





## **ENGINE 15**

by Norsebard

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## **CHAPTER 1**

Even a fairly raucous crowd - consisting of hundreds of wild, uninhibited youths celebrating the first Saturday evening of the Spring Break by dancing on the sidewalk while waiting to be let into a night club - couldn't compete with the thunderous roar from the exhaust of Kristy Newbourne's Harley-Davidson as she turned onto Nineteenth Street and raced up the busy four-lane road to get to her fire station.

Turning right into the open gate, she came to an abrupt stop in the bay allotted to her and quickly took off her helmet, brushing her white-blond crew cut to get it to stand up properly.

Leering left and right, she drew a sigh of relief when she couldn't see the old man anywhere. After putting her helmet on the right handlebar, she strutted across the smooth floor of the fire station headed for the metal staircase to get to the crew quarters on the first floor, all the while adjusting her red polo shirt so it would sit right over her impressive biceps.

As she walked past an office located at the ground level, the door opened and the old man himself, Fire Chief George Boone stepped into the doorway and put his hands on his hips.

Cringing inside, Kristy slowed down and made her way over to the imposing - yet handsome - black man who dwarfed her own five-foot-eleven-and-a-half frame. "Hey, Chief. Uh... sorry I'm late," she said, smiling apologetically.

"Newbourne, you've been here for a week now," the Chief said in a deep, smooth voice.

"Uh, yes."

"And you've been late to your watch three times... no, make that four times. If you want to continue working here, I strongly suggest that you learn the time!"

"Yes, Chief. I had trouble starting my hog."

"Mmmm. Your muffler is broken as well," George Boone said and put his hand on the doorknob, preparing to go back inside.

Looking back at her motorcycle, Kristy zeroed in on the trick exhaust and chuckled on the inside. "Uh, no, it's actually supposed to sound like that, Chief."

The Chief's only answer was a raised eyebrow and a throaty grunt before he closed the office door behind him.

Sighing, Kristy pulled out in the unbuttoned top of her polo shirt and rolled her eyes. "Don't mess this up, firebug. Recommendations on glossy paper don't mean shit if you mess things up!" she mumbled quietly to herself, poking an index finger into her washboard abs.

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A brief while later, Kristy opened the door to the upstairs crew quarters and slipped behind the makeshift curtains to step out of her street clothes to prepare for her twelve-hour watch - the station house was old so there wasn't any space for rooms dedicated to the female personnel.

Once she had changed into a fireproof undershirt and a pair of boxers, she checked that the leather string around her neck holding her St. Florian medal and her lucky dime was still in one piece. After kissing the medal, she tucked it below the undershirt, put on her bunker pants and her work boots and donned a completely shapeless Fire Department wrap-around jogging jacket to prevent her fellow firefighters from whistling wolf calls at her like they had done the first few days when she had walked around in her undershirt without giving it a second thought.

As she stepped out into the central area of the crew quarters, she went over to the coffee machine to fix herself a mug to get her watch off to a good start. When another curtain fluttered aside to reveal the twenty-eight year old Catherine McCall, the only other woman working at the Two-One, Kristy offered her a quick wave and a crooked smile. "Hey, Catherine."

"Hey, Kristy. You can't get any cream today. We're out," Catherine said and pointed at the small metal jug.

"Shit," Kristy said and shook the empty container to see for herself.

"Yeah. I'll get some for tomorrow. Anyway... Geez, the boys are goin' at it today. There's so much testosterone floatin' around in here that a girl could get pregnant from just breathin'," Catherine said and filled a mug with a healthy amount of coffee.

"I'll remember to hold my breath, then," Kristy said with a chuckle, putting two sugar cubes into her mug. "Have you seen any action today?"

Turning around, Catherine leaned against the small table and took a sip of her coffee. "Boy, did we ever! We've had three false alarms already. It's those damn Spring Breakers, ya know. They're always messin' with the sensors and stuff."

"Mmmm."

"I don't think we're done tonight, either. It's a full moon. Once dusk falls in an hour or so, watch out."

"Mmmm!"

"I... I don't know," Catherine said and put down her mug. "I've got a bad feelin' in my bones. I know it's just silly talk, but we're due a big one."

"I know," Kristy said and took several deep gulps from her mug.

"Well, if you do go out... stay safe, yeah?" Catherine said and hesitantly put a featherlight touch on Kristy's elbow.

Looking at Catherine's wiry hand resting on the red jogging suit made Kristy think of the wonderful week she had spent with her girlfriend Terri. "Always, Catherine," she said and patted her co-worker's hand in a motherly, reassuring fashion so no one would get a wrong impression of their interaction - Catherine included.

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The inevitable call came at twenty-three minutes past ten PM. Before the shrill electronic tones had fully left the loudspeakers, Kristy had jumped out of her bunk and had donned most of her gear.

*'Confirmed structure fire at one-seven-seven-two Raphael Street. Six-story brownstone. Top four floors alight,'* the female dispatcher said over the speakers, repeating it almost as soon as she had said it.

"Damn that full moon!" Kristy said out loud as she wrapped herself in the heavy bunker coat. Quickly checking that her medal was safe and sound and ready for action, she donned her indescribably filthy helmet - that had a small photo of Terri stuck into the sweatband on the inside - and tightened the chin strap hard.

When Kristy noticed Catherine, who was standing well off to a side so she wouldn't disturb the meticulous, well-drilled procedure, she sent her a winning smile and a quick "Catch ya later, buddy!" before she picked up and put on the thick gloves and raced for the fire pole that would take her and her crew mates down to the vehicles.

All in all, it had taken her twenty seconds to get fully dressed and literally jump into the fray.

Once down at ground level, she quickly grabbed radio number three from the rack and climbed up into the crew cab of Engine Fifteen where she sat down on what had become her customary spot, the rearward facing jump-seat.

The Fire Chief's Durango was the first of the five vehicles to leave the bay, soon followed by the three large Engines and finally the Ladder truck

While the red convoy was gaining speed up Nineteenth Street to get to the intersection that would take it closer to Raphael Street, Kristy took a moment to look at the four men she was

sharing Engine Fifteen with - Paul Kerwin, the freckled rookie who looked like a librarian and who had a squeaky clean suit and helmet; Ricky 'Pretty Boy' Wyatt, her faithful hands-on partner who was sitting opposite her on the bench seat; Domingo Rojas Lopez, a quiet, unassuming man who would always bleed his crew mates dry when playing poker, and finally the burly Sergeant Donald 'Paddy' O'Herlihy, senior firefighter of the team and a living stereotype of the jovial, loud Irish-American, even down to the fluorescent green Shamrock-sticker on his helmet.

The sirens blared loudly as the convoy carved its way through the busy streets with most cars giving way to them, though not all. Through the small windows at the front of the crew cab, they were soon able to see an unmistakable orange sheen in the darkness of the evening that confirmed that they were indeed going to be busy for the foreseeable future.

Turning back around, Kristy grunted and made sure her chin strap was tightened and that her gloves were on just right. After she had checked them for the umpteenth time, she happened to look up and catch a glimpse of a rather cheeky grin on Ricky's face.

"Awww, you nervous, Firebug?" he said, grinning at Kristy.

"Naw, just itchin' for a good workout, Pretty Boy. You?"

"Me, nervous? Hell, no. I'm hoping there'll be plenty of hot Spring Breaker-babes who'll swoon at the sight of a big, strong fire jock like me. Yeah, I may catch me some tonight," Ricky said and began to polish his visor in a fairly suggestive manner.

"Uh-huh?" Kristy said, not exactly bowled over by Ricky's manliness. In the week they had worked together, she had learned that he was a consummate professional who knew exactly what he was doing, even if his juvenile bluster occasionally made him hard to like - but beyond that, Kristy felt completely safe trusting Pretty Boy with her life, and she knew the feeling was mutual.

As the fire team turned onto Raphael Street, they began to slow down almost at once.

Leaning forward, Donald O'Herlihy held out his gloved fist and began to speak the age-old prayer: "Hail Mary... our Lady of victory, pray for us." As tradition dictated, the prayer ended with the five firefighters thumping their fists against each other's to teach the looming fire demons that they were one, strong unit.

The moment the truck came to a full stop, Kristy opened the door she was sitting next to and jumped down onto the street.

As always, the fire site turned into a confusing mess of activity within a few seconds of the arrival of the trucks with firefighters running around seemingly at random, but in reality, every man and woman was following a very detailed plan where they laid out the hoses and attached them to the available fire hydrants.

Chief Boone kept a stern eye on the proceedings while staying in radio contact with his units. The hand-held radio was constantly squawking muffled orders issued by the three team leaders, and he soon understood that the building had been reported as being derelict and empty of squatters in the primary search.

Looking up at the top four floors that were well alight, he began to chew on his lips when he saw the magnitude of the fire and the direction in which the gentle breeze was forcing the massive amount of embers that billowed up from the gaping holes in the roof - directly up the street and into the path of two full rows of seven- and eight-story buildings.

"Damn," he growled, pressing the button on the radio. "All units, this is Chief Boone. The building is empty so our number one objective will be to protect the other residential properties from the embers. Inform your crews. Chief Boone out."

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'*Inform your crews. Chief Boone out,*' the Chief's voice said over the radio that 'Paddy' O'Herlihy held close to his ear to hear over the roaring fire despite the fact that the Fire Chief was standing only twenty yards away from him. "O'Herlihy copy," he said and stored the radio on his belt. While he turned around to face his team, he could hear his two colleagues Daniels and Houghton respond similarly.

"All right, listen up! Newbourne, Wyatt, hose team! Up you go!" he roared, shoving Kristy in the direction of the ladder.

Nodding, Kristy checked her air to make sure it was on, picked up the nozzle of the empty hose and jumped up on the Ladder truck. Once the ladder had been turned fully around and locked in position, she effortlessly ran up the endless contraption holding the hose over her shoulder, knowing that Pretty Boy was hot on her heels to help her control the bucking hose once the water pressure came on.

As she went past the second floor still going upwards, she got her first glimpse of the fires inside the building. Deep orange flames were licking the empty windows where the panes had long since been blown out by the heat - or vandals - and the interior walls and floors had all been charred beyond recognition.

Knowing from her many years of experience that no one could have survived such an intense fire, Kristy keyed the radio. "Confirmed no survivors, Sarge. Water on."

'*Water on!*' O'Herlihy replied at once. It wasn't long before the hose came alive, sending a massive cascade of water over the fire and nearly kicking Kristy's and Ricky's shoulders out of joint in the process.

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The three hoses - Kristy up top and the two others down below - were soon spraying thousands of gallons of water onto the blazing, roaring inferno, but no matter where they concentrated their efforts by letting the hoses point at the same spot, they weren't able to douse the flames.

By the third time a particular spot rekindled after being hosed down for several minutes, Kristy began to get a feeling in her gut that something wasn't right. The strongest accelerant in the world couldn't have made it through the concentrated spraying, and the conflagration didn't produce the typical smell or smoke of a gasoline fire, but even so, she knew that something had to be feeding the flames.

Looking around in frustration, she happened to glance up at the full moon and thought for a second that the familiar face laughed at her through the flickering heat haze created by the fire. "Hmmm!" she said out loud, grinding her jaw to refocus on the problem at hand.

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## CHAPTER 2

From his position next to the Durango, Chief Boone watched the scene unfold with a rising sense of impatience. He could see that regardless of what the crews were doing, the flames kept popping back up, almost like they were mocking the firefighters.

Grumbling severely, he reached for the car door intent on calling the dispatch to get her to sound a second alarm, but before he had time to do so, the radio on his belt crackled to life.

*'Chief! Chief!'* Kristy said in a voice very clearly laced with shock. *'We have a visual contact in the building! Repeat, a visu-'*

Chief Boone jumped back from the SUV and ran into the open square next to Engine Fifteen. Atop the ladder, both firefighters were gesticulating wildly, pointing at a window on the fourth floor which was located right in the middle of the heart of the fire.

"O'Herlihy, get the ladder closer at once!" the Chief bellowed into the radio, observing the senior firefighter jump onto the truck and work the controls. "And cut the water! Newbourne, Wyatt, get ready to go in!"

Ricky and Kristy both acknowledged on their radios and hung the temporarily useless nozzle on the hooks on the side of the ladder.

As the ladder took ages to swing around, Kristy stared wide-eyed at the harrowing scene taking place so close to her. Out of nowhere, a redhead, teenaged girl had appeared in the window screaming for help. She was dressed in an odd, white dress that - together with her milky complexion and her long, flowing, practically orange hair - made her look like a fair maiden from the middle ages.



When the ladder had finally come close enough to the window sill for the two firefighters to jump in without risking their lives, Kristy took a deep breath and left behind the relative safety of the ladder to venture into the inferno - but the split second she set her booted feet down on the charred floorboards, the teenaged girl ran on bare feet out of the room and into a hallway beyond it.

Staring wide-eyed and gaped at the empty space that had been occupied by a human being only seconds before, Kristy let out an imaginative blue streak that threatened to peel off the remaining scraps of wallpaper.

"What the Hell are you going on about?" Ricky said as he came up to stand next to Kristy.

"She ran out of the room as we got in, man! She's gotta be insane or something!" Kristy growled and pulled her mask even closer.

"Probably one of those drug-crazed psychos... we can't save her now... c'mon," Ricky said and grabbed Kristy's shoulder, but the second they turned around to go back to the window, the teenaged girl's voice could be heard screaming for help from another part of the floor.

"Aw Jeez, this is the Twilight Zone! It's the full moon... it's that damned full moon!" Kristy barked and went deeper into the room despite Pretty Boy's protestations.

The floorboards creaked as the two heavy firefighters inched across them on their way towards a door that would take them into the same hallway the young woman had disappeared to.

Once standing in the doorway with her hands firmly on the wooden jambs to support herself in case everything came crashing down, Kristy looked left and right, but couldn't see the teenager anywhere. At the last moment, out of the corner of her eye, she managed to spot a flash of the girl's bright orange hair going into a room further down the hall.

"C'mon, Pretty Boy, we have her now," Kristy said and began to inch along the hall to get to the room.

"No risks, Kristy!" Pretty Boy shouted into Kristy's ear to be heard over the thunderous roar of the flames and the water that was still being sprayed on other parts of the building. "I don't want my nuts roasted!"

Kristy's reply was a series of mumbled - and largely unintelligible - words.

As the two firefighters came up to the room where the young woman had last been seen, Kristy leaned against the door jamb and peeked around the corner. "She's here," she said to her partner when she spotted the redhead pressing herself against the far wall of the room.

"Well, let's go get her, then!" Ricky said and gave Kristy a gentle shove in the back.

Stepping into the room, Kristy held out her gloved hands as she inched closer to the woman to show her that she wasn't a threat. "We're here to save you! You're in grave danger... we need to get you out of here!" she said in a mild voice just in case the young woman really was a drug-crazed psycho like Pretty Boy had suggested.

"This is my home! I won't leave!" the young woman said, pressing herself up against the far wall.

"You have to. It's not safe for you here... you'll die if you stay," Kristy said and began to reach out for the girl, but the redhead just let out a insane cackle that sent a cold shiver trickling down Kristy's back.

"You don't understand! I am fire! I am death! This... this is my home... my ho- home..." the young girl said, shaking her head vehemently. Suddenly, she broke out in a wild, inarticulate scream and began to tear at her hair. "Help me! Help me! I don't wanna die here..."

Grinding her jaw to such an extent that her tongue almost got caught, Kristy jumped forward and wrapped her arms around the young woman's body to drag her out of there before she could change her mind again. "Pretty Boy!" she barked, spinning around and pushing the reluctant girl out of the room.

"I'm on it, c'mon! Same way back, watch the floor!" Ricky said, leading the way through the hall.

"I hear ya... damn, this wildcat just won't stay calm," Kristy grumbled, squeezing her arms even closer around the young woman.

When the young redhead broke out in another insane cackle and began to resist quite strongly, Kristy knew she couldn't let up for a second in her quest to get them all safely back to the ladder, and she tightened her grip around the young girl's waist.

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By the time they had worked their way back to the room where the ladder was waiting outside, the floorboards had all been consumed by the fire, leaving behind a gaping hole that glowed in an eerie, deep orange.

"Shit..." Kristy groaned, looking at the window sill and the outline of the ladder that was so tantalizingly close that she felt she could reach out and touch it with her hand - of course, her arms would need to be ten feet long to do so.

When the young redhead in Kristy's firm grip saw the trouble they were in, she began to laugh in a creepy, high-pitched cackle that immediately grated severely on the nerves of the two firefighters.

Wiping his increasingly sooty visor with a frantic, jerky motion, Ricky couldn't take the cackle anymore and reached out to grab the woman's arm. "Shut up! Shut up, you crazy bitch! Don't you understand what's going on?"

"Calm down, Pretty Boy," Kristy said, backtracking to the staircase they had gone past twice already to see if that could be their rescue. "She's ill. There's no point in yelling at her."

"Why the Hell are you taking her side, Kristy? She's a loon, a mental case! She probably started the Goddamned fire in the first place."

"You don't know that... all right, do something useful and check out the integrity of the staircase. We only need to go down one floor to get below the fire," Kristy said, nodding towards the stairs.

"Yeah, yeah... I'm on it," Ricky said and tested the first step. When that held, he went down the next few and then turned around and gave Kristy a thumbs-up. Continuing downward, he finally reached a landing where he waited for Kristy to catch up.

Taking a deep breath, Kristy gripped the cackling girl more tightly and moved out onto the top step. It creaked quite badly under their combined weight, but it held up, as did the next few.

When she reached Pretty Boy, she held up the young woman who had once again grown silent. "Let's switch... you wanna take her for a while?"

"Yeah, all right," Ricky said and reached around the girl's waist, but the second his gloves touched her milky white complexion, she began to scream and wiggle around violently.

Shying back from the girl's flailing arms, Ricky tried to protect his helmet, but he still received a good whack over the visor that made him bump his head against the wall of the stairwell. "Ouch! Aw, Hell... that crazy little brat...! Ungrateful piece of...!" he said, turning his helmet around so it was on just right. "You keep her! Must be a woman thing..."

"Jeez, thanks a lot, fella!" Kristy growled and held the unruly teenager close again. "Go further down, we can't keep doin' this much longer!" she continued, nodding angrily at the next flight of stairs.

Grumbling, Ricky moved out onto the first step. When it held, he continued downward, taking each step very slowly so he wouldn't be taken by surprise.

When Pretty Boy had moved seven steps down, the wild girl in Kristy's arms suddenly became calm again, and after a little while, she casually leaned in towards the tall, beefy firefighter and whispered in her ear: "I hope you said goodbye to him. You'll never see him again," she said in a calm, clear voice that was far deeper and richer than her frail exterior would suggest.

That message made Kristy's jaw muscles grind incessantly and she angrily pushed the young woman away from her and up against one of the walls of the stairwell. "You. Shut. Up. Now! Do

you understand me? Shut up until I tell you to speak!" she said, keeping a firm grip on the girl's skinny shoulders.

With her spring green eyes shining with madness, the young woman broke out in an insane cackle. "Now you see him... now you don't!" she said in a shrill voice.

At the exact same time halfway down the next flight of stairs, the step broke in two and disappeared under Pretty Boy's boot. Stumbling into the gap, he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Kris- AAAAAAAAAARGH!"

The scream tore through Kristy who let go of the young girl and spun around to look down the flight of stairs just in time to see the entire staircase below the landing she was standing on crumble and fall down into a seemingly bottomless black hole, taking the screaming Pretty Boy with it.

"NO! NO! NO, PRETTY BOY! AW, FUCK NO!" Kristy said and clutched her head. "Pretty Boy! Pretty Boy?!"

Below her boots, the landing began to creak and groan, and she knew she didn't have much time to escape. Acting resolutely, she grabbed the cackling girl and dragged her back up the flight of stairs they had just come down.

Roaring out in anger and frustration, Kristy leapt upwards and threw herself and the young woman onto the floor - a few seconds later, the landing and the flight of stairs gave up the ghost and disappeared into the chasm in a creaking, groaning mess.

Kristy rolled over onto her knees and gave the charred floorboards a mighty thump with her fist. She quickly took her radio from her belt and keyed the mic. "Chief...? Sarge...? Chief? Chief, we've lost Pretty Boy! Sarge...? Damn... damn, damn, damn!"

Putting the unresponsive radio back on her belt, Kristy climbed to her feet and began to rack her brain to come up with something that could get them out of the fire trap. As she turned to ask the young woman for directions, she had to do a double-take when she realized that the redhead was engaged in a spirited, heathen-like dance that made her spin slowly around on the spot and twist her torso and limbs to an imaginary beat.

Kristy's jaw fell further and further down until only the chinstrap prevented it from slipping down to her chest.

As Kristy was watching, the dance became more and more frenzied until the young girl was thrashing about like she was in a trance or under a spell.

"This is insane... insane!" Kristy said and thumped her gloved fists into the sides of her helmet. "Look... YOU! I'm talkin' to you!" she continued, once again grabbing the girl's shoulders.

The vice-like grip made the girl stop her frantic dance movements, and she cocked her head and shot Kristy a puzzled look.

"How did you know that Pretty Boy was going to fall down? Huh? Is he still alive? And how do we get out of here? Oh, snap out of it, for Pete's sake!"

The young girl's face was completely transformed by a sudden, broad smile that graced her features. Her soft lips were pulled back to reveal a full set of perfect, white teeth, and her eyes shone with delight. "I just saw it. Oh... was he your lover? Everyone should know love. He was so handsome. I've had my fair share of handsome men. Mmmm!" the girl said, suggestively running a hand down between her youthful breasts in an entirely inappropriate gesture.

Rolling her eyes underneath her visor, Kristy snorted loudly and shook her head vehemently. "No, he ain't my lover... and you're way, way too young to understand... Hell, to even talk about stuff like that!"

"I'm not young! I'm ancient! I am as old as the world. Will you marry me?"

"Wh- ah, whut?" Kristy stuttered, not quite fathoming what she was just asked.

"You're so pretty. Much prettier than him. Will you marry me? We could have twenty children!"

"We're both women, you crazy broad," Kristy said and grabbed hold of the young woman's arm. "Will you just tell me how the HELL we can get out of here!?"

Giggling like a schoolgirl who has just realized she was crushing on a studly firefighter, the redhead excitedly pointed down the hallway towards a small, pane-less window that was less harmed by fire than the rest of the floor.

"Down there. Down there, my love. Will you go with me? Here, take my hand. We'll go there together," the young girl said and began to skip down the hall on her bare feet, not paying any attention whatsoever to the weakened floor boards or the small pockets of fire that were littering the floor.

"Nobody... nobody... nobody is ever gonna believe this..." Kristy mumbled as she allowed the elfin-like woman to drag her down towards the small window.

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Arriving at the window, Kristy leaned out to see if her rope would reach the ground, but saw to her great dismay that there wasn't enough room for her to climb out - the window was simply too small for her to fit through.

Kristy ground her jaw and turned back towards the girl who was busy studying something further down the hall. "Hey... that won't work... there must be some other place where we can-"

"The stairs."

"Don't get wise with me, smartass, you know damn well the stairs are gone!"

"Oh. How about an urn, then?" the girl said and broke out in an insane cackle.

Kristy scrunched up her face, counting to twenty - and then a further twenty - to stop her rising temper from making her slap the young woman. "You. Are. Sick! I've seen my fair share of crispy critters... I've lost two friends from burns, so don't you fuckin' start with that!" she said right in the young woman's face.

The message didn't quite get across as the young redhead casually reached up and tried to touch Kristy's mask. "Temper, temper, my love. I was just toying with you. There's another exit down here... right down this path... come on," she said, walking backwards and stretching out her arms in Kristy's direction almost like she wanted the firefighter to follow her.

All around her, Kristy could hear the structure begin to creak and groan, and she was astounded that the whole thing hadn't collapsed yet from the intensity of the fire and the thousands of gallons of water that had been poured onto it. Sighing, she decided to follow the prancing redhead.

The first four steps were all right, but by the fifth, the floor began to creak more than she cared for. Slowing down, she began to probe the boards with the tip of her boot, but the young woman ran out of patience and came back towards her. "Wait! Wait, don't come over here... the floor won't support us both," Kristy said in a hoarse whisper.

"Oh, you should have thought about that a little sooner, my love," the redhead said and gently put her bare big toe down on the other end of the floorboard Kristy was probing.

The agonizing groan the seemingly feather-light touch produced made Kristy look up and narrow her eyes dangerously.

The young girl merely smiled and put her heel down as well.

Even though Kristy raised her hands to protest, the combined weight of her and the young girl meant that seven of the eight floorboards collapsed and disappeared down a gaping black hole. Roaring loudly, Kristy jumped forward and just managed to grab hold of the jagged edge of the last remaining board with her hands and elbows.

Dangling back and forth over the bottomless chasm, Kristy could feel her elbow slowly slipping down. In a panic, she started waving her Halligan tool around, hoping to make it snap onto something, but everything below her was pitch black and she couldn't reach up above her.

"Help me! Please help me!" she cried hoarsely, looking at the young girl who was standing in a doorjamb with an expression on her face that said that everything was going to plan.

"But you're doing just fine," the redhead said, performing a few dance moves on the spot.

An intense fear of falling to her death clouded Kristy's mind and she couldn't think straight. Biting down so hard that she could taste blood, she stared at the broken, rotten floorboards without being able to come up with a plan that could get her out of the mess.

Looking around in a wide-eyed panic, she failed to see the crack developing in the board she was clinging onto for dear life, but she heard it - and then she felt it.

As the floorboard let go, gravity took over and Kristy's elbow slipped down from the perch. An instant later, she knew that she had just lost the fight - she was going to fall to her death.

Ten thousand thoughts raced through her mind as she went into a free fall; her childhood, her complicated teen years, her family, her lovers. Dropping downward like a stone, the muddled thoughts slowly gave way to a crystal clear image of Terri Schmitt, the woman that fate had only allowed her to love for a little while.

Determined to face the Reaper with dignity, Kristy forced herself not to cry or scream, but as the pitch black chasm she was travelling down grew hotter by the second, she had to let out a pained groan when she learned where she was going.

Slowly starting to tumble end over end in mid-air, she could see a deep red dot in the far distance that rapidly grew larger and larger until it filled her entire vision. Soon, she could see everything in great detail; tall pillars of glowing red rock, bonfires everywhere, grotesque, dog-like creatures running around on the ground and countless victims wailing and moaning and stretching their arms out towards the heavens - towards her.

"Oh God..." Kristy croaked suspended in mid-air. "I'm going to Hell...!"

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### **CHAPTER 3**

When the friction tore away Kristy's mask and air tank, the heat against her face turned almost unbearable, but just when she thought her skin was about to peel off, she realized that she was headed for what looked like a large tent supported by four lance-like spikes sticking up in the air.

The next thing she knew was that she crashed through the roof of the tent and landed ungracefully on a green divan that had been placed exactly where she came down.

Panting hard, she pushed her filthy helmet back from her face and looked around in a panic. She patted herself down to see if she had been impaled by the spikes, but she quickly discovered that she didn't have any holes in her chest or gut.

"In one piece... but dead..." she croaked, sitting up on the divan. Her body ached all over from the rough landing, but given the circumstances, she wasn't about to complain about a few aches and scrapes.

She soon realized that Hell was as hot as everyone said it was, and she took off her gloves and her helmet. Getting up from the divan, she unbuttoned her bunker coat and left it on the plush, green monstrosity that had cushioned her fall.

Adjusting her suspenders, she stood up straight and began to look around the tent to get an impression of her new home. The floor was covered by a thick, dark red carpet that showed horrific scenes of murder and mutilation, and the only pieces of furniture were two identical divans and a strange-looking concrete bowl atop a five-foot tall pillar that was adorned with intricate carvings of satyrs and virgin sacrifices.

Kristy walked up to the concrete bowl and traced an index finger along a line of squiggles that followed the entire outer rim. "What the Hell do they use this for...?" she mumbled, trying to work out if the squiggles were words or icons.

As if on cue, a curtain fluttered aside to reveal the redhead who was wearing the most obnoxious smirk on her soft face. She slid silently up behind Kristy and stood up on tip-toes to compensate for the firefighter's greater height. "Beheadings," she whispered into Kristy's ear, wrapping her arms around the taller woman's waist just below her breasts.

Shrieking a loud "GAH!" Kristy jumped a foot in the air and spun away from the bowl. When she noticed the arms around her waist, she grabbed them angrily and tried to remove them but found that she couldn't.

"No, no, my love. Down here in my realm, I'm the strong one," the redhead whispered, moving a hand up to caress Kristy's right breast.

"Take your Goddamned hand off my tit!" Kristy barked and tried to shove the hand away but was once again powerless to stop it from violating her private space.

Giggling, the young woman moved her hand away from Kristy's chest, down across her stomach and around her hip until she groped her butt through the heavy pants. "I thought you liked girls?" she whispered.

"You're about ten years too young for me!" Kristy said, finally able to twist her way out of the strong grip.

"Mmmm. Like I told you upstairs, I'm ancient. But all right, I can wait. After all, I have all the time in Hell."

Massaging her aching ribs, Kristy backed up until she was at the divan. "So this is Hell?" she said sitting down.



"Oh yes. This is my realm. I'm the undisputed ruler of Hell," the young girl said and threw herself on the other divan. Giggling again, she rolled over onto her left side and trapped her right hand between her thighs. After a few seconds, she began to move it in a manner highly inappropriate for a young teenager.

"Well, excuse me, Satan, but you don't look anything like I thought you would," Kristy said, looking away from the sexual display in disgust.

"Ha! Satan! He doesn't exist. Never has. It was all just a clever bit of PR by the Old Man 'cos he couldn't stand that a woman, namely me, had the guts to talk back to him. Eh, long story. In short, since the dawn of time, Hell has been my realm. Kristy, why do you look away?"

"Because you disgust me!" Kristy barked.

