

Eye Contact Over Truk - Excerpt

by Stephanie Woodman

Chapter 1

August 14, 1985 - Ventura, California

The end. Everything ends. Days end. Jobs end. Friendships end. People end. Nick Mitchel had lost count of how many endings he'd lived through, how many people he had lost. Lost. What a stupid word; as if they could be found. Though some people in this world were found, not in Nick's. Death was not recoverable. With their deaths came burials on land and sea. Memories buried as well.

This was different. Nick had known this day would come. For three years, cancer had slowly, menacingly, insidiously eaten at her body. His shoulders slumped over as he sat in his living room chair, holding the little crystal clown fish that Jeanne loved so much. A down light shined on their family photo mounted above the fireplace. The picture was a few years old, taken on the rocks at Ventura Beach with the waves crashing behind them. Nick had his arms around Jeanne as they leaned back on a rock. She was the picture of health. Anthony stood tall behind them, and Dana sat on the sand, leaning against Nick's legs. It was the four of them, as Dana hadn't married or had his sweet granddaughter yet. The light seemed to focus on Jeanne, her smile, her sparkling, happy eyes drawing her up. Nick rubbed his eyes, irritated at conjuring such a thought. *My beautiful Jeanne. When she ... is gone, how do I stay? She is my wife, my love, my best friend. She knows me better than I know myself. I've shared everything...almost. Maybe I'm not meant to go on. I don't deserve to go on.* Nick stopped this thought. Now wasn't the time to go down that black hole. She still needed him, and he would continue to take care of her until he fulfilled her final wishes.

Unconsciously, his fingers twirled his wedding ring around his finger as he tried to reconcile his prayers. He had to find the strength to pray for what would be the best for her, causing the worst for him. "Lord, it's been long enough. Please end her pain," he said.

"Dad," said Dana, choking on her words.

Nick knew it was coming. He took a deep breath and got up to face his son and daughter. His wasn't the only heart breaking. He peered into the eyes of his children, who had said goodbye to their mother.

"Mom wants you," Dana said, her voice barely a whisper, tears rolling down her face. Nick nodded to her. He saw his son fighting for control. Nick gave them both a quick hug. Forcing himself to stand up tall, he took another deep breath, walked into the bedroom, and sat down on a chair by the bed.

Jeanne lay on her side, eyes open, staring with the same vacant expression she wore for the last several days. Those eyes that had been so vibrant, so intense, now outwardly blank. Whatever held her vision was now internal and didn't live in Nick's world.

"Yes, my love," he said. With shaking hands, he moved her dry gray hair back behind her ear, then he took her hand in his. "Can I get you anything?"

With effort, she focused her eyes on him. "I told the kids, I want you to take my ashes to Hawaii."

Nick nodded.

Jeanne struggled to take another shallow breath. "It's time, Nick. You have to let me go," she said in a soft, frail voice.

"You can't ask me to do that," he whispered, shaking his head, fighting desperately for control, as the tears welled up again. Nick gazed into her eyes, the pecan color that had captured him so long ago.

"I can't stay," she said, taking a breath. "Nick, you can't follow me to the afterlife. If you do, I won't talk to you there."

At those words, Nick actually smiled. "Yes, you will. Wherever we are, we will be together."

"I'm not...going to...be there," she said. Jeanne's chest barely moved as she strained for more air. "I believe...in rein...carnation....I'm coming...back a fish." She gave a slight smile.

Nick's mouth trembled. "What kind of fish?" he asked.

"Clown fish."

"No, my love. You are too strong and elegant. You will be a manta ray or an eagle ray."

"I...like...eagle...rays."

"I know." I know everything about you, he thought. I know that you can't pass a lavender bush without feeling the leaves and sniffing its scent. I know how you smile when you see a yellow finch. I know where you keep your secret stash of semisweet chocolate chips.

"Nick...hold me."

Nick stretched out beside her, as he had done daily for forty years. As tenderly as he could, he rolled her over so her head rested on his shoulder, wrapping her, protecting her in his arms. She felt so fragile to him, almost as brittle as dried twigs.

"I've...always...loved your...strength."

But it's of no use now, he thought. Nick kissed her hair. "I've always loved your strength as well." She couldn't see his face, so he didn't try to control the tears, not that he could have.

"You have...to let...me go." Each word wheezed out, grew fainter and fainter.

"I don't know how." His heart started to beat faster and his whole body shuddered.

