

DARK ESCAPE

[Book One]

by
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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This book is dedicated to incurable romantics who enjoy the paranormal and fantasy as well.

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ONE

As per usual, he was late. This didn't surprise or even annoy Tara. Lateness was a pattern of her father, Ed O'Shea, for as long as she could remember. He focused his archeologist's brain on projects and all else went by the wayside. Ed traveled for work and when he was home his mind rarely joined him, preferring to focus on the job he'd just finished or would soon begin. When her mother died five months earlier, he dove even deeper into his work.

Shortly after her mother's death, the family experienced yet another loss. Her grandmother, Gertrude O'Shea, passed away at the ripe old age of ninety-two. She left stocks, bonds, and other monetary valuables to Tara's father and brother, but she surprised everyone when she left the estate and all its contents to her seventeen-year-old granddaughter. It was accompanied by a letter expressing her desire that Tara do her best to maintain and keep the property in the family. Gertrude even provided Tara with a trust fund to be used for the care and upkeep of the house as well as a modest living allowance that would support her for the rest of her life, providing she lived wisely. Tara knew her grandmother led a comfortable life, but she never imagined the old woman as well off as she proved to be, especially considering the poor condition of the old estate house that she insisted on living in right up to the moment she left this world.

Father and daughter moved into the run down ancestral home the day after Tara graduated from high school and just two months before her eighteenth birthday. They left behind the conveniences of city life, as well as lifelong friends. Of course, it was of little consequence to Ed, but Tara immediately felt the void. Even so, she'd made a solemn vow to carry out her grandmother's wishes to live in and maintain the ancestral abode and she

planned on doing just that. With a little elbow grease and a lot of determination, she intended to bring things back to their original glory.

The sun glistened off the morning dew coating the roof top as she surveyed the repair work that was immediately done upon moving in. It looked almost too pristine in comparison to the weathered exterior crying out for paint, and the random spots where the wood along the awnings threatened to crumble to the touch. There were several broken windows. Those that weren't, looked crammed into the wall at an angle, but the structure itself was still solid and sound.

Her chestnut mare's shrill whinny caught her attention. She whirled around just in time to move out of the way of the racing beauty. It brought to mind the need to put fence repairs at the top of her ever-growing maintenance list.

Sugar pranced proudly around her. Having been moved from the confines of a rigidly run boarding stable to the free and easy-going environment of a country estate brought surprising vigor to Tara's equine friend. Tara could never get enough of watching her mare's powerful muscles flex beneath her flesh as they met the demands placed on them. It was a sight to behold.

She reached up to pat Sugar's muzzle as the mare gently shoved her owner off into the direction of the barn. Sugar knew that, if she didn't prompt Tara out of her daze, there would be no breakfast. Tara's mind had a way of wandering for periods of time, with little recall of what occurred during the time passed. The clever mare quickly discovered this and stayed persistent in her efforts to regain Tara's attention; especially now that she couldn't rely on stable help to step in when her mistress stepped out.

Tara slapped her forehead as she remembered Sugar's needs and shouted to her father that she'd be back as soon as she'd fed her mare. Ed popped his head out of the window of the second story den and bellowed for

her to take her time, since he'd switched his flight to one an hour later. She shook her head, once again accepting his negligence in telling her this bit of information as part of his eccentric persona. He may be scattered and absent minded in matters he found mundane, but he'd made an effort to come home for short visits more than she could remember while growing up. She was just happy to have him around in any way, shape or form.

The odor of fresh horse manure assaulted her nostrils as she entered the old barn. The far corner was made to accommodate Sugar, but the major portion of the barn was still in dire need of cleaning and renovating.

Tara squealed, jumped back, and shuddered as a mouse scurried across her feet. Sugar never flinched. Instead, the steadfast mare impatiently nudged her feed bucket to bring Tara back to priorities such as breakfast.

Tara's body trembled. She had an unexplainable fear of mice and snakes and couldn't control her reactions whenever she spotted one. As her heart struggled to regain a steady beat, she scooped grain into Sugar's feed bucket. A flash caught the corner of her eye and chills covered her body. This was no mouse or snake; of that she was certain.

She looked around to find nothing there.

"Again," she moaned out loud. "I'm so tired of this, when will it end?"

Tara saw flashes through the corner of her eye most of her life. Mice and snakes may unnerve her, but the flashes and chills were little more than an annoyance. She returned to the task of feeding her mare and then raced back to the house. Her father postponed the flight by only an hour. They needed to get moving if he wanted to make the it to the airport on time.

A tall girl of Irish descent, Tara's long, firelight curls hugged her face and fell well below her shoulders in wild abandonment. Her finely muscled frame afforded her the strength to accomplish daunting tasks that most women would buckle under. Yet, for all her strength and power, she retained an air of femininity that brought boys flocking. Hers was the type of personality that people gravitated to. Those who didn't were generally the controlling types who were frustrated by her 'live and let live' philosophy.

