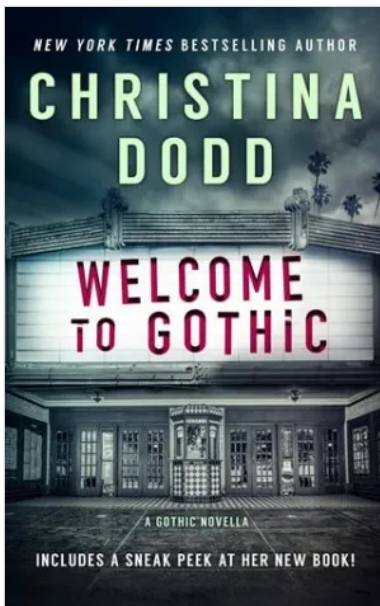




Welcome to Gothic

Author: *Christina Dodd*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: The bestselling author Christina Dodd welcomes you to Gothic, California—the mysterious village with a foggy history—in this twisty, suspenseful, and darkly romantic novella...

WELCOME TO THE PAST

At the glittering heart of Hollywood's golden era stands the regal Gothic Palace Theater—the pinnacle of thrilling shows, opulent decor, and the biggest stars of stage and screen. Here, drama unfolds on and off the stage.

WELCOME TO THE PRESENT

Today, in the abandoned backstage, fitness guru Wendy Giordano is knocked unconscious and wakes to find herself performing a daredevil stunt in the Gothic Palace Theater...in glamorous 1940.

WELCOME TO GOTHIC

Wendy is swept into the hypnotic bygone world of desperate gamblers, powerful divas, and one tormented actor who might be her ideal man. Can she save a child and stop a murder before time once more sweeps her away from all she has come to love?

Total Pages (Source): 16

Page 1

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:26 am

The remote village of Gothic, California

On scenic Big Sur

Early spring, this year

“The currents are strong today.”

“No, dear, they were stronger yesterday.”

Wendy Giordano stopped in the entry of Vintage Gothic Encore Clothing Shop—motto: Not Responsible for Haunted or Possessed Items—and soon-to-be-opened bookshop, located in the former Gothic Palace theater, to listen to the owners, two sisters, squabble. She smiled.

“No, they weren’t,” Minnie insisted. “Today is the day something will happen. Or tomorrow. But not yesterday.”

“Obvious!” Mabel snapped.

“It’s time, Mabel. Nothing’s obvious.”

In Gothic, California, an iron plaque outside the Live Oak Restaurant proclaimed the local legend:

On stormy nights, Gothic is said to disappear. On its return, it brings lost souls back from the dead.

The isolated village encouraged the woo-woo aspect of their Big Sur locale; woo-woo was good for business, good for the annual Gothic Spring Psychic Festival's publicity and the annual Gothic Garden and Flower Show. With the Pacific Coast Highway regularly washed out by a series of ocean storms and the only road in the winding and environmentally fragile Nacimiento-Fergusson Road, they needed all the help they could get.

For Wendy's money, if anyone could be psychic phenomenon specialists, it was the O'Hall siblings. They looked like twins: white-haired, round soft-apple faces, kind blue eyes that could turn sharp in an instant. Ageless, although Mabel frequently made it a point to remind Minnie she was the younger by eleven months.

Right now, Mabel huffed away from Minnie toward the front door of the shop and greeted Wendy as she stepped inside. "Hello, dear, that fog is dense this morning, isn't it?"

"Damp, gray and moving as if it was alive," Wendy agreed. Currents, she thought, and shivered.

Mabel shut the door firmly behind them.

"What are you here for today?" Minnie asked. "You brought your biggest shopping bag, so I know this isn't a mere visit."

"Although we love that, too." Mabel beamed. "You know you're one of our favorite people."

"I love you both, too." Wendy hugged them warmly. "I heard you talking about the Gothic time currents like you know something about them. Were you two born here?"

"No, dear, no one is ever born here. We're all called," Minnie assured her.

Whatever that meant.

“We have been here for a long time.” Mabel poured a mug of hot coffee, stirred in a generous dollop of cream and sugar, brought it to Wendy and offered it with one of her rare and wonderful smiles.

Wendy took it and sipped, closed her eyes and appreciated the toasty smell and rich taste of the real thing. She ran Bendy Wendy’s Yoga, Self-Defense and Workout Studio, Gothic’s only such studio, and in theory she didn’t approve of caffeine, cream and sugar. “I only indulge when I’m here.”

“No guilt!” Mabel’s admonishing finger rose. “You can work out an extra ten minutes today.”

Wendy regretfully put the mug down. “I don’t have an extra ten minutes today.” Between the locals and the periodic influx of tourists, she was always on the go and she made a good living. Important for someone with her background.

“It doesn’t matter. You look very fit.”

Wendy suspected the women didn’t approve of her formfitting spandex jumpsuit that displayed every curve of every muscle, but she considered herself a walking advertisement and . . . well . . . she looked good and she knew it.

“I’m throwing a party for my young karate masters, ages seven to twelve, and we’re going to play dress up a parent.”

Both women stopped bustling and shot her inquiring glances.

“I put one item in each bag, either clothes or a prop. The kids scale the obstacles, grab a bag and run back to their parent. They open the bag and dress their designated

parent in whatever is inside. When we run out of bags, we'll take family photos and have cake. The kids will love it!"

"Not so much the parents, I suspect," Minnie said severely.

"Probably not. One of my kids is new, and his mother is a single parent. She informed me she couldn't be there for the party, so I'm going to stand in for her and that'll lessen any potential embarrassment for her son." Wendy grinned. "And for any dignified parent."

Mabel clasped her hands. "Everybody will love that!"

"Oh, I know." Wendy didn't spend a lot of time worrying about her dignity. She began looking around the shop for the most extravagant pieces for her costume bags.

Built in the glory days of the thirties, the theater had once been a palace indeed. The ceiling was decorated with Egyptian motifs and gilded with gold leaf. The pillars had been carved and painted to look like the columns of Karnak. Framed and faded old movie posters decorated the walls. Even now, the smells of real butter and popcorn permeated the air. Wendy knew in its day the building had been a marvel. Not so much now; it showed its age, but like Minnie and Mabel kept its charm alive with three well-dressed wax figures of silent movie stars. Wendy thought the mannequins were creepy, but they attracted a lot of tourist attention.

The wall between the lobby and auditorium had been removed. The now-open space was the shop area where the sisters kept an ever-changing stock of designer clothes that attracted a diverse clientele—people with pretensions, people who loved to dress up and, possibly the most important source of income, Hollywood costume designers looking for inspiration.

Mabel got right down to business. "You're looking for wigs, feather boas, dramatic

swishy cloaks?”

“Exactly.”

“You’ve come to the right place,” Minnie said. “When Maeve Lindholm closed the theater in December 1941—Pearl Harbor forced the closing, you know—all the props and costumes were hung up or packed away backstage, and they’ve never been completely cleared out.”

Mabel clasped her hands over her heart. “There are trunks back there that have never been opened!”

“Wow.” Wendy looked at the stage, rising seven feet above the main floor and sectioned off from the space by a painted plywood wall. “How do I get up there?”

“I’ll take you,” Minnie said.

“No, dear, I will,” Mabel countered. “You know I’m more familiar with backstage.”

“How will I ever become familiar if I don’t—”

“One of us has to stay and mind the shop!”

“And it should be you!”

The sisters reminded Wendy of two bees buzzing crossly around each other.

The front door opened bringing a surge of people, chatting and laughing, ready to shop.

“The tour bus must have pulled in,” Mabel said.

Minnie consulted the small antique watch that hung around her neck. “They’re early,” she said in patent disapproval. “We’ll both need to be here to handle the customers. Wendy, can you find your way around backstage by yourself?”

“Of course!” Wendy tingled with anticipation of such an adventure.

Mabel took Wendy by the arm. “This way.” She led her through a series of industrial folding room dividers and into the other half of the floor space. The newly constructed bookshelves gave off a fresh lumber smell, and everywhere boxes of books stood open. Mabel stopped to allow Wendy to get a good look. “The bookshop will specialize in theater arts and history, of course, but we expect our primary sales to be in books about the occult and transformations and all the things Gothic is famous for.”

“The currents,” Wendy said.

“Exactly.”

“What does Madame Rune think of that?” Just up Gothic’s winding street, the flamboyant Rune ran Madame Rune’s Psychic Readings and Bookshop.

“It was her idea. She’s moving her bookshop over here for us to handle. In exchange, she’s taking some of our more gaudy items to sell in her store.” Mabel’s eyes gleamed with delight. “We have a lead on the wax figure of Maria Ouspenskaya as Maleva the Gypsy fortune-teller in *The Wolf Man*!”

Wendy gave a blank stare.

“You’re too busy to watch old movies, and that one is from the 1930s. But if we manage to land the figure, it’s going over to Madame Rune’s shop, too. Anyway, we’ve found cross-pollination increases everyone’s sales. All we have to do is find

the time to set up the shelves!” Mabel led Wendy to a locked door. “Go backstage and hunt. Remember to be careful. In its day, before it was a movie theater, this place was Maeve Lindholm’s fully functioning playhouse where she and her movie actor friends would perform to lure the public to the area. There are trapdoors and ropes and curtains and props everywhere.”

“I’ll be careful,” Wendy promised.

“Open the trunks and take whatever strikes your fancy. We’ll square it with you later.” Mabel pulled a big, old-fashioned iron key from her leather belt bag, unlocked the door and opened it with a creak that would have done the Addams family proud. “Lock the door behind you. Tourists try to sneak in everywhere.” She handed Wendy the heavy key and gave her a push.

Wendy stumbled inside.

With a resounding thunk, Mabel shut the door, and for a moment, it reminded Wendy of a prison door closing . . . forever.

She looked up the dim, narrow stairs into a swirl of dust lit by some unseen window or skylight.

Or had the fog crept backstage in the theater?

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The air here at the bottom of the stairs seemed dense; it was hard for Wendy to catch her breath.

The sensation of being trapped, shut in a dark closet, quickly grew.

She needed to out of here before something jumped out and shrieked, “Boo!”

Wendy fit the heavy key in the lock, turned it and locked herself in.

Rather than bounding up the stairs in her usual style, she moved cautiously.

Which, she assured herself, wasn’t because it felt as if she would confront some unhappy theater ghosts, but because of Mabel’s warnings about trapdoors and curtains and props.

When she got to the top, the vista opened up to show her a backstage littered with boxes and trunks.

It looked as if everything had been abandoned in a panic.

Feather boas, wide women’s hats and draped netting hung on hooks.

She collected those, and the tear-away gathered skirt and bustier that made up some medieval costume.

She forgot her trepidation; this seemed like a treasure hunt, and as she gathered each item it tickled her imagination.

She threaded her way through the dusty velvet curtains to the stage where, yes, theater ghosts lingered.

She faced the plywood wall that separated the stage from the shop, where the audience should be.

Surely the voices of the tourists in the clothing shop should carry this far .

.

. but back here, it was so quiet she could hear only the floor creak when she took a step. Wendy had lived in Gothic for six years, but never had she had a moment when she thought the local legend was true . . . until now.

The currents were strong, indeed.

Giving in to impulse, she caught up the cape draped across a trunk, flung it around her shoulders, faced the plywood and took a low bow.

She faced stage left, and took another bow, stage right, and another.

She could almost hear the roar of applause, which made her laugh at herself.

Removing the cape, she wrinkled her nose at the musty smell and placed it in her bag.

She'd have to hang it out and beat the dust off it before the game, but the kids would love it, and she loved those kids. She wanted them to enjoy a carefree childhood, to laugh, to know no one could hurt them and that they were loved.

The single onstage steamer trunk called her name, figuratively, she assured herself, so she started there.

It had been well-packed; the leather straps had been pulled through the buckles, tightly fastening the domed lid. She worked the leather free, flipped the metal clasps, and with an inhale of anticipation, she opened the lid.

Wendy expected a flutter of moths or a funky smell, but instead it smelled like . . . the theater, a smell she knew well from her high school years:

greasepaint and that indefinable sense of excitement.

She'd never been an actor, never wanted to be, but to be involved in make-believe had made her a part of something bigger than herself, something that gave people pleasure.

She'd been a stage manager, a stuntwoman, and yes, a costume designer, and now she reached into the contents and pulled out a long, blond wig.

"Wow," she whispered.

Wendy shook it and no vermin fell out, so she placed it on her head and reached for the next piece, a skimpy leather skirt.

She knotted it around her waist, took the companion piece, a leather halter, and tied it around her chest.

She went to stand in front of the mirror; her dusty rose jumpsuit molded her shape and with the blond wig and the costume, she looked like some Hollywood producer's concept of Tarzan's Jane.

Cool.

Wendy still needed to gather props. She could get everything she needed out of that

one trunk, so she headed back and leaned in. She didn't take off the costume—she figured Mabel and Minnie would get a laugh out of that . . .

From behind her, Wendy heard a whistling noise. Before she could turn, something heavy and hard struck her on the back of the head. The light changed. Stars swirled in a vortex.

She collapsed into the trunk and realized—oh, God, the trunk had been placed on top of a trapdoor. She fell. And fell. And never hit bottom.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:26 am

Wendy opened her eyes, shook her head to clear it, and, hearing voices, hastily stood up. Thinking it was Minnie or Mabel, she started to call, Here I am!

A man grabbed her by the arm. “Quiet backstage. The play is live!” He spoke softly and vehemently.

She faced him, wide-eyed and confused. Where had he come from? She looked around.

More importantly—where am I?

The man checked out her blond wig, then surveyed her leotard, her running shoes and her silly leather skirt and halter top.

“You’re the stuntwoman who agreed to step in in our hour of need, right? Thank you for that.

I’m Percy, the stage manager.”

Percy wore a suit.

With shoulder pads.

And pinstripes.

And a crisp white shirt with a tie that had been loosened to allow him to open the top button.

Wendy had never in her life seen a stage manager dressed in anything but torn jeans and a T-shirt.

“I’m Wendy Giordano.” Her voice sounded scratchy to her own ears.

“Good to meetcha.” Percy kept his voice low and his delivery staccato.

“Where am I? I mean, what’s the name of this place?”

“The Gothic Palace. How many other theaters do you think there are out here in the back of beyond?” He surveyed her as if worried. “You okay?”

“I hit my head.” She rubbed the lump on her skull.

“Can you go on? Because when Brenda broke her arm, we thought we had to lose our most impressive stunt, and the audience is expecting it.”

“Er . . . what? What do you mean?”

He got hostile and forbidding. “Don’t think by stalling I’m going to pay you more. I already doubled the amount I was paying Brenda to get you down here.”

Wendy was in the theater, obviously, the old Gothic Palace theater. But instead of the dim and dust she’d seen moments ago, the place was bright and clean, bustling with people backstage carrying costumes and props, wearing leopard print wraps, coconut shell bras and leafy, leg-baring skirts and lining up for the dance number. Onstage, Wendy could see a set, complete with painted tree trunks and potted ferns, and just offstage in the wings, stagehands stood waving palm fronds to simulate a breeze.

A jungle?

“I could use a Motrin.” Like a pain reliever would cure a hallucination.

“A what?”

“Nothing.”

“You know what you’re supposed to do, right? Sure, but let me walk you through it one more time.” He pointed up the flimsy ladder. “You’re going up. Stay out of sight until Miss Lindholm says—” he switched to a high, girly voice, “—‘Oh, Tarzan, I can’t!’”

