

## **How to Handle a Handy Man**

### **A Garden Falls Short Story**

**by Susan Gee Heino**

Mary Justice Jones had never actually considered murder before, but for one little moment as she stood there, screwdriver in hand, it just seemed so incredibly possible. His back was turned. He was hunched over the old truck. Now was her chance...

"For crying out loud, gimme the right wrench," he growled, one grimy arm flailing blindly in her general direction. "I said *crescent* wrench."

Apparently the wrench she'd already handed him was the wrong one. "I don't know which one that is," she snapped, stepping back out of flail-reach.

He grumbled and pushed past her to get to the toolbox on the worktable. Things rattled and clattered as he dug around, turning on her with some kind of hefty tool in his hand. It was basically wrench-shaped with a little screw knob built into it.

"*This* is a crescent wrench," he declared.

Since he wasn't actively swinging it at her, she stepped forward to get a good look at it. "Oh. You haven't introduced that one to me yet. Sorry."

He rolled his eyes and went back to tinkering with the truck. Mary rolled her eyes, too, but he didn't notice. Royce Briard wasn't one of those people who noticed things he didn't want to see. She'd been waiting two weeks for him to

notice the steady drip in the kitchen faucet. No luck.

When she moved into this place a month ago she knew there might be a few things she'd have to fix up. It was an older home, after all, and it had sat empty for over a year. The leaky plumbing and the overgrown landscaping hadn't come as a surprise to her. No, what sent her reeling was the one tiny little fact the property managers at Sunny Side Realty had forgotten to mention.

The house might have been vacant after Eugenia Halloway went to a nursing home and then on to her final reward, but the little carriage house out back had been occupied. It had a built-in Royce. No, not a Rolls Royce, but a brooding, mysterious handyman who used to work for Eugenia and had no intention of leaving now that she was gone.

Apparently when Mary took over the place it had been a package deal. Royce worked for Mary now, except that he didn't seem to be very clear on the concept of "working for". He seemed to think *he* was in charge and Mary just existed to annoy him. The sad truth was, though, she needed him so she had to put up with his condescending attitude.

"How much longer do I have to stand here and hand you things?" she questioned.

"Seems like if I was done with the job I wouldn't still be doing this, would I?"  
*Infuriating man.* She grumbled right back at him.

"Seems like if you'd take this dilapidated truck down to the shop they'd be doing it *for* you. Probably be done with it already."

He grunted again. "I'm fixing it after you let those clueless teenagers down at the shop mess it up last week."

"It needed an oil change."

"I've been changing the oil on this truck for years now," he said. "I'd have gotten around to it."

"I've been waiting for you to fix the kitchen sink. I thought if you didn't have to deal with the truck, you could deal with the sink."

He narrowed his eyes and muttered under his breath, but she knew she'd won. Angry, he turned back to the truck and buried his face in the engine. She felt deservedly smug.

"All your tools are right here. I'm going back in the house and getting some of my own work done for a change."

He snorted. "*Work*. Yeah, right."

Biting her tongue, she ignored him. Of course he ridiculed her work. She was an *artist*—Royce didn't seem to think that was a legitimate career choice. On his more charitable days he simply rolled his eyes at any mention of her job. On Mary's more charitable days she refrained from calling him a Neanderthal. It would have been justified, of course; Royce *was* a Neanderthal. A big, broad-shouldered, chiseled-jawed Neanderthal.

Inheriting this house and moving to this little town had not been part of Mary's life-plan. It was a huge surprise when her great-aunt, Eugenia Holloway, died and left the place to her, if she wanted it. As it turned out, it didn't really matter if Mary wanted it. She *needed* it.

Mary had nowhere else to go. She'd just come through an ugly divorce back in the city. Her ex-husband owned the studio where she had previously worked and his mother owned the gallery which had been Mary's primary source of income. If not for this big old house, Mary would have been homeless with no place to work. And no money to live on. Aunt Eugenia's kindly gift had been quite a godsend.

