

As soon as she saw that her Cessna 172 was already fully prepared, she felt a load fall off her shoulders and she took a deep breath. She ran her hands through her dark hair - recently, she had noticed a few grey strands, an aggravation she didn't need - and then let the air out slowly.

Not only did she have a throbbing headache, but the muscles in her neck were stiff and sore, a direct result of spending nearly the entire day in an idiotic meeting that didn't accomplish anything - and if that wasn't enough, she badly needed her moisturizing cream, which, unfortunately, was sitting pretty on her nightstand back home in her condo.

She unlocked the plane and walked around it to perform a visual check. Satisfied that everything was all right, she took off her jacket, put it across the seats and picked up the papers needed to file a flight plan.

Patricia knocked on the door to the Flight Control office, but didn't get the expected reply. A few seconds later, she could hear a toilet flushing and the door to the bathroom opened up behind her.

"Oh, hello, Miss Nolan. I'll be with you in a sec," a man said, standing in the doorway to the bathroom, wiping off his hands on a towel.

"Mr. Gray. Take your time," Patricia said, looking at the short, balding man. She had never seen him wear anything but dark grey pants, a white short-sleeved shirt and a leather tie that only reached halfway down his chest, and, true to form, he was wearing that outfit today as well.

"All right. I'm here. Are you going out alone, Miss Nolan?" Dom Gray said and unlocked the door to the Flight Control office.

"Yes. It's been too long since I've had a little solo time. I thought I'd take my 172 out for a little trip 'round the country side."

"We close at one, so if you're not back by then..."

"The night watchman has already told me, thank you. I won't be gone that long," Patricia said and put the papers on Mr. Gray's desk. She found a plastic chair and sat down, crossing her legs in a very proper manner.

"All right. Let's see what we have here," Dom Gray said and took a look at the papers.

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Ten minutes later, Patricia returned to the hangar with the approved flight plan. She put it in the plane and started looking around for the airfield's gofer - she could never remember the young man's name, so she just referred to him as 'Bubba' because she thought he looked like that sort of fellow. She finally found him lounging in the coffee room, balancing precariously on the hind legs of his chair.

"Good evening. Would you mind opening hangar #2 for me, please?" Patricia said, giving the young man her most winning smile.

"Of course not, Miss Nolan. I'll be right there," the young, acne-plagued man said, leaning forward so all four legs of the chair came into contact with the brown linoleum. He put down the comic he was reading and grabbed a greasy baseball cap with the Trelayne Field logo on it.

As he went past Patricia on his way out of the coffee room, she could read the small nametag on his coverall, identifying him as 'Joseph'. She made a mental note to at least try to remember it, but at the same time, she knew she would forget it even before she had taken off.

Joseph walked briskly towards the hangar, putting on his work gloves as he did so. Despite being at least three inches taller than the young man, and being equipped with a set of fairly long and shapely - well, at least in her own opinion - legs, Patricia had to walk quickly to keep up with him.

'No wonder. He's probably anxious to get back to his comic,' Patricia thought and chuckled quietly to herself.

Joseph pulled hard on the left hand hangar door, making the huge contraption begin to slide to the side. Once it was locked into place, he went over to the other side and repeated the procedure.

"All set, Miss Nolan," he said as he took off his gloves.

"Thank you, uhhh... Joseph. I'm alone tonight, so... would you mind pulling my Cessna out as well?"

"Not at all. Please stand at a safe distance," Joseph said and put the gloves back on. He went over to a small tractor and started it up. Once it was running cleanly, he drove it into the hangar and attached a towing bar to the front wheel of the 172.

Effortlessly, the tractor pulled Patricia's Cessna out of the hangar and onto the concrete surface in front of the large building. Joseph quickly unhooked the towing bar and then parked the tractor.

"Thank you very much, Joseph. That'll be all."

"You're welcome, Miss Nolan," he said with a grin.

A few minutes later, Patricia taxied out to the far end of the runway, getting ready to take off. When she reached the designated starting point, she turned the 172 around so it was perfectly aligned with the lights lining the concrete runway.

"Trelayne Tower, Cessna N62219. Holding at position," she said, keying the mic in her headset. She shuffled around in the seat to find the best spot and then pulled her seatbelts very tight.

'Roger, 219. You're cleared for takeoff.'

"Roger, Tower," Patricia said, and got the prop up to the needed revs. She released the brakes and felt the speed increase at once. Before long, the Cessna reached the 70 knots required for take-off and Patricia pulled the yoke towards her.

'219, you're cleared to flight level 2-4-5-0, over.'

"Roger, Tower, climbing to 2-4-5-0. Upon completion, proceeding to heading 0-1-1."

'Roger. There's traffic at 6500, but they're moving away. Have a nice flight, 219.'

"Thank you, Tower."

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After flying for a while, Patricia adjusted a knob on the dashboard and made a small course correction. She checked her watch and found she still had plenty of time until she had to be back at the airfield.

As she flew through the darkness of the night, her thoughts began to drift back to the board meeting earlier in the day. The entire senior staff of CalPharma had been summoned to discuss a possible takeover of a minor competitor, and the meeting had gone well until one of the Human Resource Managers - Patricia often called them the Human Resource Troublemakers - began to bitch and moan about her ever-increasing workload.

It prompted everyone to put in their two cents worth and the meeting soon degenerated into a shouting match. In the next thirty minutes, Patricia had witnessed enough drama and histrionics to last her a lifetime, and she had almost been compelled to feign a heart attack just to escape the idiocy. She blamed the CEO for not cutting through the inane nonsense soon enough.

'Cessna N62219, say heading and airspeed.'

"Tower, heading is 0-1-1 degrees, and the airspeed is 1-1-9 knots, over."

'Roger, 219. You have crossing traffic at flight level 5700.'

"Roger that, Tower."

When silence once again filled the cockpit, Patricia started thinking about what to give her partner for the upcoming Valentine's Day.

'Roses... no, they'll only hold for a few days. And chocolate or candy is out of the question... Becky is on a diet. Oh, I know... how about a wedding ring?' Patricia thought. A chuckle escaped her lips when she thought about what kind of reaction such a gift would provoke.

Patricia had to shake her head when she considered that Valentine's Day would already mark their fourth anniversary. At first, she had been worried that the feisty Rebecca Charles had ulterior motives for being interested in her - after all, a Senior Accounting Manager and a business reporter for one of the broadsheets weren't exactly typical bedfellows - but after a very romantic courtship, they had moved in together, and so far, everything had been rosy.

Patricia made another small course correction and checked her watch again. She sighed and started banking right.

"Trelayne Tower, Cessna N62219. Turning to heading 1-0-3, airspeed 1-1-2 knots, increasing to 1-1-9 knots, over."

'Roger, 219. You have slow Heli traffic at flight level 2-4-0-0, bearing 0-9-2, distance 35 miles and closing. Beware.'

"Roger, Tower. I'll keep a lookout."

As the Cessna gradually moved to the heading that would take it back to the airfield, Patricia remembered the look of horror on Becky's face when she had told her that she was using her Christmas bonus to buy a plane.

'A plane? An aeroplane? A tin box on wheels that soars through the skies?' Becky had said, her face resembling a horrified exclamation point.

'Yes, such a one.'

'Why not a new car? Why not a Porsche Convertible? We could go cruising down the coast, or...'

Patricia eased up on the controls when the plane had returned to the correct course. She was secretly rather pleased that her trip was going so smoothly. Not only had it been a while since she had last flown solo, night flying was something that had always been difficult for her.

She checked her watch again - unless she had to go around the slow Heli, she'd land right on time.

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Ten uneventful minutes later, an unusual crackling noise reached Patricia's ears, and she strained her hearing to try to ascertain where it had come from. She looked around in the cockpit, but could neither see nor smell any obvious signs of trouble.

Thirty seconds passed without further noises, so she shrugged and took a thorough look at the instruments. The engine temperature and oil pressure gauges were still in the green zone and she was still travelling on a 1-0-3 heading.

'Must've been a gremlin,' Patricia thought. She keyed the mic and began to speak.

"Trelayne Tower, Cessna N62219. Turning to hea..."

Suddenly, without any warning at all, the instrument lights dimmed and the engine started coughing and spluttering.

"What the...?"

Patricia frantically looked at the instruments and saw to her great horror that the voltmeter was reading close to zero - two seconds earlier it had been fine.

Then the cockpit and instrument lights disappeared completely and the engine skipped a cycle. The controls became sluggish and Patricia could feel the nose of the Cessna begin to drop.

"Oh, God, no! This isn't happening!" she cried out in the near darkness, the cockpit only illuminated by the rays of the full moon.

Her heart was hammering away in her chest and her hands were shaking, but she managed to pull sufficiently on the unresponsive flight controls to make the plane level out.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is Cessna N62219, I'm in distress!"

The radio was silent - it wasn't even receiving static.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday! Can anyone hear me?"

Reality suddenly slapped Patricia across her face and she had trouble breathing. As it dawned on her that she was in serious trouble, her eyes grew wider and wider and she could feel her lower lip quivering. She looked out of the side window into the vast expanses of pitch black nothingness, but couldn't spot anything at all she could use as a point of reference.

The engine note had become very rough, but at least it was still turning. When she tried to increase the revs to regain the altitude she had lost before, it only led to more popping and banging, so she quickly throttled back.

With a shaking hand, Patricia wiped the cold sweat off her forehead. She tried to calculate when she'd be able to see the landing lights at Trelayne Field, but the gravity of the situation made her unable to get the sums right.

Fighting a rising tide of panic, she realized that she didn't even know if she was headed in the right direction. She shook her throbbing head and cursed her decision to take the Cessna out for a midnight spin.

'Panic kills. Always stay calm.'

The words of her flight instructor rang loud and clear through her mind, and she forced herself to remain focused. She went through all the instruments, hoping that at least a few of them would still be operational.

She knew that the fuel gauge was mechanically driven, so that was the first one she checked. To her great relief, it still seemed to work, indicating that the tanks were still more than half full. The artificial horizon was also working, showing that she was flying straight and level, although the left wing had a tendency to dip.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday! This is Cessna N62219, I'm in distress... please acknowledge!"

Patricia's already weary neck muscles were giving her a lot of grief, but when she tried easing up on the death grip she had on the yoke, the nose immediately dropped, forcing her to work double hard to get it back up. After going through that experience twice within a minute, she decided to ignore the pain from her neck and just concentrate on getting the plane down on the ground - in one piece.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday! ... Isn't there anyone out there who can hear me?" she said into the mic. She knew that a panicky tremble had entered her voice, but by now, she didn't care one bit about keeping up appearances.

Patricia looked intently at the radio, hoping that she could will it into receiving something... anything - but, unfortunately, the radio remained deathly quiet. She sighed and briefly closed her eyes.

"I'm so sorry, Becky. You don't deserve this. I'm sorry... I love you," she whispered out into the darkness.

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Just when everything seemed hopeless, a crystal clear female voice chimed in on the radio, making Patricia jump in surprise and nearly causing her sweaty, aching hands to slip off the controls.

'Six-two-two-one-niner, this is Mama's Toy. I read ya five by five, over.'

"Yes, hello! This is N62219, I'm in severe distress. I've had an electrical failure of some kind. Most of my instruments are gone and my engine's running rough. Please advise."

'I got an eyeball on ya. Take a peek out ya Port windows, missy, I'm at your Eleven o'clock high.'

Patricia leaned forward and peeked out of the cockpit windows, but the only things she could see were a few twinkling stars.

"Mama's Toy, I don't have a visual, over. Where are you?"

'Look again, missy. I'll flash my landing lights for ya.'

Patricia looked again and suddenly spotted two stars that seemed to follow a course parallel to each other. She strained her eyes, but could not see anything solid between the two points of light.

'Great, I must be losing my mind...' she thought.

'Have you spotted me yet?' the female voice said.

As Patricia listened to the words, a dark gray shape suddenly stood out between the two twinkling stars and she could see three powerful lights flashing only a short distance away.

"Yes! I've got you. You had me worried there for a while, Mama's Toy."

'Wouldn't want that, would we. Stand by, I'll swing by ya and come up on ya Starboard wing.'

"Roger, Mama's Toy," Patricia said, wiping her brow again. While she knew that she wasn't out of danger by any stretch of the imagination, the female voice on the radio had instilled a sense of calm in her that allowed her to relax a tiny amount. With a big sigh of relief, she whispered a thank you to whichever Gods were listening.

'And here we are, 622. I'm at your Starboard wing. Stick with me, an' I'll get ya home safely.'

"Thank you, Mama's Toy," Patricia said and looked out to her right. The other plane was hovering a few feet above and ahead of her right wing, maintaining a perfect formation.

'622, does your compass work?'

Again Patricia wondered about the crystal clarity of the voice, but pushed it aside. She leaned forward and looked at the blacked out display of the main compass. She tried to tap a fingernail against the instrument's protective casing, but it didn't spring to life.

"Negative, Mama's Toy. My primary compass is in-op and... and I can't see my secondary one in this darkness."

'All right. Hmmm. Hey, good news, missy. If ya bank left just a tiny amount, you'll be headin' straight towards Fox Field. I'll be here to guide you along.'

"Fox Field...? Where is that? That's not on any of my charts."

'Y'all better get some new charts then, missy. Fox Field's been there since the summer of '38. That's where I cut my teeth on this here flyin' business.'

"Oh..."

'Stand by to bank left. I'll tell ya when to stop.'

"No, no, wait a minute. I'm not sure I can do it. My controls are sluggish at best. I don't know if I'll be able to straighten out afterwards!"

'Look, missy, Fox Field is only fifty clicks away. I know exactly where it is. Where were you headed?'

"Trelayne Field."

'Never heard of it, an' I have no clue how to help you get there.'

"But..."

'So it's Fox Field or a hole in the ground. Take your pick,' the female voice said.

"Oh, Jesus..."

'Naw, missy, I'm just another friendly pilot.'

"A-all right, Mama's Toy. I'll try. Banking left," Patricia said and turned the yoke. The Cessna slowly changed direction, banking left ever so slightly. The engine note became more strained, but didn't revert to the popping and banging it had done before. The points of light on the ground moved across the windows, creating a surreal backdrop to the events.

'Ya doin' good. Just a little bit more an' you'll be there. All right... straighten up!'

Patricia moved the yoke back to the center position, hoping and praying that the plane would respond - fortunately, it seemed to do just that. The engine note slowly returned to the way it was before she had started banking; still running rough, but at least turning over.

'Great work, 622. Won't be long before you'll have Fox Field in sight, over.'

"Thank you. Mama's Toy... what's your name? It feels strange referring to you by your call sign."

'My name's Susan P. Keilly. What's yours?'

"Patricia Nolan."

'Hey, how's that for a coincidence. That's my middle name!' Susan said with a laugh.

"Ha. Yeah..." Patricia said and shuffled around in her seat. The adrenaline that had pumped through her system in the initial shock had worn off, leaving her tired and uncomfortable. She could feel sweat trickling down from her hair and face, coming to a rest in, of all places, her cleavage.

She could feel a cramp coming on in her hands and arms, so she tried taking one hand off the yoke. As soon as she did so, the plane began dropping, so he hurriedly put both of them back on the controls.

Patricia craned her neck, trying to pick out a few details of the plane flying next to her. It appeared to be a vintage warbird of some kind, painted in olive green, except for the area just beneath the engine which was decorated as a large mouth with sharp teeth, and the tail, which was painted in a checkerboard pattern - all in all, it looked to be in tip-top shape.

"Susan, what type of plane are you flying? I don't think I've ever seen it before, over."

'It's funny you should say that, Patty. I can't recognize your wings, either.'

Patricia furrowed her brow, wondering a great deal about the other pilot's answer. The Cessna 172 had been produced in high numbers since 1956 and it just wasn't feasible that an active pilot didn't know it.

"It's a Cessna 172."

'Oh. Well, this is a Curtiss P40 Warhawk, built in '41. The tail fin is done up to honor the boys in the 325th and the mouth on the cowling is obviously a mark of respect for Chesnault's Tigers.'

"Right. Thanks..."

'Y'know, I still think the Hawks got a bad rep in the European Theater. The main problem was that they weren't equipped with a two-stage supercharger, so they weren't much use against the 109s and the 190s when they were running close support for the BUFFs. Now, in my opinion, the Merlin V1710 has plenty of oomph on the deck and otherwise, but there ya go.'

"Uhhh... really?"

Patricia didn't know what on Earth the other pilot was talking about, but she had plenty on her plate already, so she didn't want to inquire further.

'Yeah. But that means they're going cheap, so I guess there's a good side to it as well. It flies pretty dog gone good for a ten-year old bird. Anyway, I heard a funny little story this mornin' while I was sippin' a mug of rocket fuel. Ya wanna hear it?'

"Sure..."

'All right. There's this man, see, who's worried, really worried, 'cos he's suspecting his wife is having an affair with another pilot. Every time he asks her, she denies it. Ya with me?'

"Yeah. Go on."

'Well, he finally musters up the courage to ask her flat out. Do ya know what her answer was?'

"No?"

'She said: Honey, I've told ya once, I've told ya twice, I've told ya niner thousand times, negative on the affair.'

"Oh, dear!" Patricia said and began to laugh.

'Brought a smile to your face, huh?'

"Yes, it did. Thank you."

'No problem. I've got a million stories just like it.'

"Are you married, Susan?"

The pause that followed was so long that Patricia started to worry that they had lost the connection. She tried to look down to see what the radio was doing, but when she leaned forward, the Cessna dropped a few feet, prompting her to focus on the yoke instead.

'I was,' the other pilot finally said.

"You're divorced?"

'No. He... he never came back from the war.'

"Oh, I'm really sorry to hear that."

'He was my childhood sweetheart, believe it or not. But, hey, at least I got my kid. Yeah, my little Jack. I can see a lot of my husband in my kid, so... ya know. How about you, are ya married, Patricia?'

"Uhhh... no. Not exactly. I'm living with someone, but we're not married."

'Do ya have any children?'

"Oh, no."

'Don't ya want any?'

"No. Besides, it's too late for me, even if I did. I'm nearly 45."

'Oh, really? Ya sound younger.'

"Thank you," Patricia said with a chuckle.

'You're welcome.'

Some time later, Patricia found herself wishing that they would soon reach the airfield so the nightmare would come to an end. Her neck was one, big lump of soreness and her fingers were slowly getting numb from gripping the flight controls so hard.

"Susan... how far is it? I don't know how much longer I can do this. I'm so tired..."

'We're still a good seven-eight clicks away from Fox Field, but don't worry, I've got ya.'

"At that distance, we should be able to see some lights from the field, but I can't. There aren't any lights at all anywhere near us."

'Well, they're not exactly expecting you, ya know. But I'm sure they'll light the drums when they hear ya.'

"Light the... what?"

'The oil drums. Ya know, to mark the outer edges of the grassy strip.'

"Who on Earth does that these days? Why don't they have regular runway lights like everyone else?"

'Whoa, calm down, Patty. Fox Field is privately owned. We can't afford any of those fancy things.'

"But..."

'Listen, it'll all work out in the end. Trust me. I've done a thousand landings only navigatin' by the oil drums.'

"Still..."

'Hey, my first bird was made before I was born and lemme tell ya, it was a rickety contraption. Whenever I went up, I never knew if I'd be able to get safely back down again, but I always did. Of course, I did wreck once... belly flopped the damn thing but good.'

"That's not very reassuring, Susan."

'Naw, but I'm trying to tell ya that even with that rickety ol' bird, I was still able to land just fine using the oil drums. If ya just focus on gettin' down, it'll all work out.'

Patricia sighed and tried again to spot a few more details of the plane flying next to her. Even though the night had a full moon, the cockpit area on the other plane was rarely illuminated, and even when it was, it was impossible to see much of the other pilot apart from a fuzzy outline.

"All right. But I hope we'll get to it soon," Patricia said in a shaking voice.

'We will. Won't be long now.'

"Susan, would you mind turning on your cockpit interior lights...? Just briefly. I'd like to see who I'm talking to."

'Eh? Well, I guess there ain't much up here we could bang into. Hang on,' Susan said - a few seconds later, the cockpit of the warbird lit up, shining a curious mix of faint orange and pale blue light onto the person in the pilot's seat.

Patricia leaned forward and looked intently at the other pilot. Susan was wearing an old-fashioned leather flying cap and a pair of goggles that completely obscured the upper part of her face. While Patricia was looking, Susan moved the goggles up to her forehead and turned around to face the Cessna.

Even though they were less than thirty feet apart, Patricia was unable to see much, except that Susan's face appeared to have soft, friendly features. The light in the warbird's cockpit seemed to shimmer, almost creating a rippling effect that made it difficult to work out any details.

'All right?' Susan said and held up a gloved hand to give Patricia a thumbsup.

"Yes, thank you. I appreciate it."

Susan turned off the interior lights and the warbird was once again shrouded by darkness.

'Stay sharp, Patty, we're gettin' close. Fox Field will come into sight any minute now,' Susan said, gently moving the P40's wings up and down to alert Patricia to the imminent action.

"Thank you, God," Patricia said in a voice strained from the ordeal.

'Naw, as I told ya before, I'm jus' a friendly pilot. All right, listen up. I don't know how many landings you've done in your Thingamajig there, but Fox is only equipped with a really short strip and you have tall pines on either end.'

"I've... I've done a few, but I d-don't have any landing lights or anything. I'm almost flying blind, Susan."

'That's what the burning drums are for. Ya need to come in low and slow and hit the strip at the first drums. Once ya do, let it run out of steam by itself. Only apply the brakes if ya run out of strip or if ya veer off course. Ya still with me?'

"Y-yes... I got it. Oh! I s-see some kind of... some kind of tower building... is that right?" Patricia said, straining her eyes to spot the buildings that were slowly appearing out of the darkness.

'That's right, Patty.'

"I can't see any burning drums!"

'They'll be there as soon as they hear ya. Trust me.'

"All right... Fox Tower, mayday, mayday, mayday. Cessna N62219 in distress. I'm at flight level 8-2-7, approaching Fox Field from the South-West, over."

Silence.

"Susan, I can't hail the tower."

'They probably don't have their ears on. You'll have to take it down by yourself. Glide a degree or so to Starboard, we're not lined up on the center of the strip.'

Patricia eased up on the controls and let the Cessna glide sideways. The engine note changed slightly, but it still held together. Suddenly, Patricia could see activity on the ground - lights were turned on everywhere on the airfield, and several men ran from a low building into the tower. As if by magic, two rows of landing lights lit up, lining the runway and clearing the path for Patricia's Cessna.

'And there ya have your drums. Told ya so.'

"What the hell are you talking about, those are regular runway lights, not burning oil drums," Patricia said, a touch of desperation sneaking into her voice.

Lining up directly along the runway, she moved the controls forward, allowing the plane to ease into a descent. She could feel sweat stinging her eyes, so she quickly wiped her brow.

'Low and slow, Patty, but remember the tall pines.'

"Yeah, yeah..."

Despite her frazzled nerves, Patricia's routine asserted itself the moment she went into final approach, and she did all the things she'd been taught, like setting the fuel mixture to rich and checking the gauges for the oil temperature and oil pressure. When she reached the end of the checklist, her finger hovered above the switch for the landing lights. She debated with herself if she should try to push it or not, but ended up not doing so out of fear of triggering yet another disaster.

When she looked out of the windows, she could see the runway directly ahead of her - but suddenly, out of nowhere, dark shadows appeared between herself and the strip.

'You're too low, too low! Break, break, break... Goddammit, Patty, climb!'

In a matter of seconds, the dark shadows ahead of the Cessna turned into a row of impossibly tall pine trees, and Patricia twitched in shock - with a shriek, she increased the revs of the engine and turned the controls hard left.

The engine note turned very rough and the popping and banging returned. The controls started shaking so hard Patricia almost couldn't hold on to them, but by using all her strength, she was able to complete the turn and then level out. She quickly throttled back and clapped a trembling hand over her mouth.

'I told ya about those trees, Patty. Now ya have to go 'round and do it all again.'

"I... I... I c-c-can't do it... I can't," Patricia said, her voice trembling so much she could hardly understand herself.

'Yes you can. Come on. Go 'round and do it again. I'll be right here, by your side the whole time. Come on, Patty. Ya can do it.'

Several minutes passed by before Patricia could make the next attempt at landing. She'd been turning very slowly and in a very large arc, afraid what might happen if she tried to force the Cessna into making a harder turn.

'That's good, Patty. You're lined up. Now just remember the pines, an' you'll be fine this time.'

"I h-hope so. I won't be able to do it again. I th-think my hair has turned white by now," Patricia said, shuffling around in her seat, trying to ignore the sweat stinging her eyes. She suddenly noticed that the warbird wasn't on her wing anymore and she started looking around for it - it was nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, Susan... where'd you go?"

