

The girl nodded in a very dispirited fashion, and Heather could tell that she was about to burst into tears. "All right. What do your parents look like?"

"They're tall," the girl said, sniffing.

"Right. Everyone's tall to me, too," Heather said under her breath. With a 'hmmm', she took the little girl by the hand and began scanning the spectators for the missing parents.

Looking around, she finally locked eyes with a mom who was on the brink of hysteria. '*Gotta be her,*' Heather thought and raised her free hand to wave at the woman. The woman waved back and hurried over to her daughter.

Crisis over, Heather gave the Mom a couple of Silver Dollar tokens to use in Tombstone's gift shop, and then put a finger to the rim of her cowboy hat. "Have a nice show, Ma'am," she said and carried on down to the booth at the entrance to the theme park.

"Can ye spare a dime for an old vaquero?" an old and very frail-looking man croaked, holding out a trembling, crooked hand. The man was hunched over, leaning so hard on a cane that it was almost bending. His dark brown pants looked like they hadn't been washed in a decade, and his blue and green flannel shirt was tattered and filthy and at least two sizes too large for him.

Heather scrunched up her face and put her hands on her hips.

"You're gonna hafta to do better than that!" she said in a steely voice.

"Can ye spare a Benjamin Franklin or two for an old vaquero?" the old man said. When Heather still didn't answer, he started laughing - a strong, youthful laugh that didn't fit his aged appearance at all. As if by magic, the old man stood up straight and began to twirl his cane.

"Nice try, though, Ramón. Wow, you look fantastic! Come on, turn around, let me see you," Heather said and put her hands on the man's shoulders.

"I thought I'd develop a new character for the new season," Ramón Jimenez said.

The tall, graceful latino - who was actually only in his late twenties - made a mock bow and then twirled his cane some more. "Ol' Bull Scroggins was a bit hit with the kiddies last year, but I wanted to try something different," he continued.

"It's excellent. What's his name?"

"Luis Carrillo. A retired vaquero... that's Mexican for cowboy."

"Lookin' good, Ramón. Really good."

"Thanks, boss. Well, I won't take too much of your time. See you when the show opens. I got my act down pat."

"Great. Hey, did you see Sarge and the boys yet?" Heather said, putting her hand on Ramón's shoulder.

"No...? Problems?"

"Hope not, but they know I want them to mingle. Can't see 'em anywhere."

"I'm sure it's nothing. They know better than to let you down, boss."

"Hmmm. Talk to you later."

"How's it going so far, Gran?" Heather said, leaning against the backdoor of the wooden shed doubling as the booth at the entrance to the theme park.

"Oh, so-so. We're a bit up on opening night last year, but down on two years ago," Anne-Marie Maycroft said in between servicing two customers. There was a strong family resemblance between the seventy-five year old woman and Heather - they were both petite, cute and had green eyes set in a friendly face. The only major difference was that Anne-Marie's hair was gray and cut a lot shorter than Heather's.

When Anne-Marie noticed the gloomy expression on Heather's face, she crinkled her nose to show that it wasn't as bad as they had feared.

"Is he here yet?" Heather said, looking nervously over her shoulder at the road leading up to the booth. There was a steady trickle of cars entering their lot, but none of them seemed to be the kind of car a wealthy, potential investor would drive.

"Well, if he is, he's slipped past me unnoticed. Of course, I haven't been wearing my glasses all the time..."

"Gran!" Heather said; her head whipping back around to stare at her grandmother.

"Just pullin' your leg, dear. He came three minutes ago in a silver Lexus. I noticed that he made a beeline for the men's room, but I reckon he'll be back shortly."

"Please don't do that on opening night... I'm nervous enough as it is."

"Sorry," Anne-Marie said, but a twinkle in her jade green eyes proved that she was anything but.

Suddenly, Heather spotted a man in a gun-metal gray business suit standing a bit further up towards the grandstand, grinning broadly like a kid in a candy store.

"That's gotta be him. Talk to you later, Gran," Heather said and took off before the businessman could wander off again.

"Sure thing," Anne-Marie said, but her granddaughter was already long gone. Chuckling, she turned back to tear off three ticket stumps for the next customer.

"Mr. Strong?" Heather said, putting out her hand.

"Chester Strong, that's right. You must be Miss Maycroft," the businessman said. Up close, Heather could see that the photo on the man's website had been photoshopped as there were quite a few more wrinkles around his eyes than the promotional photo indicated. He looked to be in his late forties and he had an angular face, strong eyes, graying temples - and a mousy brown toupee.

"Yes, I am. Welcome to Tombstone, Mr. Strong."

"Thank you. Oh, this is quite exciting. There's a certain magic in the air tonight," the man said, taking off his wire-rim glasses to wipe the lenses.

"Well, let's hope so! Maybe some of the old ghosts of the Wild West will swing by to spice up the show," Heather said with a polite laugh. She took the businessman by the arm and began to walk slowly towards the VIP-seats.

"Wouldn't that be something? Miss Maycroft, I'm afraid I'm not too well-versed in the tales of the old west... which re-enactment are you performing this first month?"

"It's one of the lesser-known events of the old west, Mr. Strong. Back in 1870, two people led an uprising against a greedy cattle baron. Jebediah Willard had used his influence and his money to practically take over a small town in Kansas called New Hope. When one woman, Marnie Andersen, refused the cattle baron's attempts at buying her out, he hired a much feared gunslinger to silence her."

"Oh, dear."

"Yes, it could've ended badly for all involved, but there was one thing the cattle baron hadn't counted on; that the gunslinger, 'Tex' O'Brien, had a conscience. After a while, the gunslinger and Marnie started working together to bring some backbone and a sense of pride back to the town."

"Sounds like a noble thing to do."

"Well, I think so. The cattle baron was beside himself with rage so he contacted a bounty hunter, the merciless Hawk Elliott. Elliott had been pursuing the gunslinger for nearly a year, so he naturally jumped at the chance. It all culminated in a bloody showdown where the town was very nearly burned to the ground. The good people won and the bad people all found an early grave."

"The stuff legends are made of. But this sort of thing must have happened more than we think back in the old west. Why use this particular tale?"

"Well, for two reasons, Mr. Strong, one, 'Tex' O'Brien's real first name was Laureen. Yes, the gunslinger was a woman, and that's a fantastic story no matter what age it took place in, and two... Marnie Andersen was my great-great-great-great-and so forth-aunt.

"Oh, really?" Chester Strong said, not expecting that at all.

"Yes, indeed. Five generations back. Marnie never had any children herself, but her brother, William, did. So you see, Mr. Strong, it's all in the family."

"Fascinating. Tell me, Miss Maycroft, isn't it difficult to attract an audience to something like this? I mean, today, teenagers and young families have very little time and all sorts of electronic things to keep them entertained. Do western shows really have a future?" Chester Strong said, looking directly at Heather.

Heather knew that a wrong answer now would jeopardize the whole operation, so she paused briefly to choose her words with care.

"Well, Mr. Strong, I agree that we have a few challenges ahead of us, however, we can see from the guest feedback that families return to our theme park year after year. To rope in the teenagers, we have advertised extensively on the Internet and we've created a few games and apps for their Smartphones and what have you. All in all, I believe that the myths of the old west are so much a part of us that it's almost a journey of... well, almost a rite of passage to come here, if you will. To put it bluntly, once they've smelled the horses and the gunpowder, they're hooked," Heather said, wearing her most winning smile.

Chester Strong adjusted his glasses and nodded enthusiastically. "Well, I'm certainly looking forward to smelling the gunpowder," he said with a grin.

"Boss! Boss!" Ramón cried out from somewhere behind Heather. She groaned inwardly, just knowing that it would turn out to be bad news.

"What's up, Ramón?"

"Sarge just called in... uh..." Ramón said, not wanting to say too much with the investor right there next to them. Instead, he handed Heather a small, crumbled note from her own notepad in the office.

"Called in?"

"Yes... called in."

"Thanks, Ramón. Uh, Mr. Strong, this is Ramón Jimenez. He's a wizard with the lasso."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Jimenez. I think I've spoken to your lovely wife already," Chester Strong said and shook hands with Ramón.

"Well, if you've stopped by the concessions stands, you may have."

"I did. I bought some sweets," Chester Strong said with a broad smile.

"Ramón, you better get ready for your act," Heather said, wearing a smile that wasn't as natural as it had been only moments before.

"Yes, boss. You should read the note."

"I will in a moment. Thanks, Ramón. Okay, Mr. Strong, let's get you seated, shall we?" Heather said and took the businessman by the elbow.

"Thank you. Problems?" Mr. Strong said, looking at the note in Heather's hand.

"Oh, no. Probably just a little hiccup."

"There must be a million things to organize here on opening night," the investor said with a knowing smile.

"And a million and one things that can go wrong. Well, Sir, sit back and enjoy the pre-show entertainment. Like I said, Ramón Jimenez can perform amazing tricks with his lasso."

"Thank you, Miss Maycroft."

After making sure that Chester Strong was seated comfortably, Heather dug into her jacket pocket and found the note. Her hand was trembling slightly as she unfolded it, feeling in her heart that it wasn't good.

'Sarge called: bus got a flat. Spare was busted, too! ETA: Unknown at this point,' the note said, written in Ramón's steady hand. The word 'Unknown' was boxed in and underlined twice.

Heather felt a cold shiver flush over her entire body. No sooner had it passed, her heart started hammering away in her chest and an unpleasant rush of heat enveloped her. Her shoulders slumped and she let out a long, heartfelt sigh.

'Sarge' was the nickname of the retired US Army Sergeant Arthur Corbett who was in charge of their team of stuntmen who always traveled to the shows by bus. Heather had checked the horses waiting in the stables, but she had been too busy to check the dressing rooms. If the bus had a flat, it meant that the stunt team wouldn't be there - which meant that the show wouldn't be able to start... or at least not to start on time.

Clutching the note in her gloved hand, Heather began to walk towards the alley that would take her to her office. She tried to put on a brave face to stop herself from bursting into tears in the middle of the spectators, but it wasn't entirely successful.

She quickly ran up the flight of stairs but stopped before she reached the landing at the top. Shaking her head angrily, she clenched her fists and looked towards the rapidly darkening skies.

"If there is anything or anyone up there, now would be a good time to give us a helping hand!" she said in a trembling voice. When she rather predictably didn't get an answer, she opened the door to her office and slunk inside to get a few moments of privacy.

She knew she could stretch it to ten-fifteen minutes at the very most before she would have to cancel the opening night. Ramón was a highly skilled artist, but even he could only do so many tricks with a lasso before the spectators would lose interest.

Sniffing back the tears, Heather sat down at her desk and began to compose the announcement she'd inevitably have to make to the spectators.

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Down in the alley, a few grains of sand began to shift on their own accord. Soon, a small whirlwind was created from nothing, whipping around so fast that it was all just a blur.

Inch by inch, an outline of a person was formed within the whirlwind - cowboy boots, khaki dungarees, a gun-belt with a heavy .45 revolver hanging low on the hip, a brown three-button shirt with two full, rounded peaks that clearly showed that it was a woman, a khaki duster that extended to the figure's ankles, and finally a flat-top cowboy hat that hid the person's eyes.

Once the process had been completed, the person's long, raven-black hair slowly settled down around her shoulders. When the woman looked up, it was revealed that she wasn't yet a corporeal being - her eyes weren't human, but rather pools of ghostly energy; electric blue orbs shining from somewhere inside her otherwise shadowy face.

The woman closed her eyes and seemed to shudder for a few seconds. When she opened them again, her face had taken on a human appearance with full lips, a surprisingly regal nose, prominent cheekbones and two baby-blue eyes.

Drawing her revolver, the woman began to look around, almost like she was scouting ahead for someone else. When nothing happened, she put two fingers in her mouth and let out a sharp whistle.

Within a few heartbeats, seven further whirlwinds were formed in the alley, all whipping around and around like the first one had done. Soon, a new batch of apparitions stood on unsteady legs, waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies.

The first of the new arrivals to gain a human face was a woman a good five inches shorter than the gunslinger. She was blonde and she wore a pair of shortened men's pants - with suspenders - and a flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up past the elbows, revealing a pair of strong, sinewy forearms.

The apparition shook her head to get the last of the cobwebs out of her mind, and then started looking around for the tall woman. Once she had spotted the gunslinger in the dark alley, a broad smile spread out over her features and she hurried over to the other woman and pulled her into a strong, but silent, embrace.

The next four persons were quickly formed: a man in his late twenties in black pants, a black vest and a white shirt; a young, impeccably dressed man in a Derby, a gray suit and a white, starched shirt; a wizened old Sheriff in buckskin, and finally a man dressed in traditional cowboy garb.

The newcomers shook their heads like the blonde woman had done earlier and then went over to the gunslinger to get reacquainted.

Behind them, the last two whirlwinds died down to reveal the final apparitions: a fat man in a white suit and a tall man wearing a black, tall-crowned cowboy hat, black leather gloves and a black duster. He had two gun-belts hanging low on his hips, a bandolier diagonally across his chest holding several throwing knives and a pouch on his belt from which several rolled-up wanted-posters could be seen.

The other apparitions ducked behind the female gunslinger, but she merely put a finger to the rim of her cowboy hat, saluting the man in black. Nodding, the fearsome looking man grabbed hold of the fat man's shoulder, turned the two of them around and moved away from the others.

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" *'Ladies and gentlemen, it's with a deep regret that I have...'* No, that won't work. *'Ladies and gentlemen, we sadly have to announce...'* Damn, that's even worse," Heather said and threw the ball point pen down onto the desktop. She looked at her wristwatch again - eight minutes had passed since Ramón had handed her the note and there were five minutes to go to the show's scheduled starting time.

From the grandstand, Heather could hear ripples of laughter, no doubt reactions to Ramón's lasso-wielding tricks.

" *'Ladies and gentlemen, it's with a heavy heart that I have to call off tonight's show...'* "

Suddenly the phone rang, making Heather jump forward to pick it up.

"It's Heather! This better be good news!" she growled into the receiver.

'Miss Maycroft, it's Sarge. I'm afraid it's not good news. We've called for a tow truck, but it won't be here for another few hours.'

"Oh..." Heather said and fell back against the backrest of her swivel-chair. She covered her eyes with her hand and began to shake her head slowly.

'How are you holding up? I can't tell you how much this pains me, Miss Maycroft.'

"Well, we... look, Sarge, is there any chance at all you can make it here in ten-fifteen minutes or so?"

'Negatory, Miss Maycroft. We're nearly six miles out. We'd have to fly to make it.'

"Shoot."

'My sentiment exactly. Miss Maycroft, I take full responsibility for this inexcusable foul-up.'

"Thanks, Sarge, but that doesn't help us, either. No, I have to cancel. Man, we didn't need this. We didn't need this at all," Heather said, wiping away a few tears that had found their way onto her cheeks.

'I hear you, Miss Maycroft. Sarge out,' the stuntman said and closed the connection.

"Ah, I might as well get it over with," Heather said and got up from the chair. The split second she opened the office door, loud, unfamiliar, music started playing from the stage.

Scrunching up her face, she cocked her head and tried to recognize the music.

"That's not our regular intro...?" she said out loud. "Oh, Gran!" she howled, hurrying down the stairs to get to the control room below the grandstand to get the music fixed.

Holding her hat down with her hand, she flew around the corner and ran towards the short flight of stairs that led to the control room. When she was almost there, she noticed that the spectators were very vocal, oooh'ing and ahhh'ing louder than they had for years. Making a snappy decision, she changed course and ran up the grandstand instead to see for herself what was going on.

The spectators weren't being awed by one of Ramón's tricks like Heather had expected - instead, they were all looking up at the dark skies.

High above them, intricate patterns of light raced across the sky, creating images that every western-fan would recognize: A train of covered wagons striding through the desolate plains; a herd of cattle being pushed along by a few cowboys; cacti and Monument Valley; a four-in-hand stagecoach barreling through a desert; a baby born in a small, unhygienic shed; a duel in the middle of a street...

Heather rubbed her eyes - then she rubbed them again. She knew for a fact that they didn't have any equipment that could produce such a light show, and she couldn't fathom where it came from.

Moments later, she recognized the music playing from the many speakers. "What in Sam Hill... that's Ghost Riders In The Sky!" she said out loud. "We don't have the rights for that... we're gonna get sued!" she continued and spun around on her heels.

After knocking frantically on the door to the control room, Heather was finally let in by Anne-Marie. At once, she rushed over to the computers to cut the music, but she stopped dead in her tracks when she noticed that all the monitors were showing idle processes.

"Wh... what is this?" she croaked, rubbing her brow.

"I don't know, hon. It's not me! The computers are turned on but I never got around to run the programs! And we don't even have that song on file," Anne-Marie said, wearing a puzzled expression.

"Gran, what did you do?"

"I beg your pardon, young lady! I didn't do anything. Once the booth was closed, I went up here and locked myself in like I've done for the last twenty-five years. I watched Ramón play to the crowd as usual, and then I turned on the computers, as usual... but before they had time to boot up fully, everything had already started on its own."

"That's impossible... maybe you've..."

"No, Heather, I do know my way around these things. I set them up, remember?" Anne-Marie said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I know. I'm sorry, Gran. But it's all for naught, dog gone it... Sarge just called. The bus has a flat. They won't be able to make it!"

"Oh, terrific!" Anne-Marie said, slapping her forehead.

"I was about to announce it, but then all this started, and I..."

Another loud cheer from the spectators above them made Heather turn around and throw her hands in the air. "What just happened?"

"Looks like the gas-driven torches lining the street just ignited on their own accord," Anne-Marie said, checking one of the monitors.

"All right, that does it! I'm now officially freaked out! Uh, uh... uh, maybe the computers have run amuck and it only looks like they're working? Maybe you need to reboot them...?"

"Heather, they're working fine... all of 'em. This isn't a computer problem."

"Well... something's wrong, somewhere," Heather said and took off her hat so she could scratch her hair.

"For now, all we can do is to sit back and enjoy the show."

"Yeah, but-" A firm knock on the door interrupted Heather's train of thoughts and she went over to it to open it.

"Hey, what's going on tonight? I've never seen the crowd so excited," Ramón said once he had closed the door behind him. His face and neck were glistening with sweat after his performance, making the makeup and the fake beard drip down his cheeks. Once he had used a kerchief to wipe off the worst of the sweat, he reached for a bottle of water and drained half of it in a single gulp.

"We don't know, Ramón. It's not us," Anne-Marie said, pointing at the computer monitors.

"Huh?"

"Never mind, we just have to accept it. But now I have to go up and announce that there won't be a show tonight. Where's the microphone?" Heather said, looking around for the cordless mic.

"Right here, hon," Anne-Marie said, tossing the electronic equipment to her granddaughter.

"Thanks. See you in a few. Unless the crowd tramples me."

Heather ran back up the short flight of stairs and around the corner of the grandstand. After taking a few deep breaths to make her voice calm, she started walking out onto the sand-covered Main Street, turning on the microphone with her thumb as she did so.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's with a heavy..." she started to say, but stopped when no sound came from the speakers. Groaning, she looked down at the microphone to turn it on, frowning her brow when she noticed that the little, green LED was already lit.

When her own voice suddenly boomed from the PA speakers, she jumped a foot in the air and clutched the microphone so hard that her fingers started aching.

It was her own voice, but she wasn't the one speaking.

'This is New Hope, Kansas, not far from the Santa Fe Trail. It was founded by Scandinavian immigrants in 1841 an' it turned out to be a delightful little settlement with a school, a church an' the best doc for miles around. Soon, the town began to grow.'

'Among the founders were Karl-August Andersen an' his wife Katrine who had left Denmark a year earlier. They were my Ma and Pa. My name is Maren Andersen, everyone calls me Marnie. I was born March 19th, 1845, in a small shed at the back of Pa's homestead.'

'Just before the Civil War broke out, my older brother Karl Jr. joined the local brigade as a volunteer, but he lost his life in a skirmish in the troubles known as the Border Wars in '58.'

Heather opened her mouth to speak, but she was so freaked out that she was only able to produce a series of frog-like croaks. In the background, she could hear her own voice continue the story of how the town of New Hope came to be.

'Shortly after that, Pa's back began to give out, so after some consideration, he decided to spend all the money he an' Ma had saved an' bought out the previous owner of New Hope's only saloon, the Lame Horse.'

'He proudly renamed it the Wildcat in honor of, well, me. I guess I did kinda fall out of trees on a regular basis an' I guess I did kinda get myself into fights more often than my brothers ever had.'

A ripple of laughter spread through the spectators. Heather was still rooted to the spot, so entranced by listening to her own voice that she was unable to move her legs.

'As my Pa's health failed him in the winter of 1867-68, he transferred ownership of the Saloon to me and my other brother, William. We lost our Pa to pneumonia not long after.'

'All us town folks got along jus' fine an' we rarely had any problems, save for those that could be solved over a beer in the saloon, well, maybe we had the occasional bare-knuckle fight over some wimmenfolk or whatnot...'

'No, New Hope's real troubles began in the summer of 1869. One fine mornin', a fancy carriage pulled up in front of the hotel and a Dandy Dan stepped out.'

His name was Jedediah Willard, an' before long, he began to shape the town in his own image, culminatin' in a change of name to Willard Springs. Even though a majority of the citizens voted against it, we were stuck with the name anyhow 'cos he counted the votes of his own men twice.

In the fall an' winter of 1869, Willard bought out a great deal of the businesses, includin' the hotel an' the livery stable. When some of the foundin' fathers refused to sell, like the blacksmith, it didn't take long before they suffered mysterious accidents.

There's somethin' I may have to explain to all you nice folks here today. You see, we were not opposed to progress, nor to money. We were opposed to the loss of independence. We came here, to this beautiful land, to build our own existence, not to be governed by someone else.'

Several in the crowd threw their hats in the air and whooped loudly. Scattered applause spread out among the spectators, almost drowning out Marnie's story.

'As 1869 gave way to 1870, only the doctor, a mom-and-pop coffee house an' my Wildcat saloon remained independent, an' it hung over the town like a black cloud. We stopped talkin' to each other, we stopped helpin' each other, and little by little, our town slowly broke apart.

After tellin' Jedediah Willard several times that he could forget all about buyin' me out, he started buildin' a saloon for himself, the Silver Spur. I was fine with that, a little competition has never hurt anyone, right?

The gamble didn't pay off for Willard as the town folks kept comin' to the Wildcat. Then he sent his cowboys to rough up the place. When we managed to send 'em packin', we thought it couldn't get any worse... but it did. Much, much worse.'

Feeling a rising tide of panic inside her, Heather whipped her head left and right, looking for the speaker and wondering what the hell was going on. When she couldn't see anyone anywhere, she spun around on her heel and ran back to the control room.

"Who. Is. That. Talking?!" Heather croaked as soon as she had closed the door behind her.

"We... we thought it was you," Anne-Marie said, slowly losing all color in her face.

"It's. Not!"

"Well, whoever it is, she sounds exactly like you, boss," Ramón said, peeking out of the narrow windows at the street ahead of them.

"I got so spooked I almost soiled my pants up there," Heather said once her voice had returned to her. Reaching up, she wiped some cold sweat off her brow with the back of her gloved hand. The sweat left a small stain on the white glove, but she didn't have time to reflect on it.

"Hey... what's that...? Horses... There's a couple of actors on horses entering the street, boss," Ramón said and pointed out of the window.

"Actors on horses? That's gotta be Sarge. Darn it, he should've called me! He must've known we were about to cancel."

"Boss... somehow I don't think it's Sarge and the boys," Ramón said slowly, staring at the people entering the stage on horseback.

"Whut?" Heather said and walked over to stand next to the artist. Because she was a foot shorter than he was, she pulled over a plastic footstool and stood up on it. Once there, she felt her jaw slip down her chest.

The two riders had reached the right side of the stage and were dismounting their horses in front of the hotel. The lead rider was a woman; tall, well-built and wearing a khaki duster and a flat-top cowboy hat. The wind picked up her long, raven-black hair and whipped it around her shoulders, creating a spectacle that almost took Heather's breath away.

As Heather was watching, the gunslinger pushed the duster aside and reached for her revolver. The other rider was a man dressed in a traditional cowboy outfit, and he shook his head and put a hand on the gunslinger's elbow.

'Enter Tex O'Brien, a gunslinger. Legend had it that she could out-draw even ol' Scratch himself. El demonio de ojos azules, that's what our friends down South called her, the blue-eyed demon.'

Although no one knew it at the time, this was the beginning of the end for Jebediah Willard's dreams of controllin' New Hope. Once Tex arrived, the wheels of fate started turnin'. And they were soon turnin' so fast they couldn't be stopped. From now on, the whole deal was headin' for the inevitable, bloody conclusion,' Heather heard her own voice say over the PA speakers.

The gunslinger and the cowboy moved further stage-left, tending to their horses. On cue, on stage-right, the swinging doors to the Wildcat saloon opened and a figure walked out.

In the control room, Heather gasped loudly and rubbed her eyes several times. She knew that woman very well from the dozens of photos she had seen of her. It really was Marnie Andersen. Heather felt her head starting to spin out of control, but she forced herself to stay alert.

The woman, dressed in a flannel shirt and a pair of men's pants held up by suspenders, was standing tall in front of the saloon with her hands on her hips, almost like she was taunting the gunslinger.

"Gawd, Heather, is that who I think it is?" Anne-Marie said, standing up on tip-toes so she could look out of the window.

"Yes. That's a woman who's been dead since 1932," Heather croaked in a hoarse voice.

Out on the street, New Hope's old Sheriff came out of the jail and walked between the two women, carrying a scatter-gun on his arm.

"Y'all won't be havin' no fightin' here today, ya hear me?" he said to the two combatants. Reluctantly, the gunslinger exited stage-left.

Over on the other side of the stage, a Derby-wearing man came out of the saloon and went over to put a hand on Marnie's shoulder. After a brief pause, they turned around and walked back inside.

The spotlights went out, leaving the stage in darkness. Some people started clapping but others soon shushed them.

"This is madness! Madness!" Heather said, still standing on the footstool down in the control room.

Out on the stage, a dark, ominous tune started playing, and Anne-Marie immediately went over to check her computers.

"It's still not us," she said with a shrug.

"Anne-Marie, you know the story better than any of us. Who were those other people?" Ramón said.

"Well, let me see, the man in the derby is Whitley Hande. He had a crush on Marnie his whole life. The cowboy with Tex must be Joe Reilly, Willard's foreman."

"How can you be so calm?! This is a creep show! That's dead people out there! Dead! Don't you understand that?!" Heather said, almost going into a hysteric fit.

"Sometimes you just have to roll with it. You should come live with us out in the country instead of commuting from the big city, dear. Here, history is everywhere, not just in books," Anne-Marie said.

"They're dead people...! D-E-A-D! Ghosts! Have you all lost your marbles?"

Heather's question was never answered. Out on the stage, the spotlights came back on, showing a large group of people sitting at tables in the middle of the street, clearly having a jolly ol' time.

A small dais had been built at the end of the tables, and Marnie, Whitley Hande and another man was standing there, holding pieces of paper in their hand.

'Despite the presence of the gunslinger, we, the citizens of New Hope didn't want to give up without a fight. In all haste, we organized a cookout where we could discuss what we should do,' Marnie's voice said from the PA speakers even though she was standing on the stage without a microphone.

"Who's that?" Ramón said, pointing at the last man.

"William Andersen, Marnie's brother. My great-great-granddad," Anne-Marie said proudly.

"Arrrrrghhh!" Heather growled, clenching her fists in frustration.

'Little did we know that Willard wasn't about to give up without a fight, either,' Marnie said.

A shot suddenly rang out and William Andersen went down hard, shot in the chest. The other attendees all drew their six-shooters and fired wildly in all directions, seemingly without hitting anything.

Marnie jumped off the dais and knelt down next to her brother, ripping his shirt open to look at the wound. Clearly in a state of shock, Marnie reached down to pull her brother into a fierce embrace, disregarding the blood spurting out of the man's chest.

"Gawd, this is sad... And violent! We're going to get in trouble with the authorities if they keep this up," Heather mumbled under her breath. When she realized that she had thought of the dead people as 'they', her eyes popped wide open and she had to pinch the bridge of her nose to stop a sudden headache.

Moments later, the town doctor rushed over to them and began to help William Andersen.

A cry started in Marnie's throat that quickly grew in intensity. Within seconds, it had gained an unearthly quality, sounding very much like a wounded animal.

Several people tugged at Marnie's shirt to get her off the street but she just shrugged them off. After gently leaning William's body over so she could get her hands underneath him, she picked him up and carried him towards stage-right, back to the Wildcat saloon.

"Wait a minute... he made it, right? I mean, he had to, otherwise you and me wouldn't be here... right...?" Heather said to her Gran, so engrossed by the drama that she had begun biting her knuckles through the gloves.

"Yep, he made it. But it was touch and go for days," Anne-Marie said.

The men supposed to be protecting Marnie all gave her a wide berth. They took off their hats, awed by the anger and hatred that emanated from her like a furnace.

With a loud shout, Sheriff McIntyre came running into the street, still buttoning his shirt. "All right, what the hell's going on here?" he said angrily.

"William has been shot, Sheriff," an unidentified voice told him.

"By whom?"

"We don't know. We had men looking everywhere, but they couldn't find no one."

With those words, the street went dark again making the spectators go 'oooooh' in anticipation. A few heartbeats later, the lights went back up, showing Marnie walking away from the Wildcat saloon, headed towards the hotel at the other side of the stage.

Everyone among the spectators had a hunch about what was coming and they all gasped loudly.

Before Marnie had made it to the hotel, Tex O'Brien stepped out onto the street. The two women were standing only a few feet apart and the tension was rolling off them like a tidal wave.

