

Through a Wall

by James Lynn Smith

Carl neared her hospital room and the reality began to sink in. After years of loneliness, he found one who filled his life with love and enthusiasm. But now she lay in a bed, immobilized and connected to drips, tubes, sensors and needles. The prognosis was grave. The infection had spread to the brain. He entered the room and saw her elderly parents standing nearby. Nodding, he approached the bed and gently took her hand in his.

The father said, “They say there’s been no change.”

“I came back as soon as I could,” Carl said. “Praying all the way there would be some improvement. The conference is still going on, but I caught an earlier flight back. It’s been a week now, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, a little over.” Her mother said, stifling a sob. “Only two days ago she went into coma and we thought we should contact you. I know it interrupted your meeting.”

“I wouldn’t have gone if I had known she would get worse. Oh God, I still can’t believe it. Have the antibiotics helped at all?”

Brenda’s father answered. “Doc said it may be too early to tell. They sent blood and spinal fluid samples somewhere to confirm their findings.”

“Could you stay here for a while?” The mother asked. “We haven’t eaten all day, not that we really feel like it, considering.”

“By all means, go. Know that someone who loves her deeply is here by her side.”

The parents walked from the room and a nurse came in. She checked the

tape and needles inserted in Brenda's wrists, adjusted a valve on the drip tube and wrote something on a pad. She noticed Carl's questioning look and said, "The doctors are concerned, but Dr. Peters is the best neurologist around and Dr. Cummings not only has a practice but teaches bacteriology at the University." She smiled briefly and departed the room.

Pulling a chair beside the bed, Carl sat, placing elbows on his thighs so he could lean over and support his forehead in his hands. He looked downward, closed his eyes and tried to let his mind drift away from the alarm he felt. Instead, he remembered...

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One year ago they were lolling on a blanket in the park near his home. It had only been two months since they met, and he was reading a story from a book while she listened. The last time he had done this was when his younger sister was a little girl. But now it felt natural to read to an adult, especially since that adult was his lover.

"You have a great voice for storytelling," she said. "I really like the way you express things." She smiled at him, brushed her lustrous dark brown hair back and laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Nothing, really. I just feel good. And you're such a good-looking guy, too. I still can't believe how lucky we were to find each other."

"It wasn't luck. I had robots looking for the perfect girl when you brushed across their female-seeking beams."

"Hah, you're one *crazy* engineer." She stood and whirled around playfully, while he eyed her lithe figure. "But I love you just the same. Now that we've met, I don't think I could live without you."

Carl smiled as her words warmed his heart. His friends might wonder if this

much affection was healthy so soon after meeting. Did it show unusual dependency? But that wasn't an issue with Carl. Her need for his love gave his life meaning. It brought joy merely thinking about their next meeting. He craved the feel of her body against his, the smell of her hair, the intense life in her eyes.

He stood, circled his arms around her and said something that would become his verbal love pat. "You're my little everything. Whatever you want, I'll get it."

She laughed again. "Guys have said that before, but I'm still not rich."

"Why do you want to be rich when you can have me? I'll be anything you want. I'll be a diamond, the moon, or your genie. So, what will it be?"

"I just want you, crazy guy. Forget the trimmings."

*

It was late that night when Carl left the hospital. Brenda's father and mother returned and kindly shooed him out so he could rest before work the next day. Entering the apartment he and Brenda had recently rented, he felt her absence tug on his soul like a tangible weight.

Several minutes passed before he began to focus on necessities. *In the morning I'm supposed to report on my trip. I don't even know if I can concentrate. Maybe I'll call in sick.* He opened the closet and looked at her clothes. *Oh God, please don't let this happen.* He closed his eyes and felt the tears run down his cheeks. Finally, he quit dawdling and prepared for bed.

*

All night, frightful dreams and scenarios passed through his mind. When the sky began to lighten, it felt like 24 hours had passed. Arising, Carl pulled on his house robe and slippers. He stumbled to the kitchen and prepared cereal, the only thing he could stomach under the circumstances. He stood at the kitchen counter by the sink, not bothering to sit at the table.

The phone rang. Pushing his cereal bowl aside, he reached for the phone and

felt a stab of alarm. *The hospital? Something's happened.* Shakily he brought the receiver to him. "Hello."

"Carl, this is Brenda's father."

"Yes—What's happened?"

