

IT'S ABOUT SQUIRRELS . . .

Lynn Abbey

"SQUIRRELS?" Nic repeated.

"Yes, ma'am," the utility company spokeswoman replied, unaware of, or completely ignoring, Nic's sarcasm.

Nic abandoned subtlety. "I lost power at nine a.m. this morning, at nine a.m. yesterday, at the same time the day before yesterday, and the day before that, too. After four days, my computer's dead as a doornail. I'm wondering if it's safe to replace my hardware, and you're telling me that my problem is *squirrels*?"

"Yes, ma'am. From what you've said, your problem is squirrels."

"*Florida* squirrels read clocks?"

"No, ma'am," the utility representative replied, steadfastly polite.

Like so many others, Nic was a transplant to the Sunshine State, and a recent one at that. Six months ago, Thursday mornings would have found her in an urban office, sipping coffee while she dreamed up new ways to seduce consumers onto the Internet. Now she was just another dot-bomb survivor with a stagnant resume and an endangered checking account. She'd sold most of her furniture, put the rest into storage, and retreated to a one-bedroom trailer at the end of an unpaved road somewhere between the middle of nowhere and the warmer levels of Dante's Hell. Worse than that, her parents—comfortably ensconced in a nearby retirement community—were footing her rent. But worst of all, Nic's computer—her lifeline to civilization—had fallen victim to *squirrels*.

"All right, I don't understand. What makes you so certain I've got a squirrel problem?"

"You've lost power four days in a row, each time at the same time, ma'am. That sounds like squirrels. Squirrels aren't loners. They do the same things—together—day after day. They take turns chasing and following, but if the squirrel that's leading makes a mistake and falls in a pole transformer—"

"It gets fried and I lose power?" Nic cut to the chase.

"Yes, ma'am, except you didn't really lose power; your voltage fell. I'd be surprised if the drop even affected your microwave clock—"

The spokeswoman was right: Nic's microwave clock, the canary among household appliances, hadn't faltered.

"When *it* happens, there's a little hiccup as the transformer drops off the grid just long enough to reset itself," she continued. "The whole process takes a lot less than a second. You wouldn't have noticed at all, if you weren't close to the transformer."

"And then the follower-squirrels come back the next day to make the same mistake?"

"Yes, ma'am—that's exactly what happens. They keep doing what the dead squirrel did until another squirrel takes over . . . or until the whole group's dead. It's like their needle's stuck. Our engineers even have a name for them: pallbearer squirrels. It's a real problem here in Florida."

Only in Florida, Nic thought before asking: "How serious a problem? My computer's already lost its hard drive to these hiccups. How long will squirrels

be committing serial suicide in my vicinity?"

"Usually it stops after three or four days, ma'am, but they had one up near Tallahassee that went on for nineteen days. If you've got one of those fancy batteries, you shouldn't have any problems. Those stick surge protectors they sell in Wal*mart won't help you against squirrels and ospreys—"

Without knowing the cause of her problem, Nic had anticipated its solution. Along with a replacement hard drive, UPS had just delivered fifteen pounds of continuously recharged, uninterruptible battery power. She could safely resurrect her computer—assuming there wasn't something Floridian that went after batteries the way squirrels went after hard drives. Determined not to be caught blind again, Nic asked—

"Ospreys?"

"Birds, ma'am. Some call them fish-eagles. They're endangered because people've cut down all the snag trees around the lakes. Sunshine Power built nesting platforms on top of our poles near the lakes. The ospreys think our poles are as good as pine trees. Around this time of year, they bring fish back to the nests for their babies. They carry the fish in their claws and have to drop them in the nest before they can land. But sometimes they miss and the fish fall into the pole transformers. They don't usually miss twice, though, so when a transformer hiccups two days running, and at the same time, we think squirrels."

