

“All Aboard”

By Hank Phillippi Ryan

The Orient Express it wasn't. But I knew that when I'd booked my tickets on the sleeper car from my meeting in Chicago back home to Boston. It would be efficient, traveling overnight. A twenty-three hour adventure. A vacation. Sort of. My client was paying the fare, and they'd encouraged me to go for it. “All aboard,” my client had said.

The glossy online brochure for the trip on the Lake Shore Limited had looked cozy, if not glamorous, and the idea of a separate compartment, just for me, all private and serene, might even give me a chance to catch up on work without interruption. And, imagine, even get some sleep. And arrive in Boston ready to wrangle some new business.

Now, as I attempted to punch my pillow-ish thing back into some semblance of pillowness, I wondered why no one had told me about the downsides of an overnight train.

The sound of the clackety wheels over the speed rails, I knew I could get used to that, it was train white noise, I figured, and had—sort of—expected it. But my luxury bedroom was not honestly luxurious. It tried, but it was a train. Three stems of stubby alstroemeria were stuck into a tiny glass vase perched,

precariously, on a narrow metal shelf next to a cello-wrapped chocolate. A chair like a train seat, nubby tweedy blue upholstery, which didn't recline. My bed, a bunk, took up most of the cubicle. I'd chosen the lower out of the deep and powerful belief that anyone on top would certainly fall off and tumble to the floor. That floor was clammy, with carpet so thin you could feel the metal beneath it, and the shower was tiny, so tiny that I'd just wait until I got home, and the loo was in plain sight. No one was with me, but still, it felt—exposed. And speaking of exposed.

Although the porter had promised that the wide glass windows were one way, so that no matter what I was wearing in my sleeper compartment (or not wearing) no one in stations along the way could look in, I wasn't completely sure I believed that. As I stared at the bottom of the bunk thing above me, all coiled springs and twisted wires, I still feared that when we stopped—at Utica or Schenectady or Elyria—curious passengers on the platform would peer in to observe my insomniac self. Like a caged zoo animal on display.

See Cady Armistead in her traveling habitat, the sign on the outside of the train car might proclaim. Will Cady succeed in the cutthroat world of public relations? Or will she get devoured by the bigger animals?

Problem was, I thought, as I propped my head up on one elbow and watched the night go by, there was no way to tell how my life would go until the time came.

Outside, the world was all in fast forward. It would have been fun to see in the daylight, maybe Ohio cornfields, if they had cornfields, or forests of upstate New York. At one point the dense darkness was slashed by bands of light; streetlights, I supposed. The train slowed, and I glimpsed a tiny town's stoplights all go red, and lighted billboards that flashed by too quickly to read. Kind of like life, I thought, sometimes moments happen, but so quickly they're uncapturable. My life as a public relations specialist—a fixer, as Hadley likes to call me—seemed to be rushing toward something, just like this train. But we can never know if the destinations we hope for will actually be on our life maps.

Or whatever. I just wanted to succeed. I'm good at fixing things, I do know that. Clients made miserable by snoopy and big-mouthed reporters, youthful indiscretions threatening to be headlines, time-bomb emails, college love affairs hanging like water balloons over a politician's head. My job is to fend them off, calm the waters, soothe the savage whatevers, and let my clients succeed. All without anyone realizing I'd had a hand in it.

At least two CEOs and an internationally famed art dealer owe me their reputations, although I could never reveal who. One called me his hired gun. There are never actual guns involved, of course. Power and money and control and reputation—and the potential loss of them—are equally effective weaponry. Anonymity, too, is a successful tool. My anonymity.

I flinched, startled, as another fast-moving train careened past us, whistle screaming, racing west. Our windows seemed so close. And yet, no way to see who was traveling the other way, speeding toward the unknown.

I'd indulged in a late night last-call glass of drinkable-enough cabernet from the café car, read toward the end of my novel, chomped the last of the Doritos, and felt, actually, proud of myself. Content. Safe. Burrowing down in my pillow now, I thought, well, okay. Time to sleep.

And then I heard the voice.

I sat up in bed, so quickly I almost bumped my head on the bunk above. The voice was as clear as if it had been in the next room, and I guess it was. I was in sleeper car "A" and, calculating, I figured the head of my little bunk was adjacent to the head of a similar bunk in sleeper car "B" next door. It had to be, because I was hearing as definitively as if I'd been using my earbuds to listen to a podcast on my iPhone. We might as well have been in the same room.

"Sweetie, sweetie," the voice—a woman's—was saying. "That's cart before the horse. It was a real failure, right? I mean—three people in Sarasota?"

