

GEARS OF A MAD GOD



BRENT NICHOLS

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Author's Notes

This is a work of fiction. Not real. Totally made up. Any resemblance to real people, situations, murderous cults or eldritch deities is purely coincidental.

Chapter 1 - Grim Tidings

It was ironic, Colleen Garman reflected, how often a clockmaker could lose track of the time.

She was up to her elbows in brass gears and grease, thoroughly enjoying herself, when the grandfather clock in the corner began to chime. In moments half a dozen more clocks joined in, and she straightened, suppressing an unladylike curse. Six o'clock! Roland would be picking her up at seven, would take half an hour to get home, she needed half an hour to scrub the smell of grease from her skin, and then there was her hair-!

She left her tools sticking out of the clock cabinet, not the way her father had taught her at all, but this was an emergency. Then she raced around the workshop, turning down gas lights and making sure the windows were shut. She pulled a jacket on over her coveralls and paused in the doorway, looking over her domain.

Everything was squared away, aside from a few wrenches. Dad would be proud.

If she'd known how long it would be before she saw her workshop again, she would have stayed longer. Instead she turned away and locked the door.

The evening shadows were long, and at first she didn't notice the tall man in the long, dark coat striding across the lawn. Her workshop was one bay in a long block of warehouses, so she didn't pay any attention to him. He was undoubtedly on his way to see one of her neighbors.

She jogged across the grass, and he saw her, and veered toward her. Something in his face disturbed her, a look of dark intensity, and she jogged faster, heading for the lights of Spadina Street a block away. The warehouse district got short shrift when it came to streetlights, a fact that usually didn't bother her, but tonight she was nervous.

Feet thudded on the grass and she looked over her shoulder. The man was running after her, and Colleen broke into a run as well. She dashed up Treadwell Street, a growing anger fighting with her fear. What right did some clown have to chase her, to make her run? Of course, she was late, after all. She decided that was reason enough to keep going. If she turned and taught this man a lesson, she'd miss her date with Roland completely.

He was gaining on her as she reached the intersection with Spadina. It was a much busier street, with shoppers strolling between stores and businessmen leaving their offices. She was thinking about stopping, turning to face the guy, when she saw a streetcar just ahead of her. She decided to run for it instead, and picked up the pace.

The man behind her sped up as well. He was no more than a dozen feet behind her when her stretching hand caught the rail on the back of the streetcar and she pulled herself on board.

She stood panting, staring back at him, ready to hammer on his fingers if he grabbed the railing. But he was too far back. He was quite determined, the long black coat flapping around his legs as he sprinted, but he quickly fell behind.

Colleen stared into his face. It was an ordinary face at first glance, long and thin, a clean-shaven man somewhere between youth and middle age. But there was a disturbing intensity to his features. As the streetcar pulled away from him there was no frustration in his face, no disappointment. Just a grim focus as he stared after her.

Colleen shivered and hoped she'd seen the last of him. The next time she worked late, she decided, she'd tuck one of her larger wrenches into her pocket. If he came after her again he'd get the surprise of his life.

Home for Colleen was a rattletrap row house on a steep hill with a view of Lake Ontario. With her parents gone the dark house often depressed her, but tonight she was too distracted to be troubled. She trotted up the front steps, then paused to pluck an envelope from the mailbox at her front door.

Inside, she turned on the lights and tore the envelope open. She was distracted, thinking of Roland, thinking of how she could be ready in time, but the words on the page hit her like a blow. It was a telegraph form, the message succinct, blunt, and brutal.

Very sorry your uncle Roderick passed this AM in Victoria.

Colleen stared at the rectangle of paper for a long minute, then walked to the nearest chair and flopped herself down. She kept staring at the sheet in her hand, but she was no longer seeing it. Uncle Rod was dead?

By the time Roland arrived she was packing. She told him about Roderick in distracted bursts as she darted back and forth across her bedroom, gathering her possessions. She took no more than she could fit in a suitcase. A steamer trunk was more traditional, but it would be a nightmare to move, and Colleen liked to be mobile.

Roland listened silently, only sympathy on his face. He was dressed for the night of dancing he had promised her, and he looked devastatingly handsome in a brown suit that showed off his height and his broad shoulders. Colleen looked at him and felt a pang of regret for their missed evening, and a rush of affection for him. She had ruined his evening completely, and his only thought was how he could help.

He carried her suitcase down to the front door, went to the corner drugstore to phone for a taxi, then came back and looked her up and down. "I hope you're not travelling in that," he said.

Colleen looked down at herself. She was still in her coveralls, hardly suitable attire for a young lady in public. She frowned in irritation. Skirts were frankly a pain, and she would be travelling for at least a week. Well, there was nothing to be done. She thought about packing her dirty coveralls just in case, but it hardly seemed likely she'd wear them.

She changed quickly, pulling on a blue dress and grabbing a bonnet, and ran back downstairs. "I'll

come with you to the train station," Roland said as the taxi pulled up. "I could even go with you to Victoria."

"Don't be silly," Colleen told him. "You haven't packed. And you don't want to pay for a taxi to come all the way back from the station. I'll be fine."

"I don't know," he said, and she smiled at the concern on his face. She stood on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. "Thanks for understanding," she said. "You're very sweet. I'll see you as soon as I get back."

He insisted on carrying her suitcase to the taxi. He opened the back door for her, then took her hand, his face serious. "We need to have a talk when you get back."

Colleen nodded and climbed into the taxi. She watched him through the back window as the car pulled away. She had a feeling he was planning to propose to her, and the thought put a flutter of excitement in her stomach, but they had a few issues to work out first. Roland had some fairly narrow views about how a proper young woman ought to behave, and they didn't involve wearing coveralls and working with hand tools.

