

BOOGEYMAN

He just doesn't stop

PROLOGUE

The night was dark and the sky was blue; down the alley the bogeyman flew. A door was slammed. A scream was heard. A woman was killed by a flying . . .

It moved again. It was watching her. A shifting shadow like a humpbacked monkey hunkering under the doorknob against her open bedroom door. She parted her lips, but the scream lodged in her throat. No sound. Not even a squeak. Before Jacey could try again, the dark creature pounced upon her bed and wrapped strong wide hands around her neck.

Her fear froze her like a fossil. She couldn't breathe. She was going to die. It was a he and he was the bogeyman. He was enjoying it. He just didn't stop.

CHAPTER ONE

Dare Wilder shoved open the hospital room door. "Damn you, Jacey Dawson, fight the darkness and wake up!" Blue-black bruises ringing the slender column of her throat had faded to green and yellow, and then disappeared altogether. Yet, the beautiful fragile package in the hospital bed slept on. So sweet and gentle. He'd never seen her so still for so long.

Yes, the beasts always pounced on the gentle ones. The Jacey of old would have acted like the bully didn't bother her. Better still, laughed along to ruin her enemy's fun. But the beast did not give up and leave her alone this time to seek easier prey.

The door shut with a click.

Dare wheeled around to discover two men, one fair and one dark, his best

friends, closer to him than brothers by blood. They flew in, one from Denver and one from Saudi Arabia, answering his summons to reunite the trio of terror. Together they had the reputation for leaving behind bodies outlined in chalk.

Tucking hands into deep pockets nearly as white as his skin, Dr. Noah Boaz sighed. “The deed’s done. I signed for her on the dotted line. Do I get the honor of meeting my newest patient now?”

Jared Kashani held a mocha-colored hand turned palm up and waited. “Told you so a decade ago. She branded him. Pay up.”

Noah pulled a twenty dollar bill from his pocket and shot a delighted grin Dare’s way. “You don’t know how relieved I am to lose that bet. So you couldn’t stay away from Jacey, huh?”

Dare shook his head in disgust.

Taking the money slapped into his hand, Jared nodded toward Jacey. “Why else do you think we took an official leave of absence and answered your not-so-charming invitation to vacation in this mountain paradise? Oh man, the dossier you sent us on her positively waxed poetic.”

Dare grunted before tightening his fingers over the hospital bed railing. “She needs the best. She’s been through hell. The son of bitch was reprogramming her.”

Jared scoffed. “Into a killer? That’s a pretty big leap for a woman whose basic nature is supposedly kind-hearted to a fault.”

Noah studied Dare like a slide under a microscope. “Even with computer-enhanced EEG, the procedures will take time. I have to know exactly what I’m looking for.”

“Nucleic acid bands. You read the CDC report, doctor. So far all the families exhumed from their graves tested positive through exposure assessment. Someone used a nerve agent on these mountain folk.”

Dare extended his hand toward Jared. “Did you smuggle the serum out of Saudi?”

Jared reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a syringe. “You’ll give her an experimental antidote without her permission?”

After another glance down at Jacey, Dare grimaced. “She’s comatose. She can’t exactly sign a waiver.”

“And if she dies when you inoculate her?”

“She won’t.”

Noah grabbed the shot from Jared’s palm. “So certain. I suppose you won’t let her die? Your will is strong but can you will her well?”

Dare smiled. “Give her the damned serum already.”

“And if you’re wrong? If the disorder is treatable but irreversible? She can’t testify against you if she’s comatose.”

“Stick to the plan. We want this smooth and easy. Don’t tell her until we determine if she received a lethal dose.”

Noah sighed and leaned over Jacey. “Jared stole it. You bled for it, Dare. I’ll do the honors.”

Dr. Noah Boaz inserted the needle in the IV connector and injected the drug into Jacey’s system. “Who’d have figured while we were surviving that Iraqi hell-hole, someone was launching chemical warfare in the Great Smoky Mountains?”

Dare brushed the honey blond bangs back from her eyes before opening her eyelids and flashing a penlight over her pupils. Nothing. “Come back to me, Jacey. I dare you.”

His Jacey of old could not turn down a dare. But what did he know now about the delicate slender woman on the bed? She was his no longer. *His* Jacey married another man just six months after reports of Dare’s death had been grossly exaggerated.

Noah didn’t bother to hide his interest or his smirk. “We’ll see by morning if she takes you up on your dare.”

His friend back in full-fledged doctor mode, Noah waved his hands in a shooing motion toward the door. “Go on. Get. Jared’s about ready to drop from jet lag. I’ll take good care of your lady.”

“I know, Noah. If there’s a cure to make her whole, you’ll find it.”

“You didn’t deny that she’s yours. Interesting. Very, very interesting.”

“Stuff it,” Dare warned. “I’m not your patient. Stop probing my head.”

“The only wounds I’m trying to heal are the burns on your heart, my friend.”

Dare pivoted and exited Jacey’s room with all haste before disappearing out the hospital door.

Consciousness teased Jacey, tearing open the velvet cocoon of darkness where she was safe and nothing could touch her.

“Come back to me, Jacey.”

No! Cruel, so cruel. It couldn’t be Dare. Dare was dead. And she had married Knox. A shudder spiraled her up from the depths of darkness, shaking her body into wakefulness.

“I’m Dr. Noah Boaz.”

Jacey blocked him out, grasping at the elusive dark blanket of security.

He continued in a gentle tone. “You’re in the hospital.”

Jacey turned her head, squinting in the faint light that seemed so bright to her, and stared up at the doctor. Broad cheekbones. Intelligent almost knowing gray eyes. Compassionate eyes with a fan of wrinkles on each side. Troubled eyes. She wished she could do something to ease his worries, but the effort seemed too great.

“Do you recall what happened?”

How could she forget? She had been watching when CNN delivered the heart-shattering news. A US Air Force Special Operations AC-130 was shot down while supporting Marine units engaged in nighttime operations near Khafji, Saudi Arabia. Fourteen crewmembers were killed in the attempt to destroy the FROG battery capable of launching a chemical attack. The Pentagon shortly thereafter notified Jacey that her fiancé died with the honor of defending his country through Desert Storm.

But that was a decade ago. Her eyes burned and she blinked back out of the stare zone.

The rusty-headed doctor reiterated, “Do you remember what happened?”

She sighed and rolled onto her side, away from him. Of course, she remembered. When Dare had virtually risen from the dead, Jacey was married to another man. And Dare refused to meet with her even once. Neither had he spoken

with her on the phone. Nor had he answered her letters.

