



Coming November 2018 from Firebringer Press!

Andrea Lorensen considered giving a whole new meaning to the term “touchscreen”—with her fist.

Instead, she restrained herself to a sigh as the dashboard GPS announced for the third time that it was “recalculating”. *Sure, get me this far then screw me over... bastard.* She knew it was just embarrassment and frustration getting the best of her, especially since she was now 20 minutes late. The fact that her mom was with her didn’t help.

“Lost in the woods on a frigid February night. Not how I prefer to start a paranormal investigation.” From the passenger seat, Miranda Lorensen glanced at her daughter. “Just saying.”

“I can barely see the street signs, okay? It’s pitch black out here.” Andrea pulled her mother’s SUV onto a dirt road and turned around. “We must have passed it.”

“Again.”

Andrea rolled her eyes. “Don’t be a smart-ass.”

“Takes one to raise one. I thought you knew how to get there.”

Andrea turned left onto what qualified as the main road in this podunk town, probably because it was the only one that was paved. “I’ve only been to Wendy’s place once for a Halloween party and I had a hard time finding it then. Can’t your psychic mojo give us some direction?”

Miranda nodded toward the GPS. “That’s what he’s for.”

As if on cue, the British baritone voice spoke up cheerfully. “In point one mile, turn left onto Pine Swamp Road.”

Miranda snickered. “Now that’s a name that inspires confidence. Just take it slow and let’s keep our eyes open.” In unison, both women perked up and pointed ahead. “There!”

The tree line parted just enough to reveal a narrow gravel road.

“Turn left,” the GPS instructed.

“Now you tell me.” Andrea swung the vehicle hard.

Miranda gripped the door handle with one hand while pressing her other palm against the dashboard. “Jeez, girl, who taught you how to drive?”

“You did.”

“It shows.”

Ahead of them, the high beams bounced and shook as they illuminated a well-traveled path of dirt and stone bordered by patches of snow and dead grass. Beyond that, more impenetrable darkness.

“And Wendy lives all alone out here?”

“Her parents own this little one story ranch. It’s a tiny place, two-bedrooms, one bath. They use it as a summer getaway, but Wendy lives in it during the school year. It’s haunted, or so she says.”

“Right, you told me. She hears voices and her cats get spooked.”

“More than that. She also sees lights in the woods behind the house, and not flashlights either. They’re up high near the treetops. They just float around and then vanish. She’s dealing with it, but I think she’s freaked—”

“Slow down.”

“Why?”

“Something’s coming. I can feel it.”

“Where?”

Following the curve in the road, Andrea turned the vehicle slightly to the right—and screamed as a pair of headlights suddenly flashed on directly ahead of them before swerving to the left. Andrea was momentarily blinded as she veered the SUV wildly to avoid a collision. Just as quickly, she straightened out the wheel, narrowly missing a cluster of pine trees. Finally, she stomped on the brake pedal, propelling both women toward the windshield. Andrea’s seatbelt sank into her chest before her body snapped back into the seat. She turned to her mother. “You okay?”

“Fine.” Miranda nodded, pushing disheveled blonde locks away from her face. She reached over and did the same for her daughter. “You?”

Andrea slapped the steering wheel. “Bastard!” She threw open the driver’s side door and leapt out.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Miranda muttered. She followed Andrea’s gaze to the fading red glow of taillights. “They’re already gone. Nothing you can do now.”

Using the flashlight app on her phone, Andrea inspected all four sides of the vehicle before climbing back in. “No damage that I can see. Friggin’ redneck was driving with his lights off!” She sighed and sat back in her seat. “Sorry about this.”

“Not your fault. That was some quick thinking behind the wheel.”

“I had a good teacher, remember?”

“Did you happen to see what kind of car it was?”

“I think it was a pickup. I caught a flash of silver.” Andrea narrowed her eyes. “I wonder if that was Ross.”

“Ross?”

“Wendy’s boyfriend or maybe ex-boyfriend by now—you never know with her. I only talked to him once at the Halloween party, but he picked Wendy up from campus a few times. I remember he drove a silver Chevy truck.” Andrea exhaled sharply and frowned.

“Mom, are you sure you’re fine?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You’re twirling your hair. You only do that when you’re nervous. I know, because I do it, too.”

Miranda dropped her hand. “Like mother, like daughter.”

“I think we’re both a bit rattled. Let’s just get there and have a good night of ghost hunting.”

