washing machine on the enclosed back porch.

On a seemingly routine traffic stop, she prevented the rookie from being shot because she glimpsed the female passenger groping awkwardly beneath the vintage Chevy's bucket seat - supposedly for a lost earring, instead seizing an illegally obtained pistol.

She received multiple commendations, and compliments from the chief about her potential for a law enforcement career after graduation.

Lingering at the back of the squad room where the ceremony was held, Powell beamed with pride.

Nonetheless, he recommended she earn an associate degree, at minimum, prior to submitting her application to join the force.

Disappointed, she slogged through four semesters of boring courses, emerging as the top student in the criminology intensive.

Powell presented her with a dozen white roses as she descended from the stage during the commencement exercises. The card tucked among the baby's breath wasn't scrawled with mushy sentiment, but the time and date of her preliminary meeting with the police selection board.

Not a hugger by nature, due to so many psychological factors, she clutched Powell's slender fingers and pressed them to her heart in gratitude. His free hand tenderly stroked her cheek.

Then, they enjoyed chili dogs and chocolate shakes at the drive-in overlooking the lakeshore.

An extensive process of interviews, medical and psychological exams, a polygraph test, background checks, and physical fitness challenges taxed some of the applicants for departmental vacancies. The notification Myrna received by registered mail of her acceptance - with only two others of the dozen in the candidate pool - to the state academy merited a minor celebration: dinner with Powell at her favorite Italian restaurant.

"Going to the state capital, you'll be gone for six months," he stated over shrimp cocktails.

"I'll drive home on weekends."

"It won't be allowed. There'll be practicums..."

Myrna studied his stern visage. "Are you afraid of being alone, Bill?"

He preoccupied himself arranging shrimp tails on the salad plate. "Not at all."

"Can't you admit: you've gotten used to having me around the past few years?"

"I can, but that doesn't play into it."

The question spilled off her tongue, unspoken for many years. "Why did you never marry?"

Translucent shells spilled on the worn grey carpet. "Huh?"

"You heard me."

He toyed with his napkin as the server delivered their entrees: his, veal parmigiana; hers, ravioli. Then, he gulped half a glass of chianti.

"Well?" she urged.

"You want the whole sordid story?"

This adjective took Myrna aback. "Is it a sordid story?"

"In a way." Resigned, his square shoulders relaxed within the tailored blue suit. "Your mother and I went through school together on the north side."

Not at all what the young woman expected. Her mouth opened; he silenced her with a raised hand.

“Let me get through this without interrupting, okay?”

She nodded.

“We dated for awhile, on and off, more friends than anything. She was an exciting, vibrant gal. Smart, too.” He scooped up a forkful of pasta, chewing meditatively. “After we graduated, I left town for an appointment to the Naval Academy. When I came home for Christmas break, I discovered she’d married Ralph Lloyd.”

“Did you ever ask her why?”

Impatiently, he hissed, “I’m getting to that.”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s me who should apologize. This is a... difficult memory for me.”

Reaching across the checked linen tablecloth, she patted his arm.

“Ralph wasn’t a bad guy, at that point. He’d raised some hell with a gang on the west side, smoked weed, got caught shoplifting. He met your mom when his boys crashed a back-to-school picnic the week after I took off for Annapolis. A month later, ol’ Judge Murphy presided at their wedding down at the courthouse.”

He let the implication of his words linger in silence.

Myrna froze with a slice of garlic bread between her lips. “You’re not saying...”

Powell’s greying mop bobbed vertically, solemnly.

“Then...”

“Yes, kiddo. Biologically, I’m your father.”

She slumped on the booth’s red upholstery. “Wow.”

“Didn’t you ever suspect?” he prodded.

“Did Ralph ever suspect?”

“He was too self-centered to worry about such trifles, just out for the thrill.”

“Until he wound up in the can.”

“True.”

“So, what now?” drawled Myrna.

“Nothing has changed. You’re on the road to being a good cop, and I’m due for retirement.”

Overdue, actually.

“But, what about the Naval Academy?”

He chuckled. "I was young, foolish. The news of the marriage crushed me; I dropped out. I wanted to stay close to home, so my dad called his friend the police chief, and I signed on as a patrol officer."

Myrna wiped a dab of meat sauce from her cheek. "I'm glad you did. I might've turned out a lot different if you weren't around."

"Thanks."

Powell's attempt to stifle the cough failed; his whole frame shook. Myrna noticed a blotch of fresh blood on the napkin when he lowered it from his mouth.

"Call an ambulance!" she shouted, bolting upright and easing his trembling body onto the ground.

Myrna sat beside him in the back of the vehicle, clutching his hand desperately. His strength drained, he managed to raise her digits and kiss them, a minuscule smile etched on his face.

William Powell died en route to the hospital - previously located two blocks from the trattoria, but rebuilt on a larger property south of the city. The doctor's verdict: the lung cancer he'd battled more than four years had finally taken its toll.

His detective badge, clipped to his belt beneath the suit jacket, slid into her jean pocket. The police chief arranged for the number to be transferred to her when she was named Powell's replacement in that department after finishing first in her class from the academy, a credit to her father's legacy.

Sweet Rides

Carli Bishop drooled over two things: classic hot rods and chocolate.

A plentiful supply of the latter she carried in the blue cloth Walmart shopping bag. As she crossed the practically deserted parking lot - employee vehicles consigned to the row farthest from the entrance - sun rising over her shoulder, the white '72 Corvette Stingray steered into the spot immediately to the left of her '78 Mustang II Cobra.

"What the hell?" she grumbled, halting in her tracks at this suspicious behavior.

She watched as the driver emerged from beneath the T-top: a full mop of wavy bronze hair combed straight off his furrowed brow, dark aviator sunglasses propped on his straight nose hiding his eyes, thin lips, a lean physique visible within a black Under Armour t-shirt, blue jeans and hand-tooled leather boots.

Thick digits reached toward the wide red racing stripe that ran from the front bumper, over the Mustang's roof to the trunk.

"Touch it and die, buddy," she warned.

He arrested the motion, head swiveling toward her.

"This yours?" came the suave baritone.

"Ask another stupid question."

"I've seen it around town. Always wondered who owned it."

"Well, now you know." Carli unlocked the driver's door and hoisted her groceries on the back seat.

"Wanna sell?"

She snorted a laugh. "You own *that*, and you want *this*?"

"It's sweet."

"Thanks."

Dropping on the worn leather upholstery, she jammed the key in the ignition. The engine revved, conveying her anger. Tires squealed as she jammed the shifter into first gear, unaware she nearly crushed the guy's toes.

She didn't need such aggravation first thing on a Tuesday. Better if she'd simply been able to admire the Corvette and go on her way. A believer in the axiom, "I'd rather be pushed in a Ford than drive a Chevy," she never would've asked to buy his ride.

The pair's paths crossed six days later at the annual charity Show 'n Shine in the town square. Carli had arrived early and was already displaying the Mustang's supercharged engine when the Corvette braked at the sign-in tent half a block north. Tucking her polish rag in the back pocket of her jeans, she casually

sidled toward the Stingray, squinting at the placard on the dashboard beneath the windshield.

“Shit!” she muttered, reversing course when the Hawaiian shirt and Docker-clad owner abruptly spun toward her.

Gabriel Innes.

Freshly named county judge who’d served as district attorney for the past 15 years, she’d read about him in the local paper hundreds of times, as his success in prosecuting petty criminals and repeat felons merited serious coverage.

He didn’t allow photos, though, which is why she hadn’t recognized his face.

She’d never forget it.

Resuming her place between a silver Oldsmobile 442 and a gold Studebaker Avanti, Carli diligently wiped bird droppings off the Mustang’s rear view mirror, snickering to herself about the best of intentions. When she straightened, she bumped into a pliable mass, breathing gently on the back of her neck.

She didn’t have to look to realize who dared pin her against the front quarter panel in such a manner.

“I wouldn’t sell it for a hundred grand,” she stated.

He murmured, “Even if it meant my career?”

“You’re nuts.”

“No, I’m not.” He slipped his arm through the crook in hers and guided her to where a row of camp chairs had been positioned. “Hear me out.”

Carli settled on a camouflage version as she noticed the judges beginning to circulate among the vehicles. “You’ve got one minute.”

Innes selected a red folding stool, his nose scant inches from hers. “Two years ago, police reported a late-night collision which landed a rusty Jeep in a ditch out on County Line Road. The driver and his two youngsters died.”

