

Condemned

By Jason P. Henry

“C’mon, don’t be such a girl! I am telling you it is perfectly safe. The house has been abandoned for three years now. No one knows what happened to the family. One morning, an old woman was out walking her dog, an obnoxious Jack Russel if I remember correctly. As she passed the house, little Pitzzy started barking his head off. Somehow, he managed to work free of Old Lady Winthrop and ran to the back of the house. The old lady went to look for him but she came up empty handed. As she stood near a back window, frantically calling for her dog, she swore she heard yelling and loud noises coming from inside the house. Thinking that maybe Pitzzy worked his way in and managed to rouse the residents, she went to the front door and knocked several times to no answer. In her report to the police, there was a final, crashing sound before everything went silent. That’s when she walked the last four blocks home and called 9-1-1.”

“Okay, seriously, Meghan, this is the most ridiculous story I have ever heard. I mean, I am up for a little adrenaline rush and all, I am pretty f’n bored, but the little story was overboard. You could have just said the house was empty and left it at that.”

“Don’t believe me, Drake, I don’t give a shit. That’s not the entire story anyway. I guess I will just keep it to myself: Unless, of course, Nick wants me to finish?”

“Ah, what the hell,” Nick responded flatly, “There’s nothing better to do in this shit-hole town anyway. C’mon, Drake, let her finish the story. Besides, the longer she talks, the more I get to watch her lips move; it’s kind of turning me on!”

“You’re a pig, Nick.” Drake said with a chuckle, “Fine, go ahead and finish the story, Meg. I’m all ears.”

“Well, there’s an image. I’m talking to a giant ear and a walking hard-on. How did I get stuck with the two of you as friends, seriously? Did I lose a coin toss in a previous life? Anyway, here it goes:

“The cops took Mrs. Winthrop’s report and went to the little house on Oak St. to check it out. There was no answer at the door so, with an emergency search warrant later that day they went in to do a welfare check. They found an unfinished dinner on the dining room table, several things turned over and broken including a giant curio cabinet. In the master bedroom, there was an unfinished bottle of whiskey on the night stand and a 9mm Beretta beside it. They found blood on the bathroom floor and a straight razor lying in the sink.

“The kids’ rooms were in perfect condition, beds made, toys picked up: everything was intact. The

attic was clean. On the staircase leading to the basement, forensics found blood and hair samples. In the middle of the basement was a single wooden chair. There were ropes on the floor all around the chair with more blood and hair samples. They searched every room in the house, and found no one. There were no missing persons reports filed in the weeks to follow, no bodies turned up. The husband, wife and two children simply fell off the face of the earth and no matches were found to the DNA evidence. The situation has now been entered into the cold case files and the house has been quarantined ever since. No one has been allowed in or out except special investigators. Now, in two days, the fire department is going to perform a controlled burn to demolish the house.”

“Okay,” Nick said, “assuming you’re not just feeding us a bunch of bullshit, it’s pretty fucking cool! You’re telling us that everyone disappeared, even the little ankle-biting dog? And, everything in that house is just as it was three years ago when all of this shit supposedly happened?”

“Well,” Meghan continued nervously, “about that dog. The next day, the cops went to the old woman’s house to tell her that they didn’t find little Pitzy. When they knocked on the door, a Jack Russell Terrier appeared in the window, barking its head off. One of the officers went to the window and the dog tag confirmed it was indeed Pitzy yapping at them. The woman never answered the door, but the cops assumed all was well and left. That afternoon, Old Lady Winthrop was found bound to a chair with ropes, her throat and wrists slit and a pool of blood on the floor.”

“So,” Drake questioned, “If the cops had entered her house to find out when the dog had returned, they may have saved her?”

“Not likely. She was found by a forensic photographer in the basement of the house on Oak St., with footprints of blood all around her. Dog prints.”

“Okay, now that’s fucked up. So, we have two days to check out the house before it becomes a wooden marshmallow?”

“Wait a minute, Drake. Meghan, seriously, even if all of this is true, that house is going to be locked up tighter than a nun's legs on the Sabbath. What makes you think we can even get in?”

“Well, Nick, I am as smart as I am beautiful. We’ll use the key.”

Nick and Drake both began to laugh hysterically. Their friend was indeed beautiful; they’d both been competing for her since the sixth grade. Her black hair and green eyes made her, unquestionably, one of the hottest girls in town. She tried to hide her looks with a pair of librarian style, horn-rimmed glasses, however, it just added to the appeal. She’d always had been intelligent but, suddenly, that fact became disputable.

