Out of the Blue

by Jael (erynlasgalen1949)

Summary

A sequel to Not Fade Away. A clueless CPS worker investigates the complaint of a child being raised by 'crazy cultists.' Misapprehensions abound as we get a peek into the home life of 'Aaron Rivers' and his son. Characters: All the usual Mirkwood Suspects. Rated PG-13 for language. MEFA 2008 Second Place Winner.

Notes

Disclaimer: This is a work of derivative fiction based on the characters and world of JRR Tolkien. I merely borrow them for a time, for my own enjoyment and, I hope, that of my readers. I am making no money from this endeavor. Beta reader for this story is IgnobleBard.

Author's Note: This story is a sequel and will make much more sense if you first read Not Fade Away. It is also AU, although, in the words of one reviewer, "It could have happened that way." It's nice to think that the Elves might still be with us, so please enjoy!
Jane Jankowski pulled her rusty six-year-old sedan, bought used for a song because of the high mileage, to a stop outside the big wrought iron gate and switched off the ignition. "Why me?" she sighed.

"Because you're the best one for the job."

That's what her boss had said, late the previous afternoon after calling her into his office for one of his private 'chats.' "This case needs . . . finesse, and when I think of the word 'tact,' I think of you, Janey."

As susceptible to flattery as the next person, Jane had nevertheless smelled a rat. She gave her boss a wry face. "All right, Doug, what's the catch?"

Doug Schmidt might have been described as good-looking -- for about two weeks in his senior year of high school, between the time the acne went away and the paunch started to develop and the hairline recede. Twenty-five years of struggling to make ends meet on a low-paid civil servant's salary and the recent stress of having two daughters needing college tuition had not helped matters. Jane had a soft spot for him anyway. *That will be me in about twenty years,* she told herself. *A middle-aged single woman with a non-existent retirement portfolio and a head full of grey hairs. Except, instead of the daughters, I'll have a cat.* Hell, she thought, she might throw caution to the winds and get herself two cats.

"Catch?" said Doug innocently. "No catch -- just a nice scenic drive out to Lake Forest. Your Kia gets the best gas mileage of all of us. And I know you're not the type to be intimidated by a lot of money."

Jane rolled her eyes. Not likely! In her eight years as a Child Protective Services caseworker, she had learned that in this regard the rich were no different than the general population. Their children could be just as badly abused. Jane had seen welts caused by Gucci belts and emotionally scarred youngsters locked in the bedrooms of one point five million dollar McMansions. The only difference was that people with money could be incredibly touchy when called to account, and they had the means to make it very unpleasant for those doing the calling if not handled carefully. No wonder her boss felt the need for diplomacy.

"Give me the case file, Doug." She took the sheaf of paper and skimmed. Subject name, one Galen Ernilson. Birth certificate on file in Lake County, Illinois. Parents, Leif Aransen and Linda Singer, no marriage license on record. In this day and age that lack, and the differing parental surnames, barely raised an eyebrow, but Jane set aside the tidbit for later. Sometimes every little fact added up to a larger picture.

According to the complainants, who were listed as 'Agents' Angus Duncan and James Fitzhugh, the child at risk was a home birth and home schooled. Again, Jane crinkled her forehead, making a mental note. She knew many excellent and devoted parents who home schooled their children, but a child with no exposure to outsiders could be a recipe for disaster in the wrong hands. The file gave a Lake Forest address and noted that the subject resided with his paternal grandfather . . . .
"Oh, for godssake, Doug, you have got to be kidding me!" She glared at her boss. "Aaron Rivers?"

He shrugged. "That was the name on the complaint."

"THE Aaron Rivers? With the jewelry business and the shipping company and all the downtown real estate? That Aaron Rivers?"

"Yes, that's the one." Doug looked as unhappy as Jane felt. "You have to admit he's . . . unusual. From what I've read he runs that company of his like some kind of crazy cult. Bunch of long-haired hippie types in all the top positions. There are no photographs of him or his family, at his own request. Some kind of religious thing, I think."

"He's at half the charity events in Northern Illinois," Jane protested. "How does he avoid getting his picture taken?"

"If they want his money, they humor him," said Doug. "But if someone forgets and snaps one, he pays off the photographer. That usually works, but Duncan told me that last year his security goons broke the camera of a Paparazzo who wouldn't deal. The guy sounds batshit crazy if you ask me."

"Eccentric, Doug," she said. "Anyone with as much money as Rivers is eccentric, not crazy."

"Call him what you want, but this case is tricky. The guy owns half of Chicago, and this could bite us in the ass if we don't handle the case discreetly."

"Then why mess into it just on some vague suspicions? I don't see anything in here to indicate that the grandchild is being abused or neglected. Rivers has always seemed to me to be more of a Bill Gates than a David Koresh type. Besides, you're exaggerating; he only owns one tenth of Chicago."

Doug made a face. "Duncan and Fitzhugh seemed very . . . insistent."

Jane raised an eyebrow. "Correct me, but isn't that your code word for, 'they are assholes'?"

"You said, it; I didn't."

"Oh, wonderful! Now I'm between a rock and a hard place -- either piss off a rich, powerful man or have two government spooks on my neck for dereliction of duty. Since when do we give in to blackmail and persecute innocent citizens?"

"Maybe not so entirely innocent," Doug said. "Rivers got into some hot water with the IRS about eight years back. I get the feeling Duncan and Fitzhugh were behind that too, although they couldn't make it stick. There is definitely something fishy about him. Money laundering, maybe?"

"So he's Vito Corleone rather than David Koresh. What does that have to do with us?"

"It can't be healthy for the child. You know, Rivers' whole family and staff seems to live up in that locked compound in Lake Forest, like it's some kind of commune." Doug stopped for breath. "I'll share one thing that Duncan and Fitzhugh told me, and my own investigation bore it out -- that kid has never seen a doctor in his entire life."

Jane frowned. "Hmm, you're right. That is odd. Definitely something that needs to be checked into."

No vaccinations, in this day in age! Measles, Mumps, chicken pox -- most likely no fluoride treatments either. Poor kid probably wasn't even circumcised!

"All I'm asking, Jane is that you drive up there, take a look at the home life, and see what you can learn about this boy that no one seems to have seen. Is that so hard?"
Jane allowed herself the luxury of a second eye roll in one day. "Of course not. It'll be a piece of cake. So why, may I ask, are you not sending Martha or Kate?" she said, referring to her two superiors, tenured caseworkers both.

"Because you're smart, Jane," Doug said. "And you're not burned out yet. You won't just do it by the numbers. If there's anything to be seen, you'll see it."

"When you put it that way, Doug . . . ," she sighed.

"Yes, I'm putting it that way," Doug smiled. "That's my girl, Janey."

"I'll take a drive out there tomorrow morning. It's the weekend -- they should all be at home." She paused with her hand on the door. "And Doug? I'm not your girl. I'm nobody's girl."

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Off the Path

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we meet a security guard, a father, and his young son.

