

# **BestsellerBound Short Story Anthology: Volume One**

## **A Collection of Tales by A Variety of Authors**

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## **Wish Upon A Star**

by Lainey Bancroft  
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Jordana Jones flipped the pages of the scrapbook that had been left in her dressing room. The dog-eared sheets probably represented a five year labor of love. The demented effort of some dweeb who'd spent every night whacking off to her glam shots after he discovered the pathetic appendage in his pants was good for more than aiming at a urinal or writing his name in the snow.

Her fingers brushed the worn-to-velvet publicity pictures. The thought of a pervert's digits repeatedly stroking the flesh she'd bared in the images forced a shudder from deep inside her already trembling frame. She reached for the amber bottle on the table beside her and shook out a couple pills, sifting the smooth ovals between her fingers and savoring the relief they'd bring.

The scrapbook headlines were no better than the revealing pictures. A collection of best loved clichés. Reporters considered her an overnight phenomenon with the power to rise to fame like a shooting star. She'd been credited with having 'the body of a Venus', 'the face of an angel' and 'a voice heaven-sent'.

Once, all the claims were true, but it wouldn't be long before everyone realized her greatest attribute—the one that actually mattered—was no longer a trait she had any claim to.

She hummed a few off-key notes, hoping it would drown out the voices that had come nightly for months now. Her feeble warble failed to silence the judgmental murmurs. Nothing would silence them.

*Burn out. Fade away. Burned bridges. Burn out. Fade...*

The only bridges she'd burned were ones she'd already crossed and she had no intention of burning out or fading away. She'd worked too damn hard. Jordana Jones was going to keep right on burning down the house and laying claim to fame. It was her right. She *owned* it.

Someone banged on the door. The collection of lotions, potions and cosmetics on the table in front of her rattled. Jordana jumped, the icy Southern Comfort trickling down her arm anything but comforting.

"You're on in fifteen, Jordi."

"Gimme twenty." The diva-like request would be anticipated, the grating delivery, much less expected. The change couldn't have gone unnoticed. Why hadn't anybody mentioned it?

Jordana popped the pills in her mouth and chewed. The oxy, carried by a generous slurp of Southern Comfort, travelled down her throat like shards of lead crystal. Hot. Brittle. She welcomed the sharp spike of agony; it masked the relentless ache that had been ripping her apart mentally and physically for too long.

Tears danced in her eyes, fragmenting to bright bursts like shooting stars just as the comfortable numbness settled over her. She blinked hard. The tears brimmed over and fell to trail like cold drops of rain on her burning cheeks.

Her gaze dropped to the glossy eight-by-ten that served as the scrapbook cover. Her five-years-younger self stared back at her. She could clearly recall that blue-eyed innocent lifting her face to the stars that blanketed a small-town, northern Ontario sky and singing to the heavens. Singing for her freedom. For her big break. Singing for the opportunity to show the world that she *could* sing. Was born to sing.

The stars had fragmented that night, too. Well, one had, anyway. Her special star. The one she'd wished on the night Mama went away and never came back. The individual pinpoint of brightness that had called to her through her bedroom blinds so many tear-filled nights had burst into streaks of shimmering white light that rocketed out of the sky toward her, around her, and right into her. The unearthly heat had embraced her. The raw power had empowered her.

And she hadn't even imbibed a single pill or shot of alcohol that night.

Of course, Daddy'd had plenty to drink. He'd damn near knocked her into that star-studded sky when she'd tried to explain what had happened. To tell him that the very heavens themselves had told her it was her time.

Daddy was wrong. She wasn't crazy as a shit house bat just like her Mama. The cop that came after Daddy had that unfortunate incident with the hunting riffle didn't think she was crazy,

either. Officer Hawkins had used up his entire retirement fund and then some financing recording time for her and seeing that she got the proper promotional push to rocket her onto the pop music charts.

It was too bad she'd had to tell the press he'd behaved indiscreetly, but old Hawk just got too clingy as her popularity grew. Besides, the world loved to back an underdog. Being big wasn't big enough for Jordana. She needed to be the biggest. Her status as the poor little girl who'd been done wrong fighting to make things in her life right had tipped that scale. Suddenly, she was no longer merely popular, but a media darling. A freaking legend in her own time.

There wasn't a music fan in North America—in the world—in the Universe—that didn't know her name. This, her first live tour in a year had proven that when the tickets sold out within minutes of the concert announcement.

The dressing room door rattled again. "Your fans are waiting, Jordi."

"Yeah?" Jordana struggled to her feet. A rolling gait carried her toward the door, which she punched. Her eyes registered the burst of bright red blood on her knuckles but her numb hand remained unaware of the impact. "Let 'em keep waiting. I'll be out when I'm good and ready."

Her uncooperative tongue ran the last words together so they sounded like the name of her favorite, multi-colored licorice treats. Mama had bought her a little box every Wednesday when they shopped at the local grocery.

She ran her tongue over the smoothness of her teeth, longing for the taste of sugary licorice—of love—but tasting only bitter painkiller, sour alcohol and the acrid burn of bone deep loss and loneliness.

Ignoring the pleas and continued rattling at the door, she thrust a chair beneath the single window high on the dressing room back wall. She engaged in several clumsy attempts before finally managing to climb aboard, and then blinked, fighting to focus through the two-by-two triangle of smeared glass. A sprinkling of stars dotted the night sky. To the right of the Big Dipper, in the area that had been a dark void since the episode she thought of as the night of the brightest stars, a small pulse of light glowed, growing stronger as she stared.

Her heart hammered in time to the pulsating and ever brightening light. She opened her mouth and a hoarse cry of rage drowned out the plaintive begging of her manager from the hall.

"Give it back." Spittle flew from her numb lips to splatter the already blurry pane of glass. She gripped the wood window frame to keep her balance, blood from her wounded knuckles making her hold slick and slippery against smooth pink paint. "It's mine, damn you."

*"It was never yours."*

The voice was all around her. Familiar, and yet, unfamiliar in that she'd never heard it so clearly.

"Is so mine. Was born with it." Her grip fumbled and she dug her nails in, tearing the siren red manicure to tattered, bloody nail bed. Tears welled in her eyes again and angry sobs burst from her chest. She released the windowsill to swipe moisture and mucus from her streaming face. "Born to sing."

*"And sing you did. Anyone can sing, foolish girl."*

"Not like me, they can't." The chair wobbled beneath her and she clung to slippery wood with both hands. "I was born to be a star."

*"Only a star is born to be a star, Jordana."*

"Bullshit!" Her fist flew through the glass, aimed skyward.

"Jesus, Jordana! What's going on in there? Do I have to break this door down?"

Her manager's voice sounded frantic. She giggled, picturing Bernie's bulbous nose turning purple and his well-fed jowls trembling in frustration over his inability to control his meal-ticket. That's all she'd ever been to him, a fat paycheck to fill his even fatter belly.

A sucker-punch of pain walloped Jordana. She surveyed her arm, half in and half out the window, flexed her fingers and took note of the red river of blood coursing into the crease of her elbow. Nope, her arm didn't hurt a bit. It was her heart that ached. Hot tingles travelled from her fingers and along her arm for a second before her entire body felt cold and weightless.

The single hand still clinging to the bloodied wood lost its tenuous grip. The chair tilted and her body free-floated to the worn carpet. Even with her eyes closed she could see the ever increasing pulse of light in the space that had previously been dark. "I am a star."

*"Star power is leased to those who need it. Those who deserve it."*

"Fuck that. I earned it, dammit!"

The disembodied voice ignored her. *"Sometimes the power is leased for a lifetime. Sometimes it is a brief, rental trial. We tried. You failed. Your lease is up."*

The voice was no longer all around her but right in her. She wanted to tell it to shut up but couldn't seem to find a voice of her own. No voice to sing. No voice to speak. No voice.

*"I faded away so you could shine and you burned me. You burned yourself and everyone around you, Jordana."*

*Fuck you.* The words formed in only her mind, but the voice heard her. She could tell by the stern, dismissive tone when next it spoke.

*"The official word will probably be that Jordana Jones bled out due to a tragic accident caused by drugs and alcohol. The world will never know that when fame faded away what had once been the best part of her, a hope and warmth even the stars noticed, she burned out."*

*Fade away, my ass.* Jordana's head lolled to the side as the dressing room door burst open. Her manager fell to his knees beside her, screaming for someone to call 911. Funny, she could hear his cigar and triple malt voice but couldn't smell the cloud of expensive cologne that usually enveloped him. Bernie would never let her fade away. He relied on her too much to provide him with creature comforts. Burned out. That's all she was, a little tired. She needed a few more weeks to heal the pipes, maybe kick the pills. Bernie would arrange it. He'd do anything for her. She'd ask later, when she wasn't so tired.

Closing her eyes, she let the darkness and insulating comfort of the pills lift her away from the sudden chaos of her dressing room. Warm air cloaked her and she shifted, weightlessly left the commotion beneath her and floated into a wonderful, velvet blackness. Damn, but what a fine prescription. Possibly the best she'd ever had.

Jordana spread her arms and flew through the shattered window. In the midnight sky, just to the right of the Big Dipper, a brilliant star twinkled. A sob rose in her throat as she soared closer and saw that the star winked down on a poverty-stricken cabin in Nashville where a young woman with the face of an angel and a voice heaven sent sang softly to a tiny baby girl.

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### **About the author:**

Lainey Bancroft resides in the wine regions of Ontario enduring too much snow or too much humidity, depending on the season. She is surrounded by too many pets and too many teenagers, forcing her to sometimes indulge in too much lovely, regional wine. The many excesses help fuel Lainey's too active imagination and keep her fingers flying across the keyboard creating tales of

romance and speculative fiction in various lengths. Unfortunately, she's never been in a situation where she had too much time to write.

Discover more about Lainey and her award winning, Reviewer's Choice romance stories at <http://www.elaineforlife.com>

###

## Tears for Hesh

by J. Michael Radcliffe  
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Hesh wandered about the potions shop aimlessly, unable to find the rare ingredient his master needed. He grew more frustrated by the minute, for his master had been very specific in his request. He had ordered Hesh to rush out and acquire one phial of firedrake tears, as quickly as possible. Almost indistinguishable from salamander tears, the tears from a firedrake were much more valuable and exceedingly rare, since they could only be gathered from a fully grown adult of the species. This was a dangerous task under the best of circumstances, since adult firedrakes – a distant relative of the phoenix – could only be found in the calderas of active volcanoes, where they built their nests.

Although Deadwood & Blight's was one of the most reputable shops in town with an enormous selection, they just didn't seem to have it. Hesh stumbled slightly as he tried to squeeze past a plump little wizard carrying a basket overflowing with ingredients. The cramped, narrow aisles of the shop made his task that much more difficult and at almost seven feet tall, he towered over all of the other patrons. Muttering to himself as he went, he scoured the shelves looking for the ingredient.

*I will not fail the Master! He's kept me on all these years when no one else would have me. I know he could have smarter and quicker assistants than the likes of me, but I'm strong and loyal, I am! Ha – I'd like to see any of those skinny little wizards carry a cauldron in each hand like I do! I just wish I didn't stammer so; the Master said he'd fix my tongue one day with his magic. Like he said, how can I work for the most important wizard in the city if I sound like a dolt?*

He shuffled down another aisle for at least the third time, bumping into a stack of cauldrons at the end of the row and sending several of them rolling noisily across the stone floor.

"Oi! You there!" shouted Jerrick, one of the clerks. "Mind where you're going or you'll be paying damages!"

"S-S-Sorry..." Hesh stammered apologetically.

*What's wrong with Jerrick? He's never snapped at me like that before; normally he's so understanding, even when I can't get my words out.*

Hesh backed out of the way as Jerrick tried to retrieve the errant cauldrons. The shop was nearly bursting at the seams with customers seeking to restock their supplies in preparation for the annual potions competition next week.

“I’m... I’m trying to find f-f-firedrake t-t-tears,” he stuttered.

Jerrick stopped restacking the cauldrons and glared at Hesh.

“Are you *insane*? Do you have any idea how unstable those are?”

“Unstable?” Hesh’s eyebrows shot upward in surprise. His master hadn’t mentioned anything about the ingredient being unstable. He had just ordered Hesh to find them immediately and at any price.

“Yes, unstable! If you shake the container too hard or gods forbid drop them, they will combust, destroying everything within fifty feet. That’s why they are on the restricted list!”

Hesh fumbled with his bag of coins and shuffled his feet, looking around to see if anyone was near enough to hear what he was about to say.

“Look, Jerrick, you’ve got to help me. I was ordered to f-f-find them immediately. It’ll mean m-m-my head if I come back empty handed! Master won’t be happy, not happy at all!”

