

From the Wilderness

A Collection of Stories

by

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Washed Up

Trinian Pierce idled on the south-facing veranda, sipping steaming coffee as the sun rose. He wore only cut-off jeans, the heat already unbearable on this July morning. All the windows of the prefabricated, solar-powered domicile - which he'd designed and had shipped to the remote island at no little expense a decade earlier - had been thrown open but, without much breeze, the interior remained oppressive.

Whitecaps lashed at the western shore below the rocky bluff. A gale had uprooted a few trees overnight, and scattered branches through his vegetable garden. Eventually, the wood would be cut and stacked in anticipation of winter weather, though not until autumn - maybe.

Pierce reveled in not being compelled to perform chores he didn't like on any given day. He'd bought the sanctuary at a point in his life when he knew his... business enterprises faced a definite risk of dissolution. Whether legitimate authorities or enraged associates, no one would find him on this otherwise uninhabited refuge off Ireland's west coast.

He'd gone completely off the grid, and he didn't mind the lack of phone, internet or daily mail in the slightest.

Mostly, he relished not being required to deal with other human beings.

His frustrations with the species stemmed from being unable to trust anyone - including his own blood relatives - to follow his instructions without fouling up the most basic operations. Finally, that snowy Christmas in New York City, he decided to give himself a present: he packed his clothes in an old army duffel, hired a private jet to Galway, then vanished from civilization.

Nature served as his companion, seagulls, rabbits, a few deer and an occasional passing whale periodic diversions.

"Red sky in the morning," thin lips muttered as dawn colored the sky. Wispy clouds accented pastel hues; he dozed.

A crack of lightning, immediately followed by deafening thunder, jolted him upright. Raindrops splattered on steps leading to the water, a sign of more to come.

Pierce moved the folding lounge and round metal table against the wall, since the overhanging roof didn't always shield the furnishings from moisture, especially in high winds. He wouldn't have noticed the alteration in the scenery if he hadn't paused to drain the ceramic mug, summarily spitting the last gulp of tepid brew over the wrought iron railing.

A bright orange blob commingled with the rocks below caught his eye. Not of natural origins, this.

Man-made, definitely.

“Fuck!” he grumbled, resigning himself to the steep descent, sheerly from curiosity.

Intruders on his property might avoid prosecution in the traditional sense; they would nonetheless receive their due punishment: a bullet in the head.

Retrieving the object snagged on a boulder wasn't necessary for Pierce to recognize it as a tattered life vest. Slabs of white fiberglass and chunks of steel machinery slogged in the current, as well; a boat had gone down in the storm, he presumed.

Agitated fingers flipped wet sun-bleached locks off his forehead, the better to visually inspect remnants of an expensive yacht. Given the extent of the damage, there'd be no survivors.

He left the debris to be consumed by the sea, dreading the climb up the cliff. As a distraction, he pondered whether any crabs or lobsters might be about at low tide, a ready dinner. Another 20 yards along, he glimpsed a pale hand amongst a heap of seaweed. He grumbled a fresh expletive and trudged in that direction.

A rotting corpse would become a tasty meal for birds and other scavengers; he didn't need a search party foraging for the remains, either.

Two silver rings adorned exposed digits: a large amethyst in a utilitarian setting on the left middle finger, the pinky bore a plain wide band with a beaten texture. Pierce squatted beside the green tangle and touched the skin.

Warm.

He checked the wrist for a pulse.

Faint, but unmistakable.

“Fuck!”

Peeling away the seaweed proved no easy task, exposing a brunette female, clad in torn jeans and an oil-stained grey t-shirt, barefoot. Pierce could not deny the temptation to leave her to her fate, since carrying her to the cabin would be a near impossible feat, the angle of ascent prohibitive.

Still...

He waded into the shallows and tugged a flat section of the boat's hull onto the sand. Braiding lengths of seaweed into a rope, he hoisted the unconscious form onto the plank, secured her so she wouldn't roll off, then towed her along the path, muscles straining.

Reaching the veranda almost an hour later, drenched by the heavy downpour, he cradled her in his arms as he mounted the steps, then dropped her

unceremoniously on the lounge. In her filthy condition, he wasn't about to let her drip on the tile floors or ruin his bed sheets and mattress.

He snatched towels from the linen closet, drying his hair and spindly limbs first, then tugging on clean shorts. Purple striped terry was slung at the inert woman, who didn't react to the impact.

Pierce resumed his routine. The last vestiges of fried eggs cleared from his plate with a slice of toast at the same time the rain stopped, he embarked on his daily inspection of lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, spinach and other vegetables, pulling a few weeds from the muddy soil before moving on to open fields.

He'd dammed off a section of the island's lone fresh water supply to double as his bathtub, soap and shaving supplies - when he bothered with the latter - in a hand-hewn storage shed. Shaded by ancient trees, the cool water refreshed him.

His uninvited guest hadn't budged during his absence. The towels remained, unused, across her torso. Pressing two fingers against her neck, he still detected a pulse and, in such close proximity, heard a faint gurgling from her lungs.

Pierce seized a hunk of her shirt and jerked her forward until her head dangled between her knees. He left her in that posture and, as he closed the kitchen door, she wretched violently, expelling sea water from her system.

Another mop-up job, he lamented silently.

She staggered into the dwelling well past noon, her cranium encased in one towel, the other draped over her shoulders. Her legs buckled, and she flopped on a straight-backed chair at the utilitarian dining table. "Where... the hell am I?"

Her reluctant host set aside the copy of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* he'd been reading, peering over brown-framed spectacles. "The island has no name, but I own it, and you're trespassing."

"Unintentionally, I promise." Her contralto hinted at Scottish origins. "Last thin' I remember was fishin' wi' Ewan off the Hebrides, the waves kickin' up a fuss."

"You ended up way off course, in that case. A severe storm... destroyed your boat."

She shivered. "What about Ewan?"

"Don't know. Don't care."

"Quite the heartless bastard, eh?"

"Think what you will. I prefer my privacy."

She coughed, and bolted toward the sink, dry-heaving with nothing left in her stomach.

Pierce didn't move a muscle to comfort or assist her, cringing when she wiped her mouth on a tea towel.

Trembling hands splashed water on her face; she straightened and faced him. "I seem t' ha' lost m' mobile. Can I use yers t' ring for help?"

"There's no signal, even if I had one," he scoffed. "You're stuck for the foreseeable future."

"Oh, Gawd..."

"I don't like it anymore than you do. You'll need to fend for yourself, including building a shelter somewhere on the far side of the creek, finding food, and what have you."

She glanced around the cozy chamber. "But..."

"No. Plain and simple. I live alone, and I'm not going to compromise my principles to let some stupid... female..."

"Stupid? I'll ha' ye know..."

Pierce roared, "I DON'T CARE!"

She clutched the counter's edge, wavering.

"And, don't try any of those feminine games on me. Just... get out!"

Blue eyes squinted at his tall, trim frame and singular countenance. Then, she inched toward him, her slender mien intense.

"What the fuck?" he demanded.

"Ye are... Trinian Pierce," she declared.

"What of it? And, why are you looking at me like that?"

"Wi'out m' glasses, I cannae see much."

"Too bad."

"I recognize yer mug, though."

He sneered, "You going to turn me in to the cops?"

She caught the sarcasm, bristling.

"Like I said: get out."

"Bein' a foreigner, ye may nae be familiar wi' the curse o' these isles, but I hope it comes back t' bite ye in the arse!"

"I don't believe in curses and superstitions."

"Men ha' been known t' die horribly when they dinnae offer hospitality t' stranded travelers."

"Oh, fuck off."

"Be it on yer own head." She dumped grimy towels at his feet and stomped from the cabin, slamming the door hard enough, hinges tore from the frame.

Pierce slung his book across the room, striking the fireplace mantle and knocking two porcelain cherubs off the shelf. The shards would need to be swept before engaging in his next task, or risk cutting the soles of his unshod feet.

A glance through the kitchen window confirmed the woman had not departed, but remained on the veranda, gazing out to sea. Through the screen, what sounded like gibberish reached his ears. She may well have been calling down a curse upon him, before concluding the tirade with, "And I'll be damned if I let ye see me cry!"

Her foot on the top step, he hollered, "Hey! What about the fuckin' mess you made?"

She favored him with a bowfinger gesture - the equivalent of the middle finger in America, that much Pierce knew.

He also knew having a pissed-off female in the vicinity meant trouble. He'd coped with the wives of those who had died in his service; they blamed him for being prematurely widowed and popped up at inopportune moments with pistols in their Gucci purses, or took pot shots at him from behind a hedgerow bordering the circular drive as he left his Long Island mansion for a morning jog.

This one might not pose that kind of threat, but she could steal his vegetables or decimate the garden entirely, just for spite. It wouldn't be difficult to poison his water supply, or foul the motor on the pump that fed it to the house.

She didn't need a gun to kill him, and he'd be just as dead.

He despised the notion of being considerate, yet self-preservation topped his priority list.

Damned if he would chase her across the wind-swept grassy expanse to make nice.

He watched her angry gait carry her inland, increasing the distance between them. Even a salt-and-sand coated wreck, her youthful figure radiated vigor and unmitigated spunk.

Running a comb through his shaggy mop before the bathroom mirror, he recalled an era when he could bed any woman he chose: married or single, experienced or virginal, every age, weight and size. He didn't miss sex - especially not with his wife of 18 years - because it always ended with demands for affection he had no capacity to fulfill.

He'd witnessed his mother whoring herself out to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads after his father abandoned them in search of the "big time" as a punk rock drummer. Love never entered into those... rushed transactions, as much as she ached for that unrealistic dream.

She'd wound up with a knife in her ribs after a bunch of teens gang-raped her in an alley during their high school Christmas break.

Pierce had scrounged enough cash to buy the security footage from a parking lot camera near the crime scene, the night attendant a mercenary prick. He ID'd the dozen who violated the defenseless female - some his own classmates - and made sure they paid the price.

It took eight years to track them all.

As a result of that tragedy, he'd never given any miscreant a second chance if they fouled up an assignment. "That's the kind of man I am," he advised his lieutenants at their initial board meeting after he assumed control - through sheer pluck and bravado - of what federal investigators deemed a "syndicate" of illegal activities.

In actuality a diversified service provider, he kept the peace between competitors in the bustling New York marketplace, handled employee conflicts, while contributing extensively to major charities.

Snooping badges hampered his efforts at expansion, and he tired of the stress. He had no doubt the media benefitted from their coverage of his disappearance, as did the three traitors who'd informed on him to local, county and state police, respectively.

He'd slipped beyond their grasp, and had never been more content.

Except for his idyll being spoiled by that woman.

Moreso, if friends or relatives mounted a search when she and Ewan - whoever he was - didn't return from their fishing trip.

Such dolts would troll the waters off the Scottish Hebrides, though. They wouldn't think the craft had been swept so far west.

He'd not divulged that a ham radio set occupied his bedroom closet, used once a month or so to order groceries from a shop in Connemara, delivered by a sailing enthusiast just as unsociable as himself.

She could be removed from the property in less than a week, unless he wanted to deliberately torture her for his own amusement.

Most men had not the wherewithal to survive in the wild and, for modern women, no hope in hell existed for them to last two days without begging for assistance.

He'd probably find her expired from dehydration or starvation when next he went for a run around the land mass' perimeter.

Four days passed, uninterrupted, when Trinian Pierce recognized the Yankees t-shirt and jeans propped beneath a sturdy oak near his bathing nook, a

pair of silver rings glinting in the daylight. He'd come to replenish the towel supply in the storage shed and discovered a freshly scrubbed intruder napping in the shade.

He prodded her thigh with his sandal. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Ye told me I could camp on the far side o' the creek. Well, this qualifies."

"Stealing my clothes qualifies?"

"There nae be a name on the hut or anythin' in't."

Pierce scowled, thin lips a slash across his face. "Your claim of ignorance wouldn't hold up in court."

"Aye, ye would know about the workin's o' the courts."

She appeared sufficiently fed and rested; he wondered where she'd holed up. He marveled that she presented an almost triumphant demeanor, as well.

"You look like the cat that ate the canary," he drawled.

"If ye be implyin' I know somethin' ye dinnae..."

"Just another tactic to wheedle your way into my good graces, so you can leech off me."

She rose, brushing dirt and leaves off denim that clung to her curves better than it hugged his own legs. "Nae, nae, Trini."

"Don't call me that. It's Mister Pierce to you."

"Why, when I be older than ye?"

"Bullshit! You're... 45, at best."

She guffawed heartily. "Thanks for the compliment."

"Fifty, then."

"Try 64."

"Bullshit!"

On reflex, she reached for her hip pocket, coming up empty. "If I had m' wallet handy, I could prove it, *Trini*."

"Bitch."

"I ha' answered t' that once or twice, I admit. M' mates call me Tossin Turner."

The odd moniker sparked Pierce's interest; his head cocked slightly to the right. "Huh?"

"Long story short: on a campout as kids, I kept the others awake with my tossin' and turnin' on the cot in the tent. M' real name *is* Turner, so it fit."

"I will permit you to address me as Trinian."

"Why, when ye made it clear that ye want nae t' do wi' me?"

"I'm inviting you to the house for supper."

“The curse gnawin’ at yer soul, eh?” she snickered, adding, “Besides, I was plannin’ a fish fry this evenin’. Quite a lot o’ trout in this creek, and I caught a few. Ye are welcome t’ join me, if ye like.”

Disgusted, he spun on his heel and retraced the route to the house.

She shouted after him, “If ye are gonna be that way about it, I won’t tell ye about the gold!”

Pierce halted in his tracks, doubting her honesty. Being upwind, he trusted she’d hear his remark without a need to shout, carried by the pleasant breeze alleviating mid-afternoon heat. “Bring the fish. We’ll see how well you cook.”

The first order of business, when Tossin arrived, was to clean the trout. Pierce had thrown on an old dress shirt with his cut-offs, using his filet knife to make precise work of the process; had this woman planned to suspend them whole over an open fire?

He repressed a gag at the thought.

Decanted white wine had already been placed on the table, set with plates and flatware.

“Ye grow grapes out here?” queried Tossin.

He flipped the fish, sizzling in a cast iron skillet. “This is the last of three cases that came with me when I... relocated.”

Whether she felt privileged by this largesse, he didn’t care. Maybe if he got her drunk, she’d open up about the alleged treasure.

Better if it had been whiskey, he realized. Tossin held her own, though she consumed more than half the bottle.

Dishes deposited in the sink, Pierce hauled a small bucket containing carrot tops, peelings, and pea pods, along with trout heads, guts and bones out to the garden’s compost heap; the nutrients would enrich the soil.

“What do ye do for entertainment on hot summer nights?” prodded Tossin from the veranda, the sun descending amidst clouds in the west.

He retorted, “Does every moment of the day need to be filled with activities?” Joining her, he indicated a hand-turned mug. “Coffee?”

“Love the smell, hate the taste.”

No sense being diplomatic. “You mentioned gold?”

“Aye. Did ye know, at low tide on the east side o’ the isle, there’s a cavern half-submerged. It must ha’ served as a pirate’s cache in centuries past, because the coins are ancient, lyin’ around the rocks for all and sundry t’ help themselves.”

“The chests...”

“Rotted by the salt water. Bits ‘n pieces still remain, but...” Blue eyes gleamed at him. “Ye are a rich man.”

He snickered. "Already knew that."

"Ach, from ill-gotten gains. That's... different."

Gold-flecked brown orbs studied her lean visage. "You've got an oddly-aligned moral compass. You consider wealth pillaged from innocent passengers on ships untainted?"

"The original owners ha' long since gone t' their eternal reward," Tossin snorted. "Unless ye want t' track down their descendants."

"Never." He detected a wry smile playing on her lips. "You expect a finder's fee?"

"I'd just gi' the coins t' some museum in Glasgow or Edinburgh." She sidled toward the steps. "Which is what ye should do, for research and preservation."

Pierce judged the matter inconsequential. Transporting a stash of gold off the island would involve boats and... people. He wanted none of it. "Leaving so soon?"

"By the time I reach m' shelter, 'twill be dark."

"You can... sleep here, if you like," he hinted.

"Share the only bed?"

"You'd fit comfortably on the sofa."

"I rigged up a hammock that works well, thank ye." For her size - six inches shorter than his 6'1" - her stride struck him as unusually long.

Silhouetted against the dusky sky, her figure roused sensations Pierce had suppressed for years. He bit his tongue to restrain a... less than dignified comment, when she abruptly doubled back.

"Change your mind?"

Her expression sheepish - or seductive? he mulled - she inquired, "Could I trouble ye for the loan o' a knife?"

"Sure. There are plenty in the kitchen drawer."

She preceded him to the door, which tended to swell on humid days. As she tugged at the knob, he wrapped his hands atop hers, adding his strength to the effort. She leaned against him for leverage; her warmth captivated him.

One aspect of living in this haven: Pierce had sworn he would free himself of all societal conventions, doing as he pleased, when he pleased. Why should this situation run counter to that mandate?

As Tossin rummaged through assorted cooking utensils, he pinned her to the counter, powerful arms sliding under the t-shirt, encircling her narrow waist. His mouth assaulted her neck from behind. She didn't protest, didn't struggle, instead twirling toward him and taking the full force of his kiss.

The sun set on their passion, leaving them to bask in the moonlight, limbs entwined.

“For someone who has nae had a woman in o’er a decade, ye ha’ nae forgotten how t’...” She stroked his tanned skin. “And, so fit...”

He grinned, thin upper lip curling over straight white teeth. “There’s no way you’re 64 years old. You... fuck with the energy of a teenager.”

“It’s m’... favorite form o’ exercise,” she quipped.

“Wanna go again?”

They went three more times, in fact, before falling into an exhausted sleep.

No curtains on the windows, dawn woke Trinian Pierce early. He rolled left, to find himself alone on the double mattress.

Yet, not alone.

Tossin stood over him, wrapped in his dragon-embroidered red silk robe, aiming his own Colt revolver at his forehead.

“What the fuck?” he muttered, groggy.

“As much as I enjoyed the incredible shag, Trini, I ha’ a job t’ do.”

He tried to raise himself on one elbow, the pistol’s barrel dissuaded him.

“Job?”

“Dinnae try t’ lie yerself oot o’ trouble. We ha’ known about the gold for years.”

“I... didn’t...” Pierce batted aside the weapon and sat upright, burgundy silk bed sheet concealing his nakedness. “Who the fuck are you, anyway?”

“Detective Sergeant Tossin Turner.”

“Of course, you have no credentials to prove that.”

“As we speak, a squad o’ officers be loadin’ the plunder on Irish Coast Guard trawlers, bound for the National Museum of Scotland. M’ supervisor has m’ badge in his pocket.”

“So, you came here on purpose, to divert my attention from...”

“And t’ arrest ye. That storm the other night...”

“Threw a wrench in the works?”

“Aye.” She permitted him to stand. “Get dressed.”

Ignoring the directive, he grabbed her and smothered her objections with vengeful kisses. After so many attempts to indict him had failed in the States, a rape charge wouldn’t stick, either.

Tossin dropped the pistol when Pierce fell atop her on the mattress. Once finished with her, he retrieved it and fired a bullet squarely between her eyes.

Add felony murder to the list.

Her colleagues never initiated the promised raid. Pierce even made a circuit of the island before noon, finding no one, and no gold in the partially water-logged cavern, just an assortment of rotted planks and corroded hasps.

Angrily, he decimated the primitive shelter she'd constructed - sans hammock - and burned the clothes in which she'd arrived.

A hoax? he puzzled, tramping across the fields. Had Tossin engineered the whole scam, anonymous associates making away with the gold for their own personal gain?

Had she planned to kill him all along?

She was beyond answering his questions.

In the bedroom once more, practiced hands redressed the corpse. He didn't notice when the silver band slipped off her pinky and rolled beneath the bedframe. He wearily hauled her to an area of shoreline where the descent wasn't so steep, then stuffed handfuls of stones in her jean pockets. He tied the anchor - salvaged from the storm-wrecked craft - to her ankles and launched her into churning waters.

Another bonfire near the garden consumed blood-stained bedding.

"This is why I hate people," Trinian Pierce grumbled after a ham sandwich and chips satisfied his growling stomach. He filled his mug with coffee and settled on the veranda. "Be kind, and they fuck you, every time."

Best Laid Plans

“You’ve been told repeatedly: that’s outside our jurisdiction!”

Glasgow Police Commissioner Denny McKenna glowered at his subordinate, Tossin Turner, though her seniority with the department merited considerable respect among her colleagues. She’d solved more cases than all other inspectors combined over the past decade, and she’d been at it four times that long.

Her mouth moved; McKenna shushed her with a finger to his lips. “Nae ‘buts’ now. I know you’ve been after this since your early days on the force. We just cannae...”

His Scottish burr tempered by years in London, her thick inflection resonated as she trudged to her glass-walled office, swearing like a sailor.

