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A woman with long, wavy brown hair, seen from behind, stands in the center of a wet, reflective street at night. She is wearing a black leather jacket, black pants, and black boots. In her right hand, she holds a hammer with a yellow handle and a silver head. The street is wet, and the lights from the buildings and streetlights on either side are reflected on the pavement. The sky is dark blue, and numerous black birds are flying in various directions across it. The overall mood is mysterious and provocative.

**More Stories By The
Blackbird Writers**

PROVOKED

The Second Volume of Crime and Mystery Stories
by the Blackbird Writers

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The Consummation Devoutly to be Wished

It was manifestly obvious that Los Angeles Jail Clerk James Watkins was not long for this world. At least, it was obvious to me. That morning in the fall of 1869, I found myself almost pleased at the thought of his demise.

Watkins shifted painfully in his chair and coughed heartily. The cough alone was enough to make me wonder about a wasting disease, but it wasn't consumption. Riding on his lower lip was a bright red, bulbous tumor that reached halfway across his mouth. I noticed the lumps of more tumors behind his right ear and on the back side of his neck.

"I have something that could ease your pain some," I offered.

After all, I did not actually wish to see Mr. Watkins on his deathbed, writhing in agony. Nor did I want him to see how utterly furious I was, as he had little enough reason to help me. After all, he was yet another man who believed that I, as a woman, had no business owning and running one, never mind that as a widow, I had no other means of support. I had inherited my husband's vineyards and winery, so what other business was I to take up if not his? I saw it as a silly prejudice. He saw me as the embodiment of all that was wrong with womanhood.

We were in the front room of the adobe that housed the city jail. It was fairly narrow, with a dark wood counter bisecting the

space. There was a gate on the end of the counter which allowed the volunteer policemen and Watkins to pass through to the two desks on the other of the counter, and thence, into the jail cells that were in the next room back, behind a barred, rough wood door.

Watkins coughed and glared at me. "Don't need nothin' from you, Mrs. Wilcox."

He drew one last gasp on his cigarette and tossed the butt into an earthenware jar he kept under the counter. I heard a soft hiss as the lit butt hit the water he had in the jar.

"I've come back from worse," he continued, adding a host of truly horrible swear words. "So, you can keep your dagnabbed medicine show cures to yourself."

Mr. Watkins knew I set great store in being a lady. Using language so vulgar, not to mention smoking in front of me, meant that he wanted to make me angry. I strengthened my resolve not to give him that pleasure and went back to writing out my complaint.

One of my barrels containing my prize angelica - our local version of sherry - had been tainted. I'd first noticed it earlier that morning. The bung had not been hammered back in straight and when I'd checked the barrel, the pink angelica had a light orange cast to it and smelled slightly of smoky fish. Of course, it was the barrel I'd set aside for the mayor's party, due to take place in a fortnight.

It wasn't the first time someone had tried to ruin me by tainting the wine I made. It happened at least once or twice a season. Fortunately, this time it had only been the one barrel and not one or more of the vats filled with the grapes harvested the week before, which were now fermenting. I had lost a third of my harvest the previous year to what City Marshal Warren had called a little joke. It made my blood boil to think of it. I couldn't help but wonder how much of a reward I'd have to post

this time to before the marshal would stir himself to action. The previous year, he'd asked for a whole twenty dollars to find the young "jokesters" who'd tainted my grapes. Mr. Watkins looked as though he would ask for even more money, even though only the marshal was supposed to ask for bounties.

Deputy Joseph Harris wandered into the office, a tall man with a swagger and a wad of tobacco in his cheek. He went straight to the end of the counter, where three glasses sat, each filled with varying amounts of beer.

"How do, Mrs. Wilcox," he said with a leer. He spat tobacco juice into a spittoon, then looked over the glasses.

"Well enough," I said, again struggling to hold back my temper.

Like Mr. Watkins, Deputy Harris was an arrogant... Well, the word that comes to mind is decidedly vile.

As Harris finished a half-full glass, Policeman Ernesto Navarro also came into the cramped office.

Watkins coughed and eased himself off of his chair. "Time to report on your rounds, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Mr. Navarro was dark-haired with fine features that had all the young señoritas eying him wherever he went. Of course, that could have been his ready smile and the fact that he was one of the two most honest of the six-man police force.

Before pulling out his ledger, Mr. Watkins got two more glasses and filled them from a small keg next to the desk. Mr. Navarro grimaced. It was the usual ritual. Watkins served each of his six policemen and deputy a small glass of what was, by all accounts, truly awful beer, while he recorded the fines and bounties that each man had collected from the locals. The bounties were shared with the men. The beer was Mr. Watkins's idea of kindness to the men, who were actually volunteers. We wouldn't have a paid police force until the end of that year.

Deputy Harris took a long drink from the glass Mr. Watkins

handed him. "Hey, Mrs. Wilcox, I heard you got a tainted barrel up there at your rancho."

"That's very interesting, Deputy." With every ounce of control I had left, I gently laid the pen on the counter next to the paper I'd been writing on. "Seeing as though I have not said a word about it except to Mr. Watkins just now."

Watkins grumbled, then coughed, and I caught the look between him and Harris. I picked up my paper and folded it in half, smearing the still-wet ink. No matter. It had become more than apparent that I was wasting my time there.

"Thank you, Mr. Watkins, for all your help," I said as pleasantly as I could, putting the paper into the leather bag I always carry. It's a good-sized bag meant for a man, but I can't carry my supplies in the tiny bags they make for ladies.

"Our pleasure, Miss Bruja," Harris said with an insolent laugh.

I bit my tongue and instead of giving him the tongue lashing I wanted to, I turned on my heel and left the office.

Many of the people in the pueblo called me La Bruja. That means The Witch in English. Now, if those folks happened to be the Mexicans or the Negroes or the China folk in town, they meant a healing woman, which I was and still am.

But the Americans, they usually meant the nasty evil kind of woman who has sold her soul to the Devil. I might indeed have sold my soul when I married Albert Wilcox. I'd been paying the price since he dragged me out from Boston some ten years before to the miserable backwater that Los Angeles was in those days. Mr. Wilcox bought our land, planted our vines, and then died, leaving me alone, bereft, and mistress of my domain.

Most women would have gone running home to Papa. I became a winemaker to support myself and my work healing folks in town. I didn't know that I'd be able to do that back in Boston, much as I missed my beloved city. So, I was stuck there, out in

the middle of absolutely nowhere, in a town aiming to become a city.

The jail was on the Calle Segundo, just west of the Calle Principal. As I made my way outside to the street, I promptly put up my parasol. The sun in Los Angeles is relentless. It had been no small feat, but I'd kept my skin as milky white as it was when I left Boston.

Puffs of white clouds drifted along the blue sky that fall day. There was a light nip in the air, a hint of cooler weather to come -- or what might pass for it. Even as long as I've been here, for most of my life, I still can't get used to calling a rainy season winter. Still, the fall months remained one of my favorite times of the year, just after the grape harvest, with the brutal heat of summer eased. The hills surrounding the pueblo were brown and dotted with the dark green of oak trees. The Los Angeles river was barely a trickle and the zanjas, ditches used to irrigate the fields and bring water to the city, were almost dry.

"Mrs. Wilcox!" Mr. Navarro came running up from the office.

"Yes, Mr. Navarro?"

"Why did you leave?"

"Because there is no point in reporting a crime to its author," I said, at last letting my anger show. "Not unless you want some poor innocent to pay a fine. Which I do not."

"Huh?"

"I have every reason to believe that the good clerk tainted my barrel. Most likely, Mr. Watkins had Deputy Harris do it. I only wish I knew why."

"Maybe because you're a woman of property, doing what no true woman would?" Mr. Navarro laughed with unusual bitterness. "And you're nice to people like me. You know how Watkins hates us Californios. There's nothing he'd like better than to get us all in one big fight."

I looked back at the office, wondering about my barrel. "I

suppose, then, he'd have an excuse to shoot you."

"He doesn't need any excuses." Mr. Navarro frowned. "Both him and Harris."

"Still, it seems a bit far-fetched to believe that inciting a riot will benefit Mr. Watkins."

"He probably won't get one, anyway," Mr. Navarro said. "Everyone knows how quick he is to shoot. Most of us avoid giving him and Harris any reason to draw. I didn't even say anything today when he gave me the dregs of that miserable beer of his. All browned and smelly."

He added a decidedly foul word.

"Mr. Navarro! Such language in front of a lady."

"Sorry, Mrs. Wilcox." But his grin was unrepentant.

I couldn't help smiling at him. He was a truly charming rascal.

I frowned. "Still, a bad glass of beer could have been an accident."

"Bald-faced lies aren't. Mr. Watkins said I didn't collect enough fines to get a commission this week. And I arrested five drunks and there's the bounty on that Chinese prostitute I brought in that he still owes me."

"Is there anything you can do? Perhaps ask Mr. Lomax to take up your cause?"

Mr. Lomax was one of the other policemen.

"He already tried." Mr. Navarro shrugged, then grinned. "I copped a few fines that I just happened to have forgotten to report. I make enough. But I'm worried. Mr. Watkins seems to be picking fights with everybody. I wonder what else he's done to get folks riled up. It could be a big problem."

"It could," I sighed. "But there's not much either of us can do until it happens." I looked up the street. I could see the third floor of the Bella Union Hotel towering over the adobes, brick buildings and clapboard houses nestled together cheek to jowl.

"In the meantime, I think I'll stop by the hotel and check on my last delivery, just in case."

"Why don't you?" said Mr. Navarro, with the warm grin that had young women all over town sighing. "You make the best angelica in town. Would hate to see someone think otherwise."

I couldn't help laughing a little. "Thank you, dear man."

I intended it as a kind, but firm, dismissal. But Mr. Navarro either didn't understand or chose to ignore it. I would have bet on the latter had I been a betting woman.

In any case, he followed me as I checked on my latest delivery to the hotel and spoke with the hotel manager. It was not a pleasant interview. I avoided saying what had happened to my barrel. However, the manager was a chatty fellow, and I ended up spending a half hour more than I wanted to spend being pleasant when I was feeling anything but. It was quite aggravating, really. All I wanted to do was go back to my rancho before someone else tampered with my grapes and all the manager wanted to do was tell me how to make my wines. Never mind that I already made the best wine in the city, which was why he bought it.

While I was able to eventually escape the hotel manager, I was not able to escape Mr. Navarro. Continuing to complain about Mr. Watkins, Mr. Navarro followed me back down the Calle Principal, as I returned to the Calle Segundo in order to perform another errand. We walked past the jailhouse just in time to see Deputy Harris stumbling into the alley alongside. Mr. Navarro and I both looked at each other and shook our heads. It certainly appeared that the deputy had gotten too much of the clerk's beer.

At least, it seemed that way until Harris suddenly sank to his knees and became violently ill all over the alley. I immediately went to his aid, holding his stomach. The effluvia was everywhere down his chest and from his nether limbs. It smelled

acid and sharp with a vague hint of fishiness, and I gritted my teeth to keep from becoming ill myself.

“Mr. Navarro, hold him while I get my charcoal out,” I commanded.

Mr. Navarro, white-faced, stepped in to take my place. I pulled the powder out of my leather bag, along with a little flask of water. Charcoal is an excellent anti-emetic, which was why I carried it along with white birch bark and the odd purgative or two. I never knew when it might be needed.

I spilled some of the black charcoal powder as I rushed to get it into the water flask. As I shook the flask to mix it, Harris went into convulsions. Mr. Navarro lost his grip on the ailing deputy, who fell face-down into the disgusting mess and dirt. Trying to keep my skirts clear, I wrestled the ailing man onto his back. I was just about to try to get the charcoal and water into him when he shuddered one last time and went still.

“Is he dead?” Mr. Navarro gasped.

I nodded and looked around. “I’m afraid so. And I fear there may be some malevolent purpose behind this sudden illness. Why don’t we try to get him into the jail office before a crowd gathers?”

The office was empty as Mr. Navarro and I struggled in with Harris’s body. Mr. Watkins was elsewhere. The empty glasses were no longer on the counter, either.

“What could have happened?” Mr. Navarro gasped, his nose twitching at the noxious smell.

I looked at the dead man. “I believe he was poisoned.”

Keeping an eye out for Mr. Watkins, I made my way behind the counter and found the earthenware jar that held the clerk’s cigarette butts. There was that same slight smoky fish odor in the jar and I recognized it from my tainted barrel.

“Who’d want to poison the deputy?” Mr. Navarro was clearly still in shock, as we could all think of several people who’d have

wanted to poison Harris.

“More to the point, who did?” I asked and then nodded toward the empty countertop. “The glasses are gone.”

Suddenly worried, I looked over at Mr. Navarro. He seemed unaffected.

“Mr. Navarro, did you drink your beer?” I demanded.

“No. The deputy, uh, preferred to drink it himself,” Mr. Navarro said. “He made me give it to him. But he never caught on that I was happy too. That stuff is—”

I raised my hand. “Yes, I understand, Mr. Navarro. The question now is, did Mr. Watkins know that Harris was taking your beer?”

“I’m not sure.” Mr. Navarro’s face creased into a wary frown. “It seems hard to believe he never noticed, but I suppose it’s possible. Why?”

“Because it doesn’t make sense that Mr. Watkins would kill his favored one,” I replied. “And we all know Deputy Harris was his favorite.”

“The clerk has been spoiling for a fight pretty badly,” Mr. Navarro said. “But that doesn’t mean he poisoned the deputy.”

“He was most certainly trying to poison someone else,” I said. “Mr. Navarro, did you not tell me before we went to the hotel that your beer was discolored and smelly?”

“Yeah, like ashes and bad fish,” Mr. Navarro said.

I held the jar with the cigarette butts in it out to him. “Did it smell like this?”

Mr. Navarro sniffed. “Yeah. How did you know?”

“Because this is what was in that beer and in my barrel.” I held up the jar. “Tobacco juice. Steep the leaves in water long enough and it’s a nasty poison. Mr. Watkins must have given some to Deputy Harris to taint my barrel with and then poured some in your beer, Mr. Navarro.”

Mr. Navarro turned pale. “You think Mr. Watkins was trying

to kill me?"

"That's another part that doesn't make sense," I said. "If he wanted to kill you, he'd just shoot you."

"Shoot who?" Mr. Watkins gasped as he limped into the front office from the jail cells.

I backed up toward the swinging gate that would get me on the other side of the counter.

"Nothing, Mr. Watkins," Mr. Navarro said with an ingratiating smile. "We were just talking."

Mr. Watkins grunted, then noticed his jar in my hand. I set it down and slowly backed out of the gate. That was when Mr. Watkins noticed Deputy Harris's body behind me and leaned over the counter to see.

"What's wrong with him?" Mr. Watkins demanded, his hand going to the revolver on his hip.

"He's dead," I said. "We think he drank some poisoned beer."

"He..?" Mr. Watkins coughed again, then staggered back to his chair. "I told him not to drink that."

"So, you knew it was tainted," I said.

"It was just a joke. Nobody was meant to drink it," Mr. Watkins growled. Again, his hand drifted toward his revolver.

"What about my barrel?" I asked. "That was for the mayor's party. You could have killed someone."

Watkins laughed and coughed. "It's just a joke. I didn't hurt nobody."

"But you did kill someone, Mr. Watkins," Mr. Navarro said. "You killed Deputy Harris with your joke."

"It wasn't my joke!" Watkins yelped and pointed at me. "It was probably her. Getting revenge for her barrel."

Mr. Navarro shook his head. "Mrs. Wilcox wasn't anywhere near Deputy Harris or the glasses."

Mr. Watkins's hand again twitched toward his gun. It wasn't like him to hold off drawing, and we all knew it. That's when

I saw the truth of it. Watkins had no reason to kill me or Mr. Navarro. He had no reason to rid the town of the mayor and his friends either. Alas, one of us, or anyone else for that matter, was going to go up against him and do what he most devoutly wished.

“You know you’re dying,” I almost whispered.

His eyes bore into me. “Yep. I know.” This time, his hand drew the revolver. “And I’m going to take you down before I go.”

He drew a bead on me. I knew I needed to move, but couldn’t. Mr. Watkins let loose with a ragged cough, and it saved my life. The shot went wide, sending up splinters, shards of earthenware pot and splashing tobacco juice as the bullet ricocheted off the desk. My cheek stung. I think it was a splinter that hit me.

Mr. Watkins raised his gun to shoot again, but Mr. Navarro was quicker. The younger man got off three shots in quick succession, all three landing in Watkins’s chest. The clerk fell back, his eyes open and staring. Mr. Navarro had finally given Mr. Watkins what he’d wanted all along.

Galit Gottlieb

Why is Edith Such a Miserable Crank?

Moments before Marv Haskin walked into her brother's restaurant, Edith inhaled her mocha cinnamon coffee, which she liked to do before taking a sip. She closed her eyes and relaxed her entire body before opening her eyes again to see an older gentleman entering the restaurant.

He looked up and winked at her with a grin she'd waited for her entire life. He strode towards the counter and said, "May I please have whatever you're having?"

Edith had always dreamt of meeting someone whose warm smile would make her heart flutter, but men didn't usually pay her much attention. She was still in her forties and young enough to have fun, but not friendly enough to inspire smiles.

"It's a mocha cinnamon latte," she said, patting her hair in case it had gotten frizzy. "Would you like to order one?"

She didn't know then that she was going to fall for him. Edith was used to going straight home after work to play with her cats, make dinner while watching a cooking show, and read until she nodded off. She'd take an occasional class in things that interested her like drawing or arranging flowers, but she rarely tried to talk to anyone. She didn't enjoy having to listen to stories about other peoples' lives.

When Marv beamed at her that first day, lifting his chin

like a salute, Edith was temporarily thrown off balance. He was clean-shaven, and there was something appealing about the way he delicately inserted his pinky finger into an ear and spun it around.

“Yes, thanks,” he said as he checked his pinky for ear residue. “A mocha cinnamon latte sounds perfect, and I’d also like one of those pastries.”

He pointed to a tray behind the counter and looked at Edith with eyes magnified by thick glasses. Maybe he wasn’t handsome in a movie-star sense of the word, but Edith was drawn to his dark brown eyes, slightly turned down at the edges. One of his ancestors must have been raped by a Mongolian soldier, she thought to herself as he grinned again.

Was it a tic? He asked if she worked there, and she had to stop herself from retorting in the snippy way she’d grown used to. Why would she take his order if she didn’t work there? “This is my brother’s restaurant,” she said, as though it answered his question.

“It’s a nice place,” he said, looking around the room as she prepared the coffee. “I like it.”

His voice was melodic, like one of the old crooners Gary loved. Her brother would have played that music all day if Edith hadn’t made him change the channel now and then. She took Marv’s credit card and focused on his hands so she wouldn’t have to look him in the eye again.

He must have been at least a decade older than her with all those liver spots on his hands, but his nails were neatly trimmed, and his shirt was tucked in. Edith hated when men wore their shirts untucked in a feeble attempt to disguise their guts. After giving him his coffee and pastry, she slammed a glass onto the counter, hoping to erase an unbidden image of Marv stroking her cheek.

She’d been single for a long time, but she wasn’t unhappy. She

had her cats and the little condo Gary had bought for her. Edith had never needed a gang of friends and didn't care for most of her brother's young employees, so she wasn't bothered by their disdain. Most of them were there just for a season or two while they took college classes, or they worked for Gary during the day before heading to other jobs in the late afternoon. It would have been a waste of time to try befriending any of them.

Edith had started working for Gary after twenty years of managing a doctor's office. She'd gotten tired of it and wanted a change. That was long before Alene Baron, who'd worked for Gary since college, used her divorce settlement to buy the place and turn it into a health-food centered, vegan café with her know-it-all pastry chef, Ruthie Rosin. Alene and Ruthie were best friends and always made Edith feel like an outsider, as if they were in a private club that nobody else could join.

But before he sold it to Alene, Gary's restaurant had been a nice place to sit and chat. He'd bought it after his previous company folded—something about embezzled money that Edith hadn't followed. She'd tried to convince her brother to keep the restaurant going, because she liked working there, but he'd been ready for a new challenge. He was tired of the hours, he told her, and had enough money to retire. He wanted to work on his hobbies and spend more time with his not quite launched adult children, especially the son with special needs.

If Gary had asked Edith, she'd have said he should make sure all his kids had jobs and weren't still asking him for money all the time. Luckily, he made Alene promise, when she bought his restaurant, that Edith could continue working until she chose to retire.

Before he sold the place, Edith had loved having lunch with her brother nearly every day. Gary had always been a sweetheart, and he was one of the only people who could make her laugh. Then she met Marv Haskin.

That day, Edith had been wearing an apron over black slacks and a rose-colored blouse that she thought looked nice with her pale coloring. He was well over fifty, but Marv had a bounce in his step, like her brother.

Edith had once heard Gary's obnoxious ex-wife describe her as mousy with a consistently angry expression. She'd run to the bathroom with stinging eyes after overcoming the urge to smack Isabel in the head with the heavy pan she'd been carrying. Maybe she was angry sometimes, but never mousy.

On their first date, Marv had taken her to an elegant restaurant where they'd sat and talked for hours. He'd grown up in New York City and had lived in Baltimore for nearly thirty years. He'd recently moved to Chicago because he'd gone to U Chicago for law school and still had friends in the area. He told stories about his work as a lawyer, his passion for tennis, and going to college with a descendant of Thomas Jefferson.

Edith only had to close her eyes to recall the musky smell of his jacket as he placed it over her shoulders, and the rough feel of his hand as he'd walked her back to his car that first night.

The first time she invited him up to her apartment, she'd surprised herself with pent-up passion that had languished for years. She'd once been engaged to be married, but a week before the wedding, her fiancé had called it off. Except for her brother Gary, Edith had no intention of ever trusting a man again.

Marv was divorced and had two grown daughters. Edith's family consisted of Gary and his three children – one who'd probably end up in jail, one who lived in a special needs home, and one who struggled with drug addiction. She couldn't count on any of them.

She remembered Marv holding her hand while she told him how she'd wept for months after all her dreams of marriage and family had crashed. She'd even considered drowning herself in Lake Michigan like a character in a book she'd once read. Marv

had listened carefully, the way she liked to be listened to, and hugged her tightly when she finished telling the story of her failed attempt at marriage. He told her that no man was worth going that far, and anyway he would never hurt her like that.

Spring crept into summer that year, and Edith was still waking up next to Marv with a spark of something close to joy nearly every day. Nobody at the café, including Gary, knew that she and Marv were seeing each other, or that Edith was falling in love. She was afraid they'd ruin it by teasing her, even Gary, who'd always enjoyed poking fun about everything.

She imagined the day that she'd saunter into the café with a ring on her finger, and if anyone made a crack about it, she'd hold up her hand so that the prisms of light from the diamond nearly blinded them all, and she'd tell them that she and Marv had just gone downtown and picked up a marriage certificate.

It was a beautiful fantasy. Sometimes she imagined how they'd get married at the courthouse – no need to make a fuss about it, and anyway, she didn't need to be surrounded by people like Alene and Ruthie, who formed a tight little friendship circle and never let Edith in.

No, she'd buy a stunning dress, and they'd have a private ceremony, with Gary and his kids, except for the son who was on some kind of autism scale that meant he didn't know how to behave in public.

They went out for dinner now and then, and Marv liked the symphony, so they did that a few times along with renting bikes, bowling, and kayaking on the river, but their favorite activity was walking. They walked for miles, usually starting after dinner, and going on until one of them tired out.

Edith loved walking along the rocks on the edge of the lake. They usually moved to the bike path when it got too late to see clearly, although they worried about tripping or getting in the way of a bike.

Edith dreamt about a future with Marv until one night in August, when they were walking along the lake, admiring the stillness of the water, and wishing the moon was shining brighter so their path would be better illuminated. Marv suddenly cleared his throat and said, "I've decided to move back home to Baltimore."

She knew he'd lived there for many years, and his two daughters, neither of whom spoke to him, still lived there. "My eldest is going to have a baby," he added.

Edith felt her chest tighten and wondered if she was having a heart attack. She let Marv continue explaining, not even interrupting to ask how he could hurt her like this after promising not to.

She hadn't planned on the sudden wave of anguish that bubbled up through her limbs and blinded her to the night sky, the lake, the path, or the city lights shining behind their heads.

Later, as Edith hurried to her car, she'd have no recollection of the surge of anger that streamed through her body and gave her the impetus to push Marv into the water. If anyone had been watching, it might have looked like he'd simply fallen in.

Nobody asked Edith anything, because they hadn't known she was seeing Marv, or that she and Marv walked at night. And when the body was discovered near Montrose Harbor a few days later, not a single person recalled the day when Marv came into Gary's café and met Edith Vanza.

Over the years, Edith only thought about Marv now and then when she liked to imagine how much different her life would have been had their relationship kept going. She remembered him as her last chance at love, and because she'd forgotten her part in his demise, wondered if he'd found someone new to love in Baltimore. If nothing else, she hoped he'd made things right with his daughters.

Joy Ribar

The Fiery Provocation:
A Frankie Champagne Short Story

If Frankie didn't need the money, she wouldn't be standing in the Whitman Watch office begging Abe Arnold for a chance.

"You know I worked several years for the former owners when this was the Whitman Warbler," Frankie reminded the editor.

Abe scoffed. "You mean when the newspaper was just a weekly social rag. We do real news here, Ms. Champagne, and I don't have time to take you under my wing."

Inside, Frankie was seething, a teakettle almost ready to whistle. "Look Abe, I've got a lead on a possible arson, the house on River Street."