Just as Tex reached for her revolver, Marnie jumped forward, attacking the gunslinger with the ferocity of a mountain lion. First, she swung her fist at the gunslinger's jaw. A *CRACK!* was heard from the speakers and Tex faked the impact by throwing her head to the side and staggering backwards.

"No, no, no, we can't show women fighting women... Now we're really in trouble with the authorities. Oh, I can't watch," Heather groaned down in the control room.

Marnie exploited the gunslinger's weakness by going in deep and delivering a series of hard punches to the taller woman's gut that all got nice, juicy sound effects over the speakers. Finally, Marnie grabbed the gunslinger around the waist in a crushing bear hug, lifted her up and wrestled her onto the ground.

As the gunslinger's elbow hit the sand on the street, the .45 went off. The shot sounded like an explosion and Marnie was clearly stunned, stopping the fight.

Moving fast, Tex cold-cocked Marnie on the back of the head with the handle of her revolver, making the blonde woman fall down on top of her. All over the grandstand, the spectators groaned loudly.

Pushing Marnie's limp body aside, Tex moved to sit up, but she had not yet made it when Sheriff MacIntyre and Joe Reilly entered the stage.

"We heard the shot... what the hell... Marnie?! She attacked you?" Joe said.

"Yeah."

"You... you killed her?"

"No. Not yet," Tex said. With those words, the street went dark again.

After a brief pause, 'Ghost Riders In The Sky' started playing and Marnie's voice was heard over the PA speakers.

Intermission time, folks. Go grab a pop an' some corn down at Rosa's. We'll be right back!

._*_*._

"That's our cue! Gran, reboot the computers. Let's see if we can't take back control over this freakshow," Heather said, jumping down from the footstool and hurrying over to the door of the control room.

"Dear, why would you want to do that? Don't you think it's excellent? Didn't you listen to the spectators? Their response has been better than ever!"

"Gran... none of it is real. Are we having a mass psychosis or is it just me? It's a dream, isn't it? When I pinch my arm, I'm going to wake up and it'll be the morning of the show, right?" Heather said, took off her glove and rolled back her sleeve.

"Well, go ahead and try it. Let's see if it makes you feel better," Anne-Marie said with a grin.

Heather blinked a few times but then pinched her arm. "Ow!" she said when she clearly registered the pain.

"Happy now?"

"Aarrgh! This isn't happening!" Heather said and spun around. "Gran, reboot those computers. Ramón, aren't you supposed to be out on the stage? You haven't even changed your makeup," Heather continued, waving her glove in Ramón's face to underline her words.

"Sorry, boss. Forgot all about it with the show being so exciting and all," Ramón said with a frown that wasn't entirely sincere.

"Where are you going, Heather?" Anne-Marie said, reaching for the mouse.

"Into the Wildcat. I need to get to the bottom of this mess!"

Running up the stairs, Heather didn't have much time to pay attention to her surroundings, so she didn't notice the figure walking down the stairs until she had bumped into it.

"Ouch!" the man said loudly, rubbing his shin where Heather's knee had made a pretty good hit.

"Oh, now what...?! Oh... uh, hello, Mr. Strong. I'm terribly sorry... I was in a bit of a hurry."

"I noticed," Chester Strong said, still rubbing his shin.

"Is there anything I can help you with, Sir?"

"No, but I can help you, Miss Maycroft. Here's the investment contract, signed, sealed and delivered. Move over Universal Studios, move over Mickey! Your show is amazing... it's sensational... it's... it's out of this world! I have never, ever seen anything like it. I thought it was going to be a slightly dry affair, but this is riveting stuff!"

"Oh, ummm, I'm... The contract? Oh! Uh... Mr. Strong, would you mind going down to the control room? Just knock on the door and say your name. My grandmother is down there, she knows all the details of the deal."

"No problem, Miss Maycroft. With a little advertising, this is going to be the biggest draw in the state. I guarantee it!"

"That's great, Sir. Now, if you will excuse me. I have a lot to do in the brief intermission."

"But of course, Miss Maycroft, of course. See you later."

Three minutes later, Heather put her hands on the swinging doors of the saloon set that acted as Marnie Andersen's Wildcat.

She looked over her shoulder at the half-empty grandstand and at the spectators who all looked wildly enthusiastic. Some had already returned from the concession stands holding large cups of sodapop, popcorn or cotton candy.

Down on the ground, Ramón came back out and began showing off his skills with the lasso to keep people entertained in the intermission.

Peeking over the doors didn't reveal anything other than dust, so Heather took a deep breath and walked inside.

The nameless saloon set was as dusty as it had always been. No matter how often they vacuumed the floor and wiped off the plywood counter that was made up to resemble something far more expensive, all the wood used in building the set sent out so much dust that it quickly gave everything a pale gray sheen.

Looking in the large mirror behind the counter, Heather found herself wondering how everyday life had been back in the early 1870s. She had to admit that she was fascinated by the tale of two strong women winning back a town - she always had been - but listening to Marnie's words really made everything come alive.

Realizing that she wouldn't find anything in the saloon after all, Heather turned around to go back outside - but as she turned, the scenery suddenly changed.

Gone were the dust and the fake plywood sets, replaced by a blur of vivid colors and the easily recognizable sounds of an out-of-tune upright piano.

Heather clenched her fists and brought them to her mouth. Everything was spinning, but she didn't know if it was her or the room. As she took it all in, her face lost all color and she began to gasp for air.

The blur slowly receded, giving way to a rich, cozy atmosphere where several people dressed in period clothing were sitting at poker tables, clearly having a great time.

At the far wall of the saloon, an old coot was playing the piano, or rather, attempting to hit the right keys while following the sheet music in front of him. Next to him, two saloon girls of dubious virtue were singing along to the music to the best of their abilities.

When Heather heard her own voice from somewhere behind her, she spun around and gawked at the bar with eyes as big as saucers. Marnie Andersen was working the counter, apparently in a great mood judging by the wide grin on her face. She was having an animated conversation with a man dressed in a genuine Forty-Niner outfit, and the only breaks came when they knocked back a glass or two of an amber liquid Heather presumed to be Whisky.

Up close, Heather could see that while there was a certain family resemblance between herself and Marnie, they were by no means identical. Heather knew that, in this time, Marnie would've been roughly twenty-five years old, but her face was already weathered and possessed a tough quality that no doubt stemmed from the much harder life she'd had to endure.

When a small scuffle broke out at one of the poker tables, Marnie was there in a flash, putting her hands on her hips.

"Problems?"

"No, Ma'am," all three card players said as one.

"Good, 'cause you know what happens otherwise."

"Yes, Ma'am."

On her way back to the counter, Marnie stopped and looked Heather straight in the eye. "Evenin', stranger. Can I get you anything? A hot meal an' a cold beer?"

"I, uh..."

Marnie didn't appear to be satisfied with the answer because she began to walk slowly towards Heather - not in a menacing fashion, just determined to get a better answer.

When Heather realized the insanity of the situation, she twitched several times and let out a frightened scream.

As her scream echoed through the Wildcat, all the vivid colors disappeared and the dull, dusty gray plywood set returned.

Panting hard, Heather looked around the unnamed saloon and wrapped her arms around herself. "G-Gawd, I'm going insane... this can't be happening."

'Sure it can, Heather. Don't be afraid. We're only here to help,' a disembodied voice said just to Heather's left.

Twitching with fear, she turned her head to the left and saw to her great horror one ghostly being after another enter the room from another dimension. Soon, she was surrounded by a handful of ghosts that all began to move closer to her.

'Don't be afraid. We're only here to help,' the voice said again, and Heather realized that it was Tex O'Brien, the gunslinger, who was speaking to her.

"Stay away! Stay away from me!" Heather croaked hoarsely. When the ghosts kept coming, she screamed and sprinted out of the saloon and onto the street, tearing so fast through the swinging doors that one of them broke free of its hinges and landed on the floor with a thud, sending up a cloud of dust that only slowly dissipated.

'Aw hell, that didn't go to plan!' Marnie said in an accusing tone.

'Wasn't my fault!' Tex said, taking off her hat and scratching her hair.

'Didn't say it was. Come on, people, the show ain't over yet!'

._*_*._*

Heather sprinted down the stairs to the control room, going so fast that she slammed into the door at almost full speed. She tried to turn the handle, furiously fumbling and bumbling with it until she remembered that the door was locked.

"Lemme in! Please! They're coming for me!" Heather cried out in a trembling voice, pounding her fists onto the door's wooden frame.

"Jesus, child! What's going on out here?" Anne-Marie said the instant she opened the door. It was barely an inch open before Heather stormed inside and huddled down in a corner of the control room, whiter than a sheet.

"Heather Maycroft, what the hell is going on here?" Anne-Marie continued, putting her hands on her hips.

"I s-s-saw them! All of them! All the g-g-ghosts! They were inside the saloon and they came for me and I was transported back in time to the old west and..."

"And you chickened out and ran away?"

"Of c-c-course!"

"Oh, you big city people... you just don't understand the way things work out here. They're here to help, I'm sure of it."

"You didn't see what I saw..."

"Anyway, I rebooted all the systems, but like I predicted, it didn't do anything. There wasn't anything wrong with them before, and there isn't anything wrong now."

"Do we have control over the lights and the music?"

"No."

"Oh, Gran..." Heather said, segueing into a long groan.

Outside, the lights flashed to alert the spectators that the intermission was soon over. The crowd slowly returned to their seats above the control room, sounding so enthusiastic that Heather and Anne-Marie were able to hear it through the concrete walls.

"*That's* what it's all about, dear. Enthusiasm... bums in seats. And if Marnie, Laureen and the rest of the gang want to give us a hand achieving that, then we should be grateful."

As if on cue, Marnie's voice suddenly boomed from the PA speakers, making Heather flinch in terror: *'Y'all better get back to your seats now. Ya don't wanna miss anything, do ya?'*

"They're here to help, child. Trust me," Anne-Marie said, putting out her hand. Grunting, Heather took it and got on her feet.

Behind them, Ramón knocked on the door and Anne-Marie went over to let him in.

"Hey, boss, we're really rockin' tonight, huh?" Ramón said, wiping off his sweaty face.

"Yeah. Really rocking," Heather said to no one in particular. With bated breath, she stepped back up on the footstool, waiting for the rest of the show to unfold.

._*._*._

The lights were soon turned up to full strength. Through the use of an off-white canvas backdrop, a table and two chairs, the stage had been dressed to appear like the interior of the Wildcat. Marnie was sitting on one of the chairs, holding a glass of beer.

When Tex O'Brien entered from stage-left, the spectators all gasped.

"Ya come to gloat?" Marnie asked.

"I've come with a proposition."

"Don't wanna hear it."

"I think you should." Tex pulled out a chair and sat down facing Marnie.

"I'm in no mood to play games, gunslinger. Make your point and leave."

"How's your brother?"

"What's it to you?"

"I know who shot him."

Tense silence.

Marnie and Tex just stared at each other. As they did so, the silence grew increasingly uncomfortable.

"I heard you're wanted for seven'een kills. Men, women and children," Marnie finally said.

"You heard wrong. I never killed women or children."

"You're here to kill me."

"I haven't done so yet, have I? Here's my proposition. I'm gonna tell ya who shot him... but you have to promise me you won't do anythin' about it," Tex said and took off her cowboy hat.

"Are ya out of yer flippin' skull? Of course I'm gonna do somethin' about it!"

"Ya can't."

Marnie slammed her fist down onto the table, making the mug of beer tip over and fall to the ground where it shattered upon impact. "Who was it?" she growled.

"Sheriff McIntyre."

The answer appeared to hit Marnie like a slap in the face. She got up and gripped Tex's collar, much to the spectators' delight.

"BULLSHIT!"

Down in the control room, Heather slapped a gloved hand over her eyes. "Oh, no, now they're using profanity, too!" she said with a whimper. Anne-Marie just chuckled.

Up on the stage, Tex just shook her head.

"It's true, Marnie. He told me himself, not half an hour ago."

All color left Marnie's face and she stumbled backwards, sitting down on the chair with a bump. "And if I... if I go over there an' clean his clock... he's the law an'... they'd be in their right to hang me from the nearest tree..."

"Yes."

"I've known Stan McIntyre all my life. Literally all my life... When Ma went into labor, Pa was outta town, but Stan alerted the Doc. He held me when the Doc cut my umbilical cord an' he slapped my butt to see if I was all right... he once told me that the rafters shook from the loudness of my voice when I let out my first cry... An' now he's got my brother's blood on his hands..."

Marnie leaned forward and buried her head in her arms.

"How much did Willard pay you to kill me?" she asked after a brief pause.

"Two thousand dollars."

"The dirty rat."

"I gave it back."

"What?" Marnie leaned back in her seat, clearly confused.

"I've quit. It made me sick just to listen to him ramblin'."

"Yeah? About what?"

"You don't wanna know."

"Yes, I do," Marnie said; her voice suddenly gaining a steely undertone.

"Most of it had something to do with beating you to a cripple."

"Yeah? I wish he had the balls to come here an' do it himself. I'd love to teach him a thing or two."

This emotional outburst made the crowd cheer wildly - and it made Heather bury her face in her hands and groan over the profanity.

"Maybe we can do that in a roundabout way," Tex said.

"How so?"

"What if we can persuade the Sheriff to sing about Willard?"

"What's this 'we' thing, gunslinger? I don't recall invitin' you?"

"I'm not gonna sugarcoat this for ya, ya don't stand a chance against Willard and his men without me," Tex said with her hand resting on her gun belt.

"We were doin' just fine before you came!" Marnie growled.

"Perhaps, but this has moved on. It's not about the town anymore, it's personal between him and you."

"That may be. I've never asked for help in my life."

"And I've never offered it before, neither. But I am now."

Marnie looked up at the Gunslinger.

"Yer serious, ain't ya?"

Tex nodded. "The troubles are only just startin'. I've had word that Hawk Elliott is on his way," she said somberly.

Just as the lights faded to black, the music became more focused and the spectators all gasped again.

"Wow, it's a good thing we know how it ends, huh?" Ramón said with a crooked grin.

"No kiddin'," Anne-Marie said, munching on some popcorn Rosa had brought her.

"I still think this is all a hallucination," Heather said under her breath.

"Shhh, dear, they're about to start again."

When the PA speakers came alive, Marnie's voice was darker and more concerned than it had been in the earlier interludes.

'Enter Hawk Elliott. An ugly man, inside an' out. He was here for one thing... Tex O'Brien. Unbeknownst to me, Hawk had chased Tex for months. His title was bounty hunter, but in reality, he was just a simple killer who liked his job.'

A dark figure dressed in black entered the stage riding on a black stallion. Following him were seven men holding torches. New Hope was quiet, the hotel the only place the lights were on.

"Come on boys, let's raise some hell!" Hawk shouted before belting out his best Rebel Yell.

The cowboys spurred on their horses and drew their guns. They started shooting wildly all around them, breaking windows all over the place. A couple of the men tied ropes around the posts that supported the awnings over the sidewalks and tore them down.

Here and there, people began to come out of their houses, some of them armed with scatterguns. A deadly gunfight started and hot lead was soon flying everywhere, making the spectators yell loudly in delight.

On stage-left, Sheriff McIntyre and Whitley Hande ran out onto the porch of the Sheriff's office to observe the destruction.

"Dear God in heaven!" Whitley exclaimed, wringing his hands.

"Whitley, I want ya to take one of these scatterguns and go out there," the Sheriff said to the young man.

"What?! Are you crazy, you're the law here!"

"Not anymore." The sheriff took off his Star and threw it onto the ground.

Shoving one of the shotguns into Whitley's hands, the Sheriff pushed him further out onto the street. Unfortunately, this attracted the attention of Hawk Elliott.

"Lookie here, boys. There's a new Marshal in town," Hawk said as he and his gang rode towards Whitley. The cowboys riding with him all laughed.

"Don't... D-don't get any closer! I'm warnin' ya, I got this gun, and I ain't afraid to use it!" Whitley stuttered.

To underline his words with action, he cocked one of the barrels and fired the weapon up in the air - unfortunately, the recoil was a lot stronger than he had anticipated and he was knocked on his backside, dropping the gun as he landed on the ground.

"No point in wastin' lead on this young pup. Just beat some sense into him," Hawk said.

"Yeah, boss," two of the cowboys said and dismounted their horses.

The lights quickly faded to black, leaving Heather rolling her eyes at the show's high levels of violence. During the dark period, sounds of men shooting and fighting echoed across the street.

When the lights came back on, the scene had changed. Marnie was standing alone in the center of the street, battered, bruised, and bleeding from several abrasions on her face and arms. She was wielding a broken bottle that she held by the neck, using it to fend off a couple of cowboys who were slowly forcing her backwards.

Suddenly a lasso flew through the air and wrapped itself around Marnie's body, trapping her arms. Marnie roared and tried to break free, but when the man holding the lasso yanked it hard, she stumbled and fell onto her knees.

In an instant, the two cowboys were at her side, kicking the bottle out of her hand.

A fat man in a white suit walked up to stand in front of her. After taking a bucket of water, he threw it in her face to get her attention.

"Willard, you sonofabitch, I'm gonna tear ya apart!" Marnie hissed at the cattle baron.

"Big words from a little woman," the fat man answered, moving behind her. He grabbed her hair and forced her head back. "From now on when you talk to me, I demand SOME RESPECT!" he continued, yelling the last two words right in her face.

Marnie's answer was to spit at him.

Willard wiped the spit off his face and slowly unbuckled his leather belt.

Nodding at one of the cowboys, Willard started slapping the belt down into the palm of his hand. "Rip her shirt off," he hissed. "I'm gonna whip ya but good. Maybe you'll learn some respect then," he continued, turning around to face Marnie.

The spectators all howled in shock and outrage, and several parents scrambled to cover their children's eyes. Down in the control room, Heather shook her head over and over again.

"Gran, I know you said they were only trying to help, but this is far, far too violent for today's tastes! We're going to go bust from the legal fees alone!"

"Nah, have some faith. It'll all work out in the end," Anne-Marie said.

One of the cowboys moved in and grabbed hold of Marnie's shirt, but before he had time to pull it, a deafening roar filled the air. The cowboy was lifted up by the bullet and thrown onto the street, blood flowing freely from the hole in his chest.

Tex cocked the .45 again.

"Who's next?" she growled in a menacing voice.

Up on the grandstand, the spectators went wild, whooping and cheering so loudly that the people down on the stage had to pause before they could carry on, much to Marnie's amusement.

"Drop yer gun, hero, or I'll carve her a new one, right here!" Willard roared, holding a knife at Marnie's throat.

Obliging, albeit grudgingly, Tex put the .45 down on the ground.

Willard looked away. He shouldn't have. At once, Marnie buried her elbow deep in the cattle baron's considerable gut. As Willard doubled over from the pain, Marnie twisted out of the lasso and moved away from his grip.

Taking full advantage of the kerfuffle, Tex quickly bent down to pick up her gun.

Willard finally managed to catch his breath and saw that he had lost control of the situation. The knife was still in his hand, and he was clearly evaluating whether he could reach Marnie in time or not.

"Don't be stupid, Willard. You ain't faster than a bullet," Tex warned him.

"Go to hell," he muttered and suddenly jumped forward towards Marnie, sending the spectators into yet another frenzy.

Fanning the hammer of her revolver, Tex sent three bullets into Willard's chest. Once again he stumbled backwards, unable to understand what had happened. The knife slipped from his fingers and his knees buckled. He was dead before he hit the ground.

When the lights went down, the crowd started clapping rhythmically, expecting it to be the end of the show, but when the music turned ominous, they gradually slowed down and then stopped completely.

The light levels were slowly turned up, ending at a dusky darkness to illustrate that hardly any lights were on in the street.

At stage-right, Marnie and Tex hobbled into view. The fight leading up to Marnie's capture had seemingly taken more out of her than first believed because she was using the tall gunslinger for support.

"Damn, I don't feel too good, Tex."

"Were you hit on the head?"

"I can't remember..."

"Sounds like ya might'a been, then. Come on, Marnie, we can't stay here," Tex said and hoisted up the blonde woman.

"No, I can't leave... what if they come to burn down my saloon or something?"

"We can't stay, Marnie. It won't be long before Hawk is here."

"All right, all right."

Just as they crossed the street, the sound of a gunshot echoed between the houses. Instantly, Tex was swept off her feet, hit by a bullet in her leg.

"Oh no, dammit, not now!" Marnie said in a strained voice, trying to grab hold of the tall gunslinger. She looked around for the shooter, but couldn't see anyone.

Just as Marnie squatted down to help Tex get up, another shot rang out. It hit Tex in the upper chest and sent her tumbling to the ground as a lifeless lump.

"Nooooo!" Marnie screamed, reaching down to pull the dark-haired woman into a hug.

Down in the control room, Heather covered her eyes with her hands. "Gran, please tell me Tex is gonna make it...?"

"Sorry. I never blab the spoilers," Anne-Marie said, grinning.

"But, Gran!"

"My lips are sealed, dear. You'll just have to keep watching."

A man stepped out of the shadows, dressed in a black duster, a black suit and a black hat. As he came closer, the man reloaded his sixshooter and shut the drum with a metallic click.

"Ya wanna join her in Hell? No? Then scram, kid," he said in a growly voice.

Marnie appeared to be reluctant to leave Tex, but she eventually ran off, exiting stage-right.

Grinning, Hawk knelt down next to Tex.

"What the hell, Tex, you ain't dead yet?"

"You first," Tex said in a stage whisper, spitting blood at him.

After brushing off the blood, Hawk Elliott backhanded Tex across the face, making her pass out again.

Turning her over, he forced her arms behind her back and tied her hands together. Then he grabbed hold of her vest and belt buckle and tossed her over his shoulder.

"Say, Tex, that's a nice hangin' tree right there, don't'cha think? Yeah, it'll do fine," Hawk said to the lump across his shoulders.

After throwing Tex back down on the ground, he prepared a noose and forced it around her head; then he threw the loose end over a nearby branch and made it taut.

"If ya got any prayers, now's a good time, Tex."

"See you in hell, Hawk," she said, coughing from the strain on her throat.

"Oh yeah, that'll clear yer way to the Pearly Gates fer sure!" Hawk said and pulled hard on the rope.

Suddenly a shot was heard and the branch holding up the rope exploded in a shower of splinters. Tex bumped back down onto the ground, and Hawk tried desperately to get a myriad of wooden shards out of his face.

"The next one will be in yer head!" Marnie shouted, aiming a double-barreled scattergun at him.

"Get the hell outta my way! Yer messin' with the law, here!" he shouted back.

"Shaddup an' get away from her, ya creep!"

A combination of insanity and pure hatred suddenly flared in Hawk Elliott, and his hand shot down to his Colt at the speed of a striking rattler. The bullet hit Marnie on the left side of her head, carving a furrow through her skin just above her ear.

Hawk began to laugh maniacally but Marnie got the last laugh. As she dropped to the ground, her finger reflexively pulled the scattergun's trigger, sending a load of pellets into Hawk's gut and crotch, turning his body into a bloody mess.

On the stage, the lights went out and the funeral march started playing. The spectators reacted by 'awwww'-ing, but down in the control room, Anne-Marie had a huge grin on her face.

"Told ya they were here to help. Wasn't that exciting? Fabulous!" she said, nodding enthusiastically.

"Yeah, but... now they're all dead...?"

"Really, Heather... a western where the good guys die? Come on, you've watched enough movies to know that can't happen."

"Yeah, but this isn't a movie. This is real life!"

Out on the street, the lights went back up, revealing a set made up to look like a hospital.

Everything was deathly quiet. Two bunks had been set up next to each other; one for Tex, one for Marnie.

Tex opened her eyes and sat up, rubbing her neck where she still had a fierce rope burn. Her shoulder and leg were throbbing, and she pressed a hand against the two bandaged injuries.

"Hello?" she said in a stage-whisper. When she didn't get a reply, she cleared her throat and repeated the "Hello?", only a little louder.

She started looking around, soon spotting Marnie lying next to her. Marnie's clothes had been too bloodied to re-use so she had been dressed in one of the Doc's wife's cotton nightgowns. Marnie's head was heavily wrapped in bandages. Here and there, blood seeped through the white fabric.

Tex swung her legs over the side of the bunk and hobbled over to Marnie. After a brief pause, she took the blonde's hand and gave it a firm squeeze.

"Mama?" Marnie whispered, startling Tex who looked down at once.

"Marnie?" Tex said, still holding Marnie's hand.

"I'm here, Ma."

"It's not your Ma, it's Lauren."

"Laureen? Who's Lauren? Where's Ma?" Marnie said, clearly very confused.

"Marnie, I..."

"Tex!" Marnie suddenly said out loud.

Laureen 'Tex' O'Brien broke out in a smile at the sound of Marnie's voice. Leaning down, she framed the blonde woman's face with her hands.

"I thought I had lost you..." Lauren said in a stage-whisper.

"What's happened?" Marnie said and touched her bandages.

"Hawk shot you... you remember Hawk Elliott, right?"

"Yeah. He dead?"

"Yep."

"Good riddance."

"Yep."

"Tex... is it over?"

"Yeah, it's over. All who deserved to die are dead. The town's yours again."

"So... are you leavin'?"

Tex pulled a chair over to Marnie's bunk and sat down on it. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, seemingly pondering her next move.

"You know... I think I might be stayin' for a while," she said, putting her hand on Marnie's shoulder and giving it a little squeeze.

The two women sat very still, almost like they had turned into a photograph. The lights slowly faded to black, eventually leaving the stage in complete darkness.

'And with this, the story of how I, Marnie Andersen, and my dear friend Laureen O'Brien liberated New Hope has come to an end. It was a bloody affair, but sometimes, blood, sweat and tears are needed to achieve our goals. Get home safely, my friends. Don't drink and ride... after all, we want y'all to come back, don'tcha'know.'

When the lights were turned back up, the stage was deserted - it was almost like none of it had taken place at all. 'Ghost Riders In The Sky' began playing from the PA speakers, and before long, the crowd went berserk, whooping and cheering so loudly that Heather was afraid the grandstand might collapse under their celebrations.

"I'd say we're good for the season, boss," Ramón said, giving Heather a few hard thumps on the back.

Heather nodded and stepped down from the footstool. She cleared her throat and discreetly wiped away a few tears with the back of her gloved hand.

"Wow, I..."

"Hon, go back to the office and lie down for a while. You look like you could pass out any minute now. Don't worry about the computers and stuff here, I'll take care of that," Anne-Marie said.

"Yeah, that's a good idea, Gran. I think I'll do that," Heather said and walked over to the door.

On her way up the short flight of stairs, she came across the investor who gave her a double thumbs-up and yet another pat on the back. She smiled and nodded at him, but she was too emotionally exhausted to do anything apart from that.

Trance-like, she went across the street and into the alley between the saloon and the eatery. When she reached the foot of the staircase that would take her to the office, she felt her legs turn into lead and she had to force herself into climbing the stairs.

After finally arriving at the top, she unlocked the door and stepped inside. In one, fluid motion, she pushed the door shut with the heel of her boot, took off her cowboy hat and her jacket, pulled out her swivel chair, and sat down with a bump.

Moaning, she leaned forward and rested her head on her arms. It only took her a scant minute to fall asleep.

'Boy, she seems awfully wimpy. Are we sure she's related to me...?' a rich voice said from the other end of the office. Moving out of the shadows, Marnie Andersen walked closer to her great-great-great-great-niece to study the woman closely. Chuckling, she put her hand on the back of Heather's head and mussed the strawberry-blonde hair.

'They can't all have your strength. Are we done here?' Tex O'Brien said, following Marnie out of the shadows.

'Looks like it. I think we'll be back, though. Not every night, but once in a while. It was fun workin' with the old gang again.'

'Yeah, it was. It was fun killin' old man Willard again, too.'

Marnie chuckled again and moved over to stand next to Tex. *'Well, it worked better the first time. Now we have to listen to his endless complainin','* she said, wrapping an arm around the gunslinger's waist.

'True.'

'In the end, everythin' worked out just fine for all the good people. Young Heather here... well, that big, fat contract in her pocket will do her a world of good.'

'I got what I wanted, too. You,' Tex said and leaned into Marnie's touch.

A young mother and her lollipop-licking nine-year-old daughter stepped inside the tent, looking very intimidated yet a little excited. At once, the little girl ran over to a table where Xora had laid out a selection of colorful rocks and pieces of glass she had collected over the years.

Xora briefly worried that the table would be knocked over, but the young girl just stared wide-eyed at the colorful display.

"You like the stones, yes? I brought them from my home land," Xora said, smiling.

The young girl was so caught up in the display that she could only nod. Her mother stepped over to her and guided her through the tent to the chair in front of the crystal ball.

"Good afternoon, madam Xora. I'm Charlene, and this is my daughter Denise," the mother said, mussing her daughter's hair.

"Good afternooon, Denise and Charlene. Please, have a seat. You wish me to see your futures, yes?"

"Oh, just Denise's, if you don't mind. Here's five dollars," Charlene said and put a fiver into the slit in the cash box.

"Thank you, dear. All rrrright. Let's see..." Xora moved her hand across the crystal ball which instantly turned purple. Moments later, the color began to fluctuate between dark blue, purple and dark red, making Denise squeal in delight.

Fleeting images began to flicker inside the crystal ball, drawing Xora's attention - an electronic gizmo, a skyscraper, a black limousine, a tall, elegant lady wearing shades and a floppy, wide-brimmed hat. "Hmmm... I see... I see good fortune. I see wealth. I see a successful businesswoman," Xora said, nodding in a theatrical fashion. "Your Denise... she is interested in mechanical or electronic things, yes...?"

"Oh, goodness me, yes! She's constantly taking apart all our clocks and stuff!" Charlene said, earning herself a look of embarrassment from her daughter.

