

# Midnight Rain – Chapter 3

By Holly Lisle

NOTE: UNCORRECTED PROOF. Refer to the publication copy for any quotes or reviews.

*Alan stood over a stretcher in the ER, looking down at a dead woman whose unblinking eyes stared up at him. Janet, he thought, but Janet had been blonde and stunning, and this woman had dark hair, and was ... ordinary. Then she smiled, and her face changed – and she became his pretty next-door neighbor. Smiling. But still dead.*

He woke and sat up and shook his head from side to side to clear the nightmare. “Hell,” he whispered. Except for that first year after he lost Janet and Chick, he’d never been subject to nightmares – not the kind that came while he was asleep, anyway. He had always had been a good sleeper. He brought his work home with him; no matter what anyone might say, doctors who gave a shit about their patients did. But he’d never carried his work into his sleep before.

” Hell *and* fuck that.” He still breathed hard, and he realized he’d knotted the sheet in his hands. He was sweating. Middle of the day, hot as hell in the house – of course he was sweating. Which was probably what had caused the nightmare, too.

He considered going back to sleep, but he didn’t want to sleep. If he was going to have dreams like that, he’d invest in coffee and never go back to sleep again.

He decided he might as well go work on his secret project for a while. He stretched and headed upstairs to his home office and the computer. Turned it on, brought up the document he’d been working on, and did a search for “aaa” – his place-marker.

He wasn't too far into the book. He'd forgotten how much he'd deleted. Dammit. He settled into his chair and stared at the blinking yellow line of the cursor, at the deep blue background, at the smattering of white letters on the screen. He rested his hands on the keyboard, fingers on the home row, and he waited for the words to come.

The world stayed with him, though he needed it to fall away. The soft whir of the computer fan. From overhead, a small twin-engine plane circling for a landing at the Executive airfield. The ticking of his watch, usually inaudible but now painfully loud. The oppressive air of waiting gave the townhouse a silence deeper than mere stillness.

The pretty woman next door.

From somewhere in the house, a soft thump that set his heart racing ... and then the air conditioner kicked on. Alan sighed, the release from the tension almost painful, as if he'd been an overinflated balloon that had finally burst. Air conditioner. Outside, the temperature was in the high nineties. Without A/C, indoors began to feel like the inside of an oven by ten AM. And because he ran the damned air conditioner all the time, it wore out and broke down frequently. He had some sort of compressor problem, perhaps. Or maybe the ants had gotten into the outdoor circuitry again and eaten the plastic coating off the wiring. That had been four-hundred thirty dollars to fix last October, when it was still hotter than hell.

Hotter than hell. Heat. Heat and wetness.

Suddenly an image of his next-door neighbor was in front of him, with her clothes clinging to her, pert little breasts jutting out, hot and sweaty and with a look of utter, wanton passion in her dark eyes ...

Alan frowned, stared at the blue screen. Where the hell had that come from?

Air conditioning – he'd been thinking about air conditioning and suddenly there was a woman he didn't know with little breasts and big eyes staring back at him, looking like the personification of wild sex.

He did not need to think about his next-door neighbor, sweaty or not. Unless she repaired air conditioners. He needed to think about air conditioning, because the A/C wasn't supposed to thump. If it did it again, he'd have to have someone come out and take a look. He had a contract with the service people. He could call them.

In a while. Later. Before the damned thing actually broke down again, stranding him with sweat-drenched sheets and ceiling fans that did nothing but circulate hot air.

But not right at that moment. Later. After he finished what he was doing.

He shook his head and resumed his writing stance: eyes fixed on the blue screen, hands resting on the gentle curves of his ergonomically correct keyboard, shoulders tense. He resumed his vigil for the words that wouldn't come. Words that were supposed to help him make sense of his loss, that were supposed to help him lay Janet and Chick to rest after five long, hard years, that were supposed to bring him through the pain and anger and despair to the place where his life would begin again.

Maybe he was asking too much of words. Maybe he was expecting too much of himself. But the endless stream of human misery that poured through the emergency room doors was becoming more than he could bear: in every child's face he saw his dead daughter; in every beautiful woman, his dead wife. His bitterness toward beautiful women, his anguish in dealing with children – they were getting in his way. If he couldn't deal more productively with his loss, he was going to have to find another line of work.

" Healer, heal thyself," he muttered, and glared at the blue screen.

