

## Gheist

### Sample and Synopsis

#### 1

It was a good hand. Not a royal flush, sure, but a good hand nonetheless. Two aces, three queens. It was hard to keep her face neutral, the spark from her eyes.

Kat breathed in quickly so that her ribs stabbed pain into her side. That focussed her, dulled her excitement. Her side was mottled with black, purple and yellow after the kicking she got in the parking lot last night. In a way she felt lucky that's all she got. She hoped her luck would hold. That's all she had left.

She breathed in again and tried to cover her wince. Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'd see a doctor.

She must have been desperate to come here in the first place. It had cost her a thousand bucks just to get in the door. Money Kat didn't have. They'd let her put it on a tab, so she'd borrowed more. It had taken a lot of time carefully applying makeup and a stolen dress. So long as she looked like a million dollars they thought she was good for the same amount. Suckers.

Still, a bit of bling and some cleavage helped distract the newbies and other amateurs even if it seemed totally out of place in a dive like this. Her heels kept getting stuck in pits in the concrete floor. A few dirty rugs had been laid down to give the basement a more homely feel, and probably covered some troublesome bloodstains.

Kat looked round the table, studied the others looking at their own cards. Yosemite Sam was only missing the cowboy hat. Maybe he'd left it in some cloakroom. He played with his drooping moustaches, twirling the ends through his fingers. This might be his tell or a bad habit of preening himself. He laid his cards flat on the table and only curled up the corners. Spotting Kat looking at him he gave her a wide smile and a slight nod. When he spoke he oozed Southern charm. "I think I'll stick," he said, still smiling and looking at Kat all the while.

The Kid still wore sunglasses inside. It didn't matter that his tell was to rattle the ice-cubes in his bourbon. Kat could clearly see his hand reflected in the dark lenses. She wasn't so sure anyone else could see this. A pair of sixes was all he had. In another round he might have stood a chance but in this one he'd be better off folding. Perhaps he was some kind of math genius and was counting probabilities to get himself through college. Maybe he had a trust fund. If he kept going the way he was he'd be lucky to afford a textbook. Yeah, everyone else could see his hand too. "I'll take three." He put his discards on the pile and

the dealer darted three cards towards him. Lucky bastard got another six. In another round he might have stood a chance.

The dealer was a professional croupier making some extra bucks after hours. Hair was tied back and hidden under a baseball cap which shadowed most of the rest of her features. She wore a white blouse with short sleeves and a black skirt. No rings, no watch, nothing to catch the eye or that could interfere with the game. She spoke to no one and controlled the deck. If a new one was called for she took out a cellophane wrapped box and opened it in front of the gamblers.

That left Danton.

Kat had been in town only a fortnight, but that was long enough to hear about Danton. Everyone knew someone who had done this or that for Danton. No one had ever met Danton first hand. Yet he sat next to Kat flicking the edge of his cards like he had somewhere to be. He was a big guy, long hair, looked like a rock star, but a drummer, not a skinny front man like Steven Tyler. Maybe the guy from Iron Maiden. Danton had a broken nose too. Kat saw a crow made of thorns coming at her, talons ready, tattooed onto his left deltoid. A muscle that looked as big as her head. There was definitely something there, a presence about the guy. Or was it just the mystique?

He was supposed to own at least one place on the main strip and had his hands in several more operations like this one. Built his empire from the ground up one card shark at a time. Given all the competing interests in a town like this he hadn't peacefully annexed his way to the top.

Perhaps he dropped in on a different venue every night, liked to look in on his investments. Here it was Kat's lucky night. She got to meet the Great Danton, and Danton was down to his last chips.

“All in,” Danton said in his warm molasses voice. He threw his chips onto the pile with a flick of disdain. He could get more anytime he needed to, but tonight he was all in.

Two weeks ago she’d never have been here. God, it felt like a lifetime ago, being blinded by the desert glare fresh off the plane. She had to root in her handbag for her sunglasses which still seemed feeble and ineffective. Everywhere it was like bright metal stabbing her eyes. Tony picked up her case and the taxi driver helped him put it into the boot of the cab. They must see them coming in, new meat. It would be quicker to just take their money at the immigration check, but then it would be raw, brutal. Maybe it was better this way, a subtle anaesthesia, which led to a compliant willingness to hand it over, and more. Kat’s nitrous fog had dissipated a week ago. Tony had already sold their return tickets and her passport. Like early morning mist her fiancée had burned off without a trace, leaving her robbed of her winnings and with a hotel bill. That was due tomorrow, checkout before high noon.

Kat realised they were all waiting for her. She was staring at the pile of chips in the middle of the table. There was at least five hundred grand there. Enough to get the hell out of here and not look back. Enough to make it all worthwhile after she cleared her debts, and Tony’s.

“Call,” she said, and pushed her winnings towards the pile, one of the stacks spilling over. Was she mad? Too late now, she hadn’t won much, but there had been enough there to get her out of trouble. Kat could walk away even, maybe fly home without calling her mum for help. She could feel a cold sweat break out along her spine. The cards, the cards said everything would be fine. It was a good hand.

Yosemite Sam grunted and folded by flicking his cards away from him across the blue felt and pulled on the ends of his tache.

The Kid, what would he do? Did he think he actually had something? Kat would happily take his money. She ignored the advice from the Kenny Rodgers song and started totting up The Kid's chips. Whether it was because he knew his cards weren't gonna win him this round, or he knew better than to go all in against Danton, The Kid folded too.

This was it. The moment Kat had been waiting for. She closed her eyes. When she opened them Danton had turned over his cards. The concrete beneath her feet melted and she was falling down into the earth. Danton had a straight flush two to six, clubs. Kat's full house was no use.

"No." Did she say that out loud?

There it was in black and red; Danton had won.

Kat got up on weak legs, knocking over her chair. She needed air. She needed out of there.

What was she going to do? Kat had nothing but the dress she was wearing and a case with some cheap cosmetics.

The warm night air punched her in the guts. The smell of gasoline and the tendrils of cigar smoke were too much for her. She retched beside a dumpster, wiping away filaments of bile with the back of her hand.

Go. You gotta go. Now. She listened to her voice.

Kat made it to the neon safety of The Strip. She had no idea where to go next. Not the hotel, they'd find her there easily.

She pushed through the crowds, the air warm and smelling of sweat, cheap perfume and grilling meat. Everyone seemed to be heading in the opposite direction. Maybe there was a show starting nearby.

Kat wished she'd worn jeans and trainers. Her feet were killing her, her ribs pulsed with pain. She really needed to piss.

Where were the cameras? How much could they see? How well could they track her? Could she risk nipping into the Golden World Casino to use the Ladies or would that flag up exactly where she was? If governments could do it, she was sure business could too. Didn't they keep track of known card counters and the like? It was all electronic now.

Her need to go was more urgent than her need to stay hidden and she wasn't squatting in an alley. A small army of doormen waited to usher her inside all wearing different national costumes made from golden material. She'd never seen a tartan kilt like it so headed for wee Braveheart who let her into the cool darkness of the casino lobby.

Kat followed the signs to the washroom and found an empty stall. When she was finished she just sat there shaking. There was no way out of this nightmare. Fucking Tony. This was all his fault. None of this would be happening without him. They had been so happy. What went wrong? Had he been hiding a habit or did he just get hooked in the 24 hour cycle of tables and cards?

Kat put her head down low and breathed deep and exhaled slowly. She could smell bleach and desperation. Mostly her own.

She had increased her debts significantly now. A room bill she could probably have gotten help with through an embassy or something, along with her stolen passport. A few hundred thousand dollars; that was a criminal act. Fraud probably. Not that anyone was going to be pressing charges. While she didn't expect to be killed – dead people don't pay their dues – she could be hurt, or worse. Could she get a legit job? Must be plenty of illegal workers in a place like this. There was always the oldest job of all. She breathed deep and exhaled slowly. She'd take her chances, try getting out of town first.

