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Denise Zaza

Senior Editor

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Harlequin E Shivers Box Set

Contains

Darkening Around Me by Barbara J. Hancock

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Harlequin E Shivers

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Darkening Around Me

By Barbara J. Hancock



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The night is darkening round me,
~~The wild winds coldly blow;~~
But a tyrant spell has bound me,
And I cannot, cannot go.

The giant trees are bending
Their bare boughs weighed with snow;
The storm is fast descending,
And yet I cannot go.

Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me:
I will not, cannot go.

—Emily Brontë, “The Night Is Darkening Round Me”

Chapter One

I rented a convertible as tourists do, though probably not as often in this part of the world. It's not that I wanted the wind whipping around me and the fresh air following a long flight. It's that I thought I should. What I got was more frigid than fresh. It was late summer, but September in the Pacific Northwest obviously didn't mean the same as September in Virginia. My visions of driving along the 101 with big sunglasses and a scarf trailing behind me like the confident woman I pretended to be were put to rest.

Oh, it was sunny enough at first, but as I traveled it grew darker.

This was wilderness. I'd seen it called "old growth forests" and now I understood why. There was a haze in the air, a taste of primordial moss and fern blended with surf-dwelling things I couldn't name. I knew my destination was a piece of privately owned land adjacent to Olympic State Park. Other than that, I followed the GPS directions in completely unfamiliar territory. Even the jagged coastline, which was beautiful, set my teeth on edge because it was so alien compared to the sandy shore back home. I closed the convertible's roof as if I was battening down the hatches.

But I drove on.

Just as I was beginning to think I should have brought a tent and an adventure guide, the roof of the house came into view. High above the ocean and several roads off the main coastal highway, my destination was so covered by greenery I couldn't get a good look at it. The car climbed the driveway but not without a few wheezes that made me wish for a four-wheel drive and that feeling in the pit of my stomach that I used to get as a child on a Ferris wheel.

Pacific sea breezes feathered my hair with cold fingers as I stepped from my car to the garden. Thornleigh—three paces, maybe four—and then the wild tangle enveloped me. Just like that I was shut off from the world. At one time it must have been a masterpiece, hundreds of rose bushes laid out in a carefully trimmed maze of an English garden. Now one blossom-heavy bush had grown in another and twined overhead to create a true labyrinth. Its shadowy confines reached out to me with verdant tendrils seeking to draw me in and pull me close. All at once, it was far too much nature to feel usual.

Claustrophobia threatened.

My heartbeat sped up and my breath quickened even though I could make out the stepping-stone that would—*please, God*—lead me to the side door I'd been told to enter. I hurried forward from stone to halfway-buried stone, praying for a shaft of sunlight or a hint of air that wasn't petal sweet.

I was tired, worn down by travel and lack of normal routine. The nerves I normally kept in check were coming out to play in the dark.

I had taken an early morning flight from Abingdon, Virginia, and I'd flown all day with only one brief stop in Denver. A sleepy little town in spite of its cultural renaissance of the past couple of decades, Abingdon was everyday and normal. There we had orderly fields and apple orchards, the Barter Theatre and a quaint effort to spruce up historic midtown for tourists. Here was all untrimmed and untamed.

Of course, "quaint" doesn't necessarily mean safe and "wild" doesn't necessarily mean dangerous. Does it?

A ghostly white face materialized out of thorny shadows and I instinctively held up my hands in defense. It took seconds to realize the face belonged to a life-size statue. It took longer before the

seemed to matter to the instinctive fear that raised the hair on the back of my neck and kicked my pulse into rapid overdrive.

Even as I forced my hands down at my sides, the vine-covered marble unnerved me. It was a woman. The patina of age and the effects of weather didn't hide her expression of grief and fear. The wear made her tears seem ancient and ageless and never ending.

I swallowed and stepped closer. I didn't want to. For some reason, I couldn't experience the slightly embarrassed relief a person usually feels when they've been startled or frightened by something that turns out to be ordinary or mundane.

The statue still scared me.

Her eyes were moisture-filled and wide. Her mouth was slightly open, as if at any second she might beg for help or scream.

A step on the path behind me caused me to spin. My breathing hadn't recovered. Now it hitched on a sudden intake that hurt my chest.

Nothing.

Only the stirring wilderness of leaves all around and the occasional gasping sigh of a wilted petal as it fell.

My eyes, though, had adjusted to the artificial night created by the overgrown and neglected garden. Now I saw them. Face after face after face slowly revealing themselves to my wide peering eyes.

There were dozens of statues. All of women. All with horrible expressions—pain, fear, shock, grief—forever frozen and on display. The garden seemed to hold a perpetual funeral in its leafy embrace.

I closed my eyes and swallowed against the too-rapid breaths that threatened hyperventilation.

Only statues.

And in the garden of a sculptor, for heaven's sake.

No reason for panic.

No reason for the fight-or-flight instinct that had my fists clenched and my legs poised for takeoff.

Sweet, rose-scented air caressed my face and the rustling of leaves teased my ears. But it wasn't soothing no matter how I tried to make it for long seconds with my eyes closed and my nerve failing. Finally, my eyes popped open and there they were. All still exactly as before, silently harmless, while the sheen of sweat down my back said otherwise.

I went back to my car to retrieve my bag from the passenger seat with slow, purposeful strides, refusing to hurry and definitely refusing to run. Not because it was silly—though, of course, it was. Absolutely ridiculous.