Wendy nodded. Whatever had hit her must have knocked her silly. Now she was hallucinating she was a stuntwoman in a Tarzan play back when . . . “Wait. This is Angelica Lindholm we’re talking about?”

Percy viewed her oddly. “No, Maeve Lindholm. You know, the movie star? The lady who founded this town and owns every last stick of it? The ballbuster?”

“Oh. Right.” Maeve Lindholm, the actress from Sweden who became a star on the basis of her beautiful and expressive face, who made the transition from silent movies to the talkies, who constructed the town of Gothic . . . the woman who had been dead for more than seventy years, now took a starring part in Wendy’s delusion.

“Miss Lindholm will step back out of sight of the audience. Tarzan calls, ‘Jane, Tarzan catch. Trust Tarzan.’”

Wendy had put on that costume, thought about Tarzan and now here she was, in a Tarzan play back in the—she eyed Percy’s suit—in the late thirties? Makes total sense.

Percy continued, “That’s when you step onto the platform.”

“Won’t the audience know it’s not Miss . . . Miss Lindholm?”

“Naw. Remember to keep your hair pulled close around your face so they can’t get a good look at you, and don’t stare at them straight on. The wig and your shape will fool them. It’s stage magic.”

“Uh-huh. There is an audience, right?”

He shoved her toward the curtains. “There’s your official peephole. Take a look.”

Wendy strode over, lifted the flap and peered through the carefully placed gap. The ceiling and the columns were decorated exactly as they were in the twenty-first century, with gleaming gold paint and silver stars and richly colored Egyptian motifs, but it all looked brighter, newer. Red velvet chairs stood in rows with an aisle on either side, and the floor rose toward the back of the theater to afford every audience member a view. Every seat was full: women in dresses with fur stoles tossed around their shoulders, men in suits and ties, Navy men in dress whites, Army men in dress greens, shined shoes, lots of starch, lots of ironing.

Full kudos to Wendy’s hallucination for authenticity. She returned to Percy.

“Satisfied?” he asked.

“Full house!” she said brightly.

“It’s Maeve Lindholm and Hugh Capel. Of course it’s a full house.”

“Okay. The stunt.” She took a breath. “I’ll bet I’m going to take the rope and swing over to Tarzan.”

“Right. Don’t worry, Hugh’s good at this physical stuff. He does his own movie

stunts and he'll grab you. He'll put one arm around your waist and pull you close. What you want to do is keep your back to the audience, wrap your arms around him, get a good grip on his shoulders and a good grip on the rope so when he swings to the other platform—" Percy pointed to a lower platform built into a clump of trees at the back of the stage "—he's not supporting your whole weight. He kisses you, the lights go out, you trade back with Miss Lindholm, you pick up your check, change into your street clothes and you're done. Simple?"

Wendy nodded.

"Not much of a talker. Don't meet women like you very often." He chortled and slapped her butt.

Without a thought, she grabbed his tie, tightened it around his neck, looked into his face and said, "Don't ever do that again."

Percy's eyes were round, startled and confused. "Tell you that you don't talk much?"

"Slap my butt."

"It was just a friendly little . . ." At her glare, he held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. Doll, you've got star attitude."

"Don't call me doll, either."

"Oh. Ohhh." He nodded knowingly. "You're a butch. With those muscles, I should've figured."

She was ready to take his feet out from under him, when on the well-lit stage, a man stepped out in a costume like hers minus the halter top. Or the clothes underneath. Just him and a loincloth and some of the finest thighs she'd ever seen in her life.

She let Percy's tie slip out of her hands.

"Not a butch," Percy observed. "Just a confused dame. Or a confusing dame."

"Don't use butch. Don't call me dame." But she'd lost her fiery edge.

The guy onstage was handsome, yes, and the body was well-done, the result of hours of workout every day, but she couldn't take her eyes off him. He had something. She didn't know what to call it. Charisma? Star power?

"I shouldn't even have to pay you." Percy had a smirk in his voice. "You get to kiss Hugh Capel."

She turned her dazed face to him. "Hugh Capel?"

"Like you don't know who Hugh Capel is. Look at you, you're practically drooling."

"Because he looks like that, not because I know who he is."

"Where have you been for the past five years? The guy's had one hit movie after another."

"That I believe." She so believed it.

"He'll give you the kiss, but he doesn't mess with the staff."

"No, of course not. Not the staff," she mocked.

"All that tragedy, you know."

Her ears virtually perked up. "Tragedy?"

Percy glanced at his rectangular-faced Bulova watch. “Better get up the stairs, it’s almost time for your stunt.”

She put her foot on the first rung.

He stopped her. “Take off those shoes first. You’re Jane. You’re barefoot.”

Of course she was. She toed out of her running shoes, took off her socks and handed them all to him.

He accepted them gingerly, then handed them off to a passing stagehand. “Where did you get those things?”

“From the Nike store.”

“Mr. Nike makes ugly shoes.”

Wendy climbed swiftly up the stairs.

Everything went like clockwork. Miss Lindholm delivered her breathless denial, stepped back, and immediately abandoned the character of a frightened Jane to become Maeve Lindholm, seasoned actress. She handed Wendy the rope and adjusted Wendy’s blond wig. Hugh delivered his line. Miss Lindholm indicated Wendy should step forward. Wendy grasped the rope in both hands and sailed down to Hugh. The impact knocked the breath out of both of them, and with a slight smile, Hugh looked into her face.

Looked at her. Looked as if he saw her. Looked as no one had ever looked before. His smile faded. As they stood in the spotlight, hundreds of people watched, but they were alone, enclosed in a bubble of warm, secret silence.

That smile, pleased that the first part of the stunt had gone well, slipped away, and he looked at her, said to her, “Who are you?”

His words were no more than a breath, but they made her want to touch his lips, melt into his body . . .

Someone above jerked the rope he held, and they both came alive to their surroundings; they were onstage, with hundreds of eyes upon them, and they had seconds before they had to play the second half of the stunt. His arm slid around her waist, he pulled her tightly against his side. She gripped his shoulders with one hand, the other circled his chest and clasped the rope. He lifted her off her feet—Percy hadn’t mentioned that part—which made things easier; Wendy wrapped her legs around Hugh’s thigh. He shot her a look of approval and . . . something else. Something heated.

Her breath caught. This man was potent.

He placed one foot onto a knot on the rope and used the other to propel them out over the stage.

Someone above was manipulating the rope, but Hugh had given them a good shove in the right direction and they flew through the air toward the proper platform.

They both stuck the landing, hitting hard with feet flat while all around them, lions roared and elephants trumpeted.

She knew what happened now. The kiss. He had to kiss her as if he was the mighty Tarzan, king of the jungle, and she was his chosen mate.

So corny . . .

His lips touched hers. She breathed his breath, soaked in his warmth, found a home in his arms—

The lights went out.

Miss Lindholm jerked on her arm.

As Wendy stumbled away, she heard him whisper, “Wait for me.”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:26 am

Backstage was the same madness it had been before, with costumers, palm wavers, dancers and Percy gesturing frantically at the soundman to add more jungle sounds to the chase scene.

But Wendy had changed. Before she'd gone onstage, she'd been sure she had suffered a head injury and was out of her mind.

Now she didn't care if she was out of her mind. All she wanted was to do what Hugh commanded—to wait for him. To see what he wanted, to kiss him again, to find out if that single moment of connection was more than a dream.

When she walked up to Percy, he started to slap her on the butt, then at the last minute clapped her on the shoulder. He looked terrified.

"That's fine," she said.

"Good job, princess."

"Calling me princess is not fine."

"You're a gosh-darned funny woman, but Miss Lindholm was so happy with your performance she said you should change in her dressing room, and you should come to the wrap party tonight up at the estate."

"Oh. Good." Wendy touched the tender knot on the back of her head. Would she be unconscious long enough to go to a party? To see Hugh? She hoped so, because he might be an illusion conjured up by her injured brain, but for him, she wanted to give

her brain a blue ribbon.

Percy handed Wendy a folded piece of paper. “Here’s your salary.”

Wendy opened it and stared.

The date scrawled at the top was September 16, 1940.

Wendy thought about hyperventilating. Such a strange dream. So specific. Almost as if when she fell, she fell through layers of time to . . . this.

“Holy—” Don’t say crap. A woman in 1940 wouldn’t say crap. “Moses!”

“I know. Not bad for five minutes’ work.” Percy sounded smug.

She looked at the amount: three dollars.

Don’t spend it all in one place, Wendy.

She told him, “You’re paying for travel time, fast action, and there aren’t many women who could do what I did on a moment’s notice.” Actually, Wendy didn’t have a clue what stuntwomen did in 1940, but she would bet they made half what the men did so . . . because he’d doubled her salary to get her there in a hurry, she’d made what a man did.

“I like you, kid,” Percy said. “Wendy . . . who?”

Wendy was used to people not remembering her last name. “Wendy Giordano.”

“You could be a star if you’d change that last name to sound American.”

“I am American,” she said icily.

“Sure, and my real name is Milton Minkus, but that and a nickel will get me a cup of coffee.” Percy got a crooked smile on his face. “Look, there’s the real princess.”

Wendy followed his gaze.

A toddler, a little girl about eighteen months old, roamed the backstage in a white smocked dress, white ruffled socks and black patent leather shoes. She smiled a gap-toothed smile at everyone she saw, delighting in the world around her.

“Who’s that?” Wendy asked.

“That’s Miss Lindholm’s daughter, Hazel. She’s a doll, loves the theater like her mother, wanders back here charming us all while her mother’s onstage.” Percy knelt and held out his arms.

Hazel came right over and climbed in.

Percy stood with the little girl on his arm and said, “Hazel, this is a friend of your mum’s. Do you like her?”

Hazel jumped so fast Wendy’s reflexes almost failed her. She caught the child, they both laughed and quieted when Percy shushed them. Already, Hazel knew she had to be quiet backstage.

“I’m Wendy. What’s your name?”

“Hazel. H-A-Z-E-L Lindholm.” Hazel recited her name as she’d been trained to.

“Hazel, what would you like to do?”

“Go!” Hazel pointed to the door.

Wendy looked at Percy.

“Sure, take her outside. It won’t hurt her to run around. When you bring her back in, give her to the nursemaid.” He pointed to a young woman standing in the wings staring fixedly at Hugh. “She ought to be taking the baby home anyway. It’s past Hazel’s bedtime.”

Wendy glanced around, located a huge black-and-white school clock on the wall and said, “I guess! It’s almost nine o’clock.”

“If everybody does their parts right, the play’s over at ten.” Jungle drums picked up a beat, the dancers started onto the stage and Percy sprang toward them, stage-whispering, “The crocodile! Don’t forget the crocodile.”

Two of the dancers turned back and pushed a large purple-velvet plush crocodile to the back of the stage.

“Come on,” Wendy said to Hazel, and took her out the stage door and into the gathering dusk.

Hazel struggled to get down, and Wendy put her on her feet, then herded the toddling child toward Gothic’s main street.

The Pacific Coast Highway had been completed in 1937. That year, Maeve Lindholm traveled in her Duesenberg SJ north from Hollywood, turned right on Nacimiento-Fergusson Road, drove to the top of the Widow’s Peak overlooking the Pacific and announced she would build her castle here.

The Gothic village Wendy knew hadn’t taken form yet; the road’s steep seven hairpin

turns and some of the lots had been laid out, but the roadbed was gravel and only a few buildings broke the vast emptiness of Big Sur. The grand, mostly finished Gothic Palace theater sat alone on the edge of a curve. The lower edge of town was marked by the raw-looking Gothic General Store.

Two buses painted Army green were parked nearby, which explained the number of uniforms Wendy had seen in the audience. All around cars were parked: early twentieth century black carriage-looking cars with spoke wheels, colorful cars that looked almost modern, sporty convertibles.

Fittingly, there was a gas station and car repair garage across the street.

In one roped-off section, men in dark suits and brimmed hats stood beside what were obviously high-end cars, smoking cigarettes and rubbing the fenders with their rags. Chauffeurs, Wendy assumed.

They wolf-whistled and leered at her jungle outfit.

Assholes.

Hazel picked up gravel and threw it at them.

Smart kid.

When she reached for another handful, Wendy pried open her fist and made her drop the pebbles. "We should take you back in, baby." To get Hazel away from those men, especially the guy who didn't whistle, but watched them so intently Wendy's skin prickled with unease. Because if he meant trouble, she could defend herself, but the best defense was a good head start, and she had taken on the care of this little girl.

She picked Hazel up and carried her to the stage door.

The nonwhistling guy met them there and opened it. "After you," he said.

She planted her feet and looked him in the face. "Are you supposed to be backstage?"

"I'm one of the actors. One of the bad man poachers. I came out for a smoke, but I'm on in a couple of minutes."

"Okay." She hurried inside in front of him.

Behind her she heard him say, "Hi, Percy, your poacher has reported for duty."

"One of our poachers," Percy corrected him irritably.

Hmm. Percy didn't like the guy, either.

She waited until the man joined the group of very obviously villainous characters who waited in the wings for their cue, and when they went on, she turned to Percy and asked, "Who is he?"

"Oh. Bill." Percy gave a gusty sigh.

"Oh, Bill." Hazel didn't so much sigh as sneer, an odd expression on such a tiny, angelic child's face.

Wendy looked at her in surprise. So Hazel didn't like everybody.

"Did he give you trouble?" Percy asked.

"No. No. He's just not . . ." She shrugged one shoulder. "I didn't like the way he watched me and Hazel when we were outside."

“He’s a cousin of Miss Lindholm’s. She brought him out from Sweden when he was a young man. His mother said he wanted to be Miss Lindholm’s assistant. Turns out he wanted to be an actor.” Now Percy wore the sneer. “Miss Lindholm’s a good relative. She got him a screen test.”

“No interest?”

“A big, echoing void of interest. Now he hangs around here. She gives him the occasional role in her plays. Supporting roles, only. I don’t know what else he does with his time. Gambles, I think.” Percy looked sideways at her. “He must win because he’s got a car and enough money for gas.”

“That makes him important.”

Percy smirked. “I like you, kid. Ya got a smart mouth.” With a glance on the stage, he lifted his hands in despair. “Could the lighting man get the sunrise right just once?”

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Hazel's nursemaid still stood, watching the play, not noticing that her charge had been gone or returned.

Wendy carried Hazel to her, tapped her on the shoulder, and when the young woman turned, Wendy used her friendly but firm teacher voice. "Hi, I'm Wendy. You are?"

"I'm Betty." She looked like a twenty-year-old, uncertain why Wendy had interrupted her viewing of the play, and glancing over her shoulder to watch the stage.

"Betty, I've been taking care of Hazel. I've had her outside, and since you didn't notice she was gone, I'm a little worried about your lack of attention to a toddler."

Betty snapped to attention. Her eyes narrowed. "Hazel's fine. She always is. She's so friendly, everybody likes to hold her and that gives me a minute to watch Mr. Cap . . . the play."

"Do you know everybody here is trustworthy? There are people in this world who hurt children just because they can."

"You know, no one asked you to—"

"Do your job? No."

"Everyone's afraid of Miss Lindholm, so nobody's going to hurt her daughter!"

"Miss Lindholm is rich, isn't she?"

With a wealth of hostility, Betty said, “Yes. So what?”

Wendy delved into the depths of her American history to recall a relevant example. “Have you heard of the Lindbergh baby?”