"Would you rather I had come to you as a hairy spider? Or a stinging scorpion? Or a gobbling turkey for that matter?" the redhead said and rolled over onto her back. "I chose this form because I knew you liked girls."

"I like women! Not... not... fourteen-year olds! Jesus, this is like... like... the Exorcist or something..." Kristy said and rubbed her face.

"I can masturbate with a crucifix if you want me to...?" the girl said in a sing-song voice.

"NO, GODDAMMIT!"

"Oh... that was the best part of the movie. By the way, I never introduced myself to you, Kristy. My name is-"

"How do you know my name?"

"I never miss a beat, my love. Anyway, my name is Lilith," the girl said and waved her hand in the air.

"Pleased to meet ya, now be a good demon and croak so I can get home!"

Leaning her head back, Lilith laughed out loud in a strong, throaty voice that didn't suit her frail exterior at all. "Oh, I do love your spunk! You are home, my love. This is your home for all eternity."

"Will you at least tell me what I did to deserve this fate?"

"Did?" Lilith said and rolled back over onto her left side. "You didn't do anything. You were simply the right woman in the wrong place at the wrong time. Do you want some bloody eyeballs? They're really delish."

Grimacing wildly at that offer, Kristy stuck her fingers in her ears and spun around on the divan so she couldn't see the demon talking to her.

"Suit yourself," Lilith said and snapped her fingers. Moments later, a satyr entered the tent carrying a bowl of refreshments. Taking her time to pick a few really juicy ones, Lilith finally decided on a brown and two blue eyes.

As she sucked out the contents, she cast a lusty glance at Kristy's broad back, thinking about the many fun hours they would be spending together over the course of the coming centuries. "Mmmm," she said, licking her lips.

Once the eyeballs were empty, she popped them into her mouth and quickly chewed them with her teeth before swallowing. "The stuffing is the best, but the shell itself is okay, too," she said, grinning at Kristy's reaction - a brief shiver. "Oh, don't worry, I'd never suck your eyeballs. I love you too much."

A few choice grunts could be heard from the firefighter, but she didn't appear to want to rejoin the conversation. Feeling left out, Lilith waved her fingers which made Kristy's divan spin around so they were face to face again.

"Hi, darling. I've missed you," Lilith said and blew Kristy a kiss that made the older woman bare her teeth and turn her head in disgust. "Awww. Am I that ugly to your eyes?" she continued, sensually running her hands down between her breasts.

"No... but you're a child... and seeing you do... those... those things makes me sick to my stomach!"

Chuckling at that statement, Lilith stretched her arms over her head and pretended to snuggle down on the divan. "Oh, all right. How about this look instead?" she said and waved her hand. Instantly, the image of the young girl in the white dress was replaced by an image of Terri Schmitt in a smart, royal blue business skirt suit, the one she had been wearing when she and Kristy had met for the first time at a fire department demonstration at the city hall.

Terri sighed sensually and moved her right leg up which split her skirt and revealed her shapely thigh and a lace-topped stocking, a gift from Kristy for her birthday.

At first, Kristy's eyes popped wide open, but after a short while, she closed them again and turned her head away. "That's even worse," she whispered hoarsely.

"You're a hard woman to please," Lilith said surly, waving her hand to transform herself back to the image of the young girl.

"No, I'm not. If you show me the exit, I'll do the Goddamned Macarena!" Kristy said and punched her fist into her open palm.

Licking her lips again, Lilith swung her legs over the side of the divan and cocked her head. "Aren't you at all interested in me? After all, I could have let you go down another level or two. I have grand plans for you, Kristy. For you and with you."

"I don't want nothin' to do with you or your stinking plans! Why can't you get that into your thick skull?!"

"Kristy, my love. Insulting your benefactor probably isn't the wisest thing to do," Lilith said in a voice that had slowly gained a steely undertone.

"I. Don't. Give. A. Shit! I didn't even deserve to go to Hell. You just dragged me down here!" Kristy shouted and jumped up from the divan. "And now you expect me to... to... gah, I can't even say it," she continued, waving her hand in disgust.

Lilith sat completely silent. A vein started throbbing across her forehead, and it wasn't long before a glowing aura began to emanate from her body. "Well," she said after a long pause. "If you will not... or cannot love me... you leave me no choice, Kristy."

"But to send me home...?" Kristy said, clenching her fists and staring at the odd being in front of her.

"But to send you into the Labyrinth," Lilith said in a sinister voice.

"The Labyrinth?"

"Mmmm. My realm. The Labyrinth where my subjects dwell. The Labyrinth where the denizens of Hell surround you at every turn... all eager to tear the skin from your lovely bones with their teeth. The Labyrinth where the walls are made of fire... where the floor is made of slime... where the sky is yellow as sulfur and where the rivers are made of blood... thick, dark red blood. Kristy... last chance. Would being with me really be that disgusting to you?"

The demon's description didn't sound tempting at all, but Kristy knew in her heart that she'd never be able to love the redhead like she wanted to be loved. "Yes," she whispered, feeling a cold shiver run down her spine.

Lilith's face briefly morphed into a mask of evil before she jumped up from the divan and grabbed hold of Kristy in a choking two-hand grip. "Then have fun in the Labyrinth! True Hell awaits you, Kristy!" she roared in a deep, demonic voice.

The words transformed the world Kristy had found herself in. The tent and the things inside vanished in an instant, replaced by a horrific landscape of death and despair, and the cool breeze was succeeded by a lethally hot gust of wind.

Crying out in pain, Kristy fell to her knees to protect her face from the murderous wind that blew past her with the speed of a hurricane. When she stood up again, she noticed that she was as naked as the day she was born.

Feeling awfully exposed and vulnerable, she staggered along the narrow ledge she had found herself on. The rocky ground was coarse and it immediately dug into the soft soles of her feet, but she forced herself to ignore the stinging pain.

The view of Hell that greeted her as she reached the end of the ledge made her cry out in shock. Before her, a vast, apocalyptic scenery spread out in all directions; the sky was indeed yellow as sulfur above a true Labyrinth with ten feet tall walls that snaked their way through the landscape all the way to the horizon, separating the corridors and creating hundreds of thousands of death traps and dead ends.

From her position high above the entrance to the Labyrinth, Kristy could see naked, horribly filthy men, women and children staggering along the corridors in a zombified state, trying to find their way through the maze, but at the same time trying to avoid a race of vile, vaguely humanoid creatures who poked them with spears and clubs.

Choking down a rising tide of bile, Kristy began the long descent, jumping down a flight of irregular stone steps until she was at the entrance to the Labyrinth.

Up close, she could see that the walls were made of lava and she could feel an unbearable heat emanating from them, even from several yards' distance. A strong stench of death, slime, sulfur and general decay filled her nostrils as she took her first, staggering step into the Labyrinth.

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Time had no meaning in Hell so Kristy didn't know how long she had spent there. All she knew was that she had walked eleven thousand seven hundred and eighty steps since entering the Labyrinth, and yet, she was still only in the first part.

She felt deathly tired but she couldn't find a spot to rest her weary legs that wasn't covered in slime, lava or an unidentified brown substance that gave her the dry heaves when she got close to it.

Along the way, she had discovered why everyone she had met was staggering along like a zombie - it was impossible to avoid the streams of slime on the ground, but the sickly green liquid ate its way into her feet and lower legs, cauterizing the nerve ends and turning her skin white.

Turning a blind corner to get away from a particularly wide pool of slime, she bumped into one of the guards who immediately lashed out at her with its spear, carving a bloody furrow across the top of her right breast. "You motherfu...!" Kristy said through clenched teeth, taking a staggering step to the side and clutching her injury. "Why the Hell d'ya do that? I was minding my own Goddamned business!"

The vaguely humanoid creature - six foot five tall, beefy, fairly hairy and clad only in a loincloth and leather gauntlets - just laughed at her and moved the spear to cut her other breast as well.

"The Hell you will!" Kristy barked and grabbed the end of the spear just below the metal tip before it could reach any of her tender parts. A tug of war soon developed between the two muscular creatures, creating quite a spectacle for a group of poor, lost souls who came to a shuffling halt to watch.

Unseen by either of the two combatants, Lilith materialized a short distance away to observe the progress of the match. A roaming glance at the muscular, naked firefighter made her lick her lips repeatedly and run her fingers over her stomach.

Kristy had had enough of the fight with the stubborn creature, so she pulled with all her considerable might and yanked the spear from the guard's grip before throwing it into the pool of slime where it went under at once. "Now take a hike, fella. This is my spot!" she growled, shoving the hairy creature away from her.

Unfortunately, the creature wasn't about to comply. Instead of leaving her alone, it roared loudly and jumped towards her, intent on getting some barbecued meat by shoving her naked body against the nearest lava wall.

The glowing wall of the Labyrinth was so hot that the skin on Kristy's shoulders began to sizzle, and she screamed and tried to push herself away from the worst heat. When she realized that the creature was as strong as she was, her mind automatically replayed one of the moves she had learned at a self-defense class years earlier.

Grabbing the beast around its waist, she took full use of gravity and flipped the two of them around, letting go just at the right moment for her to watch her opponent hug the lava wall with its whole body.

The hairs on the creature's body caught fire at once and it began to scream in a grotesque, high-pitched squeal that made Kristy's nape hairs stand on edge. The creature tried to douse the flames with its paw-like hands, but the lava was too strong. A few moments later, it went down on its knees and then keeled over, dead as a door knob. The fire continued to burn until all of the hair and most of the flesh had vanished from the ugly body.

"Oh, well done, my love," Lilith said right behind the panting Kristy, making her jump a foot in the air. "I can't recall the last time anyone was able to kill one of my children."

"Yo- your ch... children?!" Kristy shouted hoarsely, shying back from the demon.

"All the guards are my children. Can't you see the family resemblance?" Lilith said and cocked her head to the side so Kristy could see her profile.

"Who's the father? King fuckin' Kong?"

"I haven't had the pleasure, no," Lilith said with a grin. "Just random men and women I found attractive when they arrived. After we've mated, I give birth to ten, fifteen, sometimes twenty children a few days later. Can't keep good Hellspawn in, you know."

Grimacing in disgust, Kristy began to turn away, but Lilith prevented it by putting a strong hand on her bare arm. "Are you having fun yet, my love? Think of what we could be doing now."

"It makes me sick just thinking about it."

"Awwww. That wasn't nice. Well! The further you go into the Labyrinth, the stronger opponents you'll face. Sooner or later, you'll come up against someone you can't beat. Think of what it'll do to you then. Oh, that will be quite sickening to use your own word. Have you ever tried to talk without a jaw? Or breathe without lungs? Or kiss without lips? My children are very inventive. And they do everything Mommy says."

"Yeah? Chips off the old block, I imagine," Kristy said darkly, resuming her shuffling walk to get away from Lilith and the roasted guard.

"Ha! Yes, I've taught them everything they know," Lilith said, hooking her arm inside Kristy's "...but not everything I know," she continued in a whisper.

Sighing, Kristy chose not to respond. Instead, she concentrated on bridging a wide stream of slime as she went further into the Labyrinth.

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Several hundred stumbling steps later, Kristy made a right turn into what at first seemed to be yet another dead end. Grunting, she turned around and began to shuffle back out, but then realized that a wall of lava had blocked her exit when she wasn't paying attention.

Slowly spinning around, she stared wide-eyed at the four lava walls that acted as her prison. "Trapped..." she said in a choked-up voice.

Overcome by fatigue and despair, she fell down onto her knees, not caring one bit that the green slime began to eat away at her legs. Swaying like a leaf in the wind, she looked at the nearest lava wall and considered ending her miserable existence, but before she could muster enough energy to get back up and do the deed, Lilith walked in through the lava wall like it was simply a curtain.

"What are you doing down there, love? Did you see another dime you wanted to add to your collection?"

"I want to kill myself."

"Good luck. You're already dead, remember," Lilith said, put her hands under Kristy's arms and helped her up. Cocking her head, she looked at the ungainly green slime that had already begun to stain the firefighter's legs and wiped it away with her fingers. "So... no more owie for you."

Feeling so tired that she could keel over at any moment, Kristy ran a trembling hand through her crew cut. "Wh... why are you helping me?" she said in a croaky voice.

"Because I love you, silly!" Lilith said and gently squeezed Kristy's butt. "But, oh boy, you must be the luckiest firefighter of them all. You, my love, have found the exit all by yourself. Some souls wander for millennia without finding their own noses, but it only took you seven Earth years to find the way home."

"Se... seven years...? No wonder I'm thirsty," Kristy croaked.

Lilith waved her hand and produced an object that looked suspiciously like a cool glass of water. "Hmmm?" she said, winking and holding it out for Kristy to see.

"Nuh-uh... I watched that show... if you eat or drink anything down here, you're stuck."

Leaning her head back, Lilith let out a guttural laugh that made Kristy cringe. "Oh, I can't fool you, can I? Har!"

"Where's the exit? You said I found it."

"Oh, you did. If you move a few steps that-away," Lilith said and pointed at the lava wall opposite to where they were standing, "you'll trigger a hidden wall that'll swing open. Do you really want to leave me? I could be so good for you."

Moving closer, Lilith ran her fingers across Kristy's biceps, onto her shoulders and down her chest where they came to a stop between the soft mounds. "I can feel your heartbeat. It's throbbing. You want me as badly as I want you," Lilith whispered.

"I want to go home. I don't belong here," Kristy croaked, too tired to care about the inappropriate touch.

"But I didn't even get to lick your abs," Lilith whined, continuing her little voyage down to Kristy's pronounced six pack.

Turning around, Kristy began to shuffle closer to the fourth wall, hoping in her heart that Lilith hadn't been lying to her about the exit. "Find someone else's abs to lick. I'm done here."

"Kristy?"

"Leave me alone!"

"Oh, I will. I just wanted to say... you better blaze through this one," Lilith said and briefly waved her hand before vanishing in thin air.

Looking behind her, Kristy stared at the empty spot where the demon with the face of a young girl had been. Shrugging, she shuffled onwards until she heard a very clear, metallic click. Moments later, the lava wall ahead of her started to creak upwards.

"God, I hope this isn't a trap..." she croaked. "I wanna go home!"

Then she realized that the wall wasn't going up - she was going down. The entire square between the four walls was sinking fast, going further and further down to an unknown part of Hell that she couldn't even begin to contemplate how would turn out.

A bellowing roar akin to an entire herd of stampeding elephants greeted her from below, quickly followed by a rancid stench of sulfur, decay and excrements.

As the floor stopped moving, Kristy kept standing, staring with wide open eyes at the horrible, grotesque sight that greeted her. Dozens of broken, mutilated human corpses were scattered all along the floor, some lying in piles and some lying by themselves. Skulls, rib cages, thigh bones, spines - all torn to pieces.

"God," she croaked, clapping her hand over her mouth so she wouldn't add to the already unbearable stench by throwing up.

Most of the bodies had been picked clean, but a few still had meat on the bones, showing that whichever ungodly beast had killed them had spared neither men, women nor children.

The bellowing roar returned, appearing to come from behind a grated gate made of a dark metal that had been placed across the far side of the small square. "The exit..." Kristy croaked, looking at the gate.

Even before the thought had cleared her mind, the gate started opening. For a split second, Kristy thought she was home free, but then she saw a nightmarish creature step into the square.

Ten feet tall, the creature was dressed in a brown loincloth and had a sickly pink complexion, but those particular points faded in comparison with the outrageously muscular arms, the hooves it had instead of feet and the ram-like horns that protruded from its massive head.

When the creature spotted Kristy, it flexed its muscles and crouched down into an aggressive stance where it let out the bellowing roar she had heard a few times already.

Fueled by fear and adrenaline, Kristy bit down so she wouldn't scream and spun around to run back to the lava wall behind her, hoping to trigger the hidden switch that would make the floor go back up - without luck.

Spinning back around, she looked around frantically to find something - anything - she could use to throw at the monster. Finally deciding on someone's skull, she picked up the round, gruesome object and tossed it at the beast using all her strength.

The skull hit the creature in the center of the forehead but it only made it even more angry. As a reply, it lashed out at her with its claw-like fingers, only missing her naked skin by inches.

Jumping to the side, Kristy tripped over a thigh bone that was in her path and fell flat on her stomach, burying her hands in a pool of unidentifiable goo.



"Oh... ewwww...." she said when she realized she was up to her elbows in someone's partially decayed guts.

The creature didn't need a second invitation so it raised one of its hooves in the air and stomped it down exactly where Kristy was lying.

She managed to roll away at the very last moment, but when she came to a stop, she was rudely poked in the butt by a loose rib. "This is insane! I didn't even like Army Of Darkness! Ah, to Hell with it...!" she howled and threw away the offending rib.

After wiping off the disgusting goo from her arms, she scrambled to her feet and stormed across the small square to get to the gate - but before she could make it all the way there, the creature had jumped across a pile of corpses to block her way.

"Ohhhh!" she howled, changing directions at the last moment. Rethinking her plan, she changed directions again and ducked between the monster's legs, sliding along the slippery floor on her back while hoping to discover that her opponent was a male.

With a grin, she established that it was. Jumping back up, she took a thigh bone and held it as a baseball bat, aiming squarely at the monster's purple scrotum. Really putting her back into it, she fired off a swing that would have broken all records at a baseball stadium - as it was, it broke something else judging by the pained, high-pitched squealing the creature made before it keeled over.

Once the monster had been incapacitated, Kristy threw down the thigh bone and went over to the gate. Searching high and low for a switch of some kind, she finally found a small lever that she pulled and that made the grated gate creak upwards.

Grinning but feeling a numbing sense of tiredness overwhelm her as the adrenaline wore off, Kristy dusted off her hands and flicked a drop of sweat at the monster. "That's what happens when you try to take on a woman, freak," she said and jumped through the gate.

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## **CHAPTER 4**

A blinding shaft of light enveloped her fully and she found herself going up practically at the speed of sound. She couldn't hear or see anything, but she could definitely feel; feel that the hideous creature had its hoof on her chest, thumping down on it with alarming regularity, intent on crushing her into a bloody mess like the corpses she had found in its lair.

The light slowly gave way to a reddish darkness and then to something approaching true colors.

As the creature continued to stomp on her chest, a stinging pain from the back of her head made her shake it slowly to test if she still had her brains on the inside of her skull - fortunately, the only thing she could feel scraping against a piece of wood of some kind was her hair.

Then it all came rushing back to her; the call, the burning building, watching Pretty Boy fall to his certain death, arguing with the girl-like demon and... "Ow! Goddammit!" she croaked and reached down to swat the creature off her chest before it could poke another thumb into her already tender breast.

*'She's back! Chief! Chief! She's back!'* a male voice shouted very near to her, quickly followed by a loud cheer from other men.

Realizing that her eyes were still closed, Kristy cracked open an eyelid to take in her surroundings. At first, she focused on the fact that the sky was black instead of yellow, but then a group of firefighters standing around her came into view.

"Wh... whut?" she croaked, trying to sit up.

"Welcome back to life!" the man said, supporting her shoulders.

"Oh... thanks. I've been to He- Pretty Boy?!" Kristy shouted once the voice had filtered through the wad of ether-laced cotton she had in her head. "Did we both die or... what?"

"We're both alive, Kristy. Jesus, I'm glad to see ya!" Pretty Boy Wyatt said and wrapped his arms around her in a crushing hug.

"Uhhhh! Okay... I love ya, too, man..." Kristy said, trying to get the weight off her injured breast. "But watch my right boob, it stings like Hell."

"Pardon me," Pretty Boy said with an impossibly wide grin as he moved back from Kristy.

In the far distance, the siren of an ambulance mixed with the regular city sounds, and soon, the large, yellow van turned onto Raphael Street.

"Anyone else injured?" Kristy said and looked around, but a mocking snort by Pretty Boy made her look back at him.

"Yeah, Paddy got a paper cut. Duh, Kristy... it's for you, stupid!"

"Oh... okay. I don't need it," she said and climbed to her feet. Looking down, she could see that she still had all her equipment except that her helmet and her gloves had gone missing somewhere between Raphael Street and Hell. Suddenly worried, she reached in under the hem of her undershirt and found the leather string that held her St. Florian medal and her lucky dime. She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized they were unharmed, and she quickly kissed the medal before tucking it back down the undershirt.

Coughing, she leaned against the side of Engine Fifteen and studied the fire site. The building was still burning merrily, the Spring Breakers were still watching, the sky was black, the ground wasn't slimy and the air didn't stink of sulfur - all in all, it didn't feel like she'd been away for seven years.

"Newbourne!" the Chief barked in his characteristic deep voice. "Newbourne? Where's Newbourne and Wyatt?"

"We're over here, Chief," Kristy said and pushed herself off the truck with a rattling cough.

Chief Boone strode over to her and Pretty Boy and put his hands on his hips, wearing an expression that said he wasn't sure whether he wanted to tear them a new one or give them a hug. "What the Hell happened in there, Newbourne? Where's your SCBA, your gloves and your helmet?"

"I don't know, Chief. The floor collapsed," Kristy said matter-of-factly.

"I never made it further than the staircase, boss," Pretty Boy chimed in.

Looking from one to the other, the Chief began to chew his cheek. "What happened to the visual contact?"

Kristy drew a deep breath, but then let it out slowly without speaking. *'If I tell them what really happened, I'll be committed to an asylum for the next eighty years...'* - "Uh, she was very uncooperative, Chief," she said after a little while.

"Shit, you can say that again! She was completely psycho, Chief. We couldn't get through to her at all!" Pretty Boy said with a snort.

"Yeah, and if she hasn't been found, she probably perished when the floor collapsed," Kristy added.

Nodding, Chief Boone made a note of that in a small notepad. Slamming the flap shut, he put his pencil in a pocket and put out his hand. "Well. In any case, I'm glad to see you in one piece, Newbourne. You too, Wyatt. Get to the EMTs, we'll clean up here. Once you're done, go wait in the truck."

"Oh, but I'm just fi-" Kristy started to say, shaking the Chief's hand.

"Newbourne..." the Chief said in a menacing tone.

"Yes, Chief. I'll get myself checked by the EMTs," Kristy said and nodded vigorously.

Nodding again, Chief Boone briefly shook hands with Pretty Boy and then prodded his index finger into the firefighter's bunker coat. "You, too, Wyatt."

"Yes, Chief."

As the Chief walked away from them, Kristy ran her hand through her damp crew cut and turned to her friend. "What actually happened in there, Pretty Boy? How were you able to get out of that mess?"

"When the stairs collapsed, I just held on for the ride. I only fell a single floor so it wasn't too bad. Not like you, tough chick, you went all the way down to ground level. Maybe you should consider a diet, huh?" Pretty boy said and wrapped an arm around Kristy's shoulder.

"Maybe I should. Did you find me?"

"Me, Domingo and Paddy, yeah. We waded through the debris to get ya. You were on the bottom... all the floorboards and shit were on top of you. Your eyes were wide open and just starin' into empty space and... ugh. Jesus! When we realized you didn't have a pulse, we just sorta followed the book to get you back."

"Thanks, buddy. You didn't happen to find my lid, did you?"

"Naw, it wasn't in there. Don't know what happened to it. We didn't find your gloves, either."

"Shit... I had a great photo of Terri in my helmet..."

"Uh, Kristy...?"

"Yeah?"

"You were dead. Did you... did you experience anything?"

Kristy opened her mouth but closed it again at once. Sighing deeply, she shook her head. "Not a thing, Pretty Boy. Just darkness. It was like flicking a switch. First when I went out and then when you brought me back."

"Shit, really?"

"Yeah."

"Huh. I guess I don't have to send my kids to Sunday School, then."

Grinning, Kristy thumped Pretty Boy's shoulder on their way over to the waiting ambulance. "You don't have any kids, man."

"I know, I know... I'm just thinking ahead."

By the time they reached the ambulance, a female EMT came out to greet them by opening the rear door. Kristy shot her a smile and sat down on the aluminum step at the rear. "There's thinking ahead and there's whist-"

When the EMT turned around and returned the smile, she added a nose crinkle and a little wink with her green eyes which added a warm quality to her soft, very youthful features. Reaching up, she ran her thumb tenderly across Kristy's cheekbone. "Hello, my love," she whispered for Kristy's ears only.

Kristy's throat immediately constricted to a point where she could hardly breathe and she was only able to finish the sentence she was speaking in a series of coughing croaks. Her chin began to quiver as she looked at Lilith, thinking that it had been a trap all along.

"He can't see me," Lilith whispered, nodding in Pretty Boy's direction. "To him, I'm just another EMT. I felt so lonely after you were gone, my love. We never got around to make a mess of my silk sheets, so... I just wanted to see you one last time."

"God..." Kristy croaked.

"Yeah, I know. I tried to make a deal with him. Alas, I couldn't make him see my point of view... that old coot. Such a killjoy. You tend to get that way when you haven't had sex since the dawn of time," Lilith said, nuzzling her nose against Kristy's ear. "Mmmm. You smell so good. I could eat you where we stand... figuratively speaking, of course," she continued, adding a cheeky smile.

Behind them, the burning building suddenly collapsed violently, sending a shower of embers into the air and sending the firefighters into a mad scramble to contain the fire before it spread to the other buildings nearby.

"Kristy, I love you. I hope you'll think of me from time to time," Lilith said and finished up stitching a small wound on the back of the firefighter's head.

"Only when I puke..."

"That's good enough for me. Oh, you forgot your gloves and your helmet in my realm. I await your return to collect them with bated breath, my love," Lilith said and ran her fingers down Kristy's cheek and throat.

Taking a step back, the EMT suddenly morphed into a middle-aged woman whose gray hair was tied back into a ponytail. "You're fit to go, Miss," she said in a mature voice as she zipped the medical bag she was holding.

"Ummm... okay. Thanks," Kristy said and got up from the aluminum step.

"Now what, Kristy?" Pretty Boy said, pushing his helmet back from his forehead.

"Now we go back to the fire station. I need a shower somethin' fierce," Kristy said and rubbed her aching right breast.

Putting a hand under Kristy's arm, Ricky 'Pretty Boy' Wyatt helped her up and supported her for the first few seconds until she was safe. "Ooooh. D'ya want me to give you a good soap-down?"

"That's sexual harassment, Pretty Boy," Kristy said and thumped her hand into her friend's gut.

"Ooof! No it ain't... it's equal opportunity. The Engine Fifteen crew sticks together like glue... at the fire site, in the bar, in the shower..."

"Oh, so that's what you guys were doing," Kristy said, putting a mocking index finger on her lower lip. "I heard you moaning the other night and I was wonderin' what it was."

"Oh, ha ha. You're killin' me, Kristy," Pretty Boy said as he opened the door to the truck and gave Kristy a push-me-up until she was firmly seated on the jump-seat.

"Look who's talking- why don't ya ask the Chief if he wants a soap-down?"

Pretty Boy stepped up behind her, moved past her legs and sat down on the bench seat. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, blah, blah, blah," he said, showing her a hand gesture she couldn't misinterpret.

Grinning, Kristy looked out of the door and onto the fire site. When she felt a brief but hot gust of wind caress her cheek, her smile faded into a frown - deep inside, she knew it had been Lilith keeping a close eye on her.

Shivering, she pulled the bunker coat closer and snuggled down in the jump-seat. "At least I'll get a few days off now. I'm gonna spend every last minute in bed with Terri. We can't waste any opportunity, ya know. We never know how long we have."

"Amen, Sister," Pretty Boy said and scratched his sweaty forehead. Leaning forward, he poked Kristy's knee with his gloved hand. "Make her scream, tough gal," he said in a stage whisper, wearing an impossibly wide grin.

Slapping her hand across her eyes, Kristy shook her head vehemently and let out a sound that was a cross between a snort and a giggle. "Ohhhhhh... Pretty Boy!"

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## **THE END of ENGINE 15**

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## THE SCALPEL

by Norsebard

After having waved goodbye to her last customer of the evening, Drew Miller stepped out onto the sidewalk and strode with determined steps down to the bicycle that some inconsiderate soul had left leaning against one of her outrageously expensive storefront windows.

Once the bicycle had been removed - she put it up against the delicatessen next door that had already closed for the evening - Drew dusted off her hands and took a step back to look at the facade of her store, *'Drew's Rare Arts & Antiquities.'*

Satisfied that everything was in order, she let out a grunt and went back inside to begin closing down for the night.

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Armed with a multi-colored feather duster and a pair of white over-sleeves to protect her cream-colored pant suit, Drew carefully dusted off the priceless vases and other artifacts she had amassed over the years through trade fairs and from buying the estates of deceased people; paintings large and small, porcelain figurines of all kinds, ancient books and even a few curios, like a gold-plated chamber pot from the Seventeenth century.

When she came to a corner of her store that held a display case filled with far more modern and colorful pottery, she had to chuckle at the thought of the flighty, flamboyant *artiste* Didier de Rousselle who had pleaded with her - on his knees, no less - to hold a small exhibition of his works.

Smiling all the way over to the back room, Drew hung the feather duster from its designated nail and quickly washed her hands. Looking into the mirror above the sink, she could see from the pale hue to her skin and the dark circles under her usually so vivid spring green eyes that she had been working more the past week than she really ought to. *'My hair is a mess, too... I need to get a haircut. It's too warm right now for long hair, anyway. Maybe I should get it buzzed!'* Drew thought and broke out in a hearty chuckle.

Just as she closed the water faucet, she thought she could hear a scraping sound from the store, and she quickly moved aside the curtain to take a look. When the look yielded nothing, she shrugged and moved the curtain back down.

Moments later, a new sound reached her ears, but this time, it wasn't a scrape, it was a clear, unmistakable knock on the front door.

"What the...? Who can that be at a quarter past nine in the evening...?" Drew said out loud as she stepped into the store. She hesitated briefly, thinking about the can of pepper spray she had

hidden under the counter as the last line of defense, but when she recognized the shape - or rather, the uniform, complete with a shiny gold badge on the left side of the chest - of the person standing outside the locked door, she narrowed her eyes and began to chew on her cheek.

