

2011

TOR/FORGE
AUTHOR VOICES

VOLUME ONE



Tor/Forge Author Voices

Volume One



This is a collection of fiction and nonfiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in these stories and novel excerpts are either products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously.

Collection copyright © 2011 by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.

Published by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

www.tor-forge.com

Tor® and Forge® are registered trademarks of Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.

Table of Contents

From the Editors

5 Tor/Forge Editors Talk about Writing, Publishing, and Falling in Love.....5

Short Story

Casual Sex by Deborah Coonts.....20

Author Articles

Gallants, Rakes, and Dandies - A Field Guide to Regency Men by Carrie Bebris.....300

My First Love by Rebecca Cantrell.....342

Self-Publishing, Publishing with Tor, and Being Edited and Copyedited by Rhiannon
Frater.....91

Odd historical things I learned while writing *Shades of Milk and Honey* by Mary

Robinette Kowal.....219

How to Pitch Your Book by Jon Land.....360

The Stories Keep Coming by Carrie Vaughn.....167

Excerpts

Urban Fantasy, Horror, and Paranormal Romance

Anna Dressed in Blood by Kendare Blake.....46

Original Sin by Lisa Desrochers.....69

<i>The First Days</i> by Rhiannon Frater.....	100
<i>Honeyed Words</i> by J.A. Pitts.....	126
<i>As You Wish</i> by Gabi Stevens.....	141
<i>Kitty’s Big Trouble</i> by Carrie Vaughn.....	169

Science Fiction and Fantasy

<i>The Faerie Ring</i> by Kiki Hamilton.....	188
<i>Shades of Milk and Honey</i> by Mary Robinette Kowal.....	222
<i>Pospero Regained</i> by L. Jagi Lamplighter.....	238
<i>Ganymede</i> by Cherie Priest.....	261

Thriller, Mystery, Women’s Fiction, and Historical

<i>Deception at Lyme</i> by Carrie Bebris.....	306
<i>Emory’s Gift</i> by W. Bruce Cameron.....	318
<i>A Game of Lies</i> by Rebecca Cantrell.....	346
<i>Wanna Get Lucky?</i> by Deborah Coonts.....	25
<i>Strong Justice</i> by Jon Land.....	364
<i>Angel</i> by Nicole “Coco” Marrow.....	402
<i>Cat in a Vegas Gold Vendetta</i> by Carole Nelson Douglas.....	430
<i>A Dublin Student Doctor</i> by Patrick Taylor.....	442
<i>The Dark at the End</i> by F. Paul Wilson.....	476

5 Tor/Forge Editors Talk about Writing, Publishing, and Falling in Love

Recently Tor/Forge editors Melissa Frain (MF), Stacy Hague-Hill (SH), Whitney Ross (WR), Kristin Sevick (KS), and Melissa Ann Singer (MAS) sat down to talk about what they are looking for in a submission, where the publishing industry is headed, and why love stories are the best stories of all.

Now that we have you all here, let's talk a little bit about your jobs as editors for Tor/Forge. What types of books do you edit or are looking to acquire?

SH: I work with several different types of fantasy: urban, contemporary, epic, and historical. I'm actively acquiring in all of those categories and am looking for projects with an intriguing central concept, a strong voice, and a fresh take within their genre subset.

MAS: I usually say I'm "an editor of all work," because I roam all over the place—one of the best things about working at Tor/Forge is being able to edit what appeals to you, regardless of genre. Over the years, I've edited pretty much everything. I'm looking for both contemporary and historical women's fiction, urban fantasy, horror, contemporary women's fiction with speculative or fantastical elements, and—in a complete change of pace—natural disaster or medical thrillers.

MF: I absolutely love YA for older teens and am always looking for great new teen books to add to my list—mostly but not exclusively paranormal. Romantic elements are a big plus. I'd love to find a Kristin Cashore or Megan Whalen Turner-esque fantasy. I also

edit a lot of urban fantasy and paranormal romance, with the occasional historical fantasy thrown into the mix.

WR: I just enjoy genre novels, whether it be for YA or adult. I'm currently acquiring fantasy, urban fantasy, YA, historicals, science fiction, and romance. I'd love a YA *Outlander*, a historical novel with fantastic elements, and am also a huge fan of teen fantasies like those by Tamora Pierce and Gail Carson Levine.

KS: I'm a voracious reader, so I read and acquire across genres. I'm mostly interested in crime, women's, and historical fiction. And I would love to find a fresh voice in romantic suspense.

What is it about a manuscript that catches your eye?

SH: Before I pick up a manuscript, I have to be intrigued by the concept. Once I begin reading, I'm immediately drawn in by a strong voice in the prose. Great characters, a fresh angle, and a satisfying romance will keep me reading.

MF: Voice is the biggest draw for me. A great voice will often keep me reading even if I'm having some doubts about the premise or the plotting. This is especially important for YA, because teens can spot an inauthentic voice from a mile away.

MAS: It sounds so silly to say this, but good storytelling really stands out. On top of that, I want characters to care about or empathize with. For me, the style in which a book is written is less important than telling me a story that holds my attention.

WR: I want characters to fall in love with! The characters and the chemistry between them carry me through the story, no matter what the genre.

KS: Agreed! Two boring people could be in the middle of a race-against-the-clock, save-the-world thriller and I won't care. On the other hand, two really well drawn and compelling characters could sit in a room for 200 pages and I would be riveted.

And what would make you stop reading a submission?

SH: Bad writing stops me immediately—sometimes on the first page. Poor sentence construction, awkward or wooden phrasing, word and phrase echoes, and typos or auto-correct gaffes will all ensure I'm going no further.

MF: Flat, poorly written characters. A bland or forgettable voice.

WR: Or choppy dialogue. If I don't even notice or think about it as I'm reading—it sounds that realistic—that's a good thing. I don't want to hear a "What's up!?!?" in a regency novel, either. Period novels are tough, but the dialogue should fit the time without being distractingly archaic.

MAS: Characters who behave in an anachronistic fashion and are never called on it. Too little research. Conversely, expository lumps can also make me set something aside. Figuring out "whodunnit" by the time all the characters have been introduced. And of course, just getting bored.

MF: Yes, exactly, boredom is a problem. I really dislike slow-moving stories. I get bored easily, and it's irritating when I have to muddle through 100 pages before finally getting to the good stuff.

KS: It's a very good point. If the good stuff doesn't start until a hundred pages in, a reader is not going to make it that far. Mostly, for me, it's the lack of a distinct voice. I don't want to acquire a book that sounds exactly like something I have read before.

Say you did fall in love with a submission. Do you require or recommend that an author be represented by an agent?

MAS: We certainly don't require it.

SH: I don't require it, no, but an agent is a useful, sometimes invaluable, resource. A book deal is enormously exciting, but can be overwhelming for a new author. An agent can be a business manager, a negotiator, an ally, and an invaluable source of wisdom and experience for someone who is just starting out. A good agent will also work with an author to polish the manuscript before it goes out to editors, potentially increasing the author's chances of acquisition.

KS: Absolutely agree. I have seen agents go to bat for their clients and get stunning results. A good agent is well worth their commission.

What are some good resources for an author who is looking for an agent or a publisher?

MAS: I often recommend that authors visit Preditors & Editors (<http://pred-ed.com/>) and Absolute Write (<http://absolutewrite.com/>). Both are good resources for aspiring writers.

SH: Publisher's Marketplace is also a good place to start, since its listings of recent sales and acquisitions can help a prospective author know who is buying what. Once you have a listing of publishers and agents who are acquiring in your field, always, *always* go to their websites and find out what they say they are looking for and what their submission guidelines are before approaching them. And make sure your submission both fits their specific interests *and* follows their guidelines! Not doing this is the quickest way to get rejected.

KS: Yes. This. Follow their submission guidelines. It's such a simple way to show professionalism, and yet so often ignored.

MF: As Stacy said, the deal listings on Publisher Marketplace are hugely helpful. Writing-wise, there are plenty of great books out there that can help you hone your craft. Stephen King's *On Writing* is a good one, as is Don Maass's *Writing the Breakout Novel*.

WR: I'd also recommend following the blogs of a few editors and agents. There's some fabulous ones out there, with incredibly helpful posts on query letters, manuscript submissions, and the intricacies of the publishing world. The Miss Snark blog is inactive, but is still a wonderful example.

Before we move on, do you have any last words of advice for an aspiring writer?

MAS: The two most important things any writer can do are: WRITE and READ. And also re-write.

SH: Yes. Don't just write every day, but read every day, too. Not only to keep yourself conversant with current publications in your field, but to enhance your own craft by learning from the work of others. Think of what you are doing as a writer as being part of a community or part of a dialogue not only with readers, but other authors.

MF: Reading is essential, especially in the genre you want to write in. Pay attention to what works and what is successful. You need to understand your market. For instance, if you want to write a bestselling teen paranormal romance and can't figure out why *Twilight* is popular, that's a problem. You don't have to like it, but you do need to understand why your target audience does.

WR: Be open to suggestions and the wisdom of others! Publishing is such a wonderful industry in that editors, agents, and writers are all so willing to help out beginners.

Why do you think romance is such a popular genre?

WR: Who doesn't love a little vicarious romance? You have heroes to admire, fast-paced and exciting stories... I love to escape into a different world—particularly when you can count on a happy ending!

SH: Because getting absorbed in the story of two people falling in love is not only enormously fun and engaging, it can be one of the most incredibly satisfying experiences you can have as a reader. Some of our oldest and most enduring stories are about the

great triumphs and tragedies born of the stirring of the human heart. It's a theme that resonates with everyone.

KS: I read many different genres, but I know at the end of a romance I'm going to have a big smile on my face. It's indulgent. Romance is the hot chocolate of the book world.

What characteristics do you think make for a great hero?

MAS: This is something that depends so much on a reader's individual taste! And what I like as a reader doesn't mean that this is what I'm always looking for in a writer's manuscript. Personally, I like a hero with a good sense of humor and one who is emotionally responsive—in other words, if he says something that hurts someone's feelings, he realizes that. I don't like heroes who are super-men, capable of doing or fixing anything at any time—they feel less real to me, and less like they need a life-partner.

SH: An element of emotional maturity is big for me—I'm not a fan of heroes who are always jealous or angry or possessive. A guy who knows when to press forward and when to back down, and who isn't afraid to risk everything for someone he loves is a definite keeper. It doesn't hurt if he's smart and wry and handsome, too.

MF: I tend to go for the strong and silent type: the ones who love their heroines but have a hard time expressing it. I find it unrealistic when a hero is too forthcoming about his feelings. I think it's a cultural thing—some men are socialized not to show a whole lot of emotion. Whether that's how it *should* be or not is another conversation, but when I see a very openly sensitive hero, I tend to question it, just because that's not how your average

real-life guy behaves. I guess it all goes back, again, to my need for authentic, believable characters.

KS: Superficially, I like handsome heroes who can cook. But I think great heroes are passionate—about their partner, their job, their families—whatever it is in the particular story. I want my heroes to be engaged strongly with the world around them.

Who is your favorite hero/heroine pair of all time?

SH: Maybe Beatrice and Benedick from *Much Ado about Nothing*? Though it was written about four centuries ago, their witty, merry war can tell us a lot about contemporary romance and gender roles. Maybe Tristan and Isolde? Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy? There are too many.

MAS: It all depends on my mood. Nick and Nora Charles? Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey? Jane Eyre and Rochester? “I” and Maxim de Winter?

WR: It’s practically impossible to pick just one! But I’d have to go for the classic Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. I never get tired of the story, whether I’m reading the book for the umpteenth time or watching one of the many movies. Secondary favorites—and let’s be honest, this is just an opportunity for me to recommend books I love—Claire and Jamie from Diana Gabaldon’s *Outlander* series, Clay and Elena from Kelley Armstrong’s *Women of the Otherworld* series, Fire & Brigan from Kristen Cashore’s *Fire*, Mara and Sheftu in Eloise Jarvis McGraw’s *Mara, Daughter of the Nile*, and Juliet Marillier’s *Daughter of the Forest*. Plenty of angst in their relationships, but a lot of love, too.

KS: I guess I can't be the third person to pick Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. Actually, I've always favored Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth in *Persuasion*. It's a complicated relationship, and I love how past mistakes can be fixed and that, while it might take a while, true love finds a way.

MF: I have many, but I have to say my favorite is probably Howl and Sophie from *Howl's Moving Castle*. It's YA, and not what you think of as a romance, but I love how the romantic angle plays out. In the first chapter or so, a young woman named Sophie is cursed by a witch and turned into an old lady, with all the accompanying aches and pains. She decides that since nobody can tell who she is, she's not going to worry about proper appearances anymore, and starts acting totally uninhibited. When she meets Howl Jenkins, who she believes is a wicked, womanizing sorcerer...well, it's funny stuff. I just love how the romance comes less out of how sexy they find each other and more out of them connecting with each other, appearances aside.

We talked before about what you are looking for in a manuscript. What specifically do you enjoy in a romance submission?

SH: Breathless pacing, a setting I can immediately sink into, and most importantly characters I can root for.

WR: Strong heroes and heroines. I love a story where they face their troubles head on, together, rather than having a plot derived from their own romantic misunderstandings.

MAS: For me, the most important thing is that the trouble between the hero and heroine can't be something that could be fixed in a simple conversation, assuming they ever sat down and really talked to each other.

KS: This is really the worst. I can't get behind two people falling in love who are afraid to have a conversation with each other. If you can't tell your partner that your evil step-mother is out to get you, or that you have a secret baby, or that you are in hiding from the mob/an abusive ex/a soul-sucking demon, etc., then you shouldn't be getting involved.

MF: Oh, secret babies.

KS: Right? It's not even so much that you have had a child in the past, but that you are a mother or father now. How can that not come up? A character who has to hide an essential part of who they are for "love" doesn't work for me.

MF: I want to see a believable romance. Too many times, I'll be reading a romance and thinking, "Why do these people like each other?" Love/hate relationships are fun, but sometimes there's too much focus on the hate part and a failure to show where the love comes in. I want the hero and heroine to be charming, fun, interesting—I want to fall in love with them myself so that I can understand why they would fall in love with each other!

Back to publishing, for a moment, since we certainly can't have an editor interview without talking about the future of the industry! Publishing is changing rapidly, and we've been hearing so much about self-publishing and e-books. On a scale from one to ten, how freaked out are you by the state of the industry?

SH: I'd say I'm far more interested to see how the industry responds to change than freaked out by the fact that it is changing. Change is a part of every industry, and a healthy part at that. It not only generates innovation and new business models, but creates new growth and new opportunities.

E-books are a growing but still relatively small market share. Romance readers do tend to read more titles electronically, but even so e-sales are only a portion of the market. Not everyone can afford an e-reader, or wants to read on screen, so the print book is far from dead. The dynamic potential for e-books is vast, but they aren't muscling out print books, yet.

Self-published authors more often than not are very happy to be picked up by a traditional house and to gain the benefits of an experienced team of pros backing their book—marketing, publicity, distribution are all things that a self-published author can do alone, but it's easier on the author's pockets and often more effective if they don't have to. If you notice, everyone talks about wanting to become one of the few authors who went from self-published to having a deal with a major New York house, which says to me that people still want the traditional model. The very few authors who go the other way generally have been published in print through a house for years and already have a well-established audience before they buck the system.

Stories and storytellers are part of our culture. The need to tell stories and share them with others isn't disappearing, nor is our love for the experience of reading or engaging with a good story. Modes and channels of distribution may change, but because there is

an audience, there will always be a market. The challenge on our end is making sure we're reaching that audience.

MAS: I'm a little worried about the transitional period that we're currently in, but not much. On the one hand, though there's increasing numbers of people buying electronic editions, I'm worried that there are readers who are being underserved. Because accounts are ordering fewer books, it may be that there are people who don't have e-readers, who would buy a book off the shelf of their local bookstore but who never have a chance to see that book. In other words, while some sales—a lot of sales—have shifted to electronic editions, I wonder if the industry as a whole is losing some sales entirely.

That said, I do think there is some wonderful flexibility in the world of electronic publishing. For instance, people are interested in reading shorter works in addition to book-length works, which is great. It's been harder and harder to sell "short" novels and short fiction, but this is a way to re-energize that readership. I personally also like the ability to have a couple of really long books close to hand without having to carry around a couple of weighty tomes.

As for self-publishing, I don't think what's happening there is all that different from how self-publishing—or publishing in general—has always worked. Some books get a lot of word-of-mouth and/or a lot of distribution, and they sell well. Others don't, and they don't—and sometimes those books are just as good as the ones which sell well. It's nothing new. The biggest difference is that more people have access to the technology that enables self-publishing, just like more people have the ability to make and sell their own music.

KS: For all of the reasons Melissa and Stacy stated, I think it's a fascinating and challenging time to be in publishing. I'm not freaked out—in fact, I'm thrilled to be a part of the changing industry. For the most part, it's exciting, and there is something new happening every day.

And we can't leave without talking about some of your upcoming projects! What are you excited about in the upcoming months?

SH: We have two Kitty-verse books releasing this summer: *Kitty's Big Trouble* and *Kitty's Greatest Hits*. *Kitty's Big Trouble* is the next new Kitty Norville adventure, where Kitty finds herself embroiled in vampire politics in San Francisco and is faced with some entirely unexpected new allies. *Kitty's Greatest Hits* is a collection of Kitty-verse stories featuring many beloved characters from the series and set in a variety of time periods and locations, from ancient Babylon to today. It also contains two all-new stories, including a novella that finally answers the question that has been on every Kitty fan's mind: what happened to Cormac in prison?*

MAS: In a callback to the whole self-publishing thing, we've just started publishing Rhiannon Frater's zombie apocalypse trilogy, *As the World Dies*. The first volume, *The First Days*, will be out in July; the second, *Fighting to Survive*, comes out in November, and the third, *Siege* will follow in early 2012. Rhiannon self-published the trilogy beginning in 2008 and it attracted quite a lot of attention online.**

MF: My next big new project is *Anna Dressed in Blood* from Kendare Blake, coming in September from Tor Teen. It's this deliciously creepy YA ghost story, perfect for fans of

Supernatural or Buffy. It features a teen guy, Cas, who travels the country with his mom and their spirit-sniffing cat, hunting down the ghosts of urban legend and taking them out. It's all pretty routine, but then he meets Anna Dressed in Blood—who was murdered in the 1950s and has been haunting her old Victorian house ever since—and his job suddenly gets a lot more difficult.***

KS: Oh, I loved *Anna Dressed in Blood*. Going back to the favorite hero and heroine question, Carrie Bebris is exploring the world of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* in her upcoming Mr. and Mrs. Darcy mystery, *The Deception at Lyme*****. The heroes are Mr. & Mrs. Darcy and Anne and Captain Wentworth. Two great Austen couples in one book!

WR: I'm particularly excited about a wonderful fantasy, which appeals to both YA and adults, from UK author Gillian Philip. *Firebrand* is the first book in The Rebel Angels series about two Fae brothers who are exiled to the mortal world. Seth is such a deliciously flawed protagonist, angsty and brooding, but oh-so-lovable. There's three more books to come, and I can't wait!

Thanks so much for participating, everyone!

*Carrie Vaughn's article, 'The Stories Keep Coming' can be found on page 167, and a sample chapter of Kitty's Big Trouble is on page 169.

**Rhiannon Frater's article about her journey from self-publishing to publisher can be found on page 91. A sample chapter of *Fighting to Survive* is on page 100.

***A sample chapter of *Anna Dressed in Blood* is on page 46.

****Carrie Bebris's *Guide to the Regency Male* can be found on page 300, and a sample chapter of *The Deception at Lyme* follows on page 306.

Copyright © 2011 by Tom Doherty Associates, LLC.

Casual Sex

By Deborah Coonts

Why can't I be like everyone else and grab a hunkalicious guy for some serious, meaningless sex? After all, this is Vegas—the capital of superficial liaisons. The whole system is set up to marry you on Friday, cater to your every need through the weekend, then annul the whole thing in the harsh light of back-to-the-real-world Monday.

I've never made the leap myself. I'm a happy-ending kind of gal, the poster child for wishing on a star. And since most of the men in Sin City don't share my long-term view, I keep wishing and share my closet with a guy who looks better in my clothes than I do.

Let me explain. It's not really what it seems. Okay, it is what it seems; it's just not what you think. My name is Lucky and as the chief problem solver at the Babylon Casino and Resort, happy endings are my job—other people's happy endings.

The guy in question is Ted Kowalski. Most of the world knows him as The Great Teddie Divine, Las Vegas' Foremost Female Impersonator. And he's the closest thing to long-term I've allowed in my life, which has required adjustments I didn't know I was capable of. For instance, I have to overlook the fact that he stretches out my Jimmy Choos—which, I'm pretty sure is a capital offense in most jurisdictions. And he's chirpy in the morning, while I tend toward homicidal before my first cup of joe. Not to mention the fact that he has better legs than I do. I'm here to tell you, this can set a girl back. I

expect that kind of thing from the women in my life, but not from my guy. It's a wee bit more of an issue than I thought, but I'm coping. But, to be honest, that's a lot of adjusting for someone like me.

Thankfully, Teddie gave me some time to deal with my issues. Much like he would a live Maine lobster, Teddie eased me into the pot before turning up the heat. We met casually enough when I booked his show into the small theatre at the Babylon. Like everybody else, I assumed he was gay. Please, he knew all the lyrics to every Rodgers and Hammerstein song—that's a dead give away? Right? Not to mention his fluency in all things Jimmy Choo and Chanel. I should have known that whole judging a book thing was true. Let's just chalk it up to momentary cliché amnesia.

That evening, much to my chagrin, I had an almost terminal case of foot-in-mouth disease—not at all like me. I should've known something about him was different. But, as my mother says, I don't do subtle. I need a two-by-four right between the eyes. That didn't come 'til later...much later.

Teddie was in the business of soft-selling. To someone less forgiving than myself, he was probably in the business of subterfuge—but I chose to overlook that part. Regardless of how you characterize it, I remained clueless.

Clueless even when he suggested the apartment below his penthouse in a new building called The Presidio would make a nice investment. Anxious to move out of my small digs behind the hotel into something more permanent, more adult, I was putty in his hands that morning when Teddie burst into my office.

“Lucky! Glad I caught you.”

Standing by my desk scanning some of the endless paperwork my job entails, I turned at the sound of his voice. Despite my better judgment, and in spite of all I thought I knew about Teddie, my heart skipped a beat at the sight of him.

The very personification of boundless energy sparked by a wicked bit of mischief lurking in his baby blues, that day Teddie was cleverly disguised as Ted Kowalski in a pair of jeans just tight enough to fire the imagination and a ragged Harvard sweatshirt with the neck cut out. His blonde hair, short and spiky, begged for fingers to tame it. On many occasions I had wondered who Teddie might have in his life to do that. As near as I could figure, he spent all of his free time within my orbit, so it remained a mystery. Like I said, a two-by-four.

He grabbed my hand. “Come with me. You know how you’ve been yammering about getting your own place. Well, this is perfect! PERFECT!” I’m not even sure he took a breath as he pulled me toward the door. “You’re gonna love it! Now it’s a bit pricey, but you’re getting in on the ground floor.” He glanced at me as he tugged me past my assistant’s desk. “Not the actual ground floor, you know. But you know what I mean.”

I tossed the papers I had been reading on the desk and snagged my purse from its hook on the hat rack as I pretended to resist.

Teddie prattled on, not allowing me a word, as he pulled me out of the hotel, pushed me into my car, took my keys out of my purse, and steered us out of the garage. We had been friends for a while at that point and I had learned it was useless to resist once he had the bit in his teeth.

Five minutes later, he wheeled to a stop in front of a tall glass building. Teddie continued his pitch, but his words faded into the background as I took stock of my surroundings. The city had been buzzing about this project—it was coveted real estate by all accounts. The landscaping had yet to be finished—holes gaped in the dark black dirt awaiting a tree or a bush. The entry doors of wood and glass were tastefully done yet large and heavy enough to impress even the most jaded jet-setter.

Wood graced the walls and floor of the foyer giving it a warm, welcoming feel. We dodged a bunch of plants grouped in the middle of the floor awaiting disbursement. Rectangular crates leaned against the wall—presumably the artwork. Even without rugs and furniture, which I assumed would be the final touches, I liked the feel of the place.

Teddie punched the button for the penthouse once we both were inside the elevator. “I’ll show you my place first.”

The elevator deposited us in the middle of a cavernous room. Tape and bedding lined the walls, which had yet to be painted. Drips of spackle dotted the bare concrete floors.

Teddie, gesturing grandly, made his vision come alive. “Right here will be counter,” he paced it out. “A few stools, but nothing to break the room up too much. I don’t want to block the windows.”

The windows. Like a beacon of light, the wall of floor-to-ceiling glass drew me. Being encased in the hermetically sealed casino world all day, everyday, I’m a big view kind of gal. Standing at the glass, the Strip stretched away to my left. To my right rose the Babylon. And behind it all stretched the Spring Mountains. The sunsets would be spectacular as the lights of the Strip gradually brightened as the sun faded.

“Where’s my place?” I asked as Teddie stepped in next to me. “Would I have the same view?”

He nodded, his expression serious now. There was something in his eyes, some emotion, but I couldn’t read it.

“Can I afford this?”

“Lucky, you’re one of the big-wigs at the premier property in town. If you can’t afford it, who can?”

Oh, scads of people leapt to mind, from professional athletes, to Hollywood types, to folks from obscure oil-rich nations, but, preferring to wallow in the dream a bit longer, I didn’t mention any of that.

“It even has a back staircase down to your place,” Teddie added casually. “I put some money down so they’d hold the place for you.”

“It does?” I whirled on him. “You what?” What was he thinking? Didn’t he know how much I hated to be backed into a corner? That at even the faintest whiff of manipulation, I was history?

He raised his hands in mock defense. “Don’t get your dander up. It’s refundable.” He took one of my hands. “Come, I’ll show you. I’ve worked it all out.”

And he had.

Who knows, maybe I’ll get my happy ending yet.

Wanna Get Lucky?

By Deborah Coonts

Copyright © 2011 by Deborah Coonts

Deborah Coonts' mother tells her she was born in Texas a very long time ago, though she's not totally sure—her mother can't be trusted. But she was definitely raised in Texas on barbeque, Mexican food, and beer. She currently resides in Las Vegas, where family and friends tell her she can't get into too much trouble. Silly people. Coonts has built her own business, practiced law, flown airplanes, written a humor column for a national magazine, and survived a teenager.

Chapter One

As her final act on this earth, Lyda Sue Stalnakker plummeted out of a Las Vegas helicopter and landed smack in the middle of the pirates' lagoon in front of the Treasure Island Hotel, disrupting the 8:30 p.m. pirate show.

The video ran as the lead-in for the 11:00 p.m. news. I caught it on a television in the sports bar. Actually, it was amazing I caught it at all. My name is Lucky O'Toole, and I am the chief problem solver at the Babylon, the newest, most over-the-top megacasino/resort on the Las Vegas Strip. I'd been fighting my way through the crowds packing the casino on my way to Stairwell Fifteen to deal with a naked man asleep under the stairs when I caught the television feed out of the corner of my eye.

A grainy video of a helicopter with the Babylon's script logo painted on the side appeared on the screen with a small head shot of Lyda Sue in the corner—it was Lyda Sue's sweet smile that actually captured my attention. I leaned over the backs of two guys playing video poker at the bar, a sinking feeling in my stomach. In Vegas, nobody gets their picture on the news unless they've committed some grisly crime or have been a victim of one themselves.

Of course I couldn't hear what the talking heads on the television were saying. The clamor of excited voices from the casino combined with the pinging from the video machines and the piped-in music to create a cacophony of excitement that made it not only impossible to talk, but to think as well.

Eyes wide, I watched as the station ran the video again—this time the full version as part of their newscast.

Hovering above the lagoon as the show began, the copter began to buck and roll. A body tumbled out, backward or forward—it was hard to tell. Thankfully, the final impact with the water was hidden behind the pirate ship advancing toward the British with cannons belching fire and smoke. The picture tilted, then went dark—a head shot of Lyda Sue taking its place.

“Ms. O’Toole?” My Nextel push- to- talk vibrated at my hip. “Are you coming?”

I grabbed the device and pushed the directconnect button to shout. “What?”

I pressed the thing to my ear as I tried to hear.

“Ma’am, this is Sergio at the front desk. The doctor’s with our naked guy. He’s fine—apparently sleeping off a bender. But we got another problem—some guy in Security by the name of Dane is insisting we call the paramedics just to be on the safe side.”

I stared at Lyda Sue’s picture on the television, my mind unable to process what I saw. The video switched to the police, a body covered with a white cloth, one delicate hand dangling from the stretcher as they loaded it into the back of an ambulance.

Nobody was in a hurry.

“Ma’am, are you there?”

The question snapped me back. “Sorry. Naked guy in the stairwell, right. Do *not* call the paramedics unless the doctor wants them. We don’t need to cause a scene and have this guy splashed across the pages of the *Review- Journal* in the morning—I’m sure he’d love that.” Trying to steady my nerves, I took a deep breath. Instantly I regretted it.

Smokefilled air assaulted my lungs, bringing tears to my eyes. “I’ll be right there, and I’ll deal with Dane.” I

choked the words out as I struggled to catch my breath.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I reclipped the Nextel at my waist. I fought to not only clear my lungs, but to clear my thoughts as well—a Herculean task as hundreds of questions pinged around inside my head.

Lyda Sue, dead? I’d seen her just last night, holding forth on the end stool at Delilah’s Bar. We’d

talked for a minute or two; her world had seemed stable enough. Twenty- four hours later she took a header out of our helicopter, landing smack in the middle of the 8:30 p.m. pirate show. What had I missed?

Damn. Lyda Sue was dead. Double damn. She fell out of *our* helicopter. The Babylon would be big news. My job was to keep the Babylon *out* of the news. Or to take the fallout when I failed. The Big Boss was not going to be pleased.

Tonight was shaping up to be a doozie.

I muscled between the two guys intent on their video poker monitors and leaned across the bar so the bartender could hear me. “Get the news off that television. Find a sports feed or something.”

The real world had no place in this fantasyland.

My mind clicked into gear. I couldn’t wait to get my hands on that pi lot. He should have called me right away. Lyda Sue hit the lagoon at 8:30. Damage control was

tough enough without giving the newshounds and gossip mongers two and a half hours head start. I had a feeling that nothing short of an overnight nuclear test at Yucca Flats would keep us out of the morning headlines now.

Nevertheless, I grabbed the Nextel, and started in. “Jerry?”

“Yo,” our Head of Security answered in his laidback manner.

“I want our pilot in my office right now—handcuff him and drag him there if you have to. Next, get over to Channel Eight. I want all copies of a tape Marty ran on the eleven o’clock news of a woman falling out of our helicopter. If he refuses, remind him of that awkward little situation at the opening gala—he’ll know what you’re talking about. Bring the tapes to me when you get them.”

“I’m on it.”

“Oh, and Jer? I almost forgot. What’s the status on the mega- millions winner? Did she actually hit it?”

“We’re working on it. I’ll have an answer for you in the next half hour—our plate’s sorta full.”

“Welcome to the club. Thanks.”

I disconnected then scrolled through the stored numbers looking for Dane’s as I turned to head toward Stairwell Fifteen. Paramedics! Was the guy nuts?

As fate would have it, his number didn’t matter.

Two steps with my head down focusing on my phone and I ran smack into the rather solid chest of the man I was looking for—Paxton Dane, the new hire in Security.

At a couple of inches taller than my six feet, Dane was the poster boy for the testosterone- laden, ex- military, jet- jockey set. Square jaw, soft brown hair, green eyes, great ass and an attitude—which I didn't need right now.

“Did I just hear you tell Jerry to threaten to blackmail the manager of the television station?”

His voice held the soft traces of old Texas, yet the sexy timbre of a man confident of his appeal.

“I never threaten. I offered him a deal.” I had neither the time nor the patience to educate Dane to night, but it seemed that was in the cards.

“A rather fine distinction.”

“Dane, you'll find those black- and- white lines painted so brightly in the rest of the world blur to a nice shade of gray in Vegas.” I put a hand on his chest and pushed him away since his nearness seemed to affect what rational thought I had left at this time of night. “I was already up to my ass in alligators, and the suicide dive just upped the ante. I really do have to go.”

I pushed away the images of Lyda Sue's final moments. If I kept them at a distance, maybe, just maybe, I could make it through the night. If I spoke of her cavalierly, maybe I could hold back my emotions. “What makes you think she was a suicide?” The soft traces of old Texas disappeared. Dane's voice was hard, flat and held an edge like tempered steel. The question and his tone stopped me cold. What did he know that I didn't? “You got any reason to think otherwise?”

Murder, now that would be a real problem.

He waved my question away, arranging his features in an expressionless mask. “I need to talk to you about one of our whales. Apparently the guy had a mishap in one of the Ferraris. If you want me to handle it, I can, but you’ll have to make the call as to what the hotel is willing to do. The whale in question is . . .” He consulted a folded sheet of paper he had extracted out of his back pocket and gave a low whistle. “A Mr. Fujikara and he seems to be quite a whale—he keeps several million in play during his monthly visits.”

“I know Mr. Fujikara well.”

Dane glanced up, one eyebrow raised, but he didn’t ask the question I saw lurking there and I felt no need to explain.

“We also have a Pascarelli. Apparently he wants a hug from you,” Dane continued, not missing a beat as he absently rubbed his chest where my hand had been. “And the naked guy . . .”

“He’s all mine as well,” I interjected to speed up the conversation. With major problems to solve, I had little time and even less patience. “And, Dane, for the record, never call the paramedics unless it’s an allout emergency or the doctor wants them. Casinos are closed worlds here—we protect our own—and we zealously guard the privacy of our guests. Remember that. Outsiders are allowed in to help with problems only, and I repeat, only when the problem gets out of hand.”

Dane’s eyes narrowed—his only response. A tic worked in his cheek.

I rolled my head and rubbed the back of my neck.

“I need to take Mr. Fujikara as well; this is a game we play. For his millions, he likes some personal attention—apparently I’m the anointed one. You can help me with

one thing though. We had a lady hit the mega- million, but we need to make sure she played the six quarters. Jerry's shut down the machine and is reviewing the tapes. While we're in the process, why don't you offer the Sodom and Gomorrah Suite to the winner and her friends for the night? Make double sure that she understands her winnings have not been confirmed. I'll follow up with her when I get the results of the diagnostics from Jerry."

"And who will authorize the comped suite?"

"I thought I just did." My words sounded harsher than I intended. "Sorry. If Sergio wants confirmation, have him call me."

"Right. Oh, and The Big Boss wants fifteen minutes of your time. He's in his apartment."

"He'll have to get in line."

"He told me now," Dane said as he rubbed his eyes.

"I said, he'll have to wait." Now that I took a closer look, Dane's eyes were bloodshot. The guy looked totally wrung out. I put a hand on his arm.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine." Dane shrugged my question off, then shrugged out of my grasp. "You leave The Big Boss hanging it's your funeral."

"It'll take more than that to put me six feet under." My relationship with The Big Boss was none of Dane's business. I turned and took off through the casino with more questions than answers bouncing around in my skull: Why the swan dive, why did The Big Boss send Dane to bring me to heel, and why did Dane sidestep my question?

Murder! What made him think Lyda Sue was murdered?

THE casino at the Babylon is much like any other. An intimate labyrinth, subtly decorated, windowless and, to night, jam-packed with people all paying and praying for what ever it was they hoped to get in Vegas. A thin layer of smoke hovered over the crowd, as the slot machines sang their come-on songs, and occasional shouts arose from the tables. Cocktail waitresses wearing painted-on smiles and little else darted in and out delivering fresh libations and collecting the empties. Young women paraded around in tightfitting clothes they wouldn't be caught dead in back home. Pierced and tattooed young men, their jeans hanging precariously across their butts, followed the young women. How the boys kept their jeans from falling straight to the floor was an enduring mystery.

The nightly line of the young and the beautiful snaked from the entrance to Pandora's Box, our popular nightclub and body exchange. Pulses of dance music escaped each time Ralph, our bouncer, opened the door to let one of the hip and trendy in or out. The entrance to the adjacent theatre was empty; the 10:30 show was well underway.

I knew where to find Mr. Pascarelli—thankfully he was on my way to Stairwell Fifteen. Like all serious gamblers, Mr. Pascarelli was a creature of habit and superstition. Dressed in the same shirt, a nowthreadbare Hawaiian number his wife, Mildred, "God rest her soul," had given him de cades ago when I guessed he weighed forty pounds more than he did now, he always started his night of play at the third slot machine from the end of the third row.

A gnomelike eighty, Mr. Pascarelli was cute as a bug, bald as Michael Jordan, a night owl and, I suspected, a bit lonely. Three was his lucky number, and I was his good-luck charm.

Lucky me.

Truth be told, giving Mr. Pascarelli his hug was usually the highpoint of my night, a fact that—had I time to think about it—would probably have concerned me.

“There you are, my dear!” He waved his glass at me. “I was beginning to worry.” “Worry? Don’t be silly, but this one will have to be a quickie.” I gave him a squeeze, careful to not crush him too tightly.

He laughed at the innuendo. “Hard night?”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“Little Lyda taking a header out of the helicopter?”

“Bad news travels fast. You knew Lyda Sue?”

“Sure. When she wasn’t busy she used to pull up a stool and talk to me for a while. Sweet kid, from somewhere in Texas, I think.” He shook his head and crinkled his brow. “She’d been sorta jumpy lately.”

“Did she say why?”

“If she did, I don’t remember.”

“Do me a favor—try. When she sailed out of that helicopter she landed right in my lap. I could use some help on this.”

He nodded, his eyes serious.

I patted Mr. Pascarelli’s shoulder. “Go easy on us to night, okay?”

“Sure, honey,” he said with a wink.

Mr. Pascarelli was the only man on the planet who could call me “honey,” wink at me and live to tell about it.

I dove into the crowd and wove my way on toward Stairwell Fifteen. I threw my weight against the stairwell door and came face to face with the normally unflappable Sergio Fabiano, our night- shift frontdesk manager. Dark hair, olive skin, a face a photographer would love and a body to match, Sergio was the Babylon’s resident Greek god. Women were drawn to him like sharks to an injured seal. Thankfully the women were nowhere in sight. Neither was Security. Apparently Dane had done as I asked and called off his posse.

“Thank heavens!” A scowl creased Sergio’s otherwise flawless face, but his dark eyes danced with merriment. He gestured disdainfully toward the space under the first flight of stairs.

“Good God!” The words escaped before I could stop them.

“But not a merciful God,” announced Sergio. Our naked guest must have weighed four hundred pounds, with pasty white skin and more hair sprouting on his body than his head. Thankfully he was curled in the fetal position. And he was still out cold. But, judging from the way his ass was twitching, his dreams were good ones.

“We don’t know who he is?” I managed to choke out. I kept repeating, *I will not laugh at this* over and over in my head until I felt confident I would do as I told myself.

Sergio shook his head, his jaw clamped tight, his lips compressed together. He didn’t laugh, not even a smile, or a smirk. Amazing.

I keyed my Nextel. “Security, any missing- person reports for to night?”

“Excuse me?” The unmistakable voice of Paxton Dane. Did the guy ever stop? Like the Energizer bunny, he just kept going and going, handling everything, everywhere.

“Dane, have you guys had any calls from anyone looking for someone who matches the description of our guy in Stairwell Fifteen?”

“Already checked that. And, to answer your question, no.”

“Okay, then send four . . .” I looked at the inert shape again. “Make that five of your strongest guys to Stairwell Fifteen, ground floor.”

“On their way—again.”

Taking the high road, I ignored the jab. “And, Dane, remember, a bit of discretion here. This man is most likely one of our guests. We wouldn’t want to see him on the news, okay?”

“You mean one appearance on the nightly news is enough?”

Did the guy take a class on how to be a jerk or was it something that just came naturally?

“Dane . . .” I started in on him then realized I was talking to dead air.

Sergio looked at me, his eyes round black saucers. I snapped my phone shut. “Sergio, take care of this guy,” I said as I recliipped my phone, glad that Dane had retreated. I was too wrung out to do the whole verbal thrust- and- parry thing. “You know, the usual routine.”

“Right,” Sergio began. “First get a robe that’ll fit him—preferably one with another hotel’s logo on it.” He paused to flash me a grin, then continued as if he’d memorized it all from the employee handbook and hadn’t actually learned it from me.

“When Security gets here, have them carry him through the back corridors to the worst room open to night.

Take all the bedsheets, the towels and the robes—anything he can put around himself when he wakes up, so he can’t sneak out on us.”

“You’ve got it. But you might see if Security can spare someone to stand outside the door just in case our friend—” I pointed to the guy on the floor, now snoring loudly.

“—has an accomplice to bring him some clothes.”

Sergio nodded.

“And the doc is going to check on him?” I asked.

“Every half hour.”

“Good work.” Another problem down, how many more to go? I’d lost count.

“Sergio, another thing . . .”

Again those black eyes focused on me.

“I need you to alert your staff at the front desk, the bell staff and the valets. If anyone comes around asking questions about a girl falling out of our helicopter, they are to be directed to my office. That includes the police. Our staff is not to answer any questions or to give any information. Is that clear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sergio’s eyes grew a fraction wider, but he kept his composure.

“And if anyone is poking around, let me know, okay? Just because you send them to my office doesn’t mean they will actually do as you suggest.”

I gave one last look around. I couldn’t think of anything else. Satisfied Sergio could handle the problem from here, I turned to go.

After all, it’s not as if this was our first naked drunk sleeping in a stairwell.

THE elevators lurked just inside the foyer of the Babylon, separating the casino from the hotel. The foyer was the Babylon's showpiece. Designed to draw all passersby inside, the grand ceiling was covered with millions of dollars worth of Chihuly blown glass. The Bellagio had glass flowers, we had butterflies and hummingbirds—thousands of them. Personally they made me feel like we all were in a remake of the film *The Birds*, but obviously no one shared my opinion. As usual, a crowd clustered under them, oohing and ahing.

Numerous walking bridges arched over a lazy river, our interpretation of the Euphrates, which snaked throughout the ground level. Tropical plants and trees grew along its banks lending shade for the colorful fish, swans and ducks that swam in the clear blue water. Somehow I doubted whether the birthplace of civilization ever had a river quite like our Euphrates, but The Big Boss wanted it, so there it was.

Off to one side of the lobby, behind a wall of twenty- five- foot windows, an indoor ski slope with real, man- made snow descended from high above. Again I wasn't sure whether the original Babylonians had ever strapped on a pair of K2s and flown down a snow- covered hillside, but in keeping with the relatively recent adage "If you build it, they will come," The Big Boss had built it and, indeed, they came. Another crowd gathered there watching the folks who had paid an exorbitant sum to ski indoors on the desert slide down the hill.

The other side of the lobby boasted the entrance to the Bazaar. There one could slide behind the wheel of a Ferrari, buy a six- hundred- thousand- dollar pink diamond ring, a two- thousand- dollar pair of Versace jeans, or load up on five- hundred- dollar

Jimmy Choos. A constant line of customers with fat wallets trailed through there like ants bearing gifts for the queen.

The Big Boss was an expert at separating tourists from their money. Ah yes, The Big Boss—he was next on the list. I shouldered my way through the crowd, ignoring the man yelling at one of the bellmen—a frontdesk clerk was already interceding. Paxton Dane was giving a woman a hug—probably the megamillions lady. He caught my eye over the lady’s shoulder and gave me a discreet thumbs- up. For this brief moment in time we appeared to have things under control, which, of course, was an illusion. Life in Vegas was never under control; it walked, trotted or galloped, as it chose, and we merely hung on for the ride.

Tomorrow the Trendmakers would arrive for their annual week of spouse swapping, the stars of the adult movie industry would descend on us for their annual awards ceremony, ElectroniCon started Tuesday, and I would have to deal with the fallout from Lyda Sue’s dramatic exit, which would surely hit not only the morning papers but the Internet as well.

Whoever thought up the tagline “What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas” got it backward—Vegas was always news. Heck, the video of Lyda Sue’s final dive was probably playing on YouTube by now. I was a fool to think I could corral this one. I rounded the corner, pushed the up button and pondered the reflection that stared back at me from the mirrored surface of the elevator doors. I looked like a hundred miles of bad road. Barely over thirty, and I could pass for my mother’s sister. *Haggard* was the word

that leapt to mind. Thankfully the doors slid open and I was no longer nose to nose with myself. Why people want mirrors everywhere is beyond me.

I stepped inside the empty car, inserted my security card in the slot and pressed the button marked “private.” Self- consciously I patted my bottle- blonde hair, my one concession to the land of the beautiful people. Attractive enough, I guess, I’d never be considered beautiful or buxom—at least not without serious surgical intervention—but I damn well could be tall and blonde. Self- consciously I smoothed my dress, pinched my cheeks to get some color into them, then wiped at the black smudges I had seen under my eyes. I threw back my shoulders and adopted what I thought was an air of confidence.

“Who you trying to fool?” The voice emanating from the ceiling startled me. I looked up at the “eye in the sky,” the small video camera hidden discretely in a plastic bubble partially recessed into the ceiling of the elevator car. Security monitored the video feeds from thousands of similar devices located all over the property. The voice belonged to Vivienne Rainwater, one of our Security team.

“You know what they say, image is everything.”

I forced a smile for the camera. “I’ll be unavailable for a few.”

“You go, girl.”

“Over the line, Viv.”

“I thought there weren’t any lines in Vegas, just shades of gray.”

“And you shouldn’t listen to conversations you’re not invited into.”

“You’d be amazed at what you see and hear up here.”

Not long ago, I had sat where Vivienne now sits, and received a quick lesson into my fellow man, one I assumed Vivienne was now learning. “Titillated? Maybe. Amused? Possibly. But amazed? No. Now, go away and spy on someone else.”

The elevator whirred seamlessly to a stop at the fifty- second floor and the doors slid open. Every time I made this ride I thought of Dorothy leaving Kansas in a tornado and waking up in Oz. Thirty seconds and I was transported from the semicontrolled chaos of the lobby to the quiet, serene living room of The Big Boss’s pent house.

The muted lights cast a warm glow on leatherfinished walls. The rich sheen of the hardwood floors framed hand- knotted silk rugs from the Middle East. Each was tastefully arranged and supported a cluster of understated furniture made from the hides of exotic beasts and woods from faraway lands. Lesser works from some of the great Masters graced the walls—sketches by Picasso and smaller works by Van Gogh and Monet. I couldn’t identify the others—apparently my high school art history teacher had overlooked them—but I was sure they were all very expensive and “important.” The whole effect made a three- thousand- square- foot box of a room cozy.

The Big Boss stood silhouetted against the wall of twenty- foot windows backlit by the lights of the Strip below. He warmed his hands in front of a gas fire dancing merrily in a freestanding fireplace. He explained to me once that he kept the air- conditioning on full blast so he could have his fire. Something about the ambiance.

The Big Boss, Albert Rothstein, was a Vegas legend. He had started as a valet at the Flamingo, caught the Mob’s attention—he never would tell me exactly how—and then worked his way to the top of the heap. A short man with a full head of once black,

now salt- and- pepper hair, he kept himself trim with thrice- weekly personal training sessions. His smile could light up a room and his manner made you feel like you were the most important person in his world.

He had a penchant for stiff whiskey, tall blondes and big stakes. When I was fifteen, I'd filled out an employment application, stating my age as eighteen. The Big Boss hired me on the spot even though he had known I was lying.

More than a little peeved at being summoned through the new flunky, I started in as I strode toward him. "Lyda Sue made a helluva splash, but I've got everything under control: Jerry's on his way to get the tape from the station, the front entrance staff has been alerted to direct all inquiries to me, and once I actually make it to my office I'll work on keeping us off the front page."

I stopped in front of him, but The Big Boss didn't look at me. Instead he continued staring into the fire, then he reached into his back pocket, extracted his wallet and pulled out what I knew to be a one hundred-dollar bill. He put his wallet back then started working with the paper money, smoothing it, lining up the sides, meticulously folding it again and again. The silence stretched between us, then he finally said, "Bring all the copies of the video to me."

"You don't want Security to go over it? May I ask why?"

Now he eyed me over the top of his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose. His eyes were red. He looked like hell. "For once, just do as I say."

"Okay." First Lyda Sue, then Dane, now The Big Boss. Had I suddenly stepped into the Twilight Zone? Nothing about this night added up. "Aren't you interested in what the pi lot has to say?"

“The pilot?” He repeated as if stalling for time.

“The pilot’s story should be a doozie.”

His hands shook as he folded the bill over and over. “Of course, what did Willie have to say?”

Okay, now I was sure I smelled a rat. “How did you know it was Willie? We haven’t found him yet.”

The air seemed to go right out of The Big Boss. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Lucky, you can truly try a man’s soul.”

“And you’re stonewalling me.” I laid a hand on his arm. “Boss, it’s my job to solve problems, but I can’t do it unless I know what the problems are.”

“I was solving problems long before you showed up. This one’s mine. I’ll solve it myself, my own way.” He shrugged out of my grasp.

The second man to night to do that. Clearly I was losing my touch.

“Just bring me that tape and keep me in the loop,” he growled, looking like a pit bull ready to take a bite out of somebody’s ass.

I had no idea how to reason with a pit bull—assuming it could even be done—so I bailed. “You’re the boss. Anything else?” If I couldn’t go through him, I’d just go around him.

Again the silence stretched between us as he worked, folding and folding.

Finished, he took my hand, and closed my fingers around the small shape.

He didn’t let go. His eyes looked at our hands, then reluctantly met mine. “Trust me on this one.”

“Sure.” I looked at the shape in my palm. The Big Boss had folded the bill into a small elephant. I extracted my hands from his and dropped the figure into my pocket.

“Look. Right now I got more fires than California in the fall and they are spreading by the minute. May I go now?”

“Give that to the first kid you see in the lobby.” His voice was tired. His eyes, distracted.

“Boss, it’s midnight. If there’re any kids around, somebody ought to call Child Ser vices.”

“Right.” He stepped around me and headed toward the bar. “Tomorrow then.” He pulled a bottle of single malt off the shelf and raised it in my direction. I shook my head. He poured himself a drink.

He raised the glass to his lips, took a long pull then said, “We’ve got another problem.”

That much I knew. In fact, I thought we had several.

“And what might that be?”

“Paxton Dane.”

Now *that* I didn’t expect.

The Big Boss turned and stared at me, apparently awaiting my response.

If I didn’t know better, I’d say he seemed nervous, a little antsy even, as he shifted from foot to foot. A cold chill went through me. What ever was bothering him, it must be bad—real bad. I’d only seen The Big Boss this way once before, and we both darn near went down in flames.

“He was your hire. What’s the problem?” How I kept my voice even, I don’t know.

“I hired Dane so we could keep an eye on him,” The Big Boss said, his eyes drifting from mine.

For a moment I was speechless, unable to comprehend what he had just told me, then I found my voice. “Wait, let me get this straight. You put somebody you don’t trust in one of the most sensitive positions in the house? Do you think that’s wise?” I tried to keep my voice low, my tone smooth, but even I could detect a hint of panic around the edges.

“Probably not, but it was the best I could think of on the fly.” The Boss took a slug of scotch. “Jerry knows. He’s keeping tabs on Dane, and I want you to help him.”

“Why?”

“He asked too many questions and was snooping around like he was trailing after something or someone. It doesn’t seem hiring him has put him off the scent. I want to know what he’s looking for and who’s holding his reins. So, keep him close, okay?”

“Why me? I’m not in Security. I’m the Customer Relations person, remember?”

“I know it’s asking a lot.” He turned. His eyes locked onto mine. “But, Lucky, you’re the only one I can trust.”

Anna Dressed in Blood

By Kendare Blake

Copyright © 2011 by Kendare Blake

17-year-old Cas Lowood has grown up knowing what other people don't know: that dead doesn't always mean gone, and that some of the dead would like to take you with them. Like his father before him, Cas travels the country hunting down the ghosts of urban legend and sending them where they belong—wherever that is.

Kendare Blake holds an M.A. in creative writing from Middlesex University in northern London. She lives and writes in Washington, brakes for animals—the largest of which was a deer, which sadly didn't make it, and the smallest of which was a mouse, which did, but it took forever—and appreciates Greek mythology, rare red meat, and veganism.

Chapter One

The grease-slicked hair is a dead giveaway—no pun intended.

So is the loose and faded leather coat, though not as much that as the sideburns. And the way he keeps nodding and flicking his Zippo open and closed in rhythm with his head. He belongs in a chorus line of dancing Jets and Sharks.

Then again, I have an eye for these things. I know what to look for, because I've seen just about every variety of spook and specter you can imagine. The hitchhiker haunts a stretch of winding North Carolina road, bordered by unpainted split-rail fences and a whole lot of nothing. Unsuspecting drivers probably pick him up out of boredom, thinking he's just some college kid who reads too much Kerouac.

"My gal, she's waiting for me," he says now in an excited voice, like he's going to see her the minute we crest the next hill. He taps the lighter hard on the dash, twice, and I glance over to make sure he hasn't left a ding in the panel. This isn't my car. And I've suffered through eight weeks of lawn work for Mr. Dean, the retired army colonel who lives down the block, just so I could borrow it. For a seventy-year-old man he's got the straightest back I've ever seen. If I had more time, I could've spent a summer listening to interesting stories about Vietnam. Instead I cleared shrubs and tilled an eight-by-ten plot for new rosebushes while he watched me with a surly eye, making sure his baby would be safe with this seventeen-year-old kid in an old Rolling Stones t-shirt and his mother's gardening gloves.

To tell the truth, knowing what I was going to use the car for, I felt a little guilty. It's a dusk blue 1969 Camaro Rally Sport, mint condition. Drives smooth as silk and

growls around curves. I can't believe he let me take it, yard work or no. But thank god he did, because without it I would have been sunk. It was something the hitchhiker would go for—something worth the trouble of crawling out of the ground.

“She must be pretty nice,” I say without much interest.

“Yeah, man, yeah,” he says and, for the hundredth time since I picked him up five miles ago, I wonder how anyone could possibly not know that he's dead. He sounds like a James Dean movie. And then there's the smell. Not quite rotten but definitely mossy, hanging around him like a fog. How has anyone mistaken him for the living? How has anyone kept him in the car for the ten miles it takes to get to the Lowren's Bridge, where he inevitably grabs the wheel and takes both car and driver into the river? Most likely they were creeped out by his clothes and his voice, and by the smell of bones—that smell they seem to know even though they've probably never smelled it. But by then it's always too late. They'd made the decision to pick up a hitchhiker, and they weren't about to let themselves be scared into going back on it. They rationalized their fears away. People shouldn't do that.

In the passenger seat, the hitchhiker is still talking in this faraway voice about his girl back home, somebody named Lisa, and how she's got the shiniest blond hair and the prettiest red smile, and how they're going to run off and get married as soon as he gets back hitching from Florida. He was working part of a summer down there for his uncle at a car dealership: the best opportunity to save up for their wedding, even if it did mean they wouldn't see each other for months.

“It must've been hard, being away from home so long,” I say, and there's actually a little bit of pity in my voice. “But I'm sure she'll be glad to see you.”

“Yeah, man. That’s what I’m talking about. I’ve got everything we need, right in my jacket pocket. We’ll get married and move out to the coast. I’ve got a pal out there, Robby. We can stay with him until I get a job working on cars.”

“Sure,” I say. The hitchhiker has this sadly optimistic look on his face, lit up by the moon and the glowing dashlights. He never saw Robby, of course. He never saw his girl Lisa, either. Because two miles up the road in the summer of 1970, he got into a car, probably a lot like this one. And he told whoever was driving that he had a way to start an entire life in his coat pocket.

The locals say that they beat him up pretty good by the bridge and then dragged him back into the trees, where they stabbed him a couple of times and then cut his throat. They pushed his body down an embankment and into one of the tributary streams. That’s where a farmer found it, nearly six months later, wound around with vines, the jaw hanging open in surprise, like he still couldn’t believe that he was stuck there.

And now he doesn’t know that he’s stuck here. None of them ever seem to know. Right now the hitchhiker is whistling and bobbing along to nonexistent music. He probably still hears whatever they were playing the night they killed him.

He’s perfectly pleasant. A nice guy to ride with. But when we get to that bridge, he’ll be as angry and ugly as anyone you’ve ever seen. It’s reported that his ghost, dubbed unoriginally as the County 12 Hiker, has killed at least a dozen people and injured another eight. But I can’t really blame him. He never made it home to see his girl, and now he doesn’t want anyone else to get home either.

We pass mile marker twenty-three—the bridge is less than two minutes away. I’ve driven this road almost every night since we moved here in the hopes that I would

catch his thumb in my headlights, but I had no luck. Not until I got behind the wheel of this Rally Sport. Before this it was just half a summer of the same damn road, the same damn blade tucked under my leg. I hate it when it's like that, like some kind of horribly extended fishing trip. But I don't give up on them. They always come around in the end.

I let my foot ease up on the gas.

“Something wrong, friend?” he asks me.

I shake my head. “Only that this isn't my car, and I don't have the cash to fix it if you decide to try to take me off the bridge.”

The hitchhiker laughs, just a little too loudly to be normal. “I think you've been drinking or something tonight, pal. Maybe you ought to just let me off here.”

I realize too late that I shouldn't have said that. I can't let him out. It'd be my luck that he'd step out and disappear. I'm going to have to kill him while the car is moving or I'll have to do this all over again, and I doubt that Mr. Dean is willing to let the car go for too many more nights. Besides, I'm moving to Thunder Bay in three days.

There's also the thought that I'm doing this to this poor bastard all over again. But that thought is fleeting. He's already dead.

I try to keep the speedometer over fifty—too fast for him to really consider jumping out, but with ghosts you can never be sure. I'll have to work fast.

It's when I reach down to take my blade out from under the leg of my jeans that I see the silhouette of the bridge in the moonlight. Right on cue, the hitchhiker grabs the wheel and yanks it to the left. I try to jerk it back right and slam my foot on the brake. I hear the sound of angry rubber on asphalt and out of the corner of my eye I can see that the hitchhiker's face is gone. No more easy Joe, no slicked hair and eager smile. He's just

a mask of rotten skin and bare, black holes, with teeth like dull stones. It looks like he's grinning, but it might just be the effect of his lips peeling off.

Even as the car is fishtailing and trying to stop, I don't have any flashes of my life before my eyes. What would that even be like? A highlight reel of murdered ghosts. Instead I see a series of quick, ordered images of my dead body: one with the steering wheel through my chest, another with my head gone as the rest of me hangs out the missing window.

A tree comes up out of nowhere, aimed right for my driver's side door. I don't have time to swear, just to jerk the wheel and hit the gas, and the tree is behind me. What I don't want to do is make it to the bridge. The car is all over the shoulder and the bridge doesn't have one. It's narrow, and wooden, and outdated.

"It's not so bad, being dead," the hitchhiker says to me, clawing at my arm, trying to get me off the wheel.

"What about the smell?" I hiss. Through all of this I haven't lost my grip on my knife handle. Don't ask me how; my wrist feels like the bones are going to separate in about ten seconds, and I've been pulled off my seat so that I'm hovering over the stick shift. I throw the car into neutral with my hip (should have done that earlier) and pull my blade out fast.

What happens next is kind of a surprise: the skin comes back onto the hitchhiker's face, and the green comes back into his eyes. He's just a kid, staring at my knife. I get the car back under control and hit the brakes.

The jolt from the stop makes him blink. He looks at me.

“I worked all summer for this money,” he says softly. “My girl will kill me if I lose it.”

My heart is pounding from the effort of controlling the lurching car. I don’t want to say anything. I just want to get it over with. But instead I hear my voice.

“Your girl will forgive you. I promise.” The knife, my father’s athame, is light in my hand.

“I don’t want to do this again,” the hitchhiker whispers.

“This is the last time,” I say, and then I strike, drawing the blade across his throat, opening a yawning black line. The hitchhiker’s fingers come up to his neck. They try to press the skin back together, but something as dark and thick as oil floods out of the wound and covers him, bleeding not only down over his vintage-era jacket but also up over his face and eyes, into his hair. The hitchhiker doesn’t scream as he shrivels, but maybe he can’t: his throat was cut and the black fluid has worked its way into his mouth. In less than a minute he’s gone, leaving not a trace behind.

I pass my hand over the seat. It’s dry. Then I get out of the car and do a walk-around as best I can in the dark, looking for scratches. The tire tread is still smoking and melted. I can hear Mr. Dean’s teeth grinding. I’m leaving town in three days, and now I’ll be spending at least one of them putting on a new set of Goodyears. Come to think of it, maybe I shouldn’t take the car back until the new tires are on.

Chapter Two

It's after midnight when I park the Rally Sport in our driveway. Mr. Dean's probably still up, wiry and full of black coffee as he is, watching me cruise carefully down the street. But he doesn't expect the car back until morning. If I get up early enough, I can take it down to the shop and replace the tires before he knows any different.

As the headlights cut through the yard and splash onto the face of the house, I see two green dots: the eyes of my mom's cat. When I get to the front door, it's gone from the window. It'll tell her that I'm home. Tybalt is the cat's name. It's an unruly thing, and it doesn't much care for me. I don't care much for it either. It has a weird habit of pulling all the hair off its tail, leaving little tufts of black all over the house. But my mom likes to have a cat around. Like most children, they can see and hear things that are already dead. A handy trick, when you live with us.

I go inside, take my shoes off and climb the stairs by two. I'm dying for a shower—want to get that mossy, rotten feeling off my wrist and shoulder. And I want to check my dad's athame and rinse off whatever black stuff might be on the edge.

At the top of the stairs, I stumble against a box and say, "Shit!" a little too loudly. I should know better. My life is lived in a maze of packed boxes. My mom and I are professional packers; we don't mess around with castoff cardboard from the grocery or liquor stores. We have high-grade, industrial-strength, reinforced boxes with permanent labels. Even in the dark I can see that I just tripped over the Kitchen Utensils (2).

I tiptoe into the bathroom and pull my knife out of my leather backpack. After I finished off the hitchhiker I wrapped it up in a black velvet cloth, but not neatly. I was in

a hurry. I didn't want to be on the road anymore, or anywhere near the bridge. Seeing the hitchhiker disintegrate didn't scare me. I've seen worse. But it isn't the kind of thing you get used to.

"Cas?"

I look up into the mirror and see the sleepy reflection of my mom, holding the black cat in her arms. I put the athame down on the counter.

"Hey, Mom. Sorry to wake you."

"You know I like to be up when you come in anyway. You should always wake me, so I can sleep."

I don't tell her how dumb that sounds; I just turn on the faucet and start to run the blade under the cold water.

"I'll do it," she says, and touches my arm. Then of course she grabs my wrist, because she can see the bruises that are starting to purple up all along my forearm.

I expect her to say something motherly; I expect her to quack around like a worried duck for a few minutes and go to the kitchen to get ice and a wet towel, even though the bruises are by no means the worst mark I've ever gotten. But this time she doesn't. Maybe because it's late, and she's tired. Or maybe because after three years she's finally starting to figure out that I'm not going to quit.

"Give it to me," she says, and I do, because I've gotten the worst of the black stuff off already. She takes it and leaves. I know that she's off to do what she does every time, which is to boil the blade and then stab it into a big jar of salt, where it will sit under the light of the moon for three days. When she takes it out she'll wipe it down with cinnamon oil and call it good as new.

She used to do the same thing for my dad. He'd come home from killing something that was already dead and she'd kiss him on the cheek and take away the athame, as casually as any wife might carry in a briefcase. He and I used to stare at the thing while it sat in its jar of salt, our arms crossed over our chests, conveying to each other that we both thought it was ridiculous. It always seemed to me like an exercise in make-believe. Like it was Excalibur in the rock.

But my dad let her do it. He knew what he was getting into when he met and married her, a pretty, auburn-haired Wiccan girl with a strand of white flowers braided around her neck. He'd lied back then and called himself Wiccan too, for lack of a better word. But really, Dad wasn't much of anything.

He just loved the legends. He loved a good story, tales about the world that made it seem cooler than it really was. He went crazy over Greek mythology, which is where I got my name.

They compromised on it, because my mom loved Shakespeare, and I ended up called Theseus Cassio. Theseus for the slayer of the Minotaur, and Cassio for Othello's doomed lieutenant. I think it sounds straight-up stupid. Theseus Cassio Lowood. Everyone just calls me Cas. I suppose I should be glad—my dad also loved Norse mythology, so I might have wound up being called Thor, which would have been basically unbearable.

I exhale and look in the mirror. There are no marks on my face, or on my gray dress button-up, just like there were no marks on the Rally Sport's upholstery (thank god). I look ridiculous. I'm in slacks and sleeves like I'm out on a big date, because that's what I told Mr. Dean I needed the car for. When I left the house tonight my hair was

combed back, and there was a little bit of gel in it, but after that fucking kerfuffle it's hanging across my forehead in dark streaks.

“You should hurry up and get to bed, sweetheart. It's late and we've got more packing to do.”

My mom is done with the knife. She's floated back up against the doorjamb and her black cat is twisting around her ankles like a bored fish around a plastic castle.

“I just want to jump in the shower,” I say. She sighs and turns away.

“You did get him, didn't you?” she says over her shoulder, almost like an afterthought.

“Yeah. I got him.”

She smiles at me. Her mouth looks sad and wistful. “It was close this time. You thought you'd have him finished before the end of July. Now it's August.”

“He was a tougher hunt,” I say, pulling a towel down off the shelf. I don't think she's going to say anything else, but she stops and turns back.

“Would you have stayed here, if you hadn't gotten him? Would you have pushed her back?”

I only think for a few seconds, just a natural pause in the conversation, because I knew the answer before she finished asking the question.

“No.”

As my mom leaves, I drop the bomb. “Hey, can I borrow some cash for a new set of tires?”

“Theseus Cassio,” she moans, and I grimace, but her exhausted sigh tells me that I'm good to go in the morning.

#

Thunder Bay, Ontario is our destination. I'm going there to kill her. Anna. Anna Korlov.
Anna Dressed in Blood.

"This one has you worried, doesn't it Cas," my mom says from behind the wheel of the U-Haul van. I keep telling her we should just buy our own moving truck, instead of renting. God knows we move often enough, following the ghosts.

"Why would you say that?" I ask, and she nods at my hand. I hadn't realized it was tapping against my leather bag, which is where Dad's athame is. With a focused effort, I don't take it away. I just keep tapping like it doesn't matter, like she's overanalyzing and reading into things.

"I killed Peter Carver when I was fourteen, Mom," I say. "I've been doing it ever since. Nothing much surprises me anymore."

There's a tightening in her face. "You shouldn't say it like that. You didn't 'kill' Peter Carver. You were attacked by Peter Carver and he was already dead."

It amazes me sometimes how she can change a thing just by using the right words. If her occult supply shop ever goes under, she's got a good future in branding.

I was attacked by Peter Carver, she says. Yeah. I was attacked. But only after I broke into the Carver family's abandoned house. It had been my first job. I did it without my mom's permission, which is actually an understatement. I did it against my mom's screaming protests and had to pick the lock on my bedroom window to get out of the house. But I did it. I took my father's knife and broke in. I waited until two a.m. in the room where Peter Carver shot his wife with a .44 caliber pistol and then hung himself with his own belt in the closet. I waited in the same room where his ghost had murdered a

real estate agent trying to sell the house two years later, and then a property surveyor a year after that.

Thinking about it now, I remember my shaking hands and a stomach close to heaving. I remember the desperation to do it, to do what I was supposed to do, like my father had. When the ghosts finally showed up (yes, ghosts plural—turns out that Peter and his wife had reconciled, found a common interest in killing) I think I almost passed out. One came out of the closet with his neck so purple and bent it looked like it was on sideways, and the other bled up through the floor like a paper towel commercial in reverse. She hardly made it out of the boards, I'm proud to say. Instinct took over and I tackled her back down before she could make a move. Carver tackled me though, while I was trying to pull my knife out of the wood that was coated with the stain that used to be his wife. He almost threw me out the window before I scrambled back to the athame, mewling like a kitten. Stabbing him was almost an accident. The knife just sort of ran into him when he wrapped the end of his rope around my throat and spun me around. I never told my mom that part.

“You know better than that, Mom,” I say. “It’s only other people who think you can’t kill what’s already dead.” I want to say that Dad knew too, but I don’t. She doesn’t like to talk about him, and I know that she hasn’t been the same since he died. She’s not quite here anymore; there’s something missing in all of her smiles, like a blurry spot or a camera lens out of focus. Part of her followed him, wherever it was that he went. I know it’s not that she doesn’t love me. But I don’t think she ever figured on raising a son by herself. Her family was supposed to form a circle. Now we walk around like a photograph that my dad’s been cut out of.

“I’ll be in and out like that,” I say, snapping my fingers and redirecting the subject. “I might not even spend the whole school year in Thunder Bay.”

She leans forward over the steering wheel and shakes her head. “You should think about staying longer. I’ve heard it’s a nice place.”

I roll my eyes. She knows better. Our life isn’t quiet. It isn’t like other lives, where there are roots and routines. We’re a traveling circus. And she can’t even blame it on my dad being killed, because we traveled with him too, though admittedly not as much. It’s the reason that she works the way she does, doing tarot card readings and aura cleansing over the phone, and selling occult supplies online. My mother the mobile witch. She makes a surprisingly good living at it. Even without my dad’s trust accounts, we’d probably be just fine.

Right now we’re driving north on some winding road that follows the shore of Lake Superior. I was glad to get out of North Carolina, away from iced tea and accents and hospitality that didn’t suit me. Being on the road I feel free, when I’m on my way from here to there, and it won’t be until I put my feet down on Thunder Bay pavement that I’ll feel like I’m back to work. For now I can enjoy the stacks of pines and the layers of sedimentary rock along the roadside, weeping groundwater like a constant regret. Lake Superior is bluer than blue and greener than green, and the clear light coming through the windows makes me squint behind my sunglasses.

“What are you going to do about college?”

“Mom,” I moan. Frustration bubbles out of me all of a sudden. She’s doing her half-and-half routine. Half accepting what I am, half insisting that I be a normal kid. I wonder if she did it to my dad too. I don’t think so.

“Cas,” she moans back. “Superheroes go to college too.”

“I’m not a superhero,” I say. It’s an awful tag. It’s egotistical, and it doesn’t fit. I don’t parade around in spandex. I don’t do what I do and receive accolades and keys to cities. I work in the dark, killing what should have stayed dead. If people knew what I was up to, they’d probably try to stop me. The idiots would take Casper’s side, and then I’d have to kill Casper *and* them after Casper bit their throats out. I’m no superhero. If anything I’m Rorschach from *Watchmen*. I’m Grendel. I’m the survivor in Silent Hill.

“If you’re so set on doing this during college, there are plenty of cities that could keep you busy for four years.” She turns the U-Haul into a gas station, the last one on the U.S. side. “What about Birmingham? That place is so haunted you could take two a month and still probably have enough to make it through grad school.”

“Yeah, but then I’d have to go to college in fucking Birmingham,” I say, and she shoots me a look. I mutter an apology. She might be the most liberal-minded of mothers, letting her teenage son roam the night hunting down the remains of murderers, but she still doesn’t like hearing the f-bomb fall out of my mouth.

She pulls up to the pumps and takes a deep breath. “You’ve avenged him five times over, you know.” Before I can say that I haven’t, she gets out and shuts the door.

Chapter Three

The scenery changed fast once we crossed over into Canada, and I'm looking out the window at miles of rolling hills covered in forest. My mother says it's something called boreal forest. Recently, since we really started moving around, she's developed this hobby of intensely researching each new place we live. She says it makes it feel more like a vacation, to know places where she wants to eat and things that she wants to do when we get there. I think it makes her feel like it's more of a home.

She's let Tybalt out of his pet carrier and he's perched on her shoulder with his tail wrapped around her neck. He doesn't spare a glance for me. He's half Siamese and has that breed's trait of choosing one person to adore and saying screw off to all the rest. Not that I care. I like it when he hisses and bats at me, and the only thing he's good for is occasionally seeing ghosts before I do.

My mom is staring up at the clouds, humming something that isn't a real song. She's wearing the same smile as her cat.

"Why the good mood?" I ask. "Isn't your butt asleep yet?"

"Been asleep for hours," she replies. "But I think I'm going to like Thunder Bay. And from the looks of these clouds, I'm going to get to enjoy it for quite some time."

I glance up. The clouds are enormous and perfectly white. They sit deadly still in the sky as we drive into them. I watch without blinking until my eyes dry out. They don't move or change in any way.

