

GRANDMA'S
HOUSE

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Grandma's House



CAMDEN CASCADE

PUBLISHING

A stylized, handwritten signature logo in black ink, appearing to read 'Kyle'.

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Grandma's House

A man wakes up after an accident, or does he? Written in 1985 while I lived in Japan, Grandma's House is the first story I ever completed, but it has never before been published. The story is firmly in the science fiction genre, but with the psychological drama of a Twilight Zone episode.

I shook my head. *Had it all been a dream? No, it was far too real for that.* The bare branch outside my room hit the window startling me. Snow and freezing rain slapped against the glass. The blizzard outside reminded me of the time I'd lost because of the accident. There was no snow on that awful day, only cold rain that came down in torrents.

Was I going mad then?

I pushed that thought from my mind, adjusted the head of the hospital bed into a more comfortable position, and turned on the television in an attempt to flee my own thoughts. Switching quickly to a news channel I tried to catch up on some of the events I'd missed while in a coma.

But it felt real. No, it couldn't have been.

The door of my room swung open and in walked Dr. Anderson in his white lab coat. "Good Morning, Marcus." He looked at my chart. "How are you feeling today?"

I was tempted to say, "You tell me, doc," but I resisted the urge. "Okay, I guess." I gestured toward the newscast. "Just seeing if I missed anything while I was out."

"Not much. The year ended as it began; higher taxes, unrest in the Middle East, famine in various places...."

I turned off the TV. "When can I go home? The family still has the Christmas tree up, but if I don't get there soon it will be a sorry looking tree."

Dr. Anderson smiled. "Soon. Maybe tonight."

"That would be...."

The door creaked slowly open and an older woman in a simple, pale green dress peeked around the door.

"Mrs. Ralston, let me introduce Mr. Marcus Donaldson." The doctor gestured toward me. "Marcus, this is Mrs. Maria Ralston."

"Just call me Maria." She spoke just above a whisper. With tentative steps, she entered the room, her gaze cast down.

I guessed her age at mid-thirties, but salt and pepper hair and tired eyes made her look older. Dr. Anderson mentioned she would be coming, but had not said why. Was she another shrink? She didn't have the look and wasn't dressed like one would expect—like Dr. Grant.

I nodded and smiled at her. Her lips turned up but fell just as quickly. Sadness pallid her overall expression.

The doctor continued, “As I said earlier, we’d like you to tell Mrs. Ralston your story exactly the way you told us—with all the details.”

The instruction to tell the story “exactly the same” puzzled me. I had told what happened so often in the last two days, I was tired of hearing it.

Dr. Anderson and Maria pulled up chairs near my hospital bed.

I had told my story to him several times already. *Why would he want to hear it again?*

Before I started the door opened again and Dr. Grant entered the room. “Sorry I’m late,” he said as he glanced about, apparently looking for a chair. Finding none he leaned against the wall.

I smiled at Dr. Grant. *He looks the part of a shrink: glasses, nice haircut, close trimmed beard, nice suit, and no lab coat.* I glanced at Dr. Anderson and then made eye contact with Maria. *So who is she? I should just ask.* “Well, where would you like to begin?”

“Please, couldn’t you just start from the beginning?” Maria asked. “I would like to hear everything.”

Her words were almost a plea.

The doctors looked at each other and nodded.

“Sure.”

Maria focused on me as I began. “I have very little recollection of the day of the accident. The doctors,” I gestured toward the two men, “tell me that I arrived, unconscious, in an air ambulance. Apparently I was in a coma for several weeks, but at some point I had a dream. No, no, it wasn’t a dream, a hallucination maybe.” I looked at Dr. Grant. “You’re the psychiatrist, you tell me.”

“Just go on,” he said in his shrink voice. “Tell us about waking up—there.”

Did I really wake up or had it been a dream? The branch smacked against the window again causing me to jerk and look in that direction. *What was it that I had experienced?* More perplexed than ever, I shook my head and began the story once again. “The moment I awoke I heard a girl scream...”

