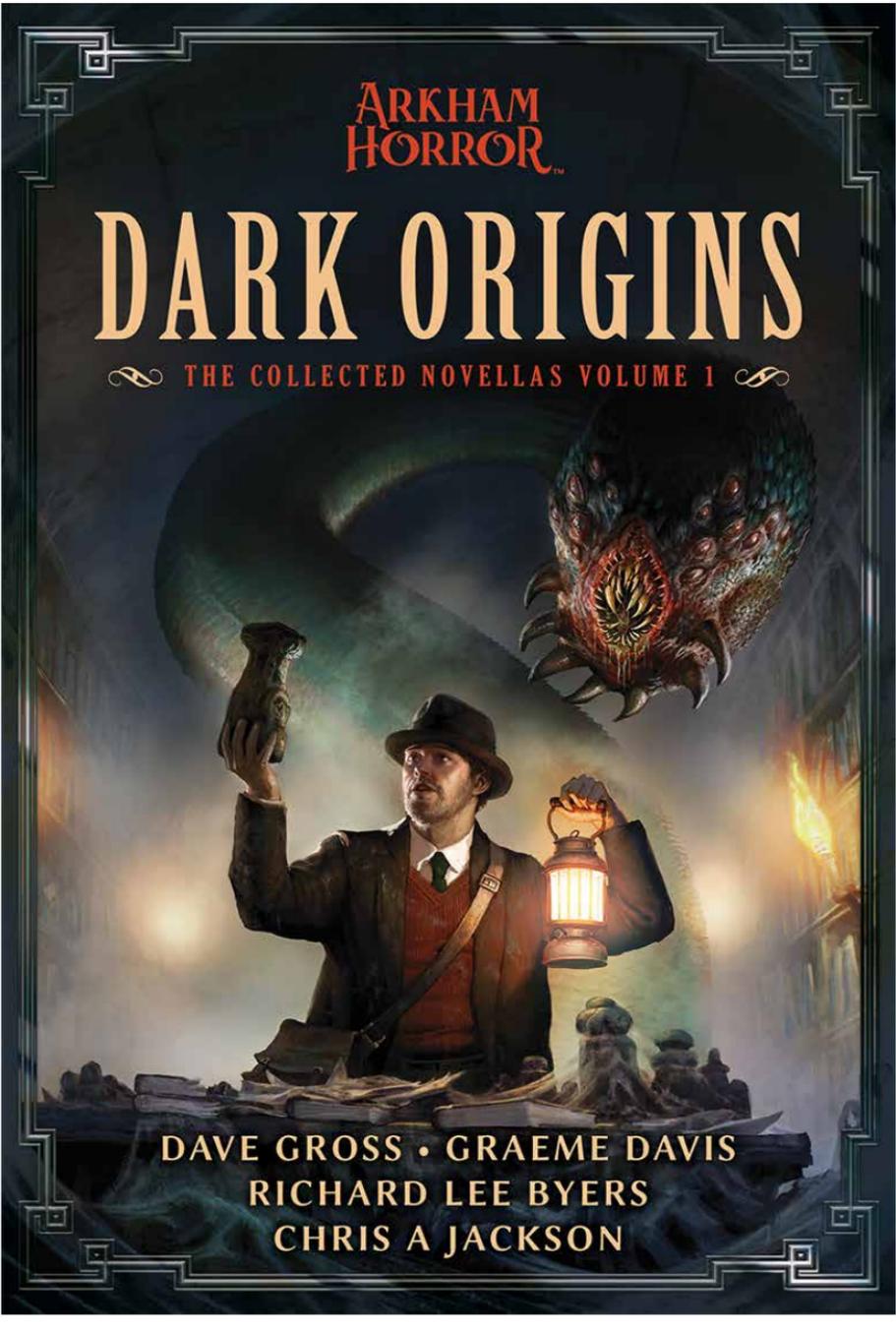


ARKHAM  
HORROR™

# DARK ORIGINS

THE COLLECTED NOVELLAS VOLUME 1



DAVE GROSS • GRAEME DAVIS  
RICHARD LEE BYERS  
CHRIS A JACKSON

*This is an excerpt from*

# DARK ORIGINS

## The Collected Arkham Horror Novellas Volume 1

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HOUR OF THE  
HUNTRESS

DAVE GROSS



## CHAPTER 1

The whistle's shriek yanked her out of an asylum nightmare. A simultaneous jolt threatened to fling her to the floor before she caught the armrest. For an interminable instant, she wasn't sure whether she was Izzie, locked in an unwanted steam bath, or Jenny, a passenger on a slowing train.

"Last stop!" the conductor called. "Arkham, Massachusetts."

Jenny sat upright. Heart pounding, she measured her breaths to calm herself. "Hold on, Izzie," she muttered. "I'm coming."

Steam washed past the car windows. The brakes squealed, and the engine ceased huffing. The other passengers, all men, had already risen from their seats. In their brown suits and wire-framed cheaters, they looked like bankers returning from Boston appointments.

None had tried striking up a conversation during the journey. Under the circumstances, Jenny considered that a relief. Still, it made her wonder just how rumpled she must appear. As the only woman in the car, she had expected some attention. In Paris, Jenny hadn't been able to walk from

her flat to the café without parrying three flirtations and a proposition.