"Driving into unmoving clouds," she whispers. "Things are going to take longer than you expect."

I want to tell her that she's being superstitious, that clouds not moving don't mean anything, and besides, if you watch them long enough they have to move—but that would make a hypocrite of me, this guy who lets her cleanse his knife in salt under moonlight.

The stagnant clouds make me motion-sick for some reason, so I go back to looking at the forest, a blanket of pines in colors of green, brown, and rust, struck through with birch trunks sticking up like bones. I'm usually in a better mood on these trips. The excitement of somewhere new, a new ghost to hunt, new things to see...the prospects usually keep my brain sunny for at least the duration of the drive. Maybe it's just that I'm tired. I don't sleep much, and when I do, there's usually some kind of nightmare involved. But I'm not complaining. I've had them off and on since I started using the athame. Occupational hazard, I guess, my subconscious letting out all the fear I should be feeling when I walk into places where there are murderous ghosts. Still, I should try to get some rest. The dreams are particularly bad the night after a successful hunt, and they haven't really calmed down since I took out the hitchhiker.

An hour or so later, after many attempts at sleep, Thunder Bay comes up in our windshield, a sprawling, urban-esque city of over a hundred thousand living. We drive through the commercial and business districts and I am unimpressed. Walmart is a convenient place for the breathing, but I have never seen a ghost comparing prices on motor oil or trying to jimmy his way into the Xbox 360 game case. It's only as we get into the heart of the city—the older part of the city that rests above the harbor—that I see what I'm looking for.

Nestled in between refurbished family homes are houses cut out at bad angles, their coats of paint peeling in scabs and their shutters hanging crooked on their windows

so they look like wounded eyes. I barely notice the nicer houses. I blink as we pass and they're gone, boring and inconsequential.

Over the course of my life I've been to lots of places. Shadowed places where things have gone wrong. Sinister places where things still are. I always hate the sunlit towns, full of newly built developments with double-car garages in shades of pale eggshell, surrounded by green lawns and dotted with laughing children. Those towns aren't any less haunted than the others. They're just better liars. I like it more to come to a place like this, where the scent of death is carried to you on every seventh breath.

I watch the water of Superior lie beside the city like a sleeping dog. My dad always said that water makes the dead feel safe. Nothing draws them more. Or hides them better.

My mom has turned on the GPS, which she has affectionately named Fran after an uncle with a particularly good sense of direction. Fran's droning voice is guiding us through the city, directing us like we're idiots: Prepare to turn left in 100 feet. Prepare to turn left. Turn left. Tybalt, sensing the end of the journey, has returned to his pet carrier, and I reach down and shut the door. He hisses at me like he could have done it himself.

The house that we rented is smallish, two stories of fresh maroon paint and dark gray trim and shutters. It sits at the base of a hill, the start of a nice flat patch of land. When we pull up there are no neighbors peeking at us from windows or coming out onto their porches to say hello. The house looks contained, and solitary.

"What do you think?" my mom asks.

"I like it," I reply honestly. "You can see things coming."

She sighs at me. She'd be happier if I would grin and bound up the stairs of the front porch, throw open the door and race up to the second floor to try and call dibs on the master bedroom. I used to do that sort of thing when we'd move into a new place with Dad. But I was seven. I'm not going to let her road-weary eyes guilt me into anything. Before I know it, we'll be making daisy chains in the backyard and crowning the cat the king of summer solstice.

Instead, I grab the pet carrier and get out of the U-Haul. It isn't ten seconds before I hear my mom's footsteps behind my own. I wait for her to unlock the front door, and then we go in, smelling cooped-up summer air and the old dirt of strangers. The door has opened on a large living room, already furnished with a cream-colored couch and wingback chair. There's a brass lamp that needs a new lampshade, and a coffee and end table set in dark mahogany. Farther back, a wooden archway leads to the kitchen and an open dining room.

I look up into the shadows of the staircase on my right. Quietly, I close the front door behind us and set the pet carrier on the wood floor, then open it up. After a second, a pair of green eyes pokes out, followed by a black, slinky body. This is a trick I learned from my dad. Or rather, that my dad learned from himself.

He'd been following a tip into Portland. The job in question was the multiple victims of a fire in a canning factory. His mind was wound up with thoughts of machinery and things whose lips cracked open when they spoke. He hadn't paid much attention when he rented the house we moved into, and of course the landlord didn't mention that a woman and her unborn baby died there when her husband pushed her down the stairs. These are things one tends to gloss over.

It's a funny thing about ghosts. They might have been normal, or relatively normal, when they were still breathing, but once they die they're your typical obsessives. They become fixated on what happened to them and trap themselves in the worst moment. Nothing else exists in their world except the edge of that knife, the feel of those hands around their throat. They have a habit of showing you these things, usually by demonstration. If you know their story, it isn't hard to predict what they'll do.

On that particular day in Portland, my mom was helping me move my boxes up into my new room. It was back when we still used cheap cardboard, and it was raining; most of the box tops were softening like cereal in milk. I remember laughing over how wet we were getting, and how we left shoe-shaped puddles all over the linoleum entryway. By the sound of our scrambling feet you would have thought a family of hypoglycemic golden retrievers was moving in.

It happened on our third trip up the stairs. I was slapping my shoes down, making a mess, and had taken my baseball glove out of the box because I didn't want it to get water-spotted. Then I felt it—something glide by me on the staircase, just brushing past my shoulder. There was nothing angry or hurried about the touch. I never told anyone, because of what happened next, but it felt motherly, like I was being carefully moved out of the way. At the time I think I thought it was my mom, making a play-grab for my arm, because I turned around with this big grin on my face, just in time to see the ghost of the woman change from wind to mist. She seemed to be wearing a sheet, and her hair was so pale that I could see her face through the back of her head. I'd seen ghosts before. Growing up with my dad it was as routine as Thursday night meatloaf. But I'd never seen one shove my mother into thin air.

I tried to reach her, but all I ended up with was a torn scrap of the cardboard box. She fell back, the ghost wavering triumphantly. I could see Mom's expression through the floating sheet. Strangely enough, I can remember that I could see her back molars as she fell, the upper back molars, and that she had two cavities in them. That's what I think of when I think of that incident: the gross, queasy feeling I got from seeing my mother's cavities. She landed on the stairs butt first and made a little "oh" sound, then rolled backward until she hit the wall. I don't remember anything after that. I don't even remember if we stayed in the house. Of course my father must have dispatched the ghost—probably that same day—but I don't remember anything else of Portland. All I know is, after that my dad started using Tybalt, who was just a kitten then, and Mom still walks with a limp on the day before a thunderstorm.

Tybalt is eyeing the ceiling, sniffing the walls. His tail twitches occasionally. We follow him as he checks the entirety of the lower level. I get impatient with him in the bathroom, because he looks like he's forgotten that he has a job to do and instead wants to roll on the cool tile. I snap my fingers. He squints at me resentfully, but he gets up and continues his inspection.

On the stairs he hesitates. I'm not worried. What I'm looking for is for him to hiss at thin air, or to sit quietly and stare at nothing. Hesitation doesn't mean a thing. Cats can see ghosts, but they don't have precognition. We follow him up the stairs and out of habit I take my mom's hand. I've got my leather bag over my shoulder. The athame is a comforting presence inside, my own little St. Christopher's medallion.

There are three bedrooms and a full bathroom on the fourth floor, plus a small attic with a pull-down ladder. It smells like fresh paint, which is good. Things that are

new are good. No chance that some sentimental dead thing has attached itself. Tybalt winds his way through the bathroom and then walks into a bedroom. He stares at the dresser, its drawers open and askew, and regards the stripped bed with distaste. Then he sits and cleans both forepaws.

“There’s nothing here. Let’s move our stuff in and seal it.” At the suggestion of activity, the lazy cat turns his head and growls at me, his green reflector eyes as round as wall clocks. I ignore him and reach up for the trap door to the attic. “Ow!” I look down. Tybalt has climbed me like a tree. I’ve got both hands on his back, and he has all four sets of claws snugly embedded in my skin. And the damned thing is purring.

“He’s just playing, honey,” my mom says, and carefully plucks each paw off of my clothing. “I’ll put him back in his carrier and stow him in a bedroom until we get the boxes in. Maybe you should dig in the trailer and find his litterbox.”

“Great,” I say sarcastically. But I do get the cat set up in my mom’s new bedroom with food, water and his cat box before we move the rest of our stuff into the house. It takes only two hours. We’re experts at this. Still, the sun is beginning to set when my mom finishes up the kitchen-witch business: boiling oils and herbs to anoint the doors and windows with, effectively keeping out anything that wasn’t in when we got here. I don’t know that it works, but I can’t really say that it doesn’t. We’ve always been safe in our homes. I do, however, know that it reeks like sandalwood and rosemary.

After the house is sealed, I start a small fire in the backyard, and my mom and I burn every small knick-knack we find that could have meant something to a previous tenant: a purple beaded necklace left in a drawer, a few homemade potholders, and even a tiny book of matches that looked too well-preserved. We don’t need ghosts trying to

come back for something left behind. My mom presses a wet thumb to my forehead. I can smell rosemary and sweet oil.

“Mom.”

“You know the rules. Every night for the first three nights.” She smiles, and in the firelight her auburn hair looks like embers. “It’ll keep you safe.”

“It’ll give me acne,” I protest, but make no move to wipe it off. “I have to start school in two weeks.”

She doesn’t say anything. She just stares down at her herbal thumb like she might press it between her own eyes. But then she blinks and wipes it on the leg of her jeans.

This city smells like smoke and things that rot in the summer. It’s more haunted than I thought it would be, an entire layer of activity just under the dirt: whispers behind peoples’ laughter, or movement that you shouldn’t see in the corner of your eye. Most of them are harmless—sad little cold spots or groans in the dark. Blurry patches of white that only show up in a Polaroid. I have no business with them.

But somewhere out there is one that matters. Somewhere out there is the one that I came for, one who is strong enough to squeeze the breath out of living throats.

I think of her again. Anna. Anna Dressed in Blood. I wonder what tricks she’ll try. I wonder if she’ll be clever. Will she float? Will she laugh or scream?

How will she try to kill me?

Original Sin

By Lisa Desrochers

Copyright © 2011 by Lisa Desrochers

Luc Cain was born and raised in Hell, but he isn't feeling as demonic as usual lately—thanks to Frannie Cavanaugh and the unique power she never realized she had. But you can't desert Hell without consequences, and in this exciting second installment of the Personal Demons trilogy, Frannie and Luc find themselves targeted by the same demons who used to be Luc's allies.

Lisa Desrochers lives in central California with her husband and two very busy daughters. There is never a time that she can be found without a book in her hand, and she adores stories that take her to new places and then take her by surprise.

Chapter 1

You Can Take the Demon Out of Hell...

LUC

Not that I'm complaining, but one serious downside of being a demon-turned-human is that I'm no longer indestructible. I stare at my bleeding face in the mirror and rinse the razor in the sink. As I examine the multitude of seeping wounds, I wonder how much blood a mortal can afford to lose.

Which brings me to another downside of being human: personal hygiene. Why the Almighty would design humans to require so much maintenance is beyond me. And all these millennia I thought we demons were the ones who got off on torture.

I'm still having trouble wrapping my mind around all of this—my new life. Frannie. I woke up in my car this morning and my heart ached because, for an instant, I was sure it had all been a dream. But it was my aching heart—and the fact that I was asleep in the first place—that convinced me otherwise. Brimstone doesn't ache.

Which brings me to yet another downside: sleep. Now that I have to sleep, I can't protect Frannie like I want to. With some assistance from Starbucks, until last night I was able to hang on. But four o'clock this morning found me sound asleep in my car in front of her house, leaning over the steering wheel and drooling on my sleeve. I'm going to have to discuss shifts with Matt.

Frannie insists she doesn't need a guardian angel, but I'm glad for the help. Of course, I haven't been quite honest with her. She doesn't know that I'm still watching every night. She'd probably beat the crap out of me if she did. It's a little embarrassing to

think that my five-two, hundred-pound girlfriend could kick my ass but, unfortunately, it's true.

“Frannie’s on her way over.”

Even though the voice sounds smooth and musical, it still scares the Hell out of me. It’s a good thing the razor is in the sink, because if it’d been on my face it would have left another gash.

I spin and survey my studio apartment for the source of the proclamation. Matt leans against the wall next to the unfinished edge of my wall mural, thumbs hooked into the front pockets of his torn jeans.

“Didn’t your mother ever tell you it’s rude not to knock?” I say. But seeing an angel standing there, next to a floor to ceiling painting of Hell, is more than I can take, and I burst out laughing.

Matt’s sandy-blond curls are almost to his shoulders and his tanned face is positively angelic—except for the fact that he’s glaring death at me. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear he was an avenging angel, not a guardian. But, as I get myself back together, a hint of a smile creeps into those baby blues.

“She might have mentioned something about that.”

I hate that Frannie needs a guardian. I hate that I can’t protect her anymore. But my power has completely dried up. There’s no spark in the plugs. I *do* miss being able to shoot Hellfire out of my fists and blast things into oblivion.

But would I go back to what I was?

Never.

I raise an eyebrow at him and try not to smile. “So, if Frannie’s on her way over, why aren’t you watching her? Falling down on the job so soon? What the Hell kind of guardian angel are you?”

A grin spreads across Matt’s face as he shrugs away from the wall. “She drives so fast not even the Hounds of Hell could catch her between there and here.”

I smile thinking about her driving that midnight blue ‘65 Mustang convertible, top down, music cranked. She does drive dangerously fast, but it’s kind of sexy.

“Thanks for the back-up last night, by the way,” I say as Matt glides over to my bookshelf and scans the titles. “I was hoping this whole sleep thing was overrated. Guess I was wrong.”

Pulling my original run Dante’s *Purgatorio* from the volumes, he scowls. “I knew you were going to be useless. Why Gabriel thought you’d be any help at all, I’ll never understand.” He fans the pages and then turns his glare on me. “You’re going to slip back into your old ways. I just know it. Demons don’t change.”

“But I’m not a demon anymore. There *are* no ‘old ways.’ Clean slate and all.”

“You’ll slip.” He flips me a glance with a self-satisfied smirk, then slides Dante back onto the shelf. “And when you do, I hope it’s a good one. I’ve been dying to smite someone. Nothing would make me happier than if it was you.”

“I thought only the hand of God could smite.”

An enigmatic smile turns the corners of his mouth. “Don’t believe everything you hear.”

I walk back into the bathroom, shaking my head, and wipe the last traces of shaving cream from my face with a towel. “When will she get here?” I say, reexamining my wounds in the mirror and tugging at the dark circles under my eyes.

My finger courses along the blood-red scar twisting down the right side of my face—Beherit’s parting gift—as Matt peers over my shoulder into the mirror and says, “Now.”

I push him aside and cross my studio to the window, throwing up the sash, just in time to see her pull in next to my black ‘68 Shelby Cobra and climb out of her car. Her face beams as she waves up at me and makes her way toward the door of my building. I sprint down the hall and meet her on the stairs.

She rushes up, smiling. “Hey. Missed you.”

Frannie’s long, sandy-blond waves are windblown and unruly. And I can’t help but admire how that white tank top and those well-worn jeans hug every contour of her body without being tight. A large tear in those jeans teases me with a hint of skin and I shudder.

“Hey,” I say. I loop my arms around her shoulders and run my hands through her hair, tying it in a knot at the base of her neck. “I missed you too.”

She pushes up onto her tiptoes, stretching her petite frame to its maximum, but I still need to lean down and meet her halfway for our kiss. I guide her up the rest of the stairs and into my apartment.

She bounds through the door, and when she sees Matt, her eyes light up. Just watching them together, how happy she is to have him back, I have no doubt that it was her Sway that influenced Gabriel to choose Matt as Frannie’s guardian. And, the best

part: she looks at him with a light heart and clear eyes now. The guilt is gone. She had to forgive herself for Matt's death in order for Gabriel to tag her soul for Heaven, so I knew she had, but something lightens in my core to see it so clearly on her face.

“Hey Matt. Long time no see.”

Matt's smile is warm and genuine as he regards his sister. “Thought you were going to break the sound barrier on the way over. I was pretty sure you'd beat me here.” He hooks an arm over her shoulder. “If you won't drive more carefully, I'm going to have to wrap that Mustang in celestial bubble wrap.” He rolls his eyes toward the ceiling, contemplating. “And maybe rig the accelerator.”

“Touch my car and you're dead, little brother.” As soon as the words leave her lips, her smile disappears and her eyes pull wide. “I mean...”

Matt chuckles and pulls her back to his side. “Yeah, good luck with that. And I'm not your ‘little brother.’”

She swallows hard and offers a wily smile. “Yes you are. By eight and a half minutes, according to Mom.” She shoves away from him and makes her way to the small wooden kitchen table, where she drops her bag onto a chair.

Up until a few weeks ago, I didn't need to eat, so the only furniture in my apartment was a big, black, king-sized bed—for recreational purposes. The addition of the table and two chairs became necessary when I kept finding food in my bed. And now that laundry is also a necessity—downsides of being human are racking up fast—we eat at the table.

I twine my fingers into hers. “Did you eat? I was going to make omelets.”

She gazes up at me, twisting a finger along the scar on my face, and I get completely lost in her eyes.

“Sounds good,” she says.

“What?”

An devilish smile breaks across her face. “Omelets?”

“Oh, yeah...”

MATT

“Not hungry, thanks,” I say.

They both look at me and Frannie cracks a smile. “That’s ‘cause you’ve never had one of Luc’s omelets. He got the recipe off Rachael Ray’s website. They’re to die for,” she says, then cringes.

“I got it, sis. They’re good. So, what’s the plan for the day?”

Frannie shrugs. “Well, lunch, I guess. Then...” She looks at the demon and an impish grin pulls at her lips. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking...?”

I roll my eyes and glare at Luc.

He leans back into the table and smirks at me as Frannie heads for the fridge. “Get your mind out of the gutter, cherub. The Mustang needs an oil change.”

Luc pushes off the table and moves to the kitchen, bringing a pan and bowl out from the cabinet below the stove. Frannie retrieves the eggs, milk and a few bags of veggies from the fridge. As they move around the kitchen, they don’t speak, but, as they work, they seem completely unaware that they are always touching—connected. And perfectly in sync.

Suddenly, it feels too intimate. How can cooking lunch be intimate? I clench my teeth to keep from groaning. I can't stand this. I have to get out of here.

“So, if you guys don't need me, I guess I'll go.”

Frannie turns back to me and smiles. “Sure you don't want an omelet?” she says, holding up a tomato.

I can't help smiling back. “Got to watch my girlish figure.”

She cracks up as I push through the wall into the hall, where I stand guard.

Alone.

As usual.

I slide down to sit on the floor, my back against the wall. When Gabriel pulled me out of training to work with me himself, he said he had a special job for me. A job no one was better suited for. When he told me I was going to be Frannie's guardian, I couldn't believe it. I wasn't proud of how I'd treated her in life, and being seven was no excuse. This was perfect. How many people get the chance to make amends with their twin sister from the other side?

What he failed to mention is that my sister is in love with a freakin' demon. How did he let that happen?

So here I sit, banging my head against the wall helplessly while my sister is in there—in danger. Gabriel was clear. I can't interfere. He says it's her life. Her choice. He says things will work out.

I don't believe him.

And it's only a matter of time before the demon does something to prove me right.

FRANNIE

“Gabe has me experimenting with this Sway thing,” I say after lunch, handing Luc the cast iron skillet to wipe down.

His eyes tighten and he doesn’t even try to hide the jealous edge to his voice. “Let me guess: late at night, all alone in your room.”

I can’t help the flutter in my stomach or my blush, and I hate that I feel guilty. But I do. I still don’t have a grasp on what I feel for Gabe. All I know is that I need him. When he’s around I can almost believe that things are gonna be okay, and when he touches me, all my panic seems to melt away.

I plunge my hands into the soapy dishwater and start scrubbing dishes madly. “Sometimes. But if the only person I can Sway is Gabe, that’s not gonna accomplish much.”

Luc doesn’t need to know that those practice sessions, late at night in my room, mostly involve me trying to figure out how *not* to use my Sway on Gabe.

He slams the pan down onto the counter with a crash that shakes the floor and stares at his hands, splayed on either side of it. “I sincerely doubt there’s much you couldn’t get Gabriel to do for you just by asking.”

I start, ‘cause it’s Gabe who can read my mind, not Luc. But the way he’s looking at me makes me wonder.

I sigh deeply and take a second to get myself back together.

“Anyway...we’ve been hanging at the park, mostly.” I feel my chest tighten as I push back the frustration that threatens to take charge of me every time I think about this

whole stupid thing. “He thinks kids should be easier to influence. But I seem to be better at instigating stuff than stopping it.”

He yanks the pan off the counter by the handle. “Well, that bodes well for world peace.”

I drop my face into my soapy hands and groan. “I suck at this. I don’t know what he thinks I’m supposed to be able to do, but I can’t even break up a sandbox scuffle over a pail and shovel.” I hate the tears seeping from my eyes into my hands. I hate everything right now. “I can’t do it. It doesn’t work.”

I don’t look at him as he turns me and presses me against the counter, his body hot against mine, his voice suddenly soft. “I’m sorry, Frannie. You know how hard this is for me...sorting all these *feelings*. Everything is going to work out.” He lifts my chin with his finger and wipes the suds off of my forehead with his hand. “It’ll all come together.” He smiles and quirks his eyebrow. “I’ll let you practice on me.”

I sniffle and wipe my nose on the back of my arm. “I did already.”

He grins and looks down at himself to be sure he’s still intact. “Should I be worried?”

I sorta smile back. “No. I already did my thing on you without even knowing it. You were like my lab rat or something. My first victim.”

Before I even knew what Sway was, or that I had it, I was using it on Luc. Course, at the time, I also didn’t know Luc was a demon. But I wanted him. A lot. And I got him by sorta accidentally turning him mortal with my Sway.

He pins me tighter against the counter and I can't ignore how his body against mine makes me feel—like Jell-O. The look in his smoldering black eyes sends my heart racing. “And how did that experiment work out?”

I feel myself getting hot all over despite the cool dish suds running down my arms. I loop my soapy hands around his neck and watch him grimace as the cold water drips down his back.

“I don't think I'm done finding out. It's an ongoing investigation. You know, like...” I press myself harder into him. “What happens if I do this.”

I feel his body react, muscles tensing, his breathing becoming faster. I smile.

“Or this,” I say, reaching up onto my tiptoes to kiss his Adam's apple.

“Interesting reaction,” I say when he tips his head back and shudders. “I'll have to log that in my journal.”

“So, it sounds like when you do what comes naturally, your Sway works just fine. Maybe you're just trying too hard.” He drops his head and looks at me, those fathomless black eyes still on fire. But then he pushes away. “If only I could finish what I've started.”

I tug him back to me by the waist of his jeans. “Why can't you?”

“Because the woman from the library told me to call her at one.” He nods to the clock on the microwave, which reads 12:58.

I shove him away and turn back to the soapy sink full of dishes. “You're such a tease.” I shake my head, frustrated. “See how well my Sway works? I couldn't even entice you to blow off a phone call.”

His hands slide down the curve of my hips and I look over my shoulder at him. “Oh, you enticed me just fine,” he says with a beautifully wicked grin. “The only reason I can resist right now is because I’m fairly certain we can pick up where we left off when I’m done.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I say, knowing he’s right. “You snooze, you lose.”

He looks genuinely concerned for a heartbeat, then his face clears. “We’ll see about that.” His smile is back and all kinds of wicked ideas flash behind his eyes. He sits in one of the kitchen chairs and pushes back, balancing on its back two legs as he dials.

He hangs up ten minutes later as I stack the last of the dishes, an old set of my mom’s, back into the cupboard. Lowering all four legs of his chair back to the ground, he says, “I start Saturday.”

“I don’t know why you think you need a job. You should be able to live forever...” I catch myself as he grins. “I mean, for the rest of your life, anyway, on your insane bank accounts.”

His gaze settles into mine. “And so could you.”

I turn back to the counter and ignore the thrill that races through me with everything he’s implying. “I’m not taking your money, Luc.” We’ve done this already.

“Fine. So, you’ll be working, and I could spend all day hanging around that pizza place, or I can attempt to become a productive member of society.”

“I guess it’s best,” I admit.

Luc tended to distract me when he was around. My first week at my new job was pretty rough, culminating with the pizza Ricco made me pay for after it slid off the tray and onto the floor on my way to a table.

I hang the dishcloth over the faucet and turn back to face Luc. “Ricco would probably have you arrested for stalking me and scaring away all the customers if you hung at his place all day. You still have that *dark* thing happening, you know. They’d lock you up and throw away the key.”

“Speaking of keys...” He slides his hand into his pocket and pulls out a shiny silver key, holding it up so it glimmers in the dim lighting. “It’s to the apartment. I know it’s only for another couple of months, but I want you to be able to come and go as you please.”

I settle into his lap. “I thought that’s what I was doing.”

“You shouldn’t have to knock.” His arms circle me and pull me closer.

“You’re not afraid I’ll walk in on you doing something you’re not supposed to be?”

“The only person I’d be doing that with would be you.” His smile turns wicked as he slides his hand under my shirt. “And you’ll already be here.”

When I press my lips to his, my heart rate doubles. He starts to pull my shirt over my head.

“Don’t mind me...” Gabe’s voice comes from the door and scares the snot out of me.

I turn and there he is, leaning against the doorframe looking all angelic: glowing smile, platinum waves, and insanely beautiful blue eyes shining out of a strong, tanned face. Nobody should be allowed to look that good.

Luc blows out a frustrated sigh and eases my shirt back down. “For the love of all things unholy, what is it with you celestials? Will you please learn how to knock?”

“And miss the show?” he says, smiling at me as I yank at my shirt.

I extricate myself from Luc and stand.

“For an angel you’re quite the pervert,” Luc says.

Gabe relaxes back into the wall and tucks his hands into the pocket of his jeans.

“Some things are worth losing your wings for.” His smile is gone and his blue eyes pierce mine. “Anyway, I really just came to say good-bye.”

“Good-bye?” The panic that lives constantly in my gut creeps into my voice. As guilty as it makes me feel, there’s nothing I can do to stop my heart from fluttering when he looks at me like that—like he’s seeing my soul.

Luc notices my awkward stare and the color in my cheeks. He pulls himself out of the chair and glares at Gabe. “Don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out.”

“Won’t be using the door, dude.” He saunters over to Luc’s wall mural. “You know you’re playing for the other team now. You’ve really got to do something about this,” he says, running a finger over the roiling orange and gold molten surface of the Lake of Fire.

“Hey, you can take the demon out of Hell, but you can’t take Hell out of the demon.” Luc’s grin makes my heart go from fluttering to sputtering.

Gabe’s eyes slide back to mine. “You’re going to be fine, Frannie,” he says. And a part of me hates that he’s in my head—reading my mind. That he knows how I feel about him, even if I don’t.

But then I register what he’s saying. My sputtering heart speeds up as an overwhelming sense of alarm takes over at the thought of Gabe leaving. “You can’t go.”

It's all I can say without sounding totally hysterical or giving away the shake in my voice.

He steps forward and brushes the hair out of my face with a sweep of his hand. "It's better this way. For everyone," he adds, glancing toward Luc.

"But—"

"You'll be in good hands, Frannie. Matt will be here if you need him, and Luc..." His jaw tightens and his eyes narrow almost imperceptibly. "Luc won't let anything happen to you."

Luc, perceiving the challenge in Gabe's words, steps forward and loops his arms around me. "You're right, I won't."

I pull out of Luc's grasp and step toward Gabe. "Why?"

He lifts a hand and brushes his cool fingertips along the line of my jaw. I breathe in his cool winter sunshine and feel calmer just standing here next to him. When he answers, his voice is soft and low—meant only for me. "It's really not wise for me to spend too much time around you, Frannie."

"But—"

"You're both tagged for Heaven, and, if you need to leave, your celestial Shields will keep both of you hidden. With Matt watching, you'll be fine. But I can't stay here." His gaze drops to the floor.

I swallow thickly past the lump in my throat. "Okay," I say, knowing he's right, 'cause there's a reason that I'm dreading turning around and looking at Luc. I can't deny that, as much as I love Luc, I have some deep connection to Gabe. Luc is my heart and my soul, but Gabe is my anchor. I hug him and pull away as I feel tears sting my eyes. I

step back and Luc's arm eases around my waist, feeling much less possessive. I look at him, sure of what I'll see, but his eyes are soft and full of compassion. He gives me a gentle squeeze and a reassuring smile.

I turn back to Gabe and stare into his blue eyes, endless as the sky. "So, when will I see you?"

"I'll be back here and there to check on you."

"You promise?" I know how desperate it sounds, but I don't care.

He lifts his eyes, but not his head, gazing at me out from under his long, white lashes. "Promise." He continues to stare at me and, even though his lips don't move I swear I hear him add, "I'll always be here for you."

I nod again and choke back the threat of tears. I open my mouth, but there aren't words so I close it again. But my eyes say what my mouth couldn't. And I know he sees it 'cause his eyes mist and he swallows hard as he disappears.

"Sorry, Frannie," Luc says pulling me to him. "I try not to be jealous, to understand your connection..."

"It's not your fault." I pull him closer. How can I expect him to understand it when I can't even figure it out?

His hand drifts to my face and he pulls me into a kiss, his lips gentle on mine, as if he's afraid of breaking me. I wind my fist into his hair and pull him closer, but it only lasts a second before I draw back, ashamed. I'm looking for something in his kiss that isn't there. Something that I've only felt in one other kiss. I'll need to find a different way to calm my nerves.

I ignore the question swirling in Luc's eyes as he gazes down at me, his brow creased.

"Help me change that oil before work?"

I can tell by his resigned sigh that he knows I was thinking of Gabe, and I hate that I'm so crappy at hiding it.

"Your wish, my command," he says. "What time do you have to be there?"

"Three."

He glances at the clock in the kitchen. "We better get on it. You have everything?"

"In the trunk." I pull my keys from my pocket, jingling the two keys that now dangle from my rabbit's foot key chain with a tentative smile.

He smiles back and takes my hand, leading me to the door. "I forgot to test your key," he says. "Try it."

I jingle my keys again as we step into the hall and use the shiny new one to lock the door behind us. I pull the key from the lock and feel him press into me from behind, his hands gliding gently around my waist to my stomach. His lips trace a line across my cheek to my ear, where he whispers, "We're in this together, Frannie. Everything's going to be fine."

I spin in his arms and kiss him again, this time wanting only him. Warmth from his kiss spreads through me till I'm burning with it.

Twisting my finger down the scar Beherit left on his cheek, I shudder thinking about how close I came to losing him. I want to tell him how much I trust him and that I know he'd do anything for me. He proved that when he risked his own life to save me

from Beherit. I want to tell him I'd do anything for him too. But I can't manage words past the lump in my throat. Instead, I turn back to the door blinking away tears, unlock the deadbolts, and pull him into the apartment.

I lead him to the bed, then pull him into another kiss. We sink into the sheets, and I just want to lose myself in him—to not have to think about anything for a little while. But when I reach for the button of his jeans, he twines his fingers in mine and brings my hand up to his face, where he kisses the back of my fingers.

“Not like this, Frannie. Our first time isn't going to be because of him.”

“It's not 'cause of him. I just want us to be closer.” But even as I say it, I'm really not one hundred percent sure it's true, 'cause those blue eyes and that glowing smile are there in my head. I feel the hole in my heart where he's supposed to be. I miss Gabe already.

“Soon,” Luc says and kisses me. “But not now.”

MATT

Gabriel filled me in before he pushed through the wall into Luc's apartment. I'm on my own. When I started to follow him through, he motioned for me to wait in the hall. He said he needed a private moment with Frannie. How he planned to accomplish that with the demon in the room is anybody's guess.

Frannie and the demon came out a little while later, and she looked seriously shaken. But he whispered something to her and they disappeared back through the door.

And I've been sitting here ever since thinking about what their deal is—the three of them.

Gabriel is a Dominion. One of Heaven's most powerful. Third in line to God Himself. But when I watch him with Frannie, everything about him changes—softens. He'd do anything for her. And the look in his eyes when he told me he was leaving... Agony. If I didn't know better, I'd swear he was in love with her.

Could he love her? Angels love everyone. It's what we do. But, I mean...is it more than that? Does he seriously *love* her?

I'm still pondering that when Frannie and the demon step out into the hall again. I follow them toward the stairs as they lock step, arm in arm. Just as we reach the bottom of the stairs, the door from the parking lot swings open. Frannie holds it as a stack of boxes with legs walks through. The stack of boxes bumps into her and the top one slips, revealing the face of a girl. She's about our age but taller than Frannie, with stringy, chocolate-brown hair hanging across her green eyes.

"Shit. Sorry," she says just as the top box slips off the stack. The demon grabs it before it hits the floor.

"Got it," he says. "Where you headed?"

"218," she says.

He glances at Frannie. "We'll give you a hand?"

"Sure," Frannie says, grabbing a box off the stack. "Are you moving in?"

"Yeah," she says, diverting her gaze. "Thanks, but you guys don't need to help. Looks like you're headed somewhere."

"No biggie. The oil can wait," Frannie says and turns for the stairs.

218 is next door to Luc's. I watch as the three of them haul boxes from the bed of the girl's beat up hunter-orange Ford pickup up the stairs and into her apartment. In three

trips they have everything. The girl wipes beads of sweat from her forehead with the sleeve of her gray sweatshirt.

“I need to get to work,” Frannie says. “You got it from here?”

The girl stares at the floor, not meeting Frannie’s eyes as she speaks. “I’m good...I don’t have that much.”

I look at the small stack of boxes in the middle of the room. If that’s all her stuff, she’s right.

I watch her scan the room. Other than the cabinets in the kitchen, which are painted a cheerful tangerine color, the place looks pretty bleak. Just an open space with peeling grayish walls. Like in Luc’s apartment, there’s a large window that overlooks the parking lot. The upper windowpane is cracked in an intricate spider web pattern that looks sure to explode into hundreds of shards at the least contact. Along the wall to the right of the window is a worn green sofa with a large tear in the middle cushion, which has belched a pile of crumbling foam stuffing onto the floor. Looking around, it’s hard to understand the excited glint in the new girl’s eyes. To me it’s just depressing, which is saying something, since angels don’t get depressed.

Frannie holds out her hand. “So, I’m Frannie and this is Luc.”

The girl takes Frannie’s hand tentatively and shakes it. “Lili.” She ducks her head like it embarrasses her to be the center of attention.

“So, where’d you come from?” Frannie asks.

“Oh...um...nowhere really. I just moved here because I’m going to State in the fall. This was the closest I could afford to the city.”

“Well, I’m next door, so if you need anything...” Luc says as he and Frannie move toward the door.

“Thanks,” she says and runs a hand through her hair, pulling the damp strands off her sweaty forehead and giving me a brief glance at her face.

It’s a good thing I’m invisible because, as the demon and Frannie disappear down the hall and onto the stairs, I find myself rooted to this spot. I can’t stop staring at her. She’s unlike anyone I’ve ever seen before. Or felt. There’s something completely foreign about her soul. I can’t read her very well; I only get snippets—fleeting sensations. There’s a dark side to her, and her soul is already tagged for Hell, but there’s also a wounded side, begging for help. And something in those green eyes makes me want to be the one to help her.

I’m so mesmerized by her that I forget myself and don’t get out of the way in time as she moves to the door to lock it. As she passes through me, I feel a rush of...something.

Desire?

I think so. I shiver as an electric tingle shoots through me, then spin and watch her shut the door and twist the deadbolts.

It suddenly occurs to me that I’m on the wrong side of the door. Those locks are meant to keep others *out*. I back off, but hesitate before pushing through the wall out into the hall. Those eyes. There’s something in those eyes.

I step closer and reach out for her face, feeling like a moth drawn inexplicably to a flame. I *need* to touch her. But just before my hand makes contact, she spins away and moves toward the stack of boxes.

Sweet Heaven above. What am I doing?

I shake my head, then push through the wall and just stand in the hall for a long minute trying to get myself together. *What was that?* I've never felt need like that before—raw desire, stirring something feral inside of me. Breathing deep, I jump up and down a few times to shake the tension out, but I'm still not quite myself when I phase into Frannie's backseat. I stay invisible as she pulls out of the parking lot, and it's not until we're halfway down the street, me in the back of the convertible, the wind clearing the fog from my head, that I fade in and allow Frannie and the demon to see me.

"Nice of you to join us," he says as I reach for my seatbelt and fasten it around me.

I slouch back into the seat, still feeling a little shaky from whatever just happened with Lili. "So...what do you think of that girl?"

The demon shoots me a sidelong glance. "Well, I think she's a girl."

I scowl. "Ha, ha. I mean did she seem, I don't know...like she needed help or something?"

Frannie glances into the rearview mirror at me. "Maybe. She seemed really shy and sorta scared. I'll keep my eye on her."

So will I.

The First Days

As the World Dies, book one

By Rhiannon Frater

Copyright © 2011 by Rhiannon Frater

Rhiannon Frater is the author of *The First Days: As the World Dies* and two sequels, *Fighting to Survive* and *Siege*. This award-winning, critically-acclaimed trilogy—originally self-published—comes to Tor Books in newly-revised editions beginning in July 2011. Frater is active in the Goth and horror communities in Texas, around the US, and online. She and her husband live in Austin, TX.

The First Days: As the World Dies tells of the terrifying first days of the zombie apocalypse. Katie, a self-possessed prosecuting attorney who is the daughter of a cop, rescues Jenni, the shell-shocked trophy wife and SAHM who loses her husband and two of her children to the zombies. Together, Katie and Jenni and an adorable German Shepherd puppy set out on a harrowing drive across Texas, searching for Jenni's stepson and for a place where they will be safe from the ravenous zombie hordes.

I thought it would be interesting for you to see Rhiannon's take on her journey as a writer, so here are some excerpts from her blog, followed by the opening scenes of *The First Days: As the World Dies*.

**Rhiannon Frater on Self-Publishing,
Publishing with Tor,
and Being Edited and Copyedited**

My Path to Publication: How *As the World Dies* Came to Be

My road to the Tor Books deal was not the one usually traveled. Don't get me wrong. I tried for years to find my way into publishing through traditional means. I met a lot of rejection because I was basically doing everything wrong. I didn't realize that at the time and stopped writing for several years, discouraged with the process and drained of all hope.

A few years later, a friend started editing for a small press. She remembered I had a vampire novel in progress (more like on indefinite hold) and offered to help me get it ready for submission. Her publisher wanted to see it as soon as it was done, so it seemed that I would finally get my foot in the publishing door. I set about rewriting my vampire story, which needed a lot of work, and was happy to have someone guiding me.

One day while I was at work, a vivid image came to mind. I saw a woman in a pink bathrobe, long hair flowing in the wind, standing on her front porch, staring down at tiny fingers desperately reaching for her through the gap under the front door. I knew

instantly that it was the first day of the zombie rising and that her zombified toddler and family were trapped in the house. She was the lone survivor.

That's how I came to meet Jenni. I wrote a quick short story about her, posted it to a forum, and went back to work. I had never written a zombie story before and I was surprised by how easily it had come.

The response on the forum was very positive and people asked if I was going to continue the story. I sat at my desk and wondered if there was more. It was like the scene in *The Matrix* when they jack in and get a massive download of information: suddenly, the whole story was just there...sitting in my mind...waiting to be written.

Over the next two years, I wrote the story in "mini-chapters" and posted it online. It garnered a huge following. I was surprised to have a growing fanbase that clamored for more. When my zombie tale was done, the fans wanted it published so they could own copies.

The small press interested in the vampire novel had closed their doors before I'd even finished the rewrite, so I buckled down and sent out query letters. My query letters suck. They really do. They're awful. I was turned down over and over again.

At last my husband sat me down and said, "Look, with all the new media taking off, we can publish these books ourselves." I was very resistant to the idea, but the more we researched, the more possible it seemed. I already had a fanbase and friends who could edit. We knew artists. I could use my blog to get the word out. As the last round of rejection letters came in, it made sense to go our own way.

As the World Dies was more than 1,600 pages long. Luckily, there were places where we could cut it into three books.

My self-published edition of *As the World Dies: The First Days* was released in August 2008. Sales were slow the first month, but within three months the book had caught on and it hasn't truly slowed down since. It has garnered very good reviews from the horror community (dreadcentral.com gave it four stars).

Because of the strong female protagonists, Jenni and Katie, the books have a large female following. The Hathor Legacy, which highlights strong women in media, gave it a very good review, and Rainbow Reviews also gave it a great review, concentrating on the bisexual character, Katie. Bitten by Books has given the first two books glowing reviews.

As the World Dies: The First Days won the 2008 Dead Letter Award for Best Book (Fiction) and was named one of the Top 10 Best Zombie Novels of the Decade in December 2009.

The second book, *As the World Dies: Fighting to Survive*, also received positive reviews and won the 2009 Dead Letter Award for Best Book (Fiction). By the end of August 2009, the trilogy was complete with the publication of *As the World Dies: Siege*.

Permuted Press, an indie publisher that is now co-publishing books with Simon & Schuster, approached me soon after the release of the first book about publishing all three novels. I considered the offer but refused it, feeling I needed to give the Indie Author route a good shot before giving up. I was also approached by another publisher, who shall remain nameless. Luckily, I had an entertainment lawyer, and he advised me to find a literary agent.

Within a week and at her request, I mailed copies of my novels to Hannah Brown Gordon at Foundry Literary + Media in New York. Within two weeks, she offered to represent me. I discussed it with my husband and then signed on with Foundry. I

compiled all my reviews, interviews, awards, etc. and sent them to Hannah. In the last week of January 2010, she pitched *As the World Dies: The First Days* to publishers in New York City.

On February 8th, we got word that Tor was interested.

March 15th we had a good deal for all three books.

The moment it all became real was when Senior Tor Editor, Melissa Ann Singer, sent me an email that read “A Deal! We’ve got a deal!”

Not once did the fact that I had self-published work against me. If anything, the fact I had a fanbase, an author’s platform, solid sales, good reviews, and support from the horror/zombie community worked in my favor. Tor has told me they look forward to building on the foundation I laid.

To think, I self-published to make my fans happy and inadvertently ended up fulfilling my greatest dream.

The End of an Era: Withdrawing my Books from Sale

I’ve pulled the plug on the As the World Dies series self-published editions. The ebooks and the Kindle editions are no longer available.

At first, Amazon changed the books’ status to “In stock, but make take 1 to 2 days to process.” I translate this as “Rhiannon, are you crazy? Put these back on sale. You got a few days, chump, then it’s ovah!” Then Amazon listed the books as “2 in stock” or “1 in stock,” plus “order soon.”

I recognize that this is a very different experience from that of most writers who are in the process of being published by a major publisher. Their manuscript has most likely never been seen by anyone outside of a few friends and family members. They have never had to deal with book cover design, interior formatting, publishing headaches, and sales tracking.

They don't know what it feels like to click on a button to "unpublish" the work they poured their heart and soul into.

I won't lie, I got teary-eyed.

This is the end of this era of my great adventure.

Now the books are firmly in the hands of Tor and I know they will treat my little darlings very well. Without a doubt, this is the best next step for me as a writer and for the series.

Just today I received the edits from my editor at Tor. I'm thrilled to be able to dive back in and revise the novel. I truly want this story to be the best it can possibly be. Growing up, I was used to my mother always taking a red pen to my writing, so I embrace the editing process as one to learn from.

I've already seen where having one massive tale divided into three books screwed with the story a bit. For example, in the later books, the history of Juan and Travis' friendship is explained, but in *The First Days*, the reader doesn't know any of that, so at one point, it seems like Travis magically knows something about Juan. I never would have seen this since I know everyone's background. But my editor caught it. And that is why I love editing!

Revision Hell (Not Really!)

On Tuesday I received official word that my revisions for *The First Days*, the first part of As the World Dies, have been accepted by my editor at Tor, Melissa Ann Singer, and she has declared the book “finished.” Now it’s moving on to the Production Department where the copyeditors will get a stab at it. I’m not certain when I’ll get the copyedits, but it will definitely be interesting to see that stage of production.

So how did it feel when I first read the editor’s notes and saw the marked up manuscript? Honestly, exciting!

Last fall, I had an interesting conversation with David Dunwoody, author of *Empire*, when I was at HorrorRealm. I am a huge fan of his but somehow I hadn’t read *Empire*, his first book. When I finally did read it, it felt a little flat to me at points. While we were talking, David laughed and reminded me that he had written it online for fun. It wasn’t supposed to be “real” writing. That really struck a chord with me, because that was what I had done with As the World Dies. It was supposed to be for fun.

Therefore, when I saw the revision notes and opened up the document to see all of Melissa’s comments and editorial suggestions, I was enthusiastic to dive in.

So what did the editorial notes suggest? Elimination of extra words, trimming sentences, adding more action or emotions, and giving clarity to certain events or character’s actions. She also made comments in the margins about a wide range of things from what she liked to if the girls took a bathroom break on their first day on the road, to questions about how trucks work, etc.

In Melissa's letter, she stressed that I had the right to reject or accept the editorial suggestions. I accepted most of them, because she was absolutely correct about strengthening the sentence structure. But they were still my sentences. Her editorial notes reinforced a lot of what I've learned to correct in my writing over the few years since I originally wrote this zombie trilogy.

I also added a whole new major scene and a few smaller ones. One scene had originally been in the story, but somehow I'd skipped it when posting online; now it went back into the book. I only rejected a few things, most of which had to do with the Texan way of talking or our culture. By the end of my first time through the manuscript I definitely felt that the writing had been tightened up.

Then I went through the manuscript again, looking for ways to flesh out my characters and their story.

A lot of the fans were afraid that Tor would come in and change the story and my writing "voice." Quite honestly, my editor did the absolute reverse. She helped me enhance the story in every way possible.

A fan recently told me he had the "real version" of *The First Days* and would buy the Tor version, too.

I can assure you that when the Tor version comes out, it will be the "real version" of *The First Days*.

On Copyediting

The last month has been a bit of a blur. I was expecting my revisions for *Fighting to Survive* to arrive but instead I got the copyedits for *The First Days*.

“Oh, wow,” I muttered, feeling the pressure of the next big step.

I reread the email and the attachment that explained precisely what I was supposed to do several times. When I read “This is your last chance to change anything,” I felt a moment of panic.

“This is it,” I thought. “We’re almost to the end of the line.”

I have never had a chance to see a manuscript with all the tags used to lay out the interior and it was exciting to see all the work that goes into putting together a Tor book. As I read through this newest version of *The First Days*, I felt a thrill of satisfaction fill me. It’s still the same story, but fuller, richer, and cleaner in prose. It feels closer to my normal writing voice and not just something I was doing as a lark online. I felt close to the characters again and Ashley Oaks was vivid and strong in my mind’s eye.

So how are copyedits different from revisions? Revisions are all about making sure that your characters are well-developed, your plot is free of holes, your continuity isn’t wonky, and your prose flows. Revising gave me a chance to make the story meatier.

Copyedits are about punctuation, word usage, and one last look to make sure your prose clearly reflects your intentions. The manuscript looked pretty marked-up until I started reading; then I realized a lot of the notations were for the formatting. The copyeditor caught me on repetitive words, abused phrases (I have a few I like to use over

and over again), and pointed out anything she felt was amiss in the descriptions of actions or characters.

When I finished up the copyedits I waited a few days before hitting the send button (ahead of deadline), giving myself enough time to go back in and change any last minute thing.

The official release date is July 5, 2011. It seems both far away and right around the corner.

A Taste of Terror: the beginning of

The First Days: As the World Dies

Somewhere in Texas

Chapter 1

1. Tiny Fingers

So small.

So very, very small.

The fingers pressed under the front door of her home were so very small. She could not stop staring at those baby fingers straining desperately to reach her as she stood trembling on the porch. The cool, morning air lightly puffed out her pink nightgown as her pale fingers clutched the thin bathrobe tightly closed at her throat. Texas weather could change so fast and this early March morning was crisp.

I knew we needed weather stripping, she thought vaguely.

The gap under the front door was far too large. These new modern homes looked so fancy, but were actually not very well built. If they had bought the nice Victorian she had wanted there wouldn't be a gap under the front door. A gap large enough for that little hand to slide underneath.

The tiny fingers clawed desperately under the edge of the door.

The banging from inside the house had become a steady staccato. It had a rhythm now, as did the grunts and groans. The sounds terrified her. But what was truly horrible were those tiny, desperate fingers.

Her voice caught in her throat as blood began to trickle out from beneath the door. Of course the blood would eventually flow out. There was so much. It had been everywhere when she had stood in the doorway of Benjamin's bedroom. The walls had been splashed red.

She covered her mouth with her hand. Another wave of chills flowed over her as her knees knocked together.

The rhythm changed to a new beat as a second set of fists banged against the door.

Through the thick, lead glass of the door she could see the dim outline of her husband's body. It was distorted by the thick smears of blood on the inside. She stared long enough to make out Lloyd's misshapen hands battering against the glass before her gaze was inexorably drawn down to those tiny fingers scrabbling so frenziedly toward her.

She really should have insisted on Lloyd putting in weather stripping.

An angry howl from the other side of the door made her jump and her thick raven hair fell into her face. With trembling hands, she pushed back her tresses. Her gaze did not waver from those tiny fingers.

The pool of blood was slowly spreading toward her bare feet.

She should move.

But where?

The tiny fingers were now raw, with tips of bone showing. Yet they still sought her out.

There was a loud thunk to her left and her gaze shot over to the window. Mikey stood there, hissing as he beat on the window with clenched fists. His torn lips were drawn back in a grimace as his dead eyes latched onto her hungrily.

“Why, Mikey, why?” Her voice was a plaintive whisper.

Why had her twelve-year-old son rushed back to try to fight his father? Why hadn't he run when she had screamed at him to follow her?

Clutching her head, she swayed slightly. She felt something cold touch her toe and looked down to see thick blood welling around her foot. Stepping back, her focus slid back to the fingers pressed under the front door. The tips of the tiny fingers were skinless.

“Benjamin, please stop,” she whispered.

He always followed her everywhere. Every time she went to the bathroom, the persistent three-year-old would be on her heels. She could never relax and just go. She would have to talk to him as he lay outside the bathroom, one eye pressed against the crack, his tiny, chubby fingers pressed under the door.

Was one eye pressed against the crack under the front door now?

How had he managed to get downstairs? There was so little left of him. Lloyd always was a big eater...

She almost threw up as both hands flew up to cover her mouth. Gagging, she stepped back, away from the door. Her body was trembling violently. She heard a clattering sound now, painfully loud. Covering her ears with her hands, she took another step back.

Why wouldn't it just all stop?

The rattling noise was louder and her jaw hurt.

Oh, her teeth were chattering.

She closed her eyes, swaying.

Those tiny fingers...those tiny fingers...

Glass shattered and growls filled the cool morning air. Her eyes snapped open to see Mikey trying to push his way through the broken window.

"No, no, no..." She stumbled backward down the front steps and fell as her bare foot slipped on the slick dew-drenched grass.

The glass shards ripped away Mikey's flesh as he shoved his way through the window, but the twelve-year-old didn't seem to notice. He kept pushing forward, growling and snarling.

It was then that she screamed. Screamed louder than she ever thought possible. Screamed like she should have when she had found Lloyd hunched over Benjamin, eating away her baby's tender flesh. Screamed like she should have when Lloyd had pursued her and Mikey down the stairs. Screamed like she should have when Mikey had turned

back to try to defend her. Screamed like she should have when the front door slammed behind her and she realized she was alone.

She screamed until her voice died in her throat.

And still Mikey grunted and hissed as he slowly dragged his torn body through the shattered window. Lloyd, blood-drenched and crazed, came up behind Mikey and fastened his vicious gaze on her. Determined, he began to crawl over his son, breaking the remaining glass out of the window frame.

Slowly, she stood. Her gaze strayed to the door.

Tiny fingers still searched for her.

She pressed her hands against her face as she watched Lloyd and Mikey wiggle and jerk their way through the narrow window.

“Get in the truck now!”

She blinked.

“Get in the truck now!”

She turned slowly. An old, battered white truck sat on her perfectly manicured lawn. The engine was hot and grumbling.

Where had it come from?

“In! Now!”

She raised her eyes to see a tall, slim, blond woman in a business suit and hunting jacket standing next to the truck with a shotgun in one hand.

“Get in now!”

Looking back, she saw Mikey slip from the window, wet, bloody and battered. For a moment, she remembered how he had looked when he had just been born. Her shriveled up little monkey boy.

Struggling to his feet, Mikey leaped forward.

It was time to leave her family. The money she had carefully squirreled away to provide for her and the kids in a new life would have to stay hidden in the closet. The suitcase she had packed for when they finally ran away to the women's shelter would have to remain in its hiding place in the attic.

Lloyd had destroyed what remained of their life together.

It was time to go.

Wrenching the passenger door open, she looked back to see Mikey hurtling toward her. She jumped in and slammed the door shut just as he impacted with the side of the truck. His battered, chewed-up face pressed against the glass as he bared his teeth and his growls ripped at her ears.

"Mikey," she whispered. She pressed her hand against the glass, blocking his gruesome face from her view.

She looked away.

The blond woman slammed her door shut and shifted gears. The truck roared into reverse as Lloyd rushed toward them, hissing loudly.

The blond shifted again and the pickup truck lurched forward and accelerated down the quiet suburban street just as the sun rose over the tops of the houses.

She dared to look back, dared to see what followed. Falling behind were Lloyd and Mikey: her husband and her son. And they were not alone. Others, bloodied and crazed, were racing out of houses, screaming in either terror or hunger.

She tore her gaze away from the things running behind her.

And the tiny fingers she knew were still pressed under the door.

2. Together

The battered pickup swerved around a corner and nearly sideswiped an SUV that was stopped dead in the middle of the road. Forced to slow down, the driver slammed the flat of her hand against the steering wheel, cursing under her breath.

The blond woman's green eyes glanced into the parked vehicle. She immediately wished she hadn't. A man sat in the driver seat, staring straight ahead. His eyes were wide, unblinking, his mouth moving in words that were too easy to make out.

“Stop, please, stop.”

Despite his plea, the female passenger hunched over him, covered in blood and gore, continued to pull ropes of intestine up to her greedy mouth. As the truck passed by, the woman looked up and hissed, slamming her hand against the SUV's windshield.

The driver mashed her foot down on the accelerator and the truck lurched ahead. She stole a glance at the pale, fragile creature beside her. The woman she had rescued sat silently with one hand pressed against the bloody smear on the passenger side window.

“Hey,” the driver said reaching over and tapping the stranger's knee. “Hey.”

The woman slowly turned her head, and the driver saw that her eyes were glassy and distant.

Great, she was in shock.

“Hey, my name is Katie. I need your help, okay?”

“The man,” the woman said in response.

Katie turned her attention to the road just in time to see a man trying to wave them down. He was drenched in blood and was sobbing violently. She started to slow the truck, but two small children suddenly leapt onto the man, their baby teeth ripping into his throat.

“Just go,” the passenger said in a dead voice. “Just go.”

Katie drew in a shivering breath. “Yeah. You’re right.”

She drove on, leaving the man wailing as blood spurted into the air and the children rode him to the ground. Katie swallowed hard as she forced her gaze from the review mirror and concentrated on maneuvering through the suburban hell they were caught in.

The rescued woman drew her pale pink bathrobe tighter around her trembling body and stared straight ahead. Her eyes were as dark as her black hair.

Katie slowed down just a tad to a quick, but more reasonable pace. The street they were on appeared to be peaceful. She needed to get her thoughts together. She forced herself to take several deep breaths. She had to keep calm. She knew that much.

“Listen, I need you to take my cell phone and call the first number in the speed-dial. 911 is not working right now, but hopefully we can get through to the police department. I can’t pay attention to driving and call.”

She had to swerve again, this time to avoid a pack of rabid humans racing toward them from a side street. Chaos was spreading quickly. The pack tried to pursue the truck for a few seconds, but was drawn off by another car tearing out of a garage in an attempt to escape.

The dark-haired woman nodded as she took the phone from Katie. She flipped it open and stared at the tiny screen. On it was a picture of a lovely woman with short-cropped brown hair and amber eyes.

“She’s pretty,” the woman whispered.

Katie choked back a sob and fought the hot tears suddenly stinging her eyes. “Yes, she is.” She brushed her mouth with her hand and tried not to cry. She couldn’t think of Lydia right now. She just couldn’t. She had to find her way out of this hellish neighborhood and to safety.

The woman worked her way easily through the menu and pressed dial.

Even Katie could hear the busy signal.

“Keep trying, okay?”

“Okay.”

Katie drove past a school bus. It was empty and the open door was smeared with blood. The rest of the block looked calm, but she knew it was not. Whatever was happening in the rest of the city was happening here. They had to be very careful. Katie had seen too many horrors this morning to think they could be safe.

“I’m Jenni. With an ‘I,’ not a ‘Y.’ I like it spelled that way,” the woman said softly.

Katie smiled despite everything. “Hi, Jenni with an ‘I.’ I’d say I’m happy to meet you, but under the circum-”

“The little boy, that was my son, Mikey. His Dad...he...my husband...Lloyd...did something to him. To him and Benji...”

Katie shuddered slightly at the harsh, brutal memory of seeing Jenni pursued by the ravaged little boy and his blood-splattered father.

“I’m so sorry.” It was all Katie could think of to say.

“It’s still busy,” Jenni said.

“Please, keep trying.”

Jenni nodded as she pushed the button again.

Katie spun the steering wheel and the pickup headed around a corner, barely avoiding two cars. She saw frightened families inside and whispered a silent prayer for them. She was hopelessly lost, not sure how to get out of the neighborhood. She and Lydia lived miles from this new, modern, cookie-cutter suburb. Lydia had designed their custom-built home. It was tucked into a hillside overlooking the lake and the city. It should have been safe there. It should have been, but the terror of this morning had even reached their quiet street.

Her feet were aching in her high heels and she wished she had found shoes in the truck. The old man’s hunting coat was comforting, warm and smelled of fresh tobacco. It reminded her of her grandfather.

How had this happened? What did it mean? One minute she had been sitting in her brand-new convertible, top down despite the cool morning, enjoying a cup of coffee and readying herself for a long day at her job as a prosecutor. The next she had been

fighting off a man who had reached across the passenger seat, grabbed the jacket of her Ann Taylor suit and tried to drag her out of the car. She had slipped out of her jacket, grabbed her briefcase, and smashed it into her attacker. She'd struck him so hard she'd heard his skull crack.

She'd leapt from the car, ready to fight ... and then seen that his throat was torn out and that a long train of intestines trailed behind him. But none of that stopped him from trying to climb over the car to get to her.

To her growing horror, she'd seen more mutilated people rushing straight for her through the early rush hour traffic that always snarled up the narrow road leading down into the city. She had turned and started to run blindly, past honking cars, vehicles with music so loud her teeth throbbed, and SUVs packed with children going to school. All of them seemed oblivious to the danger quickly running toward them.

“Hey, missy!”

An old man had stood outside his white truck, waving at her, a shotgun clutched in his hand. “Get in my truck! We'll off road it! Hurry!”

She hadn't needed to look behind her to know she was pursued. She heard the slap of their feet against the pavement.

Katie had almost been to the truck when suddenly the old man was grabbed from behind. A woman bit into his throat and viciously dragged him down to the ground. Katie had almost stopped, but the old man had waved to her.

“Get in the truck! Take the gun! Get out of here! Go! Go!” He fought with the woman that had assaulted him, but his blood had already been a fountain against the pavement and he faded fast.

Pausing for the barest of moments, she had grabbed the shotgun from his quivering hand and jumped into the pickup on the driver's side. Slamming the door shut, her hand had reached for the ignition only to realize the engine was already on.

The old man's gurgling voice had shouted, "Go! Go! Go!"

She had obeyed: shifted gears and went. In the rear view mirror, as she had driven down the shoulder and past the stopped cars that honked at her, she had seen the small pack of mutilated humans reach the old man and dive onto him.

"Don't turn here!"

Kate shook herself out of her memories and slammed on the brakes. "Shit!" It was a cul-de-sac. She quickly started to turn around when she saw a nightmarish vision. Around fifteen of the things erupted into the street and began to race toward the pickup, cutting off their escape route.

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel as she quickly pulled the white vehicle around to face their pursuers.

"Just do it," Jenni said softly beside her. "They're not real anymore."

Katie aimed right for the center of the throng, floored the gas pedal, and braced herself. The deer guard caught the first few and flung them away from the vehicle. One skinny teenager bounced onto the hood and clung there, beating at the windshield with one hand.

Katie slammed on the brake. Momentum carried him away and his hand, already barely fastened to his arm by strands of tendon and skin, snapped off, still gripping the edge of the truck's hood.

"Oh, God," she whispered.

“It’s okay,” Jenni said softly. “Really.”

Katie hit the accelerator and moments later they bumped over the youth’s body. Maybe it was just her imagination, but she could have sworn she heard a mushy popping sound as the wheels passed over the thing.

“What is happening? What the hell is this?” Katie shook her head, her blond hair falling softly across her brow.

“The end,” Jenni sighed. “It’s the end.”

3. As the City Falls

As the white truck hurtled down suburban streets that were quickly falling into bloody bedlam, it was obvious that whatever was happening was spreading at an accelerated pace. Gunshots rang through the morning air. People’s screams rose in a cacophony. Cars careened crazily through the streets. At times only Katie’s quick reflexes saved them from an accident.

Beside her, Jenni hit the Redial button once more. Katie couldn’t bear to look at the phone and see Lydia’s beautiful face smiling out at her.

If this wasn’t the end, it sure looked like it. It had to be terrorists. Some sort of weapon that made people crazy. PCP, something. Katie rubbed her mouth with her fingers. That had to be it.

Since Jenni’s proclamation of the end, they had both been silent. It was too much to absorb.

Too much to comprehend.

They just had to keep moving.

They had to keep going.

But where?

If only her Dad would answer his cell phone. Of course, he was probably going nuts trying to reach her. She could see him now, in the midst of the chaos, being the strong police chief of legend. Big Bruce was certainly doing his best to get this insanity under control. Tears threatened to fall as she thought of his strong, craggy face under his military buzz cut. It was a soothing thought in this moment.

“I got him!” Jenni exclaimed, switching the phone to speaker.

Suddenly, Bruce’s voice filled the truck cab.

“Hello? Katie?”

“Daddy!”

“Katie, are you and Lydia okay?”

Katie shook her head and whispered, “No, no. I’m fine, but Lydia, she didn’t make it. She...Daddy...she...”

“I’m sorry, Katie-baby. I’m sorry.”

She could tell by his voice that he truly was. Despite his misgivings about her lifestyle, he had come to accept and be quite close to Lydia. Though her mother had remained blissfully in denial until her death, her father had tried hard to understand. His painful, sometimes embarrassing questions had only showed her how much he was trying. And when he had shown up at her wedding, dressed in his military uniform, beaming and near tears, to walk her down the aisle, she knew that he loved her even if he didn’t understand her completely.

Now they shared a moment of silence over the woman Katie had loved.

“I’m sorry, honey,” he said again. “But you can’t let it affect you right now, understand?”

“Yes, I know. I’m trying to keep a cool head.”

“Good girl.” A tinge of pride crept into his tone. “Listen, Katie, whatever the hell this is, it’s all over the city. You need to get down to the police department. We’re barricaded in and you’ll be safe here. We got the National Guard on its way.”

“Okay, Daddy. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“Katie, be careful.” His voice was rich with emotion and she wiped a tear away.

“I’m armed, Daddy. I have a good vehicle.”

“Not that little—”

“No, no. A truck. I’m in a truck.”

“How...nevermind....”

Katie continued to drive, trying not to let her emotions overwhelm her. “Daddy, what are they?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. The damn Ruskies are behind it, I know. We never could trust them. Everyone else is saying terrorists, but I’m telling you, Katie, the Soviet Union never really died.”

She couldn’t help but laugh a little. He was such a Cold Warrior. She could hear many voices behind him, demanding, questioning. Without a doubt, her dear old dad was at the center of the storm.

“Katie, I gotta go. I love you. Get here as soon as you can. Be careful.”

“Okay, Daddy. Okay. Love you.”

Jenni snapped the phone shut, the image of Lydia vanishing from view, and smiled weakly.

Katie drew in a deep breath, trying to refocus herself. She needed to get them to safety and not think about what these things were. Of what her beloved had become. She couldn't think of how she had pulled up to their beautiful home to see Lydia and their neighbors tearing at the mailman. She couldn't think of how Lydia had rushed toward her, not to kiss her and hold her and make the world better, but to kill.

"I know what they are," Jenni said softly beside her. She was intently staring at her feet, especially her bloodstained toe.

"Yeah?"

"Zombies."

Katie laughed bitterly, then her voice died away as they crested a hill. Before them lay the city. It was smoldering. From their high position, Katie could see clearly that the city had been overrun. The things were everywhere. Chaos swirled through the streets.

The phone rang.

Katie snatched it from Jenni and pressed it against her ear.

"Katie?"

"Daddy?"

"Katie, don't come here! Don't come here! I just got word in. It's not safe. The National Guard was overrun. Don't come, Katie! Run! Get the hell out of the city! Keep safe, baby, keep safe."

Her father's anguished voice filled her with despair as she rested her forehead against the steering wheel. "Daddy..." Tears brimmed in her eyes as she struggled for words. All she truly wanted in that moment was to feel his arms around her and know that she was safe. Either he hung up or the service went out for suddenly there was nothing on the line but a pulsing tone.

Katie looked up as a car sped past, heading for downtown. In a few seconds, only blocks away, it was overrun by a horde of those things.

"We need to go now," Jenni's faint, singsong voice said. Katie looked at her and saw that Jenni's eyes were glassy. She thought her own probably looked the same. Katie turned the wheel and they headed back up the road.

"Turn here," Jenni said.

Katie obeyed automatically. Tears streamed down her face.

Jenni pointed again. "Turn here."

Katie sped down a back road that sliced behind the suburbs nestled into the hills.

"This will take us far away from the city," Jenni sighed, then reached down and cleaned her toe with the edge of her bathrobe. "Away from the zombies."

Katie whispered, "There's no such thing."

"Then what are they?" Jenni's voice held a hint of emotion. "Some bum bit Lloyd last night when he was coming home from work. This morning he ate my baby!"

Abruptly, her voice was on the edge of hysteria.

Lydia racing toward her, bloody hands stretched out, her chest torn open...

Katie drew in a sharp breath.

"If they're not zombies, what are they?" Jenni's voice was shrill.

Katie grabbed Jenni's cold, clammy hand with her own.

"Zombies, okay, Jenni. They are zombies. And you're right, this is the end."

Jenni nodded and rested her head against the passenger seat. "I know..." She closed her eyes and slept.

4. Into the Hills

Jenni woke to the steady hum of the road. She opened her eyes slowly. Her nightmares released her and she sighed with relief. Her dreams were even worse than this new, horrible reality. In her sleep she had curled up, resting against the passenger door. Now, raising her head, she saw the dried blood her son had smeared on the window when he had tried in vain to reach her.

Not for hugs and kisses, but for far worse.

Beyond the swath of gore the world was speeding by. Hills, large and small, were covered in trees decked out in colorful spring blossoms. Time for Easter and Easter baskets. She would fill them with candies and toys and the kids would scramble around the backyard looking for colorful eggs.

No, no. That wouldn't happen now.

Lloyd had taken away her kids. Stolen them away. Just like she had known he would. Maybe he had been a zombie when he'd attacked them, but Jenni knew he had only finished the cycle he'd begun when they'd married. She had been seventeen and his looks, money, and success had blinded her. He was older and wiser. She hadn't truly loved him, but she had believed that one day, she would. When he spoke of his first failed

marriage, she had vowed that she would never let him down. She would be the perfect wife, the perfect companion, and he would never say a negative word about her.

But no matter how hard she had tried, she had failed. At first his weapons were words—fierce lashings of scorn and anger. Then it was the back of his hand, and, eventually, his fists. Nothing she had done had been enough, though she'd done everything he asked of her.

Toward the end, she had known in her heart that either she would die at his hand or he would kill the children. She should have run away sooner and not waited. But then again, how was she to know he'd turn into a zombie?

“I always fail,” she sighed.

“What?”

Jenni directed her gaze slowly to the woman beside her.

The driver of the truck was very pretty, with golden hair that fell just to her shoulders in tousled curls. She had a strong yet feminine face with catlike eyes and a sensuous mouth. Jenni was sure that the driver had been the sort of girl who was homecoming queen, head cheerleader, and student council president all rolled into one. The smart, pretty girl who was actually nice. Jenni felt comforted by this. She understood these girls. They lead, you follow. It was that simple.

Her name was Katie. That was right, Katie.

“I was dreaming,” Jenni answered finally.

Katie flicked her gaze toward her for a second, then returned it to the road. “You didn't miss anything. After the last traffic light on the edge of the neighborhood it was smooth sailing. We're about an hour out of the city.”

“No one comes this way anymore. Not since the toll road was built. I like it out here. It’s peaceful.” Jenni didn’t feel so cold anymore. She still felt awfully numb, but it was a pleasant sort of numb.

“I’m not sure where we’re going,” Katie said after a beat. “I’m just driving.”

Jenni looked at the phone resting on Katie’s lap. “Did you talk to your Dad again?”

Katie shook her head, pressing her lips tightly together. “No. There’s no signal.” She motioned to the radio. “And that doesn’t work.”

Jenni nodded, understanding. They were alone, detached from the rest of the world. Since this was how she often felt, it was almost comforting.

Besides, she was sure Katie would figure things out. She looked strong and very capable.

“We’ll need gas soon,” Katie said. “Know if there are any stations out this way?”

“Yeah, there are. One is coming up soon, about two hills over.” Jenni slid her fingers through her hair and sat up. “Maybe those things aren’t out here.”

“That’s what I’m hoping for.”

Jenni laughed a little, her voice sounding odd to her ears. “You know, this isn’t supposed to happen. The zombocalypse isn’t supposed to be real.”

Katie exhaled slowly. “Maybe it’s some sort of terrorist weapon. Something like that.”

“No,” Jenni said firmly. “It’s zombies.”

Katie cast a thoughtful look in her direction. “I agree they look like zombies.”

“They are zombies,” Jenni stressed again. Katie had to accept this as truth.

The blond woman stared straight ahead as she drove. It took several long seconds before she said, “Zombies, or whatever they are, definitely shouldn’t exist in a rational, ordered world. It suddenly feels like we’re living in a horror movie.”

“A Romero movie,” Jenni agreed, then frowned. “They aren’t supposed to be so fast. They’re supposed to be slow. Very slow.” Running down the stairs, trying to evade Lloyd, had been terrifying. There had been no time to think, just run. It was sheer luck that he didn’t seem to know how to open the door and had just banged against it.

“Why do you say that?”

“In the original movies they were slow. Lloyd always watched those movies. I was afraid but he made me watch.” Jenni chewed on her bottom lip. “If the movies are right, we can’t let them bite us.” She looked over at Katie warily. “You’re not bitten, are you?”

Katie looked at her for a long, frightening moment.

“No! Are you?”

Jenni sighed, relieved. “No. I’m not.”

But she almost had been. Lloyd had almost grabbed her; then Mikey had turned back and yelled, “Leave Mom alone!” She covered her face with one hand. She tried hard not to remember the horrible fear she had felt as she had screamed at her son to run and raced out the front door.

How it slammed behind her, she didn’t know. Maybe she closed it. Maybe Mikey did. Maybe when Lloyd had grabbed her son he had shoved it shut. But the front door had slammed and she had been alone.

“How did you find me?”

“I got lost in your neighborhood trying to get off the highway. I heard you screaming, then saw you in your front yard,” was Katie’s answer.

That easy. That simple. That tiny difference between life and death. Jenni studied her reflection in the tiny side mirror. Her eyes looked too big, too wide. Her face was very pale.

“I think I’m in shock,” she said.

“Aren’t we all,” Katie responded in a harsh, bitter voice. Her tone softened as she hastily said, “It was hard to see my wife like that. But your children...” She reached out and gripped Jenni’s hand tenderly. “I can’t imagine how it feels to lose your children.”

Jenni clung to Katie, grateful for the kindness. She really didn’t care about Lloyd being dead...undead.... The children. That was harder. Much harder. They had been so sweet and innocent and for them to die... She didn’t want to think about it and quickly closed off that train of thought.

She wanted to ask Katie about her wife, the beautiful woman in the photo on the phone, but she was afraid to ask. Afraid that Katie might think she was being judgmental and withdraw her comforting hand.

