

GIVE THE DEVIL HIS DUE



ZOE DEVLIN

WHEN Dylan Fletcher kissed me, I knew I had to leave town. If I hadn't loved him already, that little brush of his mouth on mine would have been no big deal. But I did love him, and I didn't want him to die. That meant it was over between us before it had a chance to begin.

It started like any other Friday night—me waiting in my office with my feet up on my desk, pretending to work while Dylan finished upgrading a server down the hall. He maintained the hardware at Software Unlimited, and I was the sales guy. Dylan always worked late. And I didn't mind our boss thinking I liked to work late too.

I snapped my fingers and a small flame leaped up like I had a lighter hidden in my hand. But I didn't. I blew the fire out and studied the soot marks that never seemed to wash off, though the little flame didn't hurt. Every time I did the trick at the bar, somebody wanted me to show him how. But I always joked that it was the only magic trick I knew, and a man has to keep his secrets.

I dropped my feet to the floor and walked down the hall to the small, crowded server room. As I'd suspected, Dylan still sat on the floor, hunched halfway under his desk with a server in his lap. The room wasn't much bigger than a closet, with a stack of dead computers and a rack of servers taking up most of the space. He stretched for a screwdriver, and because he wasn't looking, I let myself admire the outline of

the lean muscles under his thin button-down. I waited until he'd fitted the new hard drive in its slot to knock on the door frame. Like I knew he would, Dylan jerked upright so fast he banged his head on the keyboard tray above him. I'd never managed to interrupt him without scaring him half out of his skin.

"Son of a bitch." Dylan groped at the keyboard tray, making sure it wasn't broken before he looked at me. "Oh, hey, Brent. Not you. Not a son of a bitch, I mean." He cleared his throat. "Were you ready to go?"

"Yeah, it's almost seven, and I'm getting hungry. Henry went home half an hour ago, so it's safe to leave."

He gave me a lopsided grin and turned back to the server, plugging the hard drive into the motherboard. "Some of us just stay because there's still work to be done."

"I think that's just you."

Dylan snapped the cover on the server. "All right, I'm done. I guess I can test it Monday morning." He slid the server back into the rack and climbed to his feet, wavering for a moment in the middle of the mess. I caught his elbow, and he tossed me a quick smile as he stepped over a box of spare keyboards.

The heat and humidity hit us like a double punch when we stepped out of the air-conditioned office. I rolled up my sleeves and popped the top button on my shirt, tossing my tie into the open window of my truck as we crossed the parking lot between Software Unlimited and the Woodchuck Bar and Grill. Dylan and I hesitated just inside the door, letting the cool wash of the air conditioner blow over us as our eyes adjusted to the dim interior. Even though it was a

country bar, there were a few other guys like us, their ties loosened or hanging out of their pants pockets. There aren't a whole lot of options for after-work drinks in a town this small.

I smiled at the waitress, who picked up a couple of menus and followed us to our usual table in the back corner. I slid into the booth with my back against the wall and propped one leg up on the seat. It was mostly the usual crowd tonight, maybe a few extras. Dylan sat across from me and didn't bother looking around. He picked up the beer menu like it might have changed since last Friday when we'd come to the same bar and sat at the same table.

The waitress handed us the menus and waited, knowing it wouldn't take us long to order. I glanced up with a smile, and she pushed her boobs out a little more. "Mushroom Swiss burger and a Rolling Rock, please."

"Sure. What'll you have, Dylan?" Her smile faded a little as she waited for him to order. She knew he was gay and wouldn't be looking at her boobs. Dylan ordered his usual bacon cheeseburger with onion rings and a Sam Adams and handed his menu over. I let my eyes follow her as she swayed away, because that's what everyone expected of me.

When I glanced back, Dylan's eyes slid away from mine, examining the crowd like he was looking for someone in particular. I could guess who.

The waitress set our beers on the table. "Food'll take a little while, okay? The cook's out on a smoke break."

"Sure, no problem."

It was dark in our corner, so I let myself watch Dylan's

throat bob as he swallowed and his tongue sweep over his lips when he set the beer down. If he noticed my eyes on him, he didn't say anything. I only liked girls as far as Dylan knew. But it had gotten harder to pretend I wasn't watching him since his ex stole his Camaro and left town two months ago.

"What about him?" I nodded toward the wall where a slim guy in tight jeans pushed back his cowboy hat and cocked his hip, leaning against the jukebox box and drumming his fingers on the glass.

Dylan looked, but he didn't look interested. "Never really been into cowboys."

"Oh well. His loss." I gave him the smile I'd been practicing for years. *Just a friend here, nothing more.* Dylan gave me a long look, then jumped when a woman squealed practically in his ear.

"Brent! Have you been hiding from me? I haven't seen you all week!"

"Hey Lexy, what's new?" I gave her a small smile. I'd slept with her once, and that had been enough, even if I hadn't wanted to keep her alive.

"I've missed you." She pouted a little, leaning over our table so I could look down her shirt. She didn't even glance at Dylan. That irritated me, though he wouldn't have wanted her attention anyway. Dylan was good-looking, if pretty obviously a geek with his glasses and buzz-cut. I supposed that just because I wanted him, it didn't mean everyone did.

"Brent! Are you listening to me?"

I pulled my eyes away from Dylan's profile as he

scanned the bar and ignored the woman taking up half our table. "Sorry, Lex, it's been a long week. What did you say?"

"Dance with me! I'll wake you up." She tugged at my hand, bouncing so her breasts jiggled.

I let her drag me to my feet, but my smile was for Dylan. "Be back in a minute. Get me another beer?"

"Sure." He slid out of the booth and walked to the bar.

Lexy dragged me out to the empty space in the middle of the room where two other couples danced. The cowboy had finally found a song, though I didn't think it was meant to be danced to. Because I was with a woman, her soft breasts pressed too tight to my chest, I let myself watch Dylan over her head. He'd gone back to our table with two beers. When another one of the regulars claimed me for the next song, Dylan shrugged and drank my beer too. I couldn't blame him. I was a lousy date. Or I would have been if we'd been on a date. Friday nights at the bar had worked out better when he'd had a boyfriend to keep him occupied. But as much as I wanted to, I couldn't take Charlie's place.

