

Relative Undertow

By Mark Souza

There is a weight to silence some find unbearable. To Amy Szabo it was as warm and comforting as an old quilt. It wasn't always so. At first she had no choice and silence was a reminder of loss. But over time, she adapted until silence became a fortress protecting her from a noisy world full of expectations and danger.

Amy spent her days pecking away at her laptop, translating technical jargon into plain English. Her current project was for a new MP3 player user's manual. Muffled clicks of computer keys manifested her thoughts into words. They were the only sound inside the dimly lit house. It never ceased to amaze her how little engineers could relate to the average consumer.

A rap at the door jolted through the stillness like gunfire. Her fingers jerked away from the keys and hung in the air quivering. She fixed her eyes on the door. Who would visit on a weekday afternoon? She didn't normally get visitors and liked it that way. Howard Vickers was occasionally late with the mail delivery, but he knew better than to knock.

She waited and hoped whoever it was would go away. Could it be that nosey census taker she'd been dodging? He kept threatening to come out if she didn't return his calls. Or maybe it was a lost stranger asking for directions.

On her computer, her words looked foreign now. She stared at the screen trying to recapture her train of thought. It was gone like vapor. Amy clenched her teeth. She had a deadline to meet. She waited for sounds of retreat from her porch. No such luck. Another set of raps rattled the door.

"Go around back," she yelled. Muffled words drifted through the door, a man's voice and he sounded confused. "Go--around-- back," she repeated.

Footfalls from the deck reverberated through the floor. Amy scurried to the rear of the house and bolted the lock. She peered out the window for the intruder. The man was a stranger to her. Tall and dark, he wore Levi's and a threadbare Creighton University Jays tee shirt. His hair was longer than hers and pulled back into a ponytail. He was no census taker, that was for sure. In fact, he wasn't an islander. Was he lost? He stood on the deck looking around like he was taking inventory. "Who are you and what do you want?"

The man seemed surprised when he saw her. He broke into an amused grin as if he'd discovered the dreaded watchdog was, in fact, nothing more than a Chihuahua. He approached the window and crouched down to her level. He studied her through the glass. This isn't a zoo and I'm not on display here, buddy; she thought. His grin grew. That smile had probably won a lot of favors, but Amy found it unnerving. She retreated behind the safety of her door.

"I'm Tony Szabo," he said, "your cousin. Can I come in?"

She looked closer. He looked Hungarian, and there was a little of her father in his face, around the eyes and in the cleft chin. Or was it just the power of suggestion. Would she have seen a resemblance if he'd not planted the notion? "Do you have ID?" He laughed and dug a wallet out of his pocket, opened it and pressed it against the window. She examined the Nebraska driver's license. It looked real. "Why are you here?"

"Can't I just say hi to my cousin?"

"Cousin? You came all the way out to Washington just to say hi?"

"Yeah."

"Well now that you've said it, have a nice trip back." Amy closed the interior shutters over the window.

“Wait,” he said.

She threw the latches and finally felt safe again.

“I want to talk to you.”

“About what?” she asked.

Something clunked against the door. She peeked out through the crack between shutters. Her cousin was leaning against the entry, his forehead pressed against the wood. “My mother died a few days ago,” he said. “You’re my only living relative. Since I was in Seattle on business, I thought I’d stop by. I just wanted a chance to meet you.”

There was need in his voice. What did he expect from her? She had nothing to give. But she also knew loss and what it was to be alone, the last of your line. Her defenses withered. She sighed in resignation at her own weakness and opened the door. Tony stood there, somber; as if the cheery demeanor he’d displayed earlier was a costume he’d stripped away and left on the porch. “Come on in. I’ll put on some coffee.” She pointed the way to the sofa and he shuffled past.

“Thanks,” he said.

She put a pot of water on to boil and pulled the coffee press down from the shelf.

The dock was just as the old man in town told Tony it would be. A wooden speedboat was tied up to it and draped in a canvas cover stained dark with mildew.

“The girl is letting her father’s boat rot into the sea. It’s a damned shame,” the old man said, “There wasn’t a Chris-Craft on the island as cherry as that one. Richard Szabo sure knew his boats. He’d roll over in his grave if he knew how his daughter was treating it.” His name was Howie something-or-other. He was Amy’s mailman, a widower. He liked a drink or twelve after work and didn’t mind running his mouth as long as Tony kept springing for the lubricant.

Tony tied up at the dock and took a look around. He climbed the hill and circled the property to get the lay of the land. No neighbors. The old man said as much, but it was good to be sure. A single track of gravel led away from the house and wound through the forest to the main road. It was the only way out other than by boat.

The house was nestled into the hillside facing the water. Thick-boughed cedars leaned over the roof line. Dull sunlight filtered through a thin layer of low clouds and winked off a bank of widows spanning the façade. The windows were dark behind the glass. The house looked abandoned.

A weathered Honda Civic sat in the drive next to the east wall. Howie said Amy drove it about once a week to get groceries, and that was the only time she ever came into town. If the car was there, Amy Szabo was there.

The old man had been a wealth of knowledge about a girl he really didn’t know. According to him, Amy never got visitors. Tony had all day if he needed it. When Tony asked whether he might get shot for his troubles if he arrived unannounced, the old man said: “She just might. You can never tell with that kind.” It was really no answer at all. Tony still didn’t know whether there was a gun in the house. And a gun could ruin everything.