She plucked her mobile off the doodle-marred blotter and punched a series of numbers. Two floors up, a desk phone rang; Ewan MacCready clutched the receiver. “Community Justice.”

“He willnae go for it,” she grumbled.

“So, we’re on?”

“Aye. The boat leaves Saturday at half-six.”

“See you at the marina.”

Tossin tucked the device in her jeans; she’d stopped wearing business attire to work after receiving notice her mandatory retirement would take effect August 1, a week prior to her 65th birthday. She could still outrun - and outthink - the clods seated in clusters on the opposite side of opaque panes, but the pencil-pushers insisted “rules are rules.”

Screw that lot, she groaned.

Since discovering the cache of gold coins in a partially submerged cavern on a tiny, uninhabited island off Ireland’s west coast during a summer tour with her then-fiancé, she’d ached to launch a recovery mission. Delivering samples to experts at the National Museum in Edinburgh, they verified the currency as dating from the 17th century, stolen off an English trade ship by Irish pirates during a tumultuous era between the two countries.

She’d kept a personal file containing the reports for 35 years. Each time a new face sat at the commissioner’s desk, she’d proposed the venture and been denied. Their advice: let Ireland’s Garda handle the matter, or whichever museum could afford the expense.

That, Tossin would never do. Ten percent of the treasure’s total value would comfortably fund her imposed permanent holiday.

Another complication arose when she learned Trinian Pierce - reputed criminal kingpin from the States - had purchased the island, through means legal or illegal, she never determined. He'd also taken up residence on the one-square-mile plot.

Acquiring material on the man proved difficult, since Tossin wasn't authorized to contact her counterparts in New York. Accessing computer records tricky, as well, she enlisted the aid of MacCready, well practiced at breaching internet firewalls thanks to his stretch on the cyber-crime team.

In all, she'd roped eight discontented colleagues into this enterprise. She and Ewan would sail in from the west and take Pierce captive, while the others arrived on the eastern shore the following morning to load borrowed watercraft of various sizes with the booty and haul it to a designated rendezvous in the Outer Hebrides for distribution.

Tossin had been monitoring the weather all week; an unexpected gale caught her by surprise and cost Ewan his life, washed overboard as he tried to loose the anchor, which had become tangled on a reef and threatened to capsize the yacht.

He'd ditched his life vest, and had no chance of surviving the roiling waves, even if she'd jumped in to rescue him.

Thinking on her feet always an asset when pursuing criminals, she'd employed that skill as carefully-laid plans disintegrated around her. A small dinghy hit the water; she clutched the oars to keep them from being washed away, and waited until the winds subsided and she could row toward land.

Tossin plunged into the shallows, leaving the boat to be riven on the rocks. She had no need to apply extra sand to her limbs or drape seaweed over her shoulders, the shoreline already a mess. She wedged the orange life preserver in a jagged outcropping, then sank amidst the debris.

Her acting prowess, awarded in the wake of many undercover operations, served her well. She encountered serious difficulty while Pierce jostled her onto a make-shift stretcher, then dragged her up a treacherous incline and settled her on his veranda.

She slept, knackered. Upon waking, she maintained the guise of a storm-battered survivor, vomiting at will - a tactic acquired with practice - and stumbling into the incredibly modern domicile.

She hadn't expected the unshaven, greying beanpole's virulently anti-social behavior, a boon to the task at hand. If he intended to leave her alone on the far side of the creek, the removal of the gold could proceed unimpeded.

Another potential plus she contemplated on the fly: apprehending Pierce as a fugitive from justice. He hadn't been added to the FBI's Top Ten Most Wanted list, but the wire fraud, extortion and unsolved murders linked to his activities merited him attention on two continents - and might score her a fat reward.

He could have wielded the Colt revolver on a whim and shot her as a trespasser, the weapon within easy reach of his armchair. Or, she could use it against him at the appropriate moment.

String him along, she decided. Soften him up. Let him believe her a fragile female, incapable of fending for herself.

For a few days, at any rate.

As she caught some rays on the beach by the primitive hut she'd constructed from downed branches and vines, her comrades arriving as scheduled and gutting the contents of the cave during low tide - morning and evening for three rotations of the planet - she deliberated how Pierce could be so stubborn. She'd seen neither hide nor hair of him and, once the boats departed, set off to confront him.

His self-dammed bathing pond soothed her aching muscles as she soaked in the shade. Pierce nothing if not thorough, she raided the storage shed for soap, shampoo, towels and clothes that fit reasonably well - the man so skinny, she didn't need a belt to hold up his jeans, and cuffed the hems to compensate for their difference in height. She positioned herself between the roots of an ancient oak to await his arrival.

Rough edges slightly smoothed, the invitation to join him for a meal astounded her, while providing an opportunity for the final skirmish. Her associates, aware the storm had stranded her, were due back to fetch her around midnight; they'd be transporting an extra - shackled - passenger, as well.

Pierce had implied she'd be cooking trout she'd snagged in the creek, thanks to a fishing net she commandeered from the shed. He handled the skillet himself, however, and did an excellent job of rustling up a salad of fresh vegetables grown in his own garden.

Despite his claims to the contrary, he *must* have a means of communication, she mused, excusing herself to the bathroom after consuming the last bite, detouring into his bedroom for a cursory inspection.

That's when she found the ham radio equipment in his closet.

"Bloody liar," she hissed.

A bloody risk, too, if he'd already reported the boat wreck to the authorities.

He... didn't seem the sort to maintain those types of contacts, she rationalized. Pausing near the fireplace in the main room, she scanned the furnishings. The pistol remained untouched.

Plied with dry white wine through dinner, she felt the alcohol's effects on her system before they cleared the plates from the table. Best to make herself scarce, and try again in the morning.

Trekking toward the far shore, she remembered there would be no tomorrow, since she'd be picked up in a matter of hours.

The excuse of needing a knife - a small concession from this hard-hearted sod - propelled her back to the solar-powered structure.

Then... wow.

Tossin had never let romance - much less sex - take the fore on her priority list. The stack of case files piled on her desk kept her busy day-in, day-out and, slender and attractive though she might be with her short brunette curls and winning smile, she never gave any man a second thought.

Not since... that erstwhile fiancé had run off with the rugby team's nurse two days before their wedding.

Yes, Pierce's lanky, tanned, barely-clad body - oppressive heat and humidity gave him a perfect excuse to dress minimally - held a primitive appeal, but she'd never have envisioned herself romping on the mattress with him until every ounce of adrenaline was spent.

His snoring roused her in the wee hours. She slipped into a silk robe, snatched from a hook behind the bedroom door, the fabric reinvigorating her nerves.

Had she not steeled herself against the temptation, she might have crawled between the sheets once more.

Instead, she retrieved the pistol, keeping vigil beside him until he opened those gold-flecked brown eyes.

She anticipated being unable to take him alone. Disarming her too easily, she endured the rape with not just shame, but a sense of failure.

Her associates didn't return to the island that night; the boat's engine needed repairs before they could leave the Galway marina. Having no means to contact her, the now-former police officers presumed she'd wait for them, albeit impatiently.

Another two days elapsed before they dropped anchor offshore. Finding her hut destroyed and remnants of a fire, they marched through open fields and took up posts among the trees 100 meters from Pierce's dwelling.

When the occupant strode off, late morning, toward the creek they'd forded, the squad raided the building, hoping to find Tossin trussed up as a captive.

A canvass of the four-room dwelling turned up no signs of her, until one of the men bent to tie his soggy trainers in the bedroom and glimpsed a very recognizable silver ring among dust bunnies and blood splatters beneath the intricately carved headboard.

They pried open locked metal boxes, found stacked in the linen closet, crammed with bundles of U.S. cash, total estimated at more than \$3,000,000.

On their way out, they torched the house, unconcerned whether residents of neighboring islands would see the smoke plumes.

Trinian Pierce, enjoying a good scrub in the cool waters behind the home-made dam, never saw who shot him. Blood from the chest wound flowed to the sea; birds and scavengers feasted on his flesh until the bones sank and mingled with the silt.

Not that the thieves nurtured any sentimentality about this mission's organizer. Her share was divided among them and they went their separate ways, to live on the fortune.

A celebration of Tossin Turner's career, scheduled at the Glasgow Police headquarters for July 31st, was canceled when she didn't return to duty after a long weekend holiday.

Long Before the Storm

To say the Scots and the Irish despised Queen Elizabeth in the early days of the 1600s would be an understatement. Jamie MacDonald had seen the violence, and heard the treasonous banter in taverns throughout both countries.

That's how, in fact, he ended up in a devilish predicament.

Youngest son of the Laird of Cilgravvin, a coastal estate in northwest Scotland, a flirtatious scullery maid branded the tall, lanky youth "Twigs" because of his spindly, long legs.

The nickname spread through the household, and beyond.

With no chance to inherit even a fraction of his father's wealth, Twigs had befriended a group smuggling liquor and arms from the Continent, allowing them to land and offload the goods in a remote cove the English soldiers ignored as too treacherous for such activities.

An aging Laird invalidated by gout, his eldest brother usurped the patriarch's power - a bloody tyrant in his own right. Rather than obey an order to join the local militia, the teenaged MacDonald fled on the smugglers' cutter to Ireland.

Thick Scottish burr a clear indication of his foreign status, Twigs' hopes of an easier life were dashed. His company shunned by those who believed him a spy, he was beaten and shot at, even taking an arrow in the shoulder while foraging for food in the woods near Newgrange.

The wound untreated, and infected, his fever raging, he was discovered half-dead in a cow shed by a farmer's daughter and secretly nursed back to health. The pair married against her father's wishes, migrating to Connemara. Within a year, though, that lovely, kind lass died in childbirth.

Grieving, Twigs rejoined the smugglers, soon appointed captain of a captured English frigate, its sailors too weakened by starvation to defend themselves.

The goal of these Scottish and Irish-bred pirates: collecting sufficient booty to finance a comfortable existence ashore, while avenging themselves on the English, who'd made their lives - and those of their families and friends - miserable with unfair taxes and oppressive laws.

Twigs MacDonald became a feared name in Atlantic waters, attacking any ship flying the English flag - and some sporting Spanish and French colors, if the mood struck him. The naval craft hunting the *Cara*, as he'd renamed the ship, came up empty on their patrols, potential sources of information falling silent when interrogated, due to the captain's generosity toward the poor.

Its hold weighed down with gold and treasure, the *Cara* would anchor near the eastern shore of a tiny island off Connemara. Twigs had discovered a huge yet well-camouflaged cavern, open to the sea, where longboats could row inside and store their take, unseen.

His crew availed themselves of the peace and quiet above, natural beauty making the windswept fields an ideal place to rest after their voyages. They constructed modest dwellings near a fresh-water creek, even adding a chapel where a former minister among their company could preach on Sundays to the women and children who'd settled there with their men.

Not Twigs, however. The anguish of losing his wife and child had turned his heart to stone; he would not venture down that road again.

Quite a number of women determined to change his mind, however. When the pirates reveled in Galway after pillaging a succession of ships, for instance, affluent and eligible virgins lured the elegant Captain MacDonald with wiles overt and covert. Politicians' wives vied to seduce him, sometimes in sight of their husbands. Widows showered him with jewels and more intimate gifts.

He behaved in gentlemanly fashion, politely rebuffing these attentions, yet still wound up challenged to quite a few duels, accused of dishonoring the flower of Irish womanhood.

Puffed-up public figures were dispatched with ease and, eventually, Jamie ceased joining his mates in their cups or at the gaming tables, preferring the solitude of the island.

Two decades elapsed, during which time he constructed a simple domicile on a bluff overlooking the ocean, away from the modest settlement where the children rolled hoops down a cobbled lane and played hide-and-seek. When in residence - a laird in his own right, though never flouting the title - he hiked daily to a secluded section of the creek, bathing and washing his clothes.

He never liked the sensation of salt water, much less dirt, on his flesh.

Nor could he tolerate the smell of his crew on days they were confined below decks due to inclement weather.

Jamie turned 40 during the *Cara*'s last outing. Seas extremely rough, they'd not sighted an English ship in more than a week. He'd prepared to announce a change of course for home, when the watch shouted that a brigantine had foundered on the rocks near the Outer Hebrides.

Her stores could be salvaged without incident.

A mistaken assumption on Jamie's part.

Pulleys and ropes facilitated the expeditious transfer of chests jammed with gold from the scuttled craft to the *Cara*'s hold, enthusiastic voices singing a shanty

as the men estimated the value. Perhaps those off-key harmonies prevented them from hearing the approach of a red-uniformed brigade on shore; musket fire took them by surprise.

Six men fell in the water, another two caught lead balls in the shoulder as they climbed from the longboats onto the *Cara's* deck.

Jamie resolved to provide their families with an equal share of the plunder.

If they made it safely to the island.

Which seemed unlikely, given the appearance of a warship boasting 80 cannon, bearing down on them from the north.

No way could the *Cara* outrun this three-masted behemoth, except for its shallower draft. Jamie took the frigate's helm personally; his detailed knowledge of the nautical hazards allowed the pirates to breeze over submerged reefs that would tear the warship's hull. They wound between land masses, eluding their pursuers long enough to secrete the gold in the cavern before high tide rendered it inaccessible.

The *Cara's* captain and crew took their final stand on the island's eastern beach, intent on protecting their loved ones from harm. Cannon balls ravaged their ranks, though, leaving Jamie and less than a dozen sailors to race inland and consign wives and children to longboats hidden among the rocks below the treacherous western bluff. Once the warship left the area, they could row to safety in Galway.

Twigs MacDonald wielded his cutlass with skill, watching comrades fall beside him. The squad of English soldiers who took him into custody deliberately compelled him to observe their merciless destruction of the village. They mistreated him all the way to the prison in Plymouth, where he languished in a dank cell, refusing - under agonizing daily torture - to divulge the location of the stolen gold.

Broken in body, he expired on the rack before his 41st birthday. His last utterance, a promise to his dear, departed wife: "Cara, I'll see you soon."

A Random Stop

Religious in his own way, Donald made a habit of swinging into one of the city's Catholic churches after his Saturday shift to light a candle and say a prayer for all the crime victims he'd encountered during the week, their families, the doctors and counselors who would treat them, as well as the perpetrators.

He would leave before the evening vigil Mass, however. The ritual bored him, having lost its meaning when he was a teenager.

Kneeling in a pew at the gothic St. Michael's, to the left of the main aisle, the Metropolitan Police detective inspector noticed three women queued near a pre-Vatican II style confessional, built into the wall. A red light shown over the middle door, similar bulbs above the compartments on each side not activated.

Donald glanced at his wristwatch. The Sacrament of Reconciliation, as few people called it, was supposed to begin at 1:00, according to the notice on the narthex bulletin board. It was already 2:30.

On instinct, he rose and approached the darkly vanished wooden cubicles.

"Have you seen the priest?" he queried of the penitents.

A feather-accented pillbox hat pinned to her grey coif, an osteoporosis-afflicted elder muttered, "He... sometimes falls asleep."

"You've the patience of saints, if that's the case. Your sins are forgiven. Now, be off with you."

The trio glanced at each other, uncertain of the validity of this casual absolution. When he flashed his badge, however, they left their seats and shuffled toward massive oak doors leading onto Chaucer Lane.

Once the panels banged shut - and the eerie echo faded - Donald ran trembling fingers through his bronzed mop, then reached for the tarnished knob. He encountered resistance in pulling the door open; a healthy tug wrenched it free.

The balding, white-haired priest, in button-up cassock with a narrow purple stole over his shoulders, tumbled to the floor at the detective's feet.

He leapt backward, stunned.

Yes, he'd sort of expected a tragedy of this sort, but the reality still rattled his nerves.

Yanking a mobile from his trouser pocket, he dialed for emergency services, identifying himself and explaining the situation. The dispatcher promised an ambulance would arrive in due course.

In the meantime, Donald snapped a few photos with the phone's camera, before rolling the cleric onto his side and checking his pulse at the carotid artery.

Definitely dead. No signs of foul play, except for the horrified expression on the deeply-wrinkled visage.

Something had terrified the man, and his heart didn't survive the shock.

Donald also photographed the confessional's dim interior, where a prayer book had fallen beside the cushioned seat - old bones required a bit of padding for comfort, he admitted. The side sections, each with a kneeler wired to the exterior light that turned from green to red when occupied, and the shuttered window in the wall between penitent and priest - opened when an individual's turn came to unburden the soul of sin - reminded him of a solitary confinement cell in prison.

Paramedics rolled a gurney into the structure with no real sense of urgency, followed by a pair of uniformed constables. Donald suspended his search while they followed their procedures to secure the scene.

"You think the death is suspicious?" queried the sergeant.

Donald opined, "It... looks like natural causes, induced by sudden fright."

"Yeah," interjected the female corporal. "His face... I wonder what he saw..."

"Or, more likely, heard." The detective rested on the nearest pew. "One of his parishioners confessed something so heinous, it stopped the guy's heart."

"That's... not a crime."

"What if it was a crime that was divulged? What if it was someone the priest knew? If his blood pressure spiked..."

"Still not a crime."

"If it was a deliberate act, it would be."

The sergeant growled, "How so, deliberate?"

"Priests can't... discuss what they hear in the confessional. If the person making the confession counted on this, implicating himself..."

"Or herself," chimed in the corporal.

"Yes, of course. If that person knew the priest had a weak heart, and did it with malice aforethought..."

The sergeant closed his notepad. "We'll file our report with your concerns listed, and see if the chief wants to pursue an investigation."

"I'll do a bit on my own, as well."

"That's your prerogative."

The officers departed moments before the evening congregation began trickling in for Mass. Donald remained in his seat, staring at the confessional until he sighted a young cleric enter through the side door.

Joining him in the sacristy, Donald recounted the incident - perhaps too bluntly. The sandy-maned curate dropped on a metal stool beside the wardrobe containing colorful vestments; his alb slipped to the tile floor.

Firm hands steadied him, then brought a glass of water from the sink.

"I'm sorry, Father. Do you want me to make an announcement..."

Golden-brown orbs flashed. "No... thanks. If it looks like the police are involved..."

"But..."

"You're... interest is unofficial, am I correct?"

"True," Donald confirmed.

"Then, Father Barrington's death remains just an untimely misfortune. He will be mourned and, eventually, replaced by the bishop with someone... more fit for the task."

This phrasing alerted Donald on a subconscious level. "Was Father Barrington unwell?"

"His blood pressure was out of control, and he refused to take his medication. Both his G.P. and his cardiologist had warned him of the dangers..."

The inspector had heard the same warning about his mother's condition, years earlier. The slightest exertion - or shock - could trigger a massive stroke, even a fatal coronary.

"I'll leave it to you to handle the arrangements, then," he said in parting.

"You're not... staying?"

Rather than enter into some prickly theological debate, Donald declined and withdrew.

Not that he went far. Though knackered after his shift - and hungry - he left his Skoda at the curb and meandered down the block to a homey restaurant, consuming a plate of spaghetti and garlic bread, his eyes focused on the church doors.

As well as the vicarage next door.

The curate's hand well shaken by congregants most likely complimenting his sermon - on the wide cement front steps after the final blessing - the young man returned to the church's interior. Lights soon extinguished, he emerged from the side door and crossed to the rather shoddy dwelling. The deadbolt gave him some difficulty, Donald noticed, then ceiling fixtures made the lean figure's movements visible through uncurtained windows.

When the detective glimpsed a bucket and bottle of cleaning fluid being carried through the dining room, he paid the bill for his meal and strolled at a leisurely pace toward the brick domicile.

The odor of disinfectant wafted through an open casement as Donald approached the backyard's well-maintained rose beds. He waited in the shadow of a sturdy beech until the kitchen door jostled inward and the priest - now clad in jeans and t-shirt - stumbled down plank steps with a sheet-wrapped bundle in his arms.

When the Metropolitan Police official made his presence known, the curate's load landed on the grass with a dull thud. A hand flopped from between folds of fabric.

"Oh, bollocks!" swore the cleric.

Rather than create a public scandal, Donald instructed, "Have a seat." Quavering limbs settled on the bottom step, while the experienced investigator's trained digits exposed a very dead middle-aged woman. "Who's this, then?"

A previously confident baritone stammered, "Our... housekeeper, Mrs. Hennessy."

Ligature marks around the corpulent neck testified to the cause of death. Donald favored the priest with a glance, left eyebrow arched.

"She caught me watching porn on the computer in my bedroom, and threatened to tell Father Barrington, unless I..."

"Unless you what?"

"Paid for her silence."

Donald chortled, "Priests don't have any money."

"Yeah, but the church does, and she knew I'm authorized to sign cheques on the parish account. She wanted twenty thousand pounds..."

"What did you use to strangle her?"

"The only thing close: a rosary."

A reflex action, Donald waved a vague Sign of the Cross. "Then, you went to tell Father Barrington in confession?"

"I..."

The inspector leaned against the porch railing. "You're not a very good liar." He recounted how Father Barrington had contacted the bishop a month previous about discrepancies in the finances. The bishop notified the police and requested an investigation.