Washing her hands and face in the sink made her feel better, even though the cold water never got below lukewarm. The attendant offered her a thick paper towel.

Kat started. She hadn't seen her, sitting on her stool, quietly in the corner of the washroom. She had thought she was alone.

"I'm sorry," Kat said, shaken. "I've got nothing for you. Lost it all." Kat hated these people. Not personally, you understand, but in general. Lurking, pushing themselves into your life when you want a moment of privacy, looking for a token of thanks when you just want to leave. Still, couldn't be good for them stuck in a poorly lit room listening to people in the stalls. Surely working on the street was better than this?

"I know, honey," the attendant said. "I seen that look before. Seen it in the mirror more than once myself. You still got your health. Don't forget that."

"Yeah, you're right," Kat said and she tried a smile.

"Danton'll find you though," the attendant said. "Always does."

"What did you say?" Kat felt dizzy, vertigo. How did word travel so fast, even in this town?

"Downtown. Find yourself there, always places to stay," the attendant said. "Church folks there, looking to help the fallen. Helped me get back on my feet. You want a mint?"

Still stunned, body jangly with adrenaline, Kat took a black and white striped candy from the saucer and squeezed the mint out of the cellophane. It was fresh and clean in a way Kat hadn't felt in days. "Which way is downtown?"

"Just keep along The Strip til you can't go no further."

"Thank you."

"God bless you, lady. You'll be alright."

The warm evening air felt oily. Kat walked past a gold clad German whose legs under the lederhosen were also painted gold and a woman in a golden kimono. Back on The Strip the crowds were heading everywhere other than Kat's way. She kept looking at faces, at the street, as any moment a car could stop or someone grab her and take her away.

An hour seemed to pass before the crowd thinned out and the big names and grand architecture had become low buildings; diners and rooms filled with one-armed bandits. After this the crowd disappeared and Kat was exposed, a lone walker, moving between the lit islands of drive thrus, strip clubs, wedding chapels, gas stations and motels, all surrounded by huge parking lots. Had she gone too far, was this Downtown, beyond the bulbs of the big casinos? She hadn't seen any real churches. Her feet were sore, her legs were tired. She walked into a donut franchise and sat in a plastic booth. With nothing to her name she couldn't even afford coffee.

"Hey, Lady," a guy called from behind the counter, the light on his lenses masking his eyes.

Had she fallen asleep? Kat looked around. Only a couple of other folks in here.

"Lady, we don't do table service here, you got to order at the counter."

No free parking in this town. Kat got back on her weary feet and out into the night once more. She just wanted to rest. It was starting to get cool although the day's heat was

still baking off the sidewalk. Maybe she could really hit bottom and just lie down, right here. It would be alright, warm for a while, then she'd cool slowly with the night and pass on before dawn. But her feet kept putting themselves one in front of the other and she continued along this long, long road with its endless parking lots around concrete blocks. A road sign said she was heading Downtown. Kat felt slightly better that she hadn't gotten turned around and was going back towards Danton.

Rows of shops started to appear. Mostly bail bonds and pawn shops with the odd bodega thrown in, she'd left the larger 7-Elevens behind. A few injury lawyers and yet more wedding chapels and strip clubs. Was there anywhere here you could go and not get married or see fake tits? There was bound to be a chapel staffed by strippers round there somewhere.

She knew she was in Downtown proper when she saw the law courts and banks. Nestled between gleaming black glass office buildings was the Church of the Holy Spirit. It was built in the Spanish mission-style; white washed plaster walls, low sloping terracotta tiled roof and short bell tower with a modest cross at the top of the dome. The palm trees that grew in the small courtyard out front towered over the building. No neon signs, just a nice painted wooden one behind the low wall that ran along the sidewalk. It felt homely, modest, and welcoming amongst the facades and bright plastic.

Through the large wooden door, the church was as you'd expect; wooden pews, tiled floor, congregations of candles flickering. The sign hadn't given a denomination, but there were no confessional booths. In fact there was no one around at all.

When was the last time Kat had been in a church? Her sister's wedding, maybe five years ago? It had been in a Catholic church. She hadn't known what to do. Lots of standing up at the right time and shaking people's hands. Kat always felt like she was cowering

slightly, afraid some bolt from Heaven was going to strike her down for crossing the threshold. She lived without sin, because she didn't believe in sin. Sure, she'd gone to church like everyone else when she was a kid. Her mum and grandparents believed alright. But when she got to secondary school Kat only went at Christmas and Easter. By the time she went to university and her grandparents had gone even her mom had stopped going. But wouldn't it be nice, to confess? To sit in the dark and admit your failings and ask for someone to say that it was okay and please try harder, til next time.

Kat sat down at the end of a pew near the back. She took off her heels and rubbed the balls of her feet and her arches. The stone floor was too cold to rest them on so she drew them up onto the velvet cushion with her. She watched the large shadows of the tiny candle flames on the wall.

Kat was shaken, gently. "Excuse me. Miss? Are you OK?" A lady with friendly eyes squatted down in front of her.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep." Kat felt stiff. "I didn't know where to go." How long had she slept for? Some of the candles had gone out, some looked fresh, their wax cones unmolten.

"Can I get you a coffee and you can tell me about it?" The lady had an air around her, not just the delicate aura of incense, but like Danton there was a presence, a projection of her personality into her surroundings. It had a soothing effect. "I'm Evelyn," she said. "I'm the pastor here."

"Kat. A coffee sounds great."

Evelyn stood up and waited for Kat to put her shoes back on. They went towards the altar, a low dais, only a single step up, on which there was a plain wooden table. No fancy triptychs in gold or even a crucified god here. Even the three alcoves set into the wall around the altar held no statues. Evelyn led Kat through a door in the side of the nave into a small open courtyard where the air was cool and full of the scent of the flowers and plants that grew there, then through another door into a sort of changing and storage area, and finally into a kitchen, where Kat was offered a seat at a table.

Kat watched Evelyn take a mug from a cupboard and prepare a fresh pot of filtered coffee. She sat down opposite Kat while hot water dripped through to the glass jug on the hot plate.

"What brought you to America?" Evelyn said.

“Just a holiday,” Kat said. “I came with my fiancée, Tony. ‘We should go see it, babe. The neon, the blue skies, the casinos. It’ll be magic.’ We were going to buy our wedding rings. He did a great sales pitch, made it seem like he’d never been here. I was too blinded by the sunshine to see how easily he fell back into it.” She couldn’t keep the bitterness out of her voice. She’d been trying to contain it all, hold herself together. But there it all was, ready to flood out of her; a levee about to burst its banks. “A few hands, a few drinks and the sums he was betting went up. I’d only ever played Freecell on the computer. Always been kind of scared of gambling, you know? What if I liked it? Blackjack’s an easy place to start. I started with a few hundred from Tony and made a couple of grand easy. I was high as a kite on nothing more than the thrill of it all. Tony wasn’t doing well. He seemed to sit at tables with higher stakes trying for that big win, recoup his losses. What a cliché.”

“This isn’t a gentle town,” said Evelyn. “Gets its hook in you. Deep, if you’re not careful.”

“He knew just where to go to get a loan,” Kat continued. She’d not even heard Evelyn. “You’d think that would’ve been a bigger clue, right there. Handed over our plane tickets and passports, before I knew it. Handed me the money. I was doing quite well, then I did great. I turned my thousands into hundreds of thousands. That got me into the right poker rooms. I think I’d made a million. Didn’t even cash in my chips cos I’d need them the next day. Got up and found Tony had gone, taking it all. Except he didn’t pay back the sharks. So I’ve been trying to keep them sweet and get back enough to get out of here. Last night they caught up with me, gave me a good kicking. I got into a game earlier, was doing real well, but I lost it all. I owe them, I owe everyone. I just ran, and ended up here.

