

Illusion and Reality

by
J. W. Coffey

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Cover artwork by Lorriann Russell.

The excerpt of *A Wager of Blood* is used with permission of Edin Road Press and will be released as a reprint edition in 2011.

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Dedicated to...

This book is dedicated to Janice Lester Katherine Coffey, the "most bootifullest Mommy in all the cosmos."

I love you, Mommy.

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## ***Table of Contents***

[Dedication](#)

[Foreword](#)

[Your Hand in Mine](#)

[Thirsty Boots](#)

[The Ballad of St. Anne's Reel](#)

[A Kiss on the Hand](#)

[An American Prayer](#)

[Karmic Justice](#)

[An Act of Faith](#)

[And then again...](#)

[The Salt of the Earth](#)

[Introduction To . . . .](#)

[Excerpt from \*A Wager of Blood\*  
"The Don't Pass Bet"](#)

[The Author](#)

[Coming Releases](#)

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Foreword

An author is a visitor to your home. You invite us in for that short span of time that you spend reading the story we've placed in your hands. You bring us in for coffee and cake, and we give you a few moments or hours of entertainment in the many forms in which we write.

The work you're about to read has all been the product of my rather overactive imagination, the culmination of the last five years, of all of the time that I spent in between writing my books. Some of these have been published in *The Writers Post Journal*, some have only been seen by friends and family. But this is the first time I've ever put these together in one book. I hope you enjoy them.

I want to thank you for inviting me into your home. I love what you've done with the place. May I have another piece of cake while you read?

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*Illusion is in the eye of the believer...  
Reality, the eye of the bewitched...  
Perceive as you will, young one  
But keep thy vision true...*