Jerrick just sighed as he finished stacking the cauldrons back into a neat pyramid display.

“Look Hesh, I’m sorry, okay? But trafficking in black market ingredients is just too dangerous. Besides, if your master needs them so badly, then why doesn’t he have a signed order approved by the Council Apothecary?”

“Shh! N-n-not so loud! Master said he doesn’t have t-t-time for such f-f-foolishness.” Hesh glanced around again to make certain no one had heard Jerrick.

“That isn’t right, Hesh. Do you know what they would do to you if you were caught with firedrake tears without a permit? You’d be indentured to the Council for at least ten years and forced to spend twenty-three hours every day as your animal form, whatever that might be.”

Unfortunately Hesh knew exactly what his animal form would be – a large panda bear. Unknown to Jerrick or anyone else, Hesh’s master, a member of the Council, had one day turned Hesh into his animal form for amusement. Hesh hated his animal form – the fur was hot and he scratched for hours after returning to his human self.

“But Jerrick, I don’t have a choice!” he pleaded. “L-l-look, I’ll give you t-t-ten gold crowns if you get me the stuff.”

Jerrick raised his eyebrows. “He must really want those tears,” he said, obviously surprised by such an offer. “That much coin would pay my wages for nearly six months!”

“Please, Jerrick! I must not f-f-fail the M-m-master! I m-m-mustn’t!”

“Look, why is this so important to him? What does he need those tears for, anyway?”

Hesh shook his head, and then brushed his long brown hair out of his eyes. “Dunno. All I know is he wants them, and he wants them now.”

“Alright, fine – I’ll get them for you, but keep your money. Your master doesn’t deserve you, Hesh; he’s obviously a cruel beast judging by that scar he gave you the last time we were out of ingredients he wanted.”

Hesh shuffled his feet as his hand automatically went to his cheek, feeling the scar where his master had hit him with a lash. Master had been very angry that day indeed.

Jerrick rapped his knuckle three times in an offbeat sequence on the stone wall of the shop and vanished into a dark opening that appeared. He reemerged a few minutes later with a small brown parcel cradled gently in his hands. Carefully he handed the small box to Hesh, who looked at it with interest.

“Now listen, Hesh,” said Jerrick sternly in a whispered voice, “you **MUST** make certain you don’t shake or drop this box! Even though I’ve packed it carefully and placed a cushioning spell on it, it is still very, very dangerous!”

Hesh nodded and very gently placed the parcel into the pouch on his belt, steadying it with his hand for good measure.

“Thank you, Jerrick. You’ve always been so k-k-kind to me. Maybe someday I can repay your kindness.”

Jerrick smiled. “Go on then, you big oaf. Back to your master before he sends a seeker after you.”

Hesh thanked Jerrick again and quietly left the shop by way of a side door. He would have to hurry or his master would be furious. He quietly latched the side door and hurried down the busy street towards his master’s chambers.

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Hesh continued to trot down the alleyways towards his master’s chambers, although he was careful not to jostle the priceless package he carried. He was still a number of blocks away when the soles of his feet suddenly tingled with an intense burning sensation. He broke into a trot, knowing Master must have cast the **summons**. As he rounded the corner at a brisk run he could almost hear Master’s voice warning him not to be late.

*“You tarry too long and I will not hesitate to cast a **summons**! It’s a lovely little hex I’ve found in that book you retrieved for me just last week – you remember, the Tome of Hefestus Blackstone? He was a black-hearted tyrant of a wizard. The spiteful old codger was famous for the abuse heaped upon his unfortunate apprentices, especially if they failed to arrive at an appointed time. One day, having been kept waiting for just over two minutes by an assistant who had slipped and fallen down a flight of stairs, Blackstone devised the **summons**. It begins as a tingling sensation in your feet and gradually increases in severity until it feels as if you are standing upon a bed of hot coals. Nothing will stop the burning sensation except for appearing in front of the spellcaster who placed the hex on you. If something prevents you from reaching the caller, the level of pain will eventually overload your central nervous system, causing first unconsciousness and eventually, death. You understand this, my slow-witted assistant?”*

The burning sensation in his feet was rising up past his ankles now, spurring him into a dead run towards his master’s home. The wizard had used the spell on him twice before and Hesh knew he had precious few minutes to go the last few blocks before blisters started erupting on his feet. The pain had just reached the level of a blowtorch when Hesh burst through the door of his master’s study. He collapsed in a heap on the cold hardwood floor and tore off his leather boots, tears streaming down his face as he fanned the burning soles of his feet. His master remained seated at the oversized ebony desk near the fireplace, with his back towards Hesh as he gazed into the embers of the dying fire.

“You’re *late*!” snapped Hesh’s master.

Hesh winced at the tone of the wizard’s voice and stared at the floor; at least his feet had stopped burning. “I’m... I’m... s-s-s-sorry, m-m-master,” he stammered awkwardly.

“*Sorry? Sorry??* Well I guess that must make everything alright, then, doesn’t it?” his master hissed through clenched teeth.

Rising from the chair by the fire, Hesh’s master towered over him and Hesh flinched at the thought of what his master might be contemplating.

“M-m-master, I b-b-beg of you, p-p-please! It was d-d-difficult to f-f-find!” Hesh groveled on his hands and knees, unable to meet his master’s gaze. The last time his master had been so angry, he had forced Hesh to spend the next seven days in his animal form of a giant panda.

“Of course it was difficult to find, you dolt! Firedrake tears are rare to begin with, not to mention the fact they are highly regulated!” scolded the wizard. “Well? Where are they?”

The wizard thrust his hand out, the sudden movement causing Hesh to flinch yet again. He scrambled to undo his purse strings as gently as possible, careful not to jostle the delicate parcel within. Hesh wasn't sure which was more terrifying, his master's wrath or the thought of blowing himself to kingdom come if he dropped the package. He gently placed the parcel in his master's outstretched palm, his hands shaking as he released it.

“About bloody time, you idiot! These have to be delivered within the hour, else my plan won't work!” the wizard snapped.

His master turned and stormed angrily over to the desk, dark robes billowing out behind him. Snatching up a quill, he dashed off a short note and then folded the parchment into a small triangular shape. He attached the folded parchment to the parcel and then muttered a brief incantation as he ran his index finger along each edge of the parcel. The package shimmered slightly as the spell took effect and the wizard actually smiled as he rubbed his hands together in anticipation. Hesh had never seen his master smile before; the expression of near glee on the old man's face was frightening. The wizard placed the parcel on the small silver tray located on the edge of the desk. The tray was the preferred method for sending messages back and forth to other members of the Council, as the item was transported immediately and under the security of numerous wards designed to prevent theft or spying. After muttering a brief incantation, the wizard clearly spoke the name “Tobias Follett” and the package vanished with a slight popping sound and a puff of silvery smoke.

“Now then,” said the wizard with a smile as he turned to face Hesh. “My plan is finally set in motion. You understand what I am doing, yes?”

Puzzled, Hesh studied the wizard for a moment. He knew the extremely volatile nature of firedrake tears and he had clearly heard his master lacing the package with a spell of detonation. Sudden fear crept into Hesh's eyes, betraying the cold spike of dread that had just coursed through his body. His master had just sent the package to Tobias Follett, the wizard who had just been elected Chancellor of the High Council. Unless someone warned him, he would be blasted into dust when he opened the package, and the Chancellor's position would again be vacant. Hesh knew his master lusted after power, but he never dreamed the old man would stoop to murder!

“M-m-m-master,” stammered Hesh as he struggled with what he should do.

The old wizard actually smiled at him; a wicked smile that cut Hesh to the very bone. “Yes? You think I've gone too far, perhaps? It would be a pity if anyone tried to interfere, after all of the work I've done. You've no idea how difficult it was to plan just the right... accident... yes, I believe that term will be used.”

“M-m-m-master, I p-p-promise! I w-w-won't t-t-tell!” Hesh pleaded.

“Oh, I believe you, my faithful Hesh. You will never tell a soul,” said the wizard, his voice trailing off to a hiss.

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Jerrick was just putting away the last of the boxes, preparing to lock up the shop for the night, when he noticed a small leather pouch hidden at the base of one of the cauldrons that had been knocked over earlier in the day. Scooping up the pouch he opened it and examined the contents. The purse obviously belonged to an apprentice or assistant to a wizard, as it contained only a few

coins and a silver talisman. Jerrick took the silver talisman and turned it over in his hand and noticed it was embellished with a large capital letter “H.” He shook his head and placed the token back in the purse. Hesh must have dropped the purse when he had knocked over the cauldrons earlier in the afternoon.

*Hesh must not have noticed it was missing when he tried to pay me, since all of the gold was in his master’s purse. I’ll return it to him on my way home; their chambers are not far from here anyway.*

Jerrick finished tidying up the shop and snapped his fingers, extinguishing the werelights floating around the edge of the ceiling. With one final look to see that all was in order, he closed the shop door and muttered the incantation to seal the lock and place wards around the door that would hex any intruders. His employers had been in the potions business for hundreds of years and knew the value of their inventory. Pocketing Hesh’s small coin purse, he took off at a brisk pace towards home – drawing his robes closer about him in an effort to keep out the chill evening breeze. A few blocks from the shop he came to the chambers of Hesh’s master, not far from the tower that housed the Council and offices of the Chancellor. One look at the building told of the wealth and power at the wizard’s command as a respected member of the High Council. Jerrick had never dealt directly with Hesh’s master before, as the wizard always sent his assistant to purchase ingredients for his spells and experiments. He knew however, of the fear in Hesh’s eyes when a mistake had been made that would anger his master.

Jerrick stepped up to the massive oaken door and pulled the bell-chain, shivering slightly against the cold in the process. The door opened silently and a small red wisp floated before Jerrick, pulsing slightly with light at its center. Somewhat surprised at such an important wizard using a common house-wisp to answer the door, Jerrick stepped forward and addressed the softly glowing orb.

“Jerrick, of Deadwood & Blight’s to see Hesh, please.”

The orb flickered slightly but did not move.

“Um. Is the master of the house at home?” Jerrick asked in a somewhat hesitant voice.

At this, the little wisp flickered more brightly and moved aside. Jerrick stepped through the doorway and paused while his eyes adjusted to the dim light. After closing the door, the little red wisp floated slowly down the hallway, pausing briefly for Jerrick to catch up to it. It led him to a large chamber with an enormous stone fireplace at one end, a low fire flickering in the hearth. Hesh’s master was sitting in a large leather chair near the fire, reading through an ancient tome and making notations in the margins with a black quill. Jerrick’s boots echoed as he crossed the chamber, the hardwood floors polished to a mirrored finish.

“Pardon me, are you Hesh’s master?”

The wizard didn’t bother looking up but kept jotting notes with his quill.

“Perhaps; who are you and what business have you with him?” snapped the old man, busily scratching away in the book.

“My name is Jerrick, sir, of Deadwood & Blights. Hesh was in our shop earlier this afternoon, and I’m afraid he dropped his coin purse. I’ve come to return it.”

The wizard sighed deeply and stopped his scribbling, placing the quill and book on the low table beside him.

“The bumbling fool would lose his head if it weren’t attached! I’m afraid he will no longer be running my errands, but I will see to it his purse is taken care of,” snapped the wizard as he held out a bony hand. Jerrick was shocked at the cold tone of the wizard’s voice, but knew better

than to ask questions of a Council member. He dropped the purse into the wizard's outstretched hand, flinching slightly as it was snatched away.

"Here," said the old man as he flipped a gold coin to Jerrick. "This should cover the trouble that idiot caused you. Now if you don't mind, you can show yourself out; I have work to do." Picking up his book, the old man resumed scribbling with the quill. "And mind you don't tread on the rug! It's new and I don't wish it soiled!" snapped the wizard as he jerked his chin in the general direction of the entrance hall.

Jerrick quickly stepped back and returned towards the front door, careful to avoid stepping on the large bear skin rug spread across the hardwood floor. Although he had not noticed it when he entered, it must have cost at least three bagfuls of gold he thought, since it was made from the largest panda bear he had ever seen. As he closed the heavy front door behind him and headed into the darkness of the street, he whispered a small prayer to the Ancients for Hesh, hoping the best for the gentle giant.

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### **About the author:**

An avid reader of fantasy and science fiction novels all of my life, I live with my family in the rural hills of Kentucky along with our four cats. When not acquiring ferocious felines for my wife's plan of world domination (cat armies are terribly hard to train), I enjoy spinning stories from the wisps of magic around me.

