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Truth or Dare

By Selena Kitt

Part One
Suspicion

Chapter One

Dare stood, hands clenched, nails making little red crescents in her palms, listening to the Reverend's perfect monotone as he read Psalm 23—Julia's favorite and Julia's choice. Chewing her lower lip, Dare looked down the sloping hill, past headstones of various sizes, and saw the procession of cars lined up on the asphalt drive. Shane's black Mustang was among them.

Bastard.

She tasted blood, coppery and bitter.

Her father's hand found hers, coaxing her fingers open, squeezing. Dare didn't look at him. Her palm stung where the small half-moons absorbed the sweat from his big hand. Julia, her stepmother, wept at his right into a monogrammed handkerchief.

From this angle, Dare could see beyond the fake green of the astro-turf and into the open darkness beneath her brother's casket. She seemed to have skipped sad and had gone straight to anger in the infamous Kubler-Ross grief stages, but the sight of the infinite darkness beneath her twin's coffin made her knees weak. For the first time, a wave of real sorrow hit and stopped her as if she'd run full-tilt into a brick wall.

Oh Nick, this can't be happening, she thought, staring into the darkness beneath the satin-lined box where his body now rested. He was going to be lowered into that yawning hole when everyone was gone. John Evans, who only worked at the cemetery part time from the spring to the fall, and drove the twenty-five minutes to the Wal-Mart in West Lake in the off-season to greet shoppers, would get a local kid to help him, one on each side, and they'd use the straps to lower the box into the ground. Then Evans would rev up the backhoe and fill up the empty space with dirt.

Who fills the empty space up here? She wondered, fighting a wave of nausea and tears. *The empty space in my life? In my heart?*

Dare leaned against her father, his big shoulder a safe place to rest her dizzy head, and she ignored his concerned look when he glanced down and slipped an arm around her waist for support. She fixed her gaze on the darkness, forcing herself to look there, knowing it only existed for the sole purpose of swallowing what was left of her brother's body. *He's not in there*, she reminded herself, trying on a reassuring smile as her father's hand squeezed her hip and pulled her closer.

Yes he is, a deeper voice whispered in her head. *What's left of him.*

She shivered then, in spite of the warmth of the sun on her face, her gaze moving up the casket again, back toward the light, where an enormous blanket of red roses cascaded over the sides. Those had been Julia's idea, too. Dare had suggested yellow—Nick's favorite color—but the idea had been shot down in horror. Too cheerful for the occasion, dear. Definitely not proper.

Proper?

That was Julia for you.

She gave up after that on suggesting anything for the service. She let Julia make her little plans, get her way, as usual. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore. Dare unpacked her suitcase in the room where she'd spent her childhood, feeling her life moving back in time as she did. There was nothing to remind her of the life she'd just left behind in Chicago. Even her gun and badge, the two things she hadn't been without since she'd started as a rookie on the force, had been stripped from her two days before she got on a plane to fly back to Detroit for her brother's funeral.

She had expected her father, but it was Julia who'd picked her up from the airport to make the long drive up north to their little farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. She was glad, because if it had been her father, she probably would have tearfully blurted out the circumstances surrounding her suspension like she had, as a little girl, told him about the mean boys at school. She would have told him everything, even as ashamed as she was about her own part in it.

But with Julia, she was safe. Her stepmother talked while Dare watched the strip malls give way to fields and farm land. She watched her past returning, as if on an unstoppable conveyer, and remembered how much both she and Nick had talked about getting away from small town life. They had both made it out, and yet here they were again, like nothing had ever changed.

Except Nick is dead.

Stop it, she told herself, biting the inside of her cheek, concentrating on the pain.

Who says you can't go home again? Even if it is in pieces...

Stop it, stop, just stop! The taste of blood filled her mouth.

Even when she'd been away, living a decidedly urban life in a land of concrete and steel, this little town had been home. She and Nick had talked about it occasionally, how growing up rural had made them different somehow in the midst of born city-folk, as her father always called them.

This place had always been home, and she remembered it with a vengeance as she stood in the middle of her little upstairs room, her dead brother's door open just down the hall. She stood and felt Nick profoundly as she'd known him then, the twin brother who teased and taunted but loved her, she knew, above all others.

Well...almost all others. That dark voice came again, and this time she didn't stop it as her eyes darkened too, scanning the group gathered around the casket. Relatives and family friends formed a circle, like druids dressed in black.

Nick's friends, the people they had graduated high school with eight years ago (god, had it really been so long?); his once high school and sometimes college girlfriend, Suzanne; his still-best-friend, Shane—they all huddled together, slightly separated from the family, almost breaking the circle.

Dare tried to hang onto her anger. Without it, an unbearable emptiness moved in, numbingly cold. Without the heat of her rage, she felt husked out, a fat Halloween pumpkin with a twisted visage, sitting helpless while the world finished the job bit by bit, scraping out all the extras.

Do I look like that? Dare stared at Suzanne, eyes downcast, blonde hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. *Like an enormous hand plunged into me and pulled out my insides?*

Her gaze moved down the line to Shane, flanked on either side by the same gang of guys he'd hung around with since high school—Jake, Billy, Evan and Chris. They'd been Nick's closest friends at one time, too, next to Shane. *What about you?* That dark voice again. She tried to push it away.

She'd known them all since—well, it seemed like forever. *Since you were eleven and Nick met Shane and you became just his sister again.*

Damnit! She shoved the thought away with brutal force.

Where are you, Nick? You're not in that box, you can't be. Where are you really?

He couldn't be gone. Even as she looked into the darkness beneath his coffin, she denied it. He wasn't in there. The person she'd shared her sweatshirts with, her secrets with, the womb with—he wasn't in there.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death..."

They were standing in the valleys of his death, she thought bitterly. Valleys and green pastures littered with graves and mausoleums—killed in the very cemetery he was being buried in.

Across the coffin, Shane's gaze was on her, but when she glanced at him, he looked away.

Bastard, she thought again. Her heartbeat quickened and the resentment and mistrust she'd always felt around him surfaced and congealed, like an oil slick on a lake.

The sun blazed on his blonde hair, turning it almost white, matching his pallor. *He looks guilty*. The way his eyes fled from hers told her that much. He had the look of a man whose entire world had collapsed and he was being buried alive beneath the rubble.

Was he with you that night, Shane? Was he?

Her gaze returned to her brother's coffin and she remembered talking to Nick for the very the last time.

* * * *

"It's suspension with pay." Dare closed her eyes even as she said it, resting the warmth of her cheek against the bathroom door. It was private enough in here, and her roommate, Kathy, didn't know yet. She didn't know if she was going to tell her or not. "But please, don't tell Dad. Not yet."

"They don't honestly think you're really some high class escort...do they?" Nick's voice was muffled, and then she heard the sound of him crunching.

"What are you eating?" she asked, ignoring the cat's paw sneaking under the door, looking to play. It was Kathy's cat, and it never failed to try to get into the bathroom whenever the door was closed. "Anyway, the suspension is pretty much standard procedure during any sort of investigation like this."

"Doritos," Nick mumbled, still crunching. "But really, come on, how stupid would you have to be, to *actually* be turning tricks after you busted that guy last year—what's his name, that deputy mayor guy?"

"Marx. David Marx."

"Yeah, him. I mean, you blew the lid off that whole pot, Dare!" Nick sounded so proud of her she wanted to cry. "You even uncovered the kickbacks that dirty cop was getting, the one who tried to cover it all up, right?"

"Right." She closed her eyes, remembering the headlines, her name in the papers. "I think that's actually the problem."

"What do you mean?"

Dare sighed, not wanting to tell him—but if she couldn't tell her brother, who could she tell? "Nick...there's a video."

"A...what?" He sounded like he was choking on something.

"Remember how I told you about Stephen?" She hated even saying his name now. God, she'd been so taken in. How could she have been so stupid, so naïve? Her father used to tell the story about Nick coming home one day and telling his twin sister,

“My teacher says the word gullible isn’t in the dictionary”—and Dare had actually gone to check. Nick always told her she was too honest to be a cop. Maybe he was right.

“Stephen? That senator’s aide guy you were seeing? What’s he got to do with this?”

She took a deep breath and blurted it out. “Somehow the department now has a video of me and Stephen.”

“A video of what?” Nick was quiet and she let it sink in, waiting for him to understand, hoping she wouldn’t really have to say it. “Oh.” It had finally dawned on him, thankfully. “No way. *No way!*”

“The whole thing is a setup.” She hated the pleading sound in her own voice, as if she was trying to convince him of her innocence. Already, she felt assumed guilty.

“But I can’t see a way out of it. I haven’t seen it, they won’t let me until the disciplinary hearing—and I can’t even imagine seeing it then. Christ, Nick. I can’t sit there in a room full of my colleagues while that plays...” Her face was red and burned at the thought.

“I bet they’re counting on that!” He sounded as angry now as she had felt when she found out, but she knew it was useless. There was nowhere to direct it—the cards had been played, and her hand had been trumped. Hell, she hadn’t even known she was in the game.

“Probably,” she admitted.

“But I don’t get it...you were dating this guy. He wasn’t...I mean...no money exchanged hands...right?”

She winced, closing her eyes tight against her own words, reluctantly telling him, “He left two thousand dollars in cash on the night table before he left.”

"What the hell for?" he cried.

"He says it was for sex."

Nick snorted. "What was it *really* for?"

"It was..." Dare cringed, not wanting to tell him.

He groaned. "You loaned this idiot two thousand dollars, didn't you?"

"It was short-term," she went on, trying to explain. "An investment. And he paid me back!"

"But wait a minute!" Nick sounded excited. "He can't just set you up like that. I'm not a cop, but I *am* a lawyer, and I know in these cases, it has to be clear just what was being paid for!"

She sighed. "Yeah, well, it's sure going to look like he was paying for sex."

"Huh?" Nick was back to crunching Doritos. How could he eat at a time like this? She wondered.

"He knew all about it, my working for vice, the whole sting. We used to joke all the time," she explained, her voice getting smaller as she talked. "So when he put the money on the table, he said... he said, 'For services rendered. Where do you want it?'"

Nick groaned. "Ohhh no."

"Oh yes," she agreed. "And I said, 'Leave it on the night table.'"

"Oh god. You didn't!"

"I actually did," she admitted, wincing at the memory. It was all caught on tape, she was sure. She remembered Stephen chuckling and responding, "Of course, where else?" and leaving the cash in an envelope next to the lamp. She didn't tell Nick that she followed that up with the amused comment, "Good thing you paid up, *John*, or else the

pictures will go to your wife.” She’d thought it all so amusing at the time, two lovers teasing each other, joking around. She couldn’t even fathom the idea that she might have just kidded herself right out of her career.

Her brother sighed and she could almost feel his disappointment through the phone. “Are they busting this guy?”

“No, Nick,” she explained softly. “They’re busting me.”

He was quiet for a while. Then he asked, “What does Jack say?”

“Jack knows me.” Dare shrugged. Her captain knew her well enough to know she just wasn’t capable of such a thing. Dare was a lot of things—impulsive, hot-headed, often rigid in her beliefs and thinking—but dishonest wasn’t one of them. She’d worked undercover as a rookie in vice for almost a year when it all first went down. It had been Jack she’d turned to, revealing what David Marx told her about her fellow officers taking kickbacks to keep quiet about the whole high-priced-escort operation that provided girls to all the local politicians and their friends. It had been Jack who helped her set up the sting that brought the dirty cop and everyone under him down.

That Dare would then turn around and moonlight as a high-priced escort herself, just for the cash? It was ludicrous, and Jack knew it.

“He’s in my corner,” Dare insisted. “But...”

“But what?”

“I don’t know how high this goes up. I have a feeling...” She swallowed hard.

“Remember the headlines last year? *Rookie Cop Busts Dirty Vice Ring?*”

“Yeah.”

“Just imagine the headlines now.” She sighed. *“Cop Who Brought Down Dirty Vice Ring Kicked Off Force For Turning High-Priced Tricks.”*

He gave a low whistle. “You are so screwed.”

“No pun intended.”

Nick laughed. “That’s not funny.”

“No,” she agreed. “Anyway, Jack’s in my corner. I’m sure he’ll get them to see the truth.” Dare tried to make her voice sound more sure and confident than she felt and thought she almost succeeded. “So tell me again why it is you’re back at Dad and Julia’s?”

The crunching stopped for a moment, and then Nick coughed.

“You okay?”

“Yeah...” The sound of him drinking something was almost louder than the coughing fit and she pulled the phone away. “Swallowed wrong. Sorry.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“So what is this? You said you were going back for a visit, but when Julia called last week, she said you were moving back home. What’s the deal?”

“It’s temporary,” he insisted. “Definitely temporary.”

“But why?” Dare flicked at the cat’s paw under the door and it disappeared. “I mean, come on, you have to admit, it’s not exactly our favorite place in the world.”

“Home isn’t so bad...”

Dare sighed, rolling her eyes. “Hey, I was honest with you about what’s going on here... it’s the least you can do. What’s really going on?”

"I got fired." Now it was Nick's turn to sigh.

"Fired?" She sat up straighter. "What for?"

"It doesn't matter." He was crunching Doritos again.

"Of course it matters!"

Dare waited because Nick didn't answer for a minute, still crunching. "I'm just staying here for a little while, until I can find something else, I guess."

"Ummm...not to burst your bubble, but there's not much in the way of job opportunities for hotshot lawyers in Larkspur."

He laughed. "No, but they do have the Internet now."

"Yeah, sure, by satellite at the town library maybe." Dare snorted, poking at the persistent cat's paw again.

"I'll manage."

She frowned at the tone in his voice. "Nick, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he insisted. "Really. It's not so bad, being back. It's kind of like old times. Me and the guys are even driving out to the path tonight."

"What guys?" She frowned, and understood only later that he'd said it on purpose, to distract her.

"Come on, Dare, what guys do think I'd be hanging out with?"

She sat silently, still frowning.

Nick sighed. "Do you ever let go of a grudge?"

"No," she snapped.

"God, you can be so shallow," he breathed. "Sometimes I think you're more like Julia than you are like Mom."

It hit her like a blow to the midsection and she sucked in air, blinking back tears.
"That's not fair."

Nick's voice took on a tight, sharp tone she recognized quite well. "It's not their fault, what this little tight-ass town thinks about them."

"Right." She didn't care if he was angry. She was, too. "They're the victims. Like the guy who had a nine millimeter pointed at my head, right? His mommy didn't love him enough, his daddy beat him with a two-by-four, so that makes it okay for him to rape and kill a woman in a back alley?"

Nick was quiet for a minute and the silence stretched between them. Finally, he sighed. "God, I wish you could hear yourself."

"So I'm a little cynical." She shrugged. "Sue me."

"I'm not a lawyer anymore."

"Come on, Nick." She closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the door, ignoring the insistent pawing of the cat under the door. "Let's not fight. This is stupid. We haven't had a fight in a long time."

He was back to crunching Doritos. "Funny how we still fight about the same things."

"Good thing neither of us is a psychologist." She laughed.

The crunching stopped and there was a silence again. She was about to ask if he was okay when he started talking again. "You know...every one of us carries around these labels. The world slaps them on us, and sometimes we just...grow into them. But sometimes we're not really whatever it says on the labels the world slapped on our foreheads. Not even close."

She blinked at his words and then frowned. "Are you talking about Shane?"

"...yeah, I guess." Nick cleared his throat. "You, me, Shane. All of us."

"Maybe." She didn't believe it, not for a minute, but she didn't want to fight with him. "But I still say that square pegs don't fit into round holes."

He started crunching again and spoke with his mouth full. "Shane isn't as bad as you think he is."

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes, changing the subject. "So what have you been doing, besides hanging out with the town riff-raff?"

"I'm seeing Suzanne."

Dare perked up. "Seeing? As in *seeing*? What happened to that girl you were talking about, Katie-something-or-other...?"

"You know me." She could almost hear him shrug. "Girl in every port."

"One of these days you need to settle down."

Nick snorted. "Pot meet kettle. Besides, Suzanne's taking good care of me. Hey, did you know she's a nurse now? A real RN."

"Well, that's one fantasy down..." Dare grinned.

"Very funny."

"Hey, let's synchronize our Monty Python and watch together on the phone, what do you say?" she asked. "I could use a good laugh tonight."

"Dare, don't do that." His tone made her cringe—he acted like he knew just what she was trying to do and wasn't going to let her get away with it. "I've got plans, I told you."

"Come on," she cajoled. "I'm not more exciting than Shane Curtis? You're just going to go get drunk and pass out, or worse, end up puking all night long."

He laughed. "It will be high school all over again!"

"Fine," she snipped, knowing she wasn't going to get her way. "I hope they steal all your clothes and leave you passed out on the lawn like they did on graduation night."

"I love you, too." His grin stretched so wide she could actually hear it in his voice. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay?"

"I hope you smash up your Jeep, then!" she retorted, grinning too.

"Shane's driving."

"Even better! I hope he smashes up that pretty little Mustang of his," she said, her glib, gleeful tone inching up a notch. "With you in it!"

Nick snorted, their disagreement clearly forgiven. "Not likely."

"Good riddance!" she teased.

"You're such a bitch," he said, but he was laughing. "Goodbyyyyye!"

"Rotten brother," she mumbled, laughing, too. "Bye!"

It was the last time she ever heard Nick's voice.

* * * *

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord."

Dare blinked, hearing the echoes of "Amen," and glanced around her. It was over. Mercifully, the droning of the Reverend had stopped.

She looked over at Shane. He was leading Suzanne toward his car, the rest of the gang following. The family broke up, talking amongst themselves.

"Do you want to stay a minute?" her father asked from her side. She shook her head, watching Shane's retreating form, something small, tight and burning lodged in her chest.

"No," she answered. "It's over."

Deep inside, though, she felt that it—something—had just begun.

Chapter Two

Dare had been appointed by Julia, who'd orchestrated everything about this day down to the last detail, to stand in the kitchen, accept food from the incoming guests and direct them toward the family room. The Powells, a family her father knew well, brought a casserole. After they had gone into the family room, where her father was mixing drinks, she opened the lid. It was unidentifiable except for the distinct odor of tuna.

Sarah White and Annie Miller showed up with a pie between them. It was store bought, but it was lemon meringue, so Julia might forgive them, since lemon was her personal favorite.

"I'm so sorry." Sarah hugged her. It was awkward as Dare had to keep the pie from being squashed. Annie scooted, offering her a weak smile.

She didn't know what to say. I don't either.

"Dare." James Thomas hugged her tight and she gasped for air in his hold. "My god, I'm so sorry. You look amazing. I haven't seen you since..."

"It's been a long time," she agreed, taking a step back from him and accepting a tinfoil covered dish.

"Too long." He smiled at her, cocking his head as if he was listening to something, a gesture she remembered well from high school. "What are you doing now?"

"I..." She swallowed past her words, insisting to herself that it wasn't a lie. "I'm a cop now, working in Chicago."

“Yeah, I think Nick mentioned something about that.” James looked at her appreciatively. “So are you married? Kids?”

She shook her head. “No time. You?”

“No.” He shrugged, running a hand through his dark hair. “Was married. But she left...took the kid with her.”

“I’m sorry.” Dare felt a wave of sadness come over her at the look on his face. It was amazing how much pain people carried, just beneath the surface. She wanted to hug him again, but they hadn’t seen each other in years, and it felt too awkward in the silence. She remembered him asking her out in high school, and she had turned him down. Nick always said it was because James was too much of a nerd for her, and she’d always denied it, insisting James was just too good of a friend to get involved with.

“How long are you in town for?”

“I’m not sure.” She shrugged. “As long as it takes, I guess...” The words sounded strange, even to her. As long as what took, she wondered? As long as it took for her to find out the fate of her career? As long as it took for her to find out who or what killed her brother?

“Well, maybe we can hang out.” His smile was warm. “Go out for coffee or something.”

She smiled back, teasing. “Don’t tell me Larkspur has a Starbucks now!”

“No, but there’s always the Starlite,” he reminded her with a wink.

That made her laugh. “You said coffee, not tequila.”

“Well, there’s Nellie’s...” He shrugged. “And I think they actually do have a Starbucks in West Lake now.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door, and Dare opened it to find Laurie Murphy carrying a baby and a cake covered in chocolate frosting. *Wasn’t she a cheerleader in high school?* Dare eyed Laurie’s still-svelte figure. *Probably never touches this stuff.* Dare set the cake on the table and tuned into the conversation again.

“My laptop keeps overheating, can I bring it in to you next week?” Laurie asked, shifting the baby on her hip. It was a little boy with big brown eyes who kept reaching for her dangly earrings and missing.

“Sure,” James said, and Dare saw the pain in his eyes when he looked at the little boy. Probably reminds him of his little one, she thought. James turned to her and gave her a one-armed hug. “I’ll go pay my respects to your parents. I’m sorry, Dare.”

“Thanks.” She pointed him in the direction of the living room, not really paying much attention to Laurie, who was still talking.

“Me, too. I can’t believe it. Spencer, no.” Laurie took her hoop earring from her baby’s chubby fist. “I was telling my husband just this morning how amazing Nick was—in high school, he was just the center of everything, you know?”

“Yeah.” Dare gave her a weak smile as she opened the door again. It was Martha Sanchez, who had babysat for them ages ago, carrying a quiche. Dare thanked her and accepted her apologies, although she knew the quiche wouldn’t get eaten. Julia was a picky eater, and her father... well, real men still didn’t eat quiche in rural America. When she put it on the table, she noticed that Laurie and Martha had both gone to the living room, following the sound of voices.

After that, the people and the food seemed to run together, but she wrote it down, like Julia had requested. Nellie Edwards, who ran the diner in town, brought her special—noodles and beef casserole. *Probably leftover 'special of the day.'* Will Cougar, who ran Cougar's General Store down on the corner of Hubbard and North Rose, brought a chocolate cream pie he told her his wife made.

Then he handed her a package of Twizzlers. "I remembered how much you both like 'em, hon."

It brought a lump to her throat, and she couldn't look at him when she thanked him. He touched her shoulder and then was gone.

By the time Suzanne came in the door, the list of food had expanded to include two pounds of hamburger—from Mr. Maxwell, who ran Max's Meats—a pan of brownies, five more pies—two were coconut cream, one was strawberry, one was apple, and one was pumpkin—eight cannolies, two mysterious Jello salads, and a sack of California navel oranges. Dare was running out of room on the table.

Suzanne had changed from the simple black dress she'd worn to the funeral into a pair of dark blue sweats, a hoodie and Nikes. She came through the front door into the kitchen.

"Hi." Dare swallowed, memories flooding back, and couldn't manage to follow her greeting up with anything. Looking at Suzanne brought Nick back, hard and fast. They had all known each other since grade school.

Suzanne eyed the pies lined up on the table. "I didn't think to bring anything. I'm sorry."

Dare shrugged and attempted a smile. "I was running out of room, anyway."

Suzanne smiled, but even her smile looked hollow. "Who's here?" Voices floated in from the family room, subdued, but there was still some laughter. It sounded like a party that had just begun.

"Nearly everybody I used to know, and some I don't." Dare sat on one of the kitchen chairs. "Have a seat."

"Is Shane here?" Suzanne sat down.

"No." Dare glanced toward the door with narrowed eyes. "That's one person I won't miss."

"He said he might drop by." Suzanne twisted a strand of hair, no longer pulled back, around her finger.

"Great, I'll look forward to it." Dare rolled her eyes.

"I hate funerals." Suzanne sighed, absently tucking the cling wrap back under one of the homemade pies. "But I hate these 'afterward' things most. Who needs this?"

"I know," Dare said, and she did. This wasn't a comfort—it was just etiquette. Julia could write a book on the etiquette of funerals, it seemed. Nick had always said their father had married Miss Manners.

"I miss him already." Suzanne traced the blue flower design on the tablecloth with her finger. "There was this really brief period of shock, when I didn't feel anything..."

Dare nodded. She remembered the phone call, her father's voice telling her to come home...and then telling her why. She had gone into business mode almost immediately, arranging a flight, packing her bag. *At least I don't have to arrange for time off work*, she'd thought bitterly, looking at the empty gun belt hanging over a chair in the

corner. That thought stopped her, and when the flurry of activity halted, the feeling flooded in, and she realized she'd been numb.

She had preferred numb. This pain was unbearable.

"When was the last time you talked to him?" Suzanne asked.

"The night before." Dare didn't look at her, remembering their conversation.

"We were in a fight." Suzanne's voice was tight. "We were in a stupid fight about some stupid thing—I can't even remember what it was about it was so stupid—and I hadn't seen him in two days. Hadn't even talked to him. I called the next day, the day after it happened..." She drew a shaky breath. "And your dad told me..."

"That's okay. I told him I hoped he got into a car accident. How's that for guilt-trip material?" Dare snorted. "I know what you're thinking, but it's not your fault. It's not anybody's fault."

Even as she said it, she inwardly denied it. *It's someone's fault, all right—it has to be!* It was too hard to accept an accident, no one at fault—no one who could be identified, at least.

"I don't understand what he was doing out in the cemetery in the first place." Suzanne swiped at tears. "He shouldn't have been out at all."

"I don't know." Dare sighed. And that was true. "Nobody does, as far as I can tell. It's just...strange."

"I wish I knew what really happened." Suzanne shook her head, chewing her lower lip.

Dare's heart plummeted at Suzanne's genuine look of confusion. She'd hoped maybe Suzanne could give her a clue—something, anything.

Nobody seemed to know. All sorts of red flags went up when Dare had heard where he'd been, what they assumed had happened, but no one else seemed to think it was anything but a tragic accident.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Well, I'd better go put in an appearance." Suzanne stood and stretched. "Then I'm going to go home to sleep for the rest of my life." Dare didn't say anything as she watched her walk out of the kitchen. The knock came again, more insistent and she opened the door.

"Hey, Dare." Shane stepped into the kitchen, the heels of his black motorcycle boots loud on the linoleum. Everything he had on was black—boots, jeans, even the t-shirt making an appearance above the gold zipper of his leather jacket.

"Well, aren't you the picture of mourning?" She peered over his shoulder. "Where are your followers?"

"Just me." He held both hands out, palms up in apology as she shut the door behind him. His head cocked, listening. "They in the family room?" He shoved his hands into his jean pockets and Dare looked away, feeling his gaze on her still.

"Where else?" She nodded in the direction of the voices. "I'm sure they're all in there wondering about what killed Nick."

She crossed her arms over her chest, watching him out of the corner of her eye, gauging his reaction. His eyes widened only slightly at her remark.

"Sheriff said it was a bobcat." Shane frowned.

"That's what the papers say, too." Dare snorted. "And I'm sure that's what the death certificate will also say. I'm just not so sure I believe it."

"No?" His gaze swept slowly from her feet to her eyes. "You know...you really look like him." He almost sounded sad and his tone made Dare look directly at him again. Their eyes met and she realized how long it had been since they'd stood this close to one another, let alone been in the same room. She wondered if he felt it, too, and wanted to take a step back but resisted the impulse. His direct scrutiny made her feel a little dizzy. It seemed almost as if he could see into her thoughts.

"Well, that's very clever." She managed to keep her voice from shaking. "I mean, we were only twins."

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. She'd known what he'd meant.

"Yeah. Well...I'm really sorry, Dare." He tried to catch her eye again but she focused her attention on the table, rearranging the food until he turned and left her, going in the direction of the voices.

When he was gone, Dare leaned against the door with a long, shaky sigh. It was too much to handle, too much to deal with in one day. Exhausted, she just wanted to crawl into bed and, as Suzanne had suggested, sleep for the rest of her life.

She closed her eyes, the image of Shane's always-smug smile filling her head. She hated the way he was so sure, so full of himself. A knock on the door made her jump and she turned to fling it open.

"Well hey there, Missy." Sheriff Buck Thompson stepped into the kitchen. It was strange to see him out of uniform. That uniform had sparked her interest in law enforcement in the first place, long before she could even voice her preferences, she remembered with a nostalgic smile. *I probably teethered on his badge*, she thought. Buck was a good friend of her father's and spent a great deal of time around their place. She

noticed him holding yet another casserole, and wondered if she should follow her instincts and ask him what leads they had. *Or is that bad etiquette?*

"Hi, Sheriff. Thanks for coming." Dare gave him her polite, Julia-taught speech. "Can I get that for you?"

"Sure." Buck gave up his casserole. Dare set it on the counter—there was now officially no room on the table. "I'm so sorry about your brother. He was such a good boy. We're doing everything we can."

Boy. Everyone still thought of them as kids, she realized, as if time had stopped the moment they graduated and left town to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Buck still referred to her as *missy*, for pete's sake.

"Do you have any idea yet what...what might have happened?" Dare threw funereal etiquette out the window. Besides, Julia wasn't listening.

"Not any more than the paper'll tell you in the morning." He shook his head sadly. "Probably an animal. Bobcat, we figure. Horrible thing. Horrible."

"But—"

"We're doing our best." Buck sounded defensive as he ran a hand through his hair. It was thinning and going gray at the temples, but Dare remembered when it had once been thick and jet-black.

"Your best," Dare breathed. "Your best. Right. Joe Wilson last month, my brother this month, and you and Deputy Dawg don't have any more clues than 'probably a bobcat'? What wonderful leaps of logic and rules of deduction did that conclusion take between your trips to the Dunkin' Donuts in West Lake?"

“Hey.” Buck straightened up, his jaw tight, but his eyes softened when he looked at her. “Listen, I know it’s hard to accept...”

Dare wanted to scream at him. Instead, she took a deep breath and asked, as calmly as she could manage, “Sheriff, what *evidence* do you have about the animal that allegedly killed my brother?”

He sighed, shaking his head. “You know better than anyone that this stuff takes time. This isn’t Chicago, Dare. You grew up here, you know that. I’ve done everything I can do. We’ve got some evidence over at the lab in West Lake that should help us identify the animal, and I’ve called in more help from the West Lake force for the night watch out at the cemetery.”

“If you’ve got a watch out there, how did my brother manage to get into the cemetery without you noticing?” Dare’s voice shook with anger. She couldn’t help it.

“We...” Buck cleared his throat. “We actually just started it.”

“Joe’s death wasn’t enough?” Dare snapped. “You had to wait for Nick to die before you decided a few guys with guns paying attention might be a good idea?”

“Well, Joe wasn’t actually *in* the cemetery...”

“Never mind.” Dare held her hand up, shaking her head in disgust. “I want to come see what you have so far. I want to see the incident reports.”

He stood still for a moment, lips pursed, looking as if he were thinking of a response. “I can’t let you do that.”

“And why not?”

He cleared his throat. “You don’t have jurisdiction.”

“Oh come on...”

He drew himself up to his full, considerable height. “I don’t want a suspended officer poking around in my department.”

Dare’s heart dropped and she glanced toward the family room, afraid someone had overheard. She hadn’t told Julia or her father yet.

Buck went on, “Your captain called me yesterday. Nice fella, name of Jack Fishburne. He called just to give me a head’s up.”

Damn Jack. Of course he’d called. He’d probably been on the phone the minute she hung up with him after telling him she was flying out to Detroit for her brother’s funeral. They had to have a physical contact number—not a cell—at the very least, Jack said, in case they had any questions for her during the investigation. Her face burned, from both the memory of the conversation—Jack insisting she come back to Chicago and finally relenting to Dare’s refusal—and from the shame of Buck Thompson knowing she’d been suspended in the first place.

“There’s really nothing more to do, anyway.” Buck put his hand on her shoulder and she wanted to shake it off but didn’t. “Except watch and wait.”

“Yeah, you did such a bang-up job of the watching the first time...” she mumbled, her jaw clenching and unclenching.

“Dare...”

“Okay, okay.” She sighed, shaking her head and looking at him. His eyes were still kind, concerned, and now she wanted to hug him and fought that urge, too. “I’m sorry. Forget it.”

"I'm the one who's sorry." He squeezed her shoulder and started toward the family room. He stopped in the doorway, looking over his shoulder to ask, "Oh, and Dare...you said you talked to Nick that night?"

She nodded. "About seven o'clock. I'm sure it's on my cell records."

"I just wondered..." He paused, his eyes assessing. "Are you sure he didn't say where he was going?"

Dare looked at him, silent. He had asked her this before on the phone—she had answered his questions standing in the O'Hare terminal, still in her stocking feet, waiting for her plane to board—and she had told him no. The lie had come unbidden—at the time, she had no idea why she'd said such a thing.

Now she thought she knew why. She just didn't trust him. And now, with him out of uniform, with his vagueness and evasiveness, she trusted him even less. Besides, they had brought Shane in for questioning, she knew, and they obviously hadn't found anything out. So what was the sense in telling him?

"I'm sure," Dare said.

"Your parents said Nick didn't tell them where he was going..."

She shrugged. "It's not a big town, Sheriff. I don't think they were worried."

"You're sure he didn't mention anything?" Buck asked with a frown.

"No," Dare told him, her eyes on the linoleum. "No, he didn't."

"I see." Buck stared at her and she felt uncomfortable, as if he could see through her lie.

"Well, Sheriff Thompson! How good of you to come!" Julia sailed into the kitchen with an empty tray.

"Nice to see you, Julia." Buck nodded toward her. "I'm very sorry about your boy."

"Yes, thank you." Julia paused a moment, her eyes downcast. "Well, everyone's in the family room, so you can go right on in, Sheriff."

"Thanks." He glanced once at Dare before heading in the direction of the voices.

"Nice man," Julia commented. "You should go in and say hello to everyone."

Dare just watched her stepmother fill the tray up with small, stuffed something-or-others.

"Shane and Suzanne are in there. I'm sure they could use someone more their age to talk to." Julia's voice dropped a little then. "I really don't like that boy. I don't suppose we'll be seeing or hearing much of him now, do you?"

Get rid of a son, get rid of his friends—is that the way it works?

"Why don't you come pass these out? I could use the help." Julia turned to face her and frowned. "You don't look well. Are you all right?"

Yeah, I'm great. We buried my brother about two hours ago, you're having a party and passing out hors d'oeuvres, and you want me to play hostess with you. I'm just peachy.

"I'm okay." Dare swallowed past something stuck in her throat. "I'll be there in a minute. This dress is a little uncomfortable. I'm going to change first."

"Okay." Julia picked the tray up. "Don't be too long."

"I won't."

Dare climbed the stairs, her whole body aching. She turned right when she came to the top, as she always did, in the direction of her room—and Nick's. She realized she

would have to pass it, and was suddenly, inexplicably afraid. She walked slowly, her breathing shallow, looking neither left nor right, focusing only on the door to her room at the end of the hall.

His door was open. Of course. He kept his door open all the time, and he would have kept it open when he left that night. She sped up when she reached his door, passing quickly, almost as if she thought she would be burned by the light spilling from his room into the hallway.

She sighed when she reached her old childhood room, closing the door behind her. It was just as she had left it before the funeral. Her bed was unmade, clothes tried on and discarded still scattered on the floor. She peeled off the black dress and threw it on the floor.

Hunting through her suitcase, she pulled out a University of Michigan sweatshirt, blue with gold letters. She dug through, looking for her sweat pants, but realized they were in her hamper in Chicago with the rest of the week's dirty clothes. She opened the closet and the drawers, but the clothes she'd left here were from high school—a size too small.

She sighed, sitting on the bed and pulling the sweatshirt over her head. She could borrow something from Julia maybe. But her stepmother was tiny, lacking Dare's curves, and anything she had probably wouldn't fit either. Besides, Julia had been so busy making funeral arrangements for Nick, accepting condolences, and making sure Dare wore and said the right things, who knew if the laundry had been done?

What's the big deal, just go get a pair of his sweats.

She didn't want to go back down the hall to his room, but if she didn't, Julia would come looking for her, and that would be worse. The only thing she could think of to do was to borrow a pair of Nick's sweats. They would be big, but that was okay. She used to borrow his clothes all the time. The thought of wearing something of his was both comforting and saddening.

She got up and opened her door, peeking out. What are you afraid of? she chided herself. Ghosts? But she *was* afraid. She was afraid he *was* in there, that she would see him there, and he would tell her that it was her fault for letting him go that night, her fault for not being more insistent that he stay and talk, her fault for letting Shane take him away.

"Don't be stupid," she whispered, and the sound of her own voice was comforting. "Just run in there and get a pair of sweats."

She edged her way down the hall and stopped just short of the slant of light spilling onto the floor from his open door. Dare took a deep breath and stepped into the warmth of the sunlight, and then into his room.

She wasn't expecting the pain. That came as a shock. He really was there—oh, god, he was everywhere. The room was filled with him. There wasn't a thing in the room that wasn't Nick. And she couldn't believe how much that hurt.

"Oh, god," she said, looking at his dresser, where a hair dryer and Bedhead gel still sat on the top. His bed was rumpled, the pillow still keeping the slight indentation from his head.

Her breath caught and held, and she closed her eyes, fighting the tears. If they started, they'd never stop. The pain would come with sharp, razor-like teeth and eat her

alive. Once she thought she had it under control, she opened her eyes again, and headed for his dresser. He'd unpacked his clothes into his drawers—how long had he been living here, she wondered, before he broke down and told her? She found a pair of yellow sweats in the second drawer.

Walking toward his bed, she saw a picture of Nick and Shane on the night table, taken on a hay ride out at the cider mill back when they were in high school. Dare had taken it herself, and Nick had liked it so much he'd asked her to blow it up to an eight-by-ten, so she had. At the time, Dare had thought it was the image of he and Suzanne that he wanted to keep—her arm was around his waist on his other side—but it was Shane who filled the frame with her brother, his arm draped around Nick's shoulder, a smug smile spread across his face. Suzanne had been folded under, hidden from view.

Nick smiled at her out of the gold frame, and the bitterness filled her throat as she picked up the picture, hugging it to her chest for a moment, cuddling it, her insides burning, as if she had swallowed dry ice.

In her grief, she didn't hear the footsteps behind her, and when the hand fell on her shoulder, she screamed, dropping the picture onto the bed and whirling around.

"What are you doing in here?" Julia. Jesus, god, it was just Julia, coming up to check on her as Dare had known she would. "And *what* are you wearing?"

Dare's heart rate was going back to normal, and she managed to answer her. "I... I came in here for a pair of sweats. I forgot to pack mine."

"You were going to wear sweats?" Julia's voice was full of disapproval.

"Well, they're all of Nick's that I could wear without them falling off. Suzanne's wearing sweats," she added, hating herself for the explanation and the excuses, but

unable to stop them with Julia's eyes on her. She felt reduced to eight-years-old, vulnerable and exposed standing there in just her sweatshirt and a pair of black panties. Julia hadn't seen her in her underwear since she was twelve.

"Well, you can't wear those. I'll have to lend you something."

Dare felt a lump rise to her throat for no apparent reason, and she fought it, holding back tears.

"Shane asked after you, and then he left, and good riddance to bad rubbish is what I say. Do you realize you've been up here for twenty minutes? I asked you not to be too long." Talking all the while, Julia walked toward the door, and like the eight-year-old she felt reduced to, Dare followed, obedient.

"Come on, you can change in my room," Julia said as they entered the hallway. "You'd better put those on for the moment, until we get downstairs to the bedroom." Dare watched as Julia shut Nick's door behind them. It was the first time she had seen that door shut in years.

"Well?" she asked when Dare didn't move. Dare just looked at her.

Her stepmother's eyebrows drew together and her lips pursed. "Dare, come on, I'm not in the mood for this ridiculous behavior. Don't you think I've had enough to deal with in the past few days? Now, don't be difficult."

"Difficult?" Dare's jaw tightened. "What am I, six?"

Julia crossed her arms over her chest. "You're acting like it."

"I'm not going to let you make me feel guilty," Dare snapped. "I've had just as much to deal with as you have."

"Darlene Victoria Chandler, don't you go ruining this day," Julia said in a harsh whisper. "Now come get changed."

Dare cringed at the sound of her full name. "I don't know if this day could get any more ruined than it already is."

"You can't wear that." Julia's voice was both horror-filled and pleading. "Now come on..."

"Why? Because these aren't *proper*?" She held up Nick's sweats. "Don't you get it? Those people down there aren't going to care if I wear the right thing or say the right thing." Dare tried to keep her lower lip from trembling and failed. "He was my brother, and I loved him even if you didn't."

"That was a very un-Christian thing to say." Julia's face paled and she took a step back, her hand going to her throat. "You...you're obviously not yourself today. Maybe you should get some rest."

"Can't let the cover drop for a minute, can you?" Dare sighed. "Forget it. You're right, as always. I'm just tired. Go back to your party. I hope it makes you feel better."

Dare left her there standing outside of Nick's room, and when she shut the door to her own room, Julia had gone.

Chapter Three

The sun, streaming through wispy, white curtains, crept across the rose-colored carpet. It touched a faded brown bureau carved with initials and more—*Dare "hearts" Tommy*. She had no recollection of how they all got there, but by the time Julia had discovered the carvings, it was too late to save the dresser.

The sun slid across her old stereo and a collection of her high school and college CDs. It edged across her desk, still covered in the college booklets that buried her Princess telephone, and inched past her closed closet door, falling on a mauve bedspread. It stole up that wall, resting on a poster of Orlando Bloom.

The light, hot and uncomfortable, was what forced her to open her eyes. She stretched, pulling the covers back over her and rolling on her side, away from the sun. She yawned and then smiled, enjoying the warmth of her bed in the quiet time before she was really awake.

She had been dreaming, a dream about Nick and swimming in the pond. The sun had been shining, and it was ninety in the shade. Everyone had been there: Suzanne, Sarah, Annie, Josh Walker, who lived on East Cass and had to walk a mile, Shane—everybody.

They were playing Marco Polo and Nick was IT. The way he splashed around in the water, eyes closed, made it hard not to laugh, but she knew she couldn't laugh or he would catch her and then she would have to be IT. When he yelled "Marco," she was supposed to say "Polo," but sometimes, if he was too close, she wouldn't, and sometimes she would turn and yell it in the other direction to confuse him. But sometimes he would get her anyway.

In her dream, he had grabbed her from behind and she had to be IT. She remembered closing her eyes, how warm the sun felt on her skin, the sound of splashing water as they all tried to glide past her. She started yelling "Marco!" but the "Polo's" sounded very far away, like echoes.

She had heard Nick say "Polo," though—he was close, as if he had whispered it into her ear. She had turned in a circle, groping for him. She remembered her fingertips brushing his hair, his sun-warmed back beaded with water, and she opened her eyes, ready to yell that he was IT, she had touched him, but when she opened her eyes—*Nick, where are you?*—she was staring at her ceiling and the dream—*Nick's gone, he's gone*—was gone.

Dare got up and pulled a pair of jeans and a sweater from the bottom of her suitcase. She pulled her clothes on, plaited her hair into one long braid, and went downstairs. The deep roughness of her father's voice was as unmistakable as the familiar smell of bacon. Dare walked into the kitchen and sat at her usual spot at the table, as if she'd never left home.

"Morning." Her father looked over the sports section of the West Lake Journal at her. Steve Thomas, James' younger brother, delivered it now. Nick used to do it until he had moved on to a job working at the Farmer Jack's over in West Lake, she remembered. God, that was all a million years ago.