"Nurture it," Xora said decisively, making Charlene cock her head and shoot her a puzzled look.

"Heed my words, Charlene, nurture your daughter's natural interest. I have seen one possible future, but the future is shaped by how we decide now, yes? I'm sure you will decide wisely. Thank you," Xora said and rose from her position behind the crystal ball to show that the session was over.

"Thank you, madam Xora. Come on, Denise. We've got plenty more to see here," Charlene said and left the tent with her daughter in tow.

Xora chuckled quietly as she watched the two leave. *'For once something fun... even if it only scratched the surface of my skills,'* she thought, walking over to the cooler to get some cranberry juice.

"'ey, is this Mysterious Something-or-other?" a female voice said from the entrance to the tent, prompting Xora to spin around and look at the new arrival. Once she noticed how the other woman actually looked, she narrowed her jade green eyes until they were no wider than slits.

The new customer was an inebriated woman in her mid-twenties in an ill-fitting smoky blue tank top, a pair of stonewashed jeans that seemed to be one size too small for her and a pair of trainers where one of the laces was untied. Wrapped to her right wrist with a piece of string was a helium balloon that said Kiss Me Quick! on one side and Get Lost Sucka! on the other.

Xora just stood there, staring at the unusual sight. Finally snapping out of her trance, she walked back over to the crystal ball, feeling a strong spark of mischief being ignited deep within her.

"Mysterious Xora, yeah. That's me," Xora said in her regular voice, figuring that the inebriated woman wouldn't know the difference between that and her stage accent anyway.

"Mysterious Xora... yeah. How much is it for a p-" *Hiccup!* "...peek in your crystal ball there?"

"Five dollars, ma'am."

"Get outta he! That's expensive. I can buy a hot dog for five bucks!" the woman said, taking a staggering step backwards.

"Sure, but can the hot dog see your future?"

"Huh...?"

"Of course it can't. Go on, sit down. What's your name?"

"Mary Sue Parkes," the woman said as she sat down with a bump on the chair in front of the crystal ball.

"Mary Sue? That's a pretty name," Xora said, holding her hand ready.

"Naw it ain't. In this county, everybody's called Something-Sue. Hey, why don't you start?"

"Five dollars, please, ma'am," Xora said and pointed at the cash box.

Grumbling, Mary Sue Parkes finally relented and dug into her jeans pocket. After a little while, she found a five dollar bill and put it into the slit.

"Why, thank you, ma'am."

"This better be good!"

"Oh, it will be. Trust me," Xora said and waved her hand across the crystal ball. It came alive at once, fluctuating between dark blue, purple and dark red. Soon, images began to flicker inside the crystal ball and Xora leaned forward to interpret them.

"I see... I see a woman... it's you... with one, two, three, four, five... six children in tow."

"Whut?! Get outta he! Like a school teacher or something?"

Xora looked up, flashing Mary Sue the same supremely annoyed look she always used when one of her customers interrupted her in the middle of a reading. "No, they're definitely yours. They all have your hair and your eyes. Three boys, three girls."

"Aw, hell! That stupid Thomas! I told 'im to use that damned cardon! But did he listen?"

"Cardon?" Xora said, shaking her head in confusion.

"Rubber, woman. Rubber!"

"Oh... condom."

"Cardon... 's what I said."

Xora blinked a couple of times and then went back to her crystal ball. "Anyway. I see you... uh... hmmm... that's interesting. I see that you've lived before. Many times. I see you several times through history... an olive grove... a vast army... a ship in rough waters..."

"Whut?"

"Mary Sue, how do you feel about reincarnation?"

"Uhhh... dunno. I'm not too wild about Mexican food."

Xora stared blankly at the inebriated woman sitting opposite her. Twice she opened her mouth to give her a snappy comeback and twice she closed it again, unable to come up with anything that could match what the other woman had already said.

"Yeah... okay. All right. Let's get back to the future. I see you in a bar room brawl. I see you being thrown out of the bar and landing face down in the gutter. I see you behind bars..."

"Whut?! You're makin' this up! What a load of crock!"

"No, ma'am. My crystal ball doesn't lie. I only tell you what I see. However, this is just one of many futures. It's possible to chang-"

"What a load of crock! I don't believe a word of all your hocus-pocus, Xora. Not a damn word of it. I want my money back!" Mary Sue said, slamming her fist so hard into the palm of her hand that the helium balloon danced around on its string and almost made a run for it.

"It's not my problem if you don't like what I see, ma'am," Xora said and waved her hand across the crystal ball to make it shut down.

"Hocus-" *Hiccup!* "- Pocus! I want my money back. And you know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna call my boyfriend is what I'm gonna do. Thomas...! Thomas...! THOMAS!" Mary Sue said, huffing angrily and crossing her arms over her chest.

The curtain moved aside and a man roughly the same age as the inebriated woman stepped into the tent. He was a big guy in boots, blue jeans and a slightly filthy muscleshirt, and a bushy mustache and a mullet adorned his face and head, respectively.

"Whassup, baby?"

"Mysterious Xora he' is trying to feed me some bull."

"Huh?"

"She said I was gonna end up in jail!"

"That can't be right, baby. Can it?" Thomas Stone said, looking directly at Xora. His voice held a barely hidden promise of violence, making Xora dislike him instantly.

I'm not gonna stick it to 'em. I'm not... I'm not... the hell I'm not,' Xora thought, giggling so hard on the inside that it almost bubbled up to the surface.

"Like I told your girlfriend, I only saw one possible future. But perhaps you want your future read too, Sir?"

"Nuh-uh, I want my five bucks back and I'm stayin' right here 'till you do!" Mary Sue said, nodding in an exaggerated fashion.

After staring at the inebriated woman for a full minute, waiting unsuccessfully for her to leave, Xora decided that everything that would happen to the two people from that moment on would be their own fault.

I'm gonna show those Potato Heads a thing or two about hocus-pocus!' she thought and slammed the palms of her hands down onto the table, making the crystal ball - and Mary Sue - jump.

"Look, Mary Sue, Thomas... instead of giving you your money back, how about I showed you a few special tricks?"

"How many times do I have to tell you? I want-"

"Yeah, yeah, you want your money back. But trust me, my special tricks are very special indeed. How about it? Consider it a two-for-one deal."

"Well, I... okay. But it better be good!"

"Oh, it'll be good, all right. It'll positively blow the two of you away," Xora said and waved her hand across the crystal ball. Once it had come alive, she put all ten fingertips directly down onto the glassy surface and began to whisper a few ancient chants.

Mary Sue and Thomas looked at the curious event with matching puzzled looks in their eyes. When the fortune teller didn't seem to acknowledge their presence anymore, Thomas reached down and put his hands on Mary Sue's shoulders.

Moments later, Mary Sue let out a little shriek when the tent was filled with the strangest purple smoke, seemingly emanating from the crystal ball.

Xora pulled her fingers back from the glassy surface, drawing purple and red lightning bolts out of the crystal ball. She roared with delight as she felt the powerful energy coursing through her.

"Whut in the flying flip is goin' on here?!" Mary Sue said, trying to get up from the chair but finding that her legs wouldn't obey her.

The colorful lightning bolts shooting out from Xora's fingers suddenly gained a life of their own and began to tear around the tent, weaving in and out of each other and creating intricate patterns of purple and red light. Each time the bolts collided with the inside walls of the tent, showers of sparks rained down onto the carpets and the three people, making Mary Sue scream rather frantically.

When the lightning bolts finally returned to the crystal ball, it appeared to simmer for a few seconds - and then it exploded in a bright, purple flash, shattering into a million pieces.

Once the explosion had receded, the tent shook to the sound of Xora's manic laughing and Mary Sue's frantic screaming.

"Whut are ya tryin' to do, woman! Kill us?" Mary Sue said after her screaming had trailed off. She still had a death-grip on the chair she was sitting on, and judging by the way her fingers had dug themselves into the upholstery, it would take a crowbar to get her out of it.

Standing behind his girlfriend, Thomas was frozen in place with a comical look on his face - a mixture of shock and awe.

"I'm showing you one of my special tricks, like I said I would," Xora said, straightening her wig.

"Buh..."

"We've gone back in time."

"You mean... to, like, yesterday?"

"No, no... way, way, way back... more than two thousand five hundred years. Mary Sue, we're visiting one of your previous lives, like I told you... remember?"

"But I don't wanna have a previous life... sounds scary!"

"Yeah!" Thomas chimed in, nodding like a poodle.

"Anyway, it's probably best if I show you what I'm talking about," Xora said and got up from her chair. She went around the table and took Mary Sue's hand in her own.

"Wait a minute, where are you takin' her?" Thomas said, putting his hand down on Xora's arm.

"Outside. Come on, it'll be fun."

"We just came from the outside. There's only the fair out there and that ain't *that* fun..." Thomas said.

"You'll see what I mean. Mary Sue?"

At first, Mary Sue was reluctant to leave the safety of her chair, but she eventually relented and followed Mysterious Xora out of the tent - Thomas followed his girlfriend, grumbling under his breath.

Once Mary Sue saw what was awaiting her outside the tent, she spun around on her heel and ran back inside.

"Come on, you big scaredy-cat," Xora said, ducking back inside to grab the fleeing woman.

"No! No, nuh-uh, it looked scary out there..."

"It's not scary at all. It's just a scene from one of your previous lives, like I told you."

"Time-out, okay? Time out!" Mary Sue said and held her hands in the traditional T gesture, making the helium balloon bop up and down. "It's that smoke, isn't it? You poisoned me with that damn smoke and now I'm seeing things," she slurred.

"No, it wasn't the smoke. This is all inside you." *'Or rather, inside me,'* Xora thought. "You've been here before, Mary Sue. This is your life. Come on, let's take a look at it," she continued, putting out her hand.

"So it isn't scary?"

"Not in the least. Come on, you won't regret it."

"Oh... all right," Mary Sue said and took Xora's hand again.

The two women stepped out of the tent and joined Thomas on a dusty, rocky trail in the middle of an olive grove. The sun was beating down on them relentlessly, forcing them to shield their eyes with their hands. The trail they were standing close to had two deep ruts in it, matching the wheels of heavily laden carts.

A bit further up the trail, such a cart was parked under an olive tree. On the cart's bed, three people dressed in brown tunics were reaching over to the trees, picking olives off the branches as they went past them.

"What. The. Heck. Is. This?" Mary Sue slurred, wiping her eyes repeatedly.

"This is ancient Greece. We're on Cyprus."

"I lived in ancient Greece?"

"Yes."

"I don't see no Greek babes," Thomas said, earning himself an elbow in the side from Mary Sue.

"Is any of those young girls me?" Mary Sue said, pointing at the three people picking olives.

"No."

"Then what am I doin' here?"

"You'll be here shortly."

Moments later, an old crone turned onto the trail. She was in her late fifties, four-foot nine and hunched over from old age. Even though she was wearing a dark cloak, it was easy to see that she had gray hair and bronzed, leathery skin. She was plump, her hips were wide after giving birth to many children and her bare legs were hairy.

"That's you, right there," Xora said, nodding at the old crone as she walked past the two younger women.

"Aw, hell no! No, no, no, that's not me! Whaddahell you talkin' about, woman?" Mary Sue said, stared wide-eyed at the person walking past them.

"Trust me, she is you."

"Hey, are you insultin' my girlfriend? I think you're insultin' my girlfriend. People like us don't like it when people like you start insultin' our girlfriends," Thomas said, clenching his fists.

"It's not the exterior that counts... look at your girlfriend now... uh, I mean... never mind," Xora said, biting the inside of her cheek. The slip of the tongue seemed to go over Thomas' head, and Xora breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hey, I got a word for you. Hocus-Pocus!" Mary Sue said.

"Mary Sue, will you calm down? I'm not lying to you. Let's go talk to her," Xora said and grabbed Mary Sue's arm.

"No, we ain't gonna do that! What kind of fortune teller are you, anyway? How did you do this? Is this all smoke and mirrors?" Thomas said.

"This is really happening. We're here, in ancient Greece."

"I wanna go home... right this minute!" Mary Sue said and crossed her arms over her chest. The string for the balloon got caught up in her hair and she spent the next ten seconds trying to figure out how to get it out.

Thomas nodded vigorously and began to help his girlfriend.

Xora chuckled and looked towards the heavens. "Oh, they're making this way too easy for me," she said with a shrug. "All right, go back to the tent. The sooner you sit down in the chair, the sooner we'll be home."

"Ya don't hafta tell me twice," Mary Sue said and hurried back to the tent with Thomas in tow.

Shaking her head, Xora followed the inebriated woman and her boyfriend at a slightly more leisurely pace.

Mary Sue ran over to her chair and sat down with a bump. "I'm sittin', but we haven't moved!" she said in a contrary voice.

"Actually, we're back to the fair. Take a peek out of the entrance if you don't believe me," Xora said and sat down on her own chair. She waved her hand across the crystal ball to make it come alive.

"Whut? Bull-dung," Thomas said, grinning in a nasty sort of way.

"But we haven't... lemme go see," Mary Sue said and got back up. She staggered to the entrance and peeked out. When all she could see was the various rides at the county fair, her face was transformed into a twelve-inch question mark. "How. The. Hell. Did. You. Do. That...?" she slurred as she came back to the chair.

"Magic, Mary Sue. All magic," Xora said and pretended to reach inside her long sleeves.

"Hocus-Pocus is what I call it."

"And I'm gonna call it somethin' else... B.S.!" Thomas said.

"Well, I'm sorry that you won't believe there's more to this world than what meets the naked eye... but there is," Xora said, pulling her sleeves back.

Mary Sue was sitting very still, shaking her head repeatedly. She tried to open her mouth several times, but no sounds ever came past her lips. She shuffled from one side of the chair to the other, making the helium

balloon bob around in the air. "Xora... was that woman really me?" she said, trying very hard to get every syllable right.

"You and her share the same soul, Mary Sue. Throughout the millennia, you have been reincarnated dozens of times."

"Aw, what bull!" Thomas said, laughing condescendingly.

"Well, it's true," Xora said.

"And I don't even like Mexican food..." Mary Sue whispered to herself.

Thomas leaned down and put his fists on the table, making the crystal ball shake in its foundation. "Hey, fraud... can you see my future?"

I can send you there is what I can... Xora thought. She smiled and nodded. "Oh, yes."

"Well...?"

"For five dollars."

"Aw, Jeez, you shoulda been a used car salesman. Here," Thomas said and slapped a crumpled five dollar bill down on the table. Xora took it and put it into the slit in the cash box.

"Thank you, Sir. All right, let's see..." Xora said and waved her hand across the crystal ball. Like the other times, it was illuminated at once, and images soon began to flicker inside it.

"Hmmm... Are you sure you want to know, Thomas?" she said in a honeyed voice after seeing the first few images.

"Hell, yeah. Didn't I just give you five bucks? I'm not wastin' money on nothin', so ya better tell me what ya see."

"All right. I see red skies and leaden clouds that are heavy with acid rain... I see burnt-out buildings reduced to rubble... I see a barren, desolate world devoid of all human life. Well, except you. I see several drooling, hairy creatures hounding you... oh, no, they're post-apocalyptic mutants!" Xora said, waving her hands in a very theatrical fashion. Her face was set in stone but the tone of her voice wasn't entirely sincere.

Thomas' jaw dropped down in his lap as his mind processed Mysterious Xora's words. First, he scrunched up his face, then he narrowed his eyes down to slits. "Oh, what bull!" he said, spitting out the words. "Bull, bull, bull... all of it bull. Fraud!"

"I'm sorry that you don't believe the future that awaits you, Sir. Now, if you please... hopefully, I'll have several more customers today," Xora said and waved her hand to make the crystal ball turn off.

"Naw! Nuh-uh..." Thomas started to say, but Mary Sue quieted him by putting a hand on his arm.

"Shhhh, I'm not done here."

"Mary Sue, you're done when I say you're done. And right now, you're done," Thomas said and began to move Mary Sue's hand.

"Will ya let me speak! Jeez, Thomas! You think we're already married or somethin'? Xora... would you mind showin' me another of my past lives?"

"Aw, don't tell me you actually believe this bull?" Thomas said and shot up from his chair.

"I'd be delighted to, Mary Sue. I'll even do it free of charge," Xora said, locking eyes with the irate Thomas.

"You said somethin' about a ship...?"

"I believe that's right, yes. It was one of the large ocean liners."

"Can we go there?"

"Absolutely," Xora said and began the procedure that would take them back in time.

A few heartbeats later, Xora, Mary Sue and Thomas stepped outside the tent and found themselves on the polished, wooden deck of an old-fashioned ocean liner. The ship was caught in a bad storm and it was rocking left and right, making it nearly impossible for the three people to stand upright. The wind was so fierce that Xora had to cling on to her wig with both her hands and Mary Sue's helium balloon was just barely hanging on to her wrist.

"Let's go where's it's calmer!" Xora said, shouting to be heard over the screaming storm. When she realized that her companions were too busy fighting the storm to hear her, she slapped Thomas' shoulder and pointed at a nook a bit further down the deck.

High above them, the ship's horn let out a long, braying sound, meant to warn other ships in the vicinity of its presence.

The three people strode against the wind until they reached a nook in the side of the ship that acted as a natural windbreak. When Mary Sue noticed that the wind had turned her hair into a haystack, she broke out in a wild giggle that made Thomas glare at her. When his look didn't seem to have any effect, he turned to Xora and shot her a similar glare.

"Where the hell did you take us now?" he shouted.

"This is the Prince Wilhelm. It's an ocean liner from South Africa that went down in a storm off the Cape of Good Hope in 1932," Xora shouted back.

"Who am I here? Am I the Captain?" Mary Sue shouted, grabbing hold of Xora's arm for effect.

"Well, not exactly," Xora said, nodding towards a woman in a cream-colored dress who came running out from one of the hallways at the exact same moment.

The woman slipped and slid across the slippery deck on an arduous, endless journey over to the railing. Once she was there, she leaned over the side and threw up.

"Ewwwwwww!" Mary Sue said, shielding her eyes. "And that's me?"

"Fraid so."

"Uggh, that's disgusting. Why couldn't I have been the Captain?"

A series of huge waves started slapping against the side of the ocean liner, making the large ship creak, groan and shudder. The woman in the cream-colored dress struggled to get back to the hallway, but she finally made it to the doors.

A sudden jolt coming from a different direction compared to the earlier waves caused Thomas to bang his head against the side of the ship. Nursing his hurting skull, he went into an impressive blue streak that left Mary Sue red-faced from giggling.

"You certainly know some colorful language, Sir," Xora said, chuckling. "Mary Sue, are you ready to go back now? That last jolt was the ship running into an underground reef. It'll sink in a few minutes."

Mary Sue's eyes bugged out on stalks and her jaw slipped down her chest. "Does that mean that the woman from before is gonna d-die?"

"Yes. There is another reincarnation between her and you."

Mary Sue clutched her head, struggling to find the right words through her half-drunken state. "But I... that's really unfair. Can't you shave her... uh, sha... uhh, save her?"

"Mary Sue..."

"Okay, okay... let's go home," she said, nodding her head so fast that Xora was worried it might fall off. "Once I get out of here, I'll never eat Mexican food again... much too dangerous..."

Xora rolled her eyes and pulled Mary Sue and Thomas back out into the storm. They struggled to get back across the already listing wooden deck, but they were able to get back to the tent without too much drama.

Once they stepped inside, the wind and the rocking motion disappeared in an instant, substituted by silence and stillness.

"Whoa..." Mary Sue said as she let herself fall down with a bump into the chair.

"Now you've visited two of your lives, Mary Sue."

"Wow, this is so unreal... so unreal," Mary Sue said, trying to get her wind-strewn hair back under control. Unfortunately, her gestures meant that the helium balloon got caught up in it again, snagging itself deep into her impressive hairdo. "Ohhhh...!" she whined, trying to get the string out of her hair without ruining either of them.

"You know what I think? I still think you're a fraud," Thomas said. "I think you've fed us some spiked cookies or somethin'."

"Oh, come on. Neither of you have eaten anything in here," Xora said.

"Except that Mexican food thing..." Mary Sue chimed in.

For the umpteenth time, Mary Sue's comments made Xora stop dead in her tracks and just stare at the slightly inebriated woman. "Like I said before, it's all a question of magic."

"There ain't no such thing as magic."

"Oh, trust me... magic exists, all right. If there wasn't any magic, would I be able to do this?" Xora said and conjured up a football. She threw the pigskin at Thomas but it slipped through his fingers and landed on the carpet. "Or this?" she continued, conjuring up a diamond bracelet.

"Oooh! Pretty!" Mary Sue slurred, staring cross-eyed at the piece of jewelry. "How come you never give me somethin' like that?" she said, thumping Thomas in the side with her elbow.

"Yeah, right," he said surly, nursing his ribs.

"Do you still think I'm a fraud?" Xora said, playing with the diamond bracelet by throwing it into the air and catching it again.

"Hell, yeah!"

Scowling, Xora stopped playing with the bracelet and threw it to Mary Sue who deftly caught it in mid-air. Thomas just looked annoyed. When Mary Sue put it on her wrist, she squealed loudly and bounced up and down in the chair.

'Well, I guess I know where to put that Thomas fella,' Xora thought, almost giggling out loud. 'There's always room for one more skeptic. Is it too cruel? Nah!'

One look at Thomas' sour face convinced her that her plan was spot-on and she just barely managed to hide a devilish little grin. "Thomas, do you want to be part of an experiment?"

"No!"

"There could be some money in it for you."

"Uhhh... yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How much?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe a thousand dollars. Maybe a bit less."

"What kind of experiment?"

"A survival kind of experiment."

"I'm a survivor... I can shoot and everythin'. You're on!"

"Excellent," Xora said and waved her hand across the crystal ball. Once it had powered up, she put all ten fingertips directly down onto the glassy surface.

Once again, red and purple lightning bolts tore around the tent that had already been filled with purple smoke. Xora removed her fingers from the crystal ball and let out a roar of delight over the energy coursing through her.

"When do I learn to keep my trap SHUUUUUUUT!?" Thomas howled as he ducked out of the way of a rogue red lightning that arced its way around the tent, changing its course and sending out sparks each time it hit something.

A few moments later, the lightning bolts returned to the crystal ball, making it explode in a bright purple flash.

As soon as the flash had receded, creepy animal-like noises could be heard from outside the tent.

"Where are we?" Mary Sue whispered.

"Mary Sue... Thomas... we're in the future. The distant future... fortunately. In the year 2284, nearly all of mankind will be wiped out in a nuclear exchange. Eleven billion people will lose their lives in one, fell swoop, leaving a few million scattered survivors to fend off the elements and each other. The nuclear war itself will only last six hours, but the Earth will be contaminated for thousands of years afterwards."

"Ewww... why did you bring us here?"

"Thomas agreed on an experiment... so here we are. This is the year 2809, five hundred odd years after the nuclear apocalypse. The human race is no longer... in its place, a new breed of life has evolved. Faster, hairier, less forgiving, more animal-like. My friends, I give you... post-apocalyptic mutants," Xora said and pulled the curtain aside.

Outside, the sky was red as blood, a lingering effect of the nuclear contamination. The landscape was a vast, barren desert filled with millions of stones in piles of various sizes. There wasn't any vegetation at all; everything was seemingly devoid of life - until one of the creatures stepped into view.

Vaguely humanoid, its yellow, beady eyes studied the inside of the tent with great interest. It was indescribably filthy; drool was running down from its fang-like teeth, and blood, mud and waste were caking in its dark brown fur.

"Oh-mi-GOOOOOOOD!" Mary Sue shrieked and jumped up from her chair. The hairy beast was as spooked as she was and bolted from the tent, howling loudly.

"What was that thing?!" Thomas hissed, holding onto Mary Sue like his life depended on it.

"My dear Thomas, that was you," Xora said and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I. Beg. Yer. Pardon!"

"That's where you're headed. Or rather, where your soul is headed."

"What a load of..."

"Am I here too?" Mary Sue said in a shaky voice.

"I'm afraid not, Mary Sue. Your soul will be lost in the nuclear holocaust."

"Oh... that's bad, right?"

"Yes. That's fairly bad."

"Where will you be?" Thomas said.

"Oh, I'll still be here, keeping an eye on everything. After all, I am immortal," Xora said, stressing every syllable of the last word. She put out her arms and spun around, making her colorful dress float out.

"Aw, what crap. You're no more immortal than we are."

"I'm surprised you even know what that word means, Thomas. Now, those two thousand dollars I promised you..."

"Two thousand? No, it was... Uhhhh, it was two thousand, yeah," Thomas said, nodding enthusiastically.

"They're out there... somewhere," Xora said, pointing out towards the barren wastelands. "All you have to do is to find a metallic green lunch box. The money is inside."

"A metallic green lunch box?!"

"Yes. Oh, and you better avoid the mutants. From what I understand, they're cannibals... and they must be hungry for some white meat," Xora said with a broad smile.

"Cannibals... two thousand dollars... cannibals... two thousand dollars... hmmm. All right, I'll go for it," Thomas said, puffing out his chest.

"Noooo, Thomas, don't you dare! I need you in one piece... after all, you're gonna be the father of my six children!" Mary Sue said, clinging onto Thomas like a burr.

"Whut?!"

A look of wild panic suddenly flashed over Thomas' eyes. His nostrils began to flare and his ears were practically flapping in the non-existent wind. "Six children...? What are you talking about, woman? I don't want six children. I don't even want two children! Hell, I don't want any children, full stop!"

"But... Mysterious Xora saw me haulin' six children around. Ain't that right?"

"That's right, Mary Sue, but like I said, it was only a possible future."

"Oh..."

"Anyway, I'd rather take my chances against mutant cannibals. A metallic green lunch box?" Thomas said, mopping his brow with a shaky hand.

"That's right, Thomas."

"Watch my smoke," he said and hurried out of the tent. Xora grabbed hold of Mary Sue's left hand, the one without the helium balloon, and guided her over to the door.

"Oh, but I'm not sure I wanna watch..." she whined, but Xora patted her hand in a very reassuring fashion.

"It won't be long, dear. I mean, it won't take him long to find the money, dear."

"Thomas never was a good tracker. A couple a' times, he couldn't find our truck in the parking lot down at the mall..."

Out in the wastelands, Thomas ran as fast as he could across the rubble and boulders, trying to escape the herd of seven rabid, hairy mutant cannibals that was hot on his tail. At one point, a rock slid away under his foot, but he managed to keep his balance with nary a hair out of place.

When Mary Sue shrieked and shielded her eyes with her hand, Xora wrapped an arm around the inebriated woman's shoulder and gave her a comforting squeeze.

"There, there, Mary Sue. He's fine for now. That last mutant only got one or two claws into him. Nothing to worry about."

"Ohhhh!"

Thomas twisted and turned to get away from his followers. He jumped from one boulder to the next, trying to locate the fabled green lunch box.

"Not that way, Thomas! That'll lead you right into the hands of the... oh, he's found out. No, he hasn't! Turn around, Thomas. Not that way!" Xora said, waving her arms to get Thomas' attention.

"Ohhhh!" Mary Sue said again, shaking her head repeatedly.

"And he's run right into the mutants trying to outflank him. Oh, dear. Ouch! Oh! Oooh! Ouch! That's gonna leave a mark!" Xora said, grimacing over Thomas' troubles. "Oh, well done! He's managed to get away from the biggest of them. That's probably the chief of the tribe. That's good news, Mary Sue."

"Ohhhh!"

"The lunch box is to your left, Thomas. To your left! No, LEFT! LEFT!" Xora said, raising her left hand.

Thomas finally spotted the metallic green lunch box, picked it up and sprinted back to the tent. With an acrobatic leap that was slightly less than graceful, he shot into the tent, landing on his stomach with a loud thud.

Panting like crazy, he dropped the lunch box and rolled over onto his back. When the box hit the carpet, the lid opened to reveal that it was empty.

"Awwww, it was empty all along. Imagine that," Xora said, folding her hands together and pressing them to her bosom.

"Wh-whut?! I risked my life for nothin'?!"

"Well, that's how it goes sometimes. Better luck next time," Xora said and lowered the curtain.

Behind her, Mary Sue's eyes rolled back in her head and she fainted on the spot, keeling over and falling down onto the carpet.

"Well, you can't say you didn't get your five dollars' worth now, Thomas," Xora said and sat down behind the still-flickering crystal ball.

"But you said there might be a thousand dollars... or even two thousand dollars in it for me!" Thomas said, kneeling down next to the passed-out Mary Sue. He pulled his filthy muscleshirt out of his pants and waved it in Mary Sue's face to create a bit of fresh air for her.

"Thomas, **cough, cough**, you should wash that thing before you use it as a fan," Xora said, pinching her nostrils shut to stop the penetrating smell of sweat from entering her nose.

"I'm a guy. We sweat. Deal with it."

"I can't avoid dealing with it," Xora said, waving her hand furiously.

"I still think you're a fraud."

"Whaaaat? Even after all the fun things I've showed you and your girlfriend? Come now, Thomas. Even someone like you must admit that it could be real."

"I don't know what your game is, but you sure ain't straight in your head, woman. Puttin' us regular folks through all this crapola... damn near criminal, that," Thomas grumbled.

Xora leaned back in her seat and let out a loud belly laugh. "You know, Thomas, you're closer to the truth than you think you are... but you're not quite there yet. You wanna know the whole truth?"

"Yeah," Thomas said, helping Mary Sue up in a sitting position. The inebriated woman finally came back to the world and began to rub her brow.

"Whut happened, Thomas?"

"You passed out, baby."

"Where's the money?"

"There wasn't any."

"Aw, hell. I can't believe she lied to us..."

