

August 2012 cover price \$2.00



Featuring:

Short Stories and Flash Fiction of Dark & Edgy Horror

> Photography by Eleanor Bennett

Comparative Flash
Fiction - One Photo,
Two Stories of 300
words each

An extended excerpt from Kate Monroe's upcoming novel The Falcon's Chase



Now Available on Amazon, CreateSpace and Smashwords

Contents

Editorials

- 4 The Dark Has No Edge Kalla Monahan
- 5 Dark and what was that again? Oh yeah Edgy Nina D'Arcangela

Fiction

- 7 **Heartbreaker** Alex Chase
 - "So, Doctor, can... can this be treated?" Mark held back tears, clutching at his wife's hand.
- 11 Rachel Christopher Hivner
 - Hungry for something besides mice, she ambulated under or over everything in her path, searching.
- 15 Alone in the Dark Laura E. Brown
 - I'm not afraid of the dark. I'm not afraid of the dark. I'm not!
- 18 Greg's List Allen Dusk
 - Greg knocked three times on Room 118, just as the email had instructed. The door cracked open.
- 22 **The Itch** Julianne Snow
 - Powerless to control the urge, Scott raked his jagged fingernails like scythes over the spot.
- 27 The Nightmare Frequency A.A. Garrison
 - First subject, inmate 110233, reports drastic changes in consciousness.
- 31 The Sample Case L.A. Forman
 - Glenn loved his job and loved to meet new people. People Glenn, we need more people.
- 35 One Image, Two Points of View 300 words No More, No Less
- 36 Sightseers Jon Olson
 - Becky saw for herself that the town of Hume, Nova Scotia was dead.
- 40 The Medusa Girl Alex Woolf
 - She acquired her name, in part, because of the extreme hardness and heaviness of her body.
- 44 Betty Nina D'Arcangela
 - Reaching out to shake my hand, she welcomed me to 'the program'.
- 51 Cold Sleep Morgan Bauman
 - Since the terraformers had begun to break down, most of Potosi's inhabitants had fled

Novel Excerpt

- 56 'The Falcon's Chase' Kate Monroe
 - Betrayed to Her Majesty's Royal Navy after a dalliance with the pirates...

Photography *Eleanor Bennett*

- **6 Floating Ghost**
- 14 33 (thirty three)
- 49 Can't Speak 1
- 50 Can't Speak 2
- 59 **Prink 140**
- **60 Credits**

The Dark Has No Edge: An Editorial

Kalla Monahan

Much like Galileo and his supposition of a rounded planet, I believe that the dark has no edge. The dark always exists, no matter where we choose to look. What is the dark? Merely an absence of light, in its most literal terms. Strange thoughts, but I've never once said I was normal... Let's consider for a moment what we mean by dark, or rather what I mean. Dark equates to sinister, ominous, obscure, mysterious, evil – the list goes on and on. Seems somewhat cut and dry, right?

Wrong.

Like the world, with its never ending rotation, the dark cycles back upon itself. Over the years that I have been a fan of horror – reading, writing, and watching movies - never once have I thought to myself: wow, that's a new idea... Sure there are new concepts within old ideas, but essentially the core is still the same. As we circumvent the genre of horror, the aim is to evoke emotion; the game is too see how much fear we can place within a person's mind. Some stories are retold, while others are picked apart only to be mashed with another idea and stitched up with rotted threads. So where does that leave the publishing industry? Well, my friends, it paints a very bright future within a dark world. Each and every thing that we encounter can have a darkness to it. Nothing states that we have to stick to the old ideals of what is dark is evil. It's time for us to open our minds and see the possibilities.

Can a dark work inhabit the light some of the time? Hell yes! It's all about the dichotomy of how the two interplay that leaves a lasting impression. Reality is one of the best canvasses to represent how that unfolds. Our lives are filled with pain and pleasure. Is that a bad thing? Yes - and no. As a culture, we've lost much of our sensitivity due to the onslaught of what we see every day. The youth of the world grow up somewhat apathetic to the injustice around them. Hell, I'm indifferent to certain issues and while I'm embarrassed to admit it, it's the truth. How does that relate to media? Exploitation. But not in the way that you may be thinking. When I was growing up, swearing wasn't allowed on TV - now it's practically commonplace. It's how everyone talks, how we've evolved in our speech patterns. Media helps to shape the trends by observation and exploitation. Each outlet pushes the envelope just a little further each time. What was once taboo is now accepted, absorbed, and regurgitated.

So we have a cyclical two sided coin: light and dark, good and evil. These are the foundations of many of the darkest works. But again I shall ask you – does the dark have an edge? Absolutely not - we've pushed it too far. As the world of horror and the horrors in our world engage in Ouroboros-like behaviour, ponder if you will the implications of what is now considered dark. I'll ask you again, do you think the dark has a drop off point, a point of no return, a literal edge?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Kalla is the quiet one at SCP but don't let that fool you; get her started on one of our projects and she will passionately talk your ear off. And as the Publicist of SCP, it's valuable to have someone that can both listen to the tides of the publishing world and sing your praises.

Her literary loves include horror, science fiction and the bizarre. While she does have a weak spot for a good Zombie storyline and will greedily devour anything in the genre, she does get titillated by works in any genre that are well crafted and full of great characters.

Dark and what was that? Oh yeah – Edgy: An Editorial *Nina D'Arcangela*

Sirens Call Publications is a Purveyor of Dark & Edgy Fiction. Hmmm... Kalla's got Dark covered in this issue, so I think I'll take a crack at Edgy.

We get asked by email all the time: what does Dark & Edgy mean? My response is always the same: it means different things to different people. But if someone really pinned me down and wanted to know what my personal take on edgy was, I think I'd have to reply with a question in return. What makes you the most uncomfortable? I'm not one easily frightened off by the dark, so edgy is the part that really fuels my fire.

Edgy isn't a difficult term to define. Query it on any search engine and I'm sure you'll find hundreds of sites that 'define' edgy.

The real question is: What does Edgy feel like? Edgy is more of an emotional response, a feeling that is provoked, than a quantifiable 'something' in my world. Edgy is a state of mind, a presence of being that makes me hum with excitement – not the happy crappy high pitched chattering of pretty little girls in pink sun dresses, or the tunes that matronly women with perfectly tended gardens croon. My humming is a vibration that penetrates straight to my core and shakes my very foundation.

Edgy makes me feel a little uneasy, a bit squirmy, a tad out of my comfort zone. Edgy makes my mind spin three times faster than the multitude of revolutions it's already moving at. Ramp up my inner RPMs, that's edgy; make me sit forward with my nose pressed to the screen while reading;

that's edgy; force me to be so aware of my own eye movement that I have to consciously guard against a quick flick down the page to rush the end of the story, that's edgy!

A really decent edgy piece makes my mind scream for more, while my eyes are begging forgiveness that the words have ended. It's an intensity that drives me mad in the most spectacular fashion, while at the same time creeps its way up my spine and whispers wickedly into my ear you know, this could actually happen! That is freakin' EDGY!

I consider myself very fortunate to be in the position I am, and to read the variety of pieces that pass across my electronic desk. The crafting of the wordsmiths I am privileged enough to read sing their tale through my mind as I absorb each and every word. Others shock me with the level of intensity they are able to draw from a few perfectly placed, yet poignantly significant terms. While other still, leave me breathless with anticipation at the edge of a cliff – my own imagination forced to finish the telling. There has to be an ending, right? You can't just be left hanging there? You have to know what happens next, don't you? All these questions, but only one real answer – Yes! You can be left dangling on the edge; the precipice the authors choosing, the plummet all you ladies and gents.

That, in no uncertain terms, is Edgy by my standards – and I love every second of it!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nina D'Arcangela was the type of girl who, when given a doll as a child, would immediately pop its head off to see what was inside, then spend countless hours contemplating how so many fantastic and fantastical things could be in her own head while the doll's was so very vacant.

Nina can be reached through Sirens Call Publications at Nina@SirensCallPublications.com; ordarc.nina@gmail.com. Please visit her on her blog "Sotet Angyal: The Dark Angel" atsotetangyal.wordpress.com; or "Spreading the Writer's Word" at ninadarc.wordpress.com; and feel free to stalk her on Twitter as @Sotet_Angyal.





Heartbreaker Alex Chase

"So, Doctor, can... can this be treated?" Mark held back tears, clutching at his wife's hand. Their wedding bands shone under the florescent lighting. Their five year anniversary was only a few month away; they were both praying that they'd be able to celebrate it.

"Yes, it can, but the medication is still in testing, and can have complications if you aren't careful." Dr. Gerizim sighed, looking down at his clipboard. She was suffering from an acute, late-onset autoimmune disorder, causing her neurological function to diminish. He wished there was something that he could do, but so far treatments had been experimental at best. Few cases showed any improvement; only one had any function restored.

Some patients lost their full cognitive function within a few months. Lisa had weeks at best.

"We'll pay anything, it doesn't matter. I have good insurance either way, so we should be covered if something goes wrong." Mark looked down at his wife.

"Besides, I'm sure that I can beat this if I have the right medication," she acted like she believed what she was saying but squeezed Mark's hand for support.

"It isn't that simple," he shook his head. "Cardenizine isn't covered by insurance because it's still in the test phase. In order to take it, I'll have to recommend you to be a part of the testing, then you have to be approved, then the pills will be sent directly to your house."

"How long could that take?" Mark snapped.

The doctor grimaced and looked away, unable to say that she'd likely die before getting approved.

"Isn't there something you can do?" Lisa sniffed, wiping a tear away. "I have children. They may be in college, but they're in their first year, they'll... I just..." She was projected to die shortly before her twins returned for the summer.

"Listen, maybe I can pull some strings, but I'm not making promises. I'll... I'll call you and let you know how this goes." The couple thanked him and left.

After his shift ended, Dr. Gerizim whipped out his cell phone and dialed a friend who happened to be involved with the testing only to be informed that the trial was full.

"Look, these are good people. Young, happy people who deserve better. You have to be able to do something!" The doctor whispered, glancing around.

"I'm sorry, Jerry, there's nothing I can do." Though he sounded remorseful, the doctor didn't give up.

"There's got to be a way. Maybe you can have a few bottles "thrown away" for being contaminated and ship them out instead?" The doctor had been close with the young couple since they were in their early twenties. He'd only become closer when he learned they'd met and fallen in love while sitting in his waiting room.

"Jerry, I can't!"

"What if I told you that they're in love?" The doctor whispered.

There was a pause that was followed by a soft sigh. "Give me an address, sex, weight and age. Nothing else. I don't want to know anything I don't have to."

After relaying the information, he called Lisa Derkin with the good news. Dr. Gerizim could hear Mark celebrating in the background.

When they'd finished talking, he closed the phone. He never saw them again.

The pills arrived a few days later with the tags "expedited" and "heat sensitive" written on the package. They brought the box inside and opened it. Lisa began reading a sheet of paper that was tucked amidst a half dozen bottles.

"Take one pill, three times a day, at the same time every day, with a light meal. Do not take more than one dose at a time. Do not drink alcohol while taking this medication. Do not drive until you know

how it affects you. Some users have reported mild changes in disposition, indigestion, hemophilia and migraines. If you feel your symptoms are too severe or that you are having an allergic reaction, seek medical attention immediately." Lisa half-heartedly read the sheet, though she wouldn't care if it said she'd grow a third leg as long as she could live through the summer. She was already experiencing convulsions and memory loss, which were the first signs of the fatal degeneration.

She took her first dose as soon as she put the paper down.

Lisa took her pills like clockwork; she took one every day at the same time as if she'd been born for that one purpose. One week later, Doctor Gerizim reported that the battery of tests they'd administered showed that she was improving. He felt confident that she would last the rest of the year.

A few days later, the side effects began to hit her. At first, they were small, practically insignificant changes. Her eyes became a lighter shade of blue- which she actually liked, so she didn't object to it. Her once curly and luscious hair flatted out, falling like water around her thinning shoulders. She was becoming thinner, though her scale wasn't reading any change in her weight.

Another week went by and Lisa began acting strangely. She seemed agitated and nervous all the time. She'd flinch any time Mark made a sudden movement. She'd make a noticeable, exaggerated effort to keep him happy by cleaning, cooking and organizing twice as often as she used to. She smiled as wide as she could as often as she could. Mark tried to ignore the anxiety in her eyes.

Soon, though, she began ignoring the chores entirely. She'd let dishes pile up and the laundry grow mildew in the washing machine while she read or watched television. She'd dart out of the house, claiming that she was going running or some such thing, though she'd never run a mile in her life.

Mark ignored it; he felt any side effect was worth seeing her live a long life. He didn't realize his mistake until a night in the last week of April.

Mark had gotten home an hour or so later. The sun was down, but the lights in the house were off. Lisa's car was in the driveway, so she was probably home. She'd stopped visiting friends a few weeks earlier.

He figured she was asleep so he opened the door and quietly crept in, gently shutting the door behind him.

He cried out as a hand grabbed the back of his head, slamming him face-first into the door. He saw nothing but red for an instant before his vision faded to black again. All he could see was the strangely luminescent eyes of his wife as she stood above him.

"You're late," she hissed. Her voice came out low and rough. He had the chill he imagined a gazelle might feel before being pounced upon by a lion.

"Honey, I... what did you do that for?" He groaned. He saw light glint off of something in her hand. He heard a hoarse chuckle and began to scramble backwards.

"Do you think I don't know what you do? Don't you think I know how pathetically selfish you are?" He heard footsteps approaching. His eyes hadn't accustomed to the dark yet, but he could feel her closing in on him.

"What... what are you saying?" He cried out, rolling to the side as he heard a knife slam into the floor beside him. She grunted and swung, cutting into his left shoulder.

"I hate you, you selfish pig. You're going to die tonight." He stumbled to his knees only for Lisa to kick him down again. Mark hit the floor hard and heard his wrist break.

"Jesus! Lisa, stop!" He couldn't see a thing, but he felt the knife graze his right cheek.

Off balance and in pain, Mark desperately scrambled to open the door with his one functional hand. He felt a closed fist connect with his jaw. He heard a crack and knew that it was broken. The other side of his head slammed into the door.

He saw the knife streaking towards him, but he saw it too late. An empty hand held on tight to his broken jaw as her other shoved the knife upwards. With a flick of her wrist, she carved out his right eye.

Mark screamed and fell to the floor. Lisa's hand wrapped around his collar and dragged him to his feet. Soon, she held him suspended in the air.

"Admit it!" She hissed.

"I... I..." he grunted, too scared to scream but in too much pain to respond quietly.

"I know what you did. You think I wouldn't notice? Well I did. We all did."

"What are you saying, Lisa?"

There was a gleeful cackle. "Lisa? You really think I'm your sweet little wife?"

His heart thumped erratically.

"Sorry, pal, but you slipped her an extra dose one time too many. You broke her fragile little brain. She couldn't handle this disease, so I'm taking over."

"Who... who are you?" He choked back a sob. He'd never been so certain that he was going to die.

"You don't need to know. Tell me why you did it."

"What?" He gasped.

"You're going to die tonight, Mark. Whatever you give for your reason will decide how."

Mark could feel the hot surge of blood flowing down his cheek. He jerked back, kicked her in the chest and darted across the room, but pain robbed him of what little sight he still had. He slammed directly into a wall.

As soon as he hit the ground, the knife plunged into his left arm. He screamed as she stomped down on his broken wrist. He nearly blacked out as she knelt on his chest and began to saw back and forth.

"You can die quick, or I can carve you like a turkey first. What would you prefer?"

"Alright!" He screamed. His arm felt like it was on fire; his entire body was wracked with pain. "I noticed how she was improving and I thought a little extra would help her recover faster! I never thought... how could I know...?" He began to sob.

"You couldn't know, which is why you shouldn't have done it."

"But I love her! I love her so much, I... it was like I was dying with her. I... some part of you must understand! I know my Lisa is in there somewhere. She has to know the way my heart screamed in agony when I heard she only had a few months to live," he sputtered through tears, no longer feeling the knife in his arm.

"Lisa's in here alright... but she can't hear you. I won't let her. What did you think gave you the right to play God with her disease?"

His tears shone in the streaks of moonlight coming through a nearby window. After a moment, he whispered, "I swore on our wedding day to always protect her, from anything... I did what I could to protect her from this."

"You did it for love? That's sweet." Her tone was laced with a twisted, vicious sarcasm. "Too bad you couldn't protect her from yourself."

He felt the knife plunge into his chest and tear downwards. He began to spit up blood and found himself unable to scream. He felt her hand reach into the open cavity of his chest. She tugged hard and something gave way.

"You may not be able to eat your words, but you sure as hell are gonna eat this!" She shoved something into his mouth. He could feel his life draining away. He was choking and bleeding to death at the same time. The last thing he saw was his wife looming over him, grinning and drenched in blood.

