

## NIGHTCAP

She was telling the guy buying her drinks—Greg something or other—about her job, contemplating giving him her phone number, when he looked at her the wrong way.

The more he drank the more the stygian, under-the-table smirk of contempt lurking deep in those metallic blue eyes encroached on his persona. *I'm a man, you're a woman*, the look seemed to say, *we are not equal, baby*.

She was disappointed more than offended, disappointed in herself. She should know better by now. She appreciated his unwitting heads-up.

“You really love your job,” he said. “That’s unusual.”

She laughed. “Not really. Lots of people love their jobs.”

“Pretend. They pretend to love them . . . for the bosses.”

“I am a boss.”

The look darkened. “You also *have* a boss. Right? How about the men who work under you? I bet some of them are intimidated.”

*Oh my. Was that meant to be a compliment?*

She’d told him she was executive vice-president in charge of marketing, thinking he might find the complexities and challenges of her demanding job interesting. But maybe *he* felt intimidated. Or maybe he thought she came across as egotistical, a braggart. Or maybe he was just trying to get a rise out of her.

But why shouldn't she love her job? She was damned good at it. She'd come up the cliched hard way, working smarter and longer, leading by example. Her skin had thickened under fire. She'd been labeled a tough broad, though never had she heard herself described as *intimidating*. For the most part she'd earned the respect of her co-workers—men and women. She didn't play favorites; she bent over backwards to be fair and honest and straightforward; she was proud of her accomplishments.

Yes, she loved her job. Her job was her savior.

She glanced at her wristwatch. A long day lay ahead tomorrow, a two-hour grind to see Jimmy and back again, scarfing a burger and fries behind the wheel. Another hangover wouldn't help. She should be home in bed.

"Hey, don't even think about it." He grabbed her wrist, hiding the dial. The size of his hand startled her, big as a catcher's mitt, his wrist thick and hairy. He tried a toothy smile but the edginess in his voice contradicted it.

"So who do you play for?" she asked, staring down at her Manhattan.

"Nobody now. Too many hits. I'm a boss too. Construction. Like football?"

"My son plays—played."

"High school," he said. "You're not old enough to have a son in college."

She made a wry face and turned her head to scrutinize him more closely. Thinning black hair, ruddy cheeks, big ears, hatchet nose, attractive in a coarse way. A gray shirt worn outside his khakis clasped his muscular neck like a clerical collar.

"That was sincere," he said.

“I’m sure.”

“Married?”

She shook her head.

“Same here.”

Now she felt him scrutinizing her. And what did he see? A pretty woman who looked younger than her age, pretty in a flawed way, her nose a little crooked, her chin a trifle too prominent. She watched her weight and belonged to an exercise club. She knew how to walk, how to dress. Right now she was wearing a pricey little black thing that showed off her shapely legs and just enough cleavage. Her auburn hair was full and natural, you had to search for traces of gray. She could tell a joke, knew when *not* to tell a joke; knew when to defer, knew when to stand firm. She was well read. She could hold her own in any intelligent conversation. She wasn’t angling for a hookup; she just enjoyed socializing.

And drinking.

Right now she had a bit of a buzz on. Once or twice her words might’ve slurred. That may have contributed to Greg’s condescension if that’s what it was. But Greg had had a few drinks himself. Maybe that had contributed to *his* personality change. A mean drunk? He leaned closer to say something in her ear and she caught a whiff of nicotine and cologne, both scents unappealing.

“Gotta go, friend,” she said, making up her mind. She downed the remainder of her drink in one swallow. “But thanks.”

“What the hell, sweetheart!”

The way he said “sweetheart,” like some forties film noir, bordering on a sneer, sealed the deal. “Big day tomorrow. Need my beauty rest.”

Again he grabbed her wrist, this time too tight. She eyed him pointedly as she slid off the stool. “Don’t do that. Please.” He released her with a grimace of disgust. “I can get the tab,” she said, “if that’s your problem.”

“I don’t have a fucking problem.” His voice turned into a low snarl. “Get the hell out of here, bitch.”

His rage came out of nowhere. Now he *looked* scary. *Sounded* scary. She opened her leather handbag, pulled some bills out of her wallet, tossed them on the bar. She gave Mike the bartender, who’d been watching them warily, a parting nod. She proceeded to pick her way through the tables to the door.

The moment she stepped outside and sucked in a deep breath of warm night air she had second thoughts. Her cheeks burned. She wasn’t used to being called a bitch. She didn’t like it. She didn’t want that big bastard thinking she was afraid, thinking he intimidated *her*. She decided to go back and tell the sonofabitch off.

