

Haunting Vanity by Erin Wade

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Edited by Melissa Barker

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www.erinwade.us
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by Erin Wade

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DEDICATION

To the one who has always supported me in everything I have ever undertaken. You have encouraged me and have always been my biggest fan. Life is sweeter with you.

Erin

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A special “Thank You” to my wonderful and witty “Beta Master,” **Julie Versoi**. She makes me a better storyteller.



CHAPTER 1

May 1, 2020 - Friday

Twenty-five-year-old Vanity Chase had the world by the tail. She had just released her first single record and it was shooting to the top of the charts. She was poised to be country music's next darling and nothing could stop her.

Vanity had it all: long blonde hair, perfect figure, beautiful face, and a voice the angels envied. She knew she was the whole package.

As she drove home, she mentally ran through the list of things she had procured for her birthday party at the apartment clubhouse. The band was set up and ready to go. The caterer was arranging the buffet tables around the party room, cases of beer, wine, and whiskey were stacked behind the bar, and her manager had scored some primo (joints of weed laced with cocaine) for her and her friends. *Yep, this is gonna be one hell of a party*, she thought as she drove to her apartment.

She hoped Pam was home and getting ready. She hated it when they both ended up in the bathroom trying to take a shower at the same time. *I really need to cut Pam loose*, she thought. *I'm certainly not taking her to Nashville with me.*

She parked the pickup in her designated space and sprinted to her door. "Happy Birthday!" Pam yelled, throwing open the door.

"You're naked!" Vanity exclaimed, looking around to see if any of her neighbors were outside.

"I thought I'd give you your present before the party." A lustful look gave Pam's face an unattractive appearance.

"We don't have time," Vanity croaked. "We're supposed to be back at the clubhouse in an hour."

"Van, just a quickie," Pam whined.

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“I’m getting into the shower,” Vanity said. “*Country Music People Magazine* will be there tonight. They’re doing a spread on me for my birthday. I have to fix my hair and makeup.”

Locking the door behind her to prevent Pam following her into the bathroom, Vanity stripped and stepped into the shower. Her mind was running a mile a minute as she thought about her recording session scheduled for Monday to cut her first album. For the first time, everything was perfect in Vanity’s world.

Vanity left Pam, who was still dressing, and headed for the clubhouse. As she pulled into the parking lot friends and followers engulfed her vehicle singing “Happy Birthday.” A stunning redhead latched onto her arm as she stepped from her pickup cab. “Roland sent me,” she whispered in Vanity’s ear.

“Are you my party planner or my birthday present?” Vanity asked.

“I can be anything you want me to be, honey.” The redhead placed her lips close to Vanity’s ear. “Anything you want.”

Vanity nodded and walked toward the door with the woman clinging to her. “Do you have a name?”

“Scarlett.”

“Of course, it is,” Vanity scoffed, eyeing her flaming red hair.

The clubhouse filled quickly, and Vanity wished she had hired more security guards to control the crowd. The photographers for *Country Music People* were taking photos from every angle as she approached the band, and a local TV station’s cameraman was videoing her every move.

She stepped onto the stage, greeted her band, and yelled into the microphone, “Let’s get this over with so we can party!”

They performed a couple of numbers then segued into their hit that was riding high on the country music charts.

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The merrymakers went crazy, clapping the rhythm and singing along with her.

May 2-Saturday

Vanity couldn't remember when she passed out. She knew she had consumed an inordinate amount of liquor and smoked too many of Roland's primos. A movement beside her confirmed the fear she was in bed with someone. Red hair tousled around the head on her shoulder. *Scarlett*.

Moving slowly, Vanity slid from the bed onto the floor and felt around for her clothes. She thanked her lucky stars they were piled in one place and not scattered all over the room. She dressed, ignoring the wicked clogger that was dancing inside her head.

Staggering around the room, she tried to decide the direction of her pickup. The faint light on one side of the room led her to the door going outside. Her vehicle was covered in streamers and shoe polish used to write happy birthday. She knew she was in no condition to get behind the wheel, but her apartment wasn't very far away. She squinted her eyes, attempting to block out the rising sun.

She wiped her eyes with her fingers, trying to pull the cobwebs from her brain, but failed. She climbed into the truck, fumbled with the seat belt, then abandoned her efforts to fasten it. She put the truck in reverse and shot backwards much faster than she intended. "Okay, very little control of limbs," she said out loud, giggling as she eased the gearshift into drive.

The Ford pickup shot forward and she slammed on the brakes. Trying to judge her reaction time, she hopped and jerked the truck from the parking lot. She rolled down the windows hoping the fresh air would sober her.

She pulled onto the street and accelerated through the neighborhood. The faster she got home the quicker the

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streets would be safe. Her phone dinged receipt of a text message and she wiggled it from her pocket, finally reading, “Where are you?”

The screaming of brakes and grating of metal were the last things Vanity heard as she ran a stop sign, plowing into the driver’s side of a small car. The skidding and rattling of the vehicles locked in a death struggle seemed to go on forever. Her heart was hammering as if a wild mustang was galloping in her chest. *Chains, it sounds like heavy chains rattling*, she thought as she flew through her windshield and slipped into darkness. All that noise and she never saw anything. She only heard the sound.

CHAPTER 2

April 15, 2021-Thursday – a year later

Vanity pulled her Dodge pickup into the parking space in front of the real estate office. She pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger to stop the constant headache that tormented her.

She picked up the newspaper and read the for-sale ad one more time. “Cheap. 5 acres, 3 BDR, 3bath. Perfect get-a-way.” The listed price was a fourth of what Vanity had expected, and the real estate agent had told her she could probably negotiate the price even lower.

Everything about the ad appealed to her, especially the words cheap and get-a-way.

A pretty brunette walked from the real estate office and knocked on the window of Vanity’s truck, waiting patiently as she rolled down the window.

“Are you Vanity Chase?”

“Yes. Are you Libby Reed?”

“I am,” the brunette said. “Do you mind if we take your vehicle? Mine is in the shop.”

“Sure, hop in.”

Vanity stole glances at Libby as she pulled onto the street. Libby was at least three inches shorter than Vanity’s five foot seven. Her long black hair framed a heart-shaped face with the darkest eyes Vanity had ever seen. “I have no idea where we’re going. You’ll have to give me directions.”

“It’s about five miles outside of town,” Libby told her. “You’ll see a convenience store on your left. Turn on the road that runs beside it.”

“I hope you won’t think this is a pick-up line,” Vanity said, “but what’s a woman like you doing in a one-horse town like this?”

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“Waiting for someone to sweep me off my feet. Why does someone like you want to move to this one-horse town?”

“Solitude,” Vanity muttered.

Libby pointed to the turn after the convenience store, then another turn about half a mile down the road. “That’s the house. You can pull into the drive. No one lives there now.”

Vanity was shocked by the beauty of the house and its surroundings. The two-story stucco sat atop a little rise in the center of the property. Trees arched over the driveway providing a beautiful entryway and privacy.

“Just push open the gate,” Libby advised as Vanity slowed to a stop. “Leave it open and we can close it when we leave.”

Vanity opened her door and breathed in the fresh air then she pulled the heavy chain from the fence post and pushed the gate open. The grating sound of the uncoiled hinges made her cringe.

Libby instructed her when she climbed back into the truck. “Drive around back. I have a key to the door.”

They drove to the back of the house and Libby gave her the usual realtor’s tour. Vanity fell in love with the house. It was enchanting, peaceful, and perfect in every way. “You think the owner will come down on the asking price?”

“I’m sure I can get another fifty thousand off the price,” Libby answered. “The owner is very eager to sell.”

“It seems to be ideal. Why is he asking so little for it?”

“It’s haunted.” Libby laughed.

“Right!”

“Seriously, the owner thinks the house is haunted.”

“Has he ever actually seen a ghost in the house?”

“I don’t think so. He says it’s just a feeling, and he’s heard noises.”

“Ghost or no ghost, I want it,” Vanity declared. “When can I move in?”

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“As soon as we sign the closing papers.”

May 1-Thursaday

Vanity offered to pay cash for another seventy-five thousand off, and the seller jumped at the deal. Libby wrapped up the sale quickly. She called Vanity with the final figure for the cashier’s check. “Bring that with you tomorrow when you sign the papers, and I’ll turn the keys over to you. You can stop by anytime and sign, just give me a call to make sure I’m in the office.”

Vanity thanked her, then called the bank instructing them to have the cashier’s check ready for her in the morning. *It will be good to get into something permanent*, she thought. She called her brother Luke and asked him to meet the movers at the storage unit so they could pick up everything she owned and bring it to the new house.

Luke had stood beside her through all her failures and successes. He was the perfect big brother—protective and loving.

Austin, Texas, had been a wonderful city to kick off Vanity’s singing career. She had formed a small band her first year at the University of Texas and had become a local celebrity. She recorded several songs before “After Loving You” made her a millionaire. After her wreck, dreams of pursuing her career in Nashville vanished like a faint wisp of smoke. Now she just wanted to be alone, and the house in Chickasha, Oklahoma, fulfilled her needs.

Located about forty miles from Oklahoma City, Chickasha offered the solitude of a small town but was close enough to the state’s capitol to engage in concerts, fine dining, and other crowd activities, though Vanity had no desire to partake of anything Oklahoma City had to offer.

A year had passed since the tragic accident that had left a woman dead and Vanity with several broken bones. Her

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fractured legs and arms had healed, and she was learning to cope with the constant headache and night terrors as she relived the crash in her sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she heard the horror of the monstrous cattle guard on the front of her pickup demolishing the smaller vehicle and its occupant. If she had buckled her seat belt, she would have sustained no injuries, but the impact sent her flying through the windshield.

During her year-long convalescence, her record had hit number one on the country music charts. Her band had found another lead singer and was now living the good life in Nashville. Although her attorney cost her a small fortune, Vanity had come out of it all with a great deal of money. Not enough to support her forever, but enough to hold her over until she got her head on straight.

May 2-Friday

It was after two in the afternoon when Vanity picked up the cashier's check and called Libby before leaving the bank's lobby. "I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Pick me up, and I'll buy you dinner to celebrate my commission and your new home," Libby suggested. "I'll bring the file and my notary stamp so we can have a drink and take our time going over everything."

"That is the best offer I've had all year." Vanity couldn't hide her elation at the prospect of getting the keys to her own home and spending time with Libby. "I can't wait to see you."

Libby was waiting in front of the real estate office when Vanity pulled up. She got into the pickup and started talking as she fastened her seatbelt. "This is the easiest sale I've ever made. I've enjoyed working with you."