“Okay,” Drake stated, “your bluff is called. Where on earth would we find the key to a quarantined house that has been locked up by the local police and, probably, the F.B.I.? We waltz in to the station and claim to be members of the missing family and demand to have the key to our home? Don’t think its going to happen, Sweetheart.”

“Well, I have to admit, Drake, for you, that little plan was borderline intelligent. You may want to get an ice-pack for your head. My idea, however, is much simpler. I thought we would just use the key that I found under the fake rock in their flowerbed.”

That was the moment when reality hit. Hot little Meghan, all grown up, was serious when she said she wanted one last hoorah before she took off to college. The three had been inseparable for years. Their lives had been a menagerie of adventures. Nick and Drake both had the hots for her, but in order to maintain the friendships, she had refused to date either of them. Now, both boys were certain that the glory days were coming to an end. All three had chosen different paths; Meghan was going to attend Harvard. In six to eight years, she will be known as Dr. Meghan MacCallister. Drake was going to attend a private art school in the city. He hoped to sell his own paintings but he really wanted to open a gallery and help other artists gain recognition. Nick, well, he was the less inspired of the three. He applied for community college but tore up his acceptance letter. He was actually, unbeknownst to the other two, thinking of packing up, moving to Boston, 'pahking the cah on Hahvad yahd' and surprising Meg.

For the moment, however, that was all just a painful thought of things to come. For now, they were simply trying to hold on to the few moments they had left to share. There had been many plans and ideas over the years, some had been concocted by the boys but it was always Meg who gave them the guts to follow through. She always told the other two to quit being ‘girls’ and claimed she had more testosterone than both of them combined. She was fearless. Uninhibited. Sometimes, it seemed she had a death wish but everyone was certain that she simply wanted to feel alive. For the most part, the experiences had been within the law even though a certain few may have crossed lines. This new idea, however, presented issues. It was an hour’s drive to get to Mason, where the house was located. Once there, they had to park the car down the road and wait for night fall so they could enter the house unseen. If caught, there were certain to be criminal charges and the ends of any career hopes for the lot of them. It was three hours of detailing and weighing options before the guys looked at their friend and, in unison, said, “Hell, yeah, we’re in!”

The following evening, all three met at the Parlor. It was a run-down pool hall that was usually quiet. They always met there for a couple games of cut-throat before heading off into the world. Meg always said

that playing with balls helped the boys grow a pair. Nick and Drake humored her, because arguing only intensified her jabs. Besides, she was Meghan, Queen of all things hot and she held the key to happiness. Even though she had no intention of unlocking the door, the key was power and Nick and Drake were her fools.

(They made it to Oak St. by 8pm.)

It was a nice summer evening so the sun was just setting over the horizon when Nick, their D.D., slowed the car to a crawl. "I want to make one pass by the house, just so we know which one it is before we walk up in total darkness."

"I know which one it is stupid. I'm the one that came here and found the key, remember?"

"I know, Meg, but Drake and I have never been here. We need to have our bearings in case we get separated. We'll drive by slow, turn around in the cul-de-sac and park our car back down here at the end, facing the way we need to go to get out."

Meg conceded and they made their way down the quiet, dead-end road. About half a mile down on their left they came to a two story house. It was a modest home, gray in color with light blue shutters. The crime scene tape had been torn away but remnants of it still fluttered in the light breeze as they stayed tangled in the row of bushes under the windows.

"That's it!" Meghan yelled excitedly, "That one right there. I found the key in that . . ."

"Meghan, my dear, I think the boarded up windows gave it away before you did." Drake interrupted. "You did remember the key, didn't you?"

"Yes, Monkey, unlike you, I received my 4.0. without providing sexual favors to teachers."

"Well," Drake retorted, "I was just making sure you didn't lose it along with the key to your chastity belt."

"Drake, my sweet boy, just because I have not unlocked the belt for you does not mean it has not been unlocked at all. There was a reason Thomas Hanley went to the E.R. for fatigue. Now, can you put your hormones away so we can get this show on the road?"

Nick, laughing, parked the car at the end of Oak St. where they had first turned in. They all grabbed the flashlights and extra batteries they had brought and, as usual, they made sure their watches were synchronized.

(All hands pointed at 8:45pm.)

“Remember, no matter what, we meet back at this car by midnight.” Nick said.

