

HIT
An Epilogue Novella in the GAILSONE Series

Book 6.5 in the story arc
BLACK DAYS

By Casey Glanders

Gailsone: Hit

1st Edition

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Ordering Information:

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above or visit gailsone.com.

Orders by U.S. trade bookstores and wholesalers. Please contact Casey Glanders at cjglanders@gmail.com or visit www.gailsone.com.

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No accountants were harmed in the writing of this story

Printed in the United States of America

This is Book 6.5 in the story arc GAILSONE: Black Days

This story takes place immediately after GAILSONE: Black Days

Also by this author:

Big In Japan

Blood & Rust

A Night at the Opera

Date Night

Blackbird's Song

The Impossible Door

Black Days

Red Rook

Old Ghosts

Ifrit

Paint the Town Red

No Man's Land

Rare Gems

“The test of success is not what you do when you are on top. Success is how high you bounce when you hit bottom.”

-George S. Patton

Alice Gailsone, former criminal extraordinaire and current kind-of superhero, walked briskly down the sidewalk, her heels clicking on the dirty, cracked pavement that covered much of Brooklyn. In her hands was a box from Talley's Diner, filled with large, delicious, wrapped sandwiches (two turkeys, a veggie, one tuna, and a fully-loaded teriyaki chicken), some sides (three coleslaws, a mandarin orange salad, and a massive cookie), and some carefully positioned fountain drinks (three ice teas, two lemonades.) She had treated her staff, as well as Aika, who had been gracious enough to stick around and (kind of) help out. She was smiling. She was smiling so hard she was afraid she was about to crack the enamel of her teeth. She was focused. She was calm.

An explosion from just a couple storefronts ahead promptly derailed said calm. She stopped and looked, and saw a giant, humanoid figure in an orange, scaly dinosaur suit emerge from the front of a destroyed storefront. He stood eight feet tall, and his face was covered by what looked like a horned Tyrannosaurus Rex head with the mouth open to reveal the man's head. He was wearing black-and-white domino mask to hide his identity. In his hand (or claw, Alice wasn't sure), she saw a large, somewhat-stuffed sack. People were running and screaming, and traffic had come to a standstill from the debris that had scattered from the explosion. There was honking, and the sound of alarms, and Alice thought she could hear a sprinkler system doing its thing from within the destroyed business.

"RUN! RUN AND HIDE, MISERABLE HUMANS!" The giant, orange dinosaur man roared. "RUN IN TERROR FROM DINOGORE! I WILL CRUSH YOUR..."

"Excuse me."

Dinogore, his free arm raised in a clenched fist as he declared his intent to crush things, paused in mid-speech. He turned to see Alice, standing calmly with her food in her hands. She was giving the dinosaur man a glare from behind her white, oversized sunglasses. He noticed that she barely came up to his stomach, yet she didn't seem fazed by him in the least.

Dinogore, a bit confused at the tiny woman's lack of fear, turned towards Alice and roared again. "RUN, PUNY, WORTHLESS WOMAN! RUN AND HIDE FROM DINOGORE, LEST I RIP YOUR HEART FROM YOUR BODY AND EAT IT WHOLE!"

Alice sighed. "Please excuse me. You're blocking the sidewalk."

Alice gestured with her head for Dinogore to step aside. Dinogore, now very confused, blinked.

"Look, I'm the last person in the world to say to someone starting out, 'Stop right there,' current job be damned. You wanna make a buck? You make that buck, but come on, already. You're huge, and I can't get around you with this stuff in my hands and this rubble everywhere, so could you please step aside and let a lady through?"

Dinogore, angered at the insolence from the seemingly unimpressed Alice, stormed towards her and swatted the tray of food in her arms away. Alice watched as the box of sandwiches, sides and drinks left her grip and splattered on the ground, her pants, and her shoes.

