

MURPHY'S PATH BY MADELEYN QUESTMAN

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER TWO - PASO DOBLE

"Hello, Mr. Murphy!" She smiled at him, taking a small stack of light blue index cards out of her briefcase. "I hope I included enough information for you in my forms. Yours were very interesting."

Patrick remembered that she was studying psychology. Since he had put only the most minimal amount of information on his forms, he assumed that she was trying to use that fact to make some sort of psychological statement about him, assessing him in some way because of his information – or because of the relative lack of personal details. He refused to play along.

"Would you like to chat a bit to make sure I'm going to share the right things about you?" Hero looked at him expectantly, a pen poised over a blank index card.

"You can say whatever you like – I have nothing to hide."

"Oooh – okay, well...did you need to ask me anything?" Hero pursed her lips slightly, glancing sideways. She shifted her gaze to his face.

"Are you sure you've been studying psychology and not creative fiction?"

Hero looked him directly in the eyes, her face completely devoid of expression. She blinked once as several silent seconds passed.

"It's just that..." Patrick mumbled, "Well, some of the experiences you mentioned in your forms seem a little far-fetched. No one could do that much that quickly."

"What exactly are you referring to, Mr. Murphy?" Her voice was low and even – not a hint of emotion in it.

"All the travel you mentioned, for instance. How could you have done so much traveling and still finish school?"

"Which part is upsetting to you? My travels or my having finished school?" Hero leaned back a bit, crossing her arms in front of her.

"I'm not upset about either part – I just don't think it's possible. I mean, Egypt? All by yourself? Come on."

"I see." Hero smirked. Patrick had only seen two facial expressions from her so far: smiling, or smirking. The smile was pleasant, but that smirk – he hated the way she looked so sure of herself, as if everyone around her was somehow out of the loop. "So, if you haven't done it, it must not be possible?"

The chatter around them had died down, making Patrick instantly self-conscious. He stayed silent for a moment. This Hero person sat staring at him, the slight smirk still curling the corners of her lips. His irritation compelled him to keep speaking. "Look, I don't like these kinds of confrontational challenges. I don't have time for that kind of nonsense. So let's just get through this and then we never have to speak again, okay?"

"Good idea, Mr. Murphy."

"Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Well," Hero responded, "it's probably much more appropriate than any of the other names I have in mind for you." She punctuated the comment with a slight lift of her eyebrows.

A number of servers surrounded the long table, bearing trays of plates, glasses and pitchers of drinks. Other servers placed several varieties of large pizzas down the center of the table. The noise level increased again as the new counselors chatted amicably, passing pizzas to each other. Patrick noted that this Hero person took only one slice of plain cheese pizza and half a glass of ginger ale. She greeted a few of the other counselors, smiling all the while, seemingly unfazed by her exchange with him. He motioned to one of the servers, and ordered a glass of stout. It was only Thursday, but he felt he had earned this one.

Hero watched Patrick out of the corner of her eye as he went through a strange pre-dinner ritual. He took two small slices of vegetarian pizza, and with his knife and fork he removed all of the toppings, one small piece at a time. He managed to delicately detach the melted cheese in one continuous segment. Then, with the edge of his knife, he carefully scraped off all traces of the tomato sauce underneath. He grabbed a couple of extra paper napkins and scrupulously wiped off the knife. He then replaced the toppings – slices of mushrooms, olives, peppers – in a precise configuration onto the bare crust, and settled the cheese on top. Only then did he eat his now-deconstructed pizza. *Someone's wound a bit tightly*, she thought.

After everyone had served themselves, Dr. Burton stood at one end of the table and motioned for silence. "Okay, counselors, here's how I'd like to do this. Let's have each pair stand over at this end, and each person can spend a few minutes telling us about his or her partner. Since we have so many, let's keep

each presentation to three or four minutes. Of course I don't have to remind you all: be nice, nothing too embarrassing or scandalous, unless you cleared it with the other person already. So let's begin! Why don't we start at this end?"

The pair across from Dr. Burton stood, exchanging quick 'you-go-firsts' and launching into their introductions amidst polite laughter and faint murmurs. One was from the education department – the whole field of education was doomed, so why was anyone bothering to study it? The other was from sociology, a field Patrick found nearly as uninteresting; frankly, he wasn't really sure what the difference was between sociology and contemporary anthropology.

