



*A Promise of Rain*  
*by Sharon Cullars*

With the night always came a promise of rain. She could smell it in the air. But she'd learned it was a deceptive promise. The only moisture tonight were the beads of sweat trailing her skin in rivers, breaking off and landing in waterfalls at her feet. No humidity, no cooling breeze. Not at this moment, anyway. Not a blade of grass stirred as she waited; the stagnant air suffocated her. Yet she drew a deep, hot breath into lungs already singed with the heat from the dying day. The breath didn't loosen the vice around her chest.

These few minutes were saturated with the complaints from the crickets in the field; the insects suffered from this drying heat as much as the humans. Probably more. The grass was dead, the soil had dried out weeks ago, the river level was dropping. It wouldn't do to be an insect in this field.

The newscasts called it a nationwide drought. To her, it was earth's mimicry of hell.

Seconds passed, and a cold wind slapped her. The chill was finally here. The drop in temperature was not gradual. One moment, the unbearable heat seared. Then a movement of the minute hand toward midnight, and in a blink of the eye or the intake of a shaky breath, single-digit cold. Her breath fogged the air.

This phenomenon had started up several weeks ago, and the pattern was still holding. The sudden chill stopped the path of her sweat, dried it, cooled her. The air became crisp, actually fed oxygen to her lungs before it began to sear them with arctic heat.

This wasn't normal, usual, typical, earthly, and in no way, heavenly. Her neighbors just three miles down, Deedee and Barry, had packed up yesterday – temporarily they said - heading north to somewhere, someplace Deedee declared would not "blast up heat and ice at the same time like a plague out of Egypt."

But it wasn't a plague. It was something much more apocalyptic. The word rolled around in her head, unbidden. Not a word she familiarly used. She had never gone to college, had barely made it out of high school growing up in Los Angeles. How she had come to be standing in a dark field just south of Auburn, Alabama was her personal tale of redemption that began with an invitation from her aunt Sadie to "start over down here."

She'd been starting over "down here" for three years now. Hadn't touched a bottle or a needle in that time. Almost thirty, she looked her age again, and not the walking devastation her life on the streets had brought her to.

This farm was her salvation. Which was why she wasn't leaving, come hell or else. Even with Sadie passed these months, it had never occurred to her to desert this place.

Darkness swept the field. The stars were hidden behind a blanket of black. She'd gotten used to nights without streetlights, had gotten comfortable with the pitch that extinguished shadows during regular nights. But this new darkness, this hellnight born of just a few weeks, ate the shadows then spit them out as something else. Something not entirely of this earth.

Out here was no haven. The shadows moved. Inside was worse. The shadows reached for her.

The crickets stopped chirping. They had gone to their hiding places. But she refused to hide anymore. Let whatever was out here come for her. She was not running. Not from here, not back to Los Angeles, not back to the woman she'd been - Cinda Lewis. That woman had been dead for a long time now.

The cold bit into her skin. She was dressed in a sundress that hung loose, that on normal autumn days with warm breezes, would blow away from her, allowing her skin to breathe. Now she put on the sweater she'd been holding while waiting for the cold. It barely helped.

Going inside would be futile. Even with a newly installed heating system as well as a blazing fireplace, the cold infiltrated, battled the warmth and killed it victoriously. Icicles formed inside the window panes, only to melt with the morning light.

This was the end of the world. Not just her world on this farm, but everywhere. Deedee and Barry could run, but where could they really go? This...this...whatever...wasn't confined to the county line, the state boundary, or even the bicoastal shores. And everywhere, everyone must be feeling the same fear that moved through her, hearing the same message that tore at her own soul: The world was gasping its last breath.

Still, she would stand and fight if she had to, no matter how pathetic and hopeless. Because that's what she always did, what she would do til the end.

She'd been fighting her whole life...

