

THE EIGHTH DAY

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with story contributions from Len Barnhart
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A sonic boom reverberated through the narrow street and the alleyways surrounding the Town Commons, shimmering and rattling the large sheets of storefront glass with the force of the blast. The two wide-eyed patrons sitting at a table at the sidewalk cafe were buffeted by the wave of resonance.

The sound of metal being twisted and wrenched accompanied by the ping of glass pebbles exploding from a truck windshield and raining down on the pavement like hail, followed the wave of expanding sound in a kind of chaotic disharmony. Lights flickered momentarily inside the small shops along Main Street as the transformer atop the cock-eyed utility pole rained sparks on what was left of Alvin Skinner's shiny new, red Ford pickup truck.

Colin Flannigan had just rolled to a stop along the curb in front of Brady's Irish-American Pub when the truck came careening past, drifting further into the oncoming lane of traffic as it came. Fortunately there had been no other traffic as the truck continued to accelerate and drift, smashing into the utility pole at the end of Main Street without, Colin observed, so much as a tap on the brake to try to prevent it.

'Holy Christ,' Colin thought as he picked up his pace and jogged toward the accident 'What's Alvin done now? He must be drinking again or he's had a heart attack or something.'

He was the first one to reach the wreckage as business owners and patrons began to emerge from the small shops along Main Street. The young couple who had been seated outside of the Daily Grind café jumped up and moved quickly toward the accident as well. Already the sound of the local volunteer Fire Department's siren had sounded. News, good or bad, travels very quickly in a small town.

The utility pole had been knocked precariously askew by the force of the impact and sparks rained down on the crumpled cab. Colin could hear the wood splintering and popping as the weight of the transformer threatened to finish snapping the pole in two.

"Don't touch the metal," Colin yelled, "if that wire cuts loose you'll be electrocuted."

He glanced toward the small group of onlookers who stood about ten feet back from the wreckage, afraid to get any closer after hearing his warning. Several of them craned their necks and stood on their toes to try to get a look inside the truck. Some were genuinely concerned for the truck's occupants, others just indulging that voyeuristic human tendency to ogle the gruesome and macabre. Those people were disappointed because there was nothing to see. Colin could hear the murmurings of the gathering crowd as he reached for the door handle of the mangled truck, heedless of his own advice.

"That's Alvin's truck."

"Where is he?"

"There's nobody in there! Did he get thrown out?"

"Skinner sure did it this time!"

The acrid smoke billowing from the wreckage smelled strongly of gasoline and burning electrical wiring and it stung Colin's eyes. He pulled back his mane of wavy black hair, tucking it behind his ears and wrapped the elastic band that was on his wrist around it in one fluid motion.

"Stand back folks," Colin said "before somebody else gets hurt. Back, please. Let me see if he's down in the floor." Collin pulled the handle of the crumpled door, but it only moved a few inches. He swept away what was left of the safety glass in the passenger side window and it tinkled down the side of truck like little bells. Grabbing the door frame through the opening with both hands, Colin pulled with all of his considerable strength. The door creaked and groaned in response, metal against metal; as he forced it open another foot. It wasn't enough for him to get inside the cab but it was enough for him to look inside and see nothing. No evidence of an occupant, no feet crammed under the dashboard, no one lying in the floor.

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He swung lithely up into the bed of the truck ignoring the sparks that continued to rain down. The sliding rear-window of the truck cab was slightly ajar and Colin tugged it open, pushing his head through the opening and twisting his shoulders to get them inside the cab for a closer look. 'Where the Hell is Alvin?' he thought 'The damn truck didn't drive itself into the pole.' As he searched the cab, moving the debris aside, he heard the Company One engine roll up outside and tires screeching as two Sheriffs' cruisers came to an abrupt stop, sirens blaring. The Deputies jumped out and jogged toward the truck as Colin twisted his torso and backed out the small window again.

"Alright Buddy," a short, round Deputy called up to him, "step down from the truck. Have you been drinking?"

"Me?" Colin asked, nonplussed. "No, not yet, but what difference does that make?"

"I'd say judging from the state of your truck it makes a pretty big difference," the Deputy replied, snarkily.

"Yeah. Perhaps you'd be right if this *were* my truck," Colin sniped back at him, "but it's not. I'm just a concerned bystander."

"Where's the driver then?" the taller Deputy with the boxy frame asked Colin.

"No bloody idea," Colin replied. "It's crazy, but there's no one in the truck, no one a'tall." His usually undetectable Irish brogue slipped past his practiced American accent as he jumped over the side of the truck bed and landed nimbly on his feet like a cat. "The bloody thing didn't drive itself into the pole, but I have no clue where the driver is."

"That's Alvin Skinner's new truck," said Charlie Baker, the owner of the Daily Grind Café.

"Aye, 'tis that," Colin agreed, "but no sign of him, and I never took my eyes off the truck after it sped past me on the street. I'd have seen him get out, so would they," he said, pointing to the young couple who had been sitting at the table outside the café.

"He's right," the young woman he pointed toward replied. "No one got out of that truck, but I saw the man that was driving it as he came through the traffic light. I was about to sit down at the table and we made eye contact as he passed."

"Well, where did he go then?" the short Deputy asked, turning toward the young woman "and you're sure this isn't the guy that was driving this truck?" He nodded at Colin suspiciously.

"I'm sure," she replied, "the driver was an old guy, wearing a green cap—kinda grizzled looking."

"That's Alvin," Charlie Baker agreed, "grizzled as they come."

"This is the strangest thing I've ever seen," Mary Sims, the owner of The Middleton Antique Emporium said. "Where is he now? It's like he vanished into thin air."

Colin began to ease back from the rising pandemonium as the firefighters and EMT's added their voices to the cacophony of shouting voices, blaring sirens, and electric wires crackling.

"Everyone please move back from the truck. Please. Let us do our jobs here," the Fire Chief shouted through his bullhorn.

Colin thought that the bullhorn was overkill but in a town the size of Middleton how often would he have the chance to use it for anything more exciting than calling the Bingo numbers at the Fire Hall on Wednesday nights. 'Let him have his fun if it makes him feel important,' Colin thought, 'Me. I've done my part and now it's time for that overdue stout I was headed for at Brady's.' He eased his way toward the sidewalk opposite the leaning utility pole and headed back up Main Street toward the pub.

"Wait a minute Buddy," shouted the taller Deputy with the square shoulders. "I need your name and contact info in case we have more questions or something."

Colin turned and took several steps in the Deputy's direction. "The name's Colin Flannigan," he said and nodded in the direction of the pub, "and I'll be at Brady's havin' a stout for a bit. Then I'll be goin' home to my place out on Hazard's Mill Road; about 3 miles after you turn off the main road, on the right side by the river. There's a sign on the split rail fence, says 'Flannigan's Fishin' Spot'. I'll either be one place or the other." He smiled amiably at the Deputy and turned back toward the pub.

"Hey," the Deputy called after him "like the ballplayer Colin Flannigan?"

"Right," Colin replied without turning around, "One and the same."

Colin entered Brady's Pub amidst a buzz of excited voices, passing a cluster of bar patrons who were hovering at the front plate glass window watching the commotion at the end of the street. They turned toward Colin en masse and began a barrage of questions.

"What's going on?"

"Is that Skinner's truck?"

"I heard –."

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Colin held up his hand to cut off the stream of questions. “Whoa! Hold up there,” he said, shaking his head with a crooked grin. “I don’t know anything more than you do. It’s Skinner’s truck, for sure, but Skinner’s nowhere to be found. The blonde girl said she saw him when he passed her but by the time the truck hit the pole he was just gone.” He furrowed his dark brows expressively, “It’s the damnedest thing I’ve ever seen. I never looked away from that truck after it passed me. He couldn’t have gotten out—it’s like he vanished into thin air!”

