

SARA

and the truth shall set you free...
...shouldn't it?



Sandra Puckett

SARA

BY

SANDRA PUCKETT

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I dedicate this book to
family and friends
with a special thanks to
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Thank you
for all your support
and help throughout this
long and torturous ordeal.



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SARA PREVIEW

Chapter One

The tall, thin blond fished behind her back, found the hook, and released her bra. She smiled as she slowly slid the bra straps down her arms. She was happy to be there – standing before this mysterious guy she had just met that night at a sorority party.

She and two of her friends, Sherry and Katy, had watched from across the room as he entered the party alone. He stood about six-foot-one and had beautiful black hair that fell to his shoulders. He was totally unlike any other guy there. He was dark; mysterious; attractive. Dressed in black, he stuck out like a sore thumb. How could anyone not notice him with that long black trench coat over black shirt and black pants?

The three girls watched to see who he knew; who had told him about the party. Was he meeting someone there? A girl perhaps? Or was he available for the picking? He circulated the room, speaking to no one, until he found a comfortable spot and stood alone. Who was he, they each wondered. And, most importantly, with whom would he choose to leave? Friends or not... all was fair in love and war.

Amanda was sure that he would choose her – whether he planned to or not. She had a way of getting herself noticed and a way of making guys want her. Just about every guy at that party was hoping to leave with her, and most *had* at one point in time. She was one of the few who could have her pick of any guy. Her only problem was... she wanted them all... and it was that hunger that gave her the reputation of being a whore. But she didn't care.

She dropped her bra to the cold, concrete basement floor beside her white button-up-the-front blouse.

He smiled at her, his dark blue eyes drinking her in. *If only she knew*, he thought. His smile grew – just a little.

She pushed her shoes off with her feet, reached for the button on her jeans, and did her sexy, little turn, peering over her shoulder to watch him as she slowly pushed the jeans down her long legs, revealing the hot pink thong she had just bought that day. *Yeah*, she smiled, *he's liking it*. That was one thing she knew how to do – turn a guy on.

He breathed slow and deep. She really thought she was some-thing. Yeah, she was pretty. And, yeah, she had a nice body, but she was a *slut*. He forced a smile.

She slid the thong down her legs then added it to the rest of her clothes lying on the basement floor. She slowly turned to face him, showing off her perfect body. She smiled inside almost as big as on the outside. Let those little bitches call her what they want. Let them be the ones regretting the past. Let them wish they had taken advantage of their youth and beauty. Her philosophy: fuck the guys you want, fuck the guys you can. Don't deny yourself of life's pleasures because one day, when you're old and gray, you won't have that choice.

Yeah, she shared this philosophy with her closest friends. They shook their heads and warned her she would get herself into trouble one day. But what did they know? She was the one standing in the very spot that all the girls had hoped to be. Standing naked before the best looking guy that had ever walked through those sorority house doors and getting ready to experience the most incredible night that she would ever have. Maybe she *was* a little too giving, but all she wanted to do was have fun before she grew old and wrinkled. What was wrong with that?

He took her hand, *in trouble indeed*, he thought, and led her to the stone table. *She should've listened to her friends. She should've remembered what her mother had told her about strangers.*

In a few moments, she would be remembering what they had said and wishing she had made different decisions, but for now, she was excited to be with him.

She willingly climbed atop the altar. The cold, cold stone against her bare back and buttocks. She wriggled – just a little – as her warm body began to accept the stone's harsh touch. Not so much as a whimper escaped this young lady eager to fulfill his sexual fantasy.

She wasn't about to let anything ruin this night... not even a freezing cold, stone table in the middle of a dark, shadowy basement. She took a deep breath. Butterflies filled her stomach. She was a little nervous. Why? She didn't know. She hadn't felt that way in a long time... not since the first time she had had sex.

He gently pulled her arms above her head to the table's corners and tied them to the altar. "Are you afraid?" he asked, knowing she wasn't.

"No," she replied. Her heart thumped inside her chest. She had never done anything like this before. All the other guys she had been with just wanted to get off. They didn't care to play... to give *her* a

little something. They weren't exciting like this gorgeous guy that she was *so* lucky to meet.

She had turned to her friends at the party as they watched him standing alone and announced her decision to approach him. 'No one has a chance around you,' Katy had said, only half joking. 'All's fair in love and war,' Amanda had spat back at her then taken a deep breath and turned around to face him. Their eyes locked. She caught her breath. He had chosen her. He had chosen *her* out of all the girls there. It wasn't a big surprise, really. She had known he would choose her. She just hadn't expected it to happen before she introduced herself. She watched him watch her as she made her way through the crowd, briefly exchanging conversation with one guy and then another, both trying to intercept her as she squeezed past them and ventured on to her destination. 'Hello.' She planted herself in front of him, blocking out the rest of the room. 'I'm Amanda.' 'Hello, Mandy.' He smiled back. The pet name rolled off his tongue as if he had said it a thousand times. 'I'm David.'

Wow! He had caught her off guard calling her Mandy. And she was sure it showed on her face. But she liked that – a guy so comfortable around her, and so sure of himself, that he would call her by a name other than the one she offered. How many guys would do that? None – that she had met. A flush had played across her face. God, how long had it been since a guy had made her blush? Too long, if you asked her.

David, she silently said his name as she watched him move around the stone table. She liked that name. She liked it a lot.

A devious smile spread across his face. *If only she wasn't such a slut.* He moved to her ankles and tied them to the bottom corners of the altar. *Fucking any dick that crossed her path had made her such an easy prey.* "Are the ropes too tight?" he asked, not really caring. *The tighter the ropes, the better.*

"No," she replied once again. *David.* Where had he come from? She couldn't remember him saying. As a matter of fact, now that she thought about it, he had avoided her questions... the ones about him anyway.

He turned from the altar and lit candle... after candle... after candle. The flames danced all about them.

The ropes did seem a little tight. Why hadn't he told her about himself? The only thing she knew about him was his name – and, of course, that he liked to please his partner. They had talked about what they each liked sexually. That was one thing he made sure to tell. He

had even told her in great detail his fantasy with the altar. How he wanted to tie his partner to the table and please her.

Were the ropes getting tighter? She'd swear they were. Had he slip knotted them around her wrists and ankles? Maybe he was into pain with his sex. She guessed, as long as it wasn't too intense, she'd try it. Why not? She was willing to try just about anything once.

David picked up the red, hooded robe neatly folded on a nearby table and pushed his arms into its silk sleeves. He pulled the hood upon his head and slowly took his dagger in hand – he wanted to savor *every* moment. He stepped up to the altar and looked down into Amanda's vibrant, green eyes.

She smiled. "Ooh, what's that you're wearing?" Her voice was just above a whisper.

Silent. No smile. Empty eyes. He stared at her.

Her smile faded. "What's wrong?"

He remained silent.

"Is something wrong?" She squirmed a little in the ropes. The hairs stood up on the back of her neck. She knew what he was wearing. She had seen plenty of those scary movies – Satan... sacrifices... daggers... death. Was he playing? Or was she in trouble? "David?"

He raised the dagger high above her head. Its silver blade shimmered in the candlelight.

"No!" she screamed, and started struggling against the strong, merciless ropes, pushing and pulling. "Oh, God! No!" She began to cry. What the fuck was he doing? This couldn't be happening to her. Not to *her*. She continued to struggle with the ropes. She couldn't die... not like this. She was too young... too beautiful. Oh, God, she wasn't ready... she wasn't ready to die. She cried. There were too many things she wanted to do... too many things she needed to do.

He slowly lowered the dagger... inch by inch... eyes trained on hers. He was pleased. More so than he thought he would be. He had chosen the right girl.

Amanda squirmed and screamed, "No, David, please!" Warm blood dampened her raw wrists and ankles as the ropes gnawed her skin.

He inhaled. Exhaled. His erection pulsed within his jeans as she fought the braided ropes. He breathed deep, watching her fight for life. He breathed deep... slow and deep... concentrating. He *must* stay in control... take his time. Things had to be done before the end could come.

The tip of the blade gently kissed her forehead just between her eyes. Blood trickled down the bridge of her nose and across her cheek until it dripped onto the altar.

She screamed again then stilled herself as the razor-sharp tip pressed into her skin. "Please..." tears rolled down her temples, "...please, don't do this, David." Afraid to move, but more afraid not to, she gently wiggled her wrists in the ropes hoping her wet blood would help slip them free.

"Shhh." He pressed his palm against the sharpened edge of the dagger, gritted his teeth, and ran his hand up the blade. His bright red blood spilled down the metal... down onto her forehead.

