

MY NEXT BREATH

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Enter In

The knock on the car window startled Maggie. It was hard to grow accustomed to the disoriented feeling of being abruptly awakened. Her first reaction was to reach under her seat for her revolver—too far to take hold of had the intruder really intended on harming her.

“What do you want?” she yelled through the closed car window. It was pitch black and Maggie could barely make out the grungy stranger. His face was partially covered by a dark, hooded raincoat.

“Sorry, ma’am,” the vagrant said. “Can you spare a few dollars to get me somethin’ to eat?”

“This is private property and you ain’t even s’posed to be here,” she blasted back. “How’d you get in?”

Then came the dawning realization: she had slept through her 11:15 p.m. sweep of the grounds—an infraction for which she could easily be fired. Banneker Construction Company housed expensive equipment, including heavily targeted copper wiring. She was there to guard the grounds against theft and vandalism. Tonight she was working the graveyard shift, 8 p.m. – 4 a.m. The company had invested quite a bit of money for her licensing to become a uniformed security officer and she couldn't afford to mess up. It was her friend George, an Alcoholics Anonymous graduate, who had recommended her for this job, which included badly needed living accommodations.

A five hundred square-foot efficiency apartment over the main office was the place Maggie called home. It wasn't much, but it provided freedom. She was finally unshackled from the restrictions of the AA group home and its mandatory curfew.

Maggie was eager to get the sweaty, homeless man off the property.

"You gonna have to leave," she said, turning on the ignition in her car and giving the old Sentra some gas. "If they catch you here, they might shoot first and ask questions later. Why don't you go down to the shelter on Winter Street? They'll feed ya. Get you a hot shower, too."

The man scampered off into the hot, muggy air, dragging his oversized coat behind.

"Pitiful!" said Maggie as she shook her head. "I know what you want and it ain't no food," she muttered aloud, cranking up the air conditioner.

Maggie thought back to the times when she had struggled to make ends meet, after James had abandoned her and their new baby. Still, she was able to keep a roof over their head and food on the table. Maggie had survived by making some unfavorable choices in her life—choices that haunted her to this very day.

"He left us, Momma," Maggie said.

"Who?" Annie asked.

"James," Maggie choked through her sobs. "He said we were better off without him. It's been a week."

Maggie was hundreds of miles from home, left alone in a tiny apartment on the south side of Richmond, Va.

"Maggie, now don't you fret. Just come on home."

“Why’d he do this to us, Momma?” Maggie cried. “All the money’s gone. I used the last bit on formula.” Her body trembled and voice quivered as she fought to control the tears that would eventually come. She hugged her crying baby tightly and paced back and forth in the dark room. James, the boy who’d promised to never leave her, was gone. Her insides burned like an inferno, scorched and filled with rage. She was prepared to go it alone, find a better job, and make James pay for leaving them, but all her resources had dried up. Her revenge would have to wait, because now she had to swallow her pride and do something she had vowed never to do: return home.

“We’ll send you some money, just come on home. We’ll figure this all out when you get here.”

Maggie watched the intruder leave. It was a scary job for a woman, but tough times and a tough upbringing had given her the perfect skill set. She’d lived in worse areas than this. It was the urban side of Asheville, which had been long deprived of its share of revitalization funds, making it a haven for crime. The polluted streets and dilapidated housing were a stark contrast to the French-inspired chateaus and Spanish-influenced cathedrals that graced the affluent neighborhoods only a few miles away. The majestic Appalachian Mountains encircled the small, southern city, distracting visitors from what was really stirring underneath.

The small town, known as the Paris of the South, hadn’t been so kind to the Fowler family, but Maggie was making her best attempt to recover from the hand she’d been dealt. For a long time, her attitude was to project an air of ambivalence toward anyone who proclaimed she wasn’t good enough. Sure, she’d made her share of mistakes and missteps, but that was history. She’d turned her life around by hauling a good amount of skeletons from her closet and bringing forth healing, and with the help of AA and George, her emotional wall was chipping away. Even her mother had seen a change. It would only be a matter of time before the rest of the family saw it, as well.

Since Maggie’s employment ten months ago, her only real concern was the occasional vagrant or juvenile vandalism—nothing she couldn’t handle. The world had never made any special accommodations for her. The streets had taught her how to survive, but these life lessons had come at a heavy cost.

At the age of 47, she had re-emerged a better person. She was on her own, working full time, and free from the constant cravings of alcohol. What the world saw was crow's feet, wide hips, and stained teeth. But her less visible wounds were equally unattractive. They would need just as much healing as her physical ones.

Maggie reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a bag of mints. She popped one into her mouth and stuffed the empty wrapper into a small trash bag that lay on the passenger seat. On the back seat lay an extra pair of sneakers, a rain jacket, and a bag of snacks she munched on to stay awake. The only things the cookies and chips offered were unwanted pounds around her midsection. Even so, she still managed to turn a few heads—one in particular.

She cruised through the two-acre complex, stopping to count the four cranes, the ten Mack trucks, and the eight John Deere loaders. They were positioned side by side near the front entrance, ready to be sent out for a job first thing in the morning.

Federal money for road improvements had pulled Banneker Construction Company from the brink of bankruptcy. Now they had more business than they clearly knew what to do with. Mounds of large crates were positioned toward the back of the property used for training purposes. Occasionally, a new operator would try to over lift, causing the crane to flip. The first rule posted on the training board was to never carry more than the machines could handle. It reminded her of her mother's plea: *When your load gets too heavy, turn it over to the Father.* She had to admit most of her mother's teachings had fallen on deaf ears.

