

Night is for Nightmares

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Smashwords Edition

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The Steel Box

Mark stopped the welding job for a moment to wipe sweat from his brow, and glanced out of the garage to where his flatbed truck was parked. He loved that truck. There was only one thing Mark loved more than his truck, and that was his twenty year old daughter, who was currently inside the house, studying for her college exams.

With his free hand he pulled the bottle of beer closer and finished it, then looked at the empty bottle in disgust and grunted. He stood up, walked over to the fridge he kept in the garage and fetched another beer. After draining half of the beer in one go he returned to his welding work.

The steel box he was constructing was a work of art. The top part, the part that could open, had several compartments for tools and loose spares for his truck. He was going to weld the box onto his truck, so he would always have those little parts and tools that he might need on the road.

Mark flipped the welding helmet down and once again bent to his work. In the garage, blue light danced and played as he drew the welding rod along the edge where two

sheets of metal connected, welding them together perfectly. He'd practiced welding for months before starting work on the box, because he wanted the box to be perfect.

Inside the house, the same house where his lovely daughter was studying for her exams, his bitch of a wife was probably lying in front of the television. He hated that. She could have done so much with her life, she could have been so much more, but no. After she had given him the daughter he loved so much, she had become nothing but a slob who spent her life in front of the television. He had spent the last twenty years of his life bringing in the money, money which she could not wait to get her hands on.

The flux curled off his welding job in a straight line, but even so Mark had to use the hammer to chip away more flux, but when he looked at the weld he was satisfied. It would last a lifetime, and it would be completely airtight and watertight. After brushing the weld clean he absentmindedly drank the rest of the beer, then stuck a new welding rod into the clamp and continued welding.

For twenty years, the complaining had never stopped. Every month-end was the same, there was never enough money. In her eyes all he ever did was drive his truck up and down the country, having a great time travelling, while she had to stay at home to look after their daughter.

Now though, the time his wife spent at home was going to come to an end. Thinking about it made Mark stop his work and fetch a fresh beer from the fridge. The steel box he was creating had two levels. In the top part he had made compartments for his tools, and the bottom part would hold the bed. It was a lovely bed, soft and covered with silk. After tonight, she would not be able to tell him that she did not want to join him on his rides, because she would have a bed to sleep in while they toured the country together.

Mark remembered the first few months of their marriage. It had been the most magical time of his life, when his young and beautiful wife Margery had travelled through the country with him. Everywhere he had gone, she had been in the truck with him, singing along with the radio and dreaming dreams of a long and happy life together. After a few

months though, Margery had grown tired of life on the road. At first she had stayed home for a few days at a time while he did the long haul to small towns. But the time she spent at home had quickly grown to weeks and then months, until she had stopped travelling with him altogether.

He shook his head. Thinking about those long-ago years was good, because it was what he yearned for, and it was what he was going to bring back with this box. But tonight he had a lot of work to do. The box was almost finished, but the real work would only start once the box was ready.

The beer was starting to have an effect on his craftsmanship, but tonight he needed the help of a few beers, to do what had to be done, to finish the job. He took another long pull from the bottle and touched the welding rod to his work again.

He'd chosen special thick steel plates to work with, because this box could never be allowed to come apart or to rust through. Margery was a complainer by nature, and he could imagine what she would say if the box he had made for her came apart at the seams.

Mark turned his thoughts from his wife to his daughter. Oh, the lovely Lisa. How it was that Lisa could still stay in the same house as her mother Mark could not understand, because it was obvious that Margery had grown to hate the daughter that Mark had grown to love. It was as if she hated the girl because it was another thing that her husband could feel bad about, another way in which she could annoy him.

Mark put down the clamp holding the welding rod and took off the welding mask, then finished the rest of the beer in the bottle. The job was almost done, the box was almost complete. He switched the welding machine off and walked over to the fridge to fetch another beer, but checked himself. He still had work to take care of, he could have a beer later. He walked out of the garage and headed towards the house.

He'd been right, of course. He found Margery sprawled in front of the television, watching one of the long list of soap operas she lived for. He was fascinated by how she could so utterly and completely live her life through the fake people on the television.

Sometimes he'd thought of telling her how she was wasting her life, but knew it would just result in another huge argument which she would ultimately win by spending the night in the spare room and ignoring him until he was back in his truck and away on yet another trip.

He stopped in the lounge. With their daughter in the house, there was a truce between his wife and him. Both of them knew that Lisa was the only reason that their marriage was still intact. And both of them knew that as soon as Lisa was finished with her studies in twelve months' time, their marriage would end. But Mark was determined to stop this from happening. He was going to make dead sure that Margery stayed with him.

'Would you like a glass of wine?' he asked.

'Here's my glass,' answered Margery, holding out the glass she'd been drinking from, just as he had known she would. Not a please or thank you, just the lazy way she had of getting through life with the least amount of effort.

He took the glass from her without a word and walked to the kitchen where he switched on the kettle, knowing that his daughter would not refuse a cup of coffee. While he waited for the kettle to boil he filled his wife's glass from the wine bottle that was standing on the table, noting that she'd already finished off most of the bottle. With a glance towards the kitchen door to make sure he was still alone he slipped the little bottle of sleeping pills out of his pocket and shook a few into his hand.

He'd been testing the pills on both his wife and his daughter for weeks now, checking to see how many of them he could add to their wine and coffee before they noticed something and complained that the drinks tasted strange. Lisa had been the easiest, he'd only ever wanted to give her a good night's sleep while he did a bit of work. His wife needed a bit more, but tonight she'd been drinking, she would not notice if anything was amiss.

He dropped three of the tablets into her wine, enough to put her to sleep for a good few hours, then swirled the wine around as the little blue tablets dissolved. When the wine

was ready he put two of the tablets in his daughter's coffee cup, feeling slightly guilty for doing so. But the pills would do no damage other than seeing that she got a good night's sleep.

He took the glass of wine through to the lounge and handed it to Margery, who accepted it with a grunt, as if she was doing him a favour and he should be grateful for it.

My pleasure, he thought as he returned to the kitchen, where the water was just coming to the boil. He finished making his daughter's coffee, then walked down the short passage to her room.

'Lisa sweetheart,' he said, knocking softly on her door. 'Daddy made you a cup of coffee.'

'Oh Daddy, thanks. I'm just finishing my studies, I could do with a cup. Are you still working?' she asked, opening the door and taking the cup from him.

'Yes honey, but only for a short while, then I'm going to have a bath.'

Mark fetched himself a beer from the kitchen fridge and headed out of the house, checking his wife's wine glass as he passed her. At the rate she was drinking she might not even have needed the little pills tonight. But still, he had to take every precaution.

Back in the garage he opened the beer and sat drinking in silence. It would take a few minutes for the pills to kick in, but he would give them lots of time, to make sure that nothing he did bothered them while they slept.

Some time later he saw the ghostly image of the television disappear from the lounge curtain and then the light was switched off. He drank the rest of his beer in silence as the night settled around him. In the garage the steel toolbox he'd made looked strangely surreal, out of place. He hoped he had remembered everything needed for the bed at the bottom of the steel box, but he'd gone over everything a dozen times. Margery had always liked a soft mattress, and a plump pillow. He'd chosen the sheets from the best he could find, because he had to get her the best of everything. From now on she would be

accompanying him on all his journeys, she would have to be comfortable in the bed he'd made for her.

He checked the beer he was drinking and sighed. Maybe he had overdone the Dutch courage thing a bit, but it was too late to stop now. He was way more drunk than he'd intended getting tonight, he could only hope that he would be able to finish the rest of the job with a steady hand. Around him the night grew cold, while outside in the yard his beloved truck stood waiting. Tomorrow morning, when the sun was just making an appearance, he would be in the truck, him and Margery, and the rest of their lives would start. But there was still a lot of work to get done.