As Andrea turned the SUV back onto the gravel, Miranda put a gentle hand on her forearm. “I can’t pin it down, but something’s wrong. I’m getting that old familiar pressure behind my eyes.”

“The tunnel vision, too?”

Miranda shook her head. “Not yet, but the feeling is oppressive. The driver of that truck was running from something. Whatever it is, it’s expecting us and it isn’t very happy.”

Andrea’s shoulders slumped. “Thanks, mom. You’re giving me my second scare of the night and we’re not even there yet.”

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Wendy was waiting for them. She stood just outside the front door in a loose-fitting sweatshirt and jeans that hugged the curves of her full figure. The cuffs were tucked into thick plush boots that were all the rage with young women today. Miranda never saw the appeal in them. The girl's fiery red hair spilled around her shoulders and chest from beneath a gray fleece cap complete with earflaps and tassels.

Even as Miranda and her daughter approached, Wendy didn't smile. Standing beneath the exterior light, she regarded them with a detached expression, her hazel eyes glazed and distant.

"Hey." Andrea threw her arms around Wendy and pulled her close, yet the other woman's posture remained rigid as she returned a tepid embrace.

Andrea pulled back. "Are you okay?"

"I have a skull-splitting headache after dealing with my ex. You just missed him."

"Only by a few inches. He damn near ran us off the road. Didn't even have his lights on until we almost collided head-on."

"Doesn't surprise me. We ended up in an argument. It was an ugly scene."

"If he was angry, that would explain his reckless driving," Miranda chimed in.

"Oh." Andrea stepped back and gestured to Miranda. "Wendy, this is my mom."

“Nice to meet you.” The girl smiled wanly and extended a hand. It was gelid to the touch and for a moment, the pain behind Miranda’s eyes flared sharply. It subsided as soon as their hands parted.

“Sorry if this is a bad time.”

Wendy’s gaze snapped into focus as she looked from Miranda to Andrea. Wincing slightly, she raised a hand to her stomach. “No, you need to be here. Tonight of all nights, I need your help.”

Miranda and her daughter exchanged puzzled glances.

“Uh, sure,” Andrea said. “Has there been more activity lately?”

“You could say that.” Wendy opened the door. “Come on in, I’ll give you a tour, although there isn’t much to see. This place is just one giant box.”

The living room was a narrow rectangle that spanned the entire width of the house. An entertainment center and sofa took up the left side. Behind the sofa, a vase filled with tiger lilies sat atop a half wall that opened to a small kitchen. To the right, in front of a cluttered desk, one of Wendy’s cats was curled up on an office chair watching the visitors as they entered. The other cat was likely hiding elsewhere in the house.

Andrea pointed to an acoustic guitar suspended upright in its stand beside a small brick fireplace. “Oh, cool. When did you get that?”

“My mom brought that with her the last time she visited. I played a lot in high school. Don’t get as much time with it anymore, but I wanted to get back into it. Actually, since it’s

been here, it strums every so often by itself as if someone's lightly running a finger across the strings. It only happened a few times, but I can't explain it."

"I suggest we leave a digital voice recorder on the floor in front of it," Miranda said.

Wendy led them down a narrow hallway toward the back of the house. Silhouettes of the women reflected in the glass of the storm door that opened out to the backyard and woods beyond.

Just past the bathroom, Wendy stopped and waved to her right. "I occasionally hear voices in this bedroom, which is why I sleep in the other one. I can never make out what they're saying and when I go to the doorway to listen, they shut up."

"Sounds like another candidate for a voice recorder," Andrea said. "What about the activity outside? You mentioned seeing lights in the woods?"

The color vanished from Wendy's face as she turned to gaze toward the back door. When she spoke, her tone was pensive. "Yeah... there was activity out there earlier tonight, in fact."

Miranda could sense Wendy's mounting fear. Whatever awaited them, it was in the woods—and Wendy knew it.

Andrea stepped up beside her friend. "You okay? If you don't want to go outside, it's fine. My mom and I can—"

"No." Wendy lowered her head and massaged her temples. "It's just this damn headache, but I want to show you where I see the lights."

“Take your time,” Miranda said in a soothing tone. “Is there something about the lights we should know?”

Wendy didn’t answer right away. With a sigh, she leaned against the wall.

