



## **Warning Bells**

**by**

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**It was 2:00 A.M.**

**Tara Brinson slipped out of bed fully clothed and placed the note on her pillow. The goodbye message was short and heartfelt – she didn't want to hurt her family, but she had no choice. She longed for freedom and independence away from her parents' strict rules, and the old-fashioned moral code they chose to live by.**

**One day they would understand.**

**Nick was going to take her away from boring little Lucasville and show her places she'd only dreamed about. He would even marry her later that year, as soon as she turned eighteen. They were going to have an exciting life together – Tara didn't doubt it for a minute.**

**She'd been saving money for several months, working after school at the Dairy Mart and babysitting on weekends. Nick had somehow managed to earn \$500.00. Their trip**

out west was finally about to begin. Her boyfriend was waiting for her a mile away, down by the river at Sunset Park.

Tara took one last look around her frilly, pink bedroom. She had cleaned it earlier that day, putting everything in its place, and had only packed a few essentials in her canvas duffel bag. The one piece of jewelry she refused to leave behind was a necklace, a little gold cross her mother had given her when she'd turned sixteen.

She tossed her cell phone back into her purse and slipped on a denim jacket. She would call her parents in a couple of days, just to let them know she was okay. Her friends would freak out Monday morning when she didn't show up for school.

Tara opened her bedroom door slowly, in case it wanted to creak, and tiptoed out into the carpeted hallway where a nightlight glowed softly. The house still smelled like meatloaf. She stood still for a moment, listening. The grandfather clock at the top of the stairs ticked loudly, but she could still hear her father snoring in the room across the hall.

She took a few steps and paused in the doorway of her little brother's room. Timothy was sound asleep with their old cat, Pumpkin, curled up at his side. Tara would miss her brother the most, and it hurt to know that he wouldn't understand why she'd had to leave.

She made her way quietly down the curving stairs and out the front entrance. When she heard the heavy wooden door close and latch behind her, the enormity of what she was about to do suddenly made her feel queasy.

Tara turned on the walkway and looked up at her quiet, stately house. Her friends all thought she was so lucky to live in this respectable, older neighborhood of tree-lined streets, two-story brick homes, and tidy lawns dressed up with fountains and flowerbeds. They envied her grades, her blond good looks, and her cute, older boyfriend.

For a brief moment, Tara let a niggling speck of doubt cloud her rosy vision of the future. She wasn't worried about school. She was smart – passing an equivalency test down the road would not be a problem. Missing the graduation ceremony didn't bother her in the least.

No, it was the feeling of security that she hated to lose. But wasn't it possible to be too loved? She felt smothered by her "perfect" family, restricted and held back from experiencing life to the fullest.

**She was grown up now, and her parents refused to accept it. That's why she was leaving – to show them she could make it on her own.**

**And because she would lose Nick if she stayed.**

**The brisk April night was bathed in moonlight. Tara slung her purse and duffel bag over her shoulder and escaped the Friendly Hills Subdivision, heading west on River Road.**

**Somewhere in the distance, a dog let out a pitiful, long howl. Tara quickened her pace alongside the swollen Ohio, breathing in its pungent smells and hearing its familiar sounds. A barge passed by, slow and steady, though she couldn't see it. A spooky layer of mist hid the muddy river and made the surrounding air feel thick and damp.**

**The white fog spilled over into the deserted road, softening the effect of the already dim streetlights.**

**Tara shivered. Okay, she thought, only a quarter of a mile to go before I reach Sunset Park. It had been her idea to meet Nick there, away from the eyes and ears of nosy, caring neighbors.**

**Just as she approached Waterfront Pier, Tara saw a mysterious ball of light traveling through the mist along the length of the main dock.**

**She stopped in her tracks as it moved in front of her over the sidewalk and began to expand. The light began to pulsate, and grew so bright that Tara had to look away from it.**

**She wanted to flee, but her frozen limbs refused to obey the impulse.**

**At least thirty seconds passed before the brilliant light died.**

**Tara turned her head and saw an elderly woman step forward out of the fog. She was wearing a shiny white tunic over slacks. The flat, clear shoes on her feet seemed to glow, and her short-cropped silver hair shimmered in the soft rays of the streetlight.**

**The woman's wrinkled face was handsome, her blue eyes sad. She smiled at Tara, but it was not a happy smile.**

**Tara wondered if the lady was an angel. Her parents believed in them. Her mother had given her a silver keychain when she'd gotten her license. The inscription said, "Never drive faster than your guardian angel can fly."**

**But this lady wasn't young and beautiful, and, more importantly, she was lacking a pair of diaphanous wings.**

**The old woman started to move closer to Tara, but then hesitated, gazing at her intently.**

**Her voice trembled slightly. "So innocent, you are – and so full of hopeful, brave thoughts."**

**"Are you an angel?"**

**The woman smiled again, and this time her eyes reflected her amusement. "That would be easier for you to believe, I think. Just know that I'm your friend, Tara, and I'm here to help you make the right decision."**

**Maybe the strange lady was a ghost.**

**Tara took a step backwards. "How come you know my name?"**

**"I know everything about you. I also know that you're about to make the biggest mistake of your life."**

**"What do you mean by that – and why do you even care, if you're not my guardian angel?"**

**The woman sighed. "Tara, you have your whole life ahead of you - and it could be so wonderful, so filled with love and accomplishments. But if you leave with your boyfriend tonight, you'll end up with nothing but regrets. You won't have a future worth living anymore."**

**"Nick loves me," Tara said, shaking her head. "He wouldn't let anything bad happen. Besides, we're old enough to know what we're doing. This isn't a mistake."**

**"Listen to the warning bells inside your head, Tara. I know you hear them – I know you have doubts – and you should. You don't really know Nick." She paused. "Would a young man in love threaten to leave town without his girlfriend?"**

**Tara looked away for a moment. She had asked herself the same question, at first.**

**The old lady continued. "A few days from now, you'll find out what your boyfriend's really made of, but then it will be too late. Your lives will be ruined."**

**"Who are you? How can you know all this?"**

The woman moved close enough for Tara to see the tears shining in her eyes. “I’ve come so far for you – risked so much – just hoping for a second chance. The future is so wondrous, so amazing. I want you to see it differently than I do, after having lived a life not wasted. It’s my last wish, my final request, before I let go of this world.”

