

# THE DEAD ZOO

BY

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## *Chapter one*

The day was mild and fine with not a cloud in the blue sky. The springtime woods on either side were a light, vivid green underpainted with yellow. Here and there blossoming dogwoods made white spatters that seemed to float among the trees.

Alexandra hardly noticed. She was just on her way down the valley headed for anywhere else, hitching a ride with a man in a dark red Pontiac Trans-Am. The Mary Kay decal in the rear window had to mean the man was driving his wife's car, not that he had mentioned any wife. Men never did.

Alexandra knew about Mary Kay cars because one of the kids at school had a mom who was a Mary Kay lady. The Trans Ams were no big deal. The big deal was if you sold so much stuff that they had to give you a pink Cadillac to drive.

Alexandra saw herself in the designer-decorated show room of her own award-winning showplace in Beverly Hills, hers and Brad's, demonstrating Mary Kay products to the trophy wives of big Hollywood producers. The ladies had all heard about the Alexandra Look, so now of course they all wanted to buy a complete range of home beauty products from the lovely Mrs. Brad Pitt herself. As if the Alexandra Look came out of a bottle. Yeah right, ladies. You're so pathetic, you know it?

Alexandra grabbed the door handle as the car squealed around a curve. The moron was trying to impress her by driving too fast. If he thought that was fast, he ought to drive with some of the kids on the football team sometime. He'd find out what fast was.

The man had said to call him Mac like everybody else did. Sure they did. Probably in school he was one of those losers that nobody even bothered to give a nickname to, so he had to give one to himself. Mac, whatever, was thirty or forty at least, with a belly that pooched out over his shiny white belt. At least he knew how to dress, you had to give him that. His sharply-creased red slacks were nearly the same color as the Mary Kay car. His white shoes matched his belt, and so did his gleaming silk socks. His shirt was pink-and-white striped, with the top three buttons open to show a gold chain on his hairless chest.

Around the corner the road dipped down. On the left was a junkyard for trailers, dozens and dozens of them rotting away in the sun. Yellow insulation hung out where the siding had come loose and paint was powdering off the rusty walls. Past the trailers a couple of acres of other big junk, appliances and equipment, ended in a stand of poplars. Old tractors, refrigerators, stoves and oil drums were jumbled around the main building. Little triangle flags—red, yellow, green, and blue—hung below the eaves of the corrugated tin roof. The gateposts at the entrance were sawed-off telephone poles wearing red highway cones like wizards' hats. The sign over the gate said, "HOWIE'S ANTIQUES—TRASH & TREASURES—BOOKS & RECORDS."

"Old Howie, he was something," Mac the driver said, holding his head up to keep his double-chin from showing. Her uncle used to do the same thing, except when he got so excited he forgot.

"He was?" Alexandra said.

"Yeah, that Howie. We called him Horny Howie in high school."

Here we go, Alexandra thought. She nodded politely and waited for more. After a few miles it came.

“Chilly for May,” he said. “Must have been cold hitching with just that thin shirt on.”

Your nipples were showing through your shirt when you got in, was what he meant.

“Mac,” she said, “would you mind pulling over for just a minute where there’s some trees? I’ve got to, you know—”

When he found a spot she got out and opened the back door for her pack. “Some things in it I need,” she said, and lit him up with a sunny smile. “Be right back.”

Inside the tree line she kept on walking through the heavy underbrush and then clambered up the hill till she reached a handy ledge for sitting in the sun. Mac had got out of the car. Way down below she could see his red and white clothes through the pale green haze of the new leaves. He must be able to see her, too, but seeing was as near as he was going to get. Mac wasn’t the type to come into the woods after her, not with those white shoes and fancy clothes.

At last old Mac gave up calling and waving his arms. Alexandra watched the red Trans-Am drive out of sight. The May sun was bright but thin. It was a little chilly in just her cotton shirt, he was right about that, so she got a light sweater out of her pack and slung it over her shoulders the way Mac always did with his.