Vanity drove to a Chinese restaurant where they had met before to discuss the sale. In downtown Chickasha, it was

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the best dining establishment the little town had to offer. They decided to share the Chinese dinner. Vanity placed their order, and Libby pulled a file folder from her briefcase.

She flashed a beautiful smile at Vanity and said, “Just think, when we walk out of here you will be the owner of a wonderful home.”

“I know. I am so excited. My furniture will be delivered tomorrow, and I can begin to live my life again.”

“What is the first thing you will do?” Libby asked.

“Put my bed together. Sleeping on that lumpy mattress at Budget Inn is killing me. I can’t wait to sleep in my own bed.”

“I hope you’ll keep in touch,” Libby said. “I always like to see how my clients settle into a place and how it looks when they get moved in.”

“Why don’t you keep next Friday night open, and I’ll grill steaks for us on my new patio? I noticed you don’t wear a wedding ring, so I assume you’re not married.

“I was, once, but not anymore.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Libby smiled. “I’ve gotten over it. Enough about me. What do you plan to do? Are you going to work? What skills do you have?”

“Not many, I’m afraid,” Vanity said. “I have a music degree. Hopefully, I can put it to good use.”

“What did you do in Austin?”

“I was the lead singer for a band.”

“We have an opening for a music teacher at the middle school,” Libby suggested.

“I’m not very good with children.” Vanity chuckled. “In fact, I don’t like them at all.”

Libby nodded her agreement and opened the file folder. “Let’s get the paperwork finished and it will be a done deal.”

Vanity signed and Libby notarized the papers. “A picture!” Vanity beamed holding her cellphone up in the air. “To remember the day I purchased my new home. Say

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cheese, Libby.” She took the photo then tapped the photo roll on her phone to see it.

“It didn’t take,” Vanity giggled. “You’ve broken my camera, Ms. Reed. You owe me a picture. I want something to remember you by.”

“Here, let me take it,” Libby offered holding her cellphone in front of them. “Lean your head against mine. There, that’s perfect. I’ll send it to your phone.”

They finished dinner and said goodbye, promising to keep in touch. “I’ll file these papers and deliver your copies to you when the county clerk is finished,” Libby promised.

On the way home, Vanity dropped her attorney Malcomb Levy a note that she had purchased a home. She proudly wrote the return address of her newly acquired home on the envelope.

May 3-Saturday

Vanity looked around her living room where the movers had left the boxes and smaller things. They had put the heavy furniture in place and her bedroom furniture in the master suite upstairs.

Her phone rang and Libby’s name flashed on the screen. Vanity turned on the speaker so she could talk to Libby as she worked. “Hello Libby. How are you doing?”

“Good. I’m just checking to see if your things arrived and make certain everything is going okay. Is the house living up to your expectations?”

“So far. I’ll let you know more tomorrow after a good night’s sleep.”

“I may run by tomorrow,” Libby said. “I’m meeting a potential buyer at that colonial about a mile past you.”

“I’d like that.”

Eager to get her house in order, Vanity worked most of the night putting away things, washing her linens, and

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making her bed. Exhausted, she showered and fell into bed just before dawn.

May 4-Sunday

The next morning Vanity was awakened by someone dragging something across the living room. She lay still listening for any sounds of an intruder in her home. After several minutes, she decided the noise had been the residual of one of her dreams. She let her mind wander to Libby Reed. The agent was one of the most attractive women she had ever met. Not like the girls that had fawned over her in college, but like a real woman with curves in all the right places and naturally sultry expressions that made Vanity's heart beat double time.

The sound came again. Someone was moving her furniture.

Vanity slipped from her bed, pulling on her jeans and a t-shirt, then eased down the stairs, her bare feet making no sound.

Halfway down the stairs she had a perfect view of every corner of the room. No one was in the area. Moving down the stairs she watched the archway leading into the kitchen, approaching it cautiously.

She peered into the kitchen, finding it empty. Sighing deeply, she walked to her coffee pot, filled it with water, and spooned the coffee into the filter. As she reached for a cup, a loud thud came from the living room, as if someone had dropped a sack of rocks on the floor. Vanity dropped her cup, shattering it on the kitchen floor.

In full command of her faculties, she knew the loud sound wasn't part of a dream. Something was in her house. She pulled a sharp knife from the block and moved toward the living room.

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To her amazement there was nothing in her living room. No bag of rocks in the middle of the floor. No culprits invading her home. Only a huge spiderweb that filled an entire corner of the room.

What the hell? That wasn't here five minutes ago.

Vanity carefully looked around the room searching for the spider that could spin a web that large so quickly. She was thankful that she found none. A shiver ran down her spine as she returned to the kitchen for a broom to destroy the web.

She swept the giant gossamer net from the corner, taking the broom outside to wash the sticky material from it with the water hose. She returned to her kitchen and picked up the pieces of broken cup and mopping up the coffee.

Vanity spent the rest of the day putting away everything and going over the events of the morning for some reasonable explanation.

###

It was after three when Libby called to inform her she would drop by around five. The spider web slipped to the back of her mind as she thought about preparing dinner for Libby. It would be nice to surprise her with a home cooked meal. She instructed Alexa to play music by her favorite band and went into the kitchen to start dinner.

She made beef patties and started them cooking, then rummaged through her pantry finding some instant au gratin potatoes and canned green beans. *I will plant a garden*, she promised herself, bringing some instant brown gravy to a boil and pouring it over the cooked patties. She covered the meat and left it to simmer in the gravy as she placed plates and flatware on the table.

The tea pitcher gurgled as the doorbell rang. Vanity smiled at the thought of seeing Libby. She enjoyed the energetic woman's company.

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“My, aren’t you all domesticated?” Libby grinned as she entered the house holding out a bottle of wine, a scented candle, and a small flat box. “Good luck housewarming gifts. You’re supposed to burn a candle to ward off evil and christen your home with the spirits—usually champagne but wine will do—and this.” She handed Vanity the box. “Be careful what you ask for.”

Vanity opened the box and caught her breath. Inside was a gorgeous photo of Libby in a golden frame. She raised her eyes from the photo to lock gazes with Libby. “This is fantastic. You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

Libby bowed her head as she blushed. “You said you wanted something to remember me by.”

“Yes! Yes! Thanks, I love this photo of you.”

Libby glanced at Vanity’s face. “Is everything okay?”

“I, um I’m a recovering alcoholic,” Vanity admitted. “I probably shouldn’t drink the wine.”

“I won’t be offended if you don’t drink it,” Libby said. “Is it okay if I have a glass?”

“Yes, I was just preparing dinner. Please say you’ll stay. My recipe is for four, and I’ll never eat it all by myself.”

“How can I refuse? It smells delicious.” Libby carried the candle to the dining room table and lit it. The vanilla fragrance mingled pleasantly with the scent of the simmering beef patties.

Vanity opened the wine, filled Libby’s glass, and led her guest into the living room. “I can’t believe you have everything in place,” Libby said, admiring a vase on the mantle. “You have some priceless antiques.”

“From my great-great-Grandmother. Since I’m settling down Mother deemed me worthy of them.”

“Parents can be so protective of family antiques.” Libby grinned, watching Vanity place her photo among the priceless heirlooms.

The timer on the stove buzzed, and Libby carried her empty wine glass to the kitchen. “I’ll refill my glass and let

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you take care of dinner,” Libby announced. “You know you should have a half glass of wine so we can toast your new home. Half a glass won’t hurt anything.”

Vanity pulled another wine glass from the cabinet and held it out for Libby to pour the wine. “To your wonderful new home and a whole new life,” Libby clinked her glass Vanity’s.

Dinner was delightful with Libby praising her hostess’s culinary skills. “Who would believe anything this simple could taste so good.”

“I still owe you a steak on the grill Friday night,” Vanity promised. “I do grill an awesome steak, special seasoning and all that.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” Libby tilted her head and the flame from the candle danced in the dark depths of her eyes, mesmerizing Vanity.

Breaking her trance, Vanity asked. “How long have you been single?”

“I beg your pardon.” Libby scowled.

“Your husband. How long ago did you divorce?” Vanity plunged down the slippery slope.

“Not a divorce, a death,” Libby answered, “and not a husband. My wife and I were parted over a year ago.”

“I . . . I didn’t know. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Libby placed her hand over Vanity’s. “You had no way of knowing.”

Vanity bowed her head, hiding the look of joy that covered her face. *She’s a lesbian*, Vanity thought.

“What about you?” Libby asked. “Is there someone special in your life?”

“No. There never has been.” Vanity picked up their dishes and carried them toward the kitchen. “I have a bottle of Remy Martin XO I’ve been saving for a special occasion.”

“Save it for Friday.” Libby picked up the remaining dishes and followed her to the kitchen. “I still have to drive home and should be going.”

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Vanity wanted to beg her to stay but knew their friendship was too new for that, so she walked her to the car and hugged her goodbye. “Thank you for the candle, the photo, and the wine. You are so thoughtful.”

Vanity watched Libby’s vehicle until the taillight disappeared. For the first time in a long time, she felt good about the woman in her life. She knew Libby Reed was special.

CHAPTER 3

May 5-Monday

Vanity lay still listening for the noises she had heard the day before. The house was silent. “Thank God,” she whispered as the sun came up, and no strange sounds disrupted the silence of the house. She pulled the comforter under her chin and drifted back to sleep.

She had an uneventful day doing small repairs around the house: replacing lightbulbs, tightening doorknobs and locks, and fixing the constant drip of the kitchen faucet. By nightfall she was tired but proud of what she had accomplished.

Vanity slid a plate of leftovers from the previous night’s dinner into the microwave, pushed the start button, and pulled a bottle of water from the refrigerator. *I’d give a lot for a cold beer right now*, she thought. She sat on the stool at the kitchen island. When the microwave dinged, she carried her plate and water into the TV room and turned on the news. She wondered when news had become someone’s opinion instead of the facts. She channel surfed then settled on watching a sitcom rerun while she finished her meal. Fifteen minutes into the show she was sound asleep.

It was after midnight when the screeching from the unholed gate alerted Vanity to the presence of someone on her property. She turned off the TV and lamp then moved into the kitchen. All the lights in the house were off and the full moon cast an eerie light outside, clearly lighting the landscape.

Vanity moved quickly to the front of the house to see what was making the racket. It sounded as if someone was driving a wagon pulled by a team of horses up her drive. As she opened the front door, the sound of heavy chains and pounding hoofs passed her home and clattered across the backyard circling the house.