*Thom Fury*

*le 19 Juin 1987 upon meeting my namesake for the first time*

~~~~

Your Hand in Mine
In Memory of Thom "Fury" Michaud

He hated hospitals with a passion. They were cold and unfeeling places, impersonal and uncaring. It always seemed to him that he came here warm and left freezing. *Has to be the disinfectant that fills your clothes with the stink of sick*, he thought. *Maybe it's that hollow click of heels on the tile, the one that always echoes and makes me feel so alone and lonely*. He drew a deep sigh and looked around the room. He thought, *at least they could paint these walls something warm*. He hated the sickly, pale green—so cold!

He looked over to where she was sleeping and got caught up in the watching. Her face was pale in the fluorescent lighting, a luminous shimmer to her skin. Her blonde hair fanned across her shoulders like shimmering strands of spun gold. He watched her delicate lids flutter as she slept, lost in her dream. He felt a sense of pure love that filled his soul. In all the years and all the hospitals, he had never gotten over her vulnerable beauty. She was always so fragile and he had loved that quality in her. It made him want to rescue her, made him feel . . . *heroic*.

He watched her for a time, watching the rise and fall of her chest, before turning to the window. It was the wee small hours of the day but the sunrise was still far away on the horizon. He wanted to watch the moonlight on the lawn. He moved closer to the panes to see beyond the

harsh reflections of the room. He spotted a rabbit dashing across the lawn, and watched it stop to investigate a patch of vegetation before hopping along on its merry way. There had to be a wind blowing across the blades because each one moved and shimmered in the pale glow. He stood there, caught up in the rapture of it.

It was a moment or two before he realized she was gazing at him. He turned away from the moon glow and the grass, the bunny and the images of the room and bed and machines. He turned to look into those green eyes of hers, the ones he always got lost in.

He came back to where she was. "Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to wake you." He sat down beside her. "You must be exhausted."

She gave him the smile she always saved for him alone and a little hum. "You didn't. I felt you. . . . I wanted to spend time with you."

"Then, we'll do that," he said, returning the smile. "Just you and me, okay? For as long as we can."

Her face clouded at that. "This sucks . . . *bad!*"

He nodded. "Yes," was all he said.

"It's too early," she protested, fiercely. "I'm not ready."

"We never are," he answered.

She barely moved her head as she answered, "No, I suppose not." The green eyes locked with his, a frown on her brow. "It's not fair. *It's not!* There's so much more, so much! It's too soon to leave."

"I know, darlin'. I know."

Her face began to work, as she tried to hide the tears that were just below the surface. He hated it, to see her cry. The tears had always burned inside of him and he'd been far too short with her when she cried. He always felt like the scum of the earth afterward but it was something he seemed powerless to stop. He heard the plaintive sound of her voice as she spoke, and he willed the impatience back down.

"I'm not ready to let go. I don't *want* to. We have so much to do still."

"Songs to sing," he added.

"Music to write," she said, smiling in spite of the tears. "We were gonna sing again."

"We will," he said, more assurance in his voice than he actually felt. "We will, I promise."

"No, we won't." She shut her eyes against the grief that threatened to spill from around her lashes. "This really sucks! I'm not ready!"

He chuckled under his breath. "And you call *me* stubborn," he said.

It was enough to make them both laugh. It was good to hear her laugh again, knowing it was for the last time. When she'd calmed again, he went on.

"You know, *I'm* not ready either. I don't want to let you go. You ever think of that?"

"I know! *I know*," she blurted out. The serious look on her face was almost more than he could take. "I know you don't want it either," she said, with a sigh of resignation. "It is what it is, I guess."

The moment lay there with neither knowing what to say. Without warning, he filled the space by blurting out, "Do you know how much I love you? *Do you?*" There was a sudden look of surprise on her face, and he almost laughed. "I do, you know. I love you very much."

"Do you?"

He nodded. "I always have, darlin'. I always do."

“You know, I always loved you, *always*,” she said. “I think I loved you . . .” She took a deep breath. “You know? I keep thinking . . .” Her voice trailed off and a distant look came into her eyes.

“What,” he asked. “What are you thinking?”

She turned her head away with a great amount of effort, a look on her face that he couldn’t quite interpret. He watched her, not sure if she was really going to answer him or not. She lay there, silent. Just as he was ready to give up, she opened her lips and spoke to him.

“Do you ever wonder,” she asked. She turned her gaze back to him with the same exertion. “You know; what it would have been like? You and me?”

She was watching him now, a cautioned scrutiny as if she were waiting for him to laugh at her. There was no chance that he would—he *had* thought of it. And often. He had wondered what it might have been like to have loved her in that way; the sight of her closed eyes and the taste of her lips. He *had* wondered about the feel of her body pressed to his. There once was a time when he wanted it, craved it. There had been a time when it almost happened.

He was sixteen, still showing the signs of youth. His face retained the baby fat of his childhood, the only part of him that held it. He was properly called “lanky” that year, that glorious summer. He had been pale from being inside so much, but time in the sun had started putting a tan on him. The time in the sun had also meant time with his best friend—*her*.

She had blossomed that summer from her own coltishness to womanhood. She had become a fresh faced seventeen and begun to lose the gangly appearance of her childhood. He watched her bloom from that gawky, insecure child to a beautiful woman. He had been drawn to her, that day in the music room—drawn by a mutual love of John Denver and the guitar. But that summer—that incredible summer—he had fallen in love, completely and irrevocably. It was the summer of his youth, the last summer of boyhood—and she had been all his.

