

The Knot:  
The First Book In The Patchwork Series  
By  
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*“Everybody gets exactly what they deserve,” said Alger.*

*“But everybody dies.”*

*“Everybody.”*

*“I don’t believe that.”*

*“That doesn’t make it less true.”*

*--From Interviews with Alger, Tape 3*

*“You should know your role and shut your mouth.”*

*--The Rock*

## Book I

### The Colonel, The Marble & The Cure

#### Stoker

The back alleys of turn-of-the-century New York's industrial district often proved unsatisfactory as bastions of fun and good feelings. By way of entertainment, they offered little to young boys. Still, they made do, rolling hoops with sticks, throwing rocks at rats. Bottles could be smashed with a pleasant destructive tinkling, but the pleasure was fleeting, as the most intense pleasures are. Even so, sometimes looking through a colored piece of glass was the only way to combat an existence *sans* hue. And while the meatpacking plants and simmering smokestacks of the factories were rich fodder for progressives and pamphleteers, they neither stimulated nor outraged the young Stoker Blatt. On the rare occasion that someone needed him, he was most often found on his hands and knees, crouching on the edge of a circle and squinting at a scattering of marbles.

Stoker lost his favorite marble—a fetching aggie full of red swirls, as if a melted ruby had been injected into its center—to a despicable boy in a sailor suit who appeared from nowhere and demanded to play. Then, rather than offering to play Stoker again to

give him a chance to win it back, the boy kissed the marble, pocketed it, and skipped away, calling over his shoulder: “I’m retiring! I’ll never play again!”

The next day the boy in the sailor-suit appeared at his door.

“Say, Stoker—remember your marble? The one I won from you?”

“Yes!”

“Good. I’d hate for ya to forget! See ya!” He skipped away, laughing.

Stoker passed several tearful hours in his small bedroom, alternating between prayers to God: “Please kill him!”—and the Devil: “Please kill him!” Both parties pursued a depressing silence. He commenced crying afresh.

Through the storm of tears Stoker didn’t notice the stately but grave man posing in his doorway. “Son, you cut that out now.” He lifted the boy’s face with the flat of his blade.

Stoker leaned away from the sword and turned his snotty face to his father, prepared to launch into the tragic account of the lost marble. But he stopped. He always cherished his father’s words, even striving to memorize them. This was not as difficult or impossible a task as it might seem: Colonel Jepson Blatt uttered less than 100 words in a good year, including those mumbled while sleeping. He never had much to say after the South was trounced. But so somber was his manner, barely able to stand under the weight of his medals, that Stoker could not continue. A smile surfaced beneath the corners of the handlebar moustache, and Stoker clutched the leg of his bed, fortifying himself for an onslaught of advice.

The Colonel knelt in front of him and pulled out a fancy, crusty, handkerchief. He pinched Stoker’s nose. “Blow.”

Stoker blew and counted words.

“All right son,” the Colonel said. “Don’t want to know what happened. Can’t be that bad.” He strode to the window, spurs jangling. He folded his arms behind his back. “When the South fell, people thought I’d never be whole again. ‘Jepson’s gon’ kill himself.’ That’s what they said. They cried a heap of tears and drank a sea of liquor over what they thought I felt. They were sure I wouldn’t be able to bear the thought of another day, another minute. Wrong. All of them. Wrong. They didn’t know.”

Stoker sniffed.

“You want the secret to life, boy? A happy life, I mean.” He looked at his son over an epaulet.

“Yes sir. Please.”

“Put your hand out, boy.”

This made Stoker uneasy, as the Colonel was pointing his sword at him. The blade gleamed.

But Colonel Blatt sheathed the sword and dropped a silver coin into Stoker’s palm. “Son, listen.” Stoker folded the coin in his fingers and turned to his father, who whispered: “Pessimism is killing the world. Pessimism is ten kinds of poison, you follow?”

“Yes sir.”

He walked Stoker to the window. The first stars twinkled overhead. “Some men look at the sky, they look up at the stars, and they feel a need to connect the dots. So what do they do? They start drawing lines, looking for patterns, and before long, the sky’s full of bears and dragons and belts and bulls and—well, you follow.”

Stoker looked.

