

Treasure Me by Christine Nolfi
Excerpt

“Where are you? Give me back my wallet!”

From somewhere inside Birdie Kaminsky’s apartment, the man in blue pinstripe stormed through the rooms like a long distance runner stoked on Red Bull. Flinching at the fury in his voice, she dangled from the window ledge and stared with wide-eyed fear at the pavement three stories below.

The man was seventy years old if he was a day. He probably worked out, which explained how he’d pursued her up three flights of stairs and made it into her apartment before she locked the front door.

Old men and their treadmills. It was something she should’ve considered before she’d picked his pocket on her way home from a light day of breaking and entering.

Birdie tried to ignore the sickening *whoosh* of fear zigzagging through her body. Her teeth were chattering, so she clamped her mouth shut. Three stories above terra firma made a straight drop a stupid idea. Like any good thief she was agile. But the last time she’d checked she hadn’t sprouted wings. If she let go of the windowsill and took the plunge, she’d break her legs.

“Where are you hiding? You aren’t taking my money, do you hear me?”

Something crashed to the floor inside her apartment, the sound too close for comfort. Had it come from the hallway that led from the closet-sized living room to the pea-sized bedroom? With any luck, Marathon Man would stop in the bathroom to check if she was hiding behind the shower curtain.

She gasped as her hold on the windowsill loosened. “Oh, shit!”

Pressing her long legs forward, she flattened against the building’s brick façade. To her left, the drainpipe snaked down to the street. Reach for it and risk falling? Today *was* her thirty-first birthday and therefore a lucky day. On the other hand, her landlord had threatened to evict her this morning if she didn’t make good on her rent and a demonic old geezer was pounding on the bedroom door she’d had the sense to lock before she’d stupidly made her escape.

The window on the other side of the drainpipe slid open with a *bang!* Fear scuttled her heart. Mr. Chen stuck his head out and relief swamped her.

“Birdie! What happened?”

“Uh . . .”

Another wave of fists pounding and Mr. Chen’s mouth formed an O. “Is it the police? Did they threaten you? You didn’t squeal on the Poker Kings, did you?”

Mr. Chen held Poker Kings, a Tuesday night game, in his apartment. He did a great job of seeding his hand with Aces and he was always worried the cops would find out. Birdie figured he should worry about the other tenants learning he was fleecing them. The overworked Lexington Police Department had bigger fish to fry.

She smiled at him gamely. “Um, Mr. Chen, could you help me out? I’m gonna fall if you don’t.”

“Oh. Right.”

To her surprise, he jimmied a brick from the wall. Then another. When he’d finished, he grabbed her left foot and steered it toward the handy inverse steps he’d created. Stretching to the drainpipe, she grabbed hold then started toward his window. For all she knew, he hid his ill-gotten poker winnings behind the bricks.

No matter—his thieving heart was her salvation. She shimmied toward him with her pulse rattling inside her skull.

When she reached his window he helped her through and into the kitchen.

The fragrant scents of ginger and garlic mingled in the air. A wok sat on the counter. Evidently Mr. Chen had been preparing an early dinner while she’d been chased upstairs by the man whose pocket she’d picked.

Ignoring the rumbling in her stomach, she darted through the apartment. In the living room she found Mrs. Chen seated in the shiny new wheelchair Birdie had snagged from an assisted living facility last month. It hadn’t seemed fair for Mrs. Chen to spend hours on the phone, arguing with bureaucrats in her broken English. All she’d needed was a new set of wheels. Birdie was familiar with the pricey new

facility—she'd eaten a free lunch in the cafeteria on more than one occasion. So she'd dolled up in a tight-fitting nurse's uniform and set out to snatch a wheelchair.

She'd marched right into the lobby, cornered a hunky security guard lounging by the front desk, and announced she needed to assist a woman who was having trouble getting out of her car. All too eager to help, the security guard was still checking out her ass when she rolled the wheelchair out to the parking lot.

Dismissing the memory, she paused before the wheelchair. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Chen."

"Birdie, hello. You stay for dinner?"

"Naw. I have to leave the city."

"For good?"

"My time in Lexington is up."

"You a crazy white girl, but we miss you." Mrs. Chen thrust out her lower lip. "Wish you stay longer, steal a car for Yihung. His Buick is a beater."

"I'll grab him a Mercedes the next time I'm in Kentucky." Regret sifted through her and her fingers were stinging, too. Hell, her thumbs were bleeding—she nearly *had* lost her purchase on the windowsill and plummeted to the ground. "You take care of yourself, okay?"

Mrs. Chen glanced at the ceiling, where pounding footsteps sounded. "You got money?" When Birdie started rifling through the pockets of her army surplus coat, the woman reached for the purse she'd left on the couch. She handed over a wad of bills. "Not much. You take."

