



# PHOBIA

A NOCTICADIA NOVELLA

KERI LAKE

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A NOCTICADIA BONUS NOVELLA

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Published by KERI LAKE

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Editing: Julie Belfield

**Warning:** This book contains explicit sexual content, and violent scenes that some readers may find disturbing.

## PLAYLIST

- *The Fragile* - Nine Inch Nails
- *Time Machine* - Coin
- *Hysteria* - Muse
- *Phobia* - Nothing But Thieves
- *Can You Hold Me* - NF, Britt Nicole
- *Hunter Eats Hunter* - Chevelle
- *I Would For You* - Nine Inch Nails
- *Needed Me* - Rihanna
- *Beautiful Pain* - Eminem, Sia

## AUTHOR'S NOTE & TRIGGERS

Dear Reader

Phobia is an 18,000 word novella set after the events in Nocticadia. The setting and tone of this short story is a complete departure from Nocticadia, and echoes my gritty contemporary books. I did not intend to write a second book for Caed and Bee, as Nocticadia was meant to remain a standalone, so please know before diving in that this will not be a full story. It's merely a glimpse of these two characters and nothing more.

A word of caution ...

This short story contains a number of potentially triggering situations, which include:

**Strong language**

**Murder (decapitation & stabbing)**

**Graphic violence**

**Obsession/obsessive thoughts**

**Stalking**

**Drugging**

**Mention of violent sexual assault (not on page)**

**Suicide/suicidal ideation**

**Hallucinations**  
**Torture**  
**Disembowelment**



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## CHAPTER ONE



ipples shimmer over the water's surface, as I stand alongside the edge of the indoor pool. A steady thud hammers inside my chest—the desperate plea of my heart, on the verge of breaking through.

*Tell her. Tell her you can't do this.*

**R** Just about every staff member at Bright Horizons knows my background at this point, so why they thought it'd be a savvy idea to have me do a rotation of swim class makes no sense.

*Go. Tell her now!* my head urges, but the prospect of having to withstand the wretched Ms. Balleo's scrutinizing stare keeps my mouth in check. I'd be forced to sit alongside the girls who refuse to wear tampons, whom Ms. Balleo refers to as being *difficult*, which would place me on the straight and narrow path to her shitlist for the rest of the semester. The woman was, apparently, some champion swimmer back in the day, and broke a bunch of records, but here, the only thing she's accomplished at is scaring the crap out of teenage girls.

At Bright Horizons, the teachers are supposed to be supportive of those who've suffered trauma. That's the nature of the place—to help us deal with the demons from our past.

Apparently, Ms. Balleo didn't get that memo. We'd have to bleed out in her precious pool, or damn near drown, to get a legitimate excusal. Doesn't



seem to matter that I haven't so much as toed a body of water in years.

Not since *that* night.

Distant echoes of screams interrupt my thoughts, and I wince as a dark memory slithers in from the fringes.

*"Bee."*

As the sound of my mother's whisper seeps through the distant noise, I glance around in search of its source. Gaze trailing over the pool, and my insufferable classmates, who scream and splash like toddlers at the other end of it, I search for her face. Those silvery eyes and pale skin. The crook in her spine that made her appear more monster than maternal. She's nowhere, though. No sign of her amongst the students over on the bench, or with the ones huddled by the locker room, giggling to themselves. Nor by where the dreaded Ms. Balleo, in her oversized T-shirt and bermuda shorts, glares at everyone.

*"Bumble Bee."*

On sharp breath, I screw my eyes shut, the denial of her presence smothered by another persistent whisper.

*"Don't ignore me."*

*You're not real*, my head battles back, as a nagging tendril of fear slithers up the back of my neck. *Not real.*

*"Look at the water."*

Eyelids tightly locked, I shake my head. *Don't do this. Please.*

For years, I've endured visions of my mother in her horribly mangled state. In them, she's pulling me underwater. Strangling me. I can hear the subtle distortion of her voice where something evil once commanded her tongue, can feel the way her nails dug into the bones of my arm that night.

Three deep breaths, and I open my eyes to find the ripples in the water have gone still. The surface has become a placid sheet of unsettling calm. On the fringes of my view, my classmates continue their playful splashing, but a disturbing silence settles over the room.

Until my mother speaks again.

