

A SHORT SAMPLING....

The Necromancer Candle

Full House

Merlin's Silver

**The
Necromancer
Candle**

PROLOGUE

Near Prague, 1161 A.D.

The wind outside the bone house howled with the agony of whole herds of pigs being slaughtered, their moist flesh thrown onto the coals, the bones, skin and fat tied together to be brought to Master Dupek and then boiled and separated, the tallow gleaned for the dipping of candles. Yet Jiri knew it was not pigs he heard in the wind. The pigs had been slaughtered hours earlier. What howled now was something else.

Master Dupek shouted from the doorway. "Is the cauldron ready?" The old boneman leaned heavily against the open door, his skeletal hands clutching at the wooden beam as though to keep his lean frame from being blown out into the storm.

"The water begins to steam," Jiri answered from where he stood hunched over the vast cauldron, waiting for the heat of the flames and warming water to seep beneath his skin and thaw his numb hands.

If Jiri was cold, the old boneman must be half frozen. If only he would close the door and trap the escaping warmth inside.

On most winter nights the bone house was a source of boundless heat, but shortly after nightfall Master Dupek had returned unexpected and ordered Jiri to empty and clean the cauldron.

"But the rendering has only just begun," Jiri complained. He gestured to the huge vat where the fat and bones from the slaughtered pigs had scarce begun to boil. It was Jiri's task to attend the boiling and rendering which took all the hours of night. With the rising sun he would collect the white fat from the surface of the cauldron into a tall, narrow kettle in which Master Dupek would dip the wicks, later to sell the candles to the townsfolk.

"We'll have new fat," Master Dupek had said. "Bishop Straka brings rendering to be made into candles. And," the old boneman

smiled rapaciously, "he'll pay richer coin than the dirty pennies of the townfolk."

"Have the Church bonemen died then?" asked Jiri, for he could see no reason for the Church with its copper kettles and perfumed beeswax to seek tallow candles from the town.

"Don't be a fool!" spat Master Dupek. "When the Church offers to pay good silver, you don't ask why."

And so Jiri had cooled the fires and dumped the cauldron into the trench, scraped the metal clean, poured in fresh water and added new wood. And as he did, the storm had risen and the sky grown cold, and the heat from the newly stoked fire was not sufficient to warm him.

Outside the open doorway, lightning broke the sky much like the fingers of leading in the stained glass of the tall church on the hill above the town. Time was, after long nights tending the cauldron, Jiri had enjoyed going to morning mass. Old Bishop Dagar had never spoken with a loud voice or acted condescending when Jiri didn't have a penny for the plate. But when the old Bishop had died, the town died with him.

The arrival of Bishop Straka had failed to resurrect the town. If anything, the town had died anew. The new Bishop never smiled, nor had a good word for anyone. And from the pulpit he preached brimstone and damnation. Jiri had not once heard the words *love* or *forgiveness* leave the new Bishop's lips.

Jiri had ceased attending mass, as had others. Neither was he fool enough, despite Master Dupek's frequent calling him such, not to notice how some of the townfolk flocked to Bishop Straka. Townfolk who had sneered at old Bishop Dagar.

The sky outside the bone house blossomed again with lightning, illuminating Master Dupek's gaunt face. Master Dupek was one of those who had sneered.

The wind, if it were possible, increased its wailing. Jiri smelled smoke, or thought he did. There was too much wind for fire to burn. Too much icy damp in the air.

The lightning raged a third time and Jiri knew the storm was not natural. It seemed a battle cry. Or a cry of bitter wounding. Or both. Evil imbued the night.

Jiri knew what evil was. Not the stench of raw flesh boiling in a cauldron, though the townfolk said the stink was the worst evil there was, almost as bad as the tallow candles Master Dupek sold them. Jiri knew real evil. Tiny children laid out in pine boxes.

Wars that took the town's strong men and killed them, with no benefit to the town that Jiri could see. Disease wasting young and old alike. Theft, and murder, and hate. All these were evil. Then there was the secret evil Bishop Dagar had claimed was in the world. The Serpent's Lie, more subtle and dangerous than any wrong devised by mortal Man.

The evil in the wind and the lightning was of that sort. The kind that crept into one's soul and made a man shudder for no reason he could put his finger on. Jiri could warn Master Dupek that the lightning was evil, but the old boneman would just call him a fool. "Lightning is lightning," he would say. "It just is. Now get back to work."

Jiri could hear screaming in the wind. Not the wail of gusting air through the houses and trees, but the death cries of a soul being rent.

The lightning flashed a final time and Jiri knew that would be the end of it. The battle was over, the outcome decided, and not to the good he was sure.

Master Dupek cursed in the doorway and Jiri could see that it had begun to rain. The wind was dying and, except for the hammering of raindrops against the bone house roof and the hard earth outside, the night had grown silent.

"I see him," said Master Dupek.

Despite the heavy fall of rain, Jiri could hear movement outside, the tread of many men slogging across ground grown suddenly muddy. Through the open doorway he looked past the boneman to see the new Bishop, tall and imposing in his scarlet cape, kicking up mud as he stamped toward the shelter of the bone house.

