



Riff the RAZZLE

D O U G L A S B A R T O N

RIFF THE RAZZLE

SAMPLE

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ONE

JACK BARLEY BRACED himself against the steady pull of deceleration. He was wedged into a middle seat in the last row of a stubby, short-hop Air Bounce, his shoulders taking up a third of the seat to either side. He took a shallow breath. A deep breath might crack his neighbors' ribs. Glancing over the heads of the passengers in front of him, he counted twenty-one rows, with six seats per row—every seat crammed with a fellow traveler. Then he smiled. It was a wild, infectious smile. For despite his discomfort, he wasn't complaining. On the contrary, he could hardly believe he was there.

The Air Bounce touched down with a modest jolt. The tail hatch opened and passengers streamed onto the ramp. Jack shuffled down the aisle, his six-foot, ten-inch frame bent low under the cabin ceiling. When at last he burst through the hatch, he sucked a huge lungful of thin, dry air.

He stretched and looked around. The snow-capped Rocky Mountains were silhouetted by a setting sun. The air was crisp and clear with not a cloud to be seen. The airport throbbed with activity, an Air Bounce taking off or landing every ten seconds. Jack thought they looked like grain silos that had toppled over and sprouted wings.

And they jumped into the air like grasshoppers. He turned and gazed in wonder at the twenty-story steel blade of a nearby Intercontinental transport. It rose silently upward, piercing the bright blue sky, then vanished with a silvery flash.

His fellow passengers swarmed around him, rushing toward the terminal toting carry-on bags. More than a few treated him to curious sidelong glances. He shrugged it off. He was used to attracting attention. Resembling a Greek statue of Hercules, he dwarfed the people around him with improbably broad shoulders, a trim muscular waist, and massive corded thighs. He'd be positively intimidating but for a ready smile beneath a shock of straw-colored hair, and blue eyes that older women described as kind, and younger ones as dreamy. Simply and unstylishly dressed in a wheat-colored shirt, khaki pants and deck shoes, he stood out like an oak tree at a street lamp convention.

He sauntered into the terminal, pulled a battered leather suitcase from the baggage carousel, and strolled toward the exit.

A large, black-clad man followed him at a discreet distance.

Once outside, Jack hailed a taxi. The driver, a wizened old codger who looked not a day over a hundred, waved the car door open with a genial smile. The taxi was a three-wheeler with a large brown dome enclosing the passenger compartment, and a smaller one for the driver. It reminded Jack of an oversized dung beetle, but he kept the thought to himself.

"Help you with your bag, friend?" the driver asked.

"No thanks," Jack told him. "I need the exercise." He tossed his bag lightly on the seat and climbed in. "Please take me to The Curtis Hotel."

"I know it well. A bit different, but comfy."

"Sounds great. I'm looking for different." Jack had booked the hotel sight unseen. Cousin Chloe had described the place as funky. He hoped funky included clean and not too noisy. He settled in as the taxi pulled away from the terminal.

Behind them, the man in black slid into a grey touring car and followed.

Jack dug his fingers into the taxi's cheap upholstery and shivered. An electric surge of emotion washed over him, a profound and spine-tingling release. Free at last! He was finally off the farm, out of Arcadia, and out in the wide world. He repressed an urge to shout out loud, to embrace the whole of creation and suck the juice out of it. He vowed to remember the day: Monday, the fifth of September, 2185.

The driver peered back at him through the rearview mirror, a look of concern on his weathered face. "You all right back there, young feller?"

"I'm just a little excited," Jack said, and slowly exhaled. "While it's hard to believe, this is my first trip away from home."

"Then it's about time I'd say. What's the occasion?"

"I'll be representing the Portland branch of the family at my Cousin Chloe's wedding, tomorrow night in Aspen."

"Sounds grand," the driver said, "and how about tonight?"

"Tonight I'm going to see Denver," Jack said. "And believe me, I intend to make the most of it."

Although he was twenty-six years old, he'd never been off the farm until now, and couldn't understand why. Somehow every opportunity to travel, even as far as the next household, had been stymied by Grandma Ruth or Uncle Elmer. All his protestations had been gently but firmly deflected. He could recite their long litany of excuses word for word. They couldn't possibly spare him, not now, not at harvest time. Or plowing time. Or branding time. He was utterly indispensable, for after all, no one was as skilled as he. Or as strong. Or as quick. And someone had to supervise the hired help. Surely Grandma Ruth couldn't be out in the fields with the men. Uncle Elmer was too busy and old Tom Fletcher, the foreman, was slow in the head.

