

WEEKENDS CAN BE MURDER

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SAMPLE

The vintage pumper truck taking up most of Larry Holmes's driveway in Groverton was big and boxy and extremely yellow. He'd purchased it at an auction, egged on by fellow firefighters who had banded together and basically kidnapped him there. It would be a great restoration project, they'd enthused, a perfect way to occupy his hands and his time and, coincidentally, distract his mind from his problems.

They were wrong. Each time he stepped out his front door, the sight of the truck was a depressing reminder. Like him, it had been sidelined—judged to be operating at less than optimum levels and taken out of service—and no matter how

much work he put into making it look and run like new, nothing seemed likely to change either of their situations.

Larry had been on critical incident leave for going on four months now. Three months of rehashing the trauma with a department-ordered psychotherapist following Tamara's funeral hadn't helped much. He was still just as messed up and off-duty as before, only now he had a better understanding of the reasons for it all.

As he sat behind the wheel of his Volvo, headed north to the Georgian Bay resort his cousin Alec had described in such glowing terms, Larry was determined not to get his hopes up. Using Alec's prepaid tickets to crash a literary conference didn't sound like much of a vacation. Bermuda would have been a much better choice. However, Larry had emptied his bank account to buy the truck, and beggars couldn't be choosers.

Alec had visited Windsong Resort and Spa several times in the past when he needed to relax, and he swore that much of the unwinding had taken place in the car on the way there. So far, rolling along on a broad ribbon of even pavement with a bright, sunny August sky overhead, Larry had to agree. Traffic was light on this Monday afternoon, and no one was doing anything stupid. As the kilometres mounted up behind him, he could feel the weight he'd been carrying begin to slide off his shoulders.

According to his GPS, he was making good time. Too good, in fact. He was enjoying his solitary journey. In order to prolong it, he would need to find a more scenic route.

As if cued by his thought, one appeared. The path cut into the forest wasn't a numbered road, was hardly a road at all, truth be told, but it showed up on the screen and was going in the right direction, so he took it. As the Volvo made the turn, something strange rippled through Larry's mind. Something like an affirmation that he was doing the right

thing. A nascent certainty that good was going to come from this.

He smiled with belated recognition. Optimism. He'd nearly forgotten what it felt like. Maybe Alec's idea wasn't such a bad one after all.

Several minutes later, he noticed a car off to the side of the road ahead and a woman standing next to it. He couldn't make out her facial expression, but something about the way she held her shoulders, impatiently crossing and uncrossing her arms and tossing her head, told him she needed help.

His help.

The conviction was too sudden and powerful to resist. Almost before he knew he was doing it, Larry pulled over and came to a stop behind her blue Chevrolet sedan.

* * *

The car didn't owe her a thing.

Selena Watt had been repeating these words to herself like a mantra.

She'd purchased the "pre-owned" Chevy eight years earlier, with the intention of driving it into the ground, and that appeared to be precisely what she had done. But couldn't it have had the decency to hang on until she'd parked it in the Windsong lot? Or at least until she'd made it back onto the main road?

On the highway, she could have flagged down a patrol vehicle. She could have displayed her 'Call Help' sign in the window for other motorists to see.

No, she corrected herself, on the highway the Chevy's engine would have continued to hum, without even a hiccup. The moment all four tires had left level pavement and crunched down onto the gravel at the entrance to this godforsaken dirt road, the car's fate—and hers—had been sealed. It was Murphy's Law: any shortcut taken on

desperate impulse would only make her later than she already was.

She blew out a sigh and gingerly tried the ignition key once more. The battery gave a final groan and went still, just as Selena noticed a faint gasoline aroma drifting into the cab. Terrific. Engine flooded, battery dead, power windows inoperable...

...and no cell phone service, she soon discovered. Murphy was working overtime. She couldn't even call the Auto Association.

