

# The Gilded Door

*Kristen Carson*

It sat on a quiet end of Main Street, just a block down from the Shoreline State Bank and the Sunshine Laundry. Within its dark cavern, you could lose yourself in fantasy. It was the place where Tevye first eyed his sons-in-law, where Herbie squirted oil on the bad guy's shoes, where John Wayne turned Maureen O'Hara over his knee and delivered a good spanking.

Then, when the credits rolled and the lights went up, you were still in another world, gaping at the gilt-edged ceiling medallions and the sparkling chandeliers, at the towering half pillars that bulged out of the walls. And even if the place had slipped into a genteel decrepitude, you could still see what the great Gilberto Massanopoli had in mind when he designed it all. It was still a fantasy palace, this place that everyone in Boxford knew as the Gilded Door Theater.

So imagine the surprise of Boxford's best piano teacher, Ada Runyon, when she walked by the Gilded Door, her arms loaded down with pinch-pleated draperies fresh from the Sunshine Laundry. She saw the poster of coming attractions. "LIMITED ENGAGEMENT!!!: Xaviera del'Abunda, star of *Sky-High Stewardesses!!!* Coming soon in *Amazons in Hard Hats!!!*"

The April-day bliss fell from Ada's face. Whatever happened to the *Planet of the Apes* sequel, which had been playing all winter? She emerged from the shadow of the marquee. She walked backward as she looked up at the title trumpeting itself there: Yes, it was true. Even worse, *Amazons in Hard Hats* was no longer COMING SOON! It was *here*. And so was Miss del'Abunda in that poster, where great mounds of her flesh bobbed, barely restrained in their bindings.

The first person Ada called was her best friend, Ruthalin Feldsted.

Ruthalin must have talked to her husband, Erval. Who went straight to the bishop.

That was why Bishop Keating walked in on Latham Runyon's Gospel Doctrine class. He looked like Dr. Bad News, and the class looked up like all the relatives in the waiting room.

He rubbed the bare dome of skin on top of his head. He hoisted the belt around his potatoes-and-gravy paunch. "We've got a problem," he told them.

Even his wife looked somber, and Jeralee Keating was the cheeriest person on the planet.

She wore her entire history on her face. You could see her at age thirteen, dressed in gingham, her hair in a ponytail, as she headed out the back door after breakfast to deliver cantaloupe rinds to the cows.

Today, tracks of gray shot through her short little bangs. They ran back across her head, caught up in that ponytail. And the figure underneath the gingham had gone all pillowy. But she still looked thirteen.

"Why isn't rating it 'X' enough?" said Jeralee.

"You wonder," said Ruthalin, "how much worse it can be when they're calling it 'Triple X.'"

"There's a law against that sort of thing!" boomed Erval Feldsted. "Or if there isn't, there oughta be!"

Other voices declared that "We should run them out," or "We should attend a meeting!" But how? And what meeting?

Who in the Boxford Ward even knew how the town worked? Half the ward had moved here from the deserts of the West, drawn by jobs at the Crayton Poultry Company (Darold Keating), or Tidewater General Hospital (Ervall Feldsted), or Boxford State College (Latham Runyon, who now shoved his lesson materials aside and sat on the edge of the table).

These transplants filled the center pews each Sunday. Each man wore a white shirt and a look of bemused fatigue. The women dressed in home-sewn frocks. They wielded thick, useful arms as they herded their many well-scrubbed children.

A center-pew family could live here ten years and still not know a thing about City Hall. Who had the time? Fathers worked all day. In the evenings, they taught Boy Scouts how to tie knots, or they drove about seeking lost members. On the weekends, they fixed whatever was broken in the house, unless they were asked to weed melons at the Church farm

or attend a priesthood meeting. Which happened often enough that the list of broken house parts never, ever shrank by much.

The women cooked, sewed, gardened, and canned. If that did not take up enough time, they cut out flannel-board figures to use in their Church lessons. And if that did not take up enough time, they looked for somebody who was sick and needed soup; and if no sick person could be found, then somebody who looked a little tired would do.

What you had was a people who believed in civic duty and voting and all that. But when faced with the ballot, they just didn't know whether to keep Joe Green as sheriff or throw him over for Bill Brown.

In the side pews, folks with tattoos, droopy mustaches, and faces deeply lined by hard living filled the rows. These folks were the converts. Native to the county, they straggled in every week or two in family fragments. And even though they had lived around here a long time, they had no idea how to fend off a smutty movie house. The dinette waitresses and the union welders usually saw civic life from the wrong end.

Take, for example, Sister Kilby. Didn't her oldest son still have to report to his parole officer? Now, nobody was saying Sister Kilby didn't have a good heart. But what kind of advice could she offer when the Gilded Door turned its back on Disney movies forever and the Sunday School class wanted to fight back? Yes, fight back! They would all write a letter! They would call the . . . the . . .