"Welcome back, Mary Sue. You're just in time to hear the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me Dad."

"Whaddahell you talkin' about, woman?" Thomas said and shook his had. When Mary Sue tugged on his pant leg, he helped her up in the chair.

"In reality, I am the Prankster, a free spirit from Ancient Greece. Yes, that's right. And I'm a damn good prankster. I have been here, among humans, for fifteen millennia, and you my friends are the ones I've had the most fun with. All the others have been stupid, horny, drunken teenagers, but you... oh dear, oh dear."

"Do you believe a word of what she's saying, hon?" Thomas said.

"Not a single syllable," Mary Sue slurred, shaking her head.

"Me, neither. Hey, fraud, are we back home?"

"We sure are. You're free to leave any time. When you meet your friends, don't forget to tell them about Mysterious Xora. Hopefully, they'll be as much fun as you have been."

"We're gonna tell the Sheriff is who we're gonna tell!" Mary Sue said. "All that you told me about the Mexican food... they were lies?"

"Not in your case. You really have lived before, Mary Sue. I have to admit that I exaggerated a bit on the post-apocalyptic mutant cannibals," Xora said and put her hands behind her back.

As he helped Mary Sue to her feet, Thomas grumbled something unintelligible.

"What's that, Thomas?" Xora said.

"Wouldn't you like to know. C'mon, hon. We're leaving," Thomas said, took Mary Sue by the arm and dragged her towards the entrance of the tent.

"Mysterious Xora's is always open!" Xora shouted to them, but Thomas just waved his hand.

'...adies and Gentlemen! The eighty-first annual county fair closes in fifteen minutes. Please follow the instructions of our security personnel and walk towards the exits in an orderly fashion. We hope you've had a great time here and we hope to see you next year,' the fair's PA system suddenly said.

"Whut? The fair is closing already? That can't be right," Thomas said and checked his wristwatch. "Hey, woman, is this another of your tricks? My watch says it's only a quarter past two in the afternoon!"

"Weeeellll... it's actually a quarter past nine in the evening."

"Have we been here for eleven hours?" Mary Sue said, staggering back and forth and clutching her head.

"Seven hours, hon," Thomas said under his breath.

"Seven hours!" Mary Sue echoed.

"I'm afraid so, yes. But it was fun, don't you think? I've had more fun today than I've had for the last five centuries!"

"Well, whoop-dee-do! At our expense," Thomas said and dragged Mary Sue away, leaving Mysterious Xora all alone in her tent.

"Five... four... three... two... one..." Xora said, using her fingers to measure the countdown.

"AA!" Thomas screamed from somewhere outside the tent.

"Bingo," Xora said, laughing mischievously.

From the outside, she could hear Thomas running around, shouting and screaming that he was trapped in a world of post-apocalyptic mutant cannibals. With a giggle, Xora walked over to the entrance and peeked out.

Thomas was running around all over the place, waving his arms in the air - his face had practically turned blue from all the shouting. Mary Sue was sitting on her backside on the grass, cradling her helium balloon in her hand and laughing her head off over Thomas' escapades. Meanwhile, the county fair's security personnel were trying to round up Thomas to get him to cool down, but he kept eluding them.

"Oh, well done, Thomas. You really did learn a thing or two today," Xora said, closing the curtain behind her.

Walking back into her tent, she took off her wig and began to scratch her hair.

'That wasn't nice, Xora.'

by Norsebard

After making sure his helmet and the rest of his costume were on just right, the twelve-year old Jonas Ohlsson gulped loudly and stepped closer to the door so he could reach the little button for the bell.

As soon as he heard the door bell ringing inside the Pendergast residence, he took a step back so Mrs. Pendergast could see that he was alone.

When no one came to the door, he gulped again and looked back down to the quiet street at the end of the garden path. Clutching his empty plastic bag that would hopefully see a lot of candy later, he started worrying that it wasn't the right day after all, but before long, rapid footsteps were heard behind the door.

The door opened with a windy swish to reveal Eve Pendergast. Ancient to Jonas' eyes, the thirty-four year old mother of two clapped her hands together when she noticed Jonas' costume.

"Trick or tr..." Jonas started to say, but he was completely overpowered by Mrs. Pendergast's squeal.

"Ohhhhhhhh! You're so cute! You're... you're... whatshisname... Jasper!"

"Joxer."

"Joxer, of course. Oh, you're so cute! I bet your Mom worked long and hard on that helmet."

"Yes, she did. I helped her," Jonas said, shuffling back and forth.

"Gail is a few minutes late. We had a little costume drama. Her hair got snagged in the zipper," Mrs. Pendergast whispered conspiratorially.

"Oh... ouch. That's why Mom didn't make zippers in my costume. Only buttons. Plenty of buttons..."

"That's good to hear. And speaking of drama, your bag looks empty, Jonas. It won't be for long. Here ya go," Mrs. Pendergast said and scooped up a big handful of candy from a bowl next to the door. With a wink, she dumped the candy into Jonas' bag.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. Pendergast."

"You're welcome, Jonas."

'*Mom!*' a fair, female voice said from the first floor.

"I better go and see what's wrong. Come in, Jonas. We won't be long," Mrs. Pendergast said and ushered Jonas into the hall. Once she had closed the front door, she bounded up the stairs to the bedrooms on the first floor.

Jonas gulped again as he looked around the tastefully decorated hall. From the living room, he could hear a movie playing which sorely tested his curiosity. When Gail and Mrs. Pendergast didn't come down at once from upstairs, he tiptoed over to the doorjamb and peeked around it to try to get a glimpse of the movie.

Gail's other mom was sitting in a comfy chair with a large bowl of popcorn in her lap and an extra-large styrofoam cup of Slurppy! Raspberry Fizz in her hand. The movie was an old black-and-white thing that didn't capture Jonas' interest at all, but he saw enough to know that it was a horror movie about some furry man.

Footsteps walking down the stairs made him run back to the center of the hall, and he did his best to act like nothing had happened in the mean time.

"Hi, Joxer," the ten-year old Gail Pendergast said. She fluffed her long, honeyblonde hair out over the collar of her costume and pulled down in the sleeves so the insulated, skin-colored body suit was on just right.

"Hi, Gail. Sorry... hi, Gabrielle."

"Love your costume. What do you think about mine?" Gail said and spun around so Jonas could see her entire costume.

"It's really great. The green top and the rust brown skirt look really, really great. Just like in the show," Jonas said, nodding enthusiastically.

"Thank you, Jonas. The top and the skirt were easy but the body suit took us ages to get right. Isn't that so, Gail?" Mrs. Pendergast said, holding a plastic bag that she gave to her daughter.

"Yes, Mom. We went through at least seventeen different versions of it," Gail said to Jonas.

"Well, it was probably closer to three, but still..." Mrs. Pendergast said. "Uh, Jonas, would you mind waiting outside. I just have to say a few private things to Gail..." she continued.

"I'll be right outside, Mrs. Pendergast. Gabrielle, I'll protect you with my sword if there's any trouble," Jonas said and pulled a plastic sword a few inches out of a scabbard on his hip.

"That's great, Joxer," Gail said, grinning.

A few minutes later, Gail came out of her house, holding an Amazon fighting staff made of soft foam and a plastic bag with a handful of candy.

"Are you ready for a new adventure, Joxer?"

"Yes... but I have to be home by eleven."

"So do I, but don't worry... the Bacchae will be toast by then. I wonder if Xandra is ready?" Gail said and pulled the sleeve of the body suit back a bit so she could check her Xena Warrior Princess wristwatch.

Two streets over, Xandra Collings' mom was doing her absolute best to annoy her tall and strong-willed eleven year old daughter by fussing endlessly over the costume.

"Mom, can we-"

"No, the scabbard still isn't right. What if we...?"

"No, Mom, it's almost time. Gail and Jonas will be here any minu-"

"I think if we pulled it down a little bit, it won't stand out so much."

"Will you please stop fussing, the costume looks great, Mom."

Xandra looked at herself in the full-size mirror she was standing in front of - she was wearing a faithful rendition of Xena's trademark leathers, complete with a frilly mini-skirt, a corset with a sown-on breastplate, two shoulderpads and two gauntlets that had proved very difficult to get right.

Underneath it all, she was wearing a toffee-colored sweatsuit that matched her skin tone, and that would hopefully ensure she wouldn't freeze her rear end off in the late October cold.

"Oh, you look so beautiful," Xandra's mom said and started to pull her daughter's deep brown, shoulder-length hair back into the beginnings of a ponytail, but Xandra shook her head so the hair fell loose again.

"Thanks, Mom. No ponytail. Xena never had a ponytail."

"Okay. Do you have your Chakrock?"

"Chakram, Mom... Chakram!"

"I know. I'm just teasing you," Xandra's mom whispered into her daughter's ear.

"Oh..." The door bell interrupted their conversation and Xandra bounded over to the door.

"Hi!" she said as the door whooshed open. "Wow, you look great!" she continued as she got a good look at her two best friends.

"Thanks, Xandra... uh, Xena. You look really great, too," Gail said with a grin.

"Thanks. Did you see any Bacchae yet?"

"Not yet, but there are so many creepy people out there. We've already bumped into three zombies, two Lord Voldemort's... and Bigfoot!" Jonas said with his eyes wide open.

"Ooooh! That's why I love Halloween!" Xandra exclaimed and turned back to finish off getting dressed. Behind Xandra's back, Jonas and Gail looked at each other and gulped nervously.

._*._*._

"Trick or treeeeeat!" Xandra, Gail and Jonas said simultaneously the instant old Mrs. O'Sullivan opened her front door. Like most of the other people they had visited, she clapped her hands together and squealed once she saw their costumes.

"Oh, you look terrific! So much nicer than all these Count Draculas running around," she said and reached for a plastic bag full of candy.

"Count Draculas? So you have seen Bacchae... uh, I mean Vampires tonight?" Xandra said, staring at Mrs. O'Sullivan's bag of candy with round, expectant eyes.

"I certainly have. Why, just five minutes ago, a whole pack... herd... flock... oh, never mind... of vampires stood right where you are now. They wore too much makeup, if you ask me," Mrs. O'Sullivan said as she dumped several handfuls of candy into the bags of the three friends.

"Thank you, Mrs. O'Sullivan!" they said as one.

"You're welcome. You're Wonder Woman, right?" the elderly lady said, looking at Xandra.

"Uh... no. I'm Xena. This is Gabrielle and Joxer," Xandra said, pointing at the other two.

"Oh... oh, Xena. Right. Well, anyway, good night and have a safe Halloween!" Mrs. O'Sullivan said, clearly not knowing who those characters were.

"Good night, Mrs. O'Sullivan," Gail said and waved at the elderly lady as they walked down the garden path.

They had barely made it back to Cypress Lane when a large brute of a boy deliberately bumped into Jonas, pushing him into Mrs. O'Sullivan's hedge and almost knocking him over. The brute's two companions kept two paces behind their leader, laughing contemptuously.

"Hey! What's your problem, Buzz?" Xandra said strongly, jumping in between the flat-headed attacker and her friends. At once, Gail moved over to pull Jonas back out of the hedge.

"None of your business, dork."

"You wanna fight me, Buzz? I'd kick your ass and you know it."

"No, ya couldn't. Just because your Daddy is a cop don't mean that you're good in a fight."

"Do ya wanna test that theory, Buzz?"

"You don't scare me usin' big words! What are you dorks supposed to be, anyway? The three little piggies?" Buzz said and started to laugh. When his companions didn't join him at once, he glared at them until they laughed along with him.

"We're Xena, Gabrielle and Joxer!" Gail said, helping Jonas scoop up the candy that had fallen out of his bag when he'd had the excursion into the hedge.

"Ooooooh, I shoulda known... that's a show for little kids!"

"No, it's not," Gail mumbled to herself.

"Here's what we're gonna do. You dorks are gonna give us all your candy. If you don't, we'll take it from you," Buzz said, folding his arms across his chest.

Xandra ground her jaw and began to reach for the plastic Chakram on her hip, but before she had time to grab it, one of the adult chaperones arrived on the scene, clearing his throat loudly.

"What's going on here?" Mr. Nelson, the gym teacher from the local grade school, said.

"Nothing, Mr. Nelson. Buzz and his friends were just showing us how little candy they had," Xandra said, glaring daggers at the flat-headed boy who scowled in return.

"Is that right? Well, don't feel bad about it, Buzz. There's plenty of opportunity for everyone to get candy tonight. Run along now, okay?"

"Yes, Mr. Nelson," the children said as one, going their separate ways.

On the other side of the street, a tall man wrapped in a black cloak moved further back into the shadows. He had been there for a while, watching the interaction between the two groups of kids with interest. Once they split up, he seemed to ponder which of the two groups to follow, but finally decided on the three boys.

"Oh, I hate Buzz," Gail said a few minutes later, clenching her fists so hard that her knuckles turned white.

"Yeah, me too," Jonas said, removing leaves and little twigs from his costume. The job took so much of his concentration that he didn't notice that he had fallen back from his two friends. When he suddenly realized that he was on his own, he gulped nervously and picked up the pace to get back alongside Gail and Xandra.

"I would've protected you," Xandra said, twirling her plastic sword.

"I know," Gail said and took Xandra's hand. Giggling, they began to swing their hands back and forth, just enjoying being best friends and being allowed to be out on their own on the most spooky evening of the year.

"Well, that was Mr. and Mrs. Krasnic's house. Where do you want to go now, Gail?" Xandra said.

"Oh, I don't know. How about getting some marshmallows and hot cocoa first... and then go over to Crawley Lane?"

"Good id-"

"Not the ghost house down at the park! Please!" Jonas whined from somewhere behind the two girls.

"Joxer, why would we knock on the door of a ghost house...? The ghosts won't have any candy for us," Xandra said, sticking her tongue out.

"But they could grab us and torture us and tickle us and..."

"We won't go to the ghost house, Jonas. Don't worry," Gail said, sending her friend a reassuring smile.

"Oh... thank you."

As the three friends turned the corner onto Willow Lane - that had been closed for traffic for the evening - they immediately spotted Xandra's dad who was standing near a marquee hosting a small get-together.

"What's your dad doing tonight, Xandra?"

"He'll be demonstrating some self-defense moves with one of his colleagues."

"Oh! I gotta see that... it's so exciting," Jonas said and ran ahead.

"Maybe they need a volunteer, Joxer!" Xandra shouted, but Jonas was already too far away to hear.

Holding hands again, Xandra and Gail moved up to stand at the back of the group of people watching the display. Jonas soon came running past them, unsuccessfully trying to find a gap in the throng so he could peek through.

"I can't see a thing, Xena," Gail said with a sigh.

"Me, neither. But it must be interesting," Xandra said, listening to the enthusiastic way the group of parents and children responded to her Dad's demonstration. "Let's go get some hot cocoa instead. We can always come back later," she continued.

"Yup."

On their way over to the four concessions carts that had been put up next to the self-defense display, Xandra's nape hairs suddenly stood on edge. She began to look around to see what had caused it, but she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

Shrugging, she moved to the end of the line of kids waiting for a mug of hot cocoa.

"Hi, Xena and Gabrielle! Fabulous costumes!" the fifteen-year old Louise Hoffman said from her position behind the cocoa cart.

"Thanks, Louise. Your clown suit is great, too. You're actually the first who know who we are," Gail said with a broad smile.

"Oh, I used to watch that show all the time a couple of years ago. I loved it... but it got so dark and violent in the last couple of seasons," Louise said as she opened a tap on the machine to make the hot, sweet liquid run into a styrofoam cup.

"I wouldn't know. My moms will only let me watch a handful of episodes past the first two seasons," Gail said and took the steaming mug.

"How are your moms, anyway?"

"Oh, they're fine, thanks."

"That's great to hear. So, Gail Pendergast... mmmm," Louise said as she ran her finger down a list. "Oh, there you are. I have you down for a free mug of cocoa. If you want another, it'll be fifty cents," the young woman continued and made a little check mark next to Gail's name.

"Thanks, Louise," Gail said and moved away from the cart so Xandra could get her cocoa.

At once, Louise began to fill another styrofoam cup, and before long, she handed it to Xandra after making a check mark next to 'Xandra Collings'.

While she was blowing on her cocoa to get it to cool off, Xandra looked around, casually studying the other people there.

On the sidewalk, four zombies were shuffling down Willow Lane, laughing and joking with each other with their arms stretched out ahead of them; two young girls dressed like ballerinas were accompanied by their mother; a girl in a Captain Jack Sparrow outfit was talking loudly to a Mummy and a cowgirl... and in the shadows, watching everything quite keenly, was a Count Dracula.

Xandra scrunched up her face as she studied the man in the vampire costume. She came to the conclusion that there was something odd about the person, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was.

As she was sipping her cocoa, the person began to walk slowly down Willow Lane, headed for Crawley Lane - apparently following the girl in the Jack Sparrow costume.

"Gabrielle...?"

"Yeah?" Gail said and turned back from the self-defense display.

"See that man in the Bacchae cloak?" Xandra said and pointed.

"Yeah?"

"Does he look suspicious to you?"

"Mmmm... he doesn't look like any of the chaperones, but I suppose he could be... oh, if I could only see his face!"

"Exactly."

"Sorry?"

"You can't see his face because he's always moving in the shadows," Xandra said and took a swig from her hot cocoa.

"So?"

"I think it could be our first real, live Bacchae."

Gail gasped and took a big gulp of the cocoa to soothe her nerves. When the hot liquid reached the back of her throat, her eyes popped wide open, but with a bit of an effort, she managed to swallow the mouthful without too much drama.

Coughing, she shook her head and wiped her suddenly moist eyes. Taking pity on her best friend, Xandra patted Gail's back a couple of times to help her.

"Th-thanks... what do you mean a real, live Bacchae?"

"Look at him, Gabrielle. He's preying on Jack Sparrow."

"You could be right. They're headed for Crawley Lane. What should we do...? Should we tell your Dad?"

"No, he'll only laugh at us. Gabrielle, we have to deal with it ourselves."

"Our-s-selves...?"

"Yes. I'll sneak after the Bacchae. Please go look for Joxer and follow me as soon as you've found him."

"B-but..."

"Xena did this all the time, remember? We'll be fine, Gail. Come on, it's only Halloween once a year," Xandra said, putting her hand on Gail's arm.

"A-all right. I'm an Amazon Princess. I can deal with Bacchae," Gail said and clutched her foam Amazon staff.

Draining her cocoa, Gail threw the styrofoam cup in the garbage bin and turned around to talk to Xandra, but the dark-skinned girl had already crossed the street and was moving quickly but stealthily after the mysterious man in the Count Dracula costume.

Gail took a deep breath and let it out slowly through her teeth. *'Well be fine. Xandra is strong and tough... she'll protect us from the blood-sucking, child-eating Bacchae,'* she thought, holding her foam staff ready.

"Where did Xandra go?" a strong adult voice said right next to Gail, making her scream and flail her arms in the air. As she did so, she lost the grip on her bag of candy and several sweets flew out of it and landed all over the street.

"Aw, Jeez... I'm sorry, Gail," Frank Collings said and immediately went to work picking up the errant sweets.

"Th-thanks, Mr. Collings. Uh... uh, Xandra just spotted someone suspicious and she set off after him."

"Someone suspicious? Heh, everyone here looks suspicious. Just now, the Grim Reaper, Billy the Kid and Doctor Frankenstein's monster were interested spectators at my self-defense class."

"Xandra thought she saw a Bacchae."

"Uhhh...? Oh, that's from Xena, right? Like a vampire?" Frank Collings said and dumped the errant sweets back down into Gail's bag.

"Uh-huh. He looked really creepy. He had a black cloak covering his face and Xandra said that he was following a girl," Gail said, unwrapping a caramel.

"Oh, really?" Frank Collings said, suddenly sounding very much like a police officer. "Gail, if you happen to meet him again, please come back here and tell me where he is so I can see for myself. I'll be at the marquee or the concessions carts all evening."

"Yefff, Mifffter Collingfff. We'll do that. I promifffe," Gail said, chewing on the caramel.

"Good. I better get back to the display. Talk to you later, Gail. Good luck with your Trick or Treating," Xandra's Dad said, giving Gail a thumbsup.

"Fffankfff, Mifffter Collingfff."

'All I need now is Joxer. Where could he be?' Gail thought and started looking around for Jonas.

A few minutes later, Gail spotted Jonas' easily recognizable helmet in the queue for the hot cocoa and she strode over there with determined steps.

"Joxer, we don't have time to eat now. Xena is off on a dangerous mission and she needs our help!"

"But... my cocoa!"

"You can have it later. Right now, Xena needs us," Gail said and tugged at Jonas' arm to get him to leave the queue. Sighing deeply, he eventually agreed and started shuffling away from the concessions carts in a rather dejected fashion.

"She's found a Bacchae," Gail whispered.

Mid-step, Jonas stopped walking and spun around on his heel, but Gail grabbed his arm again and forced him to go in the other direction.

"This isn't the time for a crisis, Joxer. Xena helped us with the bullies before, now it's our turn to help her. That's what Gabrielle and Joxer always do, remember?" Gail said and hooked her arm inside Jonas' so he couldn't run off again.

"Uhhh... I guess," he whined, but kept walking.

._*_*._

Applying all of Xena's many skills, Xandra kept following the mysterious man in the black cloak. The man had turned around a few times, almost like he was sensing her, but Xandra was sure he hadn't spotted her yet.

After walking two-thirds down Crawley Lane, the man got off the sidewalk and crossed over a gravelly lot in front of the house all the local kids called the 'ghost house' - an old, rundown, two-story villa that was missing at least two dozen roof tiles and where several of the windows on the first floor were broken.

Xandra stayed in the shadows, watching the man go around the back of the house and out of sight. Remembering that the adults had called it an eye-sore and a firetrap, and that she had seen a police car parked in front of it on at least one occasion, Xandra started connecting the dots in her mind.

As she was thinking, she absentmindedly reached into her candy bag and found a piece of wrapped chocolate. While she was looking down to unwrap it, the man came back out from behind the house holding a small, white bucket. A few moments later, the man descended a flight of stairs and locked himself into the house's cellar.

After putting the chocolate in her mouth, she let it melt on her tongue and enjoyed the rich, sweet taste of the strawberry-flavored jam in the center. Looking around, she could easily spot Jonas and Gail come closer and after giggling a little bit at their rock-scissors-paper playing antics, she hurriedly chewed on the remains of the chocolate and moved out into the light so her friends could see her.

"Gabrielle! Joxer! I'm here!" Xandra whispered, waving her hand at her two friends.

Gail waved back and then set off running, clutching her Amazon fighting staff and her bag, making sure that the candy didn't fall out again. Behind her, Jonas ran, too, although more sedately.

"Xena... did you find anything?" Gail whispered.

"Yes, I did. Look over there, the man went into the..."

"Ghost house!" Jonas said, followed by such a pronounced groan that Gail had to slap her hand across her face to stifle a laugh.

"I know, I know, Joxer, but I have a plan. We do what the real Xena and Gabrielle would've done... we'll be encogno... no, incogti... uh, we'll try to blend in," Xandra said.

"How?" Gail said, looking with great trepidation at the foreboding house across the street.

"We'll start Trick or Treating at the house we're at right now and move back towards Willow Lane. That way, we can get our bags filled and approach the ghost house without attracting attention to ourselves."

"That's a good plan, Xena," Gail said with an approving nod.

"Good. Let's start. Remember, act like yourselves. And Joxer..."

"Yes?"

"Don't stare at the house. If they're watching us, they'll work out at once what we're trying to do."

"Uh... right. I'll try," Jonas said and reluctantly looked away from the old, scary house.

Ten houses later - six friendly families, three sourpusses and two who pretended not to be home even though they had a light on in the living room - Xandra, Gail and Jonas arrived back at the ghost house.

"Now what?" Gail asked in a whisper.

"Well... I'm... I'm still working on that part," Xandra said, suddenly not so sure about what to do next. She reached into her nearly-full bag of candy to try to find another of the strawberry and chocolate delights, but she seemed to have a bag full of liquorice sticks.

"Anybody wanna trade a couple of liquorice sticks for some chocolate? I don't like liquorice," Xandra said, holding up a few of the sweets.

"I'll trade! I love liquorice!" Jonas said enthusiastically, rummaging around his bag for some chocolate. When he finally found a few pieces, he gave them to Xandra and snatched the sticks from her fingers.

"Thanks, Joxer. Now, the plan. We can't go up to the front door, they'll kidnap us for sure... but we can-"

"Kidnap?!" Joxer and Gail said as one, but Xandra immediately put up her hands to calm her friends down.

"Sorry, wrong word. They'll kick us out for sure."

"Oh..."

"So instead of doing that, we should try to see what's in their cellar," Xandra said and pointed at the stairwell next to the house.

"Phhhhat phffounfff dangeroufff," Jonas said around a mouthful of liquorice stick.

"No more dangerous than what the real Xena, Gabrielle and Joxer went through week after week. I say we do it. Gail?"

"And you're sure it won't be dangerous?" Gail said; her voice suddenly developing a whiny undertone.

"Well, I can't promise anything. But it'll be a great adventure. Just like in the show when Xena and Gabrielle entered the Bacchae's lair. Remember that episode?" Xandra said, nodding.

"No... I think that's one of the episodes my moms won't let me see," Gail said quietly.

"I remember! I couldn't sleep for two nights afterwards!" Jonas said, swallowing the remains of the liquorice stick with an audible gulp.

"Oh... uh. Well, it'll be a great adventure. Are you with me?"

"I'm with you, Xena," Gail said, clutching her Amazon staff.

"Let's go," Xandra said and rapidly ran across the street, headed for the rear side of the ghost house.

A few minutes later, the three of them were standing at the foot of the staircase trying to peek through a window next to the door to the cellar, but the panes were so filthy it was impossible to see through them.

"Nah, can't see anything. Why don't we just try the door?" Jonas said and reached for the handle, but Xandra intercepted his hand before he could touch it.

"We can't do that, Joxer. That would be breaking and entering. The real Joxer is a hero. He would never, ever do that."

"Oh... you're right."

"Let's go 'round the back. Maybe they have some cleaner windows over there...?" Gail said.

"Good idea."

At once, the trio of friends crept back up the stairs and moved towards the rear side of the house.

The backyard proved to be even more scary than the front lawn with deep shadows everywhere and a breeze constantly rustling the leaves and branches of the tall trees lining the boundary between the houses - and if that wasn't bad enough, the light was very scarce, forcing Xandra, Gail and Jonas to tread very carefully.

"By the Gods, this is scary," Gail said in a trembling voice, staring intently at the dark ground ahead of her feet.

"Y-y-y-y-yeah," Jonas said from somewhere ahead of her. "I think this was a bad..." he continued, but his voice was suddenly drowned out by the sound of creaking wood.

"Joxer! Stop!" Xandra's commanding voice said in the darkness, but it was already too late - moments later, the ground they were walking on collapsed in a cacophony of creaks and groans.

"XEEEEEEEEENAAAAAAAAAAAAA!" Gail howled as she found herself falling into a black hole after the ground beneath her feet had disappeared.

"AAAAAAAAAHHHH!" Jonas screamed on his way down. Moments later, his fall was broken by a dusty, old mattress that cushioned most of the blow - but a split second further on, Gail landed next to him, making the mattress bounce hard. The unexpected movement sent Jonas flying onto the concrete floor of the cellar, stirring up a cloud of dust on his second landing in as many seconds.

"Oh..." he groaned as he sat up, rubbing his sore butt and legs.

"Xena...?" Gail said before coughing hard from all the dust they had kicked up.

"I'm here, Gabrielle. Wow, that was just like the episode where Xena and Gabrielle fell into a hole and wound up in that weird place with the crazy Yoga instructor," Xandra said from the other side of the dark room they had suddenly found themselves in.

"It was dangerous is what it was! You said it wouldn't be!"

"I'm sorry. Are you all right, Gail?"

"I'm fine, I'm... my... my ca... where's my candy...? I'VE LOST MY BAG OF CANDY!" Gail howled loud enough to wake the dead.

"Oh... I'll come over to you and help you find it. Don't go anywhere. Okay?"

"I can't see you, Xandra, and you can't see me so how are you gonna find me? And we're stuck here! Stuck, I tell you! Oh, I've lost all my candy and we're never gonna get home and my moms are gonna cry so much and I'm never gonna get to watch the season six episodes and... hey, is that a lightbulb?"

"Where?"

"Over there on the wall."

"Where, 'over there'?"

"Right over here," Gail said and tugged on a chord for a wall-mounted lightbulb. Once she released the chord, the light came on, revealing the sorry state of the room they were in.

"Wow..." Gail said as she looked around the wrecked basement. It appeared to be a storage room with several large wardrobes and roll-front cabinets, piles of mattresses and several stacks of heavy-looking cardboard boxes that almost reached the ruined ceiling of the room. Two of the boxes had been knocked to the floor by the collapsing beams; torn apart by their own weight, they revealed piles of old newspapers and magazines.

"Why would anyone have a basement outside of the house...?" Xandra said, scratching her hair.

"Dunno," Gail said with a shrug.

Jonas dusted off his once-pristine costume and limped over to the nearest of the two torn cardboard boxes. Bending down, he picked up a newspaper and took a look at it.

"May seventeenth, 1897...?" he said, staring in disbelief at the headlines.

"You must be reading it wrong, Joxer. I'll bet it's 1987..." Xandra said and walked over to stand next to Jonas. "No, it actually is 1897... wow," she continued, peeking over the tall boy's shoulder.

"That's nearly a hundred and fifteen years ago... I wonder why they've kept that old stuff..." Gail said, still searching for her bag of candy. When she finally found it, her shoulders slumped and she let out a long sigh when she realized that the bag had a big tear in it - all the candy she had worked so hard to get had been scattered all over the filthy floor.