Now that she'd been here a month, though, Mary wondered if Aunt Eugenia had been so very kind, after all. Considering what a headache this house had been from the start, Mary had to consider that maybe she'd done something to upset her relative and this was Eugenia's revenge. The place was in horrible disrepair and her will included specific provisions for Royce to stay on in the carriage house. Mary didn't just inherit the real estate, but a whole lot of headaches. If Royce was so keen to stay here, why didn't Eugenia simply give the place to him outright?

But she hadn't and Royce adamantly boasted that he was glad of it. He said the last thing he'd want was to be responsible for a dump like this. Still, here he stayed, day after day, being responsible for this very dump and making Mary regret it.

Her original plan was to come back here just for the summer. She would stay long enough to get her life back in order and make a fresh start. Her dreams for that, however, were crumbling daily. She'd planned on a leisurely summer creating art, fixing up this house to sell it for a profit, then heading back rebuild her life in the city. It was becoming painfully obvious there would be little profit from this house even if she could eventually find someone to buy it.

She blamed Royce Briard for that, mostly. It was almost like he was intentionally working against her. No matter what job she needed him to do, Royce always found some excuse to work on something else. The house was not improving on schedule, but the money Eugenia left Mary sure was disappearing fast. Before long, Mary and Royce were going to have a serious conversation.

She wasn't up for it today, though. Today she really, really needed to be productive. Her current project was a new series of ink on untreated canvass, a study in the various tree leaves growing around the house. She'd become

fascinated by the way light played with the various textures and she was eager to delve deeper into the subject. Unfortunately, it looked like art would be delayed. Again.

A car was rumbling up her long gravel driveway. She peered around the porch railing and recognized it right away. Granny Snowden, from the local diner.

"I thought you could maybe use something for lunch," Granny called through the window as she parked the car.

Mary went down to meet her, checking her watch and frowning. How could it possibly be lunch time already? And how could Granny know that Mary hadn't remembered to pick up any bread or lunchmeat for sandwiches today? In the city she would just call down to the deli when she remembered to eat. It was going to take a lot more than a month here for her to get used to keeping track of mealtimes and grocery lists.

"Where's that sweet little lamb you keep working for you?" Granny asked, climbing out of the car and glancing around. "Have you starved the poor thing to death?"

"If you mean Royce, then no I haven't. He's out in the garage working on the truck."

Granny nodded. "I told Eugenia not to leave you with that thing. Nothing but trouble."

"He sure is."

"No, honey, I meant the truck. Older than dirt. Dear old Eugenie should have bought a new one to leave you, and I told her so."

That must have been an uncomfortable, morbid conversation. "Uh, thanks?"

"She had her own ways of doing things, that's for sure," Granny said with a

wistful shake of her head.

Mary had to agree. Everything in this house bore Eugenia's stamp. Even after her passing, things around here had to be done by her standards, at least as long as it was her money being used to do it. Unfortunately, part of Eugenia's evil plan was that Mary not know all the details until after she took possession of the house.

Once Mary was given access to the details of Eugenia's will, she discovered that money--a lot of it--had been placed in trust to renovate the house. Royce was to oversee the project and none of the furnishing or other property was to be sold off until everything was done. Then it would all go together, unless Mary decided to stay.

Mary had no plans to stay, but she was clearly stuck here for a while longer, cow-towing to Royce and forgetting about lunch. She would really owe Granny after this. The heavenly aroma wafting from the woman's car made Mary's stomach growl.

"Let me get that for you," Mary insisted, jumping in when Granny pried open her back door and began struggling with a picnic basket.

"I hope you don't mind, but I brought enough for you to keep some leftovers," Granny explained.

The basket was remarkably heavy and Mary could hardly wait to dig in. Granny Snowden was known around Garden Falls for her cooking. She'd owned the local diner for years and years, and she was technically retired from that, but the new owners were friends of hers and she just couldn't keep herself out of their kitchen.

"What did you make, Granny?" Mary asked. "This thing weighs a ton."

"That's probably from the pound cake I put in there for dessert."

It took Mary a moment to get the joke. She chuckled along with Granny who obviously thought herself very funny. Mostly, though, Mary hoped there really was a pound cake.

Royce appeared around the corner of the house, wiping the grime from his hands onto the grime on his jeans. The afternoon sun made a halo around him and he looked like some kind of angelic lumberjack. He must have been a pretty hungry lumberjack, too, because his eyes went big and round while the first smile Mary could ever recall seeing on him spread over his face.