“Of course I’ve heard of—”

“Charles Lindbergh, the wealthy aviator—his child was kidnapped for ransom and killed.”

Betty stared at Wendy, then what she was saying clicked and she reached for Hazel. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m the stuntwoman.” Wendy yielded Hazel. “It’s a little late to be suspicious of me. But word to the wise, keep close track of a child, even one as well-liked as Hazel. If nothing else, she could climb a ladder and fall.”

“She’s a dainty little girl. Not a tomboy!” Like you. The words hung unspoken on the air.

Wendy didn’t smirk about what was obviously a pre-WWII insult, but barely. “Kids will be kids—and it’s not a good time to be unemployed.” Because if her recall of history was right, in 1940 the Great Depression still roared on.

Someone touched Wendy’s arm.

She turned to see a plump, smiling woman with sleek dark hair who gestured and said, “I’m Beatrice, Miss Lindholm’s dresser. Come on back and I’ll fit you into your frock.”

“My frock?” Wendy didn’t remember ever having a frock before, but she followed

Beatrice toward a door decorated with a silver star and the scrawl of Lindholm.

“Miss Lindholm told me your performance pleased her, and to fit you into one of her old gowns.”

Wendy hadn't worn a gown since her high school prom, and like this one, that dress had been used, so she went along for the ride. “When did she have time to tell you that?”

“Anytime she's not onstage, I'm fixing and pinning.” Beatrice looked Wendy up and down. “Course, you're about six inches shorter than Miss Lindholm, and she's a lot more voluptuous than you. That woman is a giantess in all the ways. But I picked out a bodice with a bustier and ripped out the whalebones, and I've already started hemming the skirt. I'll be done by the time you're finished with your bath.”

Wendy looked at the froth of shimmering ice-colored silk that made up that frock. “You'll be finished all that by the time I . . . My bath?”

“Right through there. I ran your water and laid out your undergarments.” Beatrice indicated an open door. “Be generous with the scented soap. You can't go to the party smelling of sweat. And use some of that Mum. You don't want to offend with a lack of daintiness.”

“Daintiness.” What was Beatrice talking about? Wendy ducked into the bathroom, which was almost as big as the dressing room, and searched the shelves until she found a jar labeled Mum. She started laughing. “It's a deodorant! My daintiness! Who calls it . . . ?” Then she thought of Hugh.

On second thought, she would use the Mum. But first . . .

She stripped down and sank into the bath. The footed tub wasn't deep, but the water

was warm and bubbly and smelled of orange blossoms, and as instructed she used soap generously. When she got out, she towed herself off, rubbed herself with an orange blossom scented lotion and, of course, utilized the Mum.

Using Miss Maeve Lindholm's space had its advantages.

Then Wendy had to figure out what to do with the undergarments. The tap panties, sure. But the garter belt? And the silk stockings? She understood the theory, but getting them on took skill and delicacy. Then she looked around, opened the door a crack and called, "Beatrice, where's the bra?"

Beatrice chuckled.

Wendy thought she hadn't understood. "You know, the brassiere?" They called them brassieres, didn't they?

"Brassiere," Beatrice scoffed. "You don't need no brassiere with this gown. You got tiny titties—" Okay, fine, rub it in "—and it's double lined. Just don't dance the Lindy Hop. Come on now. Come out. You haven't got anything I haven't seen before."

"You've never seen mine!" Wendy hesitated, then whipped out of the bathroom.

Beatrice surveyed Wendy's mostly bare figure, then looked at the silky confection in her hands. With the satisfaction of a talented seamstress, she said, "This is going to look so good on you. You don't even need the girdle."

"I would hope not!" A hundred crunches a day were good for something besides strengthening your core.

When Wendy stepped in front of the mirror, she agreed—she did look good. "This is

amazing. How did you alter it so quickly?”

“I’m an old stagehand. Gotta be fast!” Beatrice consulted the watch that hung around her neck, a watch that looked remarkably like Minnie’s. “Listen to the cheers. The play is over. The actors are taking their bows. Sit down at the dressing table. We’ll style your hair back, slick from the face. It’s not the most popular style, but with your cheekbones you can carry it off, and we’ll add a chiffon scarf wrap. I guessed your shoe size.” Beatrice indicated the pair of two-tone stiletto platform heels.

Wendy looked at Beatrice. “Where did you get shoes?”

“It’s the theater. Never know when someone’s going to break a heel dancing, and you’ve got to have a replacement. Now try `em on!”

In other words, they were like bowling shoes. Everybody got a shot at wearing them. Wendy slipped into them, got her balance and said, “Women dance in these?”

“I’m not saying the chorus line wouldn’t rather be barefoot and in leopard print loincloths,” Beatrice allowed. “Now I’ll apply your face paint and mascara. Haven’t got time to pluck your eyebrows.”

Remembering the other women’s pencil-thin brows, Wendy muttered, “Good thing.”

“Then I’ll be ready for Miss Lindholm when she comes in, bursting with excitement and ready to party.”

“I can do the makeup.”

Beatrice pushed her down in the low stool in front of the dressing table. “I can do it faster.”

When Wendy saw the pots and paints and brushes, she realized it was true. Nothing looked like it did in the twenty-first century. “This is so last year,” she murmured, and sat still while Beatrice covered her in a swathe of linen and applied makeup with a delicate hand.

“Wow.” Wendy looked both dramatic and understated. “That’s not what I expected at all.”

Beatrice wiped her brushes on a stained towel. “I know the difference between stage paint and evening makeup.”

“You’re like a modern makeup mirror.”

“You’re a very odd girl. You might want to keep those comments to yourself.”

“You’re probably right.” Wendy didn’t want to be burned as a witch in her own delusion.

The door opened and Maeve Lindholm sailed in carrying an armful of flowers and wearing a big grin. “That was a triumph!” She caught sight of Wendy. “So’s that.” She turned to Beatrice. “You were absolutely right about the dress. It never looked that good on me! Wendy, right? That’s your name?”

“Yes, I’m Wendy.”

Maeve Lindholm bore a striking resemblance to Angelica Lindholm, her great-great-great-granddaughter, or maybe she should say Angelica bore a striking resemblance to Maeve.

“The wrap party’s up at my home, The Tower. Make sure you enjoy yourself, and make sure you spend time with Hugh. I saw the way he looked at you, and that’s the

first time since the tragedy that he's shown a spark of interest in a woman."

"The tragedy?"

"You know, the wife and child."

"Right." Wendy wanted to delve deeper, but she didn't feel right gossiping behind Hugh's back, plus she really, really wanted to know if Maeve meant what she said about the way Hugh looked at her. "You think he's interested in me?"

"Hugh's a great actor—but no one's that good. You swung off that platform and into his arms, and when he looked into your face and saw you for the first time, every woman in the audience swooned." Maeve took a deep breath. "Hell, I swooned and I've got a good guy."

"A few of the men swooned, too, I'll bet." Beatrice took a matching chiffon scarf and tossed it loosely around Wendy's head, fastening it into the preset buttons on the bodice. She stepped back and nodded. "I do good work."

"You do," Wendy assured her. "Thank you. I've never felt so glamorous."

Beatrice handed her long cream silk gloves, then moved to answer a knock on the door. "Miss Lindholm, look who's here. It's your precious girl come to say good night."

Maeve dropped the flowers on the dressing table and rushed to take her daughter from Betty. "Are you ready for bed, little one?"

Hazel shook her head stubbornly and rubbed her eyes. "No, Mommy. Stay with you, Mommy."

“Of course you’re not ready to go to sleep, but why don’t you go for a ride with Betty.” Maeve exchanged a significant glance with Betty. “Clarence will drive you, and I’ll be home to kiss you good night.”

“Mommy.” Hazel thumped her head on Maeve’s shoulder.

Maeve closed her eyes and swayed with the child, a mother in tune with her baby.

Wendy relaxed. Hazel was headed home where she would be safe and nobody, certainly not that weird Bill guy, could do her any harm. She didn’t even know why he worried her, but something about him was off. If she could just put her finger on what was wrong . . .

Wendy glanced at Betty and discovered the young woman glaring steadily and jealously, which confirmed how nice Wendy looked. Wendy decided to relieve Betty of her need for constant animosity and slipped from the room.

Backstage was flooded with actors, dancers, stage crew, all milling around, congratulating each other on a successful final performance, making plans to go to the wrap party. It was loud and raucous. The smells of face paint and warm human bodies filled the air . . . but Wendy saw only one man towering above the rest.

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Hugh stood in the midst of a fawning crowd, looking for someone . . . looking for her.

He met her eyes. He excused himself from his sycophants, strode over and took her hand. “We haven’t officially met. I’m Hugh Capel.”

“I’m Wendy Giordano.”

“Wendy Giordano.” He savored her name like a sip of rich red wine. “You looked wonderful before in your jungle outfit, but now . . .” He took her other hand, lifted her arms away from her body and looked at her from top to toe. “You’re magnificent.”

If Percy had made that move, pulling her arms up to look at her figure, Wendy would have knocked him ass over teakettle. With Hugh, she blushed—actually blushed. “Maeve’s dresser, Beatrice, is a wonder.”

“She had the right person to dress.” Hugh let Wendy’s hands go. “I’ve got to shower and change. Can you wait for me?”

“I can wait for you.”

Hugh’s eyes flickered. “Good. That’s good.” He was gorgeous. But not smug. Not aware of himself as a powerful morsel of a man. He felt . . . real.

Wendy reminded herself that he wasn’t real. Then she made an oath to herself; if she woke from this hallucination now, before she’d had a chance to talk to Hugh, dance with Hugh . . . she’d hit herself on the head again to induce another one.

But then Hugh grimaced, and Wendy suddenly felt that something wasn't right. She glanced around.

The people who moments before had been laughing, drinking, slapping each other in congratulation . . . those people now silently watched Hugh and Wendy. Every eye was upon them. Percy, Bill, Fred, the painted warriors, the leaf-skirted dancers, the purple velvet crocodile . . . although at least the crocodile wasn't nudging someone . . .

Hugh didn't so much look around as know from experience how much his every move interested the world. But he ignored the cast and crew and spoke to Wendy. "If you want to wait outside, I can find you there. Go out the front door. You'll be less likely to be interviewed repeatedly." A dimple quirked his cheek.

"That's a good idea." An interview or two would be disastrous. Because who would she say she was? Where would she say she was from? A sudden sense of caution made her take a step away from Hugh.

He sensed her onset of wariness, and in a low, urgent voice he said, "Please don't change your mind about me. I'm not the public. I'm not the press. I'm not the cast. I'm Hugh, and I would very much like to get to know you."

His words, the expression in his eyes, pushed aside her misgivings and returned her into a debutante blushing maiden. "Okay."

"You'll be in front of the theater?"

"Okay."

"I'll hurry."

“Okay.” She watched him stride to the guest star dressing room.

Betty stepped out of Miss Lindholm’s dressing room with Hazel in her arms. She put the child down; Hazel zeroed in on Hugh and ran up to him, arms stretched up, ready to be held.

Hugh stepped back, hands out as if to push her back. He opened the door to his dressing room, slid inside and shut the door.

The way he acted around Hazel, like he didn’t want to be bothered . . .

That troubled Wendy. Not a lot; some people didn’t relate to kids. But Hazel was such a sweet girl. Then Wendy remembered Maeve had mentioned “the wife and child”—she didn’t have any right to judge.

“Okay,” she mimicked herself. Whatever he saw in her that appealed to him, it wasn’t her scintillating conversation.

She started toward the stairs she’d come up, the ones that led to the Vintage Gothic Encore Clothing Shop, but changed her course and headed for the stage. Because she didn’t know if, when she descended those stairs, she’d be back with Minnie and Mabel, buying props for a kids’ party—which she loved to do—and living her unglamorous, high-energy life in the modern village of Gothic.

Onstage, Wendy gazed out over the orchestra pit and beyond, to the last of the audience as it dispersed through the wide double doors into the lobby, and she marveled at the clean floors. Apparently in the early half of the twentieth century, the audience did not spill their drinks or their popcorn or throw their candy wrappers on the floor. They left the place as clean as they found it.

Wendy descended the wide steps that led to the sloped aisle and strolled up toward

the lobby. There, a few of the audience lingered, men in their dark suits and wide-brimmed hats holding evening wraps for the wives, girlfriends and daughters clad in dresses, heels, hats and gloves.

In her slinky silk gown and her costume department heels, Wendy was overdressed. But not that overdressed.

These men looked in appreciation, but none of them whistled or made lewd comments. The rules were different in here.

One of the women approached Wendy holding a small book in her hand. "Could I have an autograph?"

"I'm not anyone. Just the stuntwoman," Wendy assured her.

"You're the one who swung down to Hugh Capel and he . . . looked at you?" The woman thrust her autograph book at her. "Yes, please, I want your autograph."

Feeling alternately foolish and pleased, Wendy signed her book, and a few others. Once she glanced up, she saw two white-haired women walk toward the theater exit.

"Minnie! Mabel!" She started forward, but they vanished out the door and when she looked out on the street, they were nowhere in sight.

Again Wendy rubbed the lump on the back of her head and reminded herself this was a dream, a nightmare . . . a Harlequin Romance fantasy.

"Miss?" One of the teens who lingered in the lobby offered her autograph book.

"Of course." Wendy signed, then escaped out the front door and stood on the short wooden sidewalk as the last of the sun set. She stood as she had seen early twentieth

century models stand: back slouched, hips thrust forward, the epitome of lazy glamor.

The remaining audience disappeared into a bus or cars. Headlights came on, and the vehicles drove toward the recently completed Pacific Coast Highway.

Wendy stood enjoying the cool air, the faint rhythm of the ocean waves against the cliffs, the sense of being familiar with this place, while at the same time, she experienced a clawing sense that little Wendy Giordano didn't belong here. Didn't belong in this time, didn't belong in this place with the beautiful people.

Wendy thought of her life outside the dream. Why was she here? She believed that a person had a fate, a destiny, a reason to be on this earth. What had she been sent here for?

A lone car, an early twentieth century model Ford, was parked facing up the road toward Maeve Lindholm's still-in-progress Tower. The engine was idling, but no one was around. She stepped back by the ticket office, curious to see who came out of the theater and drove away.

It was Bill. He carried something wrapped in a blanket, and in the dim light, he appeared grimly triumphant.

A small arm flung back the blanket. A small black patent-leather-clad foot kicked.

Wendy saw a fluff of white skirt and golden curls, and she knew. She hiked up her skirt and ran, yelling, "Hey! You! Stop now! Someone! He's got Hazel!"

Bill glanced her way, flung Hazel through the window into the passenger seat, leaped into the driver's side and roared toward Nacimiento-Fergusson Road and the depths of the Santa Lucia Mountains.

“No!” She kicked off her heels and ran faster. “You can’t have her!”

Someone caught her arm.

“Let me go!” She turned savagely.

Hugh. Hugh Capel. He held her, observing her, glancing around, zeroing in on the car roaring up the road. “Wendy,” he said urgently, “what’s wrong?”

She pointed. “He’s got Hazel! Bill’s kidnapping Hazel!”

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Hugh didn't waste time reassuring her that Bill was Maeve Lindholm's cousin, nor did he demand a lengthy explanation for her panic. He said, "I'll get my car."

In less than a minute he returned from the parking area in a nice-looking convertible. He leaned over, flung open the passenger door, and holding those stupid heels, Wendy climbed in. She barely had the door closed when Hugh put the vehicle in gear and hit the accelerator.