Nic wondered why Sunshine Power didn't put lids on their transformers but didn't ask the question, and the conversation died a natural death. She had her day's work cut out for her. Even with the best backups—which Nic didn't have—resurrecting a computer took hours. It was well past midnight before she left the kitchen table that had replaced her ergonomic desk. Since her hard drive's manufacturer replaced its warrantied products, no questions asked, in exchange for the defunct hardware, Nic's last acts of a long day were wrapping the hard drive in antistatic plastic and boxing it for the post office.

Her eyes were closed before her head hit the pillow. For a few moments, she cursed the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that had her sleeping in a secondhand bed, but the wounds were too familiar to keep her awake.

Florida wasn't called the Sunshine State by accident. The dawning sky brightened quickly and even if it hadn't, there was a Chevrolet dealership at the other end of the dirt road which opened, noisily, at seven. Nic made coffee and stuck close to her resurrected computer, waiting for the witching—squirreling—hour. At 9:08 the battery's LEDs flickered from green to red and back again while somewhere in its heavy depths a switch clicked twice.

Another squirrel was transformer bouillabaisse, but Nic's computer had survived. She collected the sealed box, headed for her car and the post office. Her neighbor—one RJ Walker, according to the letters shakily painted across his mailbox—had done a worse-than-usual job of parking his pickup truck last night. Nic couldn't get her Honda around its bright-red rear end without running through mud. Though the Honda could probably handle the risk, Nic couldn't. She considered tucking a nasty note under RJ's wipers, but his truck was plastered with Deep-South decals in praise of guns, NASCAR, and the University of Florida Gators; prudent Yankee that she was, Nic knew

better than to roil *those* waters.

Other than the Chevy dealership, there weren't many buildings within walking distance of Nic's trailer, but one of them, barely, was a post office. There were no sidewalks, of course, and traffic was surprisingly thick for a road in the middle of nowhere. Nic treated it with respect, paying more attention to what was hurtling along the asphalt than what else might be walking beside it. She didn't realize she wasn't alone until a man warned:

"Don't do it!"

The dead center of Florida wasn't the state's most prosperous region. As near as Nic could tell, it rated near the wrong end of just about every county standard, but full-blown derelicts weren't common, even along a road once known as the Hobo's Highway.

The man wasn't criminally scary. He didn't look strong or steady enough to wield a weapon. Nic didn't doubt she could outrun him—and she wasn't a runner. His clothes were long, loose, layered, and literally ragged. Whatever their original colors, they'd faded in the sun and seemed covered by grayish dust. His hair matched his clothes: faded, dusted with gray, limp, and shoulder-length. Nic lowered her eyes as the distance between them shrank.

"Don't send it away. Don't! Take it home. Get him out of the box!"

Nic stretched her eyes and wished she hadn't. The man's stare was dark, wild, and riveted to the box she carried. She clutched it tight and held her breath as they passed.

"Keep it! Keep it. He belongs *here!*"

He—the derelict had definitely muttered the word *he*.

She dared a backward glance: grass, sand, the usual roadside debris, and the Chevrolet dealership in the background, but no derelict, not even a shadow of one. No screeching brakes or battered bodies in the road, either, or footprints in the sand. The faded man had simply vanished.

Heaven knew the Florida sun got brutal enough to fry human brains, but not in the season the natives called winter, so Nic called the derelict a waking dream, a brain-cramp—the sort of mistake anyone could make and no reason not to finish her trek to the post office. But she returned to the trailer instead.

RJ Walker had removed his pickup; Nic could have driven her Honda. There was a squirrel sitting on the hood, twitching its tail, the way squirrels did. Another squirrel perched above the trailer's door while a third raced along an overhead wire, headed for a transformer pole. Her heart skipped when the squirrel leaped safely for thicker wires where it paused, twitching and scolding.

