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Becca Harper couldn't hear the comedy club trolls heckling her over the roar inside her head. The only thing that got through that noise was the smell of the green room lounge at the club as she stomped through wearing her big Doc Martens boots and her Little House on the Prairie, thrift store dress. That smell was seared into her brain and it would always remind her of the first place she ever worked as a standup.

Of course, "worked" might be stretching the facts. She never got paid. She only got to go on when it was a slow night and Billy, the talent manager, needed filler. It was only one step above open-mic night, but one step was better than no steps. Most nights she thought so, anyway.

"Why do I get suckered into these shitty gigs?!" She shouted as she marched straight out the back door and into the alley where the smokers smoked. She ran both hands through her long, dyed-black hair and yelled into the darkness.

Andrew Fuller grinned as he took the last drag off his cigarette and flicked the butt away to land with what looked like thousands of others. "They love you, girl. They just don't know it yet," he said in an Irish brogue that might or might not have been authentic.

The "girl" line grated on Becca. She was 25, for chrissakes! "I should know better by now. Right? Fucking Halloween! Everybody knows not to work on Halloween!" She got up in Andrew's face and

added, "A fucking stormtrooper climbed onto the stage and tried to hump my leg!"

Andrew shrugged and rubbed the scruff on his chin. "You gotta take what Billy gives you, girl. Why the hell do you think I'm here?"

"The brie?" sneered Becca.

"You're gonna be stuck in the ass end of this business for a while, so you might as well get used to it. You got to toughen up. Work for it, you know?"

"I work, Andrew. Jesus Christ! I just need a break. One break."

Andrew fished another cigarette out of the crumpled pack he kept cribbed in his left hand. Even when he went on stage, he held onto those cigarettes like they were a lifeline. "You gotta make your breaks, girl. Fine tune the ol' material until it sings. You get your material worked out and the rest will fall into place. Then you'll be able to face those mongo saps in there and not run off the stage like a little baby."

"Great. Ten thousand comics in LA and I'm stuck with Irish Gandhi."

"You're just mad that I'm funnier than you and I'm still here too, princess."

"So you suck. Big deal," said Becca, trying to play off her genuine hurt with humor. It didn't work and Andrew's attitude took a sudden turn.

"Listen to me, you little wanker. I know what I'm talking about. Fix your fuckin' head or you're going to be here for a long, long time."

Becca started to fling some words back at him, but she knew, deep down, that he wasn't her therapist. Hell, he wasn't even her friend. She took a deep breath, ducked inside to grab her bag, and headed for her car without another word to anyone.

Once in the safe confines of her decade-old Civic, she turned on her phone's voice recorder and let it fly. "Who the fuck does that loser think he is? I'd get better career advice from Em!" Emily was her older sister. In Becca's estimation, she was a clueless wonder who'd married rich and moved up to miserable.

The LA streets were strangely deserted for Halloween night. Becca had only lived in the city for six months. Emily had invited her to house sit while she and her husband gallivanted around Europe for the better part of a year. Becca had taken her up on it because there weren't a whole lot of outlets for live comedy in Tucson, and the few there were had quickly grown tired of Becca's quirky emo routines. Phoenix had been an option, but why not go whole hog? Of the big three, New York, LA, and Chicago, LA was the one that had suddenly become available.

Emily had high hopes that the LA grind would wear that pointy chip off her little sister's shoulder, but so far it hadn't worked out that way. If anything, Becca had become more resolute in her quest for fame and fortune. Nothing else mattered. Not even family. She wasn't going to rest until she could get her own Netflix special and blow off her

day job. She worked in the publicity department of a small production company that had an office on the Sony backlot. That's what she told people, anyway. The actual gig involved sitting in an office and answering the phone for Mark Shoals, the executive producer of such reality TV hits as "Trucker Wives" and "Frozen A\$\$ets". He got, on average, one call per week, but he insisted that Becca stay at her desk and available between 8AM and 6PM Monday through Friday. It gave her time to work on her material, but it also gave her time to wallow in self-doubt. Comics needed to be out in the world, experiencing things so they could make fun of them. Most of her friends responded to her complaints about her job with a hearty round of "Boo-hoo! Poor Becca has to screw around on the internet all day long. Oh woe is me!"

"Note to self: don't ever do stand up on Halloween night again." She put the phone down and nearly jumped out her skin when it immediately rang.

"Fuck me!" she gasped as she swiped the screen. "Hello?"

"Rebecca. It's Bradley." Emily's hubby. "I need you to do something for me. I have a Bar Council meeting all day today so I won't be available to Skype into the building's tenants' association about the door. Today's the deadline so I need you to talk to them in my stead."

"In your STEAD?" New material came from the most unlikely places.

“There’s a meeting tomorrow at nine AM. Sharp.”

“Brad, you do realize it’s almost midnight here, right?”

Pause. “Yes, I am well aware, Rebecca. I just need you to take care of this. They’re saying I have to take down my front door. Tell them that the door is from the set of *The Firm* and that it’s a historical artifact. I have the papers.”

Becca nearly laughed in his face. Bradley was an attorney but his true obsession wasn’t the law; it was the film version of *The Firm*. He was originally from Memphis and when he was a kid he’d visited the set and met Tom Cruise. It was what had made him want to be a lawyer. Now that he’d found success as an attorney, he wanted to be an actor. Go figure. He had headshots, an agent and everything.

“The documents are in the safe.”

Becca sneered at the phone. “You mean the safe I don’t have the combination to?”

“Yes. Well, I don’t think they’ll actually require that you submit them. Just the statement that you have them in your possession should be sufficient.”

“And what if they send someone to remove the door, Brad? I kinda need a front door.”

“Then I’ll sue the shit out of them, homeowners’ association agreement or no. Look, I need to go. Don’t blow this off. It’s not much to ask

considering you're rent-free for the better part of a year."

Becca could feel her face burning. This putz really knew how to push her buttons, but she knew how to get him back. She abruptly ended the call. She'd go to his stupid meeting but she wouldn't assure him that she'd go. Let him stew.

She put her phone down just as a cop car rolled up behind her and flashed its lights. "Holy shit," muttered Becca. "This day just gets better and better."

She pulled over and rolled her window down to wait for the cop to approach. A quick glance around the car assured her that she had nothing to hide.

The cop appeared in the driver's side window. "Would you please turn off the car, ma'am?" he asked through his big, blonde handlebar moustache.

"Um, I would but I'm afraid it might not start again until it cools down. Would it be okay if I just promised not to hit the gas and take you on a high-speed chase through the valley?"

The cop chuckled at that and Becca thought she was home free. She wasn't. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but chase or no chase, I need you to turn off the engine."

Becca sighed an explosive, "Fine!" And flicked the key. The Civic coughed a couple of times and then finally stopped running.

"License and registration, please."

Becca dug into her bag and fished out the necessary documents. She even managed a smile as she handed them over.

“Do you know why I stopped you?”
Textbook.

“No, sir.”

“You were on your phone. We’re really clamping down on distracted driving these days. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ticket you, Ms. Harper.”

“No, wait. Isn’t there like some sort of three strikes thing? Pass interference? Icing?”

The cop chuckled again. At least he was a better audience than the folks at the club. “I’m sorry, ma’am. That’s funny, though. I’ll have to remember that one.”

“What if I said my grandmother was in need of a blood transfusion and I’m the only one who can help her?” The smile slowly faded from the officer’s face. “Or if I just had a breakthrough in the cure to cancer but I’ll forget it completely if I don’t make it to my secret lab in the next five minutes?”

The cop leaned in and took a deep breath. “Ms. Harper, looking at your phone while you’re piloting a two-ton missile through our city might seem trivial to you...” Becca tried to interrupt but the cop stopped her with a wag of his finger. “...but I assure you that it is not. Driving is an activity that requires your full attention. For example, if that grandmother of yours were about to cross the street up ahead, wouldn’t you want other drivers to be looking at her instead of at their phones?”

Becca was over the lecture. He had to write her a ticket but he wasn't her dad. "I don't care. I imagine that getting run down in the street would be easier than lingering in intensive care with a bunch of tubes shoved up every orifice. Weeks and weeks spent lying there with ungrateful family members hoping for a piece of the pie when you finally kick. Doctors padding their bills so they can get a piece too. No, sir. Give me death by traffic any day." When she was done, she knew she'd gone too far, but she just couldn't stop herself. It was tirades like this one that had made her want to be a standup in the first place. It felt good to slap someone with words. Unfortunately, this someone was a cop.

The cop frowned down at her and made his way back to his car. Becca slumped in her seat and instinctively reached for her phone. Then she realized what she was doing and slammed the thing into her purse. "Stupid phone!" she shouted. "If fucking Bradley hadn't called me, this never would have fucking happened! ARGH!" She cursed everything under the sun and thrashed around until the cop reappeared at her window.

"Everything alright, ma'am?" he asked, ticket tablet in hand.

Becca sat up in her seat and turned bright red. "Yes. Fine. Juuuust fine."

The cop paused for a moment then proceeded with his usual spiel. Becca signed, got her copy and was warned one more time to stay off the phone. Then, in a last ditch effort to be a nice

guy, the cop added, “Would you like me to wait with you until your car starts?”

Becca held up a hand and gave the key a try. The Civic started right up. “I swear, it never...”

The cop gave her a disappointed look that said, “You’re an asshole and a liar,” then he turned heel and returned to his vehicle.

The parking garage gate clanked shut as Becca wearily punched the button that called the elevator. Her Civic was the lone hobo amidst a dinner party of Mercedes and BMWs. Brad and Emily had bought into the downtown revitalization craze before the housing crash. Now they were stuck with a large loft space that was only a couple of blocks from skid row. It was nice in an industrial chic kind of way, but it wasn’t the least bit homey. That was what Becca needed right now--a taste of home. Maybe she’d take a bath and enjoy that last beer she’d been saving.

A glance up at the numbers told her that the elevator was either broken or there was some asshole holding it at the tenth floor. Of course Bradley Dahling had to have a 12th floor penthouse. In his eyes, prestige was important even if it came with views of bums and smog.

Five more minutes passed and the elevator stayed on ten so Becca decided to hoof it. She hit the stairs at a brisk pace, telling herself she was at least going to get a workout in, but with each flight of stairs, her outlook became less optimistic.

When she reached the tenth floor, she opened the hallway door and yelled at the people who were gathered around the elevator. “Hey, assholes. Some of us actually want to use the fucking elevator!”

The group turned in unison and Becca saw that they’d been trying to get a child in a wheelchair onto the elevator with some kind of large medical machine. One of the small wheels on the machine had wedged itself into the elevator door tracks. The adults were trying to pry it free while the boy, who was dressed as The Flash, looked on with his plastic jack-o-lantern in his lap. Becca felt herself shrink to a height of approximately five inches. She turned and ran before the people could pelt her with rotten fruit.

She finally reached the twelfth floor and looked back to realize that none of the people from the elevator had followed her. What a relief. Unfortunately, that relief wasn’t long lasting. She turned the corner and saw that her neighbor, Lyle, was having a big, loud, Halloween party. Great.

She slunked down the hall, hoping to avoid Lyle. She wasn’t sure what he did for a living but it had something to do with the internet. iPhone apps, maybe? Whatever it was, he thought his money gave him the right to hit on her every time he saw her. She had no idea why he’d even look her way. Maybe because she wasn’t an LA bimbo skank like his other girlfriends. Reality could be refreshing even for a rich perv.

She'd just cracked the door to the loft when she heard the party noise swell behind her. *Shit!*

"Becca! Babe!" It was Lyle. "Having one hell of a Halloween party tonight, hon. You really ought to get dressed up and come over. I got some tasty brews and I even hired that dude Moby to deejay. Can you believe it?! He's on the downside of his career, you know, so I got him on the cheap. That's what his agent said anyway." He held his finger to his lips in the universal "shush" gesture. "It's gonna be sweeeeet!"

"Lyle, I don't for one second believe that THE Moby will be playing your little party. You've been had."

