

## October 2012 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

### **Battle of Wits** by Jamie Buchanan

Look around the room, scope it secretly.

Eric's eyes took in all they could whilst he tried to remain calm/cool. He engaged in small talk, he lay down the patter. All of it deflected by his potential witness. Eric knew he had to work for this one.

Be natural, be suave, keep the conversation flowing, he thought.

Eric kept his demeanor light/happy. His brain needed to operate on two levels:

One: it comprehended her answers, dissected them, analysed them. He read between oral lines, tried to glean more information in what she said, what she didn't say, how she said it, what she tried to say.

Two: Eric reviewed, he scoped, he observed. The room could tell him more than she wanted to, or would ever let him know.

Eric was a professional, he had done this before. Usually his light-hearted patter and nonchalant swagger worked well with female witnesses - he had a way of putting women at ease. He flashed his whiter-than-white teeth in a wide cheeky grin, the small scar on his jaw crinkling his skin in a rugged, appealing way. He softened his approach with female witnesses - softly, softly...you never know what you might learn.

Inside his mind, he collected all the data he saw. His façade worked overtime to hide the data analysis going on within.

An umbrella in the stand in the corner of the room, the tip rested delicately on the polished floorboards. A plaid scarf draped around the hat stand, the loose ends of wool lightly touched the wooden handle of the umbrella - casualness perfected.

Before his observations became obvious, his mind reminded him - ask questions:

“So, Ms. Banks, have you heard anything out of the ordinary in the last night or two?”

Ask, listen, retrieve, detect. Meanwhile, scope for signs, hints, cracks in the pristine armour.

“No, not at all,” Christine replied, her voice low and husky as if she hadn’t used it for weeks.

No time to scope. It was a closed-answer question and this is one witness who would make him work for any information he needed. Eric needed fragments of time to purvey the room, glean what he needed. Christine was not the sort of person to give him more than what was required. He needed to ask open-ended questions, force her to think, respond slower...and allow him the time to observe.

“So what was Mr. Holden like?” he asked - yes, much better. It allowed her time to think of an answer, giving him time to sneak/peek.

The fridge - unadorned with magnets, bills, pictures. Barren, clean, pristine. The fridge of a single person, unattached.

Christine picked up a coffee cup, no steam rose from it but she took a sip (maybe gone cold?). No ring of moisture left on the faux stone bench-top.

Time - for her to think, for him to scope.

White gloves on the buffet, the fingers darkened with dust. The whole room was immaculate. It was cleaner than a hospital, the floor boards shone and glistened with polish, no dust could be seen. Cushions on the sofa perfectly positioned, magazines strewn across the coffee table in a faux-random way that could only be arranged deliberately. The apartment was like a real estate photo, an advertisement for “homes open”. This room could be selling Ikea, or spacious urban living design by the next Uber-designer of urbana nirvana.

No carpet, no dust...allergies perhaps? Her medicine cabinet would give up the answer but Eric didn't hold much chance of seeing that.

“He was quiet,” Christine finally said after putting the cup back down - no hint of an offer of a coffee for the detective. She gave up very little and she cleared her throat lightly, but she didn't relax. She stood on one side of the breakfast counter (the kitchen side) whilst Eric stood opposite keeping a barrier between them. Comfort zone.

Eric summed her up when she opened the door - timid, shy, reclusive. Damaged goods - someone did a number on Christine in the past. A broken heart, unrequited love? Perhaps an abusive lover or husband? Or father? It was something like that. Yet, despite her mousey cold demeanor, she was very attractive. Long curly auburn hair, designer glasses obscuring sharp, intense eyes. Her baggy clothes (track pants and sweater) hid her shapely body - his imagination of what she looked like under those garments threw him when he first entered the apartment.

Her initial reaction to the news of Ken Holden's passing was natural - her eyes welled with tears, signs of distress for sure. She knew something had happened because of the comings and goings, she said.

Eric had told her that Ken had fallen, keeping the details for himself. He needed more information.

Christine dried her eyes, holding the tears within. Eric could see her keeping herself under control, holding it together.

“How long have you lived here?” he asked.

“Six years.”

Short answers, not allowing him much time to scope surreptitious. No emotion, monotone.

“And do you live alone?”

“You know I do,” she replied. There it is, a glimpse. The first hint that she wasn’t happy with this.

“Do I?”

“If you’re any sort of detective you would.”

