

GRAVE FUTURE

By Susanne Marie Knight

CHAPTER ONE

Spotting a desolate, backwoods road, Jocelyn Hunter glanced at the Pennsylvania map lying on the passenger's seat of her sports car. Was this the right turn-off? Worried, she bit her lip. She never could decipher highway maps... or street maps for that matter. At work everyone always kidded her that she could lose her way in a car wash.

Double-checking her friend's handwritten instructions once more, Jocelyn crossed her fingers for luck. "Yep, this has to be the turn."

As she swerved the car away from the paved road and civilization, her tires spun on loose gravel, then gripped tiny, bleached-out stones. The crunching sound made her grit her teeth, and a momentary feeling of unease fluttered in her stomach. She shook off the panic. She'd traveled this far without getting lost, hadn't she? Soon she'd be kicking up her heels at Rita's summer house.

Sighing, Jocelyn relaxed back against the black vinyl cushion of her seat. She needed this brief vacation; she needed time to lick her wounds and get on with life. Her relationship with Todd had been a mistake. He hadn't loved her. It hurt to admit that, but it was true. Love and lust—two wildly separate things. She was glad she'd told him good-bye.

The road curved into a forest heavily populated with tall, bristly conifers. She'd never seen so many trees. Through the Triumph Spitfire's open windows, a warm, pine-scented breeze swept over her. A liberating breeze. She took a deep breath. *Forget about Todd.*

Her foot itched to floor the gas pedal—to avoid all thoughts of him. A mischievous twitch lifted her lips. Why not? Why shouldn't she live dangerously and put the pedal to the metal? She pressed down on the accelerator, enjoying the sudden surge of power. The roaring engine signaled control; she had control. Something Todd had wanted to have over her.

As she zoomed up a hill, she watched the odometer soar. No one was ever going to control her again.

After speeding over the crest, she let gravity guide her down the steep decline. The fresh country air playfully tugged at her shoulder-length hair, whipping strands over her forehead, into her eyes. Inhaling the forest's earthy smells, she let her concentration wander. She didn't often escape from the congestion and noise of the city. This retreat felt good, like it was meant to be.

A blazing ray of light, probably from the sun, momentarily blinded her. As she blinked away the brightness, an unexpected bump sent her flying up, and she collided with the convertible top. Damn! Settling back in her seat, she looked ahead at the high dirt ruts cutting into the bottom of the hill.

Oh, no! Why hadn't she paid attention? She tightened her grasp on the steering wheel. The car was headed straight for the biggest rut in the road!

No time to think, she desperately angled the car away from the roughened surface. She fought the car's momentum. Her low-to-the-ground Triumph was delicate--old. It couldn't withstand the blow. The impact would be like a dagger to an animal's underbelly--cutting open vital organs. She couldn't bear for her little car to get damaged.

And she was miles away from a service station. Miles away from civilization.

No, she had to be truthful. Civilization could've been just around the corner—if the forest had a corner. She had no idea where she was.

Too late. She couldn't stop the collision. Slamming on the brake and the clutch, she braced herself. As the car hit the hardened dirt-and-pebble mound, her head jerked back against the head rest.

The car now stilled, she rubbed her newly tender neck. *Great. Whiplash. Some vacation.* Why had she wanted to leave the safety of her New York apartment, anyway?

Sour grapes on her part. She'd left the city eagerly enough.

Gazing out at her surroundings, she gulped down a little nervously. Pine trees, all in one size—gigantic—crowded together on either side of the dirt and gravel road. A never-ending forest stretched as far as she could see. The trees whispered their secrets, shaking menacingly at her, intimidating her.

Before the accident, the trees had seemed to *wave* their gnarled branches. Fluttering their elongated needles to give her a warm reception. Now they did their best to block the remaining sunlight from spilling down onto her bug-sized yellow Triumph.

The late afternoon air filled with croaking sounds: low pitched moans, frantic murmurs, an occasional piercing shriek and... hungry growls. A cacophony of creature noises.

Soon, the night would fall.

And she was alone. Alone on a dirt road in the wilds of Pennsylvania.