Nic climbed the aluminum steps to her front door. The drive's manufacturer gave her a whole month to return the hard drive before it debited her hemorrhaging credit card. She poured cold coffee into a rinsed cup and sent an e-mail to a close, yet distant, friend who lived not far from her stored furniture—

Hi, Sara. Sorry I've been out of touch. This places gets weirder all the time. Monday I lost a hard drive to suicidal squirrels— pallbearer squirrels, according to Sunshine Power, and they should know, I guess. Today I thought I saw a hobo's ghost out on the highway. I'm still sending out resumes by the score and hearing nothing back. Unless it's my folks, I'm lucky if I say two words to another human being in a day—I wound up complaining to Sunshine Power just to have

someone to talk to. It's them or the squirrels. I keep telling myself this is only temporary, that I'll be out of here in a month, so there's no need to get my stuff out of storage up north—as if I could afford to bring it down here.

Miss you. Miss winter. Miss everything I ever complained about.

All for now . . . Nic.

Nic was catching a nap in the bedroom between rounds of boredom and e-mailing resumes when someone banged loudly on the door. There was no good reason for anyone to come knocking on her door, but a bunch of bad ones. The first bad reason to form fully in Nic's imagination was her parents, who were in good health but *retired* now and *getting old*.

Never mind that bad news usually traveled by phone; once the idea had occurred to Nic, it filled her entire imagination. She had hospitals on the brain before opening the door.

Nic heard the twangy drawl of the natives: "Afternoon, ma'am. Bobby Walker, ma'am—"

He was too old to be a Bobby. No one over the age of eighteen should be a Bobby, unless he was a professional athlete and Bobby Walker, though not grossly out of shape, was long past eighteen. His face was more weathered than tan beneath unruly hair that had started to recede. He squinted as though he needed glasses—which might account for his parking habits.

But Bobby Walker—RJ Walker, in all probability—had all his teeth, at least all the ones that showed when he talked. Nic hadn't gotten used to seeing people her own age with missing teeth. Snaggle-tooth grins were a constant reminder of how fundamentally *different* life was in dead-center Florida.

Bobby Walker stuck out his hand. She clasped it barely long enough to say—

"Nicole Larsens."

"I don't mean to bother you, ma'am, but you've got to quit feeding the squirrels."

"I'm not feeding them," Nic replied, feeling very un-ma'am-like in her jeans and nap-wrinkled T-shirt.

"Maybe you don't think you're feeding them, ma'am, but they wouldn't be here like this, if they weren't finding food."

Nic blinked and realized that between Bobby and his red pickup, there'd been a squirrel explosion. The animals were agitated. She couldn't count more than a few without losing track. There were at least a dozen and more when she looked right or left.

"I'm not feeding them. I'm not doing anything to attract them."

"Well, ma'am, then maybe they've got a colony under your trailer. In winter they like to find someplace warm—"

A colony of squirrels under the sagging bedroom floor? The image conjured up countless bad movies, and Nic's thoughts must have shown on her face because Bobby Walker quickly said—

"I could check underneath, ma'am. Set a few traps—?"

Spring-loaded rings of rusty, serrated metal added themselves to Nic's imagination without improving her sense of security.

"*Live* traps, ma'am," Bobby Walker added, accurately guessing the reason

for Nic's silence. "I'll empty 'em down the road. I'll look for holes, too. You don't want to go under there, ma'am."

Southern hospitality. Southern charm. And every bit as effective as Northern sarcasm. Whatever Nic saw when she looked at Bobby Walker, what *he* saw was another damn Yankee without the sense God gave ants. On the other hand, he was absolutely right: Nic didn't want to crawl around under the trailer. She could waste time begging the park owner or accept Bobby Walker's offer.

The choice was clear, but before Bobby Walker went off to get his traps, Nic asked, "Have you heard of pallbearer squirrels?"

He gave her a doubting glance. "No, ma'am, can't say that I have."

So she told him, in quick sentences, about the power problems, her call to the utility company, and the explanation she'd received.

"Huh," Bobby Walker concluded. "They do get into habits, but so do people. Never heard anything about them following leaders—" He caught himself, changed his mind. "My momma used to say that when squirrels got crazy, it was because they were chasing brownies. My momma said things like that; she was Scottish."

Nic took note of the past tense and said nothing about Mrs. Walker's opinions of ancestry.

For the next hour, Mrs. Walker's son thumped and cursed beneath her rented trailer on his way to deciding that the crawlspace wasn't squirrel-infested.