"Am I setting myself up for disappointment if I hope there's some of your cooking in that basket, Granny?" he said.

"There's meatloaf sandwiches, my special potato salad, and a big tub of that sweet-and-sour soup you told me you loved at that last potluck supper," Granny announced.

Royce's grin got even bigger. "I sure have missed your cooking."

Granny shrugged it off. "The diner's doing just fine without me. You know I got better things to do with my time."

"Well, I certainly appreciate you thinking of us," Mary said, leading them all up onto the front porch. "Come on in and sit down with us."

"No, no, I can't," Granny said. "I cooked up a whole mess of lunch today so I've got two more baskets to drop off. But you go in, have a nice conversation over your food."

Mary could barely contain her snort at the thought of sitting down to *nice conversation* with Royce. There wasn't anything that was less likely. Apparently the feeling was mutual because Royce snorted, too.

"I gotta finish up that old truck," he said quickly. "I'll just take a plate out to the garage with me."

Granny whirled on him and jabbed a pointy little finger into his chest. "Oh no you don't, Royce Briard! I worked hard on this food so you're going to get yourself cleaned up, sit down at a table, and have civilized conversation with this nice young woman here."

"But the truck needs--"

"I'm taking my food back right now if you don't promise me, Royce."

"But Granny--"

"Promise me! Civilized conversation at a table. Or else."

They all paused where they were, Royce pinned by Granny's angry demands and Mary holding the door open letting bugs into her house. For one second Royce's gaze caught on hers and she noticed something in his eyes. She couldn't quite name it, but the closest she could come would be to say he looked... terrified. She couldn't blame him. The thought of peaceful conversation between the two of them was more than a little bit scary.

But not scary enough to overcome the sweet smell of Granny's cooking. Royce took a deep breath and agreed.

"Fine. We'll sit down and talk."

Granny gave them both a smug little smile. "Excellent. I know I can trust you to keep your word. Now, go on inside and I'll head out on my rounds."

Mary tried to delay her, to convince her to stay and chat, but she couldn't be bothered. She bustled back to her car and was out of the driveway before Royce was done muttering again. Mary was stuck with him. They'd both given their word so there was nothing more they could do but have lunch together. Ugh.



Royce grumbled all the way to the utility room where Mary heard him at the big old sink there scrubbing off some of his grime. Mary washed in the kitchen sink and then began putting out the meal. It seemed wrong not to use Aunt Eugenia's good plates and silverware so she ended up with quite a luxurious spread. Granny Snowden sure did know how to pack a picnic basket.

"You can sit over there," Mary said when Royce came into the room.

He didn't argue. Mary took the spot across the table from him and was surprised not to feel entirely uncomfortable. She'd never felt particularly at ease in any kitchen, but Granny's food made this one seem homey and inviting. Royce eyed his plate like a half-starved baboon and Mary admitted that she couldn't blame him--the meatloaf was cut thick and the sandwich bread was homemade.

For a few minutes they ate in stilted silence. It was nice to have him not nagging her about something, or scowling his disapproval every time he walked past the room she'd set up as her studio. Sunlight filtered through the branches of the gnarled dogwood tree outside the window and Mary could hear a cardinal singing in the branches. Usually when Royce was indoors the house was noisy with the sound of power tools and the air was crowded with the dust he stirred up. It was odd to find peace in his presence.

"Nothing beats Granny's meatloaf," he said between bites.

"It's really good," Mary agreed.

He didn't add anything else and after another long silence Mary decided it was her turn to add to the conversation.

"Thanks for fixing the truck. I know that wasn't on your job list for the day."

She realized after she brought it up that maybe she shouldn't have reminded him. But he didn't take the opportunity to complain again. Apparently he really

was going to uphold his promise to Granny and keep the conversation civil.

"It needs to get done," he said. "I'll get onto those other jobs around the house though, don't worry."

"I'm not," she said and realized it was true. "You're making great headway. I'm glad we can take time out for lunch, though."

"Yeah?"

She realized that bit was true, too. "Yeah. It's nice not to eat alone for a change."

"I figured you artist-types usually prefer to be alone."