Wendy dropped her shoes on the floor, groped for the seat belt, couldn't find it, groped again.

"What do you need?"

"The—" The truth struck her. In 1940, there were no seat belts. She collapsed back into the seat. "That bastard. Betty had Hazel. She was taking her home. How did Bill get her?"

"When I came out of my dressing room, Betty was lingering nearby. When she saw me, she put Hazel down. She wanted to congratulate me on my performance. I was in a hurry to get to you, but I don't like to brush off a young working woman. Hazel wanders backstage all the time. I didn't think anything about it—"

"Other than the fact Betty was drooling on your good suit?" Wendy snapped.

"I'm sorry, Wendy." He sounded guilty. She'd made him feel guilty when all he'd been doing was being polite to a fan. "I would have handled it differently if I'd suspected—"

“I know. I’m sorry, too.” She put her hand on his arm, then hastily took it away. “I’m taking it out on you when it’s Bill’s fault.”

He grasped her hand and put it back on his arm. “It’s money, I suppose. He gambles.”

Her fingers flexed, then relaxed. “I heard that. He doesn’t win?”

“I don’t know or care. I do know he’s tried to borrow money.”

“From you? For what reason?”

“Assumed friendship. It happens.”

She supposed it did. Hugh Capel was a movie star, a man who made unimaginable amounts during the depths of the Depression. Of course people would try and tap him like an ATM.

“I occasionally lend a hand, but usually through official charities and never to a gambler. Come on. When twenty-five percent of the United States is unemployed, why would I bother with a man who can’t control his impulses?”

“He’s going to demand a ransom.” She rubbed her forehead, thinking her way through this situation. “Probably already left a note somewhere for Maeve to find.”

“Is it possible he’s taking Hazel to The Tower?” Hugh asked.

She turned on him. “Have you met Bill?”

“Question withdrawn.” He shifted gears. “Hold on tight. This car will hunt him down.”

No seat belt, Wendy remembered. As Hugh whipped around the seven hairpin turns that made up Gothic, she did have to hold on. Thank heavens Beatrice had pulled her hair back tightly.

“Nice car,” she shouted.

“It’s a Delahaye 135. When I race it, I always win.”

The road before them, Wendy knew, was one of the foremost motoring and motorcycling routes in the world, famed for its curves, its scenery, its views, its groves of olive trees and old stand oaks. As the last of the twilight faded to starlight, they could see only the road before them in the headlights and, flashing in and out of the trees, Bill’s car as he raced ahead, taking Hazel to . . . where?

“When I took Hazel outside for a few minutes, I saw Bill watching her, and not in a good way. He met me at the stage door and when I questioned him, he claimed he had gone out to smoke a cigarette. I knew that was wrong, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. He didn’t smell like a cigarette, because he wasn’t smoking.” Wendy’s confession only made her more wretched to know she’d been distracted and her inattention had contributed to Hazel’s abduction. “He was hoping to get his hands on Hazel then. We have to get him before he hurts her. She can’t defend herself against a grown man. He’s bitter and he’s angry and I think . . . I’ll bet he’s in gambling debt up to his eyeballs and he needs money to save his own worthless life. The bastard. The fucking bastard! Stealing a baby.” Wendy was furious: fists clenched, jaw clenched, ready to fight.

The night air flowed over her hot cheeks, dark and cool, and the silence made its way into her mind. Hugh was, perhaps, shocked.

Wendy cleared her throat. “I guess women don’t say things like that here and now, huh?”

“Not often. Not that I’ve ever heard.”

“Probably not men, either?”

“No. Not often.” He sounded as if he was sifting through the words and thoughts and clues. “I guess my question is—why are you so angry? I’m not criticizing you at all, I’m angry, too, but I have my reasons. For you, this is personal. What are your reasons?”

Wendy knew she had to say something that would make sense to a man of the early twentieth century. To Hugh Capel. She had never told anyone about her past, but she was here on a brain-injury pass. He was her dream phantom guy. Why not tell him the truth?

Still, she had to tell it fast. Don’t dawdle, Wendy. Because the long, slow version hurts too much. “It’s not hard to understand. My mother died when I was three. My father was a good man but not good with money. We had enough to live and he cared for me. But when he died, I was thirteen and lost and destitute.”

“Must have been early in the Depression.”

“Um, yeah.” You have no idea. “I was put into a foster home, one with a lot of kids.”

“An orphanage?”

“In a private home.” Explain this, Wendy. “They have those where I come from. There were about thirty of us kids who were without family. The people who owned the home got paid a stipend for each one of us, but not a lot, and we were sleeping all over in bunk beds and sleeping bags.”

He nodded, so she hadn’t used too many modern terms he didn’t understand.

“There was a girl my age. Sandra. She’d been in the system for a while. She looked me over and said, ‘Girl, you got to get some training.’”

“Training?”

“She said I was going to get passed on to a household with fewer kids and maybe a father, and I needed to know how to fight. She said I had to be able to defend myself against . . . a grown man who would try to, um . . .”

“Molest you.”

“Yes.” Molest: the 1940 word for rape.

“Sandra sounds like a smart girl.” Hugh did not seem shocked; he seemed admiring.

“The system allowed me to take self-defense.”

He glanced at her blankly.

“Karate? Judo? Tae kwon do?” Why was she even trying? “You know, like where Asian people defend themselves against knife-wielding thugs using only their hands and feet?”

“I’m from San Francisco. In Chinatown, there are some shops that claim to teach such arts, but I never saw any proof.”

“It’s real. I learned.” She waited for him to argue further, but he drove, listening as if he wanted to hear about her and her past. “Thank God I did, because the first foster home they moved me to . . . the father locked me in the closet. When he finally opened the door, he grabbed my hair and dragged me out. His pants were around his ankles, so I grabbed his balls, ripped them up around his ears and, I swear, he’s never

going to produce a son in his own image.”

“Ripped them up around his ears!” Hugh laughed and winced and laughed. “Good for you! I know he deserved it. But that description still makes me want to curl up and protect myself.”

“You asked.”

“I know. I want to know. I’m glad you can take care of yourself. I really am because . . . this thing with Hazel reminds me of all the reasons I never want to be involved with another living, breathing person.”

“Whoa. Okay, fine. It’s your turn. Maeve . . . Miss Lindholm mentioned you had a tragedy in your past. I told you mine. Can you tell me yours?”

“You don’t know?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t. I assume whatever happened was in the newspapers?”

“And in Photoplay magazine and on Winchell’s radio program. Everywhere. I was assaulted by . . . sympathy. Awash in sympathy. Drowning in sympathy.”

“It sounds awful.”

“Yes. It was. It’s been six years, but . . .”

“Loss never gets easier.”

He glanced at her. “Right. You know. You understand. My wife was a good woman. I worked in the movies. She stayed home with our son and cared for him herself. She went to all the right parties, lunched with the right women, wore the right clothes.”

His voice developed a warmth, a timbre that spoke of love and sex. “She wasn’t the brightest girl, but she was mine, the mother of my son.”

“And your son?”

Hugh’s tone changed from whimsical to adoring. “Eddy was so smart. Outgoing, charming. Hazel reminds me of him. When I would come back from a shoot, he would run to me, lift up his arms and—” Hugh’s voice broke.

Wendy put her hand on his thigh. “I am so sorry.”

He didn’t speak for a long moment. “I appreciate that. I don’t usually speak about him. About what happened. In fact, I’ve never spoken of it.”

“I honestly don’t know your story, but if you can’t . . .” She withdrew from him, giving him space.

He caught her hand. “It’s all right. It’s time I manned up and told the story without breaking down.”

“You do not have to ‘man up,’ and you do not have to tell me the story. It’s your tragedy and you don’t owe anyone anything.” She breathed hard, indignant that this person thought he was weak for not wanting to speak of his heartbreak. “I can assume something terrible happened and they died.”

“Yes, that’s what . . . Yes. They died.”

He didn’t say anything further, and Wendy thought he was done. She focused on their surroundings, trying to map them over what she knew of the road in the future.

He picked up his story again. “Nora was not the best swimmer and my son was . . .

rambunctious. We loved that about him. He loved the ocean. He'd play in the sand, in the waves. He would marvel at the birds and collect shells. We loved that, too. We discussed it and decided we needed a home on the water. Nora found a place that sounded likely and took Eddy to look at a house where we could raise him and his sibling . . . She was expecting."

Wendy wanted to shut her ears to the pain waiting in the rest of his story.

"While she was touring the house, she realized Eddy had disappeared. He'd descended the steps to the beach. She ran after him. He was in the water, caught in a riptide. She went into the water and as I said—" He couldn't finish the sentence. He couldn't breathe.

Wendy rubbed her palm over his tense shoulder, and finished the phrase for him. "Nora was not the best swimmer."

"I lost them both that day. I lost them all that day." His voice sounded as if a rasp had ruined his vocal cords. "Every time I see Hazel, I want to back away. Because with her fearlessness, her confidence, her joy in everything around her . . . she reminds me of Eddy. And Eddy taught me life is fragile, and no parent should ever bury a child."

His wife, his son, and his unborn child. What were the words that helped a man who had suffered such a loss?

But she didn't have to say anything, because he slammed on his brakes. "We've gone too far."

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Wendy looked around. “How can you tell? It’s o-dark-thirty out here.”

“We’ve crested the hill above Gothic, and Bill’s headlights have disappeared. I can’t see them looking back at Gothic or looking ahead on the road. He stopped somewhere. But where?”

“Let me think.” Wendy rubbed her forehead and mapped the road as it existed outside her dream. “Is he ahead or behind? Where would he find a building to keep Hazel until Maeve coughed up a ransom?”

“Do you know the area?” Hugh sounded surprised and curious.

“Yes. Sort of. The landscape is different and most of the ranches and properties have been turned over to the state of California, but the closest private holding to Gothic has to be the old Flores family ranch. They raised sheep, but I think the Depression did them in. There should be some buildings standing empty on the property . . .”

“Where?”

“Turn around. Go back. Can you try to drive without your headlights?”

“We’ll find out.” Hugh doused the lights, waited for their eyes to adjust to the starlight and made a 180. “Now what?”

“There’s a driveway not too far from the summit.” In her time, the summit was a rest stop and viewpoint. No need to discuss that. “Let me get out and walk ahead.”

“In your heels?” Hugh asked.

“No, my friend. I need to keep my balance.” And anyway, the shoes were rattling around on the floor. She groped the interior of the door, seeking the handle, but she couldn’t find it.

Hugh reached over and magically let her out.

“Thank you.” She didn’t waste time worrying about old technology she didn’t understand. Instead, she started walking into the darkness, her hand on the fender, and Hugh drove by starlight, keeping up with her.

After two steps, her silk stockings shredded and as she walked, she unhooked her garters and stripped them off. Her instinct was to hurry, to run, to find Hazel as soon as possible.

But if she hurried, they might miss their target.

So she walked. Above them, the olive trees whispered in the breeze. Behind her, the tires crunched on the gravel . . . She took one step after another . . . and suddenly it wasn’t the main road there anymore. The ground sloughed off; her bare foot found a concrete drainage pipe. “Hugh . . .” Her voice was not more than a breath. “Turn right here.” She gestured.

He turned right and killed the engine, leaped out of the car and came around to join her.

“I think it’s not far. An old barn. An old farmhouse. I don’t know where he’s taken her, but I’ll bet he’s here.” Doubt niggled at her. What if she was wrong?

But this was the best bet, and when they rounded the corner and came out of the olive

grove, they saw Bill's car parked beside the abandoned, sagging barn.

Torn between joy and relief, Wendy started forward.

Hugh stopped her with a touch of his hand. "No. Bill could use the child as a shield. I'll draw him out. You get Hazel."

"Right. A plan." She should have thought of that. "I'll step over to the side into the darkest shadow . . ."

"Yes." Hugh stared deeply into Wendy's eyes. "Together, we can save the child. Together . . . we're a good team."

"Yes," Wendy breathed. She was afraid. Afraid for Hazel. Afraid to wake from her dream. Afraid to be stuck in this hallucination. But Hugh felt so real, and she didn't feel stuck. She felt as if she was alive, really alive, for the first time. Staring back into his eyes, she found herself caught up in the moment.

Sliding his hand around the back of her head, Hugh pulled her close and kissed her. Nothing fussy, nothing intrusive, but this kiss made the kiss onstage seem feeble. Since the onstage kiss had been her best kiss ever . . . weak at the knees was a phrase she now understood. This kiss brought the stars crashing down. This kiss was the beat of her blood in her ears while behind her eyes, fireworks exploded in heat and passion. This kiss made her glad to be a woman who would tonight take this man as her own.

Hugh stepped away and left her standing there, on tiptoes, head tilted up, eyes tightly closed, lips slightly open. "Here we go," he told her, and yelled, "Bill!"

Wendy jumped to attention. Right. Let's get this show on the road! This show business thing was getting to her. She slipped into the shadows. She waited until Bill

slunk out of the barn, then headed inside, stepping carefully because—she didn't care how long this barn had been abandoned—she was barefoot and the prickly straw was the least of her worries. She followed a single flashlight's dim illumination. Bill had left it burning in a closed stall where, when Wendy peeked over the door, a small voice demanded, "Wendy. Pick Hazel up!"

"You bet, honey." Wendy opened the stall, scooped Hazel into her arms, grabbed the flashlight—who knew they had them in these days?—and headed back toward the car.

They came out of the barn in time to hear Bill say in his most insulting tone, "What are you going to do about it, pretty boy?"

"He shouldn't have said that," Wendy told Hazel.

She was right, because even in the starlight she and Hazel could see Hugh's fist connect with Bill's face. Blood spurted, Bill staggered backward and righted himself in time to encounter an uppercut that knocked him flat to the ground.

Wendy chuckled.

Hazel clapped her little hands. "Bad man," she said to Bill's prone body. "Bad man!"

They all waited to see if Bill stirred.

Out of wisdom or because he was really unconscious, he stayed down.

Moving with prudent caution, Hugh knelt beside the body, rifled Bill's pockets and found his car keys. He stood, walked up to Wendy, shaking his fist as if the knuckles ached. "C'mon. Let's get this little girl home."

“Hazel will kiss Hugh.” With the confidence of a child who had never been dropped or disappointed, Hazel projected herself out of Wendy’s arms and into Hugh’s.

Surprised, he caught her. “Be careful, kid!”

She put both of her hands on his face and gifted him with a sloppy kiss.

His body language said it all. He’d invested everything in his own son, and his son had died. Hazel, too, had been in danger, and he’d been fierce in her defense, but that didn’t mean he wanted to hold her, receive her affection, become part of her life. So he tried to do what he always did around the little girl; he tried to back away. He pried Hazel off him and held her out. “Here. Wendy, you take her.”

“No!” Hazel managed to whip around, wrap her arms around his neck and cling with all her might. “Hugh will carry Hazel,” she proclaimed.

Life is fragile, he’d said, and now in the starlight, he looked almost . . . frightened of the little girl, as if she might break his heart, too.

“Hazel’s not fragile, Hugh,” Wendy told him. “That kid is tough as nails and you don’t stand a chance.”

He began, “I don’t want—”

“Hugh will carry Hazel.” Hazel glared at Wendy as if Wendy was the usurper.

Hugh sighed and gave in. “Hugh will carry Hazel,” he agreed. He stood for a moment as if still fighting to somehow keep an emotional distance when Hazel’s cheek was pressed against his and her chubby arms hugged him with all the affection of a child for the man who had felled her enemy.

