

# COLORS

David  
Berardelli



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No good deed goes unpunished, and twenty-three-year-old Lindsay Foreman becomes acutely aware of that after helping an old woman struck by a car and left for dead on a Central Florida highway.

As the old woman slips closer to death, she tells Lindsay she must give her something. Lindsay has no idea what the woman is talking about and assumes she is delirious. But later Lindsay begins experiencing strange visual sensations, seeing odd colors on people's faces or above their heads. The more this happens, the more she realizes the colors appear to coincide with emotions and situational responses of people with whom she comes in contact.

Desperate to find out what has happened to her, Lindsay digs deeper into the circumstances involving the old woman's death, hoping to discover clues about this strange 'gift' the old woman apparently passed on to her. However, a criminal element seems determined to stop Lindsay's investigation into the hit-and-run murder. Suddenly Lindsay finds herself in more trouble than she can handle – especially when an undercover DEA agent, C.C. Cross, seemingly comes to her rescue.

It's hard to know whom to trust, but with her new insight, Lindsay has a better idea than anyone can imagine. The question is, will her strange gift of colors help keep her from getting herself – and Cross – killed?

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*by*

*David Berardelli*

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**Penumbra Publishing**  
*www.PenumbraPublishing.com*

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ISBN/EAN-13: 978-1-935563-57-0  
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Also available EBOOK ISBN/EAN 13: 978-1-935563-56-3

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*Fatal Innocence*

## ~AUTHOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT~

Once again I'd like to thank Pat Morrison and the folks at Penumbra Publishing for their hard work and encouragement. I'd also like to dedicate this work of fiction to Linda, my wife, partner in crime, sounding board, helping hand, biggest fan ... and most of all, very best friend.



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# PART I

## FRIDAY NIGHT

### *The Old Woman*



## Chapter 1

As the solid wall of traffic roared past, Maisie coughed wetly and waited for the light to change.

The lights had always been her friends. They told her things, warned her of impending danger. They'd give her enough time to cross. Once she reached the mall at the intersection of Colonial and Maguire, she could use the restroom in one of their stores to wash up. Then she could find shelter behind a dumpster to get through another long, muggy night. Since the other homeless had chased her away from the Presbyterian Church, Maisie had to find some other place to rest. It was getting harder and harder to find empty nooks these days.

Thankfully, eating was not a major issue. She no longer enjoyed the leftover food she found in dumpsters or the few eateries she went into with the handful of quarters she'd earned panhandling. Burdened with crippling arthritis and the nagging wet cough that had been building up in her chest the last few months, she didn't know how much longer she could manage.

The cigarettes had done this. The many years of smoking were going to kill her. She'd given them up years ago – mostly from lack of money – but the heavy wetness in her chest remained. The uncomfortable condition had

gradually developed into a hacking cough. It raged mercilessly through her, keeping her awake at night and exhausting her during the day.

Central Florida scared her nowadays. It was much too crowded, too hectic, and too loud. Much like the merry-go-round at the circus she'd watched from her tiny booth years ago, before her special gift faded with the passing years. The city had become a huge merry-go-round packed with screaming kids and adults rushing around like a dog chasing its tail.

Many years ago, before Disney came in and brought along its own strange civilization, a body didn't have to put her life in danger just to cross the street. Back then there wasn't as much traffic and not as many people. The pace was slower, and the anger not as heavy in the air.

Modern times had made people crazy. They'd trample somebody without a second glance, everyone always wanting to be somewhere else. Modern mentality wasn't much different than it was in the camps, where people who'd been herded into a barbed wire pen wandered around in a daze, living out what was left of their existence until the uniformed monsters came to take them away forever.

The hacking fit came suddenly, without warning. She doubled over, clutching her stomach. It had come from a deeper place this time. The expulsion was heavier. She hawked out a thick mass of brownish-red into the storm drain and wiped her mouth with the filthy handkerchief she hadn't been able to wash since yesterday.

