

The Midnight Hour

It was just after two A.M., and Jessica's bed was empty.

Light from the hall spilled over the tumbled bed, leaving the rest of the room deep in shadow. Grace Hart didn't even bother to switch on the overhead light. Her tall, thin figure cast an elongated shadow across the pale rose carpet for no more than an instant. Then she moved. Three quick strides brought her to her daughter's bedside. She yanked the covers clear to the foot of the bed just to make sure, but she already knew what she would find: nothing.

Jessica was not curled up in a tight little ball beneath the primrose comforter. A hasty glance around confirmed that Jessica was not in the tweedy pink armchair in the corner, or at her white-and-gold desk, or sprawled out with a pillow on the carpet. Grace didn't even have to check to know that Jessica was not in the connecting bathroom, or downstairs in the kitchen. . . . or, in fact, anywhere in the house.

Her fifteen-year-old daughter had snuck out.

Again.

Oh, God, Grace thought, staring blindly at the empty bed, what am I going to do?

There was no one but God to ask. She and Jessica lived alone. Grace loved her daughter more than life itself--but lately she had grown terrified that she was losing her. This was the third time in the past two months that she had been awakened--by what? a stealthy sound? a bad dream? she didn't know--and risen from her bed to check on Jessica, only to find her daughter gone.

It was Monday night--no, Tuesday morning now. A school day. Jessica had to be up at 6:45 a.m. She had a Spanish test first period. Just before bedtime, Grace had spent an hour listening to her daughter conjugate verbs. The test counted double, and a good score could bring her C in that class up to an A, which would be enough to get her on the honor roll. They had both agreed that making the honor roll in high school was important, and Grace, at least, had been psyched about Jessica's chances. But how was she going to do on the test with no sleep?

Of course, Grace realized even as the question formed in her mind, that was the least of her worries at the moment.

The overriding one was, where's Jessica?

She had a pretty good idea who her daughter was with, if not where she was. Now four

weeks into her first year of high school, Jessica had fallen in with a new crowd, a "cool" crowd, she said, whose acceptance made her popular. The girls all wore flared jeans, midriff-baring tops, platform shoes, and neon-striped hair. (Talk about déjà vu all over again: Grace had worn the same kind of thing, minus the Day-Glo hair streaks, when she was in high school. But as Jess pointed out, the seventies were hot again.) Anyway, as far as Grace was concerned, this particular gaggle of girls was bad news rushing headlong toward a bad end. It scared her to realize that Jessica, her own sweet Jessica, was going to find that bad end right along with them if Grace couldn't manage to stop her.

So far, in the war for Jessica's allegiance, the score was dishearteningly lopsided. Mom had lost every battle.

A rattle followed by a soft whirring sound made Grace jump. She glanced around.

"Jessica?"

There was no answer.

It took only a moment for Grace to identify the source of the sound: Godzilla in his exercise wheel. The fat golden hamster whose cage sat atop Jessica's bookshelf was running busily, oblivious to the absence of his mistress or her mother's distress.

"Where is she, buddy?" Grace asked.

Godzilla ran blithely on. Grace grimaced at herself. Talking to a hamster was sad, she thought, and having nothing but a hamster to talk to at a time of crisis like this was even sadder. At age thirty-six, she had, besides her daughter, a sister, a father, an ex-husband, and a raft of friends and acquaintances, but no one she could pick up the phone and call at two a.m. The pattern had been set for years: she listened to their problems, not vice versa.

She was the strong one in all their lives. The fixer, the problem-solver, the one whose life was always under control.

Usually she was okay with that. But not tonight.

Crossing to one of the pair of tall windows that overlooked the front yard, she parted the ruffled pink-plaid curtains, rested her forehead against a cool glass pane, and shut her eyes. Her knee-length blue nylon nightgown had long sleeves, but still she was cold. She folded her arms over her chest, but that didn't help.