“Why is it always Midnight or Noon?” Drake asked. “Why can’t we be original and say ‘We’ll meet at 11:50pm, or something. It sounds much less ominous and foreboding that way. Every story that mentions midnight has a bad ending. Seriously, pick a different time.”

“Okay”, Meg said, “We’ll meet at the car first thing tomorrow.”

“Awesome!” Drake acclaimed, “See? That sounds so much better. It gives us more exploration time, too. Now, what time exactly?”

“Midnight!” Nick and Meghan replied in unison.

Laughing, they all stumbled from the car and piled onto the sidewalk. Meghan fumbled in her pocket for the house key. “Do you realize that this could be our last adventure together? After this, we face the world as grown-ups and slowly become old and boring like our parents. I am really going to miss you . . .”

“All right, Drama Queen,” Nick interrupted this time, “Spare the goodbyes for later. I don’t want to think about that right now. Let’s go have some fun and see if we can make Drake wet his pants again.”

“I did not wet my pants. I have told you guys a thousand times that, yes, you scared the shit out of me, but I dropped my water bottle.”

Meghan asked, “Was it your bottle of water?”

Drake, “Yes.”

Nick, “Did you drop it?”

Drake, “Yes, but . . .”

“Then you wet your pants!” Meghan concluded.

“C’mon.” Nick pleaded, “We’re running out of time. Besides, Meg, you ought to know by now that you can’t have a battle of wits with an unarmed man.”

Like little brothers, Nick and Drake began to push each other around as they made their way down the concrete walk. Even Meghan got involved and, catching them in an off-balance struggle with each other, managed to put both boys on the ground. It was then that Nick, as he stood up, pointed out that they were in front of the ill-fated home. All three of them stood and stared in reverent silence. In front of them was a simple house. Yet, inside this house, at least one person was brutally murdered and four others had disappeared. No one had ever been found and the criminals were still at large. There wasn’t a soul, other than victim and perpetrator, who could attest for the monstrosities that took place inside.

Meghan was the first to step forward and the key fell from her shaking hands. It jingled as it bounced around on the sidewalk, spinning a couple of rotations before coming to a halt and falling. As if to warn them, the cut end of the key pointed back down the road towards Nick's parked car. Meghan picked up the key as if it were molten metal, burning her fingers. Reality was in front of them, their newest adventure had started. The three cast awkward glances at each other and, in step, began the march towards the front door.

"Bah, dah, duuuuh . . . Bah, dah , duuuuh. . . Bah, dah, duuh. . . dah dup." Drake began mimicking the Mission Impossible Theme as the others began to chuckle. It had been enough to ease the tension as Meghan inserted the key into the doorknob. This was the moment of truth. Either Meghan, as sick and twisted as she was, had visited this house before and managed to turn up a key that a slew of investigators had missed, or: The crazy bitch was just screwing with the boys' minds! Nick and Drake both felt their hearts drop as they saw the key turn in the lock. They both placed their hands on the door with Meghan's, cast nervous glances and, with a silent three count, they all pushed.

The door did not open with the dramatic squeak that typically would have existed in scary stories and creepy movies. In fact, the door swung open with very little effort and made no noise at all. The only thing that could be heard were their racing hearts and labored breaths. Their adrenal glands kicked in to overdrive and the night was underway.

**(9:15pm: one-hundred and sixty five minutes before
they were supposed to be back at the car, safe once again.)**

They took a few steps into the house and gently closed the door behind them, as quietly as it had opened. The narrow slits in the top of the door allowed only the faintest beams of moonlight to pass through. Once the door clicked shut, they were engulfed in darkness. All three jumped as a circle of light unveiled the floor in front of them.

"Sorry," Nick apologized, "had enough of the dark."

The other two followed his lead and two more circles of light appeared in front of them. What they saw was an old, wooden floor. Four years of dust had settled on it and had been occasionally disturbed by footprints. Each set of those had begun new collections of grime. Most were human, likely belonging to cops and investigators who were trying to decode the mystery encrypted in the walls around them. Other prints were much smaller, some small enough to belong to rats or mice and others a little larger, perhaps

from raccoons, opossums or feral cats. As they directed their beams of light around the room, they realized it was the family room. All furniture had been covered in plastic, perhaps to preserve any clues that may have been overlooked. There was a light switch on the wall but it had no effect when Drake attempted to flip it on.

