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## **At Shadows End**

by Angel Woodings

### **Chapter One**

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#### **A Heartbeat in the First Person**

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*"Katty! Come down here, dear!" Her mother's voice echoed through the empty house, wooden and hollow, as it might echo through a giant coffin. Kate looked down at her tiny feet dangling off the side of the bed.*

*"Kate!" This time it was his voice. "Kate! Come down here now!"*

*Her tiny feet. Her tiny little feet that would carry her downstairs.*

*"Kate! Now!" he repeated with that edge of anger that tinted most of his communication. She was his child puppet, a living doll, always available for his amusement and manipulation... always available for his ego. She jumped off the bed in response to the threat of his anger and dutifully ran down the stairs.*

*For, as all children know, power belongs solely to the adults.*

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I woke with a start. It's a recurring nightmare, a parting gift if you will. I also have a recurring dream about pastries and spiders, so go figure.

Like so many nights before, my eyes opened at 2:30am to see a black and white world around me, shadowed in shades of grey. This time, however, I could hear John's heavy breathing and feel the warmth of his body as he slept peacefully beside me, completely unaware of my existence. He was a one-month stand that had spilled over into a second month. It would end soon.

I turned my back to him and curled into myself. The nightmare and my loneliness collided in the darkness of his bedroom, and the tears fell onto the cold sheets. Hidden tears -- whether in the sanctity of the shower or in the quiet of a bedroom -- are the currency of despair. Isolated sorrow is the burden of an unshared pain.

With the silence of a cat, I crawled out of John's bed and padded across the room to my clothes. I felt so alone, and I no longer wanted to be a part of this nothingness I shared with John. As I slipped out of his apartment into the cool Austin night, I felt the pulse of the sleeping city and freedom drifting on the breeze. The affair ended, and it did so as suddenly and as ineloquently as it had begun.

As I walked to my car, the cicadas and crickets sung a lullaby concerto accompanied by the gentle hum of the dreaming city. In the distance, I could see the downtown skyline. Everyone has a personal Polaris, a beacon of the heart that guides them home. One of mine is the Austin skyline. "Hiya, Downtown," I said with a small wave and a smile. I decided to leave my black mood on John's doorstep along with any other disposable feelings I had regarding this non-relationship.

There is never any traffic in the deepest hour of the night, so the fluorescent orange lights and the familiar curves of Interstate-35 gave way to quiet introspection. With no companion or conversation to occupy my overactive mind, my other self quickly showed up.

*He had a big dick*, she said. My other self is a bit bossy and self-possessed and always feels obligated to comment on the events in my life. It's like having a director's commentary track playing in my head.

"That was the only good thing about him," I replied aloud. "I've had dildos that were better lays."

I guess I should explain who my other self is... or is not. She isn't a real person nor does she have a name. As near as I can figure, she's just a part of my mind that I splintered off into a separate consciousness when I was a child. How does one explain a nonentity, vaporware of the mind?

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When I was a child, I had been hurt horribly by a cruel man that hid behind the beautiful mask of a good and honest person. I was the only one who knew the truth, but being a child, I never said a word. I was bound by fear and innocence.

I had kept my secret for years, my knowledge and silence eventually leading to isolation. Even among my friends, I was alone. In fact, I was slowly dying on the inside, becoming an animated idea of a child as the child herself slowly disappeared. So the little living child grave that I was becoming found a way to save herself: I invented a friend. I would pretend my teddy bear would listen to me and give me

advice. I was no longer alone with the dangerous and unspeakable truth as my only companion. But, of course being the fabrication of a child, my pretend friend did not always give the best advice.

"Why does he hurt me all the time?" I would ask, my eyes bloodshot with the horror of experience.

"Perhaps," replied my teddy bear, "you deserve it."

But good advice or not, my teddy bear kept me alive each day.