Selena slammed her palm down hard on the rim of the steering wheel and shoved open the driver's-side door. At that moment she hated the Chevy, hated whoever had decided to include this glorified tractor path on the road map she'd copied from the Windsong website, hated with a *passion* the person who had waited until the last minute to beg off Welcome Table duty at the conference. Selena had been forced to travel an hour out of her way to pick up a trunkful of signs, registration packages, and cartons of printed material before heading up to the resort. She'd had little hope of arriving and setting up on time even before her car broke down. Now? Forget it!

Pausing a moment to peel her damp cotton blouse off her back, she turned and looked around. She had stepped out onto a two-lane dirt road strewn unevenly with rain-muddied gravel. In front and behind her as far as she could see, thick maple and evergreen forest made a wall of trees to either side. Directly overhead hung a startling blue sky that purpled as though bruised as it neared the treetops. Selena strained to hear the low-pitched rumble of traffic from the main road, but the woods blocked all sound. Instead, what filled her ears was the rhythmic rush of her own blood as she realized for the first time since her car had sputtered and stalled—had it been only fifteen minutes ago?—just how stranded she was.

Like Barbara had been.

Dread scampered icily down Selena's back as remembered headlines from the Toronto papers flashed into her mind. Headlines about Selena's cousin who had been seen accepting a lift from someone after her car had broken down on the 400. Barbara had later been found dead on a little-used back road. One disturbingly like this one.

A sudden splash of gravel behind her brought her back to reality with a start. A bronze-coloured Volvo had pulled up behind her car and a man was getting out. Selena caught a brief glimpse of dark hair, sunglasses and a plain white T-shirt in the split second before she dived back into the Chevy. She slammed the door shut and pressed the lock into place. The air inside the car still held traces of gasoline fumes, but she didn't care. Thank goodness her windows had been closed when the battery died!

Then it hit her. By taking refuge in the car she had sacrificed all her options. She was trapped here.

Struggling for breath, Selena risked a look in the side view mirror. It was something the police always advised in self-defence seminars—study your attacker, memorize his face so you can describe him accurately later on and/or pick him out of a lineup. If you survive, that is.

He was standing motionless, with his hands resting on jeans-clad hips and a quizzical tilt to his head, just behind and beside her left rear fender. Unwilling even to guess at what he might be thinking, Selena forced herself to concentrate on his appearance.

His T-shirt was straight-from-the-package white. And his face...? As though on cue, he removed the sunglasses and hooked one of the armatures over the crew neck of his shirt, then began striding toward her window. Selena gasped and stared into the mirror, frantically committing his features to memory in the couple of seconds before he reached her.

She guessed his age at about thirty. His eyes were dark and deep set. His nose was aquiline. His jaw was strong. His hair was brown and wavy. And his smile was utterly disarming.

Of course it was. Ted Bundy had probably smiled like that, too.

Filling her lungs, she squared her shoulders, stiffened her spine, and faced resolutely ahead. Maybe if she didn't respond to him he would go in search of easier prey.

There was a light tap at her window. She forced herself to remain still.

"Miss? Are you all right?"

Her mind was racing. *Go away!*

"Miss?" he persisted. "Can I help you with something?"

Reluctantly, she turned and met his gaze. His eyes were dark blue, not brown as she had first thought, and he was clearly not taking the hint. She would have to try sending him away.

"My car won't start," she told him, loudly enough to be heard through the glass, "and my phone won't work. Would you drive to the next service centre, please, and have them dispatch a tow truck?"

"I've got booster cables. Pop the hood," he instructed her, and began walking toward the front of her car.

"No!"

Her shout stopped him in mid-stride and brought him back to stand beside her window with a bewildered expression on his face.

"What's the matter?"

Frustration was growing like a bubble in her chest, threatening at every second to burst.

"Boosters won't work," she told him emphatically. "There's something else wrong. I need a tow truck. Please."

"Listen, I know something about cars," he insisted, "and there's a smell of gas coming from under your hood. If you ran

the battery down trying to start a flooded engine, I can probably get you going again in less than five minutes. You won't even have to get out of your vehicle.”

Now she had a decision to make.

