



# **Underneath**

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“This is a joke, right?”

Dean Lovell shifted uncomfortably, his eyes moving over the girl’s shoulder to the stream of students chattering and laughing as they made their way to class. Summer played at the windows; golden light lay in oblongs across the tiled floor, illuminating a haze of dust from old books and the unpolished tops of lockers. Someone whooped, another cheered, and over by Dean’s locker, Freddy Kelly watched and grinned.

Dean forced his gaze back to the girl standing impatiently before him. Her eyes were blue but dark, her jaw slender but firm.

“Well?” she said.

He cleared his throat, dragged his eyes to hers and felt his stomach quiver.

*Her face...*

Down the hall, an authoritative voice chastised someone for using bad language. Punishment was meted out; a groan was heard. At the opposite end of the hall, heated voices rose. A body clanged against a locker; someone cursed. Laughter weaved its way through the parade.

“It’s not a joke. Why would you think it was?” he said at last, aware that he was fidgeting, paring slivers of skin from his fingernails, but unable to stop.

The girl-Stephanie-seemed amused. Dean met her eyes again, willed them to stay there, willed them not to wander down to where the skin was puckered and shiny, where her cheeks were folded, striated. Damaged.

“Since I’ve been here, only one other guy has ever asked me out. I accepted and showed up at the Burger Joint to a bunch of screaming, pointing jocks who called me all kinds of unimaginative, infantile names before giving me a soda and ketchup shower and pushing me out the door. *That’s why.*”

“Oh.” Dean squirmed, wished like hell he’d stood up to Freddy and not been put in this position. Defiance would have meant another long year of taunts and

physical injury, but even that had to be better than this, than standing here before the ugliest girl in the school asking her out on a date he didn't want.

Then *no*, he decided, remembering the limp he'd earned last summer courtesy of Freddy's hobnailed boots. A limp and a recurring ache in his toes whenever the weather changed. *Inflammatory arthritis*, his mother claimed, always quick to diagnose awful maladies for the slightest pains. But he was too young for arthritis, he'd argued. Too young for a lot of things, but that didn't stop them from happening.

The remembered sound of Freddy's laughter brought a sigh from him.

*Ask the scarred bitch out. See how far you get and I'll quit hasslin' you. Scout's honor. All you gotta do is take her out, man. Maybe see if those scars go all the way down, huh?*

"So? Stephanie said, with a glance at the clock above the lockers. "Who put you up to this? Is a bet, a dare, or what?"

Dean shook his head, despite being struck by an urgent, overwhelming need to tell her the truth and spare her the hurt later and himself the embarrassment now.

*That's exactly what it is, he imagined telling her, a bet. Fuckface Freddy over there bet that I wouldn't ask you out. If I chicken out, he wins; I lose, many times over. The last time I lost he kicked me so hard in the balls, I cried. How's that for a laugh? Fifteen years of age and I cried like a fucking baby. So yeah, it's a bet, and now that you know, you can judge me all you want, then come around the bleachers at lunchtime and watch me get my face rearranged. Ok?*

But instead he said, "I just thought it might be fun...you know...go to the movies or something. A break from study...and...I hate to go to the movies alone."

She smiled then, but it was empty of humor.

"Sounds like a half-assed reason to ask out the scarred girl. You must be desperate."

"No," he said, almost defensively, "I just..." He finished the thought with a shrug and hoped it would be enough.

“Right.”

“Look, forget it then, okay,” he said, annoyed at himself, annoyed at Freddy, annoyed at her for making it so goddamn difficult to avoid getting the living shit kicked out of him. He started to walk away, already bracing himself for Freddy’s vicious promises, and heard her scoff in disbelief behind him.

“Wait,” she said then and he stopped abreast of Freddy, who was pretending to dig the dirt from under his nails with a toothpick. As Dean turned back, he saw Freddy’s toothy grin widen and ‘go for it, stud,” he murmured.

Stephanie was frowning at him, her arms folded around her books, keeping them clutched to her chest.

“You’re serious about this?”

He nodded.

She stared.

Someone slammed a locker door. The bell rang. No one hurried.

“All right then,” she said. “I’m probably the biggest sucker in the world but...all right.”

For the first time, he saw a glimmer of something new in her eyes and it made his stomach lurch. He recognized the look as one he saw in the mirror every morning.

Hope.

Hope that this time things would work out right. That he would make it through the day, the week, the month, without pissing blood or lying to his parents about why his eyes were swollen from crying.

Hope that there would be no hurt this time.

*Way to go, Dean, he thought, nothing quite like fucking up someone else’s life worse than your own, huh?*

“Okay,” he said, with a smile he hoped looked more genuine than it felt. “I’ll call you. Maybe Friday? Your number’s in the book?”

“Yes,” she said. “But Friday’s no good. I have work.”

She worked the ticket booth at the Drive-In on Harwood Road. Dean saw her there almost every weekend. Saw her there and laughed with his friends about the irony of having a freak working in the one place where everyone would see her. Secretly he’d felt bad about mocking her, but after a while the jokes died down and so did the acidic regret.

Now, as she walked away, her strawberry blonde hair catching the sunlight, he realized how shapely her body was. Had he never seen her face, he might have thought she was a goddess, but the angry red and pink blotches on her cheek spoiled it, dragging one eye down and the corner of her mouth up. This defect was all that kept her from being one of those girls every guy wanted in the back seat of his car.

“I gotta admit, you got balls, shithead,” Freddy said behind him and Dean turned, feeling that familiar loosening of his bowels he got whenever the jock was close. Such encounters invariably left him with some kind of injury, but this time he hoped Fred would stick to his word.

“Y-yeah,” he said, with a sheepish grin.