Tony liked Howie. It was a shame the old man had to take a tumble down the stairs, but Tony didn’t need a witness who could put him on the island. He was certain the old man felt no pain. It all happened so quickly, and the old man was well past the point of feeling anything by the time he had his... accident. Tony left Howie in his house at the bottom of the basement stairwell with a broken neck. The mailman was a bachelor and lived alone. He would draw attention from hungry flies long before he would from concerned friends.

When Tony strode across his cousin's deck, he noticed the windows were boarded up from the inside. He knocked on the door. The house was still. He rapped again louder this time. Muffled shouts ordered him to go around to the back. The woman who met him looked like a mouse cowering from a cat. She had large wide-set eyes and peered out cautiously from behind the door. He turned up the charm and announced who he was. She grew more wary and closed the shutters. As a last ditch effort, he tried playing on her sympathy - a story about his dead mother with only a few details altered. It worked. He was in.

Amy's cousin scanned the premises. His eyes seemed to rest on everything he passed at least for a moment. "Uncle Richard died a couple of years ago, didn't he?" Tony asked.

"More like five." She scooped coffee into the press and waited for the water to boil.

"I liked him. He was a good man."

"Yes he was."

"So you've lived here alone all that time?"

"It's not so bad. I'm good company." She rolled her eyes when she recognized the irony.

"Well, at least good enough for me. I never complain." Tony's smile returned. She poured steaming water over the ground coffee. While she pressed down the plunger, she watched Tony surveying the house. "Cream and sugar?"

"No black is fine."

"It's odd that I didn't hear you drive up." And it was. No matter how quiet the engine, she always heard the crunch of tires over gravel when cars came up the driveway. It was the sound that announced the mail six days a week.

"I didn't drive. I rented a boat in Seattle."

"A boat? No one has done that in years. How did you know where to go?"

"I stopped in town and got directions."

A boat seemed such a bold choice. Dramatic yes, but what if she didn't have a dock. It also meant he'd left Seattle unsure of whether he'd even find her. She carried the cups on saucers and handed one to Tony. "I hope you like it strong."

He took a sip and nodded his approval. "That's great coffee."

"We're famous for it up here. How do you like the Northwest?"

"It's definitely not Nebraska. It's so green. And the mountains and ocean, we don't have that. It must be nice living right on the beach." His eyes drifted to the bank of shuttered windows.

She followed his gaze. "The beach has its benefits as well as draw backs."

"You guys were legends in my house. You were the island people. My father described this place to me like it was from a fairy tale. He said your family went everywhere by boat and owned your own island. Did your father leave you this place?"

She nodded. "Been in the family for a few generations. But we don't own the island, just this quarter mile along the shore. My great grandfather bought the land dirt cheap before there was a ferry or roads. Everyone back then thought he was a fool."

"Not now, though, I expect," Tony said. "A quarter mile of beachfront forty minutes from Seattle must be worth a fortune. Ever thought of selling?"

Amy shook her head. "There are too many memories here, and it's home."

"You must have an incredible view?" His eyes returned to the bank of windows. His brow furrowed. "Why are all the windows boarded up?"

"The sun glares off the water and it's blinding, a nuisance, really."

Tony cocked his head like a curious parrot. "But it's cloudy." He stood and unlatched a pair of shutters and swung them open. "See." He turned back to her with a smile and appeared proud for being right. He gazed out the window and sighed. "Still beautiful though. Sun or no sun, I can't imagine ever getting sick of a view like that. You're one lucky lady."

Amy turned her face to the wall and tucked her knees up next to her chin. Her voice cracked when she spoke. "Please, close them."

"Then it's true what they say about you in town?"

"What do they say?"

"That you're afraid of water, so afraid that you'll only shop in the stores farthest from shore."

"Horse Head Bay is full of gossips and fools."

"It's true though, isn't it?" The house wasn't exactly what Tony anticipated. He'd never been there before, but his father had. He made it sound like Shangri-Frikin'-La. Like his cousin's family was rolling in money. Of course if you grew up in Fall City, Nebraska, with the stench of the stockyards in your nostrils, it was all relative. Still, Tony expected more. The ceilings were low, the wood walls rustic, the furniture tattered.

If Tony had the money, the house would be a tear down. Better to start fresh and build something befitting the view. His cousin lived like the Unibomber, hunkered down in her dark little cabin without a television or radio, cut off from the rest of the world. The true money was in the property, there was no doubt of that. It was worth millions. He'd stopped at a real estate office in Seattle and checked. Amy's beachfront property could easily fetch thirty million dollars. It would solve everything. No, it was better than that. It could set him up for life.

His daddy had always said work smart, Tony, not hard. And if anybody would know, it was his dad – a man who had toiled in the stockyards until he was used up, spit out, and dead at only fifty. Tony still remembered the look of loathing on his father's face when he came to bail Tony out of jail. Possession with intent to distribute. Tony had thrown his words back at him that night: "You told me to work smart, not hard."

His father didn't say a word during the drive home. Then he tried to lecture Tony on the merits of an honest day's work. This from the man who died decades before his time with so little to show for it that his mother had to borrow money to put him in the ground. Tony swore he'd never let that happen to him.