She inched her hand to lay over his heart. "You have to...say goodbye." He didn't answer her. "Nick...our paths...part...here. You...have a...different journey...to take."

"What journey could I ever take without you?" he asked, trying to keep her talking.

"You have...to go back...you have to...feel it...You have...to say...goodbye."

Nick's lungs began to burn with each of her breaths. He couldn't help her, couldn't stop this. His world was collapsing down on him.

"I will be...right here." She rubbed her fingers over his heart. "Promise me!"

"I promise." He tightened his hold on her, knowing what was coming.

"It's time." She closed her eyes. "Goodbye...Nick Mitchel."

Tears overflowed, running down his face. "Goodbye, Jeannette Crawford Mitchel."

She took one last, deep breath.

It happened. He knew it had happened. His arms cradled her body, but it wasn't her anymore. He felt the moment her spirit left, the void back-filled with some invisible mass. What was he supposed to do now? Their bedroom was the same. No, it wasn't. A putrid, sweet odor articulated death's victory. In its last act, death took his heart, leaving a mechanical pump in its place. Why the hell couldn't it have taken him? What was the purpose of staying?

"Dad," said Anthony in a whisper, "I called Christine. She said Hospice would help with..."

Nick opened his eyes. His son stood at the foot of the bed, his arm around his sister, while she cried. Nick nodded. A task had to be performed. Duty called him into action and he grabbed it as the life ring it was. Gently, he rolled Jeanne back over, kissed her forehead, and stood up. Jeanne lay there like she was asleep. How many times had he watched her nose twitch and eyelashes flutter while she dreamed? How many times had he softly kissed her awake until she was fully alive in his arms? This time, he fell back into the well-ingrained habits of the last couple of years and quietly turned away, not wanting to disturb her. After he wiped his eyes, he pulled both kids into his arms for a tight hug. "Let's go to the living room," he said in a low voice.

The doorbell rang, and Anthony went to answer it.

"Dad," said Dana, wiping her own eyes, "I'm going to bed. I want to make sure Jani doesn't wake up and comes out. I don't want her to see—"

Nick nodded.

Christine, from Hospice, arrived, followed by two men from the mortuary. Nick did his best to talk coherently with them, answering their questions, agreeing with schedules. Part of him wanted to yell, *GO AWAY! She's just sleeping!* The robot part of him held control, clinging to the tasks that had to be done. He directed the men to the bedroom.

As Jeanne's illness had progressed, his mind had projected to her death, probably some self-protection mechanism to prepare him. Whatever the reason, it had been a complete and utter failure. But in all his projections, this moment, this scene, this agony never showed itself. She wanted to die in her own bed, and Nick made sure she did. Yet, it never occurred to him what it would feel like to watch her carried out with a blanket over her head. This is something seen in movies, not real life. Until this moment, he could pretend. God, he wanted to scream at the men to stop, leave her! Take me instead! She would wake up and then bring him the death certificates. He wanted to grab her from the gurney and pull her into a dance around the bank accounts. Lose himself in her beautiful eyes. Make love to her under the obituary. Ripped in two, he was half heart and half robot, and they raged against each other, neither containing a brain. With every step the men took, his shell cracked, his will crumbled.

The final nail was in place as he stood there, staring at the closed door. His legs, somehow rigid enough, kept him standing. Nothing made sense. His mind reeled, while his head rolled like a bobble-head doll.

"Dad, are you okay?" Anthony asked, putting a hand on Nick's shoulder.

Nick didn't move. *If you can't let him go, bury your emotions. Bury them deep.* Where did those words come from?

"Dad?"

Nick's eyes narrowed, then he shook his head to try to come back from some place, long forgotten. He took a deep breath and turned to his son. "I'm alright. How are you?"

"Not sure." Anthony gave a subtle shrug, lowering his arm. "I feel like I've been run over by a truck." He paused, his shoulders slumped like a helpless man adrift without a rudder. "What do we need to do now?"

Anthony stood eye to eye with Nick, the same build, the same straight nose, but he had his mother's eyes. Nick gazed into those eyes and saw the mixture of Jeanne's spirit and Anthony's confusion. Putting an arm around his son's shoulders, he squeezed. "We go on." His voice went down an octave. "That's what your mom wanted. We just go on." Nick took another deep breath and put on a slight smile. "You've missed a lot of work. Why don't you go home, get a little sleep, then check in with your office?"

"But I can help you."

