

VILLAINY PREVIEW STORY # 5

Life in a Box

By E. Craig McKay

Section 1: Gros Morne Park in winter

Sarah was lying inside what could well become her coffin. The temperature was 20 degrees Fahrenheit. It had seemed like a good idea at the time.

The element of surprise is important. This would certainly surprise her target.

Preparation is important too, but all her well laid plans had been scuttled by George's last minute change of routine. She could have, perhaps should have, aborted her attempt to kill him then and there. But she hadn't.

Now she was lying, curled up, starting to freeze, inside a wooden box used by park maintenance to store a mixture of gravel and sand to use on the roads in winter.

Her field of vision was limited. A small crack between two boards allowed her to watch George's car and the path he would likely take back to it. If he came back down that path she would be able to push open the lid and have a clear shot at him from within thirty feet. Even if he came back another path on this side of the parking area he would be no more than sixty-five feet from the box. But there were other paths which would let him approach from the far side which would give him a chance at cover if she didn't take him with the first shot.

If he returned on this side of the car, before her limbs had become cramped and her fingers stiff with cold, he would be an easy target with a handgun. 'Time was of the essence', as lawyers were fond of saying. She would give him half an hour more before calling it off for today.

She had planned to take him out with a rifle at short range along the cross country path he usually skied. Today he had chosen another and she had improvised. She had her Walther .380 inside her right-hand mitten keeping it and her hand as warm as possible.

She was starting to regret her creativity. It would have been so nice to sit in her warm car waiting for him to come back. Then she could step out of the car and act like a helpless woman with car trouble.

“Could you help little ol’ me with my car, sir? It won’t shift into gear.”

Surely he would have come over full of male pride. It would then have been simple to put a bullet through his thick skull. ‘Well, easier to think inside the box than out of it, I guess’ she chided herself. ‘But, if he doesn’t come back within another 30 minutes I’m out of here.’

She tensed as she heard a sound coming from near the box, but out of her sightline. It was close, very close.

Section 2: Dexter is small, but we call it home

Sarah had not expected to be boxed in. It had all started in her home town, Dexter, in upper New York State. Sarah was at the family sporting goods store, doing year-end inventory, when her father, Erik, called her the day after New Year’s. The broker had sent an offer.

“Where is it and when?” she asked.

“ASAP in Newfoundland.”

“Where?”

“A big island off the east coast of Canada,” he told her. “Want to see the details?”

“I’m coming over.”

Sarah hung up and went to check on Google Earth. Sure enough there was a big hulking island out there. It was a province of Canada.

She had heard ‘Newfie’ jokes told by people up at the cottage in Oliphant Beach. To judge by the jokes, the whole province was filled with people who spoke with a funny accent, spent most of their time fishing or drinking, and seemed unsophisticated.

She had restrained herself from informing the people telling the jokes that to a person from New York City they all seemed to exhibit those same qualities themselves.

Sarah wondered, not for the first time, why it was that people all seem to look for some other group to poke fun at. Every group you could think of had a target for their jibes or smart remarks. Certainly lawyers were a group that got their share of abuse. Her personal favorite was: *“Question: What’s the difference between a dead*

skunk in the highway or a dead lawyer? Answer: In front of the skunk there are skid marks.”

As she drove back to the house she considered the special aspects of a hit in Newfoundland (actually the name was Newfoundland and Labrador, she'd learned from the internet, but few people used the full name). One factor was that the Newfoundland section was an island and difficult to get to during January except by airplane. The other section, Labrador was always difficult to get to except by airplane. That meant that any guns which would be needed would have to be obtained locally.

Getting guns in Canada was always a little more difficult than in the U.S. She wondered how difficult it would be in Newfoundland.

Another consideration would be the 'stranger in town' aspect. Sarah would run a danger of standing out. On the other hand, it would depend where the hit took place. Newfoundland seemed to be mostly rural and Sarah was a country girl. She knew that in a small town anyone from outside the town would be a 'stranger'. She could be one of many.

When she sat down with her mom and dad, she discovered that the target lived in an isolated region within an isolated area. George, the proposed target, had a holiday home in a small town which was surrounded by the wilderness of Gros Morne, a Canadian national park.

The target was actually American, from Detroit. He had a cabin in Newfoundland; a place called Woody Point. According to the maps they consulted it was a small town not actually 'in' the park, but the park was on three sides of it and an inlet of the ocean on the north. Apparently George went there every year from mid January for about four weeks for skiing and basically getting away from business.

“Cross country or downhill?” Elizabeth asked. “If it's cross country, Sarah could catch him somewhere isolated.”

“The file doesn't say,” Erik responded, “but I'm thinking it is probable that he does cross country. I'll check with The Broker.”

