



LEIGH ELLWOOD

# *A Winter's Dare*

A Phaze Snuggler HeatSheet by

*Leigh Ellwood*

*A Winter's Dare*

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Kate Robeson's husky, *film noir* voice carried as gaily as possible through the truncated ground floor of Dare House. "Athena," she seemed to sing in the stale air, scented with ancient book dust and faded daisies, "that's enough! Behave now."

Kate stood in the kitchen of the oldest house in Dareville, now a museum preserving the legacy of a town that had withstood two wars, as well as that of the mistress who called it home during the second, and not necessarily civil, one. The plastic-wrapped loaf of wheat bread, one of a few anachronisms in the otherwise authentically appointed room, rolled to one side at Kate's feet, untouched. By human hands or feet, anyway.

Kate shook her head. Athena was going to be the death of her, she just knew it. Perhaps, though, that was the girl's plan. Perhaps she wanted more permanent company than Kate could give.

"What are you shouting about now?" The voice of Kate's mother Marlene arrived mere seconds before the shapely, sixtyish woman flounced into the kitchen, swinging a heavy purse onto a nearby butcher's block. The table's long, varnished legs cried out in response to weight it was no longer accustomed to supporting. Kate cringed and had to wonder why her mother insisted on packing like Lewis and/or Clark just for a brief excursion into town.

Marlene carried on without skipping a beat, regarding their quaint surroundings with a disapproving gaze. Her nose wrinkled and her eyes squinted, as though willing away a layer of dust that threatened to coat her skin. "Honestly, Kate," she said, "you ought to get rid of the cat. You don't need animals running around here. What if it decides to sharpen its claws on one of Polly Dare's handmade heirloom quilts?"

With a labored sigh, Kate swooped down and collected the bread with an open palm. "For the last time, Ma, there's no cat in the museum. How many times do I have to tell you that? Even if there was one, those quilts are encased in acrylic frames. No amount of cat scratching will get to them."

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Marlene shrugged. "I'm surprised you don't have a cat, as much as you try to keep Dare House authentic. Didn't Polly Dare have a cat? For all we know, those celebrated quilts have been soaked through with cat piss for all these years. Preserved forever behind acrylic."

Kate rolled her eyes upward, as though wishing for x-ray vision to verify the intact cleanliness of the aforementioned quilts, lest her mother suggest extracting DNA from the threads to clone Civil War cats for fun and profit. She tried not to fist the soft bread slices into a plastic-covered ball, though she found the gesture too therapeutic to dismiss.

Carefully, breathing sharply through her nose, Kate extracted two slices for her lunch and replaced the loaf in its cupboard. Only when the door squeaked shut did she deign speak to her mother. "Polly had a beagle, named Aristotle," she said calmly, in the pleasant hostess voice used to lecture school groups and other interested parties who requested the full guided tour. "I was addressing Athena, the house servant."

"When did you hire an assistant?" Marlene reached for a potato chip from the open bag by Kate's sandwich. "And why would you call her something like *that*?"

"*Polly's* house servant, Ma!" For once since her appointment as curator of Dare House, Kate was relieved to know the place was devoid of guests. She knew damn well her mother liked to yank her chain, closet sadist that she was; anyone unaware of this practiced comedy routine might see a harried woman yelling at her dementia-suffering mother.

To be certain, Marlene Robeson was anything but senile, yet Kate braced for the inevitable implication by Marlene that the disease had come to claim her spinster child at the ripe old age of thirty-six.

"My own daughter, hearing and seeing things," Marlene muttered. "No wonder you're still single."

"I do hear Athena, Ma. Her ghost haunts this house. How do you think the bread got on the floor?" Athena indeed haunted Dare House, it was hardly delusion on Kate's part. Three separate investigations by different experts in the parapsychological field had confirmed this over the past two years, after Kate's initial suspicions prompted her to research the possibility. Luckily, Athena's spirit was a playful one, interested only in attention as it saw fit.

Skeptics like Marlene, however, saw the ghost only as a ploy to attract more business. Kate could only wish for such a boom. Children only visited the museum by virtue of field trips, and hardly seemed impressed with the stories of Athena's invisible antics. Apparently, the

gentle ghost didn't bring the "shock and awe" kids preferred to find in video games, and hence behaved when tourists visited. Kate likened her to the cartoon frog she adored as a child, the one that sang and danced in private yet merely croaked in the company of others.

"How did the bread get on the floor?" Marlene echoed. "Because I have a clumsy daughter."

"Because Athena pushed it off the counter to get my attention." Kate had yet to actually *hear* Athena outside of the occasional rustled curtain and moved object, but imagined the ghost of the young black woman now laughed at the trouble she caused.

"Because my clumsy daughter is also befuddled."

"Is there a reason you're here bothering me?" Kate slapped her sandwich together and nearly bit the whole thing in half. A line of detached crust hung from her lip, and she chewed it slowly into her mouth.

Marlene eyed the ravenous gesture with some amusement. "Well, I had come to take you to lunch."

Kate waved the remnants of peanut butter and jelly under her mother's nose.

"Then at least close up early," Marlene pleaded. "Nobody's going to come today. There's a foot of snow on the ground, and everybody who didn't have the good sense to stay at home is at the school or at Jake's."

"I can't. I need to be here." The temptation to leave early was strong, especially with the annual Dareville Winter Festival going on at Dareville Primary Academy and the nearby grocery. Two minutes alone with her mother had Kate dying for a glass of Virginia-made Chardonnay, or whatever Jake would be serving from his inventory.

*One* glass? Kate chuckled to herself, reconsidering the thought. With her mother around, try twelve.

"You need to be *there*, socializing with real people."

"You mean men." What would be the point in that? Any man in Dareville worth the trouble was already married. All that remained were the smattering of high school graduates who had yet to move—and Kate hardly fancied herself the Mrs. Robinson type—and senior citizens about two minutes away from being able to date Athena.

