

Getting Away
With It

By Julie Cohen

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Nina Jones and the Temple of Gloom

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headline
review

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To my mother

The Birthday

I sat on the cliff edge with my legs dangling over the drop, in a gold lamé dress barely long enough to cover my arse. My bare thighs crawled with goose bumps. I'd wrapped a winter coat around my shoulders and my blond wig was perched beside me on the cliff edge like a small, extraordinarily long-haired animal, maybe a mutant guinea pig.

I never took care of wigs because I hated them. They itched and got in my way and I thanked my lucky stars whenever I got hired to double for a brunette actress or one who wore a hat. Usually if the hair people knew me, they'd hang on to my wigs until the last minute so I wouldn't lose them in a bush or something. But last night Joanne-from-hair had been in the Purple Armadillo club with us, drinking Car Bombs, and therefore this morning she'd done my hair as quickly as possible before disappearing off to the back of the trailer to nurse her hangover.

Below me, the yellows and browns of the desert stretched out in a wide arid sea. Cactuses and rocks cast long blue shadows. It looked cold, but not as cold as me. The sun had only just come up over the peak of the mountain and the film crew, bussed in from Barstow at this god-awful early hour, huddled over their equipment. They were swaddled in jumpers

and anoraks, clutching paper cups of coffee and wreathed in halos of steam.

I yawned and kicked my feet in my driving shoes. It was a long way down to the sand and rocks. People thought that making a film was all glamour and excitement, even if you were a stunt woman, but mostly it was a lot of waiting around at inhospitable hours until it was time to do something. I could have done with an hour or two more of sleep. I rummaged in my coat pocket, found my tube of extra-strong mints and was about to pop one into my mouth when I heard the crunch of gravel behind me.

‘Nice dress,’ said Allen.

‘I’d rather be wearing a snowsuit.’

‘Got any chicken in there? I could do with some more breakfast.’

I glanced down at my cleavage, unenhanced by any inserts, of the poultry variety or otherwise. I hated those more than the wigs; there was nothing quite like being in the middle of a fight sequence and having half your tits fly out of your bra into your opponent’s face. ‘Thank God, the chicken is off the menu today. She’s only a B cup.’

I heard him climbing over the guard rail behind me. ‘Sure it’s safe out here?’

‘No. But that’s the fun bit.’

His big, familiar body sat down next to mine on the cliff edge, on the other side of me than the wig. ‘Brought you some more coffee.’

‘Thanks. I can use it.’ I took the steaming paper cup from him. He made sure our fingers touched.

‘Nice view.’

I shrugged. ‘It’s a desert.’

‘I was talking about your legs.’

I laughed. Allen could leap off skyscrapers without

flinching, he could trash me in a fair fight and he could always make me laugh even when I didn't feel like it – last night, for example. He rubbed his hand through his cropped black hair and then across the stubble on his chin.

'Fun night last night,' he said.

'Yeah, it was.'

'I'm feeling a little worse for wear, though. You?'

'I'm fine.'

'You seem on edge, if you don't mind me saying.'

'Well, I am half-dangling off a cliff.'

He chuckled in his big Texan way. 'I wasn't talking so literal.'

'I'm just waiting for the car to get here,' I said, which was at least one-third of the truth. 'I can't wait to see it.'

'Yep, she'll be a beauty, all right. Liza, I really did have fun last night.'

I knew from the way he said it, the way the tips of his fingers touched the bare goose-fleshy part of my thigh, that he wasn't talking about the drinking session at the Purple Armadillo with the crew, but about what had happened afterwards in his hotel room.

'It was lots of fun,' I said, and that was the whole truth. 'Thanks.'

I smiled over at him. He'd broken his nose too many times to be handsome, but I liked the way his skin crinkled around his eyes when he smiled, and I liked his hands, and I liked how he'd stopped me from feeling lonely last night. He was one of the good guys, though more often than not he doubled for a villain onscreen. Affable and laid-back and far too nice for me.