"I AM DINOGORE! I AM THE JURASSIC SCOURGE OF MANHATTAN! I WILL SKIN YOUR PALE FLESH WITH MY TEETH! I WILL RIP YOUR HEAD FROM YOUR PRETTY LITTLE NECK! I WILL..!"

Alice barely heard the giant criminal in front of her. She was vaguely aware of the sound of police cruisers approaching, and of voices over bullhorns. She just stared at the mess at her feet and thought about her day, and her week, and how perfectly calm she had been. She thought about how this was just one more thing. Just one more tiny, annoying, angering thing that she had calmly tried to deal with, only to have it get completely screwed.

Without looking up at Dingore, she reached out with a glowing, purple hand and plunged it through his armored crotch plate. Before Dinogore knew what was going on, he felt something small, tight, and seemingly white-hot burn through his underwear and wrap around his genitals.

Dinogore dropped his bag of ill-gotten gains and let out a pain-filled, high-pitched scream as he staggered. Alice took off her sunglasses, lightly shook a strand of purple hair out of her face, and shot a menacing look at the now crying, wanna-be supervillain.

“First off,” she said in an authoritarian voice, “Dinogore is about the stupidest name I can think of. Good God, did you go to the Comic Book School of Villainy? Isn’t there a Union in New York that could have directed you better than this? Secondly, this is not dino-armor. This is a Purge-era extreme environmental containment suit. You’re lucky you didn’t blow the damn arm rotors out when you smashed through that wall. It’s meant for cleaning up bio-hazards and deep sea recovery, hence the orange. From the look of it, I’d say it’s at least eight years old, which means you probably stumbled across it in a warehouse or something.”

“E...eBay...” Dinogore stammered out in a broken screech. He wanted to run away, but the woman’s grip was like iron, and he could feel something very wrong and very painful happening between his legs. He was scared, and the tiny woman’s eyes were starting to glow a faint purple as she spoke.

Alice glanced up at the face plate and grunted. “Huh. Nice job on the welding of the dinosaur head, but in doing so, you probably melted the scanners embedded in the faceplate and trashed the long-range comm. Sloppy. Third, you’re in Brooklyn, not Manhattan proper. It’s a minor point, but it just screams tourist. My day was just screwed by a tourist in a giant orange containment suit. Those were not the words I wanted to have come out of my mouth!”

Dinogore’s eyes widened in horror as the woman’s entire body started to glow bright purple. As she spoke, he heard a choir of angry voices emerge from her mouth.

“Fourth,” she screamed, “the Tyrannosaurus was prominent in the upper Cretaceous Period, not the Jurassic! How can you call yourself a dinosaur-themed villain without researching your own fucking character?! This is grade-school paleontology! I know this! I fucking hate dinosaurs and I know this!”

“Please,” Dinogore begged as he wept uncontrollably from the pain between his legs, “Please, I’m sorry! I am very sorry! I’ll research! Please don’t hurt me!”

“FIFTH!” Alice roared, “That was my staff’s lunch! They are a very good staff! They deserve to be treated to a nice lunch! They do not deserve to have that lunch destroyed by an uneducated tourist Dinodip because he has no manners when a woman addresses him in a polite manner!”

“My name...is...Dino...gore...” Dinogore stammered out in a choked sob.

“I DON’T CARE! Maybe next time you should think before treating a lady that way! Maybe that lady can ROT YOUR DICK OFF! WITH HER BARE HANDS!”

Alice was very charged up and glowing brightly. Around her, she could hear a large commotion, but it was hard to tell. Once her powers flared up, it was difficult for her to focus on anything more than what was in front of her. Unless it was something major, she tended to block out the world.

“Hey, everything okay?”

Alice blinked. Still bright purple, she glanced up at the blue-and-white clad Miss Major, who was hovering above the spectacle. Alice stared at the floating hero with a look that screamed she was barely there. Her face, drawn and twisted by the heavy use of dark and ancient entropy magic, looked only somewhat human to Susan.