"Morning, Dad." She picked up the comics, more out of habit than interest.

"What would you like for breakfast?" Julia got up from the table. She was wearing the pink silk robe Nick had given her last Christmas. Her hair was pulled up into a loose bun.

"Nothing, thanks," Dare said. "I don't have much of an appetite."

"Are you sure? It's no problem." Julia sat back down and Dare watched her go back to writing thank you notes. Then she looked at her father, who was reading the business section.

Just any other morning.

"I'm sure." Dare felt tears pricking her eyes. She blinked them back.

"Okay. Do you want anything else, Jay?" Julia asked, not looking up from what she was writing.

Her father folded the business section and set it on the table. "No, thanks, hon. If I don't leave for the office I'll be late." He slipped the sports section into the briefcase waiting next to his chair.

"God forbid," Dare said under her breath, incredulous he was going to work the day after his own son's funeral.

"Will you be late getting home tonight?" Julia stuffed a card into an envelope. The cards were plain white with the words *Thank You For Your Kindness* on the front.

"Shouldn't be." He shrugged his coat on. "This mall project is a pain in my ass, but it should bring more revenue into this little town than we've seen in years. Did you say something, Dare?"

"No," she said softly, head down. "Just...have a good day, Dad."

"I'll try, sweetheart," he said, sounding surprised. He touched her hair.

Any other morning, Dare thought. It's like a commercial. Mother cooks breakfast, father reads the paper, daughter says have a nice day.

There's an empty chair! Her mind screamed. *Nick's chair is empty, can't you see that?*

"Don't work too hard." Julia walked him to the door.

"I'll see you tonight." He kissed her cheek and the door shut behind him.

Dare heard his truck start as Julia sat back down. It was quiet now. Behind her, Dare heard the dripping from the automatic coffee maker. The light blue of the kitchen seemed too bright, surreal, in the early morning light. Far away, a dog barked. Cody, Dare thought. Mr. Cooper's dog, Cody, was the only dog they could ever hear barking out this far.

"Do you need any help?" Dare couldn't even believe she said it. Maybe Nick was right, she thought, incredulous. Maybe she was just like Julia.

"No," her stepmother said, glancing up. "I can handle this."

Dare picked up the paper. The West Lake Journal served as Larkspur's paper as well as the surrounding towns of West Lake, Adison, and Romeo. Her father also mail-ordered the Detroit Free Press and USA Today, because The West Lake Journal was just local fare for the most part. Your Community Information Center, it read below the title. September 9, 2006. 75 cents.

Another Victim Claimed By Clinton Grove Cat.

You made the headlines, Nick, she thought.

"Is it supposed to get any warmer?" Julia asked. Dare glanced at the small box in the bottom left-hand corner that contained the weather outlook.

"Seventies," Dare told her. The article drew her eyes back to it. It wasn't about Nick, after all.

By Mike Murphy
Larkspur Staff Writer

LARKSPUR--Another victim was claimed yesterday evening by what Larkspur residents are beginning to call the Clinton Grove Cat. Scott Summers, 12, from the neighboring town of West Lake, was attacked last night while out with friends. Joseph Turner, 13, a friend of Summers', said, "We were coming home from a friend's and we took the shortcut through the woods by the (Clinton Grove) cemetery. Scott was bringing up the rear and something got him. Nobody saw it. It was too dark."

The shortcut to which Turner referred has been causing similar problems in the Larkspur area. Sheriff Buck Thompson said, "We're trying to keep the kids from using it, but it's a problem. It is a lot shorter."

The Sheriff also said that until the perpetrator of the killings is caught, an eight o'clock curfew will be in effect. There have been two other victims in the past month. Joe Wilson, 41, a life-long Larkspur resident, was attacked and killed on August 28 in an abandoned train station across from the cemetery. Dominick Chandler was killed just four days ago (see obituary, page 17) and was found in one of the cemetery's mausoleums.

Sheriff Thompson believes that the killings are the work of an animal. "It's no human, I can tell you that much," Sheriff Thompson said. "We're just about going crazy down here trying to catch the thing." Although additional help has been called in, the only other Larkspur officer is Deputy Matthew Walker.

Peter Friedman, county coroner, said "I've never seen anything like this, except for the time I was working in Australia and I was handling a lot of shark attack victims. It's definitely

an animal. I'd say it's a pretty large bob-cat. We get those every so often up here. It has tremendously powerful jaws."

There have been no reports of missing animals from any of the neighboring towns or zoos, leading officials to believe that the animal must be wild. According to the Larkspur police department, traps have been set in the areas surrounding the cemetery, and extra men have been called in from West Lake to patrol the streets at night.

Sheriff Thompson said, "I'd advise everyone to be wary, at least until we catch this thing. Stay away from the cemetery at night. There's no need to panic. Just take a few precautions and we'll be able to keep Larkspur safe."

From what? Dare set the paper face down on the table. *You don't even know what it is!*

"Dare, I'm going to go through Nick's room later," Julia murmured, not looking up from her writing. "I have to pack up his things."

Dare looked up, something heavy rolling over in her stomach. "What?"

"Do you want to help me go through Nick's things?" Julia licked an envelope, sealed it, and set it on top of the growing stack.

"What are you going to do with them?" Dare watched her address another envelope.

"I'm not sure yet," she replied. "Some of it—his clothes, will have to go to the Salvation Army, I suppose. Whatever you want, you can have, of course."

The thought of Nick's room being ransacked was making her dizzy.

Julia glanced over at her. "Do you remember what Suzanne brought? I don't have anything listed here."

"I don't remember," Dare said, her voice faint. She was thinking of Nick's baseball mitt; his one surviving stuffed animal, Dirtball the Dragon; his Louisville hockey stick propped in a corner. Julia had left everything in their rooms the way they were when they left home.

"Do you want to help or not, Dare?"

They were all still there, memories of their childhood—his posters of sports cars, and the poster of Angelina Jolie still taped to the wall. His football, his Doors CDs...

"Maybe later," Dare whispered, standing up and clearing her throat. "Maybe later, okay?"

"Well, I suppose it can wait." Julia had begun to lick stamps and put them on the envelopes. "I would like to get it done as soon as possible, though,"

"Why?" Dare frowned. "Do you want him erased from our lives as fast as possible?"

Her stepmother's sharp intake of breath made Dare wince. She hadn't meant to say it—it had just slipped out. Julia's cheeks flushed and she stared at Dare, her hand fluttering at her throat. Dare opened her mouth to say something, anything, but she couldn't think.

"I just don't want to think about it," Julia whispered finally. "If I don't have... things... around... to remind me, I won't think about it."

Dare raised her hands to her cheeks, cooling them. "I guess I want him to live a little longer." She looked at Julia, feeling more than a little pity for her. Her stepmother had dropped the front for once, but the tears trembling in Julia's eyes wouldn't fall. The only time she'd cried had been where it was proper to cry—the funeral.

"He's dead, honey." Julia's voice was soft. "There's nothing you can do to bring him back."

"I know." Dare picked her jacket up off the back of the chair. "I just don't feel the need to bury him so soon."

* * * *

The tires of Nick's red Jeep kicked up a cloud of dust that Dare glimpsed in the rearview mirror. Jarvis, the street they'd lived on as long as she could remember, wasn't paved. None of the roads she navigated up to North Rose were. The only paved roads in existence in the town of Larkspur were Cass, Essex, North Rose and Hubbard. Hubbard ran all the way through Larkspur and up through Shadow Hills. Cass, if you followed it far enough south, ended up in West Lake, which was more of a city, at least in the rural sense, than a town. Everything in Larkspur intersected at Hubbard and North Rose—the epitome of "town." Everything else was woods, farms or fields.

Dare steered the Jeep around the corner of Plainview and onto North Rose. The red, white and blue Amoco sign stood out against the backdrop of the sky. Les Cavanaugh was pumping gas into someone's black SUV. She didn't recognize the car, but she beeped the horn and waved at Les. He raised his hand as she passed by.

She couldn't say North Rose was ever busy. Lakeshore Skating Rink, where you could find most of the junior high kids on the weekends, was across from the Amoco station. Its competition was next to Nellie's Diner, in the form of the Lawrence Movie Theater, currently showing *The Passion of the Christ* (still) and a Michigan-based horror flick called *Evil Dead*. They would get something new—in a year, when it wasn't new anymore. If you wanted to see the new releases, the ones advertised between

American Idol and *House*, you had to go to the AMC in West Lake, or the Star Theater in Shadow Hills, near her father's office.

Dare stopped at the traffic light at Hubbard and North Rose. Cougar's General Store was across the way, the familiar hand-lettered advertising in the big picture window. There were no cars crossing the intersection, but Dare waited anyway, conscious of the Larkspur police station on her right, until the light turned green.

She turned right and guided the car up into the parking lot next to *Floral Gardens*—Larkspur's one and only florist.

"Hello, Dare!" A voice greeted her as she got out of the car and pocketed her keys. "How're your folks?"

"Hi, Mrs. Hughes." Dare shut the door and leaned against it, prepared for the onslaught of conversation. "My parents are..." Dare hesitated. What? Going on as if nothing happened? "Fine. How's little Mikey?"

"Growing like a weed! He's going to be a big boy." Rita Hughes smiled, hoisting her purse up onto her shoulder. Mikey was her grandson and had just turned four, if the math Dare did quickly in her head was correct.

"Give him and your daughter my best." Dare smiled back, edging toward the florist.

"I will, and you take care." Rita nodded slowly. "Nick was a good boy. It's a terrible shame."

"Yes. Thank you." Dare felt that lump in her throat again. Why did people insist on mentioning it, especially out in public? It made it so immediate. She realized how

much she sounded like Julia, even to herself, as she turned and left Rita standing there, going into the florist.

She was surprised to see Tom Connley standing near the register, working on an arrangement. His father ran the store, and as far as she knew, Tommy hadn't worked there in years, since they were in high school. But there he was, looking better than he had even then, his dark hair buzzed short, his jaw still square and strong, his eyes just as blue as he looked up at the sound of the bells attached to the door.

"Well... hi, Tom." She glanced around, the aroma of the empty store sweet and a little cloying.

"Dare!" Tom smiled at her—it was the smile that had stolen her heart the minute she saw it, broad and bright and full of mischief. "Oh my god, you're gorgeous. Come on, girl, couldn't you have gained fifty pounds and gone gray or something? You can't come back looking just as beautiful as the day I asked you to marry me!"

"I don't know if I should thank you or apologize," she said, blushing in spite of her attempt not to. He came around the counter and hugged her and she fought both tears and her own attraction to him when he did, letting herself rest her head against his shoulder and enjoy the strength of his arms around her for only a moment.

"I'm so sorry about Nick," he murmured against her ear, giving her a tight squeeze.

"Thanks." Dare broke his hold, taking a step back and looking around the store with a small smile to cover the sharp stab of pain she felt near her heart. Was this ever going to get easier? She attempted to change the subject. "So how's business?"

"Dad says it's good." Tom moved behind the counter again, leaning against it as she approached. "Although that's not always a good thing. Too many funerals lately."

"Your dad ask you to help out?"

"Yeah." Tom sighed. "He had to go to another funeral over in West Lake."

Dare winced. "Whose?"

"That kid that got killed the other night," Tom replied, shaking his head. "My dad was a friend of the family. Heck, even I knew Scott. He and little Joe always palled around together."

"I'm sorry." Dare recognized her own polite response, the one she had cringed at coming from others.

"I just can't believe it." Tom lowered his voice, as if there were someone else in the shop who might overhear them. "It's kind of scary. First Joe Wilson, which, you know, wasn't that great a loss...but Nick? And now Scott?"

Dare nodded. She was sure no one had taken much notice when Joe Wilson disappeared. Town drunks without family just didn't register on the missing persons radar for a while, even in a town as small as Larkspur. As long as she'd known him, he'd spent most of his time drinking out by the train yards across from the cemetery on the south side of town, and she was sure his pattern hadn't changed any.

"I just wonder...what is it?" Tom leaned in, conspiratorial. "I mean, what is it *really*?"

"Sheriff Thompson assured me it was some sort of animal," Dare said, hearing the sarcasm in her voice. Of course, Tom was touching on her own doubts.

"I just don't know." Tom frowned, shaking his head. "Maybe it is. But...what if they're covering something up?"

Dare stared at him for a moment over the carnation flower arrangement he'd been working on. "Why do you say that?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Buck Thompson is up for re-election this year. And that outlet mall they're building at the south end of town is supposed to bring in a lot of tourists and stuff. Maybe they don't want the bad publicity?"

"A bobcat seems..." Dare sighed. "A little too convenient?"

Tom nodded. "I don't like it, either."

"Do you have any yellow roses?" Dare asked, trying to change the subject again. It felt dangerous, feeding her suspicions.

"Sure." Tom stood fully, turning toward the refrigerated flower cases behind him.

Dare always thought it would be neat to have one of those—a refrigerator you could see into without opening it. It would have saved Nick and I a lot of "Will you shut that door's?!" from Julia, she thought, and the thought was so painful she cut it right off.

"How many do you want? A dozen?" Tom opened the door.

"Just one." Dare struggled to keep the pain in. "How much?"

"Just one?" He took a yellow rose out of the container and shut the door, turning to hand it to her. "Here. Take it, beautiful."

"Are you sure?" Dare took the rose, blinking back tears as his fingers brushed hers. Their eyes met and she saw it, in that moment—he wasn't over her, like she'd hoped. Nick had said she broke Tom's heart when she turned down his proposal just

out of high school, but she'd always told herself they were both too young. Besides, he was joining the air force, and she couldn't be a military wife.

"It's all yours," he said with a nod and a small smile. "Always was."

"Tom..." She swallowed, looking down at the flower instead of up at him.

"Don't worry about it." He stood, his big hands so out of place arranging flowers that it made her want to smile. "Okay?"

She wanted to ask him if they were still talking about the rose she was holding, but she knew they weren't, not really. "Thanks."

She turned to leave, understanding suddenly a whole new meaning to the phrase "killing someone with kindness." Every kind gesture felt like a stab through her heart.

* * * *

Dare left the Jeep parked by the front office of the cemetery. She could have driven all the way to the grave, but she felt like walking.

Warm for September, she thought, lifting her face to the gentle breeze. Her father had said it had been a warm summer for northern Michigan, one of the driest they'd ever had. The trees were just turning color and a few leaves decorated the lawn. It's always so perfect, how do they do that? she wondered, taking one of the winding paths, admiring the grass. Her father had once said the Clinton Grove Cemetery should have been a golf course.

It was silent with the exception of the leaves rustling above her head. Isolated, she thought, staring up the incline. It was at least two miles from town and on the outskirts, just before the county line. The entire ride along Hubbard had been views of farms and fields.

She stopped at the top of the sloping hill and looked across acres of land. One great big garden of stone, she thought, peering out at the rows of graves. She looked at the tall monument on her left, erected in honor of those who had fought in the Civil War, and the newest one for those who had fought in Iraq. Six or seven family mausoleums stood interspersed among trees, all containing once-prominent Larkspur residents. Nick liked to remark that a small town like Larkspur had a lot of big people and a lot of small minds.

The hill sloped back down, offering a panoramic view of the cemetery. To her left was Nick's grave and there was someone standing there in the distance, head down, back toward her. She moved down the row, realizing he was standing *at* Nick's grave. She recognized the figure when she was only a few feet away from him.

"Chris?" She put a hand on his shoulder.

He yelped, whirling to face her, his hand on his chest.

"Jesus, Dare!" he cried, his breath ragged, his eyes wide as he looked at her.

"You scared me to death!"

"I suppose we're in the right place for it." She gave him a wry smile. He looked back down, his eyes resting on the grave. They had covered the fresh dirt with sod and put the headstone up already. It gave Dare a start to see it there, an announcement to the world in gray marble.

"How're you doing?" he asked, shoving his hands into his jean pockets.

"Surviving, I guess."

"Yeah."

They both stared at the grave, neither knowing quite what to say. They had never been friends, more like passing acquaintances. Nick had been their connection, but now he was gone.

"How'd you get here?" Dare asked, unable to recall seeing a car parked anywhere.

"Oh, uh..." he hesitated and looked up, first at her and then away, off into the distance. "Shane gave me a lift."

"He's here?" Her eyes following Chris' gaze to where Shane sat on the hood of his car, just outside the eastern fence, a beer bottle resting against the crotch of his jeans.

"Yeah, but he wouldn't...he didn't feel like coming in."

"No?" As she watched, Shane tipped the bottle at her and then put it to his lips. Dare fingered the rose, turning her gaze back to Chris. "How come?"

Chris shifted his weight back and forth and shrugged. "I don't know. Gave him the creeps, I guess."

"Shane Curtis—scared?" she scoffed. "Come off it, Chris. He's never been afraid of anything in his life—except maybe jail."

"I don't argue with him." Chris met her eyes and then looked away.

She nodded, pursing her lips, and looked down at the headstone. "Can I ask you something?"

"Uh...sure." Back and forth, he shifted his weight from one foot to another.

"Did you see Nick that night?"

He laughed, shaking his head, but his eyes fled hers. "You playing detective?"

"No." Dare lied. She was better at it than he was. "Just wondering. He mentioned he might see you guys that night. He mentioned Shane specifically."

"We were all at the Starlite." Chris straightened, pulling his hands out of his pockets and crossing his arms over his chest. "Me, Shane, the gang. We were drinking beers and playing pool."

"And Nick?"

"I don't know." He looked down at his boots. "He wasn't with us."

"Hmm." Dare gazed toward the fence where Shane was parked. She raised her hand to him and he nodded in her direction.

"You don't believe me?"

Chris' words brought her attention back to him. "I don't know what to believe, to tell you the truth."

"I wasn't there," Chris insisted, his arms tightening around himself, as if he were cold in the warm September sunshine. "I don't know what happened...but I wish I did."

"I wish I did, too."

"Teri wanted me to tell you she's real sorry." He gave her a small, tight smile at her blank stare. "My wife, Teri."

"Oh. Teri..." Dare frowned, trying to remember. "Teri Calhoun?"

"She's Teri Jackson now."

She shook her head, smiling, remembering the Chris she knew from high school, wearing a leather jacket and tagging after Shane, like they all did, wannabes. "It's hard to picture you married."

“We just had a baby.” He sounded proud and that made Dare smile. “That’s why she didn’t come, you know, to the funeral.”

“Well, congratulations.” Dare looked down at her brother’s headstone and the sudden realization that Nick would never have the opportunity to make her an aunt made her feel sick and dizzy. “Boy or girl?”

“Girl.”

Chris married with a kid—it was almost too much to comprehend. Dare changed the subject. “So, what are you doing now?”

“I’ve got a good job over at the steel mill in West Lake,” he said, again with that tight-lipped smile. “We just bought a house out on Deer Trail Road. The old Avery place.”

“That’s a great house,” she admitted, knowing it well. The Averys had moved downstate not too long ago, according to Julia. “You really like living in this town?”

“Yeah, I do.” He nodded. “Everyone knows everyone else.”

She laughed softly, hugging herself. “That’s why I hate it.”

“Nick didn’t,” he replied, catching her eye. His gaze was soft now, more open.

“I know.” She sighed, shaking her head. “Maybe that’s why he came back, because he loved it here.”

Chris raised his eyebrows at her and then frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“No?”

He glanced down at the headstone and then lifted his gaze off into the distance. “I think...honestly, I think he came back because this town loved him.”

Dare smiled, blinking back tears. “I did, too.”

"Yeah, so did I." Chris' voice broke when he said it and she looked up at him sharply.

She had forgotten about him almost, but Shane startled her when he stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled.

Chris glanced over his shoulder. "Gotta go." Shane motioned to him. "Take care of yourself, Dare."

He headed down the hill, not looking back at her. Like a trained puppy dog, she thought as he climbed carefully over the chest-high spiked fence.

She watched them get into the Mustang. Shane stepped hard on the gas, dust flying from underneath his tires as he skidded down the path running next to the fence and up onto Hubbard, heading toward town. He never was one to use a front entrance, she thought.

He's lying—or he's covering up for someone.

She knelt in front of the headstone, putting the yellow rose down. She traced his name, the dates. *Dominick William Chandler. May God Have Mercy Upon His Soul.* Dare frowned. That was another of Julia's touches.

God have mercy, she thought, looking up, her eyes falling on the space Shane had vacated.

May God have mercy upon *his* soul.

Chapter Four

The door was closed.

She had to pass it every day, and it was beginning to bother her. In spite of what was going on back in Chicago, it bothered her so much she almost wished she were back in her apartment, even if her roommate's cat liked to curl around her head like a hat at night. She didn't know which was worse, the investigation hanging over her head, or the closed door she now had to pass every day.

A month, that's what she told her father and stepmother—and Jack. She told him, too, making the call in Nick's Jeep, calling from her cell on the outskirts of town, where she actually could get more than just a few bars on her phone. After that, she'd called her roommate, Kathy, who had agreed to ship her some of her clothes and personal things. She was taking a month off. A mourning vacation. None of them had been happy about it, including her. She didn't want to stay here, with memories of Nick around every corner, but she couldn't go either. Not yet.

And still, the door stayed shut, a poster of Murphy's Law thumbtacked to it. "It's okay to be a pessimist once in a while, Nick," she remembered telling him when she gave the poster to him.

She passed it on her way to breakfast. She passed it coming down the hall late at night, when she was tired enough that she might be able to get some sleep. She passed it, wet and shivering and wrapped in a towel, after taking a shower. She had passed it at least twice a day, every day, for the past two weeks...but she still didn't have the nerve to look inside.

Julia hadn't mentioned cleaning it out or going through his things again. She had changed his sheets and made his bed and Dare had watched all of that with mixed feelings of horror and awe. Then the door had been shut again.

It scared her.

Not so much the fact that the room was there and she had to go by it, or that all of his things were still in it, or that there were clean sheets waiting for him. Those things bothered her, but it was more than just that.

It was the door. The closed door.

One of Julia's favorite gripes when they were kids had been that Nick never shut his door when he was changing. Dare had always been able to go by on her way to her room and see him sitting on his bed, doing his homework, reading, munching on pretzels and drinking Mountain Dew, or whatever. Sometimes he would call her in, sometimes he was gone, but the door was always left wide open.

In the middle of the night, if she would get up to get a glass of water or go to the bathroom, she would go by and hear him breathing. Sometimes, if the moon was full—and Nick left his shade up, his curtains open and, whenever possible, the window gaping—she could see him curled up, the covers mostly kicked off.

It was unsettling to see the door shut. It was unnatural. Julia had shut the door and had somehow managed to shut Nick out of their lives without having to deal with it, and Dare didn't have the nerve to open it back up. She passed it, feeling guilty, knowing it just wasn't right for it to be closed. It stung. Nick's door stayed open. Always open.

Dare put her hand on the doorknob.

Her palms were sweating, trembling. She stared for the longest time at Murphy's Law. Anything that can go wrong, will. Oh, that was the truth. Everything had gone wrong, and it was getting more and more and more wrong every day. It had never occurred to her things could go wrong, as wrong as this, and never get any better.

Everything was out of focus, as if the world were tilting. Her hand felt disconnected from her body as it turned the doorknob, and

What are you doing? Oh my god, you aren't really going in there you aren't really pushed it open.

It was easy. Somehow she thought it would resist, but it swung open wide—no squeaky hinges, no cobwebs.

She couldn't breathe. Her heart, quivering near the back of her throat, was getting in the way. She leaned against the door frame, wide-eyed and frozen, rejecting the possibility, even as her brother, her dead brother, smiled at her from his bed.

She found her voice.

Then she began to scream.

"Dare?"

Julia. It was Julia calling up from downstairs. Dare took her hand away from her mouth and for a moment she felt everything slipping sideways. She could barely get air into her lungs, as if there were something heavy sitting on her chest. She felt like she was falling, or the floor was dropping away.

And then it was okay again. She was leaning against the door frame, staring into the Kodak paper-eyes of Nick and Shane (a picture!) lying on the bed.

"It's okay," she called, her voice surprising her, how steady it was. "It was...nothing."

She moved into the room.

His bed, his dresser, his CD collection—everything was still there, as if waiting for him to return to it.

His models—the '68 Corvette she'd helped him do one rainy afternoon, the Blue Angel planes—sat collecting dust on his shelves. His walls—Angelina Jolie from Tomb Raider, a Detroit Red Wings pennant, a bright red Porsche Carrera GT. A well-loved and often used skateboard that hadn't seen pavement in years stuck out from his closet. His skis stood propped against a chair in one corner, just waiting to be waxed so they could hit the slopes.

He was everywhere. He filled all the available space, nearly tangible. His presence followed her as she moved about the room, just looking, not daring to touch. There was a half-eaten bag of Doritos sitting on his dresser, neatly clothes-pinned shut. Waiting. She realized with a sinking feeling that Julia would never be able to yell at him again for having food in his room.

Ultraomnipresent. Wasn't that the word Nick loved, from that e.e. cummings poem? If I was a superhero, he said, that's what my powers would be. Somehow she could feel him that way now. He was here that way...somehow...because he was...

"Hey there, Dare."

The voice, the finger poking her shoulder, was unmistakable, even as she whirled around. The life felt sucked right out of her body, her heart forgetting how to beat. She knew it was. She knew, because Nick was...was...

Here.

She screamed, looking into his face, looking into his face. There were gaping holes as if someone had tried to piece it back together like some gruesome puzzle, but hadn't been quite successful. Flesh hung loosely from his scalp, flapping wetly as he smiled at her. His eyes—what eyes?—were gaping holes in his head where blood trailed like tears down his face, running through those places where hunks of flesh were just gone missing.

She screamed and screamed and screamed.

"Dare." The voice, rough and gritty, made her shudder. That wasn't Nick's voice. It couldn't be.

He grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her, looking for all the world like he was grinning, but he wasn't, there was just no skin left over his teeth, and the blood, so dark it was black, tracing rivulets from his—holes—eyes, that loose piece of flesh flopping against his head with a wet sound and she couldn't help it, she screamed and screamed...

"Dare! Wake up! Dare!"

The real world slipped slowly back and her father was shaking her. She was dizzy.

"Are you okay?" He peered into her face. He had his fuzzy blue robe on and she saw his outline in the faint light from the hall.

"Dead," she whispered thickly. "His eyes, there was...was..."

"Okay." He pulled her close, holding her. She shuddered against him, and when the world clicked back into place the sobs came, the force of the tears tremendous.

"Okay, it's okay." He stroked her hair and she clutched him, trembling, her eyes closed tight. "It's only a dream. You're all right."

Dare recognized the words and they terrified her. She'd heard them all of her life, and she knew their meaning all too well. They were a parent's words, comfort words, Band-Aid words. They were false words.

"It's okay," he told her, and she heard the tightness in his voice. "Everything's going to be all right."

They were lies. Gentle, sugar-coated words of comfort—just facades to keep life in focus, maybe even to keep insanity away. They twined themselves through the heart and mind, numbing their way.

The image of him standing there, grinning, sightless, his scalp flopping, made her shudder and she drew a shaky breath. The numbness wasn't enough. She needed something more powerful.

It was never going to be okay again.

* * * *

It was becoming an obsession.

The still closeness she felt when she entered the cemetery was calming, but it was more than that. It became a steady bit of normal. She longed for order, a sense of reality, but she couldn't even bring herself to call Jack and ask how the investigation was going. That represented responsibility. Getting back into the swing of things, as her father said. Forgetting Nick was what it came down to, and above everything, she refused to do that.

They seemed to be managing quite well, her parents. Life goes on and all that. Julia cooked dinner and did her crosswords and laughed at the jokes on *Everybody Loves Raymond* re-runs. Her father went to work, took out the garbage, read the paper, watched football on Sundays.

They had reestablished a routine.

But there was an space they couldn't ignore, no matter how hard they tried. An empty space at the dinner table, an empty space in the living room when they were watching *Lost* or *The Tudors*. Dare didn't want to go back to the way things were, not without Nick.

So, here was her order, her routine. In the cemetery, she could talk to Nick. She wasn't crazy enough to think he heard her, but somehow it made her feel better. She wasn't forgetting him, like everyone else seemed to have done. It was keeping him alive, and that was the most important thing.

"Hi, Mr. Evans!" Dare yelled, although she was only standing five feet away from him.

"Well, hi." He waved as he walked toward her car. "You were out early this morning."

"It's prettiest here in the morning." She fished for the keys in her purse and, when she found them, zipped up her jacket. It was starting to get colder.

"What was that?" He tapped his right ear.

"I said," Dare raised her voice. "The morning is so pretty here!"

"So true! I love this place." He ran a hand through his white hair. "I spent my life here. I suppose I'll be spending death here, too."

"Oh, God, here we go," Dare said with a sigh, looking out across the cemetery. Evans had been the caretaker since she could remember, and since there weren't many people to talk to out here, once he got going, he never wanted to stop.

"What was that, Dare?" He tapped the hearing aid in his shirt pocket. "I have to get new batteries for this thing."

"I've gotta go!" Dare was practically yelling. "I've got to pick up something at Cougar's!"

"All right, I'll see you tomorrow then." He turned away and limped toward the main office.

He's getting old, she thought, and it was a sad thought. He had to hire kids around town to help with the place now. He did love the place—and he really probably was going to be buried here.

"Bye," she called, getting into the car. She didn't think he heard her.

* * * *

If there was one place in Larkspur filled with memories of Nick for Dare, it was Cougar's General Store. The memories were still unbearably painful, but there just wasn't anywhere else to get the essentials without driving all the way out of town. She hadn't gone into Cougar's because of the memories. She didn't even like to look at the store front with its rotting wooden porch, and windows so filled with specials it was impossible to see inside.

She couldn't avoid it forever. Cougar's dog, Sarge, thumped his tail as she approached and she bent to pat his head before she went in. Cougar's door had never had bells on it to let him know when someone entered.

"I ain't deaf," he would say. "What do I need bells for?"

The store smelled of coffee and the tobacco Will Cougar used to fill his pipe. It wasn't a huge store, not like the Krogers in Westlake, but he kept a good variety.

"Anything you want I got, and if I don't have it, you don't need it!" he was fond of saying, and when she was little, Dare would have sworn it was the truth.

She went down the third aisle and picked up a box of Tampax. She used to be embarrassed to buy them, especially in Cougar's, but the awkward shyness passed after she was fifteen or so.

It had surprised and scared her to find her period had started. It had happened the morning after her dream. The sight of blood had made her sick. She'd even stayed in bed with cramps, something she didn't often do. It had startled her, although she knew she was due. Somehow, she still hadn't expected it. That, more than the rising and setting sun, her parent's continuing lives, time ticking away on the grandfather clock in the living room, hit home for her. There was life after Nick.

Dare moved down aisle toward the back wall where the magazine and book racks were. Cougar tried to keep up on his shipments. Her eyes scanned the book titles, drawn to the word *Horror* written in red letters. Underneath were the latest. Cougar used to stock the horror section just for them. She and Nick would split the cost of books and share them when they were kids, and they never really stopped. He'd buy one and send it to her, and vice versa.

She was about to go up to the register when a name caught her eye. STEPHEN KING in bold black letters, and below that, the title *The Dark Tower VII*. It was the very

last in the gunslinger series! She had been waiting for this book to come out forever! A familiar thrill went through her and she thought, *I wonder if Nick knows—*

She bit her tongue, closing her eyes. The bitter taste of blood filled her mouth, but it cut the thought off. She'd been doing that, having thoughts about Nick and what he might do in the future, things he would never do again. It caused a sharp stab of pain slicing through her middle when she realized she and Nick would never, could never, because Dominick William Chandler had been made a graveyard meal of by god-knows-what—*someone knows*—yum, yum, wasn't that the most delicious joke you ever heard?

She felt, for one terrifying moment, that she was going to be sick. She was going to barf Julia's special brown-sugar and pecan oatmeal up, right onto old Cougar's floor...

And then she was okay again.

She took the book off the shelf. It was soft cover, so it must have been out for a while. She'd been so busy she hadn't read much lately. That was before the suspension and the investigation. Before she found out Nick was dead. Now she had nothing but time. She tucked the book under her arm, deciding to buy it. If it took her mind off of the horror—the real horror of her life—it was worth it.

"I knew I had them, Mike." Dare looked up at the sound of Will's voice. He came out of the back room, followed by Mike White, Sarah's father. They moved toward the front of the store up the last aisle, toward the register, she assumed.

"It was just a question of finding them. I don't like keeping these kinds of things up front. I don't want any of the kids getting their hands on them."

"Yep, true 'nuff," Mike drawled. They were from somewhere down south, Dare remembered. Sarah had come into third grade with the most laughable accent. Her nickname had become "y'all" because it was all that came out of her mouth, especially, "Y'all talk funny, not me!"

"I don't sell much ammo outside of deer season," Will told him. She heard the old cash register totaling things up. "Although, with what's been happening around here lately, I should probably start advertising in the window."

"I ain't takin' no chances," Mike said. "After that Summer's boy..."

Sarah lost her accent, Dare thought. I wonder why he didn't?

"And poor Nicky Chandler," Mike continued. "What the hell was he doin' in the boneyard?"

Good question. Dare had been planning on going up front and paying for her things, maybe talking to Will for a minute or two. The mention of Nick's name had started to change her mind.

"What a thing." Will sighed. "A horrible, horrible thing." Tears pricked Dare's eyes at the sadness in his voice. "I know that family real well. He was such a good boy."

"Hotshot lawyer, wasn't he?" Mike asked..

"Yeah," Will replied. "Home for a visit with his folks, they said. I'm really gonna miss him. When he was a kid, he used to come to help me clean up, do inventory, whatever else needed doing. Him and his sister—they never asked for nothing, just came and kept me company."

Dare leaned against the shelf, tears, unbidden, welling up. She and Nick had once thought old Mr. Cougar was the best thing to come along since Kool-Aid. His word was God's back then.

"It's a real shame," Mike agreed. There was a pause, and then he asked, "So what do you think it is, Will?"

The old man didn't seem confused by the question. He knew exactly what Mike was asking, and so did Dare. "Well," Will started. "I can't rightly say. Newspaper says it's a big cat of some kind, but the Sheriff's setting traps left and right up there by Clinton Grove and all he's catching is rabbits."

"Do you think it's an animal?" Mike asked.

Dare's ears pricked up. She felt awful, her stomach churning, knowing she shouldn't be listening, but she couldn't stop herself. Julia wouldn't approve—but her instincts told her to stay put.

"Mike, I just don't know. I'll tell you something—I saw the Summers kid when they brought him in. I was jawwing with Matt down at the station, after I reported the break-in here. And we both know who did that and who isn't going to get caught for it," Will said wryly. *Shane*, Dare thought, reading his thoughts as she knew Mike would. In Larkspur, trouble was always spelled S-H-A-N-E.

Will continued: "They brought the body in, just a couple of kids carryin' him, not knowing any better, not even knowing who he was. Couldn't tell who he was anymore." Will's voice dropped. "Kid looked like he'd got himself caught up in a meat grinder. I nearly lost my dinner, I can tell you."

"So there were bite marks, like it says in the paper?" Mike asked.

"Bite marks? Feh!" Will snorted. "Mike, the kid was *shredded*. The only way they would've been able to identify him, if his friends hadn't come out of hiding long enough to find out what happened to him, that is, would've been dental records, or that new DNA technology."

"Really?" Mike's voice sounded faint.

"I ain't kidding," Will replied. "Mike, I knew Scott Summers. Real well. But I didn't know him when they brought that body in. He looked...inside out."

Remembering her dream, Dare's stomach tightened.

"So you do think it's a cat of some sort?"

"Cat, bear, hell, I don't know," Will replied. Dare could smell the distinct odor of his pipe. "But I wonder if maybe, just maybe...it's neither one."

"Yeah? Me, too."

"Whole town is wondering, my friend." She heard Will pausing to puff on his pipe. "The whole world gets turned upside down when stuff like this happens and nobody seems to have any explanations."

It was quiet for a moment and Dare contemplated just putting her stuff down and going quietly out the door. Then Cougar started talking again.

"Mike, I'll tell you something..."

Dare smiled. That's what Cougar always said when he was about to pontificate

"I've lived in this town all of my life, and I've never seen anything like this. A bear won't usually attack unless it's threatened. It's possible to have an isolated incident of bear attack, say, after disturbing one from sleep, but they're really not very smart. They would've caught a bear by now, with all the traps they've set up."

"Uh-huh," Mike agreed.

Dare nodded, listening, and waited.

"A cat, on the other hand, a cat's pretty sharp. And they're predators, there's no doubt about that. I could see one coming across Joe Wilson passed out in the train station and thinking he'd found himself a feline version of a McDonalds Happy Meal just waiting for him."

"Sure," Mike replied.

"And overpowering a twelve-year-old wouldn't be too hard for a big cat," Will went on. "And from what Deputy Matt says, Nick Chandler was pretty wasted that night. A bobcat sounds like a plausible explanation in all those cases, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." Mike actually sounded a little relieved.

Dare knew better. She was too used to Cougar's set-ups. She held her breath.

"But I still don't think it was a cat."

"Why?" Mike asked, walking just the path Cougar wanted him to.

"Did you know that Joe was found hidden under a porch in the train station, covered up with boards?" Will puffed on his pipe again and the smell wafted toward Dare. "Can bobcats do that, Mike? Even smart ones?"

Dare didn't hear any answer. Her own mind was racing.

"If we didn't have kids who like to play out there and explore the great unknown, we never would've missed old Joe. Probably would've even forgotten him. What do you think about that, Mike?"

"The papers didn't mention that." Mike sounded angry, and Dare knew how he felt.

Will chuckled. "Come on, now. Buck Thompson is up for re-election this year, and we've got that new mall going in near the south end of town. Supposed to be as good as the Second Coming, right? Bad publicity, Mike. No one wants that, do they?"

Dare was cold. She was beginning to feel sick again, and it was getting worse. Part of it was cramps, but most of it was just all the bells and whistles going off again.

"And what about Nicky Chandler?" Will asked.

"What about him?"

"You know where they found him?"

"Cemetery," Mike replied, stating the obvious and taking another step down Cougar's well-lit path.

"Uh huh." He puffed on his pipe again. "But they might not have found him at all, you know, if the Clinton Grove boneyard didn't have such a tidy caretaker."

"What do you mean?" Mike sounded impatient now, growing tired of Cougar's game.

"John Evans told Deputy Matt he found Nick while he was sweeping out one of the mausoleums," Will said. "Those doors are shut tight, Mike. You know a bobcat who can open doors?"

"Well." Mike cleared his throat. "Maybe Nick ran from it? Opened the mausoleum door himself, went in there to hide?"

"Could be," Cougar agreed, puffing on his pipe again. "Sure could be."

For some reason, Dare found herself thinking about Shane.

It was quiet for a moment, and then Mike said, "Well, thanks for the ammo, Will. I appreciate it."

"No problem," Will replied. "Just remember— sometimes it's better to be safe than sorry."

"I get you," Mike said. "Take care, Will."

Will replied, "You take care, too—living all the way out there on Arcada road. Whatever it is, it's got an awful big appetite."

Dare heard the door shut. It took a few moments for her to move, but when she'd made up her mind, she went up the back aisle toward the cash register.

"Hey, Cougar." She set her things on the counter. He turned around, startled.

"Dare! I didn't hear you come in." Will's eyes pierced hers. "How long have you been hanging around?"

"Oh, I don't know." She let her eyes fall to her purchases. "I was back by the books and I got into this one. Lost track of time, I guess."

He picked up the book and then snorted. "Stephen King, huh?" He looked on the sleeve and rang up the price. "It's a shame when a man can make millions writing this kind of garbage, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

"You know," he said, bagging the book and the Tampax. "If you want real horror, Dare, all you have to do is look around you at the rest of the world."

She took the bag and looked at him. His hair was beginning to thin and grow gray at the temples. The beard he always grew for winter even had a bit of gray in it. The laugh lines around his eyes were more defined than she remembered, but his deep blue eyes were as sharp as ever. She loved him—he was the kind of father she'd always

longed for, kind, caring. He would grieve, she thought. If Nick had been his son, he would have taken the time out of his schedule to cry a bit.

"I know." Dare didn't hide the tears.

Looking at her, his eyes softened. "Oh hon...I'm so sorry."

She nodded and opened her mouth to say the perfunctory, "thank you," but the lump in her throat wouldn't let her. When he held his arms out, she fell into them and finally gave herself over to the grief.

* * * *

"What can I get you, Dare?"

"Hmm?" Dare looked up at Nellie standing behind the counter with her pen poised above her note pad.

"What can I get you?" she repeated.

"Root beer and..." She glanced up at the list of prices written in chalk on a big black board, and added, "Fries."

"Up in a few, but I'm a bit short-handed today," Nellie told her, bustling toward the kitchen to place the order. Nellie was always short-handed, but it was worse in the summer. Winter inevitably saw a drop in the tourist traffic because of the cold and snow, but business at Nellie's was always booming—she owned the one and only restaurant in Larkspur.

Dare turned her swivel stool around. It was the lunch time crowd, all regulars, sitting in booths and at tables. Most were over from Adison, a small town to the west of Larkspur where there were limestone and iron ore mines.

Dare hoped her eyes and nose weren't too red from crying. Cougar had let her go on and on, just holding and rocking her, and although she flushed now in embarrassment at the memory, it had been good, just exactly what she'd needed. After that, she couldn't ask him what she'd planned, couldn't delve into his conversation with Mike and his speculations about the alleged "animal attacks."

But now Cougar's words kept coming back to her, and the fear clutched and groped at her belly. It went nicely with cramps. Tom had touched upon her suspicions when she was in the florist, but Cougar, he'd added something she'd been looking for all along, opening up a new dimension. Cougar had presented proof—*you know a bobcat who can open doors?*

She shuddered. The thought of Nick lying on the floor of the mausoleum—*like he got himself caught in a meat grinder*—was too gruesome and painful to imagine, but it was worse than that—*he looked inside out*—it was deplorable. He didn't deserve to die—not that way, in the middle of nowhere at the hands of—*of what?* The violation of it heated her chest and filled her throat. She recognized the desire, burning thick and almost comforting—it was a lust for vengeance. She wanted retribution.

"Dare."

Startled, she turned toward the voice. "Billy...hi." She remembered seeing him at the funeral, his dark head bent next to Shane's, so out of place in a suit and tie. Today he was back in jeans, ripped and tattered as usual, and looked more like she remembered him from high school, although the "*Coldplay*" t-shirt was new.

"Sorry I didn't come by after the funeral," he apologized. "I had to work."

That makes one of us, Dare thought. Although her career was dangling over the edge of a deep ravine, it was actually the least of her worries, and that irony didn't escape her.

"That's okay. Where are you working?"

Billy looked down at the front of his t-shirt. "I'm a walking advertisement."

"Guitar lessons?" she guessed, remembering that he'd had the typical high-school rock star aspirations of any young male guitar player.

"Guitar, piano, whatever pays the bills," he agreed, waving to Nellie and calling, "Pick up!" She gave him an acknowledging nod, slipping behind the counter and heading back toward the kitchen.

