

## Katlyn's Door

by Kelli McMillin

Her hair spilled across her face, dark against impossibly pale skin. The pale, thin garment hugged against her curves as she moved in rhythm with the slow, seductive music. There was something almost hypnotic about her movements. It drew the crowd closer, ready to burn up in her light like happy little moths. Even from the farthest table back, Caleb King had a hard time keeping his eyes from wandering over her glistening skin.

He swept a lock of dark hair from his golden-green eyes, and was once again reminded how badly he needed a haircut. He shuffled the thought to the back of his mind. His wife was not yet cold in her grave. What a ridiculous time to think about his hair. What an utterly ridiculous time.

He glanced at the beauty on the black stage, in the throes of her mystifying dance. It was the last place he should be. But he had been seduced; enticed by the dark anonymity of the strange little club.

He turned his gaze to the amber depths of his drink. The ice cubes at the bottom were melting, shrinking little by little. At that moment, he could relate. Without Jessica there to define his existence, he felt as though he, too, were disappearing; dying a day at a time. He was evaporating in the nothingness left in the wake of her death. It surrounded him, threatened to engulf him in every waking second. He was searching for an escape. He

knew he hadn't found one in Petite Morte; only a brief reprieve.

Mirabel Lackley leaned against the black bar and watched the newcomer with a hungry gaze. Mira liked black. She expressed her enjoyment of the color in a thoroughly monochromatic color scheme. It gave the bar an elegant appeal that made it stand out on the otherwise shabby strip of shops on Fulton Street, where Petite Morte sat. Mira tossed her long dark hair over her shoulder and threw a look behind the bar.

The bartender, a sixtyish man with silver hair, sharp eyes, and a stately appearance, gave a nod, filled two drinks, then sat the glasses on a tray for his employer. Mira took the tray, balancing it easily in her small hands, and walked, hips swaying appealingly beneath the dark fabric of her dress, to the table where Caleb sat alone.

"You look lost," she said, plunking a fresh drink in front of him.

He looked up at her in surprise. "Oh, thanks, but I didn't order this."

Mira grinned, eyes flashing, as she slipped into the seat across from his. "It's on the house. I'm Mira."

Caleb smiled, a little uncertainly. "Thank you, Mira. But, I'm really not in the mood for company."

“It shows,” she said. “Most of my clientele would love for a beautiful woman to sit by them. You look as though you’re about to be gobbled up by the big, bad wolf.”

That startled a laugh out of him before he could stop it. “I’m having a bad week.”

“Want to talk about it?” She asked. Her eyes glittered as though in secret amusement.

“Not really,” he said.

She leaned forward, providing a rewarding view of cleavage. “That’s okay. Talking is purely optional.”

His eyes widened a little. “Look, Mira, I’m flattered, really, but...”

Mira threw her head back and a tinkling laugh trickled from her throat. “Oh, my. You’re trying to rebuff me aren’t you? You think I’m here to pick you up.”

Caleb stared at her for a moment. He knew all the signs and signals, he was, after all, an attractive man. But somehow, he didn’t feel like he was being hit on. “You’re not are you?”

“No,” Mira said, eyes still glittering.

Caleb smiled, a little lopsidedly. “What do you want then?”

“I see a man sitting alone in my bar, not watching the show. I want to know what troubles you. I want to help if I can.”

He grinned, but it felt more like a grimace. “You can’t help. No one can.”

“Try me,” she said.

Caleb leaned back in his chair, letting his gaze wander back to the stage. The beauty was down to skin, the shadows her only modesty. He stared at her, seeing someone else. A redhead, with freckly shoulders and big grey eyes. “My wife died a few days ago. She was murdered.”

Mira sipped from her glass, waiting for him to continue. A few minutes ticked by in silence, then he snapped his gaze back to hers. “The police think she was killed by another woman, a jealous woman. A woman I was seeing.”

“What do you think?” Mira asked.

Caleb laughed, a sound so without humor it hurt his ears. “It doesn’t matter what I think. The police think she did it and that’s all that matters.”

