

The Temp

By Gail Vallance Barrington

Carl shook out his wet umbrella as he stood dripping in the entrance to his office and stared at the stranger at his assistant's desk.

“Where's Molly?”

“She was called away. A family emergency. The temp agency sent me.”

Family emergency? What family? If she had one, she never mentioned it to me.

The woman glided over to him and extended her hand. “I'm Catherine,” she said, “but most people call me Cat.”

But I'm allergic to cats.

Carl sniffed a pre-emptive sniff and managed to introduce himself. He hated not knowing what was going on, especially in his own office.

She was gorgeous, he had to admit. Tall and slender, long blond hair falling over one eye. She wore a short skirt and buff-coloured boots that rose to her handsome knees. The amber eyes that surveyed him were jewel-like, almost hypnotic, and he glanced away, afraid of what he might see.

“Well, Carl, I expect you'll fill me in.” Her smile was knowing.

He felt an itch at the back of his neck and wanted to scratch it.

Well, what do I care who does the paperwork, provided it isn't me.

He hung up his sodden raincoat, wandered into the back room overlooking the Halifax harbour, and grabbed his binoculars. He wanted to see if there were any new container ships. This was the reason he loved his office so much. Close to the harbour, he could watch the global traffic going by right outside his window. Distant places fascinated him, and he kept a book of

international flags and ships' signals close by to understand a bit about what was going on. Mostly, though, he wanted to know what was in those huge containers.

His insurance business had begun as an excuse. Something to get his parents off his back. Something so his mother could say, "Carl? Oh, he's in insurance." He started as a summer student. A family friend and long-time broker, Paul Bronson, had sponsored his license but then he had died suddenly. His kids were happy to let Carl take over the business. They certainly didn't care about insurance. It was easier for him to keep it going rather than to flounder around for something else.

I thought it was just a bunch of phone calls, forms to fill in. The same thing year after year. Ha. Was I wrong.

Clients were unpredictable and cranky and there was a lot of illness going around. He spent his time visiting clients in their homes to help them with their claims. Paul's old policies weren't that lucrative anymore, but he was too busy to look for new ones. It seemed like revenues were dropping every month.

She had followed him and stood in the doorway, radiating a sexy but faintly dangerous aura.

"Would it be all right if I brightened up the office a little bit? Just a few things?"

Carl looked at the threadbare carpets and cracked cream paint that had been here since Paul had moved in thirty years ago.

"The landlord was supposed to refurbish it. He said he'd do it when I took over the office, but he hasn't gotten around to it yet. I guess I didn't bother to remind him."

"I'll give him a call, shall I?" She smiled. "And I know a few people who can help out."

“Well, just don’t make a fuss,” he said. “I hate a fuss. And don’t spend more than a couple of hundred dollars. We can’t afford it right now.”

“Sure. No problem.”

Carl forgot about her altogether as he rushed away to his client meeting. The next morning, the city was lovely after the rain. The air was sweet with the scent of spring flowers as he walked down the hill to the old row of houses now converted into offices. Only as he rounded the corner did he remember yesterday’s unexpected turn of events. Trepidation began to crawl through his brain smothering his early morning calm as it went.

What’s really going on? Who is she?

A ladder blocked the doorway. As he navigated his way around it, he saw a painter perched above, scraping the woodwork.

“Good morning,” said Carl. The painter squinted at him, his face damaged and pale. He turned back to his work.

Upstairs, the musty carpets were being rolled up by a pair of unlikely youths with blotchy, dazed faces. Their clothes hung limp and tattered on their emaciated bodies. As they shuffled down the hall, they avoided his eyes. He could have sworn there was a faint whiff of rotting meat in the air. Cat supervised their work, looking smart and unperturbed. Her eyes narrowed as she saw him. The boys checked to see if she approved and then dragged the sagging bundles out into the alley. They didn’t come back.

She smiled an apology. “They’re related to a friend of mine. He owes me a favour.”

It turned out Cat had a very odd workforce indeed. A young guy in shredded shirtsleeves and grass-stained pants brought her the new carpet samples. He rocked from side to side as he stood in front of her desk, unable to stand still. The next day a middle-aged man in a rumpled

suit appeared, bending sideways to clutch one leg. He groaned as he took the order for a new sign. An elderly woman in a shapeless blouse and mis-buttoned skirt came and waved a tape measure around the windows, her arms jerking spasmodically. Tears flowed from her eyes.

Apparently, many favours were owed—by a cousin’s friend, a neighbour’s son-in-law, a sister’s roommate. They all gave off a faint, unmistakable scent, both rotten and sweet. It clung to the lining of his nose. His sense of unease grew. So did the rash on his arm. He popped antihistamines and tried not to scratch as he ran from meeting to meeting.