"I mean people who are breathing. You spend all day in this dreary place, and all night reading about it." Marlene clucked in disapproval. "It's no way to live, obsessed with death."

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"It's my job—and my research. And it's not all about death, either. I'm trying to learn more about Polly's *life*." Kate sighed. No sense in rehashing the same arguments with Marlene. Kate both valued her privacy and loved her job. How else would she be able to write a concise history of Dareville if she didn't devote herself to the research? Finding a man could wait, and if Mr. Right was so hellbent on finding Kate, everybody in town could tell him where to find her.

Marlene snorted at Kate's reasoning, and whipped out her green woolen beret. "Fine, stay here and talk to yourself. I don't want to hear you complain the next time you bend down for a dropped loaf of bread and your back gives out from osteoporosis, because you're so damned old and alone."

"You won't." *You'll be dead by then, I hope*, she thought, but not with malice. "And I'll try to be less clumsy. Maybe the next thing I'll have to pick up from the ground will be my hat, when I'm old enough to join the Green Berets."

"We are called Jaded Ladies," Marlene said, and arranged the beret on her head in a jaunty tilt. A few strands of gray missed by Marlene's stylist curled on her forehead. Kate tried not to laugh. It was nice to see her mother finally come out of her recent depression, following the desertion of Kate's father and a failed attempt to pursue a relationship with grocer Jake Marbury. Joining the social club geared toward middle aged women seemed a smart move for Marlene, though Kate had to question the wisdom of the name, *jaded* meaning cynical.

Then again, maybe all these women did was drink and compare the sexual inadequacies of their ex-husbands. If so, Kate felt better for having spent her nights alone.

She shooed her mother out the front door, leaving Athena to the sandwich and other antiquated household appliances. "Go," she commanded. "Enjoy the festival. I have to stick around anyway for the delivery guy. I'm expecting some documents from Richmond. If nobody comes to visit by three I'll close early and meet you there, okay?"

Marlene didn't counter the compromise and left on a pleasant note to accompany the ringing bell hooked atop the door. Kate waited until the older woman reached the sidewalk before splitting into a relieved smile. Her back to the now closed door, she sank an inch and pressed her weight against the wood, wincing as her knees creaked in response. Damn, she *was* getting old.



*Old and alone*, chided her mother's voice in her head. Kate frowned and blew away a clump of brown hair fallen between her eyes, expelling with it the sudden image conjured of an older version of herself rocking in Polly Dare's favorite chair, surrounded by cats.

*No*. Much as she enjoyed her solitary life, Kate never imagined she would be unwed forever. She corrected herself—she was *not* getting old. Thirty-six may have been ancient for the spinster Polly Dare in the Reconstruction Era, but in the twenty-first century women were reconstructed. If Madonna could stare fifty straight in the eye while spinning on a stripper pole without getting dizzy, Kate figured she had time.

Right now, she craved the time alone, and the quiet of Dare House as she waited for her important package. Just her, the books she loved, the naked woman stretched over the staircase...

*Huh?*

Kate hadn't focused on any particular spot when Marlene left, but in her reverie allowed her gaze to pan the breadth of the parlor, the hallway, and the small foyer with the podium that served as the admissions kiosk. The gentle movements dancing in her peripheral vision she attributed to everyday bleariness, as often as she pored over handwritten diaries and histories when Dare House was empty. Looking up the stairwell toward the second floor landing, her breath hitched upon seeing a lithe, young woman two shades away from midnight, her elbows propped against the step, arching her back to better display her small, bare breasts.

Naked, black, and beautiful. Dark eyes appraised Kate with silent amusement. Full lips curved upward and parted slightly to offer a flash of white. Even with the dimmed light and distance, Kate felt blinded by that smile, shocked to encounter a face she had first seen in the charcoal sketches of Polly Dare's journals.

Athena.

Bent knees wavered lazily from side-to-side in a smooth, teasing arc before parting ways to reveal something Kate *hadn't* seen in any historical document or tome found in the house. Tightly coiled black curls formed a triangle over the young woman's dark pussy, as though offering direction to the fingers of one hand snaking down the skin. Her gaze still fixed on Kate, Athena pried apart her nether lips with her forefingers, offering the curator a peek of pink flesh.

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Kate's own pussy twitched at the sight, and she turned away from Athena's challenging expression. The smile had taken on a hint of cruelty, as if saying to Kate, *Are you going to chide me not to do this?*

Kate took a deep breath and let her body slide the rest of the way to the floor. This had to be a hallucination, brought on by her self-imposed isolation and some kind of unconscious want for a sex life. She was imaging Athena naked because, truthfully, she spent more time socializing with a ghost than with the living. This suggestive pose merely represented a hidden desire, manifested through Athena's image, to embrace sexuality instead of academe. Of course. All Kate had to do was snap out of it.

She checked the stairwell again. Athena was still there, still vivid, and rubbing her clit in a rapid, circular motion. Eyes closed and neck tilted back, the young woman's thick lips pursed in a tight O. No problem deciphering what *this* represented.

"Athena. That's enough. Behave now." Kate's voice raised an octave, further words scratching her throat and nearly choking her as the door rumbled behind her.

## *Two*

*Shit!*

The rattle of the front doorknob filled Kate's left ear. Slowly she turned and watched it manically twist, accompanied by a deep, very masculine voice. "Hello?" The concern was obvious despite the caller being muffled by the barrier between them. "Is everything okay in there?"

Embarrassed heat flushed Kate's face, and her temples pounded. She hadn't realized she'd cursed aloud, and when the door nudged more forcefully behind her, she remembered where was she sitting.

"Sorry, dropped something. Just a second." Kate didn't know why she lied; whoever waited outside was bound to notice nothing out of place. Of course, it was just the deliveryman, and he wouldn't linger anyway.