The woman’s chest tightened. “The papers reported they weren’t wearing seat belts.”

“Be that as it may, it was suspected the driver of the other car was drunk, but the cop on duty never administered a blood alcohol test.”

“So?”

“I’ve been accused by some pretty prominent citizens of neglecting my duty in not pursuing prosecution of that individual.”

Now she grasped his angle. “And they’ve threatened to quash your appointment to the bench if you don’t…”

He nodded, his neatly styled mane not moving a strand.

“What’s that got to do with my ‘Stang?” she grumbled.

“Legally, I could confiscate it, but it would languish in some junk yard, which would be a real pity.”

“Confiscate it, my ass!”

“You know you’re guilty, and you deserve to serve time for being so irresponsible.”

“Bullshit!”

The judges hovered near the Avanti. Carli leapt upright and straightened her grey henley. Through clenched teeth, she directed Innes, “Meet me out back of the Nest at twelve, and I’ll tell you what *really* happened that night.”

“And if I still press for prosecution?” he drawled.

“I’ll hide this in a storage unit in Alaska before I ever sell it to you.”

Forcing a pleasant smile, she shuffled toward the two board members of the local homeless shelter, whose organization would benefit from the event’s proceeds. Innes circled the Oldsmobile and traversed the square to where his Corvette sparkled among a line of older and newer versions of that model.

Or was it a trick the light played on Carli’s eyes?

The winners of the competition weren’t announced until 9:00 pm, as the sun dipped over the western horizon that mid-June evening. Carli didn’t place in the formal competition but, like previous shows, she scored second in the People’s Choice category. The small trophy rested on her hood while a fireworks display filled the sky with colorful explosions.

After such a long day, she needed a drink. The Eagle’s Nest, one of three bars in the tiny metropolis, catered to a certain clientele: motor heads, farmers, musicians. The sports crowd congregated on the opposite end of Oak Street at Mike’s Place, with senior citizens preferring the relative quiet of Trinity Bar opposite the Congregational Church.

Carli drained the draft Michelob in two gulps, belching her satisfaction moments later. A garage band strummed covers of 80s tunes on a triangular stage in the far corner; not bad, in her opinion. A few other classic owners joined her briefly, departing before 11 to get home to their spouses.

Glad she wasn’t married, Carli ordered a third beer, then headed to the restroom and out the rear door to the dimly illuminated parking lot.

The moon reflected off the Corvette’s pristine wax; Innes leaned on the passenger side, arms folded impatiently.

“You’re early,” she smirked.

“I want this settled.”

“We could go inside...”

“It’s cooler out here.”

Carli shifted her weight to rest on the Corvette’s hood. Nimble hands jerked her away.

“What’s the big idea?” she spat.

“If I can’t touch your wheels, you can’t touch mine.”

“I don’t have any metal in my pockets...”

“I don’t care.” Innes released his grip on her arms. “Start talking.”

“You got a wife tugging your leash, too?”

“No, just a fourteen-year-old black Labrador who needs to do his business every couple hours.”

Carli chuckled at the thought of the gruff Innes owning such a mild-mannered breed.

“It’s not funny, and quit wasting my time.”

She sobered. “All right, all right.” The tale she related involved her younger brother - now 20 and doing well at the state college as a business major - and the high school senior prom. “He didn’t want to drive his beater of a Pontiac to pick up his date, and I wasn’t going to let him drive mine, so I offered to play chauffeur,” she noted. “They managed to fit in the back seat without too much trouble, and swore they’d get a ride home with friends. Being free the rest of the night, I went to a classic film festival over in Hillside. I never touched a drop of alcohol.”

“Can you prove it?”

“I charged the ticket on my credit card so, yeah.”

Innes sniffed derisively.

“Driving back to town, County Line Road was the detour for the highway construction, remember? Even with my brights on, it was tough to see the curves. I was doing forty, tops, because of that - so the cop’s statement that I was speeding was downright false.”

“I...”

“Don’t say you believe him over me, because he wasn’t anywhere near the crash site until fifteen minutes after the fact. It was late, and his shift ended in the middle of the supposed investigation. He just wanted to get home, so he fudged the details on the paperwork.”

Carli paused, gazing at the stars.

“Go on,” prompted Innes.

“The Jeep was parked on the opposite side of the road, with its lights off. I thought, maybe, the engine had stalled, so I stopped and crossed the gravel. What it was: the guy was lost. His phone wasn’t getting any signal, so he was trying to

find a map in the glove box or the door pockets. Told me he had an atlas somewhere. I helped him look and, once we did find it, I asked him to switch on the headlights. We got out and were reading the map when one of his kids crawled into the front seat and kicked the axe handle used as a stick. The Jeep started rolling forward. The guy pushed me out of the way and jumped into the drivers seat, but slipped. The wheels rolled over him as it bounced into the ditch, and the kids were thrown through the windshield.”

Innes considered briefly, then shook his head. “Impossible.”

“If you think so, you better go back and read the autopsy reports, and look at the photos taken of the scene by the coroner. I stayed on site until the last of the bodies was hauled to the morgue, and the Jeep towed away. That rookie cop never bothered to check the ‘Stang for damage; he wouldn’t have found any. There were no dents or paint chips from my car on the Jeep, either. There’s plenty of documentation, Gabe.”

“So, all this time...”

Carli croaked. “Your rivals have been yanking your chain.”

“First thing Monday, I’ll verify these facts.”

“You do that.”

“Will you be willing to make a statement to the newspaper, as well?”

“Are you kidding? Why stir up the situation again for the poor gal who lost her entire family due to a ridiculous accident?”

“It will clear my slate once and for all.”

Carli’s blue eyes met Innes’ smoldering brown orbs. “Oh, whatever.” She strode toward the Mustang, parked near the Eagle’s Nest front door.

Innes restrained her with an iron vice.

“Let go, dammit!” hissed Carli.

He countered, “There’s one more thing.”

“What, for Christ’s sake?”

The woman couldn’t deny she’d speculated about what occurred next since their chance meeting near the Walmart the previous Tuesday.

Innes wrapped her in an unyielding embrace, planting his mouth on hers almost violently. Carli didn’t resist, her rising temperature having nothing to do with the summer heatwave. He lifted her off her feet and deposited her on the Corvette’s hood, unfastening her wide leather belt and unzipping her jeans, then doing the same for himself. The slant of the fiberglass made keeping their balance a challenge and, fortunately, no one emerged from the tavern to interrupt their noisy, frantic coupling.

Carli's memory of that encounter remained with her through the years. Seeing the Corvette at car shows served as a reminder, too. Not that Innes owned it anymore. Once he was sworn in as a judge, his entire demeanor changed. Tough on those who stood before his bench, he was gunned down in a drive-by shooting the night of his 43rd birthday after sentencing a gang leader to life in prison for drug dealing, assault with a deadly weapon and robbery.

Carli didn't attend the funeral.

Unkillable

Seated on the park bench that sunny June Saturday, brown orbs perused paragraphs beneath a six-column headline declaring another drive-by shooting on the city's west side, more than 100 bullet casings found near the targeted house.

Gratuitous violence in movies since the 1930s generated an erroneous belief that the more ammunition fired at a victim, the more dead he would be.

Willy MacPherson knew better.

Thick yet nimble digits folded the newspaper and set it on wooden slats beside him. On the grassy expanse opposite, children kicked a soccer ball back and forth, aging maples substituting as goal posts. If he'd taken aim, a single shot would have felled any of them.

Clean.

Quick.

Relatively painless.

This preponderance of spraying an area with lead in much the same way as applying weed killer to a garden not only made a mess others were forced to clear away - in houses or on sidewalks - but wasted time and caused tremendous anguish to the person riddled with projectiles in the seconds before he gasped his last breath.

Anyone wishing to snuff another human being should take that into consideration prior to ever picking up a weapon, MacPherson mused.

As someone who'd been the subject of many such attempts, his experience served him well.

The mostly nondescript figure rose as a few drops of rain moistened the concrete. Tall and lean, clad in a grey turtleneck, unbuttoned black leather vest, relaxed fit jeans and black leather motorcycle-style square-toed boots, his white, wavy mane flowed past his shoulders, rustled by the wind. Those who noticed his features might have presumed him a well-preserved grandfather: clear, penetrating eyes behind round-rimmed black plastic spectacles; straight, broad nose with a small, horizontal dent at the bridge; bushy mustache and full beard concealing an angular lower jaw and thin lips.