When our food came, I managed to convince the woman I was dancing with that one of the businessmen had been checking her out so she didn't follow me. I dropped into the booth and grabbed the ketchup.

"Damn. I was going to eat your fries." Dylan sucked an onion out of its ring, and I looked away before he caught me staring at his mouth.

"You can have some if you want."

He waved an onion ring at me. "I was kidding."

We ate in silence for a while, then Dylan dropped his

half-eaten burger. “Got a call last night. They found my car.”

I paused with a fry halfway to my mouth. “Where?”

“Bottom of Boone Lake.”

“Oh shit.”

“Yeah.” Dylan picked up an onion ring and twirled it around his finger like it didn’t bother him much, but I knew it did.

I hated to ask, but—“Any sign of Charlie?”

“Nope. He’s probably long gone.”

Charlie’d once accused Dylan of being more in love with his car than with Charlie, but killing the car was just crazy. It was a 1969 Camaro Z/28, restored to original condition. Dylan had bought it in high school and spent most of his weekends working on it. Sure, he’d loved that car, maybe a little too much, but he’d loved Charlie too. I knew that, even if Charlie hadn’t. “I’m really sorry.”

Dylan shrugged. “I guess I should get a new car.”

He’d held off, hoping to get the car back if not the boyfriend. I’d been giving him rides around town a lot, though luckily we both lived close enough to work to walk. I wasn’t going to pick Dylan up at seven in the morning just so he could hide in the server room. He’d been working longer hours since Charlie left town.

“Whenever you get to it. I don’t mind driving you around, you know.”

One side of his mouth lifted. “Thanks.”

We left about an hour later, Dylan standing patiently by the door while I fended off Lexy, who thought I’d stiffed her a

dance. I promised her an extra one next week and escaped into the parking lot.

Stars sparkled in the clear sky above, though the end of the sunset still tickled the horizon. A light breeze had driven the clouds away and made the air breathable. “I feel like walking home. How about you?”

“Sure.” Dylan swayed into me a little, and I remembered he was ahead on beers. But I resisted the urge to put my arm around him to steady him.

I rolled up the window on my truck in case it rained, and we walked across the street. The little downtown strip of businesses gave way to tidy houses, their browning lawns stark under the street lights. As we drew closer to the house Dylan shared with his mother, I noticed the light on in her bedroom. I glanced at Dylan. His mouth had tightened. Dylan’s mother had multiple sclerosis, and her health had been going up and down for years. I guessed by the look on his face she wasn’t doing well, but he never talked about it.

Dylan drummed his fingers on the gate in front of his house. “If you can’t come tomorrow, I understand.”

“No worries. I’ll be here bright and early.”

“Thanks.” His eyes drifted back to the house, like he knew he had to go inside and face his mother’s suffering but couldn’t quite bring himself to unlatch the gate. I wished I could do something for him.

I don’t have any excuses for what happened next, or at least not good ones. Maybe it was the look on his face as he stared at his mother’s window. Maybe it was the beer talking. Maybe it was just because I’m a selfish bastard.

Whatever the reason, I put my arms around him and rested my head on his shoulder. He startled a little but didn't pull away. Then his body shifted toward mine, and his arms wrapped tight around me.

I could have stayed like that forever, but Dylan lifted his head. "Brent?" I looked at him, and his breath whispered on my lips. He kissed me. I kissed him back.

He tasted like beer and onion rings and the sweat beading his upper lip. I breathed him in, slow and deep, and pulled him closer. A hint of beard scraped my chin, and his fingers tightened on my back. I kissed him harder.

I knew what I was doing when I touched him. I'd caught him checking me out a couple of times, and we were close as two guys who'd never kissed could be. I was the one who brought him a six-pack and called the cops to report his car stolen when Charlie ran out on him. I've always been there for him, because he's always been there for me.

But I failed him that night. I knew it the minute I smelled gasoline.

I staggered back, wiping my mouth. "Nothing. This means nothing."

Dylan stumbled back himself, shock erasing all the wonder from his face. I wasn't talking to him, but he wouldn't know that. After all, there was no one else there, just a whiff of gasoline like some car had left a little puddle in the street. But I'd told myself lies like that for years, and I knew better.

"I'm sorry. It won't happen again." I said that looking at him, and I meant it.

He stared at me, fists clenched and face flushed. I stood my ground. It might have been better for both of us if he'd hit me. But he turned without a word and went inside, closing the door quietly so he didn't bother his mother.

I didn't linger, though I wanted to go after him and tell him I'd lied, beg him to forgive me. Instead, I turned toward home wearing my cruelest smile, like it had all been a joke. When I'd walked by myself for a few minutes, the gas smell grew heavy, like someone was choking me with a blanket. I coughed.

"I thought maybe you had a gift for me, boy." The voice stood all my arm hairs on end.

I didn't turn my head. I likely couldn't see him anyway.

"Sorry, Dad. But wasn't that fun? Did you see the look on his face?" I grinned until I thought my face would tear in two.

"I want him."

"I can't give him to you." I took a deep breath, and gas fumes clawed at my throat. I coughed again. "He's just a friend. He works on my truck for free, and I like to fuck with his head." I walked a little faster, but that didn't matter to my father.

"You have my gifts. Use them."

I could have. I could have crooked my finger at Dylan, and he'd have done anything I wanted him to, same as the women at the bar. But nothing comes for free. At least the women were safe, since I never let myself get too attached. Dylan was different. I had to put extra effort into keeping Dylan away. "I like girls, remember?"

II

“What about that boy you lived with?”

My throat closed at the thought of Shannon. “It was college. Everybody experiments in college.”

“But he was delicious.” Which meant I’d loved him.

I just about lost it. But then my father would have killed Dylan. “He’s nothing, like I said. I’m getting sick of this town anyway. I’ll probably move on soon.”

“Hmm.” A few minutes later, the gas smell was gone. I had lied to the devil and won. But I couldn’t be sure I would win the next time or the next.