Jack's hands shook just thinking about it, but he always took care to conceal his resentment. They'd raised him after his parents had died, and he was grateful for that. Uncle Elmer was like a father to him and Grandma Ruth was, well, Grandma Ruth, but she took care of him.

When Uncle Elmer handed him a ticket to the wedding, Jack thought it was a joke. His uncle had a wicked and occasionally unkind sense of humor. For years he'd promised to take Jack on a tour of the wide world, but in the end he'd always found some reason to delay the journey. Now Uncle Elmer was promising to meet him in Portland after the wedding. From there they would set out for Shanghai together. It seemed like a dream come true.

But Jack's dreams had changed over time, and he now had plans of his own. He would honor the family at the wedding, but would not be returning to Arcadia afterward. He had no desire to hurt Uncle Elmer or Grandma Ruth, but he had a life to make for himself. He'd find a piece of land, build a house with his own hands, and live as he chose to, without the two of them controlling his every action. They'd be upset, no doubt about it, but in time they'd understand.

Jack stared intently out the window. The cabbie drove west, straight at the mountains and the setting sun. Brown prairie grass slowly yielded to suburbs, then wide streets, tall buildings, and hordes of pedestrians. Jack drank it all in. After a 30 minute ride that was by his reckoning all too short, the taxi pulled up in front of the hotel. He paid the driver and hopped out with his bag.

The lobby of The Curtis Hotel was sleek and bright, all primary colors and abstract swirls. He paused just inside the revolving doors. There had to be a reception desk somewhere, but just exactly where was not immediately obvious.

A bellhop appeared at Jack's side. "Welcome to The Curtis Hotel," he said. "Are you checking in?"

"Yes, please," Jack said. "Mr. Barley, one night."

The bellhop glanced at a tablet he was carrying, then he plucked Jack's bag from his hand and replaced it with a card key. "Number 210. I'll see this to your room. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"You can point me toward a cup of coffee."

"Two blocks to the left for The Art of Joe, or one block right for Java Explosion."

“Art or explosion?” Jack scratched his head. “Art it is, I think.” The bellhop scurried off before he could thank him. Jack spun a slow 360—this place was different indeed—then strolled out the front door into the deepening twilight.

The Art of Joe featured outdoor café seating. Jack settled down into a sling back chair, clutching a large mug of Italian Roast as he watched the people go by. He contemplated his next move. Wine, women and song—in any order—were his priorities. While there was no lack of delightful women in Arcadia, wine and song were discouraged, so he had a lot of catching up to do. If the coffee was any indication, the food would be excellent. And Chloe said the nightclubs were a world-class adrenaline high.

This happy thought was interrupted by the sudden conviction that he was being watched. He glanced up and locked his eyes on a shockingly beautiful woman. A black, skin-tight body suit accentuated her full figure. Her thick black hair framed pale, flawless skin, and her eyes were veiled by large black shades. She stood with hands on hips, giving him the once-over. On impulse, he gestured to a seat beside him. Somewhat to his surprise, she strolled over and sat down.

“May I offer you a cup of coffee?” he asked.

“Make it a latte.”

Jack had always envisioned Aphrodite as a blonde, but the dark-haired goddess sharing his table might persuade him otherwise. He gestured to the waiter and mouthed ‘latte.’ The waiter promptly delivered one. Jack plucked it off the tray and placed it on the table before his unexpected guest.

“I’m only in town for one evening and don’t know my way around,” Jack said to her. “Where would you go for fine food and great music?”

“All the restaurants in downtown Denver are excellent,” she said. “One place is as good as the next.”

Jack turned her cup until the handle pointed directly at her right hand. “Where would you go?”

She raised the cup and took a sip while she studied him through her big black shades. “Your first time in a big city?”

He sighed. “Is it that obvious?”

“Let’s just say you stand out in a crowd.”

“It’s my first time in Denver and I plan to enjoy it.” He leaned forward. “Why don’t you enjoy it with me?”

She stirred white foam with a long red fingernail. “And you’ll give me a night I’ll never forget?”

Jack held up his hands in mock surrender. “All I can promise is my very best.”

She smiled at this.

Jack’s heart skipped a beat. As he reached for his coffee, his sleeve caught a teaspoon and tumbled it off the table. He started forward but she plucked it deftly from the air and waggled it between her thumb and forefinger.

Jack blinked. “That was quick.”

“Quick can be amusing. Slow is more satisfying.”