"You still play?" she asked. She'd only heard him on the few occasions Nick had allowed her to tag along with them, but she remembering being impressed with his talent. "I mean, for yourself..."

"Don't do much for myself anymore." He snorted. "Hey...I'm really sorry about Nick. Really sorry."

"Thanks." She nodded, trying to ignore the pain blossoming in her chest at the mention of his name. Part of her understood Julia's need or desire to put everything away. If people would just stop talking about it...

"I only just saw him the week before, when I went to see my mom in the hospital." Billy gave Nellie a five when she set a brown paper bag stapled shut across the top on the counter. "Thanks, Nell, keep the change."

"Oh the generosity," Nellie replied, rolling her eyes but pocketing the cash.

"That was the last time you saw him?" Dare asked, remembering Chris' denial that he hadn't seen Nick the night before he'd—*been killed*—died.

"I think so." Billy stood, frowning. "Days run together for me nowadays. My mom's got lung cancer and has been in and out of the hospital for the past few months."

"I'm so sorry." Dare squeezed his arm, wishing there was some other way to express sympathy besides that pat phrase. She was tired of hearing it herself.

"Thanks." He gave her a small smile, his eyes veiled, and she'd given it to others enough in the past twenty-four hours to recognize the look. He glanced at his watch and then said, "I've got to run. Good seeing you. How long will you be in town?"

She hesitated. It was a good question. How long was she going to be in town exactly?

When she didn't answer, Billy went on. "Maybe I'll see you around before you go?"

"Sure," she agreed as he moved away, heading toward the door with a short wave. She blinked after him, surprised how much he had changed. He wasn't the Billy she remembered at all, the extrovert, the flirt, the one who had at least two girls hanging on him at all times. This Billy was a more somber version.

Maybe Nick was right, she thought, turning back toward the counter and taking a sip of the drink Nellie had left for her. Maybe people do change. Or maybe we never really know as much as we think we do about who they are...

"Hey, came in 'cuz I saw the Jeep outside." Shane took a seat on the stool next to her, the one Billy had vacated just moments before. "Gave me quite a start for a minute there."

Dare faced him, startled, not ready for another trip down memory lane quite yet. Instead, she just looked at him, and when she didn't reply, he asked, "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue? No pun intended, of course."

She didn't bother to answer him, and she knew he didn't really expect one. He looked pale, as if he'd seen a ghost. The Jeep really had given him quite a shock and she was glad. The burning in her chest was worse now with him sitting so near.

"Here you go, Dare," Nellie said, and Dare turned back to the counter where her French fries now sat. "Can I get you anything, Shane?"

He grinned. "Not unless you recently started selling alcohol."

"Not here." Nellie frowned, tucking her pen behind her ear. "Try the Starlite. Isn't it about time you parked your behind over there anyway?"

Dare sipped her root beer, staying out of what she knew was coming—Nellie was a teetotaler, an AA addict.

"I could hop on over there for you." Shane taunted her. "Want me to bring you back a beer?"

"Lee Williams ought to be fined, the way he lets the kids drink." She patted at her hair, once a luxurious blonde beginning to turn a soft white.

Dare hid a smirk. It was true that they'd been able to drink at the Starlite long before they'd turned twenty-one, and everyone just looked the other way. Kids will be kids. The "Just Say No" and D.A.R.E. campaign never made inroads into their rural community.

"I turned twenty-one a few years ago, sweetheart." Shane laughed. "Besides, you know that's why he gets more traffic than you do from the locals. They prefer beer with their chicken wings and fries. Why don't you get a liquor license, Nellie?"

"Shane Curtis," she said, hands on her hips. "I happen to be the best restaurant in town, and at least I'm not stooping to doing anything illegal."

"You're the *only* restaurant in town." Shane leaned casually on the counter. "And if Buck Thompson is willing to look the other way if Lee lets eighteen-year-olds drink, then why not? It's sure not hurting his business any."

"It's just wrong, that's why not," Nellie replied, her eyes blazing.

Shane snorted. "Come off it. So Buck Thompson gets free drinks, and the guy who checks Lee's liquor license is shown a good time. It's the way the world works."

"Not my world," Nellie retorted. Dare was watching them, back and forth, like a tennis match.

"No?" Shane's smile was a small, cynical thing. "Then why do you hire kids under sixteen without work permits? If I remember right, little Joe Turner's just thirteen, isn't he? Wasn't he working behind your counter all summer?"

"That's different," Nellie told him after a moment's hesitation. Dare saw her jaw working. "And it's none of your business either."

"Uh-huh," Shane replied. "Pot. Kettle. Black. Ring a bell?"

Nellie was so angry she was turning red. "Shane, I want you—"

"Out of here, and never come back, I know, I know." He held his hands up in a warding-off gesture. "Don't get your panties in a bunch, all right?"

He slid off the stool, still smiling. "Be seeing you, Dare." He nodded in her direction and then strolled out the door, tucking his hands in his pockets.

"That kid." Nellie made a face. "Him and his brother—just like their father. Talk about pots and kettles."

"But it's true." Dare turned away from the door to look at Nellie. "Isn't it?"

Nellie stared at her and then sniffed. "There's true, and then there's true."

Dare stared back at her until Nellie averted her eyes, looking toward the kitchen as if she'd heard something there to draw her attention.

"I wouldn't want the Starlite's clientele anyway." Nellie narrowed her eyes as she looked at Shane standing outside. "And you know, I wouldn't put it past Lee to hire someone underage to work for him, now that Honey Moore's got herself in trouble."

"What happened to Honey?" Dare asked, referring to Lee's former often-sought-after waitress.

"Little bit pregnant is what I hear," Nellie said in a stage-whisper. "Wouldn't surprise me that Lee himself is the daddy, but she didn't stick around long enough for us to find out, of course."

"Really?" Dare asked, but her interest turned toward the big picture window in the front of the restaurant. She saw Shane outside in front of Cougar's talking to Billy. He looked, except for his pale complexion, vigorously healthy standing there in his leather. She found herself thinking about what Cougar had said to Mike White, and then remembering the last time she'd talked to Nick. *He was with Shane that night.* She knew it was true. Her instincts were always right, and the only time she found herself in trouble was when she didn't follow them.

"That boy is nothing but trouble," Nellie said, following Dare's gaze.

Dare nodded, but she was smiling. It was a genuine smile, but not without bitterness. She had an idea.

Chapter Five

Dare guided the Jeep up into the driveway and cut the engine. She sighed as she pocketed the keys and looked up at the house. It was a typical two-story white farm house with black shutters. The paint was chipping and in some places it was coming off in long strips, as if someone had stood there and peeled it.

There was a barn farther back on the property. It had been red once, but it had turned gray from the weather and time. There were acres of unused land behind the house. It had once been for farming, but her father, unlike his father before him, was no farmer.

Jay Chandler had decided that there was more money in business and had gone to Babson College in Boston, where he had met her real mother, Darlene. She'd still been in high school, but after she'd graduated they were engaged, and when Jay had received his B.A. in Accounting, they were married.

Dare knew her father had shifted gears after a year or so of accounting, deciding to go into architecture. He went back for a second degree and now owned his own, very profitable, business. Her mother had never had a career, and Dare could remember her always being there—until the cancer. She'd died when Dare and Nick were only five. Julia had come seven years later and a lifetime too late. No one could ever fill their mother's place.

The house was surrounded by unused land, most of it trees and woods. Even the barn went unused, except for storage. Her father's black Range Rover was parked in front of the garage.

Dare sighed again, taking in her surroundings, wondering what she'd been trying to prove, moving to Chicago, becoming a cop. She'd tried so hard to put her small town life behind her, to forget, except for Christmas and a few other holidays, that it even existed. She'd worked so hard to become good at what she did, eager to earn her stripes, work her way up to detective. She wanted to prove to everyone—her father, Julia, Shane, the whole damned town—that she was more than just...

Just Nick's twin sister.

Stop! She snapped at the voice and it was gone.

Funny thing was, no one had ever even come to see her out in Chicago. Not even Nick. Not once. He'd been too busy practicing law in California, not even in the same time zone anymore, a million miles away. Her life, her work on the force, had seemed so important at the time, as if she were building something, proving something. And now...

Now nothing seemed to matter anymore. Not even the suspension, the investigation, the fact that her job was hanging by a thread.

Not anymore.

Quit! She told the voice, but the thought remained, just like the blinking light on her cell. The message was from Jack. She took her phone out of her pocket, flipping it open and pressing buttons. His voice came out of the speaker.

"Dare...I keep trying you. I called your house four times. Would you please pick up the phone? I don't want...I don't want to have to tell you this in a message.

Dare...listen...I'm sorry. I did everything I could. I told you to fly back, defend yourself. I

tried...but...well, they...they decided to let you go...That's it, kid. Your career's over. I'm sorry. You were one of the good ones..."

She flipped the phone closed again, trying to shake off his words as she got out of the car, not bothering with the lock. She walked up the wooden stairs, avoiding the gaping hole on the third that was always getting a promise from someone about repair, and went into the house.

"Dad?" She hung up her coat in the closet in the kitchen. She was getting ready to do battle. "Julia?" She toed off her shoes. The bag she'd carried in from Cougar's rested on the kitchen table.

"In here," her father called from the living room. She took a deep breath, crossed her fingers, and kissed them. *We used to do that when we were kids, remember when—*

She quickly cut it off, and her afterthought was that she was getting damned good with those mind-scissors. She headed in the direction of his voice.

Stopping in the doorway, she saw her father sitting in the armchair—*Papa bear's chair. Remember—* SNIP The thought was gone. Her father was reading the paper. Her stepmother was on the couch, legs curled under her, reading glasses propped precariously on her pert nose, reading a John Grisham novel.

"I have something to discuss with you." Dare sat in a chair across from them—it was a neutral zone. She waited for her father to fold the paper and Julia to mark her place in her book, letting her reading glasses fall to hang on a thin silver chain around her neck.

I've been fired." Dare said it out loud for the first time, trying not to hear the quaver in her own voice. "I won't be going back to Chicago."

"What?" Julia cried.

"I'd like to stay here," Dare continued. "For a while."

"What?!" Her stepmother was much louder this time. "I'm not hearing right. I can't be."

"Julia—"

"Jay, talk to your daughter," Julia cried, her eyes wide.

Her father sat up tall in his chair. "Dare, what in the hell happened?"

"I was fired," she repeated flatly.

"We're not deaf!" Julia's mouth drew in tight and then she spoke again. "Don't be a smart ass!"

It was Dare's turn to stare with an open mouth. She had never heard Julia use profanity. Ever.

"*Why* did you get fired, Dare?" Her father asked the obvious, trying as always to mediate.

"It's a long story." She swallowed hard, wondering just how she was going to explain it.

"Then you better start talking," Julia snapped.

"It was a set up. Retaliation..." Dare began, wondering if this was how every criminal in jail who actually hadn't committed a crime felt when he professed his innocence. She didn't know how to go on, how to let them down, how to disappoint them in a way that wouldn't hurt so much. She looked at her father. He was watching

her, but she couldn't read his expression. She couldn't stop the memory of his arms around her in the middle of the night, his voice choked with emotion, telling her that everything was going to be okay. Do you cry? She wondered, looking back at him. Do you?

She took a deep breath and launched into the whole story, telling it from beginning to end, including the horribly embarrassing truth about being taken in by Stephen, the video, everything. When she was done, the silence was deafening, but she couldn't look at them. She couldn't face their pain any more than she could face her own.

"So what are you going to do now?" her father finally asked.

"I don't know." She sighed, shaking her head. "If it's okay with you, I'd like to stay here for a while until figure that out..."

"Jay this is ridiculous," Julia protested, turning to her husband. "These aren't children, they're grownups! First Nick, now Dare..."

"Julia, stop." Her father held up his hand. "Dare, you're welcome to stay."

"Well, I want her to pay rent," her stepmother mumbled, arms crossed as she sat back in her chair.

"That's fine," Dare replied, waving Julia's comment away.

"No," her father sighed. "You don't—"

"No, I want to," Dare insisted, glancing at her father. She didn't look directly at Julia, but she could feel the heat of her gaze. "I'll find a way."

Her father's eyes were sad, and she could barely stand the weight of the disappointment in them. "I'm so sorry this happened, Dare..."

She nodded, feeling a lump in her throat. “So am I.”

“It’s been a hell of a year.” Her father sighed as he picked up his paper. Julia sighed as well as she propped her glasses back on her nose and removed her bookmark.

The subject was clearly closed.

Dare sat there for a moment, wondering at their reaction. She had expected the disappointment, but she’d also expected anger, questions, protestations. Instead, there was almost nothing. Just this silence.

They don't care anymore, she realized, and the thought hurt. Nick's gone, and I'm all they have left...and I'm just not enough to get excited about.

She trimmed the rest of those thoughts neatly with her mind-scissors and her only afterthought was that she’d think about it later. A modern day Scarlett O'Hara.

* * * *

The Starlite was much smaller than it looked from outside. There was a bar along one wall, backed by single, triangular shaped mirrors. Like any bar, the place was filled with tables for patronage, with several pool tables at the other end. The usual Strohs and Budweiser decorative mirrors hung on the walls, and lamps hung low above the pool tables. An old Wurlitzer jukebox stood in one corner gathering dust and was often frequented by Grady, Lee Williams’ cat.

Dare stepped inside and was instantly nostalgic and missing Nick. She hadn’t been in here often—a handful of times, really, because this was her brother’s haunt and he hated her tagging after him—but it was a place that, for her, was completely and utterly Nick.

"If you miss one of those stalls, I'm going to hang you up by your ears, Sam!"

A laugh.

Dare whirled toward the direction of the voice.

"Well, hey there." Lee Williams stepped out of the shadows and into the dim light of the bar. "What can I do for you?"

" I..." Dare hesitated. Lee was a big man, formidable, with a round face and mustache. "I saw your sign out there."

Lee raised his eyebrows, pulling his ponytail over his shoulder. Dare found it ironic that forty or fifty years ago he might have been kicked out of the same kind of establishment he now owned just for the length of his hair.

"You did, huh?" Lee hitched his pants up, but his large belly, mostly accumulated from consuming too much of what he sold, still hung over his belt.

"Yes." She sat on one of the red upholstered bar stools. "I'd like to apply for the cocktail waitress position."

"You would?" His eyes flicked over her in the low light. She nodded again. "Well, I tell you, I ain't—" He paused and moved closer to her, squinting a little. "You're Nick Chandler's sister, ain'tcha?"

Again, she nodded.

He let out a low whistle. "Yeah. Resemblance is amazing." He leaned his elbows on the bar and looked at her. "Ever waitressed before?"

"No," she admitted, wondering just how she was going to handle the work history questions. That was, if he didn't already know she'd been fired from her job in Chicago. Hell, the whole town probably knew already. "But I learn fast."

He laughed. "That's good." His eyes crinkled at the corners. "You any good at counting? Taking orders? Handling money?"

She nodded, brightening. "I worked as a cashier at Cougar's General Store a few summers. I can make change in my head, no problem."

He rubbed his chin, his brown eyes sharp and calculating as he looked at her. "For the life of me, I can't figure out why you're applying for this job. You know, the library over on Essex is looking for people to shelve books. I think that would suit you."

"Do I look like the bookish type?" Dare asked, surprised, tilting her eyes up at him.

He smiled. "Not exactly bookish, but you're not quite bar material, either."

"I want this job," she said firmly. "If I didn't think I could handle it, I wouldn't be applying for it."

"I don't know." He straightened up and pulled on one side of his mustache. "This job isn't all you have rolling around in that pretty head of yours, is it?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Oh I don't know..." Lee smiled. "Call it an intuition?"

"Do you question everyone who comes looking for a job like this?"

"Askin' why do you want to work here?" Lee conceded. "I'm pretty sure that's a legitimate job interview question."

She looked away from his dark eyes. *To lie or not to lie, and by the way, why are you here, Dare?*

SNIP

She told him the first thought that came into her head, and consoled herself that it was at least part of the truth.

"You knew my brother?" Dare asked. "Well, then you know what happened to him. He spent a lot of time here. I guess this is one way of being closer to him. And besides, my stepmother insists on me paying rent if I stay with them. So I need a job, and you're hiring."

"Okay," he said, scrutinizing her. "You're not telling the truth—at least not all of it. If you don't want to come clean with me, well, that's up to you, but I warn you, this is a real job."

Lee moved so he was in front of her, arms crossed. "You listen good, because I'm only going to say this once. You have to be able to make change and add pretty damn quick in your head. You'll be taking orders out there on the floor and I'll be back behind the bar. Job starts at four-thirty, but we don't get busy until six, but closing is two a.m. That's nine or ten hours, most of them on your feet. Pay is minimum wage plus tips. I wasn't kidding about having to be good at adding in your head, because you'll be responsible for all of the money you take in off the floor. If there's any missing it comes out of your own pocket. You got that?"

"Yeah," Dare said, watching him light a Winston. The smoke made a momentary screen between them.

He frowned at her and then sighed. "I gotta tell you, you're the finest piece of ass I've seen in here in ages."

She stared at him and he chuckled. "Even if you weren't as good looking as you are, you'd get the usual hassle out there." He nodded toward the empty tables. "But with

your looks, you may have more than a bit of trouble. You know what a bar clientele is like?"

She nodded, trying not to smile and remind him what she'd done for a living just a few short weeks ago, but he continued. "They ain't particular about their language or manners here. I don't stand for no fighting, and I take care of things when they get out of hand, but a little bragging and a lot of drinking don't hurt us none. They're just words. You get my meaning?"

Again, she nodded.

"Okay." He set his cigarette in an ashtray, a replica of a Buffalo nickel. "So if you get this job, you won't be running to me every time you hear a little profanity, or get a few obscenities thrown at you along with a hand groping your ass every now and then, right?"

"Right." She'd worked for a year in vice—the thought that this guy believed she might have any problems handling herself in some rural backwoods bar made her want to laugh, but she bit back all of the sarcastic replies on the tip of her tongue.

"That's about it. Are you still interested?" he asked, his mouth set in a stern line.

"I still want the job," she said firmly. "I don't scare off that easy."

A ghost of a smile flickered over his features and then he sighed, looking at her as she stood up. "Well, you'll fill the outfit real nice." Then he did smile. "Write out this application." He pulled a piece of paper from under the bar and handed her a pen. She started to write and he watched her.

"Name fits you," he told her when she handed him the completed application.

"You sure got nerve, Dare. I'll call you."

"You do that," she said, and left him still smiling.

* * * *

Her life had not been so carefree since grade school. Dare's days vacillated between watching the soaps and game shows on T.V. and spending time out in the cemetery. She didn't leave the house much otherwise and she and Julia avoided each other during the day. Sometimes Dare escaped outside and took long walks when her programs were over.

Now Dare sat on the steps of the front porch, a tall glass of Kool-Aid beside her, feet braced against the railing, her back against the opposite railing. She was waiting for her father to come home. She hadn't done that since she was in grade school either, but she had done it every night for a week. Dare glanced at the sky, visible above the foliage across the road. It was growing darker, the sun snuggling behind the trees.

Must be around seven, she thought, but didn't have a watch and didn't feel like getting up to go look. She heard it before she saw it, but she knew it was him. The sound of the Range Rover's big tires on dirt was distinct. She'd been listening for Cody, Mr. Cooper's Irish Setter. Her father passed the Cooper farm on his way home, and Cody always barked when he went by. She remembered, as her father pulled into the driveway, that Cody had run off. It was a strange thing, according to Mr. Cooper, because Cody was always chained and his chain hadn't been broken, just unhooked. Strange. *Like someone had just come in and took him.* That's what he'd said.

Her father pulled the Range Rover past the Jeep and into the garage. Dare finished her Kool-Aid off in a big gulp and waited for him to come out of the side garage door.

She waited, but he didn't come.

She debated going in. He was probably just tinkering with the Range Rover's engine. He did that sometimes when he came home, usually a once-a-week routine to "check her juices," as he said. He usually went in and changed out of his suit before he started fooling around with oil and that kind of stuff, though. In fact, he always did.

Dare got up, brushing her jeans off, and headed for the garage. If he was checking the oil, Julia was going to have a fit. She decided to remind him about his clothes before he got something on them and she had to listen to Julia half the night.

"Dad?" she called, putting her hand on the doorknob. Her wrist turned, but the knob didn't. Her hand just slipped off. She tried it again. Locked. Strange. She moved past the flower bed planted alongside the garage and peeked around the corner. The Range Rover was parked, and she could hear the ticking of the engine as it cooled, but the hood wasn't up and her father wasn't there.

She stepped into the garage, the fading sunlight throwing shadows on the cement floor. The garage was as neat as ever, saws, rakes, and tools hung up on nails; screws, nails, nuts, and bolts all in baby food jars, tops nailed to the low beams and the jars screwed tightly into them. Two snowmobiles and the ATV Nick and their dad loved to play with during the summer were against the far wall. Everything in its place.

Dare moved toward the back wall, and she noticed the work room door open when she got to the front of the Range Rover. She breathed a small sigh. Almost had myself scared there, she thought. She was about to call out to him when she heard it.

She pressed herself against the back wall and from that angle she could see him sitting on the work bench. He was slumped over, his face buried in his arms, his sobs

muffled. In front of him, lined up on the work table, were boxes of ammunition, his .22 and a few, small rectangles of metal that glinted dully in the florescent light. Razor blades. Also in front of him was Nick's hockey uniform, his football helmet, and the basketball that they kept in the workroom.

"Oh my god," she mouthed, unsure of what to do, frozen. Her father, her *father* was crying, sobs that threatened to tear his heart from his chest. As she watched, he lifted his head, looking at the various articles he had assembled in front of him. Dare trembled. He touched the gun, the razor blades, a little tentative. He picked one up, watching it glint, playing the light off of it. Dare opened her mouth to scream.

Her father beat her to it. His scream was full of rage, and in one motion he knocked everything on the table to the floor. One box of ammunition broke open and shells rolled across the cement. Nick's helmet bounced once, rolled, and was still. The gun still lay in front of him.

"Fuck," he said looking down at it. Terrified, Dare looked at his face, and he looked old, not like her father at all. And he also looked scared—as scared as she felt. "Oh, fuck," he said again, his sobs starting all over as he leaned to pick up the helmet. He put it on his head and put his head back on the table.

Dare left.

She just made it to the garden before she was sick.

* * * *

The phone call came when she was least expecting it.

Dare had found some *Danger Mouse* reruns on the T.V. in the family room so, at two o'clock on a Friday afternoon, she sat sideways in the plush green armchair wearing her pink babydoll pajamas, her legs hung over the arm.

She had loaded herself with a bag of Doritos and a Dr. Pepper. She loved *Danger Mouse*. It had been Nick's favorite, and one of the mainstays of their childhood, along with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and X-Men. Nick used to think he was Wolverine, and would run around the house pretending to claw the furniture into submission. The thought came too fast for her to cut it off, and she closed her eyes against the familiar dull ache.

Danger Mouse reruns were a rare occurrence, she knew. Then again, she had been so busy with the soaps she hadn't paid much attention to what else was on in the day time. President Bush was discussing the nation's economy on all the major networks so Dare had done what most Americans do when the president talks on T.V.—switched stations.

She had not seen a cartoon in years, and watching one now, she found it to be even more ridiculous than she remembered, but still cute. She hadn't seen *Danger Mouse* since she was in fifth grade. *Not since Nick and I—SNIP*

The phone, the only one in the house, shrilled from the kitchen. Dare sighed, not moving the bag of Doritos from where they lay across her stomach, or the pop clutched between her thighs.

"Julia!" she called, waiting while the phone rang twice, three times. "Do you want me to get it?" No answer. Four, five...

Dare moved the stuff off her lap and headed out to the kitchen. She picked up the light blue phone, colored to match the wallpaper, off the wall. Julia and her father hadn't moved into the twenty-first century yet where cordless phones were the norm. At least it was a push-button and not a rotary dial, she thought with a smile.

"Hello?"

"Hi there. Can I speak with Dare Chandler, please?"

"This is she," Dare replied, recognizing the voice with a small smile. She crossed her fingers and pressed them against her lips.

"Dare, this is Lee Williams from over at the Starlite. You came in last week about a job?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Can you start tonight?"

Her exhilaration was almost electric. "What time?"

"Four-thirty."

"I'll be there."

"See you then."

Dare stared at the receiver until it began to make short, piercing blasts. Then she replaced it on the hook and leaned against the wall.

Since the episode with her father, she'd been a little shaky about leaving the house without checking on both of her parents. She'd found no traces of anything when she went back into the work room the next day, and her father was intact and normal—back to business as usual.

I got the job! She smiled at the absurdity of it. Two months ago, if someone had told her she would be ecstatic about getting a job in some bar, she would have laughed her head off. Now things had changed. It wasn't the most prestigious job in the world, but she didn't want it for prestige. It certainly didn't pay the best, but she wasn't out to make a fortune. She thought the job would suit its purpose very well. She went upstairs to get ready.

Chapter Six

"How're you doing, kid?"

Dare forced a smile as she sat on one of the stools at the bar, facing Lee.

"Just fine," she told him, relieved to be off her feet. The rest of the stools beside her were filled.

"Bullshit." He laughed. "But you'll get used to it."

"Bullshit." She smiled and wiggled her toes in her black heels. He laughed again, but all she could manage was a rueful smile.

"Well you got twenty minutes." He glanced at the clock before moving down the bar to take an order. "Catch a breath of fresh air if you want, but don't be wandering out there, okay?"

"Sure." She didn't move from where she was sitting, although it was too warm. She wasn't moving from this spot for the next twenty minutes if she could help it.

She'd never known the Starlite was so busy. The noise around her was an unbreakable wave of sound. Above her head, a color television blasted out a football game. The Detroit Lions were leading Dallas by seven and that miracle had everyone putting their two cents in.

Those not watching the game had acquired the use of the half a dozen pool tables at the far end of the bar. One guy stood at the old Pac-Man game in the far corner. He'd been there since she'd arrived and, she thought wryly, he was the only one in the place she hadn't served at least three times.

She'd wondered how it was possible for Lee to turn a profit in a small town like Larkspur, but she had no trouble now seeing how he managed it. There were about fifty

people in the bar, and day to day, they were all the same faces. He made his profits in the sheer volume of alcohol consumption.

She'd been working for three nights running, and she was developing a nasty blister on her right heel. It was the shoes. Although the heels were only about two inches, they still pinched, but nothing else went with the "uniform"—a black mini-skirt and a plain white blouse. Over this, she wore a black vest with tiny gold stars on it, the back of which said "Starlite" in gold letters.

A hand came down on her shoulder and she whirled around. Sam Lewis, who was what Lee called his "clean-up man," was smiling at her.

"Hi, Sam." She smiled back, glancing past him toward the door. More arrivals. It was eight o'clock and still early for the parties. "Have a seat."

He shrugged, pointing to the man sitting in the seat next to her.

"Excuse me," Dare said to the guy with a brush cut. She'd never seen him in there before. "Would you mind moving so my friend can sit by me?"

The guy took a look at Sam, did a double-take, and then sneered. "You want to sit next to this feeb?"

Dare gasped, her eyes flashing. "Listen, I asked you a favor. Nicely. There's no need to insult my friend."

The guy snorted, picking up his beer. "Whatever, lady. If your taste in men runs to idiots, what is it to me, right?"

"Dumb hick asshole," Dare whispered as he walked by. She knew he heard her, by the way his eyes shifted, but he didn't turn back.

"I'm sorry, Sam," she apologized, patting the stool next to her. "He was a jerk."

He shrugged as he sat down, glancing over his shoulder. "Uh-Uh-I'm yuh-used to it."

She frowned. "I'm sorry for that, too."

"So, huh-huh-how is it guh-going?" He leaned forward to rest his elbow on the bar. His eyes were a shocking and beautiful blue as he looked at her.

"All right," she replied with a smile. "I'm getting used to the pace of things." She liked him, in spite of his stutter and the slow, jerky movements that frustrated Lee whenever Sam pulled a keg up front. He was sweet.

"How are you tonight?" she asked, just making conversation.

"I'm pretty guh-guh-good," he replied, looking shyly over at her.

"Good." Dare kept her eyes on the door. Her twenty minute break would be up soon.

"Huh-huh-have you seen Gruh-Grady?" Sam ran a hand through his dark, wiry, short-cropped hair.

"The cat?" Dare glanced at her feet. "No, I haven't tripped over it yet tonight."

"Are yuh-you looking for someone?" His eyes searching her face.

She looked over at him, startled. "No," she denied. "No one in particular."

"Oh." He stood up, shoving his hands into his pockets. "If you suh-see him, wuh-will you tuh-tell me?"

"Who?" Dare asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Gruh-Grady," Sam said, looking puzzled.

"Oh, yeah," Dare said, her face relaxing. "Sure, I will."

"Thuh-thanks," Sam said with a grateful smile.

"Can you get me another keg of Bud out here, Sam?" Lee called. Sam nodded, his motion slightly palsied and spastic, heading toward the back room with his leg dragging behind him.

"He likes you," Lee said when Sam had disappeared through the door next to the women's' bathroom.

"What?" Dare looked at Lee, who was wiping glasses with one of the towels he always had within reach.

"He likes you," Lee repeated. Dare shrugged. "I'm just saying...I'm glad you're nice to him."

She frowned. "You mean, unlike Mr. Brushcut over there?"

"Guys like him are a dime a dozen." Lee sighed. "Some kid who talks funny is some threat to their manhood? I don't get it."

"I don't either." Dare sighed, still looking towards the door.

"He's had it rough," Lee said, following her gaze. "Especially since Roy died."

"Who?" she asked.

"Sam," Lee said, filling two glasses of beer for someone out of the nozzle. "His father, Roy, up and died last month. Sam's been pretty lost without him."

"It wasn't the bobcat, was it?" Dare asked.

"No." Lee shook his head. "Heart attack, most likely. He was my age. We were in the army together."

Dare raised her eyebrows. "You were in the army?"

"Yes, ma'am." He winked at her. "Roy and I met when we were stationed in Haiti together."

"Haiti?" she frowned. "We have troops in Haiti?"

"Troops all over the world, darlin'." He smiled. "This was back when Papa Doc was some sorta threat."

Dare looked him over. "Bet you looked good in a uniform."

"All the girls thought so." He grinned, opening the little dishwasher under the bar where he washed glasses. "So Sam's all by himself now. I keep an eye on him as much as I can."

"What about his mother?"

Lee shook his head. "She died when he was born."

"What happened?"

"The baby came out wrongways. Feet first." Lee paused to draw another beer for someone. "They had to yank on him hard, Roy said, practically twisted his little head off getting him out."

They were quiet for a moment. Dare asked, "So she died during childbirth?"

"No," Lee replied. "She died a few days after they came home from the hospital."

"Of what?"

"Embolism," he said, shaking his head.

Dare looked at him, horrified. "Oh my god... and the father was left all alone with a newborn?"

"Yeah," Lee agreed. "They got real close, just the two of them. That's why Sam's still pretty broke up about his dad."

She nodded, feeling tears stinging her eyes. "I know how he feels."

"I think he's a little lonely, you know?" Lee went on, not noticing. "And, as I started out to tell you, he really likes you... from what I can see, it's heading for a full-fledge crush."

"Oh, come on—"

Lee pointed and nodded toward the old Wurlitzer. "If you hadn't noticed, Grady hasn't moved from the juke all night."

Dare looked, and sure enough, the old Tom was stretched out on top of it, eyes closed, purring and contented.

She smiled, shaking her head. "That's kinda sweet."

"Yeah," Lee said. "I guess he has to think up topics of conversation, but he's a good kid. A little slow up here." Lee tapped his forehead. "But he's sure not lacking here." Lee's hand covered his heart.

"I know," she said, smiling. "Well, it's past time for me to get back to work, boss."

"Hey, Dare," Lee called as she headed toward one of the tables. "I know you're probably not interested, but...don't be...mean to him."

"I won't," she assured him. "What can I get you?" Dare directed her question to the guy who had just sat down at the table behind her.

"Dare!" Jake's eyes widened when he saw her and widened even further when his gaze met her hemline. "What are you doing here?"

"Working." She poised her pen above her pad. "What can I get you?"

Jake flipped a strand of long dark hair out of his eyes. "What happened to your job in Chicago?"

She shrugged, trying to ignore the twist in her belly at the mention of her former job. "It sort of disappeared."

"Kind of a step down, isn't it?" Jake looked around the Starlite and then back at her. His hair had fallen over his left eye again, but he didn't bother with it this time.

"It's temporary," she explained. "Keeps my mind off...things."

"Ah." He grimaced and nodded. "Hey, listen...about Nick..."

She waved the question away. It was the last thing she wanted to talk about, especially here. "What can I get you?"

He ignored her question, asking instead, "So what are you going to do after this, then?"

"I don't know," she replied honestly. Whenever she thought of her future now, it looked blank to her, like static on the television. There was nothing there. "Any ideas?"

"You could always come work at Vikings with me and Shane." He winked at her as he leaned back in his chair.

She laughed. "I'm hardly qualified."

"Oh come on, you could drop an engine with the best of us," he reminded her with a smile. The memory of working on cars with Nick and Shane and the rest of the gang made her both sad and nostalgic. She had rebuilt the transmission on Shane's Mustang herself.

"That was a million years ago," she said, reminding them both of that fact. "I don't remember the difference between a torque wrench and a screwdriver anymore."

Jake scoffed, blowing a stray piece of dark hair out of his eyes. "Most girls don't even know what a torque wrench is."

“Most girls didn’t grow up in Larkspur.”

He sighed. “Man, I miss those days.”

“I guess life goes on...” Dare bit her lip, hard, not wanting to remember the things that were coming back.

Jake leaned forward, hair falling in his face again, his eyes softening along with his voice. “Dare, I really am sorry...”

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. “Thanks.”

“I really wish we hadn’t...” Jake’s voice trailed off and when she raised her eyebrows at him in inquiry, his mouth snapped shut. He didn’t finish the sentence, but she noticed he glanced toward the door.

“Hadn’t what?” Dare prompted.

“I just...” Jake shrugged. “I wish he’d been with us that night. Here, I mean.”

She cocked her head at him, eyes narrowing. “Wasn’t he?”

“No.” He shook his head, his eyes meeting hers. She was good at knowing when someone was lying—it was a skill cops developed quickly—and she could have sworn Jake was telling the truth. That was maddening, considering where Nick had claimed he was going that night, and she couldn’t reconcile those two things.

Jake wasn’t lying...but she was sure Shane was. Chris, too, for that matter. She remembered how restless Chris had been that morning she saw him at Nick’s grave. Of course, no one was going to tell her the truth. They were hiding something...something. But what?

“Earth to Dare?” Jake waved a hand at her, looking bemused.

“Sorry.” She smiled sheepishly. “What can I get you, Jake?”

"Strohs," he said. "And a shot of Jack."

"Coming up." Dare turned away and headed toward the bar. "Stroh's," she told Lee. "And a shot of Jack."

"In a minute." He was just opening the breather cap on the keg. Dare leaned against the side of the bar, waiting.

"You okay?" Lee asked, and then swore as foam came out of the spout. The second was better. Dare didn't answer him for a minute. The guy she was standing next to was peering at the front of her blouse, his gaze then slipping below the line of her skirt, and then up again. She had the urge to take him down. She could, she knew—two maneuvers and he'd be on the ground. She fought the impulse, knowing her anger wasn't about him, and turned to Lee.

"Hey, can I ask you something?" Dare asked as she put the drinks on her tray.

"Sure." Lee raised an eyebrow at her.

"The night...Nick died..." She hated saying it out loud. She hadn't mentioned Nick to Lee or vice versa since the day she'd applied for the job. "Was he in here that night? Do you remember?"

"No." Lee shook his head sadly. "Cops asked me that, too. I don't know what he was doing out at the cemetery that night, Dare. Wish I could help you."

Was her motivation so obvious, she wondered. Did everyone know what she was doing, hanging around town, asking questions? Did everyone know that Buck Thompson had cut her off from any official information, that she'd been suspended and subsequently fired? No one talked about it, at least to her face, but she had a feeling they all knew.

She put Jake's drinks on the table and waited for him to dig through his pocket for the cash. Out of habit, her eyes turned toward the door and she saw Shane standing in the doorway. The sight of him made her stomach flip, and while she noted he was flanked on either side by Chris and Billy, her eyes didn't leave Shane. He hadn't been in the Starlite since she'd started work, and the sight of him now was so surprising to her that if she'd been carrying drinks at that moment, she probably would have dropped them.

"Hey, sweet thing!" Someone calling her—she knew the tone. She gave Jake a smile as she accepted his cash, moving toward the sound of the beckoning voice. She kept an eye on Shane, her thoughts and feelings mixed, watching him walk into the place like he owned it and everyone in it.

"Hey, Lee!" Shane called. Lee waved. Like old friends, Dare thought. He spent a lot of time here...still. That much was clear.

"Waitress. Hey you, with the long legs," the voice called again. She turned toward the big guy with the Red Wings cap. He motioned to her.

"What can I get you?" she asked, approaching him.

"You." He grinned. Clearly he thought he was being funny...and original.

"To drink." She rolled her eyes.

"You." His grin spread as he leaned back in his chair and put his arms behind his head. Dare had that impulse again, saw herself knocking his chair back, even saw the shock and fear on the man's face before it went over...

"I don't have time for this." Dare sighed, shaking her head to clear it of the image. "We're busy, if you hadn't noticed?"

"Gimme another Bud, doll," he said, putting his chair back down.

She threaded her way through the tables back to the bar. When Lee handed the bottle of Bud to her, she went back to give Red Wings cap his beer and collect her money, but out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Shane standing at one of the pool tables.

"You gave me a dollar too much," Red Wings cap said, holding out a crumpled dollar bill.

Dare's attention remained on Shane. He was having a heated conversation with the guy with the buzz cut who had moved from the bar and was now playing pool. Jake had joined them, she noticed, but stood talking to Chris and Billy, out of Shane's way.

"I don't want to short change a pretty thing like you. You busy later?"

"Afraid so." She pocketed the dollar.

As she watched, Shane, with the same cool expression on his face, picked up a cue stick and belted Buzzcut across his mid-section. Dare was on her way over before he hit the floor.

She glanced at the bar as she made her way through tables, ignoring people asking for refills. Lee was watching, looking calm, but his hands were out of sight, and she wondered if they were reaching for a weapon. She had reached instinctively for hers and, of course, found not only no gun, but no holster either. Everyone else paid no attention at all. The guy with the buzz cut lay crumpled on the floor, holding his stomach and gasping.

"Out." Shane ordered, leaning back against the pool table, crossing his arms, and looking down at Buzzcut. "Now."

"Are you okay?" Dare knelt beside the guy with the buzzcut, reaching out to help him up.

He looked at her, eyes dazed, coughing and gasping, but shrugged her off. Dare shot Shane a dirty look, standing and reaching her hand out to Buzzcut anyway.

"Fine," he wheezed, getting to his feet and ignoring Dare's outstretched hand. "I'm fine, I was just leaving,"

Dare turned to Shane, her voice shaking with anger. "I don't know who the hell you think you are, but where I come from, that was assault with a deadly weapon."

"Last I heard, you're not a cop anymore." Shane raised an eyebrow at her and Dare felt her whole body turn cold. Word got around fast in a small town, didn't it? "Besides, you come from the same place I do, sweetheart. And the last time I checked, you don't have any authority around here."

"You want to fight?" Dare struggled to keep her voice toned down. "Then let's go."

Shane smirked, shaking his head. "Same old Dare."

"You think I couldn't take you?"

"You'd give it the old college try, I'm sure." He laughed. "Rack 'em, Chris," he said over his shoulder.

Dare blazed at him. "You'd better start showing more respect for Starlite's customers."

"I don't hear the owner complaining." Shane's gaze swept up her outfit as he turned back to face her. "Look, Dare, suffice to say this guy is a Grade A asshole, all right? Trust me on this."

She looked over at Buzzcut as he started to stand, remembering what he'd said to Sam. "He still deserves the same respect as every other customer here—especially from the likes of you."

Shane's eyes narrowed and one hand clenched into a fist. She waited for it, anticipating. If he made the first move, gave the slightest hint toward violence...

"If you weren't Nick's sister, I swear—" he murmured, letting his fist relax with a sigh.

She smiled grimly. "I told you—you wanna fight, let's go."

His jaw clenched but he didn't move toward her.

Dare smirked. "Wouldn't want to end up in jail like your big brother, now would you?"

Shane glanced around. A few were watching, but she knew most were listening and pretending not to see. They knew he was dangerous when provoked. Dare knew it, too—in spite of her training, in spite of her years on the force, she was still trembling. She blamed it on the adrenaline.

"Later," he told her, his jaw working.

She turned to Buzzcut, who was putting on his jacket. "This table is free for you to use."

Shane opened his mouth to protest, but Buzzcut interrupted him. "Thanks, but I think I've had enough pool for one night."

"Aww, you lost that one, Princess." Shane sounded almost affectionate. The old nickname made her head snap toward him. *How old were we? Ten? Twelve? Nick used to sound the trumpets and Shane would pretend to roll out the red carpet—SNIP*

She smiled grimly. "I think we still have a score to settle."

"Do we?" He smiled back, his gaze moving down her face to the not inconsiderable V of her blouse. Dare flushed as if his eyes were burning her with their heat and when his gaze shifted back to her face, she felt his focus and attention on her completely.

"Don't we?" She felt her tone melting, morphing from her earlier, angrier one into something softer. He took a step toward her and she didn't move back, letting him fill her space.

"Always got something to prove, don't you?" he murmured, his eyes never leaving hers.

"I intend to," she agreed, tilting her head and giving him a slow, seductive smile. "One way or another."

His gaze moved to her mouth when she licked her lips and she thought she heard his breath pull in slightly when she let herself lean into him for a moment.

Then he took a quick step back, mumbling, "You're something else," as he unzipped his leather, shaking his head. He frowned and glanced toward her again. "When did you start working here, anyway?"

"Couple days ago," she replied, ignoring Chris' look of surprise as she turned and slid up onto the edge of the pool table. She saw Shane noticing when she crossed her legs, her hemline riding dangerously high. "Where've you been?"

"Why, you been looking for me?" Shane asked, turning back to his friends. The three of them—Billy, Chris and Jake—just stood there watching, cue sticks in hand. "I *said*, rack 'em, Chris."

Chris moved slowly toward the table, reaching into pockets and rolling balls onto the green surface.

"Maybe." She tilted her eyes up at Shane, noting his gaze moving up her legs. "So, where were you?"

He shrugged his leather off, tossing it onto a chair and moving back toward her. She let him come close—too close—leaning against the pool table beside her, his mouth close to her ear. He whispered, "Hunting."

She caught her breath, keeping it shallow, and looked sideways at him. "Seems like you haven't stopped."

He took a step back and smiled. "I never do."

"What were you hunting?" she inquired. "It's not deer season."

"It's not Dare season either," he replied with a wink. "And since when have I paid attention to the DNR?"

"Poaching?"

"Call it what you want." He shrugged. "Anyway, I wasn't looking for deer."

"So, what were you looking for?" She lifted her eyes to his, watchful. "A bobcat?"

