

DEAD AIR

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

MICHAEL
BRADLEY

**DEAD
AIR**

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To Simon,

*You were the best buddy a man could have asked for. I miss you.
Rest in peace.*

SHE'D BEEN FOUND OUT. There was no other explanation.

On any other night, Kaitlyn Ashe would relish the breathtaking view of the Philadelphia cityscape. The twinkle of white streetlights, red, yellow, and green traffic lights, and the white and red hues from car lights on the streets below looked like a swirling star field, constantly changing as if at the whim of a fickle god. From the twentieth-floor broadcast studio, she could look down upon Center City, could see as far east as the Walt Whitman Bridge and across the Delaware River to the distant lights of Camden, New Jersey. Yes, every other night, this view was mesmerizing. But not tonight. Tonight, Kaitlyn Ashe trembled at the thought that someone out there knew her, knew her secret, and was making damn sure she didn't forget it.

The past had come a step closer each time another letter arrived. Her fingers tightened their grasp on the latest, a crumpled paper creased with crisscrossed lines and folds. It was a cliché. The mysterious correspondences consisted of letters and phrases torn from newspapers and magazines, crudely pasted onto plain paper. Always the same message, always the same signature.

Behind her, music played softly. She turned away from the window and moved around the L-shaped counter in the middle of the room to slide onto the tall stool behind the control console. Kaitlyn leaned forward, glancing at the needles on the VU meters that jumped and pulsed to the music's beat. She touched one of the ten slider controls and adjusted the volume to remove some mild distortion.

Kaitlyn watched the onscreen clock count down to the end of the current song. Fifteen seconds to go. She slid the headphones over her ears and drew the broadcast microphone to her mouth. She tapped the green button on the console and pushed the leftmost slider upward.

Kaitlyn leaned into the microphone. "Taking things back to 2005 with Lifehouse on WPLX. That was 'You and Me,' going out to Jamie from Kristin, Tiffany from Steve, and to Tommy—Jackie still loves you." She glanced again at the clock in the upper corner of the computer screen. "It's ten past ten. I'm Kaitlyn Ashe with Love Songs at Ten. 888-555-WPLX is the number to get your dedication in tonight. I've got Adele lined up, as well as John Legend on the way next."

Her fingers darted over the control console, tapping buttons and moving sliders. Kaitlyn took the headphones off. As a commercial for Ambrosia—her favorite seafood restaurant in downtown Philadelphia—played, she stared at the crinkled letter that rested beside the console. She read it once again beneath the dim studio lights. Her eyes focused on the name at the bottom. *The Shallows*. She shivered. Who knew? And how much did they know?

Kaitlyn slipped a green Bic lighter from her pocket, lit the edge of the letter, and pinched the corner as the flames swept up the paper. She'd stolen the lighter from Kevin O'Neill's desk. She knew the midday DJ would never miss it. He had half a dozen more where that one came from.

She dropped the paper into the empty wastebasket, and watched the fire dwindle into nothingness, leaving behind blackened flakes. A

faint trace of smoke hung in the air, then dissipated quickly. She wrung her hands and sighed. There'd be another waiting in her station mailbox tomorrow, just like the four others that she'd received, one each day this week. She was certain of it.

The flash of green lights caught her eye, and she looked down at the studio telephone. All four lines were lit up. She hesitated for a moment, then tapped the first line. "WPLX, do you have a dedication?"

"Yeah, I'd like to dedicate my weekend to kissing your body from head to toe." The smoky voice echoed through the darkened studio.

Kaitlyn laughed, and felt her face become warm with embarrassment. "Brad!"

"How goes it, babe? Having a good night?"

She forced a smile, trying to sound upbeat, just as she'd learned in her voice-over classes. "It's not too bad."

"What's wrong?"

She cursed under her breath. She never could hide things from Brad. "I got another letter today."

The line was silent for a moment. "Same message?"

She glanced at the computer, then back at the phone. "Yeah. Exactly the same."

"You should call the police."