*"My little bumble bee."*

Her voice, louder this time, draws my attention back to the glassy surface. Icy fear slides through my bones, my hands and legs compelling me toward the edge of the pool, where I peer into the water.

A bead of blood slices into silky ribbons as it disperses like ink. Curls of red expand outward, turning the water a deep crimson that obscures the bottom. While, before me, a deeper shade of red gathers, taking shape into a face that rises up out of the water. Not my mother's.

*His face.*

The ShadowMan.

A glossy red arm juts out and takes hold of my wrist, razor nails digging into my flesh and bone.

A burst of held breath shoots past my lips, before a scream echoes all around me.

The arm gives a sharp tug toward the water, and I fall to my knees, the gritty cement scraping over my skin.

“No! No!”

Water splashes up into my face the moment my hand smacks against the surface, and the pull of my wrist abruptly relents.

Scrambling back from the edge, I cradle my arm, breath sawing in and out of me. I stare at the clear water, where there's no sign of the bloody arm, or my mother. Nothing but my confused expression staring back at me.

I lift my gaze to find equally confused looks on the faces of my classmates, and notice the room has become eerily quiet, aside from the whispers of those undoubtedly speculating that I've completely lost my mind. Even in a school specifically meant for students like me, they still point and stare.

Standing a few feet away, brows pinched, Ms. Balleo frowns back at me, not a speck of sympathy in those soulless stern eyes. Meanwhile, every muscle in my body is going haywire, my limbs shaking like fragile branches in a hurricane of utter confusion.

“Miss Vespertine, perhaps you should go and have that arm checked by the nurse,” Ms. Balleo finally says, and I glance down to see rivulets of blood

trailing over my skin, from deep half crescents beneath my clawed fingers.

Humiliation burns hot across my cheeks, and I push to my feet, lowering my gaze to keep from having to look at my other classmates as I hustle toward the locker room.

Once safely out of view, I scamper toward the sinks and rinse away the blood where I'd gouged my own arm. Deep, biting grooves pass beneath my fingertips, and I wince. It's not that they hurt much, but the disturbing revelation that I'd inflicted them upon myself. Again.

Because it's not the first time I've seen ShadowMan.

The night my mother killed herself, I swear I saw him then—an obscure, shadowy figure whose face I couldn't make out. I hid from him under my bed, and in spite of my father's assurance that there was no other man in the apartment that night, I developed an almost debilitating fear of the faceless figure. The root of my nightmares.

My therapist tells me he's the personification of a tragedy that doesn't make sense. A boogeyman I apparently created in my head, because seeing my mom's wrists sliced open was, according to her, too much for a fourteen-year-old to process.

I processed everything just fine. And I know what I saw.

My mother trying to drown me that night wasn't enough it seems—because years later, I still see her rage-filled eyes and taste the burn of her malevolence on my tongue. And what frustrates me most is the helplessness of not being able to stop these visions once they begin. That, and everyone refusing to acknowledge the possibility that maybe something else ultimately stole her life.

Thing is, I remember every detail of that night, right up until I blacked out. The gurgling panic when the water seeped into my lungs, and the white-hot sting when it shot up into my nose on a choking cough—as vividly as if it just happened to me.

Yet, I cannot recall one single detail of ShadowMan's face.

I manage to clean the wound enough that only a small amount of blood trickles from two of the gouges. While I don't believe they warrant being

checked, I'm going to take Ms. Balleo's suggestion to visit the nurse, because I sure as hell don't want to return to that pool.

After donning a pair of shorts from my locker, I slip into my sneakers and head toward the office. Along the way, I spot my English Lit teacher, Mr. Caed, sitting alone at a table in the teacher's lounge and reading a book. Feathery wings flutter in my stomach, as I slow my pace and take in the muscles bulging through his shirt, the sharp angles of his jawline, the intensity on his face. They're features I can't help but study when he's giving lecture in class.

The man appeared out of nowhere a few weeks ago, sending nearly every student—myself included, unfortunately—into a ridiculous tizzy over his ruggedly handsome looks. Since then, he's been the reigning subject of every *Marry, Kill or Fuck* game played by the student body—most of them opting for the latter, in his case.

Although he mostly keeps to himself, he's the kind of frustratingly handsome teacher that the girls whisper about the moment he walks into the room. The type who makes it difficult to focus on the lesson because all a girl can think about is how freaking hot he'd look without those button-down shirts that cling for dear life to his sickeningly carved body. He could be reciting a grocery list, and we'd all sit enthralled by that deep, masculine voice of his.