*"...ah, c'mon, why you gotta be like that, girl."* Uncle Lewis' breath was moist on her eleven-year-old ear. He stank of too much whiskey and too many smokes. A hand crept along her thigh, but a stapler sat nearby on the table which she slammed down on his hand, puncturing it with a staple. Her uncle's yelp carried through the house, warning her mother, who in the end was no help at all...

The abuse didn't stop though, kept on until she was fifteen when she finally packed a wallop to his nuts. Man had to go into the hospital and was finally arrested. But what had gone before had already turned her inside out, until there wasn't much left. What little survived almost died on the streets, ho-ing for just a little more money to buy a little more juice to block out the darkness that had settled on her, in her, until she fought for a little sun in her life...

...and now that sun was blotted out.

She shivered in the wind that swept up in violent gusts, pushing her from side to side, whipping her dress to and fro. Loose, dried dirt pitched into her eyes, scratching the iris. The cold crept into her body. But she refused to budge as she waited for what she knew was coming.

Tonight, she would face the thing that hung back in the shadows. One of the armies of the night.

The minutes of hell passed slowly as her fingers numbed. She hugged herself against another gust –

– and heard the soft voice she'd heard some nights ago. That first time, she'd thought it was a strange echo of the wind, but she knew better now. She knew because it called out her name, this soft voice. And though she had run away that first night, and the subsequent nights, she stood ready now, defiant. This thing that called to her could hurt her, kill her even, but never again would anyone, anything, kill her soul.

In the distance, the hideous silhouette of trees along the perimeter of the woods edging the field - trees so dark they were a blot upon the darkness - grew more defined, seemed to enlarge and move toward her. She gasped, but the breath couldn't make it past her throat. Courage diminished but didn't obliterate the fear of death.

Another darkness moved among the trees. And this shadow moving toward her carried a light source. As it neared, she made out the definition of a man, yet it didn't move like a man. Almost seemed to float.

*Run! Run...bitch...run!* The conscience that protected her often seemed to resent her, denigrating her in its panic. She ignored the voice as the man neared. Evil doesn't always look as you expect it to. She should have learned that by now. Instead of a menacing boogeyman, it took the form of someone harmless looking, in this case the farmer who lived several miles north of her. He'd moved in about three months ago, just shortly after Sadie died. Cinda had seen him on occasion, sometimes at the bank, then again at the Ace Hardware, at the Piggly Wiggly just outside of town. Wiry and lanky-haired (for the life of her she couldn't remember its color), he didn't stand much taller than she.

The light he carried swung back and forth, and she saw that it was an old-fashioned oil lantern. The light it cast barely illuminated the land around him, but provided enough glow for her to see the contours of his face, the simplicity of his shirt and overalls. A straw hat sat on top of his head. Everything about him was old rustic, a throwback to another time. An image deliberately fostered.

If she'd held any illusion that he was merely a man, just her neighbor to the north, she lost that illusion the moment he stood face to face with her. The light in his eyes weren't from the lantern. It wasn't from any earthly light she knew of. And when he spoke her name, so close, so soft, she recognized the voice that had called to her from the woods the previous nights. Only now there was something beneath the softness, something that grated and threatened.

"Hello, Lucinda," he said, taking off his straw hat with his free hand, "don't think it's a good thing for you to be standing out here this time of night."

"It's my field. I can stand here anytime I like."

His eyes moved over her sweater and sundress, then swept back up to her face, the lights in his eyes almost mesmerizing. "It's going to get much colder tonight. Much, much colder. I suggest you go inside." His drawl was hickseedy, back woods, Southern deep.

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"Suggest? Just so you know, I don't take too well to folk suggesting what I should do, especially on my own property." She said that as though she wasn't shaking inside.

He smiled. Not an "aw shucks" type of smile that would have fit in with his simple farmer costume. The smile was evil, and it transformed his features out of the bland to the frightening. She should have run; she didn't.

"Well, I'm not exactly 'folk,' but then you've probably got that one figured out right about now, don't you, Lucinda?"

"Don't call me that. You don't know me enough to call me that."