Carefully, I leaned over and picked up my satchel. It was packed with a week's worth of belongings. No more. No less. A week at Thornleigh was all I'd been allowed by the reclusive artist who was to capture my likeness in clay.

I'd seen his work in my aunt's gallery back east. Beautiful, luminous pieces full of strength and spirit. Nothing at all like the poor souls behind me. Were they his work, too? And, if so, did I trust him enough for what lay ahead?

* * *

The rose jungle ended abruptly in a gravel-strewn patio beneath the looming great house known as Thornleigh. Finally, with a deep breath, I could taste the sea once more and fill my lungs with its salty freshness. Built in the early 1960s by an eccentric millionaire, the stone-walled house would have looked more like a keep than a castle if it hadn't been for its copper-topped turrets that pierced the cloudy sky.

above it. I'd passed through many quaint Victorian-era neighborhoods in my life and they'd always seemed vaguely haunted, obvious remnants of days gone by. Thornleigh mimicked that on a grand scale, an insistent, persistent whisper of "nevermore."

Washington was already exotic to a lifelong Virginian. I thought I'd known "green." In the long drive from Port Angeles, I'd experienced more hues and shades than the tame forests and manicured lawns back home had ever displayed. Redwoods larger than I had imagined and the wild rock coastline. So violent and changing compared to the tame beaches of Norfolk's coast. I'd traveled extensively over the past two years, testing and proving myself, again and again. But Thornleigh and its jagged cliff pedestal seemed to challenge me.

Up the sides of the house, vines twisted and curled and climbed as if they sought to escape as I had from the statues in the garden or maybe pull the house down to a stony ruin at the statues' feet.

"You made it." A deep voice interrupted my morbid fascination with Thornleigh. I quickly shifted my gaze, only to meet the darkest eyes I'd ever seen. I'm five feet five inches tall. Thornleigh was four stories high and built—I had read—on top of a first-class rock wine cellar. The man who stood between us wasn't even slightly dwarfed by the house at his back. And I? I felt tiny confronted with them both.

Miles O'Keefe. Tall, dark and handsome, but more than those things. He topped me by almost a foot, but his broad shoulders curved in on him when he pushed his hands in his pockets. His eyes were so brown they were almost black and his hair fell in Byronesque waves more mahogany than chestnut, but his skin was pale, as if he spent little time in the sun. His face was perfectly formed and balanced with a lean, cut jaw and firm, well-shaped lips. But the brows on his pale face were furrowed above his watchful eyes. I was suddenly certain he'd seen me hurry from the garden, chased by an overactive imagination that had been fed by dark experiences I'd like to forget.

"Why, yes, of course...certainly no trouble finding it..." I laughed, feeling even more foolish over the fear I'd felt in the garden. I knew real fear. That hadn't been it. But, rather, it had been fed by the real terror that still lurked, pulsing along with the blood in my veins.

He looked over my shoulder, squinting enigmatically into the shadows behind me. Then, he dropped his searching gaze again to my upturned face.

But not before I glanced back. Just once. To be sure no one...and nothing...was behind me. Foolish or not, the feeling of being watched wouldn't leave me.

Jet lag, surely. No more. No less.

"One week," he reiterated. He made no further commentary on my travels or small talk about the weather even though dark clouds swirled above us and several fat droplets of rain hit his shoulders and ran down across the broad expanse of his chest at his collar.

I wanted to tell him again that I didn't believe in curses or legends or rumors of macabre hauntings, but something in the closed quality of his face stopped me. I've never been a chatterbox or a social butterfly; even less so following that horrible day years ago.... I didn't press for conversation.

I nodded, willing to humor him after my long drive and frightening walk with the statues. *He* and the statues, I reminded myself.

He reached toward me and his sudden movement caused me to startle. I jumped and squared my shoulders. One foot slid back to brace and balance slightly behind the other. He paused, one dark brow crooked and his eyes more penetrating than before.

My bag. He wants to help with my bag.

Polite gesture meet defensive overreaction. Ugh.

I didn't regret the martial arts lessons. Not for a minute. No one who had been through what I had been through should regret learning to defend herself. However, I did regret pulling out my practiced moves when they were obviously unnecessary.

“I’ve got this,” I said and I meant it. I could handle my own bag and whatever else came my way. ~~Bravado sometimes works best when your nerves are shot.~~

More rain began to fall and he turned to lead me inside. Even with a sudden downfall roaring around me, I shivered as I stepped over the threshold of Thornleigh.

Dear Mr. O’Keefe:

In January of last year, I survived multiple stab wounds following an armed robbery at my aunt’s art gallery, La Roux. I’m a silversmith. I stopped in for only a moment to deliver a custom crafted pendant. I was left for dead, but I didn’t die. Others did. A month ago, I saw one of your sculptures at the gallery. I have since learned that you are renowned for capturing the female form and conveying its strength and beauty. I have undertaken many long months of physical therapy and strength training to reclaim my health and my life. Being sculpted by you would be an affirmation for me. I hope you will consider my request.