"A police officer... oh... oh, no, please let Mom and Dad be all right," Drew said and hurried over to the front door to let the officer in.

As the door swooshed open, the officer stepped into the dim light and took off a black baseball cap adorned with Oakland PD in gold lettering.

At first, Drew was taken aback by the sight of awful, hideous scars around the officer's eyes - seemingly a lasting legacy of poorly treated burn injuries - but she soon regained her manners. "G- good evening, officer. Is something wrong?" Drew said, wringing her hands.

When the officer stepped into the stronger light inside the store, it was revealed that the tall, square-built shape dressed in black slacks and a black shirt over a black turtleneck belonged to a woman with a strong jaw, high cheekbones and cobalt blue eyes that sat as vibrant pools of life in a sea of dead tissue.

"No, ma'am. I'm Special Officer MacNeal. I've been assigned with the task of informing all female shop owners in this neighborhood that we may have a serial killer on the loose and that you may need to take precautions."

"Oh, no! A serial killer? How terrible!" Drew said and began to wring her hands in earnest. Growing quite pale, she turned around and walked behind her counter where she sat down with a bump on a swivel-chair.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, it wasn't my intention to frighten you," the officer said in a voice that held the slightest hint of raspiness.

"But... when... and how... and... and what should I look for...?" Drew said, shaking her head.

Officer MacNeal ran a gloved hand through her short, dark hair and walked closer to the counter. "Well, it's not a happy tale, I'm afraid. Miss...?"

"Oh, uh, my name is Drew Miller," Drew said and reached out to shake hands with the police officer.

At first, Officer MacNeal just looked at the offered hand like she didn't know what to do with it, but then she took it in her own and gave it a brief shake. "Good evening, Miss Miller. I'm Kara MacNeal. Well, for starters, you should beware of male transients. Witness reports indicate that several people have seen a homeless, Caucasian male at or near the scenes of the crimes."

"Oh... we don't get many homeless men here, Officer MacNeal."



"All the more reason to look out for them, wouldn't you think?" Kara said and winked at Drew with her left eye, revealing a pink eyelid that stood out very sharply against the much darker, scarred skin.

"Oh... yes. I suppose," Drew said and shuffled around on her swivel-chair to get comfortable. "I'm sorry, Officer MacNeal... I know I'm too nosy, but how did you...?" she continued, touching her own face.

"It was an accident. A gasoline fire that couldn't be contained," Kara said, grinding her jaw.

Despite her worries, Drew quickly jumped off the swivel-chair and went around the counter to put a comforting hand on the police officer's arm. "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear that... and now you're a Special Officer?"

"Yes. It was either this or the desk. I chose the streets. I've always lived on the streets," Kara said, suddenly realizing that Drew was staring at her. "That didn't come out right... oh, you know what I meant," she continued, flashing the gallery owner a charming, disarming smile and a little wave.

"Of course, of course. Well, would you mind if I went about and closed my store while we spoke? It's been a long, exhausting week and I'd like to get upstairs to my comfortable bed," Drew said and went over to a digital display near the door.

"By all means, Miss Miller," Kara said, following the petite woman with her eyes.

After Drew quickly punched in a set of digits, a large, sturdy grille slowly rolled down the inside of each window, producing a creaking, metallic groan as it slid down. Once the grille was at the bottom stop, two metal hooks grabbed hold of the mesh, making it impossible for anyone to enter through the windows.

Adjusting her utility belt that held various small pouches and tools, Kara leaned against the counter and put her legs out ahead of her. "This serial killer is one of the worst we've had for quite some time. Because of the way he goes about his business, we've nicknamed him the Scalpel."

"Oh, how horrible..." Drew said, fading down the lights so they were at the night-time setting. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"I'm afraid so, Miss Miller. He never leaves survivors so we obviously don't have eye witness accounts, but we believe that he starts by slicing open the major artery on the neck, leading to such a violent hemorrhaging that his victims bleed to death in a matter of minutes. Once the victims have been incapacitated, we believe that he... no, I'm sorry. It's just too gruesome," Kara said and moved away from the counter.

Closing and locking a glass display case holding a selection of late-Eighteenth century hair clips and necklaces, Kara's words made a cold shiver run down Drew's back, and she turned around to

stare at the police officer. One part of her had already heard too much but another part wanted to know more. After a brief struggle with herself, the part that wanted to know more won out, and she waved her hand at Kara. "Oh, you can... uh, go on... if you want, Officer MacNeal."

"I really shouldn't, Miss Miller. It'll only give you nightmares for the rest of your life."

Shivering, Drew shrugged and moved on to the next display case. "You're right. I'm sorry... oh, I'm just... never mind," she said and turned away from Kara.

"Well... Miss Miller, if you promise that you won't file a complaint over me to my Sergeant, I can give you the rest of the details," Kara said, having slipped very close to the petite woman without her noticing it.

Letting out a small yelp and spinning around in surprise at the closeness of the raspy voice, Drew dropped a brass key that clanged onto the smooth, hard floor. "Oh!" she croaked, flushing a deep red when she realized that she had been spooked so badly.

"Let me get it, Miss Miller," Kara said and bent down to retrieve the key. "See? You just delivered solid proof that I shouldn't tell you the grisly details," she continued as she handed the key to the startled Drew.

"Oh... thank you. But... oh, I... I'd still like to hear them. I won't complain to your Sergeant," Drew said and moved away from the glass display cases to get a bit of distance between herself and the imposing Officer.

"All right. But don't say I didn't warn you. Once the victims have bled dry, he uses his scalpel to surgically remove the skin from the head... the throat, the chin, the lips, the cheeks, the nose, the forehead and even the entire scalp."

"Oh God, how horrible! How disrespectful towards his victims! And their families!" Drew squeaked.

"Disrespectful?" Kara said and cocked her head.

"Think of the poor people who'll have to identify their loved one... can you imagine having to go through with that and see your mother or wife or daughter without her skin or... or... oh, God!"

Kara nodded and looked down at her gloved hands. "True. That never crossed my mind. I guess I'm too jaded to think of the families."

"What on Earth does he do with the skin and the hair? Can you tell me that?" Drew said as she disconnected her cash register.

"We've never recovered any of the skin fragments, so we can only assume what he does with them. My personal tip is that he's made himself a scrapbook."

Shivering at the thought, Drew turned a small key that made the cash register shut down for the night. "... or maybe... since he's only taking the facial skin of his victims... quite literally defacing them, maybe he's disfigured in some way... and he's getting his revenge by making them as ugly as he is..."

Drew suddenly realized what she had said and looked up in a panic at Kara who was shooting fire at her with her cobalt blue eyes. "Oh, no... oh, I'm so, so sorry, Kara... I didn't mean it like that... I didn't mean that you're ugly! Please forgive me!"

"That was uncalled for, Miss. Uncalled for and quite rude. I don't care much for rude people," Kara said hoarsely in a voice that was suddenly very raspy.

Closing her eyes briefly, Kara began to grind her jaw and move her hand towards her back pocket, but stilled her motions when she noticed that the look on the blonde woman's face was sincere and apologetic.

"I'm so sorry, Kara... speaking before I've had time to think has been my bugbear since elementary school... please forgive me," Drew said and went up to stand close to the tall officer.

"Mmmm. I've been called worse... but not by people I've been sent to protect. We can't all have your beauty, Miss. Even before my accident, I was never pretty," Kara said hoarsely.

"Oh I can't believe that... not with those eyes and cheekbones..." Drew said and reached up to touch the Officer's face, but thought better of it at the last moment.

"Mmmm."

Touching Kara's elbow instead, Drew turned around and pointed at the curtain to the back room. "Look, I've really stepped in it this time... please let me make you a cup of coffee upstairs in my apartment. Or tea, if that's your pleasure. Please...?"

Kara pulled her sleeve back to look at her wristwatch. "I don't know, Miss. I have several more places to visit tonight. The gas station, the convenience store... and I need to report back to my Sarge as well."

"Oh, but I'm quite sure the gas station and the convenience store will be there in ten minutes as well. Come on, just a single cup... just to show that I actually do have a human side...?"

A brief, but warm, smile played on Kara's lips at those words, and she nodded and let out the breath she had been holding back since Drew's hurtful words. "All right. Just one cup... then I really must get going."

On their way over to the curtain, Drew came to a shuffling halt. "Uh... I'm... before we go upstairs, would you mind showing me some identification? I... I just prefer to..."

"I understand... No problem at all, Miss Miller. As a matter of fact, I'm glad to see you've paid attention to our public service announcements," Kara said and reached into her left rear pocket. Taking a small leather wallet, she flipped it open to reveal an official-looking ID-card issued to Kara Lillian MacNeal, DOB 1/17 1973, with a tag that said '*Special Officer with the Oakland Police Department. Approved by Police Commissioner H.R. Rathman,*' underneath. "Satisfied?"

"Yes, thank you. Lillian, that's an unusual name. Are you named after your mother, perhaps?" Drew said and pushed aside the curtain.

"No. My paternal grandmother."

Stepping to the side, Drew put out her hand to usher Kara up the stairs. "I'll just be a few seconds. I just have to activate the locks on the front door."

"Don't bother," Kara said humorlessly, turning around on the stairs and using her cobalt blue eyes to zero in on the petite woman's spring green ones.

"Uh... m-may I ask why?"

"Because unless you have a back door, I have to use the front door when I leave. And then you'll have to apply the locks all over again."

"Oh... good thinking. Of course," Drew said and let out a short, nervous laugh. "I'll just work the old-fashioned sliders, then. That won't take long to undo when you leave," she continued, walking back through the curtain and over to the front door.

As the blonde first crouched down and then stood up on tip-toes to move the bottom and top sliders into their holders, Kara kept a close eye on her and her actions.

"There, all done," Drew said and dusted off her hands.

Ascending the stairs, Kara cast brief, disinterested glances at the paintings on the walls of the staircase and at the very romantic, very cutesy porcelain vase standing on a four by four-inch embroidery on a cast-iron display on the landing.

"I'm impressed by your level of protection against burglars, Miss Miller. It seems to be very effective," Kara said as she came to a stop at the landing and turned around to look back down the stairs.

"Thank you. I had a break-in last year so I had to up my game accordingly. Cost me an arm and a leg, but I haven't had any intruders since, so I guess it was money well spent," Drew said and put her hand on the small of Kara's back. "The living room is to the left, Officer MacNeal."

"So I see," Kara said and stepped into a lavishly decorated living room filled to the brim with knick-knacks of all types. "Mmmm!" she grunted as she saw the many items.

"I know, I know. But it's who I am. This is my life, Kara. I've never had money to travel far, so I've brought the world to me and my store instead. Some of them are quite charming, don't you think?" Drew said and held her hand near a moth-eaten classic British teddy bear.

"Well... mmmm. It's not exactly my style."

*'I'll say... she looks to be the utilitarian type,'* Drew thought, looking at the Special Officer's broad shoulders and militaristic stance. "Would you like instant coffee, regular coffee or tea, Officer MacNeal?"

"Instant is just fine, thanks," Kara said and walked further into the overly decorated room.

As Drew went into the kitchen across the landing, Kara began to move through the room, rolling her eyes at the many items. Pausing at a book shelf where an old postcard showing a guillotine was prominently placed, a brief smile played on her lips, but she made sure to conceal it before Drew could return.

Moving along, she quickly had enough of the knick-knack and went to sit down in one of the two antique wing chairs, careful not to break the priceless item she had in her rear pocket in a small, leather pouch.

A few moments later, Drew came back into the living room carrying a tray with a couple of apricot muffins, two mugs of steaming hot coffee, two tea spoons, a pitcher of milk and a bowl of sugar. "Here you go, Officer MacNeal. Oh! I forgot the napkins. Silly me, I'm so forgetful tonight," Drew said with a laugh as she went back into the kitchen.

"Thank you," Kara said, stirring her coffee with one of the tea spoons.

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In the kitchen, Drew leaned against the cool tiles with a hand pressed to her upset stomach. Staring at the doorway to the living room, the incessant churning in her gut was telling her that something was wrong, but she couldn't figure out what it could be.

Taking a few deep breaths to still the nervous tension inside, she began to reach for the telephone on the wall to call the police station to verify the identity of her guest - but her hand had only made it halfway there when a dark shadow appeared in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Your coffee is growing cold, Miss," Kara said in a calm, unthreatening voice.

"Oh! Oh, I... Thank you, Officer. I'm just a bit... a bit out of it tonight, I think," Drew said and flipped off the lights in the kitchen. "It's all this serial killer business. I'm not used to all this drama."

"That's understandable. Coffee should help."

Once they were back in the living room, Drew blinked a few times as she stared at the dead flesh surrounding the Officer's blue eyes, feeling a shiver run down her spine at the thought of the excruciating pain the woman must have experienced.

Sitting down, Kara took her mug and had a little sip of the coffee. "Very nice coffee, Miss. You can't tell it's instant."

"Uh... thank you," Drew said and sat down in a wing chair opposite the police officer. Absorbing the cozy atmosphere created by all the little trinkets she had amassed over the years, she suddenly felt that there was a snake in her paradise; that something had invaded her privacy, a razor-sharp, ice cold, dangerous something that she couldn't identify, but that she knew would cause untold trouble for her.

Shivering inside, Drew looked back up at the officer's scarring and chastised herself inwardly for feeling so cold and insensitive towards a fellow human being, particularly one who had been dealt such a poor hand in the game of life.

Kara took another sip and leaned back in the chair to cross her legs. "I noticed the postcard with the guillotine. Quite morbid, isn't it?" she said in a calm voice.

"Well, yes... it's from 1888. Many things were different back then. I guess people were generally more interested in... death... and the like. No, interested isn't the right word. Fascinated is probably more appropriate," Drew said and reached for her apricot muffin.

"Mmmm. 1888... Jack the Ripper. We had that subject at the Police Academy."

"Exactly! Have... have you seen many dead people, Kara?" Drew said, leaning forward on her chair.

Looking up, Kara tried to gauge the expression on Drew's face, but found it to be simple curiosity instead of an attempt at digging around. "Yes. I'm very familiar with death," Kara said casually.

"Oh... have... have you ever shot anyone? I s-see you're not wearing a gun...?"

"Special Officers aren't allowed to carry a firearm, Miss Miller. No, I've never shot anyone, not even when I was working the mean streets before my accident."

"I'm sorry... the mean streets?"

"Vice. Four years on the shady side of life," Kara said and emptied her mug.

"Oh... you must have seen a lot of misery and death, there..."

"Yes. Every single day. Most of it self-inflicted, some of it not." Putting down the mug, Kara eyed Drew closely. She felt that the plan was ready to take to the next level, and as she began to

get up from the wing chair, she cleared her throat and assumed the most sincere expression she could muster. "Miss Miller... would you like to help me and the Police Department with capturing the Scalpel?"

"Me? Oh good Lord, what could little me do?" Drew said and put her hands to her bosom, her own coffee and the muffin long forgotten.

"More than you think, Miss. I need to go down to my squad car now and call in my location. I'm sure my Sarge will chew me up royally, especially when I tell him my plan," Kara said and put on her baseball cap that she had been hiding inside her shirt.

"... which is?"

"Well, Miss, to be honest... we've run the Scalpel's M.O. through all the criminal psychology databases we have, and we've concluded that he's going to strike on this street... tonight."

"Oh God, no...!"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. That's why I was sent here, to offer you hands-on protection from the insane serial killer," Kara said and put out her hand. "Will you help me set a trap for him?"

At first, Drew just stared at the offered hand but eventually reached out to shake it. "Yes... yes, I will, Officer MacNeal. Oh, I've had the most awful feeling in my gut the entire evening... I couldn't understand why... but now I do... it's because he's near!"

"Mmmm. Serial killers are devious, insane creatures, Miss Miller. Always stalking their potential victims, always planning two or even three steps ahead, always creating elaborate ruses that will take their victims completely by surprise... oh, now I've frightened you again. I'm sorry, Miss Miller," Kara said when she noticed the pale, wide-eyed look on Drew's face.

Gulping audibly, Drew looked away and rubbed her face to get some of the feeling back. "Uh... no, it's all right, Officer. I'm just way out of my depth here. But I will help you."

"Good. The Oakland Police Department and the people of our fair city will thank you, Miss Miller. If we manage to catch him tonight, I can almost guarantee that you will be given a Citizen's Bravery medal... maybe even awarded to you by the Mayor herself."

"A medal?" Drew said with a nervous chuckle. "I'd be happy just to get the sick, twisted madman off the street so women can sleep peacefully without fearing that someone will come and peel off their facial skin. God, that's so horrible... I still can't believe a human being would want to do that!"

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Ten minutes later, Drew opened the front door to let Kara back inside the store. As she reapplied the sliders, she noticed that the police officer's face had grown harrowed in the few minutes they had been apart. "Is... is something wrong, Officer MacNeal?"

"Yes... I'm afraid that reality has caught up with our little plan. My Sergeant just informed me that the Scalpel has already struck tonight," Kara said darkly.

"Oh, no! Where?"

"An apartment building five blocks up the street. A janitor found the mutilated body of a resident less than ten minutes ago... like the others, he had been skinned."

"Oh no... no, no, no!" Drew said and doubled over, covering her face with her hands.

"Attacking a man doesn't follow the Scalpel's usual M.O. In fact, unless I'm very much mistaken, it's the first time. My Sarge told me it was a cross-dresser with long hair. Maybe the Scalpel mistook him for a female," Kara said and scratched the knuckles of her gloved right hand where a long abrasion was beginning to annoy her.

"Dear God..."

"This could make the Scalpel change his methods. Maybe from now on, he'll make doubly sure that his intended target is a woman, biologically speaking. I doubt that attacking a man was his plan. Serial killers don't just change the way they tick, you know," Kara said and helped Drew stand upright.

Shaking her head, Drew reached up and wiped away a few tears. "I w-wouldn't know."

"There's more," Kara said somberly, waiting for Drew to look at her.

"What?"

When Drew wiped her eyes again, a brief smile played across Kara's lips, but it vanished the split second Drew let her hand fall down from her face. "There's a homeless man loitering about roughly a block up the street. When I last checked, he was coming this way. We need to set that trap... and quickly. We may not have much time... the Scalpel could be here sooner than you think. He could be here right now for all we know."

"Oh, this isn't my day..." Drew said and cast a look to the heavens. "I knew it from the moment I got out of bed this morning. The first thing I did was to stub my toe on my night stand... I've lived here for six years and I've never stubbed my toe before..."

"Mmmm, that was certainly an unpleasant way to start the day. But now that you know what to look out for, I can guarantee you'll never stub your toe again, Miss Miller."



Chuckling nervously, Drew turned around and began to fiddle with a stack of brochures on her counter that she had meant to sort earlier in the day. "Oh, that's very reassuring. Can you foresee the future, Officer MacNeal?"

"My own... no. Yours... yes. Very much so. It'll be rosy," Kara said and admired Drew's slender neck and golden-blond mane.

A dark shadow suddenly slid past one of the grilles, making Kara go into a defensive stance and let out a raspy "Hush!".

"Ohhh!" Drew squealed and quickly ran behind her counter, ducking down so only her eyes could be seen over the wooden top.

"It's him," Kara whispered, pointing at the door. "It's the Scalpel. Don't worry, Miss Miller... let me handle it. I'm strong, he'll never defeat me!" she continued, jumping towards the front door.

"Ohhh! Please be careful, Kara!" Drew whispered back, covering her eyes with her hand.

Kara quickly pulled the two sliders back and tore open the front door. The man outside only had time to let out a brief, surprised grunt before Kara had grabbed the lapels of his greasy US Army jacket and pulled him inside.

Effortlessly, she threw the man onto the floor of the store, making several of the glass display cases rattle. With surprising brutality, she kicked him in the gut two, three, four times, causing him cry out in pain and roll up into a ball to protect himself.

When the homeless man was incapacitated after a few well-placed kicks, Kara leaned down and fired off a right hook to his bearded chin that sent his head flying backwards.

Looking over the edge of the counter, Drew couldn't believe the brutality of Kara's actions, and as the man's head flew backwards, she let out a terrified squeal. "Stop, Kara! He's had enough! Please!"

Panting hard and showing a devious, demonic grin, Kara slowly pulled back and unclenched her gloved fists. "Mmmm," she said, nodding to herself.

Drew swallowed the rising tide of bile that had formed at the back of her throat and dared to come out in the open. After turning on the full lights, she wrapped her arms around her trembling body and walked over to the downed man and the panting police officer. "But... but... that can't be the Scalpel. He's... he's just a regular homeless man... look at him!"

The man appeared to be in his late forties with an unhealthy pallor, greasy, wispy hair and an unkempt, full salt-and-pepper beard that reached beyond the top of his jacket. His clothes were filthy and tattered and he smelled like he hadn't visited the community bathing facilities for weeks.

"It's the Scalpel, all right. What you see is only a disguise," Kara said hoarsely.

"A disguise? You can't be serious, Kara. Look at him, he's just a poor, homeless soul!" Drew said in a voice that gradually grew in intensity.

Kara took a deep breath and held up her hands like she was admitting defeat. "Okay, okay... maybe you're right. Maybe he isn't the Scalpel after all. In any case, I need to call my Sergeant and let him know what's happened. May I use your phone, please?"

"I... uh... my cell phone is upstairs, but... we need to call an ambulance for him, too!" Drew said and knelt down next to the homeless man.

"I'll let my Sergeant do that. He has a direct line. I need to move now, Miss Miller," Kara said and moved towards the curtain to the staircase.

Torn between wanting to help the injured man and worrying about the police officer being alone in her living room, Drew didn't know what to do. After a brief delay, she let out a frustrated groan, got up from the floor and hurried after Kara.

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Once inside the living room, Kara went straight over to the cell phone that was in the process of being recharged on a small table next to one of the wing chairs. Looking over her shoulder to make sure she was out of sight of Drew, she picked up the phone and punched in a set of numbers.

Behind the police officer, Drew rushed into her living room and began to wring her hands. When Kara just stood there as a darkly clad, disfigured statue seemingly without doing anything to the phone, Drew began to pace back and forth on her plush carpet that was a replica of the one that had been in the second class cabins on the Titanic.

Kara felt Drew's eyes on her, so she began to move around the living room, coming to a stop at an exquisite chessboard made of glass. Instead of having black and white pieces, the two sets were deep blue and bright red. "Hello, Sergeant Malloy?" she said out loud as a voice came into her ear.

*'... eather service. The night will be mostly clear except in the north-east, but a cloud cover will move in...'*

"This is Special Officer MacNeal, I'm glad I caught you. I, working together with a brave citizen, have managed to apprehend the Scalpel. Yes, that's right, Sergeant Malloy."

*'... mperatures will be in the high forties at midnight, gradually climbing to...'*

"Yes... No, the sketches were correct, he's a homeless man. Yes."

Picking up the inch-tall red Queen, Kara held it tenderly, fondling it carefully between her gloved fingers. "Yes, that's right, Sergeant Malloy. Yes."

*'..tomorrow's highs will generally be in the low seventies, except where there's a possibility of showers...'*

"All right, I'll wait for you to arrive. Bye," she said and pressed a button on the phone.

"Wh- why didn't you tell him the address, Officer MacNeal?" Drew said, wrapping her arms around herself.

"I already did. In my squad car."

"Oh... please put down that chess piece. That set is one of a kind..."

"I'm very fond of red," Kara whispered hoarsely, looking with reverence at the chess piece. "The color of life, love... death. Blood. The color red is my friend, my only friend. After my accident, red was the only color I was able to see for the first few months... I've been trying to... to re-create that sense of loving companionship ever since... to re-create who I once was... before."

"Re-create...?" Drew said, narrowing her eyes. In her chest, her heart began to beat very fast as her mind realized with grim clarity what was going on. "That's... that's sick! Look, I'm sorry, Officer, I don't want you here anymore! Pl-please get out... get out now!" she continued in a strained voice, grabbing hold of Kara's arm intent on forcibly dragging the tall woman towards the staircase.

"Let go of me!" Kara hissed through clenched teeth. When the other woman didn't comply with her command, Kara lashed out and slapped her across the cheekbone, making the smaller woman's head whip around and forcing her into taking a stumbling step backwards.

"All you pretty women... I hear you when you laugh... but you! You didn't even do it behind my back... you laughed at me in my face! How dare you?" Kara said and grabbed hold of Drew's cream-colored pant suit with her left hand.

"No...! God, no! I didn't laugh at you... I didn't! Please don't kill me! Oh God... Oh God, I don't want to die! I w- won't tell anyone about you! I don't want to die!" Drew whimpered, unsuccessfully trying to pry Kara's strong hands off her suit.

A sudden flick of Kara's right hand produced an eight inch long scalpel that glinted dangerously in the soft light. Looking at the shiny three-inch blade at the end of the instrument, Kara marveled at the way it reflected the light shining from the living room's three lamps that were all covered by romantic, tasseled lamp shades.

Drew felt her heart skip several beats when she zeroed in on the razor-sharp blade, and she let out a terrified, sobbing whimper. She tried struggling against the strong hand, but her efforts only made Kara intensify her grip.

"No, you actually didn't laugh at me, did you? You just called me ugly instead. I have to give you credit, only one person has said that to my face before today. My father. He was the first to die," Kara said in her raspy voice.

An oppressive, doom-laden silence fell between the two women which lasted for several seconds until it was interrupted by Drew's cell phone ringing.

Knowing that it was her only chance to save her life, Drew threw herself forward - into Kara's grip - and reached out for the phone, hoping to have time to yell for help to whomever the caller was; the ID said 'Mom.'

An inch before Drew's fingers reached the phone, a glint of steel flashed through the air and an angry red line appeared across the upper part of her throat. Staggering backwards with her eyes wide open in mortal fear, she clutched her bleeding throat and screamed at the top of her lungs, but the only sound that escaped her severed vocal cords was a grotesque gurgle.

Kara lowered the blood-stained scalpel and let go of her latest victim - her ninth. Watching with glee as death slowly caught up with Drew Miller, she twirled the scalpel between her long, gloved fingers and waited for the best opportunity to make her next move.

The opening act of Kara's most favorite game came when Drew fell down on her knees, staring in wide-eyed terror and racked with gurgling sobs. Her mouth was slightly agape and blood from her slashed throat streamed down her chest, ruining her cream-colored pant suit.

Knowing that the time was right, Kara let the razor-sharp blade scream through the air and slice open the thumping artery on Drew's neck. A split second later, a fountain of blood spewed from the horrible wound that drenched the chess board, the teddy bear, the long-forgotten mug of coffee and everything else on that side of the room in a thick, dark red substance.

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Fifteen minutes later, Drew rose and walked over to a full-size Victorian mirror hanging on one of the walls of the lavishly decorated living room.

Tenderly stroking her throat, her chin, her lips, her cheeks, her nose, her forehead and finishing off with running her gloved hands across her golden-blonde hair, she winked at her reflection with her cobalt blue eyes that suddenly clashed with the color of her new hair.

"Oh... I'm so pretty," Drew whispered in a raspy voice, caressing the smooth, unharmed skin around her eyes as she performed a girly, little shimmy in front of the mirror. "I'm so pretty... so pretty... oh, so pretty..."

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## **THE END of THE SCALPEL**

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## **WONDERFUL BEINGS OF SHADOW AND LIGHT**

by Norsebard

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### **PART ONE**

The rhythmic cling-clang of canteens, mapholders and other pieces of hiking gear bouncing against their harnesses preceded the Coleman family by nearly a minute while the mother-daughter team scaled one of the smaller hills on their way to the world famous Lucifer's Ledge, the target of their little weekend jaunt in the mountain range in the north of their home State.

Little by little, a pair of floppy hats became visible over the rocky hill, and soon, Alison and Dorothy Coleman came into sight, both dressed in hiking boots, lined blue jeans, sturdy gloves, rugged flannel shirts - primarily green for Alison and red for Dorothy - and insulated, dark green hunting vests.

"Hang on," Dorothy said as she leaned forward and put her hands on her knees. "I need a minute... whew, that was steeper than it looked," she continued around a series of deep breaths.

Observing her mother's huffing and puffing, Alison applied a bit more suntan lotion to her nose and her rosy cheeks while she secretly chuckled at the wheezing sounds that emanated from her mother. "Well, I didn't think it was particularly steep," she said cheekily, putting the tube back into the backpack she was carrying. "Maybe it's because you used to smoke like an old diesel truck...?"

"Oh, rub it in, will you... back in the old days, everyone smoked... and I managed to quit, didn't I?" Dorothy said, pushed her floppy hat back and wiped her damp forehead with the back of a glove.

"Yes you did, and I'm really happy for you."

"And on top of that, I'm thirty years older than you!"

Hearing the same-old excuse for the umpteenth time, Alison let out a little whoop and went over to pat her mother's elbow. "Oooh, that must be it... now why didn't I think of that?"

"Yeah yeah, just make fun of me. Me, the woman who carried you for two weeks past my date because you were so lazy you didn't want to leave your comfy little home!"

'-comfy little home!' Alison mouthed, having heard that argument more than a few times over the years. Realizing that her mother had noticed, she smiled broadly and hooked her arm inside her mother's. "But just look at the scenery. Isn't it magnificent?" she continued and moved her hand in a sweeping arc over the landscape.

Standing just under a mile from the summit of the small mountain, the two Colemans looked at the vista below them. From their vantage point - just shy of a thousand feet - the parking lot where they had left their car an hour and a half earlier appeared to be a miniature.

The sky held a very special deep blue color and there wasn't a cloud in sight - in short, it was the perfect weather for a hike.

Pulling her cheeky daughter close, Dorothy nodded an affirmative answer to the statement and leaned in to give her a little kiss on the cheek. "Yes. The brochures didn't lie. And thank you for asking me to come. I know I'm just slowing you down."