She became silent. Staring up into his icy, blue eyes, she calmed. His energy embraced her... cradled her... she was no longer afraid. As his warm blood continued to fall, her breaths slowed... her muscles relaxed... she stopped fighting her restraints. She could stay there... stay there with him forever.

He eased the dagger from her head and clutched it with both hands. He gazed down at her... his child... and smiled. She – like the many girls before her – was his creation now. Basking in his life force – soaking up a part of him, she belonged to him. He placed the tip of the dagger on her chest, drew in a long, deep breath then forced the blade into her heart.

She jerked. A small squeal sneaked through her lips.

He stared down into her dying eyes. His erection throbbed in pain. She was slipping away... away from him. He pulled the dagger from her chest, dropped it to the floor, and eagerly climbed onto the altar between the dying girl's legs. Plunging his hungry lips into the warm, oozing, pool of blood on her chest, he pushed himself inside her. Deeper and deeper. Harder and harder. Until at last, he conquered her lifeless body.

Chapter Two

Sara Lambert stood in lonely darkness, chilled by the emptiness surrounding her naked body.

She saw nothing.

She heard nothing.

All was black... until *he* gave her sight.

A beam of light came down from nowhere – as if someone had simply flipped a switch and there it was. It showed to her... *him* – he who controlled her – he who controlled her world – he who, at this very moment, was her god.

She focused on him as he stood naked in the small pool of light – only thirty feet away; his erect body like finely chiseled stone. Who was he?

He stepped forward.

She gasped! He was coming for her!

His dark blue eyes, cold and empty, stared as he gradually closed the gap between them.

She swallowed; her breaths fast and shallow, her heart racing. He was evil – she could feel it... he wanted to hurt her. She had to run! She had to! But she couldn't move!

His jet-black hair brushed his shoulders as he moved closer, back and forth across his skin with each step until he came face to face with her.

She wanted to close her eyes – to hide behind their lids, but she was too afraid – too afraid to take her eyes off him.

He stood tall and confident, gazing deep into her eyes. He looked further... past the eyes and into her soul. She was the one. He slowly reached out with his right hand. Very slowly.

Sara took a deep breath as she watched his hand come toward her. A flutter started deep within the pit of her stomach. Why was he moving so slowly? It was like he was moving in slow motion. *Just touch me*, she thought, wanting so badly to lean in to his touch and end the painful anticipation of their connection, but she couldn't. He wouldn't allow it. She stood paralyzed; every nerve, every cell in her body screaming with life of its own. She closed her eyes and took

another deep breath trying to prepare herself for whatever would happen, but there was nothing she could do to prepare for his touch.

Her eyes flew open as his icy, hot fingers stung her left shoulder. She gasped, glancing down at his fingers gripping her shoulder. Were they burning... or freezing... or both? That sensation of a thousand penetrating needles dug into her flesh until, at last, it pushed her into darkness.

Her body stood still; rigid, as her mind escaped to freedom. She opened her eyes. It was she, now, who stood in that small pool of caressing light. It was she who reached out and stung the helpless victim. *She* gazed at *him* with cold eyes of stone and smiled with evil pleasure.

Her left hand flew up from her side and plunged into his chest while her right hand continued to hold his shoulder tight. Tingling surprise and amazement ran up her legs and into her stomach. Was she really feeling his heart beat as she gently closed her fingers around the warm, moist muscle? Every single hair on her body stood on end. But not from fear... to her astonishment, it was excitement. How could she find so much pleasure in such a demonic act? She quickly pulled her hand back, his heart still clutched in her trembling fist. *Oh, my God*, she silently yelled as blood trickled through the cracks of her fingers, *what have I done?*

Her knees became weak. Her eyes became heavy. Her head swayed; her body whirled.

She was back. Dull, excruciating pain flooded her chest. She slowly opened her eyes to *his* hand emerging from the hole in *her* chest, *his* fingers clutching *her* beating heart. A tear rolled down her cheek. She lifted her face and found his eyes. "Why?" she whispered. Why would he want to kill her?

His dark blue eyes smiled at her as he remained silent. He stepped closer... putting his right hand to the back of her left hand, he filled it with her heart.

Sara quickly sat up, gasping for air. Her eyes darted around the dark room. Was he gone? She raised a hand to her face and slowly wiped the sweat from her brow. "A dream," she whispered, and fell back onto her pillows. "Just a dream." But she could still feel his touch. The tingle from his fingertips. The pain in her chest. She put a hand where the hole had been, knowing it would be fine, but it was something she had to do. She closed her eyes and sighed, "Just a dream."

She y-a-w-n-e-d... and drifted back to the lonely darkness that awaited her.

Sara's eyes were drawn to a long wooden box resting on a concrete base two feet high. It glowed in the surrounding darkness. The very sight of it made her tremble inside. She rubbed both arms with chilled hands. Why was she there?

"Hello again." The almost familiar stranger appeared by her side. His presence gave her a newfound calm as he cradled her hand in his and led her to the open box. He faced her. "Are you afraid?" he asked.

"No," she replied, gazing up into his blue, hypnotic eyes. She knew what he wanted. She knew he wanted her life, but she wasn't afraid. She knew what that box was, and she wasn't afraid. There was something about him that made whatever would happen be okay. She climbed into the shallow box, resting her hands upon her chest, closed her eyes... and breathed no more.

Sara awoke in the safety of her own room, her own bed, expecting to be surrounded by wood and staring up at the lid of the box. She wasn't afraid when she opened her eyes. Something inside her would gladly die for him... would sacrifice herself if that's what he wished. It was crazy. She couldn't help but feel a bond with the stranger in her dreams. Awake now and fully aware of what had happened in that dream, a part of her still wanted to be there. A part of her still wanted to be with him. She squeezed her eyes shut. *What is wrong with me?* she wondered.

"Sara!" Tracy yelled, and banged twice on Sara's door. "Get up, you're gonna be late for class!" She went into the bathroom across from Sara's bedroom.

"What?... It's Saturday," Sara yelled back at her mother, and pulled the covers over her head.

"It's Friday." Tracy pushed Sara's bedroom door open as she came out of the bathroom. "And it's seven-thirty."

Sara threw the covers back and jumped out of bed. "Fuck."

"Sara," Tracy said, "you know I don't like to hear that." She continued walking down the hall to the kitchen.

"Sorry," Sara called out. She pulled her dresser drawer open and grabbed the first pair of jeans her fingers touched. Damn, she was gonna be late. She jerked a gray t-shirt from her closet. She had thirty minutes to get ready and be there, and it took at least ten for the drive.

She quickly dressed and ran across the hall to the bathroom. “Mom, did you make coffee?” she shouted, throwing on her makeup.

“No! Don’t have time!”

Sara glanced at the bathroom clock. Twenty minutes before class started! She brushed her teeth and ran back into her room. She grabbed her purse from her dresser and searched it for her keys. Not there. Shit. “Mom, have you seen my keys?” she yelled toward the doorway.

The front door closed with a bang.

Tracy was late too.

“Shit.” Sara rummaged through the junk on her dresser hoping to find her keys. Bra, underwear, fingernail polish, used cotton balls, new cotton balls, brush, pens, pencils, hair clip. Nope, not there. She ran down the hall, purse in hand, and into the kitchen. No keys on the wall hooks, no keys on the counter... NO KEYS. “Fuck!” she yelled, and ran back into her bedroom. *Where the fuck are they?* She stood in the doorway. *Where are they?* She looked around the room; glanced over at the dresser. She froze. There they were. Sitting nice and pretty on the corner of the dresser – where they weren’t just minutes ago. *Just shake it off*, she told herself, *no time to think about this one now*. She shook her head, claimed the keys... glanced over at the alarm clock that hadn’t gone off to wake her... and ran down the hall, out the door, and to her car. With only ten minutes to get there, she climbed in behind the wheel, pushed the key into the ignition, and turned it. Nothing. She turned the key again. Nothing. Turned it again. Nothing. “Not now!” She banged her hand on the steering wheel. Of all days not to start. Why hadn’t she taken it to the shop? She took a breath. Closed her eyes. Concentrated on the car starting and turned the key. *Please, please, please, start*. The car’s engine began to purr. *Yes!* She threw it in reverse, backed out of the driveway, and sped off to the college campus... where she couldn’t find a spot to park. Not one that she was supposed to park in, anyway.

She pulled into a spot reserved for college faculty and shifted the red Escort into park. She looked around. She would definitely get a ticket for parking there, but she couldn’t worry about that now – she was late! She grabbed her books, hopped out of the car, and jogged toward one of the five brick buildings.

“Whoa.” The soft, deep voice came from behind her. “What’s the hurry?” he asked.