“Hey,” said the chorus of voices from within Alice’s throat. To Susan, it sounded like the choir of the Damned.

Susan hovered and stared. Alice stared back. There were vapor trails emanating off Alice’s skin from where Carbon Dioxide molecules in the air were making contact with her.

“You, uh, gonna let him go?” Susan pointed to the whimpering villain.

Alice glanced at Dinogore and then back at Susan. “I don’t know,” the chorus of voices chanted through her mouth.

Susan forced herself to stay calm as she swallowed back her nervousness. “Whatever he did, I am sure he is very, *very* sorry, aren’t you, Dinospore?”

The man nodded frantically. “*I’m sorry!* I am *so* sorry! Please don’t hurt me! Oh God, please!”

“Say sorry for calling me a puny, worthless woman,” Alice chanted.

“I’m sorry I called you a puny, worthless woman!”

Susan rubbed her forehead and groaned. “Oh, you did not. She *really* doesn’t like misogyny. Neither do I, for that matter, but *I’m* not the one about to end your family line.”

Alice roared at the not-so-super villain. “Say that a woman’s value is represented by the content of her character and by how she contributes to a society that benefits from her involvement!”

“*I’M SORRRRYYYYY!*” Dinogore screamed.

Alice stared, and then nodded. Her glow fizzled out, and her voice returned to normal. “That’ll do, pig. That’ll do.”

Alice released the giant man’s (now slightly smoking) genitals and took a deep breath. Dinogore, now free from the frightening woman’s clutches, dropped to the ground as he cried uncontrollably. Around her, Alice heard law enforcement voices scream and shout at her to get down, to surrender, and so on. It was an old, familiar song, but then she heard the new verse of Miss Major, hero of the Collective Good and local pseudo-saint, telling them to stand down.

“This woman is a member of the Collective Good. Stand down! Try pointing your guns at the giant dinosaur guy that just robbed that Cash Advance instead. Good Lord...”

Susan floated down to Alice, who was now staring at the ruined food on the ground. Susan looked down at the food and then at Alice. Making a quick connection, she reached into her blue utility belt for her PhoneBuddy. A quick tap later, and she was on the line with a local deli.

“That’s right, a full buffet spread. Uh-huh. Drinks, too. Ice teas, lemonade, yeah, your Executive Buffet. Yes, Visa. Um, hold on.” Alice heard Susan dig in her belt. A moment later, she heard Dr. Gordon rattle off a credit card number and the address for *Rare Gems*. Then, she felt a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, Sweetie. You okay?” Susan kept her voice soft. Alice looked at her friend and saw the concern in her eyes. All at once, the pressure from the last week, having been continually building under the surface, started to crack through in tear-filled fissures. Susan saw Alice’s lip start to wobble and her eyes start to well up. She loudly sobbed and nodded, and then buried her face in Susan’s spandex-covered shoulder. Susan, gesturing for the surrounding paramedics and police to pay attention to the armored man on the ground and not the two ladies, patted Alice on the back and gently stroked her hair.

“It’s okay,” she cooed. “That’s it. Let it all out.”

Alice let out a loud snuffle and stepped away. She wiped her face on the back of her black business suit’s sleeve and nodded. “Yeah, I’m... I need a drink. And lunch. You free, Suzie? Just for a bit?”

Susan nodded and looked around to see if anyone heard the casual use of her name. “Yeah, just give me a few. I have to get back and clock out, and then I’ll meet you at our spot, okay?”

Alice nodded again. “Sure, yeah. Sorry this dragged you away from work.” Alice gestured to the metal man on the ground. At the moment, several firefighters were working on removing the giant, orange armor with a modified jaws of life.

Susan shrugged. “It’s cool. Just, you’ve got a thing with grabbing guys by the junk, you know that?”

Alice shrugged and sniffed. “It works.”