"We'll see. So will you come over when he does show up?" He sneered. Why was it that the rich ones sneered all the goddamn time?

"You mean IF? You get Moby in there spinning for you and I'll drop by, but it sure as fuck better be Richard Hall and not some agency lookalike like that Britney clone you had over that one time."

"That was my date, Becca," said Lyle, rolling his eyes.

"In a red latex catsuit?"

"Um...yeah!" said Lyle, eyebrows raised.

"Good night, Lyle!" And with that, Becca was finally safe within the confines of Bradley Manor. The loft space was large, well-appointed, beautifully furnished, and as cold as a witch's tit. Not literally cold. No, Bradley Dahling had spared no expense

on the HVAC system. It was cold in the way that federal buildings are cold. Becca thought a cat or two would go a long way to warming the place up but she hadn't mentioned it. Her sister was allergic.

"Welcome home, Emily." It was Kath-E, the home automation system that controlled the lights, doors, and entertainment system, among other things. Em had given Becca her key fob so Kath-E always thought she was Emily.

"Howdy, bitch. How's it hanging?"

The wall panel flashed its lights and made an off-pitch series of notes that indicated it didn't understand the query.

"Yeah, same to you," said Becca as she smashed her keys into the big crystal bowl beside the door. She secretly wanted to crack that bowl into a thousand pieces because it represented the world her sister had bought into. Style with no substance. Who needed a big, fuck-all, glass bowl with a bunch of pink marbles in it? No one, that's who.

"Kath-E, lights," she said begrudgingly as she looked out the huge picture window that filled the opposite wall of the living room. It was a cavernous space, two stories high with a sectional sofa and a crazy modern art fireplace that had never been used for its intended purpose. Emily had a serious fear of fire that not even the most expensive shrinks could rid her of. Becca was surprised that Em hadn't made Bradley Dahling remove the fireplace altogether.

She went to the relative comfort of the kitchen and flung open the fridge. It was empty except for a pack of Trader Joe's brand string cheese, some condiments, and a single Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Emily and Brad had agreed to let her housesit but the expendables were her responsibility. She grabbed the beer and a string cheese, and moped off to soak in the tub.

The over-the-top luxury of the bathroom was the only thing that wasn't wasted on her. Becca loved it to no end but she frequently reminded herself not to get used to it. She knew that the second her sis got back, she'd count herself lucky to land in some shitbox in the valley that had a rust-stained tub from the '40s and hot water issues.

Her entry awakened the room and the recessed lighting faded up around her. She said, "Kath-E, Becca one," and the tub immediately began filling. In just a few minutes, she was relaxing in a hot bath with The Julie Ruin blasting on the sound system. The loud music soothed her. It forced her to stop thinking about the cop and the ticket and the club and the kid in the wheelchair.

She scrubbed and shampooed and drank her beer in one gulp, but she couldn't shake the litany of things that had gone south that evening. Was she really such a bad person that the universe felt the need to slap her around like that? She pondered ways to change her Facebook status to "Success" and she fell asleep in the tub with visions of neuroses dancing in her head.

Becca suddenly sat up in the cold tub water. Had there been a noise? A thump? Was somebody knocking at the door? She listened but heard nothing. She climbed out of the tub and quickly dried off and pulled on a t-shirt, nagged by the feeling that someone was in the loft with her. She slowly opened the bathroom door.

“Hello?” she said louder than she’d intended. The word bounced around the hard walls of the loft. “Is someone there?” Nothing. The whole place was dark, presumably because Kath-E had shut everything down while she was in the bath. “I’m HIV positive!” Still no response. Becca’s nervousness was dispelled somewhat, but she still had to see for herself. She padded into the kitchen and was surprised when the lights didn’t turn on automatically. Her surprise made her angry. Kath-E was teaching her how to be lazy. She realized that she didn’t even know where the kitchen light switch was.

She opened the fridge and its light spilled out into the room. “Hello?” She stared across the granite bar into the dark living room beyond but she couldn’t see anything. She felt silly being scared. She’d probably just had a weird dream and the control system had rebooted or something. That was all. She distinctly remembered the clicks that had sounded as Kath-E had locked the door behind her earlier.

“Kath-E?” The control system usually responded with a questioning two-note tone row, but tonight it remained silent. “Kath-E, lights on.” The great expanse of living room remained dark. A part of Becca began to panic while her rational mind continued to try and explain the situation away. Maybe there’d been a power failure.

She walked over to the front door and grabbed her key ring from the accursed bowl. Surprisingly, it actually opened the door. She stepped out into the hall and felt sillier than ever. The hallway lights were on and the walls were thumping out some awful techno tunes that sounded nothing like Moby. Lyle’s door swung open and Becca was suddenly aware of the fact that she was standing in the hall wearing nothing but a t-shirt. She was trying to scoot back inside when Lyle came up behind her.

“Ooooo! Nice look, babe,” he said.

She swung around, way too aware that her breasts were bouncing underneath the thin fabric of the tee shirt. Judging from Lyle’s expression, he was aware of it too. “Gotta go,” said Becca, but she wasn’t quick enough with the door. Lyle managed to wedge a loafer into the gap before it closed.

“Is that your Halloween costume? Lyle like!”

“Jesus, Lyle. Cut the crap, alright? I was just...” A part of Becca wanted to tell him the truth. He wasn’t exactly a man, but he was the closest thing she had on tap at the moment. She eyed him through the narrow gap in the doorway. “Remove

your foot and I'll tell you. Leave it there and I'll crush it and make you cry like the girl you are."

The look on her face convinced Lyle that she was serious and he removed his foot. He pushed on the door but it still wouldn't budge. "Hey!" he said.

"I said I'd tell you, nimrod, not that I'd let you in."

Lyle ventured a glance behind him to make sure no one was watching. "Yeah, okay. I get it. So what's up?"

Becca took a deep breath. "The lights are out over here and I don't know where the breakers are."

"I know where they are," said Lyle a little too quickly. "I mean, your place is probably laid out the same as mine. I could take a look. You know, if you want."

It was a little like being asked if you wanted to eat the most delicious meal ever prepared with the knowledge that it was laced with a slow-acting poison. Becca pondered the offer long enough for Lyle to get the picture.

"Look, Becca. I know you think I'm not your type, but I'm not a bad person. If I can help you, I will."

Yeah, right, thought Becca, but she let him in anyway. "You just help me with the breakers and then you go back to your little party. Capisce?"

"Huh?"

Becca mimed fake sign language. “Do. You. Un. Der. Stand?”

“Yeah, yeah. Got it.”

“Good. So where’s the breaker box?”

Lyle looked around. The place looked different when the only light was the one in the fridge. “The refrigerator works, huh?”

“No shit, Sherlock. The door lock too.”

“Do you want me to help you or not?”

Becca pretended to ponder the question deeply and Lyle headed for the door. She grabbed his arm. “Sorry, Lyle. I’m sorry. I’m just... I handle stress by making fun of things. That’s how it is. How I am.”

“Apology accepted,” said Lyle as he rested his hand on top of hers.

Becca quickly let go of his arm. “Breakers?”

“Uh, yeah. In here.” Lyle led the way to the laundry room. He pushed the door open but the interior remained dark.

“Kath-E? Lights on,” said Becca in her best *understand me please, computer* voice.

“Who’s Kathy?” asked Lyle.

“Not Kathy. Kath-E. Like iPad, only... Whatever. That’s what Em calls the control system.” Lyle’s face remained blank. “You know, the whole home automation thingie?”

Lyle’s bewildered expression turned into a grimace. “No. No, I don’t. My place doesn’t have that.”

“Oh. Sorry. They just... I’m sure Bradley had it added.” She paused waiting for the jealousy to dissolve off his face. When it didn’t, she said, “Flashlight,” and went back to the kitchen. She returned with a large Maglight in hand, which she promptly handed to Lyle.

“I want the name of the company that installed this Kath-E thing, Becca. No fooling around, alright? That sounds super-cool.”

“Fine. But I need the lights on to be able to find it.”

Lyle nodded and strode to the far end of the laundry room. He shined the light from the flashlight on a small door in the wall. Becca walked up behind him as he opened it.

“See anything?” she asked.

“None of the breakers are tripped.” He tried pushing on them, then he turned a few off and back on again. “Your lights should be on. Maybe this Kath-E thing just stopped working.”

“I guess.”

“Did you try any of the lights manually?”

Becca felt like an idiot. Worse, she felt like an idiot woman. “No. I just... It was all dark, Lyle. Everything was off.”

“Try them now,” he said with more than a hint of smugness.

Becca tried the laundry room switches. Nothing. She sighed, vindicated. “Nope.”

“Weird,” said Lyle.

“So what do we do about it?”

“Did you call the super?”

Becca made her best DUH face and said, “No, Lyle, I did not call the super. In case you didn’t notice, it’s after midnight.”

“So?”

“So, I can live without power ‘til morning if I have to. It’s not an emergency.”

Lyle smirked. “So why were you standing in the hall, half-naked?”

“Well, I just got, you know, kinda spooked. That’s all.”

“I see. Well, I don’t know what kind of movies you’ve been watching, but that chainsaw guy isn’t about to bust in here and carve up your intestines.”

Becca scowled. “Ew! That’s gross, Lyle. Jesus.”

“What?! What’d I say?”

“Just go, alright? I’ll be fine.” She pushed him towards the door and took the flashlight from him.

“Yeah, but what if something really is wrong? What if Kath-E has become like a person?”

“You mean sentient?” Now it was Becca’s turn to smirk.

“Yeah! Sentient!”

“And her first action as a sentient being is to turn off the power to half of the condo?” She frowned. “Good night, Lyle. Thanks for your help.”

Lyle huffily grabbed the door handle but it wouldn’t budge. “Did you, uh, lock this, babe?”

“Oh right. The fob,” she said as she waved her key ring in front of the door. There was no satisfying click. “It should open.”

Lyle grabbed the handle again and pulled. “It’s still locked.”

Certain that her wanna-be bedmate was just screwing with her, Becca pushed him aside and tried the door herself. Nothing.

“Is Kath-E in charge of the locks too?” asked Lyle.

“It worked a minute ago.” She held up a finger. “Kath-E, unlock the front door.”

They waited in silence, then tried the door again. It remained locked. “Guess I’m yours for the night!” said Lyle, his mood suddenly brightening.

“Oh, hell no,” muttered Becca as she used all of her weight against the infamous door from *The Firm*. She finally gave up when it was obvious that the door was going to remain locked for the time being. She turned to Lyle and scowled. “You so much as breathe on me and I’m shoving this flashlight up your ass! You got it?”

“Some guys like that sort of...”

Becca pushed him back against the wall. “GOT IT?!”

Lyle sighed. “Yeah, I got it. I’m not so bad, babe. Seriously.”

“Whatever. You can tell me all about it once we’re out of here. Now, let’s find Kath-E.”

“Say what?”

Becca turned away and the flashlight went dark.

“Why’d you turn off the light?” asked Lyle.

“Gee, you really are smarter than everyone thinks,” said Becca.

“Seriously?” asked Lyle.

“Only if everyone thinks you’re an invertebrate,” scowled Becca. She shook the light because that’s how you fixed things. “It went out on its own.”

“You mean, the flashlight went off when you took a step forward?”

“Lyle, not only is that what I meant, it’s what I said.” Becca thought that taping his mouth shut would make him much more appealing. Not great, but better.

“Hang on,” said Lyle. He grabbed Becca’s arm and dragged her back to the kitchen.

Becca was about to make fun of him when the light popped on and scared them both. Becca dropped the flashlight to the tile floor with a loud clack.

“Crazy,” said Lyle.

“What?” asked Becca. She thought she just had an iffy flashlight.

“If I’m right, it’ll go out again when we go back to the living room.”

“Why the hell would it…” started Becca, but Lyle was already at the edge of the living room. As predicted, the light went out again. “Hang on,” said Becca and took the flashlight to the bedroom. It stayed on. While she was in there, she slid on a

pair of sweatpants with the word “Juicy” printed on the butt and a pair of slides. When she returned to the kitchen, the light stayed lit.