“Shit!” Katie jerked her hand away from Jenni and yanked the steering wheel hard to the left. As she slammed on the brakes, both women were thrust forward, then caught painfully by their seat belts.

A car was idling on the right shoulder of the road. Near it stood a man covered in blood. He looked at their truck in a daze; then it was as if something snapped inside him and he flung out his hands and rushed toward the truck.

Katie quickly shifted gears and the pickup leaped forward. The man's hand slapped hard against the side of the truck and they could hear his nails scrapping the metal as they escaped.

Jenni whirled around in her seat to look out the back window. The man was running after them, pumping his arms and screeching.

"How fast are we going?"

"Thirty," Katie responded. "He's keeping up."

The man howled as his legs suddenly spread askew and he tumbled hard to the pavement.

Katie braked sharply and looked back.

"Why did you stop?" Jenni exclaimed.

"I want to see if what I'm thinking is true."

Jenni watched as the man staggered to his feet, looked around, saw the truck and began to slowly hobble toward them. "Now that is the way they are supposed to be!" Jenni grinned at Katie triumphantly.

"He blew out his knees!" Katie laughed. "I thought that was what happened, but I wanted to make sure. They aren't superhuman. They can still be hurt."

They both screamed as a mouth filled with sharp teeth suddenly appeared in the back window.

"Shit!" Jenni screamed.

"Oh, my god! It's a dog," Katie said with relief.

A German Shepherd was staring at them, looking a little dazed.

Katie flung open the door to get a better look at the bed of the truck. A veterinarian's temporary cardboard carrier was strapped with bungee cords to the big silver toolbox under the back window. A corner of the carrier had been chewed open and the young German Shepherd stood on wobbly legs before her.

Jenni leaned out of the driver's side. "Uh, zombie-"

Katie looked up to see the man still shambling toward them.

Jenni picked up the shotgun from the floor of the truck and handed it to Katie.

"Just shoot him in the head. That's how it works in the movies."

Katie blinked at her, then looked back at the man. "I can't." She handed the gun back and reached out to the dog. "Come here, puppy, come here."

The dog padded slowly over to her and she lifted his heavy body out of the bed of the pickup. Holding him tightly, she slid him into the cab, then reached back to snag the vet paperwork taped to the carrier.

Meanwhile, Jenni solemnly got out of the truck, released the safety, pumped the shotgun and waited. The zombified man was moaning, reaching out to her. For a moment, he looked remarkably like Lloyd.

She fired.

The headless corpse hit the pavement.

"What the hell did you just do?" Katie looked utterly shocked.

Jenni shrugged. "We have to kill them."

Katie opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. Silently, she climbed into the cab and shut the door.

Jenni climbed in as well, slipping the safety back on the shotgun.

“We don’t kill,” Katie said at last in a low voice. She appeared shaken. “We can’t kill them.”

“You ran over the runners back in town.”

“I panicked. I...” Katie faltered.

Jenni sighed sadly. She needed Katie to be strong. She needed her to be the strong one. She hadn’t minded shooting the zombie and she would kill them in the future, but Katie needed to lead. Jenni couldn’t bear the thought of having to figure everything out.

Katie stroked the dog’s fur as she looked at Jenni for a long moment. “We’ll talk about this later. We need gas now.” Katie read over the vet’s paperwork swiftly while she scratched behind the dog’s ears. “As for Jack here, well, we need to keep him up here. Poor baby just had surgery. Good thing he was knocked out during most of our escape.” She nuzzled the dog and kissed him.

“Jack?” Jenni smiled. “I like that name.” She wrapped her arms around the dog and pulled him onto her lap.

“That’s what his vet papers say. Jack Horton. His human daddy was the Reverend Horton. That is the man who saved my life. Jack and the Reverend lived out of the city near the lake.”

“It’s a good name.”

Katie smiled slightly and nodded to herself. “Okay, gas station next. Gas, food, supplies, and we keep going until we figure out where the hell we are going? Sound good?”

“Yeah,” Jenni answered. Snuggling the dog tight, she exhaled with relief.

Katie was back in control.

It would be okay.

Honeyed Words

By J. A. Pitts

Copyright © by 2011 J. A. Pitts

Honeyed Words is the mesmerizing sequel to J. A. Pitts' debut novel, *Black Blade Blues*. Sarah Beauhall is a young blacksmith living in the modern day Pacific Northwest. While reforging an ancient sword she learns that her world is filled with shapeshifting dragons, elves, dwarves, and giants all vying for power. Confronted with all this magic, Sarah will have to decide if she has the strength to save her friends, family, and humankind itself.

J. A. Pitts is a graduate of the Oregon Coast Writers Workshops and holds degrees in English and Library Science. *Honeyed Words* is the sequel to Pitt's first novel *Black Blade Blues*.

Chapter 1

Jimmy Cornett, leader of Black Briar, paced the length of the room, eleven long strides before turning and making the return trip. In his left hand he carried a highball glass with three fingers of Glenlivet single malt scotch, but had not taken the first sip.

His world had gotten a helluva lot more complicated these last six months. Running the farm and Black Briar was full-time work. He loved the reenactment, and the swordplay, but up until this spring, that's what it had been: play. When the dragon attacked the farm with choppers full of trolls and giants, the thin veneer of it all slid right off the cracker.

His sister, Katie, had a better handle on it all. He'd always discounted her beliefs, nodding and patting her on the head. But they were definitely the children of their parents, and the secret world of dragons and myth should not have come as such a surprise to him. Of course, they had been rather vague on the whole "dragons will attack your farm in helicopters" aspect of it all.

He felt a tightening in his chest as he thought back to the battle just a few months earlier. Black Briar had been prepared, sort of. They'd trained for the various reenactment wars around the country. They were good, a well-considered mercenary house on the fringes of the stalwart Society kingdoms. While the Society of Creative Anachronism did things right, down to the linen shirts, and hand sewn boots, real steel weapons and man-to-man combat, nothing prepared them for fifteen-foot-tall giants, hordes of trolls, and a fucking dragon.

They may have come through okay, if not for that damn drake. Killed his best riders: Susan and Maggie. Mangled Maggie and burned Susan to the ground. So many fallen that long, black night.

His wife, Diedre, still wasn't home from the rehab center where she'd been recovering from the injuries she'd sustained. There was a damn good chance she'd never walk again.

Sarah had kept the dragon busy, let him rescue Diedra after the giants had broken through their defenses. But part of him blamed Sarah for all of this going down the way it had. Sure, she didn't really understand the sword that she had reforged was the legendary Gram. Hell, only Katie had thought it possible, and even he'd laughed at her. It wasn't until the dragon had kidnapped his baby sister, along with Sarah's blacksmith master, Julie Hendrickson, had Jimmy accepted the truth. All the crazy shit his parents had told him. All the history and stories were really true.

Didn't mean he had to like it.

And he wasn't alone. He had friends—friends who knew the truth about the world.

Stuart and Gunther sat on either side of a small table, each ensconced in a large, leather wingback chair. They hadn't waited, and were each sipping their scotch while Jimmy gathered his thoughts.

The room was filled with cabinets and display cases, bookshelves and weapons racks, each holding a smattering of items: swords, tomes, scrolls, cups, necklaces and trinkets. The northern wall was dominated by a huge world map.

Jimmy's grandparents had commissioned the map from dwarven artisans in the early twentieth century, but it was based on a much older one, only known by rumor and hearsay. Each continent was laid out in meticulous detail. Political demarcations were absent, but geographical locations were noted in abundance. The remarkable thing about the map was the tiny lights that glowed from spots on every continent. Most were major cities; they'd figured those out early on. Some were obviously deep in ancient mountain ranges, and two were mysteriously in the middle of an ocean—one in the Atlantic and one in what is now called the Sea of Japan.

These lights, these pinpoints which glowed in the shadows of the room, represented the dragons that ruled the world. Jimmy had seen the map the first time when he was nine. He remembered that day like many children remember the day they learn Santa Claus isn't real, or that their parents were human and fallible. He didn't understand the ramifications of this knowledge at first, not even after his parents had disappeared. It took Sarah, Gram, and that damn dragon, Jean-Paul Ducahamp, for the truth of the world to finally become clear.

He'd been in his room in a tent made from blankets, pillows, and a couple of ski poles. He had his flashlight and was reading comic books way past his bedtime. It was late, close to midnight, when he heard a commotion outside. An odd warbling sound echoed through the house. Jimmy scrambled out of the tent and jerked the bedroom door open. Katie was screaming and his father was rushing toward the front door, pulling a leather harness across his shoulders and settling a long sword into the attached sheath.

“Dad?” Jimmy called. His father paused at the door, his face grim. “Go help your mother,” he said, then turned without even waiting to see if he complied. The front screen slammed with a bang that startled him.

He turned to the sounds of Katie’s cries. His mother came down the hallway carrying his screaming two-year-old sister in her arms.

“Come on, Jim. Hurry.” She waved at him, cradling Katie to her chest.

At the end, near the library, there was an open panel, one he’d never noticed before. She sat Katie on the ground. “Take her hand,” she said to him, holding out her own. Katie loved Jimmy, and leaned into him, quieting.

“Don’t make any noise,” his mother said before kissing him quickly on the forehead. “I’ll come get you when it’s safe. Go down the stairs. We won’t be able to hear Katie there.”

“But, mom. What’s going on?” He was horrified. They’d never acted like this. “Where’s dad going?”

She knelt down and cupped her hand against his cheek. “He’s going to protect us,” she said. “I need to go help him. Can you be strong for me, James?”

When she called him James, he knew it was serious. He swallowed hard and nodded. “I’ll keep Katie safe.”

She smiled at him, which filled him with warmth. “You are brave and strong.”

“Me, too,” Katie piped up.

Their mother smiled worriedly and kissed her on the cheek. “Yes, popkin. You are brave and true. Now, go.” She shoed them onto the dark landing. “Just go to the first bend. It’s seventy-three steps. You’ll be safe there.”

The door shut with a quiet click. Jimmy pulled the penlight from his pocket and strained to see down into the void.

“Come on,” he whispered.

“It’s dark,” Katie whined. “I don’t like it.”

“We’ll be safe.” He squeezed her hand as they crept down into the unknown.

He counted the seventy-three steps and stopped at the first bend. He sat down, his back against the wall and pulled Katie into his lap. She snuggled up against him and whimpered quietly.

“I’m gonna turn the light off,” he said, stroking her hair. “Save the batteries.”

“I want momma.”

“She’ll be back soon,” he said and clicked off the light.

As his eyes adjusted, he could make out a glow coming from below.

“Pretty,” Katie said, slipping from his lap.

“Katie, wait.”

She scooted down the stairs on her bottom, one riser at a time, and he followed, holding his breath. Where the stairs ended they found a room full of treasures, lit by the glowing dragon lights.

He’d found out later that a group of refugees from Vancouver had stumbled onto the farm, harried and wounded, triggering some sort of alarm. His father had come to the stranger’s aid, helping fight off a giant and getting the mostly dwarves, along with a few humans, into the barn before the sun rose.

It was later, days after this incident, that his father had accompanied him down to the bunker and explained to his son the meaning of the map.

It held hundreds of lights. Some glowed brightly, while others flickered and waned. Only one had grown dark in recent memory. Jimmy pulled his thoughts back to the present and paused in his pacing. He dragged his finger along the bottom frame of the map and stared upwards. The map rose from just three feet off the ground to near the ceiling, putting the light for Vancouver out of his reach.

Gunther and Stuart had the best view of the map, sitting a dozen feet away, against the opposite wall. The first time they'd seen the map, three days after Jimmy received the news of his parents' disappearance, they had commented how much the map reminded them of the night sky.

"So damn many," Stuart growled when no one had spoken. "The bastards feed off us like maggots. It's about time we began to do something about it."

Gunther winced and sipped his scotch.

Jimmy turned, his face flushed with anger. "And what do you propose?" he said, sweeping his right arm to encompass the entire map. "Do you honestly think they'd sit idly by while we..." He paused, struggling to keep his anger in check. "We can't just hunt them down. This isn't the middle ages. They're practically immortal, have learned to adapt in ways we can only guess at. They don't even look like dragons most of the time. They control multi-national corporations and some entire countries, for God's sake. Hell, I wouldn't put it past one of them to use nukes if push came to shove." He looked between the two men, feeling the desperation crawling in his belly. "Most of us don't even know they exist. Can you imagine what the common man would think if he learned we weren't at the top of the food chain?"

Gunther sat his glass on the table, took up his cane and struggled to his feet. They watched him, saying nothing. The vivid memory of Gunther being smashed to the ground by a giant's cudgel was still too fresh in their minds.

"You overestimate their power," Gunther said, stepping toward the map and pointing toward Vancouver with the head of his cane. "They've ruled us for so long that we've forgotten ourselves."

"Amen," Stuart said from his seat. He wore his anger on his vest since the spring. Since they'd lost so many friends in the battle with the dragon, Duchamp, and his minions.

Gunther nodded. "We were part of an event that has not happened in written history. Not since St. George have we even heard rumors of a human destroying one of them. Now one of our very own has stepped into legend."

Jimmy flicked his hand toward Gunther and barked, "Bah. We were lucky."

"Were we?" Stuart yelped. "We lost twenty-seven good people. You think that's lucky?"

Gunther leaned on his cane with both hands firmly covering the worked bull's head handle. "I grieve as you do," he said, turning to his friend. "But this is nothing compared to the wholesale slaughter in the dark ages. Entire villages wasted, broad swathes of countryside slaughtered in the great migration."

Stuart growled low in his throat. "So says your order," he finally voiced. "There's proof of the black plague, you know."

Gunther sighed and glanced at Jimmy.

“Plague, famine, war and worse,” Jimmy said, his voice even. “My father explained it to me as well. One does not discount the existence of the other.”

“We’ve read all the notes Jim’s parents left us, and have researched on our own over the last thirteen years,” Gunther offered. “Nothing prepared us for Sarah.”

They fell silent at that. Jimmy turned, facing the map, his eyes falling on Iceland, the last place anyone had seen his parents. Gunther watched the two of them—friends and compatriots—slowly turning his head from one man to the other, waiting for the thunderheads that had been brewing for weeks.

“Deidre will be home soon,” he said. Jimmy nodded once and took a deep drink.

“About damn time,” Stuart said. “Black Briar is too quiet without her around to keep us all in line.”

Jimmy snorted a quiet laugh. “She’s worried no one needs her.”

Stuart leaned back into the thick leather chair, his anger visibly fading. “Tell her we miss her and if she doesn’t get back here soon, we’re gonna let Gunther start using her kitchen.”

Then it was Gunther’s turn to laugh. “I will not risk that woman’s wrath,” he said. “I’ll go up against giants and dragons, but Deidre scares the hell out of me.”

Jimmy nodded once, a smile on his face for the first time in a long time. “She is my light and my life.”

Each man lapsed into quiet contemplation, sipping their scotch. The anger in the room had finally begun to dissipate.

After a few minutes, Gunther shuffled back to his chair and sat down with a grunt. “But we need to discuss Sarah,” he said. “We have to figure out who she is.”

They each nodded but said nothing, waiting for the other to bring up the subject of the fiery smith.

Jimmy's phone buzzed with an incoming text message. "In case you were wondering," he said, shaking his head, "Katie and Sarah are at the Blain crossing into Canada. Katie says they will be in Vancouver in just under an hour." He paused, glancing up quickly.

"What?" Stuart asked.

"Well," Jimmy said, clearing his throat. "She also says that Sarah is hot."

They all laughed.

Jimmy slipped his phone into his pocket. "That sister of mine sure can pick 'em."

"Aye," Gunther agreed. "First Melanie, now Sarah."

"Oh, she's dated more than those two," Jimmy said, running both hands through his hair. "Drove me and Deidre crazy in high school. The drama and the angst of teenage love."

Stuart picked up the crystal decanter and poured himself another scotch. "Love ain't nothing but drama and angst," he said. "Been burned myself one time too many."

"I've been lucky," Jimmy said. "Deidre is the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Hear, hear," Gunther said, raising his glass.

Jimmy retrieved his glass and stepped toward them. Stuart stood and three of them held their glasses high.

"To the women in our lives," Gunther said, clinking his glass against first Stuart's, and then Jimmy's. "May they always find their way home to us."

They drank, draining their glasses. Stuart lowered his glass and performed the sign of the cross. After a moment, they set their glasses on the table and Stuart picked up the decanter once again.

“Now, about Sarah,” he said, pouring a strong dash into each glass. “Who is this girl? What do we really know about her?”

Jimmy went back to pacing, but Gunther stepped over to the map, following a series of lights that filled central Europe like a cluster of stars.

“Maybe she’s one of the two ancient lines of gods—Æsir, Odin’s crew, maybe, or one of the older lot, the Vanir.” Stuart suggested.

“Doubtful,” Jimmy said, striding to a case and pulling down a sheaf of papers. “According to the records my father uncovered in Reykjavik, the dragons have a covenant to kill all of them on sight.”

“Sure,” Stuart said. “But how do we know when we find one of the elder gods? Can the wyrms really tell the difference?”

“According to Markús Magnússon,” Jimmy said, pulling a page from the middle of the stack and setting the rest down on a glass case filled with golden arm bands and torques, “in 1288, the last known of the Vanir had been killed by a young dragon in Dusseldorf. She was only an infant, but he describes her as a glowing child, with hair like spun gold and a laugh that would quiet the meanest heart.”

“Who does he think she was?” Stuart asked.

“Freya...” Gunther replied, not turning from the map. “... is the last we know to be reborn. The dragons have feared their return for as long as the monks and scribes have kept hidden records.”

Jimmy and Stuart exchanged a glance.

“My order,” Gunther continued, “kept records of each Æsir or Vanir that was reborn, and their inevitable demise at the tooth and claw of one of the drakes.”

“And,” Jimmy continued, placing the parchment back on the pile with the others, “Sarah has met at least two dragons in her life, and neither of them thought she was an elder god returned to exact her vengeance.”

“Well,” Gunther said with a grim chuckle. “We don’t know what Jean-Paul Duchamp believed, may his carcass rot in hell.”

“True enough,” Jimmy said. “But this Frederick Sawyer in Portland has seen her on multiple occasions, and all he’s tried to do is invest in that movie company she works with... oh, and buy the sword.”

The three of them looked to the left, to the black blade that hung from a coat rack by the blood-encrusted leather rigging Sarah had worn into battle with the dragon.

“I think that is the key,” Gunther said, turning from the map and limping toward the sword. “This blade is the crux of things.”

“Gram,” Stuart breathed. “How did she come by it, much less wield it?”

“Katie says she bought it at an auction a few years ago. Some estate sale where the original owners had both died. Kids were selling off everything since they lived in Florida.”

“Quite the coincidence there, Jim, don’t you think?” Stuart asked.

Gunther stood in front of the coat rack and examined the sword. “Völsung,” he pronounced finally.

“Why not?” Jimmy asked. “Hell, we have giants and trolls, witches and dragons. Why can’t my sister’s girlfriend be of the lineage of a defunct German tribe purported to be descended from Odin himself?”

“Holy cats,” Stuart said scrubbing his face with his meaty hands. “Sigurd’s great, great, great, et cetera granddaughter?”

“The sword sought her out,” Gunther said. “How else can you explain it? And you know she claims to have met Odin himself.”

“Katie confirmed that,” Jimmy said. “Said he’d been haunting her place for years. She thought he was a harmless beggar.”

Gunther turned to face them. “Beggar perhaps, but if he’s Odin... How the hell did he get this old without the dragons killing him again?”

“Good point.” Jimmy rummaged around the bookcases for another bit of history. They waited while he pulled down a large dusty tome and opened the leather binding. “There are records of the dragons killing the gods over the years. I’ve counted six times Odin has been reborn. Three times for Thor....” He turned a page, drawing his finger down the thin, spidery script. “Loki is mentioned half a dozen times.”

“Okay, let me get this straight.” Stuart stood to stare at the great map. “The dragons have been in charge of things since before man figured out how to write, and you’re saying not only did they miss Gram when they were collecting all the trinkets from the elder gods, but they missed Odin being reborn?”

“I believe that is a valid assumption,” Jimmy agreed.

“You realize,” Stuart added, “if they missed Odin, then our Sarah could well be one of elder gods, reborn.”

They considered it for a moment, contemplating.

Gunther shrugged, turning to face Jimmy. “Either way then maybe it’s time to poke our heads out of this turtle shell and see who of your parent’s secret society have survived in the intervening years.”

Jimmy nodded slowly. “I’ll look into it.”

“Good,” Gunther said. “Would be nice to get some experienced help.”

Stuart reached out and poked Gram in the sheath, setting it to swinging in short reducing arcs. “They are scholars and scribes,” he said. “They watch. What we need is someone who isn’t afraid to take action. Why else collect all this?” He turned to encompass the room. “There are a lot of weapons in here.”

Weapons hadn’t stopped the dragon from snatching Katie— hadn’t kept Diedre whole, or even kept his parents from disappearing. But his father wielded a blade. He’d seen it once. Perhaps there was a place for more than waiting.

“Our weapons held up well against the giants,” Jimmy said.

“Dwarven made,” Stuart added. “For the cost, they should have.”

Jimmy took down his sword, a long thin blade which had tasted the blood of giants and trolls. “The axe needs to be repaired,” he said, pointing to the great double-bladed weapon Stuart had used in the battle months earlier.

“My blade is barely scathed,” Gunther grumbled.

“Aye, no nicks on the blade, but more than enough on the warrior.” Stuart smiled up at his large friend. “I’m just happy you live to whine about it.”

Gunther growled. “A few more weeks of physical therapy and I’ll be good as new. Hip is doing much better.”

“We cannot fight them openly,” Jimmy warned. “The witch, Qindra, and therefore her dragon mistress, Nidhogg, knows about Black Briar.”

The other two men frowned, losing the jovial banter.

“We need to proceed cautiously. Find my father’s contact and see who of the old crew is alive.”

“And in the meantime?” Stuart asked

“In the meantime,” Gunther said, “we keep a close eye on our little berserker blacksmith and try and keep her out of trouble.”

For a moment, they stared at one another, then they burst out laughing.

As You Wish

By Gabi Stevens

Copyright © 2011 by Gabi Stevens

Born into a magical family, Reggie Scott is content to live our her life as a normal human...until the moment she's informed that she's a newly appointed fairy godmother. Jonathan Bastion is a man of power and wealth—with a dangerous secret. He desperately hopes that Reggie's new powers will hold the answer to his problem, and he isn't above using her to achieve his goals. What he doesn't expect is how much Reggie will affect him.

Gabi Stevens lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with her engineer husband, three daughters and two dogs. When she's not writing, Gabi teaches eighth grade gifted language arts and literature, plays volleyball, and enjoys games.

Chapter One

Cordelia's Rules for her Daughters:

Choose Your Associates Carefully. Your Friends Are a Reflection of You.

The Star Bright Bakery

Del Mar, California

Fairy Godmother Deemed Unstable

The huge, bold headline demanded Reggie's attention. She bent closer to the *Quid Novi* to read the subtitle:

Eminent Wizard Sought for Questioning. Caution Urged in Dealing with the Pair.

Reggie lifted one eyebrow. Really? The Arcani newspapers had reported little else for the past week and a half. The fairy godmother candidate and her arbiter had evaded the Council and their Guards, and disappeared without a leaving a trace. Ten days later, the best trackers had found no hint of them. She could understand why the Council was growing panicky, but Reggie wasn't nervous. Why would two fugitives come to her bakery?

Regina Scott straightened up. She didn't have time to read the *Quid Novi*. She didn't even have time to read the *San Diego Union*. Besides, the news of the Arcani world didn't concern her. She wasn't Arcani. She was a Groundling.

It happened on occasion: two Arcani gave birth to someone without magic. Like her. It was rare, but it happened. Her parents had despaired over it, but she had come to

terms with her lack of power many years ago.

To a Groundling, the *Quid Novi* would look like a cheesy free rag. Only an Arcani could read the magical newspaper. Reggie herself could read both only because her parents had long ago cast a spell allowing her to see the magical words.

She tidied the two separate stacks. The headline of the *Union* dealt the latest stock market upset. The Groundlings wouldn't have even heard about two renegade Arcani.

For a moment she envied the pair. If she were on the run, then she wouldn't have to attend her sister's engagement party this evening. It promised to be a nightmare. She would be the object of pitying glances, and she'd have to endure people talking to her as if she were stupid instead of just non-Arcani. Not to mention the pity they'd feel because her *younger* sister was engaged whereas she had no prospects.

With a sigh she tucked a strand of her unruly dark hair behind her ear and returned to the task of wiping down the tables in preparation for the day's customers. With magic these mundane jobs might take less time, but there was no point in wishing for something she didn't have.

Heavenly smells wafted from the kitchen where Tommy and Joy were creating their special treats. She inhaled deeply. As soon as she finished cleaning the tables, she'd go check on them, pour herself a cup of coffee, and then open the bakery promptly at seven.

Four sharp raps at the front door jerked her attention from her thoughts. She glanced at her watch. Six fifteen AM. That was early even for Nate. She peered through the glass of the front window and saw three figures standing on the stoop. Leaving the cleaning rag on the table, she reached to unlock the door. It swung open before she

touched it.

“Good Morning, Reggie,” said an elderly woman with iron-gray hair. She was tall despite her age, and she embraced Reggie without waiting for Reggie’s response.

“Aunt Lily,” Reggie said in surprise. She looked at the other two women. Why were the godmothers here? She hugged the second one, then the third. “Good morning, Aunt Rose, Aunt Hyacinth. Isn’t it a little early to come visiting?”

“Not at all,” Rose said with her customary smile. “You keep baker’s hours. We knew you’d be up. If you don’t mind, I’ll go say hello to Tommy and Joy before we start.” Her white hair swishing in its stylish bob, Rose strode to the kitchen.

“Good morning, Reggie,” Hyacinth said. Of the three women, she looked the least happy with the hour. Her short-cropped silver hair stuck up in many directions. “You wouldn’t have a cup of coffee to spare, would you?”

As Reggie grabbed a mug and turned to the coffee maker, she heard Aunt Lily say, “We are not here to socialize Hyacinth. This is not a coffee klatch.”

“Who said I wanted to socialize? If you want me to function at such ungodly hours, I need coffee.” Hyacinth grimaced and sat at one of the tables that occupied the room.

Reggie gave the filled mug to Hyacinth. “Cream and sugar?”

“No, thank you. I need the jolt from the undiluted brew.” Hyacinth lifted the mug and sipped

“Coffee, Aunt Lily?” Reggie asked.

“No, thank you, dear. Some of us enjoy these early hours.” Lily gave a pointed look to Hyacinth, who merely growled in return.

Rose reappeared from the kitchen followed by two plump bakers dressed in jeans and t-shirts with long white aprons over their clothes. A smile split Tommy's wide, flat face, but Joy's face crinkled in concentration. She carried a plate covered in turnovers. Reggie felt a rush of pride as she looked at them. Too many people wouldn't see past the slightly off features to the talent that lay beneath. The two bakers weren't related, but they were best of friends. Tommy had Down Syndrome and Joy had...well, Joy was just Joy.

"Good morning, Aunt Lily," Tommy said and threw his arms around the taller woman.

"You're looking wonderful, Tommy," Lily said with pleasure sparkling in her voice.

"I am. I have a good job. But Aunt Hyacinth doesn't look happy." Tommy leaned into Hyacinth's face. "Try one of Joy's turnovers. They're apple. You will smile."

Tommy's words coaxed a curve to Hyacinth's lips. "Then give me one of those magic turnovers. I could use some help to smile this morning."

Tommy became earnest. He wagged his finger at Hyacinth. "You can't say that. Reggie told us we can't use the word 'magic' in the bakery. The Groundlings can't know."

"It's okay, Tommy. Aunt Hyacinth didn't mean it that way," Reggie said quickly. "Besides no Groundlings are here now."

"Except you," said Joy, as she placed her plate on the table.

Except me, she thought. A brief twinge of self-pity struck her, but she dismissed it as easily as it arrived. She had long since ceased to worry about the unfairness of life. Joy

and Tommy were Arcani, but had special needs. She was, well, normal, but she wasn't Arcani.

"These look delicious." Rose took a chair at the table, lifted a turnover, and sniffed it. "And smell even better."

"I'm baking more for breakfast." Joy turned to Reggie. "Don't worry. I checked the oven. It's at three-seven-five degrees and the timer still has six on it. I won't burn them."

"You never do. You're very careful." Reggie wished Joy wouldn't worry so much about every detail, but she also knew that the strict adherence to routine allowed Joy to bake her amazing creations.

Rose bit into a turnover. "This is terrific."

"Yes, it is. I have to make more now, so I'm going back to the kitchen now."

With a little wave, Joy returned to the back room of the bakery.

Tommy sighed. "I suppose I should go too. Joy needs my help. We work together. We are a good team." He followed Joy.

Hyacinth wiped a little apple filling from her lips, popped it back into her mouth, and closed her eyes in enjoyment. "No wonder everyone raves about this place. Do you think they know they're using magic to bake these?"

"No," Reggie said. "It's just automatic with them. I watch them carefully so they don't drain themselves."

"You've done a fine thing here, Reggie," Lily said and took a seat at the table.

"I haven't done much really. Tommy and Joy have a real gift for baking. I'm just helping them make a success of it."

“It will be hard to give it up, won’t it?” Rose said.

“Give it up?” Reggie drew her brows together. “I’m not giving it up.”

“You need to hire someone to help with Tommy and Joy,” Lily said.

“Well, yes. The bakery is doing really well, and I was considering expanding, but I can’t just hire anyone.” They had made a success of the bakery, and the logical step was growing the business, but how had the godmothers known that?

“Of course not,” Hyacinth said. “You need someone you can tell everything to.”

“Everything? That Tommy and Joy are Arcani and use magic to bake? That some of our customers are Arcani as well?” Reggie shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Lily waved her wand and a slim box appeared on the table. “You need to hire someone because you have a new job.” Lily opened the box.

Two wands, one of yellow wood and one of black, lay in the case. Gold encased the handle of the yellow wood. Cabochon rubies, emeralds and sapphires dotted the filigree work. Silver entwined the ebony wand. Stark geometric designs complimented the glittering, round diamonds in the handle.

Reggie stared at the two wands. “I can’t use a wand. I don’t have magic.”

Lily smiled patiently. “Who opened the door this morning?”

“I assumed you did. I didn’t have the chance to turn the key.”

“That’s because you had already unlocked it,” Lily said.

“No, I didn’t. I hadn’t even pulled the key out yet. Or I forgot to lock it again. I’ve been forgetting all week.”

“No, Reggie, you haven’t forgotten. You unlocked it with magic.” Aunt Rose’s eyes glittered in excitement.

“I couldn’t have.” Reggie gazed at them in confusion.

“Fairy godmothers don’t receive their powers until they turn twenty-seven. Merlin wanted us to understand how Groundlings live,” Rose said.

Reggie’s heart started to pound and a flow of excitement washed through her.

Was it possible? Could she have magic? After all this time?

In a gentle tone, Lily said, “Three times three times three. It’s a magical number, dear.”

“Your birthday was last week,” Hyacinth added. She drew on her coffee.

“Yes, but—”

“And you turned twenty-seven. Come on, girl. Put it together.” Hyacinth eyed her.

Lily sent Hyacinth a chiding look.

“What? It’s still early,” Hyacinth muttered.

“Are you saying I’m getting magic?” Reggie whispered.

“No, we’re saying you have magic,” Lily said.

Reggie’s heartbeat kicked a notch higher. “It’s not possible.”

“Of course it’s possible.” Rose giggled. “You’re the next fairy godmother.”

As her knees grew weak, Reggie plopped into a chair. “You’re joking, right?”

“No, dear. You’re one of the new three,” Rose said.

“For this region,” Hyacinth said.

They sounded serious.

“So you must choose.” Lily pushed the case with the two wands toward her.

The aunts couldn’t be serious. Was this their birthday present? Couldn’t they have

just given her a rabbit or something? She stared at the three godmothers. Anticipation and eagerness glowed on each face.

She glanced at the case. The two wands lay as if waiting for her. She reached out and paused. Her hand hovered above the box. A definite warmth emanated from one of the slender rods. Hesitant, almost shyly, she picked up the golden wand. Her fingers closed around the handle and she could imagine it snuggling into her palm. It rested within her grip securely and comfortably.

“I knew it,” Rose said. “I just knew you would pick that one.”

Then Reggie noticed the empty spot in the case meant for a third wand. “Where is the third one?”

“With its owner,” Lily said. A hint of misgiving appeared in her expression.

The rogue godmother. Reggie remembered the headline from this morning.

Even Rose lost her smile. “We can’t tell you everything right now. We just don’t have the time.”

A sense of unease skittered through Reggie. Something was wrong. They were hiding something.

“Speaking of time, we should get going,” Hyacinth said. She stood. “We’ve been here too long. They’re bound to have heard by now.”

“Who’s bound to have heard? And heard what?” Reggie asked still gripping the wand.

“The Council. Your name should have appeared on the wall right after you picked your wand,” Lily said. “They’ll be sending your arbiter shortly.”

Hyacinth frowned. “And probably a contingent of Guards to see if they can catch

us.”

As if proving Hyacinth’s words true, the bell on the door jangled as the door swung open. All four women gasped and whirled to face the intruder.

A man stopped in the doorway, and Reggie breathed a sigh of relief. “Good morning, Nate. You’re not the first one here today.”

Nate still hadn’t stepped in. He filled the doorway and had to stoop slightly. Despite the promise of a warm summer’s day, he wore his customary attire. Today a long black leather duster, clearly expensive, reached his calves. Black leather gloves encased his hands. A gray knit hat covered his head and forehead down to his brows. A white muffler, silk if she guessed right, wrapped the lower half of his face so that only his eyes were visible. And what eyes. Ice blue and intense, those eyes were more expressive than many people’s entire faces.

Despite six months of daily visits, Reggie didn’t know much about Nate. They had only exchanged a few words in these past months. He was a fiercely private person, and she respected that desire. Through observation, she had learned he was uncomfortable around people, so she opened the bakery early for him. She glanced at her watch. Six thirty, his usual time. He generally ordered coffee and an egg croissant. Sometimes he took a few of Tommy and Joy’s special creations home with him, but he never stayed longer than half an hour and was always gone before the breakfast rush started. She knew that he was Arcani because he read the *Quid Novi*.

Nate’s gaze darted from one woman to another. “You’re the fairy godmothers.” His voice was gravelly and rough, as if he wasn’t used to talking.

“Guilty,” Rose said. Her smile had returned.

Nate glanced at Reggie and noticed the wand in her hand. "I thought you couldn't do magic."

"Surprise," she said. "Looks like I'm a fairy godmother. I guess."

"No guessing needed. You are, dear." Lily stood. "We have to go."

Hyacinth downed her coffee and grabbed another turnover. When Lily gave her yet another chiding look, she shrugged. "Hey, if you're going to wake me, I need sustenance."

Rose crossed to Reggie and kissed her cheek. "Take care, dear."

"We know you have questions, but we can't stay," Hyacinth added, standing beside Rose. "Leave us a message."

"You won't be able to call us directly. We don't carry our cell phones around any more. Did you know they can track you with one of those?" Rose clicked her tongue.

"We'll be able to tell you more the next time we see you," Lily said, giving her a hug. "I promise. Try not to worry."

About what? Reggie wondered.

"Good bye, dear." Lily joined her companions. "Are we ready, ladies?"

"Ready."

The three women shimmered briefly, and then they vanished.

Reggie stared at the spot for a moment.

"So you're the new fairy godmother, huh?" Nate said.

She shook herself and examined the wand she still clutched in her hand. "That's what they said."

Nate moved to his regular table. "Have you tried any magic yet?"

“No. I’ve only had this thing for three minutes.” She tucked it into the pocket of her apron. “Coffee?”

His eyes crinkled. “Yes, but it can wait until you test your skills.”

Reggie opened her mouth to protest, then changed her mind. She retrieved the wand and felt the warmth in her palm again. She looked at the now empty plate on the table the godmothers had occupied. She focused. “*Vení.*”

The advantage was that she had been raised in an Arcani household. She knew the words and what to expect. The reality was that she had never done magic before. Except for unlocking the door apparently, but she hadn’t been aware of that. Her nose wrinkled, and she gritted her teeth as she concentrated.

The plate rattled on the tabletop. She held her breath. The plate levitated a fraction of an inch above the wood, hovered, then edged off the table. It floated toward her.

She expelled her breath, and with the rush of air, the plate wobbled and crashed to the floor.

Tommy burst from the back room. “I heard something break. Oh, hi, Mr. Nate. Did you break something?”

“No, Tommy. *I* dropped a plate.” Reggie quickly stowed her wand in the pocket again, and then grabbed a dustpan and brush from a closet in the corner.

“Well, don’t worry. I drop things all the time.”

“Thanks, Tommy.” Reggie swept up the shards from the ground.

“I’ve got to go back to the kitchen now.”

“Everything good back there?” Reggie asked.

“Under control, boss.” Tommy made the okay sign with his thumb and forefinger

and left.

Reggie dropped the broken plate pieces in a wastebasket and returned the brush, dustpan, and the abandoned cleaning rag to the closet. She washed her hands at the sink behind the counter, then grabbed a mug and poured a coffee for her customer.

“A little bit underwhelming, wouldn’t you say?” she said as she placed the coffee in front of Nate.

“Nah, not for a first try.” Nate hesitated. “You don’t seem excited.”

She looked at him. “I suppose the idea will really hit me later, and then I can freak out.”

He shook his head. “You did read the paper this morning.”

“No, just the headline.” She glanced at the stack of *Quid Novi*. That headline blared at her again. Oh. She was the second of the new fairy godmothers, wasn’t she? The first one was making headlines. “Right. The other one is missing.”

“It’s more than that.” Nate pointed at the papers. “The Council wants to question the fairy godmothers. The ones who just left.”

“They do?”

“Apparently they’ve been avoiding the Council’s questions.” His gravelly voice held no comfort. “They’ll probably want to talk to you too.”

“Well, I can’t tell them much.” Her family wouldn’t like it if she upset the Council. Maybe she didn’t have to tell her family right away.

Crap. The party. She had forgotten about it. If the Council made her late for the party, her mother would never forgive her. Reggie shut her eyes. Today was not the best day for becoming a new godmother.

“Are you okay?” Nate’s voice broke through her thoughts.

“I may not be later.” She opened her eyes and smiled. “I’m fine. Can I get you an egg croissant today?”

He nodded, then grabbed a *Quid Novi* and buried himself behind the paper.

Retreating behind the counter, she selected a fresh croissant and carried it into the kitchen. Tommy stood by the stove where he was already scrambling two eggs. A wave of guilt struck her. How could she leave Tommy and Joy to become a fairy godmother? They needed her. She knew how capable they were. They had been her classmates. They were her friends.

Her mother had insisted she attend an Arcani school. No Groundling school was good enough for her daughter, and despite the advice from the teachers and counselors, despite her lack of magic, Reggie remained at an Arcani school. In special education. The teachers taught her everything they could, but she couldn’t participate in most of the regular classes without magic. Only when she was old enough, did she drop out and enroll in a local community college and get her first real education. Her parents had not been happy. They had been less happy when she started the bakery.

Reggie sliced the fresh croissant in half, and Tommy laid a neat crescent of scrambled eggs on the bread. Reggie placed two triangles of cheddar cheese on top of the egg and popped it into the microwave for thirty seconds. Tommy had already moved to help Joy dust her latest pastries with powdered sugar. They were a team here.

“Those look beautiful, Joy.” Reggie placed her arm around Joy. Joy giggled and continued to work. Reggie took Nate’s breakfast out to him.

“Do you want anything with that?” She asked the question every morning and

then waited for the same answer.

“No, this is good.” Nate pulled the croissant behind the paper and disappeared from view again.

So she was a fairy godmother, huh? Too bad she had other duties this morning. Reggie glanced around the bakery. The display cases were filled and ready for the day, several pots of freshly brewed coffee awaited the first customers, and the eating area was tidy. She glanced at her watch again. Nearly seven. Time to open.

Before she could flip the sign, the door opened again. Reggie had to consciously tell herself not to let her jaw drop. Sophronia Petros swept into the bakery trailed by a muscular man who looked like he belonged on a battlefield, not in a bakery. Sophronia wore a flowing cream dress with a large pashmina thrown with artistic casualness around her shoulders. Every hair on her expensive blond head fell neatly into place in an elegant coiffure. What was her mother’s greatest rival doing here?

Sophronia took in the atmosphere of the room and wrinkled her nose delicately as if she didn’t like the smell. Reggie’s dander rose.

“How...quaint.” Sophronia said the word as if it were an insult.

Reggie pasted a fake smile on her face. “Good morning, Mrs. Petros. What can I do for you?”

“Oh, you must call me Sophie. We’re going to spend so much time together.”

Sophronia rearranged her shawl. “I’m your arbiter.”

Chapter Two

Cordelia's Rules for her daughters:

Learn to Appreciate and Recognize Good Wine. It's a Useful Skill.

Reggie's insides constricted. She had forgotten that Sophronia was on the Council. Crap. This day, which already had the potential to be a nightmare, had just turned worse.

"As soon as I saw your name appear on the tablet, I knew I had to volunteer to be your arbiter." Sophronia smiled like a snake at a mouse.

Reggie nearly squeaked. "Lucky me."

As the Guard took a position at the door, his eyes alert for any threat, Sophronia ambled around the bakery. She ran her finger over a tabletop and then brushed it off as if she had picked up crumbs. Reggie bristled. She had just cleaned that table. It was spotless.

"Only one customer?" Sophronia waved toward Nate.

Nate lifted his head from the paper. The muffler still covered his face, but the croissant was half-gone.

"We're not open yet," Reggie said. "And I won't be able to, if your goo—...Guard doesn't unblock the door." She had almost called the Guard a goon. That would have gone over really well.

"You'll just have to be a little late today. With the recent events, I can't risk an attack. The last candidate seems to have an agenda against the Council." Sophronia pointed at the headline on the newspaper. "They sent Keith here to protect me."

Reggie examined the Guard. Nate was taller, but this guy was huge. Flabbergasted, she scrutinized Sophronia. Did she really expect someone here to cause trouble? The Guard stood on alert as if he did.

Sophronia peered into the display case, then straightened. "I didn't realize you were so talented."

"I'm not. That's all Tommy and Joy's work."

The woman affected a guileless expression. "Surely not."

"I just supervise." Reggie knew Sophronia wouldn't understand the fierce pride she felt for her two colleagues.

"Very smart of you. They do all the work and you reap the benefits." Sophronia's smirk held a challenge.

"They earn more than I do," Reggie said between clenched teeth.

"Well, really, dear, that's rather silly. They wouldn't function without you, and from what I've heard, your little... business is taking off. You'd be much better off if you took a bigger percentage. And they'd never know."

Reggie opened and shut her mouth a few times before shaking off her indignation. "I would never do that."

"Hmmm." The smug sound gave ample evidence of Sophronia's opinion.

Reggie bit back the caustic remarks she wanted to loose. She crossed her arms over her chest instead. "Listen, Sophronia, I appreciate your coming by and letting me know you're my arbiter. Is there some sort of schedule you need to tell me about? Tests I need to prepare for? I've got a busy day ahead of me...."

"Of course. Your sister's party is today. Ian is such a lucky young man. Are you

baking for it?"

As a matter of fact they were, but she didn't need to tell Sophronia about it. Reggie tilted her head back to look up at the woman. Wait a minute. A quick glance affirmed her guess. Sophronia wore heels. At five feet two inches, Reggie knew she wasn't tall, but neither was Sophronia. The heels were just a tactic to try to intimidate her. "Mother expects me to arrive early."

"Well then, I shall see you tonight at the celebration." Sophronia smiled down at Reggie.

Naturally her mother would have invited Sophronia. How better to rub the engagement in Sophronia's face? Her two daughters were already married, but neither had snagged someone like Ian.

"As for the rest, there is no set schedule. I shall drop by unannounced to see how your powers are progressing, what magic you can perform. I shall be asking you questions and note your responses." Sophronia tried to peer into the kitchen. "So what did you think of the fairy godmothers?"

Reggie looked at her, perplexed. "I've known them for years."

"Are they still here?"

"No."

"What they did they tell you?" Sophronia's tone hadn't changed, but her expression took on an edge.

"That I'm the new godmother."

"And?"

"Nothing. They gave me a wand and left." Reggie held up the wand.

Before Reggie could react, Sophronia reached out and grabbed the wand, but instead of snatching it out of her hand, a bright spark flashed from the tip accompanied by a loud bang.

“Ow!” Sophronia cried out and snatched her hand back. She shook it as if she had been burned. Keith leapt forward from his place at the door with his wand at the ready, but Sophronia waved him away. “What did you do to me?”

“I didn’t do anything.” Reggie gazed at the wand, which lay peaceful in her hand. She hadn’t felt more than a slight jerk in her palm.

“You’d best watch yourself, young lady.” All pretense of friendliness disappeared from Sophronia’s face. “Attacking a Council member is a serious offense.”

“I didn’t attack you.” Reggie stepped away from Sophronia.

“Then you’d better tell me where those three women are.”

“The godmothers? I told you they left.”

“Really?” Doubt laced Sophronia’s voice. “You know they are wanted for questioning.”

“I’ve heard.” She glanced at Nate, who was following the exchange with watchful eyes. “Why?”

“Don’t you read the papers? Haven’t you paid attention to the news lately?”

“Not really. I’ve been working. We’ve been busy.”

“Their first choice for godmother has made threats against us, and we need to know if the godmothers are behind it. If you don’t want to end up like the other one, a fugitive, you should cooperate with us. Tell me where the godmothers went.”

That wasn’t right. Everyone knew the godmothers didn’t choose their

replacements. The Magic did that. Reggie shook her head. "I don't know."

Sophronia's voice dropped in tone. "Yes, you do. They told you something. It's your duty to tell me."

Reggie took another step back. "No, they didn't. They said they'd come back, but I don't know where they went."

"I think you do. I think you're hiding something." Sophronia took a step closer. Her wand was now in her hand.

"She isn't." In a fluid, graceful movement, Nate stood from his table. His newspaper fluttered to the floor. His blue eyes narrowed slightly. "They didn't say anything."

"Who are you?" Sophronia asked, recoiling slightly.

"It doesn't matter," Nate said. "The point is Reggie isn't lying, and you seem to be threatening her."

"Threatening? I?" Sophronia raised a hand to her chest. "Do you know to whom you are speaking?"

"Yes. Sophronia Petros. Member of the Council, and from today's actions, I'd say first class bitch."

Reggie bit her lips to prevent a bark of laughter. The shock on Sophronia's face made her wish she had a camera.

"How dare you?" spluttered Sophronia.

"No, how dare you? This should be an exciting and happy day for Reggie. Instead you come in here, throwing around your prejudices and insulting her and her colleagues. Have you no shame?"

“Shame? You’re hiding behind a scarf and hat. You won’t even show your face and you’re accusing me of having no shame?” Sophronia’s gaze narrowed. “What are you hiding?” She lifted her wand and aimed it toward Nate.

A deep growl rose from Nate’s throat. Sophronia’s eyes widened, and her wand trembled. Even the Guard seemed to be taken aback.

“Don’t even think of using that on me, lady.” Nate’s voice was low and even. “You don’t want to see me angry.”

Before the situation could escalate further, Reggie moved between Nate and Sophronia. For whatever reason, she didn’t fear him. She placed her hand on the arm of his leather duster. “I’m sorry, Nate. You didn’t come here for trouble. I’m sorry I couldn’t provide you with the privacy you wanted this morning.”

The squint of Nate’s gaze softened as he looked down at her. He didn’t say anything for a moment, then nodded. “You’ve a good heart, Regina Scott. You’ll make a great fairy godmother.” Nate turned toward the door.

“You sound like you’re never coming back,” Reggie said, not knowing why that made her suddenly sad. His morning appearance had become a constant in her life.

“Oh, I’ll be back.” Nate’s eyes crinkled as if he was smiling under the scarf. “It’ll take more than a Council...dog to keep me away. But if she’s smart, she won’t come when I’m here.” He strode to the door and glared at the Guard, who tried to stand his ground only to wither under Nate’s fierce gaze. He stepped aside to let Nate through. The door jingled as it closed behind him.

“Well, what an unpleasant man,” Sophronia said. She brushed imaginary dirt from her shawl. “I would pick different friends if you wish to pass my standards and make it as

a fairy godmother.”

Somehow Reggie knew that no matter how she behaved, she had little chance of meeting Sophronia’s standards.

“But apparently he is adamant that you know nothing.”

Because you’d take his word over mine. Thanks for your vote of confidence.

Reggie drew a deep breath. “Nate was here when the godmothers were. He witnessed everything.”

“Then maybe the Council should speak to him as well. Nate is his name? What’s his last name? His address?”

“I don’t know. I don’t require customers to fill out an application to eat here.”

Sophronia’s lips thinned. “Sarcasm won’t help your case with the Council or me.”

Despite the irritation she felt, Reggie kept her expression calm. “I told you everything I know. If the godmothers return...”

“They will. And when they do, you must contact us. It’s your duty.”

Reggie opened her mouth to promise, then hesitated. “I’ll do the right thing.”

“Good.” Sophronia took one last glance around the bakery, then marched into the kitchen anyway. Before the Guard could follow her, she returned. “You weren’t lying. No one was there.”

“What about my bakers?”

“Well, yes, they were there, but really, they hardly count.”

Anger flooded Reggie’s cheeks with heat. “Was there anything else?”

Sophronia bestowed her smile again. “You should practice your magic. You’ve years of work to catch up on.”

“Thanks. I’ll do that.” Maybe she’d practice by turning Sophronia into a toad.

“Good. I’m so glad we came to this understanding. We’ll get along just famously. Well, dear, I must be off. I’ll see you tonight at the party. Ta-ta.” Sophronia kissed the air above Reggie’s cheek, then swept through the door as breezily as she had entered, as if nothing unpleasant had happened. The Guard lumbered out behind her.

Reggie collapsed into a chair. The bakery wasn’t even open yet, and she was exhausted. She turned her wand over in her hand.

A wand.

She smiled, focused on the “open” sign, and said, “*Verte.*”

In her palm, the wand’s handle warmed. A moment later the posterboard flipped to reveal the “Closed” side.

“Yes.” Exhilaration sparkled in her, even as her hand trembled. This was going to be easier than she thought.

And then the sign flipped again. And again and again and again, until it whirred like helicopter blades. The lanyard it hung on became hopelessly twisted. Reggie dropped the wand on the table, and the sign settled against the window.

With a chuckle, Reggie crossed to the sign, unraveled the cord, and laid the “Open” side next to the glass.

She had magic.

But as much as she might like to try out her new powers, she still had a bakery to run. She picked up her wand, and concentrated. “*Sanctum.*”

The wand vanished, but she could still feel its tug from the other plane where it now waited for her next summons. She had seen her parents stow their wands before, but

had never believed she would do so with her own one day.

The joy of it seized her and she spun, wrapping her arms around herself. Until she stumbled a little. With a laugh at herself and her clumsiness, she caught her breath. The magic had left her a little drained, but happy. She had magic. Not under her control yet, but she had magic.

This might not be such a bad day after all.

###

Nate reached his home after a short hike. His house sat behind his neighbors' with only a long, narrow drive to connect it to the street. No one could bother him here, which was as he liked it. He locked the door behind him and threw his duster onto the coat tree in the entry. Wide windows in his living room offered a spectacular view of the ocean, but he paid it no heed. With a singular purpose, he strode to a large mirror in the hallway.

Flicking on the light switch beside the mirror, he peeled the hat from his head and raked his gloved fingers through his flattened hair. Spotlights lit the large oval mirror. For a moment he peered at his reflection, then grabbed the end of the scarf. Once, twice, he unwound the white silk from around his face, then let the material drop to the floor. His eyes narrowed as he took in his image.

A roar of anguish ripped through him. His head tilted back with the sound, and the howl filled the room behind him with near deafening volume. He tore the gloves from his hands and stared at them. Claws came to sharp points at his fingertips; the fingers themselves were covered in fur that disappeared into the sleeves at his wrists. The urge to gouge at his face overcame him, but instead he dug the sharp nails into the drywall beside the mirror. The weak sheetrock powdered beneath his touch.

His fingers embedded in the wall, Nate forced himself to look in the mirror. Except for his eyes, a beast stared back at him. His ears were pointed and tufted, his hair unruly and coarse. His nose wasn't a nose at all, but a snout, and from beneath that snout from the corners of his mouth where uneven teeth lined his gums, two tusks curled upward to lethal points. The ruddy orange hair that covered most of his head extended to his face as well. Only his eyes remained human at all, and at times he doubted that much as well.

Disgust filled his eyes. His lip curled into a sneer that would have expressed his repugnance except his mouth didn't curve that way, and so his expression took on the look of a beast about to feed.

Nate released his grip from the wall. He pulled his wand from his pocket. Despite his appearance he was as much a wizard as any in the Arcani world. He pointed the tip at his face. "*Restitue.*"

He felt the familiar wave of power drain from him into his wand. He felt the magic flow over him, touching him, tingling. And then he felt the familiar disappointment when once again the magic failed to restore his appearance.

Seven years. Seven years of hiding, of rumors about his reclusion. Seven years of searching for some sort of counter spell.

But this time despair didn't wash over him. He turned from the mirror and retreated to his living room. Daylight brightened the space. Normally he avoided the room until dusk, but today he pressed his face against the glass of the windows and looked out over Del Mar and the ocean. The coolness of the glass didn't penetrate the hair on his cheek, but he knew it was there nonetheless. He had to plan.

Who would have thought when he stumbled upon The Star Bright Bakery that it would hold the hope for his release from the curse that bound him? Until today, he thought he had just found a place where he could, for a few minutes a day, enjoy stepping into the world. Regina Scott never questioned him, and Tommy and Joy were sweet and simply accepting. The bakery was a haven, a sanctuary outside of his house. A place he was drawn to day after day. He couldn't have predicted that Reggie was the next fairy godmother.

A smile, or at least the attempt of a smile twisted his muzzle. He didn't know much about fairy godmothers except that they had special magic endowed upon them by Merlin himself. He probably would have met the outgoing ones at some time if he hadn't withdrawn from society, but now it didn't matter. Reggie had fallen onto his path without any effort on his part. And he wasn't about to muck up this chance to undo the curse. He knew when to be ruthless, how to achieve his goals, and this situation was one of those occasions.

When that self-important arbiter had shown up and bullied Reggie, he had seized the chance to stand up for her. He had seen the gratitude in her eyes. Now he just had to build upon that beginning and strengthen their bond. And he knew just how to do it.

A twinge of guilt twitched inside his gut for an instant, but he brushed it aside. He had helped Reggie and would help her again. And if in return she could remove the curse from him, well, that was just fair.

The sun rose higher in the sky. He glanced at the clock. Seven thirty AM. He had many hours before his next move. He had ample time to prepare.

The Stories Keep Coming

By Carrie Vaughn

I've just finished writing the tenth book in my series about a werewolf named Kitty. (It'll be called *Kitty Steals the Show*. Number nine, *Kitty's Big Trouble*, will be available this summer.) Some days I think, how did this happen? When I decided I wanted to be a writer, I didn't expect to be writing ten books in a series, about the same character. I certainly didn't plan it out. So, how did it happen? How does it keep happening? Because I've been writing about Kitty in one form or another since 1998, and I've got more stories planned.

On the one hand, people keep asking for more. When the very first Kitty short story appeared in *Weird Tales* in 2001, the editor got requests for more stories about her. I already had ideas—I just needed the encouragement. So I wrote the second story. Then a third. Then a novel. Then a second novel.

Because the character wouldn't shut up. And that's the real reason I keep writing about Kitty, I think.

We're told that the main character of a novel must grow and change over the course of the story. She must make discoveries about herself and the world, face hardship, and overcome adversity. Writing a series of novels about the same character doesn't change this—the plot of each book must still have a satisfying arc, which impacts

the main character. So how do you do that, when it seems so unlikely that one person would keep facing life-altering stories, book after book after book?

For me, the key to writing an ongoing series is making sure the main character is the kind of person who is constantly getting into life-altering kinds of trouble. Enter Kitty, who just won't shut up. She keeps finding trouble, which I think is awesome.

Kitty's sphere of influence has changed dramatically over the course of the novels. In the first two books, she learns to take care of herself. In the next two, she learns to take care of her family and friends. Then she gets identified as a "person of interest" by nefarious forces, and in addition to consolidating her own position—as a wife, as a werewolf pack leader—she faces problems brought in from outside. She becomes a consultant to the military, she meets the big bad guy. Her own sense of responsibility has expanded—she has to tackle big issues because she's uniquely suited to do so, based on all her previous experience. It isn't just about taking care of her own territory anymore—she's now the leader of a cause.

It's been a fascinating journey, because my own writing skills have had to develop to keep pace. The first book, *Kitty and The Midnight Hour*, was essentially a coming-of-age story. Now, including *Kitty's Big Trouble* and beyond, I'm writing international conspiracy thrillers. Every story I write I have to keep in mind Kitty's complicated past—and her increasingly complicated future. I try to set myself a challenge with each book. I don't ever want to repeat myself.

I think as long as I can set those challenges—and as long as Kitty keeps speaking to me (or shouting, often)—the stories will keep coming.

Kitty's Big Trouble

By Carrie Vaughn

Copyright © 2011 by Carrie Vaughn

Kitty Norville is back and in more trouble than ever. Her recent run-in with werewolves traumatized by the horrors of war has made her start wondering how long the US government might have been covertly using werewolves in combat. But her investigations lead her to a clue about enigmatic vampire Roman and the mysterious Long Game played by vampires through the millennia. That, plus a call for help from a powerful vampire ally in San Francisco, suddenly puts Kitty and her friends on the supernatural chessboard, pieces in dangerously active play. And Kitty Norville is never content to be a pawn... .

The Playlist

Norman Greenbaum, "Spirit in the Sky"

Social Distortion, "Making Believe"

Warren Zevon, "Lawyers, Guns and Money"

They Might Be Giants, "Wicked Little Critta"

P.K. 14, "The Other Side"

Blondie, "Atomic"

Vernian Process, "The Maple Leaf Rag"

Squirrel Nut Zippers, "Le Grippe"

PJ Harvey, "Down by the Water"

Carsick Cars, "You Can Listen, You Can Talk"

B-52's, "Mesopotamia"

Billy Preston, "Will It Go Round in Circles"

Lissie, "Little Lovin'"

Chapter 1

“I know,” I said into my phone. “This isn’t exactly standard—”

“It’s impossible,” said the poor, long-suffering office receptionist at the Calvary Cemetery in St. Louis. He was too polite to just hang up on me. “It’s absolutely impossible.”

“Maybe you can give the name and number of someone who might be able to authorize this kind of request? Is there any representative of the Sherman family on record?”

His responses were starting to sound desperate. “That information is confidential. In fact, I don’t think you’ll be able to get any further on this without some kind of a warrant or a court order.”

I was afraid of that. I’d been hoping there’d be a friendly way to accomplish this. That I could find a sympathetic historian who would back up my request or explain the situation to one of the descendants and get permission that way. Surely they would want to know the truth as much as I did. Also, I didn’t think I’d be able to convince a judge to issue said court order. The request was based on little more than rabid curiosity.

I soldiered on, as it were. “There has to be some kind of standard procedure for an exhumation. Can you tell me what that is?”

“Ms...Norville, is it?”

“Yes, Kitty Norville,” I said, thinking calm. I could wear him down with patience.

“Ms. Norville—can I ask why you want to have General Sherman’s body

exhumed?”

General William T. Sherman, hero of the Civil War on the Union side, war criminal on the Confederate side, considered one of the greatest soldiers and strategists in American history, and all-around icon. And yeah, I wanted to dig him up. It was a little hard to explain, and I hesitated, trying to figure out what to say. Last week I'd received a package from the Library of Congress containing a copy of an interview transcript from the 1930's. It had been made as part of the Federal Writers' Project, a New Deal program that employed journalists and other writers to record local histories around the country. Many valuable oral histories were collected and preserved as part of the program. The one I'd been sent was an interview with a Civil War veteran—one of the last to survive, no doubt. He'd been sixteen when he joined the Confederate army in the middle of the war and was close to ninety when he'd been interviewed, and he claimed that he'd witnessed General Sherman transform into a wolf during the Battle of Vicksburg. A librarian who was also a listener and fan of my radio show discovered it and sent it to me. I had always had my suspicions about Sherman—he looked so rough and tumble in his photos, with his unbuttoned collar, his unkempt beard, and a “screw you” expression. If any Civil War general had been a werewolf, it would be Sherman. But was my hunch and a single interview proof? No. Which was why I wanted to exhume the body, to test any remaining tissue for the presence of lycanthropy.

Maybe it was best to lay it out there. “I think General Sherman may have been a werewolf and I want to run tests on his remains to find out.”

Of course, a long pause followed. I kept waiting for the click of a phone hanging up, which would have been fine; I'd have just called one of the other numbers on my list.

I hadn't expected this to be easy.

“Seriously?” he said finally. The same way he might have said, You're eating bugs?

“Yeah. Seriously. So how about it? Don't you want to help me rewrite American history?”

“I'm sorry, could I get your name one more time?” he said. “Could you spell it for me? And tell me where you're calling from?”

I felt a restraining order coming on. So, in the end, I was the one who hung up. Oh well. You can't win them all.

#

At home that evening I sat on the sofa, library books lying open on the coffee table around me and my laptop screen showing a half dozen Web sites open. I was supposed to be researching Sherman. Instead, I was reading through the transcript for what must have been the twentieth time.

Tom Hanson had enlisted in the Confederate army at the age of sixteen. At several points during the interview he mentioned how young he'd been. How innocent, and how foolish. The interviewer kept having to prompt him to return to the focus of the story, his encounter with General Sherman under the light of the full moon.

One night while his squad was on patrol outside of Vicksburg, Hanson had gotten separated from the others and lost his way in the swampy forest some distance from where the Confederates were camped. Trying to find his way back, he'd stumbled across a pair of Union soldiers—an enlisted man arguing with an officer. Hanson swore the officer was General William Sherman himself. The enlisted soldier kept calling the other

man “General,” but with no name attached. Hanson couldn’t explain the argument because it hadn’t made any sense to him—the enlisted man was telling the general that he’d overstepped his bounds, and that he wanted to challenge him. Hanson had heard that Sherman was crazy—he could understand anyone on the Union side wanting him out of command. But that wasn’t up to an enlisted man, and they certainly wouldn’t have been discussing it in the middle of a swamp.

Hanson didn’t understand it, but he described what happened next. “The general, he took his clothes off. I couldn’t move or he’d of heard me, so I didn’t dare. I just sat there and watched. So there he was, naked in the moonlight. And then he changed. Like his body just melted, and I heard his bones snapping. I can’t say that I ever saw a wolf before, but that’s what he turned into—big, shaggy, with yellow eyes. That other soldier, well—he just ran. Didn’t do him any good. That big ol’ wolf chased him down.”

The door to the condo opened and closed—my husband Ben, lawyer and fellow werewolf—arriving home. He set his briefcase near the desk of his home office, a corner of the living room, and regarded me where I sat on the sofa, papers on my lap, my head bent in concentration.

“Still on that transcript?” he said, his smile amused.

I sighed. Ben had seen me reading it every night this week, searching for some insight. “It’s fascinating, isn’t it? What if it isn’t just a story? What if he’s right?” I pulled one of the books over, referring to a timeline of Sherman’s life. “Did you know early on in the war Sherman had a nervous breakdown? He was relieved of duty, and the newspapers and everyone said he was crazy, that he couldn’t take the pressure. But he recovered and when he came back he was this badass general. He and Grant started

kicking ass and eventually Sherman marched the Union Army through Georgia and won the war. What if that's when it happened? Somehow, he got attacked and infected around the Battle of Bull Run, it knocked him for a loop, he took time off to deal with it, and when he came back he was a super soldier. A werewolf general."

"I suppose it's possible," he said. "But if you're right, he kept it really well hidden."

"Lots of people keep it really well hidden," I said. "I'm betting it was easier to keep it hidden then than it is now."

He sat on the sofa beside me, which was too tempting an invitation. I leaned toward him, pulling his arm over my shoulder and snuggling against him. As I hoped, he hugged me close and bent his head to my hair, breathing in my scent as I took in his. Our wolf sides, claiming each other.

I said, "I just keep thinking—who else is out there? What secret histories slipped through the cracks because people kept it hidden or no one believed it? I'm not talking about Vlad Tepes being Dracula. What if Sherman really was a werewolf? Who else might have been werewolves? Maybe there was a reason Rasputin was so hard to kill, and Jack the Ripper was so bloodthirsty—"

He stopped me with a kiss, which was okay with me. I touched his cheeks and smiled.

"What would it change?" he said. "If Sherman really was a werewolf, would it really change anything?"

"We'd know the truth."

He looked skeptical. It was a fair question. Did this mean any more than

slapping labels on people? In Sherman's case, it meant a reinterpretation of his history—his nervous breakdown looked a whole lot different if he was a werewolf. But even that was speculation. He might have been infected with lycanthropy years before.

It wasn't just the labels. It meant history had a whole other layer to it, and that supernatural beings might have played an active role in guiding human events for centuries. I could almost get conspiracy minded about it.

"How can you even confirm something like this for sure? In a way that would hold up in court?" he added. Always legal-minded.

"I've been trying to find out how to get his body exhumed—"

He looked at me. "You haven't."

"Um, yeah. It's a lot harder than I thought it would be."

"Of course it is. You can't just go around digging up graves. Especially famous ones."

"Yeah," I said, wincing. "I know."

"You need to find a vampire who knew him," he said. "Get a corroborating eyewitness account from someone who wasn't a scared teenager confronting a guy like Sherman."

He probably meant it as a joke, but I turned thoughtful.

"You know," I said. "I could probably do that."

"Honey, if anyone can do it, you can."

Damn straight.

#

"Good evening, it's Friday night which means it's time once again for The

Midnight Hour, the show that isn't afraid of the dark or the creatures who live there. I'm your ever-eager host, Kitty Norville, and I hope you're ready for another illuminating evening of supernatural shenanigans."

Sitting at my table in the studio, in front of the microphone, headphones on, just a few lights glowing in the darkened space, I could imagine myself in the cockpit of an airplane or at the controls of a spaceship, commanding great power. Through the glass, I watched Matt, my sound engineer, at his board. Above the door, the on air sign glowed red. Epic.

"I've been thinking a lot lately about history and what to do with it. Vampires and werewolves and the like have only been public for a few years. Some of us are milking that publicity for all it's worth, I'm not ashamed to say. But we've been around for a lot longer than that. We must have been. What impact have vampires, werewolves, or magicians had on history? Were any historical figures—let's say General William Sherman, just as an example—supernatural creatures themselves? Those histories have been deeply buried, either because people didn't believe or because the stories were written off as folklore and fantasy. Let me tell you, when you start digging there are a lot of stories out there. What I'm looking for now isn't stories, but proof. That's where things get tricky, because traditionally, the supernatural doesn't leave a whole lot of proof lying around.

"That's my question for you tonight: what kind of proof should I be looking for, and what kind of proof would you need to be convinced that a beloved historical figure had a toe dipped in the supernatural world?"

Shows like this, where I threw open the line for calls right from the start in a

freeform brain storm, were often a crap shoot. I could get a lot of thoughtful discussion and gain some new insight. Or I'd end up yelling at people. NPR to Jerry Springer, my show ran the whole spectrum. Brace for impact...

“For my first call tonight I have Dave from Rochester. Hello, Dave.”

“Hi, Kitty, thanks for taking my call, it's so great to get through.” He sounded suitably enthusiastic—a good opener for the show.

“Thanks for being persistent. What have got for me?”

“Well. It seems to me you're just assuming that supernatural beings have been around for a long time. This stuff has only been making news for a few years now, and maybe that's because it hasn't been around that long. What if vampires and werewolves are actually the result of some government experiment that got loose and is totally out of control?”

“I can assure you that I'm not the result of some government experiment,” I said flatly.

“Well no, not directly, but maybe it's some virus that escaped and spread, and that's where vampires and werewolves came from. That's why we don't have any historical evidence.”

“On the other hand we have five thousand years of folklore suggesting that these beings have been around for a long time. What about that?”

“Planted. It's all a hoax.”

I blinked at the microphone. That was bold, even for this show. “You're saying The Epic of Gilgamesh is a hoax? That the story of King Lycaon isn't really an ancient Greek myth?”

“That’s right. It’s all been made up in order to convince people that supernatural beings have been around for thousands of years when they’ve really only been around since World War II.”

“World War II?” I said. “Like some supernatural Manhattan Project?”

“Yes, exactly! In fact—”

Oh, yes, please say it, sink my show to this level in the first ten minutes. . . .

“—It was the Nazis,” Dave from Rochester said.

I clicked the line to a different call. “And that’s enough of that. Moving on now, next call please. Hello, you’re on the air.”

“Hi Kitty, I’m a big fan of the show,” said a female voice, cheerful and outgoing. Suze from L.A. “I just wanted to say, isn’t most of history based on eyewitness accounts? People reporting what they saw? We should have reports somewhere of people talking about this. But I’m not sure how you’d go about proving something that no one ever talks about.”

I was right on the edge of whipping out that FWP transcript and discussing Private Hanson—a report that had lain buried and forgotten because no one believed it. I wanted my proof before I brought it into the light.

Instead I said, “Or maybe people have been talking about it, writing about it, whatever, but those accounts were buried because no one believed them. Which leads me to a big question—how trustworthy are eyewitness testimonies? We depend on them for historical accounts, memoirs, battlefield reports, so of course this is going to be high on the list. But is one eyewitness’s story enough? How about two, for corroboration?”

“The more the better, I guess,” she said. “But you still have the problem of

separating truth from fiction.”

“Exactly. Part of the reason I’m always trying to get vampires on the show is I figure they’ve got to be some of the best eyewitnesses out there. They’ve been around for decades, for centuries. Not only have they seen a lot, they often seem to be in the front row, watching events play out. But I gotta tell you, they don’t seem particularly interested in sharing what they’ve learned. I think they really like keeping secrets from the rest of us. That’s why we haven’t had any vampire celebrity tell-all books yet. Oh, and if there are any vampires out there writing a celebrity tell-all book, please let me know. Thanks for your call, Suze.”

Matt flagged a call on the monitor—from a vampire. Ooh, was I really going to have my wish granted? I liked nothing better than to feature an exclusive news break. What were the odds?

“Hello, you’re on the air.”

“Kitty, if we keep secrets, perhaps it’s for your own good.” She was a woman with a faint accent, probably European, topped with a touch of finely-aged arrogance.

“So you’re a vampire,” I said. “May I ask how old you are?”

“You may, but I won’t answer.”

The usual response; it didn’t surprise me. “Oh well, I always have to try. Thank you for calling. My second question for you: Why do you get to decide what should be kept secret? Don’t you think everyone has a right to the truth? Even a dangerous truth?”

“Your attitude about the truth is a bit naïve, don’t you think? The truth isn’t an artifact you can put in a box and study.”

“But I don’t want to be lied to outright,” I said. “I especially don’t want to be told

I'm being lied to for my own good."

"Tell me this: what if you did find the definitive proof you were looking for—a DNA test for lycanthropy for example, or a photograph of someone shape-shifting, or proof that someone was killed with a stake or a silver bullet. What would change? Why would it matter? The events surrounding that person's life wouldn't change. Their identity wouldn't really change—just your knowledge of it."

Ben's question again. I kept saying I just wanted to be treated like a human being—that vampires and lycanthropes of any stripe should be allowed to live normal, law-abiding lives. Would exposing any supernatural secret identities damage that? Make them freaks instead of the historical figures they were?

"I guess I'm looking for a connection," I said. "I've been floundering, wondering where I fit in the world. Would having a role model be too much to ask for?"

"I thought being a role model was your job," she said, with that haughty amusement that only vampires could manage.

"Oh, heaven help us all," I replied. "But I have to say that yes, it is important. Being a werewolf is an important enough part of my identity that I've been basing a show on it and writing about it for the last five years. If I'm going to be an authority on the subject I really want to be an authority. And that means speculating like this."

"As long as you're aware that you may never find the answers you're looking for," the vampire said.

"Yeah, I'm used to that. Maybe the important thing is to keep asking the questions anyway."

And get other people asking them, too. Keep knocking on the door until someone

answered. Or until they hauled me away and locked me up.