Jocelyn shivered. *Don't let your imagination run away with you, Jossy. Just follow Rita's instructions and you'll get to her summer house in no time at all.*

Her car showed no damage—no visible damage—so she glanced at the road map and Rita's instructions again. Jocelyn's insides knotted. She'd read the map wrong. She'd missed the turnoff. According to the directions, she should be viewing the scenic town of Buck Hill Falls. She should be following bright blue signs toward Rita's new property in the Pocono Hideaway Homes complex.

Jocelyn brushed back her tangled hair. The only blue she saw came from the indigo sky deepening into twilight. And she couldn't find this road on the map. She spotted a tiny circle labeled Angel Rock Ridge, indicating a town, but she didn't see a road.

Her friends would never let her live this down. They'd predicted she'd get lost. At the time, their cocksure insistence had sparked fire in her dark blue eyes. Stubbornly, she'd insisted right back that the trip would be a piece of cake.

Some cake. Here she was, hopelessly lost in the Pocono Mountains.

In the distance, a dull roll of thunder broke the dissonant voice of the forest. A storm. She'd better get moving. Surely this road led somewhere.

Restarting the engine, she eased the car forward. A slow crunching rumbled up from underneath the hood.

Oh, no. Jocelyn caught her lower lip between her teeth and said a silent prayer. She didn't know much about cars, but crunching and grinding noises were not good sounds--to put it mildly.

As an owl's lonely hooting echoed through the car's convertible top, a shudder shimmied down Jocelyn's spine. Owls were night creatures. The haunting tones reminded her that semi-darkness was only minutes away.

"Okay, okay, I get the hint." Determined to continue her trip one way or the other, she got out of the car, walked over to the trunk, rolled up her raglan sleeves and pushed.

At one hundred and ten pounds, she didn't have much force, but then again, her trusty old Triumph wasn't a Rolls Royce, either. After a couple of heavy grunts, she smiled. The roadster pulled through for her; the front end now angled out of the deep rut.

"Yes!" Jocelyn raised her hands up in victory. She patted the pitted exterior of the trunk. "C'mon, ol' gal. You 'n' me are gonna have our vacation yet!" Jumping back into the driver seat, she revved up the engine, and moved the gearshift into first position. "Let's go, baby!"

The car obeyed. But... but the steering didn't. Before she had a chance to react, the car rolled off the road, as if it had a mind of its own, and plunged into a waiting pine tree. The tinkling of glass from the headlights and yawning of metal from the crumpled hood reverberated into the ominous, dark woods. After a moment of silence, the forest resumed its alien communication.

Feeling as if the steering wheel was now part of her chest, Jocelyn righted herself and pressed her ribs to make certain none were broken. Sore, but solid. She was okay, but what about her car?

As she stepped outside to view the damage, her eyes misted. The poor, misshapen car was painful to look at. If she had a gun, she would've put it out of its misery.

A lump rose in her throat. She swallowed it and turned away. No choice now. If she expected to get out of this tree-infested forest, she'd have to use her tee-strap sandaled feet to provide the locomotion.

She grabbed her handbag, Rita's instructions, and the road map.

Oh, well. Better get started.

After nearly an hour of trudging through mud, thick underbrush, pine-stinging needles, and every obstacle known to man, Jocelyn'd had enough of raw nature to last a lifetime. She was filthy and exhausted. Never mind finding Rita's summer home. She'd given up on that. Now she just wanted to locate a place to stay for the night.

No longer frightened at wandering alone in the wilderness, she planted one mud-streaked foot ahead of the other. As bedraggled as a water-logged cat, she had no reason to be fearful of the forest. No wild animal would want to eat such a dirty treat.

Her feet squished in the mud puddles. Eventually, she had to find shelter. Eventually.

The weather hadn't cooperated. The distant thunder had roared into a full blown storm. As jagged lightning bolts slashed across the sky, sheets of icy rain drenched her—drenched her very soul. She shivered. There wasn't a dry spot left on her body.

Bumping into a low-lying tree branch, she contorted her face. "Ouch!" She blinked away the pain, then frowned. "What in the world...?"