Wendy saw Hugh give in. All his defenses crumbled, he relaxed and set Hazel on his arm, as he started for the car.

“Fine.” Barefoot, Wendy limped behind them shining the light ahead to guide him.

“Grab the cute guy, Hazel. You’ve got good instincts.”

Looking over Hugh’s shoulder, Hazel gloated with a large grin.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:26 am

“Not a single person has mentioned the muddy hem on this fabulous dress.” As Wendy and Hugh danced across the hardwood floor in Maeve Lindholm’s magnificent great room, a soloist crooned the lyrics of “I’ll Be Seeing You” while a live big band played. Wendy looked into Hugh’s face and laughed with the sheer pleasure of being here, in his arms, and knowing Hazel was safe in her bed and they had saved her.

“Who would have the nerve? You rescued Maeve Lindholm’s daughter from her maniac cousin. You’re the woman of the hour.”

“Everyone knows it’s really you, hero man. In these days, no one believes the Amazon myth.” She mocked the times. “No one believes a girl could have done saved that child.”

“Not true, stuntwoman. I’ve told every guy here you ripped Bill’s balls up over his ears.”

“You do like that line.” It gave her a warm feeling to know he thought she expressed herself well.

“Yes, especially since now they’re all afraid to ask you to dance.”

“Oh.” She looked around, realized no man in this magnificent ballroom dared look her in the eye. “You sneaky bastard!”

Hugh looked smug. “Thank you. One way or the other, I do like to hold the trophy—even if I have to cheat to get it.”

She was torn between indignation and laughter.

Laughter won.

He laughed, too, then danced them out of the bustling ballroom and onto the starlit veranda. “Do you believe in soul mates?”

“No. Never have.”

“Neither do I. Never have.”

A pause.

“How about now?” Hugh asked.

“Maybe now.”

He was teasing, she knew . . . but not really. Together, the two of them had begun to change their minds.

“Yes, I believe in soul mates, now.”

“Good. I didn’t want to go down the road alone.”

“We’re better when we work together to do the stunt, rescue the child . . .”

“Live a life?” he asked.

She put her head on his chest. “Yes.”

They danced slower, away from the lights of the ballroom, into a shadowy corner.

She knew what was coming, and all of herself leaped toward the moment, the passion, the union. Hugh put his fingers under her chin, lifted her face toward his—corny move! Corny move! She loved it!—and feathered his lips onto hers. Lightly, gently, brushing their mouths together until . . . she didn't know what happened . . . the trapdoor opened, they fell into each other and some kind of electrical surge fused them together, mouths, bodies, souls.

When at last they separated, mostly to breathe, he murmured, "We just made a warm, secret, lifetime promise, didn't we?"

"Oh, yes." Wendy didn't hesitate, which was so unlike her. It's only a dream, she reminded herself. Such a shame.

Hugh's mouth crooked up on a half smile. "So." With his hand, he stroked the silk wrap off her head, then returned to caress her hair, her neck, her spine. "You were going to tell me the truth about yourself."

Startled—it was such a change of pace—she said, "I told you the truth. I've never told anyone before. My father died and I—"

"I know. And I appreciate your confidence." His arms tightened on her. "It's not that I want to know. Your attitude, the words you use, the way you swear, the way you seem to know things you couldn't know. You talk about 'these days' as if they aren't your days. You seem to be . . ." He groped for words.

"Out of place and time?"

"Exactly."

She swirled out of his arms and made her way to the railing. He had guessed. She didn't fit, and somehow he'd put it all together to come to . . . the truth. Or at least a

version of the truth. Placing her palms on the cool marble, she leaned forward and looked toward the dark horizon. There was nothing out there except twinkling stars and a salty scent on the sea breeze. She tried to think how to explain who she was, where she was from, what had happened to bring her here . . . when she didn't understand it herself, or even if it was real. Yet how could she continue to believe she was hallucinating when he was so vital, so alive? When he made her feel emotions she had only ever read about?

She collected fragments of truth, about the theater, about Minnie and Mabel, about the blow to her head. She turned back to Hugh and—

Hugh stood calmly in the light, his hands up in the surrender stance—as he stared at the muzzle of the pistol clasped in Bill's shaking hand.

Oh, God. No!

“You've ruined me.” Dirt and something from the barnyard smeared Bill's dark suit. Hugh's fists had left their mark on Bill's bruised face, and he spoke as if his lips were too swollen to form coherent words. “I'm in too deep.”

Silently, Wendy slipped out of her heels.

“You could have loaned me the money. The ransom for that kid would have saved me. You got in the way.” Bill's voice rose. “It's your fault. All your fault. The gambling bosses are going to kill me. If I'm going to die, you're going to die.”

Wendy started running at him.

Hugh's tone was soothing. “Don't be a fool, Bill. You're not going to die. You're Maeve's cousin—”

Wendy was almost there. Almost . . .

“Maeve knows I took her daughter and she won’t give me a thing!” Bill screamed.

Now! Wendy launched herself in the air, a flying roundhouse kick aimed at Bill’s outstretched arm and a follow-through to his head.

Bill caught sight of Wendy. He swung toward her and then back at Hugh—and pulled the trigger.

The blast was louder than any sound she’d ever heard.

Wendy didn’t waver. Her foot struck Bill’s arm, his head and sent him flying backward across the granite floor. She twisted in midair but didn’t recover in time and hit the ground hard. Quickly she picked herself up and ran toward Hugh.

He was down and bleeding, blood pumping from a chest wound.

“No!” Wendy knelt beside him, took his hand, leaned close. “Hugh, stay with me.”

I’ll be seeing you . . .

“I will.” He looked into her eyes, his gaze clinging to hers. “I won’t lose you now.”

People ran out of the ballroom. Lights blazed, illuminating the wound, the blood, Hugh’s wide, shocked eyes.

Wendy covered the gunshot wound with her hands, desperate to hold the blood inside him. “Hugh, stay.”

“I will . . .” His words were barely a whisper.

Shocked voices rose around them.

His fingers grew cold in her grasp. “Hugh, I’ve searched my entire life for you. We’re one mind, one soul, one heart.”

“Yes.” His blood pumped slower and slower.

“Nothing can separate us.”

He coughed. “Not even death.” His gaze shifted and looked beyond her. “Not even the fog . . .”

“No!” She put her arms around him and rocked him.

And just like that, he was gone. Dead in her arms.

Someone took Wendy by the elbows and lifted her away.

“No!” This couldn’t be happening. Not to them. Not to him. Not to Hugh.

People swarmed around her, shouting, but that sound faded.

They faded.

Hugh’s figure was vanishing in the mist.

Wendy couldn’t hear. Or see. She tried to call out, but she could barely breathe.

The fog closed in . . .

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Wendy opened her eyes. She lifted her head. She was sprawled facedown in a theater trunk.

Right. She'd been rummaging in this theater trunk when something hit her in the back of the head and sent her back to . . .

Fists up, she leaped out of the trunk onto her feet. Had someone hit her? She stood, stance firm, breathing hard, ready to counterattack . . . whoever.

Yet she was alone behind the plywood wall that separated the stage from Minnie and Mabel's shop. The only sound was the creaking of a heavy-duty sisal rope with a knot tied at the end . . . Like the one she'd used to swing across the stage and into Hugh's arms.

She put her hand to the back of her head and found the giant lump. Sure. Something had hit her. The rope had broken free from the restraints that, for seventy-some-odd years, held it above the stage. The knot smacked her, knocked her unconscious, and ever since, she'd been having a dream about this place, this theater, in 1940, and an actor who was her dream lover.

Only . . . it hadn't felt like a dream.

Wendy closed her eyes against the crushing sense of loss. Tears leaked out.

Hugh. Hugh Capel.

She had met him. They talked. She discovered he had suffered pain, like her. He said

they were soul mates. And he died.

Great story, Wendy. You made it all up out of some fantasy you wished would come true. How sad was that, that the life you've built in Gothic is so barren of love you have to dream a man who is strong and brave and wounded enough to understand your own broken bits?

More—she spread her hands and looked down at herself—how had she managed to get into this outfit? This cream silk with its soiled hem and the wrinkled marks where she'd held a child called Hazel?

She had to get out of here, get back to real life. She needed to be back in the Vintage Gothic Encore Clothing Shop with Minnie and Mabel, showing them the props she'd found and bargaining with them for the cheapest price. When she'd come backstage, she'd been Bendy Wendy, business owner. Now she was brokenhearted because a man who she loved, a man who never existed . . . had died in her arms.

She gathered her full shopping bag and dragged it toward the stairs that led down into the shop. At the bottom of the steps, she found the door closed with the giant iron key in the lock. She turned the key, opened the door and stepped out into the shop—and blinked. The big room was bright with sunshine and reality.

Painful, boring, loveless reality.

The last of the tourists shuffled out of the shop, laughing and comparing their purchases, heading for the tour bus, not knowing how Wendy had found love in what seemed like a few hours.

“That was quick. Very efficient!” Minnie bustled over. “I see you found an outfit to play with. It looks good on you.”

Wendy rubbed her forehead. “The fog . . .”

“Is gone.” Mabel stood beaming. “It’s turned into a lovely day. And look at you. That outfit was custom made for you!”

Remembering Beatrice and her needle and thread, Wendy wanted to say, If you only knew.

“But what’s that on your skirt, dear?” Mabel asked.

Wendy glanced down and realized those brown smears were . . . blood. Hugh’s blood.

For the second time that day, Wendy was unconscious.

When she came to, Minnie and Mabel knelt beside her.

Minnie placed a cool wet cloth on her forehead.

Mabel patted her wrist.

“You had to ask,” Minnie was saying to Mabel.

In a low, sad voice, Mabel said, “I didn’t realize what . . .”

“Shh. She’s coming around.” Minnie flipped the cloth to the cooler side and put it back on Wendy’s forehead. “Stay down, dear. If you try to get up now, you’ll faint again.”

Wendy took a quivering breath to argue, and let it out. “Okay.”

Mabel got up and came back with a purple velvet pillow decorated with tassels. She lifted Wendy's head and placed the pillow, then handed Wendy a paper cone filled with caramel corn. "For the carbs," she said.

Wendy laughed weakly, took the cone and ate the popcorn one kernel at a time. It must have been magic, because bite by bite, she felt better. "You know I can't resist your caramel corn," she said.

Mabel sat back on her heels. "My evil plan is working."

"I left my leotard back there somewhere. And my shoes." Wendy waved a hand, indicating a back there that meant a different era and a different life. "Do you have anything I can wear on the job? I mean, my job? My current job?" Not my job as a stuntwoman in a theater that doesn't exist.

Minnie gestured toward the back wall of the shop. "Yesterday we got a shipment of last year's designer workout clothing. I didn't know what we were going to do with them, but they were made for you."

Wendy slowly levered herself up. "Where do you come up with the designer labels? And the antique clothing?"

"There's a magnetism to this place that brings them here."

"Right." Wendy got to her feet.

Minnie and Mabel hovered close.

She took a breath. She felt fine. She nodded, reassuring them, and went to the neatly folded piles of spandex. Wendy found a matching aqua outfit with all the right markings, slipped into the Vintage Gothic dressing room, changed, wadded up the

cream silk outfit that had seen so much imaginary action and dumped it in the trash behind the checkout stand when she came out.

She found a pair of training shoes that fit like a dream, a solid pair of socks . . . and just like that, she was back to being the real Bendy Wendy, no stunts, no silk, no heels, no lost loves. She looked like herself again, and she was happy about that. Happy.

Except . . . she went back to the checkout stand and plucked the cream outfit out of the trash. Without looking at them, she called to Minnie and Mabel, “Have you figured out what to charge me for the props?”

“Bring it all back tomorrow,” Minnie said. “We’ll figure it out then.”

“Actually—” Mabel went to the door and looked toward the ocean “—why don’t you have your party here?”

“Here? You don’t mean backstage?” Because Wendy was never going backstage ever again. “I mean . . . why?”

“The fog’s coming in again.”

Wendy felt a chill that had nothing to do with the weather.

“If you hosted the party in your backyard, that would be a damp and dismal celebration. Why not have it inside? Here, on the other side of the theater? Where we’re putting the bookshop?” Mabel looked at Minnie. “We could rearrange the book boxes so the children would have to jump them. They could run the bookshelves like a maze.”

Wendy felt the tightness in her chest loosen. “They could do somersaults across the

floor.”

Minnie was looking at Mabel as if to say, What the hell?

Minnie was not known to be fond of children.

Which sent Wendy back to being anxious. “Are you sure? You’re willing to do that? Because you don’t have to—”

Wendy didn’t know what kind of signal passed between the sisters, but Minnie stepped right up to the plate with an apparently sincere, “We’re delighted, and we close at six anyway. We can put the props into the bags, too. It’ll save us from another evening’s showing of Mabel’s favorite series, Good Omens.” Her voice contained all the elements of deep loathing.

“Thanks. That is great because I am so late. This took longer than I expected, and I need to get back to my studio and get ready for my next class . . .” A poster caught Wendy’s eye. One of the really old, faded ones, preserved in a frame behind a glass. She paced slowly toward it.

There he was. Hugh Capel, in a suit and tie, his intent face superimposed on a desert background. Not a jungle. A desert.

Wendy stared, soaking up the sight of him. She told herself she hadn’t noticed this poster before, but her subconscious had been on the job and that was why she’d dreamed him.

Hugh.

Hugh, alive, strong, vital.

Hugh, catching her as she swung down to him and recognizing her as his mate.

Hugh, broken and shattered by a bullet, killed for his part in saving a child from treachery.

Wendy jumped when Minnie spoke beside her. "I'm not surprised he caught your eye. Have you seen his old movies? He had a magnetism about him."

"No, I never . . . What happened to him?"

"Don't you know?" Minnie sounded astonished.

On the other side of Wendy, Mabel spoke. "No, dear, why would she?"

"Right. Well . . ." Minnie stared at the poster as if saddened. "He saved Maeve Lindholm's two-year-old daughter from a kidnapper, and the kidnapper killed Hugh. Shot him. His career was headed to the tip-top. They called him the next Cary Grant . . . such a tragedy."

"There was a woman who helped him," Mabel said. "Gossip said it was love at first sight, but after he died she disappeared. The histories don't tell what happened to her."

How did a woman come back to dull reality when, in another life, she had found her soul mate? How did she pretend her heart was whole when for a brief moment, a man appeared who recognized who she was and what she wanted, and wanted that with her?

"I imagine," Wendy said, "she went back to work and lived her life and tried not to think about what she'd lost."

That was what she intended to do.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:26 am

Wendy watched her class of karate kids kick their way across her studio, and ignored Ariel MacLean when she stepped close enough to say, “Wendy, you’ve got that look.”

“What look?” Wendy said, deadpan.

“Like the dog who stole the ham off the Easter table and is waiting for all hell to break loose.” Ariel adjusted her ever-present leather shoulder bag.

“Hmm?”

“Forget that innocent expression. I’ve got three kids, and I’ve been to your parties before.” Ariel turned to her husband, county sheriff’s department deputy Dave MacLean, known across the county as Deputy Dave, and a good guy. “Whatever it is she’s cooking up, it’s your turn to be guinea pig.”

Deputy Dave wore street clothes, and his service weapon was nowhere in sight. He looked like the other dads when he said hopefully, “Maybe this time parents won’t be involved.”

Ariel snorted.

Wendy rubbed her palms together. “Deputy Dave will be perfect.”

