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Burning Bridges As We Go

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Lighthouse on the Other Side

Sarah Tilly, twenty-two and a recent college graduate, was not the sorority sister everyone thought would become a lighthouse keeper. A journalist sure. She wrote for the Charter Gazette and the Omega Nu newsletter her entire four years at Kreske College. A wife, sure, even if she had recently broken up with her college boyfriend. Maybe even a mother, as many in her sisterhood envisioned themselves becoming after graduation. But not a lighthouse keeper.

Sarah didn't think it unlikely. More like seizing the day. Until she found herself standing inside Pigeon Point Lighthouse having serious doubts. Because the minute she'd walked into the custodial apartment and flicked on the lights, she could hear a "spooky" *thump-bump-bumping* on the other side of the wall. Something solid whacking something soft. Like metal on wood. Which was unnerving and made her immediately want to go home.

No way! Not happening, Sarah thought. If that's some lame serial killer banging on the other side of the wall, I'm outta here! I won't go out like one of those lame-ass girls in those stupid slasher flicks Brad liked to watch – running around in my nightgown, screaming my head off, trying to escape some maniacal intruder for ninety minutes. You can take that little Jamie Lee Curtis, scream queen trope and shove it where the sun don't shine!

The owner of the lighthouse knew seasonal hires weren't conditioned to the isolation. Or the ocean's tidal moods with its natural rhythms of sea swelling over rock, dashing against the lighthouse, and erupting upwards in prismatic spray. All making for some interesting acoustics within.

"It might take you a bit to get used to the old girl's sounds," the owner explained.

"She'll shift and settle in her bones, especially during high tides. Which can surprise newcomers. But don't worry, despite all the oddity of sounds, Pigeon Point is as tight as a duck's tail and fairly easy to get along with. Just listen and you'll learn her language soon enough. All those noises will become second nature. Like a secret language shared just between the two of you."

Sarah trusted the owner and took his comments at face value. But now in the quiet all by her lonesome, standing in the official caretaker's apartment, she felt unsure. And a little unprepared. And a little unnerved. She'd yet to play out the deeper quality of remote this place truly was. Or how such acute isolation could affect her over the entire year she was employed to watch over Pigeon Point.

For all my introverted tendencies, Sarah thought, have I ever been this alone before? Or this far from everyone and everything I've known? Without Mom or Dad? Or my family and friends? Wow! Now there's a reality check!

Pigeon Point, all of a sudden, wasn't feeling like the cozily romantic notion she'd conjured up months earlier when she applied for the position. Believing the job would grant her ample time and solitude to complete her first novel. Many great authors had done so – Steinbeck, Thoreau, Shelley, Proulx – all to celebrated effect. And Sarah figured if she, like they, could put away the distractions of the modern world long enough – like boyfriends and relationships and money and jobs – and step out of her comfort zone, then she too could achieve similar results.

"I'll embrace the seclusion," she brightly told friends and family, "and let my inner voice speak out loud and clear. Pigeon Point will be a wonderful place for that. Very cathartic!" *Not to mention a super quiet place for a heartbroken girl to get over all the pain and disillusionment recently suffered.*

The actual Pigeon Point was more cloistered -- a decommissioned lighthouse erected centuries earlier in stone and iron and mortar. Built to guide seafaring ships back home from the vast coldness of the deep ocean. But now, in modern times, retrofitted into a remote satellite station -- with high definition, bicameral radar array dishes mounted into the pinnacle so the ZEMCO Corporation could communicate with their orbiting satellites high above. And even to the alien stars beyond, as some conspiracy-minded people opined.

By design, Pigeon Point sat on federally protected land with a vast track of Pacific coast adding another twenty-three hundred miles all the way up to the wilds of Alaska. There were no neighbors surrounding its rocky shores. And no cell phone towers to transmit internet or cell signals. Civilization had been left behind. Which meant few, if any, knew exactly what Pigeon Point was being used for. It was that remote a place.

Sarah took a deep breath and decided to stay. *There may be weird noises coming from next door, but that doesn't mean I have to give in to my fears. Not to mention, I haven't eaten since this morning and I'm famished! So first things first -- let's have a little lunch.*

Which is what the owner instructed Sarah to do.

"Doncha do anything on an empty stomach," the owner advised. "There's little reason to rush up there -- especially when you're hungry. Hunger clouds the mind and makes a person skittish. And being skittish means mistakes. Mistakes cause problems. And problems get people hurt. You don't want to be hurt so far from help! So don't rush!

Eat a solid meal, get plenty of rest, and take your time before you do anything. Okay little missy?"

Coffee then, Sarah instructed herself. Coffee first. And toast. With bacon and some of those nice avocados I brought along. And turn on the news. Plug in the radio and let the sound liven the place up a bit. After that, when I'm calm and ready, I'll go out and check that noise. See if there's anything to report. Plus, the owner said he'd be back on Friday with supplies for the season. So I can decide then if I officially want to stay any longer.

Sarah unpacked her food supplies and set to work -- making as much noise as she could so the sounds filled the room and reminded her of being home. The coffee was espresso blend – hot and bitter strong. The toast, sourdough with Irish butter. The bacon crispy burnt. Eggs over easy. And avocado so ripe, Sarah moaned with every bite.

The news from the radio sounded like typical morning fare – advertisements, news, dull host banter. Not very interesting, but comforting. Until the end of the hour when the weather report kicked in.

"Breaking News, folks!" *Sally Surrell the Weather Girl* purred over the airwaves, "Looks like our friends down at the National Oceanic Service are forecasting a high-pressure squall cycling down from Kimmo Bay that's set to roll over us any minute now. Thanks for the heads up, fellas! The Doppler says this storm's gonna be a big one, folks – a typhoon class dust up with severe lightning and thunder, gale force winds and around twenty-two inches of heavy rain expected to drop down on our heads when this beast makes landfall. So batten down the hatches and stay indoors. And, as always, stay safe, stay tuned and we'll stay on the air, keeping you in the know from sun to snow. This has been *Sally Surrell*, your weather girl, signing off..."

"Oh great!" Sarah moaned turning off the radio, "I haven't even inspected the grounds yet and there's already a storm coming?!"