"There's a hole or two they might fit through, but there's no scat, no nothing to say they've set up housekeeping. Looks like they've just got a fascination for your front door—"

They both took a moment to study the squirrels. Nic couldn't say that there were more now than when Bobby first knocked on her door, but certainly there were no less.

"If you're not feeding them, I can't imagine why they're doing that, but once a few of them get trapped, the rest will get the idea that there's nothing here for them." Bobby had set his traps beneath the steps and beneath a holly bush midway between the steps and Nic's car. "You might hear something as they're sprung," he warned Nic.

Nic forced a smile and thanked Bobby Walker for his help. He lingered at the foot of the aluminum stairs as if he expected an invitation. She gave him a question instead.

"What happens next, if the traps work?"

"Oh, they'll work, ma'am," Bobby Walker replied, lapsing into Southern formality. "I've got 'em baited with more peanuts and corn than any squirrel can resist. Might not trap them all, but there'll be a mess of squirrels in those traps when I check them tomorrow morning."

"So, you'll be checking them? I don't have to?"

"No, ma'am. I'll take care of everything on my way to work."

"Good," Nic said. "I really appreciate that."

She closed the door and closed the curtains, too. Twice during the long evening, Nic thought she heard the sounds of squirrels succumbing to corn and peanuts. She stifled her curiosity and stayed away from the curtains. The local

news had finished and there was no reason not to go to bed.

Darkness did wonders for Nic's imagination. Never mind that she was reasonably certain that squirrels weren't active at night, she could hear their little claws scratching the roof. Nic tensed, expecting to hear the traps clanging, and stayed that way. A green-glowing midnight became one a.m., then one-thirty.

Finally, noise happened: not the expected *clang*, but a duller *thud*; and not outside the trailer, but inside.

Nic kept a broom handle between the mattress and the box spring—a souvenir from an urban survival class. With it grasped in her fist, she slid silently out of bed. Aside from glowing clocks, the trailer was dark—or it should have been. There was a steady, soft light at the end of the corridor connecting the bedroom. By that light Nic saw that both the curtains and the front door were still closed, exactly as she remembered leaving them.

Fear and curiosity battled for Nic's mind. Curiosity won—because, with the door and curtains undisturbed, she expected an annoying explanation for the light. Striding to the living room, Nic's only concession to caution came when she sidestepped along the kitchen counter rather than walk straight into the light.

Nic was fortunate that the counter was behind her when she beheld a gray-clad, self-luminous woman kneeling in front of the door: it kept her upright when she reeled and knocked unwashed silverware to the floor. The clatter—the loudest noise Nic had ever heard—surprised the kneeling woman who flung herself at the closed door.

The whole trailer should have rocked on its wheeled foundations, Nic thought with the slow clarity of panic; it hadn't. There should have been noise as the gray-clad woman pounded her fists against the door; there wasn't. The woman should have known that beating the door wouldn't help, that she needed to release the bolt and turn the doorknob.

Any full-grown woman knew that.

Then again, any full-grown woman didn't glow with her own silvery light, and most people had rounder, fleshier faces than that turned toward Nic.

"Wha—?" Nic croaked. She inhaled and tried again. "Who are you? What are you doing in my living room?"

The woman heard Nic's questions; that much showed in her reactions, but she didn't answer, just pushed herself away from the door and toward the curtains which didn't move when she touched them.

Nic wondered if she might be dreaming and willed herself to wake up. Nothing changed, then the retreating woman's gown-like clothes withdrew across a box—the box Nic hadn't gotten to the post office. It was upside down and on the floor; Nic guessed what had awakened her.

The other woman raised her hands to her face when she saw the box. Nic imagined a horrified gasp, but heard nothing.

"What do you want?" Nic demanded, though the answer to that was obvious and the wiser question would have been, *Why do you want a dead hard drive?*

The woman didn't—or couldn't—answer. She reached for the box, tears glistening on her luminous cheeks. To Nic's eyes, the woman's fingers touched the box but failed to grasp it. The pieces came together in Nic's mind; their

pattern was irrational, but clear.