Sincerely,

Samantha Knox

Later—a year later—an exquisite envelope had arrived in my dusty mailbox. Who corresponded on actual paper—luxuriously thick and clothlike paper—these days? The envelope was creamy vellum and I handled it with care because I’d never crafted the kind of ornate sterling silver letter opener I deserved. Trembling fingers had to suffice. I had seen the return address handwritten in a firm but artful script. What I found when I opened the envelope surprised me. There was a simple note responding to my emailed request, but with it a folded charcoal drawing of the statue I had so admired at La Roux. The drawing distracted me from the note for long moments. I was hypnotized by his bold and obviously hurried rendering. The charcoal pencil had been pressed into the paper so hard that it left indentions, which would have torn through cheaper paper. But the image he’d created wasn’t crude, no matter how simple. She was as compelling in charcoal as she was in clay. She leaned into an invisible breeze that swept her gown against her body. Her face was indistinct as if seen from a great distance.

Finally, I’d pulled my attention from the drawing to read the letter.

Dear Ms. Knox:

Yes. I will see you. I invite you to Thornleigh this summer. For one week. Only.

O’Keefe

I had looked Thornleigh up on Google. Of course I had. I did nothing these days without research and preparation and triple-checking of all my facts. Not because I was suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome—although my therapist might disagree.

There had been tons of information on the house and the way the surrounding community felt about it and its previous owner. Dominick O’Keefe had been seen as a reclusive madman. His wife, Maria, had thrown herself from the cliffs in 1965, not long after their wedding. Her ghost still haunted the area according to legend. There were entire books and television specials devoted to the Thornleigh Bride.

I’d purchased expensive stationary to reply to him in kind. My cursive—beyond what I used for my signature—was rusty, but my letter to him was crafted in neat, orderly rows of the script I had remembered from elementary school.

Dear Mr. O'Keefe:

~~*I will come. I am stronger now than ever. I ran two marathons this past year and I climbed Mt. Rainier in May. To paraphrase...I'm not afraid of ghosts...but one week it is. I have my training to consider.*~~

Sincerely,

Sam

Now that I'd been through the creepy encounter with the ghostly statues in the garden, now that I seen the house itself, vaguely threatening with its out-of-time mystique, now that I had met O'Keefe and seen the darkness in his eyes, I couldn't dismiss tales of the Thornleigh Bride so easily. I didn't believe in ghosts, but I'd been forced to face the dark that sometimes dwelled in the hearts of the living, and it was a lesson I carried with me to this day.

Chapter Two

It was late and I was hungry. The lunch I'd eaten on the flight from Denver was a vague cardboard memory. This I told myself as I bathed and changed for dinner though my empty stomach had little to do with the vanilla chai lotion I rubbed on my legs or the soft touch of coordinating perfume I dabbed on my wrists. Considering the curiosity that Miles O'Keefe had piqued, I probably should have nibbled on stale mints from the bottom of my purse and stayed in my room. The furnishings were dated, but, all the heavy, dark furniture aside, it was clean and the bathroom well equipped.

I didn't nibble mints.

O'Keefe had made me curious and I wanted to see him again. My interest had begun with the statue at La Roux. It had grown with the gift of the charcoal sketch. And, yes, even the mystery surrounding his "ghost." Meeting him earlier and discovering the macabre statues in the garden hadn't caused my curiosity to lessen.

The storm outside had strengthened rather than abated. The lamplight flickered as I dressed. There was no harm in seeking companionship on a stormy night, but I try not to lie to myself if I can help it. I was compelled to seek out O'Keefe and it had nothing to do with hunger or the storm. Slightly to my surprise, with electricity, but not the kind lighting up the sky outside my window. He was the first mystery I had allowed in my life in a very long time. Challenges, yes, left and right. But never the unknown. I had made sure my life was carefully organized and mapped for so long. Miles was a sudden, unexpected gasp in my steady respiration.

At least I could blame my aunt for the dress I wore to dinner. She had given it to me in the hope that I would wear it to a show of my work that had never been. I hadn't been to my workshop since the attack and was living off the income of pieces I'd previously sold. I had only packed the dress because the tags still attached to its bohemian skirt had fluttered at me from my closet. It was longer, softer, and more artfully flowing than I would have chosen for myself. But the modest neckline covered my scars and the sleeveless bodice showed off my toned shoulders. Besides, the thin sweep of skirt seemed somehow appropriate for Thornleigh. It was a casual dress but a pretty one, and I wouldn't allow it to be a weakness for wanting to look attractive in front of the handsome artist who unsettled me so thoroughly.

I walked downstairs on ballet flats that made nothing but quiet swishes on the carpeting while the thunder shook the house around me.

There's nothing like walking through an old, empty house in the dark with only an occasional flickering lamp and flashes of lightning to illuminate your way. Everything was odd, jagged shadows from unfamiliar objects. I was constantly startled by misshapen furniture revelations down every hallway and around every corner.

As far as I knew, there were no other guests in the house, so any movement I saw at the edges of my perception were tricks of light and dark and all the gray spaces in between.

I came upon a portrait that dominated one nook down a narrow hallway. It was a painting of a handsome middle-aged man whose attractiveness was marred only by a hard, piercing gaze and a mouth that was pressed into a thin line. The tiny gold plaque on the elaborate frame read "Dominick O'Keefe". I paused because the look in his eyes bothered me even though the breadth of his shoulders and the sweep of his hair reminded me of his nephew.

Dominick's eyes burned with an intensity I was surprised the painter had been able to capture with

oil on canvas.

The painting solidified my impression of the original O'Keefe's desire to be seen as important and powerful. The whole of Thornleigh was new money masquerading as old. Never mind that when the giant, imposing portrait was painted he could have been photographed. That he'd commissioned such a large oil was telling.

He'd wanted to be the master of all he surveyed.