* * *

Lying flat on my back surrounded by high grass, I looked into a clear, blue sky. The girl screamed again—a long terrified scream that reverberated from everywhere—even the sky. Jumping up I looked about, but saw only a meadow of tall grass waving gently in a warm breeze. Surrounding the field were giant oak trees decked out in green.

“Where are you?” But, there was only the breeze. *Where am I? Who screamed?*

I ran towards a path at the tree line. Reaching it, I heard the sound of water cascading over rocks. The girl might have fallen in, I thought, so I raced down the trail.

“Hello. Can anyone hear me?” I called upon reaching the bank. Quickly I scanned the wide, slow-moving river for any sign of the girl. The sound of the wind in

trees, water splashing past rocks and even birdsong greeted me, but no human voice or other hint of danger.

The path followed the bank and not knowing what else to do, I followed it. On such a beautiful day, I thought, someone should be there, walking along the river but, except for two screams, I was alone. With no other idea what to do I continued along the path figuring that it would lead me somewhere and wherever that was, there would be people.

How did I get here? I struggled to remember. Imagines of cold and rain rushed through my mind, but I couldn't seem to recall where I had been or how I arrived.

A few hundred yards farther along, the path intersected a gravel country lane. Standing at a curve, I looked right. The road crossed a modern steel bridge and disappeared into woods. About three quarters of a mile to my left stood a house. Jogging towards the building, I reassured myself someone was or would be there.

It was a two-story, white home sitting on the crest of a small hill. A covered porch circled the home and a brick chimney stood tall at the far end. As I continued down the country lane, I came to a driveway that arched up the knoll to the dwelling. Cautiously, I approached as a little girl retreated to the porch and then to the front door. "It's okay," I said. "I just have a few questions."

Our eyes locked for just a moment then she ran into the home.

I rushed up the hill to the porch. I wanted to bang on the door or burst into the house, but instead I took a deep breath and calmly knocked. Pausing to catch my breath, I waited, but there was no answer. Finally, I tried the knob. It turned and the door squeaked open.

"Hello? Could I use the phone? Is anyone home?" That was a dumb thing to ask, I knew someone was home—I'd seen her, but there was no reply.

When I heard footsteps, I walked in. The home was very neat. It was more like a picture from a magazine than a home. I moved through the living room, dining room and into the kitchen. A door off the kitchen opened to the garage but there was no car.

Turning back into the kitchen, I called out, "Hello, could someone help me?" If the girl called the police, I knew they would never believe I just wanted help or to use the telephone.

The thought of a phone made me look around. "Yes." I exclaimed. One hung on the wall at the end of the cabinets. "I'll just use the telephone and leave," I called to the little girl.

I picked up the handset with a growing sense of relief. *What's my wife's number?* I couldn't remember. Finally I decided to phone 911. I put the handset to my ear.

No dial tone.

I hung up then listened again.

Nothing.

I clicked the receiver up and down a half dozen times.

Still nothing.

After slamming down the handset, I walked from the room.

I considered leaving, but didn't want to lose my one human contact. Someone would soon be there for her and could show me the way home.

Cautiously I continued my search upstairs opening the first door. There was a child's bed with a small table and chairs nearby. In this room, unlike the neatness of the downstairs, toys and stuffed animals were scattered about the floor.

"Get out of my room," the girl screamed.

I jumped back. I hadn't seen her, but now she stood right in front of me. Stepping back into the hallway I asked, "Where are your parents?"

"My mother told me not to talk to strangers."

I paused and looked at the little girl who stared defiantly back at me, her arms folded across her chest.

After a moment, I tried again. "Who are you? Where are we?"

"Why are you here?"

"I'm lost. I was looking for someone—anyone. A girl screamed earlier and I was afraid she was...."

Her eyes seemed to soften and after a moment she said, "That was me. I'm sorry if I frightened you." Her arms unfolded and dropped. "My name is Karen."

* * *

Maria gasped.

"What wrong?" I looked at her, then, focused on the doctors and demanded, "What's going on?"

"What did she look like?" Maria asked as tears welled up.

"Ah...she had dark brown hair and brown eyes and wore a red and white checkered dress and white shoes.

"Yes, that's right," she said wiping tears.

"Huh?" I said.