He came back to life. Then he moved away. No goodbye. No nothing.

Jacey closed her eyes and embraced the darkness. Yes, she could hide there. Ignore it and it will go away.

Only that wasn't true. Something skittered across the surface of her memories, causing ripples in the black curtain of security.

You can run, bitch, but you can never hide.

Oh, God! He never gave up. He just didn't stop. He came after her in the darkness. She squeezed her eyes tightly together, making it as pitch-black as midnight behind her closed eyelids. But the ebony cape of darkness parted to expose twin dots glowing laser-red like midnight had opened hungry eyes.

Midnight was a he. *There is no escape!* He narrowed two angry slits on his prey. *You'll do more than tell me you love me. You'll prove it. And I better believe you, Jacey.*

She opened her eyes, gasping for breath like she had run five miles on a hundred degree day. Then why was she shaking like it was below freezing? The doctor, what was his name, ah yes, Dr. Boaz, lifted her wrist to check her pulse.

"Bogeyman," she forced out while panting. The thread of memory frayed and the fear eased. Now there was nothing but blankness, a black veil over a void when she reached for the recollection.

"Hmmm." Auburn eyebrows slanted down and he frowned.

"Can't remember," she inhaled hard, swiping the droplets of cold sweat from the top of her lip.

"You're fatigued. Confusion is to be expected. Sometimes it's even beneficial for short-term survival if the brain hits the safety button to block out memories."

When Dr. Boaz checked her pulse again, he let out a low whistle. "It's galloping away. What are you thinking about right now?"

"Where's Knox?"

The doctor ran one hand down his face and partially smothered a curse. "I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but Knox Cutler is dead."

Almost as if he knew she would question him, he handed her a newspaper from the bedside drawer. “Three weeks ago.”

A large colored photo looked back at her from under the headline *Cutler Killed, Wife In Coma*. Her gaze flew back to the picture. A wedding shot of her soon-to-be-ex husband and herself.

Knox. Dead? Jacey closed her eyes and the darkness spoke to her. *It's not true. I'm the bogeyman and I'm coming for you.* She opened her eyes, dispelling the darkness and the voice.

She was going crazy.

“Mrs. Cutler?”

Jacey jerked like he had slapped her. “Don’t call me that! I never took his last name.”

Dr. Boaz grabbed her hand and lightly squeezed her fingers. “I’ll be right back with a sedative to help you sleep. You need your rest to heal.”

He released her hand and left the room.

Sleep? No way! The darkness was waiting for her if she closed her eyes. She could hide there no longer. My God, if the doctor discovered she was a half-baked lunatic, then sedation would be the least of her worries.

She lifted her left arm. So heavy. Why was she so weak?

Jacey glanced toward the mirrored bathroom door. Holy hair color! Why was her hair blond? And why were her eyes light blue? She rubbed one hand across gritty eyes. Were they extended wear contacts? She didn’t even wear glasses. Who was that woman staring back at her?

Concentrating on one small goal at a time, Jacey jerked the IV from the top of her right hand. Sweating by the time she wrestled the sheet off the bed, she stood on unsteady legs, wrapped the white cotton around her like a robe, and staggered out the hospital door.

At the exit, she stumbled toward a waiting taxi.

She felt like she’d been run over by a semi. Sore. So damned weak. Weakness led to helplessness. She’d never be helpless again.

4:00 a.m.

The mobile phone beeped and Dare flipped it open. “Wilder.”

“Hope you’re happy,” Noah’s irritated tone barked in his ear. “Jacey Dawson couldn’t take you up on your dare soon enough. She came to, asked about Cutler of her own free will, then yanked out her IV. She’s already trying to remember. She’s weak as a newborn butterfly, but your lovebird flew the coup.”

“Why didn’t you stop her?”

“How? Tie her to the bed? Do you want Jacey to trust me as her doctor or not?”

“Hell.” So much for smooth plans. Dare pulled on his jeans. “Did you follow her?”

“I’m hurt you even needed to ask. She hopped into a taxi and gave the driver her address.”

Dare closed his eyes and cursed softly.

“If her memory loss is extensive, the shock of seeing you may be too much for her. Send Kashani over there, fast, or I’ll go in and blow my cover. She’s about ready to keel over and just may when she finds her apartment sealed off with yellow police tape.”

Noah paused. “Did you know she believes in the bogeyman?”

Dare crashed the phone into the base and shouted, “Kashani, the game’s afoot.”

He dashed down the stairs and pounded on the door.

Jared opened his bedroom door, yawned, and jangled the car keys. “Give me a break. I’m still on Saudi time. But if your lady always moves during the middle of the night, I may have to kick your butt.” He yawned again.

CHAPTER TWO

After asking the taxi driver to wait while she fetched money for the fare, Jacey discovered her fence, yard, and townhouse gift-wrapped in fluorescent yellow police

tape. After digging in the big pot of geraniums, Jacey unburied the extra key to her apartment. She tore off the yellow X taped over the front door and wondered if she were having yet another bizarre dream. When she swung open the door, the darkness inside seemed to laugh at her hesitation. Sudden anger squirted a boost of adrenaline through her system and she reached her hand around the corner to flick on the light.

Holy cow! Mass destruction. Scattered papers carpeted the floor. Flipped over furniture redecorated her apartment. Her television and computer were smashed, upside down, on the floor.

As she walked through her house, glass crunching and papers crackling under her feet, everything she saw was demolished. Broken dishes littered the kitchen floor. All cabinets stood open and stripped of contents. Clothes and hangers had been tossed about her bedroom. Drawers were either open or empty and broken on the floor. The mattress oozed foam from the gashes ripped in five long strips like claw marks.

A brown arm encircled her waist from behind, clamping both her arms to her sides. She was lifted off the ground.

“Don’t fight me.”

Like hell she wouldn’t fight him. With what little energy remaining, Jacey kicked backward into his shin. He grunted. Funny, the bogeyman never grunted before. But the bogeyman never stopped. Never gave up. He just kept coming. Panicking, she struggled against his hold and opened her mouth to screech.

“Calm down,” urged a quiet male voice with a faint exotic accent. “I won’t hurt you.”

The other tanned hand closed over her mouth and effectively silenced her scream. “The glass cut your feet. You’re bleeding.”

He carried her through the bedroom doorway and down the hall.

She sunk her teeth into the brown paw over her mouth at the same time as she rammed an elbow into his ribs. He dropped her.

She skidded, on blood smeared feet, down the hardwood hallway as Jacey dashed toward the front door and freedom. When she glanced back over her shoulder at the foreign man chasing her, she slammed into a hard wall of flesh.