'I'm right here.'

"Where? I can't see you anywhere."

'I don't want to be too close in case ya need to break again. But I'm here, count on it.'

"Oh... all right."

Like before, Patricia eased up on the controls and allowed the Cessna to go into a descent - except that her starting point was fifty feet higher this time. Lining up along the path of the runway, she was aiming directly for the lights that marked the beginning of the concrete strip.

'One mile, Patty. You're looking good. Hey, when we get down, I'll buy you a mug of hot cocoa.'

"Cocoa? I'd rather have a Scotch, if you don't mind," Patricia said, staring intently at the fast approaching lights at the airfield.

'A Whisky drinking woman? What's the world coming to... well, to each their own, I guess. I can't wait to introduce ya to my little Jack. He's such a lovely kid. Never gives me any trouble, that boy. I'm very proud of him.'

"I-I'm l-looking forward to it."

'Yeah, my boy Jack is a fast learner. I've only had to flog him once.'

"You... you what?" Patricia said, shocked over the unexpected statement from the other pilot.

'Seven hundred yards. Keep it up, Patty.'

Patricia opened her mouth to ask Susan again what she had meant, but an eerie, orange glow from somewhere ahead of her caught her eye and she forgot all about the other thing.

As she flew closer, she could see that a section of the forest seemed to be bathed in an orange light that didn't appear to have a source. The forest wasn't on fire, and the light didn't flicker like it would have if it had come from torches or flashlights.

The orange light was centered just beyond the tall pines and the otherworldliness of it sent chills up and down Patricia's spine.

"Susan, what's that strange light down there? Can you see it? Twelve o'clock low, down on the ground."

'Sorry, Patty, I can't see it. Perhaps you're getting tired? Five hundred yards, you're coming up to the pines. Beware.'

"I know, I know... How can you not see it? It's right there! It's a bright orange light in the middle of the dark forest, and you can't see it?"

The extra altitude helped Patricia clear the tall pine trees, and she felt elated when she saw the dark shadows disappear behind her. A split second later, the orange light on the ground flashed white and then disappeared without a trace.

"Susan! Don't tell me you didn't see that!"

'Great, you've cleared the pines. Now all ya have to do is to get the bird down in one piece.'

"Didn't you see that flash? What's going on here?"

Silence.

"Susan...? Susan! Dammit, where the hell are you! What the blazes is going on here?"

Silence.

'Two hundred yards. Make it stick, Patty. I know you can do it. C'mon... make old Susan proud.'

"Susan!"

Silence.

"To hell with her!" Patricia said angrily, letting out a frustrated groan. She went into the final descent, easing up on the controls and throttling back when she was eighty feet off the ground. When she took her hand off the controls, the Cessna began drifting right, so she had to move her hand back to the yoke and grip it hard.

When Patricia was fifty feet off the ground, the engine started coughing again. It skipped a cycle and blew a fine spray of oil out of the engine and onto the windshield - finally giving up the ghost, it rattled noisily a few times and was then still. The propeller windmilled, only helping to slow down the plane instead of moving it forward.

"Oh, God, not now! No, no, no..." Patricia shouted, frantically pushing the starter button.

The deadly combination of gravity and a lack of forward thrust made the Cessna drop like a stone, sending it hurtling towards the concrete runway at terrifying speed.

Patricia shrieked and tried to brace herself as well as she could.

The Cessna hit the concrete runway with devastating force, but, miraculously, didn't break apart - the wheels and landing struts absorbed most of the blow, bending far beyond what they were designed for. The engine cowling was torn loose on both sides and the passenger side door was pulled off its top hinge, sending the Plexiglas window cartwheeling down the runway.

Patricia tried to hold onto the flight controls, but they were yanked from her hands by the initial impact. Despite having the seatbelts pulled very tight, she felt like she was gripped by an invisible hand and then shook like a cheap ragdoll. A sharp, stinging pain spread out from her abused neck muscles and her left thumb which had been forced the wrong way when it was caught underneath the controls.

All the air was knocked out of her, so she only had strength to cry out in a strangled, pained voice. She didn't have any time to reflect on the injuries as the plane bounced hard on the runway and then took off again, swerving towards the grassy field next to the concrete strip.

On the second, gentler, bump, the dashboard lit up like a Christmas tree, setting off all sorts of automated alarms. Patricia finally managed to grab hold of the yoke and pulled it close to her to avoid taking off again. The engine came alive, but coughed, banged and rattled so loudly that Patricia was afraid it might

explode. The radio roared to life with a very loud screech, transmitting so much white noise directly into Patricia's ears that she had to reach up and tear off the headset.

The Cessna wasn't running straight, but in the grander scheme of things, that wasn't a major problem - the white smoke that suddenly billowed out of the engine was. Patricia tried to push the button for the onboard fire extinguisher, but it didn't appear to do anything.

The plane was hesitant to slow down, so Patricia gently applied the brakes, immediately feeling the plane lose speed. Even before the plane had stopped completely, she undid the seatbelts so she was ready to jump out if she had to. When she moved her left hand, a fierce pain shot up from her wrist, making her clench her teeth and hold her arm tightly against her body.

The Cessna finally ground to a halt just off the runway. Patricia looked out of the side window and saw several men come racing toward her, some of them carrying extinguishers, and some of them just waving their arms like mad. Behind them, she could see a row of large, illuminated letters on the tower building - SUSAN P. KEILLY FIELD.

The shock of what had nearly happened hit her in squarely in the gut and her shoulders started shaking. She felt incredibly cold, and no matter how hard she tried, she just wasn't able to get out of the plane.

The door was yanked open by the first of the rescuers and a pair of strong hands reached into the cockpit. Patricia could feel herself being hauled rather roughly out of the plane, but she was in no condition to complain.

"... She's alone ... Fire! Point the ... Radio's fried ... That's why we couldn't raise her ... How the hell ... Get her inside ... Call the Doc ..."

The ethereal voices swirled ceaselessly all around her, but she wasn't able to get her ears in tune with any of them. She barely registered that she was carried into a small office and put down on a couch, and the last thing she remembered before passing out was that a warm blanket was wrapped around her aching body.

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Twenty minutes later, a man in his late forties wearing a greasy boilersuit and sporting a three-day stubble walked into the small office, closely followed by an older, distinguished looking man who was carrying a large bag. They went over to the sleeping Patricia and the doctor kneeled down in front of her.

"Here she is, Doc. Is she all right?" the man in the boilersuit said.

"Well, I probably need to take a look at her before I can determine that, Bobby."

"Oh... of course. I'll leave you to it, then."

"Where's J.T.?" the doctor asked, putting on a stethoscope.

"He's out at the wreck. Want me to get 'im for ya?"

"Yes, please. If I can't get through to her, I need him to find out who she is."

"All right. Won't be a sec," Bobby said and left the small office.

The doctor could see that even in her sleep, the woman favored her left arm, so he surmised that she had suffered at least a sprain, if not a fracture. Her skin color was flushed, but that was understandable given the circumstances, and there was no evidence of bleeding.

He gently touched Patricia's shoulder, whispering quietly into her ear.

"Miss... Miss... please wake up. We need to see if you're all right. Miss...?"

Patricia blinked a few times and then sat up straight. Her sore neck muscles made their presence felt and she let out a groan. Soon, her wrist joined the chorus of aching spots and all in all, she felt miserable.

"Does your neck hurt, Miss?" the doctor said, worried over the outbursts.

"Yeah... but it did that before the crash. Where am I? Who are you?"

"I'm Doctor James Preston. You're at the Keilly airfield. You've been in an accident. Do you remember anything from it?"

"I remember everything," Patricia said and coughed dryly a few times.

"Good. Then you probably don't have a concussion. Can you remember your name? How many fingers am I holding up?" Doc Preston said and held up four fingers.

"Four. My name's Patricia Nolan. I'm a Senior Accounting Manager at CalPharma."

"CalPharma? Really? Then I have a few of your products in my bag."

"How nice. Listen, I need to call..." Patricia said, grabbing hold of the Doctor's arm.

"Is she all right, Doc?" a man said, standing in the doorway. Patricia turned her head and gave him a once-over. He appeared to be in his late sixties, of short stature, but with broad shoulders. His hair, what was left of it, was white and neatly trimmed and he was wearing blue jeans and a fluorescent green vest on top of a white, short-sleeved shirt. He put Patricia's purse down on the armrest of the couch and then moved back to stand in the doorway.

"Hello, J.T. Yes, she's mostly fine, considering," the Doctor said.

"My left wrist hurts like crazy," Patricia said.

"Let me see," the Doctor said and reached for Patricia's arm. He checked it thoroughly, squeezing and prodding and making Patricia clench her fist - a pained hiss was the direct result.

"The wrist itself is fine, but your thumb has been badly sprained. I'm going to have to wrap it. Is that all right with you?"

"Well, of course it is," Patricia said and sighed.

"You were lucky. There isn't enough left of your plane to chuck in a dumpster," J.T. said as he watched the Doctor begin to wrap Patricia's wrist in gauze.

"I know. Damn. I really liked it. I guess I better call my insurance company first thing in the morning."

"How did you... oh, I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name...?"

"Patricia Nolan."

"How the hell did you find us, Miss Nolan? All your electrics are roasted. You don't even have a radio. As soon as we heard you approaching, we tried to contact you on all frequencies, but you weren't there. No wonder, looking at the state of that thing."

"Well, I... What do you mean I didn't have a radio?" Patricia said. A chill ran up and down her spine and she briefly got the shivers.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll be more careful," the Doctor said, misinterpreting Patricia's shiver.

"No, no, it wasn't you, Doc. Go on," Patricia said.

It only took the Doctor a short while to wrap the wrist, and when he was done, he found some painkillers in his bag and handed them to Patricia.

"Take two now, and the last one a little later. Where do you live?"

"Out on the coast."

"All right. Then they'll hold until you get home."

"All right. Thanks, Doc."

"You're welcome," Doctor Preston said and closed his bag. He got up and left the room, nodding to J.T. when he walked past him.

Patricia quickly gulped down the painkillers and then leaned back on the couch, waiting for them to work.

"I need to call home. My gir..." Patricia quickly looked at J.T., who was still standing in the doorway. She figured that after all the drama she'd been through, she couldn't care less if he was uncomfortable with the truth.

"My girlfriend is probably in a state of panic right now," she said.

"I understand. There's a phone right there," J.T. said, pointing at the desk.

"What about the other plane?"

"What other plane? The only other traffic we've had all evening was a Heli."

"No, not the helicopter. The warbird. The... what did she call it? The P40?"

J.T.'s jaw fell down to his chest and his eyes grew wide. He pushed himself away from the doorway and came over to stand in front of Patricia.

"The wh... what?"

"The only reason I made it here was because some friendly pilot called Susan Keilly helped me. We got separated when I landed. Where is she?"

"Susan Keilly?"

"Yes, dammit!"

"Susan Keilly has been dead for nearly sixty years," the man said quietly.

Patricia opened her mouth to speak, but not a single sound came out. She shook her head and ran her good hand through her hair. J.T. went over to sit down in an armchair that was placed behind the desk. As he moved aside, Patricia could see a small plaque on the desk that read "John Thomas 'Jack' Keilly, jr."

"Oh... my... God...!" Patricia said, suddenly feeling lightheaded.

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Patricia gulped down the Whisky J.T. had poured for her, and then held out the glass to ask for another shot.

"Is it wise, Miss Nolan? I mean, with the painkillers..."

"Don't care... 'nother one. Please," Patricia said, raising the glass.

"Oh, well, all right. I guess I could use one myself," J.T. said, pouring a healthy amount of Whisky into his own glass and then giving Patricia a smaller one. He screwed the cap back on the bottle and then put it away in the bottom drawer of the desk.

"Mr. Keilly... I hope you don't mind me asking... who was Susan Keilly?"

"Well, she was my mother, but I guess you've worked that out already. Oh, boy... where do I start... she died in a crash in 1951, when I was ten years old. My dad was already dead then, he died at Pearl."

"I know. S-she told me," Patricia said, shaking her head. She gulped down the rest of the Whisky and then put the glass on a small table next to the couch.

"Really?"

"Yeah. We talked about a lot of things."

"Hmmm. Well, anyway, my mom was a true hotshot. She pulled stunts in that Warhawk that none of the men dared to even think about. The P40 was an old USAAF fighter she had imported from the Far East. It had flown in the Pacific Theater and was well-used when we got it in the Spring of '46. She spent every moment working on that damn thing."

J.T. took a swig from his glass and chuckled quietly to himself when a series of memories of his mother raced through his mind.

"Yeah, she was really something," he added quietly.

"I know I'm probably overstepping the line now, but how did she die?" Patricia said, moving forward on the couch so she was sitting on the edge.

"Well... April 9th, 1951, she had been out testing something, like she always did. She radioed in and said her fuel pump was packing up, but she reckoned she could make it back to the airfield. It was called Fox Field back then."

Patricia nodded, urging J.T. to go on.

"Well, she didn't make it. She didn't have enough altitude to clear the..."

"The pines! That's where... as I was flying over the pines, I saw a bright orange light on the ground, just beyond the tall pine trees!"

J.T. nodded.

"That's where it happened. The tree tops sucked her in, and the plane disintegrated on its way down to the ground. My mother died instantly. At least... I hope she did. When the P40 hit the ground, the fuel pipes were torn off the engine and the wreck caught fire."

"Oh, God..."

"Well. It's ancient history," J.T. said and emptied his glass of Whisky.

Patricia leaned back on the couch, pondering the incredible events she had experienced in the last ninety minutes.

"So, you said you wanted to borrow my phone. It's all yours. I'll wait outside," J.T. said, pushed the telephone across the desk and then left the small office.

Patricia sat down in the armchair and picked up the receiver. After making sure she had a connection, she dialed her own number and waited for Becky to answer. Her heart started hammering away in her chest and her headache returned. She tried stopping it by rubbing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose, but it was in vain.

'How am I ever going to explain this to Becky?' she thought and rubbed her forehead.

'Rebecca Charles,' a faint voice said from the other end of the connection.

"Becky, it's me."

'Oh, God, Patricia! I've been so worried about you! Are you all right? Someone from Trelayne Field called me and said you didn't return from a flight... Where are you?'

"First of all, I'm fine. I've had an accident with the plane, but..."

'Oh, God!'

"Becky, I'm fine. I got a little banged up, but... but... it would've been a lot worse if I hadn't had help from... from a friendly pilot. She guided me to a small airstrip called Keilly Field,' Patricia said. She noticed that tears were streaming down her cheeks, but she didn't care.

'Where is that? I'm coming at once!'

"No, Becky, you're too distressed to drive. I'll catch a cab, or something."

'Oh, no way, I'm...'

"Please listen to me. Becky, it's all right. I'll be home before you know it. OK? Please don't drive tonight."

'But...'

"Please."

'Oh... all right. But you have to promise me you'll get home as soon as possible.'

"That's a promise. I love you, Becky."

'Love you too, Patricia.'

Patricia put the receiver back on the old-fashioned telephone and buried her face in her good hand.

J.T. knocked on the doorjamb to the office and stepped inside.

"Is everything all right, Miss Nolan?"

"Yeah, well... you know," Patricia said and wiped a few tears away from her cheeks.

"I've found something you might be interested in taking a look at. It's a picture of my mother and me from 1950," J.T. said, holding an old picture frame.

Patricia went over to the couch and sat down. J.T. sat down next to her and gave her the frame so she could see it - it held a faded black and white photo of two people, a young boy and an adult woman in a flight suit. They were standing next to a very familiar aeroplane, a P40 with a checkered tail fin and a large, open mouth painted on the side just below the engine.

Patricia recognized the woman's face as the one she had seen in the cockpit of the warbird no more than forty minutes earlier, and she covered her mouth with her hand.

"Every April 9th, we can hear the characteristic hum of the P40's Merlin engine echoing across the airstrip, but... we've never had anything like this happen before," J.T. said quietly.

Patricia looked surprised at J.T. and then handed the photo back to him with a faint nod.

"I owe her everything... I owe her my life," she whispered.

"Miss Nolan, please let me drive you home. I have a pickup truck out back."

"Oh, no, I'll just take a cab..."

"It'll take forever to get here this time of night. I insist."

Without warning, the weapon discharged. The sleeping woman was hit on the left side of her throat and blood spurted out of the wound like a fountain.

Linda Denison bolted upright in her bed and groaned into the darkness. A door was slammed somewhere in the building and she thought she could hear someone running down the stairwell.

"Gawd... that's the worst nightmare I've ever had..." she said and rubbed her eyes. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and ran a hand through her messy, sleep-tousled hair.

With slightly shaking hands, she reached into a drawer in her nightstand looking for her cigarettes. When she finally found the pack, it was empty, and she cursed loudly.

She tried turning on the lamp on her nightstand, but when she worked the switch, the bulb didn't ignite - which made her curse even louder.

Wide awake now, Linda ran her hands across her bare thighs and sighed.

"I knew I shouldn't have smoked that last doobie. That asshole Fatty T always spikes them," she said to herself and rubbed her hands on her arms. She was wearing a tank and boxers like she always did, but for some reason, she felt cold. She got off the bed and walked over to the radiator to give it a kick, but found that it was already working overtime.

She sighed again and looked around her crummy apartment. Rickety fifth-hand furniture bought from the local Salvation Army store, a carpet that had already been stained beyond repair when Roosevelt - Teddy Roosevelt - was in office, wallpaper that was peeling all over the place, cockroaches, snow on the floor in the winter, an abundance of flies in the summer... the only thing she had she was fond of was a 2010 Car Wash Babes calendar that she had stolen from a convenience store downtown.

"Gawd, I hate this crappy place," she said quietly and shook her head. She tried to look in the drawer for her other pack of cigarettes, but couldn't find it. Instead, she found her lighter and started playing with it.

To get her mind off the nightmare, she pretended to be a cowboy in the old West and held the lighter like a gun. She assumed a firing stance and used her index finger to pull the 'trigger', creating a spark and a small flame in the process.

"Pow! Pow! Po..."

When she clicked on the lighter for the third time, the flame was reflected in a pair of eyes across the room.

11:43 PM.

Linda screamed and jumped back, still holding down the button that fed the flame.

The faint light flickered through the apartment, revealing a woman standing in the room, leaning against Linda's dresser.

"I d-d-don't have anything of value! P-please don't hurt me!" Linda said, still holding the lighter.

"I don't want to hurt you," the mysterious woman said. Her voice was a very rich alto, soothing, yet somehow chilling at the same time.

The woman kept just out of sight, but Linda could see that she was wearing a white, flowing dress and that her long, black hair seemed to be in constant motion even though there wasn't any wind in the apartment.

"Wh-who are you? How did you get in here?"

"The door was open."

Linda looked at the door - it was closed.

"No, it's not!"

"It was at the time."

"Who are you?" Linda said, still holding the lighter in a defensive position.

"I'm an old friend."

"The fuck you are. I've never seen you before. Did Fatty T send you?"

"No."

"Are you for real? You're not, are you? Aw, crap, this is just a bad trip. Jesus, I shouldn't have had that last doobie. Fatty, I'm gonna fuckin' kill you the next time I see you," Linda said angrily and threw the lighter into the drawer in the nightstand.

The mysterious woman kept standing just out of sight so Linda went over to the lightswitch next to the door. She flipped it, but that didn't work either.

"What the hell...? Is there a blackout or something? Why isn't there any light?"

"I wouldn't know," the mysterious woman said.

"Are you still here? I suppose I should be glad you're not some rapist. Or a giant cockroach. I once had a dream where I was eaten by a cockroach."

"I know."

"The fuck you do! Stop being so fuckin' creepy," Linda said and moved through the room. She suddenly noticed that all three drawers in her dresser were open.

"Hey... whatcha do that for? A you some kind of freak who breaks into single women's flats to steal their panties or something?"

"No."

"Then why did you..." Linda said and pointed at the drawers.

"I didn't."

11:45 PM.

"Well, somebody fuckin' did. Great man, this trip is goin' from bad to worse. Hey, lady, got a cig?" Linda said and sat down at the kitchen table.

"Sorry, no."

"Figures."

"Actually, Linda, we have met."

"OK, time-out...! How the flyin' fuck do you know my name?" Linda said and jumped off the chair.

"It's written on a cardboard note that's pinned to the door."

"Oh... that's right," Linda said and sat down again. She ran a hand through her hair, wishing she had a cigarette. She sighed and looked at a clock on the wall. She needed to get up in three hours to go to work, and she just knew it would be a bitch of day if she didn't get any sleep.

"And as I told you, I'm an old friend," the mysterious woman said with a great deal of warmth in her voice.

"Look, I don't give a shit what kind of hallucination you are, but listen to me: I've never seen or met you before."

"Yes, you have. Last year, at the hospital."

"The hospital...? Oh, when I... right. You were there? That's why I don't remember you. I was kinda out of it at the time."

"Well, being treated for an overdose would do that to a person. I was there the whole time, watching you," the woman said.

Linda sighed and started drawing a few doodles on the table top with her fingers.

"The Doctors worked long and hard to save your life, Linda."

"I know. And I got out of my heavy addiction."

"Yes, you did. That took a lot of courage."

"Mmmm. So you're a Doctor?"

"No."

"Then you've gotta be one of those social workers, right? Jeez, I never knew you guys came at this time of day. What happened to the other one... what was her name? You know who I'm talking about. Miss High-and-Mighty. Miss Snooty."

"Well..."

"That bitch lectured me for ages about getting out of the habit and starting over somewhere else. She was a fuckin' bitch, that's what she was. Full of all that holier-than-thou crap. I wanted to quit my addiction, but

her attitude made me wanna rebel against her," Linda said and ran her fingers up her arms, feeling the old needletracks.

11:46 PM.

"Do you regret your life, Linda?"

"Fuck, no. All right, I didn't become what my parents wanted me to be... but they didn't understand me. They never even tried to understand me. They couldn't kick me out of their fuckin' palace soon enough. Fuck 'em, the fuckers."

"But in your heart, you're a good person."

"Huh? Where did that come from? Well, sure, I don't kick dogs, if that's what you're talking about."

"It's not," the woman said and stepped closer for the first time.

Linda could see that the other woman was of extraordinary, timeless beauty, with eyes that resembled the sky in Summer and a face that was as smooth as a newborn's butt. Apart from her lips, which were rich and in a very dark red, her skin was so pale she almost resembled a porcelain doll.

"Well, I gotta tell ya, you don't look like a social worker," Linda said and chuckled.

"Thank you."

"Man, I can't believe it... it's fuckin' midnight and I have to get up in three hours to go to work, but not only that, noooo, I'm talking to a hallucination in the middle of my fuckin' living room, *and* she's a babe."

The other woman took another step closer, but Linda put out her hand.

"Get out of my space, please. I have real problems with people in my space. You understand?"

"I understand," the other woman said and took a step back.

"You're the first, then. Jeez," Linda said and rubbed her face. She didn't feel tired at all, but she did have a very strange feeling in her body.

She cocked her head and started sniffing.

"Is there a strange smell in here...? Almost like... I don't know... something icky?"

"Is there anything in here that doesn't smell icky?" the other woman said.

"Oh, hardy har har. I wanted to take a shower before I went to bed, but when I got over to the shower facilities out in the stairwell, some creep had puked all over the fuckin' floor an' I spun around on my heel, man."

"That's understandable."

"I wanna live somewhere nice. Maybe in my next life, huh?" Linda said and scratched her neck.

"Maybe."

In the apartment below them, loud music suddenly started playing. A thumping bassdrum boomed its way through the floor and made the items on the kitchen table dance around.

"Oh, great. Mr. Fuckface just got home. I can forget all about sleeping now," Linda said and buried her face in her hands.

"Playing music that loud is very impolite," the other woman said.

"He does it to annoy me. He tried to butter me up last month, but I told him to go fuck a donkey instead. I don't think he liked that."

"That wasn't particularly polite, either, Linda."

"Who are you? My fuckin' mom back to haunt me?"

"No."

"I shoulda kicked him in the nuts, that's what I shoulda done. That creep groped me. Can you believe it? Like I'm some kind of fuckin' ho or something."

"Some people are like that."

"Yeah. He said he'd get me good one day. That's why I got myself a baseball bat. One of those aluminum ones. If he ever tries anything, he won't have no balls left when I'm done with him."

"Are you sure you'd really do that?"

"You better fuckin' believe I'd do that. BAM! Just like that," Linda said and slammed her fist down onto the kitchen table.

"I'm not sure you would."

"Mmmm? Meh," Linda said and shrugged.

11:48 PM.

The music was still thumping from the apartment below, so Linda got up and stretched out.

"I'm antsy. You want a beer?"

"No, thank you."

