

~ Last Night I Dreamt I Slept A Dreamless Sleep ~ by the Fallen

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Disclaimer (HUMOUROUS): No gramophone records were scratched during the production of this story.

AUTHOR'S NOTES: This is a short story featuring the two main characters from the Xena: Warrior Princess second season episode The Xena Scrolls. It is meant to follow on directly from two previous stories of mine entitled And a Nightingale... and Who was Going to Miss an Angel or Two, Anyway? which you really need to have read in order to understand this story. The idea for this story came from an e-mail I received in which it was said that it would be impossible to write a sequel to Who was Going to Miss an Angel or Two, Anyway?, and like Alice, I always try to believe in three impossible things before breakfast.

LAST NIGHT I DREAMT I SLEPT A DREAMLESS SLEEP

A Xena: Warrior Princess [The Xena Scrolls] story
by the Fallen [e-mail ukfallenangel@yahoo.com]

London, England: Early February 1943

Like a lot of the East End, Spitalfields had suffered heavily from Luftwaffe bombs over the three-and-a-half years of war. Few buildings remained totally unscathed; even the luckiest had shrapnel pockmarks in the brickwork and the occasional missing window.

Melinda Pappas picked her way carefully over a pile of rubble that blocked the end of Princelet Street, trying her best not to lose her balance and thankful that she had worn sensible shoes. Despite her caution however, she ended up bruising her knee painfully after tripping over a piece of wreckage that might once have been a pram. Once on firmer ground, Mel flexed her leg a few times, feeling out the tender area just under her kneecap with her fingers. Already the skin was turning yellow.

It had taken her over four hours to get here. Under normal circumstances it wouldn't have taken twenty minutes. The war was to blame, of course. The trams hadn't been running in this part of London since their lines got hit last week, four overcrowded buses had rushed straight past her, each of the conductors waving apologetically, and she had found it impossible to find a taxi. So she had walked.

It hadn't been easy finding her way around the unfamiliar streets. Three times she had stopped and had to ask passersby for directions, which hadn't always helped. Not everyone had been friendly, perhaps suspicious of strangers, and she sometimes had difficulty in understanding the thick Cockney accent of some people.

To add insult to injury, when she reached the outskirts of Whitechapel the air raid sirens had sounded and she had been forced to take refuge in one of the war-torn Underground stations that served as a community shelter. Crammed in with a couple of hundred other people, she had spent two-and-a-half hours in silence, listening to the irregular sounds of bombs exploding in the distance and waiting for the all-clear, hoping desperately that nothing would happen.

Now her feet ached, her left knee was sore, she was covered in a fine layer of dust from constantly clambering over and around rubble and sandbags, and her last pair of stockings had laddered.

But she was here and that was what mattered.

Mel reached into her large purse and took out the scrap of paper. 76 Princelet Street. Her own handwriting, the address copied from the police report that the desk sergeant had insisted she sign.

She yawned noisily, making sure to cover her mouth with the back of her hand. Her mother had taught her to always act like the perfect lady even if she had never felt like one. She was tired. No, Mel admitted to herself ruefully, she was exhausted. It had been a hard and hectic week for her, what with having to find a new place to live after the Millevere Hotel had kicked her out. Or, as the snooty manager had put it, requested politely that she find other more suitable accommodation so that the remaining guests were not distressed too greatly. And she supposed she had been lucky, for many other hotels had not been so particular. Even so, packing everything and moving had taken a lot out of her.

Added to which of course, she had been kept busy making all the arrangements for tomorrow's funeral, which had not as been as easy as she had first thought. Having been raised a devout Catholic (and despite her frequent lapses of faith, she still had her faith), Mel had found the practices of the protestant Church of England considerably different to what she expected.

Mel hadn't been sleeping well either. The best she could hope for was to sleep in brief snatches; an hour here, an hour or two there. Most nights she wasn't even that lucky. And on the rare occasions when she did finally fall asleep, the bad dreams came, nightmares that woke her abruptly and left her distraught and in tears.