The smile widened a bit. "Lucinda...beautiful name. Know what it means? In latin, it means 'bringer of light.' Are you a bringer of light, Lucinda? Oh, I'm sorry, it's Cinda now, right? 'Cause you haven't been Lucy for a long time. Not since you were a little girl – way before you started giving out blowjobs. So I guess in a way you did do some bringing – not exactly light though. But I'm sure all those boys and men you serviced might disagree with me. Beautiful lips you have there, by the way."

She felt a pain in her stomach as though someone had belted her. She had tried so hard to run from her past. Sadie would never have told a soul, especially not him. No, this thing in front of her wasn't a man. She blinked back tears, refusing to let this demon beat her down.

"What do you want from me?" she barely got out in a whisper.

"You should know by now that no one wants anything from you, Luc...cinda. That's 'cause you're not worth much. You're a harlot, Cinda...a Jezebel...and what's that other phrase? Can't quite remember it. You humans do tend to overlabel something. Got it! Crack 'Ho! That's it! Crack 'Ho" he cried jubilantly. "Although, I have to say I don't like that one much. So let's simplify it a bit - you're a whore, Cinda. A nothing ho...a piece of meat not worth throwing to the dogs like they did that old Jezebel. Cinda the ho."

The tears got past her, and the pain seemed to double in her gut like something was eating her from the insides. And she realized that he was using her emotional pain to beat her down physically.

"I'm not a whore..."

"No not 'whore.' Ho! You're not worth the extra letters."

"I'm not a ho, not anymore," she said through gritted teeth, through falling tears.

"Once a ho, always a ho, Cinda," he sang out happily, putting it to a tune. The crass word was ridiculous coming from his mouth. But it was a knife, nevertheless, one that wounded to her soul. She remembered being called that, remembered when she *was* that. And that's not how she wanted to be remembered; that wasn't the sum total of who she was or even who she had been. Her aunt had understood that, at least, even when her own mother hadn't.

Cinda sniffed back loosened snot, tried to control that sadness that was overwhelming her even through the pain. She was hunched, trying not to fully double over.

"You...can...call...me whatever. You don't know me you cracka mutherfucker..."

He held the light closer to her face and she stepped back, almost tripped. "Such language. Does your mother know what comes out of your mouth...or goes into it?"

"Why...why are you doing this? What's happening to this world?"

"Exactly what you think is happening. What shoulda happened the moment humans slithered out of the slime, before they could become the pestilence they are now. This earth is tired of the parasites that's been sucking it dry for all these millennia. You humans are the vermin, the pest, the bacteria that's been festering in the earth's wounds. And we...we're the antidote, the flea powder, the roach killers..."

"We?" she grunted between breaths, but standing straighter. The pain was abating, but just a little. "Who are you?"

"There's no name for us. I guess you can call us *The Forgotten*."

He paused; she didn't ask the question, even though she knew he wanted her to. She knew he would tell her anyway. Like any man, he wanted to broadcast his superiority. He may not have been human, but he wasn't that different from the human males that she'd fucked or let fuck her. Wanting her to feel grateful for the dimes they threw her way, all for the privilege of touching her used-up, unwashed body. She may have been low, but that made them lower in her mind. They bleated about how good a fuck they were, how they could make any woman come. All that bragging, no delivery.

"So, you ask, who are *The Forgotten*? C'mon, you know you wanna know." His mocking voice had lost much of its twang, giving it an urban resonance.

Her silence stretched out as she kept a wary eye on him. She couldn't care less who *The Forgotten* were. Her knowing wouldn't stop what was happening. Whoever they were, they were about to fuck up her world big time, if not destroy everything in it.

The cold had dropped and her fingers, which had been stinging with the chill, were numb. The first stage of frostbite. She could lose her fingers.

But that paled to the fact that she was going to lose her life. As was everybody she had ever known. In some cases, that wasn't a bad thing.