Bracing against the door, she stood and stole one last glance at the stairwell. Athena remained clear as day, idly plucking one nipple, her head canted toward the rail. A raised brow and mischievous smile brightened her decidedly African countenance. *You gonna get that door?* she seemed to taunt.

Kate swallowed and opened the door just a crack; who knew if her visitor would be blessed with the ability to see the dead? A cold blast of winter air slapped her face as she edged her body against the open jamb, words of apology spilling fast.

"Sorry about that, I was getting ready to close up because of the weath—"

And Kate looked up not at a burly man in a brown uniform, whom she expected, but a handsome dark caramel face, framed with a bright red wool cap and matching muffler. Soft, gold-brown eyes set under two furrowed brows pierced her soul, she so strongly felt the young man's concern.

"Sounded like something going on in there. Are you okay?" He looked young, maybe early to mid-twenties, and wore no gloves. Kate

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caught the glimmer of a huge sapphire stone set in a knuckle-length collegiate ring; the hand curled around a thin sheaf of papers.

Strong hands, with long, tapered fingers and close-cut nails. Kate imagined one of those hands could easily palm one of her breasts and just scrape the skin below her collarbone. Most assuredly her nipple would harden in such heat, much like it had upon seeing Athena's teasing pose.

"I'm fine." Kate shook away the mental cobwebs with an awkward laugh. "It's just that it's been quiet today. Very uneventful." *Hah!* "I hadn't expected visitors because of the winter festival."

A broad smile of even, white teeth set Kate's heart to pulse. "Well, I'm on a break from school now, and this was really the best time I could come." His face then fell. "You're not really closing up now? Unless you have to be at that festival—"

"Not at all, oh! Come in out of the cold. I'm being so rude letting you shiver out here." Kate widened the door to allow the man entrance, and caught her breath quickly.

*Athena.*

Her head snapped back to the stairwell. The ghost was nowhere to be seen. Kate relaxed, and turned back to her guest. Apparently, he had not noticed her discomfort for the general distraction of the house.

"I've been meaning to come here for a while now," he had been saying, "ever since I heard about Polly Dare. I'm hoping I can find what I'm looking for here."

Kate moved to indicate the guest registry, but the young man had already tossed a crumpled bill in the donation jar and now signed the first available blank line with bold, clipped strokes. Kate bit her lip at the name: Devon Williams.

"What a nice name," Kate said, feeling quite silly afterward. Surely there were better ways of keeping a conversation moving.

She was very aware of Devon's proximity. He smelled of a woodsy aftershave; combined with the tang of his suede jacket, his masculinity seemed magnified.

Any wonder Athena chose to make herself known now? Perhaps the ghost sensed his approach. Kate wanted to laugh at that notion, of a man so good looking he could arouse the dead.

Just as well the ghost girl wasn't around, and Kate could confirm this. The paranormal experts she had consulted advised her that a ghost's presence normally coincided with a sudden drop in temperature. To be

certain, past encounters with an invisible Athena often resulted in erupted gooseflesh, even in the summer. Now, Kate experienced only the heat of a sudden, yet not unwelcome, attraction to Devon.

To her relief and increasing interest, Devon's smile implied the feeling just might be mutual.

*Sorry, girl,* Kate silently chided her friend. *You're about a hundred years too late.*

"It's actually my mother's maiden name," Devon said as he removed his outer wear. Off went the jacket to reveal a green Hampton University sweatshirt. "My family has quite a bit of history in this area. I've learned so much about Virginia in general this year, too."

"In a history class, I'm guessing?" Kate nodded to the white emblem on his chest, then gestured to a corner coat rack for Devon to hang his things. Well, she certainly excelled at stating the obvious.

"I'm finishing a master's, yes. My thesis is going to focus on the personal relationships of slaves and their masters." Devon looked thoughtful. "I have a special interest in one particular slave."

"Ah." Kate's stomach roiled at the word. The past was what it had been, but despite her years of study and total immersion in the state's history she still found it difficult to reconcile herself to that term when on the job. "For all I know of Polly Dare's life, and I probably know more than anybody in Virginia," Kate said, "that is one term I wouldn't use to describe Athena Dare."

"Why not? Athena was the property of Polly Dare's father, if I'm not mistaken. She was given the family surname, and presumably her first name as well."

"Yes. Horace Dare was an avid student of mythology," Kate agreed. The senior Dare had owned a number of slaves, all renamed for various Greek gods and heroes; it was a fact Kate didn't hide when lecturing, though she tried her best not to volunteer the information unless somebody asked specifically about it. "Athena and Polly were the same age. Athena had basically been Polly's personal, ah, *attendant* from the start."

"And she was willed to Polly upon her father's death. Polly *owned* her." There was no hint of anger in Devon's tone, no challenge to deny any attempts to rewrite history. He merely stated a fact. "Miss...?"

Kate shook her head. Her manners must have left with Marlene to get drunk with the rest of Dareville. She took Devon's extended hand; her

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entire body flushed in his warm, strong grip. "Kate Robeson. Call me Kate."

"White people owned black people once, Kate. I can assure you I didn't come here to cause trouble," he said, and added before Kate could reply, "I'm not here to hold anybody accountable for a past we can't change. I'm just a history student on a quest, hoping to bring some clarity to my present."

"Of course. I shouldn't assume everybody is overly sensitive on the topic of slavery. Forgive me." Yet when Kate when looked into Devon's nearly topaz gaze she found he was way ahead of her on that. *Oh, my.* Maybe they'd get snowed in, and Kate could get his mind off history...

*Athena, what did you do to me?*

*Kate, that's enough. Behave yourself!*

"So, what about Athena's relationship with Polly would you like to know?" Kate asked as she ushered Devon toward the parlor, the first stop on the guided tour. If only they could relax on Polly's settee for a more comfortable conversation, but Kate wouldn't bend the no-touch rules, even for herself. "We have most of Polly's journals archived here, along with some miscellaneous correspondence. Unfortunately, we're missing a few years here and there. I'd be happy to bring out what I have, seeing as you braved the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel to get here."