But she'd been shaken by the news of Uncle Rod's death. He was her last living relative. She was truly alone now. Marrying Roland, being part of a family again, coming home to a house full of light and life and love, would be hard to resist.

She lugged her suitcase into the station, found a ticket window, and bought a return ticket to Vancouver, wincing at the price. She wouldn't have long to wait. Her train was leaving in less than ten minutes.

She was on the stairs, the suitcase bumping her legs with every step, when some instinct made her turn. A man was sauntering across the lobby behind her, and he lifted a newspaper to hide his face as she turned, but he was a moment too slow. Colleen felt her stomach turn to ice. She knew that thin face, that dark coat, those burning eyes.

It couldn't be a coincidence. He was following her. But why?

Not for any good purpose, she was sure.

She kept moving, down the staircase, her eyes scanning the station. She was safe enough for the moment, but what if he boarded the same train she did? She had a sudden vision of going to sleep at night, wondering what he might do as she slept. Or she might confront him, teach him some manners and maybe get herself thrown off the train.

A group of sailors stood at the bottom of the stairs, half a dozen rough-looking young men talking and laughing loudly, and Colleen instinctively edged away from them. Then one man's words caught her attention.

"I'm telling you, it's been stolen."

"You lost it," the man beside him said. "Check your pockets again."

"I don't have that many pockets," the first sailor retorted. "I'm telling you, someone nicked my wallet."

Colleen stepped closer and said, "I think it was him."

"Huh? What?" The sailors stared at her, and Colleen, her heart thumping, let go of her suitcase with one hand so she could point up the stairs. "That guy in the black coat, with the newspaper. I think he took your wallet."

The sailors looked where she pointed and Colleen quickly moved away before they could ask any awkward questions. She hurried to her platform, not turning her head when she heard raised voices behind her, followed by the sounds of a scuffle. She allowed herself a small smile as she handed her suitcase to a porter and boarded her train.

Chapter 2 – Dragon Alley

The trip from Toronto to the coast took three days. At first Colleen distracted herself by examining the hardware of the train, from the straightforward mechanics of the steam locomotive to the complex, cutting-edge pneumatic brake system. She watched the scenery, and chatted with her fellow passengers, but by the second day all of that began to pall.

She brooded over her shattered family. Her mother was a distant memory, just a face in a photograph and faint images of warmth and love and a golden smile, so long ago that she wasn't sure if she was remembering or imagining.

Her father's death, eighteen months earlier, was fresh and devastating in her mind. The two of them had been inseparable, working side by side in the workshop whenever she wasn't in school. She still woke up some mornings not remembering that he was gone, and was crushed anew when memory came flooding in.

She reviewed what she knew of Uncle Rod. He had visited on half a dozen occasions, always on his way to some exotic new location. He was rootless, Dad had said. Born to wander the Earth, seeking fortune, seeking adventure, never content.

She remembered a broad-shouldered man, his stomach a bit bigger on every visit, his face a thicket of bristling whiskers. He smelled of tobacco smoke and peppermint and something else, a scent she'd never been able to identify. The first time Colleen encountered whiskey she'd been shocked to recognize the smell. She'd meant to tease Uncle Rod about it, but she never saw him again.

Six visits in twenty years. Oh, probably he'd visited when she was an infant, but six visits was all she could remember. They hadn't been especially close. This feeling she had, that she needed to drop everything and dash across the country, had less to do with their relationship than with the fact that he was all the family she had left.

Was this trip ill-advised? She told herself she was going to settle his affairs, take care of anything that needed doing. She told herself she was being responsible, but in truth it had been an impulsive decision.

She was plagued by questions, and it would take three days at least to get any answers. Meanwhile there were probably telegrams and letters stacking up at home with the answers to all of her questions. She sighed and read the one telegram she'd received for the umpteenth time.

The telegram was signed "Jane Favisham." Colleen had never heard of her. Was she a friend of Uncle Rod? A girlfriend? Whoever she was, she knew about Colleen.

On the morning of the third day some of her questions were answered. She changed trains in Calgary and found a Vancouver newspaper, four days old, discarded in the dining car. She glanced at a lurid

headline, dismissed it, and started to turn the page. Then a name caught her eye and she turned back, chill spreading through her body as she read.

Madman Subdued in Victoria

On Monday afternoon a near-tragedy was averted at a small public school in Victoria. A man with an axe entered Queen Elizabeth Primary School in the mid-afternoon. He apparently tried to enter the first classroom he came to, but a quick-thinking teacher, Mr. Hainsley, pushed the door shut from the inside and held it, exhorting his students to flee by the window.

The attacker was attempting to batter the door open with his axe when he was apprehended by a group of teachers and a janitor. No students or staff were harmed in the attack.

The attacker was taken into police custody. He has been identified as Roderick Garman of Victoria. The motive for the attack is not known.

Colleen stared at the newspaper, baffled. Uncle Rod had taken an axe and attacked a school? She didn't know him well, but he'd always been gentle, amusing, and patient. It made no sense.

She checked the date on the paper. May 1, 1921. The day before the telegram. Uncle Rod should have been in police custody. How had he died?

She was exhausted and disgruntled when she finally walked down the gangplank of the Vancouver-Victoria ferry and stepped onto Vancouver Island. She had never been so far from home, but she was in no mood to enjoy the sights. She hoisted her suitcase and trudged down the dock.

"Miss Colleen Garman?"

Colleen looked up. A woman of about forty stood before her. She had brown hair drawn up in a bun, and wore a modest blue dress and an uncertain smile.

"Yes?"

"Oh, it is you!" the woman gushed. "I knew it! Your uncle has- I'm sorry, had a picture of you in his house. I'm Jane Favisham. I was your uncle's friend."

