

THE
DOCTOR WHO
PROJECT

MURDER SHE LIVED!



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Chapter One: The Fair

Summer, 1947

When Juliet's father came back from the war, he was a different man. So was everyone, of course, but she was too young to remember how he had been before. So Juliet only knew the empty shell staring out of windows on beautiful weekend afternoons, as if the sun was to blame for his misery.

"What was Daddy like, then?" she asked her mother. "Before?"

"He used to be so . . ." Juliet's mother didn't finish, her lip trembling at the happy memories. Happiness, Juliet realized in that moment, could be just as poisonous as sadness when it lay out of reach.

And some men had been entirely incapable of work, so scarring were their experiences. Juliet's father, on the other hand, had taken a respectable job as the shipping supervisor of the local mill. A few months passed without any sadness. That summer, 1947, he had made enough to take them on a trip. It was only to Juliet's aunt and uncle in Denver, but it was nice to get away.

Some moments in the car, listening to the radio, talking idly, it seemed her father's spirit returned. Juliet saw the answer to her question—this quick-witted, enthusiastic man was who her mother knew and loved, and had expected to return from combat two years ago. But then, just as suddenly, the cheer would vanish, leaving only a husk and a chill in the air. She thought of a puppet—she came to imagine someone else briefly animating Father, moving his arms and pulling those lips up into a smile. It was this unseen puppeteer who allowed Father to say something kind, or amusing, or romantic. Mother would laugh too loud, and Juliet would as well. Hearing the relief in their laughter—*he's back to normal!*—the puppeteer would cruelly depart, and he would fall back into the soulless silence they knew better.

They had not passed the Canadian border when they stopped at the funfair. Father was animated again, his face lighting up like a child's at the sight of the tents and the distant, repeated organ music. He looked, Juliet considered, more like a child than she ever felt herself, racked as she was with worry and guilt over her parents.

Mother complained half-heartedly— "Chuck is expecting us the day after tomorrow, we don't have time for detours"—but she was so happy that he had come to life. So they spent the

afternoon there. Juliet felt happiest of all, so delirious with joy that she felt she had left her body, and was floating ten feet above them, as a bird might, watching the family stroll around the fairground. In that moment, they were an ordinary family, and she was a happy ten-year-old with a wide grin and a cloud of cotton candy as big as her head. Father let his girl go on every ride. There was still a little distance—while she and Mother rode the caterpillar and the rickety rollercoaster, he stayed behind. Juliet was determined, through an act of willpower, to think that he was happy and normal, so she did not look back at the gaunt ghost sightlessly staring from the sidelines as the rollercoaster circled its loop.

Juliet and her mother disembarked from the Ferris wheel, and she had never felt more carefree in her young life. Mother, too, whose forehead was usually furrowed with worry, looked so beautiful, her eyes wide and her glossy red lips spread in a smile.

The smile thinned when she scanned the sidelines, worried, as Juliet soon was, that the puppet had become lifeless again. The smile faded as she strained to look around the fairground. Neither of them could see him.

“Where is he? *Where is he?*”

The lightning switch from gaiety to panic was almost as frightening in its suddenness than Father’s customary heaviness of heart. The lurch back to their cloying, unspoken dread, after the sweet simplicity of this day, felt as terrifying as it did deeply unfair. Juliet had seen other children crying, but her sadness so thoroughly permeated her that she could not even summon the energy for tears.

Juliet tried to speak, but her mother frantically raced through the grounds, leaving her to catch up as best she could, madly barrelling past those other families and children for whom Juliet was so happy that they be mistaken earlier.

The fairground was thankfully not large, and Juliet’s mother did not have to resort to the humiliation of asking the ladies at the desk to call him over the loudspeaker. Humiliating, Juliet thought, not for her, but for her mother, who was always so adamant that she bear her sadness and disappointment inwardly, never burden anyone else with it.

A handsome man in a tired-looking knitted tank top and sandals approached them and asked Juliet’s mother if she was all right.

As Mother held back tears to explain her predicament, Juliet caught sight of him. She brusquely thanked the stranger and ran with desperate relief to her husband. He was stepping out of a fortune-teller’s booth. Juliet had never seen him look like that. He was neither the sorrowful ex-soldier they had lived with for the last eighteen months, nor the falsely animated paterfamilias. Instead, his hooded eyes flickered with a bestial fire. When Juliet came of age and started to know boys, she identified it in hindsight as a carnal, lusty look. But even in her adulthood, she would never meet a boy who looked quite as depraved as her father did at that moment.

The fortune-teller, a shrivelled woman whom Juliet reckoned to be about 200 years old, cackled knowingly as he left. He did not look back at her, and Juliet paused from her horror with her father to study the old crone, now grinning ghoulishly as another unwary soul walked into her clutches. Whatever she told Father, it seemed to have given him peace.

Mother sharply took Father by the hand and led him away. They did not speak about it, and their silence made Juliet come to doubt that it had even happened. Her parents were curiously content as they passed three weeks in Denver, followed by a leisurely drive up the west coast back to British Columbia. She called them Mummy and Daddy, not Mother and Father, the whole time.

The Monday after they returned, Juliet started at school. When she got home, her father was not there. “It’s just the two of us now,” was her mother’s only explanation.

October 14, 1995

Juliet Bleek lived in a house that was too small for guests. Its oak beams bowed inwards to further diminish its overhead space, and the library shelves haphazardly crammed into the corner walls seemed to contract the dimensions further, like a spider's web tightening around unwary visitors. She felt particularly sorry for Wyn's nephew, who looked about a foot too tall for even a normally proportioned structure. The gangly man was almost doubled over, currently running his fingers along the rows of identical white-spined paperbacks. Even his hands—large and flecked with dark hair—looked as though they would crumble the yellow pulp pages to a pulp on contact.

The hand clumsily clutched at a random milk-white spine, and tilted the book forward to inspect its cover. Good choice, Juliet thought. *Joyce Mannix Mysteries #16: A Paris Poisoning*. That was her third Edgar nomination—or was it her fourth? Anthony Boucher had said some lovely things about it. And A.I.P. made it into a film with Helen Hayes in 1973. She was sure she had a picture with Helen from the set around somewhere.

Juliet took a moment to prepare for his reaction: the raise of the eyebrows, the eyes widening as he looked back at her, unable to contain his awe at being in the presence of detective-fiction royalty.

Instead, the young oaf, his face unmoved, replaced the paperback without a flicker of recognition. Worse, he wasn't intrigued by it either. "Wow, you sure wrote an awful lot of books," he observed tritely.

He turned and smiled moronically, as if the rows of books were some ludicrous hobby. She tried to contain her bitter disappointment. Oh well, not everyone can read your books, she told herself. She tried to convince herself it was better he wasn't a die-hard fan. At least she didn't have to discuss some long-forgotten twist or try to justify a hurriedly dashed-off paragraph. But someone like him, to whom she was just another name splayed across a paperback spine, could be so much harsher.

"*Still* write them," she corrected. "*Death Worse than Fate* is one of my most popular yet. Twenty-seven weeks on the bestseller list." More copies than your wretched paper, she wanted to add, but didn't. "And Pendant want another one next year." Juliet had never got the hang of self-promotion, starting with that irritating habit of taking little panting gasps between reciting the facts, and then blurting out the words. The whole performance made her sound insincere and fraudulent, hungry for praise or validation. Perhaps it was because she could never believe her success herself.

Neither could Wyn's nephew, it seemed. He nodded, polite but unenthusiastic. He folded himself into her Chesterfield. Was he *still* ducking, even sitting down? Juliet took the armchair opposite.

"Thanks for doing this, Mrs. Bleek. When Aunt Wyn told me you moved down here I knew it would be a great scoop."

"It's Miss Bleek," she corrected gently. He nodded, showing poor journalistic judgement by not pressing her for details. There was a juicy scoop he had let sail by. "You can call me Juliet," she added, though she preferred if he didn't.

The questions Wyn's nephew put to her were a shade more insightful than many she had heard over the years. They were a little student-y, full of searching for metaphor and handy '-isms'. He must have been fresh out of college; she knew the paper would want something saucier.

However, she tried to be cryptic yet informative, and avoided self-mockery (an easy pitfall for an author, she remembered Josephine Tey saying). It was painfully obvious how little research he had done. Still, at least he didn't ask "Where do you get your ideas?" He did succumb to a desperate "Are you tired of your creation?" line of inquiry, and he seemed disappointed when Juliet told him she was not.

"Joyce Mannix has an advantage over me, and over all of us, which makes me never tire of her."

He transcribed the answer, looked up and blinked. Juliet sighed.

"Don't you want to know what that is?"

"Oh, er, yes."

"She never gets old. She's been in her early fifties from her very first case in 1959 until now. When I created her, I was only twenty-one, and thinking of my mother, what she might have done if ..." She stopped before her voice audibly trembled, and hurriedly concluded, "...if her life had gone a different way. Now, all these years later, I'm older than she is. Older than my mother was when she passed away."

"I'm sorry," he mechanically replied.

"I could never have imagined writing about one person for so long, but let those other writers' mope about how unfair life is that they've been forced to be millionaires because of this or that detective or spy. I know Joyce Mannix all the better for writing about her so long. She's more real to me than many of my actual friends. So I couldn't possibly begrudge Joyce her vitality, though perhaps I do envy it a little."

Wyn's nephew smirked at this, and Juliet frowned. No doubt to him someone in their fifties was practically dead anyway. How old, she wondered, did he think she was?

She thought of herself at ten, seeing that fortune-teller and reckoning she was 200. She shivered, and returned to the present day to scold her interrogator. "I can see you scoff, young man, but she'll still be in her early fifties when you're dead and buried."

Juliet cringed; that sounded a tad creepy. However, he was unfazed about this apparent threat on his life, nodding and moving on to another paragraph-long question about the role psychology plays in the mystery genre. His limitations as a journalist were apparent. At no point did this ever feel like a conversation, just a limited call and response. Juliet wondered if you could train a parrot to ask these kinds of questions. The bird might hopefully be quicker on the uptake. She couldn't imagine the resulting interview would be particularly interesting to read, and that was as much her fault as his. More, probably. She had written nearly a hundred books; why couldn't she talk about them, or herself, without getting maudlin?

She knew why, but begged herself not to think about it. Concentrate on this silly young man, let him ask his silly questions, and then it will all be over.

She looked guiltily at Wyn's nephew, whose name rolled off the tip of her tongue, who was in the middle of some convoluted inquiry that had descended into remembering something a friend of his said. Or perhaps it was another author he'd read (someone whose writing he actually respected, she shouldn't wonder).

"I'm sorry," Juliet interrupted. "I got a little lost there. Could you repeat the question?"

"I was just asking you about moving away."

She chuckled, surprisingly bitter. "People always ask why I left New York." She leaned forward and poured another cup of strong Yorkshire tea. "I only lived there for six years you know."

“Yes, but to leave New York for Revelstoke ...” he said. “And with your first four books selling over three million copies ... you didn’t want to stay where the action is?”

“For me, Revelstoke is where the action is,” she snapped.

That seemed to put a sudden end to the questions. With some exertion, he pulled himself free from the couch and made his farewell. She sincerely hoped no one would read the article.

October 15, 1995—2:51 A.M.

And with no plans to retire, Juliet Bleek will surely keep her millions of devoted fans in suspense for a long time to come.

“ ‘Tim’?” Brad wearily asked himself as he read his conclusion aloud, angrily adding the stray ‘e’ to the end.

Brad Gill pressed the ‘Save As’ button once more, and printed out the interview. So much for an easy assignment. It was well past midnight and every letter needed forceful squeezing into his word processor. Nor had it turned into the Woodward and Bernstein exposé he had hoped. Juliet Bleek had been a difficult subject, for no particular reason he could put his finger on, and Brad felt the whiff of failure in his work. Would all interviews need this much work? If he kept this standard up, he’d be demoted to TV critic within the week.

With only five hours left to hand it in, Brad decided to cut his losses. He staggered from his stiff-backed desk chair to his sectional sofa and planted himself face-down.

He rose, showered, and donned a flannel shirt and denim jacket. He gave the printed interview a quick glance, but couldn’t bring himself to re-read it in case it was as bad as he suspected. He tucked it into his messenger bag, the one Auntie Wyn had thoughtfully bought him in his first week in Revelstoke. He wondered how close she was to Juliet Bleek. Maybe he’d have to endure the sour old lady’s beady eyes when he finally succumbed to his aunt’s repeated invites to those weekend tea parties.

Monday morning was unusually cold as thin, grey-tinted sunlight weakly cut through the gaps of Mount Begbie. Brad wrapped his jacket tighter around him as he walked down Main Street. The few cars moved sluggishly, looking as tired as he felt. He stopped to grab a coffee from Rita, again just missing the opportunity to ask her out.

Sipping the coffee and hugging himself with his free arm, Brad almost jumped out of his skin when he saw Juliet Bleek across the street. She wasn’t doing anything, just standing, staring at him. He waved, but she didn’t react.

Then closer, Brad heard a cackling at his ear. It was so close that he whirled around in shock, certain that he felt stale breath on his neck. There was no one there, and worse, his sudden turn had caused his coffee to slosh over its lid and onto his shirt.

Brad spent the rest of his walk tense, his eyes restlessly scanning the periphery. The editor, a genial old newspaperman named Bernie Conway, welcomed him in and gestured to take a seat.

“So where’s my article, Gill?” he asked menacingly. Brad’s lower lip slipped away from his jaw a couple of times, but Conway held a meaty hand up before he could make excuses. “I didn’t always work at the *Revelstoke Mountaineer*, and in my long working life I’ve heard ‘Just twenty-four hours and it’ll be a real juicy piece’ a million times.”

Brad sighed. “Okay. And no problems there. I’m pretty resigned to the fact that no one’s going to think this is a juicy piece.” He unzipped his bag and pulled out the sheaf of papers. His heart stopped when he flipped through them.

Blank. All the pages were blank.

He scrambled through his bag, which was otherwise mockingly empty.

“No, no ...”

Bernie lit a cigarette, his expression halfway between a smile and frown. “Boy, it’s been a *long* time since I heard ‘the dog ate my homework’.”

All Brad could think about was that staccato cackling, ringing in his ears, and the sight of Juliet Bleek staring at him as he walked obliviously to hand in his pieces of blank paper. He could go home and print the file off again, but he had an irrational, deep-seated suspicion that he would not find it on his computer.