The light changed. She stepped down from the curb and hobbled across, her failing eyesight focused on the cracked pavement straight ahead. Headlights aimed at the intersection sliced through her path, clouding her vision. The moaning and growling of the stilled traffic sounded so much like the bulldozers far off in the hills, cutting into the earth to create the next mass grave.

She ignored the searing catcalls and the insults as she crossed. Ugliness, bad manners, and foul language posed no problem. She'd endured insults and rudeness most of her life. Folks no longer respected one another because they no longer respected themselves. They looked down on others to make themselves feel better, their misery oozing from their souls like bleeding sores. In their eyes she was just some dirty old woman making them late for their dinner or their trip to the 7-Eleven for beer and cigarettes.

In front of the endless line of cars, a long-haired prissy sat in a convertible, tapping the wheel impatiently while glaring at Maisie for

making her late for her date or some appointment at the nail salon.

*Soon it will all be gone, Maisie wanted to tell her. Long before you realize it, that beautiful long hair will turn brittle and break off. Your smooth skin will peel away and form pouches of tired flesh beneath the liver spots. Your bosom will fall. You'll no longer be gorgeous or desirable. Time will become your enemy. But if you remain patient, you will see that time has also become your friend. It will let you see things you were unable to see in your youth, and feel things you were unable to feel as a young, self-centered girl.*

With a deep sigh of relief, Maisie reached the end of her journey. Stiff and tired, she climbed back up onto the curb. It took a little time to catch her breath. In the midst of it, another cough tore from her throat. This one was not as intense. The sputum, mildly brown and not as thick, barely stained her handkerchief.

The light changed. The angry wall of metal screamed past. Maisie resumed walking. One more block and the light would enable her to cross Colonial. This journey would take much more time and greater care. Colonial consisted of many lanes. She'd have to proceed with utmost caution.

A few yards down, two skinny figures approached. They were male, around eighteen, wearing the baggy clothes all the kids wore nowadays. Their pants were pulled down, exposing their colored undershorts. The glaze in their eyes pierced the approaching darkness.

Maisie had seen this type often. The anger flowed freely, possibly because they had no one to guide them into adulthood. Their arrogance had run rampant. They were stupid and confused, could not speak correctly, and respected no one. They seemed to be the result of some laboratory experiment gone bad, ending in an evil mutation.

"Hey, old woman," one of them said, sniffing. "You smell like an old couch."

She made no comment, veering right, into the grass.

The other one blocked her way. His friend came up behind her to prevent her from turning around. Both reeked of weed and BO. Maisie wondered if they lived with their parents. Few of them did anymore. Usually one parent and a steady stream of boyfriends or girlfriends occupied the household. The mother produced the kid, ran the man off, and let the government support her.

In Maisie's day, the family shared one household, food, chores,

laughter and tears. But that took place in another world.

“Got money?” the one facing her said.

“Yeah.” His friend nodded eagerly. “They bum quarters all day. Bet she’s got a stash!”

The one who’d just spoken shivered. Maisie could smell their fear. She knew they wanted to do something they could tell their friends. Kids loved showing off in front of one another. It was a status sort of thing. America was a great country with all its freedoms, but over the years its children had become savages no better than those working the death camps a lifetime ago.

These two didn’t seem to care about anything. They didn’t even care about the traffic roaring by. Or that someone might stop or call a policeman.

Darkness had already settled in. With darkness came anonymity. To the passing traffic, Maisie and the boys had become a blurry, strange-moving shape along the sidewalk.

The one facing her held out his hand. “The money, bitch.”

Maisie shook her head.

“Got my blade right here.” The boy patted his trouser pocket. “No money? You’re gonna see my blade.”

“I wanna see *blood*,” his friend said, giggling like a girl. “Lots and lots of *blood*.”

