

Charles Meets Marie  
by Madeleine Dougherty

The doorbell had rung twice in quick succession, and in the void following, Marie uneasily looked through the peephole. A blond man in a nice suit stood outside, facing away. He looked calm and unconcerned. He certainly did not look like he would be obnoxious with the doorbell like the boys that called themselves men down the street, nor was he looking at all like he would be leaving.

“Who are you?” she called through the door. Upon hearing her voice, the man turned toward the door and looked at the peephole. He pulled out a business card and held it up. It just said he worked for a business called LCorp, nothing else. His name was Charles Brannigan, and he was a “company investigator.” There was no phone number, address, or email address.

“Why are you here?” she called, again. Bewilderment passed over the man’s face.

“Must we speak through the door?” he called back. Her father had been having problems at work. He had told her not to let anybody in, especially the police. This guy definitely did not look like police, but he did not look particularly safe, either. He was dressed far too nicely to be a Fed and was far too calm to be one of her father’s associates. All of his friends were currently panicking, same as her father. He didn’t have a briefcase, and there was a taxi waiting for him at the curb. Marie just did not know how to categorize him.

“You here for my father?”

“In a manner of speaking. May I ask you a few questions regarding his whereabouts?” He had a nice voice. His words had the tone of being sarcastic, but the sound was at a low pitch that was very pleasant to listen to. Her father was not at home, so there really was no problem with him coming in. He didn’t seem likely to go if she didn’t let him in.

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“My father’s not here, but I assume you won’t be leaving ‘til you get answers, right?”

“That is correct.” He smiled as he looked directly into the peephole. He had stormy blue eyes that the smile did not reach. He looked at the door, through the door, as if he could see her standing on one leg, crossing the other foot behind, bouncing her green flip-flop against her heel. See her in her white sundress with light blue dots the size of her fist about the bottom hem. See her chestnut hair curling against her shoulders, green eyeshadow, pink nail polish and lipstick, gold bracelet birthday present. See her brown eyes straight through the hole in the door.

A shiver went down her spine, but she was not sure whether it was from fear or desire. He really was a handsome man. So, she let him in.

“Do you want any coffee?” she asked as she led him into the sitting room, as her mother had called it. Marie had adopted most of her mother’s manners after she passed. She was still rather polite, but the affects of her school-mates had made her much more casual.

“That would be lovely, thank you.” Obviously, he had been brought up the same way as she.

“Please, sit.”

He sat in the throne-like chair usually used by her father. As she passed him on her way to the kitchen, she saw his gun in a shoulder holster. Fear froze her.

“Are you well?” Charles leaned towards her and stretched out his hand to her, but the movement was hesitant.

“You aren’t around people much, are you?”

“No.” His face lost its worried expression, and he looked at her blandly. She made herself leave the room and make coffee, trying to push her fear down.

“I used to work at Starbucks, so hopefully I still have the skills,” Marie said as she walked back in the room, holding two mugs. Charles had remained in his chair rather than look around at the pictures in the room. As she sat down, she tried not to see the bulge of the gun pushing out his jacket.

“What do you want with my father?”

He took a sip and placed the cup down on the antique coffee table before speaking.

“Your father is not on the best of terms with his company at the moment. His company contracted the company I work for in the hopes of resolving the issues between your father and them. I am here to investigate the matter and, possibly, create a happy solution for the two parties.”

“How long did that take you to memorize?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at his words, but not really desiring an answer. His story was simple and logical, but definitely had the ring of a script to it.

Charles’ gaze became narrowed and sharp. He pushed forward so that he was sitting upon the edge of his seat, ready to spring. Marie thought about his words again. He had to be there in an assassin type capacity. Well, that wasn’t incredibly surprising.

“My father’s a shmuck.” Marie shook her head sadly, and looked away. Her head snapped back up when she heard the man chuckle. He had a wry grin on his face as he stood.

“Where is your father now?” He looked down at Marie. She stood, and quickly made her way to the front door.

“Isn’t it your job to find him? I wouldn’t presume to impose on your chosen profession.” Her eyebrow was again raised. Charles stepped close, invading her space.

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“Thank you for your time, Miss. Prussili, and thank you for the coffee. It was quite good. Good afternoon.” He walked out as Marie held the door for him. She tried to take the mugs over to the sink, but the coffee kept sloshing out. She made sure to lock all the doors before she went to hide in her bed.

It wasn't that night or any night that week. Her father came home, and she told him of the visitor. He told her not to let anyone else into the house when he was gone. For a while it was just the same old Feds and old partners coming over. Her father spent more time at home for both their protection. Then, he had to leave. He said he couldn't get out of it or do it from home.

The Feds said that he had been strangled hours before his body had been found in the police chief's personal car. She thought of telling them, then, about Charles Brannigan. She had found his business card tucked between the couch cushions while vacuuming. She didn't say anything as she thanked and showed the Feds to the door, as she watched the coffin lower, as she went to college the next fall. She told no one why she burned her white dress and stopped drinking coffee though she heard their wondering murmurs. She would have told people why she began learning to shoot, but no one asked. In her family, everyone already knew how, so it wasn't that strange to them.