

## Old Hands

By Erin Mitchell

From DARK CITY LIGHTS

*"You have an old soul."*

*"I'm not sure about that, but I definitely have old hands."*

Lunch is always interesting. I sit on the same bench in a relatively quiet corner of Central Park most days with a book and my sandwich because I have to get out of the store, away from the squawking, yipping, mewling...not to mention the smells. I must look approachable, because usually at least one of the homeless men wandering by will have a pithy comment or three. I've gotten good at responses that are dismissive without being rude. The Soul Man, for example, had no comeback for my *hands* retort, and shuffled off muttering about pigeons.

This isn't where I intended to be. Killing a person has a funny way of getting your life off-track.

Don't misunderstand...I'm not a glamorous or interesting hitwoman. I have no idea how a silencer works, wouldn't know how to buy a gun if my life depended on it, and I don't collect stamps. I'm kind of dowdy; my most attractive feature, my Dublin accent, is fading fast into a typical New York twang. I've spent my entire life taking directions from those in positions more powerful than my own.

I was a nurse. Technically, I still am; my license is good for life, and my registration has another year before it expires. But I hadn't deliberately chosen nursing so much as I'd fallen into it by default, and I my illustrious career ended when Mr. Richards took his last breath. I gave him the right painkiller—but the wrong dose. I had glanced at the chart, filled the syringe, and with all the efficiency in the world, depressed the plunger into his IV. He was dead within minutes.

There was a morbidity and mortality conference, of course. The resident gave his presentation, after which it was abundantly clear that the mistake was mine. The order was correct, but I had misread it. When I met with the HR woman who was trying just a little bit too hard, she explained that I would get a reprimand. The Incident would be recorded in My File.

"But given that you've never had something like this happen before, we don't see the need to take any further action."

"Really?"

"Yes. You seem surprised."

"I am. I mean, I expected to be fired. I *should* be fired."

"We don't see it that way."

"I was negligent. A man died. It was my fault. How else is there to see it?"

“These situations are always difficult. We have a counselor we’d recommend you talk to.”

Instead of making an appointment with the counselor, I used the typewriter at the nurses’ station to prepare my resignation—it only took a few minutes thanks to typing skills courtesy Sister Lamb at St Mary’s Holy Faith—and slipped it under HR’s door before leaving that night.

I grabbed a newspaper on the way home and saw a help-wanted ad for a small pet store on West 71<sup>st</sup>. I figured I could handle furry and scaled creatures. The owner of the store is eighty if he’s a day, and he was impressed by my credentials so he hired me on the spot, and now I spend my lunch hour here.

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“What are you reading?”

“A book.”

“Which one?”

“One from the library.”

“Is it *The Joy Luck Club*?”

“No.”

“Have you read that? Seems to be all the rage.”

“No.”

“*No* as in not the rage, or *no* as in you haven’t read it?”

At this point, I looked up, because it seemed this particular pesterer wasn’t going to meander away any time soon. Much to my surprise, it was the physician who had been the attending on Mr. Richards’ case. Almost a year older and sporting longer hair than I recalled, but definitely the same guy.

“What do you want?” I believe in getting right to the point.

“It’s been a while. I was wondering how you are.”

“Why? And how did you find me?”

“Because you had a traumatic experience, and then you disappeared. And the phonebook. If you’re hiding, you’re not very good at it.”

“Bullshit. The phonebook doesn’t list my work address.”

“No, but your neighbor was happy to tell me where the store is. And the old guy there told me you’d be here.”

“Go away.” Again, the point.

“Have dinner with me.”

“No.”

“Look, I’ve been worried about you. You shouldn’t have quit. You’re an excellent nurse.”

“Excellent nurses don’t kill patients.”

“It was a mistake. They happen. It’s horrible, but they do. Hell, I wrote the order, and I know my handwriting is not always clear.”

“That’s an understatement, but you’re no different from any other doctor. It was my responsibility to double-check if it wasn’t clear”

He looked like he was getting ready to either babble or lecture. “I miss seeing you around, talking with you, and—“

“Fuck off.”

So much for witty retorts. But I’d had enough. As much as I hated to, I stood up, ready to cut short my precious lunch hour by a few minutes and head back to the shop.

“Have dinner with me.”

“No.” As I started down the path toward the sidewalk, I stepped in a pile of gray goo. It might have once been food or even a bird, but now it was just...slippery.