Horses? Sarasota? I admit I had a moment of trying to figure out what she might be talking about in that imperious voice, but it was now pushing 1:30 in the morning, and my get-some-rest efficiency was not being helped by the interruption. It was possible that my neighbor did not know how beautifully her

voice carried. But this would be over soon. No one would be so rude as to continue a long conversation at this time of the night. Morning.

Wrong.

“My point is, there are no options,” she was saying now. “He is not a process guy. We need to focus our efforts on hitting goal, and not be distracted with noise.”

Not be distracted with noise? That was actually pretty funny. I leaped up, grabbed the pillow from the top bunk, slid myself back under the thin, pale blue blanket, and put the borrowed pillow over my face. Tried to block out the sound. That succeeded in making me unable to breathe. But not unable to hear.

“It’s gonna be fun,” I heard her say. “I’m telling me as much as I’m telling you. But I’m his right hand person at Rotherwood, so it’s *so* not a problem. Clear sailing. We’ll keep it clean. She’ll be done.”

Nice, I thought. *Charming*. And wondered who was on the other end. Whose right hand? Rotherwood, I knew, was a fancy prep school on Beacon Hill, a row of three story brownstones with historically genteel facades. What did they have to “keep clean?” As the CEO, and only O of Cady Armistead Enterprises, I was used to negotiations. Making things right, was how I explained what I did. Spinning my clients’ sides of the story. It was funny to think that I succeeded when someone else had a problem, but that’s how the world works. Checks and balances, all

leading to equilibrium. I have to admit, as I listened, because how could I help it, to one end of the discussion-next-door, it sounded like someone indeed had a problem.

Whoever was about to be “done.” Whatever that meant. “Done” didn’t sound good, but it was none of my business.

My cell phone glowed on the floor, since I needed it near me, sadly, in case a client had an emergency. *Damn it.* Damn my curiosity. I grabbed up the phone, googled Rotherwood, looked up “contact us.” Clicked. Contact at Rotherwood dot edu, so went the address. I clicked on “Our Staff.” An array of women and men, diverse and professional in gray lapels and appropriate jewelry. I picked one at random. The email ended with Rotherwood dot edu.

We’ll keep it clean, she’d said. Keep what clean?

But again, none of my business, and I would never know. I clicked off my phone, trying to quiet my inquisitive brain. The woman’s voice had softened to a murmur, and for a moment I felt a twinge of disappointment. Something was going on in her world, and part of my job—and my passion, I admit—was to be curious. So I kind of wanted to hear the rest. But sleep was more important. I heard the loo flush in her room, had a moment of realization that if I could hear hers, she could hear mine. Then I heard water gushing in her aluminum sink. Mine was aluminum at least.

Mumble mumble, I heard. Time for me to sleep.

Outside the world was impenetrable, a dense July night, and staring, sleepless, out the window into nothingness, I imagined all the invisible dramas underway out there. The overnight hours, the time so many of us spend in suspension, our bodies recharging and our brains at rest. Or busy only in dreams. But there are those who are awake and active during that span of quiet. And some people live in different time zones, I reminded myself, so who even knew who Ms. Chit-chat next door was talking to. Still talking to.

“I’ll shoot off an email to Shay,” the woman was saying. “She’s the one who got the directive. I’ll cc you. But you minimize your contact, and then I’ll swoop in.”

Shay? I thought. Or Shea? Or Shaie? Ms. Shay? Mrs. Shay? Directive?
Swoop?

Swoop?

My phone was a tempting rectangular glow on the thin gray carpet. *No*, I ordered myself. *Go to sleep*.

It only took me about four seconds to search Rotherwood for Shay. And Shea. And for good measure, Gray. And Bray. But nothing.

“Sweetie...sweetie, sweetie.” The woman was now obviously cajoling someone. I envisioned those cartoons my sister and I used to watch on Saturday

mornings, where some animated character would hold a wineglass against the wall to eavesdrop on the animated character next door. Nina and I had tried it, and it didn't work, we couldn't hear a thing, and decided it only worked in cartoons. But what I was hearing was as clear as it had been in Looney Tunes. And maybe just as looney.

“The board has no idea, you know that. He's a lush, a total lush. The wife's a basket case,” the woman pronounced. “Ellen has disappointed me from the outset, so we can't rely on her at all. Its two t's right, in Pattillo? But if someone wants to commit career suicide, sweetie, who are we to stand in the way? Ha, ha, I mean.”

I clutched my phone to my chest. Even in bed I was still wearing my little navy jersey travel bathrobe, and socks. The socks because the floor was iffy, and the robe in case the porter had been lying about the windows. I thought about the people who'd shared the train with me before we all went off to our separate little compartments. You can't really look at your fellow passengers, even as you stagger down the aisle to the bathroom or the café car and back, balancing your wine or soda against the lurching train. That would be rude. And replaying the faces of my travelling companions only offered me half-memories of newspaper barriers, and earbuds, eyes focused on glowing screens, on a man with his head plastered against the wide glass window, dead asleep. A woman with a—I stared at

the bunk above me, as if the video of the train car was replaying. A woman with steely hair, with sunglasses on her head, and earrings. Big earrings. Was she the one plotting something in the room next door?