I should have left town that night, but I couldn’t stand the idea of never seeing Dylan again. There had to be some way I could fix this. I had to at least try.

I KNOCKED on Dylan’s door at nine the next morning wearing ragged cutoffs and a T-shirt with holes in it. He answered the door wearing boxers and nothing else, like he’d just woken up. He stared at me for a minute. “What are you doing here?”

I kept my eyes fixed on his face, my smile dial clicked to “friend.” “I thought we were building that ramp for your mom today.”

Dylan blinked at me a couple of times. “Right. Thanks.” He stepped away from the door, and I followed him through the house out to the deck. The backyard sloped down from the house, leaving the deck about five feet off the ground. We were going to build a ramp over the steps so Dylan’s mom

could get out to the garden easier. The ladies from the garden club had really made it nice this year.

We studied the deck for a moment. “I guess I better get dressed. Help yourself to anything in the fridge.”

I grabbed a Mountain Dew and lay in one of the deck chairs, the sun already hot enough to make me sweat.

A shadow fell over me. “Going back to sleep?”

“I probably could.” I rolled to my feet.

Dylan had changed into loose shorts and a paint-spattered T-shirt. “You don’t have to help me.”

“I know. I want to.”

Dylan dropped his eyes. “I’m sorry about last night.”

I wanted to tell him it wasn’t his fault, but instead I said, “It’s all right. We’d been drinking. I’m just not, you know.”

“Right, right, I know. I’m sorry.”

“We’re cool. No worries.” I took a slow deep breath and smelled nothing but fresh-cut grass from the neighbor’s yard.

He tipped his Mountain Dew back to cover his embarrassment, and I watched his throat move. I hated to lie to him when I wanted nothing more than to kiss the corner of his mouth where his smile began. But he wasn’t smiling now. I cleared my throat. “Should we get started?”

“Sure.” He stepped closer and my skin tingled. But he just walked past me, down the deck stairs to the back garage door. “Lumber’s in here.”

Dylan had made precise measurements already, so we spent the morning cutting plywood and two-by-fours in the relative cool of the garage. Because we couldn't hear each other over the whine of the saw, I spent most of my time just watching him as I held the other end of the plywood steady on the sawhorses.

When we carried the parts of the ramp back outside, the sun beat down on our heads like hammers. I leaned a sheet of plywood against the deck and wiped the fresh sweat off my forehead. "Damn. I wonder what the temperature is?"

Dylan knelt to stack his armful of lumber beside the steps. "Let's take an early lunch. By the time we come back, the shade will have shifted." He nodded at a big maple standing on the other side of the deck.

I realized he'd planned the day that way. "That was smart." He shrugged, smiling a little.

Dylan ordered pizza, and we ate in the cool basement. He'd made half the room a lounge with couches and a big screen TV. The other half looked like a computer repair shop had exploded. I stretched out on one of the couches, the leather cool on my bare legs, and let my lunch settle. "What's your mom up to today?"

"Amanda picked her up this morning and took her shopping. You want any more pizza?"

"No, I'm fine. How's she doing?"

Dylan closed the lid on the pizza box. "She's been falling more lately." Dylan took a sip of beer, then rolled the bottle between his hands. "I think maybe she's not letting on how bad her eyes are getting. And I can tell her balance is worse.

I worry about her when she's here by herself." He took another hasty drink.

I hadn't heard Dylan sound so afraid for her since she'd broken her hip a few years ago and he talked her into moving in with him. "Let me know if I can help."

"Thanks." He stood. "Ready to get back to work?"

"Sure." He reached for my empty bottle, and our fingers brushed. I didn't react, though my heart sped up a little. He didn't look like he'd noticed. I followed Dylan upstairs and managed to keep my eyes off his ass. I could do this. I could keep him alive.

He'd been right of course, and the maple shaded our work area. Dylan handed me another beer, which I rolled across my forehead before taking a drink. The humidity still choked us, but at least we'd be working in the shade this afternoon. My shirt had almost dried over lunch, so I pulled it off and tossed it on the deck before I sweated it through again.

Dylan made a little noise behind me, and I swore under my breath. But all he said was, "Good idea." He set his glasses carefully on the deck and peeled off his shirt. I let myself watch the slow reveal of sweaty brown skin and the dusting of dark blond hair on his chest and under his arms until I realized he'd put his glasses back on and was watching me watch him.

I cleared my throat and turned away, putting my hand on a random piece of plywood. "So what next?"

Dylan had the whole operation planned out, so it was quicker work to put the ramp together than it would have

been if I'd been in charge. Still, the sun had dropped behind the neighbor's roofline by the time we finished. We stood back a minute and admired our handiwork. The ramp zigzagged in front of the deck and had a nice long incline and a handrail so Dylan's mom wouldn't trip on her way down. "I'll go see if Mom's home yet." Dylan pulled his shirt back on and walked up the ramp to the house. I put on my own shirt and took a long swallow of warm beer. It hadn't been so bad today. Dylan and I had been good friends for years. Nothing had to change now. He'd get over Charlie and find someone new, and then we'd be back to normal. I could wait it out.

The glass door slid open, and Dylan's mom shuffled through with a cane in one hand. Dylan hovered at her other elbow, frowning.

I walked over and leaned on the deck floor, smiling up at her. "You're looking good, Marie." I was a salesman, so I knew my smile didn't waver, but I could see why Dylan was worried about her. The hand that hung at her side trembled, and she wobbled a bit when she took another step toward me.

"You're a liar," she said sharply, then her face lit with a smile that drooped a little on one side. "But you're sweet." I just grinned. "Staying out of trouble?"

"Yes, ma'am." I winked, though she didn't seem to see it.

Marie squinted at our afternoon's work. "Thank you both. That looks perfect." She shuffled over to the ramp and started down it.

"Are you sure you don't want your walker?" Dylan still hovered at her side.

“Oh, I’ll be fine. If you didn’t want me to use the rail then why’d you put it in?”

Dylan followed her down the ramp and stood beside me when his mom waved him away. She walked carefully over the close-trimmed grass to the flowerbeds, their white and yellow blossoms stained red by the setting sun.

“Thanks.” Dylan’s shoulder brushed mine for a moment.