The deep end. She had to be going off the deep end. Her mind was playing tricks on her—seeing reverse mirages. Instead of a vision of water dancing before her eyes—a scene a dehydrated man might see, she spotted a small, bright, hot desert.

Oh, to flop down on that beckoning bed of sand and bake to a toasty brown!

She leaned against a tree, ignoring the rough bark that bit into her back, and stared at her dry, warm illusion. It couldn't be there. It was just wishful thinking. Squeezing her eyes shut, she then stared at it again. It held; the bright vision didn't waver.

Wiping rivulets of rain off her forehead, out of her eyes, she squinted at the bright spot and brought it into focus. It wasn't a desert; it was a light—a beacon—a way out of this muck she'd been wading in since her accident.

A light in the wilderness.

Millions of zigzagged lightning bolts briefly lit the night sky. An image of a two-story, white stone house flickered up ahead. Silhouetted against the eerie backdrop of closely huddled evergreen trees, the house had an other-worldly appearance.

No matter. It was a haven; that was all that was important.

She had to get closer to it. Taking a tentative step, she wiped more rain out of her eyes. In that second, the sky's brilliance... and the house, disappeared.

She exhaled her disappointment.

But the beacon didn't disappear. It still shone through the darkness—like a welcome signal. It came from the house. Someone was home. Someone had to be home. She'd get help. Finally, she could take shelter from the storm.

She looked down at her mud-bathed feet. The slimy stuff oozed through her toes—not a pleasant sensation. Would she ever feel clean again? As it was, her clothes were fit for the garbage. She was a mess all right—no other way to describe it. Even she would have second thoughts about letting herself into her own apartment. But maybe the occupant of the stone house wouldn't mind so much. She crossed her fingers. Please?

Jocelyn adjusted the low vee neckline on her top. The weight of the rain had dragged it down, exposing her lacy bra. She lifted her chin. No one would refuse to take her in on a night like this. No one could be that mean or petty. Or inhumane. After all, she was just dirty. Nothing a little soap and water couldn't cure.

She smiled. Okay, *a lot* of soap. And it would only be for one night, anyway. She'd call the nearest garage and arrange to have her car towed. Then she'd stay in a motel or something until the repairs were made.

Instead of being a cheap little getaway, this vacation was going to cost her *mucho* bucks.

That's life. Expect the unexpected. With these words of wisdom sloshing around her brain, she headed toward the beacon radiating from the house's bottom left window. Peering ahead, she blotted out her body's various complaints. Soon, she'd be inside. The cheery beam promised a warm reception. Once she'd shed her wet clothes, she'd sit in front of the fireplace, wrapped in a woolen blanket and flannel nightgown. The crackling fire would work its magic into her soggy bones, and then she'd offer her apologies to her host and slip off to bed. Probably a feather bed.

Appreciating her imagination, she sighed with anticipation and walked up the few wooden steps to the front door. Hand upraised to knock, she stopped in mid-air. Thunder and lightning rolled together, a visual and auditory clashing of both sight and sound. To her right, in a clearing near the house, grey marble headstones protruded out from a darkened landscape.

A cemetery! A graveyard--complete with massive holy crosses, winged statues, and an imposing Greek columned mausoleum.

Jocelyn bit her lip. The sight of the unexpected graveyard gave her the chills. Something out of a Stephen King novel. Or maybe she shivered because of the rain. If she didn't get inside soon, she'd start hallucinating.

Another flash from the sky. Her gaze involuntarily drawn to the graveyard, she spotted a figure by the mausoleum's middle column. A man or woman? She couldn't tell. Who could be crazy enough to be out in this beastly weather? In a cemetery? At least *she* had a legitimate reason to be dripping wet.

With arms reaching to the sky, the person stretched. Then, before the lightning had run its course, the figure vanished.

Jocelyn blinked. Hallucinating. Maybe she hadn't seen anyone. Maybe she'd been mistaken.

Gritting her teeth for courage, she raised her hand and knocked on the weathered oak door.

She waited, then knocked again, louder. Panic welled up inside her. What if no one wanted to answer the door? What if no one could hear her?