As the Kia's cooling engine slowly ticked to a stop, Jane checked her appearance one last time in her rearview mirror. Not that it would do her much good. 'Plain Jane' she had been since elementary school, and 'Plain Jane' she would no doubt be when she finally tottered into the Old Ladies Home -- no, Managed Senior Communities was what they were called nowadays. She felt pretty certain they'd find some new euphemism by the time she got there, assuming she made it that far.

Having long ago given up the hope to be P.R.E.T.T.Y. she took great pride in being S.M.A.R.T. And, taking a final swipe of the comb through frizzy dark-blonde hair, at least today she would be T.I.D.Y. The importance of looking professional could not be overstated. There was no dirt on her nose either, so she deemed herself ready to go.

She gathered together her shoulder bag and notebook. One of these days, she knew she would have to give in and switch to an electronic tablet, but for now a plain old ring binder and a Bic pen seemed so much more comfortable and simple to use. She stepped out of the car and found herself blocked by a fieldstone wall tall enough to hide the broken glass she felt sure must be imbedded in the top, and a wide iron gate.

Interesting. Most of the estates in the area went for ersatz medieval or the frou-frou French provincial look in their security gates, but this one was all straight lines. 'Frank Lloyd Wright, unless I miss my guess,' she told herself, and the gatehouse bore it out. A connoisseur of the fine architecture to be found in northern Illinois, Jane had been a fan of the Prairie Style ever since college, and she felt a frisson of anticipation, wondering which of the master architect's designs she would have the pleasure of seeing today.

She saw a buzzer on the side wall of the gatehouse, stepped up and rang. Jane looked up to see a pale face fill a discreetly placed security monitor. "May I help you, Miss?" said a voice, almost drowned out by the sound of roaring auto engines and the excited tones of an ESPN announcer in the background. "Rudy, Orville -- turn that down, would you?" he yelled, over his shoulder, turning back to her.

No sooner done than he made a quick staying motion with his hand and his face disappeared from the monitor screen. Within seconds, a door opened and he stepped out, all six feet plus of him, dressed in a green and brown uniform with the name Hal embroidered on the breast pocket. "Sorry about that," he said, smiling apologetically. "My brothers and their NASCAR! What can I do for you?"

Looking at him, Jane understood her boss's remarks about hippie cultists. This man -- Hal, was his name? -- had fine platinum hair that fell to his shoulder blades, covering his ears. In her experience, most security guards were ex-military types who favored crew cuts and far too many doughnuts. From the looks of things, Hal had enjoyed a doughnut or two, but in spite of that, his exotic good looks almost distracted Jane from the very large pistol at his hip. Almost.

"Miss?" he prompted.
Jane kicked herself back to reality. "My name is Jane Jankowski, from Cook County Child Protective Services. I'd like to pay a call on Mr. Rivers, if he's available."

Hal raised an eyebrow. A very nice eyebrow, Jane thought, with a little mental sigh. "Child Protective Services?"

Jane's mental sigh turned from wistful to nervous. This was always the tricky part. She had no warrant, although one could be obtained under the proper circumstances. It was always easier if they invited you in, and this was where the tact Doug had spoken of became crucial. "It's come to our attention that your employer has a young child in the household, Galen Ernilson, who is being home schooled. We like to do a home visit in these cases, just to make sure everything is in order. It's purely routine." She favored Hal with her brightest smile.

"Purely routine, eh?" Jane could swear the big security guard fought to hide a grin. "In that case, bring your car around, and I'll open the gate for you."

"Oh, no, that won't be necessary. I'd rather walk." One simply never knew with these visits. A car parked visibly on the public road served as extra insurance.

"Are you sure, Miss Jankowski? It's half a mile to the main house."

'Wow!' thought Jane. That much land here in Lake Forest! She'd hate to see Aaron Rivers' property tax bill. The man must be a real fanatic about his privacy.

Aloud, she said, "I'm sure. It's lovely weather, and I can use the exercise." That part, at least, was the truth. Bright sun shone on one of those crisp fall days that made you glad to be alive, and for some reason Jane felt all too aware that her behind, spread by hours of desk work, could use some tightening.

"Suit yourself, then." Hal went to the gate and typed a code into the keypad, seeming to bend to whisper something as well. A narrow, person-sized gate panel within the larger one swung open. "Take care, Miss Jankowski," he said as he let her through, "and keep to the path."

As Jane made her way down the gravel driveway, she had the eerie feeling that eyes were upon her. 'Just doing my job, Miss,' she heard him call after her. "Making sure you're safely out of sight."

She turned at the top of a small rise to see Hal standing back at the gatehouse, smiling. "That's Ms. Jankowski, if you don't mind," she retorted. Jane continued on her way, shaking her head to clear it. She had just had the strangest vision of Hal tying a blindfold around her head and leading her through a forest of giant golden-blossomed trees.

"It's been way too long since my last date," she sighed.

Jane walked on, between the rows of beech trees that lined the drive. The gravel roadway rose and fell. Occasionally a leaf fluttered to the ground, or she heard a rustling from deep within the woods on either side. Her legs began to ache from the exertion and she had started to think that Hal was right about driving when she heard silvery laughter coming from the forest to her left. One voice was a light tenor, while the other was as high as a tinkling bell -- a child.

Forgetting Hal's warning, Jane turned from the path and made her way through the trees, seeking the source of the voices.

"Good, Galen. Now, try it again. Draw the bow, sight down the arrow, make adjustment for the
wind. That's excellent. Now hold your breath and let -- no, Galen, hold!"

Too late. Jane heard a hissing noise and an arrow buried itself in the trunk of a tree not a foot in front of her nose. She stopped short, willing her startled heartbeat back to normal.

"Oh no! Are you all right, Miss?" Jane turned to see a young man hurrying toward her, with a small child in tow. He seemed to be another of the Rivers cultists; a further example of the pale-haired Nordic type, even taller than the security guard. Rather than a uniform, this one wore khaki chinos, moccasins, a green plaid shirt and a very worried expression.

"I think so," she said shakily. The arrow still quivered in the bark of the massive oak to her right.

"Did I do something wrong, Daddy?" the little boy asked timidly.

"No, Galen; my fault. I shouldn't have let you nock an arrow before making certain the way was clear." As the father spoke, Jane noticed he quickly smoothed his son's light blond hair down over his ears with a slender forefinger, too late to prevent Jane from seeing what he had obviously hoped to hide.

'Poor child,' she thought. The tip of his ear was visibly deformed. 'Why didn't they get him some plastic surgery for that?' She made a mental note, wondering yet again if the religious scruples extended to medical treatment for, as Aaron Rivers' grandchild, cost could hardly have been an issue. If so, it might be a cause for intervention, for it seemed downright cruel to leave him that way.

"But I missed the target and hit a tree," the child continued, looking embarrassed.

"That's all right, son. Perfectly understandable. My shout startled you." The young man turned his attention to Jane. "You moved very quietly. I almost didn't hear you coming. We weren't expecting visitors, Miss . . . ?"

"Jankowski. Jane Jankowski," she said, holding out a hand to shake. "I'm from Cook County Child Protective Services."