"Oh, no," she whispered to herself, sniffing. She felt a few tears sting her eyes and run down her cheeks, but she quickly wiped them clean with the sleeve of her body suit so her friends wouldn't see her crying.

"Hey, look, there's a door over there. Perhaps we can come up to the surface by going through the house," Xandra said, pointing at a door that had previously been hidden in the darkness.

"Going through the ghost house... are you nuts?" Jonas whined; his voice climbing in pitch as he spoke the sentence.

"This is just an old house, Joxer. It'll be fine. Gail?" When Xandra didn't get a reply, she turned her head and looked at her best friend. "Oh, Gail, what's going on? Are you scared?" she said as she noticed the young blonde sniffing.

"No... no, it's not that. I've l-lost all my candy."

"Gabrielle, here. You can have my bag," Jonas said unprompted. Striding through the debris, he walked over to Gail and gave her his bag.

"Th-thanks, Jonas," Gail said and sniffed again.

"Maybe we can save some of it?" he said, looking down into the sorry remains of Gail's original plastic bag.

"No, I don't think so. Everything is so dusty here and there are cobwebs everywhere and... no. It's gone."

"I'm so sorry, Gail. It's all my fault," Xandra said sincerely from her position at the door.

"Can we please go home now? I miss my moms."

"Sounds like a great idea," Xandra said and twisted the old, rusty doorknob.

The door opened with an agonizing creak, revealing a room similar in size to the one they had fallen into. On the far wall of the new room, a very dark staircase led upwards, and it was possible to see a faint shimmer of light from the top of the stairs.

"Gabrielle, there's light in the distance. Looks like we're on the right track to escape the maze of the Minotaur," Xandra said and walked into the new room.

The second Xandra crossed over the threshold between the two rooms, a dry, rolling laugh echoed through the basement, seemingly coming from the floor above them.

"Did you hear that? That laugh?" she whispered, spinning around to look at her friends. The blank stare on both Jonas and Gail's face proved that they hadn't.

"L-laugh? N-no. I didn't hear anything. Nuh-uh," Gail said, shaking her head.

"My ears must be playing tricks with me. Let's move on."

The second room was sparsely furnished with only a few chairs and two benches placed up against the walls. Next to each chair stood a white bucket that was filled with a peculiar red liquid - and in the center of the room, covered by a layer of dust, was a rectangular box painted in a deep, shiny black with silvery highlights on the edges.

"What's that?" Jonas said, pointing at the strange object.

"I... I think I know what that is," Xandra said in a curiously muted voice.

"Well, what is it?" Gail said.

"It's a coffin."

The information took a few seconds to get through to Gail, but when it did, she slammed her eyes shut and clamped her hands over her ears.

"LA-LA-LA-LA! I CAN'T HEAR YOU!" she howled.

"We need to get outta here. Gail... Gail! Come on!" Xandra said and took Gail by the hand.

Moving as one, the trio started running towards the staircase but they had only covered a short distance when they came to a screeching halt, realizing with growing horror that someone was walking down the stairs, causing the steps to creak and groan.

As the dark figure stepped into the cone of light that came from the first room they had been in, Xandra, Gail and Jonas slowly moved backwards with bated breaths.

"Vat is zis noiz down here? Vat are you kids dooink here? Zis is private houz. Zis is *my* houz!" the man said in an unbelievably thick accent.

Once he had entered the light, they could see that it was a man of indeterminate age. His hair and eyes were very dark and they stood out sharply against his sickly pale skin that seemed waxen in the dim light. He was still wearing the black cape they had seen him in on the street, and underneath it, he was wearing a crimson vest, black pants and patent leather shoes.

"Some answers, pleaz?" the man said, folding his arms across his chest.

"We... we... we were just... we just thought... RUN!" Xandra said and bolted from the room and up the stairs. Accompanied by the sound of the elderly man howling in outrage in a foreign language, Jonas and Gail soon followed the dark-skinned girl up the stairs and into a living room of some kind.

"Over there! There's the door!" Xandra said, pointing at the main entrance.

Changing course in mid-step, Jonas nearly brought down Gail and himself as he stumbled over his own feet, but he just barely managed to keep his balance. Within a few seconds, the trio of friends found themselves on the sidewalk of Crawley Lane, running as fast as they could back towards Willow Lane.

Two minutes later, they tore around the corner and ran yelling and screaming towards the concessions carts and the group of people watching the self-defense display.

Alarmed by his daughter's screaming, Frank Collings quickly moved away from the display and intercepted the three hysterical kids. As he caught them, they started talking over each other, delivering a frenzied chatter that threatened to give him a migraine.

"Dad! - Mr. Collings! - Dad! You gotta come quick! - I lost my candy and we saw a coffin and there were... - Oh, God, it was so scary - We saw a vampire down at the ghost house! - And I hurt my knees and... - ... Buckets of blood everywhere and... - I think I peed my..."

"Slow down, slow down! I can't understand a word of what you're saying! One at a time, please! Xandra, what's going on?"

"Oh, Dad, we fell down into the basement of the ghost house and then we found a coffin and..."

"The old mansion down at the end of Crawley?"

"Y-yes!"

"Xandra, I've told you a million times not to go there! It's a firetrap!"

"I kn-know, Dad, but we did and we found a coffin in the basement... you gotta come and see for yourself! He's a vampire, I'm sure he is!"

"Who's a vampire?!"

"The man we s-saw earlier, Mr. Collings. The man in the b-black cloak. He s-surprised us while we were looking at his c-coffin and there were b-buckets of blood and..." Gail said, still clutching her foam Amazon staff with both hands.

"All right, that's another story entirely. Give me a few minutes and then Detective van Allen and I will go down there and check it out."

"Th-thank the Gods," Gail said, wiping her sweaty brow.

"By the way, have you seen Joseph Tomlinson tonight?" Frank Collings said on his way back to the concessions carts.

"Wh-what...? Who's Joseph Tomlinson...?" Xandra said, looking confused.

"Buzz Tomlinson, you know, sixteen years old, buzz cut..."

"We ran into him earlier. Why?"

"His mother has reported him missing," Xandra's dad said matter-of-factly.

Hearing that, Jonas' teeth started clattering in his mouth and he had to slam his jaws together to get them to stop.

"I th-th-think I n-n-need my f-f-free c-c-cocoa n-n-now," he said through his clenched teeth.

"I'll help you, Joxer," Gail said and put her hand on Jonas' elbow. Acting as each other's support, they walked rather shakily over to the cocoa cart where Louise was still serving the spectators.

Ten minutes later, Frank Collings and Jill van Allen, the female police detective who had helped him with the self-defense display, rang the ancient door bell that was placed on the wall next to the front door of the old mansion.

When they didn't get a response, Frank took a few steps back to look at the front of the house. Shaking his head, he put his cell phone back to his ear.

"Dispatch, did you get the owner's name yet?" he said into the phone.

'Stand by.'

"Yeah, yeah, I'm standing by."

"I'm going around the house to check the rear side," Jill van Allen said, turning on a flashlight.

"Good idea. I'll wait here."

'Detective Collings, the owner of 15 Crawley Lane is one Florian Dumitrescu, age seventy-seven.'

"Copy that, dispatch."

After closing his cell phone and putting it in his trouser pocket, Frank moved back to the front door and knocked hard several times.

"Mr. Dumitrescu, open up. It's the police!"

A bobbing cone of light on the ground heralded Jill's return, and as she walked up to stand next to Frank, she hooked the flashlight onto her belt and whistled through her teeth.

"Whoa, your daughter and her friends were really lucky. There's a huge hole in the ground back there. I can't see much down in the basement, but I'm quite sure there isn't any coffin or anything like that."

"Yeah... I guessed as much."

Just when Frank had arrived at the conclusion that his daughter had dreamt it all up, the door creaked open to reveal a creepy-looking man in a black cloak.

"Yez?"

Much like his daughter had done earlier, Frank took an involuntary step back when he laid eyes on the cloaked figure.

"Uh, Mr. Dumitrescu?"

"Zat is I."

"We're Detectives Collings and van Allen. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Kvestions?"

"Yes. If you don't mind?"

"But... now?"

"Yes, please."

"Well... all right. Come in," Florian Dumitrescu said and stepped aside to let the two detectives into his house.

._*_*._

"What do you think is going on down at the ghost house, Xandra?" Gail said, warming her hands on a steaming hot mug of cocoa.

"I don't know, Gabrielle. I'm sure Hercules has everything under control."

"Hercules?"

"My Dad is big and strong like Hercules. Besides, he loves that show."

"Really?"

"Yup. Where's Joxer?"

"He's being comforted by Louise," Gail said, taking a swig from her cocoa.

"Listen, Gail, I'm sorry I got you into this mess. I just wanted a little adventure," Xandra said and put a hand on Gail's elbow.

"That's okay, Xena. Nothing can separate Xena and Gabrielle, right?"

"Right!"

._*_*._

"Mr. Dumitrescu, how do you explain that thing?" Frank Collings said, pointing at the shiny black coffin in the basement.

"Look, meester detektive. I'm an illusionist. Zis vaz all part of my akt. Yez, zis a coffin, but wiz a falz floor. I'm old and retired but I've kept all my old props. For sentimental reasons, you understand."

"Really?"

"Yes, yes! Zis is even my old costume," Florian Dumitrescu said and held out his cape.

"What's in these buckets?"

"Feik blood. For ze akt."

"The what? The act?"

"Yes, for ze akt. I'm tryink to get my akt on ze Internet. You know, pay-per-view!"

"Uhhhh, right," Frank said and took notes in a notebook. While he was busy writing, Jill cleared her throat and stepped forward.

"Mr. Dumitrescu, you do understand that your house is very old and is in dire need of repair? Three children fell down into your basement tonight because the ceiling was rotten," she said, resting her hands on her utility belt.

"Yes, yes, I understand. But I have no money for repairs."

"If those three children had been injured, you would've been in very serious trouble."

"I understand, detektive! I'm not suffer dementia yet. I do not vant to see children hurt but children shouldn't be in back garden. Vhy children come here now anyvay? They never come in the daytime. Except when they breaks my vindovz. I love children. I used to make children smile and laugh viz my akt!" Florian Dumitrescu said in a very bitter voice, stomping his foot down on the dusty cellar floor.

"Well, in any case, you need to get that hole in the backyard fixed, Mr. Dumitrescu. We'll come back in thirty minutes and cordon off the back yard with some demarcation tape," Frank said and closed his notepad.

"All raight."

._*_*._*

"Gail Pendergast, WHAT is going on here?" a penetrating female voice said, cutting through the din at the concessions carts like a knife.

A group of parents and children waiting in line at the cocoa cart parted like the Red Sea to reveal a guilt-ridden Gail clutching her foam Amazon staff and the bag of candy Jonas had given her.

"I'm s-sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to. It all just sort of happened and we..."

Eve Pendergast held up her hands to stop her daughter before she could start one of her patented spate of words.

"Ten minutes ago, I got a phone call from Frank Collings telling me that you, Xandra and Jonas had been in an accident. Will you please tell me what happened?" Eve said and closed the distance to her daughter. She put her arm around her daughter's shoulders and gave her a little hankie to wipe her eyes with.

"We fell into the cellar of the ghost house," Gail said quietly, dabbing her moist eyes.

"Down at the end of Crawley Lane?"

Gail nodded.

"Oh, honey, Janet and I have told you several times not to go there. Actually, we've begged you not to go there. Why were you there?"

"We were following a man... someone in a black cloak. Xandra thought he might be a Bacchae and..."

"A Bacchae?" Eve said flatly.

"Y-yes. It's... it's a long story, Mom."

"It must be. And I can't wait to hear it... in five minutes' time, back at our dinner table."

"Oh, Mom, can't I just..."

"Out of the question, young lady," Eve said sternly.

"Mrs. Pendergast?" a male voice said behind Eve and Gail, making the two women turn around to see who it was.

"Oh, hello, Mr. Collings. It's nice to see you. I just wish it could've been under better circumstances," Eve said and shook hands with Xandra's Dad.

"Likewise. Well, I'm afraid I have to claim some responsibility for what has happened here tonight. Your daughter mentioned to me that they had spotted a suspicious looking man following a young girl. I told her to report back to me in case they saw him again. Looks like they took it literally and went on a little field excursion."

"Oh..."

"A boy has been reported missing tonight, and I..."

"Oh!" Eve said, putting her hand across her mouth in shock.

"Yes, and I thought the two incidents might be connected. It's Joseph Tomlinson. He's still missing."

"He wasn't at the g-ghost house. Unless he was in the coff... " Gail said in a tiny voice, cutting herself off before her mother would find out about the coffin.

"No, he wasn't, Gail. That was only a prop for an act. Turns out Mr. Dumitrescu is a retired illusionist."

"A... a what? Is that dangerous?" Gail said, looking wide-eyed at her mother.

"No, it's just another word for magician, honey. Mr. Collings, perhaps we..."

"Please call me Frank."

"All right. Frank, in light of this development, perhaps we should let our children off with a stern warning this time. I'm quite sure they have learned a lesson. Right, Gail?" Eve said, fluffing her daughter's long hair and gently clawing her neck.

"Yes, Mom," Gail said, nodding several times.

"I think that's a good idea, Mrs. Pender..."

"Oh, please... it's Eve."

"Eve. You're right. I think a stern warning is a fitting punishment. Well, I better go and talk to Xandra. Please say hello to your lovely wife," Frank Collings said and offered Eve and Gail a little wave on his way over to his daughter.

"I will. You, too," Eve said and took Gail by the shoulders so she could speak with her face to face. "Honey... I know you want to say a proper good night to Xandra and Jonas. I'll go home now so you can do that. The eleven o'clock curfew is still in place, okay? It's twenty to eleven now," Eve continued.

"Okay, Mom. I won't be late."

"And Gail... don't go down there again. You'll make your moms very upset if you do, and I know you don't want that. You were very lucky tonight, but you know from Xena that luck can run out. Like when she was hit by that dart, remember?"

"I remember, Mom."

"Good. Do we have a deal?" Eve said and clawed Gail's cheek.

"We definitely have a deal."

A few minutes later, Gail walked over to Xandra who was holding a mug of cocoa her Dad had bought for her.

"Hi, Xandra."

"Hi. Boy, did we mess up tonight, huh?" Xandra said and took a swig from her cocoa.

"Did your father yell at you?"

"Not really, but I could tell he was disappointed."

"Mom was, too."

"Hi, warrior chums," Jonas said, waving at Gail and Xandra. As he walked towards them, they noticed that he was swinging a half-full bag of candy in his hand.

"Hi, Jonas. Where did you get that bag?" Xandra said and took another swig of the cocoa.

"Louise gave me some of her candy."

"Ohhhhh, did she? Sounds like you have a girlfriend, Joxer," Gail teased, but Jonas just shook his head.

"No, no, no, no, she's much too old for me. She's fifteen."

"Uh-huh?" Gail said, poking Jonas hard enough in the side to make the tall boy squeal and blush.

Almost unnoticeably, the trio had begun to inch closer to Crawley Lane - the draw of the old ghost house proving too much for them to resist.

"What do you think has happened to Buzz?" Xandra said when they were almost at the corner.

"I don't know. And I don't want to think about it," Gail said with a shiver.

"Maybe he was in the coff-"

"No, your Dad said he wasn't," Gail said quickly, interrupting Xandra before she could say the word.

"Why do we even worry about Buzz? He's always bullying us," Jonas said.

"Yes, that's true... but if it was you, wouldn't you like to be found?" Gail said.

"Uh... I guess."

Behind the three friends, a group of young children dressed as skeletons were playing noisily; running around in circles chasing after a Wolfman and a woman in a blood-stained nurse's costume, the kids seemed to be having a grand time.

"I know what Xena would do. She would go down to the ghost house and search for him," Xandra said and emptied her mug.

"WHAT?!" Jonas and Gail said as one.

"Like in the episode where Ares lost his sword and became mortal. Xena helped him even though they were enemies most of the time."

"Xandra, I'm really sorry. I can't go. My moms will be upset and I don't want that. I experienced that last year when I fell down a ladder and I never, ever want that to happen again," Gail said sincerely.

"I understand," Xandra said, nodding solemnly.

Suddenly Jonas' ears picked up a strange sound and he turned his head so he could look down Crawley Lane. "Was that a scream?" he said, but his two companions didn't hear him.

"And besides, I only have until eleven o'clock, and it's already..." - Gail pulled back her sleeve - "Ten to eleven. I'm really, really sorry, Xandra."

"It's okay. I understand. I guess Buzz will show up sooner or later."

Feeling unusually curious, Jonas started shuffling down Crawley Lane, trying to strain his hearing in case the strange sound returned.

"You're not mad, are you?"

"No, of course not, Gabrielle. Joxer... what are you doing?"

"I thought I heard a scream before."

"Well, sure, the young children around here scream all the time," Gail said.

"No, this was different."

"What was so special about it?" Xandra said, suddenly interested.

"I don't know... it just sounded real."

"Where did it come from?"

"Down there," Jonas said and pointed in the direction of the ghost house.

"No, no, no..." Gail said, shaking her head.

In the far distance, another scream was heard. Like Jonas had said, it sounded more urgent than the playful squeals produced by the children, and it sent a cold shiver running up and down Gail's back.

"I can't go with you. I don't want to make my moms upset!" Gail said. When Xandra and Jonas didn't reply, she started wringing her hands.

"Do you th-think it's the B-Bacchae eating B-Buzz?" Jonas said. Out of nowhere, his teeth had begun to clatter again, but unlike the first time, not even clenching his jaw could stop it.

"Yes, I think it is," Xandra said darkly.

Xandra's words made Gail stick her fingers in her ears and go "LA-LA-LA-LA! I CAN'T HEAR YOU!", but her words had no effect on her two friends. A few moments later, Xandra and Jonas looked at each other and then began to run down Crawley Lane.

Gail threw her hands in the air, sending a few of the sweets flying out of the bag. With a heartfelt groan, she clapped a hand over her eyes and shook her head repeatedly.

Already feeling guilty for leaving her friends to fight off the Bacchae on their own, she turned around and began walking back to her home. For each step she took, she felt worse and worse until her legs simply stopped walking, refusing to obey her commands.

Sighing, she rolled back the sleeve to check the time - five to eleven.

She tried to take her mind off the situation by looking at the other kids having fun, but all she could see was Xandra and Jonas fighting the Bacchae in its lair - not even the sight of a miniature Chewbacca playing with two Anakin Skywalkers and a Clonetrooper could cheer her up.

Looking up at the starry sky, she sighed again as she made up her mind. Clutching her foam Amazon staff hard, she spun around and began to run towards the corner of Willow and Crawley.

Behind her, Frank Collings looked up at the exact same moment that Gail ran down towards Crawley. Cocking his head, he put his hands on his hips and 'hmmmm'-ed thoughtfully.

"Jill, hold the fort for a while, will you? There's something I need to check," he said and put on a jacket.

"Sure, Frank. What's up?"

"Don't know yet."

Halfway down Crawley Lane, Gail spotted Xandra and Jonas waving at her from their hiding place behind a fence, and she picked up her pace to get to them sooner.

"I knew you'd be here, Gabrielle," Xandra said, wearing a broad smile.

"I didn't even know myself," Gail grumbled as she crouched down next to the dark-skinned girl.

"The screams are definitely coming from the ghost house," Jonas whispered.

"Joxer, when did you get so brave? I thought you'd be peeing your pants by now."

"Well, no, I visited the little boys' room while you were talking to your Mom..."

"That's not what I meant!" Gail whispered, thumping Jonas' shoulder with her fist.

Turning around, Xandra put her index finger across her lips and looked pointedly at Gail.

"Shhhh. Can you two please argue later?" she whispered sharply.

"There won't be a 'later' for me, Xena. My moms are going to ground me for ten years and they're gonna take away my DVDs and I'm never gonna be allowed to see the episodes from season four, five and six and..."

"Gabri-*elle*..."

"All right, all right."

Moments later, the silence was broken by another terrified scream that clearly came from the old mansion.

"By the Gods, that's Buzz's voice," Gail whispered hoarsely.

"Yeah. We know," Xandra said, rubbing her forehead.

"What are those filthy Bacchae doing to him?"

"Sucking his blood out through his neck. That's what they do. Didn't you see that episode where..." Jonas said, but a firm shake of the head by Xandra convinced him to keep quiet.

"No, I didn't! And now I never wanna!" Gail whispered, clutching her Amazon staff so hard that she nearly tore it in two.

"We need to go over there and help him," Xandra said matter-of-factly. Not even a second later, she got up and ran across the street.

Just when Xandra reached the sidewalk on the other side of the street, the large bells in the nearby church tower started ringing, marking eleven o'clock - eleven strokes that Gail knew would spell disaster for her.

Shaking her head slowly, she thought of the many bad things that would happen and the many heated words that would be spoken once she got home. She knew that both her moms would be very upset with her and she already dreaded the punishment.

"Look! Look!" Jonas shouted and started shaking Gail's shoulder. Snapping out of her dark thoughts, Gail looked up and followed Jonas' pointing finger - moments later, her eyes popped wide open and her jaw fell halfway down her chest.

"Oh, Sweet Aphrodite!" she exclaimed as she stared in wide-eyed terror at the scary sight: Dozens upon dozens of bats were flying out of every single broken window and missing roof tile of the old, decrepit mansion. Once the large flock of mammals were outside, they assembled into one, huge group and began to fly back and forth above the house in a perfect formation.

Squealing loudly, Xandra came tearing back across the street and dove for cover next to Gail and Jonas.

"Look at that! There must be dozens of 'em!" she said with barely hidden excitement.

"There must be hundreds!" Gail said, covering her eyes with her hands.

Several bats suddenly broke off from the main group and began to make strafing runs. Flying very fast a mere two feet off the ground, the bloodsucking mammals quickly swept through the area surrounding the mansion, seemingly searching for something - or someone.

The trio of friends behind the fence had a pretty good idea as to what the bats were looking for, and they moved as far down as they could, but even so, several of the strafing bats came uncomfortably close.

"Yikes! They must've been spooked by the church bells!" Xandra cried out, holding not only her sword but her plastic Chakram as well.

"Xandra?!" a male voice suddenly cried out not far from where the trio was hiding.

"Dad?" Xandra said and risked a quick peek over the fence. "Dad! Dad! We're here!" she continued, waving her plastic sword in the air to make sure the running man could see her.

Frank Collings changed direction and sprinted across a narrow lawn before he executed a perfect jump over the fence. Once he had landed on the other side, he crawled back to his daughter and her friends.

"Xandra Collings, you have a lot of explaining to do," he said sternly.

"I know, Dad. We heard some screams and we wanted to check it out."

"Xandra, you need to do better than that. Bats don't scream."

"No, but we definitely heard screams. Right?"

"Yes. I heard them first, Mr. Collings," Jonas said, nodding vigorously.

"Screams...? From the old mansion?"

"That's right."

At the exact same time, the door to the old mansion was flung open and a dark figure came running out, screaming at the top of his lungs in a high pitched voice, and flailing his arms madly in the air to get the bats off him.

"By the Gods!" Gail exclaimed loudly, peeking through her fingers.

"That's not the old man, that's Buzz!" Frank said and got up. In one, fluid motion, he ran across the street, scooped up the hysterical boy and carried him back to the hideout, dodging at least five strafing bats along the way.

Even after they had returned to safety, Buzz was screaming hysterically. He reeked of beer and cigarette smoke and his clothes were dotted with red stains.

"Is... is that human blood, Dad?" Xandra said, staring at the red spots on Buzz' shirt and jeans.

"No, it's fake. He must've been in the basement," Frank said after touching the stains.

"A coffin! There's a coffin in the basement!" Buzz screamed hysterically. He tried to get away from Frank's strong grip, but all he got out of it was that the police detective pinned him down even harder.

"Calm down, you big chicken!" Xandra mocked, making a face at Buzz.

"Shut up, dork! You didn't see what I saw! There's a coffin in the basement and the old man turned into a bat right in front of me and then he flew off with the other bats and then I wanted to get away and stumbled over a bucket of blood and-and-and...!"

"The old man did what? He turned into a bat?" Gail said, desperately trying to listen to Buzz, stick her fingers in her ears and cover her eyes at the same time.

"He turned into a bat! Right in front of me!"

"You've been drinking, right?" Xandra said, grinning.

"No, no... yes, but...!"

"All right, enough of this nonsense. First of all, if you call my daughter a dork again, you'll have to deal with me, get it?" Frank said harshly.

"Y-yes, sir."

"And secondly, your mother has been worried sick about you because you didn't come home. Now, she'll find you stinking of beer and cigarettes... have fun thinking about the consequences, Buzz."

"But..."

"The bats are going back inside!" Jonas said, once again pointing at the flying critters.

Everyone looked up and watched the large flock of bats fly back into the old mansion. A few bats were left outside, almost like they were covering the rear of the others, but they eventually flew inside, too.

"Thank the Gods," Gail said and drew a sigh of relief. Sitting up, she pinched the bridge of her nose and then stared at her two friends and the panicky Buzz with a look of disbelief on her face.

"That's it, I'm outta here!" Buzz said and got up. At first, he tried to wipe off some of the red stains on his jeans, but he soon gave up. With a snort, he set off running up Crawley Lane.

"Boy, have we seen some action tonight... Best Halloween I ever had," Xandra said, grinning from ear to ear.

"I don't know about that..." Jonas said with an audible gulp.

"Last Halloween I'll ever have..." Gail said and got up. She dusted off the seat of the rust brown skirt and started waiting for the inevitable - sure enough, both her moms were striding down Crawley Lane, looking very much like the vanguard of an all-conquering Amazon army.

Behind them, a host of parents and children were following in their wake, inexorably snared in by the screams and the creepy squealing of the many bats.

Gail's bottom lip started quivering, but Frank Collings put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry too much, Gail. I'll talk to your moms," he said and ran ahead to intercept the two women.

"I need to get home, too, Gabrielle," Jonas said and got up from their hiding place.

"Good night, Joxer. Maybe we'll see each other again when we're adults," Gail said, earning herself a faint smile from her two friends.

"Call me if you want to talk... well, unless your moms take away your phone privileges," Jonas said with a little wave. Pulling up in his pants, he began to shuffle up Crawley Lane with his bag of candy and his trusty plastic sword in his hand.

"Gail, no matter how long you're grounded, I'll come and visit you. Hey, it'll be just like when Xena and Gabrielle were undercover in Gurkhan's harem," Xandra said and put her hand on Gail's arm.

"Thanks, Xena... uh, who's Gurkhan?"

"Yes, exactly," Xandra said with a broad smile.

"Whut?"

"It's one of the season six episodes."

"Oh... I haven't watched those yet. And now I never will," Gail said. She turned her head and looked at her moms who were still talking with Xandra's dad.

A long, terrifying wait later that had left Gail a quivering mess, Eve and Janet Pendergast shook hands with Frank Collings and came over to stand next to their daughter and Xandra.

"Young lady, you're in big trouble," Eve Pendergast said.

"I know, Mom."

"You're grounded for a week."

"I knew it was a good idea to drag that heavy cardboard box up from the box room... oh, this is going to be so much fun," she said and threw herself onto her bed. The old springs creaked loudly, adding to the cozy atmosphere. The pajama top she was wearing crept up and she reached behind her to pull it down so she wouldn't get a cold back.

Grabbing a small remote from the night stand next to her bed, she turned on the stereo that was prominently placed in a book case on the other side of her bedroom. Soon, soft pop music filled the room and she began to hum along to it.

As she flipped through the pages, she giggled quite often as she looked at all the entries. Not only was her handwriting meticulous yet child-like, the various things she had done and the adventures she had hoped for when she was ten all seemed so far-fetched.

"Hey, Coco, remember this one? '*When I grow up, I want to be a princess.*' That's it. Not a word about which prince I need to marry first." - "or princess," Nicky added off-hand a few seconds later.

She leafed on, continuing to look at the pages of the diary.

"Oh, here's one from July 8th. '*I made Coco a drawing today. It was of Daddy's new car. I ran out of red crayon so I had to use a green instead even though Daddy's car is red. Coco didn't mind.*' Do you remember that car, Coco? I do. It was a piece of junk," she said with a laugh.

Behind her, her pajama top fluttered up, almost like a breeze had caught it. Sniggering, she reached behind her to pull it down, but when it fluttered up again at once, she climbed off the bed and went over to close the bedroom window.

Standing at the window, Nicky shivered slightly when she looked out onto the skyline of the metropolis. The sun was slowly setting and the lights were on in most of the skyscrapers surrounding her apartment building.

Twenty-two stories below her, the streets were bustling with activity. The tens of thousands of people on the sidewalks looked like ants running around in an anthill, and Nicky suddenly remembered a failed biology project from her school days that had involved an ant farm where the glass casing had developed a crack.

She sniggered again as she got a major case of the creeps. It felt like something - maybe an army of ants? - was slithering up the inside of both her thighs, so she reached down and scratched herself thoroughly through the pajama bottoms.

After closing the curtains, she returned to the bed, jumped back onto it and continued to leaf through the diary. Apparently caught by the slight breeze, the diary had turned itself onto a page where the ten-year old Nicky had drawn a black cross.

"Oh... August 2nd, 1999. That was the day Samantha died. Remember her, Coco? God, I cried for a month. That was so tragic and unfair... she was always so careful in traffic and then she, of all people, died after being mowed down in a hit-and-run. She was my best friend. We had so much fun together."

Nicky sighed deeply and tried to move on in the diary, but her enthusiasm had suffered from reading about the tragic event, and she closed the little book and put it back in the cardboard box.

After brushing her teeth, she came back into the bedroom and clicked off the ceiling light on her way over to the bed. Folding back the blanket, she sat down on the edge of the bed and picked up the teddy bear.