Mitchell Woodbourne was one of those control freaks. She'd dated him for two years before he went off to college. She discovered his true colors shortly after he started school, when her surprise visit found him behind closed doors with a co-ed. Although her first inclination was to tear at the sneering girl's smug face, she managed to retain her dignity and storm from room with only the slamming of the door expressing her feelings. Mitch later tried to control the situation by demanding Tara realize an open relationship while in college would remove curiosity and he'd be more likely to be faithful when they married; which he was certain they'd inevitably do. She rejected the idea and suggested he go bungee jumping without the bungee.

She thought they had something special and he'd wait for her to reach a suitable age to propose marriage. In a way, she supposed his ridiculous request for freedom dating -while expecting her to sit quietly at home and wait for him- was a clear indication of what marriage to him would be like. She missed his passionate kisses and snuggling into his thick, strong arms while watching an old movie, but she could never consent to his terms.

Her cell phone rang. It was Mitch.

She entered the house in search of her father while she held her stomach with one hand and the phone to her ear with the other. She found her conversations with Mitch more and more unsettling as time went by. Although his calls were coming farther and farther apart, they were still coming. She

needed him to stop bothering her, yet she continued to answer the calls. If she had a brain in her head, she'd ignore them.

Taking a deep breath in resignation, her voice was flat as she said, "Hello Mitch."

"I see your cell phone works out there in no man's land. What other modern amenities might I find? A sink? A toilet? Running water?" Mitch said in a tone that was undeniably sarcastic.

Born and raised in a big city, he couldn't understand Tara's reasoning for living in the old, rundown estate instead of selling it and investing the money into a quality life in the hub of the city.

"Okay," she sighed, "You got your dig in for the day. What's up?" she continued.

"I was thinking about the great time we had last year in the mountains. Do you remember?" he asked in a lusty murmur.

Her body reacted to his sultry coaxing while her mind scolded that she should have known better than to answer his call. His obsession with getting her back was merely because she'd ended the relationship. Of course, she remembered. She often thought back on her times with Mitch, especially now that she lived in such isolation. It was time to move on and make new memories.

Did this conversation have a point?

She was just about to ask when he broke the silence, "Hello? Tara? Are you there?"

"What's your point?" she asked in a tone that was colder than she intended.

"Chill," he said defensively. "I just thought it might be nice to take another trip back there. Just you and me, like old days. Dennis can come, if you insist."

She stood at the foot of the stairs and craned her neck for signs of her father's progression toward leaving. An involuntarily shiver consumed one side of her body as an ice-cold breeze swept past. She glanced around in time to catch the curtains flowing in the living room, even though the windows and doors were tightly closed. She found it odd how her right side was chilled while her left side felt warm and relaxed and made a mental note to check the windows for proper insulation before winter set in.

"I'm able to enjoy the beautiful countryside right here," she replied with strained civility, "but you go ahead. It will do you good."

Her side was getting colder to the point of almost hurting. Where was that cold coming from?

"Well," Mitch gave an agitated sigh, "I'll be the judge of how beautiful your countryside is soon enough. Even though you haven't paid me the courtesy of an invitation, Dennis invited me for the weekend. We can continue this conversation when I get there."

It felt like her stomach twisted on its side as Mitch's words assaulted her ears. He sounded like a cat baiting his mouse. She should have known better than to encourage a friendship between her brother and Mitch. She couldn't expect Dennis to stop the friendship just because she broke up with him. It was true the estate belonged to her, but she'd never even think of lording that over him in any way. She'd invited Dennis to move in with her and their father, but he'd opted to remain in the city to be close to his job but visited on weekends to check in on them and help with any repairs he could.

Even though she encouraged and expected Dennis to treat the estate like it was his own, she and her older brother were going to have to have a serious talk. Boundaries needed to be set.

"Where are you staying?" she blurted.

“With eight bedrooms at your disposal, you’d make me stay in a motel out there in Deliverance?” he asked.

There was a chuckle in the undertone of his voice. He knew he’d won and savored every minute of her irritation.

The cold reached the point of unbearable. She wheeled around for a sweeping view of her surroundings. It was summer, yet this felt like winter.

As her dark green eyes landed on the source of the draft, she stood motionless. Her lids didn’t even flutter as she stared into the pale green eyes of an older man dressed in an outdated flannel shirt and wool pants. He was scowling, yet she didn’t feel frightened. Maybe it was because she was just that annoyed with him, but she sensed the scowl was meant for Mitch.

When she finally managed a blink, the old man disappeared. As did the cold.

