



GHOST IN THE MACHINE

By Ryan McFadden

She didn't belong in my world.

Maybe it was the shopping bags that gave her away — an art show was generally a destination, not a stop on a day-long expedition. Or maybe it was the way she looked at the illustrations on the wall, her forehead creased with puzzlement as she tried to understand why comic-book art necessitated evening gowns, the occasional tuxedo, and paper plates mounded with appetizers. I had blown my budget on those appetizers so I couldn't afford a tuxedo.

I tried not to be obvious watching her, the guy beside me talking about the last art show in Montreal.

"Excuse me," I finally said, trying to break away from him.

"You know her?" he asked.

"No, not yet."

I ignored the voice in my head yelling *flee, flee, flee*. I didn't approach women, at least not like this. I preferred the 'sit back and hope they somehow notice me' approach. That had never really worked.

I wanted to say something eloquent. The perfect opening line, but when she smiled I had absolutely nothing but knew I couldn't retreat. Failure to act would relegate me to another of the nameless crowd and that wouldn't do.

"That one won the gold medal from the Society of Illustrators," I said, realizing my error immediately.

"Sounds like a big deal. Are you the artist?"

"Ah, no. You see those three, tucked away in the corner from the high traffic areas? Those are mine."

"They look so lonely."

"They probably are. My name's Sam."

"Lucy." We shook hands and I hoped she didn't notice my nervousness. "I'd like to take a look, Sam," she said.

We wandered to the back. I should've been introducing the background of my works but instead I let her scrutinize them in silence. She took her time, not being pressured by my presence to render a quick verdict.

"They're nice."

Nice. The polite way of saying that they looked like pretty much every comic book out there but without the accompanying sticker shock. Other than the illustrators and the fans, who could detect the subtle differences, these works did look pretty much the same.

"Thanks." I should've been trying to push the sale but I knew she wasn't a buyer. Curiosity had drawn her here. Besides, I didn't want a sympathy buy. In the past I hadn't been too proud for that, but I didn't want that from Lucy. Instead, I asked, "What are you doing right now?"

"Are you asking me out?"

"That sounds really official. How about we grab a coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee."

"Neither do I."

She smiled. "Can you leave in the middle of the show?"

"I think my three prints will manage without me. What do you say?"

I expected her to say no. Hell, I'd say no if some geek asked me out in the middle of an art show. Luckily, I was wearing my finest (and only) suit so I looked like a presentable human being.

"Sure," she said.

Two hot chocolates led to a peck on the cheek and her phone number. I called her a day later which led to another date. And another. I fell hard and fast. Then, three months in she confessed that she was in a long-term relationship with someone else. I should've picked up on it earlier, but I wondered if I hadn't wanted to know.

I should've ended it then.

I didn't.

We sat on the floor around her coffee table and ate fondue and drank too much red wine. I leaned over and kissed her, tasting the Shiraz on her tongue. The kiss lingered until she pushed me away with her palms. “I have to pee,” she said.

“You’re such a romantic.”

“That’s what you get for trying to get me drunk.”

“I don’t have to get you drunk to get into your pants.”

“I’ll meet you down there.” She pointed to her bedroom, then climbed out from beneath me and bounded down the hallway into the bathroom.

I waited in her bedroom. The room smelled like her — the scent of lotions, soaps, hair sprays. She kept her room neat but not obsessively so: some dirty clothes on the floor and the bed sheets rumped. I walked around, intrigued.

Despite our three-month relationship, we rarely ended here. In fact, when I thought about it, I’d only been in her house a handful of times. I inspected the pictures on the walls. I knew her family only through these pictures; we hadn’t met. I didn’t see any pictures of the other man and I wondered if she hid them for my benefit or if he and Lucy were simply so detached that the only thing that held them together was the concept of being in a relationship.

I read the titles of the books on the shelf. I didn’t know everything about Lucy. Not yet, but half the amazement of being with her was discovering who she was.

A metal box sat on her night table.

The box looked old, the metal tarnished from the acidic touch of fingerprints and overhandling. I judged it empty from the weight.

I tried to twist it, turn it, but couldn’t open it. I couldn’t even get the first step.

“Having fun?” she asked, closing the bedroom door behind her.

“What is it?” I tried prying it apart.

“It’s a box.”

“I can see that. What’s it for?”

“It’s a puzzle box. It takes thirty-seven steps to open.”

“Show me.” I tried handing it to her but she wouldn’t take it.

“And reveal all my secrets?”

“What’s inside?”

“Stuff.” She fell into the bed.

“What kind of stuff?”

"The usual — my heart, my soul, my dreams."

I shook it next to my ear. "Is your heart empty?"

"That's what I've been told."

"No, really, what's inside?"

"I have no idea. I can't open it."

"Then why do you have it?"

"Because it's nice to look at and I like pretty things," Lucy said. "That's why I keep you around."

"Trying to seduce me?"

"For heaven's sake — would you get in here and make love to me? You have obligations you know."

"How could I forget?"

She was ready for me, her body molding to mine and I felt the arousing sensation of her breasts against my chest as her legs wrapped around mine.

"Gotcha," she said.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Shut up and kiss me."

"Sorry, that doesn't usually happen," I joked.

"Wow. I hope that happens all the time," Lucy said, her naked body entwined with mine. The covers lay crumpled on the floor, our bodies covered in a light sheen from our exertion.

My hand traced delicate patterns on her back and we settled into a comfortable silence. Her breathing became steady as she drifted toward sleep. I wasn't ready to relent so easily, however, and my gaze settled on the box on the nightstand.

"So you've never been able to open it?"

"Open what?" she murmured.