Jack froze as he struggled for a response, something clever but not too overt.

“No witty reply?” his guest asked.

“I’m working on it,” Jack said, brow furrowed. “Preferably something poetic.”

“You don’t strike me as the poetic type, more the rugged individualist.”

“True, but what’s on my mind will sound better if it rhymes.” That earned him a chuckle.

“While you’re thinking it over,” she said, “tell me where you’re from.”

“I’m from Arcadia.”

“A farm boy?”

“A farmer,” he chided gently. “We raise organic vegetables and free range beef. I work mostly with cattle.”

“Sounds bucolic.” Was she teasing him? Teasing was a good sign.

"I like it," he said. "I work outdoors, in beautiful surroundings. It's quiet, peaceful, and frankly very profitable."

"Really?" she said. "Synthetic food's got to be cheaper."

"People pay a premium for organic food, and Arcadia has a strong brand."

"So you're rich as well as handsome?"

Jack shrugged noncommittally. "I try to be good company. But enough about me. Tell me about yourself."

She swirled the coffee slowly around in her cup. The liquid went right to the brim, but never over. "I prefer to remain mysterious."

"Well I love a good mystery," Jack said, animated. "And it's getting dark and I'm famished. What say we continue this conversation over dinner?"

"Just dinner?"

"And some music, perhaps." He whispered earnestly, "Say yes."

She leaned toward him until he could feel her hot breath on his face.

"I like you, but I have business to attend to." She stroked his cheek with the back of her fingers. "Maybe later."

Jack settled back in his chair and heaved a sigh. "That sounds like a no."

She locked eyes with him, a neat trick through sunglasses. "It's a maybe."

"I'm staying at the Curtis Hotel," he said.

She rose smoothly and glided off through the crowd. Jack finished his coffee and stared after her until she disappeared. Then he stretched and hoisted himself up out of his chair. At least he was wide awake, and it wasn't the coffee.

He paid the tab and headed south. He'd promised Grandma Ruth that he'd pay his respects at the Shrine of the Mother Goddess. He wanted to do his duty and get on with his evening. Grandma led the Righteous Green Party, an ecological movement that worshiped the Earth as Supreme Being. As leader of a spiritual sect, she seemed obliged to make religion complicated. In Jack's mind it was simple:

this world was not all there was; somewhere there was a higher power, and that power warranted respect. Simple. He felt sure the Mother Goddess would forgive his impatience, if She cared one way or the other, which he privately doubted. Grandma Ruth, on the other hand, would not be so forgiving. And given that she was also President of the State of Arcadia, she had ways of finding things out. He hurried on.

The Shrine was located at Civic Center Park, near the Greek Amphitheatre. It was a modest affair, an unadorned standing stone that might have been plucked out of Stonehenge, surrounded by dwarf pines and wildflowers. It looked out of place adjacent to the classical magnificence of the amphitheater.

Family legend had it that a generation earlier, a few of the Greens had offered to burn the park to the ground if the city failed to make room for the Shrine. Jack half-believed that story. While most of the Greens were farmers who lived in simple harmony with the land, a small number of the party faithful were true believers in the worst sense of the word. Grandma Ruth once told him that it was a constant struggle to control the party extremists.

Jack meditated briefly in silence and, restored to his normal good humor, swung around the front of the amphitheater to get a better view of the architecture. What he got was a view of chaos. A bandstand was being assembled on the stage, with high scaffolding for the lights. Workmen swarmed over the construction like ants on a cow pie. Families with picnic baskets were spreading blankets, staking their claim to prime real estate for the show. Not exactly the kind of excitement he was looking for.

As he turned to go, a grating shriek made his blood run cold. He spun. The scaffolding twisted horribly and began to slowly collapse. People scattered. A small girl stood alone at the base of the bandstand. A woman screamed.

Jack sprang forward.

TWO

JACK TWISTED one shoulder under a metal bar and heaved. The bar bowed like the new moon, but the slow motion collapse shuddered to a halt. Then, skirling like a hundred bagpipes savaged by wild dogs, the structure slowly righted. After one final shove, he scooped the girl to his chest and bolted. The scaffolding crashed to the ground behind them.

Jack staggered backward through the commotion. A sobbing woman ran to his side, hands outstretched. He gently placed the girl into her arms. The woman fell to her knees and crushed the child to her chest, a halo of blonde curls etched against her shoulder.