As he desperately rifled through his bag, as if some hidden compartment would slide open, he heard the infuriatingly smug (and even more infuriatingly sexy) rasp of his chief rival at the *Mountaineer*, Elaine Noyce. They were both under no illusions that they were marking time penning articles in Revelstoke until the big city, *any* big city, came calling. But Brad felt he was subtle about it, whereas Elaine was brash and overt in her ambitions—and irritatingly, Bernie seemed to have more faith that she could achieve them.

“While Gill looks for his scoop,” Elaine said archly, “I have a *real* story. Which I wrote up and everything.”

Brad further groaned as the papers crisply slapped Bernie’s desk, and the grateful editor re-lit his cigarette end to celebrate. “Any port in a storm, Lainey, but mind telling me what yours is about before I slap it on my front page?”

Elaine took the other seat, and so captivating was her drawl that even Brad had to stop his futile search to listen to her lede. “Maggie Weitz. Local girl, works at the hardware store.”

“What about her?”

“So back in May she drives up to Mount Begbie.”

“...and doesn’t come back?” Brad concluded.

Elaine loosed a cynical chuckle. “Good guess,” she said insincerely. “But the *car* comes back—it had been a real piece of junk, a ’90 Lumina I think. Not anymore. It’s like new now. Her cousin Larry comes back too, tells the boss at the hardware store she’ll be gone for a while. Then *he* heads back to Vancouver. No word since. Won’t return my calls.”

“So Cousin Larry killed Maggie?” Brad guessed.

“Well ... there’s a lot of pieces. Like a blue box someone saw Cousin Larry walk out of, and that same someone is sure the next time she looked out the window it was gone. Who knows?” Elaine concluded.

After a gruelling day typing up a replacement article on the Revelstoke Orchid Show, Brad decided to stroll by this Maggie Weitz’s house. He had read Elaine’s article, and true to form, it was a masterpiece, it punchy prose concealing a compelling Gothic mystery of a missing hardware store worker.

He stopped on Caribou Lane, hiding in the shadow of a Lodgepole Pine. He smiled to himself, smug that Elaine Noyce hadn’t checked her facts.

There was a blue box standing in Maggie’s front yard right now.

Chapter Two: Meeting Your Heroes

“So where have you been?”

Maggie Weitz sat in Wyn Kolchak’s sitting room and considered the innocuous question for a long time.

Wyn’s quorum of tea-party regulars leaned in, the silence sharpening their anticipation.

The longer Maggie paused, the more elusive a plausible answer. After all, only this morning (well, by her internal clock) she had been nowhere at all, drifting through the timeless void inside a magic box with her two new alien friends, Kaylaar and the Doctor.

This particular morning, she had come out of the TARDIS library with a bone to pick. Though he wore his vast alien intellect lightly, the Doctor could be a bit of a snob. Maybe it was that English accent, or his habit of dropping names of historical figures or unlikely alien customs, no matter how tenuous their connection to the conversation at hand. But he refused to take the point, riposting that he, of all Time Lords, could never be called a snob. Since his people considered the universe at large beneath their contempt, the Doctor’s very lifestyle flew in the face of snobbery.

But this morning, Maggie found proof, and she was going to enjoy confronting the Doctor with it. She had woken early and been in the library for a couple of hours—well, as far as she could perceive elapsed time inside the TARDIS. The minutes had a funny way of stretching and slipping and falling out of reach in here, and being inside the ship for a few days exacerbated that feeling. She had found sleep particularly nebulous: unlike on Earth, where Maggie would often toss and turn, haunted by dreams of her former happiness with Ollie, inside her bunker-like cabin next door to the boot cupboard, surrounded by the hum of its distant engines and the low yellow glow of the glass discs inset into the wall, she would often barely feel she had put her head down before waking perfectly rested. This morning, feeling the TARDIS still in motion, Maggie decided to pass the time until they landed with a good book.

And the Doctor had good books. He had first folios of Shakespeare, granite tablets carved with Cuneiform, hardbacks from the early twenty-first century about someone called ‘Harry

Potter’, and the complete poetry of a Betelgeusian poet named Flimnip, encoded on a glowing metal tube she could not operate. But after lengthy study, Maggie noted a gap in the library under ‘B’, and dashed to the control room at once to confront him.

“Juliet who?” he asked, absently flicking dials on the console.

“Bleek!” Maggie repeated. The Doctor looked up, the blankness in his eyes magnified through a pair of half-moon spectacles he occasionally donned for up-close tinkering. Maggie felt satisfied to have him asking the questions and her holding the answers for a change.

“What are we talking about?” Kaylaar asked eagerly.

“Books,” the Doctor replied breezily. “Maggie has found a gap in my reading.”

“Pretty big gap I’d say. Juliet Bleek’s written nearly a hundred murder mysteries.”

The Doctor looked up. “Then this is a serious matter.” Though he seemed to be joking, he had gained a sudden urgency, pushing past her and typing frantically at the console.

Maggie glanced sideways to Kaylaar. “That’s the trouble with know-it-alls.”

On the screen opposite, rows of text flashed up along with a picture of a petite woman with unruly grey hair and a desiccated, humourless face. She looked a bit like a murderer herself. Maggie was amazed at the immediacy with which he had found this—as far as she could remember, she had never seen a photo of Juliet Bleek.

The Doctor skimmed through the biography, stroking his chin. Maggie was beginning to regret her teasing; the Doctor seemed disturbed by his ignorance. His frown deepened as Kaylaar interrupted his concentration to ask, “What are ‘books’?”

“Only the finest repositories of data, adventure, and whimsy in the known universe! My dear chap, get Maggie to show you the library! You haven’t lived until you’ve read *Gulliver’s Travels*.”

Kaylaar turned from the screen sulkily and sat on the ottoman. “You two clearly do all this ‘reading’ when I’m not around.”

“That’s not true,” Maggie replied soothingly, although now that he mentioned it, she supposed she was in the library to take a break from these two weirdos. *Three* weirdos, now that she thought of it: the library was distressingly close to that neglected wing of the Ship where the Doctor had locked the sentient computer core of the Lifeship *Miracle*¹. She occasionally heard the machine wail, begging for company one second, then ranting manically that if it ever got its independence, they would all be sorry. At moments like that, the TARDIS felt like no home at all, and it made her miss Revelstoke all the more.

“Next time we’re in Revelstoke, I’ll show you my collection. Ollie and I were her biggest fans.” Ah, but of course, there was the problem with going back to Revelstoke—the town had lost its magic since Ollie’s death. Feeling lonely and homesick, Maggie felt a need to change the subject. “Do you really not have any books on ... that planet you come from?”

“The Frenazzi sacred texts were passed through spoken word and mental projection,” Kaylaar replied. “The visions we got when we reached the Age of Perception were incredibly vivid.”

“Shape-changers and telepaths? You certainly are multi-talented.”

Kaylaar rubbed a hand through his glittering black hair. Maggie seemed to have antagonized him as well. “It only comes through cycles of patient study in the depths of our Caves of Atonement. To be honest, Maggie, it is not something I remember with pleasure.”

“And you only had ... ‘sacred’ words? No summer beach reads?”

“No summer, no beaches,” Kaylaar replied with a grin.

¹ See *The Doctor Who Project: ‘The 108 Year Hitch’*.

“Why don’t you two form a reading club?” the Doctor suggested, waving irritably at their conversation while he continued his staring contest with the console. Kaylaar jumped up and, now full of vitality, gladly followed Maggie to the library so they could do precisely that.

Only when she surveyed the shelves extending indefinitely above them did Maggie realize how hard a task this was. “Just a typical work of human literature, Maggie. I trust your taste.”

She nodded as she mounted the stepladder, perusing section after section. Obviously, *Joyce Mannix Mysteries* were out of the question, but that hardly narrowed things down. How did one sum up an entire planet’s literature? She wasn’t even sure she’d be able to recommend a representative book to someone from France, let alone a distant planet.

Maggie ran her fingers along the different titles. “The Doctor’s filing doesn’t make this any easier. I guess he doesn’t believe in genres.”

“What are genres?” Kaylaar asked unhelpfully. A moment later he had forgotten the question, instead grabbing a book Maggie had pulled out by accident. He studied it, entranced, and read the title with relish. “*Sense and Sensibility*. Ha! That’s clever!”

Unlike every other girl in her high school, Maggie never had much time for Jane Austen, but she couldn’t argue with Kaylaar’s emphatic absorption with the novel. The random selection was apparently a hit. He was practically inhaling the book as they left the library, reminding Maggie of Roberta Messenger (and her embarrassment when they found “ROBERTA + MR. DARCY” doodled inside a pink heart in her journal). He had already finished sixty pages in their brief walk through the TARDIS corridors. In the time it took Maggie to stop in the kitchen and make herself a coffee, he was more than halfway done.

By the time they were back at the control room, the Ship was at rest: daylight spilled through its open double doors, and the kaleidoscope of control panels lay dormant.

The Doctor, too, had changed into another chunky fisherman’s sweater in burgundy and baggy gabardine slacks. His green balmacaan coat was draped over his arm, and his eyes were closed as he serenely basked in the golden autumn sunlight. He beamed at the two of them, nodding approvingly at the hardcover Kaylaar had just about finished.

“Ah, Georgian comedy of manners. What an excellent choice, Maggie. With their rigid society, a Frenazzi will get a lot out of that.”

“Uh ... yeah,” she agreed uncertainly. “So, where are you off to?”

“Don’t you recognize it? It’s autumn in Revelstoke!”

“Did you say Revelstoke?”

The Doctor nodded. “Welcome back home, Maggie. And by a curious coincidence, your favourite author has just moved here too.”

And what a welcome it was! They had barely been inside her house for ten minutes—and Maggie was still reeling at the studied normality of it all, but for a thick layer of dust barely changed since she had left—when a burly old woman banged aggressively on the door. It was Wyn Kolchak, who flung her muscular arms around Maggie in delight. Behind her was an unfeasibly tall and pale man in a denim jacket whom Maggie recognized, but did not know, as her nephew.

“Come with me,” she insisted.

The Doctor was in the next room looking through these fabled *Joyce Mannix Mysteries*. Maggie gestured behind herself and began saying, “I just have to—”

Before she could introduce her friends, Wyn swept out of the house to the end of the road, where a party of her contemporaries were waiting, their noses for gossip twitching as keenly as a pack of wolves.

“I know it’s Monday,” she whispered conspiratorially, “but as soon as Brad said he thought you were back, we knew we had to have a special celebration. We even scared up Ray Tang! He was worried sick about you, but he’ll never tell.”

The grave-faced hardware store owner poked his head from the back of the crowd, harrumphing in protest.

Wyn and her brood didn’t even let much small talk burden proceedings, and Maggie barely had a tea-biscuit crumbling on her jeans before Wyn repeated the question: “Where have you *been*? Hell of a time to take a vacation.”

“I’ll say,” Ray grumbled. “Right before the summer rush. I’ve had to close up the store just to be here right now.”

“Oh, stop nagging at her, Ray!” Wyn reprimanded. “We all know how cheap you are, it’s not like you’ll be giving her any back pay.”

Wyn’s friend Scarlett leaned toward Maggie. “We’ve been ever so curious. Larry wouldn’t say anything, just that you had got a terrific opportunity, but you’d be back before too long.”

“And five months later... long enough, I think!”

As everyone laughed, Maggie laughed along and nodded slowly. Thankfully, her loud-mouthed friend Georgie cried, “Juliet, look at that! No sooner do you move into town than there’s a mystery to solve!”

Amid the general laughter, the group thankfully broke up into smaller conversations and town gossip overtook the need to solve this particular mystery. Maggie felt bad for leaving the Doctor and Kaylaar in her house—almost like leaving two children at large. But she wouldn’t forgive herself if she didn’t take the chance to talk to Juliet Bleek.

She wove through the edges of Wyn’s sitting room and penetrated a tight circle of conversation—two other church ladies in floral dresses talking to the woman Maggie now recognized from the TARDIS databank. She was exceedingly small and frail in person, and her eyes were surrounded by dark circles not visible in the picture. She looked weary, as if she had been dragged here unwillingly.

However, she smiled warmly as Maggie intruded into the conversation about her vegetable marrows (“You must let Maggie try them; delicious, not like the watery things you usually get at the supermarket”).

“I hope you don’t mind me dropping in on this homecoming,” Juliet said. “Fran here told me about your departure, and I was intrigued. Like they say, I love a mystery.”

“Not at all!” Maggie replied. She was finding it somewhat hard to breathe in the presence of this literary titan. The thought that she had considered *Maggie* an interesting subject for her presence made her even more light-headed. She wanted to tell her, solve the mystery, but Juliet held up her hand before she could say anything.

“You know what, Maggie?” she asked rhetorically (*She knows my name!* Maggie thrilled to think). “Promise me you won’t tell me anything. I’m sure the actual answer is quite ordinary.”

“Sure,” Maggie lied.

“I’m here getting away from things myself, so I know that privacy is sometimes hard to grant. But remember, it’s not anyone else’s to take; it’s yours, so hold on to it. See that one over there?” She gestured to Wyn’s pale nephew, and her eyes narrowed violently. “Asked me all kinds of impertinent questions for the paper.”

“Oh!” Fran cooed. “An interview. The *Mountaineer* is usually not much good except for the TV listings. Bernie Conway tries his best, but you know how it is. But that will be worth reading. When will the interview be out?”

Juliet’s sunny disposition turned cloudy, and she shrugged with what struck Maggie as guilt. “I don’t know,” she said with the odd evasion that implied that she did know. She brightened up as she put her almost fleshless hand around Maggie’s arm. “Maggie my dear, would you like to see my marrows? I’d love to talk to you alone.”

As they left, Maggie noticed them brush past an overdressed man—about forty in a suit and tie, whose layers of dust told that he had come from a long way out of town. He looked meaningfully at Juliet, and she stared back at him with a momentary glare so poisonous, it made Maggie shudder.

The Doctor and Kaylaar re-entered Maggie’s front room with a stack of Joyce Mannix paperbacks, only to find the door swinging shut.

He peeked through her curtains and saw her in the clutches of a broad-shouldered elderly woman, heading down the street with only slightly less force than a frog-march.

“Ever get the feeling you’re not wanted?” he asked Kaylaar.

Kaylaar moved to the door, worried for Maggie. “Should we go after her?”

By now she had been swallowed up inside one of the other houses. The Doctor shook his head. “Perhaps later. She might enjoy a bit of time with regular people, for a change. In the meantime, perhaps we should fill in this inexcusable gap in my Earth literary knowledge.”

