

Mind and Heart

by James Lynn Smith

Susan perched on the side of his desk and stared down at him with disbelief. “You’re going to show me how to be happier by removing the *numbness* in my mind?”

“Yes,” Paul said.

“That’s insulting. Why do you think it’s numb, and what makes you the expert?”

“Whoa, no need to shoot daggers from those pretty, blue eyes. I didn’t mean it as insult. My point is that most people have a kind of mental attenuator that dampens joy. We need that for self control, to live sensibly. But most don’t know how to remove it when no longer needed.”

Relieved, she was now curious. “How do you mean, exactly?”

“Imagine you work all day, handling problems. You inhibit your emotions to keep stress under control. Then you drive home amid rush hour traffic, and the radio news is about awful things that have happened in the Middle East or maybe your city. When you get to your favorite chair at home, the inhibition’s still there. It takes a while to feel mellow, but by that time, some other duty needs attention.”

“And you have an answer for that? What, bell chimes, chants and all that woo-woo stuff?”

“You *could* be more tolerant of new-age practices,” he said, smiling. “But I’m talking about something else.”

“Okay, I give. What, a pill? Nothing new in that. The whole druggie population takes that path.”

“Nope, not a drug. Nor yoga, nor aerobics. Those can be good but I have something else.”

She shook her head and twisted a henna colored lock of hair about her finger. “Are you going to get to the point?”

“It’s a computerized machine. On the surface looking like a vertical tanning booth or refrigerator with a transparent front door. But there resemblance ends.”

“Right, so what is this machine?”

“The latest evolution combining neuro-linguistic programming and brain stimulation. We call it a linguistics-assisted transcranial electromagnetic stimulator. I know, that’s a mouthful. ‘Latems’ will likely be the trademark; so that’s what we call it. Over time, the Latems can help you to quickly push through emotional inhibitions. To return to the everyday life, it gives you a little emotional reward as incentive. You don’t get trapped in any state, good or bad.”

“Sounds like a mad scientist’s invention. Where’d you get this Latems?”

“Actually this is Professor Crane’s project. I’ve been learning how it works and helping him in set it up. His private research sponsors want the Latems kept under lock and key, but Crane is away for a family emergency, so I am...*caretaker*, sort of.”

“Can I see it?”

“I was hoping you’d ask. Being a graduate student, you’re eligible for enrollment in a clinical trial.”

Susan followed Paul through the hall doorway. She enjoyed the friendly banter, and, after she received her master’s degree in psychology at the end of Spring, their relationship would grow. Currently, they were keeping appearances strictly as instructor and student. For now, she was happy their secret involvement went beyond his apparent appreciation of her wavy, reddish brown hair and curvaceous figure. The slight graying of his black hair at the temples, firm square

jaw and sense of humor attracted her, but other things mattered more. He told her it didn't bother him that she had a five-year old daughter from a previous, brief marriage before enrolling in graduate school.

They walked through the Department of Psychiatry and Psychology hallway to a door labeled "Lab 4". Paul fumbled with the combination lock until it clicked and they entered. In the middle of the lab sat an object a little taller than a refrigerator with a transparent door and wires connecting it to a control panel on a nearby desk.

"*Voila*, behold the future of mental health," Paul said.

"Is there some way you can demonstrate the Latems?"

"We've had a number of pre-trial students and friends use it, but none are here now."

"Others have used it, why not me? It's safe, right?"

"Ninety-nine percent sure *but* theoretically, there could be something unexpected."

"But nothing. Let's get underway." She saw Paul's expression turn serious.

"Crane hasn't authorized me to use the Latems with you. It could be risky if someone walks in on us."

"All adventures have risk," she said, shrugging.

"I'll lock the door and hope, because it's Saturday, no one has a reason to come here." After securing the lock, Paul came back to the machine. "The first step is the system's self-calibration to your neural profile and speech. You'll be behind the Plexiglas door and the coil over your head will lower until it's around your temples. While it scans, the Latems' computerized, simulated voice asks questions. Answer as best you can." He opened the door, helped her enter and stand correctly with hands on electrodes beside each hip, and positioned her head so the coil could lower over it.