*Mac, poor Mac. Their own fabulous yacht the USS Alexandra sipping cocktails on the bridge with all his other millionaire jet setter friends wondering where good old Mac had ever found his teen princess. Nobody knew that would be the very night that Mac passed away tragically in a fatal blaze while she watched helpless and heartbroken but the firemen wouldn’t let her run inside to save him.*

The sun came out from behind a cloud, warm on her face and on her legs where the faded denim was stretched tight. Her knees showed pale through the holes in her ripped jeans. She examined her wrists and hands, which were pale and disgusting from being indoors or with gloves

on all winter. But soon the sun would turn her skin the color of honey, with the tiny blond hairs showing yellow against it. Makes you shine like you're lit from inside, Brad always said. Brad was the same way himself in the summer, all blond and honey-colored and glowing.

Little puffy clouds were moving down the valley. Alexandra put the sweater back in her pack and started down, angling along the hill to avoid the steep path she had taken up to the ledge. When she was almost to the road a tangle of briars blocked her. She was looking for a way through, picking carefully at the prickly canes, not comfortable in the woods, when a black police cruiser passed by and slowed. Fear flashed out from the pit of her stomach. The fright faded, and she could think again. How could he see her through the brambles? Maybe he was stopping for something else. She hunkered down and stayed still.

The car stopped beyond her, and the backup lights went on. The officer backed the car as easily as if he were driving front wards. The car came to a stop, skidding a little in the gravel, right in front of where she was hidden. So he had seen her after all.

But when he got out of the cruiser he never even looked in her direction. He walked toward the rear of his shiny cruiser and with the toe of a polished black shoe he nudged at a heap of something lying just off the blacktop. At first Alexandra thought it was rags, dirty old sweat pants or something. When the policeman bent over and lifted a leg free of the heap she saw it was a dead animal, a half-starved dog of some sort.

The policeman opened the trunk of his patrol car, took out a crumpled Hefty bag, and worked it over the carcass. He slung the load aboard and slammed the trunk lid. Then he headed straight for Alexandra. She stayed motionless, even though she knew she was caught. But he stopped short of her and looked down as he fiddled with his zipper. Then he fished his big thing out and let fly, splattering on last year's dry leaves. When he was done he milked it and

flopped it for such a long time she was afraid he had spotted her after all and was showing off. Finally he put it away, though, and got back into the black cruiser with “**LUXOR POLICE DEPARTMENT**” written on the side.

Alexandra watched the car drive off, not scared anymore but just thinking about the policeman. He had been wearing a gray uniform with sharp creases in the pants. He looked a little like Ed Harris, that same soldier look. He was kind of cute except for that weirdness with the dog, and not even gloves on his bare hands to keep them clean. That was gross.

Where was he going to take a dead dog, anyway? Maybe the dog wasn't dead and he was taking it to the vet. She saw the dog in a big yard with a whole bunch of other dogs that the police had already saved, all of them barking hello and wagging their tails. They were going to be seeing eye dogs for little blind kids. The yard full of dogs switched off in her head, and she went back to picking her way through the brambles to the road.



## *Chapter two*

The sun was warm enough to make Alexandra feel like walking a little. She pulled her shirt tails out and pushed her hair up under a green John Deere cap from her pack. That way she'd look like a boy and no more Horny Howies would stop and hassle her until she was ready to hitchhike again.

The pack and the cap made it hot walking along. Sweat ran between her breasts and down her stomach, making a dark patch where it soaked into the waistband of her pre-faded, pre-ripped jeans. Alexandra swung along easily, walking against the traffic to make it clear she wasn't looking for a ride. The late afternoon sun was in her face. She ought to know what direction that meant she was headed, but she couldn't remember science stuff.

Around a bend she came upon a small town laid out below her, a mile or so ahead where the valley ran into joined another, broader valley. The town was on her side of a small river with a bridge over it. On the other side of the bridge open fields ran into wooded hills and mountains beyond. Big barns and smaller farmhouses clustered around the silos that rose up here and there, like a picture in some magazine.

Alexandra found a shady place under a tree and sat down so that the trunk hid her from the road. She didn't want anybody coming up on her if she drowsed off. People had been known to do stuff to girls when they were asleep, or at least pretending to be.