Jack stood and watched solemnly for a long moment, stock still amid the turmoil. Then he glimpsed the dark-haired Aphrodite he'd met at the café gazing at him through the crowd, her perfect features graced by a Mona Lisa smile. He froze and stared. She nodded once, then vanished.

His meditation on the sacred feminine was interrupted when a lanky youngster accosted him, wide-eyed. "Are you crazy, man? That thing must weigh a thousand pounds! What the heck were you thinking?"

“I can’t say I thought about it.” Jack stretched his neck and kneaded a deep bruise on his shoulder. “It just sort of happened.” Taking a deep breath, he turned and noticed two men a short distance off, observing him. They were tall, wide and thick, dressed head-to-toe in black, with large wrap-around sunglasses. They stood unnaturally still.

Jack held their gaze a moment longer than good manners might allow. “I could’ve used a hand,” he said.

They didn’t react one bit.

A passing laborer blew a plume of sage-scented pipe smoke in Jack’s direction. “Their kind won’t lift a hand except for business. Just hope you’re not their business.”

Jack waved the smoke absently aside and gave the black-clad men a measured stare, followed by a shrug. Then he strolled off through the crowd, which parted before him and settled back in his wake. He failed to notice that the men in black followed him. Or that the pipe-smoking laborer followed the men in black.

Jack made his way to the park. Denver smelled delicious. It was Labor Day and the Taste of Colorado Festival was in full swing. Food stands lined the park. Brightly colored holographs heralded gustatory temptations. Jack inhaled deeply. His nose was assaulted by pepper, garlic, basil, thyme, cinnamon and a dozen less familiar smells.

He found himself whistling one of Uncle Elmer’s naughty little tunes, the kind that so infuriated Grandma Ruth. Uncle Elmer had taught him many unapproved ditties and a lot about women, which was even more unapproved. Remembering the dark-haired beauty in the café, Jack tipped an imaginary cap in his uncle’s honor.

“Catchy tune that.” A sharp-featured street vendor thrust a cup filled with barbecued beef in Jack’s hand. “Have a taste.”

Jack winked. “There’s always happiness when there’s love.” He took the cup and sniffed. “Is the barbecue real?”

“It’s real good.”

“I mean from a real steer, not Cow Chemical.”

“Well,” the vendor said, “I do have brisket from a cooperative

down near Pueblo. I find it a little fatty and not as tasty as synbeef, but it has the advantage of being more expensive.”

“Sounds like just the thing,” Jack said with a wry smile. “Make it a double and don’t spare the hot sauce.”

The cook slapped the brisket on the counter. Jack snapped a slim metal card down next to it.

The vendor stared. “Is that what I think it is?”

“You’ve never seen a cashchip?” Jack said.

“Does it work?”

“It should,” Jack said, through a mouthful of brisket, “I used it this morning in Portland. It belonged to my grandfather.”

“It belongs in a museum.” The vendor examined it carefully and then waved it once over the counter. “I’ll be darned, it does work. Is it for sale?”

“Family heirloom, I’d get crucified.”

Jack tucked the cashchip back into his pocket, took another bite of brisket, and strolled off through the park. Perhaps because it was his first time in a big city, he found Denver mysteriously alluring. The city seemed to be alive. It had its own heartbeat, throbbing just beneath his hearing. Its breath washed over him, faintly perceived. There was perhaps some alien intelligence underneath it all. He strained his senses, laboring to bring some order to his experience.

As he licked the last remnants of hot sauce off his fingers, a wave of stench wafted over him. Three men appeared, blocking his way. At least he thought they were men. In their late teens or early twenties, they were tall, emaciated and bald, wearing baggy pullovers of nondescript gray. The collars looked to have been trimmed with sheep shears and their pants were so tight that one deep breath might extrude them out onto the sidewalk. Every inch of exposed skin was covered with constantly shifting numeric ciphers. And they stank of copper, which might explain the lack of hair and eyebrows, even eyelashes. Heavy metals and hair follicles didn’t play well together.

Jack squared his shoulders and stuck his chin out. “You gentlemen are blocking my way.”

The nearest of them flinched. They weren't small, but Jack was wider than any two of them, and almost certainly outweighed the whole lot.

The largest of the three skinheads, the leader no doubt, rudely waved a strange metal object in Jack's direction. Jack took one step forward. The leader recoiled with a venomous glare. Jack responded with a broad smile and slowly clenched one fist. Two security guards appeared out of the crowd and the skinheads retreated down a nearby alley.

"No need to worry," one of the guards said.