"Suit yourself, man," Linda said and walked over to the refrigerator. She pulled on the handle, but the door wouldn't open.

"What the fuck...?"

She pulled again, but the door felt like it was glued shut.

"Aw, Jesus Christ, man. Aw, fuck, this is just too fuckin' weird, man. What the fuck's going on here?" Linda said and threw her hands in the air.

"Why do they call you Linnie Dee?" the other woman said.

"How do you know about my street name?"

"I know a lot of things."

"I'll bet you do. Nah, it's nothing special, really. For some reason, us freaks on the streets like to give each other crazy names, like Fatty T or Jumpy Y. Knew a guy once called El Loopy. He was nuts. He O.D.'ed. Linnie Dee, well, that's just my name... Linda Denison."

"Do you like your friends on the streets?"

"Friends, huh? Friends... none of those sickos are friends of mine," Linda said and walked back to the bed. She sat down on the soft mattress and pulled her legs up underneath her.

"They're not?"

"They're creeps, freaks, sickos, assholes, drug addicts, hos, illegal immigrants, bastards, rotten bastards and dirty fuckin' rotten bastards. Yeah. We're the cream of the crop. The scum of the earth 's more like it. Those fuckers."

"Then why do you spend so much time with them?"

"Oh, come on. Who the fuck in their right mind would spend time with a skank like me other than those people, huh? They're like my family. Doesn't mean I don't hate them."

"Your heart is too pure to be with them, Linda."

"Come again? Didn't ya hear what I jus' said?"

"You could be much more."

"Yeah, well..." Linda said and looked away. She started playing with an abrasion on her left calf.

"If you could start over, what would you do? Where would you go?" the other woman said and came closer.

Linda noticed, but decided not to bitch about it again.

"Jeez, if I could start over..." Linda said with a sigh. After a long pause, she took a deep breath.

"I guess I'd like to go to college. Yeah. Maybe meet a pretty girl there, or two... maybe if I finished college, I could get a decent job instead of cleaning toilets at the Bus Terminal every night."

The other woman nodded and took another step closer.

"Gawd, cleaning toilets just sucks. But I need the money. If I don't have the money, I can't..." Linda said, stopping before she revealed her current addiction to the other woman.

'If she's just a hallucination, it won't matter shit what I tell her, but if she's really a social worker, she might give me the Just Say No speech all over again,' Linda thought and got the shivers just thinking about it.

"... Anyway," Linda said and coughed dryly.

Linda moved her hand up and scratched her neck again. Like before, she started sniffing the stale air of the apartment.

"I don't care what you say, there's something in here that stinks," Linda said and started looking around for the source of the smell.

"Oh, I agree with you," the other woman said.

"It's like..." -Sniff- "... like ..." -Sniff- "... warm metal, or something. And salt. Warm, salty metal. Great, I'm having a psychosis."

"Mmmm."

"Or maybe you farted?" Linda said and winked.

"Certainly not."

"Nah, didn't think so. Me, neither. Must be the creep downstairs who's cooking something gross. Wouldn't put it past him, the fucker."

11:52 PM.

Suddenly Linda could hear the very familiar sound of a police siren, and at the same time, she could see blue and red lights flashing on the ceiling of the dark apartment.

"Yippie, they've come to shut that mofo down so us normal people can get some sleep," she said and got off the bed. She went over to the window and looked out. Down in the alley, five flights below Linda's window, a police cruiser slowed to a halt. Two uniformed officers stepped out and started looking around.

They both turned their heads at once, almost like someone had addressed them. They both walked towards the entrance to Linda's building, and then disappeared out of sight.

"Ha! Perhaps I should go down and make a nuisance of myself? Whaddaya think?"

"I think it wouldn't help the situation."

"Nah, you're probably right. One look at me and the cops'll get suspicious... like they always do."

When the music kept playing, Linda scrunched up her face.

"Wasn't him. Shit. Maybe it was old man Matavic down in 3B. He always beats on his wife when he's had too much to drink... which is seven days a week. Poor Layla, I've had to help her get cleaned up several times. Man, once he beat her up so good that she looked like something out of a horror movie. Black eyes, broken nose... she was a mess."

"He'll be punished when his time comes."

"Huh? Yeah, let's hope so. I'd like to give him the same treatment with my bat, that's for sure."

Linda scratched her neck again, a little harder this time. A strange feeling spread out from the side of her neck and radiated down her chest.

"What the fuck? On top of all this shit, now I'm gettin' a rash...? Aw, great, man... can it get any better?"

11:53 PM.

Linda walked over to the door and put her ear to it.

"Naw, can't hear anything. Must be Matavic, then."

"Could be," the other woman said.

"I have the weirdest neighbors. Creeps downstairs, freaks upstairs... I guess I fit right in, huh?"

"I'd say you appear to be fairly normal, Linda."

"You don't know me too well, then. I'm a freak and I know it."

"I know you better than you think."

"My neighbors really are a weird buncha people, though. There's one of those hippie collectives living up in 6A, you know those longhaired friends of Jesus kinda people? Well, anyway, just last week, I got an eyeful of one of the guys. He was down to collect his mail... and he was doin' it in the buff."

"Oh..."

"Yeah, no shit. I had to pour down half a bottle of Vod after that. Gross, man. Why couldn't it ha' been one of the girls, huh? They look OK. A little weedy, but OK," Linda said and walked back to the bed.

"Weedy?"

"Yeah, you know..."

"No, I don't."

"Like they've been smoking too much pot. Or whatever it is they're using."

"Oh."

"But, what the fuck, I know they're saying the same about me. And it's true, so..." Linda said with a shrug.

"Well, you do smoke quite a lot."

"Oh, great, here it comes. I really thought you were different, but no. Don't, OK? I haven't been forced into anything, so don't give me that Just Say No crap."

"I wasn't going to."

"The hell you weren't," Linda said quietly and rubbed her chest. Like a bolt from the blue, her chest felt heavy and she had trouble taking deep breaths. A strange chill fell over her and she started rubbing her arms.

"Hey, I feel weird... my chest... my chest hurts."

"It's normal in your situation."

"My... my situation? What the fuck is that supposed to mean? It's the creep downstairs, isn't it? Mr. Fuckface is trying to smoke me out or something. I should go down there and give him a good ass-whoopin'. And why is it so fuckin' cold in here?"

"It's not your downstairs neighbor. Not this time."

"Gawd, I need some air," Linda said and got up from the bed. She went over to the window and tried to lift it, but she couldn't - like the door to the refrigerator, the window couldn't be moved.

"Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck! I'm stuck in the fuckin' Twilight Zone," Linda said and slapped her forehead. She threw her arms in the air and went back to the kitchen table.

"You sure you don't have any cigs?" Linda said as she sat down heavily in the rusty, old chair.

"Sorry. And besides, smoking kills."

"Aw, whoop-de-fuckin'-doo, I knew you'd give me the speech. Now you can go back to wherever the fuck you came from and tell your boss that the Subject Won't Listen To Reason, like that other social worker bitch wrote in my file," Linda said and gave the other woman the finger.

"That wasn't what I..."

"Do you know how much trouble those words caused me? I was ten seconds from offering my caseworker a BJ just to make him give me my fuckin' money... for fuck's sake! Don't you understand how much it killed me to sit there and beg? I've never felt more humiliated in my life! That fat, slimy motherfucker just sat there, looking at my 'tracks and at the lines in my face... and he smiled."

"I'm sorry."

"The fuck you are. You're all the same, all you fuckin' pretty people."

The thumping bassline from downstairs was still drowning out most other sounds and Linda tried to shut it out by covering her ears with her hands. When that wasn't enough, she clenched her fists and slammed her hands down onto the table top.

"Stop that fuckin' racket!" she roared and repeatedly stomped her foot down on the floor, a move that didn't have any effect on the music.

"That fuckin' does it! If he doesn't stop that fuckin' music right now, I'm gonna go down and splatter his fuckin' brains all over his wall with my fuckin' baseball bat!" she roared and jumped up from the chair.

Suddenly Linda's chest tightened and she coughed in a wet, rattling fashion that sent waves of pain through her lungs. She clutched her chest and bent over slightly to fight the pain.

"I c-can't breathe... what's... what's happening to me?"

"Like I said, it's normal in your situation. It's just another stage on your journey," the other woman said and came up to stand next to Linda. The other woman put a hand on Linda's arm - an ice cold touch that didn't feel human at all.

"Get away from me! What the f-fuck are you?" Linda wheezed, going into another coughing fit. She fell down on her knees, clutching her chest even harder and moaning in pain.

"Come on, let's get you back to the bed. It's almost time, Linda," the other woman said and helped Linda back on her feet. Together, they walked slowly over to the bed and then Linda sat down on the mattress.

"T-time...? Time for wh-what...?" Linda gasped.

"Not long to go now."

The music stopped abruptly, leaving Linda's apartment in an eerie silence.

"Finally... now I c-can get some sleep. The rest'll d-do me fine," Linda said and reached for the blanket.

11:54 PM.

The sound of labored breathing to her left made Linda turn her head and look.

She saw herself lying on the bed.

She had been shot.

There was a gaping wound in her throat just next to her windpipe.

She saw unlimited terror reflected in her own eyes and her face was twisted into a grotesque mask of pain.

She saw her hands balled up into fists, holding the blanket in a death grip.

She saw her chest move up and down very erratically - as she was watching, her breathing slowed and then stopped completely.

She heard herself take a final, struggling breath.

She saw her own eyes glaze over and then her eyelids slide halfway down.

She saw her hands loosen the grip on the blanket and her face lose all tension.

"It's time," the other woman said.

Speechless, Linda tore her eyes away from her own, dead body and stared at the other woman. The mysterious dark-haired woman had stepped back so she was standing in the center of the living room. On her back, a set of white wings unfolded, almost reaching from one side of the room to the other.

"That wasn't a nightmare... I'm dead... I'm really dead," Linda croaked, wringing her hands.

"Yes."

"I don't want to die!"

"It's too late, Linda. Come on, it's time."

"No! No! I don't want to go. I want to live!"

"I'm sorry."

"Gawd, no!" Linda cried out and buried her face in her hands. After a few seconds, she realized that she didn't have any chest pains anymore, and that she in fact felt better than she ever had.

11:56 PM.

With a loud crash, the door to Linda's apartment was broken down and the two police officers from before came rushing in with the landlord in tow.

The first police officer hit the light switch, turning on the naked bulb hanging down from the ceiling. Everything was bathed in a cold, white light that mercilessly revealed Linda's horrendous gunshot wound and the crumminess of the apartment.

Linda shrieked and jumped off the bed. She ran into the middle of the room and, by reflex, held out her hands to try to stop the police. The first officer ran straight through her, not even pausing for the briefest of moments. Linda shrieked again and began to pat herself to feel if she still had all her limbs.

Calmly, the angel put her hands on Linda's shoulders and pulled her aside.

"Gawd almighty," the landlord said and took a step back when he saw Linda's remains.

"Mr. Weiss, go out to the stairs. Leave this to the professionals. Now!" the first officer, Richard Danielson, said as he reached for his mic.

"Station, this is Five-King-Oh-Two, requesting a paramedic unit ASAP at the current address, apartment 5C."

'Roger, Five-King-Oh-Two, we copy.'

"There's an exit wound near her left collar bone. No pulse, but she's still warm. We might have a shot at getting her back," the second officer, Vincent Friels, said and took off his cap. He kneeled down next to the bed and pulled the blanket aside. He cracked his knuckles and began to administer CPR.

"Vince, she's got multiple needletracks on her arms and there's plenty of blood on her mouth. We can't risk artificial respiration without further info."

"Right," Vincent said and began to pump down on Linda's chest. For each pumping motion, blood squirted out of Linda's mouth and nose, adding to the already thoroughly soaked bed.

"It's no use. The gunshot must've ruptured her windpipe. You're only pumping up blood. Her lungs must be full of it," Richard Danielson said and put a hand on his partner's shoulder.

"Yeah. Damn."

As she watched the scene unfold, Linda's shoulders slumped and she couldn't hold back a sob.

"So that's it? I'm really dead?"

"Yes," the angel said.

Vincent Friels got up and ran a hand through his damp hair. He sighed and reached for his mic.

"Station, this is Five-King-Oh-Two. Scratch the paramedic unit. We need Homicide and the coroner. Still same address, apartment 5C."

'Copy, Five-King-Oh-Two. Stand by.'

"Standing by, station."

"But I don't wanna die... I'm only 23, and..." Linda said with a trembling sigh.

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? You didn't exactly try to save me, did ya? What's up with that, huh? Do you guys get a bonus for each soul you bring back to the fold, huh?" Linda said, putting her hands on her hips.

"No."

"Well, in any case, thank you ever so fuckin' much."

While the two officers waited for the Homicide unit to arrive, they walked out to talk to the landlord, leaving Linda's remains alone in the bed.

Linda stepped over to look at herself. She kneeled down in front of the bed and stared very intently at her former self.

"Linda, there's no need to torture yourself. What's done is done. It's time for us to leave," the angel said.

Linda shook her head and sighed deeply.

"There was so much I wanted to see. To do. Look at me now. Just another fuckin' carcass. I know I was a piece of work, but I didn't deserve to die like that," Linda said, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Such is the nature of life, Linda," the angel said and put her hand on the back of Linda's head.

"Shut your piehole. What does a freak like you know about life?" Linda said angrily and jerked away from the angel's touch.

11:59 PM.

"What if I want to stay here? Watcha gonna do about that, huh? Yeah, stay here like a fuckin' ghost or something and haunt that mofo who did it... hey, wait a minute... who shot me, anyway?"

"When I arrived, he was standing in the middle of the room, holding a smoking gun," the angel said.

"I coulda guessed that much, smartass. Who was it?"

"It was a white man, slightly shorter than me. A small mustache and greasy, slicked-back hair."

"I don't fuckin' believe it... that's my downstairs neighbor. Oh, man... I just knew that bastard would try something. So he breaks into my fuckin' apartment, goes through my fuckin' underwear drawer like some fuckin' psycho creep and then shoots me at point blank fuckin' range!"

"I believe the shooting was an accident. He seemed very surprised when the weapon went off."

"I can't believe it... that asshole. I hope he'll get the chair for it."

The angel closed her eyes for a few seconds and then opened them again.

"He won't."

"Oh, and you can see that just like that, huh? What about me, where am I going?"

"You're going to be put through your Final Judgment."

"Well, that leaves me well and truly fucked. I'm going straight to Hell, I know it. I just fuckin' know it," Linda said and angrily ran a hand through her hair.

"Not necessarily. There's always a chance you'll be allowed to repeat the cycle."

"Hey, can't you put in a good word for me or something? You seemed to like me earlier on, when you were still a social worker and I was still alive."

"That's not for me to do."

"Whatever, man. What-fuckin'-ever," Linda said and turned away from the angel.

"... And you can't," the angel said.

"Can't what?"

"You can't stay here and haunt him. Well, technically, you can, but if you choose that path, it'll be out of my hands. I won't be able to help you move on."

"Meaning what? That I'll roam the fuckin' Earth for all time like some fuckin' wannabe Freddie Krueger?"

"Something like that, yes."

"Oh, that's just too fuckin' great. Fuck! I'm screwed whatever I do, right? Screwed if I do, and screwed if I don't. Ain't that just terrific," Linda said and threw her hands in the air.

"Linda, there's no need for all this drama. Your troubles are over. Let go. Let yourself become one with the..."

"Lemme guess, you read that on the back of a cereal box, right? Who did you fuck to get your wings, anyway? Don't give me that look, I know how the world turns."

"I understand your anger, but there's no need for it anymore. Let go, Linda."

Linda sighed and looked back at her former self.

"... But I don't wanna let go. I wanna wake up from this nightmare and have a cig and a shower... and then go to work. And then come back home to sleep a little more and then watch The Simpsons... you know, have a normal life."

"I'm sorry, Linda, but that's not possible anymore."

12:01 AM.

The two uniformed police officers came back in and started searching high and low for the bullet that killed Linda. Vincent Friels turned on his flashlight and swept the cone of light up and down the walls and across the ceiling.

"Come on, Linda, it's time to go," the angel said and put her hands on Linda's shoulders.

"No, can't we wait a few more minutes...? Just until... just until they arrest my neighbor?"

"All right. But not a moment longer. We're late as it is," the angel said and took a step back.

"Late? How many more innocent people do you have to send on tonight, huh? Ten, fifty, a hundred? More than that?" Linda asked without getting a reply.

"Rich, I got it," Vincent said and whistled loudly after his partner, attracting Linda's attention in the process. Officer Danielson came back in and looked at where the flashlight was shining at the ceiling.

"Yep. That's where it ended up after bouncing off her collar bone."

"Yeah. Man, what's keeping the Dicks? We'll be done with the crime scene long before they'll get here," Vincent said and turned off his flashlight.

"The Dicks! Ha!" Linda repeated, sniggering loudly.

"In the mean time, I think I'll go downstairs and ask Mr. Brent a few more questions. It's him, I just know it. He reeks of fear," Richard Danielson said and left the apartment.

"Yeah, you go ask Mr. Fuckface a few more questions, buddy," Linda said with a fair amount of glee in her voice.

Vincent Friels spotted the 2010 Car Wash Babes calendar and shuffled over to the wall to check it out.

"Oh, hey, careful with that thing. I stole it fair and square. Oh, man, he's gawkin' at Miss September. She's... she was my favorite," Linda said and put her hands on her hips. She cocked her head and followed the uniformed officer over to the wall. She wasn't tall enough to look over his shoulder, but she peeked around him, enjoying a last view of the calendar.

"I'm going to miss that calendar... please tell me there'll be babes in Heaven... or wherever I'll be going?"

"When you have completed the cycle and entered the Highest State of Serenity, you will not retain any physical attributes," the angel said.

"But you look like a woman now?"

"Once we've been at the Highest State of Serenity long enough, we can choose our shape at will."

"Really? I'm glad you came as you and not a cockroach, then. That woulda been too creepy. How long will it take me to reach that level?"

"Impossible to predict, I'm afraid. That depends on you."

"How long did it take you?"

"Time has no meaning for us."

"In other words, never ask a lady her age, huh? Heh, heh."

Activity at the door made both Officer Friels and Linda look over there - a heavy-set plain clothes detective entered the apartment, putting on a pair of protective gloves.

12:03 AM

"All right, whatcha got for us, Officer?" the detective said as he dug out a pencil and his trusty notepad from his pocket.

"We were sent here on a disturbance call, shots fired. Here's the result. Female DOA. Haven't found any ID yet, but as you can see, she's Caucasian, late twenties..."

"Hey!" Linda said surly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"... gunshot wound to the throat, exit wound near the collar bone. Can't tell the caliber yet, but the slug is in the ceiling, right there," Officer Friels said and pointed at the hole in the ceiling.

"Right. Noted. We'll get it checked," the detective said and flipped a page in his notepad.

"She was recently deceased when we arrived, so we tried CPR, but without success," Friels said.

"Right. Detective Lopez is downstairs with the suspect. Looks pretty straightforward."

"Yeah. I spoke briefly to Mr. Brent. He doesn't seem to be particularly smart."

"When are they ever? Let's find some ID so we know who she is," the detective said and began looking around for something that could identify the victim.

"My wallet's in my pants, guys... check the pants... hell-lo," Linda said and pointed at the pair of jeans that she had hung across the back of a chair the night before. Of course, the detective couldn't hear her, so he looked everywhere *except* at the jeans. Linda scratched her cheek and chuckled.

Finally, the detective noticed the jeans and picked out Linda's wallet.

"Linda Denison, 23..."

"She looks older," Officer Friels said, earning himself another harrumph from Linda.

"Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm, library card, video store card, no credit cards. All right, this doesn't give us much," the detective said and put the wallet in a clear plastic bag.

"As you can see, some of the drawers were emptied out, probably by the assailant, but it's impossible to determine if anything was taken," Friels said.

"Maybe Mr. Fuckface wanted to sniff my panties, that fuckin' creep!" Linda said with a laugh.

"All right. I'll be downstairs. The coroner is on his way," the detective said, closed his notepad and put it in his coat pocket.

"OK. I'll secure the apartment until he gets here. Looks like we're attracting attention," Friels said, pointing at the door to the stairwell where the landlord and several other people were busy craning their necks to see what was going on.

The detective humphed and left the apartment.

"I'll bet this is the high point of the week for many of 'em. There's the hippie I told you about. At least he's dressed this time. And old man Matavic, the dickhead. There's Layla... oh, no... what's going to happen to her now?" Linda said, suddenly realizing that she'd never be able to help the battered wife again.

The angel closed her eyes again.

"She'll be fine. Her husband won't live long. He'll suffer a stroke," she said after a few seconds.

"Oh... well, I guess that works out, then."

12:04 AM.

"And as I said before, when he goes through the Final Judgment, he'll be punished for his behavior."

"Are you going back to pick him up?"

"No. I'm your companion, not his."

"Oh. Companion?"

"It's hard to explain. Linda, I can't wait any longer. I'm sorry. We have to leave now."

Linda sighed and took one last look at her apartment. Everything already seemed so unreal and distant to her; like it hadn't been her apartment or her life at all. As she looked at her belongings, she realized that it would all either go to the dump or back to the Salvation Army where she had bought it herself, and she realized that she didn't care one bit. Even the Car Wash Babes calendar that had been so important to her suddenly seemed insignificant.

"All right. I'm ready... well, no, I'm not, actually. But I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Lead on," Linda said and put her arm around the angel's waist. With a cheeky grin, she stood up on tiptoes and kissed the angel on the lips.

"Gotcha! I'll bet you've never been kissed by a girl before, huh?" Linda said, grinning.

"Oh, but I have. I've been kissed by you before," the angel said and closed her eyes.

'Good evening, you're watching GNN News at Seven. I'm Bill Lazarus. We begin with a developing story about an approaching massive thunderstorm that could cause local disruptions. Let's go to the weather desk for the latest update. Charles, what do you have for us?' the middle-aged anchor said.

The picture changed to show a stern-looking African-American man wearing a dark suit, a white shirt and a dark red tie. He was standing in front of a blue screen monitor that was showing a computer simulation of the predicted direction of the weather system.

'Well, Bill, the suburbs are going to get very, very wet tonight. The front is approaching from the southeast, so the residents in Trenton will get it first. They'll get the worst of the thunderstorm with high winds and even a risk of local cloudbursts. If we take a look at the simulation...'

"Ugggh!" Catherine exclaimed loudly and rolled her eyes. She hurriedly chewed down the rest of her curry dish so she could take Trixie for her evening walk before the heavy rain would start.

Just as she pulled the chair back to carry the plate back out to the kitchen, her phone rang. Trixie reacted at once and began to run around in a very excited fashion, yapping ceaselessly.

"Ohhh, now what," Catherine said and put the plate back down on the table - as she did so, she stuck her thumb into a large blob of curry and she bit back a swearword. Rolling her eyes again, she wiped off her thumb on a napkin and then went over to the phone.

Taking the cordless phone off its base, she threw herself into the comfy chair and folded her legs up underneath her.

"You have reached the Goodwin residence. Unfortunately, Catherine isn't home right now, but if you leave..."

'Ha, ha, Cat. It's your mother. I know you're there, I can hear you breathing.'

"Hi, mom."

'Are you watching the news? Charles Corwyn has just said that Trenton will get the worst of this thunderstorm.'

"Yeah. The simulation they were showing in the background didn't look good," Catherine said and craned her neck so she could peek out of the windows. It was unnaturally dark for seven fifteen, PM, even in August, so she knew something unpleasant was coming her way.

'Yes. Please be careful. Have you checked your circuit breaker recently?'

"Dad fixed it last month when he was here."

'Oh, that's right. Well, you better check it anyway. Your dad isn't the world's most capable handyman.'

"I will," Catherine said with a knowing chuckle.

'Honey, are you... are you still seeing... what's her name, Nosy, Bossy, no, what was it...?'

"Rosie, mom. Like the actress."

'Well, are you?'

"... No. I guess it kinda didn't last. It just didn't work out between us," Catherine said and started toying with the hem of her sweatpants.

'Good. I didn't like her at all. She wasn't right for you.'

Catherine chuckled sadly to herself. She didn't agree at all with her mother - not unusual when it came to matters of the heart. The truth was that she had loved Rosie a lot, but they had just been too incompatible to make it work.

'Oh, honey, you're twenty-six years old. You need to be with someone. When I was your age, I was already...'

"Already married with one kid in the stroller and me on the way. Yeah, you've told me once or twice. Anyway, that's why I bought Trixie."

'Catherine, I love dogs, but as you very well know... probably better than I do as a matter of fact... a woman has certain needs a dog just can't...'

"Mom! We're SO not going there!"

'I'm only pushing you because I love you, you know.'