Bishop Straka pushed through the doorway with a fury of animal triumph and flying water. His mitre, rochet, and cape were sopping. Water coursed down his face and beard. Master Dupek fell back as the Bishop brushed past him and stood examining the iron cauldron and its accompanying implements. The Bishop's deep, coal eyes were sharp and fierce as he took in the rough metal and the smoking branches of the fire. "It will have to do," he said. The Bishop did not see Jiri standing beyond the cauldron. Jiri was beneath the Bishop's notice.

A half-dozen men followed the Bishop into the bone house. They were dressed in the scarlet and black of the Church garrison. Soldiers of Christ. Bishop Dagar had not required any of

the townsfolk to serve the Church in this fashion. Bishop Straka, on the other hand, had made himself a small army.

Between them, Straka's Church Dogs dragged a man, broken and stripped of most of his clothing, and threw him onto the ground before the cauldron. Blood leaked darkly from several wounds.

"Your Eminence?" Master Dupek asked in a strained voice. "Where... where is the vegetable oil and beeswax?"

Jiri knew his master had made a mistake even before the Bishop cast him his barbed gaze. Straka said nothing, but turned his cold eyes to the man on the ground.

Master Dupek's face paled, and then he squinted at the beaten man's face. The old boneman trembled. "The necromancer," he whispered.

Bishop Straka's lips parted in a feral grin. "Yes. The sorcerer himself. Milos Radimir. Old Dagar would not raise a finger against him, but I am unafraid. God is on my side."

As are the Church Dogs, thought Jiri. With their strong arms and swords. Jiri had recognized poor Milos when the Dogs first threw his beaten body to the earthen floor.

Old Bishop Dagar, too, had called Milos a sorcerer, a necromancer, for the small magics he was rumored to practice in his house by the river. Some few went to Milos for simple healings and advice, and no one was ever hurt. Bishop Dagar had seen no cause to make trouble.

Bishop Straka, however, delighted in trouble. He beckoned to one of his Dogs who produced a sack filled with silver moulds. Jiri had seen candle moulds before, used only by the Church and the wealthiest of townsfolk for the making of ornamental candles, candles that look pretty on a table or shelf, but that burned poorly or inefficiently. The Bishop's moulds, however, were unlike any Jiri had ever seen. They stood six inches high and four inches across, with a delicate hinge along one side that allowed them to snap open after the tallow had hardened. From the flickering light of the cauldron fire, Jiri saw the suggestion of etchings on the inner surface of the moulds.

"You will make twelve candles," Bishop Straka told Master Dupek. "Fill the moulds to an even height so that none is taller than the others. You must use all the renderings. Throw none away. Add nothing to contaminate the tallow. Fail me in this," the Bishop glared at Master Dupek, "and you will pay with your soul."

Master Dupek looked again at the man lying beaten on the ground. Jiri watched in silence as the boneman made his second mistake. "But, your Eminence, he isn't dead."

That Master Dupek made no complaint of rendering a human body led Jiri to believe that he had done this before. How many rich folk, Jiri wondered, even now display trophies on their shelves— candles made from the fat of their enemies?

Bishop Straka scowled at Milos Radimir. "He is a necromancer. Cold steel will not kill him. But no man, not even a sorcerer, can survive the cauldron. He'll be dead when he is in your pot an hour." The Bishop nodded to one of his Dogs. "Stay here and see to it the boneman does as he's told." Then he led the others out into the rain.

When the door was closed, Master Dupek cursed and yelled at Jiri to remove the necromancer's remaining garments.

Jiri did as he was told. He did not know whose wrath he feared more, Master Dupek's or Bishop Straka's. The Bishop's Watchdog, scowling near the door, would make a detailed report.

The necromancer did not resist Jiri's ministrations. He was badly beaten, stabbed repeatedly, and bled from at least a dozen wounds that should have been fatal. The dirt where he lay was fast becoming thick with black mud. Only the slow rise and fall of the man's chest convinced Jiri that he was alive. Perhaps the Bishop's words were true, that Milos Radimir could not be killed by the sword.

Jiri prodded the necromancer's trousers and smallclothes into the flames beneath the cauldron. There was a ring on the middle finger of the right hand that Jiri removed and slipped into his pocket before Master Dupek's greedy eye could see it. The Bishop's Dog did not seem to care.

Milos opened his eyes and looked at Jiri, but there was no anger there. No hatred. Only sadness, making Jiri feel all the worse for being party to this evil.

"Let's get him into the pot," Master Dupek muttered, gripping the necromancer beneath the arms. Jiri quickly took the feet and together they lifted the still-living man into the cauldron.

The water was hot, though not yet boiling. Milos did not resist, nor did he breathe a sound as his flesh was lowered into the scalding bath. The necromancer was very light, Jiri thought, like smoke, though his flesh felt warm and solid. As his head

slipped beneath the water, Jiri prayed that Milos did not have the strength to raise it up again. Drowning would be a quicker, easier death than boiling.

When they were finished, Straka's Dog snorted and glared at them like they were about the devil's work, which Jiri believed was true despite it being the Bishop's bidding.