Devon looked down at his sweatshirt and acknowledged what had given him away. "That would be great. Really, I'm interested in two major things. One, I'd like to learn more about why Athena stayed with Polly until her death."

"I can answer that," Kate said quickly. "Rather, I can strongly *speculate*, based on what I've read in Polly's journals. Athena had been emancipated after the war; we have the papers to confirm that. Why she remained in the house in servitude, we believe had to do with her loyalty to Polly. We have access to ledgers, too, so we know Polly paid her a steady wage from her first day of freedom until she died. She wasn't a slave after the war, but a paid employee."

"I didn't know that." Devon scratched his chin. "I suppose that makes sense. I guess Athena had nowhere else to go, being a black woman in the South, in the nineteenth century...as a single mother."

"Excuse me?" Kate wrinkled at this. "Athena Dare never had children. We have her family's genealogy with our records, and they show no record of a birth since her own."

Devon shrugged. "Just because you don't have it on paper doesn't mean it never happened," he said. "Besides, if Athena didn't have a child, I wouldn't be standing here right now."

Kate opened her mouth to speak, but the air left her body. Devon extended his hand again, but she could only stare at it.

"I'm Devon *Dare* Williams, great-great-great grandson of Athena Dare."

### *Three*

The revelation, naturally, shocked Kate. To think, the state's—no, the *nation's* foremost expert on the Dare family of Virginia should have known something like this...she knew she should be ebullient to add this piece to the gaps in the puzzle of Polly Dare's missing years. Yet, her body yielded to the opposite reaction.

Polly had bequeathed Dare House and its belongings to Athena upon her death, and the will stipulated that in the event Athena preceded Polly in death, which she did, the property would instead transfer to Athena's descendants. As no such person or persons came forward after Polly's death, and as Polly left no offspring of her own, the property came under control of the state because Polly never bothered to change the will. Given the family's heritage, it didn't take long for Dare House to be declared a state landmark. It had been a museum since 1925, dedicated to preserving the family's legacy.

Kate knew she should be happy to know that Athena left behind her own legacy, in the form of this handsome, earnest man standing next to her. Why, though, could she only worry about whether or not Devon would try to claim Dare House as his own? *Could* Devon take the house? Was there a statute of limitations on such things?

She took a deep breath. *Calm down, girl.* Devon only wanted information, closure to fill branches on his family tree. It wasn't fair to assume he intended anything more than to record information for his personal satisfaction. Besides, what proof did he have of a blood relationship to Athena? Kate had no evidence to share. Help him all she might, though, no way could she bring him any closer to his goals.

And Dare House would remain with the state, and she with Dare House, her second home.

"Uh, Devon," she said finally, and Devon's hand fell to his side, "exactly how did you come to the conclusion that you're descended from Athena? I mean, not one journal we own of Polly's mentions a suitor, or



husband, for her. We had pretty much estimated the two women never married. Polly we can prove, at least."

"Last I checked, it's possible for a woman to give birth without the benefit of marriage." Devon winked. "Still happens today."

Kate laughed nervously. "True, and yes, I'm aware that many slave women had relations with other slaves, and sometimes with their white masters. There have been rumors about Horace Dare as well, but it's nothing we can authenticate." Just as Kate said that, however, her blood ran cold. Surely Polly's father hadn't impregnated Athena? To be certain, there would have been plenty of opportunity. As a house servant, it was likely Athena never associated with the other slaves Horace owned—Athena was practically Polly's sister. It wouldn't take much for Horace to seduce the young girl when the house was empty or, God forbid, take her by force...

A chill seized her spine, rippling up her back and over her scalp. Kate didn't want to think that Athena had borne a child of rape. Were it true, would Devon want to know that?

Devon's voice brought her attention back to the present. "All I know is what I've heard from my mother, who heard from my grandmother, who heard it from *her* mother. My family has lived in this area as long as I can remember. Mom even went to Dareville High, before it became the private school. She only moved to Hampton after graduating, but didn't talk much about this until recently."

"Your great-grandmother had a journal?" Kate didn't specify, but she was curious to know if Devon's ancestors had access to any diaries, particularly of Polly's, or Athena's. The girl was literate, that much she knew. Polly had written extensively of teaching her servant-sister to read and write.

To her inward relief, he shook his head. "All I have is oral tradition, much like my people. Grandma had said her father came from the most influential family in town, who else could she mean?"

"Who else?" Kate echoed. Who else but the family for whom the town had been named. She felt sick. What if Horace *did* rape Athena? What if Polly had known, and helped to secret the baby to another family to avoid shame? It certainly wouldn't be anything Polly would record in a diary, lest somebody find it.

Unless...the truth could be found among the missing links. Kate struggled to breathe. *This* was the legacy she worked to preserve all these years?

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"Can you help me?" Devon brushed her arm, and quickly all feelings of dread and unease dissolved, replaced by a renewed sense of want. A familiar emotion, one Kate seldom got to apply to real life. She rubbed her sleeve on the premise of a chill, but actually wanted to savor and spread the warmth Devon's simple touch brought to her body.

"I'd be glad to show you Polly's journals. Not the actual ones, they are kept in Richmond, I should have mentioned earlier. We have here transcripts of everything we have found. If you like, too, I can give you a tour of the house first so you can have a few points of reference. No charge." A little joke, since Dare House required no set admission.

"That would be great." Devon's smile followed her across the parlor as she led the way to the tour's starting point. Her skin tingled, as though sensing his appraisal.

Kate paused at the foot of the stairs, a bit apprehensive to climb a staircase she'd trekked up and down a million times, simply out of fear Athena might shock her with another erotic display. And what would happen if Athena did reappear in the buff? Were they supposed to walk right through her? Would Devon think her insane for seeing something he couldn't? Assuming Devon wouldn't be able to see the ghost. Assuming the ghost wasn't a result of the power of suggestion.