"*The Forgotten*. We're the ones who came before you. We were the chosen, the children – or so we thought. Before ever there was an Adam or Eve in some mystical Garden of Eden. You know, you humans strived so much to determine whether the Big Bang was the progenitor or whether God actually created the earth in six days. C'mon now, God thought it, and Bang! Pow! there it was. God created the oceans first and your preachers rally how it was impossible

that man slithered from the waters. Like that's more unbelievable than being made from a clump of dirt."

Cinda remembered the minister who'd been one of the regulars to prowl the boulevard where she maintained shop. They'd park in his car in an alley where he would preach to her about how Jesus would forgive her sins if only she would forgive herself. Then he'd hustle her into the back seat, turn her over and pump the shit out of her ass. Sweaty and breathless, he'd quote scriptures to her. Strange, she couldn't remember not a one of them. Not even those sweet little sayings she'd learned in Sunday school that had made her think someone was watching over her, protecting her. She hadn't heard from Him in a while, wondered if he was even up there now.

"Whoever wrote *Revelations* got it all wrong. See, there's not going to be any four horsemen or some devastating pandemic or any global pestilence. No earth quakes, no floods, no raining down of fire. No, the end's going to be quite simple, without all that drama. However, that blood thing...it got that one right, at least. As for us, we were before the Seraphims, before the one you call Satan. Another universe with its own solar systems and planets. And we had the same religious paradigms and conflicts...and then somewhere along the way we got clued in to the fact that we were self-destructing. And that the One, the Creator, had gone on to his next project. And to make matters worse, we found out we weren't the first. And those who came before us were just as pissed. So you see, there were several before you. You can call us the test runs. It's just that we didn't have the required humility...were too self-dependent. Not exactly what the One wanted. And He definitely regretted giving us the powers He did. He made sure not to make that mistake with you.

"So, after the One basically abandoned us, like He did the souls before us, He went and created the angels, thinking they would be better at worshipping Him. And you see how that turned out. Then He tried again with you, and it worked all of a few days. By the way, it wasn't an apple that did you in, and there never was any Tree of Life. No, just Eve getting friendly with Adam with a banana and after that, all hell broke loose. So you better believe the One has moved on to another project. Somewhere, out there, beyond your time and space, there's a simple little planet with simpletons even simpler than you living in what they think is everlasting bliss. Unfortunately for them, they're wrong."

She tried to curl her toes, found she couldn't. But at least, they burned indicating they had some life left. Not like her fingers, that were dead now. Her breath frosted in the glare of his light. He gave off no breath at all.

She would freeze to death or he would kill her. That was what she'd known when she walked out to this field from the small farmhouse a yard back - that somehow tonight she would die. But she would die as brave as she could. She would make her stand against this...these...(how many were there)...invaders. She listened but barely heard his lies; her heart was slowing, but she could hear its dying beats in her ears.

"...and we got tired of waiting, at least those of us who survived. Our world is dead; yours is dying, but it's going to have to do us for now. And when I say 'us,' not just me and my folk, but those from the other worlds created and abandoned, what's left of all of us who were left to

our own devices until we saw the light, had the vision to band together, to become as one and take the new world that even now flourishes in blissful ignorance, with a new and fresh earth.”

Not that she cared; she would be dead soon, but she was impelled to ask: “What then? You take this earth, you take the next, you’ll keep on running until...when?”

She didn’t expect his answer, or the sad solemnity with which it was said: “Until we find peace, and He finally remembers us, His first children.”

She could have laughed bitterly if it wasn’t just that sad. The same old story, from the beginning of time. It belong to her and those many others she had existed with on the streets. Everybody, everyone, even this...this...man?...in front of her – looking for love, for acceptance, for peace. At any cost. Including mankind – at least the one that belonged to this planet.

“How do you know that He’s abandoned you? He’s everywhere, watching.” She hardly believed it as she said it, but that was what had been drilled into her tiny brain sermon after sermon, lesson after lesson.