The prospect of a party filled the karate students with extra energy, and that kept Wendy happy and distracted. She wasn’t heartbroken, not close to tears; she was simply still fighting the results of what had probably been a concussion. If this

prickly sense of fear and anticipation didn't ease soon, she would make an appointment to have her head examined . . . in every way possible.

In the last ten minutes of class, parents began to trickle in; the ones who were familiar with Wendy's idea of fun wore puckish expressions, and the new parents picked up on the atmosphere and glanced around warily.

"Poor dears," Ariel whispered to Wendy. "They look so confused."

"Is it time, Wendy?" Roy was the seven-year-old, the new pupil, the one whose mother she'd seen only once, at his registration. "Is it time?"

Wendy glanced at the clock. "Almost."

The kids stared at her pleadingly.

"We'll quit a little early, but just this once." The kids started to cheer, and Wendy held up one finger. "What do we do when we finish a class?"

The kids settled down, lined up, white belt to brown belt, bowed with their fist in their palm and said, "Thank you, Master Wendy," in unison.

She bowed to them. "Thank you, students."

They quivered, waiting for her dismissal.

"Okay!" She flung her arms in the air. "The party's at the Vintage Gothic Encore Clothing Shop. Change out of your gi into your street clothes, and hustle down there with your parent. Don't lose them on the way! When we're all there, I'll explain the party game."

“Told you so,” Ariel said to Deputy Dave.

He lifted his hands in surrender.

Wendy waited until the children had galloped out in their street clothes and flung their gis into their respective parent’s arms. “Roy, are you with me?” she asked.

Roy came to her side and stuck. Although he was unusually gifted in self-defense, especially for a first timer, the boy was shy and uncertain, a good kid . . . but there was something twisted in his background. She knew. She recognized that he had faced uncertainty and fear at too young an age . . . as she had done.

Wendy led the families through the deep, damp, gray fog, down Gothic’s main, sloping, winding road to Minnie and Mabel’s shop. She stopped on the step, her hand on the door handle, waiting until the stragglers caught up with her. She was not at all uneasy about entering the venue of the old theater again. The fog was merely fog, the swirl of gray within the mist was nothing but a breeze off the ocean, and nothing in Gothic brought the dead back to life.

Sure, but the other parents glanced around uneasily and crowded together, gaining comfort from the closeness of friends and family. “The sign says Closed,” Ariel pointed out.

“Not for us,” Wendy said, and when she opened the door, everyone surged forward, enticed by the smells of popcorn, caramel and coffee.

Roy, too. Whatever fear stained his everyday life was vanished by light and the prospect of fun.

Wendy followed her class to find the lights bright and summoning them into the not-yet-bookshop half of the old theater auditorium, and when they passed through the

framed-in arch and entered the game area, she breathed a sigh of satisfaction. Minnie and Mabel had done exactly as they'd promised—put the bags of props on a line at the far end of the shop and set up obstacle courses with shelves and boxes.

She directed a smile at the two sisters, seated on stools in the shadows.

This was good. This was great. Wendy was fine, not haunted by a memory that had never occurred. “Come on, kids!” She directed each student to stand with the sacrificial parent. “Here’s what we’re going to do.”

Ariel pushed her shoulder bag behind her shoulder and folded her arms over her chest. “Look at her smirk.”

“Be careful,” Wendy warned. “It could be you out here instead of Deputy Dave.” With Ariel properly subdued, Wendy ran through the rules. The anonymous brown bags each contained an article of clothing or a theater prop. Each child had to run the obstacle, grab a bag, bring it back and dress their parent appropriately.

The kids laughed and clapped.

The parents gave good-natured groans and said stuff like, “I didn’t sign up for this.”

“The good news is, because Roy’s parents couldn’t make it, I get to be his parent.” Wendy hugged the boy’s shoulders. “He will dress me.”

The kids cheered and high-fived Roy.

“That perks me up some,” Deputy Dave said.

She grinned at him; they were both Blazing Saddles fans.

Once Roy realized he got to make a fool out of his karate teacher, that perked him up, too, and Wendy felt an upswelling of appreciation for these kids, these parents, her job and her life in Gothic. Maybe she didn't have Hugh, but she had created a satisfactory existence and if in the dark hours of the night she was lonely and cold, well, her classes and her friends made up for the lack.

Yet when she glanced toward the windows, the fog was out there, swirling with currents, and she tingled with anticipation. Not a good tingle; this was formed of heartbreak and blood loss and holding a man as he died in her arms. The fog had come for Hugh. Nothing could bring him back.

Roy slipped his hand into hers. "Wendy?"

She looked around, realized she had gone quiet, and rubbed her palms together in overacted anticipation. "Are we ready?"

The kids cheered again.

Ariel moved to Wendy's side and in an undertone said, "This is going to make you smile like you mean it."

"I'm happy!" Wendy snapped, then felt like a fool for reacting so vehemently.

"I can tell." Ariel put an arm around her. "Look at what has arrived."

"What?" Wendy barely breathed the word. She didn't hope. She couldn't imagine.

"That seriously ripped smoky beast."

Wendy knew, knew, that the fog had not returned and brought a lost soul back from the dead. She didn't believe in currents and legends. She didn't even believe in head

injuries that caused hallucinations so complete she could fall in love and break her heart all in one imaginary night.

But Ariel forcibly turned her toward the clothing side of the shop.

And Wendy saw him. Him.

Her lost love. The man who had caught her, kissed her, helped her, proved to be a hero and died because he wouldn't allow a bad man to hurt a small child . . . and because she wasn't quick enough to save him.

Hugh. Hugh stood framed in the arched entrance.

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Wendy's heart leaped with joy, but before she could call his name, Roy yelled, "Uncle Vince!" and raced over to hug him around the waist.

The man looked down at his nephew and ruffled his hair. "How you doing, buddy?"

Wait a minute. The leap of Wendy's heart became cold, dark suspicion. Was this some kind of cruel joke?

She whipped around and stared balefully at Minnie and Mabel.

Both women were perched on their stools, mouths open, staring at Hugh in recognition and confusion. Minnie turned to Mabel, and Wendy clearly heard, "What in the blue blazes? Who is he?"

Mabel looked at Wendy, shook her head in helpless amazement and mouthed, We would never do anything to hurt you.

Roy's voice dragged Wendy back to this time, this place, this situation. "Uncle Vince, we're going to play a game. Will you be my parent? Please? Bendy Wendy volunteered, but she likes to boss people around more."

"Bendy Wendy?" Vince laughed, looked up—and zeroed in on Wendy's face.

His gaze clung. And clung.

Wendy couldn't breathe. She was on the verge of tears. She wanted to run to him. To Hugh, who was here, now. Hugh, with a different name and a different attire. Hugh,

looking fashionably scruffy in faded jeans, a white T-shirt and running shoes. Yet he was exactly the same; same height, same build, same smile, same haircut, same eyes that looked into her soul and saw the woman she was and longed to be.

She scrambled in her mind for an explanation.

She must have seen him somewhere, maybe around town, and her subconscious had made up a fantasy. Although how a man who looked like a 1940s movie star could be walking and talking and—

Suddenly her brain and ears recognized the quiet in the bookshop. Her eyes saw the way everyone, even the clueless children, looked between her and Hugh.

No, not Hugh. His name was Vince.

Yet this scene was a rerun: the last time, the actors and dancers backstage in Maeve Lindholm's theater had watched them exactly like this . . . in 1940.

Self-preservation made Wendy break into a stream of babble. "Like to boss people around? Me? Ha ha, you're making a joke. Of course your uncle is welcome to join our game if you want him to. Vince . . . Vince? Come and stand over here by the other parents and I'll explain what you're supposed to do. It's really easy, I promise."

Vince walked over, his arm around Roy's shoulders, his gaze still clinging to Wendy's face. "Have we met before?"

For a moment, she wondered if he shared her memories. "Here in town?"

"No, I just arrived in Gothic. It's my first time here. But Roy and I are close."

"He saved me from kidnapping!" Roy piped up.

Wendy took a step back and almost fell over a box of books.

Vince caught her arm and held her upright.

“Thanks. Grace Coordinated, that’s me.” Of course, she usually was coordinated. In her job, it was a necessity. But with him standing there, she hardly knew how to put one foot after another, and with his hand on her arm, she was afraid she’d melt into a puddle of molten lava and scorch the antique hardwood floor.

“Kidnapping?” Ariel was happy to be curious for them all. “Who kidnapped you, Roy?”

“My dad. He’s, um, not a nice man.”

So that was the shadow on Roy’s young life.

Roy continued, “Today my mom had to go away. She’s getting a restraining order on him.”

Vince winced. “His dad is the family’s . . . black sheep, to put it nicely—every family’s got one.”

All the parents nodded, and Deputy Dave said, “With us, it’s Ariel’s sister. What a head case.”

Ariel jabbed him with her elbow hard enough to make him wince, and asked brightly, “Shall we start the game?”

“Right, first obstacle is the bookshelves. You have to run through the maze, grab a bag, bring it back to your parent—” she looked at Roy “—your adult, and use whatever is inside to decorate them. Is everyone ready?”

The kids nodded.

The parents moaned.

Wendy pointed her finger at an overly enthusiastic eleven-year-old. “You! Emma! Be careful of the littler ones.”

Emma sat back from her sprinting rabbit stance. “Okay, Wendy.”

She grinned and punched her arm. “Good girl. Now go!”

The kids ran through the bookshelves, shrieking and laughing, and came back to fling a cloak over one parent, a feather boa around another, a grass skirt, a coconut bra . . .

The kids looked at their adults and laughed uproariously.

It was exactly what Wendy intended. She waited until they were fairly calm to announce, “Next we’re going to jump the book boxes, one by one, until we get to the far side. Grab a bag, jump back and dress your adult. One at a time, please, youngest to oldest! Go!”

Roy jumped, laughing all the way.

Wendy somehow found herself standing next to Vince. Vince, who was not Hugh. “He’s a great kid,” she said.

“He is.” All an uncle’s fondness was in his tone.

“Very athletic. For a karate beginner, he picked up on the moves quickly.”

“I’ve worked with him a bit.”

That made sense. Because like Hugh, this man who was called Vince was built like a guy who knew his way around the security arts. “You’re a self-defense practitioner?”

“In my business, it’s helpful.”

“You’re an actor?”

Vince glanced at her in surprise. “Not at all. But I am a stunt coordinator for the movies.”

She laughed in a gust. “Of course you are.”

“Are you sure we haven’t met before?”

“Pretty sure we haven’t.”

Roy roared back across the shop, yodeling like Tarzan.

“I taught him that,” Vince said.

“Of course you did.” As before, her conversation left something to be desired.

Roy arrived at Vince’s side, opened the bag and found an old, closed metal case. He looked at Wendy in confusion.

“It’s stage makeup.” She popped it open. “Looks like lip color to me.”

Every one of the kids fell on the ground laughing.

The fathers sympathetically clapped Vince on the back.

Roy found the brush she'd included in the bag and went to work on Vince's face.

Vince now wore a grass skirt and thick ruby red lip color painted on with an inexperienced hand.

"This is going to be great," the next kid told his horrified father, and jumped over to the bags.

Roy watched and clapped his hands in anticipation.

In an undertone, Vince told Wendy, "Roy's had a time with his dad being what he is. Big time drug user. My sister's successful, so he figured to kidnap his own son and hold her feet to the fire. I went and got Roy. It was ugly, but I left Bill looking a little worse for wear."

"Bill?" Wendy had been telling herself, over and over, that she was feeling absolutely fine, that nothing other than Vince's resemblance to Hugh reminded her of a hallucination she'd experienced in the theater.

But that name—exactly the same name as the last kidnapper, when Hugh had died and she had lost her love . . .

"What?" Vince asked. "What's wrong? Do you know him?"

"No. No, I don't." A gust of cool air damp with fog slipped in from beyond the wall and caught Wendy's attention. A figure appeared to move within it.

Vince noticed, too. He glanced around, located the light switch and hurried to douse the overheads.

Deputy Dave caught on immediately. He indicated silence to the kids, and herded the

families and the O'Hall sisters into the back behind the bookshelves.

Wendy peeked into the clothing shop. She couldn't see much. It was all hulking shadows and silhouettes against the squares of window.

The outer door stood wide open.

The fog slid in, swirling as though something had passed through and disturbed it.

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Had the door not been firmly latched? Had those treacherous wind currents opened it?

Or had someone come into the dark, closed store?

Moving softly, Wendy stepped in and off to the side. She stopped and listened, and heard it—a footstep.

A man walked through the shop, passing between her and the windows. A man Wendy recognized. As if the mention of his name had brought her nightmare to life, it was the same Bill from 1940—that man exactly, even to the dark, dirty, rumpled suit.

Vince walked through the arch, not bothering to be quiet or stealthy.

Wendy's heart stopped.

If Bill was in the building, Vince wanted him to know he was there. He wanted to shield the families hiding in the other room behind the bookshelves.

Just as before, Bill pulled a pistol and pointed it at Vince. An automatic pistol, this time.

Just as before, their figures were silhouettes in the dark.

Just as before, Vince held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Bill, come on. Be calm."

“My son!” Bill’s voice vibrated with menace and madness. “He’s my son to exploit and you got in the way!”

This time, Wendy didn’t have to take off her heels; her running shoes would work.

This time, the result would be different.

She took a quick breath, then ran, intent on using that turning kick to take out the pistol and slam Bill’s head to the ground . . . before he even realized she was there and on the move.

Vince flicked a glance her way, and spoke louder. “Bill, listen. Roy is better without you.”

“My wife. I own that woman, she left me, she betrayed me, how dare you try to keep her from me—”

Wendy was almost on Bill, lifting onto her toes, ready to leap.

Bill saw movement, turned in a fast, jerky move. He pointed the automatic pistol at her and—

I’m going to die.

I’m going to die, now, when I’ve met Hugh, or Vince . . . whatever his name is, he holds my heart and I don’t want to wait another lifetime before I meet him again.

Bill’s eyes narrowed, the gun steadied on Wendy, his finger tightened on the trigger.

Vince hit Bill with the same turning kick she intended to use, knocking his aiming arm high.

Bullets spattered the ceiling above Wendy's head and the pistol flew through the air.

Wendy's kick caught Bill across the side of his face and snapped his head sideways. Bill flipped and hit the floor. He didn't stir.

Wendy skidded, put her hand on the floor to steady herself and came to a halt, gasping with the remnants of terror.

Bits of gilt-painted ceiling showered down on her.

Her gaze sought Vince and found him scooping up the pistol, looking at her, nodding his admiration and relief.

Swiftly, terror returned, and she ran toward the book room calling, "Are the kids okay? Is everyone—"

She barreled into Deputy Dave. He caught her, put her aside and said, "Everyone's safe." He headed toward Bill's prone body.

Ariel followed at full speed, flipped on the light, pulled a small pistol from her bag and aimed with a steady hand at Bill.

Wendy had never seen that ferocious expression on Ariel's face, and had never imagined what she kept in that stupid handbag.

Deputy Dave took the handcuffs his wife offered, rolled Bill onto his stomach and used his handcuffs to secure him . . . and surreptitiously checked him for signs of life. "He's alive."

Wendy knew she was supposed to be glad. Mostly, she was relieved because . . . this time, the result would be different. She'd actually thought that when she first laid

eyes on Vince, but when Bill pointed his firearm at her, in that split second, she had realized how different the result could've been. With that many bullets in his automatic pistol, Bill could have killed them all.