THE LIGHTS WERE STARTING to go on as she got close to town. She passed Vic's Guns and Ammo, and a sign that read, "Welcome to Luxor—Rotary International, United Methodist Church, Straight ahead. Welcome." After that came the Luxor Diner, with weeds coming up in the cracks of the parking lot. Sidewalks began and small houses gave way to larger ones.

Alexandra crossed the street Alexandra to look at a little park no bigger than a building lot. A sign said Luxor Memorial Park, but there was no memorial unless it was the three-tiered fountain in the middle. The fountain was dry. There were no swings or slides, no flowers to look at, no paths to walk on, nothing to do in the park but sit on the stone benches on either side of the out-of-order fountain. The only sign of life was a couple of empty malt liquor bottles and a crumpled paper bag that she came across when she ducked behind a hedge to pee.

Parking meters appeared when she headed into town again, five minutes for a penny, an hour for a nickel, two hours for a dime. The houses gave way to shops, most of them closed and dark.

Light came from the top windows of a small, square Victorian building across the street. Yellow bricks showed through where the dark red paint had flaked off. The trim around the tall windows had been painted so many times that the edges looked rounded and blurred. Over the door it said Municipal Building, Erected 1880. Alexandra considered the arithmetic and gave up.

But they had a woman from France on television who must have been practically as old as that building, a hundred and twenty or something. She looked like one of those dried-up corpses they found in glaciers or something. Personally Alexandra would rather be dead than look like that.

She was about to leave the town hall behind when a green-light sign on the far side caught her eye: POLICE. Covered wooden steps led up to the second floor, and she saw the nose of the black cruiser sticking out from behind

the building. She pictured the cute Ed Harris officer sitting behind a raised desk up there on the second floor, but all she could actually see through the windows was the blue flicker of a TV somewhere out of sight.

A BIG FISHEYE MIRROR looked at Alexandra from a corner of the ceiling. The question was whether anyone was keeping an eye on it. The manager of the Great American was in his raised cubicle where he could see the whole store, but he had his eyes on whatever he was doing at his desk. There probably wouldn't be any real security guards in a rinkydink little market like this, but still.

Alexandra put the big picnic pack of assorted lunch meats in her shopping cart, along with the squeeze bottle of mustard and the lettuce and cheese and bread she had already collected. She wheeled the cart to an aisle full of stuff like toilet paper and detergents that clerks didn't bother to watch because the packages were too big to swipe. She made room on a waist-high shelf by sliding out a six-pack of paper towels with one hand while with the other she hid the rest of her groceries in the empty space. She couldn't see anybody in the fisheye mirror, which was the good thing about mirrors. If you couldn't see them, they couldn't see you. In a minute she had built herself a couple of sandwiches and wrapped them in the plastic bag the bread had been in. Still nobody in the mirror. She sucked back her stomach, lifted her shirttails, and slipped the package down the front of her jeans. Then she replaced the paper towels so as to hide the leftover groceries, abandoned her empty cart, and headed for checkout. On the way she picked up a large bottle of Pepsi from the cooler.

Two of the open stations had lines and there was some kind of trouble at the third. A bearded bum with an enormous plastic sack full of deposit cans was raising his voice at the cashier.

"It's store policy, sir," the girl on the checkout said. "We only take returnables from customers."

“I was good enough to fight in Vietnam,” the bum said. “Now you telling me I ain’t good enough to cash in a few goddamned cans?”

“I just explained to you, sir. It’s store policy.”

While everybody was watching the bum, Alexandra sneaked a Snickers bar from the rack and began to unwrap it. If anybody happened to spot the candy bar before she got it eaten, she had enough to pay for it and the Pepsi both, with even a little small change left over.

“Policy my ass,” the man with the beard said. “It’s the goddamned law you’ve got to take cans from anybody brings ’em in.”

“I wouldn’t know about that, sir. You can talk to the manager if you want to.”

The manager had been hurrying over from his perch, but he stopped at a safe distance from the man. “What seems to be the trouble here?” he said.

“She won’t cash in my cans because I ain’t a customer.”

“That’s store policy. Nothing we can do about it.”