"There isn't much to do." Nick shrugged. "Your mom was clear about what she wanted. I'll take care of...the arrangements this afternoon. And at some point, mow the grass. The neighbors have been very patient with me. This morning I'll try to catch up on some sleep." He saw Anthony's uncertainty. "I'll call you when I need help, I promise. The best thing we all can do right now is to get back to our routine. Activity helps."

Anthony's face showed his uncertainty. "Alright. How about I come over this weekend and help you tackle the gardens?"

"I'd appreciate that. Thank you." Nick wrapped his arms around his son, trying to give strength as much as he was needing some as well. When they broke apart, Anthony gave a shallow smile, then left.

Nick walked back to the living room and sat down in his chair. For all his words to Anthony, Nick was wandering in an abyss, a fog. *We go on.* How? There were no immediate demands, no orders, no missions. A vacuum sucking him down to some deep hole.

Little Jani ran past him into his bedroom, her soft stomps rushing into the bathroom. She came back out, looking as lost as he felt. "Why did grandma have to go to heaven?" she asked. Jani stood in her butterfly pajamas that no longer fit growing legs. Her eyes, that hadn't completely woken up yet, welled with tears. Early morning light peaking around the drapes cast a diaphanous glow around her tangled blond hair.

Nick didn't think he had enough heart left to feel, but something tore inside him. He opened his arms. Clutching her little stuffed red bear, she ran to his lap. He pulled a soft baby blue blanket over and wrapped her up in it, then gave her a corner to rub against her cheek. Nick hugged his granddaughter close to his chest, resting her head next to his heart. In the desolate sink hole he was existing in, this little body with little arms and little ears brought a little ray of light. The two sat there in silence, listening to the soft ticking of the anniversary clock on the mantel. A tiny silver thimble wedged between the fibers of the carpet behind his foot. He breathed in her wonderful tiny child's sweet smell, as a drowning man tries to breathe fresh oxygen. Why? That was the question. *How do I explain this to a four-year-old when I don't understand it myself? How do I help her accept that her favorite person in the world is gone? And so is mine. That Wednesdays won't be grandma day anymore. They won't make play dough animals or finger paint pictures together. How do I fill this void in her life when I am a void?* There was no way to understand when love is ripped away. He sat there, trying to find the words that she could understand. "It was grandma's turn to be an angel," he said. "So she can help other people who need her."

"But I need her," Jani said, her voice as small as she was. Her body shuddered against him.

So do I. He gently rubbed the blanket covering her back.

"Oh, Sweet Pea," he said, "Grandma is going to help people who don't have anyone else. She will always be watching over you as well. Every time you see a butterfly, it will be Grandma coming to see you." As Nick hoped, at the idea of butterflies, Jani calmed down. "We still have each other, and your mommy and daddy."

"And Uncle Anty?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, smiling, "Uncle Anty as well. And you have red bear." She pulled the stuffed toy up to rest on Nick's chest. The bear was well loved, with one particular ear more loved than the other. His bow tie was undone, again.

"Will I be an angel?" she asked, with a bit of fear in those words.

"No," he said quickly. The mere idea of losing Jani caused a brief panic attack. "Not until you are very old." His arms pulled a little tighter.

“You are very old. Are you going to be an angel?” she asked, the worry still there.

Nick smiled again at her honesty, though words failed him. It made sense that Jeanne, with all her love and kindness, would be an angel, but Nick knew he didn’t qualify. “No, Sweet Pea,” he said, “I’m not going to be an angel.”

Chapter 2

August 15, 1985 - Davenport, Iowa

Natalie Thornton, her hands deep in a sink full of dishes, watched fat rain drops pelt the window. The clanging of her gate told her she hadn’t shut it. That could wait. She didn’t mind summer storms. They never lasted long and her yard needed the water. Dark black clouds seemed appropriate today. The heavens should be crying and howling. Today was a day for such sadness. Natalie had cried herself out last night.

When the phone rang, she shook off the suds, dried her hands, and reached for it. “Hello?”

“Nat, it’s me.” The voice was a plaintive whisper.

“Nick,” she said, pressing a hand to her heart. “Are you doing okay?” she asked the required, yet stupid, question.

“Yeah, I’m alright. Who called you?” he asked, his voice cold and raspy.

No, you’re not, she thought, but there was no need to state the obvious. “Dana called last night. I was going to call you tonight. I know last night was hell.” She listened, but no response came. “Nick?”