"You want what's on the drive," Nic murmured. "You want what's *trapped* on the drive."

The weeping woman met Nic's eyes with silent eloquence. Her mouth opened, shaped a word Nic couldn't hear, then she vanished, leaving Nic with the impression of a streak of light drilling through the wall.

Blinded by the dark, Nic stayed put, balanced on the cusp between fear and curiosity. Once again, curiosity won. She opened the refrigerator and by its light retrieved the cardboard box. One corner had been slightly crushed by its fall and there seemed to be a faint odor of ozone around the front door, though that dissipated quickly. Nic threw the bolt and opened the door to moonlight.

Nothing—no footprints, not even a squirrel or a glass slipper.

Back inside, Nic closed the refrigerator, turned on a brighter light, and opened the box. Like every hard drive meant to be installed in a personal computer, Nic's dead drive was a factory-sealed slab of metal and plastic, plastered with warranty warnings. Inside the slab were magnetic disks so sensitive that microscopic specks of dust would ruin them. Nic considered breaking the seal, but she couldn't afford to void the warranty. By 100-watt light, her curiosity soured. She turned out all the lights and made her way to the bedroom where sleep came in fitful naps and broken dreams about a luminous woman who opened a hard drive.

Nic was still in bed when Bobby Walker knocked on her door. Wrapping herself quickly in a bathrobe, she faced him at the top of the steps. He'd already loaded his two traps, each seething with frightened squirrels, into his pickup truck.

"Didn't get 'em all," he admitted, "but we got enough. Look around—" He opened his arms to the yard where not a single squirrel chattered or twitched.

"Thanks."

"Ma'am?" Clearly he expected greater enthusiasm. "Ma'am, are you okay?"

Nic nodded. "I haven't had my coffee yet . . . didn't sleep too well either."

"Traps must've been snapping all night."

She could have said yes and ended the conversation, but Nic needed coffee before she could lie effectively. "No, I never heard them. It was something else—"

Nic watched the squirrels tumbling over one another. Echoing memories of computer crashes, pallbearer squirrels, a strange man warning her to take the box home, and a stranger woman crouched by the door blurred her vision. She blinked and focused on Bobby Walker's face.

"Did your mother say what a brownie looked like?"

"Ma'am?"

"Yesterday you said your mother told you that squirrels chased brownies. Did she ever say what one looked like?"

He shrugged. "Can't say as I remember. Little fellows, I guess. Couldn't be very big, could they, if the squirrels chased them."

"Not tall, then? Not tall and thin and silvery—or maybe dusty?"

Bobby Walker gave Nic a slow, sidelong stare. "You see something like that?"

"Not exactly." Nic couldn't lie, but she could evade.

A squirrel ran along the utility wires. It jumped from the wires into a pine tree's dense branches and a heartbeat later dropped to the roof of Nic's car where it gave her another version of Bobby Walker's sidelong stare.

Nic said, "They're back."

"They were never here, ma'am."

"The squirrels." She pointed at her car.

"Damn. Thought we'd scared them off."

"They're the pallbearers."

Bobby Walker didn't know what to make of Nic's remark. He stood silent on the porch while a second and third squirrel took position on Nic's car.

"I better get rid of these and reset the traps—" Bobby's voice rose, as though he were asking permission.

"Did your mother ever say anything about brownies, except that squirrels chased them? Like were there special ways to catch them or—or set them free?"

Bobby shrugged. "Only that they were lucky and they'd clean house for you if you set out a bowl of milk and soaking bread for them. I think she was hoping for miracles. She had me and my brothers and my father to clean up after. It was a lot of work, if you know what I mean, and we maybe didn't make it easy for her. She went home to Scotland when I was twelve . . . said it was a vacation, but she never came back."

"I'm sorry," Nic said without hesitation.

"She didn't like the weather here either. Missed the rocks and hills and all those cold, dreary days."

"And the tall, thin ghosts?"