Since Ms. Chit-chat was in a sleeper car, she'd boarded the train with me in Chicago, at the lofty-arched and elegant Union Station, where the roasty smell of the Nuts on Clark mixed with fragrant coffee and wafts of yeast-pungent beer from happy travelers in the Great Hall. We'd all trooped down the chilly dank platform, pulling our black roller bags and tote bags. A few travelers had been lugging pillows, which I had thought, at the time, was odd. Now I know why they had them. Which passenger was in the room beside mine? Our heads together, Pyramus and Thisbe, without her knowing?

Should I ring for the porter? Ask him to intervene on behalf of sleepy passengers everywhere?

Maybe I should pretend to call someone, speaking really loudly, and then when she hears me, she'll put two and two together, realize I can hear her, and shut up.

Or I could simply tap on her door and warn her. "I can hear everything you say," I'd sheepishly reveal. Or maybe I could just indicate how I could kind of hear, so she wouldn't be embarrassed, but so that she would stop the hell talking. We'd arrive in Boston's South Station at 9:50 am.

She'd probably still be talking.

“My firm intuition, my *firm* intuition, is that come next week, after she walks across that stage, that's the last we'll hear of her.”

The last we'll hear of her. And after that line, I counted my blessings that I did not have to deal with someone like this in my own office. I had one assistant, the woefully underpaid Hadley who could find anything on the computer, break any password, track down any elusive source, get a reporter's private cell number or a police detective's home address. Hadley, unfortunately, was on vacation in some paradise with white sand and no internet. And probably good pillows. People said provocative stuff like that, though, without meaning it. *I'm going insane, I'm going to blow this place up, I'm gonna kill you.* Hyperbole. Exaggeration for effect. Everyone on the planet does it.

I heard brittle laughter through our wall. “Bye bye, Shayla Miller, right, sweetie? And then the next steps are ours. And I *know* you are, my dear. I do know. And I cannot wait to hear all about it. Sure, I'll hold on.”

If I sat up in bed, put my feet on the ground and twisted my shoulder a bit, I could plant my ear flat up against the wall. I felt the ridged wallpaper, the chill of what the wallpaper covered—metal? drywall?—and heard my new friend continue her conversation. She hadn't—that I'd heard at least—apologized for the late hour, which told me she was the alpha in the convo, or her listener was in a different

time zone. Or was just as invested in “getting it done” and “bye bye Shayla” as she was.

With a sigh and a glance heavenward, I gave up. I grabbed my little red notebook from my totebag, and scribbled down what I remembered. Rotherwood. Shayla Miller. Pattillo with 2 T’s, she’d said. The board doesn’t know. The board of Rotherwood? Doesn’t know. Doesn’t know—someone is a lush. Well, welcome to the real world.

Too bad this Shayla doesn’t have me to help her. *Next week*, I wrote. What this woman was planning would come to fruition next week. But no one can fix everything, I thought, closing my notebook and snapping the red elastic to keep it closed, and the stories of our lives have their own tracks. Separate tracks. I hope Shayla deserved it, whatever ‘it’ was, because it certainly was coming.

I guess Cruella, as I’d decided to call her, was still on hold, or had paced to the other side of her roomette, because I could no longer hear her. I settled back in, closed my eyes, and tried to imagine Shayla. What had she done, poor innocent thing, to incur the wrath of this viper next door? Was it an *All About Eve* thing, where Cru was worried the gorgeous and duplicitous Shayla was angling to take her place? I pictured Bette Davis, and who was the ingenue? Anne Baxter.

Or was Shayla a big shot? Even nastier than Cru, maybe, demanding and unreasonable, and covering up for her protector, the secret-drinking lush? Maybe

Cruella was a good person, good with an unfortunate voice, but simply trying to make her way in the cutthroat world of academia where there were knives out around every corner. Maybe Shayla had it out for her, too.

I was only hearing one side of the story.

Damn it.

I grabbed my phone, googled Shayla Miller Rotherwood. Nothing. Shayla Miller Boston. Nothing. Shae Miller, nope. Shay Miller. About a million women are named Shay Miller. So much for that idea. Shay Pattillo? I rolled my eyes at myself for doing this, an insane example of spiraling curiosity that even if it went somewhere, would never go anywhere. There weren't any helpful listings, anyway. My phone battery was on the verge of being under fifty percent, which makes me terrified, so I unplugged the lamp to make room and plugged it into the wall outlet. You'd think they'd have more plugs in these roomettes.