Oh, dear God, she couldn't take much more of this rain. Rapping harder, she bruised her knuckles. She *had* to get in out of the storm. "Hello? Is anybody home?"

Still no answer. The light from the bottom left window went out. Plunged into darkness, she raised her voice. "Hello? Please?"

Hysteria edged her pleading. Maybe the house wasn't locked up. She jiggled the brass doorknob, but it didn't budge.

Then, the door suddenly swung open, quietly, without creaking. A man stood on the other side of the threshold. A large man, cast in shadows.

As if on cue, lightning flashed, illuminating the trees, the house, and... the man.

Jocelyn couldn't conceal her startled gasp. The man had damp, thick hair, the color of midnight. A heavy stubble marred his angular jaw and a trim, black mustache covered his upper lip. He had the kind of smoky, dark looks some women fainted over.

Handsome, breathtakingly handsome. As a reflex action, she pushed back her dripping hair, hoping that would help her appearance. If he had smiled, she would've been his love slave for life. *If* he had smiled. From under the mustache, his mouth compressed into a frowning slash. From his superior height, displeasure burned from his narrowed eyes—displeasure directed at her.

"Well?"

For a moment, she could only gape at him. The man was brute strength. His starkly white half-buttoned workshirt stretched tautly over a heavily muscled chest. His rolled up sleeves revealed powerful forearms. Through his tight blue jeans, she spotted the muscles of a long distance runner. There was not an ounce of fat on this man. A warrior. He seemed to have been bred for savage force. His stiff posture along with his hands fisted against his slim jeaned hips further revealed his resentment at being interrupted.

Gulping down hard, she toyed with the leather strap of her handbag. Maybe she should forget about asking for help. Maybe she should just take off....

"What do you want?"

His deep voice rocked her back to reality. Looking longingly inside his warm... and dry house, she took a steadying breath. "I'm really sorry to bother you, but you see, I've had a car accident down the road. I'm on vacation, from New York. I took a wrong turn and now I'm lost. I—I was wondering if you'd be kind enough...."

Continuing to take her measure, he ignored her unspoken plea. Instead of responding, he took a step over the threshold and scanned the darkness. He must have been satisfied with his inspection for he stepped back inside. "Who else is with you?"

"No one. It's just me."

"Why'd you come here? Who sent you?"

He barked out his questions as a police interrogator might—which was fine with Jocelyn if only he'd invite her inside. "No one sent me. I told you, I got lost, then I saw a light in your window—"

"What light?"

She blinked back her surprise. On a night like this, how else could she have spotted his home? But the last thing she wanted to do was to antagonize the man. “Maybe I was mistaken about the light. Now that I’m here, I was wondering if you’d be kind enough to let me use your phone. To call a service station.”

His slow smile caused her toes to sizzle. However, the grin didn’t reach his eyes. “You came a long way for nothing, princess. Don’t have a phone.” He drummed his fingers against the oak door, waiting for her to leave.

“No phone?” Out in the wilderness, she supposed it might be difficult to have a telephone hookup. Telephones were conveniences a person took for granted.

“Sorry that makes it difficult for you to call your... friends, but there it is.” He shrugged.

She rubbed her aching head. The emphasis he’d placed on friends was so odd. “I hate to impose on you, but I’m really stuck. Could you, ah, drive me to a garage, then?”

“And leave here? Nice try, princess, but none are open this time of night.” He sounded bored, but his keen, sharp eyes showed he was very much aware of her, as a panther would be aware of his prey.

Forgetting her exhaustion, she started to do a slow burn. There he stood, nice and warm and dry, while she almost dripped seaweed! She’d been in the rain *that* long.

“Then, if it wouldn’t be *too* much trouble, could I ask you to drive me to a motel? Someplace I could spend the night? I’ll reimburse you for the inconvenience.”

Keeping the sarcasm out of her voice proved impossible. She’d never come across anyone as infuriating as he was. She needed *help*. And he had a big enough house—plenty of room to share. He could go back to whatever he’d been doing. He didn’t have to play the host. She certainly wasn’t a threat to him. Hadn’t he heard of the good neighbor policy?