“I have to go. Stay wherever,” she snipped as she jammed her cell phone into her back pocket.

What just happened? Who was that man and where did he come from? Better yet, where did he go? Her mind raced.

“Dad, are you ready?” she called a little shakily. “The plane won’t wait!”

Her legs were wobbly as she frantically checked the windows and locks while continuing to call out reasons for her father to hurry. She opened closet doors and pounded on their walls, listening for a hollow sound. Sometimes these old houses had hidden rooms. Maybe this man lived in one.

When she and her father were finally on the road heading to the airport, she almost said something to him about the old man, but decided against it. She saw no benefit in worrying him when he’d be half way around the world and unable to do anything to help her.

The remainder of her day was spent searching for the intruder. He probably left while she was away, but, just to be safe and to make sure he

wasn't an unwelcome squatter, she searched the house and out buildings thoroughly.

It was dusk before her search was interrupted by Dennis' Cherokee bouncing down the long, sparsely graveled drive with Mitch loudly cursing his indignation through the open window.

Sugar raced to greet them. The setting sun bounced shadows off the mare's powerful muscles as she worked them proudly. She was a sight to behold. Dennis smiled affectionately. He enjoyed the beauty of this magnificent beast. Leaping from the jeep as soon as he'd reached the parking area, he stroked her neck while she pushed him off balance with her nose. Laughingly, he put a little more swing behind his stokes, as if understanding her commands completely. He often joked that she was half human.

Mitch got out of the vehicle cautiously. He wasn't fond of animals, particularly ones that were larger than he was. Whoever heard of a horse that wandered free like a dog? This was one of the little quirks about Tara that drove Mitch crazy. She insisted on treating her animals like they were people. He was about to make a sarcastic remark about just that when he saw her stepping off the front porch.

"Dennis!" She called as she waved enthusiastically.

Mitch scowled as he watched her approach. When he was away from Tara, he held nothing but sweet thoughts for her, but, when he was in her presence, he couldn't hold down his hostility over her rejection. It was a vicious cycle.

Dennis looked at Mitch's scowl and said in a friendly, but authoritative manner, "Let's try our best to get along this weekend."

Tara let out a long groan as she reached them and joined her brother in stroking Sugar's neck.

"Oh no, I'm so sorry! I can't believe this!" she lamented.

“What?” Dennis asked smugly.

“I got involved with something this morning and I don’t know where the time went. I never made it to town like I’d planned. I have zip for dinner. How could I be so stupid?” She tapped her head with the palm of her hand and added, “I’m sorry.”

Accustomed to his sister’s tendency for being preoccupied with projects, Dennis came prepared. He winked at Mitch as he reached into the back seat of the Cherokee and produced Chinese takeout. Holding it high, he smiled with pride. At that moment, Sugar whinnied to remind them she came first. A very grateful Tara suggested her brother and ex-boyfriend to go to the house while she followed Sugar to the barn, assuring them she wouldn’t be long.

As the men entered the old estate house, a bitter cold swept over Mitch that permeated his bones.

“Did you feel that?” Mitch asked.

“Feel what?” Dennis replied.

“That...cold,” Mitch said.

“It’s practically ninety degrees, man,” Dennis said. “Are you sick?”

“I never felt better,” Mitch mused as he checked the grand foyer for the source of the draft.

He found nothing.

Mitch worked the stiffness out of his body. That cold had plagued him all through the night. The summer coverings on his bed did nothing to keep it from disrupting his sleep. He spent most of the night longing for a thick quilt or

down comforter. Scowling, he joined Tara and Dennis who were already enjoying breakfast.

The sun shining through the French doors of the breakfast nook brought out the charm of the old estate home. Tara was restoring the house to its original look. She discovered a method of repairing and cleaning the wallpaper from a “how to” show on public access television and beamed proudly at her handiwork as Mitch surveyed the surroundings. Knowing he wasn’t a fan of old, she doubted he’d appreciate her efforts or see the value in the restored rooms, but she let her pride flow anyway.

“There’s coffee,” Tara announced brightly, “and some croissants with butter and jam. If you want anything else, help yourself.”

She watched Mitch strut toward the kitchen. His thick muscles strained against his shirt. Although they hinted of an attempt to bring order to them, his unruly curls could stand a good combing. His pants were crisply creased, and his Armani shirt gleamed of newness. He was a stark contrast to the old house with its faded wallpaper and worn wooden floors.

When Mitch returned, he was washing the last of his croissant down with the remains in his coffee mug.

“I’m taking a quick walk outside,” Mitch announced. “Does anybody want to join me?”

Brother and sister replied simultaneously with, “I will.”

The two winked at each other, gave a quick chuckle, and followed Mitch outside.

