

# *Memories of an Old Man*



*Geralyn Dunbar-Giles*

Ruins, Book One, Corpses in Armor

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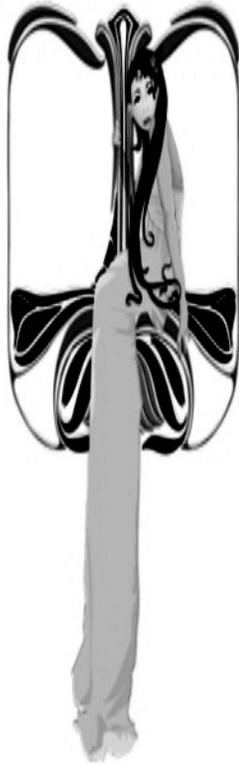
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# An Interlude

## Part One

Companion to the Ruins Trilogy  
Excerpted from the first novel  
Ruins, Book One  
Corpses in Armor

# MEMORIES OF AN OLD MAN

## A FOREWORD

*Excerpt from the life and times  
of  
Major Evelyn Archibald Lee  
(1864-1953)*

*Compiled and organized by*

*Group Captain Sir Justin Henry Charles, O.B.E.,  
and Jonathan Michael Palmer*

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# DEATHS,

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In London, March 8<sup>th</sup>, Sir Henry Charles, dead.



Printers are requested to notice.

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Sir Henry Charles, Member of Parliament, dead at 51

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Honourable  
Member of Parliament  
Colonel Sir Henry Scot  
Charles, 1<sup>st</sup> Bt, Scotland,  
and honoured veteran of  
the War, died early  
Tuesday morning in a  
motor accident north of  
London to Cambridge.  
Investigators confirm no  
survivors in the fiery  
crash that also claimed  
the lives of five mem-  
bers of Sir Henry's  
party, citing "Black Ice",



Lee Car

as the cause of the accident. Dead include Sir Henry and his wife, Elizabeth Edwards Charles, age 31, and Lady Charles's daughter by her late husband, the honourable Sir John Edwards, 2<sup>nd</sup> Bt, Queensland, Joanna Edwards, age 9. Also killed were Major Robert Lee, honoured veteran of the War, and his wife Kathryn Allyn Lee, both aged 48, and Martha Douglas Lee, age 61, wife of Major Evelyn Lee of the Foreign Office.

(continued page 2)

# Memories of an Old Man

March 8, 1932

A motorway north of London

Liz's quizzical and unconcerned comment, "How odd" had occurred about ten minutes into a lull in the general and unremarkable conversations of the car's occupants. Justin Charles would need more than his precious Black Box to confirm the object of Lady Charles's attention had been a black sedan that she could have sworn had only just passed them a few minutes before. In short then, the scenario Justin embraced of just what did happen was largely speculative. Even though no one was saying there wasn't another car out there on the road that cold silent day; there very well could have been.

The same as everyone was certain if something in particular had struck Liz's fancy, so would it have struck Henry's as he sat in the rear with Liz and Katy, his hand comfortably around his pipe.

As anything out of the ordinary would have caught Bob's attention as he sat in the driver's seat, the dowager Martha beside him.

The matter of fact that neither Henry nor Bob were the sort to go off half-cocked supported Justin's conviction that the continuing minutes of silence following Liz's remark were provocative and telling; even his critics agreed with that. Confident the men's initial response would have taken the form of exchanging silent looks rather than unduly alarm the ladies. The only trouble with any of it was that it was just theory. No rhyme, reason, or evidence to explain the apparent excessive rate of speed Bob was traveling when he went into a skid he couldn't pull out from, inspiring the next surviving recorded comment to be one of Martha's. A simple and chastising "Robert"

moments before Bob spoke his quiet and chilling words of finality, "We're lost."

Henry's intentions of shooting someone, possibly Liz out of mercy, dying with him as the town car plunged a hundred yards down a ravine, exploding before, after, or upon impact. By the time the local Constable's office arrived on the scene there were about seven people standing around, most noticeably a rather shaken young woman of about twenty.

†††

"Miss Maple Clarke." One of the footmen on the scene identified the visibly shaken young lady whose passport indicated she was just twenty.

"Mabel Clarke, perhaps?" the Chief Constable accepted the passport without so much a glance.

"Could be." The bobby was interested, young, though well trained, and not about to argue with his superiors. "They're both locals, Sir. On their way to book passage for their honeymoon...Heard the commotion, saw the car..."

"And, of course, ran to see what they could do to help, which was nothing," the Chief swallowed a tablet of aspirin, dry. "Allergies."

"Wicked this time of year, Sir," the bobby nodded. "You're right about that...That's her fiancé with her..." He called up a rather stunned looking young man identified as one John MacEnroe of the Chief's jurisdiction. His face and voice clearly Irish, the Chief never heard of or seen him before.

"McCoy," MacEnroe informed the Chief, correcting his name, and accepting his second-class citizenship without too much lip. "And it is Maple; like the tree. Maple Clarke."

"Charmed," the Chief couldn't have been less interested though certain the girl's parents probably were about the sort of company she kept. "What's all this about a commotion?"

"Explosion, Sir," his studious deputy assured. "Petrol ignited, is my guess. You can see the trail where they went over the edge..."

John McCoy was frowning, of a different opinion apparently, or not quite sure either way?

"No?" the Chief waited impatiently. "Yes?"

“Yes...Well, no, actually,” McCoy acknowledged, changing his mind again immediately. “Perhaps.”

The Chief would hate to be hanging waiting for this one to decide.

“What I mean is,” McCoy attempted to clarify, “we saw the car explode, yes. But it was the first...well, *sound*,” he debated what to call it and couldn’t think of anything else. “It certainly was loud enough...”

“Hit a tree, Sir,” the public’s attentive servant lent a helpful hand. “Took half the front...Sheared it right off...”

“As it went over the edge,” the Chief nodded. “Couldn’t have happened on the way down.”