He looked at his cousin cowering on the sofa -- spineless. Her mailman was right about her. She was an odd little duck, scared of her own shadow. He stared out the window and drew in a deep breath. He'd never smelled air like that, salty and alive. He'd never go back to Fall City if he had his druthers.

Down at the dock the boats rocked on the waves. A crack opened in the clouds. A burst of sunlight sparkled off the green, gem-like waters of Puget Sound. He could get used to this. Water patterns danced on the wall in bright, intertwining lines of light leaving Amy nowhere to turn. She squeezed her eyes shut. "Close the damned shutters!" she screamed.

"Yeah, sure," Tony answered.

Amy shivered. She tried to slow her breathing, tried to relax. Goose bumps covered her arms. It wasn't cold, but still she shivered. Though she'd seen the bright patch on the wall blink out and heard the wooden clunk of the shutter latch, she found it hard to regain her composure.

Her cousin must think she was a nut case. He probably wasn't far off the mark. Her eyes stung. Tears tried to sprout. She blinked them back. She'd be damned if he'd see her cry too.

“I’m sorry. Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded without turning to face him. She wasn’t ready for that yet. Though she’d managed not to cry, her nose brimmed with snot and she was close to gagging. One embarrassing moment would be hard enough to cope with. She didn’t think she could bear another.

She rushed to the bathroom and locked the door behind her. After blowing her nose and flushing the wad of toilet paper, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. What a wreck. No make-up, swollen eyes, a red raw nose, unkempt hair – what a fabulous first impression. She splashed water on her face and patted her skin dry with a towel.

She felt better even if she didn’t look it. She stood with her head high, shoulders back, and pasted a smile on her face. As she turned the knob to leave, she whispered Roy Scheider’s catch phrase from *All that Jazz*. “It’s show time.”

Tony waited a respectful distance from the door, his face wracked with concern. “It’s okay,” she said. “I’ll be fine. It’s not your fault.” She tried a smile. It was a weak effort and she let it drop.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking,” he said, “but if you’re so afraid of the water, why do you live on an island?”

“Wasn’t my choice. I was born here.”

“Yes, but haven’t you thought of moving someplace else?”

She nodded. “Almost every day.”

Tony shrugged. “Then why don’t you?”

She walked back to the sofa. She sat and took a sip of her coffee. It was barely warm. “I’d have to cross the water to get off the island. And every time I think about that, I start to dwell on whether the ferry would sink, or the plane would crash. The sea is out there waiting for me, ready to swallow me up. I cheated it once, and it’s been waiting for me ever since. If I tried to cross, it would find a way to get me. I know it would.”

“So you think of the sea as a living thing? A monster that has it out for you?”

“Yeah, crazy huh? I know it’s not rational, but it is what it is.”

“Always been afraid of water?”

“No.” Amy stared at the shutters but didn’t see them. Her gaze extended back in time to when she was a girl and spent her summers playing by the shore. “Believe it or not, I used to wade out into the water up to my chest all the time. My dad used to worry because I couldn’t swim. He told me the ocean was stalking me, waiting for the day when I wasn’t paying attention. On that day it would sneak up and grab me. He said it would pull me down and jam its icy fingers down my throat and into my lungs, and no one would ever see me again.”

Tony grimaced, “That would have scared the pants off me.”

“I don’t think he meant any harm. He just wanted me to be careful. It frightened me, but I didn’t stop, not until the next year.

“The next summer, my friend Carey Hines and I were on the dock. I was ten. Carey was a little older. We were playing tag and she was it. We were having fun. She’d lunge and I’d dodge. I was quicker than she was.

“And then it happened. She rushed me. I jumped to the side. She couldn’t stop and went in. I laughed. The look of surprise on her face seemed so funny at the time. I couldn’t help it.

“It took a few seconds for me to realize it wasn’t surprise on her face. It was terror. She couldn’t swim either. She thrashed so hard, her eyes wide, locked on mine the entire time. The harder she thrashed the further she drifted from the dock. It was like something had her and was

dragging her away. She fought for so long. Then the look in her eyes changed from terror to surrender, and she was gone. She went down and never came up again.

"I sat there staring at the water realizing I hadn't moved a step, hadn't screamed, hadn't tried to get help. Waves lapped up onto the dock. I remembered my dad's story about how one day the ocean would come for me and I knew I was next. I ran off the dock and hid in my room.

"It was dark when Carey's folks came looking for her. I still remember the expression on her parent's face when I told them. Their eyes were filled with horror. I saw it on my dad's face too, only worse. It wasn't just horror, it was revulsion. He looked at me like he didn't even recognize who I was and wanted nothing more to do with me.

"They sent down a diver that night, but the tide had taken her. They drug hooks from a boat and found Carey's body a couple days later. I still have nightmares about it -- that the sea reaches out and snatches me off the beach. It drags me under to Carey, who's waiting on the bottom. Then Carey sticks one of those hooks into me so I can't leave her."

Tony shook his head. "Wow, tragic, but it explains so much. When your father came out for dad's funeral, I thought I'd finally get to meet you. He made some excuse about you being sick. Now I think I understand."