In the middle of the chaos cluttering her living room, a man closed his large hands over her hips to stop her from falling back after impact.

She lifted her head until she could see his face.

Dare.

“Hello again, Jacey.”

The gruff baritone caressed her like a lover’s hand. Dare? The room spun a quick one-eighty to the right before darkness swallowed Jacey into its heart once more.

Dare caught Jacey before her knees folded.

Noah walked forward from the open front door and nodded slowly. “A woman swooning for you. I didn’t know anyone’s eyes could grow that wide. Am I safe in assuming the night three weeks ago was the first time she’d come face to face with her deceased fiancé since you’re resurrection?”

“Yep.”

The taxi driver honked.

Jared outstretched his bleeding palm. “Dammit, Dare, she bit me! I’m not paying her fricking cab fare. Your sweet and gentle kitten has grown claws. And fangs. Give her to me and you pay the driver. I’ll put her in your jeep.”

Dare slipped his arm under Jacey’s legs, cradling her like a child, and pulled her tighter against his chest. Jared walked over and held out his arms. To Dare’s horror, he couldn’t let go of her.

Noah snickered. “Going. Going. Gone.” He walked over to Jared and held out a twenty dollar bill. “She deals in danger.”

Dare urged, “Let’s split before the cops show.”

With that, he carried Jacey to the backseat of his jeep. Then Dare paid the taxi driver an additional tip, large enough to ensure the man instantly forgot ever seeing the barefoot female passenger wearing a hospital gown and sheet.

Noah rocked heel to toe, waiting at the jeep. “Any chance you’ll let me check her back into the hospital?”

“Not on your life.”

Jared sighed and handed Noah the twenty dollar bill back.

Noah turned Jared's bleeding palm up in his. "Ah, yes. Now we must keep her under observation and learn if she's rabid. Fifty bucks that she's already given Wilder the fever."

Jacey opened her eyes——night again. She stretched away the remainder of sleep and rolled over on the bed. The warm fuzzy feeling of safety lasted until she got her bearings. She was at the Wilder chalet!

Before her eyes adjusted to the firelight, she caught a whiff of pure male scent from the pillowcase. Eternity could come and go and still she would remember his smell. She breathed deeply, filling her lungs with him, torn between pleasure and fear of believing. Her heart beat wildly. Adrenaline shot weakness not strength coursing through her system. "Oh, Dare, is it truly you?" came out in a quiet rush of pain as emotions overwhelmed her.

She was going stark raving mad. Hallucinating! Was it a mirage that leaned forward from the chair next to the bed? Another dream? Aquamarine eyes studied her intently.

"It's truly me, Jacey." His baritone caressed her gently, permeating her bones and down deep into her heart.

Only when the mattress dipped to accommodate his large frame did it dawn on her, this was *his* room, *his* bed. His muscular arms surrounded her as he pulled her into a quick, hard, hug like he was merely assuring them both the other was reality and not dream this time. One large hand stroked her crown and on down her head. "This blond hair will take some getting used to."

Her heart stampeded while she fought against the sensation of suffocating. She shoved against him and then slid until she sat on the bed with her back against the wall.

"Are you afraid of me, Jacey?"

Are you afraid of me yet, Jacey? I'm coming for you.

"Did I ever force you to do anything you didn't want to do?"

I'll break you, bitch, until you give me your body whenever I tell you to.

"Are you my bogeyman, Dare?" she asked in only a wisp of sound.

"No, Jacey. I killed him for you."

It's not true. I'm the bogeyman and I'm coming for you.

“No one can kill him,” she whispered. “He just keeps coming and coming and doesn't stop.” Jacey shuddered. “He's hunting me.”

“Who?” He raked long fingers in his wavy blond hair. The cleft in his chin deepened as his light eyes watched her. Intently. “Who is hunting you?”

“Is this hell, Dare Wilder? Are we both dead now?”

She pulled up her knees and crammed her back against the wall, sitting as far from him on the bed as possible.

His big calloused hand, long fingers, extended toward her and stroked one side of her face down to her shoulder. “You used to ask me if it was heaven.”

Jacey jumped off the mattress when he touched her throat and waited, balancing on the balls of her feet. “I don't want to hurt you, Dare.”

“Easy, Jacey,” he murmured as she continued to back away from him. “You're safe with me.”

She bumped into the wall behind her.

His knuckles stroked across her cheekbone. “I would go through the darkest hell to be with you in heaven.”

She snorted her disbelief while crossing her arms across her chest. Jacey shot rapid-fire questions at him. “Oh really? Where have you been for the last *decade*? Where?”

She stabbed her index finger into his chest to emphasize each word. “How could you not even tell me goodbye?”

“Why? So you could let me down in a gentle way? There is no easy goodbye, Jacey.”

She was mad enough to spit. “For closure, you big dumb jerk! Or didn't you want me to ever get over losing you?”

Jacey slapped both palms against his chest. “Damn you, Dare Wilder, how could you let me believe you were dead?”

“Calm down, Jacey. You really shouldn't be getting so worked up.”

“I told you in the cave, don’t *ever* tell me what to do!”

Sudden deep laughter rumbled from his chest before he tilted his head back and laughed straight out.

“Why are you laughing?” Jacey balled up her fist. She might just hit him.

Dare threw his arms around her and lifted her in a hug against his sinewy six foot four inch frame.

Memories shifted like grains of sand. *The gentle gurgle of the stream. The cave. Laughter rough as sandpaper. “We’re all the same in the dark, huh, Jacey?”*

Terror seized her and Jacey panicked. What started as a tremor grew to uncontrollable shaking. She wheezed in and out, unable to catch her breath.

“You’re gonna make yourself sick, using up all this adrenaline.”

His voice was as gentle as his smile, but Jacey couldn’t stop struggling against him; she couldn’t speak either.

“Feel free to help out any time, Kashani.”

A foreign man walked into the room from the shadows of the hallway. “And get bit again?”

The man from her apartment! Although utterly weak, Jacey started to fight against Dare in earnest.

“Help me with this wild woman.”

“You’re in way too deep for help, my friend.” The exotic man added with a chuckle, “According to the dossier, she’s gentle as the first rain of spring. Ha! She’s about as tame as a tornado.”

Jacey jerked her head back away from the seeking brown hand. When two bronze fingers pressed against her neck, hard, she totally freaked. “No!”

Then she slumped to unconsciousness.

“Oh great, Jared. Go for her throat. That’ll instill trust.”

