

# Imprints

By Patricia Abbott

“Any idea when the house might be empty?” Ronnie asked. He was slumped over the kitchen table having just finished Charlie’s lunch. All that was left was a dog-eared ginger snap that he had twice scooped off the floor. Ronnie spun the cookie for a third time and they both watched without comment as it pirouetted off the table once again. Hot licks of fire seemed to shoot out of the dragon’s mouth on Ronnie’s bicep as he reached for the cookie. “Like for more than a few hours?”

“She said she was going to Nantucket for Labor Day,” Charlie finally said, regretting the words instantly. Ronnie had a way of lulling Charlie into inertia with his constant movement.

Ronnie’s thin lips twisted with interest. “All right! So it’s a good house to hit?” Now his meaty fingers played with the eject button on Charlie’s ancient cassette player. “Stuffed with jewelry, huh?” He punched the button so hard Charlie expected to see the cassette fly across the room, but the spring was pretty well shot and it opened apologetically.

“About what you’d expect for someone her age, I guess,” Charlie said, feigning disinterest. “Probably more dime store crap than anything real. She wore those big colored beads old ladies always like. I didn’t get out of her living room hardly.” Charlie’s hand reached for the cookie, but Ronnie swatted it away.

“But it was a nice room, right? Lots of antiques, oriental rugs, silver, paintings?” Ronnie fixed his glinting blue eyes on Charlie. “You did get the imprint?”

Charlie’s right hand, buried deep in his jacket pocket, moved involuntarily. Cackling, Ronnie held out a hand and Charlie tossed him the kit, remembering for the hundredth time how much he hated these jobs.

Ronnie’s hammy hand closed around it and a look of satisfaction crossed his face. “All right,” he said, almost to himself. “So Labor Day it is, old friend.” To emphasize his words, he made a fist, smashed the beleaguered ginger snap to crumbs, and then got up and left.

Charlie examined the cassette player for damage. Miraculously, the machine had survived Ronnie’s assault, which was, no doubt, intended to scare him into submission. He had a few scars from high school to jog his memory should he need a reminder.

He picked up a phone and called Alison. After six rings, her machine picked up, and he hung up wondering if it was more or less frustrating twenty years ago when the phone rang on and on with no machine to pick it up. Did people wait for ten rings? Twenty? What was the - what was the word for it - protocol? He couldn’t picture his mother ever answering a phone. Had anyone ever called them after Dennis and then Greg’s final departure? It seemed unlikely.

Alison probably recognized the sound of his hang up by now since he always slammed down the receiver after listening to her message. Forty-six calls in four days can leave an impression. Why did he even bother? Apparently he chose his friends and women from the same kick-ass school.

He zipped his jacket, regretting again his empty pocket, and headed for the Blazer. He hadn’t eaten more than a bite of his sandwich before Ronnie arrived and he’d

been hungry before that. The nausea was growing worse every day. Ronnie's presence was a trigger and he didn't need a shrink to tell him that. He looked at his clipboard for the afternoon, noticing he had three appointments on the South side - a gas log installation, a clothes washer repair, and a dishwasher hookup. At twenty-six, he was getting too old for this shit, especially now that business was starting to take off. He was beginning to get a taste for living a respectable life. Beginning to believe it was possible.

Charlie installed gas appliances in the Boston area: dishwashers, stoves, water heaters, washers and dryers, and lately a lot of gas logs. It was a decent living. Last year, he cleared over \$55,000. Not too shabby for a GED. He got the biggest kick out of installing the logs. A customer had told him just the other day that he was like a stage designer, setting the mood in her living room. It *was* sort of cool, he guessed, getting the right amount of ash, crackle and cinder, adjusting the flame, setting the logs on the grate just so. Some of the guys in the business just piled the logs on any which-way, but he took his time with it. Actually, the customer who'd said he was like a stage designer was Mrs. Blanchard, the owner of the house Ronnie wanted to hit on Labor Day. Remembering her excitement with the gas log installation made him sorry it was her imprint sitting in his pocket when Ronnie showed up. Most of his customers couldn't remember what he looked like ten minutes after he left their house, but Mrs. Blanchard had been a nice lady and a bit lonely, he thought, from the attention she heaped on him. She sat in her living room nearly the whole time, *oohing* and *aahing* over her gas log, a crappy one, by the way, that she paid too much for. If she had just stayed in the living room the whole time, he couldn't have lifted the print, but she had trotted off to get her check book, had trouble finding it, and taken a bit too long. Even then he had felt bad taking the print - had wanted, in fact - to toss it in the trash, but she came in just then and he slipped it into his pocket and forgot about it.