It was a statement, not a question, catching the bobby off guard and confusing him. “Beg your pardon?”

“What’s Clarke have to say?” the Chief asked, dropping another tablet of aspirin, dry.

“Oh, just something about the fellow’s hand. Thinks she saw it move.”

As it protruded from under the crushed hood, blackened and fairly charred to the bone? The Chief glanced over their witness perspiring in his tweeds. “MacEnroe?”

“McCoy,” the gent sighed, wanting his name at least right should he end up having to take credit for something he either did, or didn’t do. “John McCoy. You have to understand, she has had quite a fright—”

“Could it have moved?” the Chief interrupted, looking around for the verdict from someone with a badge.

“Wouldn’t think so.” He was answered. “That’s a sight down there. Need a stomach. Why?”

“Let’s have a look.” The Chief headed down the ravine, the ground crisp and frosty as the wind, the sky gray and trees barren.

†††

“Service issue, Sir.” The Copper in charge produced a pistol dangling off the end of a pencil.

“So?”

“Found it on the ground,” he explained, assurance in his tone. “Bullet’s in the chamber. Looks to me like it might have jammed.”

The Chief glanced back up the ravine, his assistant nodding and feeling sorry for the misguided lass; pretty little piece that she was,

tear-streaked and chewing on her nails. “I’m sure she is just shaken, Sir...Interesting though, gun like that on the ground.”

“Call in the number plate.”

“This one?” the Copper’s excitement heightened, apparently believing it was the guilty who always lost, in this case, died, rather than hang about posing and passing themselves off as witnesses to the unfortunate end.

The Chief was actually a fair man under all that stuffing; he tried to be. “Both.”

“Right, Sir,” he got on it immediately with a jump for the hillside, careful of the evidence, like there wasn’t enough of it strewn around. Bits and pieces everywhere, black as the dirt and the shell of a car with much of its human remains still trapped inside. “There’s a farm not too far. That’s where they rang from. I’ll send one of us on...”

“Do that.” The Chief moved on to join the fellows working over the scene, the smell of cooked flesh souring the air.

†††

“Yes?” A fair-haired man of above average height and apparent breeding opened the door to a crew of Macs from CID. Their boss, an Inspector, and therefore of presumed intelligence and experience, put the fellow’s age at about thirty.

Or so. The fellow looked somewhat understated excepting his height, and the Inspector couldn’t help wondering briefly just how much the gent might be worth, while naturally wondering who he was. Country bloke, the Inspector settled upon, rather than some visiting schoolmaster or priest, and worth plenty by the quality of his herringbone tweeds.

Actually, Joseph Lee was a schoolmaster, worth quite a bit more than what he looked, understated though he might be as his tweeds. Currently on sabbatical to reconsider his calling, that was neither here, nor there. On his way out and running late for the day’s planned affairs, it was just by chance Joe happened to be there at all; that would never happen again. A few hours from now Justin would be making a note to make sure that it never happened again. Joe, like the rest of them, would find himself locked behind those doors, a veritable army of technology and men surrounding and protecting the lot of them. Civil liberties lost to peace of mind gained.

To the point that Justin could ensure it, anyway. No guarantees,

of course, but Justin was a gambler at heart. Knew the odds. Born and raised to know and beat them, and worked hard to do just that. Today was no different from any other, just a little closer to home than most.

That it was. “Sorry to trouble you, Sir,” one of the plain-coats tipped a hat and flashed an identification tag, while the others looked the obvious gent over in surprise, “but would the Major Evelyn Lee happen to be at home?”

“An accident?” Joe repeated when told, his unblemished complexion twisting slightly in his effort to understand just what it was they were saying. He was a peaceful man, pleasant, exactly as he seemed, comfortable and quiet as his surroundings, misleadingly at ease.

“Quite, Sir,” the Inspector nodded. “Car accident. Rather a bad one, I’m afraid. Vehicle has the Major’s number plate. One of those newish Bentleys. Would you be familiar? Lend it out possibly to someone?”

“Yes, actually,” Joe agreed tentatively, though certainly knowing how he ought not to say anything, least of all to strangers. It was just one of those odd situations where you’re not quite sure what to do. “That would be Robert Lee, the Major’s son.”

“Concerned it might be something like that,” the Inspector apologized. “You would be again?”

“Joseph Lee,” Joe answered. “Major—Major Robert Lee that is,” he clarified, “is my father. Evelyn would be his. My grandfather.”

“Haven’t had the privilege, Sir,” the Inspector smiled however slightly. “Sorry it had to be today. Never easy, but that car accident of your father’s would be fatal, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll ring the Major,” Joe stepped clear of the door. “Come in, please.”

“Thank you, Sir,” the Inspector accepted the invitation, one or two of his cronies following him inside to stand in a foyer larger than the collection of huts the lot of them owned. Sparse though, it was, serene and empty. A heavy flight of stairs, walls and closed doors of dark oak and mahogany, a simple table with a telephone resting on it that was all. No furniture, draperies, or hangings of any sort, sort, let alone a manservant or mistress in sight.

“Just moving in, Sir,” the Inspector agree being that he didn’t believe he knew these folks anymore than he knew the couple they

had down at the station. “Let her for the coming season?”

“No,” Joe said.

“Out then,” the Inspector nodded in understanding of the times and troubles some of the upper class were facing, though in thinking of it he couldn’t quite say he even knew this house was out here, never mind any tenants, established though it was on its foundation. A rambling, and respectable country estate parked rather firmly in a hilly glade of pastures and gardens, undoubtedly green and flowering in the springtime with a small stream in the background completing the scene. Picture perfect. A little, too. “Fairytale she is at that, Sir,” he supported the notion. “You’ll find your buyer.”

“Yes, well, neither,” Joe said.

“Right,” the Inspector cleared his throat, returning to the facts and reason for his call. “Before you do that though, actually?” he stepped quickly, his hand down on the telephone.

