

# **The American Journeyman**

*Just Another Job*

by

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Where will the human race be in, say, a hundred or even a thousand years? Will we have evolved? Does Nature have a plan? If so, is it working? If you ask me, no, not so well. Can we, the people, help? We? No. Junio perhaps. A conundrum...

Then there's another doozie. What does Junio have in common with Joan of Arc, the Salem witches and so many other 'troubled' and persecuted woman of the past? Now that's *really* important – I'm sure of it. So, Evolution's waiting: been waiting a long time. Nature clearly needs a hefty nudge. Who better, then, to provide it than my 'Sisters of Avalon' and me, Joss Nyland, an American journeyman...



# Chapter 1

Ill-fated? Doomed..? Has to be, really. Guy like me, job like this, I should turn back... .. Or maybe not. I've come this far; I should give it a shot. At least I get to see the fabled Avalon. Ya know, it must've been a real shocker when it just kinda washed up on the South Jersey Shore like that... Hmm...

Hot! Pretty impressive wetlands around, though. Weather like this, time of year... Must be a great place for birders... Twitchers too maybe.

*What d'ya say, Dr Cindy? Sad man rambling..?*

Best fill the old gal up, I guess... Just in case.

'You don't pump your own gas in Jersey!'

Great, just what I need right now – another bad omen. Third one today. Station boss: cute señorita in corporate pantsuit. Throw in a management badge and the world is *not* a better place...

*Fine... Got it! No need for pepper spray and Taser.*

Time to retreat, get back behind the wheel and seek 'help'.

All righty then, let's see. Dr Cindy's ball-busting CD pantomime for the 'relationship-challenged' male. Forty bucks, eight hours 'inner searching' and a migraine. Another dumb purchase from Alf's famous *Buy 'em, Sell 'em* Emporium. Can someone please tell me how that guy keeps selling me all this junk?

*Okay, Cindy, hit me... Soft and slow; soft and slow.*

Finally, Avalon on the radar. *Millionaires and workmen welcome. Bums bugger off.* Cross the bridge, immediate left turn and the real estate's lined up like a thousand legions of Rome's finest, exactly as El Jefe described it.

Now then, 19th Street, close to the ocean. There it is! Wicker Lodge. Odd name for a dwelling in King Arthur's realm, but then...

Impressive. Three stories, spacious, not two cramped by the adjacents, and pale earth tones to finish. A modest but respectable asset for any guy saddled with an eight-figure checking account. And lookie here. Nemeses where none should be. A fine pair of ladies emerging from the side entrance. Looks like Buffy, the Vampire Slayer's Mom and Sci-fi Barbie.

*It just ain't my day...*

'Hello there, you must be Mr Nylund.' Buffy's Mom continues her advance with a kind of dismissive royal wave.

'Hi, Nylund's the name, but you'll find I come to heel much smarter if you go with Joss.' *Dummy! What a stupid thing to say!* 'Sorry, I'm not used to being interviewed for jobs, and to be honest I was expecting to meet a Mr Edgerley.'

The fine ladies exchange what literalists like to call a 'knowing glance'. Circumstances are on one helluva downward spiral.

'I must apologise.' Buffy's Mom smiles nervously. 'Mr Rodriguez – the gentleman I spoke with over the phone – let's just say there were some communication difficulties.'

I can't even feign surprise. Miguel's mother has less trouble understanding my broken-bar 'Mexican' than she does her own son.

'Actually, I'm Mrs Edgerley. This is my daughter Junio. Mr Edgerley is currently... Away on business.'

*Awkward moment number two.*

‘My husband has an eclectic collection of contacts, you know.’

‘Ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, if he knows Miguel Rodriguez,’ I throw in.

‘Quite... Be that as it may, I... *We* have a project which requires specialist attention. For security and other considerations, we can involve only one person. Someone skilled of course, but also someone capable of complete discretion.’

I try to look reliable but fail. The ‘interview’, I guess.

Suddenly my mind plays catch up with its surroundings, and there I am pinned under a microscope: the observer none other than Sci-fi Barbie a.k.a Junio. It’s a strange and unsettling sensation. The girl, mid-teens, is staring at me with such intent that her gaze relegates x-rays to also-rans. I make to speak, but my scrutiniser beats me to it.

‘Shall we go inside and discuss the matter further?’