Master Dupek slouched to a far corner and sat on a crate, where he stared at the cauldron without seeming to see it.

Jiri alone stood by the steaming cauldron, more for penance than a desire to thaw his frozen bones, which still could not seem to get warm. Within the pot, the water steamed and swirled, like smoke in a troubled breeze. He expected at any moment for the scalded man to leap up screaming from the cauldron and run naked into the icy rains outside; but within the clouded water there was no movement.

Jiri had heard gossip of Milos Radimir, that the man was a self-made healer who had learned to tap into the forces of nature. Widow Novosad claimed he had raised her youngest son from the dead, thus earning him the title necromancer. Milos had denied the praise and denied also that he consorted with demons. Old Bishop Dagar had agreed. "God made nature. If Milos has learned in some small way to use one of God's tools, what evil is there? So long as his heart is good."

Bishop Straka did not share his Church-brother's view. "Radimir is a sorcerer and a heretic, and must be destroyed." And this night Straka's will had won out. What, Jiri could not help but wonder, would Bishop Straka do with the ungodly candles?

A small bubble broke the surface of the water, followed by another, and soon the water was well to boiling. Necromancer or no, surely the man was now dead.

"Fool," Master Dupek muttered bitterly from his cold corner of the bone house. "The fire needs wood. Can you not perform the simplest of tasks?"

Jiri quickly began feeding branches and hewn bark to the embers beneath the cauldron. How long had he been staring into the waters? Straka's Dog, he saw, was leaning against the bone house wall, his sword sheathed and his eyes half-closed. Master Dupek had not moved, but now wore a blanket about his shoulders. The cauldron emanated heat like an oven, but the boneman would not come near it. (Story continues....)

Full House

On The Plains Of Camlaen, 645 AD

Near the lake's edge, a short distance from the fighting, three women knelt by a supine form. Two of the women cut bandages from a blanket while the third mixed herbs from string-drawn pouches at her belt. Druidic magic!

"Stop!" Galahad cried, running toward them and falling to his knees before Arthur. The king's face was pale. Pale as death. Galahad looked up at the witches. Witches! "Arthur is a Christian king. You cannot work your magic on him!"

The witch with the herbs — the eldest Galahad thought, though with youthful eyes — cast him a penetrating glare. "We do what we must, young knight. If Arthur dies, so too dies Britain. So it is written in the stars."

Galahad looked to his King. So pale. "Yes, he cannot die. But neither can you use your magic. It will change him."

"Galahad?" The word was deep and slow, the king's breath ragged. "Ah, Galahad, it is well what they do. Merlin warned me before I banished him. He foretold all. Mordred's deceit. My wounding. Even of you."

"The magician told of me?"

"Peace, my King," cautioned the elder witch. "You must save your strength." The other two witches began stripping away Arthur's surcoat, readying him for the herbs and bandages.

"But this is druid magic!" Galahad cried. "Mordred's magic."

"Aye," said the elder witch. "There is only one magic. Just as there is only one Christ. Blood and death will continue so long as this truth remains unembarrassed."

"I— I don't understand," said Galahad.

"Are you daft boy!" cried one of the younger witches. "This is what Arthur is meant to do: join the old ways with the new."

So long as past and future fight against each other there can only be death."

"Join?" Galahad echoed. He didn't understand. Arthur's chest was bare now and he could see the wound. So near his heart. How could his King still be alive?

The elder witch took no time to smear away the blood, but applied the herbs directly into the wound, urging her companions to bind the King's chest. Arthur made no sound during this, though Galahad could see his king clench his teeth.

The task done, Arthur beckoned him closer. Galahad leaned down, as from the corner of his eye he watched the three witches move off to prepare a small boat on the lake. Would they take Arthur away?

"Galahad," Arthur whispered. "For you I have a task. The Grail. Galahad of Camelot, I charge you to protect the Grail until I return."

A shadow fell across the King's face and Galahad looked up to see the three witches waiting to lift Arthur into the boat.

"And return he shall," said the elder witch. "Once he is healed the King shall return and take up the Grail, then the world itself shall be healed."

Galahad pondered these words as he helped the witches lift his King into the boat, and then watched as they took up the oars and rowed away from shore.

"The Grail shall be safe," Galahad called out.

And it seemed to the knight errant that he could hear Arthur's whispered voice return across the slap and the dip of the oars, and above the clash of blades on the plain. "Galahad. Be true."

DAY 1

A Tale of Two Houses

Jonas turned his 2005 Buick LeSabre off Crowchild Trail onto Richmond Road. It was 11 a.m. on a Friday. Too early to be going home.

He lived in an older part of Calgary, a well-treed suburb adjacent to the bustling downtown core. It was the best of both worlds: wide, quiet streets with shrub-strewn lawns, but only ten minutes from the hub of skyscrapers and big business.

Jonas slowed as he drove past the Badlin place, a wood and brick manor house that marked the beginning of his street. While all the houses on Richmond Court sported bright colors — whites, yellows, blues — the Badlin place was a deep earth-red, with the mortar so grayed it was almost as dark as the stone. Despite that people lived there, many claimed the house was haunted. Jonas figured the occupants were just peculiar. No crime in that.