Alice sat in the wooden booth at *Carlton’s* and poked at her salad. She hated salad, but still felt pretty bad after putting nothing but garbage in her body for the last 24 hours, so guilt had temporarily overrode her stomach and forced her hand into ordering something healthy off the lunchtime menu. Now, she sat and poked at a piece of hardboiled egg and sighed. She refused to check the time again. She had checked three times in the last five minutes, and she absolutely would not let her impatience get the best of her.

“Hey. No wig? No glasses? I was almost sure someone else was sitting here.”

Alice glanced up and smiled in relief. Dr. Susan Gordon (Miss Major, to those in the superhero community) was standing by Alice’s booth. She was holding her purse strap in her hand and was dressed business-casual, which told Alice that this had been a workday, and reaffirmed that Susan had stepped away from her job earlier on account of her.

“Hey! Thanks for coming. Yeah, I’m a good guy now, so why the hell not? You didn’t stop anything important just because I asked, did you?” Alice asked. Susan shrugged and slid into the empty booth across from the purple-haired witch.

“Not really, just catching up on some paperwork. Honestly, I was relieved when the emergency alert on my PhoneBuddy went off. It gave me an excuse to get the hell out of there. I thought I was gonna get to punch a giant robot-man through a wall. Instead, I find you, ready to rot off some dino-dick.”

Alice snorted and covered her mouth. “Oh God. Say ‘dino-dick’ again.”

“Seriously!” Susan said with a laugh, “The whole time, I was trying to figure out how we would spin that to the press! I was ready to say, ‘Well, we just wanted to make sure they stayed extinct’.”

Alice giggled. “It wouldn’t have taken much, believe me.”

Susan shook her head with a smile. “Figures. Why is it always the ones with the most armor?”

Alice shrugged. “I don’t know, but it’s consistent. It would almost be worth it to find a big ole’ surprise one of these times, but noooo.”

They smiled at each other for a moment, and then Susan’s face softened. “I heard what happened,” she said in a quiet voice.

Alice sighed. “Already? It’s been, like, a day. Tops.”

Susan looked off to the side. Alice, not one to miss a detail, caught her friend’s pause.

“Oh God. How many people know?”

Susan nodded a bit to herself before answering. “Everyone. At first, they were calling for your head down at Tanner Tower, but Victoria and I reminded them of each mission they royally messed up. That shut them down pretty fast.”

Alice shrugged. “Goes with the job, I guess. I mean, in the old days? I would have just burned the fucking nightclub to the ground and called it a night. I guess I’m not that good at this hero shit after all.”

“None of us are perfect at this. Even Superior Force has had days where he couldn’t save everyone. So has Blackthorne, myself, Blackbird, all of us.”

“I have a hard time imagining Blackbird admitting to messing up much of anything.”

Susan laughed. “I have a story for you some night when we have no obligations and enough alcohol. When she started out, she messed up constantly.”

“Really?”

Susan grinned. “Oh yeah. If you ever wanna piss her off, ask her if she’s run into any hobo-rapists lately.”

Alice smiled. “I would love to hear about that. In the meantime, I have to figure out how, and even if, I’m gonna keep going with this whole ‘hero’ thing. When I was evil, life was a lot less complicated. None of this moral shit got in the way.”

Susan sighed and reached across the table to pat Alice on the hand. "That's a load of crap, honey. Even when you were 'evil'," Susan made quote symbols in the air with her fingers. "You *still* worked with a set of morals. A truly evil woman wouldn't care about children. A truly evil woman would have murdered me and the rest of the Collective Good ages ago, or just let your niece die instead of taking her in, or, God help us, have kept the Impossible Door for herself."