"How do you do?" Colleen said automatically, and Jane shifted a parasol to her left hand so she could shake Colleen's hand. "How did you know I was coming?"

Jane smiled. "There's only one ferry each day from Vancouver, and I live quite near here. When I didn't get any replies to my telegrams I decided I'd come by each day starting today, for a few days at least. And here you are, on my very first day. You must have really hurried."

Colleen nodded. "Thank you for meeting me. I wasn't expecting it."

"Well, anything I can do. Rod was terribly fond of you, you know."

Colleen closed her eyes for a moment. She wasn't aware that she'd made much of an impression on her

uncle. He had a picture of her? *Oh, Uncle Rod, I never had a chance to properly get to know you.*

"Do you have a place to stay?" Jane interjected.

"No. I guess I didn't plan this trip very well."

Jane patted her shoulder and smiled. "That's all right. It must have been a terrible shock. I know it was for me. I'm afraid you'll have to check into a hotel. Your uncle's house, well, it's been damaged. And you'll have to stay in a boarding house."

"The Empress is the best hotel in town. It's really something, but expensive, I fear. I recommend the Queen Anne. It's not too pricy, but it's respectable. The best part is, it's not far. My, that suitcase looks heavy. Can I help you carry anything?"

The Queen Anne Hotel was a two-story building a block from the docks. By the time Colleen was checked in the sun was setting and her head was spinning. Jane smiled sympathetically and said, "You look done in, dear. Why don't you rest, and I'll come see you tomorrow morning."

Colleen slept late and rose still feeling tired. She was finishing breakfast when Jane arrived, the parasol dangling from her hand. The sky was overcast. She would need the parasol more for rain than for sun today.

They made small talk as they strolled through the streets of Victoria. Colleen was not an experienced traveller. She hadn't realized her country had so much variety before this trip. Toronto, she now realized, was a bastion of industry and commerce. She'd been surprised that the smaller prairie cities were so different, built of wood and sandstone instead of brick. Now she was in Victoria, the most elegant city she'd seen so far. The heart of the city was filled with elaborate Edwardian architecture and somehow felt distinctly British.

The buildings became less ornate as they walked. Soon they were on the outskirts of town, surrounded by clapboard buildings. Jane put her hand on Colleen's arm. "We're getting close to Rod's house. I'm afraid it's been burglarized."

"Really?"

"Yes, it happened right after the, that is, right after your uncle was arrested. I went by the house to pick up a few things for him and the door had been pried open. There it is up ahead."

Uncle Rod's house was a small, stand-alone structure with peeling paint and a sagging front porch. It was surrounded by similar buildings. Fresh, unpainted wood showed on the door frame where it had been repaired. Jane unlocked the door, then handed Colleen a small brass key.

"I guess this is yours, now. I haven't cleaned anything up. After Rod- after everything happened, I was just too upset. I called the police and got someone to fix the door, and that's all I did."

"Thank you for doing that," Colleen said. "Thank you for everything. For caring about Uncle Rod. For looking out for me."

Jane smiled, her lip trembling, and Colleen turned away, stepping into the house before both of them broke down in tears. ~~Uncle Rod's house was wired for electric lights. She found a light switch on the wall and pressed the button.~~

The house was a shambles. Colleen stared around the front room, her hand over her mouth, aghast. Padded chairs had been slashed open. Tables were overturned. A hutch stood open, the floor around it covered in smashed dishes.

Colleen moved through the house, shocked at the destruction. Every shelf, every drawer, every cupboard had been emptied onto the floor. Uncle Rod's mattress had been slashed open, the stuffing strewn around the bedroom. She could barely take a step without treading on his shattered possessions.

She realized she'd been looking forward to this, to seeing where Uncle Rod had lived. She'd wanted to get a sense of who he was, what sort of life he'd led out here on the coast. To get a sense of connection to him, if possible.

Instead she was surrounded by rubbish and ruin. This was no longer her uncle's home. Colleen hurried from the house, and stood outside taking deep breaths, trying to compose herself. The street was mostly empty, for which she was grateful. A man was loitering on the far side of the street, but he looked away as Colleen looked at him, giving her privacy to blink away her tears.

Jane came out of the house and stood beside her, mute and sympathetic, patting her shoulder. After a minute Colleen locked the house.

They walked back to the hotel, silent at first, each woman lost in her own thoughts. Finally Colleen blurted, "I don't understand. What happened? Why was he at that school, with an axe?"

Jane pressed her lips together and shook her head. "I wish I knew. It was very unlike him. He was the gentlest man you'd ever want to meet. You know that."

Colleen nodded, although she didn't really know Uncle Rod well enough to be sure.

"I saw him the day before, and he was agitated. He kept going on about some book he'd read. He had a collection, artifacts and antiquities from around the world."

Colleen smiled, remembering. Some of his get-rich-quick schemes had involved treasure maps, or hunts for lost cities, lost treasures, lost temples.

"I don't know what book he meant," Jane continued. "I can't remember what he said, exactly. But he kept going on about how it couldn't be true, it had to be lies, there was nothing that could be done. He was acting so strange, I told him he was scaring me. I left, I said, come and see me when you've calmed down." She looked down at her feet. "That was the last time I saw him, before he, he went mad."

"It's not your fault," Colleen said. "I don't know what happened to him, but it sounds like something you couldn't have stopped by talking to him about it."

Jane nodded.

"I know he was arrested," Colleen said carefully. "I don't know how he died, though."

Jane turned to face her, her face haunted. "He killed himself," she whispered. "I don't want to go into the details. But he killed himself in his cell."