That odd certainty claimed me as I stood there staring into long-dead eyes.

The painting, the carpeting, the paneling, the lighting—all of it was “Victorian” by way of 1960. The effect was creepily off-kilter. Thornleigh had a dollhouse quality to it, as if everything was a not quite-right copy of what it should have been.

As I stood there in the on-again, off-again flash of lightning and electric wiring that had seen better days, I had the fierce desire to fix and to freshen. To repair. Hadn't I been doing the same for myself for months? I wasn't the only soul in the world that needed healing. But the same desire to heal rising here made my heartbeat quicken and my breath catch.

Because I didn't think it was Thornleigh that I was compelled to save.

With that thought came the sudden slam of a door down a hallway that intersected the one where I stood. The loud impact of heavy wood against wood made me jump. I turned to the black opening of the other corridor and waited. Long seconds stretched by, but no one revealed themselves. Who else was in the house? I assumed my host waited for me downstairs. It probably shouldn't have bothered me that I wasn't alone, but it did. Especially when the door slamming was only followed by the distant rumble of thunder from outside. Part of me hated to turn away from the direction of the slam and continue toward the stairs, but, of course, I did it anyway. I couldn't stand there nervous for no good reason all night. Still, as I did turn and continue on my way, my neck prickled and my pace quickened.

* * *

O'Keefe had told me how to find the small morning room where we would eat dinner. It was off the grand dining room, which stood empty and cold save for dozens of ghostly draped chairs and a massive cherry table that could have accommodated fifty. I couldn't walk quickly and quietly enough past chair after empty chair as their sheets gleamed in the dark.

The smaller and brighter morning room beckoned, but even so I paused again as Miles O'Keefe came into view. He stood by a fireplace, looking down at the flickering flames, his skin alight with its glow but also shadowed where the glow failed to touch. He startled me again with his height and the lean quality of his form. How anyone so tall and obviously strong could also give off an air of vulnerability I don't know, but it was there in his dark, dark eyes and the flash of his hair against his pale forehead.

“I wondered if I should send out a search party,” Miles said as I entered, but when he turned the slight tilt of his lips fell and he was serious again.

My cheeks warmed when those almost-black eyes swept me from head to toe. I suddenly wished for jeans and sneakers and possibly a ponytail holder because it seemed to be the unbound waves of my hair that held his attention the longest. My natural desire to feel attractive warred with my need to feel safe and unnoticed by this man with flashing eyes.

“A bread-crumbs trail wouldn't be a bad idea,” I said. Pretending we were still being light and funny.

“We’ll ask Mary if she has some you can borrow,” Miles said. He smiled. Just the slightest return of a tilt to his lips and I looked away. The softening, the curve to his mouth, was too potent. It had been a very long time since I’d allowed myself this kind of attraction. Better to focus on the woman who entered the room carrying a tray full of covered dishes.

“Poached salmon and salad,” the woman offered. She sat the tray down and looked at it as if she might have forgotten what it was for in the first place.

She was thin and gray from head to foot. Her hair, her skin, her serviceable dress and shoes—all gray. But her face was smooth and her hands were young. I noticed the quick movements of her fingers when she gripped them together to still them in front of her skirt.

“Mary, this is Samantha Knox. Samantha, this is Mary. She’s my housekeeper’s niece and she cooks for me from time to time,” Miles said. He moved forward to hold a chair for me as he spoke, naturally as if he’d been born a century earlier.

“That smells delicious,” I said, claiming the seat and looking up at Mary with a smile.

She didn’t return the smile. Not in an unfriendly way, but in a distracted way as if her mind was on other things.

“If that’s all, I’ll just…” she began, but she didn’t even finish her sentence before she turned away.

“Are you staying with your aunt tonight? Or would you like to stay here? The storm seems to be getting worse,” Miles said to her back.

“No. Not here. No. I’ll be fine,” Mary assured him over her shoulder as she left the room with hurried steps.

While O’Keefe spoke to his cook, I had taken the clandestine opportunity to notice that he had changed for dinner. The cut of his suit was sharp as a razor, modern and nicely formed to his long lean legs and tapered waist. His broad shoulders filled the jacket and, sans tie, the tailored white shirt showed not an ounce of spare flesh. I thought of the marble in the garden and how physically demanding it would be to work in that medium. Then I thought of clay and the working of it and looked to his hands. He had sat down and was lifting the covers from the food, each digit curled and extended in the regular way, but I was struck by those hands and what I knew they could do.

I tried to focus on the arugula. Really. I did. Mostly because, once Mary left the room, O’Keefe’s dark eyes never left me. My face. My hands. The movements of my eyelashes against my cheeks. I don’t think that’s an exaggeration. If he intrigued me, if I found him an interesting pleasure to behold, then I, or his art at least, consumed him. And that’s what I was, surely. A subject. A study. I’m reasonably attractive, but I’ve never stopped traffic. O’Keefe seemed stopped as if nothing existed but the world beyond my face and form.

He had been telling me about Mary leaving food for him that he occasionally remembered to heat up and eat. Very occasionally, judging from his physique. But then he seemed to give up all pretenses of normal conversation.

“I wanted to give you time to recover from your trip, but in this light…your face…” He was already up. He strode over to a table by the fire to retrieve a large sketch pad and pencil.

He didn’t ask for permission. My presence at Thornleigh was by permission. I’d come here for this, after all. If I hadn’t realized how intense it would be to have his every sensibility trained like crosshairs on me, that was my problem, not his.