Freddy barked a laugh. “Give her one for me, eh Bro? And be sure to let me know how that ‘ol burnt skin of hers tastes.”

As he passed, he mock-punched Dean and chuckled, and though Dean chuckled right along with it, he almost wet his pants in relief that the blow hadn’t been a real one.

\*

The sun was burning high and bright. There was no breeze, the leaves on the walnut trees like cupped green hands holding slivers of light to cast viridescent shadows on the lawns around the school. Dean sat with his best friend, Les, on the wall of the circular fountain, facing the steps to the main door of the sandstone building, from which a legion of flustered looking students poured. The fountain edge was warm, the water low and filled with detritus of nature and

man. The bronze statue of the school's founder stared with verdigris eyes at the blue sky hung like a thin veil above the building.

"You've got to be kidding me," Les said, erupting into laughter. "Stephanie Watts? Aw Jesus..."

Dean frowned. His hopes that Les would understand had been dashed, and he quickly realized he should have known better; Les couldn't be serious at a funeral.

"Well, it's worth it, isn't it? I mean...if it keeps that asshole off my back?"

Les poked his glasses and shook his head. "You're such a moron, Dean."

"Why am I?"

"You honestly think he'd let you off the hook that easy? No way, dude. He just wants to humiliate you, wants to see you hook up with Scarface. Then, when you become the joke of the whole school, he'll look twice as good when he kicks your ass up to your shoulders. Trust me-I know these things."

Before Dean had moved from Phoenix to Harperville, Les had been Freddy's punching bag. The day Dean had showed up, he'd bumped into Freddy hard enough to make the guy drop his cigarette. Les's days of torment were over; Dean earned the label "Fresh Meat." It had been that simple; whatever part of the bullying mind controlled obsession, Dean's clumsiness had triggered it.

"What's worse," Les continued, "is that not only will this not keep that jerk off your back, but now you've put yourself in a position where you have to *date* Stephanie Watts, and for a girl who's probably desperate, God knows what she'll expect you to do for her."

"What do you mean?"

Les sighed. "Put yourself in her shoes. Imagine you'd never been with someone. *Ever*. And then some guy asks you out. Wouldn't you be eager to get as much as you could from him just in case you're never that lucky again?"

Dean grimaced, waved away a fly. "I never thought of it that way."



“I don’t think you gave this much thought at all, hombre.”

“So what do I do?”

“What can you do?”

“I could tell her I can’t make it.”

“She’ll just pick another night.”

“I could just *not* call her. That’d give her the hint, wouldn’t it?”

“Maybe, but I get the feeling once you give a girl like that the slightest hint of interest, she’ll dog you to follow through on it.”

Dean ran a hand over his face. “Shit.”

“Yeah.” Les put a hand on his shoulder. “But who knows? Maybe all that pent-up lust’ll mean she’s a great lay.”

“Christ, Les, lay off, will ya? If I go through with this, it’s just gonna be a movie, nothing more.”

“If you say so,” Les said, and laughed.

\*

“Who are you calling?” Dean’s mother stood in the doorway, arms folded over her apron. A knowing smile creased her face, the smell of freshly baked pies wafting around her, making Dean’s stomach growl. The clock in the hall ticked loudly, too slow to match the racing of Dean’s heart.

“Well? Who is she?”

Dean groaned. In the few days since he’d asked Stephanie out it seemed the world was bracing itself for the punch line to one big joke, with him at the ass end of it. More than once, he’d approached the phone with the intention of calling the girl and telling her the truth and to hell with whatever she thought of his cruelty. But he’d chickened out. Trembling finger poised to dial, he would remember the flare of hope he’d seen in her eyes and hang up, angry at himself

for not being made of tougher stuff, for being weak. It was that weakness, both mental and physical, that bound him to his obligations, no matter how misguided, and made him a constant target for the fists of life.

“Just a girl from school,” he told his mother, to satisfy her irritating smile. He hoped that would be enough to send her back to the kitchen, but she remained in the doorway, her smile widening, a look of *there’s my little man, all grown up on her face*.

“Did you tell your father?”

He shrugged and turned away from her. Frowned at the phone. “Didn’t know I had to.”

She said nothing more, but a contented sigh carried her back to her baking and he shook his head as he picked up the phone. They were always in his business, to the point where every decision he made had to be screened by his own imagined versions of them before he did anything. It angered him, made him sometimes wish he could go live with his Uncle Rodney in Pensacola at least until he went to college and was free of their reign. But Rodney was a drunk, albeit a cheerful one and Dean doubted that situation would leave him any better off than he was now. Overbearing parents was one thing; waking up to a drunk uncle mistaking you for the toilet was another.

Shuddering, he jabbed out the number he’d written down on a scrap of paper after using Stephanie’s address (he knew the street, not the exact location, but that had been enough) to locate *Julie & Chris Watts* in the phonebook.

Perspiration beading his brow, he cleared his throat, listened to the robotic pulse of the dial tone and prayed she didn’t answer.

“Hello?”

*Damn it.*

“H-Hi, Stephanie?”

“No, this is her mother. Who’s speaking, please?”

The woman’s voice sounded stiff, unfriendly and he almost hung up there and

then while there was still a chance. After all, she didn't know his name, so he couldn't be...

Caller I.D.

*Damn it*, he thought again and told her who he was.

“Oh yes. Hang on a moment, please.”

*Oh yes*. Recognition? Had Stephanie mentioned him to her mother?

A clunk, a rattle, a distant call and the muffled sounds of footsteps. Then static and a breathless voice.

“Hi. I wasn't sure you'd call.”

*Me neither*, he thought, but said, “I said I would, didn't I?”

“So we're still on for tomorrow night?”