They continued in silence, and stopped in front of the Queen Anne Hotel. "I have to go to work," Jane said. "They've been very understanding, but I'd better put in some hours soon, or their patience will run out."

"I'll be all right," Colleen told her. "I'm not sure what I'm doing next. Did Uncle Rod have a lawyer?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe I'll try to find that out. Thank you so much, Jane. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't met me at the ferry."

The two women hugged, then Jane said, "I'll come by this evening after work. Maybe about seven. I live at Mrs. Rosebottom's boarding house on Tanner Street if you need to reach me." And she hurried away, a slim, lonely figure in blue soon lost in the crowd.

Colleen turned and walked into the hotel. She felt suddenly alone and far from home, all at sea in a world she didn't understand. She longed for the sight of a familiar face, a friendly voice. What she wouldn't give to have Roland come up behind her and call her name!

"Miss Garman?"

Colleen turned. The front desk clerk smiled. "We have a message for you, ma'am."

"For me? Are you sure?" No one knew where Colleen was except Jane.

The clerk handed her a folded slip of paper. "A couple of gentlemen dropped it off, not half an hour ago," he said. "They went to the bar." He gestured toward the hotel lounge.

The note was brief, written in a strong, flowing hand:

Mr. Smith and Mr. Carter would like to speak with you at your earliest convenience. We will wait for some time in your hotel bar. We have taken accommodations in the Empress Hotel and can be reached in rooms 304 and 306.

She thanked the clerk and walked down the corridor, puzzled. She stepped into the doorway of the lounge and scanned the room.

Two men sat at a corner table, glasses before them. She saw a stout man in a tweed jacket and bowler hat facing her. He had a round, amiable face and a brown mustache, and he saw her, raised an eyebrow, and spoke to his companion.

The other man had his back to Colleen, but she felt her pulse start to race even before his head began to turn. She stared, frozen, disbelieving, at his thin face, his intense eyes, his long dark coat. As he rose from his chair she turned and ran.

A voice in her head told her she should stop, confront him here with plenty of witnesses around, but an unreasoning terror had her by the throat and all she could think of was escape. She burst out the front door of the hotel, running hard, and didn't look back until she was a block away.

The man in the dark coat was loping down the street, half a block behind her.

Colleen fled, legs burning and breath sawing in her lungs. She grabbed the tailgate of a moving truck, lifted her feet, and hung there for a block, gaining precious speed. When the truck slowed for traffic she dropped off and dashed down a side street. She wove through crowds of pedestrians and darted around another corner.

She stopped, panting, her back against a wall. Finally she peered around the corner, looking back the way she'd come.

There was no sign of him.

Something caught her eye, though. A man was staring at her, a stranger in a dark red coat. She looked at him, and he quickly looked away, but he was sidling through the crowd toward her, and she was sure he was watching her from the corners of his eyes.

Also, she had a dreadful feeling that she'd seen him before. She racked her brain, and it came to her. He'd been loitering across the street from Uncle Rod's house.

More movement caught her eyes. The street was a bustle of pedestrians, people moving in every direction, but she could pick out two, no, three people converging on her. In addition to the man in the red coat she saw a burly older man with a forked beard and a dark-haired woman in a white bonnet. At first glance they seemed to have nothing in common, but all three of them were somehow similar. It was their expressions, she realized. There was something fixed, intense, almost animalistic in their faces.

Colleen turned and ran. She was thoroughly lost, running blindly, fighting a rising panic. She twisted and turned, darting around cars and wagons and people, and she heard feet slapping the pavement behind her as the strangers gave chase.

She dashed through an intersection, flinching as a truck gave her a blast from its horn. And suddenly she was in another world. The street was narrow, clapboard buildings looming close on either side. The sidewalk was far more crowded than it had been, and nearly every person around her was Chinese.

The strangeness of it heightened her sense of terror. Strange, spicy smells filled her nostrils and a babble of incomprehensible voices crashed against her ears. It was Chinatown, and Colleen lurched down the street, only too aware that her height and blonde hair made her a beacon in this crowd.

She glanced back. The man in the red coat was right behind her, a manic grin on his face. Colleen

threw herself forward. When the press of bodies in front of her was too much she darted sideways, into an alley. It was narrow and dirty, but free of people, and she ran faster, her long legs giving her an advantage over the man behind her.

A man stepped into the alley ahead of her. He was black, and huge, a broad-shouldered man with a gleaming bald head, and he grinned as he saw her. She was running straight at him, and his arms came out from his sides, blocking her path, his fingers extending, ready to grab her.

Sobbing with frustration and terror, Colleen lunged at the first door she saw. She tore the door open and ran into a kitchen. For an instant she was face-to-face with a Chinese man dressed all in white, his hair in a braid hanging down his back. Colleen flinched away from him, and he flinched back as well. She gathered her courage and darted past him as the door behind her flew open and the man in the red coat came barrelling in.

She fled, came to a wall, darted left without looking, and found herself at a dead end with a row of shelves on one side and a wall on the other. She turned.

The man had her cornered. There was a depraved glint in his eyes, and a long silver knife in his hand.

Colleen looked around frantically. There was nothing she could use as a weapon, nowhere she could go. A metallic clang made her look up. She saw the silver knife drop from the man's fingers. A moment later he folded up and collapsed onto the floor. She saw the Chinese cook behind him, a frying pan raised over his head.

She jumped over the man in the red coat, pushed past the cook, and ran through a low doorway. She was in a tiny restaurant, half a dozen patrons looking up from their plates to stare at her.

A strangled cry came from the kitchen behind her. Every nerve in her body screamed at her to run, but she turned her head, looking back into the kitchen.

