

SHADOWS OF THE PAST



ALSO BY NELLIE H. STEELE

Shadow Slayers Stories

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SHADOWS OF THE PAST

A SHADOW SLAYERS STORY



NELLIE H. STEELE



A Novel Idea Publishing

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For my parents, Paul and Stephanie

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CHAPTER 1



Josie bolted upright from her sleep, drenched in sweat. She gasped for breath, her heart pounding. Glancing around, she recognized her surroundings. Her breath began to slow; she swallowed hard. She was at home. She had fallen asleep sitting on the couch next to her cousin, best friend and roommate. After hours of tossing and turning in her own bed, she snuck into Damien's room to see if he was awake. Dragging him from his slumber to the living room, they lounged on the couch, talking for a few hours about anything and everything on her mind before she dozed off somewhere between solving world hunger and expressing her craving for ice cream.

She glanced over her right shoulder. Damien was asleep on his side, facing her, left side leaning against the back of the couch, his head buried in his chest. He would likely have a stiff neck, Josie thought. He stirred a bit, groggily asking her if she was okay, still half asleep.

"Yes, I'm fine," she answered, standing.

He pushed himself up, becoming more awake. "Did you

have a bad dream?" He must have noticed the sweat on her brow and her elevated breathing earlier.

"Yeah, I'm fine though, go back to sleep. I'll tell you in the morning."

Damien took a deep breath, too tired to argue, and lay back on the couch. Apparently, he had no desire to go to his own room. He was asleep before she left the room. Josie returned to her own bed, feeling the cold sheets press against her as she lay down. It gave her a chill since she was still soaked with sweat.

She laid awake, still a little riled from the bad dream. It was a recurring dream that she had several times before. In the dream, she was running through a dark cave or cavern; the walls felt cool and damp to the touch; she was out of breath, terrified, being chased by something or someone. She clutched a book in her hands; she looked back over her shoulder, hearing something behind her then pushed her tired body to run forward away from the noise. She awoke before she ever reached the end of the cave. Each time it was the same, each time she woke up in a cold sweat, and each time she had trouble sleeping afterwards. She did not understand the meaning of the dream but it was so vivid that it felt as though she were living it.

Her friends, including her cousin, Damien, told her it must be a reaction to some stress in her life, perhaps with work or family and that she should try to relax, maybe get a massage or do some yoga. Nothing made it easier when the dream reoccurred; it was so intense that it would terrify her all over again. Even after waking up and realizing that she was in her own bed and her own home, the unsettled feeling that she had during the dream remained and she always had trouble going back to sleep afterwards.

As usual, Josie laid in bed pondering everything about the dream and learning nothing. The next thing she knew, her

alarm was screaming at her. Groggily, she pushed herself up to sitting, looking at the clock. It was 4 a.m., her normal wake-up call. Most people wouldn't even consider getting up at this absurd hour but Josie did it daily. An avid jogger, Josie liked to pound the pavement before most other people started their day.

She considered hitting the snooze button but decided she'd feel worse if she didn't get up now. Sleepily, she made her way to the kitchen to make her normal breakfast of oatmeal. She put on a pot of coffee. Even though she didn't drink coffee, she prepared the pot for Damien whenever he crawled out of bed. She noted on her way to the kitchen that he must have dragged himself back to bed during the night since the couch had been empty this morning. She also set a bowl of oatmeal in the fridge for him to eat when he got up.

With her morning chores completed, she headed back to her bedroom and changed into her jogging clothes. She finger-combed her blonde hair back into a ponytail with the loose curls touching the nape of her neck after being pulled up. Grabbing her water bottle, she headed out the door for her run. Her head was still a mess after the sleepless night and the nightmare, she hoped the jog on the quiet road would help clear it.

Josie loved living on a country road. At most times of the day, the road was deserted, especially this early in the morning. They lived on the outskirts of a small town. The location offered them the privacy and rural feel they had grown up with coupled with a commute of less than an hour to the city. Josie owned her own cybersecurity business and often worked from home, but she made enough trips to the city to prefer a shorter commute. Damien's computer programming position offered flexibility to work from home also, but he often traveled to his office for coworker and client meetings.

Before Damien was even awake, she finished her run and

returned to the house. She was already changed and putting water on for a cup of tea when he staggered into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes and yawning. He headed straight for the coffee without a word.

