

The Co-Star of My Worst Nightmare

I KNOW WHO YOU ARE.” Ken leaned back in his chair and folded his hands. As usual, he had on a gaudy jacket and clashing bow tie. His forehead and cheeks shone apple-like in the fluorescent light.

I thought of a smartass comeback—*You should. I’ve been working here for months*—but it wouldn’t help me. The book was on his desk, a photograph of college professor Rad Sanders staring up from the cover. Rad looked nondescript, of course. Serial killers always do. Above him the book’s title screamed in lurid yellow: *Professor of Death*. Beneath his chin crawled the name of the author, Willard Steeples.

“How did you figure it out?”

Ken was itching to tell me or he wouldn’t have summoned me to his office on work time. He scolded us for using the restroom when we weren’t on break.

“Your name, mostly. Luanda is quite unusual. I checked your job application and found out you went to high school in Deliverance, where the kidnapping took place. I thought, hold on a minute, more than one Luanda in a town that small? Not likely. So happens I have a cousin in Deliverance. I called him, and sure enough, he said the folks at Hidden Creek Lodge adopted Lu Jakes. He remembered their name. Darlington, the name you have now.” He smiled smugly, like I was supposed to gasp at his brilliance.

“I don’t like talking about it. I’m trying to get on with my life.”

When Willard Steeples had asked to interview me, my foster mother hired an attorney. She threatened to sue him and his publisher if anything about me, apart from facts of the crime in the

public record, appeared in his sleazoid book. The publisher backed off fast. Nobody had tracked me down. Until now. Once Ken started blabbing, my co-workers would treat me like a freak and eventually the reporters and sickos would come slinking to my door.

Ken lurched from his ergonomically correct chair, circled the desk, and put his hand on my shoulder. “You poor girl. It must have been terrible, seeing your dad killed right in front of your eyes.”

It had been traumatic—all the blood—but Duane Jakes was no great loss to the world.

Ken was massaging my shoulder. I fought the intense urge to shrug him off. Along with being my boss, he now had this secret to hold over me. So I let silence and passivity send the message. He eyed me in that way of his, sullen and kind of pitiful, and removed his loathsome hand.

“I won’t tell anyone if you don’t want me to, but you’re an honest-to-goodness heroine.”

“I should get back to work.”

“Yes.” He patted my shoulder one last time. “Good girl.”

I escaped back to my station.

“What did he want?” my co-worker Alice asked.

“What do you think?”

She snickered. Maybe it was just the way her eyeliner curved beyond the outer corners of her eyes, but she looked gossipy and sly. If she ever found out my secret, she would tell the world.

I spent the afternoon watching employees at Granville Imports, a business in Long Beach, California. Cyber Watch was in Salt Lake, but Ken had us spying for companies across the nation. Like most companies, Granville had installed a content filter, but some people were savvy enough to use a proxy server so they could post on Facebook, shop on eBay, play online poker, or watch porn videos. Rosita Arnold made her usual online rounds of liberal political sites and spent an hour posting links on Facebook. I gave her another pass. I couldn’t bring myself to rat her out. Not to rightwing Ken.



AFTER WORK, I STROLLED FROM the building where I worked to the Mormon temple in downtown Salt Lake. The two blocks seemed longer in three-inch heels and a pencil skirt, and my car was parked in the opposite direction. But I needed to calm down and the temple grounds usually relaxed me.

Not that afternoon. I hardly noticed the flower beds and tranquil fountains, the smell of roses mingling with traffic fumes, or the tourists gawking at the golden statue of Moroni, the angel of revelation, blowing his horn from the temple's highest steeple.

Ken's revelation had me too anxious. He was bound to give up my secret. I imagined him at some backyard shindig casually letting the bomb drop. *You won't believe this, but a girl who works for me was kidnapped by a serial killer ...*

My body remembered the night in the mountains with spells of dizziness and trembling. The fierce cold, even in summer. In nightmares I fell into Rad's bottomless gaze. Or I was splayed on the ground, my wrists and ankles scourged with pain. He didn't torture me, but he staked Lisa on a tarp, the kind you lay under a tent to keep moisture out. Her blood pooled on the plastic.

The spells and nightmares had been going on for years, but lately I had new symptoms. Moments when color leached out of the world and bleakness sucked the life from me. Moments when pain seized my belly like a fist and I ached with hunger, not for food but something nameless.