*Now would be a great time to be afraid.*

Junio is expressionless, like a robot on half charge, while Mrs Edgerley, noticeably relieved, undergoes a peculiar reset. The role of alpha female has gotten tossed over to Junio along with some weird mutual understanding that I’m still a contender. This realisation posts a couple of brain alerts. One: I’m unexpectedly pleased, and two: the past six months of hard-core positive thinking, inner-peace chanting and self-help preaching I’ve flagellated my brain with hasn’t equipped me to deal with this crackpot situation – not one bit.

My ‘Billy Graham’ moment knocks my concentration into neutral. For a second my lifeline swerves off course, only to collide with a firm but yielding crash barrier. I’m back on track, deflected not by metal or concrete, but by the soothing tone of Mrs Edgerley’s voice.

‘Mr Nylund... Joss... Are you unwell? Today *is* stifling. Perhaps a cold drink?’

I smile... I think.

‘Sorry to ask, but could you enter through the front door... Junio will let you in. The neighbours, you understand.’

I don’t, but why bother?

In line with smart military practice, the Edgerleys about-face and march, one behind the other, back through the side entrance.

Maybe I’m unwell. Long drive, no A/C, sweltering heat. But there’s no longer any doubt. Bizarre is heading for crazy way above Mach One.

Thankfully, the house doesn’t pull a ‘Lord Lucan’ or transform into O.J. I’m ushered in through the all-important front door, seated in a large living room-cum-kitchen and presented with a cold glass of some fancy juice or other.

It’s a nice space. Light, airy and not over-furnished. Kind of celestial, I’d say, making clever use of glass, beechwood and shades of white. Normally I wouldn’t go for anything like it, but here it works well... Very well.

‘Do you like the house?’ Mrs Edgerley asks nervously.

Junio frowns. ‘Oh, come on, Mom. Mr Nylund’s only been here five seconds.’

Relief hoists a flag. At last the kid sounds less like a machine and more like the usual ‘in charge’ teen.

‘It’s fine. First off, it’s Joss or nothing. And that goes for the Little Miss as well. “Nylund” would be great if I was a bank manager, teacher or IRS chief... But I’m not. Second of all, the house has style and character: a leap or two from what I’d expect to find on the South Jersey shore. Someone’s got taste.’

The atmosphere is already frozen by the time I finish speaking, and I mean ‘solid’. Both women, apparently gripped by first-degree catatonia, fix on me as if I’m a bone in a dog pound.

Best option? Join ’em, I decide.

*Great, all this way just to play at statues...*



I make it through ten Mississippi's before Mrs Edgerley flinches. A spasm, reflex action? Who knows?

'I hope you won't take offence, Joss, but my daughter is rather particular about her—'

'Little Miss,' Junio interrupts. 'Sexist, derogatory, condescending... Nevertheless, it does engender certain positive elements. Endearment, deference, a degree of respect... Should terms be agreed, you may, on occasion, call me "Little Miss"... I will permit it.'

*The robot is back.*

Elephants, gorillas and the odd hippo littering the floor space amble off into a corner, preparing for a forced evac. They aren't needed. Workman Joss is catching on. These ladies are a couple of fruit loops living the bohemian shuffle. It's their house so their rules. I need the work, so why not just jolly along with the freak show, find out about the job *then* decide. Sounds like a plan.

'Thanks,' I say, sackcloth and ashes in hand. 'Didn't mean to cause no offence... About the job?'

Mrs Edgerley, more or less completely thawed, hits the reanimation button.

'Yes, the project. I understand you've much experience in electronics, engineering and construction. Also, you don't mind working alone.'

I nod.

'You built the Champ?'

It takes a couple of blinks, a frown and a good gulp of juice before I realise that Mrs Edgerley's lips haven't moved. I look at Junio.

'The Jeep you arrived in. A composite; but basically a late 1950's British military Austin Champ.'

I'm not surprised, I'm poleaxed.

'Sure, but...'

Little Miss leaves her chair like a figure made of liquid metal.

'I read... We've an excellent library here. I have questions about the Jeep. You have the time?'

'My time is yours.'

'Follow me' seems to be the name of this latest game, as Junio makes for the door.

We head outside – front door naturally – and park by the Champ.

Inhabitants of planet Earth who've even heard of a Champ wouldn't fill a gas station forecourt. Of all the crazy joints in all the world I just happen to stumble across the one kid – a girl – who belongs to that elite.

'Can I look under the bonnet?'

I pop the hood.

'Extraordinary. Rolls-Royce engine, fully waterproofed. And, as I thought, a hybrid with extensive customisation and recently manufactured parts: all to original specifications. Am I correct?'

