

SHEEP THAT STRAY

BETS DAVIES

CHAPTER ONE

Alexandra Grey scribbled legs on the purple heart scarring her physics desk. She sat back. The heart did look a little like a butt next to the “Alex & Tom 4-ever” she had scrawled that fall. She hadn’t had to worry about a boyfriend since Tom had finally noticed her when she was fifteen. He had only been a senior in college then. Now the not worrying worried her.

“I can’t believe you are moving to France,” Carrie hissed from the other seat at the table.

“Yeah.” Alex plopped back into her chair. “Carrie, Dad doesn’t want everyone knowing he’s moving to France when he extends his operation. He just really wanted you to come with us.”

Carrie turtled her head. “My mom would never let me go to boarding school.”

“Your mom moved your whole family here so she could put you in this school. Come on, Dad says the college and the high school there are close. You could hang in my dorm.”

Carrie scribbled physics. Alex shuddered as Carrie stuck a finger in the middle of her heavy plastic glasses frames. Carrie’s school clothes fit the uniform code to a tee. Alex’s dress clung to her body, wet from the showers after dance.

“What are you doing this weekend?” Alex had to stop trying, but she couldn’t.

“Babysitting. The Raylands.”

“They get a new foster?”

“No. It’s Mary.”

“She’s, like, twelve. I was babysitting when I was twelve.” Alex blinked.

“You know she has trouble fitting in.” Carrie shrugged. “Not even the other Asian kids like her because she’s, in her words, ‘some kind of Korean mutt’. Might just be because she’s, you know, her.”

Alex laughed. “You mean she doesn’t take crap? Is Mary going to boarding school?”

“No. It’s May, already, Alex, can’t you at least finish school? You go to Alane as planned. That’s your dad’s school, too.” Carrie chewed her pencil.

“He wants me to set an example in his new location.” The words left her tired. Everything she was, was here. French kids might not be impressed that she was her father’s daughter. She might not be cool in Europe. They might see her for what she was: a Midwestern, small town, spoiled brat. “Please come with me, Carrie?”

“I don’t even want to go.”

“But I want you to.”

Carrie’s hand paused. Alex never wanted her in particular. Alex knew Carrie thought it as clearly as Alex did. She wondered if Carrie regretted it as much as Alex did. Alex and Carrie’s relationship had skimmed by on formality for years. Sometimes Carrie would invite her over and she would go out of a sense of duty to a child she had been. Once in a greater while Alex had slammed out of her house, her father still yelling, and ended up at the Raylands’ when Carrie was babysitting.

Carrie and Alex never would have met if Carrie hadn’t been one of those children singled out by Grey School’s national testing. Alex’s father told her to be nice to all of them, but Carrie had had a sense of adventure. Then it had been all My Little Ponies and Nancy Drews. When Alex had moved on to lipstick and Carrie moved up to sophisticated

mystery novels, they had drifted. Alex had always thought that a spark in Carrie had died. Recently, Alex had the suspicion something had left her, instead.

Carrie sighed. “Well, Tom works for your dad. At least you’ll always have Tom.”

Alex groaned.

“It’s nice to see you’re talking to Carrie, Alex. I thought you’d fallen asleep again.”

Alex raised her head at the sound of Mr. Thompson’s voice. She folded her arms so that her cleavage popped up. Mr. Thompson’s neatly trimmed beard and thick dreads surrounded a face the color of sand at Lake Michigan. He couldn’t be more than a few years out of college. Alex flirted with him because the other girls didn’t dare to, and because her attention made him uncomfortable.

His eyes wavered to her neckline. Nothing about her outfit—from the neckline to her heels—fit the dress code. His mouth opened. She raised her eyebrows. He turned away.

“Oh. Yes.” Alex watched his retreat. “I will always have To—”

The door flew back. A tangle hit the floor.

“If you don’t like it here, boy, I’ve got a few places lined up! I knew your mother was wrong about you. I’ll be back when I’m done with your principal.” A tall man stalked back out.

The guy on the floor knelt. A blue jay screamed outside. A throat cleared. Mr. Thompson pulled the guy to his feet. A large backpack thudded to the floor. The guy shook his head as if he hoped to dislodge it. Then he spun for the door.