For the next week, at Noah’s urging, Dare stayed away from her. The only way he managed was to fly to Washington D.C., finish paperwork for an indefinite leave

of absence, and sublet his condo. Jacey seemed to accept Noah as her doctor and all the medical technology at his disposal in one wing of the chalet. Noah said he imposed his company on her, but she mostly lived in loner mode, eating then pushing her body in the gym with a single-mindedness that scared Noah. She avoided Jared altogether.

According to Noah, she didn't sleep. Period. And spoke damned little. She stared out the window at night, into the wooded hills, with unfocused eyes. When her eyes grew more than a little wild, shortness of breath overwhelmed her.

Sitting around the octagonal table on the second floor patio, Dare listened to the report before Noah cut to the chase like only a true friend can. "Nothing has shown yet through gene amplification, but you have to face the facts, Dare. Her symptoms strike close to Gulf War Syndrome."

No, God, please! Dare prayed silently. Chemical warfare was waged against the people on the Great Smoky Mountains. Dare knew it for a fact. The pesticide methyl parathion was the same chemical in Iraqi nerve agents launched against the allies in Kuwait. The effects were cumulative, irreversible—the dosage lethal. And now Jacey had yet another symptom by behaving in a persistently anti-social manner. Sweet Jesus, no.

Jared sauntered outside and dropped a brown hand down on Dare's shoulder, squeezing wordless support.

Noah obviously didn't think Dare was comprehending because he hammered on with the evidence. "Memory loss, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, insomnia, uncontrollable shaking. Erratic behavior."

"I know the symptoms of GWS, Boaz."

Jared leaned against the Jacuzzi. "Personally, I vote for the reprogrammed into a killer theory. She's hiding something. She's aggressive when backed into a corner."

"Fear of extinction and inescapable stress will do that, Kashani. You know that as well as I do. Her nature isn't violent."

"I don't think you have a damned clue what her nature is, Dare. How's greed for a motive to poison these poverty stricken people? Power and money. Money and power."

Dare stood so fast the padded metal chair slammed back into the deck railing. "Shut up, Jared. She returned to these mountains to help *her* people."

“Jacey inherited her daddy’s tour guide business. Great Smoky Mountains tourism revenue has increased over a hundred twenty percent in the last decade alone. If the poor hills people won’t sell their land, make them move or kill them off to get it *cheap*. Cutler ran the business and he amassed millions since he married her and took over daddy’s company.”

“Jared, if you don’t shut your mouth, I’ll shut it for you. Jacey didn’t like the tourism trade. She’s possessive of what she thinks is hers. Protective. And these mountains are hers.”

Noah stepped between them and ran one finger down along his temple. “Play nice, boys. We’re all on the same team here. Jared and I have talked about it, Dare. She needs to feel sensations greatest to what she experienced with you and Cutler in that cave.”

“Hell no!” Dare barked.

“Jared believes in mocking her mind-numbing fear of imminent extinction, but I warned him you would arrange for his inevitable demise.” Noah wagged one finger when Dare stepped toward Jared. “He agreed to focus on provoking her anger.”

“Damn you, Jared. What do you have against her?”

With one bronze fist, Jared thumped his chest. “You survived that pit of hell for her—to come home and make her your bride. Your determination saved us, too. You’d been better off if she’d just gone ahead and killed you; promised you heaven but sentenced you to hell. She broke your heart, brother. Now she’ll pay. I’ll make her bogeyman seem like the Cookie Monster.”

“That would be a fatal decision, brother.”

“It was for Cutler.”

Noah placed a restraining hand on each man’s chest. “What is beneficial for short-term survival can be associated with long-term detrimental effects. She’s served a month in a bottomless pit of nightmares that come day and night since it began. He had her for ten days and those ten missing days are testing her sanity. She must remember. Soon.”

Country music suddenly reverberated from the kitchen downstairs.

Noah stepped in front of Dare, stalling, while Jared walked ahead of them into the kitchen.

Jacey had come back to life. With her back toward them, she bopped her head and her hips to the beat. She arranged vegetables on a wooden cutting board.

Jared silently walked to within a foot behind her. “Boo.”

Her unnatural control cracked, not with tears, not with laughter. Fight or flight.

Jacey gasped and whirled around on the balls of her feet, waving the knife back and forth in front of her. Her entire being focused on Jared——ready to fight.

Jared grinned wickedly as if he’d decided to give her one right now.

A morning ray of sun beamed in from the window and the deadly sharp edge of her knife gleamed.

She partially crouched, eyes primitive with fear, down to the most base level——survival, whatever it takes. Dare understood. All programmed killers did. Death was only a heartbeat away. One minute everything was fine. The next, a sound, scent, taste, word, or environment triggered survival instincts.

Dare ambled into the kitchen, pushed past Jared, and faced Jacey. He stopped with his chest nearly touching the blade that had stopped moving. He touched two fingers in salute against the brim of his black cowboy hat. “G’ornin.”

Her eyes were as wild as a trapped animal with no choice but fight or die.

He kept his voice absolutely casual, soothing. “What’s cookin, good lookin?”

Jacey seemed to focus on him. She glanced back at Jared and then at the knife in her hands. “Holy hillbilly!”

She turned and tossed the knife into the sink while breathing out slow hard exhales.

Although the t-shirt didn’t touch her throat, Jacey tugged down on the neckline and sucked in an unsteady breath. Then she jerked it away from her neck. In a blur of movement, she picked up the knife and slit the shirt into a V at the neck. When she turned again, Jacey shrugged. “Guess I’m kinda jumpy.”

Kinda jumpy hell. She teetered on a tightrope of nervous energy. Jacey must have realized she had the knife gripped in her clutches again because she dropped it. The blade clattered onto the floor, glinting in the sun. Palms up, she looked directly into his eyes.

Noah intruded, drawing her attention. “How’s my favorite patient today?”

“Crazy,” she muttered. “Same as yesterday. Maybe I’m Twisted Sisters other sister?”

She didn’t resist when Noah waved her to sit in one of the padded kitchen chairs. “You’ve probably memorized the routine, but I need another vial of blood.”

He tied the latex strip above her elbow and flicked a vein on her inner arm. “You’ll feel a little prick.”

A pinprick-sized droplet will kill a human.

“What?” Jacey demanded breathlessly. “What did you say?” she urged.

Before Noah could answer, Jacey jerked off the latex band. She jumped to her feet and raised shaky fingers to her forehead. “Oh God.”

“You can’t stop me any more than you can prevent the clock from striking midnight. I’m a part of midnight as he wakes. I’m the bogeyman, Jacey. And I’m hungry. Come to me. Or I’ll feast on one of your friends. A pinprick-sized droplet would be lethal even to your precious Dare.”