Mrs. Hennessy rang 9-9-9 that very morning about the curate trashing the vicarage study to make it look like a burglary had taken place. "If you'd been successful, Father Barrington's murder while he was napping would have appeared to be a consequence of him interrupting some imaginary intruder."

Donald acknowledged the department's failure to assign constables to the call had been a mistake, but a multi-vehicle wreck in the heart of the city had all

personnel scrambling. “I suspect, when Mrs. Hennessy interfered with your plans, you strangled her and hid the body. By then, Father Barrington had wakened. You chose to wait until he was in the confessional to admit your transgressions, knowing his heart wouldn’t be able to handle the strain. You figured no one would find him until hours after the coronary...”

“Except a nosy copper,” he snarled, lurching upright.

“Mrs. Hennessy didn’t return my follow-up voicemail, I decided to detour from my usual route home, is all.”

Two plain-clothed detectives revealed themselves from inside the house, warrant in hand. Donald allowed them to handcuff the young man, explain his rights, and lead him away.

Trudging to his auto, he lamented how his attitude about religion had been thus justified. When even priests weren’t immune to the temptations of greed and murder, did the message these authority figures proclaimed about pursuing a life of holiness make any sense at all?

The Angry Scotsman

The corner of The Angry Scotsman farthest from the entrance remained bathed in shadows each night, nearby ceiling fixtures and wall sconces disabled. The only light emitted from the round table, according to regular pub patrons: the flicker of a match and the reddish glow of a burning cigar.

Or, more precisely, cigarillo.

Occupant of the lone wooden chair, Fiona preferred the slender version of Cuban hand-rolled smokes - for the taste and the aroma - though assorted clientele out on the piss fouled the air with their cigarettes.

She'd never been able to stand the latter. Especially the stench.

Nursing a double whisky, she watched life in its infinite variety from this vantage point, offering no critique on the technique of men who tried to snare a quick shag with the single females at the bar, high-end prostitutes on the prowl, university students seeking a respite from their textbooks, solicitors winding down from the day's cases in court.

God pity the individual who disrupted this idyll by getting hammered and starting a fight.

The Angry Scotsman employed no bouncer; Fiona ejected the rowdies herself.

Owner's privilege, she called it.

The lean, sandy-haired female seldom rose from the table as the years passed; her reputation preceded her, and customers respected her rules.

The pub came into her hands in a roundabout fashion at the turn of the century. Her widowed father a member of the Scottish Parliament, he'd sent her to school in the States, hoping she'd ultimately join the diplomatic corps. A week after she'd graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from an Ivy League institution, he'd died of a heart attack on the golf course. She'd returned to Edinburgh for the funeral and disposition of family holdings, finding a fire the previous summer decimated the vast Highland estate.

Her father hadn't divulged that news.

She emerged from the ordeal with a modest inheritance, the old man's debts draining most of the reserves. The afternoon she signed the final documents, The Angry Scotsman had offered a plentiful dose of liquid relief.

She'd needed a stiff drink. Mounting a bar stool, she'd consumed three double whiskys before noticing the arthritic, grey barman and his skinny teenaged son, absently drying freshly washed pint glasses.

She chatted them up, learning the recession had taken a huge bite out of their trade. A rise in taxes also slashed their profits. The pair lived on the upper floors, which was the only reason they still had a home.

Fiona bought the establishment on a whim. She hadn't the means to continue her education, and nowhere to live in country. She settled in the spare bedroom the following day, a "silent partner" at first, leaving operations to McDonald and his son.

Except for inviting local musicians to perform authentic Scottish tunes at the weekends, drawing tourists. The unused kitchen was cleaned and renovated, so a light menu could be added, attracting noontime shoppers.

The younger McDonald - Davey - stepped up to serve the patrons when his father could no longer hold the glasses or manage the pour. Alec, instead, held court at the corner table, regaling his cronies with tales of the "good old days."

Until he choked while eating fish and chips during the annual Edinburgh Festival.

Davey and Fiona had been... elsewhere when that tragedy occurred, or they might've been able to render the required aid to ensure his survival until the ambulance arrived.

Fiona stood by Davey through the coroner's inquest and cremation, a simple brass urn placed prominently on the mantle above The Angry Scotsman's ancient stone fireplace. The lad's guilt ate at his soul for no little time; Fiona reassured him that - like her own father's situation - death came without prior warning, and he was not to blame.

A "long, tall drink of water," as many observed when meeting McDonald, he sported a full head of wild brown hair that mirrored a wildness behind brownish-gold eyes capable of mesmerizing those - especially girls - who looked his way. He had a ready wit and broad smile to match, curling his thin upper lip over straight, white teeth. He flirted freely as he served drinks, tucking phone numbers scribbled on napkins or scraps of paper in the pocket of his tight fitting jeans.

Davey celebrated his 21st birthday the summer after his father died; Fiona ignored her 26th a month later. They'd long since fallen into a routine of mornings spent restocking kitchen shelves and coolers, changing out kegs and replenishing bottles of scotch, bourbon, whisky, vodka and other spirits, scrubbing metal and wood surfaces, mopping floors and cleaning the toilets.

The Angry Scotsman opened for the lunch crowd, then enjoyed an afternoon lull. Shortly after 5:00, a cacophony of voices raised the decibel level, lasting past midnight.

When Davey called for last orders, Fiona monitored the migration of drunk and sober from the property. Doors deadbolted and windows secured, they would load glasses into the dishwasher and dump half-eaten bowls of peanuts in the bin.

“One, two, three!”

The pair raced up the rear staircase, laughing as they scrambled to the bathroom and stripped off sneakers, socks, jeans, t-shirts and undergarments.

Fiona had instituted one hard, fast rule when she'd purchased the pub: the smell of smoke might permeate the barroom, but their living quarters must be untainted by the odor.

Discarded attire consigned to a laundry basket, she and Davey jumped into the shower together - as they had been doing for three years. Shampoo was applied to their hair and rinsed, then soapy lather scrubbed the lingering stench from their flesh and excited them for what was to come.

Towels caressed moisture from their skin as they kissed, eventually falling on the king-sized mattress that Fiona had bought with her share of the early profits. The wee hours spent sating each other's passion, they slept well past daylight.

Fiona had never really aspired to more in life than a modicum of comfort, and she had achieved that goal. Perhaps too early, however, with a growing fatigue making it more and more difficult to keep up the frantic pace.

That chill autumn Friday when the local rugby squad decided to toast their latest victory, the crisis reached its apex. A trio from the opposing team spouted insults, with one tossing his lager in the winning captain's face. Fiona rose - almost ceremoniously - snuffed out her cigarillo in a cracked crystal ashtray and strode toward the dispute.

A hush fell on the throng, combatants with fists poised in mid-air, staring down at the diminutive female.

“You really want to do this?” she challenged, her contralto knife-sharp.

A fan of the losing squad chortled derisively, “Go away, little girl.”

He stumbled out the door in short order, nose broken by a vicious backhand.

Yes, his comrades towered over her and outweighed her by more than ten kilos, but not when they landed on all fours, kneecaps shattered.

Fiona held her ground until the entire assembly vacated the premises. Then, she collapsed on the floor, struggling for breath.

Davey scrambled from behind the bar, squatting beside her. He rang for emergency services on his mobile; the medics couldn't reach the pub fast enough, though they burst through the entrance in less than five minutes.

Riding in the back of the lorry, Davey clasped Fiona's hand and muttered soothing inanities. She gazed on exquisite, youthful features, tears streaming down his cheeks, as her arms were attached to beeping monitors. The siren blared, even after her lungs stopped heaving.

The attendant drawled, "I'm sorry."

Davey bent and kissed her still-warm lips.

Fiona's ashes were placed on the mantle beside Alec's urn; a pack of her favorite cigarillos remained on the corner table, atop a black memorial ribbon.

After that, The Angry Scotsman became a non-smoking pub.

The coroner's report showed Fiona had been suffering from advanced lung cancer.

Davey, soured on life by the tragic loss of those dearest, *became* the angry Scotsman. He lost his smile and steadily alienated the regulars, until a drunken politician's flunky - offended by Davey's criticism of the country's finances - torched the pub while the young McDonald slept above.

Arson was never proved, though, and the ruins were razed to construct a posh coffee shop, a legacy - and two sets of cremated remains - lost to history.

Off the Grid

“Son of a bitch!”

For the sixth time, John Tennant turned the key in the Mustang’s ignition and the engine failed to start. He could tell, too, the battery was taxed. Another few tries, and it would be drained, adding to his problems.

One distinct advantage to owning a classic: carburetors were easier to repair than electronic fuel injection and the related computer components. Still, literally in the middle of nowhere, a two-lane road nestled between gloriously beautiful mountains, with no cell signal, he couldn’t even phone for a tow.

He pounded the steering wheel with both fists, pain surging up his arms. When he exited the vehicle, he slammed the door.

Popping the hood, he checked the distributor and fuel pump; no wires disconnected. He leaned against the front quarter panel, working up the motivation to start walking.

Where?

He hadn’t seen a town, much less a house, in an hour. He’d nurtured a suspicion he’d made a wrong turn somewhere and was thoroughly lost, but without access to his GPS, he couldn’t be sure.

Dressed for a meeting to be held mid-afternoon, he contemplated his polished Hush Puppies. The hike would ruin his feet; dust would ruin the leather. From the cramped rear seat, he yanked a pair of sweats and Converse sneakers from his duffel so, when he set out, he would be more comfortable.

After at least five miles, comfort was no longer an issue. His leg muscles ached and the summer heat added to his thirst. The track before him curved, so he couldn’t see around the next bend. He kept hoping for some sign of civilization...

Ponderosa pines covered the slopes, which might provide ample shelter for wildlife, but did nothing to assist him. If an angry bear, or a pack of wolves, decided to make a meal of him, he couldn’t climb worth a damn.

Golden-brown eyes had been focused mostly on the cracked asphalt, but the increasingly loud songs of birds urged his gaze upward. Repeated trills soothed his soul, and he fell into step with the cadence.

That’s when he spied what resembled a roof, fifty yards up the incline.

Before ascending to this shelter, he rested on a tree stump worn smooth by the weather. The throbbing of his calves eased, and he resigned himself to being stuck alone in the wilderness for the foreseeable future.

Except, when he shoved open the slightly warped six-panel door 20 minutes later, he realized the log cabin boasted an occupant.

Burlap curtains covered the windows, created from potato sacks - but clean. Cupboards with etched fronts displayed dishes and glasses. He tested the faucet at the kitchenette sink: hot and cold water, meaning the dwelling had electrical power. The large room contained a love seat, desk, chair, bookshelves, two chests of drawers, dining table and twin bed, as well.

A little hermitage, of sorts, complete with a full bath.

He made use of the toilet and washed hands and face, tempted to strip off his clothes and use the shower.

That, however, might be impolite without the tenant's permission, he decided.

When he emerged from the cubicle, he came face-to-face with that individual.

Wearing a white tank-top, jeans, hiking boots and a wide-brimmed straw hat covering a curly ginger mop, Tennant couldn't initially determine if the sunburnt figure was male or female. An armload of freshly-chopped wood was dumped beside the stone fireplace before his presence was noted.

"What the hell..." came the startled grunt.

He approached before the rifle above the mantle could be retrieved and aimed at him. "I'm sorry for intruding. My car broke down..."

"In the dead zone." A lyrical laugh confirmed her femininity.

"Excuse me?"

"There's a ten mile stretch where nothing gets through."

He queried optimistically, "What about... here?"

"No luck, I'm afraid."

"Shit." He sank on a straight-backed chair at the hand-hewn table.

"It *is* possible to contact the outside world, though."

"How? A land line?"

Her sympathetic smile annoyed him. "No. But the mail carrier stops by once a month."

"Once a month!" he hissed.

"He's due next week." She wiped her palms on faded denim and extended her right hand. "I'm Erin, by the way."

Tennant accepted the gesture absently. "John."

"Nice to meet you, John. I'd like to be able to say I have a flock of homing pigeons who could be sent with a message to rescue you, but I gave up that scheme ten years ago."

This declaration jolting him from his self-pity, he puzzled, "How long have you lived here?"

“Almost 20 years.”

The inevitable: “Why?”

“I like it. There’s a peace here that can’t be found anywhere else in the country - probably, the world.”

“Who... owns the land?”

“I do.”

“How do you... get your supplies?”

“The mail carrier brings them. I have a standing order at the grocer’s in town.”

Tennant’s hopes revived. “Which is how far?”

“Forty miles.”

The bubble instantly burst. “Aren’t you afraid of being so isolated?”

“I’ve grown accustomed to it.” Erin washed her hands and began pulling containers off shelves anchored to the wall. “I bet your hungry.”

“Ravenous,” slipped out.

“We can talk more over dinner. Why don’t you grab a shower and change clothes.” She pointed to the narrow bed. “You can sleep there.”

Tennant abruptly felt guilty about invading this solitary’s idyll. “Where will you...”

“I have a folding cot in the closet. It’s actually better for my back.” She lined up ingredients on the laminate counter. “I hope you’re not a prude.”

“How so?”

“Since we’ll be sharing one large room, privacy won’t be...”

He didn’t quite know how to respond to the obvious.

“I do have some clothes line, for when it’s too cold to hang the wash outside. I can use an old blanket to...”

“No need, thanks. I... served in the military right out of college, so I...”

“Good.”

Tennant retired to the bathroom, his aching joints relishing the pulsating hot water. The shower curtain rustled as he scrubbed a layer of dirt off his skin, and he flinched.

“Just me,” Erin stated. “Towels are on the sink. Clothes are hanging on the door.”

“Thanks,” he stammered.

The relaxed fit jeans required a belt - a length of rope - and the “What if the Hokey Pokey is What It’s Really All About” t-shirt hugged his chest. When he sat opposite her before plates of pasta, garlic bread and green salad, Erin concealed a smirk behind her hand.

“Were these... your husband’s?” he asked.

“I’ve never been married.”

“A... boyfriend?”

She shook her head.

“Then...”

“When I moved up here, I bought odds and ends from a thrift shop. Some fit, some didn’t.”

“Ah, but you kept them...”

“In case of emergency.”

“Well, as someone with an unmistakable emergency, I appreciate your foresight.”

They ate, Tennant savoring muted spices in the red sauce. “All that’s missing is the wine.”

“Sorry, no luck. I have grapevines on the hill, but the bees usually get to the fruit before I do.”

“What about... the rest?”

“There’s a garden,” she thumped the salad bowl. “A few apple trees are scattered among the pines, too.”

“Who built the cabin?”

“A construction firm, a decade before I moved in.”

He wiped his lips with a linen napkin. “So, you didn’t...”

“No, it was... part of a retreat center run by a community of Catholic women.”

“Really?”

“They acquired most of this mountain range when one of their member’s fathers bequeathed it to her in his will. As their number decreased, and they needed money, they closed the retreat house and sold off sections...”

“And you bought this.”

“Yup.”

“Wow. You’re... content being by yourself?”

“In my... career, I was always around people. Though I did my best to respect them and provide resources to assist them through life’s struggles, the general attitude of ingratitude contributed to my severe case of burnout. I decided to give up my work and... well...”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Erin prodded.

“I don’t know... the human race?”

She chuckled. “You’re not responsible for anyone except yourself, John. The others... can only change themselves, in their own good time. In the process of accepting that dynamic, I gave myself the option of stepping back and changing myself.”

Tennant admired the woman’s gumption. That she’d existed in this fashion for two decades, and been employed in a social services capacity prior to that, he guessed her age to be at least 50.

She could have passed for 30, fit and lean.

“In less than an hour, you’ve wheedled my deepest secrets from me. Tell me about yourself,” she prompted, signaling him to follow her through the back door, where a small deck offered a view of the setting sun. She served him coffee and settled on a folding lawn chair beside him.

“You... seem to be ready for visitors...” he ventured.

“The occasional hunter who’s lost his way, or hiker. Even though I prefer seclusion, I can still be hospitable.”

He sipped the steaming brew, then scooped two teaspoons of sugar into the mug and stirred. “I’m originally from Glasgow,” he began.

“I thought I heard a hint of a burr.”

“I’ve lived in the States since I was five. As I mentioned earlier, I went to college, then into the military, and have done a lot of traveling.”

“For business, or pleasure?”

“Both, but mostly business.”

“Are you in sales?” wondered Erin.

“No, films. I’m a location scout for a production company.”

“That sounds... intriguing.” She warmed her hands on her cup. “Is that why you’re so far from... everywhere?”

“I was headed for Sun Valley and...”

“Damn, you’re really lost!”

“Why, where am I?”

“You’re in Montana, my friend.”

“Shit!”

“You’re safe, though, and in a week, you’ll be on your way.”

“Looking for a new job, too.”

She snickered. “I’ll be more than happy to vouch for you, if it comes to that.”

As the pastel hues of dusk faded, the pair returned indoors. Erin switched on a small lamp near the bed, using the light to rummage in the closet for the cot.

Tennant's offer to help was politely refused; she unfolded the bed near the dining table, adding a pillow and blanket.

Then, she withdrew to the bathroom to swap mud-stained attire for a purple plaid night shirt and brush her teeth. Lounging on the twin mattress, Tennant was startled to be tossed a pair of men's paisley pajamas, but not surprised at their origin. A drawstring waist came in handy, with the top hanging below his hips.

Better than sleeping in his boxers.

"Are you hooked up to the local electric service?" he inquired.

"No, there's a small wind turbine up the hill, and a few solar panels on the roof."

"That power the pump for the water?"

"I don't use much."

The next morning, Erin was up with the sun and outside tending her garden before Tennant awoke. He didn't see her for most of the day, in fact, though he did notice the rifle missing from its hooks above the fireplace.

He selected a paperback at random from the bookshelves, which held nothing published after the turn of the century. Dickens, Stevenson, Poe, Conan Doyle, and Christie mingled with E.E. "Doc" Smith, Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury and other science fiction authors. Reading a classic mystery took him back to his youth and relaxed the tension in his neck and shoulders over being stranded.

He, actually, didn't find it too difficult to be without the connectivity common in the modern era. He rarely had time for himself, running hither and yon to fulfill endless contracts for producers and directors seeking to create masterpieces within - or below - the assigned budget. While he explored locales far beyond well-traveled tourist sites, he seldom had time to revel in their ambience.

The rabbit Erin served for dinner tantalized his taste buds, a delicacy worthy of a five-star restaurant. They shared coffee over the sunset, then slept to a symphony of crickets, soft breezes rustling the trees and owls hooting.

After four days, Tennant felt himself a new man. He got dirty weeding rows of tomatoes, picking three different types of lettuce and snapping peas; he even accompanied Erin on her rounds to check small animal traps that furnished her with fresh meat.

A skunk caught in one cage presented a hysterical challenge on Wednesday afternoon. Using a long branch to unfasten the latch and flip the door plate didn't work, meaning one of the two would need to perform the task manually, and risk being sprayed.

Tennant volunteered, after ensuring Erin had plenty of tomato soup on hand to deal with the stench.

He removed his shirt and sneakers, creeping toward the cage as he muttered quiet cautions to the terrified animal. Trembling fingers failed to deactivate the locks on the first attempt, so a second try became mandatory. He sprinted away as the metal popped open, tripped over an exposed tree root, crashing at Erin's feet.

Their laughter echoed between the mountains.

Fortunately, Tennant had been upwind of the spray, so the odor did not permeate his clothes or cling to his skin.

He did allow Erin to wrap an ace bandage around his left ankle after they returned to the cabin, swelling indicating a sprain. These tender ministrations renewed his curiosity about her situation, and the fact he'd never before enjoyed a platonic relationship with a woman.

Erin's intelligence, insights, wisdom belied someone who'd rejected humanity, as a whole. She understood their foibles, yet wished to distance herself from them. Perhaps, he mused, the notion she could not bring about the change she knew was necessary to improve the lot of the poor and marginalized had soured her permanently.

When she'd asked about his marital status, he suspected she knew the answer before he spoke the words. He didn't believe in that convention, though he'd shared apartments with a series of women in the past.

"A person needs to be content in their own skin before they can live with someone else," came her sage advice. "Being in an intimate relationship is not about expecting the other to 'fulfill' you, or 'complete' what is missing in your life. There must be mutual respect, friendship, patience..."

He'd countered, "Sounds like you draw from a broad range of experiences."

"I had my share of dates back in the day, if that's what you mean."

"But, your one 'great love'..."

"I grew up with four older brothers. Men aren't... worth the trouble."

Tennant's left eyebrow arched.

"Sorry, John. I've learned that most men don't grow up, they just grow older."

"That's... essentially true." He carried the dinner dishes to the sink. "Do you see yourself as being 'whole' in the way you describe?"

"I couldn't survive this routine if I wasn't."

"Doesn't the silence drive you crazy sometimes?" he queried.

“The only real silence comes in winter. I’ve stood on the deck, snow covering the ground, with not a sound to be heard. Most days, there’s always the birds and the animals, chatting with each other.”