“My pleasure.” I watched Marie stop next to some flowering bush and touch the big drooping blooms with a trembling hand. “I should probably get going.”

“Thanks again.” Dylan squeezed my shoulder, holding on just a little too long.

I took a quick breath and stepped back, my smile freezing in place. “I’ll see you Monday.”

“Right.” He looked away.

I set my empty bottle on the edge of the deck and walked around the house, feeling Dylan’s eyes on me until I was out of sight. I didn’t look back. My father didn’t say anything, but I’d smelled the gas and knew he was watching. But it would be fine. There was nothing to see.

THINGS seemed back to normal the next week at work. Dylan was happy to be surrounded by his computers and smiled when I dropped in to see him. On Wednesday, I gave a sales presentation to the owner of the local chain of car dealerships that landed us the biggest database job we’d ever had. I’d been after them for a couple of years, but everything

came together that afternoon. The dealership owner just nodded like everything I said was perfect and signed on the dotted line. Since I was on a roll, I probably could have gotten a discount on a new car for Dylan too, but he hadn't decided what he wanted yet.

On Friday night, Dylan and I went to the bar at our usual time and sat at our usual table in the corner. Everything was fine. I could do this.

But Dylan looked a little tense that night, his mouth drawn into a tight line.

"What's wrong?"

He dropped his eyes and picked up a napkin, shredding it with his thin, nervous fingers. "Mom fell last night. Bruises up and down her side, Amanda told me, but she refused to go to the doctor. Like usual."

"Sorry to hear that."

He shrugged. "Amanda said she'd check on her this afternoon." He looked away, and I let it be. There wasn't anything I could say to help anyway.

The cowboy stood at the jukebox again tonight. I nodded at him and Dylan followed my eyes. "Sure he's not your type?"

Dylan just looked at me. "Maybe he's yours."

And there went years of pretending to be straight, right down the toilet. "Not really. I like bigger boobs." Grinning, I snapped my fingers so the flame jumped up, then snuffed it and put my hand in my pocket like I was putting away a lighter.

Dylan shook his head and balled up the shredded napkin in his fist.

Our food came quicker that night, and I managed to put off one of Lexy's friends and another girl whose name I didn't remember when they came asking for a dance. I didn't think Dylan really wanted to sit by himself tonight. But Lexy, of course, was more persistent.

She perched on my knee and lay back against me so her boobs rested on my arm. "Brent! You promised me a dance tonight!"

I caught Dylan's eye-roll and grinned. "Can't I finish eating first?"

"Oh come on, one quick little dance. You'll be back before you know it."

Dylan pulled his phone out of his pocket and frowned at the screen. He slid out of the booth, heading to the door where it was quieter. I was watching him, so I saw when his face crumpled.

Lexy spilled to the floor with a squawk when I stood. "Sorry about that." I hauled her to her feet and dropped a few bills on the table. "I've got to go."

I met Dylan on his way back to me. His face had gone white under his tan. "Amanda called an ambulance. Mom fell and hit her head." He swallowed hard.

I took his arm, steering him back toward the door. "Are they taking her to Monroe?" He nodded. "Let's go then."

"You don't have to take me. Justin's coming to get me after he picks up Amanda at the house."

“Then call them back and say I’ll take you. We’ll all get there faster.”

Dylan climbed in the truck and took out his phone again. We pulled out on the highway. It took half an hour to get to Monroe, but that’s where the good hospital was. Dylan snapped his phone shut and looked out the window into the evening gloom. The truck rumbled, and the radio was on low, but the silence filled the cab until it nearly choked me. I couldn’t think of anything to say. What I really wanted to do was take his hand or something, but that wouldn’t do any good in the long run.

So I didn’t say anything until I stopped in front of the hospital’s main doors. “Go ahead. I’ll park and come in after you.” He nodded and ran to the doors.

I found Dylan sitting with his sister and her husband in the waiting room. Amanda sat with her face buried in her husband’s chest, her fingers twined through Dylan’s. I almost hated to interrupt. But Justin nodded to me over Amanda’s head, so I came in and sat next to Dylan. He looked at me and tried to smile, then shook his head.

“She’s got bleeding on her brain, the doctor said. She’s in surgery.” Dylan’s eyes were wide, like he was trying not to cry. I just nodded.

The clock seemed to tick louder the longer we waited. At ten, Dylan pulled his head out of his hands and stood up. “I’ve got to go for a walk. Text me if the doctor comes out.” Amanda nodded, her eyes red-rimmed.

I stood too. “Want some company?”

He hesitated for a moment. “Sure.”

I still couldn't think of anything to say, but Dylan had never been a big talker anyway. We walked through the brightly lit hospital parking lot and down the residential street beyond. The night was just cool enough to make the humidity stick to our skin.

"She really enjoyed the garden this week," Dylan said. "Thanks."

"Glad to hear it."

We walked on for a little while. "I'm not ready to lose her," Dylan whispered, his words almost lost in the sound of a passing car.

"You never are." My mom had been dead before I even found out about the car accident that killed her, but it hadn't made it any easier.

He looked at me, probably remembering that I'd missed the last two months of high school when Mom died. They'd graduated me anyway, which I always appreciated.

"How long before...?"

Before it stopped hurting? I just shook my head.

Dylan sagged against an elm in front of a beige house. His glasses reflected the streetlight, and I couldn't see his eyes. I didn't know what to do until I saw his shoulders shaking. Then I stepped forward and pulled him into my arms without a thought. He leaned against me as if he couldn't hold himself up anymore, his breath hitching once in a while as he tried to stop crying. More than anything, I wanted to take his pain away, but there was nothing I could do.

I should have been expecting it, but the sharp gas smell

still took me by surprise. I stiffened, wary and listening. I hadn't seen him in the flesh in a long time, but that didn't mean my father wouldn't do more than watch tonight. If he reached for Dylan, I had to do something. I didn't know what, but I wasn't going to just give him up.

Dylan must have felt me tense, because he pulled away, frowning, then jerked back. The look on my face must have been terrible. "Sorry," he blurted, stepping out of my reach.