'So, are you a fool or not?' he asked.

'What?'

'It's the first of April. Is it your birthday today, or was it

yesterday? I couldn't quite tell with all the celebrating last night.'

'Oh. No, today's my thirtieth birthday. Yesterday was my sister's.' You'd think that with the cold and the hangover and the muscles pleasantly aching from a night of strenuous and athletic sex, I'd be numb to the little stab of pain and guilt when I mentioned Lee.

'That's cool. You were born a day apart?'

'We were born ten minutes apart, either side of midnight. Her birthday's the thirty-first of March and I'm the first of April.'

'Twins? Do you look exactly alike?' He raised an eyebrow in a comic impersonation of a leer.

'Don't even think about it. We're completely different, and we don't share men.'

'Twins with different birthdays. So you always got two parties, huh?'

'One was more than enough.'

'Too bad you're working this year. You must miss her, right?'

'She's busy. And I – haven't seen her for a while.' I picked up a rock and tossed it over the side of the cliff. I watched it fall downwards, bounce off a tussock and fly out of sight. 'I wish that Enzo would hurry up and get here. We're going to lose the light if we wait too much longer, and I don't want to get up this early tomorrow.'

'Did you have a fight?'

'I don't want to talk about it, to be honest, Al.'

'I've got four brothers and we always used to fight. But we'd wrestle it out and then go out for a few beers. Girls are different, I guess.'

'My sister isn't big on wrestling or beer. Hey, look, that's the truck.' I pointed to a silver vehicle in the distance, kicking

up a pillow of dust behind it on the desert road. I began to get up, but Allen stopped me with a hand on my wrist.

‘I’ve been thinking, Liza.’

Oh no. My stomach sank.

‘Seems silly you and me both live in LA and we never see each other except on a job. We should get together sometime.’

‘Al, I like you. And last night *was* fun, but that’s all it was. We were drinking, I was a bit lonely, we hooked up. Let’s leave it there, okay?’

He shrugged. ‘Seems like you shouldn’t have to be lonely. We got a lot in common, we live in the same town, we’re good in the sack. We could probably give it a shot.’

I took a deep breath. ‘Al, you know that’s not my thing.’

‘It seemed to be your thing when we were in bed together last night.’ He ran his thumb up my arm, bare under the coat. ‘Think about it for a few minutes.’

‘I don’t need to. You’re a stunt man, I’m a stunt woman, we work on the same films – it’s so cosy, isn’t it? It’s very lovely and all that, but it’s too safe. I know all your moves and you know all of mine. It’s like pretending to fight.’

‘It doesn’t have to be that way. I think we could really build something, Liza. We could be a good team.’

I shook my head. ‘I’m not a team person. I like being alone.’

‘I thought you said you were lonely.’

‘Well, you know, nobody likes to be alone on their birthday. But I’m not in the market for a relationship, not with you or anybody. I’m not a settling-down person.’

‘In other words, it’s not me, it’s you.’ Al’s face and voice were as laid-back and friendly as ever, but I saw a dull glint of pain in his blue eyes. He shrugged. ‘Sure. I’ve heard that

before. I get it. No hard feelings. So you think you might want to celebrate your real birthday with me tonight? We can get cake and ice cream or something.'

I really did stand up this time, snagging my wig on the way. 'I'm sorry. I don't like ice cream.' I dropped my hand onto his broad shoulder. 'Let's leave it with good memories, all right?'

'Sure. Okay.' He stood up, too, brushing down his clothes. Bits of dirt and gravel fell off his trousers and bounced off the edge of the cliff. We both stepped over the guard rail and walked towards the circus of vehicles and trailers and tents, where the rest of the crew were suddenly active, getting ready for the truck that was about to pull up.

I finished off my coffee and crushed the cup in my hand. I really could have done without that conversation this morning. Or not the conversation so much as the obvious fact that Al was putting a bright face on it. Not when I was already thinking about the birthday card, probably pink, that was doubtless lying on the doormat of my apartment back in LA. Lee always sent a card. No matter what happened, what had gone between us, she always remembered. She'd feel good that she'd sent a card, that she'd fulfilled a duty, done the right thing.

