

DAWN OF THE LIVING-IMPAIRED

CHRISTINE MORGAN

“Welcome back to *Daybreak Coast to Coast*, with Elaine Kristin,” the pre-recorded announcer said.

Elaine turned her megawatt smile into Camera One, her impeccably coiffed caramel locks falling over the shoulders of her rich turquoise blouse.

“In just a while, we’ll be joining home styles consultant Frances Meade, who’ll be showing us how you can decorate your house for the holidays with the contents of your recycling bins! But first, in our continuing effort to keep you up-to-date on events here and around the world, we have two special guests with us to discuss perhaps the most controversial issue of our time.”

Elaine shifted her gaze to Camera Two, knowing that an inset screen would now be showing scenes from some of the choicer news segments and home video clips they had on file. Nothing *too* icky, of course, nothing to put the millions of viewers off their breakfast. The sponsors wouldn’t appreciate that.

So instead of the infamous and grisly footage of what had happened at last month’s gala Entertainment Achievement Awards—a bloodbath that had made Elaine Kristen *almost* forgive them for snubbing her in the morning show host category for a third year running—the booth ran the ones of the disintegrated milling aimlessly outside of a closed mall like impatient shoppers before a big sale.

“Since the first of them rose and walked away from their mortuary slabs and caskets six months ago,” Elaine went on, ignoring the small sound of pained disapproval from her left, “their numbers have increased drastically, in an epidemic that has affected nearly every nation. Each government has taken its own steps to combat what is seen as both menace and health risk. Solutions have primarily taken the form of military action, violent eradication and disposal.”

Camera One panned back to include Elaine, her comfy dove-colored chair, and the fake windows that looked out on a photo mural of a sunswept, smog-free cityscape. It was no place that could ever be seen in reality, consisting as it did of computer-melded snippets of New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Chicago.

“Here in America, the land of the free,” Elaine chirped, “the efforts of the military have run into a roadblock. I’m speaking of the so-called ‘zombie rights movement.’ With me today to discuss the movement are General Jason Gillespie, recently retired member of the U.S. taskforce organized to deal with the situation. . . .”

Gillespie, sitting to her right, nodded brusquely into the camera. His steel-gray hair was cropped close, his dark eyes both hooded and piercing. A sort of stern charisma, all iron and resolve, radiated from him, despite the knotted white scar that scrawled from his eye to his chin, and the obvious prosthetic that replaced his left arm.

“Good morning, Elaine,” he said with a voice both deep and harsh, the sort of voice that belonged shouting orders from the top of a trench while bullets stitched the air.

Elaine nodded pertly and continued: “And Doctor Karen Wyatt-Anderson, noted psychiatrist and president of NALI.” Elaine shifted her position to face the other woman. “Doctor Wyatt-Anderson, we’ll begin with you. Can you tell us a little about your organization?”

Karen Wyatt-Anderson was a cool winter-eyed blonde in a severe navy-blue suit and silk blouse. Her features were aristocratic and patrician. Her spine was even more rigid, her shoulders more stiffly held, than the general’s.

“Yes, Elaine,” she said. “To begin, I must object to your use of the term ‘zombie rights.’ NALI stands for the National Alliance for the Living-Impaired, and we are dedicated to correcting the damaging misconceptions revolving around our clients.”

“They *are* zombies,” rumbled Gillespie, rubbing fitfully, absently at the prosthetic as if he could feel sensation in the phantom limb.

“That’s like calling those with a mental illness ‘nuts,’” Wyatt-Anderson countered sharply. “It is a hurtful term. NALI would like to see it stricken from popular usage. Along with several others.”

“What others?” Elaine asked.

“The frequent and derogatory or belittling phrases involving the word ‘dead,’” the doctor replied. “Whenever someone refers to someone else as ‘dead meat,’ or claims to be ‘dead on their feet,’ it reflects poorly on our clients.”

“Your clients dig themselves out of their graves and eat people,” Gillespie pointed out. “It’s a contagion, it’s spreading, and it needs to be dealt with. Decisively, and soon.”

“That’s the very attitude NALI is seeking to change.”

Wyatt-Anderson returned her attention to Elaine, seeking sympathy. “These people—yes, *people*—are our friends and neighbors, our families. They deserve to be treated with the dignity and respect they had in life. They should not be feared, reviled, or hunted down.”

“But haven’t they changed, doctor?” Elaine said.