After a few moments with nothing jumping out at them, Meg began to make her way across the living room floor. Hesitantly, the other two followed. Megan went to the recliner and looked at the plastic sheet draped over it. She contemplated the existence of the furniture: Someone lived here. A family. This room had been filled with laughter and tears. Someone had rested in the chair or sat on the couch watching TV. Kids played on this floor, wrestling with each other or maybe a family pet. One day, for some unknown reason, it all stopped. No one knew if they were even alive. A simple decision, like answering the door could have changed their entire lives, it brought to light that somehow, the smallest of decisions could have the biggest of consequences. What decision was made that day? Drake and Nick were near a series of shelves by a modest television. Its size did not signify wealth or mid-life crisis; it was a simple Sony with a DVD player on top of it. Drake ran his fingers across a collection of DVDs and watched the dust flutter into his light beam.

“Anyone up for a dirty movie?” he jested.

The other two turned their lights on him as if to interrogate.

“Really, Drake. Sometimes you are the worst.” Meg commented.

“I know. But it’s those times that I am the best that you’re missing out on, Beautiful!”

“Maybe, but I don’t like short stories.”

He simply smiled as he led the way into the next room.

They moved past a staircase and across a threshold that led into a dining room. To the right of the dining room was a medium sized kitchen. The dining room table was cleared. The uneaten meal had been removed. They did not find mummified corn-dogs or molded, brick-hard dinner rolls. Had it been left, the mice and rats would certainly have cleaned it up by now anyway. The chairs were all pushed, neatly, into the table. Meghan ran her finger tip over the dust table cloth leaving a small trail along the table’s rim.

She caught up to the other two who were already in the kitchen. Drake was shining his light into an empty fridge.

“Not even a beer; So much for hospitality.” He remarked.

The icebox was empty except for the smell of mildew. Nick reared back as the odor penetrated his nose, causing his stomach to turn. It had been emptied, but not cleaned. They closed the doors and

turned. Both of the boys' lights illuminated the doorway at the same time. The door was wide open and there was no doubt that this staircase led to the basement. It was not just a basement; an old lady had been tied up and killed down there. Her throat and wrists had been sliced open as she was bound upright in a chair.

As if she sensed their fear, they heard Meg say, "Not yet, let's go this way."

There were no second thoughts or protests as they allowed her to lead them back to the staircase . . . heading towards the second level of the house.

(9:30p.m. One hundred and fifty minutes and counting.)

Standing on the landing at the bottom of the stairs, Drake spoke up, "I'm really bored, Meg. The investigator people have cleaned up all the good shit. There's no hair, blood, or body parts. So, far, this is pretty lame."

"Okay, stupid, I don't know of too many instances where the cops will leave a little gore behind just in case a few law-breaking kids want to break in and check out the scene. I am pretty sure that the idea was to gather it all up for evidence and attempt to find the killer. Who, actually, was never found and could be waiting in an upstairs closet right now. Waiting to gift the world with one less moron, such as yourself!"

"Well, shit!" Nick cheered, "I say we march up there and meet this guy. I am ready for some excitement!"

With that, Nick rushed up the stairs, three at a time, rounded the second landing and cleared the rest of the steps in two leaps. Somewhere, well ahead of his friends, his sneakers squeaked to an abrupt stop. From the darkness, a confused and somewhat frightened voice said, "What the hell?!"

"Alright, Nick, not funny." Meg hollered.

"You guys have to see this shit. Someone has been here before us." Nick replied.

Drake and Meghan bounced their light beams up the stairwell as they tried to catch up to their companion. They found him only a couple of feet from the last step. He was looking back down the stairs with a look of morbid anticipation.

"Alright, Nick. What's the excitement all about? All I see is a dark hallway." Drake commented.

Without a word, Nick slowly turned towards the wall behind him. He raised his flashlight to illuminate the surface. In large red letters were the words Leave now, or don't leave!!

The paint used for the lettering had been applied heavy enough to drip and run before drying. The precise color choice gave the impression of coagulated blood. Oddly, the dust on the wall seemed undisturbed, as if the author had managed to paint directly on to it.

“Nice touch, Meg.” Drake accused, “How much time did you spend in this place after you found the key? I can’t wait to see what other surprises you’ve left. You’re not going to scare me as easily this time!”

“Seriously, Meg, this is awesome. I can’t believe you would go through all this trouble just to entertain us one last time.” Nick applauded. “Very cool. Very, very cool! Whose house is this, really?”