Tara walked contentedly behind the two young men while observing the differences between them. Her brother and Mitch were both four years her senior, but that’s where the similarity ended. Mitch had dark hair and a large frame with a thick barrel chest and brawny arms. Dennis shared the O’Shea

green eyes and reddish blond hair. He was a few inches taller than Mitch with a lean, well defined and developed muscular frame.

The trio decided to investigate the old logging trail up the west side of the wooded hillside. Tara grew up curious to explore it, but her grandmother held firm with her warnings about the perils that awaited anyone who ventured up that path. Although she felt her grandmother a little dramatic, she was still wary about venturing it alone. If there was really peril from an abundance of lifeless trees and sliding boulders, it was irresponsible not to travel in company in case of an injury. So, she'd waited for companions before entering the forbidden territory.

The morning sun barely penetrated the canopy of the trees that coupled overhead along the path. Nature's debris covered the ground that was slick from the morning dew. The smell of earthy decay rose up as Tara's feet sunk into soft layers of rich compost created from fallen leaves and branches. Deer droppings lined the path, giving evidence of their morning and evening march to graze in the field near the woods.

Loud crunching sounded behind her and she smiled at the sight of her mare casually following them. The animal was such good company in the isolation of her new home that Tara sometimes had to remind herself that Sugar wasn't human.

Noticing Sugar was fully tacked, she scowled. She'd saddled her mare for an early morning ride just as Dennis called out for breakfast. She'd fully intended to return for that ride, so she didn't remove the tack. Mitch's offer to walk pushed that ride right out of her mind. Her scattered thinking had increased since she moved to the country and she feared her father's inability to focus was hereditary. She promised herself she'd make sure to remove the tack as soon as their walk ended.

As they approached a small clearing, Dennis pointed out a wooden structure resembling a tiny house. As they got closer, they recognized it as an old well house. Excited and filled with anticipation, she skipped ahead with Sugar close at her heels.

The amount of visible decay to the structure and the plant life that almost consumed it, warned Dennis that the abandoned well might not be safe.

“Be careful!” he called out. “You don’t know how sound that thing is and there’s no telling what you’re stepping on.”

Before Dennis finished his warning, a loud crack echoed off the hillside. The ground opened up and scooped Tara into its folds. The only sign of her having been there was the small patch of torn shirt that caught on the wood as she fell through. Sugar reared, squealed, and backed safely away.

Dennis raced toward the gaping hole that swallowed his sister while Mitch froze in his tracks.

Dennis plunged forward on his belly to the edge of the opening.

“Tara! I can’t see her! I can’t see her!” he shouted as he turned frantically to Mitch. “Run and call for help! Call 911! Call 911!”

Sugar would have been hard pressed to keep up with Mitch as he pushed his sculpted body into action while Dennis flattened his body on the ground and stuck his head as far into the darkness as he could.

Tara heard the commotion above her, but couldn’t move or call out. She felt light, as if floating. She observed Mitch intently as he sprang into action. Memories of their time together flashed before her. She remembered how shy she was when they met, and he asked her to the movies for their first date. She remembered how timid and wonderful their first kiss was and how passionate they became as time went on. She remembered how she thought she loved him and no other man could ever measure up to him. Sadness swept over her. She missed him. She longed for his familiar touch and passionate kisses. Then

came the memory of walking into his dorm room to find him making love to a co-ed. Her longing for him disappeared as quickly as it came, and she once again remembered why they were no longer a couple.

The next thing she knew, she was standing next to Sugar and her attention was directed toward her brother. Dennis struggled to see her within the bowels of the abandoned well. She reached for him and was shocked when her hand passed right through his back.

“You’re out of your body. You must return now,” said a voice in her head that wasn’t her own.

Tara gasped. Did Sugar just speak to her?

She eyed the mare and asked, “Did you say something?”

Sugar blinked a few times and shook her head vigorously.

“If you do not return now you may never be able to. You must go now,” she heard the strange voice in her head say in a commanding tone.

Suddenly bright flecks the colors of the rainbow flew about. It resembled driving through an intense snow storm, except the snow was colored. Pain shot throughout Tara’s rib cage as she gasped for air. A small cry escaped her lips.

“Tara, are you okay?” Dennis called as he cautiously stretched his torso further over the edge of the hole.

He hoped the well was shallow enough to reach down for her. To his dismay, a loud crack shot out beneath him and he was forced to scoot back to safety.

At that point Sugar was behind Dennis, pushing his back with her nose and working her hoofs into the ground. He looked over his shoulder at her and she threw her head toward the rope fastened on the side of the saddle. He sat like a helpless child on the ground. The stress of the situation made him unable to think clearly. Sugar whinnied and tossed her head more aggressively.

Dennis finally got the message and pulled himself together. He stood up and reached for the rope. Tying one end around his waist, he secured the other end to the saddle horn. The mare had no training for what he was about to ask of her and he prayed for help from above while he fought back panic and he buried his face in her strong neck.