"Mrs. Chen . . ."

"Take!" The woman's dark eyes snapped. Mr. Chen came into the room and she looked up at her husband. "Make her take my dough from bingo. I only give back to St. Vincent's Church if I keep."

There wasn't time to argue. Birdie took the cash. Then she sighed at the sight of the large Mason jar in Mr. Chen's hands, the one he sat beside his chair on Tuesday nights. Quarters, nickels, dimes—his poker winnings over the last few weeks. His generosity was sweet, but she couldn't possibly lug a gallon jar to the Amtrak Station without drawing stares.

"Mr. Chen, I can't—" She cut off when he opened a pocket on her oversized coat and poured in coins. She found her voice as he moved to the other side, to weigh her down equally. "I won't be able to run if I'm lugging this much cargo."

"With legs like yours? You can run, Birdie. Now go. I'll keep the man upstairs busy. It'll give you time to get away."

"You'll do that for me?"

"Sure I will." Mr. Chen bounced his gaze across the pockets adorning her army coat. "Have you got the story with you?"

She'd placed the newspaper clipping from the *Akron Register* in a Ziploc bag for safekeeping. It was stashed in a zippered pocket above her heart.

Mr. Chen was the only person she'd shown it to. She didn't trust anyone else in the building, not with a potential windfall at stake. Every family had a legend or two, and while Birdie's clan also possessed stories of prison breaks and deals gone sour, a yarn from the Civil War probably didn't amount to much. It was also possible her mother, who was an expert at deceit but an amateur with the truth, had pruned important facts from the story. She wasn't above playing Birdie like a mark if it suited her purpose. And a tale of lost treasure, hidden away by a freedwoman when Abe Lincoln was in office, seemed more like a fairy tale than anything else.

But on the chance the newspaper article led to something of real worth, Birdie kept the clipping on her at all times.

She made a tapping motion over her right breast. "I've got it." When Mr. Chen nodded with satisfaction, she added, "Thanks for taking care of the guy upstairs. Oh. Give this back to him."

She pulled the man's wallet from her army coat and flipped it open. Jackpot—four hundred dollars was inside. It was more than enough to cover a quick grab-and-dash excursion to Ohio.

Pocketing the bills, she thrust the wallet at Mr. Chen. "Gotta go." The ceiling above them quaked. "I'll call sometime next week to see how you and Mrs. Chen are doing." She gave him a quick hug, then

dashed out of the apartment.

A blast of November wind nearly took her off her feet as she headed down the street. The Greyhound station was only three blocks away. It was no problem to hoof it.

Thirty minutes later, she was elbowing her way through the crowded aisle to a seat in the back of the bus. The floor was wet with a slushy snow-rain mix. Somewhere up front, a baby's wail cracked the air. Newspapers rustled and someone popped open a can. As the bus lumbered from the station, she glanced out of the window at the buildings streaming past, a few parking lots, then they were outside of the city with the rolling Kentucky hills turning white beneath the falling snow.

She pressed her face to the window and blew out a breath. A moist haze settled over the countryside reflected through the glass. Sunlight pooled in orange puddles beneath the hills as the blue of night bled into the horizon. It would be dark soon, and her muscles were leaden with exhaustion.

Staying in any town for too long was never a good plan, but she'd really taken to the Chens. She didn't relish the possibility of never seeing them again. Mrs. Chen had taught her how to fold dumplings so the papery skins resembled tiny kites and Mr. Chen had become an unexpected confidant. The minor criminal tendencies that lured him to the card table enabled him to accept, if not admire, her larger transgressions. Their daily conversations about Mrs. Chen's cardiovascular health and the gossip they shared about the other tenants had provided an endearing constancy. It had been some time since she'd stayed in a city long enough to learn her way around, let alone make an acquaintance. Friendship was rare, a gem she unearthed when the Chinese immigrant lobbed questions at her every time he found her creeping down the hallway.

Mr. Chen's flat lay directly below hers and she began to suspect the puckish retiree waited with his ear pressed to his door, listening for the thump of feet on the stairwell. He tried on three separate occasions to speak to her, not in the least put off by her churlish tone. On the fourth, the remnants of her mistrust vanished as Mrs. Chen wheeled from the apartment, her eyes bright and welcoming. The scent of chicken soup had trailed her in seductive waves.

It might be several years before Birdie risked another friendship. By necessity, a thief avoided the gummy substance of relationships. Familiarity was dangerous leverage in an alliance if one member made her living slipping wallets from pant pockets and lifting bills from unattended purses. The threat of prison time plagued her and she'd tried to go legal.

Learning the knack was impossible.

