

# To the Rescue

On a beautiful late-spring day, with her employers on a Caribbean cruise, Sam Covington drove across town and shot the bastard in the forehead. She used the SIG Sauer handgun that she had found beneath a stack of shoeboxes in her employers' bedroom closet. The handgun had a blue barrel and hearts on the onyx grip. Sam loved the way the gun nestled against the small of her back and felt certain that the lady of the house had never experienced a similar sensation. It took all of Sam's energy to fling the gun into the Big Muddy.

## Several weeks ago ...

Sam saw Sandra Swope (aka the lady of the house) primping in the metallic reflection on the refrigerator door, smoothing her lipstick with an extended pinkie as the grandfather clock struck midnight. Sandra was a graceful woman who moved as if her feet had built in springs. Below each of her eyes, a trio of thin lines curled like the tines of a fork, a misplaced crow's foot, that suggested time had a tenuous but nonetheless secure grasp on her face.

Until recently, Sandra and her husband, Zacharius, had been working on a second child, but then something had happened and Sandra had moved to one of the guest rooms. This Sam had learned while lying in her sleeping bag, one floor below the marital bed, although she never quite made out the reasoning behind the change. The house's musty echo chambers turned whispers into grey noise.

Sam was a home renovation contractor who had brokered a deal with Sandra and Zacharius for room and board while she restored their home. "That's the only way we can get this in your

price range,” Sam had said. The house, a Romanesque revival manor high on the hill above downtown, had long been neglected, at least for the last half of the twentieth century, if not the first half as well, to the point where a wrecker might have been a better option. Dry rot had reduced many of the floorboards to the consistency of cork. Cracked plaster sagged from the ceilings. A persistent odor of cat urine lingered in the front hall.

Several years ago, Zacharius had promised Sandra to do the restoration work himself, but something had always interfered (slapstick comedies, mixology lessons, nap time, etc.). But Sandra had a vision, or so she explained to Sam: “Imagine this house in the Jewels of St. Joseph tour next fall.” Sam gritted her teeth but agreed to the timeline. She had a vision of her own. It principally involved a warm place to sleep, somewhere she wouldn’t have to worry about a previous employer knocking on her door. She had parted ways with Key Construction on less-than-cordial terms. Could she complete the restoration by herself in nine to ten months? Not a chance in hell. But she felt the call of sanctuary. “Open a charge account at the lumber yard and we’ll make this happen,” Sam had said.

As she watched Sandra in the metallic reflection on the refrigerator door, Sam’s chest tightened. She wanted the marriage to work. Zacharius was a kind man, if somewhat distant, with a prosthetic eye that lingered slightly off center and a waist that bulged with middle age. She felt less strongly about the lady of the house and couldn’t understand why Sandra had started sneaking out (once or twice a week) after Zacharius had retired for the evening. So to solve the mystery of Sandra’s late-night excursions, Sam pulled on her jacket and boots and grabbed the keys for her motorcycle.

She found Sandra's cherry red Miata a cinch to tail, although she worried the roar of her bike might give her away. But Sandra never looked back. Sam parked in the shadow of a brownstone and listened as Sandra's heels clicked the pavement. Sandra climbed to the front entrance of an apartment building. Withered stalks hung from planters. A single light bulb dangling on exposed wires shone a pocket of light around the door. Sandra smoothed her dress, shimmied, and pushed up her breasts. Then she poked a button on a panel. Sam made a mental note of the button's location and later took a closer look.

"M. Dudley," said a curling stretch of masking tape. "7A." Sam then drove back to the Swope's house, crawled into her sleeping bag, and stared at a crack in the ceiling. A little over an hour later, Sandra returned, the door to the patio squeaking shut, her bare feet padding through the hallway and up the stairs.

## **Just One Look**

Sam had not necessarily meant to shoot the bastard. That's not why she drove across town. She simply wanted to look M. Dudley in the face, to peer into his eyes and learn what made Sandra go to him after midnight on a workday no less. Not that Zacharius was a perfect man. Hardly. He was plain and drab, although Sam thought plain and drab might have its advantages, especially considering her own history with scoundrels and thugs. But maybe the appeal of Zacharius had faded for Sandra? Sam needed to know. She felt she could help if she could just look M. Dudley in the face. Maybe she could do something or say something that might remove this boulder from the picture, that might convince Sandra that a return to the master bedroom wouldn't be a bad idea.