Somewhere in Pennsylvania, I figured, as the green numbers on the bedside clock radio thing reorganized their little lines into two zero zero. If I had simply flown, like a normal person, I'd be home, long ago, with Dickens snuffling for food and in my comfy slippers and watching the last episode of the new Stephen King. But no, I wanted an adventure, a time to think and plan and be by myself. I'd told people I'd be off the grid, which is absurd, you never really are, but it was meant to be an excuse for why I wasn't answering texts and emails.

The light changed outside, not that it got lighter, but somehow—darker. Wrapping my blue bathrobe more tightly around me, I got up to consult the framed route map displayed on the roomette's wall. Lake Erie? Which might have been fun to see in the daylight. Which was approaching more and more quickly.

Cruella was talking again. Ooh. Better than Stephen King. I hustled back to my listening spot on the bed, ear to the wall.

“My mother-in-law is dying, thanks for asking,” she was saying. “But that’s a sidebar. Otherwise, life is good.”

“Well lovely,” I muttered to myself. “There’s an interesting life attitude.” But then I thought—*mother-in-law*. She’s married. Somehow it had to be that she was the bad guy, and Shayla the target. Well, Shayla was the target, for sure. But did she deserve targeting?

“Dud, dun, duuh,” I said out loud, imitating an old-time radio show.

The train lurched, with a yank and a stutter and a grabbing of the brakes on the rails so intense I felt my entire body clench in response. The clackety sound of the wheels stopped, a silence as intense as the noise had been only seconds before. Maybe we’d pulled into a station, my brain reassured me, maybe we were in Erie, like the dot on the map indicated, and maybe I’d be able to see if anyone was looking in. I peered out the window—but there was only darkness.

And then there was noise. Earsplitting, shrieking noise, like the scraping of ten million fingernails on ten million blackboards, the kind of high-pitched piercing whistle that had me clamping my hands over my ears and leaping up so fast I almost hit my head on the bottom of the upper bunk again.

“This is a fire alarm,” a weird disembodied robo-voice announced over a scratchy public address system. “Message 524. This is a fire alarm. All passengers must evacuate. All passengers must follow the signs to the closest fire exit.”

Kidding me? I thought. I sniffed, without thinking, as the voice continued to bellow instructions, and smelled nothing, and again rued my impetuous decision to take the train. How many false alarms must there be? When we had them in office buildings where I’d worked, first we’d always ignored it, figuring since it was surely a false alarm and the darn thing would stop, we’d think, so we’d amble our way toward the exit, dragging our feet, muttering about how annoying it was to have our work interrupted. I’d always take my laptop and phone, though, and handbag, just in case.

The robo-voice did not stop. I yanked down the heavy metal handle of my compartment door, and used all my strength to slide it open. The corridors were full of disheveled and bathrobed passengers, forced to march single file down the narrow space of the sleeper car hallway. They were all going the same direction, to my right.

“Anyone know anything?” I asked the passing group in general. The alarm interrupted my every word. “Is this a real—?”

“Ma’am?” A tall woman in a navy blue uniform and billed cap motioned me out of my room. “Right now, please, there’s a fire alarm. We must exit the train right now. Ma’am?”

She must have seen my reluctant expression, and my motion to go back in to get my stuff.

“No time for that,” she yelled over the still-demanding alarm.

I looked both ways as roomette doors slid open and more people filled the corridor. The passengers must have been coming from other cars, too, since there were way more people than the sleepers could have accommodated.

“Okay,” I yelled in reply, pretending acquiescence but turning back into my room. I still didn’t smell smoke. “But I have to get my—”

“Now, ma’am,” the woman ordered, and eased me out the door. As I took two steps down the hall, she vanished, probably to roust any other reluctant occupants.

To my right, an open door. Cruella’s door. The roomette was empty. It crossed my mind to go in, like, really fast, look around, see what I could see, and go. Maybe—take her phone? But the pulsing clamor of the passengers behind me propelled me away from answers (and burglary) and down the corridor. Another

porter was stationed at the open door of the train, helping bewildered and annoyed passengers clamber down the pull-out metal steps to the gravel below.

“What’s the—”

“Please keep moving, ma’am,” he said, as he released my elbow. “Please continue walking across the grass and over at least as far as the trees over there.”

Lights from the train—emergency lights, I guessed—illuminated the way in front of us, and somehow someone had made a path of blue train blankets across the grass. Good thing. Even though the summer night was mild, starlit, and with only the softest of summer breezes, many of the people I saw had bare feet, or like lucky me, only socks.