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The noise was horrendous and growing louder. The chains rattled as the team of horses dragged the wagon across the front yard heading back down the drive. The sound stopped at the gate as it was pulled shut. The sound of the horses with their rattling chains and wagon faded away.

Vanity returned to the dining room. Her hands shook as she poured a glass full of brandy and gulped it down. The smooth liquor burned her throat as it made its way to her stomach. Falling into a dining room chair she propped her head in her hands and cried.

“I should report this,” she said out loud just to hear a normal sound.

She downed another glass of brandy and let its numbing properties spread throughout her body. *Sleep. I'm exhausted and need sleep.* She stumbled upstairs and fell face down across her bed. Sleep quickly overcame her.

May 6-Tuesday

A cold breeze blew across Vanity's back and ruffled the hair at the nape of her neck like a teasing lover. She opened her eyes without moving, listening for any sounds inside or outside her home. After several minutes she pushed herself to her feet and looked around. Everything looked perfect. Maybe she'd had a bad dream.

She stumbled into the bathroom, turning on the shower allowing the water to heat before she stepped in.

Showered and dressed, she called Libby's cellphone. It went to voice mail and Vanity left a message. “Please meet me at the Chinese restaurant at one.”

The hinges on the gate screamed the arrival of a visitor. Vanity pulled back her shoulders and vowed to get a gun when she was in town. She rushed onto the front porch as a flatbed truck rolled to a stop beside her house.

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“You Vanity Chase?” A stout fellow in a Coors Beer cap jumped down from the truck’s cab.

“I am. Looks like you’re delivering my new John Deere tractor.”

“Yes ma’am, complete with a Bush Hog mower and frontend loader. If you’ll just sign here while I unload it.” He handed her a clipboard and pen then began unchaining the green tractor from the flatbed. She cringed at the grating sound when he pulled the loading ramps from their location beneath the trailer bed and clicked them into place.

“Is there any special place you want me to put it?” he asked as he turned off the engine.

“No, I’ll take it from here.” Vanity returned his clipboard and pen.

“We appreciate your business ma’am. If you have any trouble at all just give us a call.” He handed her a business card and climbed back into the cab. “Your keys are in the tractor’s ignition.”

Vanity climbed into the seat of the tractor and surveyed her kingdom from the perch. She cranked the John Deere and drove it to the barn at the back of her property. Tomorrow she would accept delivery on a rooster and two dozen hens. *It’s the farm life for me.* She chuckled out loud thinking about growing her own vegetables and producing her own meat and eggs. She drove the tractor to the barn, opened the double doors, and pulled her new acquisition inside. The length of the tractor and mower almost filled the center of her barn.

She walked back to the house thinking about the vegetables she would plant. A text from Libby confirmed their lunch date.

###

Libby was at the restaurant when Vanity arrived. Vanity ordered iced tea, water for Libby, and as usual, the shared meal for two.

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“Your message sounded a little strange.” Libby started their conversation.

“I wondered what made the seller think my place is haunted?”

“He said he heard strange things, unexplained noises.”

“Anything specific?” Vanity asked, casually stirring sweetener into her tea.

“Not that I recall. I do remember he felt threatened. He said the ghost or whatever it was had become more aggressive. Is something threatening you?”

“No, no,” Vanity assured her. “I’m just curious if I should be on the lookout for anything special.”

“Honestly, the seller had a drug problem, and I’m sure he was hallucinating. You don’t do drugs, do you?”

Not anymore, Vanity thought. “No, Dr. Pepper is the strongest mind bending I do.” They sat silently as the waitress placed their food on the table. Then Libby asked Vanity a question. “You’re that Vanity Chase. The country and western singer, the one-hit wonder.”

“The one-hit wonder,” Vanity snorted. “Is that what they call me?”

“The DJ on our local station did a little vignette on your brief career. Somehow, he learned you are now a resident of our little town. He said you were in a serious accident and almost died.”

“What else did he say?”

Libby looked down at her hands clasped in her lap. “That the wreck was your fault, and that a woman was killed.”

Vanity nodded. “That pretty much sums it up.”

“What did she look like?” Libby asked.

“I don’t know. I never saw her face.” Vanity contemplated her lie. For a moment she had seen her victim’s face contorted by pure terror as she faced death. Vanity had blocked the image from her mind and could no

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longer recall it. She was certain it was the face of death. “Who was she?”

Vanity scowled, pulling her thoughts back to the present. “Beg your pardon?”

“What was her name?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” Vanity admitted.

“You don’t know the name of a woman you killed?”

“I was in the hospital and then rehab for over a year,” Vanity defended herself. “By the time I was able to start living again the accident was old news. The incident was hard for me, Libby.”

“Hard for you? What about the woman who died? I can’t believe you never bothered to learn her name. What did she look like? Did you get a look at her before she became just another traffic fatality?”

“I have no idea what she looked like.”

Agitated, Vanity motioned to the server for the check then turned to Libby. “Do you have a phone number for the man I purchased the house from?”

“I do.” Libby pulled her phone from her purse and jabbed at the screen. “There, I forwarded it to you.”

“Thanks,” Vanity snapped when the contact dinged into her phone.

Libby placed her hand on Vanity’s arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“It’s okay, but could we never speak of it again?”

Libby nodded. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Umm, I like the sound of that.” Vanity smiled.

###

Vanity said goodbye to Libby and drove to the only privately-owned gun store in town. The owner was a jovial man in his late fifties. “What can I do for you young lady?”

“I need a pistol and a rifle, something that will stop a horse.”

The man raised his brows. “You’re serious?”

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“Dead serious.” Vanity grimaced.

Although Vanity had won marksmanship medals in high school ROTC and was knowledgeable about guns, she asked the man for his recommendation on a handgun and a rifle.

“I’d recommend a 45-caliber automatic pistol and a 308 Remington 700 rifle using 180 grain bullets.”

Vanity nodded and pulled out her checkbook. The man slid a form in front of her. “You’ll need to fill this out.”

“Is it required by Oklahoma law?”

“No, it’s for our own use.”

“Then I don’t have to fill it out to purchase the guns, right?” Vanity pushed the form back to him. “Or I can go to the Academy and purchase your recommendations.”

“It’s not necessary,” the owner admitted. “You’ll want ammunition too. Which forty-five do you want?”

“The very best one.”

The owner became excited as he pulled a Dan Wesson Valor Commander from his showcase. “This is the best forty-five handgun money can buy.”

Vanity flipped over the price tag. *Just under two thousand*, she thought. The owner placed a rifle on the counter. It carried a thousand-dollar price sticker. “I’ll need ten boxes of bullets for each gun. I’ll need practice shooting them.”

“I’ll get that for you.”

“And an extra magazine for the pistol—maximum capacity. Don’t forget a side holster,” Vanity called to him as he walked down the aisle of bullets and gun magazines.

Vanity paid for her new arsenal and headed home confident she could do battle with whoever was tormenting her. Things were beginning to make sense. The DJ’s exposé of her on the radio had obviously caught the attention of local troublemakers who were now trying to make her life miserable. *So much for peace and quiet.*

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It was after five when Vanity pulled her pickup into her garage and carried her new acquisitions into the house. She placed a TV dinner into the microwave and spread the guns out on the dining room table. She studied the instructions accompanying the Dan Wesson 45. As she ate her dinner, she read the handgun manual thoroughly, paying close attention to the safety features of the weapon. It was after midnight when she finished reading the rifle booklet.

Feeling confident she could load both firearms safely; Vanity took all the precautions advised by the manuals when loading the guns. She threw the bolt on the rifle, sending a bullet into the chamber, then shoved the magazine into the forty-five and racked it. She carried both guns upstairs and prepared for bed.

Lying on her back Vanity listened for any sound that might indicate her uninvited visitors had returned. Her mind slipped to Libby Reed. The woman had been appalled that Vanity knew nothing about her victim. *Perhaps I should have expressed my remorse to the family*, she thought. But her attorney told her to stay away from them and to discuss the accident with no one.

Vanity had escaped a vehicular homicide charge thanks to her attorney's maneuvers. He had cost a small fortune but was cheaper than the multimillion-dollar wrongful death suit the family had tried to file against her. Drifting off to sleep, she shuddered as she thought she could have ended up penniless in prison.

May 7-Wednesday

Half asleep, Vanity rolled over on her side and slid her hand under the pillow next to her. To her surprise her hand encountered something hard and cold. She stiffened then relaxed as she recalled her handgun purchase the day before. She wrapped her fingers around the pistol grip and thought

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of Libby. She owed Libby an apology. *I'll confirm our dinner date for Friday and apologize again*, she thought as she fell back asleep.

The sun was shining brightly when Vanity awoke at 10:00 a.m. She jumped from bed and rushed to shower. Her chickens were supposed to be delivered before noon. Skipping down the stairs she glanced at the corner for spiderwebs and found none. She made coffee and was enjoying it on the front porch when a truck with sideboards arrived.

Vanity directed the driver to the chicken coop and large fenced area next to the barn as she jumped onto the running boards of the truck, hitching a ride.

The men quickly carried the cages of hens and a rooster into the coop and released them while Vanity filled the feeders. The fowls headed straight for the full feeders and the men loaded their cages back on the truck, leaving Vanity their business card.

Vanity slid her hands into the hip pockets of her jeans as she watched the chickens scratch and cluck their way around the yard. She was pleased with herself and her newly acquired birds.

She spent the rest of the day using the John Deere to build a small mountain as a backdrop for her gun targets. She didn't want a stray bullet hitting anything. She wedged a bullseye target into the dirt in front of the berm, measured twenty feet from it, and drove a stake into the ground to mark the spot from which she would fire her handgun. She then marked off a hundred feet for the rifle, drove in the stake, and turned to look at the target. *Damn that's a long way*. She wondered if the rifle was truly accurate at that distance.

The sun had almost disappeared from the heavens as she walked back to her house. She was pleased to see the chickens had entered their coop to roost. Everything was peaceful.

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Vanity made a grilled ham and cheese sandwich, grabbed a bag of potato chips and cold water, and turned on the TV. When she finished eating, she texted Libby. “I’m sorry I was so cross yesterday. I hope you are still planning on grilling steaks with me Friday.”

“I am looking forward to it,” Libby answered. “I’ll bring wine.”

“I can’t wait to see you,” Vanity replied. She put down the phone and closed her eyes. She was surprised that she was so excited about seeing Libby. *She truly is beautiful*, Vanity thought.

May 9-Friday

Vanity felt as if it had taken a year for two days to pass and awoke in a good mood Friday morning. She had practiced daily with her handgun, not tackling the rifle yet. Her hens weren’t laying but seemed to be acclimating well to their new home. She had mowed the entire property over the past two days and made a trip into town to buy groceries. Succumbing to a thirst she couldn’t quench with water; she purchased a twelve-pack of beer. Best of all, she had received no ghostly visitors.