The mare impatiently worked the ground and tossed her head, as if to say, 'get on with it'. Dennis took a deep breath and slowly felt his way down into the depths of the well. The jagged edges made an easy grip for him as he inched his way deeper into the bowels of black.

It was dark, foul smelling, and full of decay.

A soft warm breeze floated past him, carrying with it the sweet scent of honeysuckle. The refreshing difference provided a boost of energy and optimism as he preceded downward, calling for Tara as he did.

"Help," Tara moaned.

The pain in her chest prevented her from drawing enough air into her lungs to produce much more than a whisper. She could only hope her brother could hear her. The rank smell made her stomach queasy. She moved her hand and it nudged the remains of an unfortunate raccoon. Shuddering with repulsion when she realized what she'd touched, she quickly pulled back her hand.

When Dennis finally reached her, he growled with disgust as he kicked the decaying animal remains aside and knelt down to inspect the damage. She looked frail and lifeless.

He cradled her head and whispered gently, "I'm here. I'll get you out."

Dennis dug into the recesses of his mind for the method of tying the rescue noose he'd learned while in boy scouts. Panic muddled his focus. He forced himself to calm down. When he finally managed, his hands moved as if they had a life of their own.

He secured his sister with the rope -wincing with each cry that escaped her pale lips- and then commanded Sugar to back up. To his surprise, Sugar steadily worked the rope. He had little left to do except cradle her head and hold on tight as they were slowly pulled to the top. If he hadn't known better, he'd have thought they were being rescued by several draft horses.

The sound of his Cherokee barreling up the path was clear as Sugar continued to pull Dennis and Tara to safety. Leaves and mud flew as the vehicle slid to a quick stop. Mitch hopped out and rushed to help with the final stages of the pull.

As the two came into sight, Mitch reached forward and grasped Tara beneath the arms. He lifted her like she weighed that of a tiny child, lowered her gently to the ground, and then turned to assist Dennis with equal ease.

Beads of sweat coated Mitch's face and neck. His breathing was labored. He hadn't stopped to think about what he'd done. He'd just kicked his body into gear and did what he needed to do. Now, as he rested for the first time since the nightmare began, his muscles complained about the strain he'd put on them. He'd heard of situations where people developed super human strength and were able to lift things like cars in a crisis. He now knew the stories were true. He fell back onto the soft moist ground, ignoring the tiny leaves and twigs that pierced his flesh through his designer clothes.

Dennis inspected Tara. Her face was pale, and her lips were a faint purple-blue.

"Did you call for help?" He barked to Mitch, a little more gruffly than intended.

Mitch chose to let Dennis' tone of voice slide.

"They should be here any minute," he said through heavy breathing. "Should we take her to the house? I don't know. What do you do in a situation like this? Should we move her or wait?"

“How hard was it to get the jeep up here?” Dennis asked as he looked anxiously at the mucky path.

“I slid a lot,” Mitch said. He shook his head and added, “They’d be foolish to try getting an ambulance up that path.”

Dennis shook his head. He knew moving Tara, without an understanding of any injury she may have obtained during her fall, could worsen the situation, but he didn’t know what else to do.

“I don’t want to risk them getting stuck. Help me get her into the back of the jeep. Lower the back seat, will you?” Dennis asked; making a conscious effort to keep his voice less aggressive.

Mitch rose to his feet. He no longer had speed or power in his movements. It felt like lead was pumping through his veins. Each step forward was a struggle.

Dennis pulled a blanket from the back of the Jeep and spread it onto the ground near Tara.

“We can carry her in this,” Dennis suggested as he shook out the blanket and spread it next to her. “Maybe it will help balance her weight and not jog her as much. You take that side.”

They eased Tara onto the blanket and wrapped her tightly. Dennis grabbed Mitch by the wrist in a firm hold. His expression of gratitude and friendship when their eyes met caused a lump to form in Mitch’s throat.

Clearing his throat, Mitch said, “Come on buddy... on the count of three”.

TWO

Tara snuggled deep into the mound of pillows piled beneath her back to keep her torso elevated. She was released from the hospital that morning and it was wonderful to be home. Her mother's sister, Eva, gripped a bed tray as she entered the room. She'd traveled from South Carolina as soon as she learned of the accident. Tara's stomach responded with a loud rumble to the aroma of the homemade chicken soup and freshly baked rolls on the tray Eva balanced with care. She giggled as she watched her aunt struggle with the heavily laden tray.

"You're spilling my salvation," Tara teased. "You never were good with carrying trays. It's no wonder they fired you from that waitress job."

"Pick on me and I'll send you back to the hospital," Eva teased back. Her big doe-like eyes twinkled with delight.