She doubted the Caribbean cruise would help matters. Zacharius had arranged it, much to Sandra's dismay who claimed he had thrown away money they could have better used on the restoration project. Damn the romanticism of verdant jungles, blue waters, and intoxicating rhythms. "I appreciate it. Don't think I don't," Sandra had said. "But it's all a little irrelevant."

Sam missed the sounds of nightly lovemaking. In the past, the bed posts had sometimes walked across the bedroom floor. She had chosen to set up camp in the blue room (a storage room half-filled with odds and ends) not because of its proximity to the master bedroom but because using one of the guest rooms on the same floor as Zacharius, Sandra, and their eight-year-old daughter, Elaine, had seemed presumptuous. "No, I couldn't," she had said. "That's for family." In contrast, the blue room, small and simple, felt like servants' quarters. "This'll do just fine."

Beyond restoration, Sam's role had quickly blossomed to include cooking and even housekeeping. Cleaning up sawdust frequently put a broom and dustpan in her hands, so adding a vacuum and a mop made perfect sense. And a stint as a short-order cook four years ago had made her a natural with the stove and oven. She didn't complain, but enjoyed her broadening role, even walking Elaine to school each morning and watching cartoons with her in the late afternoons. She introduced Elaine to her favorites: "Be vewy vewy quiet. I'm hunting wabbits!"

When she found herself alone in the house during the spring cruise, Sam naturally began to explore—every drawer, every cupboard, every box, looking for what exactly she didn't know. She'd know it when she saw it. As she explored, she smoked a joint because it helped settle her nerves. In the process, while trying on a variety of Sandra's undergarments (which stretched tight across her flesh), she took the deep dive into Sandra's closet and dug through the stack of

shoeboxes, finding the 9mm SIG Sauer P220 wrapped in tissue paper. “Hello,” she had said. “What doesn’t belong here?” The gun spoke to her. “Take me. Hold me,” she heard it say. Or maybe it was the marijuana speaking. Nonetheless, she felt her role broadening further yet. Into what exactly? Home security?

Sam brought the gun to M. Dudley’s apartment because you never know. A previous version of herself said to be prepared. That’s how you get answers from these idlers. For the most part, though, over the past five years, while lying low in a string of locations throughout the Midwest (currently Jesse James’s old hometown of St. Joseph), she had tried to suppress this past version, to supplant it with a new version who knew nothing about violence, a version who might even one day settle down in one spot, a version who might eventually lead a conventional life. But the past sometimes has long tentacles.

Jimmy Key never blessed her decision to leave the fold. Oh, she had her reasons, which involved an aversion to certain predilections that she refused to tolerate. That no one should tolerate. “Since when’d you get so naive?” said her old partner, Whizzo (aka Tommy Garofalo, aka “the son of a made man”). “Honor’s for fools.” He unzipped his fly and wrote “fuck you” on the asphalt with a steady stream. She also hated her old job for the knowledge it had given her of things she no longer wanted to know, such as the sound a person’s chest makes—a gasping whistle—after a bullet passes through a lung, info she would never be able to unlearn (or in this case unhear).

A small tattoo, a simple asterisk etched below her left eye by an artist she met at Burning Man, had been Sam’s way of reminding herself that she was now different. She saw that difference every time she looked in the mirror. People she met—the checkout clerk at the

hardware store, bartenders, even a police officer—had asked, “What does the asterisk stand for?” At which point she turned and lifted the back of her shirt to reveal a short message tattooed in gothic letters, roughly where tramp stamps are applied: “\*Version 2.0. New and improved but still your worst fucking nightmare.”