It was the same suggestion he had made a month ago, when the letters started arriving on a weekly basis. With this week's sudden volley of letters, he had taken to repeating his advice nightly. Kaitlyn had shrugged it off as just some crank. "You get those in this business," she'd told him.

"Still no idea who sends these letters? Or what they are about?"

She hesitated for a second before replying. "No idea," she lied.

"You need to tell someone. If not the police, at least tell Scott."

Kaitlyn frowned at his remark. The last thing she wanted to do was tell her program director Scott Mackay about the letters. His overly protective nature would mean police involvement for certain. "I can't tell Scott. He'd place an armed guard on the studio door."

Brad laughed. "Would that be so bad?"

"There's no point. It's probably some infatuated teenager." She knew how ridiculous the words sounded even as they escaped her lips. No teenage listener would know about the Shallows.

"Do me a favor—watch yourself tonight when you go home." The concern in his voice was evident. If she asked, he'd be there in a moment to escort her home. But she couldn't do that to him. Not without revealing something she'd worked so hard to bury in her own past.

Kaitlyn said, "I will. Promise."

"How's the rest of the night going?"

"It's been crazy. Lots of lovers out there tonight. I can't even get them all in. Just not enough time."

"I wouldn't expect any less from the most listened-to night show in Philly."

With a glance at the computer screen, Kaitlyn noted where she was in the commercial break, and then turned back toward the phone. "What are you up to, sweetie?"

"Working my way through a couple briefs. I've got to have these ready for review by tomorrow."

"Sounds like a late night."

He sighed. "Probably."

Kaitlyn sensed fatigue and frustration in his voice. She knew nothing about corporate law other than what Brad had told her. The reams of paperwork and bewildering legalese seemed boring and unappealing. She knew he had a lot on his plate and hated to see him work as hard as he did. A mischievous smile crossed her lips. "If you want, I could slip over later tonight, and help you with your briefs."

Brad's chuckle echoed through the studio. "That'd be nice, really nice."

She leaned closer to the speaker phone and spoke almost in a whisper. "You know you want to." She added a sensual emphasis to each word. "It'll make you feel good."

“That’s not fair.” He paused, then asked, “Can I take a raincheck? I need to get these done.”

Kaitlyn glanced again at the computer and reached for her headphones. “Hang on.”

Her fingers clicked on the microphone, and, out of the commercial break, she gave a quick weather forecast before starting the next song. Then she turned off the microphone and turned back to the phone. “Are we still on for lunch tomorrow?”

“Absolutely. Just you and me in a dark corner at Toscana’s.”

Looking down at the phone, she noticed that the other three lines were still flashing. “I’ve got to go, sweetie. Love you.”

“Love you too. Talk to you later.”

When he’d hung up, Kaitlyn turned to face the window and gazed out across the cityscape. The lights below seemed brighter somehow, a little more stunning than before. She sighed with deep satisfaction. There was something about Brad’s voice that always relaxed her and quelled her fears. He was trusting, gentle, and loving. She was lucky to have him. For four weeks, he had accepted her word that she knew nothing about *The Shallows*, or why anyone would send her these letters. Brad may have suspected that she was lying, but he never pushed her. It would all come out eventually. She couldn’t go on being dishonest indefinitely. She just needed time. Time to figure out how to explain that she wasn’t who she pretended to be.

Kaitlyn turned back to the computer to check the playlist. Her gaze froze, and she frowned. REO Speedwagon was coming up on the list. Her shoulders gave a momentary shudder.

She’d loved the band for as long as she could remember. While her high school friends were listening to likes of Justin Timberlake and Christina Aguilera, Kaitlyn had dug back a couple decades and discovered REO Speedwagon. She loved their songs, but this particular one held a spell over her. Its impact had diminished over the years. She’d almost reached the point of being able to play it as opposed to deleting it from the playlist whenever it showed up. Until

recently, it only invoked the briefest of memories. She would twinge at the brief reminder and use the song's deletion as a way to purge herself of her past.

That, however, was then. The arrival of the letters had changed everything. Now, the sheer appearance of the song frightened Kaitlyn, reminded her that her past was catching up. Some secrets couldn't stay hidden forever. She'd hoped the anniversary would pass unnoticed again this year. But with only three weeks to go until that date, someone was making sure that she remembered every detail.