And I remembered our birthdays too. I couldn't help remembering them. But not the same way. It was only one of the many aspects in which we were different. She sent cards, made phone calls, and I went out partying and got laid and thought about what she was doing without me. It was already lunchtime in Stoneguard; she was at work at Ice Cream Heaven, a bunch of fresh flowers on her desk. She'd have plenty of cards, lined up in a neat row.

I'd bought one for her. It was still sitting on my table in my apartment in Los Angeles, because I'd forgotten to send it

before I left. Maybe I should call her. Yes, I should definitely call her. It was past time.

The problem was, I so rarely wanted to do what I should do. Just look at Al, walking beside me.

‘So you’re feeling all right?’ he said.

‘Fine. Great. Why?’

‘I was thinking –’ I made to interrupt him, and he continued over me – ‘it wasn’t about us, it was that I’m not sure I’d want to do a stunt with a hangover like the one you’ve probably got on you.’

‘I’m not hungover.’

‘Nobody will mind playing it safe, you know. It’s an expensive car. And this is a dangerous road. We can do it tomorrow. I’ll say it’s my fault, if you want.’

I stopped walking. ‘I am fine, Al. I’m doing the stunt.’

‘If you’re sure.’

‘I’m one hundred per cent, totally sure. Are you giving me a hard time because I won’t go out with you?’

For as long as I’d known him, Al had always been smiling. Always Texan good-natured, even in the middle of a stunt. Suddenly, he wasn’t. His mouth straightened and his face looked grim, the broken nose a sign of violence.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m asking you a couple of questions because I’m a professional. I saw you were drinking last night and I’m concerned about your safety. I’d ask anyone else the same thing.’

‘You can go ahead and ask anyone else, then, because I’m also a professional and I know perfectly well when I’m safe to drive.’

I jammed my wig on my head and stalked away from him, tossing my winter coat aside. I hardly noticed the cold air hitting my bare arms and upper chest.

Todd, the second unit director, met me on my way to the

others. He was a tall and geeky guy, wearing a woolly hat and rubbing his thin hands together in excitement and cold. 'It'll be here in five minutes,' he told me.

'I know, I can't wait.'

'The Pipe King's coming, too; Gloria's going to try to get him out of the way so we can start shooting. Apparently he needed a haircut this morning, that's why it's late getting here.'

I rolled my eyes, but said, 'I guess you want to look your best to see your car being the star of a major motion picture.'

'Something like that. You going to be ready to roll?'

'No problem.'

We joined the entire second unit, who had assembled along the side of the road waiting for the truck. I sensed rather than saw Allen join us, a few metres away. The usual early-morning griping faded into murmurs as the silver vehicle and its long trailer pulled up with a rumble and a whoosh of hydraulic brakes. 'Seems like it would have got here a bit quicker if he'd driven the Enzo himself,' I muttered. 'The thing does happen to go over two hundred miles an hour.'

'Doesn't want desert dust on the paintwork,' Todd murmured back. 'I'm not sure the owner drives it, anyway. I think it's a trophy thing.'

'It is a crime to own a car like that and never drive it.'

'Maybe he's a lousy driver.' Hogan, the stunt coordinator, was standing behind us. 'How you feeling today, Liza?'

'I'm great.'

'Should be smooth sailing this morning anyway; you just have to make the car look good, which isn't hard with a vehicle like this. No need to book it, just go on the edge of caution.'

I nodded. I'd worked with Hogan plenty before and he

knew what I could do. The stunt business is built on trust and contacts, knowing the right people and doing a good job for them so that you'll get called to work again. We watched as the truck driver opened the trailer and extended the ramp. And then there was the car, being unbuckled from its tethers and set free.