She looked down the street. It wasn't much to look at. Two rows of tiny terraced houses, all brickwork, cobblestones and tiles, with doors that were too close together and opened straight onto the street. Some grubby kids were playing cricket at the far end, having chalked a wicket on a half-demolished wall. As she watched the batsman swung and connected and the dirty red ball bounced past her, coming to rest against the pile of rubble. A group of tired-looking housewives stood with their arms crossed around one doorway, gossiping amongst themselves. They stopped talking when she passed and just stared at her with undisguised hostility.

The blue paint on the front door of number 76 was flaking away and there were several patches of a dirty green showing through. Mel knocked loudly, trying her best to ignore the women staring at her.

One of them whispered something that Mel assumed was not complimentary and the others laughed. She looked down at herself and felt ashamed at the sorry state she was in. She tried to brush some of the dust off her burgundy jacket and matching skirt but it didn't help. She felt so uncomfortable standing here. Maybe she should just leave. Walk away and not look back.

Something Janice had said came back to her suddenly. Nowhere you could bear to be seen. Guilt, or something very much like it, swelled up inside her momentarily. Mel quashed the feeling. Maybe she didn't belong here but that wasn't important, was it? She was determined not to be chased away. She wasn't about to turn her back on what had to be done.

She thought she heard movement inside but couldn't be sure, so she knocked again. Now she definitely heard something, someone coughing harshly and then the sound of the lock turning. The door was flung open and a haggard woman in a faded green dress and a dirty apron glared out at her. A cigarette hung from the corner of her mouth, seemingly defying gravity.

"Yes?" the woman snapped.

"Good afternoon," Mel said. "Are you Mrs. Carmichael?"

"I might be."

"I'm here to pick up Janice's things."

Mrs. Carmichael snorted derisively. "Are you now? So she sent you round to do her dirty work, did she?"

"Excuse me?"

The cigarette bobbed up and down as the older woman spoke. "I expected her to skip out on me. Well I've a good mind to sell her belongings as compensation."

Mel sighed. If she was honest with herself, she had half-expected this. "How much does she owe?" she asked, fumbling in her purse.

"Three-and-a-half weeks back rent. Comes to three quid, eight shillings and sixpence."

It was extortion, plain and simple, Mel thought. No one in their right mind would pay more than nine or ten shillings for a week's lodgings in such a rundown area and both she and Mrs. Carmichael knew as much. But Mel also knew that she wasn't going to get anywhere until she paid up and so after only a moment's hesitation she drew out three pound notes and one ten-shilling note. "There," she said, thrusting the crumpled bank notes into the landlady's outstretched palm, "keep the change."

Mrs. Carmichael quickly stuffed the cash into the pocket of her apron and stepped back slightly. Mel took the opportunity to press forward, placing one foot on the doorstep.

"Not so fast, dearie," the old woman said, stopping Mel with a well-placed hand. "How do I know you ain't just coming here to steal the stuff yourself? You might not even know Covington."

Trying to keep her rising anger in check, Mel stepped back into the street. "If I was a thief I would hardly be likely to pay Janice's overdue rent, would I?"

"I dunno. You Yanks are an odd lot."

Mel knew what was expected of her. She took another couple of pound notes from her purse and they disappeared into the apron just as quickly as the others had. "Do you think I could get her things now?" she asked exasperatedly.

"Suit yourself," the landlady said indifferently, turning away and walking down the hall into a tiny kitchen. "On the right, top of the stairs," she called out over her shoulder. "And don't try taking anything that don't belong to her. I'll be watching you when you leave."

Shutting the front door behind her, Mel climbed up the steep flight of stairs. She paused for a moment on the landing, staring at the oddly shaped door that led to Janice's room. Doubt crept from the cobwebs high in the corners of the hallway, scuttling over her and making her determination crumble. Did she really want to go in? Could she? Did she have the courage? She found herself reaching out for the doorknob. Not for the first time, Melinda began to wonder if her body had a mind of its own.