“Awwwww. Pants? Really, babe?”

Becca ignored him and slowly paced off each room, laying down things to mark where the flashlight worked and where it didn't. It worked just fine in the kitchen, bedroom and bath but shut off in most of the living room. After plotting it out she could see that the area without power formed a large curve. “Weird,” she said. “It's like there's an energy suck coming from the fireplace.”

Lyle nodded, not entirely sure what an energy suck was. He was about to ask but Becca beat him to it.

“It's like there's something stopping the electricity from working in parts of the condo.”

“Like what?”

“How the hell should I know?” said Becca.

“So nothing works in there,” said Lyle, “but it's okay in here?”

Becca nodded, then muttered, “Shit!” and ran into the bathroom. She came back with her cell phone in her hand. “Too late. It's dead.”

“So the energy sucker thing did a number on your phone?” asked Lyle.

Becca snorted a laugh. “Uh, no, but thanks for playing our little game. It was almost dead when I got home and I forgot to hook up the charger. You have your phone on you?”

Lyle shook his head. "It's at home," he said softly. He didn't know why, but somehow he knew this would set Becca off again.

"Jesus, Lyle! You never go anywhere without your phone!"

"Chill, babe! We'll just light some candles or something!"

Becca shook her head.

"What's that mean?"

"It means, we don't have any candles."

"What, like none at all? What about tea lights?"

"Are you deaf?"

"I thought all chicks had the hots for smelly candles."

Becca took a deep breath. "My sister used to have nightmares about burning down our house. Now she has this fear of open flames. Pyrophobia."

"Def Leppard!" said Lyle with a smile.

"No, Lyle. Holy shit."

"So why don't you just hook up your charger?" asked Lyle, eager to change the subject. He didn't know much about girls, but he knew that once they were mad at you, your prospects dropped astronomically.

"It's in my car," said Becca.

"Well, then...are there other chargers here? Maybe your sister has an old one."

Becca brightened. "Oh, right. By the TV."

“Okay, I tell you what. I’ll stand back here where the flashlight works and I’ll shine it at the TV so you can run over and get the charger.”

It sounded good to Becca except for the part where she was going to be in the dark living room by herself. “No funny stuff, alright? I’m serious.”

“I’m cool, babe.”

“Alright. It’s above the mantle. See it?”

“Yep.”

Becca tried to think of a good reason not to run across the room for the charger, but none came to mind that didn’t make her out to be a bonafide pussy. Her only option was to run over as fast as she could. She took off at a trot and plowed right into the edge of the large, marble coffee table that sat in the center of the room. “Jesus fuck!” she shouted as she fell to the floor.

“What happened?! Becca?” Without thinking, Lyle ran across the room toward her.

“No, wait!” shouted Becca, but it was too late. The flashlight blinked out and Lyle ran into the same coffee table that had taken her down.

“OW! What the fuck?!” shouted Lyle as he cradled his shin.

“It’s a marble coffee table. You’re not supposed to run into the damn thing.”

“Well, you ran into it first!”

Becca grabbed the flashlight from him and limped back to the kitchen. When the light blinked on, she saw that the leg of her Juicy pants was

soaked in blood. “Oh, Jesus,” she muttered before limping back to the bathroom. She could feel her knees weakening. Just seeing blood did it to her every time.

Lyle caught up to her just in time to keep her from falling.

“You cut too?” she asked.

“Nah, just a bruise.”

Becca looked down and caught another glimpse of her blood. Her vision slowly began fading at the edges. “I have to ask a favor,” she said. Lyle just looked at her like she’d started speaking Swahili. “My leg. I need...” She didn’t know if she could actually ask this dumbass for help or not. She sighed deeply and started again. “Will you help me bandage my leg? I have this thing with blood.”

“A thing? What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Lyle.

“It makes me swimmy-headed. You know? Like it makes me...” And with that, as if to complete her sentence, Becca passed out.

When she woke up, she was lying on her back in the middle of the bathroom. Her head was pounding like crazy. She shouted, “Lyle!” The only thing worse than being trapped with that dumbass was being trapped without him.

Lyle rounded the corner and leaned down to help her up. She glanced at her leg, afraid that

she'd see blood again. Instead, there was a neat bandage on her shin. "You did that?" she asked.

"I was a lifeguard in Malibu for two summers so I had to take basic first aid and whatnot."

Becca had to force herself not to make fun of the "whatnot". He'd just helped her, after all. "Well, thanks," she said.

"You're welcome," Lyle beamed.

Becca rearranged her clothes and realized that she'd never put on a bra. She gave Lyle the stink eye and asked, "Did you look at my tits?"

Lyle looked like she'd just hit him in the face with a 2x4. "What?"

"You heard me, skeeze. I was unconscious and my clothes are all out of whack."

Lyle looked genuinely hurt. He shook his head.

"Oh, like you didn't consider it!" shouted Becca.

"Becca, I know you don't like me, but... I couldn't do something like that." He stared at the floor and wished he could run away.

"Okay, I'm sorry, Lyle. Really. I am. I just... I overreacted. You helped me and for that I'm truly grateful." She leaned over and planted a kiss on his cheek. It almost made up for her suspicions. Almost.

"So, what time is it?" she asked as she tried to walk. Her leg hurt but it'd be worse if she let it stiffen up.

“No idea. None of the clocks work. The fridge light went out a few minutes ago when I was getting some ice for your leg.”

“What?” Becca took the flashlight and limped to the kitchen. The light blinked out well before she reached the living room. She backed up and the light came back on just outside the bathroom.

“What’s the matter?” asked Lyle.

“The power suck’s getting bigger. It probably won’t be long before the electricity in here goes out too.”

“You’re pretty smart, for a girl.”

Becca balled up her fist and hobbled toward her neighbor. “I swear to god, Lyle.”

“It’s a compliment!”

Becca shook her head. Could he really be that oblivious? She looked around the bathroom. “We need to get the phone chargers before the power outlets in here die.”

Lyle smiled. “Way ahead of you.” He pointed to the end of the bathroom vanity where her phone was plugged into one of the chargers. “I got them when you were...um...resting.”

“So we can call for help, now?!” Becca was already forgetting the throbbing pain in her shin.

“Nah. They still don’t work.”

Becca picked up her phone and tried the power button. “How long’s it been charging?”

Lyle shrugged. “I don’t know. A while.”

Becca sighed. “Like more than fifteen minutes?” Lyle nodded. “Thirty?”

“Look, Becca, I don’t fucking know! None of the clocks work, remember? It ought to come on when it’s plugged in, right?”

“What am I, Jony Ive?”

“Who?”

“Jesus, never mind.” Becca slapped the phone down on the counter. “What’re we gonna do?”

“We haven’t tried the back door yet.”

Becca felt conflicted. She was elated but at the same time she wanted to fill up the tub with lava and drown Lyle in it. “What. Did. You. Say?”

“The back door. The emergency exit.”

“What emergency exit, Lyle? This is a condo.”

“Yeah, but it’s required by law to have two exits. The balcony doesn’t count because there’s no fire escapes.” He took a step back. Becca was back to being angry again.

“And you were waiting to mention this, because?”

“I thought you knew. You do live here after all, babe.”

It was the last “babe” that pushed her over the edge. She grabbed Lyle by the collar and shook him as hard as she could. “Now you listen to me. You get your fucking head on straight or, so help me god, I’ll throw you off of the balcony.” She pushed him away and limped across the living

room. Her anger had made her bold but she soon realized that she still had no idea where the emergency exit was.

“Well?” she shouted. Lyle soon joined her. “Where’s this emergency door?”

“Are you mad at me, Becca?”

Becca almost laughed. “Yes, I’m fucking mad at you! We could’ve been out of here by now! Just find the door and all is forgiven.”

“Seriously? Will you come to my party?”

It took a moment for Becca to rein in her feelings and speak without chewing Lyle’s face off. “Just get us out of here, okay?”

“Alright, let me think. This floorplan isn’t exactly like mine, you know. It’s flipped. And it’s dark in here.”

“You don’t fucking say.”

Lyle strode ahead of Becca. “I just...OW!”

“Look out for the coffee table.” Becca smiled in the darkness.

Lyle reached back for Becca’s hand and she screamed.

“Hold onto my hand. We have to stay together.”

“Nope. Not gonna happen.”

“Fuck, babe. Just...fuck!”

“Not if my life depended on it. I can see just fine. Now get moving.”

Lyle approached the fireplace. “Didn’t you say the electric sucking thing was in the fireplace?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So, we’re at the fireplace. Maybe we should check it out.”

“Forget it. We’re getting the hell out of here. You can come back and dick with the fireplace after you show me the emergency door.”

Lyle nodded, completely unaware that Becca couldn’t see him in the darkness. He slid along the length of the fireplace until he came to the open hallway. “The emergency exit should be down at the end of the hall. Is there a big closet down there?”

“I don’t remember.”

“In my place, there’s a guest room to the right, and a closet to the left. The emergency door’s in the back of the closet.”

“No guest rooms for Mr. and Mrs. Perfect because they’d rather not have guests. They turned the second bedroom into an office. It’s on the left side of the hall.”

“Then there’s probably a closet on the right side.”

“Maybe. Actually, I think there is.”

Lyle stepped slowly into the hallway, careful to avoid any more shin-level furniture. Against her better judgement, Becca pressed in close behind him and put her hand on his shoulder.

“It’s dark as fuck in here,” muttered Lyle.

“So? If the door’s on the right side of the hall, we just have to feel our way along the wall until we reach it.”

“Is there any furniture in the way? Any coffee tables?”

“I don’t think so,” said Becca.

“Okay, good. Stay close.” And with that, Lyle took two steps forward and slammed into a large vase that stood waist high. It teetered in place and then fell over, shattering into what sounded like a million pieces.

“Shit. Forgot about that,” said Becca, cringing in the darkness. “Technically speaking, though, it isn’t furniture.”

“Wasn’t,” corrected Lyle as they crunched across the floor to the right side of the hall. It took forever, but they finally found the closet. Lyle opened the door and pushed the coats and jackets aside. He felt around on the back wall and even hit the wall with his fists. It was as solid as could be. “Nothing,” he said.

“What’s that mean?” asked Becca.

“It means your closet isn’t the same as mine.” He shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Goddammit!” shouted Becca.

“Is there another closet?” asked Lyle.

“Brad’s office is on the other side of the hall.” Becca was tired of being that close to Lyle. His skanky cologne was making her face itch.

“Is there a closet in the office?” asked Lyle.

“Jesus, Lyle, how would I know?”

“Doesn’t hurt to check, huh, babe? Maybe they put the emergency exit in there.”

“Alright. Then let’s get going,” said Becca.

Lyle crossed the hall and felt around for the office door. "Okay, I found it. Going in." He turned the doorknob and pushed the door open. Flashes of blue light appeared out of nowhere, and what those flashes illuminated was beyond Becca's ability to comprehend. The room was filled, from floor to ceiling, with a mass of long, prickly appendages that looked like giant, hairy spider legs! They were scrambling for purchase, grabbing for anything in sight. In the middle of the tangle was a large, quivering mass that suddenly started shaking and squealing!

Lyle fell over Becca's hurt leg and she cried out in pain. "Oh, Jesus, Becca, it's got you!" he shouted.

Becca couldn't hear him over the roar from the creature. She scrambled to her feet and backed out into the hall. The spider legs shuddered and then reached out for her all at once. They sprouted tiny fingers and those fingers grabbed at the wall, at the door, and then at Becca herself. The creature's fingers touched her ankle and she freaked the fuck out. She cried for help, but Lyle had run away to save himself. She kicked at the grotesque appendages with all her might. She kicked and kicked until she was sure she'd broken at least a few of the thing's fingers, then she scrambled to her feet and ran across the living room to the kitchen. She no longer cared how much her shin hurt. She didn't even care if she survived. She had one

mission and one mission only. She was going to murder Lyle.