Less than five minutes, and she could remain safely locked in? If he was correct about the cause of her problem, she would be a fool to refuse his help. On the other hand, it could be a trick to get her to drop her guard. On the first hand, she was already late, and having to wait for a tow truck would delay her arrival even more, and, dammit, people were *depending* on her.

The first hand won. Praying that she wouldn't regret it, she pulled the hood release lever.

He repositioned his car nose-to-nose with the Chevy, lifted the Volvo's hood, and set to work, pausing only to flash her another smile.

It was the opposite of reassuring. Selena's hands went to her purse, sitting on the seat beside her. She kept her entire life in this tote bag. Surely there was something here that she could use to defend herself, if need be.

Her urgent fingers located a nail file, the tiny screwdriver she used to tighten small things or pry them open, and the folding scissors that came with her emergency sewing kit. Great. The glove box was no better, containing nothing but her owner's manuals, some spare fuses, and the key wrench for unlocking her hubcaps. Struck by a sudden thought, she reached beneath the front seat and pulled out... a plastic scraper for clearing ice off the windshield. Right. That would *really* be helpful if he pulled a knife or a gun.

Just then, she heard him call out to her to try to start her car. She twisted the key in the ignition. No good. The Chevy whined, chugged, and rat-a-tat-tatted for nearly a minute, but would not turn over.

Damn!

A moment later he reappeared beside her window, shaking his head.

“Your battery seems to be okay, Miss. My guess is, you need a new starter motor.”

And he was still here.

This was too much. Selena’s frustration boiled over. “*Now* will you please get me a tow truck?” she shouted, her vision clouding with tears. “Or a Provincial Police officer? I’d even settle for the Fire Department!”

Silence.

For what seemed an eternity she sat behind the wheel of her car, feeling his steady gaze on her and wishing that she could teleport herself away somewhere.

Finally, he reached into his pants pocket, produced a small black wallet, opened it, and placed it flat against her windscreen. It was a silver badge: *Firefighter First Class, Town of Groverton Fire Department*.

Stunned, Selena stared alternately at the badge and at the man, her mouth working soundlessly for a couple of seconds before she could get any words out. “You’re—You’re—?”

“A firefighter. Ask and ye shall receive,” he said, giving her that now-infuriating smile once again.

“How *dare* you!” she yelled through the glass. Then she swarmed out of her car to confront him face to face, forcing him to jump back to avoid being flattened as she flung the Chevy’s door open. He was not much taller than her own five-foot-five. She barely had to tilt her head to glare directly into his startled eyes.

“How *dare* you frighten me like that?! Why didn’t you identify yourself before?” she demanded.

He seemed taken aback. “I’m... off-duty, and I guess I’m not accustomed to having to show my badge to get people to trust me when I’m helping them. But you’re right, I should have identified myself, and I apologize for that. Truce?” he added,

the smile morphing into a lopsided, little boy grin.

Selena tried to hold onto her anger but couldn't. "All right, truce. But you still haven't fully identified yourself," she pointed out.

"You're right. My name is Larry Holmes. I can give you a lift to the next service centre if you like," he told her. "I was on my way to a resort, but I don't mind—"

"A resort? Which one?" she asked hopefully. The universe hadn't exactly been handing out favours to her today, but maybe, just this once...

"It's called Windsong."

Yes! "That's where I'm going too," she exclaimed. "This is amazing. I'm Selena Watt, the convenor of the Crime Club conference, and I'm supposed to be there by now, managing the Welcome Table. All the signs and handouts are in the trunk of my car. Could you possibly...?"

"Sure, no problem," he replied after a beat.

It took just under five minutes to transfer Selena's freight into Larry's Volvo and get under way.

She debated with herself at first over whether even to broach the subject with him. However, as the Volvo settled down to some serious dirt road crunching and the silence between driver and passenger stretched on, Selena found herself longing to reverse the terrible first impression she'd made. Especially if they were going to be arriving at the Crime Club conference together. Crime Clubbers were extremely observant. They also had a gift for putting two and two together and getting twenty-two. If there was even a hint of awkwardness between her and this firefighter, the grapevine was sure to light up with juicy speculation.