She spun around and her heel caught on a patch in the asphalt. She nearly went sprawling. She caught herself with one hand and stood up shakily. She flexed her wrist and brushed grit off her palm. The door to The Drummer’s Table opened. She was afraid it might be Greg, but a young couple stumbled out, giggling and bumping hips on their way to a convertible. Drunk like her. *Don’t let the sauce make you do something stupid, stupid.*

She went on to her black BMW, placing one foot in front of the other like a tightrope

walker. She found the key in her handbag. She clicked it, slid behind the wheel, buckled her seat belt, started the engine.

“Turn left on Hudson,” a voice behind her said.

*“What!”*

“Don’t raise a fuss unless you wanta get shot. I mean it.”

Her eyes darted to the rearview. From this angle the backseat appeared empty.

“Just do as I say. My gun is exactly one inch from the back of your head.”

At the parking lot exit she stopped and looked both ways. She heard herself breathing—breathing hard. Sounding asthmatic. Merging with sparse traffic on the four-lane, she heard the intruder get up off the rear carpet. He groaned painfully as he situated himself on the back seat.

“How about if I hop out at the first light,” she said. “You take my car. There’s a couple hundred in my purse. My credit cards—”

“It’s you I want. Not your money. Not your car.”

If she were sober she’d be terrified.

“Stick to the speed limit. Don’t run any lights. Drive normal.”

She checked her speed and eased back on the gas. “Look, mister, I’ve had too much to drink. I’ll puke all over you if you even try—”

“Ha! The last thing I want is sex with you, Joanna. I don’t even wanta touch you. I intend to kill you.”

The quiet way he said it, minus the slightest trace of menace, now that was eerie. Who

the hell was he? How did he know her name? And why would he want to kill her? She willed herself to remain calm. She'd been in pressure situations before, though nothing like this.

“You know my name,” she said to the rearview. “Care to tell me yours?”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“Oh? Have we met before?”

“Much to my regret.”

“That’s fairly cryptic.”

“Only because you’re drunk.”

“Well . . . I wouldn’t say drunk. I’ve had—”

“You already did. I waited a long time for you to leave that bar.”

She stopped for a light and glanced to her left down the familiar lane that led to Aragon, Inc., her home away from home for nearly twenty years. A mile farther on Hudson, just past the Pizza Hut, was the community college where her ex taught history. Most likely Brian had played softball on this Friday night. He’d be having a beer with his teammates at the Moose Club.

“When did you give your son his first drink?” the intruder asked.

“My son?” The light turned green and she pulled slowly away. “What are you getting at?”

“What I’m getting at is your sorry failure as a mother. What I’m getting at is why you think it’s okay to give beer to teenagers.”

She heard him shift positions, cough, then take a deep almost sobbing breath. Now she

could make out a shadowy portion of his face. Now things were starting to add up.

“For Jimmy’s sleepover, you mean?”

“Which makes it okay?”

“Well . . .”

“Did you tell the other boys’ parents you were giving their kids beer?”

“No,” she confessed. “I should have.” Best to keep talking—keep *him* talking. “I did so many mea culpas.”

“I bet you did.”

“Jimmy is a typical teenage boy. I hoped giving him a little beer would prevent him from drinking behind my back.”

“How’d that work out?”

She didn’t answer.

Just past the Presbyterian Church, Hudson Road narrowed to two lanes. Beyond that came the Keystone shopping center. A side road led to Roosevelt High. From here she could see the new lights surrounding the football field that her generous donation had helped pay for. She pictured number five fading back to throw a perfect spiral, using that quirky sidearm motion Coach Paquadio insisted wouldn’t work at the college level. She thought she knew the man sitting behind her. If so, his animus was understandable.

But why would he want to *kill* her?

She had to clear her head. Had to think. She needed to do the things she did well and take control of this volatile situation. Up ahead on the right she saw the turn-off to her upscale

neighborhood. Pam Wells, who lived across the street from her townhouse, was looking after her fox terrier Rufus. Would Pam be concerned if Joanna didn't come home tonight? Would anyone?

"I've tried to be a good mother," she said, "but maybe I was too lenient."

His laugh oozed scorn. "Turn at the sign up ahead. Take the road to Canyon State Park."

Sure. The park. Perfect spot for a murder. Her body might never be found. She and Brian had so many good times there, hiking the switchback trail down into the canyon, Jimmy in tow, to set up their tent before fishing Canyon Creek. She'd cook the catch that evening over the campfire. Brian tried his best to get Jimmy to like fishing and hunting, to be more like him, ruggedly outdoorsy, knowledgeable about wildlife. The boy wanted only to go exploring on his own, climb trees, throw rocks in the creek—always he was throwing something—scaring the fish. Everything he did seemed to piss Brian off.