Colin’s words generated another round of speculation from the entire group and another barrage of questions aimed at him. He held up his hand and added “That’s it folks. That’s all I know, which is nothing. You’re all free to talk amongst yourselves, as you will, but for me—there’s a stout waiting with my name on it. You all have at it.” He smiled and pushed past, headed for his favorite seat at the end of the bar and leaving the rabble to bounce crazy theories off one another. These situations always seem to warrant great speculation in small towns, where a little excitement or unexplained phenomenon adds spice to an otherwise dull existence.

‘Small town life has its definite benefits though,’ Colin thought as he reached for the frothy stout that the stunning, auburn haired beauty behind the bar had poured and set in front of his favorite chair during the group exchange. He enjoyed his pseudo-celebrity status here. He was sort of the big fish in a small pond here in Middleton. His status as a professional baseball player carried a great deal of weight around here. It afforded him a modicum of extra respect, quick service at the bar or at the various little eateries in town. He even had a key to the city presented to him by the Fire Chief, who was also serving as acting Mayor. The Mayor had been ousted from his public office after a minor scandal involving the wife of the Pastor of the Methodist church, but that again, was just small town life, Colin mused over his glass of stout. ‘I love it,’ he thought, as he picked up the glass and drained it of half of its dark, heady liquid. ‘It reminds me of home.’ Home to Colin was Ireland. Though he had been in the states since he was twelve years old, more than twenty years now, he would always consider Ireland his true home, though Middleton, Maryland was running a close second.

“Can I get you some dinner Colin?” asked the pretty bartender.

“Ah, no thanks Maddie. Not tonight, but you can tell me when you’re gonna let me take you out to supper. You keep evading the question like you think I might be contagious. It’s the least I can do after all the help you’ve been to me with Keira.”

He flashed her a disarming smile with his perfect teeth and his sparkling blue eyes, a gesture that had melted many a cold heart, but it seemed to have little effect on Madison Wallace, much to his dismay.

"Flannigan, you know your magnificent charms just don't work on me," she grinned at him and winked as she turned to wait on another customer. "Besides," she called back, "Keira is almost as much a kid sister to me as she is to you. I love her."

"But no love for poor old Colin?" he pouted, playfully.

"I've seen your bevy of baseball groupies. I don't think you're exactly hurting for lack of lovin'," Maddie teased, rolling her emerald green eyes at him.

"Ah, Maddie. You know I'd give 'em all up; every one, for the love of a good woman like you," Colin shot back, only half joking. "I figure if I just keep hanging here on this barstool in the off-season, eventually I'll wear you down. Once you give me a shot I'm in like Flynn." He smiled and tipped his glass toward her in salute, then drained it to the last drop and set it back on the bar.

Colin watched as a noisy party of eight entered through the front door, shooting theories about the accident scene back and forth between them. Joe Jamison and his wife Tammy were the loudest of the group, as they always were in any group they happened to be in. Joe, in his mid-forties was a local attorney and a complete know-it-all. No one else has ever done anything that Joe hasn't had first-hand experience with. Whatever the subject, he has been there and done that. His wife Tammy was a few years younger than Joe, she had been the captain of the cheer squad and the Prom Queen in High School and those had been her best years. 'Perhaps that's why,' Colin thought, 'she's clung so fiercely to that eighties look.' She still had the eighties beer can roll of bangs on her forehead, with long layers of bleached blonde hair feathered and layered in that Farrah Fawcett meets Madonna kind of look. Add to that her Tammy Faye Baker mascara and her 'Fran Drescher by way of Paula Deen' shrill, southern drawl and you had a pretty good facsimile of the town's new mayoral front-runner and his first lady. The rest of their group consisted of county clerks, attorneys, and council members, all of whom were showing signs that this was not the first stop on the bar tour. They all clamored into the large U-shaped booth behind Colin and Tammy began snapping her fingers and calling, "Oh, waitress! Can we please get a waitress over here to take our order?"

Maddie, who was standing right at the corner of the booth as they seated themselves, reached out and tapped her shoulder causing her to emit a sharp squeal as though someone had stepped on a dog's squeaky toy. "I'm right here *Tammy*," Maddie said, and batted her eyelashes exaggeratedly, and gave her luxurious hair a little flip over her shoulder, in an exact imitation of Tammy Jamison.

Colin laughed out loud. He couldn't help it; the imitation had been spot on. Tammy glowered at him as he winked at Maddie and turned back to his empty glass.

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"Oh, there you are," she smiled her plastic smile at Maddie. "Well, bless your heart girl, I'd forgotten you're still a barmaid. Y'all tell her what you want to drink," she said to the noisy, chattering group at her table.

"How's your Mama, Tammy?" Maddie asked, smiling sweetly "She hasn't been in here much since she lost her license. I guess she's hanging out at The Knotty Pine, being as it's closer to home--walking distance, right?"

Tammy Jamison's face flushed a dark crimson at Maddie's reference to her mother, a well-known drunkard and barfly and a mortal embarrassment to both of the upstanding and politically-correct Jamison's. She pointedly ignored the question and said, "Joe, order my drink. I need to go freshen up," then strode quickly toward the Ladies Room at the back of the Pub.

"Just bring us two bottles of wine, sweetheart," Joe leered at Maddie, "One red, one white—house wine." He added, "and glasses."

"Gee Joe, glasses?" Maddie replied sarcastically, "You're really moving up in the world. I thought you'd just swig it right outta the bottle like the rest of your kin." She turned on her heel and strode away leaving Joe Jamison sputtering and trying to play off her remark as a great joke to his companions.

Maddie stalked behind the bar, grabbed a rag and wiped the bartop, then pulled a frosty mug from the little chest freezer and filled it with Guinness. Colin noted how the routine of these familiar motions had a visibly calming effect on her as he watched her move gracefully toward him and set the glass on a fresh coaster in front of him.

"Ever think of taking that routine on the road?" he asked jokingly. "You're quite the impersonator. I'd pay to watch that act again." He flashed her his most mischievous grin.

"No. I'm sure God's gonna get me for being such a smartass one of these days," Maddie said, "but that woman just brings out the devil in me!" She reached into the cooler and pulled out a bottle of the House Chardonnay "Frankly, I'd take an evening of serving her Mama over either one of them any time." She uncorked a bottle of the house red wine and set it on tray, gently a serving adding eight wine glasses to the tray.

"Hey Maddie," called Roger Bianca from his seat halfway down the long, L-shaped bar "something's happening." He pointed toward the flickering screen of the television above the cash register, "Turn that up would you?"

Maddie hoisted the loaded tray in one hand and reached to turn up the sound with the other as she passed. She rounded the end of the bar and approached the group of rabble-rousers with the Jamison's. The whole table had quieted suddenly and turned their eyes toward the bar. Maddie paused to see what had their rapt attention as she set the wine glasses and the two

bottles of wine on the table. A red banner was scrolling across the bottom of the television screen that displayed 'Special Report' in large letters behind the Anchorman.

It read: "Israel bombs Tehran. Possibly Nuclear unconfirmed." Maddie drew in a sharp breath. The entire bar, who a moment ago had been completely engrossed in speculating about the accident at the end of Main Street, was now focused on what was playing out on the world stage. "Again," the Anchor said "Our news sources in the Middle East have confirmed that Israel has launched missiles, their target: the capital of Iran. Tehran." He tugged at his earpiece and his expression, though changing, was unreadable as he continued "We have further reports coming in now but we need to get confirmation. Stay tuned and we will give you an update as soon as we have that confirmation." Then he continued to repeat what he had already reported.

Everyone in the bar was talking at once now. From the table behind him, Colin heard Joe Jamison in his best jury summation tone say, "Confirmation. No confirmation necessary. The facts are pretty clear. Israel, in their ongoing aggressive attempt to control the entire Middle East, has obviously decided to take out the competition once and for all."