Sam slipped past the apartment building’s locked front door when an elderly lady, her eyes squinted shut to all creation, took a Pekingese for a walk in the blinding light of midday. The hallway was a dim tunnel with dark light fixtures. It reminded her of a secret passage from her childhood. She hadn’t thought about the passage for several years. It was in an old motion picture serial, a cliffhanger adventure told over several weeks. She couldn’t remember the serial’s name, but several aspects of the story had remained burned into her memory. “To the rescue,” Sam said, remembering a band of children who wore capes. Buckets sat on their heads instead of hats. They held their meetings in a cave. “To the rescue! To the rescue!” they yelled before jumping onto their horses, riding through sun-drenched valleys, and combating evil. They called themselves the “Junior Thunder Riders.” Somehow the serial also involved a killer robot, an underground city, and a song with various barnyard noises, all tucked into twelve chapters, nine of which Sam had seen. Her grandfather had a thing for matinees and had taken the eight-year-old Sam to the neighborhood theater on Saturdays after Sam’s mother had abandoned her and fled for parts unknown.

Sam found 7A and beat on the door. Several seconds passed. She knocked again.

## **Be Careful What You Ask For**

As Sam waited, feet dragged across the floor.

"Who the hell is it?" a voice rasped. Sam imagined a pack of cigarettes and a Zippo lighter on a night table. Nearby, an ashtray undoubtedly overflowed.

She knocked harder. A body pressed at the peephole. Sam offered a hint of a smile and rocked on her heels.

"I'm not buying anything," the smoker said.

"Not selling. I have a message from Sandra Swope."

A cricket chirped a few bars.

"So are you going to tell me the message or what?"

Sam briefly considered going for a more feminine register in her voice. She knew she didn't sound like a woman who plied her looks. Those women knew how to sound like women whereas Sam's voice languished in the limbo between male and female. "Would you please open the door?" she said calmly.

"Just give me the message," the man shouted.

Sam's fist rattled the door again. She was five foot six, one hundred and sixty pounds. She could take out most men with her right uppercut, her shoulders like a linebacker's, her knuckles cracked and calloused. She wore a leather jacket, a beret, and black leather boots.

"Okay, okay, wait a goddamn second," the man said. He pulled back the deadbolt and opened the door a crack, a chain still holding the door in place.

From Sam's perspective, the man peeking at her looked like a reject from an eighties hair band, with mascara smeared below his eyes and pierced ear lobes. He didn't look that different from the types that she and Whizzo had routinely roused for a host of perceived

offenses—small-time hoods, selfish pricks who could never be trusted, who had all owed Jimmy Key in one way or another.

She considered whether making any more noise would attract attention. She had lived in apartment buildings like this. No, she decided, the residents would look the other way. She lunged with her foot, buckling the flat metal as the door kicked free, the strike plate ripping away from the door jamb. The edge of the door caught M. Dudley in the chest and propelled him back. He skidded onto the floor. Tiny screws and a chain bounced off the linoleum.

Sam pulled the gun from her belt and placed the barrel against his forehead. She gritted her teeth.

"Jesus, who the hell are you?" he asked.

Sam pushed the door closed and looked over the room. A yellow fog filtered through a window shade. A tottering stack of grease-stained pizza delivery boxes slouched in one corner. A pile of dirty clothes as tall as the bed slumped in another. This wasn't what she had envisioned. She had expected a round bed that rotated, a lava lamp, and space-age pop from a stereo. Instead, she found a meager studio apartment with no extras, not counting the mannequin outfitted with a white jumpsuit and gold cape.

"What in blazes is that?" asked Sam.

M. Dudley offered a cockeyed grimace but eventually conceded, "That's the King. I'm an Elvis impersonator."

Sam squinted.

“Thank-you-very-much,” M. Dudley said in a reasonable imitation. His lip quivered. He pointed at a plastic trophy cup on a corner shelf. The trophy stood a good six inches tall. “I’ve won awards,” he said.

Sam continued looking around the apartment while M. Dudley sat and tugged the bed sheet around his shoulders and waist. He wore a sock on his left foot. Sam didn’t know what should happen next. She hadn't thought this through completely. She knew she wanted to look into the son-of-a-bitch’s eyes. She wanted to see the man that Sandra chose over Zacharius. But beyond that she had no plans.

"What does a sorry ass bastard like you have that makes Sandra Swope come to this shit hole?" she asked.

He squinted at her. "No reason to get nasty.”

Sam glared.

“I know how to make a lady happy, that’s what,” he said. “Most men don't know how. Most only think of themselves.”