“Man can’t be a customer till he’s got money in his pocket. Where am I supposed to get money if you won’t cash in my damned cans?”

“I’m going to have to ask you right now to leave the premises, sir.”

“Well, I ain’t going to do it. I’m going to dump this whole goddamned bag out on the counter and wait right here till I get paid.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I’ve already notified the police and an officer is on his way.”

Alexandra had been thinking of eating another Snickers bar free, then grabbing a third one to take through the line and pay for. But she decided to leave well enough alone, now that things were winding down. She dropped the crumpled wrapper to the floor.

The bum shouldered his huge bag of cans and maneuvered it clanking through the exit. “Goddamn communists,” he shouted before the automatic door hissed shut behind him.

“Did you really call Chief Kregger?” the clerk asked the manager.

“No, but I would have if he hadn’t seen the light of day. You can’t fool with these people. Sorry he kept you waiting, young lady.”

“That’s all right,” Alexandra said. “I’ve just got a Pepsi and a Snickers bar anyway.”

Outside, she sat on the parking lot fence and ate her Snickers between swallows of Pepsi. When she was done she headed toward the rear of the store to have a look around. Supermarkets were always tossing out perfectly good stuff.

“Excuse me, missy,” a voice behind her said. She turned and saw the bum, half hidden by a dumpster. He was a big man with a slight stoop, wearing a gray sweatshirt with a hood, and a blue nylon jacket over that. His beard was mostly gray but his hair was still Brunette, what there was of it. He wore it in a ponytail, fastened with a rubber band. His hands were big, with fingers the size of hot dogs. The index finger on his left hand had two joints missing. Gross, she thought. The pink nub looked like a fat, stubby penis.

“What do you want?” she said.

“You seen the way they done me in there?”

“I seen it.”

“You know how much is in this sack?”

“How much?”

“Pretty near ten dollars worth. You turn ’em in for me, I’ll give you two bucks.”

“Well, I’d like to help you out, but I got to go home now.”

“Three bucks. I can’t go no higher than three.”

“They’d know it was your cans.”

“They wouldn’t care. They’d do it for a pretty little thing like you.”

“I couldn’t anyway. My mom’s waiting for me.”

“Bet your momma’d like to know what you got under your shirt.”

The bum was smiling in a nasty way.

“I bet that little prick of a manager would like to know, too,” he said. “I might just tell him, too, unless you help a man out here.”

“I wish I could,” Alexandra said. “But like I say, my mom. I hope you find someone, I really do.”

She shot him a smile without thinking about it. A smile was just what her face naturally fell into.

“Tell you what,” he said. “We’ll just forget about the cans and you give me that stuff you stole.”

He had moved out from behind the dumpster so that he was between her and the public area in front of the store. Alexandra tried to duck past him but he was too quick for her. She was boxed in by the dumpster and the wall. She felt like a little girl again, with the quiet footsteps in the hall outside and then the bedroom door opening.

Too fast for human eyes to see, she plunged her hands into the silver bowl that held her dennon. The magical liquid in the bowl was no color and all colors, pale gray that gleamed like an opal, the same enamel that kept pearls safe from the slime around them. Her hummingbird hands trailed sparks like Tinker Bell’s wand as they flickered here and there, smoothing dennon onto every surface and into every secret crevice. When nothing could touch her, she calmly considered the dirty man.

“Give it up,” he said. “Let’s see what you got in that pack, too.”

She handed him the sandwiches, and hunched the pack off her shoulders. The pack was her chance. The instant his free hand took the weight of it, she ran.



## *Chapter three*

He wouldn't stay behind the store long, Alexandra figured, for fear of the store manager or the police. So she stayed put in her hiding place across the street, and looked out through one of the low rhododendrons planted on both sides of the church sign. In a minute, sure enough, the man appeared with her pack slung over one shoulder. He didn't bother to look around for her. He just hurried out of the parking lot and turned right, heading out of town.

Alexandra followed, a couple of street lights behind, the shops giving way to houses as she retraced the route she had taken into town. Eventually the sidewalk and the streetlights would end, so that she wouldn't dare follow him anymore. Wherever he decided to stop, she would risk walking right into his hands. Men could do anything they wanted to in the dark. Men had their needs.