Sarah grabbed her new rain slicker, harness, and deck shoes -- as the owner instructed always to do when going top side -- and headed upstairs. Walking up several flights, past the sealed ZEMCO computer rooms on the tenth and eleventh floors, all the way to the twentieth where the old lighthouse beacons once shone deep into the darkness and fog. Sarah squeezed past the mounted radar array dishes and belted into the outside railing before looking off to the horizon. *Holy Cow!* she gasped. *That IS one massive storm!* A mountainous wall of black clouds, stretching across the sea, horizon to the sky, with the acrid smell of static electricity charging the air. Sarah touched her hair expecting it to be standing on end. *Whoa,* is all she could think.

Taking several deep breaths, Sarah reviewed what the owner said to do next.

"If a storm be coming," he'd explained, "forget the daily inspections. They'll wait. Instead, make sure all the storm guards along the upper floors are closed and locked tight. I count a dozen that require battening down, you hear! The old girl is waterproof sure enough, but she's still manually operated and needs a little help here and there. So close everything off and make sure all the shutters are firmly latched. Then she'll be storm proof and you'll be as safe inside her belly as a wee baby in her mother's womb."

Sarah flinched with the mention of bellies and babies, holding back a few unexpected tears. *Because not all babies are safe, even in their mother's womb,* she regretted knowing.

The owner didn't notice. "It should take you less than an hour closing everything off upstairs. Then you'll have to check the tenth and eleventh floor computer rooms. They have an independent power source housed in their interior systems rooms, which keeps the lights on and the power running, so don't worry about that. The interior rooms are also sealed off too and inaccessible. So you won't be able to get in there. But you do have to check the power distribution sensor panels mounted on the outside in the ante-

rooms off the stairwell. You need go in there, read the sensor panel and confirm their status. If they're green across all line displays, great! Close up and be on your way."

"Got it," Sarah replied taking notes. "Green is good."

"But you might have to trouble shoot a little though."

"Such as?"

"Well, if any monitor displays are dark, then it's most likely a blown fuse and you'll have to change it. There's a manual on the wall next to the panel explaining how. And spare fuses are kept on a shelf down in the spare apartment next to yours that we use for storage."

"Got it. Spare apartment, fuses, storage."

"Now most important! And listen up good. If any of the sensor lines read red, then you bypass me and go straight to ZEMCO direct. I can't emphasize that enough. Their emergency number is listed on the call sheet next to the shortwave radio. Report it immediately without delay, you hear! And stay on the line till they say otherwise. That's your main duty and ninety percent of the reason you're up there. To monitor those power distribution panels in real time four times daily to report any anomalies."

"Umm, red is bad?"

"Don't look so worried. Rarely are there any issues. ZEMCO's pretty excellent with maintenance. So everything should be easy peasy, lemon squeasy, right!?"

Riggghhhhtttt, Sarah thought. I can do this. I'm a confident, independent woman! I can handle this! And if I can't, well, the owner did promise to return by Friday. So if I have to tell him, 'Sorry, it's not going to work out,' and return the advance payment, then that's what I'll have to do.

Sarah vowed not to let that happen though. The contract had certain incentives, with time sensitive milestones, that made the pay substantial – life changing substantial. Which was offered in compensation for both the length of isolation and the importance of maintaining a human presence for the tenth and eleventh floors apparently.

Not to mention, Sarah reasoned, I already spent most of my first quarter advance to pay down my student loans. And if I finish out the year, I'll have made enough to not only pay off the remainder, but finance another two years of debt-free living. With an English Lit degree and a finished first novel to show for it. Not bad, huh, Sarah! So let's not let any little noises derail us, right?!

Sarah stepped back inside from the catwalk and began the lock down process -- starting with closing all the storm shutters around the ZEMCO radar arrays and continuing till all had been sealed. *Easy*, she thought. *Just like the owner said*. When she was done, Sarah headed to the ZEMCO rooms on the tenth and eleventh floors.

Now this is unexpected, she gasped stepping into the tenth-floor ante-room to discover everything was painted white. Completely white. Stark white from floor to ceiling. Everything. Floor, baseboards, light switch, light fixture, display panels. Even the manual on the shelf. All white. Which made the room look oddly infinite.

Like that weird art-house movie Brad always watched, Sarah thought. *THX-1138 or something or other. How many times had he insisted we watch that stupid film? Swearing it held some deeply modern, allegorical take on love and romance. Well, it was just strange, Brad! A strange and disturbing movie. Just like these ZEMCO rooms. Just like you. Give me Lady Chatterly's Lover any day if you want to know a woman's heart.*

Sarah immediately chastised herself for thinking of Brad at a time when she needed fewer distractions, not more. But she couldn't herself.

Is that why you aborted your baby? she asked herself. *Because Brad and THX-1138? Because love and romance were nothing like what you wanted them to be? Like D.H. promised? Because you didn't think Brad was up to your standards?*

"Yeah," Sarah sarcastically answered herself. "That's why. What other reason could there be?"

Well, she countered, I mention it because you weren't thinking of Brad when you realized you were pregnant, now were you? You were thinking how you didn't want to be a mother yet. And how fixing your "little problem" would spare you having to tell him you'd cheated on him only to become pregnant with another man's baby. Is that why you did it? So no one would find out you'd been sleeping with your English professor? Which, as far as I can tell, had nothing to do with Brad's weird fetish movie or any D.H. Lawrence novel. So what is your point exactly?

"Point?" Sarah argued back.

I'll tell you your point. That you went the abortion route because you were selfish. You killed your baby over ego and pride, which had nothing to do with Brad. Or your professor.

"Oh, shut up! What do you know."

What Sarah really resented was the fugue state of confusion the whole incident threw her into during her last semester of college. She'd pretended otherwise of course, but she was a basket case inside -- too afraid to tell anyone about it, especially her parents, while trying to fight through the guilt -- smiling at her sorority sisters, going to parties, and finishing out the semester till graduation. All while dying inside.

That's when she saw the ad for lighthouse keeper at Pigeon Point.

I'm moving forward with my life now, aren't I? Sarah reasoned. *And taking a whole year to put my life into perspective is the right kind of bold choice a modern woman is supposed to make.*

Channel everything into writing and become a novelist! What could be more positive and healing than that?