"I know. I'll find someone some day."

'I don't understand why they're not standing in line, hon. You have such pretty brown eyes and your hair is a wonderful shade of mahogany... you're just so pretty, and...'

"You're supposed to say that, you're my mom," Catherine said with a smile, running a hand through her aforementioned mahogany-colored hair.

'And it's also true. Well, I just wanted to tell you about the weather. Talk to you tomorrow. Love ya.'

"Sure. Love you, too, mom. Bye."

Catherine got out of the chair and put the handset back on the base station. After putting on her shoes and a fleece jacket, she picked up Trixie's leash. As expected, she only had to jingle it for her puppy to go bananas.

"Come on, girl. Let's go get some air while we can," she said and clicked the leash onto Trixie's collar.

A few minutes later, Catherine and Trixie walked down Fulton Lane, headed for the small park at the end of it. Trixie was zipping left and right, getting herself tangled up in the leash on a regular basis.

"Oh, Trixie, are you doing it on purpose?" Catherine said and bend down to unravel the leash for the fifth time in four minutes. The puppy replied with a yap and then resumed her frantic pace.

As they walked past the other houses on the quiet street, Catherine surmised that several of her neighbors had heard the same weather report she had because they were all storing their garden furniture and checking their windows.

One of Catherine's neighbors was standing on a very tall ladder, cursing loudly as he was trying to get a reluctant roof tile to stay fixed.

"Good evening, Mr. DuMond. Preparing for the thunderstorm?" Catherine said, afraid that her neighbor would fall down if she spoke too loudly.

"Hello, Cat. Yes I am, but the damn cement won't stick!" the man said and turned around the best he could. He wiped his brow on his jacket and then waved at Catherine.

"Well, I won't disturb you too much, then. I hope you'll get it fixed. It looks like it could be a bad one," Catherine said, trying to control Trixie so she wouldn't use the leash to tie her owner into a Swiss roll.

"Yeah, I heard. Well, they said that the last time, too... and nothing happened. So let's see, huh?" the man said and waved again before turning around to resume his work.

As Catherine and Trixie entered the park, the air was heavy with the coming rain and Catherine thought she could hear thunder in the far distance. The trees still had all their leaves and from experience, Catherine knew that the park would be a dangerous place to be in once the high winds came, simply because the large trees would trap the wind.

When she felt the first drops of rain on her face, she pulled up her collar and walked a little faster.

"Come on, girl. Looks like you need to hurry tonight," she said and tugged gently on Trixie's leash.

The puppy responded by whimpering, a sound that made Catherine chuckle.

"Yeah, I know. I wouldn't be able to do it just because someone told me to, but I think we need to hurry. We definitely don't want to be out here when the thunderstorm hits."

Trixie whimpered again, but appeared to understand.

Once they reached a small enclosed pen, Catherine opened a door in the mesh fence and let Trixie walk in. Squatting down, Catherine unclipped the leash and stroked the puppy's head.

"Go on, girl. Knock yourself out," she said with a smile. Trixie yapped and went about her business.

A short while later, a huge lightning bolt streaked across the sky, quickly followed by the sound of rolling thunder. Almost unnoticeably, the winds picked up, making the heavy branches creak and groan.

Catherine looked around nervously, hoping that Trixie would soon be finished. A brief - but happy - yap proved that she was and Catherine opened the mesh fence to let her out of the enclosure.

Clicking the leash back in place, Catherine picked Trixie up and began to walk briskly back to the entrance of the park. The puppy yapped a couple of times in a very puzzled fashion, but Catherine just shook her head.

"I'm sorry girl, but I have a very bad feeling about this thunderstorm. I think we need to get home in a hurry."

When the rain came, they were still four houses away from home. Light at first, it rapidly grew in intensity and soon, the heavens opened, dumping what seemed to be an entire ocean down on Fulton Lane.

"Oh, damn..." Catherine said, already soaked to the skin. She picked up the pace and began to jog to get home before she and Trixie drowned.

Then it happened.

From one moment to the next, the world disappeared and was replaced by a wall of blinding, blue-white light.

The heat was so intense that Catherine felt her entire body starting to burn. The metal necklace she was wearing and the silver wristwatch she had on her arm both started to glow. Moments before they would have melted into her skin, they snapped off and fell harmlessly to the ground.

She could feel in her throat that she was screaming at the top of her lungs, but she couldn't hear anything. Her arms were shaking violently, involuntarily stretched out to either side of her.

And then the wall of light disappeared.

A sudden shockwave swept Catherine off her feet and sent her flying into the middle of the street. Even after landing, she continued to convulse and white steam was pouring off her head and her body. Her clothes had been blackened and torn, but she was still mostly dressed - save for her shoes which were lying on the sidewalk, burning.

Catherine's unblinking, unseeing eyes glazed over. With a sigh, she took her final breath.

Around her, chaos had broken out. When the lightning had struck, all the street lights on Fulton Lane had exploded, showering the street in orange sparks. In rapid succession, the neighboring houses had lost power and had all blacked out, leaving everything in an eerie darkness.

Everything except the faint blue light emanating from Catherine's chest.

It started as a small dot, but soon grew in size. Within a few seconds, Catherine's body was covered by a blanket of electricity. Small blue-white arcs of energy zig-zagged across her, over her and through her - almost like they were trying to mend her broken body.

Slowly, the blanket of miniature lightning faded until there was only one dot of light left, and that was hovering directly above Catherine's heart. Moments after it had disappeared into her chest, she took several greedy lungfuls of air and raised her head off the street.

She moaned pitifully and rolled over onto her side. As she discovered that her shoes were burning on the sidewalk, she shook her head repeatedly and tried to pinch her arm.

When the nightmare didn't vanish, Catherine curled herself up into a fetal position and started rocking back and forth. Every single atom inside of her was aching and her limbs were so heavy that she was worried they'd been transformed into lead.

Above her, the deluge had eased off, but the storm was still raging and lightning bolts tore across the sky. One flashed right above her head and she cried out and covered her ears with her hands.

After a few moments, her clouded mind began to clear and she started to piece together what had happened. Soon, one thought rang through her mind...

"Trixie..." she said out loud, her voice so hoarse from the screaming that it was barely a whisper.

Looking around in a growing panic, she soon spotted a small, motionless golden bundle lying near the curb.

Catherine's lower lip began to quiver and she covered her mouth with her hand. Gathering up all her strength, she got up on her hands and knees and half-crawled, half-walked over to her pet.

"Oh, no... oh, God, no, no, no, no..." Catherine said hoarsely as she looked at the dead animal. She clenched her fists and began to cry. Large teardrops fell down her cheeks, leaving long streaks on her soot-stained skin.

A sudden urge to touch Trixie's golden fur one last time made Catherine reach out for the puppy. Gently, she scooped Trixie up in her arms and held the small dog close to her chest. By coincidence, Catherine put her right hand on Trixie's heart and her left on the dog's head - suddenly, out of nowhere, a blue-white haze was formed around Catherine's hands.

She shrieked and tried to shy back from the light, but she soon realized that it was coming from herself. Her eyes grew wider and wider as the blue-white haze continued to expand until it engulfed the dog fully.

As Catherine was watching, the light seeped into Trixie's fur and continued into her body. The blue cloud gradually decreased in size until it was just a small dot of light hovering near the dog's heart - and then that disappeared, too.

Trixie started to yap merrily and turned her head to look at her owner. She was squirming back and forth in Catherine's arms, clearly begging to be let down so she could play some more.

Catherine stared wide-eyed at the reanimated dog. Not trusting her senses, she tried to poke her index finger into Trixie's back - earning herself an annoyed yap in the process.

"You... you're alive...! We're both alive. Oh...! Oh, it's a miracle!" Catherine said hoarsely and started dancing around in the middle of the street, still holding a completely confused Trixie in her arms.

It took Catherine nearly six minutes to walk past the final four houses on her way back to her home. The rain was pelting down again so she was soaked to the core, and for each step she took, stabs of pain shot up from her bare feet.

Mercifully, the thunderstorm itself had moved on, but she could hear the occasional clap of thunder in the distance and it was still blowing a gale.

In Catherine's arms, Trixie was whimpering and desperately trying to squirm her way out of her owner's grip.

"Shhh, Trixie. I know you're wet and miserable... trust me, so am I. But crying won't help us get home faster. Man, we're both going to get a double pneumonia out of this, I just know it," Catherine said and coughed dryly several times.

When Catherine finally walked up her garden path, she dug into her pocket to find her keys. After pulling out the key chain, she stared at it with wide, disbelieving eyes - all her keys had been destroyed, melted together into one, large blob of gray metal.

Catherine shook her head slowly and put the useless keys back in her pocket.

"What more can go wrong, huh?"

At once, Trixie whimpered and nodded her head.

"I know. I really shouldn't tempt fate. Let's see if the spare set is still under the porch or if the wind has blown it all to heck," Catherine said and turned around. She walked a few steps back down the garden path and then kneeled down on the grass. Trixie was squirming harder than ever, so Catherine let her go.

The puppy zoomed away from her and ran back up to the door. Whimpering loudly, the small dog began to thump on the door with her paw, and despite the gravity of the situation, Catherine had to laugh when she saw it.

"All right, all right, I'm trying," she said and leaned in under the front of the porch. Reaching in, she soon found the spare set of keys and then crawled back out.

In no time, she was at the door and unlocked it. Before she went inside, she looked around her neighborhood - here and there, people had put candles in the windows, so that meant that the power hadn't returned yet. Catherine sighed and went inside.

Once she had checked that the power really was out, she went into the kitchen to get her flashlight - but when she clicked on the little button, all that happened was that the bulb blew with a pang.

"Oh, rats... this is not my day," Catherine said and rolled her eyes. She tried to shake the flashlight, but the sounds of rattling glass that came from it told her all she needed to know.

"All right, plan B. Candles and matches... but where are the matches...?" she said and began rummaging through her kitchen cabinets. After finding several empty matchbooks, she finally found one that still had a few matches in it.

Smiling triumphantly, she walked back into the living room to find a candlestick and a candle to put in it.

After lighting an old-fashioned scented candle, she went into the bathroom to get a terrycloth towel.

"Trixie? Where did you go? Come here, you need to get dried," Catherine said, waving the towel in the air.

A few minutes later, the living room was bathed in a pleasant orange light. As Catherine sat down in her comfy chair, she rubbed her brow and let out a long sigh. She moved the candle down so the cone of light could shine on her bare feet - and grimaced when she saw that they were as black as if she'd spent the entire day walking around in a coal mine.

"Oh, great, I must've made a mess all over the entrance and the kitchen floor," she said quietly to herself. Her voice was still very hoarse, and she had to cough several times at the end of the sentence.

She leaned back in the chair and tried to remember how she had actually ended up in the strange situation.

"I remember talking to mom and then going down to the park with you," Catherine said and looked at Trixie who was already lying in her basket, snoring loudly.

"... But then... then what? I only remember waking up in the middle of the street. I can't..."

Suddenly, Catherine was overcome by a dizzy spell that threatened to throw her out of the chair. She slammed her eyes shut and gripped the armrests so hard that her fingers almost pierced the fabric.

The world was constantly tilting left, right, up and down, and a wave of nausea came crashing over Catherine. She cried out and tried to get out of the chair, but found that she couldn't move.

When the fit finally receded, Catherine felt fifty years older even though it had only lasted a scant minute. Her ears were ringing and her heart was pounding so hard that she was worried it might burst out of her chest. She felt very weak and looked around her living room with large, confused eyes.

"Oh... oh, I'm in trouble," Catherine croaked. She rubbed her face, trying to get her equilibrium back. After taking a few deep breaths, she reached for the cordless phone to call her mother. As soon as her trembling hands touched the handset, it exploded in a shower of sparks. Catherine shrieked and jumped back, shielding her face.

The loud noises disturbed Trixie in her sleep and sent her into a yapping frenzy. The small puppy zipped out of her basket and ran back and forth between Catherine's legs, trying to figure out why her owner was so upset.

"Oh, great, that was all I needed!" Catherine said angrily, dousing out a few sparks that were smoldering on the top of the coffee table. She looked in disgust at the ruined phone and then slammed the handset down onto the base station.

"Trixie, I think I better go to the ER to get checked. I don't like it. There's something wrong with me," Catherine said and got up from her chair. She had to lean against the backrest for a few moments before her legs would obey her commands, but there was no sign of the dizzy spell returning.

Trixie appeared to understand because she ran back to her basket and snuggled down into her blanket.

"You can't go with me to the hospital. Besides, it's too wet for you, anyway. Oh, I better clean up my act first..." Catherine said, suddenly remembering that her feet were horrendously filthy.

Ten minutes later, Catherine zipped her jacket all the way up. She had changed into some dry, uncharred clothes, and the thick pair of jeans she was now wearing felt very good against her strangely chilly skin.

Catherine kneeled down next to Trixie and gave the puppy a fierce hug.

"If a stranger comes knocking, pretend you're a Doberman, OK?"

Trixie responded by yapping in a very un-Doberman-like fashion and then licking Catherine's face.

"All right, all right, I love you too! I won't be long. Sweet dreams, hon," Catherine said and put the puppy back in its basket.

Trying to be as quiet as a mouse so she wouldn't disturb Trixie, Catherine locked the front door and ventured out into the wet evening. The rain had eased off, but the wind was still strong and she shuddered as she walked around the rear of her house.

After working the lock for the shed, Catherine wheeled out her mountain bike and pulled it down the garden path. Once she was out on Fulton Lane, she got on it and pedaled hard to get up to speed.

As soon as Catherine turned onto Main Street at the end of Fulton Lane, she could see the hospital in the far distance. The lights were on in all the floors of the huge building, proving that they had power. She nodded to herself and picked up the speed.

She knew that on a good day, she could ride the ten blocks in ten minutes, but given the miserable weather and her curious condition, she reckoned it would take her fifteen minutes to get to the hospital.

It was still quite gusty, but the rain had stopped - something Catherine definitely appreciated as there were few things she disliked more than riding in the pouring rain.

After a little while, she noticed that she hadn't met any cars at all and she started wondering about it. She slowed down a fraction and looked over her shoulder. Behind her, Main Street was as empty as it was in front of her. The only sounds heard were those of her own wheels, singing faintly against the wet asphalt. She furrowed her brow but went back to pedaling hard so she could get to the hospital.

She had only made it halfway there when she had to slam on the brakes.

The mountain bike skidded to a halt and Catherine put her leg down to keep the balance. Looking straight ahead, she stared at the rather obvious reason why Main Street was so deserted: it was completely blocked by a fallen tree.

Twigs, leaves and even complete branches were strewn all over Main Street, creating a mess and making it impossible for Catherine to carry on. In two places, the fallen tree had severed the power lines, leaving them flopping around dangerously on the street.

Catherine sighed and shook her head. After a few minutes, she gave up trying to find a way past the tree, and she turned her bike around so she could go home.

She had already rolled a few feet when a blue baseball cap flew across the street right in front of her, apparently picked up by the wind. She put her foot down again and looked behind her.

"Hello? Hello, is anybody there?"

When no one replied, Catherine shrugged and turned back around. Suddenly she froze in mid-step. Out of the corner of her eye, she had seen a body lying underneath one of the thick branches. It took a few seconds for her brain to process the image, but when it had, she spun around and looked directly at the spot.

She quickly got off the bike and ran over to where the body was - it turned out to be a young man in his early twenties, wearing blue jeans and a colorful T-shirt.

Catherine kneeled down next to the body. She tried shaking the young man, but he didn't respond. She got up again and looked up and down Main Street, hoping that someone would be there to give her a hand. Unfortunately, Main Street was still completely deserted.

All the nearby houses were dark save for a few candles in the windows. Towards the South, the sky was slowly beginning to clear so she would soon have some natural light to work by, but that wouldn't help her much in the immediate situation. Even when she strained her hearing, she couldn't hear any emergency vehicles, so she had to accept - grudgingly - that she was on her own for the time being.

Before she went any further, she looked for the severed power lines but quickly established that they were too far away to present any danger to her.

Reaching in under the branches, she tried to put her fingers on the victim's neck, like she had seen all her fictional heroes and heroines do countless times on television.

She couldn't sense a pulse, but she didn't know if it was because she wasn't doing it right or if it was because the young man didn't have one.

Catherine started to panic, but when she discovered that the twigs covering the young man's body weren't attached to the main branch, she forgot all about her panic and began to throw the twigs away instead.

When the young man had finally been cleared of the twigs, Catherine sighed and closed her eyes. A sense of dread had been nagging at the back of her mind all along and now her worst fears had been proven true - he was already dead.

He had a minor abrasion on his forehead, but the unnatural position his head was in in relation to his body told Catherine that his neck had been broken by the impact.

She leaned back and buried her face in her hands. Taking a deep breath, she made up her mind and put her hands on the young man's head and heart.

Nothing happened.

"Oh, no, come on... it worked before... why not now?!"

Catherine suddenly realized that she was holding her hands wrong. She jumped up, went over on the other side of the young man and then kneeled down again. Full of determination, she put her right hand on the man's heart and her left on his head.

Within moments, the familiar blue-white haze was formed around Catherine's hands. Like before, a blanket consisting of millions of crackling and humming blue-white arcs of energy slowly spread out to cover the man's entire body. After a while, the blanket of energy began to seep into him until it was reduced to a simple, small dot of light hovering above his heart.

When the final dot disappeared, Catherine pulled back, anxiously awaiting the result.

With a loud cough, the young man sat up and rubbed his neck. He looked around in a daze - and jumped back when he saw Catherine right next to him.

"It's all right. I've just helped you... g... get free of the trees," Catherine said and put a calming hand on his shoulder.

"Thank you. Man, my neck hurts."

"Can you get up?"

"I think so. Have you seen my bike?" the man said as he staggered to his feet.

"No...?"

"It's blue, and it's... oh, great."

"What?"

"It's right there," the young man said and pointed at a mangled wreck lying under one of the biggest branches.

"Oh. Sorry."

"Yeah, well... I guess it could've been worse. What's your name?"

"Catherine. Everybody calls me Cat."

"I'm John, hi."

"Hi. Were you by yourself?"

"Yes, I was... thank God."

"OK. Listen, not to be rude or anything, but I was on my way back home. I have a small puppy waiting for me, and..." Catherine said and got on her bike.

"Sure. Maybe I'll see you around. Thanks again," John said and waved at Catherine as she took off.

The real reason why Catherine had left so abruptly was that she felt strange. From one moment to the next, she had trouble focusing and her brain had begun to feel like it was just dead weight in her skull.

Each time she trod on the pedals it became tougher and tougher for her to keep the forward momentum going. After a few hundred yards, she felt so weak that she could hardly do it anymore, so she stopped and put a foot down on the ground.

Without warning, she was overcome by a dizzy spell similar to the one she'd had in her home, except that this time, it was much stronger. A murderous headache started somewhere deep inside her brain and spread out with terrifying speed. She slammed her eyes shut, hoping that the fit would soon be over, but when it didn't show any signs of stopping, she clutched her head and cried out. No matter what she did, the aggressive headache kept torturing her and she began to get a creepy feeling that her life was slipping away.

She wasn't able to maintain her balance, so she fell hard into a puddle, injuring her shoulder as she hit the ground. She blacked-out for a few seconds, but came to as the ice cold water soaked her jacket and her shirt. Stunned, she tried to crawl away from the water, but she was too weak to move.

Suddenly every single muscle in her body began to spasm and her limbs started trashing about on their own accord, creating a surreal, demonic dance.

She wanted to scream, but she wasn't able to get enough air into her lungs to produce a sound. Towards the end of the fit, her vision became blurred and she gradually lost the ability to see. Even though she was staring into the evening sky with wide, terrified eyes, she could only see abstract patterns of blue, white, green and red colors flashing before her.

After a minute, the fit receded and Catherine was able to breathe again. Her heart was pounding like crazy and aching so much that it felt like someone had kicked her in the chest. The abstract colors faded into the background and her eyesight slowly returned.

At first, her breath came in explosive bursts, but she forced herself to breathe slowly so she wouldn't hyperventilate. With the last of her strength, she rolled over onto her left side and began to crawl away from the puddle.

After finally moving out of the water, she got up on her hands and knees, trembling from the cold water that had soaked her to the core.

"Why... why was I given this gift when I'm being punished for using it...? I saved that man. Why am I being punished for it...?" she said in a raw, croaky voice.

A final echo of the dizzy spell hit her and she fell down again, curling herself up in a fetal position.

"Wh... wh-what am I doing here?" Catherine said and shook her head to try to get rid of the cobwebs. She ran a hand through her wet, disheveled hair and moved into a sitting position.

She wrapped her arms around herself and started rubbing her body, hoping to generate some heat. When she touched her right shoulder, a wave of pain shot through it and down her arm, and she hissed from the unexpected sensation.

She peeked under her jacket to see if she was bleeding, but there didn't appear to be any blood. Grunting, she tried to raise her arm, but she soon stopped experimenting when even the simplest of gestures made her shoulder hurt.

Looking left and right, she was unable to fathom where she was or how she had ended up there. When she spotted her mountain bike lying prone on the asphalt a few yards further down Main Street, she got up and staggered over to it.

She pulled it upright and checked that everything was in working order. The paint had chipped away in a few places, but the chain was still attached and the pedals were working.

Catherine scratched her neck and shrugged. She got on her bike and tried to see if the crank would still turn. It seemed to work perfectly, so she got ready to ride home.

"Gawd, I need some dry clothes. I wonder what time it is," she said to herself and checked her wristwatch - only to find that it wasn't there anymore. In its place, she had a nasty scorch mark on her wrist.

"Wha...? What the...? What the hell is going on here?" she said out loud and shook her head. She started looking around for her watch but soon came to the conclusion that she must have mislaid it somewhere else.

"Oh, great, I'm going crazy... Rosie must be home by now. She'll slap some sense into me," Catherine said and started pedaling.

Just moments before Catherine reached the intersection at Fulton Road, a horrific accident happened right in front of her.

Unseen in the dusk, two cyclists were brutally mowed down by an SUV. After hitting the two people, the large car speared off to the right and slammed head-on into the pylon for the traffic lights at unabated speed, completely demolishing the front of the car.

In a state of shock, Catherine stared wide-eyed at the aftermath of the accident. As if in a trance, she got off the mountain bike and ran towards the two stricken cyclists.

The very moment she crouched down to check on the first cyclist, she experienced a strange phenomenon - the world seemed to shift and she felt like she briefly blacked out. When she dared to open her eyes again, it was like she was looking at the accident from someone else's point of view.

Catherine put her hands on the first cyclist, a red-headed woman in her mid-thirties. When she felt that the person was still breathing, she got up and hurried over to the other victim.

The other cyclist was a man in his late thirties, and it didn't take Catherine one second to establish that he was dead - a large section of his forehead and skull had been crushed and his face was covered in blood.

Glancing over her shoulder to see if she was being watched, Catherine put her hands on the man's chest and head. A few seconds later, the blue-white haze was formed around her hands.

Soon, a multitude of crackling and humming arcs of energy were distributed all over the unfortunate cyclist's body. Like the other times, the arcs of light entered the man's body after a brief period, save for one that continued to hover above his heart.

As soon as the last dot of light entered his body, the cyclist groaned and grabbed his head where the terrible injury had been only moments before. He coughed and tried to sit up, but Catherine put a hand on his chest.

"Don't try to get up. You've been in an accident. You need to rest. Lie down," she said, applying enough pressure to the man's chest to convince him to stay flat on his back.

"M-my wife... where's my wife...?"

"She's fine. Stay down for now," Catherine said and got up. With determined steps, she walked towards the SUV.

After pressing her face against the windows so she could check on the people inside, Catherine pulled back and put a trembling hand over her mouth. Four people were in the SUV, and as far as she could see, all four were dead.

Two of them were very young children.

Catherine ran around the car and tried to open the doors, but all four were jammed shut. The hatchback had been forced open in the crash, but even though she tried to jump into the back of the SUV, a sturdy nylon net prevented her from getting to the people in the seats.

She took several deep breaths and began to look for something she could use on the doors. After searching for a minute or so, she opened a small compartment and grabbed the jack. She went back to the left side passenger door and smashed the window with the heavy metal tool. Reaching in, she tried to pull the lever for the door, but it wouldn't work.

Undaunted, she started beating the jack against the locking mechanism. After several attempts, the lock finally released and Catherine dropped the jack and tore open the door.

She crawled into the back seat and turned around so she was facing the two small children. It was a boy and a girl and they were sitting in safety seats that should have saved them but obviously hadn't. She briefly touched their necks, but none of them had a pulse.

The wreck reeked of blood, urine, oil and gasoline, and Catherine knew she had to act quickly in case the SUV decided to catch fire. Inches before she put her hands on the first child, the boy, she pulled back.