Alexandra lost her concentration, thinking of that, and when she came back into focus the shadowy figure of the man was gone. She stopped, afraid to make any movement that might catch his eye. He had passed the next street light a minute or so ago, and he wouldn't have had time to reach the one after that. She stood stock still. Was that him, that shape just off the sidewalk? It didn't look quite right to be a person, though. The little park was in that block, and the shape resolved itself into the sign for it. Alexandra remembered the empty malt liquor bottles she had found behind the hedge. Somebody had been making themselves at home.

THE BLACK CRUISER was still parked beside the tiny municipal building when Alexandra got back downtown. Light still showed from the second-floor windows. She

thought of the policeman up there, relaxing. His tie loosened, maybe his belt, too. He could probably get her pack back, but then that would be a whole other hassle. What's your name? Where do you live, Alexandra? What's your date of birth? What's a girl your age—

Alexandra kept on walking. In the next block was a vacant store with plywood nailed over the windows. A poster on the plywood said, "Wear fluorescent orange. Be sure of your target. Wear ear and eye protection. Wear warm clothing—An unprotected human will die overnight of hypothermia at temperatures as high as 45. Respect landowners rights. A message from Police Chief Harold Kregger. For information call 221-2121." Harold Kregger, that was his name. Harold sounded kind of nerdy. Hap would be okay. Or Hal.

The Great American was halfway down the block on the other side, the only store still lit up. She crossed over and looked in, thinking about making more sandwiches if the stuff she had hidden was still there. But the store was almost deserted. The night manager up in his cage wouldn't have anything better to do but spy on her.

Well. Two two one two one two one. She wondered how much you had to pay to get one of those numbers that everybody could remember. Maybe the company gave them to cops for free. A pay phone was mounted on the wall outside the Great American.

She sat down on a bench outside the store, next to a pay phone on the wall.

She got a flashback, sitting there safe at last on the bench next to the pay phone with people around. "You're all the same," the bearded man was saying. "Playing hard to get."

His pants were open and his thing was poking out, pink and fat like the stub of his finger. The pink thing started to grow. It was amazing how big it got, how fast.

The more she remembered about what the bum did to her, the madder she got. She couldn't let him get away with that. She was going to tell.

“HOW OLD ARE YOU, MISS?” Chief Harold Kregger asked. He sounded gruff over the phone, but kindly, too.

“I’m fifteen, sir.”

“What school do you go to?”

“I’m not from here. I’m just visiting.”

“From where?”

“From Hawaii. My dad’s in the service.”

“Who are you visiting with?”

“Just friends.”

“What’s their name?”

“I don’t want them to know about this.”

“Listen, miss, what do you expect me to do if you won’t even tell me your name?”

“You could arrest him for having my pack, couldn’t you?”

“How would I know it was your pack? I need somebody to sign a complaint, or at least a witness.”

“I’m a witness. I told you exactly what he did.”

“Are you sure you told me everything?”

“Yeah. He stole my pack in that little park going out of town.”

“Just now?”

“Well, maybe twenty minutes ago.”

“So you’re a fifteen-year-old girl out there alone in the dark with this guy. How would you describe yourself, miss?”

“Blonde. Sort of petite, you know.”

“Would you call yourself pretty?”

“I don’t know, I guess so.”

“A pretty girl in that sort of a situation, it’s a hundred to one there’s going to be trouble.”

“There was. He stole my pack.”

“That’s all he did?”

“That was enough.”

“He must have done more than that.”

“Like what?”

“Inappropriate touching, for instance.”

“Like sexual harassment?”

“Well, yeah. Like that.”

“No, not really.”

“So maybe he did?”

“No.”

“You said not really.”

“Well, he really didn’t.”

“Look, miss, it’s nothing to be ashamed of if he done something.”

“I’d tell you if he did.”

“If you remembered.”

“It was only like half an hour ago.”

“Don’t matter if it was five minutes. In these types of sexual assaults you get these recovered memories where the victim completely forgets everything that happened to her. To get it back somebody has to help you. Now I’m just going to sit here and not say a word while you try to remember what this creep done to you. It’s there if you dig deep enough.”