Sarah subdued her painful memories to re-focus on the task at hand. But for the second time in as many hours, another lighthouse experience had thrown her for a loop.

Regardless, she thought, I have a job to do. So what if these white ante-rooms remind me of Brad and THX-1138? And ending my baby's life. I'm built to conquer, not capitulate.

After visually ensuring the display panels on the tenth and eleventh floor were, in fact, green, Sarah returned downstairs. And found her apartment door standing wide open.

Crap, Sarah thought, I'm pretty sure I closed that. Heading inside, Sarah heard the *thump-bump-bump* return, this time adding a drag. *Thump, bump, drag. Thump-bump-drag.*

Thump-bump-dragggg. Not even twenty feet away, coming from the neighboring apartment, which the owner said was only used for storage.

Sarah quickly ducked back inside her own apartment, slammed the door and locked it.

Backing away from the noise that left the next door apartment and started approaching hers from down the hallway – *bump-thump-drag. Bump-thump-drag. Bump-thump-dragggg.*

What IS that?! Sarah panicked.

Bump-thump-drag. Bump-thump-drag. Bump-thump-dragggg.

Damn! What could that be?! Sarah looked around for a weapon, realizing too late she'd only brought one small Swiss army pocketknife with her. *Did I really think I'd be safe up here like it was my dorm room and wouldn't need any protection? How stupid was I?*

Bump-thump-drag. Bump-thump-drag. Like a mummy's walk coming closer...closer...until...UNTIL...it stopped in front of her door. And someone knocked.

Sarah yelped, trying to hold back a scream.

"Hello in there?" a young man's voice called out.

A pause, then another gentle knock.

"Hi in there," came the voice. "It's okay. Sorry if I scared you. I didn't mean to. And I don't bite, I promise. Honest. What I mean is I'm not dangerous or anything. And I wasn't trying to scare you. I just need your help is all."

"Were you that bumping noise I just heard?" Sarah asked. "What are you doing over there anyway? Why are you even here?! You shouldn't be here!"

"Yes, sorry. Explanations first. My apologies. I heard you arrive this morning and I tried to teleport away, but the weight shackled to my leg pulled me back. That was the noise you heard. The weight attached to my leg. It's a pain too cause I have a severely bruised leg to show for it. But no matter what I try I can't seem to break free. Maybe you can help me. I certainly could use your help."

"Ummm....." Sarah replied holding still, clasping her hands together cause she almost opened the door out of instinctive courtesy.

"Hello in there?" the young man chimed. "Sorry if I scared you. My name's Jessie by the way – Jossiah Jefferson Vaughn, if you can believe that. But I go by Jessie. I'm staying in the room next to yours. Well, technically, I'm a squatter cause the owner doesn't know I'm living here right now. But I was here all last season with Kate and she didn't mind. She was the caretaker before you, if you didn't know."

"Kate? Is she here? Where's Kate?"

"No, she's not here. She's gone. Which is why I assume you're here now. You're the new lighthouse custodian for the winter season, aren't you?"

"For the whole year actually, but yes, I am. That still doesn't explain why you're here."

"Like I said, I admit it. I'm a squatter. I stayed on after Kate."

"Oh? So you've been here all this time?"

"Something like that. Time gets away from you up here. And I've been stuck to this weight for...I'm not exactly sure how long. A while. I know winter's coming, but I don't know the exact date. And I've eaten through most of my supplies."

"It's October. Do you know the year?"

"Of course, I'm not crazy. Just stuck. If it's October then the year would be 2008."

"Well, that's correct at least." Sarah replied still looking around for a weapon and trying to think tactically. Jessie sounded okay. Calm even. But this was real life and people didn't just squat in a lighthouse by themselves. And did he say he could teleport? With a weight attached to his leg? Was he crazy?

Yeah, she thought, but does that mean dangerous? Brad took medications for his mental health issues and he was fine, right? And I am temporarily trapped here with this guy for the time being. At least till the storm let's up. It's not like I can run outside and catch a ride from the seagulls.

"Hey," Jessie called in. "I don't mind talking from the other side of the door. Really, I don't. And I understand you weren't expecting anyone to be here, so it's cool. I've thrown you for a loop. But I promise you, I'm not dangerous. And I swear I won't hurt you in any fashion. It's just not in me. I know it's a matter of trusting a stranger, but I hope you will. Plus, I smelled that coffee you were brewing earlier, along with the bacon, and it has me drooling. I haven't eaten anything but beans for some time. So maybe I can come in for a late lunch and formally introduce myself? Show you that you can trust me? What do you think?"

Now what? Sarah wondered. She was in a quandary. *The real question is should I open the door? Probably since he's currently standing between me and my exit seven floors down. So realistically there's only one way to find out if he's a problem or not. By opening the door and going through the problem. Not around.*

Go around? Sarah countered, *like how you went around your baby problem?*

"Stop that! I've had enough of you!" Sarah barked to herself.

"Sorry?" Jessie answered. "Stop? I'm not sure what to stop. I'm stuck is all. And I am really sorry to be bothering you, but I'm here on a mission and have to see it through. I promise. I wouldn't be here if I didn't need your help."

"Hey, umm, Jessie?" Sarah called out.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to trust you when you say you're not dangerous, okay? I'll take your word as a gentleman. Or at the very least, as a decent human being, okay?" *There you go, Sarah, set your character expectations.* "So I'm going to open the door. But you should know I have...I have, umm, a *flare gun*. And if you try anything, I'm going to shoot you in the face. You'll end up blind with third degree burns."

"I understand. Sounds serious. Thank you for trusting me."

Sarah opened the door. She obviously didn't have a flare gun, but she did put her hand in her jacket pocket and point her pocket at Jessie.

Only Jessie turned out to be a dream. All smiles and soulfully warm eyes. He was tall and gangly, like a lost puppy woefully underfed. With ocean blue eyes and brown curly hair all a mess, like it hadn't been combed or cut properly for some time. His plaid shirt over khaki pants were equally worn and grungy, but he looked adorably

disheveled in them. To the point Sarah thought he was the sweetest Labrador a girl could want to play with -- not a dangerous criminal or escaped mental patient.