Summoning up her mother's lessons required less discipline. In a busy department store, she'd dart through the mysterious contents of a purse swinging from a woman's shoulder while its nearly unconscious owner wandered through the silks and taffetas. She didn't consider her targets 'marks' as her mother did. Rather she viewed the unlucky souls as members of a separate tribe. Her greatest shame came not from the money she took but from the personal mementos that found their way into the pockets of her army coat: a crumpled grocery list, the cheery newsletter from an elementary school. A photograph of a family pressed close together before a mantle festooned with greenery.

Of course, she'd taken nothing from the Chens except their unprejudiced affection. For the space of nine weeks they'd been everything to her. Pulling her collar up to her ears, Birdie rocked in time with the rumbling bus. The loneliness she wore like a second skin became unbearable. She began chewing her nails.

Across the aisle, a man with a beard was devouring a cupcake with brown frosting. It dawned that her birthday was nearly over. Thirty-one years old . . . most women were settled down by now with a husband and children. Not that she understood much about family life. Her mother, the notorious Wish Kaminsky, never stayed long with any man. She'd dragged Birdie from state to state as if they could live with their roots sheared off or flourish without a sense of permanency.

The bus shook and bumped down the highway. Her mood sinking, Birdie slid low in her seat. Cupcake Man leered at her with dots of icing on his teeth. Curling her body toward the window, she drew out the Ziploc bag and unfolded the newspaper clipping with exquisite care.

Second Chance in Small-town America. A journalist named Hugh Schaffer had written the article. It was a nice feature with several photographs of the restaurant, The Second Chance Grill. The

restaurant's owner had sold off everything she owned to save a local girl with leukemia. When the story broke last summer, Birdie watched the coverage on the national news. She thought nothing of it until her mother, Wish—who'd recently landed on the Fed's radar and was now scamming her way toward Mexico—mailed off the paper before hopping a bus in southern Ohio.

The article told of an auction at the restaurant. Once people learned the proceeds would be used to save the sick girl, every last item was returned.

Including a Civil War-era portrait in a shadowbox frame. Bringing the article close, Birdie gazed intently at the photograph.

Curiosity swirled through her. No, she wasn't responsible for the slaves her French ancestors had owned in the dawning years of the new republic. She'd only traveled through the South a few times and had never set foot on a plantation. Houses outside suburban Charleston now sat on the thousands of acres once owned by her forebears, the illustrious Postells. It was only fitting that their mansions had burned to the ground during the Civil War. Like slavery itself, they'd gone to ash.

Still, the story of a singular love had traveled down through the generations alongside the tales of slavery. Love between a plantation owner, who was Birdie's ancestor, and the beautiful slave who'd comforted him after his wife's death. The slave became a freedwoman and traveled north with riches given to her by her beloved. According to legend, the treasure had been stashed away for all these years.

Was any of it true? Birdie wasn't sure. The bits and pieces of lore gleaned from her mother never gave enough detail to tell.

In one of the *Akron Register* photographs, The Second Chance Grill's buxom chef stood in the foreground. But it was the portrait, clearly visible behind her, that gripped Birdie's attention.

Is the woman in the portrait the freedwoman Justice Postell?

She knew enough American history to realize a daguerreotype of a black woman, taken in the mid-1800s, was unusual. The dress she wore was elegant, the collar tightly ruffled with tiny beads—like pearls—scattered across the bodice. Could a freedwoman have owned a dress so luxurious? The portrait seemed to confirm the stories passed down in Birdie's family of how the plantation owner sent the black slave, Justice, north to freedom with hidden fortune. Once free, Justice became a successful businesswoman and wealthy in her own right. After she'd escaped slavery in South Carolina, where had she gone? In what state had she lived? The answer was shrouded in history.

Still, Birdie wouldn't have believed she was actually looking at a portrait of Justice Postell if it weren't for Hugh Schaffer's article. The story seemed to unravel some of the mystery behind a scrap of parchment her mother kept in a safety deposit box in Santa Fe. Wish swore the parchment had once belonged to the freedwoman and was a clue to the location of the treasure.

Liberty safeguards the cherished heart.

The parchment had been passed down through generations in Birdie's family as the once-proud plantation owners bred low and became a family of con artists and thieves. The cryptic message was never decoded. During those infrequent times when Birdie and her mother landed in the same city—and if they were getting along—they'd stay up late drinking Rum and Cokes and theorize about the meaning behind the words.

Every snippet of family lore agreed on one fact: Justice never sold whatever she'd carried north to freedom. Gold bullion? Antique French jewelry worth thousands on today's market?

Liberty safeguards . . .

So many guesses, and Birdie had never fully believed any of the stories. Until now.

The town where the portrait resided was Liberty, Ohio.

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