"Really?" Colin inquired, incredulously. "Is *that* what you just heard? Because I didn't hear anything even remotely like that."

"Yes. Well, then you weren't really listening," Jamison intoned dryly "Not that someone like you has the capacity to understand the political nuances here anyway."

"Someone like me, is it?" Colin turned and half rose from his perch at the bar "and what perchance do ya mean by that?" His Irish accent slipped past his practiced American colloquialism as it always did when his ire was piqued. He took one imposing step toward the table, head cocked inquiringly to one side as he waited for an explanation.

"I mean," said Jamison, trying not to show how cowed he was by Colin Flannigan's daunting, and extremely athletic presence, "that being as you are not an American and you're an athlete, you aren't one who would pay attention to how politics works." He straightened his tie nervously and swallowed.

"Ah, I see," said Colin, eyes lighting with a look of sudden comprehension, "so because I'm a big, dumb professional ballplayer *and* an Irishman who's only been an American citizen for twenty years, I'm too thick to what?" He paused expectantly "Understand plain English?"

"Hey, now you're just putting words in my mouth," whined Jamison.

"Listen now," Tammy Jamison said to Colin, taking the opportunity to slip from the corner of the booth, where she had quietly slid herself on returning from the Ladies Room. "Y'all don't need to argue politics now," she brushed lightly against Colin. Looking up at his flashing blue eyes she drummed her bright pink acrylic nails against his rock hard chest. "You know Joe. He doesn't mean anything by it. He's just a little drunk."

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Colin stepped back from Tammy and turned back to the bar, saying as an aside to anyone within earshot "Then he should learn, as a wise man once said, that it's better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak up and remove all doubt."

Tammy Jamison giggled and batted her lashes coquettishly at Colin who was entirely unsusceptible to her questionable charms and it was Joe's turn to redden perceptibly. He reached out and grabbed his wife by the wrist, pulling her back down into the booth beside him, glaring at her.

There was a sudden flurry of movement behind the anchor desk as the news anchor looked questioningly from one monitor to the next, tugging at his earpiece. He cleared his throat, shuffled a stack of papers, and stared silently into the camera for several seconds. "Ladies and Gentlemen, it appears that our report was a bit –ah-hem" he cleared his throat again, "a bit premature. Just one moment please. We seem to be having some technical difficulty." He shuffled the stack of papers again, nervously. "Is that-? Do we have-?" he was saying to some unseen entity. "Yes. Ladies and Gentlemen we do now have official confirmation of two missile launches. It has been confirmed that the early report of Israel launching an attack on Tehran was actually done in retaliation. The initial attack, that is to say, the initial missile launch came from Iran." The anchor paused as he looked at the monitor in astonishment. He paled visibly and then continued, "Israel launched in retaliation as soon as they confirmed that Iranian missiles were en route, but they were unable to intercept those missiles...I-uh-it is my sad duty to report that Tel-Aviv has been virtually annihilated."

For more than a minute Brady's Pub was utterly silent. As the news anchor shuffled his papers and the network attempted to connect via satellite with their Middle East correspondent, no one in the bar uttered a sound, along with the rest of the civilized world, they held their collective breath. Then like a giant wave breaking against the shore, the spell broke and chaos reigned. Everyone began talking; speculating, making calls on their cell phones, making emergency contingency plans, all as they witnessed history unfold. Once again the entire political climate of the world changed before their wide eyes as the visibly appalled news anchor made one last horrendous announcement.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we will be cutting to a live White House press conference in just a moment. The White House Press Secretary and the Secretary of State will give us official confirmation that the attack against Israel was in fact nuclear," he straightened and raised his head as he looked directly into the camera. "Tel Aviv has been essentially wiped out in an all out nuclear assault perpetrated by the Iranian government. Casualties are expected to be in the hundreds of thousands and Tel Aviv, for all intents and purposes, is no more."

Brady's Pub did a very brisk business for a small town establishment, particularly on the weekends, and this Friday was no different. 'At least,' Colin thought, 'no different in that respect.' But everything else, everything seemed different. Colin couldn't put a name to it, but something in the very atmosphere had changed. Of course the news of the attacks in the Middle East was part of it and the television had continued to broadcast throughout the late afternoon, reporting millions of casualties between Israeli and Iranian targets with much speculation on how the United States would respond. All the while more and more patrons trickled in, seeking their usual haunts, or companionship, or just a drink, whatever form their particular comfort took. But Colin felt that something fundamental had changed even before the announcement of what was shaping up to be World War III. He had felt that prickly sensation as the fine hair on the back of his neck stood up in trepidation.

The wreckage of Alvin Skinner's truck had been cleared away from the end of Main Street and the local power company had dispatched a truck to repair the transformer and secure the damaged utility pole. Alvin's status had remained MIA for the duration. No one had seen or heard from him and a thorough search by the local Sheriff's Deputy's had turned up no sign of him, no evidence that he had been thrown from the truck and then slunk away, he had for all intents and purposes vanished.

"Maddie," Colin called, furrowing his dark brows. "While I could look at your lovely face forever, I think I'll be paying my tab and heading out." He rolled his eyes expressively toward the table behind him where the Jamison's and their noisy entourage held court. They had continued to drink and to loudly speculate on everything from Skinner's disappearance to the CIA and American Government conspiracy to take over the entire world for the oil or the alien technology or the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Between them and Roger Bianca on the other side of him yelling out his drunken opinions on 'Anarchy', Colin decided that there simply was not enough Guinness on the planet to make another minute of listening to them bearable.

"Sure thing Colin," she smiled conspiratorially. "I wish I could escape myself," she wrinkled her lightly freckled nose and made a face at the back of Tammy Jamison's bleached head, sticking out her tongue for emphasis.

Colin laughed heartily as Tammy Jamison turned just in time to catch a good look at Maddie's gesture. She drew an indignant breath and was just about to launch into another tirade when Colin's Uncle burst through the front door and interrupted.

"Maddie, dear, I need a word—" the serious tone in his usually jovial Irish voice stopped Tammy Jamison's outburst. Colin could easily read the troubled look on his uncle's face, something was far wrong.

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"Of course Father," Maddie rounded the bar and came to stand in front of Father Flannigan. The cold finger of dread was creeping up her spine and she swallowed hard trying to regain her composure as she looked from him to the front door. It swung open as her 12 year old son Joshua, as pale as a ghost, ran in and skidded to a stop behind the Priest.

"What? What's wrong?" she looked from Father Flannigan to Joshua and back. "What's happened? Is it Mama? Where's Amy?"

The Priest reached out and put his hands on Maddie's shoulders in a gesture of comfort and reassurance. "No need to panic just yet, but—," he looked at Joshua's anxious upturned face and then back at Maddie. "It's Amy. She got on the school bus to go home but when Joshua met the bus to get her off, no Amy."

"What?" Maddie looked at him, trying to absorb what he was saying. "What do you mean 'No Amy'?" she shook her head in denial, loosening her wild tumble of auburn hair from its bonds, giving her a wild wide-eyed appearance. She turned toward Josh and repeated "What do you mean 'No Amy'?!!" the edge of panic was rising in her voice, "Where's Amy??!!!"

Colin moved quickly up behind Maddie and put a steadying arm around her for support. "Come on Maddie. We'll all go and help find her." He guided her gently toward a barstool and urged her to sit. "First we'll call the police and get them to help. We'll get to the bottom of this. She probably just got off the bus with a friend. Don't worry girl. It's goin' to be just fine," he tried to reassure her, but his clenching gut and those fine hairs on the back of his neck were doing little to reassure him.

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Madison Wallace was a single mother with two precocious, inquisitive children, whom she encouraged to express themselves. “Ask questions,” she said, “how else will you learn?” but now she was spending every waking moment second guessing herself. Had Amy gotten into a car with a stranger? Had her natural curiosity caused her to throw caution to the wind and go off on some little woodland adventure? She should have instilled more fear in her children. If she had then this would not have happened.