“You remember?”

He came back to the here and now in her question, and lost himself in the green eyes again.

“Do you? Do you remember,” she asked again.

“I do,” he answered. “Remember the picnics we had?”

“Yeah, and your catsup fetish.”

She laughed and he joined her. They had often joked of his “one true affair,” that of the french fry and catsup bottle. Once, she had called him the poster child for Heinz 57 and it seemed to have stuck. His favorite shirt had a bottle of the stuff and he wore it constantly.

“We went everywhere, that summer . . . you and me,” he said. “We went every where and did every thing.”

“We did,” she sighed. “My best friend, my only friend. You always knew what I was thinking, what I wanted.”

She was walking into dangerous ground again. He had to turn it away. “Remember running in the forest? Hiding in the trees?”

She gave her musical laugh again. “My brave warrior. And we pretended we were natives, running from the white man. You kept me safe from harm. You always did.”

He shook his head at the memory. “My parents had a cow, you remember that? So did yours.” With a deep sigh, he said, “We did it anyway, didn’t we? We didn’t care. We were together and having fun.”

“I remember.”

He relived that memory of warriors and maidens, of stalking deer for food and a makeshift dwelling of dead branches and blankets. He turned the smile to her again. "You were one beautiful maiden, darlin'. You really were."

"And you were my handsome warrior."

He warmed under the praise, felt the flush creep to his cheeks. "I did m' best."

It was her turn to bring a bit to the memory. "I had finally won the right to stop wearing my hair back in braids," she said with a rueful smile. "My mom was so strict about that. Here I could finally wear it down and you had me braiding it again! For you!"

"You never cut your hair. You never did."

"Oh, *yes* I did," she smirked and giggled again. "You just weren't around when I did it!" She winked at him. "But I didn't that often. You were the only one that cared enough to ask me not to, to ask me to grow it."

"I love your hair," he said, simply. "I always loved braiding it, so soft and golden." His hand flew out and came back. *I can't . . . I just can't.*

"I'm sorry you cut yours," she said. "I miss braiding your hair, I miss"

Again on dangerous ground.

"It was a great summer," he answered, filling the space again.

"I loved that summer," she sighed. "Running with you in the forest. That was my favorite moment, that summer."

"You know what mine was?"

"No," she said, turning her gaze back to his. "What was it?"

"Remember Hampton Beach?"

Her eyes widened and she sighed again.

So lovely, so fragile.

"Oh my, yes. I do!"

"We went to the beach, remember? You wore that yellow bathing suit, and I had my favorite khaki shorts. We stopped and got double decker ice cream cones. You had chocolate and I had strawberry. They dripped down our arms, and you kept licking your hand."

He closed his eyes and, for a moment, he could hear the waves crashing on the shore. He smelled the salt spray and he almost felt it on his skin again.

"We walked the whole length of the boardwalk, 'til we got to the shore. We spent the rest of the afternoon just sitting by the water and watching the birds."

He heard her sigh a third time and the *whoosh* of the surf was replaced by the steady *beep-beep-beep* of the heart monitor, the whirl of the respirator. He opened his eyes and saw that she was watching him intently.

"You held my hand," she said, a single tear threatening to escape the bounds of her lashes. We sat by the water's edge, and you reached out and held my hand. I remember."

He gave a slight snort at the thought of his bravado. "Where I got the nerve to do that, I'll never know." He looked down at his hands, the calluses on the fingertips of his left hand, from the guitar strings. "I was such a skinny nothing then." He ignored her sudden intake of breath, as if she were going to protest. "No, I really was. Man, I was so shy. I was afraid you were going to laugh at me."

"You knew I wouldn't."

He smiled at her. "Well, maybe a little. I just remember I wanted to, real bad. So, I just did it. Before I could think about it, before I knew what was going on, I just reached and took your hand. It was so soft, so warm. It felt right, you know?"

She nodded. "I know."

He nodded in return. "So right."

"I never laughed at you," came a whispered voice. "Never. I could *never* laugh at you."

"No," he answered, "You never did. But I remember that part of our summer. That is my best memory, sitting with you like that and you holding my hand." He looked back down at his hands again. She deserved to know the truth. "Yes, I thought it, what it would have been—you and me. What we . . . how we . . ."

"I would have loved you," she said. A single tear slipped down her cheek. Suddenly, there was no anger or impatience, just a sad longing at what could have been. "I would have loved you all my life," she repeated.

"I know you would have," he answered, tenderly. "I would have loved you, too. And we would've torn each other apart."

She opened her mouth to deny it; he knew it in his heart. He silenced her by raising his hand.

"We would have and you know I'm right." He lowered his hand again. "We were too passionate, darlin'. We were too alike." He watched his hands again, as the confession spilled out, "I was too stubborn and demanding, and you know it. I had to do it my way or not at all. You were too gentle and demanding on your own." He chuckled. "I used to dream about it, about being with you . . . and that day you held my hand."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I loved you too much," he answered. He saw the grimace come over her face and felt the pang in his heart. "Yeah, I know, sounds stupid, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it does."

"Darlin', please understand. I couldn't do that to you. I loved you too much to make you be near me during the bad times—and there were too many that you don't know about." He looked to the sleeping form of his wife, slumped over on the end of the bed with her head cradled on her arms. "It was enough that I had to ask *her*. I never wanted her to live through it, but she did. She didn't take it from me, always fought me back."

"She loves you, you know."