Suddenly wary of her powers, Catherine stared at her hands. She didn't know why she had received the gift of resurrection, nor how her abilities were even possible, but she did know that she needed to move swiftly.

When the world had seemed to shift, some, but not all, of her memory had returned, so she knew that she'd get a debilitating seizure some time after helping the victims. She looked back at the cyclist she had just helped. He was still lying on his back, but both he and his wife were alive.

'The first seizure was a minor one... the second one was much worse. And now I have to reanimate five people. What'll happen to me when it strikes again...? I don't want to die...'

Catherine shook her head and rubbed her face. A tear ran down her cheek, but she didn't do anything to stop it. Looking at the two young children and at the bodies of their parents, she knew in her heart that if she didn't at least try to help all four, she'd never be able to live with herself afterwards.

With a sigh, Catherine leaned in and put her hands on the small boy's head and heart.

A minute or so later, the little boy started flailing his arms in the air and calling for his mother. When she didn't come, he let out an ear-splitting wail that sent Catherine's stress levels through the roof.

"Shhhhhh, come on. Come on, please... shhhhhh! Oh, I can't concentrate in this racket!"

"I'll take him," a female voice said right behind Catherine.

Catherine spun around and stared into the face of the female cyclist who had somehow managed to sneak up on her while she was working on the boy.

'How much did she see? Did she see me reanimate him?' Catherine thought. She furrowed her brow, unsure of what to do.

"Come on, give him to me," the female cyclist said, apparently misinterpreting Catherine's hesitation.

With a nod, Catherine turned around and unbuckled the young boy's seat belt. She pulled him out of the safety seat and handed him to the cyclist.

"Here. I'll... I'll look at the others. I think th-they're still alive," Catherine said, suddenly experiencing a headache. She rubbed her brow, praying that she'd be able to help the others before the inevitable fit incapacitated her.

"I don't think they are. You better get out while you can."

"No, I got it," Catherine said curtly and concentrated on saving the boy's sister.

The little boy started crying again, and the female cyclist nursed him by humming into his ear. She walked away from the wreck, bopping him up and down on her arm to keep him calm and occupied.

Catherine drew a sigh of relief and immediately put her hands on the girl.

Two minutes later, the female cyclist held both children on her arms. They were both crying, so she literally had her hands full trying to comfort them.

"I don't understand it... I simply do not understand it. I was looking directly at her and she wasn't breathing. But now..." the female cyclist said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Yeah, well. That's how it goes sometimes," Catherine said, leaning against the side of the SUV. She had the strangest feeling in her body - it was almost like her soul was being forced into a box that wasn't big enough to hold it.

"By the way, I'm Emma. My husband's name is Patrick," the female cyclist said, nodding in the direction of the male cyclist who was still sitting on the ground, looking dazed.

"My name's Catherine. Everybody calls me Cat."

"Pleased to meet you, Cat. I wish it could've been under better circumstances."

"Yeah..."

"I can't understand why no one has called an ambulance yet. Someone must have heard the crash. Patrick had a cell phone, but there's something wrong with it. He can't turn it on."

"Oh. I don't have a phone, either," Catherine said, wishing that the woman would go away so she could start working on the two parents.

With a shrug, Emma walked over to her husband and put the two children down on the ground next to him.

Catherine wiped her sweaty brow and rubbed her eyes. She felt drained and deflated, but she knew that her job wasn't done, so she bit her teeth together and pushed herself away from the SUV.

"Listen, Cat... you can't do anything to help the parents. The steering column has gone straight through the driver, and the passenger wasn't wearing a seat belt, so... so her head was crushed against the windshield. I've checked," Emma said somberly when she returned to Catherine's side.

Catherine furrowed her brow again and looked in through the window - Emma was right.

"Oh, that's... that's horrible..." Catherine said and covered her mouth with her hand.

"Yeah. But you were able to save the children, and that's something at least. You're a hero... well, heroine," Emma said and put her hand on Catherine's shoulder.

"I'm... I'm not a... I have to try... I have to try," Catherine said and ran around the car.

She tore at the passenger side door until it opened with an agonized creak. Clenching her teeth to fight a rising tide of bile, she pushed the passenger's broken body back in the seat.

"What are you doing? This is crazy, Catherine! Can't you see that she's dead?"

"Not for long," Catherine growled and put her hands on the woman in the passenger seat, not caring one bit that Emma was right next to her, watching everything.

Emma gasped when she saw the blue-white haze forming around Catherine's hands, and she cried out in surprise when the passenger was covered by the blanket of energy.

Staring wide-eyed at the otherworldly spectacle, Emma felt an ice cold shiver race up and down her spine - and when the female passenger was brought back to life, Emma fainted on the spot.

Catherine nearly did as well. Only moments after she had reanimated the passenger, the world shifted again like it had done when she first arrived at the accident. Once again, she saw red and green flashes of energy zoom past her eyes and she had to slam them shut.

Too weak to stand, she fell down on her knees, only keeping herself upright by putting a hand on the side of the wrecked SUV. She shook her head slowly, wondering just what the hell she had done to deserve to be in such a mess.

A familiar sound reached her ears. Someone was crying. Catherine staggered to her feet and looked inside the car.

The reanimated passenger was crying inconsolably. She was kneeling on the seat, clutching her dead husband's head and crying out his name over and over.

Even in her weakened state, Catherine couldn't help but feel affected by the outpouring of emotions she was witnessing. She sighed deeply and walked around the back of the SUV, stepping over Emma's prone body as she did so.

She glanced briefly at Patrick who was playing with the two children. Apparently, he hadn't noticed that his wife had passed out, but Catherine didn't have enough time or energy to tell him.

Once Catherine reached the driver's side door, she signaled to the grieving woman inside that she should reach over and pull the lever. She did, but the door didn't open fully at first - resolutely, Catherine picked up the heavy jack she had used earlier and jammed it into the crevice that had formed when the door had partially opened.

After forcing the door open, she stepped up into the car and tried to push the man off the steering column.

"No... no, what are you doing? Leave him alone... you're hurting him!" the woman said hysterically.

"I can save him. Do you understand me? I can save your husband if you help me push him off that thing. Do you understand me?" Catherine said slowly, pronouncing every syllable.

The grieving woman just shook her head, so Catherine pushed the man off the steering column herself and put her hands on his head and his blood-soaked body.

Nothing happened.

Catherine's shoulders slumped and she groaned under her breath. She pulled back and rubbed her face, finding it hard to believe that her powers had abandoned her at such a moment. She tried again, but again the blue-white haze didn't appear.

"Get away from him! Get away from my husband!" the grieving woman said, growing increasingly hysterical by the second. She started hitting out after Catherine, managing to strike a few blows before she was pulled back and out of the car by Emma.

"Cat, I have her. Do your... your magic and save him. Please!" Emma said, struggling to hold the madly wailing woman.

"Emma, I c-can't... it's gone. I can't..."

"Now is not the time to question your faith. I saw what you can do. Now do it!"

"But..."

"Just do it!" Emma said, ducking and diving so she wouldn't get hit by the irate woman she was holding.

Catherine nodded and closed her eyes, trying to clear her mind of all external influences. After a few seconds, all sounds other than her own heartbeat faded away and the world seemed to move in slow-motion. Taking a deep breath, she put her hands on the dead man's head and body.

Soon, Catherine's hands went numb as the blue-white haze formed around them and then expanded to cover the victim's entire body. She concentrated so hard that the real world ceased to exist for her, leaving her in complete darkness. Only she and the person she was trying to save were there, everything else was gone.

The process seemed to last for a lifetime, but in reality, it only took two minutes. When the final dot of light disappeared into the man's body, Catherine felt so drained that she didn't even know whether she was still alive or already dead.

The man coughed and then cried out. Catherine could feel two strong hands on her shoulders, but she was too weak to resist or complain. She couldn't open her eyes and she wasn't able to stop her head from lolling around freely. She could only sense that she was picked up and placed on the hard, wet asphalt. Around her, someone was shouting something, but she wasn't able to pick up a single word of what was being said.

Catherine fought hard to find a way back to the real world, but when she finally succeeded, her acute discomfort almost made her wish she hadn't. Groaning, she opened her eyes and looked around.

The two cyclists, the two small children and their two parents were standing above her - people who had been dead but who were now alive because of her. She wanted to feel proud of that achievement, but all she could feel was her aching soul.

Catherine sat up and shook her head. Somewhere deep inside her, the inevitable fit was beginning to grow, but she refused to just roll over and die.

The man she had saved last grabbed her under her arms and pulled her upright.

"You saved us," he said matter-of-factly, still holding onto Catherine in case she couldn't stand on her own.

"I guess I did," Catherine slurred, looking at the man. He was in his late forties, with a distinguished appearance and wearing expensive clothes that still sported a gaping hole in the chest where the steering column had impaled him.

"How is that possible?"

"If only I knew..." Catherine said, rubbing her weary eyes.

"I'm Dr. Richard Forbes and this is my wife, Pamela. We... we can't thank you enough for saving our children..."

"Well, you're w-welcome. Listen, I really need to get home... I'm... I've left my little puppy alone, and I..."

"Like I said, I'm a Doctor and I don't think you should go on your own. Where do you live?"

"Right over there, on Fulton Lane," Catherine said and pointed at the street across the intersection. As she did so, she noticed that her hands were still numb so she wasn't able to stop them from trembling.

"Let me walk you home," Richard said and put Catherine's arm around his shoulder.

"Oh, no, I..."

"It's the least we can do. After all, you saved us all."

"Well... all right."

Emma, her husband Patrick, the two small children and Pamela, the Doctor's wife, all said thank you to Catherine, but she could only manage a nod and a faint smile in return.

Catherine only made it as far as the intersection before she was hit by a dizzy spell. Immediately following that, the debilitating headache returned, striking her with a force ten times stronger than when she'd saved the man that had been caught under the tree.

Every fiber in her body seemed to explode, leading to the worst pain she had ever experienced. Her muscles began to spasm and she lost her sight almost at once.

Even though the Doctor had his arm wrapped around Catherine's waist, he wasn't strong enough to fight against the powerful spasms and he had to let her go.

Falling onto the cold, wet ground seemed to make Catherine's convulsions worse. Her limbs thrashed about ceaselessly and she started screaming. After a minute, her vocal chords had become so abused that she lost the ability to speak and her screams petered out and became gruesome whispers.

The spasms grew in intensity until they were so strong that Catherine was unable to breathe. At the crescendo, every single muscle in her body clenched violently, making her as taut as a bowstring and shaping her pretty face into a grotesquely deformed mask. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she let out a long, slow sigh.

As if by magic, the convulsions stopped and Catherine fell limply back down on the ground. A faint blue-white light emanated from her chest, hovering above it for a few seconds. The arcs of energy tried to form a blanket over Catherine's body, but they were too faint to do any good.

The arcs slowly lost color and started fading away until only one remained - the dot of light above Catherine's heart. Soon, that dissolved, too.

Catherine Goodwin was dead.

Catherine found herself in a dark, silent world. When she held up her hands, she could faintly see them through the darkness, and she tried to clench and unclench her fists several times just to check if everything was still working.

The air was chilly so she wrapped her arms around herself. When her hands touched her skin instead of her clothes, she discovered that she was naked. After looking down to confirm, she immediately blushed and covered her various girly bits with her hands. Moments later, she chuckled and let her arms fall down her sides, realizing that there wasn't anyone around to gawk at her.

"I had expected a bit more of the afterlife," Catherine said out loud, jumping when her voice echoed through the dark world she was in.

She did a full 360-degree spin without seeing anything at all - save for a tiny pinpoint of blue-white light in the far distance. Shrugging, she began to walk towards the light.

Even after walking for a while, the pinpoint of light was still the same distance away. Catherine stopped and shook her head.

"I'm being punished again, aren't I?" she said, but no one answered her question.

Suddenly a faint echo of someone shouting reached Catherine's ears and she spun around to look in the direction from where she thought the echo had come.

Over the next few seconds, more and more words began to echo back and forth in the otherwise silent world - *'doesn't respond'* , *'save her'* , *'we can't'* and finally *'come on, come on.'*

From one second to the next, the world she was in changed appearance. Gone was the darkness, replaced by a multitude of colors. Gone, too, was the silence and the echoes, replaced by a cacophony of noises, one of which sounded very much like the siren of an emergency vehicle.

Catherine opened her eyes and looked up. Above her, two paramedics were working on closing her shirt. One of them put away a strange looking instrument and the other held an oxygen mask ready.

She could feel that she was moving and she soon put two and two together - she was alive. Someone squeezed her hand, so she looked to her left and saw a distinguished looking gentleman sitting next to her.

"It's all right, Catherine. Welcome back. We're on the way to the hospital," Richard Forbes said.

"Wh-what happened...?"

"You had an epileptic seizure. We lost you there for a while."

"Oh..."

"How do you feel?"

"Sore."

"That's understandable. The paramedics say you show some signs of being in the vicinity of a lightning strike. The scorch marks, et cetera."

"Oh... a lightning strike...? R-Rosie, what about Rosie... is she... is she all right?"

"Rosie? Is she your puppy?"

"My puppy...? No, Rosie is my girlfriend. Is she all right? And... and someone needs to call my mother... she must be worried."

"Don't you worry about that now, I'll take care of everything. You... you do remember what just happened, right?"

"N-no... but I guess it must've happened on my way home from work...? Oh... oh, no, I remember now. I got off my bike, and... and I met Rosie in the garden. We talked a bit... but... is she all right? Oh, God, please don't tell me she was hurt, too?"

Richard leaned back and rubbed his brow. He debated with himself whether or not he should tell Catherine about the things that had occurred in the intersection, but came to the conclusion that she didn't need to know at that moment.

"Honestly, I don't know what's happened to your girlfriend, but I'll find out. Just concentrate on getting better," he said, putting a calming hand on her arm.

Catherine was unable to find the right words to convey the mad scramble of thoughts she had in her head, so she settled for nodding.

A few minutes later, the ambulance bumped over something in the road and Catherine looked puzzled at Richard.

"We're at the hospital now. Just stay calm."

"Oh, I'm calm. I've rarely been calmer," Catherine said and chuckled weakly.

She breathed a sigh of relief. All she wanted to do was to get some sleep and then to get back to her normal, uneventful life, spending her days working in a supermarket and spending her nights hugging and kissing her girlfriend.

When Catherine thought of Rosie, a broad smile spread out over her features - she couldn't wait to get pampered by the feisty ash-blonde, and she knew she was going to milk this event for all it was worth.

Something unidentifiable was nagging at the back of her mind, but she shrugged it off. She smiled again, very much looking forward to holding Rosie in her arms and feeling those wonderfully soft lips on her own...

THE END of THE CAT WITH NINE LIVES.

Claire groaned when she thought of the woman. The Doctor was a picture perfect example of the 'girl next door' - honey blonde hair, emerald green eyes, cute little dimples on her cheeks... and a sadistic streak a mile wide. Claire knew about that, not many others did.

She also knew the Doctor's dirty little secret. Doctor McClelland was in fact an Alien from outer space - and not only that, she was the Overlord of the coming invasion. Not many people believed that, but she, Claire Lundstrom, knew.

She moved back to her bunk and curled herself up in a fetal position. She tried to keep the evil thoughts out of her head, but she couldn't stop them from invading her mind.

'The Doctor ordered the termination of my parents. The newspapers called it 'A tragic fire', but I know better. It was no accident. My parents were shot with some kind of heat ray. I saw it. I was right there, hiding behind the stairs, watching.

I saw a man and a woman enter our living room and point a strange gun at my parents. I heard a high-pitched buzzing sound emanating from the gun and I saw my mother and my father catch fire in the middle of the living room. I heard my parents scream and scream and scream until the fire had fully engulfed them. I saw my mother and my father reduced to a pile of dark gray ashes on the carpet.'

For a few days, Claire had walked the streets of her former neighborhood, shouting warnings to the other people there, telling them to run away from the coming invasion. Then she had been admitted to the psychiatric ward.

Three days later, she had met the man and the woman she claimed had killed her parents, acting as guards at the hospital. She had attacked them, but was thrown into solitary confinement where she still was, five weeks later. The only other human being she saw was Lomax, and he only wanted to have sex with her.

Claire wiped a few tears away from her cheeks and took a deep breath. She had the key. Now all she had to do was to plan her escape.

Claire saw her chance two days later. Lomax had finished his rounds, but apparently hadn't had time to fool around with her, because he hadn't come into her cell.

She listened to his heavy footsteps walking down the hallway and to the sound of the metal door closing.

She put her arm through the bars and inserted the key into the lock. It made a few metallic sounds, but not enough to alert the other guards. She turned the key and watched the locking mechanism slowly pull back.

When it was fully retracted, she pushed on the door. She knew it creaked terribly, so she only opened it enough for her to slip through. She wasn't large, so she didn't need much space.

Once she was through, she looked up and down the hallway - everything was quiet and all the other cells were dark. She didn't know how many patients the hospital had in this ward, but she was sure she wasn't alone.

She took what she hoped was the final glance into her cell - at the bunk with the lumpy mattress, at the wash basin and at the concrete toilet bowl that didn't even have a seat. She cursed it all to hell and then ran silently down the hallway.

A few minutes later, she found herself standing in front of a glass door. On the other side of the door, she could see a gravelly parking lot with a row of trees at the far end. She took a deep breath and reached for the door handle.

She paused, thinking that it had been too easy. She looked around, expecting to see the sadistic Doctor standing behind her, holding the same heat ray gun that had killed her parents - but she was alone.

Determined to get to freedom, Claire opened the door and ran as quickly as she could across the lot.

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Half an hour later, Hoyt Purcell started doing his rounds. His experience told him something was wrong from the moment he stepped into the hallway in the Special Wing, and it didn't take him more than a few seconds to spot the open cell door.

He cursed and quickly ran up to the cell. Finding it empty, he spun around and ran back to the metal door.

Within moments, sirens started blaring, alerting the guards and the other patients that something was wrong and soon, the entire hospital was a beehive of activity.

A few minutes later, Hoyt Purcell and another guard, Janet Wynter, stood to attention in Doctor Nancy McClelland's office.

The Doctor listened to the annoying wail of the sirens for a few seconds and then gulped down a glass of brandy. She cleared her throat and pushed her index finger down on a button on the intercom.

"Mrs. Orson, please find the file of patient 1027-050459 and bring it to my office. Thank you," she said and released the button.

"Mr. Purcell, how was this possible?" Nancy McClelland said, studying the two guards standing in front of her. They were both wearing the regulation dark gray uniforms and hats, but that's where the similarities ended. Janet Wynter was built like a wrestler: Five foot six, a broad chest with a small bosom, a square jaw and square shoulders. Hoyt Purcell was her exact opposite - he was six foot three and so lanky that he looked like he'd topple over in a strong breeze.

"We're not sure at this point, Ma'am," Purcell said.

"Well, find out and make sure it won't happen again! This is unacceptable. Completely unacceptable," Nancy said and slammed her fist down onto the desktop.

"Yes, Ma'am," both guards said.

"My superiors will be breathing down my neck demanding an explanation. If they believe that I can't even manage the low number of patients we have here, then I can wave goodbye to any promotion. And..." Nancy leaned forward, pointing her index finger at Wynter and Purcell.

"... If I end up stuck in a place like this, so do you," she hissed.

A knock was heard from the door, prompting Nancy to bark "Enter!"

Margaret Orson stepped into the office, holding a manila folder containing the file the Doctor had requested earlier. She glanced nervously at the two imposing guards and made sure she didn't get near any of them.

"Doctor McClelland, here's the patient's file. Gosh, I can't believe we've had a breakout!" Margaret Orson said excitedly. She was in her late fifties and looked like a typical secretary, with sensible clothes, horn-rimmed spectacles and her gray hair wrapped up in a neat bun.

"Thank you, Mrs. Orson. That'll be all," Nancy said and picked up the manila folder. Once the secretary had left the office, Nancy pulled out the file and studied the black and white photo of Claire Lundstrom.

The photo had been taken when the young woman was admitted to the hospital. Despite the lack of color, it was easy to see the barely restrained madness in the young woman's eyes, and her ragged, filthy appearance clearly showed that she hadn't been able to take care of herself in the days prior to her arrest.

Furrowing her brow, Doctor McClelland began to read the patient's data out loud to the two guards.

"Patient 1027-050459. Born August 23rd, 1938 to Harry and Jackie Lundstrom, deceased. Five foot nine, 125 lbs., blue eyes, black hair, stronger than she appears. Brought to the hospital by Sheriff Mike Watson and two deputies on Monday, May 4th, 1959. Diagnosis: Extreme paranoia, claims to have witnessed so called 'aliens' murder her parents. Caution - smart and strong. Attacked Mr. Hoyt Purcell and Miss Janet Wynter soon after arrival. Assigned to indefinite solitary confinement."

Nancy leaned back in her armchair and sighed. She closed the file and put her hand on top of it in a very resigned fashion.

"Is any one else missing?"

"No, Ma'am," Janet Wynter said.

"She must have a reason for escaping now. Find her. I don't care what you have to do, just find her. Organize a search team and send them after her. Immediately."

"Yes, Ma'am," Janet said and bowed slightly. She turned around and left the office in a hurry.

"Mr. Purcell, I want you to seal all exits. Windows, air vents... everything. Post guards at all doors. In fact, I want the main entrance to be the only way in or out. You understand?"

"Do you expect a mass breakout, Ma'am?"

"No, not as such, but I wouldn't put it past some of the other patients to take advantage of the chaos. We can't allow that."

"No, Ma'am."

"Get to it," Nancy said and reached for a fountain pen and a piece of paper.

"Yes, Ma'am."

Ten minutes later, Doctor McClelland, Purcell and Wynter stood in front of the empty cell. The other patients in the Special Ward knew better than to make any smart-alec comments when tempers were running so high, so an eerie silence filled the hallway.

Wynter opened the door to the cell and checked the lock thoroughly.

"It's still functional, Doctor McClelland," she said after working the lock a few times.

"So Claire Lundstrom must have escaped using other means. I guess we know where the missing key went. Who was on duty in the Special Ward tonight, Miss Wynter?"

"That would be Mr. Lomax, Ma'am."

"Oh dear. Mr. Lomax again," Nancy said with a sigh.

"I'm afraid so, Ma'am."

"Where is he now?"

"Probably in the coffee room."

"His negligence cannot go unpunished this time," Nancy said and put her hands on the bars on the cell door. To her surprise, Janet Wynter was still standing next to her like she was waiting for an order.

"See to it, Miss Wynter. Outside, please."

"With pleasure, Doctor McClelland," Janet Wynter said and strode down the hall, headed for the coffee room.

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Claire ran as fast as the dense forest allowed her to. She had already slipped and fallen half a dozen times and her lungs were burning from the exertion.

On occasion, she stopped to listen for any unusual sounds, but so far, she hadn't heard any. She knew she could outrun the lumbering guards, but her biggest worry was that the sadistic Doctor would send bloodhounds after her.

Crouching down behind a tree, she looked up at the sky - it was overcast and the light was very gloomy. The solitary confinement had robbed her of her sense of time, so she had no idea if it was early evening or early morning. With a sigh, she got up from her hiding place and continued to run.

Suddenly, she thought she could hear the characteristic high-pitched buzzing sound of the weapon that had incinerated her parents, and she whipped her head around, terrified that she'd been spotted.

She didn't look where she was going and the result was inevitable. Her foot got caught underneath a root and she fell heavily, banging her hip against a tree stump. The hard impact sent a wave of pain crashing through her leg and up to her abdomen, and she had to clamp her hand across her mouth to stop herself from screaming.

Despite the numbing pain, she tried to press herself flat down onto the ground to make it harder for her followers to get an aim on her.

She spent the next few minutes listening intently, but the sound wasn't repeated. In the mean time, the pain had receded enough for her to continue and she got up and moved on. The first few steps were with a pronounced limp, but she clenched her teeth and willed herself to ignore the pain.

'At least I could feel it. I knew those bastards had me sedated the whole time I was here. I knew they would try to control me... I wonder how they did it? They probably put it in the water,' she thought as she picked up the pace.

Four hundred yards on from where she had hurt her hip, she stopped and scanned the forest again. Everything was still quiet - too quiet. Claire's paranoia kicked in and she started wondering why no one appeared to be following her.

'Maybe it's because they know where I'm going... Oh, God, what if they've put some kind of tracking device on me?' she thought as she picked up the pace again.

"M-maybe they've p-put some kind of Alien homing beacon inside my b-body...!" Claire said out loud and stopped dead in her tracks.

Fighting a surge of panic, she unzipped the jumpsuit and started examining herself from top to toe. She poked and prodded herself all over, but couldn't feel anything unusual - except the small scar on her cheekbone. Growing up, she'd had dozens of small cuts and bruises and this one felt just like the others. And besides, she knew exactly where it had come from.