His gait long and purposeful, he passed mothers pushing strollers and teen couples hunting for a secluded spot to grope each other. Reaching the town's main street, he glanced left and right before crossing mid-block to a diner bustling with patrons.

He navigated the crowded tables and frazzled wait staff past the stained laminate counter toward a narrow corridor lit by a single bulb in a rusty ceiling

fixture, where a now-obsolete pay phone hung between the restrooms. The door opposite opened into the kitchen. MacPherson pushed aside the panel with his left fist, a Glock 9mm fitted with a silencer in his right hand. Five seconds later, he exited into the alley. At the curb near the local pharmacy, he straddled his Harley Davidson Fat Boy, drew his hair into a pony tail with a well-used rubber band and drove toward the interstate, the bike's engine drowning out a wave of screams.

National media outlets covered the story, with few actual details available beyond the six bodies discovered on the restaurant's floor when food service was suddenly suspended. Not one of the customers or employees in the establishment at the time of the incident recalled seeing the perpetrator.

In a Chicago penthouse overlooking Lake Michigan, MacPherson relaxed watching the Cubs win over the Pittsburgh Pirates in a double-header.

He'd come out of retirement to handle this contract, and had been well paid for his services.

That retirement had exceeded thirty years and, the professional assassin acknowledged, lacked much in the way of intellectual challenges or excitement. After he'd initially hung up his pistols, he'd enrolled in college, fulfilling his mother's erstwhile dream that her son earn a degree in engineering. He'd continued on to pursue a master's and doctorate in the field, and tinkered with a series of inventions, scoring lucrative patents for technological innovations bought by major corporations.

Except for one - a fluke, really.

The original concept: a holographic imaging system. MacPherson's random fiddling with the power source instead produced a field around his body similar to what psychics termed an "aura," but of molecular substance that created an invisible, impenetrable barrier. No solid object could reach him when the system was activated.

A bullet-proof vest, in essence, that protected from head to toe, without any kevlar or similar materials.

Over time, he reduced the size of the components to a unit that fit in his trouser pocket. He tested it by traveling to the Windy City's South Side, where rampant gang violence forced honest citizens to cower in their homes. He deliberately provoked a group of thugs on a street corner; the hail of bullets from their AR-15s and Saturday Night Specials never touched him.

The police found sixteen stiffes the following morning amidst hundreds of shell casings, each with a single shot to the forehead.

Ridding communities of these threats became his mission for a few years following this discovery. He traveled from large metropolis to small town, eliminating dangers to the populace without so much as a hint of culpability.

No fingerprints, no way to trace the weapons he used.

And, if he faced resistance, he stood his ground while the aggressors emptied their clips in vain.

Well into his 90s - a bizarre side-effect of the generator being a slowing of the aging process, some type of cellular rejuvenation - he tired of this endless task. Yet, a more sedentary routine failed to alleviate his innate restlessness so, periodically, he accepted contracts from former associates who agreed with him the justice system lacked sufficient power to stem the tide of violence.

The kitchen staff at Molly's Diner had been part of an international drug-smuggling operation, bringing hundreds of pounds of tainted cocaine into the country each month. Teens and adults had died under its influence.

MacPherson's almost surgical precision in killing these miscreants sparked a broader investigation, which revealed hidden caches of the drug in crates of lettuce, tomatoes and other supplies. The authorities were able to track the shipments to their source, according to subsequent news reports, with dozens arrested and facing prosecution across five states.

A leisurely sojourn to Wrigley Field for a Thursday afternoon game pitting the Cubs against the Cardinals wiped any concern about crimes against society from MacPherson's consciousness. Hits, runs and errors by both teams kept him on his feet, with a hot dog, popcorn and soda serving as a meal.

The woman - brunette, young-ish and rather attractive - mounted steps beside his aisle seat holding a half-full cup. He didn't notice her until the crack of the bat signaled a fly ball soaring toward right field; she spun to watch the action, slipped, pitched sideways and dumped beer down his front.

Amidst frantic apologies and grabs for napkins, neither saw the ball vanish over the ivy-encrusted brick wall.

During the seventh inning stretch, MacPherson migrated to the men's room to rinse out the blue t-shirt, hoping to reduce the stench of hops and alcohol. A warm day, wearing it wet back to his seat caused no discomfort.

Walking home after a tie score required extra innings to produce a defeat for the Chicago team, MacPherson observed life on all sides - a habit he never broke even after giving up his chosen profession. An erstwhile hippie strumming guitar on a corner benefitted from the generosity of passersby, prostitutes mingled with businessmen and tourists, as did pickpockets.

A pair of feet abruptly fell into step with him; he recognized the neon pink sneakers.

“Hello, again!” bubbled the panting fan.

MacPherson hoped, if he ignored her, she’d disappear.

No such luck.

“You didn’t really give me a chance to make restitution for being such a klutz,” she persisted. “I feel I owe you dinner, or something.”

Tersely, “No need.”

“Oh, come on. I feel guilty enough for what I did. Your shirt is ruined...”

“It’ll be fine once I put it through the wash.”

She squinted blue eyes at him. “You? Doesn’t your wife do your laundry?”

“I’m not married.” He bit his tongue, regretting the admission.

“Right!” She slipped her arm through his. “If you let me come ‘round to your place and run your outfit through the wash - to be sure there’s no permanent stains - I’ll get out of your hair.”

MacPherson acquiesced to her request, wishing to be rid of her in the shortest time possible. Up the elevator in the high-rise, she stared straight ahead, and he suspected she was watching him in the mirrored panels. He maintained a neutral expression, expletives echoing through his skull.

Entering the penthouse, he instructed her to wait in the sunken living room while he changed in the bedroom, locking the door on instinct. He pulled on a Led Zeppelin t-shirt and fresh jeans, taking the bundle of discarded clothes out to her. He directed her to the utility room and followed her, a niggling suspicion that she might be a thief on the prowl for an easy mark.

As the cycle progressed, she wandered the living room, walls lined with book shelves. “You go pretty deep,” she commented, plucking a volume on quantum physics from a collection of first editions.

Standing near full-length windows as the sun set over Lake Michigan’s choppy waters, he muttered, “You’re entitled to your opinion.”

“C’mon, dude! Lighten up!” She crossed the carpet and stood beside him. “Wow, that’s beautiful.”

“Indeed.”

“I’ve never seen it from... so high up.”

“I’m sure.”

She pouted, “You don’t like me.”

“You’re... annoying.”

“Not really. I’m actually kind of fun. I enjoy good music, good food, good conversation...”

“Good for you.”

“You’re pretty good looking, for an older guy, I mean.”

“Thanks.”

“You widowed?”

He glared down at her.

“Okay, okay!” she conceded. “I’ll stop with the personal questions.”

Slender fingers began unfastening the buttons of her chambray shirt, exposing her ample cleavage. “It’s a bit warm, don’t you think?”

He scowled, though the expression was barely visible through his thick whiskers. “Stop that. I’m not interested.”

Deliberate steps carried him to the kitchen, where he grabbed a jug of orange juice from the refrigerator, pouring himself a large glass.

“Oh, c’mon, dude. What’s wrong with a little fun?”

“That’s not what I consider fun.”

She pressed again his spine, her hands encircling his slim waist. “You don’t like to... play?”

“Not with the likes of you.”

Her left hand fumbled with his zipper. He slapped the fingers away and spun around, seething.

To see a Colt .45 aimed at his chest.

“Fuck!” he hissed.

“You’re fucked, all right.” She sneered, transforming that rather pleasant face into a callous mask. “You’ve interfered with a thriving business, and I’ve been sent to... ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

MacPherson didn’t alter his stance, but merely shifted his weight against the marble counter, activating the miniature generator in his hip pocket. “Take your best shot,” he taunted.

“At this range, I can’t miss,” she boasted.

The pistol cocked, she pulled the trigger. The revolver’s recoil sent her reeling backward; the bullet ejected by the barrel stopped cold inches from MacPherson’s ribs and dropped to the floor.

“What the hell...” she gasped.

Her last words.

A couple living on the building’s 18th floor found her dead inside the car when the elevator descended to ground level an hour later.

The police, identifying her as a paid cleaner from Los Angeles, closed the case unsolved, with a notation, “She met her match.”

MacPherson lived to the ripe old age of 142, dying of natural causes in his own bed.

The Back Door

Chicago weather in October could be... unpredictable, at best - especially when the wind blew in from Lake Michigan.