"Hold on Carl, it's not bad. In fact it's good. She's opened her eyes. I think even the doctors are surprised. This is our first sign of hope. She's not talking yet and doctors say it may be temporary, but—"

"I'm coming right down. Even if she's only awake a few minutes, I want to be there." Carl put the nearly finished bowl of cereal into the sink and darted toward the bedroom, tossing the robe aside and pulling clothes out of the closet.

*

The morning showed promise of a crisp new day as Carl walked through the hospital lobby toward the elevators. His spirits were up, but he still felt anxious. If her wakefulness were temporary, he wanted to say the right thing. *What do you say to a person who was comatose?* The elevator was slow and he had to remind himself to be patient; he was not the only one with loved ones to see. When the elevator doors opened, he stepped out onto Brenda's floor and felt it unusual that the staff behavior was normal. *Don't you know my girl was in a coma and now she's awake?* When he reached her door, it was open. Her parents stood smiling as a doctor, a nurse and a technician prepared to move out.

The doctor faced Brenda's parents. "This is encouraging. Our scan this morning shows the infection around the dura mater is clearing up far better than I had anticipated. Brenda was a very sick girl. We don't have antibiotics that work well on this condition." The doctor turned away and the staff moved out of the room, smiling and nodding as Carl entered.

She sat up in the bed, most tubes and sensors having been removed. Yet she did not appear to notice Carl and stared at her parents as if still on hold for

something.

“She’s back with us Carl,” the mother said.

“Has she said anything?”

“Yes, a few words. But I’m not sure what they meant. We need to give her a little time. She’s just come back from the jaws of—” She stopped before saying the “d” word.

Carl moved toward the bed. “Brenda.” There was no response. He moved closer “Brenda, it’s me.”

Turning her head slowly toward him, her brows knitted slightly as if mildly vexed. Then her face lost expression. “Carl. You’re here.”

“Yes, I’m here. I could be nowhere else.” He turned to her parents. “She knows me. That’s good.” Looking back at Brenda he continued, “How do you feel, Brenda?”

After a pause, she answered softly “Good.”

“I’ve been so worried about you. I can never explain to you how much I care.”

There was another pause. “That’s okay.” Her lips formed a weak smile.

Carl was puzzled. *But she’s been far, far away. Give it time, dummy.*

“Sweetheart, tell me if you want anything.”

“There is nothing you need to do.”

Carl then voiced his verbal love pat “You are my little everything. Whatever you want, I’ll get it.”

She looked away, her face unreadable.

Coming closer and tilting his head, Carl whispered. “Do you love your crazy guy?”

She looked back at him with a pleasant, relaxed expression. “We *are* love, Carl.” Then she closed her eyes and sank deeper into the pillows.

Brenda's father said, "Maybe it's time for a little rest, Carl. She might be coming in and out for a while, but now we know she's recuperating. Come over and sit in this chair. The missus and I need to check in with our doggie sitter."

When they left the room, Carl seated himself. He had been anxious, expectant and then saw a near-miracle in Brenda's improvement. But his brow was now lined with concern. *Something's not right.*

*

Over the next several days, Carl saw Brenda improving. The night before she was to be dismissed from the hospital, her mother touched Carl's arm.

"Carl, you've been such a loyal and special person to us and Brenda. But she's going to need a little more attention. We talked to Brenda and feel it would be best if she do the rest of her recovery at our place. You need to go to work, and we can see to her needs for a while."

"Well, I was hoping..." Carl was stumped. He had imagined dismissal would mean being well and returning to their apartment. However, if some vestige of illness remained, he could not fault their logic. "Oh, yes I see what you mean. I guess that would be best." *I hope it will be—not drive a wedge between us. I want my girl back.*

During the next week Brenda received Carl's phone calls and visits with courtesy and good humor. But she did not appear anxious to move back to their apartment. The following week she was back at the gym and showed rapid recovery. He also joined her gym for evening workouts and took her there and back three times per week. Becoming more dissatisfied, Carl decided to talk to her about his concern.

Returning from the gym, he stopped the car beside the road in a park area. "Brenda, we need to talk. Since your coma, you are different. Tell me what it is. Something changed you."

She looked away from him through the passenger window for a moment, then turned back. “Yes there is a difference. But I’m not sure you would understand. Do you find me unpleasant?”

“No, not unpleasant. You are very nice to me. But I feel that somehow I am unnecessary in your life.”