Working quietly, he slipped the chains from a pulley system through the handles of the box and pulled the box up with the pulley system, until the box was hanging in the air high above the bed.

When he was done Mark walked a little unsteadily out of the garage, switching off the light as he left. Now everything was dark, in the moonless night he could barely see what he was doing. During the previous few weeks though, he'd practiced everything over and over until he knew exactly what needed to be done. He pulled the wheeled trolley from the side of the house. This was not the tool trolley that he used in the garage, but another one he'd built just for tonight. It was just a plain piece of planking with four wheels, designed to carry one rather heavy object.

With the trolley in tow he walked back to the house and heaved it through the back door. Then he stopped and listened, checking that the house was quiet. He left the trolley by the back door and walked to his daughter's room, where he stood still for a while, listening for any sound, but the house was deadly quiet. He walked back and fetched the trolley, pulling it behind him to where his wife lay passed out on the couch in the pitch black darkness of the house. Here he had to move one of the other chairs out of the way to get the trolley in front of the couch where his wife lay sleeping the peaceful sleep of somebody who had had a few too many, with some added pills.

He'd lived in this house for many years, even in the total darkness it didn't take him long to pull her from the couch onto the trolley, but there was a heart-stopping moment when she hit the wooden board with a bang. He stopped and waited to hear if Lisa would come out of her room to inspect what the noise was about, but the house kept its peace, the little pills in her coffee was keeping Lisa asleep.

Still working in the pitch dark Mark moved the trolley out of the house and back to the garage. Now he did not dare to switch on a light for fear of being seen by one of his neighbours. He would have to do everything clothed in dark night until he had his wife in her new bed below his tool box. It was not as easy as he had imagined it would be, but also not as difficult as he had feared it might be. The bigger problem was that he was rather drunk, and he kept stumbling over things in the dark.

Once inside his garage he stopped the trolley next to the bed he had created for his wife, the lovely bed in which she was going to sleep while they travelled the country. He stood still and looked down at her for a while, but in the darkness he could not see her. Then he bent down and tipped the trolley over. His sleeping wife landed on the bed, and a soft sigh escaped her in her sleep, as if she was happy to be sleeping there at last.

Next came the difficult bit. Still working in the dark he slowly lowered the box, using the pulley system in reverse, over the bed, until the bottom half of the box contained his wife. Only then, with his wife safely out of sight, could he at last switch on the light. In the once again brightly lit garage Mark looked at his work, and smiled.

He switched on the welding machine, slotted another fresh welding rod into the clamp and slipped his hands into the gloves, then dropped the welding helmet over his head. With a grunt he bent down, and started the job of welding the bed into the lower part of the box. Everything fitted together neatly, all he had to do was weld, and try to forget what exactly it was he was doing. It was almost too easy, and the knowledge that he would never hear her demanding voice again made him hum a little tune as he worked.

He wondered if Lisa would miss her mother. She would probably be very worried, but when the police found no body it would become clear that Margery had left of her own free will, leaving Mark and Lisa to get along with each other while she made a new life for herself.

Mark was halfway through the welding job when he heard his wife wake up. He hadn't really expected this to happen, but by now the box was welded tight, and the noises she made inside the box were minimal. He could faintly hear her muffled voice as he kept on welding, and soon even that grew quiet as the air inside the box gave out. Of course the bedding inside would get a bit scorched from the welding, but she would have run out of air long before that could become a problem for her. In the night, still humming a tune and now wishing that he would sober up so that he could work more efficiently, Mark finished welding the bed into the bottom half of the steel box.

When he was done he inspected his work carefully, making sure there were no holes in his artwork, then he put down the tools and switched off the welding machine. Almost done, he told himself as he once again started hauling on the chains, lifting the now complete box into the air. This time he used a big trolley, one he had built especially just for this job. Even so, once the toolbox was on the trolley it was difficult going, but at last he managed to pull the trolley out into the yard and pushed it towards his truck.

There was only one way of getting the heavy box onto the flatbed truck, but the practice of the previous weeks quickly came to the fore, and within minutes the ratchet system had pulled the new toolbox into place. Mark checked its position carefully and fetched the welding machine from the garage. He was now working outside, but as long as he kept the noise down his neighbours would not complain. And even if they did come around, Margery was now safely sleeping in her bed, she would be no trouble tonight.

It took him only twenty minutes to weld the box onto the flatbed truck, then the job was truly done.

Tomorrow morning, with the dawn of a bright new day, Margery and Mark would take on a bright new future, and a new life.

*

He'd slept later than he'd intended to, but he supposed it didn't matter. All that mattered was the long road ahead, and a wonderful new life waiting. After a quick shower Mark stopped in the kitchen long enough to make a flask of coffee for the road, then he headed out to his truck, whistling a happy tune as he swung himself up into the cab. Moments later the engine roared into life, and he punched the air. With a broad smile Mark took the truck onto the road and headed for the depot where he would pick up his first load of the week.

Behind him, on the flatbed, his new box was still mostly empty. Later, when he had more time, he would add some spares and some tools, but for now it held only his wife, sleeping serenely in her new bed. It was a great day. At last, after months of preparations, his wife was enjoying the open road with him once again.

Later in the morning, when the flatbed was loaded with crates and he was on the long road and well on his way to Phillips town, Mark pulled over at a truck rest stop. Normally he would drive for many hours before stopping, but this morning he wanted to spend a few minutes in the company of his wife. He pulled his sandwiches over and left the cabin, then climbed onto the flatbed and made himself comfortable on the steel box. He ate half of one sandwich before he spoke for the first time.

'What a beautiful morning it is!' he said with real enthusiasm in his voice.

The silence of the empty truck yard answered him, but that was what he liked best. Himself and his truck, and some good company. It had been too long a time riding alone, while his wife sat at home. Now they were together again, as it should have been all those years.

‘I’m really glad you are travelling with me again,’ he said, speaking to his sleeping wife. ‘It’s been far too long, you were growing old alone in that old house. It’s much better out here, out in the open, discovering new places.’

Another truck passed on the road outside the truck stop, roaring contentedly along the blacktop. The driver must have seen him sitting on his box, because he sounded the big truck’s horn in greeting. Mark lifted a hand and waved, but didn’t look at the truck.

‘See,’ he said. ‘The truckers are a friendly bunch. Don’t you remember how friendly they always were when we stopped at the roadside? We’re a family, us truckers, and you’re part of the family now, like you used to be.’

In the growing heat of the morning Mark finished eating his sandwiches, then stood up and patted the box.

‘Don’t you worry about a thing now, Margery. You’re safe in your bed, and nothing bad can happen to you now. I’m going to take you places, like I promised you when we first got married. I’m going to show you the whole country, and we’re going to have a wonderful time together.’

With this he jumped off the flatbed and climbed back into the cab. Minutes later he was back on the road, humming to himself as the wheels rolled him forward. He still had to finish the last part of the job, but he would just have to grit his teeth and get it over with. After that, life would be splendid.

It was after lunch when Mark pulled into a truck stop just outside Phillips town. He greeted the other truckers and ordered a hamburger from the counter, then sat and ate his food while the ceiling fan tried in vain to do something about the heat. When he’d finished eating he leaned back and pulled his phone from his pocket. First things first, he thought, and rang his wife’s number. He waited for the call to ring through to her voice mail, then left a message that she should call him back.

He contemplated calling Lisa to wish her luck with the exams, but decided against it, she would probably call him when she’d finished writing to let him know how things

had gone. Instead he left the restaurant and headed out on the road again, with Grassville ahead of him. He switched on the radio and sang along with a couple of his favourite songs, while the miles rolled by.

