

# Unattended (novel excerpt)

by Laura Ellen Scott

Every moment of the night that Frank was killed is something I know like a memory, but to be clear, I witnessed nothing. I only saw the residue of the event, and the order was something I invented based on the following evidence:

A sticky glass. An open copy of Outside magazine. A flat part of the meadow that reeked of blood and cologne. A dog (my dog) hidden in the closet, shivering so hard the hangers jangled.

Frank liked his Hugo Boss scents. He always wore too much. I know what happened and how it felt. Imagining the last moments of a loved one may be difficult to experience, but it isn't difficult to *do*. Or I could be wrong about that—maybe I've just had a lot of practice.

Dr. Frank was shot to death on a stifling August night when the double-strength stars seemed magical only if you were new to the mute countryside. But Frank was tired of summer. A little drunk from two quick beers and no supper, he felt handsome and under-loved as he drove out of the protection of Black Spring's few streetlights to ascend a dark scar of mountain road. He was on a mission to kill his best friend's dog (*my dog*), but first he'd have to navigate the unlit switchbacks of Rte 5, tricky under the best of circumstances. At each hairpin turn the bloated body of some possum or groundhog appeared in the sweep of his headlights, with little clenched fists raised in angry salutation: *Hail, you son of a bitch! Welcome to Wild and Wonderful West Virginia!*

The busy little waitress back at Lola's probably needed one more night of his Tom Cruise smile and silky wit before she'd release her inhibitions. She'd already started asking him questions about India as a way of signaling her receptiveness. He tried to redirect her to the fact that he'd actually grown up in Baltimore, but she was intent

on zeroing in on his difference. Tonight she'd made him say his last name very slowly several times, after which she repeated it with breathy concentration, turning four syllables into five. He looked forward to the next episode of their flirtation and was perfectly satisfied to take it slow. Aside from his work at the hospital, there was nothing else for him to do in Black Springs. With so few eligible women, he had to make each affair last.

The vacation subdivision was never properly gated, and even so, ATV tracks scoured around the posts marking an entrance that was no more than a gravel road climbing up into trees. Frank kept an eye out for surprise deer. As the road crested, the trees gave way to a meadow on the right and my cabin on the left. My light was on, but Frank knew I was far away—he'd made sure of that.

He didn't have to break in; I never locked up, despite the fact that I'd been burgled recently. He stepped onto the screened porch and opened the door, receiving a soft warning bark from Bella who failed to stir from a cozy divot in the laundry pile. My tiny one bedroom cabin was a mess, as usual. Dishes in the sink, a peanut butter jar left open on the counter, garbage bagged but not put out in the crib. Frank always complained that my place smelled like dog and unwashed towels.

I'd left the vinyl packet of syringes on the counter with the envelope flap yawning open. Earlier, I had considered dealing with the problem myself, but I let something come up, grateful for the distraction.

Frank leaned into the bedroom to salute old Bella. He'd never had a dog growing up, which was why he made errors this night. He extracted the pair of syringes from their pouch and held the first one aloft, his thumb on the plunger. It contained a powerful sedative. The other shot would stop the old dog's heart. "Bella," he called, and there was some rustling commotion behind him. When he returned to the bedroom, she was gone.

She wasn't, but he didn't understand her habits. She'd burrowed under the dank enormity of laundry, entirely covering herself in my

funky t-shirts and blue jeans. Bella wasn't hiding, she just liked it under there.

But the first thing Frank realized was that he'd left the cabin door ajar. The beer made him careless, and it looked like Bella had slipped out while he wasn't looking. He called her name again and sighed. He cursed, I'm sure. A soft "shit" or "fucking hell" to center himself. Of course she would not come.

He set the syringes aside and stretched his hands along the counter top, letting his neck sink down between his shoulders as he tried on a pose of culpability. After a moment, when he understood that he'd be there for a while, he poured himself a brandy and selected a magazine from my stack—one with lots of pictures of water and snow and beautiful athletes.

He should have understood that the low, regular rumble he heard was Bella snoring under laundry, and not some distant train or cranky night beast roaming the forest. Knowing the difference would have saved his life. When Bella failed to return and Frank's patience finally ran short, he ventured outside to find her. Hands in the pockets of his slacks, wet pollen caking his shoes, he embarked on a low energy stroll through the meadow. This would be an obligatory search: *But I did look for her!* He let his mind wander back to the bar maid at Lola's, her strange sexy body, with just a hand's breadth between her hips and chest. She had a sweet but piggish face and probably looked radically different without the stripy eyeliner.

Frank whistled for the lost dog. His silk blend shirt collapsed in the humidity, and his nose began to sweat. The sky was too big and active over the meadow, and he didn't like it one bit. The stars seemed to make the night feel even hotter, and some of them traveled—satellites, jet planes, and asteroids—perhaps to find better positions from which to take aim at him.

He'd never been at ease with nature, distracted by the potential hazards of diseased ticks or healthy bears, but among the threats that were possible Frank had not considered this particular danger: that a troubled loner, sleeping bad sleep, spooned with a shotgun in the weeds.

He caught the buckshot with his chest. A massive shock-boom bounced around the geography, echoing off ridges and mountains, making a barrage out of a single discharge. Frank fell, confused, clinging to an awareness that was a sequence of collapsing bridges. The weeds grew suddenly tall and shed chaff down into his open throat. The meadow overtook him, and he expelled his last liquid breath, only to discover that he was no longer capable of drawing air back in. That must have terrified him. Perhaps his final thought—if under these circumstances we still think at all—was meaningless, the name of the last thing on his list of things to do: a word captured in a gleaming bubble upon his lips: “Bella.”