Dare cleared his throat, loudly. “You look like you could use some sunshine and fresh air, sweetheart.”

Jacey followed Dare like in a trance. He seemed to hold his breath as he held the door open to the outdoors. She hadn’t stepped a foot outside since the night he brought her from her apartment.

With unfocused eyes, Jacey walked to the path at the side of the house. Caught in a battle to grip a horrific memory just beyond her reach, she staggered to the edge of the stream. Staring at the crystal depths, she tilted her head and listened. She heaved hard breaths in and out. She shivered, but then tremors racked her body.

She saw her reflection in the stream, a blond-haired and blue-eyed woman, her but not her. Jacey plucked out the contacts she’d be unreasonably afraid to take out before, and flicked them into the water.

Then she covered her hands over her eyes to block out Dare. “The loud crash of rushing water, cascading showers. Everything is dark. So cold. I want into the light, but it’s through the gates of hell. Please, Dare, take me to the other side.”

Jacey dropped her hands. “My nightmares come faster and more frequently, even during the daylight, even if I stay awake. It’s stealing my sanity! Help me break this fear. If you know anything about my missing ten days, tell me!”

Memories shifted and stirred. *Dare swinging his arms, trying to regain his balance on the precipice of the waterfall. As if in slow motion, Jacey turned and shoved both hands against his chest. He disappeared over the edge.*

She screamed.

Pure male presence surrounded her. Aquamarine eyes reflected his misery like her scream ripped out his heart. Dare slid one knuckle under her chin to lift her face. She screamed again and wrenched away from his caress, backing toward the edge of the dock. Dare lifted his hands away from her, holding them out in supplication, tearing her heart in ten thousand pieces, killing them both, slowly.

Jacey uttered a low moan of pain and tears welled up in her eyes. She wanted him to hold her, comfort her. Instead she choked out, “Stay back!”

“Are you afraid of me, Jacey?”

“No, Dare. I’m afraid for you. That I’ll hurt you.”

“A piece of fluff like you hurt a big bad male like me? Will you huff and puff and blow me over?”

She gave a watery laugh, the first laugh since the hospital, and Dare smiled at her like she’d handed him the sun.

Jared butted in upon the moment, his nearly black eyes hard, boring into Jacey. “Just like a helpless woman. Using tears as a dirty weapon. You’re tearing him apart, damn you. Again!”

Jacey stopped smiling. So did Dare before he crossed his arms across his chest and didn’t move from in front of her like he was protecting her.

Jared sneered. “Is the poor timid thing afraid to be alone with me? Or has she got something to hide?”

Although Dare opened his mouth, he snapped it shut when Jacey curled her lip at Jared. “A bullet stops a brute the same as the rest.”

She circled around until Dare was at her back and Jared stood in front of her. She fisted and released her hands at her sides. Then she pulled an unnatural calm

around her like a shawl.

“You don’t happen to have a gun handy, so I guess you’d depend on a big strong man to protect you. When you thought Dare was dead, you couldn’t marry Knox quick enough.”

“Damn you, Jared!” Dare barked. “Enough.”

“See? You’re letting him fight your battle.” Jared stepped closer, crowding her comfort zone of personal space.

Jacey huffed out a hard exhale. Focus. For a moment, she said nothing. She clenched and unclenched her fists rapidly, struggling not to react to the provocation. Focus. Inner peace.

“Helpless women are good for only one thing. To fill harems.”

Helpless? She’d never be helpless again! The stream blurred before her eyes, changing into an underground lake in a cave.

Freezing and hands tied behind her back, Jacey bobbed up and down in the water, treading with tired cramped legs in the dark.

The bogeyman focused one red eye on her face. “Twelve hours. Hypothermia should have set in. Are you numb yet? Have I stolen your ability to fight? I’m going to slow you way, way down, Jacey. Make you helpless again.”

The bogeyman jumped from rock to rock until the beast stood next to her. He leaned over and clamped one hand onto the top of her head. “I’ll break you, bitch, until you give me your body whenever I tell you to. At my beck and call like a harem slave.”

Jared growled. “You’ve got something to hide, but the story’s deep in your eyes.”

Her vision vanished. The tremors stopped. Jacey inhaled a cleansing breath. Focus. Calm. “Jump in a lake of fire and fry.”

Jared smiled a bright gleam of white. “As you request.”

Nightmare mixed with reality as he wrapped his arms around her and jumped off the dock into the natural pool. Cold water seeped into her skin as her head submerged.

Dunking her, dunking her under the surface of the water even before she could fight to suck in a breath.

Adrenaline surged through Jacey and she pushed with her legs to shove her head above the water. In a whirl of speed, she spun around, connecting a roundhouse kick to Jared's head so he stumbled back. Her ragged breaths couldn't seem to fill her lungs with air, unable to stop suffocating. As her kick unbalanced Jared's footing, she moved the heel of each hand into hard chops to his mid-section. When Jared went down into the water and Jacey realized he never dunked her, just pushed her into water over her head.

She jumped onto the dock, shaking.

Jared followed her onto the wooden surface and sat there panting. "See the difference, Jacey, in telling you what happened and you remembering? All I had to do was take you under, trigger you with fear of extinction."

After wiping the blood off the corner of his mouth, he laughed. "I didn't think Dare would ever have been attracted to such a meek docile thing."

Jacey hopped to her feet. "I hate you."

"I know you do. But I've never seen Dare this gentle with anyone. And someone has to help you remember. You've become afraid of your potential for violence. Survival is the strong thing to do, Jacey Dawson. It's easy to give up."

Jared laughed and pointed at a pacing Dare. Light eyes glowed with fury like Dare was now the one struggling to restrain the provocation. "He's afraid to attack me and kick my ass because *that* might trigger it all back."

Dare stomped over to Jared and held out one hand. "Brother?"

Jared accepted the hand up.

Dare punched Jared square in the mouth then shoved him back in the water.

CHAPTER THREE

Jacey left the men on the second level of the chalet. None of them seemed to notice anything other than the cards in their hands, so she turned right and walked up the flight of stairs. At the top, she walked into the loft. The big brass bed faced a wall of windows. An inspirational view of the Smokies stared back at her.

She closed her eyes and lifted her face in the air, inhaling his scent deeply until her lungs could hold no more. “Mmm.” Dare. Powerful. Persuasive. Pure male musky spices, nearly like the exotic combined with the mountain breeze, so unique, such a turn on just to smell him.