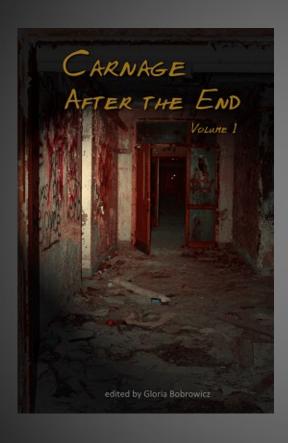
The world seemed blurry as Lisa awoke on the floor of her living room. She felt wrong, somehow, like everything had become damp and sticky. She wiped a thick, viscous fluid from her eye.

She noticed that her hand was covered in blood. So was the carpet and her outfit. Panicked, she patted herself down but found no injuries. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Then she turned and saw Mark. She saw his own heart sticking out of his mouth. She looked down at herself again realized what had happened. Then she began to scream.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Chase is a 19-year-old living with his family in New Jersey. He is currently attending a private university where he studies English and Psychology. He is a prolific writer, avid runner, and coffee enthusiast. You can find him on Facebook at www.facebook.com/alexchasethewriter and his twitter is @alexc_theauthor

Coming Soon – Carnage: After the End Volume 1



Contributing Authors
Kimberly A. Bettes
Shane Cashman
Shane R. Collins
Laura Diamond
Rodney James Galley
Michael Griffin
Russell Linton
Adam Millard
Christofer Nigro
Julianne Snow

www.SirensCallPublications.com

Rachel Christopher Hivner

Rachel

She had been out of her enclosure for hours. Hungry for something besides mice, she ambulated under or over everything in her path, searching. But she soon realized she was still trapped, just in a bigger cage. No openings allowed her egress to a larger stalking ground.

Now there were muffled noises. She slid behind a large, solid object and coiled her body. After more hollow sounds there was a shaft of light a few feet away and she could sense another animal had entered her space. As quickly as the bright light appeared it evaporated to just a sliver.

Sliding forward she lifted her triangular head to peer through the crack. She eased upward, tilting to the right. A y-shaped tongue slid in and out of her mouth, tasting the air, testing the scent of yet another creature thirty feet away. The odor was familiar. It was edible if she was allowed to hunt. But that wasn't up to her.

They were legs that escaped from a dream. The shape of the calf as they came out of the red, spike-heeled shoes called to him as she sat on his living room sofa. The skin, soft white, like crystals of porcelain. He closed his eyes to envision perfection and when he opened them, saw her sitting there. He desperately wanted to stroke her skin, feel the blood pumping underneath through the veins, massage the muscles. Make her moan. But it was too soon. Much, much too soon. He shouldn't even have these thoughts; gentlemen do not have these thoughts this soon in a relationship, and Jacques Villier was a gentleman.

His tongue slicked over rubbery lips as he tried to calm his libido. But then she crossed those legs. His eyes slid up past her knees to her thighs that were demanding to be let out of the short skirt she wore. A little too short, Jacques thought, for a woman to wear on a second date.

Jacques pulled his head back inside his bedroom. He had to compose himself before going back out to talk to her. The evening had gone better than he could have hoped. So many of his dates could not hold a conversation, but this one was intelligent, funny, and found Jacques charming. There was that one story he always told about falling out of the boat on a rafting trip, and she had laughed! He could tell it was a true, honest reaction. He was used to phony, mocking laughs, telling him he was stupid without using the words, but this time . . . she listened as though she was really interested and then that full-bodied, genuine guffaw. Music to his ears, like a symphony's bold denouement.

It was that moment in the restaurant that he decided to ask her. He had to know after all. Jacques was looking for a serious relationship, not a one-night stand. If they were going to be together, things like this were important. To him, a lifetime meant a lifetime, and he didn't want to waste it arguing about little things. So, he had asked her.

"Do you like animals?"

"Sure, you bet," she had responded cheerfully. "I have a dog, a Samoyed, Nikki." His heart skipped inside his chest, he was so nervous.

"Is it just dogs you like?"

"No, no," she had patted his hand, a flirting gesture. Jacques had felt himself blush. "I like cats too. I've never owned one, but I like them." She must have seen that Jacques was fishing for something else so she stumbled on. "Um, I don't know much about birds, but I'm sure I could get along with them. Oh, I had a guinea pig when I was a kid." Jacques had had to put her out of her misery.

"What about exotic animals?"

"Exotic?"

"Out of the ordinary. Lizards, spiders, snakes, that sort of thing."

"I... I don't know," she was stammering, but her eyes were as honest as her words. "I've never been around a pet like that, but I think all animals are fascinating, so, I guess I could try." Jacques felt twelve

feet tall.

"That's all I ask. Most of the women I go out with won't even meet my pet, give her a chance. If you could see her, I know you'd like her."

"All right. I'd love to meet her."

"How about tonight, after dinner?"

"Great. This is kind of exciting."

Jacques had spent the rest of the evening in the clouds. He couldn't even see the ground he was so high up. They had walked back to his apartment holding hands, beaming at each other, and now the anticipation had him squirming like a second grader. Jacques took a few deep breaths and re-opened his bedroom door. He took one step and stopped, staring at her gorgeous head of wavy brown hair.

"Here we come," he finally croaked with excitement. Jacques walked to the coffee table in front of the sofa, sat down on it lightly, and looked to his date with a wide, silly grin on his face. "This is Rachel, my snake."

Daphne just stared at him. Her smile faded into confusion. She looked at his arm and back to his face with no understanding.

"What's wrong? You said you'd give her a chance." Jacques felt sick. His lower lip began to quiver. He didn't want to cry in front of another one. They never understood. He held his arm closer to her. "At least try to talk to her. You owe me that after what you said in the restaurant."

Daphne looked at Jacques bare forearm. He had pushed his shirt sleeve above his elbow, and he held his arm vertically. His hand was relaxed horizontally, the fingers curled into an oval shape. She shook her head, looking back into Jacques eyes, pleading for an explanation. "What?" Jacques squealed, almost in tears.

"It's just... your arm and hand," Daphne finally got out.

"What about them?"

"There's only your arm... there is no snake." Daphne shrugged her shoulders helplessly. "What are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" Jacques stood up. "I'm sharing the most precious thing in my life with you. I know it isn't what you're used to..."

"Jacques, where is the snake?"

"It's right here!" He shoved his fingers into her face. They hung there, staring at her for a moment, before Jacques began pacing the room. "I can't believe this. I cannot believe this!" The tears started. Jacques was blubbering, walking the room in circles, his right arm and hand held up at his side. Daphne stood to talk to him.

"Jacques, please, tell me what's going on. Where is the snake?"

"Stop saying that! Why do you want to hurt me?" Daphne walked toward him, her arms outstretched.

"Please. Why are you doing this?"

Before Daphne reached him, Jacques stopped pacing. His body jerked, almost dropping him to one knee. He turned to Daphne with fear in his eyes.

"Oh no. You've done it now." Suddenly his right arm whipped around and swiped at Daphne. She screamed, stumbling backward. "I begged you to give her a chance. You said you would." He threw a backhanded punch at her.

"What are you doing?" Daphne screamed again, turning to run.

"I can't control her when she's angry like this," Jacques mewed as he chased after Daphne, his bare right forearm knocking over a lamp after it missed its target. Daphne came around the sofa, looking for a

way to get to the front door. She feinted right, then ran left between the coffee table and the love seat. Jacques leapt over the sofa, crashing down onto the table. The legs gave way, and it crumpled into a pile of kindling. As he hit the floor, Jacques managed to reach out his right hand and grab hold of one of Daphne's spike heels. She yelled, trying to pull free but lost her balance and fell to the floor, hitting her chest and stomach against a book case.

"Rachel, no," Jacques said as he crawled toward Daphne. "Don't do it. She didn't mean any of it. She's not used to snakes." Keeping his right arm high in the air, Jacques pulled his injured body along the carpet until he reached Daphne's prone form. She had managed to push herself up onto her hands and knees. Her head hung between her shoulders as she fought for a breath that wasn't agony when she took it.

"Rachel, please, no." Daphne's head raised when she heard Jacques voice right next to her. Grabbing the bookcase, she tried to stand but Jacques right hand shot out and wrapped tightly around her throat. He jerked her back down to the floor. Daphne rolled onto her back, and Jacques mounted her.

"I'm sorry, Daphne. I can't stop her when she's this enraged. She's too strong." Jacques Villier's right hand pressed harder, crushing the beautiful young woman's wind pipe. He continued to try to pull himself away from her, but failed. Exhausted and crying, he collapsed in a heap on Daphne's chest. As his body was wracked in sobs, his right hand kept squeezing.

In the bathroom, Daphne's body sat slumped on the tile floor. Her head, frayed and bedraggled hair covering her face, lay on the tub's edge along with her arms. Jacques eased himself into the empty bathtub. He leaned back against the wall and stared at Daphne. She was so beautiful, so smart, and she had liked him. He knew phonies by now and she had been real. Maybe she had been the one. Why couldn't she and Rachel have gotten along?

There were times, when the loneliness ate at him, that Jacques wished he didn't have Rachel. But then he would look at her, stare into her eyes, stroke her back, and it was all over. He loved her. She was always there for him when no one else was.

Jacques lowered his right hand and lay it on the bottom of the tub, palm up. The skin was criss-crossed with thick, fleshy scars. Pulling a lock-back knife from his shirt pocket, Jacques made two cuts on his palm, opening a bleeding, throbbing wound in the shape of an X. He slid the hand under Daphne's left arm. With the same knife, he slit her wrist. Blood poured out of her arm onto his hand and into his wound. Jacques lay down in the tub, curled into a fetal position, stroking his right forearm.

"Feed, my pet, feed."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Christopher Hivner lives in Pennsylvania, he usually writes while listening to music and enjoying an occasional cigar outside on a star-filled night. His work can be found in the upcoming Dead Sea anthology from Cruentus Libri Press and the Screaming Poets anthology from Fantastic Horror. Christopher's book of short stories, "The Spaces between Your Screams" was published in 2008. If you'd like to connect with Christopher his website is www.chrishivner.com, his Facebook page can be found at http://www.facebook.com/pages/Christopher-Hivner/187919805156, his twitter handle is @your_screams and his Goodreads page is http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/4471316.Christopher Hivner.



Alone in the Dark Laura E. Brown

I'm not afraid of the dark. I'm not afraid of the dark.

I'm not!

Many years have passed since the nights of my childhood fears, the rare nights when unknown demons and monsters plagued me, creeping from my dreams to taunt me with their shadowy forms and after-images when I awoke, escaping back into our world- but I was never afraid of the dark. I never asked a guardian to check in closets, beneath the bed and in dark corners, for patient bogeymen waiting for the moment when light would be extinguished, waiting to strike.

I have a very vivid childhood memory; one night when I was very young, I stayed up ever so late, to that unknowable time that is later than midnight, but eons before morning and the whole world slumbers. I pushed back the curtains; the sky was not black but velvet blue; the stars were not mere, lonely dots pinned into the heavens, but a sheer swarm of diamonds. For the first and only time, I saw the Milky Way, as you see it in photographs, as a beautiful, scattering cascade of stars, glowing and tumbling in an arc above the world. You will not see that in the sky above any town or city; I wonder now if there was a power cut that night. I watched for hours, finally awaking with my cheek on the window-sill. Sometimes I wonder where the reality ended and the dream began, but the memory is so vibrant, I'd believe it as true.

So, you see, the darkness doesn't frighten me. Beautiful things can come out of the dark.

So why am I scared now?

I am not yet an adult, but the childhood nightmares are now far behind me. For the last few years, my fears have been trivial and shallow, meaningless trifles in the grand scheme of things, but recently I knew true fear, had feared a final goodbye. Now that person is gone, and I fear that we are all ultimately alone. I fear that the dream of the night sky is nothing more than a dream, that death brings us a true end, and I will never see my dear one again. My heart is heavy when I realise I shall never play chess with him again, black versus white...I am alone...

It is a week or so after the funeral. It is bedtime, and when I turn out the light I suddenly become profoundly aware of *not* being alone. My near-adult mind dismisses the insane notion that an invisible something is *coming*, coming for me. It is not in the room yet at any rate. I shrug it off; the bogeyman is a distant memory as I slip beneath the covers, awaiting sleep.

It is not sleep that comes for me.

It is gathering itself, in the corner beside the bedroom door, like a storm cloud, black, furling, pregnant with oppression and promises of ill-intent. As it grows and grows, spreading like a plague or a rot, I don't dare open my eyes- but I see it there, growing tall, black and festering by the door-frame, behind my eyelids.

It's just my imagination! It's in my mind! I am not a child anymore- in a few short years I will be an adult, and dreams and imaginings have no place in my room, scaring me and getting carried away. I see only an image in my mind's eye, and I insist that it is pure fiction, nothing more. But as it stretches itself to the height of a man, I can't push it away.

To my repulsion it edges closer. I try to think of other things, pleasant things, but they are drowned by its immense, black presence. It is very tall, but not man-shaped...it has no true shape, only a long, tall figure of shadow, no face, no eyes- and now it is looming at the foot of my bed, staring intently at me. I have no idea of its purpose or intentions, only that they are sinister. I pray that somehow I remain unnoticed, although it is approaching the bed. I mustn't open my eyes...

Open your eyes and it will evaporate! If you see nothing, you'll know there is nothing! There is nothing there!

But what if it doesn't evanesce? I see it in my mind's eye and I can't bear to look upon it truly- to

look upon it would be obscene, terrible. To see it in the flesh would drive me insane with terror. My very mind would break. Even now, as my heart quickens and my blood ices through my veins, I am still trying to tell myself it is not real. It cannot be real...we are alone in this black void of a world. There is no God, so there can be no Devil. If I look upon it, it truly will become real, and I cannot bear that. Now I cannot move for fear, so petrified I have become. The air is cold, thick; now it leans over me, malevolent, hungry...

A creak...a floorboard running alongside my bed that sings when stood upon...surely...I stop denying it now. It is not a board that creaks in the cold, only when stepped upon. My nightingale floor has failed me, I realise sickeningly; it did not warn me in time.

There is a rustling on the bed. My legs are paralysed-I'm not moving, the sound isn't coming from me. I realise with horror that it is crawling over to me...I am almost in its wretched grasp. My body now betrays me, as I am unable to flee or fight. I cannot feel a weight, nothing physical, no hands pressing into me, but there is a swish of fabric...how can there be, if I am perfectly still, frozen in fear? I am trapped beneath it; I want to scream but I cannot move. It will devour me, and no one will know what is happening to me...

A red-gold flash-

Suddenly, the weight I was not aware of pressing on top of me dissipates in an instant. It feels almost like the snap of elastic- and now I am not pinned. I can move! I still keep my eyes shut, but I know my room...I trust my instincts. I scramble out of the bed, racing for the door. The board creaks almost encouragingly beneath my foot. I almost feel the brush of cold air as I twist myself, away from the invisible black entity that had practically lain upon me. My skin crawls at the thought. Darkness is its element, so as I make my escape, pulling open the door and running from the room, I slap at the light switch, flooding the room with light. But even then, I dare not look back.

This part matters little. I insist there is "something" in my room. I expect ridicule. I am not sure why my father so kindly humours my request. Perhaps it was because I had never made such a request as a child, and therefore as a teenager, something has obviously upset me. Perhaps he thinks my grief has affected me. He performs the ritual, looking beneath the bed, in the closet. It is a small room, with little place to conceal an intruder, especially with the light on. But I can feel its evil lingering.

I have to return to bed. The light goes off again, and instantly, I know the entity still lurks here, in this room, everywhere...nowhere...

Nervously, I crawl in back under the covers. I am scared...but something is different now...

The darkness has shrunk back, shrivelling and cowering. How was it so large, so eldritch? It has returned to its starting point, that corner next to the door, but it feels...compressed...pushed back and restrained. It almost seems to sulk, glaring balefully at its defeat. No longer a spectre now, more like an imp.

Beside me, I notice a new presence. It is smaller, but obviously more powerful...I feel its warmth first, but it is only behind my eyes that I see it- a red-gold light, a small ball, hanging near my head in the cold darkness, emitting the warmth that keeps evil at bay. There is nothing threatening about it to me, although it is steadily holding back the demon that it has pushed back.

It says nothing, but I know that I am now safe. I feel its warmth and it feels...familiar...somehow. I think of chess and smile. I can go to sleep...

So it would seem that perhaps I know the truth. We are not alone. The stars are not truly spread out, lonely islands of light in a velvet blackness, but dance together across the galaxy, and it would seem that so do we. I do not fear the darkness, because I know of the beauty that comes out of the darkest depths of space, but what horrors does the darkness also conceal? For a long time, I feared we were

alone in the dark...but sometimes I fear because we are not.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Laura E. Brown is a writer and artist from Hampshire, England. A lover of literature and the arts from a young age, she also writes under the pen name "Blackavar", and writes for online magazine, EGL Magazine. She loves all things strange and unusual. If you'd like to contact Laura, she can be reached at blackavar@egl-magazine.co.uk. Her Twitter handle is @LittleBlackavar.

Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed

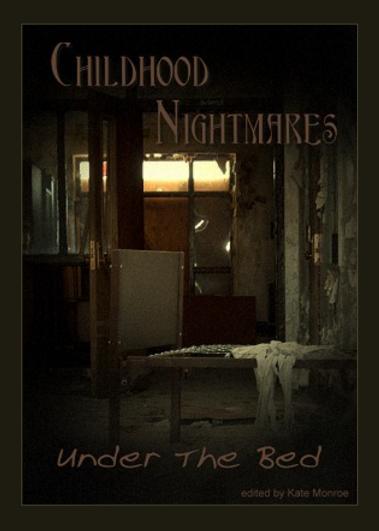
They haunt us all...

Those whispered tales of monsters hiding under the bed, or of the demons lurking in the shadowy corner where we dare not glance for fear that seeing them will make them all too real. Oh, how the innocent landscape of a child's imagination lends fertile soil to horrors ready to be sown on the slightest of sounds; the tales and the terror they wreak on our youthful minds never quite leave us.

We asked the authors in this collection to reach into the forgotten recesses of their twisted minds and share with us the tales of nightmares that can only thrive in the hidden corners of a child's imaginings; the bogeyman under the bed, the outlandishly fiendish creature lurking in the dark, the slight murmur of sound coming from the hall... did you close the door completely?

Explore the myriad terrors that only a child can twist from nothing into some 'thing' in the span of a single rapid breath. Do you dare delve into your own memories? Perhaps you'll start sleeping with the lights on again...

Tell us, who is Under the Bed?



Contributing Authors:

Colin F. Barnes, Nina D'Arcangela, Phil Hickes, Amber Keller, Kim Krodel, Lisamarie Lamb, John McIlveen, Kate Monroe, Brandon Scott, Joshua Skye, Julianne Snow, and Jack Wallen

Greg's List Allen Dusk

Gunfire echoed through the night. Three quick shots. Barking dogs consumed the subsequent silence.

Greg's heart pounded in his throat. The whole idea was ridiculous, and driving into this slum at the dead of night further cemented its absurdity. He poked his head out the window, attempted to discern where the shots came from, then pulled his head back inside the safety of his car. As if a sheet of foreign auto glass could stop a bullet. As if.

He glanced at the motel sign towering above him; two neon palm trees beckoned lowlife trash to fester beneath their glimmering fronds. The email had told him to be prompt, not a second late. If he stayed in the car, psyching himself out with bullshit, the opportunity would vanish. After another long sigh he slid from the car.

Greg knocked three times on Room 118, just as the email had instructed. The door cracked open. Green eyes shimmered past the security chain.

"You Greg?" Wine red lips clashed with porcelain skin.

"Um..." Something about her eyes distracted him. Perhaps she was wearing contacts, or maybe the neon caught the opportune angle, but Greg swore for a split second that her eyes were actually *glowing*. Left powerless by her mystique, he gathered up just enough strength to nod in reply.

"Got the cash?" She blew the shaggy raven bangs from her eyes. "All of it?"

"Yeah, right here." He pulled the envelope from his hooded sweatshirt. He had counted it four times before leaving the house. Hopefully his fiancé wouldn't notice its absence before he could replace it. He dreaded explaining his motives if it came down to that.

The woman snatched his money before shutting the door. Greg's guts curled into knots at the thought of all their wedding money suddenly lost. Relief lifted his heart up from his balls when the door popped back open. The woman shoved a cardboard box against his chest, which knocked the wind from him. Somehow his butterfingers managed to catch it before it fell. That would have been disastrous.

"This is the real deal?" He peeked beneath a box flap.

"Yep."

"Did you count the money?"

"I know where you live." The door shut firmly in his face.

Greg turned around and stepped away from the door. Jitters crept along his spine when he noticed the hookers gathered beneath streetlights across the way. Nobody else seemed to be around. He dashed to his car, placed the box gently in the passenger seat, then got the hell out of there.

The apartment was empty, except for the cat. He probably would have crapped himself if Samantha had been standing there when he walked in. Perhaps he rested a bit too comfortably in the fact that she had traveled to Atlanta for a tourism conference. No matter though, everything would be cleaned up, and the money would be back in the bank before her perky ass boarded the return flight home.

Greg walked into his office, and set the box on the desk, accidentally knocking over stacks of unreleased games blanketed with dust. A 60-inch TV wired to numerous gaming consoles occupied the far wall. Samantha's parents were troubled when they had first discovered that he played video games for a living, but the prowess of his salary quickly purchased their affections.

Samantha's plane wouldn't land for three more days, but Greg's idle hands weren't about to waste a second of time. He snickered when he opened the box. The contents sure looked like the real thing; now it was time to test if the contraption worked. He snickered again because he knew if Samantha had caught wind of this idea, she would have rolled her eyes before calling him a pervert.

Most any guy would side with him, and Greg was fairly sure of it. Everybody had a List; a meticulous roll call of which celebrities they would be allowed to sleep with if an outrageous series of events aligned

themselves to permit such a chance encounter. His best friend had Charlize Theron, Eva Mendes and Danica Patrick at the top of his List. The topic of the List even reared its head during conference calls with programmers. Hell, even Stephanie had a List, and she made it a point to tell him when her List was updated.

Greg had a List, but he never talked much about who was on it. His wasn't based on the hottest Hollywood starlet, or the sweatiest lead singers. His fantasies thrived in a world composed of gigabytes and viewed through pixels.

He admitted it may have been foolish to indulge in sexual fantasies based on video game characters, but he also knew any guy with a dick had probably had a few in their lifetime. The designers always drew the women with exaggerated curves because they knew titillation drove sales. Countless websites loaded with fan art and program mods such as *Nude Raider* were proof that their marketing strategies held clout. Teenage boys loved killing virtual villains in droves, but they also loved jerking off to Lara Croft's amazing tits.

The woman holding the prize spot on Greg's List was none other than Morgana Fatez, the notorious cyborg assassin from the *Death Rage* video game. Her pixelated ass captivated his imagination like no other character ever had. Her exotic looks combined with her swift, deadly moves stole his heart away. He swore she always smiled his way before pulling the trigger. Whatever it was, his fascination with her had become a distraction to his job and his relationship. Gradually he found himself playing *Death Rage* for hours on end, leaving his reports to pile up for another day. When he slipped into bed after hours of virtual combat, he fantasized that his fiancé's ass belonged to Morgana, and he cuddled up to her even closer.

He knew his sanity wavered. More than once he swore Morgana's voice whispered past his ear, or he laid awake at night with her fight anthem repeating through his brain. Most men would have let it go, and Greg nearly did, until he witnessed the demonstration of a Starbright hologram projector at the Consumer Gaming Expo. At that moment he knew he needed one, and he knew exactly what he was going to do with it.

Luck must have been smiling upon him. After a quick search online, he managed to track down a Starbright projector through a classified ad. The seller wished to remain anonymous, for reasons understood. Júzi Technologies closely guarded the internal working of their Starbright projectors.

Desire, if left unchecked, will lead a man off a cliff, or in this case, it will arrange a rendezvous at the Shady Palms Motel. Police didn't even dare patrol that neighborhood at night, and yet there Greg found himself with a wad of cash. He never bothered second guessing his decision. As far as he was concerned, the deed was done.

Greg set up the projector in the corner of his office. A swift download later, and the drivers were installed on his laptop; then he slipped on a pair of polarized viewing glasses. A test file produced a color cartoon fish swimming about the room. It looked so real he swore he could touch it, but when he reached out, his fingers blocked the transmitting beam.

"This should be interesting." Wonder filled his gaze while bits of cartoon fish rippled over his knuckles.

Greg took a seat in his plush leather chair, then dug through his files to find the custom naughty video of Morgana. Data buffered through memory chips. He slid a box of tissues close and unzipped his pants. Anticipation swelled beneath his boxers.

Pixels gathered in the center of the room. Amidst gaming posters tacked to walls and prototype consoles any nerd would kill for, Greg's fantasy materialized.

Every detail flickered with lifelike precision. Black tubing and green cables formed cyber dreadlocks.

cascading over her shoulders. Neon green mesh stretched across her firm, round breasts, which were cupped perfectly into orbs by a black leather corset. Gear and pistons buzzed down her knee-high platform boots. Glowing cables pinstriped every curve along her hourglass physique.

Bright green makeup painted circuit board patterns across her closed eyes. They jerked beneath their lids before her lengthy eyelashes fluttered open. Smooth white eyes scanned the room; perfect green rings illuminated their centers. Her breasts rose and fell in unison with breaths filtered through her spike-embellished respirator.

Greg's heart galloped in his chest. She stood before him, perfectly rendered by modern technology. One day perhaps, technology would exist that could enable him to touch his obsession.

Hi-end speakers rattled with Morgana's overpowering battle theme. Her eyes locked on Greg, gripping him with fear, until he nervously laughed it away. Pointed steel fingernails clicked against leather as she unfastened the intricate skulls buckling her corset. The garment faded after falling to the ground. She squeezed her breasts together with fingerless gloves before slowly pulling her hands away. Her breasts swayed back into their natural position, adorned on the sides with circuit board tattoos; green jewels glittered on hoops pierced through her pale pink nipples.

Greg stroked himself, being extra mindful not to rush. He squeezed himself firmly, then admired the fact he was harder than ever before.

Morgana unbuckled the belt clasping her chain mail kilt. The garment slid away, revealing the shaved perfection programmed into her form. Her slender fingers unhinged the respirator clasped to her face; it fell against her chest, revealing the beauty of her high cheek bones, and rings pierced through her sultry lips.

She stepped towards Greg. Air shifted in the room, and rippled past papers littering his desk. He was captivated by her sudden approach, but he expected the projection to scatter when it reached the edge of his desk.

Greg shrieked when Morgana threw the desk against the wall. He couldn't keep his eyes off her beautiful breasts, even as she leaned over and pulled away his glasses. Her nails glided through his cheeks, shredding them into thin ribbons. Blood seeped from his wounds, then soaked his shirt as he came hard. His pearly essence splattered across warmth radiating from her bare chest. Just as his orgasm subsided, the battle theme reached a crescendo.

Morgana paid no attention to the fluids oozing down her chest. More were yet to come. Her lips cracked when she smiled, revealing pixelated static swarming beneath the fractures. Somehow Greg mustered the strength to come again, even as his cock was torn away from his quivering flesh.

Minutes after the mayhem that followed, the door to Greg's apartment creaked inward. The pixie from the motel floated inside, propelled by majestic aether wings emanating from intricate tattoos illuminated along her back. She knew right where Greg's office was located; knowledge easily afforded when webcams obeyed her will.

The sight of his half naked corpse didn't bother her. Carnage was her game. Had she walked in, she surely would have tracked gore all over the place. She hovered over and retrieved the glowing etched rune stone resting in the corner. She loved technology just as much as any geek, but her relics were specially crafted to indulge the weak with their desires.

She grabbed his laptop from beneath the desk wreckage; any trace could condemn her with ease. Before she left, she studied the panic twisted across Greg's dead stare. Starvation haunted her throat, and it took every ounce of her will to gulp the desire away. Then she spotted his severed penis lying amidst the crimson congealing between his thighs.

"Maybe just a quick snack for the road," she said.

The pixie carefully plucked the morsel from Greg's lap, then popped it into her mouth. Magical fire illuminated her eyes with delight. She savored his taste bathing her tongue before she swallowed. "Alright." She set the laptop and rune beside his chair. "Maybe I'll stay for dinner."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Allen Dusk is the author of the gritty, urban horror novel Shady Palms and numerous other short stories. He lives in San Diego, CA with his wife and daughter. Other than writing, his favorite pastimes include photography, geocaching, watching old horror movies, and researching supernatural folklore. Curious readers may visit www.allendusk.com for more information. If you wish to connect with him via social media, his Twitter handle is @Allen_Dusk, his Facebook profile is http://www.facebook.com/allendusk, and his Goodreads profile can be found at http://www.goodreads.com/allendusk.



For only \$6 USD per year, you can subscribe to *The Sirens Call*, our dark and edgy literary eZine!

Don't miss an issue!

Details at www.SirensCallPublications.com

The Itch Julianne Snow

It started as an itch.

Just above his appendectomy scar.

A niggle akin to a tickle, then a full-fledged insistence.

Powerless to control the urge, Scott raked his jagged fingernails like scythes over the spot.

The more he scratched, the more persistent the urge became. Like an addict, he continued to collect his epithelials underneath his unkempt nails.

The night was endless with the constant itch in his side. He continued to dig deeper into his flesh, hoping to scrape out the source. Rubbed raw within the first hour, he knew that it would only take longer to heal. Yet, he continued to serve his annoying master. Too lazy to get out of bed to check his corpulent flesh, he resigned himself to the fate of a potential scar. Even in his restless sleep, his fingers sought out the now tender spot of raw skin.

In the morning, Scott awoke feeling groggy and thick-headed after a night spent tossing and turning. Taking his time getting out of bed, he absentmindedly scraped at his side. Feeling a stickiness, he pulled his hand away from his side and tried to focus on the tips of his fingers. Red. Blood? Had he really scratched that hard?

Coming to the full realization that he'd done some damage through the night, he made his way into the bathroom to stand before the mirror over the porcelain sink. Looking at his expansive belly in the reflection, he was aghast at what he saw.

Slowly oozing red blood and a viscous, unctuous clear fluid, the patch on his abdomen was larger than he had first imaged. *Had he really scratched a hole in the side of his body?* It was incomprehensible to Scott that he could have done this much damage overnight. Something had to be wrong; there must be an explanation...

After placing a quick call to work, he dressed and left for the hospital, silently praying that whatever he'd done to himself could be undone.

Alone in the stark cubicle, replete with pale blue dotted gown that wouldn't close over his ample ass, Scott sat on the uncomfortable hospital bed, wishing that his side didn't hurt. The admitting nurse had taken one quick look at his stomach and immediately set him up in a room with the inadequate gown. Upon her exit, she added that the doctor would be with him shortly and promptly shut him off from the hustle and bustle by swinging round the pale green curtain.

Not wanting to admit it, the fear was all that he could think about. What the heck was wrong with him? Scenes from the past few days played over and over in his head. He ran through the multitude of people he'd encountered; his co-workers, the pizza guy, the pretty check-out girl at the supermarket, even the woman he visited once a week to satiate his desires. He raked his mind for clues as he raked his flesh; could one of them have infected him?

The more he thought about it, the more his mind dwelt upon the possibilities.

The more he dwelt on the possibilities, the deeper he scratched.

The only thing that broke his reverie was the middle-aged, balding doctor that pulled back the curtain. He strode in with purpose and a level of cool aloof. Not glancing up from the chart in his hand, he stopped by the edge of the bed.

"What seems to be the problem, Mr. Harris?"

"Well doc, I have this itch on my side -"

"An itch, Mr. Harris? You came to the ER for an itch?" With that said, he finally looked up, turned and muttered, "You came to the hospital for an itch... You've got to be kidding me!"

"What?! You're leaving? You haven't even seen —"

"Seen what? Some patch of skin that has you scratching? Let me see it then; just be quick about it!"

The doctor turned on him so quickly that Scott didn't really know how to react. He stupidly fumbled with the side of the gown, trying desperately to pull the corner of it from under his thick thigh. Finally extricating the worn fabric, he lifted the edge to reveal his swollen belly, the rawness of his skin quite apparent.

For a moment, it looked as if the doctor might apologize for his outburst. Instead, he placed the chart on the bed beside Scott and bent forward for a closer look.

Just as quickly, his head jerked back, surprise covering his face. Turning to the small desk, he opened a drawer and pulled out a skinny metal probe about the length of a pen.

"I'm just going to apply a little pressure, Mr. Harris. Nothing to fear, just need to take a better look..." His words trailed off as he advanced the probe at Scott's stomach.

Scott felt a tiny bit of pressure deep inside his stomach and then a fluttering. It was a strange feeling and one he couldn't remember ever having experienced before. Not painful, but uncomfortable.

The doctor's hand retreated almost immediately, searching for something. He found it by the wall next to the desk and promptly threw up into it. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, the doctor turned to look at him, fear and revulsion painting a picture of horror across his face.

"What is it Doctor? Am I going to die?" The fear in the room was palpable. Scott, afraid for his life; the doctor afraid of his patient.

"You'll have to wait here a moment, I need a second opinion." Almost breaking into a run, the doctor left the cramped cubicle, leaving behind the stench of vomit and burnt coffee.

Within moments he had returned, a pretty young blonde haired doctor in tow. She smiled warily at Scott and introduced herself. "Hello, Mr. Harris. I'm Dr. Campbell. Would it be alright if I had a look at your side, please?" She asked with a politeness that almost made up for the way that the other doctor had behaved.

