

The lanyard

Samantha tucked a loose strand of tangled brown hair back under her stocking cap with a grimy finger. The smell of frying hamburgers caused her mouth to water. Her stomach grumbled, as she pulled the stiff blanket tight to her neck. She spotted a woman leaving the McDonalds.

"Spare change?" she asked in a soft voice.

The woman wore a lavender business suit and her auburn hair looked salon styled. She narrowed ice blue eyes, and waved a hand covered with rings in a shooing motion. "You're not getting no booze money from me. Get a job." She turned, dismissing her.

Samantha touched the lavender elbow. "I don't drink. I'm just hungry."

The woman shoved Samantha. "Don't touch me you filthy animal!"

Samantha teetered, and frantically grabbed for support. The woman shrieked, jumping back. Samantha struck sidewalk and saw stars. Dazed she pulled her blanket tight, as she watched the woman scurry away. *Why did she do that?*

Questions like that, often lead her to the darkness. She shuddered. Where she often contemplated joining her family in heaven. She forced a calming breath.

With a start she realized that a man crouched in front of her, offering his hand. He had sun-bleached hair, kind blue eyes, and a tanned face.

"You, okay?" he asked.

"I think so." Samantha felt confused and felt her face warm. The man smiled and

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eased her to her feet, then turned and headed into the restaurant. She stood staring.

He'd treated her like a real person. That reminded her of better times.

Reaching into her pocket she jingled her change. It should be enough to dull the ache in her stomach. She entered the McDonalds through the side door near the restrooms. The smell of food made her knees weak.

As she headed for the lady's room, an employee moved to block her. When she jingled her change, he allowed her to pass. As she dried her hands, she gazed at her reflection in the mirror. The weathered face looked to be sixty, not forty. She sniffed, fighting to hold back tears. Had it only been two years since that drunk driver took her family?

The drunk's widow had spent more on lawyers than Samantha had asked for in compensation. That evil woman never even met with her face to face. Her lawyers claimed that Samantha's husband and beautiful five-year-old girl had caused the accident. That cold hearted bitch won. Samantha's own lawyers had foreclosed on her house. They'd claimed that her husband's insurance policy didn't cover the court costs. With the whole world against her, she'd simply given up.

As she left the bathroom, she remembered her little Kira bouncing on her bed, blond pigtails dancing in the air. *No! Don't think about before!*

She shuffled to the counter and laid her money down for a Big Mac and a milk. Clutching the bag to her chest, she headed for the exit to the play yard. Nobody met her gaze.

The young man sat at the table next to the door. Frowning he concentrated on weaving colored strands into a complex lanyard. Under the fluorescent lights the strands appeared to writhe with life of their own.

He looked up and smiled. "Join me?"

The question startled her. She took a step toward the table, then froze. "Less trouble when I eat

outside. Besides, I like to watch the kids."

"No problem." He stood and walked into the play yard.

She followed, confused, but pleased to have someone talk to her. He sat at her favorite table with his back to the kids.

Working on his lanyard, he allowed her to eat in peace. In the morning sunlight it looked like the strands pulsed. To make her meal last, she chewed slowly, watching the skillful flash of his fingers. When she looked up from the last morsel, she found him studying her.

"Samantha, this is your lucky day." He smiled.

She shuddered. "How do you know my name?" She stared at him, feeling vulnerable. He continued weaving the glowing cords. Something in the back of her screamed a warning.

"I know all about you," he said in a soft voice. "Relax, I only want to help."

"I won't go back downtown. There's less crime here and lots of good places to hide your stuff." Samantha felt dizzy as she met his eyes.

He nodded. "That's how I see it, too. Most of the people I help live here." He pulled a long strand from the lanyard and let it lay across the table. "How would you like a place to live and a decent job?"

His eyes had a depth that seemed to go on forever. Samantha shook her head. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me." He ran a finger down the cord.

She felt a tingle run up her spine. "Yes! I'd take any job!" *Slow down, you don't know what he's after.* She studied him. His eyes looked sincere.

He cleared his throat. "There *is* one condition. You must choose someone to take your place." He brushed his fingers through the weave. Millions of threads seemed to flow across his hands now.

Samantha didn't hesitate. "The wife of the drunk who killed my family. She stole my life. She deserves to know what that's like." She was surprised how good it felt saying those words out loud.

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He raised an eyebrow. Flipping a lavender cord out of the lanyard he smoothed it onto the table next to the other. "Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord." He smiled, again. I *will* improve your situation, but healing must come from within." He crossed the strands, twisting and looping them. He wove a different pattern than before. The world around her grew fuzzy. Tug, thrust, twist... She closed her eyes against the confusion in her head.

Silence.

Samantha blinked. "What do you think you are, my fairy god--"

They stood in the courtyard of a condominium complex. The scent of jasmine drifted on the breeze. She glanced around, then looked down at herself. She wore a stylish pantsuit. *I'm clean!* The world grayed and her head spun.

The man gripped her arm, steadying her. "Listen, up." He pointed to a condo with a tricycle parked in front. "That's your new home. Your new life."