“Did they arrest her?”

“No,” Caleb said. His heart tripped over in his chest. He knew they would before long, and cut a warrant for him as well. That was how it worked. Guilt and innocence didn’t matter, only proof and politics. It was politically correct for him to be the prime suspect.

Mira watched him silently for a moment before speaking. “Did you love your wife?”

“She defined me,” he said.

“That’s not an answer,” Mira replied. “I didn’t ask if she was important to you. If she hadn’t been, you wouldn’t have been married to her. I asked if you loved her. There’s a difference.”

“Maybe,” he said. “I don’t know. How do you know if you’re in love with someone? How do you know really?”

Mira laughed. “That’s a copout, pet. You don’t have to tell me if you do or don’t. Just be honest with yourself.”

Caleb looked away from Mira’s gaze. Being caught in her eyes was uncomfortable, as though she could see things that moved inside him, things no human being should be able to see in another.

“The next pertinent question is whether or not you love the woman you were seeing,” Mira said. “Once you have those two questions answered, then you have to decide on a course of action.”

“Like what?” Caleb asked.

Mira smiled. “You always have choices,” she said, in a sly voice.

Caleb stared at her. He was struck by an otherness about her, something that set him off-balance and unsure. He was suddenly uncomfortable around her. Weary. He wanted away.

Pulling some bills from his wallet, he gave Mira a smile. Too bright and too friendly to be quite genuine. “Thanks for the company, and the drink,” he said. “I really need to get back now.”

Mira only smiled as he tossed the money on the table and pulled on his jacket. He looked away from the secret amusement in her eyes.

It was summer outside, but there was a cold bite to the air. Caleb pulled his jacket a little tighter. There was something strange about this grungy little strip of shops. He only rarely visited, and only when he was slumming, but every time he did there was an

unnatural chill about the place. It seeped through his thin summer clothes, beneath his skin to sink into his very bones.

He should have driven, but he had wanted the walk. Needed it to clear his head. He didn't live that far away, down and over a few blocks. It wasn't distance that separated the normal world from Fulton Street. The whole lane was filled with that otherness, that indistinct oddity he sensed in Mira.

He reached the end of the street, looked up and into the decrepit old church that stood silent witness to the surrounding sinners. It was a grey apparition in the gloom of the setting sun. In the shadows it looked more sinister than holy. He shuddered and shrugged deeper into his jacket, turning away to walk quickly on.

Katlyn's apartment was just on the outskirts of Fulton Street. He never went there. The place made him uncomfortable, and he preferred hotels. Nice ones, with room service and nice soft beds. It was a luxury either of them could barely afford, but it was worth it. He never brought her into his home, never went to hers. That was the worst way to get caught. But now there was no need to worry about getting caught. The need to hide in the shadows was neatly erased, dispelled by the disappearance of his wife. She was dead, he knew that. He knew that Katlyn knew it too. The police hadn't found a body, which was likely the only reason he and Katlyn were still walking the streets. But they would. He knew that eventually, she would emerge, pale and rotting, perhaps shrouded in the cold earth, bug-eaten and wormy. He could picture it; her mouth full of dirt, eyes milky

and empty, body beyond the stiffness of rigor mortis, bloated and stinking. Reduced from the slight beauty he had married to so much meat, like rotting hamburger.

Caleb shook the picture from his mind and turned in the direction of the shabby apartment building where Katlyn lived. She would be home tonight, it was her night off. She tended bar at the Cactus Club, the only other bar on Fulton Street, rationing fried foods and stiff drinks to a steady line of drunk and ragged patrons that served as the regular clientele. These were the lost creatures of Fulton Street, the ones too weary for Mira's elegant establishment, but unwilling to travel too far from home to participate in their favorite pastime.

It was a short walk and in a few minutes he was standing before the apartment building. Like most of the structures of Fulton Street, it was old and infirm, leaning slightly as though too feeble to stand solidly. There were a few windows boarded up crookedly in classic haunted house fashion, giving the impression of an old, gap toothed grin.