“I’m here.” Natalie could hear the tremble in his voice. She sat down at the table, pulling an arm around herself. A calming tea tree scent infused the air from a votive candle on the table next to a vase filled with white and red carnations. She had picked them up yesterday, trying to bring some beauty at this horrible time. They didn’t work.

“How did you make it after Carl died?” he asked.

Her yellow short-sleeve shirt she was wearing should have been warm enough, yet she shivered. Not from cold, but from memories. *How do I explain the un-explainable? That your mind has complete clarity on what happened, yet no longer functions properly? Your life is torn in two, diametrically pulling you apart. Both lives are only shells, facades, with no heart. Simultaneously living and dead. That you want to scream at people at their oblivion of the magnitude of what’s happened. No, words are useless. Experience is the only way to understand this part of life.* Instead, she shared the practical activities. “There was so much that I had to do right after he passed that I went from task to task for a while. When those ended, I threw myself into work.”

“How did you make it through the nights?” She could hear that fear in his voice at this question. “During the day, I can find things to do or get in the car and drive.”

“The nights are the worst,” she said. “Some nights, I held his pillow and cried. It still had his smell and when it wore off, I splashed a little of his English Leather aftershave on it. Other nights, I couldn’t face the bed, so I slept on the couch, usually with the TV on. I wasn’t getting much sleep, anyway.”

“She was sick for so long,” his voice rose, “you’d think I would’ve been ready for it.”

Natalie’s heart broke for him. “You’re never ready for it. It will get better. Keep breathing. Go through the motions of life for a while. When you find yourself with time, try to remember the happy times when you laughed together. Those memories are your salvation.” Nat listened, but there was only silence. The wind died down so that the ticking of her wall clock was the only sound. “Nick? Are you still there?”

“Yes,” he said. Nat held the phone closer to pick up each word. “I don’t know if I can make it.” The words shook out of him.

“Yes, you will,” Nat said with determination. “It was Jeanne’s time to go. Not yours.”

“I know, I’m just tired.” Something in his voice made her uneasy. Considering what he was going through, he would sound odd. She shook off the feeling.

“I know, three years is a long time to battle. It’s going to take a long time to heal and get your bearings again,” she said. “When’s the service?”

“A week from Saturday,” he said, his voice a bit stronger. “Are you going to be able to make it?”

“Of course. I’ll actually be there the day after tomorrow. I booked my ticket right after Dana called.”

“You can have the guest room, if you want it. Jeanne’s sister will stay with Dana.”

This was the Nick she knew, on top of details. “That works, thanks. How’s Anthony doing?”

“Not well. He’s not saying much.”

“I wonder where he picked up that trait.”

“Yeah, like father, like son.”

That made her smile. “I can’t count the number of times I heard Jeanne say that.” Again, there was silence on the line. This time, she waited. A crumb leftover from her toasted cheese sandwich sat on the place-mat. Three pictures she had brought over from the fireplace mantel this morning stared back at her.

“She wants me to go back,” he said, his voice barely audible.

"I know. She and I talked about it a while back." That something in his voice was back. Nat was very glad she would be there soon. "Don't think about that yet. Let yourself be for a while."

"Okay," he said, sounding like he'd been given a reprieve.

"Nick, if you need to talk before I get there, or just need to hear another voice, call whenever, day or night. I never sleep through the night, anyway."

"Thanks Nat." The line disconnected.

Natalie stared at the phone. Her heart aching for him. Nick was special to her, like a brother from the time she was a little girl. He always referred to her as his little sister. Secretly, though, Nat had had the biggest crush on him. So tall, so nice, so happy. No matter what he and her brother James were doing, Nick made time to talk to her and ask about her activities. When she'd had her piano recitals, he came with James to watch. Never missing any, until they both left for the war.

She'd held out hope that, after the war, Nick would fall in love with her. But nothing ever goes as planned in a war. Her wonderful brother died. When Nick came home, he was different. Still nice and thoughtful, but a part of him had died too. Or maybe it was the kid in him that had died, as it had in all of them. Also, Nick came back in love with Jeanne. When Nat first heard this, she'd been overcome with jealousy and anger that this woman had destroyed her little girl fantasies. Meeting Jeanne changed her mind, though, as Nat loved her as well. Jeanne became the sister she'd never had. There was also a nagging belief that Nick's love for his wife was what brought him back.

