

Fifteen minutes after Alex Carpenter left the accident scene, and a few minutes after the firefighters freed the trapped driver, Eli and Casey were able to remove the driver and take him to the hospital. Then, while the tow truck operator went about his job, Freddy and his crew loaded their equipment on Engine 1 and returned to the firehouse. Not too long after that, with the scene clear, Police Chief Matt Gardner drove back into town.

At the emergency room entrance to Woodhill Memorial Hospital Matt parked his police car in front of a *No Parking* sign and went inside. After the cool night air, the hospital felt too warm and the air was saturated with the pungent smell of antiseptic. The smell, in addition to the odor of his half-burned but presently unlit Havana Perfection cigar, made Matt queasy. As he walked towards the reception desk, he removed his cigar, which was bobbing at the corner of his mouth, stared at the end for a moment to be sure it was completely out, and put the cigar into an inside coat pocket. With the competing odor removed, the mild nausea subsided. He turned his attention to locating either Jessica Hegerty, the doctor in charge of the emergency room, or Dave McCann, or any other doctor who had treated the victims.

Just as Matt was about to make an inquiry of the receptionist, Dave McCann strode towards the desk. Like his brother, Jake, Dave was almost six feet in height. Both men had warm brown eyes and wavy dark brown hair, and were, in fact, identical twins, but it was easy for those who knew the McCann brothers to tell them apart; Jake's face was somewhat weather-beaten from years of firefighting, and his voice had a raspy quality to it. Dave, on the other hand, weighed more than Jake, and his complexion was smooth; an indication that, as a physician, most of his working hours were spent indoors.

“Just the man I'm lookin' for,” Matt said. “What's the deal on those two drivers? Were they drunk?”

“No, just inattentive,” Dave replied, setting a chart on the desk. “John Hilliard was arguing with his wife and she screamed, seeing the oncoming car, but he thought she was— as he put it— shrieking to make her point.” Dave shook his head, smiling slightly. “The other driver was a little too engrossed in his female companion, who turned out to be Tilly Carpenter.”

“Alex Carpenter's wife? Was she hurt?”

“Bumps and bruises, the same as Mrs. Hilliard, but she's scared to death right now about what her husband's going to say when he finds out what she was doing.”

Matt grimaced. “Yeah, I can understand that, all right. Carpenter can be one son of a bitch when he's got his teeth into something, although this is one time he might be right to be angry. So,” Matt said with a shrug “should I tell him the news and have him pick her up? I'd take her home myself, but I don't think she'd take kindly to riding in a police car.”

“Be my guest.”

“Be my guest, hah!” Matt grumbled as he parked his car in front of Alex Carpenter's house on Kent Street. He glanced at his watch, saw it was two-thirty. He rang the doorbell and waited patiently, thinking Carpenter might be asleep, although, Matt thought, *if my wife was out somewhere at this time of night I'd be damned if I'd be sleeping*. Thinking Alex might not be home, Matt went over to the driveway and saw Alex's Cadillac in the garage. He returned to the front of the house and rang twice more before the door opened.

“What?” Alex demanded by way of greeting. He was in street clothes, not pajamas.

“May I come in?”

Alex didn't budge. “It's the middle of the night. Just say what you have to.”

Matt tried not to let his aggravation show. “Okay,” he said, “your wife was in an automobile accident about an hour ago. She wasn't badly injured and I'm sure when you get to the hospital

she'll be ready to be released. Matt waited for a response but when none was forthcoming he said, "Would you like me to drive you to the hospital?"

"No, thank you, I'll drive there myself."

"Well, before you get her, you should know that she was with a man."

"I see," Alex replied curtly and started to close the front door, making it obvious that he wanted Matt to leave immediately.

Matt took his cue and said, "Well, then, Alex, I'll probably be wanting to see Tilly later today if she's up to it."

"I don't think so," Alex replied, "There's no reason to pursue the matter any further."

"Your wife did nothing criminal, Alex, but she may be able to shed some light on how the accident happened."

Alex relented, seeing as he didn't have much choice, and said gruffly, "If you insist."