Frantic parents and excited kids boiled out of the book room.

Roy pointed at his father and told Deputy Dave, "Arrest him!"

"He's unconscious, son, but when he comes to, I'll read him his rights. Will that do?" Deputy Dave asked.

A familiar arm slid around Wendy's waist.

Familiar? Not really, not in this reality, but she didn't care what century they were in, she turned and pressed her face into Vince's chest.

He pulled her behind one of the Egyptian columns. He ran his hands down her arms, over her body. "You're not hurt? No bullet, no injuries from that jump?" He dipped his head close to her ear. "Which was magnificent, by the way."

"Thank you. I'm fine. Maybe some plaster from the ceiling hit me." With trembling hands, she dusted his shoulders. "What about you? That jump! I've never seen someone leap into midair that fast!"

"I've never done it before, but I've never had that kind of incentive. You and Roy and those kids . . ." His voice shook as he remembered the threat they'd faced.

"You saved them."

"We saved them. Tonight, when I saw you standing there, surrounded by happy children, I knew you. I knew you were valiant and strong, funny and loving. I knew

I'd waited my whole life for you." He laughed unsteadily. "I'm standing here virtually naked, declaring myself to a woman I just met. What about you? Do you think—"

"That you're the man who made me believe in love at first sight? Someone I could stand beside and love forever?"

He brushed her hair back from her face, leaned close, closer . . .

Vince's breath touched Wendy's lips, his warmth enfolded and enticed. She closed her eyes, rose the millimeter to put her mouth on his and kissed the man she'd lost, and found, today. Their hands roamed, their lips roamed—

"Uncle Vince!"

Roy's piping voice broke them apart. They looked into each other's eyes, sighed in unison and turned to face him.

With awesome patience, Vince asked, "What do you want, Roy?"

Roy grinned. "You've been kissing," he said in a singsong voice.

Vince kept his arm around Wendy. "Brilliant deduction, Roy, and if you'd go away, I will—"

Wendy poked him with her elbow. "It's not going to work. I know these kids. Roy's merely the advance battalion."

They followed Roy out into the aftermath of the shooting.

Deputy Dave stood over Bill's starting-to-stir body, giving his report to the sheriff;

because Gothic was so isolated, it would take time for official law enforcement to arrive.

Ariel had herded the parents and class away from the crime scene.

Someone had placed chairs for the O'Hall sisters. They sat together while Minnie gestured furiously at the holes in the ceiling and Mabel patted her arm and murmured platitudes.

At the sight of Vince and Wendy, everyone froze, stared and grinned. Even Minnie.

"Guess we know what you've been doing," Deputy Dave said, and went back to his report.

Wendy frowned. What was this all about? Okay, they'd kissed, but the way everyone was acting—

Roy planted himself in front of his uncle. "You should ask her on a date. To eat dinner."

Annoyed, Vince said, "I know how to ask a woman on a date, Roy."

"You can't be doing it right." Roy's voice rose to reach the far corners of the shop. "You don't even have a girlfriend!"

Ariel slipped close to Wendy and muttered, "Good to know, especially if you're going at it this fast."

"What are you talking about?" Why did everyone act as if they'd been listening to that scene behind the pillar? Was there a microphone hidden back there? Was there an ill-placed mirror?

In much the same move as his nephew, Vince planted himself in front of Wendy. “After we give testimony to law enforcement . . .” He looked inquiringly at Deputy Dave.

“For sure,” Deputy Dave said.

“Would you like to go to dinner with Roy and I? The kid has to tag along because I’m babysitting.”

Roy beamed. “That’s the way, Uncle Vince!”

More laughter rippled through the group.

“I would love to go to dinner with you and Roy,” Wendy said.

A light round of applause and the first sounds of oncoming sirens rewarded her.

“You might want to fix your lipstick, first.” With a smirk, Ariel pulled a compact out of that magic purse of hers and handed it to Wendy.

Wendy flipped it open and looked. Ruby red lip color, stage paint from 1940, smeared her mouth, her forehead, her cheeks.

She shut the compact, handed back it to Ariel and advanced on Vince.

He laughed and backed up toward the door. “Just staking a claim.”

She kept stalking. “You sneaky bastard!”

He kept retreating. “One way or the other, I do like to hold the trophy—even if I have to cheat to get it.”

Hugh's voice echoed in her mind. She stopped. Tears prickled her eyes.

"Hey!" Right away, Vince was there for her, holding her, hugging her. "Please don't cry. I tease like I've known you forever, and I have no right. I just feel as if we met—"

"In another lifetime?"

"In another lifetime."

Minnie and Mabel gave a final wave to party stragglers, law enforcement and curious neighbors.

"The fog is gone," Minnie said in a low voice. "It's a clear night."

"Not a breath of wind. Not a current stirring." Mabel wearily shut and locked the door of the shop.

Minnie slipped out of her low heels, picked them up and wandered toward the entrance of their upstairs apartment. "I thought we were in trouble this afternoon."

Mabel did the same with her heels and limped after her sister. "Yes. That turned out better than I feared. I told you so."

"No, I told you so."

"Dear, don't you remember what I said this morning?" Mabel held the door for Minnie.

Her sister passed through and started up the stairs. "Yes, dear, and I was right."

Mabel followed. “No, dear—”

The door slammed behind them.

The theater settled into silence.

Backstage, as the long-ago strains of “I’ll Be Seeing You” softly played, dust swirled on an unseen current.

* * * * *

Excerpt

Please turn the page for a sneak peek at New York Times bestselling author Christina Dodd’s *Girl Anonymous*. “The Godfather” meets “West Side Story” in this twisty thriller about a girl who is forced into hiding after a deadly blast reignites a killer family feud . . .

Enjoy this excerpt from

Girl Anonymous!

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 12:26 am

San Francisco, California

This Morning

In the fourth-floor library of the Arundel mansion

“Interesting piece, isn’t it?”

Maarja Daire of Saint Rees Fine Arts Movers didn’t start at the sound of the man’s voice. When handling a painting by one of the Three Kingdom masters, or an antique statue raised from the depths of the Aegean Sea, or this miniature pitcher of fragile red glass, one did not physically startle.

Yet she realized how deeply she’d fallen into her vision of the past, for how else had this man managed to position himself close enough behind her without her hearing his approach? This man, of all people?

She swiveled to face him. “You are . . . ?” She did know who he was: scarred, unsmiling, pulling darkness around him like the black Armani jacket he wore with his blue jeans and worn white running shoes.

“I’m Dante Arundel. We spoke on the phone.”

“Yes.” His voice was distinctive: slightly accented, deep, and so soft she should have had to strain to hear him, yet so resonant she heard every word inside her head, as if a specter of the past communicated through a bond so ancient she had thought—hoped—it was broken. “You’re Mrs. Arundel’s son?”

“I am. Pronounce your first name for me.”

She blinked at him, drawing on her acting skills to subdue the primal chill that warned of imminent danger. “I introduced myself on the phone.”

“I like to be sure.”

Strangers frequently asked how to pronounce her name. But he hadn’t asked, he had demanded. Based on nothing more than that, she diagnosed him as an obnoxious bastard, intent on throwing her off-balance. Ridiculous on her part, but when a woman worked in this field, obnoxious bastards proliferated like the weeds in her garden.

The question was, why did he want her off-balance? Was he like this with every woman he encountered?

Or did he recognize her? “My name is Mar-ja.”

“It’s Estonian for Mary.”

“Yes.” She smiled again, pleasantly, and thought, If you know that, you could have found the pronunciation online.

He smiled, too, the sharp, toothy smile of a circling shark. “Is your family Estonian?”

“My mother liked the name.” Not an answer, but a mind-your-own-business nudge.

She didn’t think he’d take the hint, but he followed with, “I appreciate the care you use to move my mother’s possessions.” She gazed down at the tiny pitcher she cradled in one palm.

“That’s my job.”

“You’ve worked for her before.”

Annoying man; he knew very well she had. “Saint Rees Fine Arts Movers are the best fine arts movers in Northern California, and your mother demands the best for her possessions.”

“You’re the best at Saint Rees Fine Arts Movers?”

“Yes.” The job had landed in her lap in the summer after her high school junior year, and Saint Rees had quickly recognized her spookily accurate talent for antiquities.

“You’re not modest,” Dante said.

“I know my worth.” She’d had to pass inspection with Mrs. Rees, the power behind the throne, and a deal was struck. She’d worked for Saint Rees Fine Arts Movers in the summers while attending college, and they contributed financing toward her studies. After five years, she still had her instinctive perceptions about authenticity, a new art degree that gave her cred with the clients, and she loved her wildly lucrative job so much she’d brought her foster sister Alex onto the team.

“You’re in charge?” Dante was like a dog gnawing a bone.

“Yes.” She was done with his unwarranted interrogation.

“And yes, this is an interesting piece. One of the earliest works from the Italian island of Murano, stopper missing, assumed broken, its contents sealed with wax.”

“That’s a lot to know by casual observation.”

“I don’t observe casually.” She observed with her vision, of course, but also through the past that whispered as it sank into her skin and shrieked in her nightmares. He didn’t observe casually, either, for his knowing gaze flicked between her face and the pitcher cupped in her hand. “In my family, there’s some discussion about whether or not la Bouteille de Flamme is genuine.”

She nestled it into the tissue paper, then surrounded it with enough bubble wrap to fill the box. “It’s genuine.”

“You know this because . . . ?”

She taped the box closed and her fingers lingered as she placed it in her staging area. “When one often handles antiquities, one develops a sense about them.”

“Does one?”

“Yes. One does.” She grinned at him and thought, I’m still skinny, but I’m way taller and twenty-three years ago for Christmas I got my two front teeth . . . recognize me now?

He didn’t say anything. Or rather—he didn’t admit anything. Good. Mrs. Arundel didn’t say anything. She didn’t admit anything. Maybe, hopefully, neither one of them knew anything. Maarja had put great effort into being nondescript. She liked to think she’d succeeded, and if she hadn’t quite . . . she could distract Dante. “Almost everything in this library is genuine.” At his quick critical glance around, she realized probably she shouldn’t have said it quite like that.

“What’s not genuine?” He shot words at her like bullets.

Nope, definitely shouldn’t have said that. She gazed around the airy, gracious, classically decorated library with its first editions sheltered in locked glass cases, its

artfully lit old master paintings, BCE vase fragments and statues. “The Chinese scroll.”

“Damn it,” he said without heat. His face had not so much been formed; instead his sharp cheekbones and thin nose looked as if they’d been carved from some cruel and ancient stone. The artist that carved that crook in his nose and the long scar that slashed his forehead and cheek had been intent on warning all who viewed him that he was a survivor, a man to be feared.

“You acquired it?”

“I bought it,” he corrected. “From a highly respected auction house.”

“Mistakes are made.”

“Not when you sell to me.” Behind his brown eyes, so dark they were almost black, she caught glimpses of gold, as if molten lava emotions moved beneath his surface. It would be nice to think so; that would make him almost human.

Perhaps better to backpedal. “I might be wrong.”

“Are you?”

“No.” Surely he wasn’t the type to kill the messenger.

“I’ll have it reappraised. At the same time, I’ll have my appraisers reappraised.”

Her gaze dropped to his hands. Broad-palmed, long-fingered, big-boned. They could form a fist that would take a man down with a single punch. More than that, he sported the ridged calluses of a dedicated self-defense practitioner. The only thing that kept a person working at the sport was a respect for its real-life potential. She

knew; she had a few calluses herself.

Dante looked toward the door and called, “Nate.”

The biggest man she’d ever seen stepped into the room. In his dark suit, white shirt, and nondescript tie, he looked like one of the Aryan villains in an old Bond movie, exaggerated in his bulk, his height, his stolid lack of expression. She would bet he had calluses all over his body.

“Did you hear what Maarja said?” Dante asked.

Nate nodded, a stiff movement that barely stirred his muscled neck.

“Check on it, will you?”

Nate put his hand to his earpiece and stepped back into the elevator foyer. She heard a low rumble that might have been an approaching earthquake but was probably his voice.

She hoped Dante Arundel’s appraisers survived; cheating him, or even not giving his purchases the care he required, would be a risky business, as she was sure they knew.

She moved farther into the room, into the corner where five large paintings and three eighteen-inch-tall statues waited to be boxed. She ran the tape measure on them; the dimensions matched up with those Dante Arundel had sent. She checked them again, because one didn’t make mistakes when handling priceless art, and sent Alex a text instructing her on the sizes of the packaging for the larger pieces. She got a thumbs-up text and five minutes.

Arms folded, Dante watched as she started the process over again with a Shakespeare Second Folio and a framed Picasso sketch.

She wondered if he intended to shake her composure with his silence and his judgmental gaze, and she wanted to tell him to knock it off. She'd had far more imposing scrutiny from far more imposing watch groups.

She didn't say a word. It was his stuff, or rather his mother's, and if he wanted to observe, he could. Probably he hadn't identified her; in her loose white coveralls with her name stitched on, her white running shoes, and her short dark red hair covered in a blue bandanna, she was a far cry from the little girl wearing her Sunday dress and jumping over the black tiles onto the white tiles, using the parquet floor as if it were a giant hopscotch. She pushed her glasses down her nose to read the tape measure and jot them down, and when she was done, again checked them against the measurements Dante Arundel had sent.

He unfolded his arms and plucked her glasses off her nose, a presumptuous move that left her startled and blinking. He held them up to the window and squinted through them. "Why do you wear these? There's no correction."

"Blue-light protection."

He glanced at her tape measure and her pen and paper. "From what? You're low-tech."

"Blue light on my phone. My tablet." She nodded at her devices. "I'm back and forth all day. It's easier to wear them than to not have them when I need them."

"The glass is so lightly tinted, I can hardly see it."

"My eye doctor prescribed them. One assumes he knows what he's doing." A lie; she'd bought them online, but she itched to slam Dante Arundel down.

"Hm." He placed the black frames on the side table and viewed her face as if he were

appraising a piece of art, with sharp interest but no emotion. “Your eyes are an unusual color. Violet?”

“Just blue.” She heard the elevator door ding and hoped to hell it was Alex.

It was. Alex walked through the library door pushing the luggage cart piled with the boxes, paper, and bubble wrap. She kept glancing behind with an alert, wary expression; none of the company’s movers related well to burly men in dark suits who loitered in foyers, but Alex more than most.

She saw Dante, appraised him in a single glance, and said, “Ah.”

He stepped forward. “I’m Dante Arundel.”

Alex shook hands with him. “A pleasure.” Obviously, it was not.

Together she and Maarja began the arduous process of packing the larger paintings and highly breakable pieces of art.

“The truck is in the drive? Unguarded?” Dante let it be known he was critical.

Alex’s gaze sliced toward Maarja. She seldom spoke to the clients; tact was a skill she’d not chosen to learn, and the extremely wealthy expected to be treated with the delicacy of their art objects.

However, few of their wealthy clients irritated and presumed quite like Dante, and Maarja had to consciously regulate her tone to answer him. “A van. We have a van. Serene is with it. She’ll be fussing with the contents, making herself appear busy to any eyes that might be observing, but in fact she’s our lookout and security.”

“She’s armed?” Dante asked.

“We’re all armed, but while we’re in a safe environment—your estate—Alex and I concentrate on packing and transporting to the truck, so while we’re aware of our surroundings, we’re focused on the objects.”

“Three women think they can safeguard treasures worth millions?”

He really needed to watch his attitude.