Izzie's letters had spilled out of the literary journal as Jenny dozed. The journal lay on her lap, opened to the last page of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants." On the day she left Paris, she'd searched half a dozen shops to see what the editor had done with Ernest's latest. She finally bought a copy at Shakespeare and Company along with a few packages of Gauloises.

As Jenny gathered the fallen pages of Izzie's letters, she glimpsed an unsettling passage:

*... prints in the woods. I mean, it was a man in a dark cloak! He was just standing there watching me while those dreadful screams went on and on and...*

Jenny folded the letter. It was insane.

Of course, the doctors had said the same of Izzie when they committed her.

After months of visiting her sister in the sanitarium, Jenny had escaped her family's drama to live with their aunt in Paris. Izzie made her own escape much later, with her psychiatrists' tentative approval. Despite her guilt at abandoning Izzie, Jenny wrote to her. After months of wounded silence, Izzie began to respond. Gradually, they became confidantes once more, as they had been as girls. Just as Jenny had begun to think the worst was past, the weird events described in Izzie's recent letters dashed Jenny's hopes.

The train came to a halt. Jenny tucked the last page in with the rest of the letters and shoved the magazine back into her handbag.

When the station agent opened the door, the men rushed

out. Jenny called after them, “You fellows really know how to shake a girl’s confidence!”

No one looked back. That was fine. When Jenny felt low, a little sass always cheered her, even when it went unappreciated.

The men dashed across the platform to elbow each other at the taxi stand. The sun had set, and the station’s electric lights lent their faces an anxious pallor.

“What’s gotten into them?” Jenny asked herself. If anyone had cause for haste, it was she. Unfortunately, she had no clear idea where to find the hotel room she’d reserved from Boston. Worse, she had no idea where Izzie was staying in Arkham. The return address had read only “General Delivery.”

Jenny stepped down from the train. The gray-haired station agent offered his hand. With the other, he touched the brim of his cap and bowed, cautious of a bad back. “Miss.”

Jenny favored him with a smile. Despite her fellow passengers, it appeared courtesy was not quite extinct in Arkham.

A breeze scattered leaves across the platform. Maple red and oak yellow skittered about her feet, along with a crumpled orange handbill. Jenny retrieved the flyer and held it up to the light.

## *ARKHAM HARVEST FESTIVAL*

*October 22–30*

*Independence Square*

*Parade & Pageant*

*Harvest King & Queen*

*Formal Ball*

*Hay Rides*  
*Harvest Festival Feast*  
*Wholesome Fun for the Whole Family*  
*Volunteers contact the chairwoman, Mrs Winthrop*  
*Olmstead*

The text was banal enough, but Jenny gasped at the accompanying image. It was a crude depiction of a man's face, rough as though carved into a long-eroded stone. The man's hair and beard appeared braided, but Jenny knew that what seemed like braids in this crude print were willow fronds. She'd seen the same image on a medallion she owned, one she had paid a Marseillais jeweler to duplicate for Izzie. They were two of a kind and – as far as Jenny knew – only two.

Jenny's hand went to her throat, only to touch her traveling pearls. Before she could panic, she remembered she had secured the medallion in her luggage. In one of her letters, Izzie had asked whether she still wore it, so Jenny had brought it along as a lucky charm. Perhaps it had been lucky, for its appearance on the flyer confirmed Izzie was in Arkham.

"I said, come for the festival, miss?" asked the old station agent.

"Oh!" Jenny lost the flyer to a gust of wind. "No, I've come to, ah, visit my sister." She stopped herself from saying "find my sister."

Behind the station agent, a truck pulled away from the taxi stand, luggage heaped in the bed. Jenny recognized her "gBe"-monogrammed luggage pasted with stamps from across Europe, the Near East, and North Africa.

"Is that-?" said Jenny.

“Don’t worry, miss. Bill Washington’s taking those to the hotel. All you need is a...” There were no more taxis waiting in the queue. The station agent checked his watch and frowned. “I’m sure another will be along any time.” He shuffled back to his office.

The man’s dubious tone did little to reassure Jenny. She wondered just how long she would have to wait. The only other person remaining on the platform was a strapping young lad in oily coveralls. He’d unloaded a sidecar from the train and was attaching it to a red motorcycle. She couldn’t see his face, but he had shoulders to make a rugby player envious. A plume of blue smoke rose above his newsboy cap.

Another gust of wind blew across the platform. Jenny rubbed her arms, wishing she’d worn a sweater. From somewhere in the surrounding dark, she heard a piteous cry. At first it sounded human, but when it came again she decided it must be an animal, perhaps a lamb. Jenny considered what the Harvest Festival feast meant for livestock.

“Good luck escaping the supper table, little fellow.”

As the train engine began its slow chuff to depart, the mechanic moved to the motorcycle’s other side. Jenny glimpsed a huge wrench clenched in a fist that was all knuckles and sinew. The light in the station agent’s office went out. A moment later, so did the lights on the platform.

“Hey, Charley!” the mechanic shouted in a high voice. “I’m working here!”

“Sorry, Lonnie.” The platform light came back on. A moment later, Charley emerged from the office, locked the door, and began to walk away.

“Excuse me!” called Jenny. “Where are you going?”