“I’m sorry. An attendant in a bathroom sent me this way. I don’t even know if I’m in the place she meant.”

It was a lot to take in. Evelyn got up and poured out two mugs of coffee, then slid one over to Kat. "The spirit moves across the world in mysterious ways. You may not be where you were sent, but you're still in the right place." Evelyn had seen a few of these lost souls before. They'd already drifted past the refuges and other churches. Usually they were foreigners. Something was lost in translation and they just didn't recognise these sanctuaries for what they were. Still you had to be pretty persistent to make it to Evelyn's door. The words were different, but the story was familiar; left high and dry and in damaging debt. Had she started to grow hard, dismissive? Each person had their troubles, troubles that were a struggle for them to carry. Who was she to judge their burdens? She knew she'd do what she always did. "Have you eaten?" Evelyn asked.

Kat shook her head, recognising now what that other hollow feeling was. Her stomach grumbled just thinking of food.

"I've got some leftover chicken. I'll make you a sandwich. Then we'll find you some blankets and you can sleep on the couch. Guess we'll figure out what to do with you in the morning."

That sounded like a good idea, but was that a sigh at the end? Kat couldn't help but hear a hint of reproach in Evelyn's voice. Perhaps it was just projection; she needed someone to tell her she'd screwed up.

The sandwich was good, even if the mayo was the bright white of a movie star's teeth. One of those weird American things. Like the butter which had the taste as well as the colour bleached from it. She'd heard you couldn't buy eggs with brown shells as they were considered dirty.

Kat finished the sandwich. She washed the plate and the mugs in the sink and put them on the dryer. Might as well be as hassle free a guest as possible. It sounded like Evelyn

was checking every cupboard in the house. Kat went through into a cosy living area. She felt awkward not having been formally invited though. It's not like she was a vampire, what was she worrying about? There was a small TV, and a large number of books, most of them were on bookshelves bowing under the weight, but plenty more rose up in carefully balanced stacks. On many the paper was discoloured with age. A couple of heavy woollen blankets lay folded on the couch. Was Evelyn looking for a pillow? Kat could sleep without one. She felt heavy, a bag of wet sand which could mould itself to fit anywhere.

Evelyn smiled to see her when she came back in threading an old key onto a leather thong. "You should wear this while you're here. I think you've got everything you need. The bathroom is just through there."

Kat took the key and turned it over in her hand. It was cold and surprisingly heavy. It looked like it would open a pirate's treasure chest. Was there a door she might need to use it on? Why did she have to wear it? It seemed a small thing to do in exchange for the woman's hospitality. No worse than taking her shoes off at the door. Besides it looked like Evelyn wasn't going to leave until she put it on. She slipped the thing over her head, the cold key hanging between her breasts.

"See you in the morning," Evelyn said and went off to the back of the house.

Kat scrubbed her teeth with some toothpaste using her finger. She felt a bit better already. Kat stepped out of her dress and hung it over the back of the sofa. She unfolded the blankets and stretched out on the couch. In moments she was asleep, the key clutched in her hand.

In her room Evelyn was still awake. She had more keys somewhere, she knew it, but where? In the end she gave her visitor, the scotch woman, Kat, her own. But without one of her own who knew what would happen tonight? She lay completely still in her bed, like she

had as a little girl, hoping she wouldn't be noticed. Eventually she let go of her fear and Evelyn had a peaceful sleep.

Kat woke early, confused, on a couch. Why wasn't she in her hotel room? Then yesterday came back to her. A sense of dread wrapped tightly round her. Breathe. Breath deep. She needed a plan. She couldn't stay here. Evelyn had been kind, but Kat could see she was an unwelcome presence. However, it seemed rude to just leave, and she still didn't know where to go.

She got up, unsure what to do with herself. The weight of the key swinging around her neck was unfamiliar. What was that all about? A deep ache pulsed from her side. Her ribs still hurt, the bruises not fading but changing from purple towards green.

She slipped the stolen dress back on. Kat really needed new clothes, or to get back her own. She felt ashamed wearing this dress. It reminded her of how desperate she had become. She should have contacted the police, the British embassy, gotten help. But she chose the easy way. What could be more natural than winning it all back and winning some freedom while she was at it? No more need to worry about work, or Tony. She could start again, anywhere. She'd won enough once, she could do it again.

Exactly. She was a winner. This was just a temporary setback. She'd go back to the hotel. She'd have a long shower and change. Then she'd tell them she wanted to stay for another week. Simple really. She'd find a job for a few days, wait tables, something down to earth like that. Then with her wages she'd win it all back. So long as Danton and the other goons didn't come looking for the money she owed them.

It was very bright in the kitchen. Kat had shunned the light since she arrived, playing at tables all day round. How could it be so strong so early? Kat made herself useful by putting on the filter machine. Her stomach grumbled. The eat-when-you-want buffets had

kept her going and now all she'd had since breakfast yesterday was Evelyn's chicken sandwich. It was one thing to put coffee on in someone else's house, quite another to make yourself breakfast.

Hiding from the light in the living room, Kat browsed through Evelyn's books. It felt intrusive, this insight into someone else's tastes and interests, but she was curious. There weren't as many theological texts as you'd expect. A few on other faiths, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, the Cathar heresy, the Sufi and Ismaili sects. Hardly mainstream, but Evelyn was probably a scholar in her field. Most of the books were paperbacks, a mix of horror novels and romance books. It was an unusual combination. Hearing movement, Kat sat down.

Evelyn looked shocked to see her. Had she forgotten that Kat was here or expected her to have left already?

"I hope you don't mind." Kat lifted her mug. "It should still be hot."

Evelyn nodded. She came back with her own mug. "Sorry. You know how it is. Some mornings you need a drop of wake-up juice."

"I didn't want to go without saying thanks first," said Kat.

To Kat's surprise Evelyn smiled. She always seemed so serious. "You're welcome. But you seemed so out of sorts last night, are you sure you're ready?"

"I don't want to be any trouble. I think I was still in shock. I should do what I should've done before and talk to the British authorities. I think there's a consulate in LA. I'll see how they can help."

"As long as you're sure."

Evelyn showed Kat to the door and watched her start her long walk back to The Strip. It was a while before she realised that Kat still had her key.

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It was good to feel clean again, put on fresh clothes. She'd throw the dress into a dumpster first chance she got.

They'd been very understanding about her lost key. Kat had hesitated approaching the reception desk. Fearing someone was waiting for her, she'd scoped the place out while lurking behind a pillar. With the card games, the team of bad guys and now the spy work, she had begun living the James Bond fantasy. She forgot to mention her credit cards were gone too, and they'd been happy to extend her stay another week.

It had been strange seeing the city in the daylight, squinting in the chrome flash of the sun. It felt empty and washed out. The neon signs looked forlorn. Everything was a little shabby, frayed and bleached round the edges. Now, drying her hair, sitting on the bed, Kat could enjoy the view all the way to mountains through tinted glass with the aircon on so high it gave her goosebumps.

Over the hot rush of the hair dryer she thought she heard a knock. Stopping it she was sure.

"Room service."

"I didn't order anything," Kat said loudly. This was that old ruse to get you to open the door wasn't it? She felt a little of the excitement and fear she got at the table.

"Compliments of the house." It was a woman, not a couple of heavies.

"Just leave it outside, thank you."

"Sorry, Ma'am. I need you to sign for it."

"Can you bring it back later?"

"It's a nice breakfast, Ma'am. It'll go cold."