Mr. Thompson set a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “As much as you didn’t need to interrupt the last minutes of my class, you aren’t leaving me to your father, Robin.”

As Robin pushed his dripping hair out of his face, Alex caught sight of luminescent skin stretched over wide cheekbones.

“Jesus, look at the piercings,” someone whispered.

Alex poked Carrie. “What is that?”

“That’s Robin!” Carrie gaped at her. “Robin Larks? He’s your next-door neighbor! The one in my mythology class. He’s been around a few months.”

“That’s Robin?” Alex blinked at a blurry memory of a loose uniform and downcast eyes. When he had moved in next door, Daddy had said to be nice to him—especially nice to him. So she had ignored Robin as much as possible.

“Months? No!” Alex measured him as he walked towards them. “The smart—”

“The ‘smart, cute one’ you said I should go out with,” Carrie gagged.

“Jesus. He’s never at home. Look at the bullring!” Alex giggled. “Well, he is cute.”

He plunked down at a desk kiddy-corner to Carrie. He dragged out a drawing pad and pencil. He had a hoop through his eyebrow, a little ball through his chin, and earrings.

The bell rang. Chairs slammed back. Conversation rumbled.

“He’s never at school, either,” Carrie murmured, glancing at him. “Wait up for me.”

“Mm.” Alex sighed as the class cleared out around them. “Still no car?”

“Some people’s parents aren’t multi-kajillionaires. And Dad won’t help.” Carrie gave a folder a violent shove into her bag. “If you don’t mind, I want to talk to Mr. Thompson.”

Alex did mind.

“Excuse me, Carrie—Robin, your father is to going catch you eventually.” Mr. Thompson pushed him back into his chair. “Here.” He palmed Visine into Robin’s hand. “The dousing may have cleared your head, but it didn’t do jack for your eyes.”

Mr. Thompson waved Carrie to the front of the room. Robin used the drops. Alex stared. Robin’s eyes were the color of the water she had seen in the Big Sur last year.

“Robin.” She couldn’t help herself.

He kept scrubbing his eyes. She poked his knee with one toe. A frisson started in her toe, sank through her skin, and through her blood. Robin's eyes connected with hers. Alex gasped. She couldn't. Her veins sang with pressure. Her body felt as though it sank far under water while her mind detached to soar above her. She could look down and see a distortion of herself. She could taste something woody and sweet in her brain that was not her—was Robin. Dizziness swept through her into a pleasure at so little. At nothing. At her. Longing stretched her thin. Till she snapped.

Her world came back like a rubber band that had been pulled too tight. Her soul slipped guiltily into her body. The world shook at the edges. Her eyes finally focused. She still stared at Robin. A long white scar, running from his left eye to his chin, stood out in his scarlet face. He set his gecko hands over his eyes. Echoes of what she had felt lingered in the corners of her mind. Robin had a crush on her. She could taste it. An after taste. An after emotion.

"Mr. Thompson?" In the doorway, a man stood in a well-cut suit the color of morning fog. He had a pale, slightly familiar face. Alex turned her back on Robin in the hopes he would take the time to bolt, or at least take his head out of his hands.

"Hi." The man held out his hand to Mr. Thompson. "I'm Detective Rice. I need to ask you a few questions in—don't leave, Ms. Satchen. I need to speak to you, too."

Carrie sat at the stranger's request just as she had been gathering her things. Alex flipped her hair over her shoulder in an excuse to look behind her. Robin sat on the desk. He tucked a flask into a pocket of his backpack. His skin was once more pearl. With a quirk of a grin, he gave a nod towards the backpack and one to her. She shook her head.

"If you will come with—" Detective Rice stopped, open mouthed.

He cocked an ear. Alex frowned. Something pounded down the hallway. And screamed. Alex stood. Detective Rice turned. He crashed down as Mary bowled over him.

"Carrie—Alex!" Mary's face blotted red and custard pale. "Man—chasing me! Took me, still coming, help!"

"Carrie." Mr. Thompson's voice went soft. "Carrie, the girl needs to talk to you."