Two days ago, a fierce cramp had bent me over. My nose almost touching the keyboard, I could barely hear Alice whispering. "Are you OK? Do you need to use the restroom?" The cramp hadn't been because of my period, which had ended a week ago. The whole thing baffled me and pissed me off. After ten years I should be healing, not spiraling into some kind of weird post-traumatic syndrome.

And now Ken, with his shiny forehead and chartreuse bow tie, was waving *Professor of Death* in my face.

I wandered from the temple grounds into a downtown mall. I browsed Nordstrom's shoe department and ended up paying way too much for a pair of gladiator sandals with about ten straps crisscrossing my feet and circling my ankles. The leather was a rich oaky color that would go with a

yellow sundress I had. As Lu Jakes, I'd worn secondhand clothes, so I was trying to make up for the deprivation.

After my reckless purchase, I drank an iced chai latte and watched the other mall crawlers. I thought about eating dinner somewhere nice, but the cost of the sandals killed that idea.

Rush hour was over by the time I hit the freeway and drove to my condo in Midvale. I lived in a development called Sunny Meadow. A complex of twenty-three buildings—some with two apartments, some with four—connected by a maze of snaking driveways and parking areas. Luxury apartments once, they were now run-down condos about two steps above public housing. Many were in foreclosure, which is how I scored mine—cheap at an auction.

I stopped at my mailbox. Nothing exciting, just the usual bills and ads. When I reached the parking lot for my building, I found a Vibe with Illinois plates in my space. I guessed my next-door neighbor, Emily, had a visitor from out of state, someone who didn't know the rules. The empty spaces were all reserved for residents of the building next to ours, so I parked in the visitors lot and walked back. Golden light stretched my shadow across the patchy grass.

I unlocked my front door and stepped into the tiny foyer, where I kicked off the high heels and slipped into worn flip-flops. My parakeet, Foster, screeched to be let out. The moment I opened his cage door, he flew to the top of the blinds in a blaze of green and yellow feathers.

I went into the kitchen and added the bills to the pile on the counter. I was tossing the ads into the recycling box when—*tap! tap! tap!*—I froze, listening. The sound came from the breakfast nook. Someone was outside tapping on the sliding glass door. The door opened onto a patio enclosed by a cedar fence with an unlocked gate—the perfect spot for an intruder to lurk. I rifled through my bag and found my phone, all the time thinking it couldn't be. Not again. What were the odds? But my body paid no attention to probability. Fear squeezed my throat and filled my mouth with dust.

Time to call 911.

"Lu?" someone yelled.

I knew the voice, will know it for the rest of my life. I slid the door open. She fell into my arms,

and I rocked her back and forth through a long embrace. Pain gripped my belly—that fist, stronger than ever. The nameless hunger opened like a sinkhole.

Lisa Duncan, the co-star of my worst nightmare.

Rad destroyed her face, ripping one nostril and stripping skin from her lips and both cheeks with the sticky tape used to seal boxes for shipping. The best plastic surgeons in Chicago remade her face, but they couldn't make it beautiful again. She had a zombie look, as if the skin grafted from her body had never taken hold completely.

She seemed not to care about herself. Her hair and clothes needed washing. Scabs laced her arms from wrist to elbow, tracks she wasn't bothering to cover.

She waited out my inspection with an amused smirk. "You turned out to be the girly girl. Who would have thought?"

"I have to dress like this for my job."

"Where do you work?" She trailed me into the breakfast nook.

I explained about Cyber Watch.

She laughed, a kind of edgy titter. "Lu Jakes, cyber snitch."

The jab hurt—she meant it to—but I kept walking into the kitchen. "I go by Darlington now. Ever since the book came out."

"I don't wanna talk about the book." The mention of *Professor of Death* spooked Lisa. Her fear skittered through my body and became my fear.

I opened the fridge. "Are you hungry? Want a sandwich or something?"

"Whatever." She assessed the room with narrowed eyes, like a potential buyer. "You can afford this?"

"Debbie made the down payment. I'm gonna pay her back, though." Lisa's mom and Debbie were sisters, making us cousins in a way.

"Do me a favor, OK? Don't tell Debbie I'm here."

"Why not?"

“She’ll tell Mom.”

“So?”