Only yesterday, the snug older ranch home had burned to the ground, along with the car parked in the driveway. Worst of all, Clark Mosely lost his life. He'd been in the house, asleep. Clark's wife had been at work, but, in Frankie's mind, she was a person of interest.

"Oh yeah," Abe frowned. "If it's local gossip from the church ladies or the knitting club, you're wasting my time."

Frankie wasn't willing to say more. She wanted to follow the trail herself. "Why don't you let me follow the story and see?"

She jutted her chin forward defiantly.

“Tell you what. Stick to getting your bakery and winery up and running and send me some features about the vineyard or maybe a weekly recipe.” Abe turned his back on Frankie and walked to the back room.

Frankie shouted over the tall front counter: “My bakery is a business, Abe. I’m not giving away home recipes.” She made an undainty gesture and stomped out the door.

She drove downtown to the corner of Meriwether and Granite where the historic bank building stood majestically in the morning sunlight. The three-story, cream-city brick structure housed her beloved bakery/wine lounge, Bubble & Bake.

Frankie sold her wares in front of the building from a vending card she’d rented a few weeks earlier. Although the commercial kitchen was complete and had passed inspection, the public space, including the bakery sales and wine tasting areas, were a work in progress. She partnered with her lifelong friend, Carmen, who divided her time between the bakery and the sheep ranch she owned with her husband, Ryan. The two women baked four days a week now while they waited for completion of the shop’s interior.

Frankie was still muttering under her breath when she strode into the kitchen from the back door. Carmen was already batching Sunrise Muffins at one of the stations where a commercial mixer whirred.

Carmen poured milk into the mixer and turned it down to a gentle stir. “What’s the matter with you, Frankie. You look like someone spit in your oatmeal.”

Frankie slammed her bags on the counter with a huff. “Abe Arnold won’t even give me a chance to do some freelance reporting, and he was patronizing about it to boot.”

Carmen raised one brow, then turned back to the muffin batter, stopped the mixer, and retrieved a ladle to spoon the pre-

pared batter into pans. She was more adept at talking and working than her business partner was.

Frankie set herself up at another stand mixer and proceeded to the pantry to grab as much as she could carry in one trip. When she was focused, she was efficient. "I'm skipping the lemon poppy seed muffins to work on the chocolate zucchini ones instead. I could use the workout with the grater, frankly."

Carmen waited until Frankie was underway. "Don't you think you have enough on your plate right now, getting the business opened up, working in the vineyard, and making wine? What's got you all fired up, anyway?"

Frankie was grating mounds of green striped zucchini, then dumping one pile at a time into a giant colander in the sink to drain excess moisture. Mid thought, she opened a cupboard to retrieve a second large mixing bowl so she could divide the batter into two different flavors.

"Yes, I have plenty to do, Carmen, but I also need extra money to make it happen. The business loan and insurance money doesn't cover everything."

Frankie lost her house in a fire caused by the neighbor teens, who thought an indoor grilling party in December would be fun. She'd started over, using the insurance money to buy the historic bank building that included an upstairs apartment. She'd left her paralegal position a year ago to work solely on her new endeavor. Two years before that, she'd rented some property from her brother to begin grape cultivation so she could produce her own wines. The dream of combining her two passions was gelling into reality.

Carmen bit her lip. "I know how expensive running a business can be, but why don't you find a way to make easy money, instead of at the newspaper? It's going to eat up all your time and energy, you know." She pointed the butter knife she was using to loosen jelly-filled muffins from the pan directly at Frankie's

face.

Frankie stopped grating and lowered her voice. “Because I think the fire on River Street was arson, which means Clark Mosely was murdered.”

“Okay, that’s terrible, but you didn’t know him, right? What makes you think it was intentional?”

Yesterday morning, the Deep Lakes community had been buzzing with the tragic news of Clark Mosely’s death. Frankie heard plenty of speculation when she’d gone to Honey Bees for her double shot latte.

Mariah Becker, aka the head Honey, handed Frankie’s travel mug across the counter along with a complimentary biscotti. “Here, I’m sure you could use the extra energy today. Are you almost ready to open?”

“Thanks, Mariah. It’s coming along. The furniture’s finished, so I’m waiting on the bar and electrical work.”

Mariah smiled. “I can’t wait to see all that reclaimed furniture you’re using and the black walnut tree turned into a bar top! Did your brother find an electrician for you? They sure are hard to come by.”

Frankie admitted she was lucky to have James, construction company owner, on the job. “He subcontracted with someone since my job isn’t as big as a lot of the commercial ones.”

The departure of a few customers opened the door for Mariah to open up. “That fire was terrible, but everyone around here seems to want to stick their nose into it. They all have opinions, but I feel sorry for Bernice Mosely.”

The fire conjured terrible memories for Frankie. She and her daughter had lived with Frankie’s mother for over a year after their loss. To this day, what shook her to her core was not the loss of the actual house, but all the memories that made it

a home. Of course, she remembered the effort it took to locate copies of legal papers and identification that went up in smoke. Then there were the photos, scrapbooks, and handmade items that were irreplaceable.

Later in the day, inspired by Mariah's kind words at the coffee shop, Frankie took all her leftover baked goods, prepared a giant dish of lasagna, and drove to the new part of Deep Lakes where the chain stores, hotels and restaurants were built after the huge medical center project went up. She stopped at one of the big box chain stores for a gift card and made the short trip to Morning Glory Lane, where Bernice was staying with her sister, Elaine.

Elaine lived in a development of cookie-cutter duplexes that were quickly assembled for the new residents who filled jobs on the new side of town. Elaine managed the Super Stay hotel next to the medical center.

Frankie noticed the CH Electric truck parked in the driveway; this was the sub-contractor James had hired to finish electrical work at Bubble & Bake. Did he live next door to Elaine?

Before she could knock on the front door, Elaine appeared in the doorway and stepped outside to meet her. Elaine looked quizzically at Frankie and her eyes widened as she surveyed the box and bags she held.

"Can I help you with something?" Elaine was dressed in a jacket with the hotel's logo on it and dress slacks. Frankie suspected she was going to work.

"Are you Bernice's sister? I wanted to tell her how sorry I am about her husband and the fire. I have some food and a gift card so she can buy clothes or anything she might need." Frankie held the box out to Elaine, who stared at her, blinking.

"That's kind of you, but I don't think Bernice needs anything. We'd like to have our privacy if you don't mind." Elaine stepped back inside.

Frankie stood holding the bag, literally, and the box, too. She stood on the spot, wavering between leaving the items on the front steps or retreating home to stash the stuff in her freezer. Instead, she drove to her brother, Nick's house. Unlike Frankie's oldest brother, James, Nick was a bachelor who seldom cooked, but often did favors for his sister. Frankie knew he'd appreciate the food.

"Hey, good to see you Sis, and just in time for dinner, too." Nick greeted her with a genuine smile, known for disarming women. "Whatcha got here?"

Frankie set the lasagna down on Nick's counter. "Lasagna and leftover baked goods. The lasagna's still hot, so feel free to dig in. Before you ask, I took these over to Bernice Mosely at her sister's house, but she didn't want them."

Nick laughed. "No kidding. You actually saw Bernice? Everybody says she's not seeing anyone."

Frankie confirmed what everybody was saying. "Don't you think that's strange? I mean, everyone grieves differently I suppose."

Nick helped himself to a big slab of lasagna and offered a plate to Frankie to do the same. It wasn't salad, which Frankie planned for her dinner, but what the heck? She'd gone to the trouble, after all.

Nick took a bite, pronounced it delicious, and dabbed his mouth with a paper towel. "Back to Bernice. It gets stranger, Frankie. She worked at Triple Crown Marine, you know."

Frankie didn't know Bernice worked at the same company where Nick was a floor supervisor.

"Yeah, she worked on the line for over 20 years, never got promoted or even tried. But here's the thing, the day before the fire, she came in and quit. My boss couldn't figure it out. She said 20 years of working on the line was enough for anyone, and she was starting a new job."

“Wow, talk about timing. Did she say where she was going to work next?”

Nick shrugged. “If you want to know more, you could talk to Denise Benson. They bowled together on the Triple Crown mixed league. Denise is probably as close to a friend as Bernice has.”

Frankie relayed the tale to Carmen, who frowned. “That doesn’t mean much, Frankie. Bernice Mosely isn’t the only weirdo in town, you know.”

“Wait, Carmen. There’s more.” At Carmen’s prodding, Frankie resumed grating and measuring to make muffins.

“I called Denise Benson to ask her if she knew why Bernice wouldn’t take food or a gift card.”

“You say you’re Nick Champagne’s sister? He sure is a fun guy.” Denise’s praise for Nick wasn’t lost on Frankie. She wondered if the two had knocked boots once upon a time.

“That’s right. I’m opening a bakery in town, so I wanted to bring Bernice some food and a gift card to get clothing. I couldn’t believe it when her sister said she wouldn’t take anything.”

Denise sighed loudly. “I don’t know if I should tell you this. She and I bowled together, but we weren’t exactly friends, you know. Bernice talked a lot about quitting her job and moving away. She wanted more out of life. I don’t know anything about her marriage, and I never met Clark.” Denise’s story hit a snag, but Frankie knew there was more to it.

“Why do you think she was unhappy?” Frankie knew better than to ask a yes or no question.

“Like I said, Bernice talked about deserving more all the time. And then, maybe a month or so ago, she told me Clark was sick. He’d been diagnosed with ALS. You know, the one where you lose all muscle control. I got the impression she wasn’t too

happy she'd have to take care of him."

"Oh no, Denise. Did she say that?" A fluttery knot was forming in Frankie's stomach.

"Not exactly. For the past couple months, Bernice was working extra shifts because she needed the money, but then she up and quit her job out of the blue. She never talked about looking for a new job either. And, who knows how much longer her husband could keep working, being sick and all."

Carmen waited, hoping there was something more concrete than Denise's words. "Frankie, that doesn't mean she killed him. I wonder what kind of work Clark Mosely did."

Frankie smiled slyly. She'd piqued Carmen's curiosity at least. "Luckily, Denise knew. He was a lineman for the power company."

"There's one job you'd need a steady hand to do. Poor Clark Mosely. Do you honestly think Bernice would burn her own house down?"

Frankie was finally spooning chocolate muffin batter into a pan, while Carmen was already taking her second variety out of the oven. "I don't know, but I would have thought Abe Arnold would want to pursue it. He's a bulldog reporter, Carmen."

Carmen shrugged. "Maybe he already knows what you know, Frankie. Ever consider that?"

She hadn't.

The next morning, Frankie woke up to a buzzing cell phone.

"Hi, Frankie Champagne? This is Carl Hawgler, the electrician your brother hired. I was hoping to get an early start on your shop this morning. Would you mind?"

Frankie groaned. It was barely five o'clock, but one doesn't look a gift electrician in the mouth. "Sure, I'll meet you at the back door in 20 minutes." She hoped he was bringing coffee.

It turned out Carl had a worse morning face than Frankie, so

when she let him in, she offered to make coffee for both of them. Being Frankie, she delivered the large steaming thermal mug with a chocolate zucchini muffin.

Carl was getting acclimated to the site and reviewing James's plans. "Why thank you. This job doesn't look complicated. I'm sure I can have this done in a day."

Frankie raised her eyebrows in surprise. "Really? This building is old, and I imagine the electric needs updating. It has to pass inspection, or I can't open to the public."

Carl frowned. "There must have been another business in here recently because it all looks new. There are no fuses, so that's good news. I just need to add more circuits and upgrade the panel from 200 to 400 amps. That should account for any needs you could have down the road."

Frankie remembered the building had been used for private offices before the owners decided to leave the area, but amid so many details associated with starting a business, she hadn't recalled the condition of the electrical panel.

"That sounds good, Carl. I'm so glad James found you. Electricians are at a premium in this area, and having it done right matters. I lost my home in a fire only a year ago, and I would never want to go through that again."

Carl jolted like he'd been hit with a poker at Frankie's comment. "I'm sorry to hear that. Was it an electrical fire?"

"No, but any fire is devastating."

Carl agreed. "Fire makes me a little edgy. I'm a volunteer fireman, and that fire the other day was the worst I've seen in a long time."

Carl's comment jogged Frankie's memory. "By the way, I saw your truck yesterday when I brought food over to Bernice Moseley at her sister Elaine's. Do you live next door to her?"

Carl shifted uncomfortably and set down his coffee. "No, I don't, but I do a lot of work around town. Did you speak to Ber-

nice?”

“No, she wasn’t seeing anyone. Do you know her?”

Carl’s eyes widened and his cheeks flushed. “I know Elaine. She hired me to work at the Super Stay where she’s the night manager. Hotel rooms have problems all the time, so I have steady work.”

Frankie understood. “Everything on that end of town went up in a hurry. The developers saw dollar signs once the medical center was built. They swooped in, made their money, and left just as quickly.”

She turned toward the kitchen. “Well, I’ll leave you to it. I’m in the kitchen if you need anything.”

By the time noon rolled around, Frankie was ready to face plant into a batch of cinnamon roll dough. She’d spent the morning beating, folding, and kneading sweet roll dough, an arduous task, and was ready for a break.

Working alone made the day go slower, but Carmen was needed at the farm while Ryan attended a sheep market meeting out of town, so there she was, frequently changing music stations to stay focused.

She jumped a foot when Carl poked his head around the swinging door into the kitchen. “Sorry to interrupt, but I’m just about finished out there. Do you want to take a look?”

Frankie hated to admit she wouldn’t know the difference between accurate electrical work and a kid’s snap circuit toy set. “Um, why don’t I call my brother and see if he can look at it.”

James was in the middle of a large project an hour away. “James says he’ll be able to stop in tomorrow to look at it, but the inspector won’t be here for a few days, and the inspector has to sign off on the work, I’m afraid.”

Carl couldn’t hide his disappointment. “It’s just that I have to leave the area, and I’m not sure when I’ll be back. I was hoping we could settle up.”

Frankie was shocked. Commercial work didn't operate on the fly. She couldn't just pay him on the spot, and she told him so. Carl swore, kicked the floor with his boot, and stomped out the back door.

Frankie had just stuffed trays of rolled dough into the cooler to finish and bake the next day when a series of sharp raps on the back door startled her. Fire Captain Phil Mortensen waved through the glass, then entered the kitchen.

"Sorry to barge in on you, but I'm glad I caught you, Frankie." Phil was the picture-perfect movie star fireman, tall, dark, handsome, and charming.

"Sure. What can I do for you?" She noticed Phil was in uniform and held his hat politely in his hand.

"I know you're not fully open yet, but I was hoping the department could place an order, and we'll need it tomorrow."

Once again, the memories of her house fire charged forward in Frankie's mind. The fire fighters had done their absolute best and were just as heartbroken as Frankie was at the total loss of her home. "You know I'll do anything for the fire department, Phil. Name it."

Phil relaxed and smiled. "We need to have a decompression meeting, you know, after Friday's tragedy. I thought some home-baked goods would be a nice treat."

Frankie took Phil's order for a variety of five dozen sweet rolls and muffins and said she'd deliver it personally. "Any idea what caused the fire, Phil? Carl Hawgler, the electrician, worked here today, and he said it was one of the worst he's seen."

Was it Frankie's imagination or had Phil developed a tick in his jaw at the mention of Carl?

"We're still working at the scene. There were some propane cans that we think were stored in the kitchen pantry area. Of course, it wasn't a new house, and the electrical panel was a mix

of fuses and circuits. Could be a wiring issue.”

“I guess it’s a blessing there was only one person home at the time. I guess Bernice was working the night shift,” Frankie offered.

There was that tick again, more pronounced this time. “Right,” Phil said through clenched teeth.

Frankie wondered if she knew anyone else on the Fire Department who might be less professional and tactful than the captain.

That evening, Frankie was still baking in a steady rhythm, like a choreographed dance to fill the fire department’s order. At one point, she had three stand mixers blending at once, and she worked hard at scrubbing muffin pans as soon as they cooled enough so she could fill them up again.

Suddenly, Frankie’s brothers appeared in the kitchen, making her jump a foot. Brothers being brothers, they enjoyed her response.

“Sorry to scare you, Frankie, but I texted and tried to call to tell you we were coming.” James, the oldest in the family, was the most serious sibling.

“I’m sorry I didn’t hear the phone. I’m filing an order for the fire department for tomorrow, so I’ve been busy. But it’s always good to see my bros. What’s up?”

James frowned, while Nick sampled one of the muffins cooling on a rack. James frowned again, this time at Nick’s impolite behavior. It seemed James had taken on a parental role as the oldest son.

“Carl Hawgler came out to the office, loaded for bear. He insisted I inspect his work so he could get paid. I said I’d check it over tonight, but the formal inspection won’t happen for a week or two. If everything shakes out, maybe you can pay him half now and half later.”

Frankie shrugged. “Whatever you think, James. I trust your judgment. I just don’t understand Carl’s *modus operandi*.”

“Apparently, he’s leaving town on a long-awaited vacation. Probably needs the extra cash.” James headed toward the wine lounge area and flipped on all the lights. He had an electric meter with him to check the outlets.

Frankie loaded more pans in the oven, then slapped Nick’s hand playfully. Nick pretended to wince in pain.

“How many muffins are you making for the department, anyway?” Nick looked at the array of colorful mounds laid out on the center counter.

“Oh dozens. You know how fire fighters are—they eat like horses.” She was happy Nick hadn’t spotted the sweet rolls since they were under the cover of large cotton towels waiting to be iced.

James returned with a satisfied smile on his face. “Everything looks good out there, Frankie. I think it’s safe to pay Carl for half. If you want, I’ll take your check with me to the office. He’s stopping by to collect on another job, too.”

“Okay, James. I trust your judgment. I’ll get my checkbook.”

Frankie went to the outer alcove that served as her office and returned with a check. She was glad Bubble & Bake was bringing in money with all the extra bills involved in finishing the inside area.

“Here you go. Thank you for taking care of this.” Frankie handed him a strawberry-rhubarb muffin, still warm.

Nick protested. “Hey, I got scolded for taking one of those.”

“That’s because you swiped it without asking,” Frankie laughed. “Have either of you heard anything new about the big fire?”

James shrugged. “I haven’t paid much attention, honestly. We’re swamped at the company right now.” In Wisconsin, construction season was anytime the ground wasn’t frozen.

“There’s been a lot of chatter,” Nick disclosed. “It’s hard to know what to believe. Now don’t look at me like that, Frankie. I’m not going to repeat second-hand information.”

Frankie gave her best little sister imitation of puppy eyes and a half pout. She wrapped a second muffin in a paper towel and handed it to Nick, who threw his head back and laughed.

“I mean it, Frankie. If you want to snoop around, try talking to Linda Hintz. She’s the third shift manager at Triple Crown. Or hit up Cinda Roberts. She’s friends with Bernice’s sister.”

Frankie barely waited for the back door to close, when she did a search for Triple Crown’s phone number.

“Triple Crown Marine, this is Sherry.”

“Hello, can I speak with Linda Hintz please?” Frankie wondered why her heart pounded so loudly.

A public relations message about the wonders of Triple Crown played while Frankie waited.

“Hello, this is Linda.”

Frankie hadn’t planned what she would say or a good reason why Linda Hintz should tell her anything. How would it sound if she said her brother Nick told her to call to pick her brain. She apologized and disconnected, feeling foolish.

The next morning, Frankie found Carmen standing in the kitchen wide-eyed, surveying the row of large bakery boxes.

“Good morning, Carmie.” Frankie had risen early to ice the sweet rolls and took a twenty-minute snooze while the rolls dried on racks.

“What’s all this?” Carmen was pleasantly surprised.

“An order from the fire department. I’m delivering it in a bit.”

“You should have called me, Frankie. This looks like a lot of work.” Carmen tied on an apron and brought a tray of cinnamon roll dough out of the cooler.

“Nope. We agreed that Wednesday is your day to help Ryan

at the farm. Besides, it was a labor of love. The fire department took such good care of me when I needed them.” Frankie couldn’t talk about the fire without tearing up.

Pop music streamed into the kitchen while Carmen rolled out dough and Frankie mixed together dry ingredients for lemon cream cheese scones. She checked the iced sweet rolls to see if they were dry enough to pack and eyed the clock. She had plenty of time to get scone batter together and rolled out before the delivery.

Carmen looked thoughtful or in deep concentration on her task of slicing tubes of dough into pinwheel rolls. She avoided looking directly at Frankie, instead whistling louder than normal to “Walk Like An Egyptian.”

Frankie was cutting cold butter into cream for the scones and stopped abruptly. “You’ve got something you want to tell me, Carmen?”

The whistling faded into tinny air. “Okay already. Last night at church, I walked into a conversation between my boys and a couple of friends.”

Carmen was one of the youth group volunteers on Wednesday nights, alternating turns with other St. Anthony parents. The boys, Kyle and Carlos, were twin brothers and since they weren’t yet teenagers, they still tended to tell their parents everything.

“Which friends?” Frankie expected to hear some middle school drama.

“Lissi and Eva. But that’s the thing. Both of those girls have sisters who work as maids at the Super Stay hotel.”

Frankie was all ears. “What did they say?”

Carmen balked. “Now remember that this is just kids talking, Frankie, but Eva’s sister said Bernice Mosely has been staying at the hotel for weeks. And Lissi said she heard Bernice had basically moved into the hotel.”

Frankie blew out a loud breath. "I'd say at the very least Bernice's marriage wasn't going well. Yesterday, Nick gave me the names of two people to talk to about Bernice, but I didn't have the guts to do it. I'm not sure I'm cut out for investigating. I have no idea what I'm doing."

Carmen looked relieved. "If you really wanted to, I know you could do it, Frankie. The fact is, you're over your head in work and stress right now, and you just don't have the energy to give this. I'm telling you, there are easier ways to make some fast money."

Frankie pretended to be insulted. "That may be true, but I'm not willing to sell this stunning body." They both broke out in laughter.

A little later, Frankie carried a stack of four boxes into the city hall meeting room where a few fire fighters had begun to gather. Captain Phil waved Frankie over to the kitchen area where a table was set up with a large coffee pot, cream, sugar, and a gallon of orange juice. Frankie set the boxes across the tabletop and asked Phil where to find plates to arrange the pastries.

Phil handed Frankie a couple of fake crystal platters from a cupboard. "Thank you so much for doing this on short notice. Please make sure you stop by the clerk's office with your invoice."

Frankie laid out muffins and sweet rolls on the two platters, then snooped around the cupboards to find more, along with plastic wrap to cover them. She found a couple of trays and prepared those too, then took the remaining bakery boxes to the kitchen.

Two firemen, Troy Larson and Chuck Long, were standing near the sink, each holding a can of soda from the fridge. They nodded to acknowledge Frankie but continued talking.

"I guess we won't be seeing Carl today," Chuck spoke openly. Troy leaned in conspiratorially. "I heard he's leaving town for

good.”

Chuck scoffed. “It’s probably for the best, considering.” He allowed his voice to trail off.

Frankie pretended to look for napkins. Considering what? she wondered.

When Frankie returned to Bubble & Bake, Carmen handed her a phone message with a sour expression. “Someone from Point Press newspaper wants to talk to you.”

Frankie’s brows lifted. “Don’t look at me like that. I have no idea what they want.”

She excused herself to the alcove office and tapped in the phone number.

A chirpy no-nonsense voice greeted Frankie. “Point Press feature desk. This is Sam.”

“I’m returning your call. This is Frankie Champagne in Deep Lakes.”

“Oh perfect. I want to do a feature article about your business. Is it true you’re opening a bakery by day, wine lounge by night and that you also grow your own grapes for wine?”

Frankie was excited to garner free publicity for Bubble & Bake. She spent the next half hour answering the reporter’s questions, making sure to tell Sam that the grand opening wouldn’t be until next month after all the inside work was finished.

“When you have a date for the grand opening, call me. We’ll send someone down there to attend and take photos for the feature. Heck, I’ll probably come myself and bring a friend. Who doesn’t like wine tasting?” Sam’s interest appeared genuine.

Frankie thanked her, promised she would call with a firm date for the opening, then changed courses. “Sam, do you have a crime reporter I could speak with?”

Moments later a striking metallic voice answered. “Regional desk. Magda Guzman here.”

Frankie introduced herself and explained she may have some tips regarding a possible crime in Deep Lakes. “Arson, and if it is arson Ms. Guzman, murder as well.”

Magda mumbled in reply. “Un huh. And who did you say you are?” Magda’s skepticism couldn’t be clearer.

Frankie felt humiliated, just like she did around Abe Arnold. Her dander rose. “I get it, you think I’m some sort of town gossip. But I have a lot of leads you can follow, and I also have a communications degree and newspaper experience.” Although what she said was true, Frankie’s newspaper experience had been relegated to covering local community activities at best.

Magda snorted. “Okay, Ms. Champagne. You have my attention. Can you put together the information you have with names, addresses, and phone numbers of all the contacts and email them to me today?”

Frankie agreed, knowing she’d be spending a lot of time locating addresses and phone numbers to go with the contacts, as well as creating a narrative that made sense. Still, she had one foot in the door so might as well walk through it.

Frankie and Carmen spent the next several days knee-deep in the Bubble & Bake kitchen, experimenting with new recipes for muffins, scones, bars and sweet rolls in preparation for opening their doors to the public. Frankie couldn’t wait to add Danish kringles to the pastry case in honor of her beloved Grandma Sophie, who taught Frankie how to bake throughout her childhood.