Another shrug. "Not ghosts. Fairies—not cute, cartoon fairies, but the nasty kind, one step removed from devils." He glanced at his pickup. "I gotta get to work—"

He paused, as if expecting a similar revelation from Nic. When she said nothing, he promised to reset the traps when he got home. There were four squirrels chasing one another around Nic's car by then and dozens more when he returned in the late afternoon. Nic caught Bobby peeking at her door and windows as he reset the traps.

While Nic watched and fretted, Bobby Walker tucked his second trap under the stairs to her front door and, after a vigorous shake of his head, walk back to his own home without knocking on her door. Try as she might, Nic couldn't blame him. He had a job . . . a life. Nic's hands trembled as she typed an e-mail to Sara—

. . . It's worse than weird, Sara. Ever since I replaced the hard drive, I've been surrounded by obsessed squirrels. No kidding. They're all over this place. I've got a neighbor who's trapping them and carting them away by the dozens. He thinks I'm feeding them. I'm not, of course; I'm too busy sending out resumes to be feeding squirrels. He's got to think I'm a slug, not that I've seen a slug around here, but every time he knocks on the door, I'm just waking up. I didn't sleep well last night. I dreamed there was someone in the trailer with me—a woman all dressed in glowing, silvery gray. In my dream—I'm telling myself it had to be a dream—the fairy woman was trying to steal the dead hard drive because there was a brownie trapped on it because squirrels had chased it into a transformer. My dream made sense, but nothing makes sense now, except that I'm losing it. . . fast.

Nic checked her e-mail throughout the evening. She picked up the phone more than once, but her per-minute long-distance rate was too high for commiseration, even on a night when she found herself more depressed than she'd been when she'd first lost her job. When midnight came and went without communication from the civilized world, Nic shuffled into the kitchen, ready to wolf down some unhealthy snack on her way to bed. Her hand was inches away from a box of generic cookies when she spotted a can of evaporated milk she didn't remember purchasing.

A bowl of milk, Bobby Walker had said: bread soaking in a bowl of milk for brownies, luck, and a clean kitchen. The formula hadn't worked for Mrs. Walker, but Nic was willing to give it a try. She shredded slices of bread into a milk-filled cereal bowl. Then, because she couldn't feel any more foolish, Nic set the bowl beside the dead hard drive.

It was still there, lumpy, scummy, and utterly unappetizing, when she awoke hours later. So were the squirrels, both in the woven-wire traps and racing free around the trailer. They'd grown destructive overnight. Several of the rodents squatted on the car's hood, stripping away her windshield wipers as though the black rubber were licorice candy. Nic slapped the picture window in a futile attempt to scatter them.

The sound snared the attention of a squirrel perched on the narrow banister beside the door. It launched itself at the window and hung there a moment before sliding down. Another squirrel hit the window hard enough to make Nic jump away with surprise. This second squirrel, more determined than the first, fought the pull of gravity. Its dark claws squealed frantically against the glass before it, too, fell from sight.

When a third squirrel leaped from an overhead branch, Nic had had enough. Grabbing a dish towel, she burst out the door, flailing cloth and shouting. The squirrels scattered, but not far. When Nic turned around, one of them was at the top of the steps, scratching at the door which was closed, but not completely shut. She whirled the towel above her head and charged.

"Whoa!"

The voice came out of nowhere, along with an opposite pull on the towel. Nic let go of the cloth. She spun around and found herself perilously close to Bobby Walker.

"One more step, and you'd have landed on the ones we already caught."

Nic looked down at the writhing trap inches from her foot. She didn't know what to say, but was spared the need for words when a squirrel flung itself at the window.

Bobby Walker whistled his astonishment. "Never seen a squirrel do that before."

"They're pallbearer squirrels."

"Didn't you say that had something to do with transformers and blowing out your computer?"

She nodded.

"But these fellows are jumping at your windows."

Nic nodded again. "I lost a hard drive when the transformer first blew. It's sitting out on the table by the window. They've spotted it and are trying to get

to it."