I’ll get to it on the weekend. I’m sure I can figure this out.

Meanwhile, the office started to look smart, efficient, and warm. A gilt sign hung over the fresh red door. It read, *MacGilvray Insurance: New Clients Welcome*. A subtly patterned carpet led up to pale gray walls and white trim. The furniture was either refurbished or upgraded. Carl liked the three small armchairs covered in gray velvet that appeared in his office. They a perfect place for clients to sit while discussing their policies. Orchids bloomed on his windowsill, and antique ship blueprints lined the walls.

At the end of the month, Cat presented Carl with a bill for the second-hand armchairs for \$179.00.

“Is that it?” asked Carl.

“Oh yes,” she said. “It’s amazing what you can find when you set your mind to it.”

“But who’s paying for everything?” He gestured around him.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” she said. “Bartering is really popular these days and there are some people out there who owe me a favour.”

Carl scratched a welt on his arm.

Because he was out of the office so much, Cat organized his appointments. The clients raved about his new assistant. So friendly and helpful, it was as if she knew them already. He seemed busier and at the end of the month his suspicion was confirmed. Revenues were up.

One day Cat dropped a three-inch ring binder on his desk with a thud.

“Here. This came in the mail for you. You’re having lunch on Friday with a potential client about a large marine insurance policy.”

“But I don’t know anything about that!” exclaimed Carl. “We do life and disability insurance.”

“Well, you have until Friday. Bone up on cargo and tonnage and supply chains. We’re expanding.”

“But what will I say?”

“Just talk about sailing. It’s his hobby. You’ll be fine.”

Somehow his quiet, boring life had been upended right under his nose. His sense of alarm increased.

As he stopped for a coffee on the way back to the office one afternoon, he spotted a familiar figure hobbling past the window. “Oh no, not another one,” he thought, but looked again. It was Molly, his former assistant, struggling along with a pair of crutches. He ran outside to catch up with her.

“Molly!” he yelled but she kept crutching on. “Molly, wait up.” Finally, he caught her arm. “What happened to you? I thought you were dealing with a family emergency.”

She spun around, furious. “That woman,” she hissed. “The day we had that big rainstorm, I was standing at the bus stop on Spring Garden Road, and she started talking to me. She was very friendly, interested in my job. She asked me what kind of boss you were.”

“What did you say?”

“I said you were pretty hands off, no trouble at all. The next thing I knew, there was a clap of thunder, and she pushed me straight into oncoming traffic. I was hit by the Number One bus. I just got out of the hospital last week.”

Carl was stunned. He patted her arm and pulled her away from the foot traffic.

“Did anyone see what happened?”

“No. The thunder distracted them. She said the oddest thing just before it happened.”

“What?”

“She muttered something about needing someone to owe her another favour.”

Carl slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand.

How could I be so stupid? Obviously, I'm next on the list for her ghastly army.

“Molly, I'm so sorry,” he said.

“I've called you like a million times, but I guess she didn't pass along my messages.”

Carl shook his head. “No. But I'm going to fix it. Right now. Come back to the office as soon as you feel able. Please, I need you. We have so much to do.”

He raced back to the office and stormed up the stairs, umbrella at the ready. Seeing Cat about to pick up the phone to make another decision for him, he snapped.

“Stop! That's enough.”

The phone hovered in the air as she looked at him mildly.

“You're fired,” he said. “Now. Immediately. Get out of the office and take your ill-gotten paraphernalia with you.” His voice got louder and stronger as he went along. “How dare you hurt Molly like that. I don't want your kind of help. And I don't owe you any favours.”

Her implacable calm shattered. Her face looked ugly, almost blotchy under her makeup. “You can’t,” she growled. “Look at all I’ve done for you.”

“Oh yes I can. Just watch me. Get. Out. Now.” With each word, he poked the tip of his umbrella straight at her heart.

A violent rainstorm blew out of nowhere and a clap of thunder shook the building. Lightning blinded him. There was a sizzle, and the atmosphere rippled. Then she wasn’t there anymore. The rain stopped, as quickly as it had started.

When his vision cleared, he saw that everything was back to its grungy old self. Even the fresh paint had been an illusion. Staggering into his office, he was surprised to find that the three armchairs were still there.

I paid for them. I guess they weren’t a favor.

Unfazed by the tempest that had raged around him, instead, he was exhilarated and strangely cheerful. There was so much to do. He reached for his phone, punching in a number, while he admired the skin on his arm, clear again.

“I’d like to order a small commercial sign. The kind that swings on a bracket. And I want gilt lettering.” He explained the details and hung up. Then he looked at the thick binder which had also escaped the purge and pulled it towards him. “Now, let’s see what this is all about.”