Besides testing recipes, the business partners were occupied tasting and choosing wines to include in the lounge. Since Frankie’s vineyard was young, she’d only begun making wine using grapes from the Midwest and New York. Her bottled varieties had not yet passed state certification, so Bubble & Bake would be selling wines from other Wisconsin vineyards.

The two were so caught up in the hubbub of planning Bubble

& Bake's grand opening, they were caught off guard when Abe Arnold pounded on the front door and stuck his face against the window.

Frankie unlocked the door and was almost run over by Abe. He held a folded newspaper and waved it accusingly in her face.

"Do you mind explaining this to me?" Abe was more than a head taller than Frankie and he had to hunch over to shove the paper under her nose.

Frankie blinked and swallowed hard in astonishment. "Stop waving that around and let me see it," she said, annoyed at Abe's intrusion.

Abe stood, arms folded, glaring while Frankie read the article on the front page of the Point Press regional news section. The article detailed the fresh arrests of Bernice Mosely and Carl Hawgler, accusing them of arson and intentional homicide in the fire at Bernice's home, resulting in Clark Mosely's death.

Right under Magda Guzman's byline were the words "and Francine Champagne." Frankie couldn't believe her eyes. Magda had used all of Frankie's information and contacts to investigate and had acquired some damning details she confirmed with the Whitman County Sherriff and detectives.

The article claimed an alleged affair between Bernice and Carl that had gone on for months, after the two met at a bowling tournament. Carl was living at the Super Stay hotel, and Bernice slowly moved her clothing and important belongings to another hotel room provided by her sister, Elaine.

The article continued to allege Carl and Bernice conspired to set fire to the house while Clark was sleeping. Bernice claimed to be working third shift at Triple Crown Marine the evening of the fire, but the third shift supervisor stated Bernice had not worked that day at all. The fire investigator confirmed the fire began in the electrical wiring and that accelerants in the form of propane canisters were found in the basement and the pantry and in the

trunk of the victim's car.

Cinda Roberts, who worked with Bernice, stated the two accused planned to run away together after Bernice collected insurance money for the house, and car, and Clark Mosely's life insurance settlement.

Frankie handed the paper back to Abe, her mouth still agape. "Well, you didn't listen to me when I told you I had some ideas about the fire."

"You might have at least warned me. I have my own story on the fire and arrest, but of course, it won't be out until tomorrow's issue." Abe dropped the paper on the floor and left.

Nick Chiarkas

Good Job

If you're looking for a story about a good kid growing up in a "Father Knows Best" neighborhood, this ain't it. So, you probably will want to move on.

You're sticking with me? Cool. My name is Joe Bonifacio, I have no clue who my birth parents were, but I do know how I got my name. In 1907, Sister Maria Cristina found me in the last pew in St. Joachim's church. I was a couple of weeks old, naked, wrapped in an old towel with a note pinned to it, and a Saint Joseph medal tied around my neck. I still have them all. The note read, "I'll be back if I find a good job." When she read the note, I was told Sister Maria cried and murmured, "This baby is your good job."

No one ever came back.

Sister Maria named me Joe because of the medallion, and Bonifacio, because Boni Facio in Italian means "good job." The Sisters raised me at St. Joachim and Madonna Day Nursery. St. Joachim was the first Italian Catholic church in the United States. It was located at 26 Roosevelt Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Before Italians like me had St Joachim, we had to attend mass in the basements of neighboring Irish Catholic churches; we were not allowed to sit in the Nave during the regular mass with the Irish parishioners.

When I was six years old, my two best friends were Nunzio, who lived alone in the cellar of a tenement on Canon Street, and Pompeo, who lived on the streets; they didn't have any parents either. We started a gang with two more kids, George and Nick, and we would meet in the basement of St. Joachim. We were good kids mostly; we stayed out of trouble. All that changed in 1920 when we were thirteen.

The Baling Hook was a tough saloon with a long bar and small tables. It was owned by an ex-longshoreman, Stanley Marco, and his wife Sylvia—who was as tough as Stan. The place was decorated with nets, anchors, and baling hooks hanging over the walls—you know, the kind longshoremen use; they have a large thick metal hook with a short shank and a wooden handle at right angles to the shank; they make lifting a lot easier. The booze was cheap, and the food was tolerable. The dancers were okay—that is, except for one. Fiora Ventosa was a delicate breeze in a cigar-filled room. And when she danced, the room dropped silent.

The dancers would take off this or that but only stripped partially. Each night of the week, they featured a different dancer. Fiora danced on Tuesday nights. Nunzio fell in love with her.

The five of us would sneak in every Tuesday night. Sylvia knew but let it slide. Fiora would sometimes sit with us after her show. Thinking back, she probably thought it was cute, and compared to the rest of the clientele, we were safe, adoring fans. We would sit there transfixed. Fiora was seventeen, and Nunzio figured a four-year difference wasn't that much. So, after watching her dance every Tuesday for seven or eight months, on the third Tuesday in January 1920, Nunzio decided to tell Fiora he wanted to marry her. Seems silly now, but back then...what did we know?

Nunzio had to work late, so we waited for him and beat it over to the Hook. When we arrived, Stan was shoving everyone

out of the place, telling them to go home. Somebody said, "You kids better not go in there tonight."

We pushed our way in against everybody leaving. There were overturned tables and a couple of people standing around looking down.

Sylvia was sitting on the floor crying. Fiora was lying on the floor, covered by an oversized flannel shirt. Her head was in Sylvia's lap. Stan was arguing with a big guy they called the Bear. He was six-foot-six and must have weighed in at three hundred pounds. He was a foreman on the docks and a neighborhood bully.

The Bear, wearing only a T-shirt, said to Stan, "Don't you say nothin'. You hear me? Nothin'."

Sylvia shouted at the Bear, "You sonofabitch, you killed this little girl."

The drunken Bear wanted to see more skin. He yanked Fiora off the dance floor. She fought, and he broke her neck. It was the only time I saw Nunzio cry. It was the most heart-rending, profound sadness I've ever witnessed. Nunzio dropped to his knees and touched Fiora's face.

The Bear stood with his two buddies over Sylvia, saying to Stan, "The girl's trash; nobody's gonna miss her. So, you and your wife keep your mouths shut." He reached down, grabbed his shirt off Fiora, and started putting it on.

That was when I noticed Nunzio was missing. Then I heard the scream. It didn't sound human. It was pain and fury. It was Nunzio, and he was in midair—he jumped from the top of the bar behind the Bear. He gripped a baling hook in each hand—he had taken them off the wall. He looked like an eagle screaming in for the kill. The Bear's arms were halfway in his shirt sleeves when the points of the heavy hooks pierced his deltoid muscles from behind. The hooks hit both shoulders and sunk behind his collarbone. The Bear roared and swung from side to side. Nunzio

held on tight to the hooks, his legs flying from left to right, back and forth. The Bear's arms were pinned halfway in his shirt. He kept trying to grab Nunzio's legs. But with each movement, the hooks sank deeper.

The Bear's two friends grabbed at Nunzio, and that's when we jumped in. I was a pretty good boxer by then, and Pompeo was always a strong kid. Nick pulled a knife, and George grabbed another baling hook off the wall. The Bear's buddies ran out of the place; they weren't up for the fight. The only ones in the Hook were Stan, Sylvia, the Bear, Fiora, and us. The Bear started spinning and coughing up blood. Nunzio just held on. We were trying to get them apart. But the Bear kept turning, knocking over tables. And Nunzio was like a cape flying from the Bear's shoulders.

Finally, the Bear dropped to his knees, straight down, his arms dead, draped at his sides. As the Bear fell forward, Nunzio pulled on the hooks. The Bear growled and then whimpered as his face cracked the wooden floor. Nunzio held onto the hooks—pulling. He let go when the Bear rolled over on his back—hooks still buried in his shoulders. He looked straight up at Nunzio.

Stan grabbed Nunzio and said, "He's gone. You, kids, get out of here so we can clean up."

Stan fixed things with the police, but the Bear's pals came after Nunzio. The five of us were inseparable. Nunzio was a born leader. Battle after battle, victory after victory, we quickly gained a reputation. We called ourselves the Roosevelt Street Boys because we would hide out at St. Joachim on Roosevelt Street. The battles we won were hard fought. People were killed. We all... I killed Yuri Drochit, a longshoreman; he had two sons, both wound up in prison years later; I always wondered, what if I... never mind. I probably killed others in fights, we all did, but I still remember Yuri's face when I dropped him.

At nineteen, I decided to become a priest and devote my life

to saving as many kids in these neighborhoods as possible in return for God's forgiveness. We have an uneasy relationship—I'm sure God doesn't always agree with my methods, and I have questions for Him. But I'm sticking to the deal. Nunzio bought the Hook and renamed it Caffè Fiora.

Today, Pompeo is a foreman at the meat market; Nick is a cop; George is a foreman on the docks; and Nunzio, well, that's another story.

On the third Tuesday of each month, the five of us meet at the Caffè Fiora, like when we were thirteen; now we play poker in the back room, eat, drink, laugh, remember... and forget.

Saralyn Richard
Freedom to Hope

The newly-married Quinn and Josh Brady squeezed in a lunch date at Loma Linda restaurant on Wednesday at noon. Both needed to get back to work, but Josh was more on the time clock than Quinn, since his duties at the university hospital were highly regimented, while hers at the funeral parlor that had been in her family for three generations were less urgent. The dead could wait.

Quinn hadn't broken it to her family that she'd decided to go back to school to become a physician's assistant. She was waiting to see if her application would be accepted. Meanwhile, today had been a slow day at McFarland's, and she was enjoying the chicken enchiladas, along with her husband's company.

When the waitress brought the check to Josh, the young woman tripped on the carpet, spilling water from the tray she was carrying onto Quinn's lap.

"Oh, lo siento mucho," she said. "I'm so, so sorry." She mopped up the spilled water with a cloth napkin. She leaned over Quinn, dabbing her shoulder, and as she did so, she whispered into Quinn's ear, "Please help me."

Quinn examined the server's face but didn't recognize her. She estimated the woman's age at thirty, same as Quinn's. Her slight build; long, dark hair, pulled into a ponytail; and rosebud

lips reminded Quinn of a classmate in elementary school. The classmate hadn't had that worry line at the edge of her left eyebrow, though, or that dry-eyed look of a person who had all but given up on life.

The woman gathered the water glasses, napkins, and tray and scurried through the swinging door to the kitchen. She had a noticeable limp.

Quinn looked around to see who was watching, and, although the small cantina was bustling with customers, no one appeared to pay attention to her. After making sure she was okay, Josh picked up the bill, kissed Quinn on the cheek, checked out at the cash register at the front of the restaurant, and left Quinn to leave the tip.

Quinn took her time fumbling around in her purse for a few bills, hoping the server would reappear. After a few minutes, she gave up. A queue had formed at the front, and another couple was eying her table. Quinn took out her ballpoint pen and wrote on the top dollar bill, "Okay."

On the way out, she stopped at the cash register and asked for the name of her server. The owner rolled his close-set eyes and began apologizing for the clumsiness of his employee. "Marta is new here. I will make sure she is more careful in the future."

"No worries," Quinn said. The incident had provoked her, but not in the way he imagined. "I wanted to compliment her on how she handled the spill. Accidents happen, but she couldn't have been nicer."

"Thank you, Senora. I hope you and your mister will come back again."

Quinn nodded and picked up a business card advertising the restaurant. She slipped it into her pocket. As she left, she noted the hours of the cantina. On Wednesdays they closed at eight p.m. Josh had late hours on Wednesdays, which was why they'd met for lunch.

Driving back to work, Quinn mulled over the incident. The spilled water had clearly not been an accident. Marta had choreographed tripping in order to whisper her message to Quinn. The obvious questions were why did Marta need help, and why had she sought Quinn's assistance?

The rest of the day at work, Quinn helped with preparations for a big visitation the next afternoon. There were a thousand little things that needed attention, and, perhaps out of guilt for planning to abandon her family for a different career, she told her mother she would do them all.

As she worked, her heart was heavy, thinking about Marta. Afterwards, she went home to walk and feed her puppy, Calvin. Glad that Josh wouldn't be home until after ten, she dressed in dark, nondescript clothes and her running shoes, and loaded her pockets with her cellphone, a flashlight, and a can of mace.

She jogged from her house in midtown to Loma Linda, north of Broadway. The Gulf Coast humidity enveloped her in a cold, wet fog. She wanted to be outside the restaurant at closing time, but she didn't want to be recognized. Checking her cellphone from across the street, she congratulated herself on perfect timing. It was a few minutes after eight.

The parking lot had emptied out. The smells of charcoal and cooking grease tinged the cool night air. There was only one vehicle remaining, a dirty gray van. Chills hotfooted up and down Quinn's spine as she remembered her own experience in the back of a van just last year. She couldn't ignore Marta's request for help. If a kind soul hadn't gone out of her way to help Quinn escape her captors, she might never have—

The lights went out in the restaurant, and Quinn hid behind two garbage cans to get a good view. The side door opened, and two burly men stepped out, each flanking the side of a small woman—Marta. Even without touching her, they obviously had her under control. She limped like a broken doll between them,

her eyes cast toward the ground.

Quinn wanted to shout, “Run, Marta,” but the rear door of the van opened, and Marta clambered inside.

Quinn snapped a photo with her cellphone. The rougher of the two men was the restaurant owner Quinn had spoken to earlier. He climbed into the driver’s seat while his sidekick rode shotgun. Quinn took another photo of the license plate before the van backed out and took off.

She followed the van on foot for several yards, hoping to get a hint of its destination, but within two blocks, the vehicle turned onto Broadway, heading west, possibly off the island. Quinn retraced her steps to Loma Linda. She searched the parking lot and looked in the café windows. She even poked around in the pile of garbage bags, looking for anything that might indicate who these people were and where they had taken Marta.

Finding nothing, she ran back home, her feet pounding against the sidewalk. She counted the steps between streetlights as she went. Her stomach clamored for food, and she wondered whether Marta would have dinner. As she turned onto her block, Quinn’s neighbor Anise pulled into her driveway and got out of her car. Anise was well-connected to the Hispanic American community, so Quinn trotted over.

“Hello, neighbor,” Anise said. “Want to come in for some hot chocolate or tea?”

“No, thanks. Josh will be home from the hospital soon. I do have a question, though.”

“Sure.” Anise pulled two grocery bags from her back seat and set them on the trunk.

Quinn hesitated. She wanted her question to be open-ended. “What can you tell me about the people at Loma Linda restaurant?”

Anise’s eyebrows shot to her hairline, and she looked around, as if to make certain no one could hear. “Who wants to know?”

“I was there at lunchtime with Josh,” Quinn said, careful to keep her voice neutral. “We had a lovely server whose name was Marta.”

“Dios mio,” Anise replied. “If you know what’s good for you, Quinn, don’t ask questions about Loma Linda. It’s okay to eat there, but leave it at that.”

Quinn’s hands turned to ice, and she clenched her fists. “But why?”

Anise glanced around again before boring her dark eyes into Quinn’s. “You must trust me on this. Manuel Silva is no one to get involved with. That’s all I’m going to say.” Anise made a shooing motion with both hands. “Now go home. And lock your door.”

Quinn did as told. She fixed herself a grilled cheese sandwich and sat down in front of her computer to eat. Loma Linda had a bare-bones website. A photo of the restaurant, a listing of the address, and a snapshot of the menu was all she could find. No owners’ names, nothing personal, not even a yelp listing. Then she searched for Manuel Silva. Numerous results, ranging from Wikipedia to obituaries to Facebook listings, popped up. None looked to be connected to the local restaurant.

All she really had, besides the whispered plea, was the license plate number of the gray van. Quinn called Mary Hallom, her brother’s fiancée, who happened to be a police officer. Fortunately, Mary had just gone off duty and was on her way home.

Quinn explained her predicament, starting with the spilled water and ending with the foot chase. She left out Anise’s warning.

“Girl, you sure have a way of finding trouble—or trouble finding you. What are you thinking? Human trafficking?” Mary would be helpful to a point. She wouldn’t compromise her professional ethics, and she would go out of her way to protect Quinn as Jack’s little sister.

“Maybe. Can you run the license plate of the van? R73*W-

WK. I don't have to tell you, time is of the essence."

"I can, but you don't need me to do that. You can search the state records yourself online. I'll text you the link."

"Okay, but what do I do once I find out the owner and place of residence?" Quinn had no desire to be a police officer. She just wanted to help Marta, assuming that was the server's real name.

Mary huffed into the phone. "Here we go again. Your brother's gonna kill me for letting you get involved in another dangerous situation. I know you'll never let it rest, though. Tell you what. You dig around as much as you can tonight. Call me tomorrow morning, and I'll see if you've got enough for me to open a case. Fair enough?"

Josh walked in with a bouquet of flowers.

Quinn jumped from her seat at the table, where she'd been noodling around on the computer. "How beautiful! What's the occasion?"

Josh answered with a dizzying kiss. I bumped into one of the professors at the medical school, and he asked me about you. He'd heard about your application for PA school.

"Really? Is that normal?"

"I didn't think so. I asked about that, and he told me his wife works in admissions. Then he winked and said, 'Your wife'll be getting good news very soon.'"

A fiery bubble of excitement burst inside of Quinn. "Wuhoo. You think I got in?"

Josh swung her around in a circle until, collapsing on the couch in giggles, the flowers on the floor, they stopped to catch their breaths. "Looks like all your studying is going to pay off. I'm so proud of you."

A stab of guilt pierced the celebration for Quinn, first for her parents, who would not be happy to lose her from the family business, and then for Marta.

“What’s the matter?” Josh asked. “Aren’t you happy?”

Quinn had vowed not to keep secrets from her husband, but she was conflicted over how much to tell him. She wrapped her arms around Josh’s waist and pressed her face against his chest, avoiding eye contact.

“I’m worried about two things. First, my parents.”

“We’ve been over this many times. Your parents will find someone to take over your work. I don’t believe they would want you to sacrifice your dream for their sake.”

“I know.” She squeezed. “It just makes me sad.”

“What’s the second thing?”

“Huh?” She sat up and fidgeted. “Oh, remember the server who spilled water on me today at lunch?”

“Yeah?”

“She’s in trouble. I need to help her.”

To Josh’s credit, he hadn’t freaked out over Quinn’s explanation about Marta. A year ago, he might have, but now he knew his wife’s brave side, as well as her empathy for the downtrodden. He had, however, made her promise to keep her cellphone and her can of mace with her at all times. She also convinced him that all she would do was gather information. Then she would turn everything over to the police.

Quinn was glad she’d done all the work for the afternoon visitation at the funeral parlor. She called her father to say she’d come in around noon. Then she high-tailed it to Loma Linda for a hearty breakfast of migas and coffee.

Entering the cantina, she looked around, hoping to seat herself at Marta’s table. But Marta was nowhere to be seen. Manuel, the owner, was perched on a chair behind the cash register, same as yesterday. His shirt stretched over his belly so tightly that the buttons appeared to be losing their battle to stay fastened. Quinn strolled past him, heading for the back of the room. She

sat at a table for two, as far from occupied tables as possible, without being too obvious. Security cameras would record her movements, but, mostly, she didn't want to be overheard.

A server named Dolores came to take her order. Quinn held her menu to cover her face. "Bring me the miga platter, please. But I'm also looking for Marta. She served me here yesterday, and I have something that belongs to her."

Dolores shivered, gasped, and then whispered. "Servers come and go here. Marta probably won't be back."

"Where can I find her then?" Quinn asked, aware that she shouldn't prolong any conversation with her server.

"You can try the nail salon on Avenue O. Otherwise, I don't know." Dolores scribbled something on her order pad. "Do you want coffee?"

The Nails on O was rumored to be shady. There were numerous employees, mostly foreign-born and limited in English proficiency. Quinn had been there once or twice, and she was impressed with the steady flow of customers and the professional manners of the manicurists. But the service there was impersonal to the point of being cold. There was no way for a client to form a relationship with an employee, and that was probably by design.

Quinn picked at her migas and took a few swigs of coffee before paying the creepy Manuel Silva and leaving a tip for Dolores. Her next stop was the nail salon.

When she entered the shop, the toxic odor of polish and powder stung her nose and gave her an instant headache. Manicures weren't practical for someone who worked with formaldehyde, but she couldn't remain in the shop for more than a minute unless she signed up for service.

"I'd like a simple manicure, please. And I'd like to have Marta." A quick search of the reception area revealed no one who resembled the petite server from Loma Linda.

“We don’t have anyone named Marta. I can give you Esther.”

“Okay,” Quinn said, not wanting to give up so easily. Esther appeared from nowhere and ushered Quinn into the middle room, where rows of chairs and basins for pedicures flanked rows of tables and chairs for manicures. Quinn sat where she had a view of the curtain that separated this room from one in the back.

The music piped through speakers throughout the shop did little to calm Quinn’s nerves or soothe her headache. She had no more set her fingers into a bowl of warm, soapy water, when the woman she knew as Marta opened the curtain from the back room and peered out, an anxious expression on her face. Quinn sat up straighter, almost knocking over the finger bowl.

Marta caught her movement, and, recognizing Quinn, gave a quick nod. Then she disappeared behind the curtain.

The exchange of glances was so short-lived. Quinn wondered whether she had imagined it. She continued to let Esther tend to her cuticles while she pondered the next steps. Why had Marta been dragged out of Loma Linda, and why was she here now? Quinn had her suspicions, none of them good.

Esther worked with efficiency on Quinn’s nails, never talking, never making eye contact. Quinn wondered whether the manicurist was being paid for her labor. She could leave her a substantial tip, but perhaps she wouldn’t even be able to keep that.

The Gulf Coast island where they lived was known for tourism and balmy winters, but it had a seedy element, too, because of its proximity to open waters. Quinn knew from experience that there was a trafficking problem, and the more she thought about Marta and Esther, the more she believed they were caught up in it.

Esther shook the bottle of light pink polish that Quinn had chosen. She opened the bottle and removed the brush. Before she could take Quinn’s hand in hers to apply the polish, a loud

scream and scuffling sounds came from the back room.

Quinn jumped out of her chair and started for the curtain. Esther ran after her, shouting, "No, you cannot."

Quinn was not the type of person who listened to the word, "Cannot." She sprang forward, covering the fifteen yards in a second. She ripped the curtain aside and invaded the cavernous stockroom. Shelves of neatly stocked boxes covered the walls. The music back here was louder, but the lights were turned down low, giving the room a grim vibe. No one was there, but a large overhead door opened at the back, and plenty of action was happening there.

Another gray van, or perhaps the same one, was backed up to the door, its rear door gaping open. A stocky man was shoving Marta into the back of the van. Without reacting to Quinn's presence, the man shouted, "Get in there, you bitch."

Marta kicked and clawed, trying to stand her ground. "I'm not going. Kill me if you want, but I'm not going."

"If I had a gun, I'd shoot you this minute. Now get in the van."

A second man leaped out of the driver's seat and came around to assist.

Quinn hid behind a set of shelves and called 911. After she gave her location and the particulars of the problem, she called Mary Hallom. "Come quick, if you can," she whispered.

"Nails on O? We've been trying to bust them for ages." Mary grunted into the phone. "On my way. Be careful."

With help on the way, and a parade of nail studio employees coming after her, Quinn joined the fray at the van. "Get your hands off of her." She grabbed the man who was wrestling with Marta from the back, surprising him and his helper.

The second man grabbed Quinn from behind, trying to yank her away. The boy-girl-boy-girl taffy pull might have been comedic if it hadn't had such high stakes. The men were strong enough to overpower the women, but Marta and Quinn fought

with a strength born of desperation.

Quinn's karate background boosted her strength as she focused on her core muscles and turned herself into a human threshing machine. She threw off the man behind her with such force that he landed on the pavement, possibly out cold.

Quinn had no time to check, because the first man had Marta in a head-hold. She approached him from behind with a kick to the crotch. The man yelped and let go of Marta, grabbing at his testicles.

"C'mon." Quinn jerked Marta toward the west end of the alley. "This way." The two women ran around the pavement, into the side door of McDonald's, out through the front door, and onto the next block. They stopped to catch their breath in front of a jewelry store owned by a friend of Quinn's father.

"We'll be safe here," Quinn said, as she marched to the back of the store, gasping for breath. "Mr. Cox, there may be some bad guys after us. Okay if we hide in your vault till the police get them?"

The jeweler quickly locked his door and flipped the "open" sign to "closed." "Of course, Quinn. You can stay here as long as you'd like, you and your friend here. Would you like me to call your father to tell him you're here?"

Quinn checked the time on the antique grandfather clock in the corner. It was only eleven o'clock. "No, I don't want to alarm him. I've got time."

While Quinn and Marta made themselves comfortable in chairs in the roomy vault of the jewelry store, Mr. Cox made them some tea.

"Thank you so much, mi amiga. You saved my life today."

"I'm glad I could help you," Quinn said. "But I do have a question. In the restaurant when you spilled water on me, why, of all the customers, did you choose me?"

A grin grew into a smile on Marta's face, the first one Quinn

had seen. “Maybe you don’t know, Ms. Quinn. You are a famous lady. Like the Statue of Liberty.” She grasped Quinn’s unmanicured hand. “All the mujeres, we tell the story of how you defeated the bad guys last year. Your story gives us hope.”

Quinn started to ask how the captive women had heard of her escapades from last year, but she decided she didn’t need to know. It was enough to know that something she had done had put hope out into the world. That was part of her motivation for studying medicine.