He nodded. "I know. I fell in love with her the moment she sashayed into my life. She knew how to throw it right back at me, my moods and stupid times. She made me laugh when I wanted to cry. She held me when I *did*. *She* never laughed at me, either." He turned back to the other, the one he always thought of as his first love, and with a widening grin, said, "Besides . . . as I recall, you met your husband not too long after that."

She smiled again. "Yeah . . . *my* grounding. I used to tell him that he was my anchor to reality. I kept him from sinking into the ground and he kept me from flying off the earth."

"*She* does that to me, you know."

"I know," she answered. "I guess we made the right choice after all, didn't we?"

"We did. The moment you married him, I knew you were gonna be ok. I knew he'd take care of you. I never worried about you again."

The concerned look came over her face. "I never *stopped* worrying about you," she said. "I still do. I worry you don't take care of yourself. I worry that you don't eat or sleep enough. I worry that you push yourself too hard."

"Shh, darlin'," he cooed to her, "don't do this. I know you love me. You don't have to worry about me anymore. Everything's done . . . it's ok. I'm ok."

“I’ll *always* worry about you,” she said, fresh tears threatening to burst forth. “*Damn it! it’s not fair!*” She tried to turn her face away, but the exertion was too much. “I’m sorry, I know you hate it when I cry. You always did.”

“Only because I could never fix it, darlin’. Only because . . . only . . .” He couldn’t say anymore.

“I don’t want to lose you. Not now. *Not ever!* Damn!”

“You can’t,” he answered, meaning to reassure her. “I’ll always . . . I . . . I will . . .” He felt his own tears start now, hot and blinding. He wanted to reach out to her, touch her, let her know it was ok to let go. He wanted to comfort her and didn’t know how. The monitor decided for both of them.

The steady *hiss* of the respirator was starting to slow, followed by a warning beep from the heart monitor. His attention focused to the machinery as another red light flashed, then began to blink in a steady rhythm. That one was doing all the breathing, now. *They’ll be coming in a moment. It’s time.* He gazed back to her and saw that she knew. His mouth opened to say something, anything . . . and he didn’t know the words to say. The look in her eyes told him that he didn’t need any. *Maybe there are none.*

He stood up and walked to the side of the bed, watching the red light of the respirator go a non-blinking red. *Not long now,* he thought. He looked down at his body, lost in the coma. They had been pumping a steady stream of fluid and morphine into him, trying to make him as comfortable as possible. The body had bloated beyond recognition. For a moment, he wasn’t sure how to react. It surely wasn’t the graceful exit he had wanted but it was still going out with a fight. He knew the odds when he came in; and they were against him all the way.

But I made the try, I fought the last fight. I didn’t lay down and die like a good little boy. No regrets at all.

He heard a small noise behind him and turned back to see she had gone back to her sleep state. *Think she’ll remember this visit?* He snorted at his own question. She’d never forgotten anything, from how he drank his coffee to his favorite cup, from the moment they met to the very first song they’d ever written. He had always been welcome in her home as part of her family. She was his best friend and had been for all of his life, it seemed. *Yeah, she’ll remember. She’ll remember this.*

He looked to the sleeping form of his wife, now showing the first signs of rousing thanks to the warnings. They’d already rehearsed this little song before. They’d said all there was to say, at least he had that much. They’d said goodbye, cried their tears, and said the “I love you” part so many times in the last days. She was his soulmate and his comfort, his light at the end of the tunnel. He hoped he’d told her enough times, he hoped . . .

He turned back to the sleeping blonde who’d been his friend, his confidant, his music collaborator—so much more than he could ever say in words. They hadn’t had enough time for this one. It was a lousy way to say goodbye, but it was all they had. It would have to do.

The respirator stopped then, the alarm sounded in earnest. He’d run out of time. He felt himself drifting back to his body, felt the comforting fog beckoning him forward. Before he completely joined with the black, he voiced one more thought.

“I love you, darlin’. See you there. I’ll be waiting.”

* * *

The hand gripped her shoulder and shook it, rudely bringing her up from the doze she'd lost herself in. *Damn it, go away. Leave me alone! If I wait here, he'll come back. I'll be there again. I'm not done. There's more....damn it, leave me alone!* Another shake, this one more insistent and she opened her eyes. Her name was being called repeatedly. She bit off a sarcastic retort and looked up into brown eyes brimming with tears. A shaky voice said all there was to say at that moment.

"It's time. He's going."

"No! God, not yet." A shake of the head, and this time, she let the tears come. "I was dreaming about him."

"Were you? What were you dreaming?"

Her hand flew to her mouth for a moment, as if to hold back the flood of emotion. She swallowed the crying jag, admonishing herself. *Not yet, not now. She needs me to be strong. She needs me to help her hold on. I'll do this later. Not now...please, not now.*

"I...uh...um...we were saying goodbye. He was telling me about . . . about"

"What," his wife begged. "What was he telling you?"

She shook her head. "Memories," was her only answer.

She watched the back of the priest, heard his intoning of the Supreme Unction for the Ill. *God, I can't watch this, I can't.* But she had to. He had asked for the few of them to be there for the end, only the precious few.

"He wanted you here, you know."

She looked back into the gentle brown eyes. "Did it ever bother you, that he and I were that close," she asked.

"It did a little, at first," the other woman answered. "I was jealous of you for a long time, you know."

She smiled through the tears. "Yeah, seems you and my husband felt the same way."

The other smiled. "I know. But you two were closer than brother and sister, and it was only because we didn't understand. You spoke to each other in ways I could never speak to him. I was always grateful for that."

The hand squeezed hers, and his wife said, "You became my friend, too, you know."