There was a squirrel—maybe the same squirrel, maybe a different one—scratching at the front door. Bobby clapped his hands. It scampered a few yards, then sat up on its haunches, twitching its tail and poised for another leap at the door.

"Is that something squirrels do?" he asked. "Doesn't seem right to me. It's not like there's anything for them to eat in a computer."

Nic took a breath before explaining. "There's something on the hard drive—something that got trapped there when the hard drive failed. Now, instead of just a few squirrels stuck in a rut, it's attracting more and more of them."

Bobby Walker opened his mouth, but shut it without saying a word as another squirrel leaped at the window. The glass shuddered in sunlight.

"Maybe you should hide that hard drive where the squirrels can't see it. Too bad it's attracting squirrels. If it was turkeys or deer you'd really have something going during hunting season—"

Nic's imagination took a Hitchcockian turn as she imagined Thanksgiving-sized birds hurling themselves at the trailer.

"Or you could just bring it out here and give the little beggars what they want. I'd like to see what they'd do with a worthless hard drive."

"It's broken, not worthless. If I don't get it back to the manufacturer, I've got to pay for the new one."

"Then take it to the post office. Let them worry about the damned squirrels."

Nic sighed and told Bobby Walker about the disappearing man she'd encountered on her way to the post office.

"Just some crazy old man—"

She told him about the luminous woman with silver tears.

"A dream—"

"Not a dream," Nic insisted. "I wished it were a dream. I even tried to wish myself awake, but I wasn't asleep to begin with." She saw disbelief in Bobby Walker's eyes. "You must think I'm the one who's crazy."

"Not crazy. Someone who doesn't want to be here and would give anything to be anywhere else. It's too bad—"

Before Bobby could share the rest of his insight, they were both startled by two squirrels striking the window in quick succession.

"I better hide that hard drive."

Nic bounded up the stairs and didn't object when Bobby Walker followed her. The hard drive was in plain sight on the table. So was the bowl of milk-soaked bread. Nic grabbed it first, but not quickly enough.

"There's where you've made your mistake," he said flatly.

"Where?"

"Well, ma'am—I told you, bread in a bowl of milk won't work. That's for Scottish brownies. What we've got around here are *suth'run* brownies. You want to catch a *suth'run* brownie, ma'am, you've got to set out beer and a dish of pork rinds, or some of those little hot dogs in a can—"

Nic froze.

"That was a *joke*," Bobby Walker insisted. "You've got to laugh at yourself, Nicole Larsens, or whatever's eating at you *is* gonna make you crazy."

"I don't belong here."

"Nobody belongs *here*." He opened his arms to include the whole trailer park. "We're just passing through on our way up, or down."

"Which way do you think I'm going?"

"Can't tell yet."

"And you?"

"Can't tell that either. Up, I hope."

Nic offered to make coffee and washed the incriminating evidence out of the cereal bowl while the elixir filtered into the pot. She returned the hard drive to its antistatic pouch and stuffed the pouch into the cardboard box which, after a moment's thought, she put in the oven.

"It doesn't work," she explained. "And it's so dirty, I wouldn't use it, even if it did."

"Why not just take the box to the post office?"

"Because today's Saturday and the post office isn't open at this hour on Saturdays; and, besides, I'm going to try the beer thing."

"Do you believe in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, too?"

Sarcasm sounded different with a mid-Florida drawl, but no less biting when wielded by an obvious expert. Nic had underestimated Bobby Walker and his bright-red pickup.

"There are squirrels knocking themselves silly against my window—"

But the twitchy multitude was fast departing. Only one squirrel chewed rubber on the hood of Nic's car, another pair circled the traps that held their siblings or cousins, the rest had scattered.

"Out of sight, out of mind," Nic and Bobby Walker said together, then fell silent together, wondering if something significant had taken place.

"Can I borrow a can of beer?" Nic asked to break the silence.

