

A Story by Jack Sparacino

Carla "String Bean" D'Andrea barely got out of her law building before it went up in flames. Good old H.B. Haynes and Sons, built over 40 years and still growing, it looked like a terrorist scored a touchdown. A few of her coworkers staggered out too, but most of them simply broiled. Including her swaggering jerk of a boss, Hank Bledsoe. Her last words registering in Hank's boiling brain were to the effect that somebody had a sale on gas and turpentine. That cocky smartass String Bean, he thought. She sprayed the stuff in the mailroom earlier. Sure did look good in the process of serving his execution papers, though. Long, lean and menacing. A dressed to kill, green eyed cutlass of a woman. What had he done to her to deserve this?

Six months after the blaze Carla was starting to fly. Her aerospace brain calculated acceleration rates and lift curves for her career. She migrated to a new law firm, Higgins and Burke, in Charleston. Both John Higgins and Harley Burke were pioneers. They actually judged their people on performance and not their readiness for cable TV or a magazine cover. Someone whispered to her that she looked like partner material so she spiked her wardrobe with flashier items from Oscar de la Renta. The men in the firm routinely fell over her in the hallway and heaven help them in meetings. One glance from her and they were roadkill.

Sarah Fiedler had been homeless for three months after sling-shotting her way down society's immutable ladder of respectability. It was a graceless fall, full of pleading for loose change or a sandwich, maybe a decent cup of coffee. The stuff they served at the shelter tasted like it was made from dried octopus. The kind that Chinese grocers sell.

Her friend Della came to visit in the rain. Della ran GG's Bistro on the other side of town. The side where everyone had their own smokes, clean underwear every day, and a few bucks to spare. "Well you got to mix it up more, sister," she urged. "Scrape a few bucks together and take yourself out one night. Have a good time, meet some new people."

Sarah slept on that idea all week. On a good day she could panhandle ten bucks or so but needed every penny of that to eat. She tried picking a few pockets, focusing on older guys with a limp or some other obvious impairment. She was disappointed when most of them only had credit cards on them.

JJ Foley's, an Irish bar around the corner, had pitchers of beer for four dollars every Wednesday. She didn't drink beer, but Sarah thought they might give her a break on some wine. She dressed as best she knew how, fixed her hair and makeup in a Dairy Queen bathroom that smelled like air freshener and humans behaving badly. One more look in the mirror and she decided she didn't look scary, at least. Pretty, actually. Well sort of.

She figured most guys on their third or fourth drink might even look her way. Maybe one of them wouldn't be a creep, loser, child molester, or wear a MAGA hat to bed. Sarah slunk into Foley's nearly broke but hopeful. She sat down and ordered Cabernet from the cute kid behind the bar. He looked like a robot to her, spinning drinks and food to his customers on autopilot. He seemed to smile at no one. Except Sarah.

Halfway through her second glass, Sarah spotted a striking woman at the other end of the bar. Sucking in a deep breath, she slid down a few seats and glanced at her. Who the hell was this woman with the drop dead killer green eyes and athletic figure? She was dressed and done up like she fell off the cover of Elle or Bazaar and seemed so self-assured that men forgot their own names and probably whether they were wearing socks when they spoke with her for more than a minute or two. Sexism be damned, she was a man slayer. And knew it.

"Hey there, don't mean to bother you, I'm Sarah." "Hey yourself. I'm Carla, nice to meet you. What brings you into this joint?" Their conversation and mutual rapport took off instantly. Both in their early thirties, they still felt Big Ben counting down their lives somewhere. The guy in charge of hardship, joy, success and wrinkles.

After three glasses of wine and two stale pretzels, Sarah knew she was already in trouble over her tab. The seven bucks she had wasn't going to cut it. She needed an off ramp, and soon. But this was too much fun to let a little cash get in the way. Off she ran into her slingshot to hell story, complete with times she had to beg strangers for food near the churches in town.

"I'm wondering if a whole new gig is in order. I paint, you know. Small rural scenes in oils. They're still a little commercial and sometimes I have to match some ugly old couch for Mrs. Grimshaw or Baker. But I can also do murals, take up an entire wall in a bar or restaurant." At this point she was lying her butt off. The closest she ever got to a mural was when she watched the great Joanna Ciampa come down from Boston for a workshop. Sarah slithered into the

back row and barely said a word for eight hours.

Ciampa's creativity and barely checked energy were dazzling. In between rapid brush strokes she paused for questions, then got back on her ladder to fill in more details in a vast panorama. Sarah thought that while pretty and charming, Joanna dressed like a college kid home for a garage sale. Her red headband and tattoo sleeves along with astonishing patter. "Ever wonder what a fairy looks like in the dark? What about a dog driving an old car or a jester from another century pausing to smoke his pipe and contemplate where he will time travel to next? I do that stuff in my dreams and by the way, I don't sleep much. Sometimes on a big project on a deadline I just pull some canvas together into a bed and catnap on the floor."

Carla listened in awe as Sarah etched her pain in the air. "You know, you and I could make a pretty good team. My law work creates some interesting side opportunities, if you know what I mean." Sarah was too tipsy to let that pass. "No, what do you mean?"

"I'm talking about some wet work and risk but the payoffs can be big, sister." "Define big," Sarah asked. "Oh, five to six figures. A lot more if we don't screw up. You in, Slingshot?"

Sarah forgot about her tab and the crumpled seven bucks in her pocket. She looked over at String Bean's gold Gucci purse, perfect nails and California teeth. The tiny hairs on Sarah's arms stood up, her heart raced. Her common sense took a vacation. "Sign me up. Hey, we should celebrate sometime."

"How 'bout now. Wanna make a little ruckus?"

"Sure, boss, you're not gonna get us in trouble, are you?"

"Define trouble, girlfriend."