I needed my phone. I needed my *phone*. If that train burned up and my phone was on it I would be so mad. Silly, but that’s what I thought.

We all padded toward the stand of trees, looming dark and fairytale-like ahead of us. Two little kids, both in white terry bathrobes and slippers that made their feet look enormous, clung to the hands of a woman in what looked like a knee-length sweatshirt. Men in shorts and tank tops, a few in jeans and unbuttoned shirts, stood in clumps, arms crossed in front of them. Everyone stared at the train. We could see the engine, and a few cars, but the rest of the train was hidden in darkness down the tracks.

No smoke, no fire, no anything. I took a deep breath, smelling pine, and the loamy softness of a summer night in the woods. I was grateful for the blankets on the ground, imagining all kinds of mud and bugs and creepy things underfoot. Woods were not my favorite. But, I figured, I'd have a good story to tell, and as long as the train didn't explode or go up in flames, and as long as we got back onto the train, and as long as we got back to Boston, it would just be part of my impetuous adventure.

“Where are we, anyway?” I asked a twenty-something guy wearing sweatpants and a backwards UMass ballcap.

“Lake Erie over there,” he said, pointing. “See down there, just past the front of the locomotive? On the same side of the tracks as us, not too far away. And I know we already passed Erie, the city, and Buffalo is next, so, we're like somewhere between there. Middle-a- nowhere.”

“Lovely,” I said.

“You think there's a fire? Million bucks says no.” He cocked his head toward the darkened train. All we could see was the open doors, and inside, bobbing lights—maybe people with flashlights?—moving across the windows.

“Hope you're right,” I said. “Looks like there's not much activity. Or any flames.”

“Or phone servers,” he held up his cell. “My phone’s a brick. Looks like everyone else’s, too. Can’t even tweet.”

Many of the passengers, I could see by the emergency lights flicking shadows over their faces, were realizing they were cut off from civilization. Some people wandered farther away, holding their cells high in the air, as if somehow a signal would drop from the wispy clouds streaking the night sky above. Maybe they’d gone down to look at the lake. Chittering sounds came from the woods behind me, squirrels maybe, or birds, or some predatory creatures I’d rather not imagine. Looking at stranded us, and thinking: *dinner*.

“Excuse me.”

I’d know that voice anywhere. But Cruella was not talking to me.

“Do you have service?” She gestured her phone toward ballcap guy. It was the woman with the steely hair, now pulled back in a ponytail, her face difficult to describe in the mottled light, but she looked super thin, especially in black yoga pants, a black tank top and flipflops. *Ninja bitch*, the unworthy thought went through my mind. Not exactly Bette Davis-looking, but who knows what the modern Bette would wear? She didn’t acknowledge phoneless me. Clearly I knew nothing and could not help her.

“No bars,” the guy said. “You?”

“This is unacceptable,” she said. As if the universe cared what she thought or wanted. “I’m going to—” She paused, conjuring. “Ask for my money back.”

Conversation starter. “Yes,” I said, and then added, to show how much I admired her, “That’s brilliant.”

She eyed me up then down, assessing, dismissing, then defeated. “All my belongings are inside. Can you imagine? Our doors are open? What if there’s a...a...someone. Who robs us? Maybe this is a planned robbery, there’s no real fire, and it’s all a set-up to get us out here, in the middle of hellish nowhere, and distract us, and all the while, inside, they’re going through everything that...”

Good story, I had to admit. “I’m sure it’s fine,” I said. “You have a vivid imagination. But it seems a bit—elaborate, doesn’t it?”

“How would they get away?” Ballcap had been listening to this with some interest. Then shook his head, deciding. “Nope. Probably some jerk smoking dope in the bathroom. Probably dumped his doobie in the trash, forgot to put it all the way out. Smoke alarm goes off, everyone goes nuts.”

“Probably,” I said. Wondering if Ballcap was “some guy.” His eyes were red, and he did smell kind of like pot. But maybe there was a skunk back in the woods. And none of my business, anyway. “At least it’s not raining or snowing. Right? And we’ll be all aboard and underway soon.”

“I’m gonna check out the woods,” the guy said. And he ambled off into the trees.

“Are you from Boston?” I asked Cruella, just making polite conversation in the middle of the night on the edge of a forest in wherever Pennsylvania. “Or going there to visit?”

“I work there,” she said.

“I do, too,” I said. “I’m an actuary.” I’d just read a thriller where someone said that was the profession you should choose if you didn’t want to talk about what you did. No one thinks an actuary is interesting. “How about you?”

“I’m a school administrator,” she told me. She addressed the train instead of me, but that was fine.