"No, anything but that," Tara feigned despair.

Eva gently placed the bed tray across her niece's lap and then busied herself by patting more fluff into her pillows to provide more support for her back. Tara watched her fondly as she bustled about the room opening windows, shifting draperies, and picking up loose clothing.

"I felt a little breeze in my room last night, even though the windows were closed. It's warm now, but I think you should tend to it before the winter months come," Eva said. She reached forward and patted Tara's knee, "We'll focus on that when you're well again. I need to go fix dinner. Dennis is like a bear if he doesn't have a full belly."

Tara knew Dennis would be anything but a bear if there was no dinner, but feeling needed like that seemed to comfort her childless aunt; so, she said nothing. A successful writer, Eva often imposed the traits of her characters onto her companions. The siblings lovingly tolerated Eva's eccentricities -that apparently ran on both sides of the family in one form or another.

“How’s your novel coming?” Tara asked quietly between spoonfuls of the delicious soup. “What’s it about? I can’t remember.”

“The novel’s coming along fine,” Eva replied proudly. “In fact, it’s almost done. You can’t remember what it’s about because I didn’t tell you, but nice try.”

Tara heaved an impatient sigh and dove into her fare with exaggerated gusto. She hated secrets. Eva consistently refused to divulge the theme of her novels until they were in print. Her way of making it up to her niece and nephew was to present them with autographed first editions. Tara couldn’t understand where Eva came from with her superstitions. Just once she’d like to be able to know the plot before the world did.

“If you need anything before I get back, I placed a small bell on the night stand. It’s cute, right?” Eva chuckled as she finished loading her arms with laundry and headed for the door.

Her chuckling shifted to sweet singing as she made her way down the once majestic stairway with her bundle.

Tara was dipping the last of the rolls as a sponge to absorb the remains of the chicken broth when she felt that all too familiar cold on the right side of her body. When she turned toward the window she caught a flash in the corner of her eye. She sat still, barely breathing. The same man who appeared the day before her accident was standing at the foot of her bed. He stood completely still, watching her; simply watching her.

“Who are you?” Tara said, breaking the silence.

The old man stood silent and motionless.

“What do you want?” she persisted. “Where did you come from?”

The harshness of Tara’s whisper hinted at the panic she felt as the man continued to stare. Who was he? How did he get into her room? Was he a

thief, a rapist, a murderer? She scrambled for the little bell on the nightstand and swung it wildly. When she checked to see the man's response, he was gone.

"What's the matter?" Eva asked as she rushed breathlessly into the room.

The way the bell rang, she wasn't sure what to expect when she entered. The sight of her niece's pale, frightened expression stopped her in her tracks. She followed Tara's stare and saw the curtains flowing even though the windows were closed. She could see nothing except that her niece's room needed weather proofing like the rest of the house.

"I... I thought I saw someone," Tara stammered.

"Where?" Eva asked as she walked around the room looking behind fabrics, into closets, and under the bed. "There's no one here and the hall was empty."

"It must be the medicine," Tara moaned.

"Get some rest," Eva said as she patted Tara's hand and tucked the covers around her.

Seeing her niece so obviously distraught, Eva made a mental note to remind her nephew to see that the entire house was weatherproofed in time for winter, before moving to Tara's side and wrapping her in her arms.

Dennis approached his aunt from behind and placed his hands on her shoulders as she quietly rocked in the rocking chair on the patio. They remained as if suspended in time, neither one willing to speak and break the silence that permeated the air while they reveled in the beauty of the fiery orange ball that majestically inched its way behind the trees.

Dennis often marveled at such wonders of nature. When he was a small child, he'd sit in Eva's lap and study the stars. Eva used to point out the

constellations and sometimes tell stories about the gods and goddesses associated with them.

“Are you up for some wine,” Dennis asked as he rested his cheek against her cheek.

She nodded.

“I’ll get it,” he said as he placed a quick kiss on her cheek. “If you’re a good girl, I’ll let you tell me all about the stars.”

“Oh?” Eva laughed and lovingly patted her nephew’s hands. “You’re so good to me.” She rose and made her way into the house where the wine rack rested in the corner of the dining room. “Let’s see what kind of stock my dear brother-in-law maintains.”

Dennis followed her.

“I said I’d get it. You can’t sit still, can you?” he said with a teasing sigh.

She grinned sheepishly and shrugged while she continued to select a bottle of wine from the portable bar. The selection was limited, but good.

While her aunt and brother enjoyed a quiet evening of star watching and wine, Tara fell into a deep sleep; taking with her that disturbed feeling that clung tight since the man appeared in her room.

She tossed uncomfortably as she relived the experience of falling into the well. For the first time since the accident, she recalled the way she was able to communicate with her mare. She relived the piercing pain of re-entering her body and bolted up in bed, trembling as she gasped for air.