"Sure..." he answered, "Just tell me I'm going be okay and I'll show you anything." The comment was a bit off colour, but Scott was a warm blooded male; even in sickness, he'd do what he could to score. Not that she would ever have looked at him, but it never hurt to try...

Bending down, she stared at the spot on his side, intently trying to make out what she was looking at. Her head jerked back up, her hands coming straight up to her face.

"Oh. My. God."

"What? What is it?"

"See? I told you..."

"But that's impossible. There's no way that -"

"No way that what? Could someone please tell me what's going on?"

Again, Scott felt the stirring within his stomach. Reflexively, he placed his hand on his side and rubbed. Only this time he could feel something else.

Smooth. Hard. Tiny. Square. Plus now there was a definite hole.

"Mr. Harris, you may want to move your hand -"

The pain was excruciating. His fingers were on fire. He brought them up to his face to have a look and was shocked to see what he could only interpret as teeth marks marring the surface. Teeth? Was.

that what he had felt?

Remembering the tiny bathroom he'd passed on his way to the cubicle, Scott moved faster than he'd ever moved before. With the edges of the gown flapping behind him, he threw the light switch and ripped the fabric across his stomach to get a better look. The sight astounded him

He had a mouth on the side of his abdomen. A fully formed mouth with teeth, lips and a tongue. Looking more closely, he could see the faint swell that had started to form above the mouth, along with the twin semi-circular arches of coarse black hairs exuding from his skin above that.

Feeling sick, he turned to the doctors who had followed him down the hallway, anguish and confusion written all over his face.

"That's a mouth right? A fucking mouth on my side?"

"Yes, Mr. Harris. We believe that's what it is"

"How the fuck did it get there?"

"We have no idea, Mr. Harris. But that could be the least of your problems -"

"The least of my problems? I have a fucking mouth - with teeth – on my stomach. What the fuck could be worse?"

The two doctors shared a glance, "Well, it doesn't appear that it's just a mouth -"

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Scott's world went dark and he crashed to the ground.

Waking up in the hospital was an eerie feeling; part of his brain remembered the horror that had felled him, while the other maintained that it was just a bad dream. Trying to move, Scott realized that he couldn't. Panicking, he fought to move, believing that he was paralyzed with that thing on his stomach. Turning his head to the left, he saw that a restraint covered his wrist. He strained against it, testing it, knowing that it would be effective regardless of his hope.

Looking to the right, he saw that his other wrist was also locked in a restraint. Recognizing the futility of struggling, he laid he head back down on the pillow. Breathing deeply for a moment, he began to take stock of everything. His left leg hurt, as did his left shoulder. His head was pounding but Scott put that to the fall he knew he had taken. His attention turned to the one thing he had hoped he could avoid.

The mouth. With all of its little white pearlescent teeth.

Shuddering, he strained his head upwards, attempting to see the side of his abdomen. Letting his head fall back down in defeat, he started to cry. Scott had no idea what was going on and it scared him. Had the doctor really stated that there was a face forming on his stomach?

The wait for someone to come felt interminable. Once the doctor arrived, he opened his mouth to talk but no sound came out. The terror of that moment radiated from Scott.

"Mr. Harris, you need to calm down. Getting yourself all worked up isn't going to help you at all." Again, Scott tried to speak; his mouth opening and closing with each attempt. Frustrated, he began to sob.

"Mr. Harris, it will be all right. We have you scheduled for surgery later today. Once we remove the tumor, everything should go back to normal. These types of things happen all the time. One of the unique things about the cells within our body is that they have the ability to develop into any of the body's structures. It's simply an anomaly, however unfortunate it may be." With a reassuring hand on his arm, the doctor gave a small squeeze before leaving the room.

Resigned to accept the fate that odd things sometimes happen, he tried to put his mind at rest. At least the itch was gone. And soon the growth would be as well. Closing his eyes, he thought about the

glorious void of sleep, hoping to drift into a world unlike the hell he was currently living.

As he nodded off, a small gravelled voice spoke aloud, "But I'm not a tumor..."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - It was watching George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* at the tender age of six that solidified Julianne's respect of the Undead. Since that day, she has prepared herself for the (inevitable) Zombie Apocalypse. While classically trained in all of the ways to defend herself, she took up writing in order to process the desire she now covets; to bestow a second and final death upon the Undead. As the only girl growing up in a family with four children in the Canadian countryside, Julianne needed some form of escape. Her choice was the imaginations of others which only fostered the vibrancy of her own.

Days with the Undead: Book One is her first full-length book, the basis of which can be found in her popular web serial of the same name. You can find Julianne's *The Living Dead of Penderghast Manor* in the anthology *Women of the Living Dead* and stories in upcoming anthologies called *Childhood Nightmares: Under The Bed* and *Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity* from Sirens Call Publications.

Connect with Julianne on Facebook at Julianne Snow, via her blogs; http://theflipsideofjulianne.wordpress.com and http://dayswiththeundead.com, and on Twitter at @CdnZmbiRytr.

Coming Soon - Carnage: After the End Volume 2

Contributing Authors
Angel D. Callido
Charlie Fish
Harper Hull
Magda Knight
Jason Lairamore
Harry Manners
Zachary O'Shea
Wednesday Silvermore
Adrian Tchaikovsky
L.E. White



www.SirensCallPublications.com

ELEANOR BENNETT



Eleanor Leonne Bennett is a 16 year old internationally award winning photographer and artist who has won first places with National Geographic, The World Photography Organisation, Nature's Best Photography, Papworth Trust, Mencap, The Woodland Trust and Postal Heritage.

Her photography has been published in the Telegraph, The Guardian, BBC News Website and on the cover of books and magazines in the United States and Canada. Her art is globally exhibited, having shown work in London, Paris, Indonesia, Los Angeles, Florida, Washington, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Canada, Spain, Germany, Japan, Australia and The Environmental Photographer of the year Exhibition (2011) amongst many other locations.

She was also the only person from the UK to have her work displayed in the National Geographic and Airbus run 'See The Bigger Picture' global exhibition tour with the United Nations International Year Of Biodiversity

2010.



www.eleanorleonnebennett.zenfolio.com

The Nightmare Frequency A.A. Garrison

November 11th, 1936

Initiated trial of Noninvasive Brainwave Machine. Prison facilities accommodating, if untoward. First subject, inmate 110233, reports drastic changes in consciousness. Earclips were "scratchy." Added felt pads. Satisfactory.

November 13th

Trial continues, progressing. Testing of inmates suggests Machine operates as expected: exposure to select frequencies alters consciousness. Success.

Have already begun mapping this new frontier, with entries for confusion, sexual arousal, gradations of euphoria, dyslexia, paralysis, exhaustion. One inmate reports a religious awakening, which persisted post-stimulation. Several channels yield hallucinations of varying effect; others, reliving of memories, often in total recall. One appears to mimic theta waves, resulting in conscious dream-state. Many subjects express disappointment upon being dismissed.

November 20th

A complication today, after a week of success. Latest inmate, 019332, was exposed to several new, uncharted frequencies, and showed reaction to one in particular.

A long period of non-response, then 019332 grew abruptly hysterical, the experimentation booth left in disarray. Once Machine was off, inmate informed me that, were I to "do that again," he would inflict bodily harm. When I did not immediately disassemble the Machine, inmate returned to hysterics, requiring service of guards.

Trial on hiatus until installation of restraints.

November 23rd

Trial resumed, where it left off. New inmate introduced to last, troublesome frequency, and exhibited similar response. Subject screamed with startling sincerity, stressing restraints even after Machine's discontinuation. Incontinence, vomiting. When questioned, subject could only gibber and gesture.

Upon recovery, some hours later, inmate reported a sort of nightmare, involving "a dark place," inhabited by reptilian creatures intent on consumption.

Shifting focus to this spectacular frequency.

November 25th

Trial suspended, at request of the warden. Somehow, Machine malfunctioned today, refusing to deactivate. Subject, inmate 83901, was receiving nightmare frequency at the time, and remained so for some minutes, until Machine at last unplugged.

Subject left in seizure, followed by a comatose state. Remains unresponsive as of writing.

December 1st

Comatose subject awoke yesterday, with interesting results. Suffered from acute delirium upon consciousness, to the point of growling and self-harm. Sedation ineffective; restraint required. Infirmary staff report him "babbling in tongues," but this goes unconfirmed.

Trial remains inactive. Warden displeased.

December 5th

Subject has regained compos, yet remains sedated, with periodic relapse into non-communicative state. Has granted an interview, at his own request, and results are fascinating.

According to subject, was not in coma at all, but quite conscious, and transported to "another world." Recalls a vast, detailed fantasy in which he found himself in a "scary place with shadow and fire," occupied by intelligent, reptilian predators remarkably similar to previous subject's description. Interestingly, claims to have inhabited this nightmare realm "for years," in a time dilation, during which he fell in with a band of cave-dwelling human companions, who did not speak English, but taught him their language. Subject quotes this Gallic-sounding language at will, plus companions' social customs, mythology, religious doctrine, mating rituals.

Note: account was coherent, and survived cross-examination.

December 12th

Trial has, at long last, resumed, with stipulation of no further exploration of nightmare frequency. Warden remains intransigent on this, despite my repeated phone calls. Am now writing a letter. Hesitantly, experimentation reverted to previous course. Nothing new to report.

December 20th

Warden sees the light of reason! Testing of the nightmare frequency soon to resume, under the condition that each subject undergo sedation. Experimented upon several sedated subjects, with benign frequencies, and mechanism appears unaffected by drugs or preexisting psychological status. Nightmare frequency scheduled for tomorrow. Elated.

December 21st

More subjects undergoing nightmare frequency, incredible results. Data amassing at an alarming rate. Response remains consistent amongst subjects, including descriptions of that savage realm and its reptilian denizens, collected from those left able to talk. Inmate 820801 describes complex mathematical and chemical formulae, as relayed to him by a scientific race "over there" (man is rapist from New Hampshire, with fourth-grade education). Have solicited sketches and likenesses from subjects, and there is no question.

Note: sedation eliminates neither upset nor defecation. Sanitary measures taken.

December 24th

The Machine was functional, am sure of it! Following first incident, had it checked fully, and were no problems! But today, stayed on again. Somehow, by some means, it continued stimulating the latest inmate, on that one frequency. And, I must be losing my mind, but I could swear the Machine kept on full seconds after being unplugged, as if fueled by the man's convulsive screams.

The warden, that ignorant, narrow man, has again shut me down. The fool. Sees only his inconvenience and his liabilities, lacking any loyalty to science or progress. Perhaps the greatest discovery ever made, and this simian is blind to it.

January 17th, 1937

So much progress this last month. Much, much progress. From my own pocket, have funded a volunteer project, recruiting from the local campus and soup kitchen. Though no subject returned, still a success! "Nightmare" is no nightmare, but <u>real</u>, and proved now indelibly. Detailed drawings, identical accounts of key landmarks, the time-dilation phenomenon - and the <u>beasts!</u> Ferocious, sauroid devils, unchanged between dozens of accounts. Always aware of their observers, too, and intent on terrorizing them to the maximum, as if for pleasure. Creatures claim eminence over our world, able to manipulate our reality at will. Several speak polysyllabic names to the subjects, these objectively verified.

A shared delusion? Impossible!

Theorize another dimension, imperceptible until unveiled by Machine. Bigger than Relativity - other worlds, a multiverse, such implications on consciousness and frequency and their contingents. So many questions, so little known. Must research further. If only more money.

Have put in requests to the university, but with little faith. Machine's reputation has preceded me, thanks to the prison fiasco and the pending lawsuits.

More and more, am considering the last resort.

January 29th

Have sought funding from several friends, then Father, without success. Persuaded neighbor to undergo Machine; resulted in authorities being called. Just escaped arrest. It is decided, then. Will become my own subject.

February 1st

Am at last ready.

Checked extensively the circuitry and the crystals, and had installed all new resistors, tubes, and transformers. Three different radiomen assure, is quite impossible for Machine to malfunction within the next few decades. Self-timer mechanism guaranteed similarly, and tested no small amount. Other incidents were just flukes, anyway. Feeling confident in solo trial.

First test scheduled for tomorrow. Quite excited. History shall thank me.

"It's the last entry," said the landlord's son, fanning the journal's many blank pages. They smelled of ink and clove.

His father, standing nearby, closed his eyes and shook his head. "Shame," he sighed. "Poor bastard." For some time, the two remained in the madman's lonely study, silent, as if in mourning. Then the journal was thrown in a bag, to be disposed of with the rest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - A.A. Garrison is a twenty-nine-year-old man living in the mountains of North Carolina. His short fiction has appeared in dozens of publications, most recently *Something Wicked, Kaleidotrope*, and the *Pseudopod* horror webcast. His first novel, *The End of Jack Cruz*, is available from Montag Press. He blogs at *synchroshock.blogspot.com*.



Now Available

The Sample Case L.A. Forman

Glenn Williams, in his mid-thirties, was a door to door salesman, old fashioned for the time, not many salesmen went door to door anymore.

Except you Glenn, you're special.

Glenn liked his approach to finding customers, preferring to deal with people on a more personal level. His good looks and charismatic personality was what made him so good at what he did. Glenn always kept his face clean shaved and his light brown hair perfectly groomed. Always wearing a smile, he spoke in such a soft and friendly voice it was hard not to gain instant trust in him.

Glenn loved his job and loved to meet new people.

People Glenn, we need more people.

He liked to see the inside of some of the beautiful houses he would visit, and most of all he loved to see the expression on a customer's face when he opened his sample case.

We love it, don't we Glenn?

Glenn's merchandise was very unique, which gave him great pride. It was impossible to get anywhere else.

Before going into business for himself, Glenn worked as an insurance salesman. His days there weren't like the days he worked now. The insurance company pre-arranged all appointments, calling potential customers to arrange for a sales agent to come to their home. Meeting new people wasn't the same with the pre-arranged appointments, it just wasn't personal. All the customers he talked to spoke to him as if he were the company rather than an individual human being. The conversation was always strictly business related and very boring, never any color in the words passed between he and the customer, it was like talking to a machine. Going door to door, meeting strangers, being self-employed, was much more interesting.

It was a bright and sunny July afternoon. The humidity was low and the temperature was a comfortable sixty-eight degrees. The salesman walked briskly along the sidewalk, enjoying the weather and looking forward to finding a new customer.

Hungry...

Four sixty-five Province Street was the address written on the piece of paper in Glenn's pocket. He pulled it out to double check the address even though he knew he would recognize the house when he saw it. He had driven by it last week and loved it. The house was a beautiful Victorian with white trim and forest green siding. It had a wraparound porch painted white to match the trim. Perfectly cut, vibrant green grass gave the frontage an austere appearance. The concrete path that led to the house was lined on both sides with an array of colorful flowers.

His heart pounding with excitement, the salesman rang the doorbell. He waited a minute, went to ring again, but before he could press the button the front door opened, and a thin, old man peeked his head out.

"Can I help you?" The man asked.

"My name is Glenn Williams." He reached out to shake the old man's hand.

The old man looked at him suspiciously for a moment, then opened the door further to shake hands.

"I'm a traveling salesman," Glenn continued. "I go door to door selling my product. It's a very unique item and can't be found anywhere else."

That's right Glenn, we're one of a kind.

"I'm Louis Greer," the old man replied. "I like your style young man, going door to door like they used to in my day. I'd love to see what you've got but I've no time right now. Suppose you could come back tomorrow around noon? I'll have some coffee brewing and you can go ahead with your pitch. Whaddaya say?

But I'm hungry now Glenn...

The salesman smiled at Mr. Greer. "Of course, I'll look forward to it. Noon tomorrow then?"

"Noon tomorrow," Louis said as he shook hands with Glenn before he left.

Glenn checked into a nearby hotel so he could see Mr. Greer the next day and show him what he had in his sample case.

Oh what wonders Glenn, oh what wonders we have to show him.

When Glenn got to his room he went straight for the bathroom, turned on the light, and stood looking into the mirror for some time. He scrutinized every detail of his face, searching for grey hairs, checking to see that his eyebrows were perfectly trimmed and that he was clean shaven, making sure he looked perfect for his appointment the next day. Glenn always made sure he looked perfect for his customers.

Glenn sat on the king size bed with his sample case in his lap, caressing it with his hands the way he did every night. The way the soft leather felt on his fingers gave him butterflies in his stomach. The excitement of seeing the customer's face when they saw what was in the case was almost too much for him. Touching the case made him happy.

Feels good, doesn't it Glenn?

Eyes closed, Glenn ran his fingertips along the case, feeling a warm tingling sensation flow throughout his entire body. The hair on his arms stood on end. He smiled when he felt what was inside the case move. He loved it as if it were his own child.