Joannie Belasco shivered as she departed the classically designed Field Museum by the north entrance, a chill catching her between century-old columns. The board meeting had run well past the dinner hour, with an ensuing fundraising social in the main hall offering little more than hors d'oeuvres and free-flowing alcohol.

She despised both.

At least, Grant Park spreading before her, illuminated by elaborate street lamps along concrete sidewalks, offered picturesque surroundings for a trek to the Hilton hotel. She descended broad steps, thankful for comfortable flats, tailored slacks and suit jacket. No skirts to whip around her hips, possibly causing embarrassment.

Lake Shore Drive hummed with traffic at that hour; an underground tunnel connected the Museum Campus with the parks for the convenience of pedestrians.

A native of the Windy City who'd relocated to the West Coast after college, Joannie hadn't forgotten the metropolis' high crime rate, with most muggings occurring after dark. Frugality prevented her from hiring a taxi for the jaunt to her lodgings, which she could see from this vantage point.

She'd assume full responsibility for the risk.

Few others traversed the tunnel, including a cluster of teens lingering near an upright box shrouded in shadows half-way between the ends. Joannie wondered if the structure housed a coffee vendor, offering warmth by the cup to patrons.

As she approached, she noted its construction: more a phone booth or storage shed. But, why located here? Emergency alarms could be activated by levers positioned every 50 feet or so along the distance, and no one used payphones with the proliferation of cell technology.

Coming abreast of the object, the tired brunette puzzled whether it might be a piece of art meant to draw attention to the opening of a new exhibit at one of many prestigious galleries in the area. A placard on the middle left panel facing outward read,

POLICE TELEPHONE

FREE
for use of

PUBLIC

ADVICE & ASSISTANCE
AVAILABLE IMMEDIATELY

OFFICER & CARS
RESPOND TO ALL CALLS

PULL TO OPEN

On the adjacent door, a keyed lock, and metal drawer handle. The top section of both housed opaque windows subdivided into six panes. Above those, a horizontal rectangular strip with stencil-cut lettering. She couldn't read the words in the dimness. Atop a flat roof, a lantern of sorts reminded her of a miniature lighthouse. The basic construction of faded blue, peeling wood recessed squares within their frames resembled nothing Joannie had seen in her travels, for business or leisure.

An icy gust howled through the underpass; the object shielded her against an accompanying swirl of dust, newspapers and other detritus when she ducked around the side. Expelling flecks of dirt from her mouth, the woman began coughing, grasping the booth's moulding for support.

The supposedly rigid surface seemed to abruptly liquify; Joannie tumbled through and, stunned, could only watch the material solidify once more.

Her arms tangled and seemingly trapped, she tugged and wriggled to free herself from unknown bonds. Her gyrations must've triggered a type of motion sensor, which activated fixtures that hummed to life.

She sat in a pile of clothes - theatrical costumes, by the look of them - that had been wrenched from their hangers on a rack above her.

Her breathing resumed its normal rhythm in a matter of minutes; she climbed to her feet and glanced at the surroundings: a huge domed chamber. Circular gels, each within a rectangle affixed to concave metal, emitted colored light powered by a mysterious source. An archway to her left led... where?

The room's size itself confounded Joannie, given the dimensions of the exterior.

Or, had she fallen and cracked her skull, and this was all a concussion-induced hallucination?

If she'd sustained an injury, best summon an ambulance. She wrestled her cell phone from the jacket's inside pocket; no signal.

What the hell? she mused. No service in the heart of Chicago?

She restarted the device.

In vain.

The alternative: figuring out this conundrum and making her way outside.

“Hello?” she shouted.

Beyond her own contralto’s echo, silence.

She trod gently on a textured mat flooring; beyond the arch, a row of doorways on either side of what she presumed the main corridor.

A house of some sort? An optical illusion?

Or, more likely, a maze meant to drive a human to the edge of sanity.

Joannie wandered for hours, crossing and recrossing her own path time and again. She encountered no one, discovered no means of egress.

She peeked in on one furnished bedroom, a spacious library boasting thousands of custom-bound first editions, a game room with billiard table and obsolete pinball machines, but did not chance upon a kitchen.

Emerging into another domed hall, a hexagonal console fitted with controls and computer screens was positioned on a platform in the center of multiple curved ramps suspended in mid-air, the attached railings terminating at portals on different levels, creating an abstract sculpture.

Embedded in the far wall: a rectangular double door.

“At last!” she sighed.

A spurt of adrenaline propelled her forward, though not in a straight line. A maze, indeed, just navigating this one space!

She pulled up short ten feet from the exit, hearing a key in the lock.

Nowhere to hide in this open design...

Brushing off her business suit, Joannie hoped the smile she adopted didn’t appear too foolish, or indicative of guilt at the accidental intrusion.

The left panel creaked inward, twisted her youthful features in confusion.

Hadn’t the sign she’d read earlier given instructions to pull for access, not push?

For an instant, she thought she might faint.

A couple - the long, tall drink of water with spiked brown hair in tuxedo and black tie, his companion in a blue sequined gown idly flipping a gold coin - halted on the threshold at the sight of this uninvited visitor.

“Oh, hello,” queried the man with a British inflection. “Who are you?”

The woman, ginger tresses expertly coifed, her accent similar yet quite refined, added, “How’d you get in?”

“I... ah...”

That's as much as Joannie managed before crumpling to the floor. Her eyelids fluttered, vaguely recognizing the bedroom's sparse furnishings; she'd been laid on a divan and covered with an Amish wedding quilt. The redhead sat on a stool beside her and introduced herself as Melanie Bush. "How are you feeling?"

"Idiotic," replied Joannie.

"Not surprising. The first time I walked into this... my mind wanted to explode."

"What's... it all about?"

"Bigger on the inside? The Doctor can explain it."

"The Doctor?"

"We came over for the Galactic Visions exhibit at the Art Institute. He wanted to see the images captured by the Hubble and Webb telescopes, and how the artists interpreted them."

"I don't..."

Gold-flecked brown orbs focused on her, the Doctor hovered beneath the lintel, his expression solemn. "All better?"

"Physically, yeah," Joannie responded. "Mentally, well..." Her right hand wiggled in a gesture of uncertainty.

"You'll recover in due time."

"I'm not so sure. What... is this?"

"It's the TARDIS. It travels in time and space."

Joannie bolted off the couch. "You're kidding."

When the Doctor shook his head, his hair didn't move.

"You're... aliens?"

"We live in London," countered Melanie.

Every muscle in Joannie's body spasmed simultaneously. The Doctor caught her before she collapsed again, settling her on the maroon cushions, his long, twig-like fingers resting on her temples.

"You're not..." Melanie prodded.

"I don't have a choice. If she's allowed to remember what she's seen, and tells anyone, she'll either be confined to a psychiatric ward, or start a wholesale panic."

This, Joannie heard through a semi-conscious fog.

Had she not realized the impossibility, she'd have believed herself to be dreaming while fully awake. Muddled delusions swirled in her brain, as if forcibly extracted from her memory. Unfamiliar voices spoke in terms she couldn't comprehend, and she heard two distinct heartbeats pounding in her ears.

Along with exclamations of “What!” repeated thrice.

“Ah, here it is!” the Doctor eventually declared. “It seems, Mel, the TARDIS’ most recent modifications include a back door.”

“What?”

“One not connected to the security grid.”

“Will you be able to... seal it?”

“Once we get back to London. For now...”

Joannie awoke on the queen-sized bed in her suite on the Hilton’s tenth floor around 10:00 Saturday morning. She couldn’t remember how she got there, but did recall she hadn’t touched a drop of alcohol at Friday evening’s social.

Her flight from O’Hare International to LAX scheduled at 12:30, she stripped off her suit, showered and grabbed a t-shirt, jeans and sneakers for the trip home, sprinting for the airport shuttle.

A gold commemorative coin from the Art Institute’s exhibit sank to the bottom of her rolling bag, unnoticed for months and, then, discounted as a token of appreciation from one of the Field Museum’s fellow board members.

The Vision

Clarissa MacPherson made quite a comfortable living in her line of work. With the proliferation of Catholic religious communities reaching “completion”, being hired by the respective dioceses to assess the historic significance of buildings and furnishings turned a tidy sum.

She often chuckled at the irony of the situation: an atheist in the employ of the Church.

Perhaps that detachment from the traditions and beliefs associated with these structures and their former inhabitants allowed her a neutrality, a lack of sentimentality, when typing her reports. More than once, she’d overridden the diminished valuation of motherhouses or monasteries by certified realtors eager for a quick commission. Developers often withdrew their bids for properties she had been contracted to evaluate.