“Good morning to you, too,” she said jokingly.

He took a sip of coffee. “Ugh, I don’t know how you do it. I’m exhausted.”

“You should have come with me for a jog, it wakes you up,” she answered.

“I’d rather shoot myself in the foot,” he retorted. Damien did not care for anything athletic, choosing to get most of his physical activity from furious typing or video game playing. “I’m glad it’s Sunday and I don’t have to go to work.”

“Me too!”

“Hey, you never have to ‘go to work,’” he countered, “you work from home.”

“I guess technically, I’m always at work then.”

“Haha, hilarious, Josie.”

“You have plans today?” Josie asked while pouring steaming water into her mug.

He glanced at her. “What do you think?”

Damien, ever the introvert, preferred his own company to most other people’s, except for Josie. They grew up together, living next door to each other for the first five years of their lives. When Damien was five years old, his parents passed away in a car accident, and Josie’s mother had insisted that she care for her sister’s only child, taking Damien in as one of her own. Growing up together, they had been inseparable and were far more like siblings than cousins. While Josie’s personality was like his in many ways, Josie was more self-assured, comfortable being alone or with others. She dragged Damien to countless social events throughout the years despite his constant protests. “It’s good for you to get

out, D,” she always told him, and he always listened much to his chagrin on most occasions.

“I think we should go see that new comedy, we could both use a break.”

“Or we could find something on Netflix?”

Josie rolled her blue eyes. “Come on, D, the popcorn is way better at the theater!”

“I don’t know...”

“Come on, D!!! I need a break, you said it yourself, and no one wants to go to the movies themselves! Come on!”

“For you being the more independent one of us, Josephine Benson, you’re co-dependent.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes.” He rolled his eyes. “It’s a yes. Pick an early show so no one else is there,” he called as she disappeared from the kitchen to look up movie times.

Returning with her laptop, she said, “I don’t care how early we go. I’m still eating popcorn.” Opening her laptop, she searched for show times at their closest theater. “Oh, here’s a good time, starts at one fifteen, we’d be out around three. We could have an early dinner out, hole up for the night and play video games. I promise I’ll let you pick the game this time.”

Eating his oatmeal, he nodded in agreement. “That’s good,” he said, once his mouth was no longer full.

“Awesome, I’m getting tickets now. There’s only like four other people in the theater, so this totally meets your ‘no people’ quota.” He stuck his tongue out at her as a response. “Just sayin’!”

“And done! So, where do you want to eat?”

“Might as well go to the Mexican place next door. It’s easy.”

“Sounds good to me! Okay, I’ve got some work to do before we head out. Leave around twelve thirty?”

“Yeah, that’s good.”

Josie closed her laptop and, hugging it to her chest, disappeared from the room.

* * *

A dark-haired man studied the outside of the medium-sized Craftsman style home set in the middle of a wooded lot. It was off a country road; it took some work to find it. “Just like her to pick somewhere like this,” he thought as he stared up at the light blue exterior trimmed with dark wood. He shrugged his trench coat around him tighter though he didn’t really need it; it was warmer here than where he was from. He looked at the box in his hands. It was the first step. He waited until she left the house with a man who also lived there. She looked the same as he remembered: flowing golden blonde curls, bright, sparkling blue eyes, delicate facial features with high cheekbones, and a smile that could light up a room even on the darkest of days. She had been smiling a lot, so very unlike the last time he had seen her. She seemed happy, but he could not avoid this moment. He approached the porch and set down the box outside of the door. She would find it there when she got home, and she would remember, she had to remember. They were doomed if she did not remember.

CHAPTER 2



“*I* thought the movie was good, what about you?” Josie asked after they were settled in a booth at the neighboring Mexican restaurant.

“Yeah, it was okay, it was funny, I guess.” Damien answered, shrugging his shoulders in his usual manner.

“I thought it was funny, too. It was one of the better comedies I’ve seen in a while.”

Damien yawned widely. “Am I boring you?” Josie said, grinning teasingly.

“No, you’re keeping me up all hours of the night is what you’re doing.”

Josie made a face. “Sorry, I just can’t sleep, you know how I am.”

“Yes, I do, but unlike you, I never get used to the lack of sleep. Did you say you had another one of those nightmares last night when you finally fell asleep?”