Confused, she stared at the building. It did look vaguely familiar. When she turned to ask him about it...she stood alone.

Looking around, she thought she recognized some of the people walking between the buildings. *This can't be real. I slept in the bushes last night.* As she walked to the door, her hand automatically dipped into her purse and fished out keys. She stood holding a brass one, knowing it would work. She unlocked and opened the door. Lisa raced across the room and leapt into her arms.

"Mommy, want to see how fast I can ride? I can go super, super fast."

At the sight of Lisa's pigtails, reality blurred. Memories of Kira blended with those of Lisa. *Am I going crazy?*

Jim called from the kitchen. "You're home early. Anything wrong?"

"Susan begged to finish my shift. She needs the money." Goose flesh crawled up her arms. She

had been at work all day. Matter of fact, she'd worked in the County Clerk's office for over a year now. She took several deep breaths. Two sets of memories filled her head. What had that man done with his lanyard?

On the wall were family pictures, including one of the three of them walking on the beach. She remembered that vacation in Santa Barbara.

Jim came out of the kitchen wearing an apron. "Lisa, wash up for dinner." He tickled her as she went by. "You're growing too fast, pumpkin." Turning, he took Samantha into his arms and kissed her. His hand slid down and squeezed her butt. "I missed you."

She nuzzled his neck, smelling the after shave she'd given for Christmas. This was the life, coming home to a prepared dinner. The pain of two years of torment eased as her old memories faded. *If this is a dream, please God, don't let me wake up!*

The next morning Samantha went through her normal routine. She dropped Lisa off at school and headed for work. It wasn't until she saw a homeless person pushing a shopping cart that she remembered her previous life. How could she forget everything, and those she'd loved. Was her first life real, or was she lying comatose in a ditch right now dreaming all this?

She'd promised herself then that she wouldn't forget her first family, but as the weeks passed, she remembered less and less. Life was good and she felt happy.

Samantha left the party supply store balancing Lisa's birthday cake in one hand and a bag of party favors in the other. The cake, with pink frosting on it, had one of those big candles shaped like a six. With her mind full of plans, Samantha didn't recognize her surroundings.

A quiet voice spoke from against the wall. "Could you spare some change?" A dirty face peered up at her, clutching a grimy blanket.

Samantha started to walk past, then stopped and really looked at the woman. She shuddered,

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and almost dropped the cake. It was the woman who'd knocked her down! Memories from three lifetimes fought for dominance in her mind.

Confused she studied the woman holding her hand out. Somehow, she knew that this was the wife of the drunk. Samantha froze, feeling numb. She couldn't find any anger for the woman, only pity. She pulled out a five-dollar bill and handed it to her. "Get something to eat."

The woman's smile faded. "You!"

Stomach churning, Samantha spun and hurried into the McDonalds. She glanced back out the window at the woman huddled on the curb.

I did that to her. The thought hit her like a blow to the face.

She found herself in the play yard sitting at her old table. Numbly, she watched as a child climbed on the jungle gym. Thoughts of the woman's fate, and her own, tangled together in her mind.

"Something bothering you?" a soft voice asked.

She looked up and saw the young man. She recoiled, as everything came rushing back to her.

"I transformed you into a happy useful member of society and this is how you react?"

Samantha's cheeks grew hot, and her hands trembled with anger. "Nobody should have to live like that!" His hands kept moving. The lanyard was almost complete now, the strands seemed to glow now.

"You said she deserved it." He sneered. "Do you want me to put things back how they were before?"

"I--" Her chest constricted. "I couldn't live without Jim and Lisa." The words came out a whisper.

His gaze bored into her. "So, what's the problem? Go home." He pointed at the cake. "Have your party." He stood to leave.

"Wait!" She balled her hands. "I know I should hate her," Samantha lowered her voice and met

his stare, "but no one deserves to live like that."

His eyes squinted and fixed on her, cold and unblinking. "Are you choosing to cast aside your new life, for *her*?"

"Bastard! Was this all just a cruel joke?" Bile burned in her throat. She struggled to find a point of balance between her two lives. Must she lose everything to save the woman? Could she live with the guilt of purposely condemning another into a living in hell? Wouldn't that make her worse than the drunk's wife?

"Who gave you the right to screw with people's lives?" She spat the words at him.

"The *choices* are all yours." His smile didn't reach his eyes.

Samantha knocked Lisa's cake off the table and stood. "You *planned* all of this." She felt tears stream down her face. "Damn you."

"Choose," he ordered.

She wondered if she'd remember Jim and Lisa. *Forgive me*. "I *won't* make her live like that."

His shoulders relaxed and he flashed her a smile. "I had to test you."

A cold sensation flashed through her, and she stepped backward. His eyes seemed all pupil and the darkness went on forever. She gasped.

"You *have* healed yourself." He stood abruptly. "Go back to your family." He shimmered and slowly faded from sight. His voice reverberated in the air all around her. "The woman out front will get another chance."

Samantha whispered, "But when she climbs out of the gutter, who will fall in?"