

VIII.



Robin awoke with a start and sat bolt upright in bed. She was drenched. Her hair, her bed sheets, her oversized T-shirt were all dripping wet. Her heart raced a mile a minute.

In her dream she'd been lost in an ancient forest. There was a bridge across a fast-moving stream, a bridge she knew she had to cross. A giant barred her way and though she did not want to fight there was no way to avoid it. She had sparred with many opponents before, both in her waking life and in her dreams, but this giant was unlike any foe she'd ever come up against. It was massive with rippling muscles and a taste for raw meat. It drew its power from a different source than Robin, from something she could scarce comprehend and she knew deep down in her gut that, try as she might, she could not defeat the monster.

The images of the forest and the bridge were fleeting. They scurried back into her subconscious. But the giant remained in her frontal lobe. Its fiery eyes and gnashing teeth would have to be washed away by something more substantial, like a stiff cup of coffee.

The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon as Robin stumbled into the kitchen. She'd changed into a dry outfit and stood

next to the gurgling coffee maker, trying to put the pieces of her Monday together in a way that made sense. Scarlett's visit had been great but it had also consumed the entire weekend. Nothing had gotten done. Her niece seemed to intuit that Robin had wanted time for other things and so, in a gesture not to be underestimated coming from a teenager, she'd voluntarily collected the garbage to take out to the curb before leaving Sunday night. It was going to be interesting to hear how things went with the young woman's stepfather and learn whether or not boarding school entered into the equation.

The coffee maker finished its business. Robin poured herself a mugful and drank deeply. Outside she could hear the approach of the pink garbage truck growling its way down the quiet, empty streets. A few birds picked away at the front lawn looking for worms but otherwise the world was still and serene. It didn't take long for the coffee to work its magic. Soon Robin's head cleared and her energy level picked up. She began thinking about her job at Pericles and how she and Brian would have to do some politicking with the right people to secure their budget. She thought ahead to Wednesday night, anticipating the quarterly Board of Directors' meeting for *Even* Enterprizes. She also decided it might be time to call in some outside help to assist her with the Palm Pilot and the cell phone she'd thieved. She'd made no progress on her own and –

“Crackers!” Robin spat out. Talbot's cell phone was gone. The Palm Pilot and pinky ring were still on the kitchen counter where'd they'd been left but the phone was missing. Had Scarlett taken it with her?

She turned to read the handwritten note her niece had left on the refrigerator. *Thanks for the wonderful weekend, Auntie. I straightened up a little bit. Hope that helps. Love, Scar.*

The pink garbage truck came to a stop next to Robin's plastic bin with a squeal that pierced the morning stillness. The phone had been in a couple of pieces to dry out. Scarlett had straightened up. It could have looked like trash to her.

“Crap!”

In a single fluid motion Robin grabbed a carving knife from its holder and dashed out the front door still in her bare feet. The claw that hung

down from the side of the truck had already wrapped itself around her garbage bin. It began to lift.

“Wait!” she shouted and waved her hands. Still twenty feet away Robin launched the knife like a missile. The blade jammed itself securely into a crook of the mechanical arm and stopped it in mid lift. The sound the knife made on impact was just like that of an arrow striking its target – a dull thud followed by a soft, vibrating *twang*. Robin smiled with satisfaction. The garbage bin was halfway up, too high for her to reach without assistance. She knew she’d have to bat her eyes and use some feminine wile to get the truck driver to help her out. Older men were such patsies for young women in distress, she’d discovered. Younger men weren’t always pushovers but sometimes they were good looking.

“What the hell!” a voice erupted.

The driver’s side door of the truck opened and slammed shut. A second later a figure emerged from behind the pink vehicle with smoke pouring from its ears. Robin gasped. This was no kindly Maytag Repairman or a young blue-collar hunk. The driver was nearly three times Robin’s size, built like a brick shithouse with bronze skin, a smooth, hairless scalp and hands that looked as if they could grind bones to meal.

“What did you do to my truck?” the driver roared and glared at her. Robin gulped. She was standing in the presence of a very imposing, and justifiably ticked off, older woman.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she babbled. “It wasn’t exactly an accident – but, uh, look, I really, *really* need to get my garbage back today. If you could just help me get it down – I can’t tell you how much I’d appreciate it. It looks as if we were to -”

The driver said nothing. She stood and looked at the carving knife wedged into her mechanical arm and then turned to consider the woman who had put it there. The physics of what had just happened dawned on her by degrees. She creased her brow.

“How did you *do* that?” she wanted to know.

“That’s not important,” Robin replied. “What *is* important is that I need my garbage back. Please.”

The driver reached up and scratched the top of her shaven head.

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Um, pardon me,” Robin said, taking a less obsequious tone, “but that *is* my property -”

“No it isn’t. It belongs to me now.”

“I beg to differ, Miss, ah, Truck Driver Person, but it’s still in my yard.”

The driver turned and scowled at her.

“The garbage is currently in a bin that *you* rent from *me*.” She punctuated her statement with a couple of finger points. “It’s halfway into *my* truck. Numerous courts have ruled that trash in dumpsters can be considered public property, having been disowned by definition. And what’s more, my Momma always told me possession is nine-tenths of the law and believe me, honey, you do *not* have possession of *anything* here right now.”

This little speech only served to get Robin’s dander up. She checked her rising anger. It was just her luck to get the only garbage truck driver in the world who moonlighted as an attorney specializing in trash collection law.

“Look, I’ll say ‘please’ one more time here and we can all walk away from this happy, OK?”

The implied threat in Robin’s words made the large woman laugh.