He reached Grassville just as the sun was setting, by now the beer of the previous night was starting to take its toll on him. He drove into Macy's truck stop where he always stayed over, then sat in the cab for a while before calling his wife's number. Once again he let it ring through to voicemail and left a message. She had never answered his calls anyway, and she had never, ever, returned any of his calls. But when the police checked the records, it would have to show that he had tried calling her.

After ringing off he called his daughter's number, but her phone rang through to voice mail too. He left a message for her to call him, then looked at the screen for a while. Can't be too careful, he decided, and called his neighbour's number.

'Hey Mark, what's up?' asked Jackson when he answered the phone.

'Jackson, I can't seem to reach my wife by phone. Won't you just pop around to my place and make sure everything's OK?'

'Sure, no problem Mark. I'll call you in a few minutes as soon as I've been over there,' answered Jackson and rang off.

By the time Mark had ordered supper from Macy's, Jackson was back on the phone.

'Nobody home, Mark,' he said.

'Mmmm,' answered Mark. 'My daughter not there either?'

'Doesn't look like it. You want me to check on them when they arrive?'

'No, don't bother yourself Jackson. I've left messages for both of them, they're sure to contact me. Thanks a lot man!'

'No problem Mark, see you around.'

Mark wasn't worried. Lisa had a hectic schedule at college, she was probably staying in for the night, studying for her exams. He finished eating and then went out to his truck to check that everything was locked up for the night.

*

It was early morning when he rolled out of the truck stop, a solid breakfast inside him. He drove for two hours until he reached the medium sized city of Border, knowing he could no longer put it off. After once again leaving a message on his wife's phone he called the number of the local police station near his home.

It didn't take long to explain to them that he had not been able to reach his wife and ask them to check up on her. When the operator had logged his call he left his truck and went to sit on the steel box again, this time with a flask of coffee.

'It's going to be a bit hectic, the next few days, and I might have to leave you alone for a day or two, Margery. Don't you worry though, you'll be safe in your bed, nobody will bother you there.'

He spoke quietly this time, because there were a few other truckers around in the yard where he had chosen to stop. It had to be a safe place, because he would have to leave his truck there so that he could go home to assist the police in trying to find his wife.

It wasn't long before his phone rang and the operator explained to him that they had gone to his house, but his wife had not been there. After speaking to the operator for a while Mark agreed to return home, just in case something bad had happened. In the meantime, the operator promised that they would check all the local hospitals in case Margery had landed herself up in one of them.

*

The yellow cab pulled up to the curb and Mark handed over a fistful of coins, opened the door and stepped out. He'd taken a plane home, leaving his truck with its new steel box miles away from the prying eyes of the police. There was a police vehicle parked in front of his house, the officer idly waiting for him in the afternoon sunlight.

'You Mister Mason?' he asked when Mark walked up to him.

'That's right. Have you found my wife yet?' he asked.

‘No Sir. But I understand she hasn’t been missing for too long. Mind if I have a look around the property?’

‘Of course not,’ said Mark and beckoned the man to follow him. ‘It’s just not like her to disappear for any amount of time. She usually stays right in front of the television.’

After unlocking the house Mark went ahead, showing the officer around the rooms. Nothing looked out of order, and for the first time Mark wondered if he should have gotten rid of some of Margery’s clothes, so that it might look as if she’d left him.

They had just returned to the kitchen and Mark was offering the policeman a cup of coffee when a car pulled into the driveway. They listened as the door slammed shut, then waited for whoever it was to come around to the front door.

Moments later, Margery walked into the house. She looked at Mark and the police officer in surprise, but didn’t seem too worried about seeing them there.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked. ‘I thought you were on a trip to Broadwalk?’

Mark looked at his wife, a deep pit opening in his stomach. How in the name of hell could she be standing in the house? He had put her in her bed, there was no way she could have gotten out of there. She was sleeping, sleeping on the back of his flatbed!

‘Is this your wife, Sir?’ he heard the policeman say.

‘Yes, it’s her,’ he answered, looking at Margery in shock. ‘Where have you been? I’ve been trying to call you for two days!’

He hoped the shock he felt was not being carried on his voice, because then the policeman was definitely going to suspect something was wrong.

‘I’ve been ill,’ said Margery. ‘That wine I drank the other night make me sick. I went to sleep in the spare bedroom to make sure you didn’t wake me when you came in from building whatever it was that you were building in the garage. I’ve been asleep for almost two days!’

Mark thought furiously, trying to work out what the hell was going on. At a complete loss of what to say, he decided to stall for time until he could figure out why his wife was not in the box where he had put her.

‘Where is Lisa?’ he asked, hoping that the policeman would find the conversation boring and leave. Right now, he wanted the house empty, so that he could get to his garage and have a beer while he thought things over.

When Margery spoke it was with the scornful voice she usually used when having to talk about his beloved daughter.

‘I don’t know. The last I saw of her was before I went to sleep two nights ago, when the wine made me ill. She came in here and said she wanted to watch a bit of telly.’ Margery jerked her thumb towards the couch on which she’d sat the night when she’d been drinking the wine.

‘She fell asleep almost immediately, so I turned the telly off and switched off the lights.’ Margery sniffed and tried to sound even more sarcastic than usual. ‘I don’t think she’s going to do too well at college if she sleeps in front of the telly instead of studying,’ she said, looking triumphant.

Mark looked at the couch, a depth of sickness opening up in his stomach.

‘Excuse me,’ was all he could say, then he left the house, hurrying out to his garage. Ten minutes later the policeman left, deciding that he could see a domestic row coming on and that they could sort it out for themselves.

In the garage, Mark opened and started drinking his second beer.

*

It was an old man who climbed onto the flatbed truck. He’d stopped next to the road, far away from anything, far away from anybody. He needed time alone, time to say what needed to be said. He didn’t know what needed to be said, but he did know that he needed to say something, anything. Once he’d made himself comfortable on the steel box he opened the can of cola he had in his hand and drank deeply before looking down.

A tear rolled down his cheek.

‘Lisa, I’m so sorry. Daddy is so sorry that this happened.’

He wiped at the tear on his cheek, but more followed.

‘But at least now, my sweetheart, the two of us will always be together, and your company will be so much better than your mother’s.’

He sat for a long time before he patted the box on which he sat, then got up to get going again, taking his sleeping daughter on a long, long journey.

Forest Ghost

After resting for a while Jonathan stood up from where he was sitting against the old oak tree in the moonlit forest and started walking along the path again. He’d barely started walking when two young ladies approached him from ahead. Jonathan was surprised, he had not been expecting to find people on the forest path at night.

‘Good evening,’ he greeted them, as a few clouds scurried across the moon and a soft wind blew through the trees, sounding mournful. On a cold night like this, he thought, ladies should not be walking alone in the forest.

‘Good evening,’ the girls greeted him.

‘What are you doing in the forest at this time of night?’ asked Jonathan, feeling this would be a good way to start a conversation.

‘We’re looking for the ghost. We are staying at our aunt’s house, and it is said the forest path has a ghost, so we are looking for him.’

‘Two ladies out looking for a ghost in the forest!’ said Jonathan, surprised. ‘Well, rather you than me, I wouldn’t like to meet a ghost on a night like this!’ With this he stepped aside to let the ladies pass.

‘Walk carefully,’ he cautioned.

‘You take care too, and beware the ghost!’ said the taller of the two girls, as they continued on their way, giggling together.

The night was still long, and he wanted to be in town by the time the sun rose, so he could surprise his mother with warm bread from the baker. In the dark night Jonathan tripped over the root of a tree and stumbled.

That was close or I would have fallen, he thought, sitting down against an old oak to rest.

After resting a while Jonathan stood up from where he was sitting against the old oak tree in the moonlit forest and started walking along the path again. He’d barely started walking when a man approached him, walking carefully in the moonlit night.

‘Good evening,’ said Jonathan, surprised to be meeting another person in the forest.