Again and again, she ran her fingers across the scar, thinking about the uncaring and slimy Fred Lomax slapping her after she had given him a flippant quip about his sexual prowess. She surprised herself when a small chuckle bubbled up from her chest and escaped her lips - Fred Lomax was no Alien, of that she was certain. No Alien invasion force would ever accept such a slob working for them.

'But the others... the sadistic Doctor and the two henchmen. They're Aliens. Perhaps I should've attacked the Doctor instead. Perhaps I should've tried to tear her skin off. I'll bet she's green and scaly underneath that sickeningly sweet exterior,' Claire thought, working herself into quite a state.

An owl hooting somewhere far away snapped her out of her thoughts. With a sigh, she zipped her jumpsuit and continued deeper into the dark forest.

Ten minutes later, a large neon sign that read "Eat At Archie's" appeared through the increasing mist. At once, Claire stopped running and ducked behind a tree. Peeking around it, she could see that the sign was on the grassy verge between a road and a parking lot, and that several cars were parked in front of a diner off to the right.

Mustering up all her courage, she ran from one tree to the next to try to keep out of sight of the people visiting the diner. Once she reached the parking lot, she anxiously scanned the area, but couldn't see any immediate dangers.

There were three vehicles in the lot, a Chevrolet Nomad, a large semi truck and an Oldsmobile sedan. The Olds was parked in front of the diner's entrance, but the Nomad was behind the truck, out of sight of the diner. Making up her mind, Claire decided to go for the Nomad.

She came out from her hiding place and ran the final fifty yards towards the parked cars. The gravel crunched impossibly loud under her feet and she was sure she'd alert the entire State. After making it safely to the corner of the diner, she crouched down and looked around - all was still quiet.

She waited for a few moments to make sure the coast was clear and then raced towards the truck. Once she reached the trailer, she ducked behind it and tried to control her wildly beating heart. With shaking hands, she turned to the Nomad and put her hand on the door handle.

Much to her surprise, the door wasn't locked and it opened easily. She slipped into the driver's seat and reached down to turn the ignition key, but found that it wasn't there. With a grunt, she stepped back out and crouched down, trying to figure out what she had to do to hot-wire it. She reached in under the steering column...

Suddenly, a strong hand clamped down on her collar and yanked her out of the Nomad.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" a gruff, male voice said. The man turned on a flashlight, shining the cone of light directly into Claire's eyes, blinding her.

"Let me go! Let me go! You don't understand! Let me go!" she cried out trying to wiggle out of his grip, but the man was too strong.

"Don't you know how we deal with car thieves here in the South? We find a tree and... you can probably guess the rest. But I'm in a good mood today, so I'll just hand you over to the authorities. C'mon!"

The man held firmly onto Claire's collar and unceremoniously pulled her towards the diner.

"No... Please let me go... You don't understand, they'll get you all if you don't escape..."

"Shut up," the man said and pushed the diner's door open.

When the little bell above the door dinged, Archie Pressley wiped off his hands on a towel and came out of the kitchen, expecting to greet his friend Carlos Valdes.

"Hola, Carlos... hey, who the hell is that?" Archie said, staring at the young woman who was wearing an unusual pale gray jumpsuit.

"Hola, Archie. I just caught this little thief out on the lot. She was trying to steal the Nomad," Carlos said and pushed Claire down on one of the bar stools that lined the counter.

"The Nomad? Our Nomad?" a man said from the other end of the diner. He put down a napkin and got up. Buttoning his business suit, he walked towards Carlos and Archie.

"I'm Samuel Delano, Jr. and that's my wife, Grace, and our daughter Marilyn," the man said, pointing at a woman and a child sitting in the booth he had just left. Archie and Carlos nodded at them and they responded similarly.

"Did you say she was trying to steal the Nomad?" Delano said, putting out his hand.

"Carlos Valdes, Sir. Yes, that's right. I was in the cab of my truck when I heard a sound like someone opening a car door. I looked down and there she was, getting ready to hot-wire it," Carlos said, shaking hands with the businessman.

"But you don't understand! I have to escape! You all have to escape! They're Aliens! They'll come for us! Don't you understand? They'll enslave or burn us all if we don't run," Claire said, moving around on the bar stool, clearly on the brink of a nervous breakdown.

Carlos rolled his eyes and took an even stronger grip on Claire's collar so she wouldn't bolt from the diner.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Archie, don't you have a room or something we can lock her up in while the law gets here?"

Archie scratched his hair and scrunched up his face.

"Hmmm... No, but I have a pair of handcuffs out the back. We could cuff her to the base of the bar stool."

"Good thinking. Let's do it," Samuel Delano said and walked over to stand behind the truck driver. Together, he and Carlos were easily able to force Claire down on the floor and hold her arms against the bar stool.

Claire whimpered and moaned, but when it became obvious that the two men weren't about to let her go, she stopped.

Archie came around the counter holding a pair of handcuffs, and in no time, they had cuffed Claire to the metal pillar holding the seat. She tried to pull at the cuffs, but only succeeded in scraping her skin.

"If you keep doin' that, you're going to sprain your wrist. I doubt you want that," Carlos said.

"You don't understand... they're Aliens from outer space... they'll get us all..." Claire sobbed.

"I better go out and check the Nomad," Delano said.

"I'd lock it if I were you," Archie said and wiggled an index finger in Delano's direction.

"I will," Delano said and left the diner.

"Hey, Archie, what's with that strange jumpsuit? Ain't she a little old for that?" Carlos said.

"I think it's from the mental hospital on the other side of the forest. Turn her around."

Carlos pulled Claire around and spread out the crumpled back of her jumpsuit. He removed a few dead leaves and a clump of dirt, and stared at the name on the back:

'G.W.M. MENTAL HOSPITAL - PATIENT'

"Well, I'll be... you're right. She must've escaped. So that's why she's talking bull," Carlos said and wiped off his hands on his pants, almost like he was afraid he might catch something if he held onto Claire for too long.

"Probably. We better call them instead of the Sheriff. They'll know what to do," Archie said and turned around to reach for the telephone on the wall.

"NO! NO! They're Aliens! They'll murder us all! Don't call them, please! Let me escape, let's all escape while we have the time! Please don't call them!" Claire said, struggling to release herself from the handcuffs.

"Listen, girl, if you don't shut up, I'm gonna gag you!" Archie said, holding the phonebook in his hand.

Samuel Delano came back into the diner and stared angrily at the young woman. He grimaced at Claire and gave her a wide berth on his way back to the booth.

"No, but you can't... you don't understand... they'll enslave us all! I'm the last hope, I'm humanity's last hope... if they come here, they'll take you all... they'll burn us! They'll burn us all..." Claire sobbed.

The other guests in the diner stared at the frightened young woman, and pretty quickly, talk began to buzz between them.

"All right, that does it. Edith! Edith! Get out here at once! Bring a towel!" Archie yelled into the kitchen.

"What the hell's going on out there?" Edith Pressley said, peeking out of the door to the backroom.

"Carlos just caught some freak from the nut-ward. She's scarin' the guests. We need a towel," Archie said, still thumbing through the local phonebook.

"What for?"

"Will you just give me that towel, Edith?"

Edith Pressley came out into the diner and handed her husband the towel. Archie gave up trying to find the telephone number for the mental hospital and thrust the phonebook into his wife's hands.

"Here. Call the nut-ward and tell 'em we've got an escapee."

"But what are..."

"I'm gonna gag her," Archie said and moved over to stand behind Claire. While Carlos held her arms, Archie tied the towel around Claire's head, covering her face and effectively stopping her cries.

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Margaret Orson rapped her knuckles on Nancy McClelland's door and entered the office without waiting for a reply.

"Doctor McClelland, we have a woman from the local diner on the telephone. She says they've just caught one of our patients trying to steal a car."

"Finally. What line?"

"Number three, Doctor."

"Thank you, Margaret," Nancy said and sat down in her leather armchair. She pulled the telephone close and picked up the receiver. Pressing #3 on the row of lights, she cleared her throat and leaned back in the seat.

"Hello? I'm Doctor Nancy McClelland. I've been told you have one of our patients?"

'That's right, Doctor. Please wait, I'll give you my husband.'

"All right."

'Hello?'

"Hello, I'm Doctor McClelland."

'I'm Archie Pressley, the owner of Archie's Diner. We just caught one of your freaks down here, tryin' to steal a car.'

"I see. Where is that exactly, Mr. Pressley?" McClelland said and picked up a pencil and a notepad.

'Down on Bay Road, on the other side of the forest. It's near mile marker forty-seven.'

"All right. Noted. The person you apprehended, is she early twenties, with blue eyes, very dark hair, and a small scar on her left cheek?"

'That's right. She's also wearing one of your jumpsuits. Is she dangerous?'

"Not as such. She's delusional."

'I'll say! She's done nothing but talk crap the entire time she was here.'

"About what, Mr. Pressley?"

'Oh, the usual paranoid 'aliens are everywhere' nonsense. Personally, I blame Hollywood for corrupting our teenagers with all that Science-Fiction crap.'

"I can't disagree with you, Mr. Pressley. We'll be there shortly. Don't let her escape."

'We won't. Until then, Doctor.'

"Until then, Mr. Pressley."

Twelve minutes later, a black Mercury sedan and a pale gray Ford van entered the parking lot, stopping in front of the diner.

Janet Wynter jumped out of the van and went up to the black Mercury. She opened the passenger side door, allowing Nancy McClelland to step out.

Behind them, two more guards exited the van. One of them opened the sliding door and took out a small box and a straitjacket.

"Mr. Dukes, Mr. Purcell, get ready to grab the patient if she runs again. Miss Wynter, you're with me," the Doctor said and began to walk across the gravelly parking lot.

The three guards nodded and followed the doctor.

As soon as Claire saw Nancy McClelland standing in the doorway, she became manic and started pulling on the handcuffs. She was still gagged, but it was easy to hear that she was screaming underneath the towel. Her eyes rolled insanely in her head and when she wasn't able to break free of the handcuffs, she started banging her wrist violently against the metal pillar, apparently trying to break her bones so she could slip out of the cuffs.

Archie Pressley sneered and looked at the struggling woman like one would look at a piece of turd under one's shoe.

"Mr. Pressley?" Nancy McClelland said, looking around.

"That's me. You must be Doctor McClelland?" Archie said and moved forward. He held out his hand and the Doctor shook it.

"That's right. Well, I can certainly see your problem. Mr. Purcell, sedate the patient."

Hoyt Purcell opened the small box he was holding and took out a large syringe.

Grace Delano and Edith Pressley gasped, but Nancy McClelland held up her hands.

"Ladies, I'm sorry. I know it's brutal, but it's necessary."

Claire tried to evade the syringe, but Purcell was too strong for her and the needle soon plunged into the vein on Claire's neck. Hoyt Purcell emptied the contents of the syringe into Claire's blood and took a step back.

Claire's eyelids slipped down and the fighting spirit was drained from her. Her screams became weaker and weaker, and soon, they stopped completely. She slumped against the metal pillar, apparently in a deep sleep.

"Mr. Pressley, do you have the keys for the handcuffs?" the Doctor said.

"Oh, yes, certainly. One moment," Archie said and crouched down on the floor next to the young woman. He fumbled a bit with the lock, but finally managed to release it. He took off the towel he had used as the gag and stared in horror at a patch of blood on it. He looked at the blood trickling out of the young woman's mouth and came to the conclusion that she must've bit her cheek or her tongue while she was trying to break free.

"Mr. Dukes, the straitjacket, please," the Doctor said.

John Dukes worked efficiently and it only took a few seconds before Claire was wrapped in the straitjacket. He picked her up and threw her over his shoulder.

"I'll put her in the van, Doctor," he said on his way to the door.

"All right."

In disgust, Archie threw the bloody towel into the garbage can and then turned around and began to wash his hands thoroughly.

Doctor McClelland stepped out into the center of the diner and cleared her throat loudly.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, may I have your attention, please. I'm Doctor Nancy McClelland and I'm in charge of the psychiatric hospital that's located on the other side of the ridge. I want to offer you my sincerest apologies for what happened here tonight. I realize it must have been an unsettling experience for all of you, but I can assure you it won't happen again."

"What was wrong with her?" Archie Pressley said.

"It's a tragic tale, I'm afraid, Mr. Pressley. She recently lost her parents in a fire and, well... it sent the poor young thing into a state of emotional chaos. She kept saying that aliens from outer space had killed her parents because they were key people in the psychic defenses of our planet. Apparently, an alien invasion is near."

Archie scoffed and rolled his eyes.

Suddenly, Marilyn Delano ran from the booth her parents were sitting at and over to the Doctor. She reached up and tugged on Nancy's skirt.

"Auntie doctor, are you an alien?"

Marilyn's parents groaned and Samuel got up from the booth, but a quick wave by Nancy made him sit down again.

"What's that, sweetheart?" the Doctor said with a laugh. She crouched down and stroked the young girl's blonde hair.

"The scary woman said you were all aliens and that you were going to take us all away...?"

"No, of course I'm not an alien. That young woman is very ill and she believes she knows a lot of things, but in reality, it's all in her mind. OK?"

"OK," Marilyn said and ran back to her parents.

Nancy stood up and put her hands behind her back. She smiled at Marilyn, who waved back.

"I'm afraid that I'm something much worse than an a mere Alien from outer space..." the Doctor said out loud. The other people in the diner seemed to take a collective deep breath, and the place turned very quiet.

"I'm a New Yorker with a degree in Psychiatry," the Doctor said, earning herself a lot of relieved chuckling from the mainly Southern crowd.

Dukes placed Claire's sleeping form in the van and attached a snaphook on the floor to an eye on the back of the straitjacket. He dusted off his hands and went back out, slamming the sliding door shut behind him.

The Doctor and the other two guards came out of the diner and walked over to the van.

"Mr. Dukes, is the patient secure?" Nancy said.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Excellent. Let's hope we won't have to go through something like that again."

"Pardon me, Ma'am, but are we going to use the patient to set an example?" Janet Wynter said.

"No, Miss Wynter, we're not. That would just cause too much resentment among the other patients and frankly, that's the last thing we need now. Let's just get back to the hospital, shall we?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Wynter said and opened the passenger door of the Mercury so the Doctor could get in.

The driver of the Mercury started the engine with a roar and proceeded to drive out of the parking lot. The van followed it closely, swiftly leaving the diner and the people there behind.

Claire woke up from her drug-induced slumber when the van bounced over the small speed bump that marked the entrance to the hospital. She looked around her small metallic prison and tried to figure out what had happened and where she was. When she wanted to move around so she could see better, she found that the straitjacket she had been put in was tied to the floor and she groaned loudly.

She recognized the sound of the gravel crunching underneath the van's wheels as it drove around the main building to get to the main entrance, and surmised that she was back at the hospital. She sighed and shook her head to try to get rid of the cobwebs - unfortunately, this only worsened her already throbbing headache.

When the van finally stopped, she could hear car doors open and close. Suddenly, the sliding door was pulled aside and Hoyt Purcell stepped up into the van. Claire whimpered and started struggling to break free of the restraints, but Purcell calmly put his large boot across her chest.

"Do you really wanna fight me, little girl?" he said in a rumbling voice. Claire sighed and stopped struggling.

Purcell reached down and released Claire's straitjacket from the snaphook. Effortlessly, he picked her up and carried her out of the van. As soon as Claire could feel the gravel beneath her feet, she started to wiggle to break free of his grip. When that didn't work, she started kicking out like a madman, hoping to hit something that would hurt. Her boot finally connected with Purcell's knee, making the tall man roar and jump around on one leg.

When Claire felt Purcell take his hands off of her, she started running as fast as she could to get away from the guards. Her headache caused her to see black spots and she only had a vague idea in which direction she was headed, but every instinct in her body screamed at her to run, so she did.

"Stop her, you fools!" Doctor McClelland shouted and gave Hoyt Purcell a hard shove on his back. Janet Wynter had already started running after Claire, holding her billy club high in the air. When she could see that she wasn't gaining on the younger, faster, woman, she pulled her arm back and sent the nightstick flying.

The rod hit Claire's legs, sweeping them out from under her. With a scream, she came crashing to the ground and then moaned loudly from the hard and unexpected landing. A split second later, Wynter came at Claire from behind, landing on top of her and forcing all the air out of her lungs.

Wynter picked up her nightstick and held it tightly against Claire's neck, mashing her face down into the gravel.

"Miss Wynter, that's enough. I'm sure Claire won't run again. Will you, Claire?" Nancy said calmly.

"N-no... no..." Claire whimpered.

"Miss Wynter. Please let the patient go," Nancy said and put a hand on Janet Wynter's shoulder. The guard released her grip and got on her feet.

"Mr. Purcell, another shot of sedative is required," Nancy said and moved aside so the tall guard could get to Claire.

"N-no, please d-don't... I promise I'll b-behave," Claire said. Purcell paused and looked at the Doctor, who waved at him to carry on.

Purcell opened the small box and removed the syringe. While Wynter held Claire's head still, he injected the sedative directly into the vein on Claire's neck.

"Not the entire doses, Mr. Purcell. We don't want to risk permanent brain damage," Nancy said.

"Yes, Ma'am," Purcell said, stopping when the syringe was half full.

"All right. Let's go," Nancy said and opened the main entrance.

A few minutes later, Hoyt Purcell, Janet Wynter and the Doctor walked down the hallway of the Special Wing of the psychiatric ward. Claire was still under the influence of the sedative, so she allowed herself to be carried by Purcell without objecting.

Wynter opened the cell door and then stepped aside so Purcell had space to walk into the cell. She watched with interest as her colleague dumped Claire on the bunk and took the straitjacket off her.

Nancy stepped closer, but Purcell put his hand on the Doctor's arm.

"Careful, Ma'am. She's unpredictable."

"Don't worry, Mr. Purcell. I have everything under control," Nancy said and removed the guard's hand from her.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Wait outside," Nancy said to Wynter and Purcell and waited for the two guards to leave the cell. Once she was alone, she walked over to the bunk and crouched down so she was at eye level with Claire.

"Claire, I'm sorry that it had to end in such a way. None of this would've been necessary if you hadn't run away," Nancy said quietly.

Claire's only response was a pained moan.

"I really hope that one day, you'll come to terms with what's happened to you. You have so much to offer the world. I mean it, Claire. If you're able to overcome your grief, your special powers would make you a magnificent ambassador."

Claire's eyes grew wide and she started mumbling something unintelligible.

"Relax now. It'll all work out, I promise. Oh, and the heavy sedative will wear off in an hour or so," Nancy said and got up. She walked over to the cell door and called out for Janet Wynter to open it.

Nancy walked into the secretary's office and sat down on the corner of Mrs. Orson's desk. She sighed and ran a hand through her hair.

A few moments later, Margaret Orson came back from the archives carrying a large pile of files. She carefully leaned forward and put them down on her desk.

"Oh, Doctor, this was quite an ordeal. I hope the young woman is all right?" Margaret Orson said, discretely wiping a drop of sweat off her forehead.

"She's fine, Mrs. Orson. A bit confused, as might be expected, but generally fine. Are these the files of all the patients in the Special Wing?"

"Yes, Doctor, save for the one you got earlier."

"All right. Now for the hard part. Now I have to make out a complete report explaining the mess to my superiors."

Margaret laughed politely and sat down on her swivel-chair.

The Doctor got off the corner of the desk and thumped one fist into the palm of the other.

"It couldn't have come at a more inopportune moment. I know my superiors are monitoring me closely to see if I'm able to run a tight ship. And now I have to explain a breakout to them."

"Oh, Doctor McClelland, I'm sure it'll be fine. You're a very capable woman, and you're certainly the most intelligent Doctor I've ever worked for."

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Orson. Let's hope my superiors will see it similarly. Well, I better get started on writing that report. I don't want to be disturbed for the next hour unless there's another breakout."

"Yes, Doctor. Good luck with the report."

"Thank you," Nancy said with a smile and picked up the pile of files. She went over to the door to the inner office and opened it with her foot.

Nancy sat down at her mahogany desk and sighed deeply. She looked around at all the little trinkets she had collected in the four years she had been at the George W. Markham Mental Hospital - she knew she wouldn't miss any of it once her current assignment was done.

With a small smile creasing her lips, she looked out of the window and collected her thoughts. She opened one of the files and briefly looked at the black and white photo of Claire Lundstrom, born 1938 to Harry and Jackie Lundstrom, deceased.

She closed the file again and went over to the gas driven fireplace. She turned on the flame and waited for it to grow strong. Once it was, she threw the patient files into the fire one by one, marveling at the way the flames devoured the paper, eating at the edges, turning it black and then disintegrating it completely.

After all the files were burned, she reached up and took off her necklace. She opened a small locket and looked at a strange device inside. It was a clock of some kind, reading 40 hours, 56 minutes, 22 seconds and counting down.

With a satisfied grunt, Nancy closed the locket and went back to her desk. Leaning in, she pressed a button on the intercom.

"Mrs. Orson, summon Mr. Purcell and Miss Wynter to my office at once, please. Thank you," Nancy said and went over to a safe that had been built into the wall. She entered the combination without even looking and then pulled open the heavy door. She paused briefly, but then reached in and took out a small box.

She pressed her thumb down on a metallic looking square that was on top of the box and waited for a green light to flash. Once it did, an unseen lock released with an audible click, opening the box.

The box held an electronic keycard. She took it out and inserted it into a slot at the back wall of the safe, which in turn opened a hidden compartment just below the slot.

She reached into the compartment and took out a piece of electronic equipment the size of a large matchbox that she put on the windowsill. There was a knock on the door, and Nancy turned around and said,

"Enter!"

Hoyt Purcell and Janet Wynter came into the office and stood to attention in the middle of the room.

"Janet. Hoyt. I'm about to report to our superiors," Nancy said and pressed a green button on the electronic equipment. She took a step back and looked at the others while she waited for it to turn on. An array of red lights lit up and then went off one at a time. When the last of the lights had turned off, a miniature satellite dish unfolded and started turning around, searching for a signal.

Two short beeps confirmed a signal lock, and Nancy pressed another small button, a red one this time. When a green LED lit up, she began talking into the communications device.

"Phirax Base, Phirax Base. This is Operative One. Stand by for transmission," Nancy said and waited patiently for a reply.

A few seconds later, a sequence of beeps was heard and Nancy nodded to herself.

"Commencing transmission. Type: Status update. Xcnxmncnxvbxzyty. Uycyxvcvvhvccuuc. Xccnncnncnkdkmcmc. Fuhuhcncuuehufunvb. Nxjbtuheuhfunvtibib. Jbxuhuhrujn. Xcbnvuhuthufhenunvunr. Cfdnfnfueennmmcm 1027-050459. Ysfgfghgwhghwgwyeyw?" Doctor McClelland said.

'Quruutiehnncmncmncnuui. Qjgjhdfuhueuehuhuhudhuhe. Kjgigjitjeommvnoow! Kmanfunrtunvmwvnuinnvuvunvun Xn!' a distorted voice said from the other end of the connection.

Nancy looked down, her cheeks blushing from the angry telling-off she had just received from her superiors. She looked inside the locket on her necklace and saw to her great disappointment that the countdown had been suspended.

"Byryeuhee. Hquhryhcnbcmnruf. Mncjhcuhruwmnmc. Zcnvuhurhfunmdnmvov. Njxnvueuhf. Nncmncmhshjwuuhc. Mnxcnjjdhjjwoffofme... Uhfurhuvmvncninxcm. 1027-050459 Sncnuwhuncnc.

Niwnnfinin... psychic powers. JNxuugnuvnuvnm... alert others," Nancy said, hoping that she didn't lay it on too thick.

'Xuhfm.'

Nancy furrowed her brow and looked at the transmission device. Her superiors had asked her to stand by. She looked at her locket again, but the countdown still hadn't recommenced.

'Jhfunfunv?'

"Nncunu."

'Yes, I'm still here,' Nancy thought and prepared herself for the inevitable rejection.

'Jncununundv. NJnubnvunfuvv. Xmnvnnvoit. Zbbvnbhomoiuunrny. Mocmtenuwknv. Nunugugngunbnsdnmrvjnhnmg. Xnugueivmimimv. Micmvinwyfbyunvjnv. Poejgnugnunw. JBaybyfbybv. Zygyrbyvbybebv. Xhuen.'

"Xhuen?"

'Xhuen!'

Doctor Nancy McClelland pressed the green button on the transmitter, closing the connection. She checked her locket again and saw that the timer had been reset - and that it had begun counting backwards from one hour.

She nodded and went back to the armchair. Sitting down and putting her hands on the desktop, her lips creased into a faint smile that soon became a wide grin.