Sarah was using the internet while the family considered the offer. She had brought up a screen on Gros Morne and discovered that they had a lot of trails for cross country and even talked about “backcountry” skiing which would provide an excellent opportunity.

Sarah was an excellent skier and would be in much better physical condition than the 48-year old George who spent most of the year smoking and drinking while running his loan shark business in Detroit.

“I like the assignment,” said Sarah. “I’m looking at a website here that indicates that the Gros Morne Park has a lot of trails and lots of wilderness. It looks like a good place to isolate a target. My only concern is how I would get a suitable gun or guns there.”

“I’ll contact The Broker and check that out,” Erik told her. “What would you like?”

Elizabeth and Sarah were huddled in front of the monitor and comparing notes.

“I’d want a light carbine, no scope, bolt action, something compact. Light in case I have to ski with it, and with a reliable action in cold or wet conditions,” Sarah told Erik.

“Good criteria,” he agreed. “How about a 788 Remington in .243 caliber? Similar to the one we have in the shop.”

“Exactly,” Sarah replied enthusiastically. “If The Broker can get one of those and a Walther PPK in .380 ACP as back up, I’ll be happy”.

Elizabeth was looking at a picture of a PPK on line. “Do you like the PPK because James Bond used one?” she teased. “Or is it because they’re so small?”

“It’s a great gun,” Sarah responded. “It will fit in a purse or a small pocket. You can even carry it in your hand without it being noticed. I was sure glad I had it with me last summer in New York.”

The last was out of her mouth before she could stop herself, but both Erik and Elizabeth responded with surprised looks.

“What happened then?” Erik asked and Elizabeth turned her full attention on Sarah.

Sarah tried to make light of it. Although both her mother and father knew she could handle herself, they had natural parental concerns.

“It was just some guy who followed me when I left the restaurant last August. He was persistent, so I had to shoot him. It was no big deal,” she assured them.

“I never liked you being alone in New York,” Elizabeth said.

“Well, things happen everywhere, mom. At least I’m prepared.”

There ensued a discussion about travel. They agreed that it was best to drive into Canada and take a flight from Ottawa or Toronto to St John’s, Newfoundland. The

flights were more regular and there would be no hassle at customs since it would be an internal flight.

She would rent a car in St John's, preferably four-wheel drive for the long drive across the province to Gros Morne. The Michelin route planner calculated the driving time from St. John's to Woody Point at almost eleven hours. The population in Woody Point was listed at 400, so Sarah would probably have to search for accommodations.

Erik was able to confirm with The Broker that the specified guns and 25 rounds of ammunition for each gun would be available for pick up in Clarenville, a town on route to Gros Morne.

After a bit of searching for flights and car rental the contract was accepted. Erik negotiated an extra \$5,000 to cover expenses.

Section 3: Newfoundland and Labrador

Sarah drove to Ottawa to catch a flight to St. John's NL. Whenever possible she liked to avoid using her passport when going on a job. It was bad enough that she had to show it going through customs when driving up to Canada at Thousand Island Park. She had joined Interstate 81 near Fisher's Landing and had crossed Wellesley Island and entered Canada by the Ivy Lee Bridge.

Ottawa is reputed to be one of the coldest national capitals in the world. It was certainly cold in the parking lot of the Ottawa International airport. The good news was that the airport is not a major hub, so it is relaxing to fly in or out of.

Her flight to St John's was aboard an Air Canada plane. Sarah flew a lot. It struck her how similar all the airlines seemed.

Upon arrival in St John's she rented a four-wheel drive vehicle. She discovered that studded tires were legal here in winter. That might come in handy where she was going.

She took a room in St John's for the night and went over her plans.

The drive across to Woody Point would take about 11 hours. Sarah was always careful to keep her speed at the legal limit. When you carry guns and kill people you don't want to attract attention. Locals had warned her that moose could be expected to lumber out onto the highway at any moment. At up to 1200 pounds and seven and a half feet high at the shoulder, they should be avoided.

Clarenville was the stop to pick up the tools they had ordered from The Broker's contact. She decided that she would drive to Clarenville in the morning and then drive as far as she felt comfortable before taking a room. She would like to arrive in Woody Point rested and ready. She had brought her cross-country skis and serious outerwear. The Broker had confirmed that George skied cross-country and had given directions to his cabin.

She chose to skip breakfast to get on the road. Two hours out she discovered that service centers are not a feature of the TCH, Trans Canada Highway. There is basically only one road across Newfoundland. She passed a couple gas stations on the other side of the highway, and before she saw a place to stop for breakfast she was arriving in Clarenville. She'd seen a lot of pretty country, and lakes, and rocks. She had been told that the number of moose in Newfoundland was the same as the number of people. She hadn't seen any moose and since leaving St. John's she hadn't seen many people.