You can learn more about J. Michael Radcliffe and his work on his website:

<http://www.theguardiansapprentice.com>

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## **You Can Call Me Ari**

by Darcia Helle

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Lorraine stepped into the waiting room. Surprisingly, she found herself alone. That was certainly a first. Every doctor's office she'd ever been in had an overflow of patients, sitting in uncomfortable chairs with long outdated magazines and irritating music for company. Maybe chiropractors were different and didn't load their patients in like herds of cattle.

She walked over to the reception desk but found it, too, was empty. Had she gotten her appointment wrong? Lorraine checked her watch. Nearly two o'clock. Odd that the place would be deserted in the middle of the afternoon.

She'd never been to a chiropractor before. The idea of having her bones cracked and moved around didn't sound the least bit appealing. But it had been six weeks since the car accident and the pain in her neck and back still kept her up nights. Betty, her best friend, had convinced her to

give Dr. Grant a chance. Now, here she was, standing alone in an office that appeared abandoned. This could be a sign for her to turn around and go right back home.

For a moment, Lorraine considered listening to that little voice telling her to flee the scene. Then she turned and a horrible twinge raced up her spine. She let out an involuntary gasp. Damn that hurt! With a resigned sigh, she moved gingerly toward one of the chairs.

Just as she was about to lower herself onto a seat, the door leading to the exam rooms popped open. A man, presumably Dr. Grant, smiled at her. He stood about 5'10", had dark hair and wide-set, dark eyes. He wore tan chinos and a bold-striped, short-sleeved dress shirt. No white lab coat proclaimed him to be doctor or mad scientist.

"Lorraine?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"I'm Dr. Grant. You can come on back."

Nervous butterflies fluttered in Lorraine's stomach. As she followed the doctor into the hall, she said, "It's very quiet in here."

"Yes," Dr. Grant replied. "That awful flu going around seems to have struck many of my patients. Even James, my office manager, is out sick today."

"Oh, that's too bad. I've been lucky to avoid it so far."

Dr. Grant stepped aside and motioned Lorraine into a room. "Right in here," he said.

Lorraine's eyes were immediately drawn to the contraption in the center of the room. Logic told her it was the exam and treatment table, though her overly active imagination saw it as a torture table. She'd been reading far too many thrillers since her retirement.

"You're having neck and back pain?" Dr. Grant asked.

"Yes, since I was rear-ended in an accident six weeks ago," Lorraine said. "We weren't going fast but the jolt must have been harder than I first thought. The pain keeps me up nights and I'm having trouble getting around during the day."

Dr. Grant smiled and nodded. He had an eager smile, almost like a child on Christmas morning. Lorraine looked away, unsettled by the enthusiasm.

"Go ahead and lie face down on the table," Dr. Grant said, "and we'll get started."

Lorraine hesitated. She'd expected to sit in one of the nice leather chairs first. She hadn't given this doctor any of her history. Didn't he need to know the details of her accident and where her pain was? She stood in the awkward silence, with Dr. Grant's happy brown eyes fixed on her, and suddenly felt silly. She couldn't compare this visit to a typical doctor visit. He was the chiropractor. Of course he knew what he was doing.

The table had three sections. The top was narrow with a slit between the padding. Lorraine assumed that was for her nose, so she'd be able to breathe. She climbed on, grimacing at the pain as she maneuvered her body into the correct spots.

"Comfy?" Dr. Grant asked.

"I suppose," Lorraine said. The words came out slightly garbled, as she did her best to speak with her face crushed into the leather padding.

A motor whirred beneath her as the table lifted. Dr. Grant ran his hand over her spine, pressing firmly in various spots. Lorraine flinched when he came to the worst. "Ahh," said Dr. Grant. "I see we've found a sensitive area."

Lorraine opened her mouth to respond but the words were sucked from her as Dr. Grant did something with the center piece of the table and the heel of his palm. The table jerked up and into her belly, while he forced her down and held her there. She gasped, then moaned. "Oh, stop!" she cried. "That's hurts!"

"Does it now?" he said.

A moment passed, then the table jerked back to its normal position and his hand left her spine. Lorraine bit her lip to keep from crying. This had been the worst idea ever. Why had she listened to Betty? As soon as the pain eased, she was going to leave this office and never come back. She might even sue the man for torturing her this way!

She was about to lift her head, to tell Dr. Grant to lower the table so she could get off without hurting herself even further, when she felt something clamp against the back of her neck. Before her mind could grasp what was happening, the clamp continued around the front of her neck and snapped in place. He had pinned her neck to the table!

"What are you doing?" she shouted into the padding. "Take this off of me. I don't want any further treatments."

Dr. Grant chuckled. The sound sent a chill down Lorraine's aching spine. "Relax," he said. "Anxiety will only intensify the pain."

"I said I want you to stop!"

"I heard you. And I politely decline."

Something slipped around her right wrist and soon her arm was tightly strapped to the armrest beneath the table. She lifted her left arm, flailing it uselessly in the air. Dr. Grant's firm grasp easily caught hold and secured that wrist to the opposite armrest.

Tears burned Lorraine's eyes. This couldn't be happening. What kind of doctor strapped his patients unwillingly to a table?

His hands moved almost lovingly over her spine. "Has the pain subsided?" he asked.

"I want to get up now." Her words were a plea, rather than a command. She cleared her throat, tried again. "You need to let me off this table now."

That chuckle again, as his hands traveled up to the back of her neck. "I might have stretched the truth earlier," he said. "Perhaps even told an outright lie."

Lorraine sucked on her lip in an attempt to staunch the tears. Her nose ran onto the white paper that lined the padded table. She didn't want to hear him say what he'd lied about. By now, she'd figured it out. Hearing the words would make it too real.

The pressure on her neck increased. He kneaded a spot as he spoke. "My name is not Dr. Grant." He chuckled and pressed harder. "In fact, I am not a doctor at all. Shame on me, I know. Sometimes I simply can't help myself."

His hand left her. She gasped, sucking in air that refused to fill her lungs. A moment later, she felt something hard against her spine. "My name," the man said, "is Arian Hatch. You can call me Ari."

The object at her back came to life, slamming her against the table with a series of intense jolts. The sound was like a jackhammer. Or one of those rapid fire guns in the old war movies. The padded leather muffled her screams. A spasm rippled through her body, setting fire to her nerves.

The sound finally stopped and whatever tool he'd been using pulled away. Again, his fingers glided over her spine in much the way a man would touch his lover. "I'm sorry to tell you," Ari said, "that Dr. Grant is dead. I killed him earlier this morning. He deserved it, you see. He'd been giving me adjustments to ease my headaches. I get these blinding migraines from time to time. Horrible. Truly. He'd sworn he could help me. Sadly, the man's career was built on lies and broken promises. I gained no relief. When I confronted him with this, he attempted to excuse his incompetence by claiming that he'd never promised relief. Some patients, he told me, cannot be helped with his methods. He tried and, so he said, was sorry that I'd experienced no benefits."

Ari walked around to the other side of the table. His hand smoothed her hair down and he sighed. "Dr. Grant's blatant attempt to deflect his inadequacies by placing the blame on my own inability to heal could not go unpunished. I easily restrained and held him right here, on his own table, for a little taste of his own snake-oil medicine. Initially, I had not intended to kill him. You see, I'm normally much more discriminative in these situations. I don't kill randomly."

That creepy chuckle filled the room. Ari's hand moved down Lorraine's spine as he continued speaking. "I must admit that I lost control. That seldom happens, mind you. But, goodness, talk about a chamber of horrors! This is an ideal setup. I kept him here for three amazing hours. By that time, the final snap of his neck became a mercy killing. Sadly anticlimactic."

Lorraine sucked in as much air as her lungs could handle, then let out the longest wail she could manage. Much of the sound got trapped by the thick padded leather. She sobbed and rattled her arms against the restraints.

Ari bent forward. His breath became a soft breeze in her hair. "No one will hear you," he murmured. "Trust me on that. Now, I hate to be rude but please excuse me a moment."

Lorraine felt, more than heard, him leave the room. She couldn't move her head at all, could see nothing. Her back ached so badly that even lifting her leg an inch off the table sent her nerves into a spasm. The insanity of the situation left her mind spinning. She was trapped by a madman, all because the doctor she'd sought help from hadn't been able to cure migraines.

Someone would come and save her. This was, after all, a doctor's office. Other patients had appointments. Regular patients. They would know that this man, Arian Hatch, was not Dr. Grant. Someone would alert the authorities. Lorraine clung to that belief as the pain in her spine radiated into her legs.

Minutes passed. Lorraine thought she heard voices coming from the waiting room. A surge of hope gave her a brief burst of energy. She kicked against the table and screamed into the padding. Someone would hear her. Someone would save her from this lunatic.

A moment later, Ari chuckled from the doorway. "You're feistier than I expected," he said. "No one is coming to save you, Lorraine. I've placed a sign on the door and locked it tight. You'd be wise to stop struggling. For your own good, mind you. The struggle only intensifies the pain."

He touched her spine and his next words were a mere whisper. "And it excites me."

In the next instant, the table jerked up and into her ribs and he slammed a hard object against the middle of her spine. He forced an enormous amount of pressure, twisted her back, not easing up until something snapped. White hot pain stole her breath, the intensity worse than anything she could have imagined. She couldn't move, couldn't even scream. Tears streamed from her eyes, caught in the white paper and leather padding. Her nose ran. She tasted tears and snot as she fought to pull air in through her mouth.

Lorraine had no idea how much time passed. She gasped and cried until nothing was left inside her. Ari hadn't touched her, hadn't spoken, for what felt like hours. She prayed that he was gone, had gotten his perverse pleasure and had no intention of killing her.

But he'd told her his name.

She bit her trembling lip, sucked in another ragged breath. Then she waited, listening. She heard nothing at all. Just as she grasped that sliver of hope that he'd really gone and would not return, a rustling from the corner of the room told her otherwise. He'd been there all along. Listening. Watching.

"I killed James," Ari said. "The office manager. I don't suppose you knew him, since you are a new patient. I took no pleasure in that killing. You see, James was what one might call

collateral damage. He brought me into this room and he would soon bring other patients to the other rooms. I couldn't allow that. I wanted Dr. Grant to myself and needed our time to be free of interruptions. So, yes, James had to be disposed of. Once I had Dr. Grant properly secured, I took care of James. A quick snap of the neck. Disappointing, really. I then locked the front door, ensuring the privacy I required."

Ari stepped close again, his hand traveling like a feather over Lorraine's spine. "My intention, dear Lorraine, was to leave once I'd finished with Dr. Grant. I'd exceeded my own expectations of the day already. Oh, but killing Dr. Grant had left me both ecstatic and deflated. Ending playtime is always somewhat of a disappointment, no matter how much fun one has during the activities. As I was preparing to leave, I glanced at Dr. Grant's appointments for the day. He died at 1:38, in the midst of his scheduled lunch break. You were his first appointment of the afternoon. A new patient, for which he'd marked off an entire thirty minutes. Given that you were new, I took a chance in assuming that you would not know what Dr. Grant looked like. I do hope that you'll forgive my little deception."

Lorraine gagged as acidic vomit rose into her throat. "Please," she said. "I've done nothing to you. Please. Let me go."

Ari found that funny, chuckling heartily. "Ah, but Lorraine, don't you see? Dr. Grant was my main course. You are my dessert."

Lorraine felt herself deflate. That last shred of hope she'd been clinging to slipped away. His hands touched her spine. Time stopped. The things he did to her brought her close to insanity. She prayed for death, begged for it when able. At one point, she lost consciousness. She could have been out for a minute or a day. She had no way of judging and no longer cared. When awareness trickled its way back to her, she only felt sadness in finding herself alive.

Her legs were numb, as if they didn't exist. The pain in her back was white hot, searing. She suddenly realized that she could not feel the paper and padding against her face. She opened her eyes and the ceiling swam into focus. Bright lights. Someone singing. Was that an angel? Was she dead?

Then Ari's face swam into her vision. He grinned at her. "Welcome back," he said. "I was beginning to wonder if you'd vacated permanently."

Lorraine pushed her eyes closed, refusing to look at the devil who wanted to steal her soul. She wouldn't let him have it. That was all she had left and she intended to keep it with her until the end.

"I must go now," Ari said. "It's getting late and I'm expected elsewhere." His hands caressed her throat. "But I couldn't leave without saying goodbye. That would be rude, don't you think?"

A feathery touch floated over her cheek. "You've been a wonderful playmate, Lorraine," Ari said. "Don't you want to say goodbye?"

Lorraine kept her eyes tightly shut. She didn't attempt to speak, wasn't even sure she was able. Regardless, she wouldn't give this madman the satisfaction. She hung on to her soul, keeping it close, not allowing him so much as a glimpse inside.

Ari waited. She knew what he wanted. Her soul. He wanted to own her, every piece of her.