She frowned. The ghost had always seemed happy, playful, hardly something one would associate with a rape victim. What of Athena masturbating on the stairs? Maybe *she* had seduced *Horace*, and this was her way of telling Kate?

*Kate, stop it. We don't know there was a baby, much less a relationship there.*

Devon came up behind her, his body tense and breathing shallow. No doubt her hesitation puzzled him, but damned if his heat didn't radiate around her and inspire some suggestions more exciting than a tour of Dare House. Kate wondered if she could ascend the stairs with her thighs pressed together to keep her pussy from throbbing.

Instead, she took a bold step upward. "We'll start with the sewing room," Kate said, her voice low so as not to betray her nervousness. "Polly and Athena spent most of their nights there, quilting. All of the quilts on display were handmade by them. Beautiful work."

"I can't wait to see it, and the journals," Devon said. Stairs creaked underfoot, but they paid no mind. Kate was just happy not to see anything out of the ordinary on the short trip to the landing.

"I have lots of questions. I wouldn't know where to start," Devon added. "Grandma had mentioned learning how to quilt from her grandmother. I wonder if she did it in this house."

Kate couldn't discount that. Polly had been known to host the occasional bee. "It's the last room on the left," she said instead, guiding him down the stout hallway, "and the first stop on the tour. It's the only room that isn't cordoned off at the door, so we can go in and actually see—"

—empty acrylic cases hanging from the walls, ancient quilts scattered haphazardly on the floorboards.

And Athena Dare, naked and reclining in the midst of it all, smiling broadly.

*Four*

If only the door were still connected to the jamb, she could slam it shut on the disturbing, yet very arousing image. As it was, Kate had no recourse but to block the entranceway to the quilting room and hope to grow an extra foot high to obscure Devon's view of the mess. Even if he couldn't see Athena's ghost, surely the quilts scattered about the room would be impossible to miss. What would he think?

How had the spirit managed to free them from the framework? What kind of message was Athena trying to send here? Anxiety gripped Kate's throat, and bubbled in her stomach. Apparently, the past exercises with kicking around bread loaves hadn't garnered the desired attention.

Well, Kate was aware now that Athena had something to say, or show.

She squealed as two hands gripped either side of her waist. Athena continued to loll around the blankets, preening like a starlet. Kate straightened and stilled as a gust of warm breath tickled her ear.

"You see it, too." Devon wasn't asking a question.

"We must have been vandalized." Kate tried to keep a steady voice. "I can't imagine who would—"

"No, you see *her*."

"Who?" Kate asked, playing dumb. Yet, her heart backflipped to think Devon may be watching an ancestor frolic in the nude.

"That white woman rolling around the blankets," he said. "Ethereal. Is she the ghost I've heard about?"

*White wo...*

Kate frowned, but didn't dare turn around to let Devon see her confusion. What exactly was he seeing, a photo negative? Different views for different colors? Ridiculous.

Could Devon really see the ghost of *Polly Dare*? If so, why couldn't she? And why couldn't Devon see Athena, when she was so plainly obvious here as well?

"Uh," Kate faltered, "is she naked?"

Devon seemed not to hear her. Reaction came in an impassioned squeeze that nearly joined his hands together as they still encircled her. Kate fought for breath but didn't struggle from his grasp. It had been too long since a man touched her. Coupled with the erotic display, Kate felt her urges surface and threaten to explode. If only the hands around her middle would find more interesting parts to fondle...

"Polly," he said suddenly, and to Kate's surprise Athena looked at them with pleased recognition. She smiled a perfect set of white teeth—a testament to the good care she received in the Dare home, Kate guessed, or a gift in the afterlife—and rose gracefully. With a mock subservient bow, the young woman's body faded away.

"She's gone," Kate said, and wondered what Devon still saw. She rocked back against him, involuntarily, as she felt faint, buoyed by the brush of something hard across her bottom. Devon responded with a slight gyrating of his hips, allowing Kate the full effect of his hardening cock pressed to her. She thought her pussy might melt with the contact.

"No," Devon whispered, and urged Kate deeper into the room. "Someone, *something*, is still here. Can you feel it?"

That Kate could definitely answer. She felt something very unnatural in this room—heat. Due to her anticipation of the lack of visitors today, she hadn't bothered to set up the space heaters in the upper rooms. This exhibit should be colder than a witch's tit, to coin a favorite phrase of Marlene's. Instead, Kate felt she wouldn't be surprised to sense a line of sweat crossing her brow. Odd, considering Athena's presence in the house was normally marked by a distinct coolness.

If Devon indeed saw Polly's ghost instead of Athena's, perhaps the combination canceled each other's tendency to drop room temperature. The professionals who visited Dare House to investigate the hauntings mentioned nothing of supernatural heat, but right now it appeared to accompany another unexplained, yet not unwelcome phenomenon.

To think of it, they hadn't mentioned detecting Polly's ghost, either. Strange.

Devon's hands had trailed upward from her waist to cup the undersides of her breasts. He kneaded them gently over her blouse, and her nipples stiffened in response.

"I think you feel something else," Kate finally murmured, her voice quivering with the blast of steam from Devon's nostrils. Short, shallow breaths caressed the exposed flesh of her neck.

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"I think, somehow, you don't mind that so much." Devon continued to fondle one breast, while his other hand drifted lower to negotiate her belt buckle. Kate stepped out of her flats and dug her toes into the quilts. The patches, over one hundred years old, were feather soft to the touch, and each step seemed to release a sweet fragrance that revealed a passionate history. No faint stench of cat, as Marlene had predicted.

