

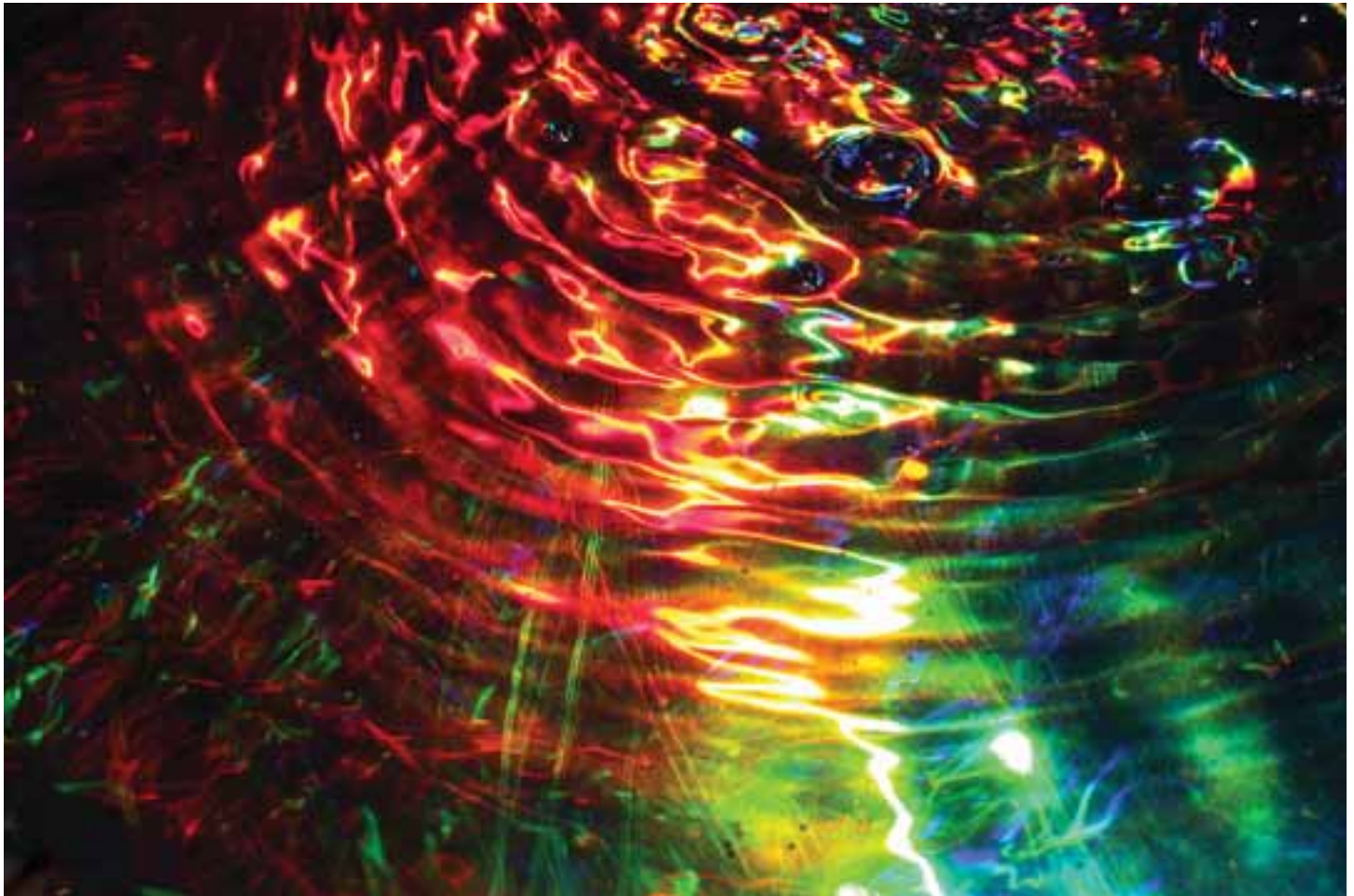


Khimairal Ink



Volume 2, Number 2

September 2006



Stories by

Tyree Campbell

Kirsten Elliott

L-J Baker

Veronica Holmes

T. J. Mindancer



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I'm typing this "welcome to latest issue of *Khimairal Ink*" from a new business computer. Carrie's laptop was just not able to handle the accumulating amount of print and graphics we use in generating the ezine and editing chores for Bedazzled Ink Publishing Company. So, with a bit of vacillation, we finally upgraded to a HP tower.

Carrie is an Apple person through and through, buying the first Mac that came out in the 80's. Nevertheless, she adapted to the PC world via work and now the business. She did what she had to by adjusting her comfort zone to include the changes and parameters of the new situation. The characters in this month's stories reflect the same circumstances. Change . . . Growth . . . Evolving . . . New beginnings . . .

The mystery, "Blindmary," is another wonderful tale by Tyree Campbell. You can't help but feel the turmoil and undercurrents evolving throughout the story. "She Brakes for Butterflies" by Veronica Holmes offers internal reflection resulting in tentative steps toward personal growth. L-J Baker's "Mallo-ry's Gift" is a bittersweet glimpse of a once happy life torn apart and the aftermath. "Purgatory" by

Kirsten Elliott, is a humorous look at the dating game and the petrifying feelings that accompany the unknown. Finally, we have a favorite excerpt from T.J. Mindancer's *Future Dreams* about a warrior who's had that life taken away from her and realizes she misses it.

You'll notice this issue is missing the wonderful drawings of Trish Ellis. Her life has also changed with the increased demand for her work. And so, like our story characters, we had to adapt and adjust the format of this issue.

It's been over a year since we published the first issue of *Khimairal Ink*. During this time our staff has been creatively challenged, our viewpoints stretched, priorities changed and yet, we've enjoyed every moment of the growing pains. We started this ezine as a "what if" and to our delight, that's evolved to "it is." I'd like to personally thank our wonderful readers and contributors for making this dream successful.

See you next issue!

Claudia

Join us for the January 2007 issue featuring . . .

The Old Woman by Q Kelly
 Excerpt from Put the Demons to Rest by T.K. Galarneau
 My Father is a Lesbian by Sharon Hadrian
 Intermittent by Stephen D. Rogers
 The Second Coming of K'Miel by T.J. Mindancer

Growth and Change

Growth and change. One can't happen without the other. As Bedazzled Ink Publishing Company grows, *Khimairal Ink* has to adapt. Growth doesn't mean more staff, at least not yet. It means more work for everyone, so we have to make adjustments that translate into time management.

Preparing a Web version and a print-ready pdf version of *Khimairal Ink* requires two different sets of source materials and takes equal amounts of time to produce. Unfortunately, we have only one staff member who does all our techie stuff for both *Khimairal Ink* and Bedazzled Ink. Because her sanity is something that is important to us, we're releasing the Web version first and the pdf version next week.

We also don't have our artist Trish Ellis. After some consideration, we decided to not attempt to do illustrations for this issue. We could never do justice to the quality of Trish's work.

We welcome back one of our favorite authors, Tyree Campbell in this issue. He continues to stretch our imaginations with "Blindmary." I'm please that we have three newcomers to our pages. It's one of the great wonders of the Internet for a California based ezine to receive submissions from all over the world as easily as submissions from the next town. L-J Baker from New Zealand, Veronica Holmes from Australia, and Kirsten Elliott from London gives us three different turning points in three women's lives. Keeping this theme in mind, we selected a small scene from T.J. Mindancer's first Tale of Emoria, *Future Dreams* that depicts a major turning point in a warrior's life.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

Carrie



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Caidy's lifelong dream is to become a warrior protector of the city of Andagor.

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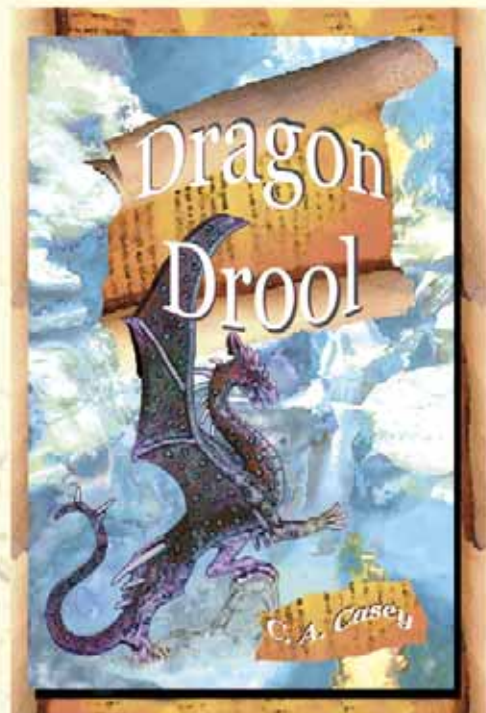
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C. A. Casey

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The body of the murder victim had already been cremated by the time I downdocked on Kalleria, as the fourth planet of WR Virgo is known, and presented my investigative credentials to Will Foley, the mining foreman and the only authority of any substance residing in the outpost. He barely glanced at them as he waved me to a chair in his primitive office near the main shaft opening. He was a grizzled veteran of many mines on many worlds, and had risen through the ranks with a disciplined toughness tempered by compassion for his fellow miners, too many of whom had lost the big risk over the years.

We both knew why I was there, of course. “It’s a fool’s errand,” I said, filling a Styrofoam cup from the coffee urn. “If someone wants to get away with murder this far out in the Spiral Arm, there’s not much that S&I can do about it, absent credible witnesses, which this case doesn’t seem to have.”

Foley was a nodder. He nodded his head in agreement while I spoke, and he nodded while he returned fire. On the fingers of his left hand he ticked off his speaking points. “Parrish died from two stab wounds, one in the groin, the other under the right armpit, either of which would have been fatal. Each of the seventeen miners carries at least one knife. It’s likely the murder weapon never will be found. As for motive, there’s beer here and often some stronger drink, and there’s the occasional disagreement and brawl. Maybe something got carried too far, and was settled privately.” He paused, staring at his hand—he’d run out of fingers. “Hell, Cooper,

everyone in the outpost thinks he has reason to kill someone here at one time or another. It just hasn’t been acted out before this.”

The coffee rated one level above cleaning solvent. While I cleared my throat of an abrasive gulp, a shiny nugget on his desk snagged my attention. It looked as if it had hardened from molten metal in someone’s hand, the shape of it accurate right up to the indentations of the fingers clutching it. I supposed the nugget served along the lines of a paperweight, although Foley’s was a paperless office.

I made a face at the coffee, and said, “I’ll want to speak with the medic who examined the body—”

“That would be Tyler.”

I nodded, and caught myself—the damn body language was contagious. “Tyler, and I understand Parrish lived with someone. A woman. I’ll want to speak with her as well.”

“Blindmary,” said Foley.

“Still, she might have heard something.”

Foley laughed, and nodded for no apparent reason. “No, that’s what they’re called. The natives—the abos, xenos, whatever you want to think of them as.”

I sat up straight. “Kalleria has an indigenous sentient species?” That fact seemed to have been omitted from the skeletal incident report I’d read.

Foley’s hand made a desultory gesture. At least it wasn’t a nod. “We’ve only encountered the women, so far. Minecorp’s locators found the scheelite deposit and sent us here. The corporate hierarchs didn’t seem to think a concessionary

agreement was necessary. In any case, that's not my call. I just go where they send me. Just like you, Cooper." He got to his feet, a bulky man with incipient paunch, weary now. "It's late, and the men will be drinking. You're drawing per diem, right? So you won't mind staying over an extra day or so. You can have Parrish's bungalow. Second cluster on the right, the one closest to the walkway. I'll have it put off-limits—it's been a while since some of the miners have seen a human woman. You can help me maintain discipline by drawing the curtains."

Although technically I outranked him, I recognized the dismissal. We'd both had long days. I told him I'd check back with him in the morning, and went outside to locate my quarters.

The mining settlement consisted of eighteen bungalows arranged in groups of three, on either side of a path so well-traveled that the understory had been worn away. I had no difficulty finding Parrish's bungalow, and no one accosted me on the way to it. The path itself led straight through the settlement and away from the mine, and the last structure on my side was a drinking establishment, judging from the sounds that emanated from it. I assumed that, aside from alcohol and sex, there wasn't much to do for recreation on Kellera. For all I knew, Parrish might have been killed just to alleviate the tedium.

Just outside my door I paused to take another look at the settlement. Across the path from the tavern, illuminated by the dim light through its windows and by the remaining dusk, I spied dark shapes that suggested buildings under construction—possibly another cluster of bungalows. Foley had not mentioned any incoming personnel, but possibly the structures were meant to house some of the xenos. If so, then perhaps there were more xenos than miners—a factor which might lead to another motive for Parrish's murder.

Which might be important were I expected actually to solve the crime. I nudged the door open, and at my command the ceiling panels began to glow. Training compelled me to assume the dwelling was occupied—a sensible precaution. Even so, it took a second glance for me to register the human shape standing in the shadows in the far corner. Almost immediately it came to

life, just as I tore my pistol from the rig over my right hip and brought it to bear.

The blindmary could see well enough. Her eyes were a deep, luminous amethyst, the irises large enough to leave very little room for white, and she held them on me as if I were the only other object in the Universe. Disconcerted, I blinked, registered the weapon aimed at her, and put it away. She did not act as if she had been in any danger.

Given her purple hair and pale blue skin, she looked human, albeit a bit slender for my taste, and she stood about a meter eighty, a height which enabled her to gaze directly into my eyes, also disconcerting. She was attired in a thin white one-strap gown and very likely nothing else. The limp fabric sculpted her; within it, she appeared to be composed of contours and shadows. Looking at her, I knew I had been too long between lovers. Bang, like that. She entwined perfectly with my vulnerability.

Yet how could she have known my preferences?

But duty had to prevail, at least for now. A crude, cushioned lounge against the right wall hardly merited attention, but I devoted myself to its study. "I don't mean to be rude, but what are you doing here?"

Like a cloud she drifted to a spot between me and the lounge. Her voice was soft as nightfall. "I am yours."

Evidently S&I had omitted a considerable amount of information from my briefing.

The bungalow comprised just the one room, with the 'fresher set off from the common area by translucent plastic curtains from ceiling to floor. Aside from the lounge, furnishings consisted of a raised futon along the far wall, a food preparation station against the left wall, an olive-drab folding plastic desk and matching chair parked in the front right corner, and what passed for an armoire between the lounge and the futon. The spartan arrangement doubtless served the lifestyle: miners worked, made their bankroll, and departed for more pleasant abodes. Simple lives engendered simple motives for simple crimes. Parrish, the bungalow's previous occupant, had been stabbed to death—

a crime of anger or of passion, differing from a billion preceding murders only in that it had happened to Parrish.

The blindmary followed me around the bungalow while I conducted a rudimentary inspection. I did not expect to find any useful clues, and in this regard I was not disappointed. Finally I turned to the blindmary, herself potentially the ultimate clue, and asked, "And were you Parrish's before you were mine?"

"No. Jenua is . . . " And she stopped, as one puzzled.

"Grieving, perhaps?" I suggested.

"I do not know this word."

I hoped I would not require an interpreter. "What is your name?"

The blindmary blinked. "Tell me."

Already my next avenue of inquiry was developing: food. Her response brought that plan to a halt. "No, I mean, how are you called?"

Again the blindmary seemed puzzled. "Tell me."

I approached from another direction. "I'm Brilla Cooper. And you are . . . ?"

Her eyes said that her mind had gone blank. Interrogations of the native sentients were going to be . . . interesting. Mentally I threw up my hands and glanced at the lounge again. It looked barely sturdy enough to support the weight of the travel bag. "Doesn't anyone repair anything around here?" I groused, rhetorically.

"Tell me," persisted the blindmary.

My stomach chose that moment to protest a lack of attention. "Where can I get something to eat?" I asked.

"I will prepare food for you."

"Do they serve food at the tavern?"

A thin smile had been about to curl her mouth. Now it vanished. "Food is served at the tavern."

I tugged the heavy jersey down over the hip rig, and went off in search of sustenance and information.

As I entered the tavern, ten pairs of eyes turned to me, a not unexpected development. Resumed conversation quickly blotted out the momentary hush, and I spotted Will Foley standing at the counter with one bottle

empty and a second about to be. The word had been passed. Not so much that I was to be left alone--rules this far from civilization typically addressed other conflicts--but that I was an operative from Corporate Security & Investigations. Were I to be killed, it was just possible that two more operatives would arrive to find out why. Even the innocent preferred not to endure that kind of attention.