A cold, writhing knot of fear had formed in Tara’s stomach. “Tell me what happens. How is my life ruined?”

“Three days from now, you’ll be traveling through Nebraska. You’ll stop at a little store outside a small town. Nick tries to rob the owner, but the man fights back and Nick shoots him. You’re both arrested for the robbery and the murder, and everyone believes you’re a willing accomplice.” A tear slid down the old woman’s cheek. “You go to jail Tara, and you stay there for most of your life.”

Tara was shaking and her mouth had gone dry. She wanted to ask more questions, but before she could say anything, a ball of light appeared behind the lady and began to expand.

The woman glanced back at the brilliant orb, and then met Tara’s worried gaze with a pleading look. “I can’t stay here any longer.” The lady lifted a necklace out from under her tunic and held it up for Tara to see. It was a little gold cross. “Heed my warning, Tara – for both of us.”

The light surrounded the old woman. Tara heard a loud crackling noise, like the sound made by static electricity, and a few seconds later the ball of light shrank to a pinpoint and disappeared completely.

Tara’s knees wanted to buckle. She hurried over to the Waterfront Pier entrance and collapsed onto a bench facing the river. The mist rolled over her, making her shiver even more violently. That lady – she wasn’t an angel and she wasn’t a spirit. But Tara could hardly bring herself to believe the other possibility.

The old woman was from the future – *her* future. The lady was Tara. She had traveled back in time to warn her younger self.

The elderly Tara had called the future “wondrous and amazing.” What an understatement.

*So, what am I going to do now?*

Tara already knew the answer.

**If you couldn't trust yourself, who could you trust? She would listen to the warning bells this time. She would go home.**

**Tara took a deep breath and rose from the bench, picking up her bags.**

**She started walking down River Road, back towards her subdivision. A picture of the old woman's tear-streaked face, and her sad smile, would be etched in her mind forever. But Tara had a feeling that when morning came, the events of that night would seem like a bizarre dream.**

**Right now, Tara was filled with an odd sense of relief that was mixed with disappointment. She would be able to get away from Lucasville in the fall. She had already been accepted into three different colleges. All she had to do was choose.**

**But getting over Nick wouldn't be easy. She loved him – even if he didn't really love her.**

**The roar of an angry car engine interrupted her thoughts. She recognized that sound: It was Nick's classic Camaro. He never drove anywhere unless it was fast.**

**She looked back and saw the bright yellow car barreling down River Road. It screeched to a halt alongside her and Nick rolled down his window, allowing a heavy metal tune to escape and shatter the stillness of the night. He turned down the volume on the radio and grinned at her.**

**“Hey, babe, aren't you walking in the wrong direction?”**

**Tara felt like crying. “Nick, I've changed my mind. I'm sorry, but I'm not going with you.”**

**The grin on his face was replaced by a look of surprised irritation. He pushed back his dark, shaggy bangs and stared at her. “You can't be serious, Tara. We've been planning this for months.”**

**“I'm afraid, Nick.” Tara forced herself to look into his angry eyes. “I just can't go through with it, but I know you have to leave, and that's all right. Please don't hate me, okay?”**

**He turned his head away and released a sigh. “I think you'll regret not going with me, but I don't hate you.” He looked over at her and smiled. “In fact, I'll even give you a ride home to prove it.”**

His beautiful, warm smile melted her insides and silenced the mental warning bells that were threatening to go off again.

“Come on, get in.”

Tara hesitated only for a second before climbing into the passenger seat of Nick’s car. As usual, the interior reeked of stale cigarette smoke and fast food.

Her boyfriend revved the engine and took off with tires squealing.

“Nick, slow down, please.”

He laughed and slammed on the brakes, spinning the car around into the westbound lane.

“What are you doing? Take me home, Nick.”

“You are home – you’re with me. We belong together, Tara. I’m not letting you back out of our adventure.”

Tears welled up in Tara’s eyes, but she wouldn’t let them fall. She didn’t want Nick to see her cry.

Why had she ever trusted him?

“Don’t worry, babe. We’ll have nothing but fun.” He turned the volume back up on the radio.

Tara put her hands over her ears and tried to calm herself. She had to think of a way out of this mess.

Straight ahead was a railroad crossing. They couldn’t hear the real life warning bells that rang out as the gates came down and the lights began to flash. But a train was approaching, and that meant Nick would have to stop. She would wait until it was dangerously close, then she would jump out of the car and run across the tracks. Nick wouldn’t be able to chase after her for several minutes. She’d be able to hide and call for help.

They reached the railroad crossing and Nick slowed down – but he didn’t stop. Of course, he planned to drive around the gates. She should have known.

The train was closer than Tara thought. She could already feel the ground tremble, and as they crossed the tracks, the light from the front engine pierced the darkness.

**She would keep to her plan. It was her only chance.**

**Tara thought about her friends and family, her little brother. She thought about the wondrous, amazing future that waited for her – if only she could make the right decisions.**

**Then she said a silent prayer and jumped from the moving car.**

**THE END**