As he cruised past the house, the living room curtains parted slightly and a ghostly figure peered out at him. Jonas shivered and hit the gas.

Jonas didn't know why the house made him curious. For the past fifteen years he'd slowed whenever he passed the place. Usually there was nothing to see. Sometimes, like today, a curtain would move. On rare occasions he'd glimpse one of the Badlin clan slipping between the house and the ancient Edsel parked in the gravel driveway. Black-haired and always dressed in black, the Badlins were a frequent topic of discussion in the neighborhood.

Six houses down from the Badlin's he pulled into the paved driveway of his half-duplex, a faded yellow monstrosity of angled gables and jutting bay windows. The home's most unique feature was a shack-shaped attic room squatting like some large, sick bird on top of the house, its single window a glass eye that glared at the entire neighborhood. A previous owner had added the attic to the existing three floors. He didn't doubt that some people gawked at *his* house as much as at the Badlin's.

He'd been saying for years that he was going to repaint the exterior, make the place look respectable, but he'd never found the time.

A decade and a half ago he and Gwen, his wife, had moved to Calgary from Toronto after Jonas accepted a job with Trans-Alta Pipeline as a *flow analyst*, a fancy name for a computer jockey who monitored thousands of mechanical sensors mounted on the insides of oil pipelines that measured how fast the oil was moving. It was a brain-dead job but it paid well. Over time Jonas had become good at it.

Even back then the house had been old, with faded yellow paint and a cracked front porch. The Badlin place had been there too, dark, secretive. Looking back, Jonas tried to think of anything in the neighborhood that had changed over the years, but he drew a blank. Everything had just gotten older.

"Jonas?"

Gwen must have heard the car drive up. She stood in the front doorway looking surprised and a bit worried. Her dusty blond hair was tied up with a white band. That, along with faded jeans and an old t-shirt, suggested that she had been doing some cleaning.

Jonas sighed and opened the car door. Gwen's appearance had solved a problem; he hadn't known how he was going to bring himself to go inside.

Stepping deftly down the porch step, avoiding the crack in the cement, Gwen approached the driver's side of the LeSabre. She spoke in a quiet, cautious voice: "Did you hear? One of the Badlin boys was murdered."

Jonas stared at her. In fifteen years nothing had happened in this neighborhood. Now here were two front page stories in one day. "What happened?"

"It was Ricky Henders. In number 22. Looks like he sat on his porch all morning with a handgun. When one of the Badlins stepped out of the house, Ricky shot him."

Jonas could only gape at his wife. Where would a kid like Ricky Henders get a handgun? Where would he learn to shoot it? And why would Ricky shoot anyone, never mind a Badlin?

"What's with the box?" Gwen asked, looking past him into the passenger seat.

And now the other news. There was no easy way to say it, so he just said it: "I've been laid off."

A View From The Attic

"Bastards." Larry took another gulp of his Coors, looked at Jonas, then said it again. "Bastards."

Jonas had just told his friend and neighbor that Trans-Alta had handed him his walking papers. They were sitting in his attic room, a deck of untouched playing cards on the round table between them.

"How many years did you give them?" Larry asked.

Jonas gazed out the window. "Fifteen, give or take."

"Sounds like they did the taking. What excuse did they give?"

Jonas snorted. "They said I was redundant. Everything's automatic now. They don't need someone telling them when there's a problem. The computer tells them. But they're right. Last few

years all I did was confirm what the computer was saying. I am redundant."

Larry drained his beer and tossed the can into the blue recycle bin next to the mini-fridge. The aluminum clinked against other empties. "So watcha gonna do?"

Jonas shrugged. "Paint the house."

"Not much of a career move," said Larry.

"No, but the house needs painting."

"What does Gwen think?"

"She agrees about the paint." Jonas picked up a pair of binoculars that hung from a nail by the window and looked out and down the street.

"Badlin's?" asked Larry.

"Got some activity," said Jonas. "Looks like Mr. Badlin going out to the car."

"He wearing that pale blue suit today?" Larry chortled, his thick gut shaking.

"Black suit. Black hat," said Jonas.

"I'd say he was dressed for mourning," suggested Larry, "except that's what he always wears. All of them Badlins. You think it's a religious thing? Like Amish or something?"

"They don't go to church," said Jonas. "There goes the Edsel. He's off somewhere. Maybe the morgue."

"Weird about Ricky," said Larry. "That boy was always a bit off. Didn't know he was paranoid."

Jonas hung up the binoculars and began shuffling the cards. "What do you mean?"

"Scuttlebutt says Ricky thought the Badlins were out to get him. They were going to sacrifice him to the devil or something."

"Says who?" asked Jonas. This was news to him.

"No one specific," said Larry. "It's just rumor. People talk when stuff like this happens. So what are you really going to do?"

"Really?" Jonas paused, not sure of what to say. He'd been asking himself that question all afternoon. "I have no idea. Beyond being a flow analyst I don't know how to do much of anything." Returning the cards to the table Jonas picked up the binoculars and looked out the window. "Edsel's back."