“Do you talk to yourself?”

“A lot. And, yes, I answer myself. If that makes you think I’m insane, too bad.”

“But, don’t you miss hearing the news, listening to music...”

“Oh, I have music.”

“Real music, not... nature.”

“Real music, John.” From one of the cupboards, she pulled a small radio/CD player, and a shoe box with assorted disks - classical, rock, waltzes, polkas.

“You know how to dance?” marveled Tennant.

“I grew up in a Polish family. As many weddings as I attended, I had no choice but to learn.”

They skipped the sunset that evening, dancing in the middle of the cabin once the furniture had been shifted against the walls. Erin’s hazel eyes beamed while her partner twirled her around the floor.

Tennant’s heart raced; he hadn’t exerted himself so much since serving overseas. He sank on the love seat after an hour, lungs heaving.

Erin brought him a glass of water, instructing him to drink slowly. “I didn’t mean to exhaust you.”

“It... felt good,” he assured her.

She knelt on the cushions beside him, massaging his shoulders. Long, twig-like digits patted her right hand, then raised her fingers to his lips.

“You’re an exceptional woman, Erin. You’ve made it possible for me to view females from an entirely new perspective.”

She bristled. “Well, if you take that knowledge with you, this break in your travels won’t have been a waste, after all.”

He shifted toward her. “Don’t you ever miss...”

Before he could finish the sentence, they’d embraced, their mouths devouring each other. The love seat gave way to the twin bed, not much more conducive to amorous activities. They lay entwined through the night, nonetheless, sleeping peacefully.

Over a breakfast of eggs and toast, Tennant spoke his mind. “Come with me tomorrow. It’s time you saw the world...”

“Not a feasible option, John. This... has been my home for too long. I’m out of touch with what many consider reality.”

“You’re the most grounded person I’ve ever met. You could inspire so many to change their lives.”

Erin buttered the wheat bread and slathered grape jelly atop it. “There’s... something you don’t know about me.”

“After all the talking we’ve done the last six days?”

“Until now, only my family...”

He scowled. “You’re dying of a terminal illness?”

“Nothing so dramatic,” she chuckled. “Or, maybe not.”

He waited as she formulated the declaration.

“Remember this land had been owned by a community of Catholic women?”

“Sure.”

“They were Benedictine nuns, John. I was one of them.”

Golden-brown orbs widened. “Huh?”

“When I worked at the community center, directing people to the appropriate resources, I was a nun.”

Tennant suddenly realized he’d violated some well-historied rule and shuddered.

“No, it’s not like that,” she chided. “Or, I think it isn’t. We’d always been a small group, no more than a couple dozen. Being the youngest, as the older gals died off, I was left to... We’d already sold most of the property; I’d bought this bit with a trust my mom had set up. When the legal papers for the dissolution of the monastery were finalized, I was informed I could transfer to another community, or be released from my vows. I was so fed up with the red tape by then, I simply walked away.”

“So, are you, or aren’t you?”

“When you don’t believe in the institution, must you comply with its rules?”

Confusion left him speechless.

“I’m... basically an atheist, John. I could not fathom how an all-loving God could allow people to suffer, to go to war, to be abused. The churches who justify such evils are... greatly misled. So, I let it go and, rather than having to explain myself over and over, I’ve been here ever since.”

“Good for you,” he finally remarked. “Maybe someday, I’ll muster the courage to tell a few narrow-minded bastards what I really think and go my own way.”

“If that’s where life leads, more power to you.”

They didn't speak to each other for nearly 24 hours. And, when the mail carrier's blue Dodge Ram pickup bounced up the old service road on Saturday morning, Erin explained the situation to the ballcap and uniform-clad driver as he unloaded boxes of groceries. He graciously transported Tennant to a small hamlet where his phone managed to reach his employer, after he met with the local auto service technician.

Repairs to the Mustang, oddly enough, amounted to no more than reattaching a loose ignition wire. That malfunction rectified, Tennant retraced his route to the main highway - more than 60 miles - braking at the base of the mountain and gazing one last time at Erin's cabin.

He knew what he'd found by accident, he'd never be able to revisit deliberately, if he ever again traveled these northern climes.

Taking the memory of that week with him, however, did lead to a major transformation in his life, for which he owed Erin an enduring debt.

The Cardiologist's Daughter

So, it had come to this.

Muriel Cummins exited the chief inspector's office, pulling the door closed quietly - though the ploy failed.

Dozens of heads appeared over cubicle partitions in the open workspace, eyes focused on her. She glimpsed a few sneers of disdain and some conspiratorial winks.

Bastards, the lot of them, she swore silently, trudging to her desk.

Didn't she have enough on her plate, as evidenced by the manila files stuffed in the vertical rack? Now, she'd be in charge of processing complaints after a derogatory article about a preponderance of police brutality graced the front page of the local newspaper that morning.

Wasn't that the job of the professional standards office? she mused.

Her supervisors were testing her, to be sure. They suspected she'd been engaged in an illicit relationship with someone in the department, but they hadn't been able to determine who. If she allowed her objectivity to slip while performing the interviews and creating the reports in order to protect a co-worker, they'd be able to dismiss her for negligence.

She wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

Snapping a pencil in half from sheer irritation, she tracked Eric Hartwell as he crossed from the lift to his glass-walled office. Dark, shaggy mane uncombed, the detective inspector's lean features appeared drawn - moreso because of his unshaven stubble; his slow gait attested to how knackered he felt after a night with little sleep.

From the day Muriel met him, she'd hidden her angst every time she heard his name. Her colleagues frequently joked about her surname - a trend started during her school years - but being the daughter of a well-respected cardiologist in the city, she could tell with one glance Eric's heart was not well.

She'd broached the subject during a murder investigation, when she'd been paired with him while his previous partner was laid up, leg broken on a skiing holiday. Hartwell nearly bit her head off, but she detected the truth - and his reluctant admiration for her deductive reasoning - in gold-flecked brown eyes.

On rare occasions, he tugged a prescription pill bottle from inside his grey suit jacket, popping tablets into his mouth. Chalky flesh and disorientation confirmed her - albeit amateur - diagnosis.

She risked official censure by following him to his favorite restaurant for lunch one July Thursday. Browsing the menu at the corner table, he hadn't noticed her sitting with her back toward him until she spoke.

"Ye need t' see a doctor before ye keel over durin' a briefin'."

"'Tis nae your business."

"'Tis, if I abide by department policy that requires reportin' officers suspected of bein' unfit for duty."

Muriel hadn't meant to upset him, twirling on her chair just as he dumped pills onto his right palm. When the medication didn't seem to alleviate his symptoms, she eased toward him and guided him toward the door.

The fresh air of a teeming Glasgow street didn't help, either. "Where do ye live?" she queried, supporting him at the waist.

"Two blocks north."

"Can ye walk that far, or should I ring for an ambulance?"

"No ambulance," he gasped.

Perhaps that was the beginning of the rumors, she deliberated from her desk. She'd draped his arm over her shoulders, so they looked like a couple enjoying a stroll around the shops. If any of their comrades had seen them...

Two flights of narrow, creaking stairs preceded Muriel confiscating Hartwell's keys and, within the cluttered flat, lowering him onto an unmade double bed. He'd spent himself in the effort, eyes closed before he hit the pillow.

She cleared random mail and magazines off a kitchen chair and positioned herself beside him. Mobile in hand, she punched a familiar series of numbers.

"Dad? Are ye busy?"

A stupid question to ask an overbooked physician, but she always started their conversations that way. She convinced him to skip his belated noon meal and make a housecall.

Stern and stocky, wisps of white the only hair left on his wrinkled cranium, Alistair Cummins toted a portable electrocardiogram machine in a wheeled khaki backpack when he shoved the door inward without knocking. Muriel relieved him of the burden, allowing him to assess the unconscious figure.

"Does he take any medication?" queried the physician.

His daughter gingerly slid her hand inside Hartwell's suit and extracted an unmarked amber bottle. Alistair examined the contents. "Metoprolol." Glancing around the mess, he directed, "Check the bathroom for the original packaging."

It would have taken the woman hours to dig through the detritus strewn on the counter and in the chest behind the mirror, if time permitted. Rather than waste precious minutes, she acknowledged defeat.

“I wonder where he obtained them,” Alistair puzzled.

“As many doctors as we deal wi’ during our investigations, he might ha’ coaxed one o’ them t’ write a prescription.”

“That someone could be up on charges with the General Medical Council if ‘tis the wrong dosage, or worse.” He unzipped the padded canvas bag on the chair where Muriel had been sitting. “Let’s get started.”

He cradled Hartwell’s neck, easing him off the pillows while Muriel awkwardly removed the limp form’s red-striped tie, suit jacket, along with his shoes and socks, and cuffed his trouser legs. Laid flat once more, chest bared, electrodes were placed on his ribs, arms and ankles.

The cardiologist muttered over the test results, as well as Hartwell’s blood pressure readings. “This man should be in hospital,” he related. “He’ll die wi’out immediate treatment.”

Muriel countered, “He refuses...”

Her father sank on the matching chair, then bent to dig through his satchel. He gave his patient an injection; lungs struggling for air eased their heaving.

“Stay wi’ him, lass. If he survives the night, get him t’ my office first thing tomorrow, so we can get this sorted.”

The sergeant lamented not delaying her scolding of Hartwell until after she’d eaten lunch; very little food filled his refrigerator or cupboards. He slept peacefully, and she resisted the temptation to run to the corner shop and buy a sandwich, her stomach growling.

By dusk, the chair aggravating her spine, she stretched out on the sliver of mattress beside him, dozing.

He woke at sunrise, confounded. His shirt unbuttoned, a bare female arm rested across his ribcage. He rotated his neck stiffly to the left, where Muriel snuggled against him.

“Hey,” he grumbled, nudging her. “What goes on here?”

Eyelids fluttered; clouded green orbs strained to clear her vision. Then, she squealed an expletive and rolled onto the floor.

“Answer the question,” Hartwell insisted, propping himself on his left elbow with no little discomfort.

Tousled ebony tresses manifested above the bedding. “I... ye... almost died.”

“Last thing I recall is leaving the office...”

“I was able t’ get ye this far wi’ nae incident, at least.”

“What happened then? Why were you sleeping in my bed?”

Muriel snapped, “Well, I was nae goin’ t’ sit up through the wee hours.”

“You... felt it necessary to hold on to me?”

“I...” She blushed. “When I was a bairn, I had a huge stuffed bear t’ cuddle when I was fretful... I must ha’ been dreamin’. I apologize.”

“There was nae a need for you...”

“My father...”

Hartwell snarled, “What about your father?”

“He wants t’ see ye this mornin’.”

“Why? To accuse me of inappropriate behavior with his daughter - which I will adamantly deny, mind you.”

Muriel straightened. “Nothin’ o’ the sort, eejit. He wants t’ talk wi’ ye aboot yer heart.”

“Eh?” He tried to adjust his posture, sinking instead on the pillow. Inquisitive fingers rubbed adhesive residue on his chest. “Did he run tests?”

“Aye.”

“So, he knows?”

She chuckled. “I’ve known for ages.”

“How?”

“‘Tis written all over ye.”

“Do you think the chief knows?”

“Depends on how observant he is.”

Hartwell rose, unsteady. Muriel rushed to catch him before his knees buckled; he waved her away. “Leave me alone. I’ve got to shower and get to work.”

“What are ye going t’ say if anyone asks where ye were yesterday afternoon?”

“Why should they?”

“Ye will nae mention we were... together?”

“Do you think I’m daft?”

He lurched toward the bathroom; she slipped into her loafers and shuffled toward the door.

Alastair rang his daughter at 10:00, wondering about Hartwell. “He’s here,” she replied, glaring at the inspector through streaked panes. “He refused...”

“Go t’ him, this instant, and tell him if he’s nae in my office by half-eleven, I’ll notify his superiors - who are good friends o’ mine!”

“Ach, Dad. Please, nae. ‘Twill be my arse, if ye do that...”

“I’ll nae back down on this, lass. If he does nae gi’ a tinker’s dam aboot his life, I do.”

“Aye. I’ll ring ye if there be any trouble.”

But, how to tackle the subject in the teeming space? She stuffed the mobile in her shirt pocket, selected a file from the collection of cases in progress and grit her teeth as she skirted cubicles to the main aisle.

Her knock on the metal door marked with a brushed silver nameplate merited a terse invitation to enter. Gold-flecked brown eyes smoldered with displeasure.

“What is it?”

Muriel relayed her father’s ultimatum.

“Is he serious?” growled Hartwell.

“Aye. He’s as stubborn as ye when it comes t’ his patients.”

“I’m not his patient.”

“Blame me, if ye must, but ye are.”

“Damn you, woman...”

“‘Tis for yer own good, Eric.”

“I’m DI Hartwell to you.”

“Even after we shared a bed?”

Not a propitious time for levity, she discovered.

“Get out.”

She obliged yet, before she’d returned to her desk, he’d snatched his suit jacket off its hook and stormed toward the lift.

That Hartwell evidently owned a single suit had amused Muriel when she explored his flat the previous evening, trying desperately to remain awake. This fact simplified monitoring his whereabouts, though, in the event of another episode. The miniature cameras she embedded in the jacket’s lapels - front and back - would enable emergency personnel to locate him via the app on her phone.

The video feed, it turned out, also facilitated disputing assorted grievances filed against him in the ensuing weeks.

A mother and her young son, for instance, who claimed Hartwell had deliberately punched her in the face two Saturdays prior.

She’d summoned the police during a domestic violence incident, to which Hartwell and two constables responded. The uniformed female was in the bedroom taking the victim’s statement, Hartwell listening to the suspect’s rant about society’s injustice in the parlor. The latter overheard his wife’s accusation, bolting toward the corridor to silence her. Hartwell blocked his path, taking blows to his face and shoulders before the second constable could restrain and handcuff the man. Hearing the disturbance, the woman leapt on Hartwell’s back to protect her husband; in the altercation, the detective accidentally elbowed the woman in self-defense.

A teen and his father reported that Hartwell had arrested the lad without probable cause, allegedly using violence to take him into custody.

The recording showed the interaction, beyond the gates of the school the teen attended, and the confiscation of a pistol which had been tucked in the waistband of baggy, chain-accented black trousers.

Muriel grilled the elder, “Why did your underage son ha’ a weapon on his person in the buildin’?”

Evidently, the son hadn’t mentioned borrowing his uncle’s weapon to intimidate a gang of bullies.

Over the course of a month, Muriel solved six burglaries, four car thefts and two assaults, also processing 84 police complaints. Of the latter, 17 involved Hartwell. She cleared him of 13, with the remaining four deemed a proportionate response in the performance of his duties.

If nothing else, the exercise proved assigning body cameras to all officers who interacted with the public would actually reduce departmental expenses by a considerable amount.

Muriel came under fire, however, for her initiative - and not just from Eric Hartwell. He considered her placement of the cameras a violation of his privacy. Her retort that she’d feared for his health went over like a lead balloon.

“Then stop bein’ so frugal an’ buy yerself a new suit, eejit,” she added.

The chief inspector and other high-ranking officials objected to the recording of situations without the knowledge of those involved. They intimated the prosecution of at least two major cases could be compromised because of her actions.

The sergeant reminded them how willing volunteers had - for decades - been wired for both sound and video to capture evidence and confessions in undercover operations, subsequently used to aid the Crown in convicting the guilty.

She ended up being awarded a medal and citation by the Scottish Prime Minister.

Hartwell denounced these accolades, and Muriel’s ongoing role in his medical treatment. He adjusted his schedule so their paths did not cross at the police station, believing her to be monitoring his activities and sharing the information with her father, who’d recommended surgery to clear blocked arteries, a procedure the detective inspector declined.

Muriel resented having to retrace her route to the office that particular Tuesday evening, realizing she’d forgotten her mobile. It did, however, prove a fortuitous circumstance.

Cubicles abandoned by personnel accustomed to the day shift, she noticed Hartwell's office lights burning and, through the glass, his lean figure slumped across the blotter.

His pulse thready, lips already tinted blue, she righted him on the chair and dug pills from his jacket. He was able to ingest the tablets and, within minutes, his breathing eased.

"Nae ambulance, correct?" she chided as his bloodshot orbs fastened on her.

"Take me home."

"Ye are that mental. Ye need to get this sorted."

"I'd rather die in my own bed than alone in hospital."

"Why are ye so afraid o' the chief findin' out? Are ye so dedicated to yer job that ye will let it be the death o' ye? Or, are ye that worried the others will think ye vulnerable?"

"Shut up and ring for a taxi..."

"Bollocks. M' car is at the curb."

Hartwell managed to hoist himself to his feet, leaning heavily on Muriel as they navigated to the lift and traversed the ground floor lobby. She endured the burden gamely, though she never thought his skinny frame would be so weighty.

They nearly tumbled down the stairs en route to his flat when he had difficulty raising his legs on the ascent. Rather than be laid on the bed in the two-room hovel, he directed her to the sofa, where she positioned his feet on the cushions, his back resting on the worn plaid arm, pillows wedged behind him.

Muriel had been on her mobile with her father during the journey; he could offer little in the way of advice beyond delivering Hartwell to hospital without his consent.

"Should he eat or drink anything?"

"Water only. I'll... see if any of the residents are free to swing by."

She filled a tumbler at the sink and helped Hartwell take a few sips. "Is there anyone I can ring t' come and sit wi' ye?"

"I thought that was your job."

"Nae, nae, Eric. Ye ha' made it clear ye dinnae want me around..."

"I don't want anyone else to know, though."

She'd planned to meet some former classmates at a pub to discuss their upcoming school reunion, and was already late...

"There's chicken broth in the refrigerator," Hartwell stated. "Warm me a bowl, would you?"

"M' dad said..."

“‘Tis little more than flavored water, and I’m hungry.”

She complied with this request, eager to depart. If only one of the doctors-in-training would arrive...

A blessing she didn’t have to spoon-feed him; he drank the warm liquid from the mug she presented, his color gradually resuming a more normal tint.

“Ye might feel better if ye showered and shaved,” she hinted.

He muttered, “Why does my beard bother you?”

“Because ‘tis nae a proper beard. ‘Tis untrimmed and scruffy.”

“You don’t like men with beards?” he taunted.

“That has nae to do...”

“Aye, it does, Muriel. You visually diagnosed my heart problem, but have you ever considered I diagnosed your problem, as well?”

“What... do ye mean?”

“Your eyes betray you every time the gaggle of detective constables steps off the lift at the start of their shift. You’re in the prime of life, too busy with your career to hunt for a man in the pubs or online, so you’re forced to look amongst your own.”

“Bollocks.”

“You’ve preoccupied yourself with my predicament, so you can forget - temporarily, at any rate - about what gnaws, night and day, at your soul.”

“Ye are full o’...”

“Afraid of the truth?”

“Nae.”

“I’d give eight-to-one odds you’d willingly get locked in the janitor’s closet with that rigger Holmsby - or even Bartlemess, the preening knob - for some serious snogging and a shag worthy of your name, if either of them waggled a finger your way, ” came Hartwell’s blunt declaration. “You’re so tense, you’re on the verge of a nervous breakdown, if not a massive stroke.”

“I’m... ten years younger than ye are.”

“More like twenty. What you’re experiencing can happen at any age. You need to relax.”

“‘Tis nae an option.”

“You can relax here, now, with me.” He pointed to the bed. “There are fresh sheets in the linen cupboard. Make up the bed and get some sleep, if you insist on staying.”

Resigned to the inevitable, Muriel did as instructed, after performing a cursory scrubbing of Hartwell’s kitchen and loading his small washing machine

with clothes overflowing the laundry hamper. Duly knackered, she slumbered without dreams, roused after midnight by movement beside her.

A bristly chin grazed her cheek as thin lips smothered her mouth.

Their passion went no further than a half-dozen amorous kisses.

“I do appreciate... what you tried to do for me,” he whispered, rolling onto his spine.

They held each other until dawn, when Muriel realized the chill she felt originated from Hartwell’s expired corpse.

He’d spent his last vestiges of energy with her, dying in his own bed.

Alistair Cummins testified at the inquest, presenting evidence of Hartwell’s fragile health, though he omitted his suspicions about Metoprolol being the wrong medication, which could have exacerbated the detective’s condition.

Nor was any mention of Muriel’s presence at the time of death included in the transcript.

She’d summoned emergency personnel before 9:00, after arranging the flat to reflect a more orderly tenant who’d expired in his sleep, informing the coroner she’d dropped by to check on Hartwell when he didn’t show up for work.

The chief inspector promoted Muriel to fill the vacant detective inspector position two days after the funeral; she posthumously accepted Hartwell’s assessment of her personality, and the fact she would never have time for a stable relationship with another individual, every waking second immersed in the pursuit of criminals.

Over the odd cup of coffee in the departmental lounge, she recalled the taste of Hartwell’s lips, that single perfect moment marred only by his neglected whiskers.