Maisie studied the first boy’s face. The pale white glow of fear emanating from the hollow spots beneath his glazed eyes had changed to blotches of red. She’d seen this same color change thousands of times before. Even though her gift had been failing her, it still told her what she needed to know. It didn’t fail her now. And when she saw the boy’s colors, she couldn’t hold back the snicker.

“You *laughing* at me, you old cow?”

“Go home to your mother, sonny,” she said. “Both of you.”

“Listen here, you stupid ugly old bat—”

“You don’t have a knife in there, sonny. Just that crap the two of you are smoking.”

“What the—”

They both froze.

“Your mothers should be ashamed of *both* of you.”

Neither said a word as she passed.

## Chapter 2

Her feet sore and tingly, Lindsay Foreman finished up her cashier duties at Sarah's Shirts 'N Stuff. Leaving the store, she walked back to her two-bedroom apartment just west of Semoran Boulevard, where she and her mother had been living the last six years. It usually took less than fifteen minutes to make the trip, but longer when she drove because of traffic. So, most of the time, she walked. It was just a couple of blocks and gave her a chance to restore circulation to her legs after standing behind that cash register for eight painful hours.

The apartment was empty except for Marvin, Lindsay's turquoise-blue crowntail betta, obsessively patrolling his territory in the small tank on the third shelf of the living room hutch. Momma wasn't home yet, probably still at the office, running late again. Ever since she'd started dating her boss, Momma came home late almost every night. At least Marvin was home to greet her, in his own cold, detached way.

Lindsay had bought Marvin a year ago at the pet store three doors down from the tee-shirt shop just before Sam, the owner, went bankrupt and vacated the building. Marvin was beautiful but slightly sociopathic. The one and only time she brought home a companion for him turned out to be a huge mistake. When Marvin savagely attacked and killed the intruder in just minutes, Lindsay realized she should've left well enough alone.

Lindsay fed Marvin his usual miniscule ration of dinner, then went into her bedroom. She laid her purse on her desk, changed into her Florida State jersey and frayed jeans, freed her long brown hair from its confining barrette, and trudged barefoot into the kitchen. She was a little hungry, but decided to wait until she'd heard from Momma. Momma wouldn't like it if she came home with supper and saw Lindsay eating a sandwich.

A cold drink would hit the spot. She dropped an ice cube into a glass and popped open a can of Sprite, then plodded back into the living room and picked up the remote. *Charmed* blazed onto the screen. She flipped through the channels. A group of giggling teens tried out for cheerleader practice. On another station, a trio of giggling teens painted their toenails and complained about their boyfriends. Lindsay wasn't in the mood. She

spent eight hours a day working in a store that sold tee-shirts, jeans, and posters of rock stars and rappers. Most of the store's customers were between twelve and twenty, and she had absolutely no incentive to waste her evenings watching that same oftentimes annoying age group on TV.

She switched to the Discovery Channel, where a group of rough-talking guys risked their lives on a boat, searching for giant crabs. She watched the show for about five minutes, gripping the arm of the couch when one of the fishermen tripped on a trap line and nearly fell into the ocean. During the commercial break, she got up and went back into her room, sat down at her computer desk, and looked out the window.

The street was heavy with Friday night traffic, everyone hurrying to get to restaurants or movie theaters. She picked up the partially read newspaper lying on her desk. The advertised giant summer sale ended this Sunday. Those large rose-tinted sunglasses she had been wanting appeared on the list. They were twenty percent off, which translated into a savings of ten bucks.

Her cell buzzed. She picked up, hearing the familiar breathy voice saying, "Lindsay, baby, it's Momma."

"Everything all right?" Lindsay asked quickly.

"Something came up. I'm gonna be late. Okay?"

Lindsay sighed. Dinner was probably going to be deli chicken or roast beef again. "Any idea how long?"

"Maybe an hour. Have you eaten? I'll stop at a chicken place—"

"I'm okay."

"Later, maybe?"