"Oh, no, Mom... we're doing just fine, don't you think? I wouldn't want to do it any faster, that's for sure," Alison said and returned the favor in kind.

"Mmmm. I need some coffee. Let's take a short break," Dorothy said and began to look for a place where they could sit down and rest their legs.

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While Alison found their thermos and poured steaming hot coffee into two hard plastic mugs, Dorothy began to draw selected parts of the landscape on a sketch pad.

"Here you go, Mom," Alison said and handed the mug to her mother.

"Thank you, dear. Hmmm. Well, we're almost there, look," Dorothy said and pointed a gloved finger over Alison's shoulder.

Turning around, Alison took a sip of her own coffee as she tried to see what it was her mother meant. From her odd sitting position, she could only see rocks, vegetation and the occasional small bird. "Uh, what are you talking about?" she said, furrowing her brow.

"That thing there... right there... looks like sunlight glinting off a window. Can't you see it?"

"Oh... yeah," Alison said and cocked her head. She tried to shield her eyes from the strong sun, but it didn't help her see better. "Oh... that must be the old abandoned wildlife observation post mentioned in the hiking guide."

"Well, there's definitely a window over there, and windows tend to be connected to buildings, so I'd say you are right," Dorothy said and took a long sip of her coffee.

Chuckling, Alison blew on the hot, brown liquid to get it to cool off a bit more so she wouldn't burn her tongue again. "Oh, really? Well, why don't we try to go over there after the coffee? I mean, Lucifer's Ledge has been here since the dawn of the continents so I'm sure it can wait a little while longer..."

"Good idea," Dorothy said and returned to her drawing.

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Fifteen minutes later, Alison and Dorothy continued their trek up the side of the small mountain, eventually coming to a spot where Alison had to help her mother up by tugging on her arm.

"Ooof... just a little bit more... a little-"

"I'm pullin', I'm pullin'!" Alison said with a groan. Just as she was running out of strength, her mother was able to get a firm grip on the sparse vegetation and pull herself up the rest of the way.

"Ugh! I'm a mountain hiker, not a damn mountain goat! This route didn't look nearly as strenuous on paper," Dorothy said and massaged the aching muscles in her thighs.

"Yeah... and when we go back, we have to get you down that same rock, too!"

"Don't even mention it... at least we're closer to the spot where the sun hit the window," Dorothy said and pushed her floppy hat back from her eyes so she could see better. "Look, it's right over there. Another two hundred yards and we'll be there."

"Looks like it." Unzipping her insulated hunting vest, Alison tried to fan her shirt in and out to get some fresh air down her front, but as she did so, she suddenly noticed that her mother was standing precariously close to a crevice in the rock face. "Mom... Mom, don't move!"

"What's that, hon?" Dorothy said and turned around.

"No, don't mov-!" Alison shouted, but it was already too late.

As Dorothy turned, the heel of her right boot slipped off the rock face and into the crevice. She tried desperately to reach for her daughter to stay erect, but she ran out of time and took a nasty tumble down into the six-foot deep crevice, crying out in shock and pain as she bumped and scraped her legs and face against the coarse rock.

"Mom! Mom! Oh God, Mom! Are you all right?!" Alison shouted and threw herself down onto her stomach.

When she could see that it wasn't as deep as she had feared and that her mother was curled up in a fetal position at one end of the crevice, Alison hurriedly unstrapped her backpack and found a rope ladder that had been in there for the better part of a decade without ever seeing use.

Quickly hammering the two metal spikes into the only spot of soil she could find, she threw the ladder over the side and began to climb down. "Mom? God, Mom, please say something... are you all right?"

Dorothy leaned her head up and watched her daughter descend the brief drop. Shaking her head in disgust, she let out a few dry coughs and tried to get on her feet. "I'm... I'm... hurting, Alison. My right ankle... I th- think I've sprained it."

"I have a cold compress in the bac- Oh, God, you're bleeding! Yo- your... you have a long abrasion on your forehead!" Alison said as she reached the bottom of the crevice and frantically began to put a plan together to get both of them out of there.

"Ugh..." Dorothy said and touched her forehead. When she noticed that the fingers of the glove were all coated in a red substance, she sighed deeply and looked towards the heavens. "I've been hiking for thirty-five years, and I've never, ever had an accident before. Well, this just sucks!"

"Mom!" Alison said with an embarrassed snicker.

"What? I know, I know, I usually don't condone the use of expletives but, young lady, this situation definitely calls for one. Anyway, it looks like we'll have to break open the medical kit."

"Yeah. Now... come on, I'll guide you up. Put your good leg there," Alison said and pointed at the lowest rung on the rope ladder.

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"There..." Alison said after cleaning the wound on her mother's forehead with an antiseptic spray. "You're as good as new," she continued as she fitted a rectangular piece of cotton bandage.

"Thank you, sweetie. Once I take off my boot, it'll be a hassle to get it back on," Dorothy said and gingerly began to unlace her right boot.

Preparing the cold compress, Alison knelt down on the hard rock face to look at the ankle. "Ewww... it's black and blue already," she said once Dorothy had taken off the boot and the thick hiking sock. "You've sprained it, all right... can you wiggle your toes?"

"Just barely," Dorothy said and tried to do just that.



"Hmmm. Okay, this will probably ache a little," Alison said as she applied the cold compress around the ankle and secured it with two little hooks.

The sharp intake of breath and the pained hiss that came from her mother the second she put on the compress told Alison that it had ached a bit more than 'a little', and she looked up and offered a sympathetic smile to make it more bearable.

"What are we going to do now, Mom? I think we have to abandon Lucifer's Ledge," Alison said as she rolled down the right pant leg of the lined jeans which fit quite snugly over the compress.

After putting her mother's hiking sock into her backpack so it wouldn't get lost, Alison pushed the boot back on Dorothy's foot, earning herself a few hisses and icy stares in the process.

Sighing, Dorothy put her floppy hat back on and began to look around. Looking to her right, she dreaded the return trip, especially the spot that she had hardly been able to scale even with two good feet. "Oh, I... I don't know. No, I think we should try to make it to the Ledge. It's not far and it's why we're here in the first place. But... we're definitely going to have to take a longer route back down to the car."

"Mmmm-yeah. It's," Alison said, checking her wristwatch, "a quarter past three now. We still have five hours of daylight. We should be a-okay... we might run out of coffee, though," she continued, but the intended joke fizzled out when her mother didn't seem to think that it was particularly funny.

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Five minutes later, the two women continued their trek, going much, much slower than they had done before the accident. By leaning on each other, they were able to hobble along the trail, but even the relatively short distance to the strange window proved to be a strenuous affair.

When they finally reached the wildlife observation post the window was a part of, Dorothy waved her hand in a very tired fashion. "Here... I can sit on that," she said and pointed at a concrete bollard outside a pair of metal double doors. "Let me down here... yes, thank you."

Once her mother was seated safely, Alison took a few steps back and studied the front of the strange building. Built almost as a pillar box, it was made of concrete and metal and it was painted in a green, blue and black camouflage-pattern to keep it well-hidden among the shrubbery - unfortunately, over the years, vandals had smeared graffiti all over the outside walls.

"Is that really a wildlife observation post, Mom?"

"I don't know. It says so in the hiking guide, but that thing looks more like an Army outpost."

"Up here?"

"Well," Dorothy said and waved her hand at the concrete building. "It's there, whatever it is."

"Yeah," Alison said pensively and scratched her hairline under her floppy hat. When her mother let out a pained hiss, she immediately knelt down in front of her and grabbed her hands. "Are you in that much pain?"

"Uh-huh," Dorothy said in a strained voice. "I think it was a wrong idea to crawl up here after all. My ankle is killing me and... and it seems to me that the pain is crawling up my leg."

"Up your leg?" Alison said and began to remove her mother's loosely fitted boot to see for herself.

"Yeah. My shin bone and my knee ache too, now. I think it's because I've been walking so oddly. I've put a wrong strain on my ligaments."

"Shit, it doesn't look good..." Alison said and studied the discoloration of her mother's ankle and leg.

"Mind your language, dear."

"Sorry, Mom."

Taking off her floppy hat, Dorothy wiped her damp forehead with her sleeve before shooting her ankle a dirty look. "And to think I actually wanted to go on this hike to strengthen my joints and muscles... Pah."

"Mom, listen... stay here while I try to find a way down that won't stress your leg too badly," Alison said and handed her mother her backpack before getting up. "Much as I would like to, I can't carry you all the way back to our car."

"I'm not quite that heavy, young lady!" Dorothy said with a wink.

Moving away fast, Alison stopped three paces further along the trail and turned around to face her mother. "Oooh, I don't know about that," she said and stuck out her tongue. "No seriously, wait here until I get back, okay?"

"Sure, sure."

"I won't be long," Alison said and moved up the trail, past the strange building.

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Three hundred yards further on, Alison turned around in a slow circle and let out a "Hmmm-" while she studied the sparsely vegetated landscape at the summit of the small mountain. She was standing next to a large, bright orange sign warning hikers of Lucifer's Ledge, but that was the only sign of life there.

The blustery wind was chilly at the summit and she had to pull her insulated hunting vest tighter around herself to stay warm. Sighing, she turned back to the sign to read what it said:

*'Caution! Mortal Danger!'*

*Lucifer's Ledge*

*1100 ft. drop*

*Hikers must proceed with extreme caution. Camping, open fire and littering are strictly prohibited.*

*Caution! Mortal Danger!'*

Looking up, she tried to see if she could spot Lucifer's Ledge itself, but the cluster of low, windswept trees that stood in her way obscured her view. She knew from reading the tourist guides that the deceptively innocuous-looking slab of granite was the devil's preferred spot to enter the mortal realm under cover of storms whenever he wanted to take an innocent soul down to Hell. Once he had found a victim, he would tie the person to his back and jump off the ledge - at least, that's what the legends and myths said.

Alison shivered slightly from the chill of the wind and the spooky story and began to make her way back towards the concrete building, realizing that the only way down was the one they had used to get up there.

Pausing briefly, she looked at the concrete pillar box from the other angle but didn't get any wiser as to what it could be or why it was there. With a shrug, Alison continued the trek back to her mother.

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She knew at once that something was wrong. As she turned the last corner to get to the front of the building, the concrete bollard where her mother had been resting her legs was vacant. Her mother's coffee mug, her pencil and her sunglasses were lying next to the backpack and the bollard, seemingly tossed there randomly.

"Mom? ... Mom? ... Mom?!"

Spinning around to see if she could find any tracks, Alison felt her heart beat faster and faster at the awful thought that something had happened to her mother. She bit down on her lips and quickly ran the other way around the concrete building, but that didn't yield anything, either.

Once she was back at the metal door, she began to search the shrubbery and the crevices in the ground to see if Dorothy could have fallen in again, but she wasn't there, either.

When she had exhausted all the places she could look, she began to rub her face repeatedly and take several deep breaths to stay focused. "There's... there's nothing wrong. Nothing bad has happened. She's just wandered off. Somewhere. There's nothing wro-"

**CRREEEAAAK!**

The horrible, nails-on-chalkboard-like sound of old, rusty hinges being forced open made Alison jump a foot in the air and let out a shriek that echoed across the entire small mountain.

Spinning around, she put up her hands in a boxing pose, ready to fight for her life against the Devil himself if need be.

Instead of the Devil, Dorothy came out of the metal door and closed it behind her. "Oh, hi. Are you back already? I had to use the little girl's room, but I thought-"

"MOM! How could you! How. Could. You?!"

"How could I what?" Dorothy said and looked over her shoulder.

"How could you just get up and leave like that? God, I was so worried..."

"I had to use the little girl's room, like I said. And I thought that whatever this building was, they had to have a bathroom. And they do. It's just inside the door. And no, I didn't break it down... it wasn't locked."

Alison threw her hands in the air and stomped back to her mother. Grabbing the elder Coleman by the shoulders, she leaned in and rested her forehead against her mother's, mindful not to touch the bandage from the earlier incident. "Mom... please don't do that again. Please!"

"Well... okay. Sure. What's wrong, honey?"

"Nothing. I just thought the Devil... or at least a mountain troll had snatched you," Alison said and pulled her mother into an embrace.

"Oh... no, I think we're safe. But if you see a dashing mountain man, be sure to get his number for me, eh?"

"Mom!" Alison howled and stomped her boot into the ground.

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## **PART TWO**

As the metal door squeaked open on its rusty hinges, Alison bared her teeth in a worried grimace. "Oh, Mom... do you think we should be trespassing like this?"

"Well, it's abandoned, isn't it? Do you think that if we knock really politely, a caretaker or security guard of some kind will let us in?" Dorothy said as she hobbled in through the opened door.

Taking a deep breath and pulling her backpack higher on her shoulders, Alison slowly shook her head and followed her mother inside.

The room behind the metal door proved to be much larger than it appeared to be from the outside. At least thirty feet across and a hundred feet deep, the room was held in concrete gray with a few metal railings and a few signs warning people not to look at the bright light. Here and there, small piles of tin cans and other kinds of garbage proved that hikers had used the room without cleaning up afterwards, and just like the outside, every wall was covered in colorful and occasionally lewd graffiti.

To the right of the room, a long crevice in the wall held a rectangular viewing port protected by thick glass - almost like a thirty feet wide gun slit, Alison thought - but the glass was so filthy and covered by the shrubbery outside that it was impossible to see through.

"Mom, wouldn't we roughly be looking at Lucifer's Ledge?" Alison asked, pointing at the viewing port.

"Mmmm... I think so. I wonder what that's been used for...? Oh, did you read the signs? '*Caution! Don't look directly at the bright lights.*' "

"Yes, I noticed. What bright lights? Lightning?"

"Hard to say," Dorothy said and hobbled across the floor past the viewing port.

The sign had piqued Alison's interest so she turned right and walked over the smooth concrete floor to try to get a better look through the thick glass. Standing up on tip-toes, she was just about able to make out a few details of the landscape on the other side and established that it did indeed overlook the summit of the small mountain they were on.

She quickly calculated that the gun slit would be the perfect height for male viewers, especially if they were wearing army boots. "Hmmm," she said, trying to imagine a row of soldiers standing where she was and looking out onto the summit. "But what on earth could they have

been looking at? And why did they abandon it...? I mean, this landscape hasn't changed for thousands of years," she mumbled to herself before moving back to her mother.

Dorothy was leaning against a metal railing that was placed at a curiously random spot in the center of the large room. Once Alison got close to her, she pushed herself off the railing and moved towards her daughter.

"Dear, the bathroom is right over there if you need to go," Dorothy said and pointed at another door that led off from the concrete room.

"No thank you, I'm fine," Alison said, suddenly slowing down when she noticed a rusty, decrepit sign hanging on something resembling a mesh gate at the back wall of the room. "Oh... look at that... 'No admittance beyond this point, blah, blah, blah... Research Facility... Trespassers will be shot on sight...!' Mom, we better get the hell out of here!"

"Language, honey."

"How can you think about that when we're only seconds away from facing certain death if a Marine or whomever finds us here? I say we leave at once... c'mon, Mom," Alison said and grabbed hold of her mother's arm, but Dorothy protested at once by pulling her arm back.

"Oh no you don't, young lady. We did this all the time in the 1960s... I was at, oh, at least half a dozen anti-war demonstrations at military and Air Force bases and they never turned ugly," Dorothy said and limped towards the sign and the mesh gate it was hanging on.

Rolling her eyes, Alison shuffled after her mother so she could offer her a supportive hand in case she got into even more trouble. "Well... quite frankly, this isn't the 1960s..."

"I know... look, the mesh gate is so rusty the hinges have broken off. Don't you want to take a peek inside...?"

"No. I want to find a phone so we can call Mountain Rescue so they can send a helicopter so we can get you to a hospital so we can get your ankle and leg checked," Alison said flatly.

Dorothy chuckled and grabbed hold of the outside of the mesh gate. "That's a whole lot of 'so's', dear. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I pretty much left that behind when I started studying Political Science at the Uni, Mom."

Shrugging, Dorothy pulled the mesh gate towards her, cringing at the squeaky, rusty sounds produced by the hinges. "Listen to that, nobody's been here for years."

"Famous last words," Alison mumbled under her breath.

"And the next door is open, too. Boy, is this thick or what? What's that, ten-twelve inches? Must be reinforced. Maybe a fire door," Dorothy said, sticking her head through the gap. When she

had taken a thorough look, she popped her head back out and turned towards her daughter. "You're not going to believe it, honey... it's broad daylight in there. It's like a staging area for something. Come on, let's explore it."

With that, Dorothy disappeared through the door.

"What? No! No, wait... what about your foot?! Oh, I don't believe this shit!" Alison shouted and threw her hands in the air.

*'Language, dear!'* came Dorothy's predictable reply from the other side of the door.

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After hobbling down a short flight of unusually wide stairs, Dorothy found herself in a corridor of dull, gray concrete on the walls and ceiling, and strangely grooved white tiles on the floor. On the right hand side wall, an olive green sign proclaimed it to be the: *'Gen. Michael F. Peyton Medical*

*Research Facility. AAAI+ security clearance needed beyond this point.'*

To her right, the entire wall consisted of one huge piece of what appeared to be armored glass that stretched from the tiles to the ceiling. The room beyond the glass was much darker than the corridor, but she was able to pick out a few details, like a bank of filing cabinets and a few chairs.

At the end of the corridor, a door similar to the one they had just gone through was slightly ajar - a flashing shadow on the floor proved that somewhere beyond the next door, a strip light wasn't working properly.

"Mmmm... this must be carved into the mountain itself," Alison said once she joined her mother at the foot of the stairs. "The building isn't this large up at ground level!"

"No... do you know what this reminds me of?"

"No?"

"The White Room, remember that? The room the astronauts used in the Apollo space program when they were getting strapped into their capsules. Or... actually, it looks a bit like a security check-in at an airport," Dorothy said and leaned against the cold glass.

"Yeah..." Alison said and took off her floppy hat. "Okay, we've seen it. We can also see there's nothing in here. Now let's go back outside and begin the descent," she continued and turned around.

Chuckling out loud over her daughter's lack of adventure, Dorothy pushed herself off the glass and limped back towards Alison. "Oh, will you wait! Don't you want to see what's beyond the next door?"

"Not particularly, no."

"Well, I do. I did this all the time when I was a teenager. There's nothing to it!"

Chuckling again at the expression on her daughter's face - a mix of shock and vague interest - Dorothy hobbled off towards the fire door at the end of the corridor.

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The second door was as heavy as the first, but the two Colemans were able to push it open without too much drama. When the door opened fully, it revealed a corridor not unlike the first they had been in, except it didn't have any glass walls, only porthole-like windows that led off from the hall.

Two red lines had been painted on the floor, acting almost like a guide telling visitors where to go. The lines went straight ahead until they reached the end of the corridor where they turned right and went out of sight.

"Look, Mom... I've found an office," Alison said, peeking through one of the small portholes.

"But no door... hmmm..." Dorothy said, rubbing her chin. "Oh! Here it is... here, let's give this thing a push," she continued, pointing at a round, metal push-button next to the portholes.

When Dorothy pushed it, the door sent out a series of moans and groans almost like it couldn't believe it was asked to do its job - finally, after several long, heartfelt, mechanical moans, a sound similar to a pneumatic pump was heard and the door slid upwards.

"Whoa!" Dorothy said and took a surprised step backwards, quickly grabbing hold of Alison so she wouldn't fall.

As the door locked in place at its upper stop, a cluster of strip lights began to turn on inside the office, revealing a horrendous mess of files, binders, books and all sorts of other office equipment strewn about haphazardly. At a desk, a swivel-chair had been left upside-down, a coffee mug had been knocked over - depositing its contents onto a stack of now brown-tinged papers - and an old-fashioned telephone had been left off the hook.

"What in the world...?" Alison whispered hoarsely, staring wide-eyed at the mess.

"Phone!" Dorothy said and limped over to the desk.

Sitting down on the edge of the desk to give her sore leg a rest, Dorothy picked up the receiver and tapped the hook several times to get a tone. When nothing happened, she put the receiver on



the telephone and waited for a few seconds. As she picked it up again and only listened to dead air, it soon became clear that it didn't work. "No, it's dead. Hmmm!"

"Mom, I really think we should leave. I mean, what if someone comes back to his or her office and sees this? They'll think we've made the me-"

Without warning, the pneumatic door slid down to its bottom stop, moaning and groaning like an old steam locomotive.

"Oh, no!" Alison howled and jumped over to the door. When she couldn't pull it up, she began to thump her fist against the glass, but it was too thick and strong for her fists to have any effect.

"What are we gonna do?!"

"First of all... don't panic, sweetie," Dorothy said and slipped off the edge of the desk. "I'm sure there must be a similar push-button somewhere close to the door. If there isn't, it would be a prison, not an office."

Looking high and low, Alison searched frantically for the push-button, but failed to look at the most logical place - next to the door.

Dorothy found it at once and pressed the small, metal button. Like before, the door slid upwards accompanied by a symphony of moans and groans. "There... no panic necessary. Oh, you know what I think? The door obviously has some kind of timer telling it when to close... but if the door is actively closed from the outside by someone pushing the button, I'll bet the lights go out in here."

"Mmmm!" Alison mumbled and wrapped her arms around herself.

Sensing her daughter's discomfort, Dorothy hobbled over to her and pulled her into a little hug. "If I'm right about the timer, the door should close in... oh, maybe a minute or so. In the meanwhile, why don't you come over and sit down on the chair?"

"I wanna get out of here! I wanna go home, Mom!"

"And we will, don't worry. But since we're here, I think we should go on a little journey of exploration. Don't you think it's exciting here? I mean, what do you think the cause for this mess was?"

"Don't know, don't wanna know... actually, I don't give a sh-" Alison said, cutting herself off before she could utter the profanity.

"Well, I do want to know, young lady. Would you mind helping your old Mom by pulling that swivel-chair upright...?" Dorothy said, pointing at the chair.

Behind them, the door closed again, making Dorothy smile broadly. "Told you so. Now, the chair, please...?"

Sighing, Alison went over to it and pulled it upright. Once she had wheeled it back to the desk, she took a peek at some of the papers that were lying on the desktop. The coffee that had been spilt had long since dried up, but it had left a huge, dirty-brown stain on the wooden desk and a stack of files - the first of which clearly read '*TOP SECRET - security clearance AAAI+*' followed by a date and endless lines of typed encrypted content.

"Whoa... March ninth, 1973!" Alison said as she started to read the coffee-stained paper. "Mom... 1973! Has this office been like this for nearly forty years...?"

"I wouldn't have thought so," Dorothy said and sat down on the swivel-chair. "There isn't any dust... though it seems to be a fairly aseptic environment, so... it's possible. It could also just be an old file someone has found in an archive somewhere."

"Mmmm-yeah, but... no, I don't think so. Oh, but that's nonsense! It's called the General Peyton Medical Research Facility... it's gotta belong to the Army... but there are no computers, no electronic devices of any kind... look, there's a Filofax, an old-fashioned paper calendar, even a typewriter over there in the corner for cryin' out loud...! It's like a... a... time warp. Or an episode of the Twilight Zone!" Alison said and jumped away from the desk like she was afraid she might be exposed to the Andromeda Strain.

After taking off her backpack so she could lean back on the swivel-chair, Dorothy began to play with an old-fashioned fountain pen she had found buried under a pile of papers. "I'm sure there must be a logical explanation to all this... 1973, that was at the height of the cold war... Nixon was still in office..."

"Mom, where are you going with that?"

"Uh... I'm not quite sure..." Dorothy said with a laugh.

"Well, I know where I'm going... I'm going back to the little girl's room, and then I'm going home! Even if I have to give you a piggy-back all the way down to the car, we're going! This place gives me the creeps..." Alison said and moved over to the closed pneumatic door after putting her backpack down on the floor next to her mother's. "Mom... please stay here... and no tricks this time, okay? It nearly killed me the last time..."

"I promise, sweetie. There are plenty of things to look at so I'll stay right here," Dorothy said and shot her daughter a warm smile.

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Walking swiftly to combat the shivers that ran down her spine, Alison made her way back to the office, grumbling constantly over the fact that her mother had left out a few small yet vital details about the state of the bathroom: that the toilet had dried up and was merely a hole in the ground, and that there wasn't any water in the faucet.

Grumbling again, Alison wiped her fingers on yet another moist towelette, thankful that she'd had them in her vest pocket instead of leaving them in the backpack like she had wanted to.

As she stepped through the second of the two fire doors, she knew at once something was wrong - the pneumatic door to the office was closed, as expected, but she could see through the porthole that the lights had gone out, meaning the door had been closed from the outside.

"Oh, Mom...!" she barked and stomped over to the push-button to slam her thumb down on it. When the door had slid open and the strip lights had come alive, Alison stepped into the office and quickly looked around.

Growling out loud, she threw her hands in the air and looked towards the heavens. "You promised! Aargh, I don't believe this shit! You damn well promised you wouldn't play any tricks on me!"

When she noticed the fountain pen her mother had been playing with lying on the floor broken in two, she cocked her head and moved over to the desk. Another quick search didn't yield any clues as to where Dorothy could be, so she pulled the swivel-chair back over to the desk and sat down.

"Mom... we need to have a serious talk when we get home... this isn't funny. This isn't funny at all," she said quietly to herself, trying to work out where on Earth her mother could be.

The papers on the desk had been disturbed even more, with the coffee-stained one gone altogether and several others placed differently to how they had been only a few minutes before.

Suddenly feeling a cold sense of dread sweeping over her, Alison began to study the files but found them to be so heavily encrypted she couldn't read a word. Digging further into the pile, she finally found a note written in clear English that read,

*'03-08-73. To General R. Kilpatrick at the Peyton Medical Research Facility. Four specimens transferring in from Red Carpet. Expected to arrive at 1400 hours tomorrow. Handle with extreme caution. New species, unable to extrapolate much information yet. Lt.Col. J. Hopking.'*

"Specimens..." Alison said out loud, "Extreme caution... new species! What the Hell were they doing here? Animal testing? Oh God, this gives me the creeps!" she howled and threw away the note.

Getting up, she paced the office a couple of times, but then made a beeline for the door, intent on finding her mother and giving her a strongly-phrased piece of her mind.

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**PART THREE**

Outside the office, Alison began to study the cold, impersonal corridor. There wasn't anything that hinted at her mother's whereabouts, but the two red lines on the floor intrigued her and she knew her mother would have felt the same.

"Hmmm"-ing out loud, she ventured left, going further into the research facility.

After thirty yards, she came to a T-fork in the corridor, but since the two red lines went off to the right, that's where she wanted to go, too. Taking a few moments to glance to her left, she noticed that the other branch stopped at a pair of solid fire doors twenty yards further on. Next to the fire doors, 'C24' had been painted on the gray walls in large, black, militaristic letters.

"C twenty-four?" she said out loud, racking her brain to work out what that could mean. When nothing came to her, she shrugged and followed the red lines.

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Another thirty yards on, she suddenly noticed something on the floor - drag marks that stood out quite clearly in the thin layer of dust that covered everything in the base-like building.

"Hmmm... that could have been made by Mom's boot..." she said quietly, crouching down to run her finger through the dust to see how thick it was.

Moving on, Alison began to spot many instances of the drag mark that was disturbing the dust on the floor. "Mom... what the Hell are you doing? Where are you going?" she whispered, wiping cold sweat off her brow with her sleeve.

The two red lines made another ninety-degree turn at the end of the corridor, moving left down a hall that was darker than the ones Alison had been in until then. Looking up, she quickly spotted the reason - three of the four strip lights in the ceiling had given out and the last one had dimmed quite considerably.

She crouched down again to search for the familiar drag mark, but she wasn't able to see anything in the semi-darkness. Letting out a curse, she stood up straight and rubbed her brow. "Damn... I wish I'd brought my backpack and my flashlight after all. Mom? Mom! MOM! Are you here? MOM! ... Dammit! Where the Hell did she go? I wasn't gone for that long... how could she have made it way over here on her bad leg...? MOM!"

When the only response was her own voice echoing softly off the smooth walls, Alison felt an ice cold chill race up and down her spine and a hard knot of fear begin to form in her stomach. "There's something wrong here... someth- ...wait a minute... March ninth, 1973," she said out loud and spun around.

"March ninth, that was the date on the paper with the coffee stain... but the other note... the other note was dated March eighth and that said that four new specimens would be arriving on... oh, God... oh, God...! S- something must have happened and... MOM! MOM! If you can hear me, shout! MOM!"

The oppressive silence of the hallway of the Peyton Medical Research Facility suddenly got to Alison and she set off running back towards the first office, hoping to find her mother there, telling her that it had all been a joke.

As she turned a corner, she came to a skidding stop and stared at the floor, or rather, at a drag mark she had missed when she had gone the other way. This mark was different from the others; it had left a short, dark brown stain on the tiles, and it was half-outside and - more importantly - half-under a closed door with a small sign that read '*Access to Central Laboratory - MORTAL DANGER! - for Security Clearance AAAI+ personnel ONLY.*'

"Oh, Mom..." Alison groaned, wringing her hands.

Like the door to the office, it appeared to be pneumatically operated by a small push-button next to the sign. Alison reached out for it, but stopped an inch before her finger would have made contact.

"This is madness," she whispered hoarsely. "Why would Mom go in there? Maybe she met someone... someone wh- who told her about a working phone...? Oh, this is madness!"

Clenching her jaw, Alison reached out for the button and depressed it. A second later, the pneumatic door slid upwards, squeaking and moaning like its colleague at the office.

Alison waited another few seconds for the strip lights to turn on, but then she stepped into the room, finding it to be much smaller than she had anticipated, especially for something called the central laboratory.

"It looks more like an anteroom... a messy anteroom," she whispered, looking at the same kind of mess she and her mother had found in the first office: files, folders, various equipment, two chairs and even an old-fashioned computer keyboard with very colorful keys had been strewn about randomly, covering every square inch of the ubiquitous white tiles on the floor.