Not Another Christmas Death

Garth MacDougall hovered beneath the lintel as the nurse adjusted the flow of saline on the patient's IV. When the winsome blonde in holiday-themed scrubs turned, she flashed a cheery smile.

"I thought you'd left," she quipped.

The dark-haired figure in belted grey wool overcoat and red-plaid fringed scarf wagged his thumb toward the bed. "Something... brought me back."

"She'll be okay, if she stays put," came in an undertone.

"Eh?"

"She's already complained about being on the heart monitor for twelve hours without any straight answers."

"Are there any?" wondered MacDougall.

"With these doctors?" The nurse's pony tail whipped toward a voice hailing her. "Gotta go."

"Merry Christmas."

"And to you."

Fiery hazel orbs glared at the visitor when he stepped inside and slid the Emergency Room triage door closed on metal tracks. "Well, well. This is the last place I thought I'd be seeing you." His attempt to convey a light tone failed - to his ears, at least.

"Oh, shut up." Plastic tubing and colored wires flopping wildly, the painfully thin woman tried to locate ties on a green-patterned gown. "Somebody text you about me, or were you already here making sure the casualties from the accident make it to heaven?"

"I've been visiting my parishioners, and heard one of the receptionists in admitting mention your name on my way out."

"People around here are too free with confidential information."

"Perhaps."

"Hell of a time to schedule procedures. Only the urgent cases will be treated over the holiday."

"Most of them are due to be released in the next day or so."

"Just being an obliging pastor, then, to ensure they drop their check in the collection basket at Midnight Mass."

MacDougall bristled. "I don't know why I bother sometimes. You can be downright brutal..."

"Isn't that what priests do? Try to wear down the unbelievers so they come 'round and cough up the dough?"

“Geez, kid. Why so harsh?”

“This whole... situation is harsh.”

He lowered himself onto a straight-backed metal chair beside her. “What happened?”

“Woke up in the wee hours yesterday with my heart running half-speed.”

“Eh?”

“Pulse dropped from over ninety to under fifty.”

“Wow.”

“Never went back up, so I had a neighbor drive me in this morning. Still can’t get anyone to tell me anything.”

MacDougall studied electrical signals creating artistic patterns on a wall-mounted monitor. The heartbeats could be distinguished as irregular, even to the untrained eye, with the blood pressure unusually high and her pulse at 41.

“They keep hinting it’s serious, Garth.” Her contralto quavered. “But, if it was, I’d have gone under the knife hours ago. Instead, they’ve left me hanging.”

“You don’t expect them to tell me...”

“As my next of kin...”

“Does the region’s most outspoken atheist really want it publicized that your closest relative, other than your far-flung sons, is a Catholic priest?”

“You think I care about that?” She spoke through grit teeth. “If you can get me answers...”

Long, nimble fingers patted her hand. “All right, all right. Be patient.”

After a tense beat, they both grinned at the joke.

MacDougall left the chamber, migrating toward the nurses’ station, where he lean on the faux-wood surface.

“What can I do for you, Father?” greeted a young care aide.

“Who’s Irene Bascombe’s doctor?”

“We’re waiting for the internal medicine specialist to arrive.”

“Internal medicine?”

“Since we don’t have any cardiologists in the area, the internal medicine folk cover that field.”

“So, she’s...”

Dimples showed on the aide’s cheeks when she smiled self-consciously. “I can’t...”

“I’m her cousin. We’re the last of our generation.”

“No lie?” she queried, then covered her mouth, embarrassed.

He countered, smirking, “No lie. Her dad was my mother’s brother.”

“Wow.”

MacDougall carried the news back to Irene, confounded by the staff's insensitivity. To leave any patient dangling in this manner...

He resumed his seat near the bed, scarf unwrapped, coat hanging loose.

"Planning to stay awhile?" Irene grumbled.

"Until the specialist gets here."

"So, someone *is* coming?"

"I saw the referral."

Her unadorned left hand clutched his in desperation. "Don't let them do to me what they did to Mom."

"I... won't."

"Or, to Gramps."

He sandwiched her fingers between his. "Gramps was a totally different situation. He collapsed..."

"Hasn't that whole debacle haunted your Christmases for the past fifty years? I can't look at a December calendar without remembering..."

"Yeah, it normally hits me just as I'm raising the chalice during the consecration at the late morning Mass. We'd caught a little sleep after singing in the choir at midnight, then opened our gifts. Mom was stuffing the turkey when the phone rang..."

"The turkey that never got eaten," lamented Irene. "I don't think I ever played with the doll house Gramps made for me, that had been tied up with that huge sparkly bow under the tree."

As MacDougall retracted his hand, she seized it.

"Don't let me die on Christmas Day," she pleaded. "I won't do that to my kids, and grandkids."

"You think it's..."

"I know my body, Garth. I've suspected for months something... was... off."

"But, you wouldn't see a doctor."

She coughed an expletive. "There's a reason they call it *practicing* medicine. They don't know anything they can't find in a book - and most of those books are written by idiots who don't realize, while the main functions are the same, the overall operating parameters are unique to each individual!"

"Calm down, kid!" he murmured, observing spikes on the screen.

Nervous digits clawed adhesive disks from beneath her gown, wires clattering on the floor. Alarms on the machinery reverberated, drawing the attention of nearby professionals.

"Get me out of here," demanded Irene. "I'm not going to die in this hole."

“They... can’t discharge you,” her cousin retorted, unsuccessfully clutching at flailing limbs.

“I can discharge myself!”

Tensions running high on both sides, MacDougall found himself in the midst of delicate negotiations. But, he knew Irene better than the physicians and nurses, and could not ignore this fact: once she made a decision, she would not change her mind.

He glanced at the wall clock: 7:42 PM. He should’ve been supervising the construction of the creche and decoration of the sanctuary, something the parish altar society and their husbands always waited to do until after the last Advent Mass was celebrated.

Ah, well. His assistant could handle that task.

The internal medicine specialist appeared on the threshold as the ruckus diminished, astonishment coloring her taut features. “What the hell is going on?”

MacDougall chased the staff from the room, then ordered Irene to sit on the bed, before leaning against the closed door, lungs heaving.

“Father?” puzzled the doctor. “Do you need some oxygen?”

“No. Just give me a minute.”

Irene interjected, “And, give *me* a truthful answer.”

“I’ve spent the past two hours consulting with experts from hospitals on the mainland.” The physician flipped pages in a small notebook. “We’ll keep you here until transport is available - probably Friday - then...”

“Bullshit!”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not going to let you treat me like a guinea pig and cage me until you’re ready to experiment. If I’m done, let me be done my own way.” Irene untied the top of the gown. “Garth, my clothes are in that closet.”

The doctor objected, “But, Mrs. Bascombe...”

“Shut up and get out.”

MacDougall shrugged when the specialist silently prompted him for support of her viewpoint.

“If you leave, Mrs. Bascombe, there’s no guarantee...”

“There’s no guarantee in life,” Irene snapped, untangling her jeans from a blue flannel shirt.

Drawing her white lab coat in at the waist, the woman exited, followed by the priest.

“Can’t you do anything, Father?” came the final suggestion.

“I never could.” He chuckled at her bemused expression. “We grew up together on the family estate. Even though I’m four years older and quite a bit taller, she always bested me.”

“But, you’re a... a...”

“‘Man of the cloth’? Means nothing to her.”

“So, you’ll drive her home and let her die...”

“I could refuse, of course, but she’d call a taxi.”

MacDougall remained outside the triage room door until Irene emerged, a hooded jacket unzipped over her casual attire.

“You know it’s below freezing outside,” he warned.

“Worried I’ll catch my death?”

He so ached to smack her on the head, but restrained the impulse.

“Let’s stop for a bite to eat on the way,” she remarked as they marched through automatic glass doors into the night.

“Everything’s closed.”

“That’s your fault.”

He halted. “My fault?”

“You and your... kind. Making a big deal of nothing, and inconveniencing the hungry.”

He detected the sarcasm and glimpsed a flash of teeth.

The snowball hit her in the face; she bounced off a nearby car as they traversed the parking lot.

Two teenagers might have been romping in the darkness, if casual witnesses had viewed the scene. The streets deserted as families gathered at area churches to welcome the newborn savior or in their living rooms near festively decorated trees, no one saw the pair scrambling for half-melted ammunition, or garments soaked with slightly mud-encrusted muck.

Struggling to breathe, Irene’s knees buckled on a stretch of whiteness; she landed on her left side, staring up at the stars with a serene smile. MacDougall rushed to her, squatting to raise her head off the cold surface.

“Thanks, Garth,” she whispered.

He carried her limp form back to the hospital, where the coroner eventually collected the body.

Unlocking the silver Toyota Corolla, he checked his watch: 11:14 PM, December 23.

Irene had achieved her goal, at least: she hadn’t died on Christmas.

Hangin' Around

Amazing how the human brain functions in moments of extreme stress.

The last place Mardie envisioned herself on a balmy Wednesday: dangling eight stories above a high-rise apartment's courtyard.

Tony held her by the armpits, the rusted wrought-iron railing providing a bit of leverage. Below, the pool hadn't opened yet; if she could push off with just enough force when he released her, she might land in the water, rather than on the concrete sidewalk.

He'd caught her off guard, for sure. After a long session at the police precinct, she'd ducked back to the flat to pack her clothes, thinking he'd be tied up at his office...

As she yanked t-shirts and plaid flannel off hangers in the walk-in closet, he'd crept up behind her and seized her elbows.

Within ten seconds, he'd slid aside the bedroom's glass patio doors and hoisted her into mid-air.

She didn't dare struggle; his grasp could loosen any second. He wasn't muscular - in fact, she puzzled how he'd managed to lift her off her feet, at all. A long, tall drink of water obsessed with designer suits and impeccable hair styles, he shunned physical exertion or any activity that generated perspiration, even refusing to tote grocery bags from the car those few times she'd dragged him along to the supermarket.

"If you don't like what I cook, you can pick what you *do* like," she'd reasoned, and he reluctantly acquiesced.

They made a distinctly odd couple on those runs: she wearing a ratty U2 t-shirt, jeans and Birkenstocks, he attired in Savile Row. For most of the outing, he'd pretended not to know her.

He probably wished he didn't know her now, wispy clouds floating across the sky.

They'd met by accident - literally. She'd been buzzing through City Central Park on her 12-speed bike and merged with traffic to cross the intersection on a green light, when his limousine decided to turn right on red and clipped her rear tire.

Fortunately, she'd learned how to fall with minimal injuries as a karate student in her youth. By the time the chauffeur braked at the curb, she was on her feet, brushing gravel from her knees.

Her resilience must've astounded him. He didn't wait for the police to arrive - at least a dozen witnesses had already phoned 9-1-1 - but presented a business card and told her to send him all the bills.

She refused the ambulance that stalled the flow of vehicles for two blocks, and walked her twisted cycle home with a slight limp. An hour later, vases of multi-colored roses were delivered with an apology hastily scrawled on a "Get Well Soon" card - though how he'd gotten her address, she couldn't guess.

Tony invited her to dinner the next day. When she showed up at the Italian trattoria in khaki cargo pants and a red spaghetti-strap shirt, he cringed.

Their conversation transcended clothing, however, which may be why he pursued her so eagerly.

That, or the sex.

These memories - jumbled with many others - flashed between her grey cells in a scant instant as she stared over brilliant green tree tops.

Is this how computers worked? she mused, simultaneously regulating her breathing.

Yes, she'd found Tony's vast knowledge intriguing, and his lean form enticing. Learning that he acquired his extensive wealth by dealing drugs, pimping prostitutes and organizing illegal gambling rings soured her enthusiasm, however.

Her own moral code demanded she rat him out to the cops.

Gathering the necessary evidence to reinforce her statements took months, because Tony hid his business transactions very, very well. He was accepted by high society muckety-mucks, welcomed at their charity fundraisers - where Mardie stood out like a sore thumb, mostly - and invited to posh dinners with politicians.

On the premise of completing her ride before the July heat spoiled the day, she'd left the apartment before 6:00 that morning. Five hours in an interrogation room, audio and video recorders capturing every word and gesture as two detectives and their supervisor scribbled notes, drained her energy more than soaring along the riverside hiking path in top gear.

They'd promised her protection.

So much for promises.

"Why aren't you screaming bloody murder?" oozed the cultured baritone from above her.

"I won't give you the satisfaction."

With characteristic wistfulness, he noted, "Despite your... oft-annoying eccentricities, I loved you. We could've been... celestial, if you'd simply kept your nose out of my affairs."

“If you didn’t make a practice of victimizing women and children, I might’ve done just that.”

Below, residents venturing out on errands glanced upward while opening their cars to the breeze. A woman shrieked, prompting Tony to unclench his manicured, nimble digits.

Rather than descend vertically, Mardie pitched forward into a horizontal posture, adding a bit of wind resistance and maneuverability to the predicament. Ten feet above the pool, she inhaled deeply and tucked her limbs into a ball, creating quite a splash.

As a throng gathered and sirens blared their approach, she swam to the ladder to the left of the diving board, emerging - physically - unscathed.

The perplexed building manager brought her a bath towel, which she draped over dripping sandy curls. One of her neighbors moved a folding chaise lounge toward her; she sank on the woven nylon, shivering not from cold but from nerves.

Tony’s limousine never made it to the street, blocked front and rear by emergency vehicles. When uniformed officers brought the handcuffed kingpin into Mardie’s presence for identification, she glimpsed terror in his gold-flecked brown eyes.

Videos of the ordeal, circulated online and via broadcast news channels, didn’t quite capture his fear with their high definition images. Mardie shuddered at this sudden media attention, grateful for the witness protection program offered by federal agents.

They could change her name, her hair color and style, her place of residence, but they couldn’t change her affinity for casual attire. The cozy bungalow’s closet in a small Montana town boasted only t-shirts, jeans and Birkenstocks - albeit augmented by a heavy parka and snow boots during winter weather.

Lacking cable television and internet access, she didn’t read about Tony’s death prior to his trial until weeks after the event. He’d been poisoned in his jail cell, reputedly by inmates from a rival syndicate, though the latter theory went unsubstantiated.

She kept busy as an advocate for human trafficking victims and drug abuse survivors, not entirely shocked how, even in such remote areas of the country, those issues still plagued the populace.

SNAFU

The Corps being understaffed boded ill for denizens of every realm.

When mistakes were made - especially by a certain trio - the consequences held ramifications for the hierarchy at all levels.

The three, individually, wreaked havoc and, with a “no termination” policy preventing them from being sacked, the powers-that-be decided to team Bob, Bert and Barney - nicknamed Larry, Curly and Moe after the famed movie Stooges - hoping their clumsy efforts at compliance would, at least, provide moderately positive results.

The position of escort didn't require a superior intellect. Instructions accompanied personnel as they dispersed at the beginning of each shift. Still, in their first days working together, the trio managed to ignore directives that specified a decidedly corpulent politician should have expired in a prostitute's bed. Through a combined effort, they kept the miscreant's heart beating long enough for him to dress and exit the building, unlock his vintage Lincoln Continental in the parking garage across the street, and slump over the steering wheel.

Those who'd negotiated - and paid - for the untimely death and the ensuing public scandal were not happy with this outcome, to say the least.

Standing before their superior, Mr. Jordan, the three jostled each other like children hoping to transfer blame for a playground accident.

“Enough!” The stern baritone rendered them immobile. “I'm not going to ask for an explanation, nor will I accept excuses. I will only remind you - again - that you must adhere to the stipulations you are given for each retrieval, observing them *to the letter!*”

A muffled chorus of, “Yes, sir,” reached his ears.

“Now, get out of my sight.”

This long, tall drink of water, bright ginger mane tousled in frustration, watched the squat crew file from his office.

The operations manager limited their duties going forward, to prevent confusion. Their colleagues might sweep a sector and bring a dozen or more to the transfer station; until they could perform each assignment without a hitch, their responsibilities would remain minimal.

While waiting for their latest fare on a sunny August afternoon, Bob and Barney sat in Chicago's Grant Park and debated the implications of collecting individuals as they breathed their last, delivering them to their eternal reward - or damnation. (This, while Bert contemplated birds singing in the trees that shaded the area.) They acted in a neutral capacity, not entitled to judge, and yet...

Barney speculated, "If Mr. Jordan takes bribes to expedite the demise of specific persons..."

"There you go, using big words again," chided Bob. "If you mean: is he on the take, there's no doubt about it. He doesn't care where the dosh comes from, either - upstairs or down."

"Your less-than-stellar roots are showing."

"Hey, when you hang around the... dregs of society, you tend to pick up their lingo, no differently than you acquired that upper-crust air."

"True," Barney conceded. "Isn't there a way Mr. Jordan can be stopped, though? It's really not ethical to... to..."

"Indulge the schemes of the wealthy?"

"Correct."

"If we had proof, we could report him to Internal Affairs."

Bob and Barney spun toward Bert at this insightful suggestion.

"And how, pray, would we gather such proof?" queried Bob.

Bert smiled beatifically. "Raid his files when he's out of his office."

"That would be... dangerous, to say the least," Barney remarked.

"What do we have to lose?" Bob noted. "Things can't get any more boring than they are."

A slender young woman in neon purple spandex jogging shorts and lime green sports bra, perspiration dripping from short brunette curls, passed them at that instant, capturing their attention.

"There she goes," stated Bert.

The trio rose and trailed her along the asphalt path toward Michigan Avenue. According to the bill of lading they'd been given, Geneva Addison was to be struck by a car running a red light as she stepped off the curb into the crosswalk.

Simple enough.

As they navigated through the throng, however, she squatted to tie her sneaker laces, a buff spaniel puppy licking her face. She delayed a few seconds to pet the squirming canine and compliment its owner; the car raced through the intersection without incident.

"Oh, crap!" grumbled Barney. "What do we do now?"

Bob replied, "There's nothing we *can* do. We can't just take her if she's not dead."

"But, Mr. Jordan will think it's our fault, another failure."

"Oh, to hell with him," Bert sniffed.

Explaining the mishap to the overworked operations manager went better than expected, to the three's relief. That administrator rifled through a set of leather-bound ledgers, scribbled on the bill of lading and shoved the form toward them.

"You're on this until it's resolved," he instructed.

The revised date of Geneva's demise fell well in the future. Essentially, the trio was consigned to "stand-by" mode.

"What do we do in the meantime?" puzzled Barney.

Bert proposed, "Start pulling together the dirt on Mr. Jordan."

The main obstacle they encountered involved the office where their superior spent very little time, in fact. Walls of glass made it impossible to search without being seen by passersby in the corridor.

Bob rationalized, "We're capable of changing our appearance, for Pete's sake. One of us can go in, disguised as Mr. Jordan..."

"The information we need isn't in the office," declared Bert. "It's in the back room."

A thickly-walled chamber secured with double deadbolts.

"The first order of business will be finding the keys."

Barney scoffed, "I learned to pick locks, thanks to... well..."

"We'll sneak in during shift change," Bob stated.

Their reputation as bumbling fools intact, none of their comrades gave a second thought to their absence from roll calls or scheduled briefings. Sequestered in a sprawling repository of filing cabinets, they scanned labels until they found "Mc to Me". The politician's name had been McDonald.

For comparison purposes, they examined the entire contents of the drawer. McDonald's was the only folder with a blue dot beside the name, though the paperwork within included few variations from other subjects.

"However Mr, Jordan handles these... dastardly deeds, he covers his tracks well," Bob commented.

Three sets of ears heard the outer office door open; Bert, on watch, doused the overhead lights as they froze.

A familiar baritone spoke at a normal level - to whom? they wondered, as he received no audible response. A silence, then a ringing tone...

How did Mr. Jordan rate possessing the very human technology of a cellular phone?

Once he departed, the trio resumed rummaging methodically through the file drawers, tucking random copies of suspicious documents in their pockets.

Something was very, very wrong, and their commitment to exposing the problem redoubled.

Another complication in the process, however, involved where they could stash this evidence until such time as they could approach the Internal Affairs board, which met periodically and, often, without advance notice.

Checking on the young woman who had inadvertently defied death, they decided to stuff the papers under her mattress in the high-rise apartment building in the heart of Chicago's Loop. Geneva's life continued its rather mundane routine - working for an investment broker in the Hancock Building, running, dates with random men - so they left her to her own resources.

Until Mr. Jordan summoned the entire battalion of escorts to a general meeting, veiling his suspicions in carefully crafted rhetoric.

Bob, Bert and Barney had been remiss about fully closing some file drawers, and a few sheets of paper had fallen on the floor, to be discovered later.

The trio kept calm as their superior droned on, and afterward. Rather than admit their guilt, they retreated to a Dunkin' coffee shop on State Street to discuss options.

Bert licked chocolate icing from a donut as Bob sipped his latte. Barney stared out the dust-encrusted window; no one glanced twice at them, despite their uncoordinated clothing and lack of ease at appearing in tangible form.

The usual practice was to travel as invisible entities, but this situation transcended those parameters.

"Don't look up!" Barney abruptly cautioned his companions.