“Guys, I have never been inside this house. Do you think I would be foolish enough to come in here alone? I might be less of a pansy than both of you, but I’m no fool. This was probably some indigent who got bored and messed with a can of spray paint he found in an alley dumpster. This is not my work!”

“Yeah, sure.” Nick replied. “Who did you hire to help? You wanted to avoid the basement which means someone is down there, in a dark corner, waiting to scare the crap out of us and earn an easy twenty bucks. Unless you pay with other options. Either way, let’s get going, this is actually getting interesting! Hope your buddy doesn’t mind a broken jaw!”

With that, Nick took his right hand and swiped through the message on the wall. A flurry of red dust fell to the floor, leaving one bare white stripe in its place. Nick looked both directions and then took a decisive step to the left. His light revealed three doors. Two of those were on the same wall as the warning message, the other was at the very end of the hall, directly in front of him. He marched, with conviction, to the first door on his right and stopped. The other two didn’t see him come to a halt and slammed into his back. He fell to his knees, dropping his flashlight. He made a lunge, but fell short as the light fell through the banister and down one story. A strobe effect ensued as the beam plummeted, randomly highlighting various extremities of the house. There was a final flash of light on the ceiling above them and then a loud, echoing thud and the sound of shattering glass. Meghan and Drake shown their beams downstairs and saw Nick’s now useless lamp lying on the floor: It had smashed its way through the glass top of a coffee table, landing in pieces on a pile of glass.

“Dude, that is sooo not cool.” Nick remarked as he picked himself up off of the floor.

(9:40 pm.)

The trio spent the next half hour rummaging through the upstairs rooms. There were four total: A master bedroom with a private bathroom, two smaller bedrooms and a master bath. With the exception of

a dead, half eaten rat under a dresser, the search proved as dull as the one in the living room and kitchen. Everything seemed in order. Just as in the lower part of the house, most things were covered with sheets of plastic, the rest with blankets of dust. There were no guns, no straight razors, and no D.N.A. Samples.

(It was 10:15 when they met at the top of the stairs.)

“Well, Meg, I’m kind of disappointed…” Drake interrupted himself with a partial scream. “What the Fuck!?”

He showed his light on the wall in front of the stairwell. He had watched as Nick rubbed his hand through the message, he was sure of it. Still, there it was: Leave now, or Don’t Leave! It was in perfect order. The lettering seemed to float on the dust, which was once again undisturbed. He pointed his light towards the floor and the pile of red soil that had accumulated after the erasure was gone. The pile no longer lay collected on the floor. It looked as if Nick had never touched the writing. Drake slowly raised his light back up and, halfway between the floor and original message, was the word: Ever. It was in the same hand, same red paint with runs and drips and looked just as much like coagulated blood.

“Okay, now is a good time to leave!” Nick cried. He held up his right hand and, in Meghan’s flashlight, they could all see the stains from the message he had destroyed. He turned into the dark and began his descent down the stairs, completely blind. Drake and Meg quickly caught up to him at the bottom landing, just as he reached for the knob of the main door.

“Nick, wait!” Meg pleaded. “I am sure there is a good explanation. There always is unless it is some stupid science fiction, paranormal story bullshit. In real life, that does not happen.”

“Okay, so, perfect explanation: While we were exploring from room to room, the local hobo and his magical spray paint decided to come out of the closet and redo the message we thrashed. In thirty minutes, he cleaned up the mess, replanted the dust, rewrote the message and disappeared into the fucking attic without making a sound or leaving a footprint. Now, he’s hiding, laughing his wino ass off and having a hell of a time at our expense.” Nick reasoned. “I call bullshit! I’m the hell outta here.”

“Don’t forget masturbating to a Stephen King novel while using night vision goggles to stare at Meg’s ass through cracks in the floor.” said Drake mockingly. “Seriously, Nick. I admit this is some weird shit, but I am sure that it’s all good. Besides, at least this bore fest is starting to show signs of life. I say we cowboy up and check out the basement.”

“Okay, Brokeback. To be considered a Cowboy, you have to ride a horse, not the cowboy. Don’t think

your exploits qualify you in “the Howdy, Pard’ner Olympics.” Meg said laughing.

“That was low Meg. Very low. And it’s called a rodeo.” Drake replied.

“Whatever, Spanky. Let’s get to that basement. Nick, you game?”

“Fine.” Nick answered. “But, for the record, I am in protest of this supernatural bullshit. Not to mention, we are three people with two lamps. I’m going to the car real quick for the spare. You two better wait here for me.”