At the other end of the counter from Foley I was served a bottle of plonk by a blindmary whose color motif was green--forest for the hair, serpentine eyes, chartreuse skin, and a smock that matched the hair. The plonk was bland and alcoholic, but drinking it filled the time until the arrival of what was advertised as "grilled ham and cheese," though I recalled seeing neither swine nor dairy cattle on the way in from the Spaceport. But there are swine, and there are swine.

I'll say this: I'm not comfortable among clusters of men in such settings, because there are always a few who reckon they have just the thing to turn me around. But S&I is less interested in my comfort than in my performance, investigation being a gender-neutral occupation. I had to make my own arrangements regarding comfort.

This one was my height and half again my width. He had a ginger beard and a ruddy complexion and a split lip and a missing upper incisor. He had, however, bathed recently. He waved a thick-fingered hand at the sandwich. "I got better than that to eat at my place," he said.

Past his shoulder I saw Foley watching me intently. Perhaps he was inclined to interfere if things got out of hand--which I dared not allow. Investigators this far out needed an authority that was clear and, most of all, independent.

But the offer of a meal from Gingerbeard was not untoward. In another setting, I might have regarded it as courteous. And he was not looking to turn me around, because he had no idea I was facing in another direction. But he was clearly the man looked-up-to by the other miners. There were two or three others in the tavern who were more massive, but he had that sort of swagger.

I took a bite of the sandwich. Its center tasted

neither of ham nor of dairy product. "This'll do, thanks," I told him, and turned to the counter, my right flank to him, hoping he would accept the dismissal. But Gingerbeard was not that intuitive. I felt his hand heavy on my right shoulder as he tried to spin me back to him.

Especially if you can do it when your opponent is off-balance and not expecting it, it's a basic aikido maneuver to twist the edge of his right hand firmly and clockwise, and with your left hand push up and then forward into his elbow, bending it unnaturally. If done properly, he feels as if his shoulder will be severely dislocated and his arm snapped if he resists going wherever you want him to go. I did it properly, and walked him around, agony quashing his resistance. First I introduced him to Mr. Stanchion, and then to Mr. Wall, and finally returned him to the table whence he had come.

To reserve cooperation without any lingering animosity, I said, gently, "On another world, and when I'm off-duty, you can invite me to pass a meal with you. But not here. And not now." He gave a little nod, and tried to staunch the flow of blood from another cut in his lip with his shirt sleeve. He would not look at me, but Foley shot me a little wink as I returned to my sandwich.

It didn't take long for the tavern to return to its previous ambience, fights being commonplace, of short duration and quick resolution. Several of the men were accompanied by blindmaries, who clung like vines to them, weighing on their every word, and even Gingerbeard soon found himself not alone. The atmosphere was informative only in that the motive for killing Parrish remained obscure. There might be one or two matters in the settlement worth fighting over, but none worth killing over.

But there was someone else in the tavern who preferred to remain aloof from the festivities. He was sitting at a table in a dark front corner, his back to the wall. I became aware of him when the green blindmary took him a bottle. Shadows obscured him there, but light from the ceiling panels reflected off his pale, tan face when he looked up to give thanks for the service. He was wearing a dark, loose outfit that concealed all but his hands and face, and black work boots. When our eyes met, very briefly, he looked away, and pulled his head further back into the

shadows.

The sandwich consumed, I flagged another bottle of plonk and approached his table, a move which he greeted with a mix of reluctance and resignation. When I poised beside the empty chair opposite him, he invited me down with a little wave of his hand.

"You'd be Tyler?" I guessed, scooting myself in. The legs of the chair made a scraping sound that seemed much too loud, and I felt as if the entire mining complement was watching us. I extended a hand across the table. "Brilla Cooper."

"Allan Tyler," he said. He had strong fingers but a soft hand—healer's hands, and a gravelly, smoky voice from living too long in dry air. "I rather supposed we would meet formally."

At this distance he looked younger than I expected, a callow youth who had scarcely begun to depilate his face, and I made a remark to that effect. Apparently he had fielded similar questions in the past.

"I began training for paramedic when I was fifteen," he said easily. He took a gulp of ale, and only then did I realize that his bottle was different from mine. "By the time they found out I was three years under regulation, I had already graduated. They've posted me this far away to keep me out of sight of the inspector general until I turn twenty one."

"So you're not a physician, then."

He shook his head. "Couldn't afford medical school. But out here it's mostly injuries. Cuts, scrapes, bruises, sprains, fractures. I can handle most anything up to and including arthroscopy. Anything more serious, we just ship them back to corporate. Do you want some of mine? You keep eyeing my bottle."

I apologized. "I seem to have asked for the wrong thing at the counter."

He grunted, and signaled the green blindmary. "Probably asked for something to drink. You should've been more specific." When he got her attention, he pointed to his bottle, then raised two fingers. "You're drinking local brew," he explained, as the order arrived. "Hydroponic hops. Next time just tell Shit4brains you want an import."

I stared at him. "Just tell . . . who?"

Tyler indicated the green blindmary tending

bar. "It's sick, I know, but the name sticks once it's bestowed. You know that."

I started to deny that knowledge when someone at Gingerbread's table laughed loudly, and sent me onto another track. I said, "They don't seem to be suffering from the loss of a comrade."

His quick, faint smile said he was reading much more into the statement. "They're older, they do hard labor, they have different interests." He drained the old bottle and started on the fresh one. "I have nothing in common with them. Some of them probably suppose I . . . prefer the company of men."

I hoisted the bottle in a toast. "Then my sitting at this table might help to disabuse them of that notion."

Tyler thought about that for a moment, and clinked me, pale eyes laughing at me from the shadows. "Truth is, I prefer women."

"Me, too."

Upon initial reflection, I had no idea why I had said that, and regretted the disclosure. But I had responded instinctively—which suggested that I might have been seeking to establish a bond for interrogative cooperation by making myself an outcast and therefore empathetic and trustworthy.

Tyler did not take the admission lightly. His face colored, and he would not meet my eyes. "Your secret's safe. I took a paramedic's oath."

I gave him a gentle nudge. "I might have to ask you about other secrets."

"I don't think I can tell you anything helpful."

I glanced around at the tables. "It doesn't bother you that someone here might be a murderer?"

Tyler shrugged. "Several of them are. That's one of the reasons they hire out here. They prefer to stay here for the rest of their lives. It would bother me if one was a serial killer. But to them, killing is just an extreme response to a sufficient provocation."

"Is that what happened to Parrish?"

A mild disturbance interrupted Tyler's response. The tavern door had opened, and in the entrance stood a sepia-and-tan blindmary with eyes only for one of the men who was larger than Gingerbeard. "Please tell me when you're coming home," she said, in a gentle voice, with-

out rancor or disappointment. "I don't want to peel the fruit too soon, or it will bruise."

The man stood up—he was dressed in a dirty undershirt and mud-stained work fatigue pants—and freed himself from the grasp of a blindmary before he chucked an empty bottle at her. This one plastic, it bounced off the door jamb and rolled a ways back to him. "I'll be home when I'm fucking well ready. And don't give me that sad-eyed look. Go on home!"

And the tavern door gently shut behind her.

The incident compelled me to look over the groups gathered at the tables. The blindmaries clung to the men, laughing with them but without apparent mirth, hanging on their every word as if it sprouted directly from a philosopher's mouth, moving the empties out of the way, and lighting the tobaccos of those few who smoked. Yet I realized now that there was nothing implicitly sexual about their behavior. At the closing of the tavern some of them might accompany their men to bungalows for the night, but such was an expectation along the same lines as the laughter and the interest. And the demeanors were not feigned or perfunctory. Each blindmary behaved genuinely, and this despite the little abuses heaped on them—condescending touslings of their hair, maulings of praise for getting a joke or grasping a point of argument, petty tolerances of remarks they offered in support of the points of their men. The observation constituted evidence of a sort—yet I could not see how it meshed with the crime I had been sent to investigate and, if possible, solve.

"I'm surprised this is the first murder to be reported from here," I said to Tyler, who had ordered another round. "They train us at the Academy not to judge, merely to evaluate, but . . ."

Tyler paused in the middle of lifting a bottle to his lips, pale eyebrows arched in surprise. "You think Parrish was killed by his blindmary?"

I shrugged. "Abused women have killed men for less than what I've seen in here so far."

"They don't feel abuse," said Tyler. He downed a gulp of ale and gave me a look one usually reserves for an ignorant child. "They don't have emotions—or orgasms, for that matter. They need warmth and attention, nothing more. Normally they get this from each other, but they've adapted to the presence of men—even had their

urethras altered to accommodate the men's erections, and undergone implants to give them the appearance of breasts."

I stared at her in disbelief, and muttered something about sentience.

"Oh, they're quite sentient," said Tyler. "Yes, in the human sense, if you wish. But what you regard as abuse, they regard as the attention they crave." Tyler drained the last of his ale. "Parrish's blindmary didn't kill him."

"Jennua, isn't it? I do need to speak with her."

Tyler shook his head. "Not while she's twinning. Unless you plan to stick around for about four more days."

"Twinning?"

Tyler grumbled something. "Better to show you, I think. If I have no immediate duties in the morning, I'll escort you to the chamber."

The tavern door banged shut. Foley had left. Outnumbered, it seemed prudent for me to depart as well, despite an onslaught of freshly raised questions. I gave Tyler a little toast of thanks, drained the bottle, and left.

The blindmary was still fretting about something when I returned to the bungalow. I caught a whiff of fresh sawdust and new fabric, and sought out the source of it--and looked no further than the lounge. Sturdy strips of wood had been cut and fitted to support the existing frame, and one of the two seat cushions had been recovered, the new greenish blue almost a match for the turquoise of the old. On the floor next to the lounge lay tools and fragments of wood and yardcloth. Following my gaze, the blindmary quickly knelt and began gathering up the loose items, presumably to take them back to the settlement's repair and maintenance bay.

"You don't have to do that," I said. "Not tonight." But she persisted, and I touched her shoulder, a signal for her to stop. Bright eyes gave me the same look others had given the men in the tavern: attentive and genuine, and without a trace of resentment. "Don't bother with this tonight," I told her. "Please . . . what is your name?"

Reluctantly she straightened, an attractive albeit pale indigo woman my height and now within arm's reach of me. I had to steady my-

self against the heady presence of her, and remind myself that she was alien, not human, not a woman.

"Tell me," she said. This time it was almost a plea.

The bright light of unexpected understanding made me blink. Over me washed a wave of sympathy for the unfortunate green bartender. The color of her eyes inspiring, I said, very carefully, "You are . . . Amethyst."

The mind behind her eyes tasted this christening and found it palatable. Her mouth found a ready smile. "Thank you." She swept to the armoire and opened a drawer. "I have placed your spare garments in here," she explained, and tugged open one of the smaller top drawers, "and your communication devices and the spare charges for your weapon in here." The other small drawer housed my toiletries.

Before I could respond in any way she hastened off to the 'fresher and returned with a plastic cup filled with water. "You have been drinking alcoholic beverages," she pointed out. "Those can dehydrate you. This will help."

"I'm fine," I said, but drank the water. "Listen, Amethyst . . ."

"Do you wish to bed yourself now?"

"I wish to bed myself now. And thank you for all that you've done. Good night, Amethyst."

She began drifting toward the door. Remembering Foley's request for support of discipline, I ordered the lights dimmed and out before I undressed. With Amethyst's meticulous house-keeping in mind, I folded my jersey, undershirt, and fatigue trousers and placed them neatly on top of the armoire, stood the boots at guard at the foot of the bed, and finally stripped off the codpad and pitched it into the small recycle bin beside the armoire.

After slipping the pistol under the pillow I stretched out on the futon . . . and yelped, and ordered the lights on. Amethyst lay sprawled along the left half of the futon, her white gown folded to serve as a pillow for herself. Her expression blended consternation and anxiety, as if she thought she had done something either improper or unexpected.

I swore softly, and sat up. "What are you doing here, Amethyst?"

"This is where I sleep . . . Brilla."

"I'm sorry," I said, and stood up, confused. "I rather assumed . . . so where do I sleep, then?"

"You sleep here." Her eyes lowered to my crotch. "Where is your penis?"

Evidently S&I had omitted an entire shipping container of information from my briefing.

About two minutes later, after I had stopped laughing long enough to recover some composure, I said, "I'm a woman, Amethyst. I don't have a penis."

A frown darkened her face, and a desperate earnestness entered her tone. "Then how will I be able to please you?"

"Amethyst, it's not necessary for you to . . . please me." I eased myself back onto the futon and recaptured my half of the blanket. "Just go to sleep."

Amethyst did not respond. She had fallen deep into thought, her face a plain blue mask, without expression, the eyes remote. Finally she slipped from the futon. "Forgive me," she whispered, throwing her gown back on. "I will return soon."

I spoke her name, but she had already reached the door. She left without looking back.

Despite having been awake for almost thirty hours, I was unable to fall myself to sleep. Job tension took the place of REM sleep. The official tasking was no closer to a final report than it had been when I first met with Foley. Two of the three basic questions of criminal investigation--means and opportunity--might be satisfied by almost any man in the settlement, but the third, motive, continued to exceed my grasp. I had the feeling that if I could resolve that one, the identity of Parrish's killer would become immediately clear.

I closed my eyes and waited, with the expectation that some small particle of information would take root, sprout, and bring all to light. No such thing happened. Behind my eyelids remained darkness. Soon a tiny sound at the door brought me alert. Amethyst had returned.

She pretended not to notice that my left hand was obscured by the pillow. I released the pistol and started to sit up, but her hand on my shoulder stopped me. Kneeling, and rather like

unwrapping an expensive gift, she drew the gown over her head, folded it, and placed it on the futon. She had no aroma that I could detect, and yet I was totally aware of her, and again of having been too long between lovers. Tyler had indicated that blindmaries didn't respond emotionally to stimulation. A part of me wished that applied to me as well.

But the other parts of me . . .

"I asked Moya," explained Amethyst. "She has experience."

Already I was fighting the urge to pull her down with me, and her bland statement of fact helped bank some fires, although I cannot say that I was relieved. Still, I was trying to be sensible about this. Wasn't I? She was an alien, not human, not someone I could love and make love with. Wasn't she? And yet she looked like that. At first I had thought her a bit too slender for my tastes, but not now, not now. A remote and sensible part of me pointed out that blindmaries were becoming more and more curious as a species, and I reached for that floating straw of sanity and held on.

"This Moya prefers women?" I asked. Belatedly I realized the question could have no context here. "One of you, I mean?"

Amethyst paused for a moment, as if she had just come up short to a barrier that had not been there before. "There is no preference. There is only technique. Lie back, please."

Battlements crumbled, ramparts were about to be breached. I managed one more feeble defensive fusillade, my mouth fumbling around some words. "Amethyst, you don't have to do this."

She stretched out beside me. "That is not the same as no."

I caught her wrist, still fighting myself and clutching that sanity straw, determined not to go down with the ship, not to go down . . .

Amethyst sighed, and threw the blanket over the two of us, and snuggled, draping her right leg across my thighs, nestling her cheek on my shoulder, and all I could think of was what she meant by "technique." It was a natural response to curl my arm around her--wasn't it?--but at this she pressed herself even closer. Her right hand, flat and fingers spread, came to rest on my stomach.

Enough of this, I thought. But I could not get my mouth to work. The pads of her fingers began a moth's-touch inspection of my skin, and my abdomen muscles fluttered. But Amethyst was an alien . . . wasn't she? It couldn't work. I'd had a man or two, long ago . . . before. And that didn't work. Her head brushed across my breast, the static electricity in her hair chilling me like spiders up a spine. But it couldn't work, not on me. I preferred women, their affections, their touches, that's what worked on me. And she straddled me, and her face nestled between my breasts only briefly before she kissed my sternum . . . my stomach . . .

Men . . . not really, no. Women, oh, yes. But aliens . . .

And presently . . . presently I thought: any port in a storm.

