Dear Mom,

How are you and Grandad and the aunts and all the cousins and everybody back in St. Catharines? Please tell the guys down at St. C. General Hospital that I got their card, and thank them for their good wishes. I love it here in the Big City, but I will miss all the folks back home.

My new apartment is small but comfortable, in a nice neighborhood. I have a little balcony, which gives me a place to grow herbs and access out to the open air. It's high up enough that nobody is overlooking my balcony directly, so I have plenty of privacy.
The Toronto Coroners Office is a great place to work. Everyone's so friendly! I'm mostly working dayshift (which is lucky for me and a little unusual -- new hires usually have to work nights, but the previous newest employee prefers not to switch) but there's a lot of overlap on the shift changes, and they'll probably be calling me in whenever there's a DNA analysis to do, since that was my specialty. I guess the long hours would be a problem if I had a husband or kids, or if there weren't so many First Nations practitioners in Toronto that there was a big demand here for an Herb Doctor. (Even the local Chinese community use the First Nations shamans for curse-breaking! They're just that good.) As it is, though, my Day Job's long hours are no problem at all. Talk to you soon!

Love,
Grace

**********

Dear Mom,

Thank you so much for the basket of cookies you sent me. They were delicious; I definitely think you and Auntie Constance should add them to the rotation at the bakery. Was the basket one of Auntie Patience's? It looks like her work -- so beautiful! I don't know how she does it.

The shift schedule at the Coroners Office is turning out to be a little crazier than it seemed at first, but I'm still handling it. My Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings are not available for work, and everybody's fine with that. The church choir is important to me! And we're really good. :-D

Toronto's a big city, but the "talented" population seems more like a small town -- last weekend at my favorite Chinatown herb shop (there are some things you just can't grow on a balcony!) I met Joe Stonetree and his wife Marie. They're both First Nations people, and they know all the psychics and spell-casters in town, and he's Captain of the local precinct. We had a nice long chat about high-bush cranberries and roses. Joe looked at me a little hard at one point, and asked me what I thought of Natalie Lambert (she's the woman who didn't want to switch over to dayshift -- I told you about her before) and I said she seemed competent and professional and pleasant to work with, which is all true. I didn't tell him I'd heard that she maybe lost a body two years ago, because that's gossip, which I never listen to (or at least I don't repeat it, or at least I don't repeat it to somebody in a supervisory position LOL) I'm sure there's nothing to it, anyway; bodies don't just stroll out of the morgue. Probably somebody just forgot to sign something when a mortuary picked up -- that happened once at the St. Catharines General morgue, but fortunately not on my shift!

Say hi to everybody for me! I miss you all.

Love,
Grace

**********

Dear Mom,

I take back what I said last week about Natalie Lambert probably not losing a body. She's such a ditz, I could totally believe it! We caught a murder case (lingo!), and they had me stay over hours past the end of my shift to test some DNA evidence, and she walked off to a political fundraiser, and gave an unauthorized statement to the TV news, WITH THE KEY TO THE EVIDENCE LOCKER IN HER POCKET!!! And she wasn't answering her pager, either. I did all the department's back paperwork, waiting for her, and finally I left word with Det. Knight about why I couldn't do my darn job, and I went home. I ran the DNA when I came in the next morning, which
I totally could have done anyhow. Talk about a waste of time! And the taxpayers' money. Grr.

Just a little rant, Mama. Actually, everything is fine here. Give my love to everybody.

--Grace--

P.S. It turns out that one of the campaign managers was the murderer! Making Natalie's RAH RAH POLITICS shenanigans even more unprofessional!

P.P.S. And in happier news, I went out on a date with that man from church. (So Auntie Constance can stop nagging any time!) You remember Charlie, the baritone everybody loved so much when you all came to hear us sing. He was nice, but so boring!!! LOL

Dear Mom,

No, really, it is all fine here. I was just ranting a little, just to you. (Thank you for being there!) At work, I hope I always act professionally. Never discuss politics or religion, right?

(At the risk of sounding like a six-year-old, SHE STARTED IT! The woman dared to call me "politically ignorant" because I disagreed with her about the mayoral race. Excuse me? I may have only lived here a few months, but I read the newspapers! To be fair, she did apologize later.)