“I don’t have time for this,” the driver said and climbed partway up the immobilized metal claw to reach for the obstruction.

“If you touch that knife without agreeing to help me,” Robin said, “we’re going to have a problem.”

“The problem’s all yours, lady.” The large woman wrapped her fingers around the knife handle and prepared to give it a good yank. In the next second, however, the air was driven out of her lungs as she landed flat on her back in Robin’s front yard. Stunned, the driver stared at the little person who had just tossed her around like a rag doll.

“What the -”

“I don’t really want to get physical here,” Robin said, backpedaling with both her words and body language. The truck driver scrambled to her feet.

“It’s a little late for that,” she snapped back. The driver brushed herself

off and opened the passenger door of the pink garbage truck. She reached inside for a wooden bat and a baseball cap with the word 'Tiny' stitched across the forehead.

It was Robin's turn to be stunned. She watched dumbfounded as the fiftyish women pulled the cap over her smooth head.

"I know you," she stammered. "You're 'Tiny' Tina Smalley, the first female fire fighter in the state. You were a legend twenty years ago. I idolized you when I was a girl. What are you doing driving a garbage truck?"

"It's also a little late for flattery," Tina snarled. "But just so you understand – I don't just *drive* this truck. I helped my daughter, Amy, start Amethyst, Inc. two years ago and I'm part owner of the company. You chew on that as you hustle your bony ass back into the house."

Robin shook her head back and forth. The giant in her dream turned out to be more than a mere mortal. Yet the thought of backing down against an older woman years past her prime didn't settle well in Robin's gut. She just couldn't walk away without that cell phone.

"My mother always told me," she replied, "the bigger they come, the harder they fall."

Her neighbor's trash bin was only a few yards away with the lid open and various items sticking out. Robin covered the distance in a second and pulled a hollow, inch-thick aluminum pole from the bin. It was nearly as long as she was tall. She returned to her yard to stand before the woman with the baseball bat. The aluminum pole cut a swath through the air and made a whistling sound. Tina's eyes grew big.

"I'll have my garbage back now," Robin told her. When the driver didn't immediately concede, Robin struck the first blow. She poked her childhood hero in the gut with the end of the pole temporarily paralyzing her diaphragm. Tina Smalley gasped for air.

"I don't want to fight with you," Robin said.

"Why not?" her opponent spit out. "No health insurance?"

The next instant the garbage truck driver attacked the small, barefoot woman, unleashing a furious barrage with the baseball bat. Robin was light on her feet, stepping back quickly and turning from side to side. The first two blows missed entirely. The next connected squarely in the middle

of the pole causing it to ring out. The pole vibrated with such intensity it numbed both of the Magpie's hands. Robin frowned and parried but her fingers were dead meat. They responded slowly. The baseball bat glanced off one shoulder putting her off balance. Tina sensed an opening and spun around to bring the bat across in a sideways slashing motion. She caught Robin on the hip and sent her crashing into the nearby chain link fence.

"Score one for me," Tina said and smiled.

Robin rolled away from the fence and rose to her feet. She had a number of superficial lacerations all over her body. Her hip, she could tell, would be needing some ice later.

"Not bad for an old lady," the younger woman taunted. "You really put the 'man' in menopause, don't you."

Tina snarled but didn't rise to the bait. She took a defensive stance and watched Robin circle her.

The hollow end of the pole came at her again and again, poking repeatedly. The enormous woman was too slow with the bat. Each time the Magpie stung her like a wasp, a circular red welt appeared on her bronze skin. Alone each mark was inconsequential, but combined they seemed to be taking their toll. Soon the truck driver was sweating profusely, her shoulders slumped over a bit, the bat held somewhat lower.

Robin aimed again for the giant's ample mid-section but Tina surprised her by stepping forward into the thrust. The pole was pushed back into the Magpie's hands. The next thing she saw was the butt end of the baseball bat as it connected with her face.

There was an audible crunch as Robin's nose broke. A torrent of blood poured down through her nostrils. The Magpie was temporarily blinded; she grasped the end of her pole and swung it around wide. It hit something. Then there was a resounding thud. When her vision cleared Robin could see her foe rising slowly from the turf. Tina was bent to one side, barely able to support herself on her single good leg.

"What's the score now?" Robin wanted to know. She smiled through bloodied teeth. Her hip was beginning to ache something fierce. She knew she could ignore the pain for as long as was necessary but she felt the same

was likely true of her opponent. Though they drew their power from different sources, the two of them were equally matched. Try as she might Robin knew she could not best the giant on her front lawn. And deep down, she didn't really want to. She needed to preserve something of the awe and admiration she'd had as a girl for the brave woman who'd fought for years through the courts for the right to fight fires alongside lesser-qualified men.

"I'd call it a draw," Tina Smalley admitted wearily. She smiled too, pleased, it seemed, to have done so well against a fit, athletic woman so many years her junior. She dropped the baseball bat to the ground and sat to nurse her swollen knee. Then she looked at the carving knife wedged into her truck's mechanical arm and thought of how she'd been tossed to the ground with such ease.

"It seems to me," she continued, "that I know who you are as well." She beamed through her pain at Robin. "I only know of one woman who can do all the things you do. In a sense you could almost say I've been looking for you my whole life."

The Thieving Magpie saw no reason to feign ignorance. *Look for balance in the most unlikely of places.* As adversaries she and 'Tiny' Tina Smalley were perfectly matched. Robin wondered what they could accomplish as allies.

"Let's see if we can drag our sorry asses into my house," she said, "for ice and coffee. And then we can talk."