These quilts had draped two beds, and no doubt had received a share of some kind of action. Athena and Horace, perhaps? Or another of the senior Dare's servants? Maybe Polly Dare had once given herself to a hulking field servant under these very covers, leaving Kate and Devon to be influenced by the residue of a long-past tryst. If so, Kate had yet to learn of Polly's dalliances in the available journals.

*Or*, Kate thought as her legs slowly morphed to gelatin, *maybe you want this for yourself*. She drew in a breath when Devon's hand slipped the barrier of her panties and his middle finger found her clit.

"I think I need to lie down," she said.

Devon moved with her as she slowly sank onto the quilts. He hovered over her just long enough to allow Kate to roll onto her back, then he quietly rocked and sat on his heels.

Kate tucked an arm behind her head and watched Devon undress. The university sweatshirt slipped away to reveal a taut, dark chest sprinkled with tight, rough curls. Sharp muscles defined his arms and abdomen, but more than anything she wanted to see what comprised the impressive bulge tenting his jeans. Her sexual conquests were few and far between, and though she had even experimented with same-sex pleasure, she had never sampled anyone outside her race. But she preferred men, and she never discounted the idea of doing it with a black man.

*This man was perfect.*

Watching Devon raise his hips to slide off his jeans and underwear, Kate gaped silently at the thick erection that sprang forth and inwardly chastised herself for not considering it sooner. *Oh, my*. Her pussy twitched in anticipation. She couldn't wait to feel his skin against hers, to see the contrast of their fleshtones as they melded.

First, though...she nodded at Devon's teasing smile. Of course. One of them was severely overdressed for the moment. It didn't take long for Kate to remove her clothes, and her confidence boosted with every item discarded. She took care to note Devon's reaction as her blouse opened, as the cups of her bra fell to reveal her silky, white breasts. *Very nice*, his

smile seemed to say. Kate hoped her returning smile was equally complimentary of his body.

After what seemed a torturous lapse in time, Devon covered her body with his and captured her mouth in a searing kiss. The sting of her hardened nipples against his chest great increased, and the amorous feeling quickly spread to her limbs, encouraging a sexual energy she'd never before experienced. Hands explored his shallow curves, starting with the chiseled muscles of his upper arms, over his shoulders and down his spine. Her body shifted for a bolder sensation when her palms came to rest on his highly-rounded buttocks; her hips slid from left to right as she thrust her mound into Devon's flesh. The pressure was just enough to allow her pussy lips to be pried apart so Kate could enhance the friction of her clit against him. The end result set her on fire.

Devon ceased exploring her mouth and rained light kisses on her cheeks, her chin, her collarbone. Sliding further down, his heavy, muscled thigh separated from her and the building orgasm quickly faded in Kate's pussy, yet Devon easily compensated for the loss by pursing his lips around one of her nipples. He suckled the one, then the other, tracing lazy circles around the raised edges of her aureoles. Kate tilted her head slowly forward, enjoying the contrast of skin tones pressed together.

He took in a staggering breath. "You have gorgeous breasts," he said on a sigh. "Delicious."

"So are other parts. You should try them." Her words surprised her. Yet, inwardly she cried out for him to slide further south. She had to feel that tongue explore her pussy. Her core twitched, aching to be breached and licked.

Devon flashed her a devilish smile and waggled his eyebrows. "Certainly can't refuse an endorsement like that." Without further persuasion, he dipped his head low and, after pausing a moment to allow Kate to widen the gap between her thighs, laved her pussy with one broad swipe. The flat of his tongue slid over her bare nether lips while the tip gently teased every wrinkle and fold. Once, twice, three times he teased her mound in this manner before settling his lips around her clit and suckling hard. The resulting pleasure hit Kate in slow, sharp waves, and she arched her back in reponse.

"Mmmm." Cupping her breasts, Kate pushed them together and pinched her nipples in an attempt to ease the pain of abandonment caused when Devon directed his attentions elsewhere. Not that Kate minded. Her head lolling to one side, she watched with quiet fascination as Devon

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worried her pussy between his lips, stoking the fires within her with every nibble, every lick, every kiss. The sight of his dark skin, his dreamy expression, served to magnify her desires and guide her to a quivering orgasm enhanced by her low, guttural cry.

And the tinkling laughter of a female ghost. As Kate floated back to Earth, she listened for Athena to laugh again and was slightly disappointed to be met with silence. Only the faint ripping of rough paper brought Kate from her reverie. She raised herself slightly to see Devon sitting back on his haunches. He had somehow produced a condom, presumably from the wallet in his discarded pants, and now rolled the tipped Latex onto his bulging, black cock. *Nice*. Kate eyed the rod with growing anticipation, sensing her juices spilling over the priceless quilt. The Dare Foundation Advisory Council would have her head for certain if they knew what was going on here now, but Kate paid her struggling conscience no mind. What had any of those stuffed shirts done for her? Kate doubted the panel of dour, thin-lipped coots could have given her an orgasm to match the intensity of what she had just experienced.

Besides, Athena *laughed*. The ghost enjoyed the show. No doubt the elusive Polly Dare was somewhere getting a chuckle over how the mortals paid their respects. The quilts had draped beds, after all, and they did more than just sleep in the 1800s. That was encouragement enough for Kate.

Devon's shadow crossed her skin as he hovered close, igniting her blood back to near boiling. His sheathed cock tapped at one knee as he positioned himself between her legs. The sterile scent of lubrication and her own musk made her heady. Her pussy throbbed, waiting, her passion unabated even by the serious expression freezing Devon's smile.

"I don't want you to think I do stuff like this all time," he said. Devon palmed one of her knees, smoothing his palm over her pale skin.

"What's that, come to Dareville?" *Come in Dareville?* She hoped to lighten the mood with the remark and was relieved to see it worked. There was that dazzling row of bright teeth, blinding her.

"I don't sleep with strangers," he said. "But somehow, you aren't unfamiliar to me. This house isn't strange. It's almost...like home."