Alexandra dug deep, and almost right away bits and pieces of it started to come back to her. How could she have forgotten something like that? Even weirder, how could the policeman have known it was there?

“You were right,” she said into the receiver, once she had recovered the whole memory. “It was horrible.”

“Tell me the whole thing in your own words,” Chief Kregger said. “Don’t leave nothing out.”

“It’s kind of hard to talk about, but okay. I had to like, tinkle, you know? So I went behind this hedge in the park, and when I was done my business I saw this huge man through the bushes. I thought he was maybe doing the same as me because he had his thing out and I stayed real still so he wouldn’t see me. But then he started to like wave it at me, you know, and I could tell he must have seen me because of the way it was, you know?”

“How was it?”

“Well, like, you know. The way they get.”

“You mean he had an erection?”

“Yeah, like that.”

“Then what happened?”  
“He ran at me and grabbed me.”  
“Grabbed you where?”  
“By the arm.”  
“He didn’t touch you anywhere else?”  
“Not yet, no. Well, maybe he touched me on the chest a little, you know?”  
“He put his hand on your breasts. Then what?”  
“He made me lie down and he put it in me.”  
“Put what in you?”  
“You know. His thing.”  
“You got to say the word. What thing?”  
“Penis.”  
“All right, he put his penis in you. Where?”  
“You know.”  
“I don’t know unless you tell me. Did he put it in your mouth?”  
“No.”  
“Where, then?”  
“In me. You know.”  
“You got to be exact. Where in you?”  
“Down there.”  
“Where down there? You got to say the word.”  
“My pussy.”  
“Your vagina?”  
“Yes.”  
“All right, the guy sinks it in. Then what happens?”  
“What do you mean?”  
“Does he ejaculate?”  
“Well, yes. Sure.”  
“How do you know?”  
His voice sounded thick. She thought of him sitting up there behind the lighted windows, getting hot. She was getting the same feeling.  
“You just know,” she said.  
“You done this before?”  
“No, of course not. I’m just a kid.”  
“Kid fifteen. That’s old enough to do it.”

“Well, I never did.”  
“So did you bleed or what?”  
“I told you. It was the first time.”  
“So you did bleed?”  
“Yes.”  
“Because if there’s blood or semen on your clothing, that’s evidence.”  
“He made me take everything off.”  
“There could still be stains. You got your clothes on now, don’t you?”  
“Well, yes, sure. I’m outside at a pay phone.”  
“So maybe there’s seepage.”  
“Seepage?”  
“On your underwear. Things seep.”  
“Oh.”  
“So do you feel seepage?”  
“I guess.”  
“Now we’re getting somewhere. What did this guy look like?”  
“I told you already. He was a bum. He collects cans.”  
“What did he have on?”  
“Bum clothes. I don’t know. Dirty.”  
“Height?”  
“Tall. Maybe six feet.”  
“Fat? Thin?”  
“In between.”  
“Hair?”  
“Kind of dark brown.”  
“How about his beard?”  
“More like black. Black with white in it.”  
“Age?”  
“I don’t know. Forty, maybe? Not real old, but old.”  
“Any distinguishing marks? Tattoos? Scars?”  
“One finger was cut off. Most of it. He just had this like pink stub.”  
“Right or left hand?”  
“Left, I think. Yeah, left.”  
“Which finger?”

“I don’t know what you call it. The one next to the thumb.”

“Index finger. All right, we’re making progress here. We got a good description, we got physical evidence. What we don’t got is a victim.”

“I’m the victim.”

“Not till you sign an official complaint. Listen, you got my word your parents may not even have to know, all right? Tell me what pay phone you’re calling from, I’ll be there in five minutes—”

Alexandra hung up on him, suddenly scared. Shit, shit, shit, why did she tell him that about a pay phone? What if there were only two or three pay phones in town? She ducked around the corner toward the rear of the Great American and took off, half-running, till she came to an unlighted back street that ran parallel to Main Street. She headed west toward the river, and the countryside beyond.