Having finished *Sense and Sensibility* and decided it was likely the finest book he would ever read, Kaylaar was keen to expand his knowledge, and so they duly brought as many of Maggie’s paperbacks as they could carry out to the garden, where they sat and read.

After his thirtieth books, the Doctor checked his watch, and was dismayed to see that this undemanding reading had taken a whole fifteen minutes. Still, he was distracted, and that feeling in his gut wasn’t going anywhere. He put *From Penn State to State Pen* down and took a break to pace up and down her garden. It was a small patch, but aside from the grass looking a little overgrown, it was a model suburban home. Clearly there had been enough rain for the plants to grow without Maggie’s help.

Kaylaar put down *Joyce Mannix Mysteries #8: Bullion in the Bouillion*. “What’s bothering you, Doctor? You’ve been restless ever since Maggie mentioned this Juliet Bleek person. Is it as simple as a gap in your knowledge?”

He smiled sadly. “I hope so.” He kicked at a stray stone in the grass, at a loss to explain the feeling. “If I were to say this when Maggie was here, she’d think I was being a complete know-it-all.”

“I won’t tell her.”

The Doctor smiled. “I appreciate that. But I *know* this planet. I have its history, its people, deep in my marrow. Oh, I don’t know everything, I admit.”

“How modest.”

The Doctor scowled. “But these books are exactly the sort of thing I should have come across, yet I’ve never heard of them. And I don’t know how to explain it, but there’s something in Juliet Bleek’s biography that sets me on edge. And then there’s the coincidence of her moving here, just up the road from Maggie Weitz.”

“Isn’t that the meaning of the word ‘coincidence’?” Kaylaar asked.

“Touché. That’s one of the problems with living on the run for so long—you get so suspicious, you cross-examine your own shadow.” As if to emphasize the point, he tensed at the sound, coming from the front yard, of a twig snapping.

The two aliens edged to the front of Maggie’s house, sighing in relief as they saw a tall and athletic woman in jeans, a flannel shirt, hard-wearing boots, and a wall of caramel-highlighted brown hair, examining the TARDIS.

“Can we help you?” the Doctor asked in an approximation of an average human.

The woman looked the pair up and down—Kaylaar exercising a modest shape-shift to lend his skin a Polynesian tan. From her expression, it would seem their performances did not convince her.

“You friends of Maggie Weitz?” she asked brusquely.

The Doctor nodded.

She swore under her breath. “Of all the things for Gill to be right about ... you know, I had the bad luck to publish a story about her disappearance. Made it into today’s paper. The very day she gets back.”

“Most unfortunate,” the Doctor agreed. “But you know what they say—they’re just tomorrow’s fish and chip wrappers anyway.”

He flinched as she slapped the side of the TARDIS. “What’s with the box?”

“Transport,” the Doctor replied vaguely. To his surprise, she nodded in understanding.

“Nice disguise. A little too cute, but does the job. Who sent you?”

Kaylaar looked to the Doctor, trying to look unperturbed. “What does she mean, Doctor?”

“Doctor, huh? What are you, a talk show host?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Cut the crap, Doctor,” the woman snapped. “There I was thinking there was a gruesome true crime story to the thing, or maybe a CIA conspiracy, but it was just a lousy job, wasn’t it? Maggie got head-hunted. You two are obviously city folk, from some network. Which one?”

“Er ... very perceptive, young lady,” the Doctor replied. “You’re absolutely right. We’re correspondents from the BBC.”

‘Young lady’? Who was this guy, Henry Higgins? Nevertheless, Elaine was happy to have her hunch confirmed, and she nodded in self-satisfaction and gave the TARDIS another disconcerting slap.

“Yeah, looks like a British set-up. What have you got in there, a mobile Outside Broadcast studio?” She peeked through the barred windows, straining to see beyond the frosted glass. “A bit sadistic cramming your tech team in such a poky box, no?”

“It’s not so poky inside, I promise.”

Elaine arched an eyebrow. “Is that so? I’d love to take a look.”

“Perhaps later.” The Doctor gently guided her away from his ship before she grew suspicious. “Trade secrets, you know.”

Her striking face creased into a delightfully cynical smirk. She clearly had no faith that the police box contained any secrets worth knowing, which the Doctor found simultaneously insulting and a relief.

“Of course,” she explained in a sweetly patronizing voice, “most news trucks in North America roll along on wheels, you know. Not that you Limeys will ever admit anyone might have come up with a better idea than you. Elaine Noyce, *Revelstoke Mountaineer*. Doctor...?” She offered the Doctor her hand, which he shook tentatively.

“That’s right,” he dodged, extending his arm to embrace Kaylaar as well, “and this is my cub reporter ... Peter Parker.”

“I knew the Bleek story was bigger than Gill thought. He’s never going to make it in the big leagues if he throws away gold like that.”

“Juliet Bleek?” Kaylaar asked.

“Does the ‘man from Mars’ schtick work better at home? Because it’s making me real impatient.”

“Doctor, why is this person so rude?” Kaylaar asked under his breath.

“She’s a journalist, a rather territorial Earth occupation,” he explained. Turning back to her, the Doctor continued cajoling. “You’re quite right, Miss Noyce.” He wasn’t exactly lying, and anyway, he was deriving a certain sporting fun from this repartee, which she clearly shared.

“Please, call me Elaine.” She was standing inches away from the Doctor’s face, and he was confused. Humans tended to value their personal space and kept their distance accordingly. There was something in her eyes that suggested an interest beyond the professional. But whatever it was, the Doctor was at a loss to explain.

The Doctor asked, “What do you know about Juliet Bleek?”

“Not enough. But I’ve got a lead. An old boyfriend put me on to a guy who found some stuff courtesy of the NYPD. He didn’t exactly acquire it legally, so he’s come here to give it to me in person. Want in?” She looked the Doctor up and down slowly, batting her eyes in a confusingly earthly manner. “I usually work alone, but we might be able to pool our resources.”

Maggie was so enjoying her conversation with Juliet that the details passed her entirely by. She had a lot of theories about Joyce Mannix’s son Gerald and why he never appeared in the stories, and she was pleased to have Juliet listen to them without mockery or boredom setting in.

They were admiring these marrows—which, though Maggie knew nothing about the vegetable, did look larger and more luscious than one might expect—while she was listing off her favourite mysteries in order. She stopped and laughed, self-consciously.

“What is it?”

“I’m so sorry, Miss Bleek. This must be terribly boring for you. Hearing a fan go on like this.”

Again Juliet touched Maggie’s arm, and was starkly reminded how long it had been since she had felt the vitality of another person so close. She felt something maternal for this stranger, something so wholesome it totally erased the dark cloud that she determined to avoid, no matter how close above her head it hovered.

“Not at all,” Juliet said. “I won’t lie to you, Maggie. Things have been difficult for me. I didn’t just move back to Revelstoke for the low house prices.”

They laughed.

“I grew up in interior British Columbia,” Juliet explained. “I can’t tell you how happy I was, after my mother took control of our lives. When it was just me and her, things felt right. But then of course, things don’t stay the same. And then, many years pass, and you just spend a lot of effort trying to put them back to how they were before all those wretched changes happened.”

Maggie nodded. “It’s odd how perfect this moment is. What you’re talking about... I know exactly what you mean...” She hadn’t cried in a long time; she hadn’t felt the need to since she had left Revelstoke with the Doctor. And she was not crying because she was sad.

Maggie hugged Juliet, and Juliet cursed herself for being pulled away from this shared moment. Juliet was distracted by the thought of that man in a suit at Wyn's house, the one she passed by and hoped wasn't looking at her in recognition. Now, there he was large as life in her thoughts, having a discussion with that damned nephew.

"Say, you know a broad—'scuse me, I should say a *lady*? Reports for the local paper, name of Elaine Noyce?"

Brad was relieved of the distraction. Elaine had struck again—intriguing him enough in her Maggie Weitz story to mooch around with his aunt, only for him to stand around here for nearly an hour with nothing to show but a dozen repetitions of his disappointing life story, bellowed in the ears of Revelstoke's seniors. Where was she?

So when the man, whose weather-beaten suit and expression of alert boredom told Brad he had travelled a long way, asked him this, Brad nodded eagerly. "Sure I am. What have you got?"

"My friends call me Slim." Since his gabardine double-breasted suit looked likely to split at every seam, Brad could only assume this was an outdated or ironic nickname. Slim pressed: "It's about that Bleek woman." He unbuttoned the jigger on his jacket, revealing a brown envelope. "I got the stuff here."

Brad smiled at the irony. Here he was intrigued by her story, while she had clearly done some digging on his. Once again, though, she showed him up: how did she get someone into town the same evening, when he couldn't even keep his hands on the profile article he'd written?

He looked around, but not seeing Elaine, Maggie Weitz, or anyone under seventy-five, he decided to press his advantage. "She told me to come get you, and share the lead with me. I'm sure you want to be getting back on the road as soon as possible."

"I'm booked in the Regent."

"Well, why don't you and I head there and look over your stuff. Elaine told me to tell you she might be a little tied up."

"No answer, Miss Noyce."

Elaine's instincts told her to sneak up the stairs and look for the man herself, but these two Brits she'd attached herself to would slow her down. She drummed the desk, thanked him, and turned around. But the lobby was empty. She spun back around.

"Say, did you see where those two oddly dressed guys went?"

"Sorry, Miss Noyce?"

She indicated, and used a pantomime to describe the pair, but it was obvious he had not seen them. Damn. They'd beaten her at her own game.

She slipped from the receptionist's sight and hopped the stairs to Room 554. A short, slight man wearing an obviously false beard blocked her way as she went, but she thought no more about him after she had pushed past.

"Doctor, shouldn't we tell that rude lady where we're going?"

“Not just yet, Kaylaar. The problem with journalists is they can be a bit too obvious—” The Doctor was interrupted by two men speaking in muted tones coming from the other end of the hall. He pushed Kaylaar against the wall. The human disguise had by now worn off, and his skin seemed to glow even in the Regent Hotel’s moody lighting. But luckily, the Doctor’s long coat merged perfectly with the shadows, and this more basic camouflage enabled the pair of aliens to stay unobserved while a gangly young man and an overdressed, portly middle-aged one walked down the hall.

“It’s all pretty weird, Mister Gill,” the portly man said. “Only way she got out of it was by skipping town before they could catch up with her.”

“Sure, Slim,” the young man said, hastily pushing Slim into the room.

“Clearly another journalist,” the Doctor whispered.

“Why do you say that?”

“They came up the back way, and he’s trying to keep the man’s voice down. I’d wager he and Miss Noyce are competing for the same story.”

The Doctor’s ears picked up the name ‘Juliet’ and the word ‘unsolved’. He moved to follow them into the room but was pulled back by a strong arm on his shoulder.

“Think you guys could get away from me?”

The Doctor sighed as Elaine spun him around, just at the same instant the guest-room door slammed shut. “Not at all, my dear. But I’m afraid our scoop just locked himself in Room 554.”

It had all been going so well, Juliet thought. Why did they have to find her? Why did people always have to go nosing around?

Ignore them, she begged. She tried to banish the vision she saw, of the two sordid men grinning ghoulishly over the reports.

“Bernie’s going to love this,” Wyn’s nephew was saying as he read the NYPD police report of Zoe’s fiancé. “Juicy and then some.”

Juliet didn’t want to see. She didn’t want any of it.

Why couldn’t she be here in the moment with Maggie? She was such a nice young woman. A lady, in fact—the kind of sweet modern lady she had hoped her daughter would grow up to be.

More unwanted memories, more anger, as she remembered Zoe leaving that brunch in Hell’s Kitchen, when Juliet had told her the truth.

Maggie had broken off from her amiable conversation and was looking concerned. “Are you all right, Miss Bleek?” Maggie leaned in closer.

The young lady, who was so like her daughter and whose company she so wished she could cultivate, receded from Juliet’s vision like an iris effect in a haunted silent film.

Slim noticed the feeling first.

The room felt different somehow when they entered, smaller and darker. No, not smaller, he realized—in fact, larger, but with darkness claiming more of its space.

He paced unsteadily as Brad flipped through the file. His collar felt tight around his neck, so he loosened it. People in this slobby town didn’t seem to wear suits and ties anyway—nothing

more formal than a flannel work shirt. That's the nineties for you, Slim thought. Standards are slipping.

"This is gorgeous," Brad crowed. "I don't believe this. So, what do they think? They were all murdered?"

Slim shrugged. "Well, seems the obvious line, doesn't it?"

"There I was, thinking she was such a sweet old lady."

Slim swallowed. "Say, Brad, you've seen it now. What say we get out of here and get a drink?"

Brad was only shaken from his investigative reverie by the cackling. Then, the wind started up.

The laughter was like nails down a chalkboard, revelling in its malevolent irritation. It echoed down the hall, and the Doctor felt it threw up some kind of barrier around the room. The barrier seemed to drum into his skull as well. The door was locked, of course, but removing the sonic screwdriver from his coat required Herculean concentration, and then its settings seemed to cycle slowly. This was an ordinary Yale lock, and yet its whirs were sounding defeat.

Finally, the door flew open of its own accord. Brad pushed past them, his eyes wide with terror.

"Burr-aaaad...?" Elaine slurred, barely able to turn her head as he raced past them, somehow unaffected by the torpor filling the air.

They entered the room to see a paralysing haze, every sight seeming to hit their eyes a fraction of a second slower than it should.

Elaine and Kaylaar were rooted to the spot, and even the Doctor was wading through this barrier with every effort of his body and mind.

At the foot of the bed, an ornate dagger sticking from his chest, was the suited man, Slim. Climbing out the window was a short, frail man wearing a false beard.

Before the Doctor's world faded to black, he remembered where he had seen the lurid tableau before. It was earlier that day, when he read of the death of shipping magnate Burl Barnabas in *Joyce Mannix Mysteries #21: Money Back Guarantee*.

Chapter Three: The Unusual Suspects

Maggie circled Juliet Bleek's prone body, punching the palm of her hand in worry. What had happened? How had she missed it? What was she to do?

Juliet felt fine—breathing regularly, heart rate normal. If she had not collapsed in such an odd way, with that bitter expression clouding her face, Maggie would have assumed she fainted, or—odd though it sounded—dropped off to sleep.