There was a challenge in her voice that he didn't like. It was almost as if she was daring him to back out, to compose some two-bit excuse and join the ranks of all the cowards her imperfection had summoned.

“Sure,” he told her and cursed silently. His intention had been to do the very thing she'd expected, to back out, to blame a family illness on his inability to take her out. He'd already come to agree with Les's assessment of the situation, and figured it really was a case of *damned if you do, damned if you don't*. Whatever happened with the girl, Fuckface Freddy had no intention of stopping his persecution of Dean. That would be too much fun to abandon just because he'd shown some balls in asking out the school freak. Now, not only would he suffer the regular beatings, he'd also have school rumor to contend with. Rumors about what he'd done with the scarred girl.

“You still there?”

“Yeah.” He closed his eyes. “So when should I pick you up?”

\*

The night was good to her.

As she emerged from the warm amber porch light, Dean almost smiled. In the gloom, with just the starlight and the faint glow from the fingernail moon, she looked flawless. And beautiful. So much so, that he was almost able to convince himself that she was not marred at all, that the scars were latex makeup she wore as protection against the advances of undesirables.

But when she opened the door of his father's Ford Capri, the dome light cast ragged shadows across her cheek, highlighting the peaks and ridges, dips and hollows, and his smile faded, a brief shudder of revulsion rippling through him. He felt shame that he could be so narrow-minded and unfair. After all, she hadn't asked for the scars and he should be mature enough to look past them to what was most likely a very nice girl.

*Christ, I sound like my mother,* he thought and watched as Stephanie lowered herself into the seat, her denim skirt riding up just a little, enough to expose a portion of her thigh. To Dean's horror, he felt a rush of excitement and hastily quelled it.

*You're being an asshole,* he told himself, but it was not a revelation. He knew what he was being, and how he was feeling. He'd become a display case, his shelves filled with all the traits he would have frowned upon had someone else been displaying them. But it was different, and he realized it always was, when you were an outsider looking in. Here, in the car with Stephanie, he was helpless to stop how angry and disgusted he felt. It was just another event in his life engineered by someone other than himself and that impotence made him want to scream, to shove this ugly, ruined girl from the car and just drive until the gas ran out or he hit a wall, whichever happened first.

"Hi," she said and he offered her a weak smile. Her hair was shiny and clean, her eyes sparkling, dark red lipstick making her lips scream for a long wet kiss.

Dean wanted to be sick, but figured instead to drive, to seek distractions and end this goddamn night as soon as possible. He could live with the whispers, the speculation, and the gossip forever, but he needed to end the subject of them sooner rather than later.

"So where are we going?" she asked when he gunned the engine to life and set the car rolling.

He kept his eyes on the street. Dogs were fleeting shadows beneath streetlights; a plastic bag fluttered like a trapped dove on a rusted railing. A basketball smacked the pavement beyond a fenced in court. Voices rose, their echoes fleeing. The breeze rustled the dark leaves, whispering to the moon.

Dean's palms were oily on the wheel.

"The movies, I guess. That okay?"

In the corner of his eye, he saw her shrug. "I guess."

"We don't have to, if you have something else in mind."

The smell of her filled the car, a scent of lavender and something else, something that filled his nostrils and sent a shiver through him that was, alarmingly, not unpleasant.

"Maybe we could go down to the pier."

"What's down there?"

"Nothing much, but I like it. It's peaceful."

*And secluded*, Dean added and remembered Len's theory on what she might be expecting from him.

"Sounds kind of boring to me," he said then, aware that it was hardly the polite thing to say but wary of letting the night slip out of his control.

To his surprise, she smiled. "I used to think that too."

"What changed your mind?"

"I don't know. The fire, maybe."

Oh shit. It was a question he knew everyone in school wanted to know, that he himself wanted to know: How did you get those scars? And now it seemed, she would tell him.

"The fire that..." he ventured and saw her nod.

“My brother started it. Funny.”

“What was?”

“That he set it trying to kill me and our parents, but he was the only one who died. Hid himself in the basement thinking the fire wouldn’t get him down there, and he was right. But the smoke did. He suffocated. I burned.”

“My God.”

She turned to look at him then and in the gloom, her eyes looked like cold stones, the light sailing over the windshield drawing the scars into her hair.

“Why did you ask me out?”

He fumbled for an answer she would believe but all responses tasted false.

“Someone dare you?”

“No.”

“Threaten you?”

“Haven’t we already been through this?”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I told you: No.”

“Then why?”

“Because I wanted to.”

“I don’t believe you.”

He rolled his eyes. “Then why are you here?”

Another shrug and she looked out her window. “I’m hoping some day someone will ask me out for real. Until then, I’ll settle for trial runs. When you look like I do, being choosy isn’t an option, even if you’re almost certain you’re going to end up getting hurt.”

“Hell of an attitude,” he said, but understood completely and both hated himself for being exactly what she suspected and pitied her for having to endure the callousness of people.

People like him.

“Maybe. I figure it’ll change when I meet someone who doesn’t think of me as a freak.”

He knew that was his cue to say something comforting, to tell her *I’m not one of those people*, but he was afraid to. It would mean fully committing himself to her expectations and they would undoubtedly extend far beyond this night. It would mean selling himself to her and that was unthinkable, because in reality, he was everything she feared—just another guy setting her up for heartbreak, and as guilty as that made him feel, it was still preferable to making her think he was really interested in her. Neither were palatable options, but at least there was escape from the former.

“I don’t think you’re being fair on yourself,” he said instead, and silently applauded his tact. “I think you look good.”

She snorted a laugh, startling him and he looked at her.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she replied, but kept looking at him, even when he turned to watch the road; even when he found himself angling the car toward the pier; even as he felt his own skin redden under her scrutiny. The smell of her was intoxicating, the remembered glimpse of thigh agitating him, a persistent itch somewhere deep beneath the skin.