She was right of course...cutting through some of the bullshit they danced around. There were no photos, no homeliness in this apartment. He couldn’t see any pictures of loved ones - parents, siblings, friends. No ex-whatever’s and no children. Not even a cat.

Eric detected a slight change in tone - pleased with herself perhaps? Go with it, work with it. Play the role, draw her out. He would have to work for this one.

“Yes, I did know...you’re right,” he conceded. “I mean, I get to meet lots of people and see lots of homes. I can kinda tell who lives alone and who doesn’t.”

“Obvious huh?” A hint of coyness...quite attractive.

“All you’re missing is a cat.”

She smiled, and Eric could see the cute young woman hiding inside the shell she wanted others to see. Her smile smirked somewhat and he expected her to say something, but she swallowed it back down. Perhaps shy, perhaps not?

Conversation stalled. Ask the police questions.

“Did you hear anything last night? Anything abnormal?”

“No.”

“Did Mr. Holden have any fights? Any enemies? Anyone he was afraid of?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Have you ever been inside his apartment?”

“Why?” A flicker of caution (or is there some panic?).

“To eliminate your prints from anyone else’s.”

“Are you saying he was killed?”

“I’m not saying anything yet...we’re still investigating that.”

She turned away from Eric, facing the window. Perhaps distressed, perhaps not. She worked him hard though, he was getting nothing for free here. He analysed what he saw – Maxwell & Williams dinner set behind glass doors of the above-sink cupboards, Nescafe Express Coffee machine and a variety of other domestic appliances. All pristine, like they had never been used.

“I thought he fell down...old people do from time to time,” she said, a hint of melancholy entered her voice, adding emotion where she had previously hidden it away.

“He did, but we have to examine every possibility.”

She took a deep breath and turned to face Eric again...composure regained.

“Yes, I’ve been in there. A few times actually and, before you ask, the last time was three days ago when I helped him move the sofa so he could get his TV remote which had fallen there.”

That explained the prints.

Eric did not enter Christine’s apartment without information. What he knew before he came in: Christine Banks rented her apartment from Ken Holden, her neighbor. Ken owned both apartments and, in this neighborhood in the city, each one of these apartments was worth in excess of \$1 Million. Ken had no family, no next-of-kin. Christine had been named the sole beneficiary of his will - which included both apartments.

Her prints were on file for a drug possession and shoplifting arrest almost 20 years ago when she was a teenager - prints don’t age. They were found in several places in Ken’s apartment which, if she was a regular visitor, was not unusual. It was strange that her prints would be found on top of the stairs leading from the mezzanine bedroom to the living area but she may have cause to have been up there. Perhaps she paid her rent in “other ways”?

Eric’s lewd mind, his police mind, his eight years in the vice squad mind...it directed him there. He thought “contra-deal”; he thought “payments-in-kind”. Woman in early 30s and a man in late 70s...it was possible. She wouldn’t be the first one to sleep with her landlord for cheap rent in a great apartment.

But, was it worth killing for?

That was what he wanted to know.

His subterfuge of a pleasant cop doing his job, interviewing the neighbours...it was working okay. But she was on edge...maybe she was always like that? People who don't deal with police are always nervous when they get dragged into things like this, that was natural. Maybe that's it.

She was intelligent, he could ask about the will directly. Then she beat him to it.

"I suppose you know I'm the beneficiary to his estate, Detective?" She wanted him to know. Don't bullshit her, she'll know. Just admit it.

"Yes, I was aware of that."

"Well, I guess that gives me motive then...if you're looking for a killer and not investigating an accident."

"In my experience, motive is only a small part of the equation." His turn to keep it short. He wanted to add: 'opportunity, emotion and ability were all greater reasons for killing someone' but he wasn't there to prove himself to her - he had nothing to prove. He was there to solve a death.

Christine raised her cup again and drained whatever was left down her throat, slowly. She instinctively wiped the bench with a nearby cloth, cleaning away the non-existent moisture ring. Eric noted - second-nature, instinctual. She hadn't even noticed she had done it. Her eyes never left Eric who continued to move around the small living room, picked up a magazine on the table, briefly examined the cover, and then dropped it. Vogue September 2011 - over a year old and on top of the pile, in pristine condition, never been opened. She didn't read these. Before he dropped the Vogue he noticed the second one was even older.

Subterfuge...camouflage.

“Do you mind if I look around?” He asked nonchalantly. He knew the answer before she said it.

“Yes - I’ve just cleaned up and I’m going out soon.” Definite, no negotiation. She didn’t ask ‘why’.