"Please Mr. Donaldson," Dr. Grant said in that low 'shrink voice' used to calm excited patients, "we will explain, but for now, go on."

I stared at the two doctors and then Maria. Tears continued to well up in her eyes as she stared at me with a quizzical, pleading expression. I sipped water from the glass by my bed and reluctantly continued.

* * *

"Is this your house?" I asked.

A frown puckered her brow. "No silly, it's my Grandma's."

"May I come in?" I gestured into her room.

She paused for a moment and then said, "Okay." She sat at the table and looked from me to the other chair.

I sat in the undersized seat feeling a little foolish. "Where is she...your grandma?"

She picked up a doll and pretended to feed it. “She hasn't been here since I came—this time.”

“How long ago was that?”

“I don't know.”

“Who watches over you? Who else lives in the area?”

She shrugged. “No one.”

“No one? That can't be.”

Her shoulders lifted once again.

I stared at her for a few moments unsure what to say next.

“Are you going to stay?” she asked vaguely.

“No, I'd like to go home.”

“Why?”

“Because, I have a family.” *I think*. I struggled to remember their names and faces. Images of a woman my age and another older woman flitted at the edges of my mind. *My wife? My mother?* I sighed. “There are people waiting for me out there.” I made a wide gesture with my arm. “Can you tell me where the next house is?”

Putting down the doll she looked at me sternly. “There isn't one.”

I smiled. “Believe me young lady; we're not the only people in the world.”

She gave me that look children give when an adult says something they think is stupid.

“I'm going to the next house.”

“Okay. Have a nice walk.” She pulled a box of plastic cups and saucers from a shelf. “I'll have tea for you when you get back.”

It was a beautiful day for a walk in the country. The sun was bright, but not hot, in the cloudless sky. I left the house and headed back down the country lane away from the bridge I'd seen earlier.

As I went, I tried to piece together how I might have come to this strange place. The meadows and pastures alongside the road stirred vague memories of growing up in the country. *Did I live on a ranch?* I couldn't be sure.

I picked blackberries from brambles beside the road. Tossing them into the air, I caught them with my mouth and felt the sweet juices slipping down my tongue, refreshing me.

The sides of the road became more wooded. I noticed a walnut tree behind a fence and was tempted to climb over and check for walnuts but decided against it and continued on my way. Wherever this place was, it was beautiful. *It feels like a half forgotten home.*

As I came around a bend in the lane, a dozen chestnut trees stood before me on the hill. Going up to the fence along the road, I leaned on a post and marveled. Could these be American chestnut trees? They didn't appear to have been planted in an orchard. I had picked many varieties of nuts and fruits from the orchard beside my home as a youth. But the chestnuts had all been from Asian varieties. The American

trees had been decimated by blight. These rare and majestic trees provided the first clue about my location as there were only a few wild groves left in North America.

Finally, I forced myself to continue down the road. Still confused I wondered again, how did I get here? Where was I and what had happened?

It was early in the morning. I was driving down the freeway on my way to work. I was upset and wanted to get there, finish and leave. As I struggled to remember, images of a curving freeway came to mind. A large truck was in front of me, the concrete barrier was to my left and another truck was to my right. Then I awoke in the meadow.

Was there an accident? Did I die?

All around me were fields, forests and pastures. A clear blue sky was above and a warm sun made for a beautiful day.

But it hadn't been warm that day—the day I drove to work. My heart pounded in my chest. It had been cold. I started running along the country lane. Cold rain had been pouring from the sky and pooling on the freeway. Sweat ran down my face. I was angry because I had been called into work on Christmas Eve.

Was I dead? I stopped running and sat in the shade of a cottonwood tree. *If this was hell, it was much too pleasant and if it was heaven why was I here with only a young girl for company?*

Dead, or alive and crazy, what choice did I have but to continue on my journey and hopefully find some answers? Bracing myself against the tree, I stood and continued down the road.

Minutes later, I came to a covered bridge that crossed a stream. The boards were wide and thick, but also cracked and worn from use. The beams creaked with each step. I wondered how safe it would be for a car, but I'd not seen a car since I awoke. I looked down through the gaps in the boards at the water flowing below.