"Listen, about what happened back there..."

"It's all right," he said, with a dismissive wave. "I figure you must be from Toronto or Montreal or some other crime-ridden place where nobody trusts anybody else and strangers

are all presumed to be axe-murderers unless proven otherwise.”

“And you’re from... Groverton?” she countered, her dander rising again. “A cozy little community tucked away in a safe little corner of Ontario, where everybody knows everybody else and a five-dollar lottery win is front page news?”

“Okay,” he said with a laugh. “You’re wrong, but I get the point.”

Selena sank back against the Volvo’s beige fabric seat. “All right, then, straighten me out. Tell me about Groverton.”

He paused, then replied slowly, “It’s a town, a pretty large town, actually. Used to be a Great Lakes trading port, but tourism is the main industry these days. We’ve got beaches and ski runs, and plenty of city amenities, like live theatre and big-box stores. And when a structure catches fire, trust me, there’s plenty of city-type excitement.”

Her next question was barely framed in her mind when he declared heartily, “So, you’re the one who organized the conference this week. Does that mean you’re a member of the Crime Club too?”

“Yes, and yes, I am. I especially enjoy reading Tess Gerritsen, Gareth Wylde and Kathy Reichs. Growing up, I dipped into my grandfather’s collection of vintage authors like Dashiell Hammett and Richard S. Prather. You?”

He shook his head. “None of the above.”

“So who *do* you like?” she persisted.

“I don’t. Can’t stand the stuff.”

Nonplussed, she half-turned in her seat and stared at him. “But you’re going to the conference, so you must belong to the Crime Club.”

“I’m not the member. My cousin, Alec Ullman, is.”

Selena recognized the name. Alec was a lawyer and budding novelist, as she recalled. He was also the Chief

Inspector of the Toronto Crime Club chapter.

“Alec was badly injured in a car accident a few days ago. There was no way he’d be able to attend the conference. When he heard about—” Larry’s breath hissed through his teeth as he caught himself up. “Anyway, I needed a vacation, so he offered his tickets to me, and I accepted them,” he concluded, the colour rising slowly in his cheeks.

Selena relaxed thoughtfully against the back of her seat. She’d planned every detail of this year’s event, and one thing it *wasn’t* going to be was a vacation. “Does Alec not know how you feel about crime fiction?”

“Oh, I won’t be attending any workshops or anything. I’m just going there to spend four days at a resort. They’ll be making all their facilities available to the guests, right? The beach, the pool, the weight room, sauna, whirlpool, stuff like that?”

“I suppose they will.”

“Because I really need to isolate myself and unwind this week. I have to sort some things out.”

Selena heard a note of tension creep into his voice and felt its echo in her stomach. The Crime Club had booked nearly every corner of Windsong Resort for the next four days. Anyone wanting—or needing—peace and solitude before Friday afternoon was most likely going to be out of luck.

“You know, Windsong is going to be bursting at the seams with this conference,” she told him. “Maybe it isn’t the best place for you right now.”

“You’re probably right, but it’s the best choice I’ve got. I just spent all my money on an antique pumper truck, so it’s either Windsong or my back yard. And I’ve really had enough of my back yard.”

“You bought a pumper truck?”

Her disbelief must have shown on her face, for he went on to explain, “It’s a firefighter hobby, buying old fire trucks and refurbishing them. Then we drive them in parades, take them

to special events, display them at antique car shows...”

It sounded like an interesting pastime. Selena felt a pinch of envy. It had been years since her life had included anything like that. Hard work had only seemed to bring her more work.

As the Volvo sped past fields and woodlands, she thought about the special invitation tucked into a pocket of her overnight case. Six members of the Crime Club would be going from the conference to Rafferty House on Friday, to be sleuths at a privately-hosted murder mystery weekend. Maybe something exciting would happen there.

She could only hope.