Rather too early Tyler awoke me, knocking on the door, entering when bidden, discreetly averting his eyes while I performed hygienics and dressed. Amethyst too arose and, unbidden, began busying herself with making coffee and straightening the bedding and other chores associated with housekeeping. Inexplicably I felt a twinge of guilt, as if Tyler had caught me out doing something untoward. But that was merely a projection—I was my own accuser. Guilt or no, I knew exactly where I wanted to bed myself, and with whom . . . tonight and—

Was that what the men felt, too?

And if so, was that intensity of feeling related to the motive I sought?

Tyler was fidgeting impatiently by the time I drew on the hip rig and stuffed the pistol into it. Protocarb crackers hardly constituted a proper breakfast, but they would have to do. I flipped one to Tyler, and we left the bungalow munching.

By daylight the settlement was like a familiar stranger: seen somewhere before, but without definition. The tavern had fallen quiet. Beyond it the valley in which the settlement lay opened to an expanse of brown and green savannah, with the great forest a dark green ribbon across the horizon. Old foothills that a billion years ago had been craggy, snowcapped peaks gently rose around us, easily scaled if we so chose. Dawn

peeked over the eastern foothills at us like a voyeur, the sun following close behind to catch it in the act. Our destination, whatever it was, awaited us at the other end of the valley, and at Tyler's nudge we headed in that direction.

Activity had worn the footpath down to dust, which lifted in little brown clouds at our feet. Ahead, much closer than I expected, yawned a mineshaft large enough to pass three abreast, and devoid of any sign of technology. I asked the obvious question.

"No rails? No ore cars?"

"Not necessary," Tyler said enigmatically.

The terse reply surprised me, given the ready responses of the previous evening. I recalled that Tyler had offered to show me "twinning" as if it had been against his better judgment. But other questions still needed answers.

"Foley said you examined Parrish's body before it was cremated," I began. "What can you tell me about the wounds?"

Tyler's grimace said he found the memory distasteful. "Two stab wounds from a fifteen- to twenty-centimeter blade. One in the right armpit, nicking the brachial artery, and the other in the groin—the right groin, if you wish—slicing open the femoral artery. He died of exsanguination."

"I don't recall seeing any bloodstains in the bungalow."

"Blindmaries are very efficient housekeepers."

"And were there corresponding cuts in Parrish's clothing?" I asked him.

Tyler paused, to stare first at me and then at the ground. He seemed to be deep in thought. "I didn't think to look," he said at last. "The body was stripped when I examined it."

"Where is his clothing now?"

Again Tyler paused. "I'll have to check, but I think everything he owned was disposed." He made a little gesture toward the mine entrance. "After you."

I held back. "You know where we're going."

As if to allay a suspicion I had not broached, he entered, and bade me follow. Here the footpath was rougher, cut as it was into old brown rock, and lit by blue-green glowstix affixed at intervals to the walls of the shaft. The descent was very gradual, and I began to notice signs of movement, of shadows—the blindmaries were

about. As Tyler and I probed further, we met several of them headed back outside, solitary or in twos, carrying little plastic containers filled with small rocks—glistening, roughly ovoid, and evidently rather heavy. All this while the miners in the bungalows were still asleep. Mining was good work, if you could get it.

“Here,” said Tyler, and we turned into an adjoining shaft. This one was short, and led to a chamber somewhat larger than a bungalow. Superficially it resembled a limestone cavern, its walls and ceiling and uneven floor resplendent in the white glowstix that revealed various shades of yellow and orange. Stalactites and stalagmites were absent, as was limestone, yet the chamber seemed naturally formed. It was warmer here, the heavy air spilling like folds of rich cloth. In the far right corner stood a blindmary . . . two blindmaries . . .

“Jennua,” said Tyler. “She cannot hear you,” he added, when I started to call to her.

Treading carefully on the irregular floor, I approached to within three meters of . . . her. She was facing me, standing with her weight evenly on the two legs that were clearly hers, arms slightly akimbo. From her left flank and at a right angle to her had emerged another pair of legs, the right one not quite yet separated from her left, and still joined at the hip. An upper torso had already formed from Jennua’s, the new one utterly lacking breasts. Jennua’s head and neck appeared misshapen, as a second head and neck was beginning to emerge from it. Even as I watched, a third eye opened on the too-broad forehead.

“Twinning,” said Tyler.

But the duplication, to me, was imprecise. Jennua was brown. The new blindmary would be ochre.

“When crystals of silicon dioxide form,” said Tyler, “amethyst, citrine, especially quartz, the crystals can exhibit the same formative process, twinning. One crystal growing from another. For them, the process is . . . perhaps not the same, but certainly analogous. It is the way they reproduce.”

My mind had blanked, but I did manage to snag one question floating around. “Then why the different colors?”

Tyler nodded approvingly. “I asked that, too.

Moya—that’s the blindmary who shares my bungalow—she explained it to me. Use quartz as an example again. Pure silicon dioxide is transparent. But different impurities add color to the crystals. Rose quartz, for example, gets its color from a trace of titanium. Jennua here has shared impurities with another blindmary, or perhaps acquired some from the rock, possibly even from one of the men. Iron in the blood, for example. Or zinc, copper, manganese. She is passing those impurities on to her ‘twin,’ with the results that you see.”

I thought about that, and about a possibility. “Iron in the blood, you said. In Parrish’s blood? Could the absorption of his blood have triggered the twinning process?”

Tyler mulled this over. “I know of no reason why that wouldn’t be possible.”

“Let’s go to Foley’s office,” I said.

But the tour was incomplete. “There’s more you should see,” said Tyler. “To understand the full relationship between the miners and the blindmaries.”

We left the twinning chamber and continued down into the mine. At the next junction we turned left, and into another, similar chamber, this one occupied by five blindmaries, each carrying a plastic container. I frowned a question at Tyler, who merely said, “Watch.”

Two of the blindmaries had extended their hands to the chamber wall. At second glance, I realized that their hands had sunk into the wall up to their elbows. The one on the right—a rich, turquoise color, with magnificent blue hair—was withdrawing her arm. Already the wrist was free. Slowly, inexorably, the hand—now a fist—emerged. After it cleared the wall, the fingers opened over the container. I heard a distinct clunk.

“There’s a vein of scheelite in that wall,” said Tyler. “She just extracted a nugget of tungsten.”

I shook my head. “Which smelts at around 3500K. That’s not possible.”

“In fact, standard recovery of tungsten is not effected by smelting, but by a complicated chemical process involving the conversion of scheelite to tungstic acid,” said Tyler. “And don’t look at me like that. I did some research. But the blindmaries’ bodies can catalyze similar

chemical processes that enable them to concentrate various metals into elemental nuggets. There's molybdenum in this area as well, and tin."

"So the blindmaries harvest the metals in pure, elemental forms, which makes the miners and Corporate happy, and the miners provide the companionship and attention the blindmaries crave, which makes them happy—and vice versa." I began heading out of the mine, tugging Tyler along with me. "That's a very convenient symbiosis."

"And Corporate asks no questions when it receives the nuggets," added Tyler. "Of course, if they knew which questions to ask . . ."

We reached sunlight. "They'd ask them. I understand. But I'm concerned with social economics only insofar as it affects the solution of this case."

Tyler grunted. "And have you solved it yet?"

"Oh, yes. I know exactly who killed Parrish, and why."

Foley, Tyler, and I gathered in Foley's office and parked on rickety chairs, myself nearest the door as a security precaution, although I doubted any severe measures would prove necessary. Tyler was eyeing Foley as if the foreman were the object of my investigation, and I had no idea whether the paramedic, who possessed an affinity for the blindmaries and sympathy for their lot, intended to confront one of their abusers.

But it clearly stunned Tyler when I opened with, "Allan Tyler, I am formally detaining you for the murder of Nevin Parrish. Foreman Foley, if you would please order Tyler's possessions packed up and placed aboard a skimmer to take us to my 'skip at the Spaceport? My things, too, please."

Foley, frowning heavily, complied with the official request, as I had hoped. I was anxious to continue speaking, in order to prevent anyone else in the office from speaking, but I waited, sitting on eggs, until he had closed commo.

Tyler started to protest, and stopped at my sharp gesture. "Not a word out of you," I snapped. "That's my legal advice, and that's my order."

"I'm entitled to know your line of investigation," Foley grouched. Already the loss of the settlement's paramedic was worrying him. I could see him reviewing files in his mind, wondering who could replace Tyler until a properly trained paramedic was dispatched from Minecorp.

"It's less complicated than you think," I told him. "And than I thought it would be. It's a simple sex crime. Did you know Parrish was gay?"

Foley nodded. "That hardly matters out here," he argued. "And not at all to the blindmaries."

"Well, it mattered to Tyler, whom he assaulted. I imagine there'll be a self-defense argument, but I doubt it will get very far. Perhaps if Tyler had stopped after stabbing Parrish under the armpit, defense might make a case for involuntary manslaughter. But that wound to the groin had to be a deliberate, malicious act, intended to kill if Parrish wasn't dying already."

"How so?" asked Foley.

"By Tyler's own admission, the knife blade penetrated deeply enough to slice open the femoral artery," I said. "That's really hard to do by accident, and easy for a trained paramedic to do. It goes beyond the bounds of self-defense."

I stood up. "But that's not my part in this. I just investigate, and effect detentions when indicated. The rest is up to the courts and the review boards." I glanced out a window. Already a skimmer had arrived for us. I handed Foley a pair of thumb bracelets. "Bind Tyler, please, and get him on board."

Tyler was glowering at me as Foley led him past, hands behind his back and secured by the thumbs. For just a moment I feared an outburst, but none came. I waited inside the office until Foley returned, anticipating rather closely what he was going to ask me.

He threw several furtive glances at the window before he made up his mind. "How thorough does your investigative report have to be in this matter?" he asked at last. He did not look at me.

"As I said, it's a simple sex crime. Tyler was attacked, fought back, carried it too far."

Foley licked his lips. He was on unsteady ground here, worried lest he approach me the wrong way. "I see no reason to include the blindmaries in your report," he said, skirting the issue of a bribe by stating in the form of an opinion

what he wanted.

I doubted he fully understood the ramifications of what he was asking, but it was not left to me to clear that up for him. “Neither do I,” I said, and got the hell out of there.

T Tyler refused to speak to me until we had boarded my *Coralie* and lifted off. I couldn’t tell whether the silence stemmed from anger or prudence, not that it mattered. After I removed the thumb bracelets Tyler plopped down in the port captain’s chair and glared sullenly at the *Videx*. As we were in null-space, there was nothing to see outside the ‘skip, but this did not daunt the paramedic.

Finally I heard an exasperated sigh. “Yes, Parrish was gay,” conceded Tyler, grumbling. “But he was going to leave the settlement. His blindmary did nothing for him, sexually. He wanted a male lover.”

I held my hand up for pause, and leaned back in the starboard chair. “Let me guess. He threatened to commo Corporate about the blindmaries unless he was allowed to leave.”

“Yes!”

“And that’s why someone in the settlement killed him.”

Tyler shot me a withering look. “Nothing escapes you, does it?”

“Foley,” I mused. “Or maybe Gingerbeard. Someone of size and strength. Foley wanted me to omit the blindmaries from my report, you know.”

Tyler nodded. “That’s what you were talking about in the office.”

I checked astrogation on the instrumentation console. Five minutes remained before course correction. Time enough.

“Foley thought he was protecting the stability of the settlement,” I went on. “He thought Corporate would be all over this place if they found out what the blindmaries were capable of. And he’s probably right.

“But what he didn’t consider was the effect the existence of the blindmaries would have on the outcome of this investigation. If Parrish was killed to prevent him from revealing the blindmaries, then almost anyone in the settlement could have done it, and this case would remain

unsolved.”

“But the blindmaries do exist,” countered Tyler. “You cannot deny that. And because they exist, it’s plausible that Parrish, being gay and wanting desperately to leave and having made the threat of exposure, was killed to silence him. Right?”

“Plausible,” I agreed.

“Well, then?”

In the *Videx* my reflection stared back at me, warning me that I might catch hell for what I was about to do. Every investigator prefers simple crimes perpetrated by simple people with simple motives. I might, if I chose, reduce this one to its simplicity, and file a plausible report. Maybe my conscience would allow me that much. Justice isn’t my concern, but that’s whose cause we investigators serve.

“You said it last night, Tyler,” I began. “Some of the men in the settlement probably thought you were gay. And it’s a certainty Parrish did, and that’s why he assaulted you. He couldn’t understand why you would reject him. But then, he didn’t know who you really were until the very end. Until it was too late. He must have died disgusted with himself.

“Amethyst—my blindmary—sent me off in the right direction, though I didn’t know it at the time. She discovered last night that I have no penis. This confused her. She did not know how to proceed. But she knew someone who did know how, someone who had experience. A blindmary named Moya. Your blindmary, Tyler.”

Tyler hissed something vile.

Silently I repeated her epithet, a rebuke to myself. “I should have seen it sooner,” I went on. “I just wasn’t looking to solve a sex crime. I mean, in a community where sex is easily and totally available on demand—hell, it’s available on the slightest hint—why would I look to that motive? But there was a subtle clue or two, a little indicator, had I not been blind. Like when you referred to ‘the men’s erections.’ That’s not how a man or even a male paramedic would say it.” Briefly I gazed at her across two meters of bridge. “It’s not Allan, is it?” I asked gently.

A corner of Tyler’s mouth twitched. “Try Ellen.”

“Parrish came very close to raping you, didn’t he, Ellen?”

"There's no point to this anymore," she said, and stripped off her shirt to reveal an elaborate elastic binding. "At least I get some relief," she said, unwinding it from her torso. Finished, she wadded it into a ball and tossed it onto the deck. "Very close," she conceded, and drew the shirt back on. "The memory of that is going to make my skin crawl . . . you must know how it is."

"Actually, I don't. I tried it their way, and it was just . . . bland. Some physical exercise, nothing more. Fortunately, I figured out soon enough what the problem was."

"Parrish didn't succeed. But someone else did, a few years ago. I still carry that memory, too," she finished, and hugged herself, shuddering.

"I'm sorry for you."

"Go to hell."

"You're not making this easy for me, Ellen."

"What do you want from me, an admission? Yes, I stuck that knife into his crotch. Yes, I know where the femoral artery branches off. Yes, I aimed for it. And yes, I watched him bleed to death, and I spat on him just as his eyes glazed over."

I felt a weak smile cross my mouth, and hated myself for it. Investigators might feign empathy, but they are not supposed to feel it. "After I figured out it was you," I said, "I thought something like that might have been the reason for the second wound."

Our eyes locked, staring at each other. Hers said I was holding her prisoner. Maybe mine said she was a murderer. I don't know. But in that moment the 'skipcomp announced that the time had come for course correction.

"So what are you waiting for?" Tyler snarled, into my hesitation. "Set the coords for Corporate. Let's get this fucking thing over with."

"Ellen, you are making this very difficult." She did not re-invite me to the nether regions, a small encouragement. "Farfrest lies along the Track to Corporate," I told her. "There's a small colony there—"

"Hypatia," said Tyler, temporizing at last. "I've heard of it. It's just another prison. I'd rather go to Corporate."

"You might fit in—"

"I don't want to fit in. I don't want the label. If you live in Hypatia, you're labeled. You're tagged." She slammed a fist against her chest.

"You might as well wear a great scarlet L."

I shook my head. "The only tags that count are the ones you give yourself."

"Oh, that is so fucking profound! Let me write that one down."

"Ellen--"

"I just want to be me," she whispered.

And then she said--and I knew I was going to win, "What's going to happen to you?"

"First thing I'll do is file a report with the Xeno Division of the Historical Institute. The blindmaries being sentient, HI will send out teams immediately to study them. That takes precedence over Corporate concerns. Likely they'll close down the mine, or at least control production in such a way that the blindmaries are not exploited without recompense. Foley and the miners will have to find other work. And, because I'll report that due to universality of motive I was unable to determine the identity of the killer, the case will go unsolved. If Foley mentions you, I'll simply state that I used you as a ruse to get us both out of there alive—a threat which Parrish's murder will substantiate." I gave her a smile. "But thanks for asking."

"I suppose . . . I could stay in Hypatia until I can get back on my feet, so to speak."

I took this as permission to set the coordinates for the next course, and did so.

