

Every Deadly Kiss

by
Steven James

Chapter 1

Saturday, May 5

Aspen Cove Lake, Minnesota

10:32 p.m.

He watched her stir the Manhattan he'd just mixed for her. He didn't want to be too forward, so rather than sit beside her on the couch, he chose the chair facing her. The cabin's living room window, black with the night, stared at him over her shoulder.

"So," she said playfully. "Let's play a little game."

"What kind of game?"

"It's about secrets." She set her drink next to his wine glass on the rustic coffee table resting between them. "I'll tell you one of mine and then you get to tell me one of yours."

"I noticed how you phrased that: I *get* to tell you one."

"Uh-huh. But it has to be something you've never told anyone else before."

"Alright."

"I mean, *never*. Not *anyone*."

"Okay."

“Promise?”

He lifted his glass as if he were toasting the idea. “Promise.”

“Alright.” She took a sip of her drink. “I once saw a guy die and I didn’t do anything to help him.”

He blinked in disbelief. “What happened?”

“It was back when I was in college and I was at this frat party, right? And people were shooting up, getting high, drinking—all that. It was a little out of hand and I’d had too many shots of Tequila. I should’ve just gone back to my dorm, but I let this cute guy take me upstairs to one of the bedrooms. You know.”

“Sure.”

She repositioned herself. “He wanted to do these lines of heroin and we were gonna do them together, but he went first and overdid it. OD’d. I could have probably helped him or called 911 or something, but I was too scared and I just watched him collapse and have this seizure and this gross vomit came foaming up out of his mouth and then he was just super still—except his arms and legs kept shaking. But finally they stopped moving too. It was like you see in the movies: he wasn’t breathing or anything. I was terrified that something bad would happen to me if I told anyone I’d been with him in that room—that I might be accused of killing him or go to jail, or whatever—so I snuck into the hall again, pretended that I was just looking for the bathroom, made my way past all those other people at the party, and ran back to my dorm as fast as I could. I couldn’t sleep for the rest of the night. The next day I heard his body had been found. They just called it an OD. No one ever came and talked to me. But I saw him die. I was there.”

“And you could have helped.”

“Yes.”

He was quiet.

“Okay.” She leaned forward. “Your turn.”

“I’m not really sure what to say.”

“Something no one else knows,” she reminded him. “Something you’ve never told *anyone* before.”

“I can trust you?”

She held up her right hand in a noble salute. “Scout’s honor.”

He grinned slightly. “You were never a scout, were you?”

“I slept with a guy once who used to be one.”

“Ah. Gotcha.”

“Taught me all his knots.”

“I’m sure I didn’t need to hear that.”

“So, tell me your secret.” She poured him more wine and slid his glass toward him.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“I can’t tell you *all* my secrets.” She waited until he’d taken a drink. “So. Tell me.”

“Well . . .” he took a long breath, “then, I’d say the toughest thing of all for me is when they promise they won’t tell.”

“What do you mean?”

“After I handcuff them to the bed, before I really get started. Sometimes they promise they won’t say anything if only I’ll let them go. They just keep going on and on like that. It’s not nearly so bad when they just beg me to stop or scream, or even pray. But those ardent, desperate vows of silence—those are the hardest to listen to.”

She stared at him coolly. “It’s not even funny to joke about stuff like that.”

“I’ve never told anyone that before.”

“I know, but in this game, in my game, whatever you tell me, the secret, it’s gotta be true.”

She glanced toward her purse on the dining room table where he’d set it for her earlier and for a moment he had the sense that she might go for it, but instead, she just said in a hushed voice, hardly louder than a whisper. “You said, ‘they’.”

“They?”

“You said sometimes ‘they’ promise. ‘They’ beg you. Who is ‘they’?”

“The women I bring home. The last one, I actually believed her. I let her go. But I shouldn’t have. She lied to me. She told. They weren’t able to pin any of the previous deaths on me so, with good behavior, I ended up serving fifteen years. And—”

“You’re a sick bastard.” She rose, strode to the table, and snatched up her purse.

He couldn’t quite tell if she believed him or was just upset by what he’d said.

She hurried out the door.

He followed. “I didn’t mean for you to leave.”

“Screw you.”

At the doorway, he stood watching her by the car.

Brisk. Cool. Even though it was spring, this far north, a tinge of winter still lingered in the forest.

The light from the porch reached far enough for him to see her fumbling through her purse for the keys, which he’d taken out earlier when he placed it on the table for her.

Both her keys and her phone.

He tapped the button on the key fob and the doors beeped, unlocked. “Does that help?”

She gasped and faced him, then somewhat clumsily kicked off her heels so she could run faster, and took off into the dark woods surrounding the lake.

It did not take him long to catch her.

Though she struggled more than any of the others had, he managed to get her back to the cabin.

To the bedroom.

To the bed.

After he’d cuffed one of her wrists, it was much easier to get the other one secured to the bedpost as well. It always was.

“When I said I didn’t mean for you to leave I was telling the truth. When I said I don’t like hearing their promises, I was telling the truth too.”

As he stepped back, she yanked uselessly to get free. It’d been so long since he’d heard the sound of handcuffs rattling in that way that he’d forgotten how much he liked it, how familiar to him it had been.

Before.

“I’ll scream. I swear to God!”

“This is the only cabin on this end of the lake so I don’t believe it’ll help, but I won’t stop you if you’d like to give it a try.”

She did, and while she did, he tilted the television to face the bed. This far out in the country, without cable, he needed to use a DVD instead of streaming the video. But he’d brought one. It wasn’t a problem.