The school bus driver had assured her and the police that Amy had gotten on the bus at the school and she had not gotten off the bus at all. Not anywhere. “I pay close attention to who is getting off at each stop” she had assured Maddie “I swear to you Miss Wallace, that child did not get off my bus at any stop. She absolutely did not walk past me to get off that bus—I swear it on my life!”

The woman had been so distraught that Maddie didn’t have the heart to blame her or to question the validity of her statement, though others had not hesitated to question it. The police were in the process of talking to each and every child who had been on that bus with Amy, Surely someone had seen something.

It was nearly dawn and the late August sky reflected in her living room picture window was beginning to lighten, edged in a pink and purple glow. She had not slept. She along with every able-bodied friend, neighbor or passing acquaintance had come together, as most small communities do in a crisis involving a child, to comb the fields and woods, knock on doors, make phone calls, and put up flyers.

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The Amber Alert had gone out nationwide yesterday within minutes of Father Flannigan's revelation that Amy was missing. But so far the search had been fruitless and Maddie's nerves were beginning to seriously fray. The more time that passed the more frantic she felt, though she tried desperately to put on a brave face. She moved, trancelike and exhausted, through the several people who were scattered about her living room, to turn up the volume on the news report that was playing silently on her television.

"That's right Bill," the newswoman said, looking directly into the camera, "the number of nationwide Amber Alerts in the last 24 hours has reached an alarming and inexplicable four hundred-seventy six, nationwide. That is to say, four hundred and seventy-six children have been reported missing in just under twenty four hours."

Maddie turned the volume up louder and raised her hands emphatically to silence the chatter in the room. "Shut up! Listen!" she cried in a voice hoarse from a long night of talking, pleading, answering and asking questions. "Listen!"

The network newsman picked up the thread of her report and continued "Thank you Robin. In addition to this inexplicably high number of missing children, there have also been reports of missing adults of all ages and backgrounds. Though we have no official numbers yet, due to the fact that an adult must be missing for 48 hours before a Missing Person report can be filed, authorities anticipate that the total number of unexplained disappearances is now in the thousands." He cleared his throat and continued, "Naturally, in light of the recent upheaval in the Middle East some people are raising questions about a possible connection between the disappearances and what is happening in Israel and Iran."

"What—what in Hell does that mean?" Maddie asked no one in particular as she looked around the room at the stunned faces.

"I don't know," Wanda Skinner said from the dining room table where she was assembling more flyers for Maddie, "but Colin and at least two other people saw my Alvin driving his new truck up Main Street one minute and then disappear like he was never there the next" she looked emphatically at Maddie. "Now you tell me how a man the size of Alvin just disappears like he was never there with folks lookin' practically right at him? Makes no sense. Makes no sense and I tell you that somethin's fishy in Denmark-as they say!" she spit snuff into her small tin cup to punctuate her statement.

The room began to spin slowly, as Maddie finally succumbed to the events of the last twelve hours. She felt a surge of heat engulf her as the edges of her vision began to darken. Before she could register what was happening she felt her feet leave the ground and the room tilt at an odd angle. Colin had seen her start to weave and had moved quick as lightning to whisk her off her feet. He easily lifted her limp form, the muscles in his arms cording as he carried her down the narrow hallway to the Master Bedroom and gently laid her down on her

bed. "Stay," he ordered her, "seriously Maddie, you're no good to your kids or to anyone if you collapse. Just let me handle this for you for just a little while and you try to rest—Please," he implored her, handing her a glass of cold water that he had drawn from the bathroom tap.

"We'll get this thing figured out. I promise." He grabbed her grandmother's quilt from the top of the cedar chest at the foot of her bed and covered her as she watched him with dazed and tear-filled eyes, feeling like the weight of the world was bearing down on her.

"Thank you Colin," she whispered, "I – I'll just lie here for a little while. You'll wake me if there's any news?" she asked, beginning to sit up again.

He pushed her gently back against the pillows and pulled the quilt up to her chin. "Of course darlin'," he brushed the shock of silky hair out of her sad green eyes "Of course I'll wake you. You just rest and let me handle it for now." He backed out of the room and shut the door as the first rays of morning sunlight streamed through the window. Maddie had already fallen into an exhausted but fitful sleep.

She awoke with a feeling of panic rising in her throat. The bright sun of midday was shining cheerfully through the gauzy lace curtains at her bedroom window.

She wondered how the sun could continue to shine as though her world were not crashing in on her. She tried to push that panicked feeling back down so she could function. 'Amy is missing but Joshua still needs his mother and I have to keep my wits about me. I need to think, to move forward, to keep going. I cannot just curl up in a ball on the floor and let this feeling of overwhelming helplessness take me,' she chided herself silently.

She rose from her bed and moved about her room, woodenly, going through the motions of gathering clean clothes from her closet and bureau drawers. She slipped quietly into the bathroom and turned on the shower to warm the water as she disrobed. A moment later and she was standing under the torrent of steaming hot water, feeling the warmth of it begin to loosen the knots in her back and neck, even as she succumbed to the flood of hot, salty tears that coursed down her upturned face. The backs of her eyelids seemed to be emblazoned with the image of her beautiful Amy. Amy laughing. Amy playing. Amy fighting with her big brother. Amy curled against Maddie in bed, sleeping soundly in her embrace. She prayed silently for her little girl and the water eased her physical pain as she felt her emotional pain would never be eased again.

She emerged from the shower, resolute about facing whatever this day might bring. Good or bad, either way she had to find a way to get through it, to do what had to be done. She dressed quickly in worn jeans and an oversized knit sweater that did nothing to disguise her long, sleek form, though she wore it for just that purpose. She had always been told how pretty

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she was, all her life, but she saw her appealing looks as more a hindrance in life than a help. She was tall, 5'10", and proportioned like a goddess, with curves and valleys that many men had begged for a chance to explore, but Maddie was not one to be distracted by a lot of hearts and flowers that in her mind never amounted to anything but heartache and trouble in the long run.

Looking in the mirror as she blow-dried her thick mane of auburn hair, Maddie thought about Jon, the father of her two children. What a charmer he had been. He had swept her right off her feet at the tender age of eighteen. He had said all of the right things, made all of the right promises, but his follow through had left a lot to be desired. They had hung on for six years, six years longer than they should have, she thought, as she considered the dark circles under the emerald eyes in her reflection. But how could she think that when those six years had produced the real loves of her life, Joshua and Amy? If nothing else could be said for Jon, his tall athletic form, curly red hair and sky blue eyes had combined with her own assets to produce two tall, beautiful, smart and loving auburn haired babies that were Maddie's reason for living. She didn't even know how to reach Jon to tell him about Amy. He traveled all over the country for work and only touched base with her and the children randomly. She never knew how to reach him at any given time, other than leaving a message with his mother, in case she heard from him. Maddie never had the need to find him. She had resigned herself to raising her children alone, six years ago when they had divorced. She had already essentially raised Josh by herself for the first six years so it wasn't much of an adjustment. She never counted on any help from him, which was good since she rarely got any. This way any unexpected help that came from him seemed like a boon, which was better than counting on it and never getting it. She supposed that she would have no choice but to try and get word to Jon about what was happening now.

She pulled her hair back into a quickly woven plait of French braid that reached the bottom of her shoulder blades, and emerged from the bathroom to a light knock at her bedroom door.

"Come in. It's open," she called lightly

Colin Flannigan pushed the door open, leaning against the frame with a steaming cup of something in his hand. "Maddie darlin', I heard you moving about and thought you might like a cup o'tea?" He held out the china cup in offering with a look of concern darkening his sapphire eyes.