She stopped in mid-stride, almost falling, spun around, and tucked some long, blond hair behind an ear. He was only a couple yards away,

leaning against a tree. His feet crossed. His hands together. His coal black hair resting on his shoulders. He was dressed in black from head to toe, including the trench coat that topped it all.

Her pale blue eyes met his. The same cold, hollow eyes from the night before. He stared into her eyes... past her eyes... as if he were looking deep into her soul. His smile, as equally cold, sent a chill up her spine. She swallowed.

“Well?” he asked, lighting a cigarette.

She stood paralyzed and speechless, eyes glued to his. Was she really seeing the guy from her dreams? The one that wanted to take her life?

Studying her, he took a long drag from his cigarette and, seconds later, exhaled a stream of smoke. “Are you okay?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. His mouth curled into a half smile.

“Uh... yeah, I’m... I’m late for class,” she stammered, then slowly turned and hurried inside. She stopped for just a moment to catch her breath, leaning back against the wall beside the door she had just entered. She had to get herself together before she walked into the classroom. She didn’t need the professor prying; asking her what was wrong... why she was all out of breath and scared-looking – like he would understand. Just because the guy reminded her of some freak from her dreams... just because he had that same evil look in his eyes. The hair stood up on the back of her neck. Was he still out there?

Very slowly, she turned along the wall to her right and peaked out the door’s small window – he was gone. *Who the hell is he?* She stared out the window a moment longer then forced herself down the quiet hallway to her classroom.

“Sorry,” Sara quietly apologized to the professor as she entered the room.

He nodded, accepting her apology, as he continued speaking to the class.

“I didn’t expect you to show,” Belinda whispered, watching Sara slide into the chair beside her. Belinda’s round face was painted in pastels; and her long, strawberry-blond hair neatly combed and pulled back into a ponytail.

“I overslept,” Sara whispered, fidgeting with her pen.

Belinda eyed her. She looked like shit, and she’d never looked like shit before – not even when she’d overslept. “Uh-uh. There’s something else, isn’t there?”

“After class.” Sara flipped through her notebook and found a blank page. She began to copy the notes from the board. It had to be him... it had to be the guy from her dreams. She continued copying the notes. How could he look so much like *him* and *not* be him? Sara put her pen down and tried to give her attention to the professor as he began his lecture. She kept seeing the stranger’s face. She watched the professor’s lips and heard his voice, but didn’t have a clue as to what he was saying. She looked over at the clock on the wall above the door, studying its hands as they slowly turned around its face.

“You belong to me,” a voice came from behind her.

Sara turned in her seat. The stranger was sitting behind her. He smiled. She glanced at Belinda, who was completely unaware of them, and turned back to the stranger. “Excuse me?”

“Give me your hand.” He reached across the table.

She gazed down at his hand and shook her head. She wasn’t giving him her hand. She wanted to, but – She slipped her hand in his. What was she doing? She didn’t do that, did she? No, at least she didn’t mean to. Her body must be acting on its own – it had to be.

“Close your eyes,” he commanded.

She closed her eyes.

“You and I were created as one. We’re meant to be together. It’s time to go.”

“What?” She opened her eyes.

Gripping a dagger in his free hand, he put its cold blade to her wrist. “It’s time to go,” he said again, and slid the razor-sharp edge across her skin.

She tried to pull her hand away. Tried to pull it free, but he held it too tight. The only thing she could do was watch her blood pour out of her wrist and onto the table.

“Sara!” Belinda shouted.

Sara jumped and looked to Belinda.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Belinda asked. “Class is over. It’s time to go.”

Sara raised her hand and checked her wrist. It was fine. She rubbed it. “Did you see him?” Sara asked, the seat behind her now empty.

“See who?”

They were alone. Everyone else was gone and heading to their next class.

Sara was dumbfounded. Was it a vision? She had had visions before, but not like this. She'd heard of these kinds of visions, but never thought they'd seem so real.

Belinda tapped her foot. "Are you coming?"

Sara grabbed her stuff and rose from her seat. "Yeah."

"What happened?" Belinda asked as they walked out of the room.

"I guess I had a vision. I don't know. It was so real."

"What was it?"

"Well, I guess it really started last night with my dreams." Sara hugged her books as she began to tell Belinda about the guy from her dreams... the guy standing beside the tree... the guy in the classroom... the guy that was trying to kill her. Dreams or visions or whatever they were, was she being warned?

Sara pushed the exit door open and entered the cool, fresh air. Belinda followed, lighting a cigarette. She tucked the pack into a side pocket of her book bag. "Okay, let's see if I've got this right. The guy you saw this morning looks like the guy you dreamt about last night?"

"Yeah," Sara replied. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear it was the same guy."

Belinda put her book bag on the ground and leaned against the building. She exhaled the smoke. "Sara, I know weird things happen around you sometimes. And that you've been able to predict things before, but I think... well, I think you're just stressed on this one."

"What!" She couldn't believe it. How could Belinda accuse her of being stressed? How could she dismiss it so easily?

"Hey, what's up?" Hooper asked, joining them. He set his book bag on the ground beside Belinda's.

"Hey, Hoop," Belinda said. She eyed up the five-foot-nine-inch guy that they had known for years. She still thought he looked like Nick Rhodes, the keyboardist of Duran Duran... and still thought he was attractive, but would never cross that line for fear of losing a friend. There *had* been times when he almost had her there... hell, from what Sara had told her, there were times when he almost had *her* there, but then stopped before anything could happen. She figured he did it on purpose to see how far they'd let him go.

"Hey," Sara replied solemnly.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," Sara lied.

"Sara had some dreams about this really weird guy—"

“Belinda!” She had lied for a reason. She didn’t want to discuss this with him.

“Oh, really?” He shifted toward Sara. “What kind of dreams?” He smiled and winked. “Were you naked?”

“Oh, shut up. This is why I didn’t wanna tell you.”

“You were. Was he any good?” Hooper continued harassing her.

“Fuck off.” Sara rolled her eyes at him. “It’s always about sex with you.”

“All right, what happened?” he asked, trying to be serious.

“Tell him,” Belinda urged.

Sara hesitantly told him about the dreams... about the guy... and what she thought that guy wanted.

Hooper put an arm around her shoulders and kissed her cheek. “You know, not to freak you out any more than what you already are, but your dream reminds me of something,” he paused, and let her go. Now, how should he put it?

“What?” Sara gently dropped her books to the ground.

Okay. He would just say it. “There was an article in the paper this morning. Some girl was found dead in Big Woods... the fucking psycho cut her heart out.”

“Uh-uh,” Sara said, wide-eyed, in disbelief. He was lying. He had to be. She wanted them to be just dreams. This could *not* be a premonition again. This wasn’t about someone failing a test or even about someone being pregnant – this was death.

“It’s true,” he insisted.

Belinda smacked his arm. “Stop fucking with her.”

“I’m not fucking with her. It really is true.”

Sara reached down and slipped the pack of cigarettes from Belinda’s book bag.

“I thought you quit,” Belinda said.

“I did,” Sara replied, plopping a cigarette between her lips and lighting it. She put the cigarette pack back.

They were silent for a moment. Sara had to think. She had to figure out what this was all about. She had to do something before someone got hurt... before someone died. “What else...” Sara broke the silence, “what else did the article say?”

“Oh, come on, Sara. You’re getting all nervous over some stupid dreams,” Belinda said.

Sara looked Hooper straight in the eyes. “Tell me.”

Belinda dropped her cigarette butt to the ground and stamped it out. "I'm outta here. See ya after class, Sara. Hooper, *see you in class.*" She picked up her bag and went inside.

Hooper smiled at Sara. "Ya think she's mad?"

Sara shrugged. "Probably. Now, what else did that article say?"

"The girl had marks on her wrists and ankles like she'd been tied up."

"Is that it?"

"Yeah. That's all it said." He took a deep breath. "Sara, Belinda's right. They were just nightmares. Don't let them freak you out."

"That guy... *he* freaked me out. He was right over there." She pointed toward the tree. "You know... Big Woods ain't that far from here."

"I know."

Sara took one last drag from her cigarette and glanced at her watch. "Shit. I've gotta go. Computer class." She flicked the cigarette butt to the ground and picked up her books.

"Me too. Algebra. Belinda's waiting." He grabbed his bag. "Ooh, I'm in trouble," he teased, and laughed.

Sara shook her head. What would she do without those two?

"Do you want me to walk you to class?" Hooper offered.

"Nah, that's okay. I'll be fine."

Sara slipped the diskette into the slot and eased back into the cushioned chair. She clicked on the "open file" icon, just as the instructor had directed, and chose drive A. She double clicked on "Table 1" and watched it open. Maybe they *were* just dreams. And that guy...