He lowers his book and turns my way, and it's then I realize I've come to a complete stop in the hallway and am leering at him like a weirdo.

With a flare of mortification practically sizzling across my cheeks, I keep on down the hallway.

The usually quiet main office stands packed with staff and three police officers when I enter. As I pass Headmistress Gallagher's office, one of the officers eyes me up and down, a creepy smirk on his lips, and I feel an urge to touch the cyst at the corner of my eye. It's a congenital cyst my mom couldn't afford for me to have removed as a baby. Sure as hell can't afford it now. I don't often think of it, unless someone happens to stare too long, and I'm reminded of the glaring imperfection.

“We conduct full background checks on all of our staff,” Gallagher says from within the room. “The nature of our student body requires stricter credentials than the public schools.”

The comment stirs my curiosity, but where I come from, a nosey cat is a dead one, so I keep my head low and enter the infirmary.

Nurse Darla pushes up from her desk with a warm smile. “Hey, Honey Bee, how goes it?” She gestures toward one of the chairs.

“I ... scratched myself in class.” The words arrive in a jumbled mutter, as I plop down in the chair.

She tips her head. “Scratches?”

“Yeah. I swear.” When I first arrived at Bright Horizons, I was cutting multiple times a day, so her office is quite familiar to me. Though nowadays, it’s rare that I self-harm. I’ve learned to channel my emotions into painting, which actually earned me a spot in the city gallery last summer, for a piece of mine I titled *PHOBIA*. It was an abstract of bees trapped at the bottom of an enormous bathtub, while hundreds of knives floated on the surface. My art teacher, Ms. LaChance called it brilliant. For me? It was one less image locked away inside my head.

With gentle hands, Darla examines the wound, and her brows knit when she runs a finger over the moon shaped grooves. “Which class?”

“Gym. Happened by the pool,” I offer, knowing she’ll disapprove.

Sure enough, her face pinches to that indignant frown she wears when someone has deliberately ignored her recommendations. “Pool? What the hell were you doing at the pool? That should’ve been excused this semester.” Relief settles over me when she adds, “I’ll write a note.”

“Thanks. I don’t want to cause any trouble with Ms. Balleo, but—”

“But nothing. That woman is an absolute tyrant. You should’ve never gotten placed with her.”

In an effort to avoid chuckling at her remark, I glance over my shoulder, and catch sight of an officer passing by. “What’s going on with the police?”

She huffs and purses her lips, taping a piece of gauze over the wound. A waste, really. I’m just going to peel it off in an hour when the feel of

something taped there inevitably begins to drive me nuts. “Another girl was found,” she says, her voice lowered from before as she smooths the tape across my wrist.

I swallow a gulp, and a face flashes through my head—that of the last girl who made the news. Jemma Jenkins, the daughter of Governor Jenkins, went missing for a week before her body was found in the nearby woods. She’d been stabbed multiple times, most notably around her privates. The discovery shook the whole town, but a manhunt resulted in nothing.

Jemma attended the university, though, not Bright Horizons. If the police were here now, did that mean ...

“Was it a student from here this time?”

Lips pressed to a hard line, Darla shakes her head and settles back into her chair. “Sorry, kiddo, I can’t say anything more.”

“We’re just gonna find out on the news, anyway,” I counter.

“Probably better that way. They’ll spare the details.” Distress flickers across her face while she rubs her brow. “Some people are beyond help.”

It must’ve been bad, but I don’t push it. The woman is a vault when it comes to protecting privacy—a trait I actually appreciate.

Darla writes me a quick note, and when I exit her office without another question, I spy Mr. Caed through the window of Headmistress Gallagher’s office. In spite of the rumble of voices around him, muffled by the closed doors, he stares back at me as I pass, the radiant amber of his eyes damn near glowing with intensity. The sight of him stirs a mild thrumming in my muscles, and to my relief, he turns back to the officer standing over him. The smirky guy who, if I had to run a quick psychoanalysis on, probably has a major god complex.

Of all the teachers here, Mr. Caed is the last I’d care to challenge. I’ve personally witnessed the power of his witty insults, the way he can easily silence the cockiest clown in class. The man seems to have little patience for arrogance.