“Dude, that would kill too much time. I bet there is a flashlight or something hidden in a kitchen drawer. It would be faster to look there. Besides, you’d be risking getting seen goin in and out. This place is supposed to be off limits. We’ll be lucky if someone hasn’t reported strange lights as it is.” Drake reasoned.

“Alright.” Nick conceded. “The kitchen. But, if we don’t find one I am going to the car. No arguments.”

As they slowly walked towards the kitchen for a second time Meghan shot an uneasy glance at the ceiling overhead. Despite the lack of cracks, she pulled her shirt down over her back side. Fucking Drake, she thought.

(10:45, seventy-five minutes left in their adventure.)

The kitchen, just as the dining room and living room before, was as they had left it. From all accounts thus far, there was no evidence of the tortured past, and no explanation of the odd writing on the upstairs wall. Even the claw marks and blood stains that had supposedly been in the upstairs hall and on the stairway had become undetectable. Traffic, dust, or a few years of age had made them virtually extinct..

Nick had taken Drake’s light and began his treasure hunt through the kitchen. From one little drawer next to a stove, nick found a Mag-light. He clicked the button again and again, but to no avail. It seems that the batteries had long ago lost their juice.

“It takes the same batteries as mine.” Nick stated after twisting off the base of the light. “I can go get the ones from my light and use them. They should have survived the fall. Why don’t you guys go ahead and I’ll catch up.

“Nick,” Drake addressed, “We can wait, man. No point in you staying up here alone. You know, strength in numbers and all.”

“Drake, I’m fine. If you’re scared it’s okay. I am sure that Meghan is tough enough to protect you. Maybe if she pretends to be your Mommy and holds your hand you won’t wet yourself when the

Boogeyman comes from under the stairs.”

“Dude, not cool. There is no such thing as the Boogeyman.” With that, he turned towards the stairs that led into the dark abyss.

“Drakey, wait up, Honey. Don’t get that far ahead of me. You know how I worry!” Meghan teased as she handed Nick a working light and fell in behind Drake.

“I’ll catch up to you guys as soon as I have my light working. Hopefully this place gets a little more exciting. I’m thinking that Pee-Wee’s Playhouse re-runs in a movie theater would be creepier than this.”

(10:57)

Drake and Meghan descended slowly. The sound of Nick’s steps across the floor above them seemed to keep time with their progress. Below them, the blackness seemed to engulf their light’s beam before it even had a chance to dance on a solid surface. Each step down was more precarious than the one before. The stairs seemed wobbly and unmaintained but Drake figured it was more likely just nerves and wobbly knees. He led the way with Meg’s left hand on his right shoulder. He stepped, stopped and then Meg stepped, stopped. It seemed that tomorrow would arrive long before the basement floor. In reality, it was only four minutes until Drake tried another step down only to find level ground.

They had made it.

(11:01)

Drake moved the light around at his feet. The floor they stood on seemed as dark as the air around them, and the air around them seemed as dense as the floor below. All of their surroundings seemed to blend into a uniform blackness that gave them the feeling of floating in a starless, night sky. Meghan wondered if taking one more step would send them plummeting into a free fall. Perhaps that is what happened to the previous tenant. The lights went out and the floor opened: a one way ticket to Hell. Drake and Meg both felt their knees buckle, when, from seemingly nowhere, a small dog began barking insistently.

“Okay. Perfect explanation. A neighbor’s dog went through its little doggie door to piss on a tree and started barking at a squirrel that was after his nuts.” Meg concluded.

“The squirrel is after the dog’s nuts?”

“Drake, you’re impossible.”

“It was a logical question considering your choice of wording.”

“Whatever, Simple Simon. Let’s go.”

One wary step at a time, they proceeded into the recesses of the basement. The yapping of Fido seemed to fade only to amplify slamming and banging in the room over them.

“Is that the kitchen?” Meg asked.

“I think so. Maybe Nick is looking through the cabinets again.”

“Maybe. Do you think we should check on him?”

“Nah, he’s a big boy. He should be down soon. After all, how difficult could it be to change the batteries in a damn flashlight?”

(11:10. Fifty minutes left)

Meg and Drake. Arm in arm. Drake swept the light from side to side as they inched slowly across the barren lower level of the little house on Oak St. With every step they took, their hearts seemed to leap further from their chests. The basement was void of any memories of the past. Nothing so much as leaned against a wall let alone rest on the floor. There were no deer antlers hanging, waiting to impale a careless visitor. Not so much as a rat scurried across the carpet of dust that lay at their feet.