I watched him, salad forgotten. His concentration. His tension. Every muscle in his body flexed to capture the perfect angle of my chin on paper. Seductive? Yes. I had to remind myself to chew and swallow the last bite I was to take of my fish. Because he came to me then and took my hand to pull me up and over to the fire. He urged me into a chair and then knelt at my side so very close, so very focused on his paper and not really on me at all. Oh, certainly on my appearance. The curve of my cheek or the shape of my brow, but I don’t think he saw what his nearness was doing to me. Not

first. Not the flush. Not the shallow breathing to limit the impact of his fresh-scented hair. Earlier he reeked of ozone from the rain. Now he smelled spicy, tempting.

His art consumed him and the flash in his eye looked very like the intensity I'd seen in the eyes of Dominick in the portrait upstairs. The resemblance made my heart kick faster. How easily intensity could go from being positive to negative. Should I be attracted to Miles O'Keefe or maybe, just maybe, should I fear him?

All this time, the storm had raged outside. The fire and the food and O'Keefe's interest had distracted me from it, but suddenly the old wiring in the house lost its battle against the frequent lightning. One of the flickers I'd grown accustomed to became an outage.

We were left in darkness.

Only the small fire illuminated and that was barely a foot or two semicircle of warmth in front of the hearth. We were in shadow, O'Keefe and I. Alone in the dark with a man who made me...what? Uncertain. Nervous. Flustered.

It was in those first moments of darkness that I couldn't deny being attracted to O'Keefe. I was fascinated by his artistry and struck by a physical attraction to him that seemed beyond a pretty face and sexy eyes to a marrow-deep pull of his male magnetism.

But I also feared him.

Deep down I knew there was no possibility of shallow interaction with his intense personality. He would shatter and shake and possibly consume, but never bore. Never that. He would never be a casual acquaintance or a cool business arrangement.

And what of those piteous crying statues in the garden? He had created them, but, in life, had he inspired those tears?

I might have set myself on a mission to reclaim my strength and courage, but fascination with a tortured artist was surely out of the question.

I was going to stand and distance myself from the man who knelt too close in front of me. In the dark, I couldn't see his expression or anticipate his movements, but I could still feel his powerful presence.

"Wait," he demanded. He must have felt my leg tense where it brushed his arm. Or maybe he sensed my desire to run away from the darkness.

Then his sensitive fingers cupped my face.

I breathed in quickly, startled by his touch, but I didn't jerk away. The pull was in effect and his warm fingers felt right against my skin.

"I almost had you...the shape of your face... Let me..." O'Keefe murmured.

My God, his voice was meant for the darkness. It was deep and masculine with a husky edge and urgency. I had the crazy idea that only the crackling fire could understand the whole of it, that I was somehow missing the burn of deeper inflections and hidden meanings.

Softly, gently, his fingers traced my face and I didn't pull away. I didn't stand. I held myself perfectly still. I didn't dare to even breathe. All this time, I'd been challenging myself with the wrong sort of tests. Obviously. Climb a mountain. Run. Whatever. Sitting in the dark with this all-too-observant stranger caused my adrenaline to spike like no climb I'd ever taken on. And that was before his hands dipped from my face to my neck and we both paused. Me, because an arch of desire sizzled through me with a sudden thrill. Only my neck, but the pad of his thumb was directly over the rapid pulse beat that revealed too much of my fear and my wants.

"You're frightened?" he asked, his murmur huskier than before.

"I'm not afraid of the dark if that's what you're asking," I replied.

How to tell him that I was afraid of him and my reaction to him? That his hands on my skin scared me because my skin was off-limits and the last thing I sensed in him was control or discipline.

“The dark of Thornleigh is something to fear. Don’t be too brave for your own good. Not here and not with me,” Miles warned.

He must have felt my pulse leap beneath his thumb, but I didn’t care. I had been much more vulnerable than this before and I’d survived.

“It isn’t dark. Not really. I can see the shape of things. I can see the gleam of your eyes,” I said.

It was true. The firelight hadn’t left us in inky nothingness. Everything was indistinct but recognizable. I saw when he closed his eyes and moistened his lips and when he leaned slightly toward me as if he would...before he spoke again.

“Don’t explore the shadows. Don’t leave your room at night and don’t...don’t... One week. We have only one week,” he said and this time his words were rushed, as if he was afraid to be interrupted. I couldn’t see his expression, but his fingers had tightened on my skin, urgent and tense.

I would never know what the third warning would have been. The lights hummed back to life and O’Keefe let his hands trail down and away from me as he stood up and moved back. I looked up at his face, but even with the added light I couldn’t read the expression that claimed it. His dark eyes were shuttered and his mouth was tight.

* * *

There was no internet connection at Thornleigh. No way to check email or use a search engine. Even my phone was glitchy. I couldn’t get online and I hadn’t received any replies to my texts since I arrived.

I finally had to accept that they weren’t getting through.

It should have been annoying or even humorous. There were Robinson Crusoe jokes to be made. But then I recognized the slight flutter in my chest for what it really was.

Panic.

There was a phone on the table in the hall directly down from my room. I remembered passing it and marveling at its archaeological quality. Big, black with a rotary dial, it was at least a chance for contact with the outside world.

I had already called my aunt and my parents from the airport, but I wanted to hear light, familiar voices. The door to my room opened with hardly a creak and I stepped into the hallway. It was several degrees cooler and infinitely darker in the passage, but I could make out the table and the phone. I padded toward it feeling as if I was reaching for a crutch in the need to hear my aunt’s voice, but hurrying the last steps nevertheless.