I forced a smile, scanning the dark behind him for signs of my father. The gas smell had gotten stronger. "No problem. Really."

"Okay." He didn't believe me, and I couldn't blame him.

"Should we go back?" I glanced over my shoulder.

"Yeah." He turned and walked back to the hospital faster than we'd come. I trailed after him, keeping a sharp eye out. After a block or two, the gas smell faded. After all, Dylan's shoulders were hunched up, and I was still gritting my teeth and glaring all around me. Nothing to interest my father here.

A block from the hospital, Dylan's phone chirped, and he broke into a run. I followed slower, not knowing if he wanted me there or not. When I got back to the waiting room, Justin sat by himself. He looked up when I came in. "She's going quick. They're in there with her." I nodded and sat a few chairs away.

I started to snap my fingers and call the little flame like I always do when I'm nervous, but then I remembered where I was. They probably didn't want open flame in the hospital. So I just sat there for another half hour or so. At least I

hadn't had to wait for my mom to die.

When Dylan came back with his arm around his sister, his face was dry and blank as if he'd been drained of grief. He looked at me, but his face didn't change. Amanda went to Justin, who pulled her close, and Dylan looked lost. I stood and took a couple of steps closer. "Want to go home?"

He nodded, probably relieved that I hadn't hugged him again, since it never ended well.

"I'll call you in the morning," Amanda said, giving her brother a fierce hug. We followed her and Justin out to the parking lot and back to town.

When I pulled up in front of Dylan's house, all the lights were off. He sat in my truck for a minute, his profile sharp against the streetlight's glare as he stared at the empty house. His jaw tightened, and he reached for the door handle.

"Do you want me to stay?" I blurted. "In case you need anything."

He stared at me so long I was sure he'd say no. "Yes."

"Okay." I climbed out of the truck and followed him inside like we were just friends and this wasn't weird at all.

"There's a bed made up in the guest room." He flipped on the light.

"Sounds good. Thanks." I hesitated in the doorway. "Let me know if you need anything."

He just nodded and walked down the hall, not turning his head when he passed his mother's empty room. I stared at his closed bedroom door. If I'd been normal, I would have

told him I loved him years ago and maybe I could have held him tonight. But I was who I was, and that could never happen. I closed the door behind me as quietly as I could.

I KNOW it doesn't seem like something as simple as a little whiff of gasoline should have kept me from comforting the man I loved on the night his mother died. But the smell was a warning, and I knew the devil always made good on his threats.

The first person I loved was Annette Royce, way back in high school. We went on a date one night, and when I took her home, she kissed me. Well, we were teenagers, so before I knew it, we were doing a lot more than just kissing and I was starting to worry that her father would catch us. When she stopped kissing me, I was sure she'd heard something. But then I felt wetness. Blood. Her throat poured blood all over my hands, and her head lolled back, eyes blank. I screamed and threw her out of the car into her father's flowerbed. And that was it—she was gone. No body that anyone else could see. And the worst part was no one even remembered she'd been born except me. It wasn't until later I remembered the smell of gas in the car.

In college, I lived with a guy named Shannon. I loved him. He died too. I try not to think about how.

One night about a month after I lost Shannon, my father came to my apartment with its too-big bed and told me why he'd died. I'd only seen my father a few times when I was a kid because my mom had hated him. He told me she'd

made a deal with him, so when she died he took her soul. And someday he'd take mine, because I was a piece of her and belonged to him too. But in the meantime, he'd take what I had to give. Annette. And Shannon.

I screamed and threw him out. He laughed on the other side of the door. "You belong to me. You'll admit it someday."

"No I won't," I whispered, but he just chuckled, the smell of gasoline slowly fading.

That's how it had been ever since. I hadn't killed anyone else because I knew to walk away when I smelled him lurking. It had never been hard to leave, knowing what the alternative was. Until Dylan.

So that's why I lay in a borrowed bed the night Dylan's mother died, hating myself because I couldn't give him a shoulder to cry on and hating myself even more because I was risking his life just being there.

I WENT to the funeral the next Tuesday and sat near the ladies from the garden club who whispered how it was a blessing that Marie's troubles were over. I stared at the back of Dylan's head and thought about suffering. And when the funeral was over, I left because I didn't think I could go to the cemetery and see the hurt on Dylan's face without doing something to comfort him.

My plans to leave were coming together. I'd be starting a new job at an electronics store in Monroe as soon as I waited out my two weeks at Software Unlimited. It might not be far enough from Dylan, but I could always move again. After all,

I'd never had a problem getting any job I wanted. Or anything else. The realtor would be listing my house next week, and I was sure it would sell quickly. I tried not to think about why my life was so charmed.

Dylan and I went to the bar like usual that Friday. Amanda had called and asked me to look out for her brother. Her shrink had told her it was best to resume routines as soon as possible after a death in the family, so would I please take him to the bar? I didn't have a problem with that, since now that I'd shown my father I didn't care about Dylan, I could take my time saying goodbye. I hadn't smelled gas since I called the realtor.

But I hadn't told Dylan yet.

Once we got to the Woodchuck, I started thinking maybe Amanda's shrink didn't know what she was talking about. Dylan downed two beers before we ordered food and another two while we ate. That wasn't normal, and I fended off the women so I could keep an eye on him. Lexy hadn't forgiven me, so that helped. She just glared at me from across the room.

When Dylan tried to flag down a waitress for another beer, I grabbed his hand. "Hey, you want to slow down a little?"

His hand moved in mine, caressing. My balls tightened. "You want to dance with me?"

I looked around, a little desperate, but for once there weren't any women coming my way.

Dylan's thumb rubbed the back of my hand. "I know you want to."

I did. So badly that I almost gave in. But I pulled my hand free and glued a grin to my lips. “Sorry, babe, I think my dance card’s full.” I winked and stood quickly, not wanting to see his face. I caught the eye of a woman I didn’t know, and when I smiled she came right over and followed me out to the dance floor. Then one of the bar’s regulars came up, so I danced with her. And there was another woman whose name I never heard. When I dared look back at Dylan, he was gone.

I caught up to him a block from his house. “Are you all right?”