“We are all sufficient in ourselves, Carl. We can love without being entirely dependent on each other.”

“See, that’s the thing. Your talk is different. You used to depend on my attention, and now...”

“What?”

“Do you still love me? Is it special?”

“Everyone is unique. But we formed a bond because we have things in common. We help each other express love in this place and time.”

“You avoid my question and then get abstract. What does all this mean?”

Brenda took a deep breath and looked through the windshield as though studying a distant object. “All right. I don’t know how much of this you want to hear, but something happened that I never believed in before. I was hoping I wouldn’t have to test *your* belief.”

“Go on.”

“I was not really lying unconscious in that bed during the coma. I went someplace wonderful. Someplace I could never imagine. But it was clearer and more detailed than anything I ever dreamed of. There were shapes and forms around me that radiated the most comfort and joy I have ever known. I wish I could explain, but it’s not describable. It had visual form, but its shapes and colors had beautiful meanings too. And I felt like I was a part of it all, a part of love itself.”

“Are you saying you had some kind of out-of-body experience?”

“I don’t know what to call it. All I know is that it was real. And the message, if there is one, is that we can only show love in a very limited way in this world. Where I was, there is no jealousy. To love one does not deny another. Do you understand?”

“I’m trying. But if I didn’t know you, I would think I was hearing some new age guru lecture on universal oneness or something.”

*

Carl felt a need for advice from someone intelligent and open-minded. Yet he would have to be selective. *A therapist will charge me an arm and a leg, yet have no clue how to help.* A minister he knew came to mind. *Yeah, he’d rehearse platitudes and recommend meditation and prayer. I tried that already.* He was left with only one option: To visit Philip, his friend.

Philip was short and wiry but possessed a deep, resonant voice. And he was spry, considering his years. His knowledge was remarkable, despite living a hand-to-mouth existence in his little bungalow near the tracks.

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Philip’s face showed mild amusement. “So the little lady does an out-of-body trip and lover boy feels slighted.”

“You can make fun if you want,” Carl replied. “But I have a pressing question. Is love real if it doesn’t involve dependence? This ‘love is everywhere’ attitude doesn’t sync with my view that life is struggle, and anything you call ‘love’ must have a legitimate *payoff*. Like physical security, pleasure or enhanced value.”

“First you need to understand something, Carl. Nothing you see or feel is the *physical* world. What we conceptualize as physical reality is really perceptions in our mind. Color and smell are not in the world, they are in our mind. The brain only embodies the *physical stimulus* for those perceptions.”

“Where is this leading?”

“Just hold on. The brain is a piece of meat that collects our sensor input, preprocesses it and transmits it to the mind. The mind is where perceptions are, and it may not even be in the same dimension as the physical brain.”

“Whoa.” Carl forced a grin. “Metaphysical speculation doesn’t help me.”

“Carl, what I am trying to say is that her experience may be real. Maybe she did slip into a mind-only dimension and found things our physical brain shields us from. Once, humanity could not conceive of radio waves or germs. Now they are accepted as part of our reality. We may someday prove the existence of other dimensions and actually enter into them.”

*

During the next evening, Carl talked with Brenda about Philip’s concepts. “...So what do you think?”

“I tend to agree with Philip, as much as I can understand. But it doesn’t matter. I experienced something I can’t deny. Now, I don’t feel the need to make love a dependency or see death as something to fear. We are above that.”

“That attitude is too open and risky for most people.”

“I know you are concerned. Last night I even had a dream that something disturbing was going happen soon and the outcome would depend on your choices.”

“Scary. But just a dream, right?”

*

Carl went to work and did his job. He managed to avoid conscious thought about the paradox, but began to feel more depressed each day. In frustration, he thought of Philip again. Although Philip’s ideas awed, entertained and disturbed him in equal measure, he would not leave Carl without something to think about.

Philip’s face was somber this time. “Okay, we can dispense with

philosophical trappings. Just realize that you need to lighten up. Preconceived concepts get you into trouble. There is no need for you to prove Brenda or yourself as correct. You see, love of someone else is basically love of the universal self.

Carl flinched.

“It’s for real, Carl. Just get over yourself and think about what I said. But I have a more practical idea for now. Have you ever taken Brenda on a camping trip or a serious hike?”

“No. I haven’t. That could be dangerous, depending on where you are. Mostly we do things in or near the city. Why?”

