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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Desires of the Dead**

Written by Kimberly Derting

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Kimberly Derting

DESIRES  
OF THE  
DEAD

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## PROLOGUE

VIOLET LEANED FORWARD ON HER HANDS AND knees over the frozen landscape. Inside her boots, her toes felt as if icy shards were burrowing beneath her skin and slithering into her veins. Her fingers were very likely frost-bitten within her gloves.

The flashlight's beam slashed through the veil of blackness that had settled over the wintry forest, creating a spotlight where Violet had been trying to uncover the ground beneath the soft layer of snow.

In her drugged state, she couldn't be certain that she wasn't hallucinating as she stared at the man who towered over her. His weathered skin seemed to glow with an

unnatural life of its own. It was both strange and beautiful.

But her thoughts were thick, and she struggled for each one, dredging them up from the swampy depths of her confused mind.

He spoke to her, unaware that her brain filtered his words, jumbling them and making them something less than coherent. She tried to concentrate as the tranquilizing sensation bled through her, deadening her senses.

But she was cognizant enough to be afraid—*terrified*, even—of this man. She could understand enough of what he was saying to recognize that he was disturbed. And dangerous.

He'd followed her. In the middle of the night. And even through the haze that distorted her awareness, she realized that he must have known why she was there. That he somehow knew she had found the body.

She glanced down at his hand, at what he held there, and her tangled thoughts immediately cleared.

She watched while he gripped the handle of the shotgun tightly in his fingers, and then he looked at her. "I'm really sorry that you found her," he explained sadly. "I didn't want anyone else to die."



## CHAPTER 1

*January, Five Weeks Earlier*

CHELSEA LEANED DOWN TO VIOLET LIKE SHE HAD a secret to tell, something she didn't want anyone else to hear. "Check out the new eye candy!" Chelsea shouted, making Violet jump.

Violet was pretty sure that everyone in the cafeteria had just heard her friend. As usual, Chelsea's internal filter seemed to be turned off.

Come to think of it, Violet couldn't remember Chelsea ever screening her words.

The *boy* Chelsea was referring to happened to be walking

right past them and, like everyone else, he'd heard her too—he would have had to be deaf *not* to hear—and he looked up in time to catch Violet glancing his way. Chelsea turned back to Jules and Claire, and pretended to laugh at something funny they'd said, giving the impression that it had been Violet who'd made the outrageous comment.

He smiled sheepishly at Violet and kept on walking. Violet felt her cheeks burning, and she was grateful that he at least had the good sense to look embarrassed by all the attention he was drawing. As humiliated as Violet was, she also felt a little sorry for him. It must suck to be the new kid in school. Even a really good-looking new kid.

As she watched, a girl joined him. Violet might have guessed from the resemblance—the similarity in coloring between the two of them—that they were related, except she didn't have to guess; Violet already knew that the girl was his younger sister.

They had a new student every now and then at White River High School, but in a town as small as Buckley, Washington, the fact that there were *two* new students on the very same day was cause for major gossip. Even if they were brother and sister.

Violet watched the pair until they found a table at the far end of the cafeteria, away from the activity and the busier tables at the center of the large, noisy space, and then she turned to Chelsea.

“Thanks a lot, Chels. I'm sure that wasn't *at all* awkward for him.” Violet glanced down and examined the contents of

her plastic tray. The pizza looked greasy and runny, and the applesauce had a faintly grayish hue to it. The food made her lose her appetite altogether.

Chelsea grinned back at her. “No problem, Vi. You know me: I’m a giver. I just wanted to make him feel welcome.” She shoved a spoonful of the grim-looking applesauce into her mouth, smiling around the flimsy plastic utensil. She gazed over Violet’s shoulder to where the two new students sat by themselves. “If he didn’t want people talking about him, he probably shouldn’t look so tasty.” She was still gawking at them when her face wrinkled up and she pulled the spoon from her mouth. “What’s your boyfriend doing over there?”

Violet twisted in her seat so she could see what Chelsea was talking about just as Jay joined the two new kids at their table. He sat beside the girl, but he was already talking to her brother like they were old friends. And then he turned and pointed in Violet’s direction—*right at her, in fact*—and smiled when he saw that she was watching him. He waved at the same time the new guy looked up to see her studying them.

It was the second time she’d been caught staring at the new kid.

Violet tried to smile, but it didn’t actually reach her mouth. She thought about pretending she hadn’t seen them but realized it was too late, so before turning around she gave a halfhearted wave. She hoped the new boy wasn’t telling Jay that she’d just called him “eye candy” . . . especially since *she* hadn’t. Jay had been her best friend long before he was ever her boyfriend, so she hoped he would



know she wasn't the one who'd said it.

"Oh, look," Claire announced, typically unaware of anyone else's discomfort. "I think Jay's inviting them over here."

Of course he was. Why wouldn't he be?

"Great," Violet muttered under her breath. She didn't bother turning around this time; instead she just glared at Chelsea.

Chelsea feigned innocence. "What? You don't want New Boy to come sit with us? Claire and Jules don't mind, do you?"

Jules was too busy eating to get involved in their conversation. The lanky tomboy looked like a prison inmate as she leaned over her tray, one arm wrapped protectively around it, shoveling the less-than-edible-looking food into her mouth.

Claire shook her head. "Of course not."

Chelsea continued, "You are one lucky girl, Violet. That boyfriend of yours has a heart of gold. He's just trying to make the new guy feel at home." And then she added, "Yet, when I do it, you get all bent and give me dirty looks. You should try being a little more like Jay and me. Try opening up your heart . . . just a little."