"Mary, hush. What are you doing here?" Carrie shook her.

The air solidified around Alex. As he unlocked his desk, Mr. Thompson's eyes stuck to the man. The detective crouched, his brown eyes taking on gold and red glints.

"No! Listen to me for once! The police—call the—" Mary punched Carrie.

"Quite unnecessary." Detective Rice launched to his feet. "I am the police."

His hand dipped into his jacket but rather than a badge, it came out with a gun. Alex's heart beat slowly in her chest. He aimed a Nine Millimeter Browning Hi-Power at Mr. Thompson.

"Tacé, little one, we had to have you quickly." The man slipped into a silver accent. Even his face was more precious. "I'm sorry my friend frightened you. Your wild-eyed arrival will make it all the easier to blame your disappearance on Clyde, though, won't it?" He never glanced at Mr. Thompson, but Alex could feel her teacher tense.

Detective Rice's aim did not waiver as he turned to nod at the shimmering man that appeared at his shoulder, an S & W Sigma in hand.

A gunshot shattered Alex's solid air. Alex flattened. Her eyes darted to Mr. Thompson. Instead of lying in a pool of blood, he steadied a gun. Detective Rice had been blown back, landing on his partner. Mr. Thompson shook, holding the gun towards the men as if he would never move again.

Mary screamed. She gave her captor a vicious kick before trampling over the two of them. Robin paused long enough to catch up Detective Rice's fallen gun. Mr. Thompson broke out of his trance and vaulted the two men. Alex stared at Carrie's blood spattered face. Carrie might have stared back. Neither of them knew when they made the decision to run.

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Alex and Carrie burst out of the school. Detective Rice and his friend launched into view.

“Jesus. They’re still coming,” Robin panted beside Mr. Thompson’s Suburban.

Mary hopped up and down. “Run! They’re right behind—get that door open, you!”

“Shoot them.” Mr. Thompson fumbled in his pocket.

Carrie lagged. Alex lost a shoe. She kicked off the other and kept tearing across gravel.

“You already shot him once. You hit him right in the—” Robin squeezed off a shot.

Detective Rice’s friend stumbled to his knees. Triumph and sickness washed over Robin. Then the man stood, and ran. Robin’s body exploded with another cold adrenaline rush. “I shot him in the leg. I shot him in the leg!”

“Next time aim for the head.” Mr. Thompson popped the locks.

Mary’s shouts rose to a new height when Carrie pitched into the gravel.

“No.” Robin closed his eyes.

“Leave her—”

“No.”

Mr. Thompson’s curses faded. Robin ran across the parking lot, towards men with guns. Carrie was at his feet before he could think about it. He fired a shot without bothering to aim as he bent for Carrie. Alex hauled her up on the other side.

His leg crumpled. Carrie shrieked. Blood spurted from his calf. A wave of pain hit him. When the world swam into focus, Alex and Carrie dragged him to the car. He slammed into a heap of bodies. As the car jerked forward he lost all control of his stomach.

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Riccé put a hand to his side as he watched the Suburban careen away. People appeared from around their cars and out of the building.

“Kiyach!” Yaneth swore as he followed the receding car with his Sigma.

“Never mind.” Riccé yanked down the fool’s weapon. “We’re drawing a crowd.”

“He’s going to kill us.”

“Don’t be any more of a gershi than necessary. We both have too much Blood for that yet. Life could get extremely unpleasant, however.” Riccé extracted the bullet from his side. Thanks to quick thinking his shield had only let it sink in an inch. If he could think a little more quickly, he could place the brunt of this mess on Yaneth’s head.

Yaneth rubbed his leg. He had had time to fully shield so all he would have was a nasty bruise from the bullet that had struck him. “But he needs her—”

“That was a nasty stroke. All the more reason not to go about trying to kill them, don’t you think?” Riccé flicked the bullet into the pool of blood at his feet.

“I aimed for his leg.”

“If we’re clever,” he ignored Yaneth, “we might convince him this is to our advantage.”

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Wheels screamed. Mary screamed. Robin screamed. Alex rolled in a slippery world of blood and vomit, knocking into walls and bodies at each curve. She caught hold of Robin. His elbow smashed into her nose.