“It can work wonders. The discipline of dealing with nature’s challenge focuses the mind. Cooperation generates perspective and mental acuity. Then you can both distinguish emotional mountains from molehills a bit better.”

For the first time since he had known him, Carl felt that Philip suggested an actionable plan. The more he thought about it, the better he liked it.

*

“Go camping? That sounds lovely. But all that *stuff* to carry.” Brenda sighed into the phone. “Maybe we could simplify it some. Perhaps a hike with backpack for necessities.”

“You’ve got it dear,” Carl said. “And I know just where to go. Flint Peak National Forest is not too far away. It has giant rocks, streams, canyons and trails. Talk with you later.”

Hanging up the phone, he began to collect information. After making a list and procuring needed items, Carl called Brenda back. He knew that, like him, she already had a backpack.

*

The next morning Carl picked her up at her parents’ house. He helped get her things into his Suburu and waved to her father who was looking out the

window. Carl eased from the curb and the couple settled in for the ride.

“How far is it?” She asked.

“About 38 miles from here. Relax and enjoy the scenery.” Carl steered onto the northbound freeway ramp, merged and pressed the accelerator.

*

A half hour later, Carl veered into an exit ramp and turned right toward the east. Soon he turned left onto a northbound blacktop road beside a large, reddish wooden sign. The carved, letters were inlaid with white paint and read “Flint Peak National Forest.” The road graded upward and became curvy. Carl felt his ears popping as they rounded switchbacks and meandered to higher elevations.

“The scenery is getting great now,” Brenda said. “You can see so far. And the boulders in this place are gigantic.”

“I think this will be quite an adventure. I never wanted to scale peaks, but I have hiked in interesting places. This looks like one of the best.” Carl slowed the car. “Look, that’s what I’m searching for, the entrance to camp grounds. Hiking trails lead out from there.”

Carl turned in, pulled to a window and paid a few dollars. Receiving a map and permit for his dashboard, he eased up before slowing and looking at the map. “I believe the second parking area will be where we want to start. Rest rooms facilities are near there too.”

“Good, I’m looking forward to the hike.”

*

Soon Carl and Brenda were winding their way upwards along an unpaved pathway. Backpacks were only a modest burden. The path led through both tall coniferous and leafy deciduous trees. At first they met hikers going up or down, but the foot traffic slowed as they advanced. In time there were fewer trees, more rocky escarpments and they were lone trekkers.

“This is a scenic spot, let me get some photos,” she said. After pulling a small camera from her backpack she waved to Carl. “Stand over here with this drop-off behind you. It’ll make some good shots.”

After several snapshots, he took the camera from her and had her pose in the same place. “All right, do your impromptu thing.”

“What impromptu thing? You mean the whirly moves? Like when we first went to the park and you read to me?”

“Yeah, that.” He took numerous shots as she pranced about for him. *I believe she is becoming her old self. This hike was a great idea.* “Okay, you can rest now.”

*

For the next hour they hiked past streams which splattered, frothed and then disappeared into deep crevices. The hiking path was now practically invisible. It was obvious to them that few ever came this far.

“Let’s stop for a bite, Carl,” Brenda said. “I’m famished.”

“Good idea.” He moved toward a fallen log near a flat-top rock for a makeshift seat and table. They pulled off their backpacks, rummaged for food and ate.

After eating, the hike was resumed. They came upon a waterfall and paused, listening to the splashy roar and deep drumming of water into the depths at the bottom. They examined the downward path of water, noting how it was lost in gorges farther down and then streamed far beyond the scree around the cliffs below.

Another half hour passed and it was decision time so they paused to rest. Brenda turned her face toward the sun. She then lowered herself into a yoga-like sitting position. Carl also sat, leaning against a boulder. After fifteen minutes passed they roused from their peaceful revelry and stood.

“Ready to go back?” he asked.

“You bet, crazy guy.”

Carl was comforted by the tenor of Brenda’s response. Again, she sounded like her old self, and this gave him hope. He led as they turned to begin their descent.

They passed over an area creased by flowing rills and covered by thin strata of rock flaked off from higher terrain. Carl knew cautious foot placement was important.

“Be careful here, Brenda.” That was the last thing he could remember saying.

*

The thin strata of rock beneath him broke, and he fell into icy water. The water was not deep, but it swiftly carried him toward the falls farther down.

“Carl,” Brenda screamed. “Try to stop, Carl. Grab something.”