"Not me." His gaze never wavered. "The Keystone Cops got that one under control, right?"

She smirked. "I hear Buck Thompson's up for re-election."

"Oh the cynicism." He held his hand over his heart. "What happened to our naïve little princess?"

She rolled her eyes. "I was never as innocent as anyone thought I was."

"That much I believe." His smile was slow, knowing, and he winked as he picked up his cue stick.

"You're not going to tell me what you were hunting for, are you?"

"Sure." He reached out to line up the cue ball, glancing at her as she turned toward him, still sitting on the edge of the table. "When you tell me what you were fired for."

She didn't miss a beat. "You first."

"What, don't you trust me, Princess?" He laughed, aiming the stick and making a solid hit, scattering pool balls in all directions.

"Feh!" She shrugged, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "I know you."

The emotion in his eyes was warm. "You seem to think you do."

Lee whistled and motioned for Dare. She nodded and waved, sliding off the table. "Got to get back to work."

"Maybe I'll see you around," Shane called as she started to walk away. She glanced over her shoulder at him. He was watching her retreating form with great interest. The eyes of a hunter, she thought. It was definitely a useful trait in a man, especially this one.

She shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe."

"Are you okay, Duh-Dare?" Sam asked when she reached the bar, putting his hand on her arm. She smiled at him, but her stomach was tilting sideways. For some reason, being around Shane always did that to her.

"I'm fine," she told him.

"I swear to god, if you ever pull something like that again, I'll kill you myself," Lee said in a low voice, his dark eyes flashing.

Dare gave him a slow, steady look, but he didn't back down. "I didn't notice anyone else doing anything," she snapped. "I thought you took care of fights?"

"Not those kind." He shook his head. "You've got a lot to learn. Situations like that don't get dangerous unless they're interfered with."

"It looked pretty dangerous for the other guy," she scoffed. "Or do you always make those kinds of exceptions for Shane Curtis?"

"Don't interfere, Dare. I mean it."

She didn't reply. She didn't want to lose this job.

"Huh-he's dangerous." Sam's brow furrowed as he looked at her.

"Fine." She turned away from him. "Next time, I'll let someone get killed, okay?"

Sam caught up with her. "Uh-are you sh-sh-*sure* you're uh-okay?" His blue eyes were filled with concern and, Dare noted, something deeper.

She sighed and swallowed around something in her throat. "Don't worry about me, Sam."

Shane watched her from the pool table while Chris was taking a shot. She felt his gaze, like a heat, following her.

What am I doing? What am I getting myself into?

She touched Sam's hand. "I can take care of myself."

* * * *

Dare slipped her key into the lock and opened the door. Julia had taken to locking the door in the past few weeks, and it was strange to use a key.

She yawned, kicking off her shoes in the darkened kitchen, the only light a luminous green from the clock on the microwave. She threw her jacket over a chair and opened the refrigerator. The pitcher of Kool-Aid was sitting between the milk and a four pack of wine coolers and Dare grabbed it.

We must have consumed gallons of this, she thought, getting herself a glass. Between the ages of six and sixteen, Kool-Aid had topped even Pepsi or Coke in *their* taste tests.

Nick used to— SNIP

She poured herself a glass in the greenish glow of the clock.

"Do you know what time it is?"

Dare gasped, whirling around, her heart beating fast against her throat. She lost her grip on the plastic pitcher and strawberry Kool-Aid flooded the linoleum.

"You scared me!" Dare cried.

Julia flipped on the kitchen light and Dare squinted against the brightness. She groped in the cupboard under the sink, taking out rags and beginning to mop up the Kool-Aid. She placed the almost empty pitcher on the counter and the pink-stained rags in the sink.

"It's two thirty in the morning, do you know that?" Julia sat on a kitchen chair.

Dare leaned against the counter, arms folded across her chest, waiting.

"Patty White let it slip about you working at the Starlite today," Julia went on. "I didn't even know what she was talking about! Who told you you could go work in some sleazy bar?"

"I'm think I'm old enough to make my own decisions," Dare told her. "I can work anywhere I want."

"Not while you're living under my roof!" Julia spat. Dare watched her light a cigarette—another recent habit, or rather, an old one taken up again. "Why didn't you tell us you were working there?"

"Why bother?" Dare ran a tired hand across her eyes. "You don't listen to me anyway."

There was a moment of silence.

"Do you want to go to hell?" Julia asked, her voice flat. "It's certainly not a Christian place to work. I want you to quit tomorrow."

"Oh my god!" Dare pushed away from the sink.

"Don't you take the Lord's name in vain!"

"I'm not eight years old anymore!" Dare hissed. "Just stay out of my life! You've shut Nick out of your life, why don't you just shut me out, too?"

"That was uncalled for." Julia's cigarette winked. "I care about you, Dare. The Starlite isn't the place for someone in our family to be working. I *worry* about you."

Dare watched her stab the half-finished cigarette out into the ashtray sitting on the kitchen table. Dare closed her eyes and an image of Nick emerged sitting at that very table, in that very spot, and she winced.

"You don't ask about me or my life." Dare met Julia's eyes. "Maybe if you were really interested, really *worried* about me, you would have known a week ago where I was working, but you're not. You're worried, all right—about yourself, and what this town is going to think about *you* having a daughter who works at the Starlite."

"Look at you!" Julia hissed. "You look like a streetwalker in that outfit! Are you sure it wasn't true, what they fired you for? Were you turning tricks, Dare? Were you?"

"Will you listen to yourself?" Dare blinked in hurt surprise. "Let's get something straight. I'm not quitting this job. Period. End of discussion."

"It certainly is *not* the end of the discussion!"

Dare turned away from her and started toward the stairs.

"I won't have you working there! Dare, did you hear me? Get back here!"

Dare went up the stairs and she didn't look back.

* * * *

Slanted shadows from her half-open bedroom door made lines of sun on the wall. Dare stood and looked at it, reading *Murphy's Law*. Somehow she never got past the first sentence. She found herself standing here a lot lately, just outside his door.

Anything that can go wrong will anything that can go wrong will anything that can go wrong will anything—over and over, the same sentence.

Her hand trembled on the doorknob. The scene had the same, surrealistic quality of her dream. Her hand felt disconnected, her heart throbbed in her throat and the world was somehow tilting sideways. She started to turn the doorknob.

the holes where his eyes had been... looked like he got himself caught up in a meat grinder... the holes... looked inside out... the blood...

The dreams continued. Night after night, he came to her, sightless, begging her to help him, do something, *do something!*

Her hand dropped away, and she backed up until she felt the wall behind her. When she turned away from the door, she tasted her tears.

Chapter Seven

"Gu-gu-guess who?" Sam asked, leaning against the bar.

Dare glanced at him. "Two Millers, Lee...what's that, Sam?"

Sam nodded toward the door, his face screwed up, looking like he had bitten into something very sour. "Lu-lu-look whose huh-here."

She turned her head toward the door. Shane was making his way toward a table—alone. She checked her watch. Seven was early for him.

"Here you go." Lee handed her two beers. She put them on her tray.

"Don't worry," she told Sam with a smile. "I can handle him."

Dare set the beers on the table of the two women who'd ordered them, and then she started toward Shane's table.

"Well, here comes the Princess." Shane leaned back in his chair as she approached. "I figured you'd have run out of here with your tail between your legs by now, fraternizing with the likes of us."

"No such luck." Her eyes flicked over him, recognizing the words he threw back at her from their conversation the night before. "I'm tougher than you give me credit for."

"No doubt." Shane inclined his head toward her. "Nick always said you were hard as nails."

She felt her jaw tighten at his words. Whenever anyone mentioned Nick, it felt like someone had kicked her in the stomach.

"So, I hear you've been hunting on Native land again."

His eyes widened and now it was he who looked like he'd been punched in the gut. "Who told you that?"

Dare shrugged. "I overhear things." So she had asked Lee about Shane's hunting excursions and he had been more forthcoming than she imagined. She wasn't going to tell Shane that.

"So do I," he replied, recovering. "Where's your gun and your badge, officer?"

"Way to change the subject." Dare rolled her eyes, trying to cover the pain. "So how's your brother? Still in jail?"

He shook his head. "You really hate me, don't you?"

Dare shrugged. "I don't know. I suppose I would—if I ever gave it any thought."

"Gimme a beer," he said with a sigh.

"What do you want?"

"World peace? Win the lotto? Nick alive again?" He met her eyes and she frowned.

"Very funny." She balanced her tray against her hip. Dare felt something constrict in her chest when she looked into his eyes but she ignored it. She almost felt sorry for him.

What am I getting into? SNIP

"I'll take you then." His gaze moved over the front of her blouse. "Do you come in a bottle?"

"I don't know, I never tried," she replied smartly.

Shane did smile then. "Give me a Stroh's," he said, admitting defeat.

She turned away from him but he reached out, his fingers brushing her back, tugging on the edge of her vest. "Come keep me company during your break?"

"Maybe." She shrugged. He nodded and she moved away.

"Strohs," she told Lee, turning back to look across the tables, meeting Shane's eyes. Every time she looked at him, she saw Nick's face, heard Nick's voice, and the memories were sharp and clearer than ever.

She'd hated Shane Curtis for as long as she could remember, and now he was just a reminder of her brother. Nick had known how she felt and did his best to keep them apart. He hated conflict, and couldn't stand the sparks that flew every time they were in the same room together. She wondered, now, if Nick ever knew the real reason she hated Shane. The fact that he wasn't the world's most outstanding citizen had always been a good enough cover.

Until now. *But what's the real reason. Come on, Dare, fess up! You were Nick's sister, but Shane was Nick's best friend and you—*SNIP

"Here you go, Dare." Lee handed her the beer.

"I could use a break." She balanced the beer on her tray. He glanced behind him at the Strohs wall clock.

"Twenty minutes." Lee shook his head, looking over at Shane who was leaning back in his chair watching them, hands laced behind his head.

"Du-du-Dare?" Sam asked from his usual spot at the end of the bar. She looked at him, waiting. He opened his mouth a few times, looking at her, and there was something in his bright blue eyes that made her uncomfortable with its intensity.

"What, Sam?" she asked with a sigh, impatient.

"Nuh-never muh-mind." He shook his head, eyes downcast. "It was nothing."

Dare glanced over where Shane was waiting, and then sighed again, slipping onto a bar stool next to Sam. "I'm sorry. It was something. What?"

“Uh-I... have something.” He looked up at her shyly, and then took something out of his pants pocket. It was a necklace, something on a long leather string. “It was muh-my mother’s.”

“Oh.” Dare watched as he held it up. She cradled it in her hand. It looked like it had been carved out of wood. She turned it over, seeing a face staring back at her, a man’s face with wild white eyes and hair and rows of sharp teeth. Gasping, she drew her hand back as if it burned.

“It’s a druh-dream eater,” Sam said with a smile. “I know it luh-looks scary, but its guh-good magic. It protects yuh-you.”

“From what?” She made a face as she looked at it spinning at the end of the string.

Sam made a gesture, as if he wanted to put it over her head. “Nightmares... you said you wuh-were having buh-bad dreams.”

“Well... thanks.” She let him put it around her neck, vaguely remembering mentioning something about her dreams about Nick. When she looked down at the figure, she shivered and tucked it into her blouse so she wouldn’t have to look at it. It was strangely warm against her skin.

“Yuh-you’re welcome.” He gave her another shy smile. Jack was watching them, polishing glasses. Dare smiled over at him and then leaned in and kissed Sam’s cheek.

“You’re very sweet.”

Balancing her tray, she wound her way through tables. Behind her, Sam’s eyes followed her toward Shane, who greeted Dare with a smile.

“Here.” She set the beer on the table.

"Have a seat." Shane patted his lap. She sat in the chair across from him.

"So, have you broken any laws since I saw you last night?" Dare asked, crossing her legs. Her skirt rose invitingly up and Shane's eyes stayed glued to her hemline.

"Nothing too serious," he replied. "So what was that all about? You and the palsied kid?"

Dare glanced over at Sam. He was watching them. "Nothing."

"Looked like something to me."

She shook her head, reaching into her blouse and pulling out the "dream-eater" necklace. "He just wanted to give me this."

Shane leaned in, fingering the pendant, and he gasped when he turned it over and saw the face carved into the other side.

"Creepy, isn't it?" Dare met his eyes and realized how close they were sitting. She could smell the beer on his breath.

"What is it?" he asked, letting it fall against her blouse with a frown.

"Sam said it was a 'dream-eater,' whatever that is." Dare glanced down at the necklace. It felt heavy around her neck. "Some special magical charm that's supposed to protect against bad dreams, I guess? Probably something like the Native American dreamcatcher?"

Shane raised his eyebrows. "Been having bad dreams?"

"Since Nick died..." She sat back in her chair and saw Shane's gaze fall once again to the curve of her thigh.

"I've had a few myself." Shane shrugged. "And I'm no psychologist, but I think it's probably a normal response to a death in the family."

“Nick wasn’t your family.” Dare narrowed her eyes at him and Shane smiled sadly.

“Right. My mistake.” He sat back, grabbing his beer and taking a long swig. She fought the immediate feeling of rising guilt and was unsuccessful when she saw the sad look on his face, his gaze scanning the bar.

“I know he loved you,” she relented.

Shane met her eyes, looking startled. “Why do you say that?”

“Because he always put you first.” Dare bit her lip, tracing the wet ring the beer bottle had left on the table. “You were his best friend.”

Shane nodded. “I miss him. I missed him when he left town, and I miss him even more now.”

“Did Nick tell you why he got fired?” She hated asking—having to ask—but Nick had always told Shane more than he ever revealed to her. It had been that way forever. Well almost forever. *Since Shane came along and you become just—*

SNIP

Shane frowned. “Fired?”

“From his firm,” Dare went on. “He told me he was fired. That’s why he moved back here with Dad and Julia...”

“No.” Shane shook his head, but he didn’t meet her eyes. “You know, Dare, he loved you more than anything.”

She smiled, feeling tears pricking her eyes and fighting them. “I know he loved me.”

I don’t know about that last part, though...

"He just wanted to protect you." Shane's voice was soft and he moved his chair in closer, so their knees were touching.

She gave a little laugh. "From what?"

His hand moved through her hair and he lifted her chin so he could see her eyes. They were full of tears.

"Everything, I guess." His thumb wiped at one of the tears making its way down her cheek. "That's what I would want to do, if I was your brother."

"Protect me from everything?"

He nodded, the look in his eyes making her whole body soften as she looked at him. "But you're not my brother."

"No." Shane shook his head, leaning in closer, his eyes searching hers. "Thank god for that."

"Why, because you wouldn't want to be related to me?"

"Kind of." A small smile played over his lips. "If I was your brother, there would be no way I could even attempt to persuade you out of that outfit."

She fought her own smile. "And into what?" Dare asked, playing along. They were both familiar with this game.

For how long? How long can you keep up this game? How long is he going to put up with—SNIP

"My bed?" he suggested.

Dare laughed. "Does that work with all the girls?"

Behind them the Pac-Man game had come to life with the aid of someone's quarter.

"God, you've always been such a tease," he told her, moving away and tilting back in his chair. His eyes narrowed to slits as he looked at her.

"Me?" She touched her chest where Sam's gift necklace felt like it was burning and felt her heart thudding against it. "I'm not teasing."

"No?" He slowly let his chair back down, his eyes meeting hers in the dim light.

"No," she repeated, her gaze never wavering.

"Want to prove it?" Shane leaned forward again.

Yeah, Dare, are you ready to prove it? Just what are you thinking about—SNIP

Shane's eyes rose to look at something behind her, somewhere above her head and she turned to look for herself.

"Twuh-twenty minutes is uh-uh-up," Sam told her, looking at Shane.

"Luh-Lee said," he added, almost in self-defense.

Shane continued to look at him, and Dare recognized his cool expression. It was the same one she'd seen on his face before he swung the cue stick at the guy with the buzzcut.

"Thanks, Sam." Dare stood and took his arm, more for his protection than anything else. "Gotta get back to work."

"Are we going to finish this discussion?" Shane asked.

"Sure," she replied. Sam's eyes were also on her, soft and concerned. Shane's gaze was cool and distant. "I think we definitely have some things to finish."

* * * *

"You're coming." Tom stood in front of her so she couldn't get past him. He had gone from asking, to pleading, to commanding.

"Tommy, will you go away?" Dare swerved around him with a tray full of beer.

"Please, come on," Tom pleaded, following her, changing tactics yet again.

"We've all hardly seen you since you've been in town, and I know you need a night out."

"My nights are spent here," Dare told him. "Sorry."

She put the beer on the table, and Tom waited until the four guys dug out their wallets and paid her.

"You can take the night off." Tom followed her back to the bar. "Lee won't mind, I know he won't. He'll agree with me."

She sighed as he grabbed her by the arm, stopping halfway to the bar. "Tom, I don't feel like the night out. I really don't. I'd rather be here. Okay?"

"No, it's not okay." Tom shook his dark head. "We miss you hanging out with us. / miss you. Isn't it enough that we had to lose Nick? I don't want to lose you, too."

Dare looked up at him, no longer annoyed. Now she felt guilty.

"The movie theater finally got something new, and we're having a party, and you're coming. That's all there is to it," he said.

"I don't know." Dare shook her head, looking over her shoulder at the bar. "Lee won't give me the night off on this short notice."

"Yes, he will," Tom said firmly, dragging her by the arm toward the bar. Inwardly, Dare groaned.

"Hey, Lee!" Tom called, taking a stool.

"What can I get you?" Lee asked.

"Her." Tom grinned, pointing to Dare. "We need her tonight to celebrate the new movie over at the Lawrence."

"Oh, yeah, that's tonight, isn't it?" Lee asked, glancing at Dare. He looked at the clock and then around the bar.

"Turn in your profits and you're off." He shrugged. "I'm not doing great business tonight, anyway."

"Go to it," Tom said with a smile, turning to Dare. She sighed.

"I can't afford this, Tommy," she told him, still trying to think of excuses. Tom took her arm and led her aside, away from the bar. Dare glanced behind him, toward the pool tables. Shane was playing pool with Jake, occasionally glancing over at them.

"Dare, hon, I know you miss him," Tommy took her hands in his. "I miss him, too, but life goes on, okay?"

"You sound like my parents," she said, her voice full of bitterness. "Let's forget all about it, why don't we? Let's forget he ever existed."

"I'm not saying that." He shook his head. "But he *is* gone, and you're still here. Stop killing yourself, babe."

"What are you talking about?"

"It's like you're withdrawing from the entire world, trying to punish yourself and everyone else for Nick's death," Tom said. Dare shook her head, looking away, but not speaking. He touched her hair, resting one hand on her shoulder.

"Look at me," he said softly. She did. "We were..." he hesitated. "We were involved once, and I will never forget the times we had, Dare. You'll always be special to me, and I'll always have those memories. It's the same with you and Nick. He'll always be with you."

"I can't..." She took a deep breath. "I'm not ready to let him go like that."

"You have to try. Take it one step at a time," he told her. She shook her head again. " If it's too hard for you, then we'll leave, okay? Just give it a try. For me?"

"I can't, Tommy," she said, turning away from him.

"Damn it, Dare," he swore, turning her back to him. She looked up at him. "I miss you. Come with me."

"Tommy," she said with a sigh, shaking her head. She glanced past him toward the pool tables and saw Shane watching them with interest, cue stick in hand. She met his eyes, seeing his brow knit as he looked at her. Dare smiled up at Tom and said, "Okay. Let me get my coat. I'll meet you in the car."

Tom smiled and touched her hand. "Great! You won't regret it." He started toward the door.

"Tommy," she called after him and he turned to look at her. "It can't be—we can't be...like it was before."

Tom, sensing her meaning, glanced at Shane. "I know."

She watched him walk out the door, and then went to turn in her profits and get her coat. She decided she would get Tom to stop by her house so she could change.

"You have a good time, young lady," Lee ordered. Dare smiled at him.

"Where are you going?" Shane turned her to face him and she gasped when he grasped her wrist, hard.

"On a date." She shook him off and started toward the door.

"With who?" he growled, following her closely.

She shrugged, but inwardly she was smiling. "Tom Connley."

"You're into flyboys?"

She smirked. "What's it to you?"

"A sad cry for help?" Shane stepped back as she shrugged on her coat, pulling her hair free and closing it around her.

"Jealous much?"

"Of that blue-suiter?" he scoffed, waving her away. "Anyone who fights sitting down doesn't have the balls God gave a hummingbird."

She ignored him and swept past, but she noticed with smug satisfaction that when Tom pulled his car out of the parking lot, Shane was standing outside and watching them.

* * * *

She felt a little uncomfortable walking in with Tom's arm around her shoulders. It was like a clock had been turned back and she was in high school again, walking into the town movie theater with her high school boyfriend. In fact, it felt like her entire graduating class was there, sitting on the red upholstered seats, talking, throwing popcorn at the blank screen and munching on M&M's. They weren't all there, of course, but enough of them it made the whole experience feel surreal.

"Where do you want to sit?" Tom asked near her ear.

Dare spotted Suzanne and pointed to a seat across the aisle. "How about there?"

"Tom!" Suzanne waved as they sat down. "Hey, Dare!"

Dare waved back, giving her a brief smile, already regretting her impulsive acceptance of Tom's invitation. Chatting and mingling and having a good time was the last thing she wanted to be doing. It had been nearly a month since Nick's death, and still being out in the world felt strange, surreal. Routine kept her sane, and being

anywhere besides home, the cemetery, and the Starlite made her feel the weight of her grief beyond words.

“Come sit here!” Suzanne pointed to the seats next to her, and although Dare protested, Tom led her across the aisle anyway.

“Hey Dare.” The guy next to Suzanne gave her a smile and a wave and for a moment it didn’t even register who he was—the Evan she knew hadn’t worn glasses in high school, and she couldn’t remember if he’d been wearing them at the funeral. She tried to picture him standing beside Shane and the rest of the crew, but they all blended together in her mind, Shane at the center.

“Hi, Evan.” Dare greeted him, following Tom and stepping past to sit on Evan’s other side. He looked so different to her, studious even, clean-cut, not the young rebel she remembered palling around with Shane when they were kids.

Suzanne leaned across him to grab and squeeze Dare’s hand. “I’m so glad he got you to come!”

Dare rolled her eyes. “I think I’ve been the victim of a conspiracy!”

“Hey, we guys have to stick together,” Evan agreed with a smile, slipping an arm over Suzanne’s shoulder. “I had to drag Susie here kicking and screaming, too.”

“She looks pretty content now,” Dare remarked, noting how comfortable the two of them seemed together. It was an odd pairing, she thought. They were total opposites—or they had been, back in the day. Who knew what Evan was doing now, who he even was anymore, she surmised. Everyone, everything had changed so much... and still, some things, some people, never did.

Suzanne flushed at Dare's comment. "I went out to the cemetery the other day. The headstone is beautiful. But who chose the wording?"

"My stepmother." Dare sighed. "Only she would think Nick needed any sort of mercy from her version of God."

"I think Nick really started connecting with her about the god-thing actually," Suzanne remarked.

Dare stared at her, frowning. "What do you mean?"

"I just noticed him talking about it more, questioning things. You know, about where we go after we die, if there really is a god, that sort of thing." Suzanne sighed. "But that's typical, you know, with someone in his position."

"Living with Julia's version of hell will make anyone question the existence of God." Dare rolled her eyes. "What do you mean, someone in his position?"

"Getting fired makes anyone freak out about the future," Evan remarked, taking Suzanne's hand and squeezing it. "Speaking of getting fired..."

"Is there anyone in this town who doesn't know I was fired?" Dare groaned and let herself relax against Tom when he slipped a comforting arm around her shoulder. "I forgot how fast news travels in this town."

"You can come work with me and James," Evan offered. "We started our own little company. Know anything about computers?"

"Only how to turn them on and type, I'm afraid," she said with an apologetic smile. "The only thing I'm good at, apparently, is beating people up."

"Not quite as marketable as being a programmer, I'm afraid," Evan agreed with a laugh.

"Well, you could always be the first female Ultimate Fighting Champion," Tom offered.

Dare laughed. "I don't think so."

"Give yourself some time if you can," Suzanne suggested. "It's hard to get right back in the saddle again, considering everything that's happened."

Dare nodded, blinking back tears. It was good to hear someone acknowledge it. Nick's death, her career, everything seemed to be falling apart at once, and she felt, sometimes, as if she should be moving on, getting her life back in some semblance of order. But she found she couldn't, even if she'd wanted to.

"So when are you leaving, Tom?" Evan leaned forward to look across Dare and ask the question..

"End of this week," Tom replied, glancing sideways at Dare.

"Oh, that's right!" Suzanne said. "I'll send you some chocolate chip cookies in the mail."

"Where are you going?" Dare asked, looking between them, puzzled.

"Where have *you* been, girl?" Evan nudged her. "Tom's heading back to Iraq to perform his Army duties."

"Air Force," Tom corrected. Dare stared at him.

"What's the difference?" Evan shrugged. "It's all military."

"Big difference," Suzanne replied with a grin. "Air Force has better looking uniforms."

Tom laughed, shaking his head. The lights went down then to a cacophony of appreciative shouts and whistles.

"Are you okay?" Tom whispered, pulling her closer. Dare scooted down, putting her knees up on the seat in front of her but she rested her head against Tom's shoulder, giving him the only real answer he was looking for.

* * * *

"It's been a long time." Tom cut the engine. They 'd driven up to the bluff in Tom's F-150, and now the truck sat parked looking over the lights of Shadow Hills. It was a clear night and there was a full moon.

"So, how long will you be in Iraq?" Dare turned to face him.

"Six months." He flipped the radio on. John Mellencamp, singing about little pink houses, came through the speakers.

"And you've already been on two tours?"

He nodded, fiddling with the radio.

"Will you miss me?" Tom reached out and touched her hand. She clasped it and looked at him. "Think about me?"

"You know I will," she told him. "We've been friends for just about forever."

"We were more than that." Tom edged closer, close enough she felt his breath against her face. Dare's heart rate quickened as she looked at him. She'd thought, way back in her sophomore and junior year, that she might marry Tom one day. God, that was a million years ago, and yet it felt very close now as they sat side by side in the darkness.

"It's been a long time," she murmured.

"Why did we ever break up?" he asked. She couldn't remember with him so near, his hands cupping her face. She shook her head as a reply.

"God, I've missed you," he whispered and he kissed her.

His mouth was gentle and prodding, his hands urgent, running down her sides, sliding her beneath him. His mouth trailed over her cheek, her neck, lower, to the open V of her blouse. She let her hands wander down his back.

His touch, his gentle prodding, his warm breath, brought back memories of after-movie adventures like this—make-out sessions that went farther and farther every time, ending with Dare telling him NO, and Tom getting out of the car, taking a short walk, rearranging.

That was until his eighteenth birthday when her jeans had joined his on the floor, and she had whispered "Yes," into his ear, and they had done it. He had told her he loved her, and she was the best birthday present he'd ever had.

"God, I want you," he murmured, running a hand up the inside of her thigh. Dare felt him through the denim, hard against her leg. He undid the button of her jeans, and the zipper came down easily.

His hand was warm on her stomach and she quivered. He'd been her first. Nick had asked her once if she and Tom had ever...you know...and she'd blushed. She'd seen something in his eyes, disapproval, maybe, or just disappointment. Dare remembered it and winced.

Tom moved his hand under the elastic of her panties. His breathing was ragged and he took her hand, placing it on his erection. Dare cringed, jerking her hand away.

"Don't," she told him, her voice sounding flat and dead. She pushed his hand away, zipping her jeans back up. He groaned against her shoulder and she moved

away from him, sitting up. He lay there for a moment, cheek on the seat next to her, eyes closed.

“What is it?” he asked finally, sliding over toward her. She let him put his arm around her.

“I miss him, Tommy.” She put her head on his shoulder. “I keep having these dreams...”

The talisman Sam had given her was still around her neck. Since she’d started wearing it, she hadn’t actually had anymore dreams.

Tommy looked at her. “What kind of dreams?”

“About Nick,” she said, snuggling closer. “About the cemetery.”

Tom kissed her forehead and squeezed her to him. “I think it’s pretty normal, don’t you? Having nightmares after someone dies...”

“I guess.” She sighed, staring out over the lights below. She felt like crying.

“You’re going to be okay,” he said, kissing her temple, her cheek.

She swallowed hard. “No,” she whispered. “No, I’m not.”

He kissed her mouth, then, his lips soft and warm, murmuring, “Then let me make it okay.”

“Can you?” she whispered, kissing him back, sliding her arms around his neck.

“I can try,” he breathed, slipping his hands up under her shirt in back, finding the warmth of her bare skin. She still felt like crying, but his mouth and hands and the weight of him as he pulled her underneath him was almost enough to keep it all at bay.

“God, you feel so good,” he whispered, fumbling with the buttons on her blouse.

Dare whimpered when his thigh pressed between hers and she slid her hands up under

his shirt, pulling it off as she went. His mouth roamed over the tops of her breasts where they spilled over her bra as he rocked on top of her.

He was hard against her hip and when she slipped her hand between them to rub him through his jeans, he groaned and stopped his quest for the hooks on her bra strap for a moment. She moaned when he gave up and just yanked the front of her bra down, spilling her breasts into his hands. He licked and sucked at her nipples, long and hard, making her squirm.

Everything felt so familiar to Dare, although it had been so long. Even the length of his cock, when she got his jeans unzipped and slid her hand into his boxers, was a comfort. She knew just what he felt like, looked like, and more importantly, what he wanted. He was something she could *do* and that was powerful.

“Come here,” Dare whispered, tugging on him in his shorts. He knelt up and she wiggled his jeans over his hips. He helped her peel them down, and still she squeezed and stroked him, making him hiss and groan. “All the way up here.”

She used his hard cock to lead him, pulling on it until he was kneeling over her as she stretched out on her back the front seat. He moaned when she put him into her mouth, sucking him slow and easy.

It had been a long time, but it all came back. She had spent a lot of time learning to suck Tom before she’d finally relented and had sex with him. He had taught her how he liked to have just her mouth, never her hands, all the way from base to tip and back again. She had learned to run her tongue around and around the head, and just the right pressure when she cupped his balls and rolled them in her hands.

“God, Dare,” he moaned, thrusting deep into her throat. The feel of him in her mouth made her whole body tingle. She reached her hand down and slid her hand past the elastic band of her panties, seeking moist heat and finding it. She rubbed herself, lost in her own pleasure as she took him into her mouth again and again.

Dare struggled with her jeans with one hand, and Tom reached behind, trying to help her without taking his cock out of her mouth. It was impossible, and he slid out from between her lips with a regretful groan, sliding down to straddle one of her thighs as he helped her work her jeans down, taking her panties with them.

His fingers were expert and knew just what she liked, spreading her open and slipping his fingers deep inside. Moaning, Dare rocked against him, her hand reaching for his cock, slick from her mouth, pumping it slowly in her hand.

“Tommy,” she whimpered against his neck. “Oh yes, oh god!”

He knelt up between her legs, his cock sitting straight up for the attention of her hand on him. He fingered her gently in the moonlight, the sound of her moans and gasps filling the car. Sliding down her body, he kissed his way, breasts, belly, lower, and she moaned, scrambling back against the door to make room for him to half-lie down, spreading her thighs for him.

His mouth was hot and wet against her as he licked and sucked, flicking his tongue back and forth over the sensitive spot she’d been rubbing herself just moments ago. She moaned, grasping his hair and pressing him there. It had taken a long time for her to allow him to do this, but once he had, she couldn’t get enough of it.

“Ohhhh!” she cried, bucking her hips and wiggling against his tongue, feeling him pressing her toward a slippery, delicious edge of pleasure. “Oh, god, Tommy, now!”

He groaned, his voice muffled against her flesh, sliding his hands under her to pull her in closer. His tongue was relentless, licking her until she was shuddering and convulsing on the seat, leaving a little puddle underneath her.

She clutched at him, still riding that great, pulsing wave. "I want you."

"Yes." He leaned in to kiss her. She could taste herself in his mouth. "How?"

"Like this." She turned around on the seat, so she was on her hands and knees. It was her favorite position and he knew it. His groan told her he remembered as she lifted her bottom in the air, using her fingers to spread herself open for him.

It was just moments before she felt him slipping the slick head of his cock through her wet slit, pressing a little forward, searching for that sweet point where her flesh began to give. He found it, slipping inside of her, and they both moaned. It's been so long, Dare thought, as he grabbed her hips and began to rock.

She kept her fingers there, rubbing her clit, loving the feel of his balls slapping against her hand as he thrust into her. Her shoulders were down on the seat, her cheek against the vinyl, her nipples grazing the material, sending electric jolts down to her pelvis.

"Dare," Tommy warned, and she felt him slowing a little. "I can't take much more of this."

"It's okay," she whispered, the thought of him coming inside of her making her rub her clit in even faster little circles. "I want your cum inside of me."

He groaned at that, driving in harder and faster now, giving into his own lust. Their bodies slapped together, the friction building with every slick thrust. Tom's fingers

dug into her hips and she heard him grunt as he shoved deep inside of her so hard it almost hurt.

"Yes!" Dare purred, squeezing his cock, milking it. She felt him coming, waves and waves of hot, white fluid filling her. His groan and shudder sent her over, and she quivered underneath him, the almost unbearable pleasure of her orgasm making her grip the seat and as she twisted and moaned.

In the foggy moments from passion to composure, they were quiet, pulling their clothes back on in the light of the moon. When they were dressed, Dare slid next to him on the seat, resting her cheek against his chest.

"You okay?" he asked, kissing her forehead.

She shook her head, feeling tears stinging her eyes. It wasn't okay. Nothing was okay, and it felt like it wasn't ever going to be okay again.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice choked. "Please...just take me home."

"Are you sure?" He breathed a ragged sigh.

She nodded, moving over to the passenger's side, watching him start the car.

"I...I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't," he said, starting the car and backing it up. "Just don't...don't do that."

He sounded sad and she turned up the radio. Tom flipped the headlights on, and Dare stared out blankly at the deserted road, thinking now the world would end.

* * * *

"Will you call me to say goodbye before you leave?" She leaned down to see him through the open window. Tom looked at her for a minute and then smiled.

"Maybe we could go out before then," he suggested. "No strings attached."

"It sounds good." She smiled. "Thank you for dragging me out tonight."

"Any time. It wasn't that bad, was it?" he asked. She shook her head. "Take care. I'll call you."

"Okay." She stepped away from the car. "You aren't mad at me?"

"What for?" he asked with a shrug. "I'll see you."

Dare watched him back out of the driveway and drive down the street. She watched in the moonlight until his tail lights were just pin points. It was the last time she ever saw him.

* * * *

Breakfast had become silent and perfunctory for Dare. Her parents sat at opposite ends of the table and Dare sat between them. Julia cooked and then sat down to read a novel. Her father ate his breakfast and read the Shadow Hills Journal. Dare would sometimes pick up the comics, and she always waited until her father was through to skim the paper herself for any more news. For the past month, Larkspur had been calm. After Scotty Summers, there had been no more killings.

Dare picked up the paper on October tenth—*a month, hey, your brother's been dead a month, want to celebrate?* she thought morbidly, watching Julia and her father, so quietly separate in the early morning sunlight—knowing just what she was going to find on the front page.

She'd heard about it yesterday at the Starlite. She read the article, anyway, her head throbbing dully, palm pressed against her forehead. It felt as if she were trying to keep her brains in.

*By Mike Murphy
Larkspur Staff Writer*

LARKSPUR—Tom Connley, 27, was found yesterday afternoon in the woods on the eastern side of the Clinton Grove Cemetery, another victim of the Clinton Grove Cat. Larkspur officials had believed the animal to be gone.

Connley was found by Larkspur officials patrolling the area. "We're putting the curfew back into effect. Nine o'clock. We're working as hard as we can to keep Larkspur safe."

Coroner Peter Friedman confirmed that Connley was indeed a victim of some animal, but refused further comment.

There was more, but Dare stopped reading and put the paper down on the table.

Julia was walking her father to the door.

"Have a good day," Julia told him.

Dare just couldn't finish the article. She cradled her head in her arms, the dull ache in her head intense.

Tommy Connley, who had chased her around the playground in fifth grade. Tom Connley, who had asked her to prom in their junior year. Tommy Connley, who had spent countless summers with them as kids, who had played football with her brother.

Tommy Connley was dead.

Why? That was the big question, but it eluded her. *Who* was more concrete. If she could find out *who*, then maybe that would lead to *why*.

Shane.

She would have liked to put the blame on him. Shane had been with Nick the night he was killed, she knew it. Her heart wanted to convict him, but her mind, if she let

it run its course, led her on another train of thought. Shane Curtis could no more have killed her brother than she could have.

The newspapers reported it was the Clinton Grove Cat, but she couldn't believe that either. Will Cougar had stated the obvious— cats can't open doors. And another thing—dogs and other small pets had started to disappear around town—Mr. Cooper's dog, Cody, hadn't been the only one. For authorities, this confirmed to them it was definitely a bobcat.

But something seemed wrong to her about that theory, and she wasn't sure what or why. She just knew there had now been four murders in a month, and still no one was being held responsible. Four dead people, one of them her brother, one of them her once-boyfriend, and she knew nothing.

Nothing except...Shane had seen something. Or knew something. Not only because Nick had told her he was going to be with Shane, but because of the look in Shane's eyes when he talked to her.

Shane knows something, she thought, and maybe the rest of his little gang knows something too. She had no power over them, but she knew she could get Shane to tell her—one way or another.

* * * *

A bitterly cold wind swept leaves from the trees and they fluttered down toward the coffin. Dare watched them, unable to look at the casket itself. The Connleys were huddled together, Dare didn't know if for warmth or comfort, but guessed it was a little of both.

She pulled her winter coat around her. Autumn was fast becoming winter. A bitter taste for vengeance filled her mouth. Dare closed her eyes for a moment, listening—quiet weeping, the rustle of leaves above her head, the dull pounding in her ears. Four people dead. Dare opened her eyes, filled with bitterness.

Someone has to pay for this.

She looked at the coffin, one that looked like her brother's had, and she fought tears.

I'm going to find out who did this, she thought.

And I'm going to kill him.

* * * *

"Hey, Dare." Lee called her over to the bar. It was just after two, and she was exhausted.

"Go see if you can hurry them up." He jerked his head in the direction of the pool tables. Shane and Chris were the only people left in the bar, finishing their game.

"Sure," Dare said. "No problem."

"Nuh-nuh-no pruh-problem," Sam said in a near whisper as she started toward the pool tables. She heard him but didn't look back.

Chris leaned against the wall, away from Shane, while he lined up a shot. Dare watched for a moment, unnoticed. The muscles in Shane's arms showed, hard and sinewy, beneath the sleeves of his black t-shirt. He was concentrating, the cue stick steady as he leaned over the table, carefully calculating, although it was obviously an easy shot.

Dare grinned mischievously. "Hey guys!"

She clapped Shane, hard, on the back. The motion sent him forward, making the cue stick hit the ball. It rolled about four inches—and stopped.

"Aww." Dare blinked innocently. "You would have made that, too."

Shane turned to face her, smiling, but his eyes were cold and dark. She took a step back. Chris did as well, wide-eyed.

"I'm gonna kill you," he told her in a low voice.

In that moment, as he advanced, she thought he was serious. He grabbed her arm roughly, jerking her toward him.

"Shane," she gasped. "I was only—"

He pulled her tightly up against him and she tensed, waiting for him to do something, anything—and then he kissed her, his mouth slanting harshly across hers. She opened her eyes wide and gasped in surprise—it was all the opening he needed and his tongue touched hers.

His hold tightened, his hands moving down her uniform and then up the backs of her thighs. She relaxed against him for a moment, stunned, and his mouth grew soft and more gentle but still insistent, his hands wandering upwards. She gave into his hands, responding with a soft moan, letting herself melt against his hardness. She pushed him away only to stop herself, but she still couldn't break free from the tight circle of his arms.

"Let me go," she said, unable to keep her voice steady, her eyes narrowing. Surprisingly, he did.

"You're a goddamned tease," he gasped, and his eyes looked pained.

"No, I'm not." She felt herself trembling and hoped he couldn't see it.

He laughed softly, never taking his eyes from her. Chris watched them open-mouthed, but he wasn't their only audience. Lee watched them, too, standing near the juke, and Sam's eyes were glued to the scene as he leaned on his broom.

"Prove it, then." The dark look in his eyes caught her breath and held it. He stepped in front of her, tilting her slightly quivering chin up with one finger. "Meet me at the path tomorrow at nine."

She hesitated, looking at him, hating him, hating herself. She regained her voice by swallowing past something lodged in her throat and narrowed her eyes at him, jerking away. "It'll be a cold day in hell before I meet you anywhere."

His soft laughter followed her as she turned and walked away.

Part Two
Accusation

Chapter Eight

"How do I look?" Dare questioned James Thomas once they were out on the front porch. He looked at her in the moonlight, seeing her as she had seen herself in the mirror five minutes ago, dark hair hanging loose in curls down her back, dressed in jeans, boots with no heel, a white blouse and a black suede jacket that had once been Nick's.

"Fantastic, as always," he told her. "But are you *sure* you want to do this?"

"Yeah." She took his hand and started toward his car. "Don't worry about me."

"He's dangerous, Dare," James told her, getting into the car. Dare fastened her seatbelt. "If I take you out there, you realize there's no phone within a two mile radius and cell service is real spotty. So be careful, okay?"

"Yes, Daddy." She rolled her eyes and he laughed. "Now will you please drive?"

James started the car and pulled away from the house. Dare looked back at it for a moment, thinking of her father sitting in the living room watching T.V., Julia reading. She felt a twinge of guilt.

"I still don't like the idea of you out there without your own car." James shook his head.

"Oh, shut *up* already!" Dare said, not unkindly, flipping the radio on. Led Zeppelin, *Stairway to Heaven*, blared out of the speakers. Dare turned it up until the sound was distorted.

* * * *

"Maybe I should wait here with you," James said as she opened the door. Dare sighed.

"James, go home!" she cried. "I promise that I won't do anything you wouldn't."

"That leaves it pretty much wide open," he said with a grin. She laughed and shut the door. He leaned over and rolled down the window. "Just be careful, okay?"

"Will you—"

"Go home," he finished. "Yeah, yeah, I'm going."

He turned the car around and she watched as he left, going out the only entrance and exit there was to the path. The little car fit easily between the long path of trees, but Dare had seen trucks come down with only a foot of room on each side.

She turned back to look at the circular stretch of land. Cars were parked haphazardly around a large bonfire burning brightly in the center. The entire stretch of land was surrounded by pine trees, the bare, unbranched part of their trunks taller than she was.

She began walking between cars, looking for Shane. A few radios competed and most people sat on their cars or on the grass, drinking, smoking, making out.

"Hey, Dare! What are you doing here?" Billy came up behind her, giving her a strange, puzzled look.

"I'm looking for Shane," she told him matter-of-factly, ignoring the surprise on his face. "Have you seen him around?"

"Sure, come on, I'll show you." He took her arm and started to lead her, but he slowed and stopped for a minute, looking down at her. The bonfire blazing brightly next to them threw shadows on his face and she waited for him to speak.