"Jesus," said Larry. "That's hardly enough time to drive around the block. Where do you think he went?"

Jonas had no idea. "He's going back into the house. I don't see any groceries or anything."

Larry picked up the cards and began dealing. "That family gives me the creeps. If I was half as witless as Ricky, I might take a shot at them myself."

"No, you wouldn't," said Jonas, putting the spyglass away again and picking up his hand. "You and I are normal people. Normal people don't shoot their neighbors."

Larry threw two cards on the table and drew two off the deck. "It might surprise you what normal people do."

All In The Family

Dinner was awkward.

Jonas hadn't said anything to the rest of the family about his job situation, but knew Gwen must have spread the word and told everyone to behave. Their idea of good behavior tended toward dead silence. The clang of forks on porcelain was deafening.

Their daughter, Susan, had been ten when they moved to Calgary. Four years ago she had married a bum. Literally. Dennis had no job when they were married, and was still unemployed three years later when they divorced. Susan had moved back in after the divorce. The details of how she and Dennis had survived their time together was not a topic for discussion.

Jonas had to admit he now felt a bit like Dennis: unemployed. But at least he had some savings put away and had received a golden handshake along with his dismissal. That and the offer of a cab ride home, which he graciously refused. It would be a while before things got tight.

Gwen's sister, Ann, had moved in when Susan got married. She had come out for the wedding and had never returned to Toronto.

The end result was that Jonas lived in cramped quarters with three women. His friends joked about being envious, but Jonas knew it was no laughing matter. Susan's marriage had scarred her and Jonas didn't know how long it would take the wounds to heal.

As for Ann, Gwen's sister was insane. Always had been. Not in a dangerous sense, but she had strange notions and was frequently doing something incomprehensible. Jonas had been subtly urging Gwen to evict her sister, especially with Susan back in the house, but to no avail. Gwen had the kindest heart of anyone Jonas knew and wouldn't hear of sending her sister away.

"These carrots are delicious," said Ann, breaking the silence.

Jonas would have been grateful had there actually been carrots on the table. What *was* on the table was Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, peas, and gravy.

"Thank you, dear," said Gwen, smiling encouragingly.

"Did any of you know Ricky Henders?" It was Susan, the first words she had spoken all evening.

Ann nodded vigorously. "Delightful boy. Lives down the street, don't you know."

Susan nodded. She always took Ann at face value, treating her as though she weren't a raving loon.

Ann continued. "Mrs. Luis next door to the Henders says Mrs. Henders told her that Ricky doesn't know why he shot the Badlin boy. He doesn't know where the gun came from and can't remember pulling the trigger. He only remembers sitting there with the gun in his hand and William Badlin lying in a heap across the street."

Everyone at the table stared at Gwen's sister.

"It must have been a traumatic experience for the boy," said Susan. "Did Ricky and this William fight at school?"

"The Badlin boys don't go to school," said Jonas.

"That's right," said Ann. "They're in home school. As is the daughter."

"There's a daughter?" Jonas knew about the boys because he had seen them. He also knew they didn't go to school because they rarely left the house. He had never seen a daughter.

"Priscilla Badlin," said Ann. "The remaining two boys are George and Jonathan."

"How do you know all this?" Jonas asked. "You don't speak with them do you?"

Ann laughed. "On no. You'd have to be mad to speak to the Badlins. I asked Mrs. Luis. She speaks to them. She's quite mad, you know."

Jonas speared a Salisbury streak and began hacking it to pieces. He wasn't sure the table discussion was appropriate. Talk of murder and motives was best left for coffee on the porch.

Ann must have read his mind. "Oh, but this is dreary talk. We need a change of subject." She looked at Jonas. "What about you, dear? Any job prospects on the horizon?" (Story continues....)

Merlin's Silver

FRIDAY

Eight Pieces Of Silver

The silver tea service rattled on the passenger seat of the Austin Mini, its polished gleam casting midday rainbows against the windshield. Joan's nervous gaze flicked between the service, the windshield, and the road ahead.

And the day had begun so innocently.

Joan had gone to the estate auction out of simple curiosity, with no intention of buying anything. The estate was that of Sir Samuel Reginald Halifax who, until cancer had claimed him, had been Calgary's wealthiest and most mysterious resident, a recluse with more rumor than fact surrounding him. Who knew what strange and marvelous items would appear on the auction block?

The auction itself was in the BMO Center on the Stampede and Exhibition Grounds, just southeast of the city's seediest neighborhood, the Beltline. How the City Fathers ever thought it a good idea to locate food banks and homeless shelters just five minute's walk from Calgary's greatest tourist attraction was as mysterious as the late Sir Halifax. But the parking lot and grounds boasted decent security, so Joan hadn't had to deal with transients. Joan detested transients.

On her own merit, Joan never would have been allowed into the auction. The staff had been instructed to keep out anyone who even hinted of riffraff. Fortunately, Joan's husband Patrick was a junior partner at Calgary's most prestigious law firm: *Hinckley, Manners, and Tate*. A flash of embossed lettering on a business card got her through the door.