Three more pairs in quick succession: biologists, historians, political scientists, economists. Patrick rested his head against his fist, his elbow propped on the table, looking over the heads of his colleagues. He wondered why anyone would feel it was necessary for him to know that the sociology grad student's greatest influence had been her great-aunt Trixie-belle, or whatever. How was this going to help him in his own work? Was this supposed to make him a better counselor? His focus was on helping students in the Humanities areas get through their programs successfully; he did not need to know about their great-aunts or their dogs or cats or their hobbies. Speaking of hobbies, he could bet that this Hero person probably spent her time knitting sweaters out of cat hair and dryer lint – she seemed like that sort of artsy-craftsy person. He glanced her way quickly, suppressing a laugh at his own thoughts.

"Okay, next we have Hero and Patrick. Ready?" Dr. Burton's voice projected an unwavering cheerfulness; Patrick thought of him as a failed game-show host.

"What a waste of time," Patrick muttered to himself as he stood and walked to the end of the table. Hero, resplendent in her teal and gold tunic, seemed even more vibrant next to him in all black. He noticed that her ballerina flats were the same color as the tunic she wore. He cleared his throat.

"Would you like to go first?" she asked him. He did not answer her, choosing instead to simply launch into his ad-lib speech. He spoke rapidly.

"This is Hero. She's a graduate student in psychology, although I suspect that her field is probably more parapsychological in nature. I believe that she engages in a great deal of astral projection, as she claims to have visited every country in the world. She seems to have some weird fascination with the medical profession, because she's doing her dissertation on cardiovascular issues, although what that has to do with psychology is beyond me. Perhaps she applied to and was rejected from a number of medical schools."

Hero stood silently with her hands behind her back, her lips parted slightly, her eyes shifted sideways toward him. Her expression held a mix of disbelief and amusement, and although she occasionally raised her eyebrows at some of his statements, she did not interrupt him. He went on.

"She writes a column for the school paper, called 'Hopeful Hero' or some such. It's apparently a sex advice column, and one cannot help but wonder about the basis of her knowledge on the subject."

A few whispers and slight gasps drifted up from around the table. Hero's face remained unreadable as she shifted from one foot to the other. Dr. Burton had stopped smiling and now sat with his arms crossed, watching Hero's face intently. Patrick continued.

"Her goals include running a tea house, and writing self-published romance novels in Arabic. She owns the requisite stereotypical cat. Oh, and her parents are some sort of Spanish gypsies. As you can see," he gestured toward her, "she's quite the colorful character."

An uneasy silence settled over the group. A few people shuffled in their seats, pouring themselves more soda, exchanging quick glances with their colleagues, while others looked down, quickly scanning their own notes.

Hero began her introduction with no preamble. "This is Patrick – but be forewarned he prefers to be called 'Mr. Murphy.' He's a grad student in the English department, and has been working for four years now on his dissertation, which he has labeled 'psychological correlates of religious symbols in medieval literature.' He's taking a long time because he's determined to write the longest dissertation in the history of the English department without saying anything of academic significance. He speaks a self-taught form of Gaelic, so he can talk with the other six people on earth who also speak Gaelic." A couple of the counselors giggled.

Smiling, Hero did not refer to her notes as she went on. "He was, at some point, studying to be a priest, primarily because 'Father Murphy' sounds so much more intimidating than 'Mr. Murphy.' He's narrowed his post-grad career choices down to two options. He will either be ordained as a priest, and will present his masses in Gaelic, which he's sure the congregation will not be able to distinguish from Latin, or he will go back to Ireland and reclaim his rightful place as a high king. His first act will be to forbid the use of the English language, which will be replaced with self-taught versions of Gaelic."

The other counselors were now laughing openly. Dr. Burton rolled his eyes heavenward, shaking his head slightly.

“Interestingly, he hasn’t been anywhere, and he hasn’t done much of anything because he’s saving up his resources for a possible hostile takeover of Ireland. He wanted me to wish you all ‘*slainte*,’ which is Gaelic for ‘choke on it.’”

Patrick glared at Hero as she tried not to laugh. When she saw his expression, she could not contain herself any longer, and she did laugh, a rich, deep laugh. His face reddened. He muttered at her through gritted teeth. “You miserable *bréagadóir*!”

She maintained his gaze, the smirk returning. “You bloody *Fenian*!”

Dr. Burton stood then, stepping part-way between them. “Let’s take a bit of a break, and we’ll continue in about five minutes.” He turned to Hero and Patrick. “What was that all about?”

“She started it.”