"If what you say is true, it could be." The words were out before Kate could think. If anything could kill the present mood, the notion of losing Dare House was it. She bit her lip, as if in punishment, but apprehension quickly gave way with Devon's smile.



"Maybe we're supposed to be here, drawn together by the ghosts of the past to for a better future," he said. With the heel of one hand, he braced himself against the quilt. With the other, he gripped the base of his cock between thumb and forefinger and maneuvered the shaft to scrape up and down her cleft. The resulting sensation sent waves of pleasure rolling over Kate, and she moaned.

The very near future was going to feel *very* good, at least.

"No sense in disappointing our friends, then," she whispered, and nearly giggled at Devon's amused reaction. Slowly, achingly, he breached her waiting, wet core and grasped her lower hip. She gasped initially at his size, but as she relaxed she was amazed with how easy Devon slid into her. He remained on his knees, between her thighs, and lowered himself slowly down until he was on top of her again. His cock filled her like nothing else.

"Not disappointed at all," he murmured, and took Kate's mouth in a probing kiss. Kate tasted her own musk, and Devon's muffled desire, as their tongues mated and danced. Devon pumped gently into her at first, as though savoring the sensation of being clamped by Kate's constricting inner walls. The rhythm was maddening. Kate couldn't remember the last time she'd had sex, and though this tender display flattered her, she wanted to be pounded into the floorboards. Let Athena and Polly enjoy a view worth well more than the price of admission to Dare House, she wanted to be *fucked*. She wanted to feel the ground vibrate, to hear the plaster beneath them rain down on the Dare parlor and turn the ancient carpets white with dust.

*White*. She pressed against Devon's chest, guiding him silently to raise his torso so she could watch him fuck her. She arched her hips upward, mesmerized by the sight of that thick, black shaft plunging into her. Black on white, up and down. A perfect fit. The view so entranced her that she didn't feel the second orgasm until it literally happened, and her upper body flew upward. Her breasts crashed into Devon's face, and when she quickly lowered, he sped up the pace.

"You like that?" he grunted, buried deep within her. "You like my cock?"

Kate's answer was a pleased groan, punctuated by her lip smacked against her tongue.

"Yeah, I like it, too." His voice was strangled now under the threat of an explosive orgasm. "Like being in you..." Whatever else he planned to say would have to wait; Devon gave his full attention to thrusting in

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and out of Kate's pussy with a force that caused her breasts to wobble to and fro to the point of pain. She matched his every grunt and shallow breath, noting the distorted pleasure on his face and predicting the timing of his orgasm.

When he came, he threw his head back and let out a series of low cries, each one fading in strength as his essence shot forth and his cock throbbed against her channel. With one last inward thrust, he collapsed on top of her, and they slowly kissed away the afterglow.

"Who'd have thought research could be so much fun?" Devon joked when he finally regained breath. He flinched with Kate's playful slap to his shoulder and suddenly pulled her close. Kate squealed aloud when he rolled onto his back, take Kate with him.

She laid against his chest, his cock semi-hard inside her, and traced the raised veins bulging in his arms. "Well, I must say, if every day at Dare House were like this, I'd never leave." She shared in the ensuing laughter, feeling calm. The fate of Dare House, and her job, didn't seem to matter much now. She was sated, her body and mind pleased beyond her expectations, and despite knowing Devon for only a short time she felt close to him. The house, its inhabitants, gave off an aura that bolstered her desire to know Devon better, and her resolve to make sure that happened.

Devon relaxed in her embrace and focused on a point on the ceiling. "It's stopped," he said, nearly whispering.

Kate was still for a moment, and realized Devon meant the ghosts. No laughter punctuated their tender caresses. Had their passion opened some portal to the otherworld, allowing them a way home? Maybe that had been the reason for Athena's sexual goading. An odd method of aiding the departing, if that were the case. Fun, but odd.

She opened her mouth to propose this theory when her hand slipped across Devon and landed on the quilt. A crunching sound accompanied the dent she made in the quilt's fabric.

"What the—" Kate smoothed the quilt square. Something was inside the stitched swatches besides goose down.

She traced her fingers over the floral pattern design and picked at a loosening thread holding the square in place. As expected, the ancient thread gave way to reveal fragile fillings: a crumbling feather, a marble-size ball of rough cotton...

...and paper.

"What are you doing?" Devon cried, and Kate turned to him with a surprised look. She felt immediately embarrassed. Here, she had just enjoyed incredible sex with the man, and nearly forgotten him with the discovery of a possible clue.

She scrambled off of Devon and curled into a sitting position, still tugging at the quilt. "There's something in here, it looks like pages or something," she said. "I wonder if they could be the missing parts of Polly's journals, but why she'd sew them into her quilts I have no idea."

Thankfully, Devon didn't seem too miffed by her sudden shift in attentions. He sat up and came to rest by her. "Maybe she didn't want them to be found," he suggested. "We all have secret hiding places."

"True." Kate managed to free the three sheets of parchment from the quilt with minimal damage. If need be she'd sew up the square with the original thread, if it didn't dissolve in her hands. Maybe the board would fire her for defiling the artifact, but who cared now? She had something they didn't.

Kate studied the gnarled, sloping handwriting that was unmistakably Polly's, as she'd read enough of the woman's writings over the years. Her smile fell, and she realized *Polly* had something as well, something nobody else experienced.

"What is it?"

She felt Devon near, concerned and squinting to decipher Polly's words. She offered him a sympathetic gaze.

"It's proof, Devon. Proof that Athena is not your grandmother."

*Five*

"Damn."

"I'm sorry." The room became suddenly cold again. Kate lifted one corner of the quilt to cover herself as Devon read the blinding script. The journal entry was a later one, written as Polly approached her final years. These final reflections focused almost entirely on Athena and their special friendship, how Polly mourned her passing every day, and how she looked forward to the day she would be reunited with her friend, her confidante, her...