She jabbed the delete key and a sense of relief washed over her as the song vanished from the screen. Breathing slow and deep, she allowed her uneasiness to subside. Then, she leaned toward the phone and clicked the next blinking line. "WPLX, do you have a dedication?"



WHEN THE ELEVATOR DOORS OPENED, Kaitlyn stepped out into the building's attached parking garage. An hour's worth of commercial voice-over work had been waiting for her when she went off the air at midnight. It took longer than usual for her to plow through it. She was too distracted, making too many mistakes, leading to far more retakes than was her norm. On her way out, she'd stopped by the studio to tell Justin Kace, the overnight personality, that she was leaving. They talked for another hour. Between station IDs and weather forecasts, Justin showed her pictures of his latest girlfriend—his third this year—and explained how they met. Kaitlyn suggested a couple places he could take her. Longwood Gardens. The Art Museum. Justin shrugged them off, saying the girl "was more into the unusual and bizarre."

Kaitlyn rolled her eyes and laughed. "Then try the Mütter Museum. That should be bizarre enough for her." Then she said her farewells and left, imagining Justin and his new girl finding romance amidst anatomically correct wax figures, glass cases full of pathology

specimens, and ancient medical equipment fit for a steampunk horror movie.

Pausing by the elevator doors for a moment, she scanned the empty parking garage, just as she'd done every other night for the past four weeks. The night air was crisp on her face and she caught the faint whiff of the city. It was a mix of odors almost unique to Philadelphia. Bitter and often pungent. She shivered in the chilled air and an unwanted memory flashed through her mind. Back then, on that fateful night, the air had been brisk as well.

She didn't see anyone around but couldn't shake the sense that she was being watched. For a while, she had chalked it up to paranoia induced by the letters, but their increased recurrence left her more anxious every day. Her fingers gripped a little more tightly on the pepper spray canister on her keychain.

Kaitlyn gave the parking garage one more inspection. No one was in sight and no sound came other than the hum of a nearby flickering fluorescent light. She strode toward her motorcycle. Her boot heels echoed throughout the empty garage. The chrome of the handlebars and exhaust pipes on the Harley-Davidson shone in the overhead lights. She smiled as her eyes glanced over the motorcycle's candy apple red fuel tank and fenders. She'd always wanted a Harley, even as a child. But a bike was a luxury that had eluded her until last year. When she topped the Arbitron ratings as the highest-rated nighttime on-air personality in Philadelphia, Kaitlyn had celebrated by fulfilling her childhood dream.

The promise of more spring-like temperatures for April was the catalyst she'd been waiting for to bring the motorcycle out of winter storage. Kaitlyn had changed the oil and washed and waxed it the previous weekend. Three days into the new week, she was re-experiencing the joy of riding she had longed for throughout the winter.

She straddled the black leather seat and zipped up her tan leather jacket. As the motorcycle rumbled to life, Kaitlyn raced the throttle a few times just to hear the engine's roar echo through the deserted

parking garage. She got a rush every time from the engine vibrations racing from the handlebars up through her arms. She smiled, and for a moment, forgot about the letters. Then, she slid a black helmet over her head and drew the visor down over her eyes. Her foot pulled the kickstand up, and, revving the engine one more time, Kaitlyn sped down the ramp of the garage and onto the dark Philadelphia streets.

SHE LOOKS NERVOUS TONIGHT. A bit more pensive than usual. Standing in the elevator's threshold, she's keeping the doors open. Almost afraid to move out into the parking garage. Her reaction amuses me. No, amusing isn't the word. Ecstatic. Yes, that's the word. I'm ecstatic over the reaction my letters are having on her. Ecstatic to the point of being rapturous. Rapturous? Yes, I like that.

She's kept me waiting tonight, longer than usual. What time is it? After 2 a.m.? Shit. I've been here five hours. Far too much time to spend in this godforsaken city. I've grown to hate it over the years. The lights. The noise. The smells. I hate it all. Too many fractured memories and an overabundance of lingering grief.