Glenn found the case in an old antique shop two years ago. He was thirty-two at the time and was doing well, although unhappy, in his career as an insurance salesman. He went into the junk shop on impulse, walking past it one day on his way home from work. The inside of the little store had been musty and everything had on its surface an ancient layer of dust. The air was thick and moist, the lighting dim. He had thought it an odd place.

An elderly man sat behind the register and looked at Glenn from behind thick glasses which looked too large for him.

"Welcome, how you doing?" The old man had said when Glenn walked in.

"Fine, thank you."

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Just came to look around."

Glenn started a tour of the place, looking at all the various knick-knacks on the shelves around him.

"What do ya do for a living?" The old man asked.

"Salesman," Glenn replied. "Door to door."

The old man's furry eyebrows lifted above the rims of his enormous spectacles as his eyes widened. "I think I have something you might like, let me show you."

Glenn followed the old man through the narrow isle between shelves filled with all kinds of trinkets and archaic appliances. It seemed to Glenn that the further back they went, the older the items got.

When they reached the back wall the shopkeeper moved a box from the top shelf and pulled down what was behind it. "You're going to love this," he said as he wiped the years of dust from its surface with his liver spotted hand.

It was an old leather sample case with a solid brass handle and corners with a lock to keep the contents safe. Where the dust was wiped off, it looked like it was in pristine condition.

Glenn wanted it immediately. He was drawn to it. He sensed there was something strange about it, even sinister perhaps, but it was so beautiful he had to have it.

"How much?" Glenn asked excitedly.

"Let's say... Twenty dollars. But I have to warn you, it's not returnable."

The case must have been worth more than that, Glenn thought. Although it was old it looked to be in very good condition. The leather looked soft and smooth with no rips or fading. The brass handle was clean and shiny, looking as though it had just been polished. He wondered why the old man was willing to sell it so cheap, but looking around he saw how cluttered and full of stuff the store was and figured the old man just wanted to lighten his inventory.

"I'll take it." Glenn reached into his wallet and handed the man a twenty dollar bill.

"Good doing business with you," the old man chuckled.

"The same to you."

That was the day Glenn's life changed forever. The day he brought that case home he decided to be self-employed and never went back to his insurance salesman job.

After showering and brushing his perfectly white teeth, Glenn turned in for the night. Climbing into the king size hotel bed he thought about how wonderful the next day was going to be.

Yes, so wonderful indeed!

Awakened by his travel alarm clock, Glenn sat up in bed and stretched his arms, yawning. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and smiled at the bright sunlight shining in through the large hotel window. He got out of bed and went directly to the sample case, patting it tenderly with his hand as if it were a household pet. "Good morning, sunshine," he softly whispered. "Today we'll meet our new customer and it will be a great day."

Great day for us Glenn, great day.

Glenn checked out of the hotel, got into his car, placing his leather case of the passenger seat, and headed for Province street for his appointment with Mr. Greer. When he arrived he pulled the car over and parked on the side of the street near the house and checked the time. Eleven fifty-eight, right on time.

Hurry Glenn, hurry. So Hungry...

Glenn got out of the car, closed his door and got the sample case from the other side. Straightening his tie, he walked down the concrete path to Mr. Greer's house. Glenn reached for the doorbell. Mr. Greer opened the door before he could ring it.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Greer," Glenn said.

"Right on time, I like that. Come on in."

Mr. Greer led Glenn to the kitchen where he had a steaming hot pot of coffee brewing. He motioned towards the kitchen table. "Have a seat."

Glenn sat down and placed his sample case on the table. He placed his hands on the case and rubbed his fingers along the surface, felling the exhilaration of knowing that soon he would be able to show the nice old man what was inside.

Soon, so soon.

"How do you like your coffee?" Mr. Greer asked as he poured coffee into the mugs.

"Light, with not too much sugar."

Mr. Greer brought the cups to the table and sat across from Glenn. "So what is it you sell, Mr. Williams?"

Show him Glenn. Show him now.

"Well it's a very unique item. One you'll never find anywhere else. It's quite amazing actually; you won't believe your eyes. Let me show you."

Hurry, Glenn. Hurry...

Glenn reached into his pocket, pulled out a key and unlocked the case. He then turned it around so it

faced Mr. Greer.

Open it now, Glenn. Open it now!

The salesman opened his case. Mr. Greer recoiled in horror, nearly falling backwards in his chair. Inside the case was a vile looking creature. Its skin was black and leathery. Its yellow eyes glared at the terrified old man from inside its oddly shaped skull. The creature stood about two feet tall on thin, bony legs and had a round stomach which bulged out from its thin body. Its ears were pointed at the tips and it had only two holes where there should be a nose.

The creature grinned, revealing its pointed teeth, looking at Mr. Greer as he stared back in shock at the unexplainable thing in the case. Mr. Greer tried to scream but all that came out was a gurgling sound.

The creature jumped from the case and onto Mr. Greer's face, sinking its razor sharp teeth into his cheek and tearing it open, the blood spilling out and running down the old man's neck. The bleeding man tried to scream again, call out for help, but again no sound escaped. Digging its clawed fingers into the man's eye, the creature tore it from its socket and began to chew on the soft gelatinous ball. Mr. Greer fell to the floor and his body began to shake violently, the terrible thing still holding on to his face.

By the time the creature had eaten most of the flesh on Mr. Greer's face and both his eyes, he had bled to death. The creature then used its claws to rip open the dead man's torso and began to feast on his organs, pulling them out one at a time until it finished them all.

Glenn sat and drank his coffee, then took the money from Mr. Greer's wallet.

The creature climbed back onto the table and got back into the case, its hunger satisfied. Glenn closed the case and locked it, putting the key back into his pocket.

Glenn left the house on Province Street and drove off to find his next customer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - L.A. Forman has been an avid fan of horror fiction for decades and is familiar with many authors and styles of writing. He is a member of an online writing group called the writer's circle and lives in Middletown, N.Y. in the Hudson Valley.

Open Submission – Bellows of the Bone Box



Travel to a world where steam power is widely used, and weave a tale where Steampunk Horror rules the night.

Tell a tale of imagination, fascination and horror that will keep the reader enthralled by what was or might have been in an age dominated by clockworks of brass, pneumatic tubes, airships with ether screws, and leather worn out of necessity not vanity.

Stories of Steampunk Horror only please, and don't forget to make your shine a bit gritty!

Deadline for Submissions: September 17, 2012

One Image, Two Points of View 300 Words – No More, No Less



Committed Kalla Monahan

Five years ago I escaped this place. I can still recall it in the rear-view mirror as I sped away.

Pain. Torment. Humiliation.

Those were the tools used to inflict physical and psychological warfare. I barely survived; I know many that suffered a fate worse than death at the hands of our jailers – judges really. Every single movement of muscle was a foundation for retribution.

It was a terrifying time, one I am glad is only a memory. Not distant but a memory all the same.

Coming back to this place has awakened the strife, the pain, the absolute terror contained in each and every moment. Living, breathing fear saturates the walls. It's still here. The passage of time has done nothing to allay the wrong that was committed.

Committed. Such a funny word. It means so many things to such a select few. I have committed myself, seen others do the same. I have even once been committed; committed to a house of horror.

As the soles of my shoes tread quietly down the decrepit hallways, I am struck full force by the memories, the atrocities. Turning to my companions, I feel their fear.

They do not know I was once a guest within these walls. I have done an excellent job melding into the façade of normal society; of hiding the great expanses of void within my psyche.

I stop for a brief moment at the doorway to Room 157; the reconditioning room. It was here that I had spent most of my tortured time. Entering the room is like flipping a switch – the restraints still sit at attention on the vinyl covered procedure chair at its centre.

I sit, overwhelmed by the memories. The restraints pull tight against my flesh as my screaming begins all over again.

Echoing... Nina D'Arcangela

Dark halls echo the sounds of the past. I put my hands to my ears, but cannot block them from intruding.

Bloodied and covered in filth, I cower in the murky dankness of my corner. A ray of sunlight leaks in just within sight—yet so far down the hall. Do I dare crawl to it, or will they come for me again? Unsure and frightened for my own safety in this house of illusions, I shiver with indecision as the glow slowly fades away, the hours tick past.

The last vestiges of light receding, my hope of sanity dwindling, I begin to crawl toward the retreating beam of hope. Nearing the doorway, I pause to make sure all is safe, clear for my passage. One splayed hand laid upon the long wooden floor before me, my body follows, curling around the frame as I begin to emerge from the room. My other hand is near to landing upon the hallway floor when I see a figure move through the source of light.

No! On hands and knees, I quickly scurry back into the corner, but not quickly enough. They know I tried to escape, they know I reached for the brightness; they know my intent was to abandon them.

Enraged by my daring, they begin to assault my every sense as the light is snuffed. It's always worse at night. Half crazed I scream for leniency, none is granted.

As my eyes adjust to the deeper darkness, I see the black shadows moving about me. "Please," I beg of them, "please don't hurt me anymore." But they only laugh. The nearest whispers a rotted warning in my already damaged ear, as the others close in upon me for yet another night of terror. Cold fingers grasping, my screams echoing...

Sightseers Jon Olson

Becky Dunsworth could not believe her eyes when she and her boyfriend, Thomas Woods, emerged through the thick wall of spruce trees. Just as news agencies around the world had broadcast, Becky saw for herself that the town of Hume, Nova Scotia was dead. Some buildings remained intact, some were just shells surrounded by piles of rubble, and others had been completely demolished. She looked down at her feet and saw that the paved street that they now stood on was badly damaged and showed years of neglect.

"I told you it was still here." Thomas said smiling.

"So that means that their explanation all those years ago was just..." she began.

"It was just a cover story to hide the truth." Thomas replied.

He slid his backpack down off of his shoulder and squatted down as he unzipped it. He rummaged around until he found what he was looking for and pulled out a digital camera. He took the lens cap off and turned it on, the LCD screen illuminating his face. It was only three o'clock in the afternoon but the sky was so overcast and grey that it made it seem closer to dusk.

"This is going to be great, Becky. We can finally prove that what's his name, that Douglas guy, wasn't off his rockers when he submitted his manuscript about what really happened here."

Becky grinned, feeling excitement brewing inside of her but at the same time she felt a sense of dread. It was a small feeling and she quickly put it on the backburner so they could get down to business.

They started walking down what was once the main street in Hume, Williams Avenue. Every few steps, Thomas stopped and snapped off some pictures of the buildings. A few burnt out cars scattered the street but other then that there was nothing obstructing their path. A Canada Post mailbox lay face down on the street, it's slot wide open and a few yellow and weathered envelopes stuck out.

"Thomas, do you think what Michael Douglas wrote about was true?" Becky asked.

He lowered the camera and looked at her. "What, that strange creatures came out of doorways in our so-called reality that were made by flying discs?" He raised the camera again and took a picture of her. "I can tell you that I don't believe that this place was destroyed by a tsunami, according to the official reports."

"I suppose."

They continued to walk down Williams Avenue, with their footsteps echoing throughout the ruins. They soon came to the only junction on Williams Avenue and knew that they had reached the center of the town. Hume only had a population of three hundred when it was suddenly wiped off of the map. Only it wasn't wiped off, as they now stood in it, but something had happened, something that the government felt the need to cover up.

A rustling of paper caught Becky's attention and she looked to where the noise was originating. In another fallen mailbox to her left, she saw an old newspaper inside. She walked over to it, reached inside and pulled it out. It was an issue of the Hume Daily News, dated July 3rd, 1990. The main headline was about Hume's mayor stepping down but in the bottom right of the paper was a small story about reported UFO sightings.

"Hey Thomas, check this out." She walked over to him. "It's a paper from the day when Hume was destroyed!" She looked down at the paper. "I can't believe it survived over twenty years inside that mailbox."

Excitedly, Thomas took it from her and pulled a file folder from his backpack. "We have to keep this. We'll put this in our book somewhere." He planned on writing a book exposing the cover up and in the process making him rich.

The wind had started to pick up and just as they were about to continue on, a loud flapping noise made them both look around. It was similar to the sound heavy curtains make when being molested by a

strong wind through an open window. They looked at each other, puzzled, and started looking around for the source of the flapping.

"Up there." Thomas said. He pointed up a street from the junction. He looked at the street sign and could barely make out Ferguson Road. "Come on, let's go check it out."

The feeling of dread returned to Becky, stronger than before, but she again dismissed it as she saw the excitement in Thomas' eyes. They started up Ferguson Road and it didn't take them long to find it. They both stopped, mouths agape and could not believe their eyes.

The flapping was from a large tear, roughly twenty feet tall, and it was the edges flapping in the wind that was making the noise. A fence, however, encircled the tear. The base of which was roughly eight feet tall and made of solid concrete. Large steel rods stood up straight out of those, reaching the top of the tear. Regular chain-linked fencing, razor wire and barbed wire were strung up from pole to pole and came together at the very top like a roof. The fence looked well maintained, which worried Becky, as it meant that there were people here to perform the maintenance.

"Holy shit, can you believe it? It's just like he said it was like." Thomas said. A grin was starting to poke at the corners of his mouth. "The tears were real." He raised the camera and started taking pictures. "Now, help me find something that I can climb onto to actually get a look inside the tear."

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Thomas." Becky said.

"Not a good idea? Are you crazy? I need to see it, to photograph it, to get the evidence we need." He looked around and saw a bench a few yards away. "Help me move that bench over."

Before she could protest, Thomas was already sprinting over to the bench. She sighed and followed. The bench, at one time, had been bolted into the sidewalk but the bolts had long since rusted out. They each grabbed an end and began to carry it towards the fence. Becky glanced down and saw the initials "I.R. + L.E" carved into one of the boards, wondering who they were and what had happened to them.

"Set it here." Thomas said. The bench was placed against the concrete base. "Now, I'm going to climb up. Once I'm up there, pass me the camera. Okay?"

Becky nodded but her eyes protested. "I don't like this."

"I'm just going to snap a few pictures and then we can be on our way out of here. Okay?" She nodded again.

Thomas stood on top of the bench and with a grunt, pulled himself up onto the top of the concrete base, careful not to cut himself on the barb or razor wire. He found a section of chain-link fencing and grabbed a hold. He peered through it and his face gave an expression of utter disbelief.

"What is it?" Becky asked.

"Just like he had written in the manuscript." Thomas replied. "It's making my fillings tingle and there's a bluish-grey light coming from through the tear. I can almost make out features on the other side!"

"Here, just take the camera and hurry up!" Becky thrust the camera towards Thomas and he squatted down to reach it. His fingers clasped around the camera's body and he pulled it up. Using one hand to keep his balance, Thomas stood up and raised the camera to his face.

He got off two pictures before it happened. A creature jumped up from the tear onto the fence. It was the size of a large dog and had what Becky could only describe as four spidery legs. Its head was level with Thomas' and before Thomas could do anything, a stinger shot out of the creature's face and stung him directly in the eyeball. The stinger retracted as quickly as it shot out and the creature jumped down. Thomas screamed and released his grip on the fence, falling back to the ground, just missing the bench.

His face, where he got stung, was already starting to swell up. His eyeball was punctured and the

pressure from the swelling pushed it out. Becky put her hands to her mouth and was about to scream when three gunshots rang out. Thomas' body jerked three times as bullets penetrated his chest, putting him out of his misery. It was then that Becky realized that there were masked men on either side of her.

One held a flamethrower and just when it looked like the swelling was about to burst, he shot a thick stream of flame onto Thomas' body. There was a sickening crackling, like logs burning in a campfire, as the flames engulfed his corpse. The swelling did pop and smaller versions of the creature that stung Thomas' eye came crawling out only to meet their death in the flames. A faint high-pitched squeal came from them as they died and soon there was only the sound of flames.

"Holy shit, that was close." one of the soldiers said.

Becky turned to look at them, counting six soldiers in all. They were all wearing some sort of body armor that she had not seen before. The armor was metal and completely covered their bodies. It looked bulky but at the same time appeared light enough not to impede the soldier's speed or agility. The helmets that they wore were metal and connected to the shoulders. The lenses covering their eyes gave off a faint green glow and their breathing sounded like it was going through a respirator. They were each carrying a large gun except for the soldier who held the flamethrower.

Three of them, including the one with the flamethrower, moved towards Thomas' body to dispose of it while the rest remained with her. One moved to her front and lifted his helmet. There was a hiss of air escaping as he did and she saw his face.

"Is there anyone else here besides the two of you?" he asked. He had a handsome yet hard stereotypical soldier face.

Sobbing, Becky shook her head no.

He raised a finger to his helmet and pressed a button, activating a radio.

"General, the situation was been neutralized. There were only two of them. One casualty." he said. Becky could not hear the reply but she could tell by the expression on his face that he was being told something. "Understood, sir." He switched the radio off. "Are you okay, Miss?"

Holding back her urge to cry, Becky nodded.