"I don't worry about the likes of them," Jack said, "though I might dip them in clove oil."

"Kills the smell?"

"Cures mange," Jack said.

Both guards laughed. Then one of the guards said, "You look familiar. Don't you play World Football for Arcadia?"

"I used to play," Jack said, "but I'm retired." He'd played World Football back on the farm. It was Arcadia's most popular sport. Arcadians favored activities where large men were given the opportunity to demonstrate their virility by pounding each other senseless. Strong and quick, he'd excelled both offensively and defensively. He'd dominated the Arcadian league and was offered professional contracts on more than one occasion, but Grandma Ruth would have none of it.

Jack stared at the departing skinheads, "They do smell like copper," he said, "do they bathe in it?"

"They drink colloidal metals" a guard said. "They think it improves their inner resonance with the 'God Frequency.'"

"Weird," Jack said, "but to each his own." He turned back to the guards. "Is there a good place nearby to hear some music?"

"The hottest place in town is Club Chinook, five blocks toward the mountains and one to the right."

There was a loud crash followed by raised voices. One guard glanced down a side street. "No rest for the weary," he said. "If you'll excuse us."

Jack waved and set off toward the mountains. The guards watched him go, then exchanged backslaps, separated and strolled off in different directions.

A few moments later, a dozen heavily tattooed skinheads entered from a side street. Their leader stared savagely after the departing guards and commanded his men to follow them. His lieutenant stayed by his side. The remaining skinheads split into two squads and loped off in pursuit.

The leader focused his attention on a flat rectangle of metal in his hand—a scanner. Suddenly, his face contorted with astonishment and rage. He turned to his lieutenant, pointed one long bony finger in Jack’s direction, and slashed his other hand across his throat.

Kneeling, the leader dragged the scanner slowly across one forefinger. It deposited a dab of copper on his fingertip, bright metal particles suspended in a thick gel. In reverence, he drew the sign of his order on his forehead in copper: a square and circle conjoined, two lines entering the square, but one departing the circle. He rose to his feet, rent open his pullover from neck to waist, and howled with unbridled fury, a high keening battle cry. Nearby pedestrians scattered. The leader ignored them, turned and sprinted back down the side street from which he’d come, his lieutenant following close behind.

Oblivious to the drama behind him, Jack wandered through city center just staring. The city at night was impossibly beautiful. Lights burned like a million fireflies framed against black mountains and a blacker, star-strewn sky. Back home in Arcadia, the nights were dark. The Assembly didn’t cotton to artificial light. The Great Mother Goddess had given them the sun during the day and the moon and stars at night and that, they said, was enough.

There were clubs everywhere, with dazzling lights and beautiful women. And the music! The music throbbed and roared, riding on powerful subsonics. It got right inside him and made him ache. He picked up his pace.

Club Chinook was easy to find. It was surrounded by a mob of

people vying for entry. The door was barred by two striking women—one white, dressed all in black, the other black, dressed in white. They granted admission to the favored few while turning the masses away. Jack gazed over the heads of the modishly dressed crowd and plucked at his shirt. It occurred to him that he might look a bit hick by contrast. As he turned to go, he said to no one in particular, “Ah well, there’s at least one person in Denver who might appreciate my company.”

The crowd separated and the two women appeared at his side. They murmured a welcome, stroking his massive chest with butterfly hands. Then they wrapped their arms around him, led him through the envious rabble, and across the threshold into a cacophony of light, sound and humanity.

Jack had never seen so many people in such a small space. He pushed forward. Hands reached out and touched him. A drink found his hand. It tasted like poison and burned like fire. Then he was dancing—a lurching, swaying sort of dance, but dancing nonetheless. He moved with the crowd, their bodies pressed against him. A sweet, delirious smell of sweat permeated the air.

His whole body began to throb with the beat of the music. The flashing lights were blinding, the din deafening. He felt lightheaded and short of breath. He looked curiously at the empty glass in his hand. Where had that come from?

The room started to spin. The crowd parted.

THREE

JACK AWOKED to the sharp staccato of rapidly approaching footsteps. He lay flat on his back in the middle of an open walkway. He felt like he'd been kicked by a plow horse. His head pounded, his body throbbed, even his teeth ached. The footsteps stopped beside him. He took a deep shuddering breath and looked straight up into the most beautiful pair of green eyes he'd ever seen. They were gorgeous green eyes, brimming with concern, even warmth—perhaps affection? He flashed his best boyish smile. He just couldn't help himself.