“Yes?” Joe looked at him with a fair mixture of expectation and surprise.

“Any idea, Sir,” the Inspector verified, “who may have been with your father? There have been no survivors, I’m sorry to say.”

“And this was on the motorway?” Joe considered, thinking perhaps of somewhere else? Expecting them to be in London, or perhaps town? The car was heading north, the Mick MacEnroe and his fiancée Clarke claimed. The city well behind them, Cambridge still miles off.

“North of London,” the Inspector assured. “On their way here, possibly?”

“My mother Kathryn.” Joe stared at the telephone. “The Major’s wife Martha.”

“Right.” The Inspector had an idea this might be more than just the usual unpleasant call.

“And Sir Henry,” Joe picked up the phone.

“Beg your pardon?” the three Macs startled.

“Sir Henry Charles,” Joe replied. “I would think his wife. Elizabeth is her name. Excuse me.”

“Not at all,” the Inspector quickly stepped out of the way. “You said Sir Henry? MP?”

“Yes.” Joe rang his grandfather’s mill, a family hobby for a couple or so hundred years keeping them wealthy, legitimate, and sane. “The Major, please. Fairly urgent.”

†††

"I'll be there for tea," Evelyn promised Martha faithfully as he took her ring.

"No, it's Joseph," Joe confused him. "There's been an accident. Robert. On the motorway."

"Robert?" Joe could hear his grandfather frown. "On the motorway?"

"Fairly bad one, I'm afraid."

"Yes, yes, all right," Evelyn was nodding brusquely on his end. "Who's there? Where's the car?"

"CID, I think," Joe glanced at the Inspector. "Where's the car?"

"Still at the scene." The point of the question eluded the Inspector. "Would that be the Major you're speaking with?"

"Still at the scene," Joe repeated to the old man. "He wants to speak with you."

"CID?" Evelyn sputtered. "The devil why?"

"Bob's dead," Joe apologized. "Mum. Martha. All of them. Henry and Elizabeth I gather as well."

"Yes, well, there would be six of them to be all of them." Evelyn was reaching for a chair. "Joseph, are you listening to me? Tell that Inspector, or whomever it is you have there, there were six people in that car. Henry. Elizabeth. And that daughter of Liz's, Joanna."

"Joanna?" Joe stared at the Inspector who hadn't mentioned anything about a child.

"Do it," Evelyn instructed. "And do not go anywhere near that house. Understand me? Joanna's fine, yes, of course she is. But we want her to stay that way, don't we? Bastards find out they missed one they'll go after the one they missed. Doesn't matter that it's a child, doesn't matter who it is. You're to stay away from that house of Henry's. You hear me?"

"I understand," Joe felt cold under his shirt and jacket, prickly little shocks tickling his skin.

"Good," Evelyn approved, sure that Joe did understand even better than he wanted to. "Soon as you get off this telephone with me, you're going to get Mike up there with you. I don't care what you tell him...tell him Claudia's had a change of heart. I want Mike there, and I want you to keep him there if you have to lock him in a closet. Claudia should just about be on her way..."

"Yes, well, actually, I..." Joe started to explain how he had been on his way to fetch her, Claudia being who she was, and that was Claudia. In some mood or another, and well, now she had a reason.

"I'll take care of Claudia," Evelyn assured, "and I'll take care of Justin—And, well, all right," he reconsidered against his will, "put that Inspector fellow you have there on the phone."

†††

"Knox, Sir." The fellow sounded somewhat flustered to Evelyn on his end. "Inspector Knox."

"Yes, well, Knox," Evelyn assured the bastard, flustered or not, "I know a Knox. Though I would rather think if the two of you were related, you wouldn't be standing there in my hall. In the meantime, however, since you are apparently, you should know you're going to have a few of my boys there in a short while—not in the damn hallway, there at the car. Wherever it is."

"On the motorway, Sir," the Inspector peered at the telephone.

"Understand that," Evelyn was called the *Old Man* because he was old, not stupid. "Of course the damn motorway's a few hundred miles long, but regardless, they'll be there—You say you traced Bob through the number plate on my car? They're there now. And I would appreciate any assistance you can give them, any information..."

"And then I would appreciate it," he fumed, "if you would get and stay the hell out of the way. Understand? Hear any of this on the wire before I want to hear it, I'll know it came from you, and it'll be the damn mistake of your career—Care about your career?"

"Course, Sir," the Inspector stared at the telephone.

"Yes, well, we'll see, won't we?" Evelyn agreed. "Off you myself if I have to, don't think I won't. In the meantime, my son Robert had a heart. Got that? Robert had a heart. I believe you'll find he suffered an attack, lost control, end of story. Unfortunate, but it happens."

"A heart attack," the Inspector repeated.

"A heart attack." Evelyn assured and hung up to ring Justin, Henry's son, off in Ireland of all God forsaken places more trouble Evelyn believed than the damn place was even worth. "Palmer?"

"Aye, right here." His man John appeared, Irish himself by

blood and personality, though he kept the politics to himself and that's all that mattered.

"About time," Evelyn nodded. "Martha's dead. Bob. Katy. All of them. Get a crew out to Joe, and another to Teddy's for Claudia before I lose any more of them—and get someone over to that damn town house of Henry's," he insisted. "Child's not supposed to be with them, don't know if she was or not. One way to find out."

"Right," John took an unconscious step forward.

"No, I'm all right," Evelyn believed. After all, seen his first wife die; watched her. The look of pain spike across her face as that uterus of hers burst, drowning the sheets and his newborn son in blood. Now couldn't be any worse than that, just felt that way. "Not so sure about Joe, not exactly his cup of tea. But if he's a Lee...and, well, he is a Lee and so that settles that. It's Mike I'm worried about, takes that Italian blood of his to heart. Bit hotheaded, he is..."