Now that the election is over, everything’s running a lot smoother at work. Detective Schanke ended up on TV, too, by the time it was all over -- at least he didn't say anything! (His outfit was hilarious, though.) Next election I'll make a point of being out of town. Natalie's not a ditz really, but there is something odd going on, I think. Since Joe mentioned it, I've been paying closer attention (I'm not being a busybody, Mama, I'm just keeping my eyes open!) and I wonder if maybe she's trying to break a curse or something by herself? I keep finding half-cups of weird potions in the sink, for instance, and she's oddly distracted sometimes. (Or maybe she just has a crush on Det. Knight! Wouldn't explain the potions, which are not "herbal tea" whatever she says.) I know it's none of my business unless she asks for help, and there are a hundred shamans in the Greater Metropolitan Area she could be getting help from already. I know! But I'm just a tiny bit worried. Maybe. But I'm not butting in!

Say hi to everybody for me. Love you all.

--Grace--

Dear Mom,

There's definitely something odd going on with Natalie. I know Grandad doesn't see so well anymore -- could you maybe read this to him and ask if there's something else I should have done/should be doing?

It started with a dream -- three dreams actually. I was in a tree, on the bank of a river full of whitewater. I could see the edge of a waterfall off in the distance (I knew in the dream it was dangerously high) and a lot of dangerous rocks, and Natalie was floating in a barrel on the river, heading right for her death. There was a man on the opposite bank -- a tall, dark-haired, good-looking, white man (what a cliche, I know!) -- and I knew that if he'd just notice her, he would pull her out of the water. Unless somebody did something, she'd be sure to die.

***************

I was in a tree, on the bank of a river full of whitewater. I could see the edge of a waterfall off in the distance (I knew in the dream it was dangerously high) and a lot of dangerous rocks, and Natalie was floating in a barrel on the river, heading right for her death. There was a man on the opposite bank -- a tall, dark-haired, good-looking, white man (what a cliche, I know!) -- and I knew that if he'd just notice her, he would pull her out of the water. Unless somebody did something, she'd be sure to die.
That was the first night.

I asked around a little at work the next day, and I stayed late so I could study her when she came in for her shift -- surely a dream like that is like asking, isn't it? She's dedicated to her work -- we all are, naturally -- but people seem to think she never dates. I don't know why; objectively speaking, she's very pretty and seems to have a good sense of humor.

That night I had the second dream. I was in a tree again, a tall one in an old forest. I could see Natalie on the ground, walking. She tripped and I could see she landed with her hand right next to a rattlesnake. Then I noticed that just past the snake there was also a grizzly bear looking right at her! But in the other direction, looking the other way, was a ranger or a hunter -- that tall dark handsome guy again -- with a rifle, and I knew that if she could get his attention he could save her from both of them.

The next day at work (in between my actual work, Mama, I'm not neglecting my legitimate duties to interfere with other people's lives -- I'm not!) I looked up some of Natalie's records and found out that it was almost her birthday. So I got a little workplace party planned for her -- you know the kind of thing, no big deal, just cake and candles and a card and club together on a gift. Everybody likes her well enough, but it seems like nobody really knows her that well. I found out that the Sidney Lambert on her home answerphone message is her cat, not a brother or an ex like I'd thought.

The last dream came that night. (Three nights in a row! -- I've never felt so psychically shouted at!) I was up in a tall tree again, near the edge of a forest, in a valley half-filled with glacier. There was a forest fire (I knew I was fine; the wind was blowing away from me) racing along, and Natalie was right in its path. Even if she'd managed to outrun the fire, and get to the ice, I could see from my high vantage point that the ice field was rotten with concealed crevasses -- there was absolutely no safe path for her there. But there was that tall, dark-haired man again -- I could see him well enough to recognize, even though he was flying a helicopter! I knew if she'd just be able to catch his attention, he'd be able to save her from both the fire and the ice.

When I woke up, I felt like I should be writing romance novels! With that in mind, I got Natalie lingerie for her deparmental birthday present. It's a traditional gag gift, anyway (she's turning thirty) as well as hopefully something to put her in the way of attracting whoever this dream man might be. And I'm keeping my eye out for tall, dark-haired white boys to throw her in the way of. But I don't really want to go casting a love-spell -- I already feel like I'm being an interfering long-nose -- and besides, love-spells so frequently go wrong. And she hasn't asked me to find her a man, or point to her true love, or anything like that. But on the other hand, there are these dreams!

For now, I've decided to put off anything further until after the birthday party next week.

Please tell me what you think would be the right thing to do, as well as asking Grandad.