"Miss Wynter, see to it that the patients in the Special Wing are taken care of. Not Miss Lundstrom, though. I have something special planned for her. Once you're done, come back here," Nancy said.

"Yes, Ma'am," Janet said, spun around on her heel and left the office.

Nancy leaned back in her armchair and started whistling a merry little ditty, waiting impatiently for the timer in her locket to reach zero.

An hour and fifteen minutes later, Claire Lundstrom could faintly hear an air raid siren somewhere in the distance, quickly followed by hundreds of instances of the high-pitched buzzing sound that had been etched into her brain when her parents were killed.

Soon, she could hear explosions and screaming; people crying for loved ones and begging for mercy they wouldn't get.

She buried her face in her hands and started to cry.

THE END of I'M HUMANITY'S LAST HOPE!

"Don't be fooled by the extravagant name, it's just a fancy way of saying it has a king-size bed," Lizzie said and winked at Hayley.

"Well, in that case, how can I refuse," Hayley said with a laugh.

"Are you here for business or pleasure?" Lizzie said as she waited for the computer to process the reservation.

"Business. I'm doing research for a book on supernatural phenomena."

"Oh, that's sounds SO interesting," Lizzie gushed.

"Well, I think it is."

"You're here for the Weeping Lady, then?"

"Yes. Yes, I am. Is she well known around here?"

"Oh yes, she's Bensontown's main claim to fame."

The computer beeped and Lizzie turned her attention to the screen. A printer spat out a page with the confirmation of the payment.

"Tell me, Miss Ralston, how does it feel to see your name on top of the bestseller lists?"

"Well, it's... different."

"I'll bet. Here it is, room 412. The top floor. Here you go," Lizzie said as she handed the key to Hayley.

"Thank you."

Once she had unlocked the door, Hayley stepped inside and put down her bags. The hotel room proved to be very nice, with two large windows overlooking the street, a tastefully furnished living room, and a small kitchen with all the appliances one would expect in 2008.

She had to laugh when she saw the king-sized bed in the junior-sized bedroom. How they had managed to get that in there, she'd never know. She hung her jacket on a hall-stand next to the door and went straight over to the radiator to turn the heat up a bit more.

After a brief visit to the bathroom, Hayley plugged her cellphone into her laptop and began the tedious task of wading through her e-mails.

THE SECOND DAY - FRIDAY, OCTOBER 24th, 2008

The morning dawned clear and bright, but the wind was still blowing fiercely.

Hayley rose early and went about town, researching for her article on the Weeping Lady. An old man at Bensontown's local newspaper told her the best information would be at the public library, so that's where she went.

As she walked into the library, she was instantly brought back to her childhood. The smell of linoleum and old, dusty books was the same no matter which library she visited.

An elderly lady was sitting at a desk, knitting. Hayley decided to cut to the chase and went straight over to her.

"Hello, Miss, how may I help you?" the librarian said kindly, putting away her handiwork.

"Hello. My name is Hayley Ralston, I'm an author, and I'm currently working on a book on supernatural phenomena. I was told by Mr. Jackson from the newspaper that you have a book on 'The Weeping Lady'?"

"Well... I believe we do. Just a moment, I need to check," the librarian said and got up from her chair.

A few minutes later, she came back with a copy of the book in question.

"Here it is, Miss. Do you want to lend it, or just read it?"

"Just read it, thank you."

"All right, you can find our reading rooms over there," the librarian said and pointed at a glass door that led away from the main hall.

"Thank you," Hayley said with a smile.

The librarian returned the smile and then went back to her knitting.

In the reading room, Hayley put the book down on a table and found her notepad and a box of pencils in her shoulderbag.

She looked at the book. It appeared to have been made locally, but to a very high standard and the cover art was very evocative. She opened it and glanced at the credits page.

'The Weeping Lady - The Tragedy of Jessica and Mary-Ann © 1983 Rita van der Zwaan. All rights reserved'

In the four years she'd been traveling the country exploring - and some times exposing - the local ghost stories, she'd become quite an expert in separating fact from myth, and for some inexplicable reason, she felt this particular story would be very exciting to get to the bottom of.

Soon, Hayley became so engrossed in the book that she didn't hear the door to the reading room creak open. Soft footsteps were heard crossing the linoleum floor, and suddenly somebody cleared her throat right behind the author.

"Jesus!" Hayley said, almost jumping out of the chair. Her knees connected with the underside of the table, sending the box of pencils flying.

"Oh dear!" the librarian said, taking a step back and putting her hand on her chest.

"Oh, it's you..."

"I called out your name twice, Miss. I'm sorry I scared you."

"It's all right, I just didn't hear you..." Hayley said while rounding up the last of her wayward pencils.

"I wanted to see how you were doing... I have a mug of tea for you. Careful, it's hot."

"Thank you. It's an exciting book, actually," Hayley said with a nervous laugh.

"It is. I knew the author. She was a friend of mine."

" 'Was' ?"

"She passed away. It's a few years ago now," the librarian said, picking up a stray pencil that had rolled onto the floor.

"I'm sorry to hear that. I have a few questions so I was hoping to get in touch with her. Perhaps I could ask you... well, if you don't mind, of course...?"

"Well, I don't really know anything about that tragic affair... I'm sorry."

"All right. How do I get to the mansion from here?"

"Take Main Street towards the Old Mill. Just before you reach it, about three miles out of town, there's a road off to the left called Falconer Drive. You can't miss the mansion once you're there."

"Thank you," Hayley said and motioned to go back to the book.

"I have to warn you..." the librarian said, putting her hand on Hayley's shoulder and leaning in towards the author.

"... that place really is haunted. I wouldn't go there if I were you!"

Hayley stared at the librarian for a few seconds to see if she was joking, but the look on the older woman's face said loud and clear that she wasn't.

"Well, thanks for the warning, but it's my job, so..." Hayley said, gulping.

"All right, but don't say I didn't warn you," the librarian said and left the reading room.

Chuckling, Hayley shook her head. The tea was still too hot to drink, so she returned to the book; she was soon lost to the world again.

Most people in Bensontown know about the tragic story, but there's always a new generation growing up who doesn't know what we old folks are talking about. For their sake, and for Jessica's and Mary-Ann's

sake, here's what it's all about: At the turn of the century, Mary-Ann Falconer lived in the mansion with her partner. She was ahead of her times, because that partner was a woman, Jessica Quinn - which was unheard of in those days. One day in late October 1908, Jessica was on a business trip out of state when Mary-Ann had a riding accident. Her horse slipped on some wet rocks and threw her. Tragically, she hit her head on a sharp stone that penetrated her skull. She died instantly.'

"Oh, how horrible!" Hayley said out loud and picked up the mug of tea. She blew on it a couple of times and then started to sip it.

'Jessica returned a day later, having broken off her trip because she could feel something had happened. The popular legend has it that within days, Jessica went insane from the loss and killed herself. Fact is that Jessica Quinn disappeared without a trace. The police soon closed the case citing a lack of evidence - without a body, it was impossible to prove that a crime had been committed. Not long after her disappearance, the first sightings were reported.'

Hayley leaned back in the chair and sighed. Once again she had the feeling that this would be a much more interesting story than the last few she had written about. She sloshed the last few drops of tea around in the mug before emptying it, and then read on.

She started to thumb through the pages until she found a reproduction of an old sepia-toned photo. Hayley briefly looked at the picture before reading the caption.

'Jessica Quinn and Mary-Ann Falconer, taken on Mary-Ann's 30th birthday, October 15th 1908, ten days before she died...'

Hayley looked closer at the two women on the photo - suddenly her blood froze to ice.

Jessica Quinn was a tall woman with long black hair, and standing next to her was a shorter woman with blonde, flowing hair and sparkling eyes... Hayley's eyes, Hayley's lips, Hayley's cheeks... her own face was staring back at her from the page of the book - in a century-old photograph.

"Oh my God..." Hayley whispered in a trembling voice. The empty mug slipped from her fingers and hit the floor, breaking in two.

After leaving a \$20 bill at the librarian's post to cover for the broken mug, Hayley left the library in a hurry, anxious to get as far away from the book as possible. Normally, she wasn't easily spooked, but seeing her own face in that book had left her rather unnerved.

In a haze, she walked down Main Street, not stopping until she reached the end of it. She looked around and realized that she had ended up outside a small bar. Even though it was barely noon, she needed something to calm her nerves, so she went inside.

The bar turned out to be a cozy little place, with small tables and comfortable booths. Soft music was playing from an old-fashioned jukebox and a sign on the counter proudly proclaimed that three years ago, Sammy's Secret Recipe Irish Coffee had been selected as the '#1 Best Irish Coffee in the State'.

Behind the counter, a large, bearded man in his late twenties was busy washing and drying glasses before hanging them on a rack above the bar.

Hayley immediately felt at home, so she unbuttoned her jacket and sat down on one of the bar stools. The bartender quickly spotted her and came over to her, holding a small notepad.

"Welcome to Sammy's Bar & Café. What'll it be, Miss?"

"Brandy, please."

He grabbed a bottle and a glass, but stopped before he had poured anything into it.

"Is everything all right, Miss? You're really pale."

"Yeah, I... I'm fine," Hayley said with a weak smile.

I'm peachy. I just saw my face in a century-old photograph... No big deal, Hayley thought.

"Tell you what, how about I make you an Irish Coffee instead? You look like you could need it. I'll guarantee it'll nip any headcold in the bud," he said and laughed.

"Sounds great, thank you... oh, hold the whipped cream, please."

"Gotcha."

The percolator started bubbling, and before long, the barkeep put down a large cup of Irish Coffee on the counter.

"That'll be \$5, Miss. Enjoy!" he said, and smiled when she gave him a \$10 bill.

"Thanks, I will. Keep the change," Hayley said, grabbed the mug, and looked for a table.

The Irish Coffee warmed her from the inside out, and Hayley soon felt better. She picked up her notebook and flicked it to the page where she had copied the main details from the book on Jessica and Mary-Ann.

She looked at the page again and again, but the details didn't make any more sense now than when she wrote them down.

Hayley wasn't a religious woman by any stretch of the imagination, or even superstitious, but there was something at work here that she couldn't explain. She was beginning to feel she had been summoned here. She had chosen Bensontown by putting her finger down randomly on a list of towns with interesting stories... but maybe 'The Weeping Lady' had chosen her instead.

Hayley suddenly got an idea. Instead of running away, she'd do what she had originally come for - she would dig deeper into the story. She had always enjoyed a good mystery, and this one promised to be one of the most intriguing ones she had ever come across. She emptied the cup and went up to the bar.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name before?" she said as she put the cup down on the counter.

"Sammy. I'm the owner."

"Hi, Sammy, I'm Hayley," she said and put out her hand.

"Pleased to meet you. Wait a minute, are you Hayley Ralston? The author that Lizzie hasn't stopped yapping about for the last three weeks?" he said as he shook her hand.

"Yep, that's me," Hayley said with a grin.

"Oh wow. Hey, would you mind signing our celebrity wall?"

"Celebrity wall?"

"Yeah, it's right over there. Whenever there's someone famous in here, I take a picture of them and ask them to put their name on this wall," he said and pointed at several autographs spread out across the wall.

"Sure thing, Sammy," Hayley said and picked up a pen. She briefly looked at the other names that were already on the wall and was impressed when she recognized a few well-known signatures from the world of sports and entertainment. When she was signing, Sammy found a digital camera and said...

"Say cheese!"

The camera took the picture, and as usual, the flash almost blinded Hayley.

"It'll be up by this afternoon," he said.

"You print them out yourself?"

"No, my girlfriend works down in the bookstore. They have a top of the line photo printer. It's gonna be great, look, it really caught your sparkling eyes," he said and showed Hayley the picture on the small display.

A chill ran up and down her spine as she remembered another picture she had just seen of a smiling woman who looked so very much like herself.

Hayley walked up and down Main Street for the next hour and a bit, looking at the sights of the charming little town. It had a very rustic feel to it, and most of the buildings were old. It didn't require much imagination to see how the town had looked when Jessica and Mary-Ann had lived there. Stopping briefly to look around, Hayley caught herself wondering if the two women had been walking on the exact same sidewalk one hundred years earlier.

When she came to the bookstore, she paused to look at the shop windows. A young woman was busy putting up the usual trinkets for Halloween, and carved pumpkins and little resin witches on broomsticks were displayed prominently.

An idea formed in Hayley's mind. She dearly wanted to solve - or at least explore - this mystery and what better way to do so but to buy the book about Jessica and Mary-Ann. Even though Hayley usually preferred to do her own research, she knew it would be foolish not to use the information Rita van der Zwaan had already compiled.

A small bell rang as Hayley opened the door to the bookstore, prompting the young woman who had been decorating the windows to come out to greet her.

"Oh, hello, Miss Ralston! We're so honored to have you in our store," the young woman said and put down the cardboard box she was carrying.

"I guess news travels fast here, huh? You must be Sammy's girlfriend?" Hayley said with a laugh.

"That's right. I'm Louise. We sell both your 'Ghostly Tales From Rural America'-books, you know. They're going quite well, actually."

"Really?" Hayley said with a cheeky grin.

"They're right over there if you want to see them...?"

"Well, I already know how they look like."

"Of course you do, silly me."

"I actually came to ask if you had Rita van der Zwaan's book about The Weeping Lady?"

"We do. It's \$19.99 hardback, or \$10.99 paperback."

"I'll take the hardback, please," Hayley said and pulled out her wallet.

"It's such a tragic story, don't you think? Is that why you're visiting us? Are you working on a new book?" Louise said as she put the book into a 'Welcome to Bensontown' carrier bag and punched in the price on an old cash register.

"Yes to all three. Have you read the book?"

"Yes, many years ago, but I don't really like spooky stories... oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply I didn't like the books you've written," Louise said and blushed.

"It's all right, Louise, I'm not that vain," Hayley said and broke out into a big laugh.

After enjoying a delicious dinner in the restaurant adjacent to Lizzie's Hotel, Hayley went back to the Honeymoon Suite and got down to business. She plugged her laptop into the socket and started her word processor.

She typed in the various items she had written down from the book, and her brain was already working on how to get the most out of this story.

She quickly concluded that there were two things that she needed to do before she could get on with the story. 1) she needed to go to the cemetery to try to find Mary-Ann's grave, and 2) she needed to go to the mansion to see for herself if this was all just hearsay, or an actual phenomenon.

So far, there wasn't actually any hard evidence of an apparition, and while Rita van der Zwaan had collected a great deal of reports for her book, a lot of the sightings had been made by young people and not all had been sober when it happened - Hayley needed a bit more than that. She needed to see for herself.

She always did that, anyway, but the shocking discovery of seeing her own face in a photograph from 1908 gave the story more meat on its bones than many of the other ones Hayley had seen over the last four years.

Suddenly her cellphone rang and she got up from the desk to pick it up.

"Hayley Ralston speaking."

'Hi, Hayley, it's Heather.'

"Oh, hi. Checking up on me?"

'Yes. That's what editors do to their favorite clients.'

"Sure. What's on your mind?"

'Well, I have to be honest, Hayley. I've been looking at the first three chapters of your new book, and... I'm sorry, they're just not good enough. They need a lot more zip, if you know what I mean.'

Hayley put her hand over the phone and sighed. She walked through the suite and sat down on the leather couch.

"Zip?" she said a few seconds later.

'Yeah, you know... action.'

"As soon as I meet Count Dracula or the Wolfman, I'll let you know," Hayley said, rolling her eyes.

'Ha, ha. I hate to tell you this, Hayley, but if you don't find better stories for the rest of the book, this one will barely make the top-15 - and it certainly won't go higher than 12th, 13th.'

"I'm working on an interesting story right now. That might have some zip for you."

'Oh yeah? Where did you go again? Hicksville?'

"Bensontown. I can't give you any details yet, Heather. But it's more spooky than the others. Well, it is to me, anyway."

'Good. It can't get any less spooky than The Ghost Of The Forty-Niner, Hayley. That was just... ugh... a snoozer.'

"If you say so."

'I do. Listen, I have to go. Break a pencil!' Heather said and laughed at her own joke. She hung up before Hayley had a chance to make a snappy comeback.

Hayley threw the cellphone down on the couch in disgust.

'Not enough zip! Zip this, Heather,' she thought and chuckled over the mental image. Jessica and Mary-Ann would provide plenty of zip, of that Hayley was certain.

THE THIRD DAY - SATURDAY, OCTOBER 25th, 2008

The cemetery wasn't open for visitors until 11 AM, so Hayley milled about in the small town, signing a few autographs and greeting a couple of people who recognized her. The day had dawned very autumnal with fierce winds and a thick cloud cover, and the leaden sky looked like it could drop its watery content on the town at any moment.

To fight the cold, Hayley had the collar of her jacket all the way up to her ears, but it didn't really help. She had bought a pair of gloves in the leather shop, but even so, her fingers were frozen.

When the small clock on the town hall chimed 11, Hayley walked back to her car and drove to the cemetery, filled with anticipation and even a little trepidation over what she might find there.

The cemetery was located only two miles outside of town, so it didn't take long for Hayley to get there. After parking the car in a gravelly parking lot adjacent to the bell tower, she found her notebook and took a look at all the notes she had taken from Rita's book, including the exact position of Mary-Ann Falconer's grave.

With a grunt, Hayley put the notebook and her digital camera in her pocket and ventured out into the October cold - she immediately got a major case of the willies that had less to do with the cold than with the fact that she was entering a cemetery.

She walked among the graves, reading all the names of the generations of people who had found their last resting place there. She soon noticed the Falconer mausoleum which was set on a grassy field, separate from the other family graves - in fact, she couldn't have missed it even if she had tried, as the building, apparently made of dark green marble, was large and ungainly.

Five plaques were prominently placed on the front of the building, telling the world who the people inside had been when they were still alive. Hayley found her notebook and jotted down all the names and dates.

MARY-ANN FALCONER

1878 - 1908

HENRY FALCONER

1876 - 1917

RAYMOND FALCONER

1842 - 1920

ELIZABETH ANN FALCONER

1851 - 1930

RAYMOND FALCONER, JR.

1870 - 1956

'Henry and Raymond Jr. must have been Mary-Ann's brothers. The date of death of 1917 for Henry hints at World War I. It must have been a big blow for Raymond Sr. and Elizabeth to lose another child so soon after their daughter's death,' Hayley thought as she wrote down the names.

She put the notebook back in her pocket and looked at the old, rusty metal door blocking the opening to the mausoleum. When she tried to move it, it wouldn't budge at all, so instead, Hayley reached for the small but powerful penlight she always carried on a chain around her neck, turned it on and looked inside.

She was able to spot five stone caskets placed on stone shelves, three on one side and two on the other. The top shelf on the right hand side was empty, and Hayley briefly wondered who that might have been for. Unfortunately, it was impossible to see which casket was Mary-Ann's.

Hayley turned off the penlight and rubbed her hands together to get some warmth in them. After doing that for a few moments, she stepped back a couple of paces and took several pictures of the mausoleum and its surroundings.

After putting the camera in her pocket, Hayley took off her glove and let her fingers run across the letters on Mary-Ann's plaque. Despite sharing looks with the woman inside, Hayley couldn't feel any emotional connection whatsoever to the words inscribed on the small metal plate.

'Damn, it looks like going here was a waste of time. I need to get to the bottom of this. And that means I have to go to the mansion... and I have to meet Jessica Quinn,' Hayley thought as she put her glove back on.

With a sigh, she turned around to walk back to the parking lot. After only a few steps, a chill raced down her spine, and she stopped to look back at the mausoleum. Even though she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary, she pulled her jacket closer and hurried back to the car.

After Hayley returned from the cemetery, she connected her camera to the laptop and started transferring the pictures she had taken. While that was going on, she settled down in a comfy chair with Rita's book and a cup of hot chocolate from the microwave oven.

She flipped through the book, intently studying all the pictures - she still got a very peculiar feeling in her stomach whenever the woman who looked exactly like her was featured, but she forced herself to ignore it.

Slowly, she began to gain an understanding of how it must have been to live back then, and the rough outline of the story she wanted to write started to form in her mind. After looking at all the pictures, she went back to chapter one and started reading it thoroughly.

'This area was much more secluded and rural at the turn of the century. There was a local train line that connected Bensontown to the larger cities, but that closed down when the automobile gained widespread popularity.'

The Falconer family moved into the area in 1890 and they quickly became prominent citizens. Elizabeth Ann Falconer, Mary-Ann's mother, was elected to lead the Bensontown Women's Society - a fancy name for what was essentially a knitting and gossiping club.

The Falconers were apparently very well off, as they not only owned the mansion, but also several buildings in the town. Most unusually, the deed to the mansion was transferred to Mary-Ann on her twenty-first birthday, her parents moving out to live in Bensontown. Their house on Main Street was later turned into the movie theater.'

'Movie theater? Hmmm... I'll have to ask Lizzie about that,' Hayley thought and returned to the book.

'Jessica Quinn was first heard of around 1904, when a rumor spread in the town that a strange woman had moved into the mansion.'

*They were seen many times walking around town arm in arm or, *gasp*, hand in hand, and, predictably, it caused a great uproar among the more conservative people living in Bensontown.'*

The uproar only intensified when it was discovered that Mary-Ann was in fact romantically involved with Jessica. Inevitably, they were both banished from the town church by the priest and the local church council.'

When she read that, Hayley cursed intensely under her breath and repeatedly tapped her fingers on the armrest. To calm down, she took a long sip of the hot chocolate and leaned back in the chair. After a few moments, she shook her head and continued with the book.

Rita van der Zwaan went on in great detail about the history of the mansion, and she had drawn a very detailed floor-plan of the house and the surrounding area, explaining carefully where the various sightings had taken place.

This was the part that really interested Hayley. Rita had been very thorough with the reports, and they were fully transcribed in the book. Hayley leafed through some of the clearly exaggerated ones until her eye caught one from 1967 where a police officer had witnessed 'an unexplainable phenomenon' first hand.

'RZ: This recording is made April 3rd, 1983. State your name and occupation, please.'

HS: Harry Swenson, Deputy Sheriff, retired.'

RZ: When did the event in question take place?

HS: An evening in late November, 1967.'

RZ: That's nearly sixteen years ago, are you sure you can remember it all?

HS: That event is etched into my brain, ma'am.'

RZ: All right. What exactly happened that night?

HS: I was driving home after finishing my shift. As I went past the Falconer Mansion, I noticed a light in one of the windows. I knew the mansion was abandoned, so I reckoned a hobo had lit a fire or some such. I stopped, turned the car around, and drove up the dirt road. The light was still on when I got there.

RZ: Just to interrupt, what time was that?

HS: Nearly half past eleven, PM. Anyway, I went inside and asked if anyone needed help. That's when I heard a woman crying upstairs. Before I could react to it, the crying stopped and an apparition appeared on the staircase. It looked like a woman, but it didn't sense me. I have to admit I was pretty scared by then, so when the apparition started moving in my direction, I made a beeline for the car and got the hell outta there.

RZ: Please describe the apparition.

HS: Well... as I said, it looked like a woman. She was bathed in a hazy, pale blue light that seemed to emanate from inside her. Her facial features were obscured by the haze, but her hair appeared to be long and black. I only saw it for a few seconds, so...

RZ: I understand. How did your superiors react when you told them?

HS: They put me on sick leave for a month and then I had weeks of mental evaluation after that. It was a pain in the rear end I can assure you.

RZ: In closing, where did the apparition appear?

HS: It came out of the first room on the right on the second floor, just up the main staircase.

RZ: All right. Thank you, sir.

HS: Thank you.'

Hayley closed the book and put it on the coffee table. Now she knew what to look for.

Later that afternoon, the weather turned to the worse. The rain was pouring down and Main Street was completely deserted. Hayley felt like talking to someone, so she went down into the Hotel lobby where she found Lizzie busy reading a paperback.

"Hi," Hayley said.

"Oh, hello, Miss Ralston. Is there a problem?"

"No, no, I'm just bored!" Hayley said with a laugh.

"The weather really drags today, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

"I don't want to intrude on your work, but... I actually have a story about 'The Weeping Lady'..." Lizzie said and put down the book she was reading.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Why don't we sit down over there. I don't want to have my celebrity guest standing because of me," Lizzie said, pointing to a couch on the far side of the lobby. Hayley replied with a wide grin and walked over to the couch with Lizzie in tow.

"Well, it was in 1984, sorta late Summer, early Fall. Me and a couple of friends were cruising around one Saturday evening, like we always did. I've always lived here in Bensontown, and I love this place, but it's never really had much in the way of entertainment for teenagers, you know?" Lizzie said after sitting down next to Hayley.

"Oh, I do. I grew up somewhere very similar to here. Anyway, can you remember what the time was?"