I must have liked it at one time. After all, I grew up in its shadow. This city litters my childhood memories like newspapers blowing in the wind. Trips over the river to see Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell. Sitting on a bench for a picture with a smelly old man dressed like Ben Franklin. Springsteen in concert at the old Spectrum. All memories that should bring a warmth to my heart and soul. But I feel nothing beyond anger and hate. She's tainted everything. My memories, this city, my life . . . everything.

God . . . I need a cigarette.

I don't dare light up. She might see the flare of the match. Filthy habit. Not sure why I started smoking. It was something to do these past few months while I waited for her to emerge each night. There's a growing pile of discarded butts by my feet. Doesn't anyone clean up around here?

She didn't play the song again. I listened all night and nothing. Why can't she take a hint? I doubt she's forgotten. I just want to hear her play it once. Just once. That's all I wanted when this all began. To hear that song and know she remembers. Why won't she ever play it?

How many months have I stood here watching her, night in and night out? You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but I'm still apprehensive. Still jittery. Would she recognize me if she saw me? It has only been thirteen years, but I've changed so much in that time. Dropped a shitload of weight. Cut off most of my hair. I'm not a goddamn kid anymore. Will she know me when we finally meet?

She's on the move, crossing the garage to that bike of hers. Audacious piece of crap. Why would she ever want one of those things? Jesse would never have gone for a biker bitch. The damn thing is loud, especially in the parking garage. Its roar pierces my ears. She'll be leaving momentarily. If I want to follow her, I need to get back to the car two levels above. But I don't dare move. She mustn't see me. Not yet. Not until everything is in place. It'll be a reunion she won't forget until the day she dies.

At this hour, she'll only be going to one of two places. Her home or his apartment. I can catch up to her either way. The breath I've been holding escapes. I'm still trembling. I need a smoke.

There's nothing like the first drag off a freshly lit cigarette. I love the way it tickles my throat. God, I need this. It's soothing and steadies my nerves. A chill hangs in the air like the night Jesse died. Was it this cold back then, or did it just seem like that? I can't remember the details as clearly anymore.

Time heals all wounds, they say. That's such a lie.

The concrete is cold beneath my feet. As cold as my heart. As cold as she will be when I'm done. Just a couple more weeks, then it'll be time for Laura Hobson to return to the Shallows.

KAITLYN GROANED when the alarm clock buzzed at 9:30 the next morning. She'd returned to her Bala Cynwyd home, arriving just after 2:30. She vaguely recalled the clock saying that it was past three when she' finally made it to bed. Normally, the alarm wouldn't go off until closer to noon, but not this morning. Lunch with Brad meant her whole morning routine had to be moved up. It was one downside to working seven to midnight. Romantic meals were always relegated to lunch.

Kaitlyn kicked the paisley sheets off the bed, sat up, and ran her hands through her disheveled hair. She hadn't slept well; tattered images of her nightmare still clung to her subconscious: the dark pool of water engulfing her, cold hands clutching at her ankles . . . She shook her head and tried to shake off the wisps of memory once and for all.

She yawned, climbed from her king-size bed, and crossed to the window on the far wall. She pulled the curtains aside and looked up at the blue sky, squinting as the Friday morning sun filled the room with a fiery yellow hue. Kaitlyn's gaze dropped to her front yard and the street beyond. The Volkswagen Beetle she'd seen when she came

home was gone. It likely belonged to one of her neighbors. Or maybe a regular guest? It'd been parked outside a couple times a week—sometimes further up the street, sometimes directly across from her house. But never in a driveway. Always on the street.

A grey Ford Focus pulled up along the curb near her driveway, and two elderly ladies—one African American and the other Caucasian—emerged from the car. Dressed in their Sunday best, each carried a large tote bag, overflowing with leaflets.