The police, including Officer Mary Hallom, arrested the two men who had tried to take Marta away to a boat, headed for parts unknown, and picked up Manuel Silva, the owner of the van, as well.

Quinn brought Marta, whose real name was Juana Lopez, back to McFarland’s with her in time to clean up and help with the afternoon visitation. Quinn’s parents, when they heard the story of Juana’s captivity and Quinn’s heroism, offered Juana a place to stay until she got on her feet.

It turned out Juana had an exceptional aptitude for science, and she was very interested in learning the ropes in the funeral home’s “beauty parlor,” also known as the embalming room. And so it was that Quinn was able to leave McFarland’s in good hands while she went back to school to fulfill her dream.

Sharon Lynn

Death in the Drawing Room

When Lady Vivian Pacock entered the drawing room, her piercing velvet blue eyes locked on the stranger. She became what can only be described as provoked. And Lady Vivian hated being provoked.

“Simon,” she called, an uncharacteristic quaver in her voice. Clearing her throat with a dainty, “Ahem,” her subsequent call held steady. She beckoned her nephew, who was staying at the manor house that week for the Easter week festivities. “Come here.”

A blond-haired twenty-something man of medium height entered the room. His watery blue eyes followed his aunt’s gaze. Still dressed in his costume for the Shrove Tuesday Pancake Race, his appearance garnered less authority than his aunt had hoped.

“Well,” he stated, removing his mask of iridescent peacock feathers.

“Well, indeed,” she agreed. “Who is it?”

Setting the mask on the 17th-century sideboard, Simon glided smoothly to the opposite side of the room. Vivian appreciated his care to avoid touching anything. Concentration creased his brow as he considered his aunt’s question.

A middle-aged man in a purple tracksuit circa 1985 lay on the Persian rug covering the parquet floor. A curly, dark brown wig adorned with a purple headband and a -one would hope-fake mustache finished the ensemble. The intruder's neck displayed splotches of an alarming red. His eyes were sightless, and he was rather stiff.

The stranger in question no longer seemed to be a man. "It's a body," Simon confirmed. "Quite dead, I'm afraid."

Lady Vivian huffed as only a stately woman of advanced years could. That huff could bring legions to their feet.

"Why is he dead," she paused, fluttering pale pink manicured nails to indicate her elegant room, "here?" She didn't like to repeat herself, but in this case, she made an exception. "And who is it?"

Simon straightened, pulling a cell from his pocket. "Right. Didn't Uncle's friend Algie bring a policeman to the hunt a few times? We can't call just anyone."

The question snapped Lady Vivian to her typical efficiency. Settling behind her Hepplewhite mahogany desk, she opened her pink leather diary and found the requested number. "Here we are. Algernon Bray. Cousin to Detective Chief Inspector Bray. That should do, I think."

Nodding, Simon lifted his phone, waiting.

Although knowing the answer, Vivian's finger hovered over the contact information. "And you really think it's necessary?"

With a glance at the body and a nod, Simon said, "Yes, Aunt Viv. I'm afraid so. Someone will miss him." He paused, head tilted. "A racer, don't you think?"

"Don't be droll, Simon." Standing, she peered over a cloisonné pot of prize-winning orchids and viewed the body from afar. "Did you watch?"

"The race? Yes. Expected, really."

As lord of the manor, Simon held the responsibility of cheer-

ing on the racers and congratulating the winner. Despite his nonchalant answer, Vivian knew he rather liked the masks, the crowd of costumed Cotswold villagers lining the street, and the inherent silliness of the Pancake Day competition.

The contest, a ridiculous affair, required racers to carry pans and flip pancakes as they ran. Further hindered by clothing and accessory choices, including fake hair, capes, and oversized glasses, few runners actually made it to the finish line.

Simon indicated the body violating her floor and said, "This man came in first. Despite his silly hair, he had taken a methodical approach and won by a yard. The DCI will know what to do."

Reluctantly, Vivian gave him the number. She simply couldn't think of a way around it. A scandal would not do. The tabloids would have a field day spinning the event to make the tragedy her fault. A headline of 'Aristocracy Kills Village Tradition' was the last thing she needed.

As Simon worked his way through the police of command, Vivian stared out the window, hoping for inspiration. Instead, she saw a camera aimed in her direction, almost as though her thoughts manifested in paparazzi.

With great dignity, Lady Vivian strode to the window just as a flash went off. Unlatching the hasp, she thrust the casement out with rather more force than necessary. But to significant effect. The corner of the lead-framed mullioned pane caught the photographer on his forehead.

"I'm so sorry," Lady Vivian proclaimed, not sounding even a little sorry. "Why don't you come in and get ice on that? Hawthorn will meet you outside." Turning to give the impression that a butler was in the room, she said, "Won't you, Hawthorn?"

Though worded as a question, there was no doubt it was an order. The reporter stood, rubbing his head, and dutifully approached the front door. Vivian did not doubt that the manor's butler would know what to do when the bell rang.

Moments later, as Simon rang off with the police, Hawthorn's stately person opened the door. "Your guest..." Hawthorn began, then faltered, swaying from side to side.

My lord, thought Vivian. The fellow looked positively peaky. Offering assistance would only embarrass him, but something needed to be done.

"We need for you to sit down, Hawthorn," Simon commanded, apparently noticing the same weakness she had. "There has been a," he glanced at the body, "development."

Barely a flicker of relief passed over Hawthorn's face as he perched on a chair, back impeccably straight. "I see," he commented, noting the dead man.

Seeing one of her only remaining servants stumble sent a frisson of panic through Lady Vivian in a way no corpse ever could. Hawthorn and his wife had been with them for years, staying loyal even when salaries were cut. Thankfully, her nephew had the presence of mind to deal with the situation, allowing her to shift priorities.

"Two developments, actually," she corrected. "One you see before you. The other—"

"I settled the man with the camera into the library," Hawthorn provided. "As he had the look of a bolter, I took the liberty of encouraging my nephew to entertain him."

Vivian caught sight of Simon's sly smile and understood.

By "nephew," their butler meant his great-nephew Rupert. A precocious boy of eight, he could ask questions for three straight hours without tiring. Although the boy's mother, Hawthorn's niece, hadn't worked at the manor house for years, her family always came for Boxing Day. Holidays simply wouldn't be the same without children, and she always kept sweets on hand for Rupert's visits.

"Brilliant," Simon congratulated Hawthorn. "DCI Bray is on his way. Turns out he was at his cousin's home, just two villages

over.”

Hawthorn smiled. “It will be lovely to see him again.”

“Indeed,” Lady Vivian agreed. “But I’m afraid there won’t be time for niceties today. The man in the library with Rupert is a reporter, and we can’t let him leave here with the pictures he took.”

Seeing her butler regain color and composure, Lady Vivian stood. “I will deal with the interloper.” And then get someone to look after Hawthorn, she added to herself as she left the room.

Vivian paused outside the open library, listening to the conversation within.

Rupert, the darling little imp, insisted, “That doesn’t make sense. What would a bee make with pollen?”

Entering, she caught sight of the photographer rubbing a hand over his hollow cheeks, the offending camera dangling by a strap around his neck.

Compact, black, and sleek, the camera looked to Vivian’s eyes quite professional. Inwardly, she slumped. Her outward appearance, however, looked nothing short of superb.

When he caught sight of Vivian, the reporter sprang to his feet, swiping the camera behind his back. An unctuous smile accompanied his outstretched hand. He attempted to step around Rupert. “Lady Vivian Pacock, I assume. So nice to meet you. I’m Jeffery D—”

“Lady Vivian,” Rupert interrupted, running to her in three quick steps. “He thinks bees collect pollen.”

Vivian handed the child a butterscotch, which had been secreted in her quilted blazer. “Then why don’t you explain it to him, dear?”

“Oh, my favorite!” he exclaimed while unwrapping the crinkly cellophane and popping the prize in his mouth. Rolling the sweet over his tongue, he turned to Jeffery. “Bees go from flower to flower to collect nectar for honey. Pollen attaches to their legs

and falls off in other flowers, and they keep the rest to feed baby bees.” Rupert smiled. “Nectar,” he repeated, to drive the point home. “For honey.”

Having been thoroughly schooled by a tyke, the reporter struggled to keep his smile in place. The resulting grimace, accompanied by a slight tic in his cheek, was quite ghastly.

“How kind of you to join our village fete,” Vivian said in a tone that indicated the opposite meaning. “Now,” with the refinement of a swan, she glided to a rococo wingback armchair and settled. “How may I help you today?”

Jeffery, smile glued awkwardly on his face, looked hopefully at the sofa. Lady Vivian ignored the hint, and he remained standing.

“Let’s remember that it was you what invited me in.”

“Quite right. Hawthorn is on the way with tea.”

As if by magic, Hawthorn entered with the intricately carved black walnut cart.

“May I play mother? Please?” Rupert pleaded, barely waiting for Vivian’s nod. More adroit than expected, the boy poured out three cups of tea. Sneaking a glance at his great uncle, who shook his head no, Rupert took a cup and saucer first to Jeffery, then Vivian, and finally gulped the last for himself.

Jeffery stood, teacup in hand, toothy expression continuing to twitch.

The delectable scent of shortbread wafted from the tea cart, and Vivian supposed that this was the real reason for Rupert’s attentiveness. He plated a biscuit, handed it to Jeffery, and looked questioningly at Vivian, who declined. Taking most of the remaining treats, he settled on the royal blue silk sofa to watch the exchange.

Now burdened with two plates and a dangling camera, Jeffery’s demeanor started to sag.

Vivian waited for a beat before offering, “Jeffery, how do you

propose to take your tea with your hands full?" She beckoned her butler. "Hawthorn, relieve our guest of his camera so that he can enjoy tea."

Giving the short, thin reporter no choice, Hawthorn graciously removed the camera and handed it to Lady Vivian.

Clicking through the images on a tiny screen she could barely see, she wondered how Simon was doing in the drawing room.

"Rupert, dear."

The lad looked up, shortbread crumbs sticking to his lips.

"Fetch me Simon, will you?"

Continuing to look at the reporter's pictures, she refused to hold the camera further from her face or retrieve her reading glasses. She went by color as she searched. Blobs of multiple hues were probably of the race. Mostly green photos, perhaps taken outside. When she got to browns and whites, she assumed these were her drawing room. Deleting each item, she hoped she wasn't mistaken.

"You can't just do that," Jeffery complained, pointing to his camera and edging closer to her. "The BBC won't be best pleased about this treatment."

Standing, she regarded him. "Am I to understand that you are a member of the BBC press?"

Jeffery nodded, pressing on. "When they hear about—"

"Your credentials, please," Vivian asked, stepping toward him.

After a half-hearted attempt at patting his pockets, Jeffery shrugged. "I must have left my press credentials in the jam jar," he claimed, slipping into the cockney rhyming scheme for car. "I'll just nip out and get them." He set his tea and biscuit on the cart. "Back in a mo," he said as he rushed to snatch his camera.

With impeccable timing, Rupert interrupted. "Simon's on his way."

"Perfect." Lady Vivian turned to Jeffery. "Rupert will be hap-

py to accompany you while I keep this safe." She patted the camera.

With a smile, Rupert blocked the door and looked expectantly at the reporter.

Jeffery deflated and scooped a piece of shortbread into his mouth. "Alright, alright. I ain't with the BBC, not yet. But I could get there with a story like this." He puffed out again, gaining steam. "And that's private property, that is," he insisted, rapidly approaching her.

For the first time, Lady Vivian wondered how the photographer had found the body. And if he had anything to do with its position in her home.

Taking a step back, she immediately regretted giving way. The situation required that she keep the upper hand.

Pressing the advantage she allowed him, Jeffery got his long bony fingers around the camera.

Before the game of tug of war commenced, Simon entered, and Lady Vivian twisted the camera back to her.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Simon," Rupert sighed in evident relief. "This man yelled at Lady Vivian."

Pride swelled her heart. She was in complete control of the situation, obviously, but witnessing such chivalry in Rupert brought her joy.

The photographer had gotten a tad cheeky but never actually yelled. Returning to her chair, she observed how her nephew handled the scene.

Simon went into motion by asking Rupert to pour more tea. And, ask your uncle for an additional pot and scones for the detectives."

Scampering away, Rupert did as requested.

"Mr." Simon addressed the reporter. "What was your name again?"

“Dailey. Jeffery Dailey.”

“Have a seat.”

Lady Vivian thought the offer odd. Opposite of her approach of wanting to keep the man standing and uncomfortable.

Once Dailey sat, Simon remained on his feet and moved closer to the sofa. The reporter seemed to cower under her nephew’s glare. Clever, she thought.

“Why were you skulking about our flowers?”

“Skulking ain’t exactly how I would say it,” he protested.

A withering look forced an answer. “It’s my job to cover local events. I weren’t doing nothing wrong.”

Vivian cleared her throat. “Ahem.”

“The man what won the race,” Dailey pouted. “I had to take pictures, didn’t I?”

“Did you see how he came in?” Simon asked Dailey as he held his hand out to Vivian for the camera.

After handing it to him, she appreciated his grasp of technology.

“Here,” Simon said, removing the card containing the pictures. “I have a bigger screen.”

Returning the camera to Jeffery, he said, “Thank you so much for your assistance.”

As if by magic, Rupert returned, accompanied by his great uncle.

Simon lifted an inviting hand toward the door. “Hawthorn will see you out.”

“That’s mine, it is,” Dailey complained.

Vivian rose, sensing it was time for negotiation.

Approaching Jeffery, she asked, “Do you have a business card, Mr. Dailey?”

The reporter paused partway to the door, pulled out a case, and handed a card to her.

“I will have DCI Bray give you a call with the details once the

case is solved. At which time he will return this.” She indicated the picture card in Simon’s hand.

Jeffery’s eyes darted from face to face. A sly expression accompanied a sudden swagger. “Why don’t you take a look at those pictures and then put me in contact with that posh DCI? I get an exclusive interview. How’s that?”

Lady Vivian had the grace to let the reporter pretend the idea was his. “Marvelous.”

Responding to her curt nod, Hawthorn led Jeffery Dailey out of the house.

“Let’s look at these images before we turn them over to DCI Bray,” Simon suggested.

With another nod, Vivian went to a drawer and retrieved a pair of pink-framed reading glasses on a rose-gold chain.

As Simon slipped the card into a picture viewer frame, he instructed Rupert to look for a mustached man in a purple track-suit.

“There he is!” Rupert exclaimed, first to pick the subject out of the crowd.

The race proceeded in stop motion as Simon clicked through the pictures.

“Wait,” Vivian insisted, finally able to see details with her glasses. “Go back.”

Simon cocked his head, then nodded. Vivian waited for Rupert to see what she had noticed.

After a moment, he touched the screen. “The man in purple stabbed another racer with his spatula.” Rupert turned to Simon questioningly. “It’s supposed to be fun. Why would he cheat?”

“Why indeed?” Simon answered.

Rupert took the implied challenge and redoubled his examination of the photos.

An admittedly well-done shot of Simon, awarding the winner a faux-golden pancake statuette, appeared on the screen.

She would ask the reporter for a copy to help smooth things over with the man. Having the press on your side could prove helpful.

“Ooh, Simon. I like your mask,” Rupert said, before looking up at Lady Vivian. “This picture is in your garden, isn’t it?”

She nodded.

“Do you think he wanted to win to get in the house?” Rupert had a keen intellect.

The following photos were of the manor house, but a flash of purple caught her eye. Pausing, Lady Vivian leaned forward to see more clearly. The man had slipped into her greenhouse.

“Rupert,” she said, a slight buzzing in her head. “Please go to the greenhouse and check on our orchids.”

Wordlessly, he scampered away to do her bidding.

Continuing through the pictures, they came across one that appeared unintended. It displayed Dailey’s face and the top of the manor house fence. “Trespassing,” Simon noted, capturing the shot with his phone camera.

They continued to scroll until a picture showed the man they began referring to as Purple Tracksuit attempting to open the outside door to their cellar.

“Why on earth would he go in there?” Simon asked. “We don’t keep anything, do we?”

“Only the compost for the garden,” Vivian answered, the pieces falling together in her mind. “Simon, did you discover anything from the body or DCI Bray?” she needed to know.

“The police recovered a white and purple sliver of something.” He cocked his head. “And the body’s fingers were discolored.”

“Yellow?” she asked.

“Yes.”

A pit opened in her stomach as Simon offered, “Sometimes rat poison will stain fingers yellow.”

Ignoring him, she sprang in a stately fashion toward the

door. "We need Rupert," she said as the boy burst into the room.

"Your ladyship," he panted. "The orchids!"

Vivian closed her eyes and placed a steadying hand on the wall.

"All of them?"

She cultivated several rare breeds of flowers, including a collection of orchids.

Rupert shook his head. "Sorry, your ladyship, but the purple tiger stripes were pulled up. We may be able to save one."

She patted him on the head. "Thank you, Rupert. At least now we know why he was here."

The boy offered her his hand, and together they sat on the sofa.

"You think the man was trying to steal your flowers?" Simon asked.

With a sigh, she said, "I'm afraid so."

Simon added, "DCI Bray recognized him from his cousin's village as being on the Beautification Committee." He paused, and she waited for him to work out the details. "How many years has your garden tipped the competition in our village's favor for the Prettiest Cotswold Village?"

"Twelve."

"Purple Tracksuit needed to win the race to gain access to our home so he could sabotage your garden and steal the pollen from your orchids."

"Is that why the police are here? To arrest him?"

She stood, realizing that the boy didn't know about the body. "Rupert, do be a dear and check if your uncle needs any help."

Once the boy was out of earshot, Lady Vivian asked, "Did the DCI mention a name?"

"Arbogast, I believe."

Remembering the man from the Prettiest Cotswold Village awards, she nodded. "Warren Arbogast. Too competitive by

half.” With a sigh, she directed Simon. “Give DCI Bray that card you took from Dailey and guide him to the photos of Arbogast breaking in.” She added, “I deleted the pictures of our drawing room, I’m afraid.”

“No problem. They’ll be in the deleted file.” Simon headed to the door.

“And be so kind as to inquire about toothpicks.”

Several minutes later, Hawthorn and Simon returned together.

“Three vials. One of pollen, another of dirt, and a third of toothpicks,” Simon reported. “How did you know?”

“Those will be for collecting the pollen.” She pondered the vials. “The dirt is interesting. It may be the compost, of course.”

“Compost?” Hawthorn uncharacteristically inserted himself into the conversation. “Oh, dear.”

“Hawthorn? What is it?” Vivian asked, shocked at the butler’s outburst.

With a glance at her, Hawthorn explained. “The compost hasn’t been aerated this season.”

Lady Vivian gasped, eyes wide.

“Aunt Viv?” Simon asked.

“Our compost is special, partly because we allow the carbon monoxide to build. Hawthorn uses a remote-control system to stir the compost in the spring and fans to blow the gas safely out of the cellar.” Her hand fluttered to the silk scarf adorning her neck. “If Arbogast went in—”

Simon finished the thought. “He would have sucked in the odorless gas, killing himself without knowing it.” He shook his head, seeming to reject the idea. “Surely a little decomposing veg wouldn’t build up to toxic levels?”

Hawthorn explained, “No, not if it’s stirred.”

“Or worms are added,” Vivian contributed. “But we found that our flowers thrive when we let the mixture off-gas for a cou-

ple of months before aerating.”

Simon nodded. “That would explain Hawthorn’s stumble this morning. If monoxides leaked into the hallway when Arbogast opened the door,” he reasoned, “Hawthorn could have inhaled a dose.”

“I will inform the detective,” Hawthorn intoned, leaving the room.

As tension released from her shoulders, Lady Vivian raised her eyebrows to her nephew, asking for a final comment.

“Well, Arbogast’s pollen and he can’t get up. I am glad we got to the root of the problem. Thieves will rue the day they try to steal from you, Aunt Viv.”

Hiding a smile, Lady Vivian responded, “Don’t be droll, Simon.”

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Sharon Michalove

Leaving Cleveland

“You’re never home, Lane.” Hands on hips, Josie glares.

In the background, the TV news shows photos of five dead women.

I can feel heat at the top of my head, a bright red beacon.

“When you married me, you knew what life would be like, hooking up with a cop.” I grab a bottle of water from the coffee table and slosh it over my head. Icy liquid sluices under my collar, down my neck, back, and chest.

“That was before we had kids. Now...”

The news reader’s voice cuts through Josie’s complaint. “A serial killer stalks the streets of Cleveland.”

I snort at the purple prose.

“Police are stymied by the deaths of these five women, all named some variant of Hollie Mann. Anyone with knowledge of these crimes should call the Witness Hot Line. A reward is available for information that leads to apprehension of the murderer.”

“You’re not paying an attention, Lane,” Josie snaps, hitting the off button on the remote.

When my cell rings, she stomps out of the room.

I hear her down the hall of our one-story, two-bedroom house in the West Park neighborhood of Cleveland. “It’s okay,

boys. Go back to sleep. Your dad needs to go out.”

“But Mom...”

“You’ll see him in the morning.”

She’s probably qualifying that in her own head. How many times have I still been out on a call when they’re on their way to school?

The interruption breaks the tension in the room, but hearing Josie’s words to the boys, my body slumps and a headache colonizes the space behind my eyes.

I call up the stairs. “Have to go, Josie. Not sure what time I’ll be back.”

“What a surprise.”

My spine tingles at the low growl that accompanies her response.

As a homicide detective in the Division of Investigations of the Cleveland Division of Police, the call is an invitation I can’t refuse—but the party will include police cruisers, an ambulance, yellow crime-scene tape to create the outer barrier and red to block off close to the scene.

Still stewing, I arrive at the site, slam on the brakes, and hop out of the car. My still-damp shirt sticks to my bare skin as the fabric dries and I pull at the itchy material. The Cuyahoga County Medical Examiner has just arrived and pulls his Cadillac in behind my Subaru Forester.

Dr. Malcolm Jones, the ME for the last fifteen years, has seen it all, but still sounds bright and eager, unlike me. “Another one, Fairchild?”

I shrug. “The call just said dead woman and the address. If she is another one...” I pause, then casually observe, “The screwy part is that four of the five dead women changed their names.”

“Changed their names? Why?”

With a shrug, I say, “Who knows? Maybe they liked Hollie Mann better. Or they wanted to pretend to be married to a big-

deal football star.”

“And none of them were married? Just a single woman’s dream guy?” Never married, with a face suitable for a Halloween mask, his lip curls to show just what he thinks of that.

“Nah. Most of them were married—or divorced.”

“Glad I only deal with dead bodies.” Doc chuckles.

Women are dying. Women named Hollie Mann. Or Holli. Holly. Even Holley. The killer doesn’t discriminate. We’ve found five bodies so far, women between the ages of twenty-five and forty. Who knew there were so many of them? This is the sixth. If she’s another Hollie.

As we walk up the narrow sidewalk to steps that lead to the open front door, our shoulders bump and I drop back. Techs hand us shoe covers and gloves before we step over the door sill. The body is on the floor between the kitchen and the living room. Nearby, a broken cup lies on its side, liquid soaking into the sculptured aqua carpeting.

Jones grabs one of the techs. “Make sure you collect some of that spillage.”

“Already did. We used an eyedropper to get some.” He holds up a stoppered test tube in a labeled plastic bag. “Then we used blotting paper to get more.” Another plastic baggie was the second exhibit, both clearly labeled. There was a third baggie with carpet clippings. The evidence person would quickly remove and put them in a drying hood to avoid contamination.

Assuming this was the same killer, the “tea” will include water hemlock. Easily found growing in local wetlands, the highly poisonous weed is hard to kill. I have it in my own yard. A small amount kills quickly, but not painlessly.

The ME puts a hand on my shoulder as he brushes past me, then kneels to look at the dead woman. Her eyes are open, and her body contorted. Just like all the Hollies. He holds one wrist, then has a tech turn the body over to take her temperature. “Vic-

tim pronounced dead at ten-fifteen p.m.”

Vomit is everywhere. Another tech gathers more samples. I squeeze past into the kitchen. A square cream envelope sits on the counter next to the sink. Someone has positioned an open card with a teapot and cup on the front nearby, a torn tea packet lying on top. Available in boxes of fifty at any drugstore, the envelope has no stamp or postmark. The whole thing looks like a display, just for us.

Typed across the face is “Hollie Mann. Requested Free Tea Sample.” Even though the Hollies don’t all spell their first name the same, the killer is consistent. All the envelopes are from the same printer. Self-sealing. Hand delivered. The killer must wear gloves, probably nitrile, since the only fingerprints are those of the victim.

I would bet they were all done at the same time. If we could find them, we’d know how many killings the murderer planned. Nothing’s that easy. A deep gust of air mixed with frustration bursts through my chest, tearing at my throat. The exhale blasts out just as the tech comes up.

“Sorry.”

“No biggie, sir.” He wipes a sleeve over his face, then grabs paper evidence bags for various items. Each will be taped, labeled, and signed across the seal.

Did the murderer come to each scene and arrange the evidence, like stage sets? The first two were before my boss assigned me to the case, so I only saw photos. But they are eerily alike, down to the china cups. They are a common pattern. A vision of Josie comes up. We have cups like these.

Once the ME’s guys finish the examination of the immediate area, Jones tells them to bag the body and take it to the morgue. “See you at the autopsy.” He gives a little wave and walks out to his car.

My phone beeps. Prepared for a text from my boss, Com-

mander Nathan Ellis, it's from Josie.

JOSIE: Kids and I going to mom and dad's house. Not sure when we'll be back.

ME: Please don't...