“Oh, Jesus!” laughed Lyle. “You got me good! Where’d you get...”

Becca balled up her fist and swung for his face, but she missed. “You left me?! Are you fucking kidding?”

“Ahhhhahaha! You scared the shit out of me, babe! Hahahaha! That’s the best Halloween prank ever! Oh my god!”

“Lyle?” More laughter. “LYLE! It’s not a prank!” She grabbed him and slapped him, hard. “That thing’s not a fucking Halloween prank!” That got his attention.

“What? Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Yeah, but there’s no such thing as giant spiders, right?!” The blood drained from Lyle’s face. “Holy shit! It’s like that thing from Lovecraft!”

“What did you say?” asked Becca, stunned. No way had Lyle ever read any Lovecraft.

“That metal band, Lovecraft. There’s a thing just like that in one of their videos! I just... Holy fuck!”

“Good. That’s helpful,” muttered Becca as she got up and stumbled back to the bathroom with Lyle following close behind.

“How can that be a real thing, babe?” asked Lyle.

Becca caught a glimpse of the two of them in the bathroom mirror just before the lights went

out. “Great,” she sighed. She felt around on the counter for her phone but it was still dead. She took a deep breath and pushed Lyle aside. “Out of my way,” she mumbled. She was mad, but he wasn’t worth it.

Becca limped into the kitchen and felt around in the cupboards. She retrieved a bottle of whisky and a couple of tumblers which she plopped onto the granite bar that looked out onto the living room. She opened the bottle and poured until both tumblers were almost full, then she hoisted herself up onto the counter.

“Drink?” she asked.

“Are you kidding? Becca, there’s a fucking monster in there! It’s going to come out here and it’s going to eat us!”

“I know,” said Becca. “My leg hurts, the power’s out, and I’m locked in here with a fucking monster. Oh and there’s that thing in the office, too,” she smirked. “I don’t know what to do about any of it so I’m going to have a taste of this very expensive scotch before I die.”

Something about that statement calmed Lyle and piqued his interest. “Scotch?”

“Yeah, 50-year-old Glen something.” She took a deep swallow. “It’s smooth. I’ll give it that.”

“Glenury? Glenfiddich?”

“Lyle, I don’t fucking remember and I can’t make it out in the dark. You want some or not?”

“Becca, if it’s one of those I mentioned and it’s really 50 years old, it’s worth like five or six thousand dollars.”

“Yeah, about that. I was warned not to touch it.”

“Brad’s gonna kill you.”

“A giant fucking spider just tried to tear my leg off, Lyle, so I don’t much give a shit what Bradley thinks right now, OKAY?!”

“Alright,” muttered Lyle as he grabbed the second glass. He took a sip and nearly fainted. “Oh my god,” he said. “This is amazing!”

“Focus. Is there a way for us to get out of here before we get eaten?”

Lyle sipped his drink slowly, savoring every drop. It was so good that it almost made him forget about the monster. “Can’t we just stay out here and drink. I don’t think it can get out of the office.”

Deep crunching sounds suddenly emanated from the direction of the office. Becca and Lyle watched as the giant, glowing spider thing ripped the office door off its hinges and took a good portion of the wall along with it.

Becca’s mind shifted into overdrive. She ran out onto the balcony and yelled over the railing at the lights of downtown LA. “HEYYYYY! HELP! HEEEEEEELP! SOMEBODY HELP US!”

Lyle followed, carefully cradling his drink. “Scream all you want. Nobody can hear you from up here,” he said.

Becca just stared at him in the sodium-vapor glare from below.

“Double-paned doors and windows. All of these lofts are insulated against the helicopter noise.” He shrugged.

“So what do we do, give up?” Becca was starting to feel panicky. “Jesus, Lyle, that thing’s going to get out of the office any minute now!”

“Okay. You’re right.” Lyle set his glass on the railing and looked over the side. “If we had a long enough rope we could rappel down to the street. Maybe we could tie some bedsheets together.”

Becca walked over to the edge and looked down. It appeared to be a couple of hundred feet to the ground, with no balconies on the lower floors. She scowled. “We’d have to have like a hundred sheets! Any other bright ideas?”

“You think we could kill it?”

“With what? Your rapier wit?” Becca sneered. She thought about what her father would do if he were there. Oh, how she wished he was here. She hated herself for it, but there were times when she absolutely needed a man. A man could put on some flannel and take an axe to that monster while she waited to smother him with kisses and a homemade meal when all was said and done.

“Bradley doesn’t collect guns or knives or anything?” asked Lyle.

“Nope. There’s some kitchen knives, I guess, but that thing has legs that are like ten feet long.”

“Then we just block the doors and wait out here,” said Lyle. “When the sun comes up, we flag down a helicopter or something.”

“And just how many helicopter rescue teams are just trolling around downtown LA looking for people to pluck off balconies? Jesus! We have to face the fact that we’re stuck in this condo with foot thick concrete walls, insulated glass windows, and no phone. Nobody’s coming to help us!”

“What about the alarm?” said Lyle, unaware of the thought until he’d actually said it out loud.

Becca stopped to think. “Maybe. If there’s a battery backup,” said Becca. She went inside to the kitchen, followed closely by Lyle. She looked up at the ceiling above the stove and dragged a chair over.

“What’re you looking for?” asked Lyle.

“Alarm, nimrod.”

“Huh?”

“There should be a heat sensor in the ceiling somewhere near the stove. If I can find it, maybe we can set it off.”

“How?”

“Gee, Lyle, let me think. How about heat?”

“But we don’t have any way to make fire, right?”

Becca pondered the problem while feeling around the ceiling for the sensor. When she found it, she grabbed it and twisted. It wouldn't budge.

"If you tell me what you're doing, maybe I can help," said Lyle.

Becca was about to answer when more squealing sounds came from her brother-in-law's office. It helped her to get past some of her bullshit. She grabbed the sensor and began rubbing it like a genie's lamp.

Another blast of squeals followed by a low rumbling sound made Lyle move to put Becca between himself and the office. "Becca, seriously, what're you doing?"

"I'm trying...to trigger...the heat sensor." She spoke in huffs and puffs as she tried harder to create friction with her hands. The surface of the sensor was definitely getting warmer.

"I don't get it," said Lyle.

Becca ignored him. She ground her fist around that sensor in the ceiling until it felt like her skin was going to come off, but nothing happened. No alarms, no lights, no nothing. She finally gave up and climbed down to check her leg. She could feel the blood through the bandage but she didn't dare look at it.

"So, I guess that didn't work, huh?" asked Lyle.

Becca felt like tearing Lyle's face off, but she knew that would only make her feel better for a moment. Instead, she rifled through the kitchen

drawers until she found a small hammer. It had a pink handle--obviously designed for the handy wifey--but it was a hammer all the same.

“What’re you gonna do with THAT?” asked Lyle as he backed away from her.

Becca shot him an “eat shit” look and got back up on the chair. She got a good grip on the hammer and started pounding on the heat sensor as hard as she could.

“Jesus,” shouted Lyle as he covered his ears. “You could warn a guy!”

Becca kept on pounding. After what felt like an eternity, the sensor popped off its mount and bounced across the kitchen floor.

“What the hell was that for?” asked Lyle.

Becca held up a finger. Wait for it. The seconds ticked by but still no alarm sounded. She sighed, “That had to trigger the alarm.”

“We don’t even know if it’s still working,” said Lyle.

“Yeah, the batteries could be as dead as the ones in the flashlight. If that happened, the alarm system wouldn’t be able to notify the monitoring company.”

“So what happens when the monitor peeps lose the signal?” asked Lyle.

Becca shrugged. “Nothing.”

“That can’t be right. What if bad guys had disconnected the power AND the battery?”

Becca thought about it. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe they’d call the cops.”

Lyle's face brightened. "So, they should be on their way!"

"Yeah, but it might take a while." Becca looked around the kitchen, taking stock. "We have food and water. Maybe we can barricade ourselves in the bathroom."

"I don't know, babe. We can't wait a whole lot longer."

"Yes, we can. Lyle, look at me."

"No! That thing was busting down the office door pretty good, right? If it can take out that door...If it can break down a whole wall, it'll get to us. It'll get to us and it'll kill us! Oh god!" Lyle fell back against the counter and slid down to the floor. He began to cry.

For the first time, Becca actually felt sorry for Lyle. She'd never considered just how helpless stupid people were, especially when they had some fifty-year-old scotch in them. She had to admit that she felt like crying too. She wanted to curl up in a ball and hide her head under the covers, but then what? Just let that thing eat her alive? No.

A new, more growly spider sound echoed across the living room.

She sighed. "Maybe we do have to kill it," she said softly.

"What?! But you said..."

"Look, I don't want to do it! I don't have some burning need to show how big my dick is! It's just that I think we have to take it out while it's still stuck inside the office. Before it can get out here

and... I think it's the only way we're going to get through this."

Lyle looked like he might pass out. "Yeah, but...we don't have anything to kill it *with!* And that thing... It's probably got like gallons and gallons of goop inside it. It could be toxic and melt through the floor like those aliens in the movies. We can't just go poking holes in it and hope that does the trick, right? What if we just make it mad?!"

A loud, guttural squeal echoed down the hall. "It's already mad, Lyle. Jesus, man the fuck up."

"Are you kidding? That Bear guy from TV would run screaming from that thing!"

"Fine, so we're agreed--you aren't a man. So where does that leave us? It leaves us stuck in this condo with a giant, fuck-all spider thing that wants to eat us!" She rummaged through the cabinets under the sink. All she found was some Drano and a wire brush. Not exactly helpful. She stood up and Lyle plowed right into her.

"Lyle!" Becca shouted, "get out of my way." She made her way to the laundry room and Lyle followed.

"What're you doing, Becca?! Don't leave me!"

Becca stopped and Lyle ran into her again. She wanted to say something mean to him--something an '80s action star might say to humiliate the bad guy--but she knew that she might actually need his help. It was a long shot, but it

could happen. She could just make out his confused expression as she turned away. She felt around, hoping to find a broom or a mop. Anything with a long handle. She found a couple of Swiffers so she grabbed them and took them back to the kitchen.

Lyle was right behind her. “What’s the Swiffer deal, babe?”

Becca was digging through the kitchen drawers again. “I’m going to stab it.”

“Are you nuts?”

“You have a better idea? It looks like its body could be fragile. I might even be able to kill it if I hit its vital organs.” She grabbed a roll of duct tape from the drawer where she’d found the pink hammer and pulled the handles off both Swiffers.

“Becca, that’s not even sharp! I’m telling you, you’re just gonna piss that thing off!”

Becca reached over and pulled a large chef’s knife out of the knife block on the counter. “We can’t just sit here and hope for the best, Lyle. Maybe that’s how you live your life, but it’s never worked out for me. I have to do something.”

“Fine. You go in there and poke that thing if you want to, but I’m staying safe and sound right here.”

“Fine.”

“FINE!”

Becca could give a shit what happened to Lyle but she was determined to survive. Let him fend for himself. After she finished taping the two

Swiffer handles together, she grabbed the knife and taped it onto the end. When she was done, she hefted the makeshift spear and tested its reach. Satisfied, she left Lyle in the kitchen and tiptoed across the living room.

She couldn't hear any sounds from the spider at all. Had it passed out or something? She poked her head out into the hall to take a quick look. The office door was gone. Not on the floor or broken into a thousand pieces. Just gone. Big chunks of the wall were missing, too. The spider thing had been busy. Maybe it was sleeping. Did spiders sleep? She eased around the corner and saw it lying there, its light faded to a dim blue. She peeked through one of the larger holes in the wall and saw that it had even broken through the concrete floor. She didn't know what the spider thing was but it had to be way fucking strong to do that. The fact that the monster hadn't moved made Becca braver. She eased a little closer and was about to poke her head in to get a better look when something grabbed her left arm!