He looked at her as though she were the most pathetic creature there was. “How can you not know that He’s abandoned you? He is peace, He is love, He is joy. Where is your peace, your love, your joy? Where is it anywhere on this earth? You say He hasn’t abandoned you, and yet the bodies from pain, suffering, loneliness continue to pile up. And I ask: How is he here? And where was He in your life?”

“He’s...He’s...watched over me. It’s just that I...I hurt my own self...” She had to believe that, hold on to it.

“Really, Lucinda?” A hand reached out to touch her cheek and she jumped back. “You did all of this to yourself? You know, I can read you. I’m reading your life in front of my eyes like a movie being played. We both know when you began to hate yourself, the exact moment when you turned from that young girl into the woman that you loathed, and it was long before you spiraled downward into nothingness. Remember?”

She shook her head, pushing out the memory he was calling up. She’d refused to think on it all these years and it wouldn’t be her last memory on the earth.

“You remember that night? Your uncle Lewis – you called him Lou. Just after your fifteenth birthday – was that the one, fifteen? You tried so hard to come in softly so no one would hear you. You’d been out with your friends, partying. And you were drunk, so drunk... You knew if he woke up, what would happen, what always happened, every night, except those times when he was so drunk, he passed out and forgot you.”

The pain in stomach was back, and it was tearing into her, ripping her apart. It threatened to spread all through her. She couldn’t, wouldn’t let it. She tried hard to hold on to her sanity, even as the night became insane and everything she had ever knew or believed became a lie.

“The lock never worked. He always found a way in. And that night was no different.”

"Shut up!" she screamed.

His voice was soothing, almost a drone as he continued. "He woke you up, climbed into your bed, and like all those other nights he was on top of you."

She doubled over, and bile and blood spewed out of her mouth, soaked into the arid dirt. She silently begged God to take her, to take her now. It wasn't true that He had abandoned her. He was still here, watching over her, over all the world. She had to believe that.

"You always froze, let yourself float away. But you were drunk tonight, it was harder to do that. The wine had your brain muddled. It should have made you number, but not that night. You were too aware of everything, of smells, of touches, sensations..."

The vomit stopped, but she kept right on wrenching, the dry heaves tearing up what hadn't been torn up before.

"And then that moment, that one moment, where your body betrayed you at last. Because all those other times, you had never enjoyed what he did to you. But then, there was that feeling that went through you, made you want more. Poor child...and you thought to yourself, "I'm a whore...no, you said, exactly in your mind... "I'm a 'ho" and you spent most of your life after that trying to prove it. That was after you punished him at last, took that book... Homer's Iliad...such a boring read, but you really got into it...you stood up, grabbed it, whammed him in the nuts. No more you thought...he wouldn't ever do this to you again. But then there were all those others that followed...all because you thought that somehow all of it was your fault."

She fell to her knees and held her head in her hands, tears joining her bile, her blood. How could she have felt pleasure unless she really was a whore? God abandoned her that night, in a way he had never abandoned her before. And he had abandoned her to every fiend after that, including the one standing in front of her right now, torturing her in no way any man could, no matter how they used her body. Torturing her only as she had been able to torture herself.

"You had nothing to be ashamed of, Lucinda. Not then, not now."

She raised her tear streaked face up at him. She was used to being on her knees before a man, but this was the first time she'd looked up with any measure of hope.

Still she accused him, the man who wasn't a man at all. "You called me a 'ho."

He took one hand and lifted her from the ground and the pain went away suddenly. "I was simply reading your mind, the way you have seen yourself all of your life. You thought the word was ridiculous coming from my mouth. You never thought how ridiculous it was to call your own self that. And you never had anyone in your life to tell you that, not even your aunt Sadie, who wanted you to start over. There shouldn't have been any "starting over." You should have been able to take up from that point in your life when it sequed into something hideous and hurtful. You have talents never explored. You would have been a doctor had life not whapped your ass. Did you even suspect that?"

She shook her head. Doctor? Her? In what universe? She barely passed science.

"How could you pass any class with all that pain inside? It takes a measure of concentration to pass your studies; your whole concentration was getting through and holding on."