"I'm really not in the mood for chicken," Lindsay said sullenly. It wasn't that she didn't want her mother to have fun and enjoy her life. Momma and Dad had been divorced for years, and Momma, at forty-four, was still a great-looking lady with a terrific figure. It was just that Lindsay didn't care for Momma's boss. He flaunted his wealth and let Momma dote over him. He also had a way of staring at Lindsay that made her uneasy.

"How about pizza, then?" Her mother offered. "Sausage and pepperoni?"

"And mushrooms."

"I'll be about an hour – two, tops. Love ya, baby."

"You too, Momma." Lindsay ended the call. The last time Momma said 'two, tops,' she got home at ten that night.

Best find something to do. It was Friday night – nothing interesting on

the tube. She wasn't in the mood to log onto her computer and waste time checking out the stupid things people were doing on YouTube. Deciding to head on over to the mall and check out those sunglasses, she slipped on her tennies, brushed her hair, and tied it in a ponytail. Then she snatched up her keys, grabbed her purse, and left the apartment.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Lindsay walked to the mall, the muggy night air swelled with a mix of traffic exhaust fumes, whiffs of charbroiled beef, and the sound of kids yelling from the open windows of passing cars. Colonial was lit up and bustling, lined with stores, fast food places, and a few fancier restaurants. Most of the activity was focused at the mall, and the theater megaplex.

Lindsay reached the end of the block. The wait for a break in the steady stream would probably take forever. She was used to it. She'd grown up in this area, seen it expand from hectic to total insanity in just a few years. She'd been dodging fast-moving traffic since she was little.

The squealing of tires directly ahead pierced the night. A loud thump resonated, followed by the screeching of brakes, then more squealing.

About a hundred feet farther down, a dark muscle car stormed loudly away from the motionless figure lying just off the curb.

Her pulse thundering, Lindsay ran over and knelt beside the still form. An old woman in wrinkled, foul-smelling clothes lay on her back, her head turned at an awkward angle. In the haze of the streetlamp, Lindsay saw that the woman's face was rough and covered with wrinkles and liver spots. Her curly white hair, dirty and matted, poked out beneath a brown-and-red checkered scarf. Her veiny gray eyes stared blankly at Lindsay. She stirred. Her small, dirt-smudged hand lifted awkwardly.

The traffic behind Lindsay slowed but didn't stop. She wondered if anyone even noticed them – if anyone even cared. *I do. I guess that's enough.*

She covered the weak, cold wrist with her hands. No pulse. She didn't know if that was because of her own trembling or because the woman's heart had already failed. "Stay with me, okay?"

No reply.

"I'll get help. I promise. We'll get you out of here."

The woman's eyes closed. Lindsay held the old woman's wrist with her left hand. With her right, she fumbled for her cell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lindsay waited on a hard bench while workers in scrubs rushed up and down the long corridor in front of her. Some pushed gurneys while others carried clipboards, each focused on his own assigned emergency. She barely noticed. She was too busy trying to forget the horrible thumping sound of the muscle car slamming into the old woman.

Why was that the only thing she could think of? That, and the nagging fear that Momma was going to freak when she got home and found the message Lindsay had left on the answering machine. Momma wasn't the most collected person in the world. She'd come home, put the pizza on the kitchen table, yell for Lindsay, then check the machine. When she heard Lindsay's voice, she'd imagine the worst. But that wasn't important right now.

Why couldn't she remember anything else about that awful moment? Aside from the sickening thump and a brief glimpse of the car zooming away, her mind had gone blank. No license plate. No bumper sticker. And since it was dark, the make and color of the car had blurred into emptiness.