The big black man had the cook pressed up against the wall, one huge hand wrapped around the cook's throat. Colleen's feet seemed to move on their own, taking her back into the kitchen. The cook had helped her for no good reason other than because she was in trouble, and outrage was rapidly overcoming her fear.

The frying pan lay in the middle of the floor. The man turned his head as she snatched up the pan, but he didn't have time to react. Colleen used both hands, spinning her entire body, and put everything she had into one mighty swing. The pan slammed into the side of the big man's head, the impact numbed her arms to the elbow, the pan tumbled to the floor, and the man fell sprawling across the floor tiles.

For a moment Colleen and the cook stared into each other's eyes. He was massaging his throat, but he grinned, and she smiled back. "Thank you," she said, then turned and raced through the restaurant, out the front door, and into the street.

Her pursuers were on her almost immediately, the woman in the white bonnet flanked by two more men. Colleen ran, panting for breath, wondering how much longer she could keep going.

Two men came around the corner in front of her. Their smiles and the way they spread out, blocking her path, told her it was two more of her new enemies. She stopped, scanning the street, and dashed down a staircase. She pushed open a filthy black door, banged her head on something, and scurried forward with her head bowed.

She was in a low, dark room, the air thick with sweet-smelling smoke. An old Chinese man sat on a stool near the doorway, and he gaped at her as she went past. A dozen or so people lounged on low sofas, most of them Chinese, a few white men dressed as sailors mixed in with them. They were no more than vague shapes in the gloom as Colleen stumbled through the room.

There was no back door, but a window at the back let in a little light. Colleen leaned past a couch to push at the window, which swung open.

She heard loud cries as her pursuers burst into the room behind her. She didn't look back, just stepped onto the couch. A soft shape squirmed beneath her foot, a voice cried out, and she realized she'd planted her foot in someone's stomach. There was no time to be delicate. She kicked off, pulling herself up to the window frame and wriggling through.

She found herself crawling into an alley, mud and fouler substances squishing between her fingers. Someone grabbed her foot and she kicked wildly, then squirmed her way outside as the fingers slid free.

She stood, looking around, and heard movement behind her. A man was coming through the window, his head almost touching her shoes, and she kicked him in the face. He flinched, sliding backward as his hands came up to protect himself, and she kicked him again. He fell back into the opium den.

She thought about staying put, keeping them at bay, but there were too many of them. The rest would be coming around the block and trapping her. She turned away from the window and started to run.

She was too late. A pair of men loomed in the mouth of the alley, and she knew that the others would have the far end of the alley blocked in moments. Then a hand closed on her wrist and a man's voice said, "Now, Miss, if you fight you'll just-"

She twisted in his grasp, turning. A man's face was inches from her own, and she drove her fist into his nose. He fell back with a cry, letting go of her arm, but the strangers were all around her now.

She punched, a man grunted, and then a fist slammed into the side of her head and she fell to her hands and knees. She got a foot under her and threw herself forward, diving against the legs that surrounded her, and people tumbled as she went rolling out of the circle.

Some rubbish was heaped against the far side of the alley, and she sprang to it, coming to her feet with a chunk of timber in her hands. It was pine, four feet long and thicker than a baseball bat, and she raised the makeshift weapon over her shoulder as she turned to face her attackers.

There were five of them, the woman in the white bonnet and four men. One man was bleeding from both nostrils, and all of them looked angry. They spread out, surrounding her, and she edged back until her heels bumped the wall behind her. For a moment she was filled with terror. She was hopelessly

outnumbered, and what did she know about fighting?

Then she tightened her grip on the chunk of timber. She knew a thing or two about tools, after all. She had used hammers and pry bars to break free rusted gears. This was a similar problem. Moving joints much softer than the brass and steel she usually worked with. She just needed to separate some joints, lift some bones from their sockets. And she had the right tool for the job. She bared her lips in a snarl and said, "Come on, then. What are you waiting for? Is five of you not enough?"

They pressed in, and she stepped forward, giving herself more room to move. She deliberately turned to her right, showing the back of her head to the man on her left, and she heard the gravel in the alley crunch under his feet as he moved into range, thinking to blindside her. She swung as she turned, and his arm came up to protect his head. She kept right on swinging, and the timber hit his arm. There was a dry snap as his arm broke, and he screamed. Colleen spun and swung at a hand that was reaching for her. She connected with the hand, and a man flinched back.

"To hell with this," the woman said. "We're not getting her alive. Finish her."

Knives came sliding out from pockets and under coats. Colleen advanced, swinging desperately, and they fell back, circling around, trying to get behind her. She retreated, keeping the wall at her back, and they pressed closer.

Then headlights filled the gloom of the alley. Colleen turned, felt a brief surge of hope, then despair as she recognized the thin-faced man in the dark coat leaning out the window of a dark blue convertible. His companion from the hotel, the round-faced man with the bowler hat and mustache, was driving.

The car came barrelling down the alley and a shot rang out. She saw a muzzle flash, realized the man in the dark coat was shooting. He fired again and a sallow-faced man dropped his knife and stumbled back.

Her attackers scattered. One man was too slow, and the fender of the car hit him, sending him bouncing against the wall of a building. The car screeched to a halt in front of Colleen, and the man with the dark coat snapped, "Come with us, or stay here and die!"

Colleen dropped her timber, leaped onto the running board, and hung onto the top of the door with both hands. The car gave a mighty roar and sped down the alley, leaving her attackers behind.

Chapter 3 – A Disappearance

"My name is Dirk Smith. We almost met in Toronto. I'm sorry I frightened you. I just wanted to speak to you, but you kept running away."

"How do you do," Colleen said, blushing a bit. To be fair, Smith and his intense eyes were still a bit frightening, even sitting calmly across a table from her in room 304 of the Empress Hotel.