Could it really just be food? Kat hadn't been surprised that Evelyn didn't ask her to stay for breakfast, she had practically rushed out the door, even so she had been a little disappointed and hungry. It seemed like madness to turn down good food when she was ravenous. She looked through the peephole – there was a woman and a trolley with a tray on top with silver domes over some plates, orange juice, a cafetiere and even a small bottle of champagne in an ice bucket. She was being silly. Kat unchained the door and opened it up. "I'm sorry. I just wasn't expecting anything."

"I'll just set it up over here." The woman put the plates on the table in the corner of the room, arranged some cutlery and crockery and handed Kat a black leather folder with a pen. The woman seemed familiar, but Kat couldn't place where. She'd probably seen her in the dining room. Kat signed for the food and added a generous tip for the trouble she'd caused.

Before the waitress had left Kat had pulled off the covers. She had bacon you could snap, eggs, salmon and cream cheese, slices of toast, some kind of sausage things, and 'breakfast fries'; potato, onion and sweet peppers fried together. Only in America could you get fries for breakfast. She didn't know where to start. Kat wanted all of it. She poured a coffee and added a curl of cream. With the orange juice she made herself a Buck's Fizz. Then she got started on the glorious food.

When she'd eaten she was full to bursting. She finished her hair and put all the used plates on the tray and placed it in the hall near her door. Suddenly she felt drained, really exhausted. She'd slept well last night, but clearly not enough. Kat closed the curtains, put a Do Not Disturb sign on the door and fell fully clothed onto the bed. She didn't hear the knocking on her door.



Where the hell was she? Kat wasn't in her room anymore. She really should keep better track of where she went to sleep. Her head felt heavy and swollen like she had a bad cold. Moving it made her feel woozy. She still had her clothes on. It didn't feel like anything had happened to her. You heard about people being Roofied on holiday, but that was usually in bars, not in their breakfast. Her side still hurt.

She was sitting in an office chair. There was no view across the city, just bare concrete walls. It may have been the place she'd played poker yesterday, assuming it had been yesterday, but there was no table, no fancy rug. But there was the big fella, Danton, and two other guys who looked scrawny beside him. She wasn't so thrilled to see him this time. One of the guys wore a suit. The other was carrying a large ceramic pot, a terracotta vase with a domed lid, like a Canopic Jar without the animal heads. He kept shifting its weight around in his arms.

They hadn't noticed she was awake yet. She could get away again if only her arms weren't duct-taped to the chair. If she struggled with her bonds she'd attract attention. She began to push the chair out of sight. One of the wheels squeaked. The men turned to look at her, dropping their conversation. The suit took out his phone and started filming. Kat started to panic and her breathing got short. Filming this was stupid, whatever this turned out to be.

"You should've stayed gone," said Danton.

"I needed a change of clothes."

"Could've got them on the road."

Perhaps her luck had finally gone. It had been a good run. Course maybe she'd lost it all when she met Tony. She just hated that the bastard was going to get away while she was the one tied to a frickin chair. "Shoulda, coulda, woulda. Just do what you're gonna do. I've got nothing left anyway."

"That's where you're wrong." Danton nodded at the guy with the jar who moved beside Kat. Was there something in it? A spider or a snake maybe? How could a piece of terracotta be so intimidating? "First of all you're going to tell us all about Tony."

For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health. Always the bridesmaid and never the bride, Kat knew the words well enough. She laughed. "You didn't need to tie me up for that. But since it's his debt, how about you let me go if I tell you, call us even."

Danton squatted down in front of her. She could kick him in the baws. His huge head came in close. His breath smelt of caramel. "Before last night that might've been true. At the very least you owe money for the dress, and the entry fee. So you tell us about Tony and that'll be wiped off your slate. The rest we'll come to in a minute."

At least she'd tried. She knew she'd played her last hand. "Okay. But it's nothing you don't know already." Kat told them what she knew.

"Now, about your other debts."

"I told you all I know. Tony has your money."

"Uh uh uh," interrupted Danton, waving a finger. "Tony has some of the money. You lost a lot of money it appears you don't have. You coulda folded and walked away, cashed in the chips, paid your bills. You went all in."

"Look, I've got nothing to give you." Kat struggled against her bonds. "I rent, I've got no jewellery."

“But you do have something. In exchange for your debt, I’ll take your heart.”

Kat felt the world open up beneath her. She felt like she was falling and had vertigo at the same time. “What? So you are going to kill me after all? Fuck you, you sick asshole. Just get on with it and stop playing with me.”

“You’ll be alive. And who knows, maybe one day you’ll pay what you owe and get your heart back. I doubt it. But there you go.” Danton rose and stepped away.

This made no sense. How could they take her heart, but she’d still live?

Jar Guy put it down on the floor beside her and took the top off. It certainly wasn’t a Canopic Jar then. They were for lungs and stomach, but not a heart. Hearts were weighed against the feather of Ma’at to see if you’d been naughty or nice.

He reached inside and his hand came out with nothing. Or was it? When he waved the hand in front of Kat, chanting something in a language she didn’t know, it had a smoky darkness around it like he’d grabbed a handful of exhaust fumes. He stepped forward and thrust this hand at her chest. It passed right through her shirt and through that key, through the skin and the bone.

It happened so quickly she barely had time to react. One moment she thought he was going to grab her breast and was turning away, the next he was wrist deep inside her chest. She didn’t feel anything except a chill breeze that caused her skin to come out in goose bumps.

Then she felt fingers curling around her heart. Her breathing got short and sweat beaded on her forehead. Kat’s chest felt tight like she needed to cough up catarrh. The guy pulled his hand back and her torso came with it, like grotesque puppetry. She rose up from the chair, arms still bound, back arched, the muscles in her legs and shoulders strained and

quivering, the chair tipped back onto its rear wheels, her neck rested on the chair-back. He gave another tug and Kat collapsed back into the seat, hair falling across her eyes.

The guy held her heart in his hand – it was pumping air, glistening in the light from the fluorescent strips, wreathed in that dirty smoke. Then he pushed his hand into the jar, brought it out empty, put the lid on and picked it up again.

Danton took out a flick knife, and Kat knew this was really it. He stepped forward, the knife heading towards her. Wasn't this the wrong way round? What the fuck was going on? Danton slashed the duct tape. Kat jumped out of the chair and out of his reach, but she couldn't breathe, had no strength. Her limbs crumpled beneath her and she was left gasping on the concrete.

"Take it easy," Danton said. "You've got no heart, remember." He put the knife away. "You want it back, you know what you godda do."

The three guys left while the room span around. Kat lay on her back and looked at the cracks in the ceiling. It was all she could do. What had they done to her? She was alive, but already it seemed limited.

When she was sure they had gone Kat tried to peel off the shreds of duct tape. It took her ages to control her hands well enough to catch a ragged edge and then the effort to control her arms, to pull the sticky fibrous mess was almost too much. It was like she'd slept on her arm and it had gone dead. It felt remote, heavy and numb. After what seemed like an hour some control returned and she left the silver peelings on the floor by the chair.

Standing was just as much of a challenge. Her legs didn't feel strong enough to take her weight. When she got off her knees her legs were like rubber posts. Kat thought about crawling to the door, but she'd rip her knees on the rough concrete floor. Slumped in the

chair she waited. She may even have slept for a while. Without windows it was hard to be sure.

Her legs got back some feeling, but still felt spongy below the knees. She pushed the chair backwards towards the door, the Judas wheel squeaking and getting caught in pits that she had to rock the chair out all the way.

Against the wall beside the metal door was her wheelie case. Kat got off the chair. It was still hard to stay up, but it was better. Moving the case took a lot of effort, so it must have her stuff in it. Even opening the door took more strength than it should and tired her out enough that Kat had to wait a few minutes, before she climbed the concrete stairs to street level, one step at a time, dragging the case up after her.