Even if she *could* remember, what would it accomplish? How could it help the old woman? She was a bag lady and probably had no identification or health insurance – or relatives, even. Lindsay didn't know much about such matters, but did know a little about how the system operated. *They'll make her comfortable but won't waste any meds on her because she has no money.*

Lindsay earned fifteen thousand dollars a year working at the tee-shirt shop, plus what little medical insurance Sarah, the shop owner, provided. How could that help this situation? Lindsay had very little savings. Because of her parents' divorce, Lindsay's college education was halted right after her sophomore year. The divorce, the therapy Momma needed when Dad left with his secretary, and the care needed to help get Momma back on her feet became a full-time job. Lindsay tried attending the local community college part-time, but even that was too much. With nothing else coming in but the monthly pittance Momma obtained from the desertion decree, Lindsay had to support them both. It had been a rough couple of years, but she'd managed. She just couldn't afford to go back to school at this point in her life. And, since she couldn't complete her education, she couldn't begin a professional career in anything that would afford her a good income or



sufficient medical coverage.

Lindsay looked up, spotting Momma, still in her business suit, rushing down the hall toward her. Her sharp-featured face was pale, her makeup unable to hide the fear in her eyes. Lindsay realized she should have waited a few minutes before leaving her message.

“Baby, what *is* all this? Are you all right?”

“A lady was struck by a car on Colonial, in front of the mall.”

“My *God*... But ... why are you *here*? Your message said—”

“The car hit her and kept on going.” Even as she said it, she couldn’t believe it had actually happened. “The poor lady ... she didn’t have a chance.” Lindsay could feel a sob working its way up her throat.

Momma shivered. “Baby ... I thought *you* had an *accident*...”

“I’m sorry, Momma. I was upset and rushed when I left the message. I didn’t know when the medical unit would—”

“Why didn’t you come straight home? You don’t *know* this lady, do you?”

“No...” That didn’t seem to matter.

“You can’t do anything else, can you? If it was a hit-and-run—”

“She’s *alone*, Momma.”

“Listen, baby.” Momma moved closer. “I know how sensitive you are. That’s a wonderful thing, it truly is. But you’ve done all you can do.”

A medium-sized guy in scrubs pushed open the swinging doors. He was about thirty, with his black hair brush-cut and a two-day growth of beard. He glanced at them. “Either of you call this in?”

Lindsay got up from the bench. “I’m Lindsay Foreman. I—”

“It was a nasty accident. She’s barely alive.”

“Will she ... I mean...”

“She’s very old. There’s internal damage. And a tumorous growth on her left lung.”

“See, baby?” Momma gently tapped her shoulder. “You can’t do anything else. They’ll take care of her and see to it that—”

“Is it ... malignant?”

“The results haven’t come in yet, but we suspect so. It’s very large.”

“Lindsay, baby, we need to—”

“Momma, the lady’s *alone*.” Lindsay kept her anger in. Momma always seemed to be wrapped up in her own little world. That was okay most of the time. But right now, it seemed cruel.

The man said, “She wants to see you.”

It took Lindsay a second to realize what he meant. “The *lady*?”

“The sooner, the better.”

“She *said* that? She wants *me* to—”

“She keeps asking for someone to come back. I can only assume she’s asking for you.”

“Baby, there’s nothing more you can do for that woman,” Momma insisted.

“Please, miss. We’d better hurry.”

## Chapter 3

The colors cascaded before her in a blinding spectacle. Maisie forced her eyes shut. It had been dark before the heavy stone wall of bright pain slammed into her. The flash of images mixing in with the colors became so strangely familiar. Images she hadn't seen since she was a little girl, when she and Mikka, the family sheepdog, were playing in the woods that dreary afternoon, just moments before the world turned black with death.

Her father and her five older brothers worked the fields while her mother, her aunts, and her two older sisters bustled about in the kitchen, baking bread and biscuits. Maisie, finished with her chores in the barn, had retreated to the woods with Mikka.

Mikka caught some animal scent and scurried into the underbrush. Maisie quickly lost him, despite the bright sheen of his brilliant white fur. *A pheasant*, she decided. *Or a rabbit*. Once Mikka caught a scent, it was impossible to distract him.