Then I'm interrupted but inadvertently hit send as I stuff the device back into my pocket, so I pull it back out. Maybe the two words will be enough. She doesn't respond.

"Hey, Lane. Come check this out." My counterpart in the district calls me over to the coffee table.

Even though officers mill around, the room looks drained now that Jones and the body are gone. Officer Grier Roosevelt stands near the taped body outline that is still on the floor. "Looks like someone else was here with her." He points to the coffee table, where another teacup and saucer sat.

"How would you explain it?"

"Maybe the killer couldn't clean up."

"Why this time? There was nothing like it at the other crime scenes."

"Panicked. Screwed up." He never moves beyond the obvious.

"Maybe this was the intended victim. The others might have been a blind. Seems like the killer stuck around to see her die."

"Why leave the cup?"

"If there aren't any prints or other physical evidence, this could be the killer thumbing his or her nose at us."

"Must be a woman. Poison is a woman's MO."

"Seriously, Grier? There have been plenty of male poisoners—H. H. Holmes, Michael Swango, Graham Young, Neil Cream..."

Roosevelt gives a snort, the seams on his face seemingly a map of disgruntlement. "Okay, you made your point. You sure like to make things complicated." He rolls his eyes and stuffs his hands into pants pockets.

When the theme from “Hill Street Blues” rings out, I walk out onto the concrete steps and pull my phone back out. “Hey, Commander.”

Ellis’ gravelly voice comes over the line. “Another one, Lane?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it the soap star?”

“Nope. All we know so far is that she’s Holli with just an ‘i’ and she lives on 18th Street.”

“Crap. We can expect at least one more, then.”

I don’t agree, but I don’t argue either. Ellis is convinced all these killings are just.

“Stop by in the morning and brief me.”

“Eight a.m. okay?”

“Make it nine. Have to drop the kids at school tomorrow. Elaine’s out of town.”

“Sure. See you then.” Phone back in my pocket, I force my steps back into the house and stared at the taped outline where the body had been. Fluids were soaked into the carpet, and I wish we could open the windows to vent the sour smell—vomit, urine, tea, and the indefinable odor of death.

Back in the house, men check every room, bagging up evidence, dusting for fingerprints. Sergeant Philips slouches over in my direction. “Everything’s under control. Go home. Come at it fresh. We’ll be hours yet.”

Home. To my empty house. My car sits alone at the curb, so I walk out to keep it company.

Both the sheer curtains and the drapes are wide open, but no lights show in the house when I pull into the driveway. My finger wanders to the opener, but I pull back. No point in parking in the garage for the few hours before I head back to work. Wet grass soaks my shoes as I cut across the lawn. The key sticks in the lock and I wiggle it back and forth, endlessly fiddling, before it

finally clicks. Josie's been on me for weeks to spray with WD40, but I never find the time. The honey-do list is long. One of the many sore points between us. Lately, she's been playing "Cat's in the Cradle" as soon as I open the door, to remind me I'm neglecting the boys. Much as I like Harry Chapin, not sure I'll ever willingly listen to that again.

When I switch on the hall light, a minor earthquake erupts in my chest. The living room, usually a scene out of a mass destruction movie, is pristine, reminding me of alien abduction. Not a toy in sight. The dog's bed, MIA. Even though it's just been a couple of hours, the whole place smells of dust and discarded lives, as if the abandonment is months old.

Ribbed wet footprints are the only sign that someone lives here. I slip off my sloppy shoes and carry them to the mat in front of the door. Then I retrace my steps, as if my socks will sop up all the wetness.

In the kitchen, I shove a package of popcorn into the microwave, grab two bottles of Carling Black Label, and turn on the TV. TCM has "Witness for the Prosecution." I settle in with my snacks and fall asleep during the courtroom scene. When my phone jangles, I tumble off the couch and land on a sea of kernels. At least the rolling beer bottles are empty.

My eyes blur, lashes wet and sticky. I can't read the screen and the ringtone is just the regular one. "Yeah?" I ground out.

"Lane? It's Vera Donaldson."

Josie's mom? Clearing my throat, I force politeness into my voice. "Uh, hi, Vera." Then I remember that Josie and the boys are there. "Josie and the boys got in okay?"

"Nice of you to show some concern for your family." Her wintery tone makes my face sting like she's sandpapering my skin.

I run a hand over my scalp. When I started going bald, shaving my head seemed like a no brainer. Josie loves it. Well, she did. Now I don't know if she loves anything about me.

I start to respond. "Look..."

She cuts me off.

"We've told Josie she and the boys can have a home with us for as long as they want."

I hear the subtext. She wants Josie to divorce me. My solar plexus throbs like she socked me in the gut. Vera and Ken never approved of her marrying a cop, especially one from Cleveland. They've pushed for years to have us move to small-town Michigan and now's their chance to lure Josie home for good.

How soon can I get to their place in Sherburne? I stub on the enormous boulder of reality. I have a major murder case. Absently, I pick up one of the beer bottles and hurl it against a wall. The crack of the glass is so loud, even Vera hears it.

"What was that? Is someone shooting at you?" She sounds shaken, as if she might even care.

I ignore the question. "Put Josie on."

"She's asleep. And so are the boys. They were exhausted by the time they got here. We told her to come this morning, but she insisted on leaving last night. Six hours, over six." The accusation is sharp and bitter.

"Tell her to call me. I need to get to work."

"That's your whole life. Your family is like a flea on a dog in comparison."

Sweat collects on my back, dampening the clean shirt I've just finished buttoning. Her bitter tone and scolding words up my guilt-o-meter to a million.

I lash out in self-justification. "Six murders," I yell as she hangs up. It doesn't make me feel any better.

A new day, a new murder, but no new leads. Copies of The Plain Dealer and The News-Herald sit on my desk, trumpeting the failures of the police, of me. There is a certain amount of fear-mongering, although only women named Hollie Mann are

being targeted.

I page through the latest report. The fingerprints on the cup are from the victim. The only new piece of evidence is a long blonde hair. We have a hair from one of the other murders, so the lab will do comparison microscopy to see if the two samples are from the same person. DNA tests would take months.

At nine a.m. sharp, I rap my knuckles against the chief's door.

"Don't stand on ceremony, Fairchild." He's leaning back in his chair, rolling back and forth, hands behind his head. I walk into a heat wave. The chief keeps his office at hot-yoga temperature. Drops of sweat roll from the top of my head down my neck.

I drop into the wooden chair on the other side of his fourth-hand wooden desk and stare at cracks and splinters that scar the surface to keep me from having to meet his eye.

"Round the clock surveillance started this morning on Hollie Mann."

I wince. Yeah, there were still many of these women, but I know this one is the wife of wide-receiver Jonathan Mann, a blazing comet in the NFL firmament. Her own career in the TV soap, "Reaching the Shore," is pretty stellar too. But I'm not convinced.

Nathan's piercing blue eyes lock onto mine. "Look, she's the most high-profile of the women who are left."

"Eight women." I stick out my chin. "The next victim could be any of them."

"We can't offer surveillance on all of them. Besides, Jon called this morning to ask for protection for her."

"He can hire security. This makes us look bad."

With a snort, Nathan runs his fingers through thick, curly gray hair. "You don't turn down Jon Manning. The mayor decided. Live with it."

With a nod of resignation, I turn and walk back to my desk, piled high with initial reports, and dig into the backgrounds of

the possible victims.

I stare at the Facebook page of Holly Mann #12 and a chill hits me. She's blonde, chunky, with blotchy skin. Definitely not the soap star, but her bio states that Jonathan Mann is her husband.

We detail two teams of cops to watch Jonathan Mann's wife. One follows her and the other keeps watch on the mansion they own in Edgewater, on the West Side of the city. Their six-bedroom Georgian is right on Lake Erie.

She calls to complain. The conversation is long and tedious.

"I don't need the police trailing me around."

"Your husband asked us," I explain, yet again.

"I'll get him to call off the hounds."

But he doesn't.

By the end of the day, Hollie has gone out three times, once meeting friends for lunch, once going to a nursery for plants, and now out for dinner with her husband. No one suspicious has been anywhere near the house.

My concentration shot, I should go home, but I dread the emptiness. No calls or messages from Josie. After I toy with the idea of asking someone out for a drink, I realize I've grown away from my old friends and made no new ones. Shrugging on the sports jacket that has graced the back of my chair since early morning, I pat my pockets for keys. A heavy hand falls on my shoulder and I whirl to face the intruder.

Six foot five and built like a heavyweight wrestler, Damon Edwards is the happiest guy I know. His slow smile calms the jump in my chest. "Scared ya, huh?"

"Jeez, Dozer. Almost dropped dead right there." I point to a permanent stain on the floor we call the Death Spot, even though the reason is lost in the mists of time.

His chortle fills the room. "Don't worry, man. You got lots

more years.”

My spine slumps at the weight of the comment. Without Josie and the boys, all I’ve got is the job. Not sure that’s enough anymore.

“Goin’ to Zone Car, want to come?”

“Sure. Nothing else to do tonight.”

The place is full of cops. Not surprising since the bar is really a social club for the Cleveland Police Patrolmen’s Association. Golf outings, cigar and comedy nights. It’s the go-to place for Cleveland law enforcement. Not a cop? Forget it unless you have a pal to bring you.

After a glance at the Black and White with the Bud Light sign shining over it, we mosey back to the red-topped bar and get a couple of beers. The noise level means no conversation, which keeps my brood going. Brief snips of conversation swirl around us. A sudden lull in the noise allows a strident voice to blare out, “if a bunch of smoke eaters get laid off, are they technically considered fired?” Appreciative laughter swirls around the room.

Dozer leans over and puts his mouth to my ear. “Being a fireman is the only profession where you have to wake up to go home.”

I snort.

“That’s it, Kid, smile.”

I wince at the unfortunate nickname. In school, I was Strong Arm for my pitching prowess. I went to Ohio State on a baseball scholarship but never made it to the majors. As one of the youngest detectives, I got rechristened Kid, and it stuck.

Beers downed, we have a second round, then move out of the crowd into the cool evening air. In the distance, sirens cry out from fire trucks, ambulances, and cop cars. The usual mix of violence, arson, and emergency medical events.

Under a streetlamp, I catch Dozer eying me. “Want some dinner?” He asks.

Now I'm suspicious. Does he somehow know that Josie took off for Michigan with the kids? I haven't told anyone. My stomach growls.

"Yeah, sure. I could use some food."

We head over to XYZ Tavern for a quieter venue, both opting for the brisket-laden Cleveland Cheesesteak with homemade potato chips. Their beer selection is extensive. Dozer decides on draft Fat Tire, and I go for a bottle of North Coast Old Russian Imperial Stout. We clink glass to bottle and take deep swallows.

"Spill, Kid," he says after his second mouthful slides down.

"Spill what?"

"Somethin's wrong. You're walkin' around with your chin dragging the floor." His keen, almost black eyes rake over me.

"Just the Hollie case." Not a lie, just half the truth. The case is smothering me like a wet, weighted blanket.

"Being reluctant to go home is never tied to a case. What else, man?"

Shit. Dozer proves again that he's one of the smartest detectives on the force. My mind spins around several other explanations before I collapse like a punctured balloon.

"Josie took the kids up to Michigan."

"To see her folks?"

I scratch my head. "Yeah."

Eyes narrowed, he finishes his beer and waves a hand at the bartender. "Two more," he tells him. A few minutes of silence later, my second bottle and his new glass are set down. I draw my finger through some spilled beer before the guy's back, handing me a couple of napkins and wiping the table.

"You told me once that she didn't like living here."

"Josie'd like to move back to Sherburne. Safer, she thinks, and a small-town environment for the boys. Her parents have been pushing for it, too. Don't like that she's married to a big city cop."

“Lookin’ around?”

I shake my head no. “Not so far, but she’s not leaving me much choice if I want to have a marriage.”

“My advice...”

I know all about his three marriages and two divorces. With a growl, I hold up my hand. “No advice. I’ll figure it out.”

We eat our sandwiches and swill the beer. Then he drops me off at my car and I make the lonely drive home.

Next day starts out quiet. My primary activity outside paper-work is walking back and forth for coffee and donuts. Mostly, I wait for Josie to get in touch. Mid-afternoon, my phone rings with her number on the screen. Heart pounding, I swipe to accept.

“Dad?” Mike’s five-year-old treble comes over the line.

“Hi big guy. Did your mom call for you?”

“Nah. Her phone was on the counter, and I just asked Siri to call you.”

“Smart aleck.” Not sure how Josie will feel about him calling me, though. “You and Jamie okay?”

“Yeah, but we miss you.”

“I miss you too. Your mom say anything about coming home soon?”

“Nah. And grandma and grandpa keep saying they hope we’ll stay here forever.”

That’s bad. I clear my throat. “Do you want to stay there?”

“Not if you’re not here.”

“What if I was?”

“That would be cool.”

Jaw clenched to keep from shouting, I stay silent.

“Da-a-a-d...”

“Buck up, kiddo.” I pause, uncertain about my next move. But when Josie’s voice replaces Mike’s, she’s in control.

“Lane? I can’t believe you called.”

“I didn’t.” My protest falls on deaf ears.

“Then why are you on the phone with Mike?”

“Mom, mom, I called.” I can picture him pulling at her sleeve.

“Don’t be mad.”

I hear a catch in her throat. “It’s okay, Mikey. Just let me talk to your dad.”

Mike yells, voice fading as he moves away. “Tell him to come here. We miss him.”

“Is that an option?” I can’t seem to speak above a whisper.

“You mean for a visit, or permanently?”

“What are you thinking, Josie? Are you asking me to find a job up there?”

Silence.

“Josie?”

“Sorry. I was nodding. Guess you can’t see that.” Her laugh sounds nervous and self-conscious.

I smile, even though she can’t see it. “It’s too hard to do this on the phone.”

“Come for the weekend.” Her soft voice hits me in the chest, sounding wistful with longing.

“I can’t...”

She breaks in, voice sour as a lemon. “Work. I know.”

“Leave the boys with your folks and come down here.”

I sound like a whiny asshole. When did I become that guy?

“No, you need to come here.”

“Josie, I have a case with six murders. Can’t just drop it and run up to Michigan.”

“Of course not.” Sudden silence. She’s hung up.

Footsteps sound. When I look up, Chief Ellis leans on my desk, a scowl darkening his face.

“Just got a call from Hollie Mann. Let’s go.”

Two black and whites rumble as they wait for us. I climb into

one and the chief takes the other. They tear out of the lot, sirens howling like demented wolves.

Fifteen minutes later, we walk into Jonathan and Hollie Mann's mansion. Three cars, blue lights rotating, sit at the curb. Someone parked a black Tesla at an angle in the driveway. A visitor. Hollie drives a white Beemer. Jon has a Maserati. Red, of course.

Floodlights eliminate the shadows and heighten the drama of the scene.

As Nate and I walk toward the open doorway, my gut clenches. Maybe he was right after all.

The chief hangs in the doorway, talking to a couple of the guys while I walk into the scene. I expect a repeat of all those other times. What meets our eyes is totally different.

Hollie Mann perches on a gold brocade couch, droplets of blood spattered over a silky white blouse. Her sleeves are shredded, scratch marks on her arms, but no cat is in sight. She screeches out some kind of guttural accusation, but her words are unintelligible.

Another woman slumps on the matching settee across the room, face resting in her hands. The sergeant nods in her direction. "Holly Mann."

The blonde on the couch snarls. "I'm Hollie Mann. That bitch just says she is."

My eyes widen in disbelief as I take in the disheveled woman, brown hair hanging loose from what's left of an updo. Dressed in an oversized long-sleeved aqua T-shirt that says "I Run for Life" and black nylon track pants, she seems almost comatose. Instead of scratches, she has several rents in the shirt with blood seeping through. They may be from the serrated knife lying near her blood-spattered Nikes.

"Did you separate them when you entered, or were they al-

ready sitting down?”

My sergeant frowns. “They were rolling on the floor, trying to control the knife, screaming, pulling hair. We pried them apart, but we had to go after them twice more when they went at each other again.”

“Why is the knife still there?”

“Last place it landed. We’re waiting for the CSI.”

“Did you take pictures?”

“Yeah.” He holds up his phone.

“Home-invading bitch.” Blonde Hollie spits at her visitor. Brunette Holly doesn’t respond.

Nathan walks in and states the obvious. “One must be the intended victim and the other the murderer.”

Both women raise their heads and shakily point to each other.

On the coffee table midway between them are two cups, both overturned, liquid still dripping onto the Persian rug that covers much of the golden oak hardwood floor.

A square envelope is ripped open, but I can see the typed words “Hollie Mann. Requested free tea sample.” The edges of the envelope and the accompanying card are wet on the edges, where the puddle of liquid has wicked into the paper.

Dark Holly keens, the whine plucking at my nerves like untuned guitar strings. I want to yell “shut it,” but the thrum of a high-powered engine adds to the external noise. Light Hollie stiffens, then, one vertebra at a time, softens into a relaxed posture. Dark Holly tenses and swivels her head, poised for the next threat.

A deep baritone growl reverberates through the room. “Get out of my way.” A massive six-five and about 230 pounds, Jon Mann, face red and contorted, shoulders past the officers and pounds over to his wife. “What the hell is going on?” The refrigerator-sized wide receiver collapses onto the couch and snakes

an arm around his trembling blonde wife, nuzzling her neck and whispering softly.

“It’s okay. No one’s going to hurt you now.”

Gone is the relaxed posture of a few seconds ago. Shoulders tight, rapidly reddening face, like Mount Etna ready to blow. Tears leak from her eyes, lower lip pinned between impossibly white, even teeth, suddenly stained by a droplet of red.

Jon pulls her closer. “What happened, baby girl?” He strokes her golden blonde head. I can’t help wondering if it’s natural or a great dye job.

Before she can say anything, his glare spikes into us. A grunt rises from his broad chest. “Fucking assholes. You guys were supposed to protect her. Should’ve hired some professionals rather than trust you bunch of incompetents. The city should fire you all.” He swings his free arm around, fist clenched like he wants to land a punch. “Where the hell were you when this maniac attacked my Hollie? Sleeping or out eating donuts? Sure as hell not doing your job.”

Several EMTs rush into the room. Mann has to be pried away from his wife’s side so the medics can check her out. Neither woman wants to be taken to the ER, but EMTs clean and bandage wounds, then dole out painkillers. Dark Holly pulls her hair into a neater bun. Light Hollie makes no effort to remedy her disheveled appearance, like she wants to prove she’s the victim, not the aggressor.

Nathan moves closer, arms folded across his chest. “We need to take this to the station. Put them in separate cars.”

The CSI walks in and establishes authority over the scene. “Okay guys. Move out. I need to take some photos.” She turns to Nathan. “Chief, are you taking the women to the station now?”

“Yeah.” He strides out but I wait until both Hollies, cuffed and accompanied by an officer, are out. I walk with Jon Mann. “You can ride with me unless you want to take your car and fol-

low us.”

“I’ll do that. Easier to get Hollie home once we’re done.”

Where does he get that overblown confidence? The assurance that everything will go his way? This guy is positive that his wife will come home with him. That his fame, and maybe hers, will protect them from any consequences. Maybe it will.

Neighbors line the sidewalk and the street, the comments of the crowd swelling into a wave of noise. A couple of women try to rush up to Hollie, or maybe Holly, but our guys hold them back while we put them into separate cars.

Once each is in the backseat of a vehicle, I climb into a squad car, and we make a procession down to the District 1 station to the sound of yells and catcalls. Once there, each is placed in a separate interrogation room. Nathan and I go to his office to drink coffee and talk strategy.

Our shoes click against the tiled hallway as we move into the small space. We’re in an eight-by-ten soundproofed room. A rectangular table has three chairs. Holly sits on one side, her chair bolted to the floor. Cuffs are attached to the front legs, but we aren’t using them. The floor is sealed concrete for easy clean-up.

Nathan and I face her, close to glowering. She shifts uncomfortably. Perfect. The two cameras and the microphone are high on the walls, almost hugging the ceiling, out of viewing range of seated suspects.

“This interview is being recorded.” Each word drops from my mouth like a stone.

“Nine-o-one p.m. Present are Commander Nathan Ellis, Detective Lane Fairchild investigating officers.”

I’m the lead. “Please state your full name.”

“Holly Mann.”

“No middle name?”

She shakes her head no.

“Please speak your response for the recording.”

“No middle name,” she says, breath whistling on a wheeze.

“Please spell it.”

“H-o-l-l-y M-a-n-n.”

“Is that your legal name?”

Her face creases. “Yeah, why?”

“Did you change it from something else?”

Now she glares. “No. You can check my birth certificate. I’ve always been Holly Mann.”

Nathan asks, “Have you ever claimed to be the wife of Jon Mann?”

Defiantly, she crosses her arms. “What if I did? It was just a joke. A friend dared me to put it on Facebook.”

Once we collect the rest of the personal info, Nathan says, “In your own words, tell us what happened.”

Holly leans forward, elbows on the tabletop, chin resting on fists. This makes her mumble.

“Please speak clearly for the recording,” I tell her.

She straightens with a groan. A film obscures her reddened eyes. “About five-thirty, just as I was pulling things out of the fridge for dinner, the phone rang. Unknown number. Usually I just ignore those, but for some reason I answered. She said she was Hollie Mann, and I recognized her voice from the TV.” A sniffle interrupts. “Do you have some tissues?”

I open the door and ask the cop at the door to get some. He’s back in less than a minute with a newly opened box and a small plastic trashcan. I put them both on the table and push them close to her.

“Thanks.” She blows her nose and squeezes the tissue in her fist. Then she rubs a cuff over her swollen orbs. “Anyway, she told me she was scared about being the next victim and that she was reaching out. I was surprised when she invited me over. I

guess I was the random Holly that she found. When I got there, we sat and talked for a while, then she offered to make tea.”

Holly looks toward the door like she’s afraid someone will walk in. I think about snapping my fingers to get her attention, but she blinks, then leans even farther over the table. Her voice is low, confiding. “That’s when I got suspicious. She put one cup down and handed me the other. I wondered why she was being so particular if both held the same drink. So I put it on the table next to the other cup and asked her about a picture on the wall. When she looked over at it, I switched the cups.”

Nathan nods encouragingly. “Then what?”

She swallows a couple of times. “I think she must have noticed because she didn’t pick up her cup. Then she accused me of putting something in her tea. I told her I didn’t, but she started cursing and came at me with a knife that she must have hidden between the couch cushions. All I had were my fingernails. Amazing how the fabric shredded. I thought silk was a tough fabric, but this came apart like tissue paper.” She gave a nervous giggle. “I have long nails.” She displayed claw-like appendages. “Then I just fought as hard as I could to get the knife.”

Reaching for another tissue, she says, “The police outside must have heard the shouting because they stormed in. By then I had several cuts and she had scratches all over her arms and face.” Reaction sets in, and she starts to shake with sobs.

“Interview concluded at nine-thirty p.m.” I turn off the recorder. “We’re going to have your statement typed up, Holly. Do you want water while you wait?”

With a gulp, she gets control back. “That would be great. Thanks.”

Outside the room, I find someone to bring her a bottle.

“That was quite the tale,” Nathan says. “Now let’s hear the other side of the story.”

The scene in the interview room down the hall contrasts in

every way from the one we just left. I'm surprised that Hollie has still made no attempt to neaten up. You'd think being a TV star would make her want to look good. The marks on her face are livid against her pale skin. Her mouth twists into a snarl as we enter and go through the same rigamarole that we did with Holly.

"Did you arrest the bitch? Is she locked away?" Her screech is like a murder of crows, scratching my last nerve.

"You are both here for statements. No arrests have been made." Nathan seems calm, except for the telltale twitch in his cheek. "Tell us what happened when Holly arrived at your house."

"What, no Miranda?" Her voice is scratchy.

"You haven't been arrested," Nathan says mildly.

"I want my lawyer."

"Again, you haven't been arrested. But you can have a lawyer if you want."

"I want Jon," she shouts.

"Sorry, but he'll be waiting to see you once we have your statement of what happened."

"Where's your notebook?"

"We're recording the interview," I tell her.

Hollie starts to get up, but the chair is too close to the table and the wall. No way for her to move. "Can't sit," she whines. "I need to move around."

"The sooner we get this over with, the sooner you can move." Nathan, rigid on the ladder-back wooden chair, drums his fingers on the table.

"Describe what happened."

"My doorbell rang, and this woman walked in."

"You let her in?"

"The door wasn't locked. She just came in."

Interesting. With cops at the door, unlikely.

“Didn’t say a word. Stalked into my living room, plunked herself down on a chair, and ...”

“And what?”

“She waved an envelope around. ‘I have your free tea sample,’ she said. I told her I hadn’t requested any tea. Then she tried to hand me the envelope, but I wouldn’t take it, even though my name was typed on the front. She threw it in my face, then sat back down.” Twisting her fingers together, she looked every inch the television diva, emoting like her life depended on it.

“Who do you think you are? she said.” Hollie wrings her hands. “My jaw dropped. She’s some stranger, sitting in my house, asking me who I am. WHO I AM.” She gives a weird little laugh.

“What did you say?” I ask.

“Hollie Mann. I’m Hollie Mann.”

“No, she says, I’m Holly Mann. You’re just a wannabe.” Her throat works. “Get out of my house, I screamed. But she just came for me with some kind of bread knife she had in her purse.”

“So the serrated knife was hers.”

“Of course.”

“What about the tea?”