She sat on her case for a few minutes while she caught her breath. The sky was cobalt and chrome, Kat had to squint to see. It must be early afternoon, and she was in a back street in some kind of industrial area. She could smell thick engine grease and gasoline exhaust. Maybe she was near the airport? Apart from it probably still being America, she could be anywhere, but it seemed unlikely she'd been taken outside the city.

She thought she had nothing before. People in the gutter could look down on her now. All she'd had to do was walk away while she was winning. It was like an infection, transmitted to her by Tony, with an itch you really needed to scratch.

Rocking it onto the concrete, Kat unzipped her case. Lying on the top was that dress. There was a dumpster over against a wall. She got halfway there before she had to stop. As much as she hated it, it was an asset now. Even second hand or pawned it was worth a few hundred dollars. She'd even left the tags on it. She had intended to return it, hadn't she? Guess she'd never know now.

Something else was wrong. She wasn't in pain anymore. Had she gotten so used to the pain from her ribs now that it went unnoticed? Putting the dress over her shoulder Kat gently probed her side. It felt tender, but nothing like the sharp pain she was used to from just breathing too hard. She looked about, and lifted her t-shirt. Her side was still a negative image of a rainbow. This should still hurt, bad. This was very wrong, but it was a good thing; she didn't need to trouble a doctor or pay for painkillers.

Kat returned to her case which looked like a turtle cracked open. She found her purse. She still had her credit cards and was surprised that there were a few hundred dollars folded in with them. She zipped the case back together, put her sunglasses on and already exhausted started the long halting walk to a road where she could find a taxi.

Kat threw open the door to her motel room hoping that sudden sunlight would scare off anything crawling in there. It had been a long shift at the diner and she just wanted to shower off the stale smell of fat and get some sleep.

She'd done pretty well for herself, considering. Finding a cheap room was relatively easy, it was more a question of how low your standards were than how much you had to pay. Waiting tables again not so much. Some places asked for résumés, can you believe it? For waitressing? She had ancient experience, but no access to printers and paper. Those few hundreds in her purse had kept speaking to her, demanding to be taken into a place on The Strip and put down on black. Those first few days though she barely had the strength to move for a few minutes. Inertia saved her where her will was weak. Both had started to return, but she was still easily breathless and too easily persuaded.

The Fool's Gold Diner was a bus ride away and she'd accepted the graveyard shift readily enough. She knew everyone else was getting paid at least minimum wage. Still at least it was more than just tips and was better than turning tricks, or hoping she turned over the right card.

It was a regular place, the same staff, the same punters, all going about their day like clockwork. She knew she only had an hour to go when Jim McCabe came in for his breakfast and asked her if she knew his cousin who lived in Ullapool. She had put the cream in his coffee and ordered the pancakes and bacon before he'd even taken his cap off.

Kat checked for bugs in the shower and turned it on so it could heat up. A downside of coming home in the morning was everyone leaving for work had used up all the water. She looked at her side in the cracked mirror over the sink. A few faint ripples of purple

remained and it didn't hurt at all now. Nothing did. She'd slopped hot coffee on her leg and cut her hand on a broken glass and both times she'd not noticed until Jeanie or Florence had fussed over her.

Under the warm water, Kat washed the day off her. She still had most of the money Danton had left her, and all the money from the dress. She didn't do anything but work and sleep at home, watch a few shows when she got up. She ate almost all her meals in the diner. Slowly she was getting some money together. To do what though? Kat didn't care. She couldn't seem to care about anything.

She'd hated the news before, a thin window onto the world's pain. Now it meant nothing to her. There were plenty of vagrants in this end of town, sleeping on the sidewalks like they were queuing for a phone launch. It would have broken her heart once. Now they were just an obstacle to her progress. It wasn't that she'd grown hard, built a defensive screen, there was just no capacity in her for compassion. This bothered her, as much as it could, but no more than losing an eyelash, or slicing her arm open. Not that she'd thought of ending it, not seriously. This all would pass.

Kat was drying herself when she heard someone moving in her room. The door was locked. She always made sure. Perhaps the Super had come in to fix something, not realising she was home. The cleaning girls knew not to bug her before noon.

She put her dirty clothes back on. Once she'd have been repulsed by the sticky feel against her skin. Kat opened the door a crack. Someone was there alright, a silhouette against the thin orange curtains. The front door was shut. She closed the door again and rested her back against it. Shouldn't she be panicking, needing to calm herself? All she had in here was a toothbrush and some toiletries. She picked up a can of deodorant, weighed it in her hand. "I'd like you to leave please," Kat said loud and clear. "Leave or I'll call the

police." She didn't really have a mobile but who else didn't? There was no sound, no door opening.

Kat peeked out the bathroom door again. The silhouette was still there. She stepped into the bedroom. "I asked you to leave." This could be no worse than the rare drunk in the diner; just be firm and unthreatening. "Please go or I'll call the cops." It was a guy, that's for sure. He didn't move. It was like he wasn't even breathing. Staying out of reach Kat unchained the door and opened it, letting in the light and the Spanish of the cleaning crew gossiping. "Come on." She gestured out the door. The guy looked pretty out of it. Totally vacant eyes. Didn't even look at her. Kat wasn't worried about being robbed. She didn't keep anything valuable in her room, but she was concerned about how easily this guy had gotten in. Wait a minute. He'd slipped the security chain back into place.

Kat stepped out into the lot. "Connie?" she called. "Connie? Can you call the Super for me? There's some guy in my room."

Connie came out of a room a few doors down, throwing some soiled towels into the bag slung behind her cart. "What is it, Kat?" It had taken Kat a while to get her to stop calling her Miss, or even Katrina. In return Consuela insisted Kat now call her Connie.

"There's some guy in my room, he won't leave."

Connie left her cart, perhaps hearing the calm in Kat's voice, walked over and looked in the room. "No one here now. Where did he go?"

"What?" Kat actually felt something leak through the thick padding that surrounded her. "I've not moved from here. He couldn't have gotten past me." She looked in her room. No one was there.

"You feeling okay, Kat? You sleeping okay? You working too hard?" Connie touched Kat's forearm.

"I'm." How could the guy have just gone? "I'm fine thanks." But clearly she wasn't.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you."

Connie smiled. "Don't worry about it. We ladies got to look after each other. He's gone now. You should see if Stefan has another room, maybe?" She left Kat and went back to her cart.

Kat shut the door. Put it on the chain. Wedged the chair under the knob and even moved the table across it. Even so, it took her ages to fall asleep and then the alarm was ringing again.

Kat got up in the afternoon. She knew she should be unsettled, scared even, but it was another thing that had been taken from her. In the Laundromat she sorted her clothes and put some washes on. While her clothes spun in suds and then dried in the big drums she liked to sit in the sun and watch the world go by. At least she could do that here. In Scotland she'd have thrown the wash in the machine in the kitchen and rushed off to meet her pals or watched Corrie. In her flat hardship was the Wi-Fi going down. Outside it would have been raining anyway. She'd tried reading a book while she waited as she used to read a lot when she was a kid, before the Internet gave her social media and shopping sites, but it didn't do anything for her anymore.

What was she gonna do with herself? How many years of waiting tables would it take for her to get together the money she owed Danton? 30? 40? If she saved hard and did nothing with her money. Putting it in a bank might earn her some interest and knock a year or two off. But she was an illegal alien, no better off than the Mexicans or Colombians she shared the neighbourhood with. She was paid in cash and not as much as the legal minimum.

Perhaps she should just go home, forget about her heart? Seems she could get by without it anyway. On the bus to work Kat saw the real America, people all dreaming of doing better, of getting their big break, thank Jesus. People who, let's face it, weren't white. Coming from a more cynical and dour nation she didn't see anyone getting out alive. So who was she kidding? If she went back home she'd be just as dead as if she stayed. This way she'd save an airfare and keep the sunshine. She'd go home if Immigration deported her.