The sounds of sirens shrieked up the valley. Gunfire. The abrupt heavy silence, like the slamming of a metal door, echoed wildly. Screams suddenly broke out. The smell of fire scorched the afternoon breeze.

Maisie ran back down the hill. Soldiers, their faces seared with death, surrounded the house. They came in trucks, the sounds of their machinery and gunfire deafening. They broke into the house, dragging out the screaming women. The inside walls were torched along with the few sticks of furniture. The men were dragged from the fields and tossed in the back of a flatbed truck.

The sky over the village turned cloudy, then hazy, then finally black with thick columns of smoke rising from the flames.

The shadows faded ... then changed. Swirling bright colors dissolved the blood of the dead lying on the frozen ground in the camps, the sky made black once again by the smoke stacks of the busy ovens, the yellow decay of the walking dead ... everything turning into a clear darkness encrusted with twinkling lights – stars, evening.

The angel appeared. She was tall and slender, with large almond eyes and brown hair covering her shoulders. Her eyes, like the stars,

sparkled in the night, then dimmed, growing sad as she knelt before Maisie. The angel's lips moved, but the deafening roar directly beside her drowned out her words.

What *was* the roar? The ocean? A storm? It was the train that had come to take them to the camps.

*I've got to get away...*

Her limbs had gone numb.

*I'm so old, so tired...*

A throbbing blister of hot pain swelled beneath her, somewhere deep in her lower back, where the screaming stone wall had slammed into her.

*Fight the pain. Ignore it. Concentrate on the angel.*

The angel could help her, hide her from the soldiers. The angel could help her family get away as well. That's what angels did. She'd read about that in her Bible studies, heard about it in the stories her grandparents read them at night, everyone comfy and warm in front of the glowing fireplace. Angels helped all sorts of people.

With the angel to guide her, Maisie wouldn't have to worry about being crammed with the hundreds of others in the boxcars, where everyone would remain until they reached the camps. She wouldn't be forced to watch everyone die a second time. She wouldn't have to be alone, spared only because of her strange gift, which had proved useful among the superstitious wives of the Nazi officers.

Maisie tried to speak but couldn't. She could barely raise her arm. The angel grasped her hand. The angel's hands were warm and strong – much like Maisie's were when she was a young girl, working in the fields. So very, very long ago. Before the camps. Before the endless deaths.

*I can't go back there ... can't...*

Blackness.

Maisie opened her eyes. The woods had faded, grown dark. *Mikka ... where is Mikka? Where is the angel?*

"Where ... *is she?*" she asked the darkness, in a tiny voice that trickled fearfully out of her throat. "She must come *back...*"

A hazy light appeared from the center of the darkness, where the woods had once been. A room. A cold room with no color. The walls were white. The ceiling, the door, the sheet covering her – all bland, devoid of color. White – the color of fear. Tubes and clear containers marked with white labels hung off to her side.

A haze formed in front of the door. A mix of white and deep blue,

turning into a lighter shade of blue, the white dissipating... Two figures appeared from the haze. One, a man. The other – the angel, the one who'd held her hand beneath the stars.

She was beautiful, with smooth alabaster skin. The inner beauty radiating from her delicate, innocent face glowed in a bright flash of turquoise. She had come to give Maisie the peace she'd been seeking all these many years. Turquoise – the color of beauty, of warmth. Of kindness.

With the angel's help, Maisie would find the others and free them before the soldiers came back. But then she remembered. *I'm old now. Old and dying. The great death has long since passed.* The soldiers were probably all gone. The others were probably gone as well. Her father. Her mother. Her aunts. Her brothers and sisters. All of them, taken to the ovens, never to return. So long ago. A lifetime. And the angel standing beside her bed would take her to see them. Peace had finally come.

Maisie gestured for her angel to come closer. It was an effort – her arm weighed a ton. The tubes made movement even more difficult.

Maisie opened her mouth to speak. The words – heavy, jagged rocks deep inside her throat – wanted to stay right where they were. She made a conscious effort to force them out. "You've ... finally come ... for me ..."

