

The Wreck of Heaven

By Holly Lisle

Chapter One

Copper House, Ballahara, Nuue, Oria

Molly McColl tightened the laces on the heavy silk bodice and shrugged into the brocade overgown. Alive, she thought. Im alive. Im alive! I was dead, and now Im alive, and Im back in Copper House. She tried on a smile, but it didnt seem to fit.

She remembered dying all too clearly – remembered taking her sisters kid through the gate between the worlds, only too slowly, because shed been unwilling to do what she had to do. And her hesitation had almost cost three-year-old Jake his life.

Saving him had cost her hers. The healing that would have been so effortless on Oria had, on Earth, required her to take every bit of Jakes pain and all of his injuries into her own body. To absorb them. On Earth, shed been only human, stripped of downworld magic and Vodi power. And on Earth she had died.

But now she was alive again, brought back by the Vodi magic. Brought back to Oria – and in her head, the voices of long-dead Vodian whispered remembrance of their own deaths and rebirths and deaths again.

Molly had only been alive again for a few hours – at least she could only remember the last few hours. She felt out of place in her own skin; she could not remember how she had arrived at Copper House. Her first memory was of stumbling naked through the forest. Her only clues about her return were the leaves in her hair and the dirt under her fingernails.

The sleek, heavy gold necklace purred around her neck almost as if it were a cat held to her throat. She didnt want to think about the necklace, or about being the Vodi; she didnt really want to think about being alive, or why that was wrong. She wanted to enjoy being with Seolar. She wanted to be in love, and happy, and carefree in a world as far from the trailer park in Cat Creek as any human being could conceivably get.

“You werent born to be carefree,” she muttered at her reflection in the mirror. The mirror only emphasized that truth. On Earth shed been of average height, moderately attractive, and clearly human. Oria had changed that, and her unexpected return from death had changed it even more. Her hair now fell to her waist, its color a copper so glossy it looked metallic. Shed grown both taller and thinner – she guessed she stood around six feet now, but couldnt be certain since she lacked any mechanism to convert local measurements to those familiar to her; she was still short by veyr standards. The bone structure of her face had new angles, high cheekbones, and a sharp little chin. Her eyes stared back from the mirror, impossible emerald green, deeply slanted, enormous. Her hair hid the points that tipped her ears. She still, thankfully, had the right number of fingers and toes. She glanced at the twelve-string guitar leaning in the corner of the room and tried to imagine learning to play all over again with the surfeit of digits on a pair of veyr hands.

“You look breathtaking,” Seolar, who was her lover and the Imallin of Copper House, said softly. She could have said the same of him. His gold skin, darker gold hair, and jet-black eyes, his height and his grace gave him the air of some otherworld angel. Even the golden-brown tattoos that curled and spiraled across his cheeks only added to his beauty.

She turned to him and smiled uncertainly. “Do I?”

“I swear it.” The smile he gave her in return trembled at the

corners, and she saw brightness in his eyes. He closed the distance between the two of them with three steps, and pulled her into his arms. "Never leave me like that again. I was lost without you. I died inside, and only when you appeared on the balcony tonight did I start to breathe again."

Inside of Molly, the darkness descended. "Im the Vodi," she whispered.

"I know. But I love you."

She nodded. "But Im the Vodi." She pulled back so that she could look into his eyes. "Do you know what sort of lives my predecessors lived?"

"I read the old records. After you... after you died ..." Seolar turned away from her and looked out the window at the last vestiges of twilight, at pale wisps of gold and pink streaked across the indigo sky. "I did little else but read, trying to understand."

"Then you know what happened to the Vodi."

"They were hunted. Mercilessly, by terrible enemies." He turned back to her. In a hoarse voice, he continued. "They died again and again. But that will not be your fate. I wont let it."

Molly said, "I hope you can stop it, Seo. You cant see the pictures I see, or hear the voices of the others. The necklace holds them close to me, and when I close my eyes and let them show me, I can see where the other Vodian went before me. They still have their horror. Theyre hollow -theyre ancient shells, and all thats left of them is the death and the pain and the fear. I close them out as much as I can. I dont want to go where they have been." As he turned to face her again, she added, "Not again, anyway."