When Alison put her boot down on the smallest of the piles to make her way across the anteroom to get to yet another pneumatic door, the sturdy heel of the hiking boot crushed a piece of glass that had been hidden under a few files.

A vile, putrid smell filled the small room, and Alison quickly covered her nose and mouth and jumped back to the first door that had only just slid shut. Frantically thumping her index finger on the push-button to get it to open, she tried to hold her breath, but her thumping heart forced her to breathe.

"Come on! Come on!" she howled muffled by her hand, but her impatience didn't impress the door that insisted on moving upwards at its own pace - until it suddenly stopped with an agonizing, moaning squeak halfway up the rails.

For the first few seconds, Alison just stared wide-eyed at the stuck door, not quite believing her rotten luck, but then she realized that if she wanted to get away from the awful stench emanating

from whatever it was she had crushed under her boot, she needed to either crawl under the door, which meant that she had to get down on the floor right next to the source of the stench, or try the sliding door at the other end of the anteroom.

Making up her mind in a hurry, she jumped over the disorderly piles and went straight for the second door.

After she had pressed her index finger against the second door's push-button, she mouthed a silent prayer to whomever was listening that it would open without any problems - her prayer was apparently heard because the second door slid open faultlessly.

Just as she jumped through it, the strip lights in the ceiling flickered to life, revealing a much larger room divided into six bays that reminded her of a suite at a hospital.

In the far corner of the room, behind an odd, square bed, a vaguely humanoid shadow briefly played across a concrete wall, but vanished when Alison spun around and thumped the button for the door to stop the stench from entering the new room as well.

"Phew," Alison said out loud and wiped cold sweat off her brow while she watched the door slide shut. Once she had regained her breath, she began to look around at the six bays, immediately wondering who on Earth would be able to fit on the weird shapes the beds had been built in.

In addition to the square one, two of them were more than ten feet long, two were so wide they would dwarf a regular King Size bed, and the final one was so narrow it couldn't be more than twenty inches across.

Above the beds, panels had been bolted to the concrete walls with the regular tubes and hoses one would expect to find at a hospital, except that the labels describing the types of equipment were encrypted.

An out of place - yet familiar and not at all unpleasant - smell was lingering in the somewhat stale air in the hospital suite, but Alison wasn't sure what it was that triggered that familiarity for her.

*Sniff, sniff* - "That's..." - *Sniff* - "that's Mom's perfume!" Alison suddenly exclaimed, hurrying over to beds to check if her mother had used one of them to rest her leg.

When the search yielded nothing, she rubbed her chin repeatedly and stepped back into the center of the room. Shaking her head slowly, she began to walk slowly down a connecting hall that led off in the other direction from the fire door.

Behind her, the shadow playing across the wall returned, only this time, it briefly split into two entities before it vanished again.

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The connecting hall had five doors leading off to the left - labeled 'Operating Room 1', 'Operating Room 2', 'Central Laboratory', 'General Storage' and 'Cold Storage', in that order.

At first, Alison couldn't get herself to depress the button for the room labeled Operating Room 1, but a part of her wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery she had been thrown into.

Gulping audibly, she put her index finger on the push-button and watched the pneumatic door slide up. Like everywhere else, the room on the other side of the door was terribly messy, but unlike the first office and the anteroom, the mess wasn't created by files or folders - instead, it was shredded white lab coats and pale green scrubs.

For the briefest of moments, Alison froze solid, thinking that she was looking at dead bodies, but then she realized it was only clothes from a nearby rack that had been completely demolished.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she looked around the small room, recognizing it as one where doctors would wash their hands and prepare for surgery.

Just ahead, a large window connecting the small room to the operating theater itself had been shattered, leaving it as a huge cobweb of irregular lines and fragments. Beyond the shattered glass, Alison was just barely able to make out a horrendous-looking bed-like frame made of black metal that had several pointy instruments attached to it on long arms.

"God, how awful," she croaked. "That's straight out of the dark ages... what the Hell were they doing here?"

Four aluminum tables on wheels were placed around the bed-like frame carrying surgical instruments of all kinds. One of the tables had been tipped over so the precision tools lay scattered all over the floor, but the others looked like they were ready for use.

"Brrrr...!" Alison said, feeling a shiver run up and down her spine. Having seen more than enough, she stepped back out of the small room and re-entered the corridor.

She didn't even bother with the room labeled 'Operating Room 2' but went straight for the 'Central Laboratory' instead. As she held her finger above the push-button, a faint echo of a familiar sound reached her ears, and she whipped her head around to stare up the long corridor.

"Mom?" she whispered in a shaky voice, but no response was forthcoming.

The sound had only been audible for a second, but Alison was sure it had been one of the pneumatic doors opening or closing. She took a deep breath and held it to focus all her senses on listening, but the sound wasn't repeated.

Getting a sinking feeling in her gut, she depressed the push-button for the door to the Central Laboratory.

As soon as the strip lights had come to life, she took a shaky step into the room. Looking around at once, she realized she had found the heart of the research facility.

The enormous lab was divided into three equally large bays that were separated by low, thin, concrete walls. Each of the three bays was roughly fifteen feet across and sixty feet deep, and they all had highly polished metal counters going the entire length of both the outer and the dividing walls.

At the far end of each bay, a ten-foot tall water tank protected by thick, sturdy metal bars had been built into the wall so only the front part was visible. The glass had cracked in two of the three tanks, but the last still held its fluid contents - and something else that seemed to float on the surface of the murky water.

Cupboards with metal or glass doors were hanging above the polished counters, but despite the heavy padlocks adorning most of them, they had all been opened.

As Alison walked on slightly shaky legs into the middle bay of the lab, she could see that the cupboards contained large and small test tubes and jars filled with all kinds of ghastly, grotesque things like animal-like fetuses, eyeballs seemingly sorted by size and color, severed hands and feet, and even a complete, bald head with features that were distinctly un-human.

"Oh... oh, this is too gruesome," she whispered, wringing her hands at the sight.

From one step to the next, she froze solid, clutching her hands to her mouth. A wave of ice cold fear swept over her, leaving her heart beating so fast that she developed chest pains. When the fear festered in every part of her, goosebumps broke out all over her body and her stomach clenched itself into a rock-hard knot.

Someone - or something - had entered the lab behind her.

With chattering teeth and eyes as wide as saucers, Alison slowly turned around to see what kind of hideous creature had followed her there.

At first, she couldn't fathom what she was looking at, but when it dawned on her that the hideous creature was in fact her mother, she let out a howling sob and jumped forward with her arms stretched out ahead of her. "MOM! OH, MOM! MOM... Oh, God, I'm so happy to see you... God... d- don't... don't you EVER... EVER... do that again! Okay? Don't you EVER disappear like that again!" she howled while holding Dorothy in a crushing embrace.

"I won't," Dorothy said and reached up to caress her daughter's cheek. "When you didn't come back at once, I wanted to see more of the place. So I left the office."

"Didn't come back at once?! I was only gone for something like five minutes! And that was only because you forgot to tell me that the toilet was just a damn hole in the ground!"

"Language, dear."



"Aw, to Hell with that now! Don't you understand how scared I got when I couldn't find you?" Alison said and wiped her brow with a shaky hand. "Mom, I've looked everywhere in this awful hellhole!"

"I've been right here the whole time, sweetie, waiting for you. It's such an interesting place, don't you think?" Dorothy said and walked unhindered over to lean against one of the polished counters. Once there, she cocked her head and moved her eyes up her daughter's body, almost like she was retrieving and storing information.

"Interesting? You call this interesting? I call it a living nightmare! God only knows what kind of medieval experiments they've conducted here... take a look at some of the test tubes, for God's sake... there's all kinds of stuff in there I don't even wanna know what is!"

"Well, I could tel-"

"Oh, why are we even still here? There's obviously not a working phone in the entire facility, so let's get back to the office, get our backpacks and get the Hell out of here!" Alison said and made for the door, but her mother just cocked her head and seemed to have all the time in the world.

Eventually shrugging and moving away from the counter, Dorothy strode over to Alison and wrapped an arm around her waist in an entirely inappropriate manner. "We could leave, but you'd be missing out on something really exciting. You'll never guess what I've found... wonderful beings of shadow and light," she whispered in her daughter's ear.

"Mom... what in the world are you doing?" Alison said, missing parts of what her mother told her when she reached down to pry the roaming fingers away from her stomach.

"I'm just happy to see you again, sweetie," Dorothy said and pulled away. Once again, she cocked her head and looked at her daughter like a stranger.

Grimacing, Alison pushed the button for the pneumatic door and waited for it to open. "Ar- are you all right? You seem... I don't know... odd. Did you hit your head on something...?"

"Oh, no."

With the door fully open, the two Colemans stepped out into the well-lit hallway. Almost at once, Dorothy began to look towards the door labeled 'Cold Storage'.

"Oh... w- wait a minute... your head... the abrasion! It's almost gone! How is that possible?" Alison said and narrowed her eyes as she noticed that the two-inch long scrape on her mother's forehead had been reduced to a barely visible, faintly red line.

"That was magic," Dorothy said and touched her forehead. "You could also call it a healthy layer of Rickman's Elixir. You know I always carry a tube in my backpack."

"Mmmm...?"

"Yes. Well, now that we're here, would you mind if I showed you something really exciting? It's right down there," Dorothy said and pointed at the door the furthest down the connecting hall. "It won't take long," she continued, smiling at Alison.

Alison looked down the hall but couldn't fathom what it was her mother was alluding to. "But there's nothing down there... except the Cold Storage? What could possibly be so exciting in there?"

"Oh, you have no idea, sweetie."

Behind them, the door to the Central Laboratory closed with a pneumatic whoosh, leaving the hall in near-silence, only broken by the faint sounds of Alison's heavy breathing.

"Well... all right. Just a peek and then we head back to the office," Alison said and walked hesitantly down towards the last door.

"But of course. Just a peek," Dorothy echoed and followed closely behind her daughter.

When Alison reached the by now familiar panel with the push-button, she felt her nape hairs stand on edge. Spinning around, she was able to catch a very brief glimpse of her mother studying her with a cold, calculating look on her face; it only lasted for a fraction of a second, then she looked like she always had.

"Something wrong, dear?" Dorothy said and cocked her head.

"No... this place gives me the creeps," Alison mumbled and pressed the button for the door.

As the double-width door opened with a series of moans and groans, it revealed that the Cold Storage room was even larger than the laboratory - however, the 'cold' part of the name was a misnomer as the temperature was no lower inside than it was in the hall. If anything, it was warmer and a lot more moist.

At first, Alison hesitated because the strip lights were reluctant to come alive, but an insistent push on the back by her mother made her step inside.

"What's that awful smell?" she whispered as she set foot on the floor that was made up of the same grooved white tiles as the halls. The unpleasant smell only grew stronger, and soon, it was so penetrating and intrusive that she had to pinch her nostrils with her fingers.

"Like I said, it's the wonderful beings of shadow and light," Dorothy said and pushed her daughter forward again.

Above them, the strip lights surrendered to the fact that they were called to duty and began to turn on in a sequence of slow and fast flashes.

For every flash, Alison saw more of the gruesome contents of the storage room; for every flash, she let out a shocked, terrified cry; for every flash, she took an involuntary step back until she bumped into her mother.

When the strip lights were fully on, Alison clutched her head and let out a piercing, primordial scream that grew in volume and desperation until it reached a near-insane intensity.

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## **PART FOUR**

The Cold Storage room had been converted into a nest for a huge, dark gray, shapeless creature that was resting near the ceiling atop a pile of vaguely recognizable material. Protruding from the creature's underside, dozens of long, pale gray tentacles formed a living curtain by hanging over the metal beams for the strip lights that ran the full width of the room.

At the end of each tentacle, suspended five feet above the tiled floor, hung a naked, hideously shrunken human corpse.

The tentacles had been forced down their throats, creating grotesque expressions on the wide-open faces of the more than seventy remains of the men and women who had worked at the General Michael F. Peyton Medical Research Facility that fateful day in March, 1973.

The horrendous sight was almost too much for Alison to bear and she began to stagger sideways, but she knew that if she didn't keep her wits about her, she'd end up next to the other poor souls.

When Alison connected the dots and realized that her mother had already fallen victim to the parasitic creature and had been sent back to lure her into the same trap, she choked up so badly that she could hardly breathe.

With her throat too contracted to scream, she tried to run back to the door but found it closed. At once, she began to look around for something she could use against the creature that was posing as her mother, but she couldn't really find anything that would be strong enough.

Dorothy turned around and cocked her head. When Alison shied away from her, she began to move forward, walking unhindered but producing a crunching sound from the sprained ankle for each step she took. "Why are you running away from me, sweetie? Isn't this exciting? Come on, let's play! You wanna play, sweetie?"

"Stay away from me, you... you... monster!" Alison said and grappled for the first usable thing she had found on her search - a four-foot long steel tube that was covered by rust but that still seemed heavy enough to inflict damage.

"Oh, that's not a nice thing to say to your mother. Me, the woman who carried you for two weeks past my date because you were so lazy you didn't want to leave your comfy little home!"

Hearing the creature say the line her mother had used so many times over the years nearly made Alison break down, but she steeled her resolve and swung the heavy steel tube at the creature's head.

The violent impact across Dorothy's temple was strong enough to kill any human being, but the creature merely shrugged it off - too hard as it turned out, as a four-inch long section of its skull behind the left eye worked itself loose and fell off, quickly followed by a stream of blood and brain fluid.

Staring wide-eyed at the sight, Alison suddenly felt her stomach clench hard. Staggering sideways, she vomited all over the white tiles, letting out everything she'd had the entire day.

Dorothy laughed out loud and reached up to touch her exposed brain. "That wasn't nice, young lady. You'll be grounded for a week for that."

After the vomiting, Alison's throat had turned so raw from the screaming and the gastric acid shooting through it that she could hardly function. It wasn't until the monster wearing her mother's skin began to walk closer to her that she reacted by staggering over to the pneumatic door.

Dorothy tried to follow her, but the abused, sprained ankle finally gave up the ghost and buckled under the strain. As the foot twisted to the side with a sickening crunch, Dorothy looked down and let out a series of curses in a foreign tongue aimed at the frailty of the human body.

The broken off foot and the exposed brain seemed to come together and create a systems failure for the creature, because it suddenly began to spew out a long stream of incoherent gibberish, smiling at her daughter as she moved closer. "Back I take can't managed hang paper was days me nearly years see need yes let's of than off that oh thank the there things thirty this short didn't lie right like hiker will window minute older plenty glinting slowing smoked in on and know to goat coffee come some look top for not you mountain route down are break brochures as asking at it steeper strenuous rub quit sunlight just every- every- every- one... I'll stay right here... I promise, sweetie," she concluded, holding her hands out palms-up almost like she was inviting Alison into an embrace.

Hearing the creature speak in a voice that was so dear to her sent wave after wave of ice cold shivers down Alison's back, and she gritted her teeth and prepared to strike the monster again to end the mental torture - but as she swung the heavy steel tube at the creature's head for a second time, she discovered that the rust and the force of the first impact had weakened the tube so much that it merely broke in two and fell impotently to the floor.

Cocking her head, Dorothy closed her eyes and seemed to concentrate hard. A few moments later, Dorothy Coleman's dead, soulless body slumped bonelessly onto the floor.

In its place stood a shadowy creature seemingly made of a dark gray fog. Almost immediately, two arms and a head with two pale gray eyes were formed from the fog. Once it was fully there, its color changed from dark gray to a bright white that sparkled like pearls.

Stretching out its arms, the front of the creature's face creased into something approaching a devious grin.

"OH, GOD! OH, GOD!" Alison howled and ran towards the door, knowing that she wouldn't have a chance against the monster.

Thumping her index finger down on the push-button for the pneumatic door, she stared wide-eyed at her mother's remains being lifted high in the air by two tentacles. As the door whooshed open, the last thing she saw before she stormed out of the storage room was one of the tentacles tearing the clothes from her mother's body and the other ramming itself down her throat, forcing her jaw to open so widely it fractured.

Frightened out of her mind, Alison tore through the hallways and rooms she had visited on her way to the wing that held the Central Laboratory. When she passed by the six hospital beds, she saw to her great horror that another of the dark gray, fog-like creatures was waiting for her by the pneumatic door to the anteroom.

As she approached it, the creature crouched down and morphed into the same pearly white color the one in the cold storage had assumed.

"OH NO! No, no, no..." Alison howled and came to a skidding halt five yards away from the second monster. Her brain had turned to mush after the horrific experiences, but she still had enough wherewithal to duck away from the creature's arms and run over to the hospital beds.

Once there, she threw pillows and all sorts of other equipment at the white beast, but nothing seemed to faze it. Coming to the end of her tether, Alison picked up a metal chair that had been left in a corner of the room and threw it at the monster.

At first, the heavy chair seemed to pass straight through the fog-like torso, but the seat hit something solid, creating an audible BUMP and knocking the beast backwards, away from the pneumatic door.

Alison didn't want to tempt fate more than absolutely necessary so she jumped forward and frantically pushed the button for the door while the creature was busy trying to remove the chair from its body. When the door whooshed open, her nostrils were assaulted by a fierce, ungodly stench and she took several frightened steps backwards until she remembered that she had produced the smell herself by stepping on some glass under the files that were littering the floor.

Just as the fog-like creature threw the metal chair into the wall with such force that it buckled and broke in two, Alison jumped into the stinking anteroom and closed the door behind her.

Her next problem was the door that was stuck halfway up - it meant she had to get down next to the source of the stench to crawl under it - but she took a deep breath and dove onto the floor.

Inching her way under the door on her stomach, she had nearly made it to freedom when an impossibly strong force wrapped itself around her right ankle that was still on the other side and squeezed it so hard that she could almost feel her bone shatter.

Little by little, she was pulled back into the anteroom where she knew certain death awaited her. Panicking, she began to kick out wildly with her free leg but she could feel she was only kicking holes in the air. Suddenly, her hiking boot impacted with something solid and the iron grip was released from her ankle.

Alison let out an unrestrained sob and hurriedly pulled both her legs out from below the stuck door. Trying to get up, she immediately noticed that her pant leg and her sock looked like they had been dipped in acid, but because of the lined jeans, her skin was mostly untouched and she could put weight on her leg without problems.

Staggering to her feet, she set off down the next hall to try to escape her followers. Ten yards further on, a weird noise behind her made her look over her shoulder - the first of the two fog-like creatures was floating under the door and quickly coagulating on her side of it.

"Nooooo!" she screamed, instantly feeling a massive sense of pain that made her clutch her abused throat and let out a series of strangled coughs and groans.

She quickly turned around and began to run for the next door, sobbing and moaning in pain with each step she took.

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A minute of frantic running later, she realized she was lost - hopelessly lost. Standing at a T-branch of three identical connecting halls, she had no idea where to go. She didn't want to turn back to where she had come from out of fear of bumping into the monsters, but she knew she had to find the exit in an almighty hurry or else she'd turn into a midnight snack for the nesting creature in the Cold Storage room.

Thumping the base of her hand against her forehead to make her hazy, scared brain think faster, she looked at all the gray concrete walls to try to find a sign or at least a clue.

When she couldn't find anything, she shook her head and set off further down the hall she was in, hoping that it would be the right one.

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Another minute or so later, she came to a sliding stop in front of a pair of solid double doors. Unlike the other doors inside the research facility, these looked to be operated manually rather than pneumatically.

Next to the door, 'C24' had been painted on the wall in large, black, militaristic letters.

"C..." she croaked, "C twenty-four... I've seen this... I've seen this already... th- that means the... the of- office is... is this way," she continued and set off down the left corridor.

A scant minute further on, she came to the door to the messy office where she had been with her real mother for the last time. Thinking about her mother's fate made her chin quiver and brought tears to her eyes, but she wiped them away angrily, determined to not allow herself to get emotional before she was out of there.

She took a deep breath and held it, trying to listen for the whereabouts of the monsters, but the blood coursing through her veins made it difficult for her to discern where the thumping sounds she heard came from. Deciding to go for it, she depressed the push-button and waited for the door to open.

A short while later, she emerged with both their backpacks, having strapped her mother's to her back and clutching her own so tightly that the carrier straps were nearly bursting at the seams.

She had already begun to take a step towards the entrance when two shadows played across the wall at the end of the corridor. Freezing in place, Alison stared wide-eyed and breathlessly at the sight of the two monsters entering the hall some thirty yards away from her.

The second they spotted her, they changed to their pearl-like color and increased the pace, seemingly floating above the surface of the tiles rather than walking or even running on them.

Sobbing loudly, Alison spun around and began to run as fast as she possibly could towards the rectangular room near the entrance that her mother had referred to as the White Room.

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To compound her misery and despair, the backpack on her shoulders got snagged on the protruding catch of the thick, heavy fire door at the entrance to the White Room. No matter what she did or how hard she pulled, she couldn't get it to release until she gave it a really strong heave-ho that tore a large, gaping hole in the front of the backpack.

Feeling awful for ruining her mother's backpack, Alison staggered around the fire door and through the short, narrow corridor. She took the flight of wide stairs in a single leap and was soon out of the upper fire door as well, once again finding herself in the strangely built concrete room with the gun slit at the top of the research facility.

Her heart was hammering so strongly in her chest and her throat had been abused so badly that she had a penetrating taste of blood in her mouth, but she pushed that inconvenience aside for later.

After slamming the rusty mesh gate shut, she tore out of the last door between her and freedom. When she was finally able to see the sky above her, she let out a long, heartfelt sob - though she knew she wasn't safe yet.

While she had been inside the nightmarish research facility, dusk had fallen and the winds had picked up, and the semi-darkness made it difficult for her to see many details of the landscape.

With her brain so hazy it was a wonder she was even standing erect, she briefly glanced to her right before running off to the left, towards what she thought was safety.

In her haste, she didn't see the sign that said,

*'Caution! Mortal Danger!'*

*Lucifer's Ledge*

*1100 ft. drop*

*Hikers must proceed with extreme caution.'*

It only occurred to her that something was wrong when she felt rock under the soles of her boots instead of soil. Looking down on the ground instead of up at the dusky horizon, she realized that she had gone from the frying pan and into the fire.

As she came to a jerking stop three feet short of a fatal fall, she let out a shriek that only compounded the terrible pain in her throat. Turning around, she began to back up on shaky legs - but she came to an abrupt stop when she saw the two dark gray fog-like creatures approach her.

Caught between two variations of certain death, she felt her courage finally leave her and she slipped to the rocky ground on Lucifer's Ledge and began to cry for real.

The creatures briefly looked at each other but soon continued onwards. Around them, the winds picked up again, turning quite gusty.

Alison felt the gusts of wind as well, tugging on her hair and her clothes, but she had reached a point where she just didn't care anymore what would happen to her.

As the first creature stepped onto Lucifer's Ledge, a powerful gust of wind howled across the exposed rock, making the diffuse edges of the monster flap in the breeze.





burst out of her chest ever since she had received the news that she was to be promoted to the rank of Assistant District Manager for the Eastern Division of the DuMont-Raltech Corporation.

"I... got... the... promotion...! I...! Got...! The...! Promotion...!" she exclaimed to herself, bouncing around the Ladies' like a hyperactive rubber ball. After the first volley of energy had been spent, she took a few deep breaths and looked at herself in the mirror above the wash basin.

Even though she felt like she had aged ten years in the ten minutes the conversation had lasted, the tall, twenty-nine year old Charlene was still an attractive woman, with high cheekbones, elegant lips, eyes like pools of cobalt and long hair the color of night - which was presently fairly disturbed as most of it had escaped from the tight ponytail she'd had it in.

Just when she thought she was ready to go back to her cubicle, another burst of energy ripped through her and sent her bouncing around all over again.

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At the same time, the impeccably dressed - yet slimy and hawk-faced - Spencer Drayton was waiting at Charlene's cubicle with his arms folded across his chest and a surly but sly look on his face.

When Charlene finally came out of the Ladies', flushed from celebrating so hard, he reached into his vest pocket and found a small envelope that he proceeded to put across her keyboard so she wouldn't miss it.

"Congratulations on your new title, Charlene," he said in a voice that always reminded Charlene of a talking snake. "Of course, I still feel that my qualifications were better, but that's how it goes... with a female boss. Oh, I've left a little something for you on your desk. Enjoy it," he said as he walked away without giving Charlene a chance to respond.

As she watched the human snake walk away, she could feel a sense of dread beginning to form in the pit of her stomach. Studying Spencer's heavily gelled hair and his outrageously expensive shoes and suit, she picked up the envelope and began to tear it open.

The message was simple,

*'I know about your little scam. \$2000 a month will keep me quiet. First installment is due tomorrow.'*

but the words hit Charlene in the gut like a sledgehammer and she had to grab hold of the back of her swivel-chair to stay erect. *'Two thousand dollars... if I had two thousand dollars, I wouldn't have had to do what I did to get this promotion... what am I going to do?'* she thought and sat down with a bump.

Reading the note again, tears began to sting her eyes, and it wasn't long before the piece of paper Spencer had used for his threat was stained by large, salty drops.

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*The next day.*

"Spencer... please... please, I'll do anything for you, but I can't... I don't have that kind of money," Charlene pleaded quietly, desperately grabbing onto Spencer's expensive lapels as the two of them were standing near a leather couch arrangement at the lounge end of their office floor.

Nearby, several of their co-workers focused on their newspapers and magazines, pretending not to have noticed the embarrassing scene.

Forcibly removing Charlene's hands from his suit, Spencer straightened it down with a disdainful grunt and looked at the woman with cold, uncaring eyes. "Well. You should have thought about that sooner. Like before you started your little scam."

"Spencer...! I need that money to help pay my sister's medical bills... you know she's very ill, and... and..."

"Like I said, you should have thought about that before you doctored your CV," Spencer said and took a step back. Cocking his head, he let his eyes glide down Charlene's well-shaped body that her elegant gun metal gray business skirt suit accentuated very nicely. "On the other hand, perhaps we could come to an agreement..."

"Not if the fate of the human race depended on it!" Charlene hissed hoarsely, clutching her fists like she wanted to clobber the smirk off Spencer's face.

"Oh, retract your claws, pussycat! I was merely going to suggest that you only pay half of this month's installment, but then make it up to me next month by paying the other half plus the next, full installment," Spencer said, taking an involuntary step back to get away from Charlene's fists.

Once he realized that she wasn't going to hit him, his natural cockiness returned and he broke out in an even broader smirk. "Now, I don't care how you get the money... embezzle them, sell pictures of yourself in the pink pages, scam your insurance company... whatever. All I care about is getting my rightful share of your paycheck that should have been mine in the first place."

Biting down a barb that would only make matters worse, Charlene spun around on her heel and stomped back to her new office.

Shrugging, Spencer turned around to admire the view from the thirty-third floor of the DuMont-Raltech Building.

On her way down to her own modest room, Charlene came to a halt at the huge corner office belonging to the woman the employees jokingly referred to as the Boss of Bosses. Through the large panes of glass that separated the office from the rest of the world, she could see Barbara

Edgeworth-DuMont - the Chairman of the Board and granddaughter of the founder of the company - working at her huge desk.

Looking at the well-dressed, highly elegant woman in her late fifties, Charlene gulped nervously, thinking about what would happen if - or when - the Boss of Bosses found out she had never been anywhere near two of the courses that had helped her get the job.

When her boss began to look up from her work, Charlene gulped again and hurried away from the windows so she wouldn't get caught staring.

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*Two months later.*

In the bedroom she'd had refitted to accommodate her sister's large, ungainly hospital bed, Charlene leaned forward on her chair and buried her face in her hands. Sighing deeply, she thought about the \$1500 she had spread out on the foot end of the bed - and of the five hundred dollars she hadn't been able to come up with.

A deep, rattling cough made her get up from the chair and move up to take her sister's hand. "Hey," Charlene said quietly. "How are you feeling?"

"Eh. My hose is bothering me today," Laurie Cooper said, pale as a sheet.

Charlene quickly looked down to follow the path of the twin plastic air hoses that ran from the apparatus at the side of the bed and into Laurie's nostrils, but she couldn't find any snags or blockages. "It appears to be okay, sis."

"Oh I know... I'm still breathin', ain't I?" Laurie said and tried to laugh, but the laughter was overpowered by another deep, rattling cough caused by the pneumonia that had claimed her while she had been convalescing from her chemotherapy. With a slow sigh, Laurie closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the pillow.

Choking up, Charlene moved her hand up and ran her thumb across the bare spot on Laurie's forehead that had always been covered by a dark eyebrow so much like her own. Her sister's paleness and the fact that her eyes had lost the shine and luster they had always had scared her so badly that she had trouble breathing herself. "How could you be so unlucky, Laurie?" she whispered, running her fingers down Laurie's cheek. "How could you get pneumonia just when you were getting better...?"

"Just my legendary rotten luck. You got all the charms of the family, Charlie," Laurie replied, winking at her kid sister.

Suddenly noticing the pile of dollar bills lying at her feet, Laurie raised her head slightly and began to count them. "Whoa... did you donate my body to science already?"

"No! Don't say things like that!" Charlene said angrily, taking a step back from the bed.

"Sorry... but what-"

"It's f- for... I need them for something at work. I shouldn't have put them there. It's nothing for you to worry about, Sis. Do you want me to fluff your pillows? Or maybe get you some water?" Charlene said, reaching up to fluff Laurie's pillows quite vigorously.

"Uh... hey... thank- hey, thank you!" Laurie said, but Charlene didn't appear to want to stop. "That's enough, thanks! Sheesh! ...Oh, you shouldn't have said it like that, Charlene. Now I know something's up... C'mon, tell your big sister what's wrong. Are you in trouble?" she continued after taking a slow, cautious breath.

Knowing that the game was up, Charlene sighed and let herself bump down on the chair. After a few seconds, she nodded and buried her face in her hands. "You might say that."

"Financial trouble?"

"Yeah."

"Because of me?"