"I don't know if you want it, but I have Nick's guitar," he told her finally. "I thought I should tell you...offer it to you." He stopped and looked away. Dare saw that he was fighting tears. "God, I miss him."

"You can have it, Billy." She blinked back her own tears, hating the way they came like that, as if she weren't in control of her own body. "I didn't even know he played." Dare took Billy's hands in hers, giving them a squeeze.

"I was teaching him." Billy gave her a sad smile. "Said he wanted to learn before..." His voice trailed off and he turned and looked into the fire. "Anyway, he was actually really good. He learned fast."

"He was good at everything he ever did."

Billy nodded, shoving his hands deep into the pockets of his ripped and faded jeans. "He was the best."

There was laughter and talking and music around them, but there was a silent understanding between them in that moment.

"Come on," Billy said finally. "This way."

She followed him and saw Shane sitting on the hood of a black Mercury. He was laughing, his arm draped across the shoulder of a girl who was also laughing, tucking her blonde hair behind her ear. His profile in the fire light made her chest tighten. He leaned over and whispered something into the blonde's ear that made her giggle. She kissed him on the cheek.

Three cars made a semi-circle around the fire. A bunch of six-packs sat on the roof of the Mercury and Aerosmith wailed "*Sweeeet Eeeemoooooooooooootion...*" out of someone's car speakers.

Jake and Evan sat on the hood of Shane's black Mustang, tossing beer caps into the fire. Chris swayed with a dark-haired girl Dare assumed was Teri, his wife, although it seemed absurd to be dancing slowly when Aerosmith was on.

A girl came up behind Billy, covering his eyes with one hand. In the other, she was holding a beer.

"Guess who?" She giggled. Billy turned around and hugged her around the waist, swinging her around. She squealed. "You're going to make me spill it!"

"There's always more where that came from, Meg. Right, guys?" Billy called, starting toward their circle, his arm wrapped around Meg's waist. He motioned for Dare to follow them.

"We got plenty." Shane laughed, tipping a beer at them and winking. Shane lifted the bottle to his mouth and, as he lowered it, he saw Dare and met her eyes. For a minute he looked stunned and pale, even in the glowing light from the fire. Billy sat next to them on the hood, pulling Meg onto his lap. Dare stopped about six feet away.

"Well." Shane smiled slowly, shaking his head. "I never thought..."

"Thinking really isn't your strong suit." Dare closed the distance easily, standing in front of him and hooking her thumbs in her belt loops.

"Same old Dare."

"Same old Shane," she countered, glancing at the blonde girl.

"Oh, where *are* my manners?" Shane said, and Jake and Evan found this statement hilarious, going off into gales of laughter. "Dare, this is Beverly." He squeezed Beverly's shoulder. "Bev, this is Dare." He gestured his introduction with the beer bottle.

"Hi," Dare said.

"Hi." Beverly was looking at Shane, but his eyes were on Dare.

"I think we have some unfinished business?" There was a light flutter in Dare's stomach when she looked into Shane's eyes. He hopped to the ground and Beverly looked at him, bewildered.

"Can you give Bev a lift home?" Shane asked Billy. "I have to go. Got some, uh," he looked sideways at Dare. "Unfinished business."

"Sure," Billy said. They were all watching now, and Dare felt uncomfortable.

"Get off my car," Shane told Jake and Evan, who were still snorting laughter every once in a while. Dare followed him and got into the passenger's side.

"Are you morons going to get off my car or am I going to have to hurt you?" Shane leaned on the open driver's side door. Jake and Evan started howling again, doubling over, but they managed to roll off the hood.

Shane muttered something under his breath as he ducked into the car and started it up. He put the Mustang into reverse and, putting his arm across the back of the seat, he quickly and effortlessly backed the car up onto the gravel running along the edge of the path. Shane put the car into drive and accelerated. Dare twisted around to see Beverly still sitting on the Mercury's hood, looking stunned.

"That wasn't very nice," Dare told him, turning back around.

"I'm not a nice guy, remember?" Shane glanced back at them in the rearview mirror. Dare didn't dispute this. He guided the car along the gravel. It was little more than a path outside the ring of grass and inside the ring of trees.

"Where are we going?" Dare asked him as he turned the car and started up the path leading out to the main road. Dare looked out the side window and, in the fading

light from the fire behind them, all she could see were the trunks of the pine trees. The branches were high above them.

"You'll see." Shane came to the end of the short path and turned right onto another dirt road, this one made with two cars in mind. Dare reached for her seat belt, and found there wasn't one.

"Where are your seat belts?"

Shane laughed, flipping on the radio.

"What's so funny?" Dare demanded.

He looked at her and shook his head.

"You," he replied, still laughing, Roy Orbison on the radio singing about pretty women.

* * * *

"You know." Shane shut the car off. "It's funny, I never read anything lately about the devil becoming a Frigidare salesman."

He clicked the headlights off. They were up on Shadow Hills Bluff and Dare was thinking of Tommy.

"Since when do you read?" Dare asked, but her mind wasn't on conversation. She looked across the hood of the car, at the lights of the city below.

"Dare," Shane said and she looked at him. He touched her hair, rubbing a strand of it between his fingers. "You up to finishing that piece of business?"

She didn't answer him.

What am I doing? What if this goes too far? What if it has gone too far?

She knew it had. Something fluttered in her stomach, and a dull ache had begun to pound in her chest. Looking at him, she tried to think of Nick, of Tommy, but they both seemed far away. Everything seemed gone, except Shane, sitting her next to her, close and getting closer.

He leaned over and kissed her, pulling her toward him. His hands were eager, insistent, and she let herself into his arms. Snuggling up to him and exhaling, she rested her forehead on the soft spot of the side of his neck.

She unzipped his jacket and undid the buttons of his shirt, running her hand over the hard, planed muscles of his chest and stomach. There was a line of hair starting at his navel and disappearing below the waistband of his jeans, blackly exciting. Dare touched it, her breath quickening.

"Dare," he said hoarsely, almost pleading. She lifted her head to look at him, aware of the power she held. He put one hand behind her head and pulled her mouth to his. She became soft and pliable in his hold, relaxing against him. He tasted like beer and it excited her.

She didn't know how long she was in his arms. A familiar smell filled the car—heated Old Spice and White Lilac. She had expected to have to fight him off, but he was slow and gentle, his hands and mouth expert but tender and caressing. Her mind rejected this as impossible, but her body responded with a fervor that frightened her. He was the first to push her away and she looked at him in the dimness, drawing shaky breaths.

Silent, he looked out across the lights of the town below. She moved back toward the passenger door, smoothing back her hair, self-conscious now. Shane closed his

eyes and shook his head, as if to clear it. She sensed an undercurrent of emotion, but couldn't decipher it.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" Shane asked, and Dare jumped, startled.

He laughed, leaning his elbow on the steering wheel and his forehead in his palm. "What am I doing here?"

He leaned back, running his hands through his hair. Then he looked over at Dare. "I don't get it. I could deal with the flirting and the teasing—that was harmless enough."

Dare didn't say anything.

"But this!" he said, his voice hoarse. "I never expected you to show up tonight. Not in a million years."

He laughed again, looking out the windshield. "When Nick was alive, I wasn't anything to you...now all of a sudden you're flirting with me, teasing me, coming onto me, and then this..."

"I wanted you." His voice tightened. "And you knew it. I've wanted you since the first day I saw you. But I don't want you like this. As some sort of sacrifice? Is that what this is?"

She was silent, head down, her long, dark hair a curtain.

"Are you doing this because of Nick? Are you, like, punishing yourself? Is this some weird, backwards kind of atonement?" He was greeted by her silence.

"I see him." Shane's voice was low in the stillness. "Every time I look at you, I see him."

Shane reached over to push her hair out of her face, his hand brushing her cheek. The radio radiated a greenish glow as Pat Benatar sang about a hell for children.

"I miss him," he told her. "I missed him when he left town, but this is different. This really hurts."

She closed her eyes, understanding his pain but not wanting to. It hit her, too, over and over, just little things, like, "Gee, I guess Nick won't be driving his Jeep anymore," or "Nick won't care if I borrow his jacket," and they were morbid thoughts that slipped in oh, so casually, their aim sharply precise and accurate.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, running a finger over her cheek. "I want you more than I've ever wanted anything. I've wanted you since the day we met. Do you remember that, Dare?"

She didn't reply, didn't look at him, all too aware of his hand on her face, but she *did* remember. As much as she would have liked to do a shearing job on *that* memory with her mind-scissors, the stupid thing was made of steel.

"You saved my life..." He paused and looked at her. "I remember what happened afterward, too, you know. It was...it was a really nasty thing for me to do to you. I know I've never told you but...I'm really sorry."

Dare shook her head, putting her hands to her head in a silent gesture. He couldn't do this to her. He wasn't supposed to do this!

She had expected the mind games, the flirting, the usual tough exterior—but not this, not the genuine feeling suddenly and unexpectedly surfacing between them. In all the time she'd known him, Shane Curtis had never, *ever* apologized. But now here it was, hanging between them like a piece of dirty laundry.

She didn't want this now. It might have helped if it had come when they were kids, after he'd hurt her, humiliated her in front of everyone, but they were useless words now. They meant nothing.

"I know it's why you hate me." His voice was closer. "At least, that's a big part of it. It was just stupid kid stuff, you know? I had a reputation to protect."

Why now? This was a side of him she'd never seen, never *let* herself see, and she didn't want to acknowledge the sincerity in his voice.

"If I could take it back, I would," he said, his voice a little hoarse. Were there tears in his voice? She couldn't believe it.

She felt his hand on her hair and she thought of that bright, hot June day, thought of their laughter, his snide remarks. She refused to believe he was sorry, and she hated him, *hated* him...

"I swear to you, I never wanted to hurt you." He cupped her chin in his palm.

No, no, no, her mind screamed, and she shook her head, her chest closing up. She tasted the saltiness of tears in her throat.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," he said softly. She heard the smile in his voice, but knew he was serious, too. "Stick a needle in my eye?"

When had she last heard that phrase? When they were twelve, thirteen? They only used it when they were being totally honest about something.

"Stop it!" she cried, the tears already started, and she had to get out, get away from him. He couldn't see her cry. She couldn't let that happen.

"I don't want to hear this," she choked out, pushing the car door open with a shove. She stumbled toward the guard rail on the edge of the bluff. She couldn't stop

the memories or the tears. Her mind-scissors were dull from use, and she collapsed, her hands gripping the steel railing.

"Dare?" His voice, behind her.

"Go away!" she screamed through her tears. "Just go away!"

She opened her eyes and looked down, the city lights a dull blur. I could jump, she thought. Nothingness would better than this. Shane took her by the shoulders and helped her stand. She tried to push him away, but he was insistent.

"I hate you," she insisted, looking into his eyes, overbright in the moonlight.

"I..." He hesitated and touched a trembling hand to her cheek. "I loved him."

He pulled her against him, so tight. She sobbed, his face and hands buried in her hair, her tears wetting his jacket, the cold stinging her face.

"Oh, God, I miss him so much, Shane," she whispered.

"I know," he managed and held her closer. She clung to him then, and they grieved together, taking what comfort they could from each other's warmth.

* * * *

"So." Shane looked at her as the radio played, radiating its eerie glow in the dimness.

The Mustang idled, headlights throwing twin beams of light across the gravel driveway onto the garage door. Dare searched the upstairs windows for a sign of a face but saw nothing.

"What happens now?" he asked as she shoved open her door.

She hesitated and looked back over her shoulder at him. A cold wind invaded the warmth of the car.

"I don't know," she said, getting out and shutting the door.

She stood on the front porch, watching until the scarlet of his tail lights were a blur in the distance, until they disappeared. She unlocked the front door. Ghostly blue-green filled the kitchen from the digital clock. No one had waited up for her. Julia had gotten used to Dare's trashy behavior. Coming in at one, two, or even three in the morning had become an every night occurrence.

She paused to kick her shoes off and drape her coat over a chair before she headed up the steep, narrow steps to her room. Moonlight threw shadows on the hallway wall, coming from her bedroom. She had taken to leaving her door open.

She was always alone up here. Always alone. Her parents' room, downstairs, was quiet. Nick's room, a constant reminder, was also closed and silent. She hated that she was the only one who had to go past it every day. No one else did. There was a bathroom downstairs and *their* bedroom was down there. Julia left clean laundry at the foot of the stairs, and an empty laundry basket for dirty clothes. Dare was the only one who had to go upstairs during the night, or during the day for that matter, but somehow, the nights were worse.

Nick was alive in her mind at night, and her mind-scissors didn't function as well when it grew dark. Thoughts seeped in, unwanted and sad, often bitter and guilt-ridden. Lying on her bed, she could see the moon, bright and full, peeking out from behind the clouds. Memories came during the night. Everything came back—things she didn't have to think about during the day, things her mind-scissors took care of. She dreaded coming to her room, passing his.

Tonight, Shane filled her thoughts as well. It was Shane's face she saw when she closed her eyes, except he was younger, so much younger—they all were. It was a time when they were indestructible, when they were going to live forever, and Larkspur was a huge playground.

Summer stretched ahead, a shimmering lineal highway that ended at infinity. Life came and went in gentle, lapping waves: ups and downs, and most of all, warmth. The sun was a molten white-hot coin in the sky, summer had begun and they were...

* * * *

FREE!

Jean cut-offs worn over a black and white two-piece bathing suit, the sun warm on already tanned shoulders, Dare walked the path, her tennis shoes crackling twigs.

Summer, summer, summer, it was a little sing-song voice. Heading down to the pond while Nick was back at the house still changing, Dare contemplated freedom. She would get bored and start wishing school would begin again, but that time was forever away because summer had finally come, and it was delicious.

The pond, across Jarvis and through the woods, had waited for summer, as well, when it could be filled with the shouts of warm bodies. It shimmered like glass in the heat, and Dare paused at its edge to look at it.

They used the pond in the winter too, for hockey and ice skating. Nick, James Thomas and Danny Clark were their best hockey players. She liked the pond in winter, when their skates sliced and dug into its frigid surface, but it seemed most dangerous in then, as cold and dead and humorless as the season itself. After the long layover from

spring, when it was warm enough to swim again, the pond seemed ready to accept them again with open arms.

The pond's sandy shores were sun-filled, except a stretch of sand covered by the shade of a big elm. There was a platform about ten or twelve feet up, where they sat on hot days, days when even the water was too warm to swim in comfortably and it was cooler up high in the shade of the elm's leaves.

Dare stepped up to the water's edge, taking off her tennis shoes. She waded a little ways out, up to her shins. The water was unbelievably cool under the hot sun. Dare hopped back to shore, pulling her shorts down over her hips and scanning the woods for a sign of her brother. He would show up soon, with Annie and James and probably Suzanne. There would be others, after everyone had gone home from school, changed, and either walked or caught rides out. Living right across from the pond had its advantages.

Dare stepped lightly out of her shorts and tossed them aside. That was when she heard the screams behind her. She whirled around but couldn't see anything—just trees and underbrush, rustling gently in the breeze, too thick to really see through.

There it was again, and she heard the distinct crackling and breaking of twigs under feet.

And a growl.

She watched wide-eyed, helpless, unable to see anything but the gentle swaying of trees.

"Help! Heeelp!" The words were distinguishable now, and Dare's eyes moved across the thick covering, searching for signs of life. It grew louder, louder, the strangled cry and the growling sound. Dare picked her shorts up, ready to retreat.

Something broke out of the underbrush and flew through the air. It took a moment for it to click in her mind, and by then he had slid through the sand next to her, face down, wearing Levis, a t-shirt and tennis shoes. The Doberman sprang next, and Dare watched it fly, streaking through the air, snarling. It landed in the space the boy had just vacated.

Dare managed to move then, the dog turning toward her. Acting instinctively, Dare shoved her shorts over its head, inside out. The boy, lying panting on the ground, watched her with wide eyes.

Dare started to run. "Come *on!*" she called to him. He was frozen, watching the Doberman shake its head from side to side, struggling with the cut-offs. Dare had managed to get its snout through one of the leg holes, so it was temporarily stuck. Dare was almost to safety. All she had to do was climb the boards nailed to the trunk of the elm and crawl onto the platform.

The Doberman, snarling and whining, was winning its battle with the cut-offs. The kid sat there, dumbfounded, not hearing Dare's hoarse plea to *run!*

Dare hesitated, her bare foot paused on the lowest board. Then she began to run back, making her way past the dog. Grabbing on to the kid's arm, she pulled, yelling in his ear, "Get up! Come on!"

The kid, startled and dazed-looking, stood up obediently. The dog, getting its front paws over the tops of the shorts, was wiggling out of them and it didn't sound happy.

"Run!" Dare screamed, pulling hard at his arm. He stumbled for a moment, but Dare didn't let go. He regained his balance and ran behind her. The distance to the tree had grown twelve feet while their backs were turned. Dare's bare feet sank into the sand, slowing her down, and the dog was now free.

She heard it behind her as she ran, faster than they were on the sand. *Sand's not slippery*, she thought. *Why am I slipping?* The kid, panting in her ear, was almost past her now.

"Up the tree," she managed to say. He flew up the elm, his feet hardly touching the boards. Behind her, the dog's jaws snapped, and she felt its breath, hot and heavy, near her thigh. She kicked back blindly with one foot, reaching up for a handhold. Her foot made contact with the dog and it yelped. In that instant, her hands found one of the rough boards and she pulled up. She scrambled the rest of the way up the tree until she lay panting, safely on the platform.

She lay there for a moment, eyes closed, sweat rolling off her back and down her sides, face pressed against the cool wood. The dog, cheated out of its fun, barked from below. Dare rolled over onto her back with a sigh. The kid, sitting cross-legged, was looking at her with a mixture of admiration and embarrassment.

"Are you okay?" she gasped, still out of breath. He nodded. Below them, the dog began to whine. She sat up, looking him over. Dirt streaked his face and white t-shirt.

"I'm Dare," she told him. "Who're you?"

"Shane," he told her, starting to wipe the dirt off his shirt and pants. Dare's eyes widened for a moment and her breath caught somewhere inside. She had never met Shane Curtis but he was a legend of sorts at school.

His older brother, Buddy, had nearly killed a teacher at the junior high school by tossing an M-80 into the wastepaper basket by her desk. Rumor had it this teacher, Mrs. Lowe, hated it when kids played "basketball" with paper and the wastebasket. When a kid used the basket as a hoop for a scrunched up piece of paper, she would take the piece of paper out and make him eat it. Dare didn't know if that was true. She had doubts a teacher would do anything like that. Buddy had tossed the M-80, hidden in a paper bag, into her trash just before lunch, and when Mrs. Lowe went to fish out, she received, in Buddy's own words, a "little surprise."

Shane, last year, had gotten suspended for having a copy of Playboy in his desk, and although he'd never done anything really bad, like Buddy, who was now doing time in the reformatory and would probably be in institutions similar for the rest of his life, Shane was expected to be as bad.

"Is it gone?" Shane asked.

Dare peeked over the side. It was quiet. The dog, either bored or distracted by something, had disappeared. It was, she knew, Casey Reardon's dog. He kept it penned up because it was so mean. It had gotten out while Shane was in the process of running a stick along the fence, Dare found out later.

"Gone," she reported. "You've still got dirt on your face."

He smiled, his eyes dipping downward from hers. "You're dirty, too."

She looked down and saw sand and dirt streaked across her suit and her bare stomach. She blushed a little, aware of his eyes on her. She became conscious of how she looked—tall, long-legged, the bathing suit too tight on her growing body. She crossed her arms self-consciously across her breasts, small buds just beginning to show.

"We can get down now," she said, keeping her eyes averted. "You go first."

"Are you Nick Chandler's sister?" He moved so he was sitting beside her, their feet dangling from the platform.

"Yeah," she answered, looking at him. His blonde hair, a little too long, shone in the light seeping through the leaves above them. His blue eyes were making her tingle with...something...when he looked at her. The feel of his jeans, chafing against her bare thigh as he swung his feet, sent strange but exciting tremors through her body.

"He's cool, your brother," Shane said to her, eyeing her. "You look a lot like him... but you're cuter." He smiled at her and Dare bit her lip. She had been around boys before, and had even played spin-the-bottle with guys in the neighborhood at parties when parents left the "kids" alone in the basement. She had kissed boys before, and she knew about sex, but the way Shane looked at her made her feel inexperienced, shy, and excited all at the same time.

"We're twins," Dare informed him. "My brother should be here any minute. We're going swimming."

"I figured," Shane said, his eyes on her suit. Dare swung her legs, turning herself over, finding the first board with her feet. She began to descend. Shane started after her.

When Shane hopped to the ground, brushing his hands on his jeans, the voices were just coming to the end of the path. Dare headed toward them, and Nick, his towel slung casually over his shoulder, led the group toward the edge of the water.

"Hey, you guys!" Dare called, padding toward them. Sarah, Annie, Suzanne, Tommy, James, Josh and Danny were crowded behind him.

"Hey, Dare," Tommy called with a smile. His eyes went from hers to look behind her and his smile faded. Everyone was looking at her now. Nick waved, and his smile wavered only slightly.

"Hi, Shane," Nick said as they advanced. Dare was only a step ahead of Shane. She stopped, and Shane stood a little behind her, his arm brushing hers.

"Have a good time?" Tommy asked coolly, picking up Dare's sandy cut-offs. Dare felt cold and exposed.

"Nice place you have up there," Shane said. "Dare was nice enough to give me a guided tour."

She turned to look at him and he winked at her. "Real private."

She opened her mouth to deny it, to deny anything and everything that he was implying, but nothing came out. All she could remember was the strange tightening feeling in her stomach, and the tingling farther down, when Shane was sitting next to her.

"I bet," Tommy said, tossing Dare's shorts to her. "I think these are yours."

She couldn't say anything as she bent to pick them up. Nick was watching her with, it seemed, a cold expression. She knew his face as well as she knew her own, maybe better. He was angry and something else—disappointed maybe.

"Quite a sister you have, Nick," Shane said with a small laugh, tossing his arm around Dare's shoulders. She shrank away, pleading with her eyes.

Rescue me, Nick! Tell them that you believe me, that Shane's a liar, tell them!

"Anyone for a swim? I'm roasting," Nick said, stepping back and looking away from her. "Shane?"

That was too much. Nick had chosen Shane over her, believed him over her. She let her shorts drop and began to run, hating them all, but hating herself more. She hadn't said a word, and she could have, easily. Nick would have believed her in an instant. Instead, she had kept quiet, unable to get that tingling sensation Shane's touch left out of her mind.

Later that night, Nick had come into her room and had left her shorts and shoes at the end of her bed. She had never worn them again.

* * * *

The moon shifted, darkened, and then was gone. Dare looked at the space it had vacated in the sky. Clouds were there, moving in the darkness.

Shane's voice, low and pleading, saying "I'm sorry." Too late. So he was sorry. Nick was gone, and it didn't matter much if Shane was sorry. She'd often thought it had been then, in that single moment in time, things had been decided. There, in that bright June sunshine, their fates had been sealed. Shane was destined to become his brother all over, and Dare was destined to live her life looking for her brother's approval.

Things had never been the same after that day. A bond had been broken, and one had been formed. It happened in an instant, a blink, a heartbeat.

We grew up, she thought sleepily. We grew up and we grew apart. It was going to happen anyway. You weren't going to stay a tomboy forever. There are just some things that you don't tell your brother or your sister, no matter how close you are. It was going to happen anyway, Shane or no Shane. All Shane did was act as a catalyst. It was—SNIP!

She almost physically tore the thought from her mind.

It was an impossible thought, an *unthinkable* thought. It was Shane's fault Nick had begun to exclude her, in little ways, and then in bigger ones.

"I'm sorry." Shane's voice echoed in her head. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

She shivered, pulling the blankets up. She'd wished him dead so often. She'd wished he would disappear, be swallowed up, something, anything, she just wished that he would *go away!* She'd wished that she had let that stupid Doberman tear his heart out, tear him apart like he had torn her and Nick apart.

She had spent the rest of her adolescence trying to live that moment down, trying to be the good girl, to do the right thing, always. Her choice of profession had been no accident—she'd wanted to find a sense of justice, to be a part of that somehow. She knew it was also no accident that she'd found herself working in vice, playing the whore. Had she been punishing Shane, she wondered, every time she brought down another John? Probably, she admitted.

And yet here she was, her ties severed, the world she believed in turned upside down. Everything was corrupt. Nothing was as it seemed. And there was, it turned out, no justice in the world after all.

I'm sorry—she shut her eyes tightly against it. Sorry... what did that mean?
Words, just words, after years and years. Where was the justice in that?

A small sob escaped her throat and she turned her face into her pillow. *Oh Nick, Nick...* God, she missed him! Sorry, sorry, oh, who cared? It was all too late. Sorry didn't make anything better. Sorry didn't bring any justice or sense of order. Nothing did. Nothing would.

Except, maybe, for her plan.

Could she accept Shane's apology? What would that mean? Hating him was the fuel for her fire. How could she let that go? She would let him think she'd accepted it, maybe, but she couldn't let herself believe it. She had to hate him—*she had to*.

"Nothing's changed," she whispered into her pillow.

It was good, better, to hear it aloud. Nothing had changed, she insisted, nothing at all. Sorry, apologies, it was all too late. Nick was dead, Tommy was dead...but nothing changed the way she felt. Nothing.

Chapter Nine

"Luh-Lee said yuh-you can guh-go on yuh-your break." Sam handed the tray of beers over the counter to her. Dare smiled, looking over at Lee.

"Thanks," she mouthed, and he nodded, taking an order.

"You've moved up in the world," she said.

Sam shrugged, looking away. "Juh-just part tuh-tuh-time."

Dare winked at him as he looked back at her shyly. "You'll be taking Lee's place soon, if you keep it up."

Sam beamed under her compliment as Dare threaded her way through the crowd towards the pool tables. It was packed, even for a Saturday. Everyone had found a some reason to celebrate—maybe because the hunt was going to be called off soon.

"Hey, it's the lady with the beers!" Billy called to her. "Gimme one!"

"Need your money first, pal," she said, holding her tray just out of his reach.

"Don't I get a discount? I'm a buddy of your boyfriend over there." He jerked his thumb towards Shane, who was sitting astride one of the chairs. Anger flashed through Dare, white-hot, but she covered it.

"He doesn't even get discount rates," she told him. "You had the Miller, right?"

Billy gave up and started to dig through the pockets of his tattered jeans. "Here." He tossed the money on her tray and took the bottle. "Hope you're happy."

"Only if you left a big tip," she said, smiling. She made her rounds with the rest of the beer—she knew by memory now what they all ordered—and then went to sit by Shane.

"Hey." He slipped his arm around her shoulders and she watched as their pool game resumed. It was amazing how easily she'd been accepted.

"They caught it." She leaned over so he could hear her over the dull roar.

"I heard," Shane replied, not looking at her. He didn't say anything else and she tried to read his eyes, but they strayed away.

"They're going to have the head mounted and put up in the Sheriff's office," said Jake, who was standing near them.

"They aren't really?" Dare asked him, incredulous.

Jake grinned and blew a stray piece of his long, dark hair out of his face. It settled back over his left eye. "If they aren't, they should."

"What's so interesting over here?" Evan wandered over from the pool table. Chris was deciding on a shot, and it took him forever in his meticulous, deliberate way.

"The infamous Clinton Grove kitty-cat," Dare told him. "What do you think? Should they hang its head in Thompson's office or not?"

"I think—" Evan started.

"Drop it," Shane said in a low voice. He didn't even look at them, but the two words were enough. The subject was dropped and the game resumed. Jake went back to being a spectator.

"Shane?" Dare put her hand on his arm. He jumped, looking at her. As always, the jolt was almost electric when she touched him, and she hated herself for it. "You okay?" She was calculating, keeping her voice at just the right, concerned tone.

He hesitated, opening his mouth. Then he just shook his head. "I'm okay," he replied, but his face told her something else. Things were not okay at all. "Hey, can you come out to the path with me this Friday? "

Dare looked toward the bar. Lee was in a conversation with Will Cougar, who had stopped by for a few after work. Sam's eyes were on her, as always, his gaze uncomfortably steady. Dare raised a hand to him and smiled.

"I can't," she told him, standing up. "I promised Sam I'd have dinner with him."

"You serious?" Shane asked after a moment. Dare nodded. She had agreed to his invitation under the stipulation that they were "just friends," and would stay that way. She felt sorry for Sam, but she'd grown to like him a lot, too.

"I've got to get back to work." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

He smiled, shaking his head. "I can't figure you out."

She shrugged, tossing her hair over her shoulder. *Thank god you can't*, she thought, looking back at him for a moment. *If you could, you'd probably kill me.*

* * * *

Aside from the Starlite, Larkspur at night was like a ghost town. Most of the place was asleep by nine o'clock. The curfew had some effect on the late night partiers, but not much. Most were already in by eight or nine, unless they were out at the path. Driving on Cass, on her way to Sam's, the traffic light went red, then green, then yellow, and no one else was there to stop for it. The neon lights of the Starlite flashed in the distance, but everything else was closed for the night.

Dare's was the only car on the road, and it felt eerie. The only light came from the widely spaced street lights and the Jeep's own headlights. She began looking for Wanda road as she neared the cemetery. She knew it was near Clinton Grove, separated from the cemetery by a stretch of woodland.

Behind her, red and blue lights flashed and she glimpsed them in her rearview mirror. Puzzled, she steered the Jeep to the side of the road and rolled down the window in the cold night air. Deputy Walker approached her wearing a heavy coat over his uniform.

"Hi, Dare," he said, leaning down. She was shivering. "Where are you headed?"

"Sam's," she said. "Sam Lewis. I'm eating dinner over there." Dare pulled her coat around her.

"I didn't recognize the car," he apologized. "We're supposed to check out anything suspicious and I couldn't read plates. The bulbs around them are burnt out."

"Oh. Sorry," Dare apologized, looking at him in the light from the flashers. "I thought it was all over?"

"Better safe than sorry, that's what the Sheriff says," Matt told her. "We caught a pretty big bobcat, and we're pretty sure that's what's been causing the trouble. Sorry about stopping you like this."

"It's okay, Matt," she said. "I know you're just doing your job. Can I go now, or are you going to give me a ticket for my burnt out license plate bulbs?"

"No, just get them fixed, okay?" He took a step back. "It's all just precautionary, anyway. We ought to be clearing out of here within a week."

"That soon?" Dare asked, shivering.

"Yup. Maybe we can get back to normal, then, huh?" She looked at him, and it seemed his expression was almost pleading with her, or maybe even with himself, to believe what he was saying. She shrugged.

"I hope so, Matt."

He tipped her a wave. She waited until he'd turned off his flashers and pulled away. He made a u-turn and headed back toward town.

"I hope so." But she didn't believe it any more than he did.

* * * *

"C-c-come on uh-in." Sam opened the front door. She'd found it—the only house on Wanda, a dead-end road and difficult to find with no street lights. The house was huge and bulky and in serious disrepair. There were sections where the windows were completely boarded up.

"It's getting cold out there." Dare unzipped her coat as he closed the door behind her. "I think winter's finally here."

"Truh-try riding a b-bike in this." Sam took her coat. He opened the closet and hung it on the handle of a vacuum cleaner and shut the door. Dare smiled to herself when she saw the mess—sneakers, boots, coats.

"Smells good." Dare looked around the foyer. The ceiling was high above them. She could see a curving staircase as she looked through the archway. A chandelier that hadn't been dusted in twenty years hung from the ceiling. The house had a musty undersmell.

"It's spuh-spuh-spaghuh-hetti. It's the only thing uh-I know huh-how to c-c-cook that isn't uh-out of a c-c-can," he said with a little laugh.

"You live in this big house all by yourself?" Dare asked, looking around. "How do you keep it clean?"

"I duh-don't," he said with a shrug. "C-come on. I'll shuh-show you where I luh-live."

Dare followed him past the archway. It must have belonged to someone rich once, she thought, looking around. It was dingy now, in need of a serious cleaning, but there was a taste of what it had once been. Dare looked up the staircase and there on the wall hung a huge portrait.

"Who is that?" Dare asked, tugging at his sleeve. Sam followed the direction of her gaze.

"Muh-my fuh-father."

Dare looked at it a minute longer, taking in the fierceness of the old man. It must have been taken later in life, because his hair was completely white and hung to his shoulders. He had blue eyes, like Sam's.

"C-c-coming?" Sam asked.

"Yeah." Dare took her eyes off the picture and followed him down the long hallway and past at least five closed doors. The house was strangely built. At the very end of the hall was a light-washed room.

"Muh-mine," Sam said proudly.

It was a small one room apartment of sorts. There was a bed, a table, a make-shift kitchen equipped with a stove, sink, refrigerator, one counter and a few cupboards. A door at the other end she assumed to be the bathroom. It was sad to see this little place, so cramped and small, surrounded by a once-great exterior.

"It's nice," she said.

"Thuh-thanks." He smiled. "Duh-do you want something to druh-drink?"

"Soda?" She looked at the strange configuration of things hanging over his bed.

As she drew closer, she realized they were masks. He had ten of them, all different, hanging over his bed.

"They were muh-my father's." Sam handed her a Coke. She took it, looking at each mask in turn, wondering what they were made of. "Nuh-Native Uh-American masks."

"Interesting," Dare commented.

"Suh-sit." Sam offered her a chair at the kitchen table. "It's ruh-ready."

Dare sat down, looking around her. It was a pretty big room, but there was no window. It seemed dreary—lonely. She looked at Sam, busying himself with dinner and humming. He seemed happy, content, but how could he be, living alone with no family or friends?

"Have you always stayed in this room?" Dare asked as he set the food on the table. It smelled delicious.

"Yes." He served her spaghetti and then served himself. "My fuh-father lived in the buh-basement, and this was muh-my place. Better than duh-down thuh-there."

"What was your father like?"

Sam looked at his plate for a moment, using his fork to wind strands of spaghetti around and around on his plate. His hands shook, making it difficult to keep on the fork.

"I nuh-never huh-had friends," Sam started. "Huh-he was my onluh-ly real friend. I tuh-take care of huh-him."

"You must miss him," Dare said, taking a bite of a meatball. "I miss my brother, too."

Sam, his head down, eyes glued to his plate, said softly, "Uh-I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Dare told him, but Sam just shook his head.

"Uh-Are you still having buh-bad druh-dreams?" Sam watched her as she took a drink of Coke.

"You know, that's weird." Dare reached into her blouse and pulled out the talisman. "Since you give me this, I really haven't! I'm wondering if it really is magic."

He smiled, chewing, his eyes following the motion of her hand as she tucked the necklace back into her blouse. "It is."

She paused, her fork in mid-air. "Magic?"

"Yes." He nodded, swallowing and opening his can of Coke. "Don't you buh-believe in magic?"

Smiling, she shook her head. "The only magic I've ever seen is on TV. You know, David Blaine and his deck of cards, David Copperfield making the Statue of Liberty disappear. That sort of thing."

Sam laughed. "That's not magic. Those are truh-tricks."

"What's the difference?" Dare noticed how his eyes followed her movements when she picked up her napkin.

"Magic is ruh-real," Sam insisted. "It's about faith, a duh-deep belief in something outside yourself. Yuh-you have it. I know, because the druh-dream-eater works for you."

Dare smiled. "That could just be a coincidence."

Sam shook his head, his eyes on hers. "Muh-my mother had it, too," he told her. "Duh-deep faith in magic."

"But I don't," she said, taking a bite of spaghetti. "I don't have any faith."

He just smiled at her from behind his soda can.

"Do you have a picture of your mother?" Dare asked, glancing around the room.

Sam got up from his chair, moving in his slow, jerky way. He opened his night table drawer and pulled out a small book, coming back and setting it next to Dare.

It had a black cover with the word "Mother" in red on the front. She gave Sam a little smile when she picked it up, beginning to flip through the pages. There was a woman smiling at the camera, the beach at her back. There were pictures of her dancing, cooking, laughing, kissing the cheek of an old, gray-haired man.

"She's beautiful," Dare murmured, turning the page. She had forgotten all about her dinner, engrossed in the album.

The next page was the woman and a fair-skinned man, his head nearly shaved but obviously blonde. It was a wedding photo—her white dress, his uniform. There was another one, where the old gray-haired man was glaring at the couple, obviously not pleased,

"Your grandfather?" Dare pointed to the old man. Sam nodded, drinking his Coke.

She gasped when she turned the page. This was the house, beautiful, opulent, like a shiny new penny. And here was Sam's mother, gardening, cooking. These photos were different somehow—she was still smiling, but the light had gone from her eyes.

"What happened to the house?" she asked, shaking her head.

"Haters," Sam replied, watching her flip the pages. "Muh-my father called them 'haters.' They didn't luh-like my muh-mother or muh-me. Thought she was a witch and I was a...a retard."

"They ruined the house?" she asked with a frown.

"Truh-trying to burn it down twuh-twice." He nodded. "Muh-my father went to the auth-auth-authorities many times. Nuh-nothing was ever done."

"She was pregnant with you here?" Dare asked, showing him a photo of her in what must have been their backyard, standing near a red rose bush. Sam nodded again.

"Oh, and this is you... Sam, this is you!" she exclaimed with a smile, looking at the little baby bundled in the woman's arms. There was another one, with the father, Roy, his face blank. He looked older than in the wedding photo...of course, he was.

"Yuh-yes," Sam agreed. She turned the page and found it blank. There were no more.

"She died then?" Dare frowned, putting the album back on the table. "Lee told me. He said it was an embolism."

Sam smiled, but it was a grim thing. "No. She died of a bruh-broken huh-heart."

"Oh, Sam." She sighed, picking up her fork again.

"Uh-I was bruh-broken," he told her, looking down at his plate. "Muh-my father didn't want a bruh-broken son."

"Don't say that." Dare reached out and put her hand over his. He looked down at it and then at her. "You are *not broken*."

"Huh-he was angry." Sam turned his hand over in hers, taking it, squeezing.

"Huh-he didn't want me thuh-this way."

"No," she breathed, feeling his pain.

"Nuh-no one has ever really wuh-wanted me." His eyes were on their hands, twined together.

"I do." Dare squeezed his hand. He lifted his face to hers, hopeful. "I mean...I want to be your friend."

"Yuh-you do?" He looked so disbelieving it made her heart hurt.

"I *am* your friend, Sam."

"Yuh-you're muh-my friend?" he asked hesitantly.

She squeezed her fingers over his. "Yes," she assured him.

"Thank you," he said softly, raising her hand and rubbing it against his cheek.

She was a little frightened by the intense look in his eyes.

* * * *

"Sorry, but I have to pick up the rest of the beer." Shane pulled the Mustang up in front of his house and shut the engine off. He pocketed the keys and looked over at her.

"You can stay in the car if you want. I won't be long."

Dare looked at the house in the fading sunlight. The small one-story drooped. Two shutters hung askew, leaving bare wood showing. The white paint was faded gray and the corner of one window had been replaced with a piece of cardboard.

"No," she replied, opening the car door. "I'll go with you."

He put his arm across her shoulders as they approached the house.

"My dad's home," he warned, opening the front door and leading her inside.

Dare inspected the small living room with its dingy green carpet and turquoise colored walls. A man snored loudly in a reclining chair while *Cops* radiated from a television set equipped with a set of coat hanger antennae. The man, wearing boxer shorts, had a beer resting on one arm of the chair and a cigarette dangling precariously between the first two fingers of his left hand.

"My dad." Shane steered her toward the kitchen, connected to the living room by an archway. Dare glanced over her shoulder at Shane's father, trying to see the resemblance. He had a pot belly hanging over the top of his shorts, and his dirty blonde hair did indeed look very dirty. He had a fuzzy beard growing.

"He's a permanent fixture there." Shane took two six-packs out of the fridge. He pulled one off the plastic holder and popped the tab. "I just kind of ignore him."

"Does he work?" Dare shook her head when Shane offered her some of his beer.

"Off and on. Mostly off. I bring in money for this place mostly working at Vikings," he said, referring to the auto parts store over in West Lake. "But he doesn't do much of anything except seasonal work and collecting unemployment."

Shane took another drink of beer. Dare looked back into the living room. He was a big bear of a man.

"Hey." Shane tugged on the sleeve of her jacket. "Come here." Dare went reluctantly and he wrapped one arm around her waist. He kissed her lightly and rested his cheek against the side of her throat. "Don't worry about me."

"I don't worry," Dare replied lightly, breaking the mood by picking up one of the six-packs. "Come on, they're all going to get to the path and there won't be any beer."

"They'll bring their own," Shane told her, grabbing the other six-pack and following her out the door. "Everyone drinks everyone else's anyway."

"That's not fair." Dare got into the car and put the beer on the floor.

"It's okay." Shane put the key into the ignition. "Everyone's too drunk to care by end of the night." He pumped the gas pedal twice before starting the car.

"And, hey..." He put the car in reverse and backed it quickly and easily out of the driveway. "Who said life was fair, right?"

* * * *

The path never failed to amaze Dare, although she'd been there dozens of times. It was so isolated, so completely theirs. The circular area had been leveled years ago, no one could remember why anymore, leaving only one natural pathway in and out.

"We're here!" Shane called out his open window in the direction of their group. They always perked on the west side.

Billy and Chris had their cars parked in an unfinished semi-circle around an already burning bonfire. Shane completed it by pulling up next to Chris.

"Party time." Shane leaned over toward Dare, his face inches from hers. "You ready?"

"I'm ready if you are," she replied and kissed him.

"Okay, you two love birds, break it up!" Billy called through the driver's side window, Meg on his arm.

Shane moved away from Dare and picked up one of the six-packs from the floor. Dare picked up the other one and got out of the car.

"Here." Shane tossed the keys over the hood of the Mustang. "Flip on the radio." Dare missed the keys, but Jake, standing behind her, caught them with one hand.

"Gotta be quick." Jake said with a smile, looking at Dare with one eye. The other was covered by the long strand of hair that always hung over his forehead. "Here, I'll trade you."

She handed him the beer and he gave her the keys. Dare crawled back into the car and put the key into the ignition, flipping on the radio. WCSC, the only rock station Larkspur picked up, was the only station allowed on Shane's radio. Creedence sang about a bad moon rising and she left it.

Dare leaned on the Mustang's door, looking around. Being a Saturday, the path was already full of life. She had weaseled an extra day off work to come, on Shane's request. The path was used by people from Shadow Hills and West Lake, too, so on a weekend, it rarely went unused.

Shane sat on the hood of Billy's car, talking and laughing with both Chris and Billy. He motioned for her to come over and she nodded, but didn't move. Another car pulled up beside Shane's and she peered inside. It was a small car, piled with people. At least six in the back and four in the front.

"Hey!" The guy that climbed out the driver's side door could have been Shane's older, heavier twin and Dare recognized him immediately although they'd never officially met.

"Hey, Buddy!" Evan called from where he sat on the Chris' hood, drinking a beer. "Shane! Buddy's here!"

"Hey." Shane hopped off the hood and walked toward him, pausing to put an arm around Dare.