"No. You are my love. You are my heart and s—" His voice broke

off, and an expression flashed across his face that worried Molly. "You are my heart and soul. I'll keep you safe." He put an arm around her and led her out of their suite. "While you dressed, I told Birra to have a meal brought to the solar. I know it's your favorite room, and I thought your first night back, it would be pleasant to have a private dinner among the flowers and beside the little waterfall. It should be ready now."

Molly smiled up at him. "That sounds wonderful." The pressure of his hand on the small of her back and his wondrous warmth and presence steadied her. She needed steadying; glad as she was to find herself alive, overjoyed as she was to be in Oria, in Copper House, in Seolar's embrace, she could not shake either the darkness inside of her nor an ugly hollowness that seemed to echo in even the smallest moment of silence. Death had changed her, and not in good ways. "That sounds wonderful," she repeated. And she wished it did. Far back in her mind, though, darkness moved and shifted and whispered. Far back in her mind, the enemies of her dead predecessors had opened their eyes and were yawning and stretching and sniffing the air, sensing fresh meat, and while Molly hungered for the ordinariness of dinner and the charm of an indoor waterfall and the sweet scents of out-of-season flowers in a room where she could look out at the moonlight on snow, she could not hide herself from the hunters that stalked the periphery of her mind.

She could not hide herself from the life she'd been born to live, from the duty that only she could fulfill, from the hand of Fate that held her in its harsh grip.

She wondered how she would manage to eat and converse with that ball of dread knotting her belly.

Seolar guided her through the private passageways that kept them out of sight of guests of the house and servants alike; they slipped through the secret panel in the solar, and Molly

stepped into a fairy realm, with thousands of slender tapers lining the walls and stuck in candelabras worked in between the flowers and the plants – in the still fish pond opposite the little stone bridge that spanned the stream, floating candles by the hundreds, flickering and golden.

On the patio where the two of them had shared their first meal together, a little table, empty plates, and empty glasses already waited. “The food will be along as soon as we call,” Seolar said. “I didnt want it to chill.”

“This is so beautiful,” Molly said. “How did you manage it so quickly?”

Seolar laughed. “I put a hundred servants and soldiers to the task. Had they not been able to do the job, I would have commanded two hundred.”

Molly found a genuine laugh inside herself. “Its good to be the king,” she muttered.

Seolar raised an eyebrow.

Molly shrugged. “A line from a... from an entertainment back home.”

“I like hearing you laugh.”

Molly grinned at him as he held her seat. “It felt good. Im so glad to be here.”

Seolar rang a bell, then took his seat across from her. “I dread asking for fear of bringing to mind great pain, or great sorrow, but... did you suffer?”

Molly shook her head. “No. Not once it was over, anyway.”

“What happened?”

“I was stupid. I hesitated leaving the scene of the battle – you know of the battle?”

“Yaner was most thorough in telling us what happened.”

Molly said, “He would be. My sister told me to flee the scene of the battle and take her son, Jake, to safety in the other world. She had the gate already in place; I could have gone easily. But I waited because I was afraid that I might not be able to get back here. I hesitated, and a blast hit us. It hit her son – tore him almost in two – just as I finally stepped into the gate. We went through to Earth, but while we were between the worlds, I felt a force keeping Jake alive. Once we reached the other side, though, I knew he would die. I could feel it, and the closer I came to Earth, the more horribly I could feel it. And if he died, it would be my fault.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, and felt tears start down her cheeks.

“You dont need to tell me,” Seolar said.

“But I do. You have to know, because I almost cost us... us.” Molly got hold of herself and continued. “I didnt save another little boy once, and I knew that if I let Jake die when, had I done what Lauren told me to do, we would have both been safe, I could never have lived with myself. So when we crossed over, I took his injuries into myself. They werent survivable. He lived; I died.”