"Thanks Colin," she smiled up at him appreciatively. She had tried very hard not to take any interest in this charming, beautiful Irishman, but there was a quality about him that really managed to undermine her formidable defenses. She stepped toward him and accepted the steaming cup, closing her eyes momentarily as she drank. She emitted a repressed cough with wide-eyed surprise as the fiery liquid slide down her throat, warming her insides as it went.

"Uh, next time you might give a girl a warning... that you've spiked her tea," she admonished mildly.

"Sorry," he grinned at her, "it's just a little spot of Bushmill's Irish. Under the circumstances I thought it might do you some good."

"It's good. Thanks." She took another long swallow, "Anything Colin? Any news?"

"While you were resting, Charlie had everyone move operations to the banquet room above the Pub," he hesitated with a look that told Maddie he was trying to decide how much to say.

"Colin? What is it? What else?"

"There's—been a bit of a development, not about Amy—exactly, but in the bigger picture, you might say," he answered vaguely.

"Come on Colin, spill. What are you getting at?" She looked at him anxiously.

"The disappearances—," he hesitated

"Yes? I heard the news this morning—about the number of Amber Alerts, right?" she asked. "Do they know what's behind this?" She furrowed her brow, creating a deep crease of worry in the center of her forehead.

"Grab your wrap," he directed "I'll explain on the way to Brady's. Your Ma is gonna stay here and man the phones with Josh and Wanda. You need to see this." He draped her heavy, long, fringed wrap onto her shoulders and led her gently out to the main room.

They said quick good-byes to Maddie's mother and Wanda with instructions for them to call the second they heard any news exchanged both ways. Maddie squeezed Joshua in a tight embrace and kissed his cheeks and forehead, brushing his long titian bangs out of his eyes, "I love you Joshie," she called him by the pet name that he usually objected to now that he was almost a teenager, but today he didn't object. He was growing into a man right in front of her eyes.

He looked up at his mother, with pain in his eyes that was born of his helpless inability to fix this for her, to make everything all better the way she always had for him. "I love you too Mom," he said, "We'll be okay. Amy'll be okay," he tried to reassure her.

She gave him one last squeeze and turned to follow Colin out to his truck. Ever the gentleman he opened doors for her and lent her his support as she climbed into the cab of his truck. He moved around the truck and quickly slid into the driver's seat, turning the key left dangling in the ignition. The sound of the Hemi roaring to life under the hood of the dark blue Dodge Ram pickup brought the slightest hint of a smile to Maddie's worried countenance as she thought how well this huge beast of a truck suited Colin's personality, rugged but beautiful,

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powerful and practical all rolled into one appealing package. 'A man and his truck,' she thought ruefully, 'a love for the ages.'

He reached over and turned on the CD player, turning the volume down so it was soft background as he began to fill her in on the latest developments. "There's something strange going on Maddie," he began. "I know you'll have to try and put this into perspective more than most because it so directly affects you, but there's something—a bigger picture here—that I can't explain." He drew in a sharp breath and continued, "since Amy's disappearance yesterday six more people have gone missing just here in Middleton." He waited for his words to hit home with Maddie before going on, "In every case the person seemed to vanish. There one minute and gone the next. Like they were...zapped right out of existence."

"Come on Colin, what are you saying here?"

"That's just it. I don't know exactly *what* I'm saying. I just know that there's more to this than meets the eye and I've known that since before Amy disappeared." He turned partially in his seat to face her, "before Uncle came in to the Pub to tell you about Amy I had this—this very odd sensation, like something in the fabric of the world had suddenly changed. I don't know how to explain it so that you'll get my meaning; it was...just this overwhelmin' sense of—not wrong, exactly, just 'something'. I don't have the words to convey the feeling. "

Maddie nodded in understanding, "I think I know what you mean," she agreed "I had this hinckey feeling last night in the bar, before the Father came in—like the hairs on my neck were raised—waiting."

"Aye. I had the exact same sensation."

As he slid the big truck into a narrow parking slot on Main Street they could both see that a large crowd was gathered inside the pub and the lights shone brightly through the upstairs windows of Brady's banquet room as the afternoon sun sank farther on the western horizon. Before Maddie could unfasten her seat belt, Colin was out of the truck and around it to open her door. He gently lifted her down to the pavement and placed a hand protectively against the small of her back as he walked her across the street and into the Pub.

The noisy din that greeted them as they opened the front door suddenly hushed audibly as they entered and every eye turned to Maddie in concern or sympathy or just morbid curiosity. As several people stepped toward her to offer help or words of encouragement the hushed spell was broken and the noisy din ensued again. There was a large knot of people gathered at the far end of the bar and there seemed to be some new tumult that their arrival had interrupted. Maddie and Colin made their way in that direction, so that they could go upstairs to join the bevy of helpful citizens who had gathered to lend support. Steve McMillan, seated at

the bar, was the focus of the excitement and the tall, boxy Sheriff's Deputy that Colin had talked to yesterday was jotting something down on a small pad.

"And you're saying that the harness was not loosened?" the Deputy said to McMillan "that at –what did you say— 700 feet in the air? She was there and then she wasn't?" he paused dramatically, "Just...zapped? Transported? Sucked into a Black hole?"

"Look," McMillan replied earnestly, "I know it sounds...crazy, far-fetched, whatever. I'm a high school Science teacher, not a magician. We were cruising in the power-chute over the fields out by Simpson's Pond, looking for Amy Wallace. We were flying in tandem. She was talking to me. I was talking to her." He paused with a faraway look in his eyes, "Then I felt – like a blast of heat and I noticed a sudden...shift— in the craft, a change in the balance and handling. I called back to Susan, to ask her if she could feel it too. But she didn't answer me. I turned around to get her attention but—she was just—just not there anymore. I don't know where she went. It's just—crazy!!" He rested his head in his sunburned hands. "I know how it sounds, but she didn't fall out. That's just not possible." He looked up and saw Maddie staring at him incredulously, so he rose and moved toward her, awkwardly embracing her. As he drew back he said "Maddie, we were trying to help. We were looking for Amy. But we—I—I just don't get it." There was a pleading in his tone, a cry for affirmation or understanding or a plausible explanation.

"I know Steve. I heard," she said in a comforting tone "I don't get it either. It's like some bad SciFi movie with people getting randomly swallowed up by some invisible monster." She reached out and patted his hand, "It'll be okay Steve. We are going to find them both. I'm sure we will," she reassured him, but she wasn't sure of anything. She was less sure with every minute that passed.

'Colin is right,' she thought 'there really is something else going on here, something inexplicable.'

Susan Evans was the seventh person to disappear from Middleton in the last twenty-four hours. Colin tried to fill her in as they climbed the stairs at the back of the bar. Alvin Skinner had been the first, as far as anyone could tell. Amy had been second. Alice Partlowe never made it home from the Mill last night. Ian Fisher got up from the dinner table, walked into the bathroom, shut and locked the door, and disappeared. The door had to be unlocked when he wouldn't answer his wife's calls but he was not inside and the bathroom was a windowless five by six box. Emily Williams had settled her kids down to sleep last night, told her boyfriend that she was going to get a glass of water from the kitchen, when she wasn't back in bed after fifteen minutes J.R. had gone to check on her but she was nowhere to be found. Todd Robbins was leaving with the High School football team from their away game in

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Frederick last night but when the coach took a head count on the bus to be sure they had everyone, Todd was gone. And now Susan Evans, the Middleton High School Spanish teacher, had disappeared while soaring at 700 feet in a tandem power-chute. No broken or unfastened harnesses, everything was still completely intact. She could not have fallen out without Steve having seen it and yet she was gone.