"Leif Aransen." The young man's smile did not falter and his grip remained firm, but Jane noticed the pale blue eyes turn icy and his free hand grip his son's shoulder protectively. "Who let you in, Miss Jankowski?"

"Your security guard at the gate -- Hal. In his defense, he warned me not to leave the driveway," she said quickly. "But, Mr. Aransen, don't you think rubber tipped arrows might have been more appropriate for a child this age?"

Looking down at Galen, Jane did a quick double-take. She surreptitiously flipped open her portfolio with the case file to check the date of birth. January 13 -- yes, she had remembered the year correctly. Seven years and a number of months, but the boy looked no more than four, definitely small for his age. Which seemed strange given the height of the father. Jane red-flagged another mental note. Failure to thrive?

"Call me Leif, please." Aransen's rather attractive dark eyebrows crinkled in genuine perplexity. "Rubber tipped arrows? You can't get any decent range or accuracy with those."

Jane pursed her lips. This was the sort of poor parenting that comes of teenagers reproducing, because young Mr. Aransen could not be a day over twenty-five, if that. 'Right, Mr. L.L. Bean,' she thought dismissively. She had these Yuppie types pegged. 'You think you're a mighty woodsman because you drove your SUV the size of an aircraft carrier through a National Forest once with the air-conditioning and the DVD player turned off. Probably never camped out a day in your life!'
Leif smiled as if Jane had just said something very funny. "What brings you here today, Miss Jankowski?"

"Our records show that Galen hasn't been enrolled in school yet."

"His mother and I tutor him. Is that a problem? If it was good enough for me . . . ?"

That accounted for a lot, Jane thought. "Oh, no, not a problem at all," she said brightly. "We just like to do a home visit under those circumstances. Perfectly routine."

"I see. Of course." Leif nodded pleasantly. "Galen, would you take Miss Jankowski up the to house while I put away the bows and quivers? I'll be right along."

"Yes, Daddy." Galen took Jane's hand trustingly. "This way."

"It's Ms. Jankowski, if you don't mind," Jane said back over her shoulder as the boy led her away.

"Forgive me, Ms. Jankowski," Leif said, with what almost looked like a bow. "Keep to the path, you two."

"How far is it to the house, Galen?" Despite her sensible shoes, Jane suspected she might be getting a blister.

"I don't know. Not far."

Jane thought she might take the opportunity to do a quick mental assessment during whatever time the walk took. Was the boy's intellectual growth as delayed as his physical? "Can you tell me how old you are, Galen?"

"Yes. I can tell you how old I am."

Jane sighed. The youngster had one of those literal minds, obviously. "How old are you, Galen?"

"I'll be eight in January. I have the same birthday as my Daddy!" The boy said this last with evident pride.

Jane smiled. Rounding up to the next birthday. That at least was normal. She met few children who did not, and she thought wistfully back to the days when she had been so eager to give herself one extra year. "Do you know how to write your name?"

He gave her a smug look. "Of course I can. Want to see?"

Jane nodded, and Galen let go of her hand. He ran to the edge of the driveway, picked up a fallen stick and made a series of long, straight marks in the dust. He beamed back at her proudly.

'Oh dear!' thought Jane. The marks resembled chicken scratches more than anything else. Perhaps she was dealing with a learning disability here as well. "I'm sorry, Galen; I can't read that."

He regarded her with what she could swear was a look of pity, sighed, and proceeded to write out 'Galen Emilsen' in surprisingly neat penmanship in the dust beside the first marks. "I like the other way better," he said. "Grandpa taught me to write it in the snow when I was two. When Grandma found out, she frowned, but Mama laughed."

Jane bit her lip. She supposed this was as good a time as any to ask. "Galen, do you know it's wrong to be touched in bad places?"
"Bad places?" The boy's eyebrows crinkled in perplexity. "Bad places -- like down in the basement behind the boiler with all the spider webs? Or out past the kitchen door where Uncle Glenn puts the garbage cans and it gets all stinky?"

Jane stared, at a loss for words, and Galen continued, "Tevildo likes to sleep down behind the boiler, and, once, Auntie Posey gave me a pat on the shoulder when we went to look for him. I don't like going in the basement by myself. Is that what you mean?"

"No, Galen, what I mean is . . . ." Jane never finished her sentence, for as they talked, they had walked and a last turn of the driveway brought them into the front yard. "Oh my!" she exclaimed.

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More to the Picture

Chapter Summary

Jane meets the butler, among others . . .

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A last turn of the driveway brought them into the front yard. "Oh my!" Jane exclaimed.

Before it swept on back towards the garages, the gravel drive circled past a twisting flagstone walk of many stepped levels, flanked by Asian stone lanterns and spreading yews. The walkway led up to a house with wide overhangs that shaded a multitude of tall windows from the summer sun. Wings spread off from the central area near the doorway, seemingly at random yet in utter harmony with the land surrounding. This building was no insult to the earth; it seemed to grow from the soil itself.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Jane whispered. All right; there were some Frank Lloyd Wright designs that had never been photographed or made it into the general knowledge, but she doubted that one of this magnitude would have gone unrecorded. The original patron who commissioned the house must have been both jealous of his privacy and influential enough to keep his home out of the published works, and this Aaron Rivers must have carried on the tradition.

'How about that, there are some perks to this job after all,' Jane thought.

Galen scampered up the flagstone steps ahead of her. "Come on, Mizz Jan-cow-skee," he said, looking over his shoulder with a grin.

"You can call me Jane, Galen," she said, echoing his smile. He seemed to be a happy child, and the picture of good health despite his small stature.

Before she could reach the top of the steps, the front door opened. A youngish man stood waiting, dressed in crisply pressed slacks and shirtsleeves. He was a variation on the general theme of Rivers cultists; tall, good-looking, late twenties at most. The only difference about this one was his dark hair, clipped back into a neat ponytail. "I see you've brought us a visitor, eh Galen?"

"My name is Jane Jankowski," she began, holding out her hand and preparing to launch into her spiel.

"Of Cook County Child Protective Services, and this visit is purely routine," the young man finished for her, giving her hand a quick shake with a surprisingly firm grip for someone so . . . effete looking. "Hal phoned ahead from the gate and told us you were on your way."

"My visit seemed to come as a surprise to Mr. Aransen," Jane replied. "I just had an arrow fly past my nose."

"That's what Leif gets for refusing to carry a cell phone in the woods. How remiss of Hal not to warn you to keep to the path." Jane could have sworn there was a hint of sardonic amusement in the man's slate blue eyes.
Jane sighed. "I'm afraid it's my own fault. Hal warned me about that very thing, Mr. . . . ?"

"forgive me. Glenn Butler, Aaron Rivers' personal assistant and general dogsbody, at your service." He motioned her inside.

Past the slate-floored entryway, Jane could see a large living room with an entire wall of floor to ceiling windows that looked out onto trees. At one end of the room, French doors stood open to the fall air, letting in the breeze. The room was empty except for a young blond man in a bathrobe and pajama bottoms lying stretched out on a couch reading a dog-eared copy of The Onion. A longhaired black cat lay curled up on his chest.

