

Once Upon A Predator

Dark Amusements Book #1

Alex Loch



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Chapter 1

Jess Gets Lost In The Dark

Ten years ago...

The hand sailed through the air; the smack like a crack of thunder, but the impact was worse. It sent the girl stumbling backwards, the wall at her back the only thing keeping her upright.

“I saw that smile—”, the woman growled, “—and while you’re living under my roof, you’ll show me respect. You stuck up little BITCH!” she spat, propelling a gob of saliva onto her lower lip. It rolled down and pooled in the cleft of her worn out chin. Her once porcelain white skin had turned a grayish yellow, and deep wrinkles etched the corners of her eyes and creased the skin around her mouth. She looked decades older than her forty-two years.

More colorful expletives flew from her lips, but the girl didn’t react. Red faced, the woman glared at her for another moment before turning to stagger down the hall, bumping along the wall as she went. Midway, she swung back. The girl, having raised a hand to her still stinging cheek, tensed as she watched from beneath dark lashes.

“Cheek smarting just a little... bit?” *Just a little bit* was

Barbara's favorite phrase, the last word spat out as if she'd eaten something rotten. "You're lucky I put up with your shit. You'd be in some foster home right now if it weren't for me. Then we'd see who's laughing," Barbara sneered. Leaning heavily against the wall, she rolled around and weaved the rest of the way down the corridor before disappearing to the right.

Alone now, the girl slumped back, allowing the curtain of dirty blond locks to close over her face. Jess rubbed her sore cheek.

Tonight's rage had everything to do with Barbara's current boyfriend, Cal. Like her, Cal liked to party. Unlike her, more often than not he'd rather do the partying with someone else. Barbara just found out he'd been out with his ex. Jess didn't understand their relationship, but then she didn't understand Barbara. On nights like this, she kept reminding herself that all she had to do was make it until her eighteenth birthday. After that, she'd start fresh somewhere far away from her mother, who was *just a little bit* crazy.

Jess retreated to her room. Barbara rarely struck out more than once, but there was always the exception. Her stomach rumbled in hunger. She glanced around, but already knew there was nothing edible here. It held a single bed, a beat-up dresser, a banker's desk lamp on a bedside table, and stacks of books scattered around the room in various-sized piles. The best piece of furniture Jess owned was her grandfather's old desk lamp. It spilled a soft yellow glow across her blue comforter, part of the dingy cream-colored rug, the photo frame on her side table and the lower half of a poster featuring the luscious Josh Duhamel. Right now, even Josh couldn't bring a smile to her face.

Jess lifted the photo frame off the bedside table. On one

side, her friends Sam and Toby, and she grinned goofily at the camera. On the other, her grandparents smiled back. Her gaze paused on them, recalling happier times. Almost four years since they died, and she still missed them so much it hurt. Before their accident, she'd lived in the city with them. Although she remembered very little about the time before that, she suspected the long, jagged scar running from knee to upper thigh had something to do with why she ended up with her grandparents for most of her childhood. Her fingers found the raised ridge of skin under her light cotton pants.

Barbara's lashing out had just been the icing on the cake. Earlier during gym class, a group of girls shoved Sam over the bleachers and she twisted her ankle. It swelled to twice its normal size and was turning an array of green, purple, and black by the time she helped Sam to the nurse's office. Jess went back to grab their bags from the locker room when Barry, the poster boy for jocks, cornered her. When she threatened to yak on his new Nikes, he'd backed away, giving her enough space to dash back into the gym where she interrupted a Junior Ed class. Still, Jess preferred the gym teacher's reprimand to whatever Barry had in mind.

It had been a shitty day. It made her wonder if there wasn't a full moon on the rise.

The only silver lining she had were her friends and fellow outcasts, Toby and Sam. Toby moved to Murphy over seven years ago, and the locals still considered him a newcomer. To top it off, Toby was more artsy than jock, preferring to hang out with Jess and Sam over the guys. In a town like Murphy, that could get you beat. As for Sam, she was a local, but didn't toe the local line of bullshit. Having a different opinion didn't jive well with the natives and was likely why she seemed to be their favorite target.

Jess's stomach growled again. Sighing, she replaced the frame, grabbed her wallet and jacket, crept down the hall and out the back door. She didn't breathe until after she heard the click of the screen door swing shut behind her. Barbara often sat in the front room watching television and downing rye and cokes. The telltale blue light dancing through the sheer curtains of the front window as she passed by confirmed it.