Love,
Grace

*****************

Dear Mom,

So Mr. Tall Dark-Haired Handsome, who I was pushing Natalie at all week -- turned out to be a serial killer!!! Just goes to show. If it weren't for the fact that I got one of my gitchy feelings when I was collecting control samples for the PCR boost (and that ended up with us getting the guy's actual DNA for a perfect match -- Nat was ON A DATE WITH HIM WHEN I found out he was
I don't know how Det. Knight got there in time to save her!) I'd be starting to think that there's something really wrong with me. I had really not been convinced that I had the right man (he was a florist, for one thing, isn't that supposed to be some sort of warning sign?) because the man in my dream felt more connected somehow -- he felt like somebody's relative or something. The florist didn't feel like that at all. (Knight's not the guy from my dream either -- he's not that tall, and he's a pasty-faced, yellow-haired, delicate kind of a guy -- allergic to all kinds of things, poor fellow -- half the time when people greet him, they open with "You feeling all right, Knight?"

All's well that ends well, I guess, and I haven't had any more dreams. I'll try to act with a little more dignity, like Grandad said. I have my own business to mind; I know that. I do. But I wish I knew who the man in my dreams was, and how Natalie is supposed to avoid the waterfall, the grizzly bear, and the ice without him.

I know, I know. We can't always know; we can't always help. I just wonder.

Love, Grace

************************

Dear Mom,

Well, the "talented" community of Toronto is one smaller today. I'd only met the lady twice, but she was a good friend of the Stonetrees. Joe was a pall-bearer at the funeral, and Marie spoke the eulogy. Everyone was there -- First Nations shamans and medicine men, Chinese sorcerors and herbalists, Anglo New-Agers and psychics, and one Gullah Herb Doctor (me.) She was a touch-telepath, and an object-reader, and she had dreams, too. Joe was particularly heartbroken -- it was written all over his face -- she was killed helping his detectives nail a murderer.

I'm praying for him as well as her.

I hope you are all well.

Love, Grace

************************

Dear Mom,

We're running like a well-oiled machine here at the Coroners Office these days. We had an auditor from the Crown all last week, and we passed with flying colours! Paperwork all up-to-date, autopsies and analyses well-documented and according to spec (If Natalie really did lose a body a couple years ago, she at least covered it up well!) and BEST OF ALL! They won't be back for at least three years! Because we did not have a single action-item written up against us! Natalie and I celebrated by having a picnic in the lab. (Food is strictly prohibited LOL!)

Poor Joe Stonetree had to kill a suspect. It was a "righteous shoot" (these couple of holdup artists were firing at him; I found the powder burns that proved it, on the dead boy's jacket) but it was still hard on him. He lost another long-time friend just a few months ago -- Inspector Fiore, another old warhorse of the police department and a bowling buddy of his, mixed up in a big sex scandal and murder. Joe got kidnapped and shot during the investigation. So he lost that friendship, too, and I think Joe's still sick about it. He keeps talking about retiring, and I guess I can't blame him. He's
had a terrible year.

I had kind of a gitchy feeling about that shooting, and it led right to the powder burns, though I'd like to think I would have found them anyway. And I finally broke a curse for somebody up here! A woman from church was complaining about how bad her health and her luck have been ever since her divorce, and the choir leader referred her to me. It was easy to clear up, and it was nice to say the words and do the work again.

The weather's been lovely recently. I was out the other night. It was clear and beautiful, and the sky was full of stars above and city lights below.

I really am glad I came here.

Love,
Grace

*************

Dear Mom,

Poor Auntie Constance! I'm happy for Toby, though, if the girl's as nice as you say. I sent them a teapot and a card with a cheque in it. He'll enjoy teaching school more than being a priest, I think, and it's not like he's leaving the Church or anything, just dropping out of the seminary. So much better to fall in love and change his mind before he'd taken any vows! I pray that Auntie Constance won't make their lives a misery. All it would do would be poison her chances of knowing her grandchildren -- she must know that.

Well, Joe retired. The party was wonderful, but it was still, to me, a sad occasion. Apparently, losing a captain meant they had to re-organize all the precincts, since there's a hiring freeze. (I'm not entirely sure how that works.) Joe wouldn't stay, though -- just too many things loaded onto him this last year. Knight and Schanke (Natalie's and my favorite detectives, respectively!) ended up under Capt. Cohen. I don't know her -- she's not Catholic; she's not "talented"; she doesn't hang around the Coroners Office. Because of the shakeup, Schanke's ended up 100% on nightshift now. I guess I won't be seeing him as much anymore, either.