‘Ah, Sir, so good to meet another traveller in this lonely old forest!’ said the man, looking at Jonathan. ‘And where would you be going?’ he asked.

Jonathan smiled at the man’s good nature. ‘I am on my way to town, for I would like to surprise my mother with warm bread from the baker,’ he said. ‘And where might you be going?’ he asked.

‘I am not going anywhere,’ said the man. ‘I am simply walking the forest looking for the old ghost!’

‘Old ghost? There have been others looking for a ghost tonight, two ladies!’ said Jonathan. ‘Can’t say that I would like to meet a ghost. What does this ghost look like?’ he asked.

‘Ah, that I do not know,’ said the man. ‘But it is said that when you meet with this ghost, the wind will sing most mournfully through the forest.’

‘Sir,’ said Jonathan, ‘I have been walking this forest all night, and the wind has been singing mournfully all night. It is what the wind does!’

The man looked around him, turning up the collar of his jacket against the cold wind, which was indeed blowing mournfully through the trees. ‘Ah, yes, now I can hear and feel the wind too, and what a cold wind it is. But I must bid you farewell, and not keep you from your quest to visit your mother.’

Jonathan stepped aside so the man could pass. ‘Go well, I hope you find your ghost!’ he said, but the man merely glanced behind him as he passed Jonathan, and continued up the path.

In the dark night Jonathan tripped over the root of a tree and stumbled. *That was close or I would have fallen*, he thought, and sat down against an old oak to rest.

After resting a while Jonathan stood up from where he was sitting against the old oak tree in the moonlit forest and started walking along the path again. He’d barely started walking, now listening to the wind singing her mournful song in the trees, when yet another person came along the path. With the clouds passing in front of the moon, it took Jonathan a moment to notice that this man was a soldier, and he was as surprised to see Jonathan as Jonathan was to see him.

‘Good evening!’ Jonathan greeted him, not wanting to seem rude for staring at the man’s uniform so openly.

‘Good evening to you too, Sir,’ the soldier greeted him. ‘Haven’t happened to see any ghosts around, have you?’ he asked.

‘Not one single ghost, but strangely there have been quite a few people looking for the ghost tonight,’ replied Jonathan. He stood straight up, thinking that a soldier would probably not like him to slouch. ‘But I wonder, could you tell me how I will know if I meet this ghost, what does it look like?’

‘That Sir, I do not know. But I think he must be near, for the stories say that when the ghost is near, the wind will sing mournfully through the trees, and clouds will scurry across the moon!’

In the dark of the forest Jonathan and the soldier looked up at the moon, where silver clouds were indeed moving swiftly across the glowing lunar disk.

‘Sir, with all respect, the clouds have been passing the moon and the wind Sir, has been blowing through the trees all evening. I can attest to that, for I have been watching the clouds, and listening to the wind all night.’

The soldier gave Jonathan a look that was most unsettling, as if he thought that maybe Jonathan was not being truthful. He is a soldier, and I must rather show respect, thought Jonathan, standing aside that the man might pass on the forest path.

‘Good evening to you Sir,’ he said, and waited for the soldier to pass him.

‘Good evening to you too,’ said the soldier, but even in the moonlight Jonathan could see that he had a frown on his face when he said this. Jonathan watched the man continue up the path. When the man was a few feet away he turned to look at Jonathan, then turned around and hurried up the path. Jonathan, feeling unsettled, turned back and continued down the path.

In the dark night Jonathan tripped over the root of a tree and stumbled. *That was close or I would have fallen*, he thought, and sat down against an old oak to rest.

After resting a while Jonathan stood up from where he was sitting against the old oak tree in the moonlit forest and started walking along the path again. He’d barely started walking when he met an old crone on the path, walking with the aid of a stick. He was immediately worried for her, for what should an old woman be doing in the forest on a night like this?

‘My dear lady,’ he said, and the concern he felt was in his voice. ‘What might you be doing in the forest, surely you should be at home, in front of a warm fire!’

‘Now, now, young man, old I might be, but feeble I am not. I live not far off, and soon I will be in front of my fire. But I am out ghost hunting, for tonight is a good night to see the Forest Ghost!’

‘It must be a good night for that,’ said Jonathan, ‘for everybody is out and about looking for the ghost tonight. You say it is the Forest Ghost?’

‘Yes sir, the Forest Ghost he is called. I am an old lady, and soon I too will die and be nothing more than a spirit, so I thought maybe I should have a word with him, ask him how things are on the other side. You know, get a bit of information to make sure I am ready for it.’

This all sounded very strange to Jonathan, who had never really thought about the fact that he would pass away one day. Get ready for the afterlife? Well, the priests had always told him to, but he’d never taken their word literally.

‘Can you tell me what he looks like, this Forest Ghost?’ asked Jonathan, thinking that he too might want to see this ghost that everybody was looking for.

‘That I cannot tell you, young man, for I do not know. But there are signs that you must look out for, such as it suddenly becoming very cold,’ said the old woman, and hiked her shawls around her as if she was suddenly freezing. ‘And you must listen to the wind, and watch for the clouds scurrying in front of the moon, for that is how you will know if the ghost is near!’

‘But it has been icy all night,’ said Jonathan, folding his arms tightly around him to keep the cold out.

‘Yes, it is getting very cold now,’ said the old lady. ‘Let me get to my cottage, that I might get in front of the fire. I bid you a pleasant evening Sir, and beware should you meet the Forest Ghost!’

With this she made to start walking, and Jonathan stepped off the path that she may pass and go on her way.

What a strange night, he thought as he continued down the path.

In the dark night Jonathan tripped over the root of a tree and stumbled. *That was close or I would have fallen*, he thought, and sat down against an old oak to rest.

After resting a while Jonathan stood up from where he was sitting against the old oak tree in the moonlit forest and started walking along the path again. He'd barely started walking when a priest came along the path, and stood in front of him.

Now Jonathan was no longer surprised. The world was out ghost hunting all right, and if they kept on keeping him up he would never get to town on time to buy his mother warm fresh bread from the bakery. But he would have to make time to talk to the priest, for not to do so would be extremely rude.

'Good evening, Father,' he said, bowing slightly.

'Good evening, Sir. I trust I find you well?' said the priest.

'Oh yes, very well. And you Father, how are you?'

'I too am doing well,' said the priest, glancing up to where more clouds were moving across the face of the moon.

'Out looking for a ghost, are you?' said Jonathan before he could help himself, but it had been a long night and a lot of people were out looking for a ghost.

'Yes, as a matter of fact I am,' said the clergyman, cocking his head as if he was listening intently to the wind blowing through the trees.

'Listening to the wind and checking the clouds, I see, Father,' said Jonathan, hoping he wasn't sounding too impertinent.

'Yes, yes that kind of thing,' said the priest, now scratching his chin and looking at Jonathan carefully. 'And I do believe I have found the Forest Ghost!'

Surprised, Jonathan looked around to see where the ghost was, but could see nothing around him.

'Where Sir? I see no ghost!'

'You don't see him Sir, because you look around you. To see the ghost, you must not look around yourself, but at yourself!'

'Nonsense!' said Jonathan, feeling exasperated with the man's words, but looking at himself nonetheless.

The priest waved a hand through the air around him. 'Feel how cold it is? See how the clouds scurry across the face of the moon, hear how mournfully the wind blows through the trees? I bet you've been hearing that all night!'

At this Jonathan stopped and thought carefully. Yes, he had been seeing the signs all night. But that was nonsense, they were not signs, it was only things that a person could expect to see along the path in the forest.

'Is your name Jonathan?' the priest asked, and now his voice was kindly.

'Yes, Father, that is my name, but how did you know?'