Until one day, the man attacked while we were away from home, and my teddy bear wasn't there to talk to, to help me bring my head above water. Drowning in pain and fear, my tiny 10-year-old mind cried out in agony...

... and there was an answer. My teddy bear was in my head. "You'll be okay," she said from inside my own mind, "you're strong." The soothing words calmed me.

And from that day forward, I was never alone again.

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A few years ago, I tried to integrate her personality back into my own so I wouldn't feel like such a freak. But, as hard as I tried, I failed. So I gave up and to the present day, I have pleasant conversations with her about my job or the weather or, as with the current conversation, the overdue departure of a bad choice.

"Male anatomy aside," I said, "I'm alone again."

*You were alone with him. Even during sex, you were alone,* she replied.

This was a haunting truth. As I had grown older, sex without emotion or consequences had completely lost its appeal. In college, sex was erotic, sensual pleasure; each opportunity filled with discovery and wonderment. My young mind would get high on the deep intoxicating smell of sexual musk, and my young body would tingle and bristle with a single touch. But now disconnected sex revealed a terrible emptiness -- each touch was like an echo in a canyon, the vast chasm realized as a single cry resounded through it.

I brought my meandering mind under control as I passed the sign for my exit; it was time to pay attention to the road.

I parked my car in the shallow driveway. Land in the middle of Austin is quite expensive, so architects don't waste it on things like driveways or lawns. The night was wearing on me, and the sight of my bed was a welcome one. Should I blog on John? Maybe tomorrow. I don't feel clever at 3am, and what's the point of blogging if you can't amaze your friends with your acerbic wit?

Besides, tomorrow is Saturday. In the Austin tech world, that means "come in for half a day and pretend to work." The transplanted California geek executives had solidified the working weekend during the start-up dot com boom in Austin, and management was sluggish to let it go. So I had half a day of surfing movie trailers and downloading mp3s ahead of me. Time for sleep.

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"What is this?" Thomas, the sys admin, stood over my desk like a disapproving parent, holding my copy of *SQL for Dummies* with dripping disdain.

"Reference material." I replied with a feigned expression of benign innocence. "Do you need to borrow it?"

"I don't need to borrow it; I need to burn it."

"Hey hey hey hey!" I dropped the act, and standing quickly, I grabbed my book. "I really do use this book."

"Have I taught you nothing? O'Reilly books have better information in a much less insulting format."

"Just call it a weakness," I replied, "like your weakness for surfing MySpace. We all have our dirty secrets."

I guess I need to take a moment to explain the geek world to the non-geeks out there: it's competitive and ruthless. Not a place for sissies. Don't get me wrong -- it can be a lot of fun, full of creativity and wit, but you better have your ego firmly in place before you visit because they *will* kill the weak in the herd.

Not exactly the picture that remains in most people's minds of the ten kids meeting after school for Academic Decathlon.

As I sat down clutching my unsanctioned SQL book, Thomas began walking back to his desk across the room, defending MySpace as he went. "MySpace has all the up and coming indie bands."

I let it go. I found MySpace to be very similar to 133t: lots of fun for the under twenty crowd. I had no desire to spend ten hours formatting my MySpace page with the latest emo indie band jpeg to show how hip I was. I have LiveJournal for that.

Kathy's light-grey open cubicle desk was right next to my light-grey open cubicle desk. They differed only in paraphernalia. She looked up at me across the low-lying divider and said, "Hey, I'm sending you a link."

Trillian immediately went "bing" on my computer as her IM came through. It was a CafePress link. A man was selling mugs, t-shirts, mousepads, and messenger bags all plastered with a picture of him and his cat sharing a passionate French kiss.

"Truth is stranger than fiction, eh?" she said with a smile.

"It could be Photoshopped," I said.

"It could be," she replied evenly and unconvinced.

Just then, we both heard the far door shut, and we looked over. Cody walked in and casually waved at us across the room as he walked over to Thomas' desk.

I was immediately nervous.