"Hey," Jessie smiled. "Nice to meet you. Am I okay to come in?"

"Umm," Sarah replied feeling a confusing dichotomy of physical attraction against a generalized fear of the unknown stranger. And to confuse things further, she noticed Jessie did have a ball and chain attached to his left leg -- like the kind they shackled prisoners to in those old prison movies.

Well, at least I know I can outrun him, she thought. "You can come in. I'm Sarah by the way."

"Jessie," he replied. "Nice to meet you. Now about that coffee." *Thump-bump-drag. Thump-bump-drag. Thump-bump-dragggg.*

"Jessie? Why do you have a weight strapped to your leg?"

"Oh, I did it myself unfortunately. An experiment really. I've been trying to increase the weight bearing capacity of my teleports. Currently, the limit is my body weight plus forty pounds, give or take, for one mile with a five minute in-transit time. Though there have been a few significant safety issues to adjust for."

"That leg weight looks like a lot more than forty pounds."

"Don't I know it! It must be fifty-five by my estimate. It has me grounded and I can't teleport. Anything over forty has me completely land locked."

"Why not just take the weight off?"

"I would, but I seem to have lost the key." Jessie laughed seeing Sarah's incredulous look. Putting his hands up in surrender. "Yes, I know how dubious this all must sound to you. I have no way to reassure you outside my word. And I don't blame you for looking to bail. But I'm trying to be as honest and forthright as I can and still have you

trust me. Which, I agree, if I were in your shoes, would be difficult. After all, why would anyone sane make up such an insane story, right?"

Sarah smiled thinking, *I've had that very thought myself.*

Jessie turned his ear to the storm outside -- listening to the rain, the wind, the heavy waves crashing against the lighthouse frame. "She's really blowing out there. That sounds like a pretty big storm."

Sarah imagined a big storm brewing inside her too. *For all I know, she thought, this situation could turn into a great romantic novel worth writing about. Like those "star crossed" lover stories her sorority sisters always swooned over and begged her to write more of. Wouldn't this make them all green with envy – especially the ones who'd rudely gossiped over her and Brad's break up – claiming he'd hurt her so bad she had to run away to the middle of nowhere just to get over him. But what if she triumphantly returned home not only debt free, along with her first novel, but with a soul mate to boot? That'd shut them all up for sure! The glass slipper on the proverbial other foot.*

Sitting in the kitchenette, with Jessie eating the last of her breakfast, Sarah appreciated his table manners. He was quiet and didn't slurp the coffee or chew his food with an open mouth. And unlike Brad, seemed relaxed, attentive, and respectful.

"Thank you for the hospitality," Jessie smiled, tipping a pretend hat toward her. "My compliments to the chef."

"Well," Sarah curtsied back, "I do what I can with what I have." And felt sufficiently emboldened to press further. "So, this teleportation thing. How did that start?"

"You wouldn't believe me."

"You mean it's more incredulous than you sitting here in a remote lighthouse with a weight attached to your leg claiming you can teleport while eating my breakfast?"

“Touché. Well, I suppose, at this point, it wouldn’t hurt to talk about since it won’t change anything. I didn’t know I could teleport till coming up with Kate last year. In fact, the first time I did was with Kate. Right here in this very lighthouse actually. We were in the bedroom back there, *in delecto flagrante* as it were, approaching the, umm, the climax, when, *BOOM!* We teleported.”

“I don’t think I’m following. You teleported during sex?”

“No, the climax triggered the teleportation. Both Kate and I. We teleported together when I, you know, orgasmed. We just shot out into the dark together.”

Sarah couldn’t help laughing. “You’re saying you went when you came?”

“Exactly,” Jessie laughed. “I teleported Kate and I naked out into the hallway just outside the apartment. I didn’t know I could do that. Which freaked me out, but Kate loved it. She said it was like flowing down a warm water slide in the dark till splashing back into reality. Like an amusement park ride. But for me it felt all tense and anxious till landing.”

“Wait, so you have to climax to teleport? And you teleported with Kate?”

“Yes. I don’t know how or why, but essentially yes. I never had sex before Kate.”

“Wait, you just said you couldn’t teleport more than forty pounds. I don’t know this Kate, but I’m sure she weighs more than that.”

“You’re right, she does. To clarify, I can teleport up to forty pounds solo. But, whenever Kate and I were together, and I climaxed, we could teleport together. Like we were one. Though there were a few hitches.”

“Such as?”

“Like I couldn’t control where we landed. Kate, for some reason, determined the location. Maybe because it’s easier for a girl to hold thoughts in her head during climax, I guess.”

“If she climaxed.”

“True. Or maybe her thoughts just overruled mine. Who knows?”

“What about solo? Can you decide your destination then.”

“Yes, but not without a lot of practice and focus. Not to mention, it sort of ruins it.”

Sarah laughed. “I can see why that would bother you.”

“I didn’t mind that Kate chose and would’ve let her keep on deciding. Only, she adopted this kamikaze attitude and started experimenting.”

“Experimenting?”

“Yeah. She wanted to see how many variables she could control – not just where we landed, but if we were together or separate. How far or how close together, if one landed before the other or not, how far away, that sorta thing. She would send us up three floors. Or down two. Or split us apart so one landed on the first floor while the other person landed up top. She kept copious notes about each trip and results in a little notebook.”

“Really? That sounds odd, but not risky.”

“Well, the edges started to blur.”

“How so?”

“Like, a few times I ended up partially wedged inside a piece of furniture. It didn’t hurt me, but the chair had pieces missing where I was embedded, so I just stepped out. One

time, she put me in a wall. There's still a silhouette where I landed. And even in a door. Kate had to cut me out with an axe on that one."

"Sounds scary."

"Kate claimed they were accidents, but I don't know. They started happening more frequently. Like one time, she sent me down to the rocks by the water's edge while she stayed inside in bed. Or another time, we both ended up on top on the catwalk and I nearly fell off. Ohh, the real fun was when she dropped me a half mile out to sea and I had to swim back naked against the tide. I almost didn't make it."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me and you both. But Kate got a kick out of it. The more dangerous, the better."

"Why didn't you just stop? You know, stop having sex with her?"