Words – not a table – began to pop up on the screen. *What the hell?*

pSychotic deranged torment domInate demonize coNtrol
conFine sacrifice destrOy consume exterminate woRship
mephistopheles eliMinate nemeses fate doom death deletE

"Where did *that* come from?" Terri asked, looking at Sara's screen. The dark-haired girl occupied the seat to Sara's right. Her screen displayed a two-column table with ten rows.

"I don't know," Sara answered.

"Are you sure you put in the right disk?" Terri asked.

“Yes, it’s the only one I have.” Sara read the three lines again. What the fuck did they mean?

“Have Mr. Thebeau check it out after he’s done with Marie.”

Sara looked over her left shoulder at Thebeau. He was an older man, tall and thin. He towered over Marie, an elderly classmate Sara didn’t know, giving instructions on how to open the file. How would he know, anyway? It was the only disk she had, and the only thing on the disk. He’d just say she had the wrong disk.

“Sara,” Terri nudged Sara’s arm, “The letters are disappearing.”

Sara looked to Terri then back to the screen. The letters were vanishing one at a time, but not all of them.

“The capital letters—” Terri stopped.

Sara saw the message even before the last lowercase letter was gone. SIN FOR ME

“Sin for me? What in the world?” Terri turned to Sara. “What does *that* mean?”

“I don’t know.” Sara’s eyes slowly rose from the screen. She peered through the glass window and into the adjoining computer lab. And there he was. The handsome stranger, standing tall and cocky. His cold, blue eyes staring back. He smiled and walked away.

Sara bolted out of her chair and into the deserted hallway. *Where’d he go?* Had he already made it down the hall and out the doors?

She ran down the corridor, half hoping to miss him. She stopped at the double, glass doors and searched the crowded parking lot. *I can’t believe this*, she thought. *He dared me with that smile of his and I fell for it. How brave I am, being inside. Aren’t they all? Until the freak jumps out and stabs them as they stand alone. The others in another room unaware of the killer picking them off one by one.*

Behind her, the men’s room door closed with a quiet thud. She jumped and turned. Holding her breath, she crept to the door and eased it open. “Is anyone there?” She stepped inside. *Just like the movies. And at this point, I’m yelling at her. Turn and run you stupid bitch! Turn and run! But does she listen?... no.*

She glanced at the three faucets spewing hot water into the sinks, the mirrors above them already starting to fog up. “Hello?” she called. She looked around. The room was vacant. She turned the water off and stepped back. Written across each mirror was NOT YET. “Not yet?” she muttered, “What’s that supposed to mean? He’s not going to kill me, yet?” She watched the words slowly disappear as her pale face replaced them.

“Hey!”

She jumped. She hadn’t heard the two guys come in.

“Are you okay?” one asked, smiling. “You’re in the men’s room.”

“Yeah,” she replied, “I know.” And walked out.

She went back to the classroom, gathered her books, and met Belinda and Hooper at her car. She pulled the parking ticket out from beneath her windshield wiper blade. Could this day get any worse?

Hooper grabbed the ticket from her. “I’ll take care of this. Don’t worry about it.”

“I saw him again,” Sara said. She tossed her books onto the back seat of her car.

“Where?” Belinda asked.

“In class.”

“He’s in your class?” Hooper asked.

“No. I saw him through the windows. He was standing in the adjoining computer lab. Watching me. He switched my disk. I don’t know how he did it. But I know it was him.”

“What was on it?” Hooper stuffed the ticket into his pants pocket.

“It was really weird. There were a bunch of words. Then they started disappearing, leaving some capital letters that spelled out... sin for me.”

“Sin for me?” Belinda asked. “Are you sure, Sara?”

“Yes,” Sara replied, frustrated. “I’m not making this shit up.”

“I didn’t say that you were, but you know, when people are stressing out, sometimes they see things that aren’t really there.”

“I’m not mental. And why would I be stressed?”

“Do you still have the disk?” Hooper asked.

“Why would I be stressed?” Sara asked again, getting defensive.

“Sara... you *are* mental.” Belinda laughed.

“Yeah, but you know what I mean. I’m not mental, mental.”

“Well, you know how you get in October,” Belinda replied.

“Okay, you guys,” Hooper butted in. “Do you still have the disk?”

“Yeah,” Sara answered. “And about October—”

“Forget about October. Where’s the disk?” he asked.

Sara gazed at Hooper. He always stepped in when they had their disagreements. Didn’t he know that it was a healthy part of their friendship? If you couldn’t have a friendly disagreement with your friends, then who could you have one with?

“Come on,” he held out his hand, “give it up.”

Sara pulled the disk from her purse. "What are you gonna do?"

"Take a look at it. I'll meet you two at my place."

"Will your girlfriend be there?" Belinda asked, adjusting the heavy book bag on her shoulder.

"No. Why?" Hooper answered.

"You know why. We don't make it a secret that we think she's weird."

Sara nodded. "She is weird, Hoop."

"Yeah, but she's great in bed." He raised his eyebrows up and down, and smiled. "See ya in a few."

Sara was last to pull into the small apartment complex. Hooper and Belinda were already inside waiting for her. She grabbed her purse, climbed out of the car, and joined them.

Hooper lived in a tiny, one bedroom apartment. The computer sat on a small desk on the far side of the living room. The kitchen, to the left, had a sink full of dirty dishes and a small, round table covered with beer bottles. Being three years older than them, he was old enough to drink and did plenty of it. There was a small pile of dirty clothes on the floor beside the love seat – the room was way too small for a couch. And the bathroom and bedroom further back – bathroom to your left, bedroom to your right – were even smaller. A twin bed and one dresser were about all that could fit into the bedroom. Sara crossed the room and stood beside Belinda, who was also standing – there was only enough room for one chair in front of the computer and Hooper was happily sitting in it.

"Okay." He slid the disk into the slot. "Let's see what he did." There was only one thing on the disk. 'Table 1' Hooper double clicked it; and a table popped up on the screen. "Is this it?"

"No." Sara shook her head. "That's not it. Are you sure that's the disk I gave you?"

"Yes," Hooper replied. "Positive."

Belinda's silence said more than words could.

"I'm not crazy," Sara insisted.

"No one said you were," Belinda said, pulling a pack of cigarettes from her purse.

Sara turned toward the front door. "She's here."

"Who?" Hooper asked.

“Psycho Bitch,” Sara answered.

Belinda popped him on the back of the head. “Why didn’t you tell us she was coming over?”

“I didn’t know she was coming.” He rubbed the back of his head. He *hated* when she did that. “How do you know she’s here?” he asked.

“I don’t know... I guess I heard her.”

The doorknob turned and Vicki walked in. She was five-foot-six, one hundred fifteen pounds with short, red hair and a fiery personality. “Hey, what the fuck?”

“What?” Hooper replied innocently. He turned in his chair to face her. She was wearing white capri pants and a three-quarter-sleeved shirt – cropped to show off her navel ring – a silver hoop with a diamond drop dangling in her belly button. Damn, she was hot!

“Why didn’t you tell me you were inviting people over?” She put her hands on her hips.

“I thought you were meeting with your study group,” he replied.

“Candi couldn’t make it.”

“We just stopped by for a minute.” Sara popped her disk out of the floppy drive and headed to the door. “Talk to ya later, Hoop.”

“Yeah, see ya.” Belinda followed Sara out.

“Call me later,” Hooper called after them.

“You’re gonna be busy later,” Vicki countered.

Sara and Belinda laughed as they walked to their cars.

“He’s a fucking idiot,” Sara said.

“Tell me about it,” Belinda agreed. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“We’ve been friends for, God, eight years now? And you’ve never told me how you do that.”

“Do what?”

“How you know things? It’s like you’re psychic or something.”

Sara laughed and leaned against her car. “Psycho maybe.”

“I really think you are.”

“Are you heading home?” Sara changed the subject. She felt uncomfortable talking about that stuff.

“Nah. I’ve got some running to do.”

“What kind?” Sara asked. She didn’t want to go home. She’d be alone. And after that vision, the last thing she wanted to be was alone.

“Oh, you know, just some piddly shit. Mom wants me to go shopping with her for some more stuff for the house. She says I don’t have enough stuff.” Belinda forced a smile. “You know how she’s been

ever since she bought that house for me.” She dug her keys out of her purse. “I’ll call ya.”

“Okay. I guess I should go home and do homework anyway.”

Chapter Three

Sara slipped a nightshirt over her head and climbed into her full-sized bed. She was tired, and Belinda hadn't called. What was up with her, lately? She was really acting strange.

Sara pulled the blankets up to her chest and looked over to the photo on her nightstand. She saw herself – ten years younger – standing beside her big brother. She plucked the picture from its spot. Tears filled her eyes. She remembered that day... the day her mother had posed them in front of the backyard tree... the day her father had kidnapped her brother. She remembered that day... she remembered it very well. It was the day she became an only child.