“Hold still!” She licked his blood off her lips.

“He’s dying!” Mary keened like a small bird. She half fell into the back seat.

“We’ve got to get to a hospital.” Carrie clamped her hands over the wound even as she clamped her expression on her pale face.

“First place they’ll check. Put pressure on it.” Mr. Thompson never looked back.

“He’s dying!” Mary’s voice rose.

“No, he’s not.” Mr. Thompson’s voice tightened. “There’s a first aid kit under the seat.”

“Hold his leg.” Carrie turned to Alex.

“There’s no one following.” Alex clutched the boy rather than his leg—unable to look at the blood oozing around Carrie’s fingers. Everything was blood.

“They’ll have an APB out on us by now. I won’t make any turns. That will have to do.”

“He’s dying!”

“Stop the damn car.” Robin ground out.

“Just a little farther.”

“No.” Carrie closed her eyes. “No. Now.”

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Alex braced herself against Robin’s shaking frame. He would have jerked away if he were stronger. Sweat covered his translucent skin. Mr. Thompson tied off the bandage on Robin’s left leg. They had pulled off the highway into heavy brush. Alex and Mr. Thompson had dragged Robin from the car into the spotted, spring light in order to get a better look at his leg. A few birds competed with a few flies that had already come out to investigate.

“You’re lucky. The bullet just blew a chunk out of your calf muscle.” Mr. Thompson dropped the bandages in the open med kit. “You lost blood. We’ll have to keep your legs elevated and get fluids into you.”

Carrie’s face looked like mint ice cream. “Thank God for the first aid kit. I’ve never seen one so—complete.”

“Always be prepared.” Mr. Thompson flicked a syringe; another stuffed into his mouth. “Roll him, Alex.”

“You are remarkably prepared, aren’t you?” Robin clutched Alex.

Her eye caught on the small scar on the inside of his right arm. Mr. Thompson answered by swabbing Robin with alcohol.

“That Beretta part of your preparations, too?” At Robin’s words, Alex’s jumbled mind snapped to a chilled calm. She held him like a shield.

“This is an antibiotic—you aren’t allergic to penicillin, right? And this is a pain killer.” Mr. Thompson jabbed each needle home.

“So. How long have you been preparing?” Alex sought out his eyes.

They might have chosen the wrong protector. Not even Detective Rice’s miraculous recovery had fazed Mr. Thompson. She’d never questioned when he wouldn’t let them go to a hospital. She cursed her blind reassurance at his authority.

“Leave him alone.” Mary huddled against the car. She had gone through Mr. Thompson’s jacket, Robin’s sweatshirt, and Carrie’s sweater and still scrubbed the seats. “He saved us—he saved me, anyway. That man took me. He showed up at my school. If school traffic hadn’t stopped him—”

“No, Mary—Mary, isn’t it?” Mr. Thompson sat back on his heels. “They have every right to ask. A long time—to answer your question. But I was serious when I said we should keep moving, and it will take a while to explain—”

Alex cut him off. “When? Where? We can’t drag Robin around forever.”

Mr. Thompson gave a skeleton grin. “It may come as a surprise to you that I am prepared for this. I have a cabin up north that they—that I believe is safe. It’s about ten hours.”

“All right.” Alex clutched Robin closer to her but her nod was firm. Robin’s head lolled under the influence of whatever Mr. Thompson had given him. Alex found herself wishing him awake. “You have until tomorrow then.”

Mr. Thompson gave a marionette’s bob. “I’ve got a sleeping bag and a pad. I’ll put the seats down and we can stretch out Robin. You and Carrie could keep an eye on him.”

Alex felt one small coil of the knot in her stomach loosen. At least she wouldn’t have to sit back down on that bloodstain. “That would be fine.”

Not that it helped much. She was still covered in blood. Robin's muscles slipped into malleability. He gave in to the medicine. She envied him.

“Look, I have a couple of canisters of water, and extra clothes. You three can clean up a bit now. Then we can stop somewhere along the road and wash up, I promise—Alex?”

Alex didn't look up at her physics teacher as she rubbed her cheek into Robin's damp hair. “We're not going back, are we?”