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## The Jagged Edge

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## THE JAGGED EDGE

by MARGE SESSIONS

A sudden path of sunlight swept over the brown hills as the dark clouds parted momentarily. It was March 21, the first day of spring; but spring was late this year. Already nine chimes had rung out from the carved wooden clock on the broad white mantelpiece, but the frost of the night before still clung to the steep slopes covered with last year's dead grass.

"It could easily snow today," Camilla Dust mused, her faded blue eyes staring at the far hills. For over an hour she'd been sitting in the arm chair by the window, her dark green shawl wrapped tightly around her as she watched the wind sway the one big beechwood tree just above the highway. Her lips twitched as she pushed back the ruffled white curtain and felt again the cold wind still blowing through the space between the window and the cracked wooden sill. It seemed even colder than at six o'clock when she first got up. She drew her arms back inside her shawl and rubbed her hands together, warming them. She had neglected to light the gas burner in the fireplace, and her knuckles had grown stiff from the cold so the blue veins rippled in her hands as she slowly bent her fingers back and forth.

She thought of getting the matches from the table behind her bed, but in the motion of rising she forgot about the burner and pressed her face against the cold glass of the window. Far down the road, almost out of sight beyond the curve, she could see the sudden break in the long sweep of the white guardrail. Five days had gone by and no one had come to fix it. Maybe they had forgotten. She

turned back to the room and rested her eyes on a tiny, old-fashioned china lady beside the clock. "Please don't let them fix the railing," she breathed softly. "Please make them forget. I have to have something to remember by, something to prove Amanda wasn't just a dream."

Amanda. Camilla had called her that. She didn't know her name. She had intended to ask the woman who called from the police station, but forgot, and had called her Amanda, the name on the base of the china lady. When Amanda's aunt had come to take her away Camilla still did not ask. She watched the woman folding the diapers that she had made from her flannel nightgown and had left drying before the burner. She heard the aunt apologizing for the trouble and worry the baby had caused her, and suddenly she did not want to know any name but Amanda.

Camilla stared at the corner where she had kept the baby's basket. The flowered print on the walls had lost its color as the gray clouds hanging low over the hills seemed to press into the room. Outside the wind echoed shrilly from the corners of the roof.

"Sounds almost like a scream. Maybe it was the wind that woke me that night and not a scream at all." Camilla frowned to remember. "No, it had to be a scream; there was no wind then."

She leaned back in the chair with her eyes closed and her hands clutched tightly in her lap. Just before she awoke she had dreamed about Amanda. In her dream she experienced again the feeling of rocking the chunky baby to sleep in her arms. Then in the dream she placed her in the large wicker clothes basket beside the fireplace and left the room for a moment to look for some safety pins that the delivery boy had brought her. Earlier they had been lying on her bedside table, but now they had disappeared. In her dream she searched through an endless row of drawers in her dresser without success and started into the bathroom when she heard the clock begin to strike and remembered that she had left them on the mantle.

The chimes rang on and on as she hurried to Amanda. The baby was lying on her face and hadn't stirred, but the clock kept ringing—on and on, louder and louder. Camilla seized Amanda and ran with her to the bedroom and closed the door, but the chimes rose to a frightful clang. For a long while she stood against the closed door and tried to soothe Amanda by singing above the noise of the chimes—before she was struck by the fact that the baby should have

been awakened by the bells. Only then did she notice how still, how almost stiffly, the baby lay in her arms. In horror she drew back the blanket and stared down into the still face. Amanda was dead—dead.

Suddenly Camilla had awakened and run into the living room. The clock on the mantle had said exactly six o'clock. She was alone in the cold and silent house.