"Brother Runyon, can you figure out who to call and get back to us?"

Brother Runyon was a history professor. He knew stuff. Maybe he could figure out what to do.

"Yes, Brother Runyon, we cannot let them get away with this!"

But they were getting away with it. That's the way things were going now. Why just last week, Ada had popped on the TV and there was Woody Allen on *Afternoon with Doug Michaels*. The two of them chatted over Woody's new movie and how it shocked people from Tallahassee to Minot. But why worry? they laughed. The people who didn't like Woody's movie were rubes that probably enjoyed having their teeth pulled by barbers with big rusty pliers.

The sexual revolution was on the march and those who refused to cheer along its parade route felt . . . lonely.

Ada Runyon could see the ladies of the Boxford Music Club through the windows as she walked up the Weston-Welshes' sidewalk on Thursday evening. She paused before the door to shake the water off her umbrella. She barely got the bell rung when Lucy Weston-Welsh opened the door and filled its frame amply. As she smiled, her cheek wrinkles dug deep into her face. "Has it stopped raining out there yet?" *'Esit stawped rehning ought theh yet?* Oh, that New Zealand accent. Ada forgave Lucy a lot, just because she was fun to listen to.

Lucy moved aside, fluffing at her cap of white hair.

The club ladies clustered here and there in the living room. They were the kind of women you might find in any college town. Most were reasonably slender, because they lived the life of the mind. This fed their souls, so they didn't need cheese puffs and doughnuts like other people did. And most left the gray strands in their flat hairdos unretouched because, thanks to that life of the mind again, they didn't panic at the first signs of aging.

"You can see, though, that the place is crumbling," said Emily Stinchfield, music instructor at Beaglin Elementary. "The pieces chipped off the columns, the carpet wearing thin."

"Well, I would gladly pay more for popcorn, if it would help," said Rachel Lowenstein, private piano teacher (Ada's competition, actually).

"Are you talking about the Gilded Door?" asked Ada.

"Some people are calling it 'The Guilty Door,'" said Emily.

"And why do we need it here?" said Rachel. "Isn't that what people go to Philly for? To do the things they don't want to get caught doing?"

"You'd think," said Lucy, "that the blokes could get what they needed from those magazines at the top of the rack, far up where the little pikers can't see those girls on the cover and their . . ." Lucy fluffed her hands before her chest. Everybody knew what she meant: *And their ballooned bosoms.*

"People! This is 1974!" said Rachel. "Haven't we learned by now to stop objectifying women?"

Ada frowned. She still wasn't clear on the meaning of the word "objectifying." But before the evening ended, Lucy Weston-Welsh said she had an idea that might be worth a try. Relief washed over Ada. Until Lucy pointed around the room at the ladies that would help her. Her finger pointed straight at Ada Runyon.

Who could say no to Lucy Weston-Welsh? Her stout form, her bel-

lowing laugh, her exactitude, which made her just right for playing the grand organ every week at St. Abelard's Episcopal Church, added up to a woman who either got what she demanded or hung you out to dry. Ada never forgot how, the year Lucy led the Music Club chorus, she cackled every time the pianist made a mistake. "Ha-ha! I gotcha! I gotcha!"

So on a day chosen by Lucy, Ada found herself in a car parked outside the Gilded Door. She got out when Lucy got out. She looked at Emily Stinchfield to see if Emily had a clue about what Lucy might make them do.

Lucy looked up at the marquee, tightened her lips, and set her rudder for the door.

And there, in the lobby of the Gilded Door, stood Mr. Elroy Skibbey, proprietor.

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"Odd man. *Odd* man, that Mr. Skibbey," said Ada.

She and Ruthalin Feldsted wandered among the craft tables at the Poultry Festival. It was their last best chance for a day out together. In another week, Ruthalin's advancing pregnancy would cross the line from evident to huge-and-miserable. Then she wouldn't want to walk around all afternoon anymore. Ada noticed that Ruthalin was reaching the huge-and-miserable stage weeks earlier with baby #10 than she had back with baby #5.

"But what did he look like?" asked Ruthalin, fingering pot-holders laid out on a sunny table.

"Mr. Skibbey? Well, the lobby was dim. And I was hiding behind Lucy . . ."

"Whatever for?"

"D'you think I want to be mentally undressed by a man who spends his working hours in a dark triple-X theater?"

Ruthalin considered this. "I see your point," she said, moving on to a table of wooden toys. "And Lucy would be big enough to hide behind."

"I was just relieved that she didn't pull a bundle of picket signs out of her trunk. I wouldn't put it past her, you know."

"Oh yes, your Lucy would be that sort. Didn't she live through a couple revolutions?"