*This is a dare*, he reminded himself when he felt a faint stirring in his groin. *I’m only doing it because I don’t want to get my ass kicked through the rest of high school. And never in a million years would I have asked her otherwise and why the fuck is she still staring at me?*

He brought the car to a squeaking halt, its nose inches from the low pier wall, the black water beyond speckled with reflected stars, the moon gazing at its shimmering twin. Boats danced on the end of their tethers, bells clanking, announcing every wave. A rickety looking jetty ran out to sea and vanished

under the cloak of night.

And still he felt her eyes on him.

After a moment in which he screamed to announce *well here we are!* he turned to ask her why she was staring-he couldn't bear the sensation of those eyes on him any longer-but when he opened his mouth to speak, she leaned close and crushed them with her lips, her tongue lashing away the memory of them.

Dean's eyes widened in horror.

*Oh Jesus.*

She shifted her lips, just a little and the side of her cheek grazed him. Hard skin. It was as if her nails had scratched his mouth. He recoiled; she followed, her hands grabbing fistfuls of his shirt. He moaned a protest but it only spurred her further. Her hands began to slide downward and oh God he was responding-even in the throes of horror he was responding and his hands were sliding over her blouse, feeling the softness there, the small points of hardness beneath his fingers and unbuttoning, tearing, freeing her pale, smooth unblemished skin. She made a low sound in her throat and broke away and for a terrible moment he thought she was going to stop, even though he wanted her to stop because this was a nightmare, but instead she sloughed off her blouse and smiled and now she was wearing just a bra and it was all he could see in a world full of pulsing red stars that throbbed across his eyes. She reached behind her and slowly, teasingly removed her bra and replaced it with his hands. His breath was coming hard and fast, harder and faster, an ache in his crotch as his cock stiffened even as his mind continued to protest *stop it stop it stop it you can't do this you don't want to do this* and she was on him again, her hair tickling his face, her mouth crushing, exploring, tearing at his clothes and he moaned, begged her, kneaded her soft, perfect breasts, then released them as she moved lower, lower, her wet lips tasting his nipples, his stomach, her fingers hooking the waistband of his pants and...

...and then the passenger door was wrenched open and disembodied white hands, large hands, leapt forward and tangled themselves in her hair, wrenching her head back to show a face with surprise-widened eyes and a gaping mouth too stunned to cry out.

Dean could do nothing, the lust that had swelled to bursting within him quickly



turning to icewater in his veins. *Oh God, no.* He watched in abject terror as Stephanie was torn screaming from the car, the breasts he had held not moments before crushed beneath her weight as she was thrown to the ground face first. She whimpered and for a moment it was the only sound apart from the steady clanking of the bell.

And then Fuckface Freddy's sneering face filled the doorway.

"Surprise, shithead," he said.

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It took only a moment for Dean to gather himself, but he did so with the awful knowledge that he was probably going to die and that awareness lent a sluggishness to his movements that saw him all but crawl from the car to see what Freddy was doing to the girl.

It was worse than he thought, because as he straightened himself to lean against the car, he saw that Freddy was not alone. Lou Greer, the principal's son, track-star and all-round sonofabitch was with him, giggling uncontrollably into his palm and shuffling around Stephanie, who was now sitting up, a shocked expression on her face, her arms crossed over her bare breasts.

Freddy was smiling, a feral smile that promised hurt.

"I'll be damned," he told Dean, "you're just full of fuckin' surprises, man. I was only kiddin' you about bonin' Scarface and here you were about to let her gobble your rod. That's really somethin'."

The bell clanged on, ignoring the hush of the tide.

Somewhere far out to sea, a ship's horn sounded.

The ground around the car was sandy, a thin layer scattered above concrete. Pieces of broken glass gleamed in the half-light from the streetlamps that peered between the canopies of box elder and spruce. This also provided a perfect shield from the road. Few cars would pass by tonight and those that did would not see much should they deign to look in this direction.

"Don't hurt her," Dean said, knowing as he did so that anything he said would

only bring him more pain at the hands of Freddy and his comrade.

“That sounded like an order to me, Fred,” Greer said, and giggled. It was the contention of most people who knew him, that the last time the principal’s son had been lucid, Ronald Reagan was taking his first spill over a curb.

Stephanie was shivering, her pupils huge, the scarred side of her face lost in shadow, and while Dean was filled with terror, he couldn’t stop himself from reflecting back on what they’d been doing before Freddy had come along.

But then Freddy stepped close enough to drown Dean in his shadow and the memory was banished from his mind.

“Since when do you give a shit about her?” Freddy asked, somehow managing to sound convincingly curious.

“I-I...I don’t know.”

Freddy nodded his complete understanding and turned back to Stephanie. She watched him fearfully.

“You do know he set you up, right?”

Greer giggled and muttered ‘oh shit, that *sucks*’ into his hand.

Stephanie looked at Dean and he felt his insides turn cold. There was no anger in her eyes, no disappointment; just a blank look, and somehow that was worse.

“That’s a lie, Stephanie,” he said, stepping forward, “I swear it’s-”

In one smooth move, Freddy swiveled on his heel and launched a downward kick into Dean’s shin. Dean howled in pain and collapsed to the ground.

“Shut the fuck up, weasel,” Freddy said, and drove his boot into Dean’s stomach, knocking the wind out of him. Dean wheezed, tears leaking from his eyes. When they cleared, he saw Stephanie, her arms still crossed across her breasts, her face drawn and pale but for the angry red on her cheek.