"Lorraine," Ari whispered. "Sweet Lorraine. Do you not wish to look at me?"

She didn't answer, didn't open her eyes.

His breath was against her ear. "Remember I told you that I don't kill randomly? I meant that, my dear. I will not kill you today, though you might wish that I had. I want you to remember me always. My name is Arian Hatch. But you can call me Ari."

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### About the Author:

Darcia Helle writes because the characters trespassing through her mind leave her no alternative. When she gives life to their stories, they live happily within the pages and stop chattering in her head. To date, she has published six novels and three short stories.

You can learn more about Darcia and her writing on her website:  
<http://www.QuietFuryBooks.com> or <http://www.DarciaHelle.com>

###

## Flames

by Maria Savva  
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*She's pretty*, thought Robert, looking at the girl who had just sat next to him on the park bench. *Looks a bit like a young Cindy Crawford*. She had originally sat quite close to him, but was now shuffling along to the other end of the bench. Blushing, Robert realised that he'd been staring. Averting his eyes, he pretended to read the novel he held in his hand, whilst thinking what a beautiful shade of green her eyes were and how her emerald earrings complemented them.

When he felt brave enough to look at her again, he saw that she was sitting at the far edge of the bench, almost sideways, as if to avoid his gaze. He couldn't blame her, after all it was a big city; for all she knew, he could be a mass murderer. Then, he became concerned that perhaps she'd moved away from him because he was suffering from a body odour problem that no one had told him about. *I'm sure I used my antiperspirant this morning*. As much as he wanted to have a sniff of his armpits, just to check, he felt too self-conscious. Shrugging, he carried on eating his sandwich.

Robert had just started working for a new company and hadn't been out in this part of town before, so he was now secretly hoping that this girl would be someone he'd see every day. *Perhaps she works close by. Maybe we'll bump into each other every lunchtime and become friends, and then...* He was getting carried away with his dreams as he stared blankly at his novel whilst finishing off his sandwich. He stole a glance at her again, from the corner of his eye, and noticed that she was fiddling with one of her earrings. *What should I say?* he thought, desperate to talk to her; but he couldn't think of anything to initiate a conversation. *And anyway*, he reasoned, *she probably wouldn't want to talk to me, judging by the way she's moved to the other end of the bench*.

Feeling the need to look at her again, but not wanting to make it obvious, Robert twisted around to face her and held up his book in front of him. Now, he was able to watch her from behind the pages. *I wonder what her name is? She must have a beautiful name, something to suit her face... Elizabeth, perhaps, or Angela... No, something unusual like... Eloise, or... Amelia*. Her perfume fragranced the air around him, a floral, feminine scent, that captivated his senses.

When she'd finished her sandwich, she reached into her handbag. As she did so, their eyes met, snapping Robert out of his daydream. He saw that his book was now on his lap, and realised that he'd been staring at her again. Looking at his watch—a universal embarrassment cover-up—he felt the colour rise in his cheeks. She'd smiled at him, and he was finding it hard to meet her eyes.

He took a deep breath, and once he'd recovered his composure, he saw that the girl was facing away from him. *How am I supposed to talk to her now?* he thought. The small window of opportunity that had been offered to him was now closed. It seemed so unfair. Back at square one, he could do nothing but stare at her long brown hair falling in soft curls over the back of her cream-coloured blouse. The sun caught a few golden highlights in her hair and he imagined running his fingers through it. Aware he was almost gawping, he withdrew his gaze and watched people rushing through the park, noticing it was very noisy. In wonder, he recollected that while he'd been staring at the mysterious girl who sat beside him, he'd hardly known that there was anything else going on around them.

Just then, her mobile phone began to ring, rousing him from his awestruck thoughts. She didn't have a silly ring tone on her phone, Robert noticed, just a traditional ringing sound. Then he remembered his own *Star Trek* ring-tone and, feeling embarrassed, prayed his phone wouldn't ring. He thought about switching it off.

'Hi,' she said, and for a moment he dared to dream that she was talking to him, but when he turned towards her, he saw her holding the phone to her ear. She appeared more relaxed as she spoke on the phone, and sat back on the bench, so now he was able to see one side of her face. *Oh, what a perfect profile,* he thought. *Like an angel.*

She laughed, and an unwelcome thought struck Robert: perhaps she was talking to her boyfriend, or husband. An irrational jealousy took over his mind. He had never believed in love at first sight, and had laughed at his sister just the other night when she'd told him how much she'd enjoyed the movie, *While You Were Sleeping*. He remembered telling her, in no uncertain terms, that if she believed all those romantic comedies she watched she would end up very lonely and disappointed. His feelings were now completely alien to him.

The girl on the bench laughed and flicked her hair back from her face, then continued speaking on the phone. He couldn't make out what she was saying, and longed to be able to hear her voice without the sounds of traffic, voices, and general city noise that was drowning it out. Tempted to move closer to her on the bench, he thought better of it; she already seemed a bit nervous of him.

In a few minutes, she stood up, brushing off a bread crumb from her pink skirt, and picking up her handbag. Her eyes met his briefly and he wondered whether she also felt something; an unexplained connection. But then she walked away, disappearing into the crowd, gone as quickly as she had arrived.

Robert watched her leave, unable to stop her, wanting to follow her. He looked at the bench where she'd been sitting—an empty space. *Why didn't I say something to her?* Her perfume still lingered in the air around him. He breathed in deeply and recalled how she'd smiled at him. Regret tugged at his heart.

Looking back at the far edge of the bench, his soul screaming for her to reappear for just an instant so he could talk to her, he noticed something small and shiny where she'd been sitting. It glimmered in the sunlight as he moved closer. His mouth fell open in wonder when he saw it was one of her emerald earrings that so matched her eyes. He reached to pick it up, excitement coursing through his being; now, he would have an excuse to talk to her. Gathering his

belongings from the bench, he began to walk briskly in the direction she had been headed. *She'll be easy to spot*, he thought, *long brown hair, pink skirt—she can't have got very far.*

He moved quickly through the lunchtime crowd, bumping into a couple of people along the way. After a few minutes he came to a crossroads and stopped walking. It became clear that he would not catch up with her. She'd probably turned a corner somewhere. Sighing, he realised the futility of his search among the hoards of city dwellers going about their busy lives like swarms of bees.

Robert returned to the bench at lunchtime the next day, and the next day, and the day after that, always taking the earring with him; hopeful. *She will return*, he told himself. She never did.

The earring became a symbol of this woman, a kind of charm that he carried around with him everywhere. When he looked at it, he remembered her face, the golden highlights in her hair, her perfume, the green of her eyes, the way her skirt hugged her hips, the sound of her laugh, and the way she had smiled at him.

Two years later, Robert lost the earring. He used to carry it around in his wallet. One day, as he was taking out a ten pound note, the earring slipped out onto the ground, unseen by Robert. He was at a music festival with a girl he had been dating for a couple of months. They were queuing at a food stall. The ground was soggy from rain, a mush of grass and soil. The earring made no sound as it fell. Robert and his girlfriend, Sally, walked away from the food stall carrying their fish and chips. Sally stepped on the earring with her wellington boot, lodging it firmly into the ground; following her were a few other festival goers, so the earring became completely buried in the soil.

Later that evening, Robert was about to place his wallet under his pillow for safekeeping.

'How much cash do we have left?' asked Sally.

'Um,' Robert opened the wallet and began to finger through the notes, 'ten, twenty—' then he stopped, his mouth wide open.

'What's wrong?' Sally looked at him. Even in the half darkness of the tent, she could see his face had fallen; he appeared distraught. 'Have we been robbed?'

'I've lost—' he stopped, thinking better of it. How could he say "I've lost an earring"? It would sound absurd. Then he had a flash of inspiration: 'I've lost an earring that my nan gave me on her deathbed. I used to carry it with me everywhere; it reminded me of her.' The words '*reminded me of her*' resounded in his head as he recalled long brown hair falling in curls down the back of the girl of his dreams, as she walked away from him two years before.

'An earring?' Sally screwed up her face. 'Why just one? They come in pairs. It seems odd. Was your nan only wearing one earring?' Sally smiled as she lifted her bottle of beer to her mouth to take a sip. But then, noticing that Robert didn't return her smile, she said: 'Sorry, I didn't mean to sound insensitive... It's just, well, I have this image now of your nan only wearing one earring.' She stifled a giggle.

Robert was in no mood for jokes. He felt numb. He had lost his one remaining connection to the girl who had stolen his heart. Until this moment, he never realised how much the earring meant to him. It had been a way of keeping the door open for his soul mate to return to his life, a way of keeping the flame alive.

Without thinking about it, he stood up. 'I'm going to look for it,' he said, gruffly.

‘But... it’s dark. Anyway, how do you know you lost it here? When did you last see it?’ Sally frowned.

‘This morning,’ he replied. ‘It was in my wallet this morning.’

‘It’s too dark to look for it now, wait until tomorrow and I’ll help you look for it,’ said Sally.

‘I’ve got a torch,’ he said.

Robert spent two hours retracing his steps around the park, shining the torch on the ground, all the while knowing that his search was in vain; but he had to try. To give up would be like letting go. He felt like a fool when he thought of the many broken relationships he’d had in the past couple of years all because none of the girls he dated could make him feel the way he’d felt about the girl on the bench. It was like a curse that followed him everywhere, and he could do nothing about it.

At 3 am he gave up and returned to the tent. Sally was asleep. He made up his mind that he would tell her it wasn’t working out between them. It wouldn’t be fair on her now that he knew he still had feelings for someone else. He’d just be leading her on, knowing that he could never care about her in the same way.

The next morning, Sally nudged him: ‘Wake up, Rob, we’re going to miss that band you wanted to see.’

His head felt groggy. ‘What time is it?’

‘Late enough. I’ve overslept because those girls in the next tent didn’t shut up until after 2 o’clock. I’m sure they were drunk. They were talking so loud. I’m going to get some breakfast, coming?’

‘I’ll follow,’ he said, fully intending to leave the festival and make his way home before Sally got back. He knew it was cowardly, but he couldn’t tell her face to face that he was leaving her. He resolved to send her a text message.

\* \* \*

Anne woke up in the tent next door to Robert and Sally. Stretching, she looked over at her friend Susie, who was still asleep. Anne thought of Steve, as she often did each morning. If she hadn’t broken up with Steve, they would have been together at this music festival, but they split two weeks ago. Susie had persuaded her to come to the festival, saying she’d accompany her: *‘It’d be a shame to waste the tickets, and it’ll do you good to get out and forget about him, instead of moping around the house,’* she’d said. Anne wasn’t so sure. Being here brought back memories of the year before, when she’d been at the festival with Steve.

Sitting up and wriggling out of her sleeping bag, she reached into her handbag and took out her compact mirror. Running her fingers through her dyed black hair, she found herself wondering whether Steve would like it. She shook the thought from her mind, reminding herself that he didn’t matter anymore. A frown creased her brow.

Susie had convinced her to dye her hair and try a new hairstyle, saying that a change would help her forget Steve. Anne had been living with him for over a year before finding out that he’d been seeing another girl for at least three months. She found a few text messages on his mobile and confronted him about them; he’d walked out the door without saying a word, never looking back, not apologising—leaving her to heal her own wounds and wonder why.

Anne was still unsure about her new hair colour—whether it suited her or not. Her hair had always been light-brown, and in her 25 years she’d never dyed it before. And she’d always worn her hair long, but now it only reached her shoulders. Shrugging, she put the compact mirror back

in her handbag and changed into her jeans and t-shirt. She picked up her bag and sunglasses. Susie somehow slept through all of this. Anne didn't have the heart to wake her; they'd been up chatting until after 2 am.

Stepping out of the tent, she knew what she wanted to do. She wanted a portion of chips for breakfast. Last year, she and Steve had shared a portion of chips for breakfast. She still missed him, and found herself wishing he was with her. As a tear threatened to fall from her eye, she put on her sunglasses. A young man walked out of the next tent, she nodded and smiled at him.

'Hello,' he said. He looked a bit grumpy, annoyed about something. His face was familiar, but she couldn't place it. Perhaps she'd seen him yesterday when they were setting up their tents. She walked past him quickly before he could say anything else, because his demeanour was quite intimidating, and she felt worried that maybe she and Susie had kept him awake last night when they were laughing and chatting.