"Oh. You mean Kenya. She was teaching there when the natives fi-

nally got fed up with the British. But she got out before they smashed the store windows beneath her flat.”

Ruthalin nodded. “So. Mr. Skibbey?”

“Yes. Well, I was expecting this swarthy villain-type, a real mustache-twirler, you know? But he was just this homely, ruddy man. Probably was the ugliest boy in his grade, the only sort that ever got crushes on me.” Ada followed Ruthalin to a patch of wrought-iron lawn ornaments. “Not tall. Not short. Standing there with his hands in his back pockets, looking at us over his glasses, then tipping his head back and looking through his bifocals.”

“So what happened?”

“Oh. Lucy. She was *so* smooth. Went right into this speech. ‘Now, Mr. Skibbey, we know that you just want to make money. And we know it’s getting harder these days, what with people staying home to watch their color televisions.’ And he says, ‘Actually, the twin theaters out at the new mall . . .’ And Lucy goes on: ‘And we know that the Gilded Door was once a vaudeville house, and the stage is still back there behind that screen, am I right?’”

“And how did he take all this?”

“He looked over his glasses. That was his I’m-sure-you’re-here-to-cause-trouble look. But Lucy just went on about the music club and about Boxford being a decent town and how she could find things to put on that stage that Boxfordians would pay to see.”

“And how did he take that?” By now, Ruthalin had arrived at a table of curiously constructed blouses. She fingered the pleats and turned out the seams to study the workmanship.

“He looked at us through his bifocals,” said Ada. “That was his I’m-really-a-nice-guy-I-just-have-to-make-a-living look.”

“So he listened to all this and didn’t throw you out?”

“Most people listen to Lucy, if they know what’s good for them. And that’s how we got two Friday nights a month to use the old stage at the Guilty Door.”

“You mean he didn’t give up the triple-X completely?”

“Oh, Lucy’s good. But she’s not *that* good. We have to prove we can make money for him. She’s lining up the shows. We’ve got a concert pianist coming July 12th, so mark your calendar.”

“I see. July 12th,” said Ruthalin, absently. She held up a blouse,

pointing to the buttoned flaps across the chest. "Are these slits for nursing?"

"That's right," beamed the craft lady behind the table.

"Clever!" said Ruthalin.

"I'll say. With one of these," said Ada, "you could actually sit through Kevin's football games, instead of excusing yourself to feed the baby."

"I could. Though I don't know why I'm hiding my bosoms when Xaviera's showing hers off down on Main Street."

The craft lady moved close to her cash box. She beamed as Ruthalin exclaimed over the precision of the zipper installment.

"Well, are you going to buy?" Ada whispered. She could not believe the look in Ruthalin's eye. Was Ada about to witness the county's foremost tin-foil re-user spend money?

Ruthalin held the blouse out for a final admiring look.

"I could make this," she said, and hung it up.

As they walked away, Ada looked back at the craft lady, whose smile had grown brittle but brave.

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"And so, the first will be Mr. Koji Yoshimoto, a classical pianist," Ada told the Boxford Ward.

The people in her husband's Sunday School class broke into a babble of happiness.

"We'll show that Mr. Skibbey a thing or two!"

"He may find out he never needed to go over to the blue movies to make a buck!"

"Yes, well, you can call me for tickets." Ada moved through the room. She passed by Ruthalin's husband Erval as he rocked on his heels next to Bishop Keating. "A thing like this wouldn't happen back home in Wales, Utah," said Erval. "Something like this . . . well, it's been one of the hardest adjustments, you know? I just think that children grow up better out west. They don't have all the problems you see here."

"You can get away from it there," said the bishop.

"Exactly. I mean, I know we saw it as an adventure, coming back east. But sometimes I wake up early in the morning and I wonder if we did the right thing. I mean, this place is so *old*. It's already made a long list of mistakes."

“Like?”

“Well, the fellas at work say gangsters run all the ports.”

“And they say the governor takes bribes.”

“Exactly! And now we all have to live with these mistakes. And it’s just not like that out there. Boys who grow up out there become *men*.”

“They meet better girls, too. When Jerry brought home that girl from New Jersey . . .” The bishop shook his head.

Ervall nodded deeply. “And sure, the kids say, ‘It’s dusty out there. It’s empty,’ but . . .”

“Empty can be a good thing. It’s like a clean slate. Give people a clean slate and maybe they’ll get it right this time.”

“Exactly.”

Ada, who herself had left the desert behind, sailed on to where her husband Latham listened to Jeralee Keating. “I told Jerry, ‘We used to entertain ourselves. We didn’t have all these movie theaters and bowling alleys and spinball arcades.’”

*Spinball?*

“‘And we had more fun then!’ I told him. Isn’t that right? I told him, ‘Why don’t you invite your friends over and we’ll show them how to have a taffy pull. Or we’ll teach them to play Wink ’Em.’ And he just can’t understand it! Why, I’ll bet you remember the days when you pulled back the chairs in the kitchen, invited the local fiddler, and had a dance.”