At the sight of them, the cat leapt up and ran to them, twining itself around Galen's legs.

"Cut it out, Tevildo, you're tickling," Galen laughed, giving the cat a pat on the head. The animal reared itself up on its hind legs and arched its back against the child's stroking hand, before trotting back off into the living room with Galen following after.

The young man hoisted himself up from the couch and held out his arms. "How's my little prince?" he grinned, sweeping Galen into his embrace and swinging him high above his head in a huge arc, giving him a little toss for good measure. Jane frowned. Even with the twelve foot ceilings, the boy might have been in danger of hitting his head, for this young man was just as tall, if not taller, than all the others, and he seemed to have more in the way of boisterous energy and good looks than common sense.

"Great, Haru," Galen exclaimed, laughing as the man set his feet back on solid ground. "I hit the target three times. But then, I missed and hit a tree."

"That's okay, kiddo. I missed plenty when I was your age. So did your daddy, although you'll never get him to admit it."

What a strange name, Haru, Jane thought. It sounded vaguely Indian and she wondered if Aaron Rivers' 'cult' religion had Eastern influences. Who was this young fellow, with his bright mane of hair, the color gold that Jane, with her own dirty-blonde, had longed for in her youth and had since learned rarely existed anywhere other than out of a bottle? He had the athletic build of a man who spent more time at the gym than behind a desk. Probably some hanger-on kept around by a rich man for his looks and agreeable personality rather than any other talents, she decided.

Jane racked her brain to identify who he reminded her of and then hit on it -- O. J. Simpson's perennial houseguest, Brian 'Kato' Kaelin. This one definitely had that 'few ants shy of a picnic' demeanor too.

Jane took a discreet glance at her watch. It was Saturday morning after all, but the fact that this fellow was still in pajamas at 11:15 spoke volumes. 'Great,' she thought. 'Just the kind of person I'd want around my kids. If I had any kids."

"You can call me Randy this morning, Galen," he continued offhandedly.

Too late, Jane thought. He'd always be 'Kato' in her mind. But Jane had more pressing concerns. As he spoke the last words, Jane had seen his quick sidelong glance, furtive and wary, and she'd had the impression of a forest creature that knows it is being watched.

"Okay . . . Randy," Galen giggled, as if it were some kind of secret game between the two of them.

Secrets are never good, and Jane gave a mental sigh at the complacency of parents who give their child into the care of a houseguest without a second thought. 'I have you in my sights, 'Kato;' you had better believe it!'
Beside her, Aaron Rivers' assistant cleared his throat.

"I hope I haven't come at a bad time, Mr. Butler," Jane said.

He shrugged. "If I told you it was a bad time, I'm sure we'd be seeing you again. And that on that occasion you'd be armed with more official papers, am I right Ms. Jankowski?"

Jane smiled wanly.

"It's no matter," Glenn continued. "This is as good a time as any, and I've cleared your visit with Mr. Rivers. Is there anything I can do for you or get you?"

Jane shook her head and smiled disarmingly. "Right now, I'd like to observe Galen in his natural surroundings. You all carry on as usual and ignore me. If there's anything I need to ask you, I'll give a holler."

"Whatever you say, Ms. Jankowski. I'll just go back to dusting the bric a brac."

As he turned away, Jane gave herself a little mental smack. 'Natural surroundings' indeed! She'd almost made it sound as if she were a nature show host observing a rare Whooping Crane from a blind. But what a luxurious blind it was, Jane thought, taking in the room's furnishings, from the oriental rugs on the floor to the paintings on the walls to the nine-foot grand piano that graced the far end of the room. Even the 'bric a brac' that Glenn presently worked on, a collection of Asian jade sculpture that might have put the Field Museum to shame, spoke of both wealth and refined taste. 'Don't let it distract you,' Jane warned herself. 'You knew Aaron Rivers has more money than he knows what to do with. But does he have the sense to keep his grandchild safe?'

"Put on my video, Randy," Galen exclaimed.

"Okay," said the young man, flashing the boy a patient smile. He pressed a button on the arm of the couch, and a flat screen TV rose up out of the floor. Sliding a DVD into a player in the TV's base and pressing another button, 'Kato' settled down cross-legged on the floor beside Galen. The two of them watched, entranced, as the familiar strains of Bob the Builder echoed from the set.

"Can we fix it?" asked the clay-mation Bob.

"Yes we can!" chanted Galen and 'Kato' in unison.

Beside Jane, Glenn made a pained face and set aside his electrostatic cloth with an air of stony calm. He closed the glass curio case and made his way to a sideboard where a decanter of red wine stood waiting. He poured himself a generous glass and downed it in one long pull. "Every damn day for the past three months," he said to Jane, by way of explanation.

As he returned to his dusting, Jane tried her best to suppress a disapproving sniff. Taking out her notebook, she quickly scrawled, 'Child exposed to dysfunctional use of alcohol.'

At that moment, a dark-haired woman who looked to be about Jane's age came strolling in through the French doors. Immediately, Jane warmed to her, for she was the first normal looking human being she had seen on Rivers estate among all the impossibly exquisite fashion model types. Jane began to wonder if Aaron Rivers were as ugly as a toad to insist on surrounding himself with such good-looking companions. It had begun to creep her out.

To Jane's surprise, the woman went to Glenn and gave him a peck on the cheek, rolling her eyes slightly as she noticed the wine fumes. "Hi, babe, where are Felice and Linda?"
"In the kitchen, baking," he replied. "Knocking off for the morning?"

The newcomer shook her head. "Just taking a quick break for a cup of tea. I'm on a roll with the latest landscape."

"Auntie Posey!" Galen exclaimed from his spot in front of the TV. "Are you still going to paint watercolors with me this afternoon?"

"You bet, hon," the woman said. "First thing after lunch."

Jane strolled over to introduce herself, smelling a strong odor of linseed oil and turpentine wafting from a paint rag that hung from the back pocket of Posey's jeans. "Jane Jankowski, Cook County CPS," she said, putting out a hand.

Posey gave her hand a quick shake, casting a sidelong look at Glenn, who shrugged, smirked and turned back to his dusting. "Mariposa Butler. I see Angus Duncan and Jim Fitzhugh are at it again. Last year they had animal control out here over Tevildo's rabies shots, and the year before that, it was the EPS about wetland protection over the pond in the back. This is getting ridiculous."

"Oh, darling, you know Fitzhugh just wants another chance to catch you with your shirt open," Glenn muttered, stifling a grin.

Posey scowled. "I'll be perfectly happy to flash him some more cleavage as long as it gets him and his partner to leave Aaron alone."

Jane did her best to keep her face neutral at the mention of the 'anonymous' complainants. She also found it mildly surprising that these two were so obviously husband and wife. Rivers' assistant had not looked like the marrying sort to her, but then, frankly, neither had young Aransen. Oh, well, one just never knew with these artistic types.

"Ms. Butler," she said earnestly, "I hope you understand not to expose young Galen to your oil paints. They can be very toxic, you know."

