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## After Office Hours: A Short Story

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## About the Author

Christine Jackson, Ph.D., is a professor of literature, writing, and music history in the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences Division of Humanities at Nova Southeastern University. She holds a Ph.D. in American Literature. She is author of *Myth and Ritual in Women's Detective Fiction* (2002) and co-editor of *Marcia Muller and the Female Private Eye* (2008). Active in the Florida Chapter of Mystery Writers of America, Jackson is researching a book on Poe's fiction. However, the fiction writing obsession keeping her up nights is an international thriller featuring a former British intelligence agent fleeing a dangerous past.

## "After Office Hours": A Short Story

by Christine Jackson

I reclined on a folding lawn chair in the middle of Gus Reno's new office. My heels were half a size too dainty, and it was heaven to kick them off.

"Do you rescue kidnap victims?" I said.

Reno Investigations ("When You Need the Very Best") kept a low profile in a tired building overlooking the North River. The street ran parallel to the railroad tracks and dead-ended at the old shoe mill. From his perch on the second floor, Gus now had a view of bums staggering along the railroad tracks before they fell into the river, not after.

Gus was now officially retired from Campus Security at North River College in western Massachusetts. The mess last autumn when Carrie Logan went missing had taken its toll on all of us, but on him especially. I hadn't seen the old coot since the party we faculty threw for him back in January. He still slouched, and his cheeks sported a sandpapery gristle, but his eyes were bright. Retirement had started the man's iron-poor blood flowing again.

Faculty contributions for his goodbye gift added up to two months' start-up for his detective agency. "Chasing down cheaters ought to keep him out from underfoot," his wife Shirley had said with love in her eyes.

Gus hunched over his desk, a rickety card table last used by Shirley's bridge club. "Okay, I'll bite," he said. "Who got kidnapped? I don't see any duct tape on your face, so it ain't you."

"Hugh McLean is holding my computer jump drive for ransom." Hugh taught Abnormal Psych using Advanced Annoying Jerk strategies. "I set the thing on the table in front of me at a meeting. Before I knew it, Hugh's big mitt had snatched it."

Gus ran a hand through his steel hair, combed in a slick Elvis-style since 1957. "Ask for it back."

"I did. Twice. He sniffed and said 'You'll get it at the next meeting. That'll teach you to act up when I'm talking.'" I felt sheepish. "Those little drives have a cord attached. Out of boredom, I was sort of twirling it around my finger, and—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get the picture. Drink your coffee, Patty Hearst."

"Gus, my manuscript is on that drive, the only copy in existence. My laptop died, and the book deadline is at the end of the week. I just heard that Hugh is away until Monday, and no one in maintenance has a key to that unauthorized deadbolt he put on his office door."

"Calm down, Dylan. There must be another way. Can't you ask for more time?"

"Extend the extension. Yeh, right." Maybe tenure and I were never meant to be.

"You could type the book again."

"Two years' worth of work? You're not serious." Embers of panic began to flare. "Please, Gus. I'm desperate. I'm ready to slit my wrists with a stack of index cards." I licked the gloss off my lips. "I have to go in, the sooner the better. Tonight, even. Will you help?"

He rose from his cardboard carton to stretch, grunting the whole way. I had seen more backbone in snails. But when Gus Reno was at the College, he was the one students phoned from the drunk tank, or when parents threw them out, or a roommate was on the verge of an overdose. I had called him myself four times last year.

"How do you know this computer thing is still in his office?" he said.

"Yesterday he opened his top desk drawer in front of me to fetch a roll of breath mints, and there it was."

Gus disappeared through a door needing paint. He emerged with a rolled blueprint in one hand and a Red Sox key ring in the other. "When I retired, they forgot to ask for this. Don't squeal." A single key gleamed from the ring. "It's a passkey to disable all the security cams."

"Oops."

"We don't want your shifty professor eyes showin' up on the campus YouTube. Also, I got an idea." Gus spread the blueprint onto his possum-hide carpet like a picnic blanket and used my shoes to hold the edges.

I pointed to a long squiggle. "What's that above the ceiling? A heating shaft?"

"Maintenance crawlspace. I can't haul my old bones up there, but you could. What are you, one office away from Hugh's?"

"Three." Trying not to pinch my elbow in the lawn chair's armrest, I pointed to squares on the blueprint. "Here's me, Leona, Matt, then Hugh."

"Okay, so you scramble up there, crawl along the crossbeams, pass over those two offices, and drop into Hugh's domain. A little more than thirty feet. Should be a snap."

