

## **Shock Point**

**By APRIL HENRY**

Hugging the sloshing milk jug to her chest with her slick vinyl gloves, Sky hurried after Meadow and Coyote. The stench of gasoline and diesel made her sick to her stomach. She was shaking, and not just from the chill of the April night.

“Now!” Coyote whispered. The three of them dashed across the street toward the car dealership. They all ran a little awkwardly, thanks to the too-large thrift store shoes they wore, the toes stuffed with newspaper so no one could trace them by their footprints. When a pebble clattered into the darkness ahead of them, Sky flinched, even though the security guard had just driven off and wouldn’t be back for a long time.

Earlier in the week, Coyote and Sky had spent three nights in a parked car monitoring the security situation. It turned out to be pretty minimal. Every two hours the same guy wove his white and green private security car through the empty streets and then drove away. This part of town was dead quiet at night, a sea of car dealerships and long windowless industrial buildings. Aside from the security guard’s car, there was no real traffic.

Now Coyote nudged her. He grinned and jerked his chin at the banner over their heads. “Hot Deals on New Hummers!”

The three teens set down their jugs at the edge of the car dealership lot, and checked their watches. Sky’s said 3:27. She had been awake for nearly twenty-four hours, but she had never felt less tired in her life.

Coyote held up one hand, fingers spread wide. He bunched them together and flicked them out three times. They had fifteen minutes.

They picked up their jugs and scattered to different parts of the lot. The dealership was a place of light and shadows. Along the edges that bordered the road, where a passing driver might stare at a new SUV longingly, it was brightly lit. But between the rows were deep gullies of black, and Sky ran down one of them now.

When she was in the middle of the row, she put down her jug and pulled a can of spray paint from the pocket of her hoodie. To her left, Meadow's giggle mingled with the hissing of the paint can. Sky shook her own can, then aimed the nozzle at the side of a black Hummer. She made a white wavy line along the side, wincing a little when it strayed up onto a window, like a kindergartner trying not to color outside the lines.

On the hood, Sky painted "I [heart] pollution," then sprayed another wiggly line on the driver's side of the car. She pressed the button to light up her watch. 3:30. Three minutes gone. She worked faster now, running from car to car. On the front of one she wrote, "Killer!" On another she wrote "Fat lazy Americans!" Other Hummers received stars and hearts and more wavy lines. On the car at the end of the row, she wrote, "The MEDics are healing the Earth," although she ran out of space and had to write the word "Earth" kind of small.

She checked her watch again. 3:41. Almost time to light the fuse.

Sky dropped the nearly empty can of spray paint. She had never littered before, but like Coyote said, you didn't want to get caught with a can of spray paint the same color as the one used at an action.

In the darkness, it took her several long seconds to find her jug of gasoline and diesel. Sky knelt down, the gravel poking her knees through her jeans, and felt for the homemade fuse held in place by a sponge. Crawling under one of the monstrous vehicles, she pushed the milk jug ahead of her until it sat squarely under the engine. After creeping out, she stood and shuffled backward, carefully unrolling the fuse until she was twenty feet away.

3:42. It was time.

But before Sky could move, her watch changed to 3:43.

She was late.

As she pulled the lighter from her pocket, she couldn't believe she was really doing this. Crouched down next to a huge black tire, she flicked the lighter's wheel. It didn't catch. She tried again. Nothing.

"Hurry!" someone hissed from behind her. She couldn't tell if it was Coyote or Meadow.

Desperate, she yanked off her glove, and spun the lighter's wheel hard. The tiny serrations bit into her thumb.

Finally, a small flame appeared, flickered, threatening to go out. Hands shaking, Sky cupped the lighter, managing to keep the flame alive long enough to touch it to the end of the fuse. A tiny orange-blue light appeared. It began to race along the string. She stripped off the other glove, and dropped it as she scrambled to her feet.

She turned and ran. At one point she tripped over her too-big shoes and scraped one knee, but in less than a second she was back on her feet. Her ears strained for the first sound. When it came, it was so loud that it was more of a physical sensation than noise.