"No! No, no, no, Sis! It doesn't have anything to do with you! This is all my fault!"

Surprised by her sister's uncharacteristic outburst, Laurie furrowed her brow and looked up to study Charlene closely - it didn't take her long to figure out that the youngest member of the Cooper clan had the weight of the world on her shoulders. Resolutely, she reached out and took Charlene's hand to give it the strongest squeeze she could muster. "Tell me, Charlie... tell me everything."

"Oh, I..." Charlene said with a half-shrug, but her voice trailed off before she could begin explaining the trouble she had brought herself into.

"Better make it quick, we don't know how long I got," Laurie said, winking and giving Charlene's hand an extra squeeze.

"Oh, Sis!"

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Some time later, Charlene steeled her resolve - which felt like a double portion of sickly green jelly - and raised her hand to knock on the door to Barbara Edgeworth-DuMont's office.

Before her knuckles could make contact with the wooden door, she took a quick glance around the offices she had worked in for the past three years; at the couch arrangement near the viewing

spot, at the cluster of cubicles where she had spent so much time, and at the water cooler where she had heard the sauciest stories imaginable.

The office floor was eerily empty at a quarter past ten in the evening, and the fact that the lights had been turned down nearly everywhere only added to the creepiness.

Sighing, Charlene knocked on the door.

*'Enter!'*

"Good evening, Mrs. Edgeworth-DuMont," Charlene said as she closed the door behind her.

"Mmmm. Have a seat, Miss Cooper, I'll be with you shortly," the Boss of Bosses said, pointing at a pair of leather armchairs that had been placed in front of her desk.

Charlene knew that it would probably be the last time she'd ever get to see the office, so she tried to take in all the sights while she could; the abstract, highly colorful paintings on the wall, the plush Persian rug on the floor and the classic - and classy - furniture.

Sitting down in the nearest chair, she kept her legs together and pushed them to the left so the dark gray skirt suit she had chosen specifically for the gruesome event wouldn't ride up.

After nearly thirty seconds, the Boss of Bosses capped a fountain pen and pushed away a small stack of papers. "So," she said as she leaned back in her leather armchair; her eyes drilling two emerald green holes in Charlene's soul.

"So," Charlene echoed, having already briefed the Boss over the telephone on the reason behind her visit.

"I am very, very disappointed in you, Miss Cooper. Very disappointed," Barbara Edgeworth-DuMont said and got up from her chair. Putting her hands behind her back, she began to walk slowly around her office, stopping here and there to study something, but never speaking a word.

As Charlene followed the Boss with her eyes, it suddenly dawned on her that she was actually a very attractive woman, no matter what it said on her birth certificate.

Her green eyes matched her blonde hair perfectly, and her dimples, her cute nose and the way the outside of her lips curved upwards gave her a very friendly, trustworthy look - of course, at that exact moment, the green eyes were shooting fire and she had little red spots on her cheeks brought on by the unwelcome news.

After doing two complete tours of the office that had left Charlene a quivering mess, Barbara Edgeworth-DuMont returned to her desk and sat down, immediately starting to tap her fingers on the polished mahogany.

"Miss Cooper, how could you? We depended on you, and now you've let the company and myself down!" the Boss said and slammed her fist down onto the smooth surface.

Forgetting all about her attempts at looking cool, Charlene leaned forward on the armchair and looked at the older woman through a veil of tears. "Uh, I... it was m- my... uh, my si- sister needed help and... and I-"

"Speak up, I can hardly hear you," Barbara said and put her hand behind her ear for effect.

Charlene jumped a bit at the harsh tone and tried to clear her throat several times. "Uh, I... oh..." - pausing, Charlene rubbed her face and fell back into the chair, knowing that whatever she did, she had just met the proverbial brick wall. "I doctored my CV because I needed the extra money to nurse my ill sister back to health," she said strongly.

At that news, Barbara leaned back in her armchair and crossed her legs in a very ladylike manner. "Hmmm," she said after scrutinizing Charlene intensely for a little while. "So you didn't buy a Lear Jet or a Ferrari? Or rent the entire floor of a hotel on Miami Beach and throw wild parties twenty-four-seven?"

"Uh... I can definitely say no to that, Mrs. Edgemont... uh, Edgewo-"

"Ah, call me Barbara. It's much easier for everybody," the Boss of Bosses said, waving her hand in a cool gesture that reminded Charlene of the movie character she had earned her nickname from, Don Corleone.

"Thank you, Barbara."

Once again getting up, Barbara Edgeworth-DuMont walked around the desk and briefly squeezed Charlene's shoulder before taking a bottle of Scotch and two glasses from a book case. "What's wrong with your sister?"

"Well, nine months ago, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer, but after surgery and aggressive chemotherapy, the Doctors managed to get it pretty much under control. Then she contracted pneumonia," Charlene said quietly.

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. Scotch?" Barbara said, presenting a glass to Charlene.

"No, thank you."

"I'll have a double, then. I definitely need it after your report," Barbara said as she walked around the desk and sat down. After pouring a healthy amount of the amber-colored liquid into the first glass, she raised it at Charlene. "Your sister's health," she continued, taking a long sip.

Wringing her hands, Charlene shot up from the armchair, so full of nervous energy that she simply couldn't sit still any longer. "Mrs. Edge- I... I mean, Barbara... what are you going to do about my case?"

Barbara sighed and put down the glass. "There isn't much I can do, Miss Cooper. I need to follow the guidelines... I'll have to suspend you. Actually, I believe the guidelines say we should automatically press charges."

"Oh..."

"Dammit! Why didn't you come to me first? If you had told me then what you have now, we could have worked something out! But now... dammit. Now you're forcing my hand, Miss Cooper!" Barbara said and thumped her fist into her open palm.

"I didn't think about it then. Oh, I'm... I'm sorry I lied to you," Charlene said and sat down with a sigh. "I can't fathom how Spencer found out..."

"Spencer? Spencer Drayton, the self-proclaimed God's gift to women?"

"Heh... yes. He's been blackmailing me. I've paid him three thousand dollars to keep quiet. He told me he'd rat on me if I didn't."

Barbara cocked her head and studied Charlene so closely that the young woman had to look away. "Oh, has he now? Well, well, well, that makes it a very different matter," she continued and crossed her legs the other way.

"It does?"

"Yes. You see, I've been looking for a way to yank Spencer Drayton around by the balls for quite some time now." - Charlene's cheeks were instantly tinted red by the unexpected vulgar language from the usually so tactful Boss of Bosses - "I think you may have given me that opportunity. Congratulations, Miss Cooper. You've officially earned the status of Whistleblower."

"Whistle-"

"Yes, which means that the rest is off the table. Now, how shall we proceed?" Barbara said and opened one of the desk drawers to find the appropriate forms.

"Off... off the table? Why... I'm... I'm sorry, but..."

"I'm glad you came to me," Barbara said as she thumbed through a thick stack of papers. "What made you change your mind?"

"Well, it was my sister. She said I should be brave like Wonder Woman and face my challenges head-on."

Leaning her head back, Barbara let out a loud laugh that she followed up with a saucy wink. "Ha! I loved that show. Are people really still watching it?"

"Uh, yes. It's still kinda popular in, uh, certain circles," Charlene mumbled.



"Imagine that... all right, here's the correct form," Barbara said and tapped her expertly manicured finger on a piece of paper.

Leaning forward, Charlene began to pat herself down to find a pen, but found that she didn't even have a paper clip in the only pocket she had in her dark gray skirt suit.

"Miss Cooper, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Uh... certainly...?"

"What is your opinion of Mr. Drayton?" Barbara said, folding her fingers in front of her chest.

Of all the questions Charlene had imagined she could be asked, that hadn't appeared on the list. Furrowing her brow, she began to think about how she could put words to her feelings without swearing too much. "Well, he's certainly..."

"I want it straight up, Miss Cooper. No sweet-talking here."

Taking a deep breath, Charlene let it out slowly as she looked directly into Barbara Edgeworth-DuMont's emerald green eyes to catch her reaction. "Look in any encyclopedia under Son of a Bitch and you'll find his photo. Pardon my French."

It didn't take long for a warm, contagious laughter to bubble up from Barbara's chest, and soon, both women were chuckling at the undeniable truth of Charlene's statement.

When the laughter had died down, Barbara put her hands flat on the desktop. "Mmmm. I hadn't expected anything less. So, with that out of the way, I'm about to reveal something to you that only a handful of people know about. It's a secret and I have to demand that you keep it until your dying breath."

"My lips are zipped, Mrs. Edge- uh, I mean, Barbara."

Nodding, Barbara Edgeworth-DuMont got up from her armchair, walked around the desk and sat down in the chair next to Charlene. "Good. Many, many years ago when I was but a little girl, my maternal great-grandmother showed me something that had been in my family's possession for generations..."

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As Spencer Drayton returned from a coffee break and sat down at his cubicle, he couldn't avoid noticing the bright yellow Post-It note that had been attached to the monitor of his IBM PC.

'*For Spencer*' it said on the cover, written in a feminine hand.

Cocking his head, he took the note and unfolded it to read the message that said, '*Spencer, I have a proposition for you. If you are willing to come to No. Four Crescent Valley Drive this Saturday*

*at ten PM, I will present you with a deal that I dearly hope will bring an end to our arrangement. I won't divulge too much now, but suffice to say it involves a large sum of money. Please call me at 555-1212 to let me know of your decision as soon as you have read this. Charlene Cooper.'*

"Hmmm," Spencer said as he crumpled the note into a little ball. Throwing the ball into the trash can, he got up from his swivel-chair and began to look for Charlene.

When he couldn't see her characteristic dark mane of hair anywhere, he pushed his chair back to search for her.

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Returning a short while later - after learning from one of the secretaries that Charlene had only been there briefly and had taken the rest of the week off - Spencer reached into the trashcan and recovered the note he had crumpled up earlier.

As he sat back down, he took a long, hard look at the phone number, wondering greedily just how large a 'large sum of money' would be. *'Maybe I can finally afford a Ferrari 328... or a Testarossa. Yeah... or maybe both.'*

Grinning to himself, he decided to try his luck and reached for the telephone. Quickly dialing the number Charlene had given him, he leaned back on the swivel-chair and pinned down the receiver between his cologne-coated cheek and his shoulder. He felt like moving his legs up on the desk - he even began to do so - but at the last moment, he realized that the risk of getting caught by the Boss of Bosses was too great and he let them bump back down again.

*'Hello?'* a female voice said at the other end of the connection after it had rang no less than five times.

"It's Spencer. Charlene? You wanted me to call you."

*'Yes, I did. I can-'*

"How much money are we talking about, exactly?" Spencer said, already laying the grandest plans in his mind.

*'Oh, I can't-'*

"Yes, you can. Otherwise, I can hang up very easily. Do you want me to hang up, Charlene?"

*'N-no... oh... oh, I shouldn't tell you, but... it's thirty thousand dollars.'*

"Only thirty Gee?" Spencer said in a disappointed voice, crossing the Testarossa off the list he had made in his mind.

*'It's... it's all I can get, Spencer. But I can only get it in one go.'*

"Hmmm. What did you do? Start an escort service?" Spencer said with a sleazy grin.

'No!'

"Ah, I don't care how you got 'em. So... Saturday night at ten at the address that's on the note?"

*'That's right.'*

"Four Crescent Valley Drive... how the hell did you sneak your way into getting something out there, Charlene? That's for the high and mighty... and I mean the really high and mighty."

*'I d-don't live here, I just-'*

"Oh, hey... you've found yourself a sugar-daddy, haven't ya? And that's his house? Yeah, yeah, I should have known. Yeah, of course. Jeez, what men won't do to keep their girls-on-the-side happy."

A frosty silence at the other end of the line made Spencer think that he had hit the jackpot, and he broke out in a his customary know-it-all grin.

*'You don't know anything about me, Spencer!'* Charlene said after a little while; her anger shining through in her voice.

"No, no, whatever. Listen-"

*'I need to know if you will keep up your end of the agreement. If you get this money now, will you let me go? Yes or no.'*

"Whoa, I don't react well to pressure, Charlene. You know that. Well, let me see... thirty Gee isn't all that much. How about making it forty? Nah, just kidding," Spencer said and leaned forward on the chair. "Yes, if I get the money on Saturday, I promise I won't ask for more. How's that?"

*'God, thank you... I'm holding you to it!'*

Grinning broadly, Spencer shook his head, amazed at the boundless gullibility of his co-worker.

"But of course... I wouldn't expect anything less. See you on Saturday. I'll be there at ten sharp."

*'So will I.'* - click.

"Oh, you better," Spencer said and put the receiver back on the telephone.

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Feeling like she needed to throw up, Charlene rubbed her brow repeatedly and moved over to her living room window where she spent the next few minutes meditating by looking out onto the impressive skyline. With a deep sigh, she returned to her telephone and picked it up again.

*'Barbara Edgeworth-DuMont speaking,'* the Boss said at the other end of the line in her typically strong voice.

"It's Charlene Cooper. I've just heard from Spencer. He bought it, hook, line and sinker."

*'Excellent. I knew that greedy so-and-so would. Meet me at nine PM on Saturday. That should give us plenty of time to set the stage for dear Mr. Drayton. I hope you're not backing out now, Charlene?'*

"Oh no. I'm in for the duration."

*'Good. In for the kill, as they say in the old country. In for the kill... bye-bye, Charlene. See you on Saturday.'*

"Goodbye, Mrs. Edgeworth-DuMont," Charlene said and hung up, feeling goosebumps break out all over her body as a result of Barbara's chilling choice of words.

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*Saturday evening, ten to nine.*

After turning right onto Crescent Valley Drive, Charlene let her six year old Buick LeSabre come to a stop at the manned gate and rolled down the window. Not sure what she needed to show the burly, uniformed guard who came out to greet her, she dug into her purse and found a credit card, her driver's license and even her library card.

"Good evening, Miss. Turn off the engine, please," the thirty-something guard said, leaning down towards the car.

"Hello," Charlene said and did as she was told. "I'm sorry, I've never been here before so I don't know what to-"

"I just need to see your driver's license, Miss."

Putting the other two plastic cards back into her purse, Charlene reached out of the window and handed her license to the guard. "Oh... well, here you go."

"Thank you. Miss Charlene Cooper, welcome to Crescent Valley, the safest neighborhood in the entire city," the guard said as he handed the plastic card back to Charlene.

"Uh... thanks."

"I've just spoken to Mrs. Edgeworth-DuMont and she is expecting you. Follow the road for another six hundred yards and then turn right just before the Celtic fountain. You can't miss it."

"Okay..."

"Have a nice evening, Miss Cooper," the guard said and went back into his booth. A few moments later, the sturdy fence rolled to a side, leaving the path open for Charlene's Buick.

Smiling at the guard, Charlene started the engine and drove into the gated community, feeling a lot less worried than she had been before. '*After all, what could possibly happen in Crescent Valley, the safest neighborhood in the entire city?*' she thought as she kept an eye out for the Celtic fountain.

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The fountain wasn't difficult to find, and soon, Charlene drove up a curved, gravelly driveway that took her to a huge, impressive mansion held entirely in cream and bright white. While she parked her modest Buick in front of the very large house, she noticed in the rear view mirror that Barbara Edgeworth-DuMont opened a pair of double doors and stepped outside.

"Good evening, Miss Cooper," Barbara said as she crunched her way across the gravelly forecourt, wearing a strange-looking black dress that appeared to be closer to a cowl than the latest high fashion from Paris. "I hope you're ready for some fireworks because I have some lined up."

Locking her car, Charlene suddenly felt a cold shiver run down her spine, but she pushed it away and immediately put out her hand so she wouldn't look disrespectful. "I... I see," she said and shook hands with the Boss of Bosses.

"Mmmm-yes. Oh, you look marvelous tonight, Miss Cooper. *Tres Chic*, if I may say so," Barbara said and cast an appraising look at the young woman.

Charlene broke out into a blush, feeling that her maroon pant suit over a black blouse wasn't really that special. "Thank you, Mrs. Edgeworth-DuMont," she said, fluffing her hair - that she had spent nearly a full can of styling foam on - and adjusting her angular shoulder pads to make them line up just right.

"Oh, will you please just call me Barbara? I insist!"

"All right... Barbara," Charlene said with a broad smile, feeling Barbara's eyes leaving two emerald green scorch marks on her face - and hoping that she hadn't gone overboard on the rouge and the eyeliner.

"Much better. Come, let's go inside. Would you like some tea or coffee while we wait for Prince Charming? I've sent the staff home for the evening so it's just us girls for the time being," Barbara said and put her hand on the small of Charlene's back.

"Coffee, please."

"Coffee it is. Go on into the den, I'll be right there. It's straight ahead," Barbara said, squeezing Charlene's elbow before closing the double doors behind them.

Looking around the impressive hall, Charlene couldn't quite work out why she suddenly felt so nervous. *'I feel like a fly who has just got herself stuck in a cobweb... but I can't believe that Mrs. Edgeworth-DuMont could be the big, fat spider at the center of the web... although, what's up with that odd dress?'* she thought as she stepped away from the hall and towards a glass sliding door that separated the den from the rest of the mansion.

The den was two steps down from the main level and consisted of a single, large room overlooking a lake behind the mansion. The room was decorated exclusively with cool Scandinavian designs; bare walls, woven carpets in bright colors and square-edged chairs, tables and couches made of untreated pinewood.

An original Alvar Aalto fruit bowl filled with apples had been placed on one of the low tables, sending a delicious, organic aroma into the room that made Charlene lick her lips.

"The coffee is on its way," Barbara suddenly said, almost freaking Charlene out with her unexpected ability to move about silently.

"Oh! Uh, thank you," Charlene said, feeling her heart rate go through the roof.

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Once the coffee cups were empty, Barbara took them back to the kitchen where she left them for later.

"All right," she said when she came back to the den. "How about I showed you part of what it is I have planned for Spencer...?"

"Mrs. Edgeworth-DuMont..." Charlene said, deliberately keeping it formal, "before we go too far, I need to know if it's anything illegal...? My sister needs me, but I won't be able to help her much if I'm doing eight to ten in a federal penitentiary." At the end of the sentence, she added a small, wistful smile meant to show that she wasn't kidding despite the slight exaggeration.

"It's not illegal, Charlene," Barbara said, nodding.

Drawing a sigh of relief, Charlene matched the nod with one of her own. "Oh, that's a load off my mind..."

"However, it does hold a dimension of danger. Not to us... but to Spencer," Barbara continued in a voice that trailed off into a conspiratorial whisper - and that made Charlene gulp loudly.

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After most of an hour had passed with Barbara explaining the basics of what she had planned to do, she sat down on the couch and put her right leg over her left. Sighing, she flicked her hair back from her shoulder and looked at an antique clock on a sideboard. "It's about time our dear Spencer showed up."

"Well, I'm sure he'll be here. Money means the world to him," Charlene said as she sat down in one of the pinewood chairs that were more comfortable than they looked. Putting her elbows on the broad armrests, she folded her hands like in a prayer and began to ponder the things she had just witnessed.

Barbara chuckled at the reflective - and slightly shell-shocked - expression on Charlene's face. "Oh, I think you're right... in fact, he's here now," she said and ran a hand over the curious, coarse dress she was wearing.

Surprised by the announcement, Charlene looked behind her and out over the dark lake to see if the aforementioned Spencer had arrived by boat. When the lake was predictably empty, she turned back around and opened her mouth to speak, but in the two seconds she had looked away, Barbara had vanished without a trace.

'*Creeeeepy*,' Charlene thought and got up from the chair.

Out in the hall, Spencer's harsh, slightly condescending voice could be heard uttering a surprised grunt quickly followed by several pieces of colorful profanity when he realized whose mansion it was he had arrived at.

Stepping into the hall, Charlene leaned against the glass sliding door and crossed her arms over her chest. "Hello, Spencer," she said coolly, eyeing the slimy guest who was as impeccably dressed as ever in a pale gray suit over an off-white shirt and a striped tie.

"Ladies," he said with a crooked grin. "Where's the money?"

Charlene had to bite down on her tongue to stop herself from snorting loudly, but Barbara just took Spencer by the elbow and led him towards the den. "In here, Mr. Drayton. Thirty thousand dollars, as per the agreement."

"Excellent. Hey, Charlene... I guess that makes you the Boss of Bosses' girl on the side, huh? Man, I should have known that was the real reason why you got that promotion," Spencer said, wagging his tongue in a very vulgar manner as he passed by Charlene to get to the den.

"Oh, grow up!" Charlene said hoarsely, wishing that the evening would soon be over. She resisted an urge to shove Spencer down the stairs - just - and quickly followed him into the den where she sat down in the same chair she had used before.

Sliding the glass door shut behind her two guests, Barbara walked down the steps holding a black briefcase. "Now, now, let's not be unfriendly to one another. Oh... Charlene, dear, please sit in the couch with me. Mr. Drayton, have a seat in one of the chairs."

Feeling that a quivering lump of goo had replaced all her internal organs, Charlene just nodded and moved from the chair and over to the couch.

Once both her guests were seated comfortably, Barbara put the closed briefcase on the low table and turned it towards Spencer. "There, Mr. Drayton. All you could ever hope for," she said and took a step away, moving her hands into the wide sleeves which made her look even more like a medieval monk.

When Spencer leaned forward and took the briefcase, a strange silence fell on the den, and the outside world seemed to come to a standstill.

Charlene was staring at the briefcase with her hands firmly covering her mouth when she suddenly heard Barbara's voice in her head, speaking to her in a crystal clear tone - *'Like I told you before, close your eyes. Don't look at the light, Charlene!'*

Spencer let out a nasty, little laugh and clicked open the two locks on the briefcase. "I knew you'd see things from my point of view. Now... c'mon, my old friends... talk to me!" he said and opened the lid.

Instantly, a very strong green light shone up from the briefcase, bathing Spencer in a sickly wash and contorting his face into a mask of mortal terror as if he was standing at the edge of an abyss. When he tried to slam the lid shut, his hands wouldn't follow his command.

An emerald green flame with a white edge slowly crept out of a wooden box that had been stored inside the briefcase. Licking around Spencer's face, it moved across his nose, his cheeks and his brow before it finally settled down near his eyes. Suddenly splitting in two, each tendril penetrated an eye and began to pulse between dark green and white as they traveled into his skull.

Spencer opened his mouth to scream, but before he had time to make even the tiniest sound, the light began to pulse stronger and stronger until it suddenly rushed back into the wooden box, ripping his soul out through his eyes and leaving him a mere shell of a man.

As Spencer's empty body collapsed against the back rest of the armchair, Barbara let out a long cackle and started doing an excited shimmy.

Taking the ancient wooden box out of the modern briefcase, Barbara's arms were surrounded by an unearthly green glow as she held it high and presented it to Charlene.

"Wh- what... what have you done to him...?!" Charlene whispered hoarsely, wringing her hands so hard that her knuckles had turned white. Looking at Spencer - who was sitting with wide, unblinking eyes and simply staring at a spot in the ceiling - the first thought through her mind was that he looked like a mannequin.

"Oh, he's perfectly all right, Charlene. Don't worry about him. He's just a little boxed in right now," Barbara said and shook the wooden box, producing an odd, hollow, thumping sound.



Moving away from the couch, Charlene walked over to Barbara and the wooden box on legs so wobbly that it was a miracle she made it even halfway there. "But..." she said hoarsely "... that can't be pleasant... he's... he's inside a b- a box...?!"

"No, he's over there... his soul is inside the box. Do you want to hold it?"

"No!"

"Awww, but it doesn't even tickle! Heh, heh... never mind. Charlene, I'm just teaching Spencer a lesson here. You understand that, don't you?" Barbara said and put the box down on the table.

"I'm... I'm not sure I do..."

"Well, perhaps you'll understand once you've seen the next part. Stand back, please."

Moving behind the couch in an almighty hurry, Charlene stared wide-eyed at Barbara as the hitherto so orderly and mature woman began to perform a ritual that was anything but orderly.

After clapping twice, reaching towards the heavens with her palms out and placing her hands on her eyes and forehead, Barbara began to chant a series of incantations in a language Charlene had never heard before.

Soon, it dawned on Charlene that Barbara was going through a set of instructions, because for every eighth or ninth word she uttered, she clenched her fists and punched the air which caused Spencer's soulless body to spasm and jerk around on the chair. As Barbara came to the end of the incantations, she shouted towards the heavens and seemed to throw something at Spencer.

The split second the dark magic reached Spencer, he jumped up from the chair and began to move around like a possessed rag doll, prompting Charlene to scream wildly and duck down behind the backrest of the couch.

"No, don't look away now! This is the best part!" Barbara said and broke out into a wild cackle. With a new hand gesture, she made Spencer strut about the den, cooing and flapping his arms like a giant pigeon. With his head bobbing up and down, he tried to take one of the apples from the fruit bowl, but his nose wasn't pointy enough to act as a beak.

Charlene observed the grotesque circus act from behind the couch; her styled hair, her eyebrows and her saucer-wide eyes were the only parts of her that were visible.

"No more cooing, let's have ourselves a puppy! You like puppies, Charlene?" Barbara said and held her hands ready for the next round. "Well, in any case, you're about to get one! Behold!" she continued, throwing another hand gesture at Spencer.

Jerking upright from the fruit bowl, Spencer pulled his arms up to his chest and began to pant hard with his tongue hanging out of his mouth. After shaking himself thoroughly, he spun around

twice before flinging himself onto the floor where he scrubbed his back against the woven carpet, making a mess of his immaculate suit.

Once that had been taken care of, he jumped up and began to walk around on all four, sniffing the furniture and gnawing at the carpet.

"Barbara...! Please stop! Please make him normal!" Charlene said in a terrified voice, staring at the horrible sight of a grown man trying to tear a chunk out of a woven carpet with his teeth.

"Oh, all right. I think he must have learned the lesson by now anyway..." Barbara said and clenched her fists. At first, Spencer collapsed onto the floor, but he was soon up, moving back towards the chair in the jerky, possessed walk.

"Charlene, look away again," Barbara said and took the wooden box. Once she had made sure her female guest wasn't watching, she held the box under Spencer's nose and opened the lid.

The emerald green flame soon licked around his face and it wasn't long before the two tendrils had attached themselves to his eyes. Controlled by a nod by Barbara, the flame thrust Spencer's soul back into his body which nearly made him jerk out of the chair.

"Wh- what?! Wh... wh- whut the hell was that?! Where am I?" he croaked, gripping the wooden armrests and looking around the den with wide, frightened eyes.

Chuckling, Barbara simply closed the wooden box and shuffled away.

With sweat pouring down his face, Spencer panted harder and harder until he had to tear open the top button of his shirt and yank his striped tie to the side to get some air.

Looking from Barbara to Charlene and back again, his face lost all color, and a guttural cry began deep in his throat. Moments later, he jumped up from the chair, tore through the den, slammed the sliding glass door to the side and sprinted through the hall to get away from the women.

A short while later, Charlene and Barbara could hear his car starting and driving off, pelting the front of the mansion in loose gravel as the tires spun furiously.

"Oh, I didn't even get to ask him if he wanted any coffee..." Barbara said and took her cowl off, revealing that she was wearing a smart black-and-gold dress underneath. "Charlene...?"

Charlene was frozen to the spot on the couch, constantly biting her lips and looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

After hanging the cowl on a nail on the wall, Barbara smoothed down her dress and sat down next to her guest. "I'd never do anything to you, if that's what you're afraid of. I'd never hurt a Sister. Others on the other hand, well, they're fair game... especially when they're greedy and impolite like our Spencer."

Gulping loudly, Charlene nodded a couple of times, still not quite fathoming what she had just witnessed. When she opened her mouth to speak, her throat felt so dry she could only produce a few inarticulate squeaks and croaks, and it took several dry coughs for her to let a squeaky "Oh..."

"Tell you what," Barbara said and hooked her arm under Charlene's. "Regarding your white lies... because you have achieved Whistleblower status, most of it is off the table like I told you the other day, but I still have to follow the company's guidelines and suspend you without pay-

"Oh no, I can't-"

"No, please hear me out... there's no way around that, I'm afraid," Barbara said and offered Charlene a wistful smile. "It's just while the investigations are going on. What I will do is to help you financially. First, I'll give your sister a loan that will see her through her illness. Then I'll help you to be admitted to the two courses you lied about having taken. You'll have to study for yourself, though. There are limits even to my powers," she continued with a little grin, nudging Charlene in the side.

"But... why?"

"Oh, probably because I see a lot of myself in you. The brains, the bravery, the beauty... right?"

"Uh, of course."

"Once you have earned yourself high grades... and I'm sure you will... you can come back and reclaim your position."

"Oh, I... I don't deserve it, Mrs. Edgeworth-DuMont," Charlene said and rubbed her brow.

Putting out her hand, Barbara leaned in towards Charlene. "Don't forget, it's Barbara. And I'll be the judge of what you deserve. Do we have an agreement?"

"Well... yes. Yes, we do," Charlene said and shook Barbara's hand.

"Excellent. Of course, you'll never speak of the things you've seen here tonight, will you?" Barbara said in a monotone, firmly squeezing Charlene's hand and looking squarely into her eyes.

Initially, Charlene felt reality fade away as Barbara's emerald green orbs drilled into her subconscious, but after a few seconds, something inside her counteracted the effect and everything returned to normal. "I promise," she said with a smile.

Barbara let go of Charlene's hand and stared at her smiling face like she couldn't understand what had just happened - or not happened. "Hmmm!" she said, displaying a fascinated smirk.

"Interesting. You're certainly strong, Charlene. Oh, we're going to make a great team, you and I," she continued, leaning forward to punch her guest's shoulder.

"W- we are?"

"Yes. Now, would you like some more coffee?" Barbara said and got up from the couch, leaving a thoroughly confused Charlene behind.

Narrowing her eyes, Charlene tried to focus on her wristwatch, but the light in the den was too soft for her to see the hands. "More coffee already? Didn't we just have some?"