Sam bent over and looked into his eyes. The irises were thunderstorms, with streaks of rain curling in the upper currents. His pupils, which were moderately dilated, looked like inkwells. Nothing in his eyes helped her to understand anything.

“You’re M. Dudley, right?”

“I am.”

“What’s M stand for?” she said.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me what that asterisk below your left eye is all about.” He dug in an ashtray on a lamp table, found a butt, and applied a Zippo.

Sam glared. She was not playing games.

“M stands for Mag-NIF-i-cent,” he said. He blew a circle of smoke to the ceiling.

Sam scowled.

He sighed. “My name is Malcolm, Jesus. Lighten up!”

Malcolm? She had expected something with a little more pizzazz—maybe Maverick or Montague.

“So what’s with the asterisk?” he asked.

She huffed. She wasn’t going to show this bastard the footnote at the base of her spine. “It means I’m a member of the Junior Thunder Riders,” she said.

His jaw went slack. She didn’t offer any clarification. They stood looking at one another for several seconds. A mini-fridge hummed, occasionally sputtering like a hyperactive clock (tick-tick-tick-tick).

“So what do you want?” he asked.

What did she want? She thought but her synapses fizzled.

“You want the Dudley treatment? You might not be a beauty queen, but I treat all women equal. I’m an equal opportunity broker.”

Her eyes drifted to the ceiling as she slowly shook her head. These pricks. She looked at the Elvis costume and wondered if it might be a clue. “Do you wear that when Sandra Swope comes here?”

“Sometimes I still have it on, yeah.”

Sam studied the jumpsuit, the cape, the scarves, all the way down to the gold shoes.

“You wanna see me in character?” he said. He ground out the cigarette butt and stood up.

She thought for a moment. Did Sandra have a thing for Elvis? Sam didn't think so. After three months in the Swope house, the subject should have come up. Still, a full picture of a person's character can be elusive.

"Okay," she said. "Do your thing."

## **Viva Las Vegas**

Malcolm gathered the items from the mannequin. "I'll be right back," he said.

"Where do you think you're going?" she said.

He pointed at the bathroom door. "You want the full effect, right?" he said.

She grimaced. "Dress here."

Sam lifted a window shade. Brilliant light streamed in. It was a small room, no more than twelve feet square, with a narrow kitchen behind a bar. Cockroaches clung to the wall above a two-burner stove. Without the jumpsuit, the mannequin stood revealed as a female torso on a post that rose from a three-legged stand. The torso had cone-shaped breasts like those of a Barbie.

The Elvis items hung limp from Malcolm's arms.

"Giddy up," she said.

He fought a short internal battle. His head tossed. "Fine," he said. He turned his back and dropped the bedsheet, revealing pink buttocks with a yellowish tinge. Sparse blonde hair formed a translucent coat on his legs. Dimples dented his hips. He hopped into the legs of the jumpsuit and struggled to pull the sleeves over his shoulders.

Sam looked away. A huge *Viva Las Vegas* poster hung over the bed. Ann-Margret shimmied and gritted her teeth, orange waves of hair swinging about her face, determined lust frozen in her eyes and lips, Elvis positioned behind her, his pelvis ready to bump her derriere. A battalion of push pins held the poster in place. Sam picked up a miniature trophy cup from a shelf beside the poster. A white sticker wrapped around the base. It said in black Sharpie, "Frontier Casino, 1st Place."

Malcolm pulled back the stool from a chrome makeup table. The legs squeaked on the linoleum floor. He sat down and opened a tackle box. Eyebrow liner pencils, tubes of mascara, and wedge-shaped sponges filled the trays. He worked on his cheeks with a small brush.

"Let's pick up the pace," Sam said. She knew it was never wise to linger.

"Rome wasn't built in a day."

Sam sighed and wondered if this was a mistake. She looked at her watch and then bent to peek at a set of photographs that had been shoved into the edge of a wall mirror. A black-and-white photo showed a boy wearing a cowboy hat on a kiddie ride. 25¢. The boy hung tight, his elbows locked. Letters on the ride's base identified the horse as "Sandy." The colors in the other photo, a Polaroid, had faded to shades of brown. It showed a short busty woman beside a skinny kid. Her hair stood like a soufflé in the oven, fragile, ready to collapse. The woman offered the boy a motherly smile. Braces wrapped around the boy's teeth. Was this the Elvis impersonator, Sam wondered?