Continuing down the road I found another chestnut grove on the right of the lane just before a curve. *How incredible to find so many of these rare trees in this area.*

I stopped to admire them. As I enjoyed the vista before me a feeling of déjà vu grew within me. I'd seen this grove of trees, I'd seen this hill. My heart pounded. In panic I raced around an all too familiar curve. Minutes later, out of breath, I saw it—the white house I had left an hour ago. I ran back towards the wooden bridge and kept running across it until I came, exhausted, back again to the white house. Even then, I didn't give up; I kept trying to find a way out. It wasn't until I stood in the middle of the wooden bridge and glanced both ways that I surrendered. Either way I looked the view was identical. I wasn't sure which way I had originally come from, but it didn't appear to matter. Like a nightmare where the harder you try to get away the more difficult it is to move, no matter which way I went down the country lane, I couldn't escape.

* * *

“She had never been over that bridge,” Mrs. Ralston said to the doctors.

“Huh, who? Karen?” I asked.

“Could you go on for now,” Dr. Grant said softly. “We’ll explain later.”

I had thought that Karen was some Freudian manifestation of my own subconscious while I was in a coma. Now I began to wonder just who she could be. Confused, I continued.

* * *

I ran back to the house. At least there I could talk to someone and try to make sense of it all.

Sweating and panting I stumbled, exhausted, back into the house. True to her word Karen had set out tea on the little table in her room.

I wanted to demanded answers from her. I wanted to shake her until she told me what this place was and how I got there, but I didn’t. I just collapsed into the tiny chair and said, “I’m confused.”

“Really? Why? I told you I’d have tea ready for you.” She poured steaming tea from a plastic toy kettle.

“Yes, you did.” I took one sip and then another, finishing the tiny cup. “But in a plastic kettle?”

“It’s the only one I have,” she said refilling it.

“I watched her for a moment wondering again if I were dead. Perhaps I was in a mental institution somewhere, bound in a straitjacket, locked in a padded cell, drooling on myself. I closed my eyes trying to force the notion from my mind. No, I was sane, but how did I get here? *Where is here?* Looking at Karen once again, I asked, “How did you get here?”

She paused, tilted her head just a bit and almost as a question said, “My mommy always brought me before.”

“But, she just left you here this time?”

She shrugged. “I always fall asleep before we get here. I just woke up in this room.” She paused again and bit her lip. “She must have brought me.”

I leaned forward across the table. “But you didn’t see her this time?”

She shook her head. “Do you want some more tea?”

“Actually I feel hot from my, uh—jog. I’ll get some water.”

“I’ll get it.” She turned to the shelf behind her and grabbed a white plastic pitcher. “You have cold water in you,” she said to it and filled my cup.

It was almost like she was performing a magic trick, but she must have filled it before I arrived. Still, the water, filled with ice chips, felt cool as I drank. “So, you don’t know how you got here or how to leave?”

“A door appeared a long time ago.”

“A door?”

“Which do you want tea or water?” she asked holding both.

“I’m fine.” I said and finished the last little bit. “This door—where does it go? Have you ever opened it?”

“No, I don’t want to leave. I’m staying,” she said defiantly.

“You want to stay here alone?”

“I’m not alone now,” she said with a big smile. “Would you like a cookie?”

“That would be nice.”

She turned and for the first time I noticed a plate of chocolate chip cookies behind her. Selecting one from the plate she presented, I bit into a warm treat.

“Where did you get all this stuff,” I asked waving my hand across the table now full of cookies, ice water and tea.

“From the shelf of course,” she declared as if it were obvious. “But,” she said softly as if to keep others from hearing, “you’re not supposed to talk with your mouth full.”

I laughed and we continued to talk about cabbages and kings while having tea in our own Wonderland.

After the tea party Karen showed me the rest of the house. “This was grandpa’s room—before he died.”

It was a large room with bookshelves, filled with books along the walls. Pulling one of the musty volumes from the shelf, I opened it. All the pages were blank. I opened another and again only clean white paper. I opened another and another—all the pages were bare.

Frightened and confused I asked no one in particular, “What is this place?”

“The library in my grandma’s house.” Karen said her eyes wide and fixed upon me.