We came within a hairsbreadth of not seeing Det. Knight anymore at all. One of the forensic techs (Jeff, on the same shift as me; I don't think I've ever mentioned him to you) apparently lost his damn mind and decided to try and frame the detective for some murders that happened near his apartment. He'd been making me feel just a little uneasy for a week or so; I guess now I know what a sudden attack of schizophrenia reads like? The whole thing was just a mess. Natalie got me to help her collect control samples (it always works better to double-team them) but instead of having me stay late to run the DNA myself, or leaving the samples for me to do in the morning (either of which would be standard -- I was particularly ready to stay late since it was one of our own detectives at stake, but she said to go on home) Natalie ran it all, and she mislabelled the samples! She's not a ditz; she must have done it on purpose. Detective Schanke, Knight's partner, and used-to-be his dayshift counterpart, filling his sentence with so many "allegedly" and "theoretically" weasel words that I knew that he was actually telling the truth, said that Knight's allergies and sensitivities have gotten so bad that Natalie was afraid he'd be thrown off the force if they tested his own real blood. The other obvious explanation would be that she was afraid he was guilty, but Schanke caught Jeff trying to get away, and he confessed and all, so that's surely not it. That's the second time that one of the reference DNA donors has turned out to be the perpetrator here, though, which is so unlikely I hardly know what to think about it. So I guess I won't. :-)

It's a lucky thing for us that Knight's not a serial killer. Despite his allergies, and the way he always
seems to look a little ill, he escaped from police custody! (Nobody should have been able to break those doors like he did! I guess he was desperate.) And nobody but his own partner had the ghost of a chance at tracking him down. Schanke didn't turn him in until he was bringing Jeff in, too, which I guess is what partners are for. When they were searching his place, they found out Det. Knight keeps blood in his refrigerator! Schanke said it was to thicken his paints (he paints a lot, apparently) but I never heard of that.

Speaking of blood in the fridge, did you ever read *The Denied* by Emily Weiss? It was the latest big thing here in Toronto a little while ago. Vampire novels are intermittently all the rage, I know, but this was a good one! Everybody around here was reading it, and then we had the further excitement of the author herself getting stalked and having to be put up in Det. Knight's apartment for her own protection! It was just for one night -- Natalie met her, but I'd already gone off shift by the time she came in, and it was all over before morning. Brush with fame!

Say hi to everybody, and let me know when I should start "gently inquiring" if my wedding presents were lost in the mail! LOL! (Is the bride a letter-writing type? I guess I'll know pretty soon!)

Love,
Grace

******************

Dear Mom,

I guess you've probably read about our latest crime spree, even in St. Catharines. It's pretty spectacular when the victims are literally ripped to pieces. The newspapers here were bringing up old stories all the way back to Jack the Ripper.

An Interpol Inspector from Ireland came over in pursuit. He'd followed the crimes all over, from Europe and on. Mama, this man from Interpol was the creepiest thing I've ever stood next to. It was like shivers of cold, waves, just coming off of him and out into the surrounding world -- shivers of cold, cold unfinishedness. Nobody else seemed to feel it; I wished Stonetree still worked at the PD! Bridget Hellman was showing O'Neill around. She was the newest detective, just promoted from uniform and shifted to nights from days. I knew her pretty well; she sang second soprano in the church choir. When she brought him down to the morgue to check out the latest two bodies, I couldn't even stay in the same room as him, he was just that disturbing.

Well, Chief Inspector Liam O'Neill got his man (or his whatever; I didn't see the body -- Natalie was acting strange, but strange on O'Neill's side, not as if she thought there was anything dark about him) and Birdy Hellman lost her life. Another good person dead. Her funeral's tomorrow. O'Neill changed his travel plans to stay until after she's buried. I guess that shows some proper human feeling?

I just don't know, Mama. I just don't know. I loved this place for the people I worked with, you know? And now so many of them are gone. Even the ones who are still here, like Nat, hardly interact anymore like we used to. The budget freezes and attrition have left everybody overworked, and the shift assignments are coming down from higher levels -- there's hardly any room for self-scheduling these days.

Maybe I should look for another job. What do you think?