"A snap?"

"You'd rather start typing?"

He knew what button to push. I took a sip from my coffee mug. "Nice brew," I said, suppressing a shudder. "I thought the doctor warned you off this poison."

"I needed to unclog the bathroom sink back there." He pointed his thumb at the peeling door. "Had some extra and I thought, maybe Dylan could use a zap when she gets here."

I slurped again. "How considerate."



Operation Memory Stick started at eighteen-hundred, or six that night. At noon in the faculty cafeteria, I felt edgy, as if getting ready to take a header off a cliff.

"Are you sick?" Leona Dudzik waved a fork over her Caesar salad. "Please breathe over there." Leona taught three sections of "Adolescent Conflicts," and she carried a few of her own. Even her lacquered hair looked angry. She wagged her hand, displaying a razor-tipped manicure. "Did everyone hear? Johnny C. and I are back together. Last week, he dropped the restraining order against me."

"He'll be sorry," Matt said.

Leona punched him. "What's your problem, dreamboat? Stacy giving you grief?"

Matt Shafer taught Research Methods and Senior Seminar. His lopsided grin and gray eyes added up to one Eligible Sexy Professor. Three years ago I arrived at NRC fresh from a divorce, and Matt was my rebound. The year's first faculty party was a boozy whirlwind.

*'Hey, you,' Matt said from the pillow next to me when I opened my aching eyes into sunshine. 'What kind of name is Dylan, anyway?' He brushed fingertips along my bare arm.*

*'My parents were big fans of Bob. They say I was conceived to 'Blood on the Tracks.'*

*'I have 'Tangled Up in Blue' on my iPod. Want me to get it?'*

*'Later.' I pulled him back.*

That was our only tangle in blue. Before long, we lapsed into the easy dance of long-time marrieds, a rhythm I never had with my ex--. He was my Matt. We still met for afternoon beers and chili at Pigpen's, a local bar, but Matt usually brought Stacy Ahearn, a law student.

"What's happening on the jump drive situation?" Matt said, leaning close over my salad.

"Developing. I'll keep you posted."

He glanced up. "Sssh. Sniper at twelve o'clock."

Hugh McLean approached. Carrying a tray before his flour-sack body, he looked like a trained bear. "Who has change for the machines?" he said. "All I have is a twenty."

Leona said, "I thought you were out of town, Hugh."

"Stayed for a meeting tonight. My flight is early tomorrow. Oh, by the way, Dylan, when's your deadline again?" He showed an evil grin.

Matt rested a hand on my forearm. "Down, girl. Your fangs are showing."

After Leona obliged with her coins, Hugh strode to his usual spot, a circular table next to the dessert bar, where he could read his *USA Today* in peace. Today he looked like a barrel in a denim jacket. Aviator sunglasses covered his thinning hair. Hugh had a bushy beard, usually complete with stray food particles even before he started eating.

That afternoon, Matt tapped on my office door. "Meet me at Pigpen's later. I have hot news."

Dread gnawed my insides. The last time hot news broke was the week after Thanksgiving.

*Matt barged into my office. 'Heard about Carrie Logan?'*

*Carrie was a senior in my Crim Justice class, a top notch student. She had proposed conducting prison interviews for a paper on criminal psychology. She would pass RiverCounty Correctional Facility on her way home to Cleveland, and the interviews would be convenient. Great idea. I asked for an outline and approved her plan.*

*'I haven't seen Carrie all week, Matt. She missed a few classes. Rory Greenlaw the soccer player came by and asked to pick up her graded assignments. I assumed he was doing her a favor. I did her a favor and told him no.'*

*'Carrie's missing. She disappeared somewhere between her folks' place in Cleveland and here. Never made it home. They found her car outside of Albany. The police think the car broke down, and some crazy picked her up.'*

*'My God.' I trembled. Had Carrie run afoul of someone at the prison, a visit I approved?*

We finished the semester with everyone in the Crim Justice class trying not to look at Carrie's empty seat. We didn't know her parents had reported her missing until the police descended onto campus.