Leaves danced around her legs and crunched underfoot with every step she took. There was a chill in the air that hadn't been there earlier. Jess tugged her unbuttoned jacket closed and headed south towards downtown Murphy. She debated on stopping by Sam's but thought better of it. The last time she'd shown up with a noticeable bruise they'd ended up in a fight and she just couldn't handle that right now.

Lost in thought, the distinctive snap of a branch nearby brought her back to the present. Whoever it was was approaching at a quick clip. With two blocks to go, she picked up her pace and crossed the street. Jess strained to listen for the other's footsteps, but heard only her own over the wind and the sound of branches thrashing. It wasn't long before she was opening the door to the pizzeria. Inside, Jess forced her tense muscles to relax as she approached the counter. After ordering a slice and a diet coke from a kid in a yellow polyester uniform with the name tag DANNY, she headed for a booth to wait.

She'd just sat down when the swish of the door opening drew her attention. The newcomer, dressed completely in black, stared at the menu board as he gave his order before turning to face the dining room.

Jess knew her manners. She knew to chew with her mouth closed, never put her elbows on the table, always

remember someone's name, and never stare. But she couldn't seem to pull her gaze away from the dark stranger. Like a deer trapped in headlights, she stared as the dark man approached and couldn't help but wonder if this guy had been the one following her a few minutes earlier.

Once at the table, he just stood there, still and silent, as if allowing her time to adjust to his presence. In contrast to her first impression, the man wasn't dark at all. His skin tone was so light it was almost white, and the hair sticking out from beneath his tuque was platinum. His eyes, which at first glance looked black, were the oddest shade of blue she'd ever seen. It was almost as if God had tried his hand at chiaroscuro and created a human interpretation of the famous Italian light and dark technique. Even looking at him was unsettling.

"Do you mind if I join you? I hate eating alone." Without waiting for a reply, the chiaroscuro man settled in the seat across from her. Jess opened her mouth, but shut it again when she realized she had nothing to say that wouldn't be interpreted as rude or outright hostile. For the first time in a long time, she was speechless and all she could seem to do was stare at the brazen stranger.

The man's eyes widened. "Oh jeez, you think I followed you in here or something, don't you?" The question hung in the air, now thick with tension. It was only made worse when he added, "Well, you're right. I did."

Jess narrowed her eyes at her unwelcome guest as she muttered, "Excuse me?"

The man laughed, holding up his hands in mock surrender as he shook his head. "I saw you drop something on the road and thought you might want it back." Still chuckling at his own humor, he stuck out a pale hand and slowly unfolded his fingers. Initially, Jess stared at the

offered hand as if it was a dead fish. It wasn't until the glint of silver caught her attention that some of the tension eased from her. In his palm lay a small silver cross, just like the one she wore.

Eyes widening, Jess dropped her gaze to her wrist. Her leather bracelet was present, but her grandmother's fine silver cross that always hung from it wasn't. She must have been twisting it again, a nervous habit she couldn't seem to quit. The small pendant was the one piece of jewelry her mother hadn't sold off after her grandparents died, and that was only because she'd begged her not to. Jess always wore it, in part because it made her feel closer to her grandmother, but also because she didn't trust her mother not to change her mind and sell it while Jess was out of the house.

She forced herself to relax, pasted on a polite smile, and met his gaze. After what felt like minutes, Jess finally dragged her gaze away from the visitor's odd blue irises down to his open hand again.

"Thank you," she said as she reached out to take the cross from his hand. When her fingers curled around the fine silver pendant, the coolness of the stranger's palm surprised her. A second or two later, she jerked her hand away when a nasty jolt stung the tips of her fingers. Luckily, her fingers hadn't let go of the cross.

"Sorry about that. I get my electric personality from my mother." The man chuckled and continued talking as Jess flexed her still tingling hand and then stuffed the cross into her pocket. He went into extensive detail about how his mother's watches always stopped working. That it didn't matter the make or quality of the timepiece, if she wore it, it would die sooner rather than later. "My mother literally and figuratively killed time!" He laughed.

The more he talked, the more creeped out she got. She

glanced around, hoping her slice might be ready to go, but Danny was nowhere in sight. Jess opened her mouth to excuse herself when she noticed her unwelcome companion had stopped talking. The unexpected silence drew her gaze back to him. He was watching her. The change in his expression was unsettling.

“So Jess, had a shitty life have you?” The stranger watched as she struggled to come to terms with what he’d said. He’d stated her name. It implied familiarity. Only she didn’t know him from Adam.