"Coco, isn't it weird to think that Samantha and I shared the same birthday? If she hadn't died, she would've turned twenty-two this year. Perhaps we would've gone to school together... perhaps we would've become roomies?" she said, caressing the well-chewed ear of the little, chocolate brown teddy bear she had affectionately, and spontaneously, dubbed Coco when she had got it for her fifth birthday.

Nicky put the teddy bear down in its customary place next to her pillow and then found the remote. After turning off the stereo, she got into bed and pulled up the covers. With a final look at the cardboard box that held her old diaries, she clicked off the lamp on her night stand and snuggled down between the sheets.

"You know, Coco... I think I had a crush on Samantha. Even though I wasn't sexually aware yet, I actually do think I had a crush on her. Mmmm. She was such a pretty girl. That's life, I guess. G'night, Coco. See you tomorrow," Nicky whispered into the darkness. With a sigh, she turned onto her left side to try to get some sleep.

Just after Nicky had fallen asleep, a gentle breeze caressed her cheek, making a few strands of her brown hair flow away from her eyes.

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'Saturday, February 26th 2011. Dear Diary.

I'm so excited! I finally did it. I finally asked Tina Dixon, the beautiful, gorgeous, wonderful girl I mentioned a few weeks ago, if she wanted to come over for a little snack or something and you know what? She said Y-E-S!!!!

She's coming tonight. Here. In my pad. God, I'm so excited you'd think I was fifteen years old all over again. I can't stop whispering her name. Tina Dixon. Her name is as gorgeous as she is. Oh, her eyes. Oh, her lips. Oh, her sexxy husky laugh ;)

I'm going to make this evening one we'll remember for the rest of our lives.

Nicky C.'

'Saturday, February 26th, addendum.

I'm swooning so badly over beautiful Tina that I forgot to mention what we were having: Chinese takeout (G).

Nicky C.'

Nicky dotted the I's and crossed the T's and then looked at the entry in her diary. Wearing a beaming smile, she nodded to herself and closed the small book. She leaned back on the chair she was sitting on at the dinner table and started humming one of the latest pop tunes, thinking about the evening's date.

Suddenly feeling inspired, she got up from the dinner table and walked over to the bookcase to get her sketch book. After leafing past half a dozen unfinished drawings of Tina Dixon, she finally found the one she had started a few days earlier. Squinting, she took a soft pencil from a small box and began to fill out the shadings on Tina's face and neck, using the shelf in the bookcase as a pad.

A few minutes later, a loud crash from the bedroom made Nicky jump. As her hand jerked, she smeared a fat pencil line directly across Tina's neck.

"Oh, no... aw, damn," she said as she tried to remove the line with the eraser at the tip of the pencil. When it only made the line worse, she growled and slammed the sketch book down onto the shelf.

She spun around and stomped into the bedroom to see what had fallen down so she could wreak revenge on it for making her ruin the drawing, but she never made it further than the doorway. As she was looking around the bedroom, she realized that nothing was out of place and she started scratching her neck and biting the inside of her cheek.

"Hey, Coco, did you hear a weird noise just now? Something made a loud crashing sound... but everything's all right in here," Nicky said to the teddy bear on the bed.

"Maybe a bird hit my window?" she said and walked over to it. After inspecting the window pane thoroughly, she discarded that idea as well.

"Well, whatever it was, it's gone now. Ruined a fabulous drawing of Tina," Nicky said and picked up the teddy bear. She pretended to tickle its stomach with her thumbs and then caressed its ears.

"You stand guard, OK? I'm trusting you, Coco. You're my little bodyguard. If you hear anything, just yell," Nicky said and brought the teddy bear up to her lips. After placing a tiny kiss on the bear's sown-on lips, she gave the soft toy a little hug and then put it back down on the bed next to the pillow.

Walking back into the living room, Nicky sat down at the dinner table and took the diary.

'Saturday, February 26th, second addendum.

Heard another of those strange noises today. This time, it sounded like glass breaking in the bedroom. But when I got there, there wasn't anything wrong.

I asked Coco to stand guard. Nobody can get past Mr. Grrrrrrizly :D

Nicky C.'

As she put the diary away for the third time in the last fifteen minutes, she glanced at her wristwatch.

"Oh! I need to get ready. Gorgeous Tina will be here in... two hours twenty-five minutes. Just enough time to vacuum and do the dishes," she said to no one in particular. Getting up, she went into the hallway to retrieve the vacuum cleaner from a small cupboard.

Behind her, and without warning, the sketch book tipped over and disappeared down behind the bookcase.

While Nicky was doing the dishes - from the last two weeks judging by the amount of filthy plates - her cell rang in the living room. She quickly pulled the plug out of the kitchen sink and wiped off her hands before she ran into the living room and threw herself onto her second-hand leather couch.

"It's Nicky!"

'Hey, Nicky, it's Tina.'

The moment Nicky heard Tina's husky voice, her body filled with a very pleasant warmth, and she pulled her legs up underneath her and started playing with a pillow.

"Hey, Tina," she said, drawing out the words. Her fingers started caressing the pillow, pretending that it was Tina's bare skin.

'We agreed on eight o'clock, right?'

"That's right. And we're gonna call for some Chinese."

'Chinese, yeah. I love Chinese.'

"Me, too."

'Do you want me to bring a bottle of wine or something?'

"Umm... no, I've got beer and sodas and stuff. We should have enough."

'Oh, OK. I'm really looking forward to it.'

"Me, too, Tina. Me, too," Nicky said and placed the pillow between her legs, thinking very hard about what it would be like if it was the warm, lively Tina instead of a cold, dead pillow.

'See you then, Nicky.'

"See ya. Bye," Nicky said and hung up. She put the cell back on the coffee table and then leaned back so she was resting her head on the armrest. She closed her eyes and soon began to hum as she thought about what the evening might bring.

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A quarter to seven, Nicky undressed and went into the bathroom. Looking at herself in the mirror, she couldn't stop a cheeky grin from spreading out over her features.

"Nicky, baby, tonight's the night. Tonight, Tina Dixon will come here. To my pad. She'll place her gorgeous butt in my couch and... Ohhh, I can't wait," Nicky said and grinned again.

The smile slowly faded from her lips when it dawned on her that the girl she'd had a hard crush on for six straight weeks would arrive in an hour and fifteen minutes. Swallowing a nervous lump in her throat that had come out of nowhere, she observed herself in the mirror.

She knew that she had a pretty face; her high cheekbones, pale gray eyes and delicate lips saw to that, but even so, she suddenly had a hard time understanding that she had actually been successful in luring Tina Dixon over to her apartment.

"Nicky, this isn't the time to get nervous. You need to be suave. Cool. A woman of the world. In total control. If you're cool, everything's gonna be all right," Nicky said to the reflection in the mirror. With a nod, she took out the band that held her pony tail in place, fluffed her hair and pulled the shower curtain aside so she could step into the cabin.

After getting soaked by the hot water, she picked up the shampoo and began to distribute it all over her body. Soon, she was so busy applying the soap that she didn't notice the shower curtain briefly fluttering aside.

As Nicky let the sponge glide up and down her arms, her torso and her legs, she felt a slight breeze caress her body, almost like the small ventilation fan on the wall of the bathroom had started on its own.

She stopped what she was doing and peeked out through the shower curtain, careful not to slip on the smooth surface. She looked up at the fan but noticed at once that it was still turned off.

She briefly furrowed her brow, but soon shrugged and went back into the shower cabin. Taking a handful of soap, she started to wash her face and her neck.

While she was still blinded by the suds, she suddenly felt another body standing right behind her, pressing itself up against her bare back. Moments later, she could feel something caress her stomach.

Shrieking, she moved forward and crouched down like she'd been taught so she'd present a smaller target to the assailant. When the eerie sensations didn't go away, she frantically reached above her, searching for the shower head.

Moments later, her fingers finally touched the cold metal and she yanked the head out of the holder and wielded it as a weapon.

"I'll use it! I swear to God I'll use it!" she yelled. The threat seemed to do the trick because the sensations she had felt on her stomach and back disappeared instantly.

Wiping the suds out of her eyes with her hand, she turned around only to discover that she was alone in the shower. The soap made her eyes sting terribly and forced her to squint and blink a lot, so she turned the water back on to wash it out of her eyes.

With her heart still beating wildly, she tore the shower curtain to a side and stared out into the bathroom only to find that it was empty, too. Still dripping wet, she took her towel and wrapped it tightly around her body.

She moved over to the door to the hallway and peeked out. Nothing seemed untoward, but she held a hairbrush ready in case someone jumped her. She couldn't hear any unusual sounds, footsteps or breathing, and after a minute, she came to the conclusion that the incident had only been in her mind.

Deciding that it wasn't necessary to wash her hair, she closed the door and moved over to the mirror on slightly unsteady legs.

Looking at herself, she rued the decision to undress in the bedroom - now she had to walk naked through the apartment to get to her clothes. After taking a few deep breaths, she unwrapped the towel and began to dry herself.

"Gawd, Nicky... I shouldn't have watched Evil Dead for lunch after all..." she whispered to her own reflection.

Leaving the bathroom, she hurried through the hallway and into the bedroom. Once there, she let out a sigh of relief and quickly put on her underwear, a tank top and a pair of jeans.

"Coco, some bodyguard you turned out to be! You were supposed to alert me in case something happened!" she yelled to the teddy bear as she brushed her hair and pulled it back into a pony tail.

"Jesus, that was scary... my hands are still trembling," she said and folded them across her stomach.

She took another couple of deep breaths to get her nerves to settle down, and then went over to her bed to put on her socks.

"It's all in the mind. No panic. If Tina sees me freaking out like this, she'll spin around on her heel. It's all in the mind... I can't panic now," Nicky chanted. She put on her wristwatch and noticed that more time had passed than she had expected.

"Damn, I need to get ready. Ummm, sorry for yelling at you, buddy. I just got freaked 's all," she said and tickled the teddy bear on the stomach. Just as Nicky did so, one of the bed's springs groaned, making her nape hairs stand on edge.

"That's it! No more Evil Dead. Tomorrow, I'm throwing that damn DVD away," she said and got off the bed so she could move on in her busy schedule.

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When the intercom crackled to life at five minutes past eight, Nicky jumped up from the couch and raced out into the hall.

"Yes?" she said after pushing her thumb against a small, red button on the panel.

'It's Tina. Open Sesame?'

"Consider yourself buzzed in. Wait in the hall, I'll be right down for you," Nicky said and depressed the button that activated the buzzer on the front door.

'You betcha.'

Squealing loudly, Nicky let go of the button for the intercom, grabbed her keys, stepped into a pair of trainers and left her apartment in a hurry.

Three agonizingly long minutes later, she exited the elevator and found herself face to face with Tina Dixon.

"Hey, Nicky," Tina said. The young woman was wearing white-and-blue Nikes, a pair of black skinny jeans, a black tank top and a navy blue cotton windbreaker. Her dark hair had two deep purple stripes in it, and up close, it was possible to see that she had applied a thin eyeliner around her almond-colored orbs.

"Heeeeeey, Tina," Nicky said, drawing out the word for so long that she ended up feeling like a complete idiot. She felt her cheeks start to burn and when Tina sent her a sweet smile, her condition was acutely worsened.

With a nervous chuckle, Nicky spun around and pressed the button for the elevator. It hadn't left in the time they had been talking, so the doors opened at once.

Once Tina and Nicky were safely inside the elevator, Nicky pressed the button for the twenty-second floor and watched the metal doors close.

"You look great today," Tina said, putting her hands into her jeans pockets.

The compliment went straight to Nicky's heart and she couldn't stop a nervous giggle from escaping her lips. She opened her mouth to thank Tina, but the sounds that came across her lips were closer to a strangled croak than a 'thank you'. She quickly clenched her teeth so she wouldn't accidentally say anything embarrassing and settled for nodding and smiling at Tina.

"No, I mean it. Those Chinos look fantastic on you."

"Th-Thanks. You look great, too," Nicky managed to say, secretly quite proud over the compliment. She ran her hands down the outside of the pant legs, thinking about what it was that Tina liked about them.

It had taken her nearly twenty-five minutes to decide on what to wear, but she had finally chosen a pair of low waist khaki chinos, a narrow, braided leather belt and a brand new blood red t-shirt with the black-and-white logo of the alternative rock band The Bleeding Angels and the their latest tour dates on it.

"Thanks. Man, this elevator is old. It hasn't been serviced since... wow, nearly three years ago," Tina said, looking at the note next to the panel with the buttons.

"Yeah, I know. We've tried so many times to tell the Super that it needs to be fixed, but he claims he can't do anything without some kind of... I don't know, something. Whatever," Nicky said, listening to the old elevator creaking and groaning on its way up to the twenty-second floor.

"God... imagine if the elevator car fell down with someone in it? They'd be crushed. They'd turn into chunky strawberry jam in an instant!" Tina said in an exaggerated stage whisper.

"Uh, yes. I've thought about that. Often. Every single time I use it, actually. Can we please talk about something else?"

"Sure. Sorry, didn't mean to scare ya," Tina said and put her hand on Nicky's arm. It only lingered there for a second, but it was enough to send a wave of electric currents through Nicky's system, and she chuckled nervously all over again.

"It's all right. Oh, Thank God, here we are."

Nicky quickly exited the elevator, followed slightly more sedately by Tina. After they had walked through the hall, Nicky inserted the key into the lock on her front door and pushed it open to let Tina in.

"Welcome to my pad, Tina."

"Thank you."

"You can put your jacket on the hall-stand if you want to. I'll find the takeout menu so we can order. Li Wong's is a great place, but they can be kinda slow."

"OK."

As Nicky walked through the hallway and into the living room, Tina admired the way Nicky's hips made the tight chinos move. Grinning, she reached for a coat hanger.

'Leeeeeeeeeeeave,' an ethereal voice whispered, seemingly coming from everywhere at once. Even as the word was still being said, something resembling a groan and a heavy breath echoed through the hallway.

Tina's eyes grew wide and she spun around to see if Nicky was playing a trick on her as a comeback for what she had said in the elevator. When she discovered that Nicky was still in the living room, she felt her nape hairs stand on edge and she gripped the coat hanger hard.

Not wanting to be alone, Tina quickly put the coat hanger back on the hall-stand and hurried into the living room.

"Did you hear that?" she said in a harried voice.

"Wh-what?"

"Someone said 'leave!'"

"When?"

"Just now!"

"I didn't hear anything," Nicky said and got up from the chair she had been sitting on.

"Someone said 'leave' and it was as clear as day. Jesus!" Tina said and leaned against the wall.

Nicky went into the hallway and looked around. She bit her lip as she considered telling Tina about the incident in the shower. Suddenly, she was able to hear some voices yelling from the apartment above her.

"Oh...! Oh, I know what that was. It's my upstairs neighbors, the Mortons. They always fight on Saturday evenings," Nicky said as she walked back into the living room.

"Y-your upstairs neighbors...? OK... wow. That scared the shit outta me," Tina said, as pale as a sheet. She wiped her brow with a shaking hand and took off her windbreaker.

"Let me take that. I think I have a gremlin living in the ventilation system, actually. Sometimes, when the wind is right, I'm able to hear exactly what some of my neighbors are saying. It's really annoying," Nicky said and went back out in the hallway. She put Tina's jacket on the coat hanger and then stopped to listen. When she wasn't able to hear anything, she shrugged and walked back to her date.

"I have the menu for Li Wong's right here. We better order... if... if you still want Chinese...?" Nicky said, suddenly worried that the spooky goings-on had scared Tina off for good.

"Uh, I'd, uh... I'd still like some Chinese, Nicky," Tina said and sat down on the couch.

"All right. The Chicken Chow Mein is my favorite," Nicky said and sat down next to Tina so she could show her the menu.

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An hour and a half later, the dinner table was littered with empty cardboard boxes, used napkins and two sets of chopsticks.

"It was a really great idea to order the mixed buffet takeout, Tina. This was a lot more fun than boring old Chicken," Nicky said, using a spoon to get the last of her ginger and lemon grass sauce out of a small plastic container.

"Yeah. And cheaper, too," Tina said, reaching up to caress Nicky's neck.

When Nicky felt Tina's fingers touch her neck, she swallowed the last of the sauce in a quick gulp and then licked her lips. She could feel her heart rate increasing by the second and a curious, but definitely pleasant, warmth washed over her.

"Ohhh..." she said, leaning almost unnoticeably into the touch.

"Mmmmm. Nicky...?"

"Yeah...?" Nicky breathed, closing her eyes.

"Do you have the Angels' latest album?"

"Uhhh, huh?"

"The Bleeding Angels... their latest album. Do you have it?"

"Oh... oh, yeah, sure. On my laptop."

"I think you should put track number four on and let it play on repeat."

"T-track four?" Nicky said, remembering that it was called 'Kissing You Senseless.'

"Track four, yeah."

"I'm on it," Nicky said and moved so quickly away from the couch that Tina's hand was still suspended in mid-air.

Flashing a wide grin, Nicky plugged in the portable speakers and powered up her laptop. Finding 'Kissing You Senseless' in the Explorer, she clicked on the track and then selected the Repeat Track feature on her player.

Soon, the familiar intro began playing and Nicky looked at Tina with round, expectant eyes.

"Now come back here so we can cuddle," Tina said and patted the seat next to her.

"Uhhh, OK," Nicky said and wiped her suddenly damp hands on her thighs. The split second Nicky rose from her swivel-chair, a cord holding a picture frame gave up the ghost making the frame fall onto the floor and shatter into a dozen pieces.

Both women jumped a foot in the air and Tina let out a little shriek.

"Jesus! What the hell is this? Spook City?" Tina said and put a hand on her wildly beating heart.

"No, n-no, it was just... just a picture. I'll... I better get it cleaned up at once," Nicky said with a groan.

"Tell you what. While you do that, how about I make us some coffee? I think we could use it," Tina said and got up from the couch.

"Coffee...?"

Nicky's face gradually fell and she took a deep breath when she realized that the moment had been lost.

"Yeah, coffee, you know. The brown liquid."

"I don't like coffee. I always drink tea."

"Tea is fine. You go get the picture cleaned up, I'll get the tea," Tina said, standing in the doorway to the kitchen.

"OK. I'll... I'll do that. The electric kettle is in the cupboard above the sink and the tea leaves are in the top drawer."

"I'm on it," Tina said with a wink that made Nicky hope that once the mess was over, they could go back to where they had left off.

"So... kettle, kettle, where's the kettle...?" Tina said, looking through the cupboard where Nicky had said the kettle was stored. When she finally found it, she picked up the appliance and took it out of the cupboard. Moments later, a heavy bowl came rolling out of the cupboard and fell onto the floor, only missing Tina's feet by inches.

"Jesus!" she said, dancing around on the spot while she was still holding onto the electric kettle. Gasping, she shook her head several times to get over the small shock.

Looking into the living room, she could see Nicky trying to vacuum up all the shards from the broken picture frame, so she decided not to bother her. After putting the electric kettle down on the kitchen table, she squatted down to pick up the bowl.

As she took the ivory-colored bowl in her hand, the lid came off, depositing a puddle of an unidentifiable liquid on the kitchen floor.

"Aw, great! Too flippin' great," Tina said, grabbed several pieces of kitchen tissue and began to wipe up the mess.

After she had drained the soaked pieces of tissue into the sink and thrown them into the garbage bin, she poured water into the electric kettle and put it back onto the base. Just as she was about to turn it on, Nicky came out to stand in the doorway.

"Well, the frame is histo... No, Tina! STOP!" Nicky yelled and jumped forward to yank Tina's hand away from the switch on the kettle.

"What! What? What?!" Tina said, holding both her hands up in the air.

"You're standing in a puddle of something. God, you could've been electrocuted if you had t-touched the s-switch...!"

Tina looked down, and sure enough, she had missed a little puddle of the unidentifiable liquid from the bowl. Her right sock just skimmed the edge of the puddle and while she wasn't sure if it would've been enough to give her a shock or not, she was glad she didn't have to find out the hard way.

"Hmmm," she said, seriously contemplating calling the Ghostbusters or a priest so he could come and perform an exorcism.

"Let me get that... come on, take a step away from the table," Nicky said and tore off a piece of tissue. Getting down on her knees, she started wiping up the last little puddle.

Tina giggled nervously at all the weird occurrences and ran a hand through her hair, thinking that someone was trying to prevent the two of them from cuddling.

Behind her, unseen by either of the two young women, a dark shadow raced across the wall of the living room.

Five minutes later, Nicky put the vacuum cleaner back into the cupboard and proceeded to wipe off her hands on a towel. Suddenly, Tina whistled and called her name, and she peeked around the corner and into the living room to see what was going on.

Tina had gone back to the couch and was patting the seat next to her, wearing a cheeky grin and winking like mad.

Nicky could feel her eyebrows twitch and she took a deep breath to get her suddenly giddy heart to calm down. She hurriedly threw the towel over her shoulder without bothering to look where it landed. In three steps, she had entered the living room and was sitting down next to her date.

"Sorry for all the weird things happening tonight, Tina. I don't know what the hell is going on..." Nicky said, picking up Tina's hand.

"Ah, whatever. Here's what I think we should do. Let's forget all about the tea and just make out like crazed rabbits instead," Tina said, leaned in towards Nicky's enticing neck and began to nibble on her left earlobe.

"Ohhhh!" Nicky said, squirming slightly under the onslaught of Tina's tongue wrapping itself around her earlobe. Reaching down, she put her hand on Tina's waist and began to claw it gently.

Tina soon moved forward, putting a line of little kisses on Nicky's jaw and cheek, leaving very little doubt as to what would come next.

Nicky turned her head to her left so she could look into Tina's almond-colored eyes. Sparks flew between them and almost at once, Nicky dove in to claim Tina's lips. Probing at first, the two young women soon threw caution to the wind and began to kiss passionately.

Below, Nicky's hand began to move on its own accord, running up and down Tina's side from her hips to the outside of her breasts. When Tina wanted to reciprocate the notion, she found that she couldn't move her hand far enough.

Breaking off the kiss, she winked at Nicky and then moved further back on the couch so she had better room. She reached down, took a firm grip on Nicky's butt - making her squeal loudly in the process - and guided her forward and up so they could resume their kissing.

Instinctively, Nicky moved up her legs so she was close to straddling Tina's lap. Leaning down, she moved herself very close to Tina so nothing could come between them - quite literally. Both women felt another shot of electricity when their bodies touched and Nicky couldn't hold back an expectant sigh.

While Tina began to explore Nicky's body with her hands, her tongue traced Nicky's lips, begging to be let in. After looking deeply into each other's eyes for a few moments, Nicky giggled and opened her mouth to let Tina's insistent tongue inside. Soon, the two women were lost in each other.

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"We never got around to the tea," Nicky said as she helped Tina get her windbreaker on a few hours later.

"Maybe next time?" Tina said and turned around. After zipping her jacket, she put her hands on Nicky's hips and pulled her towards her.

"Next time?"

"You wanna go out with me next Friday? I think I can get two free tickets to The Barbed Wire."

"The Barbed Wire? God, that's the hottest Club in town, Tina. I'd love to!" Nicky said, hoping she didn't come across as a lovesick little puppy.

"Good," Tina said and leaned in to kiss Nicky. At first, the kiss was unrestrained but it soon turned warm and gentle and Nicky didn't want it to end - ever. Unfortunately, they had to separate to get some fresh air into their lungs.

As they looked into each other's eyes immediately after breaking off the kiss, Nicky could feel a burning sensation in her cheeks and her ears, and she knew she was grinning like a maniac. Feeling a hot wave flooding over her, she dearly wished that the night wouldn't end so soon.

Once the old, decrepit elevator was on its way down, Nicky debated hard with herself whether she should ask Tina to stay the night or not, but she finally decided not to ask. Even as that thought ran through her head, she could feel tears sting her eyes.

'Man, I can't believe I feel this way. She hasn't even left yet and I'm missing her already!' she thought, chuckling quietly to herself.

"Whut?" Tina said, crinkling her nose.

"Oh, I was just thinking about what we've been doing tonight."

"I know. Hey, Nicky, I've had a fabulously good time tonight. Thanks for everything. You're an, uh... a very accommodating hostess," Tina said and leaned in to give Nicky yet another of her patented searing kisses - but before their lips could touch, Nicky sniggered loudly and blushed crimson red.

The elevator came to a bumping stop on the ground floor and the doors slid open noisily. The magic broken, the two women left the elevator and walked out to stand in the hall. Not wanting to create too much hassle for Nicky, Tina settled for kissing the tip of Nicky's nose and running her fingers across her smooth cheek.

"I'll call you first thing in the morning, OK?" Tina said.

"I can't wait. Get home safely."

"I will. Sweet dreams, Nicky."

"Oh... they'll be sweet, all right. You can count on that," Nicky said, adding a saucy little grin.

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'Sunday, February 27th. Dear diary.

It's four minutes past midnight. Tina has left now and even though we had a few problems along the way, the evening was a great success - well, in my opinion, at least... and judging by the glorious kiss Tina gave me as she was leaving, I'm quite sure she felt so, too.

As I am writing this, I am experiencing an emotion far stronger than anything I've ever experienced... oh, that's just awful English. I can't even think straight now! I'm feeling giddy, elated, warm, bubbly, all these things combined. I know what it is. You need a clue? It begins with an L.

It's not a crush, it's not puppy love, it's not even the herbal tea I've just had speaking. It really is love. When we were cuddling, little arcs of electricity flew between us, we both felt it. When we were saying good night, I didn't want to see her leave and I actually felt like a piece of my heart was torn out when she left the apartment building.

I've already mentioned it, but I have to return to the kiss we shared standing in the hallway. It was so sweet, warm and passionate I almost asked her to stay the night, but I didn't want to appear too desperate or needy on our first date.

The best part of it all was that I could SO CLEARLY feel that the gorgeous Tina Dixon felt the same way I do. I could see it in her eyes. They were sparkling.

She's going to call me in the morning and I can't wait to hear her sexxy voice purring to me over the phone. This is the start of something good. I just know it.

Nicky C.'

Nicky clicked the ball point pen off and began to tap it against her lips as she re-read her words. Nodding, she closed the diary and put it on the shelf in her bedroom.

"Hey, Coco, what do you think about Tina? Don't you think she's beautiful? Oh, I know, you didn't really get to see her, but... I was afraid that she might think I was some sort of freak if I told her I was still sleeping with a teddy bear," Nicky said and picked Coco up.

She started playing with the soft toy's well-worn ears and button nose; giving Coco a little squeeze and tickling the teddy bear's tummy, she started thinking about all the good times she'd had with her furry friend.

"I promise I won't forget you, Coco. Even if Tina and I get serious, you'll always be in my heart. Maybe not in my bed, but always in my heart," Nicky said and played with the bear's little furry arms.

"Oh, but I think I better put you down in the drawer when we're going to... you know. After all, I wouldn't want to shock you. On occasion, things can get kinda wild when people really care for each other," Nicky added in a stage whisper.

"But, hey, you're a big bear. I guess you know all about doin' the wild thing with your girlfriend, huh?" she said out loud and put Coco back on the bed next to her pillow.

Just before Nicky got off the bed, her eye caught the cardboard box with the old diaries, leading to a new grin spreading out over her face.

"Oh, Coco, imagine Tina and me in ten years time... looking through my old diaries... reading about our first night together on Saturday, February 26th. Man, I'm telling you, she's the one for me," Nicky said dreamily.

After brushing her teeth, Nicky went back into her bedroom and changed into her pajamas. As she sat down on her bed, she had to chuckle out loud over the fact that her head and her heart were still buzzing over the delightful events of the evening.

Yawning, she swung her legs up into the bed and snuggled down between the sheets. Wearing a broad smile, she closed her eyes and put her hands behind her head. A few moments later, she began fantasizing about what it would be like if she and Tina Dixon were to perform a slow, sensual dance together when they went to the Barbed Wire Club; moving as one, swaying back and forth to an insisting rhythm while their hands roamed freely... exploring, touching, caressing, squeezing.

"Mmmmm," Nicky said, grinning from ear to ear. Yawning again, she reached over to the night stand and turned off the lamp. As the darkness enveloped her, she took a deep breath and moved her hands underneath the blanket so she could put them on her heart.

"I'll remember this night forever. I love you, Tina Dixon. God, I got it so bad!" she whispered, chuckling at the things she had said and the way she had said them.

"Goodnight, Coco. Sweet dreams," she said and then rolled over onto her left side.

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Half an hour later, Nicky's soft snoring filled the bedroom. The diary, still on the shelf where she had put it, suddenly opened by itself on the latest entry.

Moments later, a deep, rumbling sound akin to a growl was heard. The pages of the diary began to move on their own accord - faster and faster, they flipped backwards through the old entries until they stopped on the one from January 3rd.

'January 3rd, addendum.

I forgot to mention that I met a new girl today. Her name is Tina Dixon. She's a bit of a goth-head with black clothes and a couple of deep purple stripes in her hair and what have you, but all in all, she's quite all right, actually. Really pretty.

Far prettier than her annoying girlfriend who, for some reason, thinks it's cool to wear glasses equipped with regular glass instead of lenses. I mean, what's the point in that?

According to our updated list of contact info, Tina Dixon's address is #4972 West 29th Street, Apartment 17. Might come in handy one day.

Nicky C.'

The diary closed on its own and peace seemed to be restored to the bedroom. A short while later, Nicky's blanket fluttered aside and was lifted up, almost like something was slithering up underneath it.

In her sleep, Nicky felt movement on her right hip and she sighed and moaned Tina's name, making the movement stop abruptly. Shortly afterwards, the blanket was thrown to the side.