Bob's cup halted in mid-air. "What?"

"It's Mr. Jordan, and he's with a female!"

"Huh?" sputtered Bert.

They rushed from the structure to see their superior assist a curvaceous figure into a black Cadillac stretch limousine before sliding onto the seat himself. A liveried chauffeur closed the door and hurried toward the drivers side.

"What on earth?" Bob swore. "How far has his corruption gone?"

Bert sighed, "We'd better find out."

"What if *he* sees *us*?" pondered Barney.

"That's the last thing he'll expect. C'mon."

Traffic congested, it wasn't hard for the team to pursue the vehicle on foot. It braked near the main entrance of a posh theatre complex, where a touring production of the musical *Wicked* was playing.

From a bus bench opposite, they discussed the import of recent developments.

“Mr. Jordan’s integrity has been thoroughly subverted,” Bob announced.

Barney protested, “Oh, stop with the big words. He’s gone native.”

“So, what do we do?” asked Bert.

“Beyond waiting on Internal Affairs, I haven’t a clue.”

A solution presented itself soon enough. Geneva was due to accidentally fall down a flight of stairs at her place of business that morning, after tripping on a section of frayed carpet. Despite this prediction, her natural dexterity allowed her to skip over the hazard, and she went on her way without a second’s delay.

The three confronted her on the sidewalk beyond the revolving doors.

“Excuse me, I’m in a hurry,” she objected.

Bob smiled, out of practice with human expressions. “Actually, you’re not.”

Gently ushering her into a deserted bistro, they deposited her at a square table and sank on the adjacent chairs.

Their explanations ran together, and her pale blue eyes widened as she tried to comprehend the gist of their babble.

“What you’re saying is: I owe you for not dying?” she rumbled angrily.

Barney bluffed. “We would have been within our rights to... take you, but you being alive may prove more useful.”

They outlined a plan wherein she ingratiated herself with Mr. Jordan, and trapped him into revealing his various rackets.

The trio would avail themselves of cameras to photograph the interludes...

They’d been shadowing Mr. Jordan the past few nights, becoming acquainted with his favorite hangouts, including a penthouse on East Wacker Drive.

That evening, they escorted Geneva - clad in a slinky black mini-skirt - to an exclusive club, bypassing the doorman through cunning subterfuge. As she positioned herself at the bar, they settled around a corner table with a clear view of the action.

Mr. Jordan gravitated to her like a nail to a magnet. He never heard the Nikon’s shutter clicking, nor realized he was being followed upon leaving the establishment after a gourmet meal.

Come sunrise, Geneva returned to her homey flat, where the trio listened to her - abridged - account of Mr. Jordan’s boasting. She had no regrets about cooperating with them, falling onto her bed with a winsome grin.

They couldn’t warn her that, only hours later, an unleashed Golden Retriever would cut across her path as she jogged in the park, causing her to trip and strike her head on a jagged rock.

That made her available, however, to testify against Mr. Jordan when he came up on charges before Internal Affairs; the trio arranged to pluck her from the queue at the transfer station and held her in seclusion until that board convened, with the operations manager believing it another of their foul-ups.

When the IA ruling was made public, the entire Corps was shaken by revelations that Mr. Jordan - so long respected and feared - had led a double life, pretending to be human in the fullest sense of the word, including interactions with mob bosses, prostitutes, and more.

His punishment defied description, with his shrieks of anguish echoing throughout the ethereal realm, an admonition to others who might succumb to temptation after aeons of a seemingly dull existence.

Bob, Bert and Barney were hailed as heroes, and promoted from the ranks to shift foremen. Geneva received a pardon for some rather serious infractions on the earthly plane - manipulating stock portfolios, falsifying loan applications and gambling on the horses with company funds, among other vices - before being transported upstairs.

The four gathered annually at the Dunkin on State Street for coffee and donuts, a small - and harmless - indulgence.

A Scot By Any Other Name...

Michael Connolly stared at the Glasgow city map, tacked to a cork board on the wall behind his desk. Dozens of brightly colored pushpins adorned streets of the less-affluent district, marking sites where dead bodies had been found over the past three weeks.

As many as 15 in one night.

Homeless, drug dealers, pimps and prostitutes.

Shot execution-style between 10:00 and 11:00 PM, left where they fell.

Yet, no one in the area heard any gunshots.

Handwritten notes tucked in the fists of some deceased declared the culprits “The Saints” - on a mission to send the unworthy to their eternal reward.

Local police had allocated no staff to investigate these serial killings, which began less than 24 hours after Glasgow’s mayor declared a need to “clear out the trash” in order to ensure the safety of “upright citizens.”

The murderers might’ve gleaned their inspiration from *The Boondock Saints* movies; Connolly would not glorify their deeds. The latest headline, composed by the editor himself, proclaimed, “Pistol-Wielding Idiots Strike Again.”

If the authorities would not bring this reign of terror to an end, he would use his own resources to accomplish that goal.

Already, three of his top reporters and two photographers had transferred to the graveyard shift, ears attuned to the newsroom’s police scanner and out the door once the zone of that night’s killings was transmitted. The *Standard* scooped their competitors, both online and in print, with the latest details.

Sales of the paper skyrocketed; website traffic tripled.

Prompting certain public officials to circulate conspiracy theories that Connolly’s team colluded with the criminals.

As a result, very carefully phrased editorials derided those same politicians and law enforcement administrators for their failure to apprehend the vigilantes.

Connolly turned from the cork board; a lithe brunette in skin-tight, distressed jeans and red plaid flannel framed in the doorway smiled sardonically.

“I could hear the gears grinding inside your skull as soon as I punched the time clock, Mike,” quipped the American.

He ventured, “How would you feel about working late tonight?”

“Sorry, I’ve got plans.”

“The purpose of this exchange program is to experience the unpredictability of the news cycle, not troll the clubs.”

She propped herself on the edge of the brass-trimmed desk. "I'm well aware that breaking news doesn't always happen weekdays between eight and five, but I don't relish roaming an unfamiliar city, unaccompanied, after sundown."

"You'll have a photographer with you."

"That's a real comfort. If we're attacked, what's he supposed to do? Throw his camera at the thugs?"

"I promise, Peg, no harm will come to you."

"Not even God could keep such a promise." She bristled. "Besides, you're not a cop. You have no authority..."

"I'm a Scotsman, and I care about the place where I was born and raised. It doesn't matter what my business is. I have a responsibility..."

"So, to paraphrase Shakespeare: A Scot by any other name..."

"Precisely."

Peg sighed. "What do you want me to do?"

"Study this map, for one. See if you can logic out some kind of pattern..."

The woman didn't budge. "These guys are calling themselves 'The Saints,' right?"

"Correct."

"Then, look for the Catholic churches. My guess would be they stop to say a prayer before they commence their deadly treks..."

"So, you've seen those films, too?"

"When they first came out, yeah. My older brother had to babysit me on weekends, so he dragged me to the theater while our folks were at work. Made me swear never to tell..."

"Nice upbringing."

"Hey, Chicago, south side. We did what we had to do to stay alive."

Connolly smirked. "Then, you have exactly the right background for what I have in mind..."

"If you mean posing as a pro, think again, Mike. I don't relish taking a slug between the eyes."

"Like I said, you won't be alone..."

"As good as. No way, and that's final." Peg straightened. "I'm heading home the first of the month, and I have no intention of being shipped back in a pine box."

She slammed the door, emphasizing her displeasure. The editor sank on a faux-leather swivel chair and buried his face in his hands.

Only for a moment, however. Betty, his assistant, knocked lightly and entered, unbidden, delivering the day's mail.

Connolly recovered his composure and forced a smile. "Ready for the weekend?" he queried.

"House cleaning while the kids are gone to my folks."

"The floors will only get dirty again once they're home."

"True, but I have to keep ahead of the game."

Which was simply what Connolly was struggling to do. "You're... friends with Peg, aren't you?"

"We hit it off pretty well when she got here."

"Do you know who she's got a date with tonight?"

Betty paused on the threshold, favoring her boss with a side-eye. "Why?"

"No reason," he bluffed.

"She mentioned that new Thai restaurant on Argyle Street."

"Thanks."

Connolly didn't know much about Peg Wozniak, but just her being from the U.S. gave him clues about her daily routine. Unlike many Europeans, who preferred to dine late, she would be hungry around 6:00. He could catch her over a tasty meal, and take her for a walk on the wild side - literally.

He glimpsed his reflection in the laptop screen, scowling. Assessing the coffee stain on his red tie, and smudges of dirt on his trousers from rubbing against adjacent vehicles in the car park, he knew presenting a polished appearance would be essential to his scheme.

Before departing the office at 5:00, Connolly reviewed the application materials Peg had submitted for the Global Journalism Networking Collaborative. She might be considered a "late bloomer" in the media field, having not earned her bachelor degree until age 31 - two years earlier. Prior to that, according to her bio, she'd cared for her ailing grandmother. Her parents had died in a massive pile-up on Interstate 80/90 in Indiana during a holiday snowstorm when she was 19.

Among her hobbies: crocheting, gardening, classic cars and martial arts.

Closing the file, Connolly estimated she could take care of herself when in danger.

His conundrum: separating Peg from her companion, but that concern proved unwarranted.

She arrived at Thai-Me-Up alone, clad in a black turtleneck, spandex leggings and fringed leather jacket; after 30 minutes, no one had joined her.

Connolly, in green striped polo and khaki Dockers, crossed from the bar and sank on the chair opposite her at the two-top table.

"What the hell..." she objected, looking up from her salad.

"You been stood up?"

“No. I prefer to eat by myself.”

“So, you’re meeting your... escort later?”

Her fists clenched on the starched linen. “If you must know, I prefer to be on my own. Less... hassle. I go where I want, when I want.”

“Good for you. I feel the same.”

“Then, get lost.”

“Thing is: I have two tickets for the early showing of that new Marvel film.”

“And, *your* date crapped out on you?”

Connolly scrambled for a feasible explanation. “They were... Betty’s, but she and her husband are driving their kids to Edinburgh.”

The waiter appeared, ready to take Connolly’s order. He summarily perused the menu and selected chicken Pad Thai.

“You’re being terribly presumptuous, Mike,” Peg scolded.

“It’s no sin to be sociable.”

She let the matter slide. “I’d... presumed you’d be more health-conscious, given your matchstick frame.”

“High metabolism,” he remarked, sipping from the water goblet.

They spoke no more for four hours.

So much for being sociable.

The movie proved... less than engaging, from Connolly’s perspective. He hoped his arts and entertainment reviewer wouldn’t allow the franchise’s popularity to color her opinion. Despite deafening action sequences and copious images of dismembered villains, he noticed Peg nearly fell asleep.

Once they emerged into the breezy darkness, he checked his mobile. Multiple texts pointed him in the direction of the latest crime scenes; he steered Peg away from the crowds.

“My car is parked in the other direction,” she protested.

“Won’t you let me show you my city?”

“Actually, I’d planned to go dancing...”

“Grand. There’s a fantastic club a couple streets over.”

Beneath a street lamp, she glared at his narrow features. “Liar.”

Still, she didn’t resist when he drew her forward.

At least, not until they saw the flashing lights of police cruisers at a junction ahead.

“You bastard!” she squealed, jerking free of his hold on her arm.

He played dumb. “What?”

“You’re setting me up as bait...”

“I told you: you won’t be alone.”

In an instant, she had stomped on his boot and jammed a fist in his torso, rendering him unable to make chase, even if his aging ankles cooperated. She sprinted away from the convergence of official vehicles, only to halt in her tracks when a pair of wiry figures intercepted her near an alley.

Connolly heard the argument as he trudged through the shadows.

“Your john get a little too rough, lassie?” growled a deep Scottish burr.

His companion added, “Or refuse to pay what he owed?”

Slipping into a recessed doorway, the editor snatched his mobile from his hip pocket and punched “Record.”

What happened next remained a blur, until he replayed the video later in slow motion. Peg didn’t even bother to set herself in a fighting posture; she lashed out with skilled fists, disarming the duo and crushing their jaws. Lethal feet cracked their kneecaps, and they collapsed in a commingled heap on the cement.

Connolly retrieved the weapons, semi-automatic pistols fitted with silencers. Before he could summon the police with his mobile, Peg positioned two fingers between her teeth and let out a shrill whistle.

“You’re incredible,” her boss praised.

She whirled on him, kicking one of the groaning assassins in the ribs for good measure. “And, you’re an absolute asshole.”

With an unusually long gait, Peg strode toward the car park, leaving Connolly to explain the situation to the constables who responded to the disturbance.

He returned to the office and reworked the morning’s front page, hailing Peg as a hero and, online, linking the article to his video. He would’ve liked to include some quotes from her, but he discovered she’d boarded the first flight departing Glasgow Airport, leaving the flat where she’d been living a mess.

She’d scrawled a parting shot on the bedroom mirror with lipstick - not that she’d ever worn make-up, to his knowledge: “We’re supposed to report the news, not *be* the news!”

Loud

Wherever Ben Nissley bought his clothes, it wasn't on Main Street.

The bright colors and abstract artistic patterns of his attire could be seen more than a block away on sunny days, and brightened the gloom when rain clouds threatened.

He almost paraded these avant-garde fashions along the streets, walking from his modest red brick bungalow to the newspaper office each morning. The 40-ish long, tall drink of water crowned with a vibrant ginger mane secured in place by plenty of hair product would then saunter along the thoroughfares, soliciting advertising from local businesses or snapping human interest photos for the publication.

At high noon, he approached the intersection of Main and First Streets; no audible fanfare heralded his approach, but Rikki's blue eyes lifted from the cash register at the flash of brilliant hues through the plate glass display window.

The youthful 63-year-old hardware store owner - many of her customers believed her nearer 45 - had her timing honed to a fraction of a second. As Ben rounded the corner, bound for the diner where he ordered the same meal each day, she latched the deadbolt on the front door, twirling the "Open" sign to read, "Gone for Coffee." Skirting shelves of clearance items, she reached the side door an instant before her prey, seizing the silken fabric of his shirt sleeve and dragging him across the threshold.

That door secured, Rikki assaulted his mouth with amorous lips as she tugged him past the curtained doorway into the stockroom, across the dusty floor to a brass-framed twin bed, placed there by her own father for use when working after hours on inventory or unpacking deliveries.

By the time they tumbled onto the mattress, Rikki had Ben's red corduroy trousers unzipped, her own jeans falling to her ankles. The passionate interlude lasted less than five minutes, leaving both panting, but sated.

Not that Rikki could really tell how Ben felt; he never smiled. His taut, lean features remained neutral, his gold-flecked brown orbs indifferent.

As he buttoned the shirt splashed with neon blues, yellows and greens, Rikki slipped tingling feet into her Birkenstock sandals. He slipped out the side door without a backward glance; she prepped for her afternoon deliveries.

She suspected he bedded other women in the city - nights and weekends - but what gal in her right mind wouldn't make a grab for him?

When they chanced to meet at city council meetings, in the grocery store or at public functions in the park, neither let on that they were more than casual

acquaintances. Rikki subdued the sudden rush of blood to her head, though, as she envisioned him without the loud threads, their limbs tangled together.

An upstanding citizen, yes; a bastion of unbiased journalism, to be sure; eccentric, undeniably.

She preferred him naked.

Skunk Fight

Madeira Scott possessed unique qualifications for the task at hand.

She also possessed a tattoo - against the objections of her mother.

But, that woman had long since died, so her anger when the teen came home one summer Friday, left forearm sporting the image of a skunk, didn't matter to her daughter anymore.

Madeira's hair a deep ebony, with a natural streak of white from premature greying, she remained a skunk 15 years later; the department she led within the vast New York publishing empire proudly referred to themselves as the "skunk squad."

And, boy, could they raise a stink!

Indeed, many of the British authors with whom they dealt objected to the "translations" of their writings for an American audience, but such revisions proved an absolute necessity if their manuscripts were to be successful in the States. Changing spellings from "honour" to "honor" for instance, or terms like "loo" to "bathroom," "row" to "argument," "shag" to some variation on the act of sex, and "snog" to kiss opened many doors to increased royalties.

While, admittedly, removing a bit of the singular British flavor from the plots.

Madeira didn't really care, at this stage. She'd been born in Leeds, attended primary and secondary school in London, then her mother and step-father shipped her across the Atlantic to attend university near Boston. She'd become an automatic translator, though the Boston American accent often reminded her of trying to comprehend her Scottish classmates' thick burr.

Rhys O'Leary's wealth may have financed Madeira's education; she grabbed her diploma and fled to a Benedictine monastery in Vermont after college graduation, rather than travel in her parents' pretentious social circle. She'd been forced to leave the cloister before professing final vows, due to her mother's illness.

After cervical cancer took his wife, O'Leary began relying heavily on his step-daughter for her organizational prowess. Madeira, for her part, never liked the Welshman, but the position he offered her within his multi-faceted corporation paid very, very well.

She quickly realized she'd been trapped in an untenable situation with a man she despised.

The opportunity to work in the New York office, at least, distanced her from his unwelcome attentions. Living in the - albeit vast - mansion with him, and

working in the same complex day-in, day-out opened her to awkward interactions and his overt sexual advances.

He dismissed her objections regarding their relationship, since they weren't really family except via a connection to her mother.

O'Leary became a victim of the skunk - Madeira's long-established totem animal - when he came to her bedroom one night, drunk from a late "meeting" with his board, and she put a huge dent in his cranium with a cricket bat kept beside her bed for just such emergencies.

She was on a plane the next morning.

Five years, to the day, she noted, flipping a page on her desk calendar.

"Diary" in the British.

Just knowing tidbits like that made her an invaluable asset, profit margins increasing exponentially since she'd taken over the department.

She'd also implemented a "reverse translation" protocol, turning American novels into minor British classics.

In an era of declining readership, making it easier for those who purchased books to grasp the context made BA, Inc. a premier producer of fiction.

Mostly, Madeira's life progressed in a tranquil cycle, including monthly round-trips to London for board meetings. She would have preferred to attend via a virtual platform, but the firm's by-laws required physical presence to vote on the assorted proposals.

At least, she flew first class, sleeping for most of the flight to and from Heathrow Airport, with an equally stressless seat on the shuttle train into the heart of the city.

If she'd accepted O'Leary's offer of a private limousine, she'd have been stuck in endless traffic jams.

Returning to the Big Apple in the wake of a particularly contentious series of discussions - O'Leary wished to expand their content to other English-speaking countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, with similar translations for regional dialects - Madeira glimpsed a familiar face across the aisle. Not much for idle chatter, though, she contented herself with an overdue nap.

Only to wake with a pair of goldish-brown eyes staring at her.

She blinked self-consciously and fastened her blue orbs on him, grumbling. "Was I snoring?"

"No, but you must've been having bad dreams."

"What makes you say..."

"Your muscles were twitching quite violently, and I thought you'd hit the floor at one point."

“Sorry.” She checked the time on her mobile. An hour until they landed. “I don’t remember anything... weird.”

He grasped her hand with elongated fingers and raised her off the seat.

How had her seat belt been undone? she puzzled.

“Let’s get you something to drink,” he insisted.

She used her own limited weight against this spindly frame. “No, thanks.”

He released her with an apology, and she slipped past him, navigating the narrow passage to the toilet. Before she reached the folding door, however, a curtain was pulled across the tiny kitchen, and she was shoved against the bulkhead, her mouth smothered by ravenous lips.

The staff must’ve been servicing coach passengers.

Pure adrenaline gave this aggressor sufficient strength to hold her in place as he unzipped his trousers and raised her skirt. This... impulsiveness stunned her, frankly, and she made no effort to stem the tide of emotions that thrilled every nerve.

She’d heard about - read about, in her editorial pursuits - the “mile-high club.”

With this brief, stimulating interlude, she became a full-fledged member.

“Damn, David,” she panted, restoring her dignity, a droplet of blood on her chin from biting her lip to stifle electrified screams. “You’re quite a brilliant piece of work.”

“And, you’re a grand piece,” he retorted, cinching a hand-tooled leather belt around his skinny waist and running confident digits through a longish bronze mop. “We’ve a meeting Friday in your office, correct?”

“I’ll... have to check my schedule.”

“Meeting, lunch and... afters.”

“We’ll see.”

Madeira and David Cormack might have been total strangers as they deplaned at JFK International, given their feigned mutual disregard. The woman’s nerves still tingled, though, and she laid awake that night, his musky scent on her flesh.

Not the first time, either. Cormack penned what the editor categorized as “erotic science fiction” and, from their initial meeting two years prior, they’d reveled in periodic encounters - even though company policy prohibited fraternizing with clients.

Her step-father wouldn’t dare sack her, even if he’d known about her... extra-curricular activities. She might have rejected that aging magnate, but she was no longer restricted by the vows of a nun.

If an intriguing specimen sat opposite her during a conference, she didn't hesitate to pursue contact. Cormack joined a cadre of men who shagged Madeira on a rotating basis, not to curry her favor, but because she gave as much pleasure as she received.