'Jonathan, one hundred years ago, on a night just like tonight, a young man was walking along this very path when he stumbled over a tree root that grew over the path. His body was found the next morning, and legend has it that his ghost has been haunting the forest path since then. This young man's name was Jonathan, and I do believe that is you!'

'But, but that cannot be!' cried Jonathan. 'I would have known if I was dead!'

'Would you?' asked the priest, giving him another careful look. 'Jonathan, the legend says that the ghost will only leave this forest once he knows that he is dead, then another will take his place. Now, I do not know who will become the ghost after you, but I implore you, turn around and go the other way, for the way that you are walking goes nowhere. Turn around, go to the next life, and leave this forest in peace!'

'And if I don't, what will you do?' asked Jonathan.

'There is nothing I can do, but if you do turn around and walk the other way, you will soon know if I speak the truth or not, for you will stop walking this path, and you will go on to the next life.'

Jonathan was about to refuse the priest's request when a thought occurred to him. He had indeed fallen over a tree root tonight! And again, and again he could remember falling over the tree root. Suddenly, the truth was clear to him. All those people, all of them walking along the path, looking for him, Jonathan!

‘I am dead, I am a ghost!’ he said in a weak voice. Fear gripped him. He had to get out of there, had to get out of the forest. Without saying another word he turned from the priest and fled, fled back the way he had come, fled out of the forest.

*

On the forest path, the priest chuckled to himself. He had heard so many stories of the Forest Ghost, and now he had sent the ghost off to where the dead belonged. Now, this path would be haunted no more, for there would be no ghost to take poor Jonathan’s place. Still, it was strange how the clouds scurried across the moon and the wind howled through the trees. The priest pulled his jacket tighter around him to keep the chill off, and continued on his way.

In the dark night the priest tripped over the root of a tree and stumbled. *That was close or I would have fallen*, he thought, sitting down against an old oak to rest.

After resting a while the priest stood up from where he was sitting against the old oak tree in the moonlit forest and started walking along the forest path again...

A Warm Welcome

Amy came around the corner of the house just as the big man in the red T-shirt was about to get back into his car.

‘Wait!’ she called.

The big man looked up, saw Amy and grunted. It was not a friendly grunt.

‘Hey Mister, wait up. Sorry, I was busy cleaning out the house, I didn’t hear the bell go!’ said Amy, hurrying to the gate.

The man outside the gate was big, very big. His extra-large T-shirt stretched tight across his chest, and even his jeans were tight around his upper legs, which were probably the thickest Amy had seen in her life. His head had been recently shaven, and reflected the bright afternoon sunshine like a mirror. Here was a man who had the word trouble written across his face, down to the tattoos on his bodybuilder arms and the scar on his bicep.

Around his neck hung a thick gold chain, another one was stretched tight across the thickest wrist Amy had ever seen.

‘What can I help you with?’

‘I’m looking for Peter Cook,’ said the man in a threatening voice, taking two steps towards the gate. The gravel crunching under his feet sounded as if a tipper truck was riding over it.

‘I’m Amy Anderson. Peter Cook is my landlord, but I’m afraid he’s not here at the moment,’ said Amy, taking the keys to the gate out of her pocket and dangling them from her fingers. The big man looked at the keys and then at the lock on the gate, a frown on his face.

‘Gmf,’ he grunted angrily, looking back at Amy. ‘My name’s Smasher Hoskins. I’m looking for Peter Cook in connection with some unpaid debt, a certain amount is still owed on a vehicle he purchased from my boss.’ He stood with his hands on his hips, the expression on his face looked like dark thunder.

Amy smiled. In build, Amy was the exact opposite of the big man. Her petite form was definitely not skinny, but there was not a spare ounce to her body. The skirt she wore had been chosen with the purpose of showing off her shapely legs, and from the hungry look on the face of Smasher Hoskins she knew she was getting her money’s worth. She could feel the big man’s eyes on her, searching. She gave him her brightest smile, showing off her full set of perfect teeth to their greatest. To make sure he got the full effect she shook her head, letting her long black hair ripple in the sunshine.

‘Why don’t you come on in, and I’ll try to get hold of him?’ asked Amy, reaching up and inserting the key into the lock. The gate swung open, and Amy stood back so that the man could enter.

Smasher looked at the open gate in disbelief. He knew what people thought of him when they set eyes on him and he told them his name, and they were not welcoming thoughts. They were usually more along the line of ‘Press the panic button and get the

security firm here *Right Now!*' For a pretty lady like her to open the gate and invite him in was something new in his books.

'I've got his name and number in the house,' said Amy, locking the gate behind him and leading the way to the house. 'I've tried to call him this morning, but he wasn't answering his phone.'

'You been living in the area for long?' asked Smasher, glancing sideways at her.

'No, only about a year, so I don't know the neighbours too well yet. Is Mr. Cook in trouble?' she asked, climbing the steps to the front door of a cottage that stood to one side of the main residence.

'You could say so, he's a few instalments behind on a vehicle he bought from my boss, and the boss is really angry about it,' said Smasher.

'Come through here, I was just going to pour myself a glass of wine,' said Amy, walking into the kitchen and pulling a bottle of red wine from the rack next to the stove. An aroma of stew drifted through the kitchen, catching his nose and making his mouth water. She took two glasses from the cupboard and started opening the bottle. She did it expertly, and Smasher could see a history of being a waitress behind her. Moments later he stood with a glass of wine in his hand, feeling more and more amazed at the pretty girl who had welcomed him into her home.

Amy lifted her glass to toast, and said 'Well, here's to good wine and good food!'

The big man also lifted his glass, and drank the toast Amy had proposed.

'I hope you don't mind me asking,' said Amy, 'But Smasher is a funny kind of name. Is that what all your friends call you?'

'Oh yeah, it's what everybody calls me,' said Smasher, leaning back against the counter and taking a long drink from his glass. 'What's that smell, it's delicious!'

The smell coming from the pot was indeed good. It suggested browned onion and spices, herbs and the most tender cut of meat that had been cooked to perfection.

‘Ah, that would be supper,’ said Amy, taking the ladle and lifting the lid off the pot. She gave it a stir, and sniffed deeply as the aroma drifted in thick clouds out of the stew.

Smasher looked at the girl in complete wonder. He didn’t have bad intentions towards her, he would never think of laying a hand against a woman, but this pretty girl had welcomed him into her home without his asking, and now she had given him a glass of wine to drink, and she really did have the most welcoming smile he had seen in his life. He felt uncomfortable. It wasn’t that he didn’t know how to behave in the company of women, it was just that they were usually very cautious of him, not at all as welcoming as she was.

‘Let me top you up,’ she said, replacing the pot’s lid and picking up the bottle of wine again.

He was surprised to see that his glass was already empty. Smasher held out his glass and watched in amazement as Amy refilled it, right up to the brim. He’d perhaps drunk the first glass rather too quickly, and already he could feel the warmth of the wine spreading through his head.

‘Smells like you know how to do a good plate of food,’ he said, hoping to sound complementing without making it sound as if he was expecting to be invited for supper.

‘It’s all in the cut of the meat,’ said Amy. ‘I used to work for a butcher, and found out that you have to cut the meat just right to release the flavours. Cut it away from the tendon, so that the tendon does not keep the flavour in. Take off all the sinewy skins that surround the muscle, and then make a couple of strategic cuts into the meat so that the juice can come out and mingle with the rest of the stuff in the pot. Then add just the right amount of herbs and spices, cook to perfection, and you have a great meal. But always remember, it’s all in the cut of the meat.’

‘Sounds like you know your stuff,’ said Smasher, impressed with the pretty girl, and wondering if he was falling in love. He looked around the kitchen, noticing the cookbooks neatly stacked on a tray. The biggest chopping block he had seen in his life all but covered

one of the counters, and the gas hob on the other side looked like a work of art. Here was a kitchen that said 'Use me', and welcomed people to try their hands at new recipes every day. A big window let in lots of light, and on the windowsill a collection of plants grew in little pots painted with the picture of each plant. There was a bit of parsley, some blood-red chillies and some other greenery that Smasher was unfamiliar with.