Not that he would. He was one of those guys, but Maarja wavered between wanting to punch him right between the eyes or ask him, Do you know who I am?

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The last impulse alone told Maarja clearly that she needed to finish the job and get out the door. “After a couple of attempted robberies, I convinced Saint Rees that armed male guards make people pay attention. Women are perceived as harmless, so a woman puttering around a large white van marked Junk means the contents aren’t valuable and not worth bothering.”

“Anyone who thinks you’re harmless is a fool.” Dante chuckled, a deep warm trickle of mirth at odds with the ruthless persona he presented.

The comment and the amusement made her pause, look at him, acknowledge that she might have misread him. In her business and with her past, she’d learned that such a misreading could put her at a disadvantage. She kept her tone pleasantly neutral as she said, “I know how to protect the objects I’m sent to guard.”

He kept his gaze on her face, observing her as he dug beneath her skin. “And how to protect yourself.”

He struck emotional gold, for she snapped, “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean you have the look of someone who puts a lot of time and effort into self-defense.”

Since Maarja put a lot of time and effort into disappearing into the woodwork, she didn’t appreciate that comment.

Alex interrupted, “Do I look as if I put a lot of time and effort into self-defense, too?” She posed, hand on her hip, and smiled invitingly at Dante.

A behavior so at odds with Alex's usual quiet professionalism and hands-off attitude, Maarja had to look twice to realize Alex was running interference.

Dante accepted the invitation and ran his gaze up and down her; her curvaceous body could not be disguised by the loose white coveralls. "You don't, but I wouldn't dare jump you in a dark alley."

Alex winked. "Best to wait on an invitation, and never in an alley."

"That's my rule." Down the hall, the elevator dinged. He glanced out the door and faced back to Maarja, and he was not amused. "That's Serene, I assume?"

Maarja gave in to her knee-jerk reaction. "No, she would never—"

Serene strolled into the library.

Serene always lived up to her name. Deep insights, lots of meditation, never surprised, never the best fighter, but always fighting to win. Tall, willowy, blonde, older than Maarja but not as experienced as a mover. She looked around the library in calm interest like a tourist on a house tour. She nodded as if the place was exactly as she expected, and to the speechless Maarja, she said, "Saint Rees sent a male guard. Were you expecting him?"

"No! Who?" Maarja shot a horrified glance at Dante.

He observed the play between the women without expression, and yet at the same time he exuded displeasure. Neat trick. Scary aura.

"That guy Morrison. Scrawny, fast with his hands, thinks he's handsome." Serene's low placid voice contrasted with her scathing appraisal.

“I know him.” Maarja took a breath and tried not to shout. “You shouldn’t have left him alone with the van. What are you doing up here?”

“I was interested in this house. It’s on the National Treasury, you know.”

“I do know, but we don’t have rights to tour a client’s home without invitation, and we don’t leave a man alone with the van. You know the message that sends.”

Dante crossed his arms over his chest and silently critiqued Maarja’s in-charge position.

“A lot of security out there. A lot of security in here.” Serene jerked her head toward the door where Nate’s shadow lurked. In her own relaxed and soothing way, Serene was undermining any confidence Dante Arundel might have had in Maarja and in Saint Rees Fine Arts Movers. “I sense this operation is blessed.”

“Serene, this is Mr. Arundel.”

Serene started forward, hand outstretched.

Maarja stepped between them. “I sense he is displeased. Return to the van. Do the job for which you were hired.”

Serene pulled up short. She smiled pleasantly. “Of course, Maarja, but sometimes it’s best to put your trust in the universe. I certainly have. Namaste.” She put her palms together and bowed, and strolled out as gracefully as she had strolled in. Alex followed her, and from the elevator lobby Maarja heard her giving Serene hell. The bell dinged, the doors closed, and the women’s voices were abruptly cut off.

Maarja turned to Dante. “I do apologize. In the past, Serene has been completely reliable, but she marches to a different drummer and unfortunately the beat

unexpectedly caught up with her. I'll speak to her, as will Saint Rees."

"Make sure you do."

The elevator bell dinged again.

Maarja heard the sound of Mrs. Raine Arundel's mechanical wheelchair.

Dante smiled, and that smile transformed his face from Sir Grumpy Black Armani Jacket to Mr. Loving and Living in Old Running Shoes.

Points to him. He adored his mother. Mrs. Arundel paused and greeted Nate.

Nate rumbled back a few words in a polite tone.

Mrs. Arundel rolled in, followed by her long-time assistant, Béatrice, a wispy woman with a face as expressionless as Nate's. In her case, Maarja suspected an addictive use of Botox and a vacuous mind.

Maarja had met Béatrice during prior moves. Her thin blond hair draped around her long pale face making it look longer. She wore a pale pink lipstick and a bright pink blush, her eyelids drooped like a basset hound's, and she always sniffed so much Maarja wanted to snap at her to blow her nose. But that was all external; Maarja didn't like her because of her morose air; with her, she carried her own personal gray sky, and Maarja was convinced Béatrice remained employed based on Mrs. Arundel's soft heart.

Dante beamed as he leaned over and kissed his mother's cheeks. "Mère, did you come to say goodbye to your cherished library?"

She cupped his face in both her bony sun-marked hands and patted his cheeks. "I'll

miss San Francisco and my lovely townhouse, but I know you'll recreate the library in my new home in Montana."

"Every bookshelf," he promised. "Every cove molding. Every hideous leering cherub on the ceiling."

Maarja hid a grin. Good to know she wasn't the only one who thought the naked cherubs on pink clouds were a little over the top . . . as it were.

"They're not leering." For such a small woman, Mrs. Arundel had a full-throated voice. "Those are the satyrs."

"Those, too." He straightened up and flicked the button on her wheelchair, putting it into manual.

Before he could move her, Béatrice said, "Mrs. Arundel, do you mind if I go back down to the office? Standing hurts my back."

"Of course, dear. Go on." Mrs. Arundel gestured her out.

"I'll catch up with you there. Remember to sort the mail while you wait for me."

"Yes. The mail . . ." Béatrice used a die-away tone as if sorting would ruin her manicure, which was beautifully done with a light pink gloss, and drifted from the room.

"She's having a bad day," Mrs. Arundel confided to no one in particular.

"Does she ever have a good day?" Dante asked irritably.

"She couldn't sit down in here?" Maarja must have thought it a little too loud.

Or Dante had his own psychic moments, for he replied, “Exactly, Maarja. Mère, we pay Béatrice to be your companion and assistant, not to watch videos on her phone.”

“You know the result of her injuries, poor thing.” Mrs. Arundel really sounded compassionate.

Dante did not. “Yes. Her lover left her after the explosion. Which proves he was the shallow bastard Father told her he was. Maybe she should have listened to her younger and smarter cousin.” He maneuvered Mrs. Arundel close enough to watch the packing. “You know Maarja?”

“I love Maarja. She’s moved things for me before.”

Maarja came to kiss Mrs. Arundel’s smooth cheek and face the same scrutiny she’d given her son. “Young lady, you’re more beautiful each time I see you.”

“I was thinking the same thing about you.” Maarja judged Mrs. Arundel to be about sixty, thin and groomed, her skin glowing with her inner spirit and perhaps an advanced skin-smoothing laser treatment. Her stylish green T-shirt dress was ruched to emphasize her well-toned figure, and around her shoulder she draped a black throw that weighed heavily on her shoulders and down her back.

The elevator dinged again, and Alex strode in. She nodded decisively to Maarja and moved into position beside her.

“Mrs. Arundel, this is Alex. We’ve worked closely together many times, and you can be assured we hold your belongings as dearly as our own.”

“Alex—” Mrs. Arundel extended her hand “—it’s wonderful to meet you.” She smiled again, a mother’s tender version of the smile that transformed Dante’s face into something vaguely acceptable.

Alex lightly embraced Mrs. Arundel.

Which showed the happy power Mrs. Arundel exuded, for Maarja had known Alex since their teens, and Alex was chary with her hugs.

Mrs. Arundel utilized her wheelchair to allow her guests a sense of height, to put them at ease, to encourage them to speak tenderly, and to undermine any anxiety about dealing with a woman who'd suffered a broken spine and lost the ability to walk. "Alex, you don't look like Maarja, but you share the same gestures and expressions. Are you sisters?"

The other thing about Mrs. Arundel: she observed what most people never did.

Alex glanced at Maarja. "We are sisters of the heart. We were raised in the same foster home."

Mrs. Arundel leaned her head back on her headrest. "For you both to be such lovely young ladies, your foster mother must have been an amazing woman."

"She was," Maarja said. "She is. She—" Wait. How had Mrs. Arundel known a woman had given them their foster home?

Dante's phone squawked like a chicken laying an egg. He scowled and looked at the screen. "Mère, did you change my ringtones again?"

Mrs. Arundel laughed with delight. "You're too serious, always busy, you never make cheer. You need a little levity in your life."

"Chickens are not levity. They're food and feathers." Maarja did not grin at his irritation, but it was a near thing.

“I need to make a call.” He kissed his mother. “Are you going to be all right by yourself?”

“Of course, dear. The girls will be here with me, and after that, I want a moment alone to say goodbye to my beloved book nest.” She patted his cheek. “Take that unfriendly behemoth with you.”

“Nate isn’t supposed to be anyone’s friend. He’s my bodyguard.” Dante placed his hands on the arms of her chair and looked into her eyes. “I should insist on getting a bodyguard for you, too.”

“Once I’m in Montana, there’ll be no need. I’ll miss the city, though . . .” Mrs. Arundel sighed.

Maarja exchanged glances with Alex. Yes, she knew the Arundels were scary people, but who would threaten a sweetheart like Mrs. Arundel? She gave Dante the side-eye.

What had he done to cause trouble? “Movers, are you almost done?” he asked.

Movers. How charming. He’d already forgotten their names. “Yes, sir,” Maarja said. Two could play that game. “This is the last piece.”

“Another ten minutes at most?” He wasn’t estimating. He was demanding.

Maarja looked at Alex, who was even now carefully placing Mrs. Arundel’s bubble-wrapped and boxed treasures onto the luggage cart.

Tight-lipped, Alex nodded. She was done talking to him. “That’s right, sir,” Maarja said. “Ten minutes.”

“Make sure you pack everything.” He picked up the small box with the tiny Murano

glass pitcher and handed it to Maarja. “Especially this. La Bouteille de Flamme has special meaning to our family.”

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Maarja accepted it. “Yes, sir. I know.”

Dante shot her one of those dark glances that slashed at her presumption, or maybe warned her of the danger she courted with her admission of knowledge.

Alex interceded again. “Everything will be safe in our keeping.”

He nodded, but he didn’t take his menacing gaze from Maarja. She smiled brightly. “Measuring me for a coffin?”

Alex moaned softly.

He answered without an ounce of humor. “That’s the undertaker’s job. I’m involved with the other end of the death business.”

“Dear boy!” Mrs. Arundel rubbed her fingers on her temple as if he gave her a headache.

Dante inclined his head to Maarja, walked through the elevator foyer, yanked open the stairway door, and descended the steps.

When the door slammed behind him, Mrs. Arundel said brightly, “Do hurry, young ladies. I do love this room and while my darling Dante will make everything the same in my new home, I’m feeling sad and, of course, I don’t want him to know.”

“I’ll do it for you,” Alex mumbled. Mrs. Arundel watched as they got the luggage cart packed, and Maarja carefully placed the package containing the small pitcher in

another larger padded box at the top.

The library shelves were still full of books, a few lesser paintings still hung on the walls, but regular cross-country movers were scheduled to handle all that.

Mrs. Arundel kissed Maarja and Alex before they left her sitting with her back to the windows, looking wistfully around.

As they moved the cartload into the foyer and toward the elevator, Alex said, “What a sleazeball that man is.”

Maarja didn’t have to ask what man. She knew. His personality left an imprint as clearly as the glass pitcher or the Picasso or any of the other genuine works she’d so carefully packed. “Yes.” She pushed the down button. “Good-looking men often are.”

“You thought he was good-looking? The body, sure, but the face? Talk about a sneering satyr! His mother’s a buttercup, though.” Alex pushed the lit button several times, as if that would hurry the elevator along. “What happened to her? What’s with the wheelchair? Was she in an accident?”

“Years ago. There was a bomb. It exploded. She was too close.”

“A bomb.” Alex meditated on that while they waited for the aging elevator to make its majestic ascent. “Because the Arundels are the sort of shady people who get bombed a lot?”

Maarja glanced around for cameras; although she didn’t see them, she knew they were here, and microphones, too. She lowered her voice. “They were. For years. Noble French immigrants who made their fortune with some disreputable dealing. It was my understanding they’ve gone legitimate. But don’t quote me on any of that.”

“Because of the bomb they’ve gone legitimate?” When it came to this stuff, Alex was

a good guesser.

“Brat Benoit Arundel was old country, a golden bully.”

“A godfather?”

Together they’d seen the movie enough times to appreciate its wisdoms. “Collector, scavenger, profiteer, criminal. Yes, a godfather. But he didn’t claw his way to the top. He was privileged right from the get-go. The explosion that killed my mother killed him.” Maarja could see Alex wanting to ask questions, but Maarja shook her head. She’d said more than she’d ever said, and probably unwisely. “Dante was about nine at the time.”

“You know a lot.”

“Front-row seat.” Now Maarja punched the elevator call button as if that would make it arrive in a hurry.

“Oh.” Alex contemplated Maarja as if that explained a lot. “Is that why you flinch at loud sounds?”

“Could be.” The door opened and the women maneuvered the luggage rack inside.

Alex pushed the starred button. “He’s in charge now?”

“Looks like it. I don’t know the details. First I was with my aunt, then . . .” Maarja shrugged.

Alex shrugged back. She comprehended in a way most people could not.

“Eventually I ended up with Octavia. Best thing that happened to me.” The doors began to slowly close, and Maarja reached up to adjust her glasses. She touched her

bare temple. “Damn it. He took my glasses and put them on the table.”

“He? Dante Arundel took your glasses? Off your face? Really, a flaming pustule of a sleazeball. Go get them back!”

“You can handle this?” She indicated the luggage cart. “Even the Arundel family package full of special meaning.”

Alex managed sarcasm well. “I’ll wait for you on the ground floor by the elevators. We’ll go out to the van together.”

Maarja caught the door before it slid closed. She touched her hand to her chest over her heart, and pressed it to Alex’s outstretched palm. They nodded at each other, sisters of experience if not blood, and Maarja ran toward the library.

She caught Mrs. Arundel in her wheelchair in the middle of the room, looking sorrowfully about her. In a concerned voice, she asked, “Young lady, what are you doing back?”

“My glasses.” Maarja picked them up, stuck them in her pocket with her carpenter’s pencil . . . and lingered. “Are you sad at leaving your home?”

“It’s become necessary.” Mrs. Arundel smiled bravely, but glanced around again, avoiding Maarja’s gaze. “Don’t they need you downstairs to help load the van?”

“Only an emergency would make them leave without me.” Maarja took Mrs. Arundel’s frail crumpled hand. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

“No, dear, really. A few moments alone is all I need.”

Mrs. Arundel looked so anxious, almost on the verge of tears, that Maarja took pity on her. “Of course. I understand. I’ll see you on the other end, in Montana.” She

walked out the door and down the corridor to the elevator. She pushed the button and waited, and as she did, she heard a muffled crash behind her.

Had Mrs. Arundel somehow fallen?

She turned in time to see a blinding flash of light, hear the roar of an explosion.

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