He always let them watch the movie.

He wanted her just like Scarlett had been. He wanted things to be just right.

After he'd pressed play, he removed the box cutter from the dresser drawer.

Early on, he'd experimented with a number of different methods, but he preferred this one, and had ever since he was a boy.

"What do you want from me!" The terror that rose in her voice was already tinged with desperation.

"I want you to be honest." He sat beside her and slid out the blade. Locked it in place.

"No secrets. Just like before."

"Listen. Seriously." The words came in quick, hurried gulps. "You need to let me go."

"Why?"

"I lied at the bar. You have no idea who I am. You don't know how much I'm worth.

I'll pay you whatever you want. Just please let me go."

"And you won't tell?"

"No, I promise I—"

But before she could finish her avowal of silence, he jammed the blade through her right cheek, clipping a tooth and burying the tip into her jaw. One swift, firm movement. One sweep of his arm. "Do not make such promises!"

She cried out in obvious pain, but then made a valiant attempt to collect herself.

"I'm . . . I'm . . ."

He removed the blade. There wasn't much blood.

But there was some.

She spit it out at him.

"I know who you are, Simone," he said. "And I know how much you're worth. Tell

me where Scarlett is.”

“What?”

“Scarlett Farrow. You used to model with her back when you two were teenagers.

The same agency. Brenning Talent Associates. In L.A.”

“Scarlett? What are you talking about?”

“I think you know where she is.”

“I haven’t seen her in years.”

He held up her phone and scrolled through the apps until he came to an alias on TypeKnot. He showed her the screen. “Snowball4? Who is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Snowball was the name of the stuffed animal in the movie. Her rabbit.”

“It’s anonymous. I don’t know if it’s really her.”

“Where does she live?”

And then sudden resolve. A steely gaze. “I’m not telling you.”

And so he began to carve.

He used the box cutter until he had what he needed from her. She did tell. Eventually, yes she did.

When at last he stood, the cuts were many, but they were not all deep.

“Don’t worry. You’re not going to die from those.”

He heard screams from the television and glanced at the screen. The scene from the lake. Yes, it was a pivotal one, vital to all that was to follow in the tree house. In the bedroom. The church.

With Simone’s phone, sent a text message to the person with the screen name

Snowball4, then he snapped a photo of her on the bed for himself.

In a way, the photograph reminded him of the famous picture of Regina Kay Walkers taken by Robert Ben Rhoades after he'd abducted her, cut her hair, and made her wear that black dress and those heels in the barn before killing her. It was one of the most memorable final photographs taken by killers that was floating around the Internet.

For all the world to see.

And now, here it was: The last picture anyone would ever take of the ex-swimsuit model—until the crime scene was eventually processed and her remains were photographed for the case files.

He walked out the bedroom door.

“Where are you going?” Simone gasped. Again, he heard the clang of the handcuffs as she tried futilely to pull free.

“I think that, considering what you did to that young man back when you were in college,” he called through the doorway, “you being here is a form of justice. It’s poetic, in a sense. Things coming full circle.”

“No, don’t—”

He returned, carrying his duffel bag. “You could have helped him. Instead, you just stood by and let him die. If you hadn’t told me that story, I might have ended this for you with the box cutter, but I think I’ll let you choose how things play out, give you ample time to contemplate what you did—”

“Time?” She caught on. “No, no, no. Don’t go.” More rattling. “Don’t leave me here!”

“Justice for what happened in the past. Isn’t that what matters most?”

He opened the duffel bag and removed the grenade.

“What is that?” she asked, but he suspected she already knew.

“This one has a time-delay. The striker lever, here, it’s held in place by this pin. When I pull the pin, as long as that lever is still depressed, we’re fine. But after it’s released, with this type of grenade, we’ll have four, maybe five seconds to get to safety.” He gestured toward the cuffs. “And that’ll be a bit easier for me than for you.”

Being prudent not to release the striker lever, he pulled the pin.

“Open up now.”

She spit at him. “That’s not real. You’d never blow up your cabin.”

“Secret number two: This is not my cabin.”

In her surprise, she instinctively opened her mouth, but when he attempted to insert the grenade, she clenched her teeth in an act of intransigent defiance. Rather than fight her, he pried the fingers of her right hand back, and then placed the grenade into it with the striker lever wedged against her palm.

Wrapped her fingers around it.

“Careful now.” He let go of her and stepped back. “As I said, I’ll leave the end of the story up to you. When you’re ready for this to be over, just open your hand. You’ll have five seconds to make peace, to ask for forgiveness for your sins. Five seconds to find redemption. The couple who owns this cabin will be out of the country for another two weeks. If you manage to survive that long, you deserve to live and you’ll have earned the right to tell the authorities about me. Good luck.”

He leaned in and placed a tender kiss on her cheek, even as she tried in vain to twist her head away.

After collecting his things, he stepped outside into the chilly Minnesota night.

Finally, he had a city.

At last, a place to start.

Detroit.

He climbed into the car and pulled onto the long, winding drive that led to the edge of the property.

After parking just beyond the swinging gate to the county road, he walked back to padlock the gate shut.

As he was snapping the lock, he heard the scream, bright and shrill and slicing like a long, narrow blade through the night. A moment later, the explosion from the cabin rocked the forest, its echo reverberating restively across the lonely, black waters of the lake.

And so, Lady Justice had found her way through the years and placed her feet firmly in the present. Just as she was supposed to do.

With thoughts of Scarlett and all that was to come, he drove south through the star-pierced darkness.

Toward Motor City.