Amy forced a smile. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Nothing to be sorry about. We didn't make it out for your dad's funeral either, so I guess we're even. We wanted to, but it was a crazy time. Mom was having health issues and we were strapped for cash."

"What happened to her? You said she passed."

Tony grimaced. For a moment Amy thought she saw anger in his eyes, and then just as quickly he looked sad and vulnerable. "She had Alzheimer's and couldn't remember things. Most days she didn't know who I was. Some days she couldn't even remember where she lived. She'd get all wound up, afraid she was in the wrong house and would try to run off. She needed more care than I could give, but we couldn't afford a nursing home.

"One morning last month, I found her dead at the bottom of the stairs. I think she got confused again, tried to get away and fell." Tony's eyes locked on a picture frame atop the bookshelf on the far end of the room. "Is that your mom?"

Amy nodded. "She died when I was four. She must have known she was dying because she tried to teach me everything she could. The stuff she told me didn't make any sense. I think I was too young."

"Like what?"

"Weird stuff like try not to change unless I had to, because eventually someone would catch me at it."

"That doesn't sound so strange. Actually sounds like good advice," Tony said.

"Well, how about the blood you take today may save you tomorrow?"

"Okay, weird. Sort of sounds like my mom near the end. We have a lot in common."

He crossed the room and lifted the picture frame off the shelf and studied the photo. "She was beautiful," he said wistfully. The words just seemed to blurt out as if he was talking to himself. He smiled weakly. "You look just like her."

Amy felt uncomfortable and shifted topic. "What brings you to the Seattle area?"

"Business," he said and left it at that. He seemed intentionally evasive and it made Amy curious.

"Yeah, you said that before. What kind of business?"

"Let's just say I'm a broker."

“What do you sell?”

“A little of this, a little of that. Sometimes I sell. Sometimes I buy, and sometimes I just bring interested parties together so deals can happen.”

“So you’re in real estate?”

He smiled. “Sometimes. What is it you do? How do you get by? Do you work on the island?”

“I’m a freelance tech-writer. I work from here. A computer and internet access are all I need. I get assignments either off the web or from an agency. I have a short list of regular clients that know I don’t travel.”

“Nice, you seem to have everything worked out.” Tony cast his eyes down at the floor and his cheeks flushed with color as if he were embarrassed by something. “I have a proposal I’d like you to consider. What if we were to swap homes? You would live in Nebraska, I would live here. I don’t know that you could find a more landlocked place than the Great Plains. Considering your circumstances, it would be perfect for you – no water, no memories. And you could finally open your windows.”

Amy was tiring of company. Their little family reunion now felt contrived, a thin layer of camouflage veiling a sales pitch. Though she didn’t want to appear rude, she couldn’t hide the impatience on her face. “I can’t leave the island, remember?”

He glared at her for a moment and sighed. She could tell from the sound that Tony was growing weary too. “How about this, what if I buy you a place in the middle of the island, far from the ocean, and close to town. Then could we work out a swap?”

She shook her head. Tony was certainly persistent. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do. You’re a very considerate man. But... .”

“But your life is perfect here, right?” He stood and unlatched a shutter and swung it opened.

Amy staggered back. “Please don’t.” He opened another. She turned to face the wall. He opened another, and another, until a view of Puget Sound filled the breadth of the house and lit the back wall in a way she hadn’t seen since she was a child. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Perfect in every way but that,” he said. He sounded smug and cruel like a sadistic child pulling the wings off a butterfly.

“Please,” she begged.

“Perfect except for living right next to a monster that wants to kill you, and the little girl at the bottom of the sea waiting to get even, right?”

He grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward the windows. His thumbs dug into her flesh as he held her firmly in place. The sun warmed her face. A red glow permeated her closed eyelids. Tony released his grip and she dropped to her knees.

Tony leaned close to her ear. “I’ve been very nice,” he said, “In fact I’ve gone out of my way.” His tone was menacing. His patience gone. “I did a little research in Seattle. Did you know that in Washington, without a will, an estate goes to the deceased’s nearest living relative? For you, that’s me. I figure a person like you, young, healthy, single and childless, wouldn’t have a will. Who would you leave anything to, right? So if you were to have an accident, it might take a little time as the authorities traced through the branches of the old family tree, but eventually, their search will lead them to me. And this place will be mine.”

She heard an odd rustling and cracked open an eye. Tony pulled a clear Ziplock bag from his pants pocket. Inside was a rag. Amy didn’t wait to find out what he planned to do with it. She rolled to her feet and dashed for the bathroom, slammed the door closed, and pressed down the lock button. Tony crashed into the door a moment later, so hard it knocked her bathrobe off the

hook. He moaned and muttered something about his shoulder before moving off. It was quiet afterward.

Amy sat with her back braced against the toilet and her feet against the door listening for Tony. What she hoped for was the sound of the back door closing and footfalls on the deck followed by the roar of an outboard motor. It didn't happen. Instead, Tony approached the bathroom again. The doorknob jiggled. A frustrated groan was followed by a blow that shook the door.

It grew quiet again. Sounds of drawers sliding open drifted in from the kitchen, and metallic clanks of Tony rifling through her things. Footfalls approached from the kitchen. Shadows from Tony's feet reflected off the linoleum through the crack under the door. Something rattled inside the doorknob. The lock button popped up with a loud click and the knob turned. Amy gasped. She'd forgotten about the small hole in the knob that allowed it to be unlocked from the outside, and Tony had found it.