She felt her hands grow hot and sticky. If only she could get out of the house and walk to the store. Mr. Herbruck knew how well she had taken care of the baby. He knew how she'd ordered strained baby food and Pablum and homogenized milk and paid the delivery boy extra to come the long miles to her house through the heavy snow. Every afternoon Mr. Herbruck had called to see if she needed anything from the store before he left for home. Then yesterday, after he learned that Amanda had been taken away, he called again and invited her to stop in at his store to see his display of handmade linen done for order by his cousin Mrs. Louise Bates—he had invited her to come to the store *since she wouldn't have to stay home with Amanda any longer.*

Camilla wished she hadn't left her order in the mailbox for the delivery boy. Now she had no excuse to go to the store, especially in such threatening weather. It was a long time since she'd been to town, but she wanted very much to go. She'd first gotten into the habit of leaving an order for the boy after her brother Richard had his stroke, and then after he died she kept right on leaving it in the mailbox. It was less awkward that way because she never knew what to say to the boys when they came to her door. Once the boy neglected to come, and she had had to go herself. At the store door she had hesitated and then turned back; after all she had enough canned food to last until the boy did come on the following Friday. Now she had to talk to someone—to Mr. Herbruck, for he knew about Amanda and how she had bought her special food and kept her warm and well, except as she forgot.

A distant roar, different from the turbulent noise of the wind, broke in upon Camilla's thoughts. She pulled back the curtain and watched as the black automobile sped around the curve out of sight. She sighed and looked far down the road at the broken railing. It was beginning to snow, and the white curtain of icy flakes helped the rail look blurred and mended.

Was it five nights ago that the piercing scream had awakened her? It seemed five years—but that couldn't be right, for Richard

had been living then. But was it only five—for a moment, as she had lain suddenly wide awake, she thought she had been having a bad dream and had reached out to turn on the light. She had stopped, though, with her hand halfway to the night light fastened above the mahogany head board of her bed. The room was abnormally quiet, except for the sound of the scream that still echoed in her ears; and the moonlight coming in beneath the yellow shade cast a strange bright glow across the room. Slowly she sat up and slid her feet over the edge of the high bed into her woolly slippers. Her long flannel nightgown clung about her ankles as she reached out to close the window. Snow—it had snowed while she had been asleep, and a tiny drift that had blown in under the window clung wet and soft to the back of her hand.

"How pretty it is," she thought, as she lifted the shade and looked down at the highway below. Everything was covered with thick clinging banks of snow. "A beautiful night to go for a walk!" Camilla let the shade roll clear to the top of the window. She loved to go for walks at night. Then the highway belonged to her, to her alone. It was easy to imagine it was the road to the stars, or to a beautiful park; and only the approach of dawn would send her home again. Quickly she pulled on a heavy green sweater and hiked the folds of her nightgown up under the waist of her long black skirt.

The mellow chimes of the clock on the mantle startled her as she felt her way down the tiny dark hall to the living room. One, two, three, four. Four! She hadn't expected it to be so late. She would have to hurry—dawn was not far away.

She took her fur-lined boots from the coat closet beside the front door and began putting them on over her slippers. She loved the feel of the soft fur around her ankles and rubbed it gently with her finger before she fastened the snaps at the top and straightened up.

Something in the back of her mind vaguely annoyed her; and she paused, her eyes resting on the double light switch beside the front door. What was it she wanted to do? She went back into her moonlit bedroom and stared at her dresser. Nothing there was out of place. She looked at her hair in the tiny square mirror and pulled back the wispy, gray strands. Suddenly she remembered—the scream that woke her up, if it was a scream. She hurried back into the living room and peered out of the window. The moonlight glittered on the smooth, fresh snow; and the slender guardrail made a long blue

shadow on the glistening highway. For several minutes she stood and gazed. The steam from her breath clouded the window, and she wiped off the pane to press her face tight against the cold glass. Then she saw it—far off, just before the curve, the broken guardrail. Nothing else, just a break in the long white bar. She caught her breath. An accident—she had often wondered what she would do if there was an accident. She ran to the telephone on the table by the fireplace and snatched up the phone book. She snapped on the low pink lamp and began searching through the numbers. *Sheriff*. It wasn't listed under S. She turned back to the first page and sat down on the straight-backed chair beside the table. "How to dial, How to call long distance." At last she found it. "Fire Department, Police, County Sheriff." She picked up the receiver, and the dial tone clicked loudly. At the same moment she thought she heard the distant sound of a man shouting. Quickly she hung up, snapped off the light, and ran to the window. On the hill below she could see the tiny moving glow of a flashlight and the dark forms of two men heading up toward the house. They must have seen the light.