She let out a shriek and jabbed her elbow into the thing behind her as hard as she could. The spider squealed and thrashed its long tentacles around the room like thick, wet ropes. Becca fell into the hallway holding her Swiffer weapon out in front of her. It was then that she heard Lyle moaning in pain.

"Jesthus, Beccah." He was lying on the floor, holding his face.

“Lyle?” She knelt beside him.

“You tried to kill me!” he screeched as he slid away from her.

Becca suddenly realized that the spider thing hadn’t tried to grab her--Lyle had. She’d elbowed him in the face as a result. “What the hell were you doing?!” she whispered.

“Helping,” muttered Lyle through his shirt. He was using it to staunch the flow of blood from his battered nose.

The spider was wide awake now, and it reached for Becca.

“Goddammit!” said Becca. She leapt up and grabbed Lyle, then quickly hustled him out of the hallway and across the living room.

Once they were back in the kitchen, Becca handed Lyle some paper towels and an ice pack from the freezer. Clearly, he wasn’t going to be much help fighting the spider.

“I thay we stay wight heah,” he said through the ice pack. “Ith not going anywheah.”

“Yeah, it’s not going anywhere, until it does. Did you see the wall?” Lyle shook his head. “It already tore half of it down and it’s breaking through the floor. It’s just a matter of time until it’s out of there.”

Lyle stood up and it made him feel like he was going to barf. Becca steadied him. “Where you think you’re going?”

“We goth to get in the tumb,” he said.

Becca started to laugh but then thought better of it. She'd been the one who hit him, after all. "The tumb?"

"TUHM-BUH," Lyle enunciated.

"Tuba?"

"NOH!"

"Lyle, whatever it is, it can wait."

"No. Tee you bee!"

"Tub?"

Lyle nodded.

"You want to get in the tub?"

"Us," said Lyle.

Becca laughed and shook her head. "I'm not getting in the tub with you now or ever, perv! You can just hump that ice pack."

"Fowah pohtection."

"And how is the tub going to provide protection?"

Lyle shrugged and said, "toe-nay-doh."

"Look, the tub's no good, okay? Just wait here."

Lyle took the ice pack off his nose so he could be heard clearly. "It might hurt you, Becca. I'm serious."

"Do you think I want to poke a giant spider with a knife taped on the end of a Swiffer? Does this sound like something I'd enjoy?"

He wasn't sure, but he thought it was a trick question. "Um...no?" he said.

"Stay put," she said, then she went back down the hallway toward the office.

Lyle dropped the ice pack and followed, stuffing paper towels up his nostrils as he ran. "Hold up!"

The spider was quiet again as they approached. Becca thought the blue light coming from it was even dimmer than before. She turned to Lyle and whispered, "I'm going to stab its body. I just want to see what happens. For all we know, it's skin is like carbon fiber or something."

Lyle nodded and said, "Okay," but he didn't sound confident. Not even for a guy with a black eye and bloody paper towels shoved up his nose.

Becca sighed. "Just be ready to pull me back if it grabs me."

"Got it."

He grasped her waistband from behind and Becca eased her Swiffer spear into the room ahead of her. She was almost in position when her foot slipped and she accidentally cut one of the spider's massive legs. It let out a howl that sounded like a flock of parakeets in a blender and it struggled to turn its massive body toward Becca. It reached for her and the end of its leg split into a hand that grabbed her spear. The spider was pulling Becca's only weapon into the room and her along with it!

"Help me!" shouted Becca. Lyle pulled Becca toward him but the spider had tremendous strength. It only took a few moments for it to wrest the weapon away from them. Becca and Lyle fell backwards into the hall and looked up just as the

creature chewed up the Swiffer spear and swallowed it, knife and all.

“Holy fuck,” said Lyle under his breath.

They ran back across the shards of broken vase that they could have swept up had they still had the Swiffers. Becca was breathing hard by the time she reached the kitchen. She took deep breaths and reminded herself that she needed to slow down and focus or they’d never get out of there alive. She leaned over the edge of the pass-through counter and took it all in. The blue light from the spider was evident on the hallway walls, and it was getting brighter. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath but she kept imagining that weird hand reaching for her.

Lyle laid down on the floor and stared at the ceiling. “Hey, did you know there were stars up there?”

“Huh?”

“Stars. Planets. A moon, I think.”

Becca looked up at the ceiling where a bunch of glow-in-the-dark stars were shining. She didn’t expect such whimsy from either Emily or Bradley. “We had some of those on our ceiling when we were kids.” *Maybe there’s hope for her yet*, she thought.

Lyle stared up at the stick-on constellations. “I’ve never been camping,” he said, as much to himself as to Becca. She didn’t respond, so he sat up and stared at her. “If we die tonight, what one thing would you wish you’d have done?”

“I won’t wish. I’ll be dead.”

“Yeah, whatever. Dodger.”

Becca thought about all the things she was supposed to regret not having done. Marriage. Children. Career. Money. Sailing the south seas. Saving homeless children. But the truth was much more mundane. “I’ve never been in love,” she said.

“What?”

“In love. Like, for real.”

Lyle looked around for someone to corroborate his indignation, but he found no one. “So you’re a virgin, babe?”

“No, Lyle! Jesus! Why am I even talking to you?” She got up and started shuffling through drawers again. Anything to keep her from thinking too much.

“Sorry, I just...that’s how girls are, right? Love?” He sighed theatrically loud.

Becca was saved by a sudden banging on the door from *The Firm*. She ran to try the handle, but it was still locked. She slapped the surface of the door with the palms of her hands.

“Hey! Hello? Is somebody out there?”

A man’s voice boomed through the door. Becca pressed her ear up to it so she could make out what he was saying. “...LAPD...alarm company...out in a jiffy.”

“Okay!” shouted Becca.

“What did he say?” asked Lyle.

“I think the alarm company finally noticed the power’s out. A cop’s out in the hall and...”

“Oh shit!” said Lyle.

“What?!”

Lyle grimaced and loosened his belt.

“Lyle, you unzip those pants and I’ll feed you to the spider myself. Seriously.”

“Hang on.” He pulled his belt free and flipped it over to reveal a zipper. Inside he had several tightly wadded baggies.

“Lyle! What the fuck?!”

“Sorry, but I didn’t think I was going to get busted at my own Halloween party!”

“You put that back on right now!”

“You’ve got to hide it for me, Becca! What if they search me?!”

“For what?!” Becca screeched. “Being locked in a condo isn’t exactly a felony!”

“No, but...what if they do?”

Becca shook her head like she was trying to rattle her brains into place. ““Why would they do that?”

There was more knocking at the door. Becca turned and shouted, “We’re here!”

“I’m going to have to break down the door!” shouted the cop in that staccato style everyone used when they thought the listener couldn’t hear them very well.

“No!” yelled Becca. “You can’t do that! My brother-in-law will kill me!” She pressed her ear to the door to await the inevitable protests.

“Is there another way in?” asked the cop, one word at a time.

Becca thought for a moment, then shouted back, “Just the balcony! Outside!” Lyle was protesting but she pushed him away.

“Stand back!” shouted the cop, obviously unwilling to requisition a rescue copter when no one was in serious danger. A broken door jamb could easily be repaired.

“No!” shouted Becca. “Seriously! This door is a priceless artifact!” She paused before adding, “It’s from a movie! *The Firm!*” He was an LA cop, after all.

The cop either didn’t hear her or didn’t care. There were repeated slams against the door. The frame began to splinter as Becca and Lyle backed away. Then, it stopped just as suddenly as it had started.

There were a few moments of silence before the cop shouted, “Sit tight, ma’am. I have another situation downstairs. Be right back!”

“No, wait!” shouted Becca, but it was too late. She pulled her ear away from the door and backed into Lyle. “Put your belt back on right fucking now.”

Lyle did as he was told. “What’s the deal with the door?”

“Never mind,” said Becca, then all hell broke loose.

The spider thing let out the worst wail yet. Becca looked down the hall to see a chunk of the wall collapse only to be replaced by what looked like curtains of moving light. Either Pink Floyd had

just gone onstage inside her brother-in-law's office, or the spider thing was doing something new.

She ran into the hallway to get a better look and plowed right into the light like it was a solid wall! No, not exactly solid. It was slightly forgiving, like sheer fabric stretched tight across the hallway. She fell and Lyle ran over to help her up.

"What the hell?" he asked.

"I touched the light!" she shouted over the howls of the creature. She stood up and went back to the doorway despite Lyle's protests. When she was close enough to the curtain of light, she pressed an open hand against it. Her mind was flooded with colors and images, very little of which made sense to her. In it all was a face. Beautiful but not human. Its eyes had no pupils but they were so compelling. Inky black and shiny and brimming with life. Those eyes stared into her and pleaded with her. *Please help me.* She yanked her hand back and the image disappeared. The only sound was a high-pitched whine, like she'd spent the night at a rave. She looked up and saw Lyle's lips moving.

"Becca? Can you hear me? Say something!"

After a few moments, Becca could hear him again, but he sounded like he was at the bottom of a well. "What happened?" she shouted.

"What?" asked Lyle. "Speak up!"

"What happened?" yelled Becca, her voice booming in her head. She looked around and

realized she was back in the kitchen. “How did I get here?”

“That thing did something to you, babe! Shocked you or something. You were stuck in that light. I couldn’t pull you away from it until just now.”

Becca nodded. She remembered the visions. They didn’t make much sense, but they’d been calming. Peaceful. Loving, even.

“I think it’s trying to communicate,” she said dreamily.

“Babe, that’s not ET in there. It’s a monster and it’s trying to fucking kill us!”

“We don’t know that,” said Becca. “I think it’s hurt.” She thought about what she was saying and realized that it didn’t make a lot of sense. She just had a feeling. “I think it needs our help.” She got up and stumbled down the hall despite Lyle’s best efforts to stop her. She couldn’t hear him any more. All she could think about was that face. She needed to see the spider’s face.

The light sheets shifted color and Becca dove into them before Lyle could hold her back. The energy enveloped her and cradled her gently. She felt like she’d fallen into a warm bath that tingled with electricity.

Her eyes were closed but she saw many shifting images. It was like the world around her was unfolding and wrapping itself around a new reality. There were dots and bars that flew about and connected to one another to form strange shapes. It was a three dimensional diagram of

something. Then the diagram morphed into pictures of things that looked just like the spider. Some were large like the one in the office, and some were smaller. Children, maybe? The world was made up of shifting lights like the one she was currently wrapped up in. The spider wasn't a thing. It was a mother! Suddenly the images shifted. Pain and rage shot through Becca and she was flung from the light. Her body slammed down onto the tile floor with a thud.

"Becca!" shouted Lyle. He dropped to his knees and cradled her in his lap. The spider's lights were fading again.

"She's hurt and she just wants to go home. She's just like us, Lyle," she said, and then she began to cry.

Lyle knew how to handle horny women, drunk women, angry women, scornful women, and stupid women, but he'd never really gotten the hang of dealing with crying women. He stroked Becca's hair as she wept with her head resting on his leg. What she was saying was crazy, wasn't it?

"Becca, that thing's not a person."

"No, it's lost and it's hurting!"

Lyle shook his head. "Better it than us, right?"

Becca made up her mind. "No! Don't you see? It's like..." and then she paused. How could she explain all she'd seen and felt in the spider's mind? Maybe Lyle could experience it too! She looked over and saw that the lights were gone. All

that was left were a few pops and crackles of electricity inside the office. The spider was dying and Becca was its last hope.

Becca was completely unafraid now. She stepped inside the office and knelt down to grasp one of the spider's hands. It was like holding a prickly sweater that had just come out of the dryer on a cold winter's day. She turned back and smiled at Lyle who watched nervously from the doorway.

"Probably shouldn't do that, babe."

Becca shook her head and looked down at the spider's face. It was like the one she'd seen in her mind, but it was sadder. Defeated. She wanted to let the creature know that everything would be alright. She was going to help her. Several images flashed in her head. It was that same shape again! The bars and dots! She jumped up and ran out into the hall.