He just kept walking.

“Hey, was it what I said? Look, I’m sorry, I’m just not.”

He spun to face me. “Not what?” He didn’t look mad, but his face was cold, like he couldn’t be bothered with me anymore.

“Not....” I still couldn’t say it. What was wrong with me? Most every guy I knew would have been swearing up and down he wasn’t gay, even if he was. Maybe that’s why Dylan didn’t believe me.

“Let me know when you figure it out.” He turned away again, and I caught his arm.

“Look, maybe you’re right. I don’t know.” I bit my lip. Maybe he’d hate me a little less if he thought I was afraid to come out. I didn’t like lying to him, but it was better than the alternative. “I’m sorry I’ve been a jerk lately. Let me make it up to you, okay? Let’s go to that new barbecue place out on the highway tomorrow. My treat.”

He studied me as though waiting for the punch line. “All

right. What time?”

“Seven okay? I’ll pick you up.”

He lifted his eyebrows. Maybe he’d thought I meant lunch. I probably should have made it lunch. Supper made it look like a date.

“That’s fine.” He pulled his arm free and walked away.

I made myself stay put, though I really wanted to follow him home. I shouldn’t have gone after him in the first place. It would have been safer if I’d just left town that night, but the idea of him hating me made my insides shrivel. I’d tell him I was leaving tomorrow, and he’d probably hate me all over again, but at least I’d have one more day.

THE barbecue was good, and Dylan laughed at my jokes as if everything was fine. He hadn’t laughed much in the last couple of weeks, and I couldn’t bring myself to wipe the smile off his face. So even after I paid and we walked out to my truck, I still hadn’t told him I was leaving.

I pulled onto the highway, wondering how to say it. Wondering just how mad he’d be. The turnoff for the old quarry road loomed ahead, and I pointed. “You ever go down there anymore?”

“Not really. I didn’t much in high school either.” He gave me a wry smile. “I wasn’t invited to all the parties the way you were.”

I shrugged. I’d have given it all up to be normal. “Mind if we go down there tonight? It’s beautiful in the moonlight.”

“Sure.” A little smile hovered on his lips, and my heart turned over. But I had to tell him tonight.

I pulled off the highway onto the rutted dirt road. Dylan rolled down his window, so I did too. It was plenty humid tonight, like every other night this summer, but the damp just made the trees and dirt and plants smell better. Dylan still had that little smile on his face.

The truck jolted down the rough road, tall weeds slapping the undercarriage. A beer can glinted in the headlights and then crunched under the tires. We rolled to a stop in a small clearing where other tires had churned the ground to mud. I climbed out, and a moment later the passenger door clunked shut.

We scrambled down the steep path to the small sandy beach on the edge of the quarry. I skidded on the muddy trail, nearly landing on my ass, but Dylan caught me and pulled me upright.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” His hand lingered, and I closed my eyes. I was doing the right thing.

We waded through the weeds to the edge of the water that had filled the abandoned quarry over the years. It looked like the kids still came here to swim and party. Behind us, a ring of blackened rocks bordered a heap of ashes. More beer cans, half-filled with sand, glinted in the moonlight.

I stood at the edge of the water, the little waves lapping at my shoes. “I’ve got something I need to tell you.”

Dylan’s arm brushed mine. “What’s that?” His low voice

sent shivers through me. He touched my cheek, his face tender, understanding. I could have told him I loved him. But that would get him killed, while this would just make him hate me.

“I’m leaving town next week. I found a job in Monroe.”

Dylan’s fingers tensed on my face. He took a deep, ragged breath. His hand fell. “What are you scared of?”

He deserved the truth, as much as I could tell without looking completely crazy. “Losing you.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“But you might.”

He shook his head, frustration creasing his forehead. “You don’t seem to care when it comes to women.”

I opened my mouth to say that was because he actually mattered, then closed it before I killed him. I looked down and dug a groove in the wet sand with my shoe.

“So you’re leaving me before I can leave you? Or am I reading you totally wrong and you’re just screwing with the gay guy?” He was mad now. I should have been happy, because anger would keep him safe. But when I looked up, I went cold all over at the hurt on his face.

“I’m sorry.” That was true enough, but I didn’t know what else to say. I dropped my eyes again.

Sand crunched, then Dylan was right up in my face. “What’s your problem?” He was mad enough to punch me, so maybe I should have been worried, but all I could think about was the way he’d tasted the last time we’d been so close.

“Well?” He shoved me backward. I tripped on a chunk of driftwood and nearly fell, but he just stalked after me. “What the fuck do you want, anyway?”

“You.” I wanted to take it back the minute I said it, but the word hung in the air between us, and Dylan breathed it in.

He stood with his fists clenched, trembling. I couldn’t tell if he was mad or not. Then he took two steps, seized my jaw, and kissed me till I thought the top of my head would lift right off. I wrapped my arms around him and held him as tight as I could, my hands sliding down to his ass. He panted against my mouth, teeth nipping at my lips and hands fumbling at my fly.

It was like his touch brought me back to life after a long sleep, so when he slid down my body, pulling my shorts as he went, I didn’t have the strength to stop him. “Dylan.” It was supposed to be a protest, but it came out as a moan when he took my cock in his mouth.

I rested my shaking hands on his short hair as he swallowed me faster and faster, like he might never get another chance. And he might not. Panic flared through me, and I put my hands on his shoulders to push him away.

But Dylan dragged me down to my knees. My aching cock rubbed against him, his denim shorts grating just a bit. Before I realized, I’d unbuttoned him so I could stroke us both in one hand. He groaned and pulled our mouths together. “I want you to fuck me,” he gasped.

My hand moved faster, the feeling of our cocks rubbing nearly too much for me. But Dylan tugged my shirt up, and I had to let go so he could pull it off. He pushed me back in

the sand and stood, pulling off his shorts. He set his glasses on top and took a glistening condom from his pocket. I pulled my shorts off too and lay back on them. He'd said he wanted me to fuck him, not the other way around, but I'd let him do whatever he wanted.

Dylan knelt, straddling my thighs, the unopened condom in one hand, his other hand stroking my ribs. "I want you to fuck me," he said again. "What do you want?"

