

Dead Man's Leap By Tina deBellegarde

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

He inched toward the precipice, his toes gripping the stone ledge as if they had a will of their own. He lifted his head and squinted into the sunlight still streaming through the blackening clouds. He took in the expanse of rushing water below. In all his eighteen years, Trevor had never seen the creek roil so ferociously.

A clap of thunder startled him. His toes relaxed, and he felt as if the slightest wind could take him over the edge. Lightheaded for a second, he regained his footing and his purpose.

He had no choice if he wanted all this to stop.

He needed to do it.

And do it now.

The downpour would break again soon. But for now, all he could hear was the rushing of Horseshoe Falls beneath him, the roar drowning out the noise of his past.

Of his father.

Of his mother.

Yes, his mother. He had expected his father to be weak, and wasn't surprised at all after he left. But his mother? A mother's love is supposed to be unconditional. At least that's what she had always said before she had turned their world upside down. It was bad enough when she had played at being the sexiest woman in town. At least when his friends teased him then, it was meant to be fun. But this was worse, far worse. Now they wanted nothing to do with him. Now they used him as a punching bag.

His gang no longer looked to him as their leader. They ridiculed him for what his mother had done. From the beginning, he knew those kids were bad news. What choice did he have? In grade

school he'd been bullied. Well, he had put a stop to that in high school. Can't be bullied if you're the biggest bully.

His mother was gone. His father was gone. And now his posse. First, it was the cold shoulder, and a few snide remarks. Then he was cornered in the locker room after the game one day. That was the hardest. He hadn't taken a beating like that since the fifth grade. But the tables had been turned on him so fast that he never saw it coming. Trevor realized now that they were never friends. They were just a group of trouble makers who hung out together. Good riddance to them. He didn't need them anymore.

Another thunderclap reminded him where he was. On the edge. Right on the edge. He either had to do this properly or he would be going over anyway.

Trevor looked over his shoulder one last time and heard a faint commotion in the background. Once they rounded the path, he closed his eyes and jumped.

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Bianca St. Denis stretched to grab the cord just out of reach above her head and yanked on it with all her force to bring down the attic staircase. She tilted her head to avoid being struck as it made its way down. She unfolded the retractable stairs and put one foot on the first rung. But there she stopped, not sure she could take the next few steps. At forty-two the issue wasn't her physical ability to climb the steps, she was active, even fairly athletic. The old saying went "the mind was willing but the body was not." Well, in her case "the body was willing but the mind was not."

She had stayed out of the attic all these months since Richard's death. She had made do without her ski parka this past winter, and used Richard's barn jacket she'd found in the mudroom instead. She had made do without the spring curtains she would normally switch out in the living room each March. The winter ones still hung heavy and foreboding. And she made do without the patio cushions she had sewn two seasons ago. She simply sat on the raw wood when she wanted to read or eat in the backyard. She hadn't realized the number of things she had been doing without by avoiding the attic, not until the town started buzzing about the rummage sale. She pretended it was because she hadn't had time to search for the items, but she knew better.

She took her foot off the rung, bent and picked up the stairs again, refolded them, and let them float to the ceiling. The hatch closed with a neat click.

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Once Trevor hit the water, his tension disappeared. He welcomed the release and let himself drop. Slowly he was pulled down into the chaos of the rushing water, but his mind had floated above it all. He didn't feel a thing, he observed it instead. He watched as his body sank, as it swirled in the vortex of the overfull creek. He watched as his body escaped the current and floated peacefully in the murky water. And he watched as he gave in to full renunciation and allowed the water to decide what was to become of him.

His thoughts slowed, as muddy as the water surrounding him.

They slowed, but he could not make them disappear.

He had managed to avoid jumping off Dead Man's Leap every summer, but this year he knew he couldn't get away with it. They had already threatened to make sure he *jumped* this year. That was only part of what the summer had in store for him. Who could he turn to? His grandparents had no idea what he was going through. They always hid their heads in the sand anyway. There was nothing they could do for him. So, he had taken matters into his own hands.

He was shocked when his head broke the surface, and despite himself he gasped for air in enormous mouthfuls until he gagged. He bobbed there, undecided, until he finally attempted the few strides to reach the cove. It took him longer than he expected, like swimming in molasses. A cross between his fatigue, his indifference, and the strong current kept him from reaching the bank in the three strokes it would normally require. On his knees, he crawled out of the pull of rushing water and dropped on the shore.

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Leonard Marshall picked up the package, the paper crinkling in his hand. He carefully unwrapped one layer, then another. Layer after layer until he held the smooth tiny statuette in his hand. He trembled, and smiled, attracted and repulsed at the same time. How could such a tiny thing hold so many emotions for him? So much power over him? It was so small he could cradle it in the palm of his hand. He closed his fingers around it. It disappeared. He opened them again, and there it was. With it came a flood of memories. Exhilarating. His heart raced with a quick pat, pat, pat.

The basement door creaked. He took in a breath.

Time slowed and his heart with it.

Thump.....thump.....thump.

The light clicked on.

Another creak. Above him a step, a pause, another step. The door ached on its hinges as it opened wider. The light flicked off. The door closed. The steps faded. He let out his breath.

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Trevor had never experienced fatigue like this. He crawled onto shore in the shadow of the cliff and collapsed. He never expected to make it out of the water, and now that he had, he lay there drawing in large mouthfuls of air, as if his lungs would never get enough. He stayed there, staring up at the sky, watching the dark clouds shapeshift. The rain would be there any moment, and to his surprise, he welcomed it.

As his breathing relaxed, he realized that the pain he felt was a sharp object stabbing his back. He rolled over, removed it, and threw it off to the side. As he turned to lay back down, his blurry eyes focused on the object. It was a bone. A human bone? He scrambled onto his knees and slowly made his way over to it. He was repulsed and fascinated, but mostly he was frightened by the sight of a bone and what that could mean. What had happened here, right here in this cove?

In the distance, he heard their drunken voices again. He knelt and grabbed handfuls of dirt to cover the bone. He heard them approach the edge of the cliff.

“He came this way. I saw him jump.”

“He’s too chicken, he didn’t jump. But when I find him, he’ll jump alright. He’ll jump or I’ll send him flying.”

“He jumped, I tell ya. Leave him alone. You wanted him to jump, and he did. I saw him. Let it go, already.”

“Yeah, well if he jumped, where is he?”

“You think he’s still under? You think he hit his head like that kid a while back?”

“I’m telling you, he didn’t jump.”

“There’s nowhere else to go but down. Of course, he jumped.”

“I’m going in. If he did jump, we’ll find him down there. He’s probably hiding under the cliff.”

Trevor carefully picked his way out of the cove. Scraping up against the cliff as close as his body would allow, he followed the contours until he came out on the other side of the falls. With his last bit of strength, he climbed up the rocky trail alongside Horseshoe Falls.