Alice shrugged. "No one is *completely* good or evil, Suzie. Everyone has a line. That doesn't make a person good; that just means they have boundaries. Even villains will pull up short of working with total psychos. I meant that I used to be able to sweep a lot of that under the rug. When I took this gig, I figured that being good would be pretty straightforward. You do it just fine, so does everyone else in your little clubhouse, so why not me? I just, I feel like that's gotten really gray for me, you know? I mean, I tried doing something good for a change. Like, beyond what was expected of me, and ended up with the exact opposite of what I was shooting for. Three little girls are dead, a business was burned to the ground, I injured God only knows how many people, those poor girls in the experimentation lab...God, I am *terrible* at this."

Susan shrugged. "You got hit. You got hit *bad*. I don't care how seasoned you were as a villain, it's hard the first time it happens to you. When you look at what you did and start to think about the thousands of ways you could have done it differently, when you start to second-guess yourself because of your guilt at how things went down, it hurts. That's something all of us deal with, and I can tell you, it *never* gets easier."

"You know," Alice said with a small laugh, "When Prometheus found me and explained what he wanted me for, I had this, I dunno, this fantasy? I used to dream about being a queen, a woman of power that could command nations with her magic. I remember dreaming of ruling the Purge, of being the most powerful and feared woman the world had ever known. Not because I really wanted to, but because I knew if I was, then I wouldn't be able to be hurt by anything. I remember, *God*, I remember this one dream in particular. It was about the Door, actually. I remember standing before it, flames gushing out of it, and me, standing tall atop the world, ready to take my powers and march my armies beyond this world to all others. Those were the bedtime fantasies that Prometheus put in my head. Those were the things I yearned for."

"So what changed?"

Alice bumped a tomato with her fork. "I guess it was a gradual realization that there was nothing I could do to stop people from getting hurt. That was cemented the night everything happened with Allison and I accidentally gained a family member. Even if I had gone full-tilt and tried to conquer the world, I would have sucked at it, and I *still* would have failed in my real goal. Those days, Allison and I to call them the black days, those days where we would be truly, horribly evil? Those were the days that fantasy would play loudly in my head. Then things happened, and suddenly I didn't want that, anymore. I got tired of seeing people die on my watch. I got tired of realizing that all our power and glory wasn't doing a damn thing except killing people that shouldn't have had to die. And then there was this one time? I, you know, I don't really feel like going into details, but I made a bad call because I got flighty, and to this *day*, Allison has not forgiven me for what I did. She probably never will, considering what happened. I just, I was so tired of my decisions leading to people losing their lives, and now here I am, back at square fucking one."

Susan nodded and leaned back as the server, well-accustomed to this particular lunchtime duo, set down a Diet Coke and drifted off. Susan took a sip and smiled at Alice. "Did you catch what you said there?"

"Beg pardon?"

"You said there was nothing you could do to stop people from being hurt. Not you being hurt, but *people*. I honestly don't think you were ever really evil, just lacking in some moral fiber. You mellowed with age, but you've never, in all the encounters I've had with you, come off as strictly evil. You care about others. You always have."

"Caring doesn't, wait. Moral fiber? That sounds like something you'd get from a breakfast cereal. You're making evil sound like constipation. Anyway, caring doesn't stop them from being hurt. Hell, just before I met Prometheus, I destroyed a friendship that had the potential to be something really great. I thought I was doing something good, and she and I really hit it off. I didn't mean to, but I acted without thinking things through and ended up ruining, well, a *lot*."

Susan sipped her Diet Coke. A moment later, a fritter appeared on the table in front of her. She glanced at the server and then at Alice, who nodded in understanding. "I ordered ahead of time for you. My treat."

"And what if I wanted salad?"

Alice gave Susan a level glare. "Suzie, you and I both know that no woman eats a salad for enjoyment. This veggie abomination in front of me was a guilt-fueled mistake from having eaten too much fast food."

Susan scrunched her brow in confusion. "Don't you just burn those calories away anyway?"

Alice sighed. "Well, yes, but it still leaves me feeling like shit. Ergo, salad. Look, if you don't want the fritter, pass it here."

Susan grabbed her plate and scooted it closer to her person. "I love you like a sister, but back the hell off. My fritter."

