



*String  
Theory*

*a short story*

*Micki  
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# STRING THEORY

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Honest.

The truest expression of a people is in its dances and its music.... Bodies never lie.

— AGNES DE MILLE (1905-1993) AMERICAN  
DANCER AND CHOREOGRAPHER

# STRING THEORY



I've done bad things in my life. Not serial killer bad, but my entry into heaven is by no means guaranteed. My father died last night. Murdered.

For the record, I had nothing to do with it.

This morning, a trio of officers arrived on my doorstep. One offered her condolences; one asked if I would mind speaking to a detective at the station; and the last one remained silent, his thoughtful gaze darting across the detritus of my apartment, dallying on the knives in my butcher block, perusing the titles on my bookshelves, lingering on my harp as if bemused.

The second officer cleared his throat and offered me a ride.

I glanced at the clock, noting the time. "I was just on my way to my mother's."

He held open the door. "It's important."



Now, the hum of the air conditioner annoys me as I strain to hear beyond it. I've been in the interview room for nearly an hour. Initially, I paced the confines. Four steps of grimy linoleum separate

the door from the dingy rear wall. Six steps mark the width. A plain table divides the room with two chairs in opposition.

The door is unlocked. I know because I tested it, nearly hitting an officer escorting a prisoner as they marched down the crowded hallway. I had considered leaving, but my mother would think this is more important than my visit to her. She respects the law.

Peering through the square window, I deconstruct the cacophony just beyond the door, matching sound to action. When I tire of the spectacle, I resume pacing.

Each step, I think of my father. I'd always disappointed the man. Turns out we had an uncanny knack for falling for the same girl, and they were nothing like mom. But I was— small breasted, dark haired, cerebral. Mom had one other thing I lacked. Money. Years ago, that had been enough for my father, then I came along, a girl-child who reminded him of all the things he'd given up.

Mom stuck it out. She ignored the subtle signs of my father's philandering and dove deeper into her own passions. She earned a law degree, but never practiced.

Her money and my talent opened doors, and I marked time at Juilliard. I play the harp. Good enough that I now sit first chair five nights a week on Broadway, cloaked in black and providing nuance in quiet measure.

I'm facing the rear wall when I hear the snick of the door handle. A female detective stands momentarily silhouetted in the doorway. She is a study of blues—tailored suit, silky blouse, inquisitive eyes, all accessorized by the officer in navy standing at her shoulder.

"Molly Capriccioso?" She thrusts her hand forward. "I'm Detective Ward."

I shake her hand. Her grip is confident without trying to prove dominance like so many men's handshakes. The weight of her scrutiny immobilizes me as she takes my measure. She dismisses her partner and I feel like I just aced an unexpected test.

"Thank you for coming to the station," she says.

Her voice is an arresting combination of sultry efficiency. I flush,

look down. She turns slightly, enough to display athletic calves, sculpted ankles. The heel of her right pump is scuffed, as if she frequently drives in stop-and-go traffic.

The detective indicates a chair and waits for me to settle into it before she sits. She places a file in front of her, but doesn't open it. Her blouse gapes where it stretches across her breasts, revealing a flash of midnight satin against pale skin. Father would approve.

"I'm very sorry for your loss," Detective Ward says.

It is a meaningless nicety. A social convention. Expected, yet I have no response. She waits for me to speak. Polite. Finally, I nod.

"I want to reiterate that you are not under arrest. I'm just trying to understand what happened last night. Your insight could be helpful to the investigation of your father's murder."

"I'm not sure how. We weren't close."

Her eyebrows draw together in a *mélange* of concern and encouragement. "What can you tell me about him?"

I take a deep breath, inhale a hint of her perfume, taste it before I speak. "My father was polarizing." The scent reduces me to cliché. "You either loved him or hated him."

She places her pen atop the file. "And you?"

"Both at one time or another—which was exhausting. Apathy is a far more sustainable emotion when dealing with my father."

"Your aunt said you threatened to kill him."

Aunt Lila. My father's sister. She thinks I'm an aberration. "That was during my hate phase."

"And just how were you planning to pull that off?"

Her perfume sours in my mouth. "There's a difference between threatening to kill and killing."

"Do you often make idle threats, Ms. Capriccioso?"

"I'd come home early from recital—"

She tapped her pen against the file. "Recital?"

"A musical performance, detective. I'm a musician. Or did that not make it into your file?" Even so many years later, the mere thought of this incident sets me on edge.