“Oh, that. I guess I forgot. When she first came in and sat down, she handed me the envelope and suggested we taste the tea together. If I liked it, she’d take my order. When I came back, she started haranguing me. Threw the cup and accused me of trying to poison her. While I tried to pick up the broken pieces, she came at me with the knife. Eventually, your officers arrived and broke up the fight. And then you came.”

With so many changes in her story, we went back over the details. Hollie’s retellings became more and more confused. Finally, we left the room, leaving her alternately making threats and crying for her husband.

"I think we need to go back in there and tell her we know she's the murderer. See how she reacts." Nathan's drooping jowls and the crinkled lines in his forehead signal his distress. He had been so sure.

"Yeah, all topsy-turvy,

"Yeah, I know. Obvious for sure. Maybe we should talk to the husband before going back in there."

"He's pretty sore, but if we can get him to think about her behavior over the last few weeks, there might be some clues. A wedge to open her up.

Jon overwhelms the interview room, both with his size and a whiff of the locker room, that covers the usual smell of disinfectant. We decide to take him up to Nathan's office, where there's more air.

The chief turns on the recording equipment and we're off to the races.

Before we can ask him anything, he says, "wife is perfectly normal."

"Did she express any fears about all these murders?"

"Not really. She might have said something once or twice about how weird it was, but she didn't seem worried."

"So you didn't have any conversations?"

"I'm not home all that much, but no."

"And you weren't concerned that a killer might target your wife?"

Jon Mann glowered, his eyes like coals under shaggy brows. "Can't imagine anyone wanting to hurt that sweet girl."

"So no worries at all."

"Me and Hollie, uh, we have kind of an open marriage. I pay the bills and she looks good on my arm. We don't have a lot of heart to hearts."

"Why did you ask for police surveillance if you weren't worried?"

“Isn’t that what a husband is supposed to do?”

We have an officer walk him to the lounge.

Nathan turns to me in disgust. “Crap. This is becoming a French farce.”

Nathan’s doctorate in English is showing. In the privacy of the office, I drop into comfortable banter. “Hey, don’t throw that fancy education at me.”

“Should have made you read that stuff when you were in my academy class.” He smirks.

He turns serious. “Charge them both with assault.” Then he waves me out and slams the door.

Both women are out on bail when we get an early morning call. It’s Jon Mann. He’s so choked up that I can hardly understand him.

“She’s dead. You need to come to the house.”

When we get to the Edgewater estate, the scene is much like the last visit. Jon Mann sits on the couch, head in his hands. A dark-haired woman lies on the floor, eyes open, in a pool of blood. There is a bullet hole in her forehead.

“Where’s your wife, Mr. Mann?”

He looks at me through spread fingers. “Somewhere in the house. Not sure.” His voice is thick and slow.

“Did she shoot Ms. Mann?”

“Guess so. I wasn’t here.”

“Where were you?”

“Out drinking with some guys. We picked up a couple of ladies. Was out all night. Got home to find this.” He gestures at the dead woman.

The door between the kitchen and the living room slams against the wall. Hollie Mann, dressed in a slinky dress, hair artfully curled, face in full war paint, faces us with a Glock held stiffly in front of her. It’s like an old-time western gunfight, ex-

cept it's taking place in a swanky living room, with a dead woman on the floor.

"I told you not to call the cops." The blond woman's high-pitched shriek could shatter glass.

"How did you get her to come back here?" I ask.

"You guys really cramped my style with all that blue around. Had to think of something else. Her face morphs into a slow, satisfied smile. "I told her that you two were back and needed to see both of us. She was so stupid that she believed me. I shot her from the kitchen door when she moved into the living room."

She had lowered the gun, and now she snaps it up, finger on the trigger. "I grew up in Louisiana and my mamma taught me to shoot, after she shot my daddy."

I open my mouth to say something, but Nathan shakes his head.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the sergeant pull out his service weapon. He's fast, but she's faster. By the time he's squeezed off a shot, she's gotten off two. The sounds could be from anywhere. I feel searing pain and warm liquid oozing down my arm. Hollie Mann has crumpled to the floor, dead. Jon Mann, a surprised expression on his face, has a bullet hole in his chest. As I watch, he topples forward, head hitting the glass-topped coffee table.

Everything is slo-mo video until I black out.

Josie's holding my hand when I open my eyes.

"Can't believe you're here." I croak like an old-guy frog.

"Dozer called and told me what happened."

"Are you back?"

"Just for now. I'm leaving Cleveland."

The pain that hits me is worse than being shot. "No hope, then?"

The pain in her eyes rips into me, but her words are a sur-

prise. “There’s always hope.”

The door to the room is open and I hear whispering in the hall. Then the pounding of feet, along with shrill cries.

“Dad, dad.” Mike and Jamie run up to the bed.

“No jumping.” Josie’s tone is firm, but I hear a smile underneath.

“Mom says we’re leaving Cleveland.” Mike is the self-appointed spokesman.

I push a button on the remote lying by my right hand. The bed raises up while I gaze at the wide eyes of my two precious boys. Once I’m sitting up, I put the solemn question.

“How do you feel about leaving? Do you want to live in Michigan?”

They look at each other, silently communicating.

Mike puffs out his chest. “You’re going too, right?”

I look at Josie and she shrugs.

“Do you want me?” I mouth the words just to her.

“If you’ll leave Cleveland, yes.”

“Guess we’re moving, boys.”

Their cheers bring tears to my eyes, and I leave Cleveland, putting eight dead Hollie Manns behind me.

This is a bit of backstory about Detective Lane Fairchild of the Sherburne, Michigan, police department, from his time with the Cleveland police. He first appeared in *Dead in the Alley* (2022).

Jokes are from Scott Burroughs, chief of the Port Aransas Police Department, in the Port Aransas South Jetty (<https://www.portasouthjetty.com/articles/garcie-inspires-corny-police-firefighter-jokes/>).

Tim Chapman

The Seed

The man grumbled as he shoved the gate open against the weight of the new snow, pushing the drift up against the garage and clearing a path through to the yard. A few flakes, dislodged from the eaves, settled on the shoulders of his shiny, black leather coat. A little brown and white terrier lay on a lawn chair under the protection of a large awning. As the man approached, the afternoon sun stretched his shadow across the snow, alerting the dog who ran to the end of his chain and yapped at him. He showed the dog the short length of two-by-four in his hand and said, "Shut up, rat."

Opening the screen door, he pulled a small screw jack from his pocket and held it against the door frame, opposite the lock. He wedged the two-by-four between the jack and the other side of the frame. Four quick turns of the jack bowed the door frame out in the center, just enough to slip the lock. He pushed the door open, knocked the jack and two-by-four out of the way, and started to enter. As an afterthought, he kicked the snow off his boots and wiped them on the mat.

Inside, the pastel green kitchen walls were covered with plaques, Bless This Mess and Kiss The Cook being the stand-outs. Toaster, blender and mixer were lined up, gleaming, on the counter. Everything was clean and tidy. The messiest thing

in the room was the refrigerator. It was covered with dozens of photographs, pictures of family events. Smiling faces looked out from birthday parties, picnics, and graduation ceremonies. The people in the pictures seemed to be staring out at him, judging him. Screw 'em, he thought. He pulled on a pair of latex gloves, took out a can of spray paint, and went to work, covering each smiling face with a patch of red, blotting out the mocking smiles. He stepped back to view the results, shook the can, and walked down the hallway to the living room.

Sean McKinney didn't like waking in a strange bed, not even the foldout couch in his mother's condo. He was disoriented and not quite sure where he was, in space or time. He briefly looked for Catherine on the other side of the bed, and then he remembered—cancer, the hospital, the funeral. It had been over a year, but he wasn't used to it. You don't get used to losing your wife, he thought, you just become functional.

The sound of clinking silverware woke him the rest of the way, and he heard the rumble of voices from the kitchen, his mother and his daughter. By the time he had dressed and folded up the sofa bed, coffee was poured and eggs were on plates. He made his way through the piles of opened boxes and crumpled wrapping paper, past the artificial Christmas tree, and slid into his seat at the kitchen table. He spooned sugar into his waiting coffee.

"Deluxe service," he said. "What did I do to deserve this?"

His mother stood over him, kissed him on the top of the head, and brushed his sandy hair back from his eyes. She was a small woman with dyed red hair that failed to disguise her age. "Not what you did, sweetie. What you're going to do."

His daughter chimed in. "Yeah, Dad. It'll be fun."

"What?" he asked. "What'll be fun?"

His mother smiled and handed him a plate of raisin toast.

“Angelina and I want to go to the Raptor Center today.”

“And be eaten by dinosaurs? No thanks.”

“It’s U of M’s rehabilitation center for birds of prey,” she said.

“Rehab center, eh? What are they addicted to, chihuahuas?”

“C’mon, Dad.” Angelina winked at her grandmother. “It’s ed-u-cational,” she said.

McKinney started to object, but his mother gave him The Look. The look that said, you’re doing this buster, so just shut up and get with the program. She was famous for The Look. It had worked on him when he was a child, and it had worked on his father.

Standing next to a cage containing a one-legged hawk, McKinney and his mother talked while Angelina moved from cage to cage, taking pictures of injured owls and fledgling eagles. McKinney watched his sixteen-year-old daughter and sighed. “She still cries herself to sleep sometimes.”

“It’s hard to lose someone you love that much,” his mother said. “I know. And they were so close. Time will surely help.”

“You’re right, Mom. This trip is good for her. She likes coming to visit you.”

McKinney’s mother put her hand on his arm. “And how are you holding up, honey?”

“Better, I guess. I still think about Catherine all the time, but it doesn’t immobilize me the way it used to.”

“You know,” she said, “since Angelina taught me to use a computer, we’ve been corresponding by email. She says that sometimes you just sit, staring, for hours. And sometimes you forget to shave, and you go to work looking rumped.”

“I’ll be all right.”

She gave his arm a little squeeze. “I know you will, dear. It’s Angelina I’m worried about. She needs her father to be there for her.”

“I... You’re right, of course.” He looked down at his feet. “She

probably doesn't feel very secure, taken care of. Truth is, she's usually the one who gets dinner together. I don't seem to have much of an appetite these days."

"Look after your child, honey." She paused. "And how are things at the crime lab?"

"Okay. I was afraid they were going to fire me for a while. I fell way behind in my casework, had a big backlog. A couple of my cases got nollied."

"Nollied?"

"Nolle prosequi. It's Latin. Means the States Attorney had to drop the case. It's one of the cardinal sins of the justice system. I'm all caught up now, though."

"Well, that's good, because I have a favor to ask you."

"I'm on vacation, Mom."

"I know, but this won't take you very long. I have a friend whose husband was killed by a hit-and-run driver. The police have a suspect, and they've impounded his car, but the detective doesn't think he has enough evidence to charge him. I promised my friend that my son, the forensic scientist, would read the detective's report and let him know if anything looked odd."

"How did she get hold of the report?"

"She was the detective's Sunday school teacher when he was a little boy. They're still close."

Angelina bounced over from a nearby window. "What're we talking about, guys?"

"Your grandmother is trying to get me to work on my vacation."

"And your father is trying to get out of it."

Angelina hugged her grandmother. "You won, right?" she asked.

McKinney's mother gave him The Look. Angelina punched her father on his shoulder. "Ha," she said. "Girl power!"

That evening, after dinner, McKinney's mother handed him

a folder containing reports related to the case of Thomas Jacobs, the man killed by the hit-and-run driver. McKinney plopped down on the couch next to the Christmas tree. Red and green lights colored the pages in the folder as he poured through them. Angelina went across the street to visit a girl she had met during her last visit.

The first report in the folder was from the medical examiner's office. It detailed the autopsy, listing the man's injuries, and described the samples that had been sent to the toxicology lab. Jacobs' injuries had been extensive—broken ribs piercing his lungs, brain hemorrhage caused by blunt force trauma, massive blood loss, shattered pelvis, spinal cord damage. McKinney thought the man had probably died before the ambulance arrived. The last page contained the toxicology screen. There was no evidence of alcohol or drugs in the victim's system.

McKinney turned to the detective's report. Color copies of some of the crime scene photos were clipped to the front page. He leafed through them. Jacobs' body wasn't in any of the photos. The blood on the pavement was the only indication of where he had lain. Another photo showed a closeup of broken bits of metal and plastic lying next to the curb. The crime scene investigators, no doubt, thought these could be pieces of the car that had broken off on impact. One of the photos showed an irregularly shaped piece of thick, black plastic. The ruler the photographer had placed next to it for scale indicated that it was about five inches by three inches. One of the short ends was smoothly curved, but the other end showed a jagged break. The material was covered with striations, no doubt part of the manufacturing process. If this piece had broken off the impounded car, it would be easy to get a match and put the car at the crime scene. He flipped through the rest of the photos until he found the shots of the car. The bumper and the hood were both crumpled on the passenger side of the car, and the windshield had cracks that

radiated out from an impact point. One photo showed a close-up of the bumper. It was light blue, just like the car's body. He had seen the results of violence before, in person and in photographs. It was always unsettling. He wished Angelina would get home from visiting her friend. He set the folder down and went out to the kitchen.

"So, what do you think?" his mother asked.

"I don't know, Mom. I can't seem to focus. Thinking about death just makes me sad. This is the same thing that happens to me all the time at work. I see the result of a tragedy and start to shut down. I guess Catherine's death has made me kind of morose."

"Yes, but you'll survive it, Sean. Even when horrible things happen, the world is filled with beauty. Sunshine still filters through autumn leaves. Birds still soar and loop through the sky. And you have the honor of seeing one of nature's most beautiful shows—a child growing into young adulthood. You just need to start looking again."

McKinney walked to the balcony doors and peered out at the snow, watching it swirl up the side of the building. Being on the third floor gave him a nearly unobstructed view of the block. He could see Angelina's friend's house across the street. He could also see Angelina. She and another girl were running through the snow. They didn't run like children playing. They ran with a sense of urgency. They crossed the street, passed under a street-light, and ran up the circular drive to the entrance of the condo building. Something's up, he thought.

The two girls stood in the middle of the living room in their coats and gloves, crying and dripping snow on the carpet. They were both trying to talk at the same time, and McKinney couldn't understand a word they said. His mother heard the noise and came in from the kitchen. "Angelina. Jill. Slow down. One at a time," she said. The girls looked at one another. Jill sat on the

carpet and started taking off her boots. Angelina began.

“Someone broke into Jill’s house and vandalized it. They spray painted all the walls and cut up the furniture.”

Jill stopped pulling off her boots and started sobbing. McKinney’s mother got down on the floor and put the girl’s head on her shoulder. She asked, “Is your mother home, dear?”

Jill was crying too hard to answer.

“She’s at work,” Angelina said.

“Till ten,” Jill added. She snuffled and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “She’s a cocktail waitress over at the Ramada.”

McKinney thought, a cocktail waitress. She’s probably got dozens of stalkers. He said, “Did you girls call the police?”

“I thought we should tell you first, Dad,” Angelina said. “So you can look for evidence before the police get here.”

“That’s not the way it works, Bella.” When Angelina was born, McKinney had looked at the beautiful, brown-eyed baby nestled in his wife’s arms and said, “Ciao, Bella.” She had been Bella to him ever since. “The police are perfectly capable of finding evidence.” He turned to Jill. “When did this happen?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I spent all day with my friends at the mall. When I came home to feed Big Bob, I saw the back door was open.”

McKinney interrupted. “Who’s Big Bob?”

“That’s their dog,” Angelina said. “He’s really cute.”

“Anyway, I knew my mom had already gone to work, but I didn’t know why the door was open, so I went in, and everything was trashed.” She started crying again. “I didn’t know if I should call the police or something, so I’ve just been sitting on the floor in the living room, trying to figure what to do.”

Angelina said, “We didn’t touch anything, Dad.”

“Except I used the bathroom,” Jill said. “Angelina was the calm one. I was totally freaking out, but she said we should come

and tell you.”

McKinney tried to suppress a smile. “Good job, ladies.” He picked up the telephone from a table in the entryway. “Let’s call the police.”

McKinney went downstairs to meet the two uniformed officers. His mother stayed inside and called Jill’s mother to tell her what had happened. She assured her that McKinney would take care of the house and that Jill was welcome to spend the night. The officers called it in, and evidence techs arrived a short while later. McKinney stayed outside when they went in the house to take photographs and look for fingerprints. They lifted a few prints off the door frame and took samples of the red spray paint that defaced every room in the house. They bagged several empty paint cans and the screw jack and two-by-four that still lay by the back door. As they left, they gave McKinney permission to clean up. He went in through the back door to look around. A little terrier click-clacked across the kitchen floor and stood looking up at him.

“You must be Big Bob,” McKinney said. He picked the dog up. “You’d just be a snack to the dog I’ve got at home. Don’t worry. He’s vacationing at the kennel.”

He tucked Big Bob under his arm and carried him along as he walked from room to room, surveying the wreckage. Photographs coated with red paint had been strewn throughout the house. They mingled with fabric and stuffing from destroyed chairs and glass from broken lamps. Kitchen, master bedroom, bathroom—all had walls that had been defaced with red paint. In the living room, the television lay on its back, its screen cracked and dented. The wall where it had stood now displayed the word BITCH in drippy, three-foot-high letters. A table-top Christmas tree had been thrown in the corner. The only room not vandalized was Jill’s bedroom. A herd of stuffed animals stared back at McKinney from the girl’s pink bedspread. He looked at the dog.

“Now, why do you suppose the vandals didn’t trash this room?”

Big Bob licked his face.

They decided to put the girls on the foldout couch in the spare room. McKinney, his gangly frame too tall for the sofa, curled up in a sleeping bag on the living room floor. He picked up the Thomas Jacobs case folder and flipped quickly past the photographs to the detective’s report. The investigation had turned up no witnesses. McKinney could find no indication that the detective had submitted any evidence to the crime lab other than the plastic and metal found at the scene. McKinney rifled through the folder. There was no report from the crime lab. If this folder was complete, it meant that the lab hadn’t looked at any of the evidence.

He tossed the folder aside and lay back, closing his eyes, pushing gift boxes of scarves and sweaters aside so he could stretch out. What, if anything, stood out from the reports? There was no lab report. Analyzing the bits found at the scene would be useless unless the detective had submitted a piece of the car itself for comparison. Wasn’t there some part of the bumper or hood that should be examined? Were there paint chips at the scene that could be compared to the paint on the car?

He was awakened by the sound of a car door. The clock over the sofa read 2 a.m. He crawled out of the sleeping bag and went to the balcony doors to look out onto the street. The moon was up and the streetlights were still on, lighting up the block and the surrounding streets. A small, black sports car was parked in front of Jill’s house and a woman in a white, down jacket and a Santa Claus cap was just getting out on the passenger side. She wore calf-high boots with furry trim around the top and carried a pair of pumps in one hand. She went to the back door first, saw where McKinney had boarded it up, and walked back out to the sidewalk to enter by the front door. She waggled her

fingers at the driver of the sports car as she went inside. A red pickup truck drove past and turned at the corner. From McKinney's vantage point, he saw the pickup pull into a driveway, back out into the street, and come around, passing the house again. A light came on in the living room, and McKinney saw the woman's silhouette cross the room. A few minutes later, she came back out carrying a small suitcase. The sports car's trunk popped open, and the woman tossed her bag in. She climbed into the passenger seat and the car whizzed off down the street.

The next morning McKinney sat talking with his mother over coffee. Angelina and Jill, having stayed awake most of the night, were still asleep. Big Bob was eating some chunks of liver sausage McKinney's mother had put down for him. McKinney stirred a couple of ice cubes into his coffee to bring its temperature down to a non-scalding level.

"Call your friend," he said, "and tell her to call the detective and ask him to check under the crumpled section of the car's front bumper. When a car's bumper is the same color as the rest of the car, it's usually just a plastic shell, put on the car for appearance. If they peel that shell off, they'll find the real bumper underneath, and I'm willing to bet the real bumper is made of thick, black plastic similar to a piece of debris that was found at the crime scene. Tell her to have the detective pull the black bumper off the car and send it to the crime lab for comparison to that piece of plastic.

His mother grabbed a pencil and scribbled down the instructions.

"Thank you, dear," she said. She turned from the counter and sat across the kitchen table from him. "Now, what are we going to do about this break-in?"

"I don't think there's much we can do beyond offering to take care of Jill. Her mother needs to talk to the police. She needs to go down to the station and file a complaint."

“Against who? The girls didn’t see who did this and you know as well as I do that it wasn’t a prank. Jill’s mother is divorced, and they live in that house alone. The next time one of them could be at home when this maniac breaks in.”

McKinney sighed. “Well, what do you think I can do? What would you like me to do?”

His mother sprinkled sugar over a grapefruit half and passed the bowl to McKinney. “I think you should catch the guy before he hurts someone.”

“Catch him? I’m not a detective. I look at the evidence after a crime has been committed—in Illinois. Minneapolis has its own crime lab.”

“Well, I think we need to question Jill’s mother and find out if she suspects someone.”

“And I think you watch too much TV.”

“Yes, well, I’ve invited her for breakfast. Unless you want to meet her in your robe, I suggest you change. And comb your hair. She’ll be here any minute.”

By the time McKinney got out of the bathroom, Jill’s mother was seated at the breakfast table, sipping coffee and taking tiny bites out of a sweet roll.

“Sean, this is Roberta Duncan.”

The woman held out her hand. “Call me Bobbie,” she said.

She was a short woman with a trim figure and mousey-brown hair pulled back from a large forehead. She wore a white running jacket with matching pants. McKinney caught a whiff of lavender mingled with tobacco smoke, and when he took her hand, he noticed the nicotine stain on her thumb. She wore rings on all her fingers.

They talked around the events of the previous night for a while, McKinney’s mother saying what a nice girl Jill is, and Bobbie complimenting her on the condo’s décor. Finally McKinney jumped in. “So, Bobbie, do you have any idea who vandal-

ized your home? Who would want to terrorize you?"

She shook her head. "No. Honestly, it makes no sense to me."

"Problems at work?" he asked. "What about customers? Anyone giving you a hard time? Any stalkers?"

"No, it's a pretty quiet place. I don't date customers, but that hasn't been an issue for a while. I'm close to Lou, one of the bartenders, but it sure as shoot wasn't him, and the other two bartenders are women."

"Why are you certain it wasn't Lou?"

"We worked the same shift last night. He brought me home."

"Any problems with Jill? School trouble? Boyfriend trouble?"

She glared at McKinney over the top of her cup. "My daughter did not deface our home."

"Okay," McKinney said. "I'm just trying to cover all the bases. Her room was the only one not damaged. There must be some reason for that." He tried a different approach. "Do you know anyone who drives a red pickup truck?"

"Oh, goddammit." She slammed her coffee cup down, splashing liquid onto the table. "He's supposed to be in Oregon."

McKinney's mother reached over and blotted the spill with her napkin. "Who, dear? Who's supposed to be in Oregon?"

"Frank. My ex. After the divorce, he went to stay at his momma and daddy's place near Eugene. The last I heard, he had a job at a hardware store. He used to work construction. He's had one red pickup after another since I first met him. It's one of his things."

"His things?" McKinney asked.

"Yeah." Bobbie gave a quick, harsh laugh. "Frank thinks he's some kind of macho cowboy character. He wears a leather coat and boots when he goes out, no matter if it's too hot. If he doesn't have his coat on, he rolls his cigarette pack into the sleeve of his t-shirt. His pickup has a gun rack in the back window. Oh, and here's the kicker. He has a Marine Corps tattoo on his bicep, only

Frank's never been in the military. Semper Fi my ass."

"When did you talk to him last?"

"Two weeks ago. I'm suing him for back child support. He called to tell me he got a letter from my lawyer and that I could go to hell."

McKinney's mother refilled Bobbie's coffee cup. "What about Jill?" she asked. "Doesn't he care about her feelings?"

"Oh, he's pissed at her, too. When he was leaving for Oregon, he asked her if she wanted to go with him for a couple of months. Visit her grandparents. She said no. Frank and Jill haven't gotten along since she became a teenager. It's a shame. They were real close when she was little." She took a sip of the fresh coffee. "He's kind of a control freak, which is why I gave him his walking papers."

After some coaxing from McKinney's mother, Bobbie agreed to let Jill spend a few days at the condo. "I'll take Big Bob home with me, though," she said. "You all don't need to be cleaning up dog poop." She also agreed to go to the police station and file a complaint against her ex-husband. McKinney hoped that, if he was still in the area, the police would pick him up quickly.

After Bobbie Duncan left, McKinney spent the rest of the morning on the couch in front of the television. Thinking about a man who was vengeful enough to destroy his family's home had soured his mood even more than usual. He was watching a TV court show when his mother came in from the kitchen and switched off the television.

"Hey," McKinney said. "I was watching that. A woman was suing her landlord to get her security deposit back, but all the judge wanted to hear about was why she installed a stripper pole in the living room."

She ignored him. "Why don't you quit moping around and take us all to lunch? Jill and Angelina could use a little diver-

sion.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I’m just not very good company today. How about if I take us all out for dinner?”

“You need to get off your rump, honey. Those two girls had a frightening experience yesterday and—”

Angelina scurried in, interrupting. “We want to go to the grocery store to get cleaning supplies so we can start fixing up Jill’s house. Can somebody drive us?” She looked at her father. “Dad?”

“I’ve got all the supplies you girls need,” her grandmother said. “I’ll get them together for you, and I’ll give you some garbage bags to put the broken stuff in. Besides, your father might not want to go to the grocery store. He might be embarrassed.” She winked at Angelina.

“Oh, Mom,” McKinney said. “Not this story again.”