“No dramas,” Eric replied, his eyes scanned/recorded.

Flat Screen TV - no dust, no static. Ever been used?

Stairs to mezzanine bedroom - mirror image of the one across the hall (sans the dead body at the base of the stairs of course).

Her bedroom upstairs...he wondered briefly if it ever saw any action. She was undoubtedly attractive to him and, therefore, to other men. Was she the sort to have men over? Or was old Mr. Holden, her landlord and neighbor, the only one to ascend those stairs to her perched boudoir?

It didn’t really matter to Eric, but he had to admit he was curious. Eight years in the vice squad will do that to you. He continued glimpse gathering.

No mirrors, no adornments.

He noted the symmetry of arrangement - potential obsessive-compulsive disorder perhaps? A clean freak, fussing over each minute detail. It almost looked like no-one lived here - it was all for show.

He logged it all.

What he knew when he went in: Motive? Check. Opportunity? Check. Emotion? Nix on that. Ability? That’s a big 10-4!

What he knew going in: interview the potential witness. If this is murder, then potential suspect.

What he knew going out: Suspect number 1. If this is murder, Christine Banks is prima suspecta. At this stage.

He moved to the doorway and stood in the threshold. As he left, Eric said: “Make sure you keep this door locked.” He noted 2 x deadbolts, a chain and an alarm keypad by the door. “If what happened to Mr. Holden turns out not to be an accident, you will need to be very careful Ms. Banks.”

When Christine replied, Eric knew it all.

The detective in front of Christine couldn't have been more obvious if he tried. He was older than he looked, that much Christine could tell. His hair dyed dark brown, the stubble on his chin flecked with grey as his hair would naturally be, a short scar dissecting the follicles. He looked 35, was probably closer to 45. Tall, over six feet for sure. His broad shoulders and large hands betrayed a man who had kept fit his whole life and still was - despite the slight paunch that had gathered around his waist.

He nervously shuffled his feet as he stood on the other side of the breakfast counter, trying to hide the fact that he was scoping out the room for clues.

Clues on Christine, her life, what she did, who else lived here.

Clues on the death of old Mr. Holden across the hall.

Clues in general.

His cheesy grin, attractive though it was, gave away his motives from the start. He was used to having women eat out of his hand. Christine wondered if his wife knew this tactic? His wedding ring was well settled onto his ring finger, it had been there for some time.

She knew that he was good at being charming, supportive, helpful. She guessed he would have more success with female witnesses and suspects than his male counter-parts. But he was see-through, his camouflage not quite right.

His greeting at the door was brief, professional. He entered her apartment after the briefest of opportunities as she opened the door - that told her he was after more than just a chat. He wanted more from her than simply a potential witness statement.

She knew a “go-getter” when she saw one.

Her tears were genuine when the detective told her Ken had died. Her tears helped her release tension, emotion, and the past. Her tears were like a weight off her shoulders, letting go whilst still feeling the emotions within. She didn't let too much leak out - it wasn't in her nature to emit emotion like that to strangers.

Christine held some in, choking it back and swallowing it down. Toughen up, she thought, don't let him see this side of you.

This detective Bryson was good though, careful not to push too hard even though she deliberately gave him nothing.

Yes, she knew Mr. Holden well.

Yes, she had been home all night last night.

No, she hadn't heard anything out of the ordinary.

Christine drank water from her coffee mug, wetting her tongue and mouth. Being nervous dehydrates you.

She knew what he would be looking for - any sign of something she didn't want him to see. And there was a lot Christine didn't want him to see. She was a private woman, she certainly did not need a detective, (no matter how good looking he was) prying through her stuff and treating her like a suspect.

Detective Eric Bryson was the consummate actor, playing his role very well - he made it seem like he was casually asking routine questions all the while scoping her place for glimpses of personality. He looked at the cup she drank from in a way that said "aren't you going to offer me one of those?" She normally would but she knew that if she did, she would have to turn away from him and concentrate on the coffee - and she wanted to keep her concentration on this policeman who asked such boring questions, despite his obvious ability.

Boring and predictable.

He finally asked an open-ended question: "What was Mr. Holden like?"

Instinct in her screamed: "Bastard! Lecherous! Sleazy! Demanding! Tough! Hardy!"

Instead she hid it, swallowed down that vitriol that was dying to break free. She drank again, giving herself the opportunity to swallow the bile that rose when she thought of her neighbor/landlord. Bought her time to remain politically correct.