Love,
Grace
Dear Mom,

Congratulations, Best Wishes, and Good Luck to Toby and Maricela! May God bless them and keep them! Is Auntie Constance looking forward to being a granny or dreading it? I think I'll just wait for a few months before sending baby gifts. (I'm a little surprised you're already telling people she's expecting! Aren't we all more superstitious than that? LOL)

Now that the shifts at work have become more strictly separated, I hardly see Natalie anymore. Fortunately, now that he's working nights only, Don Schanke comes to lunch with me and the Stonetrees sometimes, so I still hear about what's going on. (I suppose it makes sense that most of the police action in the city happens at night.) Don's so funny! I feel like I'm getting to know him more now than I did when we genuinely worked together. You should hear him rant about Nick! And Joe just makes these deep Hmm kind of sounds, and looks wise, except when he's laughing his head off. This story made Joe laugh: a few weeks ago Nick called Don from the field and told him to come pick up his (Nick's) car because there was a guy in the trunk! It turned out to be the man who'd murdered a couple of psychics -- fortune-tellers really, I knew them only slightly, they seemed like nice women -- this city seems to be particularly hazardous for the "talented", but I always watch my back, Mama, don't worry about me. Nick had taken off somehow, without his car (which is a behemoth of a classic Cadillac, just beautiful!) and ended up catching the man who'd hired the killer, red-handed, where he was trying to gun down another woman. It was all about some ancient business deal gone wrong; the perp must have been seventy years old at least!

I have three interviews next week -- St. Joseph's, St. Michael's Hospital downtown and Scarborough Grace. Wish me luck!

Love,
Grace

***************

Dear Mom,

Please pray for Marie Stonetree, may she rest in peace. Pray for Joe, too, he's taking it awful hard, as you'd expect. She passed away in her sleep last night. He'd been retired less than six months. They had so many plans for what they were going to do together, but now that's all come to nothing. All I can do is try to be there for him. I wish Don Schanke hadn't happened to be on vacation when this happened; Don can be a great comfort. (He took his vacation time -- regardless of how busy and understaffed they are in Homicide -- after being kidnapped and threatened with a bomb and rescued, very dramatically, by Nick Knight, who then spent the day in the morgue recovering from his sunburns and assorted allergic boils and hives, and keeping out of the sun until nightshift. Joe used to always make his people take their vacation time, especially after anything traumatic; Capt. Cohen had to be argued into letting Don go. I really don't care for that style of management.)

In happier news, I've gotten an offer from St. Michael's. The pay's a little better than what I'm getting here, and the hours promise to be much, much better. I think I'm going to take it.

Give my love to everybody! I miss you all.

--Grace--

***************
Dear Mom,

The new job at St. Michael's is working out really well so far. Everybody's very nice, and the work is interesting without being non-stop. I'm the new hire, so I'm on nights, but my evenings off are Wednesday and Thursday, which works out fine for choir practice. I know it sounds ghoulish (but, hey, you already know I'm a pathologist! LOL) but it's nice to do an autopsy on somebody who hasn't died by violence!

I keep making sure to have lunch with Joe every week. It was a beautiful funeral, but it turns out he has almost no family left alive -- his son is grown, and very busy with his law practice and his new wife in Vancouver -- almost everybody there was from the "talented" community of Toronto, or else from the police department. We've divvied him up, a little, otherwise he's silent and brooding, and we're all afraid for him. Old cops so often "eat their guns" after being retired andwidowed. Don's made him join the Police Association bowling league again (which he'd given up after the Inspector Fiore debacle), and Joe has standing lunch dates with two shamans and Mr. Po, from the herb shop, as well as with me.

Oh, Mama, I just heard on the news -- Natalie's goddaughter has been kidnapped! Pray for her, please, pray for us all. I'm going down to see if I can help.

Love,
Grace

*****************

Dear Mom,

Oh, what a tragedy! Poor Natalie! You've probably seen the news, even there -- the little girl was killed, they caught the murderer (they had him dead to rights, Mama! The DNA was there if it had been tested right. I could have done it if I'd been there -- they didn't let Nat do it, for obvious reasons) but then the ME who came in when Natalie had been recused altered test results to get the murderer released, so she could kill him herself. Dr. Emma Reston apparently went into law enforcement specifically so she could subvert the legal process to get her own revenge on all sexual predators. Talk about pity and terror!

I hope everyone at home is well. Give my love to them all.

