

To Slay the Dragon

The sequel to
Don't Blame the Children

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E D U C A T I O N

1 'HEY, KATH,' DEE Loring hissed. 'Look what's at the drive-in window! Get an eyeful of him! Is he beautiful or what?' Kathy Benedict glanced through the take-away window. She saw a boy with thick black hair wearing a leather jacket and jeans. He was sitting astride a big Harley bike.

'Hey, gorgeous,' Dee greeted him. 'What'll it be?'

The boy was about seventeen or eighteen, with a handsome face and broad shoulders. Kathy might have given him a second look. But right now she was going out with Todd Macon.

She and Todd were slowly building their future together. They'd finished high school last month. Then they'd both signed up at the local university. Kathy was looking forward to going to uni with Todd. In the meantime, she was spending the summer working at this fast food restaurant.

'Double cheeseburger and fries,' the young man ordered. He coolly ignored Dee's flirtatious glances. When his order came, he grabbed the bag and roared down the take-away lane to the car park. There he stopped and began to eat. But now and again, he stared back at the restaurant.

Suddenly Dee nudged Kathy. 'Hey, I think he's coming inside. Bet he wants a second look.' She squinted at herself in the chrome surface of the counter. Quickly she pulled at her hair and adjusted her cap.

Kathy just shook her head. She'd never liked Dee. But now that they worked together, she tried to get along with her. Back in high

school Dee had been part of a wild crowd. It was the same group that made senior year at Tyler High such a mess. They made so much trouble for one teacher that she lost her job.

Then there was the awful business of Alex Ross. Alex had been the worst of the troublemakers. So when he'd disappeared, everyone at first thought he was just playing a stupid trick.

But then his body turned up in South River. And there wasn't much doubt he'd been killed. A lot of people had been suspected of murdering Alex. Even Todd.

In the end, the terrible truth was discovered. Yet Kathy still couldn't shake the image of the police dragging the river for Alex's body.

'Kathy, he's coming straight towards us,' Dee announced. 'I just knew he was flirting with me at the window.' She jabbed again at her cap. 'Do I look okay?'

'Yep,' Kathy said. She watched the boy walk up to the counter. His jacket was sprinkled with colourful patches. And his heavy boots seemed to be made of real leather. He didn't look like any of the guys from around here.

'Hi,' he said, his full lips smiling over perfect teeth. His voice was deep and a little hoarse. 'What's your name?'

'Dee Loring,' Dee replied in her sexiest voice.

'Not you,' said the Harley rider rudely. 'You with the long hair. You remind me of somebody I knew once.'

Kathy stared back at him, a little startled. She wasn't interested in this guy. In fact, she even felt uneasy near him. However, he was a customer. And the rule was be nice to customers.

'I'm Kathy Benedict,' she said with a slight smile.

'My name's Zuma,' he replied. 'Zuma's a beach in Queensland. I used to hang out there a lot. So the gang I rode with started calling me that.'

'Oh,' Kathy said. She tried not to sound too interested.

On the sidelines, Dee was going wild with jealousy. She tried desperately to butt in. 'So what's Queensland like?' she asked.

Zuma didn't even look at Dee. He continued to stare steadily at

Kathy, making her uncomfortable. ‘You look like Diane. You could be her. If I believed in ghosts, I’d swear you were her.’

‘I’m Kathy,’ Kathy weakly repeated. Something about Zuma frightened her. She couldn’t understand why. Maybe it was just the way he stared at her.

‘Diane was beautiful, like you. Same hair, same cheekbones. Big eyes like yours. And long lashes,’ the boy said. His own black eyes narrowed and took on a strange shine.

‘Excuse me, please,’ Kathy said, turning away. ‘I have to get more coffee made.’ Enough was enough.

‘The thing about Diane...’ Zuma called after her. Almost against her will, Kathy turned back.

‘She died in a really horrible way,’ Zuma continued. ‘I’ll never forget it. I saw her die.’ Zuma shook his head back and forth.

Kathy turned sharply and walked back to the grill. There she found Fared, the manager, frying burgers. Fared was a forty-year-old immigrant from the Middle East.

‘Fared, some guy up front is acting weird,’ Kathy said.

Fared stooped to get a look at the counter. ‘The motorcycle guy?’ Kathy nodded and Fared went up front, smiling. ‘What can I do for you, sir?’

‘I was talking to the girl—to Kathy,’ Zuma said coldly.

‘Sorry, she’s busy,’ Fared said, his smile and voice still gentle. ‘So can I get you something?’

‘No,’ Zuma said. ‘Tell Kathy I’ll see her around.’ He turned away without another word. In a minute, they heard him start his Harley and speed off. ‘You okay, Kathy?’ Fared asked. ‘You look a little upset. Why don’t you have a break?’