The chair squeaked again as Malcolm rose from the makeup table. His cheekbones had lifted a good half inch. "Excuse me," he said. He walked to the bar that separated the room from the kitchen and lifted a scarf from a styrofoam head, revealing a wig.

“Close your eyes,” he requested, although she did not follow his suggestion.

He stooped, his knees splayed wide, and pulled on the wig. It formed a roll of bluish black hair over his forehead and reminded Sam of a famous Japanese painting of an ocean wave. The corner of his mouth pulled back in a sneer. He struck a pose, the cape dangling from his outstretched arms like the wings of a bird. A multitude of sequins sparkled.

He pushed the power button on a VCR and slid a tape into the front slot. Hidden gears rotated. He turned a knob on a television. The screen glowed briefly and then shrank to a blue dot. He slapped the side of the television. “Son of a bitch. Does this sometimes.” He turned a desk lamp onto the movie poster. “Makes no difference, though. The sound still works. And you'll be watchin' me anyway.”

A lion roared from the tiny speaker. A chicken-scratch guitar intro played. Malcolm held a child's toy microphone to his lips. His left leg started to shake. He gyrated and swaggered. Sam listened for at least the first few seconds. He had the look and the moves, as well as the voice. But she was in no mood for this. And as he broke into the repeating chorus of “Viva Las Vegas,” she held out the SIG Sauer.

"Turn off the tape," she said.

“What? You didn't dig it?” he asked. He turned off the volume. Tines inside the toy microphone hummed.

“I got the gist.”

The corner of his lip twitched.

She had seen the twitch before. No, she was no aficionado of Elvis's career. Instead, she thought of the twitchy men she had encountered while working for Jimmy Key, a gaggle of

underachievers who acted like they were God's gift to the ladies. No, she had nothing against the twitchy members of the human race. She had to confess she had twitches of her own. Yet she hated to see these twitchy underachievers get what they wanted. Like the one in front of her, who got Sandra. How did that make sense?

## **An Inside Secret**

Sam gritted her teeth as she glared at the Elvis impersonator. His cavernous pupils reminded her of black holes. They threatened to suck in everything.

"Tell me one thing you do that the ladies like," she said.

"You want the inside secrets, is that it?"

"One'll do."

"Why should I tell you shit?"

She shook the gun at him. He barked a single laugh.

"Would you really use that?"

"Try me."

He rubbed his chin with one hand. "Just one?"

She nodded.

"Okay. I'm gonna tell you my signature maneuver, but you have to promise you won't tell anybody about this. I don't want everybody trying it. You hear me?"

"Yeah. Your secrets are safe with me," she scoffed.

"Okay, here goes." He told her about a move that he called the "Dudley Butterfly." The move involved the careful placement and methodical plowing of the penis within the labia.

“This isn’t exactly what I meant,” Sam said. She wanted to hear something that brought about acquiescence. In this scenario, acquiescence was already a given.

“Hear me through,” he said. “Light in the groove. The slower, the lighter, the better. Takin’ my time. I do this several times. Back and forth. Five, six, seven, eight times. And the lips just open like a flower unfolding in the spring.”

He began to bump his hips forward and back, his hand cradling an invisible member the size of his forearm.

“And that’s your whole maneuver? Some stupid fucking insect?”

Malcolm recoiled like he’d just heard the stupidest question in history.

“It’s horticulture is what it is. HOR-ti-cul-ture. Which makes me a horticulturist, so to speak.”

Sam didn’t like the proximity of “hor-” to “whore” and suspected he was making a joke. She felt offended. For women everywhere.

Malcolm continued: “Inside every cute little housewife, in pearls and high heels, is a potential slave to the Dudley Butterfly.” His right eye twitched. Or was that a wink?

Sam felt her face flush. Was she blushing? She felt she needed to defend women and marriage. She felt she needed to defend families and the less-experienced husbands of the world. She felt she needed to make a statement against these twitchy bastards. Sam lunged forward and placed the SIG Sauer to Malcolm’s forehead. She felt him thrash against her. The handgun popped and jumped in Sam’s hand. A spray of blood, as from a perfume atomizer, drifted across the room. The Elvis wig slid off his head. He slumped as his eyes rolled back and a trickle of blood ran down his forehead. He crumpled to the floor.