Kathy gave me an evil grin, her eyes full of mischievous plans. "I believe that's Cody." She looked over to Thomas' desk and then back at me. "It *is* Cody."

"Let it go, Kathy. Just walk away."

"Are you kidding? Let's see, shall I surf CafePress or shall I torture you?"

"I don't know, maybe we could actually *work*." I knew I wouldn't be able to derail her, but I had to try.

"Who wants to work when Lover Boy is here?" She winked at me. Then she turned to Cody and hollered across the room, "Hey Code, come here."

Let me explain something about Cody. He's not particularly handsome nor does he have that raw sex appeal that makes women worry about their hair or how well their

bra is showing off their breasts. What he is -- what he is the very symbol of -- is honesty, kindness, and generosity. He has absolutely no idea what affectation is.

The first time I met him was several months ago at a party at Thomas' house. He was unassuming and quiet, so I didn't pay much attention to him. We were all lazing about on the back porch, drinking Shiner and discussing films. Austin is a very snobby town when it comes to cinema. It is the home of the original Alamo Drafthouse, Aint It Cool News, Richard Linklater, and Robert Rodriguez; we have a reputation to upkeep. Vapid popcorn blockbusters are slammed for the Hollywood merchandise churn mills that they are.

So there we all were, trying to figure out how Ben Affleck went from Kevin Smith to Armageddon, and Cody cheerfully says, "I loved Armageddon. That is the first DVD I ever bought."

Silence. None of us knew how to respond to such an out-of-the-closet positive opinion of Armageddon. And that was the first moment I felt myself drawn to Cody.

My attraction has grown into a full-blown high school crush over the past few months. I've only seen him a handful of times through dates with mutual friends. We would all go to the movies or go to dinner, and Cody would be there, his expression open and trusting and his conversation unpretentious and almost innocent.

Kathy stumbled upon my secret one day when she, Thomas, and I were discussing plans for the evening. He wanted us to come over to his house for dinner. He was cooking an absurd amount of grilled meat and had bought ingredients for margaritas. "Code is making the margaritas," he said. "Somehow I manage to always screw them up."

At the mention of Cody's name, I blushed red and said that I would be there. Given my pale Northern European complexion, there was no hiding my red cheeks. Thomas being... well, Thomas, he didn't notice my reaction. But Kathy did. She had followed me back to my desk, and immediately started asking questions.

Kathy and I have been close since we first started working together a couple of years ago. We first bonded over our name; we're both named Katherine. But since you can shorten Katherine into about five different names, I have yet to meet a Katherine that has the same name as me.

"Why did you blush? Do you like Code?" Kathy was never one to beat around the bush.

"Well..." I hesitated and blushed again.

"Oh my god!" She smiled as if it were Christmas. "I've never seen you actually like a guy. I mean, you go out with guys all the time, but that doesn't mean you *like* them."

"Look, Kathy... it's kind of... well..." I trailed off. I felt so awkward and transparent.

"This is great!" She was happier than me, and I was the one with the crush. "No, this is great, Kate. Code is a really good guy." Kathy loved to interfere with her friends' love lives. Since she was in every other way endearing, we tended to overlook this one small personality flaw.

But today I felt particularly vulnerable and exposed. Last night had not been a good night. I had finally ended it with John, but, for some reason, the experience had left my wounds open. I was hurting and felt palpably alone. Under normal circumstances, I am very adept at hiding my feelings. I am a master of deception. But not today. Today I was naked. Today I was me.

So escape was the only choice. Bowing my head slightly, I dashed past Cody out into the hall. I went to a place of solitude and safety, a place I had used many times in the past for emotional emergencies: the Ladies' Room.

I wanted to cry. I was no good with extreme, unfettered emotion. I was no good at losing control, and I was scared.