He called Ronnie later that day and left the following message. "Hey, Ron. I've been thinking it over and Labor Day breaks the six-week rule. Call me back."

He thought Ronnie was probably listening. Most people had given up answering their phone. For a while, they picked up when they heard a familiar, non-threatening voice, but lately even that seemed too risky. Everyone was waiting for machines that could talk to each other, saving them the trouble of dealing with anyone at all.

He was switching off a *Seinfeld* rerun when Ronnie unlocked the door at 11:00. He couldn't remember ever giving his friend a key, but he was the guy who invented the imprint kit, wasn't he? "Got anything to eat?" Ronnie yelled from the kitchen. Ronnie worked at St. Bonaventure Hospital. He was one of those guys who pushed people down to the labs or to surgery - an orderly. There was probably no back talk about who got to the MRI machine first in St. Bonaventure. Surprisingly though, Ronnie could talk about his patients quite tenderly. He was the kind of guy who broke a bird's wings through his carelessness, then nursed it back to health.

"There's pepperoni and mushroom in the foil," Charlie told him from the doorway.

Ronnie unwrapped it, sighing with irritation as he picked off the mushrooms and green pepper. "Got any milk?"

"If it hasn't turned."

Ronnie picked up the carton, sniffed it suspiciously, and then tipped the spout toward his mouth.

“Hey, how about using a glass?” Charlie opened the cabinet and slid one across the table.

“Tastes better straight from the cow.” But he humored Charlie by pouring two inches worth into the glass. “Look,” he said a few seconds later, pushing the glass back in Charlie’s direction. “Labor Day’s too good an opportunity to pass up. It’s nearly three weeks away and it’s been a few days since you lifted it. We made that rule before we started rolling. Didn’t know yet how things were going to play out.” He belched loudly and rubbed his stomach. “We gotta seize the day here, Batch. Old ladies don’t get invited out much.” He ran an impatient hand through his weedy hair, making it all stand up. Ronnie could look frightening with very little effort.

The phone rang and Charlie grabbed it, glad for the interruption. “Listen shithead,” a decidedly female voice said, “stop leaving those hang-ups on my machine! You ran the damned tape out.” Click. It was Alison, of course. She hung up before he could get a word in, but he took the opportunity her call provided and talked to the dial tone for another minute. He needed some time to come up with a reason that would sour Ronnie on this job. A smarter guy would have thought of one before this, but Charlie wasn’t the smartest guy - a fact he himself understood. He bought about ninety seconds and then Ronnie grabbed the phone and slammed it down. “That Alison?” he asked sullenly. He said the name like it had just been invented, pausing over every syllable.

“Right. She’s pissed at me.”

Ronnie cheered up immediately. “What ya do?” he asked, probably hoping for a miserable deed on Charlie’s part. Charlie was tempted to spin a tale of evildoing, but decided to stay closer to the truth. His friend had a good bullshit detector.

“I showed up at her father’s birthday wasted.” Charlie had regarded himself as only half-pissed, but observers suggested differently. “Things got worse after that,” he added. “I think the term ‘restraining order’ was tossed around a little.” Alison’s father, a smalltime mobster and petty tyrant, hated everything about him.

“Cool,” Ronnie said, patting him on the back. He had never gotten over his teenage admiration for heavy alcohol consumption. Charlie took advantage of his momentary good spirits to launch an attack.

“Listen, Ron, I’m afraid I talked a little too much to the old lady about how she was going away for Labor Day. A lot of that ‘last day of the season’ patter. I wasn’t thinking about you pulling the job so quick. We talked about how it was smack in the middle of hurricane season by Labor Day. She’s bound to remember me.” He paused to see if his words were having an impact and then added. “She sat across the room from me for half an hour.”

“What - you bonded with her?” Ronnie looked at his friend. “Or are you just that memorable? Just that fucking memorable.”

“Take your pick.”

Ronnie thought that over for a minute. “You pull this shit every time,” he told Charlie flatly. This was true. Charlie never actually wanted to go through with a job. He liked taking the impression with his little kit. And he liked spending the money Ronnie reluctantly parted with a few weeks later. The in-between part, Ronnie’s part actually, stunk.

