

Luck Be A Lady

“I wonder what happened here.” Callie mused as she drove by the house.

I turned in the passenger seat. The old Victorian-esque house looked the same as it always did. Red and tan paint covered the wood only in uneven splotches, revealing a dull gray and brown color beneath. Loose shingles on the roof had previously fallen off and lay in heaps on the ground. Glass fragments stuck out of empty window frames. The doors had mysteriously vanished years ago.

The front steps of the house had been gone for a long time. The walls lacked a few planks here and there, giving me a wonderful view of the empty house. There was no furniture, and no walls separating the house into rooms. In fact, it was rather small.

Behind the house sat a luscious expanse of green. The house was located just off the highway, where the farms operated. I wasn't sure if the same crops were still grown there.

Callie drove on, but the image stayed with me. I held my wife's hand, trying to ignore the memories. I moved away to forget, but coming back . . . they refused to be neglected any longer.

“Come on, Leo, truth or dare?” Maddie asked me. She was of medium height, with brown hair, green eyes, and a knack for manipulation. She giggled drunkenly. “It's your turn.”

We were about to be juniors in high school. My parents were out at a friend's for a party, and they had left me in charge of the house. My friends came over for one last hurrah, and to celebrate my birthday.

I looked out the window, seeing the farmland behind our house. The rich smell of strawberries had filled my childhood. I used to play out there in the fields, but my parents always said to stay close to our little house.

The paint was perfect, and so was the construction of the house. It was almost entirely made out of wood. Polished glass sat in the window frames. An intricately carved wooden door opened and closed without so much as a tiny creak. There were two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. The tasteful choices of furniture eliminated the cramped feeling of the small house.

I had lived here with my parents ever since I could remember. They led simple lives as a car mechanic and a restaurant manager. A tiny shed behind the house held my father's tools, along with a small table for little projects. Money was usually tight, but the house was never one of our worries. It had been in the family for generations. It was our pride and joy. Whenever my friends wanted to hang out, they always volunteered me to host. We talked, played games, ate snacks. Everyone had fun.

Maddie snapped her fingers, drawing my attention. I answered distractedly. "Uh . . . dare."

Alex and James cheered, and Laila threw popcorn at them. Alex, James, and I had been friends for a long time. Alex was a big buff guy, as a result of his position on the football team. James was the opposite of Alex—short, skinny, a lightweight, and a math genius. Alex, James, and Maddie were a dangerous combination together.

Laila was different, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and an easygoing attitude—until something went wrong. We first met and became good friends in middle school, but it wasn't

until our sophomore year in high school that we confessed our feelings for each other and began dating. She was always the responsible one.

Alex, James, and Maddie went into the other room to discuss my dare. Laila plopped down on the couch next to me. I smiled weakly.

“Should I be scared?” I asked her.

She raised her eyebrows, looking at me sideways. “You should’ve gone with truth.”

I cursed and Laila laughed. She leaned in and kissed me. When we separated, Laila sighed and rested her head in my lap, putting the bowl of popcorn on the floor.

“I’m excited for you to open your present.” Laila grinned. A small, carefully wrapped box sat on the table in front of us, next to a few empty bottles of vodka. Laila had been smiling all week as she waited for me to find out what it was.

“Let’s go!” Alex boomed as he, James, and Maddie ran past us and out the door.

“Uh oh,” I gulped.

“Come on, ‘Daredevil.’” Laila teased, getting up.

Laila helped me stumble to my feet, and we followed the others outside. Alex, James, and Maddie stood in front the house, giggling to themselves. A large stick lay on the ground in front of them. Something smelled strange. Alex’s hands were behind his back.

“Okay, what’s my dare?” I stammered.

The three of them exchanged a look and Alex held out one of my father’s welding torches.

“Use this blow torch to light that stick on fire.” Alex said.

My head buzzed. I wasn’t as wary as I should have been. “Piece of cake. Doesn’t seem like much of a dare.”

Maddie tripped on her own feet and Alex caught her. “We want to see if you’ll do it.”

I looked at Laila, who bit her lip. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this. That smell—”

James interrupted, “You’re just burning up a stick. What, are you too chicken?”

I grabbed the stick in my other hand, “Not a chance.” I sniffed the air and recoiled. “It smells weird. And it’s wet.”

“So it won’t catch fire.” Alex added, grinning mischievously.

“That smell, though.” Laila worried.

“What?” I said.

Laila shook her head. “Never mind.”

I turned on the torch, holding it far away from me. A tiny blue flame sputtered to life at the end. I brought it closer to the stick. Just as the flame made contact, Laila gasped and shouted, “Gasoline!”

The stick caught fire extremely quickly. When the flames raced towards my hand, I panicked. The welding torch hit the ground and my arm spasmed. The stick landed next to the house.

“Are you crazy? Dousing it in gasoline?” Laila was screaming at Alex, James, and Maddie. “He could’ve been seriously burned! What is wrong with you?”

The three of them only laughed while I stood frozen. Laila turned around.

“Leo, are you okay? Are you hurt?” She asked, taking my hands.

I sucked in a breath, pulling my hands away. When I looked down at the hand that had held the stick, it was bright red, steaming, and blistered.

Laila's face turned crimson and she faced our friends. "He burnt his hand! Why would you dare him to do that?" She whirled on me. "And why would you be stupid enough to go through with it?"

I shrugged, dumbfounded. My hand stung. My voice slurred. "It was a dare."

"It's a minor burn, he'll be fine." Maddie said, laughing. "Besides, now it's your turn, Laila. Truth or—"

The sound of glass shattering interrupted us. When I looked at the house, I was horrified to see that the fire had spread. The right side of the house was already in flames and the window had exploded.

"Someone call nine-one-one!" I yelled, grabbing my hair. "My parents are going to kill me."

James immediately began dialing. Alex and Maddie backed away. She was muttering hysterically under her breath, "What did we do?"

"Your birthday present!" Laila shouted, running for the door.

"Laila, no!" I ran after her.

She was already through the door and in the house. I jumped through the door after her, but a wooden beam covered in flames stopped me in my tracks. I went down hard.

When I came to, I was lying on a stretcher and people were talking all around me. Firemen and policemen dominated the scene. Bright lights flashed and sirens sounded. Someone stood next to me.

"Leo? Leo, can you hear me?" It was a girl.

"Laila?" I blinked, my vision slowly clearing.

She shook her head. "It's Maddie. Are you all right?"

I struggled to sit up. "Laila, where is she? Is she okay?"

Maddie held me down and bit her lip. "Leo . . . The firemen didn't get here in time. She . . . she didn't make it. They found this."

She handed me the small box Laila was so excited for me to open. My hands shook as I opened it. Inside was a real, small, green, four-leaf clover encased in glass. Laila was always saying how I needed some luck, especially once we left for college in a few years. It was our little joke.

Maddie held my hand as I began crying. "I'm so sorry."

I looked down at the clover in my other hand. I squeezed my hand closed, the edge of the glass digging into my skin.

"Yeah," I said softly, rubbing my thumb on the back of Callie's hand. I buried the memory under years more in the back of my mind. "I wonder what happened here, too."