

One

All Chrissie's thinking is Big. She's standing on a super-sized verandah at the heavy wooden door of an imposing stone house. Spacious grounds all around and huge old trees. Like a park. She raps on the door using the brass knocker that's big enough to take to a street fight. Even the old lady who opens the door is bigger than what old ladies are supposed to be. She's wearing blue jeans and a plaid shirt as if she's just come in from a logging camp or something, not how you expect old ladies to dress. And her hair! She's got this crazy mop of white frizzy hair, like an Afro that's been bleached to a blizzard.

"Hello, dear," the old babe says with a broad street smile. "I'm *so* pleased to meet you." Chrissie's on the small side to begin with, but she seems almost like a kid beside this towering old lady.

They sit down together on the verandah, her and the old gal, on big rattan furniture that makes you feel like a bird in a cage.

Chrissie's passed this place before on her bike. Lots of times. From

the street you can hardly see what's in here because of all the trees and bushes, plus there's an iron paling fence around it, like some Gothic mansion or something. Gothic, yah. Like she's stepped through some crazy time warp into a Faulkner novel.

Chrissie's sort of done herself up for the interview — blouse and sweater in muted greens, leather mini over black tights. She fishes her notepad and smart phone out of her pack and does a quick check for messages. Nothing. She's half hoping for maybe an emergency somewhere so she can make this real quick and get out of the mausoleum back to the land of the living.

"All set to go?" the old lady asks with a Fruit Loops smile.

"Um. Yeah. Sure." Chrissie flips open her notepad and dives back into her ratty pack for a pen. Maybe she ought to be recording the interview, but she's learnt the hard way that some of these old monkey-mouths gotta tell you everything they can think of before the lights go out. Hours and hours of meandering that you have to listen to all over again for a couple of measly quotes. No way. Now she just waits for a juicy bit and writes it down. Simple.

"Good to go," Chrissie says, forcing herself to smile back at grandma. She hadn't wanted this assignment in the first place, but Harold Harding had insisted, the dumbard editor of the *Shetterly Standard*. TA DAH! Dorkiest newspaper ever printed. Chrissie wouldn't line her canary cage with it even if she had a canary. Harding could easily have sent Watts for this gig, it's the kind of syrup she loves. But oh, no, it's got to be Chrissie *really* get the story, Harding says, and then that pukey smirk as if the two of them have a special thing going. Dumb cocknocker.

"I love the scents this time of year, don't you?" the old lady asks, maybe thinking she's got to break the ice or something. She's nodding out across the lawn to where masses of blue flowers are blooming under the big old trees. There is a weird smell in the air for sure, like smelly underwear maybe, but Chrissie wasn't going to mention it.

"Right," she says instead, "so, um, Mrs. Uh . . ."

"No, honey, puleez, I'm not Mrs. Anybody. Why don't you call me Ginger. Everybody else does."

“Ginger?”

“Yes.”

Okeydoke, Chrissie’s thinking, let’s just pop another Valium and get on with it.

“And is Chrissie short for Christine, or what?”

“No, it’s not short for anything.” To herself: Why do people always ask that same bo question?

“It’s your real name?”

“Uh-huh. My parents named me for Chrissie Hynde who was like a rock star when they were young.” (Parents is a stretch, but easier.)

“Of course. Yes, I liked Chrissie Hynde myself, come to think of it. Like, I suppose I should say; she’s still going strong you know?”

“No way, I thought she was dead from an overdose or something.”

“Not at all,” Ginger says, “big in the vegan scene apparently. And PETA.”

“Cool,” Chrissie says, “but she must be ancient by now, isn’t she? Oops! I didn’t mean . . .”

“Like me, you didn’t mean?” Ginger slaps the arm of her wicker chair with delight. “Give praise for the ancient ones, honey,” she says, chuckling, “because we know how the game’s fixed.”

“Huh?” Chrissie’s flipping possibilities. Seems like this old babe’s got some authentic piss in her.

“May I ask about your tattoo?” Ginger asks, like suddenly the two of them are getting to be soul mates or something.

“What about it?” Chrissie thought she’d got it covered. Besides, she’s supposed to be asking the questions here.

“Oh,” the old bird says, “it put me in mind of some I saw on a gorgeous young Maori once upon a time. A warrior, he told me he was, and I do believe he was. Body to drool over. The tattoos were beautiful against his dark skin, just as that one of yours is.”

People don’t usually say things like this to Chrissie, being as she’s what’s referred to as a Person of Colour, but this old Ginger’s obviously a different piece of work. “Very interesting,” Ginger says, even leaning over to run her fingertips across the skin of Chrissie’s forearm. “Who did it for you?”

“Guy in Toronto, on West Bloor. Guy’s a total genius, right, only hardly anyone knows about him. He’s from Ethiopia or someplace. A Sufi, I think, so his designs are like really mystical. Doesn’t do all that dragons and hearts and big tits kind of crap. I . . .”

Suddenly there’s a commotion around the side of the house and a freaking black dog comes bounding up the front steps and charges straight at old Ginger in a frenzy of energy, all tapping claws and swishing tail and slobbery panting. It plunges its snuffling head into the old lady’s lap and Ginger starts rubbing the mutt all over with her gnarly hands and laughing like crazy, the two of them, the dog and old dame, wriggling and snuffling like animals.