The way Jessie smiled said it all. "Because I loved her. And up here it all seemed normal. I mean, how do you say no to someone you're in love with?"

"You just say no."

"Really? Well, it wasn't so easy for me. But I did try to slow her down – to exert more control in my own head. Which helped some, but was limited. The worst part came when Kate became obsessed with those sealed computer rooms upstairs on the tenth and eleventh floor."

"The white rooms?"

"No not the anterooms. The locked interior rooms where all the computers are. Have you been up there yet?"

"Yes. Well, just to the white ante-rooms, but not inside the computer rooms. The owner said those were closed off and totally inaccessible."

"Exactly. He told Kate the same. That's why she wanted to teleport in there. To see

what was inside. Did you notice there were no door handles on the doors leading into those rooms? Heck, I couldn't even see the door most times with how seamless that creepy white on white room looked. And those ominous display panels."

"I hadn't really noticed that no."

"So how does ZEMCO get inside those rooms? Kate thought it was all some big conspiracy and was desperate to teleport inside – see what they were hiding. Take photos and collect evidence, that sort of thing. I didn't really want to, but she was determined. And convinced me to help her."

"She did?"

"Well, I admit I'd become a bit curious too."

"So, did you teleport inside?"

"Not at first. It turns out, it's more difficult to blindly teleport somewhere you haven't seen before. We tried, but the closest I came was landing just outside in the white ante-room. Kate said she was able to pass through the room a couple times and could see inside before landing outside."

"What did she see?"

"A long rectangular white box in the center of the room, ornately engraved, with lots of wires attaching to a bank of computers along the walls. Kate said she thought the box looked like an alien coffin that was communicating with ZEMCO's database."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Did she ever get inside?"

“The thing is though, when she passed through the first time, all the display panels turned red across the board and this terrible alarm went off. I thought we were busted for sure. But not even ten seconds later, when Kate landed outside, all the alarms stopped and everything reset to green.”

“Did you call ZEMCO? The owner said we’re supposed to call ZEMCO if those panels go red.”

“No, we didn’t do anything. We waited down in the apartment to see if the owner or ZEMCO called, or if anyone came out to arrest us or what. But after a week of no calls and no techs showing up, Kate thought we were in the clear and wanted to try again.”

“And?”

“At first, I refused. I don’t know why, but something seemed off about the whole thing and I was having severe cold feet. I even threatened to leave if Kate didn’t stop. She had two more months on her contract, we were almost done, and she was about to get a big paycheck. Why not stop?”

“How did Kate deal with that?”

“She wasn’t happy. She’d become convinced ZEMCO was involved in some deep conspiracy against the American people – like the JFK thing or Area 51 or whatever – hording answers to the cosmos. Like we’re not alone out there. She swore we needed to blow the lid off the whole affair and that it was the right thing to do. Again, her words not mine. But she also needed me.”

“Did you stop having sex with her?”

“I tried. I did. For awhile. But you have to understand I was completely in love with her. And when you’re up here all alone with no one else around, just you and your lover, perspective becomes a malleable thing. You know what I mean?”

“Unfortunately yes, I do.”

“So she just bid her time. And played along till she had lulled me into a false sense of security. It was actually nice, to be together after that without all the teleporting. Almost Ozzie and Harriet if they were the last two people on the earth.”

Sarah felt a twinge over the mention of Kate being duplicitous. She couldn’t say she hadn’t done the same and felt guilty about it.

“I’m sure Kate was in love with you and had her reasons,” Sarah told Jessie.

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“What happened after that, then?”

“Well, fate intervened...if you believe in such things.”

“What does that mean?”

“Fate? I don’t know if I can explain that part yet. I just need to get this ball and chain off to finish my mission. I think it’s time I did that. With your help, of course, if you’re willing. You’ve been so kind and generous.”

As far as plotlines went, Sarah knew what Jessie had just pivoted into a *contrivance of convenience* – something authors used to rationalize plot twists without giving away too much information. Why? She didn’t know yet. Though she was curious.

“So, you lost the key, huh?” Sarah played along.

“Yes. I’m a hundred percent certain I put the key here in my pants pocket. But it must’ve slipped out because I haven’t been able to find it for some time. It’s got to be somewhere in the storage room next door then – which is where I’ve been nearly the whole time. Bad luck on my part, huh?”

"Sure seems that way."

"Look Sarah, if you'll help me find the key and get this damn weight off, I promise I'll demonstrate my ability to teleport if you want."

"Umm, maybe. How about just explaining why you're really staying here? I mean do you really expect me to believe you've been hanging out since Kate left just to practice teleporting. If you even can. I may've fallen off the turnip truck, but not yesterday. If you want me to trust you, then maybe you can return the compliment."

"Okay, yes," Jessie replied nodding his head, "you're a hundred percent correct. I see I've done you a disservice. Fair enough. I'll make this vow here and now – if you help me get free, I'll not only demonstrate my ability to teleport, but tell you everything about why I'm still here. And even let you try to help if you're still interested."

"Okay, Jessie, I'll play along for now and help. I'll go look next door and look. But I'm also going to lock you inside this apartment first. I want to trust you, but a girl can't be too careful I suppose. So you're to sit tight. And if I hear you move in the least, I'm going to come back and shoot you in the face."

"Oh, right, the flare gun," Jessie grinned. "Sure, your terms are agreeable. I accept. I more than accept, I support your decision. But before you go, I do have one more favor to ask. Can I use your bathroom? The coffee seems to have run right through me."

"Sure. Please put the seat down when you're done. I'll be back in a minute."

Sarah left, locking the apartment door behind her before heading next door. *Why aren't you running away now?* She asked herself. *This is your chance.*

Because there's nowhere to run at the moment. Or did you think I can just go outside for a casual walk in this big storm? Just who's the crazy one here, exactly?

Bite me! Sarah replied. *This isn't about the storm and you know it!*

Sarah looked in the storage room. But other than a sleeping bag, a backpack, and a small trash bin filled with empty cans of Bush beans, the room was empty. She methodically searched everywhere, including inside the discarded cans in the trash, without success. Until something occurred to her. It was quiet. Too quiet. She hadn't heard any noise coming from her apartment. No bump-thump-drag. No Jessie. No nothing. Just the sound of the wind and rain outside.