"What am I going to do?" I asked aloud to no one in particular, but of course my other self showed up to take care of business. She is always in control -- the calm, logical decision maker. She started searching through the old monologue tapes in my head for the appropriate one to playback now. I had quit playing the "You're stupid and ugly; he'll never notice you" tape in my early 20s. I really wished my mind would just throw that one out, but I still hear it on occasion, playing softly in the background, almost like white noise. It's really annoying.

My other self found the "You don't need anyone; you're fine on your own" tape. "That doesn't really fit this situation," I told her aloud.

*You don't need him*, she said rather matter-of-factly.

"I may not need him, but my body -- or *some* part of me -- really desires him. That's the problem."

*Hmmmmmm...* She was thinking.

The door to the Ladies' Room started to open. I quickly ran into one of the stalls and shut the door behind me. I could hear the clack-clack of high heels on the tile floor, and then the door to the stall next to me opened. I saw a very feminine, delicate pair of feet in cute strappie sandals and pink toenail polish walk into the stall, turn around and settle in. I looked down at my own sensible tennis shoes, scuffed, dirty, and old. I wiggled my toes around in them and then looked back at the elegant feet which had unwittingly, and somewhat rudely I thought, brought one of my main feminine insecurities to the forefront.

"I suck as a girl," I thought to myself. "I'm the most unsuccessful girl I know." And then all my self-confidence and self-worth disappeared as if it had been nothing more than an illusion. And I could face Cody again. He would have no interest in me. No decent man would want such a boyish girl. The only features that revealed my gender were under all my man clothes and my man attitude.

*You chose this path*, said my other self.

"Shut up," I replied in my head. "I really don't need a lecture during an identity crisis."

*You were the one that wanted to be as strong as a man, to be able to protect yourself like a man, to never be hurt again.*

"Really," I replied, "I don't need this right now. Chastise my bad judgment later."

I waited until the other woman had left before I crawled out of my stall. I left my bathroom womb reluctantly and headed back to the office. I couldn't decide if I wanted Cody to be there or to have already left. I came to the door of the office and wrapped my hand around the doorknob. It seemed heavy and cold and scary. I just stood there, feeling the cold doorknob in the palm of my hand.

Then the door swung open, nearly hitting me. It was Cody. He looked startled for a moment before reacting. "Are you okay? I am so sorry."

I could feel myself starting to blush. I wish I could control that. "Yes... I mean no... I mean yes, yes, I'm okay." It took until the end of the sentence to regain my composure.

"I'm really sorry."

"That's okay, I'm fine." I smiled, trying to use facial expressions to erase the fact that I had just seriously stuttered.

He smiled back. "How are you doing?"

"Fine." Pause pause pause pause, pause, nervous awkward nothingness accompanied with deeply uncool and obvious fidgeting. Then I found my next sentence. "How are you?"

"I'm good." He was watching me and smiling. "I'm pretty excited about going to see *Mister Sinus Theater* tonight. I've been wanting to go for awhile. I've heard good things about it. Have you gone before?"

"*Mister Sinus Theater*? You mean at the Drafthouse?" I asked. It seemed a rather sudden introduction to a very random topic.

"Yeah." He seemed confused. "I assumed you were going too. I mean, since we're meeting at your house."

Kathy. This had Kathy's handiwork written all over it. "Yes," I said with a nod. "Yes. What time are we meeting again?"

"Kathy told Thomas and I to be there at eight. She already gave me directions."

"Right."

"Well, listen, I have to go. I have some things to do before tonight." He smiled and briefly touched my shoulder before he started to walk away. "I'll see you later."

"See ya." I watched him leave. My shoulder still tingled where he had touched me. I wanted him so very very badly.

I could feel my other self on the move, building an offense to destroy these feelings. I stopped her, holding up my hand and saying, "Just let me feel this desire. Just let me have it for a moment. It's really..." I searched for the right word, "It's really... pleasant."

Kathy, of course, had a euphemism already handy to cover her interference. "I was just trying to help," she said quickly when I walked back in the room and looked at her pointedly.