The tenderness was back in his face, but it was more than that. He wanted me as much as I wanted him.

"I want to fuck you." I reached for him, but he pushed me back and tore open the wrapper. His hands felt so good, my hips jumped a little as he unrolled the condom. He bent over me, angling his ass just right. I pushed up on my elbows and kissed him as he moaned into my mouth and lowered himself.

He eased up and down a few times while I fought to hold myself still, loving to watch the pleasure wash over his face but needing to pound into him. When he quickened the pace, I lifted my knees so my cock pushed against his prostate. Dylan fell forward, groaning, and I kissed him again.

I couldn't touch him enough—his face, his chest, his ass that flexed in my hands as he rode me up and down. We rocked together, faster and faster, until Dylan lifted himself, eyes squeezed shut, and came all over my belly. Even if he hadn't felt so good on top of me, the look on his face was enough to push me over. I groaned and pulled him down for another kiss.

We lay panting together, listening to the water lap

against the sand and the crickets competing with the bullfrog on the other side of the quarry. I was sweaty and sticky, with sand in awkward places, and had never been happier. So of course that's when I smelled gas.

"No." Had he been there the whole time and I hadn't noticed?

Dylan lifted his head from my chest, forehead wrinkled. "What's wrong?"

I wanted to kiss away his frown. But instead I smiled and said, "I think I need to get up."

"Oh sure." He didn't look reassured, but Dylan eased himself off me, even peeling off the condom. He put on his shorts and glasses, looking around like he'd suddenly realized we'd just had sex in the open.

I stood carefully, still a little wobbly, and pulled my shorts on too. Somehow that made me feel better, even though the gas smell kept growing.

"I'll take him now."

Dylan jumped, and I knew he'd heard the voice too. A shadow broke off from a tree and shuffled toward us across the weedy beach, the gas smell growing as it came. Dylan coughed. I stepped in front of him.

It was on my lips to say he'd just been a fuck and didn't mean anything, because I didn't know how else to save him, but the words froze there and wouldn't come out. I couldn't do that to him. Instead I said, "No."

"What's going on?" Dylan whispered. I held out my hand behind me, as though he couldn't die if I was touching him. But I knew that wasn't true.

Dylan's hand slipped into mine, warm and comforting.

The shadow stopped on the edge of the moonlight. All I could see was a silhouette. It cocked its head. "What did you say to me, boy?"

"You can't have him."

The shadow stepped into the light and twisted as though it hadn't quite been there before. He was gaunt as a tree, his ash-colored skin gnarled and puckered, eyes flickering like embers. I stared. He hadn't looked like that before. The last time I'd seen him he'd been fat and almost human-looking, though there had always been something a little off. The last time I'd seen him, not just smelled him, had been right after Shannon died.

"Look at what you've done to me, boy." He sighed like a dying fire. "You owe me."

"You can't have him," I repeated.

His head tilted again. "Then perhaps we can strike a deal."

"Only if Dylan stays safe."

"Safe from me, anyhow." He shrugged, bones popping like logs in a fire. "There are others. But that's his business, not yours."

"What's the deal?"

"You for him."

I sucked in a breath, my skin flushing hot and cold. Could I have done that years ago? Saved Shannon, saved Annette? "I didn't know I could do that. Why didn't you ask before?"

"You're more useful to me like this, luring them in." He creaked when he smiled, and Dylan's hand tightened on mine. I felt him trembling. "But I'm hungry. You've given me no meat for years."

I closed my eyes, doing my best not to think of the way Shannon had died. It was no use. But I could save Dylan. "Done," I snapped and pulled my hand free.

"What?" Dylan grabbed my arm. "Tell me what's going on. What does he want from you?"

I turned to look at him one last time, tracing the line of his jaw with my fingers. I could tell him now. "I love you." I smiled. "Remember that. I love you."

"Brent?"

I pulled free again and took a step toward my father. Fire roared in my ears like someone had just poured gasoline on a bonfire. Pain etched my bones, and I opened my mouth to scream, but it stopped as quick as it had started.

"Take me instead."

"What?" I stared at Dylan.

"Take me." He stepped in front of me, but it was my turn to grab his arm and yank him back.

"You don't know what you're saying."

He turned on me, furious. "Then tell me! Who is this and what does he want? What are you giving up for me?"

I swallowed. It was true. I'd never told him anything. "This is my father, and he wants your life. I won't let him take it."

Dylan blanched, looking at the gnarled shadow more

warily. “Your father? I thought you said your father was dead.”

I shrugged. “Does that look alive to you?” I pushed Dylan behind me again as my father came closer, moving faster than anything that looked like a bundle of sticks should be able to move.

“I think you’re both bluffing.” He stretched one long-fingered claw right over my shoulder, swiping at Dylan’s face. I howled and tackled the devil to the ground, landing on him with a noise like a tornado on a dead tree.

He rolled us over, and the roaring fire filled my head again. Pain hammered every nerve and muscle. But I didn’t fight. Dylan was safe. “And then I’ll take him too,” the devil breathed in my ear. “He offered himself.”

I howled and fought back, his skin crackling under my hands like a roasted chicken left too long in the oven. And then the weight and the fire disappeared, and Dylan screamed. I staggered to my feet. My father knocked Dylan to the ground at the quarry’s edge and then flung him farther up the beach, away from the water.

The water. Dylan flopped on the sand, and my heart turned over before I saw him curl up. My father scrambled after him like some freakish spider, but I grabbed him before he could reach Dylan.

The spindly thing twisted and fought, but I had my arms locked tight around him. I stumbled backward into the water until the sand fell away, and we sank like a bag of cement into the deeper part of the quarry.

He still thrashed in my arms, and I realized I’d been

wrong. The water wasn't hurting him at all. He'd kill me one way or another. And then Dylan.

I hit him with all the force I could muster underwater even as black spots started flashing in front of my eyes. I thought maybe his grip on me loosened, his struggling stopped, but then he grabbed my arm and pulled. I couldn't hold back any longer. I sucked in a lungful of water and blacked out.