“Im sorry,” Seolar said, and put his hand over hers.

“Me, too. It didnt have to be that way.”

“Im sorry for every terrible thing that ever happened to you.” He leaned forward and kissed her. “Never again, my love. Never again.”

Molly heard footsteps, and a cleared throat. She opened her eyes and Seolar moved back. Birra – dear Birra – stood before her with a covered silver tray. “Imallin,” he said, and bowed. He turned to Molly, his expression carefully polite. “And ...” His voice faltered, his body went rigid, and the tray dropped

to the table top with a horrific crash. His hands flew to his face, he dropped to one knee, and from his mouth erupted a keening that on Earth would have had every dog in a one-mile radius howling in sympathy.

Seolar put a hand on Birras shoulder and said, "Enough, man! Catch yourself in hand."

Birra put his forehead to the floor and said, "Relieve me, my Imallin. I dare not confess what my eyes tell me they see. Relieve me of my post – I have gone mad."

"Shes real," Seolar said. "Thats why I did all this. Shes real, shes back with us, and this time well keep her safe."

Birra lifted his head just high enough that he could peer over the table. "Vodi?" he croaked. "Is it really you?"

Molly smiled. "Birra, it is. I had a long way to come to get home, but Im here now."

Birra looked from Molly to Seolar and back to Molly. Tears slid down his tattooed cheeks, and he mopped them with his braids. "How?" he asked, and immediately retracted the question with a vehement shake of his head. "No, I step above my place to ask such a thing. Oh, Vodi," he said, "I would have sold the sun itself to bring you back to us, had it been mine. Anything you would have of me, you have only to ask. Thank all the little gods you have found your way back." He rose, took a deep breath, and seemingly more composed, looked at the mess on the table. "The kitchen has more of everything," he told her. "I will bring you food undisturbed by my ..." He gave Seolar a doubtful look. "... foolishness."

"Im sorry, Birra," Seolar said, picking up on the cue. "I should have told you. But I thought you would think me mad unless you saw her yourself – and she was dressing. And then I was so excited about my idea I forgot what a shock her presence would be to you."

“Lucky it did not slay me, truth be told.”

“Indeed.” Seolar had the grace to look chagrined. “Perhaps you had best warn the rest of the staff before we send for anything else – I’d hate to spend the rest of the night picking up dropped food and shattered plates.”

Birra gathered up the mess and vanished down the path, and Seolar said, “By tomorrow the House and the village will be decked in ribbons, and by the next day, all of the land, I think.”

Molly said, “It makes for quite a homecoming.” She sighed. “Lauren doesn’t know.”

“Your sister? You haven’t told her?”

“I woke up in the forest not far from here. I had no way to reach her or tell her. But if we were going to do what our parents planned for us, I’m going to have to find a way.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Seolar said. “I don’t want to take the chance of you going on your own.”

Molly would have argued, but in truth she didn’t want to take that chance either. “Send someone reliable to her,” she said. “Perhaps Yaner – Lauren knows Yaner.”

“Of course.”

Molly heard a scuffling down the path, and turned to find a handful of servants peering at her through the arching branches of the trees and the lace of the ferns. She smiled at them and they prostrated themselves, then turned and fled.

“The word is out,” Seolar said. “I could punish them for such impertinence... but I won’t. We thought the veyr were doomed; that they want to see for themselves that we once again have hope, well... I won’t blame them for that.”

Molly smiled. "No. Im sorry I so stupidly took hope away from them, even for a little while."

Seolar kissed her again.

When the food came back, it tasted wonderful, and Molly discovered that she was ravenous. She ate seconds on everything and thirds on the delicious fruit dessert the dessert chef had concocted.

Seolar watched her eating long after hed finished with an expression of bemusement. "I dont know why Im so hungry," she said. "Maybe coming back took a lot out of me." She frowned. "Well, no – there was nothing in me ..." She shrugged. "I feel like I havent seen food in a year, though, and this is so wonderful. And Im so grateful the kitchen made extra."