Miranda looked at her daughter. Andrea shrugged and shook her head. Apparently, Wendy was not normally so withdrawn. From what Andrea had told her on the way here, Wendy was known to be vivacious and cheerful. Recently, however, something had changed. Andrea didn’t know what.

After a moment, Wendy raised her head. “This is going to sound crazy, but I think they show up specifically for me. That’s just an impression I get because my parents and brother never see them when they stay here.”

“You think they’re trying to communicate with you?” Andrea asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe you can help me figure that out tonight.”

“What do they look like?”

“Small bluish orbs that hover above the trees. They never make a sound. Eventually, they fade away. It’s comforting but eerie at the same time. You know this area is haunted for miles around. People have seen spirits of American Indians and Civil War soldiers. Twelve years ago, two hikers were murdered on the Appalachian Trail not far from here. Their souls are supposedly still roaming the woods. It’s a very active area.”

“I can feel it,” Miranda said. The pressure behind her eyes returned, blurring the edges of her vision. “There’s definitely something here.”

Andrea pulled a small LED flashlight from her coat pocket. “Let’s go then.”

Miranda held up a hand. “Hold on. Before we explore the woods, I want to get a few things from the car.” She nodded toward the spare bedroom. “Andrea, can you please leave your voice recorder in here? I’d like to put the mini DV in here, too. Wendy, would you mind if I set up my laptop on your desk?”

“No problem.”

“I have a night vision camera we can take with us outside.”

“Do you need help?” Andrea asked.

“No, I’m good. Just stay put. Don’t venture out there until we’re set up in here. We’ll all go together, okay?”

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Andrea waited until her mother was out of earshot. “Wendy, are you sure you’re all right? You’ve been down for weeks and I’m really concerned.”

Wendy turned her head slowly, her expression inscrutable. “We need to go out there *now*.”

“You’re starting to freak me out. Can we just—”

Wendy gripped her hand with surprising strength. Andrea drew in a sharp breath. “Your hand is freezing. Don’t you think you should put a coat and gloves on first?”

Wendy moved toward the door, dragging Andrea behind her. “Wendy, what the hell? We should wait for my mom. She’s psychic or a medium or whatever. If she thinks there’s something wrong—”

“She’s right,” Wendy opened the door, “but it can’t wait any longer.”

Andrea glanced over her shoulder to the front door. “Fine,” she relented. “How far into the woods are we going?”

“Not far at all. He didn’t have much time. I told him you were coming.”

Andrea frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Wendy said no more as she stepped outside and strode across the small yard. Andrea followed her and noticed several pieces of firewood scattered across the frozen ground. She brought her flashlight to bear on the scene and noticed a half-cord of wood stacked neatly in a rectangular rack against the fence. It was obvious that one side had been disturbed.

“What happened here?”

“I was gathering wood for the fire when he showed up. I dropped some pieces during our argument. Come on.”

Wendy opened the gate and hurried into the thicket.

“What’s the rush?”

“You’ll see.”

Andrea weaved and ducked her way around bare branches while ice-frosted snow crunched under foot.

Wendy needed no illumination to make her way. For a minute, Andrea lost sight of her until the path curved to the right. There, Wendy stood with her back to Andrea, peering up into the sky.

At the lights.

Andrea gasped. “No shit.” Two bluish-white orbs hovered above their heads. They seemed to pass through the branches as they glided among the trees. “Oh my God, they’re just like you described.”

Wendy didn’t respond immediately. She seemed to be mesmerized. “They’re here for me.”

“What?” Andrea pulled her phone from her coat pocket and aimed it at the orbs. She took several steps forward, tracking them as they began to move out of view. When she spoke again, it was in hushed tones. She was afraid of scaring them off. “Damn it, mom, get out here with that camera. My mom got this cool night vision camera for Christmas. This is our first ghost hunt of the year and we were hoping to test it—”

Andrea turned around. Wendy was gone.

She aimed her flashlight along the path behind her. “Wendy?”

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Miranda sighed as she gazed down the empty hallway. She called out to Andrea and Wendy, but there was no response—which only meant one thing. “These kids have no damn patience.”

Carefully pushing aside a haphazard stack of notepads and index cards, Miranda placed her laptop and mini-DV camera on Wendy’s desk. She made her way toward the back door, hoping that the girls were merely waiting outside.

A distant, terrified shriek told her otherwise.