Nicky moaned again and moved her hand back to find the edge of the blanket. Once she had found it, she pulled it back on top of her, completely oblivious to what had just happened.

A dark shadow raced back and forth across a small patch of the bedroom carpet that was lit up by the light from the full moon. An ethereal growl was heard, seemingly coming from everywhere at once.

Eventually, the dark shadow slowed down, almost like it had come to some kind of decision. With a whoosh, it left the bedroom and flew through the window pane, leaving a faintly orange-brown trail behind that soon evaporated into the darkness.

Fifteen minutes later, the shadow came back through the bedroom window. It roamed the room for a few minutes before it finally settled down at the foot-end of Nicky's bed.

A faint, rumbling laugh was heard, followed by something that resembled heavy breathing and several sighs.

Moving ahead, the shadow left the patch of moonlight and was absorbed by the darkness. Moments later, the blanket covering Nicky's sleeping form was gently moved aside and then pulled back over her.

A few hours later, Nicky woke up briefly and rubbed her bleary eyes. Rolling onto her back, she thought she could feel some kind of weight on her right side and halfway on top of her, but in her sleepy state, she thought she was still dreaming about Tina.

Reaching down to her right, she scratched a persistent itch on her chest just below her breasts and then moved down to scratch another one on the inside of her right thigh. With a wide yawn, she rolled back onto her left side and promptly fell asleep again.

Once Nicky's breathing had become even, a contented, ethereal sigh was heard. After a brief pause, the blanket fluttered up slightly, quickly followed by a similar movement by Nicky's pajama top.

A few strands of Nicky's hair had fallen across her face when she had turned over, but they were gently moved to the side by a faint breeze. Another strange sound was heard, followed by the appearance of a small, glistening patch on the side of Nicky's neck.

Shivering slightly in her sleep, Nicky tried to raise her shoulder to wipe the small patch of wetness off her. After mumbling a few nonsensical words, she went back to a deep sleep.

'Love... love you,' an ethereal voice whispered, sounding very much like it meant what it said. *'Together... always...'* it continued, using a tone of voice that became ever deeper and harsher as it went along the sentence.

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The next morning, Nicky had already started wondering when Tina would call when she was interrupted right in the middle of her yogurt by the intercom buzzing incessantly.

She jumped up from the dinner table and flew into the hallway, hoping that it was Tina wanting to spend the entire day with her. Hopping up and down in giddy excitement, she pressed the red button.

"Yesssss?" she purred, pulling down her pajama top that had fluttered up when she had run through the hallway.

'Miss Veronica Campbell?' a male voice said from the other end of the connection.

"Uhhh... yes? Who is this?"

'This is detective Anthony Weston and officer Michelle Delaney from the twenty-third precinct. We have some questions for you regarding a case that has landed on my desk.'

"Oh... OK. Uh... please, come right up," Nicky said and buzzed the front door open. Remembering that she was only wearing her pajamas, she quickly moved back to the bedroom to wrap a bathrobe around herself.

Fifteen minutes later, Nicky leaned back in the couch with a bump. Her face was as pale as a sheet and her hands were trembling. She felt sick to her stomach and above all, she wanted to wake up from the nightmare.

"Miss Campbell, Officer Delaney will remain with you until your parents arrive. That's the standard procedure. Thank you for your time. I'm sorry for your loss," Detective Weston said and closed his notepad. He stood up to his full height of five foot eleven and ran a hand through his short, graying hair.

Nicky looked at him with wide, shocked eyes, unable to comprehend his words and even less able to respond to them.

"Yeah... Officer Delaney, I think Miss Campbell could use some coffee. I need to get back to the stationhouse," the detective said and buttoned his long overcoat.

"I'll see to it," the female officer said.

"All right. Talk to you later," detective Weston said and left Nicky's apartment.

"Veronica... where's your coffee?" Michelle Delaney asked, crouching down in front of the morose Nicky.

Nicky took a deep breath and shook her head slowly. "Don't have any. Don't like it. Only have tea," she whispered in a hoarse, raw voice.

"Oh, OK. Then I..."

"Don't want any, th-thank you. I need to lie down," Nicky said and got up from the couch. Officer Delaney helped Nicky move over to the bedroom door where they separated.

"Like Detective Weston mentioned, I'll be here until your parents arrive. If you need any help, just yell. I'm Michelle," the female officer said and put a comforting hand on Nicky's shoulder.

Nicky nodded and then went into the bedroom. She took off the bathrobe and let it fall to the floor. She changed her mind at the last moment and went over to the shelf above her desk where she picked up her diary and her ball point pen.

Shuffling back to the bed, she sat down with a bump and opened the diary to the current day. As she read the entry she had written just after midnight, large tears began running down her cheeks, staining her pajamas and the opened page of the diary.

Taking the ball point pen, she began to draw a black cross.

After she was done, the diary and the pen slipped from her fingers and ended up on the floor next to the forgotten bathrobe.

Nicky crawled up into her bed and reached for Coco, her only remaining friend. Curling up into a fetal position, she pulled the teddy bear close to her face and gave the furry soft toy an almighty hug.

Moments later, she began to cry for real. Time and time again, hard, unrelenting sobs tore through her as she felt her heart shatter into a million pieces.

Coco's furry face remained unperturbed by the night's tragic events and by its mistress' tearful state. The two dark studs that formed the eyes were as still and lifeless as always, as were the well-worn ears, the cute button nose and the sown-on lips that were permanently shaped into a crooked, devious little grin.

THE END of COCO

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SILENT INVASION

by Norsebard

CHAPTER 1

"Damn...! How the hell can I be outta beer so soon?" a female voice said halfway inside an old, rickety refrigerator. "I guess I musta drunk it all," the voice continued.

Moments later, Wynne Donohue took a step back and slammed the door shut with the toe of her cowboy boot. She hoisted up in her worn, faded blue jeans and walked back to her favorite rocking chair.

After cracking open the last can of beer, she leaned her head back and swallowed half of it in one gulp.

"Ahhh... much better. Sorry, gals, no dinner for you tonight," Wynne said and showed the can to her two dogs, an all-black German Shepherd named Blackie and a Golden Retriever named Goldie. The dogs were both lying on the floor of Wynne's trailer, seemingly rather uninterested in what their mistress was doing.

"Beer probably ain't good for ya after nine p.m. anyhow," Wynne said and emptied the can. Once it was empty, she rolled it across her forehead and the part of her chest the formerly white tank top didn't cover.

Belching loudly, she crushed the can between her strong fingers and aimed carefully for a three-point throw into the garbage can - which she unfortunately missed by a good foot and a half. The can ended up on the floor, joining three other, similarly crushed cans.

"No dessert tonight so I might as well read the newspaper," Wynne said and got up from the chair. Surprised by a wide yawn, she rubbed her face and ran a hand through her long, black hair.

"Or I could just go to bed. Whaddaya say, girls? Bed or newspaper...?"

Suddenly, Blackie raised her head and looked out of the trailer and into the desert. Her ears rose and turned around so they were pointing at the door. A growl started deep in the black dog's throat, and she got up and walked slowly towards the door, almost like she wanted to get out.

"Hey, Blackie... somethin' wrong, girl?" Wynne said and patted the dog's neck.

The question was answered by another growl, so Wynne spun around and took her double-barreled twelve-gauge shotgun that was hanging on the wall above the couch. She quickly found a small box of shells and loaded both barrels, but didn't cock it.

"Goldie, stay here. Me and Blackie are just gonna have a look-see," Wynne said and motioned to open the door. The Golden Retriever just sort of whimpered and ran over to the low table to hide behind the legs.

A chilly wind hit Wynne when she opened the inner door, so she went back inside for her lined denim jacket, her work gloves and her trusty old cowboy hat.

Fully equipped, she opened the inner- and the mesh door and stepped out into the darkness. In the west, the sun was slowly setting, creating a marvelous kaleidoscopic array of colors in the sky, and all around her, the insects were already busy performing their nightly serenades.

Even though Wynne stood completely still and listened hard for any unusual sounds, she wasn't able to pick up anything that was out of the ordinary. Blackie continued to be agitated, running around in a little circle and growling occasionally.

"Hmmm. What the hell are you pickin' up, girl...? There's nothing out here. Are you in heat or somethin'? Damn, Blackie, sendin' me out on a wild goose-"

Wynne stopped dead in her tracks when she noticed that the northern skies were lit up by strong blue and red lights.

"What in the world...?" she whispered, not quite believing her eyes. A curious smell of sulfur swept in towards her on the edge of the wind, and she crinkled her nose in disgust.

"What the hell is this...? Sulfur...? Gawd, that stinks," Wynne said and plugged her nostrils with her fingers. A few seconds later, the cloud had either evaporated or drifted past her because the air became breathable again.

"I better check that out. Stay here, Blackie," Wynne said and walked back to her trailer. The German Shepherd responded with a short, affirmative bark.

"Now where did I put those damn binoculars?" Wynne said as she rummaged around her trailer. She went through all her cupboards and drawers, finding a dozen old glittery magazines and two dozen empty beer cans, but not the prized possession she was looking for.

Finally, she slapped her forehead and went into the kitchenette. Standing up on tip-toes, she reached for a cardboard box that had been collecting dust on top of one of the kitchen cabinets. Opening the box, a wide grin flashed across her face and she nodded to herself.

"Hey, look, Goldie, I found my night scope binoculars. Never thought I'd have a use for 'em, but this is a mighty weird deal. You wanna come?" Wynne said to the Golden Retriever that was still hiding behind the coffee table. The dog whimpered again, and Wynne took that as a 'no'.

Stepping back outside, Wynne walked back over to Blackie and turned on the binoculars. Scanning the horizon all the way from the south, she slowly traveled towards the east and then north without finding anything. When she reached the section where the strange lights were, she checked it out thoroughly using the regular lens.

She could see flickering orange lights, flashing blue and red lights and occasionally a bright, white light that lit up the sky.

"Hmmm... weird. The blue and red lights... I wonder if that's an emergency vehicle or somethin'...? And the orange flickerin' could be fire. Blackie, do you reckon we have a plane down out there...?"

Blackie replied by barking a couple of times, clearly still in an agitated state.

"Well, there's something out there, that's for sure," Wynne said and turned the night scope back on. She re-checked the horizon, but the colors were all distorted so she wasn't able to deduce anything.

"Why can't we hear anything? Maybe it's a mirage? Nah, hasn't been hot enough for that."

Wynne wrapped the night scope's Nylon strap around her neck, took off her cowboy hat and scratched her hair. Blackie sat down in front of her, giving her a very pointed glare.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. We better go and check. Damn responsible dawg," Wynne said and reached down to give Blackie's fur a good rubbing.

While Wynne was walking back around her trailer to get to the front door, she patted all her pockets for the keys to her truck, but soon came to the conclusion that she didn't have them on her.

"Blackie, stay at the truck. I'm just gonna find my keys... they can't have gone too far," Wynne said and laughed at her own joke.

Blackie responded by yapping and jumping up on the bed of the Chevrolet pickup. Appearing to wait patiently for her mistress to come back, she put her paws over the side of the truck and looked at the trailer.

Inside the trailer, Wynne was looking everywhere for her keys, cursing a blue streak while she was doing so. She even went as far as removing the pillows from the run-down couch, but all to no avail.

Finally giving up, she took off her hat and wiped her face on the sleeve of her denim jacket.

"Crap. I can't find 'em anywhere... I really oughtta have a spare set..."

A happy yap from Goldie made Wynne turn her head and look at the Golden Retriever. The dog dug itself into the pile of pillows Wynne had just thrown aside, clearly searching for something. A jingling-jangling sound soon gave away what it was, and Wynne was quickly by her dog's side to help it rummage through the pillows.

"Awright! Thanks, girl," Wynne said as she grabbed the keys for the truck. "Are you comin' or what? Blackie is."

Goldie scooted back to her favorite hiding place underneath the coffee table and appeared to be shaking her head.

"OK. Then you'll stay here and stand guard... right?" Wynne said, opening the inner door.

With a yap, Goldie left the safety of the table and ran outside.

"Knew that would sway your mind," Wynne said with a chuckle.

After putting the double-barreled shotgun into the gun rack on the rear window of the cab, Wynne sat down and started the engine. The motor was only running on seven cylinders at first, but after a minute or so, the eighth decided that it wanted to come out and play as well.

"You all set, girl?" Wynne said and mussed the Golden Retriever's soft fur. A small yap answered that question, and Wynne took the opportunity to yank the old Chevrolet into a gear.

"How you doin' back there, Blackie?" Wynne yelled out of the window. A loud bark was heard and the German Shepherd scratched its claws on the outside of the rear window.

"Excellento. Let's see what the flip is going on out there."

As Wynne stepped on the gas, the run-down Chevrolet pickup creaked into action. Like always, a veritable symphony accompanied the old truck - the exhaust was rattling, the gearbox was whining and the rear end was grinding.

After driving off the lot, the trio soon entered the desert itself, going fairly slowly along the rough trail that Wynne was hoping would lead them closer to where the lights were.

Wynne knew that the uneven surface would stress the old truck to its limits, so she took it a lot more careful than she normally would - so careful, in fact, that Goldie seemed to be bored by the uneventfulness of the trip.

Some distance ahead of them, Wynne could still see the multi-colored lights, but she started questioning her sanity when they didn't seem to be getting any closer.

"Blackie, what I tell ya? What I tell ya, huh? Wild goose chase, doll," Wynne said out of the window.

The words had barely left her mouth when the Chevrolet suddenly died and came to a grinding halt. The headlights flickered once and then faded out. All the instrument lights went south, and no matter how many times Wynne tried to turn the ignition key, she couldn't get it back to life.

"Awwwww... shit," Wynne said and pulled her cowboy hat down so it covered her face. She shook her head slowly, wishing she had gone to bed like she'd been planning to.

Out back, Blackie suddenly began to bark loudly, jerking Wynne out of her tiredness.

"What? What do you see, girl?" Wynne said and turned around in her seat so she could reach the shotgun. Next to her, Goldie began to whimper and the golden dog tried to dig itself down into the footwell.

"What the flying flip is going on out here...?" Wynne said and opened the door. Stepping outside, she swept the horizon with her shotgun, but it was so pitch black that she couldn't even see past the tip of the barrels.

"Flashlight... I need a flashlight."

Wynne walked around the front of the truck and opened the passenger side door, still holding the shotgun ready in case someone - or something - jumped her.

Once she found the flashlight in the glove box, she turned it on and swept the horizon again.

"Nothing. There's not a damn thing out here, girls. What the hell are you picking up...?" Wynne said, surprising herself by whispering instead of speaking regularly.

Growling, she climbed up on the bed of the pickup to get a better view. Looking behind her, she could suddenly see the lantern she had hanging on a wire in front of her trailer, and she realized that they hadn't gone further than three quarters of a mile into the desert.

"Great, I've spotted our trailer. Come on, girls, let's go home. I don't care if it's Air Force One down out there. They have to wait until dawn," Wynne said and jumped off the bed. After letting Goldie out from the passenger seat, she locked the old Chevrolet and took a step back.

With a grunt, Wynne buttoned her denim jacket and patted her thigh, a signal that she had practiced many times with her dogs. At once, Goldie and Blackie both responded to her call and ran back to their mistress, forming a defensive formation on either side of Wynne. The trio soon started walking back to the trailer, trudging their way through the soft sand and the unseen rocks underneath it.

"Good thing I'm wearin' my good boots today. Man, if I'd had to wear my old pair, I'd..."

A sudden whiff of sulfur made Wynne stop in her tracks and turn around. The sky behind her was brighter than it had been the entire trip there, and she started biting her lip.

"Man, this is such a weird deal. I better call it in as soon as we get back. Maybe Bessie can send one of the boys out here. They'll have some good lights or somethin'," Wynne said and instinctively raised the shotgun at the spooky lights.

._*_*._*

Three and a half miles west of Wynne's trailer, on the shadowy side of Main Street in the small town of Goldsboro, pop. 475, four deputies were engaged in a raucous game of poker in the Sheriff's office.

The men were sitting around a circular table, playing noisily and, judging by the number of full ashtrays and empty soda cans littering the table, apparently enjoying themselves a great deal. The piles of Dollar bills in front of the players were all fairly small, save for the one in front of Artie Rains, the senior deputy.

After winning yet another hand, Artie took the deck of cards and started dealing from it to the other players. One after the other, the deputies looked at the cards and asked for new ones. Artie duly complied, often adding a quip or two on the playing merits of his fellow deputies.

In the dispatch room next to the watch room, the CB radio crackled to life, and the dispatcher Bessie Robinson went in to answer it, happy to get away from the noisy deputies.

"Goldsboro Sheriff's Office, how may we help you?" Bessie said as she pressed a button on the old-fashioned transmitter.

"Evenin', Bessie, it's Wynne Donohue. I have a weird, weird deal goin' on out here. I have colored lights lightin' up the northern skies and..."

"What kind of lights, Wynne?" Bessie said and took a notepad and a pencil.

"It's kinda hard to describe, but they're flashing red and blue... and sometimes, they're orange as well."

"Uh-huh...?" Bessie said, jotting down the information.

"Yeah. I was thinkin' that it might be a plane gone down out there. Do you have someone out here? It could kinda look like the lights on a cruiser...?"

"We don't, Wynne. The gang's all here."

"Oh... in that case, could you maybe get Rodolfo or someone to come out here with some strong lights or something so we can see what the hell is going on?"

"Rodolfo is on sick leave, Wynne."

'Shit. Not Artie. Anybody but Artie,' Wynne whined, earning her a chuckle from Bessie.

"Won't be Artie. I'll ask around."

"Thanks, Bessie."

"Anytime, sugar. Out."

Bessie tore the note off the notepad and went out into the watch room. Holding the note in the air, she cleared her throat to be heard over the din of the card players.

"Hey, I need someone to check up on Wynne Donohue. She says she can see weird lights and shit out in the desert."

All four card-playing deputies briefly looked at her, but soon returned to their poker game.

"What does that wacky broad want now?" one of the men said.

"Gee, I don't know, Tony. Maybe one of you should stop by and ask her. It sounded kinda urgent," Bessie said and put her hands on her hips.

"Send Manly," Artie said and looked at a solitary figure sitting at a desk across the room, polishing her service firearm. "I'll bet she could get Donohue to open up," he continued, earning himself a few dirty laughs from the other men.

"Yeah, maybe they could play 'Where's The Soap?' together. Two peas outta the same pod those two," one of the other poker players said, setting off another round of dirty laughs.

"Oh, grow up, you imbeciles," Bessie said and walked over to the person the poker players had referred to as 'Manly.'

"Hey, Mandy, you up for a trip?" Bessie said and put the note down on the table in front of the deputy.

Mandy Jalinski stopped cleaning the pistol and looked up at Bessie's round face, wearing a hard, unwavering stare in her jade green eyes.

From the moment Bessie had laid eyes on the new deputy, she had thought that the young woman was far too pretty for the line of work she had chosen, but when Bessie had seen the long list of commendations Mandy had brought from her previous employers, she knew that there was a lot more to the deputy than what met the eye.

"I'm ready. Where is it?" Mandy said and got up from the chair.

"Two-and-a-half, three miles east of here. You can't miss it. It's the only trailer out there."

"All right. And the caller saw weird lights?"

"Yeah. All sorts of lights out in the desert. Well, that's what Wynne told me, anyway," Bessie said and handed Mandy the note.

"She's probably been tryin' to smoke one of them cactuses again!" Artie said, much to the delight of his card mates.

Mandy turned around, put her service firearm into its holster and buttoned the flap holding the weapon in place. As she reached for her mountie hat, Artie took a deep breath and Mandy knew that he was about to make yet another of his unfunny comments.

"Watch it fellas... woman with a gun!" he said, laughing at his own crude joke. Mandy simply walked past him, ignoring his juvenile words.

"The Durango is gassed up and ready to go, Mandy," Bessie said loudly, holding her hand up to her mouth to amplify her voice.

"Thanks, Bessie. I'll call back once I've figured out what's what," Mandy said and opened the door.

"And then we can come an' save your skinny little ass!" Artie yelled just as Mandy left the Sheriff's office.

CHAPTER 2

When Wynne heard the Dodge Durango approaching, she went outside and started waving her hat to flag it down. Behind her, Blackie jumped down the single step leading to the trailer and started wagging her tail. Goldie, being her ever-cautious self, peeked around the corner of the inner door and then joined Blackie at Wynne's feet.

Wynne chuckled when she saw that the deputy had all the lights flashing on the Durango and was going so fast that the SUV nearly went past the trailer before it came to a stop.

Shielding her eyes from the cloud of dust brought on by the sudden stop, she coughed a few times, put her hat back on and walked up to the car door.

"Hey, glad you're here, deputy. It's a really weird deal... what the hell, you're a woman...?" Wynne said, completely taken aback when she discovered that she was looking into two jade green eyes sitting in a very female face - *'Two rather pretty jade green eyes... that are wearing a look of supreme annoyance,'* Wynne noted a few heartbeats later.

"The Sheriff's Office do employ female deputies now, you know," Mandy said somewhat curtly as she stepped out of the SUV. Reaching in, she grabbed her mountie hat and put it on, adjusting the brim so it was lined up just right.

"Uh... sure. Anyway... uh, it's right out here," Wynne said, feeling guilty for staring at the other woman. The deputy was a good four inches shorter than Wynne which would make her five foot six, give or take. She had short, blonde hair and she was built exactly to Wynne's preferences with broad shoulders, a bosom proportionate to the rest of the body, a narrow waist and slim hips.

Her uniform was hideous like they invariably were - black boots, dark brown polyester pants and a pale brown polyester shirt with the shoulder straps and the pocket flaps in a contrast color, and around her waist, she wore a utility belt laden down with a nightstick, a pair of handcuffs, a can of pepper spray, a walkie-talkie radio, a sidearm and three spare clips.

Suddenly realizing that she was being impolite, Wynne cleared her throat and stuck out her hand.

"Oh, how rude of me. Hi, I'm Wynne Donohue. How ya doin'?"

"I'm doing just fine, Ma'am. I'm Deputy Mandy Jalinski. What seems to be the problem?" Mandy said and shook Wynne's hand.

"Uh, it's Miss, actually. But anyway, there are these peculiar lights out in the desert, in the northern skies. I've just checked it again and they're still there."

"Right. Lights. Did you hear any unusual sounds?" Mandy said and took notes on a small notepad.

"Naw, but on occasion, there's a God-awful smell of sulfur in the air."

"Sulfur?"

"Kid you not, deputy. Sulfur. Reeks to high heaven, too."

"Please, call me Mandy."

"All right," Wynne said, wearing a beaming smile.

"Well, we can't work it out standing here. Let's go," Mandy said and opened the door to the Durango.

"Uhh... yeah. By the way, I tried to drive out there, but my old Chevy crapped out on me about a mile out the trail, so..."

"I'll drive around it," Mandy said and got into the SUV. She turned off the flashing lights and activated two strong searchlights positioned on top of the Durango.

"A woman of action! Lovely. Hey, are you married by any chance...? Just kiddin'," Wynne said as she got into the Durango.

Blackie ran behind her mistress and jumped up to put her paws on the window sill, but Wynne shook her head.

"Sorry, Blackie, you have to stay. Stay! Guard!" Wynne said sternly, using another of the signals she had practiced with her dogs. Blackie seemed to understand because she ran back to the trailer at once and plopped down in front of the mesh door a little distance away from Goldie.

A few moments later, Goldie got up and walked over to where Blackie was. With an annoyed little yap, she snuggled down next to the German Shepherd's black fur.

"Huh... you certainly have well-trained dogs, Miss Donohue," Mandy said and selected Drive.

"Nothing to do with me. They were like that when I got 'em."

"Really?"

"Yep. And just call me Wynne."

"All right. Please buckle up, Wynne," Mandy said, looking directly into Wynne's ice blue eyes.

Wynne opened her mouth to object, but when she discovered that she was completely mesmerized by Mandy's green orbs, she just nodded and reached for the seat belt.

"All buckled up, de-per-ty," Wynne said in an exaggerated fashion.

"Good. Let's go."

A few minutes later, they drove slowly past Wynne's old Chevrolet pickup truck, going a bit off the trail to get around it.

"And that's how far I got when I tried before. Good thing I had a flashlight, otherwise I wouldn't have made it back yet," Wynne said and pushed her hat a bit back from her brow.

"Well, it is quite an old tru..."

"There! You see it? The lights are back! Right there!" Wynne suddenly said, pointing out of the windshield.

Ahead of them, the blue and red lights suddenly became visible. On irregular intervals, an orange light flickered across the sky and more rarely, a bright white flash was seen, illuminating the entire northern horizon.

"What in the hell...?" Mandy said with a long, slow whistle.

"I have *no* idea what it is, but it's mighty weird, that's for sure."

"I better call it in," Mandy said and took the mic for the CB - but before she had time to press the button, the Durango suddenly died and came to a rolling halt. The two strong searchlights on top of the SUV soon faded out, leaving the two women alone in the middle of the pitch black desert that was only lit up by a myriad of stars and the new moon.

"Aw, Jesus flippin' Christ, we're caught in one of them horror movies... Jeez! What the hell am I doing here...? I hated the damn Twilight Zone and all that shit," Wynne said and angrily slapped her hat down onto her thigh.

Mandy tried to turn the ignition key but nothing at all happened. After two further attempts, she gave up and leaned back in her seat.

"Hmmm," she said, rubbing her forehead.

"Now what?"

"I'll go and investigate. You better head back to your trailer, Wynne," Mandy said, opened the door and got out.

"Aw, hell no. No way I'm going back without a flashlight. You got one I can borrow?" Wynne said, following Mandy around to the back of the Durango.

"I only have one and I need that myself."

"Then I'm stayin' right here with you," Wynne said vehemently.

"I'm not staying here. Like I said, I'm going to investigate," Mandy said and opened the Durango's backdoor. She climbed up into the rear and soon came out carrying her uniform jacket and a Mossberg pump-action shotgun.

"Whoa... how 'bout givin' me one of them babies, too?"

"Do you know how to shoot?"

"Hell, do jackrabbits have furry butts?"

"And you do have a valid permit, right?"

"Of course. Back home."

"I need to see it before I can issue a firearm to a civilian," Mandy said and closed both back doors. After leaning the shotgun against the rear of the car, she put on her jacket and zipped it all the way up.

"Oh, come on, de-per-ty. We don't know what's out there. Maybe we need to shoot our way out. It could be a buncha crazed drug runners or whatever, and I'd like to have somethin' I can defend myself with," Wynne said, putting her hands into her jacket pockets.

Mandy took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. She nodded and handed Wynne the Mossberg and the box of pellets she had taken from the SUV.

"All right, but please don't shoot unless absolutely necessary. The paperwork will be hell on earth otherwise," Mandy said and climbed back up into the rear of the SUV. A few moments later, she came back out carrying a shotgun identical to the other one.

"Oh, you betcha," Wynne said and pulled the slide back on the Mossberg so she could load the pellets into it.

Twelve minutes later; the two women were walking through the desert, headed towards the lights that were still illuminating the northern skies.

"Hey, Mandy... watch it, hold your breath or somethin' 'cos here comes another cloud of sulfur," Wynne whispered and pinched her nose.

"Aw, Jeez... what can produce a stink like that?" Mandy said, immediately covering her mouth and nose with her hand.

The smell was stronger than it had been the other times Wynne had experienced it and her eyes watered up at once. She started coughing and nearly choked on the awful stench, but just when she thought she'd pass out, the cloud went past them and the air became clean again.

"Gawd almighty, that's disgusting..." Mandy croaked, wiping her eyes.

"Maybe it's a leakin' gas pocket or somethin'...?" Wynne said, coughing the remnants of the sulfur out of her lungs.

"In the middle of the desert?"

"Well... why not? It's gotta be somethin'."

"No argument there. I've never experienced anything lik..."

Without warning, a section of the desert off to the right of the two women was lit up by a shaft of bright, white light shining down onto it.

"What the...?" Wynne said, but she didn't have time to finish the sentence before Mandy had grabbed hold of her jacket.

"Get down!" Mandy shouted, pulling Wynne down onto the sandy ground. Scrambling to turn off the flashlight, she finally managed to find the little button, making their location turn dark.

"Mercy sakes! Wouldya flippin' look at that!" Wynne said, digging herself even deeper into the sand.

On top of the shaft of white light, a large object was hovering fifty feet off the ground. Built like a perfect cylinder, the pale gray surface was completely smooth, except for its center where a small ring formed the base for the shaft of light.

"That's a...! That's a f-flippin' UFO!" Wynne said, unable to tear her eyes away from the eerie object in front of her.

"Damn... and I can't even call it in."

"Nobody would believe ya anyway!"

The surface of the flying object began to glow faintly, making it stand out clearly against the black sky. As Mandy and Wynne were watching, strong blue and red lights were turned on all over the cylindrical vessel, flashing on and off in a rhythmic pattern.

"Them's the lights I've been seein' all evenin'!" Wynne whispered, trying to crawl forward so she could peek over a small rise in front of her.

"No! Get back for Chrissakes," Mandy said and tried in vain to grab hold of Wynne's jacket.

"Oh, sweet Lord, look at that... shit, we're in trouble..."

Growling, Mandy crawled forward so she was right next to Wynne. Once she saw what the other woman had already spotted, she rubbed her eyes several times to make sure that she wasn't hallucinating.

On the desert floor at the foot of the shaft of light, a group of five aliens were standing in a circle, obviously surveying the landscape. Roughly five feet tall, the aliens were chalk-white and had a very narrow body. Their arms and legs seemed to be too long for the torso and as a result, they moved in a slightly clumsy fashion.

When one of them turned towards Mandy and Wynne, they could see that the alien's head was a shapeless lump that had been placed directly on top of its shoulders - the first thought through Wynne's mind was that they resembled a walking Q-tip.