“Ugh, yes. Same nightmare, which meant that I couldn’t sleep again after that. I’m annoyed with this dream to be honest.”

"How many times is that this month?"

"That I've had that dream? Probably six, seven times?"

"It's only mid-month, so that's like every other night. What's got you so stressed out, Jos?"

"No idea! I can't come up with anything. Work's fine, I'm fine, there's no major project deadlines looming, nothing stressful in my personal life, no major decisions hanging over my head."

"Possibly the break-up with Michael?"

"Please." Josie rolled her eyes. "That was months ago, and I was having the dream before we broke up."

"But not as much. Plus, it was only like two months ago."

"I don't think that's it, D, the nightmare would have started after we broke up."

"You didn't seem to have a good reason. 'Not feeling it' doesn't seem like a good reason, anyway. Maybe it started before because you were planning on breaking up with him?" He phrased his suspicion like a question.

Josie rolled her eyes. "Will you let that go? First, that's a perfectly good reason. Something was just... off. Besides, that's not the problem. How is a dream about running through a cave holding a book related to breaking up with someone?"

"I have no idea? Trapped feelings? A chapter in your life? How would I know? I'm just saying."

"Is that your professional opinion, doctor? Okay, so then answer this: why is the nightmare worse now that we broke up?"

"Because you didn't have a reason? And he wants to get back together with you, that could be stressing you out? Perhaps you want to get back together with him? You may have some unresolved feelings?"

Rolling her eyes again she asked, "Can we drop this? As much as I'd like to figure out why I'm waking up in a cold

sweat from the same recurring dream, I don't want to dwell on breaking up with Michael again and to be honest, I'm tired of talking about this dream, too. Let's just talk about something else." She waved her hands as though to dismiss the topic by shooing it away.

Damien shrugged his shoulders again. "Yeah, ok, fine, so what do you want to talk about?" he said, giving in to her like he usually did. They spent the rest of their meal talking about movies, work, friends, family, and whatever else that allowed them to avoid the subject.

When they arrived home, Josie found a small box on the porch. "Were you expecting a delivery?" she asked, retrieving the box.

"Nope, I'm not the Internet shopping queen, so my best guess is that's yours. Look, that's your name on the box!"

"I didn't order anything."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "I didn't ever expect to hear those words come out of your mouth."

"Very funny, D, very funny."

"Well, let's go inside, open it and find out what it is."

"I'm not sure I want to find out."

"Oh, come on." He pushed the door open and motioned for her to enter before him. "You probably ordered a dress, or a scarf, or a shirt or some article of clothing that you forgot about."

"I remember that stuff."

"You don't! You have so many clothes you don't even realize what you've got or what you've bought. Here give the box to me. I'll open it."

Josie handed him the package, and he sliced open the tape across the top of the box. Josie peered in as though she expected a rodent to come leaping out. "What's inside, can you see?"

"Some packing paper, so far," he said, carefully pulling the

wrapping apart. "I see a shiny, metal-looking thing." He kept moving the paper around until the object revealed itself.

Josie peered in at the object. "What in the heck is that? I didn't order that."

Damien reached into the box and pulled the item out. "Looks like some kind of box? Jewelry box?" They both looked at the small gold box he held in his hands. Red, green and blue jewels embellished the top. "Man, this is heavy. This must have cost a fortune, Jos."

"I didn't buy it!" she insisted.

"Yeah right. You probably bought this thing on the home shopping network during one of your sleepless nights."

"I did not buy it, not then, not ever! Besides, it looks way too old to be something that they sell on HSN."

"Yeah, this looks kind of old, definitely looks used."

"Is there a note or packing slip in the box?" Josie peered in but found nothing. She searched around, pulling all the paper out, but finding nothing else in the box.

"Maybe the note's inside," Damien said, opening the box. As he opened the lid, a music mechanism was triggered and a tinkling little tune began to play. Neither of them recognized the song although something seemed familiar about the music to Josie.

"Wow!" Josie said as he opened the top, her eyes wide. Inside the box appeared to be a large ruby necklace. "Surely that's a fake."

Damien lifted the necklace out of the box. "Whoa, it's heavy, so it's a good fake, if it is a fake."

"Oh, there's a note underneath. Hopefully this will explain something. It's probably not even for me, there's probably a mistake or something." Josie lifted out the note and stared at it.