Why waste time going head-to-head with a hard-nosed - she preferred “ethical” - professional?

This latest complex, an upstate New York Benedictine priory constructed in 1903, had closed rather suddenly, its six remaining nuns suffering from Covid-19 and dying in a matter of weeks. Where she usually had six months to a year to perform her inspections, this job was dropped in her lap with a 30-day deadline.

She drove from Indianapolis the weekend after completing paperwork on a small Franciscan friary. Accommodations in a four-star hotel had become a standard clause in the Memorandum of Understanding; why not be comfortable in her task? She settled in Sunday evening, ignoring cable television in favor of a hastily prepared overview of the property included in the manila envelope with a ring of keys ranging from ancient to new.

Clarissa had to admit: walking into the vast, deserted edifice jarred her nerves. If not the remnants of a community, then laborers crating furniture or statues provided some company on previous assignments. Fortunately, utilities remained functional, so she switched on overhead lights as she traversed the rooms and corridors, dispelling roving shadows.

Eventually pushing open inlaid chapel doors from the cloister hall, she stood transfixed at swirling dust motes lit by shafts of afternoon sunlight through frosted windows.

Odd, she mused, no stained glass like so many churches of that era.

Darkly-varnished oak stalls - individual seats where the nuns had sat during their periods of prayer throughout the day - hand carved with intricate patterns would bring a good price from collectors of such memorabilia. Four sections on

each side of a center aisle held a total of 128 bodies in their prime. The sanctuary remained intact, a lace-trimmed white cloth accented by a red runner embroidered with flames still dangling from the three entwined tree trunks carved into an altar where liturgies had been celebrated. The ambo - a matching section of the same tree? she wondered - still held an open lectionary.

The woman settled on one of the round stools, which allowed a stall's occupant to shift directions from side to front, as needed. The small, hard kneeler afforded another posture for prayer, which she ignored.

An almost tangible silence proved a welcome respite from the noises of city and rural life, sirens and farm equipment. She tried to quiet her brain as she gazed absently at the steel crucifix hanging above the empty gold tabernacle...

The string quartet playing a 17th century motet disrupted her reverie. Confused, she checked her cell phone - no notifications of voicemails, text messages or emails. She'd seen no radios or stereos that could have inadvertently switched themselves on...

She involuntarily shivered as the strains faded into silence.

As the last note echoed through the chamber, a blinding light originated between two angel sculptures mounted on either side of a mosaic backdrop representing stars and sky, causing her to shield hazel eyes with a twitching hand. The voice that emanated from the brilliance startled her with its resonance and mild Irish brogue.

"Clarissa, come to me," reverberated between the walls.

She rose tentatively. "Huh?"

"Come, dearest."

Gripping the ledge where nuns would prop their prayer books, she shook her brunette curls in the hope of dispelling this bizarre hallucination. "I'm not crazy!" she told herself.

"Of course, you aren't," came the ethereal reply. "Come to me."

"Who are you?" she sputtered.

"You know full well."

Yes, she realized, the timbre rang familiar and, when the physical form materialized within the glow, her knees transformed into a gelatinous mass.

"Ollie?" she gasped.

There could be no mistaking the dark hair, smoldering blue orbs, bulbous nose, thin lips, square jaws marred by assorted scars, bull neck, broad shoulders and barrel chest of her erstwhile lover. He'd died eight winters previous in a horrendous pile-up on the interstate during a massive snowstorm on his way to visit his family for the holidays in...

This.

Very.

Town.

“Oh, shit...” she breathed, recalling the music she’d heard had been played at the funeral home during a nonsectarian memorial service before his cremation. Then, she crumpled onto the marble floor.

How much time elapsed before she recovered her senses, Clarissa couldn’t guess. Yet, as her eyes fluttered open, there Ollie stood, as tangible as if he’d never wrecked his Mercedes.

His massive paw reached for her; she timidly grasped the thick fingers and allowed him to lift her upright.

“This makes no sense,” she stated, running her hands over his sturdy frame. “Why would an atheist be granted a vision of another nonbeliever in a Catholic church?”

“Because I grew up here,” rang the basso profundo. “My aunt was a member of this monastery, and we’d visit her regularly...”

“Damn!” She caressed his rugged features. “I still don’t...”

“Ah, you will.” Urging her from the stall into the center aisle, he led her up three steps to the green carpeted sanctuary. “The very day I abandoned these ridiculous rituals, I swore I’d return and prove the women who were gullible enough to profess vows negating the true purpose of life wrong.” He flashed a smile. “This is that day.”

“But, the nuns are no longer...”

“Their physical presence is unnecessary. Their spirits still inhabit this place, and they will know...”

He easily hoisted Clarissa so her spine rested on the altar. Then he climbed atop her, skipping all but the most cursory foreplay before a passionate coupling - something the woman had dreamed of and missed for years.

Their lust sated more than once, they lay side by side on the flat surface, staring up at the arched ceiling.

Nothing untoward had transpired.

Ollie chuckled. “These old gals used to harangue me for my irreverent attitude. They warned me that I’d be eternally consigned to the furthest depths of hell if I defiled their sacred spaces.” He propped himself on one elbow, grinning. “Look! We’re still here!”

Yet, as Clarissa moved to stroke his chest, he dissipated into thin air.

She remained prone for another quarter hour, struggling to grasp the import of this incident - a futile effort. Finally, she shifted her legs off the elevated table, buttoned her blouse and secured the belt on her slacks, resuming her work.

Unlike other jobs, she kept a copy of the key to this chapel's exterior door, remaining in town for six weeks after submitting the requisite file to diocesan officials. She crept onto the premises each night, joining Ollie on the altar until semi trucks hauling heavy equipment arrived to demolish the buildings.

The investor who purchased the property would never receive zoning approval to create an industrial park on the site, so the acreage sat empty - with Clarissa making occasional trips to park on the roadside, remembering the strange juxtaposition of two atheists making love on hallowed ground.

She never did fathom how the universal consciousness engineered that mystical reunion.

The Intern Experience

He made me laugh.

Even as a kid, when my older brother, ten years senior - stuck babysitting while our parents were out for the evening - would sit me on the living room sofa and play the “forbidden” videos, his buddies lounging on the carpet, I laughed.

Fast forward nearly two decades, and I was standing on the set of a network sit-com with the man less than six yards away, sending the entire crew into stitches: bent double, collapsing on their knees, lungs heaving, mirthful tears flowing.

Snapping useable photos while trying not to shake with giggles proved rather difficult, I admit. But, at that point, I really didn’t care. This was a dream come true for me - albeit a totally unexpected one.

My university arts program offered internships for outstanding undergrads in their final semester with a range of organizations across the country. Browsing the opportunities one autumn afternoon, I discovered I could take my Nikon camera to California and provide stills for a production company in Hollywood.

Who wouldn’t send in an application?

Waiting for the acceptance letter drove me nuts during those weeks before mid-term exams; I had three projects to finish and assorted papers to write. When the Express Mail envelope arrived, I celebrated by hiking down to my favorite pizza joint, ordering a meat-lovers and a tall beer.

Los Angeles in January is a lot warmer than Chicago in winter. The biting winds and snow I could definitely do without. My orientation at the studio took about a week; I made sure the ID badge on my lanyard was proudly displayed wherever I went - though I got lost in the maze of soundstages and administrative buildings a few times.

My duties included snapping away as actors rehearsed scenes for their episodes - the Nikon sat idle during takes, since the clicking of the shutter could be picked up by sensitive boom mics used when recording. I also got to photograph publicity stills, with one of my initial portraits gracing the cover of the L.A. *Times* weekly TV guide.

Seeing my name credited in the caption seriously bolstered my ego.

A month or so into the gig, nonetheless, I started to get bored. I’d spend eight hours a day taking the photos, and another four wading through the memory card to sort out the best. In 60 minutes, 800 images could be captured, and I might save 50 of them to submit to the public relations office.

My supervisor didn't warn me about Will MacGregor's guest appearance on the popular Friday prime time show during the Monday staff meeting. Maybe he didn't think it important when he assigned me to cover the process of script readings, run-throughs and taping.

I wore my usual - t-shirt, jeans and Birkenstocks - breezing into the conference room that afternoon, halting in my tracks when I recognized the salt-and-pepper curly mullet atop broad shoulders chatting with the director. The door slammed behind me; he swung round and I nearly melted as his intense brown eyes fastened upon me.