“Who are you? Why are you here?” I shouted.

Tears lined her face. “I’m Karen. My grandma said I could come here anytime and stay as long as I want.”

For the first time I saw alarm in her eyes. My fears seemed suddenly less important and, for the moment, melted away. I set the blank-paged book back on the shelf and softly said, “I’m not mad at you. I’m sorry.”

Needing some air, I went out on the front lawn. Karen followed and played with her dolls while I headed to the woods still looking for a way out. I yelled until I was hoarse, but there was no reply. After somehow looping back to the house for what seemed like the tenth time, I sat beside her. She continued playing with three dolls, a woman, a man and a baby.

“You were bad,” she said speaking for the man doll. “I should beat you,” and like a Punch and Judy puppet show she had the man doll slap and kick both the mom and baby doll.

“Karen, did your father hit you?”

She sat quietly for a moment, then so softly I almost couldn’t hear, she said, “I was bad.”

“No, I don’t believe that.”

She made no reply.

“But you ended up here—at your grandmother’s house?”

She nodded. "Was that bad?"

"No. I'm sure it wasn't, but why doesn't your grandmother come home and why can't I leave?"

Karen looked at the floor, "Are you afraid of someone?"

"No. Why would you ask that? Afraid of what?"

She looked down at the ground and shrugged.

* * *

Sobs yanked my mind to the present. Maria pulled a handkerchief from her purse and wiped her red and swollen eyes.

"I'm sorry this is causing you such pain," I said. "Perhaps I should stop."

Still wiping the tears from one eye she said, "No, please, I want to hear it all."

I looked at the doctors. Dr. Grant nodded, urging me to go on.

* * *

They say that insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Well, I must have been insane because I went out in the woods and tried again to walk out of my pleasant prison.

The last rays of sunlight danced their retreat among the tree tops as I returned to the house. Karen, lying on the grass, waved and yawned as I approached.

"Tired?"

She nodded, yawned again and curled into a fetal position.

The chorus of crickets commenced and the shadows of twilight deepened as I sat beside her. I was trapped here for sure, I thought, but until I found a way to escape, it was an agreeable cage.

In the blink of an eye the world went from twilight to the deep darkness of a moonless, cloudy night. I reached for Karen but she wasn't there. Were my eyes open or closed? I thought they were open but it was as if I were blind. I heard my racing heart and felt it pound in my chest. "Karen, where are you?" The only sound I heard was the sprint of my heart, even the crickets were silent. I crawled along the now invisible ground trying to find her or the house. "Karen!"

* * *

"What was happening?" Mrs. Ralston asked.

"I don't know. It was as if the life and light went out of the world."

"That must have been horrible," she said showing her first concern for me.

"Why don't you continue," Dr. Grant asked.

* * *

I heard little footsteps running towards me. Again as I opened my eyes, I was lying flat on my back, but this time I was in Karen's room.

"You're back," she said bounding in with a smile.

I stood. "What happened?"

"You weren't here when I woke up," Karen said.

I shook my head trying to understand what had occurred and how I ended up lying on her bedroom floor. What was this strange place? “The sun had been going down, but then when it did it got so dark, so fast.”

“It always gets dark when I get tired.”

Looking into Karen’s smiling face I said flatly, “Do me a favor and don’t fall asleep again.”

She tilted her head. “You’re silly.”

I smiled weakly. I had no idea how but, I resolved to find a way out that day.

The roads took me in a circle, always back toward the house. All the paths in the woods likewise looped back to the house. Even my attempt to hike through the woods off trail led me back to the house but, I thought as a smile formed on my face, the river couldn’t flow and loop back on itself. As a child I had built a raft and sailed it down the river that flowed along one edge of our ranch. I would do it again—today.

In less than a minute I was in the garage searching for what I would need. In my mind was the image of the craft I had built so many years ago. Karen’s grandpa must have been a bit of a handyman, as there were ample tools and assorted scrap lumber.

It took several trips to carry the lumber and tools to a dock and boat landing along the river that Karen showed me. Several hours later I had completed a crude raft, and for guidance a simple paddle and pole.