Inside, the foyer was dimly lit by shaky florescent lights, revealing a thick layer of dust against the walls and a liberal share of cobwebs clinging to the ceiling, veiling the corners from view. He walked across the deserted lobby, to the narrow staircase and climbed to the third floor to Katlyn's apartment. The door hung crookedly on its hinges, and he could tell even from down the hall something wasn't right.

He walked quietly, heart pounding, cautiously approaching the door. It wasn't closed all

the way, a sliver of a crack revealing the beginnings of a terrible mess within. He reached out with one shaking hand, and pushed the door open. It swung inward with a long, drawn out groan that made the fine hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He closed his eyes before he could register the sight that met his eyes.

The phone had long since quit beeping out the busy signal, now laying quietly on the floor. It was a corded phone, red with large, round buttons. The blood didn't show up as much on it. Even as the dark stain on the floor, it wasn't as noticeable. Against the blue of the carpet, it was just another stain, if slightly darker in comparison to the others. It was the wall that really gave it away.

The walls in Katlyn's apartment were off white. The last time he was there, the only time he had ever visited her at her home, he remembered thinking it was probably supposed to be white, but the stains of ages had conglomerated on it to make it a different color completely. Not that it mattered; the walls were sufficiently pale enough to show the dark, bright splattering of red. A red so slick and wet and sticky, it could only be one thing.

His mind didn't want to register any of it. There were things in this world he didn't want to know. The source of all that red was one of them. He dragged in a breath and staggered away, eyes still tightly closed. He was half way to the stairwell when it hit him. He was already the suspect in his wife's disappearance; he couldn't afford for the police to find his fingerprints on the door of his girlfriend's apartment. Not with what was so

obviously inside.

He marched determinedly back to Katlyn's door, covered his hand with his jacket, and pulled the door shut. He kept his eyes averted as he did, and only looked up again when the door handle clicked in place. Then he vigorously scrubbed at the middle of the door, where he had touched it with his bare hand. When he finished his task, Caleb looked around, making sure no nosey neighbors were around to witness his debacle. Satisfied that he was well and truly alone, he turned and walked with brisk, sure strides to the stairs and got the hell out of Dodge.

By the time he hit the street again, his heart was beating hard and fast, his breath was coming in short, ragged gasps, and he was shaking. Katlyn... First Jessica, then Katlyn. He let out a low moan, a sound that came deep, from his gut.

He walked on autopilot. His feet carried him home, away from the horror of what was behind Katlyn's door. His heart pulsed in his ears, and he tried to just *\*not\** think. Katlyn had always said he thought too much. Too much thinking can get you into trouble, she used to tease him. She teased him a lot. It was her way. Jessica used to say he didn't think enough, but not like she was teasing. She was dead serious about it. A nervous laugh popped out of his mouth before he could stop it. *\*She used to be dead serious,\** he thought. *\*Now she's just dead.\** But it wasn't funny. And, from the looks of Katlyn's apartment, Jessica wasn't the only one that was dead...

The streets between Fulton Street and his house were dark and quiet. He was alone with only his echoing footsteps to keep him company. Things seemed to move at the peripheral of his vision, darting in and out of view before he could fix his gaze on them. He thought he saw a flash of red hair once, but it was gone before he could be sure.

In his mind's eye, he could see different scenes of his life flashing. The time he broke the neighbor's window with a softball when he was ten. The day he graduated high school. The day he met Jessica. His wedding. The day he met Katlyn. Jessica yelling at him. Katlyn laughing. Jessica in bed. Katlyn in bed. Jessica staring at him with cold, dead eyes...

"You always were a fuck-up," she had told him. "Just a silly, stupid fuck-up."

He closed his eyes against the thought, but it wasn't done. He remembered the last fight he and Katlyn had had. It was about his marriage. "Take control of your life," she had told him, her grey eyes flashing just a hint of blue. "Just \*do\* something about it!"