Spotting a classmate of mine, Eunice, who works in the office during her homeroom, I stroll up to the counter. Her father is Chief of Police, so if

anyone will have the scoop on the police presence in school, it's the little gossipmonger.

"Eunice," I whisper yell, as she stands organizing a stack of papers, and she turns to me with a clipped smile. "What's going on?" I silently mouth, jerking my head toward the office I just passed.

She loves that question. Loves the power of knowledge, which I'd ordinarily find annoying, but I'm too curious to care, now that Mr. Caed is involved.

Sucking in her bottom lip, she smiles, and after a quick glance around, she shuffles toward me. "Lyla Chambers was found dead this morning," she says in a hushed voice. The girl is in her glory right now. "Heard my daddy tell my mom she was dumped in the same stretch of woods as Jemma."

The last time I saw Lyla was three days before. She was leaving the dorm with a group of friends, as I was coming in from my last class for the day.

"Went to Cobe Street for that party everyone was going on about? Never. Came. Home." She even talks like a bona fide gossipmonger, with the weird inflection she adds for dramatic flair.

Ignoring that, I focus on the trove of information she's just spilled. Jemma was murdered after attending a party, as well. "Stabbed?"

Both lips curled into her mouth, she shakes her head. "It was bad." Another furtive glance, and she leans closer, her breath fanning across my ear. "She got *raped* by a knife. And decapitated."

A phantom shock of pain stabs my thighs before I force the visual of that from my head. How utterly terrifying. For Lyla's sake, I hope the latter came before the former. "They think it's the same guy?"

"Yeah. She had a red ribbon tied around her thigh, just like Jemma."

The red ribbon, as I've come to understand from reading, marked women as prostitutes centuries ago. No idea if it means the same to the monster who's hurting these girls.

"No head, though," she continues. "They can't find it."

Damn, this guy went from zero to sixty—a stabbing to a whole decapitation?



“Jesus.” I sail another glance toward Mr. Caed, my thoughts winding back to the day I went out scouring the campus in search of an epic reading spot, which came to an abrupt end when I spied him shirtless behind the Douglas Athletic building, chucking knives at a tree. I hid behind the brush, watching him like a true stalker as he wielded those blades with such unsettling precision, I couldn’t tell if I was enthralled, or horrified.

I’ve admittedly had a crush on the guy from the moment he arrived at the school, riding up on his sleek black motorcycle like a villainous knight in shining leather, but seeing him in the wild with all of those tattoos and muscles changed my brain chemistry.

Except, what if there’s some strange connection between him and both girls? The man is undeniably proficient with knives. Irresistibly attractive, with an edge of *back-the-fuck-off* that damn near every girl refuses to oblige. And, most importantly, he only showed up at the school in the last couple of months. Jemma’s body was only found about a month prior to that. Are the police here because they have some sort of evidence against him?

No way. As Ms. Gallagher said, she conducts thorough background checks. Staff aren’t allowed so much as a noise violation in their history, or they’re rejected like a hardened criminal. I heard she turned away a Yale-educated candidate prior to Mr. Caed because of a DUI on his record from college. Someone’d have to be pretty damn crafty to hide something from the woman.

My thoughts are severed when Eunice asks, “Hey, you wanna hang out this weekend?”

Thanks to her quirkiness and a small bit of narcissism, she doesn’t have many friends at Bright Horizons. Her overall personality has never really bothered me, but she would tragically clash with my friend, Marissa, who’s coming up for the weekend.

Once a month, we get to invite a friend to stay over, and I’ve been looking forward to seeing a familiar face from home, seeing as plans to visit my sister went down the toilet over Christmas break.

“I’ve got a friend coming up this weekend from home. We have some plans.” Good grief, can my voice be any drier?

The slight smile on her face fades, and she gives an abrupt shrug. “Well, anyway, I gotta get back to work.” Eunice shuffles back to the stack of papers she was sorting.

Without bothering to look at Mr. Caed again, I exit the office.

## CHAPTER TWO



When the beat-up sedan pulls into the semicircular drive, I can't help smiling on my hustle over to the driver's side. Before I can grab for the handle, Marissa jumps out of the vehicle and slams into me with an air-deflating bear hug. One that reminds me of home.

