

RECOVERED FILE 001: Black Butterflies

Location: Joplin, Missouri

Date: May 22, 2011

Recovered Archive Copy

The following transcript predates the events of Capheleon Nights. It has been preserved as recovered evidence.

By the time Donata reached the paper goods aisle, the headache she had been trying to ignore since noon had settled behind her eyes like a tightening vice. She reached for a six-pack of paper towels and immediately regretted the movement, bracing her palms against the metal handle of her shopping cart until the pulse of pain subsided.

She'd lived with weather headaches since she was a little girl. Usually, they faded after the rain started. The doctors back home had always called them migraines, claiming stress made them worse, and according to Aunt Addy, her mother used to get them too. But Donata knew the real trigger. Missouri storms always made them unbearable.

She forced her eyes open and looked down at the crumpled grocery list in her hand. Laundry detergent, coffee.

The fluorescent lights of the 15th street Walmart hummed overhead, casting a glare over the crowded aisles. It was a typical Sunday afternoon, packed with families just out of church and getting ready for the work week. Donata had driven over from her cramped dorm room at MSSU, hoping an hour of grocery shopping would clear the headache she'd been carrying since noon.

Her phone buzzed in her back pocket. The caller ID read Addy. Donata swiped the screen and pulled the phone to her ear.

"Hey, Aunt Addy."

"Are you inside?" Addy's voice cut straight to the point, competing with a sudden crackle of static on the line.

"Yeah, I'm just picking up some things at the Walmart," Donata said, shifting her weight against the cart. "Just trying to get a break from my macroeconomics notes. Is everything okay there at the Lake?"

"The radar looks nasty," Addy said, her voice dropping out for a fraction of a second as the connection wavered. "A severe hook echo just popped up on the Springfield broadcast, heading right toward Jasper County. They're saying Joplin is directly in the path."

"The forecast didn't look that bad when I checked it," Donata replied. She glanced toward the front of the store. From here, she couldn't see the sky, but the light filtering in through the distant doors looked strange, a heavy yellowish-green. "It's probably just another round of storms."

"A hook echo isn't a normal front," Addy said, her voice cutting out into a loud, electronic hiss. "Get back to the dorms.. interior room.. Donata, do you hear..."

The line went completely dead. Donata pulled the phone away from her ear and looked at the screen. *Call Dropped*. She tried to hit redial, but the signal bars at the top of the screen blinked once and vanished entirely. No service.

She shoved the phone into her pocket, a sudden knot tightening in her stomach. Addy thought she was safe up on campus.

Donata abandoned her cart in the aisle and started walking quickly toward the front exit. But she only made it three steps before the massive overhead lights flickered, buzzed, and plunged the entire supercenter into pitch darkness.

The casual noise of the store stopped instantly. Somewhere a few aisles over, a shopping cart wheel rattled to a halt, and in the sudden dark, a child started crying. Then, the emergency backup lights kicked on, casting a dim, eerie red glow over the concrete floor.

Outside, there was no warning siren. The roar just hit. It didn't sound like thunder. It vibrated straight through the concrete, through her body, until her teeth ached.

The building began to groan.

Someone near the front doors screamed. Then the massive glass storefront shattered inward.

The red glow of the emergency lights disappeared under a mountain of grey dust. For a few seconds, there was no air to breathe, only the chalky taste of pulverized drywall, insulation, and the terrifying smell of ruptured gas lines. Somewhere above her, metal twisted with a sound like tearing paper.

The noise stopped so suddenly it hurt.

For a second she couldn't hear anything except the ringing in her ears. She coughed, sucking in air thick with dust, and forced her eyes open. The ceiling was gone. She stared straight up at a sky the color of old bruises, wondering why she could see clouds from the middle of Walmart.

It took her three tries to stand. Her knees were shaking, her jeans torn at the shins from crawling over shattered glass. The world had shrunk to a radius of ten feet. Beyond that, everything was a jagged landscape of crumpled metal shelving and scattered inventory.

"Is anyone over there?" a man's voice called out from the darkness. He sounded dazed, his voice cracking. "Hey, I need some help over here!"

Donata blinked away the grit in her eyes, her survival instincts overriding the panic. "I'm here," she called back, her voice raw. "Where are you? Keep talking!"

"Just follow my voice! Over by the pharmacy counter!" the voice shouted, accompanied by a heavy cough. "Hurry!"

She scrambled over a collapsed row of shelves, her bare hands catching on jagged metal. After a few more agonizing minutes of navigating the maze of debris she spotted the man. He was in a torn flannel shirt and straining against a heavy, fractured steel pipe that had pinned a woman and a child against a ruined counter. His muscles were shaking from the effort.

"Grab the other end," he choked out, his face slick with sweat and drywall dust. "Just hold it up long enough for them to crawl out. Don't let it drop."