"He was quiet," she replied softly, watching him scan her for signs/ticks...anything that might betray the fact that her words were disconnected to her thoughts.

He kept going with his routine questions, undoubtedly ticking off a mental list of rote questions that needed to be asked of any potential witnesses. If it were simply an accident, then there really would be no need to quiz the neighbours.

Christine Banks was one step ahead of this Detective Bryson - she saw him coming before he even knocked on the door. His casual demeanor, his cheeky grin...it was all a ruse, a façade to lull her into his grasp. She knew his type, but she resisted the temptation to tell him so. That was hard, to keep shtumm when all she wanted to do was show this guy how transparent he was. How obvious he was. How “police” he was.

His questions became even more dreary - she could resist temptation no more.

“You know I do,” she replied to his question on whether she lived alone. Anyone could see that she was a loner in this place - that was the point of it.

She was grateful he took her answer the right way, immediately dropping the bullshit of pretense as he admitted that he could tell. He relaxed a bit more, swaggered more, tried less. He was becoming more of himself and less of the detective playing cat-and-mouse. He was good, no doubt about it; always suspicious even when simply asking the neighbours if they heard anything.

There was no need to act dumb, he would see through that for sure. She told him about the will Old Kenny left - how she was the sole benefactor. He knew anyway, it was written all over his face as soon as she said it. She fished for what he knew, throwing out the bait that she had motive...if Ken’s death wasn’t an accident that is.

He was brief, but distracted. He muttered something and then wandered around the pristine room, looking for clues that did not exist. He picked up and dropped a Vogue

casually. She wondered if the room told him what she wanted it to – his actions said that it did.

He looked up at her bedroom on the mezzanine floor. She knew what he was thinking - Christine wondered the same thing herself very briefly. Detective Bryson was an attractive guy, no doubt. The suit he wore was expensive - especially for a cop - and it hung off him with style, like he was born to wear a suit. The top button of his shirt was undone, the tie slightly loosened. She sensed strong shoulders, a firm chest.

Christine knew the image she portrayed - mousey, reclusive, heart-broken loner. She knew that her casual attire was fitted well enough to give hints of curve, the allure of the unknown and unattainable. Christine knew how to play men just as this detective knew how to make women comfortable.

Yes, she knew what the detective was thinking when he looked up to her bedroom.

He wanted to look around, any excuse for staying a little longer, she thought.

No, she replied, making some excuse about going out soon. Calm, casual.

She wondered - would he pick up on the room? Obsessive-compulsive disorder perfected - this was what everyone thought when they saw it. Not that there were too many people who did see it, just a select few. It was what Christine wanted them to see - a façade, subterfuge. It was a diversion from the real Christine.

She watched Detective Bryson wander nonchalantly - distracted; already had his mind on the next neighbor to quiz about the death of Ken Holden in apartment 11C.

Her landlord was a lonely old man who just needed someone to love him for a while. Ken's wife, Meryl, had died many years before and, when Christine moved in six

years ago, he was already showing the signs of decay as his body started to succumb to the cancer that ate away at him.

But that didn't stop the sleazy old bugger landing a stray hand on her arse, or brushing past her breasts on occasion. Once it started, Christine knew exactly how this would play out. She knew a sugar daddy when she saw one, someone she could tease and provoke without actually having to do anything for quite some time. It was a surprise to her that, after three years, he decided to leave her the apartments. He and Meryl hadn't had any children and she never heard him mention any other family so Christine was about all he had.

Christine certainly knew how to play men - at any age.

Opportunity and motive had landed in her lap and all she had to do was wait for him to die and she'd be very well off indeed. But he hung on...year after year. It seemed like his body had found some natural resistance to cancer as he not only appeared to stop getting worse, but actually start to get better.

Then he had his fall.

And the police were asking her.

It was obvious they would think she was involved - given her inheritance from her landlord. And this Detective Bryson was a seasoned professional at the game. But he was leaving her apartment assured in his own mind that she was simply a quiet, mousey neighbor who got lucky befriending an aging landlord. It does happen from time to time.

The detective's façade had dropped and, as he left, he made a comment about her making sure she kept safe.

Christine relaxed, half-expecting the married Detective to ask her out for coffee. She dropped her reclusive, socially-challenged persona for only five seconds when she said:

“It’s bad enough knowing old Mr. Holden has died, but to think that maybe someone pushed him down the stairs...I’ll be keeping my door locked, don’t worry.”

Stairs? Eric thought. I never said anything about stairs.

Gotcha.

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