By the time Jimmy started high school he'd learned to resent his dad's inflexible tough love. His only interests were football and cars. He turned surly and disrespectful. One night he got in his dad's face. Brian slapped him. Hard. When Joanna saw Jimmy down on his knees, blood dripping from his nose, she went berserk. She might've killed Brian with that fireplace poker if he hadn't skedaddled. The beginning of the end.

But it was more complicated than that. As Joanna's salary grew, Brian changed. He seemed to view her greater earning power as some sort of threat. During the divorce proceedings his lawyer accused her of "buying" Jimmy's love. That was untrue. One thing she



never did was try to turn Jimmy against his father. The decision to live with her instead of Brian had been Jimmy's alone.

“Did I leave my car unlocked?” she asked the rearview.

“I can get into any car.”

“Because you're a locksmith. Lester Snively?”

“Took you long enough.”

She got the picture now, at least partly. Not the killing part—that still didn't make sense. But if Lester was serious she needed to take preemptive action.

In the glove compartment lay the loaded .38 Colt revolver Brian had bought her after a woman in their neighborhood was brutally raped by a burglar. They'd gone to the range together where she took shooting lessons. She hadn't handled the gun since. It seemed so close, and yet so far away.

“I'm really sorry Jimmy did a bad thing, Lester. I hope you believe me.”

“*Bad* thing?” He laughed without humor.

“All right. Terrible. It was terrible. It was tragic. Now Jimmy's paying for it.”

“Your kid's getting off easy. Because of his youth he'll be free before you know it. And you—you're getting off scot-free.”

“Me? What did *I* do?”

“You created a monster.”

“Oh, come on, Lester.”

“I've done my research. I had plenty of time while my injuries healed. You're one of

those fawning mothers who thinks her precious child can do no wrong. You take up for him no matter what. You gave Jimmy everything, let him get away with everything. You spoiled him rotten—that's why your husband left. I feel sorry for that boy, having you as a mother. I feel sorry for your husband. You should be the one behind bars.”

His sharp accusations stung. “Even if everything you say is true, do you honestly believe I deserve to be murdered?”

“Do you honestly think my wife and daughter deserved to be murdered?”

“They weren't,” she said quickly. “That—that was an accident.”

“Bullshit. It was murder plain and simple. Jimmy's a murderer. You were his accomplice.”

“How do you mean?”

“You encouraged your son to drink. You gave him a deadly weapon.”

It was nine miles to the park, about a ten-minute drive. Then what? She rehearsed mentally the sequence of moves required to reach across, open the glove compartment, grab the gun, swing around, shoot Lester before he could shoot her. Maybe she should surreptitiously unsnap her seatbelt.

*And think. She needed to think.*

Neither of them spoke again until they came to the park entrance. Lester ordered Joanna to take a right on Rim Road, just past the fee stand. The campground was to their left, a mile or two away. Most of the campers should be asleep by now. The dark forest closed in on both sides of the narrow road. The eyes of grazing deer reflected in the headlights.

“Lester,” she said, “if you only knew how much I regret this tragedy.”

“I’m curious,” he said, “did you ever talk to Jimmy about the dangers of drinking and driving?”

Had she? At some time or another she must have, though she couldn’t recall for certain.

“What were you thinking when you bought him that muscle car? A sixteen-year-old—you had to know he’d want to see what a Camaro could do. How fast was Jimmy going that night?”

It hurt her to say it, so she didn’t. Lester was right about her spoiling Jimmy, she admitted that. But loving your child wasn’t a crime. She’d given Jimmy the material things and personal freedom her strict, miserly, controlling parents had denied her. She’d bought him the red Camaro to make his dream come true. She’d given it to him because she loved him.

“How fast?” Lester repeated.

She licked her lips.

“How *fast*?”

“The police estimated . . . over a hundred.”

“Driving east in the westbound lane. My God.”

During the trial she’d heard how Lester swerved his station wagon at the last instant. Without braking, the Camaro plowed into the passenger side. Lester’s wife died instantly, decapitated. His daughter hung on for five days before they removed her from life support. Thankfully, Jimmy couldn’t remember anything. She sympathized with Lester’s loss, how could she not? But it wasn’t *her* driving that Camaro.

“Sweet, innocent Carla,” Lester said. “Barely ten. Her whole life ahead of her. My darling wife Francine. Do you have any idea how much I miss them? And then there’s me. I once ran a marathon . . . now I can barely walk. I’m in chronic pain. It’s taken me over a year to recover enough to be here with you tonight.”