The auction hall was enormous, with a giant projection screen and a camera that zoomed in on each item as it went up for offer. Joan sat open-mouthed as a procession of elegant furniture, priceless paintings, brass statuettes, and thick, dusty books appeared on the big screen and sold for unimaginable amounts of money. Joan had always believed that she and Patrick had money but, here, she was definitely outclassed.

"And now," called the auctioneer, "we have an eight-piece silver tea service. Included is a lidded tea pot, kettle with spirit light, sugar bowl with tongs, creamer, slop bowl, tea strainer, and portable serving tray with filigreed handles, all in pristine condition. This set is unique in that it contains no craftsman's mark. It is thought to be a one of a kind set, likely dating from the late eighteenth century. Since the entire service is sterling silver, the starting bid is \$5,000. Do I hear \$5,000?"

Joan noticed that, unlike the earlier items, few bid cards went up. She assumed this was because the provenance was unknown. Half the joy of antiques was bragging about the craftsman who had created the piece and the chain of ownership since that creation. All that was known about the tea set was its most recent owner: Sir Samuel Reginald Halifax. Still, surely that would count for something.

"Do I hear \$6,000?" called the auctioneer, at which all but two cards fell. "\$7,000. Going once."

Joan saw that only one card remained aloft, belonging to a middle-aged man wearing an expensive business suit. The buyer was getting a bargain. On impulse, she stuck her card in the air.

"We have another bid," said the auctioneer. "Do I hear \$8,000?"

Joan watched the other card remain firmly in place. \$9,000 was still a bargain.

"\$10,000," cried the auctioneer. "\$10,000, going once."

The price had jumped from five to ten thousand so quickly that Joan had scarcely breathed, but the other card had wavered lower and the auctioneer called, "Going twice."

"Sold for \$10,000 to bidder number 274," called the auctioneer as his gavel hit the stump with an echoing finality.

A woman with a clipboard appeared as if by magic at Joan's side, taking her information and verifying that Joan's check was good by calling her bank on a cell phone. Joan hated cell phones. The woman then handed Joan an embossed paper of authentication and a yellow receipt.

"Use this receipt to claim your purchase at gate four when you leave," the woman told her, and then she was gone.

Joan sat a while longer as other items were sold, again at prices that turned Joan's stomach. When a ten inch marble statue of a tall, bearded man in flowing robes, called *Merlin* by the auctioneer came up, also without provenance, the man who had bid on the tea service bought it for \$2,000.

She watched the same clip-boarded woman descend upon him and was somewhat shocked to see him pay her with cash. When the woman left, he pulled out a cell phone and had an animated discussion with someone on the other end.

Cell phones. People claimed they were the marvel of the century, but to Joan they seemed like the world's greatest nuisance. You could be interrupted any where at any time in the middle of any thing, usually by someone trying to sell you a second cell phone. A month ago Joan had turned off her phone and put it in a drawer. She hadn't missed it since.

The man kept looking in her direction, then glancing away when she looked back, and somehow Joan felt it was she who was the topic of discussion on the phone and not the statue. Grabbing her purse, she stood and walked quickly toward gate four.

"Give us a moment to find an appropriate box," the clerk told her after she had shown him her receipt and he had returned with the tea service.

Joan looked around and saw the well-dressed man coming toward her.

"That's okay," she said, lifting up the silver tray with its contents. "I'll take it as-is."

The clerk stared at her, aghast, as she ducked away from the counter and made her way toward the exit.

A voice called behind her, "Madam! Madam!" but it didn't sound like the clerk's. As she reached her car in the parking lot, the owner of the voice caught up to her.

"Please," said the man in the expensive suit. "You purchased the tea service fair and square. I'll give you that. It was my error to cease bidding too soon. I'm hoping we can come to an agreement. I'll offer you \$11,000 for it now. That's a thousand dollars profit in the space of an hour. Not bad by any standard." He [paused] to catch his breath.

Joan set the service carefully on the roof of her Austin Mini and positioned herself between it and the waiting man. She couldn't help but notice how few people were nearby.

When she didn't answer the man said, "\$12,000, but that's as high as I can go."

Joan remembered him paying cash for the statue. Was he going to pull ten dozen hundred dollar bills out of his pocket? Even if she wanted to sell the service, she wasn't going to do it like this, cash from a stranger in a parking lot.

A Ford Mustang rolled through the lot and pulled into a stall two spaces away. The man turned as the driver and two passengers got out, his expression oddly nervous. But when he saw they were a mother and two children his face relaxed.

While he was distracted Joan opened her car door and pushed the tea service onto the passenger seat. The man whipped around to stare at her, but didn't move as the mother and children walked past. Joan hurriedly slid into the driver's seat and shut and locked the door. The man waved and tried to block her Austin Mini as she pulled out, and she nearly knocked him down. As Joan drove toward the exit she cast glances in the rear-view mirror and saw his tie flailing in the breeze as he continued to wave his hands. And then she was through the park gate and racing toward Macleod Trail; she had made her escape.