Seolar leaned his chin on one cupped hand and said, "Do you think youll be this hungry at every meal now? I may have to find more cooks." He grinned at her and Molly laughed.

"I dont know. I dont think so. Its just that this is the first thing Ive eaten. And I didnt even know I was so hungry."

"Theres more if you want it," Seolar said.

Molly leaned back in her chair and sighed. "You know, I dont think I do. Finally."

Seolars smile got broad. "Good. Because I dont think there was that much more."

Molly laughed, then leaned forward. "In the next few days, well have so much to do. But tonight – tonight we dont have to do anything in particular, do we?"

"Certainly not. Why?"

"Because I would love so much to listen to some beautiful music and dance with you. Could we do that?"

“You had only to ask, my love.” Seolar looked toward the main door to the solar, and started to say something. Birras voice floated back to them before he could utter a sound. “I am on my way to get the musicians, Imallin. They shall be only an instant.”

Molly sighed and smiled into the silence, truly content.

In that silence, in the stillness of her mind, she heard the heavy, slow flap of a leathery wing, and her happiness melted away like snow on hot pavement. She froze, concentrating. Had she heard something, or had she only imagined it?

She closed her eyes and concentrated. And there it was again. Flap. A pause. Flap. It came from a distance, and she knew she did not yet hear it with her ears, but she could not doubt that it was real. She opened her eyes and looked at Seolar and said, “Something coming.”

“Something?”

“Hunters,” she said. “theyre coming. They know Im here and theyre looking for me.”

“What kind of hunters?”

Molly dreaded even saying the word. “The rrrn,” she whispered.

#

Cat Creek, North Carolina

Crocuses on the lawn, the first hints of daffodils pushing heads above the dirt, and a splash of insanely yellow forsythia running along the side of the house next to the driveway. It looked so cheerful, and so ordinary, Lauren thought as she pulled into the drive.

“Okay, puppy boy,” she told Jake. “Youre going to help me carry groceries into the house this time, right?”

Jake gave her a little smile. "I help," he said. "Im a big boy."

He sat quietly in the car seat while she unfastened him, and stood still while she put the plastic bag that held the bread over his arm. She loaded up with most of the rest of the bags, clamped her keys between her teeth, and said, "Con, Jake. Ess go."

He followed close behind her, like an obedient little lamb. Lauren wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. Jake had never been an obedient little lamb. Never. In fact, hed always seemed to her to be a cross between a caffeine-hyped kitten and the cartoon Tasmanian devil. She hadnt seen any part of the little boy she recognized for the last two weeks – not since something awful had happened to him going through the world gates and Molly had died in the process of fixing it.

Lauren wanted her busy, stubborn, fun little guy back. She wondered if hed ever make it back – hed finally started talking again, but he didnt chatter. He didnt get into things. He didnt run around. He stayed where she put him, did what she told him, and nothing more.

Lauren shifted bags to one hand, unlocked the front door, shoved it open with a hip, and swung the groceries down to the foyer floor.

She turned to find Jake plodding up the front steps to the porch, the arm with the bread on it carefully lifted to keep it from dragging on the ground.

"You doing all right?" she asked him.

"Yes." He held the rail with the opposite hand, and was doing what Lauren thought of as the Modified Wedding Walk going up the stairs – left foot, step together; left foot, step together. Cautious.

"I'll be right back, then," she told him as she ran down the stairs. "I have to get the rest of the groceries." Lauren hurried – loaded the rest of the bags on one arm, praying that the flimsy plastic handles wouldn't break, slamming the trunk, and hurrying back to the house at as close to a run as she could manage.

She needn't have worried. Jake, once inside the door, went to the foot of the stairs leading up to the second floor and sat on the first step.

"All right," Lauren said. "Let's get all this stuff into the kitchen. Come on."

He shook his head and sat watching her.

Lauren sighed. "Jake, I have to put the food away. The ice cream will melt and a lot of this needs to go in the refrigerator. Can you carry the bread to the kitchen for me?"