"Oh, shit!" escaped my lips.

Everyone laughed, thinking my exclamation was a reaction to making such a racket.

The cast parked themselves around the table; my position allowed me to wander freely - discreetly - around the room. No surprise I had to change both my battery and memory card, with most of the photos of MacGregor, to be cherished in my private collection.

During a break for the crew to discuss a technical issue, I approached the comedian, trembling like a leaf. "Mr. MacGregor?"

He sipped his coffee. "Aye."

"I'm... Bernie Wyndom."

"Bernie?"

"Short for Bernadette."

He smiled, straight teeth glistening; my knees turned to jell-o.

"I'm going to need you for a photo shoot tomorrow morning..."

"What time?"

"Around ten?"

"Aye." He set the insulated cup on the buffet table and thick digits encompassed my upper arms. His gaze penetrated to the depths of my soul, as if I was the only person in the room. "Dinnae be nervous, lass. I dinnae bite."

Tenderly, he patted my cheek, then rejoined the group to continue the reading.

Tuesday dawned sunny and warm - the exact state of my mood. In a white-painted chamber with multiple LED fixtures on stands, umbrellas to modify the light and assorted backdrops, I checked the charge on the Nikon's battery for the umpteenth time, adjusted the height of the tripod and waited.

MacGregor gushed with apologies when he strode in 20 minutes late, clad in a black turtleneck, trousers and square-toed biker boots.

"There was a problem wi' m' costume..."

I heard myself respond, “No need to apologize.”

“Where do ye need me?”

That question struck me the wrong way; my mind fantasized a myriad of possibilities. I pinched my arm, forcing myself back to reality, and inhaled slowly to prevent making a fool of myself.

With a textured mauve background, softly lit, I directed him to stand in a few rather dignified poses. As I bent to adjust the camera settings, I realized I’d begun chattering about my childhood memories of his comedy and saw, through the eyepiece, he absolutely beamed.

The Nikon came off its base, and I moved around while his eyes followed me. I hadn’t really considered myself a professional in the field up ‘til then; somehow, I sensed I was creating art that day.

I cannot, for the life of me, remember what I said that sent MacGregor into a glorious fit of hysterics. The sound rippled through me like an ocean wave, washing me of all cares and worries.

After 45 minutes, the assistant director came to fetch him for a rehearsal. I slung the camera over my neck and gave chase.

Just before noon on Wednesday, I meandered through a sea of trailers wedged between massive, windowless structures: luxurious accommodations for the actors when not required on set. MacGregor had been assigned the nicest of the lot, his name on a printed sign tacked to the door.

My knuckles nearly missed the panel when I tried to knock. I had to consciously steel myself for the task at hand, like a soldier venturing into enemy territory - only this man was no enemy.

“Come in!” I heard.

Stepping up into the dimness, I glanced around at lush furnishings. MacGregor sat in a recliner, wrapped in a gold terry robe with a towel draped over his shoulders, as if he’d just stepped out of the shower. I knew, though, he was waiting to be called to wardrobe and make-up.

“Ach, Bernadette!” he hailed above lively strains of a banjo playing on the stereo. “Good t’ see ye!”

God, I loved his Scottish burr!

I presented him with a manila folder.

“What’s this, then?”

“A few photos from yesterday.”

“Already?”

“I sorted through them last night.”

He rifled the collection of 8 x 10 glossies. “Brilliant work, lass.”

“I need you to choose the ones you want used for the promotions...”

He grinned, the dimple on his chin prominent. “I’ll leave that t’ ye.”

I felt myself sweating, though the air conditioning unit blew icy air from the vents. “You... like bluegrass?”

“I got m’ start playin’ bluegrass.”

That, I hadn’t known. I studied his hands as he admired the photos. The end joint of his left index finger was oddly - permanently - bent at a 45 degree angle. Perhaps he could no longer manage the intricacies of a stringed instrument due to some injury, or arthritis.

“My dad played the banjo,” I sputtered. “I loved to watch his fingers fly along the neck...”

“‘Tis a fun instrument. If mine had nae been stolen...”

He didn’t seem to mind me intruding on his privacy with my questions. His account of being presented with a custom-made fretless banjo by an avid fan, taking it with him on his most recent tour, and returning to his dressing room to find it stolen after an appearance in New Orleans dejected me. The local police hadn’t spend much effort on solving the theft, either.

“I’m so sorry,” I bumbled.

“So am I. ‘Twas a masterpiece in its own right.”

Our conversation sparked an idea, though. Instead of reclaiming the photos, I made them a gift to him and departed when the phone rang, summoning him to the make-up trailer.

I took the afternoon off without permission - they couldn’t fire me, since I was an unpaid intern, after all. I drove south on I-5 in a rented Honda Civic to San Diego, where I’d chanced upon a marvelous little shop during a weekend outing to the beach with some of the studio crew.

Not rich by any means, I dropped quite a chunk of change on an item I hoped Will MacGregor would appreciate. Wrapping the oversized parcel in brightly patterned paper proved a challenge; I brought it to his trailer Thursday morning.

“You must let me pay ye for it,” he insisted, plucking the Chattan Luthiery banjo’s five strings and adjusting the tuning. “‘Tis incredible.”

I sat at his feet as he played a series of songs. His misshapen digit did not impact his skill in the slightest. If this is heaven, I thought, I’m happy to stay right here forever.

The Nikon’s strap irritating my neck; I removed the camera and set it on the end table. Jolted back into the moment by the jangling phone, I forgot completely about it, rising, making my excuses and retreating toward the door.

MacGregor waylaid me briefly, clutching my arm and spinning me toward him. He planted a kiss on my lips that lives in my memory to this day.

“‘Tis the best gift anyone has e’er gi’n me, Bernadette.”

Stunned, unable to breathe, I managed, “I’m... glad.”

Not until after lunch did I retrace my steps through the studio complex in search of my equipment. A 1:00 meeting with the public relations team to critique my photos lifted my spirits; the executives were pleased with my accomplishments and hinted at a job offer once I graduated in May. I practically danced back to my closet-sized office when I looked down and saw the Nikon not where I’d grown so accustomed to seeing it.

“Shit!”

An hour later, I knocked at MacGregor’s quarters.

No answer.

Given the time, I assumed he was on set, preparing for the taping. I tried the knob - unlocked. I crept inside; the banjo was propped upright in its case beside the recliner, the vellum head splattered with...

Oh, Christ - I swallowed my heart as I crouched to view the stains - blood!

“Will?” I shouted.

Faintly, “Aye.”

Hurrying toward the rear of the trailer, I found MacGregor, his robe streaked with crimson, slumped against the bathroom doorway. Beyond him, a naked blonde, sticky redness puddled on the tiles.

“What the fuck happened?” I gasped.

“I... killed her.”

“How? Why?”

His head swiveled; he seemed not to recognize me. “‘Tis all a blur.”

Though six inches shorter than he, I steeled my muscles, wrapped his left arm over my shoulders and walked him to the desk chair, the only piece of furniture not sprayed with muck. I lowered him onto the seat and squatted in front of him. Those delightful brown eyes could not focus; he was clearly in shock.

I had no choice but to call the police.

Ten minutes elapsed before three patrol cars and an ambulance arrived, thanks to being waylaid by studio security at the gate, because I hadn’t notified staff of the emergency. That gave me a chance to nudge MacGregor back to his senses with a large snifter of brandy, pressing him for details of this disaster.

“I... dinnae know,” he repeated, close to sobs. “I came back from lunch and... and... she was in the bed. When I ordered her t’ get oot ... she attacked me wi’ the banjo.” His baritone altered for an instant as he caressed my cheek. “Your

brilliant gift.” Then, his eyes clouded once more. “I wrestled it away from her; a broken string sliced m’ arm.”

He rolled up the robe’s sleeve to display a nasty gash.

I wanted to kiss it and make it better, like a mother does when her child is hurt.

He prattled on about setting aside the banjo; the woman grabbed a knife from the kitchenette and continued her assault. He slapped her; she dropped the blade and staggered into the bathroom. He vaguely recalled picking up the knife and, as he straightened, she lunged at him, running straight into the sharpened steel.

“It’s self-defense, Will,” I whispered. “You did nothing wrong.”

Those were the last words I spoke to him before all hell broke loose. A police sergeant and four officers burst into the trailer and, viewing the premises, drew their sidearms.