“Lester, not a day goes by— ”

“That you don’t thank God your Jimmy lived through it? Pretty miraculous, huh? Broken arm, fractured pelvis, facial stitches—stupid kid wasn’t even wearing his seat belt. Fit as a fiddle now. Ironically, being drunk was probably what spared him. His friends should never have allowed him to drive away from that party.”

“I agree. I feel terrible about it—about everything.”

“Sure. You’re driving under the influence right now, Joanna. The way I see it, killing you may save another innocent person’s life.”

“You’ll go to prison, Lester.”

“I’m in prison now. Worse than prison. I lost an eye, all my teeth. Nothing in my body works right. I can’t sleep. I’m addicted to pain killers. You play tennis. I used to play tennis. Turn left on that dirt road just ahead.”

Leaving the pavement, she slowed to a crawl on the rutted road that wound through tall oaks and pines to emerge into a broad clearing. The grass was kept mowed around a picnic table and fire pit. Random tire tracks revealed where other visitors had parked. Lester ordered her to stop and turn off the ignition. They sat there while the engine ticked and her stomach roiled.

“Did you know Carla was learning to play the violin?”

She shook her head.

“Did you know Francine was a registered nurse?”

“That . . . I think I might’ve read that . . . in the newspaper.”

“She was a wonderful nurse, sensitive, competent, caring, her patients loved her. Do you know how badly we need nurses?”

She nodded.

“Did you know how much we both loved opera?”

“Opera?”

He leaned closer. She felt his hot breath on her neck. It smelled faintly of turnips. “Do you know anything about the two people Jimmy murdered? Or the person he maimed?”

“My lawyer advised—”

“Screw your slime-ball lawyer! You need to hear that we were *real*. A happy, healthy, loving family. Enjoying every minute of our lives. Until one night we meet this drunk kid . . . driving in the wrong lane . . . a hundred miles an hour.”

“But it wasn’t me.”

“Stop saying that.”

“I’m sorry, Lester. I’m so, so sorry.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“Shooting me *will* help?”

“I lied about that.” She jerked her eyes to the rearview. “Roll down the window.”

She did as he asked.

“Now hand me the car key.”

She passed the key over her shoulder. Once again silence reigned. The moon was a yellow scimitar against a black cloak decorated with glittering stars. The scent of freshly mowed grass wafted into the car. From the woods came the chirping of crickets. Her eyes flitted to the glove compartment, measuring the distance.

“Just ahead there,” Lester said, “fifty yards or so, lies the canyon rim. I’ve checked to make sure a car can get through those trees. I’ll handcuff my right wrist to your left wrist so you can’t jump out. We’ll do a *Thelma and Louise*. If by some miracle one of us survives, I pray it’s you. I pray to God you live to spend the rest of your life like I’m spending mine.”

“This is crazy,” she said.

“I *am* crazy. Crazy with grief. Crazy with pain. And you, Joanna . . . are you terrified?”

“I don’t want to die, Lester.”

“Good. What I needed to hear.” The car door opened behind her. “Excuse me for a minute. My kidneys aren’t the same these days. Just sit tight. If I hear you unbuckle your seat belt I’ll shoot . . . but not to kill, understand. I want to hear you scream as we go sailing off that rim. I want to hear you screaming all the way down.”

Lester closed the car door. He hobbled into her vision: a thin, twisted, forlorn figure hunched over a cane. He fumbled with his fly. His back was to her. Something wasn’t right.

He was using *both hands*.

She reached over and opened the glove compartment. A dim light revealed the owner’s

manual, a flashlight, some paper napkins, a chrome-plated revolver. Her sweaty fingers closed around the Colt's walnut grip. Only when she pointed the stubby barrel out the window did she consider how it would appear if she shot Lester in the back. She waited for him to zip his fly and turn to face her. He looked at the revolver as if he expected her to be holding it. A deep scar, livid pink, ran from the corner of his mouth up to his glassy left eye.

Where was *his* gun?

He dropped his cane and reached behind his back. She aimed at his heart and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. *She'd forgotten to cock the gun.* She thumbed the hammer back just as Lester's right hand came up.

*Empty. He didn't have a gun.*

Repeatedly thrusting his forefinger, he made bizarre shooting sounds like a kid playing cops and robbers. His good eye looked crazed. He broke off in mid-thrust and bent down to retrieve his cane. He swung it at the window so hard he staggered. The cane barely missed, whanged off the door, snapped in two. Lester lunged, sobbing in frustration, poking at her with the jagged fragment. She jerked back against the seatbelt. Lester lost his balance, fell against the door, crumpled to the ground.