*Detective Martin Sinclair smoothed his tie and clicked a silver pen. 'What kind of student is Miss Logan?' He smiled and was ready to listen closely. I liked him.*

*I called up images of Carrie leading discussions, shooting her hand up to answer, smiling while handing in a paper. Then I remembered that she was ambitious enough to interview an actual convict for information. But I couldn't say it. 'She re-read Crime and Punishment, and I didn't even assign it.'*

*'She wouldn't leave school on her own due to bad grades?'*

*'No way.'*

*'Did other students resent her?'*

*'She was a good kid. We all liked and respected her.'*

*He nodded approval. I had passed his exam.*

*Detective Delgado gave me a head-to-toe then said, 'Did she earn her high grades?'*

*'What do you mean?' I said.*

*Delgado had cold eyes. 'Did she ever cheat or sleep with her teachers that you know of?' He was the bad cop.*

*'How should I know?' I was steamed. 'Can't you find out on your own?'*

*'We tried,' Martin Sinclair said. 'Your college has shut us out.'*

*'They're just protecting a student's privacy.' I surprised myself. Thin loyalty, but there it was.*

*Delgado hovered, his beefy hands tipping the back of my office chair. 'Names of her associates?'*

*'Associates?' Sorority sisters? Or pimps and dealers?'*

*Sinclair said, 'Who does she pal around with on campus? Does she have a steady guy or girl?'*

*'I have no idea,' I said, although Rory came to mind.*

*'If you ever do get an idea, give us a call.' He slapped down a card like a winning ace. Even though his eyes smiled at me full blast, I was more blinded by the gold glint off his left hand.*



I never told the detectives about Carrie's plan for prison interviews. I meant to. Her car had turned up, and the authorities had official theories, I told myself. In early December, after a tearful, late-night confession to Gus, we launched our own investigation into Carrie's disappearance. We found Catrin Sistecky in the student newspaper office.

*'Yeah, she was my roommate last summer. We both tutored in the language lab, and we were tight, but you know how it is—you live with someone, and you see a different side. She stayed out late, sometimes was away the whole weekend. A dude, of course. She never talked about it. I assumed he was married.'*

Gus and I ran into Rory Greenlaw one chilly morning on the campus quad. If anyone knew about men in Carrie's life, we figured it would be him. Wearing sunglasses and with his hood up, he looked like the Unabomber.

*'We want to talk to you, Greenlaw,' Gus said.*

*'About what?'*

*That was my cue. 'Why did you ask for Carrie's paper that day in my office?'*

*'You're wondering that now? Isn't it, like, three weeks too late?'*

*'Listen, hot shot, you'll answer every question Dr. Morris has, and you'll do it politely.'*

*'This is, like, so screwed. Carrie always said you didn't care, Dr. Morris, that you didn't belong here.' His shoulders slumped, and the hoodie slipped down his back. When he turned, I saw that behind the shades his eyes were red and swollen.*

*Gus pressed. 'What else do you have to say for yourself, pea brain?'*

*I waved Gus off. 'We'll talk another time, Rory,' I said.*

*The boy lowered his head and ran off.*

Usually, the college grapevine bore ripe fruit during holidays, but students returned after New Year's and hid in silence. Something was wrong. This was real. At the end of January, Gus retired. In March, Cleveland Police picked up a suspected serial killer working the highways who confessed to the killing. Case closed. I threw away her papers. It pained me to look at them. Carrie Logan would stay forever as an "Incomplete" in our grade books. Spring term was nearly over. In the fall, a new crop of kids would fill the empty seats.



At Pigpen's that afternoon, Matt waved from our usual booth.

"You're here," I said. "I didn't see your car outside."

"Just got a new one. I'm tired of dead batteries. I ordered for you." He sat behind a bowl of chili and a line of three empty, foam-laced beer mugs. "You could use another." He signaled the waiter.

"Where's the Stace-meister?"

"Too much work. She's pulling all-nighters and working during the day. I keep telling her to cut back, but she insists."

"So, Matty, what's this hot news?"

He pushed the bowl away. "Mr. Greenlaw, our soccer star, turned in another plagiarized paper. Counting the one for your class last term, that makes three. We both can file a report and drop-kick this bozo out of school."

"I'd like to, believe me. He didn't come to class today, either. He never recovered from Carrie."

*Matt and I huddled together at Carrie's memorial service. While my tears streamed, he patted my arm and wiped his eyes.*

*Amid coughs and sniffles, Rory stood to talk. 'Carrie was a steady friend to me, just like everybody already said. Here's something nobody said. Carrie Logan could see the future.' He paused. 'Her psychic powers came from the tattoo she had on her back. It was a heart with two eyes that stared at you.' He outlined a heart in the air, and flew two fingers in V-formation at the audience. The crowd stirred with discomfort.*

Our beers arrived, and I took a long pull.

"Hey, Dilbert," Matt said. "Don't look now, but our star student just dribbled in with the rest of the jocks."