Just \*do\* something about it, she had told him. Goddammit, just \*do\* something. But what to do? He hated Jessica, and owed her his existence. It wasn't that she had \*created\* him; but she defined him. Without her there to tell him what to do, to tell him what a silly, stupid fuck-up he was, what would he be? He loved Katlyn, yes, but what was that without identity? He needed Jessica.

The little house he had shared with his wife stood suddenly before him, waiting like a mother hen. He had covered so much distance with the movie of his life playing through his head, watching darting shadows out of the corners of his eyes. He hadn't registered the lapse in time, the walk from point A to point B. He fished his key out of his pocket, and walked silently, in staggering steps up the walk to the prim little door. He had painted it only a month ago, because Jessica had told him to. It was faded, she told him. It needs a new coat, you silly, stupid fuck-up.

He walked through the house, avoiding the many pictures of his wife that seemed to glare at him from every surface. He never realized how many pictures of her there were. Or how different the bright, vivacious woman in the pictures, lovely tanned face framed perfectly by sandy, shoulder-length hair, seemed from the often angry creature he had married.

He flipped on the overhead light in the bedroom. Jewel-bright green walls greeted him, thankfully empty of snapshots. The bed sprawled in front of him. The bedspread, only a slightly paler green than the walls, rumped comfortably. Even without the pictures, Jessica's presence was obvious. Green was her favorite color. It was her room, really, and the house, despite her lukewarm feelings about it, was hers. Just as he, ultimately, was hers. Her silly, stupid fuck-up.

He looked at the bed and had a wonderful, wild image of Katlyn lying there, waiting for him, sun-kissed, freckled shoulders bare, grey eyes dancing in amusement, her red hair

tangled from hours of love-making. Ready, and waiting for more.

\*Why don't you \*do\* something about it?\*

He scrubbed a hand across his face and the image of Katlyn's door flashed behind his closed lids. He shuddered and staggered forward. Was it real? Any of it? Surely not. Surely he would wake in the morning to find it was all a terrible dream, or an awful mistake. They would be alive, breathing and yelling and laughing. Katlyn would listen to his nightmare sympathetically and hold him when he was done. Jessica would roll her eyes and tell him to get over it, you silly, stupid fuck-up.

He steadied his legs and stripped down. Jessica would have an unholy fit if she caught him throwing dirty clothes on the floor, but he didn't think he could make it to the hamper. He was exhausted to the bone. When he was down to skin, he slipped into the bed, beneath the rumpled jewel-green comforter, and rested his head against the pillow. Only when he was safely snuggled in the bed did he reach up and slide his open hand down the wall, shutting off the overhead and leaving the room in inky darkness. He closed his eyes and let a wave of sleep swoop down on him and drag him under the smooth, black surface of consciousness.

He wasn't alone. He woke from fitful, uncomfortable dreams, the kind he used to have as a child when he was very sick, feeling a presence next to him. A weight on the bed given away only by the slightest tip of the mattress. \*It's just Jessica,\* he thought, his mind

still sleep-fogged. He reached out a groping hand, needing to feel her skin against his. Needing reaffirmation of his identity. His hand touched something cold. Something too cold to be skin, too rubbery.

A little cry escaped his throat, as he snatched back his hand. He sucked in a breath and nearly gagged. The air around him had become putrid, permeated by an unbelievable stench. Rotting meat. \*Jessica,\* he thought, \*now she's just meat, so much rotting meat.\*

He wanted to reach up, turn on the overhead, and banish the oppressive darkness. But he couldn't bring himself to reach across the bed, across the thing that was too cold and rubbery to be made of flesh. The source of the unbelievable, rotting hamburger stench.

He needed to hear someone tell him it wasn't real, just a bad dream. A nightmare composed of fear and stress. He needed Katlyn to hold him, make him forget the nightmares, chase the boogey men away. He needed Jessica to yell at him, telling him it's just a nightmare, you silly, stupid fuck-up.

"It's not real," he said aloud.

