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Her Mother's Shadow

Written by Diane Chamberlain

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In memory of Nan Chamberlain Lopresti

HER MOTHER'S SHADOW

The girl in the kitchen
has her mother's eyes
the color of new jeans
and old sapphires.

She has her mother's hair,
scarlet and sienna.
Her mother's lips
and bird feather hands.

But...

When she turns her head
just so,
The indigo eyes are
flecked with amber.

The hair,
streaked with gold.
She is not her mother
at all.

—Paul Macelli

Prologue

Christmas 1990

THERE WAS CHEER IN THE HOUSE IN THE HEART of Manteo. From the outside, the large two-story frame building that served as the battered women's shelter was nondescript. There were no Christmas lights hanging from the eaves, not even a wreath on the door, as if the people who ran the house were afraid to draw attention to it, and Lacey supposed they were. Cruel men had put the women and children here, the sort of men she had no experience with and found hard to imagine. But she could see the fear in the women's faces and knew those men existed. More than that, she did not really want to know.

Although there was no sign of the season outside the house, inside was another story. Fresh garlands decorated the railing that led up to the bedrooms, and branches of holly were piled on top of the huge old mantel. The scent of pine was so strong it had seared Lacey's nostrils when she first walked inside. A huge tree stood in the corner of the living room, decorated with white lights and colored glass balls and topped by one of her mother's stained glass angels. The tree was alive, and Lacey did not need to ask if that was her mother's doing. Of

course it was. Annie O'Neill always insisted on live trees. They had one at home, and Lacey knew both trees would be taken inland, away from the sandy soil of the Outer Banks, to be planted once the Christmas season was over.

She had not wanted to come to the battered women's shelter tonight. She'd wanted to stay home and listen to her new CDs and try on her new jeans with the rivets down the sides. She'd wanted to talk to her best friend, Jessica, on the phone to compare the gifts they'd received and decide what movie they would see the following afternoon. But her mother had insisted.

"You have so much," she'd said to Lacey the week before. "You will have already opened your presents and had Christmas dinner with me and Daddy and Clay. These women and their children will have nothing. *Less* than nothing. They'll have *fear* for Christmas, Lacey." Her mother spoke with great drama, the way she always did. "Their families will be torn apart," she continued. "Serving them dinner, singing a few carols with them—that's the least we can do, don't you think?"

Now, standing behind the long tables and dishing out Christmas dinner to the women and children, Lacey was glad she had come. At thirteen, she was certainly the youngest of the volunteers, and she felt proud of herself, proud of her kindness and generosity. She was just like her mother, whom all the other volunteers turned to for direction. Annie O'Neill was the most important person in the room. The tree in the corner probably wouldn't exist if it weren't for her mother. The buffet tables would probably hold half as much food. Maybe the entire shelter would not be here if it weren't for Annie. Lacey wasn't sure about that, but it seemed a real possibility to her.

She smiled at the women as she spooned green beans onto their plates. Six women, some of them still bearing the bruises

that had sent them to the shelter, and more than a dozen children filed past the tables, balancing real china plates. Her mother had insisted that all the volunteers bring their good china for the women and their children to use. "They can't eat Christmas dinner off paper plates," Lacey had heard her say to one of the volunteers a few weeks before. At the time, she thought her mother was just being silly, but now she could see how much the beautiful plates and the cloth napkins and the glittery lights from the tree meant to these women. They needed every speck of beauty and warmth they could get right now.

Outside, a cold rain beat against the house's wood siding and thrummed steadily against the windows. It had rained all day, a cold and icy rain, and she and her mother had skidded a couple of times as they drove to Manteo.

"Remember how it snowed on Christmas last year?" her mother had said as Lacey complained about the rain. "Let's just pretend this is snow."

Her mother was an excellent pretender. She could make any situation fun by twisting it around so that it was better than it really was. Lacey was too old for that sort of pretending, but her mother could always charm her into just about anything. So, they'd talked about how beautiful the snow-covered scenery was as they passed it, how the housetops were thick with white batting and how the whitecaps on the ocean to their left were really an icy concoction of snow and froth. The dunes at Jockey's Ridge were barely visible through the rain, but her mother said they looked like smooth white mountains rising up from the earth. They pretended the rain falling against the windshield of the car was really snowflakes. Lacey had to put her fingers in her ears to block out the pounding of the rain in order to really imagine that, but then she could see it—the wipers collecting the snow and brushing it from

the car. It fluttered past the passenger side window like puffs of white feathers.