He still sat where he was, shaking his head.

Well, okay. He was obedient except for that. He wouldn't go down the hall – not for love, not even for ice cream.

She leaned down, kissed him, and took the bag of bread. "Okay. I'll put things away and then be right back. Stay there."

"Nooooo!" he wailed as he saw her start to leave.

"I'm just going down the hall. Everything is okay, monkey boy. Really."

"Nooooo," he said. The back of the foyer terrified him. The giant mirror that hung on the wall there terrified him. She could get him into the kitchen if she picked him up and carried him, and the only time she got a show of spirit from him any more was when she did try to carry him down the hall. Then he turned into a hellcat, if only briefly, and she felt like she had her little boy back.

She had too many groceries to put away to voluntarily engage in a fight, though. "I have to, kiddo. Ill be fine. And so will you."

"NOOOOO!"

Lauren took a deep breath, preparatory to just picking up the bags and heading down the hall and letting him scream. Behind her, someone knocked on the front door. She turned. Pete Stark stood there, still in his deputys uniform.

Pete was second in command of the two-man Cat Creek Sheriffs Department. He was, as well, a newcomer to the Sentinels, which had been, until Lauren returned to Cat Creek, a closed and secretive cell of a hereditary group of guardians, whose family associations had reached back for generations. Laurens own family had been Sentinels longer than theyd been Americans – and theyd been Americans well over a hundred years.

The Sentinels stood at the world gates and fond to prevent – and if necessary, repair – damage from magic that rebounded from other worlds in the worldchain back to Earth. They lived dangerous lives, and frequently died young. Hidden away in small towns, spending their days as florists and insurance salesmen and bank clerks and housewives, they kept the ancient secrets of the world gates and the magic that lay on the other side of them – because anyone could be taught to use the gates, and those who traveled down the worldchain gained the power of gods, if not the wisdom.

And magic used downworld rebounded upworld, often with horrific results.

The Cat Creek Sentinels had suffered major losses recently. Nine of fourteen Sentinels – including the three traitors who caused a magic-borne plague that had killed over three hundred people in Cat Creek alone, and millions worldwide – had died in the past month. The survivors had sworn Lauren in as their replacement gateweaver, and had taken Pete mostly because he

was a friend of Eric MacAvery – Cat Creeks sheriff and the head of the Cat Creek Sentinels – but partly because he knew too much about Sentinels and world gates to be permitted to walk away.

In spite of the somewhat shotgun-marriage manner in which hed joined, Pete had taken to the duties and responsibilities of a Sentinel with an enthusiasm and a dedication that surprised everybody.

Only Lauren seemed to wonder at his competence in tight spots. Only she seemed to notice layers to him that lay below the surface, or to suspect that he was more than he seemed. She thought he was one of the good guys, for what it was worth. Actions spoke truth where words lied – and hed saved Eric's life, and had risked his own many times in many ways.

She liked the look in his eyes. Her gut said, Hes okay. Hes one of the good guys.

But which good guys?

“Hey,” she said, opening the door. “Are you where you could take a minute or two and sit in the hall with Jake so that I could put groceries away?”

He looked startled. “Well... I suppose. I came by to talk to you, but ...” He shrugged at her, smiled at Jake, and sat down on the stairs beside him. “You want to play? Cars? Or horsey? Or something?”

Jake sat there staring at Pete like Pete had two heads.

“Right back,” Lauren said, and hauled her groceries down the hall before Pete could find second thoughts.

Hed been by almost every day since the funeral. She saw him when she answered calls to check on the Sentinel gates around the town, too, and when they bumped into each other on the street. In a town that – since the influenza epidemic – housed

only a few more than seven hundred people, not running into someone became difficult.

He wanted to be with her, to spend time getting to know her; he wanted to help her get past all the awfulness of the past couple of months – and maybe the year before that, too. He like her. For that matter, she liked him.