“Now, me,” the Colonel continued: “I think that if you start looking for patterns, you’re going to be disappointed, always and again. You know why I say that? Because I always start what I finish, meaning that when I start connecting the dots, I don’t stop. Then what do you have?”

The Colonel carved the sky with the sword.

“One big mess of scribbles, son. You connect all those dots, all you’ve done is black out the heavens. Because once you start, there’s no sense in stopping until every dot touches every other dot. Not me. I’m not going to get down because I’m not going to start wondering. Doesn’t do nobody any good, this moaning and moping, not when we got all we need right in our own pockets.”

He tapped Stoker’s fist.

“I’m not talking about that coin in your hand. I’m talking about the miracle *behind* the coin. You’ve got the secret there, son. You’ve got the cure. Take a look.”

Stoker opened his hand. The front of the coin displayed a smiling woman, winking from one eye. On the back was an address and a name.

“You know the place, boy?”

He knew it. A mile away, maybe...a dark, squat building by the wharf. Theories abounded as to what transpired inside *The Lonely Sailor*, but Stoker was the only boy he knew who would solve the mystery.

“You’re a man, son. Close enough. But listen! You go down there, you give ‘em that coin, and I better never catch you frowning again! I haven’t met the man who can be pessimistic with a breast in his hand—if there is such a man, I’ll slit his cancerous throat. The *Cure*, boy! If the Good Lord intended for us to be sad, he wouldn’t have—well, you go on and see for yourself. See just what was intended. That coin you got there...” The Colonel whistled. “Good for what ails you!” He stroked his long white beard with one white-gloved hand and winked. “You remember anything I say, you remember this: Get lively boy! That’s an order!”

They never spoke again. The next day a policeman killed the Colonel, who failed to explain, to the officer’s satisfaction, the ornate Confederate sword he was using as an apple skewer. He brandished it in the sun, hoping to impress the officer, who responded by shooting him dead. But the Cure had taken. The Colonel was more right than he would ever know. Even though his funeral was sparsely attended, even though Stoker was alone, and even though he had no prospects and no hope to speak of—he didn’t frown, cry, or toss himself onto or into the red, white, and blue coffin. Not one tear. Rather, those few relatives and friends of the Colonel who attended the service thought him deranged. “Wha’s he smilin’ at?” they whispered, disapproving of the grinning boy standing next to his father’s coffin, jingling a pocketful of change, making kissing lips and whistling while his eyes stared at something they couldn’t see.

He’d never be a sailor, lonely or otherwise, but Stoker became a favorite of the girls out on the wharf. He secured a factory job less than one day after depositing that first coin into that first pink palm, and so he was Cured of the poison of sorrow forever. Or so he thought.

The year had been 1917.

But now, today, someone is walking up the steps of Blatt Manor. Someone intends to knock.

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Nearly a century later, far away, old Stoker smiled as he snoozed on his musty couch. Not because he was happy (even though he was), but because he had not so much as frowned in 85 years—his face had forgotten how.

Asleep, he strolled through a city park. Noisy, nondescript children played in a sandbox. When he wearied, he sat on a bench. A cloud covered the sun as a slight breeze not worth noticing became a roaring gale impossible to ignore. The sky filled with massive butterflies. The wind of their wings grabbed the children. Airborne, they spun and crashed into one another, still giggling. Stoker wrapped his legs around the bench and laid his head on his arms, not moving until the butterfly, bright green and glowing, landed on his wrist.

*By the time you read this*

*You'll be dead.*

Dreams unnerved Stoker; as long as he was dreaming, he was still alive. Not that he wanted to die, exactly. Just that even though man had never spoken truer words than Colonel Jepson Blatt, Stoker's tenth decade had been frequented by a dearth of The Cure. He was ashamed to admit it, but signs of pessimism were seeping into his life.

He opened his eyes, aware of three things: (1) he was still alive; (2) the wind was howling with a force that would have made more sense in the dream; (3) someone was knocking on his door with great purpose and intensity, as if his door were the only one in Patchwork with lamb's blood smeared on the jamb.

“Hold on.”

The TV was on, muted. Stoker pointed the remote at it meaning to push the POWER button. Instead, he pressed MUTE. Onscreen, a man so muscular he looked like a stack of polygons swung a stick into someone's face. The face exploded into crimson mist as Stoker pressed another button, changing the channel. He found the POWER button, but not before hearing the end of his least favorite jingle:

*It's gettin' kinda awesome*

*kinda kinda awesome,*

*it's getting' kinda awesome, in heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeere.....*

“Who is at my door?” he muttered.