He could grasp nothing on the sides of the rill. Sky, rock and water swirled through his vision as the turbulent stream tossed him about. He gasped and choked on the cold water. The sides and bottom of the rill pounded against him as it widened into a fast moving flow. Then the water accelerated him toward a growing rushing sound.

He plummeted over the falls, anticipating a rude ending below. A loud roaring and painful crash into the pond below jolted him. Something hard impacted against his head. Feeling was partially lost. Yet he sensed waters washing him farther along. Dimly aware of gasping and struggle, he began to see colors, but his field-of-view shrank slowly toward the center until his vision was gone.

*

Brenda ran recklessly down toward the falls, hoping Carl had snagged on something before going over, but she saw nothing to give hope. She called out his

name until she was nearly hoarse. Finally, she plopped down on the hard ground, her mind reeling with disbelief.

It was minutes before she raised her head and gazed with wet puffy eyes into the distance. *I should call for help.* She tugged her cell phone from her backpack and dialed 9-1-1, but there was no signal. She moved toward higher ground. *Lord, I hope a tower can pick this up.* She tried again and got through.

“This is 9-1-1, what is your emergency?”

“My boyfriend just fell in a stream and went over the falls. We need help—quick.”

“Who is calling and where are you?”

“Brenda Morgan from Woodville. I’m in Flint Peak National Forest. I’m above the first group of trails up the side of Flint.”

“I’ll need you to hold on while I make other connections and they see what rescue equipment is available.”

“Yes, but please hurry.”

“Brenda, rescue will need to locate you. Does your cell phone have GPS?”

“GPS? I—I’m not sure.”

“Never mind, they can find your location by tower triangulation if you don’t. Just hold while I do some things here. Don’t disconnect.”

Brenda paced, her anxiety building. *Come on, I can’t stand this waiting. Are you still there?* She knew she had to calm down. There was nothing more she could do but wait.

Then she heard a voice. “Hello Brenda, I made contacts and they’ve located your coordinates. Forestry does not have a rescue helicopter, but they’re trying to get the National Guard to help. How is your phone battery power?”

“It’s low. I forgot to charge last night.”

“To conserve batteries a little, you can end the call, but don’t shut your

power off. I've got your cell phone number and I'll call you back with information."

Brenda reluctantly ended the call, but kept power on. For now, she was on her own. Gradually, she managed to calm herself and grasped at a faint sense of hope. She sat cross-legged with hands on knees, and tried to focus on the feeling.

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Everything was black. His head hurt and he was disoriented. Something was lying under his body. It was some time before he recognized it as his arm. Though cold and stiff, he had somehow maneuvered to a gently sloped embankment. Imagery in his central vision began to return. As his field-of-view expanded, Carl saw a confusing place. He was in a rocky gorge at the edge of a stream. *Where is this? How did I get here?* He sensed that something traumatic had happened. Pieces of his memory began to connect. *Brenda—I was trying to warn her.* He then remembered falling into a rill with flowing water...and the falls.

When he tried to creep farther up the bank, he felt blood trickle down the side of his head, over his ear and onto the rocky surface. His leg was bent at an unusual angle. *Oh damn, a broken bone, maybe more.* He knew he should get out of the water because the impacted vessels in his brain might be spilling blood into his cranium. *Concussion. If I black out again I could get carried off.* He reached onto the bank and tugged himself a few inches farther onto it.

*

She sat motionless, except for her breathing. The sun was warm and a gentle breeze stirred. Her closed eyelids filtered sunlight to a reddish hue. The feeling was peaceful with an undercurrent of concern.

A future question friends might ask intruded: *How did he die?* She pushed that possibility aside and resumed meditation. Eventually, she attained focus.

Brenda arose gently as though pulled to her feet. With arms extended

forward, she slowly turned toward the southeast. Her eyes opened and she saw two close, rocky peaks in the distance. Their direction was between her extended hands. She stared at those peaks. An eyebrow raised when she felt something.

Her cell phone rang twice before she decoupled from the trance. “Hello, 9-1-1?”

“Yes, Brenda. There’s a helicopter from the National Guard heading your way. It has a cable and basket for rescue. They have your coordinates and that will be the starting point. What location are the falls from where you are?”

“West of me, but he’s probably washed farther out and around. To the Southeast of me there are two rocky peaks. Have them look there first.”

“Do you see the stream going there?”