On her way home Joan turned into Willow Park Village and pulled in front of Royalty Jewelers. Having spent \$10,000 she was damn well going to find out what the tea service was actually worth, especially seeing as how the well-dressed man was so interested in it. She still wondered if she shouldn't have just taken his money. The next time someone offered her a wad of hundreds in a parking lot, she'd try to be more clear-headed.

"This is in very good condition," said the appraiser. He stood bent over the service, squinting through a magnifying glass, moving it from piece to piece. He lifted the lid from the tea pot and peered inside. "I'd swear this has never been used. It could have been made yesterday."

"It's supposed to be eighteenth century," Joan told him.

The appraiser turned over several of the pieces and waved his magnifying glass. "Strange. There are no craftsman marks. There's no way to date this."

"How much is the silver worth?"

The appraiser put down his glass and retrieved a large scale from underneath the counter. "I'd have to run tests to verify the purity and ensure it isn't merely plating, but it appears to be solid Sterling."

He set the entire service on the scale and began sliding weights back and forth. "Yes," he muttered. "Yes, yes." He picked up a solar-powered calculator and punched some buttons. "At current silver prices we are looking at a little under \$3,000. But I don't advise selling it as metal. The craftsmanship is superb. This belongs in a collection. Pity there is no provenance."

"It used to belong to Sir Reginald Halifax," Joan suggested.

The appraiser raised an eyebrow. That could be worth something. "You have documentation?"

Joan showed him the embossed paper the clipboard lady had given her.

The appraiser picked up his magnifying glass and examined the document. "Yes," he muttered. "Incontestably genuine. This is worth a bit. You shouldn't sell the service with paperwork for a penny under \$4,000." When he saw Joan's expression he added. "It will appreciate in time, of course. In a decade or two you may be looking as \$5,000."

Joan thanked him and left the store.

As she turned the Austin Mini into Canyon Meadows Drive, Joan had no idea how she was going to explain her bargain hunting to her husband. Yes, dear, I found this exquisite tea service and paid only triple what it is worth. But look on the bright side, someday when we are both dead and buried, it will be worth exactly what I paid for it. Tea, dear?

All thoughts fled, however, as she turned into her street to find the road blocked by a fire engine. Several men in bright yellow coats and hardhats guided hoses while the truck's engine pumped water from a hydrant. A house was on fire. Her house. The firemen seemed perplexed, however. No matter how much water they poured onto her house, the fire would not go out. Not until there was nothing left to burn.

When the firemen finally shut off the pumps, all that remained of her and Patrick's home was a muddy hole in the ground.

Starbuck Sally

"A Double Double Mocha-Cap," said Joan. "If you have any whisky, throw that in too."

The Starbucks server dropped his jaw and pinched his forehead. "Uhm, I don't think we can do that."

Joan sighed and threw a five dollar bill on the counter. "It was a joke. I could use a good laugh right now."

The server continued to appear flustered and walked over to the furthest machine to prepare her coffee. Joan accepted a paper cup that was both too hot and too strong, and joined Sally at a table.

"I hate Starbucks," Sally told her. "I'm a Timmy's girl." She took a deep slurp of her coffee, and then grimaced. "Why did you ask to meet here?"

"Patrick's coming," Joan told her. "He likes Starbucks."

"Patrick? In the middle of a work day? What's the occasion?"

Joan lifted the lid of her cup and blew on the contents to try to cool it. She soon gave up. "To celebrate the occasion of our being homeless." She went on to explain that an unquenchable fire had just destroyed her and Patrick's home of fifteen years.

When she was done Sally said, "Wow." And took a sip of her coffee. "You seem very... calm."

Joan shuddered a laugh. "You should have seen me half an hour ago. I went through a whole box of Kleenex. And I think I left permanent impressions of my fists on the dashboard of my car. The firemen thought I was having a seizure."

"But you're... okay now?"

"It is amazing," Joan told her, "how shock can go around masquerading as calm. Please don't ask if I'm *okay*. You won't like the answer."

Sally sat there as Joan watched her search for something safe to say. Finally she landed on, "Good thing no one was in the house."

Joan nodded. "When Patrick and I decided not to have children or pets... well, something like this happening was never the reason."

"Why your house?" Sally asked.

"Why my house what?"

"Why would someone burn your house down?"

Joan looked at her. "What makes you think it was arson? I assume it was a gas leak or something. That might explain why the fire was so hard to put out. The gas kept feeding it."

Sally's face reddened and she gave an uncomfortable laugh. "I watch too many cop shows. My mind just automatically leapt to arson. What do I know about fires?"

"Probably more than I do," said Joan. "I'll wait for the reports from the Fire Department and my insurance company before I

try to guess what happened. Truth is I'm not really concerned about the house. It was just a building. But everything Patrick and I own was in there. It'll take years to replace." She let out a nervous laugh. "All I have left are the clothes on my back and a tea service in my car."

"You have a tea service in your car? Most people settle for a cup holder."

Joan explained the estate auction and her impulsive purchase. "I suppose the auction saved my life. If I hadn't gone I would have been home when the fire broke out."

Sally's reaction was not what Joan expected. "Sir Samuel Reginald Halifax is dead?"