Latham nodded politely, even though Ada knew he remembered no such thing.

“It really was more fun then,” Jeralee went on. “I tell you, when a town fills up with these places that lure young people away from wholesome, homemade fun, trouble is right around the corner.”

What places? Like the paddle boats in the park? Like the concerts in the college auditorium? Like the new mall out beyond the bypass? Why, Boxford was a fine town. Oh, sure, the boulevard was junked up with too many power lines and car lot pennants. And you didn’t want to be out on Homecoming weekend, with all the hijinks on the quad over by College Hall. Still, Boxford was getting to be a nice place to spend a Saturday night.

Or at least it was until the Gilded Door started showing triple-X movies.

But Ada envisioned the Guilty—that is, the Gilded Door’s auditorium right now, filled so full that the fire marshal would march in on a



gust of importance, plant his fists on his love handles, and decree that the aisles must be cleared or else.

And Mr. Skibbey would look through his bifocals and then over the rims of his glasses. He would notice how his naughty movies never packed 'em in like this, no matter how much he might like to watch them himself.

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The Boxford Music Club was a busy crew. They not only had to rent a grand piano and haul it into the Gilded Door. They had to make reservations for their guest, Mr. Koji Yoshimoto, at the Best Rest Inn. Somebody had to pick him up at the Philly airport. When Lucy asked who wanted to do it, a half dozen ladies protested that they couldn't handle all those free-way lanes. So Lucy—confident, fearless, dangerous, if you want to know the truth—took on the job herself. Ada pitied Mr. Yoshimoto.

Then, when he arrived, they fed him a dinner of crabcakes and Emily Stinchfield's famous Grasshopper Pie. They dusted the black lacquer finish on the grand piano and placed a glass of cold water on a little table in the wings and offered their guest a lint brush for his pants. They passed out programs and explained to a stray customer or two that, sorry, it wasn't the usual fare at the Guilty Door tonight. It was the second Friday of the month, given over to classical music and wouldn't they like to come in and give it a try? They found themselves saying all this to the customer's back as he hurried out.

"I hope he finds relief somewhere," said one music-clubber.

"The 7-11's magazine racks aren't but five minutes away," said the other.

Not until Mr. Yoshimoto's opening arpeggio did Ada catch her breath and look around at the auditorium. *Not bad*, she thought as her eyes traveled all the way up to the seats under the balcony. *Not exactly a fire-marshal crowd but . . .* Mr. Yoshimoto's Brahms was so beautiful, she looped her arm through Latham's and lost herself in booming, wide-shouldered chords that she would never, ever hear from her students.

When he finished his Brahms, she scanned the half-shadowed faces in the audience again. Did Ruthalin like this? Did Erval?

In his final moment under the lights, Mr. Yoshimoto bowed and bowed. He nodded toward the smiles of these, his newest friends, all of them clapping hard enough to sting their hands. He was the ultimate gen-

tleman—starched, pressed, polite. Blue-haired ladies gathered around him onstage, pumping his hand. Young girls in velvet dresses—Rachel Lowenstein’s students, no doubt—gripped their rolled-up programs until it was their turn and their mothers pushed them forward.

Lucy appeared at Ada’s side. “I knew we’d forget something. Did we ever decide who will drive him to the motel?”

Ada thought a minute. “I could ask Latham.”

Ada found Latham, deep in discussion with Theodore Stinchfield, head of the math department. Latham said yes, he would drive Mr. Yoshimoto. He jingled the keys in his pocket. He looked around for Mr. Yoshimoto, now in the lobby, who bowed and autographed yet more programs.

One young boy stood before the pianist. “Can you sign in my autograph book?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“But I left it in the car.”

“Would you mind waiting?” asked the child’s father.

“Okay. Is okay.” As Mr. Yoshimoto looked around the lobby, Ada hoped he didn’t notice the burnt-out bulb just over his head, or the carpet threads hanging from the stairs up to the balcony. She hoped he couldn’t see how badly little old Boxford needed him. Let him just stand there, wearing his permanent-pasted smile, trying not to eavesdrop on Lucy and the autograph boy’s mommy (apparently another good Episcopalian) as they discussed the results of Reverend Anglesey’s biopsy.

“Do you know what kind of cancer they’re looking for?”

“Nobody’s saying.”

Mr. Yoshimoto studied the lobby, the mirrors behind the empty candy counter, the dormant popcorn machine stuffed into a corner, the worn velvet ropes lining the walls.

His eye fell on something tucked behind the display case. He cocked his head, reading sideways. Elroy Skibbey stepped forward from the shadows. Mr. Yoshimoto looked up with inquiring eyes. “You collect?” Mr. Skibbey pulled it out—a poster of Xaviera del’Abunda in her hardhat and not much else.