Vanity marinated the ribeye steaks in her special concoction that always garnered her compliments from the ladies. The baked potatoes were almost ready to come out of the oven, so she lit the gas grill. Libby would text her when she left the office so the steaks could go on the fire.

She smiled when Libby’s text dinged into her phone. She walked out to the patio, and placed the steaks on the grill. She loved the sizzling sound and scent of the seasoning searing over the fire. She closed the lid and returned to the house to put the salad dressing and condiments on the table. She placed the bowls of salad on the table as the squealing gate announced Libby’s arrival.

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Vanity walked to Libby's car to meet her and opened the door as soon as the engine stopped. Libby smiled up at her and swung her legs out of the vehicle. Vanity couldn't keep her eyes from traveling up long legs to the hem of the dress hiked up to Libby's thighs. She raised her eyes to find the brunette gazing at her in amusement as Vanity's face turned red. "I had you pegged as a breast woman." Libby smirked getting out of the car.

"May I help you carry something?" Vanity tried to brush off her inappropriate ogling of her friend.

Libby handed her two bottles of red wine, a canvas bag, and waved a video as they walked to the house. "I brought one of my all-time favorite videos," she announced. "*Serendipity*."

"I've never seen it."

"Good, you're in for a treat."

"What's in the bag," Vanity asked as she placed her parcels on the kitchen island.

"A little surprise for later." Libby grinned mischievously.

###

Libby followed her onto the patio carrying two glasses and an opened bottle of wine. Vanity flipped the steaks as her guest filled their glasses. "A toast." Libby held her glass high. "May we share many more days like this one."

A broad smile spread across Vanity's face. "I'll drink to that."

As they dined, Libby queried Vanity about the target and stakes on the far right of the property. "Why do you need a gun?"

"I feel safer out here by myself," Vanity hedged. She didn't want to tell Libby about the ghostly incidents that she now chalked up to bad dreams.

"And chickens." Libby had clapped her hands at the sight of the hens. "I had no idea you were a farm girl."

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“I’m going to plant a garden,” Vanity informed her. “I’m trying to become more self-sufficient.”

Libby beamed. “I’m so happy you are pleased with this place.”

“I truly am. It’s perfect for me.”

“You deserve it,” Libby said. “I’m glad the price was a steal.”

They carried their dishes into the house, and Libby opened the second bottle of wine as Vanity placed the DVD into her player and *Serendipity* flashed on the TV screen. Libby sat on the sofa and patted the seat beside her for Vanity to sit there.

As they watched the video, Libby twirled her fingers in Vanity’s hair, tickling the back of her neck. Vanity turned to face her. “Are you just torturing me or is this going somewhere?”

Libby took Vanity’s empty glass and placed it beside hers on the coffee table. Sliding up her dress, she straddled Vanity’s lap and settled against her. “I’ve dreamed of this,” Vanity whispered against her lips as she kissed Libby.

Everything else faded away as Vanity slowly moved her lips against Libby’s. Vanity tentatively ran her tongue between Libby’s lips then along her teeth. She thrilled as Libby’s tongue engaged hers. They kissed and caressed each other until they couldn’t breathe.

“Why don’t we take this upstairs,” Vanity suggested, kissing down Libby’s neck to the spot between her breasts.

Libby gasped for air. “I thought you’d never ask.”

In her short lifetime, Vanity Chase had been with more women than she could remember but no one had ever made love to her like Libby did. The brunette’s desire for Vanity seemed unquenchable. She left no place on Vanity’s body untouched and she begged Vanity to do the same to her.

Nothing compared to being with Libby. It was like riding a tornado—dizzying, exhilarating, and breathtaking. Vanity fell onto the bed beside Libby, moaning her name.

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Libby moved to lay on top of her, but Vanity gently pushed her back onto the bed. “Enough. I’ve had enough.”

She wrapped her arms around Libby and pulled her close. “Sleep,” she mumbled.

CHAPTER 6

May 10-Saturday

Vanity kept her eyes closed as soft fingertips walked up her body and fondled her breasts. “Are you going to sleep all day?” Libby whispered into her ear. Her soft warm breath sent shockwaves careening through Vanity’s body.

Vanity ran a quick check of her slender frame to ascertain that all her body parts were still in place. Libby could get rough. “I’ve never been with anyone like you,” she declared. “You’re . . . unbelievable.”

“That’s because there is no one like me,” Libby giggled, kissing her lips.

“Let me brush my teeth,” Vanity begged. “I promise kissing will be more enjoyable.”

“I’ll do the same.”

Libby was back in bed with the covers pulled up to her waist. Vanity stopped to admire her perfect breasts.

“I thought you might like to use that with me,” Libby motioned to the marital aid she’d placed on the nightstand. “Have you ever worn one before?”

Vanity nodded and donned the strap before slipping back into bed with Libby. “Is this the surprise from the canvass bag?” she asked.

“It is my favorite thing.” Libby kissed her as she settled onto Vanity, moving up and down on her, grinding into her. Vanity watched the brunette’s eyes as she caressed Libby’s breasts and thrust to meet her as she pushed down.

Vanity couldn’t control herself. She bucked up as Libby moved against her, caught long dark hair in her fists, and pulled Libby’s lips to hers. She raked her fingernails down Libby’s back, spurring her on faster, harder. She flipped Libby under her and drove into her.

“Yes! Yes!” Libby screamed. “Don’t stop, baby.”

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Vanity moaned as Libby dug her fingernails into her back. “Deeper,” Libby demanded.

They climaxed together, each crying out the other’s name. Vanity didn’t know when she lost consciousness. Loving Libby was too incredible to endure.

“Are you okay?” Libby gently tapped Vanity’s cheek with her fingers.

“I’m good,” Vanity heaved, trying to catch her breath. “You took away my breath. I couldn’t breathe.”

The depth of darkness in Libby’s eyes was unfathomable as Vanity lost herself in them. “No one has ever made love to me like that. I can’t believe you let me do that to you.”

“I don’t care that I’m not your first,” Libby smiled. “But I do intend to be your last.”

“You can count on that,” Vanity promised as she slipped into an exhausted sleep.

May 11-Sunday

It was almost sundown when Vanity awoke. She felt the bed next to her hoping to touch Libby, but it was empty. She sat up and looked around. Libby’s clothes were gone. Her heart sank as she realized Libby was no longer there. She slipped on her jeans and a polo and headed downstairs. *Maybe she’s in the kitchen.*

Libby had cleaned the kitchen and put last night’s dishes in the dishwasher. A note was propped against a coffee cup in the center of the kitchen island. “Thank you for a memorable evening. Looking forward to sharing many times like this one. Call me. Love you.”

Vanity carried the note around the kitchen as she made coffee. She tried to call Libby but reached her voicemail. “I just called to say I can’t stop thinking about you.”

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She was pouring cream into her coffee when the gate screeched. “Thank you, God! She’s back,” Vanity said aloud and padded barefoot to the front door to meet her lover.

She turned on the outside flood lights and stepped onto the front porch as the rattling chains and pounding of horses’ hooves struck fear in her heart. She ran upstairs and grabbed her pistol, determined to stop whoever was tormenting her. She ran out the front door as the noise stopped behind her house. Suddenly, her hens started squawking and screaming as if something was throwing them off their roosts. Vanity had never heard such a commotion. Barefoot she ran down the side of her house as the horses and wagon took off around the other side.

Determined to catch the horses and their driver, Vanity turned around and ran toward the front of her house as the rattling chains and horses’ hooves thundered across her front yard, down the drive, and out the gate. The gate made a grating noise as it closed behind them.

Vanity ran into the house and grabbed a flashlight. *If that bastard hurt my hens, I’ll kill him*, she thought.

She charged into the chicken coop to find all her hens sleeping peacefully. She flashed the light on each of them and they never moved from their roost.

Vanity ran inside the house. She washed her face in cold water, then sat down on the stool at the kitchen island. *I’m losing my mind*, she thought. Her hands shook as she texted Libby. “Please come back. I need you.”

Libby replied immediately. “On my way.”

CHAPTER 11

Vanity turned on the hot water and stepped into the shower. Her body ached—in a good way—from her time with Libby. She washed her hair, loving the feel of the hot water washing away the cold fear in the pit of her stomach. She fixed her hair and was dressed when Libby rang the doorbell.

Vanity opened the door and let Libby enter. Libby frowned as she looked into her lover's face. "You look like hell! Baby, I'm so sorry. I didn't intend to leave you in such a state."

"You didn't," Vanity said. "I have fresh coffee."

"Yes." Libby followed her into the kitchen, glancing at the handgun on the island. "What's going on, Vanity?"

"I wish to hell I knew," Vanity swore. "I'm going to share something with you that will make you doubt my sanity. I know I do."

Libby accepted the offered cup of coffee and settled on the stool next to Vanity. She listened aghast as Vanity told her of all the strange happenings inside and outside the house. "Tonight, the wagon drove to my chicken coop and threw all my hens off their roosts then circled my house and went down the drive and out the gate. The sound was horrendous."

"Did you get a look at the driver? What did he look like?"

"That's the problem, Libby. I never saw anything. The chickens were sound asleep. The horses and chains rattled right past me. All that noise and I never saw anything. I only heard the sounds."

Libby stood, wrapping her arms around Vanity and pulling her face between her soft breasts. She rocked her and stroked her blonde hair for a long time. "I'm staying the night, Baby" she said. "Let's face this thing together."

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Vanity nuzzled her face between Libby's soft warm breasts and tightened her arms around Libby's waist. "You have a way of making the world go away," she murmured.

"I left the canvas bag upstairs," Libby muttered against her lips. "I want you to use the strap on me all night long."

"Oh God," Vanity moaned as Libby pushed her body harder against her.

They ran up the stairs like two schoolgirls headed for an adventure. That was exactly what Libby was, an adventure. "Undress me," she commanded as she fell onto the bed.

Vanity dropped her own clothes onto the floor, donned the strap, and stood at the foot of the bed slowly admiring Libby's body. Unclothing Libby was like opening a deliciously wonderful present.

She slipped off Libby's shoes and firmly slid her hands up the brunette's thighs, eliciting a loud moan from Libby as she gripped her tighter nearing the apex of her legs. She slowly unfastened Libby's pants and stood up to watch her face as she slid the jeans down her body. "Touch me," Libby instructed.