"I'm Phillip Carter," said the man in the bowler hat. He smiled under his brown mustache. "You led us on quite a chase. I'm glad you're safe."

"What's this all about?" Colleen asked. "I don't understand what's happening."

"I'm afraid you've ended up in the middle of a very large, dark conspiracy," Carter said. "You're caught in a spider web that has strands reaching all over the world. Maybe even beyond."

Colleen stared at him, and he cleared his throat. "Never mind that," he said. "Were you close to your uncle?"

"Not really. I hadn't seen him in a couple of years when he died."

"I understand his house has been burglarized," Carter said. "Do you know if anything was missing?"

"Hold on," said Colleen. "I'm not letting you pump me for information and leave me in the dark. Who are you? Who were those people chasing me?"

For a moment the two men just looked at her. Then Carter said, "It might be best for you if you just answered our questions and returned to Toronto. Believe me, you don't want to get involved."

Colleen's fingers went to the sleeve of her dress. Somewhere in Chinatown a knife had sliced through the fabric, missing her skin by a hair's breadth. She hadn't even known when it happened. "I'm already involved," she said. "People are trying to kill me. My uncle is dead, and I want to know why."

Carter rubbed the bridge of his nose. "When was the last time you heard from your uncle?"

Colleen crossed her arms and glared at him. "Forget it. You're getting nothing from me until I get some answers."

The silence stretched out, and then Smith chuckled. "I think she's got us, Phil."

Carter looked at him. "We can't just tell her-"

"She already knows too much," Smith said, "and she's got the attention of the cult. I think she has a right to know the rest."

The two men locked eyes, and finally Carter sighed, nodded, and turned back to Colleen. "The people who attacked you are part of a cult," he said. "It seems to have a worldwide membership, although we don't know how they communicate or organize themselves. Their goals- well, let's just say they have some unconventional religious beliefs."

Colleen frowned. "But what does this have to do with me?"

"Well, you're involved because of your uncle. He seems to have learned something. I think the cult wants whatever it is he uncovered, and they're hoping he said something to you, sent you something in the mail, perhaps left you a message."

"But he didn't send me anything!" Colleen wailed.

Carter nodded. "I was afraid of that."

"What did Uncle Rod find out? What does any of this have to do with him?"

Carter steepled his fingers. "This is a very old cult. They've been around in one form or another for centuries, perhaps longer. They believe some very curious things. They believe in ancient, malevolent gods that supposedly once ruled the Earth. According to their mythology, these gods were banished or locked away. They want to free these dark deities from their confinement, bring them back so they can rule the Earth again."

Colleen rubbed the goosebumps that had popped up on her arms. Carter continued.

"They are searching constantly for lost artifacts of some kind that will let them open a doorway to free their gods. Your uncle was a collector of antiquities, yes?"

Colleen nodded.

"We believe he found something, one of these ancient artifacts, or perhaps a document of some kind with a clue. The cult wants whatever he found."

There was a long moment of silence while Colleen absorbed this. Then she rubbed a hand on her forehead. "It all seems so, I don't know, crazy."

"Craziness, unfortunately, is a recurring theme with the cult," Carter said. "Every cultist we've ever captured has been at least half mad. And, whatever is at the heart of their twisted religion, it seems to be something that the human mind can barely withstand. Your uncle wasn't the first person to encounter this mythology and go mad."

Colleen stared at him.

"There are stories from the fourteenth century," he said, "about a book that would drive mad anyone who read it. The book was finally burned and the ashes scattered. There have been other stories. I think your uncle found something like that. Something that was more than the human psyche can bear. The cult knew he was beyond reach then. That's why they killed him."

"Killed him?" Colleen looked at Carter sharply. "I thought he committed suicide."

"There are many ways to kill a man, Miss Garman. In your uncle's case, smuggling a razor into his cell was enough. He did the rest."

She stared at him, aghast. "Are you sure?"

Carter shrugged. "No. But a madman wouldn't be issued a razor. He had to get it somehow."

Colleen closed her eyes, willing away the images that filled her mind.

"Can we talk about your uncle now?" Carter asked, his voice gentle.

Colleen opened her eyes. "Not quite. You haven't told me who you are yet."

Carter sighed. "I was hoping to avoid that. Miss Garman, I'm going to have to ask you to give your word that you'll keep the information I'm about to give you completely confidential."

Colleen nodded.

"I'm part of a team composed of members of the Bureau of Investigations in the United States. We report directly to President Harding. If the general public found out about this cult and their mad god there would either be widespread ridicule of our efforts, or widespread panic. So we operate in secrecy.

"Last year, the president contacted your Prime Minister Meighen to discuss the creation of a Canadian force to deal with cult activities on this side of the border. Mr. Smith here is our Canadian liaison."

Smith nodded.

"The rest of the team is on their way from Washington," Carter continued. "We expect them on the evening ferry."

A worldwide cult of religious fanatics? It seemed too fantastical to believe. Colleen fingered the cut in her sleeve, and thought of her gentle uncle taking an axe and attacking a school. There was no mundane explanation for what was happening. She might as well accept that it was true.

"So tell me about your uncle," Carter said.

Colleen shrugged. "I don't think I know anything that will help. I hadn't heard from him in years. I went to his house, but it was a shambles. I have no idea if anything was missing. It was a disaster area."

The men went silent, and Colleen replayed her visit to the house in her mind. Nothing there had reminded her of Uncle Rod. There were none of the things she associated with him. No ancient relics, no maps, no souvenirs of his travels. No tools, either.

"Where were his tools?" she said. The men looked at her. "For that matter, where did he work?"

Carter's eyebrows rose. "I'm not sure your uncle was employed."