*

Twenty minutes later, Paul left the control panel desk and opened the Plexiglas door.

“That’s all there is to it?” Susan asked. “I don’t have the slight headache I had when I entered, but most of the time I was answering personal questions followed by popping and buzzing sounds. Did you hear the question and answers?”

“No, that part is private between you and the Latems. This was a calibration run with only the briefest stimulation near the end of your session. Even that might result in some small, unanticipated effect. Next time will be stimulation only, which lasts about five minutes. But let’s wait until tomorrow. I’d feel better with a step-by-step progression.”

*

Susan left the university and drove toward her apartment. First she needed to get milk at the supermarket. After pulling into a parking spot and entering the market, vertigo assailed her for a moment, then subsided.

Upon selecting a one-percent fat, half-gallon of milk, she turned and briefly looked in the face of another shopper. An unexpected Déjà vu came over her. The lady was too far for detailed observation, yet appeared familiar. The woman turned the corner and disappeared before she could get closer. A sudden nostalgia washed over Susan, and she felt as though her long deceased mother were nearby.

*

Driving home, thoughts of her mother streamed through her mind. Strange that someone seen at a distance would appear so like her. Susan even sensed the fragrance of her mother’s hair, like magnolias. She heard the soft, consoling voice when she had cut her knee in a fall, “Mommy will make it better, honey. You’ll see.” While tears blurred her vision, she felt the warm kiss on her cheek when tucked in for the night.

Then, as a teenager, she was in a hospital room, caressing her mother's forehead after a serious stroke. Her mother was struggling to say something important, but it was unable. Susan's older brother was in the room; however, their father had disappeared from her life years ago.

Later her brother left for sleep before work the next day, and she was alone with her mother. Also alone with her hours later when she took her last, labored breath. Panicking, Susan started to alert the nurses when a transient, reassuring sensation passed through her that could only be a mother's love, and she knew it was over.

During the funeral and temporary custodial arrangements for her, she held herself together by focusing on hate for her father. Told he was called into military service and later missing in action, presumed dead, her reaction was a sense of desertion. *Surely, he didn't have to reenlist.* His absence was financially and emotionally devastating.

Later, while living with her Aunt Pell, her uncle helped her come to terms with hate and pursue education beyond high school.

It was her fault that she married too soon—to the wrong person. When she became pregnant with Cindy, her young husband was not happy. Working part time she finished college and initiated a divorce herself, later enrolling in graduate school for a master's in psychology.

*

Susan broke off the reminiscences and pulled into her driveway. She then dismissed June, her sitter, and called her aunt, arranging for her to keep Cindy on Sunday morning. After preparing the evening meal and putting dishes in the washer, she helped Cindy get into her pajamas and select a bedtime story to read together.

Following the story, Susan said, "Is my precious ready for sleep now?"

Cindy looked into her eyes with her even bluer ones. “Mommy, will you be with me when I start school?”

“Of course I will.” She stroked her daughter’s blonde hair and touched her soft, rounded cheek. “Your teachers will be nice, and you’ll have other kids your age to make friends with.” Then she lightly kissed her on the forehead. “Sweet dreams, baby.”

*

Arriving at Lab 4 Sunday morning, Susan waited patiently until she saw Paul approaching. “Here comes the Wizard of Oz. I’ll bet you overslept.”

“Sorry, I lost track of time.” He unlocked the door, turned on lights, went to the control panel on the little desk and flipped on the Latems power. “Come on over.” His fingers flew over the control keyboard and soon it was ready. “How do you feel today?”

“No headache like yesterday, but a little down. Last night I couldn’t get to sleep until late and then dreamed of my early home life, like I had to make something right but didn’t know what it was.”

“You may find today’s stimulation will help that. Over time, it should even do more.”

He opened the transparent door for her. “The Latems will talk to you occasionally, but it’s mostly stimulation.”

Entering the machine, she assumed the previous day’s position and pulled the door to. “Here goes...something.” She heard Paul slide his chair to the desk, and soon a purring sound issued from the machine as the coil was lowered over her head.

“Loading calibrations,” the computer generated voice said. A faint, knocking sound followed. “Commencing level one stimulation.”