Charlie's responsibilities in the venture lay with checking the security issues in the house and taking an impression when a house key became available on service calls. Both systems read go more often than people might think. Alarm systems were easy to spot and figure out, if you were mechanically adept at all. The success of an alarm system depended on the intruder not having the time or the access for a close scrutiny. This was an advantage his house calls provided - he often had time for a leisurely look when the clients left him alone for long stretches of time. And as for the actual imprinting, Charlie was often able to locate a key near the front or back door or in a coat pocket without much trouble. Pressing the key against the wax in the kit only took seconds and there was almost always a nice clean impression to take to a guy in Concord Ronnie had cut in. Wipe the key off, put it back in place, and Charlie was done.

Ronnie handled the actual break-in; Charlie seldom even asked him about it. It was a simple plan that worked well. The six-week principle put some time between Charlie's house call and the break-in. People don't remember a visit from a repairman after a few weeks. In fact, they didn't remember his face an hour later. Sometimes he forgot a tool or the signed service order on a call and went back to get it, only to be met at the door with a blank face.

Ronnie called the Thursday before Labor Day. Charlie had finally gotten back into Alison's good graces and was waiting for her to show up. He was so sure it was her on the phone that he picked up without thinking. "Hey, Bitch," Ronnie said cheerfully, making his decades-old play on Charlie's name. "Guess you know what my plans are for this Saturday night."

"It's supposed to rain all weekend. She might be sitting in her lazy boy reading *Reader's Digest* when you arrive." He had actually planned this line ahead of time after hearing a forecast. But Ronnie wasn't having any.

"She's gone already. I saw some guy pick her up—probably her son. He was struggling with two bulging suitcases so she won't be back anytime soon."

"She could come back early. Old ladies get homesick for their own johns."

"I have half a mind to cut you out, Batch," Ronnie told him. "Except I thought you could actually pull your weight for once. I want to move you up to vice-president in charge of holding a flashlight. No house lights on this job. That Dutch Colonial she lives in is like a stage. What does she have against curtains? Or trees?"

"No can do, Ronnie. I have the date of a lifetime with Alison on Saturday night. The big reconciliation's on the table. She rented a room with a Jacuzzi at some fancy spa." Charlie paused, giving Ronnie time to appreciate what he was asking him to pass up. "Anyway, I made it clear from the start that I have no interest in a managerial position. Why don't you call it off? It feels wrong." An argument followed, but Charlie held his ground for once, insisting that no help would come from him on Saturday night and Ronnie had to work the late shift the other nights.

"Never mind, you fucker," Ronnie finally erupted. "You just can't get your priorities straight. A good score here could set you up for a month of spa trips." He rang off in a rage and Charlie wondered briefly how he would be made to pay for his supposed treachery. Ronnie was good at extracting compensation just at the time you'd forgotten about your sins.

Charlie got back from the Ritz about six on Sunday. Alison and he had topped off their evening of love with a trip to the pony track after a champagne lunch. Everything

had gone surprisingly well mainly because her father's name had not come up once, a surprising phenomenon since she was, in Charlie's mind, obsessed with Daddy. The red light on the answering machine was pulsing with messages, all from Ronnie from what he could tell by the swearing. None gave any specifics. Charlie dialed his number, but got no answer.

Swearing, Charlie went into the bedroom where he found Ronnie. Actually he was waiting in the bed itself, his scuffed black boots leaving dark slashes across the white sheets. He cradled a half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels in his arms. When he saw Charlie, he slammed the bottle down on the bedside table and leaped up. "Well, it's about time you motherfucker." He grabbed Charlie by the place a collar would be, had he been wearing a shirt with a collar, and for a moment, it seemed like his intention was to heave him through the window as if he were a stray cat carrying a fatal disease. "Hey, hey, hey," Charlie screamed. "What's wrong with you?"

Ronnie dropped him unceremoniously on the hard wood floor. "What's wrong with me?" He said it again louder. "What's wrong with me?" He threw himself back on the bed. "Oh, not much, Charlie. Things just went a little wrong with your gas log lady in Brookline. What was her name - Blanchard?"

"What happened?" A sick fear crept up Charlie's back and he rose, rubbing his left elbow gingerly.

"While you were out banging what's her name in some deluxy Ja-whatzi, I got tangled up good in Brookline. A town I've never liked by the way." He picked up the Jack and took another swig.

"Okay, just settle down. What happened?"

Ronnie laughed. "I guess you were right, Batch, Sometimes they do come home early. I don't know if it was the john she was after..."

"Go on."