"That was several hours ago, dear," Barbara said from the glass door, chuckling as she went into the hall.

"It was? That's weird... I guess time flies when you're frightened out of your wits," Charlene mumbled, scratching her heavily styled hair.

Shivering slightly at the thought of some of the crazy things she had seen, she reached out to take one of the apples - but when she remembered the grotesque sight of Spencer trying to slam his nose into the fruit, she moved her hand back at the speed of light and settled for folding her arms across her chest.

"I'm gonna need some serious therapy after this... some se-ri-ous therapy," she mumbled. Sighing, she closed her eyes and shook her head repeatedly, hoping that she could erase the evening's events from her mind.

*Postscript*

*Present day*

This story has been kept under wraps for a quarter of a century for reasons that should be obvious. The powers introduced to me by Barbara Edgeworth-DuMont are too dangerous to be used by the uninitiated, and therefore, certain details have been omitted from the telling of this story.

Barbara and I still keep in touch, in fact, I'll be visiting her for her eighty-third birthday soon. She lives in a retirement 'colony' in Florida, but she has lost none of her grace and strength - or indeed her wicked skills.

We never heard from Spencer Drayton again, but upon his death in 1993, we discovered that he had taken to the road; wandering from State to State to warn people never to be lured in by women. Poor fellow, he drowned when he was blown off the Devil's Drop near Wichita Falls, Texas, in a freak storm.

But the best news of all is that my sister made a full recovery and is looking over my shoulder - hey, quit ticklin'! - as I type this. While I was conferring with the author on the best way to

present my story, she offered me plenty of support and a few cues from her diaries, and I'm deeply indebted to her for that.

Finally, a word of advice: The incantations mentioned in this story were executed by a highly experienced professional, and novices should NOT attempt to reproduce them. Heed my warning; the Dark Realm is not to be taken lightly.

Yours,

Charlene Cooper,

C.O.B. of the DuMont-Raltech Corporation.

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## **THE END of WHITE LIES, BLACK MAGIC**

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## **PROJECTION**

by Norsebard

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### **I.**

Travelling westbound on I-four-oh in her smoke blue Chevrolet Cruze rental car, Denise Norell kept a close eye on an ominous thundercloud in the far distance. On occasion, lightning bolts lit up the inside of the cloud, but the rain that had been forecast hadn't arrived yet and she dearly hoped it wouldn't before she could reach Albuquerque.

Looking at her wristwatch - which read ten past eleven, p.m. - she sighed deeply and concentrated on keeping her car pointed straight ahead; the cruise control took care of the rest.

The low, steady hum of the engine proved to be a powerful sleeping aid, and as she felt her eyelids grow heavy, she turned off the air conditioning and rolled the window down to get thoroughly blasted by the wind - unfortunately, the wind wasn't the only thing that blasted her.

Scores of little bugs brought on by the high humidity suddenly invaded her personal space, causing her to swerve wildly while she fought to get them out.

Grumbling loudly, Denise rolled up the window and turned the A/C back on. After checking for traffic behind her, she briefly turned on the interior lights to give herself a thorough once-over in the rear view mirror to see if she had any bugs on her face or in her hair. The freckled, baby-faced, green-eyed, strawberry-blond twenty-six year old woman who was staring back at her looked so worn out and unattractive from the seven hours' drive that Denise decided that it couldn't be her at all and promptly ignored the reflection.

Half a mile later, the rental car let out an uncharacteristic cough that made Denise furrow her brow. "Oh, nooooo..." she whined as she leaned forward and tapped her index finger on the digital fuel gauge in the dashboard of her rental car.

"They told me they had filled it up! Dammit!" she continued when the needle refused to move away from the 'E' it was pointing at.

Just as she leaned back in her seat, the car began to cough and splutter for real, and it didn't take long for the instrument cluster to light up like a Christmas tree.

"Damn, damn, damn!" she said, thumping her fist down onto the rim of the steering wheel.

Looking out of the windshield, she could see a bright neon sign advertising the Desert Dream motel some six hundred yards ahead of her, and she slammed her foot down on the gas pedal to use the last few drops of fuel to get up to speed so she could coast up the off-ramp.

Coughing and spluttering, the car just managed to roll off the ramp and onto the large, mostly deserted parking lot before it gave up the ghost. As it eventually trickled to a silent stop, Denise breathed a sigh of relief and turned the interior lights back on so she could see where she was on the road map she had placed on the passenger seat.

"Mmmm... mmmm... mmmm... okay, I still have ninety miles to go... dammit," she said after she had tracked her finger across the map. "Okay... no worries, no panic. I'll just have to spend the night here and call for a tow truck in the morning. Okay," she continued as she clicked off the interior lights and pulled the little lever for the trunk.

Getting out and walking around the back, she could see that her car had come to a stop in a bad spot, especially if the motel was visited by any eighteen-wheelers during the night, but she just didn't have enough energy left to push it over to the scattered cars that were parked next to the motel itself.

Once Denise had closed the trunk and locked the car, she grabbed her two suitcases and her precious collection of samples and started the long journey across the parking lot to get to the main entrance of the motel.

On her way there, she looked around, wondering why there were so few guests at the motel when the I-four-oh had been fairly busy. The only signs of life in the huge parking lot were two trucks parked next to each other - a grain tanker and a reefer unit - and a smattering of cars and SUVs.

A closer look at the buildings gave Denise her first hint as the exterior was fairly dilapidated with decayed wood and tattered sunblinds everywhere. The walls with once-proud pastel colors had been neglected for so long that they acted as sad reminders of the frailty of life, and the air conditioning units that hung on the back wall of every suite were old and rattling - if they were even working at all.

"Well... beggars can't be choosers," Denise said as she walked around the wing of the motel.

Turning the corner onto the front porch, she stopped with a jerk, overcome by such a strong sense of *deja vu* that she had to put down her suitcases and spin around slowly to take it all in.

The motel itself and everything in its surroundings seemed so familiar to her that she wondered if she had been sleepwalking. The decrepit buildings, the neon signs, the orange lights by the old gas pumps and the dusty, warm smell of the ground were all somehow etched into her mind, along with several other memories that she couldn't connect to the scene; light glinting off a shovel, the smell of burning hair, and finally a brief flash of excruciating pain.

As she relived the moments she didn't even know she had experienced the first time around, a sense of worry flooded over her, but she shrugged it off, filing it under fatigue.

The glass door to the office had a blinking neon sign hanging above it which proclaimed to the world that *'We Never Close!'* . "Perhaps they should have..." Denise mumbled to herself as she picked up her suitcases and pushed the door open with her elbow.

Putting down her bags, she dinged on a small, old-fashioned bell that was sitting in the middle of a less-than-clean counter. When no one came to her, she began to study the rundown office where all six curtains were made of different cloth and where the carpet seemed to have as many cigarette burn marks as there were senators in the congress of the United States.

A religious calendar on the wall behind the counter had never made it further than September 2004, but Denise guessed that the reason for the tardiness had more to do with the picture of the cross at Golgatha than any fondness for the date.

A hacking cough from somewhere out back finally heralded the arrival of the reception clerk, and Denise stood up straight and reached into her purse to find her wallet and her credit card - but she had to do a double-take at the look of the man when he entered the front office.

Sweaty, overweight, unshaven and wearing a wifebeater that hadn't been washed since he had bought it, the man in his late thirties appeared like he had been caught napping because the first thing he did was to yawn so widely that Denise could see that he was missing a few teeth.

Snapping out of her shock-induced trance, Denise pulled her company credit card out of her wallet. "Uh... good evening, Mister."

"Evenin'."

"I'd like to rent a room for the night, please," Denise said and placed the credit card on the counter.

"Cash only," the reception clerk said in a smooth voice that didn't suit his scruffy exterior.

"I'm... I'm sorry?"

"Cash only."

"Oh..." Denise said and scratched her hairline. "Do you have an ATM?"

"No."

"Oh. Damn." - Sighing, Denise put her credit card back into her wallet.

"Maybe you've got something else of value...?" the man said with a crooked grin that gave Denise a bad case of the creeps.

"No. I think I'll just sleep in my car, then," Denise said and began to pick up her bags, but the reception clerk just held up his meaty hands.

"Naw, just kiddin'," he said, turning towards the back room. "Ma! Ma! Get out here, a lady's only got plastic!"

A few moments later, a gray-haired woman in her late fifties came lumbering into the front office. The woman was even more obese than her son, and the fabric of the dress she was wearing was stretched to its breaking point. As she turned around to take a few papers from a shelf, it was revealed that across her back, the dress had already exceeded that breaking point.

Chewing on her cheek, Denise tried very hard not to stare at the two lumbering giants, but she found it hard going. "Good evening, Ma'am. I need a place to sleep, but I didn't know that it was cash only," Denise said, adding a smile.

"Evenin'," the woman said in a voice that was slightly less smooth than that of her son. "It's no problem. We'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way," she continued, taking an old, manual credit card slider from underneath the counter and putting it up on the top.

"Okay...? Wow, I haven't seen one of those in decades," Denise said with a laugh as the woman processed her credit card by running the slider over it and jotting down her information.

"We're not online out here. Too expensive," the son said.



"I see. I'm Denise Norell, hi."

"Hi. I'm Mike Rowley, this is my mother Martha," the son said, putting a loving hand on his mother's arm.

Smiling, Denise felt some of the tension leave her, but she decided to keep up her defenses for the time being. "Pleased to meet you."

"Here you go, Miss," Martha said and gave Denise back her credit card. "You're in room nineteen. D'ya want my son Mike to give you a hand? He'd love to help, ain't that right, Mike?"

"That's right, Ma," Mike said, showing off another of his crooked grins that immediately sent a cold shiver down Denise's back.

"Uh, no thanks. I've got it. No worries," Denise said and picked up her two suitcases and the samples.

"Whatcha got in there? Looks heavy," Martha said, nodding at the largest of the three suitcases.

"Oh, they're my samples. I'm a sales representative for White Oleander Cosmetics."

Shoving her son in the back, Martha pointed at Denise and at the heavy bag. "Mike! That's the company that makes the cold cream I want for my birthday. You' listenin', son?"

"I'm listenin', Ma, I'm listenin'. I have it written down."

"The cold cream is one of our most popular products," Denise said, automatically going into her well-rehearsed sales pitch. "As you probably know already, our products have received the highest rating in several market and consumer tests with regards to the complete absence of harmful chemicals, and we proudly display the gold medal awarded to us for ethical research. Also-"

Martha shrugged and scratched one of her considerable double chins. "Don't care 'bout any of that. All I'm interested in is the price and that it feels good on my skin."

"Ah... okay. Well, it does. I use it, too," Denise said with a smile.

Smiling back, Martha handed Denise an old-fashioned key for the room she had rented.

"Anyway, like I said, you have room nineteen. Can you find it on your own? Once you go out of the office, you turn left and follow the inside of the horseshoe until you reach number nineteen."

"Thanks. I should be able to find that," Denise said turned around. When she remembered that the door opened towards her, she began to put down one of her suitcases so she could get a hand free, but Mike quickly slipped around the counter and opened it for her.

"Here ya go," he said, looking directly into Denise's eyes and flashing the crooked grin he apparently liked so much.

"Thanks, Mike," Denise said, once again feeling a shiver run down her back at the intrusive nature of the overweight man.

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Once the door had closed behind Denise, the smile slowly faded from Martha's face as she turned towards her son. "Careful with her, Mike. She's one of the ungodly people. I can smell it on her. She has that look in her eyes... she's been sent here to pervert us."

"But Daddy took care of the other bad people, didn't he?"

"Yes. Daddy has taken care of a lot of people over the years. You know that."

"I know," Mike said and broke out in a little snicker as he looked out of the window and onto the stretch of dirt between the parking lot and the long-abandoned gas pumps. Two orange lights still shone down onto the old pumps from decrepit light posts, creating an eerie spectacle in the darkness of the evening.

Putting her arm across Mike's shoulders, Martha pulled him towards the back room. "Come on, son. We left off at a really bad spot."

"Yes, Ma... I'll be there. I love to read aloud for you."

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"Seventeen... eighteen... nineteen. Nineteen... hmmm," Denise said out loud as she arrived at the room and took a long look at the sorry state of the drooping sunblind. "Oh well, I knew it wouldn't be the Ritz," she continued and put the key into the lock.

After giving it a few twists, she was finally able to get the door unlocked and pushed it open with her elbow.

As she dumped her suitcases and the samples in the middle of the floor, she slowly spun around to take in the atmosphere of the room that appeared to have been frozen in time since the late Seventies or early Eighties. "Mmm-hmmm... Okay. At least it wasn't too expensive... and the bed looks to be all right."

After closing the door, she kicked off her shoes and pulled aside the bed cover so she could catch a few minutes of shuteye before she would attempt to hit the shower.

Sitting down on the surprisingly soft bed, her eye immediately caught a colorful brochure lying on the night stand that promised 'Instant Satisfaction - only \$2.98.'

She choked back a grunt when she realized that it was a list of the pay-per-view porn channels offered by the motel - no less than two dozen, in every category known to man - and she hurriedly opened the top drawer of the night stand to put the brochure next to the ubiquitous King James Bible.

A moment later, she reconsidered and put it into the second drawer to keep it separate from the Bible. "After all, there's no point in making anyone mad at me," she said with a chuckle.

Yawning widely, she fluffed the pillow and swung her legs up into the bed. "Just a couple of minutes... just... just... ZZZZZzzzzzzzzzz..."

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An hour and a half later, she gradually stirred from her sleep. Smacking her dry lips and rolling over onto her right side, she suddenly realized that she had slept in; chuckling, she yawned and stretched in a cat-like fashion, making her back pop and creak.

As she swung her legs over the side of the bed, she took a look at the state of the carpet and decided that she better wear her shoes at all times. While she put on her favorite driving loafers, she noticed that the temperature in the room had dropped quite considerably. After yawning again and scratching her hair, she went over to the ancient air conditioning unit to see if it needed to be adjusted, but it seemed to be all right.

"Hmmm...?" she said with a shrug. Turning back around, she quickly put her two suitcases on the bed and unzipped one of them to get her sleeping T-shirt and her toilet bag.

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Her brief shower had proved to be more adventurous than she liked - the water in the shower cabin had been filled with little fragments of rust - so in the end, she had settled for doing it the old-fashioned way at the small wash basin next to the toilet.

Water-combed and feeling much fresher, Denise tied a knot on the belt of her favorite terrycloth bathrobe and stepped back inside the main room where she quickly unpacked her laptop and began to power it up.

While it was booting, she found her cell phone and connected it to the laptop so she could get some work done - she had monthly sales figures to report.

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Meanwhile, back at the office, Martha turned off the lights and locked the door for the night. Lumbering along the paved stones, she followed the wing of the motel before turning right, headed for two sheds and a low, barn-like hut that had been built behind the motel.

Pausing briefly before she opened the door to the hut, she tried to strain her hearing to listen for unwanted company, but soon came to the conclusion that - apart from the crickets and a coyote in the far distance - she was the only living being there.

The upper level of the hut was divided into two small bays for supplies and a staircase in the center that went down, and as Martha closed the door behind her, she flicked a switch that activated a strip light so she could see where the steps were.

Slowly climbing down the sixteen steps, Martha let out a string of huffs, puffs and groans from the exertion and the aches that shot up from her overworked knees. Once she was at the bottom step, she clicked off the light on the stairs and turned left, headed for a wooden door that was held in place by four sturdy metal hinges and no less than three locks.

After she had worked the locks, she swung the door open to reveal a modest sleeping quarter with a double bed and a small night stand. A lumpy figure was already sleeping on the bed, and as Martha pulled off her dress and sat down on the bed, the figure turned over and let out a few grunts.

"I'll be with you real soon, Pa," Martha whispered in a sweet voice. "D'ya know, we got another one today? Yessir. A pretty little thing. She's one of them... I've already told Mike that he should keep a close eye on her. She's an affront to God and we need to take care of her, Pa. Tonight. I just need some rest first," she continued, lifting the blanket and slipping in next to her husband.

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II.

Closing the lid of her laptop, Denise stretched her back and let out a long, moaning yawn. As she scratched her cheek, thinking about brushing her teeth before bedtime, she was suddenly hit by a brutal wave of dizziness that forced her to clamp both hands down on the edge of the bed to stay upright.

"Whoa...!" she croaked loudly, watching in shock as the motel room began to twist and spin away from her. When her laptop vanished into thin air right in front of her, she slammed her eyes shut and let out a piercing cry that didn't stop until she could feel the dizzy spell recede.

Panting hard, she didn't dare open her eyes for the first few seconds, but she could feel that something was wrong. The temperature had dropped again and she felt an unnaturally chilly breeze on her bare arms and legs.

Denise gulped nervously and cracked open an eyelid - a split second later, she slammed it shut again, rocking back and forth on the bed and chanting, "No... no... no... no... this isn't happening... this can't be happening...!"

'Please help us,' an ethereal being said from everywhere in a voice that couldn't be categorized as either male or female.

"No! Go away! I'm hallucinating!" Denise cried out, covering her eyes with her hands.

*'Justine, you are not dreaming. Please help us.'*

Swallowing down her fear, Denise cracked open her eyelids to see if the horrific beings were still there. When it registered that she continued to be surrounded by nearly a dozen ethereal beings - free-floating, fairy-like specters without discernible features and seemingly made of pale blue light - she broke out into a wild shiver that left goosebumps all over her body.

'Please help us,' the apparitions said again, all moving their mouths even though only one voice could be heard.

Wrapping her arms around her torso and rocking back and forth on the bed, Denise needed to wet her lips several times before she could speak louder than a croak. "Wh... wh- who are you?" she whispered hoarsely.

*'We are like you. Our lives were taken from us here.'*

"I'm not dead!"

'Yet.'

"Oh, God!" Denise said and rubbed her face.

*'No, Justine, they have never shown their faces here. This is a God-forsaken outpost of Hell. Ruled by evil.'*

"My name is not Justine! What do you want from me?!"

*'You must stop the evil.'*

"Martha and her son?"

*'Yes. They may appear human, but they are animals... demons controlled by the denizens of Hell. They have killed too many of us and they will continue to kill unless you stop them.'*

"But what c- could I d-do...? I c- can't..."

*'You are the next to die. Tonight. Unless you act now, you will never see another dawn, Justine.'*

"Oh God, no... my car's out of gas... and I'm in the middle of the desert... if I run, I..."

*'You cannot run. You need to stay and fight. You must stop the evil.'*

"But how?!" Denise cried, almost tearing her hair out. "I can't k- kill them...! I'm not a murderer! And they're two against one, and..."

Hovering in the air, the lead specter seemed to sigh briefly before it floated closer to Denise. '*Behold,*' it said, moving forward to fully cocoon the terrified woman before she had time to object.

Horrific scenes of evil, sadistic torture and ultimately cruel, violent death conducted by Martha and her family tore through Denise's mind, and no matter how hard she tried to get away from the gruesome images, they were etched into her brain, causing her to let out a piercing scream that made the windows rattle.

*'Now you see what we went through,'* the specter said and floated back from Denise. *'You are next. Like us, they will torture you to death and bury you in an unholy, shallow grave. Unless you stop this evil. Tonight, Justine. Tonight, you must put an end to their evil.'*

"God, no!"

*'You only have five hours to live, Justine. When they come for you, you will be taken to the basement. You will be strapped to a chair. They will try to conduct an exorcism on you... with fire, electricity, battery acid-'*

"STOP! STOP! You have the wrong woman! My name is Denise, not Justine!" Denise shouted, clamping her hands over her ears, but even that couldn't stop the specters from addressing her.

*'But hear it you must. If not, you will soon be one of us.'*

When Denise just shook her head wildly and began to rock back and forth on the bed, the apparitions let out a collective sigh and began to fade out of Denise's reality.

By the time the last of her ghostly companions had vanished, Denise jumped off the bed but promptly collapsed on the floor, unable to use her legs that felt like they had turned to jelly. The room was so cold that her breath was visible, and as she struggled to get up from the filthy carpet, her body began to shake uncontrollably and she let out a long, sobbing cry.

Finally able to get back up into the bed, Denise pulled both bedspreads over her and rolled up into a trembling ball to regain some of her body heat.

*'Justine,'* a disembodied voice said in her ear.

"Go away! Go away! I don't want to listen to you!"

*'If you will not listen, then you must see. Open your eyes. Open your eyes and relive your death. You have been here before, you have only just forgotten. You will die tonight unless you stop them. They will kill you again... do you not understand? You were given a second chance, do not squander it.'*

When Denise's only response was to wrap herself up even tighter in the bedspreads, the ghost sighed heavily and materialized next to the bed. With a groan, it floated on top of the bed where it began to hover above Denise's balled-up form. A few seconds later, it transformed itself into a lightning bolt of pale blue energy that streaked down into Denise's body.

When Denise opened her eyes, it was no longer 2012 and she was no longer in the motel room. Instead, time had moved back to 1981 and the location was a moldy, clammy concrete cellar, lit only by a single, naked light bulb.

Feeling chilly, Denise looked down at herself and discovered that she had been stripped naked. Growling in anger, she tried to cover herself up, but her arms and legs had been tied to a metal chair with solid leather bindings, making her unable to move an inch.

As a wooden door creaked open, Denise's eyes popped wide open at the sight of her lover walking through it, naked, beaten and bloodied. "Oh, no... Amanda... oh, no...! Wh- what have they done to you?!" she croaked, but the other woman wasn't in any condition to answer.

An overweight woman shoved Amanda into a corner of the cellar, laughing when the young woman scraped her bare knees on the coarse floor.

"What have you done to her, you sick fuckin' animal?!" Denise bellowed in a voice filled with fear, but the only reply she got was a hard slap across her cheekbone.

Behind the overweight woman, a man and a young boy walked into the cellar, pulling some kind of equipment on wheels. Staring at Denise with barely hidden disgust, the ungainly, slightly monstrous man bared his teeth in a demonic grin as he switched on a spot welder and adjusted the flame.

Filled with terror, Denise let out a wild cry and struggled madly against the bindings, but she wasn't strong enough to break free. Once she realized that she was doomed, she tried to lock eyes with her lover, but Amanda was too far gone to understand what was going on.

The overweight woman took a Holy Bible from a shelf near the wall and held it so Denise could see the golden cross on the front as she walked closer. "Freak! You have forsaken your God! This is your last chance to repent!"

Instead of giving in to the woman's demands, Denise gathered up a large blob of saliva and spat it at her, hitting her in the face. As the saliva dripped down the shocked woman's face, Denise let out a brief, ecstatic whoop that was answered immediately by the woman thumping Denise hard over the head with the Bible.

The scenes that followed that brief victory were so cruel, so inhumane and so extremely violent that the specter felt sorry for the returning Denise and pulled back from her body to give her some rest.

The modern-day Denise began to cry underneath the bedspreads, remembering every little detail that had happened to her and Amanda that night - the paralyzing electric currents that went through the metal clamps the animals had placed on their nipples; the squirts of acid that slowly ate its way through the skin, the muscles and the bones on the back of their hands, and finally the spot welder that had burned their hair and roasted their eyeballs, leaving them in a horrific, mind-numbingly painful darkness.

Pushing the bedspread off her, Denise wiped away her tears and sat up on the bed. "Amanda?" she whispered hoarsely, recognizing her long-dead lover.

*'I am here,'* the apparition said, floating down next to Denise.

"I... I'm back..."

*'Yes.'*

"H-how...?"

*'I do not know. But I am glad you are,'* Amanda said and swept a pale blue tendril across Denise's cheek.

"Now I realize I've missed you so much, but... but before, I couldn't remember you. I'm sorry..."

*'Shhh, Justine. That does not matter now. We have been blessed with your return, let us not ruin it with guilt.'*

Sitting side by side, the two women were silent for quite a while, each pondering how life and death seemed to work in mysterious ways.

"How many have they tortured to death?" Denise whispered.

*'Too many. Nearly forty. Men and women-'*

"Forty?! Why hasn't anyone reported them... I mean, us missing?"

*'I cannot say. When we died, most of us were trapped here. None of us have been able to connect with our former families. The demonic presence of the animals is too strong for goodness to penetrate.'*

"So, if I... if I don't..."

*'Yes, Justine. If you do not kill them now... tonight... if you do not end their reign of terror, they will go on and on. They will not stop killing until their evil, hoofed master sends them on in his hierarchy.'*



"If he's even planning to..." Denise added darkly, causing Amanda to look at her with a shocked look on her ghostly face.

Feeling some of the spirit returning, Denise turned around on the bed to face her former lover. "Listen, Amanda, can you help me? You and the others? I definitely need it. In this life, I'm not strong or adventurous... I'm just a traveling salesperson."

Amanda looked away and seemed to dissolve slightly, but after a brief pause, she came back and locked eyes with Denise. *'No. We cannot leave the buildings. The low hut behind the motel is the source of all evil, and it is so strong it acts like a barrier to us, forever keeping us inside.'*

"But... you're here now?"

*'The basement is connected to the motel through underground tunnels. That is why we can travel between them.'*

Sighing, Denise buried her face in her hands and began to shake her head. "Last time, I tried to fight them... but my strength couldn't save us," she said, looking up at her former lover. "Now, I'm... I'm not strong... but... but I'm a lot smarter. Perhaps I could outsmart them? Perhaps I could get them to... to... oh, this is hopeless," she continued, sighing again.

*'Where there is a will, there is a way,'* Amanda said and swept a blue tendril across Denise's hair.

Chuckling darkly, Denise reached behind her to try to capture Amanda, but she was unsuccessful. "That's what I always said back then... now my favorite slogan is Don't work harder, work smarter."

*'If you do, you can save us all. If you fail, you will join us before dawn. At least we would be together, Justine.'*

Denise broke out in a wild shiver at the thought, hoping against hope that it wasn't her time yet.

*'You shiver... would it be so bad to be together again? Here, time has no meaning. We would be-*

"In this life, my name is Denise. And I'm married, Amanda. I dearly want to go home to my wife," Denise said quietly, touching a classy, titanium wedding band on her finger.

*'Oh...'* Amanda said, floating backwards at the sight of the ring.

"I'm sorry."

*'I am sorry, too... but I understand. All the more reason for you to succeed, Denise. Now you have something to live for,'* Amanda said and vanished into thin air.

Rubbing her face, Denise let out a deep sigh. "I'll try... I'll try."

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"Ma...! Ma! ...Ma!" Mike whispered, giving his sleeping mother a series of little pokes and shoves.

Smacking her lips, Martha rolled over onto her back and tried to focus her beady eyes on the shadowy figure standing in her bedroom. "This better be good, son."

"There's something wrong with the new woman. She screamed a couple of times... and there was a queer blue light in there with her. I couldn't see anything, but it was definitely queer," Mike whispered.

"She screamed?"

"Yeah! More than once, too!"

"So? Maybe she had nightmares," Martha said and wanted to roll back over to the side, but her son put a hand on her shoulder.

"No, Ma. She wasn't sleeping, she was talking to herself. Kinda loudly."

"About what?"

"A whole lotta nonsense."

Sighing, Martha leaned her head back on the warm, inviting pillow. A few thoughts flashed through her head, most concerning how to deal with the ungodly stranger. "Screamin'... talkin' nonsense in the middle of the night... By all that's holy, on top of everything else, she's nothin' but a damn drug addict... all right."

Martha climbed out of bed and quickly walked around the room to gather a few things they'd need for the exorcism. Donning a pair of slippers and putting on her dress to quell the admiring look in her son's eyes, she licked her meaty lips several times and clapped her hands together. "Matters are worse than we thought... we need to act swiftly. The Lord has commanded it. Mike, you wake up Pa. I'll prepare the Good Book... and the chair."

"Yes, Ma," Mike said, following his mother with his eyes as she bustled about in the small bedroom.

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At the same time in room nineteen, Denise zipped and buttoned a fresh pair of jeans that she had taken from her suitcase. After adjusting the sportsbra she used for exercising while on the road, she slipped into a black, oversized T-shirt that she hoped would give her an opportunity to blend in.

As she sat down on the bed to put on her favorite driving loafers, reality caught up with her and she broke out in a wild shiver. Looking towards the heavens for guidance, she let out a small chuckle. "And it's all because I'm scared of flying. Man...! If I get out of this mess, I'll probably be scared of driving, too..." she mumbled as she rubbed her face.

Suddenly getting an idea, she took her cell phone and hooked it into her laptop. After waiting for the two items to power up, she went to one of the online encyclopedias and began to search for Missing Persons, New Mexico, 1981.

It didn't take her long to find a list of names, but much to her frustration, the page didn't list their last known whereabouts. Scrolling down, she eventually found Amanda, listed as 'Marsden, Amanda. Date of disappearance: May 11th, 1981. Age at disappearance: twenty-four. Characteristics: five foot five, 123 lbs., blonde, blue eyes, small scar on right temple, slight gap between front teeth. Last seen wearing: white Nike tennis shoes, blue denim shorts, loose red shirt over white undershirt.'

Reading about the gap between Amanda's front teeth made Denise's chin quiver. *'That's what I loved the most about her... that damned, cute, little gap...'* she thought, taking a deep, trembling breath.

She closed her eyes and tried to think back to her own previous life, but she was only able to see fragments that she wasn't sure where fit in. "A car... a convertible? A red convertible that... that ran out of gas! Oh, who makes this cruel game? This is just too awful!" she said and thumped her fist into the mattress.

Growling, she returned to the laptop and scrolled down the list of missing persons to find her own record, but she soon discovered that she couldn't remember what her last name had been, and there were no less than four Justines on the list.

"Amanda? Are you still here? I need your help... Amanda? I guess she isn't," Denise said quietly after a brief pause. "Oh well, I only need to search for people missing at or near May eleventh..." she continued, entering the search string on the page.

"Oh... that's me," Denise said, staring wide-eyed at the highlighted record on the monitor.