"So he is..." His fingers drummed on the table waiting for someone to pick up the damn telephone; they did. Ten minutes too long and he was finally talking to whom he wanted to talk to, someone who mattered. "Graham? This is Lee. Justin about? Need him. Yes, I need him. Not here, need him at home. Now. While you're at it, there's an Inspector Knox. Whitehall. Scotland Yard. Something like that. CID. Someone's giving out my damn home address. Take care of it. Have enough trouble for one day—Yes, there's trouble. No, there's nothing you can do. Nothing anyone can do, unfortunately..."

†††

"Nothing that will bring any of them back," Evelyn ruminated as he sat in a car near the spot where he lost better than half his family and two of his dearest friends, reading Joe's hastily scrawled press release of an ill-fated automobile trip on a country motorway outside London, north to Cambridge. Paid to have a teacher in the family, it did. Joe's statement was short and to the grisly point. Sir Henry Charles, honorable Member of Parliament, was dead at fifty-one. Cause of death, an automobile accident attributed to black ice, his body burned beyond recognition.

That brought a cluck of disapproval. "What the devil does that mean? Know it's Henry."

"Forensic." Justin answered, speaking the first word he'd spoken in over an hour, and it was cold, sullen, no sentimentality threatening his reserved British veneer. Justin was angry, looked it, pipe clenched in five years growth of a woolly black beard. Scare the devil right about now with his fixed owl stare pupils as black as the beard and hair crowning his long thin frame. Dangerous in his air corps fatigues, poised and wanting to kill, probably planning it as he stood there, yes, that he likely was. Do the deed himself that he would, too; who wouldn't?

"Reads like a coroner's report, at that," Evelyn grunted, continuing to screen what would be London's account of the death of Henry Charles and his thirty-one-year-old wife of six months, Lady Elizabeth Edwards Charles, and Liz's nine-year-old daughter Joanna by her previous marriage to Sir John Edwards.

"Another bright and upcoming politician," Evelyn evaluated Edwards who had met his own, rather untimely death two years earlier in the wilds of the Australian outback. "But it happens. It happens. Doesn't mean a thing."

He forewent qualifying what he meant. Fair to presume most would assume money, position, and power precluded bad luck.

"And, of course, most, as usual, would be wrong," Evelyn eyed Justin, Henry's son by his first marriage to a young and beautiful woman by the name of Phoebe Jones dead herself fifteen or so years.

"Flu epidemic, 1918," Evelyn recalled what took Phoebe's life, Justin glancing up from trying to read the damn tea leaves, or whatever it was he was doing, standing there like a statue, cup more or less frozen in his hand. "Not that that's either here or there. Other than it happened. Happened, yes, just like Henry happened. Liz—if I'd thought fast enough I would have told them you were in that automobile, not only Joanna. Didn't think, though, and I apologize. Change it, if I could, but I can't. No more than I can change Henry. Liz. Martha."

Evelyn thought about Martha Douglas Lee for a little while, also dead, burned beyond recognition in that ill-fated automobile. Age sixty-one, beloved wife of veteran RA Major Evelyn Lee alive at sixty-seven, a former Cavalry officer and founding member of the Royal Air Corps, now with close ties to the Foreign Office.

"Foreign Office," Evelyn snorted, casting Joe's account aside. "Well, I suppose they have to call it something—for that matter, me,

something. I'm a damn spy, is what I am. Same as my father before me, and his father before him...

"Same as you," he reminded Justin, lest Justin forget his own cloak and dagger. "Your father, and his father before him—four centuries. The Charleses, Lees, and Drakes—doesn't mean a thing."

It hadn't at the beginning of his ruminating, and twenty minutes later it still didn't.

"Bob would agree with that," Evelyn assured Justin, knowing full well Justin believed otherwise and would proceed to the ends of the earth to prove it. "That is if Bob were alive to agree."

Which no, admittedly, Bob wasn't alive. RA Major Robert Lee, forty-eight, son of Evelyn Lee and the late Eleanor Lee likewise perished in that same automobile crash along with his lovely and beautiful wife Kathryn Allyn Lee, also forty-eight.

"Almost got us all," Evelyn reached to retrieve Joe's hard work and give it a second, fairer look.

"Didn't, but almost did. A little too close for comfort, is that what you're thinking? Could have been a bomb. That's true. Could have been the Irish, Shiites—Henry was heavily involved in the India situation. Always was and probably always would have been—"

"Irish," Justin interjected. Second word he'd spoken in over an hour, cold and lifeless as the first.

"Same as you with those damn Micks," Evelyn agreed. "What's that *box* of yours tell you? Or whatever the devil it is you call it."

"Flight recorder," Justin replied, though admittedly, the gadget had made its home in the dashboard of Evelyn's car rather than a cockpit of an airplane. But the principle and purpose were still the same: information. Speed, function, and those all-important voices. However, rather like the trouble encountered when a plane went down not too much of the recorder had survived the car crash. Justin gave up deciphering his tea, aiming for the Scotch Palmer had been thoughtful enough to pack.

"Well, it should have something to say, oughtn't it?" Evelyn ignored him other than to tell him that. "What's the sense of having one if it can't? Henry knew the damn thing was there, didn't he? Knew its purpose. Pretty damn stupid time to keep his mouth shut, wasn't it?"

"Quite."

"Quite is right," Evelyn was back to reading about the two young witnesses, neither of whom seemed to fit or figure in a world of espionage. "Same as Bob did. And neither of them said a damn word because there was nothing to say. So there you have it. Robert lost it plain and simple, for whatever reason—speed, more than likely. Car shot off that cliff like it was shot out of a cannon. From there the petrol exploded, is my guess. I don't care what those two young ones think they heard and saw. Sight and sound has a way of playing tricks, you should know that. Liz had to be thrown fifty feet, fifty yards away—"

"Fits nicely with your cannon theory," Justin agreed.