*And how far I've fallen*, he thought, looking for his hat, *that someone at the door gets me so excited and panicky*. Nevertheless, he was unaccustomed to entertaining and visitors, other than Lewis. *It's really just not what I do*. Someone more cynical—someone like Lewis—might call this Stoker's sorry justification for having neither friends nor acquaintances. Stoker was adept at convincing himself that his company was simply too stimulating for most people. A carefully-woven cocoon of euphemisms allowed him to go on smiling, despite just about everything in the world.

It was nice.

“I'm coming, coming.” He struggled to strip his voice of excitement. “Don't leave!” He pulled on one ragged slipper and began nodding. Two minutes passed between slippers and the knocker grew more insistent. Stoker awoke for the third or fourth time that day. “Coming, coming!”

“C'mon now!” The voice on the porch was shrill and chirpy. “Open up, sir! It's very important! I've got lots to tell you!”

Stoker shuffled to the door and put an eye to the peephole. The porch was empty, but the fervid knocking reached fever pitch. After the minutest consideration, he opened the door.

Stoker browsed the girl from top to bottom, which didn't take long: she couldn't have been more than 5 feet tall. This loud, curious pygmy wore denim overalls. Unbuttoned straps fell almost to her knees. On her white T-shirt, a sheepdog wearing sunglasses bit into a taco. Inside the taco lay a morose rat. Beneath one of its whiskers were the words: HASTA LA VISTA BABY. The girl's black-rimmed glasses could have doubled as blast doors. Red sneakers protruded from the ragged hems of the overalls. Her hair: two blazing red braids, impossibly thick. She pinched the tip of one between her nose and upper lip.

She let it fall.

A large green duffel bag with a damp-looking bottom sat next to her shoes.

She smiled. Her teeth were dice-huge, dice-white. “Well hey!” She slapped him on the chest with the back of her hand.

Stoker’s thoughts: *Ouch!*

And: *when did those clouds show up?*

She extended the other hand. Stoker took it. She shook and dashed around him into the house. The duffel bag bumped his knees when she passed. Lightning flashed in the distance, an electric fence approaching Patchwork.

Stoker sniffed. His heart began to pound.

The clouds crept closer.

The girl shouted something.

And Stoker Blatt’s mouth almost, almost...not quite...but almost...began to droop.

“I’m sorry, could you repeat that?” he called after the girl, who had shoved past him, run through the kitchen, and climbed up on his armchair in the study, the better to examine the photographs over the mantel. “Where are you?”

“I said I’m...” She trailed off, her voice muffled by the two hallways and three doors that separated them. Stoker caught up with her as she climbed down from his chair. He didn’t-quite-frown at the footprint on the upholstery.

She teleported across the room to him and pumped a hand he hadn’t offered and which he dimly registered as his own. “I’m so happy to finally meet you!” Her eyes were gigantic and watery behind the lenses, an odd mix of baby-blue, red, and white: Aqua-Fresh eyes. “I thought you’d be older, but you’re not, are you!”

“I—”

She backhanded his chest with a fist as dense as dark matter. “No you’re not! And don’t say you are!” She shook her head. A braid stung his hip. “Cause you ain’t!” She threw back her head and laughed.

*She sounds like a Gatling gun.*

Stoker’s fingers worked his temples. “Who are you? Do I—Who are you?”

She rocked back and forth. “My name is Ky—*Oh man!* Is that you? It *is* you!” Mouth agape, she stared as if he were the cure for cancer, hunger, and boredom.

Stoker pointed at himself and took a step backwards.

“Well holy *Hell!* How can you—how you gonna go so far down under the water—and who’s that? That’s not you is it? It *is!*” She clapped her hands.

The picture of him scuba diving in the Caribbean usually cheered him up. The water had been very blue and the waiters generous. He had met a kind, optimistic working girl in the bar. They had scheduled a meeting for that night, and yes, the expectant and underwater Stoker had been nothing but smiles.

“Yes. That’s me.”