'Curtis, Justine. Date of disappearance: May 11th, 1981. Age at disappearance: twenty-seven. Characteristics: five foot six, 149 lbs., blonde, hazel eyes, dimples, fair skin, three nickel clamps on left ear, one stud in right earlobe, missing outer half of left eyebrow. Last seen wearing: blue Converse basketball boots, blue denim overalls, white Rolling Stones 'lips' T-shirt, blue Los Angeles Rams baseball cap.'

"... Missing outer half of the left eyebrow...? What on Earth was that all about...?" Denise said, touching her forehead to check if her current eyebrow still had its regular size. "But the rest is eerily accurate... blonde, hazel eyes, dimples, fair skin..."

***CREAK!***

The harsh sound tore through the quiet night like a gunshot and made Denise jump a foot in the air. Holding her breath and quickly closing her laptop so the blue light couldn't be seen from the outside, she tried to strain her hearing to pick up anything that fell out of the ordinary.

When a full minute had gone by without the sound being repeated, Denise released the breath she had been holding but continued to stay quiet as a mouse.

*'I need to get out of here! If I have to sprout wings and fly away, so be it, but I need to get out of here!'* she thought, shutting down the laptop and unplugging the cell phone.

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Outside, Mike moved away from the window to room nineteen and slipped back into the darkness, cursing his rotten luck that had made him step on the only creaky floorboard along the entire path.

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III.

Five minutes later, Denise unlocked and opened the door to her room, holding it only an inch ajar so she could slam it shut in a hurry in case she was attacked. Peeking outside through the narrow crevice, she scanned the entire area to make sure she was alone.

Satisfied that no one was outside, she tip-toed out of the room and closed the door very quietly behind her. At once, she stepped off the wooden pathway to walk in the dirt, thinking that it would make less sound.

As she scooted along the front of the motel, she tried to look inside all the other rooms but one after the other proved to be empty, and eventually, she understood that she was the only guest there.

"Dammit," she whispered as she came to a halt at the end of the wing. "And so flippin' typical... how many times have I been bothered by noisy neighbors? Too damn often... but now that I could use some help, I'm all flippin' alone!"

A shuffling, grating sound some distance behind her made her crouch down and hurry into the shadows. Turning around, she could see that it was Mike, the son of the house, dragging a shovel along the ground.

"That guy gives me the creeps," Denise mumbled, feeling goosebumps race up and down her spine. Once the overweight man was out of sight, Denise got up and turned the corner to try her luck with the motel's other wing.

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Some time later, she crouched down behind her rental car, weighing her options. Looking behind her, she could see that the two eighteen-wheelers and the cars that had been parked against the motel were long gone.

Sighing, she reached into her pocket and found the keys to the car, but didn't dare press the little button that would disengage the central locking because she knew that the noise it would produce would sound like a thunderclap in the quiet night.

"And nothing to disguise it... no freight trains, no jets on final approach, no farting cows... dammit," she said to herself as she pondered whether or not to press the button. In the end, she just decided to go for it.

Like she had predicted, the *KA-LONKK!* it made was loud enough to wake the dead and the blinking hazard lights illuminated the entire parking lot, but at least the car was open.

Sneaking up to the driver's side door, she quickly opened it and pulled the small lever for the trunk. After she had been completely still for thirty seconds, she went to the rear of the car and looked inside the trunk. "Hmmm... hmmm... the jack. Yeah... no, it's too heavy... oh, a spanner! Yeah, that'll do nicely," she said, taking the heavy metal tool and swinging it through the air a couple of times to test its weight.

Once she had closed the trunk and the driver's side door, she thought about locking the car, but decided that she couldn't risk another loud noise. "And there's no one out here but ghosts, ghouls and... huh, lost souls, anyhow," she mumbled to herself as she scanned the area to see if her movement had been spotted.

Deciding that she was in the clear, she quickly ran back to the motel, eager to check out the rear side and the low hut Amanda had told her would be there.

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At the same time at the other side of the motel, Mike chewed on his fingernails, already dreading the flogging he'd get when he told his mother and father that the ungodly woman had vanished.

To make sure he hadn't just overlooked the woman the first time, he went back inside room nineteen and began a thorough search that took him from the small bathroom to the living room and finally to the bedroom.

"Oh, but where could she have gone?!" he groaned as he got down on his knees to look underneath the bed. When that proved fruitless as well, he scratched his greasy hair and let out a resounding grunt.

Suddenly getting his one thought of the day, he grabbed one of Denise's suitcases and emptied it out on the bed. "Clothes... more clothes... girl stuff... oh, underwear..." he said, flashing a creepy grin when he found one of Denise's spare panties.

After sniffing them, he rolled them up into a ball and stuck them into his back pocket for later. As he continued rummaging through Denise's belongings, his fat fingers soon touched the spine of a paperback written by an author he had never heard of.

The blurb at the back told a story that made him cringe and contort his face into a mask of disgust when he realized that it was made by and for the ungodly people.

"By all that's holy," he said quietly, using the phrase he had heard his mother say countless times. Thumbing through it, his eye caught a paragraph that made him blush fire engine red, and he quickly threw the book down onto the bed like it had burned him. A few seconds of deep blushing and frantic prayer later, he picked up the book to read the rest of the page.

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Looking up at the clear, dark sky, Denise thanked her lucky stars that she had decided to wear a black T-shirt as it was the only thing that kept her out of sight at her present location, waiting at the barn-like low hut behind the motel.

Lights were on in two of the windows in the basement, but they were so filthy it was impossible to see through them.

*'Hmmm...'* Denise thought, lying flat on her stomach on the dirt, just outside the cone of light from one of the tall posts that cast a creepy, orange sheen down on everything on the ground. *'I should call the police... but I need to have something to give them... hmmm.'*

A shuffling, dragging sound made Denise look to her left, quickly spotting the obese woman walking back towards the low hut. The woman was sweating even more than she had done in the office, and Denise briefly wondered what had happened to her to give her face that shade of red.

Less than a minute later, Mike came shuffling up the path to the low hut, wearing a very clear, red palm print on the side of his considerable head.

*'Oh...! He's been slapped... they must have discovered that I'm gone. Damn, that means they've been in my room... my stuff! My laptop! If they've ruined it, I'm gonna... oh, the bastards,'* Denise thought and thumped her fist into the dirt as she watched the son walk into the hut.

The night - already unpleasantly hot - soon grew even more inhospitable as the large thunderstorm that had loomed on the horizon for hours suddenly decided to make its presence felt with a thunderbolt that set one of the cacti alight, creating an eerie yellow and orange spectacle against the black sky.

Looking behind her, Denise knew that the crackling fire would soon attract the attention of the people she was trying to avoid, so she jumped to her feet and ran away from the low hut.

Down in the basement's bedroom, Mike tried to protect his face from his mother's hands, but he was only able to stop every third slap. "Ma! But... Ma! Please stop, Ma! I couldn't know that the book was tainted!"

"It wasn't tainted, it was evil! Evil, Mike! Look what it made you do!" Martha said between slaps. "You read the ungodly words and they got to you! Finding my boy with his pants down, stroking himself... and reading an ungodly book! Why, I have a mind to take you behind the wood shed...!"

"But, Ma!"

"You will be punished, son! So help me God, I will make you repent your evil act!" Martha said and whacked her son hard over the head.

"Silence!" a booming voice said from the darkness at the other side of the bedroom. As the two people stopped fighting and turned around to show their respect, Jeremiah Rowley walked out of the shadows with a cane in one hand and a well-worn Holy Book in the other.

Even though he was in his early seventies and his full beard had turned gray, Jeremiah was as strong and righteous as ever, and his intense eyes shot fire as he looked at his wife and their son. "Son, we'll deal with your indiscretion later. First, we must see to the stray sheep who needs to be led home to the flock. With the Holy Scriptures, we shall make her see the error of her ways."

"Yes, Sir," Mike said, ducking his head.

"Wife, I need your help to- wait... is something burning?" Jeremiah said and sniffed the air a couple of times.

Knowing the perfect excuse when he met it, Mike hurried over to the staircase and put his hands on the doorframe. "I'll go and see, Sir."

"You do that, son," Jeremiah muttered, reaching for a chair so he could rest his weary legs.

Not even twenty seconds later, Mike came back into the bedroom with an excited look on his face. "A cactus is burning! Not far from the back of the motel!"

"A cactus?" Jeremiah said as his old head whipped around to look at his son. "A burning cactus... the burning bush! It's the sign! The Lord is giving us a sign! He's warning us of the stray... she will bring forth Beelzebub, her eternal master! Wife! Bring me my boots!"

"Yes, Sir," Martha said and hurried over to Jeremiah's heavy workboots.

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"Those narrow-minded sons a' bitches," Denise growled as she looked at the sorry remains of her brand new paperback that she hadn't even had time to open yet. Most of the pages had been torn from the cover and were floating around in the toilet bowl.

Throwing her arms in the air, she quickly went back to the bedroom, scooped up all her clothes that Mike had scattered on the bed and threw them haphazardly into the suitcase. After she had closed it, she took her laptop - that they hadn't bothered to wreck - and stuffed it into its protective travel bag.

With a new growl, she looked around room nineteen to see if she had forgotten anything. When she was satisfied that the room was empty, she hurried away from it and over to the rental car where she dumped everything in the trunk.

Crouching down next to the smoke blue Chevrolet, she found her cell phone and dialed 9-1-1. Just as her finger hovered above the Off Hook button, the thunderstorm rumbled again and sent several more lightning bolts down onto the desert floor.

Denise scrunched up her face and looked with a strange fascination at the section of the sky where the large, ominous cloud was looming, completely masking out the billions of stars that were visible elsewhere. From time to time, she could see lightning bolts jumping from one location to the next inside the cloud; sometimes having as many as four stops before they fizzled out.

"They're... they're red...! That thunderstorm produces red lightning... Sweet Mercy, this really is a God-forsaken place," she whispered hoarsely as it dawned on her that her fascination was brought on by the strangely-colored bolts.

Shivering, she quickly pressed the button on the phone and put it to her ear. After a brief delay, she could hear a female voice at the other end of the connection.

*'Good evening, you have reached the Santa Rosa Police Station. How may we help you? Buenas tardes, usted ha llegado a la comisaría de policía de Santa Rosa. ¿Cómo podemos ayudarle?'*

"He-hello? Uh...?"

*'Hello, Miss?'*

"Uh, sorry, I didn't know if... never mind. My name is Denise Norell. I have a problem and I need your help," Denise said quietly, pinning the phone down between her ear and her shoulder while she was trying to stay sharp in case Mike or his mother would be close by.

*'What's the nature of your distress and what is your location, Miss Norell?'*

"I was... I was... manhandled by an employee at the motel I'm staying at," she said out loud while thinking *'A white lie... but I can't tell them a ghost has warned me that I'll die before dawn, can I?'*



*'Were you sexually violated, Miss?'*

"Oh no, no, no... he just grabbed me and shoved me around. It was the son of the owner. I'm at the Desert Dream Motel, some distance east of Albuquerque... my car is out of gas and I can't leave...!"

*'We're familiar with your location, Miss Norell. Are you in a motel room?'*

"N-no, I'm outside. He's ransacked my room... probably looking for my valuables... he didn't get them."

*'All right. We'll send a squad car. Stay out of sight until you see the flashing lights. Once the two officers have identified themselves, they'll take care of you and make sure you're safe while the situation is resolved.'*

"Okay... that sounds good... thank you," Denise said and got ready to close the connection.

*'You're welcome, Miss Norell. Don't hesitate to call again if the situation changes for the worse.'*

"That's a deal. Thanks... bye," Denise said and pressed the little button. "If the situation changes for the worse... sheesh, if it does, I'll be six foot under..."

Closing the phone, she put it into her jeans pocket and crawled to the front of the car. Peeking above the front fender, she could barely make out the lights coming from the low hut behind the motel.

*'Hmmm. It'll be my word against theirs... until now, I can only accuse them of destroying my paperback and scattering my stuff on the bed. I need solid proof,'* she thought. Taking a deep breath, she hunched over and quickly ran across the parking lot to get to the low hut.

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A cloud of dust lingering in the air for no good reason caught Mike's eye as he came out of the office with a staple gun. At first, he couldn't quite work out why there would be a cloud of dust lingering in the air at that time of night, but then he realized that it had to have been made by Denise.

Clutching the staple gun, he bit down on his lips and began to sneak along the wing of the motel. As he arrived at the utility and storage room halfway down to the low hut, he quickly unlocked the door and took his favorite shovel - the one with the rubberized handlebar.

Holding it in his preferred two-handed grip, he continued sneaking down the side of the motel until a faint whiff of perfume entered his nostrils. He knew - from painful experience - that his mother wouldn't be caught dead wearing perfume, and that left only one option.

"I've got ya," Mike mumbled to himself, tip-toeing down from the pathway and onto the dirt. He tried very hard to glide along the gravel without making a sound, but his considerable bulk meant that he constantly dug into the loose surface which created a steady, crunching sound under his feet.

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Lying flat on her stomach next to the low hut, Denise tried to peek in through the windows, but not only were they quite filthy, they were both covered by curtains.

The thunderstorm had grown fairly inactive since the lightning bolt had struck the cactus, and that meant that Denise was able to pick up two people talking in the basement.

Trembling slightly from the nervous tension rumbling around inside her, she tried to move closer to the window she was at, but she was still only able to decipher a few, scattered words.

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"Wife, sometimes I wonder why our Lord continues to send us these stray sheep. Have we not done His bidding in a satisfactory manner?" Jeremiah said as he put his tools in perfect order on his workbench.

"Yes we have," Martha said, straightening the manacles on the armrests of the chair. "But there's so much perversion and degeneration in the world today that we can only... well, only rein in the strays. Anyway, I'm sure that when our Lord sees fit to call us home, we will be richly rewarded."

"Indeed, wife."

"Oh, I'm only sorry that we weren't able to cleanse everyone we've had in this chair. Some of them were just too far gone... too close to the devil and his evil ways to understand what the word salvation even meant."

Pausing, Martha began to think about the people she had seen die in the chair she was standing next to - young and old, men and women, all colors, all races; none had been spared, not even the few who had succumbed to the pressure and had begged for divine forgiveness for leading an ungodly life.

The thoughts made Martha tremble slightly and experience a cold shiver running down her spine. Misinterpreting it as a premonition of what she was about to do to their latest guest, she let out a nervous chuckle and went back to preparing the chair.

Turning around, Jeremiah leaned against his cane and let out a disappointed sigh. "Wife, once we've dealt with the stray and our no-good son has taken care of the remains, he needs to be punished for his vile actions earlier."

"I agree, Sir. The devil had to have been in that book."

"The book concerns me less than the fact that my son fell for it. A five-day fast should make him see the error of his ways," Jeremiah said and thumped the butt of his cane into the concrete floor.

"Sounds like a suitable punishment for the crime, Sir," Martha said, nodding.

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The high humidity meant that Denise's arms, face and neck were covered in a sheen of sweat, and that in turn meant that the dust stuck to her and made her look like a dog that had been playing in the mud for too long.

Pulling back from the window, she sat back on her thighs and tried to get some of the grime off her arms. *'On the other hand, when the cops show up, this could be a good-'*

A crunching sound behind her and to the left - followed by a loud whoosh - made her nape hairs stand on edge. With her heart in her throat, she began to look to her left, but before she had time to react fully, Mike's shovel slammed violently into the side of her head, knocking her out on the spot and throwing her body bonelessly against the hut.

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\*

IV.

*Drip.*

Pain.

*Drip.*

Excruciating pain.

*Drip.*

Cracking open her eyelids, Denise realized through a red, blurry haze that history was about to repeat itself. She had been stripped naked and was sitting in the same chair she had been killed in thirty years earlier.

Blood was dripping down from the side of her head and onto her breasts, but when she tried to raise her arm to touch her face, she discovered that her arms had been restrained with sturdy leather bindings.

*'I'm about to die...'* she thought, watching her own blood coat her left breast before it slipped off the edge and continued down onto her stomach. *'But this time, I don't think I'll get a new chance...'*

She sighed and closed her eyes, determined to see out her life with all the dignity she could muster.

Around her, disembodied voices floated freely around the room, sometimes forming coherent words and sentences; most often not. She also noticed that the thunderstorm had grown stronger, sending out growl-like thunderclaps that made it sound like a predator was on the prowl.

*'Denise!'* someone said very close to Denise's ear. Confused, she opened her eyes to look around, but couldn't see anyone near her.

*'Denise... please do not give up. Fight it... fight it! We will help, I promise!'* the female voice said.

Through her pounding headache, it took Denise several seconds to realize that the voice belonged to Amanda, but when it finally registered in her fuzzy brain, it ignited a spark of hope within her. *'Maybe... just maybe I can turn it around... maybe...'* she thought, taking a few deep breaths to overcome the terror that threatened to numb her senses.

At that exact moment, the wooden door creaked open and the obese woman walked in with her son in tow. Taking a Holy Bible from a shelf near the wall, she held it so Denise could see the golden cross on the front. "You have forsaken your God! This is your last chance to repent!"

Denise remembered vividly what her answer had been the first time she had heard that, and she prepared a large blob of saliva for the woman. When Martha got close enough, Denise spat at her, sending the blob directly into her bloated face.

Letting out a brief shriek, Martha staggered backwards as she frantically tried to wipe the spit from her face. "Vile creature!" she said hoarsely, but then fell quiet, remembering another, very similar, incident from the distant past.

Martha stared wide-eyed at the blonde woman occupying the chair. Little by little, she began to recognize certain similarities around the eyes; the body type; the stance in the chair- *'It can't be... it's impossible! That freak has been dead and buried for thirty years! I threw her carcass down the hole myself... and yet, here she is again... it must be a... a sister... or a daughter... or...'*

"Are you Satan incarnate?" Martha asked hoarsely.

"No, you fat piece of trash! I'm Lazarus back to fuckin' haunt ya!" Denise shouted in Martha's face, breaking out into a mocking laugh that left the obese women red-faced with anger.

Fed up with hearing the insults hurled at his mother, Mike let out a roar and jumped forward. Swinging wildly, he punched Denise hard enough in the gut to make her double over and let out

a pained groan, but when he pulled his hand back to hit her again, Martha grabbed hold of it to stop him.

"No! Get the tools... we will make her repent! The clamps first, then the acid."

"Yes, Ma," Mike said and ran over to the other side of the storage room they were in. As he came to a stop at a broad shelf, he quickly scooped up the starter cables he had converted himself and plugged them into a live battery. Taking a deep breath, he lifted the heavy apparatus off the shelf and stumbled back to the chair.

"Here you go, Ma," he said as he put it down on the concrete floor. "Oh look, she's tainted... she has the devil's mark on her arm," he continued, pointing at a small, colorful tattoo of a butterfly on the inside of Denise's right wrist.

Nodding, Martha studied the harmless tattoo with barely hidden disdain. "As expected. Now we know where to apply the acid, don't we?"

"Yes, Ma!"

Denise was still coughing and wheezing from the heavy hit to her gut, but she managed to lift her head and send her two captors a look of pure hatred. "You're... sick... sick...!"

"Pah," Martha said and took the starter cables, intent on attaching them to Denise's nipples.

Suddenly, the easily recognizable sight of flashing blue-and-red lights shone down into the basement, quickly followed by two short stabs from a police siren.

"Damnation!" Martha shouted. "Mike! Make them go away!"

"Yes, Ma!" Mike said and hurried out of the room.

Leaning in towards Denise, Martha held the starter cables ready. "If you utter a word... by all that's Holy, I will make you regret it!" she said hoarsely.

Denise felt sick to her core as she stared in wide-eyed terror at the two starter cables and at the jagged metal claws that came closer and closer to her sensitive peaks. Her heart began to thunder in her ears, accompanied by ever-increasing activity from the real thundercloud that had settled directly over the low hut.

Up at ground level, Mike stepped out of the entrance to the hut and held up his hands in a disarming gesture. "Good evening, officers. Is there a problem?"

Inside the squad car, the two police officers turned a strong spotlight on Mike that illuminated him mercilessly. "Is that him?" the first officer, Juan Galindez, said as he turned off the engine.

"Yep," Matthew McQuinn said, unbuttoning the holster for his sidearm. "A real creepy S.O.B. I've dealt with these people before. They're out of this world."

Craning his neck, Juan looked through the windows of the police car. "Can't see the woman who called us."

"Me neither, and I don't know if that's a good or bad sign. Let's go," Officer McQuinn said as he opened the door and stepped out of the cruiser.

Mike briefly stepped forward but stopped dead in his tracks when the first officer moved his hand down to his weapon. "We're cool here, officers. No problems at all."

"We've received a call for help from a Miss Denise Norell. She contacted us from your motel telling us that she had been manhandled by an employee. The son of the owner, as a matter of fact. Would you happen to know anything about that, Mister?" Officer McQuinn said.

"Uh... uh... no...?" Mike said, trying - but failing - to do some quick thinking on how to come up with a plan that could control the situation.

"Really?"

"Uh... uh... yes...?"

The two police officers looked at each other and stepped away from the cruiser. "Would you mind if we took a look around? We need to establish whether or not it was a prank call," McQuinn said, leaving the car door open behind him.

"Uh, but... buh... it was just a misunderstanding," Mike stuttered in a nasal whine, coming up short in his attempts to make the police lose interest in him. "It was just a book... how could I know that it was possessed by the devil? It forced my hand to the pages where there were lewd, graphic descriptions of... of... women... and... and... and my instincts just took over and..."

"Galindez, I'll deal with him," Officer McQuinn said and reached for his handcuffs. "Make a thorough sweep of the entire motel. I think Mister Brainiac here just spilled the beans."

"I'm on it," Juan Galindez said and ran back towards the main buildings of the motel.

Down in the basement, the sound of heavy footsteps running away sent Denise into a state of panic and she began to tremble all over. Staring at the looming starter cables, she did the only thing she felt she could do to save her life.

Officer McQuinn had just tightened the handcuffs around Mike's fat wrists when a terrified, near-primordial scream for help filled the air, making the experienced officer's nape hairs stand on edge. Spinning around, he established at once that the scream came from the basement of the hut he was standing next to.

The cry for help was soon overpowered by a crackling sound of electricity and a grotesque, otherworldly gurgle; at the same time, pale blue light flashed in irregular patterns through one of the low-set windows.

"Juan! Juan! Get back here!" Officer McQuinn shouted and let go of Mike who promptly took off into the darkness. When he could see his fellow officer return, McQuinn drew his sidearm and hurried into the low hut.

Holding his weapon ahead of him, he turned first left; then right, finally arriving at the room where it all took place. Jumping inside, he opened his mouth to give the two people in the room a warning, but his voice deserted him when he realized what he was looking at.

A naked, young woman was standing at a chair, completely enshrouded in a pale blue haze that seemed to sparkle and pulse and that made her hair flow like she was under water. The woman's head was tilted back as if she was looking towards the heavens, her right arm was stretched out ahead of her, and her hand was placed on the forehead of an obese woman.

The other woman was spasming and letting out a gruesome, gurgling groan that made it sound like she was severely brain-damaged. In her hands, she held two metal tools that had somehow attached themselves to the overweight woman's legs.

Beyond the crackling electricity, the room was filled with a thunderous, booming roar that seemed to emanate from the contact between the naked woman's hand and the other woman's forehead.

As Matthew McQuinn was watching, the pale blue haze slowly dissolved around the naked woman until it was merely a faint distortion. When it finally left her, she collapsed to the floor, hitting her back hard against the front edge of the chair.

The obese woman kept standing for a few seconds more, swaying like a reed caught in a breeze; then, she collapsed, too, slumping bonelessly to the concrete floor where she landed flat on her face without even trying to break the fall.

Just as Matthew hurried over to check the two women for signs of life, the thunderstorm above the hut released all its fury and sent a cluster of red and blue bolts down on top of the hut and the motel, blowing out all the windows and making the buildings shake.

"Holy crap!" Matthew shouted as plaster and fragments of wood rained down on him from the crumbling hut. Putting two fingers on the neck of the obese woman, he quickly established that she was dead - and not only that, she was cold as ice. "What the hell is going on here...?" he mumbled as he went over to the young, naked woman.

As Denise regained consciousness, she let out a rattling cough and rolled over onto her right side. Staring at the dead Martha who was lying only inches away from her, she couldn't fathom what had happened.

"Miss? Miss? Are you all right?" Officer McQuinn said as he knelt down next to Denise, making her jerk back in shock.

"It's the police, Miss! We need to get you out of here before everything comes down on our heads!" he continued, reaching in under Denise's body.

"I... c- can walk," Denise croaked, but the strong officer had already lifted her off the ground. As she leaned her head against the warm uniform, she momentarily lost consciousness again, feeling like she was swimming in a bottomless ocean.

'*Matt!? Matt?!*' a male voice shouted from somewhere above the two survivors.

"We're down here, Juan! Careful, the roof is gonna come down!" Matthew McQuinn said as he waded through the debris. Turning the corner to get back to the steep staircase, he bumped into a dark figure. "Hey, what the hell kept ya? C'mon, I've got-

The dark figure responded by roaring loudly and swinging an axe at him. As a lightning bolt was briefly visible through the wide cracks in the crumbling ceiling, the figure's face was illuminated, looking very much like a demon from the deepest levels of Hell.

"Fuck!" Matthew shouted, barely avoiding the axe. Jumping back into the basement, he stared wide-eyed at the demonic appearance of the elderly man.

Jeremiah's face was contorted into a mask of evil and his eyes were quite literally pools of hellfire. "You will repent!" he shouted in a guttural growl that was anything but human. Swinging the axe again, he tried to cleave McQuinn's head, but his second swing missed by even more than the first one had.

"Freeze! Drop the axe! Drop it! Now!" Officer Galindez barked behind the demon, pointing his weapon at the elderly man's body.

"Kill it, Juan! It's not human!" Matthew shouted, trying to protect Denise's prone body from yet another wild swing. "Kill it, for fuck's sake!"

Officer Galindez hesitated at first, but when the elderly man turned towards him and bared his teeth in an animal-like sneer, he squeezed the trigger and fired several shots into the man's body; each impact jerking the demon backwards until it reached the basement wall where it slowly crumbled to the floor with dark red blood oozing out of half a dozen wounds.

Lowering his smoking pistol, Juan Galindez wiped his sweaty forehead and stared at the beast. "Wh- what was that thing...? That wasn't a man!"

"I don't know what the hell is going on here... c'mon! She's the only survivor," Officer McQuinn said and nodded at the naked woman in his arms.



Just then, Juan Galindez let out a fierce scream and fell onto his knees with the axe buried in his back. Behind him, the demonic Jeremiah Rowley rose to his full height and began to cackle insanely.

"No! Oh God, no!" Matthew said and tried to reach for his sidearm, but found that he couldn't get his hand down there and hold onto Denise at the same time.

As the demonic beast stretched out its arms and began to lumber towards him, he made a quick decision and dumped Denise on the concrete floor where she landed with a pained grunt.

Whipping out his pistol, McQuinn let out an angry, desperate roar as he emptied the magazine into the elderly man's face, showering the walls behind the demon with tufts of hair, splashes of blood and large chunks of pale gray brain tissue.

As the dead, nearly headless body collapsed on the concrete floor in a sea of blood, Matthew quickly holstered his weapon and reached in under Denise. "Sorry I had to dump you, but..." he said as he held her tight. "Ah, never mind... Juan...? Are you all right? Stay calm, I'll be back in a flash!"

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Five minutes later, Denise slowly came to as Officer McQuinn wrapped her in a warm, protective blanket and helped her down on the ground next to the police cruiser. "Th... thank you... are th-they...?" she croaked.

"Yeah. Whatever they were, they're dead. The son managed to escape, though. But don't worry, I'll make sure he won't get anywhere near you," McQuinn said as he tended to his partner by applying a whole pack of first aid bandages to the horrible wound on his back.

That piece of news made Denise queasy and she tried to raise herself up to look around, but her body was so heavy with fatigue that she simply couldn't. Groaning, she bumped back to the ground and leaned her back against the car.

"Off... Officer... you need to ch- check the strip of dirt down by the old gas p- pumps... they've... that's where... they've buried..." Denise croaked.

Narrowing his eyes, McQuinn turned to look down towards the front of the motel, but couldn't see the pumps from their position. "There have been others?"

"Dozens... at least... thirty years..." Denise croaked.

"Sweet Jesus... okay. All right. I'll call for a forensics team. Miss, what the hell happened in that basement? You are the one who called us, aren't you?"

"Y- yes, I called you... but... I... I don't know what happened. The last I remember is the disgusting woman holding those... those..."



...And with that, dear readers, we close this Book Of Chills - but we shall return with more fantastic flights of fancy, more hair-raising harbingers of Hell, more spine-chilling stories of the supernatural and more tragic tales of the tormented.

Finally, I have a word of advice for you brought on by a recent and rather painful experience. At the 213th annual Ghouls Banquet, I had the great fortune to be awarded a place at the table reserved for luminaries such as His Royal Highness King Phaath of Laxia, the most esteemed Lord Rasalgethi the Dark Sorcerer, the Interdimensional Traveler, and a very charming representative of the planet Xsghwhyeymtyamyamhch, Lady Chasumqumu. (It's pronounced with a sh- sound)... however, I began to worry for my safety when I was asked to strip naked and lie down on a wooden board at the center of the table. As I was undressing, I quickly looked at the elaborate flyer and realized to my great horror that I had misread the theme of the banquet. To Serve Man was to be taken literally. *Quite* literally... I managed to save my hide, but it was touch and go for a while. Once I returned to my humble subterranean abode, it took me an hour to wrest King Phaath's fork from my stomach, and I've yet to dig all of Lady Chasumqumu's talons out of my thighs.

The moral of this horrific story? Always Read The Fine Print.

Until next time...

Eternally Yours,

Norsebard

**THE END of THE BOOK OF CHILLS, Volume III**