Susan was briefly dizzy, but a general sense of well-being followed. “Oh

this is good. Bring it on, robot man.” She smiled, wondering if Paul could hear her.

“Reconfiguring coils,” the voice said.

She could tell the coil was raised and more complex geometry was lowered back. *This didn't happen yesterday. Another stage?* There was no time for apprehension.

A sudden swirl of sensations rushed through her head. She felt she was spinning in a mélange of emotions and past events, united only by a burning desire for connection. *Mixing mind and heart...* She could not focus on any one thought and completely lost concept of time.

*

Paul wiped her damp cheeks with his handkerchief as she lay back in a lounge chair. “Are you okay?”

“What?”

“You were crying. I stopped the Latems after four minutes and brought you here. How do you feel?”

“Oh God, I was crying with joy. I’ve never experienced anything like—” She paused, looked at him and smiled. “I’m okay.”

Paul knitted his brow. “You had a greater response than others we tested. But we’re all different individuals, and we have a lot to learn about that. Sure you’re all right?”

“I’m good, Paul.”

After more discussion on the experience and a short trip to a nearby cafe for coffee, Susan announced her need to pick up Cindy and take her home. “Walk me to my car?”

“Sure thing.” Paul said. “Tell Cindy ‘hi’ for me.”

*

Driving away, Susan felt optimistic but sensed she had been imbued with

something else. A sense of anticipation accompanied her while retrieving Cindy, taking her home and settling her in her room with a coloring book.

Susan went to the kitchen. *Back to duty.* Opening the dishwasher, she began putting washed utensils and dishes away. With the last dish, that brief rush of déjà vu came again, followed by a tugging sensation on her heart.

“I must tell you now what I could not then,” a soft voice said from the doorway behind her.

Susan spun around. The dish dropped from her hands and shattered on the floor. “Mother,” she cried.

Opening her arms, Susan stumbled forward over the broken plate.

“Don’t try to touch me.”

Susan’s eyes glistened and her throat ached. “Mom, I want to hold you. I don’t understand.”

“You need to know this. Your father did not leave for military service. He was in prison for a crime he didn’t commit. He and your brother were in an automobile that hit a pedestrian running beside the road who later died. Your father had previously consumed a few drinks and claimed to be the driver.”

Susan struggled to understand. “But he wasn’t? Who was?”

“Your father was protecting your brother. He had a bad driving record and would have been jailed, losing a university scholarship and chance for a career if he were found guilty.”

“What happened then?”

“Your father was found guilty and sentenced. In prison, he wrote letters, asking about all of us. He was especially concerned about you. We made up stories about the military enlistment so the truth wouldn’t set you against your brother. In time, after I passed, your father got out. But with lawsuits, interrupted profession, and lack of a job, he felt he had nothing to offer and stayed away. You were

married then.” She paused and looked up, as if summoned. “I must go now.”

“Wait, how can I see you again. What—”

“He cared, honey, and still does.”

Susan stared and blinked, seeing only the doorway.

“Mommy, who was here?” Cindy asked, entering the room.

Susan turned toward her. *How can I explain?* She wiped her eyes and mumbled, “I broke a dish, sweetie, and got upset, so I was talking to myself.”

*

Monday morning, Susan was in Paul’s office during an early free period.

“Your experience is amazing,” he said. “I could only make wild guesses to explain it.”

“Wild away. I don’t even have that much,” Susan replied.

“Maybe the Latems caused a hallucination *or* helped you recall more details from memories of the past. Ones that lead to different conclusions about what happened.”

“Either— or? Appears it might have been both.”

He was quiet a moment. “Now that you mention it, yes. Too graphic and connected to real events for a random hallucination.”

She lifted her brows. “There’s another possibility, though you may not like it. I may be a closet psychic, and *that* was liberated.”

“I’m open-minded, but that goes places I can’t get my head around.”

“I know one thing. I don’t like my brother, Don. He’s older than me, and I never felt good around him. Anyway, I called and confronted him with this story about Dad, without telling where I heard it. He turned hostile. Didn’t try to explain his position, but said my brain was so loose it sounded like a cowbell. That I must have been snorting library fungus into my ‘diminutive gray matter.’ Said if I pushed this, he would prove it a lie and sue me for libel.”