Evelyn eyed him, tempered, since the lad had just lost his father. "It's still a damn sight better than yours. Now that I've said that, I'll also say, there's a bit of a difference between shooting your wife so she doesn't suffer—know what it's like to have your skin burnt off your body?"

"Yes, well, neither do I," he assured Justin looking at him. "Though I came close once and I can tell you it wasn't pleasant, not even the thought; that's the point. Bit of a difference between shooting your wife out of mercy and helping her out the damn door while you're rolling ass over teakettle down a damn cliff. It was an accident, my boy, an accident. Never convince you, or believe it myself, but that is what it was. Robert had that back of his, don't forget."

"And a heart," Justin reminded.

Evelyn chuckled, surprised he had one in him, for that matter any left. "Quite. And a heart. Good a reason as any. Thought fast enough I would have told them you were in that car, not only Joanna, and that would have taken care of—well, most anyway..." He eyed some young upstart bucking for a promotion. "What?"

"Ready to take you on to the morgue, Sir."

"Bully for you," Evelyn retorted, but then this fellow hadn't lost anyone whereupon he had. He'd lost his wife. His son. His daughter-in-law of almost thirty years whom he loved as if she were his own blood, and he was here to see where his family died.

"If that's all right with you," Evelyn slowly shifted his ponderous frame up from the seat of the car to its still towering height and reasonably secure stand despite the wooden pin he wore in place of his lower right leg. He was a large man, very large, fat and

muscle resting on his waistband. Powerful in his younger days, strong. Still was that, too. Mean. Kill you quick as look at you, as they say. Slit your throat and cut his own damn leg off, if he had to, and so he had, because he had to, rather than die of certain gangrene. Hacked off what was left of it—snapped off, actually, since there wasn't much left of it. Wrapped up the stump and made it back to talk about it, the details softened, of course, if there were ladies around.

"If it breaks, it breaks," he assured the bloke glancing down on the handicap that had grounded one of England's first airborne sons, for fun before the Great War, for fun and business during and now after it. "About time I had a new one anyway, one with a foot. I'm single, don't forget. Might want to go dancing—where's that damn shillelagh of mine..." He looked around, Justin handing it to him without comment.

"Smart boy," Evelyn approved, heaving himself forward, Justin's long, gangly limbs falling into their meandering lurch beside him. "Never lock horns with a bull. I should know, I'm a bull, same as you are. So, what are you going to do—mind you, going to do, not want to do—about those two 'witnesses'? They're either involved, or they aren't. You're right if you're thinking no one will ever find their bodies out here, because they won't. I'll back you one hundred percent whatever it is you decide to do, just make sure you know what you want to do. Blood's a little harder to wash off when it's innocent, but it's not impossible...Take it from me..."

He looked around that time for Palmer, right there, flask in one hand, cup of tea in the other. "True or false? Talking about those two young ones who claim they just happened by. Want their necks if they're guilty, not sure I care if they're not."

"I can understand that," John gave the tea a healthy dose or two, holding it out with a wink at the old man. "Do your soul some good."

"Might at that," Evelyn accepted the offer. "It's the Irish who drink to get the edge on, English drink to take the edge off."

"Oh? Now, who says that?" John's wink eased into a salty grin.

"I do," Evelyn downed his tea and resumed drilling his peg into the dirt. "One sniff of a cork—I've never met a Mick who wasn't philosophical or suicidal and reaching for his gun either way. Justin, in the meantime, thinks a couple of your Catholic friends just may want to take credit for this."

"Well, now if that's true," John reassured, sincere about it, too, "they better make themselves scarce, and that's the God's honest truth. The lads are one thing, the ladies quite another."

"My sentiment," Evelyn profoundly agreed. "Comes with the territory. Henry and Bob both knew that."

"Did," Justin paused to light his pipe and see what he could do about burning the rest of the forest down with a careless toss of the match that lay there flickering before it died.

"So does the ego," Evelyn roused himself from watching the match to remind Justin, "and I hate to be the one to deflate yours, but you're wrong. Henry was the target, not you. That's why it was Henry. Same as if it were me, it would have been me. Robert's too far in the background to be given the time of day—

"Or he was." His peg bore deep as he stopped at the edge of where Martha and Bob had left this life for a better one, Justin and Palmer exchanging one of those notorious silent glances.

"How old's my damn grandson, anyway?" Evelyn changed the subject, peering down on Joe trying his hand at playing detective—or Merlin. Not quite sure which, or what Joseph thought the trees could tell him other than they, too, had surrendered without much of a fight.

"Oh...twenty-six? Twenty-seven?" John was handy with the family affairs, not necessarily its bible.

"Never know it." Bitter cold March wind, two university degrees, one from Cambridge, the other from the Academy, and Joe was out there cavorting around in a pair of trousers and a shirt.

Of course, the fact that Justin was standing there showing off half of everything he owned from the waist up with his shirt unbuttoned and chest bare, was beside the point. Evelyn never met a Charles with the slightest sense of public decency, except for possibly Henry, and that was only because his mother insisted on the social benefits of good manners and hygiene. Lord knows Henry didn't come by being a fop naturally, certainly not by way of his father Scotty, Evelyn's mentor when he was once a young cadet. Oliver Barnard Scot Charles was a devil of a man. A giant in Evelyn's memory, seven feet tall, and almost as tall as that in life, hair and eyes black as midnight. Scotty looked like a savage, dressed like a savage, and could be savage if someone got on his wrong side, and Justin was not only his grandfather incarnate, he was beginning to look like his grandfather more and more every day.

“Where’s your jacket?” Evelyn lambasted Joe hiking his way back up to them. “Catch your death out here, and I think we’ve had enough of that for one day, don’t you?”

To Joe’s credit, he had enough of his own gentleman’s upbringing to accept the dressing down. “Quite. Sorry. Didn’t think.”

Evelyn softened, of course he did. Lad had just lost both his parents, and that’s a lot to take, even at twenty-seven. “Yes, well, there’s not thinking and then there’s not thinking...and, well,” he admitted with a glance down that ravine, “probably should apply that rule to myself. Anything down there I need to see?”