Making his way to the pool tables on the other side of the bar was Rory Greenlaw. He and his pals moved like young wolves in a pack, circling the crowd and eyeing the female prey. Rory wore a tan fedora. After he saw us, he pulled the hat low over his face.

"You know what?" The beer made me giddy. "I feel a game coming on." I slid out of the booth.

"My money's on you," Matt said. He followed, carrying our drinks.

Rory and his friends stood before the wall racks deliberating over cue sticks. "Hi, guys," I said. "What's up?"

"Hey, Dr. Morris." He pretended surprise but his face was flushed. "Did I miss anything in class today? I was, like, in Barf-ville."

"Feeling better, I see."

"Semi—. The fresh air helps."

The recuperative value of the stale smoky air in Pigpen's. "How about a game of eight-ball?"

"What, you and me?" His jaw tightened into a laugh, although with lips drawn back and shoulders hunched, it was more of a grimace. "You're kidding, right?"

"Try me. Winner gets a bucket of peel-n-eat shrimp."

"The guys wanted to play teams." He looked for support, but his buddies were roaches heading for the smoke-stained woodwork.

"Go ahead, Greenlaw. We'll play over here."

"Take her on, Greenlaw," Gil Martin said.

Jamie Ferrara punched Rory on the arm. "Go for it, man. What are you afraid of?"

"Okay, I'm in," Rory said. "Forget the shrimp. I win, I don't have to take your lousy final. Figure my grade without it."

I did a quick tally. "And if I win, you promise to go for tutoring?"

Rory tipped his hat back. "You're on."

Matt sidled over to me. "Okay, so you used to play your Dad the pool shark every night in your basement, but that was twenty years ago. His buddies Martin and Ferrara are snakes. This is sure to get around. Are you willing to say 'bye to your chances for tenure?'"

"Don't sweat it." I kept my voice low. "He won't last another week in the class, much less take the final. So he gets tutoring, or withdraws before the deadline. Either way, he's out."

"Before he leaves, find out if he knows what happened to Carrie."

I flashed an "okay" with thumb and forefinger.

Rory won the right to break, and he sank two stripes from the first stroke. His fedora sat jauntily on his head. He cleared the table of two more then scratched. The balls were irretrievable from the pockets of the pay table. We started again.

My first jab with the pool stick led to plenty of clacks, but nothing dropped.

Rory strutted around the table for his next shot. He sunk the eleven and smirked. "A peel-and-eat final. With cocktail sauce." He flubbed his next try, and I was up.

"Remember when you came to my office last fall to pick up Carrie's papers?" I said.

"Huh? I don't remember that."

"What were you planning to do with them? Excuse me." He stood rigid, and I had to brush past him to set up the shot.

I eyeballed a line to the grape-colored four and landed it, along with the next two. Rory and I exchanged turns, back and forth, circling the table, assessing possibilities, making the balls disappear, until Rory had only the eight-ball remaining. My three and the five sat abject in their solidity.

His voice was low. "I was light in the cash department, and someone offered to pay me to do it."

"Pay you?" What had she written? Something about fraud? "Who was it?"

He lined up the shot. "Friend of a friend. You didn't give me the papers," he turned his head to look at me, "so I had to stay poor, and I never found out who it was. Hey, guys. It's final jeopardy for the Divine Miss M." He spoke out of the side of his mouth. "Not looking so divine now, are we?"

Martin and Ferrara paused from their game and wandered over. The other three guys, whose names I didn't know, watched from their tables. Standing across the table from me, Matt tightened his grip on the empty beer mugs. Rory pulled his hat down and feigned concentration. "Eight in the corner pocket."

He tried a bank shot that was wrong from the start. The black eight ball caromed off the edge guarding the pocket, and the cue ball wobbled back down the broad expanse of felt.

"Bitch," he said. Whether he meant the ball or me was unclear.

I sized-up the table. From the left was a clear trajectory. I tapped the cue ball so it brushed the five, which disappeared into the side, and then it kissed the cherry-red three, sinking it into the far corner. That left me an easy-as-pie shot at the eight ball.

I pointed at the eight with the stick. "In the side." I aimed low on the cue and jerked the stick back with a little English, so the white pill of a cue spun away from following its black twin into the pocket.

Jamie Ferrara let loose with an "ooooh." "Should have taken the shrimp, Greenlaw."

Rory threw his cue stick, and it clattered against the wall.

"Easy, brother," Gil Martin said.

I said, "Tomorrow, be in my office at ten. I'll set up the tutoring schedule." If I finessed it, I could help him pass the final and start him bragging about who was willing to lay out cold cash for Carrie's graded assignments.