Watching over her, and debating whether to call an ambulance or just wait for her to come around, Maggie was distracted by a gust close behind her. It felt slighter than a breeze, more like breath on the nape of her neck. She turned to see one of the low projecting beams. But her neck had goose pimples from the sensation.

Along with the breathing, Maggie was sure she heard an almost inhuman rattle of cruel laughter. It sounded like the cold mockery of ... well, a witch frankly.

Then, in a flash, Maggie thought about the Doctor and Kaylaar waiting at her house. This was right up his alley—if not a medical emergency, then the odd behaviour of the author before her collapse.

Ambulance first, Doctor second, she decided. She had picked up the phone when she heard the stentorian voice—a little drowsy—behind her. “What is it, Maggie?”

“Oh!” Maggie put down the phone. For a moment there was a blaze of feral anger in Juliet's eyes, but it quickly passed. “I was worried, since you—”

“I'm just a little tired,” Juliet sighed. “I'm not used to company yet. You have to take these things slowly, don't you? There I am, only freshly moved to Revelstoke and I'm getting talked into meeting the whole village in one day. When I was younger, I had such a gay social life. No, that isn't true. I always hated seeing people, I just seemed to see a lot of them. Not that you weren't—I enjoyed meeting you. It's just... taking some getting used to. Thank you for helping me with it.” She took Maggie's hand again. “But if you don't mind, I should probably turn in.”

“Of course.”

Maggie said goodnight. She hadn't thought she had spent awfully long talking with Juliet—she could still taste Wyn's strong tea and stale biscuits—but night had fallen, and the streets of

Revelstoke were so quiet it could have been the small hours of the morning. This seemed odd, but her senses seemed sluggish somehow, as if everything were hitting her eyes and ears a second late.

Maggie walked back to her house, in a kind of daze herself. She thought no more of the Doctor or Kaylaar, and locked her door, brushed her teeth, and climbed into bed. She was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

In her front room, beside all the piles of *Joyce Mannix Mysteries* her friends had not gotten around to reading, the red light on her answering machine blinked. She had missed a call from the Revelstoke RCMP Station.

“Hey! I want my own cell! I just met these bozos!” Elaine cried as the holding cell door slammed shut.

“Ah, you’ll be all right. Bernie Conway said he’ll be down in a moment to bail you out,” the sergeant barked in withering response.

The Doctor had been surprisingly quiescent when the Revelstoke officers arrived on the scene to find the three of them unconscious, next to the body of the visitor. It was unusual for Kaylaar to be the mouthpiece, and he replied with panic to a standard Earth arrest routine. He repeatedly looked to the Doctor, hoping he might lend some clarity to his and Elaine’s breathless attempted explanations. Elaine Noyce’s rudeness was nothing compared with the police. Having grown particularly frustrated that the Doctor produced no identification nor offered a name, they had shoved the three into the holding cell with prejudice.

“Anyone you want to call to post bail?” Elaine asked Kaylaar.

“Call what?”

“Call? Telephone? ‘Get on the blower?’” she suggested, the last in a mocking Cockney accent. “I don’t think my paper’s budget will spring to three bails. Don’t you have anyone at the BBC you can lean on? What about that tech guy inside your phone box?”

“Maggie Weitz,” the Doctor said. Kaylaar almost jumped at the sound of his voice after such a long, defeated silence. “Do you suppose you could call her, Sergeant? If she isn’t too busy entertaining.” His words were not exactly comforting, sounding distant and sarcastic. The sergeant departed.

When the door shut, the Doctor rose from the bench and gazed intently out the window. “I thought he’d never leave.”

“Doctor, why did you leave me wriggling before the authorities like that?”

“Sorry Kaylaar. I was rather distracted. But then, this whole murder is nothing but a distraction.”

Elaine thought she was cynical, but his callow dismissal of her poor contact’s demise was strikingly brutal. “Who did kill Slim?” Elaine asked.

“Well, in the *Joyce Mannix* story it was Burl Barnabas’s niece Babs.” The Doctor flashed Elaine a self-aware smile. “It may sound trite when I say it like that, but it works quite well on the page, you know. Babs was believed dead earlier, but she’d actually been living incognito as the new owner of the Champlain Falls sawmill.”

“Yes, but that’s fiction,” Kaylaar interrupted. “I’ve only read ten books but even I know that, unlike our sacred prophecies, those things didn’t happen in real life.”

“Yes, but those exact events just did. We saw them. Someone or something brought a scene from the book to life. And that same power disabled my sonic screwdriver and put us all under its

influence.” He chuckled darkly. “Under its spell, you might say. Even my higher faculties were no defence. And even now it’s at work. Kaylaar, you reverted back to your Frenazzi form when we went into that room—I know it’s humanoid, but isn’t it a bit odd that no one has said two words about it? Even Elaine, who met you when you looked human?”

Elaine looked at him and, for the first time, saw his shimmering skin, the rope-like black knots of his hair, and the uncanny glint in his eyes. She was so dumbfounded she didn’t even ask how he had done it, instead asking, “How did I miss that?”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself, Miss Noyce. Next to these inexplicable events, Kaylaar’s shape-changing is—forgive me for saying, old chap—an irrelevant parlour trick. All of that means that compared with whatever force is out there, the inside of this cell is comparatively safe.”

The door jangled open, and the diminutive frame of Bernie Conway poked his head around the door.

“Still no word from Miss Weitz?” the Doctor asked.

“No,” growled the sergeant. “And the inspector got a tip-off about you. Wants me to hold you here so he can interrogate you himself.”

“Does he really?” The Doctor smiled with certifiable enthusiasm. “Well, tell him I’m available any time he’d like. I don’t seem to have much in the calendar for the next little while. Have a good night, Miss Noyce.”

Elaine mechanically wished the Doctor and Kaylaar the same, walking out into the night with Bernie Conway still feeling a sinister enchantment in the air, and wishing, for their safety, that she could stay with these two odd men.

October 16, 1995

Maggie slept in late, and stumbled through a parody of her morning routine. She felt that strange haze that came with too much sleep, as well as a strange weightless feeling that made her wonder whether she was asleep.

She had an odd dream, not a nightmare but not her usual sad reminiscences of Ollie. She dreamt she was in New York with Juliet Bleek. She thought they were being followed. For the first time, she did not reach for him when she awoke. This made her feel guilty.

She felt guiltier still when it was nearly noon and, after a slow breakfast, a second pot of coffee, and a long hot shower, she noticed the answering machine. She looked outside to the TARDIS, still proudly in her front yard, and listened to a call from late last night from a disinterested sergeant, informing her about the arrest of two males (“one, uh, African American with English accent, one ... uh, Cuban maybe?”) of her acquaintance.

As she raced out the door, she remembered the lovely day she had with Juliet Bleek. Something sinister now hung over it, and her serenity had the ugly air of manipulation. And she began to doubt that Juliet was even aware of it.

Superintendent Tornante read the desk sergeant’s report. It was all a lot to happen in sleepy old Revelstoke. But despite being certain that this arrogant English Doctor knew more about it than he was saying, the superintendent wanted to call upon someone who might be a little more

equipped to see the pattern behind this. After all, if you've got a priceless resource in your town like a best-selling crime author, why not use her and save yourself a little aggravation?

Juliet's house was a poky and forbidding cabin, its gables so sharply angled as to look like roof-sized stilettos. It sat on a high, rocky outcropping above the train station. Tornante drove up the winding path from Campbell Avenue. The sun slipped between the opposite mountain peaks, and he realized between those and the massive redwood forest on the other side, the house would never get any sunlight. It must be awfully cold in the winter.

Then Juliet Bleek answered, and he realized a cold house would be no obstacle to this cold woman.

Tornante entered and explained the problem and his suggestion. His wife had told him that she had been brought up in interior British Columbia, but he would never have guessed. She had the sharp clothes and superior manner of a city woman, and the condescension was palpable as she summarized his plea back to him.

"Superintendent, you want me to help you look into this crime?"

"Well, Miss Bleek, I wouldn't ask, but you are so admired—by my wife, and many people in the town, actually. I hear your last book spent twenty-seven weeks on the bestseller list."

"Not admired by you?" She arched her eyebrow inquisitively.

"I spend my spare time reading fishing magazines, Miss Bleek. But between that, and the scene's... staged quality... particularly its resemblance to your books?"

"You have a man in custody, I believe? The Doctor?"

The superintendent nodded. "Yes, a Doctor somebody-or-other was found at the scene."

"Keep your efforts focussed on him. If my hunch is right, he's not what he seems."

"So this Slim guy died because he had dirt on Juliet Bleek?"

Elaine shrugged as Bernie Conway relit his cigar stub. The rich plumes of smoke made her nauseous. She had slept poorly and gotten up to drive around and search for Brad Gill. But she put aside her feelings, as the editor had provided her with a ride home on top of the bail.

"I guess that makes her the number one suspect. Especially given this connection with one of her books. You ever read any of 'em? I can never really get into fiction."

"I'm a speculative girl myself." Off Bernie's blank look, Elaine continued: "Ursula Le Guin? S.F.?" Bernie's eyes further glazed over. "Spaceships and aliens?" she finally, desperately offered.

Bernie emitted an ugly noise and waved his cigar with the utmost derision, as if to banish the entire genre from his consideration.

"As to Juliet Bleek being guilty, unless anyone saw her leave that tea party Brad's aunt organized to put on a false beard, she's got an alibi." Elaine and Bernie glanced at each other. "Well, aren't you going to say it?"

Bernie waved his cigar again, some stray ash smouldering on his bench seat. "Nah. Say what?"

But he knew what, although he still rolled his eyes as Elaine said it. "Maybe someone else is acting out her mysteries to put the blame on her? Or send her some kind of message?" She pressed her knuckles against Bernie's desk. "Are you sure you can't bail out those two Limeys?"

"What am I, made of money? The BBC can bail 'em out, surely."

Elaine grimaced and turned away from him. “It definitely goes back to whatever dirt Slim brought me for my sleazy exposé. We’ve got to find Brad.”

“Yeah, very unlike the kid to run away like that. He’s a lot of things, but I’d never take him for a murderer or a coward.”

With a sad nod, Elaine said, “But now he might be both.” She headed to the door, grabbing her jacket. “Do you still know that guy down at the morgue?”

Maggie had never posted bail before. She didn’t know how much to bring. Did the police take credit cards?

She arrived at the unassuming brick building on Campbell Avenue, and upon introducing herself, the desk sergeant let loose a groan from his diaphragm. Maggie was sure it was a sigh many evildoers across time and space would share upon hearing mention of ‘the Doctor’.

“You got some funny friends, Miss Weitz. No ID, no answering for themselves, and a lot of wise-ass answers. I’m guessing he and that reporter friend of his aren’t local.”

As she nodded, Maggie guiltily recalled her little pang of relief at being able to go to Wyn’s tea party without them. It was all very well having them around when she was out of her depth in the distant past or on some far-flung alien world, but in ‘her’ world, she thought, they were a little larger-than-life, a little hard to contain.

Maggie Weitz, she admonished herself in her mother’s voice, what a terrible way to treat your friends.

The sergeant returned, but his gait was different—stiffer and less natural. He locked eyes with Maggie and lit up in joy. Maggie jumped in shock to see the policeman’s doughy features shimmer and melt away to reveal Kaylaar.

“I’m getting rather good at policemen,” he said proudly.

Behind him the Doctor bounded out, taking Maggie by the hands as they ran out into the morning air of Revelstoke’s Main Street. They found a secluded table in the Conversations Café. Maggie thought they would, or should, be furtive and eager to stay out of sight, but the Doctor was garrulous with the owner as he ordered a conspicuous breakfast banquet of cappuccinos and blueberry muffins.

But as Maggie looked around the café, she saw that there was little point in subterfuge. The locals were going through the motions, drinking their coffees by rote, nodding conversations in disinterested monotones. Her home had turned into a mere background for insanity. Though she was standing in it, looking at it with her own eyes, Maggie’s world now seemed no more real than that New England village of Champlain Cove she knew so well from Juliet Bleek’s novels. Did something bitter inside Maggie resent the Doctor, blame him for visiting this madness on her home? Of course not. She didn’t know where that thought came from, and instead felt moved at the Doctor, clutching her arm with relief.

“Maggie, in case I didn’t mention it earlier, it is good to see you.”

“Doctor, I’m sorry I didn’t come earlier. I can’t quite explain it, but I was in this odd, kind of, trance or something last night.”

“Spending time with Juliet Bleek, I hope?”

“Yes, how did you—?”

“We saw a man murdered, and if my hunch is correct, Juliet Bleek knows something about it.”

“But if she was with me when this happened, how—?”

“She’s even giving herself an alibi. It’s almost too perfect!” the Doctor chuckled to himself. “But you see Maggie, even if she didn’t stab him personally, Juliet Bleek enabled it, oversaw the man’s death. And she’s going to follow it up by getting us, or rather me, blamed for it. So my theory is that whatever is behind her learned about me through you.” He waggled his long index finger at Maggie’s inarticulate protests. “Not willingly of course, but... what did you do?”

“She took me back to her place to show me her... vegetable marrows.” As the Doctor and Kaylaar scratched their heads, Maggie recounted her odd moment of unconsciousness, and how after she woke, Maggie went home and passed an odd night as if hypnotized.

Their breakfast consumed, they headed back out to Main Street. Maggie had to stop the Doctor in his defiant march, in the broadest October afternoon daylight. “Shouldn’t we be keeping a lower profile?”

“Not at all Maggie! I suspect the local constabulary will have enough on their hands with the jewel thief of San Pedro, Duchess Daisy Daniels, Billy ‘the Squid’ Calamari... need I go on?”

“Those are all supporting characters in Joyce Mannix books,” Kaylaar stated, more for his own benefit than his friends’.

“Yes, and while we were in our cell this morning, we heard reports of people matching their descriptions around town.”

“Like in the café earlier... those patrons looked like they were zombies. What is it, Doctor? Aliens? Turning Revelstoke into a Joyce Mannix book?”

“It’s all too personal for that. Juliet Bleek has some kind of control over it, perhaps not consciously, but... Kaylaar, we need to find Brad Gill.”

Maggie snapped her fingers. “Her aunt is Wyn Kolchak. I was just at her house yesterday!”

“Jolly good! Can you find it, Kaylaar? It’s imperative we know what was in those documents Slim brought to town.”

Kaylaar nodded and breathlessly sprinted up the road. Maggie noticed again that no one paid his golden skin or statuesque form any mind as he headed past. Hell, even the running should have occasioned some comment in this slow-paced town.