"And you, mine," she said. They both looked back to the bed, and the man about to leave them. Suddenly, she knew what to do. He had told her. He was waiting for one last time between them.

The priest finished his rite and stepped away. The wife stood by the other side and watched. She sat down on the side of the bed, and the rest of the room disappeared. It was only them.

She took the bloated hand in hers, holding it softly, tenderly in her own. "I remember, darlin'. You go now. You wait for me, ok? Sing with John and Jim, and wait for me . . . *for us.* Walk on the beach for me." The tears flowed again. "Go on, my friend. Go. Remember me, okay?"

There came a sudden spike on the monitor and the hand closed around hers. The nurse turned off the respirator and they all stood, watching the heart monitor as it slowly came to a stop. She held his hand as the nurse turned off the machines. She held it while his wife took the necklace he had always cherished, his bear fetish. She held it and cried, and said goodbye.

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## *Thirsty Boots*

*Inspired by the song, "Thirsty Boots"*

*words and music by Eric Anderson*

*Performed by John Denver on the I Want To Live CD*

When he was three weeks overdue, she began to worry. He'd never been this late before. Her mind began to play tricks, little games with her heart. *He was dead*, it told her. *He had been murdered by the highwaymen*. No, she answered, no. It will not be. *He has found a woman, cast you aside*. No, she countered. He will not forsake me. And so she filled her days with the work at the tavern, drawing the pints and pitchers of ale and beer. She spoke with a saucy air to the customers, flirting and flitting around them. Anything that kept her mind from its cruel teasing, anything that kept her from believing what must surely be a lie.

"Molly, darlin', a pitcher for me and the mates and step lively!"

She had finished wiping off a table and turned to the boisterous caller. "You sit yourself down, Ned Biddle, and stop calling like this was a bawdy house. I'll get your bloomin' pitcher, never you fret."

She barely heard the hoof beats outside, as she took the pitcher from the table. She stopped only long enough to allow Ned a pat of her bottom before heading to the cask. There was a quiet thud as the front door of the inn collided with the wall, but she paid that no mind either. She drew the pitcher, replaced the bung, and turned back to the table.

And she saw him there, framed in the doorway and standing in a pose that suggested that he was wearier than she could possibly imagine. For a moment all she could do was watch him, take his presence in with her eyes. With the light shining from behind, it was hard to see much. But she could tell that he was woefully thin and his steps were labored.

She set the pitcher down on the table, turning a smile at the men sitting there. They all knew. When he was here, they all knew where her heart lay; with him. There was no teasing, no flirting when he was here. She left the pitcher and ran up the steps—two at a time—to the room that was always reserved for him.

She quickly set several buckets of water to heating in the cauldron. The oak tub was there, waiting to be filled. She went about setting things to right, drawing the covers of the bed for later. He was a creature of nature, loving the out of doors. She lit the candles for the extra illumination, but pulled the curtains so that he would have the last of the day's light. It was here that she was standing, tying back the fabric, when the door opened softly behind her.

The green eyes were deeper than before. And the face was streaked with the dust of the road, he was haggard. The black hair had been haphazardly tied back with a piece of leather; wisps and tendrils had been pulled loose and hung listlessly around his face. He was dirty and disheveled, but he was here. He was finally here, safe and sound. He was home.

"Wylor?"

He gave a fatigued smile, closing the door behind him. "I suppose you thought I had gone for good," he said.

"Don't be silly, you cannot leave me," she answered smartly. "You know my company is too dear, you'd miss me far too much."

That drew a chuckle from him. It was enough to break the spell and she crossed the room to him. "Come now, I shall draw a bath for you and help you bathe this dust from your body and hair. And I want to hear all the news. You must tell me everything."

"Molly . . ."

She moved to take his doublet, but he deftly caught her hands. For a moment, she was lost in his eyes. Yes, they were deeper. There were small lines in the corners and he couldn't bring his eyes to meet hers.

"Come now, Wyler, let me take this. You can't go into the tub in your clothes." He wouldn't let go of her hands. "I *have* seen you naked. Surely, it's not modesty."

He bowed his head, staring down at the floor in a deep study.

"My love. You've been out in the world, singing the news and entertaining those who would listen. You've been riding far and wide. Knowing you, you've not slept in a decent bed in too long, choosing the trees and that saddle."

He slowly shook his head.

"What is it, Wyler?"

"Did you not wonder where I have been?"

Her heart sank. *He has found another. He has taken another.*

When she couldn't speak, he took that as a sign of his own. He released her hands and turned away. Slowly, he began to shed the doublet, taking his time to pull it from his arms. It wasn't until he removed the garment that she saw his shirt had been torn to tatters, dried blood on the rips.

He tossed the doublet to the floor and turned back. "I have been in prison, Molly."

He seemed to be searching her face for something, some word of comfort or acknowledgment. She took a breath and fixed a smile on her face. She held out her hands, taking his and holding held them to her heart.

"I was scared, Wyler, more afraid than you will ever know. But you are home now. You are here." She kissed the fingers of both of his hands. "First, you will have a bath and wash away the dust and grit. Come, into the tub with you. You are here now and I am with you."

She helped him out of the doeskin trews and saffron shirt, laying them on the bed to fold after he was in the tub. She caught her breath seeing the criss-cross of barely healed welts on his back. His strong back that had not seen the sun for some time, his back was still showing bruises and those whip marks. She turned back to the cauldron and began pouring the hot water into the cold, heating it until it was steaming. He stepped into the tub, settling gingerly as she poured the last of the hot water. From a box, she pulled a ball of sweet soap wrapped in a piece of oil cloth.