"Call me Mariposa, Jane," Posey said with exaggerated patience. "And let me assure you that Galen knows better than to eat the titanium white. But even if he didn't, my studio is out above the old stables and he never goes there without me. I love that boy as if he were my own."

Jane nodded and smiled back, sensing the sincerity behind Mariposa's eyes. Galen had one protector here, at least.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to get my tea and go back out to the studio before my brushes congeal." Posey went on through another door leading to a dining area and, Jane supposed, the kitchen. She passed by young Aransen coming from the other direction.

"Hey, Glenn," he said, nodding to the assistant, who again put down his dusting cloth. "I gave Tevildo's litter box a quick run through with the scoop on my way in. Thought you could use a break."

"That's kind of you, Leif," Glenn said, holding out a cell phone. "I'm afraid I can't return the favor. Gary called while you and Galen were out in the woods. Big emergency with the landscaping company."

"Dammit," Aransen muttered. "What now?"

Glenn merely shrugged as Leif took the phone from his outstretched hand and dropped his long body
down onto the couch.

He punched in a number. "Yo, Gary, what's up?" He paused, listening. "Mrs. Gottrochs? That figures. I don't care what she insists on now, she ordered Hemerocallis for her back yard, not Asiatic lilies. Check her file -- you'll see her note on the photos. 'I love these Daylilies,' and the 'i' even has a little heart for a dot the way she does. Yeah, that's a charming habit in a woman her age." Aransen crossed his legs and began to bounce his foot as he talked.

Meanwhile, the video ended and 'Kato' shut off the TV set. "Let's build something for real, Randy," Galen piped. The child and the young man pulled a large box of wooden blocks out from under a side table and poured them out onto the floor. Galen knelt, while Randy plopped himself down on his stomach on the carpet. He bent one foot up into the air, and the leg of his pajama bottoms slipped down to knee level, revealing a pale hairless calf. A very shapely pale hairless calf, Jane could not help noticing.

Again, Jane sighed. It really had been too long since her last date, she realized, for her to be so affected by a man who obviously waxed.

"Look, Gary; it's Saturday and I'm with my kid," Leif said. "Just take care of it the best you can. Bat your eyes at her. Tell her we'll throw in the labor for free if she pays for the new bulbs and donates the old ones we take out to the Ronald MacDonald House. You and I both know she just wants another chance to watch my workers sweat for an afternoon."

Galen and Randy had begun to stack the blocks, building a tower. Things seemed to be under control, especially with the father in the room. "Mr. Butler, I wonder if I could see Galen's bedroom now?" Jane said quietly.

Glenn nodded. "This way." Past the entryway, he led her down a long hallway and up a half-flight of stairs. They seemed to be in a new wing of the house now, running out toward the back. Glenn opened the third door on the left and motioned Jane inside.

Jane could only smile. She did not know what she had expected for the grandson of the man who owned Dale Toy Company, but Galen's room came as a pleasant surprise. His shelves were stocked with toys, but not overwhelmingly so, as she had seen before with parents who tried to make up for a lack of time and affection with material things. He had as many books as toys. The most prominent piece, an almost life-sized palomino rocking horse covered in real horsehair, stood in one corner, its feet rising from realistic looking grass attached to the rockers.

"Who painted the murals?"

"My wife," Glenn said with a fond smile. "She had a wonderful time doing it."

"White deer -- Mariposa has quite an imagination," Jane said. "Is the bed an antique?" Oddly enough, the bed, a youth-sized piece of furniture with a tall headboard carved into the shape of a woman holding out protecting arms, did not clash at all with the straight lines of Frank Lloyd Wright's room. Jane thought it must have cost a pretty penny.

"It's a copy of one back in . . . Europe," Glenn said. "Aaron made it himself when Galen outgrew his cradle. Did a nice job of it too."

"Aaron? As in . . . Mr. Rivers?" Jane had a hard time picturing a multi-billionaire spending his time on woodworking.

"Yes, the proud grandpa himself. Aaron dotes on that child beyond all reason." Glenn shrugged.
"Well, he was just as bad with Leif, and Leif turned out all right. He turned out very well, actually."

Jane gave Glenn an odd look. He seemed barely older than Aransen himself; hardly old enough to have known him in childhood much less formed an opinion of his father's parenting skills. "Are you some kind of childhood friend?"

"A childhood friend?" Glenn smiled. "Yes, I guess you could say that. We all of us go back a bit."

Jane sighed and looked around Galen's bedroom for a final time. "I think I've seen all I need to see here." If she had expected to find dirt, or neglect, she had seen none of it. She had seen only the room of a much-loved child.

She followed Glenn back to the living room. Leif had finished his phone call, and sat reading the discarded copy of The Onion and chuckling softly to himself. Randy and Galen's tower had risen to magnificent proportions, almost three and a half feet tall. "Let's knock it down," Galen said, with mischievous enthusiasm.

"There are two ways to bring a tower down," Randy 'Kato' said, grinning back. "You can just smack it, if you're strong enough. Or you can be subtle and do it a little bit at a time, like this." As if to illustrate, he pulled a block from the base, easing it from the pile gently. The tower shook slightly, but remained standing.

Galen giggled and sneaked a block from the other side. Again, the tower trembled but held. Randy rubbed his chin and peered intently at the pile. "Getting close, Galen." He managed to pull a third block out, making the pile sway precariously without falling. "I think next time will do it."

Galen flashed his bright smile and plucked away another block. "And there it goes!" the two of them cried together as the blocks came down on the carpet with a muffled crash. Leif looked up from his newspaper, rolling his eyes and smiling indulgently.

"Tell me again about the towers falling, Haru," Galen said, his face alight. "It's my favorite story. After Bob the Builder, of course." Jane heard Glenn laugh softly. He had returned to his dusting.

"Your daddy was there, Galen, when the first one went down, and he tells me it was a beautiful sight to see it go. We were all very proud of your daddy," Randy said, casting a quick glance back over his shoulder at young Aransen. "I'm proud of your daddy for a lot of things, Galen."

"You're making me blush . . . Randy," Leif said quietly, looking over the top of his newspaper.

Randy 'Kato' smiled and looked away again. Jane could see why Rivers and his family kept him around. He was certainly very decorative. "I stood in the ruins of the second one, two weeks later, and my heart sang," he continued. "That tower profaned the very ground it stood on. We should have brought it down earlier."

Galen stared, entranced. Jane, however, felt a chill take her heart. There was 'something fishy' about Aaron Rivers, Doug had said. She had suspected tax evasion and money laundering to be the worst, but now, with expressed glee at the memory of towers falling, it all took on a decidedly sinister cast. Did Rivers' philanthropy cover up ties to terrorism?

Jane turned her head to see that Glenn Butler had left off his dusting and was peering at her intently. 'He suspects,' she thought. 'I need to get out of here, but first, I want to see this Aaron Rivers for myself. He's the key."

"It's ancient history, Ms. Jankowski," Glenn said, with a look in his eye that confirmed he had detected her disquiet. "You don't understand."
'Oh, don't I?' she thought. But before she could reply, two women came strolling into the living room from the back.