“Will you come with me Karen?”

“Mommy said not to go out on the water.”

I tried to persuade her, but she remained resolute. Finally I pushed off the boat landing and waved goodbye.

Karen ran out on the dock, wiggling her hand in frantic farewell and sat down.

As I approached the first bend in the river, I could still see her, feet hanging over the dock, playing with a doll. I felt sad at leaving her and hoped that I could find a way to come back and rescue her from this solitary place. Within minutes I passed under the metal bridge I had seen earlier and not long afterwards under the old wooden bridge. It was working, I thought. I smiled remembering the rafting trip of my youth.

Minutes later, I rounded another bend and there was Karen still playing with her doll on the dock. She smiled and waved as I floated past.

My heart sank. Using the pole, I moved the raft to the shore just downstream of the dock and landing. I stepped ashore then pushed the raft out into the river wondering if I would see it float by later that day, tomorrow, weeks from now—for eternity.

That attempt had failed, but I still wanted to find a way out. I’m sane, I assured myself, but if this was Wonderland, I wanted to go up the rabbit hole. I wanted to go home. Walking back towards the house with Karen I tried to think of something I

might have missed. It was then I remembered something Karen had mentioned. “Tell me about that door you said appeared.”

“It was a door, you know.” She pantomimed opening one.

“Where did it go?”

“I think it went to the bad place.”

“That would be out of this place, right?”

She bit her lip and nodded slowly. “Don’t go.”

“Wherever I go, I won’t leave you.”

She smiled, then told me the door would appear in various rooms of the house, sometimes in a wall and other times in the middle of a room. Gradually it appeared less and less and then hardly ever.

“As we approached the house, Karen asked, “Can you play with me now?”

“Not now, sorry I have to find that door.”

Karen stuck out her lower lip and walked off to her room, while I systematically opened every door I came to.

I had worked my way through the living room and kitchen into the laundry room when I heard a scream again. It was the same cry that seemed to come from everywhere at once, but now I recognized the voice of Karen in the scream and raced upstairs. She was kneeling in the middle of the room sobbing into her hands.

“What’s wrong?” I pleaded as I scooped her up into my arms.

“I thought you were my friend,” she bawled. Her hands covered her face.

I hugged her tight. “I am! What’s wrong?”

With one hand covering her eyes she pointed towards the wall behind me.

I turned my head and saw a plain white door set in the wall, that hadn’t been there before. I set Karen on the floor and cautiously walked over to it. “Is this it, Karen? Does it lead out of here?”

“It’s that door...to the bad place.”

I opened the door and was sucked into a whirlwind of muffled sound and jumbled, out of focus, images.”

* * *

Realizing the empty water glass was still in my hands, I set it on the nightstand. “It was like I was sucked into the passageway beyond the door.”

Maria buried her head in her hands. Her tears now accompanied by sobs. Dr. Grant placed his hand on her shoulder.

Hearing her weep, I quickly concluded my story. “As I was swept through the door I heard Karen call, ‘Don't leave me. I thought you were my friend.’ The echo of her cry surrounded me as I fell away from her. The next thing I remember was waking up in intensive care.”

Maria bolted from the room in such a fit of tears that she barely breathed between sobs.

Dr. Grant followed her but paused at the door to say, “Show him. I'll meet you there.”

Turning to me Dr. Anderson said, “Yes, we owe you an explanation.”

He helped me into a wheelchair and pushed it down one busy corridor and then another in silence. The sign on the wall read, “Long-term Care,” as we headed down a dim, gray hallway alone. Each footstep echoed on the sterile tiles. At the end of the corridor, he stopped in front of the last door, opened it and pushed my chair inside. A young girl perhaps ten, lay, eyes closed, in a fetal position on a hospital bed.

Dr. Anderson stood behind me but said nothing.

I looked closer. She was strangely familiar. After a moment, I noticed a picture on the nightstand. “That’s the girl I saw, that's Karen,” I said pointing to the picture.

The door opened and Dr. Grant walked in.

“Is this an older sister?” I asked pointing to the unconscious woman before us.

“No,” Dr. Anderson said. “She is Karen Ralston and you just told your story to her mother.”

