

The Deadly Trade

by Barbara Kyle

Chapter 1

I was trying hard to think of toys to keep my mind off death.

A plush bunny or a classic teddy bear, which would a two-year-old like? I had no clue about toys. Or kids. But planning what to get my nephew Liam for his birthday eased the sorrow that had darkened my night. Darkened all of February, in truth, since my sister's death five weeks ago, and now we were grinding into an icy March.

The plush yellow bunny, I decided.

Thoughts of my sister's sweet little guy didn't help much, though, as I made my way on foot up the slope from Craigmuir's frozen river. Liam, motherless, cared for by my grieving parents since we lost Julia. Then, yesterday's sickening fire at the stable.

Such a killing winter.

Spring, I thought with a yearning heart, could not come soon enough.

I was on my way to Paul Leblanc's house with Julia's border collie, DuPre, who had come to live with me. She shivered on her leash. Last night the temperature had plummeted during a downpour, freezing the rain, and now, at sunrise, the world was sheened in ice. It sheathed trees and phone poles and wires and made the road treacherous underfoot.

Crazy to come so early. If I'd waited an hour the sun might have thawed the crust enough to let me and DuPre get up the slope without slipping. But I couldn't lie awake any longer. With the smell of stable smoke still in my hair, I'd found sleep impossible, and Paul's anxious call just after midnight had sealed my insomnia. I needed to talk to him face-to-face.

The road curving up to the rich homes of Riverview Ridge was Saturday-morning quiet, the residents nestled under their duvets. No one out but me and DuPre, straining now at her leash.

“Take it easy, sweetie. Almost there.” She was as impatient as I was to crest the hill and relax our tense muscles on the flat, but I held her back. Her four feet could slip as easily as my two.

“Natalie, come tomorrow, first thing,” Paul had said, his voice low, troubled. “It’s about Julia.”

I couldn’t imagine what he meant. My dazzling big sister, thirty-three, her fame as a cellist just flowering, had taken her own life. Paul had been one of her many fans, so I’m sure he’d been shocked to hear of her suicide, but what could he possibly have to say now? Before I could ask, he’d hung up. I’d come this morning to find out.

My boot skidded. I caught myself before I went down on my ass, but the misstep sent a skip to my heart and a tremor to my splayed legs. Black ice: that gloss on the asphalt that tricks you. Worse if you’re driving, the pavement looking so clear you think you’re safe. My tires skidding here could’ve sent me slewing right back down to the river. It was still frozen, but in March, who knew how solid? Which is why I’d parked at the foot of the hill and walked, stiff-legged on the ice, cautious as an old lady.

The road was hemmed on both sides with massive old oaks, naked except for the ice carapace that glittered as the sun rose at my back. My noisy footfalls sent a crow flapping up from a bough. Branches disturbed by its takeoff clattered, *clickety-clack*. Like teeth chattering, I thought. It was that cold. I wondered, not for the first time, why my piss-poor Scottish ancestors had immigrated here to plough the cold stony soil of southern Ontario when they might just as well have gone around to sunny Australia.

The road leveled out. DuPre and I relaxed a bit. We rounded the bend, nearing Paul’s house, which rose beyond its barrier of blue spruce trees ranged like sentinels. A municipal truck lumbered out from the adjoining road and rumbled past us, spitting

rock salt to thaw the ice. The pea-size granules gave me traction, which was a relief, but I knew they burned DuPre's paws, and I hated to see her in pain. She flinched but carried on, head high with that stoic canine spirit that shames us whiney humans.

"Hold on, sweetie." I tugged the leash to stop her, pulled off my mitten with my teeth, and used my fingernail to pick salt crystals off her forepaw's tender pad. Its leathery softness was warm against my chilled fingertips. The faint sun glinted off the tag on her collar. My mind flashed back to the rough nylon rope, obscene fluorescent yellow, tight around my sister's throat.

DuPre suddenly whimpered as though in distress. A cut on her paw? No, her focus wasn't there but on the evergreens screening Paul's property. She jerked forward, straining again against the leash.

"Yeah, good idea, let's wake him up."

We reached the edge of Paul's property. The brittle mat of grass crunched underfoot like fragile glass. The house was oriented sideways to the road, with a wide back deck overlooking woods that led down to the river. I was heading for the front door, but DuPre's focus was on the rear. Barking in sudden alarm, she jerked against the leash, causing my boots to slip on the grass. In the slack moment of righting myself, I loosened my grip on the leash. DuPre bounded away, barking, heading for the undergrowth behind the deck. What had she seen? A deer?

"DuPre! Come back!"

I couldn't let her take off into the woods. But I didn't want to shout again, waking Paul's neighbors. I hurried after her, hoping to snatch the trailing leash. She disappeared into the dark space beneath the deck, still barking. I followed her into the shadows cast by the wooden overhang. There was plenty of headroom. Paul was having the deck extended, and I smelled the damp fresh wood overhead. The contractor's crew would be back after the weekend. I side-stepped the rubble of hunks of sawn boards and clumped sawdust.

I reached DuPre. She was barking crazily, looking up. I followed her gaze, our breaths steaming in the cold air. At the far end of the deck, deep in the shadows, a dark shape hung, suspended. My breath snagged.

A man. Upside down. His torso like a forked branch, one leg stretched taut, his foot caught in wire from the deck, the other leg splayed. His arms hung down. Still as death.

Paul.

I bolted toward him. A spear of sunlight through the deck glinted off him.

I froze. He was completely encased in a film of ice.

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