*Whoomp!* Thick air pushed past her slapping her left ear. And then another explosion, even louder, this time on her right. Sky ran harder, her breath coming in gulps. She had to get out of the lot before the whole thing was a fireball.

Behind her she heard smaller explosions as gas tanks added their own fuel to the fire. She burst across the street to where Coyote and Meadow gestured frantically. Coyote had just pulled her behind the shelter of a Dumpster when the third explosion came.

She peered around the corner at the dealership.

*My God, she thought, we did that. Three kids did that!*

Even across the street, it was like standing in front of an open oven. The three fires had grown into one, long orange flames licking the sky. Above it a pillar of thick black smoke floated up to blot out the stars. The whole thing was strangely beautiful

All Sky's fear was now gone. She soaked in the sensations, the heat tightening her skin, the hungry growl of the fire, the bright flames, the dusty taste of ashes, and the mingled smells of gasoline, plastic, leather and rubber, all of it burning.

"Run, Sky! Run!" Meadow shouted. She jerked Sky's arm, breaking the spell. They bolted away from the dealership. The long blank buildings ahead of them glowed as if lit by a summer sunset. They cut through parking lots, keeping close to the edges of buildings, and then through another dealership, zigging and zagging. Behind them, Sky

heard sirens.

They threw themselves into the car. Meadow grabbed the shotgun seat. Coyote shoved the key in the ignition and they took off.

“Woo-hoo!” he shouted, “We did it!” In his excitement, his voice broke, but he didn’t seem to notice, or care. It was one of the things that had made Sky fall in love with Coyote.

Meadow turned in the seat and shot Sky a look from underneath her straight black bangs, one that Coyote couldn’t see.

“What took you so long, anyway, Sky? I was worried you were going to be toast. Literally.” As she spoke, Meadow pulled off her dark sweatshirt. In addition to their shoes, the top layer of their clothes had come from thrift stores, and would now go into a grocery store’s Dumpster.

“I couldn’t get the lighter to light,” Sky said. “The glove made my thumb too smooth. Finally I just took it off.”

“You took off your glove?” Meadow pulled her T-shirt down into place. “So where’s your lighter?”

“I left it there.” As soon as Sky said it, she realized this was the wrong answer.

Meadow’s mouth fell open. Coyote turned to stare, whipping his head back when a police car came barreling toward them

The cop car passed without slowing down. “I had to take it off,” Sky said. “I couldn’t get the lighter to work.”

“You better hope it got burned up,” Meadow said, looking half-scared and half-triumphant at Sky’s mistake. “What if the cops pull your fingerprints off it?”

Sky tried to look worried, but she knew it wouldn’t matter. Because it was the cops – really the FBI – who had asked her to be part of this in the first place.

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## Shock Point

It was the rough hand over her mouth that convinced Cassie Streng that what was happening was real. That and the way the other man grabbed her legs.

Five minutes earlier, Cassie had gotten off the school bus and walked up the hill toward her house. A white van was parked in her driveway. She hadn't recognized the van. She barely recognized the house—after 16 years of living in the same house, it was hard to get used to some place you had only lived two months.

There was a squealing metal sound, like a door opening. Then hands grabbed her from behind. An enormous arm wrapped itself around her neck like a boa constrictor.

She swung her open backpack up and behind her, and heard the man grunt as it connected. A pen bounced off Cassie's head and a book struck her shoulder. The man tore the backpack from her and flung it on the ground, then pulled her tighter against his fat belly.

Cassie started to scream, but then his hand was over her mouth, stifling her, pressing so hard she felt the bridge of her nose shift.

This couldn't be happening to her. Cassie managed to catch a tiny fold of skin between her front teeth. She nipped it. Hard.

“Bitch!” hissed in her ear. The hand loosened for a second. She smelled fried food when she took a shuddery frantic breath, but then the hand was clamped down again, harder.

No air, no air.

Another man ran in front of her and grabbed her ankles, easily swinging her up into the air. He was short and solid, with a dyed-black mullet.