"I want you to meet somebody," he told her. She followed him, cautious.

"Told you I'd make it." Buddy clapped Shane on the back. "I brought the gang and everything. Hope you don't mind."

"Finally, a *real* party," Evan said from behind them.

"Buddy, this is Dare Chandler," Shane said. "Dare, this is my brother, Buddy."

Such a formal introduction from Shane, and meeting Buddy, left her taken aback.

"Hey there." Buddy nodded toward her. He was tall, taller than Shane, with the same blonde-blue-eyed look. He wore a denim jacket and jeans, and he looked normal, not like the hardened criminal she'd expected. His hair was cut at a respectable length and he was clean-shaven. "You look familiar."

"I'm Nick Chandler's sister," Dare said, glancing at Shane.

"Oh. Hey, yeah, I knew him. I'm real sorry," Buddy said.

Dare nodded, feeling that familiar heat in her chest. "Thanks."

"So, you two an item now, or what?" Buddy eyed the two of them standing together. Dare glanced up at Shane and he never took his eyes from her face.

They'd never discussed it and she didn't want to. Until then, she'd gotten away with not mentioning it at all.

When Shane didn't reply, Dare shrugged and looked at Buddy. "Yeah," she replied. "Something like that."

"Well, that's cool." Buddy grinned and nodded.

"Let's party!" Chris popped the top on a beer he'd shaken up. It sprayed all over his wife, Teri, who threw a can at his head and missed. It broke everybody up.

* * * *

The stars looked like studded diamonds on a backdrop of black velvet. Dare snuggled closer to Shane and he put his arm around her. A sliver of the moon sliced through the sky. The breeze was chilly, but the fire was warm.

"You're going to catch cold if you don't put your jacket back on," Dare said. Shane was using his leather as a pillow.

"Nuh-uh." He shook his head, eyes turned upwards toward the sky. "I've got you to keep me warm."

Dare laid her head back down on his chest, her eyes half-closed, comfortable with the rise and fall of Shane's chest. The party was still going, but it was more subdued. Everyone had consumed a ton of beer, herself included. She felt sleepy and relaxed.

Beverly and Billy sat by the fire, talking quietly, Beverly toying with the loose ends of thread hanging from the holes in the knees of his jeans. Chris and his wife were in the front seat of his car. Jake, Evan, Meg, Suzanne and Buddy were sitting on the Mustang's hood. Dare ignored the dirty looks Beverly threw her way.

"Is Suzanne going out with Evan?" Dare inquired quietly.

"I'm not sure what's going on there," Shane admitted, the rumble of his voice against her ear. "I think she took Nick's death kind of hard and he's trying to pick up the pieces? I hear she isn't coping real well..."

"Are any of us?" Dare asked sleepily, closing her eyes. "Isn't that what these parties are for? So we can all forget about Nick?"

"Not for me," Shane said finally, and she felt his hand on her hair, his touch soft and soothing. "For me, it's kind of a way to remember him. He made all of this more fun."

"I wouldn't know." Dare opened her eyes. "I was never invited."

"Yeah, you were." Shane rolled carefully over on his side, moving his leather under her head, looking at her in the light of the fire. "You were invited, you were just too much of a princess to come."

"Not true!" She scoffed. "I was only invited in backhand ways, and only by *you*. Nick never once asked me to come along."

"He didn't want you along," Shane told her honestly. She stared at him.

He explained. "Nick was always yelling at me about asking you. Don't you get it? *I* was the one who asked because *I* was the one who cared about you being left out. Nick didn't want you along because Nick didn't want us to get involved. Like this, or even as friends."

"That's not true." Dare laughed a little nervously. "That can't be true."

"It is," he said. "He used to tell me to keep my hands off his little sister, and I used to tell him you'd see me in hell before you let me near you. It was kidding, but it was serious, too. Nick wanted to be my friend, but Nick wanted you to stay his sweet, innocent little sister."

"I'm not—I wasn't—his little sister," Dare told him. "We were twins. Okay, he was the older twin—by about two minutes."

"He thought of you as little. It was like..." Shane paused, careful and searching. "It was like he grew up, but you were supposed to stay young and innocent forever."

Her head felt funny, light, and her mind refused to focus. "He didn't say that." Shane shrugged and Dare looked at him. "He really said that?"

He nodded.

"I always thought it was you," Dare said with a little laugh. "I always thought..."

"I know." He rubbed his thumb along her jaw. "But that doesn't matter now, because you're here."

Dare didn't answer him. She realized the conclusions he'd drawn about their "relationship," and she admitted they were the things she wanted him to feel about her. It was all going according to plan, but somehow it didn't feel right.

"Come here." Shane pulled her into his arms and sat. Dare snuggled up, but Shane stood, pulling her with him. She stumbled slightly, feeling dizzy. Shane laughed, catching onto her waist.

"You're drunk," he said.

"I'm not." She shook her head but stopped because the world had started spinning. "So are you going to tell me where you were last week?"

He had been gone for three days with no word, and she didn't want to admit to him or to herself how strange it felt not to have him around now.

Shane's mouth moved near her ear. "I told you. I was hunting."

"You're up to something," she said, lifting her face so she could see his eyes. "I know you."

“So are you.” His smile spread slowly and he hid it in her hair. “But I don’t ask and you don’t tell.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked innocently, resting her head below his chin.

“There’s a big stretch of land up near Ottawa Falls. You know it?”

She nodded, her eyes closed as they swayed together. “Isn’t that Native land?”

“I give...tours... up there.” He chuckled. “Yeah, I’m a tour guide. Let’s call it that.”

She snorted, shaking her head. “Hunting on Native land is illegal.”

“I know,” he acknowledged, pressing himself more fully against her, his hands moving to her lower back, pulling her in to him. “But considering your current employment status, I doubt you’re going to run to Buck Thompson about it.”

“I assume they pay you?” she asked, ignoring his comment.

“A thousand a trip.”

She gave a low whistle, looking up at him. “Why you?”

“Because I’m good at it doing things without getting caught.” He grinned.

“That I believe,” she said with a short laugh. “But why would they want to hunt on Native land?”

“More game,” he reminded her, shifting his weight as they moved, his thigh pressing between hers, making her gasp. “But I think it’s more the thrill of it.”

“Thrill of the forbidden?” She murmured, her face close to his, their breath mingling.

“Yeah,” he breathed, groaning when she wiggled closer against him. “I had a guy couple months ago who didn’t even take a rifle. Said he was looking for artifacts.”

Her fingers moved through his hair as they rocked. "You mean, like arrowheads?"

"I guess." He shrugged, lowering his mouth to her neck, nuzzling her hair out of the way.

"He ever find anything?" she asked, moaning softly as his tongue made slow circles below her ear.

"I didn't ask. He didn't tell."

Shane's mouth on her neck, his breath in her ear, made her dizzy with wanting and she tried to fight it, but she was losing.

"I was set up," she told him, changing the subject. "They thought I was doing something I...I wasn't."

He stopped, pulling back to look at her, his eyes searching her face. "You really didn't do it?"

She smiled sadly. "Can you see me as a high-priced call girl? Having sex for cash? Two thousand a night?"

He snorted laughter, shaking his head. "Hell, I can't even get past second base with you..." Then his tone turned serious, his eyes concerned. "Jesus, Dare...wasn't there any way to prove you didn't do it?"

She ran a hand through his hair, shaking her head. "You of all people should know how hard it is to prove a negative."

"You've got a point there," he agreed, frowning.

They grew quiet again as Bob Seger sang about night moves from the Mustang's speakers and Dare swayed in Shane's arms, resting her cheek on his shoulder.

"Hey, Suzanne, turn it up!" Dare called and Suzanne nodded, getting up.

"Looks like you're having a good time," Suzanne called.

Dare smiled at her, watching her with Evan. She knew how much Suzanne had cared about Nick but she fervently hoped Evan would win her over. He was sweet and gentle and his insistence was good for her.

"Hey." Shane tilted her chin up. "Are you happy?"

"Right now?" Dare linked her arms lightly around his neck. He nodded, eyes serious. "Right now, right this second, I'm happier than I've been in a long time." She realized it went beyond the words—she was telling the truth, not just putting on the act. It scared her.

"You make me happy," Shane told her, swallowing. "I don't let people get close. Nick got closest, I guess."

It sobered her up, thinking about Nick, remembering what she was doing, and what she was planning to do. But hating Shane while he was holding her, smiling at her, touching her, was nearly impossible. Her feelings had changed somehow—they had changed drastically while she was shoving them into corners and not thinking about them.

"Maybe that's why it's me then." Dare searched his eyes. "Because of Nick."

"It's because you're you," Shane insisted.

Dare's smile was soft and slow.

She closed the gap between them, easily.

Chapter Ten

"Hey, Sarge." Dare pet Will Cougar's German Shepard on the head. Sarge had been around a long time and he was getting old. He thumped his tail on the wooden floorboards and licked her hand. Dare went past him, into the store.

"You trying to kill your dog, Cougar?" Dare asked. Will was leaning over the counter with the Shadow Hills Journal open in front of him. "It's freezing out there."

"Old Sarge can handle the cold." Will looked up at her, smiling. "He's looking out for the place. What brings you by?"

"Cough drops." Dare headed toward the medicine aisle. "Dad caught a cold. He always does when the weather hints at snow."

"It's expecting to storm," Will said as she came back with a bag of Ricola.

"Did you read that in the paper?" Dare tossed the cough drops on the counter and Will picked it up.

"Nope," he said, ringing them up. "I read it in my joints. We're gonna get snow before the week is out."

"You've got to be getting old if you can feel the weather in your joints," Dare said in mock-awe. Cougar rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, they're getting ready for my funeral right now, in fact," Will said. "Any day now. You never know when I'm going to kick the old proverbial bucket."

Will bagged the cough drops, his eyes softening as he handed them to her. "So, how are you doing?"

Dare shrugged. "I still miss him, but I'm getting out a lot more."

"With the wrong people if you ask me." Will shook his head. "It's a funny thing about you and Shane. Up until Nick died you hated his guts."

"I didn't *hate* him," Dare said, feeling uncomfortable.

"*Hated* him," Will repeated with a nod. "It's a strange thing. Has people talking."

"Good," Dare muttered.

"Is that the goal?" Will raised an eyebrow. "To get people talking about you?"

"Why does there have to be a goal?"

Will shrugged. "It's just funny, that's all. Shane doesn't seem like your type."

"I don't think Shane is anybody's type," Dare said. "Especially in this town."

When Dare stepped back out onto Cougar's front step, Sarge whined to be petted. Dare scratched him behind his ears for a minute, staring out at the skyline. Will was right. There was going to be a storm by the end of the week. Maybe sooner.

* * * *

"Julia?" Dare stepped cautiously into the kitchen. She found her stepmother sitting at the table, head cradled in her arms, crying softly. "Julia, what happened?"

Dare put her car keys on the table. Julia didn't raise her head. It had to be something major. Julia didn't cry unless it was. Dare felt queasy.

"Julia, are you okay?"

Julia looked up, wiping her eyes.

"Is Dad okay?" Dare asked, a horrible thought occurring to her.

"He's fine." Julia shook her head, not looking at Dare. "I didn't hear you come in. It's just the delayed reaction, I guess. I was reading the paper there." Julia pointed to an article. "And it just hit me."

Dare picked the paper up, skimming the article. It was about the capture of the Clinton Grove Cat.

"Oh," Dare said softly.

"It's the cat," Julia said. She looked haggard. "It's that fucking cat." Dare stared at her agape. Julia drew a shaky breath, wiping away the last traces of tears. "How can you send a cat to prison?"

"Can't even put him on trial," Dare said, smiling weakly.

"God punishes the wicked," Julia murmured. "But what about things like this? Why do bad things happen to good people?"

"I don't know," Dare admitted, swallowing past a lump in her throat. "I wish I did."

Julia put her head back down. When Dare left for work that night she was still sitting there, staring out of the kitchen window.

* * * *

"Do you want me to stay with you?" Shane asked when people started moving away from the casket. Dare shook her head.

She'd thought about it herself often enough. The temptation to sink into nothingness, to think about nothing ever again, that seemed comforting. The only thing that kept her sane, alive, was the hate. It burned, forcing its way to the surface like a living thing, demanding to be seen, to be tended. She wished she had an outlet for it, somewhere for it to go...

"The whole world gets turned upside down when stuff like this happens and nobody seems to have any explanations."

Cougar's words came back to her while she stood in the cemetery looking at yet another coffin, Shane's arm brushing hers.

She didn't have what I do, Dare thought, looking at Suzanne's casket. She didn't have anyone to tell her what happened to Nick.

Dare had thought a lot about it—just taking too many pills, a razor blade in the bathtub, her brother's gun...but she'd never actually done anything. She couldn't. She had a burning need to know what really happened.

Suzanne, Nick, Tommy—everyone was gone. Did she believe it was a bobcat? She had to, didn't she? It had been confirmed—it had been in all the papers. Cat gone, tourists please come back. Well, not in so many words. The injustice of it filled her, thinking about Suzanne on the night of the party, tall, blonde, smiling, a little drunk. And then she had gone home and killed herself.

Dare closed her eyes, the blood thickening in her head, and she leaned against Shane. He put his arm around her, holding her tightly.

She looked at him, knowing she'd waited too long and hated herself for it. It would be hard now, even harder, but she'd lost so much more and her conviction was greater.

"Are you sure?" Shane asked. "You could come to my house. My dad won't be there."

"I'll meet you there." She turned and walked toward the Jeep.

She wasn't going to go to Suzanne's. She couldn't bear to. And she had things to take care of before going to Shane's. Dare looked back at him when she was through the gates. He stood under the overcast sky, hands in his pockets, looking across the

cemetery. Something twinged inside her. He looked worse than he had at Nick's funeral. Worse than he had in a long time. She shoved the sympathy quickly away—SNIP—and got into her car.

She had to find out the truth. If she didn't do anything, she was going to end up like Suzanne—so lost in *why* she'd drown. Dare was going to find out *who* and go from there.

* * * *

It had stayed closed for two months. Dare put her hand on the doorknob, trying to remember exactly how it looked. It had been too long. Her palms were sweating, and her heart thudded heavily in her chest. The poster of *Murphy's Law*...Dare felt like she was going to be sick. Her dream and his sightless eyes, the blood, the—SNIP

She turned the doorknob and shoved the door quickly open. It was dark and she felt for the light switch. It was there on the wall, like it always had been, and no hand came out to cover hers in the darkness as she flicked it on.

Light flooded the room and Dare took a step back.

Oh Nick...

It was in suspended animation. Everything waited for Nick to come back. All the things she had dreamed about, and more—the models, his posters, his skateboard, his skis—all there. The picture of Shane and Nick stood still on the night table. A hairdryer and jar of Bedhead gel sat on the dresser. Dare closed her eyes for a moment, fighting tears. It was hard, still so hard, and so unfair, oh, nothing was ever fair...

Dare made her way toward his dresser and knelt in front of it, running her hand along the wood. Tears blurred her vision. She opened the bottom drawer of his dresser

and stared dully at his sweaters. Won't be needing them this winter, she thought, and shivered.

She lifted them carefully out of the drawer and found what she was looking for. She pulled it up and looked at it—Nick's gun, a .45 automatic. It was the first real gun, aside from a rifle, she'd ever fired. The irony that she had to use her brother's gun, instead of her own, didn't escape her.

Dare picked up the box of ammunition he kept with it and put it in her pocket. She really only needed one bullet and the thought startled her. She hefted the gun in her hand, feeling something flutter inside of her. The heavy way it sat there made her stomach tighten.

For Nick, she reminded herself, looking at the smiling face in the picture frame. And Suzanne and Tommy. She knew, most of all, it was for herself. Beyond everything that had happened and regardless of what might happen to everyone else in Larkspur, she was doing it for herself.

She glanced at her reflection in the mirror, seeing the talisman hanging around her neck. Taking it off, she set it on his dresser, knowing that after today, there wouldn't be any more bad dreams.

When she left, the door stayed open.

* * * *

"So, what do you think?" Shane opened his arms wide. "It's not much, but I call it home." He shut the door behind them. Dare looked around, setting her purse on his dresser. It was dark, the only light coming from the full moon shining through the window, and she made out the shapes of a bed, a dresser, the window. That was all.

"It's a little dark to tell." Dare turned to him. "Want to turn on a light?"

"Can't." He gave a short laugh, moving in front of her. "Dad didn't pay the bill. They tend to frown on that."

"We have to talk," she said suddenly.

Shane grew quiet, looking at her. "Okay...so talk."

Dare folded her arms over her chest, cupping her elbows. She didn't know how to start and didn't know if she could.

"What is it?" Shane prompted, moving in close, slowly running his hands down her upper arms. "Is it Suzanne?"

"Yes." She sighed and shook her head. "No. It's Suzanne and Nick and Tommy. It's everything."

She didn't look at him. She could see his outline in the dimness and that was all she wanted to see. She didn't want to have to meet his eyes, see his concern. As much as she thought she understood him, she still didn't trust him. She didn't think she was capable of trusting him or anyone anymore.

He touched her cheek, rubbing the backs of his fingers there. "I know."

"Yeah." She jerked away from him and sat on the bed. "Yeah, you *do* know, don't you?"

He sat beside her, close. "I think I know how you feel."

Did he? Did he really?

"Do you still think I hate you?" Dare asked, looking at him. She could only see one side of his face—the other was in shadow. Light and dark, Jeckyll and Hyde.

"I..." He hesitated and then reached out for her. Dare felt herself go weak against him, unable to fight it, and not really wanting to.

He held her for a minute, and she heard his heartbeat through his shirt. "I think you believe you still hate me."

"Then why am I here?" Dare asked him...and herself.

"I don't know." His breath was warm on her throat. "You tell me."

"I..." She paused and Shane nuzzled her neck, his mouth doing strange things to her insides. "I don't know, either."

"Yes, you do." He held her at arms length. Again, she saw the dichotomy on his face in the moonlight. "You just won't admit it."

"Admit what?"

"You want me." He pulled her back to him, roughly. "You want me just as much as I want you. You always have."

She didn't deny it as his mouth covered hers. Instead, she put her arms around him and gave in to herself.

His hands were large and rough, eager, roaming over her body through her clothes. She felt what he had been holding back, everything they'd both been covering up. There were no words, but they weren't necessary. She knew it all in the way he tugged at her jacket and unbuttoned her blouse, the way she ran her hands up under his t-shirt, slipping it over his head, the way she fumbled with his jeans and made him moan against her throat when she touched him through the denim.

There was no time for tender exploration. They were all eager, greedy mouths and hands, aching to find their way together at last. The rest of their clothes found their

way to the floor and they tumbled together on the bed, the heat of their bodies both a shock and an urgent reminder of their need.

She couldn't get enough of him, her hands rough, gripping his hair as her mouth slanted over his, raking her nails down his back as he rocked against her, pressing his cock hard against the softness of her belly as they rolled. The steel heat of it made her dizzy with wanting him.

Their kiss went on and on, the slick urgency of their mouths together making her thighs wet. She couldn't deny it anymore. Her body responded like it never had before, her nipples hardening under his fingers, her legs quivering as she wrapped them around his waist, aching to pull him into her.

He said her name, close to her ear, and she kissed the side of his throat as a reply. His hand moved low over her belly, reaching her in the darkness, finding soft, moist flesh parting easily under his fingers. She moaned and thrust against him, her movements jerky, abandoned, just pure frustrated lust.

"Shh," he murmured, quieting her hips with his, pinning her to the bed. He kissed his way down her neck, her breasts, his tongue making circles around her nipples. She writhed beneath him, wild, growling, but he held her hips tight in his grip as his mouth pressed between her legs.

"Oh no, no," she whispered, wanting to deny him, deny the sensation, her feeling, but she couldn't. His tongue found her, licking, sucking, hungry and eager between her thighs, and Dare bucked, grasping his hair in both hands, working her pussy against his mouth.

“Oh please,” she begged him, hovering on the brink of disaster, a painfully pleasurable moment, aching to go over and holding herself back. “Please, please!”

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. His mouth was full of her flesh, her juices covering his face, and he didn’t let her go, his tongue lashing at her clit, forcing her further toward the edge.

“Stop,” she gasped, pulling his head back, hearing him groan.

“You want it,” Shane murmured, his fingers finding her instead, rubbing her pussy, making her gasp and shift on the bed.

“No,” she whispered, shaking her head as he moved between her thighs, pinning her with his weight.

“Yes.” He kissed her, hard, and she tasted herself on his tongue. “Yes,” he said again as she reached for him, guiding him in spite of herself. “Yes.” He moved slowly forward, and Dare gasped, breathless, as their bodies connected for the first time.

“No,” she moaned, and felt like crying as she pressed her face against his neck with a whimper.

“Oh god, Dare,” he murmured, buried in her now, his breath hot against her cheek. “Oh my god, yes, yes, say yes...”

“No,” she insisted, clutching at him anyway with her arms, her thighs.

“Tell me.” He waited, poised above her, his cock throbbing. She could feel his pulse between her thighs. “Say yes.”

She groaned, sliding her hand down between them, finding the place where their flesh joined, searching in the wetness with her fingers. He grabbed her hands in his and

pressed them above her head, his full weight on her then, his mouth murmuring against hers.

“Say yes, Dare. Say yes.”

“Oh fuck,” she breathed as he moved, just slightly, inside of her, a shift of his weight. “Shane...”

“Yes!” He kissed her, his tongue thrusting but his cock still, an enormous pulse between her legs. She whimpered and squeezed him tight, her hips moving in spite of herself.

He raked his teeth along her jaw, bit at her ear, making her squeal and twist against him. “You want it. Tell me.”

“Oh god,” she murmured, closing her eyes against the admission. “Oh yes... oh yes, yes. Shane, yes!”

He gave a low growl, pulling back and thrusting deep. She lifted her hips to his as he began to move, matching him with her breath, her movements. He let her wrists go and she wrapped herself around him, pulling him in deeper, wanting more, more...

She couldn't get enough as they rocked together in the darkness, and they tore at each other, clawing, biting, driving each other deeper. When he rolled, pulling her on top of him, his cock never leaving the slick wetness of her body, she didn't miss a beat, rolling her hips on him until he begged her for release.

“Dare,” he whispered her name, holding tight to her hips.

“Yes,” she murmured, seeing his face in light and shadow as he shifted and moved inside of her, and when she reached out to touch his cheek, he turned and kissed her palm. “Shane... Shane...”

And then he was on top of her again in one swift movement, driving her into the bed. She slid her hands down the hard, ropey muscles in his arms as he held himself above her. She reached down between them, finding the aching, sensitive bud of flesh, begging for more. Rubbing it, she met his eyes, her breath coming faster and faster as the delicious friction between them escalated, swelling delightfully with every thrust.

“More,” she pleaded, arching her back beneath him. “Oh, fuck, yes, yes, fuck me hard, harder! Please!”

He groaned, driving into her, long, deep strokes that moved her dangerously closer and closer to the headboard but she didn’t care. She was lost in the buck and thrust and heat of him as their bodies slapped together in the darkness. Her fingers slipped down and felt him sliding into her, that place where they were joined like a separate, new heartbeat between them.

“Close,” she whispered, feeling that sweet ride upward reaching a sudden peak. It felt as if her mind exploded, her body filling with a hot, bright light, moving through her like quicksilver. She gasped, clutching him blindly, hearing his ragged breath in her ear. He whispered her name, moving roughly against her, his body shuddering under her hands, and then he was still.

She held him there when he went to move, feeling him against her, slippery with sweat. She stroked his dampened hair, her eyes closed, and she tasted the tears in the back of her throat.

I love him, she thought suddenly, feeling his heart beating in rhythm against her own.

I love him.

She cried silently.

* * * *

I have to find Nick. I know he's here.

She ran through the cemetery in the snow in bare feet, but she didn't feel the cold at all. She saw her breath, though, and felt a stitch in her side as if she had been running a long time.

Glimpsing him slipping behind one of the mausoleums, she set off again, holding her side against the ache there as she ran. It was dark, but there was a full moon to see by, and the sky was littered with stars.

Nick! She saw him, running away from her, and she called to him, but he didn't turn. She came around a tree, knowing he would be there, but he wasn't. It was Shane, kneeling next to Nick's grave, yellow rose petals scattered across the snow.

Shane? Kneeling, she touched his shoulder and felt it shaking with his sobs. She felt tears coming, too, and went to hold him. He turned to her and she saw blood on his hands, and when she turned her face up to his—

It was Sam, wrapping his arms around her and holding her so tightly she couldn't breathe. She tried to scream, but she had no voice. Struggling, she pushing against him, twisting in his arms. He called to her as she began to run, finding her way through the cemetery, looking for a way out.

Pretty girl.

Dare screamed, stepping away from the figure coming toward her. It was the talisman from her dream come to life, wild white hair and silver eyes in the moonlight, a mouth full of razor sharp teeth.

The wild white-haired man chased her, croaking: Pretty girl. Here, pretty girl.

* * * *

Snow fell, the first snow of the year, blanketing Larkspur in white. Dare sat on the window ledge, watching the streetlights flicker. The gun, lying next to her on the ledge, glinted dully in the streetlight's glow. Her purse, its temporary carrying case, sat next to her on the floor.

Dare looked back at Shane. He snores, she thought with a small smile. He clasped the pillow beneath his head, covers kicked off, wearing only a pair of boxer-briefs. Dare, looking at him and then at the gun, felt her stomach tighten. It was coming full circle now.

Except she hadn't planned on a lot of things. Like Tommy. Or Suzanne. Or Shane, for that matter. Things like falling in love with him. Oh, no, falling in love had been the last thing on her mind in the beginning. That wasn't part of the plan at all.

She'd been sitting there for hours, after her horrible nightmare, watching Shane sleep.

What if I'm wrong? What if he doesn't know, what if Nick lied to me about where he was going, whatifwhatif...

Now, with the gun in her hand and the threats forming on the tip of her tongue, she felt afraid—afraid he would call her bluff and, if he did, anything might happen.

She felt trapped. She'd set out to trap him, and it had been easy, using his desire for her. What else did she have to hold him now, to get him to tell her, except the piece of metal in her hand? And now she loved him. She knew she could never pull the

trigger, as she once believed she could. Swallowing hard, watching him stir, she knew she was going to have to give the performance of her life.

"Dare?" Shane sat up. Her heart fluttered in her chest as he stood and stretched. "Whatcha doing?"

"It's snowing." She touched the gun and looked out the window.

"You're wearing my t-shirt," he said, amused. It came to mid-thigh on her.

"I was cold."

He put his hands on her shoulders and bent to look out the window. "I hope it doesn't storm," he said and sighed.

"Shane." Dare picked up the gun. He hadn't seen it yet and it was now or never. He moved away from the window so he could see her face. "Who killed Nick?"

"What?" He took a startled step back.

She turned and leveled the gun at him. "I know you know."

Shane stared at the gun, jaw dropped, eyes wide.

"Who killed him?" She couldn't back down now. It was too late for that. "If you don't tell me, I swear to god, I'm going to kill you."

"He was my best friend." His voice never wavered but his eyes remained fixed on the gun. "I didn't kill him."

"You know something." Dare paused. "And you're going to tell me."

"Listen, Princess." He took a step toward her. "You don't have to be so dramatic. Questions don't have to be asked at gunpoint in order to get an answer. Come on...put it down and we'll—"

"Stop!" It was the voice she used with a perp, forceful and commanding. He hesitated. "If you move one more inch I'm going to blow your head right off your shoulders."

He was still, so still. Only his eyes moved, from the gun, to her, and back. Dare thought of the bright, summer day they'd met, thought of the dog, the times she'd wished it would have killed him. This was better—so much better. The power was heavy in her hands and it was *good*.

"Okay." Shane threw his arms wide. "Go ahead, Dare. Shoot me."

She looked at him, thoughtful. She could—for Nick and Suzanne and Tommy—for the things Shane had done over the years. The memories flooded in, the thousands of times Nick had gone out with Shane and "the gang" instead of her, the *first* time Nick had gone off with Shane instead of her.

Her finger fluttered on the trigger.

"Kill me." Shane let his arms drop to his sides, defenseless. "If it solves anything for you, go ahead and do it."

She hesitated in the pale light from the window and then he took a step toward her.

"Stop!" she cried, seeing Shane standing up on the bluff, holding his arms out to her. She saw him—lying under the stars, sitting on the hood of the Mustang in the fire light, up in the treefort, moving gently with her tonight...

Shane took another step toward her.

"Stop." Dare's voice wavered. "I mean it."

"Do it." He took the barrel of the gun and placed it against the hollow of his throat. "Shoot me."

Dare's eyes widened as she looked at the pulse beating there beneath his skin.

"Do it!" he cried, and she looked into his eyes. They were daring her, pleading with her, to pull the trigger.

"Shane, don't." Dare shook her head. His hand covered hers, the gun. "Stop it."

"DO IT!" His finger moved over hers on the trigger, and he squeezed gently. "DO IT!"

"STOP!" Dare pushed his hand away, pulling her own hands away from the gun at the same time, suddenly hating the familiar feel. Shane caught it easily. Dare covered her mouth with shaking hands, her breath coming in short gasps, horrified as she looked at him, hefting the gun in his hand.

She looked at the gun, resting in the palm of his hand, the barrel pointed towards her. She looked at him and his eyes glinted in the light.

"Nick's," Shane noted, looking back at the gun. He clicked the safety and placed it on the dresser beside him.

"I..." She was unable to say any more, and she turned away. In the mirror mounted over the dresser, she saw her own reflection, the moonlight throwing shadows, creating a dichotomy. Light and dark.

"Are you okay?" Shane asked, and his simple concern started her sobs.

"Hey." He pulled her in to him. Dare pressed herself against him fiercely, unable to fully comprehend the magnitude of what had happened—or had almost happened. He pulled her down onto the bed, rocking.

"I—" Dare choked over her words, moving away from him on the bed. "I'm sorry."

They were the only words that would come to her groping mind. They recalled Shane's apology to her and she covered her face, unable to look at him.

"I know." Shane's hand was on her hair, and that was all he said. It was all he had to say. Dare's hands fell away. He did know. The understanding was in his eyes, his touch.

Finally, he said, "I knew what it came down to when I got involved with you. I don't even think you knew for sure yourself, but I knew. Either I was going to tell you, or I was going to lose you. It was that simple."

"You couldn't... you couldn't have known," she breathed.

"I knew." He laid back on the bed with a small groan, throwing an arm over his eyes. Dare reached out and touched him with trembling hands. He peeked out at her and then let his arm drop away.

"Okay." Shane drew a shaky breath. "Okay, you're right. I was with Nick that night. I know who...what...killed him."

Dare drew her knees up, pulling his t-shirt over them.

Shane sat up and leaned back against the wall. "Sure you want to hear this?"

Dare nodded, but she wasn't sure now. Looking into his eyes, reading his expression, she wasn't sure at all.

"I'll tell you," Shane said. "But let's straighten something out first. I'm not telling you because of Nick, and I'm not telling you because you pulled a fucking gun on me."

Shane looked at it for a moment sitting in the dresser and shook his head.

He looked back at Dare. "I'll tell you for the same reason I would've told you if you'd just simply asked me. I'll tell you because I love you, and it's eating you up inside."

Dare blinked at him but didn't reply.

"And because it's eating me up too." He sighed. "You aren't going to believe me anyway—I wouldn't believe me if I were you. But I'll tell you."

He took a deep breath, and then began.

Chapter Eleven

It was a dare.

The best—or worst, depending on your perspective—dare when they were kids was staying in the graveyard overnight. Shane and Nick were the only two who'd ever actually stayed out in the cemetery the full night.

"Bet you both two-hundred bucks you wouldn't do it now!" Chris said.

It wasn't really the money. Shane had just never been able to resist a dare.

He looked at Nick, and Nick had grinned back at him with a nod. "You're on!" Nick said. "Let's go."

They all piled into Shane's Mustang. Chris' car was in the shop and Billy had thrown a rod on his Mercury. Going on ten o'clock, Shane pulled up along the eastern fence. The gates were always locked after eight. John Evans made sure of that.

Tossing his keys to Chris, Shane said, "If you mess her up, I'll mess up your face!"

"Yes, boss!" Chris snapped him a salute.

"Here." Nick handed Shane a six-pack. "We may need this."

"Good deal." Shane eyed the low fence. It was only chest-high, but the spikes running across the top were pointed and sharp.

"I'll go first." Nick zipped his jacket up. "Then you toss me the beer. After that, I could care less if you spear your nuts."

"Go screw, Chandler." Shane watched Nick put his foot on the first crossbar.

"I'm not into necrophilia." Nick grinned back at him as he swung one leg up so his foot was on top of the fence, between two of the spikes.

"You're a sick man!" Jake called from the car.

"You know it." Nick squatted on top of the fence, poised precariously above one of the spikes.

"Have a seat, Chandler!" Evan snorted laughter.

Nick jumped, hitting the ground and rolling. He stood up, unhurt, and gave Evan the finger. "Okay, now for the beer!"

Shane handed the six-pack through the fence and started to climb.

"Well, guys, I suppose we'll see you in the morning!" Chris called, heading toward the car. Shane hit the ground and stood up.

"I swear to god, Chris, if you mess that car up, I *will* kill you!" Shane called through the fence. From inside the car, Evan clicked the headlights on and off.

"If you're alive in the morning!" Billy called, exaggerating a mock-scary laugh. "Bwah-ha-ha-ha!"

Chris got into the driver's side of the Mustang. Shane watched as he started the car, put it in reverse, and backed it out onto the road.

"My car is going to be totaled," Shane lamented, watching Chris peel out and disappear toward town.

"Don't worry about it." Nick laughed. "He's only a little bit drunker than you are."

"You're a big help." Shane picked up the six-pack.

They made their way through the cemetery by the light of a full moon. Nick stopped by an old oak tree just beginning to lose its leaves and plopped himself onto a flat headstone.

"Have a seat." Nick nodded at the headstone next to him. Shane sat, placing the beer between them. "Here." Nick pulled two beers off the plastic ring and handed one to Shane.

"To life, man." Nick held his beer up, popping the tab. Shane lifted his and touched the can to Nick's.

"To friendship," Shane said.

"To sex," Nick countered with a grin.

Shane laughed, tipping his beer up. "I'll drink to that."

Nick leaned back with a sigh, resting his back against the tree, wedging his beer between his thighs. "Man, I want to get so shit-faced I won't be able to feel how damned cold this headstone is."

"What headstone?" Shane looked around, innocent. That cracked them up.

"God, you're one lucky son-of-a-bitch, Shane," Nick sighed. "You don't have to do anything but stay in this town and party for the rest of your life."

"Spare me that fate," Shane said, looking across the cemetery. In the moonlight, the headstones rose darkly, and tree branches threw shadows over the grass.

"Hell, this little town isn't so bad," Nick said.

Shane took a drink of beer; it was getting warm. "Not if you're Nick Chandler, I guess, but if you're Shane Curtis this little town isn't exactly Barnum and Bailey's."

"Life sucks sometimes, doesn't it?" Nick asked with a little sigh.

Shane agreed with him, finishing the beer off. They were quiet for a while, listening to the sound of the wind rustling the leaves above them.

"Ah damn, I gotta get up early tomorrow," Nick groaned, closing his eyes. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

"Up early on vacation?" Shane raised his eyebrows and tipped back his beer again.

"Yeah, about that..." Nick looked at his friend, his gaze then quickly falling to the ground. "I wanted to talk to you. Shane...I'm sick."

Shane looked sideways at him in the moonlight but didn't say anything.

"They pretty much did everything they could do for me back in California." Nick's smile was a small, sad thing. "I came home because... well, because I wanted to die at home."

"Fuck." Shane crumpled the can in his hand and threw it, hard. It clinked against one of the headstones. "Cancer?"

"Secondarily, yeah," Nick agreed.

Shane frowned. "What is it primarily?"

Nick sighed, his gaze finally moving up to Shane's face, meeting his eyes. "AIDS."

They sat together quietly again for a while, the wind picking up in the trees. It was Nick who started talking again. "I haven't told my parents yet. But Suzanne knows. And since she's an RN, she's agreed to do all the at-home stuff I'll need, when it, you know, gets bad. Gotta love a girl armed with a morphine drip."

Shane's snort of laughter was his only reply.

Nick took a gulp of his beer, looking off into the distance. "I know what you're thinking."

"Do ya?" Shane popped the top on another beer.

"Yeah." Nick crushed his empty can, looking over at his friend. "And you're right. It's true."

"I know." Shane's reply surprised them both.

"How long have you known?" Nick sounded like he'd gotten the wind knocked out of him.

"Since we were kids, I guess." Shane shrugged. What need was there to pretend? He'd suspected as much for a long, long time. "Who else knows?"

"Suzanne. She's actually known longer than anyone—since high school." Nick frowned. "No one else, not really. This town..."

"Tell me about it." Shane nodded, smiling grimly. "I'm glad you finally told me."

"But..." Nick hesitated, frowning. "You never felt the same way?"

"Man, you know I love you." Shane smiled and nudged his friend. "But I don't pitch for that team."

"I thought..." Nick laughed, shaking his head. "I thought you'd hate me if I told you. I thought everyone would hate me."

Shane nodded. "Some might," he agreed. "I don't."

"Well... thanks." Nick sighed deeply, leaning back against the tree again.

"She wouldn't hate you either, you know," Shane said after a moment.

"Who?"

Shane nudged him again. "You know who."

"Oh hell." Nick shook his head, frowning. "I fucked that up so bad. I love my sister, Shane...you know I do. But I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand seeing her with you."

"Well, now she hates me." Shane's voice only caught the slightest bit. "And she doesn't know the truth about her own brother. I'd say...yeah, I'd say it's pretty fucked up."

"I'm sorry." Nick sighed. "I'm gonna do my best to try and fix it."

"So you're gonna tell her you're gay?"

"Yeah." Nick tipped up his beer. "I am."

Shane crumpled a can and tossed it between his feet. "You can't protect her forever. She's not something you can lock up in some cage." Nick was silent and, to Shane, he seemed sad, tired and even a little bit ashamed.

Shane watched these emotions cross Nick's face, and finally Nick said, "I know...and I'm sorry. I wish now that I *had* told her. I wish I'd just let things happen between you two, because I think I've hurt her more than anyone will ever hurt her in her life, and god knows I never meant to. But you have to understand how much..."

Nick looked down at the ground, shaking his head. "I was a kid. I didn't even understand what I was feeling at first. And I thought, maybe, some day...you would..." He shrugged, meeting Shane's eyes. "I loved you. I won't apologize for that. I wanted you to love me back. I wanted you to love *me*, not *her*."

"I know." Shane kicked at the can between his feet. "Man, I'm sorry. You're like a brother to me. You know that."

"So...you're not into incest either?" Nick grinned.

Shane laughed. "I'm into women, I'm afraid. And one in particular, even after all these years, sad as that is."

"She's in love with you, too," Nick said, his voice cracking. "Always has been. Still is, Shane. That's the truth."

"She has a hell of a way of showing it," Shane scoffed.

"I won't be in the way anymore." Nick leaned his head back and looked up at the stars. "I promise you that."

Shane glanced at him, swallowing hard. "I'm afraid it's too late."

"Maybe not. You won't know if you don't try." Nick grabbed another beer.

"Water under the bridge." Shane shrugged. "And she's a little far away to be testing the waters."

Nick hung his beer between his knees for a minute, staring at the ground. "I think I can get her to come home for a while. Her circumstances...have changed."

"Quit playing matchmaker, all right?" Shane laughed, clapping Nick on the shoulder. "I'm more worried about you than I am about anything else. What's all this 'I'm dying' crap about? You're not gonna die. Not on my watch."

Nick smiled again, that sad, small smile, and shrugged. "Maybe not. Who knows?"

Shane leaned back against a tree with a sigh and closed his eyes. The beer was beginning to give him that warm, sleepy feeling it always did when he'd gone past his usual limit. Not that he set those too often or anything. Then he heard Nick's deep, even breathing and knew, from years of sleepovers, the sound of his friend asleep.

He began to think of Dare, knowing Nick was wrong about one thing—Dare would never love him now. Nick had definitely put a stop to that. He dozed off, listening to the gentle rustle of autumn leaves. The next thing he knew, Nick was trying to wake him up.

"Shane?" Nick shook him, hard. "Shane, are you awake?"

"I am now." He opened his eyes and stretched. He was stiff and cold. The wind had begun to blow harder. He checked his watch. It was almost one in the morning.

Christ, whose idea had this been anyway? he wondered groggily.

"Do you smell something?" Nick whispered.

Shane focused on his friend, squatting in front of him, shivering.

"Do I what?" Shane pulled his collar up.

"Smell something," Nick repeated. "I smell something...bad."

"No." Shane shook his head.

Then he did. The wind had shifted and now there was...something...

"Yeah," Shane corrected himself. "What is it?"

"I don't know, but it's coming from over there." Nick pointed into the distance.

Shane squinted, trying to see into the darkness. They were near the western fence, and all he could see were headstones and the dark, hulking shape of a family mausoleum. There was nothing moving but the wind in the trees.

"It's probably nothing." Nick hugged his arms across his chest and stood.

The smell was stronger now, and Shane had finally placed it. It was the decaying smell of something long dead.

"Maybe a dead coon or something?" Shane wondered out loud.

"Yeah, maybe." Nick shivered. "You think they'd know if we took off? I'm freezing!"

Shane stood, looking around. There was no sign of life. Everyone had gone back to the Starlite, or more likely, were out joy-riding in his Mustang. He was sobered up now and cold.

"Probably not." Shane stomped his feet on the ground, trying to get feeling back in them. "It was a stupid idea anyway. We're not twelve anymore. Let's get out of here."

Nick leaned over to grab the rest of the six-pack. Then they heard a low, scraping sound, and Shane turned to look at Nick.

"What the hell?" Nick cocked his head.

Shane shrugged, looking toward the mausoleum. The smell was worse now, riding the wind current in their direction.

"Is it coming from in there?" Shane pointed toward the mausoleum. Nick strained to see in the moonlight.

"Dare you, Shane." Nick grinned.

"Dare's go first," Shane said automatically.

"All right." Nick dropped the beer, motioning for Shane to follow him.

Shane came up behind Nick as he walked toward the mausoleum. In the moonlight, they could see the cement steps leading up to the door. The family name, carved in stone, was in the shadows.

Shane's fists clenched and he realized his heart was beating hard and fast. He thought of Joe Wilson, dead and buried, killed by what the authorities could only surmise was a bobcat, and decided he didn't want to pursue this any further.

"Nick, let's—" Shane started, but Nick nudged him, cutting off his words, pointing toward the door. It stood slightly ajar.

"No wonder it smells." Nick glanced over his shoulder at Shane. "These are supposed to stay shut. One of the vaults is probably cracked."

Nick reached out to push open the door, moving it only slightly—it was solid cement and extremely heavy.

And a hand closed over his wrist.

Nick yelped in surprise and fear and Shane cried out, too, taking an instinctive step back. Then Nick began to scream and Shane heard a crunching sound he only later understood was the sound of the bones in Nick's wrist being pulverized.