Walking towards the food stalls, she could see a few people milling about, but it was early and none of the bands had started playing, so it was quiet. As she approached a van which had "*Fish and Chips*" emblazoned in green lettering across the top, she hung her head, feeling a bit glum as she again remembered being here with Steve the year before. Something shiny caught her eye, sticking out from the mud next to the van. *Perhaps it's a pound coin?*

Wondering if she'd be lucky enough to get a free breakfast, she bent down and picked it up, cleaning off the dirt. She was amazed to see, in her hand, an earring, exactly like the one she'd lost a couple of years ago. Steve had given her the pair of emerald earrings after their first date and she'd worn them every day. Gold drop earrings with beautiful green stones, which Steve said matched her eyes. Having a habit of fiddling with her earrings, she often found that she was missing one. Usually she would find it again, somewhere in her house, but she'd lost the emerald earring one lunchtime when she had lunch in a park. After lunch, she'd returned to the office where she worked, and Kelly—her colleague—had asked her why she was only wearing one earring. Anne had rushed back to the park, retracing her footsteps all along the street and through the park, but she never found the earring.

As she looked at the shiny piece of jewellery in her hand, she wanted to believe that it was the same one she had lost. It wasn't one of a kind; there were probably thousands of girls who owned the same pair, but she couldn't help thinking that it was some kind of sign. She'd been thinking of Steve when she found it.

Anne took a tissue out of her handbag and cleaned the remaining mud off the earring, wishing she'd kept the other one, but she remembered throwing it out not so long ago. As she placed the earring in her purse, she resolved to keep it with her always. It was like a connection to Steve, something to hold onto, to keep the flame alive. *Maybe one day we'll get back together.*

\* \* \*

Robert walked out of his tent and saw a young girl with very dark, shoulder-length hair, wearing sunglasses standing outside the next-door tent. He remembered Sally complaining that the two girls in that tent had been talking loudly well into the early hours.

The girl looked at him, nodded and smiled. He said 'Hello', to be polite, but his mind was still in shreds about how best to end it with Sally. He was in no mood for small talk with a stranger, and hoped this girl would not try to speak to him. Frowning, he tried his best to look unapproachable.

As the girl with the dark hair walked past him, he caught a breeze carrying a fresh, floral perfume, that brought with it memories of a warm summer day somewhere back in time, but he couldn't remember quite where he had smelt that scent before.

Robert walked away in the opposite direction and took out his mobile phone to text Sally. *I'm going home. Don't try to contact me. It's over. It's not you, it's me. Sorry. Bye.*

After sending the text message, he wondered whether he'd been too blunt. Shrugging, he made his way out of the park, thoughts of the girl on the bench still haunting his mind.

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### **About the Author:**

Maria Savva is a novelist and short story writer from the UK. Her novels and stories are inspired by the world around her, containing many true-to-life characters. She writes dramas, about relationships, which cross over various genres from romantic fiction to the paranormal. She began writing her first novel, *Coincidences*, in 1997, and has since published a further three novels (*A Time to Tell*, *Second Chances*, and *The Dream*), and three collections of short stories (*Pieces of a Rainbow*, *Love and Loyalty (and other Tales)* and *Fusion*). She also co-wrote an online novella on <http://www.BestsellerBound.com> in 2010, with author Jason McIntyre: *Cutting The Fat*, (a murder mystery, which revolves around a group of indie writers and their conspiracy to kill an evil book critic).

Maria lives in London, and is also a qualified lawyer. As well as writing books, she loves to read, and is a reviewer for [Bookpleasures.com](http://www.Bookpleasures.com). She is also a resident author/moderator for <http://www.BestsellerBound.com>. You can usually find her on Twitter @Maria\_Savva. You can learn more about Maria and her writing on her website: <http://www.mariasavva.com>

###

### **Minor Details**

by Jaleta Clegg

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"What do you think?" Mitzi twirled so Lainey could get the full effect of her outfit: stiletto heels, fishnet tights, black leather micro-mini-skirt, and black baby doll tee complete with rhines-tone skull and crossbones on the chest.

Lainey rolled her eyes and flipped her blond hair over her shoulder. "I said witches, not pirate hookers." She set her glossy pink tote bag on the bare plank floor in the middle of Mitzi's attic. Stacks of storage boxes and odd items filled the dusty corners.

"As if your outfit works," Mitzi said. "Not."

"It's one hundred percent authentic. I looked it up online." She'd bought it online, too, forty dollars for *\_Mystica Glamour\_*. Her dress was slinky black silk, and made her feel like a very sexy witch. "Now be quiet. I have to commune with the cosmic forces of darkness." Lainey tilted her head back, stretched her arms out, closed her eyes, and hummed tunelessly.

Mitzi crossed her arms and tapped one pointed toe. "My outfit's more fun."

Something rustled inside Lainey's pink tote. A tiny head with large, buggy eyes and tufted ears popped out.

"You brought Mr. Numffis?" Mitzi's turn for the eye roll.

"He's my familiar. Every witch has to have a familiar. Where's yours? On your hairbrush?"

Mitzi stuck her tongue out. Lainey pretended not to notice, closing her eyes to slits. Her nasal hum intensified.

Mr. Numffis jumped from the tote. He sniffed at a stack of dusty boxes and sneezed. Mr. Numffis was supposed to be Mr. Muffins, but no one had checked Lainey's spelling until after the papers were registered. Lainey hated spelling, all those little letters drove her mad.

"Mr. Numffis is tinkling on my mom's Christmas tree," Mitzi said.

Lainey broke off humming to giggle. "Bad widdle Mistoe Numffis," she scolded in a high voice. She scooped the dog back into the tote. "Did ums need to tinkoe?"

"Good little dog," Mitzi said. "We're witches. Aren't we supposed to be evil?"

Lainey cocked her head, thinking it over. "Very evil."

Mitzi patted Mr. Numffis. "Then let's get on with it. Let's raise a demon to prove how evil we are, just like in that book you found."

Lainey nodded, giggles forgotten. "You do the candles. I'll do the pentagram. I'm better at art than you are." She dug a handful of colored chalk from under Mr. Numffis.

The dog objected by hopping out of the tote to continue his exploration of the attic.

"Here, keep track of this. We'll need it later." Lainey handed a crumpled sheet of blotchy parchment to Mitzi. "The candles are inside."

Mitzi unwrapped the candles from the parchment and set it aside. She didn't think to check the document. Lainey assured her she'd used a spell checker on it. They'd both giggled over that one.

"Are you sure these will work?" Mitzi wrinkled her nose at the pink candles with 'Happy Birthday' stenciled in gold on the side.

"They were the only ones I could find. When we're real witches we won't have to borrow from our moms for ingredients. Then maybe we can try out the really good spells in the book."

Mitzi peeled plastic wrapping from the candles.

Lainey hummed as she drew hearts and flower swirls at each corner of the pentagram sketched on the wooden floor.

"What did your book say to do now?" Mitzi cradled the pink candles.

Lainey admired her artwork. "Put one in each star point and light them. Make sure you go coldwise. And make sure you don't step over the line."

"Coldwise?" Mitzi asked. "Are you sure that's what it said?"

"Positive," Lainey wiped a smudge of pink chalk from the design. "I read it five times to make sure."

"Which way is coldwise?" Mitzi squinted at the pentagram.

Lainey sighed. "Am I the only one who thinks these things through? It's obviously north." Lainey tapped the cover of her ancient book, *The Compendium of Spelles*. "The North Pole is the coldest place on earth so coldwise means start at the north point of the star and go around the pentagram."

Mitzi set the candles into little glass holders, setting each on a star point. "Ooo, that pink just matches the chalk hearts."

"Not very witchy, Mitzi."

"Sorry."

"Light the candles, mistress of darkness!" Lainey raised her arms over her head. The cheap costume popped a seam. "It's supposed to do that. It proves I'm channeling the powers of evil." She twisted, squinting at the rip along her side. It was just a little tear. No one would notice.

Mitzi picked up the box of matches and struck one. Flames blossomed. She held it over the first candle.

"Oh, wait! I almost forgot the paper!" Lainey moved Mr. Numffis off the crinkled parchment then smoothed it over her leg. The signatures looked gruesome. They'd used their own blood to sign it, just like the book said. Tomato juice just wasn't the same.

"Ready?" Mitzi asked.

Lainey nodded, her blond hair bouncing.

Mitzi lit the candle.

"Oh dark lord, we summon thee," Lainey said. That part she'd made up. She wasn't going to read unless she had to. "Now you say it."

"Dark lord, we summon thee." Mitzi lit another candle.

"By all the powers that ebb!" Lainey said loudly.

"That doesn't sound right." Mitzi dropped the match.

"Who's the head witch here? Who's idea was this?"

"Yours, Lainey." Mitzi struck another match and lit the pink birthday candle.

Lainey held the parchment towards the fluttering candle flames. "We sell our souls to you!"

Mitzi lit the last candle and stepped back. "Now what?"

Lainey held the paper. The candles sputtered. Mr. Numffis lifted his leg at the pentagram. Mitzi nudged him aside.

Nothing happened.

"We could go to the dance," Mitzi said. "Justin did say he was bringing..."

"It's working!" Lainey grabbed Mitzi's arm.

Mist rose in the pentagram, red and white swirls that reeked of peppermint. Both girls backed away. A form materialized in the pentagram. The mist spun, lifting to reveal heavy black boots, topped by baggy red velvet pants.

"Fat Elvis?" Mitzi whispered. "I didn't think the devil would be so tacky."

The mist revealed a big belly covered by more red velvet with white fur trim.

"I didn't think he'd be so fat."

"I like the belt. I saw one like it in Fashion Mod last month."

"You did not. Liar."

"A beard? That is so out. Gross!"

"And he's old. I thought you said he'd be young and sexy, like in that movie we saw."

The mist cleared, revealing the apparition in the pentagram.

"Santa?" Mitzi squinted. "Give me that paper!" She snatched the parchment from Lainey.

"Michelle," Santa said with a bright smile. "Are you trying for the naughty list this year?"

"It's Mitzi. And we're both going to be evil witches."

Santa chuckled. "You'll never make it. You aren't naughty, Michelle, no matter how hard you try. And you, Elaine, you've always been one of my favorites."

"Lainey, and you know why I changed it. I hate Elaine."

Santa grinned. "I always enjoyed your letters, when you were young enough to still send them. Dear Satan," he quoted. "Most years we figured out what you were asking for, although that year you asked for a pyno, that was a tough one."

"I asked for a pony. You left a big, dirty tree. Mother was furious about the mess on her rug."

"That imitation Persian she's so proud of?" Santa winked.

"Imitation?" Mitzi lowered the parchment. "O. M. G. She told my mother it was real. She's been bragging about that rug since we moved here."

"Your mother's been on my naughty list for years." Santa shook his head. "Such a pity."

"So why are you here?" Lainey asked. "It isn't even close to Christmas."

"You summoned me," Santa said. "Nice pentagram, by the way. I really like the little hearts, so much better than the usual evil markings."

"We didn't summon you," Lainey tossed her hair. "We summoned Satan, Lord of Evil."

"No, we didn't." Mitzi read from the parchment. "We summon thee, Santa, Lord of Elvi. You said you checked this."

Santa reached for the parchment. "I believe you both sold your souls to me. It's in writing, signed in blood. Binding by every rule. I hope you aren't too set on being naughty, because I can't have that."

"Lainey, you stupid, brainless twit! How could you do this to us?"

"Me? You were the one telling me to hurry up. You know how I get when you rush me."

Mr. Numffis scuffled over the chalk markings and sniffed at Santa's boots. He lifted a leg. Santa scooped him up in one gloved hand.

"I can't have that on my suit, not my good one." Santa looked at the girls. He wasn't even a teeny bit jolly now. "The pentagram is broken. I'm collecting your souls now. The boys are so looking forward to meeting you."

"Elves. Ew." Mitzi shuddered.

"Are you going to make me wear one of those green felt skirts with jingle bells?" Lainey glared and crossed her arms. "Because I refuse. Those are so not in style."

"I had something else in mind." Santa eyed her sexy witch outfit.

"Won't Mrs. Claus object?" Mitzi said.

Santa laughed. "Mrs. Claus? She's a piece of fiction, dreamed up by a feminist group back in 1921. They couldn't stand the thought that Santa was a bachelor and very happy that way. There is no Mrs. Claus."

"And no fur trim," Lainey said. "I don't wear real fur. It's not fair for the animals to have to go naked so I can be fashionable."

"No fur," Santa agreed.

"What are you going to make us do?" Lainey challenged him with her stare.

Santa winked. "I have a few ideas. You can't believe how messy reindeer can be, cooped up in a stable half the year."

"I am not shoveling reindeer poo. It would ruin my nails." Lainey spread her hands. The nails were the longest fake acrylic the salon had, painted bright scarlet.

"How about cookies?" Santa asked.

"Fattening," both girls said.

Santa handed Mr. Numffis to Lainey. "We'll work something out. Time to go."