"How do you know all of this and why do you care?"

"Let me tell you a story. It's a story of a boy growing up on a farm much like this one. In a universe far away, and yet not much different from this one. He wasn't a special boy, no different than those around him. He could communicate with the animals, knew when the rains were going to come. Knew when to sow, when to harvest just by the flow of his blood. He grew up with love and joy, but then one day they left. And everything good became marginal and the evil came and grew. The evil killed off his parents, his sisters, in the form of a militia that took over his city. And he prayed to The One, prayed that the killing would stop somehow. It never did. A millennia later, there was hardly anyone left. And this boy was at the point where he knew only one thing, that he wouldn't live to see another day. He would climb to a mountaintop and leap into the river below.

"The earth was dying, everyone he had ever loved was dead. Why shouldn't he die?"

The light in his eyes faded for a moment, then brightened again. She felt herself mesmerized, as though all of the answers she had ever sought could be found in those unearthly points of light.

"That very day he saw a creature that would have froze his blood any other time. He was near the base of the mountain, ready to climb and he felt a touch on his shoulder. It wasn't a hand that touched him, more like a tentacle. The thing had several mouths, several eyes. The boy thought he was hallucinating, or at the least, looking at pure evil. And the creature told him a tale of another world, of other worlds, told him the truth, and invited him to be one among the many, among *The Forgotten*.

"Is your pain gone?" The question was abrupt, broke her awe.

"Yes. I feel so..."

"Unburdened?"

She nodded.

"What you spit up needed to come out of you. You feel your fingers?"

And she did. She flexed them. They were well.

The cold had stopped, at least for her. Even though her breath blew cold, her body was warm as though she were sitting in front of a blazing fire.

"Are you doing this?"

He nodded. "That was a gift from the elder who found me, taught me my destiny."

"You destiny?"

"To find all of *The Forgotten*, to start anew, to live in peace with all of those who came after. To create heaven on this new earth. To find joy again."

"But you're destroying our world."

He shook his head. "No, you've done that on your own. This phenomenon from the past weeks, it's your earth gradually beginning it's implosion. Our worlds did the same eventually. The elder found me decades before my world finally gave out. Just as I found you."

"You found me?"

"I looked a long time for you. To Los Angeles, then here. Waiting for the right time, the right way to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because you are someone worth saving. We can't save everyone here, although we want to try..."

"Why would you want to save vermin? Isn't that what you called us?" She couldn't even manage to get angry now.

"You expected a monster, Lucinda, and I gave you one. You needed to face your fears, so I brought all of it to you, forced you to see your boogeyman...whatever that word means. You humans do have an amazing lexicon...so many words that mean the same thing, so many ways of saying nothing at times."

She felt a breeze; it was warm, freeing.

"You saw all that I was and you still think I'm worth saving."

"I thought you were worth saving the very moment I saw you."

"When was that?"

"In the incubator at St. Joseph's. You were a beautiful baby. I meant to watch over you all those years...but I'm still learning. I lost you when your parents moved to Los Angeles. I wasn't there when you needed me. But I'm here...now."

He placed his hat back on his head and held out a hand. "It's time to go. Will you come with me?"

She ignored his hand and looked around the dark field. "What's going to happen to this place?"

He followed her gambit. "It served its purpose. But now it's time to prepare. There are others we need to find. Before this earth finally gives way and turns completely on itself."

"And where will we go?"

"A new world, Lucinda, bringer of light. By the way, I gave you that name. You can say I 'inspired' your mother."

She took his hand; it was cooler than her own, but strangely gave off a newer warmth that went through her.

"You'll heal the sick, in those rare instances, and you will find another farm in a place that doesn't "blast up heat and ice at the same time." He laughed. "I like Deedee; she's another one we have to find."

"But the new world...will He abandon it?" She asked as they began to walk toward the dark woods. A path of light opened up in front of them.

"We'll just have to make Him remember us. One day we will."

She stepped into the path of the light just as the rain began to fall.