#

After the show I invited Rick, Master of the local vampire Family, to meet me at New Moon, the bar and grill that Ben and I owned. I was careful not to say anything like, “Let’s go for a drink,” or “How about we grab a bite.” Not that Rick would have taken me literally, but I didn’t want to open myself up for the kind of teasing I’d get. Rick was a vampire, feeding on the blood of the living, although I was pretty sure he only drank from volunteers and just enough to stay functional. Still, you had to be careful about what kind of invitations you offered to vampires.

Rick was a friend, and I trusted him. That didn’t mean he told me everything.

He was handsome, with a hint of old-world aristocracy to his fine features and straight bearing. From what I could gather, he came by it honestly—he’d been the younger son of a Spanish noble family who traveled to the New World seeking his fortune in the first wave of immigration in the sixteenth century. I didn’t know if he ever considered his fortune found. He wore an expensive trenchcoat even in summer, a button-up silk shirt, and well-tailored trousers. Perfect, elegant. You couldn’t help but respect him.

“Hi,” I said, letting him through the glass front door. “I’m not even going to ask if I can get you anything to drink.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” he said, glancing around. “Business seems to be doing well.”

The place wasn’t crowded—not surprising at this late hour—but enough people sat here and there to create a friendly buzz.

“Lack of pretension,” I said, guiding him to a table in the back, where my beer

was waiting for me. We took seats across from each other. “I think that may be the secret.”

“I think you may be right,” he said. “Now, what’s the problem?”

“Everyone always assumes there’s a problem.”

“This is you we’re talking about,” he said, perfectly good-natured.

“I just wanted to have a nice, friendly chat,” I said. “How’s life—er, unlife—been treating you? What’s new in your neck of the woods?”

“Is that a pun?”

I had to think about it a minute, my brow furrowed. “Ah. Not intentionally.”

If Rick wasn’t laughing at me, he was at least chuckling, and I scowled.

“Nothing to report,” he said. Gaze narrowed, I studied him. “Kitty, I don’t ask about every detail of the workings of your werewolf pack, I’m not going to tell you every detail about my Family.”

“You can’t blame me—I’ve built a career out of gossip.”

“All the more reason for me to keep my mouth shut.”

That wasn’t what I wanted to hear. I blundered on. “I’d like to ask you about a story I’m tracking down. Did you know Sherman?”

“As in General William T.?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m afraid not, though I’m sure he was fascinating.”

I must have looked deflated.

“It’s not like I knew every public figure who lived for the last five hundred years,” he said.

“But you knew Coronado. And Doc Holliday. That’s a pretty amazing roster right there. Five hundred years is a lot longer than most of us get. Do you know anyone you might have known Sherman?”

“Any vampires, you mean?”

“Anyone who might be able to tell me if Sherman was a werewolf.”

He pursed his lips, considering, making him the first person who hadn’t looked at the claim with outright skepticism. “What’s your information?”

I told him about the interview with the Confederate soldier, and my own hunch, which couldn’t exactly be called information. You couldn’t tell a werewolf in human form just by looking. Unless maybe you were psychic, which was something to consider. Maybe I could call my friend Tina, a psychic with the TV show Paradox PI, and see if she could channel Sherman...

“That would be amazing if you could prove it,” he said. “We’d have a whole new perspective on his career.”

“But the only way I can really prove it is to test a tissue sample, assuming a testable sample still exists, or talk to someone trustworthy who might have known him.”

“And no one’s very excited about exhuming the general’s body, I’m guessing.”

“Exactly.”

“Alette’s the only one I can think of who would know. She has her fingers in everything, even going back to that period. If Sherman spent any time in D.C., she would know.”

“Sherman spent a ton of time in D.C. She’d have to know,” I said, excited.

Alette was the Master vampire of Washington, D.C., and had been in the 1860’s. She

was already on my list of people to call after talking to Rick. If she didn't know, I'd probably never find out.

“Something to consider,” Rick continued. “Even if she does know, she might not tell you. You're not the only one who's been asking these sorts of questions since lycanthropy and vampirism went public. Alette could have leaked the information herself if she wanted people to know.”

That vampire sense of superiority again. I shook my head. “She shouldn't be the one to get to decide what people know.”

Rick made a calming gesture, forestalling the rest of my rant. “Consider this—if Alette knew Sherman, knew that he was a werewolf, but hasn't told anyone, it may be because Sherman didn't want anyone to know. The secret may be his, and Alette—or anyone else who has the information—may be keeping a promise with him.”

Sherman was dead and gone, he shouldn't get a say in it. Historical public figures were fair game for all kinds of digging, as far as I was concerned. But a vampire's promise went on forever, didn't it? I had a thing about exposing people who didn't want to be exposed. My own lycanthropy had been made public against my will. Afterward, I took the publicity and ran with it as a survival mechanism, but I could understand why Sherman wouldn't want something like this public. It would overshadow his entire record and all that he'd accomplished. His autobiography—considered one of military history's great memoirs—would become next to meaningless because it doesn't say a word about it. Which meant that maybe he didn't want anyone to know. If Sherman's ghost appeared and asked me to drop the question, what would I do?

Thoughtful, I rested my chin on my hand and said to Rick, “How many promises

like that are you keeping?"

Smiling, he glanced away.

"Oh my God, you are," I said, straightening. "You know. You've got something juicy on somebody famous. What is it? Who?"

"You've gone this long without knowing, why should I say anything now?"

"I just want to know," I said. "It's important to know that people like me have existed for thousands of years, living their lives, surviving. Roman's been recruiting vampires and lycanthropes for his secret supervillain plans for two thousand years. I have to assume that vampires and lycanthropes have been opposing him as well, like us. To know who they were, to have some kind of history—who knows what it could tell us about his methods? You know Roman would have tried to recruit Sherman. I'd love to imagine that Sherman told him to shove it."

Rick sat back. He seemed amused, thoughtful, studying me through a narrowed gaze. Like he was considering.

"What?" I said. I got the feeling I'd said something funny or strange.

"It's a cliché, you know," he said. "Eternal life being boring. Maybe for some of us it is, the ones who lock themselves away in mansions or castles, cut themselves off from the world and the people in it. For the rest of us, there's always something new coming along, if we know where to look. We stay interested by having a stake in the game."

"The Long Game?" I said. The Long Game, a conspiracy among vampires. The few people who knew about it spoke of it in whispers, in hints, if at all. Near as I could figure, it really was a game, but one that dealt in lives and power. And the one who dies

with the most toys wins.

Rick shrugged. “Not always. After all, Kitty—you’re one of the people who keeps life interesting.”

He gazed over the dining room and bar, waiting for me to respond. I’d already finished my beer or I would have taken a long drink. “I’m flattered, I think.”

“If you want my advice, you’re narrowing your focus too much,” Rick said. “Don’t just look for the secret vampires and lycanthropes. Look for people who might have hunted them. People like your friend Cormac.”

Now there was an idea. “You’re not going to give me any hints about where to start, are you?”

“Think about it for a minute. If I met Doc Holliday, who else do you think I might have known?”

Western history wasn’t my strong suit, but my knowledge was better than average. I remembered the stories of the Wild West and O.K. Corral, and a few choice Hollywood treatments of the same, and my eyes grew wide.

“Wyatt Earp?”

Rick just smiled.

The Faerie Ring

By Kiki Hamilton

Copyright © 2011 by Karen Hamilton

Debut novelist Kiki Hamilton takes readers from the gritty slums and glittering ballrooms of Victorian London to the beguiling but menacing Otherworld of the Fey in this spellbinding tale of romance, suspense, and danger.

Chapter One

London , December 1871

“You wouldn’t be here pickin’ pockets, would you?”

Tiki jumped as the dark figure loomed over the corner where she sat pretending to be half-asleep. Thick, black hair hung low over his forehead, shadowing his eyes. The aggressive way he approached made her instinctively recoil. The glittery light of the pub illuminated his face as he leaned toward her and the fear that bubbled in her stomach dissipated as she recognized him.

“Rieker.” Tiki spoke in a low voice. “What are you doing here?” His timing couldn’t be worse. “Are you following me, again?” She’d identified her mark and was just waiting for the right moment to make her move.

“Me follow you?” Rieker gave an arrogant snort. “Now why would I do that?” He jingled the coins in his pocket as if to taunt her. “I’ve been workin’ the World’s End for a few months now.” He leaned an elbow on the plank table, a mug of ale clutched in his hand. “Maybe you’re followin’ me.” He looked her up and down with a mocking gaze. “Because I’d swear I’ve never seen your pretty face in here before.”

Tiki forced an insincere smile. “Maybe you weren’t looking hard enough.” She tugged the bill of her cap down to hide her features. Dressed in breeches and a man’s oversized jacket, no one but Rieker would have known she was a sixteen year old girl. And even he hadn’t known until two months ago.

It had been when she'd spotted him coming out of a clockmaker's shop in King's Cross with both hands shoved into the pockets of his tattered black coat as though he'd hidden something in their depths. The cautious way he'd glanced over at her had made her wonder what he'd nicked. Curious, she'd followed him.

Rieker had made a name for himself throughout the slums of London. Stories about him stretched from Bishopsgate in the East End, to Charing Cross in the heart of the city, all the way to Kings Cross, here in the North End. The other pickpockets whispered that he could steal anything. But Shamus had told her something else: that Rieker could disappear in the blink of an eye. She didn't believe Shamus, but she did want to know how Rieker always got away from the Bobbies. She also wanted to know why she'd seen him in Charing Cross, her home turf, so often lately.

As though sensing her presence, Rieker had glanced over his shoulder. His gaze had skipped from her face to something behind her. Without a word he'd turned and ran. Instinct made Tiki run too. That's when the Bobby had shouted at them to stop.

The policeman had been so close he'd torn her baggy coat from her back, revealing her long braided hair and a shape that couldn't belong to a boy. She'd never forget the look on Rieker's face that day.

"What are you doing up north here in Camden Town?" Rieker's voice brought her back to the present. "Bit far from Charing Cross, aren't you?"

"Maybe." Tiki kept her tone even. "But the biggest pub in all of London is worth the trip."

He pulled one of the chairs away from the table, the wooden legs scraping against the floor. "Are you here alone?"

Tiki put out a hand out to block him. “Don’t sit down—you’re not staying. And it’s none of your business who I’m with or where I go.” Irritated, she turned back toward the crowd. Where was her mark? A smoky cloud hung in the room above the motley crew of sailors, chandlers, coal porters, and dustmen who filled the pub. She recognized Bilby, the rat catcher, and Mr. Bonfield, the costermonger from up round Covent Garden Market, but where was MacGregor?

For weeks she’d been watching the big, ruddy Scotsman, following him in the evenings from pub to pub. He owned clothing shops in Seven Dials and Petticoat Lane and loved to drink his profits, especially on a Friday night. When he got drunk he got careless. Tiki’s fingers itched in anticipation. It was hardly a challenge for someone of her skills, but she had grown to dislike his swaggering and the way he bullied the barmaids. It would be a pleasure to lighten his pockets. Damn, had she missed her chance?

“Last call!” The bartender’s voice cut across the noise of the room. “Drink up fellers, pub’s closin’.” The World’s End had a packed house tonight. The wooden plank floor of the pub was slick with spilled ale and the rich, yeasty smell of beer hung thick in the air.

A row of sailors sat shoulder to shoulder along the wooden bar, hunched over their drinks as though fearful their glasses would be snatched away. Big mirrors lined the walls, etched with the names of ales or whiskeys, reflecting the bright lights in the room as well as the cloud of tobacco smoke. Barmaids and prostitutes, with their skirts partially tucked up in their waistbands, worked their way through the thick crowd milling between the full tables, smiling and joking with the customers. The tinkling notes of a piano were

a backdrop to the cacophony of accents that clashed above it all, like an instrument with several strings out of tune.

Tiki's eyes stopped on the silhouette of a tall man with a large bulbous nose.

There he was.

A meaty looking fellow with shoulders like a bull underneath his worn, brown jacket, MacGregor looked in fine form tonight. Red-faced, swaying, he was belting out a raunchy tune as he waved his mug of ale in time to the song.

Rieker followed Tiki's gaze. He leaned forward. "No. Not MacGregor."

Tiki let out a snort of disbelief. "Why in bloody hell not? I've been watching him half the night." She started to slide out of her chair but Rieker's hand clamped down on her wrist, pinning her to the table.

"He's too drunk," he warned. "If he catches you, there'll be no mercy."

"Take your hand off me," she gritted through clenched teeth. Tiki yanked her arm away and shot out of her chair. Fiona might chatter on about how handsome Rieker was with his tall, rugged build and elusive air, but as far as Tiki was concerned he was equal parts annoying.

The corners of Rieker's mouth quirked, his smoky, gray eyes dancing.

"Just like a kitten pretending to be a lion," he said. "Except I don't think your claws are sharp enough to hurt anyone, little kitten."

Tiki reacted without thinking. She jabbed her finger into his chest.

"Listen to me, Rieker. I'm not your 'kitten' or anybody else's. I'll do what I please and I'll thank you to leave me the hell alone."

Fast as a cat, he grabbed her arm. A look of shock crossed his face before he tried to hide it.

“What’s this?” he asked, holding up her wrist.

Delicate lines twisted and turned like a tangle of vines, encircling her small wrist. They were dark against her pale skin. Rieker’s fingers gripped her hand so tight that her fingers began to tingle and she winced, swallowing a gasp.

“Rieker, stop it. You’re hurting me.”

His grip loosened but he didn’t let go. “Tiki, where did you get this mark?”

Rieker’s gaze was incredulous, searching, as if trying to see into her very thoughts. She couldn’t help but notice how long his dark lashes were, framing his smoky eyes. A strange nervousness started to flutter in the pit of her stomach when MacGregor’s drunken bellow for more ale cut through the noise in the pub and broke the spell.

“I. Said. Let go!” With a great surge Tiki jerked her arm back and in the process managed to send Rieker’s mug of ale flying directly into the face of a nearby sailor. After a stunned moment, the sailor shook his head, his bleary eyes searching the crowd for the culprit.

Tiki turned just in time to see the sailor drop his head and plow his shoulders into an innocent chimney sweep. The diminutive man, still covered in coal dust, went flying backwards into the crowd, sending bodies scrambling to get out of the way. Mayhem broke loose as sailors and tradesmen shoved back with fists and feet.

For a second, Tiki wondered at Rieker’s strange reaction to her birthmark. But she pushed the thought aside. This was her chance.

Tiki stepped away from the table and slid sideways through the crowd, head down so the bill of her cap shadowed her face. Usually she wouldn't take such a risk on her last pick of the night, but she wanted to prove Rieker wrong.

"Tiki, wait," Rieker called after her.

Tiki glanced back but Rieker was stuck in the crowd, unable to stop her. She smiled to herself in satisfaction. She could handle MacGregor. Plus, a few more coins to line her pockets would certainly warm the long, cold ride home to the abandoned clockmaker's shop adjoining Charing Cross.

Tiki took a deep breath as she neared her mark, dodging the arms and legs swinging wildly around her. MacGregor was engrossed in the brawl, red-faced and hollering encouragement in a hoarse roar. His face shone with excitement, a large bead of sweat hanging from the tip of a nose that had seen more than a few fights.

She slithered close and slipped her hand into his pocket. Just as she'd hoped, MacGregor was carrying a load of money. She pinched several of the coins together and started to pull her hand free.

The big man's gaze landed on Tiki with the weight of a boulder. MacGregor squinted his red-rimmed eyes in her direction.

"Wot you be about, boy?" he growled.

"N..nuthin' Guv'nor," Tiki stammered. She tried to back away but was hemmed in by the mass of bodies.

"Wot you got in your hand?" He snatched for her with a big meaty paw. "Show me."

Tiki slapped her hands together to mask the sound of the coins dropping and held her palms up, wiggling her fingers to distract him as the coins slid down her sleeve.

“Nuthin’ sir, I swear.”

There was another surge in the crowd and a large man, dressed like a coal porter, collided with MacGregor. The man’s black hat flew off as MacGregor’s glass of ale hit the wooden floor with a resounding *crash*.

This was trouble.

MacGregor roared with rage. Tiki swung her right elbow back as hard as she could, hitting a soft belly.

“Umphf,” a voice gasped as her elbow made contact. “What the bloody hell?” The man behind her stepped back, opening a small space in the crowd. In a blink, Tiki darted through the gap.

“Come back ‘ere, you little thief,” MacGregor yelled.

Tiki cut her way through the crowd. She reached the heavy plank entry door and yanked it open just enough to slip out into the chill winter air. Her breath came in short gasps, her chest heaving with exertion. Where could she hide? She only had a moment before MacGregor would be on her.

In the distance, the brisk *clip-clop* of a lone carriage working its way up the cobblestone lane echoed in the cool night air. *Blast*. It was so late there were few cabs about and this coach was headed in the wrong direction.

She took a step toward the street, peering right and left, looking for any other means of escape. Behind her, the pub door creaked open.

“Where is he?” a thick voice cried.

Tiki's breath caught in her throat. It was MacGregor. *Damn.* She pushed away from the building and ran. The carriage was just turning the corner onto the lane.

"You there," MacGregor cried. "Stop!"

Tiki darted out of the shadows and raced toward the back of the carriage. With a burst of speed, she placed a hand on one of the rear struts and jumped lightly onto the boot where the luggage was usually stored. Wedging herself into the corner of the little shelf situated behind the wheel box, she watched as MacGregor lumbered onto the cobblestone lane, his head swiveling back and forth in confusion.

"Where'd he go?" he bellowed.

Behind him, just exiting the pub, Tiki recognized Rieker's tall silhouette.

"And that's how you pick MacGregor's pocket," she whispered.

The carriage creaked around a corner and the pub disappeared from view. Tiki repositioned herself on the small shelf with a tired sigh, settling in for the ride back to Charing Cross. Her body ached from the long day on her feet and her stomach growled with hunger. She fingered the solid weight of the coins she had stashed in her pocket and pressed her lips together in a small, satisfied smile. There would be enough to pay the muffin man and to buy a chunk of cheddar big enough for all of them.

Tiki thought of how excited the others would be. Food had been scarce lately. Shamus and Fiona had been giving part of their portions to the younger ones, Toots and Clara, and even with that, four year old Clara was painfully thin. Tiki tried not to think of the persistent cough that had been wracking the child lately. Maybe she could find some milk for Clara to soak her bread in as well.

Wrapping her arms tight around her knees to ward off the chill, Tiki eyed the black swirls on her wrist and wondered again about Rieker's strange reaction to her mark. She usually made an effort to keep her wrist covered, not wanting to draw attention to the odd birthmark. When she was younger her mum had teased her and told her she'd been marked by faeries. Her mother's whispered words came back to her now. "*They're around us. Pay attention and you'll see them.*"

A pang of longing twisted inside at the memory of her mum and she pushed the painful thoughts away. She had more important things to think about now, like finding enough food to fill their stomachs each day. Tiki leaned her head back and closed her eyes, listening to the staccato rhythm of the horse's hooves echoing in the night.

Chapter Two

Tiki jolted awake.

The carriage had come to a stop.

She leaned forward to peer around the edge of the cab and stared in confusion at the orbs of lamplight glowing through the thick mist. Where was she? She could make out the dim shadows of other carriages forming a queue. Snorts and the shuffling clack of horse's hooves were oddly muffled by the dense fog. To her left, through the shadows, the walls of a great mansion loomed. To her right, she could see the dim light of the streetlamps through the overhanging trees. But which street did they light? It was impossible to tell through the fingers of fog that wrapped everything in its blinding grip.

She tightened her grip on a strut as the carriage jerked forward, crouching down on the boot, trying to stay hidden.

"Bring her this way," a man cried in the distance.

She had to get away. Through the fog she could see the outline of the large building. Tall columns stretched along the front of the façade. The bare limbs of several elm trees stretched in a row toward the entry. Taking a deep breath, Tiki jumped from the back of the carriage and ran for the shadows that surrounded one of the trees. The bark was rough on her fingers as she leaned against the trunk, waiting to make sure she remained unseen. After a moment she pushed off and raced toward the side of the building.

Tiki heaved a sigh of relief as she leaned back against the rough stone. Of all the idiotic things to do, how could she have fallen asleep on the boot? And now she didn't even know where she was.

Her stomach gave a loud growl. She hadn't eaten since afternoon and that biscuit had been hard enough to crack her teeth. Clara and Toots would be starving unless Shamus or Fiona had been able to pick a pocket or snitch some fruit from a costermonger's stall today. But the costermongers guarded their fruit and vegetable carts well, carrying a long switch to swat the hands of hungry children who might think to steal from them.

A twinge snaked its way through Tiki's chest. It had to be close to midnight. She usually returned home around the supper hour as the crowds were too thin to safely pick a pocket. Clara liked to wait up for her return each day. Was the little girl clutching Doggie, her sawdust-filled ragdoll, wondering where she was right now?

Tiki peered toward a swath of light that cut across the dark yard. A side door was stretched wide open as if beckoning her. The aroma of roasting meat was tempting. Tiki's stomach gave another growl, louder this time.

She hesitated. The coins she had pocketed tonight were heavy in her pocket but the muffin man who worked near Charing Cross was long gone for the day and the shops were closed. The children would be so hungry. Did she dare try to find some food before she started for home again?

She inched closer. She couldn't resist the fragrant smells of baking bread and roasting beef. As Tiki stepped through the doorway, the heat from the coal burning fires of the kitchen enveloped her like a warm blanket. The room bustled with activity. A red-

face, round bellied woman, clearly in charge, brandished a butcher knife as she barked orders at the kitchen maids.

Tiki ducked into a dim alcove stacked with bags of flour and stayed tight to the wall as she peered around the corner. Her eyes grew wide at the staggering amounts of food being prepared. Soups and sauces were stirred over the fire. Some sort of meat, venison or beef, dripped juices onto the open flames. Nearby, pots full of asparagus, peas and carrots waited to be steamed, and there was an entire table full of bread. Loaves and loaves of fresh baked bread.

Tiki's mouth watered as she eyed the bounty. What she would give to take even a few loaves and a good hunk of beef home to the others. At seventeen, Shamus was grown but he'd become so thin and tall that his wrists and ankles stuck out from his ragged clothes as if he'd pulled on ten year-old Toots' trousers by mistake. And fifteen year-old Fiona's pretty face had become angular and sunken.

"Turn that spit, before the meat chars and I have to char your backside." The cook whacked at the meat on the cutting board. "An' you, young Miss." The cook pointed her knife at a girl who stood stirring a large pot. "Don't let me catch you daydreamin' again."

Tiki eyed a round block of cheddar on a nearby table that was surrounded by a number of smaller chunks of cheese, just waiting to be melted. She could snatch a few of the smaller hunks and a couple of loaves, and no one would be the wiser.

A movement to her left caught her attention. A young boy watched her from the floor. He reminded her of a dormouse, his big eyes like two dark plums centered in the round pie plate of his face. She raised a finger to her lips. He blinked at her, and nodded that he understood she wanted him to be quiet. Could she take the chance?

“That bread has had time to cool,” the cook bellowed. “Mary, start putting it in the bread baskets and store them against that wall. We need that table for the sweetcakes.”

It was now or never. She made her way over to the table with the cheddar and crouched beside it. Watching the swirling skirts of the kitchen maids walking to and fro, she snaked a hand up over the edge of the table and grabbed blindly for a hunk of cheese. She slid the cheese into the oversized pocket of her jacket and on hands and knees worked her way over toward the table laden with loaves of bread.

She shot a quick glance back at the young boy. He was still watching her every move.

“Ellie,” the cook yelled, “get me a bag of flour.” The clank of pots and pans along with the rhythmic beat of chopping knives continued as though the kitchen was a great machine, its gears and cogs in full motion.

Tiki crept along the floor, grateful for the shadows cast under the tables. Under the bread table, she paused, waiting for the right moment. Whoever lived here had so much food they’d never notice a few missing crusts. She thought of how Toots’ freckled face would light up when she showed him the fresh cheddar.

One of the kitchen maids came over to the table where Tiki hid. Tiki held her breath as the girl shuffled the loaves of bread from the table to a basket. When the girl walked away Tiki groped blindly over the edge of the table. She’d just latched onto a loaf when a scream split the air.

“Who’s under there?”

Tiki bolted out from under the table. She caught a fleeting glimpse of the little boy, his eyes wide, his mouth open to form an ‘o’ of surprise as she flew by. As she ran for the door she’d come in, another kitchen maid stepped out of the alcove where Tiki had hidden earlier, a huge sack of flour clutched to her chest. A scream erupted from her throat and she froze in place, blocking the exit.

“Stop you!” the cook bellowed. “Thief!”

Tiki darted toward another door, desperate for an escape. A dim hallway stretched before her and she flew as fast as her feet could move, unmindful of the clatter her boots made on the wooden floor. Shouts and shrieks followed her departure and Tiki could hear the lumbering gait of the well-endowed cook.

“Get back in the stables where you belong!” the rotund woman yelled down the hallway after her.

Tiki ran down a warren of dim corridors until she found a door slightly ajar. She slipped inside the door, closed it softly behind her, and pressed her forehead against the cool grain of the wood. She strained to hear any sounds of pursuit. Long moments ticked by as Tiki held her ear to the door, poised to run. But there was nothing to be heard in the hallway and she heaved a sigh of relief.

Thankful that she’d escaped for the moment, Tiki turned and gasped. She stood in a huge room with eight angled walls that formed an octagon. Every wall was filled with bookcases, every shelf filled with books. And if that wasn’t enough, a second set of bookshelves lined the walls above the first set, reaching all the way up to the large, arch-top windows far above her head.

Her jaw sagged in disbelief as she tilted her head back and gazed up at the enormous number of books. Underneath her boots plush carpet softened her steps. Tiki turned in a full circle, trying to take it all in. The sheer size of the room made her feel ant-like and small.

A large desk sat in the center of the room and on the far side there was a glass-paned door. A fire burned low in the grate, gas lamps lighting the interior of the room with a soft glow. A familiar longing tugged at her as she gazed at the shelves lining the walls.

An old memory rushed to mind, of her father sitting before the fire, a pipe clutched in one hand as he read stories from Dinah Craik's *A Fairy Tale*. Scotty, her cocker spaniel, was asleep on her lap as she listened. Her mother sat in a nearby chair, her dark head bent over her fancy needlework. A lump suddenly filled her throat at the vivid recollection.

Drawn by an irresistible pull, Tiki moved to the nearest shelf and ran her fingers over the leather spines. She longed to pull open the pages and read the secrets kept inside. She moved deeper into the room. The great desk was exactly the same shape as the room, with four legs to support the eight-sided top. Nearby, an over-sized book lay open on a stand with a magnifying glass resting on its surface. Tiki picked up the circle of clear glass suspended by an ornately carved handle and peered at the map.

"I know it's here somewhere," a voice said from outside the glass-paned door. "I was looking at it earlier."

Tiki jumped in alarm as the door to the library swung inward. Still clutching the magnifying glass, she dove under the desk, her pulse drumming in her ears. The soft shuffle of boots on carpet moved in her direction.

“It’s the only way you’ll get him to believe you at this point, Arthur,” a second voice replied. The pages of a newspaper rustled overhead, alarmingly close to Tiki’s hiding place.

“Ah, here it is.” Arthur’s voice was deep and pleasant.

“Have you found it, then?” The second voice was not as deep as the first and sounded younger.

“Yes, I’ve got the information right here,” Arthur said. “Smithson will have to eat his words once he looks at these numbers. I’d wager this is Grace’s best cricket season yet.”

Tiki’s heart beat a wild rhythm in her chest as she listened to their conversation, huddled under the massive desk. She couldn’t possibly explain her presence in this room to these two young men, with bread and cheddar tucked in her pockets. They would know at a glance that she was nothing more than a thief.

“Probably should’ve upped the bet,” the younger voice said. He snickered. “You know what they say, Arthur, build your wealth when opportunity knocks.”

“Yes, Smithson owes me after the beating I took in cards the other night. Speaking of that, Leo,” Arthur said, “I think Isabelle Cavendish considers *you* an opportunity.”

Leo's voice answered just above her head and Tiki jumped in surprise. She had to bite her lip not to gasp out loud when she spied the toes of two black boots only a few feet from her shoulder.

"At least Isabelle is interesting. And pretty. Doesn't she look breathtaking tonight? So many of these young women can hardly carry on a decent conversation, what with their incessant giggling and whatnot. Why is the female species so dreadfully boring, I wonder?"

Arthur laughed. "Maybe you should try talking about something besides horses and hunting. What is it about Isabelle, besides her looks that you find so fascinating, then?"

Tiki heard a soft *pop!* and then the clink of crystal.

"She was asking me about one of Mother's rings tonight. You know the one." There was a pause and then a soft sigh. "I do love champagne."

"What ring?" Arthur sounded like he had moved closer.

"The one Mother has hidden, with the red stone," Leo said. There was a rustling sound. "This one."

There was a long moment of silence. "Is that the ring of the truce?" Arthur's voice was hushed. "Where did you get that?"

"I took it from Mother's strongbox earlier today," Leo said.

"Does she know?"

Leo snorted. "What do you think I am, a complete fool?"

"What are you two doing down here?" The strident tone of an older woman interrupted their conversation.

“Oh, hello, Mother,” Arthur replied smoothly. “Just came down to get the paper to show Charlie Smithson something.” Papers rattled as if to emphasize his point.

“And Leo? What is your excuse?” The sound of skirts swishing moved closer. “You both belong upstairs in the ballroom with your guests. And what’s that in your hand, Leo?”

“Just a glass of champagne, Mother,” the younger voice replied. Something dropped down into the darkness underneath the desk. He sighed. “I thought I’d take a break from the party.” He took several steps away from the desk, but remained close enough that Tiki could still spy the black heels of his boots. “I need a breather every once in awhile from all the attention.”

“Yes, well, the attention serves a purpose,” the woman said. “There are alliances to be forged. Stop spending so much time with Isabelle Cavendish. You’ve known her all your life. Spend some time with that young Duchess from Russia – what’s her name? Maria?”

“Grand Duchess Maria Alexandrovna.” Arthur said.

“Yes, that’s the one.”

“She looks like a horse.” Leo said.

“Well, you love horses, so you should find her quite appealing.” Fingers snapped. “Come along, then, both of you. Our guests expect to have the opportunity to see and talk with you tonight,” the woman said, “and many have traveled a great distance to be here.”

“Yes, we’ll be right up,” Arthur said. “I just wanted to...”

“*Now.*” Her tone made it clear there would be no further negotiation.

There was just a split-second of silence before the whisper of boots moved across the carpet.

“Brilliant idea, Mother.” Leo’s voice light and pleasant. “Can we escort you upstairs?”

“Thank you, dear, that would be lovely. I plan to return to ...” The woman’s voice faded as they left the room and the door snapped shut.

After several long minutes, Tiki released her breath and relaxed against the thick carpet.

That was close.

She eyed the item that Leo had tossed under the desk. Mesmerized by its beauty, Tiki reached for the ring. It was a burnished band of rich gold, capped by an intensely red stone the color of blood that almost seemed to beckon to her.

Tiki stared into the ruby red depths, turning the stone this way and that to catch the light. Something flickered and her heart caught in her throat as she peered closer. Deep within the heart of the stone it looked like flames burned as though lit by a fire.

She crawled out from under the desk and tilted the ring under a lamp on the desk. How could there be flames *inside* a ring? A tiny bit of writing inside the band caught Tiki’s eye.

Na sóchána, aontáimid: For the sake of peace, we agree.

Tiki murmured the words aloud to herself. She held the ring up again and watched the flames within the stone flicker and dance. It was breathtaking. She couldn’t look away.

She slid the ring on, her finger tingling as though the fire in the ring warmed her skin. She held her hand out to admire the beauty of the stone, the flames winking in its depths as if sending her a secret message.

Tiki gave a furtive glance around the room before sliding the ring off her finger and into her pocket. She had never stolen something just for herself before. She had only stolen to survive. But she had to have this ring.

“They’ll probably never even notice the ring’s gone missing,” she whispered, trying to convince herself.

A clock on one of the bookshelves chimed twelve times. Midnight. She needed to get back to Charing Cross. The others would be worried. She hurried to the back wall and eased the door open a crack to peer into the hallway. There was no one in sight.

She rushed down the dim corridor, keeping to her toes, trying to minimize the sound of her boots. As she wound her way through the maze of halls the din from the kitchen became louder. Pans clanking and a cobbles of voices talking; kitchen maids and the low tones of a man. Above it all the shouts of the cook could be heard.

Tiki slowed as she approached the door. Stealthily she leaned forward and peered around the door jamb. The cook and her helpers were busy: chopping, stirring, steaming, kneading. A thin, balding man in a red coat leaned against the wall of the alcove that held the flour. His back partially blocked the door.

“A thief in the kitchens? Are you sure Cookie wasn’t samplin’ the wine again?” he said.

“Now don’t you start in on that, Angus,” the cook called over her shoulder from where she stood at the great stove. “I’ve heard just about enough out of you.”

No one was looking in Tiki's direction. Now was her chance.

She hurried down the hall to the exterior door and skidded into the cold night. Without looking back she dashed for the shadows under the trees. The fog had lifted and she could see carriages stretched in a queue around the corner, lined up awaiting the return of the partygoers. She didn't dare try to catch a ride from here.

Staying deep in the shadows, she ran across the street toward what looked to be a park, and disappeared into the darkness. When she was a safe distance away, Tiki dug into the pocket of her trousers and pulled out the ring. By the light of the moon she could see the flames embedded deep in the stone flicker and glow, like the embers of a fire still breathing with life.

A strange yearning pulled at her. She slid the band back on her finger, turning and twisting the ring to watch the play of light. The piece of jewelry had to be worth a fortune. Could she take it home with her and fence it?

No. She didn't dare.

If caught with the ring in her possession, she'd be thrown into Newgate Prison to rot until the end of time. She needed some time to think, to plan.

Tiki ran alongside a lake until she came to the base of a stately old elm tree, its dark shadow looming over the other trees under the patchwork light of the cloud-shrouded moon.

She grabbed a branch and swung herself up on a limb. Perched in the crotch of the tree, she ran her hands over the spongy moss-laden trunk until she found a rotted out hole where an old branch had fallen away.

The ring would be safe here for a few days. No one would think to look in this old tree. She would leave it just until she made up her mind what she was going to do with the thing.

She tore a piece off the bottom of her ragged trousers and reluctantly pulled the ring from her finger. Tiki carefully wrapped it in the fabric. Then, with tentative fingers, she reached into the hole and tucked the bundle into the crevice, covering it with several chunks of moss.

Satisfied the ring was safely hidden, Tiki swung down from the branch and landed in the thicket. She brushed off her trousers and smiled to herself before turning to gaze back across the lake toward the grand mansion. Though the trees eclipsed part of her view, from this distance she could see the building lit up like Big Ben. Her smile faded as cold fingers wrapped around her heart. She recognized that familiar silhouette.

It was Buckingham Palace.

She recalled the names of the young men who had been in the library with her. Leo... *Prince* Leopold? And *Prince* Arthur? And the older woman...*Mother*...

Oh bloody hell. She'd just stolen the Queen's ring.

Chapter Three

Tiki pushed aside the board hanging from a single nail and slipped into the abandoned clockmaker's shop that adjoined Charing Cross railway station. The milky light from the railway station drifted in through the three arched windows that lined the common wall between the station and the room they called home. Positioned above their makeshift door, the windows let in just enough illumination that she could see their shadowy figures of her small family of orphans.

"Tiki!" Toots scrambled across the room and threw his arms around her. "We thought you'd been snatched by the Bobbies."

"Or someone had caught your hand in their pocket." Worry made Fiona's voice softer than usual. "An' hauled you away for good."

"Everything okay, Tiki?" Shamus stood, a tall, thin shadow in the dim light.

"Yes, not to worry," Tiki said. She wrapped her arms around Toots' thin shoulders. "I just hopped a boot and fell asleep."

"You fell asleep on the back of a carriage?" Fiona asked. She was snuggled in a pile of ragged blankets on one side of the small box stove, which created enough heat to keep the room bearable in winter, if they could find the coal to fill it. "In this weather? It's freezing out there."

"I was tired," Tiki replied. A match sizzled to life as Shamus lit a candle; the small flame cast wavering shadows against the wall as the wick ignited. Shamus' blonde hair glowed yellow in the candlelight.

Rumpled blankets and tattered pieces of clothing stretched on both sides of the box stove, divided into boy's and girl's sleeping areas. In the middle of the long room an upturned crate covered with a plank of wood served as their table. Tiki made her way toward the two rickety chairs they'd scavenged from a burned out flat in Drury Lane. "I'm home now though, so let's eat." With a flourish she pulled the loaf of bread and chunk of cheddar from her pockets and placed them on the wooden surface.

"Cheddar," Toots cried. He skittered across the floor, nearly tripping in his hurry. "Where'd you get that, Teek?"

"Oh, had a bit of luck on my way home."

"I am so hungry." Fiona pushed aside her covers and joined Toots at the table. "We didn't have any luck today." She tore a chunk of the bread and shoved it in her mouth until her cheeks bulged.

"How's Clara?" Tiki asked. She freed her own long dark braid from inside her jacket and began to unweave the strands, anxious to massage the tension from the back of her head.

As if in response to her question a deep gurgling cough rose from a small lump next to where Fiona had sat huddled. The cough ended in a raspy sigh.

Tiki turned toward the sound. "She sounds worse."

"Ay, she's been coughing a mite more," Shamus agreed.

Six months ago Tiki had stumbled over the little girl curled up in a pile of trash on secluded Craven Street outside Charing Cross. She had taken her home and cared for her but for weeks she wasn't sure the little girl would live. In the ensuing months Tiki had

worked hard to nurse Clara back to health. Not more than four years old, the frail child had continued to improve until three weeks ago when the cough had started again.

Tiki moved across the room, her eyes adjusting to the dim light. Deeply asleep, Clara clutched Doggie close to her face. A pang of love pierced Tiki's chest with such fierceness that it made her breath catch. She would need to find some medicine for Clara in the morning. She couldn't bear the thought of the little girl being so sick again.

Gently, she pulled a blanket up over Clara's shoulders, resting the back of her fingers along the little child's soft cheek for a moment. She felt warm enough but the congestion in her chest made her breathing labored.

Tiki sank down in one of the chairs as Shamus tore off a hunk of cheese and sat on the floor beside her, one arm wrapped around his knees.

"I was so hungry," Toots said in between bites, "that my stomach was knockin' on my back bone. An' the Bobbies were as thick as flies on fish today." Even in the dim shadows his red hair seemed bright and his pale face was covered with freckles. He took a bite of bread, chewing with his mouth open. "That's why I thought they'd caught you. They were *everywhere*."

"And it was so bloody cold," Fiona said, "that Shamus made me stay home with Clara. And Mr. Binder wanted him to come in and talk about the bakery wagon today so he and Toots only got to work the streets for a few hours. They came back and said the crowds were too light to even pick a pocket."

Tiki looked over at Shamus. "What did Mr. Binder want?"

Shamus shrugged. "Wanted to know if I could drive a carriage. Said maybe I could fill in when his regular driver doesn't show up."

Tiki smiled. "That would be fantastic, Shamus."

"Yeah, if he pays me."

"Is the pot empty?" The pot was where they stored the extra coins they were able to steal. Their stash was hidden beneath a floorboard in the far corner of the room and to be used for food on those days when they couldn't steal enough for a meal or pick a pocket.

"Fraid so." Shamus nodded.

Tiki pulled the coins that she'd collected at the World's End from her pocket. They made a soft clinking noise as she laid them on the table, the silver, copper and bronze gleaming in the light of the candle. "There was a pretty good crowd at the pub tonight, but I had a close call with MacGregor."

"You didn't try to pick MacGregor's pocket, did you?" Toots gasped.

"MacGregor is vicious when he drinks," Fiona said in a quiet voice. "I saw him beat a woman once."

"I didn't try." Tiki grinned proudly. "I did it." She held up two gold quid. "But he chased me out of the pub and I hopped a carriage that took the long way home. That's why I fell asleep." She nodded at the coins. "We can use some of this for food but I'm going to go to the apothecary up in Leicester Square first thing in the morning and get something for Clara's cough." She nodded towards the sleeping little girl. "She doesn't sound very good."

"She waited up a long time for you to come home, Teek." Fiona's eyebrows drew down in a worried expression. "But she was so tired she finally fell asleep."

“Well, that’s what we all should be doing,” Tiki said. “It’s got to be close to two in the morning.” She made a shooing motion with her hand. “Toots, get back to bed.” Toots scrambled across the hard floor to his pile of blankets on the opposite side of the stove from where Fiona had been huddled. “We can talk in the morning.”

Fiona followed the boy and crawled back into her own ragged pile of blankets, pulling them over her shoulders with a shiver. Tiki waited for Toots to settle in. It wasn’t long before snores emitted from his corner of the room.

“I’ve done something,” she said in a low voice.

“What is it this time?” Shamus asked. “Or should I ask *who*? Did you find another orphan to live with us?”

A year ago, she’d found Toots in Trafalgar Square. Thin as a rail, his mother had kicked him out of the house because she had too many other children to feed and care for. But even though he’d been starving, he’d offered to share half his apple with her. She’d brought him home to Charing Cross that day.

“And what if I did?” Tiki said. “I’m thankful every day that you and Fiona had it in your hearts to help me.” After her parent’s death Tiki had been sent to live with her mother’s sister, Aunt Trudy, and her aunt’s banker husband. It had only been a matter of months before it became evident to Tiki that the well-to-do veneer of her uncle’s position hid a dark side to his personality. Her skin crawled with fear as she thought of him watching her each night as he drank his whiskey. There was a lust in his eyes that didn’t need words to define. Even now she could hear the creak of the floorboards as his uneven footsteps staggered down the hallway, searching for her.

She had fled from their house in fear for her own safety, intending to seek shelter with Mrs. Adelaide Bishop, a dear friend of her mother's. But upon her unannounced arrival on Mrs. Bishop's stoop she learned the woman had also died of the fever two weeks prior.

Unsure of where to go, but knowing she had to hide from her uncle, Tiki had gone to King's Cross railway station. There, the small valise she had taken with her from her uncle's was stolen and she found herself alone, struggling daily to find a way to fill her stomach. That's where she'd met Fiona. The girl, only a year younger than Tiki, had shown her how to spot a mark and how to bump their arm so they didn't realize their pockets were being picked.

A few weeks later, Fiona took Tiki to meet her cousin Shamus and showed her the hidden little room they shared in Charing Cross.

"But it's not a who this time." Tiki lowered her voice. "I took something."

"Oh," Shamus perked up. "Something good?"

Tiki nodded at Shamus through the dim light. "Yes, it's something completely brilliant if I don't get caught." She hesitated, then added, "This could be our way out of Charing Cross, Shamus. Into a real home."

He tilted his head at her and Tiki could make out the frown on his face. "Blimey, Teek, what'd you do? Steal the crown jewels?" His teeth flashed as he grinned at his own joke.

"Next best thing," Tiki whispered. A thrill of excitement shot through her as she waited for his reaction. "Belongs to Queen Vic, herself."

Shamus' brow drew down in a surprised frown. "Are you serious?"

There was a rustle of cloth as Fiona wrapped a dirty blanket around her shoulders and crept closer.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she whispered. She turned big eyes up to Tiki. “What’d you steal, Teek?”

Tiki recounted her tale of hitching a ride on the boot and waking up at an unknown mansion. “I didn’t realize it at the time,” she whispered, “but the blokes in the room with me were *Prince* Arthur and *Prince* Leo and for a minute the Queen herself was there.” Tiki giggled and her voice danced with excitement now that she was out of danger. The story sounded fantastical even to her ears.

“So you took the ring?” Shamus asked. He spoke with a mixture of disbelief and awe. “And nobody saw you? Nobody knew you were there?”

“Well, a couple maids and a little boy saw me snatch the bread, but nobody saw me take the ring.” She grinned at him. “I was like a bloody ghost.”

“We ate the Queen’s bread?” Fiona breathed.

“An’ what’d you do with it?” Shamus said.

“I hid it. That way we’ll be safe until we can figure out a way to sell the thing.” She looked over at both of them through the flickering candlelight. “That is, if we can figure out how to sell it without getting caught.”

“I’ve heard Rieker talk of a bloke over in Cheapside who buys things,” Shamus said.

Tiki grabbed his arm. “No. Not Rieker.”

“Why not?” Fiona asked. “He’s practically a legend. I heard he knows everyone.” She gave Tiki a lopsided grin. “Plus, he’s handsome.”

“I don’t know...there’s just something...” Tiki hesitated. “I don’t trust him. He’s been around too much, lately. He was even up at The World’s End tonight. It’s like he’s following me.” Her voice wavered with concern. “I’m afraid he wants part of our territory.”

“The Queen’s ring,” Shamus repeated with a dreamy air. “How much do you suppose the thing’s worth?”

“I don’t know,” Tiki replied. “Maybe a hundred quid, eh? Enough to rent a nice flat over in Kensington and put some food in the cupboards, anyway.” She nudged Shamus with her elbow and grinned. “We could pretend to be brothers and sisters. I could be a governess and Fi can be a seamstress. Toots will go to school and you could work for Mr. Binder. We’ll be a family, just like we’ve always planned.”

Tiki gazed around the familiar room as her words seemed to echo in her ears. They’d talk about leaving Charing Cross before, never really believing it could happen, but why couldn’t their dream come true? She’d stolen something that would let them escape their daily struggle to survive. Now all she needed to was sell the ring.

Odd historical things I learned while writing

Shades of Milk and Honey

By Mary Robinette Kowal

When one decides to write a historical novel, even if it is a fantasy, one must brace oneself for copious amounts of research. Research which feels as though it will never end. The curious thing about all this research is that much of it does not show up on the page. While writing *Shades of Milk and Honey*, set in an alternate England in 1814, I learned a number of things which surprised me. Here are a few my favorites.

What it means when a letter was crossed.

In Jane Austen's day, sending letters was expensive and you were charged for the number of pages. The way to avoid a hefty postage fee was to write the letter, then turn the page 90 degrees and write across the previously written lines. (Trivia note: I had a reference to a crossed letter in *Shades of Milk and Honey* but cut it because it was too hard to explain and the fact that it was crossed wasn't important to the story.) Curious about what a crossed letter looked like? Here's an example (<http://www.themorgan.org/collections/zoom.asp?id=443>) from Miss Austen herself in the Morgan collection.

There is no such thing as a left shoe.

Until about the 1850s, left and right shoes were identical. Only by wearing them would the shoe begin to acquire a left and right shape. When Louis XVIII was fleeing Napoleon in 1815 he said, "...it's my slippers that I regret most... Nobody understands what it means to lose slippers that have taken the mold of one's foot." While footwear is important, he might perhaps need to work on his priorities.

How to turn the table.

A formal dinner was a lengthy affair lasting several hours and had very rigid etiquette tied to it. Typically served in several courses, each course would consist of dishes already set upon the table. Gentlemen would be assigned to escort a lady to dinner, seating her on his right. He would help the lady with dishes and would converse with her during the first course. After the first course, all the dishes would be removed and replaced. A gentlemen would turn and converse with the lady on his left and vice versa. If you were pinned with an unfortunate conversationalist as a dinner partner, you couldn't wait to turn the table.

Hello is not a word.

I am going to let you know a shameful thing. I slipped when writing *Shades of Milk and Honey* and use "Hello" in the first chapter of the novel but it's not a word in 1814. I had rooted it out everywhere else and didn't notice this one until recording the audio book. In 1814, the word "halloo" was most often used to call hounds. "Hullo" was usually an expression of surprise. Although "hello" is recorded as early as 1830, it didn't

become a standard greeting until the invention of telephone. To greet someone during the Regency one says “Good day” or perhaps “Good evening.”

(Note: for the trade paperback, we fixed this. See if you can spot the change!)

Looking ahead to *Glamour in Glass*.

One of the things that’s tricky about writing historical fiction like *Shades of Milk and Honey* is getting the vocabulary right. There are a lot of words which are obviously anachronisms but there others which aren’t. Short of looking up every word in a novel, there’s no way to really know if a seemingly innocuous word like “hello” exists yet. So here’s my plan for *Glamour in Glass*.

I’ve created a list of all the words that are in the collected works of Jane Austen to use for my spellcheck dictionary. It will flag any word that she didn’t use and I can then look those up to see if it was in use in 1815. It also includes some of Miss Austen’s specific spellings like “shew” and “chuse.”

It won’t be perfect. For instance it won’t flag words whose meanings have changed, like “check” or “staid” but it will be an improvement.

For the curious, there are 14,793 words on the list.

Shades of Milk and Honey

By Mary Robinette Kowal

Copyright © 2010 by Mary Robinette Kowal

Mary Robinette Kowal was the 2008 recipient of the Campbell Award for Best New Writer and a Hugo nominee for her story “Evil Robot Monkey.” Her short fiction has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, Asimov’s, and several Year’s Best anthologies. Mary is an active member of Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America and currently serves on the Board of Directors.

A professional puppeteer and voice actor, she grew up in North Carolina and spent five years touring nationally with puppet theaters. She wrote *Shades of Milk and Honey* while living in Iceland and performing on the hit television show *Lazytown*. Mary currently lives in Portland, OR with her husband Rob and nine manual typewriters.

Chapter One

Jasmine and Honeysuckle

The Ellsworths of Long Parkmead had the regard of their neighbours in every respect. The Honourable Charles Ellsworth, though a second son, through the generosity of his father had been entrusted with an estate in the neighbourhood of Dorchester. It was well appointed and used only enough glamour to enhance its natural grace, without overlaying so much illusion as to be tasteless. His only regret, for the estate was a fine one, was that it was entailed, and as he had only two daughters, his elder brother's son stood next in line to inherit it. Knowing that, he took pains to set aside some of his income each annum for the provision of his daughters.

The sum was not so large as he wished it might be, but he hoped it would prove enough to attract appropriate husbands for his daughters. Of his younger daughter, Melody, he had no concerns, for she had a face made for fortune. His older daughter, Jane, made up for her deficit of beauty with rare taste and talent in the womanly arts. Her skill with glamour, music, and painting was surpassed by none in their neighbourhood and together lent their home the appearance of wealth far beyond their means. But he knew well how fickle young men's hearts were. His own wife, while young, had seemed all that was desirable, but as her beauty faded she had become a fretting invalid. He still cherished her from habit, but often he wished that she had somewhat more sense.

And so, Jane was his chief concern, and he was determined to see her settled before his passing. Surely some young man would see past her sallow complexion and

flat hair of unappealing mousey brown. Her nose was overlong, though he fancied that in certain lights it served as an outward sign of her strength of character. Mr. Ellsworth fingered his own nose, wishing that he had something more to bequeath to Jane than such an appendage. He slashed at the grass with his walking stick and turned to his elder daughter as they walked through the maze comprising the heart of the shrubbery on the south side of the house. "Had you heard that Lady FitzCameron's nephew is to be stationed in our town?"

"No." Jane adjusted the shawl about her shoulders.

"They must be pleased to see him."

"Indeed, I believe that Lady FitzCameron will extend her stay rather than returning to London as she had planned." He tugged at his waistcoat and attempted to speak idly. "Young Livingston has been made a captain, I understand."

"So young? He must have acquitted himself ably in His Majesty's navy, then." Jane knelt by a rosebush and sniffed the glory of the soft pink petals. The sunlight reflected off of the plant, bringing a brief bloom to her cheeks.

"I thought perhaps to invite the family for a strawberry-picking Thursday next."

Jane threw her head back and laughed. It was a lovely laugh, at odds with her severe countenance. "Oh, Papa. Are you matchmaking again? I thought Lady FitzCameron had it set in her mind that the captain was to marry Miss FitzCameron." He stabbed the ground with his walking stick. "No. I am merely trying to be a good neighbour. If you have so little regard for the FitzCamerons as to shun their relations, then I have misjudged your character."

Jane's eyes twinkled and she pecked him on the cheek. "I think a strawberry-picking party sounds delightful. I am certain that the FitzCamerons will thank you for your courtesy to them."

The tall yew hedges hugged the path on either side of them, shielding them from view of the house. Overhead, the sky arched in a gentle shell of blue. Mr. Ellsworth walked in companionable silence beside his daughter, plotting ways to bring her together with Captain Livingston. They turned the last corner of the maze and went up the Long Walk to the house. On the steps, he paused. "You know I only want the best for you, my dear."

Jane looked down. "Of course, Papa."

"Good." He squeezed her arm. "I shall see to the strawberries, then, to make certain they will be suitably ripe for next week." He left her on the steps and went to the hill on the east side of the house, making plans for the party as he walked.

Jane folded her shawl over her arm, still thinking of her father's thinly veiled plans. He meant well, but would surely tip his hand to Captain Livingston, who was, after all, several years her junior. She had first met Henry Livingston before the war broke out when he wintered with Lady FitzCameron while his parents were away on the continent.

He had been an attractive boy, with large dark eyes and a thick crop of unruly black hair. Though a favourite of Lady FitzCameron, he had not been back to the estate since, and it was hard to imagine him as a grown man. She shook her head, settled the folds of her muslin frock, and entered the drawing room.

The smell of jasmine nearly overpowered her, burning her nose and making her eyes water. Her younger sister, Melody, who wove folds of glamour in the corner, was evidently the source of the overwhelming aroma.

“Melody, what in heaven’s name are you doing?”

Melody jumped and dropped the folds of glamour in her hands; they dissolved back into the ether from whence she had pulled them. “Oh, Jane. When I visited Lady FitzCameron with Mama, she conjured the loveliest hint of jasmine in the air. It was so elegant and . . . I cannot understand how she managed such a subtle touch.”

Jane shook her head and went to open the window so the jasmine fragrance could dissipate with more speed. “My dear, Lady FitzCameron had the best tutors as a girl, including, I believe, the renowned German glamourist Herr Scholes. It is hardly surprising that she can manage such delicate folds.” When Jane let her vision shift to the ether, so that the physical room faded from her view, the lingering remnants of glamour were far too bulky for the effect that Melody had been trying to attain. Jane took the folds between her fingers and thinned them to a gossamer weight which she could barely feel. When she stretched them out, they spanned the corner in a fine web. Once she anchored the folds to the corner, the glamour settled into the room, vanishing from view. The gentle scent of honeysuckle filled the air, as if from a sprig of flowers. It took so little effort that she barely felt light-headed.

Melody squinted at the corner where Jane had left the web, as if trying to see the invisible folds.

“Please do not squint, dear. It is unbecoming.” She ignored Melody’s scowl and turned back to the web. Not for the first time, she wondered if Melody were nearsighted. She could never handle fine work, even with needle point, and her glamour seemed limited to only the broadest strokes.

“What does it matter?” Melody threw herself on the sofa. “I have no hope of catching a husband. I am so abysmally poor at all of the arts.”

Jane could not help herself. She laughed at her sister. “You have nothing to fear. Had I half your beauty I would have more beaux than the largest dowry could settle upon me.” She turned to straighten one of her watercolours on the north wall.

“Mr. Dunkirk sends his regards.”

Jane was thankful that her back was to her sister, for the sudden flush she felt would have given her away. She tried to hide the growing attachment she felt towards Mr. Dunkirk, particularly since he seemed to have a higher regard for Melody, but his gentle manner drew her to him.

“I hope he is well.” She was pleased with the steadiness in her voice.

“He asked if he could call this afternoon.” Melody sighed.

“That is why I wanted to freshen the drawing room.”

The wistfulness in Melody’s voice would only be appropriate if she had reached an understanding with him. Jane turned to her sister, scrutinizing her countenance.

A gentle glow suffused Melody’s delicate features. She stared into the middle distance as if her cornflower blue eyes were blinded by a radiant image. Jane had seen the same expression on her own plainer face in unguarded moments. She could only hope

that Melody had been more cautious in company. She smiled gently at her sister. “Shall I help you set the drawing room to rights, then?”

“Would you?”

“Of course.”

The drawing room already had a simple theme of palm trees and egrets designed to complement its Egyptian revival furniture. For the better part of an hour, Jane and Melody twisted and pulled folds of glamour out of the ether. Some of the older threads of glamour in the palm trees had become frayed, making the images lose their resolution. In other places, Jane added more depth to the illusion by creating a breeze to ruffle the fronds of the glamour. Though her breath came quickly and she felt light-headed with the effort of placing so many folds, the effect was well worth such a trifling strain.

Placed in pairs in the corners of the room, the trees seemed to brush the coffered ceiling, accenting its height with their graceful forms. Between each tree, an egret posed in a pool of glamour, waiting an eternity for the copper fish hinted at below its reflection. Simpler folds brought the warm glow of an Egyptian sunset to the room, and the subtle scent of honeysuckle kissed the breeze.

When all was settled, Jane seated herself at the pianoforte and pulled a fold of glamour close about her. She played a simple rondo, catching the notes in the loose fold; when she reached the point where the song repeated, she stopped playing and tied the glamour off. Captured by the glamour, the music continued to play, wrapping around to the beginning

of the song with only a tiny pause at the end of the fold. With care, she clipped the small silence at the end of the music and tied it more firmly to the beginning, so the piece repeated seamlessly. Then she stretched the fold of glamour to gossamer thinness until the rondo sounded as if it played in the far distance.

The door to the drawing room opened. Melody leapt to her feet with a naked expression of welcome on her face.

Jane rose slowly, trying to attain a more seemly display. She placed her hand on the pianoforte as the room spun about her with the lingering effects of working glamour.

But only their father entered the room. "Hullo, my dears." The plum brocade of his waistcoat strained across his ample middle. He looked around the drawing room in evident plea sure. "Are we expecting company?"

Melody said, "Mr. Dunkirk said he would honour us with a visit this afternoon."

"Did he?" Her father looked befuddled. "But I saw him not fifteen minutes ago passing through our fields with the FitzCamerons. They looked for all the world as if they were going hunting. Are you certain you did not mistake his meaning?"

Melody's face soured. "His meaning was clear. But perhaps he preferred to spend the afternoon in the company of a lady than a farmer's daughter."

Jane winced as Melody flew from the room.

"Good heavens. What has gotten into the child?" Mr. Ellsworth turned to Jane with his eyebrows high. "Does she think that the whole neighbourhood must dance attendance to her whims?"

“She is young, and . . .” Jane hesitated to commit her sister’s potential indiscretion to words, but as her sister had not taken her into confidence, and as Jane feared for Melody’s state of mind, she continued on. “I fear she may be developing an attachment to Mr. Dunkirk.”

“Does he return it?”

“I do not know.” Jane plucked at the waist of her frock.

“Certainly his behaviour has been above reproach in every instance of which I am aware.”

Mr. Ellsworth nodded, evidently satisfied with that reassurance.

“Then we must hope that Melody will not embarrass herself while we wait for this fancy to pass.”

The front door slammed.

Jane hurried to the window and peered out. Melody strode across their lawn, heading for the fields between their home and Banbree Manor. Jane caught her breath. “I fear that is what she has set out to do.”

Her father looked over Jane’s shoulder. “I will go fetch her before she can damage our neighbour’s good opinion of her.”

Jane nodded, though she wanted to tell her father to let Melody do as she would. Let the headstrong girl make a fool of herself. The rational part of Jane knew that Melody was not her obstacle to Mr. Dunkirk’s affection. Jane was too plain and too quiet to engender any interest in him or any other gentleman.

Jane turned from the window and sat at the pianoforte. She loosened the fold around it, silencing the distant song. Quietly, she began to play, losing herself in the

music. Her fingers played across the keys and stroked thin folds of glamour on the ebony and ivory surfaces. Colours swirled around her in answer to the sound. She welcomed the lightheadness, which came with too much glamour, as a distraction from her cares.

When the front door opened, Jane kept her attention on the pianoforte; she did not want to speak with Melody and have to comfort her. But that was unjust; Melody could not know how her actions affected Jane. Bringing the song to a close, she looked up as the colours around her faded.

Mr. Dunkirk stood in the door to the drawing room. His face was alight with wonder. "Forgive me, Miss Ellsworth. I had told your sister I would call, and am later than I intended."

Jane's heart pounded with more than the effort of glamour, and a flush of warmth flooded her face. "Mr. Dunkirk. You have just missed her; she has gone for a walk with my father." Jane rose with care, pretending that gray blobs did not swarm in her sight. She would not swoon in front of him.

"But please be welcome. May I offer you tea or a brandy?"

"Thank you." He accepted the brandy she offered and raised the glass to her. "I had no idea you were such an accomplished musician and glamourist."

Jane looked away. "It is an idle amusement, sir."

"Nonsense. Music and the other womanly arts are what brings comfort to a home." He looked at the palm trees and egrets adorning the drawing room. "I hope to have a home such as this one day."

Jane put her hand on the piano to steady herself, keenly aware that she was alone with him. "Indeed," she murmured. "Though I would venture to say that Robinsford Abbey is most gracious."

"But it lacks that comfort which a wife with the gift of glamour might bring." He inhaled the scent of honeysuckle and exhaled it in a sigh. "Other men might seek a lovely face, but I should think that they would consider exquisite taste the higher treasure. Beauty will fade, but not a gift such as this."

"Do you not think that glamour might be learned, whereas beauty is innate?"

"Glamour, yes. But not taste, I think." He smiled and inclined his head. "It was a conversation close to this topic which prompted my tardy arrival here. Have you had occasion to meet Mr. Vincent?"

"I'm afraid you have the better of me."

"Ah. I thought Miss Melody might have mentioned him. Lady FitzCameron has retained his services to create a glamural for her dining hall. He is a fascinating fellow, who studied with Herr Scholes and has taken commissions from the Prince Regent. Stunning talent, really."

"Did Melody meet him, then?" It seemed odd that her sister would fail to mention it. Visitors to their neighbourhood were rare enough to be newsworthy, but to have such an accomplished glamourist in the vicinity was a significant event.

“I thought they met, but perhaps I am mistaken. In any case, Mr. Vincent had much to say on the subject of glamour, which I think you might find to be compelling arguments in my favour.”

The front door opened again, and Melody flung the door to the drawing room wide. Her face was red and stained with tears. When she saw Mr. Dunkirk, she uttered a cry of dismay and fled the room.

Jane closed her eyes. Poor Melody. What must she think? To see Jane quite alone with a man for whom Melody so clearly had an attachment must seem as a betrayal. When Jane opened her eyes, he had set his glass down to greet Mr. Ellsworth.

Excusing herself, Jane said, “I feel that I must look in on Melody.”

“I hope she has not suffered an accident,” Mr. Dunkirk said.

Jane’s father harrumphed and mumbled that Melody had twisted her ankle while walking, to which Mr. Dunkirk replied, “Then I will leave you to tend to her.” He took his leave, only pausing at the door to say, “May I call again?”

“Of course!” Mr. Ellsworth beamed. “Come whenever you like.”

“Then I will see you soon.” Mr. Dunkirk bowed. “Your daughter is a credit to you, sir.”

When the front door closed, Mr. Ellsworth said, “Well.

Melody needn’t have worried after all. ‘A credit.’ “

Jane smiled. “Indeed.”

Still glowing with the words of Mr. Dunkirk’s praise, Jane went abovestairs and knocked on the door of Melody’s room. Such a small thing, those words, but it was the first

time she could recall coming to his special notice. He had always been courtesy itself when in her company, but her attachment to him grew more from how he treated others than from any sense of his having regard for her.

She leaned her head against the door, listening for sounds within the chamber.

“Melody?”

“Go away.”

Jane sighed. “Dear. Let me come in.”

The silence stretched out, during which Jane had time to examine the wood grain on the door and the age worn in the softened edges of its panels. “Melody?”

Cloth rustled within, and the key turned in the lock, unlatching the door. As Jane opened the door, she was in time to see Melody fling herself artlessly upon the bed, where the rumpled spread shewed how she had spent the time since Mr. Dunkirk’s visit. Her golden curls lay across the bed in an intricate lacework, and tears glittered on the ends of her lashes like diamonds.

Jane closed the door behind her and leaned against it, regarding her sister. “Mr. Dunkirk sends his apologies for his tardiness.”

Melody sat up with alarming speed. Her face flushed.

“Is he still here?”

“No. Papa let him understand that you had twisted your ankle while out walking.”

Jane sat next to her sister.

Placing her hands over her eyes, Melody groaned and fell back on the bed. “Now he thinks me clumsy as well as overexcited.”

“I am certain he does not.” Jane wiped her sister’s brow, which was hot with the force of her excitement. Reaching into the ether, Jane conjured a cooling breeze to soothe her.

Melody pulled her hands away from her eyes, though she kept her lids shut and turned her face toward the breeze.

“But he does. I stammer and blush when he is present. La! Do not tell me you have failed to notice.” She opened her eyes and glared up at Jane.

“Until today, I had not the faintest notion that you had any affection for Mr. Dunkirk beyond that of a neighbour.

Indeed, I had thought you were no more fond of him than of one of our uncles.” Jane smoothed the folds of her skirt, praying that her own countenance was not as transparent to feeling as Melody’s. “Have you an understanding with Mr. Dunkirk?”

Melody burst into laughter. “An understanding? My dear Jane, Mr. Dunkirk is gentleness embodied. He is grace and elegance and all that is good in a man, but he is also too conscious of propriety to betray anything beyond courtesy. This is why I had such hopes when he said he would come to call today. I had hoped that perhaps he might have begun to pay notice to me as myself instead of as simply the daughter of his neighbour.” She groaned and rolled over, burying her face in her arms. “What did you speak of while I was out acting the fool?”

“Very little. Music. Glamour. Lady FitzCameron’s glamourist.” Jane waited to see if Melody would speak of meeting Mr. Vincent, but her sister charged ahead with her litany of woes.

“You see! I could not speak with him of any of those. I am talentless.” She clenched her fingers in her hair, and for a moment Jane feared that Melody would pull her own hair out by the roots.

Such were Melody’s torments that Jane gave away the comfort that she had taken for herself. “Not true. Ask Papa what he said about you.”

In an instant, Melody turned over, her eyes a vivid, sparkling blue. “What did he say? Do not teaze me, dear sister.”

“He said, ‘Your daughter is a credit to you.’ “

Melody’s face lit with an inner glow of pleasure, but it faded quickly. “He was surely speaking of you.”

“I was there, Melody. Why would he speak of me as if I were not present?” And as Jane spoke, she realized that it was true. She had taken Mr. Dunkirk’s words to her heart as if he had spoken of her, but he surely had not. Who else could he have meant but Melody? Had his compliment been intended for Jane, he would have said, “*You* are a credit to your father.” There could be no doubt that he had meant Melody. Jane reached out and tousled Melody’s hair to mask the wet disappointment that seeped through her.

“You see?”

Melody sat and flung her arms around Jane. “Oh, thank you. Thank you for telling me.”

“Of course. We must find these small comforts where we may.” Jane held her sister and wondered where she would find her own small comfort. She reached for a new

topic, to push away the pain of this one. “And now, should I chide you for not telling me of Lady FitzCameron’s glamourist?”

Melody pulled back, her eyes wide with guilt. “Oh, Jane! I am so sorry. When Mr. Dunkirk said he would call, all else slipped my mind. Though, truly, there is little to tell.”

“Well. What sort of man is he?”

“More bear than man, really. La! He said barely two words the whole visit. Lady FitzCameron says that he is frightfully clever, but I did not see any signs of it.”

“Fortunately, one does not need to speak to weave glamour.”

Jane sighed. “I should like to have had the training that he has had.”

Melody leaned against Jane, wrinkling her nose. “See! You chide me, but you already know more of him than I do.”

“You were too distracted by Mr. Dunkirk, I daresay.”

When Melody blushed, her infatuation was writ large on her cheeks. “Oh, Jane. Is Mr. Dunkirk not the most handsome, most admirable man you have ever met?”

“Yes.” Jane hugged her sister, so that her own telling countenance was hidden.

“Yes, he is.”

Prospero Regained

By L. Jagi Lamplighter

Copyright © 2011 by L. Jagi Lamplighter

Prospero Regained is story of Miranda, Prospero's daughter, from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It's now; Prospero has been kidnapped and held by demons in Hell, and Miranda—along with her younger siblings (who Shakespeare didn't know about)—is trying to rescue their famous paterfamilias. And Miranda has, for centuries, longed for the joys of wedded bliss, and yet knows that being a maiden dedicated to the Goddess, status that is central to her being, is itself a state of grace. Saving her father and finding her bliss is her story...

Chapter One

Once More Back into the Swamp

“What we need now is a cheer weasel!” My brother Erasmus pulled his boot out of the thick ooze with a sucking pop. Mud splattered across his dark green breeches, his justacorps, and the hem of Mab’s trench coat. Erasmus winced. “Sorry about that, Company Detective. This not-letting-go-of-each-other business makes things rather cramped.” He lifted Mab’s right hand, which he held in his own. “Still, beats being led astray by demonic illusions, I suppose.”

“What in tarna ...” Mab muttered in his Bronx accent. He glanced nervously at the infernal landscape that stretched around us in all directions: the dreary swamps, the cypresses dripping with dead moss, the lurid red sky, the Wall of Flame burning in the far distance. His left palm, slick with sweat, was slippery in my grasp. “What in Creation is a ‘cheer weasel’?”

“It’s something Mephisto says when people are glum: ‘Nothing a good whack with a cheer weasel won’t fix!’” Erasmus tentatively stepped onto a shaggy gray hummock. The lump of dead grass sank beneath his weight. Pulling his foot back, which now dripped with more goo, he made a face. “I have no idea if it’s a modern pop- culture reference or an invention of my brother’s deranged brain. Either way, I think I might benefit from a whack of the old cheer weasel about now. Might increase the appeal of being trapped in Hell, searching for my lost family members with my brother the former pope, an Aerie One trapped in a human body who thinks he’s

Humphrey Bogart, and the sister I hate.”

“Not Bogart.” Mab glanced up at his fedora— he would have pulled it low over his eyes, but he did not have a free hand. Under his breath, he muttered, “Well ... maybe Philip Marlowe.”

Erasmus, Mab, Gregor, and I moved slowly through the Swamp of Uncleaness— where dwelt the souls of those who had fallen prey to the sin of lust. Walking hand in hand was easy enough on a paved road. When the ground underfoot was spongy and sinking, it became both treacherous and aggravating, particularly for those of us who were in the middle. We could neither wipe sweat from our faces nor pinch our noses to block out the horrendous stench.

It was so hot here that steam rose from beneath our feet. Apparently, there was a reason why this place was called the Inferno.

Worse than the stench were the sinners themselves. Yet, we could not lower our eyes and ignore them, as if wearing imaginary blinders. Instead, we had to peer into every nook and cranny, searching for our missing brother.

And our presence here was entirely my fault.

On my other side, my brother Gregor stuck his staff, a length of ebony carved with blood red runes, under his arm, and gave my hand a comforting squeeze. His crimson cardinal’s robes, with their billowing half cape, stood out against the landscape, a bright spot in the literally God- forsaken gloom.

For most of his life, Gregor had been a bulky, almost brutish, bully of a man, consumed by hatred, mainly toward the Protestants. Our youngest brother Ulysses, to save himself from the demon Abaddon, imprisoned Gregor for many years. Yesterday,

we discovered this and rescued him. We found him a changed man. The new, more contemplative Gregor was slender. He had dark, shoulder-length wavy hair and a calm, almost saintly, expression. What sparked this change in Brother Gregor, we did not yet know. I had to admit to myself that I was curious about what had happened during his imprisonment to bring about this rather dramatic transformation. It had to be something more significant than losing four stone of weight.

Gregor slipped his arm up so that our elbows were hooked together. This freed his hands, which he cupped around his mouth with its close-trimmed black beard.

“Mephisto!” Gregor shouted for the umpteenth time. Lowering his hands, he spoke, his voice hoarse and breathy due to a magical mishap in his youth. “I do not see him anywhere. Are you certain he is here, Miranda?” Then, looking across the swamp, he called out again, “Mephisto! Mephistopheles Prospero!”

“No sign of him, Ma’am. I’m with Father Gregor, here. Are we sure this is where the Harebrain landed?” Mab muttered. His “this” sounded like “dis.”

“In the vision the angel showed me, his besetting sin was lust.” Sweat ran into my eyes. I blinked rapidly. The heat still was oppressive, but the memory of the angel and the sense of peace she brought momentarily lifted my spirits. “That means the Hellwinds would have dropped him here. So, he’s here ... somewhere. Unless he’s found his way out on his own.”

We glanced across the tremendous expanse of swamp that stretched out in every direction as far as the eye could see.

“It’s hopeless,” sighed Erasmus.