"Now, we shall see if that handsome face is still under that dirt. But first, your hair needs attention, sir."

She pushed his head forward and dutifully, he bent it. She took an old pitcher and poured the water over the blue-black locks. With the ball of soap, she began to work his tresses into a lather.

"Molly?"

"Yes, my love?"

He gave a heavy sigh, almost as if it came from his toes. His lips parted several times, as if he wasn't sure what to say or how to say it. She said nothing, only working the soap through his hair with her fingers and gently teasing out the tangles. It was some time before he did speak. She waited patiently.

“How can one man be so cruel to another? All for . . . words.” He gave another heartfelt sigh. “I know, I know. You have often cautioned me to watch my tongue. You have counseled me much for the control of it.”

“Have I, my love?”

“I could not see the injustice and let it go unnoticed. I could not.”

She took the pitcher and rinsed the soap from his hair. “What did you see, my love?”

“I saw a man beaten so that another could have his land. I saw the fatted lord of the shire laughing as it happened. Too many suffer for greed, Molly. Too many cry from hunger and disease and it would seem there are none who care.”

He pushed the wet hair from his eyes and sat back as she soaped the cloth. He closed them while she cleaned the dust from his face and rinsed it. He kept his lids shut as she began to gently scrub his arms and chest. But he talked on.

“I sang of what I saw. I meant only as farce, only to tease. But the duke took affront. He bade them to throw me in the dungeon until such time as I had learned my lesson. But first, I was tied to a post and whipped for my slander, he said. So they did. Ten lashes for my crime and two weeks in the dark recesses of the gaol.”

She gently washed the healing wounds on his back, angry stripes that rose from his perfect flesh. The blood had since dried, but the skin was still an acrimonious red. She patted at the lesions as softly as she could, but she heard each hiss of his breath. He never cried out, never made another sound other than the sudden inhales through his teeth. She carefully cleaned the dirt and grime from the lash marks, then rinsed them.

“There, now,” she whispered, as if soothing a child. “There now, all clean and that will heal nicely. I’ll get one of Mother Morton’s unctions to put on those and they will no longer pain you.”

He only nodded.

“Are you hungry, my love?”

He nodded again.

“Then, I shall feed you. You are far too thin, my love. And so weary from it all. I shall care for you now. I shall heal you and take care of you. You will grow strong and well again. All of that is past.”

His eyes met hers. “Molly?”

“Yes, Wyler?”

“Are you not shamed of me?”

“For what, my love?”

“I am . . . I have been to prison. I have . . . committed a crime.”

“To speak the truth and give voice to the oppressed is not a crime, my love. Because an old, fat, uncaring tyrant could not have the truth spoken to him? Because he drew insult from having his own shameless deeds thrown back in his face?”

She took one hand in hers; she could see that the knuckles were bruised. She kissed them, stroking the back of his hand as she did.

“No, sweet Wyler. I am *proud*. Proud of you for standing up to such vile behavior. Proud of your big heart and gentle ways. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

He smiled so sweetly at her that she felt her heart filling up, felt her whole being warm with the glow.

“Now,” she said, “there is a night shirt on the bed. I shall go fetch your supper and a pitcher of ale. And I wish to hear all about the wondrous parts of your journey. Of all the villages you saw and the people. You must tell me of the gossip of the court and the land.”

She left the lambskin where he could reach it; use it to dry his body with.

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she entered the hallway. *They threw him in prison; threw Wyler in prison. A gentle man with no more thought to hurt anyone and they beat him like a dog. Oh, that I were not a woman and could right the wrong. Oh, that I . . . I . . .*

She went wordlessly about as she carved the lamb from the bone. She laid the slices on a platter and heaped the carrots by the side. She cut thick slices of the hearty brown bread and laid that on the platter as well. All that was left was to pour the ale; but in the middle, she stopped. Carefully setting the pitcher back on the table, she buried her face in her hands and wept.

*Wyler, shut away . . . how could they? And whipped him . . . why? He's a simple bard, a gentle soul. Why?*

She wiped the tears away and finished pouring the ale. She found the jar of ointment and, balancing a mug on the platter, managed to get the lot upstairs. She was forced to set the pitcher on a nearby table to get the door open, but she was in the room just in time to see him belting up the treads again.

“Now, you sit down, my love,” she said, setting the platter down on the table. “I’ll get the ale and then I’ll tend t’ your back.”

He did as told, sitting before the platter but not eating it; he picked at the food, moving it around. She poured the mug of ale and set about to dressing the cuts.

He caught her hand only once. The little boy look on his face both amused her and broke her heart.

“Will it sting?” he asked.

She kissed the tip of his eyebrow. “No, it will not sting. But it will lessen the pain.”

He began to eat the food before him as she tenderly applied the contents of the jar. She was dismayed to see his ribs standing out against his skin but made no mention of it. Of course he was too thin; they’d done that awful thing to him.

“It was terrible in there, Molly. Animals, they live like animals in cells. Dark and dank, chains and manacles.”

“I’m sure it was horrid.”

“They spat on us, called us wicked names, foul things. There was no privacy, no . . . they beat one poor sot. He bled to death, right there in the cell, and they left him.”

She finished with his back, laying the jar aside. “Wyler, I’m so sorry. You were never meant for that place. It was just wrong.”

He stuffed a piece of the bread and meat into his mouth and sat chewing in somber silence. Molly reached out, taking his free hand in hers, drawing his attention.

“I wish I could take it all back. Make every moment gone. I would do that for you. But I can’t.”