She pressed with her legs and braced for impact. The upper corner of the door bowed inward as Tony fought to get in. She locked her knees and held on. Tony grunted and pressed harder. She knew if she allowed any flex in her knees it was all over. They'd buckle like cooked spaghetti.

The old wooden stiles popped and cracked under the strain. Amy feared the door wouldn't hold. Tony grunted and pushed till he ran out of steam. The door straightened and Amy could hear him panting on the other side. She kicked the button back down. The doorknob rattled again.

"Why are you making this so hard, cousin? The more you fight, the angrier I get. And the angrier I get, the worse it'll be for you once I get inside. Open up!"

She didn't. He picked at the lock again, but she was ready this time. When the button popped up, she kicked it down. Tony kept working the lock so she kept a foot on the button while bracing the other against the door.

"Let me in."

"Leave now and I won't call the cops. It'll be like nothing ever happened." If only she could get to the phone. She'd call the police the first chance she got.

Tony walked away. The back door slammed. Maybe he was going. Or maybe it was a trick. He could be watching from the window waiting for her to come out. How far was it, maybe five running strides from back door to bathroom? He could cover that in about a second. She waited for the sound of an engine starting. Tony said he came by boat. She didn't hear him arrive. Would it be possible to hear him leave?

The thud of the back door shuddered though the floor followed by the sound of someone approaching. A shadow appeared under the door. Then she heard the rapping of metal on metal. Something pinged off the linoleum. She crouched low and peered through the crack under the door. A hinge pin rested next to Tony's shoe. The pounding started again. He was working on the middle hinge.

Amy scrambled to her feet and searched for a weapon. In the kitchen she'd have had access to a block of knives and a meat hammer. Why did she pick the bathroom? She pulled open the vanity drawers. Hair brushes and eyelash curlers weren't going to do the trick.

The second hinge pin hit the floor. In desperation she pulled the lid off the toilet tank hoping there might be something sharp or metallic inside she could use. There wasn't. She felt the heft of the porcelain lid in her hands. It was probably as good a weapon as she would find. Tony was working the last hinge.

When the last pin hit the floor, she cocked the toilet lid back like a batter readying for a pitch. The door fell. Tony rushed in with the hammer clutched in his hand. She swung. The porcelain connected solidly with his skull. The lid cracked in half and tumbled out of her hands. Tony collided into her. She crashed into the tub with Tony on top of her. White streaks bolted across her field of vision and for a moment she thought she would pass out.

Tony's body pressed down on her in the tub and made it hard to breathe. Tony groaned. Blood oozed from a gash in his scalp and matted his hair. Amy tried to push her cousin's body off her. Pain jolted her arm. It was useless and possibly broken. There was no time to dwell on it. One way or another she had to get out from under Tony before he came to. She rolled the other way and pressed herself up with her good arm.

Amy felt wobbly on her feet and nearly tripped on the bathroom door. She staggered to the kitchen. The phone hung on the wall next to the refrigerator. The pain in her arm started to ebb. Maybe it wasn't broken. She lifted the receiver, punched in 911 and held it to her ear. It was dead. Did he cut the line before he came in, or after he trapped her in the bathroom?

She reached for her car keys. The bowl was empty. Bastard. Her nearest neighbor was nearly a mile away. Normally it was a short fifteen minute walk. She doubted she had fifteen minutes. Sticking to the road would make her an easy target once Tony came around. She'd have to hoof it through the woods.

She started for the door. Her purse, she might need it. When she turned to go back for it, Tony jammed the rag in her face covering her mouth. She tried to scream. It was reflexive. He hadn't made a sound. Tony's hand smashed her lips against her teeth. She could taste blood. A sickly sweet odor filled her sinuses. Her vision started to go and her legs buckled. The scream ran out of juice before it could escape her mouth. Her eyes drifted in opposite directions and she was falling. Later, she wouldn't remember ever hitting the floor.

Tony regained consciousness in the bathtub, his skull pounding like the bass drum in a marching band. A sanguine stream oozed into the drain. He dabbed his scalp with his fingers and they came back crimson. She had gotten him good. He stood and would have keeled over if he hadn't braced himself against the vanity. Blood trickled down his forehead. What he saw in the mirror looked more like an accident victim than Tony Szabo. He found a towel on the rack and wiped his face before wrapping it turban-style around his head.

Boy, had he screwed this up. She'd gotten away. Now the question was would she call the cops? Of course she would. It didn't matter that he was family. She didn't know him from Adam.

He heard something. Someone was in the house. Out in the kitchen, his cousin was trying the phone. He crept out of the bathroom and eased up behind her. When she turned, he had the rag ready. It was startling how quickly the chloroform took effect. She barely had a chance to squirm. Her eyes rolled up in her head and she went down in a heap.

He looked down at his cousin sprawled on the kitchen floor. Twice he'd made her an offer that benefited them both, and twice she'd refused. She deserved what was coming and he wouldn't lose sleep over it. Why did she make it so hard? How much did she weigh? One-ten max? She'd hit him like she was frickin' Mike Tyson.