Around us, fetid quagmires, dotted by bracken-covered islands, stretched beneath a lurid sky crisscrossed with bands of steely gray. Souls damned for excessive lust floundered in the muck, crying out for succor—until they were dragged down by their more licentious compatriots. On the larger islands, groups of the damned engaged in massive orgies, resembling a battle more than any erotic acts. Others clambered onto smaller islands, upon which great corpulent demons disported with them. On one nearby isle, a six-horned demon whipped the damned until they dropped to their knees and performed acts of obscene obeisance.

The whole sordid scene, with its noxious gases that left the four of us reeling and retching, was made even worse because we now knew that the liquid in the swamp was not water but the accumulated drippings of the wanton desires of those on earth. Qualities that were merely spiritual upon earth had a physical nature here. Just the memory of having had to swim through the stuff left me queasy, and here I was, voluntarily walking into it again.

I would not have done it, not for any price, had there been another way to find my missing siblings and rescue our father. But there was not, and I could not leave my family stranded in Hell forever.

Gritting my teeth, I choked back my gag reflex and forced myself to scour the unseemly landscape, searching each passion-contorted face for the features of my brother Mephisto ... the brother who held the crystal ball that could lead us to the others and to Father.

Beside me, Gregor bent his head in low, breathy prayer, “Lord Jesus, hear my prayer. Help us in our hour of need.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Erasmus scoffed. He stood ankle deep in reddish mud waiting for the rest of us to jump onto the next hummock. His staff was strapped diagonally across his back. His Urim gauntlet hung on his belt. When we first set out, he had worn it in order to be ready in case of attack. But since he could not use the Staff of Decay while standing so close to the rest of us, he eventually decided there was no point in wearing the hot, unyielding gauntlet. “God does not heed the prayers of those in Hell.”

“Why shouldn’t He heed ours?” I countered. “We are not damned. We’re still alive.”

“Gregor may not be damned,” Erasmus granted, “but sisters who betray their family are another issue.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Surely you don’t expect me to believe you summoned up the Hellwinds by mistake? I will remind you that Abaddon warned us there was a traitor in our family.”

“Careful, Professor Prospero!” Mab jerked his head, trying to push back the brim of his fedora, which was now falling across his eyes. “It does not pay to listen to demons!”

“That’s what you told us,” Erasmus replied mildly, “right before your Miss Miranda, here, scattered our family to the four quarters of Hell. Or perhaps I should say, to the Nine Circles of Hell.”

“It’s not like she did it on purpose,” Mab countered.

“I fear, Spirit Detective, my dear sister has deceived you as to her nature and intent. Either that, or you plotted with her.” Erasmus turned his head and regarded our other brother through his lank dark hair. “Really, Gregor. Out of our whole family, the only other person you managed to save was Miranda? Couldn’t you have given her a push and

rescued someone worthwhile?”

The terrible regret that had tormented me ever since I accidentally summoned up the Hellwinds, which caused us to lose six of my siblings—seven if one counted Caliban—gave way to wrath. Anger rushed through me like a tidal wave beating against an unprotected shore.

Surely, there was no one in all the world as horrible as Erasmus! It seemed a cruel irony that Theophrastus, whom I loved so dearly, had been ripped from my grasp and carried away, while Erasmus, of all people, had been saved.

Erasmus clearly felt the same way about me as well.

“I saved whomever I could,” Gregor replied gravelly. He nodded toward Mab and me, his silky black hair spilling over his crimson-clad shoulders. “Clearly the hand of Providence was upon us. Without Miranda, we would be lost. She is the only one who can see through the illusionary pleasure garden that lies over this Circle of Hell. It befuddles us whenever we are not touching her, leading us astray. Without her, we would have lost our way an hour ago.”

“I like the pleasure garden,” Erasmus grumbled. He released Mab’s hand and gazed around at the alternate landscape. Mab quickly took the opportunity to use his free hand to adjust his hat and to wipe his face with a monogrammed handkerchief.

Erasmus smiled and drew a deep breath, as if inhaling fresh garden air. “It’s pleasant, with cool fountains and dancing girls wearing veils and harem outfits. The air smells like . . .” — he sniffed again— “cherry petals.”

I sighed, wishing that I, too, could experience that false utopia. I disliked the idea of volunteering to be fooled, but I was bone-weary and soul-tired. A few breaths of

something that did not smell noxious—even if it was actually noxious—would have been a welcome relief.

But, it was not to be. I could not see the infernal illusions. I was not sure why, but I suspected that it had something to do with the two wings of emerald light—like impressionistic brushstrokes—that stretched from the shoulders of my enchanted tea gown. Perhaps, if I stripped off my emerald dress and donned a garment not steeped in protective enchantments, I, too, could have fallen prey to the deceits of Hell. But I was not about to pull off my gown in the midst of the prison for the torment of the overly lustful.

Besides, it was not in my nature to deliberately fool myself. I had not served Eurynome, the White Lady of Spiral Wisdom, for five hundred years, just to throw away all the wisdom I had learned for a few moments of relief.

The memories of my years as a Handmaiden to the Unicorn and of the reason for my having been demoted from those honored ranks returned to me. A tear trickled down my cheek, but I could not free my hand to wipe it away.

Erasmus grabbed Mab again, smiling regretfully. “The real picture is far less rosy, of course. What appears to be a fountain is actually oozing sewage. The dancing girl is a giant, bloated spider dripping with poison.” He pointed at another island where a creature such as he described hung upon a gigantic web. “As to the smell ...”— he started to sniff the real air and coughed, nearly gagging—“I will not even begin to elaborate.”

“By Titania! Why a plea sure garden?” Mab scratched his eternal five o’clock shadow with the hand that clasped Erasmus’s. “It makes no sense!”

“Wish I knew,” Erasmus responded wistfully.

“Ma’am.” Mab pointed my hand at the horizon. “What’s that?”

In the distance, a single point of light shone above the swamp waters. Unlike the steely gray bands amidst the lurid reds of the sky, it was pure and silvery, like starlight. A spark of hope stirred within me, as if I beheld some fragile and heavenly thing that gave wings to my heart.

“Beware,” Mab growled. “Could be a trick.”

“It is no trick,” Gregor replied. “It is holy.”

“How could there be something holy in Hell?” Erasmus scoffed, peering into the gloom. “It’s a will-o’-the-wisp, sent to lead us to our doom.”

“We’re already in Hell; how much more doomed could we be?” muttered Mab.

“There are worse places than this one.” Erasmus kicked the water. It splashed thickly, clinging to his shoe like gelatin.

“It is a holy light,” Gregor repeated, and he began to walk.

“How do you know?” asked Erasmus, as we waded back into the swamp, all still holding hands.

Gregor gave him a grave, contemplative look. “What worries me is how you could not know.”

Warily, we approached the tiny silver star, sometimes walking along narrow islets, sometimes wading through mud, sometimes swimming in the awful goop itself. The silvery light proved to be farther away than it had first looked. After a time, it winked out.

“Told you,” Erasmus murmured, faintly amused. Gregor merely continued walking in the same direction.

The longer we walked, the heavier my heart became, until it seemed that my flagging spirits were physically dragging me deeper into the mire. I hated the putrid smell, the eerie green fires burning above the marshes, the gray light cast by the bands of steely luminescent clouds streaked across the ruddy skies, the acts of crudity taking place around us, all of which seemed to involve violence rather than pleasure. I, who so hated rapists—who had been robbed of all that was dearest to me by that violent crime—was trapped in the country of eternal rape. I felt like a claustrophobe whose path to salvation lay through a narrow closet the length of the Grand Canyon. I tried to avert my gaze, to look only at faces and not see what the bodies were doing, but it was a futile effort. Each time I failed, it was as if I came face-to-face again with the monster Osae and all that he had taken from me.

My fists clenched, making Mab and Gregor, whose hands I was holding, grunt in surprise. How it galled me to know that my attacker, this same Osae the Red, currently lay with his head resting upon the knee of Lilith, the demon Queen of Air and Darkness. She fed him dainty morsels from her own hand as a reward for his treatment of me—for having successfully robbed the Prospero Family of my Lady's counsel.

Without my Lady's help, how were we ever going to find Mephisto in this vast place?

But even that was easier to face than the question that truly worried me: what had happen to the others? Erasmus spoke the truth when he said that there were far worse places in Hell than this swamp. Where was Theo, and what awful torture was he suffering? And what condition would he be in when we found him?

To keep from dwelling on such painful matters, I let my mind roam, leaping from

subject to subject. I considered briefly a dozen topics: the fate of my father, what was happening back on earth, how Prospero, Inc., was doing back home; et cetera.

Eventually, all my thoughts drifted to the elf lord, Astreus Stormwind.

I pictured Astreus: his joyful triumphant laugh when I accepted the Book of the Sibyl from his hand; the outrage I had felt when he asked me to kill him and then would not explain himself; and the way his irises had burned with a golden fire when he admitted that, before the Fall, he had been an angel, and not just any angel but of the Eighth Choir of Cherubim. How eerie his gaze had been—that wild yet calculating fierceness—when we flew above his palace in Hyperboria, and he offered to drop me from a great height, so that, when my brains were dashed upon the ground, my soul might be sped upon its way to Heaven. Most of all, I recalled his parting words, as I stood before the storm playing my flute.

Because I would have my last memory be of the two things I most loved.

Surely, he did not mean me?

He was an elf. I was merely a mortal maid. Such a pairing was, in his own words, as likely as a hawk wedding a dove. He loathed me for being a slave owner because I would not break my magic flute and set free the Aerie Ones, Mab's race. He despised me so much for this—even though setting the Aerie Ones free would mean the death of millions of human beings—that he decided I was not worthy to slay him.

He could not have meant me.

If he did not, then to which two things did he refer: the sky and my flute? The sky and music?

The mere thought that he might have intended the words to include me caused my

cheeks to burn. How foolish could I be? For five hundred years, I had remained distant, pure, and virginal. Osea the Red had seen to it that I was no longer the latter but that did not excuse a flurry of foolish girlish emotions. That I might allow myself to become enamored again, so soon after my humiliation at the hands of the fake Ferdinand— which led to Osea's attack, to the loss of my Lady's patronage and of the Water of Life that keeps my family immortal, and, ultimately, to the destruction of the Family Prospero and all that we stand for—was shameful.

Of course, the fake Ferdinand had actually been Astreus, too, but in his demonic guise.

My only consolation was that, since I would never see Astreus again, this foolishness would soon pass. Surely, the image of the smiling elf, currently constantly reoccurring in my thoughts, must have been caused by the influence of this swamp. As soon as we departed from this horrible place of torture for the lustful, my mind would grow calm again.

And yet, as I remembered the tone of his voice when he had spoken those parting words, a strange and glorious tingle spread through me that reminded me strangely of joy. It did much to drive back the gloom.

Ahead stretched one last narrow island and then an expanse of oily murk dotted here and there by large rocks occupied by fat spiders or ugly lizards. A series of hummocks formed a bridge between our current location and this last isle. To cross them, we had to let go of each other and leap from one to another in single file.

My heart dropped at the thought that at the end of this next island, we would have

to climb back into the swamp. I shivered at the memory of that awful slime oozing along my skin. Muttering darkly under my breath, I leapt onto a hummock that stood between me and the island, cursing when I slipped and landed hard on my knee. As my other leg dropped into the slimy mire, something snaked out of the water and grabbed it, dragging me backward into the mire.

Greasy ooze slid over my face and skin. Grasping hands reached underneath my gown, groping at my thighs and tugging at my underclothes. I twisted angrily, my motions made awkward by the viscous liquid, and kicked free.

Through the semitransparent murk, I faced three leering dead men. The damned souls grabbed at me hungrily. Something ugly burned in their dead eyes. Behind them, a fat, grinning demon floated naked in the filth. I averted my eyes at once, but the brief horrifying glimpse remained burned in my mind, causing me to squirm and retch.

The demon wielded a cat-o'-nine-tails, with which he scoured the men. Whenever they approached me, the demon trembled with plea sure. Whenever the men lost their grip on me, he hissed, dismayed. When he cracked his whip, the men convulsed, crying out with pain and greater hunger. This, too, caused the demon convulsions of plea sure.

They came at me from three sides, seeking to crush me between their naked bodies. I kicked and punched, struck at them with my four- foot- long pinewood flute—the same instrument that had so recently betrayed me by accidentally summoning the Hellwinds. I grabbed for my fighting fan, but, the gunk around me kept drawing my shoulder bag away from my grasp, and I could not reach the weapon.

My attackers were weak, but my blows merely passed through them. Wherever the cloth of my enchanted emerald tea gown brushed them, how- ever, they were repelled,

making my elbows and knees better weapons than my fist or foot. As I turned, the mysterious winglike brushstrokes of emerald light coming from the shoulders of my dress touched the spirit-flesh of one of my attackers, causing him to reel back, screaming in pain.

I had a new weapon!

I spun about. The three men recoiled, their arms and faces burnt where my wings had caught them. Eagerly, I sought to take advantage of my momentary freedom and rise. My meager supply of air was nearly depleted. When I swam in the direction I thought was up, I found only more water and more copulating pairs, one or two of whom caught sight of my struggle and left their ravaged partners to pursue me.

Desperate for air, I circled in the murky slime, hoping for some glimpse of the lurid red of the sky. Spinning kept the damned souls at bay, for they quickly learned to fear the wings of emerald light, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw the demon itself approaching.

It floated forward, leering lasciviously. A twelve-foot tongue protruded from its wide mouth and snaked through the water. Slipping beneath my gown, the black tongue slithered up my stomach with its forked tip. I jerked backward, resisting the urge to cry out.

I turned to my Lady for help ... but of course, She was no longer there.

The urge to scream grew stronger, but I dared not open my mouth.

The memory of the taste— like fat drippings mixed with rotting corpses and feces— still filled me with horror.

Desperate, my heart pounding, I struck out. I struggled and swirled, badgering the

crude horror with my wings. The glowing emerald light seared its skin as it had the dead men's, but this merely excited the demon. Again and again, it lashed out with its terrible whip, causing the dead souls to twitch and dance. Despite the pain my wings had caused them, they clawed at the slime to get back to where I swam, as if only by doing so could they sate some terrible inner hunger that tormented them.

The curling tongue, prodding my flesh, sent shivers of revulsion across my body. It triggered memories of Osae's attack. That, combined with lack of oxygen, was too much. I panicked, thrashing wildly, my limbs flailing. I was sure I was about to lose consciousness and die, drowned in the discarded sludge of human lusts.

In my delirium, I dreamt that Mab hovered above the demon's head, his lead pipe rebounding off the creature's thick skull. Then everything went red, and the demon's face twisted and decayed before my hallucinating eyes.

Strong arms, unharmed by my wings, hauled me through the ooze. Gasping, I kicked and punched, determined to win my way to freedom. My elbow slammed into something, causing a loud crack and a scream.

Dumping me unceremoniously on the bracken, my brother Erasmus howled with pain, holding his bloody nose. His humming staff fell to one side, and all the bracken for ten feet in every direction turned gray and withered away to dust. I quickly jumped away from where the Staff of Decay buzzed unattended.

"You see what comes from helping her?" Erasmus shouted when he could speak. "I told you we should have left her down there! Would have served her right, ending her days as the doxy of a demon! She would have been following in her dam's footsteps!"

Behind him, Mab and Gregor emerged from the swamp, dripping with dead vegetable matter and scum. They both came over and touched me. Gregor gagged and let go again. He tried to wipe off the scum he could not see.

“Ugh, but that’s foul!” Mab swore, squatting beside me. “Don’t listen to him, Ma’am. He didn’t say any such thing— about leaving you in there, I mean. He just screamed like a banshee and leapt right in after you.”

“Oh, don’t tell her that! It will go to her head,” moaned Erasmus. He gingerly poked the swollen bridge of his nose with his pinky fingers. “Well,” he added presently, “I guess every cloud has its silver lining. When I came out of that ... stuff, I thought I would be ill again. But the pain in my nose had put that entirely out of my mind.”

“That was ... horrible,” I gasped for lack of a better word, shaking with revulsion. Frantically, I brushed at my body, trying to rid myself of the lingering goo. As I wrung the slime out of my hair, its shining black color gave me a shock. I had forgotten Erasmus had restored its original color. I had expected to see the silver- blond locks that had been mine for so many centuries.

Erasmus glanced over at me, his mouth and chin bloody, his eyes accusing.

“Thank you, Erasmus. You saved my life,” I gushed, overwhelmed by gratitude for both my brothers and Mab. “I’m so very sorry about your nose. I thought you were another one of them.”

I reached out to touch his arm as I talked, but he pushed me away.

“Humph!” Turning his back, my brother used his white Urim gauntlet, which had once been part of an angel’s armor, to pick up the humming length of his staff. The gauntlet would not wither, though it was pitted and dull. All other Urim I had ever seen

shone like living moonlight. Once back in Erasmus's hand, the Staff of Decay stopped its deadly humming. Its whirling gray length slowed and fell still, becoming a long, rectangular staff, the sides of which were painted alternately black and white.

"Don't know what possessed me," Erasmus continued. "Amazingly stupid idea, traveling around here with a woman. What were we thinking? We should have left her on the bridge, taken our chances without her."

"We would never find Mephistopheles that way," Gregor observed. "We would have been sucked in by some pleasant-looking evil, or perhaps walked right past him, his face hidden from us behind a dream."

"True," Mab said, mopping his craggy brow. "When she fell in, everything turned nice again. Made it kind of hard to find the baddies who were attacking her. I had to bonk a dapper gentleman in a tuxedo on the head with my trusty lead pipe, and punch right in their kissers a couple of swains, who were offering her flowers and chocolates."

"Dapper gentleman!" I cried. "That horrible bloated ... well, on second thought, maybe it's better you didn't see it." I shivered again, suddenly cold.

"Wish it could have been me instead of you who saw him, Ma'am," Mab replied humbly.

"We won't find Mephisto this way either," Erasmus complained. "All this walking around on the surface. We're only seeing a small percentage of this place. When we first came through the gate, it seemed to Miranda as if we were under the swamp, slime and ooze in all directions. What if Mephisto is down there, like the things that tried to drag her into the depth? We'll never find him if we're up here!"

"What else can we do?" I countered. "Without Mephisto, we can't rescue any of the

others.”

“So that’s it.” Erasmus plopped down and folded his arms behind his head. “This is how I shall end my days, slogging through the Swamp of Uncleaness, searching aimlessly for my brother who had the Ball of Getting-Us-the-Hell-Out-of-Hell, in the company of the sister I hate more than any other— whose fault it is we’re stuck here to begin with— until I die, most likely from complications stemming from an infected broken nose. Appropriate way to go, I suppose, killed by Miranda.”

“Enough.” Gregor’s head had been bowed in prayer. Now, he straightened, his voice calm yet stern. “We are in Hell, Brother, where the malicious burn upon the fires of their wrath and envy. One might hope their example would teach you civility.”

“I have proven remarkably hard to teach,” Erasmus replied blithely.

“That is not a trait of which I would boast,” Gregor said, his voice again stern.

Much to my surprise, Erasmus looked chagrined.

“You’re probably right,” he murmured, wiping his face on his sleeve. The red of his blood showed brightly against the subdued landscape. From the left, there came a kerplunk, as if something large had slid into the water.

Mab frowned. “There are things down here that feed on blood. Wraiths, demons, and servants of demons! Vile things! Maybe we’d better get moving!”

Hopping back across the hummocks, he stooped and picked up his fedora. Apparently, he had thrown it aside when he leapt in to save me. Frowning down at the water, to make certain no demon waited to grab his foot, he hopped back.

We held hands again and started walking, slower than before. We were thirsty and tired. It was hot here, and it stank. The vile acts and general repulsiveness worsened as

we continued. Demons, some hideous, some gorgeous to behold, moved among the damned souls, inciting them to yet greater excesses. Nearby, an emaciated man moaned pitifully as he tried to sate some burning hunger upon a fat lizard.

In the distance rose a vast cylindrical tower with a round mushroom-like cap, constructed from something living that writhed and squirmed. I decided not to examine it any more closely, but Erasmus did and, apparently, regretted it. With a grunt of sympathetic pain, he drew his legs together and cupped his free hand protectively over his groin.

“Oh, that’s ghastly!” he said.

“Don’t look, Ma’am,” Mab advised. “It’s not a sight for ladies.”

“Nothing here is fit for ladies.” Gregor’s voice sounded even more gravelly than usual.

“Good thing our dear sister isn’t one,” Erasmus replied, a note of cheerfulness in his weary voice. When Gregor gave him a quelling look, he pointed at his swollen nose with his free hand. “Would a lady do this?”

“No true lady yields her virtue without a fight.” Gregor used his ebony staff as a walking stick, swinging it, planting it, striding forward, and swinging it again. Its blood red runes glittered eerily as it swung.

“But our good sister already lost her virtue to a demon,” objected Erasmus. “Why bring my nose into it?”

“It was an accident,” I snapped back, more harshly than I had intended. “I already apologized. No one ‘brought your nose into it.’ At the time, I thought you were a demon.”

“A likely story,” muttered Erasmus.

Gregor halted and leaned heavily upon his staff. With his free hand, he wiped sweat from his face. "Is it my imagination, or have we been walking for hours?"

"Certainly seems like hours," replied Mab.

"We must rest," Gregor said. "We cannot continue as we are."

Eventually, we found refuge on a sandy flat isle that to me seemed completely exposed, but which my brothers and Mab, when they released my arms, assured me was surrounded by high arbors of black roses.

"Does anyone have something to eat?" Erasmus asked sadly. "The food I brought has been ruined by the swamp."

I looked through the contents of my shoulder bag, but swamp water had soaked through it. Nothing remained edible. I carefully wiped off my mirrored fighting fan, my figurine of Astreus, and my tightly sealed vial of Water of Life. A wistful action really; the bag would probably just get drenched again the next time we started moving.

To my great dismay, I discovered that the silver and horn circlet Father Christmas had given me was gone. With it, I could return Astreus's memory to him. Apparently, it had fallen out of my bag during the fray. That meant it now lay at the bottom of the Swamp of Uncleaness, if there was a bottom. If not, it drifted ever downward and, with it, my hope of ever seeing Astreus again.

For without it, even if the elf lord still lingered somewhere within the sooty depths of the demon Seir of the Shadows, I would never know.

Mab's food had fared better than the rest of ours. From the pockets of his trench coat, he pulled a number of Ziploc bags. Inside the sealed plastic, his bread and cheese

was squashed but fresh. He shared the food among us. Hungry as we were, neither Erasmus nor I could bring ourselves to eat much. Erasmus shared some fresh water from a canteen.

“I’ll never look at another woman again,” murmured Erasmus. He was lying down with his head resting on some object that was invisible to me, so that his head seemed to be floating in mid-air. He covered his eyes with his hands. “Ever! My womanizing ways are a thing of the past! Oh, to think ... ugh!”

“If you had not done so previously, you would not be in such a sorry state,” Gregor observed. “I find the place no more wearing than any other unpleasant location.”

Erasmus raised his head. His eyes glittered black with malice. “Forgive me if I don’t happen to be a priest, a spirit, or an ex-virgin whose only experience with love has been demon-rape. Some of us are men and must live like men.”

“And shall suffer, after death, like unto what you call ‘men.’” Gregor thundered back in his preaching-from-the-pulpit voice, steady yet booming. “Had you chosen a virtuous life, you would not now be obliged to pay the wages of sin.”

“Oh, and you’ll do so well when we come to the country of one of your besetting sins, will you?” Erasmus snapped.

“The angel said Gregor was closest of all of us to overcoming his vice,” I offered, my spirits again buoyed by the mere memory of the angelic encounter.

“You would come in on his side.” Erasmus closed his eyes and let his head drop back until it again rested upon his invisible pillow. “You shouldn’t have repeated that where Brother Gregor could hear you—the pride it engenders will mar his good record.”

“He is right.” Gregor nodded. “Pride is a difficult enemy to defeat, and those who

succumb to it suffer in a far lower place than this.”

Looking around, it was hard to imagine that there were places worse than this. But that was where my sins would have dragged me to the place where pride was punished. I shivered, suddenly extraordinarily grateful for Gregor and his staff.

Erasmus looked out over the swamp, staring out at the dead cypress trees dripping with slimy gray moss. He murmured again, “It’s hopeless.”

“Rest, Brother.” Gregor’s voice was gentle despite its gruffness. “Let us examine the matter again when we are rested.”

“Very well.” He shut his eyes. “I’ll rest, rise, and look forward to another day of looking for Mephisto on an empty stomach. We’ll be lucky if we don’t draw the attention of the other Mephistopheles with all this shouting ... the demonic one.”

Mab and I exchanged glances, but neither of us had the strength to speak, much less to explain to my brother that there was no other Mephistopheles, just our brother, the demon. Besides, we did not know how Gregor, the Catholic priest, would take it.

We took turns sleeping. For a time, the horrors of Hell were replaced by the terrors of nightmares. I awoke, sweating, to find reality worse than my dream, and sat, alone in the sweltering heat, in the squalor and stink of Hell.

Mab sat up suddenly. “Look, Ma’am! Our holy star is back!”

It was, and much closer now. Rousing the others, we had a brief discussion about what to do next. Erasmus and Mab were still wary of the star, and after my recent encounter, I was as well, but Gregor continued to insist that the light was holy. He started toward it, walking with long strides, and the rest of us were forced to abandon him or follow.

Pushing onward, we soon came upon a wide flat area, rather like a beach.

There, we saw a strange sight.

Ganymede

By Cherie Priest

Copyright © 2011 by Cherie Priest

The air pirate Andan Cly is going straight. Well, straighter. Although he's happy to run alcohol and guns wherever the money's good, he doesn't think the world needs more sap, or its increasingly ugly side-effects. But going straight is easier said than done: whether he likes it or not, the captain's first legal gig will be paid for by sap money, because the Seattle Underground is in dire need of supplies.

New Orleans is not Cly's first pick for a shopping run. He loved the Big Easy once, back when he also loved a beautiful octoroon prostitute named Josephine Early—but that was a decade ago, and he hasn't looked back since. He's still on Jo's mind, though, or so he learns when he gets a telegram about a peculiar piloting job. She says she needs him, and no one else will do. It's a chance to complete two lucrative jobs at once, one he can't refuse. He sends his old paramour a note and heads for New Orleans, with no idea of what he's in for—or what she wants him to fly.

But he won't be flying. Not exactly. Hidden at the bottom of Lake Pontchartrain lurks an astonishing war machine, an immense submersible called the *Ganymede*. This prototype could end the war, if only anyone had the faintest idea of how to operate it....if only they could sneak it past the Southern forces at the mouth of the Mississippi River....if only it hadn't killed most of the men who'd ever set foot inside it.

Now the only question is whether there's enough reward in the world to justify the risk to Cly and his crew.

This excerpt introduces the book via its opening chapters, the first from the perspective of Josephine Early, and the second via Andan Cly.

1 [Josephine Early]

“Croggon Hainey sends his regards, but he isn't up for hire,” Josephine Early declared grimly as she crumpled the telegram in her fist. She flicked the wad of paper into the tiny, round waste bin beside her desk and took a deep breath that came out in a hard sigh. “So we'll have to find another pilot, goddammit.”

“Ma'am, the airyard's full of pilots,” her assistant, Marilyn Quantrill, responded.

She leaned back in her seat and tapped her fingers on the chair's armrest. “Not pilots like *him*.”

“Hainey...he's a colored fellow, isn't he? One of the Macon Madmen?”

“Yes, and he's the best flyer I know. But I can't blame him for turning us down. It's asking a lot, for him to come so far south while he's still wanted—and we don't have the money to pay him what he's worth, much less compensate him for the extra danger.”

Marilyn nodded, disappointed but understanding. “It didn't hurt to ask.”

“No. And if it were me, I wouldn't take the job either.” Josephine ceased her tapping and shifted her weight, further wedging her voluminous blue dress into the narrow confines of the worn mahogany chair's rigid arms. “But I sure was hoping he'd say yes. He's perfect for the job, and perfect doesn't come along every day. We won't

find anyone half so perfect hanging about the airyard, I can tell you that much. We need a man with excellent flying skills *and* absolutely no loyalty to the Republic or the Confederacy. And that, my dear, will be the trouble.”

“Is there anyone else we could ask, anyone farther afield?”

“No one springs to mind,” Josephine murmured.

Marylin pressed on. “It might not matter anyway. It could be Rucker Little is right, and a pilot won’t have any better luck than a seaman.”

“It’d be hard for anyone, anywhere, to fail so spectacularly as that last batch of sailors.”

“Not *all* of them drowned.”

“Four out of five isn’t anything to crow about.”

“I suppose not, ma’am.” Marylin lowered her eyes and fiddled with her gloves. She didn’t often wear gloves, given the heat and damp of the delta, but the elbow-length silk pair with tiny pearl buttons had been a gift from a customer, and he’d requested specifically that she wear them tonight. Her hair was done up in a twisted set of plaits and set with an ostrich feather. The yellow dress she wore cost only half what the gloves did, but they complimented one another all the same.

Josephine vowed, “I’ll find someone else, and I’ll show Mr. Mumler that I’m right. They’re going about that machine all wrong, I just know it. All I need is a pilot to prove it.”

“But you have to admit,” the younger woman carefully ventured, “it sounds strange, wanting an airman for a...for whatever it is, there in the lake.”

“Sometimes a strangely shaped problem requires a strangely shaped solution, dear. So here’s what we’ll do for now: Tomorrow afternoon, you take one of the other girls—Hazel or Ruthie, maybe—and you go down to the airyard and keep your eyes open.”

“Open for what?”

“Anyone who isn’t Southern or Texian. Look for foreigners who stand out from the usual crowd—ignore the English and the islanders, we don’t want them. We want people who don’t care about the war, and who aren’t taking sides. Tradesmen, merchants, or pirates.”

“I don’t know about pirates, ma’am. They scare me, I don’t mind saying.”

Josephine said, “Hainey’s a pirate, and I’d trust him enough to employ him. Pirates come in different sorts like everybody else, and I’ll settle for one if I have to. But don’t worry. I wouldn’t ask you to go down to the bay or barter with the Lafittes. If our situation turns out to call for a pirate, I’ll go get one myself.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Let’s consider Baratavia a last resort. We aren’t up to needing last resorts. Not yet. The craft is barely in working order, and Chester says it’ll be a few days before it’s dried out enough to try again. When it works, and when we have someone who can consistently operate it without drowning everyone inside it, then we’ll move it. We have to get it to the Gulf, and we’ll have to do it right the first time. We won’t get a second chance.”

“No ma’am, I don’t expect we will,” Marilyn agreed. Then she changed the subject. “Begging your pardon, ma’am—but do you have the time?”

“The time? Oh, yes.” Josephine reached into her front left pocket and retrieved a watch. It was an engineer’s design with a glass cut-out in the cover, allowing her to see the hour at a glance. “It’s ten ‘til eight. Don’t worry, your meeting with Mr. Spring has not been compromised—though, knowing him, he’s already waiting downstairs.”

“I think he rather likes me, ma’am.”

“I expect he does. And with that in mind, be careful, Marylin.”

“I’m always careful.”

“You know what I mean.”

She rose from her seat and asked, “Is there anything else?”

“No, darling.”

Therefore, with a quick check of her hair in the mirror by the door, Marylin Quantrill exited the office on the fourth floor of the building known officially as the Garden Court Boarding House for Ladies, and unofficially as “Miss Early’s Place,” home of “Miss Early’s Girlies.”

Josephine did not particularly care for the unofficial designation, but there wasn’t much to be done about it now. A name with a rhyme sticks harder than sun-dried tar.

But quietly, bitterly, Josephine saw no logical reason why a woman in her forties should be referred to with the same address as a toddler, purely because she’d never married. Furthermore, she employed no “girlies.” She took great pains to see to it that her ladies were precisely that: ladies, well-informed and well-educated. Her ladies could read and write French as well as English, and some of them spoke Spanish, too; they took instruction on manners, sewing, and cooking. They were young women, yes, but they

were not frivolous children, and she hoped that they would have skills to support them upon leaving the Garden Court Boarding House.

All of the Garden Court ladies were free women of color.

It was Josephine's experience that men liked nothing better than variety, and that no two men shared precisely the same tastes. With this in mind, she'd recruited fourteen women in a spectrum of skin tones, ranging from two very dark Caribbean natives to several lighter mixes like Marilyn, who could have nearly passed for white. Josephine herself counted an eighth of her own ancestry from Africa, courtesy of a great-grandmother who'd come to New Orleans aboard a ship called the *Adelaide*. At thirteen she'd been bought to serve as a maid, and at fourteen she'd birthed her first child.

And so forth, and so on.

Josephine was tall and lean, with skin like tea stirred with milk. Her forehead was high and her lips were full; and although she looked her age, she wore all forty-two years with grace. It was true that in her maturity she'd slipped from "beautiful" to merely "pretty," but she anticipated another ten years before sliding down to the dreaded "handsome."

She looked again at the watch, and at the waste bin holding the unfortunate telegram, and she wondered what on earth she was going to do now. Major Alcock was expecting a report, and Admiral Partridge had made clear that it wasn't safe to bring the airship carrier *Valiant* too close to the delta for very long. Texas wouldn't tolerate it—they'd chase the big ship back out to sea like a flock of crows harrying an eagle.

She had until the end of May. No longer.

This left not quite four weeks to figure out a number of things which had gone years without having been figured out thus far.

“*Ganymede*,” she said under her breath, “I *will* find someone to fly you.”

All she needed was a pilot willing to risk his life in a machine that had killed seventeen men to date; brave the Mississippi River as it went past Forts Jackson and St. Philip and all the attending Rebels and Texians therein; and kindly guide it out into the Gulf of Mexico past half a dozen Confederate warships—all the while knowing the thing could explode, suffocate everyone inside, or sink to the ocean bottom at any moment.

Was it really so much to ask?

The Union thought she was out of her mind, and though they wanted the scuttled craft, they couldn’t see paying yet another seventeen men to die for it. Therefore, any further salvage efforts must come out of Josephine’s own pocket. But her pockets weren’t as deep as the Major seemed to think, and the cost of hiring a high-level mercenary for such a mission was well outside her reach.

Even if she knew another pilot half so good as Croggon Hainey, and without any allegiance to the occupying Republicans or the Confederates, a month might not be enough time to fetch him, prepare him, and test him.

She squeezed her watch and popped it open. The gears inside flipped, swayed, and spun.

On second thought...

She’d told Marilyn she didn’t know any other pilots. The lie had slipped off her tongue as if it’d been greased, or as if she’d only forgotten it wasn’t true, but there *was* someone else.

But it wasn't worth thinking about. After all, it'd been years since last she'd seen him—since she'd even thought about him. Had he gone back west? Had he married, and raised a family? Would he come if she summoned him? For all she knew, he wasn't even alive anymore. Not every man—even a man like Andan Cly—survives a pirate's career.

“He's probably dead,” Josephine told herself. “Long gone, I'm sure.”

She wasn't sure.

She looked back at the waste bin, and she realized that with one more telegram, she could likely find out.

Croggon Hainey frequented the Northwest corners, didn't he? And Cly had come from a wretched, wet backwater of a port called...what was it again? Oh yes: *Seattle*—out in the Washington Territory, as far away from New Orleans as a man could get while staying on colonial turf.

“No coincidence, that,” she said to the empty room, realizing she flattered herself to think so. Well, so what? Then she flattered herself. She wasn't the first.

Downstairs, something fell heavily, or something large was thrown and landed with a muffled thunk.

Josephine's ears perked, and she briefly forgot about the waste bin, the telegram, and potential news of long-ago lovers from distant hinterlands. She listened hard, hoping to hear nothing more without daring to assume it.

The Garden Court Boarding House was different from many bordellos, but not so different that there were never problems: drunk men, or cruel men who wanted more than they were willing to buy. Josephine did her best to screen out the worst, and she prided herself on both the quality of her ladies and the relative peace of her establishment; even

so, it was never far from her mind how quickly things could turn, and how little it would take for the French Quarter to remember that she was only a colored woman, and not necessarily entitled to own things, much less protect them, preserve them, and use them for subterfuge.

It was a line she walked every night, between legitimate businesswoman performing a service for the community of soldiers, sailors, merchants, and planters...and the grandchild of slaves, who could become a slave herself again simply by crossing the wrong state lines.

Louisiana wasn't safe, not for her or any of her ladies. Maybe not for anybody.

But this was Josephine's house, and she guarded it with all the ferocity and cunning of a mother fox. So when she heard the noise downstairs she listened hard, *willing* innocent silence to follow, but suspecting the worst and preparing herself accordingly.

In the top left drawer of her battered, antique, second-hand desk, she kept a .44 caliber Schofield—a Smith and Wesson revolver she'd nicknamed "Little Russia." It was loaded, like always. She retrieved it and pushed the desk drawer shut again.

It was easy to hide the weapon behind her skirts. People don't expect a left-handed woman, and no one expects to be assaulted by anyone in a fancy gown—which was one more good reason to wear them all the time, as far as Josephine was concerned.

Out past the paneled office door she swept, and down the red carpeted runner to the end of the hall, where a set of stairs curved down to all three lower levels, flanked by a banister that was polished weekly and gleamed under the skimming touch of

Josephine's hand. The commotion was located on the second floor, or so her ears told her as she drew up nearer.

This was a good thing, insofar as any commotion was ever good. It could be taking place down in the lobby, and no one wants that kind of thing in one's lobby. It's bad for business, and bad for covering up trouble, should it be required. At street level people could squint and peek past the gossamer curtains, trying to focus on the slivers of light inside and the women who lived within.

At street level, there could be witnesses.

Josephine was getting ahead of herself, and she knew it. She always got ahead of herself, but that's how she'd stayed alive and in charge this long, so she couldn't imagine slowing down anytime soon. Instead she held the Schofield with a cool, loose grip. She felt the gun's weight as a strange, foreign thing against her silk overskirts, where she buried it out of sight. As she'd learned one evening in her misspent youth at the notorious pirate call of Baratavia, she need not brandish a gun to fire it. It'd shoot just fine through a petticoat, and knock a hole in a man all the same. It would ruin the skirts, to be certain, but these were trade-offs a woman could make in the name of survival.

Down on the second-floor landing she stepped off the stairs so swiftly she seemed to be moving on wings or wheels. She brought herself up short just in time to keep from running into Fenn Calais, a Texian.

A big man in his youth, Mr. Calais was now a soft man, with cheeks blushed pink from years of alcohol and a round, friendly face which had become well known to ladies of the Garden Court. Delphine Hoobler was under one of his arms, and Caroline Younger was hooked beneath the other.

“Evening, ma’am!” he said cheerfully. He was always cheerful. Suspiciously so, if you wanted Josephine’s opinion on the matter, but Fenn was so well-liked that no one ever did.

With her usual polite formality, she replied, “Good evening to you, Mr. Calais. I see you’re being properly cared for this evening. Is there anything I can get you, or anything further you require?”

Caroline flashed Josephine a serious look and a sharpened eyebrow. This was combined with a quick toss of her head and a laugh. “We’ll keep an eye on him, Miss Josephine,” she said lightly, but the urgent, somber gleam in her eyes didn’t soften.

Josephine understood. She nodded. “Very well, then.” She smiled and stepped aside, letting the three of them pass. When they were gone, she turned her attention to the far end of the corridor. Caroline and Delphine had been luring Fenn Calais away from something.

From someone.

She could guess, even before she saw the window that hadn’t been fully shut, and the swamp-mud scuff of a large man’s shoe across the carpet runner.

With a glance over her shoulder to make sure the Texian was out of hearing range, she hissed, “Deaderick? That’d damned well *better* be you.”

“It’s me,” he whispered back. He leaned out from the stairwell. “That Fenn fellow was passed out on the settee with a drink in his hand. I thought I could sneak past without waking him up, but he sleeps lighter than he looks.”

She exhaled, relieved. She wedged Little Russia into her skirt pocket. “Delphine and Carrie took care of him.”

“Yeah, I saw.” He looked back and forth down the hall. Seeing no one but his sister, he relaxed enough to leave his hiding place.

Deaderick Early was a tall man, and lean like his sister, though darker in complexion. They had only a mother in common, and Deaderick was several shades away from Josephine’s pale skin. His hair was thick and dense, and black as ink. He let it grow into long locks that dangled below his ears.

“You’re lucky it was only Fenn. He’s easily distracted and probably too drunk to recognize you.”

“Still, I didn’t mean to take the chance.”

She sighed and rubbed at her forehead, then leaned back against the wall and eyed him tiredly. “What are you doing here, Rick? You know I don’t like it when you come to town. I worry about you.”

“You don’t worry about me living camped in a swamp?”

“In the swamp you’re armed, and with your men. Here you’re alone, and you’re visible. Anyone could see you, point you out, and have you taken away.” She blinked back the dampness backing her eyes. “With every chance you take, the odds stack higher against you.”

“That may be, but we need soap, salt, and coffee. For that matter, a little rum would make me a popular man, and we could stand to have a better doctor’s kit,” he added, looking down at an ugly swath of inflamed skin on his arm—caused, no doubt by the stinging things that buzzed out in the bayou. “But also, I came to bring you *this*.”

From the back pocket of his pants he produced an envelope that had been sealed and folded in half. “It might help your pilot, if you ever find one.”

“What is it?”

“Schematics from a footlocker at the Pontchartrain base. It’s got Hunley’s writing on it. I think it’s a sketch for the steering mechanism, and part of the propulsion system. Or that’s what Chester and Honeyfolk said, and I’m prepared to take their word for it.”

“Neither one of them needs it?” She slipped the envelope down into her cleavage, past her underwear’s stays. The paper showed only the faintest seam through to the outside of her bodice.

“They’ve already taken that section apart and put it all back together. It doesn’t hold any secrets for an engineer, but a pilot who wants to know what he’s getting himself into...this might come in handy. Or it might not, if you have to trick someone into taking the job.”

A loud cough of laughter came from upstairs, and the *whump* of heavy footsteps. The siblings looked up to the ceiling, as if it could tell them anything; but Josephine said, “Fenn again. Probably heading to the water closet. Listen, we should go outside. Out back it’s quiet, and even if someone sees you, it’ll be too dark for anyone to recognize you.”

“Fine, if that’s what you want.” He pushed the back stairway door open and held it for her, letting her lead the way.

Down they went, her soft, quiet house slippers making no noise at all, and his dirty leather boots trailing a muffled drumbeat in her wake. At the bottom, she unlocked the back door and pushed it. It moaned on its hinges, scraping trash and mud with its bottom edge.

It opened, letting them both outside into the night.

The alley itself was dark and wet, smelling of vomit, urine, and horse manure. Overhead the moon hung low and very white, but they barely noticed it over the grumbling music, swearing sailors, drunken planters, and the late-night calls of newspaper boys trawling for pennies before closing up shop. The gaslamps on Rue des Ursulines gave the whole night a ghostly wash, leaving the shadows sharp and black between the lacy Old World buildings of the Vieux Carré, and leaving Josephine and Deaderick as close to alone as they could expect to find themselves.

Josephine swatted at her brother's vest pocket, the place where he always kept tobacco and papers. He took the hint, retrieved his pouch, and began to roll two cigarettes between his fingers. "It's a good thing that dumb bastard let himself be dragged away so easy."

"Like I said, you were lucky. Some of the younger men lounge around armed, and after a few drinks they're quick to draw. Fenn's not dumb, but he's harmless. Even if he'd seen you—even if he'd recognized you—we might've been able to buy him off."

"You'd trust some old Texian?"

"That one?" Josephine took the cigarette he offered, and waited for him to light it. She gently sucked it to life, and the smell of tobacco wafted up her nose, down her throat. It took the edge off the mulchy odor of the alley. "Maybe. I don't think he'd make any trouble for us. He'd die of sorrow if we told him he wasn't welcome anymore."

Deaderick lit his own cigarette and stepped onto a higher corner of the curb, dodging a rivulet of running gutter water. "You making friends with Republicans now? Next thing I hear, you'll be cozying up to the Rebs."

“You shut your mouth,” she whispered hard. “All I’m telling you is that Fenn spends more time at the Court than he does at his own home, assuming he has one. He’s sweet on Delphine and Ruthie in particular, and he won’t go talking if he thinks we’ll keep him from coming back.”

“If you say so.” He sighed and asked quietly, “Any chance you heard from that pilot friend of yours? The man from Georgia—could you talk him into it?”

“He can’t make it, so now I’ve got to find someone else. I’m working on it, all right? I’ve already talked to Marilyn, and tomorrow she’ll take Ruthie over to the airyard to look around.”

“There’s nothing but Republicans and Rebs down at the airyard. You’d have better luck in Baratavia. Not that I’m suggesting it.”

She snorted, and a puff of smoke coiled out of her nostril. “Don’t think I haven’t considered it. But I want to check the straight docks first, all the same. Times are hard all over. We might find foreigners—or maybe westerners—desperate enough to take the job.”

“How much money you offering?”

“Not enough. But between me and the girls, we might be able to negotiate. There’s always wiggle room. I’ve talked it over with those who can be trusted, and they’re game as me to pool our resources.”

“I don’t want to hear about that,” Deaderick said stiffly.

“I suppose you don’t, but that doesn’t change anything. If we can get this done between us, it’ll all be worth it. Every bit of it, even the unpleasant parts. We’re all

making sacrifices, Rick. Don't act like it's a walk in the park for you and the boys, because I know it *isn't*."

Life was hard outside the city, in the swamps where the guerillas lurked, and poached, and picked off Confederates and Texians whenever they could. It was written all over her brother's flesh, in the insect bites and scrapes of thorns. The story was told in the rips that had been patched and re-patched on his homespun pants, and in the linen shirt with its round wood buttons—none of which matched.

But she was proud of him, desperately so. And she was made all the prouder just by looking at him and knowing that they were all struggling, certainly—but her little brother, fully ten years her junior, was in charge of a thirty-man company, and quietly paid by the Union besides. He drew a real salary in Federal silver, every three months like clockwork. Out of sight, at the edge of civilization, he was fighting for them all—for her, for the colored girls at the Garden Court, and for the Union, which would be whole again, one of these days.

And just like her, he was fighting for New Orleans, which deserved better than to have Texas squat upon it with its guns, soldiers, and Confederate allegiance.

Deaderick gazed at his sister over the tiny red coal of his smoldering cigarette. "It can't go on like this much longer. These...these..."—he gestured at the alley's entrance, where a large Texian machine was gargling, grumbling, and rolling, its lone star insignia visible as it shuddered past, and was gone—"vermin. I want them out of my city."

"Most of them want out just as bad."

"Well then, that's one thing we got in common. But I don't know why you have to run around defending them."

“Who’s defending them? All I said on behalf of Fenn Calais is that he’s an old whoremonger with no place left to hang his hat. I have a business to run, that’s all—and I don’t get to pick my customers. Besides, the better the brown boys like us, the safer I stay,” she insisted, using the Quarter’s favorite ironic slang for the soldiers who, despite their dun-colored uniforms, were as white as sugar down to the last man. “I can’t have their officers sniffing around, looking too close. Not while I’m courting the Admiral, and not while you’re running the bayou. As long as we keep them quiet and happy, they leave us alone.”

“Except for the ones you treat to room and board,” he sniffed. “You let that old fat one get too close. You call him harmless, but maybe he thinks like you do. Maybe he watches you send telegrams, or pass messages to me or Chester. Maybe he sees a scrap of paper in the trash, or overhears us talking some night. Then you’ll sure as hell find out how far you can trust your resident Texian, won’t you?”

It was something she’d privately wondered about sometimes, upon catching a glimpse of Fenn Calais’s familiar form sauntering through the halls with Delphine, Ruthie, or a new girl hanging on his arm...or drinking himself into a charmingly dignified stupor in one of the tower lounges. Occasionally it occurred to her that he could well be a spy, sent to watch her and the ladies. Spies were a fact of life in New Orleans, after all—spies of every breed, background, quality, and style. The Republic of Texas had a few, though as an occupying force they were all of them spies by default; the Confederacy kept a number on hand, to keep an eye on the Texians who were keeping an eye on things; and even the Union managed to plant a few here and there, keeping an eye on everyone else.

As Josephine would well know. She was on their payroll too.

She dropped the last of her cigarette before it could burn her fingers, and she crushed its ashes underfoot on street stones that were slippery with humidity and the afternoon's rain. Her house slippers weren't made for outdoor excursions of even the briefest sort, and they'd never be the same again—she could sense it. Between her toes she felt the creeping damp of street water and regurgitated bourbon, runny horse droppings strung together with wads of brittle grass, and the warm, unholy squish of God-knew-what, which smelled like grave dirt and death.

"I don't like it out here," she said by way of changing the subject. "And I don't like you being here. Go home, Rick. Go back to the bayou, where you're safe."

"It's been good to see you, too."

"Just ... stay away from the river, will you?"

"I always do."

"Promise me, please?"

Down by the river and roaming the Quarter's darker corners, monstrous things waited, and were hungry. Or so the stories went.

"I promise. Even though I'm not afraid of a few dusters."

"I know you're not, but I am. I've seen them."

"So have I," he declared flippantly, which meant he was lying. He'd only heard about them.

"They aren't dusters," she muttered.

"Sure they are. Addicts gone feral, like cats. And you worry too much."

She almost accused him of lying, but decided against starting that particular fight. If anything, it was good that he was ignorant of the dead—or that’s what she told herself. She’d be thrilled if he went his whole life without ever seeing one, even though it meant that he wrote them off as bedtime stories, designed to frighten naughty children.

He’d last lived in the quarter ten years ago, before he’d headed off to fight. Back then, there hadn’t been so many of them.

Deaderick didn’t want to argue any more than Josephine did. “I’ll stay away from the river, if it’ll make you happy. And maybe I’ll head out to Barataria myself, one of these days soon. We hit them up for discreet mechanics and supply fliers every now and again. While I’m there, I’ll see if I can’t spot any potential pilots for you.”

“All right, but if you find anyone, be careful what you tell him. It’s dangerous work we’re asking for, but anybody we have to trick too badly won’t do us any good, when push comes to shove. That’s why I’m sending another few telegrams tonight. I’ve got somebody else in mind.”

“You do?”

“I know of a man who might be good for the task. If I can find him. And if he’s still alive. And if he can be persuaded to come within fifty feet of me.”

Deaderick grinned at her. “Sounds promising.”

“It’s *not* promising, but it’s better than nothing. We have to get that thing out of the lake. We have to get it out to sea, to the Federal Navy. Once they get a crack at it, it’s just a matter of time. *Ganymede* could change everything.”

“I know,” her brother said, putting his arms around her. “And it *will*.”

In the distance, a cheer went up and so did a small flare—a little rocket of a thing that cast a pink-white trail of burning fire into the sky. A second cheer followed it, and the clapping of a crowd.

“Goddamn Texians,” Josephine said wearily, the words garbled against his shoulder.

“What are they doing?”

“Tearing up the cathedral square, gambling on livestock and shooting off fireworks. It isn’t right.”

Deaderick nodded, but noted, “You haven’t been to church in half a lifetime.”

“Still,” she said, “that doesn’t make it right, what they’re doing over there.”

A faintly burning chemical stink joined the city’s odors, trapped in the humid fog of Gulf water and river water that crept through the Quarter like a warm, wet bath. Gunpowder and animals, men and women, alcohols sweet and sour—bourbons brought from Kentucky, whiskeys imported from Tennessee, rums shipped in from the islands south of Florida, and grain distillations made in a neighbor’s cast-iron tub. The night smelled of gun oil and saddles, and the jasmine colognes of the night ladies, or the violets and azaleas that hung from balconies in baskets; of berry liqueur and the verdant, herbal tang of absinthe delivered from crystal decanters, and the dried chilies hanging in the stalls of the French market, and powdered sugar and chicory.

Josephine leaned her head on Deaderick’s shoulder as she hugged him good-bye. She breathed, “We’re drowning like this, you know,” and she saw him off with tears swallowed hard in the back of her throat.

2 [Andan Cly]

Andan Cly folded the telegram shut and said, "I'll be damned." He slipped it into his shirt pocket, then changed his mind and set it instead on the bar—as if he were reluctant to touch it, but didn't want to let it out of his sight.

"What for?" Angeline drew her feet up onto the stool's bottommost rung and looked at him expectantly. She was dressed in her usual preferred attire, a man's shirt and pants cut down to size. A slouch-rim hat sat atop her head, crowning the two long, gray braids that hung down her back in the Duwamish style.

The pilot and sometimes-pirate cleared his throat and signaled the bartender for a glass of something stronger than what was already in front of him. "It's...it's a message. From someone I used to know, a long time ago."

"Must be a woman."

"I didn't say it was a woman."

"If it wasn't, you wouldn't be hemming and hawing like a schoolboy."

"Hush, you," he told her, not for a moment expecting her to do so.

Lucy O'Gunning slipped a shot in front of him and then put a bottle of whiskey beside it. "One for you too, Princess?"

"Since you're offering."

Lucy poured another drink, using her one mechanical arm as deftly as any bartender ever used two of the usual kind. "And what have we got here?" She reached to pick up the cheap slip of transcription paper, but Cly snatched it back, crumpling it in his hand.

“It’s a note from a woman,” Angeline informed her. “He won’t admit it, but that’s what it is. Telegram came up from Tacoma. Freddy Miller brought it in his sack with the last batch of mail; I just brought it along, ‘cause I was passing through anyhow.”

“A woman?” Lucy gave Andan Cly a suspicious squint. “You airmen, all the same. A girl in every port.”

“It ain’t like that,” he insisted. “I haven’t seen this woman in...I don’t know. Eight or ten years. She’s a few thousand miles away, and she didn’t dash off a note because she missed me.” Under his breath he added, “I can promise you *that*.”

“Ooh.” Lucy leaned forward, planting her matronly bosom on the countertop and propping her chin in her clockwork palm. “Sounds juicy.”

“What does she want?” Angeline asked bluntly, unconcerned by the blush that climbed the fair-skinned fellow’s neck. Cly’s hair was cut close to his scalp, and it was light enough to plainly show the pink when embarrassment made it all the way to the top of his considerable frame.

“She wants to hire me.”

“For what kind of job?” Lucy asked.

“She wants me to come to New Orleans. There’s a craft she wants me to fly, but I don’t know anything more than that. The telegram is thin on details.”

Angeline harrumphed. “Sounds like a trumped-up excuse to bring you out for a visit.”

“She’s not that kind.”

“You don’t sound so sure if it,” Lucy said. She waited for him to down his shot. When he did, she poured him another before he had a chance to ask for it.

“I’m plenty sure of it, and now you’re just trying to liquor me up so I’ll tell you more.”

“You complaining?”

“No. Keep ‘em coming.” He cleared his throat again, and said, “There’s got to be a catch. New Orleans is a huge place—big port, big airyard. She could get a perfectly good pilot by setting foot outside her front door and hollering for one.” Unfolding the paper, he reread a few lines and said, “All I know is, it’s got something to do with this thing, the *Ganymede*.”

The bartender asked, “What’s a Ganymede?”

“A dirigible, I assume. She needs someone to take it from Pontchartrain to the Gulf, and she’s willing to pay...but it’s only a few miles, from the lake to the coast. Why she’d want me to come all the way out there to move it for her, I just don’t know.”

“Ask her,” suggested Angeline.

“Not sure it’s worth the trouble.”

Ever the practical one, Lucy asked, “Is it enough money to make the trip worthwhile? That’s a long way to go, to fly a ship a few feet.”

“Almost, but not quite. She’s offering low, asking it like a favor for old time’s sake.”

Angeline smiled. “Old times must’ve been good.”

Lucy straightened up and grabbed a towel. She pretended that the bar needed a good wipe-down, and hinted, “I never been to New Orleans.”

“Me either, but I done heard about it,” the older woman said, her smile still firmly in place—and now with a playful gleam twinkling in her eyes. “I hear it’s a city for music and dancing, and drinking too. I hear it’s all Frenched up.”

Cly swallowed his beverage but put a hand over the glass when Lucy used her bar rag to nudge the bottle his way. “New Orleans is one hell of a city, or it was last time I saw it. Even though Texas had been sitting on it for years.”

Angeline’s smile contorted into a puzzled frown. “What’s Texas got to do with it?”

He picked up his glass and fiddled with it, tipping it this way and that between his fingers. “Early in the war—back in 1862—the Union went after the city. They thought if they could control the port and the river, they could get a good choke hold on the Confederate supply line. So they took the place. Trouble was, they couldn’t keep it.”

“Texas took it away from them?” Angeline guessed.

“Yeah. The Rebs couldn’t pry the Federal troops out on their own, not for trying; but the Texians didn’t like having the Union presence so close by, so they agreed to lend a hand. They freed up the city in ‘64, I think. But once they’d booted out the Union, they had a problem: The Rebels didn’t have enough people on hand to keep the city secure, and the Union wanted back inside it real bad. That’s the biggest port this side of the world, you understand? So Texas could either hold down the fort, or it could withdraw and risk an enemy stronghold right outside its eastern border.”

“So Texas stayed,” Angeline inferred.

“Texas stayed. And nobody likes it much.”

Lucy nudged the bottle Cly's way again, and this time he picked it up and poured another round for himself and the princess.

"Texas did some rebuilding, and they set up shops of their own to take advantage of all the trade and travel—trying to make the best of it. Nobody knew how long the war would last, though. Nobody knew it'd straggle on twenty years. Even back when I was there, in '71 and '72, the locals were fed up with the occupation. It must be worse now, worse by all these extra years."

Andan Cly ran his fingers around the lip of the still-full shot glass, thinking about the French Quarter, and about a woman named Josephine. Neither of his companions interrupted, but both leaned expectantly toward him, waiting for more.

"New Orleans," he said slowly. "It's not like other places, in the South or anywhere else. I mean, all over the South you've got a whole lot of colored people—not surprising, since they went to so much trouble to import 'em; but in New Orleans there's a goodly number of *free* negroes, and mixed folks too. They own property there, and have businesses, and get married and make families and run households just like the southern white people do in other places. The whole state is organized different, and that city is especially different, that's all I'm saying." He scratched his head, trying to find a good way to explain the place, and not coming up with anything that sounded right.

"What do you mean, it's organized different?" asked Lucy.

"Oh, like they don't have counties and such. They have parishes, left over from when France was running the place, and their elections are different—the people who get into power are different. It's hard to explain. But as you could guess, the free colored people don't have much interest in being run by the Confederacy...or any of its allies,

either. Hell, being unhappy with Texas is the one thing the colored locals have in common with the Confederates. You'd think it'd give them something to bond over, but that's not how the world works."

Angeline's frown deepened. "Don't the Rebels want to keep the city open for their own country?"

"Sure, but Texas holding New Orleans—it's a permanent reminder how the Rebs couldn't hold it themselves. They talk like it's about honor, but it's not. It's just pride, same as anything else."

The princess shook her head. "Honor, I understand. Pride, I've got a handle on. But sometimes you white folks are crazy as a snake-loving rabbit."

"Aw, come on Angeline," Cly grinned.

Lucy laughed and said, "*Surely* you mean present company excepted."

"Nope!" She spun off the stool, swallowed her drink, and saluted them both with a tip of her hat. "Both of you are well included, I fear." As she dug around in her pockets, she added, "And I thank you for the history lesson, Captain, that was real enlightening. But I need to be on my way. I have a train to catch tonight, from Tacoma."

"Where are you going?" Andan asked. "Maybe I could give you a lift."

"Portland. But don't you worry about it, much as I appreciate the offer. I'm headed down there to see an old friend, and sometimes I don't mind a nice train ride. It's only half a day's trip, and he's meeting me at the station." She tossed some coins on the counter and winked. "I'll catch you two when I come back around."

"All right, Miss Angeline," Lucy said with a wave. "You have a safe trip."

When she had exited through Maynard's sealed, filtered front door, Lucy shook her head. "I swear to God, that woman.... I don't know how she comes and goes so free and easy, like it's nothing at all to get inside or out again."

Andan examined the telegram again, shielding it from Lucy's curious hovering. He scratched at his ear and revisited the letters again and again, in case a fourth or fifth reading might squeeze some extra meaning out of the few brief lines.

"Captain?" she asked, pretending she was offering another drink.

Without looking up, he said, "Hm? Oh, I'm sure Angeline has her methods."

"No doubt. But what about you? What about that telegram?"

"What about it?"

"You taking the job?"

He shrugged and finally looked up. "I could use the money, and there are lots of things I can pick up in New Orleans—things I can't get just anyplace. I could bring you back some absinthe, Lucy. You ever had any absinthe? You'd be the richest bartender in the Territory if I could fetch you a few barrels."

"Oh, you'd do it for *me*. And here I was thinking maybe you wanted to go strike a match on an old flame."

"You've got it all wrong."

"I bet I don't."

"It was complicated."

"I bet it *wasn't*."

Just then the front door opened, sliding stickily forward on its rubber-coated seals. Everyone in Maynard's—Lucy, Andan, and the three men playing cards at a round, green

table in the back corner—turned to see the newcomer. After he entered Cly shifted his weight on the stool, putting one foot down on the floor; and the men at the green table became engrossed in their game once more, their eyes darting back and forth over the cards.

“Yaozu,” Lucy both announced and greeted him.

The white-clad oriental man surveyed the underground saloon. His attention skimmed past the drunks and the gamblers, settled briefly on Andan Cly, and returned to Lucy. “Mrs. O’Gunning. I’d like to try some of that beer you brew. The local selection,” he clarified in precise, flawless English.

She blurted, “Are you sure? It’s...an acquired taste, or so I’m told.”

“Then allow me the opportunity to acquire it.”

“As you like.” She stepped away from Cly, grabbing a clean mug off the second plank shelf and toting it over to the tap. “But if you don’t care for it, I have some *huangjiu* on hand. Mrs. Wong gives me a bottle every now and again; I think she takes them away from her husband. A barkeep should have something on hand for all her customers, don’t you think?”

“Yes, but there’s no need to assume. Today I’d like to try this beer...about which I’ve heard so...*much*.”

Though the pub was more empty than full and there were many seats available, Yaozu chose the stool next to Andan Cly. He sat upon it with a graceful swish that let the tail of his jacket fall perfectly behind him. An ink-black braid snaked back and forth between his shoulder blades when he turned his head to examine the state of the fixtures,

the stock on the shelves, Lucy O’Gunning as she filled his mug, and his own reflection in the mirror behind the bar.

Then he regarded Andan Cly. Their eyes met in the glass.

Cly adjusted his position on the stool, a frequent occurrence, for it was about a size too small for him. “So...what are you doing here, Yaozu?” He aimed for a cautiously friendly tone and more or less hit it.

To what Cly considered the Chinaman’s credit, he did not stall the conversation with disclaimers or pleasantries. “I’d heard you were inside the walls—that your ship is docked at Fort Decatur. I thought I might find you here.”

Lucy arrived with the beer and placed it before Yaozu with a dubious look in her eyes. Seattle’s home-brewed beverage was distilled from blight-contaminated water; and though it was safe to drink, it was rarely anyone’s first choice. Or second. Occasionally, it came in third.

“Thank you, Mrs. O’Gunning,” he said. Without so much as a nervous sniff, he lifted the mug and began to drink. Two or three swallows into the draught, he paused and cocked his head to the right. “It certainly has a *distinctive* flavor.”

“You’re too kind,” she said, still not convinced she wasn’t being humored. “I’m glad it suits you, and I suppose I’ll leave you to it.” Taking up her rag once more, she ambled to the far side of the bar and started cleaning anything that looked like it might hold still for a wipe-down, whether it needed it or not.

When Lucy was gone, Yaozu set the beer aside. He said to Andan Cly, “I need a ship.”

“What are you moving? Big sap shipment going out?”

“On the contrary, I want to bring goods *into* the city.” He gave the beer a hard stare and a moment of philosophical inquiry. He took another drink before continuing. “I’ve been reorganizing Minnericht’s operations—a task which needed to be done *long* before his demise, might I add—and I’ve discovered that Seattle is running perilously low on the basic necessities. Between you and me, Captain, I’m not sure how much longer the city can remain habitable. Such as it is.”

Intrigued, Andan Cly nodded. “So what are we talking about?” he asked. “Pitch and the like, for seals? Masks? Pump equipment?”

“All that and more. We need canvas, lumber, charcoal for filters, coal for the furnaces, and that’s just the beginning.” He sighed. “Last week we ran out of coffee, and I thought the chemists would start an uprising.”

“It can be a lifesaver,” Cly acknowledged. “Sharpens the mind, and the hands, too.”

“That’s what they tell me.” Yaozu abandoned the beer glass, now more empty than full. “This will be an enormous undertaking, and I’m happy to finance it. Minnericht was an able tinkerer, but some of his works are not so stable or permanent as one might wish.”

The ensuing silence in the saloon was so thick you could spoon it into a bowl. Cly realized that everyone had been listening in, but he was still startled to feel the eyes of everyone present glued to himself and Yaozu.

In a normal speaking voice, intended to be overheard, his companion added, “For now, things are as safe as always, of course. But there’s room for improvement, don’t you think? Here,” he pulled out some coins, one of which appeared to be pure gold.

Placing these coins on the counter, he added, “Let us take a walk. We can discuss your fee.”

Andan Cly wasn't sure how he felt about taking a stroll with Minnericht's former right-hand man, but there was more to be said, and Yaozu was unwilling to say it in front of an audience. The captain couldn't blame him, so he shot Lucy a two-fingered wave and followed the Chinaman out the sealed door, into the dark, mulch-smelling spots beneath the city.

Both men carried gas masks for convenience or emergency, but the masks were not required in the unfinished basement wonderland. There, forests of brick created a dank labyrinth that unfolded with bends, kinks, and curves under the streets as far as the Seattle wall extended, in every direction. It would have been an impenetrable place, blacker than any night without a moon, except that lanterns were hung on hooks at the spots where corners crossed, and at the mouths of the tunnel entrances.

Yaozu unhooked a lantern and turned the knob to raise its wick. He offered the lamp to Andan Cly, who lifted it above his head. Courtesy of his prodigious height, the whole Quarter was bathed in a yolk-yellow glow.

“This way, Captain. Toward the vaults. If we take the long way around, I can show you what I mean.”

The corridor was wide and flanked by the exposed, wet bricks that characterized so much of the underground's topography. Its floor had been packed, but it was not paved in any way; the surface was soggy from the atmospheric moisture—seeping rains above, drizzling down long-dead tree roots and filtering past the houses and businesses of the polluted city.

The air captain and the oriental man walked side by side, their feet struggling slightly with the mucky path. And as they pushed onward, back farther and deeper away from the buried saloon called Maynard's, Yaozu explained.

"I am fond of this particular passage. It sees little travel, partly because"—he gave his dirty boots a rueful gaze—"no one ever installed flagstones or slats. And up ahead, one of the walls has crumbled across the path."

"Then why do you like it so much?" Cly asked, doing his best to keep the lantern steady. But with every step, shadows danced and kicked to the sway of the light, up and down the moss-covered walls, and along the black-mud footway.

"Because it very nearly connects our Chinatown to your vaults, and to the storage quarters back beneath Commercial Street."

Andan Cly said, "Huh. I can see why that would be useful. So you want to clean it out? Shore it up?"

"I do. However, two walls will need to come down in order to make the way passable by track and mining cart," he replied, referencing the handcarts and buckets by which some of the residents moved supplies and toted important items. "And above those walls, new sections of street-level buildings must be sealed against the blight."

"Gotcha."

"Also, if we expand and fix this passage, we could turn one of the offshoot basements into another pump room."

"Do we *need* another pump room? The air's plenty breathable down here."

"So far," Yaozu agreed. "But in the last few weeks the workers have been keeping longer hours, and more coal is being used to power the pumps. My engineers suggest that

it's a maintenance issue. Therefore, I wish to invest in maintenance procedures. I want to clean the pump tubes, all two- to three-hundred feet of them, one after another."

Cly made a low, worried whistle. "That sounds like a big job."

"Yes—a job that will require the pumps to be shut down for cleaning, one at a time. But before we can begin such a chore, supplementary pumps must be operational. Do you understand?"

"I do," he said thoughtfully. Then he stopped and said, "And this must be the brick pile."

Yaozu nodded. "You first? Since you're holding the light."

They scaled the bricks, and slid down the other side. Cly dusted off his pants and observed, "The kind of thing you're talking about...big renovations, big improvements...is going to take time. And money."

"Money we have, and time too—though less of the latter than the former."

The path split before them and Yaozu urged Andan Cly down the right fork.

"How much time?"

"Impossible to say. The tubes and pumps have held for years, and might hold for years to come. Or they might not."

"What about those engineers you mentioned?" Cly asked. "Can they give you a better idea?"

"They're trying, but they are new to the city and still learning the finer points of its workings. I have recruited them with *generous* paychecks. And I am trusting your confidence on this matter when I tell you," he paused, and looked up into the giant's face. "I'm burning through Minnericht's coffers at a rather alarming rate. He left a fortune, of

course. He hoarded it like a dragon, underneath King Street Station. But it is *costing* a fortune to keep this place livable.”

The captain asked, “Then why are you going to all this trouble? Does the sap really make that much money, to make it all worth this?”

A thin, slow smile spread across Yaozu’s face, and it was not entirely pleasant. “Oh *yes*. And the potential for more money still is *staggering*. The gas—this punishing, brutal substance that killed the city above us—it offers us the means to save it. With better processing and more efficient means of survival underground, these doornails”—he used the white men’s slang for the underground citizens—“could make more money than Californians have ever dug out of their rocks.”

“And you.”

“Me?”

“You stand to make a bundle too, don’t you?”

“Absolutely. But as I was sometimes forced to wonder, with regards to my former...employer, what does it profit a man to be wealthy, but to live in the midst of such...” He hunted for a word, and settled on one. “Instability? It was obscene to me, how much he could have done for this place—and how little interest he showed in doing so.”

“So why don’t you make your money and leave? With what’s left of Minnericht’s stash, you could live like a king outside these walls. Everybody knows it. Everybody wonders.”

“Everybody knows it?” Yaozu asked, his understated smile fixed in place. “I wonder what else everybody knows.” He gazed down the pathway, and once more struck

out for it. “But to answer your question, I stay here because I want to. I like this settlement where a man like me, or like you”—he gestured one long hand toward Cly’s chest—“can live undisturbed by others.”

“But *I* don’t live here.”

“You could if you wished; you’d fit right in. Perhaps,” he said, watching Cly duck to dodge a low-hanging support beam, “less so in the literal sense. I’ve often thought it must be strange to be a man of your size. Like Gulliver in Lilliput, at times.”

Cly was familiar with the tale, and Yaozu wasn’t the first to make that comparison. The captain shrugged as he ducked another beam. “I’ve been big my whole life. You get used to it. I’ve known a few dwarves—a couple of them pirates, and damn fine ones—and I’ve wondered the same thing about them. I expect it’s not so different, living in a world where nothing is the right size.”

Yaozu murmured, “I know what you mean.”

“There’s nothing strange about your size,” Cly observed.

“Not my *size*, no. But outside these walls, I could be treated as a monster, evicted from my home, my property seized and my family sent away. It happens all the time in Portland, you know. Strange persons such as ourselves, Captain Cly...we may be very different from one another, but we recognize a kinship all the same.”

In silence they traversed another few blocks, and all the while, Cly considered this. Finally he said, “I suppose that answers my question well enough.”

“Speaking of fitting in...you’ve spent a good deal more time in the underground than before these last few months.”

Cly flushed, and even the rattling lantern couldn't hide the creeping color. "I'm not... Well. Maybe a *little* more."

"You protest too much, Captain. And look, here we are at the cross-paths before the vaults."

It was true. Their conversation had brought them all the way to the edge of a set of living quarters, the entrance to which had once been a great bank vault with a reinforced door in a reinforced room.

Here, where people came and went more frequently, the labyrinth opened and the streets were packed cleaner, lined with planks or stepping stones held aloft from the perpetually moist floor. More lanterns hung, dimmed, from the end of every wall; and containers of fuel were stationed beneath them, left ready for any passers-through who might require them. Painted signs were affixed to walls or mounted to posts between the corners where mine-cart tracks split the right-of-way. These weathered rectangles held messages in handwritten black lettering and clearly marked arrows.

UNION STREET, THIS WAY; SENECA STREET, OVER HERE; COMMERCIAL AVENUE,
TO YOUR RIGHT.

"So," Yaozu said, clapping his hands together. "My appeal for your services."

"Yeah, that," Cly said. "Sure, I'll make your supply run. I'll need some details, and a list, and a budget—"

"Absolutely. I'll draw up all of these things, and we'll discuss your rate."

"Oh that's easy. I ask—"

“Whatever it is, I’ll double it. I’ll need you back by the end of next month, and I’ll need my instructions followed to the letter. I’m fully prepared to pay for speed and quality service.”

“That’s good, that you’re giving me a few weeks. Because I’ve been thinking...”