“Oh man oh man I *knew* it! Oh, I could never go divin’! Scuba divin’, I mean! The other kind of divin’ don’t look so scary—I could probably even dive out of the sky! But down so deep, oh I just couldn’t!” She came at him and pounded his shoulders as if he were the world’s tallest, oldest nail.

Stoker had a million questions, but the only one he heard himself ask was:

“Why?”

“Oh, you know,” she said, “I’d be way too scared of gettin’ molested! Nah. No thank *you!*” She shook her head in furious negation and then narrowed her eyes at him, as if he himself were entertaining thoughts of molesting her.

“Molested by who? A fish? Doesn’t sound too likely. Or dangerous. I don’t know. Maybe if it was a swordfish.”

She screamed laughter in his face, the force of which knocked his powder-blue fedora back onto his head. Her laughter was not contagious, but in the rank cloud of her breath Stoker wondered if it might be infectious. He rubbed his aching mouth, which was still threatening to frown.

“No, silly! The instructor! Man wasn’t made to get in the water, did you know that?”

“I—”

“Well now you know—can’t move too fast in the water, and that’s the first sign. We aren’t—people, I mean—supposed to be in there, no sir. And all it takes is one perverted dive instructor to say...” She lowered her voice, tucking her chin into her chest

and speaking as a perverted diving instructor might: “Hey there sweet stuff. What say you and me go on over by that coral formation. I’ll give you the royal treatment. The grand tour.” She shook her head again and Stoker was forced to close his eyes against the headache that monitoring her rapid movements was inducing. “Nah. You’re only a victim if you let yourself be victimized, and that’s that, so no thanks to that pervert and his grand tour! No *thank* you! I wouldn’t be able to get away from him unless I wanted the Bends! *You* want the Bends? Me neither and no thanks—I guess I can molest myself!” She chewed her lower lip and sighed. “Sure is a nice picture though.”

*Yes and no* thought Stoker.

“But you knew that, and if you didn’t, well now you can say I told you so. I—”

“It *is* a nice picture, but, I’m sorry—who are you? Who told me so? What are you doing here?”

“Huh. Who’s that?” She ran to another wall and pulled down a black and white photograph of two small boys in knickers and sailor hats, their arms draped around each other’s shoulders. “Who are these little boys? They look just like you!”

“They should,” said Stoker, taking the picture from her. “That’s me there.” He tapped the boy on the left.

She smiled. “Adorable. And who’s that?”

“Just a friend. Now, I’m serious: who are you?”

“I’m Kylie Jo Monolo, and don’t you gimme that face, grumpy. Nobody’s pullin’ on your pubes. It’s gloomy enough *outside*. And I ain’t late or nothin’. And where the hell is your damn kitchen, while we’re jabberin’. You got any licorice?”

“No. Late? For what?”

“I don’t know. You sure you don’t got any licorice?” She stretched and yawned.

“What do you want?”

“Oh, your daughter says hi.”

“My daughter.”

“Yep. Your daughter.”

“Which one?”

Kylie Jo Monolo took a deep breath. Stoker grabbed the brim of his hat.

“How many you got, dum-dum?”

“Was it Lisa?”

“You don’t *have* a daughter named Lisa. Why’re you tryin’ to trick me? What’re you playin’ at?” She wheeled and began to run about the room like a manic spaniel. She opened drawers and peered inside. She ran her fingers along the top of the mantel and took down and inspected knick-knacks and bric-a-brac. Stoker’s swiveling neck shrieked, but he let her go until she lifted the lid of the piano.

“No! That’s enough!”

Kylie Jo skidded to a stop. Her face looked so anguished that Stoker forgot about the manner of her arrival, her claims to know his daughter, and her all-around aura of categorical insanity. “Well, why have a piano then, Mr. *Big Shot*?”

“How do you know my daughter?”

“Oh, she’s a good friend of mine. Met her down in Seattle a while ago, after the carnival and before the derby and before the compound.”

“The derby?”

“Yeah! She was skatin’ in the roller derby! You ever watch roller derby? Lord, they got some great stories. I mean it’s all a drama, you know, like pro wrestlin’. In fact, your girl Janezilla was all set to mix it up with a big mean dyke named Queen Kong at the end of the season. Badass match. *Man* we had some *times*! Sorry to be the one to tell you, Mr. Blatt, but your little girl can drink any ten lumberjacks under the table! Whew!”