"It started out good. Real good. I got into the place easy. It was one of your better prints, by the way."

"Thanks. Go on."

"I headed for the dining room to look at her silver. I was looking through the drawers when I felt this whispery, cool breeze on my neck. I thought I'd forgotten to close the door for a minute, except it's summer right and the breeze wouldn't have been cool." He looked to Charlie for validation of this observation and his friend nodded. "So, I almost ignored it," Ronnie went on, "but it happened again - this tiny puff of air with just a hint of sound to it. I whipped around and the light from my flash picked up the white in her nightgown. She couldn't have been more than five feet away." Ronnie paused. "I moved the light up a little and saw a deer rifle pointed right between my eyes. I gotta tell you I almost lost it," Ronnie shivered. "I can see where a guy might shit in his..."

A soft whistle came involuntarily from Charlie's lips. "Go on." His voice was hoarse from fear at what would come next.

"I switched off the flash on instinct so the room was dark as hell. I figured it would give me the advantage, given her age and her fear. She didn't move a muscle though and neither did I. We stood there listening to each other breathe and gradually getting used to the dark, seeing a little better each second."

"Jesus!"

“Right. So after twenty or thirty seconds of this, a car turned the corner and began coming down the street. It was coming so slowly it had to be cops and I fancied I could see a small smile on her face. But then I realized she was like a deer in the headlights. She was frozen kind of. She had the gun, but she didn’t, if you know what I mean.

“She was probably in shock.”

“Right. So after another few seconds, I noticed she had lowered the gun a little without realizing it because she was thinking about that car coming and what it meant. Wondering if it was a neighbor or her son or the cops. The gun looked slack in her hands now and it was pointing more at the floor than at me.”

“So what did you do?” Charlie was genuinely taken with the story, forgetting for a moment his involvement with it.

“I seized the opportunity and grabbed for it. I tugged the thing so hard she went down, hitting her head on the table as she fell.” Ronnie drew in his breath. “I can tell you I didn’t like the sound of it at all.”

“And?”

“And I guess she’s dead.”

Ronnie’s voice was flat. Like he was telling a story about how he gotten rid of a spider in his tub or a bee in his car.

“You *think* she’s dead?” Charlie finally asked when it was clear Ronnie wasn’t going to go on and say that she got up finally and was fine. “You don’t know for sure. Didn’t you check?”

“As much as I could in the dark. I wasn’t gonna turn on the lights at that point.” He paused. “There was still that fucking car outside too. Idling by then.”

“Was it cops?” Charlie asked.

“Think I’d be here now if it was cops, you idiot? No, it was some horny kids getting ready to make out in the turnaround at the end of the block.” Ronnie started to chuckle but seeing his friend’s stricken face, stopped.

“Give me the key,” Charlie demanded, holding out his hand.

“No way. There’s nothing you can do for her now. I got out of there without laying a finger on her and that’s the way it’s staying. I didn’t get squat from that house and no one’s gonna pin her death on me. “

“Give me the key or I’ll call the cops right now.”

“You call anybody, anybody at all and you’re dead,” Ronnie said, menacingly. “If you gotta check it out, then it’s gonna be just you going in there. But what’s the point? Unless you need to pay your last respects, that is.” He tossed the key to Charlie, who snatched it in midair.

“Say a word to anybody and you’re dead,” he called after Charlie as he headed out. Charlie had no real idea what he was going to do, but he knew he couldn’t let it rest there - not with the possibility that Mrs. Blanchard was still alive. Some line had been crossed and he would have to act, like it or not.

One thing was sure though; at some point, Ronnie had turned from a punk into a murderer. He had always been a mean son of a bitch, for sure. Too much booze, too many fights, and, of course, the imprinting business. He was Charlie’s oldest friend, and their friendship had had odd twists and turns in it, things he didn’t like to dwell on, but murder? Or was it murder? Murder was in a different stratosphere that the grimy pissant

places they usually occupied. Or was any of this true? He didn't really believe Ronnie could be this casual about the death of a harmless old lady either. It didn't sit right.

He pulled up to the Blanchard house at 7:45, but it was still light. Ronnie was right about that situation. The house was way too exposed and should have been rejected for that reason alone. They had gotten careless even considering this place for a job. The split level across the street had a direct bead on the front door with only the occasional passing car to obstruct it. If he remembered correctly, her dining room, with her body supposedly stretched across the floor, faced the street as well.