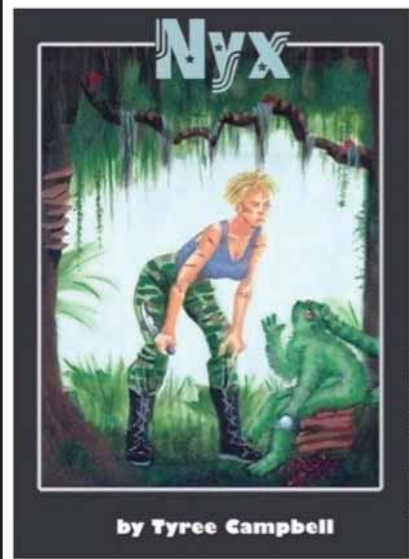
Ellen shrugged, and settled back in the chair. "Maybe they could use a paramedic," she said softly. After a moment she turned and looked at me. "What about you? What will you do now?"

"Take some time off. Maybe go rockhounding."

"Rockhounding?"

Her frown reflected an unspoken question, but I was entitled to at least one secret of my own.





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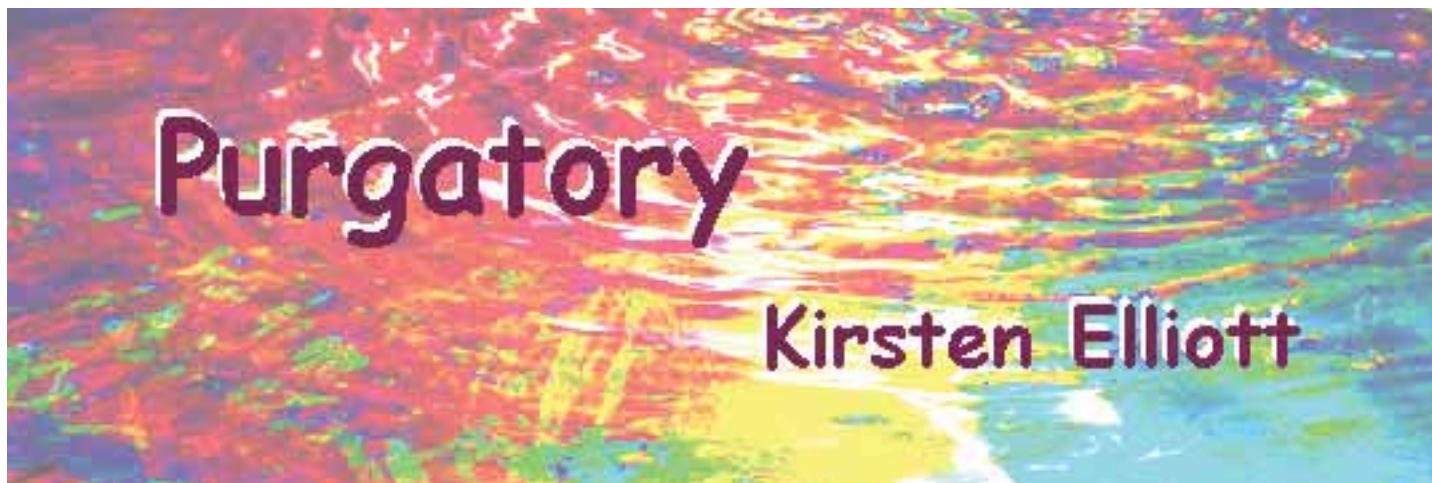
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OK. This is it. The big day. My big day. I need to stop my hands from shaking. She'll know I'm nervous. I have a right to be nervous. Does she already know? How will she react?

No point worrying about something I can't predict. Focus on the present. Right, sip of coffee. Try not to spill. Good, normal behaviour for a café. Is a café the right place to do this? Is anywhere the right place to do this? Stop panicking. Distract yourself. Peoplewatch. Old man in the corner reading. Or pretending to read. Hasn't turned a page since I got here.

And the laughing, kissing talking couple to my left. They look so happy. In love. I wonder how they got together. Whether he was this nervous when he said how he felt about her. But then he probably wasn't declaring his sexuality too. Coming out for the first time.

But then, am I being sexist? Maybe she made the first move. A sexist lesbian, that's what I am.

Lesbian. Should I use that word? "I'm lesbian." Too blunt. "I think I might be a lesbian." Too hesitant. Besides, I know I am. Maybe I should just plunge in with the ultimate phrase of our culture, our lives--"I love you." But what if she doesn't understand? Or chooses not to understand. I love you too, as a friend. Or the eternally damning "as a sister."

Should I tell her sexuality before my love? Is that the coward's way out? To see her reaction before risking my heart. I cannot do this. I have to. I refuse to spend my life hiding who I am. I don't want to tell her. But I have to. God, life was easier before puberty hit.

I cannot let myself back out of this. She must not walk away from here without knowing how I feel. When I think of the times when I almost kissed her, almost confessed. Confessed? Strange way to think of it. Maybe I subconsciously consider my love for her as a sin.

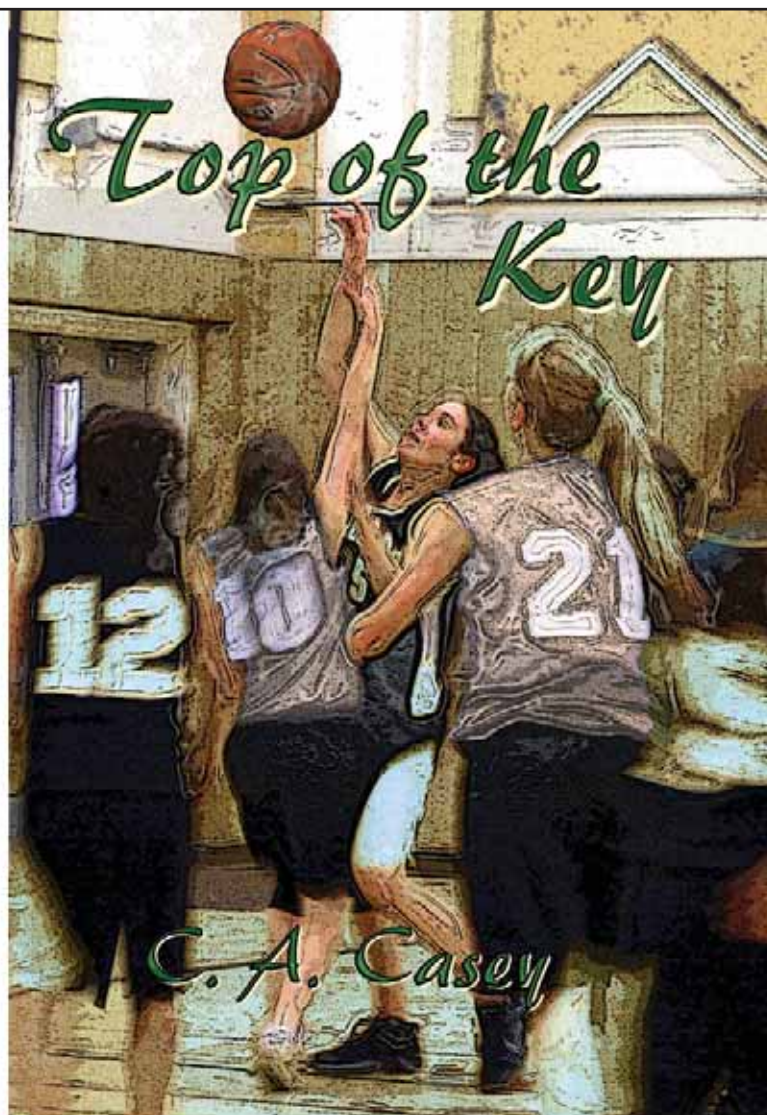
Oh God, where is she? Maybe she won't come. Buy me some time. More time to wait and worry and wonder. More time for her to live in blissful ignorance. But is it blissful? Or is she like me, desperately wanting to know, to tell, to share? Or, worst case scenario, lesbian and not wanting me. Rejection not for my sex but for my self. Hell. Where I would be if she never speaks to me again. If I could never see her again.

I'm just being an idiot. I know her; she'll be fine. She'll consider my feelings. She's wonderful like that. A saint, an angel. Ah the irony, I've fallen in love with an angel. Angels are meant to be chaste and pure. And presumably heterosexual. Damn religion.

Thinking about it, she's too beautiful to be an angel. Conjures up too many impure thoughts. With her incandescent blue eyes and rose petal lips. And perfect, perfect breasts. No, I mustn't let myself drift into an erotic daydream. Focus on the present. On my coffee. Must be sensible. And breathe.

Fuck, she's here.





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Gerry Lawson punched through a credit card sale and offered the customer a mechanical Target happy-holiday smile.

"There'll be single women there." Mary elbowed Gerry aside to use the cash register. "You are coming to the Christmas party? It's at Louise and Elaine's place this year." In a whisper, she added, "All dykes, of course."

Gerry served a woman interested in children's watches. After she finished, Mary paused from wiping greasy fingerprints off the glass counter.

"Yvonne Cunningham likes you," Mary said. "She always asks after you. Okay, so Yvonne has some issues, but she's getting really good results from therapy. And she's into crystal healing now."

"Good luck to her."

As it had been doing since the day after Thanksgiving, the store's speaker system blared out a continual noise of Christmas songs . . . on the fifth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me five go-old rings . . .

Gerry had already given Mallory a gold ring. That had been at their commitment ceremony eight years ago. This Christmas, it was to be a sapphire pendant. None of the ones in the Target jewelry cabinets across the aisle looked nearly as nice as the one she'd selected from the display in Zales, the jeweler's in the mall. She'd go there during her lunch break to buy it.

When one of the alarm clocks went off, Gerry's attention jolted back to her own counter. The clocks ticked whether she watched them or not. You could take the batteries out, but you couldn't stop time. Even if joy had died, and the life left

behind ceased to have any meaning, time kept ticking like the heartbeat of a cosmic organism that didn't notice the death of one tiny cell.

"Hey! I've just remembered." Mary dropped in the chair next to Gerry at lunch. "Elaine said there's going to be a new woman at the party this year. Fresh out of the closet. Or just moved to Indianapolis. Something like that. Her name is Shirley. Sounds nice, huh?"

Karen, a supervisor, looked up from her plate of fries. "Who?"

"This new woman who'll be at the party," Mary said. "Sounds perfect for Gerry, don't you think?"

"Hey, Ger, that's great that you're coming this year." Karen smiled.

"About time. It's been three years since Mallory—"

"I've got to go." Gerry stood. "I've a gift to buy."

"You sly thing!" Mary beamed. "You got someone without telling us?"

Gerry walked away from the look that passed between Karen and Mary.

The mall seethed with harassed, determined, cheerful, perplexed, and frazzled people and their squealing, demanding, crying, babbling, and sulky children. Gerry threaded her way through the shoppers. Like a salmon fighting the tide to the spawning ground, she shoved past the multitudes crowding around the large plastic Santa grotto and avoided being accosted by young women in silly elf costumes.

The bright lights in the Zales window display made all the gold, silver, and tinsel sparkle.

Gerry watched the necklace rotate on its stand. The blue of the sapphire wasn't the exact color of Mallory's eyes, but Gerry could imagine the pendant lying against the curve of Mallory's bosom.

And Mallory's smile above it.

Gerry stepped into Zales. She didn't see the child until after she banged into her. She apologized, but the girl ignored her and rose on tip-toe to see over the counter.

The assistant smiled at Gerry. "What a pretty girl your daughter is."

"She's not with me," Gerry said.

"I want to buy that." The girl pointed back to the window display. "The blue one. For my mom."

The girl deposited a pink plastic Barbie purse on the counter. The assistant tried to extract the identity and whereabouts of the girl's mother from her.

"Blue is her favorite color," the girl said unhelpfully.

Gerry moved to the next counter when the assistant there came free.

"Would you like it gift-wrapped?" the woman asked.

"No thanks," Gerry said. "I like doing it myself."

Gerry slipped her credit card back into her wallet and buried her purchase deep in the pocket of her pants. She turned to see the other assistant still trying to deal with the girl.

"We need to find your mommy." The woman cast an agonized look at the customers waiting to be served. Gerry knew that feeling.

"I work here in the mall," Gerry said. "I could take her to the security station before I go back to Target."

"Oh, that would be wonderful. Her name is Brooke."

Gerry took the small, warm hand firmly in hers and guided the girl out of the store.

"I want to buy my mommy something pretty," Brooke said. "It'd make her real happy."

"I'm sure it would," Gerry said. "I bet she'll be even happier to see you again."

Gerry wedged a way through the crowd for herself and the girl. Brooke talked without needing much in the way of a response. By the time they reached the security station, Gerry knew that Brooke had a ten-year-old brother called

Tony who liked doing horrible things to Brooke's dolls and eating icicles dipped in sugar. Confusingly, though, the mother who liked blue had just bought herself a red car and was teaching Tony about fixing engines and Brooke how to knit.

Gerry barely stepped inside the security station door when a woman rushed at her.

"Brooke!" The woman bent to wrap the girl in a fierce embrace. "Oh, baby, are you okay? Where have you been? Mommy's been so worried about you."

The security guard nodded to Gerry. Behind the woman, a young boy slipped from the plastic chair to go and finger the decorated tree near the counter.

"How could you take my child?"

Gerry blinked and found herself confronted by Brooke's mother.

"I've been worried sick wondering where she could be," the woman said. "All this time you had her. I should prosecute you, so that you don't do this to any other child."

"Look, lady," Gerry said. "You—"

"My baby." The woman herded Brooke away from Gerry. "Did anyone do anything to you that—Tony! Leave that alone. How many times do I have to tell you?"

The security guard shared a look with Gerry and shrugged. Gerry left them to it.

Gerry washed her dinner plate, dried it, and set it back in the cupboard. She started the bath running and carried the necklace to the table. She opened the case to admire it. She remembered Mallory's smile. Gerry carefully cut and folded the shiny wrapping paper. She tied gold ribbon around it and made a lop-sided bow. Finally, she selected a tag with a happy snowman on it. Mallory loved snow: throwing snowballs at Gerry, and wrestling to shove snow down Gerry's clothes, and making snow-women with big breasts to shock the people in the neighboring apartments.

To Mallory, with all my love for always, Gerry

Gerry set the glittering parcel beside the three others under the unadorned little fake tree on the coffee table. All the parcels were for Mallory. Mallory's photograph smiled at them.

Gerry carried a bottle of wine into the bath-

room and sank alone into a tub large enough for two.

“Her name is Vicky,” Mary said. “She used to date one of Sam’s cousins. But that’s over now. Callie says that Vicky would be just your type. And you know Callie got Laquita and Susan together. She—Hey.” Mary dropped her voice. “There’s a cutie. Don’t look. She’s at the other end of the counter. She’s checking you out.”

Gerry sighed and looked around. She saw a vaguely familiar, thirty-something woman wearing a worried frown.

“Go, girl,” Mary whispered as Gerry stepped toward the woman.

“Perhaps I could show you something, ma’am?” Gerry said. “Are you interested in the underwater watches?”

“What? Oh. No. Look—” The woman glanced at Gerry’s name tag. “Gerry? You probably don’t remember me. I’m hoping you don’t. But I had to apologize. I feel rotten for snapping at you yesterday.”

Now Gerry knew her. She was the lost girl’s mother.

“I’m really sorry,” the woman said. “I know it’s no excuse, but it was just one of those days. The crowds. Tony being a pain. And then I turned around for five seconds and Brooke vanished. I was frantic. I know I should’ve thanked you. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. You were worried. I understand.”

The anxiety drained from the woman’s face. She was, as Mary said, good-looking.

“I hunted everywhere before finding the security station. It was terrifying, not knowing where she had gone.”

“She was at Zales,” Gerry said.

“The jewelry store?”

“She wanted to buy you a necklace.”

The woman shook her head. “Tony spends every cent he gets on junk food. Brooke always buys presents for everyone but herself.”

“She’s a cute kid,” Gerry said.

Brooke’s mother smiled. Yeah, Gerry thought, very attractive.

“Do you get a break?” the woman asked. “I’d

like to buy you coffee or something by way of thanks and apology.”

“Oh,” Gerry said. “Um. I don’t—”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mary slapped Gerry on the back. “It’s her break time right now. Off you go, Ger. I’ll look after things.”

Gerry shot her a look, which Mary countered with a grin and wink.

Gerry carried her flat white to an unoccupied table and waited for Brooke’s mother to sit first.

“I’m Claire,” the woman said. “Claire Campion.”