*Where the hell was his gun?*

She peeped over the edge of the window at the top of his head. Kneeling in the grass as if in prayer, his whole body seemed to quake.

"Please tell me what's going on."

He looked up and groped behind his lower back again, prompting her to shove the

cocked pistol against the bald spot in his crown. But he was only pulling a handkerchief from his pocket. He used it to swipe at his good eye, then tenderly dab at the oily discharge around his artificial eye, and finally to wipe his mouth.

“Why didn’t you shoot me? That’s all I wanted.”

She lowered the revolver. “You mean this was all a ruse? You never even had a gun?”

She listened in wonder as he explained. How he’d written a letter accusing her of making drunken phone calls threatening him for sending her son to prison. A friend was holding the sealed letter to take to the police, should anything happen to Lester.

“I knew you had a gun in your car,” he said. “Campers would’ve heard the shots. The police would find an unarmed man . . . shot in the back . . . way out here. You’d be charged with manslaughter at least. Sent to prison, lose your job. Jimmy would suffer. Killing me would put an end to my misery. That’s what I wanted.”

It sounded deranged. But of course, the man *was* deranged. She shook her head in aggravation. “Give me the goddamned key, Lester.”

He’d tossed her key into the grass. She got out of the car and used the flashlight to retrieve it. He waited for her to help him to his feet, walk him around to the passenger side. Returning to the driver’s side, she realized she’d left the gun in plain view on the seat. Lester took no notice. Maybe he didn’t care. She stuck the Colt in the door pocket beside her leg. She drove out of the park and turned toward town.

For several miles neither of them spoke. Until at last she said, “I’m trying to understand, Lester, why you didn’t just get a gun and shoot me like you threatened?”



“It’s not that easy.”

“Getting a gun?”

“Shooting someone. Killing a person in cold blood, even somebody you hate.”

She nodded. “On that we can agree.”

He turned his head and peered at her with his good right eye. “Is that why you didn’t shoot me?”

She considered letting him think that, but what was the point? “Single action,” she said. “I forgot to cock the damned thing or you’d be dead.”

He made a whimpering sound. “That’s all I wanted.”

“Surely you can find some reason to go on living. That civil suit your lawyers filed could bankrupt me. Anticipating my financial ruin should give you some measure of satisfaction.”

He didn’t reply. How she pitied this poor man.

She turned in at The Drummer’s Table. Lester pointed to a yellow van with black letters on the side, parked in the rear of the lot. She pulled into a slot nearby and waited for him to get behind the wheel. After he backed out, she followed the van until it turned left on Hudson Road.

She was cold sober now. Exhausted. She needed a drink. She pulled into a slot near the entrance.

Greg spotted her the moment she walked through the bar door. She’d forgotten about him but he obviously hadn’t forgotten her. His body stiffened. His face flushed with inexplicable rage—a murderous look. He slammed his glass down, flew off the stool, bulled his

way through the tables.

She turned and fled.

She nearly ran over him as she backed out of the slot. He stopped just in time, yelled something, banged on the Beamer's trunk with his fist. She squealed away, slewing out into Hudson Road.

She kept checking her rearview. Within moments she saw a car fishtail out of the parking lot after her. What did this psycho think he was doing? What did he think she'd done to him?

There was little traffic on Hudson Road at this time of night. She pushed her speed up to ninety. Greg was driving faster; trying to outrun him was crazy. Dangerous. What would he do when he caught up—force her car off the road? Then what? Force her into his car? Then what? She glanced down at the Colt. Would she be forced to shoot him?

Could she?

His brights lights came up fast, blinding in the side mirror. With one hand she dug her cell phone out of her handbag, dialed 911. Hudson Road narrowed to two lanes. She was so focused on the phone, on Greg, she didn't notice headlights pulling out of the Keystone Shopping Center. Greg passed on her left, turned his wheels to cut her off. At the same time the oncoming lights swerved, aiming at her like a missile.

She slammed on the brakes.

It all happened in an instant. The Beamer skidded sideways onto the berm as the two vehicles in front of her whomped together, a sickeningly dull sound. The night exploded in a

voluminous vortex of crunching metal and fire. The heat of a thousand blast furnaces washed over her.

She reversed quickly to a safer distance. She sat mesmerized behind the wheel, staring at the raging flames. At last she grew aware of the insistent voice issuing through her cell phone, now lying between her legs.

She retrieved it and said, “I just witnessed a car crash. Hudson Road. In front of the Keystone shopping Center. A speeding driver smashed into a yellow van. They’re on fire. . . .”

END