

The slender man in the gray suit and felt hat sat alone on the park bench feeding kibble treats to the little dog he was with, as if it were the middle of the afternoon and he had nothing better to do with his time. Robin watched for a long moment from the shadows in the ravine and frowned. Something smelled wrong with the whole situation but the white Schnoodle with the green eyes, leashed to the park bench armrest, had already been divested of the emerald necklace. Robin was loathe to go home empty handed so she threw caution to the wind, reached up to adjust her mask, drew the pistol from her hip holster and stepped forward into the clearing to stand next to the statue.

The man smiled broadly, rose to his feet and removed his hat.

“Good evening, Lady Magpie,” he spoke with a disarming British accent. “How are you and all the little magpies?”

This overly effusive greeting stunned Robin as effectively as a blow to the solar plexus. She blinked several times and said nothing. It didn’t help matters that the charming, well-dressed and obviously unflappable Englishman was so adorable that he made Package Delivery Guy seem like a loaf of moldy bread.

The strangely ingratiating man replaced his hat, brushed the fingers of one hand across the brim with a flourish and sat down again to tend to the dog. Schnitzel was being very well behaved, influenced no doubt by the bulging bag of kibble treats in the man’s suit pocket.

“Your promptness pleases me no end,” the man said to Robin, his attention remaining focused entirely on his canine companion. The gun that was pointed his way seemed to concern him not at all.

“Who are you?” the Magpie asked. She moved forward at an angle still looking to see if the man had any accomplices hiding nearby.

“M.W. Winters. Cat burglar extraordinaire and sometime thief of -”

“What does the M.W. stand for?” Robin interrupted.

The man sighed.

“Marion Walter, if you must know,” he replied. “Why is everyone in this country so put off by initials?”

“Marion,” Robin said, her tone softening now that she was satisfied they were alone. “You have something that I want. I’ll be taking it now, if you don’t mind.”

“An aggressive bird, the magpie,” M.W. said to the dog and winked. “It’s always best to stay on her good side.”

With a nearly invisible flick of the wrist Marion tossed the emerald necklace into the air. It caught Robin’s attention in a flash and she stepped forward to reach out for it without thinking. The second she snagged it she knew she’d made a mistake. The Englishman was standing again, still smiling broadly. He pointed his own gun at her abdomen.

“We both know I’m quicker than you,” he said. “So why don’t we agree to put our party favors away and discuss things like civilized people.”

Robin’s eyes were drawn to the skein of square-cut green stones linked together with platinum settings. The necklace writhed in the moonlight like a chain of sumptuous dark berries bursting with ripeness.

“How do I know I can trust you?” she asked softly. Her entire demeanor had changed now that she had something to protect.

“Oh please,” Marion protested. “I’ve just given you a bauble the likes of which no man has ever bestowed on a woman before and you want the receipt?”

“Don’t you know what this is worth?”

“It burns my fingers it’s so hot. I don’t envy you the task of having to fence it.”

The hypnotic pull of the gems was strong but Robin worked hard to minimize the effect. She forced herself to look away from them and regard the hospitable and infinitely accommodating gentleman who held her at gunpoint.

“If you didn’t hope to profit from the necklace,” she wondered aloud, her own weapon unwavering and defiant, “then why did you steal it?”

“I should have thought that’d be obvious,” Marion replied and

laughed. "I wanted to meet you, of course."

Robin paused for a long moment and almost forgot she was wearing the calfskin mask.

"Jewelry," she said, "and compliments. Throw in a corsage and this is the best date of my life."

"In that case I suggest we stow the artillery. It does tend to puncture an otherwise romantic evening."

Robin lowered her weapon slowly and watched as Marion followed suit. When their guns were secured the Englishman sat down on the park bench again. Schnitzel placed her two front paws on his knee prompting the man in the hat to offer her another kibble treat. The Magpie slipped the necklace into the outer zippered compartment of her backpack.

There were police sirens in the distance but nothing that seemed as if it would interrupt their unscripted tryst in the clearing next to the statue of Lafayette. Robin saw no reason not to sit down on the bench next to the enigmatic cat burglar.

"How did you manage it?" she inquired. "You had at most one point eight seconds to make the switch. Who tipped you off? How did you -?"

Marion made clucking sounds with his tongue and shook his head.

"I haven't tried to peek under your mask, now, have I? You could at least extend me the same courtesies."

"Then at least tell me why you've gone to such extreme lengths to meet me."

The man in the hat picked the dog up and placed her on the bench between the two of them. The Schnoodle proceeded to acquaint herself with her second new friend of the evening.

"It should come as no surprise to you," Marion said, "that a securities analyst named Frank Bishop is extremely anxious to hang you from the highest yardarm. He has, in fact, gone so far as to hire his own private security force – a posse, if you will – to track you down and see justice done."

Robin bristled at the mention of Bishop's name.

"And has he hired you," she asked, "as part of this posse?"

There was a silent moment during which Marion scratched Schnitzel

behind the ear.

“Yes. He has.”

“I imagine there must be a terribly interesting reason why you’re not pointing your gun at me again and demanding the emeralds back?”

Marion reached up and touched his nose.

“Nail on the head, my dear lady, as they say. That necklace, as difficult as it is to fence, is worth infinitely more than Mr. Bishop is offering for your head on a platter. I trust I’ve clearly demonstrated that my motivation in this matter is not financial in nature?”

Robin furrowed her brow together.

“How would you describe your motivation then, Mr. Winters?”

“Altruistic.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow you.”

Marion put his hands in his lap and sighed.

“The world is a dangerous place,” he said. “And men like Frank Bishop only make things worse. You have stolen data that he considers absolutely vital. We’d both be making the world a little bit safer if that data were to find its way to the proper authorities instead.”

It was Robin’s turn to laugh.

“Wait a sec here,” she told him. “You’re trying to tell me you’re one of the good guys now? An undercover operative for British intelligence or something? I’ll admit the accent’s cute. And the bit with the hat is nicely done. This little fantasy of ours in the moonlight is romantic as hell. If all you were after was my virtue you’d have rounded home plate long ago. But come morning you’ll still just be a man. And whether you’re named Frank or Marion or George – it doesn’t matter which ‘side’ you’re on; men are still the problem.”

Robin stood and prepared to make her goodbyes.

“You can’t break the encrypted code locking Bishop’s files, can you,” Marion observed. He leaned over as if to speak directly to the dog. “Magpies are clever but sometimes they fail to think things all the way through.”

The woman in the black mask put her hands on her hips and frowned.

“Don’t make me wish we’d never met,” she warned the charming man in the gray suit.

“How many characters long is the encryption code?”

“Twelve,” Robin spat back at him. “Can you solve it for me right now or do you need a scratch pad and a pencil?”

The cat burglar and sometime thief of hearts reached into his vest pocket for a business card which he held out to The Thieving Magpie.

“Try *Corpus Regnum*,” he told her. “And then give me a call when it works.”