*I swear I didn’t* he mouthed to her but knew she didn’t understand, knew she couldn’t understand because the look in her eyes told him she wasn’t really here

any more, that she'd retreated somewhere neither he nor Freddy and Greer could reach her.

Greer stopped giggling long enough to ask: "What'll we do with her, Fred?"

Freddy shrugged and turned back to face Stephanie.

"Can't fuck her," he said, as if he were talking about the weather, "they'd swab her scabby ass and I'd be off the football team."

"Please, leave her...alone," Dean managed, though every word felt like red-hot hooks tugging at his stomach.

"If you don't shut up, we will leave her alone, and do all the unpleasant things to you instead," Freddy said, over his shoulder and for a moment Dean stopped breathing.

*Do it, his mind screamed. Tell them to go ahead and beat the shit out of you. At least they'll leave her alone!*

But he said nothing, merely wept into the sand.

He didn't want her to get hurt, but he had been hurt so much himself that he couldn't bear the thought of more. Even if all of this was his fault. Even if the memory of the way she was looking at him haunted his sleep for the rest of his life.

He.

Couldn't.

Do it.

Incredibly, sleep danced at the edges of his mind and he almost gave himself over to its promise of peace, but then he heard a grunt and Greer's manic giggle and his eyes flickered open. The world swayed, stars coruscating across his retinas, then died.

Stephanie was no longer kneeling.

She was lying flat on her back, breasts exposed with Greer holding her wrists in his hands, as if preparing to drag her over the broken glass. As Dean watched, heartsick and petrified, Freddy grinned and straddled the girl. Still, she would not take her eyes off Dean. He wished more than anything that she would and “please,” he moaned into the sand, sending it puffing up around and into his mouth.

“How did she taste, shithead?” Freddy asked and, setting his hands on either side of Stephanie’s midriff, leaned down and flicked his tongue over her left nipple. As Greer giggled hysterically, Freddy sat back and smacked his lips as if tasting a fine wine.

“Charcoal, perhaps,” he said and that was too much for Greer. He exploded into guffaws so irritating that eventually even Freddy had to tell him to cut it out.

And still Stephanie stared at Dean.

*Oh fuck, please stop.*

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, and knew she didn’t hear.

“Then again...” Freddy tasted her right nipple, repeated the lip smacking and put a thoughtful finger to his chin. “Maybe soot. You wanna taste, Greer?”

He didn’t need to ask twice. They exchanged positions, Stephanie never once breaking eye contact with Dean and never once trying to struggle against what Freddy and Greer were doing to her. She said nothing, but bore the humiliation in expressionless silence.

Dean, unable to stand it any longer, scooted himself into a sitting position, his back against the car, drew his knees up and buried his face in the dark they provided, surrounding them with his arms. In here, he was safe. All he could hear were the sounds.

It lasted forever and he wept through it all, looking up only when a sharp smack made him flinch.

Greer was on the ground, his giggling stopped, a hand to his cheek. Stephanie was in the same position as before, but her jeans and panties were rolled down almost to her knees, exposing her sex, a V-shaped shadow in the white of her

skin. Freddy towered over Greer, one fist clenched and held threateningly at his side.

“I said *no*, you fuckin’ retard.”

Greer looked cowed, and more than a little afraid. “I was just goin’ to use a finger.”

“Get up,” Freddy ordered and Greer scrambled to his feet. They stood on either side of the prone girl, the threat of violence in the air.

“You do as I say or fuck off home to Daddy, you understand me?”

Greer nodded.

“Good, now pull her pants back up and go get the car. We’re done with this bitch.”

Another nod from Greer.

The sigh Dean felt at the thought that it might all be over caught in his throat when Freddy turned and walked toward him. Dean’s whole body tensed, anticipating another kick, but Freddy dropped to his haunches and smiled.

“Do we need to have this conversation?”

Dean said nothing; didn’t know what he was supposed to say.

“Do I need to tell you what will happen if you tell anyone what happened here? Not that anyone will believe a little fucked up perv like you anyway, and I have ways of making sure the finger gets pointed in your direction if you start making noise. Capiisce?”

Dean nodded, tears dripping down his cheeks.

“Good. Besides, we didn’t hurt her, now did we? We were just havin’ some fun. Harmless fun, right?”

Dean nodded.

Freddy’s grin dropped as if he’d been struck. He leaned close enough for Dean

to smell the beer on his breath.

“Because you open your fuckin’ mouth, shithead and two things are gonna happen. First, we’ll have a repeat of tonight’s performance, only this time we’ll go all the way, you know what I’m sayin’? We’ll fuck that little burnt-up whore ‘till she can’t walk no more and then I’ll get Greer to do the same to you, just so you don’t feel left out, understand?”

Dean nodded furiously with a sob so loud it startled them both. Freddy laughed.

“Yeah, you understand,” he said and rose to his feet, taking a moment to dust the sand off his jeans. He looked over at Stephanie, still lying unmoving where they’d left her, and said to Dean: “She’s not much of a talker, is she?”

Dean was silent.

“Pretty fuckin’ frigid too. Must be your aftershave got you that itty bitty titty, shithead.”

Greer’s Chevy rumbled to a halt a few feet away.

Freddy glanced back over his shoulder, then looked from Dean to Stephanie.

“Well folks, it’s been fun. I hope you’ve enjoyed me as much as I’ve enjoyed you!”

He turned and walked to the car, his boots crunching sand.

With a whoop and a holler, Greer roared the engine and they were gone, the Chevy screeching around the corner onto the road behind the trees.

Night closed in around the pier and there were only the waves, the clanging of the bell and the soft sigh of the breeze

\*

“Stephanie?”

He had brought her clothes, gripping them in a fist that wanted to tremble, to touch her, to help her, but when he offered them to her, she closed her eyes and

didn't move.

