

—TOLL

by Blu Gilliland

She's only here because her son is sick.

Three a.m. at a dead-end toll booth job is not where her ambitions lie. It is not something she has studied for, prayed for, sweated for, sacrificed for. Oh, there has been sacrifice, and will continue to be; but this job is not the thing that makes it all worthwhile. This cramped little booth with its buzzing fluorescent light and constant draft.

She's here because her son has an illness. "His illness" is all they know to call it, because after two years the doctors (and they have seen lots of doctors, Lord a'mighty knows) still can't put a name to it. It creeps in, this illness, from all angles. It ravages his small body, knocking down defenses and stealing away in the dead of night. It's a vile, torturous thing, and with every thrust and parry it is bringing her son closer to death.

So she sits in this booth and works double shifts whenever she can (like tonight), because her husband's job doesn't offer much in the way of insurance, and they have bills mounting up like drifts of snow. She was going to school, but that's on the backburner for now—a semester's tuition just about covers a weekend visit to the hospital, and there's really no choosing between the two, now is there?

Her name is Lindsey Billings. Her son's name is Preston, and he's six years old and is the smartest, cutest, bestest boy in all the world. He isn't the healthiest, but they are working on that. Her husband is Fred. Fred drinks a little too much and gets a little too upset when the Falcons lose, but he works hard and usually says something nice about the way she looks or the food she cooks. Lindsey and Fred got married five months before Preston was born, and they are fighting hard to carve out a good life for their little family.

Fred is Preston's hero. One reason for this is that Fred invented the Happy Shake. It is nothing more than a chocolate milkshake, but it is sometimes the only thing that will bring a smile to Preston's face when "his illness" is digging a path through his guts. Fred likes to surprise Preston with Happy Shakes when the boy's pain has been at its worst. Lately, Preston hasn't been able to finish them, but it seems to take his mind off of things, at least for a little while.

A truck approaches the booth, its headlights piercing the low-lying fog. Lindsey sticks her hand out of the booth as the truck rattles to a stop. The driver, a haggard man in a blue shirt and matching cap, holds a half-empty Mountain Dew bottle in one hand and digs through an ashtray full of change with the other. He drops an assortment of quarters, dimes, and pennies in her hand and impatiently taps the gas

as she counts it. He's ready to get where he's going. She understands, but she also knows she has to close out a balanced till at the end of the night. She counts the coins and raises the bar to let him through.

She has barely sat down when she sees headlights again, approaching slowly. She stands and stretches, sips water from her bottle, and leans against the toll booth window.

It's a BMW, coming in so slow that Lindsey wonders if it's out of gas, coasting in on fumes and a prayer. There's a gas station just down from the toll booth, but it closes at midnight and opens at five, so it's of no use to anybody right now.

The car glides to a stop and she can hear the low purr of the engine as it idles beneath her window. It's a beautiful piece of machinery, sleek and black with accents of chrome. As Lindsey leans out to get the fare she can see the gas station parking lot, where her 1987 Toyota Corolla sits all by its lonesome. It's boxy and blue with accents of rust, and the vinyl roof is peeling off in long, ragged strips. But it gets her to work, gets her home, and gets Preston to the doctor's office, and right now (she reminds herself) that's about all that matters.

There's a woman behind the wheel of the BMW. She's dressed in a simple white blouse that soaks in the blue light from the dashboard, wrapping her in a surreal, otherworldly glow. She's wearing an expensive-looking pearl necklace and matching pearl earrings. Beneath the necklace, the side of her neck is striped with vibrant purple bruises.

Lindsey tries not to stare. The woman doesn't let go of the steering wheel, and she doesn't offer up a dollar bill, or a five, or a handful of change. She just sits there, staring straight ahead through unblinking eyes while the BMW's engine hums patiently.

"Um, ma'am," Lindsey says. "That'll be one dollar, please."

The woman doesn't turn her head. She brings one delicate hand up from the steering wheel and points one polished nail at her neck.

"Haven't I paid enough?"

"I don't..." Lindsey says. "...I just need a dollar."

"I have business on the other side of that gate," the woman says. "And you are the only one that can let me through."

"Yes, ma'am," Lindsey says, and feels the blood begin to rise in her face. She's never been good at confrontation, and she doesn't want to argue with this woman, but she doesn't want to argue with her boss over a short tally in the morning, either. She wishes desperately the woman would just produce a dollar and drive away.

"He did it in front of my children," the woman says, and that makes Lindsey think of Preston, helpless in a body that is often in revolt against him while she offers the only comfort she can: hugs and kisses and whispered promises that it's going to be okay, just ride it out, it will pass, life won't always be this hard.

Lindsey raises the bar. She's got a dollar in her pocket that she was saving for a soda, but she'll pay this woman's way instead. She doesn't know why, really. Kids shouldn't suffer, is all.

The woman watches as the bar raises and the light above it changes from red to green. She turns her head and looks at Lindsey, and Lindsey sees two oval marks, each about the size of a thumb, overlapping in the center of her throat.