TWO

Much earlier

Rafferty House had been built on an island in a simpler era, when life moved at a more leisurely pace and entire families would repair to summer residences in the hottest months of the year. Comfortably ensconced in *chaises longues* on the gingerbread-trimmed veranda, the adults would sip iced drinks served by a lace-pinafores servant. Meanwhile, the younger children would frolic on the broad, terraced lawn, and the older ones would spend their time rowing or sailing on Georgian Bay.

The house and its grounds were inhabited and cared for year-round in those days. The boathouse and dock were scrupulously maintained. The lawns were fed and manicured, the shrubbery kept artfully trimmed in summer and burlap-wrapped for protection over the winter. The veranda posts and railings and the safety fence on the bluff top were regularly inspected and swiftly repaired. And all exterior wooden surfaces got a fresh coat of white paint every third spring without fail.

It was said that the first Phineas Pyke, the patriarch of the family, had hand-picked the huge Douglas firs that became the

walls of Rafferty House, choosing trees that had already lived a century for the construction of a home that he intended should last another two. He'd also imported shiploads of topsoil and sunk barriers into the bedrock to contain it, turning the island into a huge raised garden.

As three generations of Pykes grew up in and around it, the house enjoyed the ministrations of three generations of servants, who also called Rafferty House home and took great pride in its condition. The louvred shutters were kept well-oiled. The oak banisters and hardwood floors were lovingly waxed and polished. Brass gleamed and pewter glowed all over the house. The laughter of children filled the rooms and corridors, and the constant presence of the Pyke family and their servants kept the house warm and cheerful.

Then there was a war, and after it a depression, and the Pyke men stopped having children and began instead to propagate heirs, allies, and assets. Summer stopped being a time to relax and became a time to marshal forces. The Pykes came out less and less frequently to Rafferty House. They visited rather than lived there, choosing to spend most of their time in the city during July and August. One by one, all but a couple of servants were dismissed. Eventually, they found they could no longer maintain the house and were forced to board it up and leave it as well.

On the day the last person left Rafferty House, there must have been an earthquake somewhere, for the house shuddered and settled with a hollow sigh. It was now completely empty and alone on its island in Georgian Bay.

Years passed. Paint peeled. Untended, the grass and shrubs around the house grew thick and wild. Alternating onslaughts of heat and cold, damp and dry caused wooden joints to loosen, posts to lean, planks to crack and warp. Still, the house held together. Like the Pyke family itself, it would endure.

Then, one tender April day, footsteps echoed down the long main hallway of Rafferty House.

The contractor marvelled at how well Phineas Pyke had built, how much residual protection there had obviously been from all those years of meticulous care.

Arthur Pyke, youngest grandson of a second Phineas Pyke, this one less concerned with the fate of the house than with the value of the property beneath it, nodded happily as he led this prospective renovator on an inspection tour.

“So you think it’s feasible to restore the place to exactly what it was before?”

“Not exactly what it was.” The contractor jotted something on his clipboard, then glanced again at the black and white photograph in Arthur’s hand. “We can make it look the same, or close to it, but it’s a cinch the original structure doesn’t conform to current building or safety codes. Without even looking I can pretty well guarantee that we’ll have to rewire the whole place and install at least two new generators. Then there’s the heating and cooling systems—central air is a must these days—and the plumbing.. wall insulation..”

As the contractor resumed making rapid notes on the clipboard, Arthur stared forlornly at the photograph. It had been taken in the summer of 1955. One of the smiling people lounging on the veranda and raising an iced tea in mock salute was Edyth Beauchemin, soon to be Edyth Pyke, Arthur’s mother. Very young, very happy. Years away from early widowhood, decades away from stepping into the role vacated by her late mother-in-law as the formidable matriarch of the Pyke family. Arthur treasured this photograph of *Maman* in her lighthearted teens, and of Rafferty House, still in its Victorian glory.

But he had to admit, the contractor was right. If Rafferty House was to succeed as a resort, it needed to attract paying

guests, and anyone paying the sort of rates Arthur would have to charge would expect the appearance of antiquity to conceal every modern amenity.

“You’re telling me this is going to be a major renovation,” he said.