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### Chapter One

I fell in love with Janet Terrell the first time I saw her. I was thirteen and she was eleven, and I was carrying home bread and milk for my mother, and I pedaled around the corner of the sidewalk too fast and almost ran into her. She was hanging upside-down from the lowest limb of a maple tree that grew between the sidewalk and the street. Her hair was honey-gold, tangled, and so long the tips of it brushed the grass beneath her. Her bare knees were skinned and scabbed, and her eyes were the same blue as the sky that day—the autumn Kentucky sky, which is the bluest and most perfect of blues. Her parents were directing the movers, who were carrying furniture into the big old house next to ours—the Victorian monstrosity that had been empty for eight years, ever since the last of the Hardings died. I'd watched the work crews repairing it all summer. I'd been mightily interested, hoping that the people who moved in would have kids, and that the kids would be boys, and that the boys would be about my age, and especially that they wouldn't be dorks. I wanted a kid on the street besides Kenny Unger, who was pudgy and pimpled and whiny and whose mother hovered over him and made him keep his hands clean and wouldn't let him ride a bike because she said he was too uncoordinated and fragile.

" Hi," I said to the upside-down girl. "My name's Alan. I live next door."

She grinned at me: a lopsided, broad, fiendish grin. She said, "Go to hell, penis-breath." Then she laughed like a hyena and launched herself into the uppermost branches of the maple tree like a cat chased by wolves.

Both her parents heard her laughter and looked over, squinting at the tree, then at me, then finally directing their gazes upward until they located their wild offspring, who was swaying in the topmost branches where only a few yellow leaves still clung. They studied her for an instant. Then, to my amazement, they both went back to directing the movers. Neither one yelled at her for being on thin branches forty feet in the air. Evidently her parents weren't worried about her being uncoordinated or fragile. I thought right then that she looked a lot more interesting than Kenny Unger.

That was the sum-total of what he'd written yesterday. The day

before he'd deleted the fifty-seven pages he'd done on version five. He decided that the last sentence needed to be a paragraph on its own instead of the concluding sentence of the previous paragraph, moved it, and looked at his watch. He'd been sitting there for an hour.

He swore softly and closed his eyes. He shouldn't have dumped version five, but he'd lost everything about Janet that had been good in a haze of anger. Fifty-seven pages of rage. He had to let go – had to move past the fury and the hatred and the feelings of betrayal at her infidelities, or he was never going to be able to live again. And he wanted to live. He didn't want to give Janet any more of his life than she'd already stolen.

And he'd been making her the only villain – but he wasn't writing fiction. If he'd been writing fiction, he would have come up with a better ending for himself. For Janet. For Chick.

He typed:

Let her go. Let her go. Let her go. Let her go, let her go, let her go.
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He stared at the words on the screen, and at the yellow cursor that blinked behind the last period while it waited for him to continue.

" And with her and all the bad, Chick and all the good," he muttered. If it hadn't been for Chick, he would have moved past Janet and all her poison the day of the wreck.

He highlighted the new material and deleted it.

Chick, he thought, and started a new chapter. The words were there – for Chick, he thought, he would always be able to find the words.

Chapter Two

Chick was both our triumph and our downfall. We didn't really name her Chick, of course. Her name was Emily Helen, after Janet's mother and mine the name picked out even before her conception. She would have been Bryant William, after my father and Janet's in that order had she been a boy. But

Janet had an amnio, so we knew early on that this child, our one child, planned, yearned for, and finally gifted to us, would be Emily Helen. We thought we knew what to expect. Saw our futures with our daughter-to-be spreading out before us like a comfortable road, well-marked by signs and well-appointed with all of life's necessities and a plentiful share of its luxuries.

But the surprises started early. Emily was born with a head full of scruffy blonde hair, and when the nurse dried her off and handed her to us there in the birthing room, that hair stood up in all directions like the down on a chick. We had planned to call our daughter Em, but that plan never made it off the ground. Chick she was, ever after. She didn't go along with our other neat plans, either she neither slept during the night nor during the day. She talked early, walked early, and graduated immediately from crawling to mountain climbing up the front of the refrigerator and caving in the cabinets. She figured out the child-proof locks, the child-proof bottles, the child-proof plug guards. Things child-proof were not Chick-proof, and we learned early and well that the only guarantee that our feral offspring would survive from one day to the next came from our constant, unblinking supervision.

"She's just like you," Janet's mother told her one afternoon when she was visiting us, and I'll never forget either the smugness in her smile or the inescapable gleam of vindication in her eye.

We were infatuated with Chick. She became the center of our universe, our gravity and the air we breathed. Her laughter pealed like bells, her face was the sunshine, her

He stopped typing. Glare from the brilliant sun outside found its way through his window to the bottom left-hand corner of his monitor, making a few of his words and part of his page disappear into the yellow haze. Alan reached up and to his left without looking, pulled the cord that closed the vertical blinds, and then the chain that rotated them. For the next few hours, he could work in relative gloom.