She wasn't surprised by what she found. The room was pretty much as she had imagined, although maybe a little smaller. The tiny window barely letting in any light but perhaps that was just as well. It was harder to see the filth in bad light. A small wooden bed with unmade dirty sheets stood upon a threadbare rug.

Mel pushed the door shut with a soft click and rested against it, not daring to move for a moment or two. She just wanted to stay still. To take everything in. To breathe in the dust and the dirt and the stale nicotine smell. To breathe in hope. To breathe in Janice.

Nothing seemed to have been touched. Mrs. Carmichael might have been a shrewd businesswoman but evidently she wasn't the world's greatest cleaner. There was a thin layer of dust over the bedside table. A full ashtray, a book missing a cover, a travel alarm clock, an empty packet of cigarettes, a watch with a broken face.

Eventually she summoned up the courage to move, to start working on what she had come here to do. A loose floorboard creaked as she moved towards the wardrobe. The handle on one door came away in her hand as she pulled. There weren't many clothes. A few shirts, a couple of pairs of trousers, a navy skirt, an olive tie. All drab colours. It was fitting, really, Mel thought, given the situation. She left the clothes where they hung. Mrs. Carmichael could have them.

A battered red gramophone was partially hidden beneath a dirty pair of boots at the bottom of the wardrobe. There were some records too. She crouched down and looked through them, laying them out on the floor. The Mills Brothers, the Ink Spots, Ambrose and his Orchestra, Vera Lynn, Bing Crosby and the Andrew Sisters, the Lew Stone Band. Rather an eclectic mix. Who'd have thought Janice was so musical?

It was getting dark outside. The sounds of the children playing began to lessen as one by one they were called in by the mothers for their dinners. Getting to her feet, Mel drew the thick blackout curtain across the window and then reached for the light switch. The bare bulb cast a harsh yellow light, giving everything a sickly appearance.

On an impulse, she clambered over the bed and picked up the book from of the bedside table. 'The Seed' by Tarjei Vesaas. A Norwegian author apparently, although Mel had never heard of him. Rolling onto her back and kicking off her shoes, Mel flicked idly through the pages, reading a little here and there whenever a passage caught her eye. She lost interest quickly, bored with the depressing storyline. She didn't even hear the thud of the book hitting to the floor.

Mel stared up at the dirty grey ceiling for a while, thinking about everything and nothing, trying her utmost to blot out the one image that kept haunting her. It didn't work. Sooner, rather than later, her thoughts turned to Janice. She struggled to think back to their time together in Macedonia or to that one passionate night that had stolen. But it was no good. She couldn't picture Janice smiling, nor laughing, nor chewing on a cigar, nor snarling curse words at all and sundry, not even moaning and clutching the bedstead.

Try as hard as she might, Mel could now only imagine Janice one way.

Dead. Those lifeless green eyes staring up at nothing. That reddish-blond hair now darkened and slickened with cold bathwater. That tanned skin now pale, wet and streaked with blood. Dead.

There was something cold on her cheek. She felt it trickle over the skin and fall into her ear. Mel wiped at her face instinctively and only then did she realise it was a tear. Another came, then another. She didn't want to cry. Why was she? It was time, she supposed. She hadn't been able to cry since last Friday morning.

She wouldn't have thought it possible to be as lonely as she felt. Oh God, Janice had been taken away and wasn't coming back. And that thought alone was enough to open the floodgates.

Sobbing hard now, Mel turned over onto her side, pulling her legs up and curling into a fetal position. She dragged the bed covers around her, her fingers and toes clawing at the fabric as if she were about to tear it to shreds. She could feel the dirt in the bed beneath her, grinding against her skin. The sheets smelt of old sweat and stale tobacco, and as Mel cried she revelled in the smell of the love she had lost.

Before she knew it she had cried herself to sleep.

Only to be woken a few hours later by an angel sitting at the foot of the bed.

* * * * *

"Melinda?"