Once I proved my identity and that I’d made the call to summon them, I was released - Nikon around my neck. My co-workers, gathered beyond yellow crime scene tape, peppered me with more questions than the authorities, especially after Will MacGregor was led away in handcuffs.

To be honest, I collapsed in my office, paying no attention to anything the rest of the day. Taping was suspended; the PR staff huddled to determine how best to handle this crisis. A statement was released prior to the evening news deadline that the studio mourned the loss of a valued staff member, script coordinator Caryn Pilcher, saying nothing about her cause of death or MacGregor’s role in it.

My legs finally recovered a modicum of strength after the day’s ordeal; I planned to head to the apartment I’d been assigned within walking distance of the studio around 6:00. As I did at the end of every other day, I removed the Nikon and tucked it in the camera bag...

That’s when I noticed the switch was positioned at “On” and in video mode.

“Oh, shit!”

Digging an HDMI cable from the zippered pocket, I hooked the camera to my laptop.

Not the first time I’d accidentally bumped the button that commenced video recording on the device. Usually, though, it didn’t operate for more than 30 minutes.

Unless...

Had MacGregor deliberately - or by chance - pressed the shutter to begin recording as he struggled with the intruder?

From where the file began, it looked as if he'd crashed against the table where I'd deposited the camera and, maybe, the falling lamp had activated the mechanism. The direction the lens was aimed, fortunately, would clear the actor of all guilt.

En route to the gate to grab a taxi to police headquarters, I saw where investigators were still collecting evidence onsite. I asked for the supervisor who, abandoning a conversation with the coroner, introduced himself as Detective Ian Nissley. It took no little effort to convince him to watch the video on a television in the trailer that had already been dusted for prints and tested for blood residue.

Besides verifying MacGregor's account, the clip included audio of the woman screaming expletives at him, swearing he would be publicly ruined - or dead - if he didn't reciprocate her affection.

Accompanying Nissley to his office didn't qualify as an enjoyable outing. Once the file transfer was completed and the district attorney contacted, however, escorting Will MacGregor back to his hotel amply compensated me for my trouble.

I exceeded my job description by arranging the 10:00 pm press conference, but I didn't care.

Clearing MacGregor's name topped my priority list.

He'd had the opportunity to shower and change into a tailored black suit, white shirt and gold tie, presenting the confident persona for which he'd been so well known. He even added a few humorous insights to his experience in the precinct's holding cell.

We retired to his suite after the last reporter closed his notebook in the posh lobby; MacGregor ordered a late supper for two, both of us starved. As we devoured chicken salad croissants and potato chips, sipping glasses of Chardonnay, I confessed that I'd hidden the banjo in a neighboring trailer in those last seconds before the police arrived - they had enough other sources of blood for their purposes.

I returned the repaired banjo to him the next morning. He blessed me with one more kiss of gratitude before we parted company and, through the studio grapevine, I heard he flew back to Scotland on Sunday.

The sit-com episode in which he was slated to guest star was replaced by a re-run that week. The recording was held in reserve until summer, broadcast without fanfare just prior to the series finale.

My reward as an exceptional intern, transmitted back to the university's program supervisor: the position of assistant public relations director, with commensurate salary and phenomenal benefits.

I turned down the post in favor of a stretch with my hometown public broadcasting station. There, I didn't have to deal with the crazies who, hoping for 15 minutes of fame, made life miserable for others.

Will MacGregor's farewell tour brought him to Chicago the following spring. He somehow tracked down my address and sent me front row center tickets. I invited a co-worker, Jenny, to come along, since she didn't believe the tales I shared about the celebrities I'd met during my internship

The comedian had grown out his hair, which had turned white - from the stress of that woman's hideous death? - and sported a bushy mustache and full beard. I blushed when he included the Hollywood fiasco among other narratives that kept the audience rolling in the aisles. He brought me on stage to considerable applause and gallantly kissed my hand before I returned to my seat.

Photos featuring the two of us were circulated in the local news the next day.

Where, ordinarily, I would've preferred to crawl in a hole in the wake of such notoriety, I let my joy shine through, a smile constant.

And, when MacGregor died of a heart attack just before Christmas, I mourned like one who'd lost a beloved friend. A month later, UPS delivered an oversized package to my apartment: the banjo. He'd signed the vellum head with a black Sharpie, near a faint pink splotch - remnants of blood? - "To Bernadette, let the music in your beautiful soul always fill your days. With deepest affection and gratitude, Will."

I would never know precisely when he inscribed it: if he'd intended to send it to me before he passed or if, in his final days, he'd sensed his own mortality.

Enshrined in the corner of my living room, I see it daily. The best of the publicity photos I snapped - unused by the studio - hangs in a plain black frame above it. I've never stopped playing the videos of his performances, either.

He still makes me laugh.

Come the Rains

Wendy Snodgrass managed to slip beneath the radar of notoriety for three decades, despite writing more than two dozen novels distributed by a major American publisher - six of which had been made into blockbuster Hollywood films.

By keeping a tight rein on her personal information, especially what circulated via the internet - and using a pseudonym - she lived quietly in the bungalow her grandfather had built in Plymouth, Indiana, volunteering at the local food pantry and animal shelter when not hunched at her computer, fingers flying over the keyboard.

For her, writing wasn't just a way to earn money. She'd suffered from an obsession with creating plots and characters since her pre-teen years; inspirations claimed her soul like an infection with Wendy having no choice but to let each particular bout of illness run its course.

A week, a month, a year... page after page spilled forth like a fountain, and even sleep didn't stop the gears grinding inside her skull.

If she'd had to deal with the attendant publicity that came with being a best-selling author, she'd have gone mad.

That extremely hot summer, negotiations for the movie rights to her latest adventure finalized, she bought an airline ticket to Dublin. The Chicago train, which she'd ridden many times rather than drive in the Windy City, deposited her at O'Hare International Airport on a Tuesday evening in time to catch her Aer Lingus non-stop flight, a light backpack her only luggage.

The immigration official who stamped her passport eight hours later gave her a suspicious glance when she explained her holiday involved a walking tour of the Emerald Isle. Once beyond the congestion of Dublin, she would make her way along country roads and stop wherever she chose.

Being a millionaire had its advantages.

So did being single.

Wendy never had time for romance of the tangible sort - relationships concocted in her head far outstripped any games men played in the modern era. She'd enjoyed friendships with guys on the track team in high school, eons ago, and socialized in the early days of her fame with a couple editors when visiting New York City. That ceased around her 30th birthday, extended sessions at the typewriter consuming her life.

She didn't mind one bit, either. The possibility of enjoying platonic interactions between the sexes didn't exist for her. Bachelors she met in the

grocery store, the library or at her alma mater's basketball games always seemed to want something from her - usually sex. She refused their requests for dates, preferring classic movies on TV if she needed a distraction.

This trip - this permanent relocation, though she couldn't confess that to the Irish authorities - she'd brought no distractions: no cell phone, no computer. She had an mp3 player and ear buds, and ten hours of music files, if she tired of reveling in the lush countryside.

Not that she did.

Her retirement would be a radical communion with nature and a culture she'd admired for years.

The first night, she hadn't a clue where her feet had propelled her beyond a general southerly direction. The village boasted a pub, of course, and she tucked in to a hearty meal of lamb with mint sauce, boiled potatoes and fresh vegetables, with a bottle of Jameson beside her plate.

Not that she liked the taste of whisky. It had become a necessity on nights when dialogue would loop *ad infinitum* and she desperately needed rest.

What the locals called the "craic" - a combination of ideal companionship, idle chatter and excellent music - relaxed the traveler. After a slightly tipsy elder bumped her table and spilled her drink, his cronies offered to include her in their next round, and she joined a group that didn't have a care in the world, for the moment.

Her dream of a perfect life encapsulated in that homey sphere, she might consider this crowd friends if she remained in the area. That, however, wasn't her intention. She had no plans to settle in one place ever again.

Cozy accommodations on the inn's top floor provided sufficient sleep to head out at dawn the next day.

So Wendy proceeded along the eastern coast, a contented smile never leaving her face, even when drenched by unrelenting rain.

A mid-day downpour one Friday forced her to end her jaunt early, taking shelter in a library that smacked of centuries past. The stooped, greying matron at the desk directed her to hang her poncho on a hook in the lobby, and provided a towel for her to dry hands and face.

"Not much going on today," Wendy remarked, she the sole patron.

"Never is during work and school hours."

"Is there a hotel handy?"