“Gerry. Lawson. Thanks.” Gerry lifted her cup and sipped. “Good coffee.”

“It is, isn’t it? I usually have to drink Coke at McDonalds, because I have the kids with me. It’s nice to be an adult now and again. Not that I don’t love my children. Don’t get me wrong. It’s just that I sometimes like them better when they’re at school.”

Gerry smiled. Claire smiled back. The seconds slid by a little faster.

When Gerry returned to work, ten minutes late, Mary beamed at her.

“Don’t get any stupid ideas,” Gerry said. “Claire has two kids. She’s straight.”

“Claire? You work fast. Get her phone number, too?”

Exasperated, Gerry strode away to serve an elderly gentleman.

That night, as she lay sleepless on the right hand side of the king size bed, Gerry realized that this was the first time she had looked at a woman other than Mallory. And she had found Claire attractive. Gerry scowled at the darkness hovering all around her. How could she be unfaithful to Mallory?

Gerry threw the sheets aside to get up and snap on the light. Mallory’s portrait smiled back at her. Gerry sank onto the side of the bed and stared.

“I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty tomorrow,” Karen said.

“I’m not going,” Gerry said.

“I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty.” Karen pulled up the noisy zipper on her coat. “Remember: no booze this year. Louise is finally on the wagon. And don’t make me try to park in front of

your building. I've just had the front fender fixed again. Stand near that tree."

"Look, I never liked parties. I don't--"

"This isn't just a party. It's the girls. Everyone asks after you all the time. Now, buy a bottle of fancy grape juice or something and be ready at seven-thirty."

Karen stomped out into the swirling snow before Gerry could attempt another denial. Her truck roared into life and she zoomed out of the parking lot. Gerry dug her gloved hands in her pockets and trudged out to begin the walk home.

At seven-twenty the next day, Gerry stood frowning at herself in the mirror in Mallory's half of the walk-in closet. Gerry couldn't remember the last time she'd been out socially. She worked long and late as often as she could. Not for the money. She did okay, even without touching one single cent of the insurance payments. Mallory was the social one. She picked out Gerry's clothes when they went out. Left to her own devices, Gerry lapsed into indecision. Black pants, white shirt, black leather jacket. She tied a necktie on, then pulled it off. The Doc Martens remained: Mallory had bought them for her. Gerry frowned even harder at her reflection. Mallory had bought every item of clothing she wore--including her boxers.

At seven-thirty, Gerry crunched across the salted parking lot to the tree where Karen's truck waited. She climbed in next to Chris.

"Great to see you." Chris kissed Gerry's cheek. "Merry Christmas."

Karen had the good sense to merely smile and hit the gas.

"Karen tells me that Mary has been trying to fix you up," Chris said. "Don't let her bother you. I'll keep her off your back. You just enjoy yourself."

"Or sit in the back room petting the dog," Karen said.

"Yeah," Gerry said. It was probably what she would do.

"It's great to see you back in circulation at last," Chris said.

Gerry frowned and stared out the side window. She ignored Chris's pat on the leg.

Trucks and SUVs vied with eco-friendly hybrid cars for parking in Louise and Elaine's driveway.

Laughter and kd lang rang from the house. A thousand blinking lights dripped from the trees. Gerry trailed Karen and Chris up the path. She had no idea why she'd come.

Gerry added her coat to the pile, lifted a hand in general greeting, and carried her bottle of grape juice through into the kitchen. Elaine looked surprised and hugged her, but tactfully didn't say anything.

Gerry found a corner near the dishwasher where she was out of the way.

After half an hour, Phyllis Mitchell sailed into the kitchen holding a platter of cheeses. "Elaine, darling, where shall I set these?"

"Fridge is over there." Elaine signaled with an elbow.

"Oh, no, darling," Phyllis said. "These need to breathe."

Elaine, looking annoyed, broke off her conversation to take the platter out to the table. Phyllis visibly checked the impulse to follow when she spied Gerry.

"I was devastated to hear about poor Mallory," Phyllis said. "DJ and I were in Europe, or we would certainly have attended the funeral. It's so heartening to see you recovered from the tragic business."

Gerry tried to offer thanks, however insincere, but the words lodged in her throat. Phyllis didn't notice. She patted Gerry's arm and moved off to tell people she'd brought the most divine cheese anyone had ever tasted--and from the most expensive gourmet store in Indiana.

Gerry wormed her way around the animated chattering clumps of lesbians covering the sofas, chairs, and Elaine's hand-made Guatemalan rugs. She paused near the den door when she whiffed the sweet smoke of dope.

"Ger!" Mary's voice boomed. "Shirley is here. Come and let me introduce her."

"I--um. Later. I've got to pee."

Gerry ducked into the bathroom. She locked the door and sat on the side of the bath. It was a long way, but she could walk home. When someone knocked with real desperation, Gerry left to find her coat and hat.

In the spare bedroom, Gerry discovered on the bed a chaotic pile of coats worthy of the worst ravages at Target's after-Christmas sales. She began sorting through them.

"Can I have that one?"

Gerry picked up the pale blue parka and turned to hand it to— "Claire."

Claire Campion stood with her arm out to take her coat. "Gerry. I didn't know you were here."

"I thought you were str—"

"Elaine asked me," Claire said. "We work in the same building."

"Oh."

"I don't remember you at last year's party."

"Um. No. I—um—I'm not very social."

"Me either. But that's because the kids keep me so busy." Claire finally took her coat. "Are you coming or going?"

"Um. Going."

Gerry hurried on her coat and held the door open for Claire. Claire stopped near an old blue sedan with a faded Tigger in the back window.

Even in the flashing colors of the blinking icicle lights, she was a handsome woman. And a dyke. Who'd have guessed? Gerry's gaydar must have shut down when she and Mallory got together. She'd not needed it after that. She hadn't needed anyone but Mallory.

"Good night," Gerry said.

"Good night. Merry Christmas."

Gerry rammed her hands into her pockets and cursed herself for forgetting her gloves. She strode away leaving the laughter behind.

After passing the third lawn littered with plastic illuminated ornaments, Gerry saw a car slowly overtake her and stop. The passenger door opened. Claire leaned out.

"Can I give you a ride?"

"Um." Gerry's breath puffed out around her face. Her fingers were going to freeze before she got halfway home. "It's probably out of your way."

"Hop in."

Gerry eased into the seat. Their fingers accidentally brushed when they hunted for the seat belt. Uncomfortable, Gerry let Claire find it for her.

"Where to?" Claire slipped the car in gear.

"Twenty-first and Post is close enough," Gerry said.

Claire actually pulled the car to a complete stop at stop signs. She didn't exceed the speed limit once in half a mile.

"Turn left here," Gerry said. "Isn't it hard to get

a babysitter at this time of year? Kids want to be out partying themselves, don't they?"

"I'm the only woman I know who has no trouble. My girl knows I'm always home early but pay her the full amount."

As they drove along East Washington, Gerry racked her brain for a polite way of asking how Claire had two children. Heterosexual relationship? Adoption? Sperm bank?

"You made quite an impression on Brooke," Claire said. "She talked about you at breakfast yesterday."

Startled, Gerry said, "Me?"

"She said you bought what she wanted. She asked me if I could find you to offer her purse to you. And she said you have a nice way of holding hands."

"She's a nice kid. And cute."

Claire smiled. "I like to think so, but, then, I'm hardly objective."

"Does she take after you?"

A flush of color darkened Claire's cheek. She checked the rear vision mirror, then glanced sidelong at Gerry and smiled. Gerry belatedly realized how her comment could have been taken. After two blocks of squirming, she realized that it didn't matter. After all, Claire was cute and nice.

At the traffic lights a few blocks from Gerry's apartment, Claire suddenly interrupted their conversation about cheesy Christmas songs to ask, "I don't suppose you'd like a drink?"

"Um."

"There's a Starbuck's just down the street. But we could go to a bar if you wanted."

"Coffee's fine."

Gerry held the door open for Claire and followed her to the counter.

"I have a confession to make," Claire said. "I'm very relieved that you didn't want to go to a bar. I haven't been in one for years. The idea of being surrounded by bright, drunk, young things has very little appeal. And I like being able to hear what you say."

Gerry smiled. Claire smiled back. Time gave a little skip as it slid by.

Gerry didn't have to ask about the children. Claire broached the subject as she toyed with the froth on her second coffee.

"Part of the reason I was so crabby and

horrible the other day," Claire said, "was because I'd had a call from Jennifer that morning. She's decided, after all, that she wants to take her turn at having the kids for Christmas. Apparently her mom is visiting her, so Jennifer wants to make a family affair of it."

"Jennifer?" Gerry said.

"My ex."

"Oh. Sorry."

Claire shrugged. "I wasn't. Not when I found her in bed with another woman."

Gerry looked outside to see snow falling steadily. Big heavy flakes drifted down through the outside lights. Just like on Christmas movies. Mallory would've loved it.

"When we split," Claire said, "we had some horrific arguments. I mostly won. But no matter how much I dislike and mistrust her, she is also their mother. And they miss her." Claire sighed. "I've been trying desperately not to think about it, but it's going to be a miserably quiet Christmas for me. How about you?"

Gerry drained the last of her cup. "Yeah. Quiet."

Claire studied her. "You can tell I don't get out much. I just made a huge blunder talking about my ex, didn't I?"

"Doesn't bother me. Can I get you another coffee?"

"Not for me, thanks. But you go ahead. I'm quite happy sitting here and just talking."

Gerry hadn't intended to have another drink, but she didn't think she could not get one now. Socially, she was every bit as hopeless as Claire professed to be. Gerry hadn't been out with anyone other than Mallory for over nine years.

"Thanks," Gerry said as the car pulled up to her apartment building.

"I was going to thank you," Claire said. "I enjoyed myself far more than I expected to this evening. Can I give you my number?"

Claire opened the glove box. Toys, half-eaten candies, and screwed up Kleenex tumbled into Gerry's lap. Apologizing, Claire helped Gerry clear it away. She wrote her phone number on the back of a business card for an orthodontist, which she found in her purse. Awkwardly, Gerry offered her own number in exchange. Claire smiled. Gerry smiled back.

In her apartment, Gerry hung up her coat,

turned up the heating, and sat in the dark. She could see the black outline of the frames of the pictures of Mallory, and her and Mallory, but not the images. Her memory filled in the blanks.

"A very quiet Christmas," Gerry said.

. . . Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way . . .

As the tinny tune blared from the overhead speakers, Gerry pulled out a magic marker and added another tick on the scorecard beneath the till.

Now she was three points ahead of Mark, who had bet that the store would play "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" the most times, and ten points ahead of Mary, whose choice was "Snoopy's Christmas."

"Did I tell you that I talked with Ronnie last night?" Mary asked. "She said that Yvonne mentioned you when they were at the bowling alley."

"Uh huh," Gerry said. "I'm taking my dinner break now."

Gerry strode out of the store, feeling that familiar sense of release and relief that the crowds pouring into the store would not be her problem for thirty minutes. The mall was crammed, as you'd expect so close to Christmas. The fast food area was insanely packed. Gerry threaded her way toward the line at Pizza di Roma. When she finally had her pizza, the prospects of a table looked slim to none.

"Gerry!" Claire waved from a table a few feet away, where she sat with her children. "We have a spare chair."

"Um. Thanks."

Claire introduced Gerry to Tony and Brooke. To Gerry's surprise, Brooke remembered her.

"We're going to our other mommy in Texas," Brooke said. "Would you like to come?"

"Um. I can't," Gerry said. "I have to work. But thanks."

"It's their last dinner with me before they fly out to Jennifer's," Claire said. "I asked what they wanted to eat and—"

"McDonald's burgers are best," Tony announced. He squeezed sachet after sachet of bright red ketchup onto his carton of fries.

"So, you're drinking Coke," Gerry said.

Claire smiled. Gerry smiled back. Time slipped by so quickly that Claire looked startled to discover it was ten after seven.

"I have to be at the airport in thirty minutes," Claire said. "Tony, take this trash to the bin." She leaned across to wipe Brooke's face.

When Gerry returned to Target, Mary teased her for being unpunctual. Gerry had no idea that children could eat so much ketchup. Six minutes later, Claire leaned against the counter looking as frantic as the first time Gerry had seen her, but this time she had both kids in tow.

"I've got a flat," Claire said. "I can't figure out what to—"

"Where's your car?"

Gerry strode out from behind the counter, with a passing comment to Mary to hold the fort. She was glad that she didn't see Mary's expression.

"I'm so sorry about this." Claire opened the trunk. "I guess I could've found a security guard. I didn't think."

"No problem." Gerry handed the lug wrench to Tony to hold while she uncovered the spare. "When was the last time you checked the inflation on this?"

"The what?" Claire said.

"I see."

"God," Claire said. "Something else has gone wrong, hasn't it?"

Gerry dropped the spare to the ground and pressed a thumb against the tread. "Nope. This one will fly."

Gerry had to squeeze down between the sedan and a Buick to loosen the lug nuts. At least Claire hadn't parked next to a Lincoln. Despite the blanket from the backseat that Claire insisted that she kneel on, Gerry's pants were wet from the snow, she was freezing, and she had skinned her knuckles by the time she let the jack down. Claire bundled the kids into the car while Gerry heaved the flat into the trunk.

"I'm so incredibly grateful," Claire said. "But I have to run. I'm beyond late. I'll call you. You're marvelous."

Gerry watched the tail lights curve out of the parking lot to be lost in the traffic. It had been a long time since she'd been useful to anyone. And years since anyone had thought she was

marvelous. Three years, five months, and eighteen days.

Gerry let herself in the apartment. She poured a glass of wine from the open bottle in the fridge and sat with a book in her lap. The phone rang.

"You saved my life," Claire said. "If you hadn't—Hell. I'm sorry. I've just noticed the time."

"I just got home from work. Did you get the kids on their flight?"

"I missed it and had to put them on a later one. It didn't leave till nearly ten. Jennifer has promised to call me when she picks them up at the airport."

Claire's voice sounded thick and shaky. Still, she'd just sent her kids off to Texas a few days before Christmas. It was a wonder the woman wasn't a complete mess.

"You okay?" Gerry asked.

"Yes. No. I'm sorry. Look, I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciated what you did. I had no right to just barge in on you like that when you're at work. I owe you big time. Thanks."

"Um. Look, you want to talk?"

After a pause, Claire said, "I'd love to. I'm sitting here alone and I hate it. This is embarrassing to confess, but I'm hugging one of Brooke's dolls. I'd really like to see you. But it's so late. I can't ask—"

"I offered."

"If you're sure . . ."

"Yeah. I am."

"I'll make you my special hot chocolate," Claire said. "Or I have a bottle of scotch."

"I can't get to your house. I don't have a car. I don't drive any more. How about Steak 'n Shake? There's one on Post near the intersection with 25th street. Close to the I-70 off-ramp."

"Sounds good. Need me to pick you up?"

"I'll meet you there."

Gerry was careful to nurse one cup of decaf, because she'd been too wired to sleep after the last time. Claire looked rough, and kept fiddling with her cup, the sweetener sachets, and her cell phone. But she didn't cry, which Gerry had half expected. Inevitably, Claire talked a lot about her children, and, eventually, her breakup. Gerry found it interesting, because, she

realized, she wanted to know about Claire.

"At first, the last thing I wanted was another relationship," Claire said. "And the kids soaked up every waking moment. It was hard for them, too. So, I didn't even try to get out. Then, by the time I got around to liking the idea of adult company, I realized I'd lost my confidence. And it wasn't as though I'd ever been very good at dates. Actually, I'm lousy. And who'd want to go out with a woman with two kids? Lesbians are supposed to have dogs and cats, not children."

"I think your kids are nicer than any pets."

For the first time that evening, Claire smiled. Gerry smiled back.

When Claire's cell phone rang, Gerry went to the bathroom to let her talk to her ex and kids in private. Claire was brushing away a tear when Gerry returned, but she had relaxed a little.

It was nearly two o'clock when they trudged out into the frozen night. Gerry accepted a ride home. The car started easily but when it began rolling it made an ominous thump-thumping noise. Gerry climbed out and saw the front tire on her side was flat. There was no way Claire had had time to get the puncture on the spare fixed.

"Shit," Gerry said.

"What's wrong?"

"You won't believe this. You've got another flat. I don't suppose you're a triple-A member?"