“Stephanie, he said if I asked you out, he'd quit picking on me. He scares the shit out of me and I'm tired of getting my ass kicked and creeping around worrying that he'll see me. So I agreed, like an idiot. I'm sorry. I really do like you, even if I wasn't sure before. I do like you and I'm so sorry this happened. I swear I didn't know.”

There was an interminable period of silence that stretched like taut wire between them, and then she opened her eyes.

Dark.

Fire.

Slowly, she reached out and took the clothes from him.

“Wait for me in the car, I don't want you looking at me,” she said coldly, but not before her fingers brushed the air over his hand.

“Okay,” he said and rose.

She stared, unmoving.

“I am sorry,” he told her and waited a heartbeat for a response.

There was none. He made his way back to the car and stared straight ahead through the windshield at the endless dark sea, ignoring the sinuous flashes of white in the corner of his eye. Echoes of pain tore through his gut and he winced, wondering if something was broken, or burst.

When the car door opened, his pulse quickened and he had to struggle not to look at her.

“Drive me home,” she said and put her hands in her lap, her hair, once so clean and fresh now knotted and speckled with sand and dirt, obscuring her face.

“Now.”

And still the smell of lavender.

He started the car and drove, a million thoughts racing through his mind but not one of them worthy of being spoken aloud.

When they arrived at her house, the moon had moved and the stars seemed less bright than they'd been before. There were no voices, no basketballs whacking pavement, but the breeze had strengthened and tore at the white plastic bags impaled on the railings. Stephanie left him without a word, slamming the car door behind her. He watched her walk up the short stone path with her head bowed, until the darkness that seethed around the doorway consumed her.

Still he waited, hoping a hand might resolve itself from that gloom to wave him goodbye, a gesture that would show him she didn't think he was to blame after all. But the darkness stayed unbroken, and after a few minutes, he drove home.

\*

He awoke to sunlight streaming in his window and birds singing a chorus of confused melodies in the trees.

A beautiful morning.

Until he tried to sit up and pain cinched a hot metal band around his chest. He gasped in pain. Gaspd again when the pain unlocked the memory of the night before, flooding his mind with dark images of a half-naked scared girl and maniacal giggling.

The clanging of a bell.

*oh god*

He wished it had been a dream, a nightmare, but the pain forbade the illusion. Real. It had happened and the light of morning failed to burn away the cold shadow that clung to him as he recalled his cowardice.

*Jesus, I just sat there.*

When his mother opened the door and spoke, startling him, he exaggerated his discomfort enough to convince her to let him stay in bed. He endured her maternal worrying until she was satisfied he wasn't going to die on her watch, and then cocooned himself in the covers.



When she was gone, he buried his face in the pillows and wept.

*I just sat there.*

He wondered if Stephanie had gone to school today, or if, even now the police were on their way to Dean's house, to question him. The momentary thrum of fear abated with the realization that he had done nothing wrong. Freddy and Greer were the ones in trouble if the authorities were brought into it. And still he felt no better. Doing nothing somehow made him feel just as guilty as if he'd been the one holding her down, or pawing at her breasts, mocking her.

He wanted to call her, to try to explain without panic riddling his words, without fear confusing him, but knew he'd lost her.

*But what if I hadn't lost her? he wondered then. What if Freddy hadn't interrupted us and we'd ended up having sex? What would that mean today? What would that make us?*

He saw himself holding her hand as they walked the halls at school.

He saw himself holding her close at the prom as they danced their way through a crowd grinning cruelly.

He saw the look of need in her eyes as she stared at him, the possessive look that told him he was hers forever.

He heard the taunts, the jeers, the snide remarks but this time they wouldn't be aimed at Stephanie alone. This time, they'd be aimed at him too for being the one to pity her. For being blind to what was so staggeringly obvious to everyone else.

*What the fuck is wrong with me?*

Pain of a different kind threaded its way up his throat.

He didn't like the person his feelings made him.

He didn't like who he was becoming, or rather, who he might have been all along.

*I just sat there...*

As the light faded from the day and the shadows slid across the room, Dean lay back in his bed and stared at the ceiling.

Watching.

Waiting with rage in his heart.

For tomorrow.

\*

“Mr. Lovell, we missed you yesterday,” a voice said and Dean paused, the only rock in a streaming river of students.

The main door was close enough for him to feel the cool air blasting down from the air conditioner, the sunlight making it seem as if the world outside the school had turned white.

Dean turned to face the principal, a tall rail-thin man who looked nothing like his son. Small green eyes stared out from behind rimless glasses. His hands were behind his back, gaze flitting from Dean’s pallid face to the object held in his hand.

“Yeah,” Dean muttered. “I was sick.”

“I see,” Principal Greer said, scowling at a student who collided with him and spun away snorting laughter. “Well this close to exams I would expect you’d make more of an effort to make classes.”

“It couldn’t be helped.”

Greer nodded. “Where are you going with that, may I ask?”

Dean lingered, his mouth moving, trying vainly to dispense an excuse, but finally he gave up and turned away. He walked calmly toward the main door.

“Excuse me, Mr. Lovell, I’m not finished with you.”

Dean kept moving.

“Mr. Lovell, you listen to me when I’m talking to you!”

Now the scattering of students in the hallway paused, their chattering ceased. Heads turned to watch.

The doorway loomed.

“Lovell, you stop *right this minute!*”

Dean kept moving.

“You...you’re parents will be hearing from me!” Lovell sounded as if he might explode with rage. Dean didn’t care. He hadn’t really heard anything the old man had said anyway.

The hallway was deathly silent as he passed beneath the fresh air billowing from the a/c, and then he was outside, on the steps and staring down.

At where Fuckface Freddy was regaling two squirming girls with tales of his exploits.