Sarah considered her situation again and came to a decision. *This is just getting too uncomfortable. Not panic time yet, I think, but the best thing I can do now is get to the CB radio and call the owner. Which is sitting on the desk in the other room. I can call the owner, run out and get picked up down the road somewhere. Crap, why am I so bad at this whole thing?*

Heading back to her apartment and unlocking the door, Sarah got a strong whiff of lilacs. *Weird*, she thought. *Why do I smell flowers?* "Jessie?" she called in. No response. "Jessie? Are you here?" Nothing. *Well, that sucks! If he's hiding around the corner waiting to jump on me, I'm gonna be really pissed.*

Sarah cautiously entered the apartment, tiptoe-ing as she went, trying to look everywhere at once. But no Jessie. Not in the living room, kitchenette, single bedroom, closet or bathroom. However, in the bathroom, she did discover the ball and chain weight with no Jessie attached. *Now where did he go? Crap!* Sarah thought. *Alright, I've had enough of this.* Sarah quickly went to the living room desk and turned on the CB, dialing to channel four as the owner instructed. *I believe this officially qualifies as a problem he'll need to deal with.*

"Hello?" Sarah said keying the mic, receiving only static in return. "HELLO?!" she repeated with the same results. "Darn this storm!" she cursed dialing through several more channels. *And this is only my first day. If this is how it's gonna be, I'm definitely going home. Because I don't think I can take any more of this.*

"Whatcha doing, Sarah?" Jessie asked from behind her.

Sarah screamed.

This time Jessie did laugh. "Oh, sorry! I scared you again. Sorry, I wasn't trying to."

"But you did! Where did you come from? Where'd you go? Don't come any closer!

You stay there! I swear I'll shoot you if you don't!" Sarah reached for her pocket.

"Oh, yes, the flare gun. We can dispense with that little lie. I know you don't have one.

You're a liar just like Kate was." Jessie looked angry. "But did you know we actually have a flare gun in the emergency kit in the cupboard?" He held up a red handled flare gun. "Like this one. Actually, this one exactly. It came from that kit. You'll forgive me, but I had to check. To see if you really had it. Otherwise, I wouldn't have wasted so much time getting to know you."

"Don't hurt me!" *How did he get between me and the door again?*

"I won't as long as you don't make me." Jessie grinned, his puppy-dog smile gone replaced with a maniac's grin. "But I will if you push me."

Sarah tried not to panic with so many thoughts crowding her mind. "What do you want? How are you free? You said you needed my help, but now you're threatening me! What game are you playing?!"

"Well, it was the damndest thing. I went to the bathroom like I said because I had to...you know...relieve myself. Sorry to be indelicate, but it's been a while and I was a little backed up. I sat down on the toilet and pushed. Maybe too hard because the next thing you know I teleported down one flight down, sans the weight. Finally. If I'd known straining through a bowel movements would que up the old teleportation, I'd have done so long ago. Now I'm free to finish what I started." Jessie practically danced in place.

“Okay, you’re free. So you can leave. If you can teleport like you say, then it won’t take you long to get to town.”

“Yes, that is a consideration. Only I still have one last piece of business to conclude before I leave.”

“Whatever it is, I don’t care. I don’t want anything to do with that anymore. You said you needed help to get free. And now you’re free, so leave.”

“Not until I get Kate.”

“Kate? What do you mean get Kate? What does that mean?” *Here comes the twist he’s been holding back about.* Sarah thought. *Why he’s really here.* “You said Kate left.”

“No. Well, yes. Well, yes and no. Look, Sarah, I’m going to tie you up now. I don’t want to, but I need a little time to finish what I started and I don’t want you interfering. Or calling anyone on the radio like you just tried to do. I promise you once I’m done, I’ll come back and untie you. Then I’ll leave for good and you’ll never see me again. You can call whomever you want after that. But if you interfere or try to stop me, I’ll have to kill you.”

“No, don’t do that. Please. Just stop and think what you’re doing. You don’t have to tie me up, okay? I won’t do anything or say anything to anyone. I’ll even leave so you can finish what you have to and I won’t be in the way. I’ll just leave.”

“It’s not that simple. I’d like to believe you, but you’ve already proven to be a liar. And I might need you at some point. Maybe I won’t, but I can’t tell until I’ve tried to get Kate out.”

“Where is she? I’m confused.”

“I’m going to tie you up first.”

"NO! DON'T do that! If you try, I'll fight. I'll gouge your eyes out."

"Sorry Sarah. It's not personal. I know I'm asking a lot, but it has to be this way. Till I finish what I started."

Sarah made a break for the door, but Jessie grabbed her. Dragging her back inside to the ball and chain weight and cuffing her to it.

"There," Jessie said, breathing heavy. Backing away to avoid Sarah's pummeling.

"There, all secure. Now, that wasn't so bad, was it? And I'm hoping you'll understand when I tell you I'm honestly not trying to hurt you."

"THEN LET ME GO!"

"Sorry, not yet. Not till I'm done upstairs. I'll be right back."

He's got me, but I'm not giving up! I just have to flip the script on this, Sarah thought. It may be my only chance at getting free from this insanity. "Wait! At least tell me before you go why you're doing all this. At least I'll know. Maybe I'll even sympathize and be on your side."

Jessie looked at Sarah for several minutes -- his eyes boring into her. Then he replied, "Okay, why not. I don't see how it'll change anything. Kate is upstairs inside one of the sealed computer rooms."

"She's inside the room? Right now?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"On our last teleport together, she successfully made it inside."

"Weren't you with her?"

"No, I landed in the white ante-room outside. I told her not to mess with those rooms or experiment further, but she didn't listen!"

"Why didn't you let her out?"

"Couldn't. Like I said, there are no door handles. As far as I can tell, there are no doors. Believe me, I checked. There are no cracks, gaps or obvious ways to get into those rooms. For all we know, the only way in or out is through some kind of access codes punched into the display panels mounted outside the room. Which neither of us had. And I searched every manual I could find in this lighthouse without finding a single clue."

"So you called the owner, right? And had him drive up to let Kate out."

"Yes. Well, no. Not....no."