Mr. Yoshimoto gave the poster a long appreciative glance. Even if he only spoke tourist English, he seemed to comprehend perfectly well, as Skibbey explained what went on at the Gilded Door all the other nights of the month. “Ah!” His eyebrows rose up. “I see! I see, yes!”

Skibbey rolled up the poster and gave it to Mr. Yoshimoto, who tucked it under his arm with a secret smile. He signed the little boy's autograph book. He bowed one last time.

Ada's husband broke away from Dr. Stinchfield, shook out his car keys, and said, "Ready to go?"

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And he had seemed like such a gentleman. He had seemed like the kind of man that if, say, he were locked into a room at the Best Rest Motor Inn (accidentally, of course) with someone as pretty as Emily Stinchfield, he would never lay a finger on her. He would let Emily have the bed, while he slept upright in the little square chair. And Emily would never wake up to find him standing over her, breathing heavily.

But men could shock you. Latham had. When Ada first met him, he had been one of the most upright young men in her congregation, the kind that took every last commandment seriously, the kind who walked blocks out of his way to avoid a bathing beauty on a billboard.

But when she finally had his ring on her finger, when she finally got him alone behind the door of Room 824 at the Hotel Bonneville, she was shocked at how ably, how eagerly he undid the buttons of her going-away suit.

Not that she minded, oh no! But the next time she sat in church and saw all those suited men up front, her world had turned so fast that the sun now came up in the west and water flowed uphill. Here were men who delivered thundering sermons to the teenagers, sermons about bridling one's passions. They were so convincing that you were sure these men had no passions at all.

Didn't need 'em!

Bathing beauty on a billboard? They didn't *want* to see it. It was something they didn't *like*, just like they didn't like cucumbers, or Preparation H commercials.

At least that's what virginal Ada thought.

Newlywed Ada knew better. Newlywed Ada understood that it took monumental will for these fellows to stare straight ahead when that billboard loomed.

This morning, as she wiped up an orange juice spill, she remembered Mr. Yoshimoto's delighted face as Xaviera del'Abunda came out from behind the concession counter. As she shook the dust cloth out on

the back porch, she pictured him in the passenger seat of Latham's car. And as she sorted socks on the bed, she wondered if Mr. Yoshimoto had tried to share his little souvenir with her husband.

Had Latham looked?

No. She knew Latham pretty well. Ogling the wife was okay. Everybody else was off-limits.

But would he secretly wish that he could look? Did he long, deep-down, for his wife to look more like Xaviera (that is, what little he could see of her as he turned away from Mr. Yoshimoto's poster)?

Ada tucked the folded socks into the drawer, reached down for the laundry basket, and caught sight of herself in the mirror beside the door. She stood up straight and studied the image.

The shock of gray at her temple was not that bad. It didn't detract much from her minstrel-boy haircut. And she was still slender, aside from the little pooch-out left over from three pregnancies.

Hers was not the kind of beauty any man would associate with wild midnight fantasy. But maybe she wasn't trying hard enough.

She turned sideways and lifted her chin just so.

She thrust out her bosom until her back muscles complained.

She flared her nostrils and composed her face into its most Xaviera-like pout.

She posed her arm behind her head and stared at herself in the mirror, her body all S-shaped. S for Slithery, for Siren. Then she . . .

The bedroom door burst open. "Ada, have you seen my white notebook? I'm late already for pries. . ."

Latham stopped.

He looked her up and down, his eyebrows jacked up with surprise.

"Don't scare me like that!" Ada undid her pose. "Well, what are you staring at?"

"I wish I knew."

"Oh, this is too much!" She picked up her laundry basket and batted at the air. "Too much Guilty Door! Too much Xaviera! We can't get away from that woman. I just . . . well, tell me Latham. Do you ever wish I was more like . . . like that?"

"Ohhhhhh," he moaned, low in his chest. He moved close, nuzzlingly close. He looked at his watch. "Darn priesthood meeting," he muttered. "Next time you're wondering," he whispered, "you let me know. And right away."

Then, after one last hungry look, he left.

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The women of the Boxford Ward, as warriors go, were fierce but undirected. They were fierce in the church kitchen on a Thursday morning, with the air conditioning broken and the hot water steaming out of the faucets as they washed up all the sticky utensils and blender parts with which they had conquered four bushels of peaches. They were fierce with the mop and the vacuum as they cleaned up the morning's food spills in the children's room. They were fierce with a plate of lunch as each woman ripped into her dinner roll and mopped up every last bit of salad dressing.

They could be fierce about the Guilty Door, too, if they only knew what to do. So, that Thursday morning, when Ada Runyon mentioned that the next show would be the Halifax Fiddle Band all the way from Nova Scotia, they gathered around, these warriors, ready to be told which direction to throw the spear.