The picture of her and Jeanne was about twenty years old. They were on a friend's sailboat in Ventura Harbor, posing like sun goddesses, holding up their glasses of frozen strawberry margaritas, laughing as they almost always did together. That was a good day, sailing in the morning and having dinner on the boat that evening. *Back when I actually looked good in a bathing suit. I could be myself with Jeanne. No artifice, no judgment.* Kindred spirits, friends, sisters. How much fun they had together and with their families. Her death caused a hole that Nat knew would never be refilled.

She picked up one of the other pictures, a very old black-and-white photo of a trio of beautiful boys. James, Nick, and Tony, laughing in their khaki Navy uniforms, were home for only a day before heading to their next level of training. Nat was young enough to see it as an adventure they were going on. Nothing bad could happen to them. So strong, so confident, so invincible. Young heroes. It wasn't until she saw her mother and saw the fear etched on her face that the possibilities entered Nat's consciousness. She quashed them, telling herself that her mother was being a worrywart. After the boys left, life continued its routine. Until one day, about a year later, a telegram came. Her mother's legs gave out, and Nat caught her to break the fall. While on the floor, she glanced up as her father read. "We regret to inform you that your son, Lieutenant James Steven Carson, is missing in action." Nat watched the light in his eyes die. It was then that reality hit her. Fragments of hope lasted until they received the letter from Nick.

The photo next to that was of her wedding day to Carl Thornton. Another casualty of the war. He survived, but never got over it. That war took so much.

Chapter 3

September 3, 1986 - Ventura, California

Nick's head thrashed back and forth. Eyes wild under the closed lids. Bombs exploded. "NOOO! Tony, pull up, pull up!" someone screamed. "Get us the hell out of here!" came over the radio. "Torpedo away." So cold. Each exhale fogged his windshield. "There's one behind us." "Keep the canopy open," the commander ordered. "Let's get a table. Where's Tony?" "Bull's-eye, bull's-eye." "He's late. He saw Jeanne off at the train." A little boy, in a boat, stood with his arms out. James flew ahead to the right and yanked his plane up. "You want a beer?" Nick saw it, but the stick wouldn't move. It blew, throwing the plane to the right. "We're hit!" Danny yelled. "Jason's hurt." Engine stalls. Tony walked in, smiling a big grin. No power. "Guess what? Jeanne and I are engaged." Jeanne's beautiful face stared back at Nick from the picture jammed in the control panel. The cabin reeked of burning fuel. Beer ran down his neck, filling his suit. Arms froze, the stick froze, the plane froze. Nothing worked. "Nick, what are you doing? Pull up, pull up! Do something!" James sat beside him in the one-man cockpit. "I'm sorry, Nick. I'm so sorry. I should have taken that shell." Explosions all around. Jeanne's soft voice whispered in his ear. "It's okay Nick." The radio broadcasted the guys screaming their pain. Cold air whipped around his face. The nose slowly began to move down. Gravity took control. Nick watched, fascinated, as the view ahead changed from the beautiful blue smoky sky to green burning islands, then to blue gray burning water. Huge waves rolled in the cold. A tropical storm brought in the cold snow. The plane began to pick up speed, faster, faster, faster as it raced toward the wall of water, the end, the finish, the termination. Picket boats are too far away to make it in time. Climb out on the wing. Nick tried to wrestle free from his straps. Nothing. He lost all feeling in his legs, welded to his seat. "Am I hit?" Ahead JC's eyes grew larger and larger, head nodded the invitation: join me. Falling, falling, falling, falling. Why isn't my life passing before me? Isn't that part of the process? This is it! He closed his eyes, threw his arms up in front of his face. Yell...

"NOOO!" Nick bolted up, struggling to breathe, eyes jumping around the living room. Furniture waves exploding up. Family picture above the instrument panel. His pulse raced as fast as he was flying. Anti-aircraft fire pushed him around. Empty plant pots strafing the table. His hands felt his gray sweat suit. His toes felt the carpet. Reality inched ahead in his mind. Home. His throat was dry and raw. Nick realized that he had screamed out loud. Tension in his shoulders eased as the nightmare cleared. He leaned his head back and rounded his lips to blow out, extending each exhale, calming his breathing. Moisture around his eyes felt cold on his skin.