“Get up, you dumb ox, you're going to get us both killed.” Green Eyes kicked him none-too-gently in the ribs with the toe of a coal-black lizard skin boot.

“Killed?” Jack swiveled his head painfully from side to side. The walkway spanned the dimly lit atrium of an office building. Vertical gray walls and darkened windows extended out of sight above and below. He had no idea where he was or how he'd gotten there.

The boot thumped him again. He turned his head and examined the footwear. It looked expensive, a little retro perhaps, but pricey. So

did the woman who was wearing it. He squinted up at her. He felt sure she should look familiar. His memory delivered nothing but fog.

“Killed,” she said. “As in dead.”

“But who—”

A burst of gunfire raked the walkway beside them, and the floor exploded in a shower of carbon polymer plasticrete. The noise was deafening, louder than a lightning strike on a tin roof, and the loudest noise Jack had ever heard.

“Move!” Green Eyes screamed. “Now!”

She bunched her fingers into the front of his shirt and to his astonishment, wrenched him to his feet. Buttons popped and played hopscotch on p-crete. A well-placed heel propelled him down the walkway toward the atrium wall. He staggered forward. The only cogent thought he could muster was that he really wished she’d quit kicking him.

A second barrage of gunfire thundered behind them and the wall above his head erupted, fragments flying everywhere. He ran blindly forward, shielding his eyes with both forearms. Jagged shards stung his face, arms and hands. He charged through an archway and careened headlong into a deserted bistro. Chairs and tables scattered like ten pins and he collapsed face-down in a pile of broken furniture, cursing incoherently.

Green Eyes hurtled up behind him, stumbled over his feet and belly flopped right on top of him. She cursed quite coherently.

There was an explosion. It lit up the room, revealing a courtyard set with tall round tables, lattice-backed bar stools and cheap paper shrubbery. A ball of fire whooshed overhead, followed by a searing blast of heat. It sucked the air out of Jack’s lungs and pressed him into the floor with crushing force. An instant later, it was totally dark.

Jack lay twitching, sucking in air as multi-colored Rorschach blots danced before his eyes. Green Eyes gasped in his ear and untangled herself from broken furniture and building debris. She also had to unravel herself from Jack. Somehow, his hand had found its way into one of a dozen pockets on her jacket. Her lizard skin boots might be

synthetic but the rest of her was natural—real natural. Her very warm body squirmed off his back.

He struggled to rise, flailing ineffectually at shards of synthetic wood and lumps of shattered masonry. It was like doing a breast-stroke in a garbage dump. A hand brushed his hair roughly then jerked his head back. Green eyes stared into his with great intensity. “You all right?” she asked.

“I’m ready for anything,” he said with a croak. But his eyes refused to focus, and the room spun slowly before his gaze.

“Well, you’re in no condition for a fight,” she said. “Follow me. We seriously need to get out of here.”

She dragged him to his knees by his hair, sending a shower of debris clattering to the floor around him. Then she pulled a compact black Omni tool out of her pocket. Flicking on a narrow beam of red light to illuminate her path, she glided off into the shadows, crouched and alert.

Jack stumbled to his feet and stared after her, vainly massaging his aching scalp. Whoever she was, their relationship was not getting off on the right foot. Groaning, he limped after her through the darkness.

She led him down a dark cross-corridor and into a hallway that ran the length of the building. There were offices to the right and left, each with desk, chair, credenza and holograph: standard Corporate issue. The walls were blighted at regular intervals with office art—squares of colored plastic, cardboard, and what looked like globs of wet toilet paper, framed under glass. Through an open office door, beyond floor-to-ceiling windows, the lights of the city blazed. He looked out at them in awe. Abruptly, they dimmed and went out.

Jack flinched. “A power outage?”

“They blacked out the windows. They don’t want witnesses.”

“How? Who?”

“You ask a lot of questions for somebody getting shot at.” She glanced back at him. “The glass is filled with magnetized nanorods. Flip a switch and they line up and block the light.”

“Must be expensive,” he said, staring at the now darkened windows.

“Cheaper than curtains.”

She stopped and checked the hallway in both directions. “As for who, the same people who are shooting at you would be my guess.”

Jack squinted back the way they’d come. There was nothing to see but a long row of open doors vanishing into semi-darkness. He cocked an ear at the shadows, but all he could hear was his own ragged breathing. The place was abnormally silent, incongruously normal. Could he have imagined gunfire and an explosion? He plucked a shred of plastic wicker from his hair. Apparently not. He dropped the bit of wicker and watched it flutter to the ground. “Why are they trying to kill me?” he asked.