\* \* \* \* \*

The old woman lay in the bed, her withered face strangely peaceful, her glazed gray eyes focused on Lindsay standing in the doorway. A little frightened, Lindsay followed the doctor in. He went over to the cluttered row of monitors beeping softly from the long shelf bolted to the wall behind the bed.

Lindsay dreaded hospitals. Fifteen years earlier, as a little girl, she'd visited her grandmother in this same building. Granna could barely see or talk, but wanted to hold Lindsay's hand. Lindsay took it, shivering at its coldness, its frailty. Granna tried talking, but in the middle of her sentence closed her eyes and went limp. Lindsay was afraid Granna had died. She was also afraid that since she was holding Granna's hand, she would also die. She put Granna's hand gently back down on the mattress and backed up quickly, knocking over the food cart. The accident woke Granna and brought in two nurses, an orderly, and a nurse's aid to see what had happened, turning Lindsay's panic into a huge embarrassment that gave her nightmares for weeks.

The old woman's hand raised a few inches, gesturing for Lindsay to come closer.

Lindsay felt so sorry for the poor soul. This lady might have been on her way to church to find shelter for the night. No one should be struck by a car and left to lie in the gutter amongst the tossed food wrappings and cigarette butts.

It just wasn't fair. She wasn't *always* an old woman. At one time, she was a little girl. At one time, she was Lindsay's age. She'd probably had a husband and kids. Who knew what happened to turn her into someone no one cared about? Who knew what injustices, what horrors, this poor old lady had endured to turn her into the broken creature living her last agonizing moments in a hospital bed?

Hesitantly Lindsay took the old woman's offered hand in hers. It was just as cold as it had been earlier, when she lay beside the busy highway. But right now Lindsay felt a strong, fast pulse. It pumped through the woman's brittle veins with bursts of energy from reserves that probably hadn't been used in a long time.

"You've ... finally come ... for me," the woman whispered weakly.

Lindsay could hear sharp clicking sounds in the woman's throat. They sounded wet, almost bubbly, in her labored breaths. The old woman was probably hallucinating. *Best agree with whatever she says and make her last moments pleasant.*

"Please ... come closer..."

Lindsay bent, forcing herself to ignore the woman's sour breath, the urine smell emanating from beneath the sheet, and the dirt and sand in the damp matted hair. The woman's eyes were now very clear. They closed, and she smiled, showing yellow teeth with some missing. "Thank you ... for coming back," she whispered.

"You shouldn't be alone," Lindsay replied. "Everyone else—"

"They have ... all gone."

*Confusion, obviously.* It was no wonder. Her head had whacked the pavement, cracking her skull and causing major trauma and possible swelling in her brain. Lindsay could only imagine how hard it was for the poor soul to think coherently.

The doctor remained watching the monitors. He must have sensed Lindsay's gaze. His slight grimace told her the worst.

"Are you in a lot of pain, ma'am?" Lindsay asked.

"I am ... at peace."

“Is there someone ... someone I can—”

“They’re ... all gone.”

“I’m so sorry...”

“Everyone is happy. I will be with them again. I might even see Mikka again.”

*Mikka. Her husband? I need to find out her name, who she is. Where she’s from. If she has anyone. She has to have someone. She can’t really be all alone.*

The old woman began staring at Lindsay as if seeing her for the first time. Confusion and fear cast shadows over her ancient features.

*My God... She’s going away...*

“Is ... everything okay?” Lindsay instantly realized how stupid that question was. “I mean, is there something I can do?”

No reply. The old woman tilted her head as if she was listening to something. Or somebody.

*She’s hearing voices. There was brain damage.*

“Ma’am?”

“I must ... give you something...”