“They’re not the same as they were, no. But neither is someone who has suffered a debilitating brain injury, or fallen into a coma, or been stricken with a mental illness or decline in cognition. Yet in those cases, the afflicted are still cared for. Their basic needs are still met.”

“Basic needs!” The general leaned forward. “Lady, the only basic need a zombie’s got is to chow down on human flesh! I’ve *seen* these things in action. I was in New York during the big July breakout. I saw one bunch of them overturn a bus-load of kids and dig right in!”

“How did you handle the July breakout?” Wyatt-Anderson shot back. “By gunning down thousands of the living-impaired, in direct violation of their civil rights.”

“Damn straight! They’re not people anymore. They’re corpses. Their civil rights went out the window the minute they pulled themselves out of the ground and started helping themselves to brain take-out!”

Elaine knew there was a time to intervene and a time to sit back and let the interviews take their course. This was the latter. She discreetly picked up her coffee cup—emblazoned with the sponsor’s logo, naturally—and sipped as the studio audience enjoyed the argument.

“It has been consistently proven that the living-impaired retain rudimentary memories of their past lives and habits. They are able to recognize familiar faces—”

“And bite ’em off to get at the gooey bits,” snarled Gillespie. “They need to be wiped out.”

“Destroying them is not the answer!”

“What is? We could have had this country cleansed by now, if you people hadn’t come along whining about tolerance. What would you rather do? Get ’em all in a circle, hold hands, sing ‘Kumbaya’?”

“With proper treatment, the living-impaired can be brought to a reasonable level of functioning.”

“What sort of treatment?” Elaine interjected smoothly.

“Primarily therapy and medication—”

“God bless America,” the general muttered as a curse, rolling his eyes. “Therapy!”

Doctor Wyatt-Anderson ignored him and went on speaking

to Elaine, who was nodding encouragingly. "Their desire for flesh, which is simply another form of addiction, can be treated with a patch."

"A patch?" Elaine urged.

"The Necroderm C-Q," she explained. "It's a time-release appetite suppressant combined with a craving inhibitor."

"Does it come in a gum?" someone from the audience called snidely.

"No," Wyatt-Anderson said, "but there is a liquid form that can be injected in stronger doses. We use that to stabilize clients in crisis."

"Suppose that you can control their addiction," Elaine said. "What then?"

"Then we enroll them in a series of programs. Anger management. Coping skills. Job training. We help them and encourage them to manage their symptoms and compensate for their condition, with the goal of being able to exist in a non-restrictive environment."

"Non-restrictive . . . you mean on their own?"

The general muttered a comment, but it was lost as the doctor continued her explanation.

"Yes, Elaine, but to get them out on their own involves a slow, tedious process. At the moment, we have over six hundred of the living-impaired placed in residential facilities, and thousands more in more intensive hospital-style settings. But millions more are out there, desperately in need of our services. The hardest part of our job is outreach, getting help to these people. Thanks to the efforts of those like the general here, most of the living-impaired are afraid to come forward."

Elaine nodded sagely. "Recent statistics have shown that the living-impaired population now outnumbers the homeless and the mentally ill," she said. "When even those people couldn't receive adequate help, can NALI realistically offer their services to everyone?"

"Sadly, Elaine, we can't. NALI just doesn't have the staff or resources to extend all the help we'd like. Funding for our programs is practically nonexistent. We depend almost entirely on private donations from families who have been touched by this tragedy. But you mentioned the homeless and the mentally ill. The living-impaired population hasn't so much outnumbered them as it has absorbed them."

"Yeah, they feed on the ones they can catch," Gillespie said. "The bums, street people, winos, loonies. If they leave enough meat on the bones, then those sorry bastards get up and start walking, too."

The doctor swept him with a scathing look. "With the drastic decline in those populations, one would expect that there would be considerable funding left over. Money that had been going toward mental health and housing rehab programs could, and *should*, be funneled into ours. Yet that's not happening, Elaine, and it needs to be."

"What about the Center for Disease Control?" Elaine asked. "What's their stance? I had heard that this was being treated as a communicable disease . . . postmortem infectious necrivorism, I believe was the term. Lots of people are concerned about how to keep themselves safe."

Gillespie nodded, eyes glittering. "One bite, and they've got you. Don't I know it! All they have to do is break the skin and there's not a damn thing anyone can do. When they had me and were pulling me out of that evac chopper. . . ."