She followed the Doctor into an alley. She had been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn’t recognized it until she looked it up and down.

“Where the hell? Are we behind the police station?”

“Breaking into the morgue of course.”

“Oh right. Stupid of me to ask. So it’s not bad enough that you broke out of prison?” Maggie retorted sharply. “A crime to which, by the way, I’m an accessory? Now we have to go grave-robbing too?”

“What if I told you the victim had some information about Juliet Bleek and was stabbed with an Asian dagger? *And* that we saw a small person with a beard jump out the window?”

“*Joyce Mannix Mysteries* number twenty-one?” Maggie blurted in recognition. “*Money Back Guarantee?*” Maggie’s shoulders sagged as she surrendered to the curiosity the Doctor had so expertly piqued. “OK, what’s a few years in prison? Lead the way.”

They found the window unusually easy to force, and the damage caused the Doctor to suspect that Elaine Noyce was following the same line of investigation, and the thought of what she might find in the morgue made him quicken his pace.

Classic Revelstoke, Elaine thought as she prised open the door to the morgue. Everyone skipped out of work early. If she were such a clock-watcher, when would she ever catch a scoop?

In a way, this made her job easier. Bernie's contact at the morgue was one of those cocksure career men who could only communicate with a girl (and of course, she was always a girl to him) by flirting. She wondered how many dates she had made with the man just to get a sight of some unfortunate tourist who had been mauled by a bear.

She always took such morbid tasks in her stride, Elaine thought sadly. With the shadow of Juliet Bleek and whatever dirt that man had died bringing to her, she irresistibly considered that train of thought Bernie Conway had found so ridiculous: how very like some murder mystery this whole thing was. And yet, at the same time, it *wasn't*, for she grew increasingly doubtful, the more she investigated, that it would have a straightforward solution. Especially with that oddball BBC Doctor in the mix.

When she had visited to see that poor tourist, the morgue had been sterile and un-atmospheric, no different from an examining room. Tonight, bereft of its attendant, it seemed to be occupied with a ghostly fog. Elaine's skin went goose-pimpled at the random distant clangs and the electric on-off sizzle of malfunctioning lights.

Close behind, suddenly and terrifyingly near, she was certain she heard a shrill, malevolent cackle. She stopped short of screaming when she lurched backward and collided with a familiar coat: ankle-length, deep emerald green, and made of soft cashmere. Looking at her searchingly with his sensitive brown eyes, the Doctor gave her shoulder a gauche slap.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said wryly.

"Tell me you heard that," she pleaded, a little embarrassed to be seen so panicked by the Doctor, now with a frizzy-haired woman in her thirties (presumably Maggie Weitz).

"Was it a—kind of— 'witch's cackle'?" Maggie asked, her voice adding disbelieving quotation marks to the last two words. Elaine confirmed that it was, and Maggie sighed in relief. "So I'm not crazy—I heard it too, at Juliet's house."

The cackle began again, and even the Doctor tensed at the sudden noise. At this moment, they became aware of a fourth person in the room. How they gained this awareness was difficult for any of them to put their fingers on, since there were no tell-tale signs of life—breathing, the sound of footsteps, the animating presence a person transmits. This fifth intruder in the morgue was bloodless, soulless.

The dim halogen illuminated the figure, and the Doctor, Maggie, and Elaine did everything they could to maintain their composure at the sight. It was Elaine's informant, Slim, but his sallow and stubbly face was now replaced by a doll-like shine.

The Doctor swallowed. "It certainly is busy in this morgue. Slim, old chap, how are you? I must say you look a little peaky."

He staggered toward them, and so transfixed were they at his progress that they did not even notice the fifth presence in the Revelstoke Morgue, watching them relentlessly and with grim satisfaction: the same presence who had been laughing so mirthlessly.

Chapter Four: Juliet Bleek's Muse

New York, 14 September 1989

Of course, Juliet Bleek thought, Zoe would have picked this restaurant. It was typical of her extravagant lack of taste: ridiculous prices, lacklustre presentation, and the hollow cachet of being surrounded by a bunch of celebrities Juliet didn't recognize.

Not that Juliet was cheap, nor did she worry about paying the bill. But it was the kind of punishment Zoe joyfully meted out. *You're my mother, and I hate spending time with you. So if we're going to do it, you're going to have to pay for the privilege.*

Juliet nursed an indifferent Nicoise salad and Perrier, and the size of the portion gave her ample time to contemplate the feast Zoe had treated herself to. Sauce from the duck confit dribbled down the young woman's face—she had inherited her father's ruddy complexion, Juliet noted cattily—and the red wine she drank with abandon only enhanced this glow.

"Just so we're clear," Zoe finally said, "there's no chance of him ever coming back. Just like Dad."

"Zoe, I've explained that—"

"And you *know* I've tried to understand you," Zoe replied hotly. "And I do feel for you. But don't you see how ridiculous it is. We're not in the Middle Ages, Mom. Look around, it's New York, it's the eighties! I can't live my life believing in this fairy-tale from your childhood. And worse, I can't have it influence my life. And if you're in my life, *it* is too. Right?"

The presence watched Zoe walk away. Juliet cursed her daughter for being so oblivious to its arcane power. Nowhere, not even New York in the eighties, was too far for its reach. But then, it was her fault. All her life, Juliet had brought the malignity with her.

And it ultimately needed her as much as she did it. So though Zoe was daring to tempt its power, though it could with a wave banish her to the same nowhere as all the others, Juliet

apologized to it for her daughter. But she also knew that she would have to stay away if she wanted her daughter to remain safe.

You've cursed me to be alone, she told it when she looked in the mirror.

You're not alone, it replied. You have me. Just like you've had since you were ten years old, when I took care of your father. Why do you upset yourself by living in this cold soulless city? Why don't you move back somewhere that means something to you? Those old, mysterious forests in British Columbia. Full of secrets.

Juliet Bleek sat in darkness. It was afternoon, and she had promised herself she would look over her latest manuscript. She didn't want to think of this anymore.

Yet, her omnipresent friend was insisting, this Doctor makes it essential.

"Well," she said aloud, seething, "what can anyone do about the Doctor when all these things from my books are happening?"

That is your fault, the presence rasped in retaliation. Your control over the barrier has been slipping lately.

"Perhaps we can solve the problem here and now." Juliet picked up her phone and dialed the emergency line to the RCMP. Tornante himself answered. "Those reports you've been receiving. Ignore them, Superintendent. You need to find the Doctor."

"The Doctor, but he's—"

"He's escaped. From what I've heard, he's quite good at that."

When she hung up, Juliet sat at her creaking leather armchair and looked at the blank computer screen. She had hung on to typewriters for too long, but one couldn't fight the tide of modernity.

But her next adventure with Joyce Mannix still did not come into focus. All she could see was that lanky journalist, Wyn's nephew, pacing up and down in his aunt's cellar. And the handsome alien was coming to get him.

"Why didn't Maggie bring you 'round yesterday, Mister Larr?" Wyn asked the handsome young man who nervously entered her front room.

"Oh... I think she was a little embarrassed by us," he replied sheepishly. "We don't know the ways of your people."

"We're very welcoming, I'll see to that myself." This young man enchanted her—Cale Larr, he said his name was. She particularly admired his eyes—a bright gold. Along with the glisten on his skin, she sensed something exotic, perhaps South American. The formal way he spoke also indicated that. "Why don't you come in?"

"I'm looking for your nephew, Mrs. Kolchak. Brad Gill?" Those golden eyes probed the space, losing their friendliness as Cale's purpose became clear.

Wyn frowned slightly. "I... I haven't seen him since he came around yesterday."

"Mrs. Kolchak, I know he's frightened, but I want to help."

She wanted to believe him, but Brad had been so insistent.

Neither of them could continue the dance of deception before another knock came at the door. "Anybody home?" a thick Brooklyn accent drawled.

“That’s funny...” Wyn said to herself. Then the stranger pushed her to the ground. She smarted from the violent act, but then caught her breath altogether when a hail of bullets studded the front windows.

“What the—?” she panted, breaths coming fitfully through a fog of panic.

“Your nephew!” Cale cried. “We’ll draw whoever that is away from here, keep you safe!”

She pointed up to the attic, unable to speak. As Cale bounded up the stairs, the door was kicked in. A gangster—literally from the pages of pulp fiction in loud pinstripes and fedora, clutching a tommy-gun even—stepped carelessly through Wyn’s front room and followed him up. And amazingly, her visitor was right. He hadn’t seemed to even notice her.

A few seconds later, she heard the sound of an engine starting. Wyn crawled over to the window and saw a Revelstoke RCMP cruiser tear down the road. Cale was driving and Brad was in its passenger seat. They must have jumped out the upstairs window, she realized, as she hadn’t seen them go by. It was like some movie.

No, she thought to herself. The gangster was in no movie. He was in a book—a Joyce Mannix mystery. As Wyn looked around the rubble of her front room, she felt so detached from reality that the only tangible emotion she could hold on to was a spiky note of pettiness.

“All those Sunday tea parties, and this is how Juliet repays me!”

“I hope,” Maggie cried out through ragged breaths as she ran the gauntlet away from the morgue, “that was worth it!”

She was now sprinting ahead of the Doctor, who brought up the rear as they took flight from the lurching parody of Slim, staggering towards them, a low groan emanating from his doll-smooth face. Not quite a groan, Maggie thought; a kind of hum, with a musical cadence.

She had grown no better at sprinting since she began her travels with the Doctor. Infuriatingly, neither he nor Kaylaar ever seemed to run out of breath: it must be some kind of alien thing, she thought. This time, Elaine too ran without much apparent effort.

Maggie could hardly fail to notice how she seemed to relish the Doctor’s company, though he seemed as ever naively oblivious to her interest. As he replied to her, the tails of his coat fluttering seeming to tickle the outstretched arms of their pursuer, he seemed unconcerned about their present predicament, instead lost in thought.

“Hm? Oh yes, Maggie, as a matter of fact. I’m rather glad Slim isn’t as dead as we thought. Definitely fits with my theories—yike!” He jumped as Slim’s possessed hand flailed to grab him.

They barred the door of the morgue as they emerged into daylight, but no sooner had they caught their breath than an overweight iron-haired officer—Superintendent Tornante, Elaine identified—stepped toward them, hands on his hips, declaring, “Doctor! You’re under arrest!”

The Doctor backed away, and to their amazement Tornante’s police cruiser raced from the other end of the alley. Its driver cranked its handbrake.

Brad Gill sat in the passenger seat, his eyes still as wide as they had been the previous night.

The driver, Kaylaar, leaned out the window and bellowed, “Get in! Quickly!”

As they squealed away, Maggie considered whether this too had featured in a Joyce Mannix mystery, and noted with concern that she couldn’t tell anymore.

They drove by Maggie's house, hoping to get to the TARDIS, but the superintendent had anticipated that and stationed two officers in the yard. It was funny how unnatural it was to see the supposed police box with actual policemen around it, Maggie thought.

This refuge cut off, they crossed the bridge and found themselves in the side road leading up to the dam. With the car stopped, Brad clutched at the Doctor's sleeve. "I tell you, first she came for my article, and now I can't sleep, I hear it all around. That damned, unending cackling..."

The Doctor sighed. "Brad, do you still have Slim's folder?"

He laughed, the pitch alarmingly like the witch-cackle. "To think I thought that was worth all this... seeing him die like that... Doctor, it's Juliet Bleek." He clawed at the Doctor's arm, his fingers running up and down the coat sleeve desperately. "She's behind it, I tell you..."

"You're quite right Brad. But the documents?"

"What good are they Doctor? No chance I'll ever get to write this up... no chance it can protect me..."

"Something in those documents made it necessary to kill Slim and try to kill you. I need to know where all this started."

Brad's gaze glazed over, settling vacantly on a distant point. The Doctor, frustrated with his frailty, patted him down like an overzealous airport official. He looked over at them, self-conscious. "Why don't you three get out and keep a look out for the law enforcement? I assume Revelstoke, charmingly bucolic though it is, can run to more than one police car."

Maggie looked up at the bridge. This road led back to the Trans-Canada Highway. Going west, you reached Vancouver, going east Alberta—here there was little of the town square's nonsense charm, and only a few forlorn motels. Most of all, every building was easy to see from the road, as were they. Revelstoke's few streets were easy to cover, and a dedicated police force could no doubt find them quickly. Luckily, manhunts were a little outside their purview. But unluckily, their surroundings offered far fewer hiding places than a city.

"I wish we could all change shape," she muttered ruefully to Kaylaar.

"I don't suppose you're going to explain how you *do* that?" Elaine asked, keeping one eye on the Doctor as he flipped from paper to paper.

"Just the way I was born," he admitted with a modest shrug.

The Doctor emitted a triumphant yawp of laughter, and Elaine, ever dedicated to her story, ducked back in to the car. Brad still sat staring ahead blankly, oblivious to the unbuttoned shirt that told the tale of Slim's hidden papers.

"So what have we got?"

The Doctor had spread them across the back seat, in an attempt to sort them into chronological order. They were a mixture of police reports and newspaper clippings. There was a browning brochure for a funfair travelling through the Pacific Northwest and southern British Columbia in 1947. Next to it, a 1970s photo of Juliet Bleek, staring down the barrel of the camera and radiating a dark, dangerous beauty, next to the headline: "THE CASE OF THE MYSTERY AUTHOR'S HUSBAND".

"Her father disappears in 1947," Elaine muttered as she followed the Doctor's pattern of reading. "Then her husband?"

"Then look at this one." He passed her the police report, dated 1989. "Missing person ..."
She frowned. "So who's this Greg Tiller?"

"Engaged to her daughter," he said.

From then, Juliet Bleek went off the radar for a few years (“BEST-SELLING MISTRESS OF MYSTERY ELUDES PUBLISHERS”), a disappearing act luridly compared to Agatha Christie’s in 1926, before turning up in Revelstoke a few months earlier.

As the Doctor and Elaine dispassionately absorbed this information, Maggie looked over their shoulders, guiltily thinking of their conversation the previous night, and Juliet telling her why she had moved to Revelstoke. Here she was, giving so much joy to millions of readers through her writing, when her personal life was filled with all this misery. The most miserable, somehow, was that first account of her missing father. Maggie read through the ancient interview, clearly cut from the time. “A total mental breakdown followed by abandoning the mother and daughter? I had no idea of any of this.”