The silence of the basement seemed as heavy as the darkness that lay on their shoulders. Even the noise from upstairs had faded to nil. Meg expected to see the glow of Nick's light rise behind them at any time.

She leapt out of her skin, when, without warning, Drake's voice broke the eerie silence.

“This sucks, Meg. Keep in mind, I am the least likely to want to call quits on anything that involves you and sucking, but this really blows. The place is clean.”

“Let's just wait for Nick. He'll be pissed if he never even gets to see the basement for himself.”

“Fine. But this is not going down as our last adventure. I refuse to have our final gig to be a lame one.”

“Deal.” Meaghan agreed.

“Hey, Nicole, hurry the fuck up. You take much longer and I'm gonna deflower Meg right here.”

“I warned you. Now it’s too late.”

The voice was a barely audible whisper but loud enough, and near enough, to make Meg and Drake

both scream. Drake thought he felt breath on the back of his neck and he spun around pointing the light in the direction of the staircase.

“Nick, you Dick, not fucking funny!” Meghan snarled.

“Seriously, Dude. Not cool. I am thoroughly impressed you made it down the stairs with no light, but cut the crap.” Drake added.

“Nick is gone.”

This time, Meg felt the breath on her neck when the whisper again came from behind them. She pulled herself tight against Drake as they both spun again. The flashlight danced across the basement walls and then, two feet from where they stood, it came to rest on a wood chair, ropes piled around it in pools of fresh blood.

Drake moved the light to illuminate Meghan's face.

“Please tell me this is your work. You have full credit for scaring the ever-livin shit out of me. You are the Master.”

“Drake, I swear to you this is not me. Let's just get the fuck upstairs, grab Nick, and go.”

“No arguments from me. Whatever you do, don't let go. We're getting out of here together.”

They both turned, as one, back towards the stairs. Drake moved his lamp to light their path.

“I said it was too late!!”

The voice was much louder than a whisper now and full of anger. This time the voice was not behind them and there was no breath on their necks. Once again, the chair was in front of them. A mangled and bloody figure was seated and bound. The creature was faceless, features rendered unrecognizable by open wounds and crimson smears. The hair, what remained, was charred and flaked. It had burnt right to the scalp and remained only in patches. Fingernails were broken and bleeding, clawing at deep gouge marks in the arm rests beneath them. Wrists and ankles bled from the filaments of the ropes as they wore into the flesh. The toes were curled and the muscles were taught beneath an unrecognizable dress. The skin, every inch showing, was flaking off in black chunks as if the fire burned at it still.

“Where's my fucking dog?!” A sound that would make a banshee cringe poured through the charcoal lips of the ghastly figure in their path.

Drake and Meghan turned toward each other, screaming, and came together so abruptly that the light fell from Drake's hand and bounced on the floor.

The basement was dark again.

Meg screamed and, letting go of Drake, dove to the floor in search of the flash light. She flailed her

arms around, frantically patting the floor hoping to strike gold. She heard Drake scream and go silent again.

Her hand landed, not on a flashlight, but on what felt like a foot. The hide felt like that of a steak that had been left on the grill too long. Meaghan screamed again and flung herself backwards, away from the horror loomed in darkness in front of her. She tried to catch herself but her hands could not get under her quickly enough. She fell. The back of her head met the concrete and was not given a warm welcome. A pinging sound rang between her ears and she thought her head would implode. A fire burned inside her skull as the pain began to build. She could feel herself going out.

“Now you'll stay.” was the last thing Megan heard.

(12:00)

As her eyes slowly opened, Meg saw the glowing hands of her watch. Both pointed straight up to the twelve. It was midnight and she was supposed to be meeting the guys at the car. She tried to move but she was tied. She tried to move her fingers and her nails dug into what felt like wood. She curled her toes and felt concrete under her feet. She blinked her eyes rapidly, trying to focus, but she was cloaked in darkness. The only light was the glow of her watch.

From the darkness, a dog began barking.

“It's okay, my precious, Pitzy. Mommy found you. You must be starving. It won't be long now.”

Meghan tried to scream but managed only a gasp.

As her eyes began to adjust to the darkness, she thought she could make out motion in front of her. Something passed right in front of her. And again, in the opposite direction. It looked like a person.