Jehovah's Witnesses, she thought as they started the short trek up her driveway. Kaitlyn pulled the curtains closed again as the doorbell rang. She made no move to answer it. *I'll have to slip out the back this morning.*

She walked down the hall to the bathroom. Flipping on the light, she glanced in the mirror over the sink. She ran both hands through her hair and pushed it back from her face. The dark shadows beneath her eyes looked more pronounced this morning. Just another sign that she hadn't been sleeping well over the past few weeks.

Was this really her? The same person who had been walking hand in hand out there, beside the Shallows? Just the two of them in the chilly evening. The innocence, the tranquility, and the love.

She turned on the faucet, cupped her hands under the cold water, and splashed her face. She smiled. The green toothbrush beside her pink one made her think of Brad. How late had he been up? He'd sounded pretty exhausted on the phone last night. Hopefully, he hadn't been forced to stay up too much longer after they'd hung up.

She hated deceiving Brad. In their two years together, there had been no secrets between them . . . except one. Her past, as far as he knew, had been as normal as anyone could hope for. No scandal, no remorse, and no death. She had hoped that he'd never have to know the truth, but she couldn't keep lying about the letters forever.

Back in the bedroom, she drew open the top drawer of the oak mission-style dresser to grab a sports bra. She caught a glimpse of the small box near the back and reached for it. Her hand hovered over it

for a moment. She never should have kept it. With a force of will, she grabbed a bra and pushed the drawer closed. Then, Kaitlyn rummaged through the bottom drawer, pulling out black spandex running shorts and a pale blue tank top. She slipped a pair of Nikes onto her feet, tightened the white laces, and flexed her feet. The shoes were worn. Maybe it was time to get a new pair. She grabbed her iPhone from the dresser and slid it into the armband strapped to her right upper arm. She plugged the earbuds into the phone and crossed again to the window. The Ford Focus was still parked in the street, but there was no sign of the two women. She scooped her keys from the dresser, pausing to get a firm hold on the attached pepper spray canister.

KAITLYN SNEEZED when she stepped out into the backyard. Fresh cut grass. She vaguely recalled hearing a lawn mower earlier in the morning. *Must have been Fred getting an early start on the yard work.* She sighed. She'd end up dragging grass clippings into the house on her shoes later. Her eyes fell upon the row of American Boxwoods that she'd planted two summers ago. They still hadn't grown tall enough to block her view of the cemetery beyond. Kaitlyn had thought she could live with a cemetery practically in her backyard, but it was far creepier than she'd anticipated. Perhaps if she couldn't see the cemetery, it wouldn't bother her. With earbuds in her ears, Kaitlyn cut across the lawn and jogged off toward the nearby street.

Her house, a split-level colonial with beige siding and chocolate-colored shutters, sat on the corner of Belmont Avenue and Garnet Lane. Her home was the smallest along the secluded lane; the others had more square footage, bigger yards, and better landscaping. Her neighbors were all married with children. None of this ever bothered her. She didn't mind still being single at thirty-two. Her early career in broadcasting had kept her moving from city to city every year or so,

making it difficult to develop a long-term relationship. But she'd returned to the Philadelphia area three years ago, and now she was putting down roots.

Kaitlyn jogged along the road's shoulder and paid little attention to the passing cars and trucks. She was familiar with just about every inch of the path along this stretch of Belmont Avenue. She'd jogged the same route every morning since moving in. A few blocks down, Kaitlyn turned left onto East Levering Mill Road, which took her to the entrance of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail. The trail, which looped around the Westminster Cemetery, would eventually bring her back around to Belmont Avenue, just north of her house.

The wooded trail was a flurry of activity, far more than Kaitlyn expected for ten in the morning. Mothers pushing strollers—both walking and jogging—as well as retirees out for a leisurely stroll formed a human maze through which Kaitlyn weaved. She smiled. The beautiful Friday morning weather must have drawn the people out. Spring was in the air, which meant the flowers were in bloom, leaves were sprouting on the trees, and the fair-weather exercisers were coming out from their winter hibernation. Her smile widened as she remembered how she'd practically had the trail to herself in the bitter cold of January and February.