What am I doing wrong? The unspoken question repeated itself over and over in time with the pulse throbbing in her head. Trying to ease the pounding, she massaged her temples with her fingertips, then ran her fingers despairingly through her short, blond-streaked brown shag. I love her so. I'm trying my best. What am I doing wrong?

In her position as a Franklin County Juvenile and Domestic Court judge, she dealt with problem children on a daily basis. It was a rare session in court when she was not confronted with teens who were out of control.

Usually the kid's problem mirrored some kind of breakdown in the family.

Was that why it was so hard to acknowledge that her daughter was rocketing down the same path as the kids who appeared before her every day? Because she would then have to blame herself?

Was it not the unpalatable truth that she was as much a failure as a parent as any of those whose children were hauled into her courtroom?

She loved her daughter so much. She would kill for her. She would die for her. Every success she'd ever had in her life had been achieved for Jessica. How, then, could they have come to this? How was it possible for her to have succeeded in providing Jessica with everything she herself had longed for as a child, yet still have managed to lose Jessica along the way?

Was Jess out there somewhere drinking? This new reason for fear suddenly popped full-blown into Grace's mind, washing over every other consideration like an ocean swell hitting sand castles on the beach. Jessica had to be so careful--but she wasn't. She refused to be.

The last time she'd snuck out with the crowd, she'd come home smelling of booze. Although of course she had denied drinking more than a couple of sips from a friend's can of beer; someone had spilled the rest over her clothes, she'd said, to account for the smell.

Yeah, right. As much as Grace longed to believe it, that story didn't ring true. If a kid told her that in her courtroom, she wouldn't have swallowed a word.

It hurt to acknowledge that Jessica was lying to her. It hurt then, and it hurt now. But then, she'd let her daughter get away with it, on the off chance that she was telling the truth.

Big mistake, and one that she would not repeat.

No more Mr. Nice Mommy for Miss Jess. This time, Grace meant to lower the boom.

But she could do nothing but wait and worry until Jessica came home.

Grace opened her eyes. From her second-floor vantage point, she could see half a dozen darkened houses stretching to the east and west along their street, Spring Hill Lane. All were two-story, deceptively unpretentious residences built in the '20s and '30s,

nestled cozily into tree-dotted grounds of half an acre or more per house. Their own house was of narrow white clapboards, with ten-foot-tall ceilings inside and green-painted shutters outside. It blended with its neighbors harmoniously, though none of them was in precisely the same style. A suburb of Columbus, Ohio, Bexley was an old neighborhood, well established, moneyed, safe. Which was why she had chosen it as the ideal place to bring up her daughter.

The tall oaks and elms standing sentinel in her own front yard swayed as a gust of wind caught their branches. A flurry of dislodged leaves swirled through the air, then drifted ghostlike toward the ground. Long shadows cast by a high-flying moon shifted and blended into the line of blackness that was the four-foot-tall privet hedge bordering the street. It was September, and the wind would be warm. Moonlight washed the landscape.

Behind her came the continuous whir of Godzilla on his exercise wheel. The sound was oddly comforting now. At least she was not totally alone in the house.

Jess was okay. She had to keep telling herself that. After all, Jessica was not out in the cold or the rain. She was not lost, and she probably was not alone.

It was Jessica's mother who was alone. And lost. And scared.

Out on the lawn, the shadows danced with the wind. One separated itself from the others, moving with seeming purpose toward a far corner of the yard. Grace blinked with surprise, then realized that she was watching someone walk away from her house toward the small, wrought-iron gate in the hedge.

Jess, or one of her friends. It had to be. This time she had caught her daughter in the act of coming in--or going out.

Before the thought was finished, Grace whirled and ran for the stairs. Her bare feet moved soundlessly over the thick, moss-green carpet that covered the upstairs hall and the steps themselves, and made scarcely more noise as they encountered the oriental runner and highly polished hardwood floor of the center entrance hall. The front door was unlocked, she discovered as she turned the knob. Jess would never go out and leave the house unlocked. As two females living alone, they were both extra careful about that.