"Uncle Rod wouldn't have a regular job. That was never his style. He might have repaired things, designed things, to make money. He was very good with his hands. A natural born engineer, my dad called him. But that house was tiny. There was no place to work."

Carter said, "Are you sure he-"

"The last time I saw him," Colleen interrupted, "he was drawing up plans for a flying machine with a propeller on the top, lifting it up. The time before that, he gave me a brooch he made from brass gear and silver wire. He was always tinkering. Always. He must have had a workshop. I guarantee it."

Smith and Carter exchanged glances. "This is excellent," Carter said. "The cult may not know about the workshop. Perhaps we can get a jump on them. If we can find it."

They spent most of the day on the telephone, and hit paydirt in mid-afternoon. After dozens of calls to every place of business they could think of that used complex machinery, they reached a John Roebuck who ran a tailor shop with half a dozen sewing machines powered by a central spindle. He'd hired Rod to repair the equipment, and he'd picked up the parts at Rod's workshop. He gave them an address.

They caught a taxi in front of the hotel, Carter declaring that the convertible was too conspicuous. The taxi took them to the outskirts of Victoria, where they found a run-down warehouse at the end of a dirt road. Carter asked the taxi driver to wait, and they walked forward to investigate.

The warehouse was ivy-covered brick, the windows filthy, rust streaking the brick under the window frames. There was a door for trucks, padlocked shut, and a man door, standing ajar. Smith drew his pistol as the three of them approached.

Carter yanked the door open, Smith sprang inside, and the taxi driver, clearly alarmed, drove away. Carter watched him leave with a shrug.

"It's clear," Smith said, and they followed him inside. The interior was gloomy, poor light trickling in through the grimy windows. A large boiler filled the space before them. Ancient, rusted machinery, wreathed in cobwebs, lined the walls. They moved around the boiler and looked into the rest of the warehouse.

Colleen immediately felt at home. Long benches lined one wall, dozens of tools racked above them. There was a treasure trove of machinery, metal lathes and drill presses and punches. She saw gears of every size, and brass and steel stock waiting to be made into parts or tools.

Machines littered the floor, in various states of repair or disassembly. She saw automobile engines, a washing machine, and something designed for stamping metal. It was all dirtier and messier than her father's workshop had ever been, but somehow delightful. Colleen gazed around the room and felt as if she had finally found something of Uncle Rod.

A cot in one corner showed that he sometimes slept here. That was where they began their search.

There were few personal possessions, just dishes and a change of clothes. They expanded their search outward, examining every piece of equipment, every tool, every cabinet.

It was Carter who made the discovery. "Uh oh," he said, and Colleen turned to find him kneeling in front of the wood stove by Uncle Rod's cot. He had the front door of the stove open, and he brought out a charred strip of leather. "The good news is, it looks like he found a book. The bad news is, he burned it."

"Maybe it's for the best," Smith muttered, but he joined them at the stove. Carter lifted a burned chunk of wood from the stove, setting them on the floor. Then he took a deep breath, reached in, and brought out a thick sheaf of blackened paper.

Most of the book had been destroyed, but a little bit remained. The back cover, blackened and bubbled, was essentially intact. On top were sheets of fire-damaged paper. Carter did his best to lift the top sheets, but they crumbled to ash at his touch. Undiscouraged, he kept going, delicately lifting away layers of ash, working his way deeper.

There were partial remains of perhaps a dozen sheets of paper. The top sheets were mostly gone, just a few words of Latin still legible on the fire-darkened paper. Smith drew a notebook from his black coat and took careful notes.

As Carter worked his way deeper the legible parts of the pages grew larger. Finally he came to the last page.

"This one's different," he said. "I don't think it's part of the book. I think someone tucked this into the back."

"What is it?" Colleen asked.

"I'm not sure." The paper was badly fire-damaged. Nearly half of it was gone, and the rest was blackened, with large sections completely eradicated. The top of the page contained some sort of diagram, with curving lines in a pattern that meant nothing to any of them.

The bottom of the page held text, most of it gone. Carter drew a pair of spectacles from his pocket and peered at the sheet. "Tana," he said. "I can't make out the next letter. But it starts with T-A-N-A." He shook his head. "I suppose it could be anything."

It was a long walk back into the city. Eventually they reached downtown, and took a table at a small cafe. Colleen felt drained and spent. The three of them drank coffee and discussed what they'd found, making no progress.

"You should ask Jane what she knows," Colleen said. The men looked at her blankly.

"Jane," she repeated. "Uncle Rod's friend? You didn't know about her? That reminds me, she's coming by my hotel this evening. What time is it?"

It was nearly seven. They paid the bill and walked to the Queen Anne. There was no sign of Jane, and

no message.

There was a knot of worry in Colleen's stomach as she asked at the front desk for directions to Mrs. Rosebottom's boarding house. The three of them walked through the darkening streets, grim and silent.

The knot of worry bloomed into cold, sharp fear when they saw a crowd of people gathered in front of the boarding house.

The crowd was a mixture of policemen and rubbernecks. Colleen, Smith, and Carter stayed on the fringe of the crowd, avoiding the police and picking up gossip. A woman had been attacked, less than an hour earlier, as she came up the steps of the boarding house. Several men had dragged her into a sedan and raced away.

When they had learned what little there was to know, the three of them returned to room 304 of the Empress Hotel. There they held a grim council.

"Well, that's too bad," Carter said. "Poor woman."

"We lost a good source of information," said Smith. "I hope she can't tell the other side too much."

Colleen stared from one man to the other, getting more upset with every word. "What are we going to do?"