I shake my head in disbelief. 'You certainly are, young lady. I can't believe you know all this.'

Junio is glowing like a 250-watt bulb. A happy teenager – not something I've seen in a long while.

She wants to sit in the driver's seat and start the engine. I let her.

'I'm sure some of my family were British like yours. Probably had military connections too, although I'm less certain of that.'

Confusion I hate, but confusion I've got. *What the hell!*

I try to ask what she means, how she knows, but I'm drowned out by engine noise: a bout of enthusiastic gas pedal abuse. Finally, I catch her eye, and in a flash her face changes. She cuts the engine then flows onto the sidewalk.

‘We should go back inside. Mother will be worried. I don’t like to leave her alone. Thank you, Joss.’

Given the dramatic mood swing, launching into a third-degree doesn’t feel right. Maybe later, I decide.

Back in the living room Mrs Edgerley is perched on the edge of her seat sipping tea. She looks like a wannabe Victorian parlour maid waiting for some stuffy Mr Jeeves character to interview her. Well, that’s my image anyway.

‘Ah, you’re back,’ she says softly. ‘I hope you’ve not been pestering our guest, Junio. You know what you’re like when something interests you.’

Both women lock onto me with that searchlight gaze of theirs. If I were a World War II bomber, I’d be a goner.

‘No problem,’ I insist; and the truth is I mean it.

Statues again. Drinks – sure. Conversation – nada. I wait. Seems the best option. Let the girls keep running the show. If that’s what they want, fine. Time, maybe, to do a little staring of my own.

Mrs Edgerley: Buffy’s Mom. Not far off the mark for a first impression. One of Nature’s gems, she radiates a sense of warmth, caring and comfort. This is a good woman. I’d stake the Champ on it. Probably clipping 35 to 40, she exists in two dimensions – sort of. The 1950’s and the 1990’s. The long, golden blonde, wavy hair, sharp features and subdued makeup peg 1996 and Sheryl Crow. ‘Hand to this glove’ is the classy fitted swing dress, wide belt and white stilettos – a dead ringer for just about any 50’s household ad. She could have been a 21st-century Lauren Bacall... Well, maybe... Lose the oversized cardigan first. For sure, they are about the same height and build; but it’s the lips that clinch it – a blessing fit to vex angels. So far, she’s appeared nervous and uncertain, but that’s not the whole story. There’s a pressure pack of strength and passion anchored inside that fragile frame. Prick Junio, for example, and watch your own blood flow. Yes, there’s plenty going on behind those intelligent, dark green eyes. Plenty. I like this Mrs Edgerley. I like her a lot...

As for the Little Miss: a Rubik cube with shifting colours. No clue. Fourteen, fifteen or a thousand. Who knows? To look at, you *could* say, ‘Hey, another anorexic clotheshorse in the mix.’ Tall, perhaps five foot seven without stilts. Short platinum blonde hair, and slim. But to be fair, still a couple of stops shy of wire-doll central. Unlike Mom, Junio is all business. Ninety degrees on the boardwalk, it surely is, but this little lady is an Ice Queen made for Rockefeller Plaza and Wall Street. For her, beachwear of choice means a light grey exec suit, maroon top and Jimmy Choo’s. Top of the range? That doesn’t quite gel. Shoes aside, I reckon home-made. A girl of many talents..?

‘Shall we look at the room?’

Mrs Edgerley is standing right in front of me, looking a tad puzzled. Junio has vanished.

Flash trance, I decide. Bad news, since a ‘room’ has been mentioned and I wasn’t listening. I gesture her to lead on, hoping that my ‘tune out’ moment is just a ‘finger snap’ glitch.

We head south and enter a small annexe at the back of the house. There, Junio has the carpet rolled up. She steps on a worn, discoloured area of flooring and voilà, a small wooden flap pops up: home to a keypad. Nimble fingers ‘tickling the ivories’ cause the ground to creak as a three-foot square section of flooring drops an inch or two then slides aside. The ladies now definitely have my attention.

I receive a flashlight and dust mask from Mom and instructions from Junio to, ‘Follow me,’ down the ladder attached to the opening. After, say, seven feet we’re standing in a steel box the size of a typical nursery.

While I bounce the light beam around rubbernecking, my underworld guide repeats her trapdoor-opening trick and hops onto a second ladder. At the bottom I think she's dumped me and run off down some godforsaken cavern. I can't find her anywhere. I call out.

Clang! Metal on metal followed by a power surge. The lights come on. Junio re-materialises.