To work best, Amy's death had to look like an accident. A murder investigation would hold up the payout. And sloppiness equaled life without parole. There couldn't be any bullet holes, knife wounds, broken hyoid bone, or suspicious bruising. Just a body washed up on a Seattle beach, a floater is what the police called them, identification in the pocket, maybe the victim's

shoe at the edge of her own dock – that would be a nice touch. Leave just enough clues for the police to quickly connect the dots.

Tony rifled through the cupboards in search of bleach. He had to clean his blood out of this place in case there was an investigation. After her body washed up, it should be an open and shut case of accidental drowning. But you never knew. Someone could get suspicious and go all Columbo. And if they got as far as Amy's house, it had to be pristine. DNA was a killer. Though he couldn't forget about his fingerprints either. Maid's work, really. He hated it. But at least there was a hefty payday at the end. He would be the highest paid maid in history.

Sweat ran down his back and soaked his shirt while he scrubbed. Amy snored away where she had fallen. She hadn't budged in the two hours it took him to clean the place up. The guy who sold him the chloroform told him to be careful. The gap between unconscious and dead was small. But Amy seemed to be doing just fine.

Tony walked through the house to double check his work. The bathroom was spotless and he'd re-hung the door. The cups and saucers had been washed and returned to the cupboard along with the coffee press. Amy's car keys rested in their bowl again. All was as it had been. His cousin's place had probably never been cleaner.

He hoisted her body over his shoulder and started the arduous trek down to the beach. By the time he reached the boat, his back ached and head throbbed. The girl felt like a ton of nails tearing at his muscles. He dumped her in the cuddy cabin below the bridge and locked the door. He sighed and rubbed his shoulder where he had collided with the door. His head was still tender but at least the bleeding had stopped. He fired up the engine, cast off the lines and swung the bow toward open water.

Amy awoke slowly, groggy and sick, her temples pounding. Saliva matted her hair to her cheek. She lay on her side curled around a steel post supporting a triangular table above her head. Banquettes on both sides curved and joined together at one end as if they'd been formed around a giant arrowhead. The thin orange and brown carpet beneath her face reeked of gasoline.

A rumbling resonated through her bones like a low rhythmic bass while something familiar slapped in from the sides in a slow defined beat like a snare drum. She recognized the sound but couldn't muddle through the fog in her head to put a name to it.

The room was about the size of a closet with a low ceiling, and seemed to rock side to side, but maybe that was her throbbing head. It wasn't familiar and she didn't know how she'd gotten there. She remembered the rag and the sickly sweet smell. The bastard had drugged her.

A short set of stairs led to a tiny wooden door opposite her little warren. Amy crawled from under the table and collapsed on the floor when her head swooned. She fought off nausea and struggled to the steps. She kneeled and tried the door. It was locked. She staggered to her feet and shuffled over to a small round window. The floor shifted and she braced against the curved wall. She pressed up on her toes to peer through the glass. The sun was setting, half of it already under the horizon. It splashed the undersides of a low layer of clouds ablaze in orange and pink. The colorful glow reflected off a choppy sea.

Amy's knees buckled at the sight of all that water. She felt vomit rising. It all made sense now – the low rumble of the engine, the curved walls, the rhythmic slapping of waves against the hull. She was trapped on a boat. She tried to think but reason was slipping away. She moaned. The moan turned into a wail as fear took control. Moans grew into screams. The animal inside her took over as the rational part that was Amy Szabo retreated for safety in the dark recesses of her mind. She screamed until her throat was raw, dove under the table and clutched at the carpet.

The engine died. The boat slowed and settled deeper in the water. When the forward momentum stopped, the boat rocked on the waves. The wooden door opened. A man stood in the doorway smiling down at her. His name wouldn't come, but she knew he was responsible. He had put her here. It was his fault. He was the enemy.

"Ah, you're awake. Too bad for you. This might have been easier on both of us if you were still unconscious." He smiled. That smile wasn't to be trusted, that much she remembered. The welcome and warmth it promised were lies to lure the unwary. Trouble followed that smile like hyenas trailing herd of antelope.

Amy scurried under the table as deep as she could, back pressed against where the benches joined at the point of the bow.

"Why don't you come out of there and make things a little easier for your cousin Tony, huh?"

Tony, that was it. Amy's mind locked onto the name like a life ring. Anger elbowed its way through her fear. Amy curled up to keep as much distance as she could from her cousin. Tony crouched under the table so they were eye to eye and gazed at her.

"I've made some unfortunate deals with some very dangerous men. You're sitting on a few million dollars I need desperately. So what do you say? Crawl on out of there and help a relative out."

Why was he telling her this? Did he want sympathy? Did it somehow excuse what he planned to do? "I'm not related to you. Richard Szabo wasn't my father," she said.

Doubt clouded Tony's face. She could see him weighing whether his plan was ruined, or whether she was lying. For a second it was there in his eyes to see. Then confusion gave way to a grin. "It doesn't really matter. You were able to inherit the house. The documents that proved you were Richard Szabo's daughter will point to me as your only surviving relative."

He crawled forward, snatched her ankle and pulled. She kicked with her free leg and connected solidly with his face. The crunch of cartilage registered through her heel. Tony yelped. He clutched his nose. Blood gushed through his fingers. When he saw the blood, his eyes flared with anger. "Bitch! Fine, have it your way."