As though in answer, he heard a peal of laughter; Katlyn's laughter. His heart thumped painfully hard, painfully fast in his chest. Terror pushed a shot of adrenalin through his veins, he could feel it in his bloodstream, like a drug. It made his body tremble.

He had never heard Katlyn laugh like that; crazy, almost maniacal. It was almost as though she had fallen down, but instead of bumping her head or spraining her ankle, she had fractured her mind, broken her sanity. Because that's what waited behind the veil, beneath the thinness that separated life and death. That was what waited behind Katlyn's door.

He closed his eyes tight, forcing a breath of cold, fetid air into his lungs. \*It's not real. It's a dream, and dreams can't hurt you, they can't break your mind, they can't drag you into the cold nothingness and eat you like the monsters from your childhood fears. It's just a dream, just a...\*

A hand was touching him, running rubbery, cold skin up and down his bare arm. He gulped at the air, tried to move, to scream, but suddenly he couldn't. He was frozen, paralyzed by blind, unbridled panic. He felt hot, moist breath on his face, breath that stank of nothing human, but of earth and bugs. He felt it grow closer, until he could almost feel the dry, cracked lips against his own. A sob of fear erupted from his throat, sounding croaky and pitiful in the dark. \*Don't let it get me,\* he thought. It was the thought of a child, not a grown man, but it \*was\* his thought. A sentiment echoed by the hot gush between his legs as his bladder let go.

“Why didn't you look, you silly, stupid fuck-up?” The voice sounded raspy, weak, but still Jessica's. Still close -too close- to his face. “Why didn't you look and see what was

behind Katlyn's door?"

A tear, hot and huge, slipped down his cheek. A whimper sounded in the back of his throat, this time more animal than child, a sound humans aren't meant to make. He felt the breath come closer, moister, and the cold, calloused lips finally touched his, feather-light. He felt the tiny, many legs of an insect crawl across his mouth and finally let loose with the scream that had been building in the back of his throat. It had a mad, hysterical edge to it and he supposed he should have known...

It was conceived a scream, but born a laugh, as twisted as Katlyn's, and he knew his sanity had cracked.

He sat bolt upright, still spewing that awful laughter. He snapped his mouth shut. His body was slick and cold with sweat, and the warmth between his thighs was giving way steadily to chill. The air he forced into his lungs reeked of sweat and urine, but was thankfully vacant of that sickly, rotting stench of putrid meat. The room was dark, but not black, the streetlights and moon shone in through the window, dimly illuminating a room empty of anyone but himself. But he didn't have to look around to know he was alone; he could feel it. The bed no longer had that tipped feel to it and the dark was empty of that oppressive feeling. He could move and did so, bounding from the bed and slapping a hand across the wall, turning on a flood of welcome light.

He pulled at the sheets, stripping the bed furiously, and dumped the soiled bedclothes in a

heap on the floor. Then he strode across the room, down the hallway and into the bathroom where he turned on the shower. As the water heater groaned with the effort to raise the temperature of the steady stream, he rested his hands on the vanity of the sink, staring into the mirror, leaning his forehead so close he almost touched his own reflection.

The face that stared back at him was frightened, wide-eyed and tight-lipped. He could still hear that laughter, that twisted version of Katlyn's sweet mirth, echoing in his head, could still feel that moist and fetid breath against his mouth. He closed his eyes and an image of Katlyn's door, just as he found it, open a sliver, flashed in front of his vision. He opened them again, desperate to escape it, before he saw that door open, become a portal to things that his sanity couldn't support.

"It was a nightmare, you silly, stupid fuck-up," he said.

His voice was strong, confident, a complete contradiction from his expression. If he kept talking to himself like this, maybe he would make himself believe. In the mirror, a bug darted across his face.

He stumbled back and retched into the toilet.

The jet of warm water from the shower that cascaded over his cold, goose-pimpled flesh felt good. He scrubbed his body raw, as though he were trying to wash away more than

earthly filth. When he finally emerged, after twenty full minutes of scouring, until his flesh was angry pink, he felt a little better. He still started at small noises, but he no longer stank of urine and vomit, and that was something.