'This is the project, Joss. We've detailed specifications.'

I had *not* expected this. I can hear the reruns playing in my head. An underground panic room.

Junio isn't sure if the installation was put in before or after the house went up. I tell her definitely before.

What we've got here is nothing less than a completely self-contained metal strong box set in concrete. Most of the island homes in the area are raised on stilts to minimise flood damage. From the outside, the airlock we passed through would look like a utility space: a kind of lower ground floor add-on. No one would ever guess that beyond and below that someone had stashed an eight-foot by 20-foot square nuclear shelter. The whole place is in a pretty bad state of repair. Basically, it hasn't been used and probably just got forgotten about over time.

When questioned, I find Little Miss to be very precise on some things and vague on others. She knows all about the house: built 25 years ago by Dad, pre-Mom era. Post Mom, a couple of rooms were added, the first-floor balcony extended and plans for an indoor pool postponed – indefinitely. She doesn't know why the old man wanted a military-style bunker in Avalon and neither do I.

I take the Cook's tour in my stride. Think it best to skip the whole, 'Whoa dude,' thing. Keep cool, be professional, get the job and cash the pay cheques. Sound advice.

As a refuge of last resort it isn't a bad billet. There's a set of bunk beds, a small kitchen area, a few chairs and a table; and to keep mind and body from imploding, amenities are plentiful – TV, fridge, shower, shelves full of books and videos, and the must-have phone, all included in the package. On one wall, not so discreetly hidden by a Perspex screen, is the business end of things. I need more time to prod and poke, but at first glance everything you'd want to survive a small-scale alien invasion is either hooked up – batteries, oxygen cylinders, carbon dioxide scrubbers, or ready – video, A/C, waste disposal.

Junio starts coughing: the third time in as many minutes. The air was bad when we entered; now it's plain nasty.

No words are necessary. We leave, batten down the hatches and track down Mrs Edgerley in the kitchen.

'Drink this,' she commands. 'It'll clear the dust.'

It tastes like balsam laced with Jack. The dust doesn't stand a chance, but then neither would leaded paint.

Back in the living room I feel the atmosphere is more relaxed. Mrs Edgerley apologises for not joining us in 'the crypt' – her words – then focuses on the main feature: the job.

For the next 30 minutes or so I jot down details of the work on offer. Basically, the ladies want the installation completely checked out, cleaned and overhauled. There is also a list of specific tasks: lay in a hardwired audio/video link to the house, fit a modern A/C system, new plumbing and a rework of the fitted furniture. By the end I'm no longer so sure about my alpha female role-swapping theory. Mrs Edgerley really is something else.

'What do you think, Mr Nylund... Joss? Would you be willing and, if you'll forgive me, able to tackle a project of this scope... Alone?'

I try for a confident, positive smile – my best shot.

‘Well, Mrs Edgerley, it’s a lot of work and some of it’s pretty specialised. Junio mentioned you had specs. If I could look those over first, then I promise an honest opinion. Right now, I’d have to say “willing” yes, “able” maybe. I hope that’s okay.’

And with that Junio wheels in the plans: a truckload of ’em.

Truthfully – I have to say it – we’re still operating in the *Twilight Zone*, but I’m getting used to it. Here I sit, some unfamiliar guy who turned up in a Champ, trusted to study confidential plans. No ID check, no references. It doesn’t sit well that Mr Edgerley knows Miguel; and for something like this the guy would be here, whatever: stands to reason. But then what am I thinking? By now, for certain, I’d have normally gotten full chapter and verse on prospective pay, terms, conditions and the contract. Hell, I haven’t even asked what it’s all about. Again, who needs a panic room in Avalon?

I spend three hours sifting through the blueprints. About 90 minutes in, Junio decrees it’s way past lunchtime and smartly rustles up three separate meals in nothing flat – a cheeseburger for me, salad for Mom and some weird Japanese spread for herself. We don’t talk, just eat then get back to work. When I stop, it’s not because I’ve finished, it’s because I can’t; least ways not at one sitting. The whole kit and kaboodle is a Chinese puzzle. For starters there’s no reference to who designed, built or installed the beast, and no manufacturing info stamps featured on any of the documents. No question the plans are higher than high-end. Clear and comprehensive drawings of even the smallest component are a cinch to find and follow. My problem? No warm, tingly feeling inside. This honey was definitely put together off-grid. The question is why?

A good half-hour before I finally push back from the paper strewn table, the ladies begin taking turns circling. Patient eagles, I decide, not hungry vultures. Now, it’s all emergency landings. So far they haven’t spoken, so I will.