"Jesus." Shane's voice was barely a whisper as the moonlight slanted across the grass and into the doorway.

"Come on in." The clotted voice was full of humor, and Shane's mind was unable to quite grasp what he was seeing. A man, once, possibly, dressed comically in a three-piece suit. He got brief, split-second impressions—razor-sharp, pointed teeth, claws and wild whitish hair matted with blood. Nick struggled but he—it—held his wrist tightly in one clawed fist.

"Come on in," it said, its voice a rotten, chortling thing. "Join me for a bite." It patted its stomach, grinning, its voice low and full of grit.

For a moment Shane was frozen, feeling warmth spread through his crotch, although he wouldn't realize for hours that he'd wet himself—then he lunged at the thing. It was surprised only for a moment, and that was Nick's one chance. He took it, wrenching free of the things grasp while Shane wrestled it to the ground.

The thing's face opened up—a mouth gaping wider than anything Shane had ever seen, pointed teeth dripping with saliva as it bared them and prepared to take a bite out of Shane's flesh. He felt it coming, knew it was the end, but still he didn't let go, his hands closing around the thing's throat.

"No!" Nick's foot connected hard with Shane's side and he felt pain radiate through his ribs—cracked two, he found out later—and he groaned as he flew off the thing and landed hard on the ground. Nick's eyes were wide and wild as he attacked the man—thing—throttling it to the ground.

"Mine!" That's what it said. Shane knew he'd heard that clotted voice say, "Mine!" as it flipped Nick to the ground, just before its face opened up again and it buried its teeth into Nick's mid-section.

"Go!" Nick screamed. Impossibly, he was screaming at Shane, telling him, "Run, Shane, run!"

It happened too fast. Shane stood, only a few feet away, prepared to attack, to pull Nick to safety, but his friend was pinned on the grass beneath it and his screams had suddenly stopped. Long, sharp teeth sank into his flesh, and Shane shrank back, watching, horrified.

The bright moonlight showed the starkness of Nick's ribs as the thing stuffed innards into its mouth, swallowing. With one long claw, Nick's eyeball was popped out and tossed into its mouth. It chewed, eyes closed, savoring it as if it were a delicacy.

Shane stood and watched with dawning horror, jamming his fist into his mouth to stop a scream.

And then he ran.

He slipped once or twice, glancing over his shoulder, appalled as the thought crossed his mind—*what if it's still hungry?*

The thought spurred him on, and he flew over the fence, unable to block the image out of his mind of that thing taking his friend's insides out by the handfuls and shoving them into its mouth.

* * * *

"No." Tears streamed down Dare's face when he finished. "No! No!"

Dare rocked herself, shaking, her arms wrapped around herself, and he reached for her in the darkness.

"Why didn't he tell me?" she whispered against his chest, letting him rock with her.

He buried his face in her hair. "He didn't want to hurt you."

"Too late." She gave a short, pained laugh.

"And he was scared." He sighed, kissing the top of her head. "And so am I."

Dare tried to reconcile what he said with what she knew. Her brother—Nick, the star quarterback—he was gay? Even as she wanted to deny it, she knew it was true, that she had lived in denial about his feelings for Shane, the way Nick kept them apart, for too long. She shook her head, not wanting to admit it, that he had been afraid to tell her, had even feared revealing his illness. My god, he'd been dying. Her brother had been dying the night he was killed... The irony made her shake with anger, and her thoughts turned back to what Shane had told her about who...what...had killed him.

"Shane, are you sure...what you saw...?"

"I told you." He laughed. "I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"I... well..." Her mind groped for words that made sense. "It's kind of out there."

"Tell me about it." He moved away from her and Dare stood, arms folded, going to the window and looking out onto the street where the snow blew in the cold November wind.

"Maybe you just *thought* you saw this... thing?" She looked over her shoulder at him. "It was dark. And you were both drunk. "

"Not that drunk." Shane snorted. "I saw what I saw."

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

"Only you would suggest that." Shane laughed. "I can see it now. Me, Shane Curtis, little brother of Buddy Curtis, telling the Sheriff I'd seen my best friend eaten up by a monster in the cemetery at midnight..."

Dare frowned. "Well, if it was the truth—"

Shane snorted again, smacking his forehead with his palm. "They don't give a damn about truth in this stupid little town. If they did, that thing would be dead by now. The law in Larkspur ignores the truth. Everyone does. They're rather believe the illusion, the lie. It's more comforting. Why do you think your brother never told anyone he was gay?"

She turned back toward the window. "I can't believe..."

What? That her brother had been gay and never told her? That he was sick, and hadn't told her that either? That he'd been killed by some...what? The thing she couldn't believe was that she was no closer to the truth about what had taken her brother from her after confronting Shane than she had been before. She had gotten the truth, all right. Plenty of it—but it hadn't been anything she'd expected.

"This is a very small town, Dare. You know that as well as I do. They would have arrested me in a heartbeat."

"You're no saint, you know—"

"No, I know I'm no saint," Shane agreed, cutting her off and she could see the anger etched into his face even in the dimness. "But do you really think Chicago is the only place the law is corrupt?"

"Probably not," Dare admitted with a sigh, thinking of how defensive Buck Thompson had been that day, standing in her kitchen and telling her they were doing "everything they could."

Shane sighed. "Anyway, that's why I didn't go to the cops."

"What did you do?"

"I threw up." He swallowed, his head down, eyes closed. "And then I went to the Starlite and told the guys Nick got sick and went home. I don't think they believed me. And of course, they found Nick's body the next day..."

Dare stared at him. "Do they think you did it?"

"I don't know," he said bitterly. "They covered for me, anyway, even if they did. Lee did too. The Sheriff even questioned that spastic kid. I think they were looking for him to slip up, but he didn't. I don't know why I'm not in the state pen right now. There were beer cans out there with our fingerprints all over them, Dare. I don't know who picked them up. Maybe the cops didn't even bother to check for prints. Maybe I just got lucky. I don't know."

"But my brother...he wasn't so lucky."

He sighed. "I knew you wouldn't believe it, but Dare, I swear to god I'm telling you the truth."

Dare didn't look at him. She stared out into the empty road. Did she believe him?

looked like he was inside out the holes where his eyes had been in pieces like he got himself caught up in a meat grinder only thing that I know that can open doors is people shredded pieces the holes pieces his eyes

"Are you *sure* it wasn't human?" Dare rubbed her hands over her arms again.

"I don't know." He sounded tired and defeated. "I've never seen a human being with claws or teeth like that, but I've never seen an animal that wore three piece suits and walked upright and talked, so you tell me?"

Dare turned it over in her mind. As incredulous as it was, she knew *he* believed it, and for some reason, it rang true to her own ears.

"Where did it come from?" she asked, remembering the image from her dream.

Shane wiped a hand across his eyes. "I don't know. All I know is that it kills, and it *eats* what it kills."

Silence. Outside the snow had stopped falling. The wind whipped tree branches against the side of the house.

Dare stared out, her back to Shane. "We're going to kill it."

"What?" Shane asked from the bed.

Dare turned to face him, arms folded across her chest. "I want to find it and I want to kill it. Like you said, we can't go to the police, so we're going to have to do it ourselves."

"You don't know what you're saying." Shane sat upright, eyes wide. "I don't even know if it *can* be killed."

"I want to try," she said. "If you won't help me, I'll do it alone."

"You're crazy." Shane stared at her, incredulous. "Besides, maybe it's gone by now. There haven't been any more murders. Maybe it went where the food was better. Or maybe it hibernates in the winter."

She laughed softly. "Now who wants to believe the lie?"

Shane got up and came over to her, standing close. "We could both end up dead."

"I have to." She swallowed and looked out the window, her eyes overbright. "For Nick."

He touched her cheek, catching a falling tear with his finger. She looked at him, not caring about the tears, letting them fall.

"You sweet girl," he whispered. "You sweet, stubborn girl. Do you love me?"

Dare nodded, reaching out for him and he held her to him, tight.

He took a deep breath and whispered, "Okay, babe. We'll do it."

"Thank you," she said against his neck.

"I don't think you're going to be thanking me later," Shane replied. "Not after you see."

They stayed that way for a long time, alone in the darkness, taking comfort in the warmth they could find in each other's arms.

Part Three
Redemption

Chapter Twelve

"You're out of your mind!" Chris exploded, pushing away from the table. "If you think I'm going out on a manhunt for some—"

"Keep it down," Dare hissed, glancing around the Starlite. It was a busy night and she had to get back to work in five minutes.

"Listen to me, Chris," Shane said in a low voice. "All of you, listen to me."

They got quiet. Chris sat back down. Billy, who had been leaning against the pool table, took a chair and pulled it up to the table. Evan sat down next to Jake.

"I'm telling you the truth," Shane said. No one talked or even moved. "If we're going to kill this thing, we need you guys. We can't do this alone." Shane leaned back in his chair, surveying them.

"It's too much, man." Jake ran a hand through his long dark hair. "I'm not a kid anymore, Shane. I stopped believing in the boogey man a long time ago."

"I'm telling you the truth," Shane said again.

"Okay." Evan pushed his glasses up on his nose with a deep sigh. "Okay, if we do, and I'm not saying that we are, but if we *do* go...do we have a plan?"

"If you think I'm going in there without a gun in both hands, you're crazy!" Jake said, shaking his head, his dark hair falling back across his left eye..

"Come on, guys," Shane smirked. "Did you think I wouldn't bring guns?" He glanced at Dare and a low communication passed between them—if *guns can kill it*.

"Enough for all of us?" Billy asked.

"Plenty," Shane agreed.

"And ammo?" Evan asked. "Guns don't help if we don't have bullets."

"Ammo, too," Dare agreed. Shane looked at her, as surprised as everyone else. "Got it covered," she murmured.

"All right." Shane shrugged. "So what do you say? Are you guys in?"

They were silent. The Starlite's usual noise level seemed to rise—the clink of glasses and bottles, the low buzz of the T.V., the crack of billiard balls.

"For Nick." Billy was the first to speak and his voice was low. "I'm in."

"Count me in." Jake grinned. "Who knows, maybe we'll be heroes."

"Me, too." Evan sounded reluctant, sliding his glasses back up.

They all looked at Chris and he sighed, leaning back in his chair. "We're probably going to end up spooking at an owl and shooting each other—but, yeah, okay, I'm in."

Dare let out a sigh, closing her eyes. She'd never thought they would do it. She felt a hand in hers and opened her eyes to meet Shane's. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

"So when are we doing this thing?" Chris asked. "I'd like to have time to make out my will."

That broke everybody up. It wasn't that funny, but it relieved the tension.

"Tomorrow night." Dare looked around the table at all of them, wondering if they were doing the right thing.

"Enough of this, man, anybody up to a game of pool?" Billy asked. Evan agreed and Jake went to find a better selection on the juke, at Chris' request.

"Shane, this thing. This... monster?" Chris leaned his elbows on the table. "Are you sure? I mean, are you sure you weren't just hallucinating? You were pretty drunk when you showed up here that night."

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life," Shane told him.

"It's a little far-fetched, man," Chris said. "Either it was human or it wasn't. As far as I know, there isn't an in between."

"I don't know," Shane looked between Dare and Chris, shaking his head. "All I can say is that after you see it, if you see it, you can decide for yourself."

"Jesus." Chris put head in his hands. Then he looked up at Dare. "Do you believe him?"

"He believes it," she said, looking at Shane. "That's good enough for me."

"Duh-Dare?" Sam poked her shoulder and she jumped. "S- s-sorry, buh-but your b-b-break is over."

"Thanks, Sam." Dare stood. "I'll be there in a minute." Shane caught her hand and she looked at him.

"Tonight." He squeezed her hand.

She nodded and followed Sam, who glanced back to see if she was coming.

"P-p-problems?" Sam asked

"No," she said, taking her tray from Lee. "Why do you ask?"

"I huh-huh-heard him s-s-say suh-something about a muh-monster?"

Dare looked at him, startled. How much had he overheard?

"It wasn't anything," she assured him. "Just a private joke."

It was a feeble excuse and she smiled at him, trying to make it more convincing. He just looked at her.

"Well, got to get back to work," Dare said.

Sam nodded and she moved away. Ten minutes later, when she looked back at the bar, he was still watching her.

* * * *

"Where did you get them?" Dare stared at the pile of guns on his bed. "Never mind, I don't want to know."

Shane laughed, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind. There were four, no, five of them lying haphazardly on the threadbare bedspread. "None of them are loaded. But I have ammunition."

"I told you, I know where we can get more." Dare looked back at him and he gave her a puzzled look.

"Is that so?"

"Trust me." She turned in his arms, smiling.

"I do." He sighed. "But I can't help thinking about what's going to happen."

"We're going to kill it."

He snorted. "You're so sure of yourself."

"You want to back out?"

Shane hesitated and then shook his head. "No. I should have... I should have saved him, Dare. It... god, it should have been me."

Stunned, she looked at him and then hugged him fiercely. "Don't say that. Don't ever say that."

"It's just the truth."

"No."

"Yes!" He pushed away from her and she stumbled from the force, turning and striding to the window. Dare looked at him, running a hand through her hair. He was so solid, his arms crossed, hands cupping his elbows. His t-shirt pulled tautly across the hard muscles of his back, disappearing below the waistband of his Levis.

What could she say without being hypocritical? Hadn't she always wished him dead? She'd even threatened to kill him herself. Hadn't she thought the exact same thing? She had used him, hurt him and she now felt very small.

Yeah, but that was before...

Before what?

Before I realized I love him. Before I realized I've always loved him.

She'd once sworn she hated Shane Curtis, but she'd discovered the old saying, there's a fine line between love and hate, was very true. She had only to cross that line, and without even realizing it, already had. She loved Shane—more than she'd ever loved anyone in her life.

She came up behind him and leaned her cheek against his arm. They stayed that way for a moment, and then Shane drew a shaky breath and said, "Scott Summers was just twelve. You think you're going to live forever when you're twelve years old."

"It's not your fault." Dare put her arms around his waist. "You couldn't control what happened. You couldn't have stopped it with your bare hands. We don't even know if a bullet will kill it."

"I could have told someone." He wiped a hand across his eyes. "Last night, when you asked me why I hadn't told anyone, I realized for the first time what I'd done."

"What?"

He sighed. "I might as well have put guns to their heads and shot them, Dare. It probably would have been a lot quicker and less... painful. Here the cops were, looking in the wrong place for the wrong killer, and *I knew*."

He paused, closing his eyes for a moment and then finished. "I knew, but I didn't tell anyone. How selfish was that?"

"Human," Dare murmured. "Just human, that's all."

He turned and took her in his arms, seeking comfort, and she gave it to him, holding tight. Her kisses were soft, her hands caressing, and she let him get lost in her, lost in the moment, pushing away the reality of what might be.

"I want to go away with you." He nuzzled her neck, her ear, whispering. "I didn't tell you...but I bought a little place further up north. Used the money I got from my little hunting expeditions."

She smiled, nuzzling him back. "Were you planning on running away?"

"God, I want out of this town," he murmured, pulling her in closer. "Would you come with me?"

She nodded, closing her eyes and giving in. "Anywhere."

He kissed her then, his mouth soft, his tongue probing. She gave into that, too, arching against him, moaning softly when his thigh slid eagerly between hers.

He backed her up toward the bed and then broke their kiss, gasping, "Gotta move the guns."

"No, don't," she said with a smile, wiggling up against him. "They make me feel sexy."

He laughed. "Guns make you feel sexy?"

“Mmm.” She ran her hands up under his shirt. “Hard steel... all that... power...”

“Dare,” he whispered against her neck as she slid her hand over the crotch of his jeans.

“Ever had sex in a pile of guns?” she asked, taking her t-shirt off and unhooking her bra. His eyes moved over her, hungry, and then it was his hands, cupping and kneading her flesh.

“No, not on the guns,” he said as she turned away from him, unbuttoning her jeans and sliding them over her hips along with her panties. “Dare, seriously...”

She crawled up on the bed on her hands and knees, feeling the cool metal of the .45 against her wrist as she found a place to put her hands in the midst of the weapons laid out on his bed.

“Come on,” she whispered, arching her back, sticking her bottom in the air. “Fuck me.”

He groaned and she smiled when she heard the sound of his zipper. Reaching between her legs, she spread herself open for him, her fingers slipping in and out of her flesh. His hands grabbed at her hips, and she felt him probing between her lips, his cock already hard. He was standing behind her, aiming himself, and she rocked back against him, moaning when she felt him sink into her.

“Yessss,” she hissed, keeping her fingers there, between her legs, rubbing herself as he began to thrust into her. Her excitement was already high, her wetness spreading over her thighs as they rocked together, making a sweet, squelching sound that filled the room.

Dare's hands gripped the bedspread, and she found her hand wrapped around one of the guns, a .38, maybe the one that would kill the monster that took her brother's life. She moaned, shoving back against him violently, meeting his drive with her own, deeper, wanting more.

"Harder!" she gasped. Every time he slammed into her, it vibrated through her body, and still it wasn't enough. She wanted to feel the force of him as he grunted and rolled his hips against hers. "Oh, god, Shane, please! Fuck me harder!"

And he did, driving her forward onto the bed, pressing his full weight into her. Dare gasped, feeling the cold steel of the guns biting her belly and thighs, but she spread wide for him, arching and taking all of him as his hands dug into her shoulders to gain more leverage.

"Dare," he whispered, and she knew it was a warning. The thought of him emptying himself inside of her sent her reeling, and she moaned, working her fingers over her throbbing clit in tight, fast circles, feeling the familiar tug and ache for release.

"Come for me," she purred, the little flutter beginning in her belly and spreading through her pelvis. Her muscles tightened and released around his cock as she came, twisting and arching underneath him, feeling the hard steel of the guns against her skin.

"Oh god," he groaned, thrusting one, twice, one last time, straining and shuddering and gripping her shoulders. She could feel it, a burst of heat again and again, deep inside.

"Ouch," she said after a minute, and he laughed, standing up and pulling her with him. She had little red marks where her skin had been pressed into metal.

"It was your bright idea," he murmured, kissing her deeply.

They got dressed again, grinning at each other all the while.

"We need that ammunition I was talking about," she said, looking at the clock on the night table that read 3:12 a.m. She grabbed her coat off his dresser. "No better time than the present."

"Where are we going?" Shane asked, smiling, bemused.

"Cougar's."

He turned to stare at her. "Cougar's General Store? We're going to get ammunition from the general store at three in the morning?"

"Trust me," she said again, shrugging her jacket on. He sighed, pulling his leather on.

"Shane?" Dare asked, watching him put the guns in a box and store them under his bed.

"What?" He flicked out the light. The full moon shone into the room, casting eerie shadows.

"What happens if guns don't work?" she asked. "What if it *can't* be killed?"

"Well," he said, opening the bedroom door. "Either one or all of us will die." She looked at him in the pale moonlight and her heart seemed to forget to beat.

"I love you," she said. "Whatever happens." It was the first time she'd ever spoken those words to him.

He held his hand out to her and she took it, letting him lead her.

"I know," he said, and shut the door behind them.

* * * *

"How did you know all of this was here?" Shane whispered, looking at the assorted boxes of ammunition on the shelves in the back of Cougar's General Store.

"How did you know how to disconnect the alarm?" Dare whispered back and Shane laughed. "Fair enough. Here, put these in your pockets."

He began to hand her boxes of ammunition. She couldn't read them in the dark, but when Shane held the flashlight up to the shelves, she made out some of the print. He was handing her ammunition for a forty-five, a thirty-eight, ammunition for shotguns, handguns...

"Look," he said, shining his flashlight on a box. "That's honest-to-god for a machine gun. You know anyone with a machine gun?"

She shook her head and shrugged.

"Seems to me like Cougar's running a little illegal business on the side. Check those out." He shined the flashlight farther down the shelf.

"Fireworks," she whispered. "M-80's, cherry bombs, firecrackers—there's some highly illegal stuff here."

"I'll say." He handed her another box.

"Shane my pockets are getting full," she said, taking yet another box from him.

Shane began to fill his own pockets. Then he opened his jacket part way and began stuffing boxes inside.

"Do we really need so much?" Dare looked around in the darkness.

"Better safe than sorry."

"Here." He grabbed the box of fireworks and began putting those inside her jacket. She squealed. "Shh! Zip it up."

She zipped the jacket up, wide-eyed.

"I look pregnant," she whispered. He shined the flashlight on her and then laughed.

"About twelve months."

That made her giggle, and she put her hands to her mouth but she couldn't stop.

"Shh!" Shane said, shining the flashlight back on the shelf.

"Will you be quiet?" He arranged the boxes carefully with gloved hands, trying to make it look as if the supply hadn't been depleted.

"Shane," Dare gasped, still laughing. "I have to pee."

The look on his face when he turned toward her cracked her up.

"Dare, be quiet, okay?" he asked, almost pleading.

"Your face." Dare laughed behind her hands. "Your face! Oh, god, I'm going to pee my pants!"

That broke Shane up. Dare leaned weakly against him in the darkness, still laughing.

After a few moments had lapsed she said, "I still have to go."

"Okay." Shane grinned. "Let's get out of here. We'll find some bushes you can go in."

Dare stared at him, horrified. "That's gross!" she hissed.

"God, I love you," he laughed, pulling her toward the back door.

They went out into the still, cold night, holding hands and laughing.

Dare managed to hold it until they made it back to Shane's, where they dumped all of their stolen ammunition and spent that last night together before the end, sleeping belly to belly in his bed.

Chapter Thirteen

They stood outside of the cemetery, the six of them together for the very last time. Trees loomed beyond the iron fence, which rose spear-like from the ground. Graves, arranged in rows, seemed haphazard from this angle among winding paths of asphalt. Headstones rose darkly, stretching up toward the sullenness of the moon and the wide expanse of black sky above them, casting slanting shadows in the snow.

"I feel like Butch Cassidy or something," Jake said in a low voice, hefting the gun in his hand. He had a .38. Dare's own gun, Nick's .45, felt heavy in her hands.

"I feel like going home and watching T.V." Evan eyed the fence. "Letterman should be on."

"I feel like a Big Mac," Billy said, a sawed-off twelve gauge shotgun propped against his shoulder.

"Funny, you don't look like one," Chris remarked.

No one laughed.

"Once we get over the fence, we'll split up in twos," Shane told them. "Leave the guns on the outside of the fence and when you get over, reach through to get them. We don't need anyone shooting themselves."

They began to climb. The fence was wet from the melting snow. Dare's Nikes slipped on the cross bar. Being shorter than they were, it took her longer to find a way to get over without killing herself. When her feet were on the ground she let out her pent-up breath. Those spikes were no joke.

"I hate this damned fence." Chris reached through it to pick up his gun. It was a .45, like Dare's. Evan, like Billy, had a sawed-off twelve gauge. "If I spear my nuts on this thing, my wife is gonna kill me."

Dare stood close to Shane. He was looking across the cemetery, holding a flashlight, the heavy-duty kind, in one hand, his gun in the other.

"Billy, you've got the other flashlight, right?" Shane asked. Billy flashed it as an answer.

"And you have the other one, Jake?"

"Yeah," Jake agreed.

"Okay. We'll do it this way. Evan, you go with Jake. Billy, take Chris with you. I'll take Dare. We've got to check the mausoleums first. But *be careful*," he warned.

Shane met Dare's eyes and then looked around at them, shaking his head. "Just don't mess around, okay?"

"And yell if you see anything," Dare said.

They all paused to look around, and Dare looked back toward the car with a sinking feeling in her stomach. It was parked in its usual spot by the eastern fence. *What if there are only five of us left to get into it?* she thought. *Or none of us?* She shivered.

"Let's get moving," she said. "I'm cold."

"Who wants to cover the back?" Shane looked around the circle they made. No one answered. There were no streetlights back there like the ones that buzzed out here on Hubbard.

"We will." Jake looked at Evan. "Is that okay with you?"

"Good deal." Evan nodded, pushing his glasses up.

They started across the graveyard, hopping over the smaller headstones, winding around the larger ones. Dare watched them go and the ache in her stomach got worse.

"We'll cover the middle," Chris told Shane. "You stay up here and get these up front. And keep an eye on the road."

Shane nodded.

Chris tipped him a salute. "See ya in a while, boss."

"Not if I see you first," Shane said as he watched him walk in the direction that Jake and Evan had gone. Dare could barely make out their shapes as they got farther away.

"Do you think it's here?" Dare asked him.

"Yeah." Shane looked over at her. "I just wish I could remember where."

He started to walk, and Dare followed him closely. The snow crunched under their shoes. Shane had abandoned his boots for the occasion and his feet were clad in a beat-up pair of Keds.

Dare followed the tracks he left in the snow, walking between the rows of headstones. They were drawing near the first mausoleum and it looked pale gray in the moonlight. Icicles hung precariously from the roof, dripping onto the melting snow below. The family name engraved read *Jackson*.

"Stay behind me," Shane told her, slowing his pace. She didn't argue with him. He flicked the flashlight on and Dare gripped her gun in both hands, looking around him

at the door. He shined the light around the door, running the beam over its edges. It was shut.

"Are you—"

"Shh." He motioned for her to be quiet, mounting the two cement steps. She followed and waited, her breathing shallow, taking the flashlight from him. Then he shouldered the door open, stepping inside, the gun pointed in front of him. Dare quickly flashed the light inside. Nothing.

At least, nothing unusual. Just six cemented-in coffins.

"Next." Shane turned to face her.

Her heart was hammering in her chest. "Don't point that at me," she said, backing out of the mausoleum.

"Sorry." He shut the door behind him.

She looked off into the distance and made out the shapes of two people. Chris and Billy, most likely. "Sounds like they haven't found anything."

"Yeah. But I think splitting up may have been a bad idea." Shane started to walk again. "If they find it, it's going to be all over before I can get there."

"They've got the same guns and bullets we do," Dare said, walking next to him. "And like Chris said, we get it done faster this way."

"Yeah, I thought so at first, too, but I forgot—that thing has an advantage over them that it doesn't have over me. *I've* seen it," he told her, dodging a tree. It split them up for a moment. "They just may flip out long enough for it to get them."

"I doubt it," Dare said, but the thought itched at her. There was safety in numbers. Bare tree branches swayed above them, casting shadows in the moonlight.

"Here we are," Shane said and Dare looked up at it. It was larger than the last. The inscription read: *Thompson*. They were still one of the more "important" families in Larkspur.

Again, the light traced the edges of the door. Shut. She held the light steady on the door, gun pointed in the same direction in her other hand. Shane stood there, looking back at her, and she had an awful image of the door pulling open and Shane falling inward, long claws reaching out—

"Ready?" Shane asked. She nodded.

He shouldered the door, but it stuck. He tried again and there was a loud scraping sound when the door flew open and Shane stumbled inward, sprawling across the cement floor.

Dare gasped, hurrying up the steps, flashing the light around. Nothing but Shane lying on his back, looking up at her.

"You okay?" She knelt beside him. "Are you hurt?"

"I didn't know you cared," he said with a smile. She shoved him, standing up.

"Come on," she said. "I don't like it in these places."

Shane groaned, getting up, rubbing his hip. He leaned over and picked up his gun.

"Lucky thing it didn't go off," Shane said, looking at it.

"Come on," Dare said, hugging herself. Even in here it was cold, although the wind was less.

"Well, that's two down," Shane said, walking toward her. "And we haven't heard anyone yell. Maybe I was right when I said it moved on."

Dare screamed, backing quickly out. She forgot about the steps and fell, landing in the snow.

"Something ran over my foot!" she cried, pointing.

Shane came to retrieve the flashlight and then she heard him laugh from inside.

"It was a mouse," he called. He came out, shutting the door. It made the same awful scraping noise as it shut.

"Are you okay?" He offered her a hand and Dare took it, letting him pull her up.

"Scared the daylights out of me," she told him and she wasn't kidding. She was trembling in his arms.

"You scared him, too," he said. She closed her eyes for a moment, leaning against him, into the familiar Old Spice and leather combination.

"You okay?" he repeated.

She smiled. "My ass is wet, and I'm going to catch pneumonia, but other than that, I'm just peachy."

"Awww, poor baby," he said, caressing her wet behind.

She slapped his hand away. "Quit!"

He grabbed her bottom, squeezing. "We'll have to take you home and get you out of those wet clothes."

"Get away from me, you fiend!" she cried, laughing. She leaned over to retrieve her gun.

"Sounds good, though, doesn't it?" he asked, reached over and squeezing her hand.

"The best," she said, returning his smile. "After all of this is over, we—"

The screams cut her off.

"They found it." Shane's voice was flat and he started to run.

It took her a moment to move, as if the messages to her brain were being delayed somehow. Then she followed him, instinct kicking in. His strides were longer and he was faster, jumping over headstones she went around. She followed him as fast as she was able, but her feet were slipping in the snow, slowing her down.

And the screams...

They were closing the distance, but the wind carried the words away, and she could only hear the voices. She couldn't tell exactly where they were coming from. And then, there was a sound like firecrackers, but she knew the sound of gunshots well enough not to mistake them. Shane seemed to know exactly where he was going and his pace never slowed.

Then, the screams stopped, and there was just the sound of the wind and their feet on the snow. Shane paused then, and Dare caught up to stand beside him. Her breathing was short and harsh and she had a stitch in her side. Shane glanced at her. It was too quiet and her eyes widened. The silence was worse, so much worse.

"No," Shane breathed. "No, damn it, *no!*"

He began to run again and she followed him. The spaces between headstones were larger back here and they ran between the rows. Dare concentrated on keeping up with him and maintaining a tight grip on her gun. She held the flashlight in her other hand.

Then she ran into Shane, who stopped abruptly, and she steadied herself by grabbing onto the back of his jacket. She peeked around him.

The mausoleum looked similar to the others, rectangular and ugly, with two cement steps leading up to the door. Except this door stood slightly ajar. Dare strained to see inside, but it was impossible. There was no sound, just the swaying of the branches of the big oak above them and the wind in her ears.

"That's it," Shane said, in awe. "That's it."

He advanced, but she hesitated. Now that she was here, the moment at hand, she didn't want to go in there. Not now, not ever. For Nick, she thought, looking at the gun in her hand. But she started forward for Shane—she couldn't let him go in there alone.

He stood on the steps, looking at the gap between the door and the frame. Then he looked at Dare, who came to stand beside him. Her hands trembled as she flicked the flashlight on.

Why the silence? she thought. Where were the guys? If this was the place, they should be jumping around and clapping each other on the back for a job well done. Her mind simply wouldn't allow any other conclusion.

The silence was deafening, a roar in her ears, and her breath turned to glass in her throat. She looked away, up to where the icicles hung, and down, where they dripped onto the snow. Something glinted there. Glass, maybe a bottle. Dare leaned to get a closer look, shining the light on it.

It was glass all right—shining out of wire-rimmed frames. Glasses—Evan's glasses—separated at the bridge.

That's when whatever was left of the real world began to ebb away as the slow horror dawned upon her, and paradoxically, things began to happen at an alarmingly fast rate.

There was that awful grating as he shouldered the door open, and moonlight flooded inside, slanting toward the back wall. The life drained out of her body in one fell swoop, and all memory was lost—she forgot how to breathe, move, she remained only eyes that watched, immense saucers.

Shane grabbed the flashlight from her hands, shining it across the floor. Dare stepped in beside him and grimaced, looking down. The floor was darker, and as Dare took another step, she almost slipped and had to grab onto Shane to keep from falling.

In the circle of the flashlight's beam she saw the reddish tinge to the floor and realized with a slow, dawning horror that she had slipped in blood. The floor was thick with it, slick with it.

Shane brought the light upward and across the floor and Dare closed her eyes, a small gagging sound escaping her throat. Blood pooled around Evan and Jake, sprawled across one another, lifeless. The beam of light ran across their faces, and there were gaping holes where their eyes had been. Their blue jeans were stained black with blood, intestines spilling across their laps, strung across the floor, ribs starkly white and protruding.

Likes eyes best, Dare thought, opening her own eyes with a shudder. Guns, the .38 and a sawed-off shotgun, lay uselessly on the cement. The light flashed over them to the far wall, trembling.

"Join me for a snack?" it croaked.

Dare tried to scream, but air just escaped her throat with a small hissing sound.

Sitting Indian-style on the cement, it grinned up at them with teeth that looked as if they had been filed to razor-sharp points. She didn't know how long she stared at it, unable to discern what it was, unable to digest what she was seeing—the familiar comprehension patterns just wouldn't form in her mind. It couldn't have been more than seconds, brief impressions that would haunt her dreams in later years.

The beam of light wavered on its face. Red dripped down its chin, staining the front of the suit it wore. In its hands—claws sharp and thick—it held another hand. Dare saw the third hand, severed at the wrist, as the thing bit down, still looking up at them as two of the fingers disappeared into its mouth. A sickening crunching sound reached her ears.

bones, it eats the bones—

It spit something out and there was a chink on the cement. Whatever it was bounced past her and onto the first step. Dare glanced down, scrutinizing it in the moonlight. A ring, the color of the stone looking black in the light. It was Jake's class ring.

That's when the surface calm broke. Finally finding her voice, she began to scream. Looking back inside, she saw it was beginning to get up. Shane stood immobile.

The scream wouldn't stop and she covered her mouth with her hands, her gun dropping into the snow, all her training disappearing in the face of the monster in front of them. Shane glanced back at her from inside, looking dazed. She began to back away, down the steps. It was moving toward him, and he was looking back at her.

"*Kill it!*" she screamed, pointing. Shane whirled back around and she watched in the moonlight. It moved toward them, grinning. Shane raised the gun, and he was a split second too late. It tackled him and they slid across the slick cement toward the door. Both the gun and flashlight flew through the opening when Shane hit the floor and

CRACK

the gun went off as it hit the ground about three feet from Dare, taking a chip of stone from one of the headstones nearby. The flashlight bounced on the steps and the light flickered and died.

She reacted then, finally, her breath coming back, her body responding, and she grabbed the gun at her feet and bounded up the steps. The thing was making an ugly, chortling sound, and it took her a moment to realize it was laughing.

"*Shut up!*" Dare cocked the gun and aimed it. It looked up, startled, from where it had been about to sink its teeth into the vulnerable flesh on the side of Shane's throat. Her hands were shaking and she fired and missed. The bullet hit the far wall, whizzing past its head. She cocked it again, and this time it hit, sinking into its shoulder, jerking it back. It wailed loud, clutching its wound.

It stood, snarling at her. She pulled the trigger again, frantic, and the bullet made contact, tearing a hole in the side of its throat. It stumbled backward, falling, and then it was still.

Still.

She lowered the gun, her heart thrumming in her throat. There was no movement at all, not a sound.

"Shane," she breathed, and looked down at him. Eyes closed, covered darkly in blood, he lay motionless, but she couldn't tell if any of the blood was his. The flashlight was useless.

"Shane? Can you hear me?" She knelt beside him, ignoring a small *squish* under her right knee and not bothering to look at what she had kneeled on.

He was breathing. Thank God for that. It was shallow though, and blood was streaked across his face, in his hair.

"Shane," she said, shaking him. "Shane, are you okay?"

He came to, his eyes losing their dazed look.

"Oh, thank God," she breathed, tears welling up in her eyes. "Can you walk? Are you all right?"

"M'okay," he said thickly, lifting his hand to his head and rubbing the back of it. "What am I laying on?"

"Never mind," Dare said, not wanting to think about the things that were beneath them in the darkness. Only a foot from Shane, Jake gaped at them, lifeless. "Come on, I'll help you up. I want to get the hell out of here."

She stood up, offering him a hand.

"Is it—?"

"It's dead," she assured him, looking over at it. "Come on."

He took her hand and got up, looking down.

In the moonlight he was able to see more than she would have liked him to. He face twisted and he looked away, closing his eyes.

"God," he said.

Dare squeezed his hand, pulling him out of the mausoleum. They went down the steps, out into the bright moonlight.

"Jesus, my head," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Where are Chris and Billy?"

"I don't know." Dare looked at him, tears forming in her eyes. She couldn't help them and they rolled down her cheeks in tiny rivers.

"Hey," Shane said, seeing her tears. "Hey, what's this?"

"You're a mess," she said and then hugged him fast and hard, pressing her cheek against his neck where that thing had almost sank its teeth. He hugged her back, and they stood there, silent.

"Leaving so soon?" a rasping voice asked from behind them. Dare screamed, tearing herself away from Shane, looking to see it standing in the doorway.

"Oh, shit! Dare, where's the gun?" Shane grabbed her arm and backed them up as it came down the steps.

"I shot it," Dare cried. "I swear to God, I did. It was dead, Shane. It was dead!"

"*Where's the gun!?*" he bellowed. Dare looked up at him, startled, and then pointed.

"In there," she said simply. He groaned and it advanced toward them, chortling, claws raised.

"Oh, fuck," he said, rummaging through his pockets as he backed away. "Give me a lighter, a match, something!"

"I don't think—" She began hunting in her pockets as they backed away. It didn't seem to be in a hurry as it came toward them.

"Here!" She handed him a lighter out of her jacket pocket.

Dare looked at the thing coming toward them, grimacing. Its hair was matted with blood, its clothes stained with it—God, what was it?

"Get ready," Shane said, and she looked back over at him.

He was holding an M-80, trying desperately to light the fuse. The...thing...had decided to stop fooling around and broke into a run. Dare screamed, tugging at Shane's jacket. He looked up.

"Come on, you mother," he said. The fuse caught with a hiss.

"Run!" Shane yelled, pulling her arm. He threw the M-80 at it, hitting it square in the chest. She followed Shane, glancing back. It was bending to pick it up, examining it.

"Shane," she gasped, tugging at his sleeve, still looking over her shoulder.

"Shane, look!"

He did. The M-80 had a long fuse and it still hadn't gone off. The thing was lifting it to its mouth. Dare almost laughed.

We win, she thought. *We win!*

"Son-of-a..." Shane's sentence trailed off and he stopped, turning to watch as it tried to chew on the M-80.

"It's gonna go off! It's—"

Shane groaned as it threw the M-80 to the ground, uninterested.

"It's a dud," Shane said grimly.

Dare's heart plummeted. It looked back up at them, grinning with its pointed teeth, its mouth opening in an impossible yaw.

"Come on!" Shane grabbed her arm and pulled hard, beginning to run.

"Where are we going?" Dare gasped.

Shane didn't answer, his fingers digging into her flesh. It was gaining. She didn't know how, but it was gaining on them. Dare glanced behind her, over her shoulder.

"Don't look," Shane panted. "Just *run*!"

She stumbled over a headstone and Shane caught her, slipping in the snow. He skidded down and Dare slid next to him, groping for a handhold. There wasn't one, and she slipped until her hip hit another headstone. Shane was up already, pulling on her arm.

"Come *on*," he said, and she got up, stumbling after him, her hip throbbing.

She didn't look back. Ahead was the western fence. Maybe if they could get over it...

"Here." Shane hopped a headstone. Dare went around it, following him down a sloping hill to the asphalt. "Hurry!"

They ran, their feet pounding on the pavement. Dare's hair flew behind her and she had a dreadful thought, seeing that horrible thing, in her mind's eye, grabbing her hair, pulling her back—

"Down here." Shane cut right, toward the back of the cemetery. There was another mausoleum rising in the dimness in front of them. She looked behind her and it wasn't in sight. They had lost it—for now.

"Quiet," Shane said, his own breathing heavy as he collapsed on the steps.

Dare sat beside him. He pulled something out of his back pocket.

"What—?"

"Shh." He hit the chrome and six inches of steel glinted in the moonlight. "Trusty switchblade. I don't leave home without it."

"Kind of like American Express," she whispered.

He smiled at her, examining the blade.

"I thought that M-80 was our ticket," Shane said with a sigh. He spoke in a low voice. "I can't believe it was a dud"

"Just our luck." Her eyes were on the cemetery in front of them. It was out there—somewhere.

He smirked. "Me and Nick used to go fishing with them. They go off under water, so we used to tie rocks on them, light them, and throw them in. The blast would knock the fish out and they'd just float to the surface. We could just pick them up with nets, or our bare hands if we really wanted."

"That's awful," she said, disgusted.

"And illegal," he added.

She couldn't help smiling.

"What was that?" she asked. "Did you hear it?"

"Shh," he said, standing up. There it was again, a low rustling from the right side of the mausoleum. Shane motioned for her to stay quiet, holding the knife in front of him. Dare looked at his back, blood caked and drying on his jeans and in his hair. He moved toward the right side of the mausoleum.

He edged around the corner and there were high-pitched screams, and *CRACK—*

Six feet away a bullet lodged into an elm tree.

"Holy shit, Chris, you nearly blew my fucking head off!" Shane yelled, still ducking.

"Hey, I'm sorry, but Christ, I didn't know it was you!"

Dare sighed, closing her eyes when she heard the familiar sound of Chris' voice. She stood and joined them. Billy was holding the 12-gauge, eyes wide. She smiled at him and he smiled weakly back.

"Where've you been?" Shane asked.

Billy shrugged. "Looking for you guys."

"Didn't you hear us?" Dare asked him.

"Well." Chris and Billy looked at each other. "We heard something."

"Thanks a lot," Shane said. "We could have used a little help."

Dare touched Shane's arm, shaking her head. Chris wouldn't meet their eyes, looking at the gun in his hands. Billy stared at the snow.

"Well, the thing is still alive," Shane said, his face grim. "But Jake and Evan are dead."

Chris gasped, sounding as if someone had hit him in the stomach.

Billy stood wide-eyed. "Dead?" he repeated, looking at Dare. She nodded.

"Did you try to kill it?" Chris asked them. "Did you shoot it?"

"I shot it," Dare said grimly. "Twice."

"And I threw an M-80 at it," Shane told them. "It put it in its mouth. I think that would have done it, but it was a dud."

"What *is* it?" Chris demanded, turning to pace toward the back of the mausoleum. "And what the hell is it doing here?"

He stopped and leaned against the wall.

"I don't know, Shane," Billy said, sounding uneasy. "There's not much we can do if bullets can't stop it." He joined Chris.

"Depends." Shane followed them toward the back of the mausoleum. "Depends on where it was shot." They stood there in the shadows and Dare joined them, shivering. It was getting colder. "Bullet wounds aren't always fatal."

"It was a head shot." Dare frowned. "Well...a neck shot, at least."

"I don't know," Shane shrugged. "Maybe you missed the artery?"

She gave him a cool look. "It should have killed it."

"Then it can't be human," Chris said. "Can it?"

"I think it *was* human," Dare said, frowning at the memory of the thing, the wild, white hair, the filthy, tattered suit. "At one time maybe. But now—?"

Shane motioned her to be quiet and she gave him a strange look.

"She's right." Shane's voice was loud and he motioned for Chris to give him his gun, still talking. Chris handed it over, puzzled. Shane was looking behind them. "If it was human once, it can be killed. "

He put his finger to his lips after checking the ammunition in the gun and then pointed. They all turned around. A long shadow was growing on the snow in the moonlight on the other side of the mausoleum. A shadow with hooked claws.

Dare opened her mouth to scream but a hand was in the way—Shane's. He shook his head, turning her around, still talking.