“Wow, what does Don do for a living?”

“He’s some sort of inspector; landed a job with the county after barely graduating from the university.”

“I thought he might know something about law from his comments, but—”

A ringtone sounded and she fumbled through her purse for her phone.

“Hello...Slow down Aunt Pell. You were outside and Cindy did what?” An invisible hand clutched her insides while her heart pounded. “Missing?...The Police said what? Yes, I’m coming.”

Paul’s brows knitted. “What happened?”

After a quavering wail, Susan’s words came out in a rush, “Cindy was at Aunt Pell’s. She took Cindy outside to play on the front lawn. She turned her back for a moment, heard brakes squealing, and a scream. When she turned around, a dark car was speeding away and Cindy wasn’t there. Police are at her place now.” Her tone rose. “God, Paul, I never imagined anything like this happening. I have to go.”

“You’re white as a sheet. Let’s take my car; you’re in no shape to drive.”

Paul led the way, with a quick stop at the main office to cancel his remaining classes.

*

A policewoman was consoling the aunt when they arrived. Another officer and a detective were comparing notes.

The latter turned toward Susan. “You’re the mother, right?” he asked. “I’m Police Detective Percy. Since we know this is a kidnapping, it’s a priority for us. Police are alerted to look for a dark green sedan.”

Susan could only sob in response. She felt Paul place his arm around her.

“I’m sorry for the rush,” the detective said, “but we need to know if you suspect anyone in particular. We also need family information to eliminate any

grudges or custodial disputes that might be a motive.”

He motioned to the aunt and led Susan to the dining table where they all sat for half an hour while he took notes.

Susan’s cell phone number was very private, so police were only installing monitoring equipment on her home phone to record possible ransom demands. That was unlikely, she knew, for there was no money to warrant a kidnapping. *If it’s mistaken identity, maybe Cindy will be returned.* Her thoughts were grasping for any hope.

When Susan came from the dining room, Paul said quietly, “This is not my normal thinking, but an emergency brings out weird things. It’s possible the Latems exposed your hidden mental traits. Maybe clairvoyance. At least for you, it has had both positive mood and uncanny mental effects. Are you willing to try it again? Might pick up some clues.”

“I’m for anything to help find Cindy. Let’s get back to the university and do it. Then follow me to my house.”

*

The Latems had similar effects on her as before, but there was more. Susan admitted it helped her with enough stress relief that she could function, but she didn’t want to discuss the other thing until they were back at her house so she could receive any phone calls coming there.

After Paul made coffee and they had settled in the living room, She said, “Just as things were winding up with the Latems, I saw my mother again. This time she was reciting or ad libbing a poem. Didn’t make much sense, but seemed important.”

“What was it?” Paul asked.

“She spoke calmly, asking me to be at peace and said,

‘Star obscured, star so pure. Deed so foul, we must endure.

The close but far conceals the star.

Place of joy, forgotten now. All decay with drooping bough.

The close but far conceals the star.”

“That’s strange. Any ideas on what it means?”

Susan was briefly lost in her thoughts. “Maybe the star is Cindy. And ‘close but far’ is a place, but that doesn’t help. ‘Close’ and ‘far’ are opposites.”

“Try to relax now. Let your mind wonder and show what it will. I think the Latems is helping, and the police are at work in other ways. Your ‘mother’ is at least offering you an olive branch in asking you to be at peace.”

“Branch—that hits a cord, the ‘drooping bough’ in her poem.” She leaned back on the couch. “Something is...” That familiar vertigo returned for a moment and next a feeling of being outdoors. The scent of fir trees and smoke aroused her senses. Then she saw the branch of a spruce tree, just becoming long enough to bend downward. Amidst a cloud of smoke on an open barbecue grill, her father was cooking steaks. It was a cabin the family had rented when she was in elementary school.

“You sense something?” Paul asked.

“I remembered a cabin in the next county where my family took outdoor vacations. It was next to a lake. That’s been decades; it might not even be there now.”