I was startled by the size and weight of the telephone receiver in my hand when I picked it up. I held the cool earpiece to my cheek and reached for the dial. Then, disappointment hit. *Nothing.* No dial tone. No sound whatsoever. Just dead emptiness. I jiggled the receiver rest. I tried several numbers on the rotary dial, surprised at how hard it was to actually get it to turn.

Still nothing.

The lines might have been down because of the storm. Or the old phone might have outlived its usefulness sometime before I was born.

I was alone with O’Keefe in a haunted house. I didn’t for one minute believe that it was haunted by a ghost, but I had definitely seen some expectation of darkness in my host’s eyes. I might not believe in poltergeists, but I definitely believed in being haunted. I had personal experience with it myself. I climbed and ran to get away from it. I avoided my workshop because I was afraid of what my crawls might reveal about how deep my cuts actually bled.

With all those thoughts haunting me, I needed a hint of normalcy. I needed distraction. A few cat memes would not be remiss.

There was one room in the house that might help me. I'd seen it on my way to my bedroom. The library. It had been huge and dark and gloomy, but huge meant shelves upon shelves of something that might make up for the fact that I couldn't connect to the web to download a book to occupy me until the rain had passed.

I put the receiver back on the phone with a solid thump.

The need to run burned in my knees, but I wasn't familiar enough with my surroundings. Right now, the only place I knew of to stretch my legs was the garden pathways. The thought of going back into the garden at night was not a cheerful one. My mind jeered at me with images of me running a race. But in those imaginings I was running from something or someone, my feet pounding and my heart pumping and always the idea that I would never be able to run fast enough.

* * *

I met Mary's aunt in the library. I wouldn't have known she was blind by the way she cleaned. I attributed her slow, methodical movements to age and habit. Her hair was gray and piled high on her head, held with unseen pins in an elaborate style from a time before wash and wear. She had a careful familiarity with the books she dusted. Her fingers weren't nimble and quick, but they were sure, never hesitating from one volume to another.

"It's quite a collection," I offered, sure she'd seen me walk into the room in the wavy glass of the antique mirror behind the mantle. I tried not to look at it much myself because of the odd wavy reflections seemed to play in old glass.

Only then did she startle and jump, turning toward me with dim, unseeing eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to surprise you," I said.

Thankfully, she didn't frown or faint. She merely nodded and turned back to her work.

"If I was easily frightened, I wouldn't have worked here for thirty years," she said, matter-of-factly.

"I thought one week was the limit?" I replied, jokingly but not. Not really joking at all.

"Well, I come and go, don't I?" she said, continuing to dust each book in turn. "I've tried to keep the place habitable even when no one lived here."

"Thirty years. That's a lot of dusting," I said.

I looked around the room at the floor-to-ceiling shelves filled with aging tomes. For some reason her dusting seemed less OCD and more tragic, as if she'd set herself a Herculean task that no one would ever even appreciate should she accomplish it.

"The first O'Keefe didn't read. But he definitely collected. Oh, yes, he definitely collected," she said, still dusting, one book after another. Pulled it out, slid the grimy cloth over each cover, front to back, then the top of the pages, then the binding, then the bottom. And then she slid it back into place. Again and again. "I'm Mrs. Scott," she offered.

"I don't know how you do it," I said. I had only been in the room long enough to see her dust several books and I already wanted to run screaming for fresh air and sunshine.

My heart thumped in my chest. And not just because of her endless patience for her never-ending task. I was imagining what it would be like to walk the halls of this giant, dark house blind to who was there and what might be around me.

I swallowed. My mouth had gone dry. I allowed a look at myself in the mirror and saw my face floating pale among the shadows. My green eyes were wide. They were also darker than they should have been. More shadows or faults in the old glass? I couldn't be sure.

Behind me, the hall was even darker and beyond that the whole empty house. Or was it? Was it really empty after all? Since I'd stepped into the garden, the spot in the middle of my back between

my shoulder blades had been tingling. Thornleigh definitely encouraged it. So many rooms. So many shadowy corners. And mingling in the size and the darkness, there was a heavy feeling of disuse, of dust and decay. Poor Mrs. Scott had her work cut out for her.

“I’ve been blind since I was a little girl. They said it was scarlet fever. These days even my hearing is fading.”

She turned to me suddenly. So suddenly, it was my turn to start. Her eyes were a pale, unfocused blue. Her face was wrinkled to the point that it was impossible to decide what she might have looked like years ago before her skin began to sag. She was pretty now. The kind of pretty a nice, neat elderly woman acquires when all her edges have softened and all her softness has sharpened.

“I’m no audience, that’s for sure,” she said. It sounded like a warning. “I can’t see at all and I can’t hear well and even when I could hear I refused to listen. You shouldn’t stay. Thornleigh is hard on people who can see.”

I thought of O’Keefe and how very deeply he seemed to see me when we’d met earlier. With his artist’s eyes, Thornleigh would be the hardest on him of all.

“I’ll be fine,” I assured her. The words came easily to my lips. They’d been my go-to platitude for a long, long time. *I’ll be fine...even when the pain won’t fade and the nightmares keep me up at night.*

Mrs. Scott closed her eyes and lifted her chin. She tilted her face to the side as if she was listening with her failing ears to something I couldn’t hear.