Chrissie’s totally freaked. Very slowly she pulls her legs up and folds them under her in the chair. She’s trapped here in this chair, cornered like a rat. Then without warning the dog comes lunging towards her and Chrissie screams in terror. She hadn’t meant to, it just came out, but the fucking dog has a huge pink tongue hanging out of its mouth and long goobers of slobbery slime and vicious looking fangs. Chrissie can see them sinking into her flesh, crunching her bones. Tearing her to pieces.

A single sharp whistle sounds from somewhere around the corner and the dog instantly drops to the floor as though its battery just went dead. It’s staring at Chrissie with huge brown evil eyes. She can see intention in those eyes. Cunning malice. There’s something thick and clotty stuck halfway down Chrissie’s throat, afterbirth of her scream, preventing words or . . .

“Oh, you frightened of dogs, honey?” Ginger asks her like a idiot.

Oh, no, Chrissie almost says back to her, I’m just crapping my pants here to put a little colour in them.

At that moment a man appears at the foot of the steps. He’s wearing high rubber boots and brown khaki pants, a battered sports jacket over a denim shirt and a lazy slouch cap. Lord Toppenpot playing at being a farm hand. He glances curiously from Ginger to Chrissie and back again but doesn’t say a word. Chrissie’s not sure he even saw her. The dog’s breath pants up at her in furious rank gusts.

“Oh, Peter,” Ginger says to him, and you can tell she’s trying really

hard not to laugh, the old bastitch, “I’m afraid Shep’s given our poor visitor a bit of a start.”

The guy gives another quick whistle and the dog instantly bolts down the steps and heels alongside him. “Sorry,” he says to Chrissie in a barely audible voice, but not looking at her, not speaking to her really. Like he’s sorry for everything in general. He reaches down and caresses the dog’s head absently. Absent is what he seems like. Already Chrissie feels the terror draining out of her, gurgling away scummy as bathtub water. Something like shame comes seeping in to replace it, which she hates. She’d prefer it be anger, but it isn’t. This dog and weird whistling man.

“Oh, Shep here wouldn’t hurt a flea, would you, darling?” Old Ginger speaks directly to the dog and in answer the mutt gives two quick yips and swishes its tail across the ground like a broom. “See, dear?” Ginger says, looking at Chrissie, as though the frickin’ dog is smarter than she is.

“Chrissie,” Ginger then announces with mock formality, “this is my beloved son Peter and his faithful sidekick Shep.”

The guy half bows towards Chrissie, touching the peak of his slouch cap. She can’t tell if he’s being smartass or not, but the gesture confirms her first impression that there’s something off his box about him, something out of whack.

“Certain people like to imagine that Peter’s the faithful sidekick and Shep’s the one in charge,” Ginger adds, smiling fondly at her son and his dog. “An understandable perception, I suppose, when you consider that border collies aren’t really dogs in the conventional sense of the term, are they?”

“Huh?”

“More like highly evolved beings in the guise of sheepdogs whose purpose is to show us fool humans how to conduct our affairs with greater dignity.”

Is this a put-on or not? Chrissie’s got to restrain herself from rolling her eyes, being as she’s got no time for this kind of Chakra Cookie BS.

“Chrissie’s a reporter with the *Standard*,” Ginger explains to son Peter, “and is interviewing me for salacious details about various townspeople, so best watch your words.”

Chrissie smiles lamely at the tired joke.

Peter glances towards Chrissie again, still avoiding eye contact, probably thinking she doesn't look much like a reporter, which is what everybody thinks, but his attitude is inscrutable, at least to Chrissie. Not hostile, but not warm either. Indifferent. Like one of those loony county bachelors in British detective shows who emerge from seclusion and are gossiped about as being pervs. Or worse. Dark secrets. Gay, maybe, Chrissie speculates, though he's not the least bit swishy. Slow perhaps. Shut down for sure. Chrissie nonchalantly puts her feet slowly back on the floor, though the mutt's still watching her and looks like it could lunge at her again any second. Weird how the guy won't look at her at all and the dog won't look at anything else. Could be he's blind and it's a seeing-eye dog. She'd anticipated being bored to death on this drain bramage assignment, not scared shitless and then mystified as a kicker.

"Are you still going to tackle the roses this afternoon?" Ginger asks the loony as though everything was just as it should be.

"Hmm," he half replies, gazing out distractedly across the lawn. Still could be blind. Then half turns again towards Chrissie, nods once more by way of repeated apology and, with dog at heel, retreats behind the house.

"Sorry about the scare, Chrissie," Ginger says. "Are you all right?"

"Yea, it's just . . ."

"Have you always had a fear of dogs?"

Chrissie knows precisely where her fear of dogs began. When that Dicksmoke Chuck moved in with her mum and her. Him and his two fucking Rottweilers. But she's not going to get into that whole episode with someone she's only known for five minutes.

"They don't usually bother me," she says instead.

"What about when you're on your bike?" Ginger nods down to where Chrissie's bike is stashed at the bottom of the steps. "I can always remember being chased by dogs when I was cycling."

"Uh-huh," Chrissie says, "I carry a can of bear spray. Coupla shots of that and they learn pretty quick to leave you alone."

"I suppose so," Ginger chuckles.

"Um, I'm feeling like we better get on with the interview," Chrissie says.