Both were dark-haired, tall, slender and incredibly good-looking. Was Glenn Butler's wife the only person in the entire household over the age of thirty, Jane asked herself incredulously? The two might have been mistaken for sisters, with their delicate features, except that while one of them had dark slate-blue eyes that matched Glenn's, while the other, who bore an odd resemblance to the protecting woman on Galen's headboard, had grey eyes so pale they looked almost unreal. This second woman wore a necklace of silver and moonstones that matched her unusual eyes perfectly. As Jane stared, she reached down to brush a smudge of flour from the hem of her simple tunic.

'Oh, yeah,' Jane thought. There must be real money here if the women wore designer clothing to cook in.

Galen scrambled up and ran to the blue-eyed woman, throwing his arms around her waist with enough force to joggle the plate of biscuits she carried. "Mama!"

"Take it easy, Galen," she laughed, swaying gracefully under the onslaught. She favored Jane with a smile. "Posey told us we had a visitor. Would you care for some refreshment, Ms. Jankowski?"

Jane began to utter her usual polite refusals. The first thing a social worker learns is not to take food from a client, and those who ignored this wisdom often found themselves spending a miserable night on the toilet. But, the moment the irresistible aroma of the bakery hit her nostrils, she found herself saying, "Yes, thank you. I don't mind if I do."

'Cornbread,' she thought, as the first morsels melted on her tongue. But what cornbread! She savored the light, airy texture, sweet without being cloying, and oddly satisfying for something so insubstantial. Before she knew it, Jane had finished the first piece and had accepted the offer of a second.

"It's time for your piano lesson, Galen," said the other woman, the one with the hauntingly pale eyes.

"Yes, go with Felice now," said the first. This must be the mother, Linda Singer, Jane thought, finding herself drowning in a gaze surprisingly calm for a woman facing a CPS worker.

"What about the blocks, Mama?" Galen said.

"Randy can pick them up for you. He helped you make the mess; he can help you clean it," Linda told him.

"And this time," echoed the other woman, Felice, casting an impish smile in 'Kato's' direction, "Randy will actually pick them all up himself and not make Uncle Glenn do it for him." She took Galen by the hand and led him over to the grand piano, seating him on a thick telephone book. Jane took a surreptitious glance at the lettering on the fallboard and nodded. Of course Aaron Rivers' grandson would be taking his lessons on a nine foot Boesendorfer.

Felice settled down next to the boy and immediately the two of them commenced a series of rapid scales.

"Have you any questions for me, Ms. Jankowski?"

"Hmmm?" Jane realized with a start that she was halfway through her third piece of cornbread. Galen's amazing coordination on the keyboard had distracted her more than it ought to have. "Ah, no . . . Ms. Singer, is it? Perhaps later, but for now I'd like you to carry on as usual. Just ignore me."
"Linda, please. Have you met Aaron yet?"

"Mr. Rivers? No, I haven't, but I would like to before I leave. I'm sure he's a very busy man."

Linda shot a quick sidewise glance at Randy, who was down on all fours fishing a stray block out from under a settee, and raised a dark eyebrow. "Indeed. I'm sure Aaron will show himself when the time is right. Now, if you'll excuse me, I haven't seen my husband all morning."

She set the plate of cornbread down on a nearby credenza and joined young Aransen on the couch. He threw an arm around her, drawing her in close and kissing the top of her head before returning to his newspaper.

Jane distanced herself from the credenza before she found herself tempted to eat the whole plate. Meanwhile, Galen had finished his scales and launched into a very competently performed version of Mozart's 'Ah Vous Direz-je, Maman.' He played alone, with Felice watching carefully, his small forehead crinkled in concentration.

"Well done, Galen," she exclaimed, when he had finished the second variation.

"It's a baby song, Dear Nana," he protested. "I want to play something harder. I want to play your song."

"Some day, little one," she said. "But your hands aren't big enough yet."

"When?" he asked. "Already, when I go to play with Jacob and David in Lake Geneva, they're so much bigger than me. It isn't fair. I'm going to be small forever."

Jane detected that Felice cast a discreet glance in her direction. "No you aren't, Galen. You're tall for your age."

Jane bit her lip. 'Don't lie to the child,' she thought. 'Even if he has something wrong with him, he should be told the truth.'

"You will grow tall and strong," Felice continued. "You will have your father's hands, long-fingered and graceful. And you will have your grandfather's hands, clever, kind and gentle. You have all the time in the world, my little one."

Felice put her arm around the child and hugged him tightly. "You have been a gift to my spirit, Galen. I wish I could keep you small for a long time. You will grow big all too soon for me."

"Play your song for me, Dear Nana," said Galen. "You, know, my favorite."

"All right, little one," she laughed. "But you'll have to give me some elbow room." Obligingly, the boy slid down the bench, as Felice shook out her arms and began to play.

Chicago's classical music station, WFMT, was Jane's constant companion on the Kia's radio as she made her rounds, and she had become quite knowledgeable about the music itself, in addition to taking some piano lessons as a young girl. Now, she found herself surprised and impressed to hear Felice launch into Franz Liszt's transcription of Robert Schumann's Widmung. This was a piece for experienced pianists only, and Felice played it well. One of Jane's favorite classic piano programs featured old recordings from the 1930s and 40s, and Jane recalled hearing work by a pianist by the name of Felicia Ribeiro, who had been a skilled interpreter of the Romantic composers. Felice played just as well, and Jane briefly wondered if Felice had been named after or inspired by this long dead lady pianist.
At the first arpeggios, Randy hoisted himself from the floor and strolled over to the piano. Leaning against the music desk, he caught Felice’s eye and smiled meaningfully. She smiled back at him, paused, and repeated the first notes, returning to the beginning of the composition, waiting for him.

He drew breath and began to sing, in a beautiful rich baritone, "Du meine Seele, du mein Herz, du meine Wonn', o du mein Schmerz. . . ."

Jane gaped. Randy, whom she had dismissed as no more than a lightweight, a hanger on, spoke flawless German and sang like a professional. Even more surprising, he and Felice, who exuded class like a diamond gives off sparkle, were obviously an item, for as he sang, his eyes never left her face.


Jane barely remembered to breathe, so entranced by the magic of the music that she feared to miss a single note. 'I would give almost anything to have a man look at me that way,' she thought.

"O du mein Grab, in das hinab ich ewig meinen Kummer gab . . . ."

Jane could not understand the words, but the look of pure adoration on Randy's face told her all she needed to know. Gone was the pretty surfer boy, transformed into . . . she did not know what. The rumpled flannel, which had seemed so careless before, hung on him now like the robes of an ancient king. As he drew in a deep breath to sing, the left side of his lapel fell open slightly, revealing strange blue marks tattooed over his heart -- marks that resembled the 'chicken scratches' Galen had left in the dust of the driveway.

'Who are these people?' she asked herself. 'What am I seeing here?'

"Du bist die Ruh, du bist der Frieden, du bist vom Himmel mir beschieden . . . ."