Elaine shuddered in genuine sympathy. She'd argued bitterly with her producers over whether or not they could show *that* clip, the one in which, to avoid being dragged down or bitten by the trio of gray-green corpses clinging to him, Gillespie had given the order that had cost him his arm. Little wonder he was having trouble holding to the military's usual polite, but firm stance on the subject. Then again, the general was retired and thus removed from the control of handlers, and a notorious hothead—both of which helped make him such a flashy guest.

The general was rumbling, with an almost cheerful grimace, through his war story, but Wyatt-Anderson was intent on spoiling it for him. "The key to containing the spread of the illness," she interrupted, "is to avoid exposure." Her icy tone made it clear that she believed that the general had cost himself his arm, and nearly his life, by provoking the attack. "The use of universal precautions, to prevent the introduction of the infected material—"

"Zombie spit," said the general. "The thing to do is eliminate the *source*. If there were no goddam zombies, no one would have to worry about catching it. We find them, shoot them, burn what's left, and there you go. End of story, end of danger."

"Is that how you'd handle other contagious illnesses, General?" Wyatt-Anderson asked. "AIDS, hepatitis, TB? This isn't the Dark Ages, and we will not treat patients like condemned criminals! They are victims of a terrible, terrible disease. We owe it to them to *help*, not draw plague circles around them!"

Elaine, responding to increasingly urgent signaling from

her producer, cut in with another of her brilliant smiles. “We have to take a short break for some important messages, but we’ll be back with General Gillespie and Doctor Wyatt-Anderson in a few minutes to take questions from our studio audience. And we’ll also meet Barb and Danny, two of NALI’s success stories.”

The sign switched from ON AIR to OFF, and canned elevator music issued from the speakers over the audience. A couple of crew members came onstage to check and fiddle with this and that, and Elaine motioned for a refill on coffee.

“You’re bringing some of those things out here?” asked Gillespie. His face had reddened, making the pale scar stand out in vivid relief.

“Don’t be afraid, General,” Wyatt-Anderson said condescendingly. “The counselors have everything under control.”

“How *do* you keep them under control?” Elaine asked. “It’s fine and well to talk about universal precautions and not getting bit, but when you’re dealing with a new . . . a new client, how do you even get close enough to slap the patches on them?”

“Some direct methods are necessary,” the doctor admitted. “They can be stunned or subdued by an electrical charge. Before the effects wear off, we get them under restraints to begin treatment.”

“Waste of time,” growled Gillespie. “Waste of money. You think you’re going to rehabilitate zombies, put them back in regular society? That’s crazy, that’s all it is. Crazy.”

“Thirty seconds,” warned one of the production assistants.

Elaine thanked him with a nod, and got up. She smoothed her skirt—white with a tropical floral pattern in shades of turquoise—and took the handheld microphone.

“And . . . we’re live in three, two, one!”

“Welcome back,” Elaine said brightly. “We’ve been listening to some rather opposing viewpoints on today’s topic. Doctor Karen Wyatt-Anderson, president of NALI, supports compassionate caregiving and treatment for the living-impaired. Retired General Jason Gillespie feels that zombies are a threat and must be handled with extreme prejudice. Now let’s see what our audience thinks.”

She held out the microphone to a clean-cut young college boy in a cableknit sweater. “Hi, Elaine, hi. I’m Jeff. My question is for the doctor. Do you, personally, work with the zombies? Er . . . with the living-impaired?”

Wyatt-Anderson gave Jeff a cool, lofty look. “In my capacity with NALI, I work very closely with the staff of several

hospitals and facilities. My main function is in training and education.”

“So that’s a no?” he pressed. “You don’t work personally, hands-on, with the stiff’s? You don’t have to look at them, smell them, worry that they might take a chunk out of you?”

“I have seen several living-impaired clients,” she said.

Jeff looked straight into the camera and hoisted one eyebrow knowingly. Elaine thanked him and moved on to a portly man possessing the jowls and the sorrowful eyes of a basset hound.

“Albert Lawry here,” he said, gaze fixed on the microphone. “I just . . . my wife Helen. . . . She died a year ago. . . . I was wondering, Doctor, if you could help me find her? She was buried in Oregon, with her parents, and when everything started I went to the cemetery, but she wasn’t there. Do you have a list or something?”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Lawry. Most of the time, our clients have no identification. We try to track down their records, but it’s a slow process. If you call NALI, at 1-888-555-3323—”

“That’s 555-DEAD,” Jeff announced, drawing a laugh from the audience and a flush of chagrin from the doctor.