"Yeh, yeh." He tugged the fedora brim so it was low over his flushed face.

We returned to our booth and congealed chili. Matt said, "Betting a student about a final. You're a lunatic." He tipped a foam-flecked mug. "I love it."

I told him about Rory's lost income over Carrie's paper.

"Did he know who it was?"

"He didn't say, but who's usually behind anything smarmy around here?"



Wednesday at dusk, the night air was tender with spring. I stood on the deserted walkway outside the Fein Building. Night class instructors had begun to drone in the far wing of the building.

"Wait here," Gus said at the building's entrance as he went to disarm the security cams.

I was tense with what lay ahead. We had plotted details of our operation like a NASA launch. Now dressed in jeans and a black sweatshirt, I hopped in anticipation. Gus signaled me an all-clear.

We climbed the stairs to the fourth floor and approached the target office: *Hugh McLeod, Ph.D.* From the wall next to the door stared an incongruous picture of North Korea's "Dear Leader," Kim Jong-Il wearing big glasses.

"Uh-oh," Gus said. The door of a maintenance closet at the end of the hall stood open. A vacuum cleaner whined, and a woman sang what sounded like "The Girl from Ipanema."

"It's only Rosa," I said. "She's okay."

"Maybe, but if she walks in on you hanging from the ceiling like a bat, she's bound to notice, and you'll get written up. She doesn't vacuum each office, does she?"

"Not if my carpet is any indication."

Gus backed against the wall. "Watch it."

Pressed in the alcove behind the water fountain, we saw the short, pudgy woman plod down the hall. With her vacuum cleaner trailing like a poodle on a leash, Rosa disappeared around the corner.

Gus unlocked the department's main door. We scooted down the corridor and slipped into my office. Gus exhaled as I clicked the lock.

I cleared my desk of books and papers, and Gus climbed onto it and reached. "Damn." The ceiling was too high.

"How about if you put a chair on the desk?"

"What do you think this is, *Cirque du Soleil*? I have another idea." He jumped down. "Help me move this sucker."

We pushed my desk to the side and waited for Rosa to complete another interminable round of hall vacuuming. Finally, the mechanical whine curled into silence. As soon as Rosa disappeared to clean the restrooms, Gus scurried to the open maintenance closet. He returned balancing an aluminum ladder in the crook of his arm.

Gus positioned the ladder where my desk had been. Standing on the next-to-the-top step, he pressed upward on the ceiling tile as if pumping iron and slid it to the side. "Flashlight, please?" He played the light around in the darkened square.

"No rust or rot. Looks like sturdy support up there. Not enough room to stand, though. Just remember to stick to the crossbeams. Don't step in the center of the tiles, and you won't come crashing through the ceiling. Hopefully."

I winced. "That's reassuring."

Gus climbed backwards down the ladder. "It's all yours, kid. Got your cell phone and Mag Lite?" I patted my jeans pocket. "Good girl. Here's the rope."

I looped it over my shoulder and ascended the ladder while he steadied the legs at the bottom. "Easy. Take it slow. Be sure of your footing."

From the very top step that said it was not a step, I grabbed hold of two metal crossbars and hoisted myself upward through the ceiling. Not a glass one, but I was making progress. I clicked on the flashlight.

"How's it look up there?" Gus said.

"Tight. This is a crawlspace? Who did they think could fit up here? Maintenance chimps?" I inched over to a cross-wise beam, and lay on my stomach, so I could crawl like a baby. "All systems go, Houston."

From below Gus said, "I'm headed to the lot to keep watch. It's quarter to seven. If by any remote chance the goofball happens to pull in, I'll call from my truck."

He clicked off my office light and locked the door behind him.

After letting my eyes adjust, I started. With breastbone flush against the beam, I inched along, keeping track of the distance. At first, I made steady progress about halfway across Leona's office. Then my ribcage felt ready to snap like a dried turkey carcass. The pressure from the beam was getting to me, and the narrow space was stifling.

I couldn't keep sliding on my stomach. I could barely breathe. God, I had to stretch.

I tried to sit up but bumped my noggin. Huffing like an old bus, I was suffocating. After the manuscript was safely on its way to Chicago UP, I'd log in more mornings at the gym. *I promise, work out gods. Please, let me get through this.*

Maybe if I flipped onto my back. I thought through the move: a shoulder roll, hip twist, and a backwards crabwalk. Sounded like an order for sushi. A snap, as Gus would say. Rosa's ridiculous singing floated up. *And when she passes, each one she passes goes ahhh.* Hmph. Easy for you to say.