The air conditioner kicked off, and Alan became conscious of the sound of his own breathing, the hum of the computer fan, the low drone of someone cutting hedges outside. The dry fronds of the palm tree that grew up against his window

rattled on the window glass. He leaned back in his chair and shoved the nearest panels of the verticals back so that he could look outside. The sky was pale and clear, with the hard tropical brightness that still surprised him – the brownish greens of winter had given way to the jungle greens of Fort Lauderdale's summer, but the intensity of the sun still made the sky look almost white. The palm fronds twitched beneath a light breeze, but the breeze didn't look like it was strong enough to offer any reprieve from the heat.

He turned away from the window, which was entirely too seductive; he'd never get through the book if he didn't force himself to write it. He found that the distraction had cost him the end of his sentence – he didn't remember what he'd planned to write next. He tapped on the space bar. Then the backspace key. Then the spacebar again. Then the backspace key. The cursor slid right, then left, then right, then left, over and over.

Downstairs, he heard the thump again. He waited for the air conditioner to come back to life, but it didn't. Instead something tickled across the nape of his neck, as light and gentle as the brush of a cat's whisker. He reached back with one hand to see if a thread had worked loose from his collar, and his fingers caught in a fold of thin, crisp cloth that blew against his skin. He felt a breeze, and smelled rain and wet earth and the peculiar heavy smell of ozone and dust washed out of the air. The impossible scents and textures flashed into his brain in a fraction of a second.

He yelled and jumped, moving so quickly the chair he'd been sitting in toppled backwards to the floor. He grabbed for the baseball bat that leaned against the corner of his desk and spun to face the intruders with it gripped firmly in both hands.

No one else was in the room. What he found, however, was worse. The window he had just looked out of was changed. The

vertical cloth blinds were gone, replaced by pale, translucent yellow curtains that billowed in the breeze. A steady, heavy, rain streaked down the glass and blew in through the open lower half of the window, wetting the carpet, and the dull roar of the water and the scents of dust and greenery tickled at his memory. Something about the smell ... about the rain itself ...

Who had opened the window? He needed to shut it; something inside of him said if he could shut it, he could shut down whatever was happening. He could make it go away, make it not happen. Gut instinct assured him the open window was the culprit. Closed, nothing could come through it to threaten him. He edged towards it, brandishing the baseball bat against any intruders who might materialize. But nothing entered through the round-bellied curtains except for the alien, sweet-scented breeze. Spring breeze. Jesus, it was a spring breeze. Spring scents in the air – but spring up north. Kentucky spring.

He rested a hand on the window sill to shove it down, and realized it was wood instead of metal, and that his office window slid from side to side instead of up and down as this window did. And then he looked outside, at a girl who stood in the rain, soaked to the skin, staring up at the window and at him, and for a moment she looked like a stranger, and then she didn't. Then he realized that she was Chick . . . Chick who had died, Chick who had vanished from his life into a hell of twisted metal and shattered glass and who had not been able to emerge – until this very moment. Because he would have known his daughter if he had been blind and deaf and under water; and the child standing in the rain watching him was undeniably, inescapably Chick.

She didn't look like a ghost he couldn't see through her. She looked solid. Completely real.

He tried to breathe. Said, "Oh, Christ, oh, Jesus." Screamed,

“Chick, sweetheart, stay right there! I’ll be right down!” And said, “Jesus, please, please, please don’t go anywhere please.” And he thought for one insane moment about climbing out the second-story window and jumping to the ground so that Chick wouldn’t have time to go back to wherever she’d been.

She smiled at him, and he could see her yell “Daddy!” but for some strange reason he couldn’t hear her.

He started to back away from the window, wanting to run down the stairs, out into the rain beside her, but afraid to let her out of his sight. But that single step backward broke the spell. The curtains disappeared, and suddenly the windows were covered by the thick cloth vertical blinds that were supposed to be there, blinds that blocked his view of his daughter. The sweet wet earth-scented air became once again dry and air-conditioned.

Alan screamed a second time, just “NO!”, and clawed through the blinds and blinked at the harsh sunlight outside and fumbled with the lock on the window.

But she was gone, of course. No sign of her remained, and no sign of the rain that had brought her to him. Heat shimmered off the bone-dry walk and the cloudless sky offered no hint of moisture, and after staring into the midday sun with tear-blurred eyes, he finally let the blinds fall back into place.

Causes of hallucinations, he thought: mourning and stress, sensory deprivation, sleep deprivation, epilepsy, brain tumors, central-parietal foci. Tumors, if he remembered his DSM IV, gave the best hallucinations – full scenes, the presence of voices, complete sensory input while they lasted.

He forced himself to breathe slower and deeper. That had been a very ... complete ... hallucination.

He sagged against the wall and slid down to the floor in one long, slow movement, weeping for his loss and for the pain

from that single moment of hope.

And the rain water in the carpet beneath the window soaked into the knees of his pants.

He ran the palm of his hand over the spot, and pushed his face down to smell it. Sweet – the scent of rainwater, ozone, and spring.

Alan shuddered.

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- Barnes & Noble

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