“Well...” Joe gave it his best. “I guess if they used just enough powder to blow a tire...or the door...that could explain Bob losing control...it’s just an educated guess.” His supporting smile was humble and apologetic. “I don’t see anything out of the ordinary, but it’s not exactly my cup of tea.”

“You’re allowed,” Evelyn assured.

“Aye, and it’s a good guess at that. Done it myself,” John added his support, offering the lad a turn at the flask. “Go on, takes the edge off.”

“Right. Thanks,” Joe borrowed Justin’s teacup. “What do you think?” he asked him. “Can you prove it wasn’t an accident?”

Yes, well, if Joe was going to be a stickler for proof, “Doubt it,” Justin replied and Joe nodded, “Just an educated guess.”

“That’s about the size of it,” Justin relit his pipe, turning his back on the ravine to ogle the roadway cleared now except for theirs and them. “Rifle, maybe. Take out one of the tires. Less chance of leaving any evidence. Toss the casing over the side. Never find it.”

“Have to be a damn good shot,” Joe frowned.

“Mike could do it.”

“So could you.”

“Probably,” Justin imagined, turning his sights on Evelyn.

“Anything about this mortuary business I should know?” Evelyn beat him to it. “Realize Martha’s burned, they’re all burned, asking if there’s anything else.”

“Went through the windscreen?” Justin shrugged.

Evelyn had the picture. “Use your imagination from there. And, well, all right. I’m sure I’ve seen worse—in fact, I know I have.”

With that, he turned away but stopped, because quite frankly he couldn’t do it. No, he could not. “Sorry, but I can’t.” He did not

apologize, no reason to. He was the one who was going to have to forgive himself, no one else. “I’ve seen too much. Never gave me a turn. Never would, unless it was one of my own. I’ve seen Eleanor die, Teddy, Scotty, and Robert through those back surgeries of his and that was bad enough. I’d like to remember Martha the way I remember her. Not some charred hunk of...well, mutton.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Joe had his youth on his side to protect him and Evelyn was grateful for that.

“Thank you. Sure it’s a violation of some protocol...but, well, I’ve never been much for protocol and I’m not about to start now...you?”

Justin just looked at him and Evelyn nodded again. “Understand Henry’s funeral will have to be some sort of State affair, but I’d like to keep the rest of them private.”

“Would,” Justin agreed.

“Henry’s, too,” Evelyn was certain, “if you had your druthers, which you don’t. In the meantime, there’s that child of Elizabeth’s who also has to be taken care of—”

“Joanna,” Joe seemed particularly concerned, probably the schoolteacher in him.

“Quite. Joanna. Must have been found by now...”

“Oh, yes, she’s up at the house with Mike,” Joe assured, “and Claudia. I’ve been thinking of Claudia...”

“Smart thinking.” Joe didn’t have to explain any further. Claudia had nothing but time on her hands, anyway, even with that little Andrea of her own, and if she could be talked out of this divorce business with Michael, Liz’s daughter would be all set. New mother, new father, and even a baby sister to play with. It all sounded good to Evelyn and he doubted if anyone had any better ideas, if they had any idea at all.

He knew one who didn’t, or did, depending on how one looked at it. “She’s not about to end up in a work house,” Evelyn directed that point to Justin, in this up to his neck whether he wanted to be or not. “Never live with myself if I let that happen. Realize she’s no blood to anyone, and that none of us really even know her from Adam, but that’s hardly the child’s fault. We’ll help you all we can; you have my word on that. But your father married that little girl’s mother. She’s your sister. Step, I’ll grant you, she’s still your moral responsibility, and be prepared or not, my boy, considering that child’s age, I believe you’ve just had yourself a daughter.”

With that, he did turn away, aiming himself for the car before Justin fell over the precipice to his death, never mind anyone else. Ridiculous though, when you come to think of it, after all, spies, though they might be, instead of business men, bankers, or thieves, that had nothing do with sex or marriage or propagating the ranks by virtue of marriage or otherwise, the same as everyone else in the damn world. Evelyn should know. He'd walked that path himself a few times; twice once, he'd wink when asked, to the same damn woman. The same as every Lee, Drake, and Charles had for the last four centuries; married, that is respectably, and legitimately, contributing to their family trees. Granted there weren't many of them, but that had to do more with the nature of their business and its limited life expectancy rather than it did with some physical or psychological failing.

"That is except for Justin," Evelyn confided to Palmer as he heaved his way back to the car.

"Aye, you've got yourself a hard sell," John had his own ideas about that one.

"Yes, well, something short of Nancy boy, one would hope," Evelyn snorted. "Justin's no more one of them, than I am, anymore than he's some sort of monk. He's self-centered, is what he is, a little too. He's got Scotty's arrogance, if you want to be kind. A snob, if you don't. And don't think they don't know it when he looks down on them because they do."

Well, John supposed they did. Didn't matter. Not the point. John wasn't thinking anything about Justin other than suddenly having a tot on his hands. Never happen that it would not. Michael, their confirmed black sheep, didn't have a monopoly on shying way from that sort of responsibility. "Think it may have been better if you stopped with reminding our boy Justin he had a sister," John proposed wisely. "Never met a fellow who ran at the idea of his mother having a child, met plenty who'd run at the idea of someone giving them one."

"As well as plenty who'd drop him in his damn tracks unless he assumed his responsibility," was Evelyn's answer to that social problem.

"Oh, no, now you can't do that," John dissuaded him from any hasty action. "Not but, what? Twenty-five years old himself? He'll come around. Just not time yet. What's he going to do with a wife and family at his age? Nothing but drive himself and her crazy."

"So he's a man's man," Evelyn stopped to sputter about what had to be one of the most ridiculous things. "What the devil does that mean? Fear of women? Never heard of such a thing. Can someone explain it to me?"