“I swear,” he was saying, “the bitch told me she got off when guys did that. I mean...in a goddamn *bowl* for Chrissakes! Can you believe that shit?”

It took four steps to reach him and when he turned, he squinted at Dean.

Sneered.

“The fuck *you* want?”

Dean returned his sneer and drew back the baseball bat he’d taken from his locker.

He expected Freddy to look shocked, or frightened, or to beg Dean not to hurt him. But Freddy did none of those things.

Instead, he laughed.

And Dean swung the bat.

\*

His parents, talking. He lay in the dark, listening. They were making no intent to be quiet.

“Did you talk to him?”

“I didn’t know what to say. He says his sorry.”

“Sorry? He gave the guy a broken jaw, a busted nose and a concussion! Sorry isn’t going to cut it.”

“He was upset, Don.”

“Oh and that’s supposed to get him off the hook, huh? Did you ask him what the hell he’s going to do now? Greer *expelled* him. You want to appeal against that? Just so our darling son can beat the shit out of the next guy who’s dumb enough to cross him? Everyone gets upset, Rhonda, but not everyone pisses away their future by taking a bat to someone. I can’t wait to hear what that kid’s parents are going to do. They’ll probably sue the ass off us.”

“He says the guy was picking on him.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake.”

“Well I don’t know...you go talk to him then.”

“I’m telling you...if I go up to that room, it won’t be to talk.”

“Then talk to him tomorrow. He’s obviously got some problems we didn’t know about. You being angry isn’t going to help anything.”

“Yeah well, jail isn’t going to do him much good either, now is it?”

He lay in the dark, listening.

Smiling.

\*

Over the next few days he was dragged to meetings, and heard the tone, but none of the words. Voices were raised, threats were issued, and peace was imposed. There were questions, different faces asking different questions, all of them

threads connected to the same ball: *Why did you do it, Dean?*

Had he chosen to answer those blurry, changing faces in all those rooms that smelled of furniture polish and sweat, he would have told them: *I just sat there.* But instead he said nothing, and soon the faces went away, the slatted sunlight aged on the walls and there was only one voice, a woman, speaking to him as if he were a child, but still asking the question everyone wanted to know and which he refused to answer because it belonged to him, and him alone.

“Dean, I want to help you, but you have to help *me.*”

That made him smile.

“Tell me what happened.”

He wouldn't.

“Tell me why you did what you did.”

He didn't, and when she shook her head at some unseen observer, standing in the shadows at his back, he was released. No more faces, no more voices, just his parents, expressing their disappointment, their frustration. Their anger.

It meant nothing to him.

\*

In the dark of night he awoke, unable to breathe, his body soaked in sweat, panic crawling all over him.

*I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm so sorry*

*Look at you now*, a voice sneered in his ear and when he turned toward it, Fuckface Freddy was grinning a smile missing most of its teeth, his nose squashed and bleeding, one eye misshapen from when Dean had knocked it loose. His breath smelled like alcohol. *Look at you now shithead.*

Dean clamped his hands over his eyes, into his hair and pulled, screamed, a long hoarse tortured scream that made lights come on in more houses than his own.

*Look at you now...*

\*

“These sessions will only be beneficial to you, Dean, if you open up to me...”

\*

*Look at you now...*

\*

“He starts at Graham High in the fall. Let’s hope he doesn’t fuck that up.”

“Don’t talk like that, Don. He’s still your son.”

“Thanks for the reminder.”

\*

Stephanie kissed him, her head making the covers ripple as she worked her way down his stomach. He moaned, filled with confusion and desire. Surely it couldn’t all have been a dream, but if not, then he was thankful at least for the respite, this neutral plain where no harm was done and no one had been hurt.

Not here.

And when he ran his hands through her hair, she raised her face so that he could see the scars. So that he could touch them, remember them. But there were no scars. Only a wide gaping smile from which Greer’s giggle emerged...

\*

Almost a month later, his parents left him alone for the weekend. They’d asked him to come with them to Rodney’s farm; his uncle was sick, and they claimed getting away from the house for a while might do Dean some good. And Rodney would be just tickled to see his nephew.

Dean refused, in a manner that dissuaded persistence, leaving them no option but to leave him behind, but not without a litany of commands and warnings. Then, on Friday evening, his mother kissed him on the cheek; he wiped it away. His

father scowled; Dean ignored it. Then they were gone and the house was filled with quiet, merciful peace.

Until there was a knock on the door.

Dean didn't answer, but his parents had not locked it and soon Les was standing in the living room, hands by his sides, a horrified expression on his face.

"Dude, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Venting," Dean said, drawing the blade of his mother's carving knife across his forearm. He stared in fascination as the cuts, deep and straight, opened but remained bloodless and pink for a few moments before the blood welled.

"Hey...don't do that okay?" Les said, his voice shaking as he took a seat opposite Dean. "Please."

"It helps," Dean said, wiping the blade clean against the leg of his jeans. Then he returned the knife to an area below the four slashes he'd already made. Blood streaked his arm and Les noticed a spot of dark red was blossoming on the carpet between his legs. Dean had his arm braced across his knees, as if he were attempting to saw a piece of wood. Face set in grim determination, eyes glassy, he slowly drew the blade back, opening another wide pink smile in the skin.

"Jesus, Dean. What are you doing this for?"

"I told you," Dean said, without looking up from his work, "it helps."

"Helps what?"

"Helps it escape."

"I don't get it."

"No. You don't," Dean said and grit his teeth as he made another cut.

\*

There were dreams and voices, the words lost beneath the amplified sound of skin tearing.

And when he woke, he knew his arms were not enough.