Miranda threw open the storm door and bolted across the yard. “Andrea!”

he stepped on something solid that rolled under her foot, sending her stumbling forward. Snow-patched earth rose up to meet her. Miranda yelped as her chest landed squarely on another piece of firewood. She pushed herself up just enough to slide it out from beneath her and push it away.

“Mom, where are you!”

“I’m here,” Miranda croaked. Wincing against the pain, she rolled onto her side and wrapped her arms around her chest, forcing her breaths into a calm rhythm.

When she opened her eyes again, two people stood above her a few feet away. The closest was a tall, stocky man wearing a leather jacket and baseball cap. He turned away just as Miranda gazed up at him, making it impossible to see his face. The girl, however, was unmistakable.

*Wendy.*

She cradled a few pieces of firewood in her arms as she stared wide-eyed at the man who was shouting at her. He was young, judging by his voice.

“You’re fucking with the wrong family, bitch! You better keep your goddamn mouth shut.”

“I’m not talking to you about this.” Wendy held up a hand as she sidestepped him and made her way toward the house. “Just get the fuck out of here, before I call the—”

“Lying whore!” In a blur of motion, the man grabbed her arm and jerked her backward toward him. He brought his other hand up to her chest and shoved her effortlessly into the rack of firewood, knocking several pieces to the ground.

Miranda reached out to the chain link fence and pulled herself to her knees, all concern for herself forgotten. No one turned to look at her. This was a vision of events that must have occurred shortly before Miranda and her daughter arrived.

Wendy cried out as she crumpled to the ground. The young man moved in and grabbed her by the hair. She picked up a hefty piece of firewood and swung, but he anticipated her. He caught it easily and yanked it from her grasp, then raised it above his head. “You’re not calling anyone, bitch.”

“Oh, God, no...” Miranda could only watch in disgust as he clubbed Wendy in the stomach. She groaned and doubled over, but that wasn’t enough for him. He continued his assault, beating her in the back of the head even after she collapsed into the snow. He stopped only when her body began twitching.

Seconds later, that stopped too.

Still on her knees, Miranda leaned forward, holding onto the fence for support. She wanted to vomit.

The man tossed the firewood aside. It landed exactly where Miranda had tripped. Despite the pain in her chest, she forced herself to her feet and spoke through gritted teeth. "You son of a bitch."

He lifted Wendy over his shoulder and carried her out through the fence and into the woods. Miranda watched until they vanished into the darkness.

Wendy's words from earlier came back to her. *You need to be here. Tonight of all nights, I need your help.*

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"Andrea!" After following what she hoped was the right path through the woods, Miranda spotted the boots first. She slid to a halt in the snow and traced her flashlight along the body. Wendy's face was obscured by her thick mane of saffron hair, made crimson by congealing blood.

Andrea knelt over her friend. She looked up at Miranda. Her mouth hung open in confusion and horror. Tears fell from her face. "Where the hell were you? I was calling for you!" Struggling to catch her breath, she held out her hands above Wendy's prone form. "She's..."

"Dead, I know."

As Andrea broke down into quiet sobs, Miranda moved beside her and took her into her arms. “Honey, I’m so sorry. I would’ve been here sooner, but when I stepped outside, I... I had a vision of what happened.”

Her daughter pulled back. “Tell me.”

Miranda wiped the tears from Andrea’s face. “It can wait. We need to—”

“No, I want to know who did this!”

Miranda hesitated. “The guy driving that truck killed Wendy in her backyard and dumped her out here just before we showed up. Problem was, it was too dark to see his face.”

Andrea fell silent as she began to tremble, eyes wide. Miranda could only watch helplessly as cruel realization seized her daughter. “That means we were talking to her *ghost* the entire time?”

“That would explain a lot, like why I felt such heightened stress and fear when we first arrived, and why Wendy was so cold to the touch.”

“Oh, God.”

Miranda remained silent as Andrea stood and turned away. She leaned against a tree until she regained her composure. “At first, I thought she just tripped and fell, but I would have heard that. Then I saw the blood on her head... and she wasn’t moving and...” Andrea doubled over, gritting her teeth. “Damn it.”

Finally, she stood and ran a sleeve across her eyes. “We saw the orbs. Wendy said they were there for her.”

“It’s possible. They could have been the souls of just about anybody who lost their lives in these woods. Maybe they were here to shepherd Wendy to the next life, I don’t know.”  
Miranda glanced at the sky, but saw only the stars. “I really wish you’d waited for me before venturing out here.”

“You’re going to start on me now? It’s not like I was expecting *this* to happen.”