Out of the corner of her eye, Jane noticed that Linda and Leif, close already before the singing began, had snuggled even tighter. Aransen had his head bent towards his wife, nuzzling her ear. Glenn had set down his dusting cloth and watched Randy with a faraway smile on his face.

"Daß du mich liebst, macht mich mir wert. Dein Blick hat mich vor mir verklärt . . . ."

Galen hopped down from the piano bench and ran over to his parents. He clambered onto the couch and squeezed himself between them, managing to catch his father a passing dig in the crotch in the process. Aransen let out a pained, 'Oof!' before recovering himself and enfolding both wife and child into a tight hug. Jane saw him laugh and whisper into Linda's ear, "Later . . . ."

"Du hebst mich liebend über mich . . . ."

'Oh, what the hell,' thought Jane, going back over to the credenza and taking another piece of cornbread. What was she doing here? Her job was to rescue children from unhappy and dangerous home situations, and, while her head told her these people were more than a little odd, her heart said otherwise. She had seen nothing but a home full of love, and a happy child adored by every adult in the household. There was, of course, the matter of Randy's disturbing statement about falling towers, but she would worry about that later. Jane was done here.

After putting another piece of cornbread in her shoulder bag for good measure, Jane turned to see Randy put out a hand to stroke Felice's cheek. Felice's pale skin pinked up at the caress but she managed to keep on playing without missing a beat.

"Mein guter Geist, mein beßres Ich!"
As Felice launched into the closing passages, playing the theme borrowed from Ave Maria, Jane quietly left the room. It was rude of her, perhaps, to leave without explanation, but she doubted anyone would miss her. Leif and Linda sat cuddled on the couch, their little boy between them, off in a world of their own. After the last note rang out, Randy swept Felice up into a fierce embrace, and the two of them kissed as passionately as if it were the first time for them, which for all Jane knew, it might be.

At the front door, Jane turned for one last look. Randy broke away briefly, looked her dead in the eye over Felice's shoulder and winked. He mouthed a phrase at her before returning to his clinch.

Jane could have sworn that phrase was, "Le chaim!"

Glenn Butler caught up to her at the bottom of the flagstone steps. "Leaving so soon? You haven't spoken to Mr. Rivers yet."

"I don't need to, I've seen all I need to see. There are children back in Chicago who actually need my help, so I won't waste your time any further."

"Can I drive you back to the gate, then, Ms. Jankowski?"

Jane shook her head. "No thank you, Mr. Butler. I prefer to walk for the exercise." She suspected she might have overindulged on the cornbread, and she had begun to feel rather full. But rather than feeling ill and sluggish, she felt suffused with boundless energy.

"Good," he replied. "I'm eager to get out to the studio, where I plan to spend a pleasant hour or so congealing my wife's brushes. For some reason, when Aaron sings that song it always affects me that way."

Jane did a double-take. "Aaron?"

Glenn smiled at her blandly.

"Aaron, as in Aaron Rivers?"

"Yes, Ms. Jankowski, one and the same. He has a lovely singing voice, hasn't he?"

"But . . . but . . ." How could that young man, who looked not even thirty, possibly be young Aransen's father, not to mention the grandfather of Galen?

"He keeps himself fit. Plastic surgery works wonders nowadays. He has incredibly good genes and really great bone structure. Take your pick," Glenn said with a cryptic smile. "But really, Jane, you'll sleep better if you don't try to explain it. Just accept."

"Yes, Glenn," she sighed. "I think I'll do that." She turned to leave.

"Goodbye, Jane," Glenn called over his shoulder as he hurried on back toward the old stables. "And keep to the path. You'll find wilder things in these woods than just a father teaching his young son the bow."

"Aliens, pod people . . . fairies?" Jane muttered to herself as she went back down the driveway, uncomfortably aware that talking to oneself was the first sign of an incipient mental breakdown. Maybe Aaron Rivers and his clan were from some kind of exotic ethnic group she'd somehow managed to miss hearing about. There were those incredibly long-lived Soviet Georgians from the old yogurt commercials. Yes, maybe that was the explanation. But no, those grandpas and grandmas had looked like grandpas and grandmas. Jane decided to follow Glenn's advice and not think about it.
for the time being.

Ever since eating the cornbread, her hearing seemed to be heightened, as were all her senses. As she walked, Jane heard noises from the woods, in addition to the rustling of the leaves and the creaking of the boughs. She heard silvery voices raised in laughter and once, even, the strains of a harp. They called to her heart, but she followed Glenn's advice, ignoring them and sticking to the path. *It's your imagination, Jane,* she told herself.

Three-quarters of the way to the gate, by her reckoning, she heard music again, coming over the next rise in the road.

"*My my, hey hey; rock and roll is here to stay. It's better to burn out than to fade away . . . ."*

That could not be her imagination, and sure enough, a green Ford pickup with a Wisconsin license plate and a bumper sticker that read, 'Tigerton Junior Chamber of Commerce,' crested the rise, its windows open and the CD player blaring. It needed some work on the shocks, Jane thought, from the way it bounced over the ruts. A young blond man in olive drab trousers and a camo tee shirt, long-haired of course, leaned out the driver's side window.

"Here to see family," he said laconically, turning the volume on the sound system down in order to be heard. "Can I give you a lift back to the gate, young lady?"

'Another one!' Jane thought. This Aaron Rivers had two sons, by all appearances, for the newcomer could be Aransen's brother judging by his tow-headed, fine-featured looks. She almost laughed; the yuppie and the hippie!

"No, thank you," she said aloud. "It's not far now. I'll walk it."

"Are you sure?" the young man asked.

"You're kind, but thank you, no."

"Ya sure?" he grinned.

A pretty blonde girl sitting in the passenger seat spoke up. "Let the nice young lady go about her business, Orrie. I'm in a hurry to see the boys." She had bright gold hair, just like Aaron's. Now, hair like that simply had to come out of a bottle, Jane told herself.

"Now, Honey, be patient," he said, patting the girl on the brightly patterned knee of her Indian printed granny dress. "Patience is one lesson life finally taught me. We have all the time in the world." He turned his attention back to Jane and shrugged. "Suit yourself then, Miss. It's a nice day for a walk. But stick to the drive. It isn't far now."

"I know -- wild things in the woods," Jane laughed as he put the Ford back into gear and turned the dial on the sound system up again.

The truck pulled off, music drifting from the open windows. "*The king is gone but he's not forgotten . . . ."*

Jane watched it disappear over the next rise before she turned and continued on toward the gate.

"Hey hey, my my; rock and roll can never die. There's more to the picture than meets the eye . . . ."

"You can say that again," she muttered. She felt as if she had entered one of those M. C. Escher drawings, where perspectives changed, up turned into down and objects became something else the more you stared at them. And yet, like with an Escher painting, she had been granted a glimpse of a
magic world. There were no monsters here, or were there?

Before long, the gate came into view. Hal stood there waiting for her, his arms crossed casually over his chest.