"That box."

"Aren't you supposed to be sleepy after sex?" Her eyes closed and her voice softened.

"Not always. I can finally think clearly with all the static gone."

"You're a strange creature. Do you act this way with all your girlfriends?"

"Ah, my other girlfriends. I have so many. Why don't you ask your boyfriend about it?"

I sensed the tension, perhaps from her silence or maybe I subconsciously picked up on a barely noticeable shift of her body — a roll of her shoulders or maybe her breath hitching slightly.

"You haven't talked to him?" I asked.

"I promised I will."

"You've been promising for three months. Is there something going on here?"

"Of course not, Sam. I love you. But it's complicated."

"No, it's not."

She sighed and pulled away, retrenching on the other side of the bed.

"It is complicated. You don't know Alan. He's got a temper."

"You're scared of him?"

"Not in that way. It's going to be messy. I've got to make sure everything's in order. You don't walk away from someone you've been with for five years."

"Sure you do. Alan — you're out. Sam — you're in."

"You're already in, Sam. You know that."

"Do I?"

"I love you, Sam. No one else but you." She held my gaze, guiding my head with her hand on my cheek. "Only you. Do you believe me?"

"Of course." The tension in my gut signaled that I might've been lying.

She kissed me, hard. "Good, now leave me alone." She fell back into the bed. "Don't guys go and play video games or something? This is your perfect opportunity. All my girlfriends complain about their husbands spending too much time in front of the TV playing games."

"I want to spend time with you."

"I know, that's the problem." She tossed the pillow and I ducked.

"Besides, I don't play video games."

"You're so sensitive. Now get the hell out."

"Fine, I'll amuse myself."

Pulling on my boxers and T-shirt, I watched her falling asleep and wondered if maybe I should climb back into bed.

"I can feel you staring," she said, eyes closed.

"I'm just admiring, that's all."

"Hmm." She smiled and my emotions grew so large I thought they'd overwhelm me.

I had been married once. A foolish thing when I was far too young and far too stupid. I had fallen more for the concept of being in love rather than for her, mesmerized by the intimacy

and the closeness but when the inevitable friction began, we didn't have a foundation to get us through the rough patches. Sometimes, I had wondered if I was incapable of anything more than infatuation. Lucy proved I did.

I picked up the puzzle box and admired the design. Though old, the craftsmanship was excellent. As I pried, a section of the box disengaged and twisted around itself like a Rubik's cube.

"Ah," I muttered. Except that quick victory was only a decoy and I didn't get much further, my frustration growing and I wondered if perhaps video games wouldn't have been a better choice than playing with a stupid box.

"Who gave you this?" I asked.

"You're going to talk all night, are you?"

"Until I open this damn thing."

"Maybe you should get a hammer. It might be—" Her voice caught. I looked over, Lucy having retreated further up the bed, the sheet pulled protectively over her breasts and her gaze fixed on the now open door.

An intruder stood in the doorway, his dark hair disheveled and wet, clothes soiled and tattered, and face unshaven. Dried blood caked his cheek and neck from where it looked like his ear had exploded. His nose was alarmingly crooked.

He held a shotgun, finger on the trigger, the barrel dull and pitted.

Alan. The other man. I had seen him in pictures but never looking so wild. In the pictures, he had been clean cut, together. The kind of guy who was probably a jock back in high school and hadn't let himself go. Nothing like the man standing in her bedroom doorway.

We stood that way for several long breaths. I needed to say something. God, I needed to say something so badly, as if the right words would shatter this dream and the man and his shotgun would pop like a bubble and disappear.

I opened my mouth but said nothing.

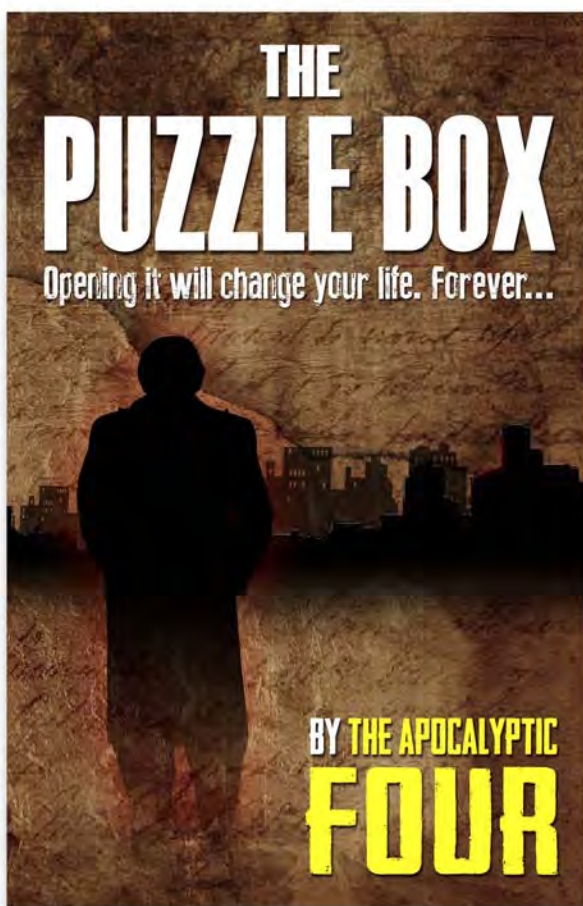
"Alan?" she finally whispered.

The shotgun blasted and Lucy jerked, her chest erupting red, the sheet shredded. She fell back, her head bouncing off the wall with a hollow thud.

Why wasn't I doing anything? She tried to inhale but her damaged lungs wouldn't allow it. Her eyes fluttered.

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