“And what happened after the recital that prompted you to threaten your father?”

“I found him in bed with my girlfriend.” The image used to haunt me. “Admittedly it wasn’t my best moment.”

“What happened?”

“I’m fairly certain you already know the details.”

She flips through her papers until she locates the proper page and scans the report. “I’m curious.” She sets the file down and cocks her head to the side. “How did an itty-bitty thing like you chase a six foot two naked man into the street?”

“I was motivated.”

The corners of her mouth quiver, then it’s all business again. “Were you able to patch things up with your girlfriend?”

“Allegra decided she liked men more than women.”

Her pen beats a rapid staccato against the metal table. “That must have made you angry.”

I think back to that date, pick the scab from the wound that never really healed. “Look, Allegra was like her name. Quick and lively. Loving her was like living an opera. Full of drama and louder than it needed to be.”

For a moment, only the air conditioner fills the silence.

“Did your mother know about your father’s affair?” the detective asks.

It seems almost a sacrilege to talk about my mother here, a betrayal of sorts that I don’t want to share. I sift through my words. Chose them carefully. “I suspect she knew about them all. This wasn’t the first time my dad stepped out on my mom. It just happened to be the only time he got to cheat on both his wife and daughter at the same time.”

In the hallway, a man passes by the interrogation room window, one of the many people in this busy place. Like a person in the subway, he strikes me as one note in a symphony of anonymity.

“Do you own a gun, Ms. Capriccioso?”

Her question derails my reverie. “Do you ever ask a question you don’t already know the answer to?”

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She smiles. It seems genuine, wide and toothy. “Not very often.”

“I’m sure the registration paperwork is in your little dossier. I’ve never been convicted of a crime. I believe I’m well within my rights.”

She removes a legal pad from the file, touches the tip of her pen to the top page. “Where were you last night?”

There is a rhythm to her questions, a variation on her themes that suggest a song. My guilt is her refrain.

“With my mother.”

“Your mother is very ill.”

“Yes.”

“You were close.”

I taste my anger. “We *are* close. She isn’t gone yet.”

“She’s in hospice.”

My throat tightens. “Is there a question there?”

“No.” Her voice softens. “I went through something similar. I know how hard it is to lose someone close.”

I search her eyes to see if she’s playing me, but she stares back, unflinching.

“Your parents stayed married?” she asks.

“It’s complicated. My mother is Catholic.”

“But your father lived alone.”

I shrug. “Some couples have separate beds. My parents chose different homes. They’ve lived apart for a couple of years, now.”

Her eyes still watch me. “Do you blame your father for your mother’s illness?”

I take my time answering. “How long have you been a detective?”

“This isn’t about me.”

“How long?” I prod.

She leans back, crosses her arms, answers, “Seven years.”

I lean forward and claim the space she just vacated. “That’s how long my mother has been ill.” I drill her with my eyes. “Seven years, Detective. Plenty of time to assign blame. My father for infecting her, my mother for loving him despite everything. The doctors for

not curing her. Hell, I even blamed God for letting it happen. Most of all, I blame myself. I introduced Allegra to my father.”

“I don’t see the connection.”

I shrug. “Allegra was HIV positive. She and I took precautions. My father did not. So yes, Detective. I do blame my father for infecting my mother.”

Her brows arch, forming tracery above the windows of her eyes. “All the more reason to be angry.”

“Why don’t you just come out and ask me if I killed my father?”

“Did you?”

“No.”

She rips her notes from the pad and pushes it towards me. Very deliberately, she positions her pen atop the blank sheet. “You’ll feel better.”

She’s wrong.

I push back from the table. The chair scrapes loudly against the linoleum floor. “Am I free to go?”

Detective Ward remains seated. “You haven’t asked how your father died.”

“You questioned me about a gun, Detective. Isn’t that what you guys call a clue?”

Her shoulders rise and fall in a you-got-me-there motion. “You don’t seem very broken up about it.”

“My father’s been dead to me for years. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to be with my mother.”

I step toward the door.

Detective Ward stands and blocks my path, her hand on the knob. “He was strangled. More precisely, he was garroted. You have a harp, do you not?”

“What are you implying?”

“And not just one,” she says.

“Check your goddamn file. I’ve got two. If you need verification, ask the officers you sent to my apartment to round me up.”

“Talk to me about the strings.”