“Maybe,” she finally said just as the moment grew awkward.

Her eyes popped open and I almost gasped because the hallway behind me was reflected in her widened black pupils, and it looked as if it stretched on forever in the curvature of her eyeball.

“Maybe not,” she continued.

I didn’t know what to say to that. No one had ever challenged my assurances before. It was easier to accept I was okay rather than try to prove to me otherwise.

My neck prickled and I had to glance back to prove to myself and to my instincts that some black hole to eternity hadn’t opened behind me while Mrs. Scott had distracted me with her dusting and her creepy proclamations.

Nothing.

Only dust motes and shadows and old faded carpet that was more alarming to my senses than I had any right to be. An alarm that said a good home makeover would go a long way toward setting things right. There was something about the abandoned and forgotten quality in the air here that went beyond poor maintenance and shoddy upkeep. The house was almost willfully aged. As if it refused Mrs. Scott’s efforts to clean it. Yes. I know. Dark fancy. But how else to explain the dust when she worked so hard to get rid of it?

“No, really,” I said firmly, to settle my nerves and break the prophetic mood of her words.

“Maybe,” she said, unconvinced, and then she turned to slide another book from the shelf.

Go. Get sculpted. All my friends had thought it was the best idea. And my therapist had called it “brilliant,” though there were times she worried that I forced myself into situations where bravery was necessary in order to prove the attack hadn’t turned me into a coward. If they all could see me now reduced to being nervous of statues and shadows, their certainty might turn into dusty maybes, as we

* * *

I chose a book at random, barely glancing at its cover, before murmuring a goodbye to Mrs. Scott. She didn’t pause again in her work, only dusting, dusting, dusting. There was a perpetual quality to her movements, as if she’d been at the task forever and would be at it forever still after I left.

I breathed a sigh of relief when I was able to walk away, but niggling unease prickled me

subconscious because I knew she continued to dust even after.

I tucked the book I'd picked under my arm and made my way across the aged carpet. It noiselessly ate my footsteps all the way to the stairs.

I'd rushed down them earlier, twisting and turning with little thought as to what or who might be around the frequent bends. It wasn't spiraled exactly, but it did curve, with landings at each floor.

My room was at the top, just beneath the attic.

Now that I'd come upon Mrs. Scott unexpectedly, I slowed my climb up the wooden treads, conscious that the thin runner beneath my feet wouldn't mask my advance. "She's coming," each step seemed to announce.

Creak-creak-creeeaaak.

For some reason, silence would have been better. I wanted to pass back to my room unnoticed. Why? I couldn't be sure.

Intermittent wall sconces flickered. From the storm or faulty wiring, I couldn't be sure. They didn't illuminate the long, winding staircase as much as its dark corners demanded. Each landing attained opened up onto a long, barely lit hallway lined with empty rooms.

I sneezed twice because the atmosphere was heavy with dust and age. Both times the explosive noise made me cringe and hold my breath.

Then, I knew I wasn't alone.

Five treads before the final landing, there was a difference in the air. Respiration or the very atom around me stirred by a second pulse? It was a deep and instinctive surety. I wished as I took each step that I didn't recognize it as a prey-to-predator reaction. But I did recognize it. I knew it well. The attack hadn't made me a coward. I'd traveled the world looking for challenges to prove it. But this time I might have gone too far because not being a coward and not being afraid were two different things. Thornleigh did unsettle me, but unreasonable fear wouldn't chase me away. I wouldn't let it. The flutter of it in my chest was only a constant reminder that I wasn't as strong as I was determined to be.

Maybe I should have stopped, one foot above the other, with a superstitious shiver and a wishful sigh that the threat would stretch on forever rather than the sudden split second need to face it. Or maybe I should have gone back down in a stumbling fall all the way to poor Mrs. Scott and her dusty library.

I shook off both urges even as I caught the scent of rain in the air.

It was O'Keefe. He had paused on the landing, waiting for me. I was intimidated and glad all at the same time. While the landing barely left room for us both when I reached it and stood beside him, the staircase would have been worse. In its close confines, we would have been touching. Here, we were nearly touching.

Even that made my pulse quicken.

"I came to check that you'd found your room," O'Keefe said.

I didn't doubt him. I was nervous and oddly affected by him. My instincts were drawn to him and put off by him at the same time. But he seemed detached from me. Observant but totally untouched by what he saw.

"I went down for a book," I explained, pulling the pilfered volume from where I'd tucked it. Only then did I see it was old and leather-bound. Probably some first edition and I'd grabbed it like a paperback from a grocery store shelf.

O'Keefe reached for the book and my breath caught as his fingers brushed mine. His were calloused, but also long and well formed. Mine were shaking. Though brief, his touch was intimate. Warm and immediate and nothing to do with books and dark stairways.

"I don't spend much time in the library. It's Mrs. Scott's domain," he confessed.

“She was dusting,” I said. I watched his hand on the book. I had fisted the fingers he’d touched
stop the tingling.

“Yes. She does that,” he replied. “And, yet, it’s always dusty.”

He opened the cover of the book and flipped a few pages. A nervous laugh in response to what
might have been a joke caught in my throat.

I had noticed, but I didn’t want to offend him or insult his housekeeper. And I certainly didn’t
want to share my hypothesis about the old house preferring it that way.

“Victorian poetry? I guess we’re poorly stocked. No recent thrillers or erotic romances.” O’Keefe
commented on the book I’d unknowingly chosen. He handed it back to me. It had fallen open to a page
marked by a faded ribbon.