He dressed quickly, having to manually slow his movements to put his pants on properly. He wanted out of the house. Away from the nightmare. He wanted to be somewhere else, somewhere dark and crowded. He looked at the clock, saw it was only just past eleven p.m., and suddenly knew where he wanted to be.

The crowd had grown since he left, many hours before. But they were all gathered around the black stage, paying no mind either to the bar, nor to the tables. Mira was still there, in her slinky black dress, somehow looking more regal and lady-like than ever. She smiled at him from across the room as he took his seat at the bar, a lazy, heavy-lidded smile that teased him with promises that would never be kept. Her eyes still sparkled with a secret amusement, and he was still struck by an otherness as he looked at her.

She approached him slowly, as if giving him every opportunity to break and run. But he didn't run. In the wake of his nightmare, he felt a strange sort of recklessness. He watched her come, making a conscious decision to be her willing victim. \*It could be worse,\* he thought; \*at least she doesn't stink of rotting meat...\*

“Back, I see,” she said, as she slid gracefully into the stool next to his.

The bartender sat a tumbler of amber liquid in front of him, a fluted glass filled with something dark red in front of her and retreated to the other side of the bar.

“You weren’t surprised when I told you about my missing wife or outraged when I mentioned my girlfriend.”

Mira toyed with her wineglass as she regarded him. “I felt neither surprise, nor outrage.”

Caleb tore his gaze from hers and downed the burning contents of his glass. “I tried to take your advice,” he said. “I went to Katlyn’s apartment. I still know what to do, but I went. Do you know what I found?”

Mira’s smile broadened. “You found nothing, Caleb; you didn’t even go in. You stood there frozen, just outside Katlyn’s door, too afraid to go in.”

Caleb stared at her nonplussed. “How did you know that?” He asked quietly.

“I know,” Mira said. “That’s all that matters.”

“I had a nightmare. It’s why I came back. I need to know what decision I have to make.”

“You already made it, Caleb,” Mira replied. “You made it when I came across the room, and you chose not to run away.”

“I don’t understand,” Caleb said. But he and Mira both knew it was a lie.

“They’re waiting for you Caleb,” Mira said. The amusement was still there, hiding just behind her darkly glittering eyes, but her expression was solemn. “In the back.”

“They’re dead,” Caleb said. “They’re both dead, aren’t they.”

“You already know the answer to that,” Mira said. She stood, and held out one hand to him. In the other she held the fluted wineglass. Caleb took her hand with no hesitation. This is what he had come for.

Mira led him past the crowd, and Caleb saw for the first time their slack, vacant expressions. More of her willing victims, just like him.

She led him past a black curtain, into the back where the dressing rooms were. The doors were all closed and corridor was quiet. Silent as the grave. They walked until they reached the very end of the hallway, to the very last door. Mira opened it without knocking. Not that it mattered; the creatures on the other side were beyond embarrassment, as beyond modesty as Caleb was beyond redemption.

Katlyn’s red hair and creamy skin were perfect, her face and body so completely unmarred she looked in the peak of health. It was her eyes that gave her away. They

were as glossy and empty as a doll's. There was no spark of recognition here, no sign of thought or life. Caleb shuddered and looked at the other one. The one that used to be Jessica.

She sat, head down and hands folded. Her body was covered in a thin film of earth. The white dress he had buried her in looked like a winding sheet. Her skin was grey-tinged, and he was suddenly glad she was looking down. He didn't want to see her face.

"Why does Katlyn look so alive?" He asked, unable to tear his gaze from Jessica.

"For the same reason all the girls here look so alive," Mira replied from behind him.

"Because we feed them so well."

Caleb heard the click of a lock behind him and knew without looking that he was alone. Alone with the two women he had loved so obsessively, and killed so ruthlessly. Now, he knew, it was his turn to be the victim.

The End.