“Oh, such a small world,” I said, so chatty. “My little daughter, Tassie, she’s quite the student, and a piano prodigy, and well, we’re just ready to look into schools. Walter and I are thinking private. And there are so many *fabulous* ones in Boston. Her trust fund of course will pay for all of it, so we’re—”

“Clarissa Madison,” she said. She had turned, and was now looking at me in a different way.

“Oh, is that the name of a school?” I pretended to misunderstand.

“No dear, that’s my name,” she said. “And you are?”

“Looking for a private school.” I pretended to misunderstand again.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” A man’s voice interrupted my playacting. A stocky guy in a blue uniform—how many of those were on this train?—clapped his hands out in front of him, trying to get the passengers’ attention. By this time, some had scattered off the blankets, probably the ones with shoes, and strayed farther into the woods or drifted along the length of the train, curious or frightened or bored. Or looking for phone signals.

The alarm from the train had stopped. *Good.*

I gestured toward the porter. “This sounds promising,” I said.

“Better be,” Cru—I guess, Clarissa, said.

I chortled to myself. I’d been close on the name.

Those of us who responded to him moved closer, a huddled group of displaced bleary-eyed passengers in various ruffled stages of haphazard clothing and bedhead hair. People mostly keep to themselves on trains, knowing if you strike up a conversation with the wrong person, they’ll talk your ear off from here to Peoria. And too much physical scrutiny is rude, and likely to get you an accusatory look in return. But here we all were, this random pod of passengers or, what Kurt Vonnegut might have called a granfalloon—a group of people connected by a thing that doesn’t really matter. We’d all go home, sooner or later, and this would all be a hazy memory, an adventure in some of the retellings,

fraught and dangerous. In others, an amusing entr'acte, an unexpected but insignificant detour.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” the porter called out again. We all looked at him, I at least was, trying to make sense of this all, suddenly in the woods, strangers on a train, immersed in this shared experience. Blah, blah, the porter said, please be patient, we’re checking, making sure, all fine.

Bottom line, fifteen minutes.

The crowd dispersed like Brownian molecules, aimless and adrift. Not me. I stuck by Cruella. I’d considered a plan, actually thought it through, that I would casually suggest we take a walk to see the lake. Why not on a summer night, we’d never get to see it otherwise. We’d talk about my (imaginary) Tassie and her trust fund and then I’d get her to spill about the turmoil at Rotherwood, and then I’d get some nugget of usable info and call Shayla when I got back to Boston. Maybe even anonymously.

I was just tired enough, I thought, as we stood there, silent in the throng, to imagine I could also lure her to the lake, knock her out, push her in the water, like, forever, and then pretend I’d never seen her. Would they even do a head count before the train pulled away? And even if they did, how could it be my fault? Poor Clarissa, must have lost her way in the dark.

And Shayla would be saved by the vagaries of mortality.

That plan did have a few complications, morality for one. And the law. And the unlikelihood of murder being the most reasonable solution to save a person I didn't even know.

"You know, Clarissa," I finally said. "I'm not really an actuary."

"Oh?" She seemed infinitely uninterested in that. Apparently not being an actuary is just as boring as being one.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm actually, well, what my staff calls a fixer."

"I see," she said, which from her tone I was obviously supposed to translate to *I don't care*. Then she did. "Why did you tell me about—do you really have a daughter?"

I took another deep breath, spooled it out. "I'm so embarrassed. No. That was a lie."

I went on, not looking at her, but we were both observing the random walks of the passengers, who now reminded me of those zombie movies, faceless pale creatures in tattered clothing, lurching through the forest on the determined hunt for brains. Or in this case, trains.

"I'm actually a public relations person, someone who can help harried executives when they have a particularly thorny issue in their office, something they'd like to get accomplished without letting the public know they had a hand in

it. All very confidential, of course, but sometimes, things being how they are, there needs to be a fine hand making sure things go as they...should.”

Oh, so now she was interested. Tentatively, carefully, interested, just a quarter turn toward me.

“I see,” she said.

The lights on the train all came back on with a flare and a loud hum of power. The crowd cheered, inspired to delight by the promise of bathrooms and light and shoes, and maybe a massive glass of wine. Of cell service, and internet, and normalcy.

And the light dimmed again, and the crowd sighed, as one, and stood staring at the train, as if their collective longing would power it up again.

I pursed my lips, seeming to make a momentous decision, even though it was almost too dark to see each other clearly. “So, Clarissa, I’m embarrassed to tell you this. But—here we are, and it doesn’t seem fair if I keep this a secret.” I added some optimistic enthusiasm to my voice. “And maybe this is all for the best. If not for this apparently false alarm, we’d probably never have met.”

“You’ve lost me,” she said. She looked at the screen of her phone, still an opaque black rectangle, then stashed it into the waistband of her yoga pants.