And slip I did, forward, right onto my knees. My book—*Lullaby*, as it happened—went flying. In that instant, I fully expected to feel his hand on my arm, being oh-so chivalrous, helping me up, but he went for the book instead.

“Ed McBain. I’ve heard of him.” I rolled my eyes. “Look, that was karma telling you to talk to me.”

“No, that was this gray...shite that’s now all over my trousers and will probably ruin them. Just give me my book.”

He handed it to me. I wasn’t lying to the homeless guy; my hands are wrinkly and knobby and look like they belong on an old woman. I gripped the novel so hard that my antediluvian mitt that slipped on the cellophane cover.

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Not long after dark as I was about to close up the shop, in he walked, doing that Doctor Strut like he owned the place.

“I’m persistent.” He grinned.

“You say that like it’s a good thing: the perseverance of the stupid. And we’re closed.”

“Have dinner with me.”

“You already asked, and I declined the invitation.”

“This is where I’m hoping my persistence pays off. I really want to talk to you. And it’s just dinner. Nothing fancy.”

“You make it sound *so-o* appealing.” He guffawed. “Even if I wanted to, I can’t. I have to go home. I need to feed the cat.”

“I think the cat can wait.”

“You don’t know this cat. She’s gets grumpy when she’s hungry. And she doesn’t appreciate dinner being late.”

“Luckily, cats can’t tell time.”

“Again, you don’t know this cat. She can.”

“I’ll spring for an extra entrée you can bring home to her.”

“You have an answer for everything.”

“Not really, but I’ve been practicing this conversation for months now. I feel so guilty, like I participated in your giving up your calling. If I’d—“

“I also need to change my trousers. They’re stained.”

“You can barely see it. Nobody will notice. You look great. You—“

“Fine. I’ll have dinner with you.” I said it as much to shut him up as anything, but I’d wanted to say yes because I found him weirdly if amusingly sincere. I grabbed the slightly tatty purple LeSportsac that I carried everywhere and headed toward the door. As he fell in step next to me, I noticed that he had a slight limp.

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“Can we get a bottle of the house red, Judy?”

The restaurant was typically anonymous—lime green walls, glass-topped tables, a generic Italian menu—but he must have been a regular. Judy’s glance told me I should make a little more effort. Before I could think of something to say, he asked, “So where are you from?”

“You made such a fuss about dinner to ask me that?”

A grin. “Yeah, ok. I know you’re Irish.”

“If you have a third cousin twice removed in Ennis, I don’t know her.”

Still grinning. “No, no Irish relatives. I’m from Davenport. Iowa. That’s—“

“I know where fecking Iowa is. How’d you get the limp?”

“Football. American football. My ACL is shot.”

He traded the grin for what I assumed he figured was a meaningful stare into the depths of my soul.

“I guess I should tell you why I’ve called you here.”

“You didn’t call me. You just appeared. Twice.” I should have been curious what he really wanted, but for the moment, I was enjoying our little tête-à-tête, which a shrink probably would have characterized as some kind of power-play.

“I work with a lot of nurses. I can tell when someone is meant to be a nurse. You shouldn’t have quit.”

“Perhaps your perceptions aren’t as astute as you think. Mr. Richards’ family sure wouldn’t agree with you.” I emptied my wine glass in one go.

He reached out as if to take my hand, but stopped short and showed me his palm.

“Listen to me. I know not a day goes by that you don’t think about that night. About Mr. Richards. You didn’t do it deliberately, but I’ll never forget your expression when you realized what had happened. You looked at your hands. Just like you’re doing now.”

He was right. I was staring at my hands.

“Your life is stuck, and unless you want it to stay stuck forever, you need to do something about it. You need to go back to nursing.”

“Look, not that it’s any of your business, but I’m fine. I have a great job. Wonderful friends. A cute flat. Apartment. I said my Hail Marys and moved on. Really. I guess I appreciate what you’re trying to do—you’ve sure made an effort—but it’s not necessary.”

“That’s great, even if it is a pack of lies. I know it is. I saw how you interacted with patients. The depth of your compassion is unmistakable. You have to forgive yourself. You made a mistake that had a terrible outcome, but that shouldn’t stop you from fulfilling your potential.”

I tried his stare-into-the-soul back at him. “I appreciate that you care. But I’m finished with nursing. Now, can we change the subject?”