“It seems,” she said, taking Angelina’s hand, “that when you were a very little girl, you occasionally threw temper tantrums. One time, when you and your mom and dad were at the grocery store, you lay down on the floor and started screaming and kicking your feet because they wouldn’t buy you any candy. Well, your mother was always full of creative solutions. She lay down next to you and started screaming and kicking her feet, too. You were so surprised you stopped crying and sat right up.”

“And I was so embarrassed I moved back about twenty feet to watch,” McKinney said.

“Your mother took advantage of your dad’s bashfulness. She picked you up and followed him around the store, saying things like, “Please darling, don’t throw us out into the cold” and “Deny us if you will, Clarence, the child is yours.” Your mother had a marvelous sense of humor.”

Angelina threw her head back and laughed. She laughed until her sides hurt. She wiped away tears that were equal parts joy and sorrow. “Ha!” she said. “Mom owned you, Dad.”

“Yes,” he said. “Yes she did.”

McKinney woke from a dream about his wife and daughter. He had dreamt of Catherine, following him around a store saying, "Deny us if you will." He was still on the living room couch, and the glare from the television lit the dim room. He looked at the balcony doors. It was dusk. A noise from the kitchen caught his attention. "Mom?" he called.

She came in, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "Have a nice nap?" she asked.

"Yeah." He stretched and stood up. "Are the girls here? It looks like it's almost time for dinner."

"They're still across the street. I was just about to call over there."

McKinney walked to the balcony doors and looked out. Across the street, parked in front of the Duncan's house, sat a red pickup truck. McKinney shoved his feet into his shoes and headed for the front door. "Call the police," he shouted. "Tell them to get over here. Now."

He slid to a stop at the front door to the Duncan house and tried the knob. The door was locked. He plowed through the snow, cutting across the yard to the back door. It was no longer boarded shut, but when he pushed, the door only opened an inch or so. He looked through the kitchen window. The refrigerator had been toppled onto its side and shoved against the door. McKinney grabbed a lawn chair from the patio, shook the snow off, and used it to shatter the kitchen window. He ran the chair along the sill, clearing away the sharp edges, and climbed through into the dark kitchen. There was no point in being quiet. If Duncan was here, he would have heard the breaking glass. McKinney called out. "Bella! Jill!" No answer. He crept through the kitchen to the hallway, trying to avoid stepping on broken glass, listening. A voice he didn't recognize said, "In the living room, buddy. Join the party."

The lights were off in the living room, too, but the drapes were open, and a streetlight lit up the room, glowing yellow and casting long shadows. Angelina and Jill were huddled together on the shredded remains of the couch. Jill cradled Big Bob in her arms. Both girls looked at McKinney as he entered, their eyes big and fearful in the gloom. A man in a leather coat was crouched on the floor by the window, his back against the wall, his arms resting on his knees. Light coming through the window shone off his bald head. A large, black pistol dangled from his right hand, and sitting next to him was a steel jerry can. McKinney could smell the gasoline.

"This is Mr. Duncan, Dad," Angelina said.

The man waved his gun at McKinney. "Sit your ass down."

McKinney sat. "Duncan," he said. "What's going on?"

"Just waitin' for the missus to get home." He tapped the jerry can with the barrel of his gun. "Gonna have a little bar-be-cue."

The man's voice quavered. This guy is on the edge, McKinney thought. He glanced out the window. How long since his mother called the police? Would their presence help, or would it set this guy off?

"Whatever you want to do," McKinney said. "But let's get the girls out of here first. Look at them—they're scared to death."

"No can do, buddy. I like the company."

"For what? You going to burn the house down?"

"That's likely to be the result," Duncan said, "but this can of gas is for me. Bitch destroys my life. Let's see if she can live with my death."

Jill began to cry. She squeezed Big Bob, and he let out a yip. Angelina put her arms around them both. "But you can't—" she started.

McKinney cut her off. "Don't say anything, Bella."

"Smart man," Duncan said. "Maybe you should all keep your mouths shut."

"I just figure pleading with you is a waste of time. Anyone willing to do what you're planning is too egotistical and selfish to reason with."

Duncan raised the gun and sighted down the barrel at McKinney. "Don't push it, pal. You can't manipulate me with your little games. You're not smart enough. Hell, Bobbie's the selfish one." He sat back and smoothly spun the gun on his index finger. McKinney pictured him practicing fast draws and fancy tricks in front of a mirror.

"Would she subject Jill to the kind of horror you're planning?" McKinney asked.

"I thought I told you to shut the hell up."

"I'm a father, too," McKinney said. "I know what I'm talking about. Jill is the miracle you helped create. She's your gift to the world." He stood up and inched slowly forward. "Being a father doesn't give you the right to terrorize her. It means accepting your responsibility to help her and to love her, no matter what, for the rest of your life."

"Which isn't going to be much longer for either of us if you don't sit back down." He pointed the gun at McKinney's stomach. McKinney sat down. He was closer to the man, but not much.

Duncan looked at him, hard. "I will god damn kill you if you try that again. This is my last day on earth, and I don't intend to let you mess with me. The only woman I ever loved betrayed me. She caused me so much pain that I just plain don't want to be in this world anymore, and she is going to watch me leave it. You can't possibly understand how I feel, so you can shove your punk-ass psychology or whatever else you think you wanna try."

McKinney laughed. He laughed a little too long and saw the girls looking at him and realized that his laughter must sound crazy. He looked down at his hands, clenching them in his lap. "Duncan," he said, "my wife died last year. She had a cancer that devoured her, and all I could do was watch. I watched her light

grow dimmer and dimmer, and when it went out, I felt like my light had gone out, too. And you know what? That's when my daughter needed me the most, and I failed her. You and I do have something in common, we're fathers. Everything that word signifies was planted in us, like a seed, when our girls were born. It may be the only part of us that's worth anything." He looked up at the man holding the gun. "We have no right to indulge our grief."

It was quiet after that. McKinney strained to hear approaching sirens. The only sound was Jill, quietly weeping. She looked at her father. "Daddy?" she said.

Tires crunched through the frozen snow out in the street. Cold blue lights stabbed into the room, illuminating Duncan's tortured face. His eyes were wet. McKinney felt the dampness on his own cheeks. Duncan stood and walked to the door. He looked back at his daughter. When he spoke, his voice was subdued. "I'm sorry, Cupcake," he said. He tossed McKinney the gun and stepped out into the flashing lights.

It was Friday afternoon in a cold Chicago February, and McKinney was just finishing up a report on a gun shot residue case when his telephone rang. The case had only come into the lab the previous afternoon, but it was high priority, and his supervisor asked him to work it right away—another drive-by shooting, another innocent bystander killed. The media was all over it. He hoped the ringing phone wasn't a reporter. He reached through the stacks of books and papers on his desk and reluctantly picked it up.

"McKinney here."

"Hello, honey," his mother said. "Guess who I just spoke with?"

"Hi, Mom. I don't know. Aunt Opal?"

"Sean, your Aunt Opal has been dead for eight years. Try to

keep up, dear.”

“Okay. I give up. Who did you just speak with?”

“My widow friend, the one whose husband was killed in the hit and run.”

“So what happened?” McKinney asked. “Did they catch the driver?”

“They did. You were right about the car’s bumper. The crime lab here was able to match it to the piece of plastic from the crime scene. When her detective friend confronted the owner of the car with the evidence, he confessed. My friend says ‘thank you,’ and she’ll take us all to dinner the next time you come up to visit.”

“That’s great. Ask her to keep my participation quiet, though. There’s a four-inch thick binder in my supervisor’s office titled Illinois State Police Forensic Science Center Rules Of Conduct. I’m sure giving out advice must have violated at least one of them.”

“Sure, honey. And how’s my favorite granddaughter?”

“She’s fine. I’m taking her out to Starved Rock State Park tomorrow. There’s a little canyon Catherine and I used to go to in the winter. Icicles from the waterfall at the top hang down almost to the canyon floor, about 40 feet. It looks like a ballroom for elves. I want her to see it before the ice melts.”

“She’ll be able to see the wildflowers out there in a couple of months,” his mother said. “Spring will be here before you know it.”

McKinney looked out the window at the snow-covered parking lot and the barren trees. “Not a moment too soon,” he said.

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Tracey Phillips

The First Punch

Mark Walters cocked his arm and let his fist fly. His knuckles struck again and again at the clean-shaven face in his narrow field of vision. This kid couldn't just walk into the bar and insult people. As if he were the son of a king. He needed to pay. Blood flew. He was on his knees. On the ground. And he didn't stop.

The next thing he knew, someone pulled him off. His bloody fists struck air as they dragged him to the truck.

"Get in!"

The sound of blood rushed in Mark's ears. He twitched and panted like a dog until they got on the road. Until the bar was way behind them.

Enrique's Ford F-250 straddled the faded yellow dividing line of the Northern Indiana county road. The loud truck engine punched through the silence, deadening Jailhouse Rock, the staticky music coming from the truck radio. Seated in the center between his two coworkers, Mark stared into the tunnel of light created by a single headlight cutting through the dark. He rubbed the sore, cut up knuckles on his right hand.

Heat and maybe anger radiated from the men on either side of him. Mark was so wrapped up in his own rage that he couldn't tell if it was his or theirs. Enrique white-knuckled the steering

wheel and kept his gaze locked on what was coming. Pressed against the passenger side with his dust-covered fedora pulled low over his brow, Julio rested his elbow on the open window frame. His face unreadable in the feint glow of the dashboard lights.

The men had just come off the new highway job at the end of a long day. The guys were dressed in soiled dungarees and dirty shirts. Mud on their boots and under their fingernails. Julio wanted to relax before going home to his wife and kids. Enrique, his brother, liked to shoot the shit with the other Mexicans in the crew. They gulped glasses of beer and groaned, leaning on their stools and into their aching muscles. Their muddy boots tracked dirt onto the floor, and the tangy odor of hard labor overpowered the scent of beer. Even though he was underaged, Mark pulled his weight and drank beer like the rest of them. With the job, he'd grown strong. He liked to think he looked cool, like James Dean in those movies. Tough enough to stand up for his friends.

Then Mark threw the first punch. His fist connected with the square jaw of a rich kid who had no business being in that out-of-the-way bar. He and his preppy friends sauntered up to a table and ordered a pitcher—as if they belonged there. As if they owned the place. They could have, Mark decided. Wearing shiny leather shoes and loosened ties, he and his friends were a few years older than Mark. Maybe even graduated from college. But they acted like the kids who graduated from that private academy in Carlson, Indiana—the one Pops could never afford. These kids came from money. Lots of it, by the looks of their clean pink hands.

Neither Julio nor Enrique had spoken since the three of them got into the truck, spewing gravel in their wake.

Mark had to break the silence. “I didn’t mean—”

“You didn’t think!” Enrique’s Mexican accent peppered his

English. His eyes flicked to Mark. He let go of the wheel with one hand and rubbed it across black hair slicked with Brylcreem.

Julio shook his head but kept his gaze out the right window. “Dios mío.”

“This will come back on us! On me and Julio. You catch my drift?” Enrique asked.

His words punched Mark in the gut. “Do you really think so?”

“You see what you’ve done? I don’t want to take the blame for this.”

“But it was all my fault.” Mark had acted out of sheer impulse. Mark’s mother died seven years ago. After that, Pops had trouble keeping a job. Not because of the booze. He was good at hiding that. His temper, on the other hand, was what usually got him fired. Pops would say he was just like him that way, short-sighted and combative.

Now look at me. I’m just like my old man.

A moth splattered yellow guts on the windshield.

Enrique loosened, then tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “Someone will go to jail. But it won’t be me.”

“I have a family to feed and what are you, like fifteen? I should have been watching out for you. Now I’m going to lose my job over this,” Julio said.

Mark picked the dirt out from under his thumbnail. “I’m seventeen.”

“Oh.” A smile flickered across Enrique’s face.

“Big boy.” Julio nodded and patted Mark’s thigh. He leaned forward and grinned at Enrique. “Big boy, eh, Enrique?”

Since Mark started working for the Indiana Department of Transportation, Enrique and Julio had taken him under their wings. They spoke in Spanish, but Mark understood when they talked about their niños, and esposas. Their families. When they

spoke English to include him, they made him feel like one of them. Not an outsider. At first, he didn't even have a decent pair of boots to wear. Mark had never worked road construction before, so he appreciated their kindness. They showed him how to drive a bulldozer and pace himself during the long hot days. The brothers gave Mark water out of their own repurposed milk bottles. He'd go home sunburned and sore from shoveling and spreading concrete. It was a good feeling, knowing he helped Pops with the bills and groceries.

Once, he lost control of the bulldozer and drove it right into the back of the concrete mixer. The Mexican brothers covered for Mark when Dick Richardson, the foreman, asked what happened. Fortunately, Mark had stopped the tractor before real damage was done. They laughed about it, but Dick Richardson had the power to hire and fire on the spot. Mark couldn't afford to get fired. But it would be worse for Enrique and Julio.

God! He wished that guy had never come into the bar. What have I done? Guilt and regret clung to him like the sweat gluing his blood-splattered shirt to his back. His friends weren't to blame. Mark had no idea how or what it would take, but he had to fix this. "I . . . I'll take care of it."

Julio stared out from under the brim of his fedora. "You can't even take care of yourself. I think you proved that tonight."

"I beat him up. You didn't have anything to do with it. I'll tell Dick Richardson that it was all my doing," he said.

"He is not the one you should worry about, chico." Julio brushed the brim of his hat.

"Who then?"

"That gringo and his friends will call the cops. And you know who will take the blame? We will." Julio slapped his own chest.

That gringo. Mark knew right away the preppy kid and his friends were trouble. At first, Mark blended into the crowd of

workmen and watched them acting as if they were better than everyone. Better than all the hard working family men sipping beer and patting each other on the back. Geoffrey—that was his name. Mark remembered hearing them yell it when he was on the ground laying into him. Well, Geoffrey wasn't any smarter, kinder, quicker, or better looking than any of them. And for some reason, Mark needed to prove it.

"You almost killed that kid." Enrique punched at the air with his stained, oily index finger. "We got you the hell out of there just in time. Now, you need to worry about who that rich boy will call."

"You didn't use your head, chico." Julio jabbed at Mark's head with each word. "You. Did. Not. Think."

Mark ground his teeth together and dropped his gaze to his dirty, bloody hands. He hated knowing he followed the ground-work laid by his old man. Mom had tried to cure him of that when he was a kid. What would she say now?

In the distance, a pair of headlights crested a hill and illuminated bugs spattered on the windshield. It was the first vehicle they'd seen since fleeing the bar. Straddling the centerline, Enrique slowed the truck and pulled into his lane. "What will you tell them? When they come asking?"

"Who?"

"Estupido." Julio shook his head.

"You think the cops will come after me?" Guilt and shame mutated into cold yellow fear.

"The bar owner saw. Everyone knows you work for Dick Richardson." Enrique turned stiffly to glance at Mark. He was stocky and muscular from working in road construction, and though he seemed older, he was probably only thirty. "You won't get away with it."

Red lights on the roof of the approaching car lit up the high-

way and surrounding fields.

Mark gripped the dashboard to steady his nerves. "Are the police going to the bar? What will happen now?"

"What will happen?" As the police car passed, it lit up Julio's dark stormy eyes and turned down mouth. He said, "Pull over. I want to beat some sense into this kid." Julio cocked his fist and Mark had no room to duck. The swift strike raised swirling stars in Mark's field of vision. He fell into Enrique. He tasted blood.

"Julio—" Enrique swerved off the country road and parked under a copse of trees.

Julio leapt out of the truck and held the door open. "Ven aqui!" He reached in and grabbed Mark by the arm and shirt. Tearing him out of the truck, he shoved Mark to the ground and spit on him.

Enrique shut off the engine.

Julio strode in a wide circle, then came around to stand over Mark again.

Mark lay back on his elbows, stones cutting into his forearms. "I was trying to protect you. I consider you a friend, amigo."

"Don't use that word. You and I are not amigos." Julio threw his hat on the ground.

Enrique got out of the truck and stepped around it with his hands on his hips. He said something to Julio in Spanish and Julio answered. Mark caught the gist of it. Enrique talked his brother off the ledge. They were deciding what to do.

Julio rubbed both hands through his hair. "I have a family. A wife and five beautiful daughters. They count on me to bring home real dollars each week."

"Lo se, hermano." Enrique looked down at Mark. "If we get arrested, our whole family suffers."

"What happens when we can't support them?" Julio's features were hidden in the dark.

Mark uttered, "I was just trying to help, man."

"We don't need your help." Enrique lit a cigarette and leaned against the truck.

"I didn't like what he said. I didn't like it one bit. And I . . . I couldn't hold back. I . . . I'm sorry."

Enrique took a long drag of his smoke and blew it into the wind. "You should have walked away. We all should have walked away."

When Geoffrey shoved Julio and insulted him for no reason, Geoffrey's smug cronies nodded their heads like a flock of sheep falling in behind the ram with the biggest horns. Though the name-calling lit Mark up, the intensity of his rage scared him. When Mark punched Geoffrey, he became blind to everything else. At that moment, nothing mattered but smashing that kid's face.

And Mark kept punching. All the anger and rage poured out of him as he beat the kid to the ground. Anger about his dead mother. About his mean-tempered Pops. About having to get this summer job because Pops couldn't hold onto his own. And because Enrique and Julio were his friends.

The white shirts and working men backed away. Now he couldn't get the look of fear—the whites of Geoffrey's eyes and the blood everywhere—out of his mind.

"Never treat nobody worse than you want them to treat you." Mom's words rang true.

As they pulled away in the truck, Mark locked his gaze on Geoffrey's body. He didn't get up. His friends surrounded him, shaking him and trying to wake him. Blood from his face was everywhere.

"You spics won't get away with this," one of them yelled. "Mr. Weir has more money than you'll see in your lifetime, you stupid piece of white trash."

Enrique took Mark by the elbow. They moved Mark away

and, in a few quick steps, packed him into Enrique's truck. On the way out, Mark saw the eyes of his co-workers looking at him.

"You must fix this, Mark Walters." Julio lifted Mark by the scruff of his shirt.

"How?"

"You figure it out!"

"Julio, enough!" Enrique patted his brother on the shoulder and looked him in the eye.

Julio dropped Mark back down in the dirt. "It's okay, hermano. I'm not willing to ruin my family's lives." He kicked dirt on Mark, then picked up his fedora and brushed it off. "I want to go home to my wife. I want to hug my daughters."

"Si. Let's go." Enrique dropped his cigarette and ground it into the pavement and circled back to the driver's side.

Julio climbed into the truck's passenger side and closed the door. Out the open window, he said, "Do the right thing, Mark Walters."

Enrique started the engine, and it backfired. The explosion silenced the crickets and cicadas. He pulled away, his taillights disappearing over a hill, and left Mark in utter darkness.

One step at a time, Mark shuffled along the quiet county road. The cut on his lip had stopped bleeding. Yellow fireflies lit up dark fields and stars speckled the black sky. He was about eight miles from home with his head in his hands. His eyes grew cloudy, and he squinted back tears.

Mark never meant to cause more problems—certainly not for Julio and Enrique. Geoffrey insulted them, and that was something Mark wouldn't stand for.

"Never treat nobody worse than you want them to treat you, Mark William Walters."

Mom's words stayed with him long after she died. He could

see her chain smoking at the kitchen table in her flower-print house dress and apron. In front of her, the ash tray full of lip-sticked cigarette butts. Pops bought her that dress with the lacy collar when he was making good money doing the books for local businesses. Long before she got sick.

That day, Mark came home from second grade with a black eye, a scraped knee, and torn knuckles—just like tonight. Younger Mark had been sent to the principal's office at school for causing a fight on the playground. He and a new kid named Jerome got into a brawl. Some kids dared Mark to tease Jerome. He didn't know Jerome was used to kids making fun of him, or that he didn't stand for it. He fought back like a rabid possum.

Mark thought talking down to the kid would make him feel bigger than he really was. It didn't. It made him feel small. Especially when their teacher, Mrs. Meeks, dragged the two of them to the principal's office by their ears. Those kids that dared Mark? He found out later that Jerome beat them up pretty badly, too.

Mom was so disappointed.

"But Mom, everybody makes fun of him," Mark cried.

"Do you think you're better than him? It's what's on the inside that matters, Mark William Walters. Look at you. You aren't any better than anybody, now. Are you?"

Mark fingered his dirty shirt. The knees of his dungarees had new holes.

Mom took him to school the next day and walked him right up to that boy. In front of the whole class, she made Mark apologize for calling him names and for fighting with him. Mark didn't care that he was suspended for a week for breaking the kid's nose. After that, he and Jerome became great friends. They sat at lunch and played kickball on the playground together. He stood by his friend and made sure no one ever called him "fat boy" ever again.

"Never treat nobody worse than you want them to treat you,

Mark William Walters.”

The hum of the cicadas had begun to diminish by the time Mark got back to the trailer home. A red smear of clouds streaked across the horizon. He turned the doorknob and stepped inside. Pops lay collapsed on the sofa in his jeans and undershirt.

Mark pulled his bloody shirt over his head and unzipped his jeans. Leaving his clothes in a pile on the floor, he rinsed his cut-up knuckles in the sink.

“Do the right thing, Mark Walters.” Julio’s words echoed in tandem with Mom’s. He took a deep breath, picked up the phone, and called the police.

This story is about Mark Walters, a POV character in my currently unpublished manuscript “Forewarned.”

Valerie Biel

122 TRANQUILITY COURT

I eased into my hometown much how I'd left 18 years ago, only this time I was in the driver's seat. I'd changed more than a little, but my '65 Mustang was still the same, always a standout with its original turquoise color. Me—not so much. My hair was streaked with gray, I'd like to think stylishly so, and oversized Ray Bans covered up the beginnings of crow's feet.

For a moment, I wondered if I should have returned more anonymously, but quickly dismissed the idea. Stealth was going to make me look guilty of something, even before I actually was.

I still wasn't sure what I planned to do, but after reading my sister's diaries, I knew I had to do something. I figured the sisterly contract to not invade each other's privacy ended at death—but maybe it shouldn't have.

The things I contemplated doing were dark, every single one illegal.

Idling at the only stop light in town, I got an admiring nod from a guy with a man bun at least ten years younger. The nod was for the car—not for me. I knew that. I laughed and revved the engine. He shook his head and turned right.

I'd made a reservation at the only hotel in town, just two nights. It was a Motel 6 turned no-name brand that had been rumored to host swinger weekends back when I was in high school. I only knew that because one of my classmates had worked in

housekeeping and would tell the tales of what she'd seen in our Monday morning homeroom. Nobody notices the housekeeping staff the way they ought to if they want to keep secrets.

I should have believed her when she whispered a different story to me in private. One that had nothing to do with consenting adults doing whatever behind closed doors.

But like an idiot, I didn't.

I asked my sister what she'd been doing, hanging around the motel. She made up some story about a friend's relatives being in town and how they were just using the pool privileges for the night.

I believed her. She was a good liar, or I was a gullible sister—maybe both.

In those final days, as cancer ate away at her body, when truths and regrets were slurred through the haze of morphine, she said something I'd barely heard. I asked her to say it again, but she'd drifted off. It sounded like, "He ruined my life."

Only now, having read the words in her own handwriting, did I realize how badly I failed to protect her. Had she asked for help in some way that I'd missed? I tried to remember.

He was our next-door neighbor. My sister babysat for his kids. We held backyard barbecues with our combined families. My parents liked him. Wilkes. Everyone called him Wilkes. . . even though that was his last name.

I pulled into a spot near the motel's front door. The building and grounds were surprisingly well-kept. I ambled inside, nearly dropping my bag when the former homeroom-gossiping-housekeeper greeted me from behind the front desk. "Claire Reynolds!" she shouted.

"Gina Maskovitz! What are you doing here?"

"I moved back a few years ago to take care of my mom, and this dump was for sale. I figured I'd use my hospitality degree and see if I couldn't make a go of it. What do you think?" she

asked.

“It’s great. Really cute.”

“Thanks. I was going for that home-away-from-home vibe. We have a lot of people who stay here regularly for work and such.”

Just then, two women in scrubs passed through the lobby to the front door, telling Gina they’d see her in the morning.

“I’ll have the coffee on and the cinnamon rolls warm,” she said.

“You’d better!” Their laughter trailed after them as they left.

“Travel nurses. Headed out to the hospital for their shift,” Gina explained. “What about you?”

“I’m on a road trip, passing through. I thought why not stop and see what’s new and what’s stayed the same.”

“I’m surprised you’d come back at all. I didn’t think we’d ever see you again after you headed out west with Jake Tully. Whatever happened to him?”

I laughed—at least I could laugh about it now. “Leaving town with Jake was not the brightest idea I’ve ever had. Not sure where he is now. We parted ways after about a year.” I now cringed at my impetuous rush to leave once I graduated, searching for anonymity away from such a small community where everyone always knew everyone else’s business.

“We were all jealous of you. You had the hot guy and the hot car. Say, do you still have her—that car was the best!”

“Yep. Ditched the guy, kept the car. She’s outside now.” I gestured in the general direction of the lot.

Gina rushed over to the big window and gave a low whistle. “Just like I remembered.” Smiling, she returned to the desk. “Let me get you registered.”

She prattled on about the town this and the town that. My ears perked up when I found out that one of my classmates was now the police chief. Joey Michaels—smart kid, nice kid—too

nice for me. I always gravitated to the bad boys. Dumb me. But this bit of information might prove helpful, maybe. If I had the guts to do what I'd been thinking.