We've known each other since I was about four, went to preschool together, but when things went downhill with my mom, and I ended up here instead of high school back home, I was so scared we'd drift apart. Marissa's the only friend who's gone out of her way to keep in touch all these years. Probably my only real friend.

She finally releases me and opens the rear passenger door for a small duffle bag, which she hoists up onto her shoulder. "So, what happened? Thought you were supposed to be in Dracadia visiting your sister."

I take the lead up the concrete steps of my dorm and offer an unenthusiastic groan, as I hold the door open. "The baby happened. My dad's booty call finally squeezed out a demon child a week before I was due to hop the train, and Lilia decided to go back to Covington to help out."

Marissa chuckles, stepping past me into the foyer. "I take it you're not enthralled by *the baby*."

"I'm not fond of kids in general, but especially my father's man-whoring spawn." A passing student shoots me an unimpressed glance, but I keep on

with my venting. “Like, he couldn’t help himself, could he? *Callaghan?*” Our neighbor back at the apartment complex who made a point to flirt with my dad at every opportunity, even when my mom was still alive. “It’s like she was just waiting for my mom to die to rope him in and strap him with a kid.” I punch the button for the elevator, the anger brewing inside of me all over again.

“So, you went back to Covington instead of Lilia’s?” The elevator door opens, and I usher Marissa inside among the few students already in there.

“Hell, no. I want nothing to do with that kid. Lilia went back, for reasons I can’t even fathom, and I stayed here. I don’t know why the hell she’s so nice to him. He’s a loser. And he’s so ... *stupid*. We’re barely getting by, as it is. Why introduce another mouth to feed?”

The elevator comes to a stop at my floor, and after a short walk down the corridor, we reach my dorm room.

Eyes clenched, I shake my head. “I’m sorry. None of that this weekend, I promise.” I unlock the door, swinging it open to my room—a single I managed to score after my roommate dropped out last semester.

“Sokay. My world is kind of shit back at home, too. My dad started drinking again, so ... you know how that goes.” Marissa dumps her bag onto the floor beside my bed and plops down on my desk chair.

“That sucks. How long this time?” I swipe up my water bottle from the nightstand and lean against the wall beside an *Arctic Monkeys* poster pinned there.

With a roll of her eyes, she sighs. “He was sober for approximately two months, three days, and five hours. Believe me, I’ll take your family drama over being home any day of the week.”

“Sorry things are crap for you, too. But, hey, we’ve got a weekend with Harry, gummy bears, and popcorn. Doesn’t get any better than that, right?”

“Actually ...” She curls her bottom lip between her teeth and, from her coat pocket, pulls out a small black wallet. “I was thinking of something a little different.”

Shit. I don't like the wily smirk on her face. Marissa's got a history, after all. Harmless for the most part—mostly late-night rendezvous with boys from school, and she's run away a couple times—but I happen to know the girl has a wild streak. Far wilder than me. And in a place like Bright Horizons, where staff hawk your every move, this might be a disaster waiting to happen. "What do you mean? We always marathon this time of year."

"When we were kids. You're eighteen, Bee. You've not had one crazy night of fun since you moved up here."

I sneer and cross my arms. "I've had crazy nights of fun."

"Like what? Give me one example."

A few months back, one of the other Bright Horizons students scored a flask of whiskey from Mr. Jacob's desk drawer, and we snuck down in the basement to sip it. Correction: I refused. But I did watch the others take a sip, while stressing that we were going to get busted.

In my quiet contemplating, she removes what appears to be a driver's license and hands it off to me. "Congratulations. You're officially legal."

Staring down at the piece of plastic, I frown at the blonde in the picture. Mainly at her pale blue eyes and, most importantly, lack of cyst at the corner of her eyebrow that everyone seems to notice immediately. "You brought me a fake? She looks nothing like me."

"People dye their hair, Bee."

"I'm not talking about her hair, *Mar*. Like, her face is completely different. Her nose. Her eye color. Everything."

"Contacts exist, too. Look, I just thought we could go out and have some fun. Meet some hotties."

While I'd love to get away from this place for a night, there's no way I'm taking a chance with this abomination. "They're college bars. They're trained to look for this stuff."

"Then, we'll go somewhere the college kids don't hang out. I'm just trying to get you out of this place for a night."

Shaking my head, I catch a New Mexico address on the card and notice the bronze tint of the girl's skin. My pasty ass would never pass for her.