She regained her composure, but if telepathy were real and could kill, there’d be one attractive twenty-something laid out on the floor. “If you call NALI and leave your name and information, we can contact you should we locate your wife.”

Elaine moved to the next waving hand, which belonged to a teenaged girl with intricately beaded and cornrowed hair. “General Gillespie, my dad is in the Marines, and he says that zombies can only be killed if you blow their heads off or burn them, is that true?”

“I hardly think that’s an appropriate question!” Doctor Wyatt-Anderson snapped.

The general faced the girl. “As near as we’ve been able to tell, the only way to stop them is to take out the brain. Fire might do it eventually, but in the meantime, they’d still be running around. And I’ll tell you one thing . . . may be hard to believe, but a fried zombie stinks worse than a regular one.”

Karen Wyatt-Anderson’s lips had drawn together in a line so thin and tight that they’d almost disappeared. “I must once again object to your choice of language. These are *people* we’re talking about. Wives, husbands, sons, daughters, mothers, and fathers! You demean and degrade them by referring to them in those terms!”

A thin, almost frighteningly intense woman with long dark hair popped up beside Elaine, pushing aside an anxious

grandmotherly type. "They're *dead!* Can't you get that through your politically correct skull?"

"They've come back. Not all the way, granted, but they've made the effort."

"Effort! Some alien germ or solar radiation makes the corpses walk, that's all it is! Not God, not their own free will! Who would want to come back as something like that? Who'd want to live like that? I say that putting them out of their misery is doing them a favor, not sending them to some twelve-step program!"

Savage applause, not the least of which was from the general, greeted the woman's remarks. Mixed in were cries of "You said it!" and "All right!" and one man chanting, "Bring out your dead! Bring out your dead!"

"Why don't we?" chirped Elaine in her most vivacious talk show hostess tone. "Let's bring out Barb and Danny, and hear what they have to say!"

Jeff and the man who'd been chanting the Monty Python dialogue both cupped their hands around their mouths to make megaphones and called, "Braaaaaaaaiiiiiinns!" in slow, dragging imitation of the undead.

The good doctor stood up. "I will not have them subjected to this blatantly hostile abuse! NALI's purpose is to increase public awareness and help our clients."

"Maybe it would help for everyone to see the progress they've made under treatment," Elaine suggested. "Instead of the negative, sensationalized images of their kind most of us have seen."

"Progress!" Gillespie snorted. "Couple of zombies, hosed off and put in clean clothes. Maybe you can train 'em like animals, but they're still flesh-eating monsters. Suppose you bring them out here and they decide it's an all-you-can-eat buffet?"

"Barb has been flesh-free for eight weeks," Wyatt-Anderson said huffily. "Danny for almost as long. They're proof that the patch and the treatment are effective, two of our most compensated clients."

Elaine caught the eye of one of the backstage crew, and he responded with a nod.

Moments later, a small group emerged from the side door of the set. Three men and a woman, all in pristine white lab coats, ushered in two shuffling figures.

An appalled, fascinated "Ooooh!" came from the audience, accompanied by a shifting rustle as they all leaned forward to get a good look at the necrivores.

The larger of the two, introduced as Barb, must have been a huge woman in life and hadn't diminished much since. A drab mustard-colored sweatsuit neither concealed nor flattered the drooping swell of her belly or the pendulous melon-sized breasts that bobbed like loosely filled sacks of gelatin. Her behind was truly mythic in its proportions, and with her head bent down against the glare of the studio lighting, her chins descended to her chest in a series of mushy folds.

They'd obviously made an effort to get her presentable. Her skin was doughy and blue-gray, but she was clean and not visibly maggot-ridden. What was left of her brown hair had been drawn neatly back in a scrunchied ponytail. She had the sadly sweet face of so many hopelessly obese women, hinting at the beauty that might have been hers had her life taken a different turn.

It would have taken about eight Dannys to make up one Barb. The smaller of the pair couldn't have been more than ten years old when he died, and the evidence of his death was present in the form of a malformed dent in the side of his head. It was the sort of injury one might expect to see when a kid disregarded the helmet law and came to grief with one of those zippy little scooters.

The ghost of an impish smile lurked around his slack, dry lips. He wore jeans and an oversized football jersey and high-top sneakers like any other kid. Yards of spice-scented wrappings might have suited him better, for he appeared wizened and dry, more mummified than rotting. His dark skin had taken on a hue and texture reminiscent of ash-coated beef jerky.