'Now,' she told herself, 'this is the part where if Aaron Rivers and his family are really a nest of terrorists I'll find myself looking down the barrel of that handsome security guard's gun, and six months from now, they'll find my body in the trunk of my car sunk in some pond in Beloit.'

She was just beginning to chuckle at her own wit when she saw Hal smile and slowly drop his hand to his hip.

* * * * * * *

Chapter End Notes

**Author's Note:** Here follows the translation to the Widmung. Poem by Friedrich Rückert, originally set to music by Robert Schumann and then transcribed into a notoriously difficult version by Franz Liszt.

*Du meine Seele, du mein Herz:* You are my soul, you are my heart;
*Du meine Wonn', o du mein Schmerz:* You both my joy and sadness are,
*Du meine Welt, in der ich lebe:* You are my world, in which I live,
*Mein Himmel du, darein ich schwebe:* You are the heaven in which I hover,
*O du mein Grab, in das hinab:* You are the grave in which I bury
*Ich ewig meinen Kummer gab:* All my past sorrows.

*Du bist die Ruh, du bist der Frieden:* You are my rest, the protector of my peace.
*Du bist vom Himmel mir beschrieben:* Heaven gave you to me.
*Daß du mich liebst, macht mich mir wert:* Your love gives me worth
*Dein Blick hat mich vor mir verklärte:* Your gaze transfigures me.
*Du hebst mich liebend über mich:* You raise me up,
*Mein guter Geist, mein beßres Ich!:* My guardian sprite, my better self!

Lyrics for Out of the Blue and Into the Black by Neil Young.

The carved bed and the rocking horse are details inspired by Aislynn Crowdaughter, in her cartoon entitled, Not a Bard.
Epilogue: Into the Black

Chapter Summary

Did Hal shoot Jane? Find out in here . . .

Jane Jankowski looked up at the big plate glass window with the neon shamrock sign, and then back down again at the address written in elegantly rounded cursive on the back of a business card in her hand. Yes, this was the place all right.

"Unfounded." The words had felt as sweet on her tongue as Linda Singer's cornbread when she dropped her finished report on Doug's desk Monday morning.

"Duncan and Fitzhugh are bound to be disappointed."

"Pray ask me if I give a rat's ass."

Doug had furrowed his brow then. "Are you sure there's nothing to see?"

"Oh, there's plenty to see, all right. Rivers and his people are as odd as they come. But the kid is happy, Doug. It's not my job to change that." Jane gave Doug a look that indicated she meant business. "Now, if you don't mind, there are some children who really need my help."

Jane had returned briefly to her desk for one unfinished piece of business. Although she felt convinced of Galen's safety, there had been that disturbing statement about falling towers. Reluctant as she was to give Duncan and Fitzhugh any more ammunition, she remained uneasy about keeping it to herself. A quick Google search of Aaron Rivers' name revealed a list of his favorite charities. The ACLU and Amnesty International might have been troubling to some, especially his two government nemeses, but the others -- Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, The Heifer Project, and a plethora of women's and homeless shelters in the Chicago area just for starters -- indicated that the man was no terrorist.

What had she been thinking, Jane wondered with an angry little shake of her head? Let Duncan and Fitzhugh go on digging if they were so certain there was something to find, but Jane would not be the one to help them. For good measure, she put her handwritten notes through the shredder and smiled with dark satisfaction as she watched them turn to confetti.

It had gone on to be the day from hell, and Jane perked up at the Heinekens sign that burned next to the green neon shamrock in the little bar's window. A beer wouldn't come amiss right now, and she wondered if there might even be dark ale on the tap.

Her first case had been a four year old whose mother held his hand to a hot iron to 'get the Devil out of him.' His new foster mother had found other marks on him as well when she checked him over. That call had been a no-brainer.

The second still made her feel slightly sick at heart: a young woman, still recovering physically and emotionally from an auto accident that had killed her husband. She had been brought to the attention of CPS by her pediatrician when her six month old daughter, born two months prematurely as a result of that same auto accident, had gained only half the weight she should have in the four months
since being released from the neonatal ICU.

Jane sighed at the blinkered ‘wisdom’ of these medical professionals who, with the best of intentions, do their utmost to interfere with the mother/child bond and then blithely plunk one stranger into the arms of another and send them on home, hoping for the best.

Jane should have felt anger, but she could summon only pity for this young woman. The apartment had been clean yet -- Jane fished for the word and landed on 'cold -- despite the thermostat set at a constant seventy-two degrees. All seemed in order, except for the mother's oddly apathetic response to the few feeble cries her baby girl made. She fed her daughter and held her, but stared off into space with listless eyes while she did so.

Those eyes had gone entirely dead when Jane informed her that, as a matter of emergency, her infant would be removed from the home pending psychological evaluation. Inured to the sorrows of this job as Jane thought she was, her own eyes had been blinking back tears as she carried the baby girl down to her car. 'I may have just put this poor woman over the edge to salvage what I can of her daughter's life,' she told herself sadly as she strapped the infant into her carrier and belted her into the back seat.

Jane still had faint hopes for a happy ending for mother and child, given proper counseling. But there were so many people needing help and so few resources in this day of eroding tax bases and budget cuts. 'This job is going to end up killing me,' she thought, looking forward to that beer even more.

The address confirmed, she returned the business card to her pocket, smiling despite her downhearted mood as she recalled how transparently eager Hal had been to press it upon her, giving her not only his cell number and his land line both at home and at work, but the address of this little drinking establishment on a quiet side street only a few blocks from the loop.

"I'm there almost every night," he had said earnestly, "but Mondays are a sure bet, because that's Rudy's night to drive." And then he had stared after her hopefully while she walked to her car and drove off. This time, he hadn't even been looking at her butt.

Jane put her hand to the brass handle of the front door. Beneath the neat gold lettering that read The Harp, Est. 1956, she spied a 'no smoking' sign taped to the interior of the glass. 'That's odd for Chicago,' she told herself as she pulled the door open.

Odd, but nice. An aroma unlike the usual tavern reek of stale beer and cigarette smoke wafted out as her as she entered. The Harp smelled faintly of incense and the barest hint of fresh rain, and Jane inhaled deeply, feeling her spirits rise. A middle-aged man behind the bar, his reddish hair shot with white, smiled in greeting. At the back of the room, Glenn Butler stood next to an old-fashioned Wurlitzer jukebox, drink in hand, watching while his wife bent over her pool cue, lining up a difficult shot. In one corner booth, a pale hand stretched out of the shadows, clasped around the stem of a glass of dark red wine.

And at the end of the bar stood Hal, his face brightening with recognition as she walked into the room. 'You came!' Jane saw him mouth, with a smile of surprised delight.

Jane returned the smile. Walking into The Harp felt like coming home, although she had no explanation for why that should be. Following Glenn's good advice, she did not try to explain it; she merely accepted.

'It's amazing what lovely surprises life has in store for you,' she told herself as she went to join Hal, 'when you have the courage to step off the path.'
"It's better to burn out
than it is to rust . . . ."
Neil Young, 'Out of the Blue and Into the Black'

The End

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