Redder than sin and glossier than temptation, low to the ground, like a predator. It looked fast even when it was standing still. It came to life with a roar and rolled down the ramp to the road and I licked my lips in anticipation. The driver's side door opened like a wing.

Of course, then the bloody Pipe King had to go and spoil it.

He leaped out of the car, a short guy with thinning hair and rimless glasses, and shouted, 'Hey, guys! How about it, huh? You likee?'

'It's a pity that all the really expensive supercars have to be owned by rich people,' I said quietly to Hogan. Todd hurried up to shake the Pipe King's hand.

'All you have to do is make a fortune out of pipes, and this too could be yours,' he answered.

'You know, right now that's looking like a viable career ambition.' I walked up to the car. Up close, it was even more gorgeous, glorious low-slung high-tech speed, crouched on wide tyres. I touched the rear spoiler and slid my fingertips up the sleek red surface.

'The car's the star,' the Pipe King was telling everyone who would listen, in a hammering voice. 'The car's the star. You know, I had to be personally invited to purchase this baby: there were less than four hundred made, for special customers only. I went to the factory and saw it come off the line myself. I fell in love right there and then.'

I peered down into the engine compartment. Six-litre,

aluminium-block V12 engine, every part pristine, emblazoned with the Ferrari stallion. I shuddered with lust. The Pipe King might be a tosser, but he had a point. This car was a star.

‘Six-sixty horsepower, top speed two-nineteen. Zero to one-oh-oh in six point six. Purrs like a lion kitten. I’m telling you, once you’ve driven one of these, you never look back.’

‘Have you got it up to full speed?’ I asked. The Pipe King looked at me with surprise that anyone else could do any talking.

‘Not exactly, not that fast, no. I like it too much to risk it. Every time someone crashes one of these, the value of mine goes up another few hundred thou!’ He chuckled. ‘It’s enough to feel all that power behind you, and the looks when you drive this baby out on the roads.’

I caressed it, walked around to the bonnet and followed the long line of it with my eyes. Imagine having a car like this, one of the fastest on the planet, and never driving it full speed. Imagine caring more about how people looked at you in it and what the figures were, than feeling the rush, the adrenaline, the power. Imagine calling it *baby*.

This car was most definitely adult.

‘I can’t wait to get behind the wheel,’ I said.

‘Of course, we’ll be going nowhere near the full speed today,’ Todd jumped in quickly to reassure the Pipe King.

‘Sure, sure, I can’t wait to tell everyone that’s my car up there on the screen. I thought Carmen Clare was driving it, though?’ The Pipe King craned his neck, peering around for a genuine honest-to-goodness movie star.

‘I’m her stunt double,’ I told him, holding out my hand for a shake. ‘Liza Haven.’

‘Oh. Oh, nice to meet you, I thought I’d be meeting Carmen today.’

‘She’ll be on set tomorrow to do the pick-ups in the car,’ Todd told him.

‘Oh, okay. I just thought—’

I knew what he’d thought. His fancy car would get him in with one of the most beautiful and famous women on the planet. Instead, he had me in a blond wig. ‘If we’re ready, we can get going,’ I said to Todd.

‘Sure, we’re all set up, and I don’t want the sun too high. Nice if we could get it in one take, otherwise we’ll have to do it again tomorrow.’

‘Shouldn’t be a problem.’ The hair and make-up crews descended upon me, tutting about my wig, and while they were faffing I reached for my walkie-talkie.

‘Practice run first at halfspeed,’ Hogan told me.

‘I can do it without, we’re pressed for time.’

Hogan frowned. ‘You driven one of these before?’

‘It’s a car, Hogan. I can drive it.’

I heard a subtle sound behind me, like a cough. I glanced back: Allen.

‘Will you be shooting the practice run?’ I asked Todd. He nodded. ‘Then I’m good to go.’ I screwed up my eyes for a last powder-puff assault and then headed for the open door of the car.