She continued along, absorbed in the music from her earbuds and paying little attention to what was around her. As the trail wound into the shade of the trees, the temperature dropped by a few degrees. Kaitlyn shivered at the sudden change. She passed a mother with two infants bundled up in a dual seat stroller. The woman looked haggard and frustrated, as if she'd spent all her energy just to get to the park. Kaitlyn returned the woman's nod and half-hearted smile with a wave, then pressed on.

The crowd thinned out, and Kaitlyn found herself alone on the trail. As she rounded a bend, she noticed a bench with a seated figure hunched forward, looking at a mobile phone. Dressed in a gray hoodie, the face was covered except for the long flowing chestnut-brown hair falling out from under the hood. No telling if it was a man

or a woman. She tried not to pay much attention to the figure as she approached, but paranoia nagged at the back of her mind. *Be aware of your surroundings*, she reminded herself.

When Kaitlyn came alongside the bench, she turned her gaze toward it. The hood tilted upward, giving her a momentary glimpse of a shadowy face. It locked onto her and seemed to follow her as she passed. Before any of it could truly register in her mind, the hood tilted down again, and Kaitlyn continued to jog further up the trail.

Only after a few strides did she think again about the face she'd seen. She halted and turned back toward the bench. It was empty. There was no one around. Kaitlyn's hand trembled as she tightened her grip on the pepper spray canister.



WHEN KAITLYN ENTERED TOSCANA ITALIANO, she inhaled the tantalizing aromas of garlic, homemade tomato sauce, Italian herbs, and freshly baked breads. She drew in a deep breath. The upscale bistro, located in the city's arts district, was on Spruce Street. It was elegantly decorated in dark woods and crimson fabrics. The tinted-plate glass windows and dim lighting created an intimate atmosphere, perfect for a romantic lunch.

She scanned the restaurant and spotted Brad's smile from across the lunch crowd. As she made her way through the scattering of occupied round tables, Kaitlyn admired the well-dressed man who waited for her. His coal black hair was brushed off to the right—not a single hair out of place. The chiseled jawline and tuft of hair on his chin gave Brad a rough look that Kaitlyn adored.

He rose from his seat as she approached, moving to pull out the chair beside his. Kaitlyn touched the arm of his pinstripe suit jacket and kissed him on the cheek. "Sorry I'm late."

"I only just arrived a few moments ago myself." His deep voice sounded far more relaxed than the night before.

Kaitlyn noticed the shadows beneath his blue eyes. “Were you up late last night?”

“More like early in the morning. That Radcliffe-Hesterton brief was a nightmare,” he said. “Took me three hours just to get through that one alone.”

Kaitlyn frowned, and reached across the table, touching his hand. “Probably good that I didn’t come over after work.”

A young, petite waitress in black blouse and trousers approached the table to take their order. A salad—grilled chicken Caesar—with an iced tea for Kaitlyn, and chicken piccata with a glass of water for Brad.

“Did you hear that GBT struck again last night?” Brad said when the waitress stepped away.

Kaitlyn closed her eyes and shook her head. “Strangled. What a horrible way to die.” *Almost as bad as drowning*, she thought.

“Heard it on the morning news. They said his latest victim put up a fight before being killed. Police found the body behind Pegasus—that nightclub at Penns Landing.”

Kaitlyn set her fork down on her plate. “I heard an announcer from Faith FM said this was God’s punishment on the city for allowing homosexuality to flourish.”

“Some religious fanatic trying to make a point. . . . That’s probably who GBT is. It’s a hate crime. Pure and simple.”

“I hope they catch him soon.” She took a long sip of iced tea.

They fell silent. The space between them became a vast wasteland of reticence that made Kaitlyn feel uncomfortable. She didn’t like these moments, which had become more frequent of late.

“How’d the rest of your show go?” Brad asked, probably just as uncomfortable as Kaitlyn but much better at lightening the mood.

“Same as it does every night. The phones rang off the hook. I’m doing the anti-dedication song tonight. It’ll be even crazier.”

“Which song are you using tonight?”

“I took your suggestion. ‘Love Stinks.’”

Brad nodded his head. “Classic J. Geils Band.”