He glanced over his shoulder, at something in the darkened room. Was someone else inside? Watching them? Uneasy tingles of fear crept up her spine.

Returning his hardened gaze to her, he said flatly, “It would be too much trouble. The bridge is flooded out between here and town. Can’t get through. News just came in on the radio. You’ll just have to go back the way you came.” He made a move to close the door. “Sorry.”

He wasn’t sorry. But Jocelyn was. Sorry she had to ask for charity from this heartless creature. Without thinking, she shot her arm out to prevent him from shutting the door on her, surprising herself with her boldness. For a second, they both watched as a torrent of water fell from her saturated raglan sleeve. The diversion gave her time to compose herself.

She didn’t know this man from Adam, but she had to appeal to his better nature—if he had one. “Look, maybe I haven’t made my situation plain enough. I’ve been tramping through the forest for an hour. I’m soaked, filthy, and thoroughly lost. My car is wrecked, I’m exhausted, and I have no place else to turn. I really do hate to bother you, but I need help. If there are no motels nearby, could I stay here for the night? I’m not dangerous, honest.”

There. That was as close to begging as she’d get.

From his precision cut hair, a drop of water trickled down his jaw. He wasn’t going to give an inch. As if to contradict his nonchalance, the corner of his mouth twitched. Whether in amusement or outrage, she didn’t know.

He should have been shamed into offering her a bed. He should have been struck with remorse. He wasn’t; he remained mute.

She pitied the man.

Straightening her shoulders, she lifted her nose at him. “Fine. Thank you for your time.” Stiff-lipped, she turned away from him. She didn’t want to stay at his house anyway. She adored feeling like a soggy fish. It built character.

She sniffed. What was she going to do? Other than sit under some tree and cry her eyes out.

Eager to leave the scene of her humiliation, she made her way down the stairs. Lightning, for once her friend, blazed overhead. She spotted the graveyard... and the mausoleum.

The mausoleum! Perhaps she could spend the night inside the mausoleum. She was sure those who rested eternally within those walls wouldn’t object. The dead had more hospitality than that oversized, obnoxious, self-absorbed man. The longer she thought about him, the longer her list of dreadful adjectives grew.

“Where are you going?”

It was that selfsame man, his voice ringing out to her. Pivoting around, she saw he had stepped out into the rain. From the stairs, he gazed down at her. Heavy drops of water flattened his shirt to his skin. His dark hair, damp before, now glistened with moisture. Even wet, he was very attractive; he exuded animal magnetism. But his mouth still slashed in a frown.

She took her time answering him. After appealing to his non-existent compassionate nature... and failing, she didn’t give a hoot if he got wet!

Wet. Something tugged at her memory but she couldn’t identify it. Probably wasn’t important. “What do you care?”

“I don’t.” With some urgency in his voice, he repeated, “Where are you going?”

Bone-sapping tiredness washed over her, even as the rain continued to bombard her body. Her eyes closed. She felt herself sway.

She blinked. No time to delay. Heading for the marble building, she answered, “To the mausoleum.” She’d have to hurry. Very easily, she could slip into unconsciousness. She’d been through a lot. Better to pass out in an enclosed area, then collapse right here, where she stood.

She heard a muffled oath. Or did she? She couldn’t be sure. Didn’t matter anyway. The mausoleum was just ahead. A few more steps. She could make it. Just a few more steps.

Hitting a protruding rock, she stumbled. Pain shot through her bare big toe. The sensation jerked her awake.

Someone grabbed her around the arm. Hard. “Come on. You can stay. But just for tonight.” He roughly steered her up the stairs and through the door, into the entryway.

She didn’t protest. At this point, if the genie of the lamp had offered her one wish, she’d ask for a nice, soft bed inside this house.

After the man shut the door, the sudden quiet seemed unnatural. Then she heard the plip-plop of liquid drops hitting the slate stone floor of the closet-sized entryway. Muddy rain water trickled down her legs, off her tee-strapped sandals, into puddles around her feet. She stood rooted to the spot; she didn’t dare spread the growing mess.