"Where are you, David?" She wiped at her tears with the back of a hand as they slid down her face. "It's been ten years. Where the hell are you?" She stared at his eyes. Why hadn't he come back? Was he dead? She put the photo to her chest and closed her eyes tight, squeezing the thought out of her head. He wasn't dead. He couldn't be dead. She would know if he was... wouldn't she?

She rolled to her side, and still holding the photo against her chest, drifted off to sleep.

A gentle hand slid across Sara's cheek brushing the blond hair from her sleeping face.

"Mom?" she asked drowsily.

"No," a deep voice softly replied.

Sara gasped; her eyes flew open. She clenched her blanket in fists. She was wide-awake now, terrified-awake, heart pounding as she stared up at the intruder.

"Shhh," he hushed her, placing two fingers against her lips.

She quieted and gazed into his beautiful blue eyes. She looked deep into those familiar blue eyes. There was something there. Something she knew. She wasn't quite sure what it was, but it was warm and inviting and begging her to come. She wanted to go... to be there... to

be in that safe place it offered... to reach out, take hold, and never let go.

Her fists slowly opened. She reached up with her right hand and slid her fingers across his cheek and into his soft black hair as a tiny part of her begged to flee. That tiny part knew he was danger. *Push him away and run*, it whispered. *Yell; scream; do something*. But she did nothing. Even as he leaned in and pressed his lips against hers, she did nothing.

He slowly pulled the blanket back, exposing her naked body. His face was without expression as his eyes explored her thin figure. He slid a hand under the pillows and carefully pulled out a red silk scarf. He gently draped it across her breasts.

The cool material aroused her. She closed her eyes as he kissed down her stomach, pushing her legs apart with a gentle hand. What was she doing? Her heart thumped against her chest as she felt his warm breath on her inner thighs. She had to stop him. She couldn't – she shouldn't let him go on. But she wanted him. She grasped the sheet beneath her. Oh, God, she wanted him.

He teased her with his long, reptile-like tongue, barely touching her delicate skin. He smiled as she raised her hips to meet him. Her hard shallow breaths gave him great pleasure. She wanted him... and now, she belonged to him.

Her body burned from head to toe – inside and out, then exploded. She sat up; her legs bent and open, her body damp with perspiration. She was alone; the blanket resting at her feet, the nightshirt pulled up to her waist. She eased back onto her pillows, not quite sure what had just happened. *A dream*, she supposed, although it seemed so real.

She fixed her nightshirt and pulled the blanket back up to her chest, but she wasn't tired. She rolled to her side. Her eyes looked straight at the picture on her nightstand. Had she put the photo back in its spot? She didn't remember putting it back. But she must have. Right? Who else could've? Her handsome companion was only a dream. He couldn't have done it, now could he? *No he couldn't have*, she silently stated, and then decided to climb out of bed. With the sun starting to peek through her window, there was no way she could go back to sleep now.

Wandering down the hall and into the kitchen, Sara found her mother, still in nightgown, leaning against the counter with a cup of coffee in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

Sara yawned, ran her fingers through her hair, and reached for a coffee mug. “What’s new?” she asked, pouring coffee into her cup.

“There’s been another murder,” her mother replied.

Sara sat down at the table and sipped her coffee. *Was it him? Was he killing people? Was that what the vision and dreams were all about?*

“It’s the same as before,” Tracy continued, “except this time a red, silk scarf was found near the body.”

Sara’s eyes widened; her jaw dropped. It was him. She knew it. She sat the cup down with a clank and reached for the paper. “Let me see that.”

“What’s wrong?” her mother asked, hesitantly giving up the paper.

Sara scanned the article, reading bits and pieces. Two girls were dead now from the same man. But this time he left a red scarf behind. She dropped the paper to the table.

“Sara, what is it?”

“Nothing, Mom. I just need to talk to Belinda,” Sara replied, rising from the table. She grabbed her car keys from the hook on the wall. “I’m okay... it’s just... these murders kind of scare me.” She forced a smile and hugged her mom. “I’ll be back soon.” She turned and quickly walked toward the doorway.

Tracy cocked an eyebrow. “Sara?”

“Yeah?” She turned.

“You think maybe you should dress first?”

Sara glanced down at her nightshirt and bare feet. She gave a weak laugh. She was losing it. “Yeah, I guess I should.”

Tracy wasn’t stupid. She knew something was up with that girl. She *was* her mother after all. She could tell when something wasn’t quite right. And it wasn’t just the murders... although, they had her worried too. There was something else. Something she knew Sara would *not* share with her. Something she would have to find out about all on her own.

“Belinda!” Sara pounded on the front door. “Belinda!”

The door opened a crack. Belinda stuck her head out.

“Have you seen the paper, yet?” Sara asked, pushing the door open and barging past her.

“Uh, Sara this isn’t a good time...”

Sara turned. Belinda stood at the door wrapped in her blue cotton robe. “Did I get you out of bed?”

“No, but—”

“The article... did you see it?” Sara continued into the living room. “Ohhh,” she sighed, coming to a sudden halt. A guy stood, his back to her, looking out the bay window.

“Sara, this is Steve. Steve, Sara,” Belinda introduced.

Steve turned to them. He was five-foot-ten with short blond hair – greased back, and green eyes that immediately focused on Sara. Neither said a word as he scanned her up and down.

Sara understood now. He was the one Belinda had plans with, not her mom. He was the reason why she hadn’t called. Why hadn’t Belinda told her about this new guy? Why was she keeping him a secret?

And then she saw it. A red silk scarf peeking out from beneath his gray jacket. Sara’s heart jolted. She caught her breath. Why was he wearing a red scarf? A scarf that was identical to the one that had been draped across her. One that was probably the same as the one found with the dead girl.

“Hi.” Steve smiled. “It’s nice to meet you, Sara. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Yeah, well, I wish I could say the same.” Anger touched her voice.

“Sara—” Belinda started to explain.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.” Sara turned on heel and headed to the door.

“You don’t have to go.” Belinda followed her.

“Yeah... yeah, I do,” she insisted, walking out the front door. She stopped and half-turned. “You better watch him. The killer left a red scarf at the scene. Read the paper.” She turned away and walked to her car.

“I’ll call you.” Belinda watched as Sara climbed in behind the wheel. She had lied to Sara, and Sara knew it. She had never been good at lying and hated to be put in that position.

“It’ll be okay. She’ll come around.” Steve put a hand on Belinda’s shoulder as she watched Sara drive away.

“I lied to her, Steve. She knows I lied to her. Damn it.” She pushed his hand from her shoulder and faced him. “You don’t know her. Not like I do. I’m her best friend. You don’t lie to your best friend. You just don’t.” She shook her head. “I thought I was doing the right thing, but I wasn’t. We should’ve just told her. We should’ve told her the truth.”

Chapter Four

“You always did take after your father.” Sara heard her mother’s voice as she entered the house.

“Mom?” Who was she talking to?

“In here, Sara,” Tracy called from the kitchen.

Sitting at the table, coffee in hand, was the stranger from the college. The keys slipped from Sara’s fingers and fell to the floor with a clank. Trembling and wide-eyed, she stared at him. She was having another one of those visions. She had to be. Her mother had to have been talking to herself or on the phone, but not to him. That would make him real.

“It’s David.” Tracy’s eyes filled with tears. “It’s your brother.” Things would be better now. Sara would have her brother to confide in. And David could help Sara with those things that she refused to tell Tracy about. She was so happy to have her son back... so happy to have her children together again.

David reached down and retrieved the keys from the floor. He stood and offered them to Sara with a smile.

Sara stepped back. “No,” she shook her head, “he’s not my brother.” Tears came to her eyes. She was *not* going to take those keys from him. That would give him too much satisfaction. “Mom, he’s not David.” Tears spilled down her cheeks as she slowly backed out of the kitchen. She ran down the hall and into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

“Sara!” Tracy gasped. She couldn’t believe it. What was wrong with her?

“It’s okay, Mom,” David said, “I’ll talk to her.” He squeezed the keys in his hand.

Tracy hugged him. “I’m so glad you’re home.” A tear slid down her cheek. She had waited a long time for this day. An eternity, it seemed.

He hugged her back. “Me too,” he replied and went to Sara’s room. He opened the door, without knocking, and stepped inside.

Sara rose from her bed. “Get the hell out,” she ordered, through gritted teeth. Her heart pounded in a combination of anger and fear.

“No.” He locked the door and tossed her keys onto the dresser to his right.

“What do you want?” She retreated a step.

“My sister.” He stepped forward. “I’ve been gone for ten years. Now I’m back... and I want *you*,” he replied in a stern tone.