As Maddie and Colin entered the bustling banquet room above the Pub, several people shouted greetings to them. Peggy Williams, with her sister Sue and her daughter Beth, who looked like three short, round clones, that varied only slightly in height and girth, and only slightly in height *from* girth, all waddle-ran to embrace Maddie. As they came together around her, like Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum plus one, she would have disappeared in the onslaught except that she stood more than a foot taller than the Williams' women. As Maddie looked up and caught a glimpse of their reflection in the mirror, her head and shoulders looked like the topper on some mad, colorful 'Alice in Wonderland' cake. Colin could only smile as they brusquely shoved him aside to converge on Maddie.

"Thank you all so much" Maddie said gratefully even as she tried to extricate herself from the knot of soft, pliable flesh, "everyone has been so thoughtful, so kind."

Father Flannigan quickly moved to Maddie's aide, knowing that his presence alone would send the gaggle of devout Pentecostals scurrying in another direction. "Thank you lovely ladies so much" and then dangling the carrot of distraction that never failed, "would you ladies like to take charge of getting all of the food that was so kindly donated for the volunteers, organized and ready so we can feed them?"

"Yes, of course Father" Peggy chimed, flushing a deep crimson as she addressed the Catholic Priest by his designation. She scurried toward the kitchenette pulling Sue and Beth along with her, barking out high-pitched orders all the while.

"Thank you Uncle" Colin stepped up and embraced the big, white-bearded, priest who was a bear of a man, a fact that his collar could not hide.

"All in the course of duty son" he smiled and returned his nephew's strong embrace. Turning to Maddie he could plainly see the wild mix of emotions playing out across her porcelain face. He put his big arm around her shoulder and gave her a reassuring squeeze. "This will all work out in the end, darlin'" he said, "God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit have a plan at work here and in the end all we can really do is leave it with Him."

The flash of anger in her wide green eyes belied her softly spoken words "I think I'd be a lot more apt to do that if we weren't talking about the disappearance of my six year old child, Father."

Father Flannigan's reply was cut short by the bark of Joe Jamison's irritating voice shouting above the noisy room "Listen up! They're making another announcement on the tube!"

The room quieted quickly as the volume on the huge, old, big screen projection television in the corner was turned up so they could all hear the latest proclamation. The news anchor had no time to speculate, with just enough time to say "We take you now to the White House for a Presidential News Conference."

The picture immediately cut to the White House Press Room as the Press Secretary entered from stage right and took her place behind the podium with the Presidential Seal. The reporters shuffled in their seats in anticipation as she spoke. "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President will be making an important announcement; however, he will not be taking questions when he has finished." A loud murmur reverberated through the Press Corp as she concluded, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the President of the United States."

The President entered and took the podium with a look of grim resolve. "I am here to address two major issues and to inform the country how the United States Government intends to proceed in light of the developments in the past forty-eight hours. Foremost among them is that at 3 o'clock Eastern Time, this afternoon, Iran in an act of continued aggression, cemented our active participation in this Middle Eastern conflict by attacking the U.S. Military base in Saudi Arabia." He paused until the wave of chatter from the crowd of reporters subsided, "This unwarranted attack has negated our resolve to avoid military action in support of our Israeli allies. Since this attack was sanctioned by the Iranian government it is an act of war and the United States will respond to this aggression with the full force of our military." He held up his hands to single for quiet at the loud murmur of voices "The Secretary of State and General Westinghouse will follow me with a statement outlining our troop realignment and pending military response, but rest assured our response has been swift and deadly. It will be our response to any nation or group who takes aggressive action against the U.S. or to any who offers aid or support to our enemies."

At this statement the low murmur that continued to roll through the Press Corp pitched into a chaotic shouting match.

"Have we declared war on Iran?"

"How many casualties were sustained at the Saudi base?"

"Has a strike against them already been ordered?"

"Was the attack against the U.S. nuclear too?"

"Is this recent rash of disappearances somehow connected?"

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"Are they behind the five hundred plus children who have gone missing in the last 24 hours?"

The President stood with his hand raised to call for quiet, as the barrage of questions continued. Suddenly his hand descended to thwack the podium with his open palm, "QUIET!"

The murmur hushed immediately and the President continued, meanwhile the crowd gathered around the big screen television sat and watched in stunned silence, except for the soft hiccupping sobs that Peggy Williams emitted to the rhythmic cadence of her sister's repeated pleas "Oh Lord Jesus, oh my Lord." Father Flannigan patted the back of Maddie's hand with one big, bear paw and made the sign of the cross with his other hand.

"You can ask your questions to General Westinghouse. Please listen, because I also have another issue to address which some of you have just asked about." He paused and drank from a black mug that he put back under the podium as he continued, "We seem to have another crisis at hand which needs to be addressed; the recent inexplicable disappearances that have resulted in over four-hundred nationwide Amber Alerts in less than 24 hours. As far as we are able to determine at this point, the disappearances are not connected to this attack, however I have dedicated significant Federal resources to investigating these disappearances. At this time, in addition to those missing children, we can add at least eleven hundred instances of persons whose whereabouts are unknown and are still pending official Missing Person status." He shifted uncomfortably, clearly more reticent and indecisive about the disappearances than he was about the military strike. This was obviously unknown territory and a phenomenon that he was uncomfortable defining since there were no plausible answers to the disappearances. "Obviously we are dealing with some as yet undefined threat with this many random people vanishing at once." He stopped and swiped a white silk handkerchief across his forehead, stowing it in his jacket he continued "the thing is, whatever the cause, this phenomenon is global."

Commotion erupted again in the Press Corp but the President continued, raising his voice to be heard above the din, "we have spoken with authorities in Europe, Africa, South America, and India, all confirming similar disappearances. We have had no response from the Chinese on the subject, but initial indications are that they too are experiencing this phenomenon." He stopped and waited for them to quiet down before he said "At this time, that is all we know. I cannot tell you what is behind this, I can only say that we are working in conjunction with our foreign allies to unravel this mystery and every effort will be made to find these missing people and bring them home." With that he turned and marched off the platform and through the curtained exit. As his Press Secretary stepped up to the microphone and began rattling off press conference itinerary for the FBI and military briefings.

The room above Brady's Pub was now in as much turmoil as the Press Corp had been. Women were crying, men were making arrangements to gather arms, others were making immediate plans to batten down and hold on for whatever might be coming, but not one person in the room failed to see that in less than a day every aspect of their life on earth had been significantly altered. The world was tilting on its axis to such a degree that it threatened to unbalance the whole human race.

3

The heat of the late August sun shimmered like a mirage above the hot asphalt as the StatFlight medical helicopter touched down on it, outside of St. Vincent's Hospital.

Gina Starks rushed out, ducking and shielding her eyes to avoid the stir of debris caused by the blades of the helicopter. The team of six emergency medical personnel worked together like a finely tuned machine to convey the injured patient from the landing pad into the Trauma Center. Gina fought against a growing state of trepidation, aggravated by physical exhaustion. She had begun her shift eighteen long and arduous hours ago. In her six years as a trauma nurse at St. Vincent's she had never seen anything like the escalation of events that she had witnessed here in the last eighteen hours. There was a growing state of panic in the general public because the authorities had failed to give any plausible explanation for the rash of disappearances, which by the latest estimates were in the tens of thousands. 'How can thousands of people just go missing overnight?' she wondered. It was a puzzle that boggled her senses so she was thankful to be so busy that she didn't have too much time to dwell on it.

Gina and Chauncey Mitchell worked together to secure the patient to the stretcher and roll it quickly from the pad to the automatic doors that led to the ER where Doctor Samuels awaited them. Doctor Samuels was one of the physicians who had been working through the

crisis just as Gina had, for endless hours without a break to rest, eat, or even relieve himself. The signs of fatigue were becoming increasingly evident on the entire overworked medical team.

"Regina," Dr. Samuels said as Gina worked to administer the drugs he had ordered for this patient into his IV drip "as soon as you finish with that and note this patient's chart I want you to go take a break. You haven't so much as stopped to take a drink of water in the last twelve hours. You need to take a break."