Claire shook her head and swore.

Gerry looked up and down the street. Work-shops would be long closed.

"You can't get this fixed tonight. But there's a place half a block from here where you can get both tires repaired in the morning."

Claire pulled her cell phone out of her purse. "Hell. I don't even know the number for a taxi. Do you?"

"I never use them. Sorry. Um. Look, you can sleep at my place, if you like."

Claire's expression was too complicated for Gerry to decipher all the elements, but gratitude and relief were major parts.

By the time Gerry unlocked her apartment door, she was cold and Claire's face had lost its flush of exertion to look unhealthily pale.

"Wow." Claire looked around. "This is the tidiest home I've ever seen. Easy to see you don't have kids."

Gerry smiled and turned the thermostat up ten degrees higher than usual. When she took Claire's coat to hang up, she noticed Claire shiver.

"I'll fix a warm drink," Gerry said. "Would you like a shot of whisky in it?"

"Yes, please." Claire's teeth chattered.

Gerry fetched her one of the spare blankets to wrap around herself and turned up the heating a few more degrees. "Maybe you'd be better off taking a long, hot shower. That'll warm you up."

"Would you mind?"

Gerry found clean towels and smiled when Claire marveled at the pristine state of the bathroom.

"I—um—I don't have much in the way of pajamas, but you're welcome to use this." Gerry offered a long football shirt.

Hearing someone in the shower gave Gerry a nasty moment of flashback. She reminded herself that it was Claire, not Mallory, who would walk out. Claire.

Gerry paused as she reached for the bottle of whisky. She had someone in the apartment who was not Mallory. A stranger. Well, not a complete stranger. But another woman.

Claire emerged looking tousled and pink. She wore Gerry's shirt, which stopped mid-thigh. She was taller than Mallory. And had larger breasts.

"That was great," Claire said. "And I didn't even miss standing on Mr. Froggie."

Gerry smiled. Claire smiled back. Gerry's pulse did a little skip out of time.

Claire cupped her mug in both hands. "This is yummy."

"Better than Coke?"

Claire laughed. "I owe you again, don't I? I actually had two minutes there when I wasn't fretting about the kids."

Gerry shrugged. "What are friends for?"

"You know, I feel like we are friends. I'm glad you feel that way too. Some people get all hexed about having to know someone for years before they feel they know them, but I disagree. Time doesn't make any difference. If you connect, hours or weeks or years don't matter. Do they?"

Gerry lay wide awake. In the next room, Claire made no noises, but Gerry was acutely aware of someone else in her home. The train of events

that led to Claire's presence had been so natural and inevitable that she couldn't see how it wouldn't happen the same way again. What really worried her, though, was that she liked Claire. A lot. And she had noticed her physically. That should be wrong, but it didn't feel wrong.

"I love you," Gerry whispered to Mallory's photograph. "I always will."

The alarm woke Gerry at nine. The bedding was neatly folded on the sofa and a cup and plate sat in the dish drain. There was no sign of Claire. Gerry found the note on the table.

I hope I didn't wake you. You have a very comfortable sofa. I owe you a lot—including a bagel and a cup of coffee. I'll call you later to thank you properly. You saved my life again. Love, Claire.

Gerry sat touching the note while she ate breakfast. Love, Claire. The words had an uncomfortable effect on Gerry. She got up to put the bedding away. She found herself holding the shirt. The memory of how Claire filled it sprang vividly to her mind's eye.

"Shit."

Gerry dropped the shirt on the bed and stared at Mallory's picture.

Mallory smiled back as if Gerry had not been guilty of thinking about another woman.

"Yes," Claire said when Gerry phoned her. "I guess I looked the pathetic female because I had a hairy mechanic acting the knight in greasy overalls for me. He fixed both tires. I was only an hour late for work. The really sad part is that I wouldn't have known where to get it done if you hadn't told me. I'm hopeless. In case you hadn't guessed, Jennifer used to deal with all things mechanical."

"I—um—I used to take care of that stuff for Mallory."

After a pause, Claire said, "Can I make you dinner? I'd offer to take you out, but we're neither of us social butterflies, are we? And I can cook. I'm free every evening. When is your day off?"

At six-fifteen on Thursday, Gerry stood in her boxers staring at a pile of her clothes on the bed.

Mallory's picture smiled at her from the wall.

"I shouldn't be doing this," Gerry said.

Mallory continued to smile.

By the time Claire knocked, Gerry was dressed and holding a photo of her and Mallory. Gerry carefully replaced the picture beside the small Christmas tree. She grabbed a bottle of wine from the fridge and went off to dinner with a woman who wasn't Mallory.

Claire lived on the west side. It was a typical family suburb, with kids throwing snowballs under the glow of colored Christmas lights. Claire's house had some lights decorating the front porch. Inside, it was cozy and lived in with an armchair that didn't match the other chair or the sofa. Pictures of the kids adorned the walls. Over-sized stockings with the names "Tony," "Brooke," and "Mommy C" sewn on them hung from the mantle. A large tree, heavily over-decorated and with a Barbie as the angel on the top, twinkled in the corner. A pile of presents spilled from under it.

"I should've sent their gifts with them so they could open them on Christmas Day," Claire said. "But I couldn't. It's something for me to look forward to when they get back."

Gerry didn't know how to offer appropriate sympathy. She opened the wine.

"Much, much better than Coke," Claire said.

Gerry smiled. Claire smiled back. They clinked their glasses together. It sounded like the chime of an ethereal clock.

A loud sizzling sound hissed from the stove.

"Hell!" Claire dashed into the kitchen.

Gerry followed but stopped abruptly in the doorway. Claire was bent over wiping something off the floor. Her pants stretched tight over her backside. Gerry couldn't stop staring. She blushed when Claire rose and turned.

Claire had set the table formally, including a couple of candles. Dinner was the best that Gerry had eaten in three years, five months, and twenty-two days.

One or twice, their fingers brushed. Gerry's heightened senses were aware of Claire's knees close to hers. Every accidental contact set Gerry's nerves jangling. By the time they retired to the sofa with the last of the wine, she seethed with indecision.

Claire handed Gerry a parcel wrapped in

Christmas paper. It felt yielding, like a piece of clothing. She sat close enough that their arms touched. Gerry's skin was hyper-sensitive to the contact.

"Merry Christmas," Claire said. "Promise me you'll keep it under your tree and not unwrap it before the twenty-fifth."

"You—you shouldn't have. You don't owe me. Not really."

"I do, actually. But I bought this because I wanted to."

"Um. Thanks."

"There's something else I want to give you," Claire said.

The husky undertone in her voice made Gerry look sharply at her.

Claire's intense stare flicked between Gerry's eyes and lips. Gerry's pulse skipped a beat. Time stood still as she sat immobile and let Claire gently touch her face with warm fingertips. Gerry shuddered.

Claire leaned forward and kissed her mouth. Soft, moist and hot, it aroused strong sensations deeply buried. Gerry closed her eyes against the painful surge. Confused and dazed, Gerry pulled away when Claire attempted to repeat the kiss.

"I'm—I'm sorry," Claire said.

Gerry shook her head. So much was happening inside. Too much. Part was searing, naked desire. But part was also shock and disbelief—at her own feelings, not at Claire. A large slab of it was horror at her betrayal of Mallory and the willingness of that infidelity. Underlying it all was fear.

"Gerry?"

"Look. Um." Gerry rose. "It's—it's not you. I—um—I'm sorry. I'd better go."

Gerry strode to the door.

"Gerry! Wait. I have to drive you. And you need to put your coat on."

Feeling stupid on top of everything else, Gerry grabbed her coat and avoided eye contact with Claire. In strained silence, they began the drive back to Gerry's apartment. Less than halfway there, Claire pulled the car over to the side of the road and parked.

"I know about Mallory," Claire said. "I asked Elaine about you."

Gerry frowned down at her lap.

"I'm really, really sorry about coming on to you like that," Claire said. "The very last thing I wanted was to send you running. Gerry, I like you more than I ever have anyone. And I never dreamed I'd feel so . . . well, that anyone would ever interest me after Jennifer."

That, at least, Gerry could understand. She loved Mallory, and she always would. Claire wasn't Mallory. But she liked Claire and wanted to be with her and . . . and she wanted her.

"I can't undo what I did," Claire continued. "But I want to patch things up so that this doesn't send you off into the night without ever coming back. What I can do?"

Gerry wanted to say something, but she could barely think for herself, let alone someone else.

"God." Claire set her elbow on the windowsill and rested her head against her hand. "I can't believe how badly I've screwed this up."

"It's not you."

After a long pause, during which Gerry felt Claire watching her, Claire said, "I can't possibly make this any worse, so I might as well tell you that I'm in love with you."

Startled, Gerry turned to her. Of all the expressions she might have seen on Claire's face, desperation pierced Gerry's inner maelstrom.

Nothing could've been less like Mallory—nor provoke more powerful primitive protective reactions in Gerry. The desire to wrap her arms around Claire to keep her safe cut through everything else and made Gerry realize that she didn't want to run away from Claire completely.

"I—um—maybe we could talk at my place," Gerry said.

They barely spoke all the way to the apartment. Gerry made coffee. When she carried it into the living room, Claire stood looking at the framed photographs.

"She was beautiful," Claire said.

"Yes."

"You look very happy together. A good-looking couple."

"Yeah."

"Has there been no one since?"

"No." Gerry sagged onto the sofa. Mallory was not a topic likely to calm her emotional turmoil.

"Are you still in love with her?"

Gerry swallowed hard and looked across to

the picture of her with Mallory leaning against her, laughing.

"At first," Claire said softly, "I wished Jennifer had died rather than stopped loving me. But I'm actually glad she didn't."

"She just left one morning," Gerry said. "For work. As usual. She didn't come home. The cops came instead."

Claire lowered herself beside Gerry.

"It was a car accident," Gerry said. "A pile-up on I-74. Eight cars and a semi. A girl in a Jeep was talking on her cell phone. She didn't see the car in front of her brake. The truck driver tried to swerve around the collision, but lost control and crashed through the on-ramp barrier." Gerry swallowed with difficulty. She kept her eyes on Mallory's laughing face. "Mallory never had a chance. She was coming down the ramp. She hit the truck. The cars behind hit her and rammed her car under the trailer. She was—she was dead before the fire broke out."

"Oh, God."

"The girl on the phone walked away without a scratch."

Gerry looked down to see Claire holding her hand. Gerry tightened her fingers.

"I never saw her body," Gerry said. "We had a funeral. But none of it seemed real. The casket. The service. Nothing about it proved that Mallory was dead. And that she wasn't going to come home one day and life would go on."

"Gerry—"

"I need a drink."

Gerry fetched the bottle of scotch. Her hands shook so much that Claire took the bottle from her and poured.

"I can't ever forget," Gerry said. "I won't. And I can't stop loving her. She was everything."

"No one expects you to forget."

"But—but—" Gerry struggled with bands holding back something both terrifying and wonderful. She looked at Claire. So different to Mallory in so many ways. "But I—"

Claire stroked Gerry's hand.

"You make me feel alive again," Gerry said. "That scares the hell out of me."

"Because I'm not Mallory? And I might die?"

Gerry nodded.

"I'll never be Mallory. I wouldn't want to be. And I don't want to take her away from you. But

I'd love a place of my own in your life." Claire clasped Gerry's hand between both of hers. "I don't know when I'm going to die. I hope it's not for a long time. But I can't give you any guarantees. You know that. But would you rather not have loved Mallory, and not have had those years with her, just so that you wouldn't have had to miss her afterwards?"

"No."

Claire smiled gently and touched Gerry's cheek. As if something snapped inside, Gerry sagged against Claire and clung to her—a warm, soft body that she wanted to bury herself in. Claire slipped the glass from Gerry's hand, set it aside, and held her.

Gerry woke on the right side of her bed. Claire slept on the left side.

The alarm clock radio burst into life.

". . . clearing in the afternoon. Now, all you parents out there this Christmas morning, listen to—"

Gerry turned the clock off. She eased out of bed and made breakfast. She carried the tray into the living room, then stopped. Gerry set the tray down and lifted one of Mallory's pictures. Mallory was still smiling.

Whatever Gerry did, Mallory would still smile at her.

"I love you," Gerry whispered. "I always will. Do you mind that I also love Claire now?"

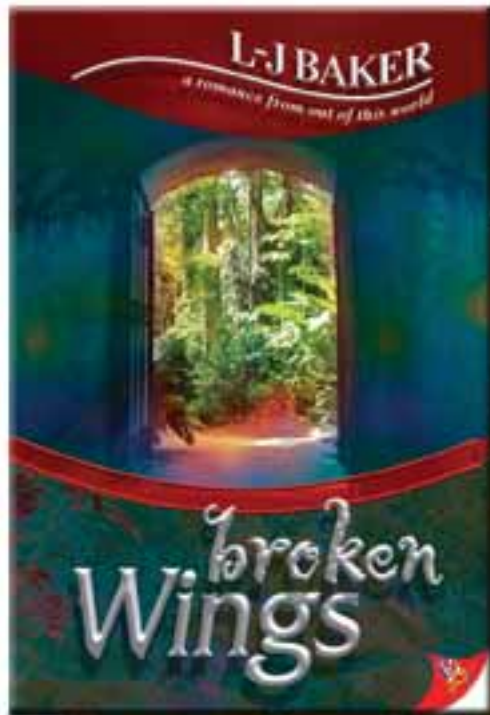
Mallory continued to smile.

Gerry kissed the glass before replacing the picture. She turned to the Christmas tree. Every year, she'd bought Mallory a piece of jewelry. This year was the sapphire necklace that Mallory would never wear. Blue, Claire's daughter had said, was Claire's favorite color.

Gerry picked up the shiny parcel, removed the tag, and carried it into the bedroom.



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Becca examined herself critically from the ground up as she passed a full length mirror. Black high-heeled sandals, burgundy dress draping over slightly-too-ample hips. It clung to her in a flattering way she supposed, especially to her breasts that were molded round and lifted high by the cut of the fitted, push-up bra.

The neckline of the dress plunged square and low, a silver chain hung around her neck, she could feel the metal cold against her skin. Gold jewelry might have been better, she thought idly. Silver made her look pale. Her lips were slashes of bright red. Heavy eyeliner and mascara brought out her eyes; an unexpected, steely blue. Wisps of blonde, shoulder-length hair framed her face, styled and tweaked and tousled into submission.

It was an elegant look, the exact look she wanted to project. It was a look meant more for admiring than for living in.

The Brasserie was full of those damned mirrors. She tried not to let them distract her as she walked. As they moved through the crowded restaurant the maitre'd parted the crowd effortlessly. Glittering people wearing clashing couture and expensive perfumes smiled at her. Some stopped her to half-hug and to kiss the air on either side of her cheeks.

She fancied that she could no longer feel her feet. She might have been tiptoeing her way along, or crashing through the tightly spaced tables like a panicked elephant. Her nerves rubbed raw. Here, look at me! I'm a nervous freak! It was always like this in crowds. She couldn't go out without this feeling, like the entire world was

watching and unanimously disapproved. What were they saying as she passed? What were they thinking? She's alone. I heard she's a lesbian. As if those two facts were synonymous.

Just entering the restaurant was an exercise in social gymnastics. At any moment in a conversation anyone might see someone more important or more beautiful than the current companion. Then they would perform an absurd two-step, an about face so sudden and dexterous a champion ballroom dancer might envy them, as they honed in on their new target. The trick was not to stay too long. Always leave, never give yourself a chance to be left.

Becca focused all her attention forward. Her table was in an excellent spot for watching and being watched. She was sure her agent had picked it for exactly that reason.

"Jake." Becca held out both hands and forced a smile. He was wearing a gorgeous, micro-fiber suit. The weave of the blue fabric was suddenly absurdly interesting to her. A suit that looked immaculate no matter how long you'd been sitting. What a frickin' marvel. She resisted the urge to reach out and touch it, admire its good looks and modern practicality. The suit seemed to have more personality than half the people in the restaurant combined.

He gave her a real kiss on each cheek, making contact, smiling warmly. "Rebecca. Glad you could make it." Rebecca. She hardly recognized that more formal of her names.

Of course, as a writer her name meant far more than her face, which was probably why her agent insisted on these monthly dinners;

firstly to drag her from her self-imposed solitude, and secondly to try and put a public face to her name. Any publicity was good publicity apparently.