Tony rushed up the stairs and out of the cabin. He returned a moment later carrying something about the size of a hair brush, plastic and black. He bent down and jabbed her with it. A jolt of current coursed through her body. Her joints seemed to disconnect and her body convulsed. Nerves fired and muscles jerked involuntarily. When it was done, she felt as flaccid and helpless as a jellyfish washed up on the beach.

Tony grabbed her legs and hauled her out. The carpet peeled her shirt up to her shoulders and abraded her bare back. As she slid past the table post she grabbed on weakly. Tony jerked her free with little effort. He dropped her near the stairs, bent over her and leered like she was his prize. His nose was broken and cocked to the side. When he grinned he exposed bloodstained teeth. She had done that. Amy felt a small wash of pride. At least she hadn't gone quietly. She'd fought.

Tony noticed the look of satisfaction on her face. He leaned close so his face was inches from hers. His breath stank. Blood dripped off the tip of his nose onto her cheeks and lips. "You think you've won something? You haven't. You only have a few minutes left in your pathetic life and I'll get what I came for," he said.

Amy ran her tongue over her lips and tasted the metallic tang of his blood. She smiled back at him. Tony crinkled his nose in disgust. "What a little freak you are, cuz'. But hey, whatever floats your boat."

He grabbed her arms and pulled her into a seated position, bent down, bear hugged her around the waist, and hoisted her body over his shoulder. Blood rushed to Amy's head. She felt her strength slowly returning. Tony took the stairs on shaky legs and nearly dropped her on the deck. He barely managed the rocking motion of the waves with the added burden of her weight. At the rail he paused. "Sorry it has to end this way, cuz', but hey, it's not such a great loss. I mean you were practically a shut-in. What kind of life is that? Maybe you'll do better in the next one."

He heaved her overboard. To Amy it all seemed to happen in slow motion. Her chest clenched, her heart pumped so hard she thought it might burst. She flailed through the air as if, with enough effort, she might fly and somehow save herself. And Tony grinned.

The water hit Amy like an icy slap across the face. Time sped up again. Instinct took over. Her lethargy from the Taser vanished. She clawed at the water. For a moment she felt buoyant. If only she could summon more strength, maybe her flailing would raise her in the water till she could race across its surface like a basilisk lizard.

Then it all went wrong. She began to sink. She tried harder but had no more to give, the pedal was already to the metal and it wasn't good enough. She was going down. She remembered Carey Hines and the look on her face when she drowned. Amy knew that expression was on her face now - desperation, and soon, resignation.

Tony felt a thump under his feet and knew his cousin was awake. He pulled the throttle back and let the boat drift to a stop before setting the anchor. Here was as good as anywhere, no other boats around, sixty feet of water below him, and over a mile to shore in any direction. The man at the rental office had warned him about Puget Sound, the water is so cold you'll die of hypothermia in twenty minutes.

When he opened the door to the cuddy cabin, he couldn't see her at first. A wave of adrenaline jangled his nerves as he wondered if she'd managed to get away. Then he spotted her huddled deep under the table like a trapped animal, her eyes wide with fear. He grabbed Amy's leg and started to haul her out. A foot fired at him so fast he didn't have time to react. It was a flesh colored flash followed by pain. She'd caught him full in the face and knocked him on his ass.

He heard and felt his nose crunch. He tasted the blood in his mouth. How had she gotten the drop on him again? He rushed to the bridge and grabbed a knife. This time the bitch would pay. He would cut her up and feed the pieces to the fish. No one got the better of Tony Szabo. He had started for the back of the boat when he remembered the plan. No signs of foul play. It had to look like a drowning. He returned to the bridge and traded the knife for a Taser.

When he got below deck, he hit Amy with the fifty thousand volts and kept the button pressed down longer than he needed to. There was something satisfying about watching her writhe and jerk. She kept twitching even after he pulled it away which made him smile. She had it coming and more. They weren't close to being even. He dragged her out by the legs and propped her up.

As he bent over her, blood dripped from his busted nose onto her face. She flinched. If she didn't like it, that was tough, in fact she could have more. He hovered over her and dripped a bloody trail from her cheek to her lips. He was shocked and repulsed when his cousin licked his blood off her lips. Her eyes widened and he thought he saw them change. Weren't they blue earlier?

His head started throbbing again. It was dark in the cuddy cabin. The sun was almost down. He couldn't be sure what he saw, and it really didn't matter. It was time for Amy's first and last swimming lesson. He lifted her onto his aching shoulder one last time. The pain was worth it.

When he tossed her over the side, he gave it everything he had and almost went in himself. The splash when she hit was as beautiful as church music. She thrashed and struggled. For a few moments she wouldn't go down, and it seemed she might make it back to the boat. Then she started to sink and Tony could feel his blood pressure ease. Even after she slipped under the water, he watched for a while to be sure, and then went below deck to fix his nose and clean the boat. Details, details, details.

It wasn't like her father said at all. Nothing grabbed Amy from below. Nothing pulled at her. Instead, the water gave way like a polite man holding open a door. She gasped for air. Her chin dipped below the surface. Seawater rushed into her mouth. She swallowed and choked. Her head bobbed up and she gulped for air, but her throat had clamped down tight. A wave washed over her head. She fought to the top again. Still no air. Her muscles burned and weakened. Everything slowed again, her movements, her reactions, time. She slipped under. The surface slid away. Something inside told her she'd never reach it again.