"When I'm ready," Vanity muttered. She dropped Libby's pants onto the floor and got on her knees between Libby's legs. She stroked her lover's thighs, teasing the area Libby needed touched.

She wanted to bury her face in Libby, but more than that she wanted to make Libby beg for what she was about to do to her.

A practiced lover, Vanity kissed her way up Libby's legs-first one and then the other. Libby writhed and clutched at her hair trying to pull Vanity's mouth to her, but Vanity moved to her stomach and kissed her way up to Libby's breast.

Vanity caressed Libby's breasts, giving each one equal attention. Continuing to caress one breast, she licked the other, making Libby gasp. "Please!" Libby pleaded. She circled Libby's areola with her tongue then flicked the erect

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nipple causing Libby to scream out her name. She teased the nipple as Libby fisted her hair and pulled her mouth onto her breast. Giving into her desire to suck Libby, she pulled Libby's breast into her mouth and suck, licked, and nipped until Libby was crying for relief.

"I need you in me," Libby begged. "Please, I need this."

"Not yet."

"Please, just put it against me. Just the tip. Please," Libby pleaded." She raked her nails down Vanity's back and bucked up at the same time. Vanity sank into her.

"Yes! Yes! Oh God yes Vanity. Yes!" Libby screamed.

Vanity lost track of time. Her world was filled with warm, moist kisses, soft breasts, lips, fingers, and tongues. She seemed to merge into Libby as her lover demanded more of her. "Harder, faster, deeper," echoed over and over in the night.

"You're hurting me baby," Libby whimpered, and Vanity realized she had Libby's breast in a vise-like grip. "I'm so sorry." She gently caressed the breast kissing it and mumbled against it. "I just can't get enough of you."

May 12-Monday

The smell of cooking bacon mingled with coffee wafted up the stairs and into Vanity's dreams. She reached for Libby, but no one was there. She rolled onto her back and replayed the night before. Libby had been loving and nurturing, holding her and telling her not to worry because she was there. She would always be there. She would always let Vanity do the things she wanted to do to her.

She closed her eyes and recalled Libby's ferocious appetite for the things they had done to one another. They had made love in every position imaginable. With Libby constantly begging for more, harder.

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Vanity cringed at the sound of something coming up the stairs. She frantically looked around for her gun and recalled it was in the kitchen. The sound came closer and Vanity cowered under the covers.

“Breakfast in bed, baby” Libby announced, entering the room.

Vanity whimpered in relief as the beautiful woman brought light into her world. She pulled herself up in bed, leaning against the headboard as Libby placed the tray on the nightstand, then tossed Vanity a Henley. “As much as I enjoy the beauty of your body, you should wear something while you eat. Hot coffee and soft breasts can be a recipe for disaster.”

Vanity pulled the shirt over her head and leaned back as Libby placed the tray across her lap. “Two sweeteners and cream, just as you like it.” Libby leaned over and brushed her lips against Vanity’s.

They quietly sipped their coffee, enjoying the hot, bold liquid. Libby broke the silence. “Vanity, I heard nothing last night except the storm you created in our bed.”

“Neither did I. Thank you for staying with me.”

“I enjoyed it,” Libby admitted. “It was nice to make love with you, cuddle you, and feel you cling to me. It’s been a long time since someone has needed me, and no one has ever made me feel the things you do.”

Vanity knew she had clutched Libby to her all night. Libby had become her lifeline to sanity. Before she could voice her need for Libby the brunette’s phone rang. Libby’s eyes darted around the room as she listened to the caller.

“I have to go,” Libby said, slipping the phone back into her pocket. “A client is demanding a meeting with me. Do you need me to return tonight?”

“If you can.” Vanity tried not to sound too needy.

“I will, darling. Believe me if I had time I’d beg for a replay of last night.” Libby kissed her goodbye and hurried from the room.

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Vanity ate breakfast and showered. She stood naked in front of her mirror to dry her hair. “Jesus, no wonder the water made my body sting.” she gasped out loud.

She surveyed her torso in the mirror. Long scratches ran between her breasts and bruising was beginning to show a perfect handprint on her right breast. Her arms and neck were covered in claw marks. She trembled as she recalled how Libby had turned pain into unimaginable pleasure. She ached for tonight and a replay of the previous night. No woman had ever been able to take what she dished out and return it tenfold. Libby was her soulmate.

She dressed, counting the minutes until Libby would be back in her arms. She walked slowly down the stairs, checking out the corners as she went. She relaxed when she spotted the handgun on the kitchen counter. She buckled the holster around her waist and secured the gun in it.

As the day passed, she became braver knowing that Libby would be with her during the night. The haunting only seemed to manifest itself when Vanity was alone.

She fed the chickens, counting to make certain they had survived the night, and was relieved that they were all there.

It was late in the afternoon when Vanity practiced with her pistol. She was glad to see she was still accurate. She returned to the house and was cleaning her gun when Libby texted her. “Don’t worry about dinner. I’ll bring Chinese.”

She holstered the cleaned pistol, pulled a beer from the fridge, and relaxed in a recliner, hoping to steal a couple of hours sleep before Libby got home.

The screeching of the gate opening pulled Vanity from a deep sleep. It was dark, and she reached for her cellphone to check the time. Her heart stopped when she saw the message from Libby. “Sorry, Babe. Can’t come tonight. Something’s come up.”

The noise started, rumbling up the drive, chains rattling and horse hooves pounding to the beat of her heart. Determined to put a stop to the shenanigans, Vanity ran out

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the front door as the sound stopped at the hen house and threw all her chickens off their roosts. She didn't run to the chicken coop. She ran to the front gate. She planned to be waiting for the culprits when they came down the drive. Vanity was halfway to the gate when she heard the sound bearing down on her. She drew her gun and turned to face the menace. To her amazement, nothing was there. Nothing at all.

Then the sound ran over her, engulfing her in horrible screams, howling, and shrieking all around her. Cold! The cold was unbearable. *This must be death*, she thought. Vanity twirled around like a leaf caught in a cyclone. The coldness numbed her as it passed through her body. She crumbled to the ground and lay in the fetal position. The sounds of Hell continued out the gate and down the road, fading away.

Much later, Vanity managed to sit up. Crawling on her hands and knees, she searched in the darkness until her hand touched her gun then holstered it. Still chilled to the bone, she fumbled her cell phone from her pocket and called Libby. The call went to voicemail. Libby never answered her phone.

On legs almost too weak to carry her, Vanity stumbled to the house, pulled herself upstairs, and fell across the bed. Her dreams were filled with screams, unearthly howls, the screeching of dragging metal and rattling chains as steel grated across the pavement.

May 13-Tuesday

Vanity awoke in a cold sweat gasping for air. *What had awakened her?* She listened as someone moved all her furniture downstairs, then the sound of a bag of rocks dropping, shaking the walls of the house. She tried to phone Libby but again it went to voicemail. She touched the handgun that was still strapped to her and gathered the

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courage to stand. She had to contact Libby. The haunting only happened when she was alone.

She walked downstairs. All the furniture was in its usual place. There was no tow sack filled with rocks, only a giant spiderweb in the corner.

Vanity took her truck fob from its spot by the garage door and walked to her truck. She had to talk to Libby. She drove to the real estate office and walked in. Four desks—two on each side of the room—featured name plates for the four agents. “May I help you?” the agent with the name plate Martha Crow asked.

“Yes, I need to see Ms. Reed,” Vanity said.

“We have no one by that name,” Martha replied.

“Libby Reed,” Vanity insisted. “Long black hair, black eyes, slender, about five feet, four inches tall.”

The four women shook their heads. “She sold me a house.” Vanity fought to keep from screaming at them.

“What’s the address?” Martha asked, tapping her keyboard.

Vanity gave her the address and waited as she pulled up the house and turned the monitor screen toward her.

“Is this the property you purchased?”

“Yes. I bought it about two weeks ago.”

“This house isn’t for sale,” Martha said.

“I know. I told you I just purchased the damn thing.” Vanity was getting angry.

“It’s been off the market over a year,” another agent volunteered. “The owner has no wish to sell it. The neighbors say it’s haunted.”

“It is!” Vanity screamed. “By demons from Hell.”

Vanity caught sight of her reflection in a darkened plate glass dividing an office from the women. *I look like a mad woman*, she thought. She hadn’t stopped to comb her hair that was tangled and shooting in all directions. Her eye makeup was smeared and running down her face, making her look like some macabre demon.

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She turned on her heel and ran to her truck. Inside her vehicle she called the woman she had purchased the house from. “This number has been disconnected,” the recording answered.

Vanity buried her face in her hands, trying to decide what to do. *How do I locate Libby? The restaurant! I bet she’s having lunch.*

She drove to the Chinese restaurant, parked, and went inside, praying Libby was at their regular table.

Their usual waitress approached her. “May I help you?”

“I’m looking for my friend,” Vanity explained. “The brunette I normally dine with.”

The woman’s vacant stare agitated Vanity. “We were just in here a couple of days ago. We come here all the time.”

“You were here,” the waitress agreed, “but you were alone. You are always alone. You order only one meal.”

“Because we always split it,” Vanity screamed.

Vanity backed from the restaurant, keeping her eyes on the waitress. *Something is wrong*, she thought. *This is like the Twilight Zone.*

###

As Vanity pulled into the garage her phone dinged with a text from Libby. “Sorry about last night. I’ll definitely see you tonight.”

Vanity inhaled deeply and expelled the air slowly. She would see Libby tonight and get to the bottom of this. More than anything she wanted the haunting to happen while Libby was there so she could verify Vanity wasn’t losing her mind.

The sun went down, and darkness settled over the small farm as Vanity walked onto the front porch. She decided to walk to the gate and meet Libby. She double checked her gun, leaving the holster’s security strap open so she could draw it quickly.

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She had walked a hundred feet when she heard the wagon arriving at the gate. Pulling her pistol, she braced herself for her duel with the devil. The sound of rattling chains, metal grating against concrete, and the beat of horses' hooves mesmerized her. The sound moved slowly, taking its time to reach her. As it engulfed her Vanity gasped, and a freezing cold seized her body, making it impossible to breathe. Her limbs were useless. The sound lifted her and whipped her around. She tried to scream but couldn't open her mouth.

A voice! A voice called her name as Vanity twirled. A bright white light cut through the sound and Libby reached out for her. "Oh, Vanity."

"You!" Vanity screamed. "You came back for me!"

"I told you I'd be your last." The clamoring roaring sound violently shook her, dislodging her pistol from her hand slamming it to the ground. One shot fired and Libby disappeared. The sound carried Vanity up the drive, into the chicken coop, and out again. It circled the house and headed toward the exit. Dropping Vanity where it had picked her up, then disappeared through the gate.