"I need something to write with! Now, Lyle, before I forget!"

Lyle looked around as if he might find a box of Sharpies just lying on the hallway floor. When he saw nothing, he panicked "I...There's not...There's pens in the office, right?!"

Becca could feel the image in her mind becoming fuzzy. She'd had it so clearly only moments before! If she waited any longer... "Lyle! Fuck!" She ran back into the office, careful not to step on the spider's legs, and fumbled through the trash on the floor. She uncovered a black marker and was about to run back into the hall when she

felt something on her foot. For some reason, she didn't recoil, but instead looked down to see that the spider was touching her. Gently. Kindly. She nearly burst into tears again. How could anyone not help this poor creature? "I'll be back," she said, not knowing if the creature could understand her or not. "I promise." And with that, she bolted from the room.

The line drawing was clear in her mind again and Becca knew she only had moments to write it down before it was lost forever. She ripped the top off of the purple El Marko and began drawing on the wall. Slowly at first, then faster. When she was done, she stood back to admire the strange piece of cubist art she'd scribbled in the hallway.

Lyle ran over the crunchy vase shards and held out his hand, triumphant at last. In it, he held a small golf pencil. When he saw Becca's creation on the wall, his face fell. "Oh. I guess you found..." He paused, staring at the drawing. "What's it supposed to be?"

Becca sighed. "Hell if I know. It's what she was trying to show me."

They were gazing at Becca's masterpiece when banging noises suddenly erupted from the floor below. The spider reared up and screamed! Sparks shot off her body and she changed colors like one of those '60s Christmas trees with the spinning color filters.

Becca grabbed Lyle's arm. "That cop went downstairs, right?" she asked, now frantic.

Lyle nodded. "Yeah, I think so."

"Jesus, they're hurting her! We've got to get down there!"

"What? Why?"

Becca didn't have time to explain. She grabbed Lyle and got in his face. "Listen to me. You either help me save her or I'll rip your balls off and feed them to you. Do you understand me?"

Lyle had never seen her like that. Part of him liked it. "I get it," he said as he moved his hands down to protect his crotch.

Becca let him go. "Good," she said as she headed for the front door. "Let's see if we can finish what that cop started."

Officer Booker had been an LAPD officer for over twelve years and his world-weariness was beginning to show. He stood in the dining room of Sarah and Tovi Stein and casually glanced back at the older couple as they lingered in the hallway behind him.

"This is how it was when you got home just now?" he asked.

Tovi nodded. "That's right. I tried calling it in but my phone's on the fritz. Our neighbors across the hall are having problems too, but luckily they saw you as you were headed up the stairs."

“Yeah. Elevator’s busted,” said Booker to no one in particular. “Power’s out upstairs. That’s why I’m here.”

The dining room was the single dark spot in an otherwise well-lit condo. All of the walls in the place were covered with framed photos of the old couple’s adventures over the years. There were shots of them rescuing sea turtles and others of them on the decks of ships in the antarctic. There were other artifacts, of course, but the photos dominated the rooms.

Officer Booker tried the light switches on the wall but nothing happened.

“We tried that, of course,” said Tovi, somewhat perturbed that the cop thought so little of his hosts.

“Sorry,” said Booker. “Just seeing for myself.” He approached the center of the dining room and used his nightstick to poke at a dimly glowing, gelatinous sphere about a meter in diameter that protruded from the Steins’ ceiling. Then he noticed a couple of vine-like things sticking out of the ceiling in other parts of the room. He pulled on one, and its end splintered and grabbed at him. He drew his sidearm and yelled, “Get back!” He shot at the swinging tentacle and managed to sever it where it emerged from the ceiling. It fell to the floor and leaked glowing blue ooze onto the floor. Booker pulled out his handkerchief and used it to pick the thing up. It was like a cross between a tree branch and a celery stick. He plopped it down

on the dining room table and scratched his head. Hell if he knew what to make of it.

Becca and Lyle ran in through the open front door and stopped when they saw the Steins. Becca scoped out the apartment and ran toward the dark dining room.

“Hold it right there!” said Officer Booker, quickly holstering his sidearm. Citizens tended to get weird when they saw the gun, and he needed cooperation. “Who are you?”

Becca gazed up at the ceiling and realized that the glowing thing was the lower portion of the spider’s body. What did they call it in sixth grade science class? The thorax? The abdomen? Whatever. It didn’t matter. No wonder the poor thing was freaking out.

“She’s stuck in the floor,” she said to Lyle before turning to the cop. “You have to help us save her!”

“Wait, what? Who’s stuck where exactly?” Booker was used to the frantic types. He’d already made up his mind to give her a minute and if that didn’t work, he’d cuff her and chill her out for a bit.

“Oh my god! That’s one of her hands!” she screamed, gesturing at the weird branch thing on the table. “What did you do?”

“Now just calm down. What’s your name, young lady?”

“You have to help her! That’s what you’re supposed to do, right? Help people?” She was starting to panic. Just the thought of that poor

creature and all the suffering it had endured. She had to make it stop.

Booker scowled. “Had a little too much to drink tonight?” he asked sarcastically. “Maybe a hit or two of something with an even harder kick?” He moved to guide the young woman out into the hallway, but she had other plans. She struggled to get away and accidentally clocked him in the jaw. That was it. He grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her back as he reached for his cuffs. Becca struggled and he threw her to the floor and held her there. Just then a bright burst of electricity arced across the room and nearly hit him in the back of the head. He fell off of Becca as his sidearm slid across the floor and came to a stop in front of Mr. Stein. Tovi picked up the gun and casually turned the barrel toward Booker. The cop looked more amused than afraid.

“Point that somewhere else, okay?” Booker reached for his weapon. “You need to be careful with...”

Tovi slid the safety off and aimed the gun at Booker’s chest. The cop took a step back. Lyle turned to him and pleaded, “I don’t know him, officer. I live upstairs. Across the hall from her.” He pointed at Becca. “Sorta catty-corner across...”

Booker swatted Lyle away like a pesky fly and kept his focus on Tovi. “You need to consider the consequences of your actions, sir. Just put the gun down and step back and you won’t be in any trouble.”

“No, you step back,” said Tovi. “There’ll be no police brutality on these premises.”

Sarah beamed with pride but she was afraid for her husband as well. “Tovi, what’re you doing?” she whispered. “You’re going to get us into trouble.”

“Nope. This is our home and we have the ultimate say about what happens on our property.”

“Well, technically, not all of this is your property,” said Lyle. “According to the Covenants, Conditions, Restrictions and Easements, the ceilings aren’t yours. The doors and windows either.” He stopped when he realized everyone was staring at him.

“How do you know all of that?” asked Becca.

“I wrote some real estate software,” he shrugged. “Made good money on it, too, babe. Gooood money.”

“So what?” asked Tovi. He still had the gun, after all.

“So, this thing in the ceiling isn’t your problem. It’s Becca’s. She’s currently the resident of the condo above yours. Maybe you should explain it, Becca.”

Tovi’s face danced with the pulsing light from the spider’s belly. “Somebody better start explaining what’s...”

Booker suddenly made a move for his weapon and Tovi leveled the barrel at the cop’s face. “It’s been a long time since I handled a little pop gun like this, so I’d stay well back if I was you.”

He looked over at Becca. “Who is it you’re trying to save, hon? No bullshit.”

Becca tried to think up a lie that would make this man want to help her, but she couldn’t come up with anything. She looked to Lyle for support. “Don’t look at him. Look at me,” said Tovi. “Tell me what that thing is.”

Sarah took her husband’s hand and looked up at him like she was ashamed of him. “Tovi! You’ve no more business threatening this girl than that policeman did.” That took the wind out of Tovi’s sails.

Becca swallowed hard and rapid-fired her words. “There’s a giant spider alien thing upstairs in my condo and she’s stuck between the two floors and she’s trying to get back to wherever she came from.”

“What?!” exclaimed Booker. “Say that again.”

“Okay, so it isn’t my condo. It belongs to my sister and her husband. You can check the...”

Booker stopped her. “No, not the part about the condo. The part about the spider.”

“I saw it too!” said Lyle.

Sarah patted Lyle’s hand. “That’s nice, son. Now let your girlfriend talk.”

“It’s like six feet across,” said Becca, “and that’s just its body. I mean, her body.”

“You’re serious,” said Tovi.

Becca nodded. “You have to promise not to kill her! She won’t hurt anybody. She’s stuck

between our two floors and I think we can help her get free.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” said Booker. “That’s a bad idea, Miss. Don’t you think that’s a bad idea, folks?” He looked to the Steins for support.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Sarah. “We haven’t even seen the poor thing yet.” Tovi smiled.

Booker shook his head. “Giant spider, my ass! If this is all an elaborate Halloween prank, you kids are in some serious trouble.”

“Then call for backup,” said Lyle, suddenly emboldened. “I bet you already tried, but nobody’s coming because your radio doesn’t work. That spider thing is sucking up all the juice.” For the first time in his life, he had the upper hand with a cop and he savored it.

“Alright. Let’s say you’re right about that,” said Booker. He turned back to Tovi. “You folks got a phone?”

Mr. Stein nodded. “I just got one of those new genius phones. Is that the right word, Sarah?”

“Close enough,” said Mrs. Stein.

“Like I told you before, it’s not working.”

“You folks have a regular, plain old phone that plugs into the wall?”

Sarah said, “We had three of them at the old place, but they didn’t even put the wiring in here. Said it was unnecessary. I’m not sure I agree on that point, but no, we don’t have that kind of telephone.”

“Well, if I don’t check in, backup will arrive eventually.” He turned back to Tovi. “In the meantime, unless you want to spend the night in jail, you need to give me my weapon back. Right now, before somebody gets hurt.”

The older man glanced at his wife, then popped the 9mm’s clip, ejected the bullet in the chamber, and handed the empty gun back to its owner in one fluid motion. “There you go, officer,” he said as he slipped the clip into his pocket. “You’ll get your rounds once I’m certain that you’re not going to shoot anyone in my home.”

Booker scowled at him as he holstered his weapon. “Her story’s a scam,” he sighed. “These young people were trying to rob you. They dropped this light up balloon thing through a hole from the condo above and intended to steal all your valuables while you were distracted by it. Trouble is, they cut their own power by accident when they drilled through the ceiling. Isn’t that right, kids?”

Becca scoffed, “That doesn’t make any sense!”

Surprisingly, it was Tovi who came to her defense. “You’re right. It doesn’t. Which leaves us with your crazy spider story.”

“I know how it sounds,” pleaded Becca. “If you don’t believe me, just come upstairs and see for yourself. You just have to promise not to hurt her.”

Officer Booker’s eyes lit up and he jogged out of the Stein’s condo without a word.

“Where’s he going in such a hurry?” asked Lyle.

Becca looked at her neighbor and then muttered, “Shit!” and ran after the cop.

Lyle chased after her, followed closely by the Steins. They pushed a couple of Lyle’s guests out of the way and made their way past the broken door from *The Firm*.

It didn’t take long for Booker to find the spider but he wasn’t prepared for just how alien she actually was. He stood transfixed in the light that emanated from her body.

Becca ran up behind him and noticed that the spider was generating a lot less light than before. “You leave her alone!” she screamed at the cop, beside herself with fear that he’d hurt the creature in some way.

Sarah and Officer Booker were totally taken aback, but Tovi acted like he’d seen dozens of giant spider creatures before. He turned to Becca and asked, “How do you know it’s a she?”

Lyle said, “She did the Vulcan mind meld with it! It was awesome!” Becca could have killed him.

“Hold on a second,” said Booker. “You came into contact with this alien organism?”

“We don’t know where she came from,” said Becca.

Booker slapped his forehead. “You have to be quarantined. Just like the astronauts. It might be carrying some kind of alien virus or something.”

Lyle slowly backed away from Becca. "It ate a kitchen knife and two Swiffers! I saw it!"