She’d better dredge up some manners. “Ah, thank you for inviting me in. You know, I really *am* sorry to... inconvenience you.”

The man ran his hand over his head. His thick black hair sprang back into place. To himself, he mumbled, “I must be a fool—asking for trouble.” Then he barked, “Stay right there. Don’t move. I’ll get you a robe and...” He shook his head, giving her the once over. “... and prepare a bath. The shower doesn’t work.”

Turning fast, as if he feared he would change his mind, he vaulted up the aged wooden staircase, taking the steps two at a time. From the second floor, he flipped on a light switch. A circular overhead light brightened the entryway. He gazed down at her, then shook his head again. His dark expression was unreadable.

Frowning, Jocelyn smoothed back her stringy hair. So he wasn't as heartless as he'd pretended to be. Maybe she couldn't blame him. She did look like something the cat dragged in. But, for once in her life, she didn't care about her appearance. Soon, she'd soak in a nice hot bath, then drift off to slumber land. She couldn't wait.

She must have closed her eyes, for she started when he touched her shoulder.

"Here, change into this and give me your clothes. Then I'll show you to the bathroom." He handed her a large, powder blue terry cloth robe.

Up close, his cynical grey eyes seemed mock her. They contained a question. What question? What did he want to know? Meeting his gaze, she began to tingle. For the first time since she'd left her car, she felt a bit of warmth invading her.

Frowning, he broke contact first. "Hurry it up." Shoving the robe at her, he then leaned against the paneled stairway wall and waited.

A hot flush mottled the skin on her neck. It always did when she was nervous. "Ah, you want me to change? Here?"

His frown deepened. "I'm not about to let you track mud all over the house."

"I can't take my clothes off right now—not with you looking at me!" He couldn't possibly be serious.

With his stormy gaze, he raked her from head to toe. His upper lip curved up. "Too late to be picky about the accommodations, princess. You wanted in and you got your wish. And don't flatter yourself. I've seen better at a horse show."

But he did pull away from the wall, then stepped into another room. "Let me know when you're done."

Jocelyn stomped her foot. Horse show! How dare he insult her? What she wouldn't give to wipe that sneer off his face. Damn the man! No one had ever complained about her figure before. Looking down at her chest, she flushed again. Her vee neckline had stretched past her bra. She must have given him quite a view.

She ground her teeth. No matter. Maybe he actually preferred horses to women. He certainly had the manners of one!

"Finished?"

His question startled her. "Almost." Quickly pulling off her top, she put on the man-sized robe, tied the belt, then wiggled out of her leggings. She kicked off her sandals. "Ready." The scratchy warmth of the robe felt heavenly against her puckered skin.

She didn't have time to enjoy it. He dashed into the entryway, and suddenly stopped at the sight of her. Looking away, he ordered, "Leave the clothes there."

After he checked his wristwatch, he muttered, "Damn," then led her up the steep steps to a small, steamy bathroom across from the stairway.

He opened a closet door and handed her a towel. "Make it snappy. I don't have all night." Pointing to the bedroom on the right, he glared at her. "When you're done, you'll sleep in this room."

She lifted her eyebrows. He didn't have all night to do what? And why did he want her to hurry? He obviously didn't want her in his house, so why had he done an about face?

Having no intention of hurrying, she murmured her thanks again and extended her hand. “By the way, we haven’t introduced ourselves. My name’s Jocelyn Hunter.”

He turned his big, broad back on her. “Just hurry it up, will you?”

She had him over a barrel and she knew it. He couldn’t throw her out of the house now. As he thundered down the stairs, she called after him. “I need to know the name of my most gracious host.”

Even from the bottom of the steps, she could see his dark eyes snap impatiently. “I’m Ferguson, damn it. Now clean yourself up before I do it for you.”

He would, too. She clicked the white paneled door shut and leaned against it. Too bad it didn’t have a lock.

Her memory cleared on one point. When Ferguson had answered the door, his hair had been damp as if he’d just taken a shower. But he said it wasn’t working. Had he been out in the rain?

Or had he been the figure she’d seen by the mausoleum?

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