"What the hell are we gonna do now?" Wynne whispered, but Mandy didn't have an answer for it.

They could see that the aliens had eyes - if two dark spots towards the top end of the chalk-white face were anything to go by - and a mouth, but no visible ears. One of them was holding some sort of equipment in its hand that it proceeded to turn around in a sweeping motion.

The alien holding the equipment raised an arm, making the shaft of light disappear.

"Shit..." Mandy said, rubbing her eyes again. The sudden darkness made Wynne and Mandy unable to see any details whatsoever, and they dug themselves even deeper into the sandy ground while they waited for their eyes to adjust.

"Now what? Now what?!" Wynne whispered.

"How the flying flip should I know? They're aliens from outer space for flip's sake!" Mandy whispered back, slamming her fist down into the sand.

A new cloud of sulfur drifted across the desert and Wynne and Mandy held their breaths until it evaporated.

"So that's what that sulfur shit was... their beam. Man, then they've been dumpin' Q-tips all evenin'!" Wynne said, shaking her head.

"... They've been dumping *what* all evening?"

"Q-tips... never mind. But has it been the same ones who've gone back and forth...? Or... or are there several... Jesus, several groups like that one out there...?" Wynne said and started looking around to see if she could pick up anything in the surrounding desert, but the darkness of the night made it impossible.

Shaking her head slowly, Mandy groaned as she thought about the possible implications of Wynne's words. With a despondent sigh, she crawled forward again so she could peek over the small rise.

"They're still there. They're so white they almost glow in the dark. A couple of them are bending down... probably taking rock samples and things like that," Mandy whispered.

"Is the UFO still there?"

"Yep."

"I think we should try to get back to my trailer. Earlier, I still had CB contact... we need to... to... to make it public. Shit. No one is going to believe us."

"No, you're definitely right about that."

"Won't your fellow deputies start to worry about you when you haven't called in? I'm guessin' they would come out here to check up on you... or somethin'?"

"You know... I don't think so. No," Mandy said with a pointed look at Wynne.

"Oh... but I still think we should try to get back."

"We'll need the flashlight to do that, but if we turn it on, they'll come for us, one hundred percent guaranteed."

"Look, de-per-ty, I don't know about you, but I've read the National Enquirer enough to know that they're likely to conduct experiments on us. And I'm not particularly lookin' forward to gettin' dissected! I prefer my inner bits to stay where they are right now, thank ya very much," Wynne hissed, earning herself another pointed look.

"All right, all right. Let's turn around and try to follow the trail back to the Durango. How long were we walking for? Ten-fifteen minutes?"

"Somethin' like that, yeah."

"Can you manage it?"

"You better believe I can," Wynne said and crawled back from the small rise. Once she was sure she was out of sight of the aliens, she got up, hunched over and started walking fast in the direction she thought was the right one.

"Aw, shit... Wynne...? Wynne!" Mandy said, trying to whisper loud enough for the other woman to hear it but without alerting the aliens.

"I hear ya, for Chrissakes. Come on!"

"You're going in the wrong direction!"

"No, I'm not...?" Wynne whispered and stood up straight.

"Yes you are! You're walking further into the desert, for cryin' out loud! We came from *that* side," Mandy said and pointed in the other direction.

"Oh... you sure?"

"Yes!"

Wynne shrugged and started backtracking, trying to follow her own footprints.

Mandy rolled her eyes and sat up. She dusted off her hands and got up on her knees, but before she had time to go anywhere, the UFO reactivated the shaft of light.

"Oh, shit!" Wynne whispered hoarsely and threw herself down onto the ground right next to Mandy, bumping the butt of the shotgun into the deputy in the process and sending both of them sprawling onto the sandy desert floor.

"Ooof! Thanks a lot, Wynne!" Mandy said, rubbing her shoulder where the shotgun had hit her.

"Look, they've turned the light back on!"

Mandy grumbled under her breath and crawled back up to peek over the little rise. Once she was able to see down towards the aliens, she noted that two of them had returned to the rest of the team, and that one of them was holding a jackrabbit in its large hands.

"Hmmm..." Mandy said, brushing some sand out of her face and hair.

As Wynne and Mandy were watching, the alien holding the jackrabbit entered the shaft of light. Another of the aliens, the one that appeared to be the leader, raised an arm, making the shaft of light send down a white pulse. Once the pulse went back up, the jackrabbit was gone from the alien's hands.

Wynne gulped nervously and looked at Mandy.

"So... uh, uhhh, I definitely think it's time to vamoose, M-Mandy."

"And I agree with you. But this time, make sure you go the right way!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah... Jeez. I'm going now."

Wynne pulled back and got up on her hands and knees. When the aliens still didn't appear to sense their presence, she got up fully, hunched over and began to move away. Half-walking, half-stumbling over the many unsighted rocks, she tried to move as quickly as she could, but more often than not, she was simply fighting to hold her balance instead of moving forward.

After having run a good hundred yards, Wynne turned around to see how well Mandy was keeping up, but was horrified to only see the empty desert stretching out behind her.

"Mandy...? Maaaaan-dy!"

When no reply was forthcoming, Wynne took off her hat and slammed it against her chest in frustration, creating a little sandstorm. She started debating so much with herself whether she should go back or continue onwards that she didn't pay any attention to footsteps edging ever closer to her.

Wynne sighed and put her hat back on. After much deliberation, she had finally decided on continuing onwards so the world at large could be told about their ground-breaking discovery. Turning around, she hunched over and began to walk briskly towards where she thought the Durango was parked.

After one step, she bumped into a dark, soft body.

"Ooof!" a muffled female voice said.

At once, Wynne cried out and took several steps back, inevitably stumbling over a rock and ending up on her butt, losing her shotgun. She covered her face in her hands, but only then did she realize that the body she had made an impact with felt far too human to be an alien.

"Oh, for Pete's sakes, Wynne! Watch were ya flippin' going, will ya?" Mandy said, nursing her cheekbone where the top of Wynne's head had hit her.

"Mandy?! Where did you come from? And where did you go?!"

"I was here the whole time. I was on your right. You were too far left... again. And I didn't want to yell at you to get you back on track. Oh, what is this... the Three flippin' Stooges?"

"Uhhh, sorry."

"No time for apologies. Get your Mossberg and let's get the hell outta here!" Mandy whispered and put her hands on her hips.

"I got it, I got it... it's bound to be around here somewhere..." Wynne said, patting down the desert floor. She finally touched the cold steel of the Mossberg and quickly pulled it towards her.

"OK, got it. Let's..."

At that exact same moment, a group of five aliens emerged from the darkness and surrounded Wynne and Mandy.

CHAPTER 3

"Mandy... shoot 'em... kill 'em... do something!" Wynne hissed, staring wide-eyed at the five chalk-white creatures.

"You got a gun! You shoot 'em!" Mandy said and reached for the small can of pepper spray clipped onto her utility belt. Moving her arm slowly so it wouldn't appear to be a threatening gesture, she took the can and held it ready. "Wynne... hold your breath and get behind me. I'm gonna give them a shot of pepper," she continued.

Wynne took a deep breath and slammed her eyes shut. Mandy took that as a cue and depressed the button on top of the can. Spraying the entire content of the can at the aliens, she noted with some glee that the first

two staggered backwards, but then she realized that the others rushed towards her instead of succumbing to the gas.

"Shit! Wynne! They're coming!" Mandy roared and dropped the can. Grabbing her nightstick, she started swinging it at the alien nearest to her. She hit it directly across what she surmised was its forehead, but even though she clearly heard a loud thunk, the alien didn't seem affected by the hit at all.

Wynne cried out as she felt a pair of alien hands on her body and she reacted immediately by viciously kicking out at the owner of the hands, managing to strike something soft. The alien hurried away from her and doubled over, clutching its crotch and acting like it was in great pain.

"Ha! Gotcha!" Wynne said triumphantly and then tried to kick out at the next alien.

Mandy pulled the nightstick back and took another mighty swing at her own opponent, but in the mean time, the alien had wized up and ducked out of the way. As Mandy pulled her arm back, the alien grabbed hold of it and forced the nightstick out of her hand.

"Damn!" Mandy yelled, but she didn't even have time to speak the word fully before the alien attacked her. Even though it was shorter and lighter than she was, it jumped up and forced her backwards down onto the ground where it began to claw her legs and body with its large hands.

"Aw, hell, no... you no-good piece of shit!" Mandy yelled, grabbed hold of the chalk-white alien and threw it off her, sending it flying.

"Kick 'em in the crotch!" Wynne shouted, trying to do what she was preaching.

"Where is that?"

"Where it always is!" Wynne said, striking a direct hit on the next alien. "Two down!" she cried out.

Mandy jumped to her feet and set off to finish her opponent, but the chalk-white alien had disappeared into the darkness.

"Wynne, we need to get the flip outta here. One of those critters is scampering back to his pals right now. They'll bring reinforcements!"

"Yeah, I'm on it," Wynne said, kicking out at the next alien. When she missed by a few inches because she hadn't had time to aim, the creature quickly disappeared into the night.

The last standing alien reached out with its arms, trying to grab hold of Mandy but she coolly applied her self-defense skills and flipped the attacker over her hip and onto the ground where it landed with a hard thud.

Putting her boot hard down on the alien's chest, Mandy took her service pistol out of the holster and aimed at the alien's head.

"No, Mandy, please wait... it's already down."

"One of his pals groped me!"

"Uh, yeah, that's really impolite... but I mean, if we kill one of 'em, they'll come after us with a death ray or something for sure."

"Wynne, two minutes ago, you *wanted* me to kill 'em all."

"But that was before we knew how easy they were to defeat. Let's leave while we still can!"

"Oh... all right," Mandy said and removed her boot from the alien. Within seconds, it got up and disappeared into the darkness. "Where's the flashlight?" Mandy continued, looking around for the tool.

"I got it," Wynne said and pressed the button, turning it on right in their faces.

"Aw Jesus! Wynne, for cryin' out loud!" Mandy said, jumping back and clutching her chest.

"Sorry. Look, there's your nightstick," Wynne said, pointing the cone of light down on the ground.

"Great... but where's my mountie hat?"

"Uhhh... can't see it anywhere," Wynne said and let the cone of light wander across the nearby areas.

"Damn, I paid for that myself. Never mind, let's skedaddle."

Seven minutes of steady jogging later, they reached the Durango. At once, Mandy climbed in and tried to turn the ignition key, but the SUV was still dead.

"Damn," she said and thumped her hand down onto the rim of the steering wheel.

"It's probably the UFO that's blockin' the electronics or some such. Of course, that doesn't explain why my old carbureted truck crapped out, too," Wynne said, standing in the door and looking at her own truck that was still parked another two hundred yards further down the trail.

"Hmmmhm," Mandy said absentmindedly and took the CB mic off its hook. She tried tapping the transmitter button a couple of times, but that was as dead as the rest of the police vehicle. After putting the mic away, she tried the walkie-talkie she wore on her belt, but the results were the same.

"Mandy, I'm going to go back to my own truck. Please stay close by. I don't wanna lose you all over again. Okay?" Wynne said, putting a concerned hand on the deputy's shoulder.

"Sure, sure. Go on, I'm just gonna take some papers from the glove box and then I'll join you."

Once Wynne reached her own truck, she climbed up on the bed and looked towards her trailer.

"Yay! I still got power in my trailer. Mandy, ya hear?"

Wynne turned around and waved her hat at the deputy who was seventy yards behind her. "I still got powe..."

The rest of the sentence got stuck in her throat when she saw a second, much smaller, saucer-shaped UFO emerging from the darkness of the night and coming straight for Mandy.

It was pale gray like its bigger brother, but that's where the similarities ended. Roughly twelve foot wide and three foot tall in the center, the aggressive, hard-edged design left little room for misinterpretation - this one wasn't a surveyor craft, it was a hunter.

"G... get down! GET DOWN!" Wynne cried out, waving her hat like mad.

Mandy waved back, thinking that Wynne was only being friendly, but when she heard the panic in Wynne's voice, she felt a chill race up and down her spine and she spun around to look behind her.

"Ohhhh shit!" Mandy yelled and dove down onto the desert floor, narrowly escaping being run down by the second UFO.

After it had passed by her barely three feet above the ground, the strong wake sent a cloud of dust and sand over her. Grunting loudly, she buried her face in her hands to protect herself from being pelted with rubble and all sorts of other unidentifiable things.

Looking up, she could see the UFO banking over, no doubt preparing to come back for a second pass. Reacting only on instinct, she scrambled to her knees, worked the action on the shotgun and sent several blasts against the approaching craft - one of which hit it square on, sending a shower of sparks down onto the desert floor.

When the pellets hit it, the UFO immediately broke off the second attack run and went straight up into the dark night, leaving a faint trail of orange in the air.

"Mandy?! Are you all right?" Wynne said, having dived for cover underneath her truck.

Mandy was cursing too hard to answer, but she waved the shotgun in the air and began to run as fast as she could towards Wynne.

"There it is again! Oh, those Goddamn sons o' bitches!" Wynne cried out and raised her own shotgun. Waiting impatiently for Mandy to get out of her line of fire, Wynne squeezed the trigger and sent a load of hot pellets up in the air, hoping to scare off the UFO before it could do any damage to either of them.

The UFO easily evaded her shot and responded by turning on a crimson beam of something that resembled concentrated lightning. When the beam reached the desert floor, a foot-wide scorch mark appeared in the sand, headed directly for Wynne's abandoned truck.

"Oh... Ohhhh! OH, CRAP!" Wynne yelled and rolled away from the Chevrolet. After getting to her feet in an almighty hurry, she ran away and threw herself into a small ditch, still clutching the shotgun.

Spinning around, she watched the beam of lightning hit her truck. At first, nothing seemed to happen, but then the Chevrolet exploded in a big fireball that sent cascades of burning fuel all over the desert.

Moments later, Mandy finally arrived and dove for cover next to the stunned Wynne.

"We can't stay here, Wynne! That's the death ray you were talking about!"

"My t... my truck! That sumbitch just gone and demolished mah truck!"

"Wynne! We need to move!" Mandy said and tore at Wynne's jacket to get the angry woman to leave the ditch. Reluctantly, Wynne followed the deputy out of their shelter and started running back towards her trailer.

"Mandy... don't... go... near... my... trailer... I... don't... want... anything... to... happen... to... Bla... Blac... to... my... dogs...!" Wynne said, panting so heavily from running in the soft sand that she could hardly speak.

"Get to the highway! The highway, Wynne!" Mandy shouted back, stopping briefly to check where the aggressive flying saucer was.

As if on cue, the hunter came sweeping down towards them, sending up another cloud of dust in its wake. Mandy angrily emptied her Mossberg against the attacker but she was only able to get one hit in. She patted her pockets to find the box of pellets, but when she realized that she had dropped it, she threw the useless shotgun away and drew her service pistol.

The moment the attacking craft came down to make yet another pass, Mandy started firing at it, emptying an entire clip into the exposed underside of the saucer. At almost point blank range, there was no way she could miss and the slew of bullets sent showers of sparks and several chunks of debris falling from the craft.

Like in the earlier passes, the hunter pulled up and away from the two women, but Mandy thought it had a different look and feel to it. She nodded to herself and ejected the spent clip. Taking a full one from her utility belt, she slapped it into her weapon and held it ready in case the saucer came down again. When it didn't, she spun around to follow Wynne back to the highway.

Finally reaching the black strip of asphalt, Wynne began to run in the opposite direction of her trailer. Several times, she thought she could hear Blackie barking in the distance, but she didn't want to turn around to see if it was true.

Panting so hard that her lungs felt like they were on fire, Wynne had to stop running, completely unable to do anything but wait for Mandy to come to her. As her breath slowly returned to her, she noticed that she was leaning against an old, disused telegraph pole that was partially illuminated by a large ICE billboard on the side of the road.

She had heard the deputy fire off at least ten rounds at the hunter, but she had no idea how the one-sided firefight had turned out - she definitely hoped for the best.

Out of the corner of her eye, she suddenly noticed movement coming towards her from the edge of the highway, and she let herself drop down to the base of the pole so her profile would be much smaller.

Mandy bounded out onto the highway, still holding her sidearm ready. She started looking around for Wynne and soon spotted her characteristic cowboy hat hiding at the foot of the telegraph pole.

"Gawd, am I glad to see you," Wynne said once the deputy had moved down next to her.

"Thanks."

"I heard you shootin'. Did ya hit it?"

"I hit that mother right in the gut, yeah. It lost a couple o' chunks off the fuselage... or whatever it's called on a UFO."

"Good! That'll teach him for blowin' up my truck..." Wynne growled.

"Hey... what's that?" Mandy said, looking to her left. She groaned when she realized just what it was - it was one of the other SUVs from the Sheriff's Office barreling down the highway with all the lights flashing and the siren going at maximum volume.

"Someone musta heard the explosion and called them. Jesus, he'll be blown up for sure," Mandy continued and got up from the ditch. Ignoring the hunter UFO for the time being, she ran out into the middle of the road and started waving her arms like mad to get the other deputy's attention.

Too late - at the exact same time, the attack saucer swept down from the sky and activated its killer beam. The SUV went into the shaft of crimson lightning at full speed and exploded in a huge fireball that sent debris high up in the air. The burning wreck took off at an oblique angle and ended up in a ditch twenty yards off the road.

CHAPTER 4

"Oh, no!" Wynne cried out as she ran up to stand next to Mandy.

Mandy ran her hands through her dusty hair and then roared all her pent-up frustrations up into the night sky.

"Come on, we need to see if we can help him," Wynne said and started jogging towards the wreck.

"This ends now! Gimme your shotgun!" Mandy shouted and reached for the other weapon. Not wanting to stop for even a second, Wynne pitched her gun to Mandy who deftly caught it in mid-air.

The deputy put the weapon to her shoulder and went into a shooting stance, forcing herself to wait until the final moment so she could get a perfect aim at the attacking craft - she didn't have to wait long. A few moments later, the hunter came swooshing down towards her, its lightning beam carving a scorched path across the desert and the highway.

It closed the distance so fast that Mandy nearly didn't have time to react, but when it was a mere sixty feet from her, she opened fire, delivering load after load of hot lead into the UFO. In all, she had time to fire four times and three of them were direct hits.

The beam of lightning continued straight for her, finally getting so close that she could smell the asphalt being scorched. At the very last moment, she threw herself off the road and into the ditch she and Wynne had just occupied.

The hunter UFO went straight on, narrowly avoiding the top of the old telegraph pole; the lightning beam cut the ICE billboard in two perfect halves and set fire to the remains.

Once Wynne arrived at the burning wreck, she could see that the explosion had appeared worse than it really was. The hood, the radiator, the engine and the windshield were all shot to pieces, but the driver's compartment was relatively intact and the fire was already dying down.

Noting that the deputy inside was slumped over the wheel, she tore the door open and reached in to grab the unconscious man. He was heavier than he appeared and Wynne almost gave herself a hernia trying to pull him out.

Only after wasting a couple of attempts did she notice that he was wearing a seatbelt, and she cursed vociferously and reached across him to get him free.

"De-per-ties usin' seatbelts... what the hell's the world comin' to?" Wynne growled as she finally pulled the man out of the wreck. She dragged the unresponsive man across the sand and put him down gently a safe distance away from the police SUV.

Once Wynne rolled him over onto his back, she could see that it was Barry, one of the less hostile deputies.

"I guess I better see if he's awake and alert... sure as shit hope so. Not plannin' on givin' a guy mouth-to-mouth any time soon," she said and gave him a little slap on both cheeks. When he seemed to come to, albeit slowly, Wynne breathed a sigh of relief and moved away to check up on Mandy.

When Mandy looked up at the saucer, she could see that it was rocking in the air and soon began to fly erratically. Getting up from the ditch, she thrust the shotgun in the air and let out a loud, triumphant whoop.

Spinning around on its axis, the attack craft came back down towards Mandy, but the damage from the shotgun blasts was clear to see: there was a large hole in the forward part of the underside right next to the gun port for the lightning beam.

The craft stopped just out of Mandy's effective range, hovering silently in the air. Mandy kept the shotgun at her shoulder, ready to fire if needed. Side-stepping across the highway, she inched herself closer to the UFO, but it didn't take her long to suspect that it was playing with her as the distance between them never changed.

A strong whiff of sulfur made her realize that it was trying to draw her into a trap, and she quickly put down the shotgun and drew her pistol. She fired off a few rounds at the UFO, but she didn't have time to see if they hit because the craft suddenly turned on the lightning beam and came straight for her.

Cursing loudly, Mandy ran back across the highway and dove head-first into the ditch. The beam swept across the road and continued into the desert, setting fire to a road sign and two cacti in the process.

The attack saucer suddenly flew straight up and began to zig-zag wildly. From one moment to the next, it lost all forward propulsion and dropped like a stone, spinning around on its axis several times. It finally hit the desert floor with a loud crash, exploding in a shower of blue and white sparks.

"All rig..." Mandy started to say, but when she looked across the highway, she soon had other things on her mind - five chalk-white aliens had just stepped onto the road, one of them carrying what looked to be a weapon. The group fanned out into a crescent and began to move forward as one.

"This is why I hate the nightshift," Mandy said with a sigh. She jumped out of the ditch and began to walk backwards and to her left. She picked up her shotgun and pointed that and her pistol directly at the approaching aliens.

"Aw, Jeez, Mandy..." Wynne suddenly said from somewhere behind her.

"I know, Wynne. I see 'em," Mandy said without taking her eyes off the aliens.

"The deputy is all right."

"Good. Who is it?"

"It's Barry."

"All right. At least it's not Artie."

"Are there any more than those five critters?"

"Not close by, but who knows."

"Uh..."

"What?"

"The big UFO is approachin' slowly from the north... I mean, from your left," Wynne said. A touch of desperation was beginning to creep into her voice and she had to clear her throat to calm down.

"Oh, swell..."

As if on cue, the surveyor craft turned on its transporter beam; the shaft of bright, white light that had swallowed a jackrabbit whole earlier. A pulse ran up and down the shaft of light, sending out a cloud of sulfurous gas each time it reached the ground.

"Uh, Mandy...?"

"I know, I know! Don't go anywhere near that beam, Wynne. We'll be sucked up!" Mandy said, still walking backwards.

"How much ammo do you have left?"

"Not enough. Where are you?"

"Five paces behind you, walkin' backwards!"

"Good. Stay there."

"Oh, I ain't goin' nowhere! Do you have a plan?"

"... Any minute now. Dammit!" Mandy said, stepping on an unsighted rock on the road and nearly losing her grip on the heavy shotgun.

"And all this started just because I ran outta beer! For cryin' out loud!" Wynne said and slapped her hat angrily against her chest. "Hey... wait a minute! I got it!" Wynne continued and took a deep breath. She put two fingers in her mouth and whistled the loudest she had ever done.

"What the FLYING FLIP WAS THAT?!" Mandy yelled, quickly following it up with a series of colorful curses.

"That was me callin' for backup."

"Bac... look, I know your dogs appeared to be well-trained, but we're in the middle of a Goddamn crisis here!"

"Mandy, stop. You're at the edge of the road. Another step backwards and you'll fall off the blacktop."

"Oh, this just keeps getting better and better... five critters coming closer, a UFO trying to suck up my brains... and we're waiting for two dogs."

"We're two against five... six if you count the surveyor craft. If Blackie and Goldie come, we'll be four against five on the ground."

"Yeah, yeah. Wynne, come up and stand next to me."

Wynne took a couple of long strides and quickly moved up to stand next to the deputy.

"Wynne... if this is the end, it's been nice knowing you," Mandy said, chancing a quick glance at the tall woman standing beside her.

"Uh, thank you. Likewise, Mandy. But I doubt this is the end. We beat 'em before, we can do it again."

"I have a bad feeling we... WATCH OUT!" Mandy suddenly yelled as the alien in the center of the crescent stepped forward and turned on the piece of equipment it was holding. On the electronic device, a series of little lights flashed first white and then blue.

Once the blue lights went out, the center part of it turned crimson red, the same color the lightning beam had been on the attack saucer.

Mandy waited for as long as she dared, but when the alien took a step forward, she pulled the shotgun's trigger. The powerful weapon sent out a load of hot lead that tore chunks out of the lead alien and sent it flying backwards away from the road.

"Gawd, that's disgustin'!" Wynne said, desperately trying to look away from the mess.

At first, the other aliens stared in disbelief at their dead colleague, but a few moments later, they spun around and attacked Wynne and Mandy as one.

"Here they come!" Mandy cried out and worked the action on the shotgun, but before she had time to fire again, the first alien had reached her and had forced the weapon out of her hands.

Wynne jumped forward and started wrestling with two of the aliens. She tried several times to get a clear line of fire so she could kick them in the crotch, but judging by the way they were cleverly evading her, they had obviously learned a thing or two from the previous altercation.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that Mandy was in similar trouble with the remaining two aliens, but she didn't have time to come to the deputy's assistance.

One of the aliens jumped up on Wynne's back and thumped her across her neck, sending her cowboy hat flying and forcing her down on one knee.

"Mah hat!" she barked, frantically reaching behind her to grab hold of the alien. She finally did so, flinging the chalk-white critter down on the ground. As she got up, the other alien had unwittingly positioned itself

perfectly and Wynne instinctively kicked out with her right leg. The tip of her cowboy boot connected squarely in the center of the alien, making it double over in pain.

Suddenly, two furry shapes, one black and one golden, came out of nowhere and joined the melee. The two dogs flew around the fight, barking like mad and snapping their jaws at the aliens.

"Go get 'em, girls!" Wynne shouted, pumping her fist in the air. When she noticed that Mandy was sitting down on the asphalt having been knocked over in a sneak attack by one of the aliens, she quickly ran over to her to help her get back on her feet.

"Thanks, Wynne. Damn, my butt hurts..." Mandy said and rubbed her aching behind.

"Oh, it seems to be all right from here. I'll take a closer look later. How 'bout them dawgs, huh?"

"Yeah... they really saved our bacon."

The chalk-white critters reacted by going into an obvious state of panic. They started bumping into each other left and right, and within a few seconds, they spun around and ran clumsily back to the waiting surveyor craft. One by one, they were transported up through the shaft of light.

"Yeah, you get the hell outta here, ya buncha chickenshits! That'll teach ya for pickin' a fight with wimmenfolk!" Wynne hollered after the fleeing aliens, waving her newly-found hat high in the air.

Once all the aliens had been whisked away, the shaft of light rescinded and the surveyor UFO slowly moved upwards. Suddenly, a bright white flash was seen, forcing Wynne and Mandy to shield their eyes.

"Whoa!" Mandy said, putting her arm up to her face.

"It's gone. Ha! If ya can't stand the heat, ya shouldn't ha' landed here in the middle of the Goddamn desert!"

Barking a few times, Goldie ran around her mistress' feet and then stretched up to put her paws on the denim jacket.

"Ohhhhh, that's a good girl! I'm gonna serve you the biggest treat you've ever had," Wynne said, rubbing her hands all over the fur of the Golden Retriever to show the dog her gratitude. With a happy yap, Goldie started licking Wynne's face, earning herself yet another rubdown.

More sedately, Blackie went up to Mandy and nudged the deputy's leg a couple of times.

"Thanks, uh... dog. Blackie, wasn't it?" Mandy said. When Blackie acknowledged the question by barking briefly, Mandy reached down and mused the German Shepherd behind the ears.

"Hey, Mandy?"

"Yeah?"

"I have two questions for ya."

"Shoot."

"One, what do we do with the carcass of the alien you blew away?"

"Nothing. We call it roadkill and forget all about it. The paperwork is gonna be murder."

"Ugh. All right, question two... you wanna come over for a cup o' coffee... or somethin'?" Wynne said, adding a little wink.

"It's tempting, that's for sure."

"So...?"

"Ah., what the hell. Sure. I'd love to," Mandy said with a grin.

"Awright!"

"I need to call this mess in and check up on Barry first, though," Mandy said and mussed Blackie a couple more times. When the black dog decided that it'd had enough affection for one evening, it ran over to Wynne and Goldie.

"Oh, yeah... de-per-ty Barry... I forgot all about him," Wynne said and pushed her hat back from her forehead.

"So this is actually your first week here?" Wynne said once they had waved goodbye to the ambulance that took Barry away to the hospital.

"That's right."

"Uh, are you plannin' on stayin'...? I mean, here in Goldsboro?"

"Well, yeah. I have a room down at Mrs. Peabody's."

"Mrs. Busybody's."

"Hah, yeah..."

"Mmmm."

"What's on your mind?" Mandy said, cocking her head.

'Oh, wouldn't you like to know...' Wynne thought, wisely keeping it to herself. "De-per-ty Mandy, I think this could be the start of a beautiful, uh, friendship."

"You do, huh?" Mandy said, crinkling her nose - a gesture that Wynne thought was too cute for words.

"Yep," Wynne said, wearing a beaming grin.

The two of them turned around and started walking back to Wynne's trailer, closely followed by Blackie and Goldie. After a few steps, Mandy gently bumped shoulders with the taller woman walking next to her.

"Mmmm. You could be right."

THE END of SILENT INVASION

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...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.

A brief word before we seal the coffin: I have learned that several of you have neglected to feed the monsters that live in your closets. I fear it will only come back to haunt you if you don't, so chop-chop, get to it. I know from personal experience that most of them prefer a warm heart to a cold shoulder, but if you are unsure of what to feed your particular monster, first try a freshly killed goat. However, they usually aren't picky, so if you go too long between feeding them, you should probably wear some sort of protective clothing when you open the closet doors. Thank you.

Until next time...

Eternally Yours,

Norsebard

THE END of THE BOOK OF CHILLS, Volume II