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Opening extract from

Anna Dressed in Blood

Written by

Kendare Blake

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ANNA DRESSED IN BLOOD

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ANNA DRESSED IN BLOOD

KENDARE BLAKE



Chapter One

The grease-slicked hair is a dead giveaway – no pun intended.

So is the loose and faded leather coat, though not as much that as the sideburns. And the way he keeps nodding and flicking his Zippo open and closed in rhythm with his head. He belongs in a chorus line of dancing Jets and Sharks.

Then again, I have an eye for these things. I know what to look for, because I've seen just about every variety of spook and spectre you can imagine.

The hitchhiker haunts a stretch of winding North Carolina road, bordered by unpainted split-rail fences and a whole lot of nothing. Unsuspecting drivers probably pick him up out of boredom, thinking he's just some college kid who reads too much Kerouac.

'My gal, she's waiting for me,' he says now in an excited voice, like he's going to see her the minute we

crest the next hill. He taps the lighter hard on the dashboard, twice, and I glance over to make sure he hasn't left a ding in the panel. This isn't my car. And I've suffered through eight weeks of lawn work for Mr Dean, the retired army colonel who lives down the block, just so I could borrow it. For a seventy-year-old man he's got the straightest back I've ever seen. If I had more time, I could've spent a summer listening to interesting stories about Vietnam. Instead I cleared shrubs and tilled an eight-by-ten plot for new rosebushes while he watched me with a surly eye, making sure his baby would be safe with this seventeen-year-old kid in an old Rolling Stones T-shirt and his mother's gardening gloves.

To tell the truth, knowing what I was going to use the car for, I felt a little guilty. It's a dusk blue 1969 Camaro Rally Sport, mint condition. Drives smooth as silk and growls around curves. I can't believe he let me take it, yard work or no. But thank god he did, because without it I would have been sunk. It was something the hitchhiker would go for – something worth the trouble of crawling out of the ground.

'She must be pretty nice,' I say without much interest.

'Yeah, man, yeah,' he says and, for the hundredth time since I picked him up five miles ago, I wonder

how anyone could possibly not know that he's dead. He sounds like a James Dean movie. And then there's the smell. Not quite rotten but definitely mossy, hanging around him like a fog. How has anyone mistaken him for the living? How has anyone kept him in the car for the ten miles it takes to get to the Lowren's Bridge, where he inevitably grabs the wheel and takes both car and driver into the river? Most likely they were creeped out by his clothes and his voice, and by the smell of bones – that smell they seem to know even though they've probably never smelled it. But by then it's always too late. They'd made the decision to pick up a hitchhiker, and they weren't about to let themselves be scared into going back on it. They rationalised their fears away. People shouldn't do that.

In the passenger seat, the hitchhiker is still talking in this faraway voice about his girl back home, somebody named Lisa, and how she's got the shiniest blonde hair and the prettiest red smile, and how they're going to run off and get married as soon as he gets back hitching from Florida. He was working part of a summer down there for his uncle at a car dealership: the best opportunity to save up for their wedding, even if it did mean they wouldn't see each other for months.

'It must've been hard, being away from home so long,' I say, and there's actually a little bit of pity in my voice. 'But I'm sure she'll be glad to see you.'

'Yeah, man. That's what I'm talking about. I've got everything we need, right in my jacket pocket. We'll get married and move out to the coast. I've got a pal out there, Robby. We can stay with him until I get a job working on cars.'

'Sure,' I say. The hitchhiker has this sadly optimistic look on his face, lit up by the moon and the glowing dashlights. He never saw Robby, of course. He never saw his girl Lisa, either. Because two miles up the road in the summer of 1970, he got into a car, probably a lot like this one. And he told whoever was driving that he had a way to start an entire life in his coat pocket.

The locals say that they beat him up pretty good by the bridge and then dragged him back into the trees, where they stabbed him a couple of times and then cut his throat. They pushed his body down an embankment and into one of the tributary streams. That's where a farmer found it, nearly six months later, wound around with vines, the jaw hanging open in surprise, like he still couldn't believe that he was stuck there.

And now he doesn't know that he's stuck here. None of them ever seem to know. Right now the

hitchhiker is whistling and bobbing along to nonexistent music. He probably still hears whatever they were playing the night they killed him.

He's perfectly pleasant. A nice guy to ride with. But when we get to that bridge, he'll be as angry and ugly as anyone you've ever seen. It's reported that his ghost, dubbed unoriginally as the County 12 Hiker, has killed at least a dozen people and injured another eight. But I can't really blame him. He never made it home to see his girl, and now he doesn't want anyone else to get home either.