She stumbled back onto her bed.

David sat down in the rocking chair beside her. “I *am* your brother. And neither of us is leaving this room until you give me a chance.”

“Fine.” She glared at him. “Why didn’t you tell me who you were at the college?”

He pulled a cigarette from his trench coat pocket and lit it. Inhaled. Exhaled. And offered it to her.

“What makes you think I want that?” she asked, wanting it more than ever.

“Don’t you?”

She hated that he knew she wanted it. And she hated it even more that she would take the cigarette from him. So she took a slow, steady breath as if pondering the idea, using everything she had to remain calm and not snatch it from his fingers, then accepted the cigarette and filled her lungs. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked, smoke escaping her as she spoke. *And why do you want to kill me? And did you kill those two girls?* she wanted to ask, but didn’t.

He popped a cigarette between his lips and lit it. “I don’t know.” He shrugged and rested his head against the back of the rocking chair. He closed his eyes and took a long, steady drag from the cigarette. “Remember when we were kids...” he blew smoke into the air, “I would slip into your room after Mom and Dad had fallen asleep.” He opened his eyes to meet hers and smiled as he spoke. “We would climb out the window and into the night. Breathing in its cool, crisp air. Feeling the power of freedom it gave us.”

Sara tapped the cigarette out against the bottom of her shoe and tossed the butt onto her dresser. She dangled her feet above the pile of ashes that she had flicked to the floor. She remembered. A smile came to her face. “We would hold hands—”

He was sitting on the edge of the chair now, excitement racing through him. “And I promised to always protect you,” he broke in.

She tilted her head. Her eyes narrowed. She studied him for just a second. “From what?” she asked. *From you?* she thought. He was the only one she could think of who would want to hurt her.

He rose from the chair, drew one last time from his cigarette, and replied, "Everything."

He did that well. A shrug to brush the question off or a catchall answer to avoid confessing the real one. She should push for the real answer. She knew this, but did she really want to know? Her guess? No, she wouldn't want to know. Sara's head dropped. She looked at the floor. "Why didn't Dad come back with you?"

He tossed the burnt out butt onto the dresser and moved to the bed. "Well," he took her hand and sat down beside her, "Dad died six months ago."

Dad was dead? Could this be true? Something wasn't right. If their father had died six months ago, why did it take him so long to return? That feeling in the pit of her stomach told her this was not right. Told her to get away. Only danger lurked ahead. After a moment of silence, she turned to him and, totally ignoring that feeling that had steered her right so many times before, asked, "Why did he take you away?" Okay, she knew she shouldn't ask. She knew that curiosity killed the cat, but she had to know. She had to know why he took her brother and not her.

"Do you remember him?" David asked.

"No. I was eight years old. I know I should remember him, but I don't." Another clue not to ask. It was obvious that she had blocked the memory of him out. And she knew the only reason anyone blocked things out was because it was too traumatizing to remember.

"Look," he said, pulling photos from his coat pocket. "Dad gave these to me."

They were photos of Sara and her mother taken throughout the last ten years. "Where did he get these?" Sara asked. Had this David been stalking her for ten years? Maybe he *was* her brother... or knew her brother – she liked that idea better. She didn't want to believe this guy was her brother. And if he wasn't her brother, then he had to have known him. That would be the only explanation for him to know things they had done as children.

"Dad sent someone down to find out how you were doing. He wanted to know that you were all right. He *did* love you."

Yeah, well, he had a funny way of showing it. She shook the feeling away. It wasn't him that she had missed all these years anyway. "Down from where?"

"Canada."

Canada. She lay back on her bed. “Tell me what it was like there.” Maybe if she got him talking about his childhood, he would slip up and say something that would prove he was lying.

He stretched out on the bed beside her, recalling the years spent with his father. “We traveled from place to place for about four months until we finally settled just outside Winnipeg. Dad got a job with a contractor. And after I graduated, I went to work with him...”

Sara’s eyes grew heavy. They closed. She could hear David’s voice, but only from a distance as she started to drift away. Had her brother really come home after all these years? He hadn’t really done anything bad to her. He was just evil in her dreams. And the floppy... well, there *was* a table on it when Hooper put it in his computer. Maybe Belinda was right. Maybe she *was* just a little stressed out.

David pulled Sara to her feet and escorted her down the hallway.

“Where are we going?” she asked, watching him open the front door.

He remained silent. He tightened his grip on her wrist and took her out of the house and into the night, across the street to a neighbor’s house.

“What are we doing here?”

“Go in,” he commanded, pushing the door open.

She took a deep breath and looked around and hoped they wouldn’t get caught. She entered the dark house.

A set of hands grasped each arm.

“David!” She struggled with them. “David!” She frantically turned her head one way then the other, looking for him. Where was he? Why wasn’t he helping her?

He was evil. That was why. She knew better than to trust him, but she let her guard down. She wanted to believe her brother was back.

The two, hooded figures dragged her into a candlelit room. The neighbor’s body was sprawled atop an altar. Her wrists and ankles bound with rope. She was lying still. Too still.

They forced Sara closer. She didn’t want to see, but she had to know. She had to know whether or not her neighbor was still alive.

Sara stared down at the motionless woman. She was not alive. Her chest lay wide open. “No!” Sara began to cry.

A figure in a red, hooded robe stepped up to the altar opposite Sara. He looked into her scared eyes, and then reached down and scooped up the heart. He smiled, took a small bite, and offered it to her.

She shook her head. Her stomach turned. “David!” she screamed, praying he would save her.

“It’s okay, Sara.” David stepped up behind her, his body pressed against hers. “I’m right here.” He reached around her and retrieved the heart. “Join me.” He pressed it to her mouth.

Sara threw herself forward, her chest heaving. She placed both palms on her bed for support and looked around the moonlit room. Was he gone?

“Bad dream?” David asked, stepping out of the shadows and approaching the bed. He extended his hand. “Come with me.”

Sara thought a moment, trying to clear her head. Was she awake now? Should she really go with him? But it was too late. Her hand was already in his. She followed him out the window and across the lawn to his Mustang. He opened the passenger door. And without a word or hesitation, she slid into the car’s leather seat. One survival rule broken: never get into a stranger’s car. But was he really considered a stranger? After all, her mother did say that he was her brother. Besides, the car was neat and clean and smelled of his cologne. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. That smell. She smiled. It was familiar. It gave her a feeling of safety.

David parked the Mustang along the side of an old unknown gravel road just outside of town. He immediately exited the car, rounded its back, and opened the passenger door.

Sara hesitantly rose from the seat and joined him. Trees crowded one side of the road; a grassy field stretched out on the other. An uneasy feeling crept into the pit of her stomach. “Where are we?” she asked.

David was silent as he crossed the ditch and entered the field.

“What the hell?” Sara muttered. Instinct told her not to follow, but she found herself trailing behind him anyway. One day she hoped she would learn her lesson, but that day would probably be her last.

David stopped at a small pavilion in the middle of the field and waited for Sara to catch up.

“David, what are we doing out here?” she asked.

“Sit down.” He motioned toward the stone table.

“That’s okay. I’ll stand.” She folded her arms. She wanted to be ready to run in case he tried to kill her.

“Damn it, Sara!” He grabbed her arm and forced her to the table. “Sit down!”

She perched herself on the edge of the table, her feet on the stone bench, and watched him pace back and forth. *Get ready to run*, that little voice inside her whispered.

Finally he spoke. “Dad... Dad was a Satanist. That’s why we left.”

She looked at him in disbelief. “What?” She shook her head. “No.” She would’ve remembered that, wouldn’t she? Had she blocked it out? Was that the reason she didn’t remember her father? No, surely her mother would’ve told her.

David stilled himself. “I know you never believed in it, but I did. That’s why Dad took me.”

“But Mom—”

“She never knew,” he cut her off.

Sara gazed at David dumbfounded. “I’m dreaming. I’ve got to be dreaming again.”

“Do you remember Charlie and Niki?” he asked. He would make her remember whether she wanted to or not.

“Yes. They were my friends. They used to come over and play... but that’s been years ago.”

“What happened to them?”

“I don’t know.”

“What happened to them, Sara?”

“I don’t know!”

“Yes, you do.”

“No!” She jumped up and ran from the pavilion. She didn’t want to remember. But he *had* to come back... he *had* to come back and make her remember. And she did... all those horrible stories. She remembered them all. Her mother had tried to protect her from what had happened, but the other children had told her. They told her how the two girls had been found in Big Woods... dead. Their hearts cut from their little chests. She had cried for them then. And now, she cried for them again.

“Sara!” David yelled. He hadn’t expected her to run, but he was always up for a good chase. He just needed to keep his head on this one. No mistakes. No getting carried away.