Mel stirred a little, her subconscious mind aware that someone was calling her but as yet unable to get her body to respond. A slight moan escaped her lips.

"Mel, wake up. Mel?"

She felt someone touching her, placing a hand on her thigh and shaking her. Another quiet moan. 'Please... no...' Mel murmured almost inaudibly. "I need... need... you..." Another shake. Sleep began to give up the fight and soon reality started its victory celebrations.

Upon waking, Mel propped herself up in the bed, managing to knock the badly stuffed pillow onto the floor in the process. She wiped at the corner of her mouth, conscious of the spittle that had dried there. A little groggily, Mel turned her head to apologise to the landlady for falling asleep. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Carmichael..." she managed to say before falling silent in shock.

Janice was sitting at the foot of the bed.

The young woman was naked, her skin glistening with moisture. Her long auburn hair was wet and clung to her scalp. She seemed indifferent to her lack of clothing, instead her eyes were watching Mel intently, full of concern.

"Janice?" There was something hot burning inside Mel, like a furnace that had suddenly been fired up and was about to be stoked thoroughly by relief. Her excitement was building and Mel could feel her heart, which she had once wished to never beat again, pound almost painfully against her lungs. A swarm of butterflies burst out of their cocoons and took a guided tour of her stomach.

"Were you expecting someone else?" Janice grinned widely. Oh God, Melinda exclaimed, it felt so good to see that smile again! She lunged forward, embracing Janice desperately, clutching her frantically, holding on to her as hard as she could, praying that she would not escape.

Then, abruptly, thoughts that were as sober as they were unwelcome popped into Mel's mind. She pulled away, putting a little distance between them, and let her hands fall to her sides. "I'm dreaming, aren't I?" She was disappointed, perhaps more in herself than in her sudden sense of loss.

"No," Janice said, "you're not dreaming."

"I must be..." Mel shook her head. "You're not real. You're a ghost or... or something..."

"I'm not a dream and I'm not a ghost." Janice reached out and took hold of her hand. "Don't I feel real?"

Mel looked down at the hand that held hers. The skin was paler than she remembered, almost translucent, as if the blood had all drained away. Her eyes drifted up a little, taking in the deep gash that ran along the length of the woman's forearm. It was Janice. It had to be. She felt sick. "Then how...?" She gulped down a breath.

"I'm not supposed to be here," Janice told her, "but I had to see you... I had to hold you one last time..."

She shuffled a little closer and reached up to gently cup Melinda's chin. Her touch was so cool, almost icy, Mel thought, as she tilted her head and leaned into the palm. She felt Janice's lips brush against her own in a kiss that was as delicate and uncertain as the moment seemed to be. An involuntary moan of despair surged up inside Mel and then she felt Janice's tongue flicker delicately over her lips as the kiss broke.

"Dance with me," Janice asked her.

"What?"

"I can't stay here, Mel. Soon they'll find I'm missing and I'll have to go back."

"Back where?"

The question was ignored. "Give me a memory to go back with, Mel," Janice pleaded. "Dance with me."

Mel rose up from off the bed and pulled the gramophone out of the wardrobe. Placing it on the bed, she wound the handle until the tension inside warned her to stop. As she plucked a record at random from the collection she found herself wondering if the music would ruin everything, waking her and dispelling the dream, or perhaps summoning an angry landlady and causing her angel to disappear.

As the pleasant few opening bars filled the room, Mel walked around to stand in front of the naked Janice. She held out an upturned hand, which younger woman took and then rose to her

feet. Janice slipped her arms around Mel's waist and rested her head on her shoulder, pressing tightly against Mel's frame.

And they danced. Not perfectly, perhaps not even elegantly, but they danced. Just swaying in time with the music, shuffling their feet, clinging to each other, feeling each other's heartbeat.

I'm making believe that you're in my arms,
Though I know you're so far away,
Making believe I'm talking to you,
Wish you could hear what I say.
And here in the gloom
Of my lonely room
We're dancing like we used to do.
Making believe is just another way of dreaming,
So 'til my dreams come true
I'll whisper goodnight,
Turn out the light and kiss my pillow,
Making believe it's you...