He swallowed slowly. Taking a deep breath, he said, “I won’t go back, Molly. I will never go back. I’m shut of it all. I’m shut of the road, the tales. I’m shut of singing the news and being pelted with rot. I’m . . . done, I tell you, done.”

“Shh,” she cooed. “My love, it is what you are. You are a bard, a bringer of story and song. You have that in your blood and you are the best of them.”

He shook his head. “No, no longer. I wish to settle now. I wish for a home and children. I wish to make my life mean something, be respectable.”

“You are respectable, my love.”

“No, I’m just the itinerant who wanders, telling the wrong tales and insulting the wrong men.” He stared at the table. “I am the man who has disgraced you.”

“I do not feel disgraced.”

“You should.”

“No. I should not.” She reached and pulled his gaze to meet her own. “You are a very respectable man, Wyler Bain. And I will not hear other. If you truly choose to settle, then you have a home here. If you want it.”

The weight lifted from his shoulders and she watched his body ease its burden from his soul.

“I choose it, Molly.”

“What will you do, my love?”

“I have a fair hand with the lathe and chisel. I’ve been carving things, making small toys. I could apprentice with the wheelwright. I should like to make furniture and mend things of wood.”

“Then that is what you will do.”

“That is what I shall do,” he repeated, the smile curling his lips up and setting the emerald eyes to twinkling.

“But, surely you will play for me?” she asked shyly. “Some times when the night is warm and I should like to hear the beautiful voice singing songs of love? You will sing for me?”

He pushed himself back from the table, pulling her into his lap as he did. “I shall sing for you, my dear.”

She stroked his face. “And you will not miss your travels?”

“Molly—”

“Wyler, you will not miss them?”

“I have missed you far more.” He took her hand to kiss the palm. “I thought only of you while I was in that place. I could not hope you would wait for me.”

“Then, you must kick off your thirsty boots and stay for a while. Rest and eat and sleep until you are ready to take the travels again.” He opened his mouth, but she was faster, stopping his speech with her hand against his lips. “No, my dear. You are not a woodwright. You are a bard. It is in your soul and I will not keep you from it.”

He kissed her fingertips. “You do not. I want to come home, Molly. I want to stay here, with you. Please? May I?”

Her answer was the kiss she gave him, his lips soft and yielding. His hands crept around her waist like agile mice that meandered in the soft places and firmly held her close. Her arms went around him, careful to avoid the rips in his skin. The taste of the sweet carrots and the salt of the meat was on his tongue and she savored the spice of it.

He lifted her up and carried her to the bed. With his deft fingers, he plucked the laces of her gown and tossed the cloth aside. His treads joined the pile on the floor, then he was under the quilt with her. His hands—his musician’s hands—were strong from the strings of the lute but soft and gentle as he touched her everywhere. He seemed to revel in her and she let him take his time.

She found the places on his body that made him shiver and moan with the joy of it, the places that tingled and brought him pleasure. She had washed away the pain of this journey, now she would fill him with her heart. She stroked and kissed the muscles, exploring still others that seemed to go rigid and eager.

She wanted to play the vixen, to bite and scratch. But she was not that way; he was different, she couldn't be that way. When he took her, he filled her with his pleasure. They rocked in a single rhythm, her hands clasped around his neck. He whispered her name as they moved as one. And when the moment came, he stiffened in her arms and then released against her shoulder. She stroked his arm, whispering his name, and kissing the side of his jaw and neck.

When he rolled over to lie on his back, she saw the tears on his cheeks.

"Wyler? Wyler, is it your back? Have I done something to pain you? Wyler? What is it?"

He sniffed back the tears. "No, it isn't my back. You've done nothing wrong, Molly. You've . . . you made it all well again. You gave me back myself. My pride." He reached to her, pulling her close. "I have seen much, lost much. But you gave it back to me."

She kissed his lips again. "I gave you nothing you didn't already have, my love."

"Then, allow me to give you something."

"What is it, my love?"

He turned over, reaching into the bag that had been tied on his belt. He pulled out a scrap of cloth and shyly handed it to her. When she opened it, she saw a band of silver carefully wrapped inside. Her eyes widened as she looked up at him.

"It is for you, Molly. If you will have me. If you will honor me."

Now, she burst into tears. He held her close and let her know it was all well. He held her close until they slept, wrapped in each other's arms.

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The Ballad of St. Anne's Reel

Inspired by the song, The Ballad of St. Anne's Reel
Words and Music by D. Mallett,
performed by John Denver on the *Autograph* album/CD

Welcome t' PE Island, sir. How can I help you, eh?"

Jack nodded to the clerk. "My freighter isn't here. I'm looking for the Mandy Lee."

The young man inside the cage looked down, shuffled papers for a few moments, and then looked back up with an annoying smile on his face. "Uh, she's not in dock."

Jack gave a nervous cough, planted his hands on the counter, and answered, "Yes, I know she's not in dock. That's why I'm here. She supposed to be at dock three and she's not. *Nothing* is in dock three."

"Oh, er . . . um . . . hmm." He looked back down, shuffled the papers again, and looked back up with the same smile. "Well, then, she's had a bit of a delay, eh? Sorry, that."

Jack was fast losing patience. "Sorry? Look, mate, I have to be on my ship in three days. The Mandy Lee is the only one going to the States and if I'm not on it, I miss my ship. If I miss my ship, I'm in dutch with the captain. Understand?"

"I'm sorry, sir—"

“Sorry? *Sorry?* Look, buddy . . .” Jack took a deep breath. There was no sense berating the man. “Look, *I’m* sorry. I need to make that ship. Did she dock at all?”

“No, sir. She hasn’t come in to port.”

Jack nodded. “Then, she will.”

“Perhaps she’s just delayed, sir. Perhaps there was a squall or something, eh? Circuit’s a bit dodgy this time of year, eh? She’ll make berth, you’ll see.”