But I immediately smiled. I was still feeling very delicious from my conversation with Cody in the hall. "Don't worry about it," I said. "It'll be fun."

Kathy smiled again. She was a firm believer in the adage, "It's better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission." And with yet another situation, her belief and her behavior were further solidified.

As I sat down at my desk, I asked, "Who all is coming along on this group non-date?"

"Well, Terry of course, although I haven't told him yet, and Thomas. I also phoned Pete. And of course he wants to come along." Then her endearing mischievous grin was back on her face. "If we're lucky, Pete will soon be the odd man out." Her eyes squinted and twinkled with happy wicked thoughts.

I chuckled. "Pete isn't going to be the only single one left." Just as Kathy had her forgiveness/permission adage to direct her behavior, I had my "He'll never notice me" adage to direct my behavior. Though I longed for Cody, he seemed impossibly out of reach. "Cody and I aren't going to hitch up tonight."

She just continued grinning. "Perhaps." Then we both actually began working.

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As I walked into my house that afternoon, a restlessness settled upon me. I felt like I had just drunk an entire pot of coffee. Apparently nervous anticipation and caffeine have the same effect on the body. Any plans of reading, surfing or any other restful activity were right out. I had to *do* something.

And what do women do when they are filled with nervous energy? We clean. We clean like little robots with new batteries. Our minds tick away the future possibilities as our hands scrub and wash and shine.

My mind, however, also likes to play tricks. It is not merely satisfied with taking fantasies to romantic conclusions. No, it must deviate into darkness. It intertwines anticipation with pain, the possibility of future euphoria with the annihilation of the past.

I stopped scrubbing the tub. Sitting back on my heels, my gloves dripping with Scrubbing Bubbles, I stared blankly at the bathtub's tile wall. Why does it have to hurt all the time? When is the break?

*Self-pity?* asked my other self in a disparaging tone.

"Good lord," I replied as I began to clean the tub again, "don't you ever let up?"

*It's useless and unproductive,* she said.

"But perhaps necessary." I replied. "I don't think you could label crying as useful and productive, but you definitely feel better at the end of it."

*There are better choices,* she replied.

I sighed. My other self was a task master. I pulled off my gloves and went into my bedroom. Lying down on the bed, I closed my eyes.

*What do you see?* she asked.

"I see me," I replied. With my eyes closed, I pictured a bright, white light. It sparkled and flickered like light reflected off water. It was how I pictured my soul. It was my inner self without a body. Then I saw myself playing on the beach as the sea water came up to tickle my toes. "It's lonely."

*But no self-pity,* she asked.

"No. No self-pity." The Kate on the beach was smiling and waving back at me.

*And you're okay to continue working?* my other self asked. *You won't get bogged down in the pain?*

"I think I'm okay." I opened my eyes and stared at the ceiling. Ever since I was a child and the beast tore through my family and my soul, the pain had become a part of my everyday life. It was a deep, low bass that came from no direction. It was my ever-present undertone.

I rose from the bed. The swell had been confined back into its constant background hum. But this time I put *Red-Headed Stranger* in the CD player. Working in silence was obviously too dangerous.

I was just putting the vacuum cleaner back in the hall closet when the doorbell rang. It was 7:53pm. Butterflies immediately entered my stomach and began salsa dancing. I looked through the peephole to see a distorted fisheye Cody looking idly about my front porch.

I had to open the door. I mean, it *is* assumed that when you have company over, you actually let them into your house at some point.

But this was *Cody*. Maybe if I didn't have butterflies doing fancy Brazilian dance steps in my stomach, I would have no problem opening the door. But this was *Cody*.

Then along came a savior or three. Kate showed up along with Pete and Terry. I watched them all greet each other from behind my fisheye lens. From my disassociated third-person view, I was able to calm my nerves. I opened the door, smiling. My fragile feelings were once again safely hidden behind a placid, perfect mask. "Hey, everyone."

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## **End of Chapter One**

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