“Double bacon on toasted rye, two eggs over easy and a side of pancakes?” Kat asked Mr Simmons as he climbed into the booth. No first names with him, even though he sat in the same booth at the same time every midnight and ate the same breakfast before heading to his shift in bowels of one of the casinos. Kat poured him his coffee.

“Sure,” said Mr Simmons, taking off his cap.

Kat went off to get his order.

Two hours later and the guy from her room was there, standing in the middle of the diner, not moving. Kat nearly dropped the plates she was carrying. She managed to put these down in front of her customers without spilling anything. Had he followed her here? Was he stalking her? “Sir, if you take a seat I can take your order,” she said.

The guy just stood there. Eyes rolled back to show the whites. He was no silhouette here under the diner’s strip lighting. His shirt was dirty and torn, his jeans matched. This didn’t look like the careful wear of expensive clothes, more like he’d been dragged along a rough road. Given how he looked she expected him to smell like the guys sleeping on the sidewalk, but all she could smell was frying bacon and coffee grounds.

“Sir, please take a seat. There’s a booth right over here.”

Still no response. She caught the looks on the regular’s faces. She must have raised her voice too loud.

“Kat? Who you talkin to?” said Florence, the other waitress on the shift.

Kat turned to point to the guy, but he was gone.

Whatever her emotional state, this was just too fucking much. There had definitely been someone there. Just as the same guy had been in her room that morning. She wasn’t hallucinating. Her heart might be missing, but her head was just fine. People don’t just vanish.

Cleaning tables and serving customers, Kat started to have second thoughts. What if she was hallucinating? She wasn't taking any drugs, not even, or particularly not, painkillers. But you never knew what the people in the room next door were doing. Maybe she had a tumour growing in her head, causing her to see things and her mind interpreted them as this guy. How else could someone enter a locked room, keeping it locked? Perhaps she was seeing ghosts instead. I mean who knew what not having your heart could do to you? Bet there weren't many cases of it written up in medical journals.

So hallucinating, having a brain tumour, seeing dead people or some combination of all three, unless she could see living people no-one else could. If all they did was stand there and do nothing then Kat could probably live with that. If they wanted her to solve their murders or take them over to their final rest then they could fuck off. Work was a constant intrusion and kept her from worrying about it too much. Another good reason to take the job in the diner; she was always too busy to think.

Kat looked for more than bugs when she let the morning sun into her room. It was clear. She closed the door, turned round and the guy appeared. Although flickered might be more accurate. Like film speeding up through a projector. She just wanted her shower and some peace. Kat was almost angry. It was good to feel something, even the thin reflection of it.

"What do you want?" she shouted.

The man just stood there, casting no shadow in the light coming through the curtains. His indifference really irritated her. She pushed him, but her hands met barely any resistance, as though pushing a lace curtain. Whatever he was, the guy didn't seem to notice her. Pushing him made no difference.

Something warm jumped around on Kat's chest when she got close to the guy. The key that the pastor had given her. Evelyn. It was vibrating on its leather thong. While Kat took it on and off regularly, she barely noticed it. Just wallpaper.

Kat took it out and it started to get warmer and vibrate faster. The guy saw the key. His head snapped around to look at it. His eyes rolled back into place, bloodshot and wide. A high-pitched keening noise emerged from him. The sound should have been unnerving.

Taking the thong from around her neck, Kat held the key out in front of her, like Van Helsing warding off Dracula with a cross. It almost jumped out of her hand and she nearly dropped it as it quickly heated up. The guy flickered out as fast as he'd appeared. The key began to cool and stopped vibrating.

What was so special about this key? Kat looked closely at it. An unusual pattern ran through the dark grey metal. It was geometric, angular, like someone had marked a number of lines that crossed each other diagonally; as though several cubes had been hammered flat and shaped into an ancient key.

It was Evelyn's key and she really should have taken it back a long time ago, but it was a long way across town and when she got up she barely had enough energy to go to work. Maybe she'd take it over in a few days, build herself up to the journey. Little steps, like when she quit smoking, cutting down one fag at a time.

Except she never did quit that way. She may have bought less, but Kat begged and borrowed from anyone she knew. That long night, when she'd flushed half a packet away, the bits of tobacco floating in the bowl, she'd walked through a storm visiting every late night kebab shop and chippy til she found a shop still open and able to fill her cravings. She couldn't drive to the big supermarket as she'd been drinking. Kat would've smoked something she picked up off the pavement if it all hadn't been sodden. After that night, Kat

knew how low she could have gone, how far she would've walked. She went cold turkey when she finished that pack, smoked every bit of every cancer stick, and hadn't looked back.

There was no good putting this off until she had the strength. She would always be weak now. Better to accept it and act than keep pretending there was some brighter tomorrow when she'd be full of vigour.

Hector had been happy to let her take a day off, if a little surprised as Kat had worked every day since she'd started. While a whole shift probably wasn't necessary, she didn't want to feel rushed, and besides Evelyn deserved her whole attention. It was always possible that Evelyn might also be out or busy when Kat got to the church. Looking up the number and calling ahead would make sense, but the only working payphone was in the diner and there wasn't a phone book there. These things were practically obsolete and Kat might as well be living off the grid without a mobile phone.

She'd planned ahead and knew which busses she needed to take, where to change, and showed up at the Church of the Holy Spirit mid-afternoon. It was a comforting sight, the old building amongst the new, something that felt clean but not antiseptic. It was a good place, no doubt why she'd been drawn to it all those nights ago.

Kat opened the main door, like before, and walked in. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, during which the church went from looking empty to being packed. There were so many people here and she'd just blundered in. It was a bit embarrassing to intrude on the service that was taking place. She turned to go when she heard Evelyn call her name.

"Kat. Oh, I never thought I'd see you again," said Evelyn, who looked relieved. "I thought you might be dead."

"Sometimes it feels like it." It was odd that Evelyn would just abandon the service. "I'm sorry. I really should have come to see you sooner. But I can see you're busy," Kat said.

"Busy? No, not at all. I saw you at the hotel and I didn't know what to think."

No one in the congregation was moving, or singing. No one had even turned to see who had disturbed the service. Maybe they were all praying. Something wasn't right here. "At the hotel?" said Kat. "When?"

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What should she do? Kat hadn't said what hotel she was staying in. But Evelyn needed that key back, that's for sure, and Kat couldn't have gotten that much of a head start.

Evelyn drove towards The Strip; she almost never came this way. She practically avoided the lights and the crowds. It was usually just her and the church.

It was an unusual calling in this day and age, being a pastor. Her parents had wanted something more for her, to be an engineer or a doctor, but Evelyn's grandma had seen where her talents lay so she'd followed her grandpa into the church. Her diocese was large, but her congregation was small. Not too many shared her faith.

She was used to the occasional interruption to her routine; it came with the territory, and the city. But no one had been quite as disruptive as Kat. Why had she given her the key in the first place?

Well it wouldn't be hard to spot someone walking along the sidewalk wearing a red dress at this time of day. Even the crowds would be thinner near the big casinos. Every now and again someone would toot their horn and angrily drive round her. It wasn't easy checking both sides at once. Evelyn gave up and concentrated on the closest side. She'd go back the other way.

The attendants were out in force this morning; the street cleaners, sidewalk washers, flower waterers and all the other busy bees who made the city work. Now and then a stray tourist got in the way of this secret side of The Strip and was gently ushered back into the gloom of the nearest establishment while the army did its thing.

Evelyn reached the end and looped back round.