The Halifax Fiddle Band was fifteen high school kids, their fiddles, their drums, their accordions, and their keepers. A band like this, Ada told them, didn't have the budget to put themselves up at the Best Rest. They needed homes to stay in, and they must be fed, of course.

The women of the Boxford Ward took them on. Ada scribbled wildly as they volunteered: Galvins, two spare beds; Buckmans, another two. Jeralee offered a potato salad. Ruthalin was good for a cake.

Lucy would be proud. She had an opinion about Mormon women, who knows where she picked it up. When she faced the club and barked off all the tasks that it took to bring in those fiddlers from Halifax, and when the ladies raised their hands and offered this and that and still there were gaps on the list, Lucy looked Ada's way. And that look said, *I know your people will come through.*

So here Ada's people were, coming through. No problem. They changed bedsheets and made cakes all the time anyway. What was one or two more?

Especially when they were still furious about that Guilty Door. Every time they hit the stoplight at the boulevard and Main and saw that marquee, it bothered them like a grease stain on a new skirt. They remembered how things once were, and how they could still be if only *that* hadn't happened.

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It was Ada's job to sweat the small stuff. It was all listed in the carbon-smudged contract Lucy had typed up:

Stock orange juice for a diabetic drummer.

Arrange a hair appointment for the band director.

Provide buttons. One dozen, black, round, 7/8 in., four holes. When showtime loomed ten minutes away and a costume fell apart, that was no time to knock at the locked doors of Chandler's Fabric, or search the bottom of a purse, or snip what you needed off Lucy's husband's suit coat.

When Ada stepped into Chandler's and found the wall of buttons, she also found Ruthalin, which was no surprise. Chandler's and its aisles of pincushions and seersuckers was Ruthalin's guilty pleasure.

Ada sighed before the wall. "Did they used to have this many?" Pearlies. Shiny metals. Buttons big as stethoscopes and small as aspirins. "Where are the plain black ones?"

"What do you need?" Ruthalin looked at Ada's list. "Oh, don't buy those. I have bunches of 'em back at home."

"It's not a problem buying them. No, really! It's in the contract. That means it's reflected in the ticket price."

Ruthalin grimaced. "Why spend money when you don't have to?"

"It's covered. It's not a problem."

"No, I can't let you do this. Well, if buttons were on sale, maybe, but . . ."

So Ada found herself standing in Ruthalin's kitchen, while Ruthalin sorted buttons like dry beans and poured all her black, round, 7/8 in., four-holed ones into Ada's cupped hands. It was more trouble than Ada needed, driving all the way out to the Feldsteds' house today. But Ruthalin looked so pleased with herself. *The cause needs buttons. Therefore, I have helped the cause.*

\* \* \*

The cause also needed bodies.

Or so Lucy said one evening as she packed up her music after chorus rehearsal. When the last alto was out of earshot, Lucy leaned close to Ada. "You know, I was surprised to see none of your people at the Yoshimoto concert."

Ada felt like she'd been caught playing with Lucy's baton. "Oh, that

can't be," she said, when she could stop stammering. "We're all very much . . ." But could she remember where Ruthalin sat? Which aisle she walked down? Whether she wore the blue maternity dress or the peach one? Had Ada seen Jeralee waving across the room at other ward members? Linger- ing in the lobby after the show?

"Several years ago," said Lucy, "I taught in a place called Idaho Falls—don't know if you've ever heard of it—but it was just crawling with Mormons. And they were the backbone of the symphony there. Wonderful people. And when I met you here, and heard about your ward, I thought the arts in Boxford would be in fine hands."

Lucy picked up her music bag. "But now, I'm just . . . puzzled." She walked off to her beater car.

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"As if the whole burden was on us!" Ada dipped her fingers into the cold cream and looked out the bathroom door at Latham. "We're just a teeny part of this town. Yes, there are more Mormons here than you might expect, far off the beaten path and all, but . . ."

"But she's right." Latham lounged on the bed. "It should be us filling that theater."

"There's not enough of us!"

"Oh, come on. Put the Feldsteds in there and you've got a crowd. They even look like more than they are, because none of 'em can sit still."

"No, here's the problem." Ada wiped her face clean. "Does some- one like Lucy even understand what it is for Erval and Ruthalin to buy *eleven* tickets? How much money have they got left after the groceries and the shoes? After the tithing and the mission funds?"

"It still should be us."

Ada laid her head on the pillow. "I know. But she can't be unfair about this. I don't know how they did it in Idaho Falls. But, Idaho Falls or Boxford, it's tougher for us than for the average Episcopalian. That's the part Lucy doesn't see."

"Just go buy a couple dozen tickets and spread them around. We're good for it."