The interior was stripped-down, stunning in its simple functionality. I slipped into the carbon-fibre racing seat and adjusted everything for my size. I was slightly taller than the owner. The edge of the seat was warm from the Pipe King’s backside, especially compared with the chilled bare skin of my legs.

‘You beauty,’ I said to the car.

‘Practice run first,’ Hogan said to me, leaning in through the door. ‘And remember, we’re not testing the car, merely making it look good. Go on the edge—’

‘– of caution. Got it.’ I closed the door, turned the key in the ignition and pressed the start button on the dash.

Oh, heaven. The engine growled into life behind me, thrumming through the seat into my spine. Oh, *yes*. I touched the throttle, the merest touch with the tip of my toe, and it roared.

The way cleared in front of me and I drove the car, all restrained sleek power, to the starting point. The tracking vehicle was already waiting, cameras mounted. I couldn’t hear anything above the engine, but I knew that Todd was shouting orders, alerting the camera crews along the road that we were ready to begin. Film sets: hours of waiting, and then everything happens at once.

I sat and looked at the car, felt it alive around me. Found the controls, learned its tricks. Of course a car like this could only show you its true identity once you had it on the road, at speed. I glanced at the road ahead of me; it was a curved course down the mountain, with a sheer drop on the left beyond the guard rail. For a moment I pictured hitting the accelerator without warning, jumping from nought to sixty within a heartbeat, scattering the crew waiting for Hogan’s signal. I could roar past the cameras, forgetting ‘the edge of caution’, and once I got down the mountain to that glorious, long straight stretch of desert, opening up the engine and seeing what she could do. Just me, and the car, and a long fast ride to nowhere.

Of course, I wouldn’t do that. Making off on a joyride with the fabulously expensive principal car was a one-way ticket to unemployability – if not a jail sentence. But for an instant I closed my eyes and imagined it. Then I opened them again, and waited for the signal.

The walkie crackled. ‘All ready, Liza,’ said Hogan’s voice. The car leaped forward, pressing me back into the seat, and I began to smile.

The waiting crew passed by in a blur. The rising sun gilded the rocks of the cliff edge on my right.

‘Practice run,’ Hogan’s voice said. ‘Take it easy, get used to the car.’

I shifted gears with the paddles on the wheel, enjoying the sequential transmission. The steering was tight. Nice. It would be nicer in race mode; I hit the button and the engine instantly kicked up a notch and the steering got sharper. The car ate up the first few bends like a bead rolling over a ribbon – smooth, fast, frictionless.

It was too easy. A car such as this liked to be pushed; it probably never had been pushed, with an owner like the Pipe King. I had quite a way to go before I was teetering on the edge of caution, and Todd was shooting already; if I was lucky I could get this right on the rehearsal, and we could all go home.

I leaned harder on the throttle and let it rip. Not all the way, no.

But more. Always a little bit more.

Maybe a lot more.

‘Slower, Liza,’ said Hogan.

The Ferrari arched gracefully around the curves. Below me, the shadows were disappearing from the desert. I was mid-descent, but still high enough so that it felt as if I pressed the throttle a little harder, I could fly. Right up into the lightening sky, among the effortless clouds.

‘Happy birthday to me,’ I said, my voice lost in the thunder of the engine, and I edged it faster. The car growled in appreciation. The road straightened for a short stretch, dipping downward, and I used the straight to pick up some more speed.

What had Allen been talking about, anyway? I knew my limits, I knew my abilities. I knew who I was, and I had never felt better in my life.

‘Slow down, Liza,’ crackled Hogan. ‘*Now.*’

‘Yeah, right,’ I said, though he wouldn’t be able to hear me.

A camera and crew were perched near the guard rail on the bend ahead, waiting to pick up the wide shot as I passed. I’d cut it fine, kick up some gravel for them. I smiled, reached for the handbrake for the turn, and it was at that exact moment that I realised I was going faster than I’d thought.

‘Shit,’ I muttered, maybe I yelled it, I don’t know because the car was so loud, and I turned the wheel and engaged the handbrake and the car began its sideways slide, gravel spitting exactly as I wanted it to. All I had to do was power out and away – it would be fine. Fine.