General Gillespie made a sound somewhere between a moan and a snarl as the two zombies shambled closer. Their attendants stopped them at the center of the stage, Cameras One and Two zooming in for close-ups.

Both of their patches were in plain sight, pasted to the sides of their necks just below the ear. In a final bizarre touch, the patches were for some reason the gleaming plastic pink-tan that used to be called "flesh" by the crayon people, a color that didn't match the skin of any race of the living, let alone the dead. On Barb and Danny, it was as hectic as a clown's vivid red cheeks.

Doctor Wyatt-Anderson crossed her arms smugly and threw Gillespie a silent "Told you so!" as the nervous tittering and revolted gasps of the audience gave way to murmurings of pity.

Elaine was surprised to find that she understood their

feelings, for there was something unspeakably tragic and solemn about the pair. They stood slouched by both in the poor posture of death and the inescapable defeated hopelessness of their circumstances.

Danny goggled at the nearest camera. One of his eyes was milky but otherwise normal; the other was distended from the socket as if it had been popped out and replaced without true concern for the fit. That orb was roadmapped with broken veins, and a purpled corona engulfed the pupil.

The bleak incomprehension in their stares changed as they took in the sight of the studio audience, dozens and dozens of healthy humans. The glint put Elaine in mind of reluctant dieters confronted with a bakery window.

What must we look like to those glassy gazes? the host wondered. *A parade of meaty limbs and delectable torsos?* She thought about the old saying—you can't help someone who didn't want to be helped. What was the treatment doing to the living dead? As far as she knew, as far as anyone knew, they came back with only one driving impulse: to eat. And now that had been taken away from them. What did that leave?

"My God," Elaine heard herself say. "This is terrible!"

"The growth rate of the living-impaired population," Wyatt-Anderson said, "has leveled off thanks to the increase in cremation as a form of funerary services. But there are still millions of them out there, and they need your help."

Gillespie shook his head. "What they need is to be sent back where they came from. That one lady was right—this is no way to be!"

Barb swiveled slowly in the general's direction. Watching her move was like watching the gaseous atmosphere of Jupiter rotate, bands of flesh shifting and sliding at different rates. A whiff of her odor reached Elaine. Mostly soap and talcum powder, but underneath was a faintly rancid, wholly repugnant reek of spoilage.

The general realized with evident, utter horror that he was the focus of three hundred-plus pounds of zombie attention, and took an involuntary step back.

"Deaad," Barb said, forcing the word sluggishly through liquefying vocal cords.

"Dead," Danny seconded, his voice more clear but raspy as a file on sandpaper.

"And they should stay that way," said someone from the audience. Elaine recognized the intense brunette without needing to look. "Dead things should stay that way. This is wrong. Can't you see that? Wrong!"

Doctor Wyatt-Anderson stepped forward to argue, but Barb's chins tripled and then receded as she nodded. "Rrrrrrronng!"

Her pudgy, sausage-fingered hand floated up as if tied to a helium balloon. It wandered aimlessly around her head for a moment, pulled strands of hair from the scrunchie to hang lank in her face, and then found the edge of the patch. Two of her fingernails peeled loose as she dug at it.

"Barb, stop it," said one of the attendants.

Danny squinted up at his behemoth companion, some dim understanding welling in his muddy eyes.

Barb's patch came unstuck with a grisly squelching noise, tearing away a spongy mat of flesh with it. "Dead!" she shrieked. "Dead-dead-dead!"

The attendants rushed in, bringing heavy-duty tazers out of concealed holsters. Elaine, rooted to the spot, was buffeted as the audience yielded to instinct and thundered for the exits.

"Dead-dead-dead!" Danny parroted, and ripped the patch from his own neck so vigorously that he nearly beheaded himself. The ivory knobs of his vertebrae poked through like stepping stones.

"Stop her!" Wyatt-Anderson ordered above the din. Then, incredibly, "We'll never get funding like this!"

It was, Elaine would later think, a pretty crappy set of last words. Barb lumbered forward with the force of a charging rhino, and crushed the doctor's rib cage with one swing of her massive arm.

Still unable to move, hypnotized by the spectacle, Elaine observed with detached marvel the way the impact sent ripples through the zombie's flab.

Barb seized Wyatt-Anderson, pulled her close as if going for a kiss, and clamped her jaws on the doctor's shoulder. Elaine, in a space beyond terror now, batted at Barb's face with the microphone and squashed her nose into a soggy ruin. Barb let go of her victim.