“Clarissa? Full disclosure. My roomette is next to yours, and apparently you were on the phone this evening. Tonight? Before the alarm?”

Oh, yeah. Now I had her full attention.

“And?”

“And I heard every word.”

“You listened to—”

“It was impossible not to, I’m afraid. The walls must be—well, who knows, but yes. ‘The board doesn’t know’? And ‘he’s a lush,’ and well.” I shrugged.

“Shayla.”

It would have been funny, really, if it hadn’t been the middle of the night in the woods outside of wherever Pennsylvania, with a massive broken train in front of us and a scatter of zombies loitering around us. I guess it was still funny.

Her chin came up, and even in the gloom I could see her wheels turning.

“I can help you,” I said. “As a professional, I can tell you it’s silly, and even—and this is just between us, trust me—misguided for you to take matters into your own hands. Whatever the matters are. Why get your hands dirty? Tell me the situation. I’ll make it all work. And you, with a clear conscience, can go on with your life. Without Shayla in the way.”

Her eyes got wide, then narrow. Strange to watch her think, in the random half-light of the emergency lighting and the occasional bloom of moonlight from behind the drifting clouds.

“Do I sound melodramatic? I apologize,” I said. “It’s not like you’re planning, you know,” I paused. “To actually harm her. Physically.”

“Of course not,” she said.

“Okay, then. You’d simply like her to do whatever she does, shall we say, somewhere else. Just guessing here. She’s good at it, maybe too good?”

Clarissa nodded.

“And— to give you deniability, don’t say anything—it doesn’t appear that whoever is protecting her—the lush? Has any inclination to change the situation himself.”

She nodded again.

I shifted on the blanket. My socks were damp from standing in the same place. I chose a drier spot. “So here’s the thing. I could tell from the call—”

“I still can’t believe you heard all that.”

“Oh, I’m certain not *all* of it,” I reassured her. “But I assume you’re a busy woman, who only has the best of intentions, maybe...” I paused. “Fundraising for the school? Perhaps higher salaries for administrators like you, more perks, more recognition, a bit more prominence, some changes in the—”

“Yes.” She cut me off. “Exactly.”

“And this Shayla...wants your job? And you’re thinking there might be a way to—embarrass? Or—”

“Can we not go into that?” She shook her head, as if shaking off cobwebs of temptation. “You eavesdropped, that’s unacceptable. Shall we just pretend this never happened?”

“Of course.” I agreed instantly. That’s how you reel in a fish, let them think they’re off the hook. I laughed. “My entire business model is ‘this never happened.’”

She nodded. Looked down at the soggy blanket. The hum of the crowd surrounded us, and from time to time a clanging of train doors, or a random night bird. I waited. Public relations, I’d reminded myself, was all about helping whoever needed help. Not about sentimentality or Lifetime movies or damsels in distress. My clients were not always paragons of moral virtue, but they always needed me. Sometimes I had to allow them to realize that.

“It’s like three in the morning,” I said, looking at my Fitbit. “Wow.”

“Her name is Shayla Miller,” Clarissa said. “But you know that.”

I nodded.

“Her phone number is—” She pulled out her phone, saw it was still a brick, put it back. She told me a number. “Can you remember that? And her email is at Rotherwood dot edu. You won’t find her on the website. She’s just moved to Boston.”

“Got it,” I said. And I did.

“I don’t want to know,” Clarissa said. “What’ll happen and when.”

“Goes without saying.”

“You’re not going to hurt her? I mean—physically? I want to be clear about—you’re not going to k—”

“Please.” I put up both palms, stopping her. “This isn’t the movies. This is business. Civilized business.”

“And—if it’s not indelicate...” She glanced around. We were as alone as we could be.

“How will I pay you?”

I shrugged, as if it wasn’t about the money. Which, I realized, it wasn’t. It was about the balance of power. “Invite me to some event at Rotherwood, we’ll talk. After it’s over. And let me reassure you again, this is absolutely confidential. I will never ever say we’d worked together. Never. I’ll never say I’ve talked to you, or know you. No matter what the circumstances.”

“But what if—”

I gestured to our surroundings. “There’s no what-if. There’s no one who can put us together, not in any way. Maybe the pothead kid with the hat,” I dismissed him with a flip of my hand. “Otherwise, you and I never met.”

She laced her fingers together, put them under her chin. “I’m so—relieved. We were going to—”

I smiled, approving, letting her know we were comrades. And that she should continue.

“We were going to send emails from her computer,” she went on. “With certain pretty compromising pictures we were having made, and then it would all get out, and she’d have to resign, and then we’d be back on track. The headmaster, well, he does drink a bit. But that makes our lives so much easier.”