‘Thanks, but I’ll be all right,’ Kathy said. ‘I don’t know why he bugged me so much—even before he talked about that girl dying. He seemed a little crazy.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Dee said. ‘You know how guys are. They’ve all got a weird sense of humour. Remember how Alex fed old Mr Sonderville’s mice to the snake? No more science experiments with those stupid things,’ Dee said with a laugh.

'Alex was a sick person, Dee,' Kathy snapped. Alex Ross had spent his life hurting people. He loved to make fun of and embarrass anyone who was vulnerable. Mr Sonderville, their science teacher, had only been one of his victims.

'Alex just had a wild sense of humour,' Dee insisted. 'I miss him. You want to know somebody who really needs some help? It's Todd. He always seems so angry. I hardly ever see him laugh.'

Kathy turned away without replying. Dee's snide little remark hurt because there was some truth in it. Sometimes Kathy worried about Todd. She would have liked to see him smile and laugh more. But she loved him as he was. She tried to understand why he often felt bitter.

Todd had only been fifteen when his life had been dramatically changed. He'd worked that summer in Lancaster, a nearby town. One day he'd become involved in a terrible accident. He found a girl trapped in her car, surrounded by flames. Todd tried to rescue her but failed. And in the process, he suffered terrible burns.

Now the scars on his face and body made him self-conscious and often angry. Yet he was still loving and gentle to Kathy.

Fared interrupted Kathy's thoughts. 'You sure you're okay, Kathy?' he asked.

'Yeah, thanks,' Kathy said, smiling gratefully. Fared had three kids of his own, the oldest near Kathy's age. He took a fatherly interest in all the teenagers who worked at the restaurant.

'You know what I think?' Dee said. 'I think he was really trying to get my attention. Did you see the way he looked at me in the window? I know he was flirting with me. He just started talking to you, Kathy, to try to make me jealous.'

'I hope that's true,' Kathy said. She shook her head. 'Believe me, Dee, I'd be the last one to stand between you and Zuma.'

Dee stared at her, uncertain how to take the remark. 'Well, I thought he was cute,' she finally said.

Kathy didn't answer. 'Cute' somehow didn't seem the right word for Zuma.

At four, Kathy finished work and headed for her car. She was

thinking about her date with Todd later that evening. So when the voice came from behind her, she jumped in surprise.

‘Kathy.’

She spun around and found herself facing Zuma. Despite the lazy smile on the biker’s face, she wasn’t reassured. Should she dodge past him and head back to the restaurant? Or should she try to handle this herself?

Zuma seemed to read her thoughts. ‘Don’t be scared,’ he said. ‘I just want to talk. I won’t bite.’

‘What do you want? I have a lot of things to do,’ Kathy said. She tried to keep a distance between them.

‘Look, spare me a couple of minutes. I was kind of shocked to see you in there today. You look just like Diane.’

Kathy shook her head. ‘Listen, Zuma, I’m sure it must have been a shock to you. But it doesn’t...’

Zuma held up his hand, as if begging for silence. Kathy let her words fall. ‘You ever love somebody who died, Kathy?’ he asked. ‘It really messes up your head, you know? And Diane was someone special.’

‘She was older than me,’ Zuma added. ‘So, of course, she didn’t really notice me at first. But I thought if she really got to know me...well, then, maybe she could see I wasn’t like other guys.’

Kathy didn’t want to be unkind to anybody. Not even to this strange guy. But she didn’t want to make the mistake of encouraging him. She looked at her watch nervously.

Still Zuma pressed on. ‘But she never got that chance—the chance to know me. People kept getting in between us. Telling her lies about me.’ He frowned, and Kathy saw a storm brewing in his eyes.

‘I really gotta go,’ Kathy said. She slowly stepped backwards towards her car.

Zuma drew back and stared at her coolly. ‘Okay. I get the message. I don’t want to bother you. It’s just that seeing you brought it all back. For a minute, I thought maybe she was alive after all. I mean I never saw her...afterwards. After she died. I looked at you

and I thought, 'Man, she's alive. I've found her again...'

Zuma trailed off, and Kathy took that as her cue. 'Well, good luck,' she said. She slipped inside her car, locking the door after her. She sighed with relief when she heard Zuma's Harley rocket out of the carpark. She hoped Zuma was heading straight for the highway, right out of her life.

Kathy started her own car and headed for home. She again let her mind drift to Todd and their date tonight.

She'd gone about five blocks when the sound of an engine caught her attention. She glanced in the rear-view mirror and gasped.

'Oh, no! He's following me!'