But he wasnt Brian, and could never be Brian. And Brian had reached back from death to save Jakes life, and had told Lauren that he would always love her, and that he would be waiting for her. That didnt leave Lauren with a lot of room to move on with her life.

She was at such loose ends. She owned the house outright, and with government money that came in monthly, she and Jake could afford to live without her working, even though to do so they had to live very small lives. It wasnt such a hard thing to live a small life in a place like Cat Creek.

But her life had been planned to be so much more. Until Mollys death, she had been one half of a partnership born to save Earth from self-immolation and to prevent the escalating collapse of the worldchain of which Earth was just a single bead. Shed spent thirty-five years of her life heading toward a destiny of unimaginable wonder, had in a single day at the end of that thirty-five year trek discovered who she was, who Molly was, what their parents had planned for the two of them, and that her life mattered in huge ways she couldnt even fully conceive... and in the same day, Molly had died and shed lost the sister shed only just found and the future shed spent her entire life hungering after. And that same bitter death had rendered her parents sacrifice of their lives years before futile – for if Lauren and Molly couldnt carry out their parents plans, they had died for nothing.

Lauren jammed cans onto the shelves of the pantry and the fruit into big wooden bowls lined along the counter and

refused to let the tears come. Shit happened. It happened to everyone, and if it didnt seem fair that so very much of it had happened to her, well, no one with any sense had ever tried to claim that life was fair, had they? Or even that anyone ought to try to make it fair. She still had Jake. She had a place to live, a little bit of money, the time to give her little boy that so many young mothers didnt have. She had a lot, and she would not succumb to the temptations of self-pity. She would not. She loathed whiners.

She could hear Pete out in the foyer talking to Jake. Reading him a story, she realized. "The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything?" She winced. That had been one of Jakes favorite books prior to... well, everything. But he couldnt seem to stand the suspense anymore, and when the pumpkin said, "Boo, boo!" he always burst into tears, even if the pumpkin said, "Boo, boo!" very quietly.

"He hasnt been doing too well with that one lately," she yelled.

"Hes hanging in with it right now," Pete called back. "Has his hands over his eyes, but Im going light on the dramatic presentation."

"He cries at the pumpkin."

"Ill take it easy."

Suit yourself, Lauren though, annoyed. If he has a fit, though, youre going to deal with both of us.

Bread in the freezer, muffin mix on the shelves, flour and Toll House morsels and brown sugar on the baked goods shelf at the top.

"He DOES NOT!" Lauren heard Jake shout suddenly. "The very scary pumpkin say, BOO! BOO!, not I gots a cookie!"

Lauren stopped putting things onto shelves and listened.

“Right here,” Pete was saying. “See – it says, “The very big, very orange, very scary pumpkin says, I have a cookie in my tummy.”

“You a dumbass,” Jake said. One of Brians words. Usually Lauren found a little bit of comfort in hearing Jake using Brians words, in the same way that she found comfort in knowing that he now remembered his father – but she wasnt sure how Pete would take being called a dumbass by a three year old.

Pete was laughing. And an instant later, so was Jake. She leaned against the counter and put her head down on it and cried. It was the first time Jake had laughed since the accident, since the awfulness – and by all rights she or Jakes father should have been the ones to make him laugh, and instead, he was laughing at the man who seemed to want to take his fathers place.

Lauren wanted to be happy with that breakthrough. A part of her was – hearing Jake laugh again was like music from heaven. But a big part of her was hurt and jealous and – yes, she admitted – bathing in self-pity.

Dammit.

She straightened up, wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her sweatshirt, and took slow, deep breaths until she got over it. Brian was dead, and he couldnt be there for his son anymore, though he sure as hell had been there when it counted. Molly was dead, and she couldnt be there for Lauren, or the plan. Mom and Dad were dead, and shitty as that was, theyd been dead for a long time.

And if Lauren didnt get her ass in gear, the ice cream was going to melt all over the floor.

She heard footsteps in the hall, and turned to see Jake riding on Petes shoulders – and Pete had gotten him through the back

end of the foyer and past the dreaded mirror without so much as a whimper.