“And Slim made notes here. He’s been reading up on her his whole life!” The Doctor nodded approvingly. “A meticulous researcher, I must say.”

“There’s more sources than peeping at keyholes,” Elaine noted.

“If he ever recovers, he might write an interesting exposé.”

“If he recovers...?” Maggie felt a little disturbed at the Doctor’s continued complacency about all this. Even Brad, sitting near-catatonic in the driver’s seat, was treated as an encumbrance, with the Doctor irritably pulling at papers he happened to be sitting on.

“All in good time, Maggie. Her control can be broken, I’m sure of it.” His eyes gleamed as he turned back to Maggie. “And you are just the person to do it!”

“Me?”

He took her hand. “She made a genuine connection with you, Maggie.”

“Which you want me to exploit...”

“It’s not like that, Maggie. I—I want to help her, you must believe me.”

“As long as you think we *can* help her.”

“Meaning?”

“Do you promise you’re not going to... zap her with your sonic screwdriver, or disintegrate her to dust, or shove her into a... parallel universe.”

He shook his head. “None of those things. Promise. I think we can resolve this, and I want to do it without ‘zapping’. But one thing’s for certain, I absolutely can’t do it without you. Please, Maggie.”

Juliet Bleek left her house, feeling the odd stillness inside her house spill out to the streets, surrounding her, as if she were walking in the eye of a great storm. It had never been like this before. Why was it becoming so hard to control?

Zoe knew enough about it to never want to see Juliet again. If Juliet could have kept her daughter and banished *it*, the malignant force in her life, she gladly would have done so, though Juliet knew her daughter wouldn’t believe her when she said as much. And anyway, there was no getting rid of it now. Without understanding it, she had come to... know it somehow. And it had, in its own way, tried to help her. She would never have been able to write with such concentration without that windfall from her husband’s death. And even apart from not liking Zoe’s choice of boyfriend, that insufferable Greg was looking for dirt, she was sure. The problem was there wasn’t enough concrete evidence to convince Zoe. Juliet could never let anyone get too close, a lesson she forgot with that silly interview with Wyn’s nephew. Even though it wouldn’t have harmed anyone, she knew her muse would seek him out and never let his article be published. All because

she hadn't wanted it. Yes, that mystical calm that hung over her like a cloud just now—though she hated it, it knew her like no one else did, and its actions had formed the spine of her entire life.

Maggie was now deep in the old-growth forest that fed into Mount Begbie. Here in the woods, that presence in her life was most at home. She found its laughter chiming with the winds rustling through the trees, and she knew it had lived here long before men and women visited. The Native tribes seldom settled here for long, passing in their lore tales of the ageless forces that enchanted these woods, and they knew better than to disturb them. Why, Juliet wondered, had her father thought he could know different?

She turned away from the natural to the man-made. She had arrived at the Revelstoke Canyon Dam. How long had she been walking? She lost track of time, allowed herself to get lost in her thoughts amid the ageless quiet of the old growth forest. In the dam, too, she heard the music of nature, the infinite rumble of water, against which the mockery of her watcher blended, yet clashed.

Standing at one end of the dam's shallow ring was Maggie. Juliet took a few steps forward, wanting to hold her new friend close, but then she stopped when she saw the Doctor.

Kaylaar stood outside Brad's car, every so often shooting a glance inside for signs of movement.

"It's like sleeping sickness," Elaine said, frustrated.

He nodded, and offered an example from his own world—the deep trances sometimes entered as a result of a taxing telepathic commune.

"Not only is paralysis common, but those unschooled in form control are apt to blend in with their surroundings. It's sometimes quite a challenge to find the afflicted student."

Elaine nodded slowly, deciding that no amount of follow-up questions could explain all that detail. After today, she would have difficulty keeping track of what was too far-fetched.

Kaylaar continued talking, but with a sudden jolt, she realized she was in the middle of something else inexplicable.

The sound of his speech had cut out suddenly. No words were coming from his mouth. In their place there was a loud, rushing sound of water. Kaylaar heard it too, and now ceased his unheard communication, a flush of copper darkening his golden cheeks.

Elaine looked in the car, and was startled, yet unsurprised, to see that it was empty.

"It took Brad!" she mimed.

The sound grew louder.

"Whatever this thing is, it's coming for us!" she bellowed, but the words came out as more rushing water.

Then it grew maddeningly loud, and Elaine put her hands to her ears. She was alone. Kaylaar had vanished right in front of her.

Then, the noise rose again, and the forest was entirely empty.

Maggie paced down the dam, approaching Juliet with her hands outstretched. She tried not to look over the edge. This dam always freaked her out and she avoided visiting it. She feared something more than just falling over the edge.

“Maggie,” Juliet said warmly, taking the young woman’s hand. She was so like Zoe. Perhaps she didn’t need her daughter’s forgiveness if she could have this woman as a substitute. Was that her thinking that? Surely she had more attachment to her own flesh and blood?

No... that was *it*. And all it wanted was for her to remain under its thrall. She was mad, the rage practically a wall of red over her eyes. But Juliet did not want to be mad at dear Maggie Weitz. The only woman in this silly small place who could understand the sadness and the scale of horror that lurked outside while all she wanted was to live a normal life. Instead, she had to content herself with the trappings of success, the enormous but hollow pay-off for a life of such solitude.

Maybe Maggie could help her get through this, she thought for a second, but banished the thought just as quickly, worried that *it* would lock onto the thought and expel Maggie the same way it had her father and husband.

She willed herself to look past Maggie, and saw the Doctor. Try as she might, she softened toward him. She did not see what her muse saw in him. He was not so alien, so hostile. He looked sympathetic, concerned about her.

Ignore that, the cackle declared. We know him. We have seen him jump about from time to time, as casually as you walked to this reservoir. You mean nothing to him. No one on this planet could. He has seen such sights.

Maggie could hear these thoughts, and shivered at the realization that the Doctor was right. Somehow this malignancy got inside Juliet’s head and entirely distorted her mind, her whole life lived out in its sad shadow. Against that, her skill and success seemed feeble and incomplete. And in the wake of that, their own recently struck friendship seemed an insincere, tactical betrayal. She looked back, feeling like a traitor to her alien friend. But the Doctor looked placidly on at the scene, willing her on in her task.

“The Doctor and I want to help you,” Maggie began.

Juliet looked away from these two benign souls, clutching at her closed eyes with her hands. “No! I can’t trust him. He’s an alien, he’s an enemy, he doesn’t want what we want.”

“You’re wrong. The Doctor isn’t like that.”

Juliet approached her, and even though neither woman spoke loudly, this connection meant that even above the roar of the reservoir, they could hear each other.

“Please Miss Bleek—Juliet. Whatever this thing is, it’s not good for you. It’s hurting you.”

“Maggie, you’ve read my books. I thought you knew me better...” Better even than Zoe, she thought, but it was an unworthy and painful thought, which she banished in shame. “I don’t know what I would be without it.”

“You’d be just as good. You don’t need it to be the writer I love. Tell her Doctor!”

She heard nothing. A blinding flash of panic filled Maggie’s heart, stopped her breath. She looked back for the Doctor, but he was no longer there.

The Doctor closed his eyes for a second. Somehow watching Juliet Bleek talk with Maggie was straining his concentration.

Focus, Doctor, he commanded himself. But even hearing them speak became harder, the rushing of the waterfall ever louder in his ears. Indeed, after a few moments the endless torrent of water was all he could hear.

Something like sleep was pulling him away from the moment. The Doctor knew what malign influence was at the back of it. He opened his eyes, only to find water all around him, leaping onto the surface of the dam and carrying him away.

Maggie's breath caught in her throat. She had taken for granted that the Doctor would be there to protect her, she had callously not thought for a moment that he might need her to protect him.

Juliet was unmoved by his disappearance. "He's being taken care of, Maggie."

"How can you say it like that? So coldly, so callously? If anything's happened to the Doctor..." She felt he must still be alive, but seeing the damp patches on the concrete walkway drained her optimism. "You'll be responsible for his death just like those other ones."

"There were no other deaths," Juliet replied, so innocently that Maggie was further sickened.

"How can you be so careless of life and death? Does living with this thing, this whatever-it-is in your head, make you lose sight of the most important..."

"No, Maggie!" she protested. "They're all there. Slim, my husband, even my father... they're on the other side of the barrier. And the Doctor is there with them."

Chapter Five: Over the Rainbow

Many centuries of high-stress adventure had left the Doctor mistrustful of sleep. Oh, he certainly didn't mind the odd forty winks every century or so, but all too often sleep came as an unwanted result of a knock over the head, a drugged cup of tea, a mind control beam, or some other incapacitation. Why, even his present incarnation had suffered what amounted to a century of enforced sleep, passing his days as a simple fisherman Theo with no memory of his real life. Then, too, his mind distrusted the contentment, could not handle the strain of relaxation, and accordingly haunted his sleeping moments with the visions that brought Maggie Weitz into his life².

Still, at least the Doctor was prepared. Surrounded by darkness and lacking any kind of sensory input, he rooted through his mind for the last definite memory. He was standing on the Revelstoke Dam, watching Maggie and Juliet speak. Then, his senses were primed to notice anything amiss, but it seemed an altogether ordinary afternoon. Their conversation, too, was ordinary, but it was only as they spoke that the Doctor found the words increasingly difficult to make out, the rushing waves from the nearby waterfall cascading more loudly in his ears. Soon that was all he could hear, and then he felt himself carried away in their sweep.

Yet he didn't feel like he was drowning. He wasn't even wet. But, now that he was more attuned to the moment, he did realize he could feel a rushing sensation. Not that of navigating strong waters, but of flying through the air. And yet, for all the movement, there was a paradoxical stasis.

Around him, the darkness filled in. It was not the kind of view that could be processed by rods and cones, but needed the heightened awareness of a time sensitive. And as such, the only visible parts of this domain were a sensory overload of vivid colour: a cold horizon of electric blue, billions of bolts of lightning illuminating it in a kaleidoscopic rainbow, with a brilliant silver jewel at its centre, infinitely distant.

The Doctor felt it only briefly before realizing he had been flung headlong into that mysterious void where time and space were one. He was moving through the time vortex. And, he noted ruefully, he most definitely did not have a parachute.

² See *The Doctor Who Project: 'The 108-Year Hitch'*.

In this darkness he sensed other, more fragile beings. Here was a human from the 1940s—a man he tentatively guessed was Juliet Bleek's father. He also felt the essences of Slim, Kaylaar, and Elaine Noyce in here. They considered themselves damned, and this a kind of Purgatory. Unable to help them, nor even to contact them beyond feeling their presence, the Doctor was in no position to disagree with them.

And the spark of malevolence that he sensed hanging above Juliet Bleek was here with him. What in the innocuous daylight of Revelstoke seemed a mere vague portent, a 'bad vibe' even, was on this side of oblivion an all-encompassing nightmare. He wondered if she felt it this intensely. If she did, she must have incredible fortitude to have kept composed all these years.

He was in no immediate danger, so he floated amiably in the nothingness, gently inquiring (without, in this realm, the need to resort to speech; there was no atmosphere for words to be heard in anyway) who it was and where it came from. Their minds were linked, and he could feel it bristle at the inquiry.

He would get no answers, to be sure. But with his mind open to the intelligence, he saw the briefest glimpse of Revelstoke, as it was in 1886. He remembered that visit, in the synaptic chaos just after his regeneration, when the TARDIS collided with the Lifeship *Miracle*.

The Doctor smiled, happy to at least get some possible closure on that little mystery. The *Miracle*'s computer had attained some kind of sentience thanks to something it had encountered in the time vortex. It seemed highly likely that this entity was what it had encountered.

In the blink of an eye, it was decades later. Two young people, full of the *joie de vivre* of the recently married, now had to say goodbye. The Doctor could see from the green serge uniform that the man was heading off to war—the Second World War, he estimated.

Now that man was racing through Dresden, surrounded by hails of bullets and bombs, his surroundings nothing but grey rubble. For some reason, this entity had followed him. It seemed to gain some twisted pleasure from pulling at humans like a demented puppeteer.

For now the man was returning, his war fought and won. But the price he paid was his soul. And a little girl watched sadly at the change. The Doctor recognized her as Juliet Bleek, just ten years old.

The Doctor burned with rage at the poor humans this presence had toyed with so callously. It sensed his hostility, and mocked it, knowing that while it had him at bay in here, he had no power to stop it. In here, it had so much power and what little the Doctor had was not enough.

A sickening jolt of movement surrounded the Doctor. The light show was slowing, the end of the tunnel neared with sudden speed. The symbolism was hardly appropriate. What lurked beyond was no divine afterlife, but obliteration, eternity spent in undying agony.

The Doctor had to get away from all this, and fast. He may not have the innate ability, but he had learned about surviving outside linear time incalculable centuries ago. As a youth, he had spent a considerable period in the Quantocks, his studies including the ancient and potentially suicidal art of vortex swimming.

There was a world of difference between the calm meditations of the Qualactin mystics, and being dumped head-first into the void by a malevolent writer's block. But the principle was sound enough, relying as much on mental balance, and inner serenity, as physical ability. Attaining and maintaining that balance, of course, was the maddening heart of the challenge. The Doctor had learned more about being a Time Lord in that one sojourn than a lifetime of temporal theory lectures at the Prydon Academy.

The Doctor closed his eyes—not literally of course, but he at least summoned a concentration that dismissed the maelstrom around him from his consideration. A face from his

past, who meant a great deal to him, filled the Doctor's perception. It took considerable effort for him to stop the myriad gears of his mind whirring, suspend his instinct to out-think, outwit. This required no action, no thought at all.

The young Doctor, who as a young acolyte had always been too eager to move on and became so easily frustrated with anything too simple. He distrusted its simplicity as deeply as he did a good night's sleep.

In spite of that, the Qualactin mystics had never lost faith in him, knowing that it would come, as it did to all minds who sought its wisdom with purity and sincerity.

The Doctor thought it was difficult when he was young, but now the difficulty seemed to have increased tenfold. Tenfold, he thought, quite literally: attaining serenity became so much harder with the inevitable chaos of ten separate lifetimes mingling in his brain.

But, thinking not of the urgency that he escape or the impossibility of defeating his opponent, but instead simply allowing that face from long ago to stay foremost in his thoughts, the Doctor slowly inched toward the suspension he sought.

When his restless mind finally stilled, and he reached that serene moment, he was able to move. This was the simplest and hardest part of the entire process, to move one's mind and body through the depthless infinity. His left arm windmilled. He felt movement. He kicked out with his legs.