Lindsay choked down the sob filling her throat. This poor soul had nothing, yet wanted Lindsay to have something. There was no one else. She’d even said so. Maybe she kept a trinket or a memento from her childhood, and wanted Lindsay to have it for helping her. But it wasn’t necessary. Besides, Lindsay would feel funny accepting such a gift from someone she didn’t even know. “You don’t have to give me anything.”

The veiny gray eyes narrowed. “Yes. I do.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The angel had vanished. The turquoise colors radiating from the slender figure gradually faded, becoming a pale white. The alabaster skin changed to pink. The beautiful face turned plain. The dark-brown almond eyes, too large for the narrow face, filled with sadness. The figure standing before her was the young girl, the same sweet thing who’d stopped for her, held her hand, and called for the ambulance.

*Where is my angel?*

Then Maisie heard the voice. “*I am here, child...*” The silken voice drifted very close to her ear. The room had grown warmer. The hot, intense pain consuming her only moments ago vanished.

*Where are you?* Maisie wanted to know.

*"I am right here."*

*Am I going with you?*

*"Very soon."*

*I'm ready.*

*"You must do one thing first. You must give this girl a lasting gift for her kindness."*

The angel was right. Because of this girl's compassion, Maisie would die in this bed – not on that filthy pavement beside the road. *She's the first person who did something nice for me in a very long time.*

But Maisie had nothing to give. Everything had been taken away. Many years ago, when she came to this country with the others who'd escaped, she had nothing but the dirty, well-worn clothes on her back. And, of course, the gift...

*"That is it, child ... your gift."*

*Give it away?*

*"Yes."*

It had been both a blessing and a curse, destroying Maisie's chances for romance, for happiness, for a normal life. It had made her an oddity. An oddity she remained all her long, lonely life.

*This girl is very sweet. And sensitive – much like I once was. Perhaps she is too sensitive to handle my gift. She appears very troubled. I shouldn't burden her...*

*"Give it away, child ... you no longer need it."*

*It could ... destroy her.*

*"Maybe ... and maybe not."*

*But how will I know what it does to her?*

*"If you do not give it away, I cannot take you with me."*

Her family waited for her in their wonderful new place. A place without soldiers, without camps, without barbed wire. Without ovens. Without monsters masquerading as children. Or faceless fiends that ran over old women and left them to die along the road.

"I must ... give you something," she told the young girl.

"You don't have to give me anything," the girl replied, and Maisie could feel the sadness emanating from her.

"Yes. I do."

The colors. The only thing Maisie had left. The only thing no one could ever take from her.



This girl wasn't like the others. She was shy and humble, much like Maisie once was. Everyone was like that back then – quiet, hard-working folks providing for their families, hurting no one.

The colors might help this girl as they'd helped Maisie during those long, bone-chilling nights in the camps. As they'd helped her escape. This girl was restless, insecure. The white halo framing her young head burned clear and bright. The darker slivers hovering near her eyes eclipsed whatever light attempted to escape. The fear, the confusion – everything clung to her like a suffocating shroud. The hazy pink aura surrounding her slender form told Maisie this girl feared people and hid her innermost feelings from them. The colors might even give her the courage to face life – as they had for Maisie.

Using what little strength she had left, Maisie grasped the girl's warm hand in her own and squeezed. *Go to your new home, little ones...* They raced down her arm like frightened ants, mingling with the girl's hand.

The warmth disappeared. Maisie's hand, depleted of all life, dropped to the mattress like a chunk of concrete. She no longer felt the girl's hand, or her own arm. The room grew dark, the white turning gray, then darker, until it became the gaping mouth of a tunnel. The haze disappeared.

The angel's voice drifted out of the darkness. *"Now we can go, child..."*

A thick sphere of glimmering turquoise appeared, floating just above the mattress. The angel, bright and beautiful in her long white robe of shimmering satin, stood within the sphere. The angel's hand, a flawless masterpiece of alabaster, reached for her. Maisie, young and happy once again, rose from the broken husk on the mattress, took the angel's hand, and hopped into the sphere.