"What does the note say?" Damien said, still studying the necklace and the box.

Josie didn't answer.

"Jos? What does it say?" he persisted.

"Ah..." She paused, trying to make sense of what she read. "It says 'My dearest Celine, or as you are now known, Josephine, A piece of your past to help bring you back to us in your future.'"

Damien furrowed his brow in confusion. "Huh? What does that even mean?"

"No idea. Who is Celine? Is that me? And why are they calling me Celine like my name changed?"

"Let me see the note?" he said peering over her shoulder.

She repositioned the note so he had a better view. "As you are now known? Yeah, looks like Celine is you, at least that's what they think. Piece of your past..." He continued to read bits and pieces out loud. "Was this yours as a kid?"

"Not that I remember. I'd remember something like this, right? I mean you'd think I'd remember something like this, but I don't remember this at all."

He looked at the necklace and jewelry box. "Yeah, I think you would. I don't remember it either. Nothing about this is familiar?"

"No. Well..." She paused.

"What?"

"The music seemed familiar. But I bet I just heard that song somewhere along the line."

"I don't recognize this song? I'm surprised you do; it's not any well-known song that I can remember. Anything else about it?"

"Nope. Nothing." Josie was puzzled, not understanding the note or the object it accompanied.

"Try asking your mom."

"Yeah, good idea. She may know something. Here I'll take a picture, hold the box up," she said, opening her camera app on her phone. "I'll text her."

Josie attached the picture and typed: *Hey Mom—Found this on my front porch with a weird note that called me Celine and said it was a piece of my past? No signature on note, don't remember this at all. Any idea???*

“Okay, sent!”

Damien had moved on to studying the necklace. “I don’t know much about jewelry, but if this is a fake, it’s an awesome looking fake.”

Josie took the necklace from him. “Wow, this thing is heavy. It’s beautiful! Here, put it on me!” She handed the necklace back to him and swept her hair up, turning her back to him. After he clasped it, she spun around. “How does it look?” Without waiting for an answer, she headed toward the entryway mirror to admire the jewelry.

“Looks... big and fancy,” Damien said as she made her way over.

“Yeah, wow, it’s really something. It’d be crazy if this thing was real. No one wears anything this extravagant, right?”

“Yeah, it’s really something. If that thing was real, it would cost a fortune!”

Josie’s phone chirped to life, informing her of a new text message. “Oh, I bet that’s your mom answering you, Jos,” Damien said, carrying her phone to her.

Josie was still admiring the necklace in the mirror. She rubbed her hand across each jewel as she eyed it on her neck, her other hand still holding her hair up. Damien held the phone out for her. “Josie, I bet this is your mom, wonder if she knows anything.” His efforts garnered no response. “Josie? JOSIE?” he almost yelled, poking at her arm.

“Huh? What?”

“Geez, obsessed much? Stop admiring yourself and check if this message is from your mom?”

“Oh, I didn’t even hear that come in, thanks!”

Josie unlocked her phone and checked her messages, finding one from her mother: *Never saw that before. You sure it’s for you? Wrong address? Sounds like it was for someone named Celine.*

Josie answered her: *The note has my name too. And box is addressed to me.* She sent a picture of the note and the address on the box.

Her mother answered almost immediately: *No return address?? Some kind of joke?*

Josie answered: *Nope, no return address... no postage either so someone hand-delivered... Yeah, could be a joke.* Then she let the subject drop. Her mother knew nothing about either item.

“So, she doesn’t have any ideas either, said she didn’t recognize the jewelry box and was wondering if it was a prank or a joke, but I noticed that there’s no postage on this, so someone hand-delivered this to the house, D,” Josie said.

“Oh, well, that doesn’t help us. The hand-delivery might narrow it down. Who would do this as a prank? And why?”

“No idea. It says something about bringing me back to someone? Might be an ex? Michael?”

“What ex of yours would do something so weird, do you really think Michael would write a weird note calling you Celine? I mean unless you guys had some weird role-playing nicknames or something like that.”

Josie laughed. “No, he never called me Celine for any reason at all, ever, so no. And none of my exes ever called me Celine. I’ve never heard that name mentioned before today.”

“Okay, so your mom doesn’t recognize it, you don’t think an ex would do it. Anyone else with a weird sense of humor?”

“You?”