“She's a sassy one,” he said and grinned. He was still grinning when Cassie kicked him in the face. Her shoe flew off her foot. Dropping one of Cassie's legs, he clamped a hand across his nose, which was now spurting blood. The hand across her mouth loosened. Cassie dragged another breath into her lungs, then let it out in a scream.

It wasn't as loud as she had hoped; there hadn't been enough air behind it. But surely her mother must have heard. Or the neighbors, then. One of them might be dialing 9-1-1 right now.

The men grabbed her again, no nonsense now. The mullet-haired man lifted her other ankle and caught them both under his arm. The man behind her, the one she couldn't see, clamped his hand over her mouth again.

Holding her between them like a rolled up carpet, the men began to maneuver her around to the back of the van. The doors were now open. Metal bars divided the front bench seat from the empty back. The floor was bare except for a rubber mat and a white five-gallon plastic bucket. An iron bar was bolted on one wall, and from it hung a two-foot long loop of chain fastened with a metal lock.

The guy holding her legs grunted as he tried to step back and up into the van. Cassie started thrashing even harder, hoping to throw him off balance. If she could just get her feet under her!

She heard the front door bang open. Hope bloomed in her. Her mom! Cassie imagined Jackie with the phone in one hand and her step-father Rick's gun in the other. That must have been what had taken her so long, unlocking the gun from its safe.

Her mom ran around the corner. No phone, no gun. Instead she held a suitcase in one hand. The other clutched a brochure, with a starfish on the front, to her swollen belly. Cassie almost didn't recognize Jackie. Her eyes were slits, red and swollen. Had they beaten her? Had they hurt the baby? Was her mom being kidnapped too?

She arched her back even more frantically, managed to get her mouth free.  
"Mom—Mom! Help me! Mom!"

Her mom looked at Cassie, then away. Something was terribly wrong. Cassie felt like she had stepped out into the air, never noticing the staircase beneath her feet. The feeling of beginning to fall.

Behind her, cold metal clicked onto her wrists, so tight it pinched her skin. Handcuffs. The man with the mullet let her feet go, and she fell against the man behind her.

In a strangled voice, Jackie spoke to the two men. "Wait! I don't—I don't know if this is

right. Do you have to manhandle her like that?"

The man with his arm looped around Cassie's neck spoke. "They're tricky at this stage, ma'am. You can't ask them to come along quietly—because they won't. They will lie and manipulate until they've got you believing that what's up is down and what's black is white."

"Mom—what's happening?" Cassie asked in a choked whisper. "What's happening to me?"

"It's for the best, Cassie. They're going to help you." Jackie's in-drawn breath was like a sob.

"What? Mom, what are they doing? Where are you letting them take me?"

The man behind Cassie gave her shoulder a little shove. "Okay, ma'am, we need to get this show on the road." Cassie took one step, two, not resisting. Her mother handed the other one the suitcase and he threw it into the back of the van. He picked Cassie's shoe off the lawn and threw that in, too.

She heard the front door open again, and looked over to see Rick coming out of the house. He came down the steps and put his arm around her mother. "That's right, Cassie. Just go along with these gentlemen. They're going to help you with your problems."

"I don't have any problems!" she yelled. "It's you who has the problem!"

"Cassie—I found the crystal meth in your room. Don't try to lie."

Shock stiffened her spine. "What are you talking about? I don't use drugs." She appealed to her mom. "I don't! How can you even think that?"

But instead of turning to her, her mother looked up at Rick, her brows knitting together.

"Be strong, Jackie. Would you rather see Cassie in jail—or dead? This is her only hope."

The man behind Cassie shoved her. She sprawled onto the floor of the van, vainly trying to jerk her handcuffed arms forward to break her fall. Rough hands dragged Cassie

forward, and turned her so that she was sitting. They unlocked the chain and slid it through her handcuffs, then clicked it closed again. She only had eyes for her mother. Surely Jackie couldn't allow this to happen? Surely she would know whom to believe?

Instead of looking at Cassie, her mom pressed her face into Rick's neck. Absently, he patted her back, but his eyes didn't move. The last thing Cassie saw before the van doors slammed closed was her stepfather's cold stare.

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