Sara could hear David’s heavy footsteps in the background of her memories.

“There’s nowhere to run!” he reminded her.

She gasped for air. Had they really walked so far? She sensed him closing in. His strides were even and his breaths came easy. Shit. She didn’t have a chance. He would overtake her with little effort. There truly was nowhere to run, but she would not give in. He’d have to take her by force. As she knew he would.

She remembered the horrible things her father had done. Things she wished had remained forgotten. Like her seventh birthday. The birthday Daddy had gotten her a little fuzzy gray-and-white kitten. She had taken care of that kitten like her own baby. She had loved him with all of her heart – for seven days.

Seven days later, made to participate in one of Daddy’s rituals, she watched her father hold her squirming baby by the head.

No, Daddy, please, she begged, rivers flowing from her eyes.

He knifed it from throat to belly. Its bright red blood spilled to the basement floor.

No, she sobbed.

David put an arm around her shoulders. He pulled her face into his young chest. *I’m sorry, Sarabelle,* he whispered into her ear. *I’m sorry.*

But now, her protective older brother pursued her.

He reached out and grazed her arm with the tips of his fingers. “Damn it,” he muttered, then leapt forward and tackled her to the ground.

She landed face down in the soft, moist grass, her arms tucked underneath her chest. She was fucked now. Helpless under his weight, she lay lifeless.

He hooked his arm under her chin and lifted her face from the ground. “Why?” He clenched his teeth together. *Stay in control,* he told himself. He inhaled. Exhaled. “Damn it, Sara... why are you run-ning from me?”

She remained silent. He knew why she was running. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of hearing it come from her lips.

He pulled a knife from the inside pocket of his trench coat and set it to her throat. It was the kind of knife a hunter would use to gut his prey. “What are you expecting me to do?” he asked.

“I...” she drew in a shaky breath. “I don’t know.”

“Is this the way you imagined it? Huh? Did you think it would end this way? Tell me, Sara... what did you think when you first saw me?”

He jerked her chin up with his arm. “Well?... Little sister? What did you think?”

“I thought I was afraid of you.” She swallowed. “But, now, I think you’d better use that knife or put it away.” If he were going to kill her, he would do it no matter what she said or did. And if he was going to do it then let him do it quickly. She wanted no false hopes that she would get away and no long minutes of being afraid. If he was going to kill her, she hoped to make him mad so that he would just do it... without thinking... and without torture.

He released her chin and rolled off her. “I can’t believe you. A knife to your fucking throat and *you* force the issue.” He sat up and shook his head. The bitch was strong.

She scooted away from him. “You fucking psycho! Get the fuck away from me!”

He grabbed her foot and pulled her to him. “Psycho?”

She kicked him in the chest with her free foot, knocking him back. She scooted away, turned over on her hands and knees, and tried to get to her feet.

He grabbed her ankle and jerked it back.

She went down on her stomach. She turned and kicked at him, but he blocked it.

He pulled her to him once again. “You little bitch.” She was a fighter just like Dad had said she would be, but he would break her.

He raised a fist and knocked her unconscious.

Chapter Five

Joni's eyes gradually opened. Her naked body was stretched across the cold, hard slab of stone, her wrists and ankles bound by ropes. "Oh, my God," she said softly, still in a bit of a daze. What happened? Why was she here? She tugged at the restraints. "No," she sobbed. "No. This can't be happening." She squeezed her eyes closed. She was just at a party with her friends. "Oh, God," she cried as she opened her eyes to candle flames dancing all around her and hooded figures chanting to their Prince of Darkness.

"Help me! Please, somebody help me!" Joni pulled against the ropes trying to slip her hands free.

A man in a red, hooded robe came to her side. Their leader.

"Please," she looked up into his shadowed face, "please, let me go."

He slipped her left hand from the rope and brought it down to her side.

She sighed. Tears rolled down the sides of her face. Was he going to let her go? Yes, he was, she convinced herself. Why else would he untie her? "I won't tell anyone," she promised.

"I know," he replied softly. He raised his right hand into the air. The red sleeve slid down his arm as he lifted the dagger high into the air. "I know you won't." The metal blade shimmered in the candlelight as it came down and sliced into her wrist.

"No!" she screamed. Blood gushed from her numb wound.

The leader held her forearm tight as he exchanged the dagger for a goblet and placed her wrist over its mouth. He loosened his grip on her arm. Her blood poured into the goblet.

"No! God, please, no!" Joni continued to cry. She fought him and the ropes that held her.

He handed the goblet to a follower then placed two fingers to her lips. "Shhh."

She twitched as he touched her mouth. A calmness came over her, and she quieted. She would die. Tied to the cold stone, she would die as the blood flowed from her body. But she calmed. She calmed as a soothing force enveloped her, gently held her.

He slowly raised her wrist to his lips and drank her fresh, warm blood. He closed his eyes. Delicious. This one was not like the others. No ritual. This one served another purpose.

Chapter Six

A blaring horn woke Sara with a start. She was lying on her bed fully dressed. David must've brought her home, thrown her in bed, and left her to herself. Or, at least, that's what she hoped.

She slowly climbed out of bed, opened her bedroom door, and made her way down the hall, past the kitchen, and through the living room. She pulled the front door open and stepped out into the bright sunlight. She put a hand above her eyes to shield them from the sun.

The taxi was a block away now, and she watched as the standard yellow auto drove out of sight.

Standing on the porch, staring down the empty road, she drifted off to nothing. She dropped her hand from her forehead, closed her eyes, and raised her face to the sun and let it hold her in its warm embrace. No sounds. No thoughts. Nothing, except the warm, warm sun. This was where she wanted to be. This was where she wanted to stay.

"You're alone, now." David's whisper came from behind her, shattering the peace that she had found.

She jumped and spun around. No one was there. She darted to the end of the house and peered around the corner. No one. She turned... looked around... up the street... down the street... no one. She jogged up to the porch. No one was around. Absolutely no one. She slowly backed into the house and locked the door. Was she hearing things now? Maybe she *was* going off the deep end. She walked into the kitchen, grabbed a glass from the cabinet, and filled it with water. Somehow she knew it was her mother inside that cab. And somehow she knew her mother had left her. Left her alone with that evil freak.

She turned from the sink and leaned back against the counter and began to sip the water into her mouth. What was she gonna do?

Her eyes fell upon an envelope sitting on the kitchen table. She lowered the glass from her mouth. Her name was scrawled across the front of the envelope. She stared at it. It was her mother's hand-writing. She was right. Her mother was gone – but she had never left without saying good-bye before. Why would she do it now? It had to be David. Everything that was happening was happening because of him. She just knew it.

Knowing what the letter would say, she slowly pulled it from the envelope.

Sara,

I'm afraid I have to go on another business trip. I wanted to wake you to say good-bye, but David said you weren't feeling well last night and suggested that I let you sleep in. I've left enough money to keep you until I get back. I'll call you later. Be back before you know it.

Love,

Mom

Sara dropped the letter to the table. *That bastard!* She grabbed her car keys and sped to Belinda's house. She pulled into the driveway beside Belinda's car and parked. Seeing no other cars there and hoping Belinda was alone, she jumped out of the car and ran up to the door.

"Are you alone?" Sara asked as Belinda opened the door.

"Yeah," Belinda replied. She *had* been for about two hours. Steve had left around ten that morning. Where he went, she had no clue. He didn't tell her where he was going, and she didn't ask. Had he been any other guy, she would've asked, but with Steve and all that was going on, she didn't question much. Besides, he had laid down some ground rules when they started dating, and she had accepted them.

Sara crossed the threshold and stood just inside the door.

"What's wrong?" Belinda gave Sara a strange look. "Have you been up all night or did you sleep in your clothes?"

"Lock your door," Sara commanded.

Belinda flipped the lock. The hair stood up on the back of her neck and the top of her head. In her mind, she could see her hair standing straight up in the air (the way it did in those comedy movies when people got scared) and, on any other day, that would've brought a smile to her face, but not today. She could tell that Sara was scared, an emotion she rarely saw in Sara, and that scared the shit out of her. "What is it?" she asked, afraid to know.

"That guy from the college—"

"*He's* David?" Belinda asked.

"How did you know?" Sara countered.

"He answered the phone last night when I called."

A puzzled look came over Sara's face.

"Didn't he tell you I called?"

“No.” Sara ran splayed fingers through her rumpled hair. What was she gonna do? He had convinced her mother that he was her long lost son. And, now, he was steering *her* life in the direction *he* chose.

“Sara, what’s wrong? You’re scaring me.” Belinda prayed for Steve to return. What had David done to scare Sara so much?