The room was abnormally dark, and she could barely see her hand in front of her. Eva, thinking Tara needed as much undisturbed rest as possible, took great pains to tightly secure the drapes over the windows to prevent any evening air from coming in through the cracks and help muffle outside noises.

A glowing ball slowly manifested in the corner of the room. Tara covered her mouth while she watched a robed figure step regally out of the ball.

It reminded her of the science fiction movies where people traveled through space and slowly re-materialize. The figure glowed in such a way that she expected to feel heat radiating from him and was surprised when she didn't. Suspecting she was still dreaming, she rubbed her eyes and squeezed them shut in hopes that when she opened them he'd be gone. He wasn't. Try as she may, she was unable to see the face of her mysterious apparition. It was tucked far too deep in the wells of the hood of a rich, blue-grey cloak.

"Hello?" she whispered.

"Greetings. May the grace and peace of the Eternal One be upon you," he said in a tone that caused a soothing calm throughout her entire body.

Then he was gone.

Tara stared while the light faded, and the room went dark again. She made a mental note to check the side effects of the medication she took and drifted peacefully off to sleep.

Her body felt weightless. The dark room around her gradually receded and she was floating amidst wisps of clouds. She felt a tug on her shoulders, as if someone was pulling her down. She resisted, briefly, before giving way the motion. As she drifted downward, her surroundings grew more visible. Beautiful lakes of an indescribable bluish-green glistened while reflecting the shapes and colors from the leaves on the trees. On the water's edge, stood a cloaked man. His cloak glistened with fine strands of gold and silver. They added to, instead of masked, the base color of blue-grey. When he moved, he created a magnificent sight.

The grip on Tara's shoulders loosened and she found herself in a field of flowers of all shapes and colors. Beds of roses without their thorns, coupled with lilacs, lilies, and every flower imaginable stretched into nothingness. Oblivious to whether it was their season or not, they simply coexisted in this massive field that seemed to go on forever. As the flowers gently brushed her

bare calves, happiness exceeding anything she'd ever felt before radiated through her. She could remain there forever.

The figure in the cloak stood motionless while she worked her way across the field of radiant colors until she would be able to reach out and touch him, should the desire to do so strike her. This time his face was clearly visible. It was a gentle face; clean and free of facial hair and milky soft in appearance. It bore no wrinkles from age, worry, or anger. His eyes were the deepest blue-green she could remember seeing. They reminded her of the water they stood next to.

He smiled softly, "Greetings. You are most welcome."

His twinkling eyes watched patiently while she drank in the sight of him.

"Who are you?" she asked when she finally found her tongue.

"I have been with you since before this embodiment and I shall be with you while you walk this planet and thereafter. We are bonded." He said in words that were a gentle soothing song to her ears. "I am Liam."

As she absorbed the words that floated gently and clearly through her head, Tara realized that Liam's mouth hadn't moved.

"I have been watching closely," Liam continued. "Since you will need assistance soon, I chose to remind you that I am here."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she murmured.

She marveled at her lack of fear. She actually felt safe and secure. She shook her head. Should she be so complaisant about this? Should she be reveling in this wondrous relaxation when she had no idea who this Liam character was? What did he mean when he said that they were bonded?

She knit her brows together and tension returned. Liam gave a little smile and gently swept his hand close past her face. She felt a slight pressure, but not his touch. Once again joy mixed with peace and tranquility swept over her.

“I am your guardian in spirit,” Liam explained. “It is my task to work with you while you are in this growth process. I am honored to assist you in expanding your knowledge of the earth plane, as well as the spiritual plane.”

His voice stayed smooth and gentle.

“I’m not sure I understand,” she stammered.

She found it difficult to harness the thoughts and form them into sentences.

“In time, you will become strong in your understanding and you will be able to share with others what you have learned,” he said. “In the beginning, you will feel tired from our meetings. I assure you this is temporary, and you should not be alarmed. No harm will come to you here. You are loved and protected. You may call on my guidance at any time, for I am always near.”

Again, Tara felt the pull on her body. It was like someone was steering her through space. The beautiful surroundings faded and once more she found herself enveloped in a cloud. She hovered there for a moment before opening her eyes and finding herself snuggled safely in her bed.

Her eyes snapped open and she cautiously checked out her surroundings. Dust speckled streams of morning sun peeked through the cracks of the fabric barrier Eva created the night before. Faint singing of the birds filtered through the glass barrier, bringing a smile to her lips. She stretched in a cat-like manner and rolled over. She wasn’t quite ready to give up that feeling of euphoria and come back to reality.