“What?”

“Four years ago Karen was brought in on Christmas Eve by her mother. She had been badly beaten.

“Her father?” I asked.

“Stepfather,” Dr. Grant said. He paused for a moment. “Dr. Anderson was the attending physician and I was called to calm Mrs. Ralston who was, understandably, hysterical. As time went by all of Karen's physical wounds healed, she is as whole today in the physical sense as the day she was born. But we now know where Karen never healed.”

“We couldn't figure it out,” Dr. Anderson said in exasperation. “We treated every wound and physically she responded well—she just never woke up.”

“I'm not sure I understand.” I said.

“Somehow, Mr. Donaldson,” Dr. Grant said in a soft voice, “your mind touched Karen's, and now we know why she never woke up. The pain this little girl knew in her life at home was so frightening that when her stepfather beat her the last time, she fell asleep and woke up at her grandmother's house, but this time only in her mind. And Karen is still there afraid to leave and come back to us.”

* * *

As I hurry across the parking lot of the hospital, the cold winter wind and snow bite my face and hands. Long shadows and the yellow glow of streetlights give a surreal appearance to the world, but I remind myself, this cold, dark night is real.

The doors slide open as I reach the top of the steps and warm air envelopes me, fogging my glasses. Stepping into the lobby, I pull a handkerchief from my suit pocket and wipe the lens clean.

I greet and wave to staff members as I walk along. Over the last year my visits have been frequent, but this Christmas Eve visit is a very special one.

As expected, only the minimum staff is on duty. Those who recognize me, greet me. No one questions my presence. I walk down one busy corridor to another less busy and then another until I am alone in gray hall. My steps echo off the faded pastel walls.

The door creaks as I enter the familiar room. I smile and greet Dr. Anderson, Dr. Grant and Mrs. Ralston. On the bed, in her usual position, is Karen. Two of the nurses who care for her are also there. I smile and nod to them.

In addition to the equipment that had always been in the room there is now a second set along the wall. A gurney is positioned beside Karen's bed.

Dr. Anderson pointed to it. "Are you ready?"

I nod.

"This is dangerous."

"I know. You've told me."

"You could suffer brain damage or die."

Again I nod, and then remove my jacket.

Dr. Anderson talks with the others as I unbutton my shirt.

"If anyone has any doubts about what we are doing they should leave now."

Looking at the two nurses, Dr. Anderson said, "If this goes wrong we will lose our licenses to practice medicine and probably go to jail."

No one left.

Laying on the gurney I reach over to Karen with one hand and gently uncurl her stiff fingers. Holding her hand I asked the questions I have on every visit. *What if we had gone through together? Would she have been brave enough to walk with me back to awareness and reality? Why had I set her down before I opened that door?*

A sigh brings my attention back to the room.

Dr. Anderson stands over me with an IV needle in hand. "I've never put a healthy patient into a coma before. This will sting a bit."

It hurt.

When the flow started he said, "Count back from one hundred."

I leaned over and kissed her hand. "Merry Christmas, Karen. I'm coming to get you. 100...99...98...."

Also by the Author



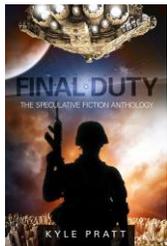
A Time to Endure The exciting saga of Major Caden Westmore continues in this, the second book of the *Strengthen What Remains* series. In the first book, *Through Many Fires*, terrorists use nuclear bombs to destroy six American cities. Now, the nation's economy teeters on the verge of collapse. The dollar plunges, inflation runs rampant, and the next civil war threatens to decimate the wounded country. In the face of tyranny, panic, and growing hunger, Caden struggles to keep his family and town together. But how can he save his community when the nation is collapsing around it?

* * *



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* * *



Final Duty – The Alien War Anthology Twenty years after the death of her father during the Battle of Altair, Lieutenant Amy Palmer returns to the system as an officer aboard the reconnaissance ship *Mirage*. Almost immediately disaster strikes and Amy, along with the crew of the *Mirage*, must face the possibility of performing their final duties. *Final Duty* is a military science fiction anthology that includes a novella and two short stories set in the same genre and universe.

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