Smasher was not a sophisticated person. If he had been, he would have spent less time in the gym, and even less time running around looking for people who owed his boss money. He looked at his glass, surprised that it was empty again. Tomorrow, he thought, maybe he should also learn to do something like cooking, just to add a bit of flavour to his life. It was strange what good wine and a pretty girl was doing to his head.

'I would love to be able to make a meal like that,' he said, as Amy refilled his glass again.

'I'm sure you can!' said Amy with laughter in her voice, reaching up to the wine rack and carefully selecting another bottle. 'With a bit of help from me, you could make many meals like that!' Her voice had a merry ring to it, she believed every word she said, and was going to prove it to him.

Smasher grinned at the pretty girl. He knew he should be leaving, but as long as Amy was going to refill his glass, the chances of that happening were not good. Already all thoughts of the job the boss had sent him to do was draining from his head, replaced by the cotton-wool fog of alcohol.

Back at the stove Amy lifted the lid off another pot and peered inside. 'Perfect,' she said, as the fragrant smell of basmati rice mixed with the smell of the stew. 'Let's eat!'

Without waiting for a reply from Smasher she took two plates from the cupboard and placed them on the counter, then selected a ladle from the drawer and started dishing up. Smasher watched in fascination as the pretty girl first placed a generous helping of rice on each plate, then ladled stew onto the rice. Thick gravy soaked into the rice, and the smell was almost overpowering, inviting Smasher to forget about his life for a few hours,

and become one with the smell instead. As a last touch Amy reached over to the windowsill and plucked a few leaves from one of the pots, placing each leaf separately and with care on the plates.

‘Dinner is served,’ she said, handing a plate to Smasher. ‘Grab yourself a knife and fork, and let’s go through to the dining room!’

She led the way through to the dining room, which was just off the kitchen, and in stark contrast to what the kitchen was. Here a huge mahogany table dominated the landscape, and there was no other furniture. The table itself was empty, the thick drapes in front of the windows had been drawn.

‘Have a seat,’ said Amy. ‘I’ll be right back, just going to fetch us another bottle of the good stuff!’

With that she quickly turned around, leaving Smasher to sit down at the table.

Smasher felt uncomfortable, but drunkenly so, so it probably didn’t matter. He waited for her to return, knowing it would be regarded as bad manners to start eating before his hostess arrived. He didn’t have to wait long, Amy returned almost immediately with a full bottle of wine which she was already uncorking even as she entered the dining room.

His glass was empty again. Smasher did not know how it had happened, but now he was really drunk and the wine was flowing like he’d never known before. In his wildest dreams he had not thought that something like this might happen to him.

‘Enjoy!’ said Amy, pointing to the food and laughing. She refilled the big man’s glass and took up her knife and fork, and got stuck into the plate of food.

It was a good plate of food, even if she had to say so herself. She’d bought the vegetables fresh from the market just that morning, and the meat, well the meat was the last of what she had had left in the chest freezer. It didn’t matter though, tomorrow morning she would restock the chest freezer to the brim.

The big man was eating with relish, a faint film of sweat forming on the shining dome of his head in the sheer effort of enjoyment. He was also drinking like no man Amy had seen drink before, and already his speech was becoming slurred. But that didn't matter, what mattered was that Amy liked to entertain her guests with good food and good wine, and this man, although only a hired muscle, was enjoying his meal like few others before him had done. Amy smiled, to see the man eat was a complement to her cooking abilities.

'Tonight, I think I must get to know you intimately, from the inside out, and tomorrow I think you must make a roast,' said Amy, looking at the big man with an affectionate smile on her face.

Smasher looked at her in shock, but really liked the thought of her getting to know him intimately. 'A roast?' he asked between mouthfuls. 'I've never cooked a meal in my life, you'll have to show me how to do it.'

'Don't you worry about a thing,' said Amy, 'It will be the first meal you've made in your life, but not the last!'

She looked down at her plate, which was already empty. As a rule she didn't eat too much. What would have surprised Smasher, if he had cared to notice it, was that the glass of wine in front of Amy was still the first glass of wine she had poured for herself, and it was still only half empty. All the other wine had been drunk by Smasher himself, which would explain why the big man was currently starting to see double.

'Excuse me just a second, I need to check on the dessert,' said Amy, pushing back her chair and getting up from the table. Across from her Smasher nodded his head in good nature, smiling with his mouth still chewing.

Amy walked through to the kitchen, but then turned sharply and entered the house through the lounge, walked to her study and returned to the dining room moments later. She hated the mess this always made, but the freezer was empty and wasn't going to refill itself.

Entering the dining room from behind Smasher, she lifted the silenced pistol and pulled the trigger, watching with enjoyment as a little hole opened up in the back of his gleaming white head. In front of him a stream of blood sprayed over the table. Smasher sat still for a moment longer before he slumped forward, falling into the plate of food he had so recently enjoyed and spilling the glass of wine over the table.

Behind him Amy sighed at the sight of good wine going to waste. She placed her left hand on the dead man's shoulder and leaned over him to put the pistol down on the table.

His arrival had been lucky, it could have been the police. She thought of Peter Cook, whom Smasher had come searching for. If the debt collectors were already looking for him, it would not be long before the police came knocking at the door, asking all those silly questions that so annoyed her.

She lifted Smasher's head and removed the plate that contained the last bit of Peter Cook from under him, then dropped Smasher's head back to the table with a thud. It was going to be a long night, but by tomorrow morning the place would have to be shining again, and the deepfreeze full. Except for the roast, of course, because she had promised Smasher he would make a great roast tomorrow. She really couldn't let the good man down.

Then she would call the moving company to fetch her stuff.

She took the plate with the last scraps through to the kitchen and returned moments later with a long cleaver, ready to begin the night's work. It was time to get to know Smasher intimately, from the inside out.

Weird Wolves

'Morning everybody,' said Olga brightly, walking into the sunny breakfast room. She took her place at the table and poured herself a glass of orange juice.

To describe the twenty year old Olga Baum would be to describe a wolf in human form. Her thick brown hair was almost the same walnut colour as her eyes, but already it

was streaked with silver. When she smiled her teeth were perhaps just a bit too long, a bit too pointy, matching her nails, which she had coloured a bright red for the occasion. This morning she was wearing a short leather skirt that could only be described as medieval, and her knee-length leather boots gleamed with polish. Her dark make-up took the medieval look further.

Her father looked at her over his breakfast plate and muttered ‘Good morning’ in a way that said he rather wished it was going to be, but that he had serious reservations about it.

‘Morning dear,’ said her mother, looking at her father with just a hint of disapproval. She knew why Heinrich felt so grumpy, but there was nothing that could be done about the situation. The preparations had been made, the guests had been invited and the party was going to go ahead.

‘Morning Sis,’ said Hans and winked at her from across the table. Today was going to be her big day. It had taken Olga more than a year to organise the gathering that was going to take place today. Hans had helped, of course, but it could not be denied that the party was all down to Olga’s organizational skills. And her dark sense of humour.

Their parents had thoroughly disapproved of the idea right from the start, but Olga had a will they could bend steel around, and once she had set her mind on something, there was nothing in the world that could stop her.

‘Come on Daddy, stop being so grumpy!’ said Olga, giving her father a bright, toothy smile. ‘It’s going to be fine, it’s all just a bit of fun!’

A servant entered the breakfast room and placed a plate in front of her. Olga looked at the thick strips of raw steak on the plate and sniffed deeply. The wolf inside her wanted to dig right in, to lower her face to the plate and eat as fast as she could, but of course her mother and father so disliked that kind of behaviour, and the bloodstains never came out of the tablecloth.