Then she saw her, or at least it was a similar woman wearing a similar red dress walking up the Processional Way off The Strip towards The Hanging Gardens casino hotel. She'd already passed the exit into the hotel and there was nowhere to pull over. Evelyn thumped the steering wheel with the heels of her hands suppressing a howl of anger. At the next opportunity she looped round again and drove towards the lobby, passing through a replica of the Ishtar Gate – lapis lazuli blue glazed bricks with golden dragons and aurochs in bas-relief. The hotel itself was a massive step-pyramid, with water cascading down the edges and flowing around each level watering the numerous plants and flowers. Evelyn got out and nearly threw her keys at the valet, barely looking at her ticket, as she dashed through the doors.

The lobby was vast. Huge winged sphinxes alternated with angelic beings carved in relief on the walls. The human heads on the sphinxes sported ringlet beards while the angelic beings had four wings, human bodies and the heads of birds of prey. Behind the lobby area the structure opened out. Inside was as lush and filled with water as the outside. Marbled terraces rose up the inside walls towards the apex, covered in plants. Apparently there were rooms in the walls, and at least twenty or thirty floors. In the centre was another terraced pyramid rising almost as high. Around the outside were the entrances to the various casinos and auditoria. Everywhere the sphinxes and angels stood guard. Plants of all types hung heavy with rich blooms, the scents from the flowers almost overwhelming. And around it all a complex system of water ran down the sides of the pyramids, along the terraces.

How much did all this cost? The lights, the water. How much fuel was burnt just keeping this place alone going? At night four pillars of light beamed up from the roof,

stabbing the sky. This was why Evelyn didn't come down here often. The waste of resources sickened her. An artificial oasis in the desert. What greater hubris could Man aspire to? They'd even underlined it by building a Tower of Babel next door to accommodate the demand.

She nearly lost sight of her goal. The atrium was quiet as it was still early. Evelyn saw a woman in red heading towards the elevators. If she could get there in time she could pay her valet charge and go home. But the floor was freshly washed and waxed and too slick to run on even in her sneakers and Evelyn got to the elevator just after it had already begun to ascend. It only stopped at three floors, good. But she had no idea how she'd find Kat behind corridors of closed doors.

Maybe if she climbed the pyramid in the centre of the hotel she might see the person walking to their room. Evelyn really wished she did more exercise. She ran nearly every day, but it was more a long gentle jog on the flat than a sprint uphill. She dashed across the lobby and up the steps, but there was a hell of a lot of them.

Was the key really this important? Her grandpa had given it to her, and he claimed it had been passed down the family since the sect was founded. Some in the church put that in the religious melting pot of Alexandria, the home of another Ancient Wonder, around 150 CE. Evelyn had suspicions it was much older still.

At the top of the pyramid Evelyn spun round trying to see Red Dress walking along the corridors along the walls. Despite its height she still couldn't see into the upper levels very well. But that must be where she had left the elevator, as no one walked down the lower corridors. She might have narrowed down the floor, but still had no idea which room. At least the higher up you went the fewer rooms there were.

Evelyn caught her breath and headed back to the elevators. She waited for one to arrive and pushed the floor button. Nothing happened. Of course, the keycard also gave guests access to their floor. It could be ages before she could tailgate another guest to the right level, assuming security didn't get alerted before then. She scrunched her hands into tight fists in frustration. Should she just give up now, go wait near the entrance and hope Kat left that way? Perhaps the reception desk staff might help her? Evelyn took some deep breaths and decided to wait.

She did a lot of riding up in the car and smiling at the few guests who helped her ride up with them; often it was too late for her to dodge back out when she found they weren't going to her floor. With a bit of practice she found she could lurk about reading some tourist pamphlets until guests entered and she could jump in just before the doors shut, delighted they were all going to the same floor. Wasn't it hot? Had she seen the exhibition? Wasn't that magician, wossisname, like one of the Three Kings, really good? Well worth it. Finally she got a lucky break and made it to the floor she thought Kat was staying on.

It had been quite some time since she saw the woman in the red dress enter the elevator. Evelyn still had to figure out which room she was in. There was really no way to guess, so she'd have to start on one side of the elevator and work her way round the floor. Next time she'd be sure to get a little more information from her visitors.

"Whadda ya want?" grumbled one guest after another.

"Room service," Evelyn said. That always got people to the door, didn't it? Except everyone said they'd not ordered anything.

A member of hotel staff was pushing a trolley down the corridor that was laden with cloches covering food – real room service. Evelyn stepped out of the way on the side that looked out over the hotel's vast central space, fished out her pamphlets and tried to decide

between the Jack the Ripper exhibition and standing on a glass ledge out over the Canyon. She smiled at the waitress who wished her a good morning, ma'am. The waitress went round the corner and Evelyn went back to knocking on doors.

She'd finished the half side by the elevator, and the first full side. When Evelyn turned into the next corridor she saw a woman putting a tray in the hall outside her door. It was Kat, she was sure of it.

Within moments she was at the door banging on it, but Kat wasn't answering. She was just there, how could she not hear the knocking? Had she just stepped into the bathroom? Had something happened? Maybe she'd fallen and hit her head?

This was worse than before, when she didn't know where Kat was. Now she knew and she still couldn't do anything. Should she call the front desk, or security, to open the door? Maybe someone from her church was in the hotel? She didn't want to bother them, but she was getting really desperate. She could just wait a while and Kat would come out sooner or later. No. Something was wrong.

"My friend, Kat, isn't answering her door," Evelyn told the receptionist, giving the room number. She had checked, but none of her congregation was here. This was her last chance. "Can you send someone to have a look?"

"Are you sure?" said the receptionist. "The door was opened a few minutes ago. Maybe she was indisposed when you knocked?"

Evelyn felt it all drain out of her. She couldn't stake out the hotel for the whole day. It would be so much easier if one of her parishioners was here. "Can I leave her a note?"

"Of course." She was provided with an envelope and sheet of creamy paper. She handed the note over and as she turned to go she saw Kat huddled between two large guys

being walked out of the hotel. She wasn't in the dress anymore, but Evelyn was certain it was her.

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"You were leaving, with two guys," said Evelyn, sounding nervous. She wasn't wearing any robes, just jeans and a t-shirt. Maybe this was one of those modern churches that did away with the dog-collars and silly hats.

Suddenly it made sense, although it was a black hole for Kat. "Danton's people." Couldn't Evelyn have stopped them, called the police maybe? "I owed them some money. They took their pound of flesh." She was being unfair. Evelyn looked like she couldn't break out of a wet paper bag and it wasn't like Kat had been able to do much more than give them a withering glare. "Look, I can see you're in the middle of a service. We can talk about this later."

"Service?" said Evelyn. "No. There's no service."

No service? "Then why are all these people here?"

Evelyn looked stunned. "You can see them?"

"What's so surprising about that?" Then it sunk in. They were the same, weren't they? The same as the guy she saw yesterday. But that meant Evelyn could have seen that guy too, right?

"This is just some of my congregation," Evelyn said. "Usually no one else knows they're here."

That pretty much confirmed it. It was obvious now. "They're ghosts, aren't they?" The only explanation, really. Some side effect of losing her heart. She'd been seeing them for a long time now. She just hadn't realised because until yesterday she hadn't interacted with any of them. If you can call shouting at a silent stalker interaction.

“The service doesn’t actually start for another few hours. Why don’t you come through the back and we can talk about it?”

Kat let Evelyn lead her to the kitchen. The key hanging round her neck got warm and started vibrating as she passed Evelyn’s congregation. The large number of ghosts here, all staring blindly off into different directions, all packed into the rows, was distinctly unnerving. They were dressed in tuxedos, jeans, leathers, suits, skirts and shirts. All kinds of dress, as varied as the races, and ghosts of both sexes were present. A few sported obvious injuries; burns, traumatic holes, impaled objects, but most looked intact. The front two rows of the church were nearly empty, despite the crowd of silent souls in the other pews. Unlike the others, the ghosts sitting there watched her go by.