“Exactly. You’re not experienced with the paranormal and even if you were, investigators should never go anywhere alone because you never know what to expect. You’ve heard me say that more than once when I bring new members onto my team. At minimum, we work in pairs.”

“I can handle myself, and Wendy was with me... sort of.”

Miranda held up a hand. “We’ll talk about this later. Right now, we need to go inside, put the equipment back in the car, and call the cops.”

Andrea shook her head. “I’m not leaving her.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll go to the house and call from the landline. There’s no cell signal out here.”

“What are we going to tell them?”

“Well, they’re not likely to believe that her ghost led you to her body. It’s probably better to say that the house was wide open when we got here. We noticed the firewood in disarray and the back gate open so we went looking for her.”

“And tell them about Ross.”

“We’ll tell them about the truck.”

Mother and daughter shared another embrace before Miranda started back toward the house.

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Andrea dropped to her knees and closed her eyes. “I’m so sorry we were late. Please forgive me. It was my fault we got lost. I’m sorry.” After a silent prayer, she opened her eyes and reeled back as a bluish-white sphere, no larger than a child’s fist, hovered over Wendy’s body.

“Wendy?” Andrea slowly reached out, but before she could touch it, the orb floated skyward and eventually joined two others that materialized above the trees. After a few seconds, all three faded into the night.

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Four hours later, Wendy’s body had been removed and the property cordoned off with caution tape. In the backyard, the cops had found blood on a loose piece of firewood. It had been bagged as evidence. In the living room, Miranda sat with one arm firmly at her side

and the other around her daughter. In keeping her hands away from her head, she hoped to stifle her hair-twirling habit in front of the sheriff as he reviewed their statements.

Of course, that didn't stop her from fingering a lock of Andrea's hair instead.

Finally, the sheriff nodded grimly and closed his notepad. "Well, thank you both for your help. We'll contact her family tonight. I'll be in touch if I have more questions."

"Absolutely." Miranda and her daughter rose from the sofa. "Whatever we can do, please let us know."

"Actually, sir," Andrea spoke up in a timorous voice. "Before we leave, would you mind if we feed her cats?"

"Unfortunately, ma'am, this is a crime scene now. I'm not supposed to let you touch anything," the sheriff tapped his notepad against his other hand, "but you ladies don't seem like killers to me. Just make it quick. I need to go talk to my deputy. I'll be back in a few minutes to escort you out and lock up."

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In the kitchen, the women kept their voices low as they filled food and water bowls and cleaned litter pans.

"You didn't tell him about your vision in the backyard," Andrea said.

“That would only have complicated things. Besides, I didn’t see the guy’s face. We told the sheriff about the truck. They found the firewood. Let them do their jobs. I’m more concerned about you right now.”

*If you only knew...* “I’ll be all right. I just need time, and I think I owe you an apology.”

Her mother frowned. “For what, sweetie?”

“All these years listening to your ghost stories, I never really knew whether to believe you or not.”

“Oh, I know, and now that you’ve had your own experience, you’re finally convinced that your mom isn’t an embarrassing whack-job.”

“Something like that.”

“If the spirits know you can see them, more will come. Most will be like Wendy, innocent lost souls just looking for help.”

“Most?”

The sheriff stepped through the front door.

“We’ll talk more about it later.”

“Do you think I’ll see her again?” Andrea whispered.

As if in response, a single, gentle strum startled both women. They turned to look at the guitar in the far corner of the living room. Even the sheriff was startled.

“I think you just got your answer.”

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Phil Giunta's novels include the paranormal mysteries *Testing the Prisoner* and *By Your Side* published by Firebringer Press. His third novel in the same genre, *Like Mother, Like Daughters*, is slated for release in late 2018.

Phil's short stories appear in such anthologies as *A Plague of Shadows* from Smart Rhino Publications, *Beach Nights* from Cat & Mouse Press, the *ReDeus* mythology series from Crazy 8 Press, and the *Middle of Eternity* speculative fiction series, which he created and edited for Firebringer Press. His paranormal mystery novella, *Like Mother, Like Daughters* is slated for release in 2018.

As a member of the Greater Lehigh Valley Writers Group (GLVWG), Phil also penned stories and essays for *Write Here, Write Now* and *The Write Connections*, two of the group's annual anthologies. He also served as chairman of the 2015 Write Stuff writers conference in Bethlehem, PA.

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