Clarenville was a major center. She had two hours to kill, so to speak, before meeting up with her gun contact. She asked one of the locals for advice and against her own instincts went for a late breakfast at the Irving Gas Station restaurant. She was wrong; the local was right. She had a great breakfast of bacon, eggs and toutons. Toutons are Newfoundland's answer to biscuits. They are basically pan fried bread dough, served with molasses. The toutons were tasty and the rest of the breakfast was good home-style cooking with bottomless cups of good coffee.

Sarah was in a good mood when she met the gun supplier. That was good. He was 40% amateur and 60% annoying. The guns were both used and the PPK had only one magazine. She wanted to try them out but was told she would have to find a place outside of town to do that. The salesman didn't know how to handle guns himself. He actually pointed the pistol in her general direction at one point and she never saw him make one safe.

She decided that she didn't have many options here. She paid the price, which was too high and took her guns and ammo down the road to test them. It turned out that the rifle fired a little left, but good enough. The .380 was in good condition; it felt good in her hand and the action had been well cared for.

It was just past 12:00 but the winter sun was rushing toward the horizon. The road was better than she had expected and she set her sights on Deer Lake for her next stop. The town of Deer Lake was at the north end of Deer Lake. That made sense. The odd thing was that there are no deer in Newfoundland. Go figure.

The road took her through long stretches of forest and provided vistas over lakes and streams. As she approached Gander she had a long view down the lake and wished she could be here in summer with a boat.

When she topped up her tank in Gander she parked and went into the Tim Horton's donut shop. Horton was a Canadian hockey player who had lent his name to a chain of coffee and donut outlets before his untimely death in a sports car. The sports car was really hot, a De Tommaso Pantera, which Tim had moving more than fast enough when he failed to make a corner while driving through St. Catharines, Ontario. The coffee was good; the donuts were donuts.

Sarah checked into a B&B in Deer Lake and went over the file on George again. Often his targets were drug dealers or fringe lowlife who had crossed someone. George was a small time loan shark who had put some heavy pressure, including a broken nose, on a businessman who was into him for thirty thousand. George had not realized that the businessman was connected. The connections had ordered the hit.

George qualified for Sarah's personal list of acceptable targets. She considered herself a professional in all senses. She was her own judge of whether a target deserved to be taken out or not. George did. Sarah made these decisions before accepting any contract. Right or wrong, it was a decision she could live with. Some proffered contracts didn't make her cut list.

The Broker had once sent a semi-political assignment which Sarah had refused. She agreed that many politicians were sewer rats, but she thought the electorate should decide who to toss out and who to reward with their vote.

She started to think about eating.

This trip was turning into a real culinary experience for Sarah. At the recommendation of her landlady she ate at a Roadhouse called Jungle Jims. Unfortunately it was the same old, same old. Decent fast food and draft beer. It was busy inside, considering Tuesday was a slow night for most restaurants. They had a chicken wing and bucket of beer special which seemed to be drawing them in.

Section 4: Parks provide a chance to relax, and to meet people

Wednesday morning was clear and crisp. The drive into and through Gros Morne Park was uneventful, though she did note the increased number of moose warning signs. Woody Point was as small as she expected. She found George's cabin and

decided she would probably be better off taking him out away from town. Too many windows looked out over the flat terrain for her to feel confident of not being seen.

She checked into the Seaside Suites, where she found the accommodations very comfortable. Her suite, called Tablelands Suite for a reason she never quite understood, was actually fairly luxurious.

Woody Point seemed to focus on summer for most of its tourism. They made a great deal about boat trips and the walking trails. Sarah noticed a couple cars with ski racks and engaged one of the couples in conversation in the coffee shop. She learned that there was downhill skiing available nearby, but that snowmobiles and cross-country skiers used the park trails. Sarah already knew that George often used a groomed trail at Trout River Pond, but that he also did some backcountry skiing.

Over the next week Sarah shadowed George as inconspicuously as possible. As long as he didn't know she was following him, it didn't matter if he saw her. He didn't know her and he wouldn't be identifying anyone after she finished with him.

George was regular in his habits. He got up late. Never out of the cabin before 10:00 and there was no sign of him sitting inside before 9:00. He was not an avid skier. He spent about one hour to one and a half per day on the groomed trails at Trout River Pond and showed no inclination at all to go off the tame trails into wilderness skiing. Sarah would have to catch him alone somewhere near or on the trail. She spent five days watching and decided to hit him Monday. There would be fewer people on the trails then. Monday was Martin Luther King Day in the U.S. but she didn't think that would be a factor here.

She could ski out behind him and pick him off near one section with a drop-off along one side. With any luck she could tip the body onto a spot where it wouldn't be noticed until the spring thaw.