Matt left the Carpenter house, headed home, longing for his bed, but as he drove by the firehouse on Court Street, he saw the apparatus floor lights were on and decided to get what information he could from the first-aid men if they were still on duty.

The three bay doors were closed, so Matt went around to the side door and barely had it open when Hank, the firehouse dog, came barreling towards him.

"Hoo-hoo-maa!" she yowled happily and pushed her head up under Matt's hand to be petted.

"Leave me alone," Matt said, but he petted her anyway, thinking as he did so that Hank, who looked like an oversized red and white beagle with long legs, was not the least bit intimidating and was, in Matt's opinion, the worst excuse for a watchdog he'd ever seen.

As Matt walked between Engine 2 and the ambulance, he heard Eli Sheffler and Casey Durban talking. He came around the open rear door of the ambulance and said, "Cleaning up?"

"Holy Mother!" Casey squealed, "Ya scared the crap outta me!"

Matt stifled a grin. Casey's face had turned almost as red as his hair. In contrast to Casey, Eli looked drab, with hair and eyes almost the same gray-brown color. He was nice-looking, but appeared to need some time in the sun to give him better color.

"Sorry," Matt said. "Can you spare a minute to tell me about the victims?"

Eli moved past Casey and got out of the ambulance. He was holding a bundle of bloody towels. "What about them? Mr. Hilliard broke the driver's side window with his head and Mr. Black had multiple bruises. The women got tossed around and they're going to feel it tomorrow, but other than that it was just a normal kind of crash."

"Okay," Matt said, "so, there's nothing you can add?"

"Is there some kinda mystery?" Casey asked.

"No, just trying to get as full a picture as I can. Is Jake here?"

Eli replied, "No, he's at Laura's farm. Another baby horse was due tonight. Freddy's upstairs, though." Eli took the clean towel Casey handed to him, flipped it open on the floor and put the bloodied towels on top of it, then he tied the whole thing up in a bundle and set it back into the ambulance.

Matt thought the bundle looked like a decapitated head, which brought an involuntary shudder as he ascended the marble-treaded steps that took him to the firehouse living quarters. The dormitory was the central area on the second floor. Three beds were lined up against each of the longer walls, and each bed was separated by a chair that acted as a nightstand. To his left were two doors, one leading to the washroom, the other to Jake's bedroom. On the far side of the dormitory, next to the kitchen, was a linen closet and Eli's bedroom. A brass pole surrounded by a guardrail rose to the ceiling in the middle of the dormitory and Matt ran his hand along the rail as he passed it, liking the smooth coolness of the tubular stainless steel.

The cooking area in the kitchen took up one wall, leaving plenty of room for a massive oak dining room table with six leaves and a dozen chairs. In the far corner four overstuffed lounge

chairs were arranged in a semi-circle in front of a mahogany-finished RCA Victor floor-model radio.

“You’re too early for breakfast,” Freddy said, looking up upon Matt’s entrance. With the exception of his eyes being a striking blue, Freddy bore a close resemblance to Jake and Dave although they weren’t related. Freddy immediately returned to copying his on-scene photo log notes from a scratch pad onto a larger piece of paper, neatly printing the order and description of photographs for Matt. “If you wait a few minutes you can have this photo log and you can have the photos later today.”

“That’s fine,” Matt said as he took a clean mug from the drain board and filled it from the coffeepot on the stove. “You want a refill?” he asked, and when Freddy shook his head, Matt set the pot back on the burner and stayed by the stove as he drank.

Still writing, Freddy asked, “Everything cleaned up?”

“Yep. You know, one of the women turned out to be Tilly Carpenter.”

Freddy raised his eyes. “Carpenter? Bill Carpenter’s mother?”

“Fraid so. Bill’s one of your boys, isn’t he? A volunteer fireman in the summers when he’s home from college?”

“Yeah, this summer’ll be his third. He’s in his junior year at Western Reserve. A psychology major.”

“Well, I hope his mother’s soon-to-be questionable reputation doesn’t cause him any problems,” Matt said, setting his cup in the sink. “I’ll be talking to her and Alex later today. Maybe we can keep her activities quiet.”

THE DEMISE OF THE HORSE FAIRY

by

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