“Sorry, miss. That was the last train, so I’m off duty.”

“You don’t expect me to wait alone for a taxi, do you?”

The old man said, “Lonnie will keep an eye on you until another taxi comes ’round. Won’t you, Lonnie?”

The big wrench rose up from behind the motorcycle and waved assurance.

Jenny didn’t like it, but she saw little alternative than to make the sort of fuss she considered beneath her dignity. Besides, it wasn’t as though she couldn’t take care of herself if this Lonnie proved frisky.

That’s what she liked to tell herself, anyway.

Jenny fished the cigarette case out of her handbag and fumbled with the holder. After another gust of wind, she gave up struggling with a light. As she stuffed it all back in her handbag, she noticed a figure standing just beyond the station’s far corner.

Cloaked in shadow, the figure looked taller and straighter than Charley. Besides, Jenny had seen the station agent walk off in the opposite direction.

“Who’s there?” She left her hand in the bag, hoping a would-be masher would think she had a derringer.

The man stepped forward. There was something strange about the way he moved. Only his shoulder and one leg came into the light. The shadows pooled beneath his coat, and the leg looked crooked. One could almost imagine a hoof where his foot should be.

Jenny recalled the e e cummings poem about spring with its goat-footed balloon man. Unlike the whistling faun in the poem, the figure on the platform remained silent. Lines from Izzie’s letter came to mind next: ... *it was a man in a*

*dark cloak! He was just standing there watching me...* Cold dread oozed down Jenny's spine.

Showing fear only encouraged bad men, so Jenny pushed her bluff. Forming a pistol with her fingers, she pointed the bag at the stranger. "Show yourself."

It was difficult to look menacing without removing the gun that wasn't in her handbag. For a long, cool moment, the figure stood still.

Then he took a step forward.

"I'm warning you," said Jenny. She kept the warble out of her voice, but it stuck in her throat like a pigeon trapped in the chimney.

The stranger took another step.

A hand fell on Jenny's shoulder. She whirled around, and the pigeon escaped. "Aaah!"

A big wrench clattered to the platform floor. Lonnie shrieked back, higher and longer than Jenny. The cigar bounced down the front of the greasy coveralls and sparked on the platform floor. Jenny got her first good look at the mechanic.

Lonnie wasn't a big strapping lad after all. She was a big strapping lass. The revelation did nothing to diminish the threat of her big fist quivering beside her freckled cheek, poised to strike.

"Sorry!" both women shouted.

"I didn't mean to startle you, miss." Lonnie lowered her fist. Her cheeks flushed – whether from excitement or embarrassment, Jenny couldn't tell.

"There's a man," said Jenny. She pointed to where he had been, but there was no one there. "Oh, he's gone."

“Ain’t that always the story?” Lonnie retrieved her cigar. As she rose, her lopsided grin exposed a missing eyetooth.

Jenny sighed, tension pouring out of her trembling arms. She flailed for a moment before extricating the “gun” from her handbag. “That kind of story I can handle,” she said. “It’s just that with this wind and the dark and the breeze and the leaves...”

“Yeah. Spooky.” Lonnie looked down at her. The mechanic stood a good six feet tall. Her work shirt fit tight over cannonball biceps. When she grinned, the muscles on her neck stood out. “Listen, I don’t mind sticking around, but I don’t think there’s going to be another cab. You ain’t the only one in Arkham’s got the heebie-jeebies these days.”

“Oh?” said Jenny. “Do tell.”

“I guess it’s old hat to those from the big city, but in a small town like Arkham, people get shook up when young girls go missing.”

Jenny clenched a fist to stifle the shakes. She couldn’t tell whether it was fear or rage that made her tremble.

“‘Girls’, plural?” said Jenny. “How long has this been going on?”

“Since the end of summer, I guess.”

Jenny estimated intercontinental postal delivery times. Izzie couldn’t have been a victim of the current wave of kidnappings – unless she had been its first victim. She considered lightening the mood by paraphrasing Wilde’s adage that losing more than one looks like carelessness. She decided it was not the moment for a joke.

“Listen, Miss...?” said Lonnie.

“Barnes.”

“Lonnie Ritter; Ritter’s Plumbing and Motor Shop. Wait, I got a card.” She dug inside the bib pocket of her overalls and produced a rectangle of dingy paper. She brushed it off with the heel of her hand but passed it to Jenny when it became obvious she was only making it dirtier.

“Say, Lonnie,” said Jenny, dropping the card into her bag. “How would you like to earn a fare?”

“Yeah?” Lonnie tapped ash off her cigar and looked Jenny’s French dress up and down. “A fancy lady like you isn’t afraid to ride in a sidecar?”

“I’ll drive the bike myself as long as you tell me the way to the Continental Hotel.”

“No way! Papa ordered this rig special. Anybody gets a scratch on the Big Chief, he’d murder ’im. And me, too! Hop in.”

Jenny stepped into the sidecar, avoiding the big toolbox Lonnie had set on the floor. Lonnie straddled the bike and pulled down the brim of her cap. “I oughta have goggles,” she sighed. “With an aviator’s cap, I’d look just like Amelia Earhart.”

“Who’s she?”