‘I reckon two to three months... Less with help. Parts I can order, shouldn’t be a problem. I know guys who can supply the Holy Grail if you’ve got the cash – no religious disrespect intended. The really unusual stuff, probably I can knock together or, worst-case, rig up a workaround.’

I’m not sure if Mrs Edgerley has heard me. She doesn’t react, just asks right out.

‘Your fee?’

‘Same as always,’ I confirm. ‘I go by the hour, whatever the job.’

‘Do you have a family, Joss? People who depend on you?’ Junio continues with the twenty questions.

‘No family, no dependents. Sounds sad, I know, but it isn’t and I’m not.’

Mrs Edgerley flashes one of her Buffy’s Mom smiles. ‘In cases like these, how do you manage logistics? I mean, do you have your own tools, workshop?’

‘And would you expect to commute?’ Junio puts in, worried, maybe, that Mom has forgotten crucial point number 19 from their pre-prepared prompt sheet.

I hold up my hands in surrender. ‘Sure you ladies don’t work for the FBI?’

*They like that. Guess it helps with the bonding process.*

‘Okay. Miguel has a buddy, lives just off island. Older guy, he said. Owns a piece of land where I could park my trailer. Also, there’s some outbuildings I might be able to use. I don’t commute. The trailer’s home to me and my tools. It’s the way I like things. And finally, if you want, I don’t mind working late and at weekends, but that’d be up to you.’

‘Sorry, Joss, if we seem overzealous. But this is a considerable undertaking for Junio and me.’

*Hmm, guess Mr Edgerley’s not part of the picture after all.*

‘And as I’m sure you’ve gathered; this is a sensitive matter... Which leads me on to one last point. Whomever we engage must accept certain stipulations. Payment will be directly to

the person in question. Fees to any third party – Mr Rodriguez, for instance – will be dealt with separately. As previously mentioned, we require the services of only a single employee. Additional help is out of the question. Most important of all, is discretion. It's our primary concern. Consequently, no aspect of the project may be discussed beyond these four walls and no part or section of the plans are to be removed or copied for any reason. All that said, I think, for once, Mother and daughter have reached the same conclusion. Mr Nylund... Joss... If you'd like the work, it's yours for consideration.'

I stand up almost at attention.

'You're leaving?' Junio's alarmed tone drags me back online.

'No, no. Can't think why I did that. Brain cramp, maybe.'

*More like brain stun. Getting a job this size without hours more questioning and days of 'thinking things over/thanks for your time'... Headline News, top story this hour: it has to be.*

I sit down again.

'That's great, but I have to ask, why me? A major contract demanding skilled labour for refined ladies like yourselves – Miguel Rodriguez and his motley crew wouldn't be most people's first choice.'

Mrs Edgerley does the dismissive royal wave thing again.

'You're far too modest, Joss. We may seem like refined ladies to you, and by the way, thank you for that; but we are not without guile. There are many facets of our situation we're not at liberty to divulge, leastways not for the present. Please accept that we've done our homework, so to speak. The result: you're here. How can we help you decide..? Dinner perhaps?'

I'm beginning to feel like captain of the Argo caught in the grip of Siren song. Could be I'll never leave this place...

*Great! Suckered by fantasy now... Still, a troubling thought – and yet, somehow, I don't seem to care.*

Time check. The old Seiko says 4.30 p.m., which means chances are – much closer to five.

'I'll be honest.' *My best line in customer relations.* 'The job's one-of-a-kind. I'd like the challenge. There're other ways to describe it, but ladies present... For certain you're looking at a bunch of problems. Failures and setbacks, a given. So, if it's no bother, ladies, I should take another look at the specs then revisit the site. After that, if I think I can give it a better than evens shot you've got a deal.'

'Would three hours be enough?' Junio's expression says it all. Do it, review it, agree to it already. 'Mom's making enchiladas. We eat at eight.'

*Let the games begin...*

Dinner at eight. Not something I'm used to. At least it means the kid likes Mexican, whereas most robots don't – I guess.

Eating with the help. Hmm... Most folks can't wait to get rid of you and definitely want you gone before the neighbours get home. Could be a first. Strange, though. One minute we're worrying about a redneck slipping in the side door, the next we're totally okay with the same redneck hangin' round after dark for cocktails...

Must concentrate. Trying to decipher how Mr Edgerley's steel trap came to life is tough enough without drifting off into the depths of female psychology. Sad fact is, if I hadn't been minded to junk all that kinda stuff I'd probably be out in the Champ right now spendin' quality time with Dr C.