Joan nodded. Well, Sally did have an interest in celebrity doings.

"And you have his tea service?"

Joan nodded again and Sally was silent for a moment. Then, "I have a friend who is in Europe for a month. You can stay at her place while you figure out where you and Patrick are going to live."

A fortyish man with wavy black hair appeared at Sally's shoulder. "May I join you ladies?" He sat down and Joan pushed her untouched coffee toward him.

"Just how you like it," she said.

"Thanks," said Patrick. "But I may need something stronger. I went by the house on the way here. You weren't kidding when you described it over the phone. There's not a scrap left. The basement walls appear to have melted — I didn't know concrete could melt — and I couldn't find a single burned brick from the fireplace. It's as if the house never existed. Whose phone did you use, by the way?"

"One of the firemen's," Joan murmured, and then louder, "Sally says she knows of a house where we can stay for a few weeks while we sort things out."

"Thank you, Sally," said Patrick, "but my office has already made arrangements. A Regency Suite at the Hyatt. Best I could do. Calgary has the most pathetic hotels on the continent."

"The Hyatt will be fine," said Joan, then she gritted her teeth. "Though I hate downtown." Before Patrick could suggest changing hotels, she raised a hand and added, "But I'll survive for a few weeks." Patrick worked downtown and it would be nice if he could walk to his office until they found a new place to live.

"This house I know of is very nice," said Sally. "It's in Signal Hill. You'll love it there."

Patrick looked at Sally. "We appreciate the offer but we'll be fine at the Hyatt."

"Yes," Joan added, "It will be nice to be pampered by the staff."

"Well," said Sally. "At least let me store your belongings. No sense cramming them into a tiny hotel room."

"Belongings?" said Joan. "They all burned. All we have are two cars and a tea service."

"A tea service?" Patrick asked.

Oh well, thought Joan, compared to one's house burning down, what's a little shopping spree?

Welcome To The Hyatt Regency

It was a nice hotel. The underground parking was only slightly better than none at all, but the hotel itself was an art museum, its walls decorated with mountain and prairie settings inhabited by [Cowboys and Indians]. Originals, not prints. Its most distinguishing feature was the ceiling above the front desk lobby, which was designed as a giant upside-down canoe.

The staff were amiable, but turned apprehensive when they discovered that Mr. and Mrs. Longmeyer had no luggage. "You wish to stay how long?" a receptionist asked. "With no luggage?" Eyebrows rose further when they saw the silver tea service in Joan's hands. Joan could almost read the questions in their eyes: What *were* these people going to do in their hotel room?

When Patrick explained that theirs was the house that had burned to the ground that afternoon, the staff quickly regained their practiced cordiality.

An elevator took them to the eighth floor where a middle-aged bellhop placed the tea service with great care on the lone table in what Joan discovered was a rather small hotel room— the Calgary Hyatt, apparently, only had small rooms. His demeanor suggested that Joan's luggage was hardly the most unusual he had carried in his many years in the hotel industry.

The bellhop had scarcely left when a twenty-something woman in a blue uniform arrived with several shirts and other items luggage-less patrons might require. Everything was still in its original packaging. This really was a full service hotel. Patrick tipped the woman and then the Longmeyers were alone in their temporary home.

Since leaving Starbucks Patrick hadn't said a word about the tea service except that it was very shiny. He did not mention the \$10,000 Joan had spent, even though Joan had never spent \$10,000 on anything in her life. Silence was the worst. She hoped it was just the loss of the house and all their worldly possessions that was distracting him and that he would have a more reasonable reaction later. Joan supposed she could always sell the service if he was too upset. Perhaps that man with the hundred dollar bills was still roaming around the BMO Centre.

After a few minutes Patrick put on his all business expression and Joan thought: here it comes.

"Look," he said, "I don't know how to say this so I'll just say it. I have to go to Toronto for a few days to see an important client."

Ok. Not what she had expected. Toronto? She supposed it made sense. *Hinckley, Manners, and Tate* had clients everywhere. "When do you have to leave?" she asked.

"Tomorrow morning."

Joan stared. "Tomorrow! But our house just burned down! How can you possibly leave at a time like this?"

"I asked the office to send someone else." Patrick wagged his head. "But our client won't see anyone but me. I'm the only one familiar with his case."

"But, tomorrow?"

"It's probably for the best." A boyish smile crinkled the sides of Patrick's mouth. "I hired a house-hunting firm to shortlist some decent properties on the market. It will take them a few days. By the time I get back they'll be ready to show us what they've come up with. Until then it's just a waiting game."

That was Patrick. All logic. Never an impulsive act. Joan could only hope that when Patrick did decide to react, he would surprise her.

Sleepless In Calgary

After a very nice dinner in the hotel restaurant they walked along an outdoor mall to a theatre and watched a movie. She suspected there would be a lot of movie outings in the near future. The film — *Harry Potter and the Slytherin Curse* — had none of the charm of the earlier books and movies and Joan feared that an attempt to salvage the franchise would result in Harry becoming a space pirate or a gigolo. Neil Young was right when he said it was *better to burn out than to fade away*. (Story continues....)