“Who’s Amelia Earhart?! Why, she’s only the pilot of *The Canary*, which set a new altitude record for women! I shook her hand in Boston.”

Jenny directed a pointed glance at Lonnie’s heroic arms. “And has Miss Earhart regained the use of that hand?”

“Ha!” Lonnie gripped the handles. She started the engine on the second kick. With a roar, the bike flew off the platform and onto the street. Lonnie spat out her cigar. Jenny held onto her hat.

As they rounded the first corner, the sidecar rose a foot off the ground. “What do you weigh?” yelled Lonnie. “Ninety pounds sopping wet?”

Jenny made an effort to smile as if she'd received a compliment, but she felt her stomach lurch. She gripped the safety bar and hoped it wasn't obvious she was hanging on for dear life.

They drove past several factories and warehouses, dark but for lonely beacons at the guard stations. Black shadows pooled beneath loading docks and water towers. The only building still filled with lighted offices was labeled “Arkham Advertiser” in big white letters. Jenny smelled ink. She heard the hum and clatter of a printing press.

The industrial buildings gave way to residential blocks. Clotheslines crisscrossed the dark alleys between brick tenements. Jenny tried not to imagine they were enormous spider webs. As Lonnie drove past a row of storefronts, the motorcycle headlight raked across a sign reading “Curiositie Shoppe.”

“How quaint,” said Jenny, but Lonnie didn't hear her over the roar of the Big Chief's engine.

They passed a sign marked “Miskatonic River” and ascended a raised bridge. To either side, the ripples of dark currents reflected light from the waterfront streetlamps.

South of the river, Lonnie took the next turn a little slower – a courtesy that saved their lives.

A horned figure rose shrieking before them. Lonnie squeezed the brakes so hard the rear wheel rose up along with the sidecar. The rig swung around, forcing Jenny face-to-face with the interloper.

“Blaaaah!” Toothy jaws gaped at Jenny, unleashing a hellish stench.

“What the devil?” bellowed Lonnie.

“Naaaaah!” blatted the goat. Its coat was black except for a rusty red patch around one eye and horn. A rope hung from its neck, the frayed end wet with saliva.

Jenny recoiled from the animal’s barnyard pong. Its muzzle followed her into the sidecar, dipping down to forage. She rescued her handbag and stepped up onto the seat. The goat nipped at the toes of her Mary Janes. She kicked, not too hard for fear of angering the beast. “Shoo! Get away, you cad!”

Lonnie guffawed. “Is that how you deal with mashers in the city?”

“This isn’t exactly the sort I’m used to meeting in Paris.”

“Paris? Ooh la la!”

At first, Jenny couldn’t tell whether Lonnie’s tone was admiring or mocking. One look at the big woman’s gap-toothed grin convinced Jenny of her sincerity.

Jenny hopped out of the sidecar. “On second thought, he’s not as hairy as a few Frenchmen I’ve met.”

The women stood for a moment, allowing the goat to sniff around in the sidecar while Lonnie recovered from her latest bout of laughter. It was an infectious sound, but Jenny found herself strangely immune. She wondered how close Izzie was. If Jenny called out her name, would she hear?

Jenny looked out at the piers jutting into the river beyond the waterfront street. Her first impression was that they wouldn’t have seemed out of place in one of the small towns along the Seine. Then she noted a garish logo on the side of a cartage company and another on the petroleum station next

door. Wherever she saw signs of progress in this American town, they came in the form of brash advertisements. Where marketing must leave its print, she preferred to see it rendered in art nouveau.

A bill pasted to a nearby streetlamp caught her eye. The notice featured the sun-bleached and rain-stained image of a girl with light braids and a gingham dress. "MISSING: ANGELA HOUSTON," read the title. Below, in smaller print, the bill read, "IF SEEN, CALL SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT."

The sound of an approaching automobile engine snapped Jenny out of her reverie. A sheriff's car skidded to a halt on the other side of the goat. A uniformed young man popped out. He fumbled with his deputy's cap before tossing it on the front seat. "Lonnie! Are you all right?"

"Of course I am, Gal," she said. "Got your goat."

"He's not my goat." The deputy's sigh suggested he'd heard that joke before. "Second time this week that rascal's escaped Schrader's farm." Gal edged closer, reaching out for the severed tether. Noticing Jenny, his hand went up to doff the cap he was no longer wearing. "Evening, miss. Excuse me while I – oof!"

The goat butted him in the belly. Gal doubled over. He stood, color rising to his cheeks. Jenny noted with relief that the young man appeared unpunctured.

Gal shook a fist at the goat. "Why, you rotten, ornery..." With an abashed glance at Jenny, he left the rest unspoken.

"That's telling him, Gal!" Lonnie threw an arm around the animal's hind legs, holding him from the side to avoid a kick. "Hurry, get his front legs!"

Gal caught the goat's legs and neck, pressing his head

against the animal's neck to avoid the horns. Together they heaved the beast off his hooves and shoved him into the back seat of the sheriff's car. Lonnie slammed the door shut. The goat bleated a complaint and stuck its head over the front seat.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Gal dove in to rescue his cap. With a sigh of relief, he turned to the women. "Thanks, Lonnie."

"You know I don't mind looking after you, Gal," she said. "Why, Miss Barnes, would you believe that when we were in grade school—"

"Lonnie, don't."