“How do you know my name?” Jess asked, clenching her hands in her lap.

“You introduced yourself when I sat down,” He stated, the corners of his mouth curving up.

Jess forced herself to remain calm. What was this guy playing at? He’d stated the blatant lie as if daring her to challenge him. They were in a public place with people less than twenty feet away. It would be stupid for him to try anything here. If she wanted to find out what this guy thought he knew about her, now was the time.

“Fine. And what exactly do you think you know about my life?” Jess said, keeping her voice as neutral as he had.

The stranger’s hint of amusement bloomed into a full-blown Cheshire grin, and Jess realized she’d made a mistake. It was his eyes. His odd blue eyes darkened to black. Cool hands grabbed a hold of hers under the table and dragged her close, the table the only barrier between them now. The edge of the linoleum dug into her upper arms. She tried to yank her hands free, but his grip didn’t waver. He had pulled her in so close onlookers would assume they were a couple enjoying each other’s company. Almost nose-to-nose with him now, Jess shuddered. Aesthetically, he was an attractive man, yet every-

thing about him revolted her. She dropped her gaze. When she wasn't looking into his eyes, she could think more clearly.

She opened her mouth to yell for help, but a sharp, searing pain in her left-hand pinky finger turned her shout into a gasp of pain. Before she had time to process the first break, crack went her ring finger. Jess's breath came out in bursts as her eyes teared up, the pain verging on unbearable. It felt like her pinky and ring fingers had been crushed at the joint. She heard herself whimper, but it sounded far away. Her thoughts wandered from the present terror and pain to grief over her poor ring finger.

"Please..." Jess pleaded, her face now wet with trailing tears.

"I thought you'd never ask." The words spoken so low she almost missed them. And then he began to talk and each time Jess tried to get up or say something, he broke another bone in her left hand. The strange man deftly wore her down until she didn't care about much of anything except wanting it all to end.

By the time Danny, the pimple-faced pizza boy, brought over their pizza and hard plastic cutlery, tears were streaming in a steady flow down her face. Head bowed, Jess didn't even glance up when he placed the slices on the linoleum table in front of them. His white sneakers took a step back as if to leave, then paused. The kid was hesitating.

He dismissed Danny with a perfunctory, "Her dog just died, so she's a little upset. You know how emotional women get." After another few seconds of being ignored, Danny's sneakers walked away.

Shortly after that, the stranger got up and left, whistling as he exited the pizzeria. She continued sitting in the booth long after the tears stopped flowing. The only discernible

sounds in the pizzeria came from the easy listening station being piped through the speakers.

* * *

Danny's dream girl with the sad gray eyes and dark blond hair was still sitting in the booth and it was twenty minutes until closing. He'd checked on her an hour ago, after the guy she'd been sitting with left. Her head remained bowed. He had little experience with girls and no clue what to do when one was crying. He dropped off extra napkins and mumbled a "Um, here you go, miss. Sorry for your loss," all the while thinking she must have really loved that dog. Now the boss was getting antsy and had instructed Danny to clean the dining area in the hopes their one customer would get the hint and leave.

Paper towels and spray bottle in hand, Danny started on the closest booth and made his way around. He was cleaning the booth behind his dream girl when his shoe slipped, bringing his attention to the red trail of partial shoe prints on the floor. He'd stepped in something and was now tracking it across the gray ceramic tile. Luigi's customers weren't the most fastidious lot, so having to clean up the marinara sauce, or red sauce as the boss referred to it, happened more often than one would think.

"Great." Danny muttered and dropped the towels and spray bottle on the table before going to get the mop and bucket. On his way back, he noticed the red sauce was still dripping from somewhere under the booth. It had already traveled down the booth's length to the drain in the center of the floor. He bent down, his gaze retracing the sauce's trail to its origin.

Danny stared for a moment, trying to make sense of

what he was seeing. The source of the red sauce seemed to come from his dream girl.

* * *

No one saw Jess pick up the hard plastic knife and use it to rip a hole through her light cotton pants. Nor did they see her tear into the flesh of her upper thigh. The coroner would later reveal her cuts were hesitant at first, as if unsure of what she was doing, but grew bolder with each successive stroke. Jess traced the same path as her scar, as if digging through the layers of flesh would reveal something hidden within. She broke both hard plastic knives and was using a fork before anyone stopped her, but by then she'd already dug so deep she'd nicked her femoral artery. Even when Danny pulled the broken fork from her right hand and pressed a wad of Luigi's Pizzeria napkins to her wound to staunch the flow, Jess didn't say a word or even gasp in pain. It was like she'd already moved on.