"Okay. My name is Corporal Bollea. We're going to escort you to a secure location and make sure you're alright before we get you out of here." He pulled the helmet back down over his face and started walking. Two soldiers, on either side of her, gave her a gentle push to encourage her to follow the man that she presumed was the leader.

They didn't walk very far before they stopped in front of one of the buildings that was still intact. A faded and partially burnt sign said "Jerome's Bakery". Corporal Bollea opened up what was once a glass door but was now boarded up and held the door open for Becky. She stepped through the doorway and stopped when she saw what was in front of her.

In the middle of the room was a giant pit and in the bottom were piles of bodies. Human, animal, and some that she couldn't identify. Horror dawned on her as she realized it was a mass grave. She heard a click behind her as Corporal Bollea held a pistol up to the back of her head and fired a single shot. Her body fell forward and landed on top of the heap of bodies with a heavy thud.

"That's a shame. She was a pretty girl," one of the soldiers said in a deep voice.

"The general wants us to make alterations to the perimeter so that we won't be having anymore visitors." Corporal Bollea said. "These fucking kids. Why do they think this town is a playground?"

"They don't believe the bullshit cover story they were given so they want to find out for themselves," another soldier said. His voice was high pitched but raspy. "Hell, I didn't believe that cover story for a minute when they told it to me."

"The general wants us from this moment on to neutralize any intruder the minute they step foot in

Hume. Is that understood? No more sightseers." Corporal Bollea ushered the two soldiers out of the way and stepped out of the building pulling the door closed. "I hate this fucking town."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Aside from writing in his spare time, Jon works as a Pre-Board Screening Checkpoint Coordinator at the Halifax Robert L Stanfield International Airport. When he is not working or writing, he can usually be found at home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada with his fiance and four cats. Jon can be found at @jonolsonauthor on Twitter or at www.facebook.com/authorjonolson on Facebook.

Open Submission – Mental Ward: Stories from the Asylum

Sanatorium, mental ward, psychiatric hospital – they're all the same. Places where the infirm, the crazy, and the certifiable go for treatment... Or what passes for 'treatment'.

We want stories of bedlam taking place within the padded walls of an institution. Give us stories of experiments gone wrong, patients revolting against the staff, or even the perspective of those charged with giving care. Make them sick, make them deprayed, make them atrocious — these should be the kinds of stories that rarely reach the light of day.

Are you brave enough to see what your mind could come up with... Or are you afraid you'll be locked up for trying?

www.SirensCallPublications.com

The Medusa Girl Alex Woolf

They found the body of the Medusa Girl in the basement of the building where I live. She was lying on the floor of the laundry room, near the door. She acquired her name, in part, because of the extreme hardness and heaviness of her body. The newspapers said it took six strong men to lift her onto the trolley. I can vouch for that, as I was one of them. As an employee at the mortuary where her body was taken, I can also confirm that other little detail – the one that certain newspapers seemed to take a peculiar interest in: the Medusa Girl is completely hairless.

I remember that first embarrassing postmortem. I was still breathless from the effort of helping to carry her from the freezer to the autopsy table, and as I gazed at her pale, slender, muscular body lying there, I recall thinking: how could such a little thing weigh so much? I felt for the pathologist, as he broke three scalpel blades trying to cut into her. And that was when we realised that the girl wasn't just hard, as in rigor mortis – she was hard as in stone. Her tabloid name was becoming ever more appropriate.

They tried other ways of getting inside her. But in the magnetic field of the MRI scanner, her protons refused to spin. Attempts at X-ray imaging, thermography and tomography were similarly ineffective, as were the high-frequency waves of ultrasound. By the time they attempted to cut into her with a diamond-tipped saw blade, I sensed an air of desperation in their work. The blade sparkled and burned in the heat of its own friction, but it failed to leave a mark on the gleaming smoothness of her skin.

I'd sort of guessed by then that if they wanted to understand what this girl was, they were probably looking in the wrong place. They should start by looking, not at her body, but at where it was found. I'd never liked visiting the laundry room in the basement of our building. There was something about it that I'd always found bothersome. I saw her once while I was in there, doing a wash load — this was before she became the Medusa Girl. She wasn't bald then, but her hair was very short, in a crew cut. She was dressed in loose- fitting, dun-coloured trousers and top, and she moved with a supple, athletic grace. There was another guy in there, too, and she asked him for a coin to use the machine. I felt embarrassed for him. He'd been staring at her, but now he shook his head and turned away. She came over and asked me. I ignored her. Instead I watched my laundry going round and round in the little window at the front of the machine. I was using the third machine on the left. The soap tray in that machine had never fitted right in its slot, no matter how many times I took it out and cleaned all the powder and gunk off it. That was one of the little things that bothered me about the laundry room, but it wasn't the main thing. The main thing was hard to explain. But the room did give me nightmares. The worst of these happened a few weeks before the incident with the girl asking for a coin. It began like this...

I'm in the basement corridor, naked, carrying all my clothes in a large black bin liner. The stone floor feels damp and cold under my feet. I walk along the corridor. I want to carry on past the laundry room door, but I know I won't. I go in. The room is dark when I enter. There's a faint gushing, gurgling sound of water and soap sloshing about. I can see the outline of the third machine on the left, with its soap tray sticking slightly out. The machine is vibrating as if on a gentle spin cycle. Its window is black — I can't see any washing in there. I look more closely and it seems to me that it's not on spin cycle, it's shaking. Or maybe it's being shaken by something I can't see. I need to wash my clothes, and I would like to use any of the other machines — but I know I'll end up using that one. That's just the way it goes with these nightmares.

One of my colleagues slipped a disc the other day while we were transporting the Medusa Girl to the examination room for more tests. Management said it was his fault for not following the standard health and safety procedures for lifting heavy objects. He said that there was nothing in the health and safety manual that dealt with lifting an object the weight of the Medusa Girl. Management reluctantly offered him paid sick leave until he's better, but they've insisted on bi-weekly doctor's reports on the state of his back in case he's even thinking of shirking.

The guy called me up last night – said he was really struggling with his back. It was taking him half an hour just to get out of bed. He asked me if I'd come over and give him a hand with things around the house.

I was surprised, and a bit embarrassed for him. "Don't you have a relative who could help?" I asked.

"No," he said bluntly. "My wife's back from her mum's in a couple of days. But I've got nothing in, and I'm going slightly crazy with hunger."

"It's a little inconvenient," I said, as I flicked through the TV channels with my remote.

"I'll pay you," he offered.

"How much?" I asked.

"Fifty," he said. "For an hour of your time. I just need you to get some shopping in, and maybe cook me a meal."

I agreed to the deal and drove over to his house, stopping off at a convenience store on the way. In my nightmare, I reach down and open the door of the third washing machine on the left. A rotting smell of old wet towels hits me. The machine falls still. The open door is like the mouth of a blind, deep-sea creature. I reach inside and I half expect to feel teeth, but instead my hand touches something slimy and wet that falls apart as I try to grasp it. I'm acutely aware that this is someone else's laundry, even though it feels nothing like it. I'm very frightened because the someone else is also in the laundry room, sitting on the long bench that runs down the centre of the room. He has his back to me, but I know he knows what I've just done. His head is vibrating with fury. I know he's going to do me some harm.

Somehow I just know this. There's a kind of pornographic inevitability about everything in this nightmare.

The door was unlocked when I got to my colleague's house, and I went straight into the kitchen. He struggled through from the living room as I was putting the ready meal in the oven. With his face buried under three days of beard growth and creased with pain, and with his body looking so scrawny in his vest, I barely recognised the guy. But he seemed embarrassingly pleased to see me. He even greeted me by name. He looked about ready to faint, so I helped him over to the table. He reeked of stale sweat.

After I'd served him his meal and watched him attack it like a ravenous dog, I asked him if he needed anything else. He said he didn't and told me where his wallet was. I went and fetched it for him. I showed him the receipt for the shopping, and he paid me for that, as well as the fifty.

As he was handing me the money, he said an odd thing. He said, "You know there was a time when you'd have done this as a favour to me as a friend." He used my name again as he said this.

What could I say? The whole thing was too embarrassing. I just nodded, pocketed the money and left.

Shock news from work: the Medusa Girl may be alive! They've detected an ultra-deep vibration coming from her chest area. They've no idea what it is, but it's certainly not the kind of noise a six-week-old corpse should be making.

In my nightmare, I'm standing in the laundry room. The other man is facing away from me. His head is vibrating with fury because I dared to open his machine and interrupt his wash cycle. I know I have to pay the penalty for this crime and it's going to be bad. He wants me to put my own laundry in the machine — to mingle my clothing with the foul-smelling black slime that is his. Somehow that will make things alright between us. Reluctantly, I open the bin liner and start to take out my laundry. As I do this, I realise that it isn't my clothing in there. It looks like my clothing, but I know as soon as I feel it that I'm handling something far more delicate and precious. It's actually me I'm handling. I don't mean my physical body, I mean something more like what religious people might call my soul. I start to put it inside the machine. It kills me to put it into all that black slime, but I do it.

There are some wild theories doing the rounds. The wildest of these is that the ultra-deep vibration inside the Medusa Girl is the beginnings of a heartbeat. This has started me wondering: If you're faced with the loss of your soul, what would you do? If you could slow yourself down — I mean right down — so that you're living in a different kind of time from the rest of us, wouldn't that be the best escape? And if you wanted to fool people, at least for a while, that you were dead, you'd have to shave — because hair should always move, and in your slowed-down state, yours would be as stiff as sticks of iron. You couldn't do anything about your hardness and heaviness, but what do you care? Encased in your cool, deep world, we'd be no more to you than an agitation in the air — a whisper of insect wings on a long and peaceful afternoon. We could do what we liked to you, speculate to our heart's content. The main thing is that you'd be safe — safe from the man in the laundry room.

I can't stop thinking about what my colleague said to me that evening as I took his money. The way he looked at me reminded me of the expression on the face of the Medusa Girl. I know her face very well by now. But maybe I should stop looking at her and start looking at myself. Because, unless I'm much mistaken, I think I've changed lately.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Alex Woolf is a published author of over sixty books, both fiction and non-fiction, mostly for young adults. His fiction writing credits include a science fiction trilogy, 'Chronosphere', published in 2011/12 by Scribo. His gothic Victorian detective novel 'Aldo Moon and the Case of the Ghost at Gravewood Hall' is publishing in 2013, and has been described by best-selling crime writer Peter James as 'a real delight, witty, ghostly and at times deliciously ghastly.' His interactive horror e-novel, 'Soul Shadows', was published in 2011 by Fiction Express. Readers were given options at the end of each chapter and were able to vote on how the story continued. 'Soul Shadows' is due to be print published by Curious Fox next year. Alex's short fiction has been published in e-zines and on websites, including Leafing Through, Strange Circle Magazine, Words Undone, Writers Billboard and Sirens Call Publications. Two of his stories were runners up in a Strange Circle writing competition in 2011. For further details about Alex and his writing, visit his website alexwoolf.co.uk, follow him on Twitter at @RealAlexWoolf or on Facebook.

Sirens Call Publications

PURVEYORS OF DARK & EDGY FICTION

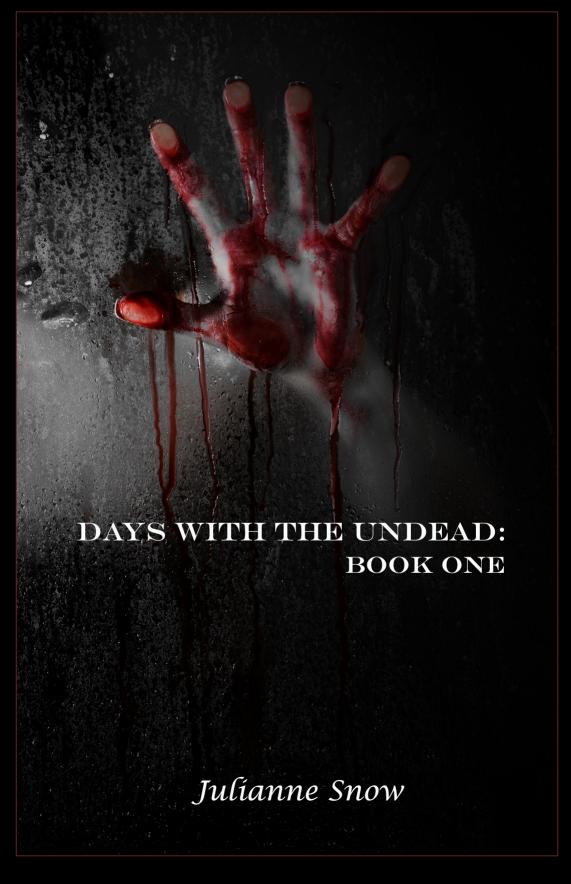












Now Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, and Smashwords

Betty Nina D'Arcangela

When I first saw the flyer posted on the campus bulletin board, I couldn't believe my eyes. The ad was for a full month's stay at a Lake Point Tower condominium - no rent, no fees, free meals; all the lucky candidate had to do was participate in a sleep study for a mattress manufacturer. It looked like the flyer had just been posted, so I snatched it up right away and called the number.

After speaking to a woman on the phone for less than fifteen minutes, answering various questions about my height, weight, body type, sleeping preferences, and a few more personal details that seemed oddly out of place; I was offered the open spot in the study – just like that! It seemed almost too easy, but as a collage under-grad who planned to bum around on her Grandmother's couch for the next two months, it was an unbelievable break.

I was instructed to be ready by 3:00 pm sharp on Monday, told to pack only the barest essentials as everything else would be provided for me, and a car would pick me up from Gran's address and whisk me away to where I would be spending the next month.

505 N Lake Shore Drive was pretty impressive from the outside. An amazing building with a façade of gleaming glass, and wicked curves. She was a real beauty, and not the usual high-rise box of units found this close to the lakefront.

Climbing out of the sleek black Town Car to stretch, I noticed a proficient looking blonde woman approaching the car with a smile on her face and a clip board in her hand. She was certainly not dressed in the same casual summer gear I had donned. Wearing an understated yet elegant Chanel suit, Jimmy Choo pumps, and sporting a chignon so perfect that not a hair was out of place, even in the Chicago wind, she cut quite an impressive swath through the crowd.

Reaching out to shake my hand, she welcomed me to 'the program' and asked me to follow her inside, instructing the driver to deposit my belonging in the lobby. When I tried to engage her in small talk while waiting for the elevator, she asked me to reserve all questions until we reached the facility, her smile seeming a bit more contrived than I had initially thought. When the lift arrived, we stepped in. She inserted a key card and pressed P. I silently glanced at her questioning: P can't possibly be for Penthouse, could it?

When the elevator doors opened, we stepped into the most impressive modern condo I've ever seen. We were indeed in the Penthouse suite – and it was magnificent! Floor to ceiling glass walls overlooking the lake ran the full length of the unit, modern minimalist furnishings in black, white, grey, and chrome with pops of red here and there; the living room alone was nearly the size of a small lecture hall. There were no real walls to speak of, mostly room dividers like the monstrously large flat screen TV, an open concept book shelf that was utterly mind blowing, a completely open kitchen and dining room that were so spotless they looked like they'd never been used before. As a matter of fact, the whole place was immaculate! The only areas to seemingly have walls were the bedrooms; I could count three from where I was standing, and the bathrooms, of which I would later learn there were five.

Turning to my escort, I tried explaining that there must be some kind of mistake; I was here for the sleep study test. Before I could go any further, she shook her head from side to side and interrupted my blathering.

"Let's start things, shall we." She said. "My name for all intents and purposes is Ms. Blonde," with this she pointed to her hair as an obvious clue, "and you will be called Betty."

I began to protest that my name wasn't Betty, but again she interrupted me.

"In the interest of providing the purest test results, it's important that each handler - that's me - and each participant - that's you - remain anonymous. I'm sure you understand the reasoning without my having to..." She was in the process of explaining as another young woman emerged from the master

bedroom, this time interrupting her.

"Hey, hi there." She said in a friendly voice, with a little wave of her. For some reason this seemed to annoy *Ms. Blonde*, as she was quick to interject before anymore pleasantries could be exchanged.

"This is Tina, she'll see to whatever needs you may have during the study; such as taking your meal orders, running small errands, and providing you with a minimal amount of companionship during the day. Before we go any further, I have paperwork for you to sign. If you wouldn't mind moving to the table, this won't take long." Ms. Blonde clicked her way across the marble tiles to the sunken living room/dining room combo and set about arranging her paperwork. Somewhat at a loss for what to do, I followed her.

After a brief explanation of what each document was for (participation, safety, security, indemnity, confidentiality, etc.), and my respective signing of each, she relaxed further into the plush chair and began to explain in more detail what was expected of me; which really wasn't much.

