

A Story by Jack Sparacino

Carla “String Bean” D’Andrea scooted down the buckled brick sidewalk like a mouse with her tail on fire.

A five foot nine inch mouse, 145 pounds. She figured if she hustled enough, the little flame would eventually snuff itself out on damp leaves and cigarette butts. She had a business meeting to get to at 8 AM. Her third in a row this week, called by her boss. Six-one, blue eyes, wavy short brown hair singed with grey. Hank Bledsoe was one of those guys who thought his service in the Navy gave him a free pass at work. He belched orders and announced meetings that weren’t productive. Or fun.

Once you got more than 10 people at these gatherings, they turned into a eulogy, acceptance speech, or a sleeping pill. Hank pumped all three rounds into his team. Twice, he referred to Carla as String Bean, a nickname no one had used around her since eighth grade. Back when looks and acting effortlessly cool were everything. Carla promised herself she wasn’t going to sit through all of that baloney today. She didn’t want to see baloney made, sliced, served or eaten. Especially by this guy. What a pompous jerk. His right ear stuck out way too far, like a tour bus with the door open. A toy bus with a regular size door. Maybe her eyes were starting to fool her. But three years in the Marine Corps said otherwise.

Carla never forgot some of the best officers that she served with. She did her tour with the squids on the USS Indiana, one of the most advanced nuclear submarines in America’s fleet. These were the boats that the Navy saw fit to equip with chefs’ kitchens. Four-star hotel food was served as hazard pay in the mess. This included crab and lobster at dinner after lean pastrami Reuben sandwiches, bouillabaisse and French onion soup for lunch. Well, what was the use of going to sea without eating any seafood? She wondered if the guys on the Bounty ever ate seafood. Along with the bitter hardtack and a rare slug of rum.

Tall, lean and lynx lovely, Carla wasn’t just runway ready, she was ring ready. Boxing or wrestling, you name it. Not wedding ring, not for now. Her pseudo boyfriend Brian was still trying to figure out a way to move out of his parents’ house. He was charming and did look good in a

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suit, though, and her mother loved him. Made him chicken soup and homemade yogurt followed by veal meatloaf, garlic mashed potatoes and green beans. Finally her famous pumpkin pie with vanilla ice cream. Just to fatten him up a little.

Carla figured her career would get a boost as soon as she stopped working for Mr. Jerk at H.B. Haynes and Sons. Her marine and naval training, preceded by a couple years with the CIA, had taught her many ways to kill a man. With her hands, a garrote, handgun, knife, kitchen sponge (preferably wet). Soup spoon. Tweezers. After being passed over for promotion twice at Haynes despite her excellent performance reviews, hard fought attendance award and beauty queen looks, she was stiff with anger. Her body remained nearly steady as her hoop earrings trembled. Sure, she neutralize a fellow pretty badly with those earrings alone, but there must be a better way. Cleaner.

Back in the Navy, the USS Indiana was her kind of ship. She displaced 8200 tons with a beam of 34 feet. She was depth tested to 800 feet. Forward speed 25 knots. Indiana's mission length constraints were negligible, she could stay out for over three years. That's a lot of lobsters, Carla thought.

Hank received a small package at the office wrapped in wrinkled brown paper and tied with twine. He shook it gently and held it to his ear. Nothing. Maybe it was cash, a quiet bonus from the guys upstairs. Maybe it was drugs, though he hadn't been involved in that charade in two years now. Maybe it was socks. He liked LL Bean the best, even at \$16 a pair. Hank opened the package like it might contain rotten eggs. He used a pair of scissors to cut out an exit for the package.

Carla had collected more serious accolades than Hank and he knew it. The bestselling *Seniors' Guide to the Law*

, a patent for 3-D printer blocks, appearances on local television stations with CNN pending. The afternoon kind where the plastic host is a mongrel used car salesman and game show host. Sky blue shirt, navy blue sport coat. The glassy eyes of a stuffed owl caught over a creek at low tide.

Hank had insulted Carla once too often since he pointed out in a staff meeting that her suit jacket wasn't buttoned properly (it was, in fact) and she wore too much jewelry. This was after he had twice eyed her up and down like a side of beef at the Iowa state fair. She was vegan, he ate only take out Italian, Greek and French. He loved prosciutto, spanakopita, and escargot with

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fresh baked bread. All washed down with Errazuriz Estate Series Merlot 2018 Valle de Curicó. Mr. Big Shot with the big shot pallet. Maybe he was laundering money for that kind of budget. Carla figured his whole program needed laundering. They bumped into each other in the tiny mail room late on a Friday afternoon. Both were about ready to float into their other lives, the ones everyone else cared about. Their quirky families, the charities they favored (she liked the Doris Day Animal Foundation). They came through the same door moments apart. She had him at "hello," her mesmerizing green eyes slicing his heart out between beats. They stared at each other like predators. Before the knives came out.

Not just any knives. He carried a Jagdkommando Tri- Dagger, she a Navy Seal SOG Tactical Knife. All weather, all purpose, all death all the time radio KILZ. Startled by her presence in such a small space and those eyes, Hank said "Hey, String Bean." "Hello yourself, Ensign." "Actually, I was a Lieutenant, Beanie. You would be well advised to pay more attention to rank around here." "Have it your way, Lieutenant Bledsoe. Is that Bledsoe as in, he bled so much from a shaving cut that he was in sick bay for a week? Am I getting close, pal?"

Carla drew her knife so quickly that he gasped. Close quarters, her weapon out first. Time to make that last call home. Actually, five minutes ago. When she slit open three letters and two packages in the time it took him to swallow, his heart rate spiked to 110. Her weight in middle school. Nobody shoved her around then. When she offered that fluorescent grin, they knew she meant it.

Someone softly knocked on the door. Hank said he thought he smelled paint thinner. The maintenance guys had been around earlier. Carla smiled. "Actually, it's a mix of gas and turpentine. They had a sale."

Hank prayed for paint thinner.