The night is darkening round me,
The wild winds coldly blow;
But a tyrant spell has bound me,
And I cannot, cannot go.

The giant trees are bending
Their bare boughs weighed with snow;
The storm is fast descending,
And yet I cannot go.

Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing drear can move me:
I will not, cannot go.

—Emily Brontë, “The Night Is Darkening Round Me”

He teased, but the mood of the poem seemed to more closely match the expression on his face.
I couldn’t help looking at him. Even in the flickering light that painted shadows across his bold
features, I saw more than I’d seen before.

He wasn’t detached. He was contained. Carefully, carefully contained. The poem and our
proximity tested that control. I could see the war he waged to hold himself apart. Why? Why not laugh
and talk and enjoy not being alone in this gloomy place?

I could only guess based on my own experiences. Any emotional connection might tap into dark
emotions I couldn’t and wouldn’t face. I loved my friends and family. Possibly even more than before
the attack. But I didn’t show it. Ever. One fissure and the dam would fail. For some reason, O’Keefe
had the same sort of dam to hold himself back. What had caused him to be this way? What darkness
did he hide within himself?

“I didn’t even know what I had picked up,” I said, lightly touching the once-red ribbon with my
index finger. When it moved, it left a yellow line of age down the page.

“Be careful. Thornleigh has a way of making you do the unexpected,” O’Keefe murmured. He
reached out and closed the book as if he found the poem threatening.

I probably should have scoffed. I wanted to reach out and brush the dark waves of hair from his
forehead. Instead of either, I spoke.

“I’m always careful,” I confessed. Here, in the dark with O’Keefe it didn’t feel like a boast. More of a reassurance or a promise. I always looked for experiences to challenge myself, but those challenges were always carefully executed and controlled.

“Are you?” he replied.

He stood so close we were almost touching. I had to tilt my neck to look at his face. He held his hand turned down to me...almost...leaning.

“I’m not sure that’s true,” he continued.

I stood in near-dark in an almost empty house on a stormy night with a man I’d never met before. One who smelled of rain...and roses.

No. Maybe I wasn’t always careful. And maybe that wasn’t a bad thing, after all.

My heart was just beginning to pound in response to a certain gleam in his eye when he drew back and turned away.

“Good night, Ms. Knox. Don’t dream.”

I stayed on the landing and listened to his retreating steps until they faded away.

Chapter Three

It happens sometimes. More often than I confess to anyone. The nightmare comes—when I’m too tired or not tired enough, when I’m someplace new and different or I’ve been too long in Abingdon when I’m exhilarated from reaching a goal or I’m disappointed because a goal has slipped through my grasp.

I remember the beautiful day. I used to love spring with its promise of flowers in the air and my workshop thrown wide-open to the Virginia breeze. The nightmare always begins the same. I don’t think it would be nearly so bad if I didn’t remember the “before” moments so clearly.

That day, I had finished a particularly challenging piece with intricate solder work and numerous settings for precious stones that had to be fitted to perfection or risk losing heirloom rubies that had been in my client’s family for generations. I had spent months designing then crafting a necklace that was to be an engagement present from a man to his fiancée. He was old Southern railroad money. She was from Quebec. It was to be my largest commission to date and it would support me for months but, most important, I thought the piece had captured the couple’s relationship in a meaningful way. It was a sweet, romantic gesture to welcome her to his family and I was pleased and proud to be a part of it.

La Roux had a reputation to uphold and this piece, more than any I’d created before, lived up to that. I wasn’t just the dabbling niece. I was contributing something meaningful. I remembered my eagerness to show my aunt the pendant. I didn’t even change. I wore my worn and faded denim bib overalls complete with scorch marks and solder drippings. I loved those bibs. Their looming destruction in my nightmare eats at me every time I relive it. Almost as if they mattered more than my flesh because they couldn’t heal. One day I’ll ask my aunt if she’s the one who threw them away.

I drove carefully through town because of the speed trap all the locals mocked and all the tourists cursed. No matter how many times I drive that street, I can’t make my dream-self put on the brakes and turn around. I try. Each time I try.

La Roux is lovely in and of itself. Even if my aunt hadn’t filled the walls and the carefully arranged pedestals and shelves with brilliant works of art, both local and from all over the world, the building itself is stunning. Built of dark red salvaged brick in the old-fashioned shotgun style so popular on main streets throughout the South, it had drawn me to its cool, whisper-quiet interior for years. It hurts that I love it even in the nightmare almost as if it’s a different place before the attack than after. Because I don’t go there anymore. He took La Roux from me, too.

My parents had me late in life. I was an only child and was closer to my father’s youngest sister than anyone, even my own parents. When they retired to the Florida Keys, it was natural for me to gravitate even closer to my aunt and La Roux. She encouraged my interest in silversmithing. I helped her with her business as it became established and regionally respected. The gallery was ours. The artistic community of southwest Virginia was our extended family.

That day I was happy, confident, loved and safe. Oh, how I thought I was safe. There was a warmth to that perception that I’m sure I’ll never recapture.

My aunt had been out. I remember being disappointed. In my nightmare, the disappointment is sharp and accusatory as if her presence might have saved me. In waking moments, I’m so happy she wasn’t there. What if he had taken her, too? Of course, he did. One of the worst parts of the nightmare is that I know I’ve lost her in some way and I don’t know how to find her again.

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