CHAPTER 12

May 25-Sunday

The movers packed everything into the moving van and drove away, leaving the house as empty as it had been the first time Vanity had looked at it. The only things left to pack were the priceless heirlooms on the mantle and the gold framed photo of the beautiful woman.

“We’re here to collect the chickens,” the poultry company advised. “We know where they are.”

A large flatbed trailer pulled through the gate and stopped in front of the barn. They watched the driver in a Coors Beer cap load the new John Deere tractor and drive away as the local sheriff’s car rolled up the driveway.

Luke and Malcomb walked outside to greet the Sheriff. “I wanted to tell you once again how sorry I am for your loss,” the sheriff expressed his condolences.

“Thank you. Did you check on the marks on my sister’s body?”

“Yes, I have a copy of the coroner’s report. The marks were self-inflicted. Her own skin was under her fingernails and her nails were a perfect fit for the deep scratches on her torso and back. The medical examiner concluded that Vanity was a self-mutilator.” He handed Luke a copy of the report. “I’m so sorry.”

Luke thanked the officer and they watched him drive away before entering the house.

“I’ll take the family heirlooms,” Luke said. “My mother will want them back.”

Malcomb Levy handed him a sheet with a list of the items checked off. “Just sign here so nothing comes back on me.

The attorney held a manila file folder out to Luke. “What should I do with this blank check for \$400,000 and a

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scribbled warranty deed for this property. The envelope is postmarked May 2. Vanity mailed it to me.”

“I’ll take care of it.” Luke picked up the gold framed picture. “This is an old cover of *Country Music People Magazine* featuring a beautiful woman. Do you know who she is?”

“Yes, she’s the woman who died in the accident caused by Vanity’s drunk driving. Her name was Elizabeth Reed.” Vanity’s attorney answered. “Damned shame.”

“Do you think Vanity committed suicide or was it an accident?” her brother pondered out loud. “After the wreck she went to several psychiatrists seeking help. One diagnosed her with post-traumatic stress disorder, and another said she was suffering from survivor’s guilt.”

“With Vanity, we will never know.” The attorney shook his head. “She took that secret to the grave with her.”

THE END

I hope you enjoyed this Halloween short story. If you did, please leave me a review at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B09B4Z5BSK>

Haunting Vanity by Erin Wade

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Below are the first six chapters of my newest release “Dark Justice.” It is now available for preorder at [ENTER LINK](#)

It is new and different, and I hope you love reading it as much as I loved writing it.

Chapter 1

The huge black cat flattened against the tree limb and watched as the thugs ran into the campsite killing the weekend campers. They looted and ravaged the two couples who were on an outing to get in touch with nature.

A pregnant woman fought the hardest trying to save her unborn child but, in the end, she was left bleeding beside the body of her dead husband as the looters rode out of camp.

Kinga had seen the pillagers before. They preyed on law abiding citizens and people vacationing in the canyons. Palo Duro Canyon had been Kinga's home for as long as she could remember. Always on the move, the big cat roamed the second-largest canyon in the United States at will, careful to avoid human encounters.

Considered a mythical legend in the Texas Panhandle Kinga was a black jaguar but the stories related about her always described her as a panther. Capable of running thirty-five miles an hour she roamed the one-hundred-twenty-mile-long gash in the Texas landscape.

A nocturnal creature the black jaguar had a keen sense of smell and excellent eyesight. Right now, Kinga was listening to a soft mewling sound. It seemed to come from the woman. She knew the woman was dead because one of the looters had slashed open her stomach.

Kinga silently dropped from her perch on the tree limb, her ears turned to magnify the sound. Stealthy she approached the woman. The smell of blood made her lick her lips running her tongue over sharp canines. She was hungry but preferred a fresh rabbit to a human.

She slinked to the woman and watched her body. She inched closer as the sound came again. Suddenly a tiny hand reached toward the night sky and a wail that rivaled Kinga's own broke the silence. Flattened against the ground Kinga

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watched as a tiny foot joined the hand in its macabre stirring of the night winds.

Kinga inched toward the sound and stood to her full height. She found herself standing above a tiny human that was shrilly declaring its hunger. The pitiful thing wouldn't make a decent meal. She backed away from the baby, but something drew her back to it. She picked it up, careful not to puncture it with her teeth. The puny thing didn't weigh as much as a newborn kitten.

Kinga padded from the massacre scene wondering what to do with the tiny creature. She carried it to one of her many lairs that dotted the canyon and placed it on the animal skins she had left from various meals.

Leaving the whimpering baby Kinga prowled the canyon floor searching for a female deer or goat. The baby needed milk if it were to survive. Sniffing the night winds, she located a doe and her fawn bedded down in a nearby thicket. She knew she couldn't get the doe to the baby, so she swiftly returned to the newborn and carried it to the doe.

Approaching on the downwind side of the doe, Kinga was standing over the mother before the deer realized she was in danger. Placing a powerful paw on the doe, Kinga prevented her from standing. She dropped the baby against the doe's teats and nudged the infant until it found a nipple to suck. Terrified the doe remained motionless as her own fawn snuggled into the human and both began to nurse.

Kinga, the doe, fawn, and baby formed an unlikely family. On more than one occasion the powerful panther saved the doe and fawn from being eaten by predators and the doe accepted the tiny human as her own.

##

Kinga sunned herself on the flat rock overlooking the valley. Her green eyes never left the naked child chasing the buck that she thought of as her brother. To Kinga's delight the girl's laughter echoed through the canyon as Anton

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carefully jabbed at her with his antlers. She caught his rack, and they began the daily wrestling match that the big buck always won. Kinga knew how the game would end. The girl would leap onto the flat rock, Anton would move close to it so she could jump onto his back and they would race around the canyon until both were exhausted.

Just as Kinga had been given her name many years ago, the wild things in the canyon had named the human child. She was known as Sage. Kinga had no idea how her name had evolved only that it easily rolled off the tongue. Sage, it almost tickled her mouth when she growled it.

Knowing Sage was safe with Anton, Kinga slipped from her perch and padded across the canyon to the water hole where she could catch an unsuspecting waterfowl or rabbit for their supper.

Kinga had been surprised that the human could use its thoughts to communicate with her and other animals. Of course, all animals had the ability to do that and Kinga had met a few humans who had the capacity but never quite achieved the ability.

The big cat reasoned that the telepathy was a result of having an open mind and it came naturally to the girl. Kinga drank from the small stream that gave life to the canyon and spotted a large crappie hiding under a rocky outcrop of the stream's bank. She would surprise Sage with fish for their evening meal.

##

The winter of Sage's sixth year a severe coldness swept over the canyon bringing ice and snow. All the animals burrowed into their lairs to stay warm until the thaw came. Sage became ill and Kinga reasoned she had no winter fur to protect her. Leaving the child covered in rabbit skins, the jaguar went in search for something that would provide a skin large enough to cover her cub.

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Kinga considered the bison that grazed the park but knew the hairy animals were difficult to kill and would fight her to the death. She spotted a herd of Barbary sheep and began following them at a distance trying to ascertain the oldest and weakest of the herd. She had overheard tourist talk about the sheep who were native to north Africa and had been brought to the park in the 1950's.

The Barbary were large but not as fierce as the bull bison. She spotted an old ewe crippled with age that was unable to keep up with the herd. She knew she could kill the animal quickly and drag it back to her den.

Crouching close to the ground Kinga inched along the rough terrain until she was a few feet away from the ewe. The sheep stumbled and Kinga pounced taking her to the ground. In one quick motion Kinga bit through the ewe's skull between the ears delivering a fatal bite to its brain.

A low growl behind Kinga made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. She had been so focused on the ewe she had not noticed any other animals. She sprang sideways as a bobcat lunged but a claw caught Kinga in the neck. By the time the attacker regained its balance Kinga was facing him.

The largest cat native to the Americas and the third largest in the world, Kinga far outweighed the bobcat. The smaller cat had the good sense to skulk away from the black panther.

Kinga circled the ewe making certain there were no other predators waiting to take her kill then she clamped her teeth into the ewe and dragged it like a rag doll back to her cave for her cub.

Sage huddled beneath the rabbit skin as Kinga's powerful canines slit and pulled the skin from the ewe. The skin was still warm when she wrapped it around Sage then piled the rabbit skins back on her.

Kinga lay beside Sage pulling the small child into her for warmth, but the girl was lifeless. Desperate to save her

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cub, Kinga placed Sage's mouth over the wound the bobcat had opened and encouraged Sage to nurse her blood. Both purred as they fell asleep.

The next morning Sage was much better and hungry. Although she lacked the powerful bite of her adopted mother, she wasted no time satiating her hunger with the carcass of the ewe. The meat from the sheep would last them for several days allowing Kinga to stay close to Sage and keep her warm.

##

Summer brought new visitors to the canyon and Kinga led her cub into the most remote part of the gorge to their summer lair.

Sage was ten when she encountered her first human, a girl wearing jeans and a t-shirt. The girl stood motionless as Sage circled her on all fours. A shrill scream echoed from the canyon walls as Kinga spotted her cub with the human.

The girl ran toward her family's camp and Sage dashed toward the sound of the roar. Campers and guides laughed at the girl when she tried to tell them about the half-naked human she had encountered.

The girl's image stayed with Sage as she studied her own reflection in the stream. *That looked very much like me, she thought to Kinga. What was it?*

A human, Kinga answered. They are dangerous. They played with your parents for hours, before killing them. Humans are cruel. They kill for fun. We only kill to survive.

May I observe them? Sage asked.

No, it is too dangerous.

##

From her perch high above the campsite Kinga studied the girl Sage had seen. The big cat knew it was only a matter of time before her cub was discovered by humans. She knew

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Sage needed to wear some type of covering. She waited until the family began their hike down the canyon then slipped into the girl's tent and stole the clothing, she had worn the night before.

Sage warily poked at the offering Kinga dropped at her feet and shrugged. *Wear*, Kinga commanded.

After several failures, Sage managed to pull the cloth over her legs and up to her waist. She worked with the zipper and snap until she secured the clothing around her waist. It took her a couple of tries to get her head through the right hole of the t-shirt. She resisted putting her arms through the sleeves feeling restrained. She finally pulled the shirt over her body and flexed her muscles. The covering was confining and chaffed her in places, but Kinga insisted she wear it.

By her sixteenth year Sage had learned much from observing humans. She had learned the chaffing cloth was called jeans and the soft upper garment was a t-shirt. She had also learned to steal a silky item that protected her from the chaffing of the jeans. She learned about feminine hygiene and stole boxes of soft bandages every chance she had wondering if her malady would ever heal.