He reached across the pentagram and took their hands. The mist swirled, like a giant candy cane cloud. The pentagram flared red and green, twinkling like a string of Christmas lights as it disappeared. All that remained was the lingering scent of peppermint.

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## About the Author:

Jaleta Clegg was born some time ago. She's spent the years since telling stories- in her head and to anyone who would listen. Once she obtained her first computer, a Commodore128 at a garage sale, technology set her free. Her writing has exploded into science fiction adventure novels and lots of silly horror short stories. Find more about her at <http://www.jaletac.com>. She recently adopted a shelter dog and cat to go with her ancient toothless cat and horde of children. The dog also amuses her husband so she can write without worrying about him becoming lonely.

###

## Ice Cream Man

by Neil Schiller  
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It's time, again.

'Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for our house band, The Jason Jeffers Trad Jazz Trio.'

A spattering of weak applause as the lights go up on Nick. He starts a big booming bass walk, his fingers stretched tight around the neck and fingerboard and a look of extreme concentration on his face. When Steve joins in on the piano you can hear they're a semitone apart already. It sounds pretty fucking bad. I try to cover it with the beat and stare at Nick, willing him to look over so I can nudge his fingers up the strings a centimetre or so by sheer willpower. He doesn't turn his head through the whole set. He's lost in some grey dream of himself.

When it happens, when the three of us click into place up here, it's like an electrical current has just burst the banks of its circuit-board. It's effortless, it sends you into a gorgeous black trance where you just go with what you're doing and you're vaguely aware of the other things happening around you. As soon as I saw the sweat dripping from Nick's nose I knew we were never even getting close tonight. We haven't for a while. The bassline stutters along mechanically enough and the piano tinkles earnestly over the top. I try and throw in a few licks but they threaten to rip the music apart so I give in and just tap away monotonously instead.

The crowd don't seem to mind. The crowd don't seem to be listening. They're here for the food and I don't blame them. We're a background noise, marginally better than the uncomfortable scrape of cutlery on dirty plates.

We plod on through our usual set. *Love Me or Leave Me*, *My Funny Valentine*, *Mac the Knife*. We finish with a Tom Waits number. Usually it brings the house down.

Tonight, nobody pays any attention. Steve isn't putting the effort in. He usually elongates the words, plays with them in an exaggeration of the innuendo in the lyrics. One time he leaned out front and sang it into a crowd of mature women on a sophisticated hen night. He winked at

them on the line about the cherry popsicle. I don't know for certain but I'm pretty sure he scored that night.

At the moment he's going through one of his serious rhythm and blues phases. He's much less fun this way. Tonight he's sat on his stool with a practiced slouch. He has a fedora tilted too carefully on his head and a beard to shame the Amish. He thinks he's fucking Dr. John. I can't wait to get off this stage.

Everyone assumes that being a musician is glamorous. It isn't. I was in a big band once. Up under those house lights the white dinner jackets gleam and shimmer. The brass section reflect a spectrum of amber tones back at the audience. And the sound is so tight, so elegant, you imagine every player is a charming aesthete with a hundred witty anecdotes. In the green room, the lead trumpet lets out a fart that levels Hiroshima. The band leader is drunk and is screaming at the trombone to wipe some of the stains from his suit, they're too dark, you'll see them from the front row. The clarinet player can't get his trousers fastened so hides it under a creased cumberbund. He stinks of stale sweat and cigarettes. He's trying to come on to our female vocalist and she's telling him in no uncertain terms to fuck off.

'Well boys, that was shit.'

The restaurant manager hands us our hundred quid anyway and we pack up and go home.

The cold light of day next morning is polar. Winter is here. There are magpies nesting in a tree, in the city, in the rain. Croaking at the morning like the illiterate dead

This December day is the first real day of the year, come at last when we've all tired of waiting. Damp, solid, frozen into nothing. The voices of people out Christmas shopping are crushed flat by the weight of the air. Their words fall to the ground from pallid lips and lie there in the gloom. Gone, dead, trampled away. This weather pushes you back down into the depths of yourself. I'm rippling with shivers and painfully conscious. Like a stock inventory I'm aware of my body: cold limbs cold face cold ears.

After last night I need something to cheer me up. I check out the keyboards in Dawson's. They have an antique Hammond in back which the manager lets me tinker around on. I'm not as good as Steve, my fingers don't have the same loose dexterity, but I can hammer out a tune in my own way. I start with B flat and work around it carefully.

'What's that one? It's not in your set.'

It's one I've written myself. I'll teach it to Steve when he lightens up enough. I'm calling it *The A-Train Rag*. Or some such rubbish.

'What about this one?'

B flat again, but this one keeps coming back round to the same note over and over. It's like a fucked up Glen Miller.

'Hey, that's alright. Did you write that?'

I did. I don't know where these have come from, but I just sat on my bed last week and before I realised I was doing it I had *The A-Train Rag* and *Nobody Loved You* worked out and memorised. It was a bit fucking weird actually because I've never written anything before. God knows how the other two are going to take it. But I think I might be onto something.

From Dawson's I'm out, across the road, and I take a sharp left down Button Street. There's an entrance to some steep steps and I take it. An old guy specialises in bop records down here, hidden away from the property developers in a small dank basement. He's gone digital because he's had to, but he still sells a bit of vinyl. In a locked case he has collectable '78s.

When I enter he has Dave Clarke playing. He sees me and switches it off sheepishly.

'It's for the tourists.'

He knows I'm a purist. I have a look around for something I haven't come across before and I hear the crackle and hiss of a needle on one of his rarer items.

'Shit.'

The melody switches between piano and guitar, but there's no mistaking it. It's the *A-Train Rag*. Well, not quite. But it's close enough. The worst part about it is it's much better than my amateur version of the same chord sequence. It dips sharply where mine just goes routinely back around. There's a key change and a dischord which gives it a real edge.

'You like it? I just got this in. Some old guy popped and his son brought a load of his records down.'

I must have heard it before somewhere. And for a moment there I thought I'd finally made some sort of breakthrough.

'Who is this?'

He's a walking history of the jazz age this guy, so I'm surprised when he shakes his head at the scuffed sleeve.

'Some New York quintet. Never heard of them before.'

I snatch it off him and stare at it. He's still talking in the background but I'm not listening. I'm transfixed by the faded black and blue photograph of a band now probably all dead. There's a coffee stain in the bottom corner of the cover. There's dust, and tobacco grains caught in the overlap on the back.

I don't know how long I take to read and reread the liner notes, but when I come back to myself it seems as though he's served at least three or four people at the till.

'So what do you think? You want to buy it?'

I hand the sleeve back to him and walk out without a word.

The day has turned gunmetal grey. There is hardly anyone about on the slick cobblestones, but I still manage to nearly knock an old woman over. I can hardly see in my distraction. I'm struggling to catch my breath in what seems like a sidewind that keeps hitting me as I walk into the gap between buildings.

'Fucking hell.'

Snatches of music explode in my brain like debris from a nail bomb. Every one of them is sung in Steve's shitty, disinterested voice.

'Prick.'

Tomorrow, I'm back at work and my shirts need ironing.

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### **About the Author:**

Neil Schiller is an IT consultant and part time PhD student from Liverpool. Previously, he has published critical work on the authors Charles Bukowski and Richard Brautigan. His first work of fiction, *Oblivious*, a collection of twenty one short stories about life in Liverpool and the surrounding North West of England, was released in November 2010. *The Haiku Diary* – the result of a project where a diary was kept in Haiku form for each day of 2008 – followed in December.

He currently lives about three miles outside the Liverpool city limits, across the river in Prenton, with his partner and four year old daughter, two hyperactive foxhounds, a

warmongering hamster and eight rather introverted tropical fish. And he's not related to Friedrich Schiller, or Goethe, or anyone else for that matter...

You can learn more about Neil and his writing on his blog: <http://neilschiller.wordpress.com>

###

## No Eyes But Mine Shall See

by Sharon E. Cathcart  
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Gilbert's cravat hung loose, his shirt collar open. He dried the pen, closed the inkwell and sighed. His handsome face was tired and drawn in the lamp's glow. Outside, the rain fell on dark London streets; it was late. He ran his fingers through cropped curls the color of old Roman coins and willed the tears to remain in his dark brown eyes as he reread the letter he would never send. He absently rubbed his leg with the other hand; the damp English weather made the old injury ache.

"Dear Claire" ...

So innocuous. How could such a simple salutation say so much and so little at once? He read on, the words flowing in his native French.

\*

I watched your carriage drive away today, standing at the window until it was out of sight. There were so many things that I wanted to say to you, but you were gone.

I wanted to say those things when you stood in front of me, saying your farewells. You looked so beautiful in your blue cloak, its silver fox-furred hood lighting your eyes. Did I ever tell you how much your eyes reminded me of the Camargois sky?

No, I do not believe I ever did.

Your glorious chestnut-colored hair was styled in an elaborate coil of braids: very fashionable. Yet my fingers recall its weight as I held those locks to brush them.

And my lips recall the kiss I stole that night. Did you feel what I did?

I wanted to speak so many times when I escorted you around London or Paris. Restaurants, museums, shops; we went so many places together. I wanted to be much more than your majordomo, but you never knew.

You encouraged my drawing, but you never saw the dozens of sketches I made of you. Some were from memory, from the days in Paris. You riding your fine horse; I know how you have missed that black mare. Many of them were made while you lay ill; I feared for you, as did the entire household.

I wanted to whisper to you then, but I said nothing. Instead, I brought a black velvet toy mare and gave her to you. Your quiet smile was thanks enough.

I understand so much better now how a sadness of the heart sickens the body. The doctor called your illness hysteria, said you were mad. How wrong he was. You have ever been sane, even in the darkest times. Perhaps I could have done more to ease your burdens; I will never know. I did what I could.

I wanted to speak when you befriended Joseph Merrick, and when you railed at Doctor Treves, my benefactor thanks to you, for the way he treated Joseph in death.

I thought about speaking up when the English ladies decided not to receive you anymore. You tried so hard to make things right. I wished, many times, that we could all go back to France. Now you are going, and I am staying here.

I wanted to say something the night you made sure, for the first time in years, that I was dressed and barbered properly. Your eyes were the first to look upon me as a woman looks upon a man whom she admires.

I wanted to tell you whenever I watched your kindness to the people of the Opera Garnier. You never failed to smile and say a kind word, even though I knew your misery.

Oh yes, I knew your misery. I watched your cousin Francois ... my brother-in-law ... take everything you had. He did the same to my sister; she died giving birth to his child. He lived in my home, but made it clear I was there at his sufferance. I became a servant in the home that should have been mine: your cousin's valet. After all, how could a man with a twisted leg manage the affairs of a cattle ranch?

I watched Francois beggar and ruin you, and I could say nothing. He sold your home, just as he did mine. Damn those laws that say a man must control a woman's property. Those same laws gave my sister's inheritance to Francois; he squandered it all.

The closest I ever came to speaking my mind was the night I learned you were married, when Erik pressed his wedding ring into my hand and sent me to the little cottage where you awaited your newlywed husband's return. Francois even tried to take him from you.

That night, I said that I was your man. You presumed that I meant only to help you. The truth was, I meant that and more. I wanted to be a bold chevalier: a protector. Yet, you barely knew me; I was your cousin's valet, after all. It would have been unseemly to say more than I did on that night.

As it was, our lives were never the same.

Claire, I said nothing because I am a coward.

How could I say, "I am in love with you," even as you were preparing to return to France with your dying husband? Erik was as good a friend to me as he could be, and you chose him.

How could I say, "I have loved you from afar," without looking like a madman?

How could I consider casting myself at your feet and begging you to stay in London? Yet, that very thought crossed my mind as I watched your coach disappear.

How like you, in your compassion, to ensure that I would not be destitute in this strange land, since circumstances prevent me from going back to France with you.

There were times when you thought me so brave, Claire, but I am not. Only a craven would fail to speak these simple truths.

So, now I have done so, in a letter that no eyes but mine shall see. Perhaps one day, when I am in my dotage, I will tell my grandchildren about it. Perhaps, by then, I will be brave enough. I will live without you because I must, but your face will always live in my heart.

I am, your humble servant,

Gilbert Rochambeau

\*

Gilbert blotted the ink and folded the paper carefully. He swiped a hand across his eyes, wiping away tears of regret, and tucked the letter into a desk drawer. He thought of glancing through the sketchbook there, but had felt his share of melancholy for the night.

Using the blue-knobbed walking stick, a gift from Claire at Christmas, he rose to his feet. He tried to keep his halting footsteps quiet as he made his way to the bedroom where his wife slept, peacefully unaware.