“Mama, Pete did the story wrong,” Jake said, and he had a real smile on his face. “He said... he said ...” Jake started to giggle, “that the very big, very scary, very orange pumpkin said he gotted a cookie in his tummy.” He wrapped his arms around Petes eyes and leaned over his head, laughing again, laughing so hard his head bobbed up and down and his belly shook. “But the pumpkin spose to say, B00! B00!” Jake did those boos with the tremendous vigor Lauren always used to give them when she read the book. “An I say Pete is a dumbass.”

Lauren winced and said, “I heard.”

Pete grinned at her. “He has his opinions, doesnt he?”

“He does.” She smiled at his son. “This is the happiest Ive seen him. Since ...” She shrugged.

“Hes a tough little guy,” Pete said. He swung Jake down to the floor, and Jake ran to her and hugged her around the thighs.

“Can I help?”

Lauren handed him a soup can and pointed him toward the floor of the pantry. “Right there,” she said. “Put it away, and come back for the next one.”

Pete said, “I wanted to let you know that a new Sentinel came in today. Girl named Darlene Fullbright. Eric asked me to stop by and let you know, maybe run you by so you can set up her gate. She was going to be staying with June Bug, but apparently Darlene is allergic to smoke, and June Bug said that at her age shes not going to be told to go outside her own doors to smoke – the two of them did not get off on the right foot at all.”

Lauren smiled a little. “I dont see June Bug being any too

happy about someone suggesting that she make any changes, frankly. And anything involving those damned cigars of hers ...”

“Shes a character,” Pete agreed. “Want me to run you by? Soon as you put up the rest of your groceries, of course.”

Lauren shrugged. “I might as well. I have to give Jake a bath this evening, but thats the biggest event I have going.”

“We could do something together. Go get something to eat – over in Rockingham or Laurinburg or down in Bennettsville. You dont need to be spending every evening alone. Youve been through a lot – and I have the feeling that, like ol Jake there, you could stand to laugh a bit.”

Lauren thought wistfully of the evenings that she and Brian had gotten dressed up – Lauren in a pretty dress, Brian in his blues with his service ribbons proudly displayed – for special events on base at Pope. She could close her eyes and see him standing in the living room of their little base housing duplex, flight cap in hand, smile on his face. She hadnt worn a pair of hose or a dress for anything other than funerals since Brians death.

Maybe it wouldnt hurt to take Pete up on his offer – maybe it was time that she thought of high heels as something other than shoes to wear when people died.

But would that be leading Pete on? She wasnt a free woman. She was a widow, but a widow under special circumstances – she would never be a free woman.

Yes, she decided. Knowing that Pete liked her, and would like to date her, she couldnt accept something that he would look at as a date with a clear conscience. “Thats sweet of you,” she said.

“But... youre going to turn me down.” Pete smiled sadly. “I

swear, Lauren, I could see the whole thing running across your face while I was standing here looking at you. You wanted to go, you considered going, and then something changed your mind. What?"

"Brian."

Pete closed his eyes, took a slow breath, and blew it out with the air of a man trying to find patience he didn't have. Lauren expected him to tell her that Brian was dead, that wedding vows were only until death – and instead he just nodded. "All right, then," he said.

Lauren discovered that she'd wanted him to try to argue her out of it. What the hell did that mean?

She turned away, put the last of the groceries in their places, balled up the plastic bags and dumped them into the trash, and wished that she could understand herself.

At her feet, Jake said, "Oh, no. Mama. No."

Lauren turned to see what was bothering him. She couldn't see anything. She took a step forward and moved into a spot of air so icy, so terrifying, that she almost shrieked. But in her mind something whispered, Get the man to leave. I have news for you,

WORLD GATES EXTRAS

Where to buy

- Amazon
- Barnes & Noble
- Kobo
- Apple iBooks

(as a set)

- Amazon

Contents © Holly Lisle. <https://hollylisle.com> All Rights Reserved