“Yes?”

“About making a trip to New Orleans.”

“When?”

“Soon. Real soon.”

“That’s...quite a ways off, for a jaunt. May I ask why you’ve chosen such a destination?”

“An old friend wants me to run an easy job, down there on the Gulf. It wouldn’t interfere with anything you’re asking—not at all—and New Orleans has everything you’re looking for.”

“And then some, I’d bet.”

“You’d bet right,” Cly said. He was surprised to hear himself selling the idea, but he sold it anyway. “It’s huge, and with all those Texians on the premises, you can bet I’ll find plenty of good industrial-quality wares. They’ve got the best machine shops on the continent.”

“I’ve heard as much,” Yaozu said, considering the possibilities. “I wouldn’t have thought it’d be worth the trouble, to send you so far away. But if you’re already going...it might work out well for us both. Two of my engineers are Texians, or they *were*. They’ve been known to complain about things I can’t provide them—instruments and tools they wish they had, or equipment they can’t necessarily find on the West Coast.”

Cly said, "Ask them what they want. I'll get it for them. I'll kill two birds with one stone, Yaozu—yours and mine."

"And you'll collect two flight fees for a single trip."

"There's that, yes," the captain admitted, counting up the coins in his head.

Between what Josephine was offering and Yaozu's bold statement that he'd double the usual asking price...there was enough money in the trip to make major plans.

Life-changing plans. Settling-down plans.

The Chinaman contemplated the pros and cons, staring alternately into space and into the captain's eyes. After a few moments of deliberation, he declared, "I like the sound of it! I'll speak with my engineers, and you and I shall confer again shortly."

With that, he made a short, dipping bow and excused himself down the far passage to the right. He disappeared on the other side of a sign that said KING STREET. Before long, even his shadow and footsteps were lost to the buried city.

Captain Cly stood in the moldering chamber, chewing over the conversation, replaying it in his head—trying to figure out how much to believe, and how much to accept regardless of whether it was true or not.

Yaozu had been an unknown quantity back in the bad old days, suspicious for the obvious fact that he kept so close to a capricious madman. Even his fellow Chinamen didn't trust him, for they had suffered too much at Minnericht's hands. And Angeline, last surviving royalty of Chief Seattle's reign, had made concerted efforts to kill him. Under the best of circumstances it would have been difficult for the primarily white, working-class doornails to warm up to the oriental man with the educated voice and a millionaire's manners. And now that he was running the empire which remained—

whether it was by default, ambition, or some other power mechanism yet undetermined—the enigma of his presence was both a blessing and a curse.

On the one hand, he managed an operation that pedaled poison to willing takers. On the other, he'd done an admirable job of holding the underground together while leaving the doornails in peace. Therefore, complaining was kept to a superstitious minimum, as if Yaozu might change his mind or vanish, only to be replaced with someone worse if too much ill were spoken of him.

“Strange persons such as ourselves,” Cly recalled out loud.

He resolved to await the list with an open mind and an open pocket, and he approached the great vault door.

From the outside it looked like the portal of an enormous bank—which it had been, once upon a time. The spinning lock jutted like the spokes of a wheel, and though the combination to this lock had been long-since lost or forgotten, it had been rigged to open to a different key. Now, when a visitor wished to come inside, all he had to do was pull a lever hidden beneath the panel. Unless the door had been barricaded from within, it would open with a tug.

Cly lifted the panel, and pulled the lever with its rubber grip and rusting hinge. With a creak and a low moan, the heavy door swung out and Cly descended the uneven steps down into Briar's living quarters in a basement beneath a basement, two cool, secure stories deep underground.

Gallants, Rakes, and Dandies

A Field Guide to Regency Men

By Carrie Bebris

This year marks the 200th anniversary of Jane Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. Almost entirely unknown during her own lifetime, the name of the now-famous English novelist has become synonymous with romance today. Modern readers still enjoy watching her heroines overcome pride and prejudice to find happy endings, and the Regency era remains a favorite setting for both authors and readers.

Marriage in Austen's time, however, was about far more than love—it was the most important decision of a woman's life. Women in the early nineteenth century did not have the rights and freedoms we take for granted in the twenty-first. Unless one had an independent fortune upon which to live (unlikely, as inheritance laws favored men), spinsterhood was a risky proposition, particularly as a woman aged and had no children to care for her during her declining years. A respectable “lady” could not support herself through paid work; even if driven to it by economic necessity, she had few employment options and the wages she earned were minimal compared to the social stigma she earned with them. Women who were lucky enough to be heiresses surrendered their assets along with their maiden names unless protected by the terms of their marriage settlement (prenuptial agreement). Even a wife's body became her husband's property.

A young lady entering the “marriage market,” therefore, had not only her heart to consider, but also her physical well-being and financial security. She hoped to marry a gentleman with a comfortable income, connections, and proper social standing—but also to marry for love. With so much at stake, navigating the terrain of courtship was a complicated business. Just as single women today recount disaster dates with mama’s boys, players, and parasites, the assembly rooms and drawing rooms of Regency society were populated with gallants, fops, fortune-hunters, and rakehells—types of men who would have been instantly recognizable to Austen’s audience, and some of whom made much better husband material than others.

This might have been a less-than-ideal state of affairs for real women of the time, but it is one perfect for fiction plots. A little intrigue, a little romance ... Jane Austen could not resist, and neither can I. Though the novels of my Mr. & Mrs. Darcy series are mysteries, every one of them is a love story as well.

When a suitor comes calling, how is a young lady (or reader) to determine whether he will prove essential or devastating to her happy ending? For the benefit of modern readers and Regency heroines alike, I offer here a field guide to that fascinating species, the Regency male.

Name: *Beau* (plural: *beaux*)

Description: *Beau* is a general term for any male admirer or suitor. The ideal beau is handsome, clever, well groomed, and always perfectly dressed. He has broad shoulders, a slim waist, and muscular calves; he moves with athletic grace, engages in witty conversation, and wears smart, well-tailored clothes. For years, George Brummell so

defined the standard of male fashion and deportment that he became known as “The Beau.” Brummell’s extreme attention to dress (he could spend hours just tying his cravat) and cleanliness has led to the word *beau* also coming to mean *dandy* (see separate entry below).

Related species: *Crusty beau* (a dandy who wears cosmetics applied with a heavy hand); *beau-nasty* (a wannabee dandy who is well dressed but not well groomed).

Habitat: Any venue frequented by fashionable society, from private drawing rooms to public assembly rooms, gentlemen’s clubs, and the theatre. Has a tendency to migrate to London, Bath, and Brighton during established seasons.

Mating Call: A beau will woo his lady with pleasant conversation, impeccable manners, and skill on the dance floor.

Agonistic Display: Rarely seen. The ideal beau prizes coolness and possesses an unflappable demeanor. If provoked, a stinging riposte will come from his tongue, not his rapier.

* * *

Name: *Buck*

Description: A boisterous young gentleman who devotes his time largely to the pursuit of pleasure (gambling, drinking, riding, driving, etc.). The behavior of bucks can range from merely spirited to downright obnoxious. *Loungers*, for example, display their superiority by strolling Bond Street ogling bystanders with their quizzing glasses, tripping passersby with their walking sticks, or walking three abreast to force others into the gutter.

Related species: *Blood* (aristocratic buck), *Corinthian* (fashionable sportsman), *lounger*, *scourer*, *rowdy*

Habitat: London, fashionable spa towns (such as Bath), universities, gambling clubs, horse races, Hyde Park (to show off one's horsemanship and carriage), Bond Street.

Mating Call: Boasts, bluster, catcalls.

Agonistic Display: Scourers (a particularly wild species) amuse themselves by harassing passersby, assaulting the watch, and smashing windows.

* * *

Name: *Dandy*

Description: A man so excessively attentive to his appearance and so affected in his manners that he renders himself ridiculous.

Related species: *Coxcomb*, *court card*, *exquisite*, *fop*

Habitat: Almack's Assembly Rooms (*the* place to be seen)

Mating Call: Dandies are so engrossed in themselves that they are oblivious to the need to issue any sort of mating call to attract a woman's admiration.

Agonistic Display: A *bon mot* criticizing the cut of one's coat. Dandies imagine themselves great wits.

* * *

Name: *Gallant*

Description: A gentleman of fashion, often particularly courtly in his manners toward the lady he woos.

Related species: *Blade*, *lad*

Habitat: Balls, soirees, concerts, theatres, gentlemen's clubs, Jackson's Rooms (boxing salon), Angelo's Haymarket Room (fencing school)

Mating Call: A Shakespeare sonnet.

Agonistic Display: A provoked gallant might settle a dispute through a sparring match or fencing contest.

* * *

Name: *Scoundrel*

Description: A man of unscrupulous character. Scoundrels take many forms; they might cheat at cards, betray their friends, flee their creditors, steal fortunes, seduce innocent girls, or commit any number of other crimes against honor. Unfortunately, these ne'er-do-wells are not always easy to identify. Many masquerade as worthy gentlemen before their lack of honor and integrity reveals itself.

Related species: *Bounder, fortune-hunter, rake (rakehell, rakeshame), rascalion, scapegrace*

Habitat: Any—from the royal court to the seediest gaming hell. Particularly wicked behavior might earn a scoundrel social ostracism, but fashionable society can overlook much in a man of title and wealth.

Mating Call: Lies.

Agonistic Display: Pistols at dawn.

* * *

And what of our favorite Regency males—the Mr. Darcys and other deserving gentlemen who win their ladies’ hearts and hands? They defy classification and need no description. They are, quite simply, heroes.

* * * * *

Carrie Bebris is best known as the author of the Mr. & Mrs. Darcy Mysteries. Winner of the Daphne du Maurier Award, the series features the hero and heroine of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* as reluctant sleuths whose adventures bring them into contact with Regency males of all types—especially scoundrels. Her newest book, *The Deception at Lyme*, releases in October 2011.

References

- Hendrickson, Emily. *The Regency Reference Book*, 1991. Revised and reissued 2004 on CD-ROM. www.emilyhendrickson.com
- Laudermilk, Sharon H., and Teresa L. Hamlin. *The Regency Companion*. New York: Garland, 1989.

Copyright © 2004, 2011 by Carrie Bebris. Portions of this article first appeared in Jane Austen’s Regency World magazine, November 2004.

The Deception at Lyme

(Or, The Peril of Persuasion)

A Mr. & Mrs. Darcy Mystery

By Carrie Bebris

Copyright © 2011 by Carrie Bebris

The Deception at Lyme (Or, The Peril of Persuasion) is the latest book in the delightful award-winning and critically acclaimed Mr. & Mrs. Darcy mystery series.

In Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, the Cobb—Lyme's famous seawall—proved dangerous to a careless young woman. Now it proves deadly. On what should have been a relaxing seaside holiday, Mr. & Mrs. Darcy, the hero and heroine from *Pride and Prejudice*, stumble upon not only a body lying at the base of the Cobb, but a conspiracy surrounding the death of Mr. Darcy's cousin, a naval lieutenant, that hits much closer to home....

Chapter One

After securing accommodations, and ordering a dinner at one of the inns, the next thing to be done was unquestionably to walk directly down to the sea.

—Persuasion

Elizabeth Bennet Darcy had yet to glimpse the Cobb as she negotiated one of the steep cobblestone streets that wended through Lyme’s cliffside dwellings and shops. The close buildings obscured her view of the renowned seawall and harbor some half-mile distant from the town itself. Yet even had the breakwater been within sight, her gaze coveted a still more remarkable spectacle: the sea itself. In all her three-and-twenty years, she had never before laid eyes upon the sea, and the narrow glimpses she managed to catch between buildings as her small party walked down to the shoreline only whetted her impatience to behold it unobstructed.

At last they reached the end of Broad Street, where a promontory opened up a commanding prospect, and she stopped to absorb the sight. She could see not only the harbor, but also miles beyond. The sun traced its descent toward the horizon, its rays diffused by clouds into muted green and yellow light that slid across the dark water rolling toward the beach.

“Is it as you imagined?”

Had her husband not stood directly beside her, his question might have gone unheard. The wind blowing across Lyme Bay tugged insistently at her bonnet, the ribbons beneath her chin straining to prevent its taking flight.

“I could not possibly have imagined this.”

Though she had seen depictions of the sea, no canvas could capture its magnitude, nor the latent power she could feel even from their elevated vantage point. Tall-masted ships moored in the harbor, their mighty hulls dwarfing the smaller fishing boats bobbing round them with the incoming tide. Still more great vessels anchored beyond the seawall, majestic silhouettes against the horizon.

She turned to Darcy. “Thank you for indulging my eagerness to walk down to the sea tonight. You and your sister have visited the coast on enough previous occasions that it cannot hold for you the novelty it does for me.”

“I have never visited this part of the coast before. And I believe my appreciation of the sea is the greater for viewing it this time with you.”

“Despite my having drawn you and Georgiana out of our lodgings nearly the moment we arrived in Lyme?”

“The more so, because you did.” Darcy smiled. “I believe you are even more keen to experience the sea than Lily-Anne.”

Elizabeth had felt a touch of guilt upon leaving their young daughter with her nurse while the adults walked to the shore. Their family had been speaking with such anticipation about this holiday that although Lily-Anne’s vocabulary was limited, “sea” had been among her most-used words for the past fortnight. The journey to Lyme, however, had tested the eighteen-month-old’s temper beyond endurance. She would enjoy her first sight of the sea in the morning, after the proper night’s rest for which her nurse was now settling her down.

Georgiana clamped a hand upon her hat. “Lily-Anne would have been carried off by one of these gusts of wind. Do you think it will rain?”

Darcy glanced at the sky. “Not tonight. However, more clouds are forming, and sunset is not long off. We should continue to the beach so that we can see it and return to our lodgings before full dark.”

As they descended steps down to the square, another gust swept the cliff, catching hold of Elizabeth’s wide-brimmed straw bonnet. “If I do not adjust my hat, the wind will carry *me* off,” she said.

An inn, the Lion, stood not far up the street, with a narrow passage between it and its neighbor that would provide shelter from the wind. They walked to the building, and Elizabeth entered the alley while Darcy and Georgiana waited at its entrance.

She removed her gloves and tried to untie the bonnet. The wind, unfortunately, had strained the ribbons so taut against her jaw that now, though the ties had slackened in the sheltered space, they formed a knot so tight that she struggled to work it free. She glanced at Darcy and Georgiana, thinking to summon one of them for assistance. They, however, had become engaged in conversation with a couple she did not recognize. The lady appeared of an age similar to Georgiana’s; the gentleman, about a decade older. The animated manner with which Darcy’s sister spoke with the lady suggested the familiarity of previous acquaintance.

Electing not to interrupt, Elizabeth continued her solitary struggle. As she tried to coax the knot, she became aware that Darcy and Georgiana’s conversation was not the only one taking place near her. Voices drifted through an open window of the inn.

“Do not deny it—I saw you leave the Sheet Anchor with one of them, and later walking on the Cobb with the other.” The voice was a woman’s, sharp and high-pitched. “You told me you had done with them.”

“I have not seen either of them in I know not how long.” This voice was male. Cultured. Condescending. “I was not aware they were in Lyme until we happened to meet today.”

“Do not insult me with your lies; I know you better than anyone. And were that not enough, I have talked to each of them myself. You never stopped. All this time, I thought the business had ended. But you have been carrying on behind my back.”

Elizabeth tugged harder at the ribbons. Uncomfortable with the accidental eavesdropping, she wanted to secure her hat and move along as quickly as possible.

“My affairs are none of your concern.”

“*Your* affairs? Those affairs never would have begun had I not been so foolish as to introduce you. We came here to meet them, did we not? You allowed me believe we were on holiday, when all along you were planning these rendezvous.”

“Of what have you to complain? You *are* on holiday,” responded the man, who Elizabeth presumed was the woman’s husband. “You spend my money as if you were.”

“Your money! And where is mine? Where is my share of what they have received all these years?”

“Do I not provide for you? You are wearing your share. You dine on your share. You drive about town in your share, patronize half the shops in London with your share. So long as you live under my protection, whom I meet and why is *my* business.”

“Your business—and *you*—can go to the devil.”

“Madam, at times I believe myself already in his company.”

There followed an expletive which Elizabeth had never before heard uttered, let alone by a woman. She edged away from the window to distance herself from the scene of marital discord.

“What of the promise you made me?” the wife continued, her shrill voice rising to a volume Elizabeth could not escape despite the increased distance. “Did you ever intend to keep it?”

“In time.”

“You have run out of time.”

“Not quite yet. I suggest you keep that fact in mind.”

“Depend upon it, I have.”

A brief silence followed. Elizabeth hesitated to take another step, lest her retreat be heard and her presence realized.

“I have friends in Lyme, you know.” The wife’s voice was calm, steadier.

The man issued a low, scornful chuckle. “No doubt you do. Half the navy is ashore. Though in your present state, you hardly present an enticing object.”

“Certain individuals might be very interested in learning what I know. I am not the only person *your* affairs have betrayed.”

“You are hardly guiltless yourself. Unless you are an utter fool, you will keep your mouth shut.”

The next sound was that of a door opening.

“Where are you going?” the man said.

“Out.”

Though Elizabeth had failed to free her knotted ribbons, she hastened to rejoin her party. An accidental witness to the domestic drama, she had no desire to meet its actors.

Georgiana and Darcy were alone once more; the couple with whom they had been speaking were now a good twenty yards up the street, slowly negotiating the steep incline.

“You just missed my friend Miss Ashford,” Georgiana said. “What a delightful surprise! I had no idea of her being in Lyme. She is here with her brother, who comes regularly. In fact, he likes it so well that he leases a house here throughout the year. They arrived a se’nnight ago, and were just come from a promenade on the Cobb, which they highly recommend. Sir Laurence said the view from the top is very fine. They have gone every afternoon, and invited me to join them tomorrow.”

Elizabeth took Georgiana’s arm and continued walking, hoping to move their party along. “I am glad you have found friends here. Are they Derbyshire acquaintances?” She could not recall having heard the name before.

“No—their family home is in Somerset. I know Miss Ashford from London; she and I have studied with the same harp master since we were girls. I met her eldest brother once about three years ago, but this is the first time I have seen him since he inherited the baronetcy from his father. He is Sir Laurence now. That makes him sound older than merely ‘Mr. Ashford,’ do you not think? Yet he is not too old—” She turned to her brother. “I believe about the same age as you, Fitzwilliam. I did not realize until today that you know each other.”

“We have met occasionally at White’s,” Darcy said.

Georgiana, noting the unaltered state of Elizabeth's bonnet, offered her assistance, but Elizabeth declined.

"It can wait. I am impatient to reach the waterfront." She glanced over her shoulder toward the inn's entrance, but saw no one who answered her mind's image of the couple she had overheard.

In but a few steps more they passed the Assembly Rooms and arrived at the beach. From here they could see the Cobb half a mile southwest. Small boats bobbed in the harbor created by the semicircular breakwater, which extended at least a thousand feet from mouth to shore. The seawall met land near a cluster of buildings their landlady had referred to as Cobb Hamlet. Separated from Lyme proper by an undeveloped cliff prone to landslips, the harbor and hamlet were linked to Lyme by an elevated promenade known as the Walk, which ran parallel to a cart road that skirted the beach.

Elizabeth, Darcy, and Georgiana ambled along the Walk, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of the sea. Dusk approached, and waterfront activity both on and offshore was winding down. Vendors packed up their wares; sailors finished unloading goods from recently docked ships; horses pulled the last of the carts toward the Customs House for clearance. Four bathing machines, having long since completed their service for the day, were parked on the beach out of reach of the lapping tide.

A set of steps led from the Walk down to the cart road and the beach itself. The rising tide brought the water quite close, and Darcy asked whether Elizabeth would like to go down and dip her hand in the seawater breaking onto shore. She responded enthusiastically.

At the base of the stairs, a young gentleman who been about ascend moved aside to grant them clear passage. Even in the fading light, his features evinced considerable time spent at sea. The sun had tanned his skin to a rich hue and bleached to pale gold the long hair tied back beneath his hat. The result was not unfavorable; in fact, he possessed a mien of health and vigor superior to most of the other sailors they had passed as they walked through Lyme. He nodded politely at Elizabeth and Darcy as they reached the bottom step—a civility they returned—but when his gaze shifted behind them to acknowledge Georgiana, a spark entered his blue eyes, and an expression of patent admiration overtook his countenance.

Elizabeth turned to regard her sister-in-law. A well-favored, graceful girl even in ordinary moments, Georgiana at present appeared altogether fetching. The wind that had played such havoc with Elizabeth's bonnet had brightened Georgiana's eyes and loosened tendrils of honey-blond hair that fluttered becomingly around cheeks pinkened by the persistent sea breeze—or perhaps by consciousness of being the object of so admiring a look. No one could be insensible of such attention from a handsome gentleman, certainly not a young lady of nineteen.

And certainly not her brother.

Darcy glanced from the sailor to Georgiana, and saw his sister through the stranger's eyes—the eyes of a man. A man who was not her brother, not her protector, but a warm-blooded buck who could not help but respond to the sight of a beautiful woman. Worse—a man turned onshore after months at sea entirely deprived of women's company. Decent women's company, anyway.

Though there had been nothing improper in the sailor's expression or manner, his interest put Darcy on guard. It reminded him all too vividly of the last time he and Georgiana had been at the seaside, and the evil she had so narrowly escaped. Darcy had thwarted the designs of one fortune hunter, but scavengers of Mr. Wickham's breed flocked in watering-places like gulls.

Before Darcy could offer his hand to assist Georgiana's descent, the stranger offered his own. She accepted his aid, placing her hand in his. She negotiated the stairs without incident, but as she stepped onto the beach—her attention entirely upon him, to the neglect of her own feet—a small mound of shingle shifted beneath her, throwing her out of balance.

The gentleman quickly caught her, preventing a fall. Darcy stepped forward to help steady Georgiana, relieving the sailor of any need—or excuse—for further contact with his sister. Georgiana took Darcy's arm, but required it for only a moment. She had regained her equilibrium. Her composure, however, was not so easily recovered. She cast her gaze about, fleetingly meeting the stranger's, then shifting it to look at anything but the man's countenance.

His face reflected amusement. Hers was in high color. She stammered a few halting words of gratitude, by all appearances directed at the wall behind him. The edges of his mouth upturned to a half-smile.

He tipped his hat—"Your servant, miss"—and continued on his way.

Though she had refused to meet his eyes, Georgiana watched his back as he nimbly cleared the stairs and hastened along the Walk.

"He thinks me a careless featherbrain."

Darcy, too, observed the retreat of the man who had found his sister's discomposure charming. "The opinion of a common sailor you will never again set eyes upon should cause you no distress."

"He is not a common sailor. From his manner and dress, he is a gentleman. I wager he is a naval officer, as Gerard was."

Indeed, there were enough ships in the harbor that the stranger could well be an officer on one of the small naval vessels, if not the master of a merchantman. Darcy doubted, however, that the man could ever wear a uniform as proudly as their late cousin had worn his the last time Darcy and Georgiana saw him. A newly commissioned lieutenant of the Royal Navy, Gerard Fitzwilliam had died three years ago in action aboard the *Magna Carta*.

"Even if that fellow is an officer, neither dress nor stripes make a man a gentleman," Darcy said. "Put him from your mind."

They strolled along the beach a little way, but the sun soon dropped so low that the filtered light faded quickly. The wind picked up, and the temperature, which had dropped decidedly since they began their walk, caused both Georgiana and Elizabeth to shudder. Electing to postpone the pleasure of their first promenade on the Cobb itself until the morrow, they headed back toward their lodgings.

Darcy looked at the sky once more. Clouds obscured the young moon. Perhaps a storm was gathering after all.

[Carrie Bebris](#) is best known as the author of the Mr. & Mrs. Darcy Mysteries. Winner of the Daphne du Maurier Award, the series features the hero and heroine of *Pride and*

Prejudice as the Regency era's answer to *The Thin Man's* Nick and Nora, searching for truth between teatimes amidst the social whirl of Jane Austen's England. Her newest book, *The Deception at Lyme*, releases in October 2011, while the trade paperback edition of *The Intrigue at Highbury* will be available in August 2011.

Emory's Gift

By **W. Bruce Cameron**

Copyright © 2011 by W. Bruce Cameron

A magical and comforting coming of age story about a young boy and his broken family being healed through the power of faith and love, *Emory's Gift*, a new novel by the *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Dog's Purpose*, releases in August 2011.

W. Bruce Cameron is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Dog's Purpose* and *8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter*, which was turned into the hit ABC series. He has twice received the National Society of Newspaper Columnist's award for Best Humor Columnist and his weekly nationally syndicated column is published in more than fifty newspapers. He lives in California.

Chapter One

“What do I do if I’m in the woods and I run into a cougar?” I asked, starting off with one of his favorites.

“Cougar,” Dad responded, nodding.

My stomach tensed. It was my favorite game, not because I really thought I’d encounter a cougar or a wolverine or any of the other animals I’d ever mentioned, but because of the way it engaged my father. When we first moved from suburban Kansas City to our home both high and deep in the Selkirk Mountains of Idaho, my father lectured me all the time about how the woods were full of predators, but the gravity of his instructions had been drained away after five years without incident, so that now we just ran through the list and he repeated his warnings in what had gone from conversation to ritual. He set his fork down on his plate, gathering his thoughts. I leaned forward eagerly, as if I’d never come up with “cougar” before.

My father wasn’t a big man. When he stood with other men he seemed to be on the shorter side of average, and his hands were small, though they worked well enough with wood to keep food on our table. Over the past two years he’d lost a few pounds and it didn’t look good on him; his neck seemed too small for his collar and his reddish brown hair was often unkempt.

“Nobody has seen a cougar in a long time, Charlie.”

“They’re out there, though,” I insisted. There were notices posted at the state campsite that warned hikers of mountain lions, a.k.a. cougars, a.k.a. pumas, a.k.a. panthers.

“They are out there,” my dad agreed. “But a cougar probably isn’t going to be after you,” he said. “Most times you see a cougar, it will be running away.”

“But if it’s not,” I insisted, my eyes pleading with him to stay in the game.

“But if it’s not,” he nodded.

I relaxed.

“Well, let’s see, how much do you weigh, now? Twenty pounds? Twenty-two?”

My father was teasing me. I made a fierce muscle, my bicep quivering in alarm as I forced it to make what meager appearance it could muster. I had blonde hair like my mother and the same brown eyes as my dad. As I proudly regarded the small lump of sinew I called my bicep I could see the nearly invisible blonde hairs sticking up out of my tan skin.

“Eighty-five,” I announced.

Dad grinned. “You don’t weigh eighty-five pounds, Charlie.” Then the grin died, his eyes drifting toward the head of the table. There was a time when the woman who once sat there weighed a mere eighty-five pounds, when her weight was obsessively monitored and announced and analyzed, all for no ultimate good whatsoever. There was no doubt that this was what he was thinking as he looked at Mom’s empty chair.

“Cougar,” I reminded him.

He turned back to look at me. I still had his attention. “Well, a young cougar, one that isn’t good at hunting, he might think a bite-sized boy like you could make a tasty meal. When they first get kicked out of the den they’re hungry and wandering around, trying to find a territory they can call their own. Especially the males, they need a huge area. They don’t want to run into a person—humans used to shoot them on sight and sort of selected out the bold ones, so the only mountain lions left are descended from the timid ones. But they could be dangerous if they’re hungry enough, or if it feels threatened.”

“So if it’s hungry...” I prompted.

“Okay, so if it’s hungry, the first thing is, don’t run. If you’re running, a cougar’s just a big cat. Ever see a cat jump on a string? It’s instinctive.”

“So stand still.”

“Right. Stand up big and tall. If you’ve got a stick nearby, hold it up over your head, but don’t throw it or point it. What you want is for that cougar is to see you as a meal that’s going to cost him, put up a real fight.”

Dad said this last with less enthusiasm, tiring of the game already.

“Grizzly bear.” *Please Dad. Please keep playing.*

“Oh.” Dad waved his hand. “You’re not going to see a grizzly around here, Charlie. Last one seen in this part of Idaho, had to be thirty years or more ago. They’re practically extinct in the lower 48.”

“But still. If I saw one.”

My plaintive insistence carried a lot of despair that my father could have picked up on if he’d been paying attention. I was losing him. No matter what I did, I couldn’t

seem to hold his attention for more than a few minutes at a time, anymore. I could've danced around directly in front of him, waving my hands, crying out, "Dad, look at me! Here I am," and he'd somehow lose sight of me.

His gaze drifted back to the empty chair at the other end of the table.

"Dad?" *Why don't you love me? How can I get you to love me?*

"Dad!"

His glance seemed a bit surprised, as if he couldn't quite remember who I was.

"Grizzly bear? If I did see one."

He sighed. "Charlie."

"Grizzly," I insisted.

He looked within himself, consulting his inner encyclopedia. "Thing about a grizzly is it probably isn't looking to eat you. If it is, you'll know because it'll act like it doesn't care you're there. It won't look at you, it'll pretend it's foraging, but every time you see it, it's gotten closer. That kind of bear, you treat just like a cougar, you talk loudly at it, you back away, you get yourself a weapon, and if it attacks, you fight. Go for its eyes. Let it know that as far as unplanned meals go, you're not worth the bother."

A wiser child would have quit the game right there, but I kept pressing. "What if I just run across one, by accident? One with cubs?"

"Mother grizzly is just like a black bear. She's defensive; she just wants to protect her cubs. You back off, you try to get as much distance as you can from those

cubs without running. If she attacks you, you curl up, protect your head and neck with your arms, and play dead. Lie there until she's long gone."

"What if it's a male? Dad? What if it's a male grizzly? What then?" A certain shrill desperation crept into my voice.

Dad didn't hear me. He was looking at the end of the table, seeing his wife, maybe, or maybe just seeing the hole she'd left in his life when she died. I knew he'd be unresponsive now, a shell of himself, and that he wouldn't see me either, not even when I got up from the table to do the dishes. It was as if I didn't exist.

When this happened, it felt like there were not one but three ghosts living in the house. He said only two more words to me that night. I was in bed, lights out, lying there as silent as the house had been since dinner. My window was open a crack, cool mountain air flowing deliciously across my body. I heard my father ease out of the chair in the living room, snapping off the light next to where he had been reading. He came down the hall and stopped in the dark rectangle of shadow that was my open door: I felt him standing there, looking at me sprawled in a blanket of moonlight. "Tomato cages," he said.

And then he was gone.

"I hate you, Dad," I murmured into my pillow, the sound too quiet for even my own ears. I didn't hate him, of course. He was my whole world.

Sometimes I allowed myself the horrible contemplation that maybe my father hated *me*. Maybe he knew what I had done. The thought made my heart pound, it could wake me up at night with the sensation of drowning in cold water.

I didn't have a name for it, this thing. It was my awful secret, my awful, horrible secret. If my dad knew, if he had even a strong suspicion, it would explain how a father might come to hate his own son. Wouldn't it? How would he ever forgive me, when I couldn't even forgive myself? I was a bad person, though the only other human being who knew what I'd done had died a year ago last April.

That night I heard Dad sobbing in his bedroom, a choking noise that filled me with dread and fear. He never cried in front of me, not once, but this was far from the first time I'd heard him down the hall, facing his pain alone.

I was hurting too. Why didn't he come out of his bedroom and ask about me, his only child? We never talked about what was the most significant event of our lives. We came back from the funeral as if the only reason we were together is that we had shared a ride, and each went our separate way into our grief as soon as the last well-meaning neighbor departed from our home.

It was as if Dad had an awful secret of his own, but everyone knew what it was. Mom was dead. That was the secret.

It happened to me, too, Dad.

It was August of 1974, and I'd just turned thirteen. I was small for my age, several pounds shy of the eighty-five I'd boasted of at dinner. Our home in northern Idaho bordered state land and for miles and miles in every direction and when we'd moved there a few years prior I thought it was paradise. Mom had loved it.

We used to have real family conversations when she was alive, not just animal games but discussions about my future, the War in Vietnam, what they were building at

Dad's shop. Now my dad would let a whole day go by without initiating a dialogue—I knew, because I'd tested it once, but it made me so heartsick that I broke silence the next morning, babbling ceaselessly just to beat back the loneliness. That night's final exchange had been typical.

“Tomato cages.”

The wire tomato cages were sitting out in the square patch of lumpy earth that used to be Mom's garden, looking like skeletal soldiers filled with a twisted circulatory system of brown, dead plant stalks from the year before.

One Mother's Day long ago I'd presented Mom with flags I'd made for the top of the cages. They were just strips of white cloth the art teacher provided, but I'd laboriously painted “Tomato” on them, seeing them in my mind as pennants snapping in the wind out in the garden, serving notice that the tomato cages were for tomatoes and not corn or potatoes or zucchini. In reality they hung limp from their wire frames, the letters illegible in the folds.

Mom said she loved them. She never pointed out that tomato cages are supposed to be narrow at the bottom and wide at the top—I'd crafted flags for *upside down* tomato cages. From that year forward she placed the tomato cages so that they looked like miniature oil wells out in the garden and at the end of each growing season would carefully roll up the flags and then duct tape the roll so that the flags wouldn't be affected when the tomato cages were stacked in the pole barn.

Mom had had a good October day two years before, tending to her garden, preparing it for the winter and for a spring planting the doctors correctly predicted she

wouldn't see. I helped her do some raking and told her she didn't have to tape the flags on the tomato cages. By that time I knew how stupid I'd been and was embarrassed that the neighbors might see our upside down cages and think I was just a kid.

"We should just throw those out," I said.

"Nonsense, Charlie, I love my flags," Mom said. I was growing up, in my eyes, but she sometimes still treated me as a child.

She tenderly taped each flag in a thick roll atop the cages, then straightened, putting a hand to her face. "Whew. Let's put these away tomorrow, I need to go lie down."

The way I remembered it, she never really got out of bed after that, not in a way that didn't make me feel as if she were invisibly tethered to it. By April of the following year, my dad and I were standing numbly in a spring snow storm, listening to Pastor Klausen talk about what a wonderful woman Laura Hall was, while the wet built up on the casket in a way that made me want to towel it off to save the gloss from being ruined. My dad held my hand and his fingers were like ice.

Most of the people wore black. I resented the ones who gave me pitying glances and I resented the ones who lacked the courage to look at me and I resented the ones who reacted to the wet weather with distressed expressions. I knew it wasn't fair but there was nothing fair about any of it.

I didn't cry until we got back home, where Mom's presence was still everywhere, palpable, defying the unreal fact of her death. And then, when I cried, it was as much out of guilt for what I had done as anything else.

So that's why I hated my father for bringing up the tomato cages. Why now? Why did he even care?

Touching them was the last normal thing my mother had ever done. As long as they still stood sentry out there in the garden, it was as if they were waiting for a woman who was coming back any time now.

The next morning, instead of obeying my father's instructions to yank the tomato cages, I deliberately chose to embrace a glorious disobedience. I'd long before discovered the small tin in my father's bedroom drawer that contained the key to the gun cabinet. I loved to pull the guns out and sight down on small prey in the backyard and "pow!" they'd be blown to imaginary bits. The 30-06, a huge, heavy rifle, had a small telescope on top, two thin hairs intersecting on pretend wolves and bears across the valley. The slugs rolled around in my hand with a thrilling weight and snicked into place when I loaded each weapon.

Dad told me when we first moved to Idaho that when I was big enough he'd teach me how to handle guns. But he was never going to teach me; he hadn't even opened the cabinet in two years.

I spread a kitchen towel on the table and lined up my tools. I glanced at the sweep hand on the clock and saw that it was just ten seconds away from 11:50 AM. I decided to see if I could disassemble a weapon in two minutes, the way recruits did in boot camp movies. The second hand passed over the twelve and I began confidently dismantling my dad's 30-06 rifle.

I went farther this time than ever before, basically taking the gun completely apart. I examined each piece of metal, a few of them very small, as I freed them from the main assembly, placing them on the towel like a surgeon lining up scalpels before an operation.

Just before noon I realized I'd failed to track when my two minutes were up, but it didn't matter because I'd just heard something that made me freeze, my eyes wide open, disbelieving.

We seldom got much traffic up in these hills beyond town. Anyone turning off the paved road, County Highway 206, was either lost or on his way to one of only six houses clustered up here on Hidden Creek Road. A long climb, full of switchbacks, would take you to our place, and a little farther on you'd crest the hill and then make your way back down to join highway 206 again, the downward half of the loop just as steep as the upward half.

I knew that climb well. The school bus always went to the opposite end of Hidden Creek Road first, so that our house was the last stop. This was fine for the morning because it meant I had a few more minutes to sleep in, but in the afternoon I was too impatient to make the full loop and would get out with a handful of other students who lived just off Highway 206. Then I'd run home, my breath getting ragged as I chugged up the steep switchbacks on Hidden Creek Road. And I mean *run*, because my mom was sick and I wanted to see her and make sure she was okay.

I never told her the reason I raced up Hidden Creek Road as if being pursued by outlaws was that I was running home to her, but I'd like to think she knew. She was

always glad to see me. Walking in the front door to her welcoming smile was often the high point of the day.

Whenever a vehicle turned off the pavement and headed up our way, we could hear it in the valley. I'd long ago learned which sound meant the mail truck was coming; which clanking, grinding noise meant that the neighbor lady, Mrs. Beck, was driving her husband's stick shift; and which throaty roar meant that my father's Jeep had turned the corner.

It was this last that came to me clearly through the open kitchen window to me now. What was he doing home? Did work let out early?

And what really mattered: I had just a few minutes before my father came into the house and saw me sitting there with his forbidden rifle broken apart on the table. I jumped up and my motion jerked the kitchen towel and the gun parts fell to the floor in a shower of metal.

Chapter Two

The sound of the front door opening coincided perfectly with the firm click of the gun cabinet door as I shut it. I whirled and faced my father, who stood on the threshold and stared at me. Behind me I could feel the 30-06 rifle vibrating in its slot. I'd reassembled it with an alacrity that would put a smile on the face of any drill sergeant, but I was still standing right in front of the cabinet with no excuse for why I was there, guilt painted all over my face. I eyed my father with fear. I read in his expression that he knew what I'd been doing and my heart sank with it.

“Charlie?” he said, his tone puzzled.

I drew in a breath. My fists clenched the gun cabinet key in my hand, its tiny teeth digging into my palm.

“Charlie? You're not ready?”

I blinked at this, unsure.

“Get a move on. It's Saturday, did you forget what day it was?”

Truthfully, I had. It was summer vacation, and I had lost all sense of the calendar. Saturdays my father took me to the YMCA for junior lifesaver training. I was supposed to be wearing my bathing suit.

“Oh!” I could have laughed with relief. I ran down the hall, stealthy replaced his key, then tiptoed back to my bedroom and slipped into my trunks and grabbed a towel.

He was already back out in the driveway when I emerged from my bedroom and skipped past the gun cabinet, giving the rifles a parting glance.

Dad started the Jeep as I slid in. He backed out of the driveway and we bumped along in silence.

The air was so clear it seemed to shine as the Jeep rattled down the curvy, rutted road. I looked out at the perfect day and tried to think of something to say to my father. The county road snaked along next to the river, Dad's thickly treaded tires buzzing on the pavement. When we first moved to Selkirk River five years ago, I noticed the quick transition from utter wilderness to town, a sudden clutch of buildings jumping up from the riverbank as if in surprise. It was like, I told my mom, a house here and a house there got together and said, "well hey, we might as well have a town while we're at it!"

Selkirk River put everything it had into about five square blocks and then seemed to lose ambition. Downriver the homes and occasional stores continued a ways, and the shop where my dad's employer turned out customized furniture parts was another couple of miles in that direction, but after that there was nothing to the south until you got to the city of Sandpoint. Up north there were only mountains and Canada, both seeming to stretch forever.

My dad wheeled into the parking lot of the YMCA, turned off the Jeep, and then twisted in his seat to look at me. I felt a rising, unspecified guilt, and cast about for something to attach it to. Could he know about the rifle?

"I need to talk to you, Charlie."

"Yessir," I swallowed.

“It’s about where I was this morning. Do you remember me telling you I had business to take care of?”

He’d never told me that. I could recall with absolute clarity everything my father had said to me the past month, the past two months, maybe even stretching all the way back to Mom’s funeral, because he spoke so seldom now. I wondered if this meant he was talking to me in his head, like I often did with him, and that he was confused over what was real and what he had imagined.

“I don’t remember that.”

He thought about it. “I guess I meant to. Charlie, I’ve decided to go into business with Rod, you know Rod Shelburton, has that ranch where we all rode horses a couple times? Him.”

Dad was watching me intently. I tried to understand what sort of reaction was expected of me. “Okay,” I finally said.

“The thing is, I’m investing some money with him. What’s left from your mom’s life insurance after we paid off the medical bills. You understand? So it’s like it’s not just my money. It’s our money, Charlie, yours and mine both. So in a way, I’m investing for the both of us.” With that, he stuck out his hand like we were closing a business transaction.

I guess I’d known there was some money after my mother died, but I never thought of myself as having any claim to it. I gripped Dad’s hand and shook it, baffled.

“Okay, then. You have a good time in lifesaving.”

I was dismissed. Still a bit unclear, I swung out of the Jeep and headed toward the building. I heard the Jeep start up behind me, but didn't turn around to wave, because I hated when I did that and my dad wasn't looking at me to wave back. My hand would just hang there in the air, waving at nothing, noticed by no one.

I was one of only two eighth graders in junior lifesaving. The rest were seventh graders and one sixth grader. Seventh graders were the lowest grade in junior high school and considered to be among the most worthless life forms on the planet. They were referred to as "sebies." I didn't talk to them or acknowledge them because they were so far beneath me.

I had been a seventh grader myself until just a few weeks ago.

Back in my bedroom I had a photograph taken of me when I was in little league in Prairie Village, Kansas. I'm standing there with the rest of my teammates, and here's why the picture was on my wall: I was a big kid. Not the biggest on the team, but easily one of the three or four largest. My coach called me "Slugger."

What happened then was we moved to Idaho and the clean air and water apparently stunted my growth. I just stopped growing, stopped gaining weight. As I stood shivering and wet by the indoor pool at the YMCA, I was acutely aware that I was shorter than any of the despised sebies, and barely had any height on the sixth grader. Every one of my ribs was clearly on display, and my scrawny legs stood stork-like out of baggy swim trunks, as if someone had put shorts on a tomato cage.

Our instructor's name was Kay. I thought of her then as an exotic older woman but looking back on it I suppose she was no more than eighteen or nineteen years old.

I had decided to take junior lifesaving classes because I harbored a fantasy about saving Joy Ebert, a blond, blue-eyed girl in my grade, from the river rapids. She'd be drowning and I'd plunge in and pull her to safety and she would love me and marry me. I had been in love with Joy since fourth grade and had even talked to her a few times.

Then I went to the first junior lifesaving class and Joy was forgotten: I was totally in love with Kay. Kay had a thin figure she kept wrapped in a taut one-piece bathing suit—both of us had some blossoming to do, I figured, so maybe she wouldn't care about our age difference so much. In a part of the country where the faces were as pale and uniformly bland as uncooked biscuits in a pan, Kay was deliciously exotic, some kind of Asian blood adding spice to her look. Now it was Kay, with her short black hair and almond shaped eyes, who I pictured rescuing from the river waters; she would be pleased one of her students had learned so well and she would love me and marry me.

I was sort of big on the idea of marriage, which was somewhat of an unusual attitude for an eighth grade boy, but I liked the permanence it implied. You married a girl and she was yours forever, there was even a law about it.

“Now these are your manuals,” Kay said to us, holding up a pamphlet with the Red Cross on it. “Who wants to pass them out?”

As one all seven of us surged forward, and Kay backed up, laughing a little. “No, I mean one person to hand them out. Here,” she said, turning to Danny Alderton. “Pass these out.”

The rest of us tried to hide our jealousy.

Danny Alderton was a neighborhood friend, though at that moment I didn't have much use for him because Kay had picked him over me. He lived up the road from us, next door to the Becks. His skin turned a little pink, his freckles burning, as he accepted the pamphlets and handed one each to his classmates. "Here," he muttered as he thrust one at me.

"Be sure to study the chapter on mouth-to-mouth resuscitation," Kay lectured us. "Once you have someone out of the water, you need to make sure their lungs are clear, and you need to give them mouth-to-mouth until they can breathe on their own. In two weeks, we'll have a class on it. Okay? You don't need to wear your swimsuits that day. We'll be practicing the whole session. Yes, Matthew."

The sixth grader had his hand up. I never asked Kay questions lest she thought I was unworldly. That's why God invented sixth graders.

"What do you mean 'practice,'" Matthew asked. His teeth were chattering from the cold and it gave his question a trembling-with-fear quality.

Kay didn't understand the question. "What do you mean what do I mean?" Matthew struggled to put it into words. He gestured to us, his classmates. "Practice?" he asked tremulously. "On who?" As in, *do mouth-to-mouth with each other?*

The thought hadn't occurred to me but now that Matthew had brought it up I figured if his assumption was correct I'd probably skip that lesson.

"Oh," Kay said, getting it. She shrugged. "On me."

She turned away to pick up some life rings and thus missed the shock that passed over our faces. I was so flabbergasted I forgot my boycott of the seventh graders and exchanged stunned expressions with them.

I realize times have changed, but it was a more simple era then, and I had never before kissed a girl. The previous year a torrid wave of making out had rampaged through the school like a fever, but it had passed me by as if I had been inoculated. The idea that my first lip-to-lip experience would be with a womanly woman like Kay drenched me with excitement and dread.

We spent the afternoon pulling each other out of the water. Half the time I simulated drowning and half the time I simulated saving but all of the time I was in a full out swoon, going through the motions. In two weeks I would be mouth-on-mouth with a *woman*. I had an *appointment*.

Dad picked me up and asked me how my lesson went and I said fine. He asked me if I wanted burgers for dinner and I said fine. He suggested I go fishing in the creek while he went back to work with Mr. Shelburton I said fine. I was in a fog.

What pulled me out of my day-dreamy state was what I saw as I headed out the back door with rod and creel. My father had been busy while I'd been dragging fake drowning seventh graders out of the water at the YMCA.

Mom's tomato cages were gone.

Our paved driveway descended steeply from Hidden Creek Road and swooped into the two car garage, which was set into the ground floor of our house. If you ignored the curve and went straight, a dirt driveway branched off and ended ten yards away at a

pole barn. It looked more like a big garage than anything, with a two-car wide garage door in front and a person-sized door on the side.

The top of the side door was glass, so I didn't have to go inside to confirm that the tomato cages were stacked in a neat pyramid over on the far wall, I just peered in the window. I stared at them for a long time.

What was I going to do, put them back? Then it would be by my hand, not my Mom's, that the cages stood sentry in the garden.

I didn't understand why my father didn't see any value in leaving Mom's things alone. I hated it when my dad's older sister came to town after the funeral and cleared our home of Mom's clothing and shoes; I despised the way he acted as if her toothbrush in the bathroom meant nothing to him and tossed it in the trash for me to take out with the used dental floss. What was wrong with him?

I trudged down the path to the creek, kicking at rocks. I'd walked that path probably a thousand times; it was my main destination whenever I went outdoors. My mother didn't like me in the creek because most of it was hidden from the house, etched into a steep crease in the valley floor well past our property line. She preferred I climb the opposite shore and go into the trees where she could see me again, though if I went all the way to the top, where a rocky spine marked the ridge line, she got nervous because she thought I'd fall from there and tumble all the way back down the hill, like Jack and Jill or something. And if I went over the ridge I was hidden again, and she wasn't too fond of that, either. It was difficult to have any fun at all under such circumstances.

During the spring the waters of the creek were dark and cold, a sharp contrast from the milky pool water from which I'd been saving sevies all morning. From bank-to-bank the stream was more than thirty feet. In the summer, though, with the runoff down to a trickle, the creek bed was mainly dry, littered with rocks and mud and tree branches. The creek itself shrank back until it was only six feet wide, hugging the far bank and deep enough to swim in. That's where the fish liked to lurk, up under the tree root overhang. From the base of our hill, the creek had only another couple hundred yards of independence before it joined the river, adding strength to the flow to town.

I started casting along the banks of the opposing shore, and it wasn't long before I'd hooked and pulled in a nice little brook trout. I put it in the creel, thinking that a couple more just like it and we'd skip the hamburgers that evening.

A few minutes later I had another one, and then another. Man, they were really biting! I left the creel lying on the bank and moved downstream a bit.

The fourth trout was the best of all, fat and glistening, bending my rod with authority while I wrestled it ashore. I was carefully pulling the hook from its mouth when I got the sense of being watched.

I turned and studied the opposite bank. The slight breeze gave the woods an empty sound, but I knew there was someone there, and I felt the hair on my arms stand up as my skin goose-bumped in alarm.

I gave a start when I looked higher up the hill. A pair of black eyes met mine, unwinking.

It was a cougar, watching me from a jumble of rocks.

When it saw I'd spotted him, it leapt with nimble ability down the slope, closing the gap between us. With a soaring jump that was almost absurdly graceful, it cleared the part of the creek that was deep water and bounded to a sudden halt in the shallows, making scarcely a spray.

It all happened so quickly I never even had time to gasp. He stopped, staring at me, evaluating the situation. No more than fifteen feet of rocky creek bed lay between us.

There was no retreat possible. Behind me the bank was sandy, capable of supporting some sparse grass but no trees—as if climbing a tree would save me from a cat. If I tried to scramble up the bank the cougar could easily take me from behind. The deep water was too far away and there wasn't enough of it anyway. There were no good options.

The mountain lion was not running away. His rear end was lowered, his gaze intent. I was reminded of what my dad told me, "like a cat jumping on a string." That's what he looked like to me now, a cat getting ready to pounce.

There were no sticks nearby. My rod was handy but so thin I doubted it would be intimidating. What was it Dad said? *A bite-sized boy like you would make a tasty meal.* My fear was so strong and real I was sick with it. *Stand up tall*, my father had instructed. *What you want is for the cougar to see you as a meal that's going to cost him, put up a real fight.*

I took in a shuddering breath, raising my trembling hands over my head.

The cougar moved again, holding his body low, slinking toward me. There was absolutely no question of his intentions. He stopped, crouching. I stood my ground, quivering.

“Go away,” I said in a whisper.

The cougar stood motionless. His muscle bunched, he sank lower, his lips drew back.

I found my voice. “Grrrr!” I roared at him.

There was no reaction at all.

“Grrrr!”

I watched in terrified fascination as the tension built in the big cat’s shoulders. His eyes were locked on mine. *This was it.* I braced myself for the attack. I would put up a good fight. I would make him decide that, as meals go, I was too much trouble to bother with.

I swallowed. I would put up a good fight, or I would die.

He was coiling to spring and then he froze, raising his head sharply, his eyes widening. I actually saw the irises turn dark with alarm. The cougar stood still for only a second and then turned and rocketed away, scampering up the bank and disappearing into the brush.

My legs were still weak and trembling. I wasn’t sure what had happened. How had I gone from bite-sized to intimidating in mid-pounce? I stared after the big cat, terrified it might return, but after ten seconds, then twenty, there was no sign of him.

I was safe.

Then I was enveloped in a moist odor, dank and strong. I turned and found myself face-to-face with the reason why the cougar had broken off its attack and fled.

Standing on two legs, a dozen feet behind me, was an enormous grizzly bear.

My First Love

Writing about the City that Never Let Go of My Heart from Thousands of Miles Away

By Rebecca Cantrell

As a teenage exchange student in the 1980s I fell in love with Berlin: the sights, sounds, tastes, and historical burden. I lived in the cold shadow of the Soviet wall, toughing it out with scrappy old timers, sarcastic artists, and draft dodgers. More flirting teenagers, guest workers, and GIs danced to Starship's "We Built this City" in the Kuh-Dorf disco than lived in my Alaskan home town.

Eventually I moved away but, like any first love, Berlin never really let go of me. Twelve time zones and a cultural chasm away, I journeyed back in my imagination to write my historical mystery, *A Trace of Smoke*. Why face just a historical distance when I could face twice the challenge by writing from a diametrically opposed location too? Gazing out at dancing palm trees and warm waves from my lanai in faraway Hawaii, I filled my pages with 1931 Berlin's coal and cobblestones.

The paradox between intimacy and distance worked: I finally had the space to immerse myself in the history of Berlin without being overwhelmed. With my heroine, Hannah Vogel, I moved into Berlin in 1931, the year before Germany was completely lost to the Nazis. Wanting to know my beloved city, I started at the top level of research with secondary sources, thick scholarly tomes like *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, but only through page 387 because I wasn't interested in the fall yet, just the rise. I

romped through Otto Friedrich's history of Weimar-era Berlin, *Before the Deluge*. And where else but in Hawaii would I have time to start the thousand year history of Berlin, *Faust's Metropolis* by Alexandra Richie?

In my novel, Hannah never gives up in her search for information. Like her, I dug deeper, down into the primary sources to see how Berliners felt at the time. Luckily, Berlin in 1931 housed wonderful diarists. I devoured the diaries of Count Harry Kessler, Bella Fromm, William Shirer, Viktor Klemperer, and the grim articles of Joseph Roth collected in *What I Saw*. I read until their ghost voices haunted my sleep. Not always fun, because 1931 was their last moment of freedom and some of them, especially Roth, knew it. When the Nazis took power in 1933, Roth wrote a scathing indictment of all European intellectuals and moved to Paris where he drank himself to death.

Even the rough voice of Lotte Lenya, widow of Kurt Weill, belting out an enchanting "Mack the Knife," a song released in—you guessed it—1931 in Berlin, wasn't enough for me. Now I needed to see their world. Berlin's UFA Studio was the center of the German film industry from 1917 to 1945. Amazingly gifted directors who worked there would later come to the United States and become famous enough that even their early films are available on Netflix—only a few days shipping time from my tiny TV—classics like *M*, *Emil and the Detectives*, *Nosferatu*, and *Triumph of the Will*. Thank you, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, FW Murnau, and Leni Riefenstahl for helping my research, even if I didn't always agree with what you had to say (yes, Leni, you know who I mean). Even better, a lot of them filmed on the streets of Berlin so I see those streets almost firsthand. No need to worry that some careless prop master might slip in a modern telephone or coat.

It was pure self-indulgence but, I wanted to taste the city as well. I trekked to a specialty grocery store and brought home boxes of bockwurst, Berliner weisse beer, chocolate, and apple strudel mix. It wasn't quite Berlin in 1931, but at least it was my Berlin from 1985. Writers get to have fun, too.

Senses satisfied, I traveled back to Berlin myself to search for more intangible responses. I walked down the streets that Hannah strode in my imagination, or what's left of them. Many of the locations in my book were flattened in World War II. And to make matters worse, some were never rebuilt, but were paved over and had a giant wall built through them for 28 years. But I prevailed upon a Berliner school friend as beautiful and determined as the city itself. She took me on a tour of the major locations in my book on a hot summer day in 2006. That's when we moved into the sixth sense.

Hannah's apartment? Gone. Her office? Still there and recently restored. It's closer in appearance to where she worked than at any time since 1931, when she typed her make believe news stories there. Eerie, but very cool.

But eeriest of all was the gay bar El Dorado. It's where Hannah's brother Ernst, a drag queen decades before we invented the term, mesmerized audiences with his singing. The Nazis closed the actual bar after the elections in 1933, and, not skilled at recognizing irony, turned it into a political headquarters.

In the 1990s the bar reopened. When I ordered a Berliner weisse beer, my old college favorite, they only had raspberry red shots. I laughed, because that is all that Ernst would have ever ordered anyway, red being his signature color. At last, Ernst's old haunt was restored, not as it was in real life, but as I invented it with him in my novel. Goosebumps raised on my arms as I studied the oil paintings that lined the walls. Each

was a deja-vu-inducing scene from my book. El Dorado today looks less like it did in 1931, and more like a representation of the world I created in my novel. I wasn't the only one who fell in love with Berlin in 1931 and tried to recreate it whole.

Again I sit on my lanai. This time I must imagine an even darker Berlin. In *A Game of Lies* Hannah and I have been drawn into the murderous Berlin of 1936, during the Summer Olympic Games. And so from this sunny Hawaiian Island, I step into its shadows. In spite of devoting years and pages to it, Berlin still won't let me go.

A Game of Lies

by Rebecca Cantrell

Copyright © 2011 by Rebecca Cantrell

During the 1936 Berlin Olympics, journalist and spy Hannah Vogel must discover who murdered her mentor and get his secret package out of the country before the Nazis tighten their noose...and before her true identity is revealed. This is the third book in the critically acclaimed and award-winning Hannah Vogel series.

Award-winning author **Rebecca Cantrell** majored in German, Creative Writing, and History at the Freie Universitaet of Berlin and Carnegie Mellon University. After that she worked as a technical writer for 10 years, before switching to writing more entertaining fiction full time. *A Trace of Smoke*, her critically acclaimed first novel, was awarded Bruce Alexander and Sue Feder Awards for Historical Fiction. She currently lives in Hawaii with her husband and son.

Chapter One

The crowd pushed the three of us between the Marathon Towers toward the Berlin Olympic Stadium. The left tower displayed a simple clock. On the right, both politically and geographically, hung a twisted iron cross—the swastika. I understood the message: it was 1936, and the time of the Nazis had come.

Inside the stadium I shied away from the enclosed white cabins that signaled press boxes. The journalists inside knew me as German crime reporter Hannah Vogel, wanted by the Gestapo for kidnapping the young son of the now-deceased Ernst Röhm. I nervously tilted my wide-brimmed hat to conceal my face and moved with the crowd down the stairs. Surely I would be difficult to notice among so many faces. My current identity was Adelheid Zinsli, neutral Swiss reporter and, hopefully incognito, part-time spy for the British. I looked over at my contact, SS Hauptsturmführer Lars Lang, as we moved toward our seats in the stadium. Years of our deadly game made most trips feel routine, but this time I was frightened.

Lars and I pretended to be lovers, a fiction he enjoyed, and every few months we switched off weekends in our home cities of Berlin and Zürich. But instead of a few days, my editor had insisted that this time I stay in Berlin for a full two weeks to cover the Olympic Games. To keep my job, I had agreed to attend events clogged with my old colleagues.

The crowd stopped and I bumped against Lars's friend, chemistry professor Andreas Huber. When he caught my arm, his sweaty hand lingered there. I pulled my arm free. He let go reluctantly and I shot him an inquisitive glance. Lars did

not seem to notice. “Forgive me for running into you,” I said.

“Of course.” Andreas looked down at me with a crooked smile. “Quite a crowd.”

“I believe that the German government expects one hundred thousand people for the opening ceremony.” I quoted the statistic just to make conversation. I did not add that what the Nazis expected, they too often made happen.

“I hope it doesn’t rain on them all.” Andreas looked at the overcast sky.

“We will have to hope for sunlight,” I said. “Even the Führer cannot control the weather—”

“There’s a bar nearby,” Lars interrupted. He pushed his black hair back. Longer now than he usually kept it, the new length made him look less militaristic. “We have time for another belt.”

“I must stay in the stadium. For the paper.”

I hiked my leather satchel up on my shoulder. A drink sounded like just the thing to calm my nerves, but Lars did not need another one.

“So dedicated.” Lars glared at me. “To your job.”

“Not such a bad quality, dedication.” Andreas took Lars’s arm and led us down the nearest row to a seat at the end. A staunch party man, he understood the possible consequences of Lars’s indiscretions. And his own responsibility to report them.

Lars sat, peeled off his dark brown suit jacket, clumsily folded it in half, and rolled up his wrinkled shirtsleeves. He caught me watching and blew me a sloppy kiss. If my life did not depend on the world thinking we were lovers, I would have left without a backward glance. Instead I put a warning hand on his bare arm.

Although he was not, he looked harmless in civilian garb. Ordinarily, he cleaved

to his black SS uniform, but an order had come down requesting all SS and SA members to refrain from wearing uniforms to the Games.

The German government had issued the order in response to criticism from the Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen the previous winter. Reporters had commented on the number of uniformed Germans in the crowds. This time we would have to guess how many men were trained for warfare.

Although I noted the new order, I would not write about it. If I did, I would not be able to move freely into Germany. Instead of exposing Nazi politics, any story I wrote would have to extol Nazi pageantry.

Indeed, it felt like a royal court with the peasants awaiting a thundering and massive coronation. I spotted a complete orchestra, several military bands with gleaming brass instruments, and a choir dressed in white that must have numbered a thousand. All calculated to impress German and international spectators. Nazis staged spectacles as cleverly as ancient Greeks.

My eleven year old adopted son, Anton, was far fonder than I of such events. He would have adored it. I wished I could take photographs for him, but foreign journalists were forbidden from taking pictures at the Games. I would tell Anton details when I got back home and retrieved him from Boris, my one-time lover, but for now I tried not to think of him. Superstitious, I knew, but I did not like to bring even thoughts of Anton into Germany these days.

When I searched for a pen, my fingers rolled over my perfume atomizer, a costly French gift from Boris. The tiny mother-of-pearl creation was called a Le Kid and evoked memories of the Charlie Chaplin movie and happy times together.

When this assignment came up, Boris had begged me to stay safe in Switzerland. When I refused, he ended our five year relationship. It had been more than a month, and I felt unmoored. I woke every night with my hand searching for him across empty sheets.

I dropped the atomizer and rooted around until I found my pen. I sketched the arc of the stadium first, then the crowd, the bands, the special booths, and the far off oval of the field. I had often drawn pictures of courtroom scenes in my days as a crime reporter and I enjoyed using the skills again. A shadow fell across the page and I looked up.

Overhead the *Hindenburg* ponderously circled the stadium. A white Olympic flag, bigger than a house, flapped under her gondola. The familiar black swastika stood out on her tail. The Nazis owned even the skies.

Although Anton and I had traveled by zeppelin from South America to Germany a few years before, the giant silver shape made me nervous. One spark in the wrong location and explosive hydrogen would ignite and shower a stadium of eager spectators, including me, with flaming debris.

Andreas followed my gaze. "They are very safe. All precautions have been taken to ensure it."

"Yet hydrogen is quite flammable, is it not?" I countered.

"Under the correct conditions, everything is explosive." Lars draped a heavy arm across my shoulders and I gave him an annoyed look. "And don't I always protect you?"

"So far, we have escaped fiery death," I said. "But that is no reason to let our guard down."

Andreas laughed.

"Must you always keep your guard up?" Lars leaned in close and mouthed the

word “Hannah.”

If he said my real name aloud, fiery death might look a good option, and he knew it. I turned the worry in my voice to anger. “It has served me well so far.”

In the past, I had relied on his natural reserve and the caution he had cultivated during his years as a policeman to maintain enough discretion to keep us both out of trouble. But, as with everything else, those rules had changed. I had to figure out a strategy to deal with him before he got us both killed.

To spite me, he kissed me on the nose. I smelled Korn schnapps. “Back in a flash, Spatz.”

I wanted to tell him that I was not his sparrow. Instead I smiled so unconvincingly that he snorted out a laugh. He forced his way down the row and hastened up the stairs. I hoped his destination was the men’s room and not the bar. I longed to abandon everything and head back to Switzerland, but I worried about how I could support Anton without the newspaper job. We did not have Boris to rely on anymore.

I moved to the seat next to Andreas, leaving my satchel to hold Lars’s seat for him from the crowds that thronged into the stadium. The smell of the antiseptic tar soap Andreas favored drifted to me. He and Lars seemed like an odd match. They had met back when Lars was still a policeman and Andreas often testified as an expert witness about the presence of poison in corpses. I wondered what they had in common, save an early interest in National Socialism. Perhaps they had grown close during those long and fevered meetings.

“How long has he been like this?” I asked in a low voice to prevent those nearby from overhearing. The noise of so many excited voices chattering made it unlikely, but

you always had to be careful in Germany these days.

“Off and on for about two months. Worse in the past month.”

My stomach sunk. “Do you know why?”

“Do you?” His brown eyes were curious and perhaps accusatory. What had Lars told him about our relationship? Did he know it was a sham?

“Should I?” I met his challenge with one of my own.

He spread his thin hands wide in a gesture of peace. “I am not trying to make problems. I fear you have enough of your own.”

“Have I?” I struggled to appear calm while I wondered what he thought my problems were. Had Lars told him the true reason for my trips to Berlin?

“I apologize.” Andreas kept voice low. “I did not intend to imply anything.”

“What would there be to imply?”

“Indeed,” he answered.

We sat in awkward silence until Lars slid in next to me, face shades paler. He gave me an apologetic look. “I believe I have a touch of stomach flu.”

“I hope you feel better soon,” I said, as if I believed that his trip to the men’s room had more to do with flu than it did with alcohol. At least now he seemed fairly sober.

When the orchestra curtailed our conversation, I closed my eyes in relief, concentrating on the music and the weak sun on my arms. With my eyes shut, I did not see the swastikas, and I pretended that Germany was as free as it had been when I first escaped with Anton five years before.

But it was not and that was why I was here. I had to do everything I could to keep

the Nazis from taking over Europe as they had taken over Germany. The Nazi regime had killed many already, and I feared that many more would die before they were removed from power. Anything I could do to save those lives, I had to do, and not just because it was morally right, but also because I bore some blame. To save my adopted son Anton, I had traded my chance to discredit Nazi leader Ernst Röhm by publishing his sexually explicit letters. Perhaps their publication would have made no difference, but perhaps my decision had helped the Nazis more than I dared to contemplate.

The music faded. Fanfare trumpeted from the fortress-like Marathon Towers. Hitler must have arrived. I opened my eyes and sighed. No more pretending.

Instead I pulled battered field glasses from my satchel and trained them on Hitler as he descended the stairs in a khaki suit and knee-high boots in front of two men in dark frock coats and top hats. Both wore the heavy gold chains of the International Olympic Committee around their necks. A larger group trailed behind.

Everyone rose to scream and clap. I stood too. Tens of thousands of arms shot up in the Hitler salute, mine, regrettably, among them. I dared not stand out. I wished I knew how many in this forest of arms saluted out of fear, and how many out of patriotism. I quickly dropped my arm and picked up my field glasses with both hands. Surely demonstrating a desire to see the Führer up close would excuse me from continuing the vile salute.

Hitler marched along the crimson cinder track while strains of Wagner, his favorite composer, rose above adoring screams. A girl in a cornflower-blue sundress, blonde braids pinned up in a wreath, ran to Hitler. She looked about five, the same age Anton had been when he showed up dirty and alone on my doorstep. I hated the way the

little girl lent the proceedings an air of gentleness and innocence.

She dropped into a curtsy, bare knee pressed onto red cinders. Her upraised hands offered a bouquet of posies. Smiling indulgently, Hitler took the flowers and pulled her to her feet. He patted her head once before trotting to his loge of honor. The child scampered off the field and I lost sight of her in the crowd. Her sweet and simple gesture would be reported across the globe tomorrow. Another shrewd Nazi propaganda victory.

I glanced at Lars's wristwatch. I needed to sneak away soon to meet my one-time mentor, Peter Weill. Peter claimed to have uncovered something that would change the course of the war we were both certain would come. Thousands of lives were at stake, he had said.

I had a few minutes before my meeting with Peter, but I decided to leave while the men were distracted so I would not have to invent an excuse. I had not told Lars about my meeting with Peter and hoped to keep it from him. The less he knew about anything beyond our work together, the better, especially now that he seemed to be falling apart. I stepped through standing crowds and lifted voices, hoping that Lars would not follow. I suspected that he trusted me no more than I trusted him, and he kept very close to me when I visited Berlin, but perhaps he was drunk and distracted enough by the spectacle to let me alone.

I hurried up the stone stairs. At the top I turned and ducked behind one of the wide square pillars that lined the corridor that ran along the upper rim of the stadium. Spectators filled even the topmost row of seats, but the pillar hid me from their view. With all eyes on the spectacle, I felt blessedly alone. I breathed in the dusty smell of limestone.

Silence descended as the last notes of the German national anthem died away. The “Horst Wessel Song” followed. Written by a Nazi killed by a Communist in 1930, it had served as the accompaniment for more Nazi events than I cared to think about. A hundred voices sang it when a Nazi mob attacked Anton and me in front of Wertheim, a Jewish-owned department store, in 1931.

A hand grabbed my shoulder. I gasped.

“Shush,” said a familiar rasping voice.

“Peter!” Rumpled navy suit, fedora tilted too far back on his head, grin as wide as ever. Peter Weill had mentored me at the *Berliner Tageblatt* and insisted that I take over his crime beat when he moved to Dresden to retire. I had not seen him in years, since before I fled, but it had been his urgent message, more than anything else, that made me brave coming to the Games. Seeing him, I was glad I had.

His faded blue eyes sparkled with excitement when he pulled me into an embrace. Never large, now he felt like a bundle of sticks. I hugged him back with care, conscious of every one of his seventy-four years.

“Hannah!” I winced at the sound of my name. He gave me an appraising look. “It is good to see you again.”

I stepped back and glanced up and down the empty corridor. “Likewise. But we are supposed to meet further down. How did you find me here, and early?”

“Always so suspicious.” He chuckled. “Made you the best Peter Weill.”

“After you, of course.” I had taken over his name when I took over his beat at the newspaper; someone else used it now. “So, how did you find me?”

“I’ve been watching you for over an hour.”

I imagined him dividing the stadium into sections and methodically sweeping each with binoculars, patient and thorough. And, like so many things he did, it had worked despite the odds. “Have you?”

“You and your SS consort. With your blond hair and blue eyes, you are quite the Aryan prize, I see.”

“Why do you think he is SS?” I knew better than to lie to Peter directly.

Military music and applause swelled. Below athletes marched in, starting with Greece.

“Did I teach you nothing? It’s how they walk. How they stand. Their sense of entitlement.” He ticked items off on his thumb and twig-like fingers. “They don’t need uniforms anymore. It’s under their skins.”

Correct and dangerously astute, as always. I kept quiet.

“I could also see, even from across the stadium, that you are not pleased with the one who is pawing at you. Although he fancies you. I think Huber does too.”

“It is a very long, very private story.” I paused. “How do you know Andreas’s name?”

“Chemist. Used him as a source once.” His blue eyes shifted left, away from mine.

I would follow up on how he knew Andreas later. For now I hugged him again, smelling pipe tobacco and whisky. “It has been far too long.”

“Hasn’t it though? But I did not skulk around here to question your dubious taste in men. I’m here because I have news.” His voice rose on the last word, like a thousand times before.

I smiled. News. Peter always had news.

He studied the empty hall. Then he stepped closer and lowered his voice as if to keep unseen watchers from hearing. "I've found out something horrible. Something that will show the world definitively that the Nazis are not peace seekers or peace keepers, or whatever they call themselves these days."

Two huge Olympic bells, cast for the occasion, tolled homage to Hitler and the Games; softly at first, but steadily increasing in volume. "And you would tell me this, though you just saw me with the SS? Seems like bad judgment."

He grinned. "You're not one of them. Whatever you're doing over there, it has more to do with Bella than them."

"Bella?" I cocked a curious eyebrow, knowing I would not fool him. My head throbbed with the peals of the bell.

"She gets things out, doesn't she? And I guess you work for her."

"Interesting guess." I did not work for well-connected socialite reporter, Bella Fromm, but he was close enough. When Lars delivered me canisters of film containing pictures of top secret SS documents, I couriered them not to Bella, but to a British espionage contact provided by an old friend and journalist, Sefton Delmer.

"I want you to get information out. Information and something else." His faded eyes sharpened as he studied me.

He pulled a silver flask from his hip pocket. Peter's Famous Flask. He carried it everywhere and started drinking from it when events got well underway. He offered it to me and I knew that the news was sure to come soon.

I took a small sip of whisky to be polite. Although Peter's expensive whisky

tasted smooth as always, watching Lars today had soured any taste for alcohol. “And if I say I have no idea what you are talking about?”

Peter took the proffered flask and raised it in a mock toast. “Then I’d be proud of you.”

“If you think Bella can get your information out, why not go to her directly?” As curious as I was to know Peter’s news, something did not make sense.

His gnarled fingers lined up with geometric patterns engraved in his flask. “We don’t move in the same circles.”

A lie. But why? I knew that he and Bella were acquainted. The lie appeared pointless, and he did not believe in pointless lies. “When does the pfennig drop?” His face crinkled in a smile. “There is a certain package that she can’t deliver. But you can.”

“Package?” Bella’s network of sources and helpers was far more extensive than mine. I would have thought that she could deliver anything. A wave of heat ran through my body. I brought my hand to my forehead. I could not have a sudden fever. That made no sense.

Peter took a swig of whisky and coughed. He sniffed the flask.

“Peter?”