Lonnie didn't skip a beat. "—Galeas Morgan here was the smallest boy in our class. Sometimes the other boys would catch him after arithmetic—"

"Lonnie," Gal pleaded. His deep voice reminded Jenny of a baritone she'd met at the Teatro alla Scala. He stood an inch taller than Lonnie, and he was so lean Jenny guessed he skipped meals.

Jenny thought she might need a friendly sheriff's deputy in her search for Izzie. It would be best if she got off on the right foot with this one. "Whatever size he was as a boy," said Jenny, "I think we can all agree he's grown admirably. Thank you for your help, Deputy Morgan."

Gal's eyes radiated gratitude.

Lonnie shrugged, threw a leg over the motorcycle, and kicked it back to life. "Better get moving."

Gal put on his cap and touched the brim. "Enjoy the Harvest Festival, Miss—?"

"Barnes."

"Say, Miss Barnes, you haven't happened to have seen a

black or green truck tonight, have you?”

“I’ve come straight from the train station,” she said. She considered mentioning the strange figure on the platform. She decided it would be better not to appear to be a nervous Nellie. Still, curiosity got the better of her. “Why do you ask?”

Gal began to reply, but a tearing sound from the sheriff’s car drew his attention. The goat had its teeth in the upholstery.

“Hey, knock it off, you devil!” Gal rushed back to the car.

“Come on, Miss Barnes,” said Lonnie. “Papa worries if I’m out too late.”

Stifling her laughter at Gal’s ridiculous struggle against the goat she now thought of as “Devil”, Jenny returned to the sidecar.

“Good luck, Gal!” Lonnie cried as they zoomed away.

Jenny shouted over the motor’s roar, “Why did he ask about a truck?”

Lonnie’s grin faded. “Somebody saw one near the last disappearance. Sheriff Engle has everybody on the lookout.”

They drove along the waterfront until Lonnie turned the bike toward the heart of the sleepy town. She slowed as they approached a colonial-style house with a wide veranda on the ground floor. Yellow light flickered through a pair of garret windows with arched tops. The half-drawn shade in one lent the edifice a snooty air as it peered down at the circular driveway. A sign in the round garden read “The Continental Hotel.”

The doorman narrowed his eyes at the motorcycle as gravel crunched under the tires. Then he noticed Jenny’s pearls and hastened forward.

As she stepped out, Jenny remarked, "I didn't notice a ring on Gal's finger."

"What?"

"I mean, he's an eligible bachelor, isn't he?"

Lonnie's eyebrows formed a comical pair of arches. "You don't mean – I mean, a lady like you wouldn't be interested in a fella like–"

Jenny smiled, pleased that Lonnie rose to the bait. Jenny had a knack for identifying affection disguised as bullying. It had been her own *modus operandi* as a girl. "It just seems strange," she said, "a good-looking young man like that without a wife or at least a fiancée. Perhaps a sweetheart?"

"Ha!" Lonnie slapped her cap against her thigh. "Gal's been too busy looking after his ma and sisters. Ever since his papa and his older brothers ... you know."

"The war," Jenny nodded, regretting the turn the conversation had taken. It had been much worse in Europe, but she knew many in the States who had lost someone in the Great War. She handed Lonnie five dollars. "Thanks for the ride."

Lonnie gawped at the bill. "Miss Barnes, it's too much."

"No more 'Miss Barnes' from you." Jenny tucked the bill into Lonnie's overall pocket. "My friends call me Jenny."

## CHAPTER 2

After unpacking and freshening up, Jenny donned a glittering black Chanel evening frock. She inspected herself in the mirror and concluded it was a bit formal. She exchanged it for an acid-green moiré dress by Paquin. It was no more subtle than the Chanel, but it was far more frivolous. She brushed her lashes with mascara and her cheeks with rouge. She finished with lipstick and blew herself a kiss in the mirror.

She exchanged her handbag for a beaded pochette. She pulled the matching gloves up past her elbows. As she transferred the necessities from her handbag, she spied the Green Man medallion lying beside Izzie's letters on the bed.

She picked it up, surprised as always at its weight. The circular disc was a little more than two inches in diameter and about a quarter-inch thick. Verdigris obscured the finer details, but the highest edges gleamed deep bronze.

On one side was the image of a man's face, the willow fronds of his hair and beard lifted as if in a strong wind. His features seemed vaguely Mediterranean. His eyes yearned upward, mouth open as if singing – or screaming.

The green patina covered more of the opposite side. Jenny could make out the pattern of willow fronds around the border. Within the fronds appeared concentric circles or a continuous spiral. Jenny could never decide which. She studied the obscured pattern, trying to discern the minuscule shapes that formed its lines, following them deeper toward the center. She grew dizzy and averted her eyes.

Jenny had found the medallion at an archaeological dig she'd funded near Turin. Poor management and labor relations, exacerbated by political turmoil, resulted in a complete fiasco. At least Jenny had collected a souvenir for her trouble, along with a few anecdotes to thrill her fellow expats in Paris. Besides, she liked the Green Man iconography, one of the few ways in which her tastes intersected with her father's obsession with Arthurian lore. She sent Izzie a copy, along with an account of her disastrous investment.