She smiled at him warmly, "I will, just as soon as things calm down around here. Besides, you haven't either and I don't see you slowing down."

"Perhaps," he conceded "but I am not in my third trimester of pregnancy, you are." He reached over and patted her hand in a gesture of affection, "Really Reggie, you need to take better care of yourself. I know you must be about to drop from exhaustion."

Gina squeezed his hand and leaned down to brush a kiss on the cheek of her sweet mentor. "I promise I'll take a break as soon as I get this guy squared away, drugs administered and wheel him over to x-ray like Dr. Jordan asked me to."

"Okay," he agreed "but that's it. I want you to go home and get some rest after that. You aren't the only capable staff member here, just the best one." He closed the patients chart and slipped it back into the wall pocket by the cubicle door, giving Gina one last raised, bushy eyebrow as he left "Home with you Missy. I mean it. I don't know what in this crazy world is going on out there but I want you safely home with that big bear of a husband to look after you and keep you safe."

"Yes sir," she smiled at him and waited until he was out of earshot to say "as soon as they have everything here under control and you don't need me."

Gina and Doctor Samuels were a legendary team at St. Vincent's; like Fric and Frac, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, Stanley and Doctor Livingston. They worked in tandem so often that they could nearly complete each other's sentences. She jokingly referred to him as her "work husband" and him to her as his "work wife", though what an odd looking pair they made. At twenty-seven and nearly six feet tall in her stocking feet, Gina was athletic, with the body of a long distance runner and skin the color of milk chocolate. Her hair hung in long braided, beaded strands almost to her waist; she kept them tied back when she worked. She had a proud bearing that Samuels said lent her the appearance of an African Queen or an Amazon Princess rather than a trauma nurse. She also had such hauntingly pale gray-blue eyes that they were utterly startling. By comparison, Doctor Samuels was in his fifties, barely five and a half feet tall, with a thick gray moustache and wild tufts of soft gray hair that lent him the look of a mad scientist, belying the fact that he was one of the most respected names in emergency

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medicine in the country. They both shared a passion and dedication for their work that was unsurpassed and was the reason they made such a first-rate team.

As she finished administering the last of the pain medication into the IV port Gina felt the familiar vibration of her cell phone in the side pocket of her scrubs. She ignored it as she tucked a blanket over her patient "That should help with the pain," she reassured the injured male flight attendant. "Just rest here and I'll be in to take you down for those x-rays in about ten minutes." She walked out of the cubicle and reached for the cell phone as she glimpsed her reflection in the glass partition and giggled at the sight. 'I look like I'm smuggling a basketball under this shirt,' she thought wryly as she answered the vibrating phone.

"Hello handsome," she cooed in her most sultry, phone sex voice, "Miss me?"

"I always miss you Baby," said the static charged reply on the other end of the phone, "I'm getting seriously concerned about what is going on right now Gina. I want you to come on home – now--please" he urged her "you've been working since yesterday afternoon and I'll bet you've barely taken a break," he speculated.

"I know Terrance" she said "people are in a state of panic here. We were taking in dozens of people every hour and then that plane skidded off the runway and things really broke loose!"

"The news said that the co-pilot was talking to the passengers in the cabin while the pilot taxied down the runway. When the plane started drifting off course he ran back up to the cockpit and the pilot was gone," Terrance said, incredulously. "Just disappeared! And the co-pilot just barely saved them from hitting another plane by veering it off the runway."

"That's pretty much the way I heard it too."

"How does an airline pilot just vanish in mid-flight?" he asked "This is Indianapolis, not the damn Bermuda Triangle!"

"Beats me Baby," Gina replied "I have my hands full just trying to handle all these hysterical passengers and the poor flight attendant that got trampled when they stampeded to the exits." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, adding "and the traffic accidents have been crazy. We've had seven fatalities since I came on yesterday. It's like the whole world has gone insane."

"Well, then I may as well go ahead and hit you with the next thing," he paused, hesitantly.

"What is it Terrance?" she asked with trepidation "What happened?"

"Nothing happened, but...Jamal is here."

Gina's face flashed hot at the mention of her brother's name. "What in Hell does he want?" she asked, anger flaring in her voice, "Whatever it is, we don't have it!"

"He says he just wants to be near family," Terrance tried to reassure her "I think he's just a little freaked out by all that's happening—he's talkin' about your Mamma Ngina and some story she told you two as kids," Terrance said. "I think he's just scared that's he's going to Hell."

"Well, he can't get there soon enough for me!" Gina snapped, her frayed nerves were beginning to show. "I'm sorry Terrance. It's not your fault and Jamal is certainly not your problem. I'll deal with him myself when I get home."

"When is that?" Terrance asked

"I've got a couple of orders I still need to finish, and then—" she hedged "barring some unforeseen emergency, I'll be home."

"How about you let someone else handle the unforeseen emergency and you bring your fine self on home to me, girl. I mean it."

"I hear you Baby. I'm coming."

"Hey Sweet Girl—promise me you'll be careful. Bring you and my Heisman trophy winner on home safely."

"Hmmp!" she grunted at him, playfully "she'll be the first *girl* to win one of those, won't she?"

Terrance laughed "We'll see. NO girl can kick as hard as this little guy does!"

"Bye Daddy" she said as she clicked off the phone and slipped it back in her pocket. 'Just one more thing to take care of and I'll be home' she thought as she picked up the orders for the x-ray technician and headed back to the glass cubicle for the wounded flight attendant.

Gina entered the cubicle so she could wheel the slightly built, blond man down to x-ray to get films of his badly swollen and discolored ankle. The young man's head had lolled to one side as the injection of Dilaudid worked to ease his pain but he was shivering uncontrollably. At the clear indication of shock, Gina asked him if he would like a warm blanket. When he nodded and clenched his chattering teeth, Gina ran to retrieve a warm flannel blanket from the warming cabinet in the hallway that was bustling with activity. Nurses, doctors, orderlies and clerks were scurrying in all directions in a vain attempt to bring some order to the state of current chaos that prevailed in the hospital.

Chauncey Mitchell charged out of the little break room as Gina passed, his eyes wide with astonishment. "My God Gina," he grabbed her arm "did you hear the news?"

"What now?" Gina asked with apprehension.

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"The TSA has announced that they are *grounding* all commercial aircraft effective immediately—because of these crazy disappearances. They're afraid that something might happen while a plane is in flight. But that's not even the worst of it!"

"Why? What else?"

"The President came out and practically all but threatened to drop a bomb on the Chinese if they go through with their promise to give military support to Iran!" He gulped and continued "I swear Gina, shit is seriously hitting the fan. I've been here since three o'clock yesterday and I am going to clock out and get the hell out of here; home to my family." He rubbed at the worry lines furrowing his brow, "I've done my part here, now I'm going home to my family to wait and see what happens next." He reached over and gently patted her basketball-sized abdomen, "You need to call it and get on home to yours too."

"I am. I'm going as soon as I finish up with my patient, the flight attendant from that American West runway accident." She shook her head in disbelief and added "Chauncey, it's all a lot of political posturing—you know? We aren't going to just suddenly start dropping bombs on each other just because Iran and Israel are at war."

"Maybe. Maybe not," he said "but there's something a lot more sinister than just politics going on here. These disappearances are like something from a science fiction movie—they're all gonna come back at once as Pod People or something!"

Gina laughed and patted her shifting round belly "Uh Oh! The Pod is restless," she smiled at him "you go on home. I'll go soon." She opened the warming cabinet and took a blanket, adding as an afterthought "and Chauncey, be careful out there. Whatever is going on—it's dangerous and getting more frightening by the minute."