## **A Getaway of Sorts**

When Sam looked down at where M. Dudley lay on the speckled linoleum, she realized a switchblade knife was sticking out of her thigh. She hadn't felt it go in. All her concentration had been on restoring the Swope household with Sam in her sleeping bag, eavesdropping on the marital bed. She wanted to continue cooking meals and watching cartoons with Elaine. Hell, maybe she'd figure out the name of the cliffhanger serial and buy a copy on video. Maybe they'd all watch it together. Maybe she'd even save money from her net profit each week and buy Christmas presents for the Swopes, assuming she was around that long. But then she looked at the knife. It was buried up to the ivory handle.

Sam grabbed the knife and yanked it from her thigh. Pain streaked to her knee, reversed, and banged through her pelvis. The amount of blood surprised her. She cut a rectangle from the bed sheet and stuffed the folded fabric down her jeans, hoping it might help staunch the flow. The knife clattered behind the bed. She peered after it but saw nothing in the crevice except rolls of dust and empty condom packages. She grabbed the mattress and heaved it against the wall. Beyond the grid of springs lay a collection of frayed pornographic magazines and wadded hamburger wrappers. But no knife. A white-hot ball began burning in her brain. She suspected she had bigger issues to consider than the knife, even if it had her fingerprints and blood. A clock had begun ticking. She let the mattress fall back in place. The metallic vibrations grated like fingernails on a chalkboard. She knew a man who could patch her up, if she could only find him. Last she knew, he ran a veterinary office in Atchison, across the river, maybe twenty five miles away. She wondered if she could drive that far without passing out.

Her face contorted with each step as she limped down the hall and stairs. She struggled with her helmet but finally snapped the buckle. She rose on the kickstart pedal and came down hard. A spasm of pain jumbled her brain. The engine fired, sputtered, but then caught hold. A smell of gasoline and burnt oil lingered. The tappets need adjusting, she thought. It's always something. She pushed off the stand and balanced the motorcycle with her toes, ready to twist her wrist and give it gas, but she felt rumbling all around her. She turned her head and couldn't believe what she saw. A horde of children on horses approached. The children wore buckets on their heads. Their capes rippled. At first, Sam smiled, but then she saw the look of disappointment, maybe even indignation, on the children's faces. They pointed at her and slapped the flanks of their horses with lariats. "To the rescue!" they yelled.

She braced herself and closed her eyes. The horses ran through her, a rush of wind filling her ears and nostrils. She waited until the rumbling died away and then she opened her eyes. Nothing, just the flat light of midday, on a plain stretch of asphalt beside a row of dilapidated brownstones. A pitbull with a pink nose barked at her through a fence.

"Riders on the fucking storm," she muttered. She looked down at her thigh and saw the blood had spread through her jeans in a rough oval. The shape reminded her of an egg. A clock continued to tick.

Sam twisted her wrist and the motorcycle surged forward. She tried to remember the best way to cross the river and decided on the Pony Express Bridge. That would put her in Kansas as soon as possible. Getting out of Missouri seemed like a good idea. She drifted through the city's small downtown and onto the entrance ramp for the bridge. A quarter mile span lay open to blue sky. She let a pickup go by so that she had the bridge to herself. Halfway across, she coasted to a

stop and looked over the railing. The river, a brownish-green sludge, flowed below. To the right, hills covered with trees wrapped around the north and east sides of downtown. Sandra and Zacharius's house stood there somewhere among the leaves. To the rescue, she thought. Had she improved the marital situation? She wanted to think she had, although she wished she could be there to see the results. She didn't like leaving without giving notice.

Sam lobbed the gun over the railing and waited for the splash. She heard nothing and wondered if the gun had hit a mud bar, but a tractor trailer now turned onto the bridge. She had no time to waste. And what if the gun had landed on a bar? Was she going to retrieve it? Not now. Not today. Not ever.

This is how life is, she thought. You never fucking know. She gave the motorcycle gas and headed west.