"It's easier to get work done when I'm alone, but I'm not totally anti-social, you know. I like pleasant conversation over lunch."

"Huh. Then I guess it's a good thing Granny's such a stubborn old coot about certain things. I don't mind conversation, either. In fact... there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

She was instantly wary. "Oh? What is it?"

"You're not going to like it."

That was entirely probable. Still, he was playing nice so she figured she ought to humor him. "Try me."

He put down the last couple bites of his sandwich. "Okay. Here's the thing—I've got a friend who's moving to another state for his job."

"And?"

"He can't take his dog with him so I offered to help out."

"Help out? How?"

"Well... I said I could keep the dog for him. Here."

She waited for him to continue, for the part of the story that she wasn't going

to like. It didn't seem like he had more to say about it, though. He just sat there, watching her over their potato salad.

"It's not some kind of rabid wolf-dog, is it?" she asked.

"No, it's a beagle mix. Cute little guy."

"Sounds darling! So what's the part about this I'm not going to like?"

"Well, I said I'd keep the dog here. Not sure how long it'll take me to find a permanent home for it."

"So he might be here indefinitely?"

"I guess, maybe."

"Okay, but what's the down-side?"

"Um, I kind of thought that would be it. I didn't figure for you to be a dog person."

"I love dogs!"

"You mean you're okay with having a dog here? Indefinitely? I'm not going to just leave him tied up to a tree and ignore him all day, you know."

"Of course not! If you're too busy to keep him with you, he can stay here in the big house with me."

"He'll need walks, and he might shed all over your stuff..."

"He's a dog, that's what they do. I'll get him some squeaky toys, and maybe a nice little doggy bed so he can take naps in the studio while I work if you're too busy to keep an eye on him. Does he have any special dietary needs? I hope the pet store in town carries organic, grain-free dog treats."

Royce was staring at her and she couldn't help but wonder how much bigger his eyes were going to get. Who knew he'd been hiding such pretty baby-blues under his usual squinting scowl?

"You really don't mind me bringing a dog here?" he asked.

"Are you kidding? I always wished I could have a dog when I lived in the city. In fact, I wanted to get a dog when I first got here but I figured you'd just yell at it and get mad when it dug holes in the yard, or something."

"Like you said, that's what dogs do," he said with a shrug. "But that stuff is okay. It's not like a dog is going to take on some stuck-up attitude, or act like it's all artsy-fartsy better than me."

She had to pause a moment while she processed that. "Is that what you think I did? I showed up here with my artsy-fartsy attitude and acted like I'm better than you?"

He cocked his head and considered her. "You know, I kind of did. But maybe I was wrong. You're not afraid to get your hands dirty working on the house, and you like dogs... maybe you're not so bad, after all."

"What do you know about that. And maybe you're not so bad yourself, after all. So when do I get to meet this homeless mongrel?"

"Anytime. We can head out and get him as soon as we're done eating."

"You mean as soon as you're done working on the truck."

He slurped up another mouthful of Granny's sweet-and-sour soup and gave Mary a sly little grin. "You know what? I've been done with that truck for an hour now. I just liked watching you get all huffy and day-dreamy about throwing tools at me."

"You kept me standing out there in your disgusting garage for no reason?"

"Not for no reason," he insisted. "I don't think it's good for you to stay locked up in that studio all day. You forget when it's time to eat, and all those paint fumes can't be good for you."

"They absolutely aren't as bad as the fumes in your garage! How can you stand it?"

He shrugged. "I guess we just put up with what we like."

"I guess so. Luckily, we're both willing to put up with a dog."

"Who would have thought it?"

"Not me," she agreed with an involuntary chuckle. "So what do you think? Is there hope that we might finally be able to put up with each other?"

He finished the last crumbs of his sandwich, pushed back from the table and studied her. She studied him right back and realized that--just maybe--she'd been a little bit wrong about him. He wasn't quite the heartless, mindless brute that she'd assumed him. He liked dogs, he helped out his friends, and the little gleam in his blue eyes made her wonder if there wasn't a sense of humor buried deep inside him, too. She was determined to find out what else she'd missed in Royce Briard.

"Yeah," he confirmed, with a smile. "There might just be hope for us yet."