He gave Gina a quick hug and sprinted off toward the time clock at the rear employee entrance to the ER, while she headed quickly back to the glass cubicle with the warm blanket. 'He's right,' she thought, 'it's time to call it and get home to deal with my worrisome brother. It's hard to fathom how much the entire world can change in the blink of an eye—and it surely has.'

When Gina walked into the small glass enclosure she was shocked to find it empty. She had drawn the curtain around the flight attendant and it was still drawn, but the bed was empty. The young man was gone and the IV lay there leaking clear fluid onto the bed clothes.

"What?! This is just not possible," Gina exclaimed aloud "I was just outside in the hall. I would have seen—" she turned and raced to the duty desk "What happened to the patient – the one from the airport accident?" she asked the three busy staff members who were doing pirouettes around each other as they juggled charts and tried to do ten things at once.

"What are you talking about Gina? You took him into 18A—," a short, round, pie-faced nurse replied.

"I'm talking about— it's empty," she paused "He's gone. His IV is still there. His person—his body—HE 'S GONE!!"

Marcus Henry, a sweet, soft-spoken admissions clerk, frowned at her, perplexed "Now we have patients disappearing right from the cubicles—right in front of our eyes?"

"Apparently, that's exactly what we have!" Gina answered.

When a cursory search failed to turn up any sign of the missing patient it was too much for Gina's tired mind to handle. She could not shake the feeling that his disappearance was somehow her responsibility. Her supervisor tried to reassure her that there were any number of plausible explanations for the disappearance and he would show up eventually, but Gina could not shake the feeling that she had somehow dropped the ball on this one. In six years as a trauma nurse she had never lost a patient. Patients had died, certainly, but she had never just *lost* one. Her state of exhaustion nearly overwhelmed her now as she gathered her things from her locker and headed out to the staff parking lot.

'This whole situation is just surreal,' she thought, as she replayed the events of the last couple of days in her mind. 'It's bad enough that we have people in the Middle East trying to bomb each other out of existence, but now we're threatening to "take extreme action" against other governments.' She unlocked her car door and lowered herself into the driver's seat, still pondering events. She lovingly rubbed her palm in soothing circles over her taut abdomen, feeling her little bundle shift restlessly under her caress.

"It's okay baby," she cooed "Mama will take care of you, no matter what. I promise I will do whatever I have to do to keep you safe. You just stay put, grow, be healthy, be happy, and let Mama worry about keeping you safe from all the bad stuff in this old world."

Gina reached over and slipped a CD into her car stereo. It was light classical with the sound of rainfall and distant rolling thunder, a gift from Linnie, Gina's closest friend Lynette Noel, who ran a spiritual/new age shop called The Mountain Mystic Trading Post. The store was part of their farm property which she had converted from an antique store. Their home which was built in 1863, sat on five acres with a horse barn, pole barn and a Carriage house that had been converted into a three car garage with a spacious apartment above it, which Linnie rented.

'I wonder what she'll make of all of this craziness?' Gina thought. Terrance jokingly referred to Linnie as "Hippie Chick" especially when she endeavored to try and educate them on the joys of natural childbirth, water birth and any number of other new age, crystal using,

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chanting, meditation methods for a “safe, gentle, joyous and empowering childbirth.” Lynn timer was single and had no children, so her information on the subject was secondhand at best, but her intentions were pure, Gina smiled as she thought about her dear friend who would have seemed more at home in a commune of vegans than living in a rural Indiana farming community full of hunters and Nascar enthusiasts.

‘Still,’ Gina thought ‘listening to the sounds of a distant thunderstorm with the strains of light classical piano music is a relaxing alternative to the constant onslaught of bad news and worse news that the public airwaves are offering now.’

She decided to keep to the back roads rather than the interstate for her thirty mile commute home. Fortunately traffic was light as people seemed to be hunkering down to await some resolution to the unfolding events; gathering family members close and even storing up provisions in case this turned into a national emergency. ‘Not a bad plan,’ Gina thought, as she mentally took a cursory inventory of her basement pantry. They usually kept it well stocked with backup food stores as winter approached. You never knew when Mother Nature would throw one of those killer winter blizzards on you out here in the heartland, but it was only late August now and Gina had not done much canning for the season yet. Her pantry probably had a paltry amount of backup staples stored in it right now, but she would certainly check on that as soon as she got home.

Forty minutes later Gina wheeled the car onto the lane that led to the circular driveway of their stately, century old home. It was a large white, two-story Antebellum home. From the moment that Gina first set eyes on the old place she knew it had to be theirs. All of Terrance’s plans to build a new, state of the art, computerized home went by the wayside and they traded those modern conveniences for stunning architectural detail like twelve foot ceilings with crown moldings, and an enormous barn with a hayloft large enough for playing full court basketball. It was Gina’s dream home and if Gina was happy that was all that mattered to Terrance.

This home was the mark of their success, of their endeavor to leave behind the difficult early years that Gina had endured in Harlem. Lebanon, Indiana was about as far from Harlem as one could get, philosophically if not geographically. Unfortunately, Gina’s brother Jamal had not been quite as eager to leave his gritty upbringing behind him. In fact, Gina thought, he flourished by using it to his advantage. He didn’t want to put the gang violence and criminal mentality behind him if he could use it to further his questionable career as a pseudo-celebrity. Gina was thoroughly repulsed by Jamal’s celebrity persona, the ‘Gangsta Rapper’ turned soap star who wore his criminal past like a badge of honor rather than something to overcome. They had long ago gone their separate ways and Jamal never showed up in Gina’s life unless he wanted something. His arrival was never a portent of something good and Gina knew that this

time would be nothing different. She steeled herself for the inevitable face to face meeting with her brother as she got out of the car and moved toward the front porch of a home in which her ancestors might once have served as house slaves. She drew herself up and took a deep breath as she entered the foyer.

Terrance had been anxiously watching for her and he was waiting in the foyer to greet his statuesque and beautiful wife. At six and a half feet tall and a muscular, athletic two hundred and forty pounds, he still managed to dwarf Gina's long and slender frame. He folded her into his arms and kissed her deeply as though he had not laid eyes on her in ages. His relief at having her at home with him again was plain to see in his expressive and earnest face.

"God baby, it's so good to have you home," he said softly, reluctant to release her from his embrace. "Did you have any trouble getting here?"

"Not really, considering that the entire world seems to be turning on its end."

Terrance stepped back to take in the sight of her. He reached out and rested his huge paw against her perfectly round stomach, "And how is my boy?" he smiled, teasingly.

"She's just fine, Daddy," Gina's gray-blue eyes sparkled at his playful jest. "Where's Jamal?" she asked, her expression changing quickly from playful to serious.

"I sent him in town about an hour ago to pick up Linnie. She called for a ride. She went in to stock up on supplies...since she's fairly sure that the world is coming to an end," he said only half kidding.

"Great," she said, sarcastically "those two together, feeding one another's paranoia, they'll have us all eliminated by plague or pestilence or worse, before the day is done." She had no sooner made the comment than the sound of Terrance's old Chevy farm truck, rattled up the long driveway. In just seconds, Gina heard the sound of Linnie's bare feet slapping against the flagstone porch just before the front door swung open. The look on Linnie's face stymied Gina's greeting.

"What is it?" Gina asked her startled by her haunted, solemn look.

Linnie stood, staring dumbfounded at Gina, her face flushed. She swallowed hard and tried to speak but her voice failed her as huge tears spilled from her big brown eyes and ran down her suntanned face. Jamal came through the door behind her, looking uncharacteristically cowed. He reached out to put an arm comfortingly around Linnie's shaking shoulders.

Shaking his head in disbelief he announced "They did it. They really fucking did it."

"Jamal, what are you talking about?" Gina asked impatiently.

Jamal's voice cracked under the strain, "They nuked New York. They nuked New York City—Manhattan! They did it," he repeated in stunned disbelief, "They really did it."