"All right Betty, first off, please don't disclose your actual name to Tina either, she will be the only individual other than myself that you'll be interacting with for your month's stay with us. You have free run of the condominium and all its amenities. There are books to be read, a home theater system with all the latest movie releases pre-loaded onto it, a vast selection of music, and down the hall just past the two guest rooms, you'll find an en suite spa, including a resistance lap pool – smaller than average, but the constant flow of water makes them extremely efficient. There is also a steam room, a fully equipped gym with state-of-the-art machinery, and each of the bathrooms – minus the small hall bath of course, has a jetted tub. We want you to be as relaxed and comfortable as possible while you're here."

Stunned into silence for a moment while she and Tina both sat there staring at me, I finally shook off my stupor and asked "You're kidding, right? All this for a sleep study?"

Placing her fingertips on my knee with the level of revulsion one might experience when being forced to touch a slug, Ms. Blonde sweetly intoned, "Of course honey, we realize that you'll be segregated from the rest of the world for a full thirty one days — you do remember agreeing to that in the contract you signed, don't you?" I nodded my assent. Removing her hand as quickly as possible and glancing at her watch, she continued, "Good, then you can understand why we'd go to such lengths to ensure your comfort. Now, it's just about time for dinner, Tina will show you the menu and I'll be back before bedtime at 10:00 pm." And with that, she rose from her chair and clicked her way back to the elevator, leaving the two of us alone.

Tina got up and fetched a beautifully bound leather book which turned out to be the menu, as I sat there disbelieving what had just transpired.

"Is she for real?" I asked Tina.

"Oh, yes. Ms. Blonde is excellent at her job and you'd be wise to follow her advice." The quizzical look I shot her obviously made Tina uncomfortable, and she went on to add, "What I mean to say is she'll make sure everything is taken care of for you, she's very nice – give her a chance, you'll see." I couldn't help feeling Tina was behaving twitchy and wanted to get off the subject, so I let it pass.

After selecting my dinner from the unbelievable extensive menu, Tina called my order in to... whomever, and went to the kitchen to grab us both something to drink from the fridge.

I got up and wandered around, commenting "Wow! Can you believe this place? It's incredible. Were you a participant too at one time?"

"It is amazing. The view is to die for, isn't it? But I'm sorry; I can't discuss personal details any more than you can." Tina replied in an apologetic tone with a small shrug.

"It's okay, I was just making chit-chat. So what do we do until —" A knock at the door interrupted me. It was dinner, already! These people don't mess around.

Seeing the shocked look on my face, Tina laughed and said, "Don't worry, you'll get used to it. Things are very efficient here. I hope you don't mind, but I ordered my dinner as well and thought we might..."

"Absolutely! Please, eat with me; it'll be a long 31 days if I have to eat alone every night. I more than welcome the company." I said playfully. "That is if Ms. Blonde doesn't mind."

Again, Tina looked nervous, but brought our plates to the dining room and we settled down to enjoy our meal.

One floor below, Ms. Blonde and her co-workers monitored the interaction between 'Tina' and the new BETTE. Dr. Theltch, who was on hand in case a medical emergency should arise, inquired as to how everything was progressing.

"Exactly as planned," Ms. Blonde replied, "She was thoroughly caught off guard by the décor and Tina's presence. She barely even glanced at what she was signing."

"Excellent." The doctor replied. "And how do they seem to be getting along?"

With a grin, Ms. Blonde answered smugly, "Like two peas in a pod. Complete and immediate trust. Eating their meal together was a superb suggestion, by the way."

"Well, I do have my moments now and again." As the doctor took his leave, Ms. Blonde and the rest of the crew began preparing for the evening to come.

At 9:30 pm, Ms. Blonde stepped out of the elevator once more. Tina and I were sitting in the living room watching a movie, and Tina immediately scrambled up to rush into the master bedroom. I hit pause as my eyes followed Tina's mad dash, wondering what the rush was all about. Ms. Blonde caught my attention again by asking how I'd enjoyed my dinner.

"It was delicious," I said. "Where did Tina hurry off to?"

"She has a few things to prepare for the beginning of the sleep study that's all, nothing to be concerned about."

Looking at the clock, I mentioned that it was only 9:30, I thought the study started at 10:00 pm. Ms. Blonde affirmed that the study did begin at 10:00 pm, but it would take approximately a half hour to set everything up – at least for the first evening.

"Okay. Do you need me to do anything?" I asked.

"Yes dear, go into the bedroom and Tina will instruct you what to wear. I'll be joining you in just a moment to get everything set up." Another unnerving and somewhat insincere smile adorned her face.

Once in the bedroom, I saw that Tina had gotten out a body suit of sorts for me to wear, the type little girls don for dance recitals – without the tutu of course. Shocked and a little embarrassed, I asked, "They want me to wear *that*?"

"Yeah..." She answered with a nervous giggle, "it doesn't get in the way of the electrodes."

"Electrodes?"

"What is all this chatter girls?" Ms. Blonde asked as she entered the room. "Betty, let's hurry. Into the bathroom to change and brush up. We can't miss our 10:00 pm deadline."

Wondering what I may have gotten myself into, I scooped up the body suit and did as I was told. When I emerged from the bath, I noticed that they'd wheeled a cart and an IV stand over to the side of the bed. Wait a minute; I didn't remember agreeing to being drugged or hooked up to a bunch of machinery! And I said so.

Ms. Blonde looked me square in the eye and said, "Yes you do remember. It was in the contract you signed just hours ago, the same one in which you agreed to stay indoors for the month. I specifically reminded you about that contract and you affirmed that you remembered signing it."

Feeling a bit uneasy, but realizing I had no option, I simply replied, "Yes, I remember you quizzing me about signing it, but I don't recall there being anything about being drugged in it. I think I'd like to have a look at it again if you don't mind."

After a brief pause, Ms. Blonde's face softened. "Betty, I can certainly let you see it again, but we'll miss the 10:00 pm deadline, and you'll be disqualified as a candidate for this round in the study. You don't want that, do you? Besides, the IV contains only a very small dose of a sleeping agent and saline solution to insure you sleep well and stay hydrated properly. The electrodes allow us to monitor your vital signs throughout the night so we can offer the manufacturer the most comprehensive results possible. It's up to you Betty, no one is going to make you do anything you don't want to." She stated with motherly affection in her voice.

I glanced at Tina, who after one quick look at Ms. Blonde's profile, nodded that I should trust her. With one small gesture, telling me that everything would be fine if I just went along with the program. Besides, others had already done this, what was the worst that could happen? I'd sleep well?

I took a deep breath and walked over to the bed to lie down. Once in place, Ms. Blonde assured me again that there was nothing to fear and went about the task of inserting the IV needle into my arm, then injected the 'small dose of sleeping agent' into the line which immediately knocked me for a loop. I tried to protest, tried to fight it and get up, but both Tina and Ms. Blonde were holding me down – all pretense of friendliness gone.

The last thing I remember while I lay there immobile is the sound of a buzzer, and the two of them placing electrodes in various places on my body – including my unusually cold head. A comment or two passed between them, but by this point I was no longer lucid enough to make much sense of what they were saying, other than to hear Tina say "I hope you're right about them not feeling any of this, after the last one..."

One floor below, Ms. Blonde, Dr. Theltch, Tina and the remainder of the staff watched as the process began and the first board was lowered from the ceiling.

Tina asked, "Do you really think we have the right genetic markers this time? This one is awfully small and frail."

"Absolutely." Ms. Blonde answered, not bothering to look up. "Besides, what better candidate than one who poses no threat at all?" As the monitors' glow reflected off her glasses, the first board made contact with BETTE's body. "Start the dose; I want twice what we used on the initial push last time."

The doctor's eyebrows arched as he glanced at Tina who was dispassionately watching the screens. Why should any of them care? The money was just as green, and far more plentiful here than it was in the public sector...

His thoughts were interrupted by the jerking movements on the panel of flat screens. The moment of truth, he thought to himself.

Ms. Blonde and Tina had a great deal riding on this BETTE - #26 in the program so far, and their results were less than satisfactory. But Ms. Blonde was dead certain that this one was *the one*.

More twitching on the screens, followed by small moans of pain. "Increase the dosage by 5cc's" ordered Ms. Blonde.

All eyes remained glued to the monitors as the thrashing became more violent and erratic. The board that was lowered onto the specimen began to buckle with her gyrations.

"Lower the second board, and push another 5cc's through." The second board began to descend as an additional 5cc's of genetic cocktail blended with BETTE's bloodstream, flushing her tissue with a new sequence. Just before the second board made contact, there was a harsh bellow, and the first board

began to crack down the middle. A huge grin spread across Ms. Blonde's face as her tongue tapped her upper lip in anticipation. She ordered the first metal plate lowered as well.

The second board split down the center, affording the watchers a glimpse of the malformed creature on the titanium reinforced bed. The metal plate from above making contact a mere second after the wooden ones gave way, effectively pinning the subject into place once again.

With a slap of her hands and a triumphant shriek, Ms. Blonde shouted, "Yes! I knew this would be the one." Her outburst startled everyone in the control room. "Okay, plate #2 with #3 moving right behind it, and I want another 10cc push."

Tina pulled her eyes away from the screens, "Wait, 10cc at once, isn't that how we destroyed the last one?" Looking angrily over at Ms. Blonde and not caring who heard it, she reprimanded the other woman, "Hey, I just asked you a question!"

"And I heard it," Ms. Blonde grinned as she turned to her, "But it's too late now. Look at the monitor." Tina's eyes turned back, as did everyone else's. "Let's bring down plate #4 just to be on the safe side, but I think we've got this bitch pretty well contained." Ms. Blonde stated. "Should we try for another 5cc's just to see if she can take it?" She asked Tina.

Tina nodded, then after a pregnant pause, she turned to the doctor and asked, "How'd she do doc? Did we push her too far?"

The doctor removed his glasses, rubbed his eyes, put his glasses back on and took one more look at the subject's digital stats. "I think you can safely stop calling her a 'she' and start officially calling it an 'it'. The stats are all strong, stronger than before the test began in fact, and the sequencing was successful. Congratulations ladies, it looks like your Biologically Engineered Tactical Terrorist Experiment is now a success."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Nina D'Arcangela was the type of girl who, when given a doll as a child, would immediately pop its head off to see what was inside, then spend countless hours contemplating how so many fantastic and fantastical things could be in her own head while the doll's was so very vacant.

Enamored by the imaginatively woven tales of Edgar Allen Poe, H.P. Lovecraft, Ray Bradbury, H.G. Wells, Edgar Rice Burrows and Arthur C. Clark, magical worlds took form from their inspiration keeping her awake night after night reading by flashlight under the covers, or nesting in a closet with the door shut. While willing to read just about anything that is well crafted, she has a soft spot for the darker side of writing in the Horror, Sci-Fi and Other World genres.

Nina can be reached through Sirens Call Publications at Nina@SirensCallPublications.com; ordarc.nina@gmail.com. Please visit her on her blog "Sotet Angyal: The Dark Angel" atsotetangyal.wordpress.com; or "Spreading the Writer's Word" at ninadarc.wordpress.com; and feel free to stalk her on Twitter as @Sotet_Angyal.





Cold Sleep Morgan Bauman

Whether the sharp, dry wind howled or the jagged, brilliant lightning split the barren sky, the sun always burned above. Since the terraformers had begun to break down, most of Potosi's inhabitants had fled; Erin was one of the few left. Her parents had both been "boom-towners"—planethopping from gold rush to gold rush, cryogenically freezing themselves for each successive journey. Erin remembered cold sleep: the icy, suffocating pressure of being put under; the plummeting sensation that followed the slow march of death across your body. Nothing she wanted to repeat.

In the distance, she heard the rush of air that cushioned spaceship landings. Their regular rocket was due; it'd been scheduled for months. She hated the shrieking children and stinking sweat and grabbing hands as people fought for supplies—she always spent supply days out on the mesa. Erin stared up at the sky; green lightning cradled the sun, and dust devils were kicking up sand on the horizon. A sure sign that it was time for bed; no one wanted to be outside once the wind ramped up.

With the sun burning against her back, she traced the edge of the mesa. It was a sheer drop for about a mile, at which point it began to form rough foothills. Erin's parents had once ordered her to scale down the cliff-side to see whether there were any copper veins below—Erin keenly remembered dangling in midair, the filthy, dusty wind that had tried to batter her against the rocks; the nauseating, unending sway of the cable that had tried to shake her loose; and always, always, the watchful eye of the sun.

Sweat rolled down Erin's back as she left the cliff behind her. Sedona had once been a sprawling mining colony; she passed several boarded up cantinas—saloons, newcomers had always called them—on the outskirts of town. Only one grocer was left; the rest stood empty, the boards torn down by hungry colonists. It was in one such building that Erin had made her home after her parent's lease on their apartment had run out. It wasn't dark, though the power had been cut off years ago—the sun peeked through the cracks in the boards. Potosi was a slow-turning planet; night wouldn't fall for another few centuries, at which point no one would be able to survive there.

Erin ambled up the steep, rickety ladder to the attic she called home. She scraped off as much grit as she could, then rubbed oil onto her dry elbows and knees, dabbing a little of it on her braids. Wind howled in the distance, and Erin tied a scarf to her head as thunder rolled on by. The attic was dim; it had never had windows, but the caulk between the boards had fallen out in places, letting in the sun. They rattled as the wind hit; dark, ruddy sand whistled through the gaps as Erin wrapped herself up in a sheet to keep off the worst of it.

As she drifted off, she could have sworn she heard screaming—but she'd learned years ago that the wind could sound like anything. It could sound like rattling and pounding at her door, the wailing of a baby, or even a familiar voice calling her name.

When she woke up next, it was to the sound of a rocket blasting off. In its wake, Erin could only make out the faint hissing of wind as it twisted between the buildings. No one was hawking scrap to be reused at home; no one was calling for their children to come in and eat; no one was singing drunkenly in the only cantina that remained open.

Sixty or so inhabitants had been left when Erin had gone to bed, but the streets were deserted. She remembered the morning she'd woken to find her parents still and unbreathing, the silence that had overtaken their apartment, crowding her out of the house, hounding her into the streets. Now it pursued her through the town, chasing her down alleyways, tugging at her as she ran to the ship launch station, where a screen always ran the daily news.

The screen was jittery; bars of distorted color raked across it, jumping as the wind shifted. There was no ticker tape of grocery prices, no running account of mineral values. One sentence glittered on its

dusty screen, inked in liquid crystal.

The last shuttle takes off at 0700 hours.

The wind rolled across the village, and thunder rattled the empty buildings.

Erin broke into the news station, whose computer warned her that Potosi was being evacuated due to the failing terraformer; when that finally went out, odds were good that Potosi would be rendered uninhabitable.

The computer estimated three weeks before the terraformer gave out.

Erin sent out video, audio, and digital signal beacons in all directions, but she knew that, even at light speed, the messages would take forty years to be intercepted by the nearest habitable planet. No one was coming to save her. No one would even know that she needed saving until she was a sand-filled skeleton in a ghost town.

As she passed an abandoned oddments store—where a kind, round-faced woman had sold scrap to pay for food—she felt vertigo overtake her. Once again, she was dangling off the cliff-face, supported only by a thin cable meant for zero-gravity towing. Erin dug through a bin, unraveling knotted, kinked spools of cable. Sturdy enough to support a person. Well, if it didn't snap.

On the mesa, she was trapped. Food and water were extremely limited; the chances of survival were low. Off the mesa, though, the unknown waited. Better to chance death trying to escape than let inaction kill her.

Erin stood at the precipice, one foot securely on the mesa, the other hovering, hesitant, in midair. The cable biting into her waist was cushioned with discarded clothing; the coil of slack was firmly in one hand. She glanced backward, teetering over the colossal drop, then—suddenly sick to her stomach—sank to all fours, head between her knees to stop the spinning.

Finally, she crawled over to the communications tower she'd used to anchor her cables, testing them for the eighth time. They felt secure; she'd pieced together enough coil that she felt sure it'd reach the base of the mesa. There were some knots and kinks in the line, but she wouldn't be rappelling. Taking in a deep, deep breath, Erin returned to the edge of the mesa. This time, she knew not to look down; she only felt for the first step. Then the next. Then the next. She hoped that lightning wouldn't hit the tower; the cable was metal. Another step, another.

She slipped, cutting her knuckle as she caught herself. For several long moments, she breathed, her forehead pressed against the warm stone. Blood made her hand slick—but, finally, she reached down for another step.

By the time lightning blasted and thundered in the distance, her arms were so weak and wobbly that she could barely support herself; her head burned with the pain of dehydration, her tongue thick with bitter, rusty dirt. Down and down and down.

Lightning rang out above her, so close that she saw it through shut eyes, hotter than the surface of the sun. The rumble came almost immediately after, nearly dislodging her grip on the mesa. Her ears rang, tinny and distorted—her stomach sank—suddenly she was aware that there was too much slack—there was an ominous creaking between rolls of thunder. Erin blinked up at the communications tower far, far above her as it groaned, bending away from the lightning blast, the bars splitting open in a metallic scream. Cable began to droop, curling, onto her arms. Frantically, Erin reached for the next step, but the communications tower toppled with a cacophonous peal the rang like a death knell.