Alice watched Susan take a large bite and then looked at her own lunch. "I need to rethink some life choices."

"If that's how you feel," Susan said after washing down her bite with a sip of soda, "then have you considered tracking down that friend and reconnecting? Even to say sorry?"

Alice crossed her arms. "First off, I was referring to my lunch. Secondly, not that you're wrong, what makes you think *I'm* the one that needs to apologize?"

"Because you wouldn't feel guilty unless you thought the reason you had a falling out was your fault."

Alice opened her mouth to respond, and then shut it with a frown. Susan saw this and smiled, but wisely stayed quiet.

Alice shrugged her shoulders. "Wouldn't matter. It wasn't like we were friends for long, and it's not like I could trace her nowadays anyway."

“Yes, because we don’t have, oh, I don’t know, the Internet or anything.”

Alice started ticking points off in her fingers. “She could be dead, or using a fake name, or in jail, or in Tahiti, for all I know. Seriously, it’s been *years*. She probably doesn’t even remember me anyway.”

“You remember her.”

Alice bit her lip and nodded as she looked away. “The events of the last few days have lent towards some serious flashbacks, yes.”

Susan took another bite. “Look, each of us works through this kind of thing in their own way. The fact that you chose to talk about it is good. It helps to get this kind of thing out in the open. I’m just suggesting that you take it a step further, is all. Give her a call. You would *obviously* like a little closure.”

Alice slumped in her seat and sighed. “Ain’t gonna happen, Suzie. Like I said, she’s long gone, and I doubt I could ever find her, even if I wanted to. Now,” Alice put her finger in her salad. Susan watched as Alice’s hand glowed purple, and the offending greens withered and rotted away to dust. Alice then glanced around until she made eye contact with the nearest server. “Hi!” Alice waved, grinning. “Please bring me a brownie sundae with a side of Coconut Vodka?”

Susan shook her head, polished off her fritter and smiled. “Whatever you say, Alice. Whatever you say.”

The rental car slowly made its way down a wooded lane dotted with tiny, older homes until rolled up to a small, gray ranch-style house nestled in a Portland suburb. The car, a black sedan, parked and waited, and a moment later, shut off. A pale woman in a purple business suit with hair to match emerged and looked at the small house, and then at an address scribbled down on a note in her hand. She took a breath to steady the small swell of butterflies in her stomach and hoped that she wasn't making a mistake.

After summoning her courage, she grabbed a small bag from the passenger seat and headed up the slightly unkempt stone walkway to the door. She noted a plastic slide in the yard and the older model van in the driveway, the satellite on the roof, and the smell of coffee and pop tarts as she reached the white, wooden door. She reached up, ready to knock, and then paused. She wondered at how good of an idea this really was, and even if she should be there at all.

Then she thought about what Aika had said just a day before.

"Those days do not leave us. They teach us, mold us, make us better than we were before. They are the milestones that remind us why we are who we are."

Alice stared at the door.

"I'm just suggesting that you take it a step further, is all. Give her a call. You would obviously like a little closure."

"Dammit, Suzie," Alice muttered.

After taking a deep breath, she knocked.

There was the sound of movement, a muffled voice, and of a lock rattling. A moment later, the door opened to reveal a woman roughly Alice's height with shoulder-length hair and a slightly rounder face than Alice remembered. Melissa had aged well, and Alice instantly recognized her old friend. Alice did her best to look like she was calm, but she could feel the anxiousness emanating off of her. She was at once grateful that she had stopped to pee at the corner gas station, as she was practically vibrating with nerves.

The woman looked at Alice and instantly widened her eyes in recognition. They stood like that for a few seconds in awkward silence before Alice grinned and said "Hi," in a small voice.

There was a pause.

"Hello," Melissa said cautiously.

"I, um, was in town on business and thought, um, that I would try to reconnect? If that's cool?"