“It’s David... my father... everything.” She fell back against the wall. Her eyes trailed to the floor. “My father’s dead. Thank God...” She seemed to be talking to herself now. “...I just wish David had never come back.”

“What happened?” Belinda’s voice was soft. She reached out and brushed Sara’s arm with a gentle hand to get her attention.

Sara’s eyes shot up to Belinda’s. “You gotta cigarette?” She really needed one now. David was taking over her life. She had to calm down and think clearly.

Belinda nodded. She disappeared into the living room, and returned with two glowing sticks. She drew on one and extended the other.

Sara snatched the cigarette from Belinda’s fingers and caressed it with hungry lips. Its magic filled her. She leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. What the hell was she gonna do? She was alone with her satanic brother and couldn’t ask anyone for help. She wouldn’t take the chance of putting anyone else in danger. He had already killed and would kill again; she knew it. She was on her own and didn’t have a clue as to what to do.

Thinking clearer now, she knew she shouldn’t have come to Belinda’s. She was only putting her in danger. She wasn’t thinking and needed someone to talk to and Belinda was the only one that came to mind. She had always told her everything. Belinda was her best friend. But this time she couldn’t confide in her. She couldn’t put her in the middle of it all. She would have to take care of this alone.

“Sara?” Belinda tried for Sara’s attention. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end again and chills ran up her spine. Her fingers trembled. Something was seeping in around them. Seeping into their world. Something she couldn’t see, but she sure could feel it. And feel it strong.

Sara straightened, her heart racing. She looked into Belinda’s scared, brown eyes. “He’s here,” she announced.

“Who?” Belinda trembled inside. Things were getting out of hand. Where was Steve? Where the hell was he!

Sara’s eyes jumped to the door. “David,” she replied, unlocking the door.

“What are you doing?” Belinda asked. Her heart pounded against her chest. “Don’t open it.”

Sara glanced at Belinda as she opened the door to its fullest.

Dressed in black, David leaned against his brilliant, black Mustang parked across the street from Belinda’s house. A cigarette tucked between his lips. He was truly a sight. Enchanting.

Belinda gasped. The cigarette slipped from her fingers and crashed to the floor in sparks. She quickly grabbed it up.

Sara sauntered out and down the walk. She started around the back of the car then came to a sudden stop. She dropped her cigarette to the ground.

Belinda’s gaze met David’s deep blue eyes. She understood why Sara had been so startled by him on their first meeting. His eyes were like blue glazed ice reeling her in... deeper and deeper until it was too late to turn away. She found herself wanting to be there... as she stood paralyzed, watching them, she wanted to be in his presence.

Sara turned and joined David. She pressed her lips against his – just a little peck – and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Belinda tried to look away... she wanted to look away. She didn’t want to see the control he had over Sara. And she didn’t want to know the control he could have over her. But, spellbound, she watched on.

David brought a hand to the cigarette resting between his lips, and wrapped his other arm around Sara’s waist. His eyes stayed with Belinda. He smiled and tossed the cigarette to the ground then led Sara around the car and tucked her into its leather. He gazed up at Belinda and smiled once again as he shut the car door.

Belinda could see the *‘I’m in control’* in that smile he flashed, and all she could do was watch as he rounded the car, climbed behind the wheel, and drove away.

“Don’t go there anymore. It’s a bad place for you,” David commanded.

“What do *you* know?” Sara spoke softly, her eyes fixed on the outside world.

“A lot more than you think.”

Her eyes shifted. She watched him concentrate on the road. His blue eyes attentive to all that stretched ahead; his fingers loose around the steering wheel. He almost seemed like a regular person – almost.

He glanced at her, reached under the seat, and pulled out a silver flask. “Here.” He shoved it at her and smiled. She was bonding with him. No matter how hard she fought it, she would connect with him.

She kept her eyes on him as she took the metal can, slowly removed the cap, and smelled the drink. “What is it?” she asked, crinkling her nose.

He gave another glance. The right corner of his mouth curled into a half-smile. “Try it.”

She swallowed nervously then put the metal flask to her lips. *What the hell are you doing?* she asked herself as she sipped the liquid into her mouth. The flavor was strong, but fruity. The liquid tingled across her tongue. “Mmm, not bad.” She offered it to him.

“Go ahead.”

She studied him for a few seconds. What was he up to? Why didn’t he want a drink? She took another sip. It was really good! She hadn’t tasted anything like it before. “What is this?” she asked.

He pulled the Mustang to the curb in front of Sara’s house and turned the key back. He relaxed against the door and focused on her. A smile spread across his face. “How do you feel?” He slid the key out of the ignition.

She turned to him. The world began to swirl. She blinked and giggled. “Whoa.” She blinked again and sank back into the seat. She put a hand to her forehead. “You fucking drugged me,” she slurred. But she did feel pretty good.

“Yes.” He sounded pleased as he slipped the flask from her fingers.

Her eyes closed. *Fucking asshole*, she thought as she drifted off.

Seconds later, she found herself in David’s arms. She was blacking out... in and out. She giggled and wrapped both arms around his neck. Her head bobbed back and forth. It seemed to weigh a ton. “Where are we going?”

He held her close and tight as he unlocked the front door and nudged it open with his foot. He didn’t answer.

He was taking her home. “No,” she whined, “I don’t wanna go home.” The fucker had drugged her to take her home? What the fuck was that all about? She would’ve gone home without being drugged, but now she wanted to party... have some fun!

He stepped in, flipped the deadbolt, carried her down the hall, and sat her on her bed. He kissed her forehead. “I’ll be right back,” he whispered, pulling himself away from her.

“No, don’t leave me.”

He walked out.

She lay back on the bed, her feet hanging off the side. She should get up and lock the door... lock him out of her room and then crash until the drug wore off. See how he liked that. She would've done it too, if she could've gotten up off the damned bed. She looked around the room. It was a hazy glow. The walls and furniture melted together in a beige and brown swirl. Even David melted into the mixture as he entered the room with a shiny metal clutched in one hand.

"Sit up." He sat down beside her.

"I can't." She giggled. "My head's too fat." She laughed. "No, I mean," she laughed again, "it's too heavy."

"Yes, you can." He slipped a hand under her head and raised her up.

She leaned against him. Her eyes fell on the shiny thing as he switched it from his left hand to his right hand. "What's that?" she asked. *What is it? Is it a knife?* she wondered, still unable to see clearly.

"To my Father, for my Father." He placed the dagger's blade against the palm of his left hand. "I give to him my blood." He ran the razor-sharp edge along the width of his hand.

"Wow," she managed to say as his marvelous red blood flowed over the metal like the sea engulfing a dying ship.

"Join me." He offered the bloody dagger.

She stared at the blood raining from his hand. *This can't be real.* She dipped her index finger into the shallow pool of blood – the same way a child would upon finding something unfamiliar.

"Take it," he softly encouraged, pushing the dagger into her right hand.

She gazed up into his eyes and closed her fingers around the handle. Finally reunited with her brother, she felt whole again.

Seeing his features very clearly now, she found herself willing to go to the fullest extent. There was nothing she wouldn't risk to see how far he'd take her. So she jumped in... with both feet... and let the dagger taste of her flesh.

The silver, blood-smeared dagger slipped from her fingers and fell to the carpeted floor with a thud. She hadn't thought about the pain.

David grabbed her throbbing hand. Their warm blood spilled onto her clothes, onto the bed, and onto David. He pressed his lips against the palm of her hand and sipped her life into his mouth.

“What are you doing?” she whispered. He was drinking her... stealing a part of her... taking what she hadn’t given... or had she?

He released her hand. Blood trickled down his chin.

Her blood trickled down his chin.

He laced his fingers with her fingers; his slash pressed against hers; their blood joining, mixing, becoming one. He pressed his lips against her mouth and forced his tongue between her soft, moist lips. He eased her back onto the bed.

She pushed against his chest. What the fuck? Wasn’t it enough that he drank her blood? She turned her face away from him. “What are you doing?” she asked, still trying to push him away.

He grabbed her wrists and held them to the bed. “Relax,” he whispered into her ear and climbed on top of her. He forced her legs apart with his knees and settled between her thighs. “Close your eyes.”

She closed her eyes. Why? She wasn’t sure.

“You belong to me, now,” he whispered. “You and I are one.” He brushed his lips against hers.

She opened her mouth just a little... just enough to let him in... her body... her mind... her soul.

Belinda stood in the living room staring out the bay window. She watched the sun slowly slip away as the night and its darkness eased in. Her trembling fingers held a burning cigarette that she managed to her lips. “Who the fuck is David?” She glanced over her shoulder at Steve. “Or should I ask...” she took a deep, shaky breath, “*what* the fuck is David?”