"No?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Sarah, listen to me. Did you know when you took this job, you officially became a sub-contractor to the federal government."

"No."

"You did. And as such, this lighthouse is also officially classified as under the authority of the federal government?"

"So? What does that have to do with Kate?"

"Don't you see? If Kate was a federal sub-contractor, along with the lighthouse being on federal land, then her breaking into those sealed rooms without permission would be a federal crime. And trespassing in restricted areas within federally designated

locations is a felony punishable by imprisonment at Leavenworth. And that's before you get to the whole creepy alien-computer interchange going on inside those rooms. Didn't you notice the warning on the display panels in the white ante-room?"

"No."

"Well, they're there. Why though? If the rooms are sealed and impossible to get into, why do they need a sign telling you it's punishable to enter those rooms without permission? Are they worried about spies and espionage or what?"

"You're being paranoid."

"I don't think so. There's a reason the pay is so good up here -- especially in comparison to the unskilled labor required. Or did you not consider that either? Kate did before she even took the job."

"Well, no. I just thought the pay was, like, a bonus for the length of isolation required."

"No."

"Okay. So I didn't perform my due diligence. But I don't understand why, if you loved Kate, why you didn't call the owner, or ZEMCO, or whomever you needed to get her out."

"Because all they would've done is throw Kate in prison for life and me in a looney bin. Do you think they would've understood if I told them how Kate got into the room? Or that I can teleport? No! They wouldn't care. They'd just call me crazy and charge Kate with being a spy or an eco-terrorist or something like that. And there's nothing we could've done to stop them. Even if we wanted to. If you haven't noticed, there aren't a lot of people paying attention around here who could stop them."

"That's not the true. This is America. And you're an American citizen."

"Now who's being naïve? Since when has that every stopped them?"

"That all sounds awfully paranoid to me."

"I'm not! Don't say that! I know what I'm talking about!"

Sarah could see the irrational light in Jessie's eyes and accepted he was plain crazy.

Which meant he was dangerous if pushed in the wrong direction. *How could I have ever believed him?* She wondered. *I'm such an idiot.*

"Look, Jessie, I have an idea. How about I call the owner and tell him about Kate myself? Not you, but me. Then he'll blame me. I won't even mention you. You can just teleport away."

"Sorry, but that won't work."

"Why not?"

"How are you going to explain Kate being dead inside the sealed ZEMCO room? Even if you could, do you think they'd believe you?"

"Kate is dead?"

"Yes."

"You killed Kate? Did you kill Kate?"

"No, of course not! I loved her! But I couldn't reach her. I tried! Oh believe me, I tried. But I couldn't get into those damn sealed room. I tried till I became dizzy and passed out, but I just couldn't reach her."

"You left her in the computer room to die?"

"Are you not listening?! I did everything I could! I tried! For days and weeks. Well past when she stopped talking. Or tapping on the door. Or making any sounds. And still I tried, but it was no use."

“Didn’t the alarms go off? Didn’t the panel turn to red like before?”

“No.”

“No?”

“NO! I don’t know why, but they didn’t!”

Jessie was looking more unhinged than ever. To the point Sarah realized, even though his story wasn’t adding up – and becoming more unbelievable by the minute -- she didn’t need him to know that. She just needed to find a way to escape. “Well, maybe Kate’s still alive, just in hibernation or something. I’ve heard that can happen. People drop into deep trances and are brought back months later. I tell you what, Jessie. I’ll call the owner, get the codes and go in and rescue her. You said you loved her. Let me help you rescue her.”

“No, she’s dead.”

“Well, maybe I could pull her out anyway. It must’ve been hard for you to leave her in there. I totally understand. So let me help you get her out.”

“I had no other recourse, you understand?! What else was I to do? It wasn’t my fault!”

“No, I don’t think it was.” Then something occurred to Sarah. “If Kate is still here, then the owner must be concerned. Aren’t you afraid the owner will come looking for Kate?”

“He doesn’t know about this. He thinks Kate went home.”

“How?”

“I emailed him from Kate’s online account a month ago. I pretended to be her and told him I was heading home a little earlier than expected, so would he mind forwarding the

last check by mail. He emailed back no problem. For a top secret lighthouse, they're pretty cavalier about security around here."

"Didn't he come up here and check? Or inspect the lighthouse?"

"No. Not that I know of. No one has been here or shown up till you did this morning."

"Oh goodness."

"So look Sarah. Here's how it's going to go. For some reason, I feel like I can get Kate out now. Somehow I think I'm strong enough. You had a lot to do with that. Thank you. But if I can't, I may have to resort to the original way. It's not what I want, but I might have to. And if I can't get Kate out on my own, then there's a chance I'll need you and I to work together to teleport in there. I'm afraid time has run out and I'm out of options."

Sarah couldn't believe what she was hearing. *Was this really possible? How did I end up like this?* "Look, Jessie, no matter what you think, you should never resort to that!

You're not that kind of a guy, right? Just let me call the owner. I promise you, I'll take all the heat and get Kate out for you. Even if I'm the one who has to go to Leavenworth. You just have to trust me. No one will ever know about you. You can just head out. And you'll have fulfilled your responsibility to Kate by letting me get her out for you."

"I feel pretty strongly about getting her myself. She's my responsibility. Even if you and I do so together."

"I'll get Kate, I promise. But not your way. I won't do that. And I guarantee you, if you try it that way, it won't work."

"How do you figure? It did with Kate."

"Because you said it yourself. Kate was the one who focused on the destination during teleportation, not you. So Kate determined where you went. Well, I promise you, if

you force me into having sex with you – if you rape me, I'll never focus on getting you in that room! I'll picture us being a hundred miles away in the middle of the ocean just so you'll drown. Or imagine you deep underground and bury you alive till you suffocate. You'll never get me to think about getting you into that room if you rape me!"

"You could die too if you did that."

"Maybe. But I'll take you with me, that's for sure. Only listen! It doesn't have to be like that. We just need to try it my way."

"How will you explain Kate being in the room and all?"