“I’m telling you we’re going to have to gut the place and basically rebuild it from the inside out. And then there’s the landscaping. Considering the remoteness of the location, I’d plan on a year, at least.”

Just then something creaked overhead, causing them both to glance upward.

“This place is too old to still be settling,” muttered the contractor, and added, “I think it would be a good idea to reinforce the roof joists.”

Somewhere in the house, a door slammed closed. Arthur felt a shiver across his shoulders and told himself it was just the wind.

Fourteen months later

Rafferty House was filled with footsteps, had been for more than a year. Not the light, tripping footfalls of joyous children, but the heavy booted tramping of workers. Upstairs and down, and even in the basement, hardly a corner of the stately old building had escaped violation. Rough hands had stripped away walls and mouldings, yanked down ceilings, torn up floors. They’d pried and clawed at every part of the house, hammered it all over with blunt instruments, thrust probing hands and long sharp blades into private corners. They had exposed every one of its precious secrets.

Arthur Pyke had stayed away during the first stage of the renovations, unable to bear the sight of the elegant old house being gutted. Only when the contractor had notified him that demolition was completed and reconstruction well under way had Arthur dared to visit the site. He’d come to check on its

progress several times in the past few months. Now he paced nervously along the upstairs hall, threading his way through the platoon of coverall-clad tradesfolk rushing busily to and fro.

“They *still* won’t work. Must be a faulty breaker...” muttered one as she brushed past.

Arthur glanced a question at the foreman, who shrugged and shook his head in weary disgust. “We’ve installed brand new, high efficiency everything, brought the wiring up to code, and upgraded the circuit panels,” he explained. “There seem to be a lot of intermittent problems popping up. And not only with the electrical system, but with the heating and plumbing systems too. Little glitches, not serious but there one minute and gone the next, and enough of them to be annoying as hell. If I were a superstitious man, I’d say this job was jinxed.”

“And are you? Superstitious, I mean.”

A pause, then, “Nah. We’ll track everything down eventually.”

“By mid-August?”

The foreman pursed his lips, considering. “Maybe. Intermittent problems are the toughest ones to solve. You can search for weeks sometimes before finding the answer. Or, you can get lucky and have it figured out in just a few minutes. We’ll do our level best for you, Mr. Pyke. That’s all I can tell you for now.”

A door slammed shut right beside them, nearly launching both men out of their skins and pulling an angry yelp from the man working inside the room. The foreman turned the knob and pushed, but the door refused to open. “Again, Lou?” he groaned loudly.

“I didn’t touch it, Frank, honest!” shouted the man on the other side.

“Jeezus!” exclaimed a third voice from the end of the hall.

“I just finished planing the top of that door.”

Arthur watched in fascination as the door, bowing inwards, resisted the combined efforts of Lou and the foreman to get it open again. Finally, muttering imprecations, the foreman strode to the banister and leaned over the stairwell.

“Brad,” he bawled to someone downstairs. “Bring that ladder around to the bedroom window for Lou again, will ya? And bring the pry-bar in case the damned window is stuck shut too.” When Brad had acknowledged the order, the foreman turned with an exasperated expression on his face. “You see what I mean, Mr. Pyke? And that’s just the doors and windows. With all these weird little things happening to slow us down, I honestly can’t promise that we’re going to be finished before the end of August.”

Arthur’s skin went clammy. “But the murder mystery weekend is already arranged, and my—my family will be coming. It wasn’t easy to talk them into visiting. They thought I was a fool to put so much time and money into restoring this place, and I have to show them—Please! It’s really important that the house at least *look* completed by mid-August, just for that one weekend. Isn’t there anything you can do?”

“We can try, Mr. Pyke,” said the foreman, “but if the house won’t cooperate with us, we’re stuck.”

As he was saying this, the door that had been refusing to budge swung open, apparently all by itself. Arthur’s jaw dropped. The foreman crossed himself. Mystified, Lou stepped out into the hallway.

“Just—Just do the best you can,” stammered Arthur, already halfway down the stairs on his way to the front door and feeling a breeze at his back that should have been physically impossible.