I turned onto my shoulder, but the beam scraped my forearm. I shifted onto my right elbow, over-compensating onto the ceiling tile next to me, which caved in and dropped with a mushy thud. *Ish.* Myleg dangled into Leona's darkened office. I drew it up, tightening muscles to restore balance on the support beam. Breathing painful jabs, my entire body trembled.

Rosa's singing stopped.

The smashed tile lay in shards on the desk below. I could make out two shadows breaking up the line of hall light coming in from under the door. Rosa. Would she investigate?

The shadows left. Either the cleaning woman decided to ignore the racket coming from that crazy Dudzik woman's office, or she was calling in reinforcements. I had to hurry.

My new backwards position was an improvement. I had no clue where I was headed, but at least my head and body aligned with the beam. I crossed over Matt's office. There. The magic tile marking my descent into Hugh's domain.

The tile pried up like a cap on a beer bottle. I shoved it to the side and started to ease my way down into the gloom, when my foot slipped, and I crash landed on Hugh's credenza, flattening two framed pictures. The hall was quiet.

*Whew.* I re-positioned the frames. Mrs. Desperate Housewife McLean and three McLeanettes. Lovely. Now for the search. Where was my property held for ransom?

The desk key was, as usual, in the lock so the good Doctor could find it. Great security, Hugh. I flicked the key to the right and slid open the top drawer, my last sighting of the sacred drive. It had a sharper memory than my own and held all my research and three years' worth of writing.

Hugh McLean was a pack rat. The drawer was crammed with old course handouts, syllabi, and grade lists. Didn't he know that North River College was now paperless? I sifted through snarls of papers clips and rubber bands, nested plastic forks, and plump packets of salad dressing. He also had a large stash of loose change, coins bummed from poor Leona. My transportable computer drive was gone.

In a panic I tugged on the next drawer down and the next. Nothing. The room began to swirl around me. Where else? He'd keep it close, wouldn't he? His weapon, his security. I began to close the bottom drawer when I saw a manila folder marked "Confidential."

No jump drive. The folder held assorted news clippings. I fingered through reports on faculty speeding tickets and drunk driving arrests, compromising pictures of my colleagues in partying moods and indiscreet postures. One clip provided the real story behind Johnny C.'s restraining order against Leona. Hugh McLean was slime.

Then, there it was, a metallic rectangle the size of a stick of gum, my drive stuck in Hugh's desktop computer, its black cord snaked across the desk. He had probably downloaded the files. Unbelievable. Now, did I dare pull the device out of the USB port without clicking the safety release? I could ruin the entire drive. To extract the stick safely, I'd have to boot up the machine, and its password was a mystery. The bastard.

Still torn with indecision, I saw another folder in the drawer. "Carrie" was the label. It contained a single sheet of folded paper covered with tiny, lavender ink printing: *what we meant to each other, a one-man woman, you were wrong, will tell the dean, don't want to live, my heart is yours to break, love forever, Carrie.*

My head spun. Carrie's boyfriend was not Rory, but Hugh? When my cell phone rang, I jumped.

"Move out. He's on his way," Gus said and clicked off.

My heart was in my throat. I had to risk it. I grabbed the drive and tugged. I jammed the stick into my back pocket and slid the cabinet drawers shut. I twisted the key into the lock the way I found it, the key tag swinging. Hugh's window overlooked the parking lot. Under the halogen lights, his parking space was still empty. Gus had seen him, though. Hugh must have parked closer to the front door.

I unfolded Hugh's step-stool that he used for cleaning the top bookshelves. *Why did the professor bring a ladder to class? Answer: To promote higher education.* Get a grip, Dylan. Stay with it. I placed the small ladder in the center of his desk, and unrolled the nylon rope. I looped it through the ladder's top step, and hoisted myself up, carrying the other rope end with me into the crawl space.

Lifting that sucker six feet was easier in theory. The two-step ladder was dead weight, and my forearms trembled as I hoisted it. It swung and flattened the framed pictures like bowling pins. When Hugh saw the drive was gone, he'd know what happened, but I couldn't worry about that now. After the third try, the ladder swung within reach. I drew it up and set it to the side, untying the rope. Maybe Hugh would file a complaint against maintenance.

Downstairs, the main door opened and squeaked shut. I replaced the tile into the ceiling, sealing myself in. Sweat trickled down the back of my neck. I sat tight.