An attendant grabbed for Danny as Doctor Wyatt-Anderson's body was hitting the ground. The dead child writhed snake-fast and got a mouthful of muscle, eliciting a scream that was more fear than pain. And it was a lot of pain.

Barb stepped mostly over but partly on the fallen psychiatrist, cracking bones like twigs underfoot, and reached for her next meal. Elaine thrust out the microphone in a defensive effort and Barb chomped into it, masticating furiously at the spongy black covering before spitting it aside.

Someone dropped an iron safe onto a solid hardwood

floor. Or at least that was what Elaine's first thought was as a colossal *boom* resonated through the studio. It wasn't until the side of Barb's skull blossomed out in a pulpy yellow and gray spray that she realized what had happened. The giant body went down so hard that it should have set off car alarms in the parking lot outside.

Elaine very nearly went down with it, as Barb's flailing hand snared the front of her blouse. She was yanked backward to safety by the college guy in the cableknit sweater—Jeff.

General Gillespie, his uniform jacket all askew and a holster tucked into the rear of his pants, was waving a gun roughly the size of a small cannon. He squeezed off a wild shot just as Frances Meade, *Daybreak Coast to Coast's* answer to Martha Stewart, came rushing onstage to see what all the fuss was about. She went flying back in a crimson spray that clashed horribly with her pale green outfit.

Elaine saw that even though the cameramen had fled, the lights and the ON AIR sign were still working fine. Camera One had been knocked aslant and was getting nothing but stampeding feet. Camera Two, however, was getting everything.

Electricity leaped and sizzled as the attendants tried to tazer the ravenous smaller zombie into submission, but Danny was having none of it. The taste of hot blood and warm meat was in his mouth for the first time in weeks, and he was not going to be denied.

Elaine, knowing that this show would either make her career or destroy it, tore away from Jeff and rushed at the general. He was yelling incoherently, blasting away. It was a pure miracle that more of the panicked studio audience hadn't been hit. She snatched at the gun—wincing, but not pulling away from the touch of the hot barrel—and wrested the weapon away from him.

Danny was atop the bitten attendant. Grisly snacking and slurping noises could be heard even above the rest of the cacophony.

Elaine slammed her dainty turquoise-blue pump down on Danny's back, set the barrel of the gun to the back of his head, and with a grimace that she somehow knew resembled the way her mom looked when fishing around in a turkey for the giblet packet, pulled the trigger.

The recoil was instant and tremendous, slamming up her arm with such force she thought she had dislocated her shoulder. But the bullet plowed through Danny's small and already cracked skull, out the other side, and lodged in the thrashing

attendant's face, saving him from the basic fate worse than death.

Only one NALI attendant remained, the other two having remembered pressing appointments elsewhere. In a total loss of sanity, he pointed his tazer at the morning show hostess. General Gillespie, wanting his toy back, had the bad luck to interpose himself in time to take the volts. He collapsed, twitching and jerking.

"It's all right!" Jeff yelled, pointing at the motionless bodies of Barb and Danny. "They're down! Both down!"

His words took the edge off of the furor, but it all went to hell again a split second later.

With a sudden convulsive lurch, Doctor Wyatt-Anderson pushed herself upright. She held herself awkwardly, with half of her ribs caved in and one arm dangling crazy-jointed and limp.

The remaining attendant, Jeff, and Elaine all shouted a word that would have been edited out or bleeped on tape, but they were still live, still rolling.

Wyatt-Anderson's gaze fell upon them. Formerly haughty and cold, it was now filled with a mindless hunger. Her lips drew back to expose a view that would have been right at home in a toothpaste commercial. She darted forward and swiped a handful of manicure at them.

On raw reflex, Elaine fired again. The shot hit Wyatt-Anderson between the eyes and took most of the top of her head off. The doctor cartwheeled in a tumble over the gore-splattered dove-gray chair that Elaine vowed never to sit in again, and came to rest in a heap at the bottom of the window with its fake cityscape.

"Wow," said Jeff shakily. "I guess she wasn't just president of the National Alliance for the Living-Impaired . . ."

It was the insanity of the moment, or the reek of blood and decomposition that made them take leave of their senses. But the rest of the surviving trio came in with him on the end.

"She's also a client!" they chorused, and finally someone in the control room had the good sense to go to commercial.

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