"Why did you do it, Janice?" Mel whispered in her ear, taking advantage of a lull in Ella Fitzgerald's vocals. They circled again, the shuffling of their feet on the frayed rug barely audible over the music. "Why did you kill yourself?"

A gap appeared between them as Janice pushed away a little to look up at her. Tears formed in her eyes. "Don't ask me that, please, Mel."

"I need to know."

Janice put her head back on Mel's shoulder. "I can't tell you," she said. "Please don't ask me again."

"I loved you, Janice," Mel said faintly, "I... that is... I still do. Love you, I mean. Oh God, I'm so sorry. I'm not very good at this..."

"You don't have to be," Janice told her. "I know how you feel."

"Do you?" Mel shook her head. "I don't think you do. If you truly knew, why would you do such a thing?"

The song drew to a close and they just held each other for a moment longer, listening to the scratching and hissing of the needle bouncing at the end of the record. Then, slowly, Janice prised herself away from the embrace and Mel reluctantly let her go.

"I need you to do something for me," Janice said. She crouched down and after throwing back a corner of the rug she pulled up the loose floorboard. From the cavity she withdrew her pistol, which, after she straightened up, she held out for Mel to hold. "Take it."

"Why do I want this?" the puzzled Mel asked. She held the unwelcome pistol with only her fingertips; almost as if she was scared the barrel would twist back and bite her. She had never liked guns and this one made her feel no different. It smelt of grease and gun oil.

Janice took hold of Mel's hand and wrapped her fingers around the grip. "We can be together, Mel," she said quietly. "We don't have to be apart anymore."

Mel could hardly believe her ears. "What are you saying? You want me to kill myself?"

"So we can be together. You want to be with me, don't you?"

"I... Janice... I can't..."

"You won't feel much, I promise you. The pain is fleeting. An ache of the soul, nothing more. And then we'll be in each other's arms for an eternity."

"Janice..." was all the confused Melinda could say. She needed time to think. She didn't understand why this was happening?

"Do it, Mel." Janice was crying openly now, the tears flooding down her face.

This didn't feel right. Something about this just felt wrong to Melinda, although she couldn't figure out what exactly it was. She was being rushed. Why was Janice so insistent? She needed a moment to think.

"Do it!" shouted Janice.

"Just give me a second..."

"Please..." Janice sobbed. "Please... I need you to do this... I'm begging you... for all the nights we have spent together... please be with me."

Realisation stirred gradually in Mel's mind and everything suddenly fell into place for her, just as if she had finally found the last missing part of a jigsaw puzzle down the back of a couch. Her mouth fell open a little in shock, then her features took on a hardened, determined look. Without warning, she abruptly struck Janice hard across the face. "How dare you?!"

Barely able to believe she had just been slapped, Janice's hand went immediately up to her cheek, rubbing gently at the hot red finger marks. "W-what...?" she stuttered.

Mel didn't choose to respond. She stared furiously at the vision before her for a second or two, then she turned her back. "Go away."

"Mel, please..." the figure begged.

"Go away."

"Listen to me..."

Mel spun around angrily. "Leave me alone!" she yelled. "How dare you use Janice like this?"

"Please..."

"Go away, Gabrielle," Mel said quietly, having by now recovered her composure. "Whatever you wanted, it hasn't worked."

They were silent for a minute or two, perhaps longer. One final drawn-out hiss came from the record as the gramophone spring wound down completely. Someone in a nearby room was snoring loudly. A fire was raging somewhere in the neighbourhood, doubtless caused by a Luftwaffe incendiary bomb, and there were screams of panic and shouts of courage.

"You don't what it's like, always being alone," Gabrielle finally said.

It wasn't much of an admission but it was more than Melinda had hoped for. "Don't I?" she said with a bitter laugh. "Perhaps you haven't been watching my life as closely as you should have."