Jenny began to slip the medallion into her pochette but stopped. The color wasn't a perfect match, but it didn't clash with the Paquin, so she fastened it around her neck. She hid Izzie's letters beneath some clothes in the dresser.

Izzie had mentioned moving out of a boarding house in spring, but not the address. Jenny had only a few names of friends and places. Of those, there was only one she could visit so late in the evening. At least it was one of the more interesting-sounding locations.

Jenny donned her coat and swept out of the room.

In the lobby, Jenny found the concierge standing motionless behind an oak-paneled counter. In his old-fashioned suit and with his wavy white hair parted in the middle, he might have been mistaken for a painting of a Puritan. All he lacked, in

Jenny's opinion, was a wide-brimmed hat with a big brass buckle.

"Excuse me," said Jenny. "Could you tell me where to find the Tick-Tock Club?"

The man's head swiveled on a neck barely thicker than a pencil. Jenny imagined frost forming over his eyeballs. "I'm sure I don't know, miss. While you might be used to European customs, Prohibition is still the law of the land in the United States of America."

Obviously, he knew the place she was talking about. In Paris, there was always a way to smooth things over with a supercilious functionary. Jenny lay a gloved hand on the counter, spreading her fingers to reveal the color of money beneath them.

The frost expanded across the concierge's face.

Jenny decided to try her luck with a taxi driver, if she could find one. As she passed the young doorman, he whispered, "You'll find the Tick-Tock two blocks that way, miss, around the corner from the watchmaker and down the stairs."

"Naturally." Jenny slipped him the bill she'd offered the concierge. "Is there a password?"

"I'm told it's always midnight at the Tick-Tock." Before Jenny could ask him to explain, he added, "You'll need an escort, miss. Unaccompanied women are not admitted."

"Oh, I'm never unaccompanied, not even when I'm completely alone." Jenny walked off, leaving the doorman to puzzle over her meaning as she puzzled over his. She enjoyed trading in enigma. It was a fair substitute for flirting when no suitable partner was readily available.

Half a block from the hotel, Jenny felt glad she'd brought

her coat. She could feel the damp from the river a few blocks away. Only one car drove past during her walk, reminding her just how quiet the rest of the town seemed. In Paris, even in the dead of night, one could always hear distant music, laughter, or the sounds of lovemaking.

As she rounded the corner from the watch shop, Jenny found three taxicabs lined up at the curb, the drivers standing together and smoking. They started at the sound of her footsteps. A cigarette fell from one cabbie's lips.

"So, this is where you've been hiding," Jenny said.

Before anyone could offer her a ride, Jenny turned to descend the nearby stairs. She glanced back when she heard the cabbie grumbling. He fetched his discarded butt and put it back to his lips.

"Serves you right," muttered Jenny, annoyed to find them here when she'd wanted a taxi at the train station. On the other hand, her journey with Lonnie had been much more exhilarating.

A talented artist had painted a jaunty clock on the door. Its oval face and curved arms suggested the swift passing of time.

"Must be fun in there." Jenny heard faint music from somewhere inside. When she opened the door, the sound grew louder. Before her lay a hallway with three doors marked as service entrances; signs indicated the watch shop, a florist, and a cobbler.

A grandfather clock stood at the far end. Jenny approached the clock. She noted the hands showed the time as 8:22, which she guessed was about right.

*"It's always midnight at the Tick-Tock."* Jenny smiled at

the clue. Standing on tiptoe, she opened the glass front and advanced the minute hand, carrying the hour along until both pointed at the twelve. Rather than a succession of chimes, she heard a metallic *click*. As the hands rewound themselves to the correct time, the clock swung outward.

Beyond lay an antechamber draped in burgundy velvet. A burly man stood up from a stool, a folded newspaper in one hand, the stub of a pencil in the other. He frowned to see she was alone.

“No unaccompanied dames,” he said, sounding exactly as Jenny had always imagined one of Al Capone’s Chicago gangsters might. “Scram, Sheba.”

“But my escort is right here.” Jenny produced a ten-dollar bill from her pochette. “Allow me to introduce Mr Jackson.”

The big man glowered. For a second Jenny imagined he might throw her over his shoulder and deposit her on the sidewalk. How the cabbies would howl!

Instead, the bouncer snatched the bill and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “G’wan in.”

Jenny glanced at his newspaper as she walked past. “Cur.”

“What’s that?” he growled.

She looked back over her shoulder. “Fourteen down. Three letters for ‘mongrel.’”

The bouncer peered at the crossword. “Oh, yeah.” He rubbed out “dog” and scribbled in the correct answer.

Jenny stepped into a smoky room. Clock faces adorned every foot of wall space, each in a different style. Some had hands like a churchyard fence, others cartoon arms with big white gloves for hands. The hours appeared as Roman or Arabic numerals, pairs of dice, or numbers drawn by one of

Mucha's countless imitators. Every clock indicated a different time.

Every face tells a different lie.

Jenny winced at the tacky floor and wrinkled her nose at the smell of cheap tobacco, but her ears perked up at the music. The writhing clarinet melody was enough to forgive the speakeasy's other deficiencies.

An oak bar stretched across the right wall, its stools vacant. Half-empty glasses filled fifteen or so little tables curling around a small dance floor, where the customers wiggled with more enthusiasm than grace. Jenny recognized a little Charleston, a little Turkey Trot, and a lot of groping.