She ran into her room and pulled off her skirt and sweater. Then with trembling hands she knelt in her nightgown below her window and softly opened it. Now she could hear the men's voices, but they were too far away for her to understand. They had stopped moving and were throwing the beam of their flashlight in a broad circle about them. It swept in an arc across the snow toward the house. Camilla ducked. What if they had seen the moonlight shining on her?

She half crawled across the floor to the doorway and ran into the living room. "The light," she thought, "I'll have to turn on the light." She flicked the switch by the front door and ran back to her bed. "What if they want to come in? What if they bring a dead person into my house?"

She tensed, jumping at the sound of the heavy knocker even though she'd been expecting it. She stood up and walked mechanically back down the hall to the front door. She unfastened the chain and slowly pulled it open.

Camilla rubbed her eyes. She couldn't remember what had happened next, except that they were there, in her house, talking to her. In her mind she could still see the wet puddles left on the rug by their heavy boots and feel the tiny fingers of the baby clinging to

the folds of her nightgown. A baby. At first she hadn't been able to understand why the men were bringing her the baby. Then she realized and began rocking it gently back and forth. A moment later the men were gone, and she and the baby were left alone. At first Camilla didn't know whether it was a boy or a girl—its tiny face was so puckered up with cold—but she hugged it closer.

The next morning Mr. Herbruck heard about the accident and called to see if Camilla needed anything special. She sat with Amanda—it was a girl and she had named it that—on her lap as she planned its diet over the phone and found with surprise when she hung up that she had talked for over fifteen minutes.

All day long she played with Amanda and watched her tiny hands examine the pattern in the rug and the carved legs of the chairs around her. Soon after seven that night Amanda fell sound asleep in her basket beside the fireplace, but Camilla stayed up until after twelve washing her diapers and making a bib from an old linen napkin and two pink ribbons. At last she finished and hung the diapers by the burner so they'd be dry and warm in the morning. Then she opened the living room window an inch and went to bed exhausted.

Before dawn she awoke startled. She thought she heard someone crying, but listened, and all was quiet. Sleepily she reached out and closed her window, then snuggled back to sleep. Perhaps it had been the cold that woke her up.

The next thing she heard was the clock striking seven. Suddenly she remembered—Amanda. She had meant to get up in the middle of the night and check to see if everything was all right. She pulled on her robe and glanced out of the window. It had snowed again during the night. She ran into the living room and looked down at Amanda. Snow was on the floor by the arm chair, and the baby's skin and tiny fingernails had turned blue during the night. With a cry Camilla picked her up. "Poor baby, poor baby," she murmured over and over as she walked back and forth in front of the fireplace and hugged the baby close to warm its shivering body.

Camilla clutched her hands nervously. She had even cried before Amanda finally opened her eyes. "Now I don't even know where the woman was taking little Amanda," she thought. She stood up and walked dully over to the closet and took out her heavy black coat. "Maybe Mr. Herbruck will know where I can find her," she told herself as she pulled open the front door and felt the cold sting



of the snow flakes blown hard against her face. She pulled the door hard behind her and ran down the hill to the highway. Already the snow had buried the tracks of the last automobile.

She stepped cautiously onto the slippery surface. Suddenly she realized she was going to pass the place where Amanda's parents had been killed. She wanted to cut away up the hill, but her feet kept on moving slowly toward it. When at last she reached the broken place in the railing she stopped and felt the cold, jagged edge. She stared at the ground by her feet and then slowly looked down the steep hillside. Halfway down she could see the wreck of a black car caught on the slope above a clump of thick hawthorn bushes. Snow was sifting in through the broken side windows, and the door hung partly open. Camilla forced herself to turn away from the edge of the road and begin walking along the highway again. She barely noticed the bitter wind as she plodded on with her head and shoulders hunched forward. Once she grew tired and stopped to rest a moment before going on. All thoughts of finding Mr. Herbruck had flown from her mind.

"Amanda's dead," she thought. "She's dead in the cold and the snow, and they've taken her away." She walked on, snow stinging her eyes. Each step sounded the words, "She's dead." Camilla stumbled down the hillside and sank on her knees in the snow. "She's dead," she choked and covered her face with her hands as the rush of wet stinging snow carried away the sound.

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