\*

Summer died and took fall and winter with it, a swirl of sun, rain, snow and dead leaves that filled the window of the Lovell house like paintings deemed not good enough and replaced to mirror seasons that surely could not move so fast.

A somber mood held court inside. A man and a woman moved, tended to their daily routines, but they were faded and gray, people stepped from ancient photographs to taste the air for a while.

And upstairs, a room stood empty, the door closed, keeping the memories sealed safely within.

Another year passed.

\*

“Two, babe,” the kid said, running a hand over his gel-slicked hair and winking at the pretty girl in the ticket booth. On the screen behind him, garish commercials paraded across the Drive-In screen and the meager gathering of cars began to honk in celebration.

The kid glanced over his shoulder at the screen and looked back when the girl jammed two tickets into his hands. Using her other hand she snatched away his money, offered him a dutiful smile and went back to her magazine.

“Chilly,” scoffed the kid and returned to his car, his shoes crunching on the gravel.

The movie previews began and the honking died. Crickets sawed a song in the field behind the screen.

The moon was high, bathing the lot in a cool blue light.

“One,” said a voice and the girl sighed, looked up at the man standing in front of her and began to punch out the ticket. Her hand froze.

“Hi Stephanie,” Dean said.



He moved his face closer, so the amber glow fell on his face and Stephanie barely restrained a grimace.

“What are you doing here?” she asked after a moment, then tugged the ticket free and slid it beneath the Plexiglas window.

“I wanted to see you.”

“Oh yeah, for what?”

“To apologize.”

“Apology accepted,” she said testily and glared at him. “That’ll be two dollars.”

He smiled, said, “You look amazing,” and passed over the money.

And she did. The scars were gone, with only the faintest sign that they’d ever been there. Perhaps the skin on her right cheek was just a little darker than it should have been, a little tighter than normal, but that could be blamed on makeup. Without the scar, she was stunning, but then, through all his nights of suffering and the endless days of rage, he’d come to realize that even *with* them, she’d been beautiful. It was he who’d been the ugly one, ugly on the inside.

She stopped and stared at him, the look he remembered, the look that had haunted him, but then it was gone; exasperation replacing it.

“What happened to you?” she asked.

He put a hand to his chin, to the hard pink ridges of skin there and shrugged. “I had to let it out.”

He expected her to ask the question so many people had put to him ever since the day his father had kicked in the bathroom door and found him lying bleeding on the floor, his face in ruins, his mother’s carving knife clutched in one trembling hand, but she didn’t. She simply shook her head.

“You destroyed yourself.”

He nodded. “For you.”

Her laugh was so unexpected he staggered back a step, the scars on his face rearranging themselves into a map of confusion.

Someone honked a horn at the screen. A chorus of voices echoes from the speakers.

Stephanie looked ugly again. “You almost killed him you know.”

“Who?”

“Freddy.”

“I know. He deserved it.”

“No he didn’t.”

He watched her carefully, watched her features harden and a cold lance of fear shot through him.

“What do you mean? After what he did-”

She frowned, as if he had missed the simplest answer of all. “I *asked* him to do it.”

On the screen, someone screamed. For a moment, Dean wasn’t sure it hadn’t been himself.

“You used to see Freddy hanging around all those cheerleaders and blonde bimbos at school, right?”

He nodded, dumbly, his throat filled with dust.

“Did you ever actually see him out with any of them?”

He didn’t answer.

Ominous music from the speakers; footsteps; a door creaking loud enough to silence the crickets.

“He had an image to maintain, Dean. He had to fit the role of the high school stereotype. He was a jock and that meant he should be seen with a certain type of

girl. But that's not the kind of girl he *liked*." She smiled, and it was colder than the night. "He liked his girl's damaged, as if they'd been through Hell and returned with tales to tell, as if they had scars to prove they were tough and ready for anything. The Barbie doll type made him sick."

Dean shuddered, jammed his hands into the pockets of his coat; wished he'd brought the knife.

"I was his girl," she said, a truth that wrenched his guts surer than any blade. "No one knew because he still had his pride. Why do you think he hit Greer for trying to fuck me? That was going one step too far. 'Course that dumbass Greer knew nothing about it and still doesn't."

Dean stared, his body trembling, his hands clenched so tight the scars on his arms must surely rip open and bleed anew.

*A joke. It was all a joke.*

"We didn't think you'd freak out like you did and beat seven shades of shit out of Freddy. Christ. You nearly killed him, you asshole."

But Dean didn't hear her. An evil laugh filtered through the speakers, followed by a hellish voice that asked: "Where's my pretty little girl?" And then a scream to make Fay Wray proud.

*Where's my pretty little girl?*

"How..." Dean began, before pausing to clear his throat. "How did you...?" He indicated his own mangled face with a trembling forefinger.

"Surgery," she said airily. "It's why I'm still working in this fucking dump. My mother refuses to help me pay for it. Too busy buying shit she doesn't need on the Shopping Channel. Of course, when I lost the scars, I lost Freddy too. I was tired of him anyway."

The sound of unpleasant death, of skin rending, gurgling screams, and bones snapping, filled the air.

"Hey," Stephanie said with a shrug, "it's all in the past, right? No hard feelings?"

*Look at you now, shithead.*

Dean nodded, licked his lips. “Yeah. Right, no hard feelings.”

Stephanie nodded her satisfaction. “Good, so are you going to watch your movie, or what?”

*Look at you now.*

###

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kealan Patrick Burke is the Bram Stoker Award-winning author of *The Turtle Boy*, *The Hides*, *Vessels*, *Kin*, *Midlisters*, *Master of the Moors*, *Ravenous Ghosts*, *The Number 121 to Pennsylvania & Others*, *Currency of Souls*, *Seldom Seen in August*, and *Jack & Jill*.

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