"Shut up, Lyle," said Becca before turning back to the cop. "If I go into quarantine, so do you, so you might as well get off your high horse."

Sarah laughed at that. "She's correct."

"And just what do you know about it, lady?" shouted Booker.

Tovi took a step toward the cop. "When she was a practicing physician, she was the director of the Center of Infectious Disease Research in Seattle. Any more stupid questions?"

Becca took advantage of the distraction and pushed past the cop. She flung herself into the office and a new volley of light curtains appeared to envelop her.

"Mind meld," said Lyle.

Booker couldn't believe how casually these people were reacting to a creature that could be a threat to every living thing on Earth. "It could be doing anything to her; scrambling her mind, reprogramming her DNA, dragging her into a wormhole."

"Hogwash," said Sarah as she examined Becca's drawing on the wall. "You've seen too many Star Track episodes."

"That your professional opinion, lady?" scoffed Booker.

Mr. Stein held out his hand like he was stopping traffic. "There's no need for you to talk to my wife that way."

“Alright, fine. I’m sorry. You happy? We still have a big...” He paused when the spider’s colors suddenly shifted from deep lavender to a pulsing red.

“Uh oh, “ said Lyle.

“What?” asked Booker. “What’s that mean?”

“It was never red before,” said Lyle. “It started out blue. Then it turned light purple the first time Becca talked to it. Then it was blue again downstairs and that turned into that purplish color.”

“Jesus,” said Booker. He looked over at Tovi. “You understand what he’s saying?”

“Yeah. The colors have something to do with the creature’s energy. Maybe how strong it is. Maybe how it feels.” He shrugged. “No way to know for sure. Red light’s at the long wavelength end of the visible spectrum and takes the least amount of energy to produce, so it’d be my guess that it’s getting weaker.”

“Red light’s also used in pain management,” said Sarah, still distracted by the drawing on the wall.

“Huh. I didn’t know that,” said Tovi.

Booker threw up his hands. “Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Science. Now, if we could just get back to saving every life on Earth...”

Lyle laughed, but stopped when Becca stumbled out of the office. “Becca!” he shouted, grabbing her.

Booker pulled her away from Lyle and asked, “What was that all about, missy?”

“She needs our help,” said Becca.

“That’s not your call,” said Booker. “It’s mine. That thing looks dangerous to me, so I’m going to have to ask all of you to vacate the premises.”

Becca exploded. “You can’t do that! I know my rights! You have to have probable cause or a warrant or something, right?”

Tovi stepped in, eager to join this particular argument. “Is she being arrested? This isn’t exactly a state of emergency, giant spider notwithstanding.”

“You wanna do this the hard way? Fine! You’re all under arrest!” shouted Booker. “I need everyone to go downstairs and wait until my backup arrives and books you.”

Tovi didn’t much cotton to law enforcement, but he usually obeyed them when it seemed like they had a good reason to bark their orders. This one didn’t. Tovi was about to explain that to him when Sarah suddenly exclaimed, “Oh my god! I get it! Yes!”

All eyes turned toward her as she jumped up and down with joy. She turned to Tovi and said, “I think I understand this.”

Becca looked at her, stunned. “I drew that after she talked to me before. The spider...it’s what she was trying to show me but I couldn’t understand it.”

“It’s simple, dear,” said Sarah, grasping Becca’s shoulder, “but only if you know a little chemistry. I can’t be absolutely sure, but...”

“Explain,” interrupted Booker, “and make it quick.”

Tovi moved in. “Be nice.”

Sarah looked at her husband and held up a hand. “I can handle this, honey,” she said. She patted the pocket of her sweater and smiled. Tovi held up his hands and Sarah continued. “Becca, your drawing is a crude diagram of an electro-chemical reaction. This part,” she pointed at the lines and circles, “tells us what chemical we start with and this section,” she pointed at a curvy set of lines, “appears to be a reaction coordinate diagram. I think you were right. She was asking you to help get her back to the place she came from.”

“And where’s that, exactly?” asked Booker sarcastically. “Venus? Mars? West Hollywood?”

Sarah sighed deeply. “Mr. Booker...”

“*Officer* Booker.”

“Mr. Booker, I mean no disrespect when I say this. In fact, I hold the people who protect those less fortunate than ourselves in the very highest esteem. And yet, there are some, like yourself, who wish to bring harm upon the disadvantaged. Take for example, this creature.”

“Lady, if you’re about to tell me it’s my civic duty to help you send this monster back to outer space, I’m afraid you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

Booker’s simplistic take on the situation angered Sarah to no end. She spoke through gritted teeth. “If this creature has intelligence, and I

say that she does, letting her be killed would be just like letting a little girl be murdered in front of you.”

“That isn’t a first grader in there, lady. It’s an alien life form and it’s dangerous. Look at what it’s already done to this condo! This shit’s way above my pay grade so we’re all going to chill out downstairs and play nice until I can get somebody from JPL to make the call. You got it?!”

Tovi moved closer and Booker drew his sidearm. “Stop right there,” he said a bit too loudly.

Tovi smirked. “What’re you going to do, poke me with it?”

The cop unexpectedly smiled back and fired a round into the damaged wall, “I had two extra clips on my belt. Now I need all of you to back out of here nice and slow. Do as I tell you and we’ll all make it through this.”

“Honey?” asked Sarah.

Mr. Stein put his hands on his hips and sighed, “Oh, alright.”

That was all Sarah needed to hear. She lunged forward and hit the cop with 100,000 volts from the Uzi Tazer pen she’d been holding in her sweater pocket. Booker convulsed and Tovi leapt in to catch him as he fell.

“Jesus, Doc,” said Tovi. “We’re really in trouble now.”

Sarah smiled. “Yes. Reminds me of the old days.”

Tovi’s scowl morphed into a grin. “Yeah, I guess it does at that. Now what?”

Becca and Lyle were frozen in place with their hands over their mouths. Sarah patted Lyle on the shoulder as she passed. “The diagram is for a solution of sodium chloride and water that’s a medium for connecting a capacitor to a source of actuating current.”

Tovi stepped in and examined the drawing as the pulses of light from the spider grew less frequent. “Probably right. I just don’t get what the capacitor is.”

Sarah smiled. “It’s the spider’s body.”

Tovi squeezed her hand with a grin. “Then we’d better get going, Doc!”

“What’re you doing?!” shouted Becca. “We have to save her! Please!”

Tovi was nonplussed. “Come downstairs with me,” he said, dragging her out the door.

Lyle stepped around Booker. “Can I help?”

Sarah patted his cheek. “Of course, you can, son. Grab his legs.”

Tovi dug into the hallway closet in his condo and emerged with a couple of five gallon pickle buckets. “These’ll do.” He hauled them over to the kitchen sink and began filling them with water. “Hold this,” he said as he handed Becca the spray nozzle.

“What’re we doing, Mr. Stein?”

Tovi had his head buried in the pantry so his voice was somewhat muffled. “Sarah explained it, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t understand it. I mean, I understood each word but not what they meant when she strung them together.”

Tovi looked back at her. “Don’t they teach chemistry anymore?”

“Um, well, not to me.”

Tovi emerged from the pantry with a couple of Morton’s salt containers. “We’re making a solution of water and sodium chloride.”

“What’s sodium chloride?”

Tovi held up the salt. “This,” he said. “The salt helps the water conduct electricity. When the spider showed up, you lost power upstairs, right?”

“Uh huh.”

“That’s because it absorbed the power like a big capacitor.” Becca’s confused look was enough to prompt him to explain further. “That’s a thing that holds electrical power in reserve. Sarah thinks its whole body is a capacitor.”

“Her.”

“Oh yeah, right. Her whole body. It appears that she could dampen the electromagnetic fields but she couldn’t recharge herself directly. We’ve got to help her do that.” He turned off the water and dumped some of the salt into each bucket. “Grab a bucket!” he shouted.

Upstairs, the scene was grim. The light from the spider was getting dimmer and the pulses were less frequent than before. Tovi and Becca entered

with their buckets and Sarah followed them into the office. “Oh dear. Are we too late?” she whispered.

“Only one way to find out,” said Tovi as he tipped the buckets over one by one, spilling salt water into the room. The liquid sloshed into the deep pile carpeting that surrounded the spider and splashed up onto her face, but she didn’t react.

“I’m going to sit with her,” said Sarah. “Take the boy and refill the buckets in the kitchen. Ten more gallons should do it.”

“Sure, sweetie,” said Tovi as he turned to leave the office.

Sarah sat beside the creature and took one of its legs in her hands. She was surprised to find that it was warm to the touch. “Oh, you poor thing,” she said, looking at the creature’s face. The spider’s featureless eye looked up at her, its shape opening slightly. It looked to Sarah like the eye of a whale she’d once seen up close. “We’re trying to help you, sweetheart, but I’ll be honest--we don’t really know what we’re doing. Sadly, we’re not as smart as you.” She patted the spider’s appendage and it blossomed like a flower. She jumped back in spite of herself, then saw that the appendage now resembled a hand.

“Weird, huh?” asked Becca from the doorway.

Sarah nodded. “Beautiful.” She eased back over to the spider and gently intertwined her fingers in its own. Much to her surprise, the creature actually held her hand. Becca sat beside her and

caressed the spider's body. It was smooth but not slippery. She'd never felt anything quite like it.

Tovi entered with more water. "I couldn't find the boy."

"Lyle," said Becca.

"Yes, Lyle. You know where he went?" He tipped over the buckets and watched as they emptied.

"He's taking care of our law enforcement friend," said Sarah. "Locking him in the laundry room." Tovi nodded his approval and Sarah turned back to Becca. "I need you and Lyle to go downstairs. Run and get him and I'll explain."

Becca left the room and Tovi moved to stand beside his wife. She leaned against his leg. "Is she gonna make it, Doc?" asked Tovi.

"I don't know," said Sarah, "but there's a chance. You know how it is. Wherever there are people who give a damn, there's always a chance." Tovi nodded and ran his hand through his wife's hair.

"Okay," said Becca from the hallway. "We're ready."

Becca stood on the Stein's dining room table beneath the spider's exposed belly where dribbles of salt water rained down. The images that the spider had shown her were clear enough, but what if Sarah was misinterpreting the message? What if the drawing she'd made wasn't accurate?

They could be doing all the wrong things. They might even be hurting her!

Lyle interrupted her moment of self doubt by slapping a long, yellow extension cord onto the table. "Will this work?"

"Perfect," said Becca as she hopped down. "Did you find the toolbox?"

Lyle smiled. "Yeah. Right where Mrs. Stein said it'd be" He hoisted the big, red toolbox onto one of the dining room chairs. Becca dug around in it until she found some wire cutters. She cut the female plug off the end of the extension cord and began stripping the outer jacket. "How do you know how to do this stuff, babe?" asked Lyle, genuinely impressed.

Becca frowned. "I'll tell you if you stop calling me babe."

"Okay, I'll try," said Lyle.

For a split second, Becca actually felt sorry for the dumbass. "My dad taught me how to fix things. Emily wasn't interested and we didn't have any brothers, so he taught me."

"You were interested in that stuff?"

"Not really, but I was interested in my dad." She grinned sheepishly.

"Oh, I get it," said Lyle. "I'd like to have a little girl someday."

Becca looked at him like he'd sprouted a second head. "Seriously? You?"

"Why can't I want a daughter?"

Becca shrugged. "I don't know. You don't seem like the type." She peeled the last few inches of insulation off the black and white inner conductors and cut the green wire off, then she went back to the toolbox.

"You think I'm a moron."

"Um...only because you are!" said Becca. She brought back two large screwdrivers and handed one to Lyle. "But you're not as bad as I thought. I'll give you that."

Based on Lyle's reaction, you'd have thought that Becca had asked him to marry her. He flushed and couldn't think of anything more to say.