Forcing herself to use self-control she picked up the knife and fork and started eating like the well-mannered daughter her parents so wished her to be. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her father give a faint nod of approval at her self-control, but she ignored him. She was only doing it to keep her father happy, because she knew he hated the idea of what would happen later during the day.

‘Lots to do today!’ said Hans brightly, trying to lighten the atmosphere.

‘Are all the guests’ bedrooms ready, dear?’ asked his mother.

‘Yes, the servants have done an excellent job,’ answered Hans. ‘The guests that could not be accommodated in the house have been put in the cottages, and a few preferred to book into the Royal in town.’

‘You let werewolves book into the hotel?’ asked his father, now thoroughly alarmed.

Hans shrugged. ‘They’re people dad, they have lives like everybody else, I’m sure they are quite used to staying in hotels and know perfectly well how to keep out of trouble.’

Heinrich rather doubted it, but kept quiet. If the fools had booked themselves into the hotel it had nothing to do with him, he had not made the arrangements. He angrily dragged a piece of bread through the blood on his plate, soaking up as much of it as he could, then stuffed the bread into his mouth with rather less self-control than his daughter had shown. When he’d swallowed the bread without chewing he pushed back his chair and stood up.

‘I’ll be in my study,’ he growled in a voice that suggested he did not want to be disturbed, and stalked out of the breakfast room.

‘He really does not think this is a good idea,’ said Hans, sighing and rolling his eyes at his sister.

‘He worries too much,’ said Olga calmly, dabbing a dribble of blood from her chin with a crispy white napkin.

‘He just doesn’t want any trouble,’ said her mother.

In his study, Heinrich sat in his easy chair with the big volume open on his lap, the volume containing the blood lines of all the werewolves since the original curse had been cast three hundred years ago. It was this damn book that had caused his daughter to come up with the idea of getting everybody together, so that all the werewolves could once again be a pack. He'd tried to explain the problem to her, of true blood and mixed blood, but she'd simply ignored him and followed her own head. And now there was going to be trouble, he knew it.

People today, Heinrich sat thinking, just had no idea about werewolves. They rented a movie from the DVD rental shop, or they saw a series on television, and what they saw was what they believed. It was all full-moon and fangs and gruesome killings, and it all ended with a silver bullet shot by the unlikely hero.

These were modern times, but somehow humans had never let their imaginations, or the truth, for that matter, catch up. When it came to werewolves, they were still living in the sixteenth century, when the werewolf had to be killed by a silver-tipped arrow shot from a crossbow.

Heinrich sighed as he looked down at the big volume he had been paging through. Back then, back in the sixteenth century, at the time when this book had only just begun to be written, werewolves had been true blood creatures, fresh from the curse that had created them. Each one had been a noble beast, strong and sleek and proud.

Three hundred years had been a long time. And despite their bloodthirsty reputation, the truth was that werewolves were, for all but three days of the month, human beings. Well, almost human. But they had thoughts, and feelings, and instead of there being an Alpha male and female, there were family units in which everybody were allowed to mate.

That, Heinrich mused, was where all the trouble had started.

In their human form, the werewolves of old had fallen prey to human shortcomings. Well, not shortcomings really, just generally being human. There had been

love with other humans. Marriages that should never have happened had been tolerated. And when they had not been tolerated, the couple had simply disappeared together, to make a life for themselves in another village, or another country.

It must have come as a nasty surprise to some of the young men and woman to find that the lover they had chosen was not quite what they had appeared at first sight. Probably a few had never found out until the pups had been born. . .

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The old mansion had been in the family for generations. It stood at the top of a hill, overlooking the moors to the south. Ivy clung to the walls and crawled in under the eaves, and in front of it sprawled immaculate lawns. Inside its walls twenty five guest bedrooms awaited the arrival of the guests, and the kitchens and sculleries bustled as it had not done for many years.

Servants were placing tables and chairs on the wide veranda, where the guests would be entertained for most of the day. From the gardens the smell of roses drifted in the air, mingling with the scent of pine from the forest that stood to the west.

A perfect setting, Olga thought, standing on the veranda and watching the final preparations being made. Next to her stood Morissa, head of the servants.

‘Now remember Morissa, when the sun sets tonight, I want all the servants to be either away from the property or securely locked up in their quarters, understand?’

‘Yes Miss,’ answered the head servant. ‘I’ve explained what tonight is about to all the servants, and besides, they know it is full moon, they will not be out tonight.’

‘Good,’ said Olga. ‘I don’t want a repeat of that incident when that stupid boy Oliver wanted to see what a werewolf looked like and uncle Horst got hold of him. Now, has all the food been prepared?’

‘Cook is busy with the final preparations, but everything will be ready. We will serve dinner just before sunset, but we will only clear the tables tomorrow morning.’

Hans ran up the steps from the lawns where he'd been checking preparations in the gardens. 'Using ornamental water features as a place where they can have a drink later tonight was a nice touch,' he said.

Hans wasn't a big man, but he was built athletically. When he smiled he displayed a perfect set of teeth, right up to the pointy tips of the canines that most people who did not know his background found disconcertingly long. His eyes were the dark brown of most of his kind, and even this early in the morning his stubbly beard was starting to show. His thick brown hair hung loose over his shoulders, reminding those who saw him of the mane of a wild animal. A wolf, most thought.

'Thank you, Hans. I will never forget the night we visited cousin Hubert and he put out dog-bowls, actual bloody dog-bowls, for us to drink out of. What an insult! I hope he thinks long and hard about why he didn't crack an invite to this party.'

Hans laughed. 'I've got to check that the sherry is ready, the first guests should be arriving any moment now. You might want to make sure that daddy remembers to come out of his study to greet the guests, some of them are family, after all.'

'I think I'll give mother that job!' said Olga with an evil grin. 'He's not too fond of me right now. While you're inside, please check that all the silverware has been put away, it would be so unpleasant if any of our guests should burn themselves.'

'Good point,' said Hans, and headed into the house, where things were starting to quiet down before the arrival of the guests. The rooms had been checked, the house was spotlessly clean and now the servants could catch a quick rest outside the kitchen in the sunny quart-yard until the first guests arrived. Of the silverware his sister had spoken of there was nothing to be seen, Morissa had done a good job of preparing the house.

In the large marble-floored foyer a table had been decked with bouquets of flowers surrounded by sherry glasses. A white-gloved butler called Robert was making a few final preparations, picking minute specks of dust from the tablecloth and making sure there were no fingerprints on the crystal glasses and finely cut decanters.

From outside came the low purr of a motor and the crunch of tyres on the gravel driveway. Hans stepped outside just as a sleek black Bentley pulled into the closest parking bay. Moments later the car door slammed as the first guest turned towards Hans.

There was no mistaking the figure of General Harms, Hans's favourite uncle.

*

'Hans you old fox, how are you?' he said in his loud booming voice as he climbed the stairs to the front door.

'I am great, Uncle, how are you?' asked Hans, shaking his uncle by the hand.

'Doing fine, lad, doing fine.' He dropped his voice. 'Between us, your father did not sound very happy about this whole party idea, but I think it's excellent!' he said in a loud whisper.

'I'm sure it's going to be a great party,' agreed Hans as a servant appeared behind him, no doubt ordered there by the butler. 'But hand your case to young Clarence here and head on in, mother will be delighted to see you.'

'Thank you Hans, I will chat to you later, I see more of your guests are arriving, You're going to be a busy lad for a while.' With a heavy handed pat to the shoulder he left Hans standing on the front porch, looking on as a small Toyota pulled into the yard.