Her hands came free of the cliff-side.

Once again she was eight and dangling midair, loathing the sensation of falling, knowing that no one

would save her if she screamed for help.

Erin spat out sand, coughing, listening to the receding wind. All sense of time was lost; she'd have to wait for the next wind storm to know the hour. She pulled herself out of the dune, freeing her legs.

She tested her limbs. No breaks—just bruises. Sitting up, she eyed the cliff—her cable had split, the loose end dangling about thirty feet above the slope she'd skidded down. Some abrasions stung at her elbows and shoulders, but she'd hit sand, not stone—it was the only reason she'd survived. Craning her neck backwards, she saw the communications tower teetering over the edge of the mesa. The sand scorching her fingers was soft, finer than the sand that rattled at her doors at night. She sank into it. Maybe she hadn't been out for long; the lightning was still striking the sand in the distance, the tower still creaking and groaning on the mesa. Erin scanned the mesa, looking for shelter from the relentless lightning—then she spotted it: a dark shadow, an indent in the side of the wall.

Running across the sand was nearly impossible; she had to fight to keep her balance, and the sand was so hot that her feet blistered and burned through her shoes. A brittle, wrenching screech rang out above the thunder, and Erin redoubled her efforts; the communications tower plummeted, rocking the ground as it struck the sand, making the dust ripple like boiling water around her feet. Suddenly, darkness—she was in the cave. She panted, sinking against a smooth, stone wall—cool against her skin, not touched by the sun for thousands of years. Wind whistled along the mouth of the cave, but it didn't snake inside.

Standing, she found that the cave was smooth and even, twice her height and just wide enough to let her spread her arms. Erin's eyes narrowed as she examined the cave walls; they were flawless. Unsettled, she peered down the long corridor. Pitch darkness hung in the distance; a darkness like she hadn't seen since coming to Potosi. She felt sucked in. The percussive beat of thunder rolled behind her, breaking like waves against the side of the mesa. It drove her forward, into the alien darkness, the absolute unknown.

One hand tracing the slick wall, she went into the belly of the mountain.

Always, always, there had been the sun. Lightning and thunder, the sun and wind—brightness and noise—had been her only constants. In the still darkness of the cave, she knew fear. Too much silence hung in the cold, brittle air around her; it suffocated her, choked all language from her tongue. Even the ever-present wind was missing; the silence and darkness were absolute.

Erin imagined water pouring down the walls of the cave—the tunnel—running like rain over palms, drowning her. Erin's hand met a sharp curve, air; something about the shape of her breathing told her the tunnel had opened into something else. Slowly, she realized that her eyes were closed; opening them, she found a dimly lit room carved entirely out of red stone. Light panels—no, screens—were set into recessed cavities along the walls. It was curved like an amphitheater, with a hallway cut out on the far side of the room. She walked up to a nearby screen, touching it. A face looked out of it—her own face, reflected.

The doppelganger's mouth opened, and words came out, filling the screen with characters that Erin couldn't begin to recognize. The other screens flicked on from standby mode, and a generator powered on behind a stony wall, rumbling.

Finally, a language she recognized caught her eye—unthinkingly, she reached toward it, and a voice began to read it aloud, eliminating the unknown languages, overriding them.

The story it told was simple: a lost ship, a stranded crew. Terraformers too weak to shape the outer landscape, but powerful enough to control the inside of the mesa. Night was coming to Potosi—the crew

endured a long, cold twilight, then put themselves and their children into a cryogenic slumber.

A chill pressed against Erin's neck, and she turned, shaking. A figure stood on the far side of the room, holding out a thin, pale hand—the mouth seemed unable to speak. Human, yet warped by the long, icy wait. Filmy eyes; hair gone; limp, hanging flesh.

For a moment, neither moved. The figure was dressed in a white medical robe, its face drawn, its sides pinched and misshapen. Screens around the room lit up with videos from the surface. Atmospheric lightning shattered the sky; fierce dust storms raged. The figure's face contorted into something hideous to behold—a grim parody of agony—it shut off the screen and turned away, hunched, covering its face.

The display spoke again. It thanked her for activating the wake up protocols; it thanked her for returning life to the planet. There was a stench of rotting and decay in the air. The figure made a keening, grieved sound—inhuman and yet so full of pain that Erin stumbled backward.

As the putrid smell intensified, the displays split into multiple views—the mining tunnels that bored through half of the cryogenics machinery, the cases shattered by cave-ins with mummified flesh spilling from the cracks, the cases opening to reveal the rotted remains of what had once been humans. Erin ran for the exit, trying to escape the stench, but an icy hand clamped around her throat.

She remembered going into cold sleep for the first time—her limbs icing over, her heart slowing despite her terror, the conviction that she would never fall asleep—that, if she slept, she would never wake. The suffocating sensation of breathing liquid oxygen. As the creature's long, pale fingers knotted around her throat, Erin struck back, driving her elbow into its mushy gut. It cried out in a language she didn't know, its voice warped with eons of disuse, but its grip was unwavering. Erin clawed and bit at its hands, prying its fingers loose. She turned and hurled the creature away from her, knocking it against the displays. They shattered on impact, and splinters of glass lodged into its cheek, its ear, its neck. Blood ran down its face—in death, it finally looked human. Behind the corpse, the broken screen sparked, and the lights around her flickered out, plunging her into pitch blackness that stank of death.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - Morgan Bauman has been a fan of science fiction for as long as she can remember, and is an avid reader and writer. Since the success of the KickStarter launch her first novel, she has poured herself wholeheartedly into writing and editing. Connect with Morgan via her blog, http://qolpress.blogspot.com or directly at mbauman@golpress.com.



Sirens Call Publications Purveyors of Dark & Edgy Fiction

www.SirensCallPublications.com

@Sotet Angyal @KallaMonahan @GlorBobrowicz @Sirens Call

www.facebook.com/SCPSirens

sirenscallpublications.wordpress.com



Introducing...

Pink Pepper Press

... a home for Romance and Erotica

Now Accepting Submissions for Novels, Novellas and the Anthology —

He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not

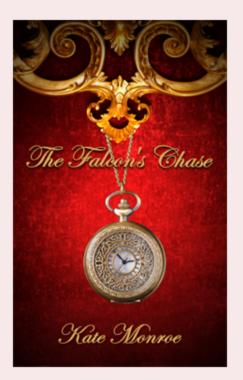
The age old question: Does he really love me, how will I know?

We'd like a collection of stories that come down on both sides of the fence - some yes's, some no's. How does a modern girl know when she's being taken for a ride, or may be just having the ride of her life? Either way, remember to keep it nice and steamy without being crass or relying on excessively overt descriptions to carry the piece. We like a little meat in our Romance/Erotica!

What we will not accept are stories of violent rape, incest, or pieces involving characters below the age of consent (18 years old).

~ Please see our website www.PinkPepperPress.com for additional guidelines and closing date ~

Coming Soon from Pink Pepper Press...



The Falcon's Chase

Captain Reuben Costello is just hours away from facing his execution when the unlikeliest of rescuers storms into his cell. Lady Arianne Dalton needs the assistance of the infamous Black Swan to flee England and all its constraints. He finds himself more than willing to help the fiercely independent Ari in exchange for his freedom.

However, when they come to find their fates inextricably tangled in a plot that threatens the very foundations of British society, they are swept away on a chase that puts not only their lives, but their hearts at risk- and neither of them can defy the wild and stormy ride they find upon the Falcon.

Keep reading for an exciting excerpt from Kate Monroe's

The Falcon's Chase...

The Falcon's Chase Kate Monroe

Chapter One

London, 1861

Reuben Costello knew that he had tried a hundred times to wrench the unyielding iron bars of his prison cell apart, but he could not resist the urge to try just once more. However hard he tugged, though, they withstood even the inhuman amount of force that his prosthetic arm applied to them, just as they had so many times before.

He delivered a furious kick to the bars that had him inescapably trapped as his dark eyes settled upon the copper plated arm that he wore like a badge of honour. Meticulously bonded to the living flesh it clung to, it was just as responsive and more effective than the arm of muscles and bones that had existed in its place for the first eleven years of his life; but though he had worn it for twenty years now and it had served him well for all of those, the sight of it still filled him with a bitter and resentful disgust.

Even that painful emotion, though, could not distract him for more than a few moments. Far more pressing was the grim awareness that with every second that passed, sunrise drew nearer, and with it would come his execution. Reuben had lived a far from blameless life, always dancing along the thin, blurred line that separated the pursuits of an ordinary merchant and the more interesting activities that he liked to indulge in.

Betrayed to Her Majesty's Royal Navy after a dalliance with the pirates that roamed the Red Sea proved too irresistible for his mercenary side to ignore, Reuben had been captured and dragged to the infamous Tower of London. It had taken no less than a dozen captains to bring him in. Had he been aboard his ship when they attacked, he had no doubt that they would not have succeeded.

Reuben had not been aboard the Falcon, though. Instead, he had been spending the night with his latest mistress - and when she had brazenly lounged back on the bed with a cigarillo between her perfect red lips and laughed loudly as they dragged him away, he had silently cursed his propensity for choosing his bedmates based on looks alone.

That, it seemed, was not a mistake he would have the chance to ever make again. Though his crime was nowhere as severe as it should be to warrant execution, that was the sentence that had inexplicably been passed. Time was rapidly slipping away from him and much to his disgust, it was becoming clear that there would be no escape from the harsh fate that awaited him.

He sank down to the cold, grimy cobbles that lined his dungeon cell and affixed a menacing scowl to his face for the sole benefit of any gaolers that should happen to parade past his cell with their looks of disdain and taunts about the noose that was so soon to be claiming his neck in the hangman's embrace. Soon, light footsteps heralded the approach of just such a person.

Reuben snatched upon the only amusement that would be his on this last lonely night of life. He wrapped his fingers around the hateful bars of his cell and knelt down, drawing back his thin lips to expose the gleaming teeth beneath as he deliberately allowed a low, ominous growl to rise up from the pit of his stomach and echo around the confines of the dungeon.

He squinted into the dimly-lit gloom as the footsteps quickened and caught sight of a distinct shape emerging from the putrid darkness. Far shorter than any of the guards he had become accustomed to - he would estimate that the top of their head would not even reach his shoulder - and dressed all in black, the person reached into their pocket and extracted what was undoubtedly, from the jangling sound of metal against metal, a bunch of heavy brass keys.

Reuben's eyes narrowed as they quickly swept across the newcomer appraisingly. Their head was bowed low, concealed from his gaze by the shadow of the black cap atop it, and a full-length greatcoat

enveloped their body and skimmed across their ankles to reveal tight-fitting breeches and laced leather boots.

Everything about the clothing that they wore screamed of masculinity, but an incredulous suspicion was rising inside him that it was no man that stood before him. The slender fingers that were now fumbling with the keys were pale and unblemished, as far removed from the rough and calloused hands of the gaolers as it was possible to be. As they unlocked the door and hastily slammed it shut behind them, the shape of a second person stepped out of the shadows in the corridor.

"I shall stay at the end of the corridor to stand guard, then - just shout if you need me, ma'am." They were dismissed with a jerk of the head and an irritable wave of the delicate hand that had unlocked the door.

Even if those intriguing words had not made it plain that it was a woman now locked in the cell with him, any remaining doubt he might have had was extinguished when he inhaled sharply and a delicate scent that had wafted in with the newcomer danced around his senses, teasing and tantalising him with its faint notes of jasmine and gardenia. It was a scent that was intrinsically and undeniably feminine in origin.

Reuben swallowed hard, for a woman's appearance in his cell could mean only one thing. He let loose a soft groan. He had been alone in his cell for over a month now and the company of a woman was perhaps the only thing that might make him able to forget his imminent execution. With a deep, primal hunger raging inside him, he stared at her intently as she slowly pulled away her cap to reveal the face of the woman that had come to offer him the scant comfort she could provide.

"Ah! You are to be this condemned man's last meal, I presume?" Reuben's low voice was hoarse, for the instant that she had removed her cap and revealed herself to him, he had been consumed by such a forceful throb of aching desire that he knew he had to have her, prostitute or not. Not even pausing to think upon the surprising and uncharacteristic generosity that his gaolers had shown in sending such a rare beauty to him on the eve of his execution, he roughly backed her up against the stone walls of the cell.

Her soulful eyes widened and her lips parted, but before she could speak Reuben devoted himself to the far from unpalatable task at hand. If this was to be the last woman he would take before his execution then, he thought wryly, it was fitting that she was by far the loveliest he had ever had in his arms, despite her manly attire - attire that he intended to waste no time in stripping away from her shapely form.

He shook his tangled, jet black braids back out of his face, lowered his head and laid forceful, triumphant claim to her wonderfully soft and pliant lips, already dizzy with the strength of his desperate yearning for her. Reuben slipped one hand behind her head to caress the delicate nape of her neck and hold her in place as his fingers wound through the silken curls of hair escaping the tight bun attempting to restrain them, his arousal rapidly spiralling out of control as he pushed himself up against her to mould himself against every feminine contour of her body.

He forced his prosthetic arm between their bodies to reach for the intricate buttons of her greatcoat and tugged them apart with such force that they ripped free of the fabric, but even that was not enough to persuade him to break the kiss. Never before had a mere kiss managed to arouse him with such ferocity. Perhaps it was the adrenalin pounding through his body in anticipation of his death intensifying all that he felt, but Reuben had never craved any woman as much as he did this one.

As his fingers insistently moved between their bodies to seek out the fastenings of her shirt, though, brushing against the agonisingly tempting curve of her high, full breasts as they did so, she twisted her head to the side with a loud and rasping cry. "What in God's name do you think that you are doing, sir?!"

Reuben arched one dark eyebrow incredulously as he fought for breath and ruthlessly kept her pinned up against the wall. "I thought that was more than obvious! I was beginning to avail myself of all the pleasures that your sweet mouth had to offer to me. Is that not why you came here?"

"No!" Rage burned in her wide, darkened eyes as she struggled desperately to free herself of his hold. "Good God, I am no...no..." She trailed off, blushing hotly as a small smile began to quirk back the corner of his lips.

"Prostitute?" Reuben offered mildly, his anger at being interrupted fading away in the face of her evident reaction to his proximity - a reaction that it seemed she was not simply falsifying for the sake of her wages.

"Indeed I am not!"

Her curt denial seemed genuine, much to his bemusement. As he allowed his fingers to work their way underneath the shirt she wore to caress the bare skin he found beneath, he tilted his head to the side. "But I don't understand - how did you get in here if you are not a prostitute, little lady?"

Her flush deepened but her lips twitched with what could only be irritation as she plunged one hand into her pocket and extracted a furled piece of parchment. She unravelled it and thrust it at him contemptuously. "Admiral Dalton's seal tends to open any door that happens to be in one's way."

"Admiral Dalton signed an order for my release?"

"No, but I am very adept at forging my father's signature; I am Lady Arianne Dalton. My friends call me Ari, but you may call me milady - and you can let me go now!"

Reuben laughed loudly, the hoarse sound foreign to his ears after his month of incarceration. "Ari will suffice perfectly, thank you." Reluctantly releasing his possessive hold on her as she hastily hushed him, her eyes darting about nervously, he took a step back to protect them both from his compulsion to force her to resume the way that she had been responding to his passionate assault on her lips. "So, little lady, what is the Admiral's daughter doing locked in a cell with a condemned prisoner?"

ABOUT THE ABOUT - Kate Monroe is a redheaded author and editor who lives in a quiet and inspirational corner of southern England. She has penchants for classic sci-fi, horror and loud guitars, and a fatal weakness for red wine. Her interests in writing range from horror to erotica, taking in historical romance, steampunk and tales of the paranormal on the way; whatever she dreamed about the night before is liable to find its way onto the page in some form or another...

Kate has had short stories published in numerous anthologies including works by Sirens Call Publications, Cruentus Libri Press, Rainstorm Press and Angelic Knight Press. The Falcon's Chase is her debut full-length novel.



Credits

Contributing Authors
Morgan Bauman
Laura Brown
Alex Chase
Nina D'Arcangela
Allen Dusk
L.A. Forman
A.A. Garrison
Christopher Hivner
Kalla Monahan
Jon Olson
Julianne Snow
Alex Woolf

Photography by Eleanor Bennett

<u>Novel Excerpt</u>
The Falcon's Chase - Kate Monroe

Ads created by SCP Designs

Copyright © 2012 Sirens Call Publications

All stories and images are the intellectual and artistic property of their respective authors/photographers/artists. Sirens Call Publications has been granted permission by the abovementioned individuals to reproduce their works in Issue #04 of *The Sirens Call* eZine.