More movement!

He took another powerful lunge with his right arm.

The two Revelstoke RCMP constables were growing impatient. There was tension in the air, invisible but as noticeable as the increased pressure that preceded a storm. But despite all that, they were stuck outside some lady's ill-tended front yard, pacing around a blue box.

"It isn't even the Super who wants us to do this. It's that mystery writer."

They both narrowed their eyes at Juliet Bleek's house, looking down from the upper hillside where foothills gave way to Mount Begbie. The prominent prow of its gable seemed to look down its nose at them.

"Figures. Some writers like her spends all her time writing about us as flatfoots, but soon as something mysterious happens, we're supposed to listen to her? That Super."

The younger constable wrinkled his nose. "Do you think it should be 'flatfoots'? Or 'flatfeet'?"

Scowling at the junior officer, the older constable went to his cruiser to radio in—hoping against hope that they might get the all-clear. After the aimless silence of the last twenty minutes, the noise behind them, when it came, caused both of the burly men to jump, nearly out of their skins.

With the irrational trumpeting of stampeding elephants, the box behind them was enveloped in blue mist, and groaned its way into thin air.

With the box dematerialized, the constables stood rooted on the spot for a long time. "Well," the younger one finally said, "I guess we're off the hook on this."

"This, maybe... but what about them?"

Turning to answer his slack-jawed colleague, the young constable found a slow-burning dread replacing his shock at the police box's disappearance. A crowd of strange characters—a man with a false beard, a caricatured Indian prince with jewelled turban, a leather-jacketed 1930s

airplane pilot, a regal-looking society lady in mink and silk—were shambling toward them. At the head of this ludicrous yet haunting parade shambled the man from the morgue, Slim, the ornate handle of the knife that killed him still stubbornly protruding from his chest.

Juliet Bleek's voice remained eerily calm as she stared out at the Columbia River's white-capped waves and told Maggie her odd tale. "It's been important all my life, Maggie. It doesn't act wantonly. It only takes away people who stand in the way of my success."

"And the Doctor?"

"He's safe, Maggie. They're all safe."

Maggie tried to ignore the insistent way Juliet kept repeating her name. Wherever they were, she could help them more by staying on the author's good side.

"And now, the rest of Revelstoke will join them." In her mind's eye, Juliet could see her characters, alive and walking through suburban Revelstoke. Those two policemen would be the first. Then Revelstoke, and then... well, there was no limit. "Human lives, my muse has realized, are so frustrating. They don't tell a story. They're inconclusive. At first it was content to gain its satisfaction through my work." She emitted a self-deprecating chuckle. "It was not just my muse, it was my first real fan. Do you know how many writers would kill to know such success could be theirs? But it has this power, Maggie. A power that has only grown through my life. By being so close to me, it has found a way to make my world real. Make this world the world I created."

"Is that what you want, Juliet?"

Juliet looked at her. She answered, "Yes." But the plea in her eye told Maggie it wasn't her who was saying it.

Maggie's next concern was that the Revelstoke Canyon Dam began to blur out of her vision.

Colonel Drummond and Mrs. Padgett looked out onto the unfamiliar territory.

"I say," she cried with her New England drawl, "this is a far cry from Champlain Cove, wouldn't you say?"

"You know who could explain it," the Colonel retorted as he lit his pipe. "That frightfully clever Joyce Mannix."

The Emir of Er-Ranek, Faisal, approached with a humility that belied his rank. "If you will forgive me for eavesdropping, I am given to understand that we are in a Canadian town called Revelstoke."

"Mm." Mrs. Padgett's eyes narrowed. "And that Doctor chap is still at large, yes?"

"No. Joyce thinks she's licked him," the Colonel quickly answered with a self-satisfied chuckle.

"And yet ..."

The trio shrugged and looked over to Duchess Amalfi. "Just remember, we have to sort out these locals."

They turned as one, the ungainly fruits of Juliet Bleek's imagination, with evil intent for the two Revelstoke constables.

“If you think I’m going to stand my ground against all this weirdness,” the older declared toughly to his subordinate, “you’re out of your mind.”

“Judging from these characters, that makes two of us,” the younger quipped back.

But his senior did not hear his quip, as he was already over Maggie Weitz’s hedge and sprinting as fast as he could, perhaps heading to the RCMP station, perhaps just keen to shelter anywhere that would offer him some escape from all this.

The first sensation the Doctor really, properly felt was his hand on a flat wooden panel. Sighing in relief, he pushed the door inward and fell into the TARDIS.

He patted himself up and down, the simple feel of breath in his lungs and the cool air inside his beloved ship’s control room feeling like miracles after the timeless agony outside. He unsteadily walked across to the console, placing his hands on its panels and sighing in relief. His telepathic link with the TARDIS was not always reliable. “But this time, old girl, I have to hand it to you. You came through for me. In spades.”

And now, since the situation was far direr than he realized, he would have to get to Maggie. He hoped his ship could be just as attentive in rescuing her.

“Isn’t this better Maggie? We’ve formed quite a connection, you and me. I’ve seen the sadness and the loneliness in your life.”

Less and less of Maggie’s surroundings were clear. She fought against the soothing niceties coming from Juliet Bleek, but they were increasingly all she could perceive.

“The... Doctor...” she began, but her speech was slurred, her mind too addled to finish the thought. And her surroundings were like smoke now.

“The Doctor!” Juliet waved her hand dismissively. “You think he saved you, because your life was so empty from Ollie’s death. I’ve seen it all. I’ve lived it, Maggie. My husband. It took him from me. I wouldn’t have been happy. He was too demanding. Too weak. My father too. They would always have left me with nothing. I can’t have anything distracting me from my purpose.”

“Is it ... your purpose? Or this... thing’s?” The same thing, Maggie noted ruefully, that was pounding against her temples, hammering her forehead like a steel mallet.

“The Doctor didn’t give you anything Maggie. Just a pell-mell existence, where you barely pause to catch your breath between one crisis and the next. I don’t know about you, but that’s not what I call a well-adjusted life.”

Maggie felt relieved to hear a sound above Juliet’s increasingly raspy, inhuman voice—the voice, she feared, of this malign presence in her life. It was a familiar wheezing, groaning sound.

Though the dam appeared to overflow with water—the same cascade, she guessed, that snatched away the Doctor—the TARDIS appeared above its waves. Its door whipped open violently, and she saw the Doctor, smiling in relief to see her, his long-fingered hand extending towards her.

She jumped across the water—for a moment there was nothing but air and waterfall around her—and landed in the narrow doorway of the police box, the Doctor pulling her inside. To her surprise, he then jumped across the divide. He waded through the water, now seeping up to his

knees on the platform. He grabbed Juliet Bleek, who did not seem to notice. The whole time her eyes had remained locked on Maggie.

He flung her over his shoulder, and with little apparent effort, hopped back across the chasm of furiously flowing water. A second later an enormous wave flooded the spot.

The level of water kept rising, and Maggie knew it was something greater than the Columbia. She saw a massive waterfall stab out from the flow, like a massive liquid hand, tumbling toward the TARDIS doorway, as if to seize her in its clutches. Just then, the doors slammed shut and the air filled with the sound of its engines.

Yet the TARDIS was not safely away. The engines shuddered, sounding sluggish. As she crossed the control room, the ship violently pitched one way, then another. Juliet Bleek, lying on the ground in the same frozen posture, squeaked up and down its floor, a scene that, were it not so sad and eerie, would have had a note of low slapstick comedy.

The Doctor was scrambling around the controls, leaning into the console as if physically pushing his ship up a very steep hill. “Whatever this force is, it’s spreading through the time vortex. And out into Revelstoke...”

Maggie’s eyes widened as she thought of the mayhem they just left behind. “Kaylaar! Elaine?”

“Over the rainbow, to coin a phrase.” The Doctor’s eyes narrowed in a sad, muted rage. “Though there isn’t much colour out there. I felt them in the darkness. The rest of Revelstoke as well. It didn’t dump them directly into the vortex, it’s kept them in a kind of... limbo. And in their place, it’s going to fill the town with the population of your favourite author’s works.”

Maggie put her hand on her mouth. She and the Doctor left the console and bent over Juliet Bleek, lifting her onto the ottoman, where her stiff muscles sagged as she rested. Other than that physical reaction, there was no sign of life—she seemed almost catatonic. The Doctor looked at her with the same rage. “It’s time we got some answers. And this connection with my recent past gives me an idea. I questioned the wisdom of keeping that uppity bundle of wires around, but you know, Maggie, what foresight that I did.”

Maggie rolled her eyes, and thought back to that previous morning, avoiding its cries on her way to the library.

“Oh, not *that* thing. It gives me the creeps.”

But against her better judgement, she joined him in his journey to a distant, disused suite of VIP staterooms. This one had been furnished in almost black polished wood, baize padding, and stained glass, as sombre and silent as a mausoleum. Its only decoration was a rectangular plinth. Little more was needed. After all, the only occupant of this particular suite, resting on that plinth inside a Thorlind memory cube, was the sentient computer of the *Miracle*.

“Good day, Doctor, Miss Weitz,” it intoned, its monotone somehow making it sound sarcastic. The Doctor returned the greeting equally haughtily. “I suppose this is not a social call. Still no luck finding a distant enough planetoid or nebula to abandon me into?”

“We’ll get there,” the Doctor assured it. “I was wondering if you might have changed your mind and tell me about that experience... the one that gave you your sentience and your time sensitivity.”

“I’ve deleted my databanks, Doctor,” it replied with a mechanical sneer. “More for its sake than mine, if I remember. That’s the problem with deleting memory, you tend to forget why you did it.”

“*Its* sake?” Maggie repeated.

“Yes, that’s what I said. It was very adamant that the Doctor, and his people, learn nothing about it.”

“Where and when did it originate? What does it want?”

A harsh burst filled the air—mechanical laughter, Maggie reasoned. “You spend too much time with linear beings, Doctor. It is not some Dalek or jumped-up reptile person. It is everything... it is eternal. You may not believe this, but in the glimpse of wonder it showed me, I saw something beyond life as we know it.”

The Doctor frowned. Maggie looked from her friend’s face, lined with doubt, and the silent computer. “Doctor,” she whispered, “if I didn’t know better, I’d say this thing was... ‘born again’.”

“I can hear you even when you whisper, Miss Weitz,” the computer interrupted. “And I take the reference. You are unusually astute. It was in many ways a religious experience. What do you think of that, Doctor? A being with no physical form, no planet of origin, an omnipresent force outside organic life and linear time... a tad too irrational for a Time Lord to comfortably contemplate, eh?”

The Doctor’s eyes narrowed. “There’s a poor Earth woman in my control room whose life it has laid waste. Maggie’s home town looks likely to go the same way.”

“And all your fault, eh?” the computer asked smugly.

“How do you figure that?” the Doctor spat back.

“Our little encounter in the time vortex. It opened up in that little town, didn’t it?”

Maggie shivered as she thought back to Juliet’s harsh words at the Dam. If she never saw her hometown again, if Kaylaar and Elaine Noyce remained missing and Juliet remained catatonic, would she forgive the Doctor?

Yes, she decided. Though it made her shudder, she saw no other choice. Because good intentions, making a choice, were hard enough in normal, everyday life, let alone the terrifying universe he dealt in. And he always carried that burden, knowing that no one else knew or cared enough about its injustices to make any kind of stand at all. Every time he opened the door of his ship he must struggle with the constant, overwhelming pressure to make the right choice, and yet still he did, over and over again, and still he was able to see the best in it.

But perhaps letting him go unpunished for a wrong decision because he was a good person made her complicit in the ethical minefield of his actions. But then again, it was clear that what he needed was someone to support and understand him, no matter how limited her understanding could be.

The Doctor was nodding slowly, still considering the computer’s proposition. “Perhaps you’re right... by your own logic, therefore, it’s my duty to undo the damage this time-dwelling presence has caused?”

The computer uttered a harsh mechanical grumble. The Doctor beamed smugly, interpreting it as grudging agreement.

“Thank you for your help. Come on Maggie, I think I’m starting to have an idea.”

“What about me Doctor?” the computer wailed as they departed the stateroom.

“Don’t worry! After this is all over, there’s a lovely quiet binary star a few parsecs past the Boötes Void. Just the place to get away from the cares of the universe!”

The Doctor hummed to himself as they walked back, his words worryingly vague: “It’s a gamble... but I don’t see what our alternatives are...”

He was examining Juliet in the control room when the TARDIS thudded to a landing that felt like it had fallen from a cliff-side. He patted Juliet’s forehead, and looked back at Maggie. “No disintegration, I promise. Come on.”

The TARDIS was now nestled behind a child's shooting gallery. Gaily dressed families, couples, and holidaymakers ran and skipped past. Hollowly jolly music repeated through loudspeakers.

"Before you ask, I'm not a hundred percent sure where we are," the Doctor apologetically admitted. "The TARDIS used Juliet's memories to navigate."

"That fairground, where her father had that odd encounter?" Maggie remembered the cagy references Juliet had made to the incident. Her perceptions could of course cover any number of childish misunderstandings about adult activity. In a way, the idea that this supernatural force corrupted him somehow was a little more palatable than that the war had perverted him.

And this funfair looked exactly the part. The Doctor volunteered a date in the summer of 1947. There was a post-war exhaustion thick in the air. Even those candy-striped colours were muted, as if behind a dusty gauze curtain. Maggie wondered if Juliet's muse, too, was casting its inescapable gloom around the whole scene.

The Doctor's fierce eyes were darting rapidly around every corner. Along with that atmosphere, Maggie felt the crowds coldly reject them: white bread Americans all, their WASPish eyes somehow noting that they didn't belong. She wondered what they were noticing more, her Jewish features or the Doctor's dark skin.

For his part, the Doctor remained defiantly oblivious to shameful human behaviour, returning every puzzled gaze with his usual broad smile. "I say..." he asked several people, only to have them brush past him angrily. "At times like this, I need my jelly babies."

"Say," a sympathetic Boston voice called over to them, "You two look lost."

They turned to set eyes on a man in a Fair Isle sweater rife with holes, and sandals. Though about fifty, he had the lonely, faraway look of a perpetual adolescent. There was a baroque sadness in his presence here, Maggie thought: a lonely man who just wanted adult life to be as simple as his long-gone childhood.

The Doctor shook his hand eagerly. "Yes, my dear fellow."