Once again Kat sat at the kitchen table while Evelyn was busy with the traditional ritual of guest coffee-making. She ought to feel shocked, scared, something, anything. But as she well knew, it was hard to find anything more than a sense of mild discomfort or irritation. Did Danton know about this side-effect? Maybe she’d always been seeing ghosts and the loss of her heart had nothing to do with it. If that was the case, surely one of them would have disturbed her before now?

Evelyn put a mug in front of Kat. Kat couldn’t remember if this was the same one she’d used last time she was here. The coffee was dark and welcome.

“I’ve seen ghosts since I was old enough to notice the difference,” Evelyn said. “My Grandma realised and she persuaded my Grandpa to take me under his wing. He was a minister in the church and none of my uncles, or my dad, had shown any indication of truly seeing. They understood the tenets but they had to take it all on faith.”

“One of Danton’s goons took my heart,” said Kat. “Part punishment, part exchange for my debts. But it was only yesterday that they first stood out.”

“How can he take your heart? You’re still here talking to me. That’s just not possible,” said Evelyn, who reached out and gently pinched Kat. She was real. “Wasn’t it just suggestion or something?”

Kat laughed. “Come and have a listen if you like.” Instead she stood up and held Evelyn’s hand to her chest. There was not even a slight tremor.

Evelyn snatched her hand away and held it in her other hand like she’d burned it, or got an electric shock. She looked sick. “That’s...”

“Just not possible?” said Kat.

“I’m sorry,” Evelyn said, still mystified. She talked to the dead, but the, what, half-living? This was new and strange even for her.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Kat, sitting back down. “Once you accept you’ve had your heart taken out and you’re still alive...” She shrugged.

Evelyn took a sip of her coffee and added more sugar.

Kat looped the thong from round her neck and handed the key over to Evelyn. “This is why I came here. It scared off the ghost who was bugging me yesterday. I’ve no idea how. I’d forgotten I still had it until then.”

Evelyn smiled. “Thank you. When I saw you being taken off I thought it was lost forever. I didn’t know what to do,” said Evelyn. “Given what you’d told me about your situation I was worried. I called the cops, who spoke to the hotel. They said you’d checked out, paid your bill with your credit card. I’d been standing there the whole time, but seems you can do these things from your room’s entertainment system. I did what I could.”

“It’s OK. I appreciate that you tried,” said Kat. “Many people wouldn’t have bothered. I didn’t mean to keep it. It’s so unusual I figured it must be important. What does it open?”

“It’s kind of a relic,” said Evelyn, uncertain how much to share with Kat. Just because she could see the dead now didn’t make her part of the church. “It can be kinda useful in keeping away drones like that.”

“Drones?”

“Yeah. The ones who’ve forgotten who they were. They can’t communicate, but can be pretty scary if they react to something. Like mini-tornadoes; full on poltergeist, electrical disruption, the whole works.”

“So what do you do when one takes a liking to you?” said Kat.

“Just what you did. Get them to go away with some iron. They don’t like that. I’ve only ever used the key though. Might be something about it, its shape maybe. It is a bit like an ankh at the end.”

“Anything else I need to know?”

“Plenty, I’m sure. Not all ghosts are drones. Many of them remember well who they were and you can have a good conversation with them. We, the Church, try to provide some care for them. It’s when they forget that they become drones.”

“So you help them to pass on properly? Surely not everyone stays behind as a ghost? This town would be much more crowded and I’d like to think I’d have noticed sooner.”

“We believe they’re sacred, an important part of the Trinity.”

The Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. “All ghosts are holy?” said Kat.

“God didn’t take them to Heaven for a reason. We don’t think it’s a punishment but a blessing to spend more time here without the burdens of the flesh.”

Kat smiled. “No offence, but that’s the first time I’ve heard you sound like a pastor.”

“None taken.” Evelyn smiled too. “The faith isn’t something I really get to preach to many of the living. Usually it’s just family or people with a gift like yours who come looking

for answers. Everyone else at a service is dead. Well, mostly, I've met the spirits of people knocking on heaven's door. Some recover from an illness or some such and join the church. Many pass on."

"I guess you'll have to get ready soon," Kat said, standing.

"You can stay for the service, if you want," said Evelyn. "You can meet some more of the congregation, living and dead."

"I'm normally thinking about getting ready for my shift," said Kat. "I find I get used to routine easily now. But I actually have the night off." What harm would there be in hanging out with the dead for a little longer? What kind of service can you hold for ghosts? Not much chance of communion if you can't eat the wafers and drink the wine. Maybe they take it a bit more literally.

"Where are you working?" said Evelyn.

"Just a diner. Need to save enough money to get my heart back from Danton." Kat could see the question in Evelyn's eyes and answered it first. "I'm done with the tables and the cards. That's how I got in this mess. I still itch to play, but I'm gonna get out of this with hard work, even if it takes me forty years. Hopefully the immigration people won't catch up with me before then."

## Gheist – Synopsis

While on holiday in Vegas, Kat McKay's fiancé skips town leaving her with his debts, she plays poker with casino owner Danton. When Kat loses she flees and finds sanctuary in the Church of the Holy Spirit. The pastor, Evelyn, lets her stay the night giving her an odd metal key to keep her safe. Kat returns to her hotel only to be kidnapped by Danton who takes her heart, leaving her alive to pay her debt.

With no heart, Kat is weak and emotionless. She finds work in a diner. A customer no-one else sees follows her home, but Evelyn's key makes him disappear. Kat realises she needs to visit Evelyn who says she'd seen a drone – a ghost that's forgotten itself. In the Church Kat meets the ghosts of Clint Jefferson, Jack the Knife Malone, and Jimmy Fingers Fingal. Criminals, they all know ghosts killed by Danton. She hatches a plan to cheat at cards with the group's help. They practice in Kat's room when Evelyn refuses to let them meet in the church. In the casino Kat feels her heart is nearby. Kat wins big but on the final hand her friends are yanked out of the room and a mob of ghosts distract her. Again Kat loses all her money. Not hearing from the guys for days Kat visits Evelyn. Evelyn confesses she manipulated the anchors of Kat's friends - objects significant to them in life. Kat takes the anchors and uses them to bring the guys back. Kat decides to steal back her heart, but Danton has moved it to the Inferno Creek Casino in Death Valley.

Kat and her friends put a crew together. Vincent Vadim, the casino architect, explains that the real Danton is an old woman. Melchior the Magnificent, the Strip's finest stage magician, is in thrall to Mrs Danton who also killed his twin. Finally, Amy Duncan joins them, an expert on electronics whose anchor is a video of her death.

The gang enter the casino and make it to the vault where they find an unexpected guard. Taught by Melchior how to appear, Clint knocks him out but is exhausted in the process. Fingers, Amy, Jack and Kat work together to open the physical and electronic locks on the vault. They're about to reach their prize when Danton Jr appears and takes them to see Mrs Danton.

Mrs Danton, wearing Finger's anchor round her neck, used him as a spy. She had a relationship with Clint getting pregnant with Danton Jr's father. Clint reappears and tries to persuade Mrs D to hand over Kat's heart. Melchior arrives and demands to be set free. Jack loses control, his poltergeist activity a hurricane of destruction in the penthouse suite, injures Melchior and Mrs Danton. Jack becomes a drone. Clint possesses Danton Jr, holds a shard of glass to his throat. Mrs D agrees to give Melchior his freedom and Kat her heart, but not before trying to kill Kat one last time.

The gang returns to the Church. Evelyn has learned how to put hearts back and will if Kat returns to Scotland. After a service of remembrance for Jack, Kat helps Clint connect with his son, and destroys Amy's video. Evelyn returns Kat's heart and she can no longer see her friends. Driving towards LA, she is stopped by a storm of drones heading for the Strip. She turns the car around a heads back to all she just tried to leave behind.