"Oh, I don't know... maybe 11:30 PM or so. Yeah, I guess half past eleven. Is that important?"

"It could be. Please go on."

"Well, some of my friends suggested we drove out to the mansion on a dare. None of us wanted to look like chicken, so we headed out there. Once we were there, we ran around the house a couple of times, you know, regular kids' stuff... but suddenly we could hear a woman crying. Very clearly. It scared the sh... uhhh... stuffing out of us..." Lizzie said and visibly got the shivers.

"And it couldn't have been the wind, or an animal, or...?"

"No. No way. It was a woman crying. Trust me on that one. We jumped back in the car and broke all speed limits on our way back to town. Jeez, it was so creepy I couldn't sleep for several nights... well, that's it basically."

"All right. Very interesting. Thanks for telling me that story, Lizzie," Hayley said and patted Lizzie's knee.

Hayley stopped her car at the top end of Falconer Drive, the avenue that led directly to the deserted mansion. She rolled back her jacket sleeve and looked at her watch - 11:20 PM.

She released the brake, making the stationwagon creep slowly toward the mansion. The winds had picked up and the weeping willows lining the road were swaying back and forth, creating a suitably creepy ambiance.

As she came closer to the mansion, the lights on her car illuminated the walls of the large house. Dark and foreboding, it looked exactly like a haunted house should. Many of the windows on the first floor were broken, but nearly all on the second floor looked intact.

Hayley drove slowly around what had once been a fountain in the courtyard in front of the mansion, parking the car so it was facing the avenue in case she needed to make a swift exit.

The rain had eased off so Hayley decided to leave her umbrella in the car. She put her notebook and a pencil in her jacket pocket and then stuffed her camera and some gloves into a small backpack. After checking her penlight and a larger flashlight, she looked at herself in the rear view mirror.

"I guess I'm ready. Jessica Quinn, here I come," she said and got out of the car.

As she walked towards the main entrance, Hayley thought about a few details from Rita's book: After Mary-Ann's death and Jessica's disappearance, the mansion was abandoned and remained thus until the early 1930s when Raymond Jr. moved in after the death of his parents. However, he and his servants quickly discovered that the mansion was haunted, so he moved back to live in the townhouse instead. He continued to own the mansion until his death in 1956, after which the house was largely left to its own devices. Raymond Jr.'s children inherited the mansion and the surrounding land, but they refused to have anything to do with it.

The front door had stood the test of time remarkably well, and Hayley had to push with all her strength to get it open. She turned on the large flashlight and moved the cone of light from left to right across what appeared to be a hall. Broken furniture, old carpeting, doors slapping in the breeze - everything was just like Hayley expected it to be. A corridor stretched out in front of her going beyond the flashlight's range, and a large staircase went up on the right side of the main hall.

All the sightings compiled by Rita van der Zwaan pointed to the second floor, more specifically the first room on the right hand side of the small hallway - Rita had presumed it might have been their bedroom. Hayley tried to shine the flashlight up the stairs, but the light wasn't able to penetrate the darkness.

Hayley walked a few paces into the lobby and examined the staircase. It looked solid, so she tried to put some weight on the first step. It creaked, but held. Slowly, she ventured upwards, one step at a time.

When she reached the top step, Hayley thought she could smell something. She couldn't put her finger on what that smell might be, but it was definitely organic - her question was quickly answered when a fat rat scurried across the hallway, right in front of her hiking boots. She jumped back, but the rat was long gone.

She pointed the flashlight down the small hallway, but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary there. She slowly turned the light around and got a good look at the landing at the top of the stairs.

'Well, I've come this far, I might as well go all the way,' Hayley thought and started moving towards the first room on the right, making sure to tread very carefully in case the floorboards were rotten.

Once she reached the doorway to the room, she peeked inside. The door had fallen off its hinges and was lying on the floor in the center of the room, but other than that, everything looked to be in pretty good shape.

She stepped inside and gave the room a thorough look. Her first thought was that despite what Rita had said in her book, there wasn't anything that suggested that it had once been a bedroom. The room was empty, save for a large closet without a door, and an ancient dresser placed against the wall on the far side of the room. The drawers had long since been removed and the large mirror on top of it was broken. As expected, a thick layer of dust covered everything, but Hayley was able to see a few shards of glass from the broken mirror reflecting the light from the flashlight.

She started walking towards the closet to check it out, but then came to an abrupt halt - she had heard something. It had sounded a bit like the breeze sweeping through the hallway, but it hadn't been accompanied by the typical slapping sound from a loose window or door...

Three seconds later, Hayley's flashlight went out and she found herself in total darkness. She tried to click several times on the little button, but it was dead. She groaned and reached inside her jacket to find her penlight.

A pinpoint of light in the center of the room Hayley was in suddenly grabbed her attention. As she was looking, the small point of light expanded, rapidly turning into a full-bodied apparition.

Hayley could almost feel her heart stop beating and she grabbed the flashlight so tightly her fingers were aching. Every instinct in her was screaming for her to run away, but her legs wouldn't obey. Her eyes grew wider and wider as she looked at the creature in front of her.

The specter was a hazy, pale blue energy cloud and it was suspended in mid-air no more than four feet away from Hayley. Discernible features slowly appeared through the haze - blue eyes, a sorrowful mouth and long, dark hair. Hayley immediately identified the apparition as being Jessica Quinn.

Once the ghost was fully formed, it floated silently towards the window where it appeared to look outside. The sound of crying filled the small room and Hayley could see the ghost's shoulders shake.

'Why did you leave me? Why did you leave me, my love?' an ethereal voice said, filled with despair.

The incredible sadness in Jessica's voice overwhelmed Hayley and she couldn't stop a heartfelt gasp from escaping her lips.

The ghost turned around and only now spotted the intruder. The ice blue eyes of the apparition drilled their way into Hayley's soul. Almost forgetting to breathe, Hayley saw the ghost linger for a few seconds before it seemed to recognize her.

A pale blue tendril was formed from the body and stretched out towards Hayley.

'You've returned...' the ghost said and moved closer to Hayley.

This broke the spell Hayley was under - her legs obeyed her commands again, and she bolted from the room and rapidly descended the stairs. Behind her, she could hear Jessica cry out, followed by a series of heartbreaking sobs.

Hayley sprinted across the courtyard to get to her car. Halfway there, the flashlight came back to life, and the sudden light spooked her so much she slipped and fell face-first into the wet gravel. With a pained groan, she scrambled to her feet and continued running towards her car. She fumbled with the door for a few moments but eventually managed to open it. She jumped in, turned on the engine and left the courtyard in a shower of gravel from the spinning wheels.

When she reached the paved road, she slowed to a halt and looked back at the mansion. The pale blue light emanating from Jessica was still clearly visible in the window, but as Hayley was looking, the light faded away and the mansion was soon as dark as it had been before.

Hayley's heart was thumping so hard she had chest pains and her forehead throbbed terribly. With trembling hands, she turned on the roof light in the car and looked at herself in the rear view mirror.

She discovered that she had an inch-long abrasion above her right eye, and that blood was steadily dripping down into her eyebrow. She shivered and swallowed hard as she remembered how Mary-Ann had died - exactly one hundred years ago.

With a final look at the mansion, Hayley drove off and headed back to her hotel.

THE FOURTH DAY - SUNDAY, OCTOBER 26th, 2008

Unsurprisingly, Hayley couldn't calm down after the ordeal, so she spent most of the night writing down her thoughts on everything that had happened out in the mansion. When the clock on the town hall struck 4 AM, she was done and promptly collapsed on her bed. She fell into a deep sleep where all her dreams were about dark-haired women and life at the turn of the last century.

When Hayley woke up a little past 11 AM, one thought still lingered in her mind: Jessica and Mary-Ann were still separated. Jessica's remains had never been found, so she had never been given a proper burial, and Hayley theorized that Jessica would never find solace or peace until someone found her bones and saw to it that she was buried alongside Mary-Ann.

Someone. Hayley's mind reluctantly connected the dots. That 'someone' was her. That was why she was here - it had to be. Hayley groaned and hugged her pillow as she realized that everything depended on her.

After a long, hot shower and a quick breakfast, Hayley left the hotel to get some fresh air and to process the myriad of thoughts that ran rampant through her head. The weather had improved, so she decided to walk from one end of the town to the other. She had so much on her mind that before she knew it, she had walked for nearly an hour and a half - her rumbling stomach told her it was time for lunch, so she turned around and headed for Sammy's Bar.

"Hello, Miss Ralston... good heavens, what's happened to you?" Sammy said as soon as Hayley entered the bar.

Hayley gingerly touched her tender forehead. Over night, her right eye had developed quite a shiner and she had a big, red lump just above her eyebrow.

"I had a little accident," Hayley said with a shrug.

"With what? A sledgehammer?"

"I slipped on some wet gravel and fell, that's all."

"That's plenty. Come on, let me get you something for that eye," Sammy said and started to reach down behind the bar.

"No, it's all right. Don't bother. I've had a couple of painkillers and I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh yes. Anyway, I'd like a mug of coffee and two ham-and-tomato sandwiches, please."

"Comin' right up!"

Hayley found a table and started gathering her thoughts. The walk had done her good and she had mostly digested her meeting with the Great Beyond. If nothing else, the meeting had proved once and for all that 'The Weeping Lady' was no hoax.

Sammy put down a tray with the coffee and the sandwiches and collected the money.

As she unwrapped the first sandwich, Hayley decided on the battle plan: She was going back to the mansion and she was going to tell Jessica Quinn that she wanted to help her.

'God, what if she kills me just to get some company...?' Hayley thought morbidly, sending a chill down her spine.

"Hello, Miss Ralston," somebody said, interrupting Hayley's dark thoughts.

"Hello, Louise. The bookstore's not open on Sundays, I gather?"

"That's right. Thank goodness. If it was, I'd never get to see my boyfriend. This bar is always open and he seems to think it's more important than me," Louise said a little too loud.

"Heard that," Sammy said from the other side of the bar where he was polishing the shiny surface of the counter.

"Good," Louise said and winked at Hayley.

With a grin, Hayley unwrapped her second sandwich and watched with great interest as Sammy came over to give Louise a little smooch on the cheek.

"Do you need anything, Miss Ralston?" he said and put his arm around Louise's shoulder.

"No, thank you, I'm fine. Oh, by the way, I read in Rita's book that the Falconers had a house where the movie theater is now... but I can't find a movie theater anywhere?" Hayley said as she took a large bite of the sandwich.

"The cinema's long gone. It burned down in... oh, 1994 or so. If you look out of your window in your hotel room, you should be able to see a new building off to your right. That's where it was," Sammy said.

"Oh. I see. Thank you."

"Is your research going well?" Louise asked.

"That's, uh... it's going just fine, Louise," Hayley said with an enigmatic smile.

"Glad to hear it. Well, I won't bother you anymore. I just came to tell Sammy that I expect him home shortly," Louise said, again a little louder than necessary.

"I'll be there, don't you worry about that," Sammy said and pinched Louise's backside.

A few hours later, Hayley re-read the things she had written the night before. After making a few corrections and additions, she began writing in earnest, not stopping until the clock chimed 11 PM. As she went through the file that held the first twenty pages of the 'Weeping Lady' segment of her new book, she chuckled to herself.

'Heather, this one's definitely got some zip. I've traveled all over the United States doing research and I've seen some very strange things along the way... but The Weeping Lady takes the prize,' Hayley thought and shook her head repeatedly.

As Hayley closed her laptop, there was still one question on her mind: how would Jessica respond? From reading the many reports on the sightings, Hayley knew she was the only one the ghost had reacted to since it started haunting the mansion. 'You've returned...!' Jessica had said to her.

Hayley got up and went into the bathroom. She turned on the light and studied her bruise in the mirror. Her eye and her forehead looked like she had gone a few rounds against a boxing champ, and the injury was still sore.

As she looked at herself in the mirror, a strong feeling of dread flooded over her. Overwhelmed by the emotion, she went back into the living room and grabbed a pen and some stationery. She sat down at a table and started writing.

Once she was done, she signed the letter and put it into an envelope. She looked at the blank front of the envelope for a while and then wrote *'To be opened in case of my death - H. Ralston'*.

She held the envelope for a few moments, almost like she couldn't believe what she was doing. With a sigh, she left it on the table, leaning against a pepper shaker.

Not long after, Hayley stood outside the mansion and looked with great apprehension at the crooked trees and the scary looking house.

"I must be nuts," Hayley said out loud and thrust her hands into the pockets of her jacket.

She grunted and checked her equipment. She had been forced to buy a new flashlight as the glass on the other one had cracked when she fell on the gravel the night before. Satisfied that everything was in order, she started walking toward the front door with a thermos filled with hot tea in one hand and her digital camera in the other.

Hayley took a cautious peek into the room where she had met Jessica, but it was empty. She held her watch up to the penlight and saw that it was 11:22 PM, nearly the same time as the night before.

'I guess I'll have to wait. At least I have plenty of tea...' she thought and walked into the room. She huddled down in the corner next to the closet and opened the thermos.

Fifteen minutes later, Jessica still hadn't shown herself. The cold was beginning to creep into Hayley's bones and she shifted uncomfortably. With a drawn-out sigh, she reluctantly came to the conclusion that Jessica wouldn't be making an appearance, so she started collecting her things - suddenly the penlight went out, leaving her in darkness.

Within seconds, the room was bathed in a pale blue light, heralding the appearance of Jessica Quinn. As a reflex, Hayley held her breath and bit down on her lower lip, but gradually relaxed when she remembered why she had come.

'I've waited so long for you, my love...' an ethereal voice said.

Even though her heart was beating wildly, Hayley looked up and locked eyes with the ghost.

"Hello Je... Jessica," Hayley said in a trembling voice.

Jessica put a hand on her mouth and allowed ghostly tears to run unhindered down her cheeks.

'You're so beautiful... I knew you'd come back to me...'

"I'm... I'm not..." Hayley started to say, but stopped. The strong sense of dread she had experienced in her hotel room returned, and a knot of fear was rapidly forming in the pit of her stomach.

"I need you to s-show me your remains... s-so you can be together with your love..."

'But you have returned...?' Jessica said puzzled.

"I'm not Mary-Ann, Jessica. I... I just look like her. I'm not her."

The apparition floated a few feet away from Hayley, who released a breath she hadn't even noticed she'd been holding. Suddenly the temperature in the room dropped dramatically and a strong tide of mortal fear washed over Hayley. Jessica's beautiful features started morphing into something far more demonic and a terrifying growl filled the room.

The ghost suddenly closed the distance between itself and Hayley and bellowed out a thunderous roar directly into the author's face:

'GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!'

Hayley screamed insanely and raced out of the door and down the stairs. Halfway down, she lost her footing and fell heavily down the final dozen steps. When she landed at the bottom of the staircase, her head crashed against a panel with sickening force. She twitched once - and was then still.

Jessica's demonic form swooshed out of the room, apparently intent on following the fleeing woman, but as soon as it saw Hayley lying still at the bottom of the stairwell, it came to an abrupt stop.

A long, heartfelt sigh was heard from the creature, and after a few seconds, Jessica was transformed back to her normal appearance. She started floated silently down the stairs towards the stricken woman.

Jessica sat down next to Hayley and caressed the author's golden hair. After a while, she began humming a song that she and Mary-Ann had loved to sing together.

Several minutes later, Hayley slowly came to. Her head was throbbing mercilessly and tears were running down her cheeks from the impact and the shock. She tried to get an arm under her body to push herself off the ground, but she struggled badly as black spots had invaded her vision and her head felt like it had caved in.

Suddenly Hayley noticed the pale blue light right next to her, and she panicked and pressed her back against the wall with a terrified look in her eyes.

'Please help me. I'm sorry I became angry with you...!' Jessica said in a very sad voice and stretched a tendril out towards the author.

Hayley tried to draw back even further, but the ghostly hand merely touched her cheek, leaving a tingling sensation.

The words Jessica had said were the last things Hayley had expected to hear. Her heart was still pounding in her ears and her instincts still told her to run away, but the strange connection she shared with Jessica was strong enough to convince her to try again.

'*All right, this is it... it's now or never,*' Hayley thought. She tried to summon all her courage, but her voice was still trembling as she spoke.

"Jessica, I think it's possible to reunite you with Mary-Ann. If you show me where you died, we can bury your remains next to your love... and then you'll be together until the end of time..." Hayley said, half-speaking, half-whispering. She held her breath as she waited for an answer from the ghostly being.

Jessica nodded. She got up and floated away from the stairs and out into thin air. She settled down on the floor and went directly to what appeared to be the door to the cellar.

'*Where's she going...?*' Hayley thought, confused. Shakily, she got up and followed Jessica down the stairs and across the floor - but then the ghost floated through the wall and out of sight.

"Oh, great..." Hayley said and gently rubbed her aching forehead.

An old, rusty door handle suddenly started moving by itself and promptly falling to pieces. The door to the cellar opened with a howling creak. Jessica stood on the other side, waiting patiently for Hayley.

'Come. It isn't far.'

A very dark staircase went downwards from the ground level. It was very dark, and Hayley fumbled her way down. Fortunately, the light emanating from Jessica made it slightly easier for her.

When Hayley reached the bottom, she could see they were in a pantry. Rows of shelves lined the walls and there were old tin cans scattered everywhere. A broken kerosene lamp stood on a small shelf above her head, out of her reach.

Hayley started looking around for any clues that might reveal where Jessica's remains were, but she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. She remembered reading in Rita's book that the police had already thoroughly searched this part of the house back in 1908.

"Where are you taking me, Jessica?"

Jessica didn't answer, but floated to the far wall. She pointed at a section of shelves.

'Here. Secret door.'

Hayley moved over to stand next to Jessica and began pushing and pulling on all the shelves. When that didn't work, she tried to wiggle the old wood around, but all she succeeded in doing was to rip one of the shelves off. Jessica floated up towards the ceiling and pointed at a latch that was just barely visible.

"I can't reach that!" Hayley said frustrated and started to look around for something to stand on.

'My love couldn't, either. I always opened it for her,' Jessica said sadly.

Hayley spotted a box made of metal and dragged it over to the secret door. The rusty box could barely hold her weight, but with a little effort, she reached the latch and depressed it. A section of the shelves swung open, revealing yet another staircase that went down even further.

Moldy, stale air assaulted Hayley's nostrils and she crinkled her nose. Jessica led the way, and before long, they reached the foot of the stairs and entered a small room that Hayley presumed could have been a shelter from the Civil War.

With a long, ethereal sigh, Jessica floated to the far wall of the small room. Hayley stepped forward and came face to face with the top half of a skeleton, sitting on a chair, half-leaning over a table. Even after a century, the skeleton was still holding a small vial in its hand. A few strands of dark hair were attached to the skull and it was possible to see small fragments of what had once been a white shirt across the back of the ribcage.

"Oh, Jessica..." Hayley said and covered her mouth with her hand.

'Poison. My death was quick and painless. But I was doomed to return every night. To relive my heartbreak every night.'

The ghost turned to Hayley and caressed her cheek again.

'Please help me find peace.'

"I will, Jessica. I promise," Hayley said, feeling tears sting her eyes.

Jessica sighed and turned to look at her own skeleton.

'When I returned, some helpers had placed my love in the room upstairs. I wanted to hold her, but her skin was cold and dead to the touch, and I... I couldn't, I just couldn't... she had always been so full of life, but now...'

"I'm so sorry..." Hayley whispered.

'We never got the chance to say goodbye. Her eyes looked straight at me, those beautiful green eyes... but she couldn't see anymore. I... lost my temper. I became so very angry with her...' Jessica said and closed her eyes. For a moment she seemed to fade away, but then she regained her composure.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," Hayley said, her voice merely a faint whisper.

'I've kept it inside for so long... I have to tell you. But not here,' Jessica said and looked away, guilt etched across her ghostly face. She turned around and started floating towards the door.

A few moments later, they were back up in the hall. Jessica had been silent since they had left the small room at the foot of the stairs, but Hayley knew that all had not been said yet.

'I blamed my love for dying and for leaving me, so when her family came for her body, I didn't go with them,' Jessica said, sighing deeply.

'A day later, it finally dawned on me that the only thing I lived for had been taken away from me... I was overcome by guilt and pain... and I lost my mind. I wandered aimlessly around the house for several hours before...' Jessica's voice tapered off, and she looked towards the pantry.

'But when I died, my spirit wasn't willing to leave. And I soon understood that I had to remain here for all eternity,' Jessica said. Large, crystal tears began to run down her cheeks.

"I'm so sorry for what happened to you, Jessica. But everything's going to be all right now, I promise," Hayley said in a trembling voice.

She reached out to try to touch the ghost, but her fingers merely went through the blue cloud, resulting in a tingling sensation that slowly spread up her arm. Despite her tears, Jessica smiled and formed a blue tendril from her body. To Hayley's great surprise, the ghost was able to touch her, and for the briefest of moments, Jessica gave Hayley's hand a goodbye squeeze.

Hayley walked slowly back to her car. Now that the adrenaline had left her, the pain returned, and by the time she started punching in a set of numbers on her cell phone, her head was throbbing so hard she had to close her eyes.

'*Sheriff's Office, how can we help you?*' a voice said from the telephone. When Hayley opened her eyes again, she saw Jessica waving to her from the bedroom window on the second floor. As Hayley was watching, Jessica slowly dissolved and the blue light faded away.

'Hello?'

"Oh, sorry, I'm here. My name is Hayley Ralston and I've found some human remains," Hayley said and began to give the details on where she was.

Several hours later, Hayley staggered into the lobby of Lizzie's Hotel. After being cleared of having a concussion, she had told the deputy that drove her home that she could take care of herself, but she had to admit she wasn't feeling her best.

Lizzie was doing the night shift, and when she saw the author look very unsteady on her feet, she jumped up and gave her a helping hand. Upstairs, Lizzie fumbled with the keycard to Hayley's room, but finally managed to get the door open.

"You have to tell me what's happened, Miss Ralston. I'll burst if you don't!"

"I had a little accident. I fell down some stairs out at the mansion..."

"Which mans... the Falconer mansion?!" Lizzie said shocked as she guided the author to the bedroom.

"Yes. I..." Hayley said and took off her boots and her jacket. With a grunt, she sat down on the bed.

"... I found her. I found Jessica Quinn..."

"You what?!"

"I found her remains," Hayley said and fell back on the soft bed, not even bothering to take off her shirt or her pants.

"I know you're working on your book, but really... wandering around in a haunted house past midnight... by yourself! That's just asking for trouble."

"I wasn't alone..." Hayley slurred and promptly fell asleep.

With a puzzled shrug, Lizzie turned off the lights in the bedroom and went back into the living room. As she was about to leave the apartment, she spotted the envelope Hayley had written earlier, next to an open book lying on the table.

She recognized it as Rita van der Zwaan's book and went over to the table to take a look at it. It was opened on an old sepia-toned photograph of two women standing outside the Falconer mansion. Lizzie picked up the book and read the caption beneath the photograph.

'Jessica Quinn and Mary-Ann Falconer, taken on Mary-Ann's 30th birthday, October 15th 1908, ten days before...'

Lizzie's eyes narrowed as she focused on the photograph. A little voice at the back of her mind told her something was wrong, but she couldn't make the connection - suddenly the pieces fell into place and she gasped loudly.

Her eyes grew wider and wider as he looked from the photograph to the woman sleeping in the bedroom and then back to the book. She felt her nape hairs stand on end and all color drain from her face. Her mouth gaped open, but she wasn't able to produce a sound apart from a series of strangled, terrified squeaks.

She dropped the book like it was on fire and ran out into the hallway, slamming the door shut behind her.

EPILOGUE

In late November, Jessica Quinn's remains were released from the custody of the Sheriff and she was given a proper burial. She found her final resting place in a new grave that had been created next to the Falconer mausoleum - and when Mary-Ann's casket was moved from the mausoleum to the new grave, Jessica and Mary-Ann were finally reunited.

In a fierce storm in late January, the Falconer mansion partially collapsed when one of the weeping willows was uprooted and fell against it.

Hayley's book was published soon after and it instantly became a bestseller. She was able to negotiate a more lucrative contract with her publishing house, and with the money from the deal, she bought the mansion and the surrounding land from the Falconer estate. She has later begun restoring the mansion to its former glory.

'The Weeping Lady' was never seen again, robbing Bensontown of its main attraction - but after a while, people passing by the cemetery after dark swore they could hear a faint echo of two women singing...

THE END of THE WEEPING LADY.

...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.

Oh, and don't forget... even a monster needs to feel loved, so please treat the scaly ghoul under your bed and the spiky critter in your closet the same way you would a beloved, furry pet. Thank you.

Until next time...

Eternally Yours,

Norsebard

THE END of THE BOOK OF CHILLS.