Donata slid her fingers under the cold steel. The weight was immense, a crushing force that threatened to snap her wrists, but she locked her elbows and lifted with everything she had left.

"Go," she gasped to the woman. "Get him out."

For thirty agonizing seconds, the world was nothing but the tearing pain in Donata's shoulders and the man's heavy breathing beside her. The woman dragged the crying child from beneath the gap, moving quickly across the debris until they were clear.

With a collective groan, Donata and the man let the pipe slam back down.

"Thanks," the man panted, wiping his forehead, leaving a streak of dark blood across his brow. "You okay?"

Donata looked down at her hands. They were trembling violently, covered in white dust and grey soot and blood from where she scraped them on the jagged metal. "Yeah," she whispered. "I think so. The cuts are shallow."

"We need to get outside," he said, looking up at the unstable walls left standing. "The power lines are all down. Come on."

They helped the people they could reach before stepping through the empty frame where the glass doors used to be. The parking lot did not look like a parking lot anymore. Cars had been tossed like dice, stacked on top of one another, their windows blown out. Across Rangeline Road, the landscape was completely flattened. There were pieces of wood embedded in the sidewalk.

Right at the edge of the shattered asphalt, clinging to the broken side mirror of an overturned sedan, Donata caught sight of a small, dark shape. A butterfly. Its wings were entirely black, beating slowly against the dust. She blinked, and a gust of wind swept a sheet of loose paper across her vision. When it cleared, the butterfly was gone.

Three days passed in a blur of volunteer tents, dust, and the heavy smell of chain saws cutting through broken oak trees. Donata had not gone back to campus. She couldn't bring herself to care about her macroeconomics final exams anymore. She had stayed in town, wearing a pair of heavy work gloves handed to her by a disaster relief truck, helping clear debris from what used to be a residential neighborhood just blocks from the ruined supercenter.

The work was exhausting, but as she carried twisted siding to the curbs, she listened to the survivors.

At the local church aid station, she sat near a table where a volunteer was washing drywall dust out of a little boy's hair.

"The big black butterfly told me where to hide," the boy whispered to his father, his eyes wide and vacant.

"It wasn't black," an older woman sitting on a nearby cot murmured, her hands trembling around a paper cup of water. "I know people think I'm crazy, but I swear there were butterflies in that storm shielding us. Mine was blue."

A volunteer setting down a tray of sandwiches quietly replied, "My daughter said they were white."

Donata kept her head down, sorting through a box of donated shoes. *Trauma does strange things to memory*, she thought, anchoring herself to the logic she needed to keep from breaking down. *People survive the unthinkable and their brains invent miracles to make sense of the dark. It's just shock.*

Later that afternoon, she saw another black butterfly. It was resting on the jagged trunk of a snapped oak tree, its wings a deep, flawless velvet. She watched it for three long seconds before it flickered up into the gray sky and vanished over the rooflines.

By Wednesday evening, the sky was a flat, dull grey.

Donata was kneeling in the dirt of a ruined front yard, throwing splintered pieces of a porch railing into the back of a pickup truck. Her body was a map of deep aches, but as she stopped to catch her breath, she realized something that made her stop.

The blinding headache she had carried into the Walmart on Sunday was completely gone. In its place was a strange, hollow quiet.

She reached down to pick up a shattered piece of green plastic, a remnant of a child's toy.

Sitting perfectly still on the plastic was another butterfly. Its wings were a deep velvet black.

Donata held her breath. The butterfly didn't move. It didn't flutter. It simply sat there, its wings beating in a slow, deliberate rhythm that felt entirely out of sync with the chaotic world around them.

She pulled off her heavy work glove, extending one dust-covered finger. Her pulse quickened as the creature gently lifted its legs and climbed onto her bare skin. Its touch was entirely weightless, but a sudden, icy shiver traveled up her arm, settling directly behind her eyes.

It was the exact same pressure she had felt right before the sky broke.

"Hey, Donata," a volunteer called out from across the dirt road, his boots crunching loudly over the gravel. "We're heading to the next block. You coming?"

Donata blinked, tearing her eyes away from her hand for a split second. "Yeah," she called back. "Just a second."

When she looked back down at her hand, the butterfly was gone.

The air was empty. There was no sign of black wings against the grey afternoon sky, no trace of it among the broken trees.

She stood up slowly, her fingers closing into a tight fist where the creature had just been standing. Her mind raced, desperate for a reason, anything to make the moment make sense.

You haven't slept in seventy-two hours, she told herself, her voice firm and defiant in the quiet of her own head. You're exhausted. People see strange things after surviving disasters. It's just trauma. It's a hallucination.

She took a deep, shaky breath, pulled her work glove back on, and picked up another piece of debris.

It had to be.

High above the broken neighborhood, something dark crossed the gray sky.

Donata never looked up.