"The first Noel..." Her mother began to sing now as she used salad tongs to set a small pile of greens on the plate of a young girl, and the other volunteers joined in the carol. It took Lacey a bashful minute or two to join in herself, and the beaten-looking women standing in line took even longer, but soon nearly everyone was singing. The smiles in the room, some of them self-conscious and timid, others overflowing with gratitude, caused Lacey to blink back tears that had filled her eyes so quickly she had not been prepared for them.

A tall woman smiled at Lacey from across the table, nudging her son to hold his plate out for some green beans. The woman was singing "Oh Christmas Tree" along with the group, but her doe-eyed son was silent, his lips pressed so tightly together that it looked as though no song would ever again emerge from between them. He was shorter than Lacey but probably around her age, and she smiled at him as she spooned the beans onto his plate. He looked at her briefly, but then his gaze was caught by something behind her, and his mouth suddenly popped open in surprise. Or maybe, she wondered later, in fear. His mother had stopped singing, too. She dropped the good china plate filled with turkey and mashed potatoes, and it clattered to the floor as she stared past the volunteers toward the door of the room. Lacey was afraid to turn around to see what had put such fear in the woman's eyes. One by one, though, the women and children and volunteers did turn, and the singing stopped. By the time Lacey could force herself to look toward the door, the only sound remaining in the room was the beating of the rain on the windows.

A huge man stood in the doorway of the room. He was not fat, but his bulk seemed to fill every inch of the doorway from jamb to jamb. His big green peacoat was sopping

wet, his brown hair was plastered to his forehead and his eyes were glassy beneath heavy brows. Held between his two pale, thick, shivering hands was a gun.

No one screamed, as if the screams had already been beaten out of these women. But there were whispered gasps—"Oh, my God" and "Who is he?"—as the women quietly grabbed their children and pulled them beneath the tables or into the hallway. Lacey felt frozen in place, the spoonful of green beans suspended in the air. The tall woman who'd dropped her plate seemed paralyzed as well. The doe-eyed boy at her side said, "Daddy," and made a move toward the man, but the woman caught his shoulder and held him fast, her knuckles white against the navy blue of his sweatshirt.

Lacey's mother suddenly took the spoon from her hands and gave her a sharp shove. "Get into the hall," she said. Lacey started to back away from the table toward the hallway, but when she saw that her mother wasn't moving with her, she grabbed the sleeve of her blouse.

"You come, too," she said, trying to match the calmness in her mother's voice but failing miserably. Her mother caught her hand and freed it from her sleeve.

"Go!" she said, sharply now, and Lacey backed slowly toward the hallway, unable to move any faster or to take her eyes off the man.

In the hallway, a woman put an arm around her, pulling her close. Lacey could still see part of the room from where she stood. Her mother, the tall woman and her son remained near the tables, staring toward the doorway, which was out of Lacey's line of sight. Behind her, she could hear a woman's voice speaking with a quiet urgency into the phone. "Come quickly," she was saying. "He has a gun."

The man came into view as he moved forward into the

room. The woman grabbed the doe-eyed boy, pulling him behind her.

“Zachary,” the woman said. She was trying to sound calm, Lacey thought, but there was a quiver in her voice. “Zachary. I’m sorry we left. Don’t hurt us. Please.”

“Whore!” the man yelled at his wife. His arms were stretched out in front of him and the gun bobbed and jerked in his trembling hands. “Slut!”

Lacey’s mother moved in front of the woman and her child, facing the man, her arms out at her sides as though she could protect them more efficiently that way.

“Please put the gun away, sir,” she said. “It’s Christmas.” She probably sounded very composed to everyone else in the room, but Lacey knew her well enough to hear the tremulous tone behind the words.

“Bitch!” the man said. He raised the gun quickly, squeezing his eyes together as he pulled back on the trigger. The blast was loud, splitting apart the hushed silence in the room, and the women finally started to scream. Lacey’s eyes were on her mother, who looked simply surprised, her deep blue eyes wide, her mouth open as if she’d been about to speak. The tiniest fleck of red appeared in the white fabric of her blouse, just over her left breast. Then she fell to the floor, slowly, as if she were melting.

The man fell to the floor, too. He dropped the gun and lowered his face to his hands, sobbing. One of the volunteers ran into the room from the hallway. She grabbed the gun from the floor and held it on him, but the big man no longer looked like a threat, just weak and tired and wet.

Lacey broke free from the woman holding her and ran to her mother, dropping to her knees next to her. Her mother’s eyes were closed. She was unconscious, but not dead. Surely not dead. The bullet must have only nicked her, since the

amount of blood on her blouse was no more than the prick of a thorn would produce on a fingertip.