Love,
Grace

*****************

Dear Mom,

Wow, that automatic sprinkler system in the kitchen of the bakery really paid for itself, eh? I'm sorry to hear about the rest of the strip mall, of course, but I'm glad your shop is mostly unharmed. Will the insurance pay for the water damage and all? It was nice of Toby to give up his summer vacation to work on fixing it all back up with you. How are he and Maricela doing? Is he mainly happy to just be out of the house, away from the rampant pregnancy hormones? ;-)

I'm so glad nobody was hurt!

Speaking of fire, I'm afraid we've had a madman attacking homeless people with a flamethrower here recently. I hope to Heaven that they're not making Natalie do the autopsies on those bodies. She's very badly affected by burned flesh -- everybody has their idiosyncracies. When I first
worked there, we had the flexibility in the Coroners Office to work around things like that, but I'm not sure they still do. They might not even have anyone else qualified to do the work -- with the hiring freeze, it may be just her and Dr. Zhang, and he's only an intern. I should give her a call.

I was out on a date at the Trattoria Roma last week (Karl Forrester, from Payroll -- a good man, but not very interesting) and ran into Don and Myra Schanke. It was nice to meet her.

Say hi to everybody! Tell Maricela to stay out of the heat and put her feet up! LOL

Love,
Grace

***************

Dear Mom,

Congratulations to Auntie Constance on being a grandmother! LOL! (You can see why I didn't write that directly to her.) I sent Toby and Maricela some baby things, but I'm not holding my breath waiting for a thank you note. :-D

Don Schanke was going to meet Joe Stonetree and I for lunch today, but he called it off on account of having to wash Knight's car! I can't wait to hear the story of whatever bet he must have lost for that!

Work continues to be fairly interesting and not too hard. I hope I'm not getting bored with it. One thing I am getting bored with, though, is the local set of men to date. I may have to take Myra Schanke up on her offer to introduce me to her hairdresser's nephew.

Say hi to everybody for me!

Love,
Grace

***************

Dear Mom,

I have failed.

There was a curse -- I still don't know exactly where or how, what triggered it off, or what kind it was. Nobody asked me to break it, but I could feel a curse, an old one, a big one, right around town here. I didn't hunt it down, because I was minding my own business.

Maybe you saw about the plane crash in the news? Don Schanke is dead, along with Capt. Cohen. And I think it was caused by the curse, that I could feel around my town and I did nothing about!

The heck with dignity, and the heck with minding my own business. If I feel such a thing again I will fight it. No matter what.

Sorry.

Love,
Grace

*******************
Dear Mom,

I'm sorry that I worried you with my last letter. I'm okay, really. I'm going to miss Don, though.

The new Homicide Captain is a man named Reese. I've never met him, but Joe Stonetree doesn't seem to have all that high an opinion of his competence. Oh, he doesn't really say anything, but it's the way he doesn't say it. Detective Knight's been assigned the Police Commissioner's daughter, Tracy Vetter, as his new partner. I don't know her, either -- she must be since my time.

It's odd how much has happened since I worked there. It seems so recent, but really it's almost a year ago that I left. I don't know why I never seem to have more news from the hospital. I guess I could tell you that they got a new MRI machine? LOL Not that interesting!

Love to everybody!

--Grace--

Dear Mom,

Sometimes I think this whole darn city is under a curse! Then I realize it's just that some people are terrible, and that it's probably the same all over.

Joe Stonetree had to be a pall-bearer again, at the funeral of Gary Blackwing, medicine man of the Missisaga Tribe, just north of Toronto. He was murdered. (Det. Knight from Joe's old precinct was one of the investigators.) It turned out to be the tribe's lawyer, who was up to some shenanigans about a big piece of property the tribe owned. The whole situation became one of these giant, corrupt tangles where all sorts of people get murdered to cover up the original crime. Ultimately, Knight and some other members of the tribe confronted the lawyer with the truth -- the lawyer ended up dead, and so did Marian Blackwing, Gary's grandchild, who inherited his vision and should have inherited his post.

I guess some people are happy that the property issue has been resolved justly. I can't get over the tragic loss of life.

Send me some pictures of Toby's baby, would you? I'd like to feel hopeful again.

Love,
Grace

Dear Mom,

Good heavens! Auntie Patience got married again?!? What is she thinking?