Chapter 2

Courtney (Court) Southerland slipped her degree back into its folder, tucked it into her duffle bag, and set out to conquer the world. A confirmed genius, Courtney had graduated from high school at sixteen, completed her college degree in digital journalism in two years, and attained her masters at twenty. She had been driven to complete her conventional education so she could explore and discover things others had not experienced.

Her doctorate at Columbia University in New York—a documentary on polar bears in the artic—had won her an Oscar nomination but no Oscar. The three years spent in the polar region located at the northernmost part of the earth had driven her to the heat of Texas.

Turning down lucrative offers from local and national television stations, Court planned to take off a year from the world in general. She had wrangled a grant from the state of Texas to produce a documentary on the Palo Duro Canyon. She planned to set up camp in a cave she had discovered as a teenager and live in the canyon documenting the creatures that made their home there. One animal had caught her attention, a black jaguar.

Most Texans scoffed at the legend of the big cat, but Court had seen it many times during her exploration of the canyon. It was true Court was curious about the jaguar, but she was obsessed with the girl she had seen running wild with the animal.

Using part of her grant, Court purchased a Ford Ranger Lariat with four-wheel drive to explore the canyon, and a 45-caliber automatic pistol with holster, along with the best binoculars on the market. Her filming equipment was already top of the line thanks to a documentary she did last summer on the migration of the Mexican free-tailed bats from central Mexico to Austin, Texas.

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Court stood on the rim of the canyon admiring God's handiwork as the sun came up and washed the walls with many colors. The ringing of her cellphone broke the silence and her brother's face filled the screen.

"Hi Court. Just checking to make sure you made it okay." Zeb said when she answered.

"I'm standing at the rim of the canyon absorbing its breathtaking beauty," Court replied.

"Tell me again, how long you plan to stay in the wild?"

"Until I have collected enough footage to tell the story of this canyon and its beauty," Court answered. "You should take off a few days and visit me."

"I just might do that." Zeb chuckled.

"I'm going to check in with the park administration and let them know I'm here. I've already cleared it with them to set up camp wherever I want so I should be in a tent beneath the Texas sky by nightfall."

"Be careful, Sis. You know they have problems with marauders."

"I've got Jake with me and I'm packing. I will set up perimeter alarms, so I should be okay. With any luck at all I'll find a nice cave somewhere."

Court said goodbye to her brother and whistled for Jake to join her in the truck. The Dark Belgian Malinois bounded to her and waited patiently while she opened the door on the passenger's side.

A former police dog Jake had been shot on his last assignment and retired from the force. The vet treating him had called Court. "You can have him for the vet bill," he had said. The vet bill had been almost a month's pay, but Jake was worth every penny.

At thirty inches tall, Jake was big for the breed and the most ferocious dog Court had ever seen. She had nursed him back to health and gained his undying adoration. He followed her everywhere and was the epitome of protectiveness.

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“I’d rather take on two grizzlies than Jake,” her brother had declared.

##

Court checked in with the park security officer and discussed her plans. “Where will you set up camp?” Security Park Ranger Kent Langley asked her eyeing the dog at her side.

“I’m not certain where I will set up permanently. If it is okay, I’d like to explore before making that decision.”

“It would be helpful if you could give me an answer by the end of the week.” Langley shrugged. “Do you have a firearm?”

“Yes.”

“You know it is a crime to shoot anything in the canyon?” he added.

“It’s purely for self-protection against the two-legged beasts that roam the place,” Court assured him. “I’ve been warned about the gangs that occasionally gets their jollies by slaughtering campers.”

“Yes, but we try to downplay that.”

“Don’t you think campers should be warned so they can protect themselves?” Court questioned.

“I don’t make the rules, I just enforce them. I am betting your dog would die protecting you.”

“He would,” Court affirmed, “but I love him too much to let that happen. Here’s a photo of my vehicle, license plate number, and a picture of me. Just in case we go missing.” Court grinned.

Langley laughed. “Looks like you have it covered. Be safe Ms. Southerland. I’d hate to tell the world we lost a pretty woman like you.”

After driving for miles, Court shifted the Ranger in four-wheel drive and left the paved road heading for rougher terrain.

Chapter 3

Court drove the last stake into the ground as the sun disappeared from the sky. She had gathered firewood, dug a pit, and set up her alarm perimeter leaving the tent for last. She lit the paper stuffed under the dry twigs and watched the fire jump to life.

The wrought iron skillet sizzled as she flipped the hamburger patty and stirred the mushrooms cooking beside it. Reluctant to survive on k-rations she had purchased a Titan Deep Freeze ice chest guaranteed to keep ice for eight days. She hoped the ads for the chest were factual since she had packed enough meat, eggs, and milk to last a week.

She had placed video cameras at each corner of her parameter to capture her activities as she set up her camp site. If her documentary was well received, she would try to sell advertising to companies whose products she used. She moved in close with another camera to show the Titan cooler and its contents.

Court was aware that she was being watched. Although Jake's hackles were standing, he didn't growl, indicating something was out there but not dangerous. She stood and walked around her camp, staring into the darkness trying to get a look at her peeping Tom but saw nothing. The little hairs on the back of her neck stood up and she considered sleeping in her locked truck.

Get over yourself, she thought. I need a good night's sleep for the day ahead of me. I won't get it scrunched up in the back seat of the Ranger.

She made certain the fire was out, walked to her tent, and took one last look around, but nothing presented itself. Jake made a pass around the perimeter then went into the tent. Although it was hot on the canyon floor, she closed and fastened the tent flap. *Definitely going to find that cave, she*

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thought as she drifted off to sleep listening to the low rumble in Jake's throat.

##

Court rose with the sun and started a fire for coffee. She sipped the black liquid as she changed the SD cards in her cameras. Slipping the tiny cards into her pocket, she placed the wrought iron skillet on the fire and filled it with bacon.

After breakfast she propped against a tree and opened her laptop to see what she had captured on video during the night.

"What the hell?" Court exclaimed as she watched a giant black panther mosey through her campsite. "No wonder you didn't go charging after that thing," she told Jake. "You are a very wise dog."

The big cat ambled around the camp sniffing everything it could contact. It didn't disturb anything and even seemed docile. It leaped into the pickup bed and pawed at the Titan ice chest. Court hoped the chest was as indestructible as advertised.

Something outside the camera's coverage caught the cat's attention and it reared up, placing its huge front paws on the top of the tailgate. Court watched spellbound as a human tentatively entered the camp. At least she thought it was human.

The creature moved on all fours much like the panther. A shock of matted red hair covered its head and shoulders. Sage couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. It was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt and appeared to be relatively clean except for the tangled hair.

Court viewed all the SD cards, fast forwarding to the appearance of the human-like creature. She was certain it was the same girl she had spotted as a teenager. The reason she was here!

##

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Court secured everything in her truck bed and opened the passenger door for Jake who immediately curled up and went to sleep in the front seat. He had stayed awake all night guarding them, now it was Court's turn.

Putting the Ranger into four-wheel drive, Court eased along the canyon bottom until she spotted the area where the cave should be. She parked the truck and strapped on the top-of-the-line GoPro Camera that was about the size of a paperback. She never went anywhere without the high-definition camera and some of her best live shots came from it. Calling Jake, she began walking up the canyon walls looking for a safe place to spend her time there.

After four hours of moving shrubs and poking the bushes, she located the cave opening. Illuminating the cave with her flashlight, Court edged into the hole. She breathed a sigh of relief when she found no bones or animal skins in the cavern. She shuddered at the thought of being trapped in the den by the panther.

"Welcome to our new home Jake," she said as she scratched behind her companion's ears. "Let's drive the truck as close as possible."

Returning to the pickup was much faster than locating the cave and they pulled the vehicle within fifty feet of the cave entrance before sundown. Court carried the ice chest inside and built a fire at the entrance.

"We'll keep this burning at night," to discourage visitors," she talked to Jake as she worked. "I'm thinking bacon and egg sandwiches for dinner, big fellow."

##

Kinga and Sage watched the white-haired woman as she spread skins on the floor of the cave and started the fire both feared. *Is she dangerous?* Sage thought.

All humans are dangerous, Kinga answered.

I think I am a human.

Not entirely, Kinga responded. *You carry my blood too.*

Chapter 4

Weeks passed without Court spotting the panther or the child that traveled with it. Although she never saw them, they constantly studied her as she videoed the canyon's animals and botany. Court was careful to never damage the the canyon's ecosystem and left no evidence of her presence in the gorge.

Court made a comfortable home for her and Jake. A battery-operated lantern filled their cave with light at night and the fire repelled unwanted varmints and insects. She covered the cave floor with heavy quilts and overstuffed pillows. A small butane driven generator placed outside the cave was turned on each night to recharge Court's laptop, cameras, and cellphone. They visited the general store in Canyon, Texas once a week to replenish supplies, butane, and ice.

November brought cold nighttime temperatures to the canyon floor requiring Court to spend an inordinate amount of time collecting firewood. She ventured into an area of the canyon that was unfamiliar to her. It was deeper than her campsite and the terrain was rougher.

She filled her duffle bag with firewood and was filming the area panning from the floor to the top of the canyon walls when she spotted something running along the side of the canyon above her. Magnifying the figure, she focused on the redheaded girl and filmed her until she disappeared.

Court lost track of time as she filmed the nymph that had eluded her. Night came quickly to the canyon floor and light disappeared forcing Court to return to her cave.

Jake dropped low to the ground and growled fiercely at something that was running in the bushes beside them. "Easy boy. Don't start anything with something I can't see. It might be bigger than both of us. Heel."

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Jake fell into step with Court walking close by her side but continued his rumbling growl warning whatever was stalking them that he would fight to the death to protect the woman beside him.

Court was relieved to see the moon's light reflected from the top of her pickup. She began the climb that would take her and Jake to the cave and—hopefully—safety.

Inside the cave she quickly started the fire and peered out into the darkness trying to catch a glimpse of their stalker. “I will not lie,” she talked to Jake as she cooked their dinner, “I was terrified, but you made me feel safer. Tomorrow we go off trail and explore places we’ve never been.”

They had supper then Court put the SD card from her camera into her laptop and studied the girl she had videoed. Incredibly athletic and fast, the girl was a mystery Court wanted to solve. Where did she come from? How did she end up running the canyon with a black panther? Where was her family? Did she talk? Could she speak English? The questions were endless, and Court had gotten no closer to her than the first time she had spotted her.