Yet, woe to those who stood in opposition to her in the office, or daily life in general.

She had, more than once, quashed movie deals for authors who refused to approve her department's alterations, and even engineered revocation of invitations for university commencement speeches and honorary doctorates when the skunk aimed its spray.

That she managed such feats never became public knowledge, however. Innuendo might be leaked to the media, her name never mentioned.

But, who ever wanted to admit being sprayed by a skunk? Better to keep such embarrassment secret.

Especially when this perpetrator of destruction rambled about most days in t-shirt and jeans.

Her penthouse on Central Park West - purchased for her by O'Leary - barely contained any furnishings, except for a French Provincial bedroom suite, a second-hand dining table with two chairs, and kitchen basics. She might have thrown elaborate parties in the ample space, opting instead to fulfill imposed social obligations during business hours in public venues.

The Friday afternoon post-lunch tumble with Cormack skirted the line between business and personal.

Bodies still entwined, both smiling, the couple relaxed on the king-sized mattress in the wake of three rounds of horizontal gymnastics.

"You leave Sunday for the West Coast," Madeira murmured.

"I... thought we were making a weekend of it."

"No can do. With your series growing in popularity, next week's sci-fi convention will earn you - and us - scads of cash."

The novelist rolled on his elbow, somber, a tousled lock obscuring his eyes. "Is that all I am to you: a cash cow?"

"And a really fantastic fuck." She seized his clothes off the carpet and flung them in his face.

He brushed them aside. "If we were married..."

"Not happening - ever. Marriage is an antiquated concept developed to railroad the masses into conformity with societal strictures."

"But, you'd be..."

"Always and forever: independent. The skunk will out."

He sat on the edge of the bed, untangling his socks. "I can be a skunk, too."

"I've had more practice," she chuckled facetiously.

"I just don't understand why..."

"Trust me, David. Staying at arms' length from me is the wisest course."

He leaned down, kissing her cheek. "How can you call this being at arms' length?"

"Emotionally. Don't get attached to me."

His fingers ventured beneath purple silk sheets, stimulating her anew. "It would be very difficult not to become attached to this tight..."

She didn't care he wore only his left red and black striped sock as he humped her. Her nails dug into his undulating backside, pulling him deeper with each thrust.

Little did David know, as they showered together before dressing and parting ways, that she would go another three rounds with one of his closest friends that same night - stopping in New York at the conclusion of a promotional sweep through New England for his new mystery novel before heading home to Liverpool.

Madeira acknowledged how, in odd moments at her desk on the high-rise's 23rd floor, she pondered why she enjoyed sex so much - and so much sex. She traced the origins of what some might deem promiscuity to the afternoon of her mother's funeral when, returning to the mortuary in the black Rolls Royce limousine, Rhys O'Leary's youngest brother - still ten years older than her - had seduced her with the chauffeur none the wiser, the darkly tinted partition raised.

The combined ecstasy and relief she'd experienced transformed her life, to say the least.

She'd experimented quite a bit since then, discovering she savored any position where her partner's hardness and length fully plumbed the depths. Never content to allow a man climax without her, she developed a methodology to judge the timing so her orgasms rattled her to the core.

In casual conversations with co-workers and former college classmates through the years, she realized this rush matched the high achieved under the influence of alcohol and many illegal drugs - and occurred without any monetary cost.

During David's swing through California, Oregon and Washington, the skunk squad operated in relative calmness, clearing a dozen manuscripts for stateside release, and another six for printing across the pond. The biweekly

department administrators' confab showed these efforts were roundly appreciated, though requests for the original versions remained popular in some sectors.

Just as some television series transplanted from the old sod and "Americanized" never made a go beyond a few episodes; purists found the British approach more appealing.

Madeira couldn't argue with that.

She'd always held that British slang and terminology added color to the page, while American lingo suffered from a lamentable blandness.

As did quite a number of American men.

Rarely did a native New Yorker find his way into her bed. Perhaps a remnant of earlier generations, the U.S. male's inherent sense of entitlement - using women as tools rather than equals - repulsed her.

Angus "Sandy" Alexander, from Paisley - outside Glasgow - appeared on her office's threshold that Thursday; her curiosity, and her temper, flared. A failed novelist, the ginger Scot with a toned figure redirected his energies to a career as a bass guitarist, spending two decades touring globally with hard rock bands. When arthritis curtailed his dexterity, he'd hired on as director of creative projects with BA, Inc. He and Rhys O'Leary became fast friends; Sandy being delegated increased responsibilities, as well as handling a selection of less pleasant duties.

Despite their age difference, Madeira readily fell into the sack with him when the occasion arose.

But, not this day.

His ruddy features pinched, she grasped he wasn't delivering her annual bonus.

"Speak up," she prompted once he'd nudged the door closed.

"Yer da dinnae be pleased."

God, she loved that incomprehensible burr. "Should do. He's hated me since the day I sent him to hospital with a cracked skull."

"He received notice o' a lawsuit last week, namin' the company, him, and ye as defendants, seekin' five million pounds for alienation o' affection."

"Huh?"

"Mrs. Harold Bartlett claims ye shagged her husband, one o' our clients, while he was over here last year finishin' rewrites on his historical epic." Sandy flung himself onto a green striped armchair near full-length windows offering a view of the Chrysler Building. "He filed for divorce the day he arrived back in London."

"Shit."

"In Rhys' words: ye need t' keep yer knickers on, or he'll gi' ye the boot."

“What’s he going to do about the lawsuit?”

This nominal vice president smirked. “He keeps confidential files on all the authors - and many o’ the employees, for that matter. The solicitors will ha’ nae trouble provin’ Bartlett is a skirt-chasin’ cad who’s bonked no fewer than a score o’ women in the last year alone.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming...” sighed Madeira.

“A condition, anyway. Rhys wants ye back in London, back in the old house...”

“So he can get in my knickers himself?”

“Why does that surprise ye, Maddie?” Sandy moved from his seat to kneel in front of her chair, parting her legs and edging his powerful hands beneath her Rolling Stones t-shirt to fondle her breasts. “Ye are fantastic beneath the sheets...”

Her spine arched, heart pounding. “I... have my standards.” She drew his mouth toward her taut nipple, moaning quietly as he sucked. “Mom confided in me, the day before she died, that Rhys couldn’t satisfy a corpse with that twig of a cock. I deserve better.”

“Aye, in that ye are right.” His trousers sagging around his knees, he maneuvered Madeira to the teak desk, taking her from behind.

Had he coordinated the incident so everyone else was out to lunch, and no one would hear them give vent to their passion?

“Is this why you finagled a trip over on your expense account?” she snickered, upright once more, tucking his blue polo shirt tail into his slacks.

“Only partly,” Sandy confessed. “Who needs an excuse t’ feel...”

“So, Rhys isn’t serious about me leaving New York.”

“Nae yet. One more... violation o’ the policy...”

“You know as well as I do, Sandy: I’ll fuck who I want, when I want, where I want, and he can’t stop me.”

“Amen.” He French kissed her and squeezed her bum, as if ready to go again. “Just be a little more discreet from now on.”

Escorting him to the corridor, she smirked, “Like locking the door before dropping your pants?”

He shrugged, striding toward the elevators.

That evening, she fetched David from the airport and, rather than fight commuter traffic, they drove east to Sag Harbor for a quiet weekend.

Except, not so quiet.

Whether from exhaustion or aggravation at flight delays and missed connections, Cormack stared out the passenger window as the countryside passed,

saying nothing. While not much for small talk, herself, Madeira tried three times in vain to strike up a conversation.

They'd eaten healthy portions of Asian take-away in the cozy rented cottage before settling on the overstuffed tan sofa, television droning sit-coms in the background.

Finally, she'd had enough. "What the hell is wrong?"

"You really want to know?"

"Must do."

David extracted a mobile from his hip pocket. He clicked an app that displayed a list of video files. He selected a tile at the top, angling the device so she could see images of herself and Sandy Alexander rutting on her office desk.

"You.. planted cameras in my office?" she spat.

"Rhys paid me to do the job."

She nearly choked on a sip of coffee. "You mean, my step-father..."

"From what I've heard, he gets off watching you have a go, and shares the videos with quite a few of his friends."

Madeira stifled her grin. "So, I'm an unpaid porn star."

"Seems so."

"And, Sandy will get the sack when he..."

"Could do."

She bristled when he tried to caress her arm. "You agreed to this, why?"

Goldish-brown eyes stared absently at the dormant fireplace. "He's agreed to bankroll a grand wedding for us..."

"And you believed him?" She shot off the cushions, glaring at him. "You... fucking... toady! He intends to use this footage to blackmail me straight into his bed!" She punched a hole in the plaster wall. "Well, he's got another think coming!"

Cormack approached, hands slipping around her waist. She jerked free.

"I... didn't mean for Rhys to hurt you," he lamented. "It's just... I can't live without feeling myself inside you - not just once in a blue moon, but every day. We could live comfortably in my London flat. You could work, and I would write..."

"You can go to hell!" Madeira snatched her car keys off the credenza and stormed into the night.

The 1970 Ford Mustang was backing from the drive when the author burst from the dwelling. "You can't leave me here!"

"See if I can't!" reached his ears on the breeze.

She booked the first available flight to London, marching into the BA, Inc. Tower at 10:00 Friday morning. She might've resembled one of the city's

thousands of vagrants as she traversed the lobby in the grubby purple t-shirt and distressed jeans, but she didn't care.

The receptionist, who Madeira knew only from infrequent visits, didn't dare impede her progress. Ringing the executive suite, however, gave O'Leary fair warning of her arrival.

The dissipated, bald executive didn't have time to duck through his private door to escape his step-daughter's wrath. Before he could utter a semi-pleasant greeting, she had him by the collar, wedged against the oak-paneled wall.

"You heartless sod!" she bellowed. "How dare you treat me like some two-bit trollop!"

"That's all you are, when push comes to shove," he snarled. "Your mother knew I only married her to get at you, but she made me wait until you came of age and, then, shipped you off to school in America on the sly, so I couldn't have you. I've waited years, and you go off and shag every guy who looks twice at you."

"What gives you the right to record me doing it?"

"The digs where you live are mine. I own the building where you work; I pay your salary..."

"In other words, you think you own me?"

Rhys leered, "I *do* own you."

"Like hell."

Before she could unleash her own particular brand of skunkish hell, Sandy burst through the door, restraining her by the shoulders. She wrenched from his grip, her eyes not leaving O'Leary.

"Why you let him stay, even after..."

"I gave him permission to fuck you, as long as I could watch."

Her head whipped around so swiftly, her neck popped. "*What!*"

With only a hint of sheepishness, Sandy explained, "I would ha' taken ye, wi' or wi'oot his permission, Maddie. Ye are too good t' pass up."

"Am I supposed to take that as a *compliment*, you Scottish bastard?"

David Cormack joined the conflagration then, two security guards on his heels.

O'Leary shooed the latter from the room.

"What do *you* want?" rumbled Madeira.

"To apologize," the British author stammered. "To beg forgiveness. To beg you to marry me."

Thus momentarily distracted, Madeira didn't notice her step-father signal to Sandy, who again clasped her shoulders and steered her onto the desk, suddenly cleared of papers with a swipe of the publisher's arm.

She bucked against the prospect of being raped by O'Leary, then discovered his plan extended to what American's refer to as a "gang bang." Sandy went first, with none of his customary foreplay. Madeira glimpsed O'Leary, almost drooling in anticipation, as he stood with his manicured mitts pressing her back against the wood surface.

David's tangible anger brought tears to her eyes; any concern for being forgiven had evaporated. She might have loved him - having respected him as a marvelous writer and intriguing personality - no more.

Their respective macho dominance complete - each turned away while the other sated himself - Sandy and David withdrew, leaving O'Leary to avail himself of the panting female. When he mounted her, lowering his jowly mien to gloat at besting her, she shoved the steel letter opener from the top drawer between his ribs.

She'd groped for it while the others had treated her little better than a whore.

In the silence that followed, Madeira used O'Leary's desktop computer - open, since he'd been typing a letter when she invaded his sanctum - to erase all copies of the offensive videos, and the app that recorded them. As she understood the process, once those files had been shared with others, they self-deleted in 24 hours, so random copies would not be circulated via the internet.

She left her step-father in a widening puddle of his own blood, his eyes wide open, his jaw gaping in shock. She wrapped herself in a mackintosh dangling from a coat tree, the fabric of her t-shirt soaked with sticky redness.

Sandy and David paced the waiting room, O'Leary's assistant peremptorily dismissed. Without a second's hesitation, Madeira confiscated orange plastic-handled scissors from amongst a collection of pens and pencils in a smiley-face mug atop a row of filing cabinets and severed their carotid arteries with swift, arcing motions.

She checked into the Savoy, purchasing a change of clothes in a trendy lobby shop. While she showered, the concierge arranged for her flight to the States. A detail of Metropolitan police constables and detectives converged on the BA, Inc., offices once O'Leary's petrified aide reported the murders - which judges and other officials alike determined an act of self-defense after a video of the assault was forwarded to the Crown Prosecutor.

Madeira had planted one of O'Leary's own mini-cameras on the stem of a floor lamp upon entering the chamber, the entire ordeal recorded for posterity.

The skunk victorious, she assumed control of the publishing house, remaining in New York while her good right hand from the translation department took over London operations.

Her need - and desire - for sex decreased as her days filled with meetings and, surprisingly, charitable engagements. She mingled with an influential crowd, having her choice of eager and willing men, though still preferring Brits and, especially, Scots.

But, solely on her own terms.

A Dickens of a Mess

Deena Norris had seen every movie version of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* more than once - barring the animated kids' fare or those with puppets portraying the main characters. She'd always been bothered by the ending: Scrooge repenting his mistakes and vowing to reform his life solely because he feared death and an eternity in hell.

Of course, she understood from growing up Christian that the message being preached from pulpits in churches of multiple denominations in the mid-19th century involved not behaviors based in ethics - doing right for the sake of right - but actions grounded in a faith that denied the equality of human beings, and justified war against those whose beliefs differed.

Dickens had only reflected his times by basing Scrooge's redemption in fear.

Still, that didn't negate the truth for Deena.

Nearly 200 years later, the majority of people still donated to charity only to get a tax deduction, not because poverty continued to be a scourge on society, or natural disasters devastated entire communities. Administrators of those charities lined their own pockets with a generous percentage before the needy ever saw a penny, as well.

The philosophy that every good deed merited a reward, and "sin" deserved some sort of divine payback - be it hell, karma, or other concepts - distorted reality: unless human beings treated each other, and the planet, with courtesy and integrity, life itself would be destroyed.

Deena lived with an abiding awareness what an individual possesses should be shared with those in need, because otherwise it's wasted. Furthermore, regardless of color, culture, gender or age, all people are worthy of respect and kindness.

When a modern Scrooge, one of the partners at the accounting firm where she managed the tax department, persisted in inflicting his personal foibles on his employees, she decided to nudge him toward a change of heart by demonstrating these tenets.

She knew George Tarlton's back story all too well. His father, Edward, made a fortune by handling the financial concerns of businesses in the region, with political aspirations of his own. He neglected his wife and sons, yet expected the highest standards of compliance with his dictates. When Edward discovered Celia had engaged in an affair with a clerk at the local grocer's, he refused to divorce

her, instead bundling her off to New York, where she lived on a generous allowance as long as she caused no public scandal.

To avoid any adverse publicity on the home front, Edward's tight rein on his sons - Eddie, the elder, and George, a mathematical prodigy - spurred a natural outcome: they rebelled.

Deena, daughter of Tarlton's butler and cook, had wakened at the commotion outside her bedroom window the night a half-dozen police cruisers converged on the yellow brick mansion. Raised voices in the main hall reached the servants' wing: Eddie, with his gang of friends, had crossed the state line, using fake IDs in an attempt to buy liquor. When the store manager confiscated the bogus documents, one of the teens drew a pistol. The manager countered by pulling a double-barreled shotgun from beneath the counter and firing a load of buckshot at the group.

Eddie caught most of it in the face, dying almost instantly.

The Tarlton patriarch cursed his son, and warned the reporters and photographers who'd followed police to the site that any mention of the incident would merit a lawsuit.

In those pre-internet days, such tactics carried considerable weight.

Days after the funeral, Eddie's cause of death listed as a "hunting accident", Edward's rage transitioned to George. The teen was banned from any activity beyond attending school, eliminating the possibility he would pose any danger during his father's pending election to the state legislature.

Deena didn't see him much after that, as she wasn't allowed above stairs. On those rare occasions when their paths crossed, he seldom smiled, as in the past, and never laughed. Graduating from high school as valedictorian at 15, he departed for university that fall, his major - accounting - already confirmed.

Edward expected his remaining offspring to take over the family firm, and no objections would be tolerated.

George complied with these demands, up to a point. Excelling in his courses, he rated the notice of a government recruiter during his final semester. Offered a post in Washington, DC, with a commission investigating tax fraud by major conglomerates, he hopped a plane the morning following his successful completion of the CPA exam without telling Edward.

He knew, by this time, his father wouldn't raise a fuss, simply to avoid any damaging press.

Indeed, no public reports of the ensuing debacle occurred, thanks to Edward's lingering threats. Deena, her own prowess with numbers noticed by the senior Tarlton, had accepted his offer to pay her tuition and enrolled in the

accounting program at George's alma mater. She was earning a bit of spending money as a journalist on the school's newspaper when the rumors began swirling.

George, never allowed to date or socialize with youth his own age, might have been an excellent auditor, but he lacked a basic understanding of human nature. When the niece of a corporate vice president being investigated managed to wheedle her way into his affections and steal evidence files from his office, he was quietly terminated from his position - to prevent the Department of Justice from disbanding the commission outright.

The young man slunk home with his tail between his legs, no option but to join Tarlton and Company, Certified Public Accountants, as junior partner.

His resentment - at his father's superiority and his own failure - only swelled from there.

Deena and the other employees had to deal with George's snarls, insults and disdain long after Edward - never elected to any level of government, yet wielding substantial influence - died of a heart attack at his desk while completing his personal tax return hours before the yearly deadline.

Summed up: George Tarlton trusted no one, and made everyone he encountered miserable, because those closest to him throughout his life had treated him miserably. He fostered a litany of reasons for this hatred of his fellow human beings - nonsensical prejudices ranging from an individual's poverty to their race, religion or even their hair style.

Deena, among the handful who endured in the midst of frequent staff turnovers, deliberated how this damage could be reversed, a vital soul resurrected.

She recalled listening to George, as a youngster, coax beautiful melodies from the grand piano in the mansion's library, and had discovered a journal of his poetry while polishing furniture in the front parlor on a sunny spring afternoon before...

Glancing up from her computer keyboard, she saw the dark-haired, broad-shouldered figure scowling at her.

"My office, now," he grunted in a deep bass register.

"Yes, sir."

She paused long enough to save the open spreadsheet and logoff her account, confidentiality always a concern.

Of greater concern: no one but George ever entered what had been Edward Tarlton's office. The heir to the business held his meetings in conference rooms suitable for four or twelve participants. To be summoned into the *sancto sanctorum* could only mean one thing...

On the threshold, Deena gaped at the furnishings and decor, unchanged and undusted since Edward's death. He'd designed the chamber to impress wealthy clients, rivals, and donors to his political campaigns. Now, his son tapped his pen impatiently on massive brass-trimmed oak desk.

"Close the door," he instructed.

She complied and crossed the worn Persian carpet, halting near two buttoned leather armchairs. He signaled her to take a seat; she remained standing - cognizant that both had broken springs in the cushions.

Long, thick fingers waved an embossed invitation at her. "Did you receive one of these?" he droned.

"This weekend's reunion? Sure."

"Are you going?"

"Terrible waste of money, to be frank."

He slumped on his executive chair. "They're appointing me to the board of trustees."

Deena stifled a chuckle. "Really?"

"I'm not deaf to the gossip that goes on out there," George declared, pointing through the far wall. "Everyone in the building knows when the old man died, he left Eddie's share of the fortune to the university, with the proviso I be appointed to the board. Well, there's finally a vacancy on that august body, and I don't have a choice."

"Of course, you do."

His ebony mane, slightly grey at the temples, shook in the negative. "If I refuse, I forfeit my claim to millions being held in trust."

"Your dad painted you into quite a corner," slipped out before Deena could bite her tongue.

Smoldering blue orbs scorched her soul. "As you say."

"What's this got to do with me?" she pressed.

"I want you to accompany me to campus."

She blanched. "Huh?"

"You... are more familiar with trivial interactions. You can protect me from the idle chatter and fawning fools."

"I don't think that's what was meant by the line, 'Other duties as required,' in my job description."

George straightened and rose, his height causing him to tower over her. "You've... known me your entire life, Dee. You know I'm not good around people, and you know why. Do this for me, and I'll approve the raise you've been denied the past five years."

She felt her cheeks burning, the implication demeaning. “If you believe I’d agree solely on a mercenary basis...”