"Dare shot it twice," he was saying. "It could be lying dead out there right now."

She stared at him with wide eyes as he talked. He moved her behind him and motioned for Chris and Billy to do the same.

The shadow grew longer and longer, and Shane kept talking, raising and quietly cocking the gun.

"This damn cemetery is huge," Shane said.

Dare looked past his back, toward the western fence, and then at the growing shadow. Billy and Chris stood protectively on either side of her.

"And it really could be anywhere."

It sprang from around the corner, claws raised, teeth bared, and Dare did scream then. Her screams mingled with its laughter and Shane's voice. Both Chris and Billy jumped back, crushing her between them.

"But it's right here and it's going to *die*!" Shane began to pull the trigger.

The first bullet caught its throat, jerking it back. The second went into its chest, the third into its stomach, the fourth, the fifth, and Shane kept firing, watching it stagger back toward the fence.

"*DIE*, you son-of-a-bitch!" Shane screamed.

He was pulling the trigger and it just clicked, empty. Dare looked at it leaning against the fence, its breathing ragged, but it was *breathing*—

"You fucker!" Shane yelled, the rage in his voice thick.

He went after it with his bare hands and Dare cried out, starting after him. Chris grabbed hold of her waist and pulled her back. Shane abandoned his gun, throwing it in the snow, and Shane encircled the thing's throat with his hands, screaming at it.

"You killed my friends, you bastard!" Shane forced it backward and it seemed weak. It didn't even raise its claws.

"You're—Going—To—Pay—For—It!" Shane cried, punctuating each word by pushing it farther back. It fought weakly and Dare watched, horrified with herself when she felt pity as she heard it choking for air, spitting up blood.

It was dying. *Enough*, she thought. *Oh, that's enough.*

Its eyes rolled back into its head as Shane pressed harder, harder. It was up against the fence now, squirming and wheezing.

Dare screamed when a long spike pierced its throat, straight through Shane's hand. Shane cried out, cursing, pulling his hand carefully, painfully, off the spike. Dare rushed toward him, screaming his name. He stood there, holding his hand, his eyes closed, something clenched tightly in his fist.

"My God, are you okay? Shane, are you okay?" It was a stupid question, but she couldn't think of anything else to say.

She repeated it over and over until he dutifully replied, "Yeah, I'm fine." But it was obvious he wasn't.

They all looked at the thing dangling there. Its chest had stopped heaving. Dare felt her stomach tighten, looking at the spike protruding from its throat.

"Is it over?" Billy asked hoarsely, coming to stand beside them. Chris stood just behind Billy, staring at the body with wide eyes. Then he turned and vomited into the snow. Dare looked away, her own stomach heaving.

"It's dead," Shane told them.

And that doesn't exactly answer the question, does it? Dare thought. *Is it over?*

They had three bodies to explain and tomorrow to look forward to. Dare thought of Nick. His killer was dead, but she didn't feel relieved, or unburdened or even satisfied... she just felt sick. She tried to imagine her brother's face and found she couldn't. It frightened her. She couldn't remember just what he looked like, couldn't remember the exact tone of his voice, the exact color of his eyes. She looked at the body on the fence. It was dead. And so was Nick.

"Can you guys do me a favor and take the guns back to my car?" Shane sat in the snow. "I'm not feeling so hot."

"Sure." Chris picked up the forty-five. Billy was still holding tightly to the shotgun.

"I'll be there in a minute or two. I'm gonna rest here," Shane told them. "I'll meet you at the car."

"No, you won't." Dare knelt beside him. The blood was running freely from his hand. There was an actual hole right through it, the flesh parting in an odd, jagged way. She reached into her pocket and flipped open her phone. "No service. Damn it." She glanced up at Chris and Billy. "Can you get service?" They had their phones out already, but both of them shook their heads.

Dare began digging in Shane's pockets.

"What are you doing?" he asked when she pulled out his keys.

"Chris, take the car," Dare said. "Drive toward town until you get service or find a phone. Call an ambulance. And the police. I'm going to bandage his hand the best I can and I'll wait here with him."

Chris hesitated, looking at Shane.

"He's not driving my car," Shane told her, standing up. "Last time he drove my car—"

He swayed unsteadily and then sat heavily back down.

Sighing, he looked at Chris. "Take my car."

"Okay," Chris said, looking worried. He glanced over at Billy, who was also frowning. "We'll be back."

They started away and Dare watched them for a moment.

"I feel drunk," Shane said, looking at her and Dare turned back to him.

"You're losing too much blood," she said, taking off her coat.

Shane watched as she unbuttoned her blouse and took it off. He stared at her then, at the flesh of her breasts over the top of her bra.

"Now?" He grinned.

"Pervert!" Dare laughed, pulling her jacket back on and starting to tear strips of her blouse. She unclenched his fist and frowned at what he had clasped there. "Where did you get this?"

It seemed like a million years ago when she took off the talisman, leaving the "dream-eater" Sam had given her at home before taking Nick's gun with her to Shane's.

He looked down at it. "That thing was wearing it."

She held it up, frowning. It wasn't an exact replica of the one Sam had given her to wear, but it was close. Tossing it aside, she turned her attention back to Shane's wound, wrapping the strips around his hand. He winced and shut his eyes. When she finished, he opened them and looked at her.

"I'm cold," he said. She moved toward him, putting her arms around him and sitting next to him in the snow.

"My ass is still cold," he murmured against her hair. Then he said, "I'm tired."

"So'm I," she replied, snuggling closer to him against the wind.

He stroked her hair with one hand, his bandaged hand resting on her thigh. The moon was sinking behind the trees. Behind them, the body dangled quietly, lifelessly, but Dare didn't look back at it.

She wanted to. She was afraid it might be moving.

"We're gonna be okay." Shane said it as if he could not believe it. "We did it. We really did it."

"Yeah," Dare breathed, a sadness settling somewhere inside. Nick was still gone.

"Now what?"

She didn't answer him. She honestly didn't know. It had grown darker, the moon moving away from them, behind the trees. She could only see his outline.

"My hand hurts, Dare." He sounded like a child. She kissed the top of his head, closing her eyes and snuggling in closer to him.

"NO!"

Dare looked behind her, gasping.

"NO! NO!"

"Sam, what are you *doing* here?" she asked after she'd caught her breath.

Sam looked behind her, beyond her, his jaw dropped, eyes wide. Puzzled, she stared at him. In one hand he carried a gun and a flashlight. In the other—*Sarge, that's Sarge!*—he held a dog by the scruff of its neck. It hung limply.

"Yuh-yuh-you b-b-bitch!" he spat, looking at her, flicking the flashlight on and shining it in her face. She couldn't see.

"What do you want?" Shane shaded his eyes with his bandaged hand.

"Yuh-you k-killed huh-him!" Sam cried.

The dog thudded in the snow and Sam looked behind them with wide, frightened eyes. Dare stared at him, thoroughly confused, questions coming and going in her mind faster than she could keep up.

"Yuh-yuh-yuh-you kuh-kuh..." Tears began to fall down Sam's cheeks. "Yuh-yuh-yuh-yuh..."

"Sam, what are you doing here?" Dare asked him, her voice gentle. "What's the matter?" She motioned for Shane to be quiet. "I don't understand what you're—"

"Yuh-You k-k-*KILLED* huh-him!" He swiped a hand across his eyes. "Huh-he was m-m-my fuh-*FATHER!*"

"Your what?" Dare whispered.

Sam narrowed his eyes at her. "Yuh-you said you wuh-were m-my fruh-friend."

"Sam, I *am* you friend, but you're not making any sense."

"Dare," Shane said beside her. She motioned for him to be quiet.

"Huh-he wuh-was m-my fuh-fuh-fuh-father," Sam said, tears glistening on his cheeks. He looked young, staring behind them forlornly at the grotesque form speared on the fence.

"Father?" Dare whispered. In the distance, she could hear sirens.

"Dare," Shane said, much more urgent. She twisted around so she could look and she saw... really saw. Dare stared at the body, the wild white hair, the vicious, fierce expression...

"Roy," she whispered. The picture. The name above the mausoleum: LEWIS.

"*DARE!*" Shane cried, shaking her. "Damn it, Dare, that's Nick's gun he's got and there's two—" He stopped.

Dare met his eyes and then looked back at Sam. The gun was leveled at her.

"Sam," she breathed, but she couldn't follow it up with anything. The breath had been sucked from her body and she could only stare at the gun. The sirens that, just a moment before, had been piercing the air, now seemed very far away.

"I luh-luh-loved him." Sam cocked the gun but she was frozen. "Huh-he was m-m-my fuh-*FATHER*."

"NO!" Sam glanced toward the sound of Shane's voice. "You crazy fucker!"

She couldn't move. Nick's gun. She saw the lights, red and blue flashing, coming down the asphalt drive toward them, but she didn't acknowledge them, she couldn't. Sound had receded.

Sam paused, looking at her, and then glanced back toward the lights. It was the only chance Shane needed. He leapt, knocking the gun from Sam's hand, wrestling him to the ground. Dare sat frozen, her heart rising in her throat, cutting off air flow. They were a thick tangle and then a hand reached out blindly, searching. It fell over the gun.

"NO!" She found her voice, her breath, her thoughts, and she jumped up. Sam had gotten the upper hand and leveled the gun at Shane.

"No, don't! *Don't!*" She screamed, starting forward.

"Kuh-KILLED HIM!" Sam pulled the trigger.

Sheriff Thompson, stepping out of the squad car, pulled his gun, yelling, "What's going on here?"

Chris and Billy, following the Sheriff, stared unbelievably. Dare, sobbing, looked at Shane's inert form.

"Bastard!" Dare looked up at Sam. A bullet whizzed past her ear. She didn't stop coming toward him.

Thompson's gun went off and caught Sam in the chest. Sam fell back, looking at her, dazed. She couldn't say anything, something tight and constricted in her chest.

"The ambulance is coming," Billy said urgently, grabbing her arm.

"What the hell is going on?" Chris looked between the two bodies lying on the ground.

Dare collapsed beside Shane on the snow. The bullet had gone through the left pocket of his leather, a chest wound. He was bleeding heavily, and it spread, thick and dark.

"Shane?" She tried to keep the tremble from her voice. He didn't answer her.

"Where's the ambulance?" she demanded, looking up at Billy and Chris. The tears streaked her face. "I told you to call a goddamned ambulance!"

"One's on the way from Shadow Hills." Chris knelt beside her. "Is he...?"

"I don't know." She covered her face with her hands. "I'm afraid to..."

"Hey." The low sound made them all look. Shane was looking at them, unfocused, but alive.

"You're going to be okay." Billy dropped beside them. "Ambulance is on the way."

"Get... him?" he asked. His eyes were slits, his voice thick and slurred. Dare leaned over him touching his hair.

"They got him." Chris glanced back at Sam.

"Ambulance should be here in a few minutes!" The deputy called. Matt was on the radio in his car, and Buck knelt over Sam. No one made a reply.

"Ain't got—" Shane gasped and then coughed. He was panting. Fighting for air, Dare thought, oh, god, he's fighting to *breathe*.

"Lie still, okay?" Dare stroked his hair, his cheek, unable to stop the tears falling on the collar of his leather and trickling down his throat. "You're going to be okay. Like you said, all bullet wounds aren't fatal. Just...just lie still."

"You're getting my jacket wet," he said faintly. Dare smiled through her tears. He managed to smile back.

"That's my girl," he whispered. The ambulance pulled up behind Matt's squad car. She looked back down at Shane. He coughed and coughed, something thickly congealed in his chest, his throat. The paramedics were getting out.

"Ambulance is here, babe. They'll fix you up. You'll be fine."

Shane coughed again, his mouth filling with blood. Dare wiped it away, whispering, "Oh, my god, oh, my god," over and over, unaware of the hot tears pooling at her throat and running between her breasts.

"Dare," he whispered. She looked across him, helplessly, to Billy and Chris.

"You're gonna be a hero, man," Billy said hoarsely, tears making tiny rivers down his face. "A real hero."

"Yeah?" His voice was growing weaker, but he sounded pleased.

"I love you," Dare whispered through her tears, past whatever had lodged in her throat. Hot tears fell on him, wetting his shirt collar.

"I know," he said attempting a smile, looking at her through half-closed eyes that were already beginning to glaze over from shock. "Be..."

"Shh, Shane, please," she whispered. "Please, god, don't talk anymore. You'll be okay. You will, you will," she said, trying to convince herself as much as reassure him. She didn't want to hear him say anything close to 'goodbye.'

"Dare," he said again, weaker, blood from his mouth pooling at this throat, his voice choked with it. She wiped at it helplessly.

She had to lean in close, so close, to hear him, his voice choked with blood.

"I always loved you."

That was all.

Epilogue

—taken from the Shadow Hills Journal, November 7, 2006

*By Mike Murphy
Larkspur Staff Writer*

LARKSPUR--The perpetrator of the Larkspur murders that have occurred in the past few months has been found—again. It was reported earlier the killer was a thirty pound bob-cat caught in the woods next to the Clinton Grove Cemetery. Peter Friedman, county coroner, verified the teeth marks and hair samples matched, but apparently was mistaken. Friedman was unavailable for comment.

The killer has been identified as Roy Phillip Lewis, former Larkspur resident. Lewis was pronounced dead on August 22, his body was placed in a family mausoleum. Lewis was reportedly buried alive.

Roy's son, Sam Lewis, suffered a fatal gunshot wound in an incident that occurred Sunday night in the Clinton Grove Cemetery.

The teeth marks and hair samples found match those of Roy Lewis. Neither the county coroner nor Sheriff Thompson were available for comment.

—Hand written letter from Sam Lewis, written to Dare Chandler, found in Lewis' home tucked inside a photo album marked "Mother."

Dare,

I'm writing this in hopes you can understand what's happened. You're my friend, and I want you to know, to understand, as I hope only you can.

I told you my mother died when I was a baby. I never knew her, and I feel that loss deeply every day. She had a profound belief in real magic, and my father...he was heartbroken after she died. He couldn't imagine life without her. He became obsessed with death, with life after death. He traveled all over the world, looking for ways to prolong life. Using everything he had learned from her, he spent his life looking for the secret to immortality.

And I think he found it.

The talisman I gave you came from Native land, and the one he was buried with did too. It's a hungry magic, Dare, and it feeds...it has to feed. For you, it just ate your dreams. It was a good sort of magic. My father's talisman was like its dark twin, voracious, twisted.

My father wanted to live forever, and to do that, he had to die first. I thought he was gone, but he came back changed, a revenant, my father but not my father. I don't know what he did, how he did what he did, but he came back terrible, horrible...

What else could I do?

He's still my father. Dare. In spite of what he did, he's still the only person in the world who ever showed me any caring or kindness—until you came along. I don't understand how he came back—but he has come back, and he's hungry, Dare. He won't stop, and I don't know how to stop him. If I don't feed him, he finds ways to feed himself.

What choice do I have, now?

I am going to try to end this tonight. I think taking the talisman will be the only thing to stop him. I am hoping it will end his suffering...and ours. And I am so very sorry for yours, Dare. So very sorry. Maybe this will be my redemption. It's all I can hope for now.

If it turns out badly, if you find this letter...

I just wanted you to know that you were the only one who ever made me feel whole and wanted. I will be grateful for that, forever, no matter what.

*I love you.
Sam*

* * * *

"I know who he is."

Dare sat up suddenly from where her head rested on the mattress at the hoarse sound of his voice, her hungry eyes searching his face.

“Shane?” she whispered, squeezing the familiar hand she’d been holding for what felt like days.

His eyes were still closed, but he spoke again, his voice cracking. “He was the one...” He swallowed, his eyes fluttering. “Dare...?”

“I’m here.” She moved so he could see her and a flicker of a smile crossed his face.

“He was the guy I took on that trip,” he croaked, his eyes closing again. “The one looking for artifacts...”

Dare blinked, frowning, hearing words that would only make sense later, after Buck Thompson gave her the letter addressed to her from Sam. Poor Sam, who had set out that night to kill the man who had raised him and instead had found him already dead.

She heard Shane’s words but didn’t care, not paying attention at all to the content, caring only that Shane was here, alive, conscious and actually talking to her after days of silence and not knowing.

“Shhh,” she murmured, pressing her mouth against his ear, sobbing. “It doesn’t matter. I love you. I love you so much.”

“I’m not dead, then?” he murmured.

She laughed through her tears. “Not unless this is heaven.”

“Must be.” He smiled, whispering the words just before she kissed him and proved them both right.

The End

ABOUT SELENA KITT



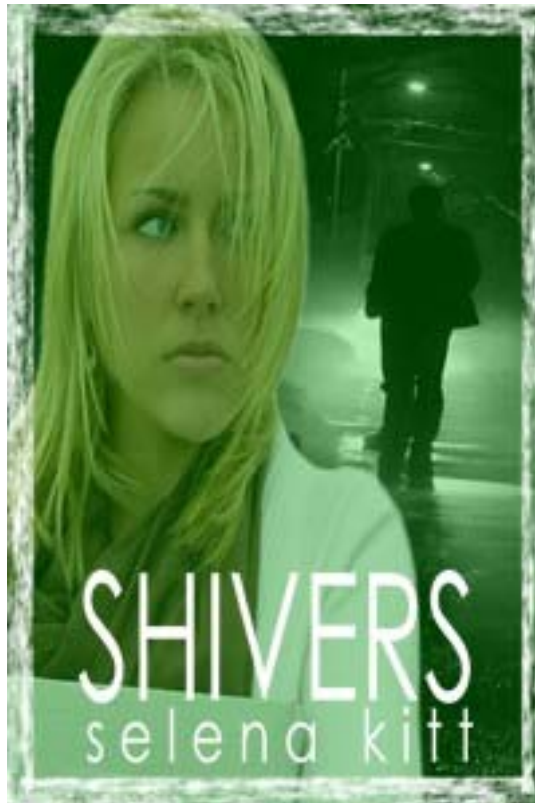
Like any feline, Selena Kitt loves the things that make her purr—and wants nothing more than to make others purr right along with her! Pleasure is her middle name, whether it's a short cat nap stretched out in the sun or a long kitty bath. She makes it a priority to explore all the delightful distractions she can find, and follow her vivid and often racy imagination wherever it wants to lead her.

Her writing embodies everything from the spicy to the scandalous, but watch out—this kitty also has sharp claws and her stories often include intriguing edges and twists that take readers to new, thought-provoking depths.

When she's not pawing away at her keyboard, Selena runs an innovative publishing company (www.excessica.com) and in her spare time, she worships her devoted husband, corrals four kids and a dozen chickens, all while growing an organic garden. She also loves bellydancing and photography.

Her e-publishing credits include: [*Rosie's Promise*](#) published by Samhain and [*Torrid Teasers #49*](#) published by [Whiskey Creek Press](#) featuring two short stories, *French Lessons* and *I'll Be Your Superman* in 2008. Her stories and poems are in the following anthologies: [*Coming Together: For The Cure*](#), [*Coming Together: Under Fire*](#) and [*Coming Together Volume 1*](#) and [*Volume 3*](#). Two stories, [*Sacred Spots*](#) and [*Happy Accident*](#), have been published by [Phaze Publishing](#), and her novels [*Christmas Stalking*](#), [*Blind Date*](#), *The Surrender of Persephone* and *The Song of Orpheus* are coming soon. She has also been published online in [*The Shadow Sacrament: a journal of sex and spirituality*](#), [*The Erotic Woman*](#), and her story, *Connections*, was one of the runners-up for the [2006 Rauxa Prize](#), given annually to an erotic short story of "exceptional literary quality," out of over 1,000 nominees, where awards are judged by a select jury and all entries are read "blind" (without author's name available.) She can be reached on her website at www.selenakitt.com.

If you enjoyed [TRUTH OR DARE](#), you might also enjoy:



SHIVERS

By Selena Kitt

Eight darkly erotic and horrifically delicious stories guaranteed to give you shivers, in more ways than one! Stories include: The Velvet Choker, Pumpkin Eater, The Ride, Mercy, Advent Calendar, Silent Night, The Laundry Chute and The Gingerbread Man.

Warning: This title contains graphic language, sex and erotic horror.

Excerpt From "Advent Calendar" in SHIVERS:

"So, seriously, what's the joke?" I asked.

She was hanging her head off the end of my bed, watching the tail end of A Charlie Brown Christmas Special upside down.

"Don't you love the way they talk? Wah, wahhh wahhhh. Isn't that totally how you used to hear grown-ups?" She lolled her head off the corner and put her bare feet up on the wall, crossing them at the ankles.

"I still hear grown-ups that way," I snorted, pulling my t-shirt on. "Come on, Betz, give."

"Oh, this wasn't enough for you?" She teased me, opening her thighs and pointing between them. Her pussy lips were still a little swollen and they glistened. I sat next to her, my hand inevitably drawn to the wetness, rubbing the moist and slightly sticky skin with my thumb. God, she's intoxicating.

"Everything isn't about sex, you know?" I tried to sound serious, although my fingers betrayed me and slid through her slit as my cock began to throb against my thigh.

She laughed--god, I loved her laugh--it tinkled, like ice crystals forming in midair. Rolling off the bed, she grabbed for the remote and started to flip channels. "Do you have CNN? I have to see if they're broadcasting any other signs of the apocalypse."

"Ha." I said. "Ha." She grinned up at me, sprawled naked on my floor, her hair like dark chocolate streams covering the generous swell of her breasts. "Well, if you're not gonna tell me what it's all about, I'm not opening any more of those stupid doors." I grabbed a new pair of briefs out of my top drawer, shoving the advent calendar aside to do it. It toppled toward the wall and balanced there, its first five black doors hanging askew showing five decidedly blank white spaces.

Every morning I felt like a fool, opening a new door in the hopes that this time, something would appear. I had noticed a different odor each day--first the oranges and cloves, then cinnamon, then something I couldn't identify at all, then something that smelled faintly like pumpkin pie. I joked with her on the phone that she had invented the world's first "Scratch 'N Sniff" advent calendar. She just laughed. There was a different

smell today, like those red and white pinwheel peppermint candies my grandmother used to keep in her pocket to keep us quiet in church, but it didn't linger long. I was getting really tired of whatever game Betsy was playing.

"Nice ass," she commented softly. I didn't reply, tugging my jeans on. God, she pissed me off sometimes.

"Is that all I am to you?" I tossed her jeans off my bed and into her lap. Her eyes were bright, dancing, as she looked up at me, incredulous. I stopped, my jaw as slack as hers. "What the fuck?" I said softly, out loud, rubbing my chin thoughtfully. What the hell am I saying? What the hell do I care?

"I'm gonna go home." She started to get dressed. I couldn't see her face as she bent to slide her panties on. I felt bad all of a sudden and then I was pissed that I felt bad. This wasn't good at all. I watched her slide her jeans on, her back to me, her panties caught slightly in the crack of her ass. My cock jerked reactively, just seeing her bent over and sliding denim up her shapely thighs. I sat on my bed, uncertain.

"You don't have to keep opening them if you don't want to." She kissed my cheek and smiled softly before opening my bedroom door. She must have been chewing gum because she smelled like peppermint.

"There's no point!" I called after her. "It's not funny!" I heard her laugh and gritted my teeth. This wasn't gonna fly. I was done. I don't care how much she gets my dick hard, no girl is worth this kind of hassle and game-playing.

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And look for these other titles from SELENA KITT:

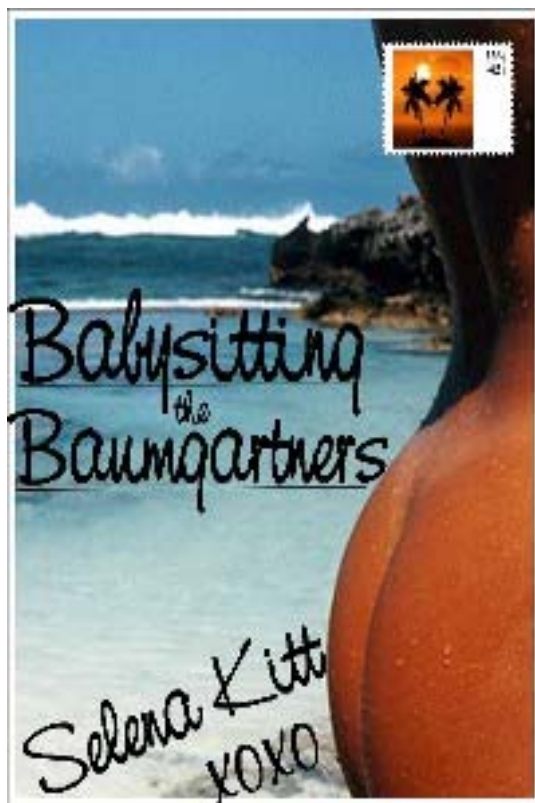


NAUGHTY BITS

By Selena Kitt

David has been brightening up his gray Surrey, England days with the porn collection hidden in his parents' shed, but when he find that his older sister, Dawn has discovered his magazine collection, things really begin to heat up. Their parents insist that their just-graduated son look for a job, but their daughter has the week off and is determined to work on her tan. Distracted David finds himself increasingly tempted by his seductive older sister, who makes it very clear what she wants. Her teasing ways slowly break down the taboo barrier between brother and sister until they both give in to their lust... but what are they going to do about the feelings that have developed between them in the meantime...?

Warning: This title contains incest and anal sex.



BABYSITTING THE BAUMGARTNERS

By Selena Kitt

Ronnie—or as Mrs. Baumgartner insists on calling her, Veronica—has been babysitting for the Baumgartners since she was fifteen years old and has practically become another member of the family. Now a college freshman, Ronnie jumps at the chance to work on her tan in the Florida Keys with “Doc” and “Mrs. B” under the pretense of babysitting the kids. Ronnie isn’t the only one with ulterior motives, though, and she discovers that the Baumgartners have wayward plans for their young babysitter. This wicked hot sun and sand coming of age story will seduce you as quickly as the Baumgartners seduce innocent Ronnie and leave everyone yearning for more!

Warning: This title contains MFF threesome, lesbian, and anal sex.

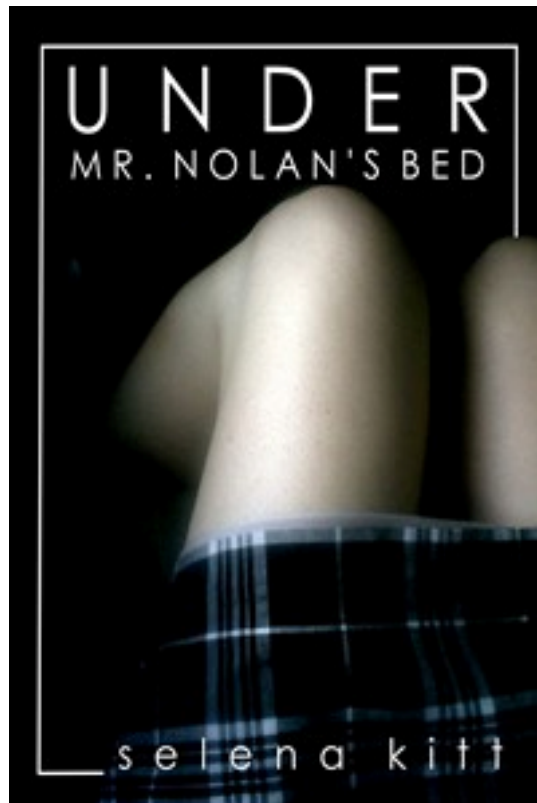


BLUEBEARD'S WIFE

By Selena Kitt

Tara's husband has never shared a fantasy with her, or even masturbated—that she knows of. However, this curious wife discovers a phone bill full of phone calls to sex lines and realizes her husband has been living a double life! Instead of getting mad, Tara's curiosity leads her to begin listening in on John's steamy conversations in hopes of finding out what he really wants in the bedroom. After several failed attempts at bringing fantasy to reality, however, a frustrated Tara turns to her much more adventurous best friend, Kelly, for help. A quick psychology 101 diagnosis from Dr. Kelly marks John as having a classic "madonna/whore" complex, and she quickly sets about making plans to rectify this situation. Tara goes along for the ride, hoping that Kelly may have the answer to bridging the seemingly ever-growing gap in her marriage...

Warning: This title contains a MFF threesome, a daddy/daughter role play between consenting adults, strong language, minor drug use and F/F sex.

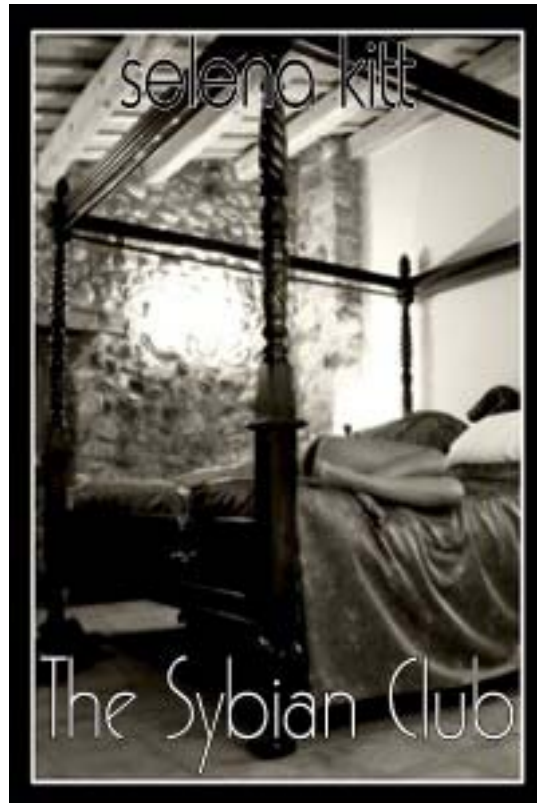


UNDER MR. NOLAN'S BED

By Selena Kitt

Leah and Erica have been best friends and have gone to the same Catholic school since just about forever. Leah spends so much time with the Nolan's—just Erica and her handsome father, now, since Erica's mother died—that she's practically part of the family. When the girls find something naughty under Mr. Nolan's bed, their strict, repressive upbringing makes it all the more exciting as they begin their sexual experimentation. Leah's exploration presses deeper, and eventually she finds herself torn between her best friend and her best friend's father—but even she couldn't have predicted the shocking and bittersweet outcome of their affair.

Warning: This title contains a threesome, lesbian sex and incest.



THE SYBIAN CLUB

By Selena Kitt

Tasha convinces her husband, Max, to buy her a the ultimate female pleasure machine – a Sybian – but he only agrees if she can come up with a business plan to pay for it. Determined to keep her promise, she creates The Sybian Club and begins bringing women to the basement room set up just for her new toy. It becomes so popular, she has to enlist the help of new friend, Ashley, to keep up with the demand, and the women enjoy an exciting ride as the business thrives. But Tasha has developed feelings for Ashley, and doesn't know how to tell her husband that she wants to add more to their sex life than just a new toy...

Warning: This title contains a threesome, lesbian and anal sex.



STARVING ARTIST

By Selena Kitt

Ellie is living the life of a true starving artist in a small efficiency apartment in dangerous downtown Detroit, but more dangerous than her surroundings are the men to whom she pays rent. Denied help by her prosecutor father, who believes his daughter is wasting her life in art school, Ellie finds herself in a precarious position and surrenders helplessly to her predicament. However, a strange twist of fate gives Ellie a chance at revenge. Will she take it?

Warning: This title contains graphic language, nonconsensual and anal sex.



ON CHERRY HILL

By Selena Kitt

Midwife Anne gets pulled over in the middle of the night on Cherry Hill Road. She's on her way to a birth, but her urgency doesn't sway the unsympathetic officer. When the cop discovers something suspicious on Anne's driving record and insists she get out of the car, she knows she's in real trouble. When he cuffs her and bends her over the hood, things go beyond trouble...

But the surprising outcome of this tale gives both Anne and the reader a jolt they never could have anticipated...

Warning: This title contains graphic language and nonconsensual sex.



ESCAPING FATE

By Selena Kitt

Sam has an unusual interest in humans—well, considering she’s a fairy of fate whose profession it is to determine their futures, it’s no wonder! But it isn’t just Karma she’s curious about... Sam has what her fairy-pal Alex thinks is an inordinate and rather wanton interest in certain biological aspects of human behavior—most notably, s-e-x.

When Sam’s job leads her into the path of a handsome man who rocks her world, Sam’s interest becomes obsession. Alex reminds her that fairies get one Christmas wish – will Sam consider using hers to become human to experience one night of bliss?

When things become even more complicated—Sam discovers that Drew, the sexy stranger she’s been fantasizing about, can actually see her—Sam finds herself immersed in a complex and tangled web of human experience. She has to make a choice that will teach her a twisted lesson in fate, ultimately change the course of human existence and even reveal the origin of Santa Claus!

Warning: This title contains graphic language and sex.



TICKLED PINK

By Selena Kitt

Who says sex can't be fun - or funny? You'll find more than enough amusing mishaps and uproarious situations to tickle your funny bone—and more!—in this delightfully wicked and delightfully sexy anthology from Selena Kitt.

Warning: This title contains graphic language and sex.



PAPERBACK ROMANCE

by Selena Kitt

Maya's heart yearns for romance and adventure, so that's what she writes about - but James Reardon, her college creative writing professor, insists she's wasting both time and talent. Determined to prove him wrong, Maya stumbles onto the fact that her professor's been keeping secrets - not the least of which is his attraction to her. Faced with a choice, she will have to decide whether or not to reveal his secret to the world—and her own desire for a man nearly twice her age.

Warning: This title contains graphic language and sex.

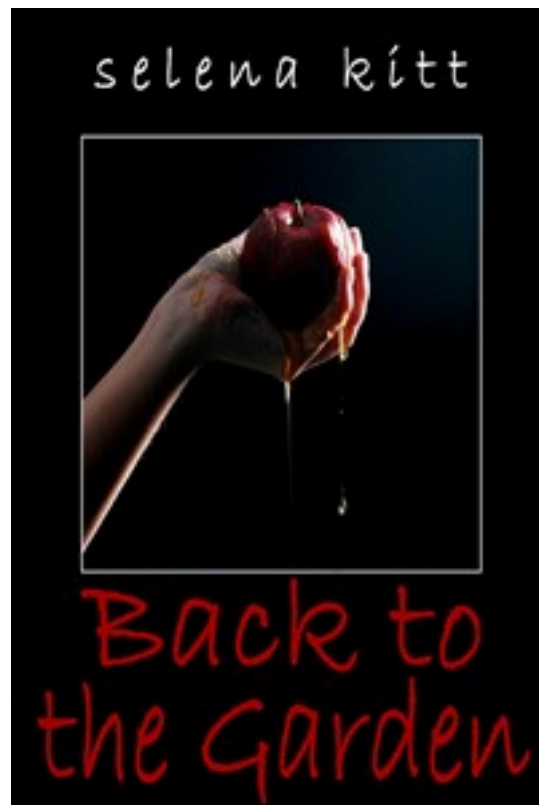


TAKEN

By Selena Kitt

Lizzy’s friendship with her older boss, Sarah, turns into something deeper and much more exciting one rainy day after work, and Lizzy finds herself drawn into a world she never knew existed. Sarah has a dominant streak, and as she leads Lizzy into the role of a submissive, the two women become closer than they ever thought possible. But while Sarah, hurt too many times, wears a ring, and tells guys she’s “taken,” Lizzy knows she secretly longs for a man. Determined to find one for them both to share, Lizzy is just about to give up when a dark, handsome, virile answer shows up right under her nose. Lizzy may think she and Sarah are going to seduce David—but she underestimates their handsome co-worker, and David turns the tables on them both. But will he be able to tame the untamable Sarah?

Warnings: This title contains graphic language and sex, a m/f/f threesome and mild bdsm elements.



BACK TO THE GARDEN

By Selena Kitt

Discover the deliciously taboo lure of an incestuous siren call with four stories bundled into a wickedly hot anthology that's determined to keep it all in the family!

Warning: This title contains graphic language, sex and mother-son, father-daughter incest.



ECOEROTICA

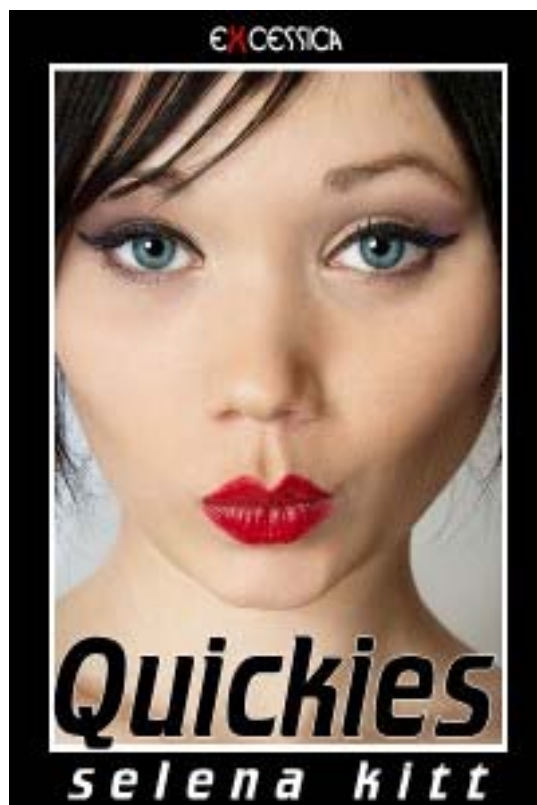
By Selena Kitt

Mother Earth is one hot, sexy Mama, and in this tribute to nature and the environment, Selena Kitt pays homage to her beauty, her grandeur — and her conservation. Who else could tackle topics like global warming, strip mining, animal endangerment and environmental toxicity, all while making it hot, hot, hot?

This anthology includes six sexy and environmentally provocative stories that will rock your world—and arouse and raise more than your environmental awareness.

Stories include: The Break, Cry Wolf, Genesis, Law of Conservation, Lightning Doesn't Strike Twice and Paved Paradise

Warning: This title contains graphic language and sex.

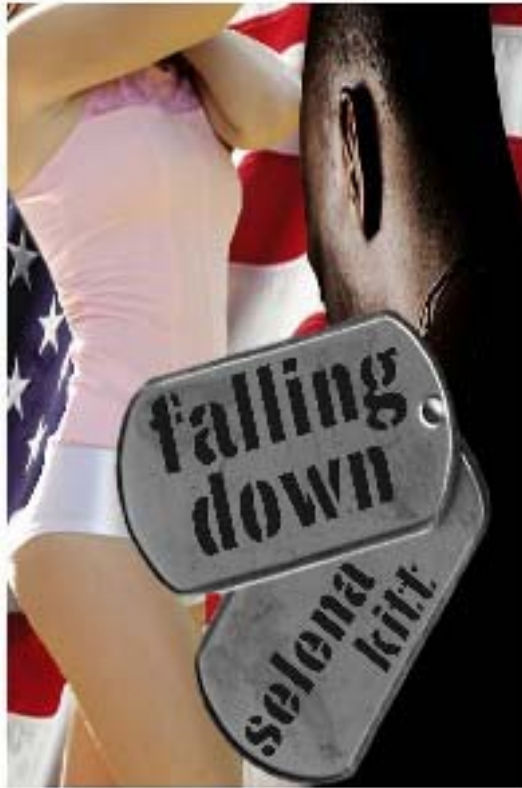


QUICKIES

By Selena Kitt

Whether the story is about a quick encounter of the erotic kind or it's just a fast and furious read, here is a pulse-pounding twenty-five story anthology, promising to take you on a headlong express to ecstasy. Join Selena Kitt on a swift, delightful ride, from stories of heart-racing sex in elevators or across office desks or in dressing rooms, to the impatience and excitement of the first time experience - you're sure to have a blissful ride on the these racing rapids of erotica!

Warning: This title contains graphic language, explicit sex, nonconsent, prostitution, sibling incest and lesbian and m/f/f group sex.

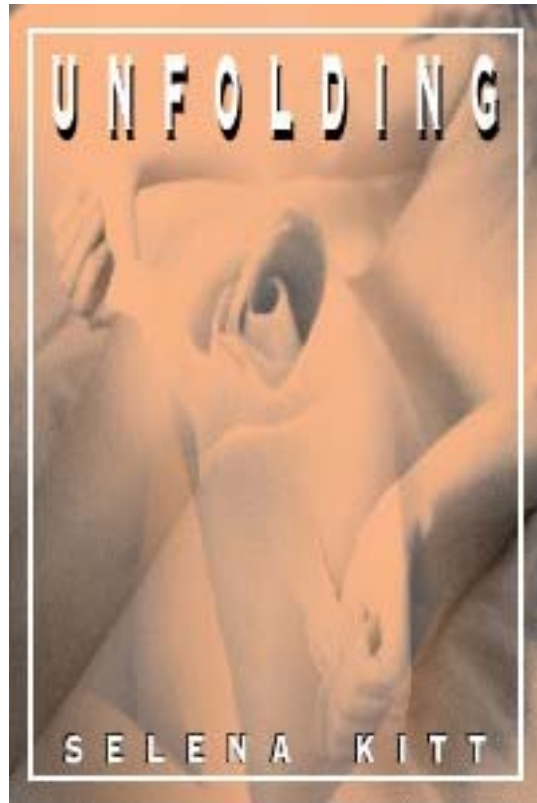


FALLING DOWN

By Selena Kitt

Lindsey is a bad girl, and she's determined to stay that way. She's been called a slut enough to know it's true, and she's not ashamed of the fact anymore. She makes it known to every man she comes in contact with that she's available for the taking—the rougher, the better. When she meets Lieutenant Zachary Davis, she finally finds a man who refuses to treat her like the trash she believes she really is. But can Lindsey change her wayward, dangerous ways and learn to value herself the way the Zach seems to?

Warning: This title contains graphic language and nonconsensual sex.



UNFOLDING

By Selena Kitt

Charlie lives an average life in an ordinary home, and she isn't complaining. Jack is a good husband and they have beautiful children—but when she discovers her penchant for a secret taboo, she finds that it suddenly turns her sex life from a mundane distraction into a mind-blowing, transcendent experience. This is the story of a woman's exquisite unfolding, as her sexual discovery and yearning for something more pushes she and her man to the edge, testing boundaries and forcing her to surrender to something much deeper than herself.

Warning: This title contains graphic language, a m/m/f threesome and anal sex.



STARGAZING

By Selena Kitt

Turn up your collar, feather your hair, put that big comb in your back pocket, and splash on some Polo, because we're going back to high school in the '80's! Sara is obsessed with pop star Tyler Vincent, and as she nears the end of her senior year, she's determined to find a way to be with him - although her best friend, Andi, keeps telling her to find a different escape from her desperately violent home life. Complications arise when Dale, the mysterious new transfer student, sets his sights on Sara, and she falls for this rock-star-in-the-making in spite of her better judgment. When Sara wins a contest, she is faced with a choice - travel to Tyler Vincent's home town to meet him, or stay and support Dale in a Battle-of-the-Bands hosted by MTV. Their triangulated relationship is pushed to its breaking point, but there is another, deeper secret that Dale's been keeping that just may break things wide open...

Warnings: This title contains graphic language, sex, and some violence.