Above, clouds glowed pink across the sky through the shifting prism of the waves. It was so beautiful and so strange viewing it from below the water. What a day to die. And she was dying.

Cold numbed her limbs. The air inside her was hot and devoid of oxygen. It fought to get out. Keeping it in hurt. She released some and watched the stream of bubbles ascend. It was a mistake. She knew it immediately. Lungs on the verge of bursting moments before, now felt like a vacuum. Those bubbles were seconds of life, the last seconds she'd know. She stopped flailing. She was too weak and it was pointless.

Her lungs screamed for air. The animal inside her was back again and ready to try anything, including taking a breath of seawater. Her heart hammered. It was desperate too. She felt her will dissolve and knew soon she would take her last breath and it wouldn't be air. Her head grew light and her vision dimmed. Tiny sparks flashed in front of her eyes. She finally relented and sucked in. Water rushed inside – so cold. A spasm wracked her. She forced the water out with a hard exhale and took in more. Oddly, she felt calmer.

Something brushed her hand. She clamped down on it and looked up. It was the anchor line. Amy pulled herself hand over hand to the surface. Along the way she felt changes in her body, new strength, new bulk, new abilities. Her clothes were too small for her new form and cut into her waist and clamped onto her limbs. She felt the top button of her jeans give way.

When her head crested the surface, she hacked the water from her lungs. The transition from water to air was every bit as difficult as drowning. The sun was nearly gone, just an orange sliver hovering on the horizon. Amy grabbed the gunwale and edged her way to the back of the boat. She silently pulled herself onto the deck. Tony hummed to himself up on the bridge, oblivious. She stripped off her clothes.

A dim light burned inside the cabin. She crept inside and looked for a weapon. The Taser sat on the table. Poetic justice. She took it. On her way out she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her hair was matted down and darker. She was a good head taller than before and broader. Tony's twin. This is what her mother tried to tell her about, all those years ago. She liked the changes. She smiled. The resulting sneer appeared as disingenuous as when Tony did it. She'd have to work on that.

The engines fired up. She left the cabin and stalked up to the bridge. Tony had his back to her. He was pressing the button to raise the anchor and watching the line to assure it didn't bind on the winch.

"Hey cuz'," she said. The timbre of her voice was lower and foreign to her. Tony spun. The look of shock on his face was priceless – a combination of fear and confusion. He obviously didn't know what to make of his carbon copy. Amy hit him with the Taser. He tumbled to the deck in convulsions. She tugged the plastic bag out of his pocket, withdrew the rag and pressed it over Tony's mouth. "Good night sweet prince."

While Tony slept, Amy took his clothes and then busied herself with the anchor. She cut the line and hauled it up by hand. The loose end of the line she tied around Tony's legs. Though she would have to pay to replace it when she returned the boat, it was worth it.

It was dark when Tony woke. Amy remembered how she had felt when she emerged from the drug. She gave him a few minutes to clear his head. His eyes were fixed on her face. He blinked rapidly as if it would change what he saw. "How? It's not possible," he said.

Amy smiled. "I told you we're not related. I think when my mother sensed she was dying, she tried to teach me what I was, but died before she could. Thanks to you, I think I know now. "Until you bled on me, my mother's form was the only shape I could achieve. Thanks for the DNA, cuz. And when I show up as Tony Szabo to return the boat and visit Nebraska to close my bank accounts, no one is going to think Tony Szabo is missing. And if they do, they'll look in Nebraska, not at the bottom of Puget Sound."

Tony's mouth hung slack. "You're going to kill me?"

"No, not kill. I'm going to give you the same chance you gave me. You'll have about three minutes to untie yourself. My daddy was in the Merchant Marines and taught me to tie some pretty mean knots. I'll be honest. I don't like your chances. I do want to thank you for one more thing though."

"What?"

"Thanks for getting me past my fear of water." Amy kicked the anchor over the side and it kawumped into the water like a kid doing a cannonball. Tony's eyes widened and he sucked in a deep breath. It took little more than a second for the line to come taught and jerk Tony's nude body over the edge.

Amy watched the bubbles rise where he'd gone in. She knew it was only the air trapped in his hair. The real show wouldn't begin for a couple minutes when stale air devoid of life singed his lungs like a flame. At some point he would exhale and his next breath would bring an icy death.

The boat bobbed on the waves. In the darkness, she didn't see Tony's last breath rise to the top, but she heard it burble when it broke the surface. It put her at ease, as did what she didn't hear. There wasn't another sound for ten minutes other than the soothing lap of water against the hull.

Amy started the motor and aimed the bow for the lights of Seattle. She found the rental agreement in a drawer of the console next to the wheel. There was an address on it for Ray's Yacht Rentals and the coordinates were marked in the onboard GPS.

The next couple weeks as Tony Szabo would be interesting. It sounded like people were hunting Tony and she might need to be careful during her trip to Nebraska. She was looking forward to returning to her normal form and a more leisurely life once she settled Tony's estate. Maybe she would finally travel. Maybe even a cruise