

—STONE

by Catherine MacLeod

Sometimes the last person you expect to see shows up in the last place you imagined finding her. And here she is now.

(A six letter-word for *encounter*: impact.)

She used to call herself Stone. I have to look twice, but no, she's not a figment of my imagination. She's dressed just well enough to go unnoticed. Long sleeves, high collar, no surprise there. She's brunette now, wearing gold-rimmed glasses she probably doesn't need. A gym bag and a coat over her arm. It's strange to see her shifting her own luggage; her assigned bodyguard usually did it for her. I remember him, vaguely. How she killed him is anyone's guess.

She never told her clients her real name. I wanted to know, but most of us didn't. Her pimp said the alias came from the old saying, *You can't get blood from a stone.*

Don't believe it: she bled like nobody's business.

The ticket clerk wakes up as she says, "Hello?" A whiskey alto, never pitched higher than necessary, and always the first thing I recall about her. "I'd like a place on the next bus, please."

"How far?"

"End of the line."

I could have guessed—Stone's heading for Andu. Where else? Me, too. There'll be a few stops before we get there, but most people headed that way tend to keep going. It's the end of the line in more ways than one; a good place for people who want to disappear. Not good for the faint-hearted, though—what gets you arrested here barely raises eyebrows in Andu.

The only crime there is getting caught.

Stone is the most frightening woman I've ever known. She'll do well, I'm sure. She always had a way about her: gracefully feral, treacherously kind. She left as many scars as she got, but deeper. I can still feel them all.

They say you never forget your first love.

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I try not to stare, but fail. After all this time she's still horribly beautiful. But when she goes to the ladies' room I glance around.

I like people-watching. A bus station is a good place for it any time. This late at night it's perfect. The wind's picking up; there's rain on the way. It's a fit night for

leaving this life, one way or another. We won't all take the same route, of course.

On the bench across from me a young woman shakes a half-dozen capsules from a bread bag and washes them down with Styrofoam-flavored coffee. She casts one cautious glance at the security guard, who's maybe the only unarmed person here, and ignores the rest of us. The businessman beside her is more modest. He opens his briefcase for cover, but a little coke still blows off his hand and dusts his leather shoes. Nobody cares.

Or almost nobody. The young mother beside me hoists her baby closer and takes a firmer grip on her purse. The child is nursing. A carefully-arranged fold of blanket hides the act. I don't find it offensive, but for whatever reasons, some do. My mother once said she stopped nursing me because I wouldn't stop biting, but this woman doesn't have that problem. She seems content, if watchful. The baby's quiet.

I've heard it said that a woman's breasts are the hardest pillow.

They're not.

A middle-aged man carries his bag-wrapped bottle off to a dim corner. I could be wrong about the middle-aged part, but the young aren't usually so discreet about indulging their appetites. Certainly not the boy at the snack machine, eating his fifth candy bar.

I enjoy seeing people feed their cravings. The only one I indulge in public is a penchant for crossword puzzles. I love learning new words.

Only one person knows what I hunger for in private. And Stone doesn't care.

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(A six-letter word meaning *common occurrence*: cliché.)

Uninitiated young man, experienced older woman. How much older I don't know; to me, Stone seemed timeless. But naked she looked ancient.

Her clothes rustle softly as she sits beside me now. I remember every seam of the body under them. I was far from her first. She had scars the first time I met her. She wore them like gold leaf.

They were actually that expensive.

I slide down the bench to make room. "Excuse me, you probably shouldn't leave your bag on the floor. Sometimes things go missing."

She sets it between us. "All right. Thank you." There's no recognition in her brief smile. I didn't expect it. I was nothing to her but another serrated blade. But even those few words take me back. Stone speaks as if she's waiting to tell you a secret or trying to hold back laughter. She was always more courtesan than hustler.

I've met other women who sold their bodies, but none with Stone's verve. Her clients sliced and sawed. They stapled and stitched. They ornamented her with teeth marks. Once I saw a woman take a bite out of her upper arm, chew, swallow, and smile.

"Another satisfied consumer," Stone quipped as her surgeon patched the wound, and even he chuckled. Her indifference was charming.

She had a patron skilled in trapunto, a craft usually practiced on fabric. Objects are inserted under folds of cloth to make patterns. Most tailors use cotton batting. This one used screws and roofing nails.

"Lovely," Stone breathed. "Will I scar like that when you remove them?"