

The Shadow of the Past

by Tanaqui

"I'm sorry, ma'am. There's been an accident. The road's closed." The New Bern deputy rested his hand on the rolled-down window and jerked his head in the direction Heather had come from. "You'll have to go around. If you go back about a mile and—."

"It's okay, officer. I know the way." Heather nodded in acknowledgment, trying not to look too hard at the New Bern Police Department badge pinned on the deputy's uniform just about at eye level. "Thank you."

Putting Charlotte into reverse, she waited for the deputy to step away and then carefully backed the truck round. As she headed away from the deputies and the police car angled across the road, she let out a long breath, trying to dispel the fear that had caught at her when she'd first seen the temporary roadblock. It was silly: the war had been over for nearly eighteen months and Constantino and his thugs dead almost a year before that. And yet....

It was part of the reason why she rarely came to New Bern on her own like this. Usually, if there were errands to run, Jake would do them. But attending an old schoolfriend's baby shower was hardly something Jake could do for her, and it would have been churlish not to go just because of a few bad memories.

Besides, all that had been required was to drive to and from Megan's house. It wasn't like having to deal with the other part of why she didn't much like coming to New Bern: the way people looked at her in the stores or on the street. The way they pointed her out to each other and whispered. No one ever said anything nasty or did anything horrible like spit at her—but she'd still always be the woman who'd killed Phil Constantino.

Shaking her head, she dismissed the memories and concentrated on looking for the turning she needed. It would add another ten miles to her journey, but she should still be home before dark, despite the gray clouds overhead that gave the day a dull, depressed quality. It had been something of a shock when she'd left Megan's to exchange the cheerful chatter and heaps of colorful discarded gift wrap inside for the louring weather outside. Even the orange jack-o-lanterns already set out on stoops in anticipation of this evening's trick-or-treaters hadn't been able to lift the gloom.

Ten minutes later, she was on a backroad heading toward Jericho again. She briefly wondered about cutting across to the main highway once she could be sure she'd come out the far side of the accident. She decided against it. Once she was past Oak Bridge, the network of dirt roads would bring her out on Route 6 a mile or two north of the ranch. It would be just as fast as using the highway and the Tacoma Bridge to cross the river and then having to skirt the center of town to get home.

Another ten minutes after that, stifling a yawn and wishing she was home already, she saw a sign at the edge of the road that made her lift her foot off the gas pedal and let the truck slow. The paint was peeling and the wood underneath was rotting away at the corners, so that it looked like something from one of those old cartoons in which the coyote tried to catch the roadrunner. For all that, she could still easily make out the words "Franklin Mine" and the arrow pointing to the right.

She'd never been so glad to leave anywhere behind as that place, though she had only the sketchiest

memories of her actual exit: Jake bundling her into a truck, Constantino's blood spattered over her, and flooring it up the dirt ramp that led out of mine while bullets thwacked into the bodywork. What had happened right before that she'd tried hard to forget.

After a moment, she realized she'd brought Charlotte to a halt and was sitting staring at the sign. Shaking herself, she put the truck into gear and moved off. She could see the turning coming up on the right. On a sudden impulse, she hit the blinker and turned down the track.

It was another mile or more of dirt road, heavily rutted by long-gone trucks, before she reached the edge of the mine. A couple of times she thought about turning back but, no: now she was here, she wanted to see.

Descending the ramp, she saw nothing much had changed. The same collection of tumbledown huts and rusting machinery crouched along one side of the mine, while the high walls and flat floor still gleamed with unnatural-seeming whiteness, if not the glare with which they'd bounced back the July sun last time she'd been here. And though Charlotte's heater was fitful at best, so the inside of the cab wasn't much warmer than the air outside, she still shivered as she pulled the truck up next to the cluster of huts and climbed out. Her mouth felt dry just at the memory of how hot it had gotten inside the small shack where Constantino and his thugs had locked her for a few hours.

One thing had changed from her memories: the place was deserted. Somewhere among the collection of buildings, a shutter banged fitfully in the gusting wind, but otherwise the place was silent.

It must have been about *here*—she turned herself around slowly—that Jake had been kneeling, and *there* where Constantino had been standing, his gun pointed at Jake's head....

Rubbing her hands along her arms to warm herself, she crossed over to the hut where she'd passed those long, thirsty hours. The door stood half open. Probably the way it had been left when she'd been escorted out, thinking she was on her final journey to New Bern and a noose. The inside of the hut was too dim to make out and she pushed the door further open, needing to see. The hinges squealed in protest and she remembered the rusty nails holding them in place and her futile attempt to unscrew them.