“Me?!?” he cried, his face incredulous. “I didn’t do it, why would I do this?”

“No idea, why would anyone do it? This is just bizarre.”

The pair of them studied the box and necklace, which Josie had now removed and replaced in the box but they weren't able to come up with any answers. After about a half hour of further discussion, they packed the jewelry box carefully back into the package and set the package aside, giving up on solving anything for the moment, turning their attention to unwinding before the start of the week with some T.V.

Before they headed to bed for the night, Josie was sure to check all the locks twice. “Paranoid?” Damien asked her, watching her jimmy the door to be sure it was locked tight.

“I'm just getting an uneasy feeling. Someone brought that box with the weird note right to our door. I mean, who does that? Some crazy person who thinks I was named Celine or am Celine or whatever was literally standing three feet from where I am right now. It just gives me the creeps a little.”

“Why not text some other people? Someone may have a clue? Might settle your nerves?”

“And what if they all answer no? Then I might feel worse. The only one I could imagine might do this and it's really a stretch is Michael. You said he wanted to get back together, and the note says something about bringing us back together.”

“So, text him now, maybe you'll sleep better.”

“Okay,” Josie said, grabbing her phone. She sent a text to her ex, Michael, saying: *Hey, super weird question for you but did you leave anything on the porch for me today?*

Michael responded within a few minutes: *No????*

Josie took a moment to consider her response. She didn't want to have a conversation with anyone now, especially not Michael. “He said no,” she reported to Damien as she typed back: *Ok, thanks!*

Unfortunately for Josie, that was not enough to end the

conversation outright. Michael responded quickly: *Everything ok? What was dropped off?*

“Now look what you’ve done,” she said to Damien, showing him the message, then typing back her own: *Everything’s okay... some music box with a necklace inside.*

“Hey,” he said holding up his arms in protest, “not my fault! Tell him you’re going to bed. Speaking of, I can sleep in your room tonight if it makes you feel better? We still have that inflatable mattress in the closet, I can set that up.”

“Uh, as much as I want to say no and I’m fine, I’m just going to lay awake thinking about who sent that and how creepy it is they were on our porch, so, yeah, I’ll save you the midnight wake-up call and take you up on your offer.”

“All right, I’ll set up the mattress, you can finish texting with Michael.” He winked as he darted up the steps in front of her.

Josie turned off the lights, made her way up the steps and into her bedroom. Damien was already dragging the inflatable mattress out onto the floor as Josie climbed into bed. She checked her phone to find another message from Michael: *Wrong address? I assume you didn’t order it?*

Josie sighed, it looked like she was in it for the long haul. Besides, it would help pass the time while the mattress inflated. She texted back: *No... I didn’t order it. Wasn’t sent through a carrier, someone put it on the porch, no postage on box, just my name and address.*

“What’s he want now?” Damien asked, tossing himself across her bed as the mattress inflated.

“He’s asking about whether it could have been a wrong address. I told him it wasn’t even delivered; someone hand-carried that box to our house. It doesn’t make sense.” Her phone chimed: *That’s weird, are you sure you’re okay? I can come over.*

Josie rolled her eyes, sighing with annoyance. “Now

what?" Damien asked, noticing her expression. She held the phone out for him to read the message.

"I'm wondering if he didn't do this just so he could offer to come over," she said only half-joking.

"What if you never texted him though? No, nope, that one doesn't add up, next theory."

Josie was already answering: *I'm fine... D is here, all good... just about to go to sleep, good night!* She barely clicked her phone off when the response came back: *Ok, text if you need anything, good night!*

"No more theories, I am going to sleep!" Josie said after finishing texting with Michael.

"Sleep? You promise?"

"Well, I will try," she said, pushing her feet under the covers and playfully kicking at Damien to get off the bed.

"Okay, okay!" he said, leaping off the bed and testing the mattress for firmness. He turned off the inflator pump, tossed his pillows and blanket on top and settled into the mattress. "Good night, Josie."

Josie turned off the light. "Good night!"

* * *

The man watched the lights go out, plunging the house and its surroundings into darkness. She had gotten the package; he had seen her carry the box into the house earlier. He assumed she had opened it. He couldn't know for sure. Did it have the intended effect? Did she remember? Only time would tell. For now, he could rest, having carried out the first piece of his plan. He turned the key in his car's ignition and, without headlights, eased the car back onto the road from the service road he had hidden his car on earlier. Only after he was on the road did he turn his headlights on,

heading to his motel. He'd work on the next step of his plan in the morning. For now, having finally accomplished something, he hoped for a good night's sleep. The first in a long time.