"Lover."

The word came from Devon with surprise, not scorn. For that, Kate was relieved. The revelation shocked her, yet for some reason she was surprised to be shocked in the first place. An affluent, wealthy woman like Polly Dare would have had suitors lined outside her door, yet she never married. A free woman of means like Athena Dare chose to remain with the family that once owned her rather than risk a life of total independence. How could she have not seen it?

Devon finished reading and handed back the papers. "Neither of us had known men, nor desired to," he quoted Polly's words. "Well, it does answer a few questions I had."

"I'm sorry they weren't the answers you wanted," Kate said quietly.

Devon offered a half-smile. "I guess what's important is that Athena was happy. I doubt I'd leave if I were in that situation."

Kate felt light-headed. "She was in love, and free."

"Maybe she's free now."

Devon's words confused her. He noticed her furrowed brows and added, "I'm guessing it isn't normal to have these quilts strewn on the floor like this."

"No, and I have no idea how they got out of the cases." Kate laughed, gathering up the fabric. She'd think of a way to restore them. Right now, though, she needed to restore her own sanity. That Devon

hadn't immediately slipped on his clothes and took off was a comfort, more so when he leaned over to kiss her.

"I saw Polly Dare. I'm guessing you saw Athena?" When she nodded, he said, "Maybe they couldn't see each other. Maybe something was blocking them from being reunited in the next world."

Strange as the entire situation was, it did make some sense to Kate. Athena's antics around Dare House, the sexual display...a ploy to get her and Devon up here to find the missing journal pages? An interesting theory, but Kate imagined the ghost could have achieved her goals through less prurient means.

As Kate thought of Athena, she shook her head. Where would have been the fun in that, though? As long as Kate had put up with Athena, surely the ghost had gotten tired of Kate's bellyaching over a lack of sex life.

She clutched the pages in her hands. *The truth shall set you free*. In finding this, Kate hoped Athena and Polly were now free to be together.

Quietly Devon helped her to stand, and they shared a few smoldering glances as they dressed and righted themselves. "Thanks for the tour," he joked. "Is there a membership plan?"

"Yes, but it's very exclusive," Kate said coyly, "and very much worth it for all benefits." She folded the quilts and set them against the wall.

"Sign me up." And Devon drew Kate into his arms for a bone-crushing hug. The second they made contact, a stream of delighted laughter floated into the room, followed by a second, happier noise.

This one from another person.

Kate pulled away and saw by the expression on Devon's face that he heard it, too. Visitors? The bell hadn't rang, but then Kate wouldn't have heard it for her distracted attention.

Had a delivery *woman* arrived with her package? Her mother, God forbid? Kate thanked the heavens they were dressed and guided Devon to the second floor landing to find the source of the merriment.

Her heart stopped on seeing two women in period dress—bell-shaped skirts and bonnets—milling about the foyer and hanging on each other like two drunk biddies at a cotillion. Run-off from the wine tasting at Jake's, more than likely, a couple of reenactment players looking for trouble with the fifth of Merlot consumed.

"Can I help you ladies?" she called from the top of the stairs.

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The covered heads turned upward to reveal two very familiar figures. Kate's body froze, her hand clutching the mahogany railing as she stared into two faces she'd seen on preserved daguerreotypes and sketches.

Polly was absolutely radiant, casting an adoring sideways glance to her love before offering a brilliant smile to say Kate's assistance was no longer needed. Hand in hand, the couple bowed in unison and faded away.

"Damn," Devon whispered. "Nobody is going to believe that."

Kate pressed against his back, savoring the rush of heat. Holding the remnants of Polly's journal to her chest, she smiled down at the spot where the two ghosts had stood. "Maybe so, but that doesn't matter. We were led to the truth of their relationship, and once we announce this discovery everybody is going to believe that Polly was a passionate, devoted friends."

"*Should* that be made public?" Devon asked. "I mean, some people can't accept that kind of love now, imagine how people would think—"

Kate shrugged, cutting him off. "Nothing anybody can do about it now. Athena and Polly loved each other. Hiding the truth kept them apart, obviously. Why keep hiding?"

Devon scratched his chin, nodding. "Good point. Speaking of hiding..." He hooked an arm around Kate's waist, "how about showing me the rest of the place? Maybe we'll find more hidden treasure."

"Well, as it happens I'm free all day." Kate giggled. "And, I don't know if you know this, but Athena did have blood relatives in the area. Some owned by Horace Dare, too. I might be more likely that Athena is a distant cousin of yours."

"Really?"

Kate nodded. "If we're lucky, we might unearth some clue to your ancestry in the next room." Kate gestured behind him.

"Which room is that?"

"The bedroom."

## *About the Author*

Leigh Ellwood lives and writes in the sweltering South and seeks inspiration in the many people she has met and loved over the years.

Having found moderate success in writing mystery and suspense, Ellwood decided in 2004 to try her hand (and pen) at romance. Her first two attempts resulted in shelved projects that, after some time away, were combined together to produce one full-length novel. This book would eventually become the Phaze release, MUSE. Ellwood's first attempt in the erotic romance genre is Phaze's TRUTH OR DARE, the first of Ellwood's Dareville series. The inspiration for the contemporary romance TRUTH OR DARE evolved from many a day browsing a message board dedicated to one of Ellwood's favorite music groups...and the strong feelings of one particular member as evoked by his female admirers! The meaning of the name Dareville is two-fold: Dare is a name commonly seen around Virginia, as Virginia Dare is the first known born on US soil among the original Plymouth settlers, and of course each book in this series is quite daring, as you will soon read.

The second book in this series, DARE ME, is now available, as is third Dareville book, DARING YOUNG MAN. You are welcome to read up on the progress of this and Ellwood's other romances at her website: <http://www.leighellwood.com>. Ellwood also welcomes comments from readers at kspatwriter at yahoo dot com.