The afternoon seemed to drag by. Paul made sandwiches but there was only one phone call, which was from police checking the phone tap for recording. Paul asked for the detective and talked with him few minutes. Afterwards he looked at Susan. “Percy filled me in on some things, but it’s too scrambled in my head to repeat yet, Give me a little time to sort it out.”

Susan’s patience grew thin. She didn’t want to spend hours finding an old property in the woods but couldn’t forget about it. “Let’s go find that cabin, Paul. I

don't remember the address, but I've got a state map and might recall enough to get us there."

"Shouldn't we tell the police?"

"I don't remember the address, and they would think my visions are crazy. But my mother may have wanted me to find some clue at the cabin."

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Searching for the cabin was not easy. Paul drove, using Susan's doubtful memory of curves, gullies, and streams as navigation cues. Then she recognized something.

"Stop." She saw a rusted out mailbox and downed entrance sign by a graveled drive. With difficulty she made out the words. "Says 'Fred's Paradise'. This is it, I remember now." Brush and vines had encroached on the drive and scraped against the car as they turned in. The drive led to a dilapidated little cabin with a large area in back facing a lake. In her youthful memory, the cabin was much larger. Then she saw a pickup truck with another barely visible vehicle on the other side of it.

They parked short of the leaf covered front yard and cautiously approached the cabin, keeping behind foliage where possible.

"We really don't have a plan here, do we?" Paul said.

"I merely wanted to look for clues. Didn't know for sure anyone would be here. How should we do this?"

"You have a cell phone on you?"

"Yeah, could call police, but why?" she asked. "Would you knock on the door while I stay out of sight? Tell them you're lost, and ask if they know the way back to County 31. If anything's suspicious come back, and I'll sneak over and get license numbers on the vehicles. Then we could call police to see if owners have criminal records or reported cars stolen."

He moaned and his complexion paled. “Stay hidden, this may be serious.”

She watched him walk to the front door and knock. A dingy curtain on a window near the door pulled back. After a second knock the door opened and a middle-aged man in undershirt and scruffy beard appeared. There was gesturing and conversation she couldn't hear from her position, but it soon concluded without mishap and Paul started back.

“He said he and his wife were thinking of buying the property and fixing the cabin up. He told me how to get back to County 31.”

“Did you hear or see anything else?”

“There was some murmuring from the back room, but the man said his grandbaby was with them because his momma was sick. His wife was taking care of it.”

Susan grew more alert. She moved a few steps from her cover to better see the car beyond the pickup.

It was a dark green sedan.

An adrenal bolt hit her chest, electrifying her body. Dizzy with rage, wild and irrational, she ran toward the cabin's front door screaming, “Open the damn door. Give me back my Cindy.”

Paul yelled, “Susan, come back. He has a shotgun in there.”

When she reached the door, it suddenly swung open and a hand clutched her arm, jerking her inside. The door slammed to and she felt a blow against her head. Everything went dark and there was no more rage, no thought.

*

She came to, tied up and lying on her side in a dusty room. Her head hurt and the floor planks were hard, exposed nail heads starting to tear her skin. Little by little, she remembered events. *Where's Cindy? And Paul?* Her scuffling must have been heard because the room's door opened. She couldn't see the man's face

for he was standing with light behind him.

“You’re in the hell of a fix, little lady. Now we have to take this to the next level. The brat we could handle, but you’re a real problem for us. If you think your friend is gonna save you, think again. A few minutes ago I fired a shot at him and heard him scratching off in the gravel.” The man chuckled. “He won’t get far because, earlier, I told him how to get to a road washout, not County 31. I got somebody going to intercept him now.”

She tried to feel for the cell phone in her back pocket.

“Cell phone’s not there. Won’t work anyhow, we’re in a dead zone here. It goes out for a distance, you man friend’s got the same problem.”

“How did you tell someone to intercept him?”

“We’ve got a CB out in the truck. Use a code when talking.”

“Where’s Cindy. What have you done to her?”

“She’s okay. I’m leaving now. Keep your mouth shut or we’ll shut it for you.”

“Wait, why the kidnapping? I don’t have money.”