“If they were trying to kill you,” Green Eyes told him, “you’d be dead. From the sound of it, they’re packing the latest Matsui sniper system: multi-spectral scope, laser range finding, motion detection, and auto target tracking. They could’ve drilled ‘Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year’ into your chest if they’d wanted to.”

She strode off down the hallway, away from the courtyard. “They’re trying to herd you. They want you cornered. That’s why they blew the entrance to the courtyard. We can’t go back.”

Jack hurried after her. “Won’t somebody call the police?”

“Nobody to hear this time of night. We’re on our own.”

Jack skidded to a stop. “They shot up a balcony, blew up a courtyard and absolutely nobody’s going to notice?”

She kept walking. “They’ll have a remediation crew in tow. In half an hour, you’d never know anything happened here.”

“But why?” Jack cried out.

She spun back to him and poked a finger at his chest. “You tell me.”

“I haven’t done anything to anybody,” he said. “Have I?” He stared blankly down at his torn shirt and the dirt ground into his khakis. Had he offended someone, or seen something he shouldn’t have? Nothing came to mind. In fact, try as he might, he couldn’t

remember anything that had happened to him since he'd left the farm in Arcadia. Not one thing. His hands began to tremble.

"Look at me," Green Eyes commanded. Jack flinched and looked up. "You're alive," she told him, "so you have something they want. If you were a threat, you'd be dead. What do you have that they so desperately want?"

Jack gestured helplessly. "I have a little money saved?"

"Tens of millions?"

"Hardly."

"Then they're spending more rounding you up than you're worth. What else?"

"I don't know..."

Green Eyes froze and motioned for silence. Jack listened intently, but heard nothing other than a faint background hum. Abruptly, Green Eyes dragged him into the nearest office. The room smelled of stale coffee. A sign on the wall proclaimed: "Furious activity is no substitute for understanding." Words to live by, Jack thought. He had no idea what was going on.

Green Eyes knelt and gazed carefully around the edge of the doorway. Jack choked back a myriad of questions and stuck his head out just above hers. A small circle of light appeared on the wall down the hallway. It danced around briefly, then winked out. Green Eyes glanced up, waved him sharply back into the office, and remained motionless for a full minute. Then she eased back and stared thoughtfully at the darkened windows.

Jack looked down at her. Those dazzling eyes were set above high cheekbones, a short straight nose and full lips. Her skin was very pale and framed by dark hair cut in a page-boy. Hers might be the face of a child but for those eyes and the set of her jaw. And her body was definitely not the body of a child, but very fit and very female. She smelled faintly of wildflowers. She turned her head suddenly and gave him a steady look.

Jack wasn't sure what to make of that look. He desperately wanted to make something of it.

“We’re running out of time,” Green Eyes said. She scanned the hallway again then stepped back with a shrug. “When all else fails, do something crazy. At least that’s what they taught me at St. Uma’s School for the Incurrible.”

“Who’s St. Uma?” Jack said.

“Also known as East Amherst Women’s Penitentiary,” Green Eyes said. “I did five for aggravated assault.”

Jack frowned. “Uh, you don’t look like the type.”

“Somebody tried to take advantage,” she said flatly. “I left him singing soprano and thought that was fair. The judge didn’t see it that way.”

Jack took one step back. A tingle sprang to life in the small of his back. He stifled an urge to cover himself.

“Relax.” She swiped her thumb across the Omni and examined it carefully. “I earned two Master’s degrees there. I spent most of my time in solitary, so I had plenty of time on my hands.”

Jack eyed her cautiously. “Exactly how did you end up in solitary confinement?”

“A few of my ‘classmates’ got a little too affectionate, so I bit off their...”

Jack gasped.

“They sewed them back on,” she said. “But it’s hard to get them really even.”

He took another step back.

“Those five years were a good lesson in the futility of violence.” She slowly clenched and unclenched her right hand. “And the need to be prepared for violence from others.”

Jack stood slack-jawed and struggling for some response.

“You’re doing a fine imitation of a largemouth bass.” She tucked one finger under his chin and snapped his mouth shut. “What say we concentrate on getting out of here?”

Jack sputtered, but she held up a hand to silence him and stared off into space.