“I can’t see it because there are gorges and canyons. But I *feel* we should look there. Can I talk to the helicopter pilot?”

“Patching you through might take a while. I’ll relay your message myself, but what you suggest to the southeast may not be their search protocol. I’ll call you back.”

Brenda looked at the phone. *God, help us. Please don’t let him die because they have rigid protocols.*

It seemed longer, but the operator came back on a few minutes later.

“Okay, the pilot says he sees the two peaks and will swing by before coming to the falls.”

*

Carl’s headache was getting worse. Still at the water’s edge of the embankment, he had tugged himself upward as much as possible. He was feeling nauseous and began to lose awareness of his situation again. For several minutes, he felt a strange sense of floating. Then Carl saw his long-deceased father sitting on the bank. It seemed he had merely been away for a long time. His father’s fatal

illness was cancelled, but he was somehow different. He looked at his son without concern.

“It’s me,” Carl said. “It’s good to see you returned.”

His father nodded nonchalantly and looked away at a rocky peak. Then he smiled. “It’s been a long time since I first saw those. Tell your mother I won’t be home for dinner.” His face faded into the embankment.

From that embankment, Carl saw tiny rivulets appearing. They became more numerous, and contained a viscous fluid oozing toward him. *Stop. I’ll wash back into the stream.* The flow toward him increased and darkened to the color of blood. He felt himself slipping back as the rivulets became narrow, branching streamers surrounding and covering him. Soon, he was twisting like a snake through a viscous, foamy substrate, feeling each movement sink him deeper into the morass. He heard words. *How did he die?* He did not know the origin, or what they meant. A feeling of dread foretold writhing, groping, never knowing what he was searching for.

As he sank deeper, it became darker and cold. The blackness was absolute, and he sensed his identity evaporating into the void.

Amid the featureless dark, a small dot of light appeared. It came nearer and he faintly sensed familiarity. The surrounding blackness no longer felt empty. An urgent need burst from his soul, and he reached toward the light with every fiber of his being. The object grew to a brilliant, pastel-colored sphere with diffuse edges. Filaments of bright light protruded from it and waved about like wispy tentacles. Upon grasping two of the tentacles, he felt a surge of comfort and power coursing into him. Tears of gratitude streamed as he became a part of something greater. The duration was not measurable in time...

Eventually, he heard a voice, “Now I see it too.” Later, he realized the voice was his.

*

Carl blinked and saw featureless white. A restraint held his leg, and he sensed he was supine, looking upward. A blurred object soon approached. When his focus adjusted, he saw it was a face.

“I heard that, crazy guy.” Her voice had a slight quaver. “Welcome back from Hades.”

“Brenda?”

“Yea. You know me.” Lines of concern on her forehead smoothed and she laughed. “Such relief. Do you remember what happened?”

“I...I fell? God, where is this?”

“You’re in the hospital. You’ve got a broken leg below the knee and some minor lacerations. But your head had serious damage. When they found you, you were way beyond a concussion. Couldn’t talk or recognize anything. It’s been several days since they brought you in.”

“How did I get here?”

“I’ll let one of these fellows answer that. They were engaged in war games, but when 9-1-1 and Park Service needed help, they had the chance to save a life. They wanted to see how you were doing. When you showed signs of waking, I called them.

The helicopter pilot was the taller of the two men. He stepped forward. “This insistent little lady told us where to find you. I figure she knows more about that terrain than she lets on. Maybe studied a map or something. But you were way downstream in a canyon between two rocky peaks. It’s a miracle you survived. The sergeant here was lowered with the cable and we brought you back up in the rescue basket where the medic tended to you.”

Brenda knitted her brows briefly then faced Carl. “I know *nothing* about that terrain. Between times talking on the cell phone, I was trying to calm down by

meditating on hope. Then, it was weird. My arms were actually pulled toward your location. Soon it felt like something was holding to them, as if coming through an invisible wall. I've never felt more peace and determination than at that moment.

The pilot raised an eyebrow and cast a quizzical look to his companion. "We'd better get along now. Just wanted to drop in and see how you were." He patted Carl on his good leg. "Heal quick, now."

Brenda turned to the pilot. "I want to thank you men so much for what you did." She reached with both her hands to shake his.

Surprise registered on the pilot's face when he glanced down to take her hands. Both of her forearms had a fading bruise as might be left by a firm grip.

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