Drake? Nick? She thought.

The shadows moved, dancing in the darkness that hid them. The air around her seemed as alive as it did stale. Someone was crouching in front of her. She felt breath on the back of her neck. Someone seemed to run a finger, gently, up her bare arm. Her skin crawled and her nerves twitched as she tried to scream and couldn't. The figure in front of her was closer now, nearly in her face. The glow of the watch seemed to illuminate the face of Drake and his devilish grin.

The face faded and Nick seemed to be staring into her eyes now. Tears welled in her eyes as the constantly changing mirage moved closer and closer. She felt a dry tongue touch her cheek and softly move towards her lips. She flung her head and the figure was nose to nose with her again. This time it was

not Nick. Not Drake. It was the charred, featureless face that she had looked down on earlier. This time, its body was not strapped to a wooden chair. She was the prisoner now and fear swelled in her.

The apparition vanished.

The barking stopped.

More noises could be heard. They were coming from above her. She heard voices. Men's voices. She wanted to get their attention but she could not make a sound. It seemed the voices continued for hours before they silenced. Why doesn't someone come to the basement?

"Please. Help, me." She cried in silence.

There was light. She could see it on the walls and floor around her. It was faint at first but it began to brighten. Oranges, reds and yellows danced all around her. One color faded into the next as the darkness began to fade completely. The sun was coming up. It had to be the sun. She looked again at her watch.

(12:45)

It was too early for sunrise.

Her nostrils burned and her nose twitched as they were filled with the smell of smoke. The colors danced more feverish and fervently and the basement became an oven. The flames around her were not what her eyes saw first. As she tried in futility to scream, her eyes saw the Jack Russel.

He was only a few feet away, chewing contentedly on a piece of meat. His eyes looked up. His teeth bared. A slight snarl dared anyone to take his treat from him. Feeling secure, he went back to his morsel.

It is then that she saw the flames.

In the same instant, she felt them.

They were all around her. They came up from the floor and licked at her feet and ankles. The wooden chair ignited and the flames kissed every inch of her body. The searing heat swathed her face as her hair went up in flames. Her toes curled, and muscles tightened and her finger nails broke and bled as they dug into the smoldering wood of the chairs arms.

It felt as if thousands of knives were cutting at her. Every inch of her body screamed in agony yet she could make no sound still. Pitzzy lay on the floor, chewing away at what began to look more like a tongue with every flame that erupted around her.

She began to convulse and tremor as the flames caressed her. She saw the watch fall to the floor, still attached to her wrist. As she watched her hand twitching on the floor, she began to see the black snow

cover the ground. The dry, charred flakes of her skin floated like feathers around her as she began to crumble and wither away.

Her eyes opened and she sat up, terrified. It was not the wooden chair she felt under her but the cushioned mattress of a bed. Her heart was racing and tears filled her eyes. She looked around into total darkness and screamed for somebody . . . anybody. No flames danced on the walls but she still felt them clawing at her flesh. She could still feel the blanket of heat that she thought had engulfed her. She screamed and pounded at the bed. She jumped to the floor and, disoriented and scared, made her way clumsily around the room. She groped the walls for a light switch and reached in front of her, hoping to find a table, a door.

When she finally found a doorknob, it was locked. She tugged. Pulled. Twisted. Fumbled for a lock set. The door would not give way. She looked up and threw herself back as she was once again face to face with the tortured and featureless woman from the basement. The blackened face and eroded lips cast a grisly smile at Meg as they whispered:

“You'll never leave.”

Meg closed her eyes, jumped up and raced to where the door had been. She smacked the wall frantically and her hand found a switch. She flipped the switch up and light flooded her squinting eyes. Her eyes burned from the sudden invasion and sent pulses of pain radiating through her head. She closed them again, giving them time to adjust. As she opened them, slowly this time, they looked at a mirror.

It was her own reflection she gazed at. Hair charred and remaining only in patches. Face rendered featureless from wounds and scars. Her skin was dark and crumpled from the burns. She looked at the hideous creature in front of her and realized it was her.

She fell to the floor.

She screamed.

Someone shook her gently.

Drake, “Good morning, Sunshine, are we going to do this or are you just going to lay there dreaming about me?”

She looked out the window of the van to see a Jack Russel Terrier sauntering down the sidewalk towards the house on Oak St.

Nick, “Now remember, no matter what, we meet back at this car by midnight.”

Drake, “Why is it always midnight or noon?”