“Thank you for sending him back safely,” she prayed. Jacey smiled with genuine pleasure seeping into her bones.

She opened her eyes and gasped, so startled she jumped back. “Dang it, Dare. How long have you been there?”

His full lips turned up, deepening the cleft in his chin, and Dare shot her with a confident, purely masculine, smile.

She nearly drown in his light eyes, pools the color of warm tropical waters. Even in her dreams she’d forgotten how she burned under his utterly sensual caress, without him having to touch her——other than with those eyes. A raw bolt of hot lust ricocheted through her.

She shivered, shut her eyes, and whispered, “I missed you.”

“It wasn’t easy to leave you alone, baby.” His deep voice breathed into the hair by her ear.

She opened her eyes suddenly and he was close, so close, yet he wasn’t touching her at all.

He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs. “Mmm.”

“Don’t, Dare. I-I can’t stand anything to touch to my throat. My face. My mouth. It makes me feel very . . . violated. Assaulted.”

She turned her palms up. “And I’m afraid if I touch you, you’ll vanish into thin air again. Poof!”

“Like at the waterfall?”

Jacey tilted her head, listening as the veil of blankness slashed open, and memories pounded her like the crashing roar of water, cascading over slippery rocks to the misty darkness below.

She backed up, holding her arms out to her sides, keeping between the men, keeping Dare safely behind her. “He’s an honorable man, Knox.”

Knox laughed. “But you’re not an honorable woman, are you, Jacey? He’s only honorable in that he knew if he came near you, you’d be the adulterous bitch you are.”

“No!” She covered her eyes with shaky hands. No. She didn’t even want to remember more.

Dare fisted his hands at his sides. He stifled a curse at the horror in her voice. How much had she remembered? “You’re safe with me, Jace.”

“You were there, Dare? Or are they nightmares? I don’t care about Jared and his theories on the difference between remembering and being told. Something too horrible to imagine happened. Ten days of my life are lost. Tell me before it eats me alive!”

Dare stared down into her violet eyes. “When you remember, does your heart beat hard? Does your breathing quicken? If some sound, or word, or scent triggers your fear, maybe it scared you so much you’re not ready to remember it. Maybe you never will. The longer it takes, the less chance there is you’ll recall it.”

She snorted, then lifted her lips in a lopsided grin. “My heart beats hard and my breathing quickens when I’m near you, Dare. And it has absolutely nothing to do with fear.”

Dare closed his hands over her shoulders. When she didn’t freak out, he slid them down her spine and then back up. “I’ve imagined you a million times in that brass bed, but I’d forgotten how fragile you feel.”

He slid his arms around her and pulled her against him. “I want to kiss you. For an eternity. God, I missed that.”

“But if you touch my face, my mouth, I can’t breathe.”

“Oh, Jacey, there are so many other places I could kiss you.”

“Holy hormones. Take it easy, handsome, with all that testosterone, or I’ll wonder if you’re trying to seduce me.”

“I’d like nothing better. But I won’t.”

“Tease,” she laughed. “How about if I seduce you?” she sounded about half serious.

“No, Jacey. I can’t.”

“Because of Knox?” She finally put the question to him.

Dare stiffened and pulled her tighter against him. “Yes. Because of Knox.”
Because I killed the man you wed.

“But I left him nine years ago.”

“He was your husband, Jacey. You married him.”

“Dammit, Dare! I attended your *funeral*. With you dead, I just wanted to go to sleep forever and join you in heaven. Knox was your friend, too. After my family died, I suppose I simply went along with what he said.”

“He made you his doormat and you let him do it.”

“More like his punching bag and I left his ass for it.” She shoved out of his arms. “File *that* in your dossier. You didn’t read any of my letters, did you?”

“No,” he said succinctly.

“What’d ya do? Burn ‘em as soon as you got ‘em?”

Dare walked to the window and stared out into a one-eighty view of the wooded mountains. “I returned them. Unopened. Return to sender.”

Jacey paced the room.

“Was there something in those letters you wouldn’t want your *husband* to see, Jacey?”

“I guess you’ll never know, Dare.”

“Oh but I do know, Jacey. Knox told me.” *And then I killed him before he could kill you.*

Jacey swayed as the wave of memories washed over her like a fragmented baptism in hell.

The waterfall. Knox. Dare. The letters!

The roar of water pounded in her head. A dark moonless night, bone-numbing cold as water churned, current pulling.

Knox screamed at the top of his lungs and yanked her nearly frozen body up against his. “It’s always been about him. Kiss me like you used to kiss him.”

His mouth smashed down on hers.

Jacey bit his invading tongue.

Knox slapped her mouth. “Bitch.”

Then Knox hit her across the face again with the back of his hand, knocking her to her knees. “There is no escape! I stole your kung fu shit with hypothermia. You’re helpless again, wife. Don’t you get that yet? There will be no divorce! I’ve told you that since the day you married me.”

Knox jerked Jacey to her feet and lifted the gun to her head.

She spit in his face.

He hit her again, hammering her with his fist this time in the kidneys. Then he pulled her up from her knees. “Tell me you love me. Oh and I better believe you, Jacey, or that bastard Wilder will die once and for all.”

“Say your prayers, Cutler,” shot Dare as he waded into the water straight toward them.

The gun shifted and the bogeyman’s eye glowed a red dot on the center of Dare’s forehead.

Jacey screamed, but Knox grabbed her by a fist full of long hair.

Knox laughed, sandpaper rough and laced with poison. “You really missed out by returning those letters unopened, Wilder. Mrs. Cutler was on the make. She’ll make you crazy, she’s such a teaser. My wife promised you heaven on earth, promised you’re the only one. Don’t even believe her. We’re all the same in the dark, huh, Jacey?”

Knox yanked viciously on her hair.

Dare growled low in his throat.

Knox released the fist of her hair and shoved her toward Dare. “Tell him about our wedding night, Jacey.”

“No, damn you to hell, Knox. No!”

But Knox continued just to hurt her and maybe Dare too in the deal. “Tell him about when the drug wore off and you learned you’d married me. Not him by proxy. Tell him how you cried for him, how I beat the hell out of you for it til you were broken and bleeding at my feet. Tell him how I held you down, slowly strangling you, wife, while I forced you against your will.”

A masculine roar of rage ripped from Dare. He stepped toward her, holding out his hand to her. “Come to me, Jacey. You’re safe with me.”

She glanced behind him and the water crashing over the green-slimerocks—a ninety foot drop, eight different rocky ledges of cascading water. She surged to her feet and rammed into Dare. Surprised didn’t sum up his expression as he teetered on the edge of the waterfall, swinging his arms to regain his balance.