Jack studied her cautiously out of the corner of one eye. Who was

she, and why was she helping him? She was a mass of contradictions. She claimed to be a violent felon, yet she'd risked her life for him, and for no apparent reason. It didn't make any sense. He'd always felt supremely confident around women. They'd flocked to him since he was old enough to stand, and he'd never failed to please. Women just plain loved him—his size, strength, looks, sense of humor and gentlemanly code of honor. And he'd loved them right back. But this woman was unnerving. And she didn't seem too impressed with him, which stung more than he cared to admit. "What are you looking at?" he asked.

"Floor plans."

He examined the floor. "I don't see any plans."

"Retinal implants." She tapped her temple. "Let's keep moving." She slipped from the office and padded silently down the hallway.

Jack followed. "Can't we hide?"

"Where are you going to hide?" she said. "You're the size of a rhino on steroids. Going to close your eyes and hope they don't see you?" She pulled him into another courtyard, which sported the same ugly furniture and lifeless foliage as the last. Then they slipped into a short side corridor, finding twin elevator doors. "There's no place to hide," she told him. "We've got to get out of here."

"And we're going to take the elevator?" Jack asked dubiously.

"Not exactly. I'm sure they're disabled. I just hope the cars are above us, not below." She pried a six-inch probe from the Omni and jammed it into the emergency keyhole on the elevator door. There was a flash and acrid grey smoke wafted upward. Then she wedged her fingers into the door crack and wrenched the doors apart.

Jack looked down. There was a bottomless hole in the floor, disappearing into darkness. "Surely we're not going to climb," he said.

"Of course not, we're going to jump."

Jack blanched. "Jump? Are you nuts? We'll be killed! Bug splat!"

"I said we'd have to do something crazy. Either that or consign yourself to hell at the hands of those mercenaries. I don't know what they want, but you can bet you won't enjoy it."

Jack choked back bile. The whole situation was insane. He gave Green Eyes an uncomprehending stare. She gazed calmly back, the only still point in a world turned upside-down. He flushed, overcome by a profound rush of gratitude for her presence. "Why are you doing this?" he said with a stammer, "I don't even know you."

"I thought I'd made quite an impression," she told him. "Guess I was wrong."

"What?" Jack shook his head and blinked furiously. "I... the coffee shop! I'm sorry I—"

"Maybe I liked the way you stepped in and saved that child."

"And that's enough for you to risk your life for me?"

She swiped impatiently at her bangs and looked away. "Somebody's got to look after you. You're too clueless to do it yourself."

Jack flinched like he'd been slapped. She ignored this and pushed him toward the elevator shaft. Jack spread-eagled in front of the open door, hands and feet against the wall on either side. "I'm not jumping!"

Green Eyes frowned. "These are very unpleasant people. They're likely to stick electrodes on your gonads, or worse."

Jack struggled for some response. Nothing came out but a croak.

Green Eyes took a step back and sighed. After a brief moment of indecision, she sidled up to him, stood on tiptoes and draped her arms around his neck. Looking up at him through half-lidded eyes, she smiled a wicked little smile. "Jack," she whispered. "Would you like to be joined together forever?" Her open lips brushed his chest.

"What on earth are you doing?" Jack said.

She pressed her body firmly against his and gave him the barest hint of a bump and grind.

"Stop that," he said without conviction. "You're confusing me. Anyway, you called me Jack. How'd you know my name was Jack? What's your name? What do you mean by together forever?"

"We'll be joined together forever," she said, "because if this doesn't work, there's no technology in the world that'll separate your

pulverized flesh from mine when we hit p-crete after a hundred-story freefall. They'll just hose us up together."

Jack stared down at her, incredulous.

"Time to go," she said.

"I'm NOT going!"

She kned him firmly in the groin. He doubled over, bug-eyed, wrapping his arms convulsively around her. She twisted her hands into the back of his shirt. The last button popped.

"My name's Jill."

They toppled backward and fell into darkness.

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You've reached the end of your sample of *Riff The Razzle*. To keep reading, buy the book at www.douglasbartonauthor.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doug Barton was born and raised in Virginia. He worked his way through college singing colonial ballades in the taverns of Williamsburg and attended the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London where he studied opera and oratorio. In the interest of eating regularly and sleeping indoors, he returned from London to Virginia and took a job supporting nuclear submarines. He went on to serve as technology director on worldwide command, control and intelligence systems, and most recently served as Chief Engineer for the modernization of the DoD's electronic health record system.

He once juggled for Shirley Temple. No kidding. She was very gracious and had perfect hair.

Riff the Razzle is his first book. However, Jack and Jill are quite insistent that they have more stories to tell. Stay tuned ...