It took five minutes for the ambulance to arrive, but by then it was already too late.

Within minutes the local police were swarming the pizzeria. Yellow police tape was already in place when onlookers gathered and shot questions at the stony-faced patrolmen guarding the scene. Little Murphy hadn't had this much action since the multi-car pileup on Highway ninety-three last winter and the locals were abuzz.

Of all the employees, only the kid working the front cash saw the man sitting with the victim before her death. Chief Turner was the senior officer on scene. Normally he'd let one of his investigators do the interview, but the victim was a friend of his daughter's. He found the teenager seated in the back office. There were bloodstains on his hands, his

right sleeve and midriff of his yellow polyester shirt. There could have been more on his work pants, but the dark color hid them if there were. They'd have to collect his uniform before they released the kid.

Danny was shaking his head, muttering, "Who does that because of a dead dog?" under his breath.

"Danny? My name is Chief Turner. Can I ask you a few questions about tonight?" He waited for the kid to acknowledge him with a nod before continuing.

"So you found Jess after she'd cut herself?"

The kid's gaze dropped to the floor. He nodded.

"The guy she was with, did you catch his name?"

Danny shook his head.

"Maybe you overheard something they said—?"

Danny looked him in the eye. "I heard nothing. When I brought them their pizza the guy said she was upset because her dog died. I mean it was just a dog." The kid looked haunted. Although he sympathized, Chief Turner had to press on to get what details he could while they were still fresh in Danny's mind.

"Can you describe the man?" After a few seconds of silence, he continued. "Was he a teenager? In his early twenties? Late twenties? Thirties?"

The kid replied with a shrug.

The chief decided on a different tactic. "Did he look like he was around Jess's age?"

"Older." It wasn't much, but it was an answer.

"Ok. Did he look as old as me?" Chief Turner was in his early forties, so when the kid emphatically shook his head, he jotted down mid-late twenties with a question mark. Sometimes questioning a witness was like peeling back an onion, especially when they'd seen something traumatic.

"What did he look like?"

The kid only shrugged.

"Caucasian?"

He got a nod.

"Tall?"

Nothing.

"Short?"

Still nothing.

"Around my height?"

This time he got a nod-shrug combination, followed by a "Sure".

"Hair color?"

Another shrug.

That's when Chief Turner decided this interview was more like pulling teeth than peeling an onion. "Ok. Was he bald then?"

"He had on a tuque. And he was all in black."

Chief Turner nodded, then asked, "What about his features?"

The kid sighed and rubbed his hair in frustration, knocking off his Luigi's Pizzeria hat. "I don't know. I wasn't paying attention to him. He came in. Ordered a slice. Sat down. Chatted her up. Ate his pizza while she sat there crying. And left. I can't give you anything more because there's nothing more to give." The kid's voice rose in volume until he was nearly shouting. When Danny spoke again, his voice was shaky and barely more than a whisper. "What does it matter anyway? She killed herself."

Although Chief Turner agreed with Danny, this wasn't just any case. He gave him time to settle down again before pressing him for more, but the kid clammed up. From then on he responded with only Yes/No answers or a shrug. Shortly after that, the chief let him go. No matter how much he wanted answers, he couldn't force them out of the kid.

* * *

The reality was Danny had been far more interested in watching Jess that night than the guy she was with. Ever since she started coming to the pizzeria, Danny had developed a little crush on her. His chest tightened at the thought he'd never see his dream girl again.

On his way home, he found an empty Coke can and absently kicked it all the way back to his parents' house. It annoyed every resident still awake along Main Street, though Danny didn't notice or care. His thoughts were on the sad, fair-haired girl who always seemed to have the world on her shoulders.

Media trucks showed up to sniff out the dirt from the tragic scene, but to their disappointment, the police refused to give a statement until after they notified Jess's family. Two police officers went to Jess's mother's house to relay the news. Initially, Barbara was angry about the intrusion during her Monday movie night. The officers apologized but pressed on. The fact Jess was dead must have seeped through Barbara's rye soaked brain in to her consciousness because she started crying.

* * *

After a year passed and no further evidence came to light, they closed Jess's case, letting her cause of death stand as a suspicious suicide. The fact they couldn't explain who was sitting with her before she died or how the baby, ring, and middle fingers of her left hand got crushed forced them to use *suspicious*.