A second look at the plans was a good call. First time round some of the electrical and piping interchange work didn't make sense despite the wealth of comprehensive artistry, so

by the time I head back down into the dungeon, I feel confidence stepping up lively behind me.

Junio doesn't want to play warden. A bit of a surprise. Instead I get a box of masks, two flashlamps and an ultimatum: 30 minutes in the hole then she's coming in after me.

A closer inspection of exposed fixtures and fittings confirms my initial diagnosis. Age, neglect, salt air and damp equals seizures, cracks and erosion. Nothing I can't handle, I tell myself. As for structural integrity... Well, it isn't perfect, but compared to the Liberty Bell, no problem. One thing, though, I can't gloss over. This can never be a one-man show. The Edgerleys aren't stupid. They know this sure as day, yet not even the massed armies of heaven and hell can force these ladies to have a rethink. *Questions, questions everywhere, but answers, answers oh so rare.*

My allotted time is almost up. I collect my gear together, kill the lights and make for the ladder. Step one goes well, step two never happens. Beneath the lower bunk bed, a shadow struck by my flashlamp draws me back.

Meddle or not to meddle, that is the question... Curiosity has this cat dead to rights.

Lights back on, a quick search-and-recovery turns up a folder: a large folder filled with pencil sketches. Best I can tell the drawings are of the same family of three: the Edgerleys. I figure the artist is Junio and the collection a keepsake put together by Mom. It's a pretty comprehensive mix ranging from childish stick figures to accomplished portraits. I'm no shrink, but preliminary polling stats favour 'happy kid'. All the early stuff features two adults plus child, holding hands, smiling beneath a huge yellow sun. Some of the pictures are dated, which, if factual, mean the girl's talent must have sprouted like Russian vine: a definite gonna-be Gainsborough. The close-up studies are spectacular; but that's where 'happy' hits the rocks. Mom's striking profile progressively takes on dramatic signs of worry; self-portraits cry out 'sad girl alone'. And as for Pop, there are clearly 'issues'. In common with the ladies, he has qualified for his very own dedicated portfolio: trouble is, all images are sketched out of focus. It's like looking at a ghost: a man imprisoned behind sheets of cellophane. Whether the guy's just plain dog-ugly or seriously out of favour, who knows?

Back to Junio and there are clearly two ponderables to chew on. One: from the very first stick figures she always places great emphasis on her signature short blonde mop, and two: recent self-portraits look to have been copied, reduced in size, then stuck in the middle of a blank sheet. All around the heads, complex mathematical symbols and foreign script, possibly Cyrillic, have been scribbled in black marker pen. Could be no more than a form of experimental montage, but whatever the intention it sure doesn't feel healthy.

'Time expired, Joss. Eight o'clock in 40 minutes.'

Junio's offbeat phrasing shatters my 'snoop around' trance. Later...

I climb back into the Mad Hatter's domain and tell the ladies I need a quick breath of sea air. The boardwalk comes highly recommended. Apparently access via 21st Street is close by, and that way I'll get a change of scene along with the fresh air. Sounds fine to me. So with a solemn promise to go, breathe and come straight back, I set off.

Labour day has already passed. *Why, Mrs Edgerley, what can you be thinking wearing those white shoes?* The streets are deserted and a peaceful silence plays around me as I strike up a determined pace. Thankfully, both 21st Street and the boardwalk exist, which, given the past few hours, is by no means a sure thing. I lean against the side rail looking out over the dunes and fake a few breathing exercises – a man of my word, if nothing else.

'Is it really such a smart idea to get mixed up with these loopy ladies and their Jules Verne bunker?' I ask Earth and sky.

A light breeze rattles through the dune grass, the ocean roars in the distance, but there is no—

'Most definitely!'

Surprise, shock, start – basic survival response 101– but I don’t even flinch. Should have worked, but doesn’t. Explain that... ... Junio?

‘Worried I’d skipped town,’ I say without turning.

The youngster joins me propping up the rail.

‘Mom’s concerned you may decline our offer.’

‘And what do you think, young lady?’

Junio scans my profile. ‘I believe you’ve yet to decide.’

I grin. *Who the hell taught this girl how to speak?*

A couple of minutes and the light has all but faded away.

‘Time for your Mom’s enchiladas,’ I declare.

Junio leads the way back onto 21st Street. At the top of 19th she stops.

‘Now I believe you’ve decided.’