Shit.

At times like these, everything slows. I saw Rory, that was the cameraman’s name though I didn’t know I’d known it, and Wanda beside him wound in a yellow scarf. Rory’s face was obscured by the camera but Wanda was focused on the car, smiling with her eyes screwed up. She had no idea anything was wrong. *Don’t take a camera out*, that’s the first rule, but the rule should be *Don’t take the camera crew out*.

I needed the throttle or I’d plough sideways into both of them and carry them over the cliff. I punched it and the car, the amazingly responsive car, shouted and sprang as more petrol fed into its hungry engine. The front tyres gripped the tarmac and sped me away from the crew and I held tight, tried to keep it on the road but I was going too fast.

‘Fuck, Liza, what the fuck are you doing?’ yelled the radio.

The back end of the car slid and I steered into it, but there was a cliff wall ahead of me and a drop-off behind me, not quite sheer at this point, no, but enough to tumble me into the desert, and I felt the moment when the car decides it’s going

to spin and there's not a bloody thing you can do about it, nothing but ride it out and hope there's enough room.

There wasn't. I braced my body against the back of the seat.

I saw every last rock and scrubby bit of brush on the side of the road. A small weed, spitting pink flowers. I heard gravel flying from the tyres. I got a glimpse of Wanda's yellow scarf far off to the left, safely out of the way, and then I felt the crunch of the guard rail against the side of the car and a sickening tilt.

April Fool, I had time to say, or maybe only to think, and then the car was flying.

An endless now. No past and no idea of the future. Gravity gone, and control.

My insides contracted with something that could be fear. Could be joy.

The noise of the engine seemed to have disappeared and all I heard was the rush of air. A strangely empty sound. Outside, the world should have been a blur but I saw tree branches scraping against the nearside window like skeleton fingers and then a jolt as if someone had unexpectedly kicked me. Then a crack. Then a long endless shivering squealing. Something snapped, I felt it snap inside me. The side of the bonnet crumpled in slow motion, the windscreen starred and the side of the hill was unnaturally close and getting closer. Just outside lay a crushed Diet Coke can. If not for the windscreen, I could have reached out and touched it. In a minute I would be it.

The airbag exhaled into instant huge life around me. I didn't feel any pain, and at that moment, while I was feeling nothing, my breath stopped itself in panic and the car rolled over, hit something and then stopped, the right way up.

I should feel it. I should feel pain. I looked down at my legs

and I couldn't see them, only the white airbag, and then I made myself breathe and smelled the fire.

'That's another few hundred thou on the value of the Enzos that are left,' I said, my voice flat against the airbag, and I reached down and unbuckled my seatbelt. I could do that, at least. Then I braced my hands, which seemed to be unhurt, and my arms unhurt too – at least, I couldn't see any blood – I braced them on the seat and pushed myself up as hard as I could, because if the car was on fire I needed to get out sharpish.

I couldn't move.

Something warm trickled into my eye. I blinked and it rolled downward. When I tasted it with the tip of my tongue it was blood. I'd hit something with my head, but that was the least of my worries, if I couldn't feel from the waist down. It must be a rib that had snapped. It had to be a rib. Not my spine. Please.

But it had been further back than my ribs.

I tried to twist my legs, tried to brace them against the car floor, while I grabbed a hand hold and pulled. It was getting hotter and I smelled petrol, smelled burning plastic and hot metal, and I could see the flames now, to my left beyond the suffocating embrace of the airbag. I pulled, gained half an inch. Pulled harder.

There was shouting now in the distance, and sirens. I pictured the Pipe King tearing out what little hair he had left. The loudest voices, though, were those inside my head as I struggled against the car.

The edge of caution, said Hogan.

We could probably give it a shot, said Al.

These are my lists, said my mother.

Loudest of all was that pink card, lying on my mat inside my door in Los Angeles.