He wiped his trembling chin. “I don’t feel well.”

Tears coursed down his cheeks. Sweat broke out on his brow. Saliva dripped from both sides of his mouth. He reached up to wipe it off, knocking his fedora to the ground. I thought of picking it up, but took his arm instead.

“Are you in any pain? Chest pain?” His pulse raced under my fingertips. My own

heartbeat sped up.

“No.” His voice rasped.

“Perhaps you should sit?” We took a step toward a nearby bench.

“Hannah—” His face darkened to brick-red. Not a sign of a heart attack. I listed conditions in my head, but none seemed to match his symptoms.

I wrapped my arm around his thin shoulders and dragged his trembling body another step toward the bench. Should I leave him and fetch a doctor? Did I dare leave him alone? Could I find one even if I did?

Before I decided what to do, Peter collapsed against my side, convulsing. Together we fell heavily to the concrete. My hip took the brunt of our weight and the flask clattered to the floor.

“Peter!” I rolled off his too-light body. His pupils shrank to pinpoints.

His bowels let go. He twitched once, then lay quite still. I knew what to expect before I lay my cheek against his wet lips. “Please. Oh please.”

No breath.

No need to check his pulse.

How to Pitch Your Book

By Jon Land

I spend my life pitching. Because I write screenplays as well as books, I'm pitching all the time. Every day, in one way or another. Hey, I don't sell everything pitch—not even close. But I never lose based on my presentation and I want to share what I've learned over the course of twenty years.

I normally do pitch sessions like this in person and that's the effect I'm still going for here in writing. Just you and me in a room working on how best to pitch your book to an agent or publisher. So let's see if I can help you make the strongest possible presentation about your book this way. Remember, you may be meeting someone in a hallway, or sitting next to him or her at a meal, or in a "speed session" where you only have a few minutes to make your point. With that in mind, everything you've heard about the importance of making a good first impression couldn't be truer in this case. So how can we make sure you do just that?

Let's start with the book I'm currently working on myself, the fourth in the Caitlin Strong/female Texas Ranger series, **BLOOD STRONG**. Lots of people have been asking me what it's about. Here's what I tell them:

“Female Texas Ranger Caitlin Strong takes on homegrown terrorists as she races to solve the one mystery that eluded her legendary Ranger father and grandfather.”

BOOM! Short, sweet and to the point!

Now let’s see how it fits the John D. MacDonald Rule. John D. McDonald, of course, wrote the seminal Travis Magee mystery series. What’s the MacDonald rule? Well, when asked once by a young writer to define what a story is, MacDonald replied simply,

“Stuff happens to people you care about.”

I like to apply the MacDonald Rule to all of my pitches. In other words, even though it’s only a few lines, a pitch should explain who is trying to do what and why. Remember, the initial pitch is only the bait to hook your audience of one or maybe two-three, make them want to hear more. A good pitch gets them leaning forward and listening. A not-so-good pitch, well, they may tune out the rest of what you have to say even if you have a great idea for a book or book itself.

What I recommend strongly, and this is something you won’t always hear when it comes to pitching, is to **make your pitch character driven** in the same way your book will be. Give a reason, even in your pitch, why your audience needs to care about your hero, become emotionally vested in him or her. Example:

NOT “A burning skyscraper threatens the lives of thousands, including a pregnant woman trapped on the top floor.”

INSTEAD “A former firefighter, fired for insubordination, races to save the lives of thousands of people in a burning skyscraper, including his pregnant wife.”

See what I’m getting at here? Let’s try a couple more.

NOT “High school students turned zombies seek vengeance on the town officials who closed their school for budget reasons.”

INSTEAD “A high school prom queen and the bad boy she secretly loves lead their friends-turned-zombies in a battle to get their school reopened.”

And one more:

NOT “A man falsely imprisoned on death row will die at dawn if the governor doesn’t pardon him.”

INSTEAD “An intrepid reporter has only 24 hours to save the innocent man she’s fallen in love with from execution.”

NOT “A woman’s new home is haunted by a ghost, and she fears for the safety of her children.”

INSTEAD “A recently widowed woman moves her family to a new home only to fall in love again with the ghost of her husband who’s haunting it.”

In each case, we know who the hero is and what their quest is. **You have not only told the agent what your book is about, you have engaged him or her emotionally in the action that’s taking place.** Do that, and your pitch will be a winner. You’ll have succeeded in making them want to hear more and then read your manuscript.

Nothing is more important than passion here. You need to love your hero. You need to relate to your hero in the same way you want a potential agent to and that’s what you need to communicate to him or her. Do that and someday soon you’ll be teaching *me* how to pitch and I’ll be asking you for advice!

Strong Justice

A Caitlin Strong Novel

By Jon Land

Copyright © 2010 by Jon Land

Texas Ranger Caitlin Strong takes on white-slave trafficking and a sadistic serial killer in this stand-alone sequel to *Strong Enough to Die*.

“Land delivers exactly what readers want. *Strong Justice* kicks butt and takes names.”

—Steve Berry, bestselling author of *The Paris Vendetta*

1

El Paso, Texas; the present

Caitlin Strong approached the police command post set up behind the ring of squad cars bearing the markings of both the El Paso Sheriff's Department and Texas Highway Patrol. The cars formed a makeshift perimeter, essentially barricading the city's Thomason Hospital. Above, clouds raced across the sky, leaving the sun to come and go over the scene.

El Paso's sheriff Bo Reems and Captain Rafael Mercal of the highway patrol saw her coming at the same time, sharing a glance that dissolved into a sneer.

"Took your sweet time getting here," Mercal said between lips now pursed into a scowl.

"Rangers covering the area been sent to watch the border," Caitlin told him.

The blazing sun slid out from beneath the clouds again and she studied herself briefly in the reflection off Mercal's mirrored sunglasses. Free of her Stetson, her black, wavy hair tumbled past her shoulders, evidence of a broken promise to herself for weeks now to cut it. Her skin was naturally tan and unblemished, save for the scar left on her cheek a year before when a Mexican drug lord had bitten down in a fight that had left him dead. At first glance her dark-blue eyes seemed too big for her face. But Caitlin had learned from her grandfather how to hold them wide enough to see things people would never have thought she could, like the sheriff's deputies snickering and whispering just out of earshot.

“You boys wanna join us up here?” she asked them and, embarrassed, the deputies quickly turned away.

Caitlin felt a sudden breeze kick stray patches of her hair across her face. “Austin figured watching the border was more important under the circumstances,” she said, brushing the hair aside, her back to the snickering deputies now.

“Austin,” Sheriff Reems started, “didn’t need to send nobody here at all.”

“Procedure, Sheriff.”

“More like bullshit, if you ask me.”

“I didn’t,” Caitlin said and swept her gaze about the ring of officers watching the cordoned-off access road, wielding shotguns and M16s as if they expected an attack any moment. “Looks like you’re fixed to fight a full-scale war.”

“These drug cartels out of Juárez want to get somebody, no border’s gonna stop them,” said Mercal. “No Ranger either.”

Mercal had been an all-conference defensive end for the University of Texas. His record for tackles had stood for some time and he would have gone pro if not for tearing up his knee in the Cotton Bowl. Caitlin noticed him grimacing now, but not from the pain, she thought.

“Sandoval?” she asked, referring to Fernando Lozano Sandoval, a commander with the Chihuahua State Investigations Agency who’d survived an assassination attempt and was being treated inside.

“Mexican gangsters cut through six of his guards that were fronting the building and four more inside,” Sheriff Reems answered. In stark contrast to Mercal, he looked as wide as he did tall. One of Reems’s officers had once told Caitlin that the sheriff had

never once left the state of Texas. He breathed noisily through his mouth and she could never recall a time when the underarms of his khaki uniform shirts weren't darkened by sweat, today being no exception.

"They killed a bunch of bad guys in the process," added Mercal, turning his gaze back on the building. "But the rest took Sandoval hostage in the intensive care wing."

"How many bad guys left?"

"We got no eyes inside the building to tell us. Best guess is three or four of the original dozen come to finish the job on Sandoval that started in an ambush on the other side of the border in Juárez. This being the only level-one trauma center for three hundred miles, he got brought here."

Caitlin joined Mercal's gaze on the hospital, holding her eyes on a third-floor bank of windows. "Snipers?"

"Four of them," Mercal added, "best I've got. But the Mexicans left inside know enough to stay clear of the glass. SWAT team on site and ready to go."

"But no communication with anyone inside."

"Not a peep," said Sheriff Reems. He pulled a wad of tobacco from his cheek and tossed it to the ground. "We been calling every phone on the wing and used the bullhorn to tell them to call us." He shook his head, his bulbous jowls flapping like twin bowls of Jell-O. "Nothing."

Caitlin dug a finger into her hair. "You mind if I try something?"

"Matter of fact, I do," Mercal said, spine straightening to give him back the height that was mostly a memory. "Austin says we gotta have a resident Ranger, that's fine. They don't say we need to let you involve yourself in our affairs."

Caitlin returned her gaze to the windows. “People in that intensive care wing might feel otherwise. And you been at this too long already for it to end any way but bad.”

Mercal exchanged another glance with Reems, whose cheeks puckered as if he were readying to spit the tobacco he’d already discarded. “I’m offering you cover here, Captain,” Caitlin resumed, paying deference to the man in charge while ignoring the sheriff. “Things end bad, it’ll fall on the Rangers.”

“What exactly is it you’re fixing to do, Ranger?”

Caitlin pulled the SIG Sauer from her holster and handed it to him.

“You’ll know soon enough, Captain.”

Holster empty and Stetson back in place, Caitlin stretched her hands into the air and walked straight for the hospital’s main entrance, feeling the gazes of the deputies and highway patrolmen following her the whole way. But it was something else she felt even stronger coming from the third floor: the eyes of other men upon her, likely perched behind some wall cover where a glimpse was all they could grab unless they decided to expose themselves to a shot.

Caitlin passed members of the SWAT team camouflaged by the bushes set in a small strip garden just before the glass doors, but didn’t acknowledge them for fear of alerting the men watching from the third floor windows to their presence. She walked slowly through the glass doors and then straight to the elevator, doing everything possible not to conceal her presence.

Inside the cab, she tightened her Stetson over her hair so it rode lower on her forehead and pressed 3, then stood right in front of the doors with hands raised again as the door slid open.

A pair of wide-eyed gunmen sweating in the air-conditioned hall greeted her, holding Heckler & Koch submachine guns—expensive hardware for simple drug gang members.

“Acuéstese en el piso!” said one with a deep scar that looked like an exclamation point down the right side of his face. “Down on the floor!”

Caitlin lay facedown on the tile just beyond the elevator.

“El Rinche,” Scar spit out.

He checked to make sure the elevator cab was empty while the other gunman patted her down roughly through her jeans and denim shirt, paying special attention to her boots to make sure no pistol was holstered to her ankle.

“¡Levántate! Get up!”

Caitlin rose, hands back in the air.

“¿Qué te quieres?”

“I want to make your lives easier, that’s what I’m doing here,” Caitlin said in Spanish. Then, when her remark produced only a confused stare from Scar, “I’m gonna take the place of those kids over there.” She gestured toward a pair of boys and a girl trembling so hard beneath their bedcovers their IV lines were jiggling. “Means you can let them go.”

Caitlin could see eight other beds occupied, all set against the windows with only terrified faces visible above the bedcovers, one of which belonged to Fernando Lozano

Sandoval. A third gunman stood against the wall nearest the windows while a fourth man, the youngest of the bunch, sat in a growing pool of blood with his shoulders propped by an empty bed, bleeding from both leg and shoulder wounds.

Caitlin's gaze met Sandoval's briefly before moving on to a pair of children a few beds down. Arms still raised, she started slowly forward, sliding between Scar and the other gunman.

“¡Para te! Stop!”

“You're in better shape than you think,” she told him, her gait purposely deliberate. “Once we get the kids out, I'm gonna talk you through walking out of this as protected witnesses in the service of Mexico instead of perps. Right, Mr. Sandoval?”

The man from the Chihuahua State Investigations Agency nodded fearfully, looking like a disembodied head resting atop the pillows.

“I'll shoot you, *el Rinche!*” Scar threatened.

“Do that and I won't be able to help you and your wounded young friend down there. Two of you look alike. You brothers or something?”

She reached a young boy's bed and laid her Stetson down atop the bedcovers. “Let's get you ready to move,” she said as reassuringly as she could manage to him.

Caitlin began to unhook the monitoring machines. She heard Scar yelling at her, glimpsed the third gunman lurch away from his perch against the wall.

“No!” Scar screamed at him too late.

The first sniper bullet caught him in the face, the second in his throat, resulting in twin plumes of blood splattering over Caitlin and the bedcovers. She felt the sting of

splintered bone smack her cheeks, as she dug a hand into her Stetson and yanked out the .40 caliber pistol she'd taped under the dome.

She saw Scar twist his submachine gun on her, finger finding the trigger an instant after Caitlin jerked hers twice. She put two bullets into his chest, and he dropped like an oak tree, getting off a single wild spray that found nothing but wall.

Caitlin felt the hiss of a bullet surge past her ear and swung toward the final standing gunman, dropping into a crouch. She registered the pistol trembling in his hand as she shot him dead center in the forehead.

He fell at the feet of the wounded man, more of a boy really, who was fumbling a pistol into his off hand. Caitlin could still feel the surge of adrenaline rushing through her, electricity dancing along the surface of her skin, turning her nerve endings raw. Instinct took over before thought could intervene. She'd shot the wounded kid three times before she even felt the pistol reheating in her grasp, muzzle flashes flaring like shooting stars she used to wish on as a little girl.

The blare of the gunshots deafened her to the screams and sobs of the hostages, all safe and alive, as Caitlin turned toward the window, raised her arms, and waved them to signal Captain Mercal and Sheriff Reems that it was over.

“You Rangers sure know how to make a mess,” Mercal told her, huge beads of sweat still dappling his face.

He and Caitlin watched the body of the last gunman being carted away.

“Gotta make a mess sometimes to get things cleaned up,” Caitlin said.

Mercal swiped a forearm across his brow, leaving a patchy wet streak upon his sleeve. “Well, you got the biggest set of balls I ever seen, woman or not.”

“Stop, please,” Fernando Lozano Sandoval told the orderlies wheeling his bed from the room when they reached Caitlin. “I know who you are, *señorita*.”

“You can thank me later, sir.”

Sandoval’s expression wrinkled in displeasure. “I would rather thank you now. Many in Mexico know of you. They believe it would be better if you stayed out of our country.”

“It’s out of my jurisdiction anyway, Mr. Sandoval.”

“I’m talking about your most recent investigation into missing Mexican girls.”

Caitlin felt heat building behind her cheeks. “You mean the ones being sold as sex slaves?”

“These are dangerous men, Ranger.”

“I thought we were talking about the girls.”

“You saved my life. I’m trying to return the favor. You do not want these men as your enemies.”

“If they’re bringing kidnapped children across the border, they’re already my enemies. Why don’t you just tell me where to find them?”

“You want to die that much?”

“Funny how you didn’t ask me that when I was gunning down your captors. I’m starting to think I’ve been looking in the wrong place, Mr. Sandoval. Instead of warning me off, just point me in the right direction. Do that, sir, and we’ll call it even.”

Sandoval looked around him, picturing a different outcome. “Nuevo Laredo,” he said finally.

“That where I’m going to find what I’m looking for?”

“Only if you’re *loco* enough to try.” Sandoval’s gaze recovered its focus as quickly as it slipped away. “The men you are looking for have much of Mexico in their pockets.”

Caitlin backed away from Sandoval’s bed, so the orderlies could slide him on again. “Then I guess it’s a good thing I’m from Texas.”

2

Albion, Texas; the present

Like all fourth-grade teachers, Faye Magruder hated rainy days. A bunch of nine-year-olds being cooped up inside for recess was a recipe for disaster if ever there was one. In the late spring, when it grew especially hot, she'd conduct her class outside beneath the thick canopy of a cottonwood tree. It got so her students prayed for the heat it would take to move their studies outside and, for her part, Faye Magruder didn't blame them. She'd spent her whole life in the southwest Texas she loved in spite of the droughts, stifling heat, and crazy storms that turned the air thick with ozone. She'd done plenty of traveling in her time and it was always the smells she missed the most. Other places smelled fake and unnatural to her. The smells of Texas, especially this close to the desert, had likely been the same since the Ice Age had shifted the continents about.

But lately things had been smelling funny to her, enough so that she'd seen the doctor, who quizzed her about allergies and colds and inquired whether she'd been using any different cosmetics that may have affected her olfactory senses.

Faye Magruder told him she hadn't changed her cosmetics in fifteen years, even stopped using them altogether after her husband was killed by an IED in Iraq and she'd buried her favorite perfume with him in the ground. Anyway, cosmetics couldn't explain the pounding headaches that had been racking her as of late. She'd never suffered from migraines, but imagined this must have been what they felt like. They were at their worst in school, especially bad by the end of the day.

And having her young charges stuck inside while hailstones pounded the classroom windows wasn't helping things either. The kids were wild and unruly and Faye Magruder was willing the day to end when Molly Beaumont approached her desk holding a pair of scissors and a cutout floral design she'd traced herself.

"Now, what have we here?" Magruder said, spreading the floral design out before her.

She never noticed the little girl raise the pair of scissors she was still holding, much less see them come down. Not until the blades had pierced the back of her hand and dug deep did she realize something had gone terribly wrong— and then only because her hand was literally stuck to the desk by the scissors that had dug into the wood beneath it.

She felt her ears bubble and it took a moment for her to realize it was her own scream doing it, as little Molly Beaumont looked on, giggling with glee.

3

Sweetwater, Texas; the present

“You understand why I asked you to meet me here, Meeks?” Hollis Tyree III said to the man keeping pace with him down Main Street of Sweetwater, Texas.

“No, sir, I don’t.”

“That’s right, you haven’t been with me long enough. I walk like I own the town, don’t I?”

Meeks remained silent.

“That’s because I do pretty much, the real estate anyway. This is home, Meeks, where it all began, where I come when things need sorting out and I need to be left alone.” Tyree gazed about almost whimsically. “Only place people just let me be, besides a friendly hello. You see, my grandfather was constable of this town when the oil boom hit. To hear him tell it, it was the most lawless time imaginable. But he stuck it out and a good thing too, since the biggest strike of all was found smack dab on his two-hundred-acre spread. Birth of the Tyree family fortune. Now it’s the only place in the world I can walk around like normal without a parade of bodyguards and business suits following me.”

“You do have me, sir,” the man walking at Hollis Tyree’s side said. At six-foot-two they were the same height, but Meeks was by far the broader. He kept his hair somewhere between short and long, a man neither comfortable with his military background nor able to embrace the civilian lifestyle that had replaced it. His face had an

unfinished quality about it, ridged and angular as if a sculptor had fashioned the broad strokes but never got around to adding the detail work. The result was pocks and gaps like a natural rock formation where flesh should have been. Some of it was scarring, some of it wasn't, and even Meeks himself couldn't tell which was which.

Hollis Tyree, on the other hand, had the rawboned, sunburned features of the derrick workers and riggers who'd flooded Sweetwater over eighty years before. He looked like a man who was comfortable in the field because he'd been there from land to sea and had the scars and pain to prove it. Like his grandfather and father, Tyree had learned the oil business from the bottom up, standing side by side with laborers whose yearly salary he now made in a nanosecond.

“You like working for me, Meeks?”

“I do, sir. You speak your mind, make it clear what it is you want accomplished on your behalf.”

Tyree nodded and stopped suddenly, Meeks gliding to a halt by his side. “Over there, across the street,” he said, gesturing toward a chain drug outlet, video franchise, and local bookstore. “There used to be a dozen derricks. They knocked out the backs of buildings to drill them. They're all gone now, not a single one left. I figure we should have left at least one rig standing to remind this town of its heritage.”

Meeks gave Tyree his space, let him continue without interrupting.

“My favorite place in the world is still my grandfather's spread. Been in the family since his grandfather came to Texas after the revolution. He had to defend it from Indians more than once, Comanche streaming across the plains like a storm the way he told it. You've got history in these parts too, don't you, Meeks?”

“My ancestors were Pinkerton men come west for entirely different reasons, sir.”

“They worked for Hearst I seem to recall.”

“They did.”

“Killed some men in his employ, I imagine.”

“First for gold. The oil came later. Military men like me before they signed on as Pinkertons.”

Hollis Tyree swung away from the spot where oil derricks had once spiraled upward while ravaging the earth. “Tell me about Albion, Meeks.”

“A half dozen incidents now, the latest being this teacher who nearly lost a hand to a nine-year-old wielding scissors.”

Tyree’s face wrinkled in revulsion. “No connection found yet.”

“None that my people have been able to detect. Just an elected sheriff and his deputies handling things. Easily contained.” He paused, holding Tyree’s stare. “For now.”

Tyree’s gaze swept over the main drag of Sweetwater, imagining it choked in mud and men in the time of his grandfather. “You have children, Meeks?”

“They live with their mother.”

Tyree’s hands clenched into fists. “I had two, a son and a daughter, both in college. They went to Mexico on spring break two years ago and disappeared. Just dropped off the face of the earth, along with a couple of their friends. I spent the first week waiting for the ransom call and the last two years still praying it’ll come. So here I am with all the money in the world to buy their lives back and nobody gives me the

chance.” Tyree’s eyes misted up, his sagging shoulders shrinking their breadth and making him look suddenly frail. “I never told you this before?”

“I read about it, Mr. Tyree.”

“Here’s something you didn’t read. I sent an army of investigators down there and paid off enough government officials to start my own country.” Tyree shook his head, slowly with no emotion in his gaze. “Nothing. Not a single shred of evidence linking the disappearance of my kids to anyone. I haven’t stopped looking, I’ll never stop looking.” “I’ve got some contacts down there myself, sir. Glad to use them if you’d like me to.”

“Of all the things you could do on my behalf, that’d be the most important. I’m looking at the end of the line for my family name. I spent the first two months my kids were gone moping. What brought me back was knowing I had to find something to put myself into. Something worthwhile that could make me something other than money. That’s what we’re doing in Tunga County is all about. And now you’re telling me it might be going to hell too.” He paused. “Albion’s about the same size as Sweetwater, isn’t it?”

“Give or take a thousand, I guess so.”

Hollis Tyree’s eyes roamed the center of town again, seeming to cast his gaze well beyond it. “A lot of people.”

“Everything’s relative, Mr. Tyree.”

“I suppose it is.”

4

San Antonio; the present

Caitlin entered San Antonio's Central Police Substation with her Stetson held by her side, the haircut she'd been promising herself put off yet again. The clerk behind the glass reception counter, a pudgy middle-aged Latino with black hair dye leaking onto his temples, regarded her and the Texas Ranger badge pinned to her denim shirt and rose almost reverently. The building's air-conditioning was fighting a losing battle with the ninety-degree temperatures outside, accounting for the sweat that had begun to bleed the combed-in color from the clerk's hair.

"Caitlin Strong for Captain Alonzo. I'm here about Dylan Torres." The clerk's gaze remained fixed upon her, lingering on her breasts. Caitlin's stomach was flat, her arms and shoulders well muscled from all the riding she'd done as a little girl and gym time later. She'd taken up boxing more recently, found it to be the perfect workout for keeping her body toned and her mind off things she was trying to put aside.

"Sure thing, Ranger," the clerk said. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise," Caitlin started, brushing some stray hair from her face as she read the clerk's nametag, "Officer Ortega."

"The captain's expecting you," Ortega said, lifting a phone to his ear. "I'll tell her you're here."

"Thank you."

"Sorry to bother you with this, Ranger."

“No need to apologize, and I appreciate the call.”

Ortega still had the phone pressed against his ear. Caitlin hadn't seen him hit a number yet.

“Is it true what they say about that town down in Mexico back last year?”

“Don't know. They say lots of things.”

“That a hundred men died in the gunfight.”

“I didn't stop to count, Officer.”

“Casa del Diablo—something like that.”

“The House of the Devil,” Caitlin acknowledged, her gaze lowering to remind Ortega about the phone.

Ortega pressed a key and spoke quickly before replacing the receiver. “Captain Alonzo is waiting for you. Fourth office down on the right. I'll buzz you in.”

Caitlin heard the buzz followed by the click of the security door snapping electronically open. She grabbed the latch and started to pull, turning back toward the clerk.

“It wasn't a hundred men at all,” she told Ortega, whose face drooped in disappointment. “It was ninety-five,” Caitlin followed with a wink.

Captain Consuelo Alonzo greeted Caitlin with a cursory handshake, as cold and impersonal as it got. The substation commander's office was plain and neatly furnished with the modern amenities the building's relatively recent construction allowed. Alonzo didn't smile and closed her office door after ushering Caitlin inside. She was a stocky,

muscular woman who wore her hair up in a bun that would fit neatly under her cap. A Hispanic whose features looked more Indian than European.

“I want you to know that this is all by the book,” she said, settling back into her desk chair. “The boy had a phone call coming to him and he chose to call you.”

Caitlin took one of the two chairs set before the desk. She noticed the wall behind it was lined with professionally mounted citations and awards. “I understand, Captain.”

“I want no suggestion of favored treatment here because you’re a Ranger.”

“I appreciate that.”

“We’ll release the boy to you under his own recognizance, which is standard protocol.”

Caitlin waited for Alonzo to continue, spoke only when she didn’t. “You mind telling me what charge he was arrested on?”

“You mind telling me how you know him?”

“Through his father.”

“That’d be Cort Wesley Masters?”

“With all due respect, Captain, I suspect you already know the answer to that question.”

“I just find myself curious as to why a Texas Ranger would be bailing out the son of the most famous outlaw in modern Texas history.”

“I’m not bailing him out at all, ma’am. The boy’s being released on his own recognizance, like you said.”

Caitlin watched the veins riding Alonzo’s temples bulge a bit. “We got him in here on drug dealing charges.”

“Was he holding when your officers picked him up?”

“Are they ever?”

Caitlin leaned forward, her holstered SIG Sauer seeming to keep pace with her right hand. “Excuse me, ma’am, but just who are ‘they’?” Alonzo’s spine stiffened in her chair. “A patrol car spotted him in East San Antonio during school hours. When the officer drove toward him, he ran.”

“You ask him why?”

“That officer did and then one of my detectives once the boy was brought in. He wouldn’t talk to either of them. Said he wanted his one phone call instead. Well-schooled, Ranger.”

“By which you mean ...”

“Do the math.”

“Like you arresting a boy on drug charges who’s not holding and then keeping him in custody on account of his father. That’s how it adds up to me.”

Alonzo stuck her chest out, forcing the flabby stomach straining the folds of her uniform over her belt. “He was with a girl,” she said after a pause. “She ran too, managed to get away.”

“You ask him who she was?”

“Only thing he told us was his name and address. I thought I told you that already.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.”

Alonzo’s stare grabbed hold of Caitlin and wouldn’t let go. “Cort Wesley Masters is a killer.”

“We were talking about his son, Captain.”

“Son of a man everyone knows you’ve been cavorting with.”

“My personal life an issue here?”

“Not at all.”

“Then I’d appreciate you not raising it. Keep things professional.”

“Keeping time with a man like Masters can’t help but affect your profession, if you don’t mind me saying, Ranger.”

“Actually, Captain, I do mind.”

Alonzo’s expression wavered as she tried to form her next thoughts into words. “I’m not gonna ask you what really happened in Mexico, or how many people you and Masters killed down there. I’m not gonna ask you about him shooting up a bar and leaving a pair of dead bodies behind a day or so after he was released from prison on a case the Rangers botched. I’m just gonna tell you that the only thing stopping me from hauling Masters’s sorry ass in here to retrieve his devil spawn offspring was the mention of your name. That kind of courtesy to a fellow law enforcement officer trumps all else, regardless of my personal feelings.”

“I appreciate the consideration, Captain,” Caitlin said, rising from her chair. The heat she’d felt building behind her cheeks began to recede, the slight twitching in her fingers stilled with the level of common ground between her and Alonzo holding for now.

Alonzo rose too, straightening her gun belt. “Truth is, I truly admire you having the guts to go after whoever’s behind the kidnapping of these young Mexican girls who end up enslaved as prostitutes.”

“So far I haven’t done all that much,” Caitlin said, thinking back to Sandoval’s lead about Nuevo Laredo, wondering again what he’d left out in their brief conversation, “except arrest a few of the drivers bringing the girls into Texas.”

“You made sure the girls they were carrying got home safe too. I got nieces back over the border. Makes me sick thinking of them being victimized like that.”

“Not if I can help it, ma’am.”

Alonzo looked as if she were waiting for Caitlin to say more, seeming disappointed when she didn’t. “Well, anything this department can do to help you out, just let us know.”

Caitlin started for the door, stopping to look back at Alonzo before she got there. “One thing, Captain. Releasing a minor on his own recognizance isn’t standard protocol at all.”

“Must’ve slipped my mind,” Alonzo told her.

5

San Antonio; the present

Caitlin stood waiting back in the reception area while one of Captain Alonzo's sergeants escorted Dylan through a door leading up from the holding cells. It had been six weeks since she'd last seen him and he already looked older, dressed in baggy jeans with white shirt hung outside the waistband over well-worn sneakers. Caitlin wondered if he ever wore the cowboy boots she'd gotten him for his fifteenth birthday at Allens Boots in Austin four months ago, but decided not to ask. Too busy feeling guilty over having not been around for so long. She knew there'd be hurt lurking in the boy's dark, deep-set eyes if the kind of dread fear that comes with an arrest hadn't swallowed up everything else.

His escort retrieved Dylan's belt, wallet, and shoelaces from the duty officer and handed them back before leading the boy the rest of the way to the entry door that opened with its distinctive click. Dylan passed through and let the door close behind him, tossing the black wavy hair from his face with a shake of his head.

"Let's get you out of here," Caitlin said.

The boy brushed the black hair back over his shoulders and followed her out the door. "You gonna tell my dad?" he asked her, threading the belt through the loops of his jeans.

“Once he finds out, I don’t know which one of us he’s gonna kill first,” Caitlin said when they were inside her SUV.

Dylan’s eyes remained fixed out the window as Caitlin pulled out of the parking lot.

“Anything you got to say on that subject?”

“Thank you.”

“Just thank you?”

“Thank you, *ma’am*.”

Caitlin studied the road just long enough to realize she couldn’t just sit quiet.

“Captain told me you were picked up on drug charges.”

You believe him?” “It’s a her, and not for one damn minute.”

Dylan finally looked toward her. “Thanks for that too.” He reached over to the console and turned the air-conditioning higher. “I’m still hot from that cell. Was like being stuck in a box with holes cut in the sides. Now I know how a trapped rabbit feels.”

“Let that be a lesson to you.” Caitlin glanced at him across the seat.

“Where you been anyway?”

“You trying to change the subject?”

“Just asking you a question.”

“I think it’s my time to do the asking,” Caitlin said, as much to avoid answering Dylan’s question as anything. “What was it you wouldn’t tell the police about what brought you to the east side of town?”

“That’s for me to deal with.”

“ ‘Til I got dragged into this, you mean. Sorry, son, but it’s not so easy to drag myself back out.”

The boy stiffened, his dark eyes taking on the familiar harshness of his father’s. “Don’t call me son. You’re not my mother.”

“No, I’m not. And my guess is what ever it is you’re holding inside, you wouldn’t tell her either. Doesn’t exactly help us figure what to tell your dad, though, does it?”

“Why we have to tell him anything?”

“Because I’d expect the same. Discussion might come easier if I could help you make sense of it for him.”

Dylan huffed out his breath, started playing with the buttons on his shirt. “He’s away, down in New Orleans. On business.”

“He said that?”

“Far as I remember. I didn’t have anyone else to call.”

Caitlin made sure he could see her smile. “I’m kind of glad for that.”

“You haven’t been coming around as much. My brother misses you.”

“Does he now?”

“He smiles more when you’re around. Only time pretty much.”

Caitlin felt something heavy settle in her throat. “You taking care of Luke while your dad’s away?”

“That’s right.”

“Think about that before you skipped school and got yourself arrested?”

“Something else I was thinking about.”

“That girl the police saw you with, I’m guessing.”

Dylan kept his eyes from her, saying nothing.

“San Antonio PD’s still looking for her.”

Dylan turned back her way. “Why?”

“Captain Alonzo’s not about to let go.”

“On account of my dad?”

“Part of the reason, yeah. Other part is cops see a couple of kids running around the east side of the city in the middle of the day, first thing comes to their mind is drugs. Since they didn’t find any on you, they’ll set their sights on the girl.”

Dylan’s dark eyes widened, then narrowed again. “Drugs got nothing to do with this.”

“What does?”

“Maria—”

“Maria?”

“That’s the girl’s name,” Dylan said, squirming in his seat as if the upholstery was boiling his skin. “She was running away, from men a lot worse than my dad ever was. Men who stole her and put her in some kind of human stockyard so they could sell her to freaks to have sex with.”

Caitlin felt her heart skip a beat and leaned forward in the driver’s seat. “Maybe you better start at the beginning.”

6

New Orleans; the present

Cort Wesley Masters raised his hands in the air, submitting to a frisk by Frank Branca Jr.'s bodyguards as Frankie himself looked on grinning.

"Tell me something," Frankie said to him in the living room section of the St. Louis Hotel's Fleur de Lis Suite. "In prison, did anybody try and touch you?"

"They knew better." Two of the three bodyguards backed off while the third looked on, their job complete, and Cort Wesley lowered his arms. Bright sunlight streamed in through the open balcony blinds, making him squint. "Just like you, Junior."

The glistening white smile slipped from Frank Branca Jr.'s face. "Nobody calls me that anymore. It's Mr. Branca now."

"Sorry, your father's the only Mr. Branca I know," Cort Wesley said, eyeing the figure frozen in a wheelchair placed by the open French doors that offered a sprawling view of the French Quarter overlooking Iberville Street. Katrina had mostly spared this area from the catastrophic damage still afflicting so much of the city. And those trees that had been uprooted had all been replaced now, though the new shadows were substantially smaller than the old, more sun left to bake the asphalt in unforgiving fashion. The suite, meanwhile, was furnished exquisitely with handmade traditional furniture upholstered in rich fabric with perfect stitching. It smelled of the lush foliage sprouting from Iberville Street beyond and was bathed in light spilling in through the windows and exposed balcony.

“Five years is a long time, Masters.”

“Six now.”

“Things have a way of changing, don’t they?”

Cort Wesley glanced again toward Frank Branca Sr. The last time they met, Frank Sr. was still playing golf and tennis and worked out every day. A stroke had robbed him of that and plenty more, confining him to a wheelchair wired to portable monitors and breathing with the help of a ventilator. The elder Branca wheezed occasionally through a mouth that no longer functioned. His skin was pale and sallow, the work of some twisted artist, it looked like, re-drawing his visage in milk on dried parchment a stiff wind might tear. His once thick flesh had melted away to leave him almost skeletal. But the old man’s eyes were the worse. Utterly blank and unresponsive, lacking the very capacity for thought and flicker of amusement Cort Wesley had always seen in them, belying the murderous and brutal business he had chosen for himself.

Frank Jr. noticed the direction of his stare. “My old man survives every attempt by New York and Chicago to take him out and look how he ends up. Fucking shame. You know how many times I thought about taking a pillow to him myself?”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I talk to him, something tells me he’s still there. I dress him myself every day. Get his tie tied the way he likes, even stick his old .38 in a holster he bought off a collector claimed it belonged to Dutch Schultz. Just having him around gives me the kind of security I’ll never have again once he’s gone.”

The Branca crime family had pulled out of Texas a few years into Cort Wesley’s stay inside the brutal Huntsville prison known as The Walls. A combination of violent

Mexican drug mobs moving into the state, along with the return of organized crime to New Orleans in Katrina's wake, had chased them back to their roots here and in southern Florida. They had rented this suite on a permanent basis because, according to Frank Jr., his father had always enjoyed the view.

“Come on, Masters, take a load off,” the new head of the Branca crime family told Cort Wesley, plopping himself down on a cream colored couch with cushions thicker than clouds.

Cort Wesley took the chair opposite him, hating the moment. Last thing he wanted to do was come to the Branca family, especially under Frank Jr.'s auspices, for the money they owed him. After what went down yesterday, though, he needed it and needed it fast.

7

San Antonio; the day before

Marianna Silvaro, the social services worker assigned to his case, had been waiting for him in the health club lobby when he emerged still sweaty from his workout.

“Didn’t know you were a member, Ms. Silvaro,” he asked, throwing her a smile. He’d focused on back and chest today, leaving his muscles straining the bounds of his shirt. The muscle heads and juice monkeys loved the mirrors that rimmed the free-weight room upstairs. Cort Wesley hated them for the message of age they imparted. He never thought of such things until his boys fell to his responsibility. Suddenly the creases and worry lines he hadn’t even noticed before reminded him of every bad grade and missed parent conference with this teacher or that. He looked around the room filled with clanking iron and grinding cable and wondered how many other men here had a couple kids they were still getting to know.

More recently, Cort Wesley had started wearing sunscreen, and last week he’d used the gift certificate to a hair salon Caitlin Strong had given him for his birthday before it expired. The only difference he could see, besides the price, was a shampooing, and he hated the feeling of someone else wetting down his hair and running their hands through the lather. Then the stylist asked him if he wanted the gray at the temples touched up.

So this is what raising kids does to you ...

He told the stylist to leave the gray and decided to go back to a barber.

Silvaro pushed her considerable bulk up from a chair that creaked under the strain, making Cort Wesley instantly regret his comment. Her skin, colored a deep shade of beige from too much makeup, seemed stretched to its limit by the simplest of gestures. But as his Department of Social Services representative she'd been mostly fair with him and deserved better than the admonishing stares those coming and going through the door cast her.

"You're a tough man to track down, Mr. Masters. And you missed our appointment yesterday."

"I plum forgot, ma'am."

"You also forgot to file your means of support forms, along with proof of income and employment with the department."

"I'll get to it right away. That's a promise." Cort Wesley noticed her eyes straying to the tattoos that dominated both his shoulders. "You like my tats, ma'am?"

"I recognize the skull and crossbones," Marianna Silvaro noted, studying him closer. "What's the other one?"

Cort Wesley angled his body so she could better see his left shoulder. "Bloody dagger being stuck back into its scabbard."

"Oh," Silvaro said, face wrinkling in displeasure. "Mr. Masters, I want you to understand how precarious your situation is becoming."

"Precarious?"

"You need me to define the word for you?"

"I was in the Gulf War, ma'am. I think I know what precarious means."

She took a step closer to him, Cort Wesley not at all used to someone narrowing the gap that way. “In this case it means you’re in very real danger of losing custody of your sons.”

The sweat cooling on Cort Wesley seemed to freeze in an instant, making his pores feel as if someone had jammed icicles in them.

“Mr. Masters,” Silvaro continued, “since you were granted provisional custody, you haven’t complied with a single request from the department. I’ve stood up for you as best I can, but a man with your past has to expect additional scrutiny.”

“What kind of past would that be, ma’am, I mean, considering I’ve never been rightfully convicted of a crime in my life?”

“The lack of a female influence in your sons’ lives is also a concern.”

“Since their mother got murdered, you mean.”

Silvaro still didn’t back off, leaving Cort Wesley feeling tense and awkward. He’d never known a man tough enough to stand up to him this way, and here he was cowering before a social worker as wide as she was tall.

Another thing raising kids will do to you, Cort Wesley thought.

“I’m on your side, Mr. Masters. I’ve interviewed your boys and have no reason to believe you’re anything but a good father to them. But that does nothing about the glaring omissions in your file we need to resolve before I’m forced to make a decision none of us wants. What are you doing to make a living, for example?”

“Been doing a bit of bodyguarding.”

“Is that how you put five people in the hospital in the past six months?”

“Sometimes bodyguarding requires it. An occupational hazard, I guess.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“The men who hired me to protect them are just fine,” Cort Wesley said by way of explanation. “I’d call that a job well done.”

“I’m not sure my department would agree. I tracked you down to tell you that you need to better demonstrate you’re financially capable of taking care of your sons. Am I making myself clear?” Silvaro asked, eyes lingering on his tattooed shoulders once more.

“You like my tats that much, ma’am, you should get your own.”

“Mr. Masters, I don’t see—”

“They’re Disney press-ons. My youngest boy picked them up when we were in the park a few months back and stuck ‘em on me yesterday.” He turned sideways again, giving Silvaro a better look at the dagger. “See how when I flex the muscle, it looks like the knife’s moving?”

Marianna Silvaro looked down, then away.

“Those Disney folks are really something, aren’t they?” Cort Wesley asked her.

8

New Orleans; the present

“You said this was about business,” Frank Branca Jr. was telling him.

“That’s right.”

“Because we’re about to make a move back into Texas, you know. Cut a deal with the Mexican cartels to move product for them.”

“That’s not the business I came about.”

“No?”

Cort Wesley pictured the lavish garden beyond the window to help steady his breathing. “We had a deal when I went in. You were supposed to take care of my kids and their mother.”

“Me?”

“The family.”

“Which in those days would mean my dad. You got a beef, Masters, you’ll have to take it up with him. Hey, Dad, you taking visitors today?”

A thick, gurgly wheeze emanated from the old man’s mouth, frothy drool emerging to dribble down his chin.

“Guess not.” Frank Jr. turned back to Cort Wesley. “Guess you’ll have to come back, try again tomorrow.”

“I just want what’s coming to me, Frankie.”

“Heard the mother of your kids got herself killed.”

“Through no fault of her own.”

“No, I’m guessing that was yours and, look at this, now you got all the responsibilities of a dad. Got a couple of kids myself, a boy and a girl, with my wife, Rosie. You remember Rosie?”

Cort Wesley nodded, but recalled instead the various showgirls and prostitutes with whom Frank Jr. kept company. He was popular with them for his power more than his looks, which were never much to speak of. He had pearl-white teeth, wore his coarse black hair slicked back with hourly applications of gel, eyes he tried to make hard, and skin so smooth and unmarked that the Branca family soldiers used to call him “Francie” behind his back. Since he was insulated under the protective umbrella provided by his father, they’d never think of saying it to his face any more than the women he bedded would dare comment on his physical shortcomings.

“Rosie loves Texas,” Frankie Jr. continued. “Claims she hasn’t been happy since we left there. The kids too. But the schools are better here. Cost me some green to get them into the best parochials. Fifteen and my son’s got to wear a tie and dress shirt every day, you believe that.”

“I’d like to be able to afford the same for mine.”

“Good luck.”

Cort Wesley turned his gaze on Frank Branca Sr., the angle of the sun making the old man’s eyes water. “Why do you leave him out there like that?”

“He loves the sun.”

“Looks like he’s in pain. Or maybe it’s because he knows his son is a low-down dirty welcher.”

Frank Jr. shifted in his seat quickly enough to draw the attention of his bodyguards. “Talk like that’s a good way to make your kids orphans.”

“You really think me not having a gun makes any difference?”

“Maybe you didn’t notice my bodyguards are ex–Army Rangers, some shit like that, just like you.”

Cort Wesley glanced at the three men again, having trouble picturing that. “I was Special Forces, and I just want what’s coming to me, Frankie.”

“Don’t we all? Only solution I can see is you coming back to work for us, like I said before.”

“Already told you I’m not interested. Sorry.”

Frankie Branca leaned back, stretching his arms out so they cracked at the elbows before lacing his fingers behind his head. “You go Boy Scout on me or something? ‘Cause I heard stuff about you hooking up with a Texas Ranger. First time I hear it said, I’m thinking can’t be, since no way Cort Wesley Masters is a faggot. Least he wasn’t before he went inside. Then I hear it’s a woman Ranger. True or false?”

“That she’s a woman or a Ranger?”

“I knew you before you became a wise ass, Masters. Trust me, it doesn’t suit you.”

Cort Wesley jammed a hand into the pocket of his jeans, causing Frankie Branca to flinch and his bodyguards to tense. But all he came out with was a piece of paper.

“I wrote you a bill. Back payment for services rendered, just like I said.”

He rose from his chair and extended the paper toward Branca. When Frankie didn’t take it, Cort Wesley dropped it in his lap.

Frankie acted as if it wasn't there, pretended he couldn't see it. Crossed his legs so it would slip to the floor.

"Oops," he said, making no move to retrieve it.

Cort Wesley remained standing, hands coiling by his sides, unable to get the thought of the punk's father, who'd always treated him square, roasting outside. Then, ignoring Frank Jr.'s bodyguards, he started toward the balcony.

"Where the fuck you think you're going?" Frankie asked him.

"Get your father out of the sun."

A knock fell on the suite door, one of the bodyguards moving to open it.

"You don't mind, I got another appointment."

"This won't take long," Cort Wesley said, kneeling in front of Frank Branca Sr., ignoring his son.

Pfffffft ... Pfffffft ... Pfffffft ...

The sound alerted Cort Wesley to what was happening an instant before the first bodyguard's body was blown backward, midsection shredded by silenced submachine-gun fire. The three gunmen who stormed the suite focused on Frank Jr.'s other two bodyguards, giving Cort Wesley the opportunity to tear the old man's .38 from Dutch Schultz's holster.

The revolver felt strange in his hand, just six shots, he reminded himself, as the three gunmen started blasting away at the weaponless Frank Jr., who'd taken refuge on the floor behind the couch. Cort Wesley lurched back inside the suite, still unseen until he dropped the first man with a pair of headshots. A second spun his way to be greeted by

two bullets that found his left cheek and right eye, while the third ducked back into the dining room portion of the suite, opening fire wildly.

The bullets stitched a jagged design through the balcony doors' glass, just missing Frank Sr. who reacted not at all. But the mere thought of the old man nearly perishing in the spray was enough to fuel Cort Wesley into motion. He hurdled the couch, ready to shoot as soon as the final gunmen twisted around from his wall cover to right his barrel.

The man appeared just as expected, thinking the advantage to be his, never anticipating Cort Wesley to be right upon him. Cort Wesley saw the shock and fear in his eyes as he shot him in the throat and chest, the man's final barrage stitching a jagged design across the ceiling that sliced a crystal chandelier from its mount and sent it smashing downward.

Cort Wesley discarded the pistol and retrieved the piece of paper Frankie Jr. had let fall to the rug. He stepped over the shards of shattered glass and watched Frankie rise from his position of hiding, twin patches of urine staining his linen trousers.

"I take checks, Junior," Cort Wesley said, tossing the bill back at him. "And you should take better care of your father."

Angel

By Nicole “Coco” Marrow and Laura Hayden

Copyright © 2011 by Ice Touring, Inc.

Internet and television sensation Nicole “Coco” Marrow, wife of rapper and actor Ice-T, has written a sexy, genre-bending thriller about a beautiful woman with a dangerous secret. Angela Sands awakens terrified on a plane as it is plummeting into the Hudson River. She survives the crash, but awakens to a new nightmare—she has no idea who she is.

Chapter One

CoastalEast Air Flight Number 617

The woman's body convulsed. She woke with a gasp. It was as if she suddenly recalled why and how to breathe. The screech of roaring engines at full thrust thrummed in her ears. The noise was so loud it made her body vibrate in a similar pulsating rhythm.

A second later, a different shiver coursed through her. She couldn't think. Couldn't remember ...

Even trying to remember was like moving through a fog. Nothing was visible. Nothing made sense.

The overwhelming wall of sound seemed to take her over, as if her body was in the grip of its rhythm.

She clenched the arms of ... what? A chair?

Where am I?

She opened her eyes, slowly focusing on the blue panel directly ahead of her: a small flat- screen television that featured a tiny icon of an airplane pictured against a map of the East Coast of the United States.

What's that?

The screen changed, the map now showing a larger airplane over a jagged blob tagged with "LGA."

I'm ... on a plane?

A male voice from an intercom tried to cut through the shrieking engine noise.
“Ladies and gentleman, the pi lot has informed me that we’ve been cleared to land.
Please turn off and stow all portable—”

The plane bucked and the passengers groaned en masse.

Where am I going?

“—electronic equipment. We apologize for the turbulence.”

Where have I been?

“Please return to your seats, make sure your seatback is in an upright position
and—”

The plane pitched sharply to the right and dropped a good fifty feet. She gripped the arms of the chair and fought the small wave of nausea that seized her stomach. The other passengers reacted with universal sounds of alarm including groans and a more than a few screams.

What’s happening?

The flight attendant’s voice lost its cultured polish. He swore “Oh, shit ...” into the uncovered microphone. Then the sound cut off .

What was happening?

Now the attendant barked into the mike, “Fasten your seatbelts, now!”

The seatbelt?

She unpried a hand from the chair arm long enough to reach down to discover the safety strap was already pulled tightly across her lap. Nevertheless, she tugged the free end of the belt, harder.

If tight was good, tighter must be better.

She glanced to her right at the sleeping man seated next to her. Slumped against the window, he was evidently the sort of seasoned traveler who didn't let a little turbulence disturb a good nap. At least he wore his seatbelt.

Was he a stranger? Did she know him? Were they traveling together? Questions pounded at her, slamming into the blank wall of her memory.

I don't even remember getting on this pla—

The aircraft lurched again, resulting in another chorus of screams from the passengers. Two young men on the other end of her row laughed and raised their arms as if riding on a roller coaster.

And yet neither the rough ride nor the noise woke the dozing man next to her.

Glancing past him, she looked through the small window, expecting to see rain lashing the glass, or bolts of lightning slicing through angry clouds ... anything that could be considered an unfortunate but logical cause of the plane's erratic movements. But she saw nothing unusual. She looked down at Manhattan, where the tops of very tall buildings clawed a cloudless blue sky like fingers searching for a handhold.

It was at that moment when she realized that the small window at the end of her row was actually part of an exit door. She stared blankly at the instructions on how to open the door in case of emergency, but her mind was too confused to absorb much detail. The directives and graphics printed there mostly boiled down to open door, throw it aside, and get the hell out.

If the situation warranted it, she would do just that.

The plane shuddered again, this time with such violence that several unbelted passengers slammed into the ceiling. Her mind supplied the sound of breaking bones but

she couldn't have heard anything over the now- unsteady roaring of the engines. Several of the overhead bins burst open. Their contents spilled out, flying around and striking unsuspecting victims.

Shouts of concern or surprise transformed to screams of pain and fear.

The man next to her awoke. "What th' hell?"

She had no time to answer. Another sharp motion slammed her to the left, then to the right, and then, God help her, turned them all upside down.

The sound of screeching metal, screaming people, and explosions replaced the engine roar.

Suddenly, whole chunks of the airplane tore loose as they slammed into something hard. The plane bounced, maybe even cart wheeled several times, before settling upside down.

Something hit her hard on the head, then blackness.

She must have passed out for a moment.

When she awoke, she heard no screams, no panicked pleas for rescue by man or by God. Either the explosions had affected her hearing or everyone else was dead.

She was afraid to look around to see which it was.

But she had to do something.

As she hung from her seat, her fear and panic shrank into one small, highly-condensed knot in her stomach. Something deep inside told her that she wouldn't have a choice of fight or flight.

If she wanted to live, she'd have to do both.

Bracing herself, she took a good look at the wreckage of the plane she still couldn't remember boarding.

She took stock of her options for escape. Where the right wing had been attached to the fuselage, there was now a great gaping hole. She could see flashes of daylight through it. But it was ringed with tangled metal and sparking wires. The smoke boiled through the opening, rapidly filling the cabin. Despite the decreasing light, she could see that the seats just one row ahead of her had been torn away.

Then she smelled burning. The smoke reeked of plastics and wiring ... and the unmistakable stench of burning flesh.

She looked forward.

The first- class section was engulfed by an inferno. And then the sound of water rushing in, along with a great wave of burning fuel washing down the center of the plane, racing toward her. But not here yet, not yet... .

Hell! Time to move!

She reached over the bloody body of the man who had been sitting next to her, trying to ignore that fact that most of his face was now missing.

Before she could reach the exit- door handle, the plane shifted with a groan of metal on metal.

She clutched the arms of her seat. At least she was no longer hanging upside down. She was on her side, with a gaping hole in the plane threatening to drown her.

The ragged hole dipped so close to the water's edge that oily waves lapped into the plane.

The metal of the remaining fuselage groaned under the stress. She could see cracks forming in the plastic and metal sides of the jet. It was breaking up under the pressure, and sinking fast. No time for the door, she thought.

She coughed, struggling to breathe, somehow aware that there were toxins in the smoke. Between that and the rising water, she had to react.

Now.

Using her legs to brace herself, she released her seatbelt. It took all her control to stay in place and not plunge into the smoldering water, filled with broken pieces of airplane, luggage, and people. She had one, maybe two chances to swing herself toward the gap in the metal before the smoke, the fire, or the water killed her.

Using strength and dexterity she had no idea she possessed, she took a deep breath and launched herself toward the gap just as the plane shuddered once more and rolled over again.

As she struggled through the hole, her shoulder hit something hard, slowing her momentum. But she managed to continue forward, propelling herself like a world-class caver through the tangle of conduits, wires, and cables that lined her escape route.

Her progress jerked to a complete stop when something wrapped around her ankle and held her fast—a deadly tether anchoring her to the plane. It was almost as if the plane was refusing to allow her to leave, but insisted she perish along with the rest of the victims.

Refusing to give in to her rising panic, she reached back, groping blindly through the murky water in hopes of reaching the snare. Somehow she had to find a way to get loose, so that she could surface.

The loop bit even harder into her ankle as the plane shifted once more. The sinking plane seemed determined to drag her down with it. Rather than paralyzing her with fear, the revelation pushed her into overdrive.

Fear or hesitation would kill her.

Once she touched the cable twisted around her foot, she realized it was metal, not something she could easily saw through or break. The only thing she could do was to try to untwist the cable by maneuvering herself.

Her first turn was in the wrong direction and the cable grew even tighter. She turned the opposite way. With each revolution, the noose loosened. Finally, just as her lungs threatened to burst, the cable released and she was able to push herself free.

She swam for the surface and her last hope of survival.

Breaking through the waves, she was rewarded not with clean air, but more inky black smoke.

She coughed and gasped for breath, battling the minefield of burning debris, razor- sharp pieces of metal, the contents of a hundred suitcases, and the broken bodies of those who had once owned those items.

She strained to hear the sounds of fellow survivors yelling for help. But she heard nothing other than the groan of metal from the airplane that threatened to disappear completely beneath the water's surface.

As water filled the inside of the airplane, the small currents it created gently tugged at her.

Not again, she thought.

With a few hard kicks, she moved far enough away from the plane to escape the pull. When she turned around, she found herself mesmerized by the sight of the sinking plane. Any sane woman would have tried to put as much distance as she could between herself and the plane.

But something in the back of her mind insisted that she watch. Even worse, her brain insisted on analyzing the mechanics of the situation.

Water filled the fuselage even farther. The intact wing rose up in the air as the broken water-logged wing caused the plane to submerge sideways into the water.

She squinted through the smoke and spotted the outline of New York City.

We went into the river. The Hudson, I guess.

Time to get out.

She rolled over and kicked harder, pushing herself farther away from the plane. But in the process, she bumped into a metal suitcase, mostly intact, that bobbed on the water's surface. Grabbing the suitcase by its broken handle, she attempted to pull it close and take advantage of its buoyancy, but it was slick with oil and difficult to hold.

Something else floated nearby, obscured by the smoke. She swam toward the object, recoiling only when she realized it was the body of a man, floating face down.

Rest in peace, she thought automatically.

A light breeze stirred the smoke that clung to the water, creating clear patches, allowing her to see more. More destruction, more bodies, more random objects floating in the water— a child's doll, a ball cap in perfect condition, a mangled pillow, a shoe ...

... a seat cushion, which could also double as a floating device.

She took a stroke forward and grabbed it.

With the cushion strapped in place, she pushed herself through the water with scissor kicks, trying to ignore the increasing number of bodies and body parts that blocked her way.

Small sounds started to creep into her conscious— sirens in the distance, voices that seemed miles away. And something closer— a small burbling sound. It sounded almost human. She stopped, trying to determine where the noise was coming from. Behind her? Swinging around, she took another look at the items she'd passed by. She spotted the doll, now floating precariously close to the airplane, directly beneath the sinking wing.

It was wearing a blue outfit.

She peered at it. *Did that thing just move?* Or was she just seeing the results of the toy being buffeted by the occasional wave? Then she spotted one little hand moving, the fingers flexing as if trying to latch onto safety.

A baby ... ?

The plane lurched with a moan of failing metal and some of the cables that held the broken wing aloft snapped. Now it swung loosely, as if waiting for the last support to fail before tumbling free. If it fell, it would land directly on the baby.

One more innocent victim ...

Not if I can help it.

She began to swim hard and fast toward the child, abandoning the cushion when she realized it was slowing her down. The airplane continued to sink, sliding faster into the water, dragging other debris along with it. Even if the wing didn't separate from the

airplane, it would be mere seconds before the aftertow sucked the baby beneath the water's surface.

She swam harder, dodging debris.

Twenty feet, ten feet, five feet ...

Too late. The wing settled into the water, pushing down on the small bundle and forcing him under the water.

Taking a deep breath, she dove beneath the surface, letting the moving water drag her down. She reached out, her fingers grazing the child's chilled flesh. Then she grabbed the torn jumpsuit he wore and pulled him close.

With strength she shouldn't still possess, she fought against the current and pushed to the surface. Once they broke through, she kept the baby's face above the water as she swam away from the churning, boiling spot where the plane had once floated.

Searching her memories, she tried to recall if she knew how to give artificial respiration to a child, but the baby made that moot by opening his mouth and releasing a weak mew of a cry.

"It's all right, sweetheart." The sound of her own voice startled her, as if she'd never heard it before. How could that be?

She kissed the baby on the forehead as she cradled him close to her side above the waves. "You're safe now."

The baby responded with a strangled cry that sounded more pained than upset.

Then his cry turned into a coughing barrage as he tried to breathe. To further complicate things, she realized each rip in the child's little jumpsuit exposed a bleeding injury. Some cuts looked small, others looked threatening.

No time to lose, she thought.

“Hang on, kid.”

The sounds of sirens and voices grew closer and the smoke dissipated.

She shielded her eyes from the sudden, brilliant sunshine and saw something large and dark closing in on their position.

A voice shouted, “We’re coming. Hang in there.”

The baby stopped coughing and, perhaps, even breathing.

“Hurry. The baby ... I think he’s stopped breathing. Hurry!”

There was a large splash and someone swam toward her with powerful strokes.

“I’m coming.” It was a man’s voice. A strong voice.

Then the rescuer reached her. As he approached, he called out, “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“No, but the baby is. I think he stopped breathing.”

The man reached for the baby, but she had a difficult time releasing the child. Cramping muscles, she told herself, not a reluctance to let go.

He knows what he’s doing. He can help. Let him take this responsibility, she whispered to herself.

After he gently extricated the baby from her arms, he cradled the baby in the crook of his arm. The man’s relief seemed as strong as hers when the child moved and cried out.

“I’m so sorry, kiddo,” he crooned. “I know it hurts. But I’m glad you’re breathing.”

“Me, too.”

He turned to her. “You hurt, too?”

“No, I’m glad he’s breathing.”

The man managed a smile, then glanced beyond her. “Looks like our ride is here.”

She turned in the water and was startled to see a ferry boat floating a short distance away. A handful of people stood at the rail at the bow, gawking.

“A commuter ferry?”

“We were the closest boat. Can you swim that far or do you need help?”

“I can swim.” She proved it by doing so.

The man glided alongside her, saying quiet words of reassurance as he held the child’s head out of the water.

“The baby’s too young to understand you,” she said between strokes.

“He can understand the tone. Right, kiddo? I could be reciting the Gettysburg address to him and it wouldn’t matter so long as it sounded reassuring.”

“I guess ...”

He managed a watery smile. “Just watch. ‘Four score and eight years ago—’ “

“Seven.”

“Huh?”

“ ‘Four score and seven years ago.’ “

He smiled at the baby. “I hope you grow up to be as smart as she is. ‘Four score and *seven* years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent ...’ “

When they reached the boat, the gawkers turned into helpers with outstretched arms.

She was dragged aboard the boat like some strange fishing catch. She sat up, dripping and gasping, safe at last.

The ferry passengers crowded around her. She owed them her life for the timely rescue, she supposed.

But their insistence on patting her as if their gestures were reassuring was more than a bit irritating.

Why do they have to touch me?

She hid her surprise when her rescuer held out the baby. "I suspect he'd rather have you hold him right now."

She looked at him and then at the baby and made no moves. "Why? You're doing a fine job."

The look of astonishment on the man's face confused her for a moment, then she suddenly understood. "Oh ... I'm not his mother."

Something twisted in her gut and a sharp pain sliced through her head from one temple to the other. "At least I don't think I am."

The man's concern deepened. "Think? You don't know?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Thoughts and images whirled in her mind like a merry-go-round turned to warp speed.

She didn't remember getting on the plane.

She didn't remember where she'd been.

She didn't remember anything until a few moments before the crash occurred.

This wasn't her child. Was it?

After a moment of empty- handed soul- searching, she added, “I don’t really know.” She reached blindly behind her and found a chair. The people standing around her helped her sit.

Her rescuer’s expression softened. “I think we need to get you two to shore and to some medical attention.” He knelt down to her level. “What’s your name?”

She drew in a long breath as if she could draw in knowledge at the same time. But the question stumped her.

What was her name?

She knew what color the sky was. She knew the Gettysburg address well enough to correct an error.

But a simple question like *What is your name?*

She didn’t have a clue.

She expelled the breath that she finally realized she was holding. “I-I don’t know. I don’t know who I am.”

Chapter Two

Ten minutes earlier:

Dante Kearns dredged up a friendly smile and pointed the camera at his quarry. “So, how long have you captained the *Admiral Calvin Baumgartner*?”

The ferry’s captain, who had begrudgingly introduced himself as Kerwin Grant, stared straight ahead, his hand resting on the wheel. “Eight years.”

“I bet you’ve got some great stories to tell, right?”

“Yep.”

Silence.

Great. The talkative type. “Could you tell me one, Captain Grant?”

The man’s impressive mustache twitched slightly. “Nope.”

Dante tried to keep his pleasant expression in place. “Why not?”

The man turned and stared into the lens. “I’m tolerating you in my wheel house only because my boss says I have to. Don’t push it.”

Dante raised one hand in mock surrender. “I’m not going to get in your way, sir.”

Grant curled his lip in a growl. “You’re already in my way.”

Dante shifted back a few inches, hoping to demonstrate how he would neither block any view nor touch any of the controls. *Anything to get on Captain Ahab’s good side.*

“Look ... sir, I’m just trying to do my job.” *If you even have a good side.*

“Me, too.”

“Just give me a good sound bite, a bit of footage of you at the wheel, doing your job, and I’ll get out of your hair and your wheelhouse.”

The man stiffened. “You want a sound bite? Well, try this.” Grant turned toward Dante. He drew in a deep breath and made a hand gesture that would have to be blurred or excised in the final cut. “This is what I think about you and your moronic *Twenty-Four-Seven* Internet crap that masquerades as news.”

Dante bristled. “It’s the twentieth-first century and we’re beyond two-dimensional—”

Grant dismissed him by slicing through the air with one callused hand. “You’re nothing more than a bunch of motherfucking ...” His voice trailed away and his ruddy face drained to a pasty white. “Oh, shit.”

Dante straightened. He thought, *Reporter causes captain’s heart attack. Ferry runs aground. Film at eleven.* “Are you all right, sir?” “Shut the hell up.” The captain picked up his microphone. “All hands, all hands. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill. We got another one. Prepare for—”

An explosion blasted the boat, the percussion making the glass rattle and the deck list momentarily to one side. Dante almost dropped his camera. Once he regained his footing, he spun around to peer out the wheel house window behind him. That’s when he saw the source of the captain’s concern.

An airplane had just finished tumbling end-over-end down the Hudson, leaving behind broken, burning chunks of metal in its wake. The fuselage lay in three main pieces, and the center portion was floating for the moment. Its two broken wings were

probably the only thing keeping the main cabin afloat. One wing stretched out on the water's surface and the other stuck straight up, acting as a counterbalance.

The captain continued barking orders into the microphone. "Prepare all emergency equipment— all life boats, all life- saving paraphernalia, all medical supplies. Secure all passengers inside the main cabin and brace them for impact if there are more explosions. All ahead full."

Dante used the camera to get a better look at the carnage. He zoomed in but the spilled jet fuel flamed up, filling the lens with inky black smoke.

No way in hell anyone survived that.

Nonetheless, this was going to be the lead story on every news Web site, every television, and every newspaper. And here he stood, in the wheel house of what might be the first rescue ship to reach the disaster.

"This is Dante Kearns, on board the *Admiral Calvin Baumgartner*, a ferryboat operated by CityWaterways. The captain has just given the order to all hands, altering their usual mission of commuter transport. We've just witnessed a passenger jet crash-landing on the Hudson River." He focused on the bit of airplane's tail that had broken off completely and was bobbing on the surface several yards downriver. He zoomed in on the logo, a globe lapped by stylized waves, now replaced with real ones, making the tail bob erratically.

"It appears to be a CoastalEast flight but we can't determine what flight or what equipment. We have no idea the number of passengers and crew on board. We don't know how many of them—if any—may have survived."

He swung the camera around to focus on Captain Grant who was still barking into his microphone. “This is the *Admiral Calvin Baumgartner* to the U.S. Coast Guard. A passenger jet has just crash- landed in the Hudson near Fifty- sixth Street. We are responding in rescue. There is fire and spilled fuel. I repeat: A passenger jet has crashed into the Hudson. We are the closest vessel to the main wreckage and we are responding.”

A tinny voice answered him. “Admiral Baumgartner, this is the Coast Guard. We copy. We will alert all necessary responding units.”

Dante shot a last bit of footage while standing in the wheelhouse door. He slipped out before Grant could stop him. Tripping down the metal staircase, he managed to keep upright as a choppy wave hit the bow. They’d picked up speed, something the ferry boat wasn’t necessarily designed for. Deckhands stood at the rail with jackets, boat hooks, and binoculars, scanning the wreck site.

“See anyone yet?” Dante yelled above the engines roaring at full throttle.

“Not yet,” one crew member replied. “But honestly? No way anybody survived that. No way in hell.”

As they moved closer to the wreckage, Dante realized that the currents in the river as carrying the remains to drift downriver, spreading the carnage and the burning fuel. If here were any survivors, they could be practically anywhere. Plus, the growing fumes and smoke were going to make any rescue that much more difficult.

The boat slowed as it came closer, minimizing the wake so that they wouldn’t churn up any oily water. The captain’s voice emanated from the deck speakers. “I see something. I think there’s something or someone moving off the starboard bow.”

The crew rushed to the starboard and Dante followed them, only to be blocked by a rather large young man who planted himself in the way. “No one but crew permitted on deck.”

“Are you kidding?”

Gargantuan looked like he’d never kidded anyone in his life. Maybe pounded them into the ground, but never kidded them. Dante tried to smile. “I’m with Twenty-Four- Seven.” When the name failed to elicit a response, Dante switched tactics. “C’mon, man, I’m only doing my job.”

The man’s stern expression never changed. “Me, too. You. Stay.”

Unable to see what was happening on the other side of the boat, Dante turned his attention to what his limited view afforded him. Using his camera, he methodically searched the floating debris, spotting and identifying pieces of insulation, seat cushions, and suitcases— some broken, some intact.

At least he tried to convince himself that the things he saw had always been inanimate. But he knew full well many of the unidentified floating masses were bodies.

In his head, he was composing the voice- over that would accompany the footage, drawing words from the horrific images.

Is this “wanton” destruction or “capricious” destruction? Which word is better?

He knew not to voice his thoughts. He’d be thought coldhearted. In reality, compiling a mental monologue was a defensive technique he’d used since college to distance and distract himself from the shocking sights that often existed on the other side of his camera lens. It was the journalist’s creed. Someone had to keep a cool head and a keen eye, in order to preserve a factual history of events.

But once he put the camera down, he no longer had a temporary barrier between him and the disaster in front of him. He knew that without his journalistic barrier, his heart broke just like anyone else's upon witnessing such devastation.

A series of small blasts rocked the wreckage and the main fuselage began to sink, its broken wing dipping closer to the water's level. Dante didn't want to contemplate what might happen if the wing broke off. It was probably the only thing keeping the cabin from sinking completely.

That's when Dante saw movement. Someone struggling in the water.

A survivor?

Impossible.

He used the camera to zoom in on something light-colored, bobbing in the water.

A person?

My God, someone survived.

"A survivor!" he yelled, trying to get the attention of the deckhands on the other side of the ship. "We got a survivor."

No one appeared to hear him.

At that moment, his self-protection procedures failed. Using the camera to see the victim more clearly, he couldn't subdue the voice inside of him that screamed for him to stop shooting footage and *Do. Something. Now!*

He watched as the survivor—a woman—stopped swimming and swiveled around in the water to peer behind her.

"No, don't look back," he yelled. "Keep swimming. This way!" He waved his free arm as if she could possibly overlook the fact that he was standing on the deck of a

big- ass boat headed straight at her. It wasn't like he thought she'd turn into a pillar of salt if she looked back, but the sight of the sinking plane might overwhelm her.

Demoralize her.

Make her give up ...

“Survivor on port side,” he screamed, drowned out by another small explosion.

The ferryboat's engines rumbled and they began to move but away from the sinking plane.

“No, no, don't go,” he yelled.

He watched in dread as the woman began to swim back toward the sinking plane.

Was she crazy? Confused? She needed help. Now.

He pulled the camera down, the horror no longer neatly framed in the viewfinder, but laid out in front of him. There was only one thing he could do.

He wedged his camera into a nearby deck chair, weighing it down with his camera bag, trying to point it in the general direction of the wreck.

Stuffing his wallet into the bag, he kicked off his shoes and grabbed a lifesaver ring. Then, ignoring the voice inside his head that told him his job was to report the news from an impartial angle, not interact with it, he jumped over the railing and into the churning waters below.

Although he hadn't been in a body of water larger than a hot tub in the last five years, memories of his misspent youth as a high-school lifeguard struggled to the surface. Luckily, the waters were cold but not freezing— after all it was May.

His first few strokes were uncoordinated and ineffective, but it didn't take long before he found a rhythm he could use to move forward despite the wake caused by the boat and the fetid waters, fouled by jet fuel and debris.

And bodies.

Ignore the bodies, he told himself. *You can't help them. Help the living.*

As he swam, he kept his head up, trying to keep his face out of the fouled water and hoping to spot her again amid the watery field of flotsam. Finally, he found the woman, now swimming back away from the sinking wreckage.

"We're coming," he shouted. "Hang in there."

Please be okay, please be okay, please be okay, he chanted with each stroke.

Her voice carried over the water. "Hurry! The baby ... I think he's stopped breathing." She released an anguished cry. "Hurry!"

Oh my God ... a baby?

He dug into the water harder, faster. He tried to respond to her but an oily wave hit him in the face. Swiping away the slime with one hand, he managed to shout, "I'm coming."

It took what seemed like an eternity for him to reach her. As he closed in on her position, he asked, "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Before she could answer, he heard shouts behind him. Maybe someone on the ship saw splashing around in the river. Then again, maybe they were headed off to rescue someone else. Panic coursed through him, giving him an added boost of energy which he used to bat away a floating chunk of something in his path.

Something, not somebody, self- protective instincts reminded him. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

The woman’s voice seemed weaker. “No, but the baby is.”

Dante pushed himself, covering the last few yards with only a couple of strokes. The bedraggled woman held the baby close to her chest with one hand as she treaded water.

“I think he stopped breathing,” she said between coughs, her own breath sounding labored.

He reached out for the baby, while searching through his memories and trying to remember if he’d ever learned how to do CPR on an infant.

Slow, shallow puffs ...

“Let me help,” he said gently. *I know what I’m doing. I can help. Let me take the responsibility.*

The woman seemed confused, unable to release her child. It was evident she was caught between warring emotions—”Let someone help” versus “Who is this stranger who wants to take my baby from me?”

She finally released the child and he shifted the limp bundle into the crook of his arm.

Slow, shallow puffs, he reminded himself.

But before he could position the tiny blue- clad bundle, the baby opened his eyes and emitted a tiny cry.

Thank God, he’s breathing.

Paternal instincts kicked in. Actually, more like the instincts of an uncle with six nieces and nephews, all under the age of five.

“I’m so sorry, kiddo,” he said, using the same voice that had calmed his youngest nephew, affectionately known as Colin the Colic. “I know it hurts. But I’m glad you’re breathing.”

“Me, too,” the woman said in a strained whisper. There were two victims here, he reminded himself. The child and his mother. Maybe a third if he couldn’t get them back to a boat soon. He turned to the woman. “You hurt, too?”