The red laser dot now centered on Dare's heart. Knox was crazy. Oh how he hated Dare! He'd provoke Dare into a fight and kill him. In that instant she turned and shoved Dare off the edge onto the next slimy ledge before jumping after him.

Knox hollered after her. "You can run, bitch, but you can never hide."

Only Dare wasn't on that slippery ledge. He'd vanished. Had she shoved him too hard? Had he missed the rocky outcropping and dropped ninety feet? She'd killed him!

Jacey screamed, just like she had then. "Nooo!"

"Open your eyes, Jacey. Look into mine. You're safe."

"You're not," she said and then sighed wearily. Jacey spun around and raced down the three flights of stairs to the main level.

Dare caught up with her before she opened the front door. "Where are you going?"

She replied with only silence. She dashed out the door and down the drive.

He grabbed her arm to spin her around but she spun on her own momentum. She held one arm up in front of her and one turned upside down by her side——attack position.

When she realized what she'd done, Jacey slowly shook her head. She didn't bother to explain, just kept right on walking.

7 p.m.

Dare drummed his fingers on the counter while Noah reported in via secured phone line. "She *what!*" He could hear Jared in the background, chuckling about Noah owing him twenty bucks.

"I said you wouldn't like it when I told you." Noah shushed Jared's laughter, then spoke directly into the receiver again. "Listen carefully this time, Wilder, so I don't have to repeat it all again."

Dare closed his eyes and exhaled a hard cleansing breath.

When Noah spoke again, a hint of laughter tinted his voice. "She retrieved her car and drove to the cemetery where she walked over and spit on Cutler's grave. Then she visited a hair salon where she walked in a blond and walked out with hair as black as midnight."

Jared could be heard in the background. "Fifty bucks that raven black is her

natural color.”

Noah continued like Jared had never spoken. “After that, she drove way up in the mountains to some old cabin, and an old coot who looked like he sold moonshine, and came out packing a .38 special. When she returned to town, Jared followed her into the martial arts studio where she announced to the class he was an Iraqi terrorist.”

Jared must have gotten closer to the receiver because his voice sounded louder. “She smiled when she did it, Wilder. Smiled and virtually ordered that class of rabid females to attack me.”

“So,” Noah drew in a breath, “That’s when we lost her. She slipped out the back and we’ve lost her trail.”

Dare thudded his forehead against the kitchen cabinet. “She’s only been gone four hours!”

“Holy shit.”

“What?” Dare asked, almost afraid of the answer. Noah sounded like he’d been zapped with a stun gun.

“You might want to get down here, Wilder.” Then Noah hung up.

“Down here where?” Dare demanded from a dead line. He no sooner hung up than it rang again.

“Foaming at the mouth yet?” It was Jared this time.

Dare had the phone tucked up between his shoulder and ear as he raced outside and jumped into the jeep. “Where is she?”

“Jacey just walked into the busiest nightclub in town. She’s . . . as deadly as a black widow.”

Jared hung up on Dare’s vicious curse.

Jacey pushed off from the wall next to the entrance as soon as Dare walked in. “Howdy, handsome. Took ya long enough.”

“Oh, Jace, you steal my breath.” Dare stood like he was rooted in his tracks. “Dark hair. Dark eyes.”

His aquamarine jewels bathed her in warm light like sunshine after the storm, touching her everywhere, but not touching her at all. “You’re the living breathing

version of the woman I see when I close my eyes. A sexy temptress tattooed on the back of my eyelids. Yet more beautiful than in my sweetest dreams.”

She felt like the most valued treasure in all the universe. “Would you do me a favor, Dare?”

“Anything at all, Jacey.”

“Well in that case . . . did I kill Knox?”

Silence. His eyes shuttered behind long thick lashes.

“I see. Did I try to kill you, too?”

“I didn’t come down here to talk about Knox, Jacey.”

Dare closed his hands under the long fringe at her waist, but over the bare skin at her midriff, and pulled her near. Yet not touching her anywhere other than the big hands clamped onto her waist. “Where’s Noah and Jared?”

“I took care of Dumb and Dumber.” She pointed in one corner where Noah and Jared sat in the midst of about a dozen hungry-looking women.

“You set me up, Jacey Dawson.”

She smiled at him, feeling every one of her female instincts purr. “Damned straight, Dare Wilder.”

“Why?”

“Cause I can’t move away from this wall.”

“Jacey, I’d forgotten how crazy you can make me. The wall?”

“I feel like I’ve been swept away in some old Western and have to keep my back to the wall. I’m stuck. Didn’t make it farther than the front entrance. You seem to be the one, Dare. The only one I can have at my back.”

Dare groaned. “What do you think that means, Jacey?”

“That we have to dance.” She nodded. “Out there.” She pointed. “In the middle of all those people.” She shook her head. “Not yet. The next slow one.”

“My pleasure,” Dare said with a bow. He lifted her hand to his lips, holding her eyes with his, and placed a slow open-mouthed kiss in the center of her palm.

Oh! In less than a blink, heat spread from where his tongue touched her hand to her loins, burning. Oh Dare.

Jacey closed her eyes and blew out a slow breath through her mouth. Focus. Don't push him to the floor and ravish him. She inhaled a deep breath threw her nose. Focus. Don't dip your tongue into the cleft in his chin.

He broke her concentration again, this time with his sexy deep voice. "How long did you study Tae Kwon Do, Jacey?"

"Not nearly long enough. I waited until *after* I'd learned what helpless felt like."

"Tell me about Knox, Jace."

"Thought you didn't want to talk about Knox?"

"You have on red. You look *sizzling* hot. And you spit on his grave today."

The band broke into the first few bars of a slow country song. Ah, saved by the music.

Jacey held out her hand to Dare before tilting her head. "Here's the next slow one. I should warn you, besides possibly freaking out when my back is exposed out there, I'm more than a little rusty. The last time I slow danced was with you."

"You don't have to test yourself like this, Jacey."

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"Yeah, if it scares you, you want to face it head-on."

"Dance with me, Dare. Please."

He swept one arm ahead of them and stepped right up against her back. "After you."

Jacey raised her head and blew out a quick breath before she walked straight through the crowd to the packed dance floor. Dare's palm rested against the small of her back as she moved. When they reached the middle, his big hand stayed on her back.

"Easy, sweetheart." He slid over in front of her before sliding his other hand around to the middle of her back. Then he pulled her as close as possible without actually holding her. "Ok?"

"Closer."

"Oh, Jacey," he breathed as he molded his body up against hers. "Relax, babe."

