

Chapter Six

Wake Up, Little Susie

This is an excerpt from my novella, Daphne, a side-story in the Deadgirl saga. It features the “meet-cute” between a newly introduced character, Josephine Jones, and series regular Daphne (who is essentially a were-harpy on the run from monster hunters).

Here’s the thing about small town weddings - they ain’t small.

Not when the bride and groom are the prom queen and the star quarterback, in that order. Not when the groom looks the way Trevor Clark does, with the short messy gold hair and movie star jaw, or the way Amanda King does, with her pile of auburn curls and the kind of lips that make you dream.

The people of Pickens didn’t follow royal weddings or the lives of TV stars - they followed each other’s lives. They cheered in the streets and whispered in their bedrooms about their neighbors, their cousins, the owner of the grocery or the old sheriff.

And when Trevor and Amanda were looking to get married just after high school, the whispers started.

Weren’t strange to get married young - happens all the time. Weren’t strange to end up with your high school sweetie - it might be rare in the big city, but back home it was a shocking as a blue jay in flight.

No, the folks of Pickens were following this wedding closely for one very important reason (one that weren’t related to their general good lucks and fairy tale quality, anyway): Amanda King, rumor had it, had been fooling around with someone just a few months back. Someone who wasn’t Trevor Clark.

There were ten or eleven “true stories” about the nature of the affair, which meant there were none.

In fact, in the whole of Pickens, only two people knew the truth of the matter.

Those two people were Amanda King, and Josephine Jones.



Josephine Jones wiped strawberry syrup off the Formica and pondered her life choices, few as they were.

“Jo, table 7!” Paul barked at her.

Paul. Paul Finch. Obnoxious twat with more hair in his nose than on the whole of his shiny head. He waved from the kitchen and stabbed a finger toward the north side of the restaurant.

“Don’t trouble yourself, Mr. Finch, I got it,” Jo said with a sweet smile.

Poison tastes sweet sometimes, don’t it?

Her heels stabbed at her feet as she walked - she’d begged Paul for sneakers, cute little white canvas sneakers, Americana as all hell, but he’d balked. The boys were allowed to wear Converse Hi-Tops, slacks and cardigans, loose, comfortable.

Jo smoothed the skirt of her red-and-white polka dot swing dress and sighed.

Table 7 wanted the cheeseburger, the sirloin, two orders of fries, and two Cherry Cokes. They asked if they had any Fats Domino, and Jo promised with a pearly smile that they'd punch it in to the jukebox in two shakes of a lamb's tail.

Table 9 asked for more fries - the ones they got were cold. They asked if Jo could tell the difference between hot and cold, and she pledged through her teeth that she could. Table 10 grilled her on every item on the menu, asking for the math on the carbs, the sugar, the fiber, hell even the wheat content.

Lady, there ain't a cheeseburger on God's green that won't clog your heart and kill you slow.

The lady ordered the salad, after some convincing and a sour look to both husband and Jo. When she brought the food back to table 7, they asked her if she was from China. She wasn't. They asked her if she was from Korea. She wasn't.

"Where are you from, then, sweetheart?"

"Simpsonville," Jo said.

"Oh," the old lady said, her face gone blank. Then she smiled again up at Jo. "Are you parents from China?"

An hour more of this, and Jo jumped on her fifteen with gusto.

Josephine darted outside, purse on her arm, and found a spot of empty brick you couldn't peep from the parking lot. Out came the Virginia Slims Menthol, out came the little silver lighter. Click. Heat.

She breathed in a long curl of smoke and let it sit in her lungs as long as she could stand it.

Her phone told her that all of her friends were happy. Some still in town, enjoying their new freedom from school. A few gone away, trips given as senior gifts.

Jo's graduation gift had been an apron, high heels, and the red polka dot dress she had on right now.

"18's old enough," her mom had said. "18's time to fly on your own, honey."

Yeab, I'm soaring with the eagles, Mama.

Jo sucked on her cigarette and pondered the practical joke that was her life.

Her phone twiddled. She shucked it into her hand and gazed at the small picture of Amanda King.

"Hello?" Jo drawled, trying to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

Silence, for a time. Soft breathing.

"Don't got all day, sweetie."

"Hey," Amanda whispered.

She was either somewhere public or just feeling particularly guilty. Maybe both.

"Um, how are you?" Amanda asked.

Jo bit her lower lip and told some lie.

"That's good," Amanda whispered.

"I thought we weren't talking," Jo said, and pinched one of her own eyebrows hard enough to hurt.

"I guess I miss you."

"You still gonna marry Trevor?" Jo asked.

"W-what?"

"I think you heard me, darlin'."

"Come on," Amanda hissed.

"That a yes?"

"Of course it's a yes!"

Louder, this time. Finally shouting. Maybe she wasn't in public after all.

"Already dropped the down payment on the venue?" Jo asked.

She immediately regretted it. Amanda hung up.

“Dammit,” Jo hissed.

Jo dragged the cigarette down and flicked the remnants into the dumpster. Maybe it’d catch heat, burn the whole restaurant down. She sighed pleasantly at the thought.

“Ow!”

Jo froze. The yelp sounded from inside the dumpster.

Jo gripped her phone in front of her like a shield, for some reason, and leaned over the top of the trash bin.

She wasn’t ready for the sight of a bruised and bloodied blue-haired girl lying naked amongst the garbage.

“Oh shit!” Jo hissed.

The girl rolled her head toward Jo and brushed cigarette ash off her face. Her long blue hair hung in tangled mats around her heart-shaped face, and her dark eyes glittered with indignant rage. Her lips squeezed shut.

“Are you okay?” Jo asked.

Images slammed unbidden into her mind, unwelcome ones. How did a young girl end up naked and beat to hell in a dumpster?

Jesus Mary and Joseph.

Jo fumbled with her phone.

“I’m gonna call the ambulance okay, sweetie, just don’t move - “

“Nuh-uh. Nope.”

The girl sat up.

“What? You gotta go to the hospital.”

“Sure don’t, but good lookin’ out.”

The blue-haired girl flung herself out of the dumpster and landed on bare feet. Jo got a better look at her body, and it wasn’t pretty. She was more injury than girl, a walking, talking pile of contusions and cuts and filth.

“Wait - “ Jo grabbed the girl’s arm.

The girl shook off Jo’s hand with surprising force. Jo staggered back like she’d been bitten.

“You need help!”

“You ain’t wrong, sister,” the strange girl said.

The Pickens greenbelt snuggled right up to the back of *Little Susie’s Diner*, a verdant tangle of growing things that overtook every inch of land if you didn’t cut it back on the regular. The blue-haired girl marched right for the tree line, and before Jo could say anything else she was gone.

“What in the golden hell . . . “ Jo whispered to herself.

She glanced down at her phone. Her fifteen minutes were up, and Paul didn’t let you have so much as a trip to the little girl’s room outside of your break time. Which was truly unfortunate because Jo felt a sudden and almost irrepressible urge to pee that always came with sudden, creeping anxiety.

The blue-haired girl disappeared completely - Jo couldn’t see even a flicker of movement in the trees.

Jo knew she should call the sheriff. Or maybe even run after the girl.

She gritted her teeth.

There weren’t many jobs in town that she could stand, and as much as it pained her to say it, slinging plates wasn’t the worst calamity that had befallen her. And if she lost it, mom would blister her hide.

She could go and help the girl, or she could keep her job.

Jo headed back inside, her stomach aching from her own cowardice.