Yes, well, if someone could it wasn't John. "Didn't think so," Evelyn snorted again. "No one can. Just one of those things, I suppose. Like fear of needles, or something. Yes, that's what it is, like fear of needles. Lord help me—and that child, while he's at it," he clucked sadly. "Yes, Lord help that little girl. Doubt if she woke up this morning expecting to lose her family, never mind me."

"Oh, well, now, that other idea of yours," John could help all he could with that. "The one about Michael and my darling lady Claudia taking her in as one of their own?" he reminded. "Can't do much better than that. Like you said, they're already married, a child of their own. And Michael's not been in any hurry to leave since Henry's wedding, not that I can see..."

"No, that's true," Evelyn considered, "that's true."

"Is," John promised, however tactfully, since Michael's sudden interest in staying around no doubt could be traced to the unexpected sight and scent of the lovely Elizabeth Charles rather than any renewed interest in his own wife. John wondered briefly if anyone had bothered to check Claudia's whereabouts at the time of the deed before settling on blaming the local Mick. Be a rather comedic twist to the tragic state of affairs but for the fact there wasn't anything funny about it, and so he dismissed the thought of a woman's revenge to focus on the here and now. "Little of the right sort of encouragement and I'm inclined to agree with you. Don't believe anyone's going to have to be concerned about a divorce between those two any time soon."

"That, and Claudia's Roman," Evelyn agreed. "Yes, she is. Converted to marry Mike. First Roman in the family to my knowledge—certainly the first Yank. Surprised Teddy didn't turn over in his grave, yes I am surprised that did not happen. If that doesn't beat all."

"Yes, well, you talk to me about that when one of you brings home a Mick," John got the door, helping the old fellow load himself back inside as comfortably as possible. "That's what I want to be there to see."

"Oh, well, now, that will never happen," Evelyn was close to laughing to the point he almost had tears in his eyes. "Never

happen. Every damn ancestor there ever was would be in an uproar. The closest any of us ever got to crossing those lines was that smidgen of Scot Scotty had in him. Not enough so that it counted—it was on his mother’s side in the first place—just enough to make him a contrary son-of-a-bitch. I should know. I’m a contrary bastard myself, and I know another one when I see one. Word to the wise, word to the wise, don’t let my jovial nature fool you. I am an evil old man...

“Yes, I am an evil old man,” Evelyn patted his shillelagh with a shake of his head. “Same as my father before me, and my son aft, and one of these days I’m going to have to figure out how in the devil I ended up with a schoolteacher for a grandson. Love him dearly, don’t get me wrong, always have, and always will. I just have no idea where he came from...must be from his mother’s side, yes, it must be. Devil knows it’s not from mine.”

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“Was Henry the target?” Joe watched the old man hulk away.

“Doubt it,” Justin highly doubted it, also doubting if Joe really wanted to know the reason why he thought that.

“You’re right,” Joe cast a short, sunny smile around the gloomy hillside, “I don’t. Sometimes I almost wish I did, but then I’m glad I don’t—no disrespect intended, old chap,” he cast his smile briefly over Justin. “You might be a bit barmy, but who isn’t? And we’d be lost without you, just the same.”

“Yes, well...” In Justin’s opinion, Mike was the one who was rather barmy, but he supposed, if he looked at it from Joe’s perspective, Joe had his point. “At least my sister will have a good education.”

Joe had to laugh a little at that. “The best. Take’s care of my needing to find a new position as well, fancy that.”

“Yes, well...” Justin didn’t have much to say about that.

“No,” Joe didn’t expect he would and let it drop there. “Well, you have my word, the old man’s, too. As far as Claudia...”

“Claudia can do what she’s damn well told to do,” Justin fell into his gangly lurch for the car. “That goes double for Mike. Stuff and nonsense, the two of them; Evelyn’s right. Not to say a workhouse probably wouldn’t be the fairer choice, because it probably would be. Were she a few years younger, it definitely would be. She’s not though and so, quite, Claudia and Mike are it, like it or lump it,

or there’ll be two more bodies out here no one will ever find.”

“Cold, Charles, cold,” Joe paused in his own easygoing gait, a touch surprised by the venom. He looked up to Justin. Not meaning in the sense of a pun considering Justin’s rather extraordinary height, but looked up to the man himself. Though Joe was the elder of the two, Justin was the sage, old as Evelyn in his own way, at not but twenty-five. “She’s a Drake, is all I was going to say, Teddy’s daughter. Evelyn’s cohort in crime...” The light dimmed briefly in Joe’s eyes as he thought of the freakish way Teddy had died. A hunting accident, weekend outing. There was more to that story Joe was sure, the same as there was more to this one, though he doubted if one would find the answer to this one in the family stables.

“Your point, Lee?” Justin requested.

“Right,” Joe roused himself. “Just Claudia, that’s all. Fairly confident she’ll go along without the need for your thumbscrews, or whatever it is you use. She knows enough to accept what she doesn’t understand, same as me.” He looked around again, lost in thought for another moment or two. “Sorry. It’s just me. I shouldn’t even be here. But I couldn’t just sit there. Not the sort of thing to just sit there.”

“Yes, well, does that include a dead child quite alive with free run of the parlor?”

“Sorry?” Joe looked at him.

“Claudia,” Justin lit his pipe. “Somewhat less confident in her than you are...somewhat less confident in her than I am in Mike,” he admitted, who he could always beat into submission if he had to. Use his damn “thumbscrews” of whatever the hell else Joe thought he did for business or for sport. Justin shook his head, finishing his point. “She’s a bit of a hag when she wants to be.”

“Yes, well...” Joe smiled, “if you mean as far as the idea of a child having free run of the parlor, you’re right. It will never happen; not hers.”

“Yes, well, good,” Justin said, because she certainly wouldn’t have the run of his, and he didn’t have the time or patience to train her.