"Wrap that wire around the base of the screwdriver. The metal part," said Becca as she wrapped the other screwdriver. She pushed the table into one corner and Lyle helped her climb back up. Mrs. Stein had told her to place the electrodes at opposite corners of the room. The office upstairs was bigger than the Steins' dining room, so Becca took her best guess. She held the first screwdriver against the ceiling. "Okay, hand me the hammer," she said holding out her right hand.

Lyle grabbed an old-school, claw hammer from the toolbox and passed it to Becca. She began pounding the screwdriver into the ceiling. It went in easily at first but then the screwdriver came into contact with something. The hammer vibrated in her hand with each blow and her heart sank. They hadn't considered the inner structure of the building. Becca moved to another location a couple

of feet away and began again. It had to work! The screwdriver went in a couple of inches and then, CLANG! It hit metal again. She tried several more places but they were all the same. There was a metal plate covering the whole ceiling.

“This isn’t going to work,’ she said as she jumped off the table.

“What’s the problem?”

“There’s some kind of metal covering the whole ceiling.” The light from the spider’s belly faded further and Becca panicked. “Oh god, there’s no time!” She looked around but no ideas came to her. “What do we do? I can’t let her die, Lyle. I can’t!”

Lyle put his hand on her shoulder. “Maybe that’s just how it has to be, Becca. She was never supposed to be here, you know?”

“No! There has to be a way!” She was sobbing.

“We could run the wire up the stairs, but it’s not long enough.”

The answer occurred to Becca suddenly and she very nearly kissed Lyle. She coiled up the extension cord, slung it over her shoulder and ran out the door.

“Um...I’ll just stay here, I guess,” said Lyle.

Becca poked her head back in the front door and shouted, “Stay here. I’ll drop the plug end down to you!” Then she was gone again.

Sarah was singing softly to the spider when Becca came bounding in, splashing salt water everywhere. “The ceiling’s too tough,” she said, holding up the screwdrivers. “I mean the floor. Floor to you, ceiling to me.”

“I got it,” said Sarah. “What now.”

“Well, I have an idea.” Becca took the plug end of the yellow extension cord and crouched beside the spider. She covered the prongs with her fingers and gently pushed her hand between the spider’s body and the condo flooring. At first, she thought she wouldn’t be able to get through, but then the spider’s body gave way slightly. Bit by bit, she worked her hand down, hoping beyond hope that her arm would be long enough for her to push the cable through to Lyle.

She was at the extent of her reach when Tovi returned carrying a glass of some particularly good scotch whiskey. Sarah explained, “She’s fishing the cable through.”

Tovi nodded. “The cop’s still out. He shouldn’t bother us again.”

“Then why don’t you go downstairs and see if you can help the boy,” said Sarah.

Becca looked up at the Steins. “I don’t think I can reach.”

Tovi said, “Sit tight,” then he ran off, still cradling his beverage.

Tovi ran into his own condo and found Lyle leaning against the dining room table. “She’s pushing the cable through past the spider,” he said.

Lyle looked up at the softly glowing abdomen that protruded from the ceiling, but there was no hand and no cable. “Nothing yet, dude,” he said.

“Get up on the table and see if you can reach her. She’s on this side,” said Tovi, pointing to the side nearest them. “The cable should come through about there.”

Lyle slid the table over and climbed up. “You mean poke my arm in there?” he asked, indicating the spider’s abdomen. “I can’t reach it.”

“Hold on,” said Tovi. He hoisted one of the dining room chairs onto the table. “I’ll hold it steady. You climb up.”

The light from the spider faded again and the room was plunged into near total darkness. Lyle nervously climbed onto the chair, glancing down at Tovi every couple of seconds. He pushed his arm in past the warm surface of the spider’s body and gagged. The thing smelled like dead fish mixed with Elmer’s glue. He pulled his arm back out and nearly threw up.

“Oh, no. You don’t get to chicken out, son,” said Tovi. “Give it another go.”

Lyle didn’t know which was worse; the smell of the spider or Tovi’s glare of disappointment. He took a deep breath and slid his hand back into the gap.

“Her body’s warm,” said Becca. “I thought insects were cold-blooded or something.”

Sarah smiled. “Spiders aren’t insects, dear, but they are cold-blooded.”

“Oh, right,” said Becca. “Eight legs.”

Sarah got up and sloshed around to the other side of the room. “This creature is clearly neither an insect nor a spider. I count twelve legs, including the one that policeman shot off.”

There was movement below and Becca’s heart raced. Could it be one of the guys downstairs? She slid her hand back and forth. *Please please please!* The seconds passed like hours but eventually Becca exclaimed, “I feel fingers!” She handed the plug off and unspooled the extension cord until all that was left above floor level was the stripped wire and the two screwdrivers. Sarah took one and Becca took the other.

“The farther apart, the better,” said Sarah. “I’m not certain, but I believe she’ll be able to keep the circuit from shorting out as long as she’s between the two electrodes.” Becca didn’t question it. They moved to opposite corners and shoved the screwdrivers into the wet carpeting. Sarah tugged on the wires twice, sending Tovi and Lyle the message that it was okay to plug it in, then she corralled Becca toward the door. “Quickly, now. We have to get out of the water,” said Sarah.

“Wait,” said Becca. She went back to the spider and leaned down to look into her eye. “I don’t know if you can understand me, but if you can, I hope you get back to your family. Sorry about your leg. Not all humans are monsters.” With that, she leaned over and kissed the spider’s head, then she got up and ran from the room.

Tovi felt the yank on the cord and shouted, “Batter up!” He dragged the yellow plug into the kitchen and showed Lyle where to connect it behind the clothes dryer. It was the largest circuit in the condo and the least likely to trip a breaker. The young man stood by while Tovi went to the closet to monitor the breaker panel. “Okay, go!” said Tovi. Lyle jammed the plug into the outlet and stood back. The lights in the condo dimmed and the breaker got warm, but it didn’t trip. So far, so good.

Sarah and Becca stood at the end of the hall outside the office. They held hands while they waited for the fireworks, only the show was interrupted. Officer Booker snapped his cuffs onto the two of them from behind.

“What the hell?” yelled Becca as she struggled to get free.

“You’re both under arrest for felony assault on a police officer.”

There was a bright blue flash in the adjoining room, followed by a rumbling sound and a crack that sounded like fifty batters drilling fifty

home run hits at the same time. The air became hazy and it smelled like a particularly violent thunderstorm had just passed through.

“What are you people up to?!” shouted Booker as the noise got louder. He looked into the office and saw that the spider was glowing bright blue. She shifted her body to look at them and tried to stand on shaky legs. “Oh, hell no,” he mumbled. He pulled his handgun from its holster and moved closer to the creature, then he casually unloaded the entirety of his 9mm clip into the spider’s body. The bullets penetrated her skin easily and brightly glowing fluid poured out to mix with the salt water on the floor. The spider’s blood flowed out toward Booker and splashed onto his legs! All of the current that had been stored inside her shot through him in a flash of blue light. He died just before the spider charged forward and fell on top of him. Becca desperately wanted to go to her, but Sarah held her back. All of the electricity that the spider had absorbed was still present within her glowing, purple blood. Gallons of it sloshed out of the magnificent creature and turned the hallway into a carnival black-light ride. The spider’s noble face was filled with pain when she looked up to see Becca at the end of the hallway.

“We have to do something!” screamed Becca, but Sarah held firm to the handcuffs that connected them. If Becca was electrocuted, she would be too, and she couldn’t have that. She was

at peace with the idea of dying, but she couldn't bear the thought of leaving Tovi to live without her.

The spider's light was dimming again, more rapidly than before. Her life force was literally draining from her body. She looked up at Becca and Sarah and reached out an open hand to them. The message was clear. Thank you for trying.

Becca fell to her knees and burst into angry tears. She felt helpless. The hallway crackled with electrical energy and the spider's light faded away.

The morning sky was getting lighter, but Becca's long, dark night had just begun. "No!" She screamed through her sobs. Her body convulsed as she was overwhelmed with the desire to destroy all men like Officer Booker. If she'd had a button that would have eradicated the entirety of the human race at that moment, she'd have used it.

Sarah tried to help her to her feet, but she'd have none of it. She pushed the older woman away.

"Stop it!" shouted Sarah. She yanked on the handcuffs that linked them. "You stand up right now and stop feeling sorry for yourself!" She grabbed Becca's arm and hauled her to her feet. "Use that rage and resentment to fuel your fire but don't let it poison your heart. If you do, you let them win. People like that policeman. Do you hear me?"

Becca breathed deeply and looked at Sarah through red, teary eyes. "It's not right," she whispered hoarsely.

“No. It isn’t.” Sarah hugged her close but the girl didn’t hug her back. They were standing like that when Tovi and Lyle ran in.

“What the hell happened?” screeched Lyle as the morning sun streamed in through the windows.

Tovi took in the scene before him and his face hardened in anger. He turned toward the spider.

Sarah grabbed his sleeve. “No, Tovi! The power!” she said.

“It’s off,” grunted Tovi. He shrugged off her grip and stomped down the hall. She could just make out his figure in the dawn light as he examined what was left of the spider. He used his foot to move something on the floor, then crouched down to get a closer look.

“It’s safe!” shouted Becca. She bolted for the hall, dragging Sarah along behind her.

The walls that had once been decorated in designer colors were now scorched down to the grey concrete underneath. The bulk of the spider had become a fragile black latticework like a burnt doily. All of her moisture had been depleted and she’d cooked from the inside out, leaving only the delicate black husk behind. Sarah touched one of the appendages that had so gently held her hand and it collapsed to dust in front of her.

Becca looked down to see what Tovi had been looking at. It was Booker’s head. The rest of him had turned to ash but that stubborn head

remained. Becca stomped on it as hard as she could, turning it into a storm of bone and soot. Tovi brushed off his hands and went into the office.

The carpet that had once lined the office floor was gone. The books that Bradley has so meticulously lined up on the shelves were gone too. All that was left was the gaping hole in the floor that led to the Stein's dining room.

They stood there for several minutes, shellshocked. Even Lyle remained silent. Tovi finally dug around in the ashes of Booker's body and found the keys to the handcuffs. After he freed Becca and Sarah, he tossed the keys back to the floor along with the cuffs.

"How do we explain this?" asked Sarah. She looked at the others, one by one.

Tovi cleared his throat and said, "Terrorists."

Sarah nodded. She didn't want to lie, but what else could they do? Once the authorities discovered that a police officer had been killed, they'd dig their heels in for sure.

Tovi swept his hand through every inch of the spider's remains until the crystalline structure had been reduced to a pile of black soot.

Lyle cleared his throat. "So, we say a bomb went off?"

Tovi looked at the hallway and the crater in the office. "Looks like a bomb to me."

Lyle shook his head. "Just one problemo. No explosion. No big bomb sound. People at my party across the hall would've heard it for sure."

Sarah looked at the young man, amazed that he'd thought of that. There might just be some hope for him yet.

"Moby," said Becca softly.

"What's that dear?" asked Sarah.

Becca cleared her throat and wiped the tears off her face. "Like they say, it was so loud, you couldn't hear a bomb go off."

"Worth a try," said Tovi, "as long as we all stick to the same story. Last night, Sarah and I discovered something on our ceiling. We got the attention of Officer Booker and he came up here where the thing blew up and killed him." He pointed at Becca and added, "You're here because you live here, and you," he pointed at Lyle, "heard something from the hall and came in to help her."

"That's pretty much the truth," said Lyle.

"Good," said Tovi. "The closer it is to the truth, the easier it is to make it stick. Now, let's go downstairs and hope the genius phone works now."

Everyone turned to go except for Becca. She went over to the mantle and picked up a small, wooden keepsake box that her sister had paid way too much money for. She took it into the hallway and scooped up a generous portion of the spider's ashes. Then she closed the box, kissed it gently, and stood there until she felt Sarah's hand on her arm.

"Realizing that the human race is hell bent on destroying itself and everything else in its path is

a bitter pill to swallow.” She looked at what was left of the spider. “She seemed...nice.”

Becca broke down again and fell into Sarah’s arms. The older woman held her close and cried with her.