She returned his kiss. "Nice suit."

"Thanks. It's new."

"Why, are we celebrating?"

"You left the house, that's pretty special," he chided, but it was a gentle hit.

"Did you give me a choice?"

He grinned, unrepentant. "No, but I'm afraid one day you'll call my bluff."

It was their ritual. She would chew him out for his constant harassment. He would exasperate over her seclusion. She would capitulate gracefully. "No, you're right, it's good for me to get out from time to time. I'm so wrapped up in the book, I barely know what day it is."

"Well, the businessman in me likes the sound of that. But as your friend . . . ?"

She reached over and touched his hand, lightly. "I'm here. Let's just enjoy our dinner?"

A photographer from the restaurant milled around. Jake gestured him forward at the same moment as Becca waved him away. The photographer stepped forward, caught her look, stepped back.

Jake sighed, his plans thwarted. "What are you, some kind of vampire? Can't have your picture taken?" She shrugged and studied the menu. "Okay, that's it. When was the last time you got out, did something fun, spontaneous, even if just by yourself?" he asked.

Becca frowned. "I'm working, Jake. It's a full-time job."

"I have a full-time job, out in the world where I need to talk to people. I also have a girlfriend, a gym membership I never use, a symphony subscription . . ." he said. "It is possible to work and have a life." He picked up his whiskey and soda, twirled the crystal tumbler in his fingers, took a sip. She sat in silence. "So . . . Do you like the way the book is going?"

"Of course." Becca decided she would need something stronger than the ice water on the table to cope if Jake was determined to give her the third degree. She waylaid a harassed-looking waiter. "Amaretto Sour please. Ice and lemon."

Jake wasn't about to let up. "Any women in

your life?"

"Not for a while now."

"That's not healthy. It's been what, two years?"

"Almost three," she corrected him.

"Anyone since Jodi?"

"No."

"What happened to that fox I met at the book launch? The PR woman? She seemed okay."

She pulled a face. "Briana? Ughh. Too clingy."

"Clingy?"

"As a nineteenth-century corset. After five minutes, I couldn't breathe."

She studied her menu. It was so many levels of pretentious, from the feel of the card to the names of the overpriced dishes. Lots of exotic monikers for dishes that were essentially just pasta with cheese, pasta with fish, pasta with tomato sauce.

"I'm sorry," Jake said.

Becca looked up, amused. "I said she was clingy. I didn't say she was dead."

He let that pass with a look. "I'm sorry I keep dragging you out in the world against your will."

The waiter arrived with her drink. She took a long, first swallow and felt the sour bite of the liquor as it entered her body. She stopped the waiter with a wave and pointed to the glass. "Keep them coming." Very soon the alcohol would start working its way into her bloodstream, thawing her out from the inside. "No, I'm the one who should be sorry. You're just trying to help."

"Okay, then, let me help. Tell me why you're so miserable?"

"I'm not miserable. That's a bit extreme."

He took her hand across the table. "Right, well I'm willing to bargain down to unhappy, but that's as low as I go."

"How about mildly disaffected? Disillusioned? Distempered?"

"I hear they have shots for that," he quipped.

"I'll call my vet."

He refused to shift topic and stared at her, not unkindly, until she was forced to look away.

"What is it?"

"Give me a sec and I'll try to explain." She paused, thoughtful. "Remember when I was in Germany a couple of years ago? That book tour?"

Jake nodded. "You were great. You even talked

to people.”

“Not the point, Jake. Anyway, me and the PR guy, we’re driving one-seventy-five down the AutoBahn”—she ignored Jake’s look of horror—“when all of a sudden I saw something, in the corner of my eye. I jammed on the brakes so hard the car starts spinning out of control on the ice and almost swings into the other lane. We’re both screaming, our lives flashing before our eyes . . .”

Jake took a huge swallow of his whiskey. “I don’t know if I want to hear this.”

“Our lives are flashing before our eyes,” Becca continued, “and finally I get control and manage to stop the car from spinning. I stopped the car and he’s staring at me going, what the hell did you do that for?”

“And why did you?”

She hesitated. “There was a butterfly.”

“A what?” Jake asked.

“I’m serious. It was a goddamned butterfly. It flew onto the windscreen and I didn’t want to hurt it. I nearly killed us both. It was this totally subconscious thing.”

“A butterfly,” Jake repeated, incredulous. He looked at Becca’s face and laughed. “Oh no, it’s not true. Tell me it isn’t.” Becca looked down in embarrassment. “Okay, you’re never going near my car. Ever.”

“Did you know, I’ve never driven since then?” Becca said. “Here I am cruising full speed down the highway and the smallest little thing makes me lose control. I careen off into chaos.” She sighed. “All this, me, the way I am . . . I’m just being cautious.”

“Cautious? There’s caution and then there’s . . . stopping. You can’t stop driving because of one stupid thing,” Jake reasoned, serious again. “Becca, you can’t stop trying because you’ve screwed up a few times.”

“Yes, I can,” she said.

“You have to move on.”

Becca tried to smile, to joke his concerns away, but she just didn’t have the energy. “You know, let’s eat.”

actually found she was having a good time, good enough to be sorry the night was ending.

A limo pulled up and met them by the curb. Becca stared. “What’s this?”

“What does it look like?” Jake laughed.

“It looks like a limo.”

“Good guess. A driver too. He’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

“Where would I want to go?” she asked, perplexed.

“Well, home if you like, but I was hoping you’d keep enjoying yourself and drive around for a while. The bar is fully stocked. Consider it a gift.”

“You’re not coming?”

“Wouldn’t you rather be alone?” he asked.

She smiled fully this time, a genuine affection for him welling up inside her. “You know me way too well.”

He leaned in to help her into the back seat just as the driver wound down the glass partition. “So, where are we going tonight, ma’am?”

Becca thought for a moment. “This is going to sound a bit weird, but can you just drive? Anywhere? Just around the city for a bit?”

He nodded. “Actually it’s a pretty common request. How about over the bridge and up north a little bit? The lights are really pretty this time of night.”

“That sounds perfect. Thank you.” She hesitated a moment before adding, “I’m Becca.”

He nodded. “I know who you are, Miss Harmer.”

“No, really, Becca is fine.”

“All right, Becca. I’m Robert.” He nodded briefly. “Now, how about that drive?”

“Anywhere but home, James,” she said.

He gave her a mock salute. “You got it.”

She leaned back. The richly upholstered, leather seats sighed and welcomed her in. A mini-bar sat to the side and she explored it. To her delight she found piccolos of Bollinger, delicate champagne flutes stacked neatly and a punnet of fresh strawberries. Feeling utterly self-indulgent, she popped the cork on a bottle and poured.

“Jake, you are a man of exquisite taste,” she muttered as she swallowed first a mouthful of champagne and then sank her teeth into a ripe

When dinner was over they paid the bill and Jake took Becca’s arm to escort her from the restaurant. To her surprise she

strawberry. "So, Robert, how long do I have you for?"

"My shift ends at eight a.m."

She raised an eyebrow. "All night?"

"If you want."

She shook her head. "Don't worry, I'll have you home early. My batteries die long before then."

Lights flashed past. Becca wrapped herself in her thoughts and sipped quietly on her champagne. As they drove she wasn't really sure how much time had passed, or even in which direction they were headed. She thought about everything, about the evening just gone, about the things Jake had said. For a few moments she even allowed herself to think about other things.

Jodi had lived with her for two years. Every afternoon when she came home from work she would ask Becca about her day. Becca would stare at her computer and know Jodi was there, but not really know. Back then her first novel had been so near completion that she could barely stand to leave it. Like a colicky child she gave it constant attention; she massaged it gently, soothed its ills, plied the difficult text into submission. Her thoughts were rarely far from it.

Becca had quit her job. She worked day and night, pouring everything she had into the pages until there wasn't much of herself to give outside of the work. Jodi had lasted a long time before she finally moved on. She needed someone who cared more about her than fictional characters and words on a page. Becca understood, but that understanding didn't mean that she could change anything.

Jodi had a daughter now. A partner. A three-bedroom house in the suburbs. A King Charles Spaniel named Davey who had licked at Becca's ankles the only time she had gone to visit. That had been a mistake. For so long Becca had barely noticed Jodi was there and then when it was convenient for her she had finally mourned that she was gone. It sounded so unforgiveably selfish, even to her, even now.

"Becca?" Robert's voice broke into her thoughts.

"Yeah?"

"Do you mind if I grab a cup of coffee?" He indicated a small diner that glowed a little way up ahead.

"There's something open now?" She glanced at her watch, surprised. It was half past eleven.

"Seems to be," he answered, slowing down as they neared the roadhouse.

Becca looked through the open window into the denseness of trees that surrounded them on both sides of the road. She sniffed at the rich air and was rewarded with the smooth scent of eucalyptus. "I don't think I've ever been up here. It's beautiful."

"You should see it in the daylight," he said, pulling into the empty car park. The engine of the limo shuddered off. "Would you like anything?"

"Actually, why don't you stay here and I'll go?" she said. "I wouldn't mind stretching my legs."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, just give me a couple of minutes."

"No problem." He settled back into his seat, pulled his cap down over his face, and closed his eyes. She couldn't help smiling. He'd probably power-nap the whole time she was gone. Some people lived strange lives.

She pulled on her shoes and opened the car door. The woodland air filled her lungs as she stepped out. Even just this little bit out of the city the air was so deliciously different.

The sign on the roadhouse door read that it was open for another half hour. As she pushed her way inside a little bell attached to the door rang, the shrill tone alerting a dozing waitress who started upwards from her stool in the corner, rubbing her tired eyes. "Oh hey there. Come on in."

"Thanks." Becca sat down on one of the bar stools at the counter. She looked around at the scuffed linoleum floors, the vinyl-covered booths, the Formica countertops. She was suddenly keenly aware of how formally she was dressed.

The waitress noticed too, looking her up and down with a lazy grin. Becca returned the favor and stared back. The girl had long brown hair pulled loosely back into a ponytail. Thick strands not quite long enough to be tied back fell along her cheekbones and down to her jawline. She wore old jeans and a faded red polo shirt that advertised the roadhouse.

The writer in Becca enjoyed taking in the scene. A late-night waitress. An old coffee-stained counter. A battered, old jukebox in the

corner. It probably had lots of Neil Sedaka and Patsy Cline.

The girl struck a polite pose, one hand on her hip, waiting to hear whatever Becca might want to order. Behind sky-blue eyes was an exhaustion that was difficult to hide, try as she might. On the floor near the chair she'd been sitting on was a textbook left open, too far away for Becca to figure out the subject.

"Studying?" Becca asked.

The girl nodded. "In between trying to keep my eyes open, yeah." The girl's smile struggled through her fatigue. She cocked her head and said in a faux-perky voice, "I'm Natalie, your waitress."

Becca giggled. "I'm Becca."

Natalie cast a glance through the window and spotted the limo parked outside. She let out a low whistle. "Is that yours?"

"What, the driver or the car?"

"Both."

Becca smiled. "No, I'm just borrowing them, for the night."

"Nice night for it," Natalie quipped. "You need coffee, right?"

Becca gestured outside. "He does. Black, I guess."

"And you?"

"Coke?"

Natalie nodded and got to work on the coffee, rattling the machine. "Mind if join you? It's been a long night."

"Please."

Becca watched Natalie as she worked. Her right eyebrow seemed to raise itself up and down uncontrollably at odd intervals while she was concentrating. She wore silver studded earrings, one in each ear. She had no other obvious piercings. Her fingernails looked short and clipped (not chewed, Becca noted), but unpolished. The clomping on the floor as she moved suggested Natalie was wearing heavy boots.

She accepted the drinks as Natalie came back over. "I'll be back in a second," she said, lifting Robert's takeaway cup off the counter.

"Here. Take these." Natalie handed over a small milk and sugars with stirring rod. "Just in case you guessed wrong."

Becca's sandals crunched through the gravel and dirt of the car park as she made her way

back over to the limo. She knocked on the driver's side window. Robert woke quickly and wound it down.

"Your coffee, sir."

He accepted the cup gratefully, then noticed she made no move to get back in. "You hanging out here a while?"

"I thought I might, just for a few minutes. Is that okay?"

He nodded. "You're the boss."

"Thanks."

She made her way back across the car park and into the roadhouse again. The welcome bell clanged in protest.

"I hate that thing," Natalie said, pulling her chair up to where Becca sat down. They sat quietly, sipping their drinks for a few moments.

"So, where do you go to school?" Becca asked.

Natalie sipped more coffee, mindful of the heat. "Sydney Uni. I'm doing my Masters in English."

"Research?"

"Uh huh."

"You got a topic?"

Natalie got up from the stool and went to fetch the book that was lying on the floor. She book-marked her place carefully before handing it over.

"Nonsense Verse in History and Literature," Becca read aloud. She grinned. "Nonsense verse?"

"It's fun, all about the humour of the day, how it related to their politics, their way of life, the drugs they were taking at the time . . ." She grinned.

Becca handed back the book. "It's certainly original."

"Everyone else is doing Plath or Virginia Woolf." Natalie yawned. "There's only so many earnest critiques you can read about women throwing themselves into rivers or gassing themselves in ovens."

"I was one of those," Becca mused.

"What? A suicidal, tortured poet?"

Becca laughed. "No, hardly." She twirled the half-full coke bottle lightly in her hands. "I meant, I was one of those melancholy young girls with a mangled copy of *The Bell Jar* on my bedside table."

"And now?" Natalie asked.

"Now, I'm a writer. And I'm pretty sure The Bell Jar is still in my room somewhere."

"Writer, huh. Published?"

"Twice."

"That's amazing," Natalie said.

"I've been lucky."

"It takes more than luck. You must be talented, too." Natalie looked at her, her gaze unflinching. "No point being modest, you don't even know me."

Becca hesitated. "I hope I have talent. I have a great agent."

"What name do you publish under? Just so I can run to the library tomorrow and brag that I met you and borrow your books."

"Borrow?" Becca raised an eyebrow.

"Well, one day when I'm not working at a late-night roadhouse in the middle of nowhere for twelve bucks an hour and struggling to finish a Uni degree, I promise I'll buy them," Natalie said. "So . . . ?"

"Rebecca Harmer."

"See, that wasn't so hard, was it? I was going to freak you out by pretending I already owned a copy and it was sitting right here under the counter . . ." Natalie winked.

Becca snorted. "It happens more often than you might think. Then people ask me to sign them."

"Maybe I should get you to sign a napkin or something, then it can go up on the wall?" Natalie pointed to a noticeboard on the far side of the room.

Becca got up to examine "the wall." It was covered with an array of signatures on various scraps of paper and napkins, from TV stars to pop singers to football players. "Excellent. Can mine be stuck up underneath this rugby guy? The lesbian, feminist author meets macho, misogynist footballer dichotomy appeals to me."

"I met him. You're much better looking, I have to say. Not to mention chattier." Becca kept her eyes and face firmly toward the wall so Natalie couldn't see the faint blush her compliment had aroused. "Talking to people I don't know doesn't usually come this naturally to me."

"I wouldn't have noticed if you hadn't told me." Natalie looked up at the clock. "Ahh, quittin' time. Or near enough. Could you flip that closed sign for me?"

"Sure." Becca moved toward the door. She looked outside. Robert was asleep in the car again.

"I already cleaned up, I just have the coffee machine to do." Natalie looked up, suddenly unsure. "Are you in a rush to get anywhere?"

Becca shook her head. "No hurry."

"Mind keeping me company while I close up? It's nice to have someone to talk to for a change."

"My pleasure," Becca replied. "Let me see that book?"

Natalie handed over the textbook and wandered down to the other end of the counter. Becca opened the book where it was bookmarked and started to read aloud:

*One fine day in the middle of the night,
Two dead men got up to fight.
Back-to-back they faced each other,
Drew their swords and shot each other.
A paralyzed donkey walking by,
kicked a blind man in the eye,
Sent him through a rubber wall,
into a dry ditch and drowned them all.*

"Ahh," Natalie mused when Becca was done. "A classic."

"By whom?" Becca wondered. She flipped through a couple of pages.

"That one's signed Anonymous. It's like an old folk song or a sea shanty. It's so old and weathered nobody knows who wrote it anymore. And it changes so much over time that whoever wrote it might barely recognise it anyway. As time goes by, things go, thing stick."

