

Context: *John Sturgess, test pilot of the space plane Celeste Three, hit the bottle when he lost his wife to cancer. When he returned to duty he was sidelined, then discovered that he was to be fired. He hit the bottle again. Julie Fallon is a Private Investigator hired by Greg Topozian to find out if Sturgess would be prepared to fly the plane again. She has allowed herself to be picked up by Sturgess in a bar.*

An hour and several drinks later for Sturgess, Julie had not even finished her second beer. In that time Sturgess had talked freely and said plenty. He put up a hand and excused himself.

“Gotta go to the john,” he slurred, easing himself gingerly off his stool. He weaved his way unsteadily past the pool tables.

The bartender came over to Julie. “You owe me twenty bucks. And the bar tab, unless you want another drink.”

She opened her purse, removed a fifty-dollar bill and handed it to him.

“Keep the change; I think we’ve both had enough.”

He grinned. “Glad to be of service, anytime.”

A few minutes later John Sturgess returned. Julie slipped off her stool and stood up. She took his arm. “Come on, John, I’ll take you home.”

He started to protest. “My car’s outside, I...”

“Gimme the keys and I’ll drive.”

He stopped and appeared to be thinking about it. “What – what about *your* car?”

“I used a cab. I’ll call one to take me back to my hotel, after I get you home.”

Sturgess grinned crookedly. “OK, sounds good.” He took out his keys and handed them to her. They climbed into his car and Julie put the key into the ignition.

“Which way?”

Sturgess waved a hand languidly. “Straight on, then make a right at the lights. Keep going, I’ll tell you when to turn.”

A minute later his head dropped and he slumped in his seat. Julie kept going, she did not need his directions.

Julie struggled to get Sturgess, a dead weight, out of the car and into the house. He was awake enough to find his front door key and his bedroom. Julie tipped him onto the bed where he lay spread-eagled and immediately began snoring. She removed his anorak, trousers and shoes. She looked at him. Even blind drunk he was so good looking, she

thought, in a craggy sort of way. Then she made her way to the kitchen, where she took out her cell phone to make a call. Moments later in his apartment in New York, her boss Buff Cody answered.

“Yes, Julie, where are you?”

“In his house.”

“His house? Jeez, you’re a fast worker. What you got?”

“Plenty.”

“OK, go ahead.”

“Not now. I’ll make some notes and call you tomorrow.”

“You going back to the hotel?”

“No, I’ll stay here tonight. It’s getting interesting and he’ll trust me more if I’m still here to make him breakfast. My flight’s in the afternoon.”

“Good girl, sleep well.” He chuckled. “On your own.”

“Up yours, Cody.” Julie ended the call, put her mobile back into her purse and went to the fridge to see if it contained anything edible.

Next morning Julie returned to the kitchen, but she needed to make her call to Cody before thinking about breakfast. She glanced at her watch, it would be about mid-day in New York.

“Where the hell you been? I been waiting hours,” he snapped.

“And good morning to you, too, Cody.”

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry, I was worried.”

“Why don’t I believe that? We can talk now, he’s still asleep.”

The conversation went on for fifteen minutes, with Julie doing most of the talking.

“Good stuff, Julie. I’m gonna call the client now, could be he’ll want to meet the guy.”

“What do you want me to do?”

There was a pause. “Go home, I’ll get back to you later.”

Julie looked around and found the coffee pot, mugs and milk. “Homogenized,” she sniffed disparagingly. It would have to do. In the fridge she found a carton of eggs, butter and some tired lettuce that was useless for any kind of breakfast. She found a box of cereal in one of the cupboards and was looking for the crockery when a bleary John Sturgess

shuffled in. He was wearing an orange bathrobe, socks that hadn't been taken off the previous night, and a weary expression. His hair was tousled like a schoolboy's. Julie grinned.

"Morning, John," she said brightly. "And what gets you up at the crack of ten o'clock?"

He slumped into a chair, put his head in his hands and groaned. "Uhhhh."

"Coffee coming up. What you want for breakfast? I found eggs and cereal. No toast, unless you tell me where you hide the bread."

"Coffee." He moaned again. "I feel like shit."

Julie put a hand on her hip and made a happy face. "Sorry, I'm fresh out of shit, the eating kind, I mean."

Sturgess frowned and sat up straight. "Say, what the hell you doing here, anyway?"

"You want me to go?"

He was massaging his forehead with one hand. He raised the other. "No. No, I didn't mean that."

"Then what did you mean, John?"

"Christ, I dunno, gimme a break. Oh, my head."

Julie poured coffee into a mug. "No milk, black is what you need right now." She handed him the mug. He reached for it and his robe came open.

She grinned again. "Nice view."

He put the mug down, pulled the robe together quickly and tightened its belt.

"And another thing. What you done with my pants?"

"Hung'em up with your coat. Before you ask, I slept in the spare room and I didn't take advantage of you last night."

He managed a smile. "You brought me home. Thanks...hell, I can't even remember your name. I guess you think I'm a real horse's ass."

"Uh-huh. It's Julie. Julie Fallon."

"Julie, yeah. Thanks, Julie."

"My pleasure." She grinned. "Specially the last part."

He looked at her and shook his head slowly. "You know, you're something else."

"I know. Now, you want some breakfast? It'll have to be quick, I need to call a cab."

"You're going?" He seemed disappointed.

"I have to get my stuff and check out of the hotel. Then straight to the airport."

“Will you be coming back?”

“Maybe. Depends on my client.”

She saw his face fall and immediately felt sorry for him. “OK, give me your number; I’ll call you if I do.”

* * * * *

Chris Calder

Celeste Three is Missing