“Money’s not our client’s motive, but he’s got to make some decisions now that you’re here.” The man closed the flimsy door and locked it , leaving her in semidarkness.

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Although she was tied, hands behind her and ankles together, she worked feverishly at the cords, squirming to get enough slack to slip a hand or foot loose. All to no avail. She imagined the man going outside to his truck and sending a message to the “client” for orders. How would he refer to them? Maybe he’d say “big package” was delivered prematurely from the same address as “little package”. The CB seemed crude for their purposes; only so much could be said in predetermined code words when the unexpected happened. Perhaps the client

would need to come out and talk to render his verdict.

Feeling frustration and defeat, Susan squeezed her eyes shut. *Mother, if you can hear me, tell me what to do.*

There was no response to her plea.

Later she heard something outside. It sounded like the clanking of metal yard tools sliding from underneath the cabin. *Shovels. That's their solution to the unexpected?* She growled aloud. "Stupid degenerates, I won't beg or go quietly."

The anger was only a brief reprieve. Melting like putty back to the floor, she was sure she could hear the scrape of shovel on dirt.

A long, silent period followed before Susan heard footsteps returning . They came onto the back porch with the heavy breathing that follows manual exertion. *Now it ends. Oh Cindy, I hope it's quick for you. But I'm going to raise hell for both of us.* She inhaled to scream, but stopped.

Gasping, gurgling, then scuffling sounds from the back porch were followed by quiet. The back door eased open and something moved into the house.

An alarmed female voice and one of a child rang out. Then the sound of rapid footsteps approached the room Susan was in. After several kicks the old door crashed open. Paul stood in the doorway with her captor's 12 gauge shotgun across his shoulders.

"He won't be using this, nor his lady accomplice. Let's cut you free so you can see about your daughter."

Paul had barely begun cutting Susan free when Cindy ran into the room. "Mommy, Mommy," she cried and fell on her mother, hugging her about the neck.

With hands free, Susan wrapped both arms around Cindy, tears flowing. "Baby, I can't possibly say how happy I am to see you."

"Pardon me," Paul said, "but I've got to tend to an unconscious thug I left on the back porch."

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Darkness was approaching by the time they had tied the odious, middle-aged occupants of the cabin to chairs in the main room. Both appeared dazed at the turn of events and grudgingly gave only their first names as Pete and Velma. Cindy sat with Susan on an old, worn couch on the far side of the room.

Paul came over and seated himself beside her. In a low voice he said, “When leaving earlier, I found my cell phone wouldn’t work. I remembered passing a high hill on the way here, but the turn Pete directed me to take wouldn’t get me to it. Figured there must be more than one way to County 31 or else he had deliberately misled me.”

“He told me he directed you to a road washout,” Susan said.

“Then, it’s good I ignored his directions. When I came to the hill and climbed it, the cell still wouldn’t connect. Looking around, I saw a fire lookout tower and got partway up it when it connected. After calling the number the detective gave us, I told him our situation and tried to describe where we were. He said some things that made me rush back here.”

Paul took a deep breath. “Arriving, I found some jute cord near the tools under this cabin and tried to strangle this creep from behind when he came to the back porch. His trashing about was nearly my undoing so I tossed the cord and put him in a sleeper hold before he could turn around. Hung on ‘til he passed out.”

“Where’d you learn that?”

“From TV shows,” he said, smiling. “Good thing he was tired from digging.”

“What did the detective say that disturbed you?”

“He added info to the conversation we had on the phone at your house. Back then I had learned the conviction your dad received was not straightforward. Police were suspicious of your brother, Don. He was reckless and had some

misdemeanors. The pedestrian was not a stranger, but a kid he often had bitter arguments with. If Don were the driver, the prosecution could argue he intended to run over the kid.”

Susan’s brows knitted. “But that’s in the past, why would that disturb you now?”

“If your brother thought you were going to resurrect the pedestrian death issue, he might be afraid of charges for premeditated murder, which has no statute of limitations.”