The trio lived in harmony for the next two weeks while Tara steadily regained her health. Eva and Dennis dove into some much-needed house repairs. Eva worked diligently each day, while Dennis drove in from the city on

the weekends to do what he could. They repaired a large hole in the paddock - where Eva insisted Sugar remain- and finished the paint job that Tara started on the porch.

Tara had a slow and methodical way of working. Eva, on the other hand, was swift and to the point. She completed an easy two months' worth of work for Tara in two weeks.

Eva didn't hear Tara walking up behind her as she eased herself cautiously into the wicker rocker on the patio to enjoy yet another magnificent sunset. Her muscles ached, and her movement was noticeably rigid.

"You're hurting," Tara said softly.

"You started me!" Eva exclaimed as she covered her heart with her hand. "I'm sore, but I enjoyed putting around." She let her body sink deeper into the rocker. "I think I'll go home. You're pretty well recovered and I'm behind on my manuscript."

Tara positioned herself on the cool flagstone patio at Eva's feet and laid her head in her aunt's lap. She always hated to see her aunt leave.

"I was too sick to even enjoy your stay," she whined. "Can't you stick around a little longer, so we can do a few fun things together? Please?"

"I wish I could, but I took off in such a rush that I left a lot of loose ends. My publisher's asking for the final chapters." Eva stroked Tara's soft locks while she stared absently across the shadowy fields at Sugar, who grazed peacefully. "You'll be fine now," she continued. "I'll be back before you know it. I still plan on making my regular visit. Don't think this is a substitute."

Tara giggled and snuggled her cheek deeper into Eva's lap, like she did when she was a little girl. They stayed -each deep in thought- until the cool fog of the evening forced them to move inside for warmth.

Eva took a long look around at the interior of the charming antique house. It would be quite a beauty once it was restored. She could almost feel

the life and hear the laughter of the years gone by. There were marks on the woodwork leading into the laundry room where the growth of children from early years was monitored. The slight curve of the stairway leading up to the second-floor added grace and elegance, while the intricately carved banister boasted style and charm.

It was an unusual country house to be found in the north. It had the style and charm of a southern plantation home. She wasn't aware of such structures on northern farms and estates. It seemed far too grand, even in its run-down condition. She felt as if the wonderful house smiled with gratitude at the work she and Dennis completed. Yes, she'd be back, and would be happy to come.

The next morning, Eva was packed and saying farewell. Tara reluctantly waved as Dennis chauffeured her aunt off in his Jeep Cherokee. Tiny puffs of dust rose from beneath the Jeep's wheels while it disappeared down the drive.

She found the intense silence left behind unnerving. An eerie feeling that came over her as she observed the stillness. Seeking the refuge of companionship, she headed toward her pacing mare, who was clearly not appreciative of the repair work done to contain her in the paddock.

The pungent aroma of the horse's body mingled with the scent of grass and a hint of manure. Tara inhaled deeply, taking in as much of the familiar smells as she could while reveling in the comfort she immediately received for her unsettled nerves. She wanted to erase the gap of time that elapsed between herself and Sugar while recovering from her fall.

Sugar turned her nose deep into her mistress's side. The mild pressure to Tara's ribs brought a twinge of pain and she flinched.

'I see you are not yet recovered.' Sugar's thoughts penetrated their way into Tara's head.

“Not quite, but it’s much better” she replied before realizing she’d received a telepathic message from her horse.

It sent her bolting backward and stumbled to the ground.

Confusion enveloped her as she scrambled toward the fence. Her breathing labored, and the threat of hyperventilating hovered. The mare watched Tara’s reaction briefly before returning her focus to luscious rich pasture that awaited her.

Regaining a semblance of composure, the startled young woman rose shakily and made her way back to her mare.

“Did you do what I thought you did?” she asked warily.

Sugar steadfastly graze and reveled in the juiciness of the rich green grass as if deliberately ignoring Tara’s question.

“Sugar!” Tara demanded.

Tara was sure Sugar was demonstrating her dissatisfaction at being disturbed, when the mare turned her rump toward her, urinated, and walked away.

Confused and exasperated, Tara returned to the house to lie down until Dennis returned. She’d experienced a firm pressure in the middle of her forehead while communicating with Sugar that transformed into a full-blown headache. Perhaps this was just a hallucination of some type. After all, she’d suffered a terrible shock when she fell, and she wasn’t quite recovered. Maybe she just overdid things, and this was a result of it. Once again, she made a mental note to check into her medication.

Tara stopped at the top of the steps leading up to the broad wraparound porch and watched the peacefully grazing mare. There was something familiar about the pressure she felt while communicating with Sugar, but she couldn’t quite place it. The brief memory of a glowing robed man came and left just as quickly.

Making her way toward her bedroom, she decided it would be best not to mention her dream or her telepathic hallucinations to Dennis. Some things were better left alone.