Gina handed me the key, but then reached over with her other hand to hold mine. "Hey, I was sorry to hear about your sister."

"Thanks. It was hard to lose her—still is." I held back the tears, fighting a wave of grief.

Gina let go. "Don't hesitate to let me know if you need anything." Her tone was too bright. She'd noticed my reaction. "You're down the hall about halfway."

I nodded and made my escape.

The room was indeed cute, done up in homey colors of burnt orange and cornflower blue. Efficient and clean. All I really needed. And best of all, Gina had kept the outside doors in true motel style, where you could park right outside your unit and come and go as you wished.

I threw my bag on the bed, used the facilities, and made my way back to the car via that outside door. The less Gina knew about my comings and goings was for the best, although it was hard to be stealthy with a car that rumbled like mine as I started her up.

Less than ten minutes later I rolled into the old neighborhood and turned into the cul-de-sac, parking in front of the house I grew up in—120 Tranquility Court. Things were the same in so many ways, but completely different. I sat there for a while, taking it all in. Many of the big shade trees had been removed and some of the houses were different colors. But my house and the house next door where he lived looked the same. I could almost imagine I was back in high school.

A loud rap at the passenger window startled me out of my reverie.

My car didn't have automatic anything, so it was easier to hop out than roll down the window. I stared across the roof to-

ward a petite woman with dark curls that bobbed as she shouted at me. “What are you doing sitting here like this? Who are you?”

I felt like I should know her. “Sorry. I was just looking at the neighborhood. I used to live here. Do you live in this house? I grew up here.”

“Claire Reynolds?” she asked.

“Yes.” And then it dawned on me. She’d been a classmate of my sister’s.

“I’m Missy—”

“—Simon,” I finished for her. “Do you live in our old house?”

She nodded. “It’s Michaels now—I married Joe. It’s a great house. We loved—love—it.” She shook her head as if to clear away a thought.

I couldn’t help noticing her correction. “I’m so glad someone I know lives here. And you married Joey? You’re the police chief’s wife!”

“Guilty as charged! And I’m sorry. I should have recognized this car!”

“It’s been nearly two decades. I wouldn’t expect your memory to be that good.” Maybe I should have rented a nice inconspicuous sedan.

“I’d spent so much time here with your sister. When the people who bought it from your parents decided to downsize, we snapped it up. I should tell you how sorry I was to hear about her death. It was on our class Facebook page. It’s too bad we’d lost contact through the years.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.” I pivoted, looking at the six other houses on the court. I could see how stupid it was to have thought that there’d be no one here to remember me. I’d forgotten small towns were like that, but the everyone-knows-everything of small-town living was coming back to me fast. Surprisingly, it didn’t feel oppressive like it had when I was a teen.

“Is it all younger families here now?”

“Mostly.”

“Does Wilkes still live next door?”

Missy stiffened. “He does. We were hoping he might move nearer to his kids when his wife died a few years back, but he didn’t.”

Hoping? Hmmm. Her dislike of him was obvious, so I fished some more. “Well, he’s getting older. Eventually a house that size will be too much for him to keep up.”

“He gets around better than you might imagine for his age. Our daughter, Nora, used to clean for him to earn some spending money, but not anymore. He has a cleaning service now.”

I got a sick feeling in my stomach. “How old is she?”

“She’s 16. We have twin sons who are 12, Samuel and Elijah.”

Yup, the dread was definitely growing in my gut, but I didn’t let on. “Congrats! I’m sure they keep you busy.”

“How about you?”

“No. Never married. Just a series of long relationships that haven’t gone anywhere. Yet,” I added. “I’m seeing someone now who has potential.”

“Well, good for you! Do you want to come in? I’ve got time to make some coffee—or I can offer you something stronger? It’s after 4 pm . . . happy hour?” She grinned mischievously.

It was a grin I now recognized from her teen years. I smiled back. “Sounds great. I’d love to.”

Walking into my old house was surreal. The floor plan was the same, but the color scheme and furniture were all different, of course. I passed by the family photos hung in the hallway on the way to the kitchen and stopped to take a look. Missy’s daughter was a beauty and appeared far older than 16. I had a strong suspicion why she no longer cleaned for Wilkes, but I couldn’t come right out and ask. Or could I?”

Missy pulled two bottles of wine out of the fridge. “Red or white? The white’s a Riesling and the red is a Cabernet.”

“The Cab, please.”

Missy poured generous amounts in each glass and headed for the patio. “It’s such a nice day. Let’s sit outside.”

The backyard looked the same except for the trampoline in the middle. My parents never would buy one of those for us, even though we’d begged. “Too many injuries,” I remember my dad saying. I glanced over at the Wilkes yard. “Gosh, I forgot how close everyone is back here.”

“Yeah, the lots are wider at the front. We could have moved into one of the newer subdivisions with more space, but this is close to the police station for Joe’s late-night calls.”

I nodded and sipped my wine and decided to take the leap. “Can I ask you a question about something from high school?”

“Sure, but I can’t guarantee I’ll remember.”

“I went through my sister’s things after she died. You know how she liked to keep diaries?”

Missy nodded. “One for every year.”

“I guess it sounds kind of terrible telling this now, but I read a few of them from her high school years and came across something disturbing. It would have been from your sophomore year—when I was a senior.”

I took another sip of my wine.

“Do you remember my sister saying anything about being out at the motel with an older guy?”

“What?!” Missy sputtered and coughed, my sentence having caught her mid-drink. “You mean like for a hook-up with a college guy?”

“Not exactly. What I read made it sound like she’d really liked this guy. Like he treated her nice. She thought she was in love. But then they went out to the motel one night, and her memories were blurry on this, but she wrote down that she remembered multiple men in the room, and they did horrible, horrible things to her. What she wrote was gruesome.”

“Oh, God. I never knew. She never said.” Missy closed her eyes, placing her hand over her heart like she was trying to control her breathing.

“So, she didn’t talk to you either?”

Missy slowly shook her head. “No, she didn’t, but was this in the fall right at the end of football season?”

“Yes.” I slid forward in my seat.

“We had a big fight. She’d been avoiding me and disappearing for hours when we were supposed to be hanging out. I thought she was mad at me. Eventually we made up, but I do remember her being quiet. I thought maybe she was depressed.”

“That checks with what I read. I asked her about the motel once, after Gina Maskovitz tipped me off that she’d seen her out there. She told me that a friend had relatives staying there, so they decided to use the pool. And . . . I believed her.”

“Damn.” Missy took a big gulp of wine. “Why didn’t she tell one of us?”

“The man threatened her with a video he took of the night. He’d drugged her to make it look like she was willing. She was mortified by the idea of anyone seeing it, so she kept quiet.”

“Wow. That’s so terrible—and she went through it all alone.” Missy’s voice was tight, like she was trying to hold back tears. I’d done my crying about this already, now I was just angry. I had to wait for Missy to catch up. “Did she name this person?”

“Yes,” I said. I waited. Missy knew, and I knew she knew.

“Damn,” she said again, almost at a whisper.

“Did he get your daughter, Missy?” I nodded toward the house next door.

Her eyes flew wide, and she gasped. “Almost.” She swallowed hard, looking like she might throw up.

“You don’t have to tell me specifics.” I reached across to the table to grab her hand.

“No, no. That’s not it.” Missy took a deep breath. “It’s just I

haven't told anyone. Not even Joe."

"Why?"

"Because Joe would kill him and then that'd be the end of his career. He likes being a cop. He's good at it. No—I wanted to handle this myself. But I haven't done anything yet."

"Yet?"

"Yet." She glared at the back of the neighbor's house with hatred. "It was taking her longer than usual to clean his house, so I walked over and knocked. When Wilkes finally opened the door, he had a wild look about him. It was creepy. Then I heard Nora call out from upstairs. I ran in and found her laying on a bed with only her bra and panties on. She'd thrown up all over herself. Wilkes tried to tell me that she'd gotten into his liquor cabinet and overindulged a bit. He was letting her sleep it off, so she wouldn't get in trouble."

"But her clothes—"

"Right, I asked the same thing. He said that she'd thrown up on them, too. He didn't lie about that. He handed them back to me in a plastic bag covered in puke. I wrapped her in a blanket and took her home. Luckily, the boys were all out of the house. I got her cleaned up. All she did was cry." Missy wiped the tears from her own cheeks.

"He'd offered her a can of cola, and she drank it and then began to feel dizzy. She remembers him stripping off her clothes. She thinks he took pictures, but she's not sure. She's terrified that - that he has pictures of her. She's terrified to live here next door to that c-creep." Missy's voice cracked with emotion.

"I don't blame her, but what if she didn't?"

"Didn't what?"

"Have to live next door to him anymore."

"What are you saying?"

"You know what I'm saying. It's the same thing you've been thinking. It's why you didn't tell your husband and decided to

handle this yourself. What if you don't have to do this alone?"

"I'm not sure what I was going to do."

"I don't believe you. I think you know exactly what you want to do, but maybe you're not sure how to go about it and not get caught."

Missy glanced toward her house, where we could now hear the commotion of kids in the kitchen. "The boys are home. Nora stays at school until they pretty much lock the place for the night." She sighed and wiped her palms on jeans. "Do you have a plan?"

"I do."

"What day?"

"As soon as possible. Tomorrow?"

She took a deep breath. "Tomorrow works for me, but after dark."

"Of course. Meet me at the motel for drinks at 8 pm to establish our alibi."

I'd never expected to have an accomplice. But I was impressed that Missy hadn't told Joe about Wilkes and was quietly planning her own brand of revenge—even if she hadn't carried it out.

I spent the day being conspicuous. I shopped at the few stores in town and ate at the local diner. By midday I found myself back at the motel, contemplating a nap. I walked in through the main door, in search of the promised afternoon chocolate chip cookies, and Gina was again on duty.

"Do you work all the time?" I asked.

"Pretty much." She shrugged. "Comes with that ownership title. So, what have you been up to?"

"Oh, just wandering around. I checked out the old neighborhood and caught up with Missy Sim—Michaels, I mean."

"I'd forgotten they bought your old house. That's kind of fun."

She was a friend of your sister's, right?"

"Yes, she was. She's going to meet me here for drinks later tonight. Girls' night out. Well—in—guess, we're planning on staying here. Is it okay if we use that fire pit out on the patio?"

"Of course, that's what it's there for."

I grabbed a couple of cookies and poured myself a cup of coffee and nearly headed down the hall to my room, but something stopped me. I turned back to the desk. "Gina?"

She glanced up from the computer. "Yeah?"

"You know back when you worked here as a housekeeper in high school?"

"How could I forget? I'm reminded every day." She laughed.

"You remember when you told me about what you saw—with—with my sister?"

Gina's face turned somber. "Of course."

"I need to apologize."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't believe you and I should have."

"Oh."

"When I asked her about it back in high school, she lied to me. It was only after she died that I read her diaries and learned the truth. So, you were right. What happened that night was bad—really bad."

"She never said anything?"

"No—not to me. I asked Missy about it too. She never said a word."

"Shit. I kind of hoped I was wrong. Y'know."

"You said you saw her with a man?"

"Yes. An older guy . . ." Gina's voice trailed off. "I didn't know who exactly until months later when he was checking in, and I heard the front desk clerk say his name when she handed him his key."

"So you know it was Wilkes."

Gina nodded.

“That night—with my sister. Did you see any other men?”

“Other men?” Gina’s voice went up an octave. “What other men?”

“I’m pretty sure that by what my sister wrote in her diary there were more men that night.”

“I never saw anyone else, but there are those outside doors.”

I nodded, the very doors that I’d noted were so great for coming and going without being seen.

Her face turned pale. “Was she . . .” Gina took a deep breath “Was she—she . . . ?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, my god. I should have gone to management. I should have known she was in over her head, but she went into the room on her own. She was laughing, but it all felt . . . just wrong.”

“Hey, you did do something. How were you supposed to know?”

“Still, I feel awful. I should have trusted my instincts. And that pervert—he got away with it. I’ll bet that wasn’t the first or last time he’d done something like that.”

“It wasn’t . . . I confirmed that yesterday.”

“God, I’d like to be the one to give him what he’s got coming. He acts like this perfect model citizen and in the end he’s the worst kind of predator.” Gina’s hands had curled into fists as she talked, like she was ready for a good fight. And maybe she was.

I wondered if I’d be making a big mistake to expand our daring duo to a trio for the night’s activities. I looked around and even backed up to peer down the hall to make sure we wouldn’t be overheard. “Do you mean it?” I asked.

“What?”

“Do you mean it when you say you’d like to give him what he’s got coming?”

“I do. We know how this goes, even if your sister could still

testify—it all gets turned around in court and the victim is treated horribly.”

I decided to take the leap. “So tonight, there are plans to do just that.”

Gina’s eyes got wide. She leaned closer. “To give him what he deserves?”

I nodded.

A slow grin spread across her face. “How can I help?”

“How do you feel about being an alibi?”

Gina reached across the desk to shake my hand. “I would consider it a privilege.”

By the time Missy arrived for girl’s night at the fire pit behind the motel, Gina had explained how easy it would be to produce a continuous loop of her security camera footage, showing all of us there for the entire evening, should she be asked. She assured me she was very good with video technology and an equally good liar. I believed her.

At first, when I told Missy that Gina was going to help us with our alibi, she looked alarmed. “Are you sure you can trust her?”

“Very sure. I don’t know what’s happened in her life, but I get the feeling that she understands what it’s like to be a victim. Plus, she feels guilty for not doing more to help my sister.”

“Okay, but one more person increases our vulnerability.”

“True—but I think having someone else say we stayed put all night and being able to prove it with actual video footage gives us an extra layer of protection.”

Missy sighed, but agreed, and sipped her wine.

I only sipped at mine too—being tipsy was a sure way to screw up.

We waited until after 10 pm to make our move, leaving our cars parked in full view in front of the motel for additional video proof—one that wasn’t faked. We thought we’d be back within an hour if all went according to our plan.

We didn't use city streets, instead walking on the railroad track where shrubs sheltered us from view, even where we passed close to houses. We approached the neighborhood from the rear, cutting through the tree line that buffered the backyards of the Tranquility Court homes.

We hesitated before crossing the grass. "Are you ready," I whispered as we pulled on plastic gloves.

Missy whispered back, "Ready."

We rushed efficiently across the yard and onto the back porch, shutting the screen door quietly behind us. Missy fished the key out of the potted plant and opened the inner door to the kitchen, which squeaked, making us jump.

The hallway lamp that Wilkes left on gave us enough light to maneuver. I opened the fridge, to find the beverage that would be his last. It seemed fitting when I spied a six-pack of cola, partially gone, and twisted a can out of the plastic band. Cracking it open over the sink, I poured a little out to make space to add what I needed.

We took the back staircase to the second floor, cringing as each tread seemed to groan louder than the last. Here again, there was enough light to see our way as the streetlight glowed through the large window above the front stairs. Snoring came from the main bedroom.

"You still good?" I whispered to Missy. "We can back out if you want."

She shook her head at me and moved down the hall into the bedroom. His queen-sized bed was centered along the far wall. I set the can of cola on the nightstand and eased the fentanyl nasal spray out of my pocket.

This was the tricky part. Wilkes was on his back with his mouth open. I leaned in and squeezed twice near his nostrils and three times into his open mouth. From the much smaller dosage my sister had used, I knew that'd be enough to incapac-

itate him. He snorted and shifted positions, and I backed away.

Missy flicked on the light.

“Wha—What??” He woke with a start.

“Hi, Wilkes,” Missy said from the doorway.

“What’s wrong? Why are you in my bedroom?” He awkwardly pushed himself to a sitting position.

Then he saw me, and his eyes widened.

“Ah, you remember me, don’t you? You were really fond of my little sister when we lived next door.”

“Get out of my house,” he sputtered, spittle flying from his lips.

“Aw, we’re just paying you a neighborly visit—returning the favors you were so kind to bestow on our families,” Missy said.

“I’ll call the police. You two are crazy.”

“Go ahead, call the police. Ask for the police chief. I’m sure he’d be very interested in what you had planned for our daughter.”

“What do you want?”

“We want you dead, so you can never hurt another person.” The fear that flickered across his face was satisfying to see. Knowing he was feeling just a fraction of what my sister had was the revenge I needed.

“What!? I never...” He trailed off, his words beginning to slur.

“It’s working,” I said, stepping back to the nightstand. I twisted the top off the spray and dumped the remaining liquid into the can of coke. “Wilkes you look so thirsty. How about some nice cold cola with a special twist? We know all about how you like to add things to drinks.”

I leaned in, holding his head with my arm. I tipped the can up to dribble the liquid into his mouth. He tried to twist away but his strength was waning. “There you go,” I whispered. “A little more now.” He swallowed reflexively, but some tipped out and ran down his chin. I didn’t care to wipe it away.

I made sure to wrap his hand around the can, transferring his prints before setting it back on the nightstand.

He slumped onto the pillows, watching us. His breathing became labored. I knew he wasn't ever going to get out of that bed again.

"That'll do it. Let's find the videos and photos."

It didn't take long before we uncovered his horrible souvenirs in a box in the spare room closet. He was organized and each video and photo envelope was labeled by date and name. There were so many. Too many. I fought back nausea. I grabbed the video reel with my sister's name and Missy grabbed the printed photos and the memory card labeled with her daughter's name. We left the others for proof of his crimes.

Downstairs we logged onto his computer and typed up a suicide note, grateful that he had kept up with technology to make it plausible that he'd write his send-off this way. Short and not very sweet, the note said that he couldn't live with himself any longer after what he'd done to so many innocent girls. We left the screen open to that page, after searching the drive for photos or videos and finding none. He'd been careful not to use the computer for his depraved hobby.

I went back upstairs to check on him. I leaned close, counting to a minute. He only gasped twice.

"We good?" Missy asked as I came down.

"He's nearly gone. There's no way he'll revive from that much fentanyl."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. Let's get out of here. The longer we stay the more likely it is that we'll be caught."

We shut and locked the back door, replaced the key in the plant, and slid back into the darkness along the train tracks. At the motel, Gina came out to join us as we toasted to a job well done. I threw the evidence into the fire . . . the empty Fentanyl

bottle, the gloves, the video of my sister. I'd never want to view that. But Missy opened the envelope and flipped through the photos of her daughter, tossing them one after another into the flames. Before she got to the last one, she leaned over the arm of the Adirondack chair and threw up. I grabbed the remaining photos from her and tossed the lot into the fire.

"Stop it now. You don't need to torture yourself with those. It's done."

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and stood up. "You're right. Look, I'm going home. It'd be weird for me to stay out much later. It's almost midnight."

"You okay to drive?"

"I'm fine."

I walked her out to her car and gave her a big hug. "You sure you're okay?"

"Never better." We both knew she was lying.

"Talk tomorrow?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'll call you in the morning."

I watched her drive away before heading back to the fire pit. Gina and I didn't talk much as we let the fire die down, poking around in the embers to make sure nothing was left.

When she headed inside, she squeezed my shoulder. "You did something good for the universe tonight, Claire. Don't doubt it for a moment."

The only thing I felt bad about was that I hadn't been able to help my sister get justice while she was still alive.

I didn't know what time I went to bed exactly, but my cell phone ringing woke me way too early. It was Missy. "You need to come over here now," she whispered.

I had no idea what to expect, but when I pulled into Tranquility Court things were far from tranquil. Emergency lights from police cars, a fire truck, and an ambulance flashed brightly, sending my heart rate into overdrive.

I rushed to the door, which Missy opened before I got there. “What’s going on?”

Missy launched into a rapid-fire explanation. “I just wanted to make sure he was really dead. I started to have a nightmare that he wasn’t and that he would tell everyone it was us. I couldn’t sleep. Finally, at dawn, I got up and made cinnamon rolls—so I had a reason to go over there. Everyone knew Wilkes was an early riser. The rolls were still warm and no one else was up yet. I figured it was the perfect plan.

“When Wilkes didn’t answer, I told Joe I had a bad feeling (which wasn’t a lie). So I went in and set the cinnamon rolls on the kitchen counter before I checked upstairs. And there he was, just like we’d left him. Definitely dead. Rigor mortis had set in. I rushed back home to let Joe know. And—and here we are.”

“Jesus. Here we are.”

Missy nodded.

“Good job,” I said. “Better to get it over with rather than waiting days for someone else to find him. You got any coffee?”

Missy pointed me toward the half full pot on the counter. I spied the pan with the remaining cinnamon rolls and helped myself to one.

“I made a double batch. I bake when I’m nervous,” Missy explained.

“I assume Joe knows you bake when you’re nervous, too. Did he ask about that?”

“No, but there’s no way he’s going to think I had anything to do with this. Right? It’s going to look like a suicide, right?” Her expression was pure panic.

“I’m sure we’re fine.”

Just then, Joe came in through the back door.

Missy pounced on him with her questions, her expression having morphed from panic to neighborly worry. “So, what happened? Did he have a heart attack or a stroke?”

Joe ran his hands through his hair. “No. Looks like suicide.”

“Suicide?” Missy’s eyes were big and her lip began to tremble.

Damn, she was a great actress.

“But why? Was he sick?” I asked.

“Not like you think, but he was a sick bastard alright. He had videos and photos of teen girls, more than thirty of them. The thing I can’t figure is why would someone like this have trouble with his conscience after so many years?”

Missy just shrugged.

“Maybe since he’s getting older, he was beginning to think about the salvation of his immortal soul?” I offered.

“Maybe.” Joe nodded, narrowing his eyes at me.

I should have been less snide with my comment, but it was too late to take it back.

“He kept a notebook in his bedside table listing every one of his ‘precious girls’—his words, not mine. Your sister’s name is there and so is our Nora’s. But the funny thing is that there are no photos or videos of either of them—they’re the only ones who are missing from his archive. There are even empty spots where those would have been. It’s almost like someone removed those on purpose.”

“How strange,” I murmured and took another sip of my coffee, anything to keep my hands busy as they were now shaking. “You say my sister was on his list?” I tried so very hard to act surprised, but I wasn’t as good an actor as Missy.

Joe let out a sigh and hooked his thumbs in his gun belt before turning to Missy. “You should have told me. What did that bastard do to our daughter, Missy?”

Missy barely hesitated. “I rescued her before it got very far. He drugged her and stripped her clothes off—not all of her clothes, she still had her bra and panties on.”

“What the fuck—why didn’t you tell me?” Joe’s complexion had darkened to a deep red, and his entire body was vibrating

with anger.

“What would you have done?” Missy asked.

“I would have killed the fucker.”

“Well, now you don’t have to.” Missy stood up and embraced him. Peering over his shoulder, our eyes locked, and we waited for what might happen next.

Joe pulled away and said, “Look, I don’t want to know any details.” He paused, scrubbing his hand down his face. “Let’s just say that I’m glad you two have an alibi.”

“What?” I croaked.

Neither Missy nor I said anything. If he didn’t want details, then we wouldn’t give him any. Fine with me. But dang, he was smarter than I remembered. I suppose we should have removed some of the other photos and videos. That had been a mistake.

“I’m assuming that your campfire was successful last night?” Joe stared at me as he asked this.

“Successful?” I wasn’t sure what he meant.

Joe waited for me to catch up. When I did, I nodded and watched his expression as I said, “Yes, very successful but we were careful and waited until the last embers burned out and there were only ashes left. Can’t be too careful about stray sparks.”

“Yes, fire safety is very important.” He was pressing his lips into a thin line. “And I’m sure that you’ll want to be heading back to your life soon now that you’ve had your chance to catch up on things.”

“For sure, leaving today.”

“Good,” he said and pivoted to the back door.

Both Missy and I let out a breath as he let the door slam behind him.

“Holy shit,” Missy said. “He figured it all out.”

“But he has our backs. I mean, I would expect him to overlook any crimes that you’d commit, but he doesn’t have that kind

of relationship with me.”

“You’re forgetting how this all works in a small town. We’ve all known each other forever. We’ve got to have each other’s backs.”

She was right. I’d forgotten the brighter, better side of small-town living. People cared about other people—well as long as you weren’t a pervert. Then all bets were off.

Eventually, I peeled myself from the hard wood seat of her kitchen chair. “I’d better do what I said I’d do and head out. Missy, I don’t know what to say. I’m glad your daughter avoided the worst of what could have happened to her.”

“And I’ll be forever sorry that your sister didn’t.” Missy said as she walked me to the front door and gave me a big hug.

As I crossed the lawn to my car, I glanced over to the cops in front of Wilkes’ house. Joe gave me a cursory chin nod as I pulled away.

I checked out of the motel, updating Gina when I turned in my key.

“Officially, Joe’s saying it was suicide. Wilkes couldn’t live with himself after all the hurt he inflicted on so many young girls through the years.” I didn’t tell her that Joe knew what we’d done. It wasn’t like he was going to come checking on anything. That was clear.

“Well, behavior like that does have a way of catching up with you,” Gina said.

“That it does,” I answered. “You be well now.”

“You, too. Take good care of yourself and that beauty of a car.”

Driving out of town, I picked up speed as the city street became highway and the miles between me and my hometown ticked upward on my odometer. It’s a funny thing about small towns, sometimes we don’t like that everyone knows our business, but other times that’s exactly what we need.

Tracey S. Phillips

Acknowledgements

I founded Blackbird Writers in 2020 because, to me, the task of getting my books seen around this immense world seemed daunting. I needed a supportive community. I needed to learn from authors who had been there. And in four years, Blackbird Writers has surpassed and exceeded my dreams.

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