"A nice one down the block, but check-in isn't until half-three. There are newspapers, if ye'd like to read in the meantime..."

"Thanks."

She'd just turned toward racks of periodicals when the glass door wrenched open and a dripping figure rushed inside. Initially, Wendy thought him the mail carrier or a delivery driver, but the broad shouldered frame sported no uniform. His collared shirt and trousers, in fact, were soaked through, as was the brown paper sack he held in a massive paw.

White fabric clung to a barrel chest; a dark mane dangled over his forehead.

"Roibeárd," chided the librarian. "Didn't I tell you to dress for the weather when I left this morning?"

"Sorry, mum." He deposited his parcel on the reference desk. "You forgot your lunch, and I just dashed over from the office during my break..."

The woman clucked her tongue, then grabbed her son's arm and tugged him down to her level to kiss his cheek. They both laughed.

"You're a good boy, Roibeárd."

"I try, mum."

"Off with you, now."

As he retraced his steps, Roibeárd halted mid-stride at the sight of Wendy observing the scene over the top of the *Limerick Leader*. "How ya?" he greeted.

She swallowed her heart, stammering, "Hi."

"You get caught in the rain, too?"

Damp brunette curls bobbed affirmatively.

"Have ye eaten?"

"Not since breakfast."

"Come on, then." He commandeered the newspaper, folded it carefully, then entwined his thick fingers through hers, leading her toward the exit.

"If you're goin' to the pub, be sure to sit by the fire and get dry!"

Roibeárd's mother advised as they sloshed out to the sidewalk.

Still dazed from this encounter, Wendy didn't recover her composure until they were settled at a round table - near turf crackling on the grate - in a bustling café, a menu open across a china plate.

"Ye on holiday?" Roibeárd queried, perusing the available selections.

"Sort of."

"Ye have a bed for the night?"

"Not yet. Your mother suggested..."

"Forget her suggestion. I'm off for Galway this evening, and my room'll be free."

Her jaw gaped. "I... couldn't..."

"Of course ye could. The sheets are clean..."

“It’s not that. I... don’t even know you!”

“What’s to know? You’re a damsel in distress, and I’m Prince Charming to the rescue.”

He didn’t resemble a prince in the least, Wendy chuckled. He reminded her of how Spot - a black cat with one white speck above its left eye - looked after a bath.

“I appreciate it, really, but...”

That’s when she noticed his eyes. Smoldering pools of aquamarine, fixed on her, unblinking.

Roibeárd’s overtures might simply be neighborly, but any chance of a casual acquaintance with him was nil - not with those eyes.

“I’ve... got to go,” Wendy gushed, snatching her backpack off the floor and rising.

A firm grip restored her to the chair. “Nonsense. A good meal first, then ye can be on your way. The rain should move off soon, anyway.”

Logical.

Not waiting for her to decide, he excused himself and placed an order with the publican at the bar. Resuming his place, he smiled - a genuinely pleasant expression. “Ye trust me, eh?”

Hesitantly, “Sure.”

A warming bowl of pea soup, followed by chicken salad between generous slices of bread filled Wendy’s empty cavern. As she pulled out her wallet to pay her share of the bill, Roibeárd dismissed the gesture.

“Consider it compensation for your visit to our village being ruined by the rain.”

“I... can’t do that.”

“Please.”

God, she sighed silently, he’s so well mannered...

She allowed him to cover the tab and, on their way out, smirked as he plucked an umbrella from a brass stand in the corner.

“I’m borrowing this, Brian!” he shouted at the cook, busy in the kitchen.

Along the main thoroughfare, cramped beneath the umbrella’s limited circumference, they passed not one, but two hotels. Wendy twice attempted to divert indoors; Roibeárd urged her forward.

“I really don’t think...” she protested.

“Mum will enjoy the company, and feel safer with someone else in the house.” He flashed a grin. “She’s a grand cook, too, when she has someone to cook for. Dinner will be a feast!”

Wendy had ogled basic Irish dwellings in the weeks she'd been hiking, but never thought she'd see the interior of one. A small living room, kitchen - where the water from the sink drained into the ground through exposed PVC pipes - two bedrooms and a bathroom covered the necessities. Neat as a pin, the woman imagined Roibeárd's widowed mother laboring from dawn 'til dusk, at home and her paid job.

Roibeárd's room didn't contain many personal touches. At her mystified expression, he explained, "I only stay here when I'm checking on the branch office."

Relieved, she clarified, "So, you're in Galway most days?"

"Galway, Waterford, Shannon. We're all over." Opening a tall chest, he scooped the clothing from the top three drawers and tossed the load into an antique wardrobe, securing the scratched door. "Make yourself comfortable."

Wendy set her bag on the floorboards, not wanting to unpack until Roibeárd withdrew. Sensing her embarrassment, he bowed his head in parting and backed over the threshold.

The women spent a delightful evening, cooking together, washing the dishes and chatting while the television droned a badly edited version of her first novel. When Wendy yawned, Moira shooed her to bed with a compliment. "You're a good girl, child. Ye should've been married long since and had babes of your own."

"That... wasn't in the cards for me."

"Ah, so ye are what is called an independent female?"

"I suppose so."

"G'night, then."

A good night, for Wendy, meant basking in a natural quiet peppered with animals rustling the bushes beyond the window, cows or sheep calling for their mates. She slept hard until a shaft of light from the hall hit her directly in the face, jolting vertical to see Roibeárd beneath the lintel.

"What the hell?" she squealed.

"Sorry, Wendy. The trains to Galway are cancelled indefinitely. The storms washed out two bridges along the route..."

Her mind struggling to clear the fog of unfamiliar surroundings, she croaked, "What's that got to do with you..."

"I just came to fetch my pajamas and an extra pillow. I didn't mean to wake ye..."

Her lungs gradually slowed their respiration. "All right. Go ahead."

"Thanks."

She managed a laugh. Any threat to her person, after all, would be overheard by Moira, slumbering not 20 feet away...

Roibeárd, his arms full of linens, pulled the door closed gently. Wendy flopped on the mattress, but couldn't get back to sleep.

She stared at rough-hewn ceiling beams, wondering how she would've reacted if Roibeárd had taken advantage of the awkward situation.

Younger than she by ten years - or more - and her reputedly youthful countenance not considered pretty by most, why would he have bothered?

"Because some men can't help themselves," she spoke aloud.

Murky daylight and dense fog precluded travel when she awoke. Rather than inconvenience Moira, Wendy feigned her departure, planning to take a room at a local hotel.

"Don't think it, girl," the older woman scolded. "It's not safe. The roads are narrow through the hills, and the drivers wouldn't see ye until their tires crushed ye under their weight."

Now Wendy knew where Roibeárd got his stubborn streak.

"As you wish."

Thus thrown together for six days, until the weather front passed, the trio became an impromptu family unit, contributing to the housework and feeding a herd of cattle on the slope behind the house. Still, Wendy felt guilty about robbing Roibeárd of his bed, even hinting she'd take the sofa so he could adequately stretch his legs.

Almost too polite, he declined.

That last morning, Wendy packed her freshly laundered clothes and sneaked out before breakfast, adamant about not fielding any more of Moira's excuses to stay. A Toyota idling at the whitewashed gate puzzled her, until she saw Roibeárd, six paces behind her, toting a briefcase.

"My boss sent a car, since the trains are still not operating," he remarked. "Can I give ye a lift?"

"No, thanks."

"If ye are ever near any of our offices, please call in to see me," he invited.

"I... try to avoid the cities."

"Well, be safe. I hope to see you again."

The vehicle accelerated toward the main road, leaving Wendy to stroll over the nearest hill. A niggling disappointment mingled with admiration for what might have been the first man she'd ever met who respected women as equal human beings.

Somehow, two months of meandering brought her to Shannon, where she passed directly in front of Roibeárd's company offices, nearly colliding with him as he burst onto the pavement, bound for a meeting. His quick reflexes prevented her from slamming on the concrete and, when he raised her upright, those incredible orbs bored into her soul like lasers.

"Wendy!" he practically shouted, then smothered her lips with his, breaking off to mutter, "How I've missed ye!"

To her own shock and dismay, she reciprocated the passion.

Still, since the moment Roibeárd had captured her heart with his eyes, she'd suspected they would wind up together.

Not that she abandoned her travels for a more domestic lifestyle. Brief interludes with him provided a break from exploring the island's non-tourist treasures but, even though she never divulged her heading to Roibeárd - or herself, for that matter - he always found her, and they reveled in each reunion.