“It’s a stringed instrument, Detective. It’s got several.”

Impatience flits across her face, but disappears so quickly I don't know if I imagined it. "What can you tell me about their composition? What are they made of?"

"I use Concedo strings. Does that mean anything to you?" I demand. "No? They're gut. But they've got extra layers of varnish on them which increases their opacity."

"So, they lack transparency?"

"I own a Lyon and Healy concert grand pedal harp. I play in an orchestra. In a pit, Detective. It's dark. White strings are easier to see."

Her index finger taps against the handle as she thinks. "And the other harp?"

"It's a Thormahlen. A folk harp, strung with lever-gut. The lower octave strings are steel core wrapped with silver-plated copper."

"What about nylon? And before you answer, you should know I have detectives executing a search warrant at your apartment, right now."

I nearly laugh. "If that's your murder weapon, you need to look for a new suspect."

"And why is that?"

"I earned my Masters of Music from Juilliard. I've performed in every major concert hall across the world. Nylon is for amateurs. It's cheap. It would be like asking Louis Armstrong to play the kazoo. Sure, it's still music, but you don't see many professionals with kazoos."

I place my hand over hers and push down on the slash of metal to open the door. In the hallway, I stop, turn back to Detective Ward. "Maybe you should speak to Allegra. She plays guitar."

"So?"

"So? Allegra's the beneficiary to my father's estate. The house. Insurance. Whole damn kit and caboodle."

"They're still together after all these years?"

"Did you forget to put that in your folder?" I can't resist poking

her. “While you’re making notes, you might want to jot down that her guitar had nylon strings. Drove me crazy.”

Two pink spots grow on her cheeks. “How does an estranged daughter know so much about her father’s affairs?”

“My mother’s our family’s attorney. She drew up the papers. Now either arrest me, or get out of my way.”



THE HEAT BLASTS my face as I enter my mother’s apartment. It amplifies the scent of inevitability that settles into my pores. I drop my bag by the hospital bed set up in the living room. The hospice nurse gathers her things and promises to return in the morning.

I hold Mama’s hand. It’s as light as a bird and I feel as if I am the tether that grounds her to this earth. My shoulders sag. I am not ready to let go.

Her hand tightens, more twitch than squeeze. “I was getting worried.”

“Nothing to worry about, Mama. I’m here now.”

“A daughter shouldn’t have to see her mother die.”

“Shh. No one’s going to die. Not today.” I say, but I’m not certain.

A coughing fit wracks her frail body and I adjust the pillow behind her.

“Did you stop for a new string?” Her voice is breathy.

My response clogs my throat.

She doesn’t notice and continues speaking. “I know my harp isn’t as grand as yours, but would you play something for me?”

I cradle Mama’s lap harp. It only takes a moment to thread the new string through the soundboard and wind it around the pin. I run a glissando, my fingers sliding rapidly between the ascending notes.

The pain on Mama’s face eases. “You can make even nylon sound beautiful. Did the detective know about the different kinds of strings?”

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“I told her. She took good notes.”

I pluck the new string. Slightly flat. I make a minute adjustment and it reverberates with renewed life.

“And the insurance policy for Allegra?” Mama asks.

“That took the detective by surprise,” I say.

She nods and closes her eyes. “Your father never did pay attention to the important stuff.”

I choose her favorite piece. The sound is not true, but nylon never is. My mother quiets and I continue to play until my fingers cramp. Finally, I play a requiem.

My father died last night. The record reflects I had nothing to do with it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**M.E. BROWNING** served twenty-two years in law enforcement and retired as a captain before turning to a life of crime fiction. Writing as Micki Browning, she penned the Agatha-nominated and award-winning Mer Cavallo mysteries, and her short stories and nonfiction have appeared in anthologies, mystery and diving magazines, and textbooks. As M.E. Browning, her first Jo Wyatt mystery, *Shadow Ridge*, won the Colorado Book Award for Mystery and earned the silver medal in the Popular Fiction Category of the Florida Book Award. *Mercy Creek* continues Jo's adventures.

Micki is a member of Mystery Writers of America, International Thriller Writers, and Sisters in Crime—where she served as a former president of the Guppy Chapter. A professional divemaster, she resides in Florida with her partner in crime and a vast array of scuba equipment she uses for “research.”

*To learn more about Micki, visit her website—and while you're there, join her newsletter for the most up-to-date info about events, new releases, and behind-the-scenes-peeks!*

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