"And what does it mean?"

Natalie shrugged. "You marinate long enough over something and you can make it mean anything you want."

"Okay, good point." Becca closed the book again. "What does it mean to you?"

Natalie talked as she cleaned. "That reality is filled with paradoxes. Kick someone into a wall and the wall might metaphorically be made of rubber and they'll bounce right back at you. No truth is infallible. That's the significance of the reference to the blind man. Everything is just someone's version of the truth." She placed the clean cups up on the shelf and looked over, one

hand resting on her hip. Becca realised that it was a natural pose for her. "And on top of everything else, we need to remember that was just lampooning the truth the way the writer saw it, in his time."

"That's fascinating." Becca grinned. "Actually, you're pretty fascinating yourself."

"You sound surprised."

"I am," Becca replied. "No offense intended, but believe me, I wasn't expecting to find anything or anyone fascinating tonight." Becca searched around and snagged two napkins from the tabletop. She fished a pen from her purse, thought for a moment, then started writing.

"What are you doing?" Natalie asked from over the top of a broom as she swept out from between the cubicles.

Becca kept writing. Finally, she nodded in satisfaction and snapped her pen closed. She took one of the napkins she'd been writing on, walked toward the noticeboard, found a spare pin and stuck it up.

Curious, Natalie walked up behind her and read what Becca had written over her shoulder.

*There once was a girl named Bec
Who was a miserable wreck
She walked into the place
And took up some space
Then left without paying the check
Cheers, Rebecca Harmer*

Natalie laughed. "Awww. So touching."

"And this is for you." Becca handed over the other napkin.

"Call me? Becca," Natalie read. Underneath was a phone number. "And if I don't?" she teased.

"I'm going to be here again this exact same time next week to find out why." Becca lingered, annoyed now that the time seemed to have come for her to go. "But why should the night end here? Did you want to come for a ride? I've got this guy all night."

Natalie looked at the time. "It's late. I have classes tomorrow."

Becca sighed, disappointed. "Okay."

"Besides . . ." Natalie said quickly, "I don't make a habit of getting into limosines with strange women."

"But I'm not strange. And I have champagne . . ." Becca dangled the bait, hoping for a bite. "Are you sure?"

"You know, the alcohol doesn't make it better." Natalie laughed. "Isn't that just the adult equivalent of taking candy from strangers?"

"Probably," Becca said. "I'm just finding it oddly difficult to say goodnight." "Let me make it easier for you," Natalie said. She reached around Becca to open the lock and swung the door open. They stood together in the open doorway. Impulsively Natalie leaned in and captured Becca's lips gently with her own.

Becca returned the tentative kiss. They broke apart and Becca was shaking. "What was that supposed to make easier, exactly?"

"I don't know. I tried to resist. It just seemed like the right thing to do," Natalie said. "So what happens now?"

"I'm not sure." Becca reached up and touched the side of Natalie's face, so lightly she barely felt the skin. She wondered why, at that particular moment with this particular woman, she felt so free. "But I think I'm ready to believe that's a good thing."

Natalie blinked. "Huh?"

Becca grinned, shaking her head. "Nothing. Goodnight, stranger." With a last, gentle kiss on Natalie's cheek, Becca turned and walked away.

I won't look back.

She rapped on the front window of the limo and Robert was instantly awake, turning over the engine to warm it up as she clambered into the expanse of the back seat.

"Where to?" he asked, then let out an enormous yawn. "Excuse me."

"Home." Becca sighed. "Take your time."

I won't look back.

"Done," he said and put the car into gear, pulling out from the dirt driveway and onto the main road.

She looked back, and kept looking until Natalie had faded into the distance.



"BE WARNED: AFTER THE INITIAL SET-UP, I COULD NOT PUT THIS NOVEL DOWN."

Jean Stewart, author of the "Isis" series



"Have Gun We'll Travel is one kick-ass debut thriller. Set in the woods of Northern Minnesota, the story is riveting, the writing lean, tough and tense. I'd met Dez Reilly and Jaylynn Savage before, but in this book, author Lori L. Lake doesn't pull any punches. She puts her cop heroines in danger that doesn't let up, pushing them to the very edge of their physical and emotional limits. Lake's north wood's tale is full of passion and terror, twists and heartbreak, but in the end, the message is all about friendship. If you miss this one, you'll miss one of the year's best."

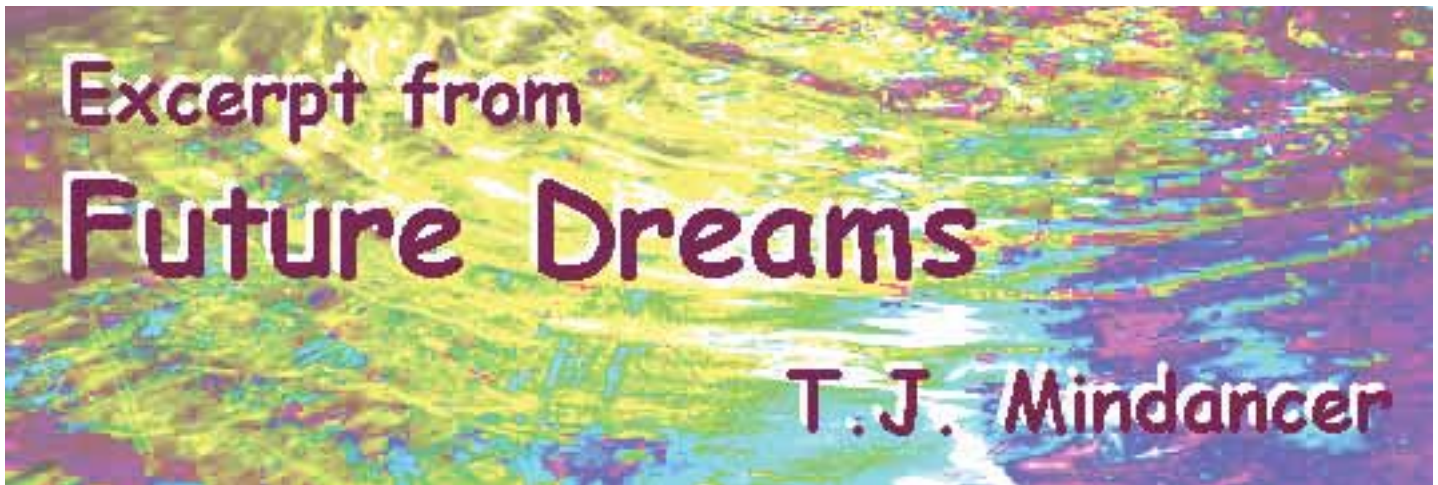
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"Lori L. Lake writes richly detailed novels that are full of heart. Her characters are real people who seem to have stepped out of real life to share their stories with us."

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Have Gun We'll Travel
by Lori L. Lake

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Tigh stared at her door for several heartbeats, knowing she was supposed to go to Pendon Larke's office after her morning meal. Despite her slow and deliberate consumption of the food, the tray sat empty outside the door. Unsettling evidence that she had to be on her way.

She inspected her face in the tarnished mirror. She looked a little better than she had a few days earlier. At least she didn't look like Bal's ghost. She straightened to her full height and studied the spotless white tunic and leggings. The nervous lad had brought a clean set for her with the meal. White was not as utilitarian a color as the black she had gotten used to and the cotton weave was harder to keep clean than good leather. The clothing's lightness made her feel vulnerable and that was the last thing she wanted to feel.

She turned to the door. She had to leave soon or they'd come and get her. In her army that would be humiliating and Guards didn't react well to humiliation. She swallowed down the memories of that person she used to be and searched within herself for the sword-strong backbone she had once possessed.

"I can do this," she muttered. "It's just a door. I've walked through thousands of doors without a thought. It's not like I have to go outside." Her breath caught as she pushed down a panic attack. What did they do to me that I fear walking in the sunshine and fresh air? "You've as much backbone as a newborn lamb. Just step through the door. You can always turn back."

Soothed by that thought, she took a step and

fell into a Guard trick by raising her consciousness to a state that felt as if she was floating outside her body, removing herself from her actions. She was out the door and staring down the corridor without even realizing she had moved.

The assistant healer gaping wide-eyed at her from his little table at the end of the corridor helped her relax. People staring at her in fear was as familiar as her favorite boots and the healer's stare made her forget the Elite Guard was no longer within her.

She walked down the corridor, concentrating on stretching her leg muscles. As far as she knew, she hadn't been on her feet for any length of time during the past several weeks and her legs screamed from the neglect. She glanced through the barred doors of the cells that had once belonged to her comrades and confirmed she was the only one left on that floor. She wondered if watching over this floor was considered a prime assignment or a punishment for the assistant healers.

Tigh stopped a few paces in front of the table. The assistant healer looked as if he was trying to say something, but all he could manage was a straggled noise in his throat.

"I was told I have to sign in and out," Tigh said.

The assistant healer stopped his efforts to communicate with visible relief and nodded. "Here." He pushed his chair to the wall, pointed to a ledger, and snapped his hand out of the way.

Tigh picked up the pen, scribbled her name, and, after glancing at the sand clock on the

wall, the time. She straightened and captured the assistant healer's eyes with her own. His wide brown eyes brimmed with near panic. "I've been down the corridor with my door unlocked for two days. You've no reason to be frightened of me."

"That's what Pendon said," the assistant healer said in a shaky voice.

"He should know. He helped cleanse me, after all." Tigh raised an eyebrow and turned down the short corridor to the central stairs. The clatter of the chair dropping back on all four legs echoed behind her. The world was as afraid of her as she was of the world. The thought was not comforting.

She paused at the top of the large stone staircase. Her mind flashed to the last time she had walked down those steps, when she had to fight against the surging flow of black clad Guards in full battle gear. They had been on their way to the plains of Hillian for what had been the last campaign of the war. She fought back memories of that bittersweet event that had marked the end of her career as a Guard and the start of her two years as a fugitive.

The fall of her soft boots on the worn stone stairs penetrated the silence of the stairwell. She could almost see and hear the Guards huddling on the steps, jogging up and down the flights to keep in shape, testing the echo with midnight drunken vocalizations . . . the central stairwell had been a living place. Tigh couldn't remember it ever being empty or silent.

She walked numbly down two flights. The silence overwhelmed her with a profound sense of loss, and she collapsed onto the glacial step. The idea that she would never see her comrades again or raise a sword in battle alongside them brought on a wave of grief the depths of which felt bottomless. Five years of her life, filled with the heightened reality that the Guard enhancements gave her, had been stolen from her. She loved being a warrior and a Guard. Nothing compared to the feeling of invincibility in battle or the elation of victory. Even if she couldn't face Tigh the Terrible's ruthlessness, her heart ached for the company of her comrades in arms.

She clenched her fists in anger. That life had been ripped away from them by the Federation Council in an act as ruthless as anything Tigh

the Terrible had ever committed. Their victory had not been celebrated with parades and they never received sashes of honor. Their reward had been a relentless hunt to capture them and strip them of the life they had loyally given to the state.

Tigh snapped her head up. She wiped away her tears with her sleeve and knew she'd been there far too long. The last thing she wanted was to be found sobbing like a lost child. She concentrated on settling her thoughts and emotions and made it down the remaining flights of steps.

As she stood in the main entry hall of the fortress, she realized she didn't know which office Pendon Larke had taken over. Gray-robed healers and a few Guards in white tunics passed by, but she wasn't ready to talk to any of them yet. Her legs moved from habit and she found herself at the threshold of her old office. Through the opened doorway, she was puzzled to see Loena Sihlor behind her old work table.

Loena looked up and put on a welcoming smile. "Good morning, Tigh. Pendon is expecting you. He's the next door down."

Tigh stared at her, still fumbling with the idea that this was no longer her office. "Thanks." She shuffled to the next opened door.

Pendon, seated behind a table, looked up from his work. "Come in, come in. Sit." He waved a bony hand and Tigh slipped into the office, glanced around it in search of something familiar, and sank into the visitors chair. "Good, very good. And on the first try, too." The wrinkles around Pendon's eyes threatened to obscure them as he grinned.

"First try," Tigh said.

"Sometimes it takes days for a cleansed Guard to make that first step outside their room," Pendon said. "You made it on the first try in only a few sandmarks. Good work."

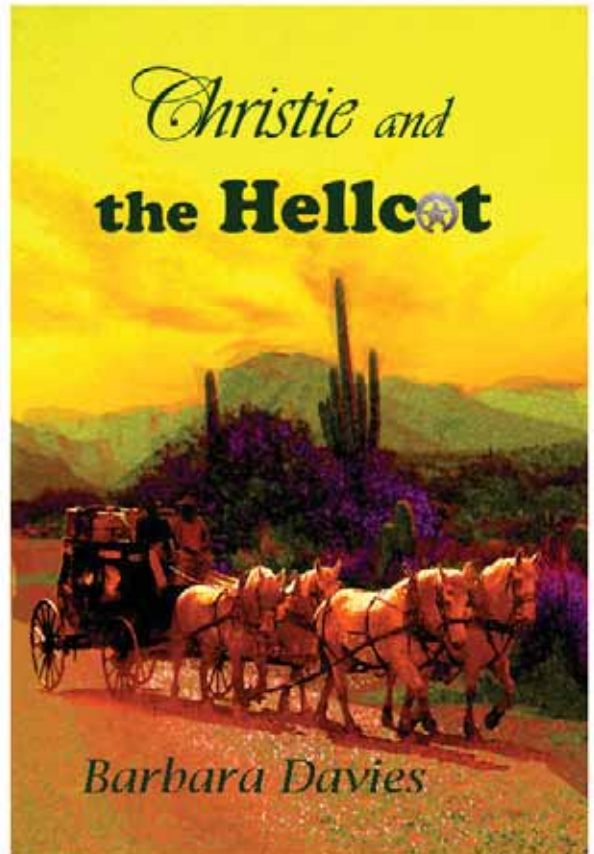
Tigh sat back and stared dumbfounded at Pendon. The compliment did nothing to lessen the pain those few sandmarks had brought. If this was an example of the healers' blind attitude toward cleansing then it was a miracle a Guard got through rehabilitation sane, much less alive.



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Contributors

Tyree Campbell

Tyree Campbell is a retired U.S. Army translator [Russian, Spanish, Thai] with some 80 stories and two dozen poems [including a 2003 Rhysling finalist] published to date. His first novel, *Nyx*, about an assassin who rediscovers her emotions while on assignment on a strange world, is currently available from Project Pulp at <http://www.projectpulp.com>. Just do a simple search, you'll find it. His second novel is currently under a second reading with a publisher. He is also the Managing Editor of Sam's Dot Publishing, and invites you to <http://www.samsdotpublishing.com>.

Kirsten Elliott

I'm a Londoner. I adore my city, but I'm to leave to spend 5 or 6 months travelling around Europe and then go to university to study History and Politics outside of London. I'm currently working as a charity fundraiser. I enjoy writing short stories, and also the lyrics for a gothic jazz band called Weeping Fig. I hope to one day finish a novel, but I'm not sure I'll ever be able to do it.

L-J Baker

L-J Baker lives in New Zealand, though she did spend a few interesting years in Indiana. Her passion is for writing about women, especially lesbians, mostly in the speculative fiction genre. Her first fantasy novel, *Broken Wings*, will be published in Sept 06 by Bold Strokes Books. Info about L-J and her writing can be found at her homepage (<http://homepages.ihug.co.nz/~wordchutney/index.html>).

Veronica Holmes

Veronica Holmes is a Technical Writer living in Sydney, Australia. She is currently studying for a Masters in English Literature, writing various short stories and attempting to write four different first novels at once. Her other passions include her lesbian film review website (<http://www.kissingfingertips.com>), reading all kinds of fiction and playing with her four year-old labrador..

T.J. Mindancer

As fictional as her fantasy stories, T.J. Mindancer is a figment of C.A. Casey's imagination and Casey takes no responsibility for what Mindancer forces her to write. Mindancer roams the World of Emodia. Visit Mindancer Press for information on newly published editions of her Tales of Emodia. Casey's writings include articles in library journals and in *Strange Horizons*, and stories in *Aoife's Kiss* and *Beyond Centauri*. She also penned two novels for kids, *Dragon Drool* and *Top of the Key*.