Past the dancers, Jenny spied the six-piece jazz band on a tiny wedge of a stage. The pianist appeared to be their leader, but the clarinetist was standing for his solo. His houndstooth suit was tight in the shoulders and loose everywhere else. He closed his eyes as his dark brown fingers danced along the keys.

Jenny waved off the girl at the coat check and turned back to enjoy the music until the solo ended. Before the dancers could fill the seats, she claimed an empty bar stool. She pretended not to notice the curious stares she drew as the only single woman in the place. She slid a dollar bill across the bar. Like a ghost in the mirror, the bartender materialized.

"What's your pleasure, miss?" He spoke with a warm Irish lilt.

"What sort of cognac do you have?"

"Bourbon, rye, rum, and gin." His tone cooled.

Jenny realized her mistake. Prohibition aside, Arkham was a far cry from Paris or even Boston. Besides, she ought to

acknowledge her return to the United States with a distinctly American drink. “I don’t suppose you can build a perfect Manhattan.”

“Rye or bourbon?”

“Bourbon, if you please.”

The band struck up another song as the bartender created her drink. Jenny was heartened to see him produce French vermouth and Angostura bitters from beneath the bar. He shook the cocktail and strained it into a martini glass. She didn’t complain when he garnished it with a candied cherry instead of a lemon twist.

The bartender watched as she took a sip. The drink was a trifle sweeter than she was used to, but she liked it. She raised her glass in salute, and he nodded. It wasn’t much of a relationship, but she hoped it would support a few questions.

“I don’t look familiar to you, do I?” she asked.

He lifted an eyebrow.

She removed her hat. “Imagine my hair is lighter and curled. Also, I’m two years younger.”

He squinted, a puzzled frown on his lips.

“And my name is Isabelle.” No one but Jenny called her sister Izzie. Isabelle preferred her given name, while Jenny couldn’t stand hers.

The barman’s frown became an O of comprehension. “Your sister, is it?”

“Isabelle Barnes. She mentioned this place in her letters. Have you seen her lately?”

Rather than answer, he glanced at a plain round clock above the entrance, which Jenny guessed was the one that indicated the actual time: 8:43. Right in the middle of the

band's song, he reached up to ring a brass bell in a distinctive three-two-three pattern. "Last call!"

A wave of men crashed against the bar as the ladies queued up at the entrance to the powder room. Jenny shot the bartender an inquiring look, but he was busy pouring drinks and settling tabs.

"I guess I should have warmed him up better," Jenny grumbled.

"You can warm me up, doll."

Jenny turned to see a man standing too close. He was only a little taller standing than she was sitting on the stool. He was clean-shaven with sharp features that might have been passably handsome except for the sneer of his thin lips. He was the only man in the place wearing his hat, a felt fedora that matched his blue suit and tie. Tufts of red hair stuck out on either side.

"Sure," said Jenny. "Got a match?"

He reached into a pocket before getting the joke. "Cute," he said. "And inquisitive, I'm guessing." Jenny noticed the lump of a pistol under each of his arms. He and the barkeep exchanged nods.

Jenny realized the bartender must have summoned this charming character to check her out. He was much too small for a bouncer, so she guessed he was the owner – or an "associate", as the newspapers called rum runners. If she were to learn any information at the Tick-Tock, unfortunately, it appeared she would have to get it from this man. She tried a new tack.

"I'm Jenny Barnes." She offered her hand.

The man's hands were small, even for a short fellow. They

glistened, too. Jenny was glad she'd worn her gloves. "Dainty Donohue," he said. His green eyes fixed on hers, daring her to laugh at the nickname. With a big friend at her side, she might have cut him down shorter still, but she hadn't come to the Tick-Tock to trade barbs with this leprechaun.

"Mr Donohue, I was just asking your bartender whether he knows my sister, Isabelle."

"Isabelle?" Donohue shrugged, but he flinched at her name.

Jenny offered up the only other relevant clue from Izzie's letters. "She might have been here with someone named Auggie."

"So, your sister is that dip's girl?" Donohue took a seat.

"She was with a drunkard?" said Jenny.

"Naw, not a dipsomaniac," said Donohue. He reached for her clutch as if to slip his fingers inside. "He takes a dip," he said. "Like so."

Jenny moved the handbag out of his reach. "Izzie wouldn't date a common pickpocket."

Even as she said the words, she knew she was wrong. Izzie had no discrimination when it came to men. She'd never had.

"If it's any consolation, he wasn't all that common. He was a real swell, well heeled. I figure he dipped for thrills," said Donohue. "Had a knack, too. He fleeced the flock for weeks before we caught wise."

"What did you do with him?" Jenny flinched as a woman brushed past, giggling at something her date had said. "What happened to Izzie?"

"Don't get sore." Dainty patted her shoulder. Jenny shuddered at his moist touch. "We shook out his pockets and gave him the bounce. Nobody touched his squeeze. Ain't her

fault she's dizzy for a bad egg."

Jenny breathed a sigh of relief. "Where can I find this Auggie now?"

Rather than answer, Donohue accepted the cash box from the bartender and began counting. "Give us a couple of those special cocktails, Pat. Then you can call it a night."