Killing an hour in the suburbs was tough. They had cops there with nothing to do but drive around looking for trouble, so Charlie drove up and down the leafy streets cautiously, looking for a burger place to hang out. Apparently fast food places were not popular in this burb. Finally finding one, he sat inside it for an hour. The coffee was shitty, and the place was full of losers who were probably also waiting for the dark. In his heart, Charlie knew he should have charged right into the Blanchard house, casting caution aside; the additional hour could only hurt her chances of survival. But twenty hours had gone by now. Would another hour make any difference? And, if not, why was he even contemplating breaking in? Ronnie's threats hung heavy in the air or he would have called EMS or the cops and let them break the door down.

By nine, it was dark. He parked a block away and let himself in the back door. Mrs. Blanchard wasn't big on curtains anywhere so the street lamp cast a thin bar of light through the front of the house as he made his way there. Once in the dining room, he proceeded gingerly, expecting to trip over her body at any time. But his flashlight skipped over an empty floor. Room by room, he went through the house, thinking maybe she had crawled away - or that Ronnie misunderstood the room. Nothing. Nada. No sign of her or any disturbance anywhere. Had Ronnie even been here at all? He looked in closets, under beds, in bathtubs and down the laundry chute.

He was trying to come up with a new place to look when the phone rang. He let it ring, of course, and on the fourth ring, the machine picked up. Mrs. Blanchard had a nice cheery message on her machine. It brought back the warmth he remembered from the day he installed her log. Where the hell was she? He wondered, looking around.

It was then that he heard his own voice, or his recorded voice, that was. "Hi, this is Charlie Batch. I'm not in right now but if you leave your name and number, I'll get back to you." Ronnie - it had to be him - was playing his recording into Mrs. Blanchard's answering machine. He ran over to pick it up, but a dial tone greeted him. He could hear Ron laughing across the miles, and watched mutely as the little red light began to pulse. He listened to the message again and was ready to punch delete when the headlights that Ronnie had lied about earlier, shot across the living room and into the kitchen. Another set followed, and he saw two black and whites sitting in the drive. The officers were already pounding on the door.

It's called home invasion nowadays - what they charged him with, that is. If you're not carrying a weapon, don't have any loot piled up, and don't have any priors, you're good to go in a pretty short time. Or so his court-appointed attorney told Charlie across the metal table. The guy, wearing a cheap suit from Syms probably, didn't even care about the story Charlie told - basically said it was unimportant and don't waste his time. They never came up with any of the specifics - not the imprinting kit, not Ronnie,

not the guy in Concord. Charlie was guilty of a momentary lapse in judgment. The only loose end was the tape sitting in Mrs. Blanchard's machine and he used his free call to put some corridor noise on that, figuring she had rewound it by then, not knowing what to make of the message if she even heard it. It was possible he had even hit the delete button, but he wasn't sure.

The story Mrs. Blanchard and the cops came up with was he had taken a key from the kitchen drawer on the day he installed the log and replaced it that night - because no key was now missing. She was certain of that, and, naturally his fingerprints were on one of the three keys in the drawer. Charlie's lawyer told him he would probably get by with some community service. Maybe pay a fine.

The thing Charlie couldn't be sure about - the thing that he spent all day considering - was what part Ronnie played in the scenario. Was he completely set up? Was he meant to be sitting in this jail cell? Or was it meant to be a joke and the arrival of the cops was completely unplanned? So far, Ronnie had remained silent and Charlie certainly hadn't attempted to get in touch with him. It was better that the home invasion look like the first-time misstep of one man than the last in a long string of burglaries by a trio of miscreants.

But this is what Charlie couldn't let go of. Where did Ronnie get the story he told him? He'd known Ronnie since his freshman year in high school, and he'd never been able to come up with even a good excuse for missing school. Charlie always had to do that for him. He couldn't be bothered with it himself. He's just say, "Fuck, I didn't feel like taking your test today, Mrs. White," and end up in the principal's office every time. So where did he come up with this saga - with its whispers and breezes and glints?

Charlie finally decided that it really happened - but not that night. One night in the not too distant past, Ronnie broke into a house and some old lady in a white nightgown came upon him. He yanked the gun; she went down and hit her head. And he left her to die on the floor. Probably she didn't die - he would probably have heard about it - but maybe she did.

This was probably a good time to put some distance between Ronnie and him. If Charlie could keep Alison from finding out about the home invasion thing, maybe they had a future. Maybe this time, Ronnie would stay away and let him lead a normal, respectable life. Just maybe.

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