It made sense. Hugh was arrogant enough to go after a student. Catrin Sistecky said she thought Carrie's lover was married. He would never allow Carrie to expose him. *A one-man woman, go to the Dean.* Hugh would risk everything to stop her.

It was quiet below. I scootched over Matt's office. A door down the hall opened and closed. Hugh came closer. By now, he would know I'd been in there.

I covered the length over Leona's space with more speed, reaching the open square above the ladder in my office. I sat at the opening, legs dangling and tried Gus on my cell. His phone drilled four times, five, a question with no answer. Where was he? I dialed again. Nothing. *Battery discharging.* Damn!

My office was dark. I lowered myself, feet feeling for the ladder. Eager to reach my desk phone, I misjudged the steps and fell. The ladder tipped and clattered against a chair. I grabbed at the phone. No dial tone.

Someone with feet bigger than Rosa's stood outside my door. Gus, say something. The doorknob rattled. I waited, muscles rigid, holding my breath. Silence. Dear God.

From a distance, the main hall door squeaked, and the hall went dark. I took my chance. Grabbing my purse, I inched open my door. No one. I tore down the hall to the stairwell. I was on the last few stairs from the bottom when footsteps scraped from above. I ripped open the outside door, digging for my keys. Where had I parked?

The parking lot was dark.

A figure wearing a ball cap appeared from around the bumper of a truck. Hugh? No, too fast.

"Dylan? What are you doing here?"

"Matt. Thank God."

"What the hell is going on?"

"Hugh." I was winded. "In there." I bent to catch my breath. "A love letter—from Carrie—" I huffed, my heart thudding. "The cops were wrong. They need to see—"

"Come on. I'll take you to the station. My car's over here."

"Wait." The black truck was gone. "Gus should be driving around here someplace."

There under the halogen street lamp, Matt pulled out a knife, the kind I use to bone fish. Its tip glinted in the light. "Don't bet on it."



A few lone cars sat at the far end of the lot. We moved toward them in a death march. The spring night was filled with slow-whirring crickets, and the alert line of trees bowed toward us like nocturnal predators. The knife was aimed at my spine.

Where the hell was Gus? A lump of dread settled in my midsection.

I considered making a dash for the trees but didn't trust my legs. Would it be like in a nightmare, running in quicksand? Matt was fast. Even if I reached the trees, what then? He could stab me better there in the shadows than under the stars.

"Here's my new addition." He patted the hood of a red SUV. "What do you think? Fabulous ride, huh? Let's go to Pigpen's. Like always."

I couldn't savor the new car. A bomb had exploded too close to my skull. "It's late. I have an early morning—"

"You drive." He opened the driver's door, and gave me the key. My insides howled with anger and hurt. How could he do this? My Matt. Matty. I had to focus.

"I've been correcting papers all day, and I have no motivation. I'm out of it."

"I don't take no for an answer." I realized with a shock that the nudge to my backbone was the knife. "Need more motivation?"

"I'm getting a second wind," I said.

"I had faith that you would." His breath reeked of alcohol.

He made me climb behind the steering wheel, and he settled into the back seat. The locks clicked. "You'll love how this baby handles. It's cool to sit high and blast people with the lights."

Using the engine thrum as cover, I felt for the door handle but in the unfamiliar car could only fumble at the armrest.

"Don't even think about bailing," Matt's voice came out of the darkness of the back seat. A warning bell sounded. "Safety first. Buckle the belt."

I clanked the metal against the holster, pretending to fasten it. A gleaming icon on the dash continued to scold me.

"I said *buckle the belt*." He pressed the knife edge against my neck. "Don't piss me off again." The drops trickling onto my blouse collar were not perspiration. "Head toward Pigpen's. Go."

He tapped my skull with the knife edge. My scalp prickled. "You know, Dylan, I could have gone for you in a big way, but somehow the time was never right."

"What happened to Carrie? You two had a thing, and she threatened to expose you?"

He whacked me in the side of the head with the flat of the blade, metal against bone. I squeezed my eyes and breathed into the throbbing.

"Sit up," he said. "It was just a little love tap."

I shook off the pain. *'If some scum ever kidnaps you, challenge him,' Gus once said. 'Keep 'em talkin.' Make it personal.'*

We approached Pigpen's. The lot was packed with cars, and light and music spilled from the open doors. I tried again, keeping my voice even. "Are we headed in for beer and chili?"

"I don't feel like it now. Go through town and take a right after the bridge." Matt kept the flat of the knife pressed against my neck even as he spoke with an eerie disconnect that had nothing to do with me. "She found out I was a fraud and threatened to go to the Dean. I couldn't let her." His voice pulsed. I looked at him in the rearview mirror. The visor of his Boston ball cap hooded his eyes.