Please don't tell her I reacted like that. :-)

Oh, well. What does this one do? High-wire performer? Bronco buster? Reptile handler? LOL

Things at St. Michael's continue to be good, and pretty quiet. The most exciting thing that happened there lately was when Detective Knight came in with a gunshot wound and suffered some retrograde amnesia for a few days. It wasn't serious, although there was some mix-up when he first came in and he was actually "called" with a time-of-death -- Natalie said it was a side-effect
of some of his pre-existing medical problems, that he could have a ridiculously faint pulse for a while even though he wasn't that badly injured. Dr. Turner said he was lucky his skull was so thick.

It was nice to see Natalie again. She seemed glad to see me, too, although preoccupied and a little twitchy. That's understandable. Even if she isn't crushing on Nick Knight (and I can never really make up my mind if she's in love with him, or if she just finds all his allergies and sensitivities to be a fascinating medical syndrome LOL) they still have worked closely together for many years now. It's scary when your friend gets shot in the head!

I went up and sat with him awhile, the day he spent in hospital. We had a nice little chat, and it occurred to me afterwards that I've really never known anything in particular about him. I pretty much confined myself to telling him some of the funny stories about himself that Det. Schanke had told me over the years. I still miss Don.

Speaking of Nick Knight's partners, if you watch the "Jerry" show you may have seen the new one -- Detective Vetter was in the studio audience when they did the "Supernatural Lovers" episode. She was the pretty, blonde woman in the black-and-white outfit who said, "Um, they should get help?" LOL

Oh, they caught Nick's shooter, and Nick did get his memory back.

Say hi to everybody, especially the newlyweds! Let me know their address, and I'll make sure to send something.

Love,
Grace

P.S. Thank you so much for the photos! They were just what I needed. Such a cute baby!

******************

Dear Mom,

Something terrible has happened, something unbelievable. I'm going to need to tell you the whole story in writing, so I can get it clear in my head. Then I'll call you in a couple of days, when Natalie's well enough to travel, and ask you if I can please take her home to you and the family for a while.

Except for when she was here when Det. Knight got shot, I honestly hadn't thought very much about Natalie for several months -- with Don gone, I don't really see anyone who knows her very often. And the hospital keeps me busy, and church, and I've been picking up a little more curse-breaking and healing work lately -- Audrey in Emergency refers people to me.

Then I had another dream about her. There was no tall, dark-haired stranger in this one, waiting to save her if only she could catch his eye -- just me, perched in a tall tree, watching her stumble into a dark, dangerous cloud. It was wet, and cold, and there were the glints of wild animals' eyes (or demons' eyes) in the surrounding darkness. I called the Coroners Office the next day, just to check up on her, but Nat wasn't available, and that night when I called during her shift, she was out on a call. I chatted a little with George and Jimmy, and they both said she seemed fine, so I left my number and let it be. After all, she hadn't asked me for anything. It was hardly my business, anyway.

I had that same dream, or variations on it, a few more times over the next month. I'd call, and leave a message, and Nat never called back, which is a pretty clear indication that she didn't want to talk
to me, certainly didn't want my help. But the dreams were a pretty clear indication, to me at least, that she did need my help, and they were coming to me, which kind of did make it my business.

I told Joe Stonetree about them, and he looked concerned. We talked about her a little; in addition to her goddaughter last year, Joe told me her only brother was killed the year before. That's not even counting the number of times she's been kidnapped or threatened during the course of her work -- she's always worked the nightshift, and she's so close with Det. Knight -- she gets into way more dangerous situations than is standard for Coroners Office staff. That's got to be stressful. He said he'd try to talk to her, and I thanked him.

Two nights later a body came down to the morgue at St. Michael's. The gitchy feeling set in hard as soon as I touched the sheet to pull it back. Mama, it was Tracy Vetter! She'd been shot, right in the precinct, and died of her wounds here.

I didn't hesitate for a heartbeat. I spoke the words and laid my hands on her face, and I asked her what she needed me to know. I'd never done it with someone who wasn't a family member before, and it was odd, but it worked perfectly. Her spirit spoke in my heart, just like Great-Aunt Prudence's had when Grandad showed me how to do it the first time. She told me everything.

I didn't even wait for the elevator; I ran up the stairs. The landing lights for the helipad made edges of pure dark shadow on most of the rest of the roof. I've never spoken the words so fast before; I spread my blackbird wings and stepped out onto the air. Tracy's spirit stayed with me, and whispered where to go, whispered still what she'd thought I'd have to be dealing with. She'd had her losses this last year too, poor child. I wished I could have known her.