She tried, but it was like her backbone had been replaced with a board. And she

was very careful not to touch her head, her face, on his shoulder. “It feels like I’m about to be shot in the back any second.”

“No,” Dare said as his hands and fingers spread, covering the majority of her back. “I would never allow that to happen.”

After he started moving to the music, she sighed. An old warm feeling wrapped its arms around the minute. She slid her hands up and around to test the texture of curly golden hair at his neck. “I wonder how many times we’ve done this in my dreams?”

Then Jacey rested her cheek against the soft cloth over his shoulder.

“In my dreams, I’m kissing you while we dance.”

“Was I kissing you back, Dare?”

“Wanna find out, Jacey?”

The slow song ended and the band kicked into a fast one, breaking the spell.

Dare cursed under his breath when Jacey slid her hands down to his chest and pushed lightly to escape his hold. He dropped his hands from her, letting her know without words he wouldn’t force her into anything she didn’t want, too.

She spun around to the beat and her hips undulated with the rhythm of something primitive. Violet eyes darkened to deep purple, burning him with her heat. Red fringe swayed over her mid-riff, tempting him with glimpses of golden skin. The tight skirt hung long, but slits up the sides exposed her thighs, teasing him.

Oh hell, Dare swore silently. Not now. Not here. His body responded like she danced for him alone.

A large hand slapped his shoulder and he turned toward a big, burly, and not very pretty old friend. “Hey, Jimmy. Hear you’re running things now over at Appalachian Tours.”

Jimmy pulled Dare into the male version of a hug, a quick thump against the back. Then he addressed Jacey, loudly, over the music. “Howdy, Jace. Can I borrow Dare for a minute?”

She shrugged and kept dancing, looking relaxed and like she was having fun.

Dare walked off the dance floor. “Good to see you, man.”

Jimmy’s craggy face screwed up with a grimace. “Hope ya still think so after

I've had my say."

Jimmy pointed one stocky finger toward the back corner. A dozen good old boys stood against the wall directly behind Noah and Jared who were looking at Dare. Waiting.

"You took Jacey down for the count when your plane went down and you were reported dead. You hurt her like that again, Wilder, and you and your buddies might be the ones lined in chalk."

Dare crossed his arms over his chest. "If you're so damned protective of Jacey, where in hell were you and the boys when Cutler moved in for the kill?"

Jimmy cocked his elbows, hands on waist, and looked down at the floor. "Y'all were friends. We all were, working summers as tour guides." He shrugged. "Right after she attended your funeral, Knox convinced her not to skip a semester of college. No sooner did she go back to the university, than the flu wiped out her family."

Not the flu, Dare thought. Knox and his toxic chemicals.

Jimmy sighed before adding, "It seemed like Knox was helping her, stepping in to run the company so she could keep going to school. But when summer came, Jacey stayed up in her dad's old cabin and told Knox she wanted to close the business, to stop the influx of tourists raping her mountains. They fought about it all the time until she hated Knox Cutler."

Jimmy scratched his scruffy chestnut beard. "It was the damndest thing you ever saw, Dare. The next thing you know she was married to her enemy. Nobody saw it coming, least of all Jacey. Since she's come back from the university, she's openly opposed Knox." Jimmy laughed loudly. "It was like Cutler was afraid of her."

Dare slapped Jimmy's hand in a high five. She returned to these mountains to wipe out illiteracy and to teach the poor native highlanders how to break the cycle of poverty, cutting into Cutler's plans to steal their land.

Jimmy chortled. "When she started a women's shelter and taught self-defense to abused women, Knox about shit. He ranted that it didn't look good for the town, for tourism revenue, or for his wife. But she didn't divorce him. It was damned strange. She just acted like she wasn't married at all."

Dare frowned. Jacey never lived with Knox. She lived either in her apartment or with Dare's grandfather who Jacey loved as if he were her own—until a month ago when Grandpa had died during the night. She filed for a divorce the next morning, but Cutler had tried to change her mind.

Jacey placed her delicate-looking hand on him. Her tremors vibrated his arm, too. "Dare?" She breathed unsteadily. Her violet eyes glazed like a slightly feverish purple swirl.

Dare cupped her elbow, supporting her. “What’s wrong?” He had to lean way down to hear her quiet reply.

“Run, Dare,” she whispered. “He’s here.”

Dare signaled for Noah. “He who?”

“Mr. Bogeyman. Looks like there’s gonna be a showdown.”

“No, Jacey.”

Dare sighed and wondered how much longer before Noah would discover if she had received a lethal dose. Cutler’s reprogramming included the two things Jacey harbored deep in her subconscious——childish fears of the dark and the bogeyman.

“Yes, Dare. Two red eyes glowing in the dark.”

“A red laser sight on a gun. Not eyes. One red dot. One gun.”

Noah walked on her other side, Jared in front of her, and they moved toward the exit.

Jacey turned, her back almost touching Dare, observing the crowd. “No. Two evil eyes. Poison dripping from his mouth. Blood on his soul. He’s still hunting me. He just doesn’t stop.”

Dare pulled her tighter against him.

“He’s calling me.” She clamped her hands over her ears, dragging in rapid gulps of air. “Run, Dare. He’s coming!”

Dare lifted her hands off her ears. “Knox is *dead*, Jacey.”

“Do you know that for certain, Dare? You came back to life. I didn’t actually see his body buried either.”

He winced. “I’m sure.”

A long-legged blond waitress hurried over to Jacey. “Wow, honeychild! You’ve got a whole crew of them tonight. Who was the man on the dance floor a few minutes ago, Jace? He looked dreamy in that black suit.”

“Steer clear of him. He’s the bogeyman. And he’s hungry.”

“Get real, girlfriend. But he did look hungry. Wish he looked at me like that. Haven’t I seen you with him and Knox before?”

Dare and Jared turned toward the crowd, scanning.

Noah stepped directly in front of Jacey, staring down into her dilated pupils. “She’s been triggered. What did he say to you, Jacey?” When she didn’t answer, he urged, “It’s very important for you to tell us exactly what he said to you.”

Jacey pivoted and made time for the exit, escaping the men while memories stabbed her like knives of truth. The church bells dinged in the distance, tolling ten times like a death knell.

Two more hours.

“You can’t stop me any more than you can prevent the clock from striking midnight. I’m a part of midnight as he wakes. I’m the bogeyman, Jacey. And I’m hungry. Come to me. Or I’ll feast on one of your friends. A pinprick-sized droplet would be lethal even to your precious Dare.”

Oh, God. It’s not over. That voice didn’t belong to Knox.