“But I had no intentions—“

“Don didn’t know that. It’s unproved, but your brother is suspected of taking bribes to pass contractors on inspections; also consorting with some nasty underworld characters. When I was on the phone back at the fire lookout tower, the detective guessed that Don needed to distract you from the pedestrian death issue with something so heinous that you would be overcome with grief and forget him. He might even later pretend to pay a ransom to get Cindy back. That would put him in a favorable light with you. But if anything goes wrong or things get complicated, he’s quite capable of murder.”

“I think my appearance here was that complication.”

“Yes, I noticed the two intended graves.”

She kissed Cindy on the head and said, “Are the police coming? My brother Don or whoever is behind all this might come out to see what’s going on. Pete told me earlier that someone was on the way to encounter you at the road washout.”

“I hope police get here first; did my best with directions. That other *someone* may be Don or another hired goon.”

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The sound of crunching gravel announced an arrival, a navy blue SUV with darkened windows. Susan rushed to the window as two men exited. The dim porch

light and remaining glow from the sky above the sinking sun made them barely visible. “Paul, one of them looks like Don. I don’t recognize the other guy.”

Don stood behind the passenger door holding what appeared to be another shotgun. He waved the other man toward the side of the house. “Pete, come on out here,” he called. “Tell me what’s going on in there.”

“Y’all are in trouble now,” Pete said. That shotgun you took only has two shells in it. The others are in the truck.” He snickered and, in a mocking tone, added, “Why don’t you sashay out there and get some more? I think a hole through your chest would look dandy.”

While Susan watched through the window, she saw Don wait a moment and then turn toward the inside of the SUV and pull out a five-gallon can. He waved to the other man who came back, took the can and moved to the side yard again. “Paul, I think they’re going to burn us out.”

A moment later, she heard a splashing sound on the front porch and side of the house. Then footsteps and a splash against the back.

Pete sat, looking confused while Velma began moaning and jerking.

“He can’t do this. The bastard,” she said.

Pete yelled to Paul, “He wants to ‘limate everybody. Let us loose, man.”

Paul ignored him and looked at Susan. “Does this place have a cellar?”

“A tiny one.” She flinched as an arc of light outside the window landed on the porch. An instant whoosh of blue and yellow flames appeared. “Throwing flares,” she yelled above the roar and crackle of fire.”

“If we run outside we’re shot,” Paul said. “We have to get down below but we’ll be trapped there.” He turned toward Pete and fumbled his pocket knife out, sawed bindings on one hand loose and left the knife with him. “Do the best you can from here on.”

“It’s here, Paul,” Susan said, pulling up a hinged section of floor. Get on my

back, Cindy. I'm climbing down a ladder."

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It was crowded below, but quieter. All three moved away from the floor access above, to avoid it's possibly falling down upon them in flames. Vents to the cellar ran to the surface outside, but still some smoke was coming through.

Two shots from outside rang out, and Susan started. "What was that about?"

"Don't know," Paul said. "Maybe they mistook Pete and Velma for us, or just eliminated them as loose threads."

Cindy was whimpering. "Are we going to die?"

Susan could imagine her little chin quivering in the darkness, and held her closer. "Honey, we're not giving up yet."

For what seemed a long time amid low roaring and popping sounds, timbers above them fell and crackled. "Smoke's burning my eyes," Susan said. "Might as well shut them, it's dark anyway." After a while, she tired and braced against a wall, feeling water. "Must be broken pipes. We could drown while it's still dry and hot above." She noted that Paul was quiet. *Must be very tired.* Weary with the stress, she slumped also. There was nothing they could do.

A sudden bump and scraping above woke her. She had no idea she had dozed. Don and his goon were probably looking for them, and discovered the cellar door in the floor. Grunting and more scraping occurred as the access door was raised. A blinding light flooded in. There was nothing she could throw or hide behind. Surely a hail of gunshot was coming.

Instead it was a gush of water and a voice. "Ms. Susan Thomson? Police Detective Percy here."

*

Outside, work lights and fire truck hoses extinguishing the last smoldering timbers presented a comforting chaos. Paul placed his arms around Susan and

Cindy. “What’s the status here?” he asked the detective.

“Three officers and I were approaching this address on the road when we saw flames and called the fire department. We got here at the moment assailants were shooting at a couple running out of the burning cabin. At first, we thought they may be you two. The man was killed, the woman might make it.”