Lisa tipped her head sideways, bringing her ear a little closer to her hitched shoulder. Like a shrug but not. “She wants me to go to rehab. Again.”

“You left the state to avoid rehab?”

“Yeah,” she said too fast.

“What do you want, cheese or tuna?”

“Cheese, I guess.”

I sliced from a block of cheddar. What had spurred Lisa to come to Utah after being out of touch for years? Even if I bought the rehab story, why here? “How did you find me?” Except for stuff like credit cards, I kept my address unlisted.

“Debbie’s Christmas newsletter. Don’t tell me she forgot to send you one.”

“No, I just forgot to read it.”

We both laughed, Lisa’s titter skipping above my chuckle.

“Can I stay a few days?”

“Of course. You can always stay with me.”

“It won’t be for long. Just until I figure out what to do.”

I looked up from the mustard. “About what?”

“My fucked-up life.”

“What’s so fucked-up about it?” I grinned. “Besides the obvious.”

“I won’t do drugs here. Nothing illegal, anyway.”

“Thanks.” By then I had the fry pan heated, so I buttered the cheese sandwiches and dropped them in. “What are you using?”

“I was on smack. Now I’ve weaned myself to just Vicodin.” Lisa closed her eyes. I felt her shame, crushable as a snail inside its shell. It became my shame. The strength of the feeling startled me so much I missed some of what she said next: “... since the operations. They hurt so much I

wanted to die. You can't know, Lu, until you go through it." She finally opened her eyes. "They sent me to a pain clinic where I learned biofeedback and shit like that. You're still in pain, but you have techniques so you can stand it."

"Guess they don't work too well. Where'd you get the pills?"

"From a doctor."

"He didn't notice the tracks?"

She gave me a scalding look. "I'm in pain."

"I know. Sorry."

The silence grew heavy while I turned the sandwich over.

"God, you're so different, Lu. From that summer."

The summer when we were fifteen, she meant. When Lisa was cute and spoiled and I lived in a trailer with Duane and Norlene Jakes, the alcoholic half-wits who pretended to be my parents.

I flipped the sandwiches. "We both are."

"Yeah, but you were so weird. Creepy. Staring over your glasses at things that weren't there. Shit, remember those nerdy frames you had?"

"Uh-huh."

"You're so styling now. How come you don't wear contacts?"

Raucous screeches came from the living room.

Lisa flinched. "What's that?"

"Just my parakeet." I put the cheese sandwiches on plates and used the spatula to cut each one in half. "Sit down and eat. There's beer in the fridge."

After dinner Lisa grabbed another beer and went out on the patio to catch the last of the daylight. I cleaned Foster's cage. I chanted a few choruses of The Doors' "Light My Fire" to settle him down before covering him. Then I went upstairs, unfolded the inflatable mattress in the guest bedroom, and spent five minutes getting the pump to work. I emptied the top drawer of the dresser with teddy-bear stencils that I'd picked up cheap from Deseret Industries. I'd almost passed on

buying the dresser and the air mattress. Just couldn't see myself having a houseguest. Now I had Lisa for as long as she wanted to stay.

I was making the bed by the time she came upstairs.

"Better bring your suitcase inside," I said.

"I don't have one."

"Well, your clothes, then."

"I didn't bring anything."

Somehow I wasn't surprised.

Lisa stared at the floor. "It was spur-of-the-moment, coming here."

She was running from something seriously bad. Maybe she owed her dealer money. Once her supply of pain pills ran out, she might rip me off. But so what? Nothing in the apartment mattered to me except Foster, and she couldn't pawn a parakeet.

I paused for a moment. Did I really not care?

The night on the mountain, Rad became the Destroyer. He meant to take my soul and almost took my life. Like most true-crime books, *Professor of Death* has photos, including one of Rad after he slid over the edge of a snowmelt gully and fell hundreds of feet. He looks like roadkill after a week on the highway. I should have been roadkill, too, but a daemon caught me in his arms and set me down inches from the gully's edge. Hard to believe, but that's what happened. Afterward, I huddled through the night in a sleeping bag with Lisa, smelling her blood, afraid she would die before morning.

Now I had a job, a condo, a routine life. But it felt like a dream of flying. You take a step that miraculously goes on and on. You sail above the world, leg outstretched, wondering how long, how far before gravity brings you down. Somewhere inside yourself, you know that it's a dream and that when you wake up the Destroyer will be there.