Kaitlyn smiled. Brad's knowledge of '80s music bordered on the obsessive. His music library was crammed with songs that even she had never heard of. She'd always considered herself to be an expert on popular music, a trait that went with the job. But Brad always had her beat when it came to music from that era.

The waitress returned with their meals. As they ate, she looked across the table and smiled. He turned his gaze away from her. Kaitlyn shifted in her seat and studied him. There were shadows beneath his eyes and the slouch in his shoulders was more pronounced. She felt a pang of compassion for him. Unlike her, he wasn't accustomed to working late into the evening, and she could tell just by looking at him that he wasn't tolerating his late night very well.

"I need a weekend away," he said suddenly. "A long weekend. Are you interested?"

She felt a surge of excitement within her. A getaway sounded like a tremendous idea. Get away from work. Get away from the letters. She locked eyes with him and grinned. "What'd you have in mind?"

"Three days in the Poconos."

"Sounds nice."

"There's a little resort up there, just for couples," he said between mouthfuls of his meal. "We could go up on a Thursday after your show and stay through Monday."

"I love it. When?" she said.

"I'll have to see what availability the resort has, but maybe two weeks from now?"

"Can we get one of those rooms with a tub shaped like a champagne glass?" Kaitlyn laughed. "I've always wanted to try one of those."

"I'll see what I can do."

Although the restaurant was bustling with the lunchtime crowd, their corner table was isolated in a silent bubble. An awkwardness hung over the table. Brad toyed with his food, using his fork to push it around the plate.

“About these letters . . .” he said.

Kaitlyn set her fork down. It clinked against the plate a bit louder than she wanted. “Do we have to talk about this again?”

“Again? We’ve barely talked about it at all. You always shrug it off like it’s nothing.”

Kaitlyn folded her arms and glared at him. “It *is* nothing.”

“Then why the nightmares?” His words rumbled across the table like subdued thunder.

The topic wasn’t new with them. But Brad had never been as fervent before. Maybe he was just tired. Kaitlyn furtively glanced around the restaurant to see if anyone was watching. Then she leaned forward and spoke softly. “Please . . . let’s not talk about this now.”

“Then when do we talk about it?”

She opened her mouth to speak, then thought better of it. If she wasn’t ready to tell him the truth, then there was nothing she could say to make matters better. She looked down at her meal and jabbed at some lettuce with her fork. The Shallows was weaving its way into her love life like virulent poison ivy.



AS THEY CROSSED the restaurant to leave, Kaitlyn took hold of Brad’s hand, giving it a tight squeeze. They paused just inside the entrance. She leaned toward him and kissed his lips. As she pulled away, something smacked against her shoulder, jostling Kaitlyn back into Brad’s arms.

She heard the rough feminine voice utter apologies as the woman pushed open the door and exited with great haste. Kaitlyn caught the merest glimpse of chestnut brown shoulder length hair as the woman rushed from sight on the busy street.

“That was rude,” Brad said, still holding Kaitlyn in his arms. “You okay?”

Kaitlyn eased herself out of his arms. “I’m fine.” She gazed

through the window at the street. The hair on her neck stood up but she couldn't explain why. There was something familiar, but she couldn't tell what. Was it the woman? Was it her voice? Or, was it something else completely? Everything else around her became white noise as *déjà vu* swept over her. It was the hair; she was certain of it. She'd seen it before. Where? The trail, on the bench, earlier in the morning. But could it be the same person? Was she being followed?

"Kate? You there?"

She jerked her head around to stare at Brad. "What? Yeah, yeah I'm here."

"You were off in Lala Land for a moment," he said. "What's up?"

Kaitlyn turned to look out on the street once more. "I thought . . . It was nothing."

"You sure?"

She nodded. "Yeah. Let's go."

Kaitlyn grasped his hand, leading him through the door onto the sidewalk beyond. They embraced, and she held him tightly for just a moment longer than usual. His arms around her helped to push away the uneasy feeling the collision had stirred within her. When she pulled away, Kaitlyn gave him a quick kiss. "I'll come over after my show. See you tonight."



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