Maggie completed her tracking forms and made a final tally just before dating and signing her name at the bottom. She slid the small card into her back pocket. She parked in her normal spot up front and entered the main office. Last week's time sheet still sat in Barren's outgoing box.

Barren Banneker was her boss and the dumbest of the three Banneker sons. As usual, he was late submitting her work hours to payroll. *Screw-up*, she thought. The only reason he was still there was because his last name was Banneker. Having Barren as her supervisor was teaching her the art of taming her tongue, even in instances where she felt wronged. There were times when Maggie left the office fuming, but cussing him out served no purpose other

than to get her fired and back to being homeless.

The Bannekers were the type of people who'd stumbled into their money. They were one generation removed from the trailer park and it showed. So while her parents struggled, working menial, subservient jobs, the Banneker hillbillies were raking in money from all the new roads and buildings being constructed in Asheville.

The small, under-supplied office contained a metal desk, an outdated desktop computer, and a combo printer/fax machine. With only half of the fluorescent ceiling lights working, the office seemed lifeless. Brown walls with random scuff marks, unraveling soiled carpet, and a damp, musty smell greeted Maggie each day. Barren and his father couldn't see the need for improvements. Their only concern, at the end of the day, was how much money was made. It wasn't the Ritz Carlton, but she *was* grateful for the pay and the spoonful of freedom.

Maggie opened a side door adjacent to the bathroom to access the stairs that led to her upstairs apartment. Her shift had ended but her short nap in the car had given her a small burst of energy. Posted on her refrigerator was a large calendar which detailed her work schedule, AA meetings, and her serving duties at church. Three more days till her mother's 70th birthday party and there was still so much to do.

Maggie smiled as she pondered the thought of seeing her family re-united once more. She loaded the dishwasher and swept the crumbs off the floor. She used the broom to poke the roach trap that sat in the corner, half expecting something to dart out.

Just a few short steps from the kitchen was the living room that doubled as her bedroom. The unimpressive apartment had a sleeper sofa, small end table, and a twenty-inch T.V. propped up on an old crate. She wondered what Tara and Marcus would think. She reminded herself of the AA quote: *Happiness is appreciating what you have, not getting what you want.*

She lay back on the protracted sofa bed and closed her eyes. *God will supply all your needs*, was what her church taught her, but every day seemed like a fight. The battle between faith and fear was intense, but while returning to alcohol was a quick fix, it didn't provide a real solution. In her three years of being clean, she had only failed her test once. It was a brief lapse and she'd quickly repented to God and her AA group.

She swirled her tongue around her mouth, trying to remember the texture and feeling of

her liquid friend. It wasn't wise to linger there too long. She closed her eyes and forced her mind elsewhere until her muscles relaxed and her jaw unclenched.

The humming sound of the outside generator faded away, as did the cares of the world. She was lulled into a deep sleep. Her body felt weightless as if suspended in air. She began to envision herself in a dark room, devoid of any light or air.

Eight black ninja swords encircled her, two in the front, two in the back, and two on each side. The black-handled swords were suspended in air and surrounded by a crimson mist. Each sword spun, as if taunting her. The blood-red mist drizzled over her clenched eyes, down her nose, and over her lips. She folded them in, hoping to avoid the undoubtedly sickening taste.

Maggie awoke out of breath and gasping for air.

Relieved it was just a dream, she pulled out her cell phone and dialed George's number.

"George, this is Maggie. Are you asleep?" Maggie could hear faint breathing and mumbling.

"George, you there?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm here. Is everything okay?" he asked with a deep growl to his voice.

Maggie immediately felt ridiculous calling George for such a trivial matter.

"I'm sorry I bothered you. Go on back to sleep."

"What is it? You need me to come over?" George said.

Maggie had expected George to sense her uneasiness and come to her rescue like he'd done in the past, but she hesitated in asking.

"Just say the word and I'll be there in five minutes."

"George, I know I can't keep callin' you like this. I feel like I'm leadin' you on."

"Look, Magdalena Fowler, I told you that whatever time you'll give me, I'll take."

"George, you're a good man." She hugged the phone to her ear and smiled.

"A good, God-fearing man," George teased, mimicking an old southern man's dialect. "Isn't that what you ladies say you want?"

A smile spread across Maggie's face. George was from New York and had moved to Asheville, North Carolina after the death of his wife eight years ago. She never understood what he saw in her.

"I'm coming over," George stated emphatically.

“No, don’t do that. I’ll talk to ya tomorrow.”

“But wait,” George said. “I mean, since you got me up at 5:30 in the morning...”

“You’re tryin’ to make me feel bad,” Maggie giggled.

George started singing in a high pitch voice. “No wind, no rain, will stop me.... Ain’t no mountain high enough.”

Maggie laughed aloud again as she pictured George with his hand on his hip singing like Diana Ross.

“You are something else, Mr. George Johnson. What would I do without you?” she laughed.

The phone grew quiet.

“You’ll never know,” he replied in a serious and yearning tone.

“George?”

“Yes, love?”

“I need more time.”

There was a sweet silence which lulled over the phone.

“I know,” he answered. “Do you want me to come pick you up for your mother’s party this weekend?”

“No,” she paused, not wanting to lead him on any further. “I gotta be there real early. So I’ll meet ya there. Okay?”

“Okay. Good night, Magdalena.”

“I shoulda neva told you my real name.”

George snickered. “Good night. See ya Saturday.”