"You don't know how lonely Elysium is, Mel. I've spent millennia there, surrounded by others, yet always alone." Gabrielle spat angrily. There were still tears falling from her eyes but now Mel believed they stemmed only from a mixture of frustration and self-pity. "And I miss Xena so much. You think you're suffering? You don't know anything. You lost Janice a few days ago, that's all. I've been without my love for thousands of years and I know I'll never see her again. Never. Does that sound like paradise to you? Is that your idea of heaven?"

"So you chose me as a replacement?" Mel asked. "The best stand-in you could get?" Janice's words were coming back to haunt her. Xena would do anything to keep Gabrielle... Mel gets her sidekick...

"Was that so wrong?" Gabrielle pleaded. "You need Janice, don't you? Why else would you be here? Well, I need Xena! Please, Mel, be with me!"

"I'm not Xena and I could never love you, Gabrielle," Mel said honestly, "I don't even know you."

"That's not true!" said Gabrielle desperately. "You and Xena are connected somehow, just like me and Janice. You know everything there is to know about me. This can work, trust me!"

"It won't and I don't want it to." A small and angry part of Mel wanted to hit her again. To hit her and keep hitting her until she understood. But instead she swallowed down the temptation and closed her eyes. "I don't love you, Gabrielle, accept that. I love Janice."

"I can wait," Gabrielle snarled. "Your time will come and I'll be waiting for you. How will you

endure the never-ending pleasures of Elysium, Mel?" The sound of her voice was gradually becoming faint, her words fading away into the darkness, her pleas and threats being swallowed up the irregular explosions and the steady stream of answering gunfire from the nearby anti-aircraft stations. "You won't find Janice there. You'll be just like me... suffering alone in heaven..."

"Maybe," Mel heard herself saying, "but at least I will be in heaven."

And when Mel at long last dared to open her eyes again, she was thankful to find herself alone.

* * * * *

There was a cherry blossom tree at the far end of the graveyard. It was buffeted occasionally by the growing wind, the branches waving generously. Come springtime there would be a flurry of pinkish-white petals, a glorious sight to behold, which would scatter everywhere with each and every gentle breeze. But right now the branches were bare.

A small group of crows had convened a council upon the flint wall that ran behind the tree. They were taking turns in cawing at one another, each growing agitated and then calming just as quickly. Whatever crime one of them was accused of must have been serious to provoke such a heated debate.

"I am the resurrection and the life, sayeth the Lord. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." The elderly vicar's voice sound cracked and weak, as though he was on the verge of tears. Perhaps he was. He had a good voice for funerals, Mel thought, although perhaps young and nervous brides might not find it to their liking.

She followed the vicar, keeping pace with his slow steps and treading as carefully as she could, anxious not to slip or fall on the damp and uneven gravel path. Behind her she could hear the pallbearers struggling with their load. The rain continued to hammer down, beating a staccato rhythm on the lid of the coffin.

Up ahead waited the open grave. The restrictions of wartime meant there was only one gravedigger, a wizened old man who was leaning on his shovel some distance away and rolling a tiny cigarette between his dirt-encrusted fingers.

"The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. So when..."

They reached the graveside and Mel refused to look down. Instead she forced herself to concentrate on the Bible that the reverend held in his shaking hands. Was it cold? She couldn't tell. She felt numb.

The coffin began to be slowly lowered into the waiting grave as the vicar continued to read from the scriptures. "As much as it hath pleased all mighty God in His great mercy to take unto himself the soul of our dear sister here departed..." the vicar continued to mumble. "We therefore commit her body to the earth, so that it may be like unto His glorious body, according to the

mighty workings, whereby He is able to subdue all things to Himself."

Mel wasn't crying. She supposed all her tears had flowed last night and there would be no more. Perhaps she was all cried out. Perhaps tonight she would cry herself to sleep again.