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### **About the Author:**

Sharon E. Cathcart is the author of *You Had to Be There: Three Years of Mayhem and Bad Decisions in the Portland Music Scene*, *Sui Generis*, *Les Pensees Dangereuses*, *2010 Hindsight: A Year of Personal Growth, In Spite of Myself*, and *In The Eye of the Beholder: A Novel of the Phantom of the Opera*. She is the co-author of *Born of War ... Dedicated to Peace*.

Gilbert Rochambeau first appears in the pages of *In The Eye of The Beholder*. He also plays an important role in the upcoming sequel, *In The Eye of The Storm*.

Sharon lives in the Silicon Valley, California, with her husband and an assortment of pets. You can learn more about her and her work at on her website:

<http://home.earthlink.net/~scathcart1964/sharonecathcart>

###

## **The First Texas Twister**

by Magnolia Belle  
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This tale begins before we knew anything about the space-time continuum and how easily it could be ripped. This tale begins shortly before the Civil War, in the high plains of Texas, before there even was a city named Amarillo. Buffalo and Native Americans had worked out a respectable balance between themselves, allowing each to live and prosper. Buffalo fed the humans, and humans thinned out the weakest from the herds.

Then, in the midst of this utopia, Europeans pushed their way past the Appalachian Mountains, past the Mississippi River, and headed toward the west coast. Some of them stopped along the way, settling in the midst of the buffalo and Native Americans, building homes and starting farms.

We all know this is where the trouble began for the Great West. But, what most of us don't know is that this is also the birth of the killer tornado.

Let me take you back...

The Kiowa, White Fox, sat outside his wife's lodge, his nervous eyes searching the wide-opened blue sky. As shaman of his village, the Kiowa elder had a certain reputation to uphold. He interpreted spirit dreams, knew which plants and herbs made good medicine, and conducted marital counseling on a surprisingly regular basis.

But that morning, his brow furrowed in worry. Murmuring throughout the camp grew louder each day about the lack of rain. The prairie grass crackled and broke when anyone walked on it. The buffalo moved further north to find water, making hunting difficult. They would have to move the village if this kept up. But, before they resigned themselves to yet another move, they waited on him to DO something.

The old man had tried everything in his power to affect the weather, but nothing had worked — not the sweat lodge, not the sacred smoke, not the dream quest for a vision. The simmering heat brought sweat to his wrinkled face, and trickled down his leathery cheek. Lost in thought, he didn't feel it. He considered the sky, spread unadorned without even the wispiest of clouds; no soft breeze stirred the feathers in his graying braids. He grunted once, as if coming to a decision.

"Little Crow, come here," he addressed a young brave strolling by.

"Yes, father?"

"Tell the village to prepare themselves. This afternoon, I shall perform our sacred rain dance. The people must fast until then. And send the dancers to me."

"Very well." Little Crow nodded and went to his task.

White Fox bowed his head, hoping this would work. If it didn't, they would be forced to move tomorrow or the next day.

\* \* \*

Ruthie Simpson pulled hard on the reins, bringing their four mules to a stop. The covered wagon shuddered for a moment, sending puffs of dust pluming to the sky. Five other wagons stopped behind her.

"What now?" Her husband, William, walked up and rested one hand on the wheel.

"We oughta settle here," Ruthie explained.

"*Here?*" He made a slow turn, studying the horizon. Heat waves shimmered several yards ahead, across dry grass and brown shrubs. A quarter mile away, a small hill rose, the only landmark in the otherwise flat, barren landscape. "*Here?*" he repeated.

"Yep. Here." The flint-jawed woman nodded once, put the reins down and tucked a rebellious wisp of brown hair underneath her bonnet.

"Why'd we stop?" Red Parker came up behind William. "Mule go lame?"

"Naw." William pulled a bandana from his back pocket, lifted his stained hat with one hand and wiped his brow with the other. "Ruthie wants to settle here."

"You're joshing. Right?" By now, the other men had joined the discussion, all looking up at Ruthie, perched on the wagon seat, her lips in a thin line.

"Just 'cuz I'm a curious ol' cuss," Red smiled to disguise his anger at the most stubborn woman he'd ever met, "why here, Mz. Simpson?"

"Just a feeling I have in my bones."

"A feeling in your bones," he echoed, trying to keep his opinion of her suspect sanity out of his voice.

"There's no water here, wife," William explained.

“There was and there will be,” she disagreed.

“How do you know that?”

“See that creek bed? That means there’s water.” She pointed a little distance away.

Sighing, William walked to it, pulled out his Bowie knife and plunged it into the gully. After digging for a few moments, he stood and called back. “If there was water, it ain’t been here in a long, long time. It’s nothing but dry dirt for several feet down.”

“Sorry, Mz. Simpson, but this place won’t do.” Red shook his head.

“It will, too!” Ruthie jumped down from the wagon, landing on her feet with a heavy thud. She stood with her arms akimbo, in her favorite arguing stance. “I know what I know, and this is the place!”

“She’d out-argue God,” Red muttered under his voice.

“There was water here, and there’ll be water here again. It’s gonna rain. Just see if it don’t!” Ruthie ignored her husband’s pained expression at being embarrassed yet again in front of their friends.

“I’d like to knock you into next Tuesday,” he threatened under his breath. But, there were too many witnesses, she had a powerful left hook, and she stood a little taller, a little wider than he did. “We’re wasting daylight,” he said out loud.

“I’m telling you! It’s gonna rain!” In her proclamation, she raised her hands skyward and shook both fists. “IT’S GONNA RAIN!”

She spoke with such fevered conviction that the weakest minded of the wagon train wondered if she might not be right — somehow.

\* \* \*

On the other side of the low hill a quarter mile away, unbeknownst to the wagon train, White Fox assembled the musicians and dancers. They smoked the pipe and washed in the sacred smoke. After that, he led them to the center of the ring formed by the people.

The drums began first, throbbing in slow rhythm. Flutes, piercing and sweet, joined in. Some people had eagle bone whistles and blew them.

White Fox danced, one moccasin stomping into the dirt, and then the next, raising small red puffs of dust. His braids jostled at each step. The younger dancers spun around in circles to the music, and all the people watched the sky. After half an hour of dancing, White Fox scanned the horizon. Nothing. After an hour, still nothing. Feeling the pain and weariness in his joints, the old man felt he couldn’t continue. Perhaps they would have to move after all. In one last burst of strength, he held his arms up, his fists clenched, and let out a cry, begging for rain to fall.

As it happened, Ruthie raised her fists at the exact same moment. A man agreeing with a woman, and a Native American agreeing with a settler, all less than a mile apart, proved too much for the universe to handle. That is when the space-time continuum ripped and a new thing came to earth. If people had listened carefully and had understood, they would have heard a slow wind in the distance. The prairie grass dipped slightly. Even without clouds, the sky grew a bit darker blue.

The Kiowa and the settlers felt a change in the atmosphere. Looking to the west, the sky began to transform; the wind picked up. The dark blue turned an eerie green. The eerie green turned to pitch black. Thunder growled, low and dangerous. The Kiowa had seen storms before, but nothing like this — ever. Lightning clawed the ether with golden talons. Hail as big as a child’s fist fell, sending the people scrambling for their lodges. And the *wind* — the wind turned

from a gentle breeze to a monster. White Fox felt certain the Wind Spirit was paying a personal visit.

The howling gale deafened ears. The hail pelted down mercilessly. And then nothing — nothing except skin-crawling silence. Even the grass stood still.

“What in tarnation?” William wondered out loud as he peeked out the back of his wagon.

“Told you it was gonna rain!” Ruthie crowed in her triumph and climbed out. She ran several yards towards the clouds, eager to be the first one to meet the rain.

“Get back in here!”

Ignoring William, she saw it — the biggest, blackest, vilest cloud covering the western horizon. It dropped lower and lower, until it formed a belly. The belly twisted and writhed, pointing closer to the ground with each second, sending debris piercing the air. Before Ruthie had time to run to shelter, the twister jumped the small hill, jumped the dry creek bed, and landed on top of her.

When it disappeared, no sign of Ruthie could be found. William wasn't quite sure how he felt about that (until he found her on the trail four days later — on a Tuesday). With all the ensuing rain, the Kiowa didn't have to move; the grass greened up and the buffalo returned. White Fox gained even more status with his people and died several years later as a revered elder.

And now you know how killer tornados were born — combined stubborn agreement from polar opposites — in *spite* of the obvious (which some people call faith and some stupidity). *And*, you have proof that someone really can be knocked into next Tuesday.

\*\*\*

### **About the Author:**

Published my first novel in 2005 under the pen name Magnolia Belle and write primarily about Texas and Native Americans, in both historical and modern genres. I graduated from Tarleton State U. in 1978 with high honors and as a member of Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities. My business degree specialized in accounting. Go figure. Black Wolf Books was established in 2005 and incorporated in 2006 to handle my publications.

<http://www.blackwolfbooks.com>

###

## **Shadow Lantern**

by Gareth Lewis  
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"It's enchanted."

"And therefore valuable?"

"There's enchanted, and then there's cursed. The difference can be expensive."

"And which do you think it is?"

"Which do you believe it to be?"

"Enchanted, of course. Can't your little device tell you what it does?"

"If it had, don't you think I'd have said?"

"Not if you wanted to know if I know what it does."

"Do you?"

"I might."

"No, you don't."

"No I don't. And your device isn't telling you?"

"I won't be employing it fully until I know more about the lantern. It bears a strong enchantment, but considering what happened last time you brought something like this to me, I'm sure you'll forgive my caution. And understand my impulse to just have your throat slit and call it my own."

"Now that's not hospitable. And since you don't usually take this long to make decisions, I doubt you'll be doing that. Probably."

"We'll see. How did you come by it?"

"It's an inheritance from a sweet old uncle, lived over near the eastern dwimmerstone mines. He suffered an unfortunate accident involving a Sister of the Eternal Yearning, a triple humped melon-cow, and a..."

"If you're not going to give a serious answer, my decision on what to do with you may come sooner than you'd like."

"Considering your profession, and my profession, how do you think I acquired it?"

"Then I'll rephrase. Where did it come from?"

"The old warehouse formerly used by the dwimmercraft school. They had a section for old artifacts. They recently had to move out due to the cumulative effects of the gathered energies on the structure. Stuff was transported to new sites. Heavily guarded, of course, and we were vigilant in ensuring nobody else stole any of it."

"So how likely is it to be missed?"

"Its container still holds an old lantern as listed in the manifest. So, since it hadn't been touched in a century or two, I doubt you need to worry about someone coming looking anytime soon."

"Good. Were there any notes with the manifest offering a clue as to what it does?"

"There were notes. Unfortunately I'm unable read High Sumerrial, and didn't have the opportunity to copy them."

"So we're back to the problem of not knowing its... abilities."

"You can't use your device to prod it till you find out?"

"I employ people to do that. Y'know how dangerous these things can be? Had a... colleague, who acquired a similar item, spent a lot of time trying to work out what it did, convinced it was valuable. One morning they came into his room and found what was left of him in a puddle. He fit in a jar. A small jar."

"I'm sure you'd be far more cautious..."

"I'm not finished. His wife kept the jar on her mantelpiece. But one day her drunken brother visited, looking to borrow some money to maintain this state. He spied the bottle, and, well, let's just say I don't want to end up pissed into the gutter by a drunkard."

"So I guess you're not going to light it and see what happens?"

"Do I look stupid?"

"How do you want me to answer that?"

"Carefully. You know my lads're just outside."

"So why not ask them to bring us some drinks from out front?"

"I'm not thirsty. But I am tired. It's been a long day, so let's get down to it. Why're you here?"

"Trying to sell this, of course."

"There're other places to sell it. Buyers with less history. It's been a few years since you disappeared following our previous... dealing. Then you suddenly turn up, unannounced."

"You have access to a number of specialists who can find out what it does."

"So do my competitors. Some o' them'd even buy it without knowing, and bargain with less vigour than you'd expect from me, so that ain't it. What's the real reason?"

"I'm back in the city, figured I'd need to make sure there's no hard feelings."

"And do you think there are?"

"Hey, accidents happen. But you're a businessman, and the stuff you seized should've paid for your inconvenience."

"And yer friend? Are there hard feelings over what happened to him?"

"Occupational hazard. Besides, what am I going to do? Since you met me in private, not knowing if I'm holding a grudge, I have to assume you're wearing enough charms to protect yourself from anything I could try. Am I right?"

"..."

"So what are you protected against? Just physical attacks? What if I pulled a dwimmerstick on you?"

"..."

"Okay, okay. You know, you're a very suspicious person."

"No, I'm cautious. You're suspicious."

"That wasn't called for, now was it. Anyway, my point is you obviously feel confident enough that I'm not going to harm you."