He gave an exasperated sigh. “Looks like I’m stranded here.” Another thought struck him. “Look, this is a port of call. Is there any ship scheduled to get in sooner, going to the same place?”

“Um, let me look, sir.” This was followed by the shuffling of more papers, but this time the young man opened a ledger. One well bitten nail traced down the column, stopping at the bottom. “Yes, sir. The Bonnie Mary. But she’s not due to sail out until morning, sir.”

Jack exhaled hard, closing his eyes. He really didn’t have to be aboard until the morning of the fourth day, but he’d wanted a day to relax, do a little sight seeing, before resuming his duties. “Has there been any radio contact at all?”

“No, sir,” the young man answered, rather apologetic at the news. “Should I go ahead and book passage, sir? Just in case?”

Jack nodded. “Just in case.”

“She’ll be in, sir, you’ll see,” the clerk assured. “She’s just late, eh? Bit chancy, is nothing more. She’ll be in. But I’ve booked your passage.”

Jack gave a confident smile to the young man. He hoped it hid the frustration inside of him. “Well, looks like I’m a guest of your village. Any place I can go get a cup of coffee? While I wait? For the Mandy Lee?”

The clerk’s face lit up. “That’s the spirit, eh? Keep a positive mindset! Well done.”

“Coffee?”

“Oh, sure, down the street a bit, sir. Hotel. Got plenty o’ hot coffee, eh? You go straightway there and I’ll have the boy come down to fetch you when Mandy comes to dock. Eh?”

Jack loosed a short sigh, nodding as he did. He crossed to the door and looked out on the bleak December evening. The snow was falling, silent and frigid. The small village was a print right out of a story book, the most angelic place he’d ever seen. It did nothing to improve his rapidly building frustration or mood. He tugged his cap down further over his ears, the lapels of his coat up over that, and pulled the door open. He left the warmth of the office and walked out into the bluster of evening.

He’d only walked a few paces before realizing he’d not asked the clerk which way the hotel was. He crossed out into the empty street, looking up and down the road. There was no hint, no clue of any hotel. He was about to give up when a sudden bump turned him around. A gentleman, wrapped in a thick fur coat, stopped. The woolen scarf was wrapped around the man’s face obscuring anything below his nose. It wasn’t until the gentleman had pulled the wool down from his face that Jack saw the smile that brightened the man’s eyes.

“Hello, friend. You lost?”

Jack nodded. “Yes, where’s the hotel?”

The gentleman held up a mittened hand, gesturing in a direction. “That way, five doors down. Can’t miss it. On other side of the street there, eh? You head there; they’ll take good care of you.”

Jack looked in the direction the man had pointed in. He could just make out the posts and gate in front of the hotel. He turned back to thank the gentleman, but the man was gone. Jack

watched him scurry off across the street and off in the same general direction. Jack went back from whence he came and then, proceeded to the hotel.

The wind made it a bit rough and it took him several minutes of fighting to get to the entrance. Breathing a sigh of relief, all he wanted to do was go inside and sit down. A cup of coffee was sounding real good at this point; something warm and hot in his belly and he could wait for the ship. Even if he took the ship in the morning, he'd make it. It would be ok. The captain wouldn't have an excuse to dock his pay.

But as he made the turn to go into the gate, something stopped him. His hand, numb from the cold, paused in the act of opening the gate. There was something . . . some sound, some . . . *music*. He heard the sound of a fiddle, soft and sweet, under the ferocity of the wind. It was jaunty and plaintive at the same time. It took a few seconds of listening, but he could pick out small snatches of the music. He turned around to face the street and saw the lights in the building directly across from him. Maybe it was nothing; maybe it was something. The music seemed to be coming from there. *What the hell*, he thought to himself. The worst that could happen was there was no music and he'd go back to the hotel and have that coffee.

He fought the wind as he crossed the street, his hands now in the pockets of the old peacoat. He stepped up on the wooden sidewalk, clomping across the surface. Every step brought him closer to that door. Every step and he could hear voices now, laughter. There was a yellow glow to the door, light spilling out from around the cracks. He put his cold fingers to the door knob, turned and pushed.

The moment he stepped inside, the music swept around him; a gentle kiss of warmth. No wonder the streets were deserted; they were all here. In one corner, coats and hats had been piled into a huge stack. The room was filled with people; some dancing jigs and merry steps in the center while still others stood on the fringes of the room, engaged in conversation and laughter. A small band was in the opposite corner, the fiddler standing on an old soapbox. His arm sawed away, the fingers dancing over the strings.

"Hello, friend. Welcome."

He turned to another man, who was walking by.

"Uh, thank you."

"You look lost."

"No, no," Jack answered. "I . . . uh, what's going on?"

"Village holds a dance, once a week, eh? Gives everyone a chance t' socialize, see one another. Hard week o' fishin' leaves a man lonely and a woman empty."

Jack nodded, watching the room. "Yes, it does."

"You from around these parts?"

Jack turned back to the man. "Excuse me?"

"You from 'round here?"

"Oh," he answered. "No, no I'm not. I'm from Norfolk. Virginia. In the States."

"Ah," came the jovial reply. "What brings ya t' PE Island?"

"I came to see my sister and her husband. They live on the mainland. I have to catch a boat back and the only one going back was leaving Prince Edward . . . oh, hello."

She crossed over to him, carrying a steaming mug. "Albert, you've been standing there talking to our guest and I'm sure you haven't made one offer of a cup of coffee at all."

Albert mumbled something, Jack was never sure what. From the moment she had walked up to him, he'd lost all thought of anyone else. She had long, flowing hair the color of summer wheat—the yellow tresses pulled away from her face, then spilling over one shoulder. Her eyes

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