CHAPTER 3



“Good morning,” Damien said, yawning as he walked into the kitchen and straight to the coffee pot.

“Good morning,” Josie said, sipping her just-made hot tea. “Did you sleep okay on the air mattress?”

“Yeah, how about you? Any bad dreams?”

“Nope! Slept through the night, even with the creepy visitor thing looming. Thank you, by the way,” she said, putting her hand on his arm, “for sleeping in my room last night. It really helped.”

“No problem,” he said, pulling her in for a hug. “I’m glad you slept.”

“Me too,” she answered as the doorbell rang.

They exchanged a puzzled glance. “Who would that be at this time of the morning? It’s not even six thirty,” Josie said.

“No idea,” Damien answered.

They stood in silence until they heard a knock at the door.

“Whoever it is isn’t going away,” Josie said, her heart beginning to beat faster as adrenaline coursed through her body. She crept through the doorway toward the living room

and the front door with Damien following her. They saw a figure looming at the front door.

"Here, let me go first," Damien said, pushing her behind him.

"Get the bat from the closet," Josie whispered. Damien grabbed the bat from the closet, holding it ready as he crept toward the door. "Who is it?" he called.

"Michael," a voice answered.

They both breathed a sigh of relief as Damien dropped the bat and began unlocking the door. Josie rolled her eyes at him and made a face that Damien recognized as her "are you kidding me?" face.

Damien pulled the door open. "Hey, man, how's it going?"

"Good, how are you? Hey, Josie," he said, stepping into the house, "I wanted to check on you. How are you doing with all the excitement over that strange package?"

"You could have texted, Michael," Josie said crossing her arms. "You scared us half to death after all that excitement."

"Yeah, well, I knew you'd tell me not to come, Josie, but I wanted to make sure you were okay, like for real okay."

"I'm fine, slept okay, no nightmares, no more weird packages."

"You're still having the nightmares?" Michael asked, smoothing his tie against his dress shirt. He used that matter-of-fact tone that irritated Josie to no end. The tone she had nicknamed his "Dad" tone.

"Shouldn't you be getting to work?" Josie asked, trying to avoid the question.

"I've got time," Michael answered. "Can I see the package?"

"Yes, it's right here," Josie answered, irritation dissipating a bit since she did not mind if he looked. She showed him the box on the table.

Michael picked it up, looking at the address and lack of

postage on the top of the box. He opened it and pushed the packaging aside to pull out the music box.

"Whoa, this is heavy, nice, it's beautiful." He opened it, looking at the necklace first, then the note. "So, are you Celine? Why would you think I sent this?"

"I don't know, I didn't think it came from you. It was more of a hope because it's disturbing to realize that some random person dropped it off."

"It was definitely not me. But it concerns me that some strange person who thinks you're someone else dropped stuff off on your doorstep. You should contact the police. And it may be a good idea if I stayed here, just in case."

Typical Michael, Josie thought, using the situation to his advantage to try to push back in. Growing up in a prominent family, Michael Carlyle had never wanted for anything. He was a savvy businessman, learning from his father and grandfather who had taken a small family business to a multi-billion-dollar international industry. Michael's split-second decisions and overconfident behavior sometimes drove Josie to the point of madness. "Neither is necessary. I mean it's creepy but I don't think it's dangerous."

"How do you know? This person sounds like a whack-job. Calling you Celine? Talking about this being a piece of your past and hoping it leads you back to ...whoever this is? It's crazy."

"We'll be fine," Josie said, crossing her arms, trying to dismiss the conversation.

"I'd like to be sure. I can sleep in the guest room, you won't even realize I'm here."

"Won't I? Really?" She raised her eyebrows in disbelief.

"I'm not going to argue about this, Josie, I'm not taking any chances. Sorry, I realize it bothers you I still care, but I do. I can stop by my place after work, grab my gear and be over."

"You want to help out here?" Josie said turning to Damien.

He shrugged his shoulders and shook his head, unwilling to get into the argument. Josie threw her arms in the air, sighing. "Fine, whatever, the more the merrier, I guess."