“Mom!” Lacey tried to wake her up. “*Mom!*” She turned her head toward the man, who still sat crumpled up on the floor. “Why did you *do* that?” she yelled, but he didn’t lift his head to answer.

Women crowded around her and her mother. One of them knelt next to Lacey, holding her mother’s wrist in her fingers.

“She’s alive,” the woman said.

“Of course she’s alive,” Lacey snapped, angry that the woman had implied anything else was possible. The sound of sirens mixed with the pounding of the rain. “Her body just needs rest from being so scared.” She could hear her mother’s voice in her own; that was just the sort of thing Annie O’Neill would say.

The woman the man had meant to kill was huddled in the corner, her arms around her son. Lacey could hear her speaking, saying over and over again into the pine-scented air of the room, “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” and another woman was telling her, “It’s not your fault, dear. You were right to come here to get away from him.” But it *was* her fault. If she and her son hadn’t come here, this crazy man wouldn’t have run in and shot her mother.

The room suddenly filled with men and women wearing uniforms. They blurred in front of Lacey’s eyes, and their voices were loud and barking. Someone was trying to drag her away from her mother, but she remained on the floor, unwilling to be budged more than a few feet. She watched as a man tore open her mother’s blouse and cut her bra, exposing her left breast for all the world to see. There was a dimple in that breast. Just a trace of blood and a small dimple, and that gave Lacey hope. She’d had far worse injuries falling off her bike.

She stood up to be able to see better, and the woman who

had tried to pull her away wrapped her arms around her from behind, crossing them over her chest and shoulders, as though afraid she might try to run to her mother's side again. That was exactly what she wanted to do, but she felt immobilized by shock as much as by the heavy arms across her chest. She watched as the people in uniform lifted her mother onto a stretcher and wheeled her from the room. The man was already gone, and she realized the police had taken him away and she hadn't even noticed.

Lacey tugged at the woman's arms. "I want to go with her," she said.

"I'll drive you," the woman said. "We can follow the ambulance. You don't want to be in there with her."

"Yes, I *do!*" Lacey said, but the woman held her fast.

Giving in, she let the woman lead her out the front door of the house, and she turned to watch them load her mother into the ambulance. Something cool touched her nose and her cheeks and her lips, and she turned her face toward the dark sky. Only then did she realize it was snowing.

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June 2003

THE CHAIN AT THE END OF THE GRAVEL LANE hung loose from the post, and Lacey was grateful that Clay had remembered she'd gone out for dinner with Tom and had left the entrance open for them.

"Will you put the chain up after you drop me off?" she asked Tom.

"No problem." He drove between the posts and onto the forest-flanked lane, driving too quickly over the bumps and ruts.

Lacey pressed her palm against the dashboard for balance. Although it was only dusk, it was already dark along the tree-shrouded gravel lane leading to the Kiss River light station. "You'd better slow down," she said. "I nearly ran over an opossum on this road last night."

Obediently, Tom lifted his foot from the gas pedal. "I'm glad you don't live out here alone," he said in the paternal tone he occasionally used with her since learning he was her biological father a decade ago. "I'd be worried about you all the time."

"Well," Lacey sighed. "I won't be living out here too much longer." The Coast Guard had finally decided to turn the nearly restored keeper's house into a museum, a decision she had hoped would never come.

"You're upset about it, huh?"

"Oh, a bit." She was frankly scared, although of what, she couldn't say. The isolation the keeper's house had offered her had been more than welcome, it had been necessary, especially this last difficult year. "They've restored every inch of it except the living room and the sunroom." She shared a studio in Kill Devil Hills with Tom, but she'd turned the sunroom of the keeper's house into a small studio, as well, so she could work on her stained glass when she was at home. "They'll restore the sunroom after I leave, and the living room will be turned into a little shop and information area."

"When do they want you out?" he asked. They were nearing the end of the road. A bit of dusky daylight broke through the trees and she could clearly see the gray in Tom's wiry blond ponytail and the glint of light from the small gold hoop in his ear.

"Some time after the first of the year," she said.

"Where will you...holy shit." Tom had driven from the gravel road into the parking lot, and the keeper's house came into view in the evening light. The upper portions of nearly every window were aglow with her stained glass creations.

She followed his gaze to the house. "In the year and a half I've lived here, you haven't seen the keeper's house at night?" she asked.

Tom stopped the car in the middle of the lot and a smile came slowly to his lips. Shaking his head, he leaned over to pull Lacey toward him, wrapping her in the scent of tobacco as he kissed the top of her head. She had gotten him to stop drinking, but had failed at getting him to give up cigarettes.