"You got it, Dainty." The bartender began mixing a couple of drinks beneath the counter.

Donohue turned back to Jenny. "Say, I like that accent of yours. Where's it from?"

"Charm school." While she tended to adopt the local dialect in other languages, her mid-Atlantic diction returned whenever she spoke English. In any event, she refused to be distracted. "Mr Donohue, I need to find my sister. At least tell me this Auggie's last name."

Donohue paused in his count. "Never knew it. Sixty, seventy... Besides, he's blown. I'm bored with him. I wanna know more about you."

"If you don't mind, Mr Donohue—"

"Ninety-five, one hundred... Call me Dainty. All the gals do."

"Listen, Dainty, I haven't seen my sister in years. Now she's in trouble, and I've come back from Paris to help in any way—"

As the last patrons pushed through the exit, the band concluded its set with an embarrassing squeal from the clarinet.

"Wrap it up, you clowns," yelled Dainty. "And don't come back until Reggie remembers how to play that licorice stick."

The musicians chuckled in the self-deprecating manner of employees used to mistreatment – all except the clarinetist.

He stared at Jenny, his expression grim.

Pat set a couple of drinks on the bar, one beside Dainty, the other next to Jenny. They were some sort of whiskey cocktail with beads of citrus oil on the surface. Jenny glanced at Reggie, the clarinet player. His gaze flicked down at her drink. Almost imperceptibly, he shook his head.

Donohue finished counting. He compared his tally against the slips of paper in the till and nodded. "G'night, Pat. Lock up on your way out."

Jenny didn't like the sound of that. Whatever Donohue had planned, she didn't expect it included answering her questions about Izzie.

"Night, boss." Pat slunk away, avoiding Jenny's glare.

Donohue smiled, revealing a plentitude of teeth. He reached for Jenny's knee. "Now we can get to know each other."

Suppressing the impulse to slap his hand, Jenny looked toward the bandstand. Pat and Reggie exited through a servants' door. "Where are they going?"

As Donohue turned to look, Jenny switched their drinks. She sloshed a little of the cocktail on the bar. Donohue turned back before she could wipe it away.

"Don't worry about them. This place is full of nooks and crannies," said Donohue. "You could get lost back there. It's a real maze."

"You've never been to the Khan el-Khalili, have you?" Jenny had a feeling this man didn't even own a passport.

After a blank look, Donohue said, "Sure I have. All the time."

Donohue picked up the drink beside Jenny. Afraid he'd

caught wise to her trick, she began formulating a plan involving knocking over the bar stools and making a run for the door. Rather than drink, however, Donohue handed the cocktail to Jenny. He raised his own glass in a toast. "To the Connell Collie."

"The Connell Collie!" Jenny agreed, choking back a laugh at Donohue's ignorance. He was all bluff, and that knowledge gave Jenny courage. She clinked her glass to his. Donohue watched as she tossed back her drink.

"Wow! My kind of dame!" He drained his glass.

Jenny fanned her face with a hand. "That giggle water comes on pretty strong."

Donohue blinked. Jenny imagined the manager of a speakeasy could hold his liquor, so whatever Pat dosed it with must have been strong.

"Too bad you sent Pat away," said Jenny. "I could use another."

"Yeah? Me, too," said Donohue. He hopped off the barstool, wobbled, and steadied himself. "Or maybe a glass of water."

"Water?" Jenny struck a tone of disbelief. "What kind of a man drinks water while he's making a gal a drink?"

As he rounded the bar, Donohue whirled, thrusting up a finger like a professor making a point. "Right you are." He slipped and grasped the bar's edge for support.

"Steady on, Dainty."

He struck the bar gate several times before realizing he had to pull it open. "Say, Pat must have mixed up..." He fixed Jenny with a look of comprehension. "Wait a min—"

He slumped behind the bar.

Jenny boosted herself onto the bar surface, spun around on

her bottom, and hopped down beside Donohue. He babbled a few more syllables into a bubble of saliva that disappeared with a sad little pop.

“That’s easy for you to say.” Jenny went through his pockets for the keys. She raised them in triumph. “Aha!”

A muffled bang came from behind the servants’ entrance. Jenny feared Pat had returned.

Donohue stirred. Jenny saw he was reaching under his jacket.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” She rolled him over and slipped a gleaming .45 automatic from its holster.

Donohue got a hand around her wrist, squeezing with surprising strength. She brought the pistol’s butt down on his chin.

“Pat!” he shouted. He reached into the other side of his jacket.

“While I hate to pick on somebody smaller than me,” said Jenny, “in your case I’ll make an exception.”

She cracked him on the forehead, but he kept struggling. It took her two more tries to still him. She held a finger under his nose. When she felt his breath, she heaved a sigh of relief.

She took his second pistol, twin to the first. The engraved nickelplating was beautiful, but Jenny liked the tapered grip even more. She’d fired big pistols before, but she’d found the grips too big for her hands. These fit perfectly.

Another sound from the back startled her. Jenny juggled the pistols, her clutch, and the keys. As she tried to hang onto just the pistols, she dropped everything on the floor. She winced at the clatter, but at least the guns didn’t go off. She picked one up and braced it against the bar as the bandstand door began to open.





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