“Isn’t everyone mercenary in the end? No one does a favor for another without expecting due recompense...”

Deena scanned framed photos of Edward with the former governor, a past president, Middle Eastern oil magnates, and the British Prime Minister suspended from faded paneling. Tarlton had never shared a piece of advice with great or small without profit.

A disgusting family trait, she opined inwardly. “The purpose of these reunions - fifteen years for me and twenty-five for you - is to get together with old friends and enjoy a bit of fun.”

“Which is why I’ve never attended. I have no friends there - or anywhere else, for that matter - and haven’t the faintest notion how to have fun.”

In that moment, Deena pitied George. This might be the way...

His re-education would begin immediately.

She propped herself on the edge of the desk, to his visible horror. “How dare you!” he remonstrated.

“If I accept *your* offer, you’ll accept *my* conditions.”

“What do you mean, give you free reign to wreak havoc?”

She guffawed heartily, swinging into a cross-legged position on the mottled wood. “You’ll have to demolish the barriers you’ve erected around your heart, let go of your resentment against humanity as a whole. Just because you’ve been screwed over a couple times in your life, you don’t need to write us all off.”

Unblinking eyes glowered at her. “My personal... pain is none of your business.”

“It is, when you transmit that pain to everyone in your employ, and fail to acknowledge simple joys in life.”

“Joy?” scoffed George. “There is no joy...”

She scooped his massive fist off the blotter, uncurling his digits and cradling them tenderly. “When one person reaches out to another in a gesture of kindness, that is the beginning of joy.”

He retracted his hand, as if an electric shock had jolted him. “Nonsense.”

Deena nimbly spun off the desk and strode toward the door. “Take it or leave it, Georgie.”

Cognizant addressing him so would spark a reaction - she’d affectionately called him that when they were children, playing badminton or kickball on the lawns of the estate - she delayed grabbing the silver inlaid knob a fraction of a second until she heard his, “Okay, you’re on.”

“Pick me up at the gate house at noon on Friday.”

Another stipulation of Edward Tarlton’s will: he’d bequeathed the vacant three-bedroom gate house on his property to Deena’s parents and their progeny - as long as they physically occupied the dwelling - meaning the girl lived on the grounds after the retired servants relocated to Florida.

When George honked his red Lamborghini’s horn at the appointed hour, Deena emerged from the limestone-accented structure with a sports bag slung over her shoulder.

“That’s all you’re bringing?” the driver remarked. “Tomorrow’s dinner is black tie...”

“I rented a gown from the shop where I bought my clothes when I lived in the dorms,” she replied. “Easier than trying to pack something so the skirt doesn’t get all wrinkled.”

Impressed, George held the passenger door for her, then secured it before sliding behind the wheel.

They didn’t talk much during the three hour excursion, tension almost palpable between them. Arriving at a luxurious hotel near the university campus, a female concierge escorted them to the two-bedroom suite, a porter hauling their bags on a gold, trimmed cart.

“What the hell?” Deena directed to her companion once she’d tipped the pair as they withdrew. “Did you wait so long to give the board your answer that this was the only room they had left?”

George stood near the sitting room’s ceiling-high windows, gazing at a landscape vastly transformed since his graduation. “No. I confirmed the reservation three months ago.”

“You’d planned to bring someone else, who cancelled?”

“No.”

Temper rising, Deena’s fingers clenched and unclenched as she struggled to regulate her breathing. “Then, you’d better explain.”

“Do you know why the old man paid your college tuition?” he queried.

This seeming change of subject further irritated the woman. “As a way to thank my folks for their years of devoted service, I guess.”

The sound emitted from his throat wasn’t quite a laugh. “No. He told me, years ago, he wished I had turned out like you: a truly nice person, liked by all, who - for some reason utterly beyond my comprehension - genuinely cares about others and wants the best for them.”

Ah, Deena mused, now he made sense. She joined him to admire the view. “You *are* a nice person, Georgie. You’ve just been terribly hurt by unscrupulous sorts...”

He lamented, “And a man who valued his reputation and public opinion far more than his own family, something far too common in today’s world.”

“True, but there’s still a lot of good people out there...”

“Show me where, and I might believe you.” He commenced a disturbingly bigoted rant, listing the faults of diverse races, differing religions and cultures, until Deena covered her ears with her palms to silence his madness.

“Stop, already!” she begged. “You’ve sunk yourself so deep in your anguish and distrust you no longer look at individuals as unique human beings, instead lumping them together with derogatory generalizations.”

“There’s no other way I can...”

She spun him toward her, clutched his chin to prevent him from averting his eyes. “Of course, there is. Every single person who works for you has their own set of qualities - and problems - yet you’ve never bothered to listen to their conversations in the break room or at their desks. All those people out there” - she swept her free hand at the glass casements - “aren’t just a mindless mob. They have talents, experiences, lives that are their own, worthy of consideration and patience...”

George wrenched from her grip. “Bullshit. Why should I bother with any of them?”

Perhaps it’s hopeless, Deena pondered.

He glanced at his Rolex. “We’d better get cleaned up and head over to the quad.”

“Why?” she countered.

“The board members are required to be present at the opening parade.”

He sidled to his room and slammed the door.

Deena flopped on the floral print sofa and stared at an elegant crystal chandelier.

That’s where George found her an hour later, his red Tommy Hilfiger polo shirt and khaki Dockers replaced by a black Savile Row suit and gold tie.

“We’ll be late if you don’t get a move on,” he chided.

She righted herself, tucking her tie-dye t-shirt into her jeans. “I’m not on the board. Who do I need to impress?”

“When you’re with me, you’ll dress accordingly.”

“You sound dangerously like your father,” Deena hissed. “I’m not going to be sitting on some reviewing stand, watching floats go past. Nobody will care...”

“If that’s how you see it…” He marched toward the exit.

She grabbed his arm before it reached the knob. “That’s how *you* should see it, Georgie. Strip those rich jerks of their custom tailored rags and they’re no different than the kid who’s running up thousands in student debt because his parents work two or three jobs earning minimum wage.”

“That’s…”

“The absolute truth, and you know it in the depths of your heart. You won’t admit it, though, because the idea that others are your equal frightens the hell out of you.”

“I’m not afraid of anyone!” he objected.

“Then, let’s go.”

Reluctantly, he conceded, ushering her into the corridor. Joining a crowd of alumnae in the elevator, Deena watched his expression morph from disdain to amazement when no one looked twice at her.

Parking at a premium on campus, they walked the half-mile to the quad. As George’s pace faltered near the raised platform where the school’s executives gathered, Deena shoved him forward.

“You can do this,” she urged. “Be polite, and smile.”

He clamped his massive paw around her waist. “Don’t leave me.”

She patted his hand. “All right. Come on.”

Without overtly taking control, Deena led George to his seat, shaking hands and pleasantly greeting vice presidents and trustees en route. He learned from her example, his muscles gradually relaxing as he marveled at the ease with which she circulated.

“You know all these people?” he whispered as they settled on folding chairs.

“Sure. We do most of their tax returns every year.”

“So, our advertising in the student newspaper has paid for itself…”

“No, because I’m here three times a semester talking to students, faculty and staff about business ethics and financial transparency.”

Thick, dark eyebrows arched. “I… never knew.”

“You never asked.” She smirked as the band struck up the lively fight song. “Before Edward died, we signed a memorandum of understanding with the business program to provide expert advice on their curricula. Not being one to rely on textbooks, I volunteered to be guest lecturer and, from there, my duties grew into an adjunct professor position.”

Additional discussion drowned out by cheering crowds and deafening music, they shifted their attention to the festivities. Not until they returned to the

hotel near midnight, exhausted, did George have an opportunity to assess Deena's revelation.

"You... willingly enhanced the firm's prestige, without insisting on additional compensation or a promotion..."

"Originally, the dean wanted you, citing your status as a *summa cum laude* grad. Edward feared your... missteps in Washington would be exposed, so he proposed I take on the task."

George mocked, "With your squeaky-clean demeanor."

Kicking off her sneakers, she exhaled. "You haven't a clue how many mistakes I've made in my life. The difference between us: I acknowledged them and learned from them. I didn't retreat into a bubble of anti-social isolation, refusing to trust even those closest to me."

Her cell phone pinged; she checked the screen. "Does your schedule for this weekend include the faculty tea tomorrow afternoon?"

A horrified mask froze his features. "Are you kidding?"

"Fine. I'll go myself. You can stay here and stew in your self-made misery."

"But, you don't drink tea."

"It'll end up being a cocktail party, if I know that crew. Martinis and hors d'oeuvres before the banquet."

"And deafening, inane banter." He loosened his tie and began unbuttoning his shirt.

"You'd be surprised what insights can be gained from that inane banter, Georgie. If nothing else, it's a lesson in life."

Against his better judgment, he acquiesced to the plan before withdrawing. Deena watched the moon rise from the sitting room, optimism at his potential reformation pumping adrenaline through her veins.

Dozing around 4:00 am, she woke when room service trundled in with the lunch George had ordered.

"Half the day's gone, sleepy-head," he hailed with startling cheerfulness from the threshold.

Sheets drawn around her neck, given that she slept in the buff, she chortled, "You're in a good mood."

"I went for a long walk this morning, to think about what you said last night. I sat in the park and watched kids playing soccer and people walking their dogs... I was astounded how many of them looked sincerely happy, and even greeted me - a total stranger."

"And, your conclusion?"

“There might be something in your theory about simple pleasures.” He sank on the edge of the king-sized mattress as the waiter finished setting the table and departed. “If I refuse to join the board, the old man’s money will be donated to a list of charities supporting much-needed services for the homeless, addicts and the mentally ill, so they can get back on their feet. It’s a lot better than languishing in some investment portfolio, waiting for another crash on Wall Street.”

“Makes for a fat tax deduction, too,” she remarked.

“That’s not why I’d do it.”

“You hate the idea of boring monthly meetings and dealing with trivialities that much?”

He sighed. “I loathe the prospect of dealing with snobs full of their own manufactured importance.”

“Like your father?”

The square jaws stiffly bobbed.

Deena always knew a good heart beat in George’s barrel chest. By allowing himself to be exposed to ordinary humanity, his superior intellect allowed him to discover not everyone intended to deceive, or had ulterior motives for their actions.

“If that’s your decision, how ‘bout we ditch this popsicle stand and have some real fun?” she suggested.

“What do you have in mind?”

“I seem to remember you liked baseball, and there’s a minor league team playing a double header this afternoon...”

He slung a pillow at her, with enough force to jar her hands loose from the sheets. She fumbled to restore the fabric over her breasts.

“Get out of here, so I can get dressed,” she chuckled.

“Make it fast.” He rose and stretched. “I’m actually looking forward to this!”

A first step on the road to recovering from long-festering traumatic experiences, but Deena retained the hope that George wouldn’t regress into old opinions and habits.

By the time he retired, leaving her in charge of Tarlton and Company, he’d funded dozens of housing developments for the homeless, free clinics, treatment centers, no-kill animal shelters, playgrounds where he could often be found teaching boys batting and fielding techniques, and was known throughout the city - and beyond - for his resounding laugh and delightful smile.

To Holmes, With Misgivings

In the nearly 140 years since Arthur Conan Doyle created his character Sherlock Holmes, quite a number of people - not only children - have believed him to be a flesh and blood human being, rather than just the work of an incredible mind. For many years, the company occupying the property that would have been 221B Baker Street in London employed a special secretary tasked with answering the countless letters delivered by post to that address, proving the great Detective's enduring popularity.

I didn't have that problem. From the moment I borrowed the *Complete Sherlock Holmes* from the local public library at age 10 - curious after watching old Basil Rathbone movies on WGN from Chicago - I grasped the fictional nature of the stories.

Still, I was hooked.

When I took pen to paper a year later, launching my own lengthy tenure writing mysteries and other tales, the first protagonist I developed was Sherlock's great-great-niece. She reclaimed 221B from a descendant of Mrs. Hudson, and the case took her to the gates of Buckingham Palace.

The classic Holmes remained with me through the decades. I learned deductive reasoning from him, applying the technique not only to my fiction, but to my career as a journalist, investigating stories in such a way I could tell both sides and keep readers properly engaged and informed. Even stints as an accountant, auditing the books of various organizations, were aided by my ability to research discrepancies - discovering embezzlements and other malfeasance in the process.

My very existence was impacted by Holmes. No man I met avoided being compared to him; the ability to hold an intelligent conversation became mandatory in a relationship (not that I ever met a male who could hold a candle to him). For prolonged periods, Holmes would simply be a "given": the primary basis of my own eccentricities. Then, he would assert himself anew, bringing fresh waves of exquisite anguish to my soul.

Ways of expressing this dichotomy varied, with release of the energies vital to my continued sanity. In high school, I was gifted a deerstalker cap by a friend who'd traveled to England. I had customized t-shirts with "Sherlock" across the shoulders (and a classmate served as my Watson with matching attire).

I gained a reputation for being able to find lost objects, even more reliable than praying to St. Anthony of Padua. Thinking logically, and understanding the tendencies of absent-minded individuals served me well.

A blend of logic with creativity gave me a brain that balanced both hemispheres that, perhaps, Holmes lacked. Instead of doing drugs to relieve the mental pressure, I wrote.

And wrote, and wrote.

Once an inspiration inveigled its way inside my skull, no horse in the Kentucky Derby could've moved faster. Dialogue, descriptions and characters gushed from my brain, spilling first into spiral notebooks, then onto a Smith-Corona typewriter. In subsequent years, when my handwriting grew so illegible I couldn't read what I'd scribbled ten minutes later, I opted for computers.

Novels nearly killed me. From opening paragraph to final chapter, two weeks of my life would be spent in a haze. Work and family were neglected; I didn't sleep. After torturing myself this way through nearly a dozen full-length efforts, I resolved to be more disciplined.

Ha!

Short stories aren't as physically taxing, being completed sometimes in a couple hours or, at worst, a few days. I can tolerate the dangling plots through that limited span without losing control.

And, yes, I have lost control. In the throes of a first draft, my fatigued brain would periodically escape the confines of the time constraints I attempted to impose. What some might call a nervous breakdown would occur, with my entire body twitching like a loose electrical wire after a lightning strike, screams of misery wrenching the air.

My parents sent me to a psychologist; others recommended serious counseling, even medication. I knew, though, if I submitted to these processes to mold me into a "normal" human being, I would lose the essence of myself.

Thanks to Holmes.

His example of extreme focus on the task at hand warped me into a workaholic - whether writing or my more practical labors to earn a paycheck. In lieu of a seven percent solution of cocaine, I gravitated toward chocolate to offset the constant drain on my reserves when attacking the keyboard and spilling my guts onto the monitor screen.

My body became so accustomed to the massive intake of delicious treats, I can no longer live without it. My digestive system literally rebels in the most unpleasant ways if I don't drink straight from the syrup bottle each day or grab a handful of mini-candy bars.

Such is my life: an endless cycle of well-hidden madness - acquired from Holmes.

And yet, I do owe immeasurable gratitude to Sherlock Holmes: for my analytical brain, my skill at “reading” people - essential in a respected journalist. From that initial inspiration as a youngster, I was able to immerse myself in a world where problems could be solved by due diligence (much to my mother’s chagrin).

From a make-shift “office” in the basement of my childhood home - walls created from an oversized refrigerator box - to the “writing den” where I now hole up and type, my brain gets plenty of exercise.

My mother’s lament that I am not a social being smacks of the inconsequential. The more I interacted with people, the more I grasped that social behavior is a ridiculous waste of time. Idle chatter not only bores me - as it did Holmes - but only serves to reveal the shallow level on which most people live.

I’ve always craved deeper challenges.

As Holmes needed no female in his life - beyond Mrs. Hudson to cook and clean - I need no man, having tried three times to make a go of the religiously-based notion of marriage.

Holmes contented himself with the parameters of his knowledge, ignoring certain subjects he held to be inconsequential. He saw himself as whole unto himself; I do likewise. I know what I need to know, letting others delve into the sciences, advanced mathematics, and so forth.

If Sherlock Holmes had been real, I would’ve wished to shake his hand and thank him for his unique example, then scolding him for adding a pervasive element of hell to my daily routine. The dozens of other inspirations I’ve endured - many with connections to Holmes - would be similarly greeted.

In the meantime, I write, I edit... with full awareness Sherlock Holmes - and his foibles integrated into my personal behavior - can never be exorcised from my soul.

Dueling Pianists

What had gone so wrong?

Barry Innes and Steve Glodowski grew up together, next door neighbors in an exclusive Arlington, Virginia, subdivision. Their fathers both worked in Washington, DC: Barry's at the British Embassy; Steve's in the State Department. The two boys - and Steve's younger sister, Amy - attended the same grade school. Both mothers insisted their children learn piano, carpooling them to the music conservatory once each week for lessons.

While the boys were skinny for their ten years of age, their bodies differed considerably. Barry had a large bone structure. Steve resembled a twig. Barry had a thick head of dark hair; Steve's unruly sand-colored curls hated the comb.

Yet, their relationship ran deeper than most brothers.

Until...

Amy made a random, joking observation in the back seat of Mrs. Innes' BMW on the way to the conservatory that May afternoon.

"How can Barry learn piano?" she quipped in her irritating eight-year-old soprano. "He has fat fingers."

Not exactly hurt, Barry studied his hands intently the rest of the drive. Indeed, his digits were thicker than Steve's spindly sticks, but they were just as long, just as nimble.

The boys could hear each other practice the requisite hour a day, their homes mirror images of each other, so their living rooms were only separated by about four yards of grass. Steve, however, liked to duck out on his duties in favor of sports, so he paid Amy half his allowance to play in his stead, while their mother occupied herself cooking dinner.

That's how the duel got started.

Amy improvised a combination of scales and trills, just for fun - being far more adept than her brother or his friend. Through the window, Barry heard and mimicked her. Amy grew more and more elaborate with the impromptu melodies and bass lines, but Barry kept up.

When she finished covering for Steve, she retired to her room, preferring books to outdoor play, Barry left wondering where his mate had vanished.

By his junior year of high school, Barry had composed the *Sonata in E minor for Fat Fingers*, proving his skill on the keyboard.

Steve, for his part, produced what he titled *Sonata in G for the Perfect Pianist*, unwilling to let his compatriot outshine his own talents.

At the school's spring concert, these pieces were included on the program, and merited acclaim from teachers, parents and students.

Within two weeks, letters arrived in Barry and Steve's respective mailboxes, offering each an audition at Juilliard in New York.

The journey via train was arranged, and accommodations reserved for the boys, their mothers and Amy, since her father was traveling abroad on business and Mrs. Glodowski refused to let the 16-year-old stay home alone.

Steve and Barry were, rightfully, nervous on what might be the most important day of their lives - except that Steve had scored two try-outs for the track teams at prestigious eastern universities, as well. He debated deliberately botching his performance, while not wishing to disappoint his traveling companions.

Fate intervened, nonetheless. While piling into a taxi for the drive from the hotel to the school, the cabby too eagerly closed the mini-van's sliding door, catching Steve's right hand in the gap. Within minutes, three of his fingers were swollen, probably broken.

Rather than upset his mother, he hid the injury behind a stack of music he carried, pulling Amy aside as they waited for the elevator on the ground floor of the lauded performing arts institution.

"You've got to play for me," Steve whispered.

"I... can't do that."

"I saw the layout yesterday when we came over for our interviews. There's a grand piano in the hall, with another backstage. I'll pretend to play, and you can do it from behind the curtain."

"That's..."

"Cheating? Sure. But I don't want Mom to be embarrassed in front of these big shots. I'll tell them privately after..."

"Promise?" she pressed.

He crossed his heart.

"Okay."

Barry executed his composition flawlessly. When Steve approached the piano bench, his mother noticed he continued to hide his fingers. Glancing at the dozen instructors present, no one else seemed concerned.

From the angle of her seat, Mrs. Glodowski recognized her son's fingers never touched the ivory keys, though bass arpeggios accenting a mid-range theme filled the chamber with intricate precision. She said nothing in front of these strangers, but would have the truth...

The audition concluded, Steve rose and made a perfunctory bow, moving toward the steps. The music, however, restarted.

Amy's unrehearsed meanderings.

Barry, from his seat, grasped the truth. He rose and hopped on stage, repeating Amy's phrasing on the Steinway with glee.

After less than three minutes, the duel ended with spontaneous applause. Amy emerged from behind thick maroon curtains, grinning mischievously.

Steve, incensed, stormed from the auditorium. Pursued by his mother, he submitted to her demand he see a doctor about his crushed fingers - three of which were severely fractured.

Denied a scholarship without being allowed to present his explanation, he shunned pianos after that. Barry accepted his windfall, graduating from Juilliard with highest honors. Amy, too, was offered admittance, heading for New York the day after she graduated high school.

Touring together with a repertoire of serious and comedic music, the Dueling Pianists eventually married.

Steve visibly absent from their nuptials - busy with his career as a college track coach, according to rumors - he never spoke to either of them again.