Court noticed her clothes were tattered and she wore skins for shoes. Hoping the woman liked clothes as much as most women she added a red t-shirt and new jeans to her shopping list.

##

Kinga and Sage watched over the white-haired woman and her canine friend. Both were fascinated by her. She obviously loved her companion and protected him as much as he watched out for her. On the rare occasion that a black bear followed the woman, Kinga had driven it away.

Sage began moving closer to the woman and dog. She was wary of them but also attracted to them. She was on the rim above the pair when Court slipped and tumbled down the canyon wall. A big rock broke her fall, rolling a short

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distance before wedging between two huge boulders as Court slammed against it.

Dazed, Court lay on her back waiting for her head to stop spinning. An angry rattling sound alerted her to the presence of a rattlesnake. Too late she realized she had kicked it out of hibernation when she dislodged the big rock.

Court moved her arm, and a sharp pain pierced her forearm. She knew the snake had bitten her. Jake jumped at the snake then bounced back as it struck missing its mark and giving the Belgian Malinois an opening to grab it behind its dangerous head. Jake snapped off the rattler's head and tossed the body aside.

Moving one limb at a time Court ascertained she had broken nothing but was battered and bruised. It hurt to move. Still dazed, she propped her back against the rock and tried to recall her training about handling a rattlesnake bite. Her snakebite kit was in the cave. She knew the venom would reach her heart before she could make it back to the cave, still she had to try. She would surely die if she stayed where she was.

Jake whimpered and lay down beside Court. A shadow fell across the pair as the red-haired girl stood over them. She stooped down and took Court's arm. Without any fanfare, she bit into the area around the snakebite and began to suck. Sage spat and sucked until she was confident she had removed the poison from woman's arm.

"Who are you?" Court asked but Sage was gone before the blonde could stop her.

##

Court placed her items on the counter of the general store. The store owner chatted as he rang up her purchases. "Have you seen the woman that roams the canyon?"

Court scoffed. "No! Is she the locals' answer to Bigfoot?"

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The man laughed. “Something like that. You’ve been in that canyon almost six months. If you haven’t seen her, I’m guessing she is just a figment of folks’ imagination.”

“Probably some tall tale the Canyon promotion people put out to increase tourists’ interest in the park.” Court suggested.

“Two red t-shirts, two pair of jeans, moccasins, a jacket, two sweatshirts,” the man rattled off the items as he placed them in the sack. “Ladies undergarments and unmentionables. Is that it for this week?”

“Throw in this large bag of bite-sized Snickers and don’t forget I refilled the two butane tanks in the back of my truck, got gasoline, and ice,” Court reminded him.

She stopped at the meat market to pick up her order of chicken and beef. She purchased a sugar-cured ham for herself and large bone for Jake. Her last stop was Debbie’s Diner and Truck Stop where she had her one good home-cooked meal every week and a much-needed shower.

“Why don’t you plan on staying in town overnight next Friday when you come in?” Debbie suggested. “I can show you what our town has to offer.”

“I appreciate the invitation, but I can’t leave my camp unattended overnight,” Court replied.

##

I know she is watching me, Court thought as she carried her weekly acquisitions into the cave. She put everything away then walked outside with the jeans and shirt. She held them high over her head and paraded around in front of the cave hoping the girl was watching. On a flat rock in front of the cavern, she placed the clothes, moccasins, and bag containing the lady’s item. She was careful to place a small Snicker bar on top of the clothes. *Now to see if she takes the bait*, Court thought as she walked inside the cave.

She didn’t have to wait long. Sage cautiously crawled toward the offerings on the stone, looked around, snatched

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the Snicker bar, and ran into the brush. From inside the cave Court watched through a pair of binoculars. She smiled as Sage tore the wrapper from the candy and popped the sweet treat into her mouth. The look on Sage's face was pure joy as she savored the sweet chocolate and peanuts.

Sage crept back toward the rock and watched the clothes for a long time examining the surrounding area for a trap but found nothing dangerous. Tentatively she approached the shirts and jeans. It took her a while to figure out what the moccasins were but decided they would cover feet. Sniffing the air, she wondered where the white-haired woman was. She could smell Court's scent and was always surprised by the sweetness of it. She stuffed the moccasins into the sack beside the clothes and clasped the bundle to her chest. She would examine the offerings more closely once she was with Kinga.

Chapter 5

Two weeks passed and the canyon had grown colder. Sage and Kinga hunkered down in their lair. While neither of them hibernated, they did avoid the severe cold, confining their hunting to midday when it was the warmest. Sage looked forward to her daily visits to the white-haired woman's cave where she always found the delicious treats. First there had been only one, now there were two and Sage gave one to Kinga who loved the taste.

Sage scurried along the side of the canyon eager to taste the treat she knew would be waiting for her. She skidded to a stop as she realized the woman was sitting on the rock with her legs crossed indian style. Court held out her hand, palm up, holding two of the treats waiting for Sage to grab them.

Sage froze in her tracks. Was it a trick? Was the woman trying to capture her? She backed away.

"Don't go," Court murmured. Her soft voice mesmerized Sage. "You have nothing to fear."

Court slid from the rock and placed the candy in its usual place. "I'll never hurt you," she promised as she disappeared into the cave.

Sage sat motionless balanced on the balls of her feet, ready to spring into action at the slightest movement, but only the wind rustled the trees. She stood on two feet and slowly walked toward the candy.

Court held her breath. She had never seen the girl standing upright, so close. Sage usually scurried about on all fours. She guessed Sage to be about her own height but much more fit. Her body was sinewy. Well defined muscles shaped her legs and flat abs accentuated her breasts. She was a golden color from her time in the sun. Court had never gotten close enough to see the color of her eyes and today was no different.

Sage grabbed the candy and dashed into the brush.

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Court jumped when her cellphone rang. It was a number she didn't recognize but she answered it anyway. "Court, this is Debbie at Debbie's Diner. Thursday is Thanksgiving. I thought you might want to come in on Thursday instead of Friday this week. We're having turkey and dressing and all the fixings."

"I would love that," Court replied. "Thank you for thinking of me."

"I think of you a lot," Debbie flirted.

"You are very kind. I'm looking forward to Thursday. I'll bring someone with me. You will love him. He has a great sense of humor. See you Thursday."

She severed the connection before Debbie had a chance to respond. She wondered how the restaurant owner had gotten her phone number.

##

A soft blanket of snow covered the canyon during the night and Court awoke Wednesday morning to colder weather and a winter wonderland. She added wood to the fire, stood in the cave entrance sipping hot coffee, and searching for any sign of Sage. She hoped the girl was warm. She placed four of the bite-sized Snicker bars in the usual place and a sweatshirt on the snow-covered rock.

She pulled a chair up to the folding table that served as her audiovisual desk and turned on her laptop. She would stay inside and begin editing the video for her documentary.

She gasped as she reviewed the footage from the Go Camera. Her tumble down the canyon wall and encounter with the rattlesnake mesmerized her. "This is award winning stuff," she whooped to Jake.

The camera had caught the snake's head rising from the ground and striking at Jake. She was always amazed at how fast a dog Jake's size could move and gasped as he dodged the strike catching the snake behind its head.

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She silently watched as the girl appeared on the screen looking directly into the camera. *Green. Her eyes are the purest green.*

##

Court had called Zeb and was looking forward to seeing him tomorrow at Debbie's Diner. An airline pilot, he had arranged to pick up a flight into Amarillo and was delighted to make the eighteen-mile drive to Canyon to share Thanksgiving with his younger sister.

Jake tugged at her pants leg and whined. "Ready for breakfast, buddy?" She laughed.

She put the wrought iron skillet on the fire and filled it with chicken and bacon. She never fed Jake pork. Although she loved the meat, she knew pork was not good for dogs.

She whipped their eggs in a metal bowl as the meat cooked and refilled her coffee cup. A movement at the cave's entrance made her heart jump then she realized it was the girl. "Is everything okay?"

Sage cocked her head and frowned. "You don't understand English, do you?" Court asked.

Sage glanced at the cooking meat and rubbed her stomach. "You're hungry?" Court guessed as she began removing the meat from the skillet to a plate. "It's hot." She put up her hands to stop Sage from grabbing the scorching food. She picked up a piece of bacon and blew on it until she knew it was cool enough to eat, took a small bite, then handed it to Sage. "Bacon," Court said.

The girl took the offering and emulating Court, blew on it then ate it. She licked her lips and held out her hand for more.

Court laughed. "Let's try the chicken. Too much bacon might upset your stomach." She blew on the chicken then handed a piece to Sage who copied her then wolfed down the meat.

"Do you have a name?" Court asked. "I am Court."

Haunting Vanity by Erin Wade

Court patted her chest and said, “Court. Court. My name is Court.”

Sage tilted her head in vexation. Trying to understand what the woman expected of her. She held out her hand for more bacon. She shook her head no when Court offered chicken and pointed to the bacon.

“My bad,” Court snickered. “I should not have introduced you to bacon. It is addictive.”

A low growl from Jake pulled Court’s attention to the cave entrance where the black panther filled the opening. The cat was much larger than Court had thought. She mentally kicked herself for not turning on a camera when the girl entered.

“Stay, Jake!” Court handed the entire plate of food to the girl and gestured toward the panther. When the girl turned her back Court switched on her camera.

Sage pushed a piece of bacon into her mouth then walked to the big cat. “Kinga,” she whispered holding out a large piece of chicken.

Kinga gently took the chicken from the girl’s hand then looked up to her for more. The girl fed the cat the entire plate of meat then dropped the empty plate onto the cave floor. The panther backed from the cave and the girl followed it.

Court crumbled to the floor beside Jake. “Good boy. Jake is a good boy. We never want to engage that monster. It could kill both of us in a heartbeat.”

Court reached for her coffee cup and realized her hand was shaking uncontrollably. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She had to admit the panther had scared the hell out of her. She knew the girl had called the animal a name but couldn’t hear it for the beating of her own heart.

“As soon as my hands stop shaking, I’ll cook our breakfast,” Court promised Jake, making a mental note to buy a double order of meat for next week.

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Haunting Vanity by Erin Wade

Thanksgiving morning brought more snow, but Court wasn't worried about getting out of the canyon. The little Ranger's four-wheel drive had accomplished everything she had asked of it. She was sure it could handle the snow.

She put the coffee pot on the fire and walked outside to get more firewood from under the tarp. She smiled when she saw two sets of footprints in the snow—one human the other panther. She pulled the last two pounds of bacon and a pound of chicken from her ice chest and placed the meat in the largest skillet she had. She walked to the rock and placed two Snickers on it. Snickers had become her welcome mat.

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