I WOKE to someone pounding on my chest. I rolled over and coughed up what felt like half the quarry.

I opened my eyes, but everything was dark. Then I saw pinpricks of light and realized I was lying on my back looking at the stars.

"Brent? Brent, say something!"

"Dylan?" I croaked. Or tried. It didn't sound much like his name. He pulled me into a tight hug. I leaned against him, glad for his warmth and the solid feeling of his body against me. "I love you," I whispered. I had to make sure he knew that.

"I know." He kissed my cheek. "I love you too."

I held him tighter and then stiffened. "Where is he?"

"Gone, I think." Dylan helped me stand up. The moon glistened on a bundle of sticks that bobbed on the water.

I sighed, then dropped to the sand again. "Thanks for dragging me out." My voice sounded almost normal.

Dylan sat next to me, his arm warm around my back.

“You’re welcome.” We stared out at the quarry. “That wasn’t your first time with a guy, was it?”

I laughed and coughed up a little more water. Dylan rubbed my back until I stopped. “No,” I said finally. “It wasn’t.”

“Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

I took a deep breath and coughed a little more. “It’s a long story.”

Dylan’s arm tightened. “I’ve got all night.”

“All right. Well, you know my lighter trick?”

“Yeah?”

I showed him my empty palm and then snapped my fingers. Nothing happened. I did it again, still nothing. And the soot was gone from under my nails. I started laughing.

Dylan laughed a little too, in a puzzled kind of way, then the smile dropped off his face. “It wasn’t a trick?”

I shook my head and snapped my fingers again. “He’s really gone.”

“Tell me.”

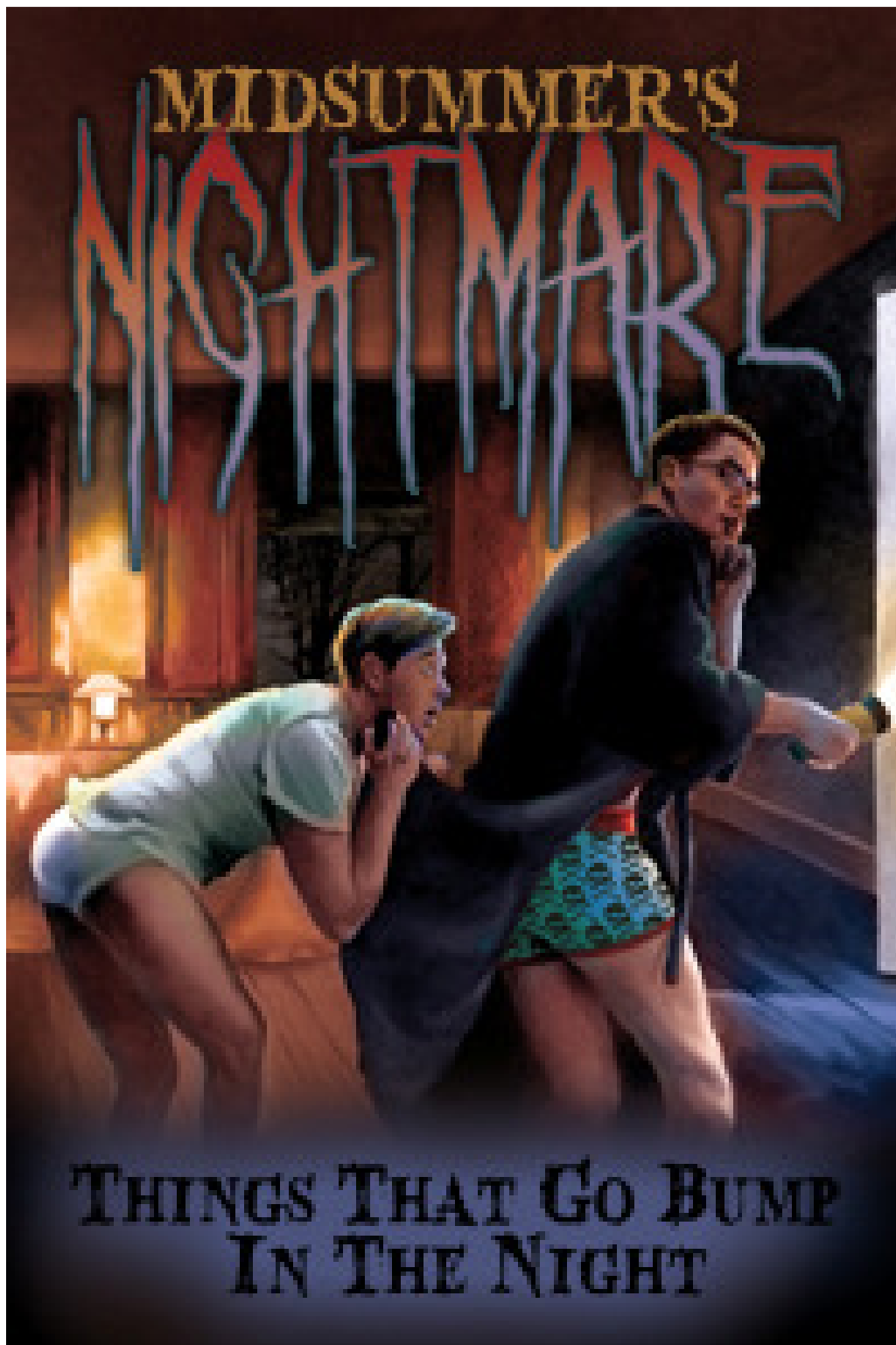
So I did. I told him everything. How I’d nearly burned down the house at five years old when I found out I could light my fingers with a snap. About Mom. How Annette died. And Shannon. “I’m sorry I lied to you. I just didn’t want you to end up—” I couldn’t say it. If anything, the idea of losing him hurt more than ever.

Dylan understood. He squeezed me tighter. “It’s over now.”

I looked across the water, where the bundle of sticks drifted farther away, separated by wind and waves. One by one, they sank below the surface. I took Dylan’s hand. “Or maybe just beginning?”

Dylan smiled. “Let’s go home.”

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Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Released in the United States of America
June 2010

eBook Edition
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-487-9