Section 5: Praxis involves putting theory into action

Monday morning found Sarah parked within sight of George's cabin. If his routine held he would come out just after 10:00 and drive away from where she was parked toward Trout River Pond.

She would follow at a distance, park after he did and overtake him on the trail on skis.

That plan turned to rat shit as soon as he failed to make the right turn which would take him to Trout River. He seemed to be heading toward the exit from the park at Wiltondale.

Then, before he got that far, just past Glenburnie on the Bonne Bay Road, George pulled off into a public parking area which was shielded on the road side by a row of trees. Sarah had to drive on by and then turn back further up the road. She did a drive by and spotted George heading off down a trail on foot.

By the time she could turn around and come back, he was out of sight down one of three paths.

She had to make a choice. She could call it off for today and start again tomorrow. She could head off down one of the trails and hope to meet up with him. Or, and she thought this was a plan, wait here until he came back out. She had already checked out of her room, so she wouldn't have to head back to Woody Point. This was actually a better location if she could make a clean kill.

There were two cars in the parking area in addition to hers and George's. She wondered if there was someplace out of sight from which she could watch without being seen.

Then Sarah had a really stupid idea. It seemed good at the time. But it was really a bad idea. There was a big wooden box, apparently used to hold sand, beside the entrance to the rear section of the parking lot. For some strange reason which she could never understand later, she decided that it would be a good place to hide. It had a series of wide cracks which she could see out of and it was less than half full of a mixture of sand and crushed stone.

Thirty minutes later she started realizing how foolish this decision had been.

Section 6: Back in the Box, Where's George?

Sarah heard the noise getting closer. It almost seemed to be coming towards the box.

What if some park employee was coming to scoop out some of the sand-salt mixture? It would look pretty strange to find her curled up on top of the pile. Luckily the gun was still inside the mitten. She would just have to smile sweetly and say she was playing hide and seek with some friends who must have given up and gone home. It wasn't actually illegal to hide in a box. It was just very weird.

On the other hand

What if it was George who had somehow seen her climb in here 45 minutes ago and was coming back with a shotgun?

‘Okay, here’s the plan,’ she decided. ‘I’ll keep the glove on and smile if it’s the employee, and shoot George through the mitt if it’s him.’ There would be some deflection of the bullet on the way through the woolen mitten, but not a significant amount given that she would be firing at a separation of three or four feet.

She prepared to move, but the sound, which had passed right beside the box moved past it. She peered through the crack and clearly identified George. He was three feet away and walking toward the car.

Sarah pulled off the mitten and used her left hand to lift the lid.

She reared up onto her knees and swung the muzzle toward George’s back.

He heard the lid open and spun around in time for her to see his startled expression as she squeezed off a shot into his body mass. He jerked back and she fired again from her crouching position in the sand. George went down hard. A .380 doesn’t have knock down capability. She must have made serious contact.

She held her position for a moment. She could see his right hand and the left was under his body. He was not moving.

Slowly, keeping her eyes fixed on the inert body, she climbed out of the box onto stiff legs. There was no sign of life, but she would take no chances. Without shifting her attention, Sarah moved to her left to circle the body until she had a clear view of the head. She carefully put the next shot through the centre of the skull.

Now she could spare the time to look around.

Her first concern was to check for witnesses. There was no one in sight and she could hear nothing going by on the highway.

One of the weaknesses of her hiding place was that she could not check the area to make sure it was clear before taking George out. Hindsight being always 20/20, she realized now what a stupid idea it had been. ‘Well, the result was alright; just don’t ever use that approach again,’ she resolved.

She had fired three rounds. She glanced down and saw a spent cartridge which she picked up. She walked over to the sand box to close it and spotted the other two brass casings. It was worth a couple seconds to scoop them into her pocket. She closed the lid and turned back toward George’s body.

Still no one in sight. It took less than a minute to drag the body to the edge of the parking area and tip it into a ditch. It would be nice to move his car to somewhere it wouldn’t be noticed, but that would be complicated and not worth the risk.

She walked to her own car, started it and drove back out the short, tree-lined entrance to the main highway. She turned right and headed back toward the park entrance near Wiltondale. She dumped the rifle at the edge of the woods near East Arm and the spent shells and Walther went into the water as soon as she found an isolated spot where she could do so.

One of her main concerns was the scarcity of roads. Even though she was now mostly clean of all traces of the hit, the Trans Canada Highway was the only way back to St John's.

It wasn't until she reached Gander that she felt as if she was out of the woods, although technically the whole island seemed one big forest.

Next stop, Dexter.

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Look for this and 22 other exciting stories in the upcoming Hall Brothers Entertainment anthology **VILLAINY**, available June 9th.