Had she been no farther away than her own porch, or yard, all this time?

Grace yanked open the door and burst through the unlatched screen onto the covered front porch. The concrete slabs that made up the porch floor felt cold to her feet. The wicker swing suspended from chains at the far end creaked as it was caught by the wind. The matching white rockers moved too, as if pushed gently back and forth by unseen occupants. A lightning glance around told Grace that her daughter was not there. She ran to the top of the half-dozen brick stairs that led down to the yard.

"Jessica!" Her hand curled around the cool wrought iron of the banister. Embarrassment at the prospect of waking the neighbors moderated her volume to some degree. Though it was hard to be certain amidst the obscuring shadows, Grace thought the figure heading toward the gate paused at the sound of her voice. Certainly it glanced back. Moonlight glinted briefly on a pale oval face.

"Jessica Hart, you come back here this instant!" If there was a cross between a hiss and a shout, that was the voice Grace used as she descended the front steps, beckoning imperiously to her daughter.

Jessica heard, and saw. The stillness of her, and the fact that she continued to look back, told Grace that. Grace was thankful that she didn't need to scream at the top of her lungs to get her message across.

Although she would have, if necessary.

Two yards over, the Welch's dog began to bark. It was a Scottie with an unmistakable, high-pitched yip. Someone must have forgotten to let it in for the night, as they sometimes did, to the consternation of all the neighbors.

Just as Grace reached the brick sidewalk at the base of the steps, Jessica moved. She turned, leaped like a deer over the remaining few feet of lawn, snatched open the gate, and ran headlong down the street.

Jaw dropping at this blatant act of defiance, Grace needed only the space of a pair of heartbeats to respond. Unconcerned with her bare feet or the fact that she was wearing only her nightgown, Grace pounded across the yard in hot pursuit.

"Jessica!"

The grass was firm and faintly prickly underfoot, the ground damp but not overly cold. The scattering of fallen leaves was slippery when stepped on, like magazine pages on carpet. Wood smoke from an afternoon of leaf burning lingered in the balmy night air. She trod on a sharp stick and yelped, but didn't stop. Unbelievably, Jessica was running away from her, fleeing down the road.

"Jessica!"

Grace reached the gate at the corner of the yard, jerked it open, and bounded through it. Her right foot came down squarely on something soft and squishy and round and furry. Something that didn't belong in a grassy yard. Something that rolled as she stepped on it.

What . . . Grace thought even as she lost her balance and fell, landing heavily on the asphalt road. The impact to her knees and palms was instantaneous, jarring, and

painful. She cried out.

At the sound, Jessica glanced back, but didn't stop. She had almost reached the bend in the road that would hide her from her mother's sight. Gasping with exertion and pain, Grace could do nothing but gaze furiously after her.

The fleeing figure ran through a bright patch of moonlight that spilled in a narrow swath across the road. At last it was clearly illuminated.

With a thrill of disbelief, Grace realized that the person she had been pursuing so desperately was someone she did not know.

The hip-length dark coat and dark knit watch cap did not belong to Jessica. Jessica was not that tall, or that bulky. Jessica did not move like that. It was not Jessica.

Whoever it was ran on around the bend, and out of sight.

It was a long moment before Grace was able to glance away from the spot where the figure had disappeared. The next object that registered with her confused senses was the soft, squishy, furry thing she had stepped on to cause her fall, which now lay just a few inches from her right hand.

It was a teddy bear.

Jessica's teddy bear, to be precise, the one she had owned since she was a tiny girl. The one she loved. The one that, up until at least tonight's bedtime when Grace had seen it there as she bade her daughter good night, had been perched on Jessica's bedside table ready to watch over Jess as she slept.

Now it was lying in the grass beside the road, button eyes staring sightlessly up into the dark night sky.