

# Payout

*by xTx!*

Twenty-three million dollars was a lot of money and Annabelle deserved every cent.

Twenty-four hours for thirty-three days, never stopping; exhaustion long gone, now transformed into something akin to transcendence and the encapsulated air within the hollow bones that kept birds afloat.

Vision slowly returning; tear ducts drained, devoid. Her fingers, now nubs - it's fine, she'll buy gold tips along with new lips...hers gone, worn right through: an exhausted hangman's noose.

Her father attempted to translate for the reporters...her words reduced to half-taut slurs and gradient whistles peppered with sounds reminiscent of vowels and consonants. It was clear she wanted to speak, but....her brain still not set right; askew.

Decay set in on her knees, elbows, feet, whittled close to the bone by the exertion.

The neighbors...the town...celebrated her completion; the feat had taken its toll on more than just the victor. Parents tired of minimizing the frightened questions of children, their trusting eyes not quite believing,

"No, Annabelle won't be coming for you...where did you hear that?"

"It's not screaming baby, that's only the wind...",

"Daddy's not crying...he's just...tired."

Dismissive mothers, avoiding eyes, prayers pregnant in their throats.

The residents just wanted the quiet freedom of their streets back; the privilege of a summer breeze ruffling the curtains of their kitchen windows, of flies batting against a screen door fighting for entrance - these things long closed since the horror of the third day, the fourth, and thereafter.

Seven hundred ninety two hours. In the evidence of broad daylight, in the secrecy of darkness, in drizzling rain that teased the embers, Annabelle worked hard.

So very hard...

Everybody watched, at least once....., and no matter how foolishly she would spend her new wealth, nobody judged; they could not. It was well earned.