"Great! I'll see you later then," Michael said, squeezing Josie's arm before turning to head out the door. "Damien, nice seeing you again." He nodded to him as he left.

"Thanks so much for the assist, D," Josie said, after Michael left.

"I'm not getting in the middle of that and besides, I wouldn't mind having someone else here, between your nightmares and the creepy stalker. Sometimes you listen to him more than me."

"He's not a stalker. We have no idea what's going on. Oh, never mind, never mind, let's just forget about this stupid thing," she said, stuffing the music box back in the box and shoving it into the nearby coat closet along with the discarded bat. "I've got some errands I need to run. I'm going to head out. I'll be back later."

"Okay," Damien answered, knowing when she needed to cool off. "I'm heading into the office for a few hours. See you when I get home?"

"Yep, have a good day, D."

Josie stormed up the steps, trying to push the morning's events from her mind. It was barely 7 a.m. and she'd already had enough of this day. Stepping in to her room, she closed the door behind her, shutting her eyes and taking a deep breath. She opened them and scanned the room, seeing the air mattress lying on the floor. She gave it a half-smile. She was glad Damien had stayed with her last night. Thinking about it, perhaps it wouldn't be half bad having Michael in the house, too. She hated to admit it but she had some unre-

solved feelings about him. Perhaps this would help resolve them.

She would not dwell on it now; she'd concentrate on getting dressed and out of the house to run her errands. One perk of self-employment was running errands when most other people were at work. She hopped into the shower, dried her hair, put on some makeup and was out of the house within the hour.

She made a few quick stops, picking up some various household items that she needed and a few food items from the store now that they would be entertaining and eating for three. She dropped everything off at home. Checking the time, she saw that it was only 10 a.m. She didn't have much on her work schedule for the day, but she figured she would get a start on them and clear them off her plate.

Upon sitting down at her desk, she found herself distracted. She pushed through a few items but found it difficult to focus. She checked her window often, which overlooked the front of the house, making sure no strangers were lurking around. After about thirty more minutes of work she found herself too distracted to continue. Despite her words this morning, she really was unnerved being in the house alone. Her mind lingered on the strange package that was delivered and on the person who had delivered it.

Not being able to focus, she gave up on work. She settled on getting out of the house and doing some shopping. Whenever she was stressed, she found that shopping was a great way to relieve her mind. With her mind made up, she grabbed her keys and headed out the door.

Josie eased her car into a parking space at the mall, parking outside one of her favorite department stores. She hoped the distraction would help ease her mind. She made her way through the store, stopping every so often to browse at a few clothing items or accessories. Finally, her mind

began to relax at the expense of a new dress and a pair of shoes. Considering this a success, Josie decided to eat before continuing her retail therapy. She dropped her purchases off at her car and headed to the food court.

When entering the food court, she felt off. She chalked it up to waiting too long before eating lunch. As she considered what food appealed to her most, she began to feel worse. A stabbing pain above her right eye made concentrating difficult. She rubbed her head in the hopes this would relieve it until she sat down to eat.

She settled on pizza and made her way to the counter to order, practically running into a man along the way. She apologized to him, unable to take her eyes off him even after he began to walk away. He turned back, staring at her. Something about him seemed familiar to her, but she couldn't place it. Suddenly, the pain in her head became ten times worse, nearly blinding her with its stabbing sensation. Instinctively, she put her hand to her head; her mind was a jumble of thoughts. Her nightmare was pushed to the front of her mind, she remembered her hands on a cold wet stone, her labored breathing. She closed her eyes, trying to shut it all out. When she opened them she noticed the man she had almost run into still staring at her. She stared back for a moment before her vision narrowed to a pinpoint, blood rushed into her ears. Her limbs became heavy, and she sensed herself slipping away. Her eyes rolled back, and she slumped to the floor.

Intrigued to find out what happens to Josie? Check out the full book here: [Shadows of the Past](#)

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading this free book sample! *Shadows of the Past* was inspired by my love for the show *Dark Shadows*! While I'm not a first-generation fan of the show, I fell in love with it when my mother introduced it to me in my late teens. It left its mark on my heart and my imagination.

I hope you enjoyed reading these chapters as much as I did writing them! If you loved them, I hope you'll consider finishing the story!

It's available here: [Shadows of the Past](#)

All the best, Nellie