His pulse and breathing returned to normal. Feeling more secure in his own recliner, Nick scanned the room. Jeanne's conch shell, with the dried fan coral attached, sat on one of the

shelves. She had found it on a pile of shells in Tobago Cays. Board games stacked on the bottom, ready for the game nights they used to play. Little Jani sitting on his lap, as he tried to teach her Monopoly. But she wanted to play with the little metal game pieces, several of which went missing after that night. College graduation pictures of Anthony and Dana, many years old, gave evidence of fleeting time. Books and figurines collected through the years brought more comforting memories.

The mantel was built out of driftwood he'd found after a storm. He remembered the hours he had spent planing one side to get it flat enough. On it stood the antique brass anniversary clock and the box of Jeanne's ashes. A brass plaque on the front of the box stated her full name, a name that he uttered only twice. Her parents called her Jeannette, but to Nick, she was Jeanne. A thick, fat dust bunny leaned up against it. Nick knew what he needed to do, but doing it was another thing. He peered at the family photo, confused by his own smiling face. Why was it so hard to remember being happy? Memories confirmed that man had been happy, yet now he felt no connection to those feelings.

Nick's stomach growled, motivating him up and into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator door in the hopes that it was fuller today than yesterday. No, the food fairy hadn't come. An old jar of mustard, two dehydrated carrots, a tub of butter, a bag of moldy lettuce, and a shriveled cherry tomato stuck on one of the wire shelves were the only options. Opening the freezer would be equally useless. Nothing to eat. Cold air floated around him. "I need to go to the store and get a rotisserie chicken," he said to no one. "Anything, something. Nothing sounds good. I don't want to cook. I don't want to eat. I don't want to go," he yelled, then exhaled, deflating his anger.

"Yet I don't know how to stay either." Nick finally uttered the words that had been hiding under his surface. "I don't want anything. I don't want to have to think. I don't want to feel. I don't feel. I'm numb. For three, no, four years I lived in hell watching her waste away. What's left to feel about? She's gone and all I have left are the bombs!" he yelled again. "She took the only good part of me with her. I want out. I want to sleep, to escape. But there is no escape. They come when I sleep. I left them. It's over. Why are they coming now? What the hell am I supposed to do?" He stopped and waited for an answer, but the hum of the refrigerator gave no guidance.

Nick slammed the door shut and turned to examine the kitchen. "Empty. The whole goddamn house is empty. My life is empty." Leaning back against the door, he slid down to the floor. A bottle cap sat under the cabinet. "I guess I'm supposed to pick that up," he said. "Who the hell is going to care? Who the hell is going to even see it?" The kitchen was dark. The drapes closed off everything that could be light, that might spark life. Pops and crackles came from the refrigerator compressor. Nick noticed the stains on his sweatpants. He couldn't remember when he'd changed his clothes last. *What's the point?* He sat there and noticed a smell. *What the hell is that?* He leaned forward enough to realize the stench was him. "I could take a shower. For whom? I could change my clothes. For whom?" He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. A pair of eyes stared back at him. He couldn't get away from them. Wherever he went, they followed.

He opened his eyes again. A dark, dusty, lonely house. "I could go to work, but I don't have any ideas. I'm as useless there as I am here. I have to do something, but what? I have no goal, no destination. I'm a dead ship, floundering in this house. Can a person release their past? Can I say

'abracadabra' and everything that happened is no longer? If I do that, then I have to release the good as well, and I don't want that part to go. I want what I had." Futility summed up his life. "I can't have what I want. What the hell is left?" He covered his face with his hands, massaging his forehead, then ran his hands up through his hair. "Jeanne, what the hell do I do now?" Jeanne's words came back to him. *You have to go back. You have to feel it. You have to say goodbye.* "How am I supposed to go back? They're all gone. I don't know how to do this."

A hushed, rhythmic sound came from the other room. "What the hell?" The pattern became clear. "Oh no." Anger exploded in him as he jumped and almost ran back to the living room. The anniversary clock rang out its Ode To Joy chime, mocking Nick with its dulcet tones. Nick grabbed the clock with both hands, raising it above his head. "I have no control over anything else, but I damn well don't have to take this from you!" His target was the brick fireplace. He moved his arms down to launch the missile, then stopped, closing his eyes. Jeanne was there, in Paris, smiling as she listened to the beautiful chime. She loved Ode To Joy. It was one of the songs played at their wedding. Nick brought the clock back down, knowing it wasn't to blame. Killing it wouldn't solve anything, nor would it make him feel better. Instead, he shut it off, sentencing it to permanent silence. Nick placed it back on the mantel, then blew off the dust bunny and rested his forehead against Jeanne's box. *Something is going to have to change.*

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