They looked at her blankly. "What CAN we do?" Carter asked. "We don't know where they've taken this woman. It's probably too late to save her anyway. We need to focus on figuring out our next move. What does 'Tana' mean? How can we figure out what this diagram is?"

Colleen wanted to scream. Jane was out there, suffering God only knew what tortures, in mortal danger, and they wanted to write her off? Just give up and move on?

"We can only do what we can do," said Carter gently. "Believe me, I would help your Jane if I could."

Colleen glared at him, unconvinced. She stood up, unable to keep still, and paced back and forth in the small hotel room. Finally she opened the door.

"Colleen, where are you going?" Carter sounded alarmed.

"I don't know," she snapped, and walked out.

She paced the corridor, then stomped down the stairs and paced back and forth in the hotel's elegant lobby. The hotel was vast, and the room she was in was huge, light, and airy, but she felt constricted, closed in by the walls around her. She gave a longing glance at the front doors. She wanted to go outside, but she was afraid. The cult was out there. So long as she stayed inside the hotel she felt reasonably safe.

Her illusion of safety was shattered when a hard, cold hand closed on her upper arm. She turned and

found herself looking into a familiar face. It was the cultist with the red coat. He stood close beside her, sneering. He was unshaven and not particularly clean. She could smell sweat and alcohol on him and some other scent, something bitter and dark that made her skin crawl.

"Where is it?" he said.

She looked wildly around the lobby. No one was paying the slightest attention to them. She wanted to scream for help, but her lungs seemed paralyzed.

"Where is Tanathos?" His voice was low, but it had a manic edge. His eyes glittered, and his fingers dug into her arm.

She gasped, "What- what-"

"Don't play no games!" His fingers twisted deeper into her arm. "You all left this morning in a taxi, and you came back looking like cats that got into the cream. You found something. You know where Tanathos is!"

She stared into his face, feeling the sour taste of panic on the back of her tongue. He was mad! How could she persuade him that she didn't know anything?

He gave her arm another twist, and it occurred to her that he thought he was hurting her. His pointless arm-twisting was supposed to keep her terrified. With that thought her panic vanished, and she grinned into his face. Men were always underestimating how strong she was. It wasn't their fault. Well-brought-up young ladies didn't spend their days in machine shops, after all. Most of the women Colleen knew would have been helpless in this man's grasp.

Not Colleen. She closed her hand on his wrist. He tightened his fingers, twisted again at her arm, and she chuckled. "Is that the best you can do?" she asked. Then she squeezed his wrist with all of her strength and twisted.

His hand tore away from her arm, his body rotated as she moved his wrist, and she brought up her free hand, grabbing him by the elbow.

He lifted onto his toes, his other hand went under his coat, and Colleen marched him forward, across the lobby. People were turning, staring, gasping, and she heard a woman say, "That man has a knife!"

Colleen chose a sturdy-looking pillar near the front door. The cultist, dancing on his toes, could only scurry beside her as she drove him forward. She didn't give him a chance to brace himself or use his knife. She marched him toward the pillar, and as she got close she picked up the pace. She was running by the time he crashed into the pillar.

There was a thud of impact, and she let go. He fell onto his back, the knife clattered onto the floor, and she drove her foot, hard, into his lowest rib. He grunted and curled up, his hands going up to cradle his bloody forehead.

Colleen knelt over him. "Where's Jane?"

He stared up at her, his face scrunched up with pain, mute.

She caught his hand, bent his index finger back until tears filled his eyes. "Tell me where she is, you-

A man knelt behind her and to one side. Colleen caught a whiff of cologne and a glimpse of his knee, clad in elegant pinstripe trousers. A smooth voice with a British accent said, "All right, then, I'll take care of this ruffian." A hand rested on her shoulder. "Let him go, miss. I'll take it from here."

"You don't understand," she said, "This man-

The tip of a knife pricked her back and she went silent.

"I said let go of him." His voice was pitched low, for her ears only. "You will, one way or another."

"You wouldn't dare. In front of all these people?"

"Not unless you force me," he said. "I'm taking Jimbo with me. One way or another."

The knife pressed against her a tiny bit harder and she released Jimbo's finger. In a moment the newcomer hauled Jimbo to his feet and hustled him out the door, holding his arms as if he were a prisoner. Colleen watched them go, the scruffy thug and a well-dressed man with greying hair. The Englishman kept his back to her as they hurried out of the hotel. Jimbo looked back, though. He gave her a glare full of hate and rage as his comrade dragged him out.

A buzz of conversation sprang up, and Colleen scurried out of the lobby, moving deeper into the hotel. The last thing she needed was the attention of the hotel staff. If they kicked her out of the hotel it could prove fatal.

She returned to room 304. Carter gave her a thin smile and touched the brim of his bowler hat. Smith ignored her. Colleen sat on an empty chair, tuned out their conversation, and let her mind wander.

She had a niggling feeling, like an itch she couldn't scratch. She knew the feeling well. It usually came to her when she was struggling with a tricky bit of machinery. Some part of her mind had figured out a solution. She just had to listen to herself to figure out what it was.

The feeling had come on her as she left the lobby. She had learned something, then, in her confrontation with Jimbo. She ran through every word he'd said. He was looking for someone named Tanathos. She explored that idea, and decided it was a dead end.

Well, if it wasn't something she'd heard, perhaps it was something she'd seen. What did she know about Jimbo, or his accomplice? The feeling, the mental itch, told her it was something about Jimbo, not the Englishman.

She ran through what she knew of him. An inch or two shorter than she was, maybe five foot seven. Not especially strong for a man. Greasy, unwashed hair, dark brown in color. Brown eyes, sallow complexion, perhaps Italian or mixed blood. Fleshy, unpleasant face. Not too meticulous about shaving or washing.

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