I furled my wings, dived, and crashed through the window of Det. Knight's loft; glass and blinds flew broken into the room. (I was lucky the metal shutters were open.)

"Back away, and put down the spear!" I yelled. The obvious vampire looked at me, surprised. So pale, like an albino, with a fleshy, decadent face and short white hair. Nick Knight kneeled at his feet like a slave, facing away from him and looking at Natalie, who was lying on the floor, almost dead.

My wings barely fit in the room. I didn't have the time to spell them back, not if I was going to cast a healing in time before Nat died, and I wouldn't have time to cast healing if I had to cast defense against this thing. Maybe I could just get him to leave.

"Just leave," I told him, calm as I could. I pulled power in from the world around me, gambling that I'd have the chance to heal Natalie instead of fighting. "Please, just leave." The vampire leaned the point of his wooden spear against the floor, like an umbrella, and tilted his head. "What are you?" he asked. Nick had crumpled down over Nat, his forehead to her forehead, his shoulders shaking with quiet sobs.

I stood taller, humped up my wings up to make me look taller still. (And to get them clear of the window and the broken glass on the floor.) "Take Nick and go. Take the other vampire, and leave Dr. Lambert here. I can heal her."

Nick's head snapped up. He looked at me with a desperate hope on his face, and then turned to his master to plead. "LaCroix," he whispered, sounding broken.

Almost too fast to see, LaCroix had grabbed Nick up and gotten them both out through the broken window. I had the healing words going while the wooden spear was still clattering on the floor where the vampire had dropped it.
Natalie came around by the time I thought I had her healed enough to move. She was crying. I flew her to St. Michael's, and landed in the dark, and carried her down in the staff elevator to Emergency, and begged Audrey to take care of her and make the paperwork all make sense, and went back to Tracy's interrupted autopsy, and I broke down in tears. If I'd stayed at the Coroners Office, if I'd been there for her these last two years, would any of it have come to this? I don't know. If I'd been happy to interfere when I started dreaming of her in peril -- if I'd realized from the beginning, from the first dream, that I was there, watching over her, I was there, in a tall tree! She was my responsibility.

And she still is.

Mama, in a couple of days, when Natalie's a little better, may I please bring her home to you, there in St. Catharines? I've been here long enough to have two weeks' vacation. I'll bring her with me -- I know for a fact that she's never taken all the vacation she's entitled to, and I don't care what Reese says about wanting to question her about Nick's disappearance -- he's a suck-up, and from what Joe Stonetree has let slip about the man and what Tracy's spirit thought about him, Reese meant to use Knight as a scapegoat for the shooter in the precinct from the beginning. Natalie needs our help, or she'll die. And she is my responsibility, for now. I'm asking you for your help.

Talk to you in a couple days. See you soon.

Love,
Grace

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Author's Notes: This is not a crossover, but I have made Grace into a Gullah Herb Doctor, such as I first read about in The People Could Fly, which is a children's book of African American folk tales by Virginia Hamilton. I got more information about the Gullah people and their traditions from this article by anthropologist Joseph Opala, Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone. (And can I just say that I found it disappointing that most of the Teachers' Resource type things on the internet about The People Could Fly made it sound like it was an allegory about escaping slavery via death, whereas the anthropological article made it look like the Gullahs were really good at escaping from things, which might give people a perfectly legitimate reputation for some of them being thought to be able to fly.) Celli said Grace's PoV for her gen-prompt, and her wildcard prompt was wingfic, which is why I even thought of it. Then imdb showed me Grace's last name was Balthazar, and that article about the Gullah people showed me they tended to have private family names as well as public names (like so many magic-using people), and this article said that Balthazar Barreira was an anti-slavery Jesuit cleric in the Sierra Leone & Angola regions (where the Gullah were originally from) in the late 1500's-early 1600's, which would make Balthazar a terrific public name for a Gullah family to assume when they're going to be using it to interact with European-based cultures, and I knew I had to do it.

St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada (which I'm using for Grace's home town here) was the northern end of the Underground Railroad in Harriet Tubman's day.

The term "gitchy feeling" is originally from Gran'ma Ben in Jeff Smith's Bone.

I choose to have this be a prequel to my massively multi-crossover stories Five Doctors House Didn't Drive Away from PPTH and A Date for the Fourth of July.

Disclaimer: The characters from "Forever Knight" are owned by Sony or Columbia/TriStar or James Parriott, not me. I'm just fooling around.
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