He obliged, sort of. He regaled me with tales from the hospital, about hilarious patients and inept colleagues. As he talked, I realized his eyes were a lovely dark green flecked with gold bits. The veal was better than I expected it to be, and I wondered if that had something to do with the company.

“I’ll pay the check and then let’s go for a nightcap.”

“No, I really do have to get home and feed the cat.”

“Ok, I’ll just get a chicken breast to go and I’ll walk you home.”

I laughed; I couldn’t help myself. “Don’t worry about the chicken, but I will take you up on the walk home. I’ve been on edge with all the Central Park Jogger crap.”

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We ended up running most of the way back to my building through a fierce drizzle. I didn’t have a proper awning, so I pulled him into the foyer with me. As I checked the box for mail, I asked whether he’d like to come up for a coffee. I barely had the words out before he’d accepted and started toward the staircase.

My flat was tidy, if tiny. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a visitor, and wasn’t sure what exactly the protocol was. The cat met us at the door, making it abundantly clear that she was not pleased that her dinner was late. She was all-white with blue eyes and deaf as a doornail. As I set about emptying a can of mystery-meat pate into her bowl, he reached down and petted her cautiously.

“She likes you.”

“I’m glad. I would hate to be on her shit list. She’s obviously important to you.”

I’d offered coffee, so I grabbed the bag of Bewley’s my da had sent, turned the gas on under the kettle that I always left full on the cooker, and pulled the top off the French press.

“Cream and sugar?” I figured I sounded like a flight attendant.

“Yes, please.” He was looking through the cassettes on the shelf attached to the wall.

“You like traditional Irish music.”

“Congratulations. You can read tape covers.” I realized I sounded like a real bitch.  
“Sorry. Yes. My da is a musician.”

“I like the Chieftains.”

“Everybody likes the Chieftains.”

“Do you get back to Ireland much?”

“No, not really. My sister was over for a visit a few months ago, and I ring my parents every weekend”

“Do you have a big family?”

“Enough about me.” I put the mugs on the upside-down wooden crate that served as a coffee table in front of my miniature loveseat. He squeezed down next to me and took my hand.

“I—“

“I know.” I kissed him. Or let him kiss me. Either way, the coffee went cold while we relocated ourselves to my twin bed. The sex was entirely passable—not workmanlike and nothing to set off fireworks. It was...comfortable. Nice.

Afterwards, he snored while I dug my book out of my bag and relocated back to the loveseat. The cat joined me; as much as she could be cranky, she was good company. When we were alone, I would read to her sometimes even though she couldn't hear a word.

I finished the last few pages of *Lullaby* and noted that the snoring had been replaced by the steady breathing of deep sleep. I stopped at the fridge en route back to the loveseat.

The cat kneaded my lap while I observed my prehistoric hands scratching behind her ears. After a few minutes, she decided I was softened up enough and sat down, purring and still digging her nails into the side of my leg in the rhythm that's built into feline DNA.

I kept petting her as I thought about what he'd said, about my being meant to be a nurse. I was still considering this, wondering what about me had made him so certain, as I picked up the chilly syringe I'd already filled and had retrieved from the fridge. The cat didn't feel a thing when her breathing slowed then stopped as the tranquilizer flooded her little body.

I hadn't been absolutely sure what would happen because etorphine is normally only used to subdue big wild animals. I had made some assumptions about the dosage, and had no idea whether it would cause seizures or other dramatic reactions. I had expected someone to question the order coming from a small Manhattan pet store that dealt in nothing larger than a French Bulldog, but it had simply arrived in the post.

The cat's death had been painless and peaceful, just like Mr. Richards' had been.

It had been easier in the hospital because I'd known exactly what he would be prescribed and when and precisely how much extra to administer to make sure he died before anyone realized what had happened. And I had the perfect cover story, of course—The Great Mistake—but I wasn't thinking about that as I depressed the plunger. I was overwhelmed by the simple satisfaction of finally doing what I was meant to.

My reverie was interrupted by a cough from the bed. I laid the cat's corporeal form aside gently and picked up the second syringe.

He jerked his arm and opened his eyes just as the needle pricked his vein. I suppose my expression was curious, because patients tend to reflect what they see in their caregivers, and his countenance held a thousand queries, but confidence made my grip strong and my ancient hands held. As his heart slowed and he pulled a few last labored breaths, he must have realized what I said to him right after he died:

“I told you I wasn't cut out to be a nurse.”