He paused to wave at an approaching ambulance and gestured in the direction of the gunshot victims. “After subduing the two assailants,” he continued, “we arrested them for homicide and arson. Later, kidnapping charges will be added. Hoping you had managed to find a possible basement nook, we told the fire trucks to keep pumping water on the cabin, even though it was essentially gone. When it was cool enough to approach, we came looking for you.”

“I am so grateful you got here in time,” Susan said.

“Glad to help. Sorry about your brother’s involvement. I’m pretty sure he’ll be shut away for good.”

She sensed something. Turning, she saw her brother glaring at her as he was led, handcuffed, to a patrol car. As the officer depressed his head to clear the back door opening, the scowl on his face dissolved, showing only dismay.

“Someone’s coming,” Paul said.

The detective faced Susan. “Ms. Thomson, this man was insistent on seeing you.”

The man looked familiar. Her memory struggled to picture him from a previous time. *Maybe he was younger.* Then she gasped. “...Dad?”

*

Considering all the time she had lived under a misconception, it took a while for Susan to regain her composure. She haltingly introduced Paul to her father, Robert, and gestured toward Paul’s car. “Let’s go sit in the car, away from the noise.”

Entering the car, Susan was still uneasy, but pressed onward. “Cindy, I want you to meet your grandfather. His name is Robert, and he’s my daddy. I wasn’t much older than you when he went away.”

She timidly offered her tiny hand to the strange man’s big one.

“Cindy, that’s a pretty name,” he said, “for a beautiful little girl.”

“Mommy, did he come down from the army in Heaven?”

Susan snuffed her unexpected chuckle. “No, sweetie, that’s all a misunderstanding.” She looked at her father. “Isn’t it?”

“Yes, Detective Percy filled me in on things. I contacted him myself after...a certain *alert*. It’s difficult knowing Don went down the path he did. After my release, I needed work and tried to communicate with him. He brushed me off, like I was a nuisance. We haven’t talked in years.”

Paul shrugged. “This despite the fact you did hard time for him? It’s difficult to believe the same genetics for son and daughter could have such different outcomes.”

Robert took a deep breath before answering. “Don isn’t my biological son. Susan, your mother was young and pregnant with Don when we met. Her ex boyfriend had skipped the scene. I patronized a cafe where she worked as a waitress. For me, love at first sight grew to something real. Soon, I promised to marry her and take care of her son.”

“Like mother, like daughter. We repeat the same errors,” said Susan. “Except that Cindy’s not going to be a mistake.”

“Not if *we* can help it,” Paul said, placing his arm around Susan.

“Dad, I want you to stay in contact with us and be a part of Cindy’s life. I remember how much fun you were before you left.”

He nodded. “This old man would be more than willing.”

Susan saw a tear on his cheek, and her remaining sense of distance drained

away. Then she remembered. “By the way, Dad, what did you mean by ‘a certain *alert*’?”

He smiled and raised his brows. “You may not believe this, but I went to bed early last night and dreamed I saw your mother. She was reciting a poem, like she used to do for me on Father’s Day. But she was reciting to *you*. You two were in a kitchen, and I remember her repeating a phrase, ‘the near but far conceals a star’. So lucid, like no other dream I’ve ever had. I started looking for you using internet resources and called police in nearby towns for any news concerning you. Detective Percy called me back. Then I realized the meaning of ‘near but far.’”

“Some *place*, right?” Susan asked.

“No, it’s a person. Don was ‘near’ in that technically he was family, but ‘far’ in disposition and outlook. I figured he had something you considered a ‘star’ and unloaded all this on the good detective. That’s when he told me about Cindy’s kidnapping.”

Paul shook his head. “No idea how I’m explaining this to Dr. Crane. Appears that visions of the deceased by one person can be transmitted to dreams of others. Human consciousness goes way beyond what we thought the Latems would stimulate. We need to completely revise our approach to mind research. Personally...I’m truly boggled.”

Susan laughed, clasped his face, and kissed him on the cheek. “Maybe you ought to see a psychiatrist.”

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