There was another pause. Alice could hear the sound of a cartoon blaring somewhere within the house, and of laughter.

"Because if it's not cool," Alice said hastily, "I can go. I can totally go. It's no big thing. I just, it had been a while, and the last time we saw each other was kind of, um, that was a bad day. That's a gross understatement. I was in town. On business. And I'd been thinking about, you know, those days, and

remembered what you said about coming out here, and you know what? This was probably stupid, but I thought I'd drop by and at least say hi, and I was in town, and this seemed like a better idea on paper."

There was another pause. A dog barked somewhere nearby.

Alice held up the small bag in her hand. "I, um, used secret woman powers to grab some drinks. You know, if you drink still. Which if you don't, that's cool. I'm cool. I was in town. This was stupid, wasn't it? I should go. It was good to see you again. I should go."

Alice backed away from the door, her confidence now completely derailed. She started back towards her rental car and then stopped when she heard Melissa ask, "What exactly was wrong with secret *girl* powers?"

Alice turned and grinned. "Boobs work great, but credit cards get consistent results."

Melissa smiled a little, but then it faded. "I know who you are," she said in a cautious tone. "I've seen the news. I watched what you've done. They called you the most dangerous woman in the world. From what I've seen, I would have to agree."

Alice swallowed and nodded. "I can't argue that."

Melissa stood with her arms crossed and took in the sight of the scattered business woman in front of her. "Why in God's name would I let you in my home? Near my children? Why are you even here? We knew each other for what? A week? What the hell *is* this?"

Alice slumped and sighed. "This week, something happened. Something involving *St. Agnes*. It stirred a lot of old memories for me, and the biggest one was of the only friend I had at the time. That's all. I just, I guess I just wanted to know that you made it, you know? That you were okay and had a life and all. I swear, that's it. I just, I dunno. Again, this seemed smarter on paper."

They stared at each other, the only sounds being those of insects buzzing, cars moving in the distance, and somewhere far off, there was the whistle of a freight train.

Melissa looked like she was about to speak several times, but then would stop, as if she thought better about it. Alice saw this and nodded. With a small smile, she said, "I'm glad you made it. I'm glad you have a life, and that you got out of that place. I hope you stay safe. You take care, Mel."

Alice turned to leave.

"Hey,"

Alice glanced back.

"There's a steak house near here. *Bernard's*? You probably passed it when you came up here."

Alice nodded. "Yeah, by that weird giant chicken statue down the road?"

Melissa nodded. "That's the farmer's market entrance. Yeah. Look, my husband gets off at five. I'll toss something in the slow cooker for him and the kids, and I'll be there at six, if you want to catch up."

Alice smiled and nodded. "I'd like that."

While she wasn't sure, Alice thought she saw a small smile as Melissa closed her door. Alice headed back to her sedan and took another look around the neighborhood. She saw the line of SUV's, small, single-story homes, play sets, animals on leads, garden gnomes, sprinklers, and beautiful, lush trees that lined the street. She took a breath and breathed in the smell of cut grass and fresh air. She closed her eyes, and for a moment, she could see herself in one of those homes. She imagined loading a child, maybe two, into the backseat of a station wagon to get them to their swimming lessons. She imagined cooking a dinner each night for a family, of getting hugs and cuddles and staying up late to watch television, of being held at night by someone who chose to share that life with her, of being content in a normal, average, everyday life.

Melissa grinned. "I've always wanted a house, you know? Not an apartment, but a house. It doesn't have to be big or anything, but a home, with a family. You know, kids, a dog or two, maybe a van or something? Soccer practices and scout meetings and all of that crap. Just something normal, like everyone is supposed to have. That's my dream, Alice. That's always been my dream. I don't care how boring it sounds. I want it."

Alice looked back at the small gray house, and smiled. Without a word, Alice drove out of the neighborhood and back towards the main road. There was a bookstore she had noticed that looked perfect for passing the time, and it was still three hours until six.