She managed a smile that didn’t quite reach her pained eyes. “No, I’m glad he’s breathing.”

Now, how in the hell am I going to get both of you back to the boat? He looked behind him, expecting to see the *Admiral Calvin Baumgartner* long gone, but to his relief, it was chugging their direction. Someone *had* finally seen them.

He didn’t have to fake his grin when he nodded toward the ferry. “Looks like our ride is here.”

She followed his gaze, but her expression didn’t change at first. Then realization kicked in and relief flooded her face.

“A commuter ferry?”

“What can I say? We were the closest boat.” He judged the distance between them and the edge of the debris field and pointed to a chunk of insulation at that edge.

“Can you swim as far as that big white floating ... thing or do you need help?”

“I can swim,” she said with an odd air of resolution.

To his surprise, her stroke was relatively strong, at least for someone who had just survived an airline crash that should have killed her. It certainly seemed to have killed everyone else on it.

Except this little guy.

Later, Dante couldn't recall what he said to the baby. It was just the sort of things you chatter about to fill the silence, to remind the child that he wasn't alone, that someone was there who cared.

He did the same with the woman. He chitchatted as they swam, anything to distract her from her injuries and what had to be horrific memories of the crash. But what surprised him the most was that her answers were prompt and on subject. Between her mental clarity and her physical condition, she seemed to have survived with only minor problems.

Then again, he wasn't a doctor just a reporter who gave up the story of his life to enter said story.

Neither of them commented when they pushed past a dead body or the pieces of floating debris in their way that turned out to be parts of bodies. Those observations were bad enough. They didn't need to talk about them.

When they reached the ferry, the gawkers along the rail turned into helpers with outstretched arms. They pulled the woman up and then helped to brace Dante as he climbed up the ladder, one rung at the time, carrying his precious passenger. Once on deck, the circle of rescuers erupted in applause, but Dante ignored them and held out the baby to its mother. "I suspect he'd rather have you hold him right now."

She looked at him as if he'd grown a purple horn right in the middle of his forehead. "Why? You're doing a fine job."

Dante gaped at her and immediately took back his assessment of her mental state.

She looked equally surprised, then her expression faded. "Oh ... I'm not his mother." She paused as if suddenly realizing that she was in pain. "At least I don't think I am."

"Think? You don't know?"

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. The crowd surged around her, helping her to sit. One of the passengers, a motherly type, reached out for the baby.

"Let me. I'm a peds nurse. I need to check him for injuries."

He gave this woman a quick once-over. She looked like someone who knew what she was doing, so he reluctantly gave up the child. After a moment of obvious bewilderment, the woman from the plane finally spoke in a soft voice. "I don't really know."

He tried to smile, to assure her that this sort of confusion was a normal thing after surviving a trauma such as this. "I think we need to get you two to shore and to some medical attention." He knelt beside her. "What's your name?"

She remained silent for several seconds before expelling the breath that she probably didn't realize she was holding. "I-I don't know. I don't know who I am."

He maintained his smile. "That's okay. That's not unusual after an accident. Everything'll come back to you soon."

She reached out as if she wanted to grab his arm, but pulled back just short of touching him. She couldn't disguise the panic in her face. "You sure?"

“Absolutely,” he said in his most encouraging voice, hoping he wasn’t lying.

One of the deckhands pulled Dante aside. “Captain wants to know if you saw any other survivors.”

“Tell him no.” Dante’s stomach suddenly twisted. He’d worked hard to ignore the bodies floating in the water. But now, the images were burning in his brain and he couldn’t knock them loose.

So much death, so much destruction. He swayed a little at the thought. Hands braced him. “You okay, sir? Here, sit.” Someone wrapped a blanket around him because he was shaking. But it wasn’t a chill; it was the memories—of the bodies, of the water slicked with oil and blood ...

That’s why he was shivering. Right?

By the time they approached the dock, he’d managed to work hard and push the memories to the back of his mind. He’d fought and won, regaining some semblance of control. It wasn’t the first disaster he’d covered, he told himself. And it wouldn’t be the last.

One of the female deckhands brought him his shoes, camera, and bag. As he stared at the camera, he wondered how long he could stall before reviewing the footage. Maybe he could send in the raw footage and let someone else edit it. He wasn’t sure he wanted to see the whole thing again.

In any case, he needed to send in his footage.

Dante looked up to realize the young deckhand was still standing next to him.

“Don’t look in the bag right now,” the young woman said in a quiet voice.

“Captain Grant ordered me to destroy your camera.”

Cat in a Vegas Gold Vendetta

A Midnight Louie Mystery

By Carole Nelson Douglas

Copyright © 2011 by Carole Nelson Douglas

Temple Barr, Las Vegas' ace public relations wizard, and her furry sidekick, Midnight Louie, take on rabid cat fanciers and deadly relatives in this fast-paced mystery featuring one of America's best loved four-footed gumshoes.

Cat in a Vegas Gold Vendetta is the twenty-second title in **Carole Nelson Douglas'** sassy Midnight Louie mystery series. In addition to tales of her favorite feline, Douglas is also the author of the historical suspense series featuring Irene Adler, the only woman ever to have "outwitted" Sherlock Holmes. Douglas resides in Fort Worth, Texas.

Chapter One

Temple Barr, PI

Temple's fingers were doing the flamenco across her laptop keyboard, writing a press release, with Midnight Louie, her twenty-pound black cat, playing his usual role of paperweight beside her, when her phone rang.

She jumped.

Midnight Louie growled in alarm and rose up on his forelegs.

Temple wasn't the skittish type. You had to have nerves of steel to deal with the emergencies and sudden zigs and zags a freelance public relations person had to control, particularly in Vegas and particularly in these Internet character-assassination days.

She had a right to be jumpy after that international phone call twelve hours ago from the late great Max Kinsella, missing magician and ex-significant other, back from the presumed dead. He was even now flying back to Vegas on her say so, after he'd encountered danger, death, and memory-melting head trauma in Northern Ireland. She was picking him up at the airport late this afternoon.

So this phone call could be full of woe.

Or, since her new and true love and official fiancé, radio counselor Matt Devine, was flying back from Chicago in three days and had family there, he could be calling to report snags, feuds, or winning the Power Ball lottery.

Either way, she was now a nervous Nellie about the simple act of answering the phone.

No caller name popped up on the phone screen. Normally, a blank screen meant new business, but just right now Temple was a little shaky on dealing with voices from the Blank Nowhere.

She picked up the phone and said, "Hello." Cautiously.

"Temple Barr?"

Relief. A woman was calling. The ghost from her recent past wasn't calling back. Yet.

"Right," Temple said.

"Do you mean this is the right Temple Barr?"

"Yes."

"*The* Temple Barr?"

"I like to think so."

By now Louie's soft, growled warnings were a musical accompaniment. He knew when she was tense or worried.

"I didn't reach that eatery out on Temple Bar at Lake Mead somehow," the voice persisted. "It sounds like a kid is whining in the background."

"No, you've reached me, the Temple Barr with two *rs*."

The voice, both breathy and chesty, was beginning to sound awfully familiar. "Awful" in the deeply serious sense of the word.

"May I ask who's calling, please?" Temple said. Her normal voice had a slight, hoarse edge and it was getting raspy with impatience and ... dawning horror.

"This is Savannah Ashleigh." Pause for effect. "The screen star."

The second sentence was highly debatable. The first was ... all too true.

Temple had crossed paths and swords with the ditsy, glitzy C-movie queen several times. The worst was the occasion when Temple's co-habiting cat, Midnight Louie, had been cast in cat food commercials with Ashleigh's Persian beauty, Yvette. When Yvette proved to be with kittens, Savannah had accused Louie of littering and actually tried to do him bodily harm.

Fortunately, twenty pounds of ex-alley cat Louie can handle any scheming human from murderer to media minx. He came out of the incident proved innocent, intact, and on top, as usual.

Temple, however, was terminally disgusted with Savannah Ashleigh and all her works.

"What can I do for you, Miss Ashleigh?" Temple asked in a businesslike monotone, polite and oh-so-wishing the connection would break. Cell phone reception was extremely iffy in Las Vegas, especially near the Strip. Connections could be hard to hold. This one wasn't. Alas.

Temple sat and listened and nodded, not inclined to take the woman seriously. Finally, she got a sentence in.

"Murders happen every day in Las Vegas and surrounding suburbs, Miss Ashleigh ... No, not in your neighborhood, I'm sure ... Oh. Never, you say?"

Temple couldn't quite believe that any Vegas neighborhood hadn't hosted murder old or new.

"Um, you want to *hire* me to investigate a murder? And where do I see *clients*?" she echoed her caller.

Temple thought hard. She was now too curious to indulge her dislike. Although she had a knack for solving murders, no one had ever wanted to hire her to do it. And the “case,” would take her mind off . . . impending men.

She did not want the memory of Savannah Ashleigh polluting her living quarters, not that the woman was bad, besides at acting. She was just a Ditz Queen who usually traveled with a purse pet of some kind. Louie would never get over his turf being so invaded after what Savannah had done.

She glanced again at Midnight Louie, getting an idea. He’d once favored hanging out near a canna lily stand and koi pond like Sam Spade keeping office hours behind the

“Of course,” she told Savannah Ashleigh. “We could meet at the Crystal Phoenix Hotel.”

“Yes,” she repeated her caller’s reaction, “it *is* ‘always gracious to do business over a good belt.’ I’ll meet you at the Crystal Court Bar. Three P.M.”

Temple shut off the connection.

Louie was regarding her, enormous green eyes reducing his pupils to their most condemnatory slit. Temple made excuses, fast.

“It is Savannah Ashleigh, as you heard. Maybe she meant ‘belt’ in the sense of . . . a solid Austrian crystal Judith Lieber designer belt—yum—or Conchos or shells, or even a black belt.”

Louie gave his opinion of this meeting by swiping the last printed-out pages off her desk. Now that was a “good belt.”

“You can come along and visit Midnight Louise,” she coaxed him. “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

Midnight Louise was a black stray who’d taken his position of house cat at the Phoenix after Louie had moved in with her at the Circle Ritz condominium and apartment building.

Nice? Louie had no comment but chewing the hairs between his toes.

“Besides,” Temple mused. “I’m wondering why Savannah Ashleigh wants to see me about a murder. Aren’t you even curious?”

That comment propelled him off the desk to the floor.

Temple checked her watch. Eleven A. M. It must be five o’clock somewhere and she could use a belt or two as well. Matt wasn’t coming home from a career-changing personal appearance on *The Amanda Show* in Chicago for three days and what was left of Max was flying in from Northern Ireland late this afternoon.

Temple guessed she could use a time-wasting rendezvous with a has-been B-minus movie actress to keep her mind off the forthcoming personal apocalypse.

Chapter Two

A Very Feral Fellow

I am not accustomed to rolling up to the Crystal Phoenix's elegant front entrance in style. Usually, I must slink in the side or back of the fabled Las Vegas hotel-casino like a common stray.

Frankly, I prefer it that way. No PI in the business wants to announce his particular sources and haunts.

However, I feel obligated to escort my esteemed roommate on this difficult day. I am doing all I can to distract her from the impending reunion with her former roommate, Mr. Max Kinsella. If I must throw a few papers around, or a tantrum, I will.

I will even show my mug on the front passenger seat of Miss Temple's red Miata. Usually I hitch a ride on the dark carpeting of back seats, unseen and inhaling a lot of foot odor and the scent of all the ugly things a human shoe can stomp on. Unlike we of the superior breed, humans *never* clean their soles, but reuse them unwashed again and again.

On the bright side, this filthy habit does make the human kind much easier to track.

"Why, Louie," Miss Temple says as I slip in the open driver's side door and hop onto the passenger seat. "You want to ride shotgun?"

After an exasperated look and a check of the large dial of her wrist watch, she caves. "If this were an airport run, I'd kick you off the leather seat, but it's only the

Crystal Phoenix, and I suppose you want to arrive at your old place in style. Remember. Velvet paws. No claws on the leather upholstery, not even if I have to brake suddenly. The floor carpeting is all right, though.”

I do like the way my Miss Temple acts as if I am totally conversation-worthy, although I would never deign to talk back to humans.

I blink my agreement to her terms and prepare to enjoy what some of the commonest dogs do, a spin in the car.

Las Vegas is offering a warm spring day, so my Miss Temple has donned lots of lightly scented sun screen that helps ban any offensive human odors. She is a red-cream kind of kitten with sun-sensitive face and body leather.

Of course my glistening black coat shines like wet tar in the sunshine and even under the Crystal Phoenix’s front canopy of mirror and tiny crystal lights when we shortly arrive there, sans sudden braking.

I jump out when the doorman opens my side and wait politely for Miss Temple to precede me within while tourists gawk. They do not know my long history here as hotel cat and unofficial house detective before I linked up with Miss Temple and the Circle Ritz bunch.

Before we can enter I am finessed, however.

Out of the row of brass and glass doors rushes one Fontana brother.

Just one. What a disappointment! There are ten in all, and Nicky, the youngest, owns the Crystal Phoenix. Out comes Aldo, the eldest. The fickle tourist cameras turn toward his five-star looks and high-style pale-mango Italian suit and the petite redhead on his arm who embraces my Miss Temple and does kissy cheeks.

Those of my breed do not deign to do kissy cheeks. It would disarrange our magnificent, delicate vibrissae, aka whiskers. We do sniffy noses. Wait! That is not as off-putting as it sounds.

“Temple,” the former Miss Kit Carlson, her maternal aunt, says. “We are just back from abroad and were heading to the Circle Ritz to see you.”

I stare rebukingly at the new Mrs. Aldo Fontana until the searing burn of my regard forces her to look down.

“To see you *and* Midnight Louie, of course,” she corrects herself.

By now, Aldo is doing the kissy cheek thing with Miss Temple. Continental, I am told, but it strikes me as unsanitary.

“How was Italy?” Miss Temple inquires, it being impolite to baldly ask how these post-wedding flings called “honeymoons” went, which is, of course, what everyone really wants to know.

“Divine,” Miss Kit replies.

I do not abide by human conventions. I do not care if Miss Kit Carlson is married; she is still a Miss Kit to me. “Missus” is such a déclassé word.

“How are things going here, with you?” Miss Kit adds with an amiable smile.

“You would not believe,” my Miss Temple answers. “Meanwhile, I’m late; I’m late for a very insignificant date. May we catch up later, please?”

“Of course,” Miss Kit says. She is a thirty-year older version of Miss Temple and her prime state of preservation for an old dame should cheer up my now-distracted roomie.

I am not about to miss a word that these two exchange about the Current Crises, for they are more gal pals than aunt and niece. Since Miss Temple has only older brothers in Minnesota, it is fortunate she has a hip, ex-Manhattanite aunt on the scene to help me provide aid and comfort in the coming end of days.

We bustle inside. That is, my Miss Temple bustles, slinging greetings to bellmen and other passing hotel staff. I follow her in slink mode so she will not have to answer awkward questions about my ability to heel like a dog if I so choose.

My breed is not expected to trot docilely along, and Bast forbid that I should let my breed down. Besides, I know that Miss Temple is headed for the Crystal Court, so I race to install myself discreetly before her arrival. She will think that I have headed to the rear pool area to drool over the nearby koi pond.

Soon my baby greens are peering through the indoor greenery to the cocktail table for two where Miss Savannah Ashleigh has arranged herself.

Being five-foot-nothing, Miss Temple favors high heels, but they are usually the classy three-inch designer kind. Miss Savannah goes for what are called “hooker shoes,” high rises of four or even five inches. She also wears inflated blond hair (extensions) and inflated lip and chest parts (collagen).

I can understand the human urge to supplement their scanty hair but not to emphasize bare skin devoid of fur.

I examine the bulky purse thankfully concealing the Ashleigh footwear at the moment. A pair of small shiny black eyes peeks out. Or is that “Pekes” out? I know the fickle actress has forsaken her Persian cat beauties for mere pipsqueak canines these days. Recalling my recent undercover gig as a “purse pussy,” I am in sudden sympathy

with the pathetic pooch. The front paws and full head are now visible, and it is too small for even the tiniest Chihuahua.

I pad over to inspect and sniff. Dear Predatory Bountiful Bast! It is vermin of some kind! Barely have I realized its, ah, composition, than it slithers out of the designer bag, runs out of sight behind me and hitches a ride on my terminal member.

Spinning, I discover it is clinging there with all four tiny paws, like a quartet of staplers. I cannot whip around fast enough to dislodge the furry little imp, and I am soon dizzy and in danger of making an exhibition of myself, which is the last thing an undercover operative wants to do.

On my final spin I lose the unwanted “tail,” and spot it once again peeking out from the side pocket of the blasted bag. Surely such a savage little thing is not housebroken. The mind boggles at what it must be doing in Miss Savannah Ashleigh’s purse all day.

Behind me I hear the crisp approach of Miss Temple’s Stuart Weitzman petite-platform ankle-strap shoes. *Rats!* I need to dive back under cover. Rats? Why would Miss Savannah Ashleigh have a pet rat? One that is not even an attractive laboratory-white but plain Dumpster-brown?

I had been planning to make a sentimental journey back to my old PI office near the poolside canna lilies out back ... back by Chef Song’s koi pond. Now, I must guard Miss Temple platform-and-ankle-strap from some street vermin playing footsie with her.

I settle onto my haunches for a long eavesdropping session, when a low hiss at my rear tells me we are not alone.

“I thought I smelled a rat,” says Miss Midnight Louise, nosing her obnoxious way alongside me so close you could not slip a piece of onionskin paper between us, “but it is just you.”

“Most amusing. If you will keep an eye on Miss Savannah Ashleigh’s bag, you will spot a real rat.”

“No? Has purse poochery come down to this? The underground link to Gangsters has been certified rat-free by the health department and the Neon Nightmare access has been cemented shut.”

“That case and the secret tunnel may be closed, but more crime in the making is afoot somewhere. Just keep watching and listening.”

Something more than mere vermin is afoot, and it has peroxidized hair and mighty high arches.

A Dublin Student Doctor

An Irish Country Doctor Novel

By Patrick Taylor

Copyright © 2010 by Patrick Taylor

Patrick Taylor's devoted readers know Doctor Fingal Flahertie O'Reilly as a pugnacious general practitioner in the quaint Irish village of Ballybucklebo. Now Taylor turns back the clock to give us a portrait of the young Fingal—and show us the pivotal events that shaped the man he would become. The sixth book in Patrick Taylor's *New York Times* bestselling series, *A Dublin Student Doctor* is a moving, deeply human story that will touch longtime fans as well as readers who are meeting Doctor Fingal O'Reilly for the very first time.

Chapter One

It's a Long, Long Road from Which There Is No Return

Fingal Flahertie O'Reilly, *Doctor* Fingal Flahertie O'Reilly, edged the long-bonnetted Rover out of the car park. "Lord Jasus," he remarked, "but this 24th day of April in the year of our Lord 1965 has been one for the book of lifetime memories." He smiled at Kitty O'Hallorhan in the passenger's seat. "For all kinds of reasons," he said, "and now that the Downpatrick Races are over, it's home to Ballybucklebo." He accelerated.

Kitty yelled, "Will you slow down?" then said more gently, "Fingal, there are pedestrians and cyclists. I'd rather not see any in the ditch," The afternoon sun highlighted the amber flecks in her grey eyes. She put slim fingers on his arm.

"Just for you, Kitty." He slowed and whistled *Slow Boat to China*. "All right in the back?"

"Fine, Fingal," said O'Reilly's assistant, young Doctor Barry Lavery.

"Grand, so." Mrs. Maureen 'Kinky' Kincaid, was O'Reilly's housekeeper as she had been for Doctor Flanagan. Fingal had met Kinky when he'd come as an assistant to Thómas Flanagan in 1938. She'd stayed on when a thirty-seven-year-old O'Reilly returned in 1946 from his service in the Second World War and bought the general practice from Doctor Flanagan's estate.

They'd been a good nineteen years, he thought as he put the car into a tight bend between two rows of ancient elms. So had his years as a medical student at Dublin's Trinity College in the '30s.

“Jasus thundering Murphy.” O’Reilly stamped on the brake. The Rover shuddered to a halt five yards from a man standing waving his arms.

O’Reilly’s bushy eyebrows met. He could feel his temper rise and the tip of his bent nose blanch. “Everyone all right?” he roared and was relieved to hear a chorus of reassurance. He hurled his door open and stamped up the road. “What in the blue bloody blazes are you doing standing there waving your arms like an out-of-kilter semaphore. I could have squashed you flatter than a flaming flounder-fish.”

The stranger wore Wellington boots, moleskin trousers, and a hacking jacket. He had a russet beard, a squint, and was no more than five foot two. O’Reilly expected him at least to take a step back, apologise, but he stood his ground.

“There’s no need for youse ‘til be losing the bap, so there’s not. There’s been an accident, and I’m here to stop big buggers like youse driving into it, so I am. See for yourself.” He pointed to a knot of people and the slowly rotating rear wheel of a motorbike that lay on its side.

“Accident?” said O’Reilly. He spun on his heel. “Barry. Grab my bag and come here.” He turned back. “I’m Doctor O’Reilly. Doctor Laverty’s coming.”

“Doctor? Thank God for that, sir. A motorcyclist took a purler on an oil slick, you know. Somebody’s gone for the ambulance and police.”

“Here you are,” Barry handed O’Reilly his bag. “What’s up?”

“Motorbike accident.” He spoke to the short man. “You’d be safer back down the road where drivers can see you before they’re on top of you.”

“Right enough. I’ll go, sir.” He started walking.

O'Reilly yelled, "Kitty. Kinky. There's been an accident. Stay with the car." Kitty would have the wit to pull the car over to the verge. "Come on Barry." O'Reilly marched straight to the little crowd. Time to use the voice that could be heard over a gale when he'd served on the battleship HMS *Warspite*. "We're doctors. Let us through."

Ruddy-cheeked country faces turned. Murmuring people shuffled aside and a path opened.

A motorbike lay, an exclamation mark at the end of two long black scrawls of rubber. The engine ticked and the stink of oil and burnt tyre hung over the smell of ploughed earth from a field and the almond scent of whin flowers.

A middle-aged woman knelt beside the rider. The victim's head was turned away from O'Reilly, but there could only be one owner of that red thatch. A duncher lay a few yards away. It irritated O'Reilly, that Ulstermen wouldn't wear crash helmets but favoured cloth caps worn with the peak at the back

He knelt beside the woman and set his bag on the ground. "He's unconscious, he's breathing regular, his airway's clear, his pulse is eighty and regular, and he's not bleeding. There don't seem to be any bones broken," she said and added, "I'm a first-aider, you know."

"Thank you, Mrs?"

"Meehan. Rosie Meehan."

O'Reilly smiled at her. "Donal? Donal?" he said gently. Fifteen minutes ago he'd seen Ballybucklebo's arch schemer, Donal Donnelly, riding the motorbike from the car park.

No reply.

O'Reilly grabbed the man's wrist. Good. Mrs. Meehan was right; the pulse was strong and regular. "Donal," he said more loudly, "Donal."

Donal's face was chalky. He wore his raincoat reversed and buttoned over his back. It was the practice of country men when riding motorbikes. It stopped the wind of passage getting through.

O'Reilly was hesitant to move Donal. He could have a broken neck. Better to wait for the ambulance. The first law of medicine was *Primum non nocere*. First do no harm. O'Reilly bent lower. "Donal?"

Donal's eyelids fluttered. "Numuh?"

Better, O'Reilly thought. Donal might only be concussed. If that were the case he should start regaining consciousness. But you could never be certain about head injuries. The damage might range from a simple concussion with complete recovery through to serious brain injury leading to paralysis, permanent brain damage, and even death. O'Reilly gritted his teeth. Donal had a new wife and a wean on the way. O'Reilly's heart went out to the pregnant Julie Donnelly, née MacAteer. He heard the, "Nee-naw," of an approaching siren. O'Reilly leant over. "Donal?"

Donal's eyes flew open. "Doctor O'Reilly? What are youse doing here?" He struggled to rise. "I shouldn't be in my bed."

Donal recognised O'Reilly. That was a good sign even if he was unclear where he was. O'Reilly put a restraining hand on the man's shoulder. "Lie still. You had an accident."

Donal put his hand to his head. "I must have hit my nut a right clatter," he said. "It's pounding to beat Bannagher, so it is."

“Do you know what day it is?” O’Reilly asked.

Donal frowned, “Uh? Saturday. We made a wheen of money on the oul gee-gees at the races.” He grinned like a small boy who had answered the teacher’s question correctly. “And this here’s the road to Ballybucklebo.” A look of concern crossed his face. “Jesus, is Paddy Regan’s motorbike all right? It’s only on loan.” Donal tried to rise.

“Stay put,” O’Reilly said and smiled. If Donal knew about events immediately preceding his accident it was probable he had suffered only a minor concussion. Even so, O’Reilly would never forget a footballer who’d been knocked out, recovered, gone back to finish the match, and died from a brain haemorrhage two hours later.

The “Nee-naw, nee-naw,” grew louder.

“I don’t need no ambulance,” Donal said. “I’m for going home, so I am.”

“Sorry, Donal,” O’Reilly said, “but you’ll be spending tonight in the Royal Victoria Hospital.”

“Och, Doctor—that’s daft. I’ve a motorbike to get back to—”

“The Royal. For observation,” O’Reilly said. “No arguments. I’ll take care of the bike.”

“But—”

“Donal, you’re going to hospital,” O’Reilly said as if speaking to a not overly bright child. “That’s final.” He stood and spoke to Barry. “I’ll do a quick neurological exam once he’s in the ambulance. Establish a baseline in case he gets worse. I’ll go up to the Royal with him. Kitty’s the senior nursing sister on the neurosurgical ward there. She’ll want to come too. She can go with Donal in the back of the ambulance. God knows she’s observed a hundred times more head injuries than you and I put together.

She'll keep an eye on him and warn me if his condition deteriorates. You drive Kinky and the Rover home."

"I'll go and get Kitty," Barry started to turn as a yellow Northern Ireland Hospitals' Authority ambulance drew up and its siren was turned off.

"In a minute," O'Reilly said. "Once the police have come and done whatever they have to do, measure things, take photos, and statements, they'll have you fill in forms. When you're done, get them to give you a hand to load the bike into the boot of the Rover. At least Paddy Regan won't need to come all the way here to collect it."

"Paddy? I'll let him know," Barry said.

O'Reilly turned. "Do you hear that, Donal? We'll get the bike home for you."

"Thanks, Doc. But what about Julie? She'll go spare if I don't get home too."

O'Reilly frowned. "You've no phone, Donal, have you?"

"No, sir."

"I'll nip round and see Julie," Barry said. "Tell her what's happened. That she's not to worry."

"Thanks, Doc."

Barry turned to leave as two men approached wearing peaked bus-driver's caps, silver-buttoned blue uniforms and carrying a stretcher. The bigger one, a burly, open-faced man, spoke to the first-aid lady. "What's the story, Rosie?" Of course he'd know her. They'd both be Downpatrick locals.

She nodded at O'Reilly. "Better ask your man there, Alfie. That there's Doctor O'Reilly."

The man turned to O'Reilly and grinned. "From Ballybucklebo, the wee village near Hollywood?"

"That's right. How did you—?" He frowned. Alfie did look familiar.

"I met you at a rugby game, sir." He pointed at Donal, "What do you reckon about your man?"

"He came off the bike and hit his head. He was unconscious for a while but he's awake now. Concussion at least and I'd like him in the Royal for observation. You know head injuries can—"

"I do know. Too bloody well." The ambulance man frowned. "My brother, God rest him, got a smack on the nut with a hurley ball. He bled into his skull and died." There was a catch in Alfie's voice. "He was only nineteen."

"I'm sorry," O'Reilly said.

"Aye well." Alfie tugged at his tie. "Standing here both legs the same length won't get your man there to the Royal. What do you want us to do, Doc?"

"Before you move him, I'll give his fore and hind legs a once over. Then I want you to take him, me, and Sister O'Hallorhan, she'll be here in a minute, up to the Royal. We'll radio ahead to arrange for him to be seen in casualty, get things rolling, then have him admitted to the observation ward."

"Right, Doc. Come on, Bert." The ambulance men aligned their stretcher alongside Donal as O'Reilly examined Donal's arms and legs through his clothes. "You're right, Mrs. Meehan. There are no bones broken," he said and stepped back to let the attendants do their work. "Thank you, Mrs. Meehan," O'Reilly said. "You did a great job. Now go on home and get your tea."

She smiled, bobbed her head, and left.

O'Reilly climbed aboard the ambulance. "For crying out loud," Donal said, and tried to sit up,"this is daft, so it is. Going to all this trouble. Sure couldn't I just get the bike—"

O'Reilly made a noise like an enraged gorilla, one whose last banana had been stolen. "For the last time, Donal Donnelly you're going to the Royal. This is not a bleeding debating society—so shut up, lie down, and let me examine you."

"I will, Doctor O'Reilly, sir," a clearly chastened Donal said—and did.

Fingal satisfied himself that Donal's reflexes were normal, that his pupils were equal in size and reacting to light, his pulse was strong and steady and his blood pressure was normal. The only worrying thing was a bruise over Donal's right temple. The parietal bone there was thin. There was a chance the skull was fractured. O'Reilly didn't need to reassure himself that getting Donal to hospital was the right thing to do. The middle meningeal artery lay beneath the parietal bone. O'Reilly climbed out to meet Kitty.

Barry was providing information to a uniformed Royal Ulster Constabulary officer. The man had a heavy pistol in a hip holster. Good for Barry, O'Reilly thought, one less chore for me and frankly, the sooner we get Donal to hospital the happier I'll be. If his condition did deteriorate, speed of intervention was critical.

The second ambulance attendant climbed into the back and offered his hand to Kitty.

"Hop in," O'Reilly said. "All his baseline findings are normal, but please keep an eye on him. I'll be in the front, so if he starts to go downhill, let me know."

"I will," she said taking the proffered hand.

He watched her climb in and as she did so her skirt rode up. God, but she had a well-curved calf, O'Reilly thought, but then, he grinned, she always had.

Barry finished with the officer. "Thanks for seeing to that, Barry," O'Reilly said. "You'll have to look after the practice tomorrow too because Lord knows what time I'll get home."

"That's all right."

"Off you trot." O'Reilly noticed his bag where he'd left it on the ground. "Take my bag to the car while you're at it. The ambulance will be fully equipped."

He paused. "How will you and Kitty get home?"

"Kitty lives only a short walk from the hospital. I'll get a train. Now go on. It's time we were off."

O'Reilly stuck his head into the ambulance. "Everything OK, Kitty?"

"No change."

"Good." As O'Reilly walked to the front of the ambulance, the last colours of the sunset flared and died. A straggling clamour of rooks flapped untidily across the dimming horizon and Venus rose, a glittering forerunner of the myriad stars that would spangle the sky's dark dome.

He climbed in to the passenger side and shut the cab's door. "How's about ye, Doc?" Alfie, the driver asked.

"Grand," said O'Reilly. "The lad in the back's a patient of mine," and, he thought, as close to being a friend as I'll let any of my patients be. "I think he'll be all right."

"Right," said the driver, "let's get going." He switched on his flashing lights, but not the siren, put the vehicle in gear, and started for Belfast.

“Can we radio ahead?” O’Reilly asked, “Let the neurosurgery people know we’re coming?”

“Aye certainly, sir.” The driver lifted a microphone, depressed a button and announced, “Ambulance despatch, Ambulance despatch. This is Delta Alpha Two sixer, over.”

In moments O’Reilly had relayed the details to the dispatcher who would contact the neurosurgery registrar on call. “Who is the senior neurosurgeon on call tonight?” Just in case, and the thought niggled at him, just in case that bruise at the side of Donal’s head was a sign of more ominous damage.

“Mister Greer, sir.” The voice from the speaker was distorted

“Thank you, dispatch. Delta Alpha two sixer. Out.” O’Reilly handed the mike back. “Thank you,” he said.

Charlie Greer. He and O’Reilly went back to 1931, and that wasn’t yesterday. He hoped Donal would have no need of Charlie’s services, but if Donal did deteriorate he couldn’t ask for a better brain surgeon.

“How long until we get to Belfast?” O’Reilly asked.

“About an hour and a half—and if you’ll excuse me, sir, I’d better concentrate on driving. The road’s twisty here.”

O’Reilly said. “Pay me no heed.” He sat staring through the window as rays from the dome flashers flickered and the headlights’ beams picked out fluttering moths, the verges and hedges, and dry stone walls draped with straggling brambles. He wondered about Donal. O’Reilly knew that no amount of worrying was going to help anything. Kitty would let him know if anything changed, and if it did, Donal was well on his way

to being in the hands of a bloody good neurosurgeon. Charles Edward Greer, M.D., F.R.C.S, from Ballymoney, County Antrim. A long time ago he had been a rugby-playing medical student like O'Reilly at Trinity College Dublin.

O'Reilly had met student nurse Kitty O'Hallorhan while he and Charlie, along with their friends Bob Beresford and Donald Cromie, and a nasty piece of work called Ronald Hercules Fitzpatrick who now practiced in the Kinnegar, had been working in Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital. Back in 1934.

He'd been twenty-five-year-old and had completed nearly three years of his medical studies at Trinity College, Dublin.

Dublin had been richly described by the playwright Denis Johnston as, "Strumpet city in the sunset. So old, so sick with memories." The place had memories for O'Reilly all right.

Trinity College with its Library's Long Room wherein resided the Book of Kells and the Brian Boru harp. The pubs, Davy Byrnes, The Bailey, Neary's, and the Stag's Head. Great broad O'Connell Street crossing Anna Livia, the Dubliners' name for the River Liffey. The tenement districts like the Liberties, the Coombe, and Monto, filthy, squalid, vermin-plagued, but with indomitable inhabitants. O'Connell Street and, halfway up it, Nelson's Column beside the General Post Office, from the steps of which Pádraig Pearse had read out the Proclamation of the Irish Republic at Eastertide 1916. Its façade and Ionic columns were still pockmarked with British bullets from the siege during the Rising.

O'Reilly was distracted by a sudden movement ahead and leant forward to see the bushy tail of a badger scurrying for cover and its home.

Dublin had become O'Reilly's home in 1925 when his father, young for the job at forty-five, had been appointed professor of classics and English literature at Trinity. O'Reilly had been born and brought up in Holywood, County Down, Northern Ireland, still part of the United Kingdom, but for eleven years had lived in the Irish Free State. Sometimes he thought he was neither fish, fowl, nor good red meat. He'd loved Ulster all his life, particularly Strangford Lough where he and his older brother Lars had spent their winter Saturdays wildfowling. But he loved Dublin too.

The ambulance slowed then halted to give a large lorry right of way. O'Reilly turned and slid back a window between the cab and the rear of the vehicle. "Everything all right, Kitty?"

The lighting was dim and he had difficulty making out her features.

Kitty said, "Everything's fine. Donal's sleeping."

If the middle meningeal artery had burst, Donal would be deeply unconscious not asleep, but surely a nurse with Kitty's experience—

"It's all right, Fingal. I've no trouble waking him up and there's no change in any vital signs."

O'Reilly exhaled. He hadn't realised he'd been holding his breath, and dammit, he should have known better than to doubt. "Grand," he said. "We'll be there soon." He closed the window as the ambulance began to move. Donal was going to be all right. Of course he was. O'Reilly looked out the windscreen to see the ambulance taking the left hand fork of a Y junction.

Ireland was full of strange road confluences, The Six Road Ends in County Down, the Five Road Ends at Beal na mBláth in County Cork where Kinky had grown up on a

farm, and Michael Collins, head of the armed forces of the Irish Free State, had been assassinated in August 1922.

O'Reilly had come to a crossroads in his own life in '27. If he hadn't made his choice about which road to follow, he'd not have Charlie Greer and the others as friends, nor Kitty. Nor would he have been a rural GP, a life he loved, if he'd meekly caved in when Father had decreed over breakfast in the family house on Lansdowne Road in Dublin that no son of his was going to be a physician. The ambulance lurched over a pothole and a goose walked over his grave as he shuddered and remembered that day, September 17th, 1927.

Chapter Two

It is a Wise Father that Knows His Own Child

“So, Fingal,” his older brother Lars said refusing another slice of toast, “you’re convinced Sir Malcolm Campbell can beat Major Henry Seagrave for a new land speed record?”

“Seagrave did 203 miles per hour,” Fingal said, digging out the yolk from a soft-boiled egg, “but Campbell’s tenacious. I admire that.”

“I think,” said Father, “you are forgetting that fragments of miles per hour can be critical. The major’s actual speed was 203·841.”

Fingal shook his head and looked across the table. Father was a professor at Trinity, a breed who tended to be inward-looking, but he had always been interested in the world around him and a stickler for accuracy. He was a tall, slightly built man with a neatly trimmed black moustache. His high forehead was scored with three horizontal lines, his nose aquiline. He wore a three-piece pinstripe suit, wing collar, and Old Harrovian tie.

Father looked at his watch. “Fascinating as speed may be, boys, I have to be in the College in fifty-three minutes, and, Fingal, I should like to have a word in my study.” He rose.

Fingal glanced at Ma who nodded encouragement. Lars rolled his eyes skyward. During their younger years, an invitation to the study from Father had always been a prelude to punishment or a dressing down. Father, with a capital F, never Daddy, Dad, or Da, had strict standards. Fingal had never been one for unquestioning obedience so such

trips to Father's lair had been frequent. As Fingal walked along the high-ceilinged parquet-floored hall he wondered, and not for the first time, if his contrary streak was a reaction against Father's standards.

Fingal went into the *sanctum sanctorum*, the holy of holies. He wasn't in trouble, but he wasn't looking forward to the interview. He knew they were going to replough a well-turned furrow and he was determined not to give in. He knew what he wanted from life and was not to be swayed.

"Please close the door and sit down." Father sat in a high-backed chair in front of an open roll-top desk. There were neat piles of papers, an open volume of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and today's *Irish Times*.

Above the desk hung his M.A., 1904 from Queen's University Belfast and his D.Phil., 1907 from Oxford. Degrees befitting his position as professor of classics and English literature at Trinity College, Dublin. He'd moved the family here from Holywood, County Down, when he'd accepted the post. The Victorian, sixteen-room, semi-detached house on Lansdowne Road was a short cycle ride from the college.

Fingal walked past floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. The room smelt of the dusty old books. Father wanted an academic career for his younger son, a life, as far as Fingal was concerned, that would be as dry as this library. He had other dreams.

He glanced through the window to where the stands of Lansdowne Road Rugby Grounds loomed against a soft autumn sky. One day, he told himself, he'd put on the green jersey with a sprig of shamrock embroidered on the left breast and play rugby football for his country. For now he'd better pay attention to Father because this conversation was going to concern Fingal's other, more important, aspiration. Since their

last discussion of the matter, Fingal knew that Father would be expecting his son to have changed his mind. He bloody well hadn't. He sat and crossed his legs, aware of Father's disapproving look at his son's scuffed boots.

Father's own shoes were brightly polished. "It's September," he said. "Your school days are over. You've very good marks in your Leaving Certificate. It's time to make the decision about your university future."

Fingal said, "I'm going to register at Trinity next week. I have the five shillings fee."

"Good." Father steepled his fingers. "You've thought about what I said? You'll be reading for a science degree?" He smiled and there was warmth in his brown eyes.

"You're going to make me proud of you, son."

"I hope so, Father." Fingal sat erectly. "I truly appreciated your advice. I've given it a great deal of consideration." You're not going to like what's coming, he thought, but I will not back down.

"I'm delighted to hear it. You owe it to your forefathers. We O'Reillys go back a long way, descendants of the O'Connor kings of Connacht. Our name, *Ó'Raghallaigh*, is taken from the Irish, *ragh* meaning race and *ceallach* or sociable."

Fingal had heard it all before. He knew Father was, in rugby terms, kicking for touch, slowing the pace by putting the ball out of play to give himself time to formulate what he really wanted to say. Take your time, Father. I'm in no rush for the fireworks to begin.

“In mediaeval days we were renowned traders,” he smiled, “so famous the word ‘reilly’ became a colloquial term for money.”

“You’re a grand man for the names, Father,” Fingal said. “You gave me ‘Fingal,’ a fair foreigner, and ‘Flahertie,’ a prince.”

“I did,” Father said. You were born in 1908, eight years after Oscar Wilde, Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde, died.”

“But Lars was born two years before me. If you thought so highly of the man why didn’t you give Lars his name?”

Father frowned. “I thought hard about it. You do know Wilde had been imprisoned and died a disgraced man?”

“I know that he was homosexual. He and the marquis of Queensberry’s son were—”

“Indeed.” Judging by how Father’s nose wrinkled he had not approved of Wilde’s relationship with the poet Lord Alfred Douglas. “Your mother persuaded me that it was too soon after Wilde’s imprisonment. She didn’t want to cause a stir among our friends.”

“I suppose people were a bit more—conservative back then,” Fingal said. “I don’t think it should matter what people do in that line, as long as it’s in private.”

“Good,” said Father. “I should like to be able to agree, but old habits, the teaching of one’s own parents, are hard to overcome.”

But you can do it if you really try, Fingal thought.

“That is why I have tried to steer you and Lars along liberal lines.”

“And we both appreciate the direction, Father.” Fingal looked deep into his father’s eyes. “In most things.” He knew the real matter under discussion was going to cause a rift and now he wanted to get it over and done with.

Father was not to be side-tracked. “Instead we named your brother Lars Porsena O’Reilly, after—”

“The Etruscan king who went to war with Rome about 500 BC.”

Father’s eyes misted. “It seems like yesterday since I’d read the poem to you and Lars. The poet, Thomas Babington Macaulay, was the subject of my master’s thesis”

Fingal smiled. He had fond memories of a much younger Father sitting in the nursery, one boy on either knee. “You named Lars for your thesis?” Fingal smiled. “Was your doctoral thesis about Oscar Wilde by any chance?”

“It was.” He gazed out the window. “I wrote a dissertation on his children’s stories.”

“I remember them. *The Happy Prince*, *The Selfish Giant*, *The Remarkable Rocket*. You always made us laugh with that last one and showed us how pride truly does come before a fall.”

Father was nodding very slowly. “Those stories have a lot to teach about care for other people, self-sacrifice, selfishness. I think, no matter what his sexual proclivities, Oscar Wilde was one of the greatest masters of the English language—and one of the most romantic. I was proud to name you for him, despite what Mother believed people might think.” He laughed gently. “I’ve always wondered if—remember I was still a

young man when you were born—I didn't do it with a touch of mischief too. It certainly raised some eyebrows in the faculty common room.”

Fingal sat back. Father? Dry old Father had had a mischevious streak?

The laugh faded. “It took me a while, Fingal, but I soon came to see that humour was all very well—in its place, but if you wanted to advance academically, and I did, it was better to be seen to be serious and not offend the establishment.”

Like you want me to toe the party line, Fingal thought. He took a deep breath. “What about someone who doesn't give a tinker's curse for the establishment. Wants to go his own way?” If Father wasn't going to come to the point, Fingal wanted to, but that sudden glimpse of a different side to Father had weakened Fingal's resolve. “Father,” he started, but it was as far as he could go.

Father sat forward, steeped his fingers, rested his chin on them and looked directly at Fingal. “What are you trying to say, son? ‘Wants to go his own way?’” He frowned.

Fingal hunched his shoulders and rocked in his chair, then steeled himself and returned Father's gaze. “I do want you to be proud of me, but I'm not as sure about having to preserve the O'Reilly name, and studying science is not what I want.” It was out. Again.

Father pushed back in his chair. “You are still being stubborn.”

“I know, and I really don't mean to be.” Fingal didn't want this to grow into a row.

Father held out his hands palms up. “Then take my advice. Study science.”

“Father, I want to be a doctor.”

Father pursed his lips. “So you’ve told me, many times.”

“Then why won’t you listen? Let me go to medical school. Please.”

“I am your father. It is my responsibility to advise you and if you won’t take my advice, I must do what I perceive as being the very best for your and your brother’s futures.”

“You didn’t object two years ago when Lars wanted to study law.”

“We are not discussing Lars. We are discussing your career.” Father’s voice was calm, the tones, Fingal thought, of a man who held all the trumps because he and he alone controlled the purse strings.

Fingal started to sweat. “I’ve wanted to be a doctor since I was thirteen in Hollywood when Doctor O’Malley took out my appendix. When I was better he let me ride round with him while he visited patients at home, Father, you know that. I’ve been telling you for years. I told Ma—”

“I think you mean Mother.” Father frowned. “Why must you let your language drop to the level of a street vendor?”

“Sorry,” Fingal said.

Father’s voice was cold. “I spent a great deal of money to have you properly educated. It was easy for a thirteen-year-old to be impressed by a rural GP who wore mutton-chop whiskers and a frock coat and drove round in a pony and trap.”

“He was kind. He cared about his patients. He was a real man, not a prince in one of Oscar Wilde’s tales. You could see how he made a difference in the village. Father, I thank you for my education and for the time you spent teaching Lars and me about books, music, paintings. I know you’re trying to give me good advice—I do know—but,” Fingal put as much weight as he could summon into his next words, “I want to study medicine.”

“You have a fine mind, Fingal. Don’t waste it.”

“I’d not waste it.” Fingal felt his fists clench.

“I agree it’s a respectable profession—”

“There *are* professors of medicine.”

“And how many do research?”

“I don’t know.” And I don’t care. Fingal uncrossed his legs and rubbed his thighs with the palms of his hands. I’d never get interested in research, he thought. I like people.

“Here at Trinity, medical research is done by Professor Bigger in bacteriology, Professor Jamieson in anatomy, Professor Fearon in biochemistry and few other basic scientists. Not very impressive.”

“But I want to look after people not laboratory rats.” For God’s sake listen to me. Hear what I’m saying. Try to understand.

“Fingal, you’re only eighteen—”

“I’ll be nineteen next month and I’m sorry, but why shouldn’t a nineteen-year-old know what he wants?” He knew he was letting a sarcastic edge creep into his voice.

“Youth,” Father said and shook his head. “I’ve been around the groves of academe all my adult life. It is what I have tried to groom my sons for.” He frowned. “Poor Lars. I don’t think he’d have done very well,” his smile reappeared, “but you, Fingal, you have exactly what it takes. Trust me.” He leant forward and stared into Fingal’s eyes. “You are special, Fingal O’Reilly. I’m a professor. Professors can make a difference too—but not in a small village like old Doctor O’Malley. In the whole world. Look at Einstein’s work. He was awarded the Nobel Prize six years ago. Who can predict where his discoveries will lead—but you could be at the forefront of making new ones. You could go on and become a dean, a Vice Chancellor, because the subject of the future is—” Father’s eyes shone,

“Nuclear physics. I know.” Fingal’s shoulders drooped. He rolled his eyes. He said, “But I’ve told you, God knows how many times—”

“Mind your language.”

“Oh, bugger my language. I’m not doing nuclear physics.” Fingal got to his feet.

Father pursed his lips. “Sit down.”

Fingal shook his head. “What is so terrible about medicine?”

“Nothing, but it’s not the best you can do.” He stood and folded his arms. “It is the duty of every father to guide, yes, and if necessary force his children, particularly his sons, to do what they are best suited for—”

“And,” Fingal knew his voiced was rising, “for me that’s medicine—not bloody nuclear physics. Can’t you understand? For God’s sake, Father, Queen Victoria died seven years before I was born. The old Irish tradition, first son gets the farm, second son

into the church, third son Colonial civil service, stupidest son into the army, exactly as father dictates, those days are over. My friends have been able to choose their careers.

Why in hell can't I?"

Father did not look remotely persuaded. He said, "Calm down and sit down."

"No."

"I can't force you to sit, Fingal—"

"No you can't—" Fingal hesitated. If he carried on like this he might cause an irreparable rift.

"And I obviously can't force you to study nuclear physics."

"Good." Fingal smiled weakly. Thank the Lord he hadn't said what he wanted to say—that Father couldn't force him to achieve the goals Father hadn't achieved in his life. "I'm sorry," he said, "I came very close to losing my temper." It wouldn't hurt to offer the olive branch.

"I can't make you study nuclear physics, yet," Father said very quietly, "but I will not finance your medical studies. Perhaps when you've had time to give the matter due consideration we can reopen it. Students can enroll in April as well as in October. Six months really won't make much difference considering how long it takes to get a first class Ph.D."

"What?" Fingal heard blood pounding in his ears, felt his fists clenching and unclenching. His breath came in shallow gasps. He felt the tip of his nose blanch. That was, and had been since he was sixteen, a sure sign that his temper was about to erupt.

"No," he yelled, "No."

From somewhere inside a tiny voice told him, Control yourself. Get out of here.
He's your father. He's wrong, but as Ma often taught, 'least said, soonest mended.'
"Thank you, Father. Thank you very much," Fingal said trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, "I'm sure I'll find something useful to do between now and then."

Chapter Three

I Feared It Might Injure the Brain

Something useful? O'Reilly was thoughtful as he stepped down from the ambulance into the brightly lit bay outside the Royal Victoria Hospital's casualty department. Young Fingal had found something very useful to do. He had, literally, run away to sea.

O'Reilly walked to the back of the vehicle and waited for the attendants. They'd gone to bring hospital orderlies to load Donal onto a trolley then take him inside. O'Reilly and Kitty would follow. If they'd been relatives they'd have been told to stay in the waiting room, but as members of their professions they'd go with Donal. And O'Reilly would not be a doctor today if it hadn't been for Lars and Ma, bless them both. Despite his bravado with Father, a young Fingal O'Reilly had thought things pretty hopeless after that morning discussion in 1927. He had stood in the dining room beside Ma and across from where Lars sat.

"Well?" she had asked, reaching up a hand to him, a faint smile on her lips, but tiny wrinkles on her forehead.

Fingal shook his head.

Her smile faded, the furrows deepened. "I'm so sorry, dear," she said. "I'm not sure what to advise. I had hoped after I'd had a word with your father—" She sighed. "Tell Fingal what you've been saying to me, Lars."

Lars pushed his chair back from the table and stroked his dark moustache. He cocked his head to one side. "I have a suggestion—"

“If it’s to do what Father wants, don’t bother,” Fingal snapped and immediately regretted it. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Go on, Lars, I’m listening.”

Lars looked at Ma. “Once Fingal has—and I hesitate to use the term—but once he has ‘declared war,’ with Father, he won’t be able to live here. He’ll have to find a job and move into lodgings.”

“I might be able to manage a little money,” said Ma, “but—”

“Thanks, Ma. I understand. Go on, Lars. I’m listening” Fingal felt a lump in his throat. Ma simply could not have the resources to support him for the five-year medical course.

“It seems to me that you’d be able to save fastest if you had a job that gave you free board and lodge and no opportunity to spend.”

After the interview with father, the rising temper, and the disappointment, Fingal was in no mood for pie-in-the-sky suggestions. “I’d get that in the Mountjoy Gaol. But the wages are poor.”

Lars lowered his head and regarded Fingal from under a set of bushy eyebrows. “Don’t be facetious, Fingal, I’m trying to help.”

“I’m sorry.”

“How would you fancy going to sea?”

“Going to—?”

O’Reilly felt a hand on his shoulder that pulled him back to the present. “Excuse me, Doc. Could youse move back a wee ways?”

“Sorry, Alfie.” O’Reilly stood aside to let the driver open the back doors, but his thoughts were soon back to 1927.

That suggestion of Lars and the twenty pounds Ma had given him from her own private nest egg had certainly opened the door for the young Fingal O'Reilly. He had enjoyed his three years at sea in the merchant navy.

When he'd joined the Royal Naval Reserve in 1930, he'd spent another year at sea, this time on the British battlecruiser HMS *Tiger* as part of his training. He had made money in the peacetime auxillary branch of the British Navy and he'd made a good friend. A young sub-lieutenant named Tom Laverty. The Lord does move in a mysterious way, thought Fingal as the traffic noises rose to a crescendo on the Grosvenor Road outside the Royal Victoria Hospital. That Tom Laverty was the father of the young Barry who was now O'Reilly's assistant.

It had been a condition of RNR service that members would be called-up for active duty in the event of hostilities, but it was only eleven years after the end of the Great War and he'd thought the risk small. The great powers had not seemed belligerent in 1930. The United States was following a policy of isolationism. The Fascist Mussolini in Italy seemed like a peaceful chap whose intention was to get the trains to run on time. Adolph Hitler couldn't even take his seat in the German Riechstag because he was an Austrian national. And Ramsay Macdonald, the British prime minister, was too busy trying to deal with the after-effects of the Great Depression of 1929.

And Fingal O'Reilly had a lot more pressing business in mind. The sea had made him grow up, but he'd never wavered from his determination to be a doctor. As soon as he had saved enough he'd, in the naval parlance of the day, swallowed the anchor in '31 and enrolled at Trinity College Dublin. He might not have been as polished as some of

his classmates—the sea could do that. Dealing with seamen didn't call for drawing room etiquette.

But at least he knew enough now to say, “Thanks, lads,” to the ambulance crew as they handed Donal over to the hospital staff and prepared to depart. “Safe home.”

Kitty climbed out. “No change for the worse, Fingal,” she said. “Pulse, blood pressure fine. He's still asleep, but he'll wake up if you call his name.”

He took her arm and followed the orderlies as they wheeled Donal to the Ambulance Room, a part of Casualty where patients were seen and assessed. The lights were bright, the floor tiled. The room was divided into cubicles that could be screened by closing curtains and each contained an examining couch.

The smells were ones he'd known for more than thirty years, and those in Belfast differed not one jot from the ones he'd first encountered in Sir Patrick Dun's, a Dublin teaching hospital. He was barely aware of the niffs of disinfectant, floor polish, vomit. Sounds of retching came from behind curtains.

Donal was wheeled into the nearest cubicle where a nurse would record his pulse, blood pressure, respiratory rate, and level of consciousness before a doctor came.

O'Reilly stopped near the front of the room at a tall desk that looked like something out of a Dickensian counting house. A young woman house officer leant against it. Her blue eyes behind rimless spectacles had dark bags beneath. He knew the hours these youngsters worked, could still recall the breaking dawns of his own junior years.

“I'm Doctor O'Reilly. I've come with the man with the concussion,” he said, and this is—”

“Hello, Sister O’Hallorhan,” the young woman said. “I’ve just done three months on Ward 21.”

“Doctor Fleming,” Kitty said. “Good evening.”

The house officer pulled out a lined four-by-eight card. “I’ll have to get a few details, Doctor O’Reilly.”

“I’ll give you them in a tick,” said O’Reilly, turning to Kitty. “Why don’t you go and sit down? Or head home? I’m going to wait until I see Donal settled.”

He felt Kitty squeeze his arm. “I know you’re worried.”

“Och, not really,” he said, “but—”

“I know you, O’Reilly. I still remember you sitting up all night with a patient when you were a student.”

“Sergeant Paddy Keogh. Pneumonia. I remember him too.” He smiled. “I just want to be able to tell Julie that Donal’s fine.”

“I understand.” She looked down the room. “There’s nothing for me to do,” she said, “and the staff won’t like having an off-duty sister breathing down their necks, but would you like me to stay and keep you company?”

O’Reilly shook his head. “Head home.” He’d like to have kissed her, but not here. He lowered his voice. “You and I have to go shopping in the next week. I hear tell Sharman D. Neill’s do a nice line in rings.”

“I know,” she said and smiled. “I’ll look forward to that, but I will run on now,” she said. “I might see you tomorrow if you’re still here at the hospital. I’ll be on the ward in the morning.”

“We’ll see,” he said, “but I hope Donal’s well enough that I’ll be able to get home soon.”

“Good night, Fingal. Look after yourself—and Donal.” She turned and left. It wasn’t a long walk home and the hospital grounds were well lit.

O’Reilly turned to the houseman and gave her Donal’s details.

He heard a voice behind him. “Doctor O’Reilly?”

He turned. “Yes?”

“I’m Mister Rajat Gupta, neurosurgery senior-registrar.” He held out a hand. O’Reilly shook it and appraised the young East Asian. His hair was glossy black, his eyes deep set and mahogany brown. His grip was firm. As the man’s title was Mister, not Doctor, he had already passed the Fellowship examinations of the Royal College of Surgeons. Being a fully qualified general surgeon was a prerequisite for training as a brain surgeon.

“Thank you for coming,” O’Reilly said. “It’s probably just concussion, but I’m a country GP and there’s no harm getting an opinion from an expert.”

Mister Gupta smiled. “A trainee expert.”

“You’d be surprised,” O’Reilly said, “by how little brain surgery I practice.”

“I understand.”

“Donal Donnelly’s in there.” O’Reilly indicated the cubicle.

“Come in.” The senior registrar held back the curtain and O’Reilly followed.

Donal lay on the trolley taking short shallow breaths.

“Donal, wake up you lazy bugg—so and so,” O’Reilly said, moderating his language for the student nurse who was taking the patient’s blood pressure.

Donal muttered something but did not open his eyes.

O'Reilly noticed the pallor of Donal's cheeks, that his breathing was shallow.

"What's his pulse rate, nurse?"

"One hundred, doctor, but it's strong. His temperature is only 93°."

O'Reilly was sure his own pulse had speeded up. Donal's condition had worsened, not dramatically, but he was concerned. "Mister Gupta?"

O'Reilly waited patiently until the senior registrar finished his neurological assessment. "I'm sorry," he said, "but your patient has a mild cerebral contusion. Nothing terrible, but I want him on the neurosurgical ward."

"Fair enough." Donal would not be going to the observation ward where he'd have spent the night if it looked as though he had suffered only a mild concussion.

Mister Gupta frowned. "I think there's a bit of relatively mild bruising of the cerebral cortex, but I can't completely exclude compression, squeezing of the brain because of bleeding."

"Go on." O'Reilly folded his arms across his chest and stroked his chin.

"He's got a bruise over his right temporal bone. That could mean a skull fracture and a possible tear to the —"

"Middle meningeal artery. Damnation."

Mister Gupta said, "I hope it's not, but to be on the safe side I'm going to arrange skull X-rays, the routine blood work and cross match in case he needs a transfusion, and we'll do an ultrasound once we get him admitted to ward 21. Unless, you have some questions, Dr. O'Reilly, I'm going to get those tests ordered."

O'Reilly nodded. "Thank you, Mister Gupta." This young man clearly had everything under control and Donal was in good hands. O'Reilly looked at the unconscious face of Donal Donnelly, his freckles standing out against his pallid skin, the tips of his buckteeth barely visible. God, O'Reilly thought, he looks so young. He dropped into a chair beside the trolley and waited until the curtains parted and Mister Gupta reappeared. "Everything's organised, and I've had a word with Mister Greer. He's at home. He agrees with our plan—"

O'Reilly was flattered by the "our."

"He says to say, 'Hello.'"

"We were students together," O'Reilly said.

"And to call him if things get worse. Your patient might need surgery if they do."

"A craniotomy?"

Mister Gupta nodded. "Perhaps. If it's only a small bleed I can do a burr hole under local, drill through the skull, and let the blood out, but if it's a bigger bleed or doesn't stop, Mister Greer will remove more bone, drain the clot, and tie off the artery." He smiled. "I honestly don't think either will be necessary."

"Jesus," O'Reilly said softly, "I hope you're right. When I was a student, the mortality rate from brain surgery was fifty percent."

The senior registrar smiled. "We've come a long way, sir, and your friend Mister Greer is one of the people who's brought us to where we are today."

It was hard to imagine today's pillar of the medical establishment as the irresponsible young Charlie Greer of O'Reilly's student days. He shook his head. "How long before you'll have the tests done?" He took another look at Donal.

“About an hour.”

“And you’re sure—as sure as any of us can be—that Donal’s not going to get worse?”

“Pretty sure.” Mister Gupta stepped aside for two orderlies.

“All right if we take your man here ‘til ward 21, sir?”

“Please,” said Mister Gupta.

“Right,” said the first orderly to his mate, “take you that end, oul’ hand and away we go.” The rubber-tyred wheels squeaked as the trolley began to move. “Thon axle could use a wee taste of oil,” he remarked.

O’Reilly put his hand on Donal’s clammy arm. “You’re going to be all right, Donal,” he said quietly and hoped he was right.

The Dark at the End

A Repairman Jack novel

By F. Paul Wilson

Copyright © 2011 by F. Paul Wilson

The Dark at the End is the final Repairman Jack book. It segues into *Nightworld* which, with its ensemble cast from the Adversary Cycle and the Repairman Jack series, serves as the capstone of both series and the end of the Secret History.

WEDNESDAY**1**

“Sir!” the cabby said in heavily accented English as Jack slammed the taxi door shut behind him. “Those people were—”

“Drive!”

“They were there first and—”

Jack slammed the plastic partition between them and shot him his best glare.

“Drive, goddammit!”

The guy hesitated, then his dark features registered the truth that he wasn’t going to win this one.

“Where?”

“There!” Jack pointed uptown, where the cab was facing. “Anywhere, just move!”

As the cab pulled into the bustling morning traffic on Central Park West, Jack twisted to peer through the rear window. The couple he’d shoved out of the way to commandeer the taxi stood at the curb, huddling against the March wind as they stared after him in open-mouthed shock, but they seemed to be the only ones.

Good ... as if anything about this could be called good.

He faced front again and checked his arm. His left deltoid hurt like hell. He noticed a bullet hole in the sleeve of his beloved, beat-up bomber jacket. He reached inside, touched a reeeally tender spot. His fingers came out bloody.

Swell. Just swell. This was not how the day was supposed to go.

It had begun serenely enough: shower, coffee and kaisers with Gia, then a trip to Central Park West to drop in on the Lady. He knew certain forces wanted to rid the world of her, and had almost succeeded a couple of weeks ago. But he'd never expected an armed ambush.

#

After finding the Lady's apartment empty, he'd taken the stairs one floor up to Veilleur's apartment.

Even though he could call him Glaeken now, he'd trained himself to think of him as Veilleur and Veilleur only for over a year, so shifting to his real name was going to take a little time.

He knocked on the steel door at the top step. "Hello?"

"Come in, Jack," said a voice from somewhere on the other side. "It's open."

Inside he found Glaeken slumped in an easy chair in the apartment's great room, sipping coffee as he stared out at the morning sky through the panoramic windows.

Jack slowed as he approached, struck by his appearance. He was as big as ever; his shoulders just as broad, his hair as gray, his eyes as blue. But he looked older today. Okay, the guy was old—he measured his age in millennia—but this morning, in this unguarded moment, he looked it. Jack hadn't been by since the Internet mess. Could Glaeken have aged so much since then?

"You okay?"

He straightened and smiled, and some—but not all—of the extra years dropped away. "Fine, fine. Just tired. Magda had a bad night."

His aged wife's memory had been slipping away for years and was little more

than vapor now. Glaeken radiated devotion to her, and Jack knew he'd hoped they'd grow old together. The old part had worked out, but not the together. Glaeken was alone. Someone named Magda might be in a bedroom down the hall, but the mind of the woman he'd fallen in love with had left the building.

“Didn't the nurse—?”

“Yes, she did what she could, but sometimes I'm the only one who can calm her.”

Jack shook his head. Like the old guy needed more stress in his life.

“Have you seen the Lady? I stopped in to check on how she's doing but her place is empty.”

She occupied the apartment just below. Couldn't say she lived here, because the Lady wasn't alive in the conventional sense.

“You just missed her.” Glaeken gestured to the window. “She went for her morning walk in the park.”

“Really? When did she start that?”

“Almost a week now.”

Jack stepped to the glass and stared down at Central Park, a dozen or so stories below. A little to the left, ringed by winter-bare trees, the grass of the fifteen-acre field known as the Sheep Meadow showed brown through patches of leftover snow.

“I take it she's recovering then?”

“Still weak but feeling a little stronger every day.”

“Well, I guess after being wheelchair-bound and damn near dead a couple of weeks ago, that's not bad.”

“Would that I had a fraction of her resilience.”

Jack scanned the park but couldn't pick her out. Even though the park was relatively empty due to the cold, the strollers looked too small from up here. All his uncles looked like ants, as the joke went.

"Can you spot her?"

Glaeken rose and stood beside him, leaning into the sunlight as he squinted below. "My eyes aren't what they used to be."

"What's she wearing?"

"One of those house dresses she favors lately. It's yellow today."

"That's all? It's freezing—" He caught himself. "Never mind."

Glaeken shot him a quick glance but said nothing.

Right. He knew. The Lady didn't feel cold. Or heat. Or pain. And her clothes weren't really clothes, simply part of whatever look she was presenting to the world. She'd worn the form of Mrs. Clevenger before her near-death experience and seemed to be stuck in that ever since.

Glaeken said, "You know how she likes to be out among her 'children.'"

Jack spotted a bright yellow someone strolling the near half of the meadow.

"Got her." He turned away from the window. "I'll catch up to her."

"She'll be back soon."

Jack shook his head. "Got things to do. Today's the day I start looking for the R-Man."

"You can say his name now."

"I know. But it's geekier to have code names for him."

Glaeken looked at him. "Geekier?"

“Don’t worry about it. Just me running at the mouth.”

“I hope it doesn’t indicate that you are in any way taking him lightly.”

“Believe me, I’m not. I’ve seen what he can do.”

Just my way of coping, he thought as he headed for the elevator.

Glaeken’s elevator had two buttons—one for the top floor and one for the lobby.

One of the perks of owning the building.

At street level, Jack waved to the doorman and stepped out onto the sidewalk.

Central Park loomed just across the street. He strode to the corner of Sixty-fourth and waited for the light.

He’d developed enormous respect, maybe even a sort of love for the city’s traffic signals after they’d gone down during the Internet crash. Days of pure hell followed. They were back in working order now, though not all in synch yet. The Internet, however, still had a ways to go before it could call itself cured. The virus that had brought it down—and the city’s traffic and transit system along with it—was still replicating itself in unvaccinated regions of the Web. Cell phones were back up and running, much to everyone’s relief, though local outages were still a problem.

He adjusted the curved bill of his Mets cap lower over his face. Working lights meant working traffic cams. Designed to catch red-light runners, they recorded tons of pedestrians every minute. Couldn’t go anywhere these days without some goddamn camera sucking off a bit of your soul.

He crossed with the green and trotted a block uptown to one of the entrances. He stopped at the edge of the fifteen-acre field known as the Sheep Meadow. In the old days it had lived up to its name, with a real shepherd and his flock housed in what was now

Tavern on the Green. Nowadays, in warmer weather, hordes of sun worshippers littered the grass. Not much sun to worship on this blustery March day, making the Lady's yellow dress easy to pick out.

He spotted her ambling along the tree line at the northern end. Mrs. Clevenger had been a fixture in his hometown when he was a kid, but she'd always worn black. To see her in any other color, especially yellow, was jarring.

As he started toward her, he noticed the stares she was attracting. People had to think she was a little off in the head, strolling around in this temperature wearing only a thin, sleeveless housedress.

He was about fifty yards away, and readying to call out, when four men stepped out of the trees, raised semi-automatic pistols, and began firing at her.

Jack froze for a shocked instant, thinking he had to be hallucinating, but no mistaking the loud cracks and muzzle flashes. He yanked the Glock 19 from the holster at the small of his back and broke into a run.

The Lady had stopped and was staring at the men firing nearly point blank at her head and torso as they moved in on her. She didn't stagger, didn't even flinch. They couldn't be missing.

As he neared and got a better look, she seemed to be unharmed. No surprise. Her dress was undamaged as well. The bullets seemed to disappear before they reached her.

One of her assailants looked Jack's way. As their eyes locked he shouted something in a foreign language and angled his pistol toward him. Jack swiveled his torso to reduce his exposure and veered left, popping three quick rounds at his center of mass. Two hit, staggering him, felling him. He landed on his back in a patch of old

snow. The third bullet missed but winged his buddy behind him. Another of the attackers shouted something and fired just as Jack changed direction. He felt an impact and a stinging pain in his left upper arm. He dropped to a knee and began pulling the trigger, firing two-to-three rounds per second in a one-handed grip. This was going to run his mag in no time, but he had only one man down and couldn't allow any of the three still standing to get a bead on him.

Relief flooded him as they grabbed their wounded pal and ran back into the trees. He stopped firing and didn't follow. He'd counted thirteen rounds fired. That left two in his magazine and he wasn't carrying a spare—a firefight had not been on the morning's agenda. He did have his Kel-Tec backup in an ankle holster, but that was useful only at close range.

The Lady was staring at him. "They tried to kill me."

"Ya think?"

Jack looked at the downed attacker. His face matched the shade of the dirty snow cushioning his head. Ragged breaths bubbled the blood in his mouth. His pistol lay by his side. A Tokarev. Jack had seen a lot of Tokarevs lately—too many—and its presence pretty much nailed who'd sent him and his buddies.

The Order.

Drexler had sent out a hit team on the Lady. What was he thinking? Nothing of this Earth could harm her, and lead slugs were of this Earth. Drexler knew that. So why would he try? Unless he thought he'd come into some special super bullets.

As Jack holstered his Glock, he grabbed the Tokarev and felt a jab of pain in his left upper arm. Yeah, he'd been hit. Worry about that later. People were pointing their

way, some already on cell phones. Too much to hope for one of the random phone outages here and now, he supposed. And even if they couldn't get their calls through, they could use the phones as cameras. None of the callers was too close but that could change. Cops would be here soon.

He shoved the pistol into his jacket and grabbed the Lady's arm.

“We've got to get you out of here.”

In the good old days—as in, before last summer—she could simply change into someone else or disappear and reappear somewhere else. But nowadays she was stuck in old-woman mode and had to travel like a human.

She wasn't very spry but Jack moved her along as fast as she could go. He pulled his cap even lower and kept his head down, not exactly sure of where he was taking her—out of the park, definitely, but after that? Couldn't take her straight back to her apartment. Her damn yellow dress made her stick out like a canary at a crow convention. Needed to get her off the street, then figure out what to do.

As they reached the sidewalk he saw a taxi pull to a stop before a late-middle-age couple—he wore an Intrepid cap and she carried a Hard Rock shopping bag. Tourists. They stood a few feet ahead. He knew his next step...

#

The Lady sat beside him in the rear of the cab and stared at the blood on his hand.

“You're hurt,”

“Yeah. Looks that way.”

Jack wiped his fingers on his jeans and moved his left arm. Pain shot up and down when he flexed the elbow. He checked the sleeve and found the exit hole in the

leather. He wondered how bad it was but wasn't about to remove the jacket here in the cab to find out.

The Lady gently touched his sleeve over the wound, her expression sad.

"Not so long ago I could have healed you."

"I know." What he hadn't known was that she no longer could. "You've lost that too?"

She nodded. "I have lost so much. But at least I am still here."

"Yeah, that's the important part. But there is something you could do that would help things."

"Tell me."

"Can you change into someone else?"

She shook her head. "I am not able. I am still fixed as Mrs. Clevenger."

"Well, how about switching that dress to something less noticeable?"

"That I can do." Suddenly she was wearing a drab cloth coat. "Better?"

"Much."

He marveled at how he'd come to take these things as a matter of course. The workaday world remained blissfully unaware of the secret lives and secret histories playing out around them. As he once had been. As no doubt their cabby was.

He checked their driver. The Lady was seated directly behind him and he gave no sign that he'd witnessed the transformation. If and when he did notice the coat, he'd assume she'd carried it in with her.

Jack spotted Seventy-second Street approaching. The light was green. He rapped on the plastic partition.

“Take a right up here—into the park.”

The cab turned into the traverse and headed across Central Park. Where to now? Couldn't have this guy take them back to Glaeken's. He'd left a dead guy behind in the park. NYPD would be all over the area, collecting witness accounts, checking the traffic cams. They might end up talking to ... he checked the operator license taped on the other side of the partition: Abhra Rahman ... they might tack down Abhra here and want to know where he'd dropped them. Jack needed a diversionary stop.

He pictured the city. They were heading east. What was landmarky in this area of the East Side? Of course—Bloomie's down on Sixtieth and Third. Get out there, walk through the store, then over to the subway station on Lexington, hop an inbound N, R, or W two stops to West Fifty-seventh, then cab back to Glaeken's.

Yeah. That would work.

He rapped gently on the partition. “Drop us at Bloomingdale's, please.”

He'd make sure to give Mr. Rahman a good tip.



The community site for all things romance,
delivering the best in:

- Original stories from new writers and authors you already love
- Sneak previews of upcoming releases
- A full slate of blog content and non-stop discussions
- Sweepstakes offers and more!

VISIT HEROESANDHEARTBREAKERS.COM
AND DISCOVER A WHOLE
NEW WORLD OF ROMANCE!

HEROES and
Heartbreakers.com