"Doesn't mean you're not tryin' to cheat me. In fact, given our history I could just call the Watch in and claim the lantern's mine. You want those inhuman bastards getting hold of ye?"

"Now come on, we're just talking here. There's no call for threats. Especially since you don't want the Watch in your business any more than I do. If only 'cause of the smell."

"Well then, I suppose I'll just have to call me lads in. They lack the creativity to make it an interestin' threat, though."

"Creative underlings are the last thing you'd want."

"But fer brutal violence, they do the job."

"Brutal violence is the last thing I want."

"An' what I want's to finish here. I'm tired, an' me eyes are goin'. Everythin's turnin' green, so give me one good reason I shouldn't..."

"Oh, it's not your eyes. In fact, if you'd glance at the wall behind you..."

"An' turn my back on ye?"

"I thought you were protected from anything I could do? I give my word, for what that's worth, to make no move against you. Go on, you know you want to look."

"So th' wall's lit up a garish green. So wha'?"

"And what's missing?"

"Missing? Yer bloody face if ye don't stop... My shadow? It's barely there. What...?"

"I knew you'd spot it eventually. Of course I thought you'd realise your candle had gone out first."

"How...? Whe'...?"

"Where's the light coming from? The lantern, of course. I lit it before coming here."

"But it's..."

"An invisible flame? Yes. Against which your charms apparently offer little protection. And it's the flame which is stealing your shadow, your vitality, your ability to form a coherent sentence."

"Ah'm..."

"Weak? Lifeless? Yes. But on the bright side, I feel energized."

"Why?"

"As you said, he was my friend. So, let's discuss reparations for the goods you seized..."

\*\*\*

### **About the Author:**

Gareth Lewis has written a number of novels and shorter pieces in a few genres, fantasy, science fiction, and thrillers, a number of which are available as eBooks. A programmer, he has a degree in computer studies, and lives in South Wales.

You can learn more about Gareth and his work on his website: <http://www.garethlewis.eu>

###

## **STAINED**

by Amy Saunders  
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When Betty Silva entered Room 153, the only light in the room peeked through the curtain sides. No one answered when she knocked so she propped open the door with her cart stocked with towels and tiny soaps and shampoos, pocketing the master key. Her stubby legs lined with rust-colored nylons scurried across the beige carpet to the windows. The room seemed bare from the outlines she saw. Nothing on the faux-wood dresser or desk to her right. The floor appeared clean. It looked like an easy job. Of course, she hadn't seen the bathroom yet.

Betty yanked on the white curtain cord, the sea foam green polyester curtains swishing back and forth. She looked out the window to the street below where a line of cars and trucks waited at a light. The view stunk but she supposed the occupant just slept there anyway. Most of their visitors came for the technology companies that branched out around the hotel like spokes on a wheel. With light filling the room, she turned to get a good view of the work ahead of her. Her round chin dropped slightly, her dark chocolate eyes shooting open.

It would be a lot of work for someone.

A man in dark blue jeans and a white T-shirt lay spread eagle on the bed. Blood matted his brown hair and dyed the white sheets underneath him. They'd never get that out, Betty thought.

She bolted for the door, pushing the cart away enough to slide through, and ran all the way to the hotel lobby.

She shook as she told what happened a little while later to the heavy-set police officer with wavy dark brown hair. He hiked up his pants and sat in the rusting fold-up chair across from her in the break room. Betty forced her lips to spread out in a smile, her round face placid compared to the turmoil inside. She wrapped her hands around the Styrofoam cup holding black coffee and straightened her back. Officer Durante smiled, his golden brown eyes steadying her. He first asked questions about her routine and procedure. Then came the questions she dreaded. Her heartbeat spiked as she described the young man's goopy hair and the blood drenching the white sheets. That's the only reason she knew he was dead and not sleeping. She shivered a little imagining if she hadn't seen the blood and had just left or...or touched him, trying to wake him up.

The officer nodded and took notes, asking kindly if she would repeat a few things he missed. She swallowed and tried to speak more slowly so he wouldn't have to ask. Officer Durante finally closed his notebook, none too soon for her, and gently told her to go home and take it easy for a while. Betty nodded emphatically, her eyes welling up for the first time since she'd found the young man. The officer left her alone, joining his compatriots in another part of the hotel to do whatever he would do. The day manager popped her head in and told Betty to go home and recover. But Betty sat in the break room alone instead, steadying herself before driving home. She pulled her wedding band off and on her bloated finger and stared at the mint green wall in front of her. Something in the room buzzed and a fluorescent bulb flickered above her.

Fifteen years of cleaning someone else's toilet and nothing that astonishing had ever come her way. Nothing that threw her world into slow motion and made her rethink life. Betty purposely focused on the man on the bed whom she'd only seen for a moment. That's all she could think about anyway so she might as well. She thought he looked young, not that she saw his face, but he dressed young. Fashionably, even. He wore dark jeans with one of those modern washes she saw in GQ when she flipped through copies at the hair salon. He was only wearing a white T-shirt but she had the feeling he looked like a model strutting through downtown. She sighed and finished her coffee. She wanted to forget his face, and yet remember it forever.

Betty made spaghetti for dinner that night. Her husband and son sat at the table, buttering the Italian bread she had picked up on her way home. She sipped red wine, her diamond engagement ring askew on her finger. She hadn't told either of them about the day's events. After about a half-hour of sitting in the break room, she'd slung her leather black purse over her shoulder and driven the fifteen minutes to her white-paneled ranch house tucked away on a side street. David, her fourteen-year-old son, wasn't home from school and her husband Jack was still at work. So she cleaned. She washed the previous night's dishes, folded two loads of laundry, vacuumed the entire house, and then caught a few minutes in front of the TV before Jack got home.

Betty turned to her son, her bronzed face still smooth despite her forty odd years. David stuffed a wad of spaghetti into his mouth, his narrow face looking gaunt as he chewed. He resembled Jack, but he had her puppy dog eyes, the feature of her face that she liked the most.

"How was school?" She said, acting as casual as if the day had been all about spaghetti and wine.

David shrugged his underdeveloped shoulders, licking sauce from the corner of his mouth. Sauce that looked like blood, Betty thought. Maybe she'd chosen that for dinner subconsciously for that reason.

"I got a C on my math test," he said, glancing at his father from the corner of his brown eyes.

Jack tilted his stout head and sighed. He was fresh from the office, his graying hair slicked back off of his forehead. Betty thought he looked too harsh that way, but he insisted on styling it like that anyhow.

"It's an improvement from the D you got last time I guess," he said.

David grinned the same mischievous grin his father wore when in trouble with Betty.

"I'm getting Bs on my homework now."

Jack smirked and turned to Betty, who patted her golden-brown hair, the curls billowing out from her scalp.

"So what about that suicide in your hotel this morning?" Jack said, pointing his fork at her. "You haven't said a word about it yet."

Betty nearly choked on her wine and set down her glass, wiping her mouth to stall and figure out what to say. She set down the napkin, looking at the reddish-purple stain left behind and suddenly saw the sheets in the hotel room that morning. She stopped the flashback there and glanced from her husband to her son.

"Really?" She said, trying her best to sound dumbfounded. "There was a suicide?"

Jack narrowed his round green eyes as much as possible, and crossed his arms on the table. Apparently, she hadn't sounded as dumbfounded as she wanted.

"Weren't you at work when they found him?" Jack said, not flinching.

Betty swallowed, racing for a reasonable response.

"Of course I was. But I was busy. I had a lot of toilets to clean." She took another swig of the wine, hoping he'd just let it go.

Her husband frowned.

"He was a young guy apparently," Jack said, ignoring her for the moment. "Checked in to the hotel last night, found him shot to death this morning."

Betty shuddered. She hadn't been able to bear thinking about how he'd died earlier.

"How...how do you know it was suicide?" She felt her voice quaver and hoped no one noticed.

Jack looked up at the ceiling as he chewed a slice of Italian bread, his square jaw chomping sideways.

"They found a gun in the room with the guy's prints," he said after swallowing. "Didn't get very specific on all the facts. You know how the news is."

Betty nodded, suddenly mesmerized by the squashed thumbprint on her wine glass.

"You OK?" Jack watched her from across the table, his rectangular brow furrowed in neat rows like a field.

Betty blinked her doe eyes, searching for yet another appropriate response.

"I'm just shocked," she said nonchalantly.

"Me too," Jack said. "I can't believe you didn't hear about a suicide in your own hotel."

After dinner, David hid in his room to do homework. Betty guessed he was actually playing video games but was too distressed by the dinner conversation to nag him. Jack vanished into the garage to stain trim for the living room, finally ditching his white dress shirt for a white T-shirt. Relieved to have a minute alone, she listened to him whistle a Johnny Cash song while she

waited for the computer to ramp up. Once online, she searched through the stories on the local news station's Web site and found a leading article about a shocking suicide in a local hotel. Betty held her breath as she scanned the article, trying to slow down and focus on the words.

Adrian Annantuonio, a 23-year-old from a neighboring town, had shot himself in the head in the middle of the night. No other hotel guests or staff members heard anything, which is why Betty found him the next morning. The article covered the facts in a couple of paragraphs with no comment from his family.

His family.

An image of her son, just fourteen, lying on a bed with blood clumped onto his chestnut hair flashed through Betty's mind. And even worse, the idea that he would take his own life.

"What are you reading?"

Betty jumped, grabbing her chest.

David leaned over her shoulder, straining his skinny neck to read the article, his face glowing in the computer screen light. "Dad was right."

Betty closed the window with the article and rolled back in the office chair to stand up.

"You have homework," she said, not even able to look at him, wrestling with a sob.

"Not that much," he said indignantly, standing to his full height, which was now at eye level with her.

"Not enough from your grades," Betty said in a gravelly voice. "Get to it."

David blinked and skulked back to his room, his "No Adults Beyond This Point" sign banging against his door. Betty sat back down and rubbed her forehead. She knew enough.

Betty and Jack said goodnight around eleven, Jack still watching her with suspicious eyes as he kissed her lips. She still pretended the day had been all about dusting and changing sheets. Jack flopped onto his side and snored softly next to her in minutes. Betty laid there with her eyes closed but her mind awake. Every time she drifted off to sleep, she remembered something about Adrian Annantuonio. The white T-shirt fitted across his chest, his dark bare feet, the way his brown hair curled over his ear. She gave up after one in the morning and snuck out of their bedroom so she wouldn't wake Jack. Betty crouched over the kitchen counter in her light pink nightgown that fell to the floor, waiting for water to boil for tea.

She scanned the shadows covering the dining and living rooms, the fluorescent bulbs under the cabinets in the kitchen highlighting the furniture. The house was bare and dark, like the hotel room that morning. She yawned, wishing nothing incredible had happened that day so she could sleep. She dunked a bag of mint herbal tea up and down with her eyes closed.

"Back hurting or something?"

Jack leaned his thick frame against the wall at the kitchen's entrance in his white T-shirt and boxers, eyes half-closed. His formerly slicked back hair now stuck out in spikes on the side of his head.

Betty looked over her shoulder, too tired to be startled.

"No," she said through a yawn she tried to stifle.

"Everything OK then?"

Betty watched the steam rise from her tea, squishing the bag against the side of the mug.

"Betty?" He said. "Are you OK?"

Betty exhaled and squeezed the bridge of her pudgy nose with her thumb and forefinger. "I lied," she said wearily. "I did know about the suicide." She stopped, leaning her full weight on the kitchen counter. "I was the one who found him."

Her husband's eyes popped open. Betty supported herself on the counter, suddenly shaking. Whether from grief, relief, or just exhaustion, she wasn't sure. Jack wrapped his fingers around her arms, turning her toward him.

"Why didn't you say so?" He said softly, his brusque features melting in front of her.

Betty took a deep breath but her voice still shook.

"It was too awful," she said, tears forming and falling from her brown eyes before she could stop them. "I didn't want to repeat it. Thinking about it has been bad enough."

Jack pulled her into his arms, his chest muffling her cries. They stood in the kitchen until she calmed down, retreating into their bedroom to talk. Betty finally felt strong enough to empty her heart of everything she'd witnessed. Jack held her close in their bed, never saying a word. Cleansed of the fear and panic she'd contained all day, Betty relaxed enough to feel herself drift off. They both finally fell asleep side-by-side as the first signs of day peeked through the curtains.

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### **About the Author**

Amy Saunders grew up in Massachusetts, which often serves as inspiration for characters and settings. Other than writing, she loves graphic design, history, and baking. Amy is also the author of *Dead Locked* and "Bast & Immie."

You can learn more about Amy and her writing on her website: <http://www.amysnovels.com>

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