"You weren't looking for that little girl and her mom, were you?"

The Doctor's eyes lit up. "As a matter of fact we were."

"She was worried sick about you. I just saw her..." He roved around the fairground, craning slowly through the crowds, ignoring the Doctor's impatience. "Ah! There she is!"

With another eager shake of the man's hand, the Doctor led Maggie through the suddenly dense mass of leisure-seekers. When she saw the ten-year old Juliet Bleek, Maggie felt something like when she had seen Ollie's baby picture: she saw where the seventy-year-old woman had come from, yet also saw something absent from her harder adult self, a cute and angelic essence. But of course, children from this time had a pathos to them, and Juliet was no exception. They had already seen and known sadness, and the forlorn look on the young girl's face made Maggie want to hug her and never let go.

Any chance to get that close was remote, however, as Juliet's mother was highly suspicious of the Doctor's customary friendly greeting. "What do you want? How do you know me?"

"Well, it's actually your husband we're interested in."

"What do you *mean*?" she asked rudely.

"We're from the FBI," blurted Maggie. "He's wanted in ten states."

"Ten?" repeated the Doctor. "Good grief. Well, you heard Special Agent Weitz. If you could help us..."

Juliet pointed to the distance, with a heartbreaking tremble in her tiny arm. They ran to the lop-sided tent from which Juliet's father was emerging. Maggie estimated his age at forty, but the hard forty years men of his generation eked out: clad in drab flannel, haggard lines adding another two decades to his face, his frame lanky and malnourished, and his eyes perpetually bleary from a lifetime of pain, from winning a war and losing a soul. He ineffectually doused this pain with smoking, liquor, and lust.

He loomed waywardly into their view, a frightening blankness in the father's lined face. Maggie noted again that the Doctor hesitated to confront the dark side of human nature. Here, face to face with life's prosaic misfortunes leading a lost soul down a dark path, a high-handed Time Lord could offer little help or understanding. The Doctor gave him one pained glance before pressing on.

The flaps of the tent rustled in the breeze, and the decrepit woman's arrival was preceded by her omnipresent cackling. It had a steady, in-out rhythm at this point, like breathing.

"Doctor," she greeted. "I'm sorry we haven't met earlier."

The Doctor gave her a curt bow. "You're a little far from home, aren't you?"

Maggie tugged his sleeve. "Hang on—it hasn't encountered us yet, has it?"

"Linear time is nothing to so formidable a presence. No doubt you've infected past as well as future? Found your way into the nightmares of quite a few humans over the ages?"

"Where I come from is such a barren place compared to the mind of that young one," she declared, thrusting a skeletal finger to Juliet. The girl stared at the crone in fascination, clearly somehow not feeling the terror that was rooting Maggie to the spot. "How I love the patterns she creates, the order she brings to the frantic restlessness of these ephemeral lives."

"Yes, but fiction is her art. Let it stay that way."

"Why, Doctor? Look at your young friend." Maggie's blood ran colder when that fleshless finger indicated her. "She deserved happiness with that poor man, but fate intervened. Doesn't she deserve the ending from a story? When she was the age of young Juliet here, she didn't look forward to wandering through time and space with someone like you. She wanted that man, yes, but she wanted something more. A settled life, a complete life. She wanted to feel like a whole person, secure." The crone's eyes narrowed cruelly. "You've never been able to give that to any of the humans you've abducted."

"The Doctor didn't abduct anyone!" Maggie interrupted.

"Think of it, my dear," she cooed, the natural harshness of her voice dropping an octave as if to woo her. "The Doctor's objections to my interference in Juliet's life... isn't there a little guilt behind them?"

"It wasn't the Doctor's fault that vortex-y thing opened up in Revelstoke in 1886!"

The skull-like head nodded. "Perhaps not," she conceded. "But he accuses me of being a parasite, preventing Juliet Bleek from living her life and taking away those who would give her happiness beyond her work: from her father here, to her husband, to her future son-in-law. Doesn't the Doctor do just that? And before you object, you might want to ask Steven Taylor, Tegan Jovanka, Perpugilliam Brown... Tom Brooker and Valentina Rossi... Hannah Redfoot..."

Maggie shook her head at the unfamiliar names, but it took no great effort to infer their significance.

"Now think of this," the crone continued, and with the wave of her hand summoned a vision as she described to Maggie: "It's a typical day in Revelstoke. You work in the hardware store, but there's a murder. Just like there always is. Perhaps Ray has been bludgeoned with a hammer, or perhaps Superintendent Tornante has been shot. There's more to it than that of course, so you and

Ollie, your dear husband, still alive and healthy, take it to Joyce Mannix, who lives at the top of the road with her lifelong friend Juliet Bleek. You solve the mystery by dinner, and go to bed happy, knowing that every day will offer nothing but the certainty of the day before. No unhappiness, no misery. All disruptions safely resolved.”

Maggie could see it, so real, unfolding in front of her: Ollie alive and well, making his silly jokes... the two old ladies beaming at them... them and Juliet awed by the deductive mastery of Joyce Mannix. No matter how many times Joyce solved a mystery, made it look so easy, they were always amazed, always making the wrong guesses, but always enjoyed being put right.

But she shook her head. “My life with Ollie wasn’t about routine. You really don’t understand us, do you? I didn’t like everything about it. We were strapped for cash most of the time, he could never get a job he deserved, and Revelstoke can get pretty boring in the winter if you don’t like skiing. I don’t regret joining the Doctor for a moment. Just because you can’t imagine something doesn’t mean you don’t want it. Sure, I have pain. Every person does. But taking that away is as pointless as taking out your tongue when you taste something bitter.” Maggie neared the crone, her shapeless frame suddenly slither and more pathetic. “Now, since you didn’t back off for the Doctor, maybe you’ll back off for me. Leave Juliet alone.”

The little girl stepped forward, taking Maggie’s hand.

The crone stood her ground, and moved her withering gaze from Maggie to young Juliet. Their minds were connected, as they were when she was an elderly author, and so Maggie could see that she had her older self’s memories. “You’ve seen what riches are to come... you’ve seen what I can give you... what are a few ephemeral relationships worth compared with that?”

The young girl looked up at Maggie and back at the crone. “No thank you,” she said with the affectless cruelty only a child is capable of.

A howling wind overtook the fairground, and the tents and rides lost their definition, becoming first flat panels against a flat, monochrome background, then undefined shapes in a surrounding of smoke. The crone collapsed into her tent, which swallowed into a pit of blackness; the same blackness the Doctor recognized from his own perdition.

Only one object was clearly defined: the bold blue of a police box. The Doctor and Maggie, now the only two in the scene, ran toward it. All around Maggie was the raging wind, which drummed deep into her head and seemed to sear her thoughts and memories as much as it did her body.

And then they were inside the TARDIS. Its takeoff was as tremulous as its arrival, but the column shuddered to life, the noise of its engines drowning out the confusion in Maggie’s mind.

And then, the pressure relieved, and she opened her eyes to see the control room in its customary grace. The hum soothed her head, and the pain was gone. She felt, indeed, like she had awoken from an awfully long, occasionally restless sleep. Juliet, too, sat up from the ottoman, that wiry grey hair shaking with grogginess, her eyes locking with Maggie’s in thanks.

The TARDIS landed again. “Doctor,” she protested, “I just need a moment—”

“Trust me, I think you want to see this,” he insisted. “You too, Miss Bleek.”

They opened the door and saw the same scene, but its distorted dimensions and colourless bleakness were replaced with Norman Rockwell-esque beauty. The Doctor pointed to a man and a woman, and a young girl in their hands.

“I’m afraid he still leaves you, Juliet, as you will now remember,” he said sadly. “He wasn’t able to adjust. A fate suffered by many, in silence.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry I set the whole town of Revelstoke on you, Doctor.”

“I’m sorry to have to change your life story, Miss Bleek.”

“No problem. In fact, I’m rather keen to get back to it.”

Chapter Six: A Familiar Groove

As the malign muse returned to its oblivion, the town of Revelstoke slipped into a familiar groove. The Revelstoke Canyon Dam reported no high-water levels. The RCMP had no record of any arrests. Juliet Bleek's cavalcade of characters returned to the mind of their author. Wyn Kolchack's front room was undamaged. Slim awoke back in New York, feeling hung-over but still ready to dig up dirt on Clive Cussler. Brad Gill awoke in front of his computer, an article on deforestation ready to be handed in to Bernie Conway. And Elaine Noyce and Kaylaar awoke in Maggie Weitz's sitting room.

Elaine staggered unsteadily to her feet and drew the curtains, relieved to see an utterly ordinary British Columbian afternoon looking back. She felt an exceptional story lay just beyond her reach. Although there were two RCMP constables outside, both looking around, not quite certain why they had been so tense.

All concerned put aside their rational objections and felt relief as a blue police box thundered itself back into existence on Maggie's lawn.

Maggie Weitz passed an uneventful few weeks in Revelstoke. By the second day, it had been like she had never left. There was a lingering awkwardness that everyone's memories of the past few days were fuzzy, inconsistent, and nightmarish, but they coped as well as humans always did with such glimpses of the unfathomable.

Ray was even kind enough to give her an envelope with all her back pay. "What can I say? Takings were fairly good over the summer, so it'd be mean to cut you out." He clapped his leathery hand on her back in his avuncular fashion. "And the job's always here for you if you want to come back. Even though I have a feeling you won't."

Materially, the absence of Juliet Bleek's muse had subtly changed time. Elaine Noyce was now robbed of her scoop, as Juliet's relationships ended in thoroughly ordinary ways common to the high-strung creative: she was now divorced, still estranged from her daughter, but Zoe's husband had not disappeared into a void and so their marriage had been happy for the last six

years. She was an author, but the Joyce Mannix mysteries were neither as best-selling nor as acclaimed as formerly. That picture with Helen Hayes, the Edgar Awards, and Anthony Boucher's kind words, had taken the place of Bleek's father and husband on the other side of the void.

She was happy for the exchange. People, she concluded, were ultimately more important. Even if she had moved to Revelstoke to avoid them.

The Doctor, meanwhile, had made good his promise. He piloted the TARDIS the requisite seven hundred million light-years from Earth, and lifted the Thorlind memory cube from its VIP suite. They took a moment in the door to contemplate the unremitting blackness.

"Breathtaking," the Doctor whispered. "I'll set you down on that rock there." He pointed to a tiny pebble, a little speck of mud that seemed to glow only by comparison with the deep dark ink surrounding it.

"Why not? I don't care. And thanks to you I can't die and be reunited with the divine majesty I glimpsed."

"That's true. Those Thorlinds build their memory cubes to last."

Both stood in the doorway for a while, wanting the other to say something. "Doctor," the computer finally said, "what would it take to convince you to keep me aboard?"

"Well, you were next to no help with this problem, if I'm honest."

"I could promise to help you next time."

"And Maggie is—what's the Earth phrase? —'creeped out' by you."

"I'll be more polite to your pets." Sensing the Doctor's ire, it corrected, "Forgive me. Helpers, companions, whatever you call them."

"And it goes without saying, I can't connect you to the TARDIS databanks or ever let you out of that suite."

"Perhaps you could let me out once in a while, if you happen to pass by a sight as... heavenly as this."

"Fair enough. Although an evangelical computer will take some getting used to. Now let's get Maggie and Kaylaar."

"Bless you, Doctor," the *Miracle* computer said, coming close to amusement at the Time Lord's discomfort.

November 1, 1995

The Doctor returned to Revelstoke to find its autumn warmth had grown considerably colder, the leaves now brown, a harsh interior British Columbia winter on its way. Maggie and Kaylaar rushed to the TARDIS.

"Ready to go?" he asked, indicating the massive cases she was heaving into his arms.

"You bet."

"I'm glad. I thought some of those words might have hit home."

"You think some carnival barker can change my mind? When Maggie Weitz makes a friend, you can believe we're going to stay friends." A half-smile crept up her lip. "And speaking of friends, Elaine Noyce was asking about you..."

The Doctor groaned. "Maybe I'll catch up with her next time. How about Juliet Bleek?"

Maggie looked up the hill. "Gone to New York to try to patch things up with her daughter. It's funny having two sets of memories. Funny for us both."

Kaylaar sighed. “I can’t help but wonder if she’s regretting her decision. After all, she’s still ended up alone, and markedly less successful.”

“I had a thought about that,” the Doctor said mysteriously, beckoning them inside the TARDIS.

December 6, 1999

“Whom do I make it out to?”

Maggie paused, waiting for Juliet Bleek to look up from the splayed endpapers of the latest Joyce Mannix mystery, *Down the Dark Tunnel*. When she did, her eyes lit up. She enthusiastically autographed the book, but could say no more than a few general pleasantries, and a blurted “See you back in Revelstoke!” before the next book lover pushed forward in line.

She crossed the street. New York was festively decorated. The crowds shuffled past the TARDIS, to all intents and purposes just another phone box blocking their hectic commute.

She paused before returning to the Doctor, to Kaylaar, and to that damned computer (which—maybe she was crazy for thinking—seemed to have been a little friendlier the most recent time she passed the library). She took a moment to savour the ordinary, but also to anticipate returning to the extraordinary.

She flipped open the imposing tome. Nearly 400 pages. Juliet had outdone herself this time.

The book opened at the dedication. *To my muse*, it read.

Maggie’s eyes widened. Could it be—had they not got rid of the evil whatnot from the time vortex after all?

She read on.

To my muse, MAGGIE WEITZ, for getting me through a tough time.



When Maggie points out a gap in the Doctor's reading—her favourite writer, bestselling doyenne of mystery Juliet Bleek—she is surprised to find him so disturbed. Even more surprising, Bleek has moved just up the road from Maggie in Revelstoke, British Columbia. Ever distrustful of coincidences, the Doctor's suspicions are aroused by local reporter Elaine Noyce, who is looking into puzzling events in Bleek's life that caused her to move out of the public eye.

When a source with information on Juliet Bleek ends up murdered in a manner identical to one of Bleek's Joyce Mannix Mysteries, it is obvious that there is more to the mistress of mystery than meets the eye. While Maggie befriends her, the Doctor is targeted as the culprit of the strange occurrences.

On the run from the Revelstoke RCMP and Bleek's creations come to life, the Doctor, Maggie, Kaylaar, and Elaine realize that they must uncover the sadness in Juliet Bleek's past. In her childhood, Bleek came into contact with a force of formidable malevolence and power—a force that threatens to undermine the very nature of reality.

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