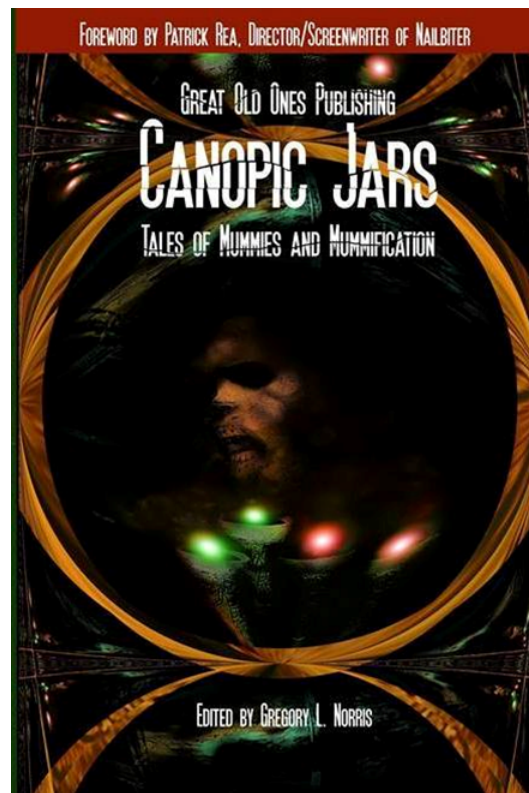


Jarring Lucas

Kristi Petersen Schoonover



Sometimes all it takes is a push. To be born. To kill your asshole father. To convince the parole board that you are, to your very *core*, remorseful for what you did. To assure the astonished realtor that you're so desperate to put the past where it belongs that yes, *really*, this broken hulk of a mansion in Murrells Inlet lying just beyond a state preserve is *perfect*.

My childhood friend Leza's excitement that I'm back makes her even more beautiful than I remember, and I wish I'd taken the time to shave and look decent, although it seems she doesn't notice. She wrinkles up that cute little nose of hers, folds her arms across her form-fitting yellow sweater and says, "Really, Lucas? Why didn't you pick something in better shape?"

I'd hoped she'd instantly fall in love with it. "This was the most out-of-the-way place I could find." A ghost crab scuttles across a patch of sand in front of my car; they're nocturnal and beach-dwellers, so I take this as proof. I survey the weather-beaten stones, the rotting door, the broken stained glass window that overlooks the foyer. "Plus, the owner

died, the family wanted nothing to do with it, and it's been sitting here like this for years. So I got it for practically nothing. I can fix it up." I'd always worked construction and had returned to the job I'd left, thanks to the fact the company's owned by a family friend. I have income and inexpensive access to materials. "Wait 'til you see the inside."

She moves next to me; I can smell her, a faint hint of cucumber and melon. That's when I see the scratches on her neck: five neat lines, like a claw mark. I reach out and brush back her hair to get a better look. "What's that?"

She shifts the collar of her sweater to obscure it. "You know me. Always getting into things."

Although I sense something's off, it's true. When I was in prison, she sent me a letter just about every week, chronicling her volunteer activities at Huntington Beach State Park, sharing high jinks at her for-fun job at Whales pushing \$3 towels and sand art, and familiarizing me with the strays she feeds after her daily runs.

"It was just one of the cats." She moves across the arid, sea-grass choked lawn and hesitates on the stone steps. The cicadas are so loud she almost has to shout: "Come on, I haven't got all day. My husband's done at five."

Kent is a pilot and inherited his dad's tourist-shuttling scenic flight business. He's always been possessive of her and I notice she's nestled her red Miata beneath a cluster of palmettos, up against the untamed tangle of woods that separates us from a cliff overlooking a beach.

She's right. We don't have much time.

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