We pass mile marker twenty-three – the bridge is less than two minutes away. I've driven this road almost every night since we moved here in the hopes that I would catch his thumb in my headlights, but I had no luck. Not until I got behind the wheel of this Rally Sport. Before this it was just half a summer of the same damn road, the same damn blade tucked under my leg. I hate it when it's like that, like some kind of horribly extended fishing trip. But I don't give up on them. They always come around in the end.

I let my foot ease up on the gas.

'Something wrong, friend?' he asks me.

I shake my head. 'Only that this isn't my car, and I don't have the cash to fix it if you decide to try to take me off the bridge.'

The hitchhiker laughs, just a little too loudly to be normal. 'I think you've been drinking or something tonight, pal. Maybe you ought to just let me off here.'

I realise too late that I shouldn't have said that. I can't let him out. It'd be my luck that he'd step out and disappear. I'm going to have to kill him while the car is moving or I'll have to do this all over again, and I doubt that Mr Dean is willing to let the car go for too many more nights. Besides, I'm moving to Thunder Bay in three days.

There's also the thought that I'm doing this to this poor bastard all over again. But that thought is fleeting. He's already dead.

I try to keep the speedometre over fifty – too fast for him to really consider jumping out, but with ghosts you can never be sure. I'll have to work fast.

It's when I reach down to take my blade out from under my leg that I see the silhouette of the bridge in the moonlight. Right on cue, the hitchhiker grabs the wheel and yanks it to the left. I try to jerk it back right and slam my foot on the brake. I hear the sound of angry rubber on asphalt and out of the corner of my eye I can see that the hitchhiker's face is gone. No more easy Joe, no slicked hair and eager smile. He's just a mask of rotten skin and bare, black holes, with teeth like dull stones. It looks like he's

grinning, but it might just be the effect of his lips peeling off.

Even as the car is fishtailing and trying to stop, I don't have any flashes of my life before my eyes. What would that even be like? A highlight reel of murdered ghosts. Instead I see a series of quick, ordered images of my dead body: one with the steering wheel through my chest, another with my head gone as the rest of me hangs out the missing window.

A tree comes up out of nowhere, aimed right for my driver's side door. I don't have time to swear, just to jerk the wheel and hit the gas, and the tree is behind me. What I don't want to do is make it to the bridge. The car is all over the shoulder and the bridge doesn't have one. It's narrow, and wooden, and outdated.

'It's not so bad, being dead,' the hitchhiker says to me, clawing at my arm, trying to get me off the wheel.

'What about the smell?' I hiss. Through all of this I haven't lost my grip on my knife handle. Don't ask me how; my wrist feels like the bones are going to separate in about ten seconds, and I've been pulled off my seat so that I'm hovering over the stick shift. I throw the car into neutral with my hip (should have done that earlier) and pull my blade out fast.

What happens next is kind of a surprise: the skin comes back onto the hitchhiker's face, and the green

comes back into his eyes. He's just a kid, staring at my knife. I get the car back under control and hit the brakes.

The jolt from the stop makes him blink. He looks at me.

'I worked all summer for this money,' he says softly. 'My girl will kill me if I lose it.'

My heart is pounding from the effort of controlling the lurching car. I don't want to say anything. I just want to get it over with. But instead I hear my voice.

'Your girl will forgive you. I promise.' The knife, my father's athame, is light in my hand.

'I don't want to do this again,' the hitchhiker whispers.

'This is the last time,' I say, and then I strike, drawing the blade across his throat, opening a yawning black line. The hitchhiker's fingers come up to his neck. They try to press the skin back together, but something as dark and thick as oil floods out of the wound and covers him, bleeding not only down over his vintage-era jacket but also up over his face and eyes, into his hair. The hitchhiker doesn't scream as he shrivels, but maybe he can't: his throat was cut and the black fluid has worked its way into his mouth. In less than a minute he's gone, leaving not a trace behind.

I pass my hand over the seat. It's dry. Then I get out of the car and do a walk-around as best I can in

the dark, looking for scratches. The tyre tread is still smoking and melted. I can hear Mr Dean's teeth grinding. I'm leaving town in three days, and now I'll be spending at least one of them putting on a new set of Goodyears. Come to think of it, maybe I shouldn't take the car back until the new tyres are on.