Stoker was silent.

Lightning flashed.

“You’re probably wonderin’ why she never called,” said Kylie Jo. “Truth was—is—she didn’t think roller-derbyin’ was real respectable, not for a woman of her age. She always talked nice about you though. ‘My father’s one slick prick,’ she’d say. Anyway, she met Mother Rutabaga or whatever her name was and off they went to that compound. But don’t you worry! She sends me a postcard now and then, says she’s juuuust fine.”

Stoker grieved for ten minutes ago. “Janezilla?”

Kylie Jo raised one foot and held it before her face, gripping her ankle with both hands. “I do yoga. Janie said I could live with you for a while,” she said, meeting Stoker’s eyes above the toe of her shoe. “Janie thought we’d get along great for a while—a *while*, don’t make that face!—just ‘till I can get some work and get out of your hair.”

Stoker opened his mouth to—to what? He wasn't sure, so he closed it again and scratched his head under his hat.

The wind raked the eaves of the house, which creaked like Stoker's neck. The screen door banged against its frame.

“Oh, I can do stuff for you,” said Kylie Jo. “Some cleanin', some cookin', some of this and some of that...I can dust and I can rub your feet maybe. I'm great at talkin', fine art of conversation—I'm pretty much a dazzler all around, and you gotta be kinda lonely in here. It's so dark!”

“Anything else you can do?” Stoker wasn't thinking of anything in particular, but his tongue and mind had utterly failed him.

She laughed and wagged a finger at him. “Mmm-mm-mm-mm...Janezilla *said* her daddy was spicy. Close your mouth, no use protesting! I know the effect I have on you men!” She performed a neat pirouette; the dangling straps of her overalls upset a ceramic bowl on a nearby shelf. Stoker leaned back to avoid her braids. “We'll see about that. Never say never, that's always what I say, but for now, you just think on some odd jobs, though me and you would be pretty odd and that's a fact—make me a list or whatever. Show me to my room, give me tonight to sleep and I'll be at your *disposal!*” Finally she was still. She laced her fingers and cracked her knuckles. “What do you say? Just for a little while?”

*No.*

“Well, I guess I could use some help with the place. It *is* a little dark.”

“Well *all right!*” she shouted, leaping and wrapping her legs around his waist. They toppled against the wall, dislodging a dusty mirror. Her left breast came to rest against Stoker's palm. He saw himself smiling in a shard of the mirror that had lodged in the carpet.

The sun dove behind a cloud.

Stoker extricated himself, collected his breath, and checked for broken bones in the suddenly dark room.

“Whew!” said Kylie Jo. “Wasn't that fun! Where's my room? Oh, and first, where do I put my fish? Gonna be the death of me.” She hoisted a bowl from her bag. A dazed-looking goldfish with a red spot on its head bobbed in five inches of murk.

“This is Julian,” said Kylie Jo. “Say *hello*, Julian. Say it! His friends call him Pierre.”

“Hello, Julian,” said Stoker.

“No! *Pierre*, knucklehead! ‘Cause of the red spot. It’s his own little beret! Do you know how to say fish in French?”

“No. Do you?”

“Nah. I wish I did. Maybe someday. You got the Internet?”

Stoker, still breathless, shook his head, pointed up the stairs, and jerked his thumb to the left. With a smile that nearly ripped her head in two, Kylie Jo grabbed her bag and took the steps three at a time, leaving Stoker and Pierre/Julian to stare at each other.

Kylie Jo disappeared into the second room on the left and closed the door. She opened the door and stuck her head back into the hall. “Hey you!”

“Yes?”

“Get ready for a dinner that’s gonna beat your face in!”

Stoker was very still. The wind was very loud.

“I usually go for a walk in the afternoon,” he said.

“Well *la-dee-da!* Just kidding! Don’t get blown away!”

“All right. I won’t. See you in a bit. Make yourself at home. We’ll talk later.”

He bent and picked his hat up. He shook out bits of the mirror. He put on the hat and took a step towards Patchwork, tacking into the wind.

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Far away on a hilltop, a singing frog finished his song...or so he thought. When he opened his eyes, the air swarmed with dark, wriggling bodies.

“Oh. Hey,” he said.