She looked into his face. "Why is it I never think of these things?" He shrugged, proud of himself.

"All right," she said. "Two dozen tickets. That Mr. Skibbey's not

gonna drag Xaviera del'Abunda into this town without a fight on his hands."

"Oh, Xaviera del whatever! She's got nothin' on you. Say, could you do that little pose thing again?"

"No!"

"Come onnnnn."

"No, really, I hurt myself."

"Where does it hurt? I'll make it better."

"Stop that!" she laughed. "*Stop that!*" And she was still laughing when the light clicked off.

\* \* \*

On the Friday of the Halifax Fiddle Band's appearance, Ada's phone rang non-stop. If it wasn't seventeen different people wondering when the coffee and barbecue meat were supposed to be at the theater, it was a host family's bathroom out of order.

Finally, she tucked the extra tickets in her purse. She had promised them all around the ward. Now, it was time to deliver.

She drove through town. Heat shimmered off the sidewalks. She rang at the Keatings' house. When Jeralee's sober-faced eight-year-old daughter answered, music floated faintly through the door.

Inside, Jeralee sat before a reel-to-reel tape recorder. She pressed the off button. "I don't like the scratchy sounds," she told her teenage son.

"That's just you, handling the microphone."

"Well, I have to hold it."

"No, you don't. You can put it here." He planted it on the coffee table. "It'll pick up."

"Oh, hi!" Jeralee stood up. "I was just recording some songs. I've been procrastinating this for years. But this week I said to myself, 'Jeralee, They'll be lost! Lost! Your little granddaughter will never hear the songs your grandmother sang.' Sometimes, you have to put aside the dusting and the green-bean canning and just do what's really important! Isn't that right?" She walked into the kitchen. "The potato salad's in here." She raised a foil-covered bowl from the kitchen counter.

Ada took the bowl. "And I brought those tickets I promised. I don't want anybody breaking the bank or anything."

"Oh, we won't be needing them."

"Really? Well, good, you got your own then."



“No.”

“No?” asked Ada.

“Um . . .” Jeralee fingered some loose hairs that escaped her ponytail, “Are you aware that the Guilty Door is still showing those other movies?”

Ada studied Jeralee’s face, where *Doing the Right Thing* did battle with *Being Nice*. “Jeralee, that was part of the deal. Mr. Skibbey has to make money. We’re just trying to show him that he can make more with our kind of show than with his.”

Jeralee knitted her brows. What a world! Good and evil were so marbled together that a spoonful of one picked up a stripe of the other. “Well, I couldn’t feel right about going there. Someone might see. They might misunderstand.”

Ada gripped the bowl of potato salad, an edge of foil jabbing into her finger. She left Jeralee’s house, with Jeralee singing something about “Old Uncle Ned” into a microphone that her teenage son would not let her handle, for a granddaughter who was—what?—six months old?

Ada rehearsed, all the way down the Feldstedts’ road, how she would tell it to Ruthalin: “*Someone might see. They might misunderstand.*” *Can you believe that, Ruthalin? Let’s just lock up and go home now!*

When she arrived, their garage yawned open. Eerval pattered in the dark. He emerged, shaking out a rope.

“Good news, Eerval!” Ada sang out. “I finally brought your tickets.”

“Tickets for what?”

Ada stopped. She stared at him and his rope. “You’re kidding me, right?” She watched him toss the rope into the little trailer attached to his van. A tent, a Coleman stove, a couple of ragged lawn chairs sat packed into the corner. “Okay, I can see you’re going camping. But you’re leaving after the show, right? You remembered the Halifax Fiddle Band is playing tonight, right?”

“Is that so?” He dropped new batteries into a big yellow flashlight, clicked it on, and watched the bright new beam of light dart around the rafters.

“Yes, that’s so. You and Ruthalin remembered, didn’t you?” She followed him around like a child whining for ice cream money. The very idea, a grown woman pleading like this! Giving up on him, she stepped through the door into the hall, picking her way between the bedrolls, the canteens, the mosquito repellent.

Ruthalin, in the kitchen, sweated over a counter of half-made sand-

wiches. She looked up, shoving back a loose tendril at her forehead. No, no, she hadn't forgotten the Halifax Fiddle Band, she said, but she had forgotten the Scout camp-out. "You know how these things sneak up on you," she said.

"Maybe the Scouts could skip this time." said Ada. "Wasn't there a camp-out just last month?"

Erval joined them in the kitchen. "There's a camp-out *every* month."

"Well, that's what I'm saying. With plenty of chances to build fires and track raccoon prints all year long, one month off won't hurt."

Erval laid his flashlight on the table. "Those boys need consistency. You haven't got a program at all if one month it's yes and the next it's we'll-let-you-know."