“Oh, quite,” Joe’s gasp was contrived as Justin dug into the back seat for a jacket that out of spite turned out to be his. “That’s what’s really getting to you. With Henry gone, you have responsibilities. A house. A home. Furniture—”

Joe had the Air Corps eagle whammed into his chest.

“Chicken?” Justin drawled, as Joe looked the jacket over.

“About frostbitten,” Joe admitted, and therefore would survive. He slipped the jacket on, the leather cold and well worn. “Wouldn’t happen to have a cigarette hidden away in the dash—or a pocket somewhere—that and a flask—”

“Yes, well...” A flask and a match Justin had. The cigarette he had to pinch from a subordinate strolling past.

“Thanks,” Joe exhaled, unmindful of the fact they could have been to Killarney and back by now. “It’s just this mortuary business. You said Martha went through the windscreen?”

“Decapitated,” Justin yanked the throttle and sat there revving the engine.

“Right,” Joe’s voice was tight. “No, the Old Man wouldn’t have been able to take that. Still, Liz had to bear the brunt of it, didn’t she, dashed on the rocks like that?”

“Did,” Justin agreed.

“Good,” Joe exhaled that time in relief. “Sorry, but it’s Katy. Bob’s one thing, but Katy? I realize she’s my mother, not my wife...”

“Yes, well...” Justin realized Henry was his father, not his wife. Liz was one thing to him, Henry quite another. Not saying he didn’t like Liz, because he hardly knew her well enough to like or dislike her. Their relationship, had one evolved, would likely have been more of a distant and respectful relative rather than some sort of surrogate mother had Henry’s and her marriage endured, which it hadn’t, just unfortunately not because Henry had decided to come to his fifty-one year-old senses.

“Do you remember Phoebe very much at all?” Joe was just curious, though knowing Justin had to remember his mother. He was young when she died, desperately sick himself, but certainly at eleven old enough to remember her quite vividly. And so did Justin remember, Joe supposed he was wondering, not her, but what it was like to have her and then lose her so suddenly? Justin was so difficult to know sometimes, what touched him and what did not.

“I remember my cot,” Justin threw the car into gear and tore out of there like a bat out of hell, wrenched the steering, spun her around and hit that curve at forty, taking it clean.

“Brilliant!” Joe gasped as they came to a halt. “What’s her top speed?”

“About eighty,” Justin lit his pipe.

“The devil it is.”

“The devil it’s not,” Justin took off again without any further shenanigans. “Mercedes invented the damn SS supercharge in ‘26.”

“Yes, well, that’s true,” Joe admitted. “Rival Royce, if anyone can believe that.”

Justin could. He nodded ruefully. “De Valera isn’t the only rotten fish in the sea. There’s Mosley and his gang, and that bolshie Hitler.”

“Of course,” Joe sighed. “Mosley. Forgot about him. So what’s next? If it’s not the IRA responsible for this, you and the Old Man set your sights on the Blackshirts? Honestly, Charles, what a wretched life we lead, really. Thought the need for any of this be over by now...for that matter,” he fingered the jacket, “thought you fellows were just about disbanded.”

Yes, well, if Joe meant grounded, he was right. Disbanded, was another thing. Not quite, and not hardly, but then flying wasn’t all there was to it. Justin should know, flying not exactly his cup of tea. Not because he didn’t have the skill, because he did, just more because he was more valuable on the ground—that, and, of course, at six-foot five and a half inches tall, he could just about barely fit inside a damn cockpit, at least the modern ones, at least not comfortably. “It’s De Valera,” he assured. “In the name of.”

Joe nodded. “And it’s not over. Well, one step ahead of them is the best any of us could hope for, I guess. Two more bodies, you said, I mean when we were talking about Claudia and Mike. Two more bodies out here, you said as if there were already two. I take it, it’s less important if those two witnesses are saints or sinners than simply not worth the risk.”

“Quite,” Justin said.

“War is hell,” Joe sighed.

For some, Justin supposed. For him, it was not only convenient, but had the potential of being quite satisfying. “Not going to get away with it, Lee,” he assured, “that they’re not.” In the meantime, he did top it out at eighty along the motorway to London. Again, just to prove it could be done despite the damn black ice.

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“That’s an odd couple.” Evelyn noted as Justin tore out of there like his tail was on fire after proving his point to himself. “Yes, that’s an odd couple—trio, not to exclude Mike. But then, well, so were Teddy, Scotty, and I. That we were. That we were.”

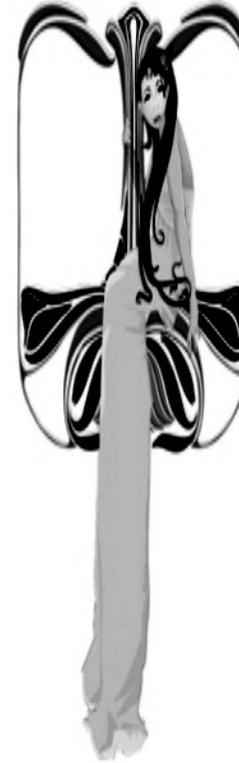
“Been a while,” John agreed.

“Thirty years,” Evelyn nodded. Thirty years since any of them died in the line of duty, or more accurately, battle. That would be Scotty in the Boer War. Teddy’s demise, quite, that was a family affair. “Overdue, is that what you’re saying?”

“No,” John said. “Just that it’s been a while.”

So it had been. It was eight years later, almost nine, before the black wreath hung on the door again. That time for RAF pilot Joseph Lee who died in service to his country on or about the 20<sup>th</sup> of December 1940, age thirty-five. But then it came with the territory, yes, it did, whether it was the Irish, the Shiite, Dutch, and so forth and so on.

“So forth and so on.” Evelyn Lee puffed on his pipe, putting aside the faded photographs of Teddy, Scotty, Robert, all of them. Joe now added to the chronicles. His young widow left behind. Joanna.



*Memories of an  
Old Man*



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