"You could, if I had any. Never got a liking for the stuff. Tastes like horse piss. Wouldn't do you any good right now, even if I did. According to my momma, brownies are nocturnal. 'Course, what did my momma know? She never caught one, not in Scotland or Florida. Could be our Florida brownies like their beer in the morning or, could be, they spend the whole day racing squirrels and don't get thirsty till the squirrels go to bed. My daddy's kind of like that."

Nic would have asked a few polite questions about the Walker family if she'd gotten the change, but with coffee still dripping into the pot, Bobby Walker got restless.

"I'd better load those squirrels into my truck and take them out to the woods—it's cruel to leave them trapped up. You going to want me to set 'em out again later today, or do you think the beer will do the trick?"

"Better set them out," Nic decided and knew in a dark corner of her heart that the reason had nothing to do with squirrels.

"You gonna put the beer in the oven with the box or put 'em both where the squirrels can see them?" Bobby asked, with his hand poised about the doorknob.

"I don't know, Nic admitted. "I'll decide tonight and tell you tomorrow."

Bobby Walker drove off with the squirrel traps and was still gone when Nic went shopping for a single can of beer and another of Vienna-style sausages.

His pickup was back in its usual place— partly blocking Nic's end of the dirt road—when she returned. She thought about knocking on his door for a change, but the traps were already set, and she locked herself in for the night.

After a day's contemplation, Nic had rejected both the oven and the table for her Florida-brownie trap, choosing instead to build herself a tower of beer-filled plastic cups, sausage-bearing plates, and noisy silverware on the seat of a warm rocking chair with the naked hard drive tied securely to the back. If anything happened overnight—not that anything possibly *could* happen—the Rube-Goldberg construction insured that Nic wouldn't sleep through it.

And she didn't. When the tower collapsed somewhere between midnight and dawn, she was sitting bolt upright in bed before the last fork clattered to the linoleum floor. There were no follow-up sounds, but there *was* light! Grabbing her broom handle, Nic raced down the corridor in time to see something dark and cat-sized dart behind the refrigerator. The scuttling shadow didn't hold Nic's attention long. The light was in the living room—two lights: one feminine and familiar, the other masculine and also familiar, but more aristocratic now than he'd been in sunlight.

The man's dark eyes shone with an unfriendly temper. He tossed a flowing cape over one shoulder and stalked *through* the front door. The woman gathered her skirts but hesitated, watching the refrigerator as closely as she watched Nic.

"I set him free," Nic reminded her glowing guest. "Or her. I think that's what you wanted, and if it was, I think I'm entitled to an explanation. What happened? How did he, or she, wind up on a hard drive? What's with the squirrels? And, last but not least, what are *you*?"

"I am myself," the woman replied without moving her lips. Her voice was whisper-soft in Nic's ears, yet easily understood. "As you are yourself and the little ones—the *brownies*—" She made it plain that the label was not one she preferred to use. "Are themselves. They know better—" She cast a mother's stare toward the refrigerator. "But the *ee-lek-trece-ity*—" Another word that did not come easily to the glowing woman, "Is so sweet and their minds are so small. When they play, they cannot always remember the danger."

Darkness surrounded by dust bunnies emerged from beneath the refrigerator. Nic got an impression of spindly limbs and a leathery, sharp-featured face before it was gone—*through* the door—and only the dust bunnies remained, settling to the doormat.

"And they wind up trapped on a hard drive until you rescue them?" Nic asked.

The woman—the fairy queen, Titania?—shook her head. "Usually," she uttered a birdlike musical sound, "this happening is rare, very rare. We hear them suffering, but rescue is difficult —impossible."

"Without the help of something more irresistible than electricity, something like beer?"

Titania nodded. "There will be great celebration—and fear, too, that they will forget everything and think because one was rescued, there is no longer any danger. This happening was chance, not plan."

Nic heard more fear than celebration in Titania's voice. "If there's ever anything I can do . . . set out another round of beer and sausages . . . ?"

Titania raised her arm and Nic felt a brush of warm velvet against her cheek and the faintest scent of ozone, like dew-fresh air after a thunderstorm. Nic closed her eyes as the velvety touch passed over them. When she reopened them, she was alone.