She felt empty inside, something she had never previously experienced, regardless of how bad her life had ever got. She couldn't help but wonder why that was. Mel had lost lovers before. She had been left alone before as well: by so many men who failed to fulfill so many promises; by her father's untimely death; and by her uncaring mother. So why did she feel so empty and alone now?

All her life Mel had wanted more. She wanted to know more than anyone else, to learn more, to experience more, to be more. As a child she had been naturally inquisitive, a trait her father found endearing and one he had encouraged. At school and at college she had kept pushing, kept asking, kept learning, almost to the point of expulsion on several occasions. Leaving college, she travelled across the United States, although she never quite found what it was she was looking for. Her father praised her curiosity. Her mother accused her of shirking responsibility, of running away from life. They had both been right, she could see that now. She had wanted more from life.

And then thanks to Janice she had finally found out what more was. To get more, she had to give more. To be complete, she had to surrender herself completely. And the beautiful Janice was the one person she chose to give herself to. She had let her body be used so her heart could be taken. She had been kissed, bruised, prodded, caressed, groped, and none of it mattered for it meant that she truly loved Janice.

Mel thought that Janice was the answer to every question she had ever felt the need to ask. Until she discovered Janice had some unanswerable questions of her own.

"Earth to earth... ashes to ashes... dust to dust..." the vicar intoned.

Sometimes she thought the world was to blame, for taking away what she had loved. More often than not, she blamed herself, because she had given what she loved up. If only she had been brave enough to tell Janice that she loved her, even once, then things might have worked out differently. But she had been a coward, choosing to run away as she always did. Ran away from life, ran back to death.

"...in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ." Closing his Bible, the priest bowed his head momentarily in silent prayer and then stepped back. He crossed himself before turning and walking away, back toward the church.

Mel wanted to say something but wasn't sure what. Maybe it was too late to say anything. Then again, maybe it wasn't. She didn't really believe angels had anything to do but listen.

'So here we are,' she said a little hesitantly. 'I heard someone once say that funerals were both an ending and a beginning. Do you think that's true? No? Well, you always were a little cynical.'

She looked up, felt the raindrops splattering against her face, and desperately wanted to fall into the sky. 'It hurt me so much to be with you, Janice,' she said quietly, her gaze returning to the gaping hole at her feet. 'But it hurts even more now that you've gone. Maybe that's how I realised I love you.' She tried to smile but it came out more as a grimace. 'I've never told you that before, have I?' Not out loud anyway.

Mel unclasped her purse and withdrew Janice's pistol. The gun felt heavy in her hand. She barely felt strong enough to lift it, and it was almost as if something was holding her arm down. She had trouble holding on because her fingers were so numb; partly from cold, partly from fear. Her purse slipped off her shoulder and fell on to the wet grass.

'I don't want it to hurt anymore, Janice. You can understand that can't you? I'm so tired of it all. I just don't want it to hurt.'

She raised the pistol in one smooth movement.

'I love you, Janice.'

A loud bang echoed throughout the churchyard suddenly. The startled crows abruptly put aside their differences and took flight in panic. The unlit cigarette fell from the gravedigger's lips as he stared open-mouthed in astonishment. Over by the vestry door, the shocked vicar spun in alarm toward the sound.

Mel had thrown the pistol haphazardly, not really caring where it ended up. As it was, it landed squarely on the small brass plaque screwed into the coffin, bounced once and skidded off the lid. Mel watched it disappear, then stooped to retrieve her purse, checking to make sure that the crumpled Cunard Atlantic ticket was still there. She crossed herself, took one last brief look at the casket, then turned and began to walk away.

She would go home, back to the family estate outside Charlotte, and there she would eke out whatever miserable life she could. She would endure her mother's taunts and put-downs. She would do whatever her mother told her, marry whoever her mother suggested, live however her mother wanted her to.

Yes, Mel would dream of a mythical warrior princess, of a great quest for archaeological treasure, or even of a exhilarating life-and-death battle with the fabled God of War.

And maybe, when she was old and lonely, she might even dream of falling in love.

But right now all she longed to do was dream of a world without dreams.