"Erval, we need to fill that theater tonight. If we don't . . . well, Mrs. Weston-Welsh says she's surprised that the Mormons haven't turned out."

"I'll buy a ticket, if that'll help."

Her smile felt brittle but brave.

\* \* \*

Fifteen shadows stood on the old vaudeville stage at the Guilty Door. The lights went up. A hand gripped a drum. Another stretched its fingers before the white of the accordion keys. Another raised a flute to a pair of lips. Then the first bow struck the strings and they were off.

Behind the music, extension cords twined through the wings. Instrument cases gaped open. Up the tar-papered stairs, a lone light shone in a dressing room littered with open garment bags and hair-clogged brushes.

Down the hall, the scent of barbecue slowly died on a long table. Sheets of tin foil, smeared with frosting, potato goo, and melon juice, threw light up to the ceiling. Paper plates slouched in the garbage and a small pool of coffee dried in a Styrofoam cup.

And the music reeled on and the dimly lit bodies out in the house seats sat like a wave that had tried for high tide but fallen short of the wet sand line. Toes tapped along helplessly to the beat.

Meanwhile, at the back of the house, dark men straggled in. They stirred in the shadows, too restless to sit. They scowled at the stage.

One made his way unsteadily down the aisle. He found a nice

mid-house seat and fell in. The metal fittings wheezed under his bulk. He scratched his lumberjack beard. He yawned the long and thorough yawn of a door creaking open.

His scrawny buddy sat three seats away.

“When do they take their clothes off?” said Mr. Big Beard.

Heads turned. Eyes glared.

“Shut up, Mugly!” whispered Mr. Scrawny. “Gaaa, I can’t take you nowhere.”

Lucy bolted from her seat and charged up the aisle.

Everybody was too busy being uncomfortable to notice the beads of perspiration growing on a flute player’s forehead. Nobody noticed how deeply she swayed or how off the beat she was. Nobody noticed until her wooden flute fell to the floor and she rushed into the wings. Then, before the audience could finish murmuring in surprise, a fiddler ducked through the same gap in the curtains.

By the time Ada arrived backstage, Emily Stinchfield mopped the brow of the waxy-pale flautist. The toilet behind a closed door flushed and platoons of Halifaxers who could not wait for the bathroom retched into cups, shopping bags, and the already pungent garbage can.

Ada surveyed the food table. She stood over Jeralee’s glistening potato salad. She laid her hand against the bowl. Feeling its wan room temperature, she counted the hours back to Jeralee’s kitchen counter.

Out on the stage, the Music Club ladies laid out the sick. They offered up blazers, stacks of programs, even instrument cases as pillows. Ada walked among the bodies. Even on a night like this, the Gilded Door couldn’t help playing like the movies. Scarlett O’Hara in the Atlanta train yard came to mind.

She heard Lucy shouting up in the lobby. “Mr. Skibbey, it’s *our* night at the Guilty Door!”

“A man buys a ticket. A man gets in the door.”

And, from the orchestra seats, “All I asted was, when they gonna take off their. . .”

“Cut it out, Mugly! I heard ya the first time. *Ever*’body heard ya.”

“I should think, Mr. Skibbey, that you can tell the difference between *your* kind of ticket buyer and *our* kind!”

“I’m a businessman, Mrs. Weston-Welsh. I don’t much care where a dollar comes from.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. Mugly, he’s had a little too much tonight. He don’t know what he’s sayin’.”

“Well, then, take him home and tuck him in for the night!”

“Right, ma’am. Come on, Mugly. Mugly? . . . Mugly? Hey, anybody seen a guy with a big beard?”

Mugly, meanwhile, did his best not to trip over the power cords, the instrument cases, the tar-papered steps.

And when he saw the long table, he found a spoon and dug into the potato salad.

\* \* \*

It sat on an even quieter end of Main Street.

Parents used to drop their children off at the curb on Saturdays. Even when the Disney movies left, the children still came to browse the comic book store next door. But with the likes of Kandi Lotusblossom and Xaviera smirking out over Main Street, the mothers of Boxford feared that comic books wouldn’t keep their children’s attention. So they didn’t bring them anymore.

The comics were a steal, though. “5 cents!!!” said the sign in the window. “Close-out sale!”

At the Sunshine Laundry, smashed cigarette packs and crumpled brown bags blew against the chipped wall. Inside, empty spaces grew on the revolving hanger. The owner spent more time at his new branch out by the mall, where the profits were tidy, and the atmosphere as fresh as a newly starched shirt.

Without customers or a boss to bother her, the Sunshine attendant found time to read each and every story in her *True Confessions* magazine.

And at the Shoreline State Bank, little old ladies pulled up to the teller window, safely encased in their Buicks. They gripped their pass-books and drove down Main the other way, so they wouldn’t have to creep past scowling men who looked this way and that before they entered the Guilty Door.