I frowned, emphatically so she could see, even in the gloom, how serious I was. “Can of *worms*,” I said. “IP addresses, email chains, metadata, back and forths, the forensics people can find absolutely anything anywhere. You cannot send emails, Clarissa, it’s like putting a spotlight on yourself. No, seriously, you leave Shayla alone. Pull way back. Let go. You were—and forgive me—saying something about walking across the stage?”

“Awards ceremony,” Clarissa said. “She getting some national honor for—”

“Let her accept it,” I said. “You join in the celebration. Encourage her, befriend her. Applaud her. The key is, you can’t know when I’m going to do what I’m going to do. You have to be genuinely surprised. In a way, you know, your idea is perfect, subtle but devastating. But it has to be done the right way. I know how to hide the tracks, and no one will ever know, and think of how much easier your life will be.”

“No violence.” She held up a finger.

“Never,” I said. “There are other ways to end people’s lives; professional lives, at least. After we’re back on board? Have a glass of wine, go to sleep, forget about this. It never happened.”

A piercing whistle cut through the night, so surprising I clutched at my bathrobe. Clarissa, startled, grabbed my arm. All the lights in the train flared into brightness, and a rumble sounded from the massive locomotive on the tracks across the blanketed grass.

A blue-uniformed conductor climbed the three metal steps to the now-open doorway where many of us had disembarked more than an hour ago. “Ladies and gentlemen?” He called out again, and once again we all surged forward to hear him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are so sorry, this was a false alarm. We have gone through our checklist, and checked again, and our fire crew has discovered there was apparently someone smoking in the café car restroom, and they failed to extinguish their smoking materials before they were placed in the trash bin. Once again, ladies and gentlemen, smoking on the train is prohibited by law.”

The crowd grumbled, a murmur of disapproval for this flouting of the social contract.

“Idiot,” Clarissa whispered.

“But we certainly appreciate your patience,” the conductor went on from above us, “and your cooperation, so we’ll be offering each passenger a voucher for future travel on the Lake Shore Limited, or any trains in our system. And now, with your continued cooperation, we’ll be underway as soon as the engineer signals.”

As we clambered back aboard, I let Clarissa go first, leaving at least ten people buffering between us, making sure no one ever connected us, or could put us in the same place. Sure, if someone really delved into it, for some reason, they might find we’d been on the same train, but who would get that far?

Her door was already closed by the time I got to my roomette. Without even closing mine, I scurried to the listening spot. She was already on the phone.

“You won’t believe what happened, sweetie,” she said. “But I’ve been thinking. Let’s let it go. We’re bigger than this, are we not? We’ll rise above it, and simply put our conversations down to a few too many glasses of wine. I’m out, sweetie. Let’s let Shayla be. And let the chips fall where they may.”

I got out my own phone, draped my earbuds around my neck, all of a sudden not feeling one bit tired. Now that we were back on the train’s wi-fi, I had three internet bars, but I wasn’t naïve enough to google Clarissa’s name. Or her headshots. Which I would ask Hadley, in due time, to attach to various kinky clothing-free bodies, thereby creating certain gasp-worthy photos that might not

make our Clarissa too happy. I mean, it wasn't my idea. But if it was good enough for Clarissa to do to Shayla, it was good enough for me to do to Clarissa.

But no one would know where the compromising photos came from. As I'd said, I knew what I was doing.

And maybe, if Clarissa Madison kept her part of the leave-Shayla-alone bargain, I wouldn't have to do anything at all.

I put in one earbud, ready to block out the noises the rest of the night had in store for me. It was time to sleep, peacefully sleep, knowing that starting tomorrow morning, when the Lake Shore Limited arrived in Boston, Shayla Miller's life would be different. And she'd never know why, never know she had me as her own personal public relations fixer. All of us women, starting in our careers, need all the help we can get.

I slid under the covers again, thinking about power and justice and sisterhood.

The whistle sounded, piercing the night, doors slammed, and a grumbling under my feet announced our journey was once again about to be underway.

"All aboard!" The conductor called.

BIO:

HANK PHILLIPPI RYAN is on-air investigative reporter for Boston’s WHDH-TV, winning 37 EMMYs and dozens more journalism honors. A *USA Today* bestselling author of 12 thrillers, Ryan’s also an award-winner in her second profession—with five Agathas, three Anthonys, and the coveted Mary Higgins Clark Award. Critics call her “a master of suspense.” Her highly-acclaimed *TRUST ME* was an Agatha nominee and chosen for numerous prestigious “Best of 2018” lists. Hank’s book *THE MURDER LIST* is an Agatha, Anthony and Mary Higgins Clark Award nominee. Her newest standalone is *THE FIRST TO LIE* (Forge Books August 2020). The *Publishers Weekly* starred review calls it “Stellar.”