"It was the only way to shut her up at the time. God knows I didn't want to. You think I wanted to?" His voice was slow and heavy, not like his own.

I couldn't stop shaking. "You sat with me at Carrie's memorial service. You cried."

"I was plenty upset, I'll tell you." He sounded off-kilter, his voice foggy. He was either drunker than I thought or in the middle of a psychotic breakdown.

I stayed quiet and he continued. "You know that Carrie was a terrific writer. She gave me all her manuscripts to read, except one she wrote about me. I trusted her, and she betrayed me."

"It probably wasn't that bad."

"Shut up! I'd told her my deepest secrets, about a forged transcript and my fake recommendations. She put it all out there. Her writing was like the eye of God. I shined it on her instead."

"Did you pay Rory to pick up her papers?"

"No. I had Stacy do it."

"Where is Stacy?" I said. "I haven't seen her in a while." Ice stabbed my gut.

"Don't ask about her." God, did he kill Stacy too? "That was totally her own idea to run. I had nothing to do with it."

I held onto hope that Stacy was still alive.

"Hold it. Turn here."

The SUV's headlights found a dirt road, all but hidden by the shrubbery along the river. The unlit road was mushy from the spring thaw, and the SUV fishtailed as I wheeled around the tight corner.

I said, "Where are we going?"

"Don't you want to see your long-lost student?" Matt said. "Here you thought Carrie had vanished for good."

"Matty, for God's sake," I said.

I knew what the end of this road had in store. I had to keep talking. "Why did Hugh have that letter if Carrie wrote it to you?"

"He came into my office one day and took it, same way he took your stick. He needed his little power plays."

"I never knew you were like this, Matt."

"Dilbert, we're all like this. Even you. Now shut up and drive"

My brain clicked off. I concentrated on the road, trying to forget the cold steel against my collarbone. The road twisted along the river. Then distant headlights shone in the rearview mirror. Gus following in his black truck? Hope flared.

"Jesus," Matt said. "That idiot security guard is following us. Hasn't that nitwit retired yet? Step on it." I tapped the accelerator. "I told you to step on it!" He slapped my forearm with the knife handle.

My arm exploded with sparks then went numb, and I lost my grip on the steering wheel. The car wobbled toward the curtain of trees. I brought it back.

About thirty yards ahead, a car was stopped in the road. Its red tail lights gleamed into the night like devil eyes. I slowed.

"Go around," he said. "Do it!"

I passed the stalled car, aiming for the grassy shoulder, steering as best I could with one arm. I had no sense that we were actually on the rails until the tires shook my already quaking brain. A far-off Amtrak whistle filled my head like a nightmare.

I revved the engine to bump us off the tracks, but the tires caught and spun in the gravel.

"Gun it!" Matt said.

The train's engine gathered from the shadows like roaring destiny. I summoned every ounce of energy to warm frozen muscles into motion. Releasing the seat belt, I swept downward, groping for the door handle. The latch finally fit into my palm, and I lifted, lifted again, until the door swung into my freedom. Matt yelled and lashed with the knife, but like an outfielder stretching for a ball sailing out of the park, he was a split second too late. I stumbled over wooden ties, metal rails, and then slid down a gravel bank.

The hulking engine thundered out of the dark.

Pulverized metal sprayed a cloud of red paint-flecks, chrome, and broken glass. Dirt and small stones fanned outward like the tail of a comet. *Matt—Matty*. My vision turned liquid. The crumpled mess ratcheted along the track and burst into a fireball.

I moved as if underwater across the road's soft ground and downward to the river. From a distance, someone called my name. My voice was lost in a clutch of sobs. The ground was cold.



Two days later, North River PD found the body of Carrie Logan buried under the railroad trestle along the river's south bank. The police located Stacy Ahearn, Matt's former girlfriend, in Los Angeles using an assumed name. She talked a blue streak.

Rory had said that Carrie could see the future, that I didn't belong at North River College. She was right. One rainy morning not long after, I stood on the riverbank and tossed the useless memory stick into the brown roiling water. My publisher cancelled the book, but it didn't matter. After I settled into another office, whether at a different university, an employee break room at a local supermarket, or on my lawn chair with Gus, there might be other chances. For now, I didn't care. I figured that when maintenance removed the *Dylan Morris, Ph.D.* sign from my office door, the empty rectangle would be covered in less than a day. Swollen from spring rains, the North River pushed toward the Atlantic.