"I don't have to. It's my first day on the job today, remember? There's no connection between Kate and I. Nor any reason I should know she's up here in one of those computer rooms. For all I know, she left to return home, right? Just like you said. So I'll just say I was performing my first day inspections and noticed something happening with the control panels during the storm. The owner said to call right away if I thought anything was off. Well, I'll just tell him the panel kept flashing red during the storm. Or something glitchy like that. I'll call the owner, per his instructions, and report it just like he said to. And he'll come up here and actually open the door and find her. I won't know anything about what's inside the room simply because I literally just arrived. So he won't suspect me. And if you're gone, then there'll be no connection to Kate since you said the owner didn't even know you were up here with her. So no one will suspect you, right? They'll figure she just made her way into the room, got trapped and died."

"ZEMCO will know."

“No, they won’t. Or they’ll think some stranger came along. It’ll be a mystery for sure, but not one you or I will ever be suspected of, right? Because there’s no connection! I just arrived and you were never here, right?”

Jessie smiled. “You make some really good points. Okay, I’ve changed my mind. Let’s try it your way. I’m going to leave. But listen, Sarah. I won’t go far until I’m sure you’ve kept your word. I’ll watch from a distance and make sure. So if you don’t do what you say, I’ll teleport back here when no one’s around and make you pay. You understand? Do you agree?”

“Jessie, I give you my word. One hundred percent! I’ll get Kate out and get her back to her family so they can put her to rest.” *If there even is a Kate.* “And I’ll take the responsibility for whatever happens with the federal government. As long as you keep your word and leave.”

“Deal,” Jessie smiled before turning and walking away. “I’m going to trust you. But, I’ll be watching from a distance.”

Jessie walked out of the apartment and Sarah breathed a little easier. She was still shaken, and very scared, but despite her fear, she felt she might just’ve won her life back.

Sarah dragged herself to the CB radio and called the owner, but still had to wait a few hours till the storm eased up and reception improved. Waiting for the storm to pass, Sarah started hallucinating. Because, at one point she looked at the door and saw Brad there holding her unborn baby in his arms. And when the baby started crying, Brad screamed, “*This is all your fault!*” Which must’ve woken her up because when she looked again, he and the baby were gone.

“Poor girl sounds like a basket case,” the lighthouse owner explained to his ZEMCO contact. “Something about the storm and the ZEMCO computer rooms and the control panels flashing red. She says there’s a girl inside the sealed computer rooms.”

“I don’t get those readings where I’m at,” the ZEMCO contact replied. “And my people insist the sensor panels are all reading five by five here.”

“Well, maybe the storm is playing havoc at the lighthouse...or maybe she’s hallucinating. I don’t know. It does happen on occasion with those who’ve never been that alone before. She passed the psych and background, but still. I’m setting out right away and should know more when I get there. I’ll call you again in a few hours.”

When the owner arrived at Pigeon Point, the storm had considerably eased up. And he found Sarah holed up in the keeper’s apartment with a ball and chain locked around her ankle. *Why in the hell did she do that?* he wondered.

“There you go, little missy. You’re safe now,” the owner said after retrieving his bolt cutters from his truck and cutting Sarah free. Then wrapped a blanket around and, with his help, guided her down to his truck. Babbling the whole time about a strange boy who’d taken her hostage – who could teleport – and who had locked her to the ball and chain. Then something about aborting her baby and leaving a dead girl in the computer rooms to have sex with before “he’d” let her go free. It was all very confusing. *Poor girl*, the owner thought. *I think I need to take her to the hospital. None of what she’s saying makes any sense. The poor girl’s obviously gone mental.*

Before they left, the owner told Sarah, “I need to head back inside before we can leave, little missy. To check the computer rooms. Just wait for me here and I’ll be right back. You’re as safe as a baby...err....you’ll be safe in the truck while I’m gone. I won’t be but a few minutes.”

"Okay," Sarah mumbled, "But leave the truck keys here." She planned to keep the doors locked till he returned. And drive away if she needed to.

"Sure thing," the owner replied dropping the keys on the seat and heading into the lighthouse.

Sarah tried to remain calm. She locked both doors and held the keys tightly, staring out the windows for any sign of Jessie. Till an hour had passed and she realized the owner hadn't returned. Now something didn't feel right.

"Hello?" she called out rolling down the truck window.

No answer.

I'm not getting out of this truck and going back in there! The hell with that! Sarah cracked the truck door and tentatively stepped from the vehicle. Calling out loudly, "Hello?!" Then louder still. "HELLO!"

"Hello, Sarah," Jessie answered, smiling as he walked out of the lighthouse door into the sunlight -- his face, hands, and shirt covered in blood. Gone was the puppy dog lost smile replaced by a most sinister grin.

Sarah screamed and dove back into the truck.

"Now, there you go again, Sarah. You startle so easily. And then there's the lying! Don't you know lying ruins trust in a relationship! And now you've violated my trust again by breaking your promise! You told the owner about me! About me and Kate and the computer room. I heard you. Then the owner arrives. And instead of helping, he comes upstairs and tries to arrest me. He attacked me Sarah! And now Kate is still stuck in the computer room! Nothing you promised came true. But unlike you, I'm a man of my word. I follow through with what I promise. Do you know what that means, Sarah?!"

Sarah screamed again.

“Now Sarah. I still need your help! And I can’t have you screaming when we go get Kate!”

Sarah got behind the wheel, fumbling with the keys till she could get the right one into the ignition to start the engine. All the while chanting, *I’m not gonna die! I’m not gonna die! I’m not going to die!*

Yes you are, you stupid girl, she answered herself, *unless you get this truck moving and run the bastard over before it’s too late! Now get your ass moving!*

Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP! Why can’t you just shut up and leave me alone!

“Saarahhh!” Jessie yelled running toward the truck. “You broke your promise! You LIED! You told the owner about me and now he’s dead as a consequence. That one’s on you! I told you what they would do if they came up here.”

Sarah got the engine started, threw the truck into gear, and mashed the accelerator down as hard as she could. Sending the truck lurching forward, hitting Jessie and sending him splaying in the dirt and mud. Sarah cranked the wheel, spinning the truck and hitting the gas again -- sending the truck in the opposite direction away from the lighthouse.

“SAARRRAHHHH!” Jessie screamed. “I’LL BE SEEING YOU SOON, SARAH! *Don’t forget I can TELEPORT!!!*”

The End.