"Oh wait. Never mind," Claire announced, ignoring Chelsea. "The new kids are staying where they are. But here comes Jay."

Violet shot a warning look at Chelsea as Jay sat down beside her. He slipped his hand beneath the back of her shirt, tracing his thumb across the small of her back. It was so

familiar, his touch, yet disarming at the same time. Violet leaned into him and he kissed her forehead. His lips were soft but left her skin tingling. She could hardly believe that her stomach still did somersaults whenever he was near.

“What are you guys talking about?” Jay asked, and Violet wondered if she only imagined the implication she heard in his words.

Chelsea smiled sweetly. “We were just curious about your new friends over there. Well . . . more about him than her.”

Chelsea Morrison was a pretty girl. She had smooth skin; a slim, athletic body; and shiny, chestnut-colored hair. It wasn’t until she opened her mouth that the near-perfect illusion of femininity was shattered. Fortunately for Chelsea, she couldn’t care less what people thought of her . . . one way or the other. Chelsea refused to conform to what anyone else expected her to be.

Jay chuckled at Chelsea. “You mean *Mike*?” he asked, giving the new kid a name. “I was just asking if he wanted to come sit with us, but for some reason”—he glanced at Violet with raised eyebrows—“he didn’t want to. Is there anything you want to tell me? Like why Mike might prefer *not* to sit at the same table with you?”

“It wasn’t *me* . . . it was *her*!” Violet, nearly choking on the bite of soggy pizza she was trying to swallow, pointed at Chelsea.

Chelsea laughed, and even Jules stopped stuffing her face long enough to smile appreciatively. Claire was the only one

who remained straight-faced, mostly because she didn't seem to be listening anymore. Her fingers worked viciously over the keys of her cell phone; she was absorbed in a long series of text messages . . . probably to someone sitting only a few tables away.

"I know," Jay admitted. "Chelsea's the only girl at this school who would actually have the balls to say something like that right in front of someone."

Chelsea did her best to look indignant, her eyes widening in mock outrage. "*Whatever!* Why couldn't it have been Jules? Or Claire?"

"*What?* I didn't say anything," Claire piped in, suddenly paying attention.

Chelsea rolled her eyes at Claire's serious tone. "Paranoid much? No one was actually accusing you of anything. Besides, what do I care if he knows it was me? There's nothing wrong with noticing that he's . . . *mmm*, delicious. If he plays his cards right, he could end up as Mr. Chelsea."

"As if that's even possible, Chels," Claire declared. "The guy doesn't change *his* name; you'd have to change yours."

Chelsea rolled her eyes again, this time so that Claire couldn't see her, as she visibly bit back her irritation. "Thanks for the lesson in social convention, Claire-bear."

Claire shrugged and smiled ingenuously. "No problem."

Violet glanced at Jay, grinning over Claire's innate ability to annoy Chelsea without repercussions.

Violet envied Claire for that. But she knew that the only reason Chelsea didn't turn her wrath on Claire was because,

more than anything else in the world, Chelsea hated apologizing. So somehow, with a strength of will that she was unable to find when dealing with anyone else, Chelsea managed to curb her temper when it came to Claire's sensitive feelings.

Violet found it highly entertaining.

But Jay was grinning back at Violet for an entirely different reason. He bent toward her, and sparks of anticipation crackled through her body. His lips quietly brushed over hers, right there in the middle of the crowded cafeteria, just the whisper of a kiss. Yet Violet was powerless to stop him.

Even if she'd wanted to, her body never seemed to follow the simplest of instructions when it came to Jay. He was like her Kryptonite.

Chelsea stared at them disgustedly. "Will you guys stop it already? I think I just threw up in my mouth a little bit." She shuddered exaggeratedly. "If you can't wait until you're alone, I'm gonna have to ask you to find another place to sit." And then her short attention span got the best of her, and she nodded her head in the direction of Mike and his sister. "So what's their story?"

Jay shrugged. "I have no idea; I just met him today. He's in my first-period class. His family just moved here. That's about all I know."

"Why *here*?" Jules asked, and Violet had to admit that she was wondering the exact same thing.

It wasn't as if Buckley was a first-choice kind of town. And it didn't have particularly easy access to anywhere

important. It was more of a pass-through city on a small stretch of highway that headed nowhere in particular.

Jay shrugged again.

“That’s weird. You should find out,” Chelsea commanded. “What about her? Does she have a name? Not that I care really, but it would be rude to call her ‘new girl’ once Mike and I are dating.”

“I have an idea,” Jay suggested, leaning toward Chelsea from across the table. “Why don’t you put together a list of questions, in order of importance, and I’ll have him fill out the answers? Kind of like *new-kid homework*.” He smiled innocently. “You don’t have to do it now, of course; just try to get it to me before the end of the day.”

“Ha-ha.” Chelsea made a face. “You’re freakin’ hilarious, Jay.” And then she turned to Violet. “That must be why you like him so much. ‘Cause other than that, I just don’t get it.”

Claire’s brow creased, as though Chelsea’s statement didn’t make sense. She decided to help Violet out. “No, he’s cute too.” And when Jules started laughing, she added, “*Well, he is!*”

Chelsea was unmoved by Claire’s explanation and, as usual, had to have the last word. “No offense, Violet, but no one’s *that* cute. That’s all I have to say about it.” And then, in usual Chelsea fashion, she changed the subject before Jay had the chance to remind them all that he was sitting right there. “Hey, don’t forget, we’ve got a date on Saturday.”