Over the screech of the metal, she heard a scrabbling noise. She caught the edge of the door, halting its movement. Silence descended—and then the scrabbling came again. Her breath caught in her throat as she recalled her own hands vainly prying at the door and walls to try and find a weak spot.

Then she leapt back with a squawk as something small and dark shot past her feet. It scurried across the open space behind her before diving under a broken-down excavator.

Raccoon, her brain told her, as she stood with her eyes closed and her hand to her chest, her heart pounding and her breath coming in great gulps. Just a raccoon that must have been taking a nap in a quiet corner. She laughed wryly to herself, reckoning she must have scared it even more than it had scared her.

At last, feeling calmer, she opened her eyes and turned. And saw—.

The figure of a man. Wavering and insubstantial, but the blue eyes like chips of ice and the jutting pepper-and-salt beard were clear enough.

She snapped her eyes shut again. *Don't be silly*, she told herself. *It's just a trick of the light*. Just her

brain trying to make sense of a jumble of rusted machinery and weeds.

She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself, while—

"Still haven't got the guts to look at me, huh?" The words were quite distinct and she recognised the voice: gravelly and carrying its customary edge of contempt.

She took another deep breath, reminding herself she was imagining things, that she didn't believe in ghosts. She opened her eyes.

There was nothing there, just the rusted excavator and a couple of wooden crates and a plastic bag caught on the cab door that rustled slightly as it stirred in the breeze. She breathed out slowly.

Starting to turn, ready to head back to her truck, she caught another movement in the corner of her eye and heard a low, scornful laugh.

"You're dead," she said firmly, to the old excavator and the ramshackle huts and the weed-grown mine walls.

"Well, you would know." A snort. "You murdered me."

Heather turned her head and looked toward where she'd seen the movement and where the voice had seemed to come from. There was nothing there, of course, except some tall weeds waving against a hut wall. Yet she still felt as if someone was standing close, just out of sight. And that even if she turned her whole self around through three hundred and sixty degrees, she still wouldn't see him.

"I didn't murder you." She didn't know why she felt the need to speak. Why she didn't just get back in her truck and drive away. She knew there was no one there. But the accusation had stung her. "I was saving Jake's life. I was stopping *you* from murdering *him*."

There was another snort. "Ah yes. Jake Green. The man you ran away from when he didn't return your ridiculous crush on him."

"My husband." She spoke quietly, drawing strength and reassurance from the still unfamiliar weight of the ring that Jake had placed on her finger just two weeks ago.

Whatever it was—not a ghost; ghosts didn't exist—seemed surprised at that. There was a moment of silence before it spoke again. "And how does your husband feel about going to sleep every night next to a killer? About having a child with a killer? How do you think that child's going to feel growing up knowing its mother is a killer?"

Heather curved her hands across her belly, not yet showing visible signs of the life inside. She swallowed. "Proud. Jake's proud of me, and my child will be too. You were the murderer, not me. You were the one who executed people when they'd done nothing. *Nothing*."

"I was protecting my town." There it was, that quiet assurance with which Constantino had always spoken, sounding so reasonable even when he was telling barefaced lies. "My friends. The place I was born. Not betraying it."

"Protecting it?" Now it was her turn to sound scornful. "You were milking it for everything you could get and using your thugs to get rid of anyone who stood up to you. I wasn't the one betraying

it. You were." She took a step forward, her gloved hands clasped together, and gave a sharp shake of the head. "I'm not sorry for what I did. I never wanted to kill anyone, but I'm not sorry for what I did. I saved Jake, and I saved me, and I saved *my* town, *my* friends, *my* birthplace."

Her words, loud and clear and confident, bounced back at her from the rock walls. She drew in a deep breath, suddenly feeling lighter, as if an approaching thunderstorm had broken or a weight had been lifted from her back. Then the last echoes died away and silence swept in. Even the wind had dropped and the loose shutter had fallen silent. And though the light was fading quickly, the deepening shadows held no menace now. She no longer felt there was something or someone hovering over her shoulder, always just out of sight.

She stood there a moment longer, letting this new peace settle on her, before she chuckled quietly to herself and headed back toward Charlotte.

She didn't believe in ghosts, did she? There'd never been anything here but her own imagination. But maybe a ghost or two *had* been laid to rest today.

A few minutes later, the old mine was deserted again and Heather was on her way back home: to Jericho and Jake and her own future.

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