When the invitations had gone out, there had been no consideration of class or creed. They had simply contacted as many of the old families as they could, and found out who would be interested in joining the party. Tonight it might well be rich sitting next to rags, bound in history by the ancient curse of the werewolf.

The lady that alighted from the Toyota was neatly dressed in a blue skirt and matching shirt, and immediately Hans saw the first signs of what would make tonight's party unique. Her hair was blond, not the brown that most true-blood werewolves had. By the time she had opened the boot of her car a servant was on hand to help her with her luggage, and moments later she had climbed the steps and he could see her eyes. Blue eyes, as blue as the sky above, looked at him from behind a neat pair of spectacles.

‘You must be Hans, I am Margaret Willow,’ she said, handing him the blue invitation card that Olga had sent to all the guests.

‘Welcome to our home, Margaret,’ said Hans, smiling his most welcoming smile. ‘I hope you had a good journey here?’

‘No problems whatsoever,’ she said, smiling back at him. ‘Thank you so much for the invitation. It really is not often that I get to mingle with people who have the same condition as I have.’

From behind Hans his mother emerged through the front door and introduced herself to Margaret Willow, while Hans turned to face the arrival of the next person. His mother had barely taken Margaret inside when the young man was standing in front of him, holding out the invitation card bearing the Baum family crest. Hans made a quick assessment of the man’s features. He had almost black hair, with light-brown eyes. Not a true werewolf then, Hans thought, although the man did display the overlarge canines when he smiled broadly. Hans welcomed him and smoothly handed him over to the next servant waiting in line to take his luggage.

Hans noted that Robert had moved in behind him. Officially, it was Robert’s job to welcome the guests, but for now Hans stood at his post, his curiosity about the appearance of the guests keeping him there.

The first couple to arrive was almost certainly purebred werewolves, they had the shaggy brown hair streaked with silver and the brown eyes of the classic werewolf in human shape. After them came an elderly lady with hair so red that Hans immediately guessed it must have been coloured, no woman of her age would have a head of hair so devoid of grey, especially not a werewolf.

A beaten up old Volkswagen beetle coughed and spluttered its way into the yard, followed closely by the lowest Ferrari Hans had seen in his life, purring in a voice that suggested it could growl at the merest touch of a pedal. When the owners of the cars got out though, all difference in class was forgotten in a moment. They were not here to show

how rich or poor they were, they were here to make new friends, to meet people who had the same affliction as they had.

As the guests were shown to their rooms in ones and twos, Hans could smell the nervousness of the servants. They knew what these people were, and it made them anxious. They were used to being around werewolves, but usually it was just the Baum family and a few of their closest friends or family. Today though, the whole house was filling up with werewolves and Olga had invited more than seventy of them. But the servants had been in the service of the Baum family for generations, and they trusted their masters to take care of them. It was a good deal, the werewolves got people to serve them, and the servants could go home in the knowledge that their families would be safe from attack.

Today though, many of them had already started waiting for sunset, promising themselves to get as far away and be as securely locked up as it would be humanly possible to be. What would happen to any unwary villagers who might stray close to the property tonight did not bear thinking of, but the servants knew better than to voice their thoughts. For them, it was better to keep their heads down, do their work, take their wages, and be glad that they and theirs could walk in safety.

Tonight, they would keep their families locked up inside.

*

The sun had moved past its zenith when Olga emerged from the house. She had changed into jeans and a T-shirt in an effort to appear less formal. For this occasion she was wearing a T-shirt sporting a howling wolf.

The party was starting to liven up. A large group of people who had never met each other before had congregated on the veranda, and loud howls of laughter emanated from this group in regular bouts as stories and jokes were shared. Instead of a served lunch, Morissa had made the cook prepare a buffet of raw meats to which the guests could help

themselves. Just as an in-case, a small selection of cooked meat was also available. This, Olga noticed, had not been touched.

She approached a young girl who was talking to a man of about the same age and introduced herself, carefully studying both of their features. It was true what Hans had told her, some of the people who were at this party were definitely not true bloods. But then nobody had expected them to be, the book had made it quite clear that the original werewolf blood was rather thin these days.

The girl had curly white hair, with a smooth and very pale complexion. Most werewolves had brown hair streaked with silver, and they had much darker skins. She was also built smaller than most werewolves, and it was only a very slight lengthening of her canines that suggested there might be something wolfish about her.

The boy who she was speaking to, and whom she had only met at the party, was even worse.

He had curly brown hair, and he was built small, much smaller than most werewolves. Smaller than most humans, Olga reflected, with a slight sense of unease. She hoped he really did have some werewolf in him, because if not, then tonight's rising moon would see the last of him.

She left the couple so they could get better acquainted and moved off to watch a young man who was looking slightly out of place. He was sitting in the circle where most of the action seemed to be happening, but not partaking in any of the conversation. This guy she could only describe as an odd bunch. He had one or two features that might be wolfish, but then again he had lots of features that were anything but wolfish. His nose was short and flat, his lower jaw seemed to be sticking past his upper jaw and his legs were so bandy they might have been wrapped around a barrel.

Olga scolded herself for thinking such negative thoughts about her guests and moved towards the man, determined to make sure he was feeling welcome.

On the other side of the veranda, her mother and father were also mingling with the guests, although with some reserve on the side of her father. Heinrich was stiff and courteous, and his wife was starting to think it might be better to get him back in his study before he did himself a disavour. She was about to do just this when her brother saved her the trouble by greeting Heinrich warmly. At least here was one friendship that had grown over the years, and she left the two to talk over old adventures and plan some new ones, while she herself moved once again between the guests to make sure everybody was well looked after and having a good time.

*

The sun had dropped to the western horizon when Morissa rang the small but clear bell, indicating that dinner was about to be served. The old dancehall had been set with tables and chairs, the tables decked with bouquets of flowers, crystal glasses and the finest of eating utensils, conspicuous only by the total absence of silverware. All the knives, forks and spoons were made from solid stainless steel.

‘I think it’s working,’ said Hans, appearing at Olga’s shoulder where she was watching the guests taking their places at the tables.

‘Oh yeah, what do you mean?’ asked Olga.

‘I welcomed many of them personally when they got here this morning, and there are definitely a lot of new friendships forming. I even introduced some of them to each other.’

‘That is good news,’ said Olga, smiling brightly. ‘Shall we go sit? I’m starving, and the blood on that rump-steak is making me salivate.’

Hans laughed and led the way to their table. ‘Just don’t drool,’ he said.

*

Alone in his study, Heinrich could hear the scrape of chairs as the guests took their seats at the dinner tables. He had the book open on his lap again, but was staring out of the window at the last rays of sunlight leaving the grounds. Pretty soon it would be dark, and in

a few hours the moon would rise. At that time, if her timing was correct, Olga would have all the guests out on the lawn, and the moon would once again reveal the curse of the werewolf, as it had done for three hundred years.

He sighed again.

*

Silence descended on the lawns as the guests turned towards the eastern horizon. Dinner had been served and well received, and then Olga had led the guests out of the house and onto the lawns, to await the rising of the full-moon. At the moment it was dark, but pretty soon the moon was going to come over that hill, the moment they had all been waiting for would arrive.

Standing on the veranda and joined by Hans, Olga watched as the first thin slither of silver crested the hill, and felt the hair stand up all over her body as the curse awakened. It started as a tingling, an itch she felt she had to scratch, but pretty soon the burning started at the base of her spine, moving up and taking control of her body. Now the hair was growing all over her body, brown streaked with silver. Before her hands could start changing she ripped the T-shirt over her head and, with a snarl, started undoing her jeans. It was always so bloody awkward to do these things once the wolf inside had come out.

Moments later, where Olga and Hans had been, two silver-backed werewolves stood looking down at what was taking place on the lawns below the veranda.

The moon had almost completely crested the hill, revealing what three hundred years of cross breeding had done to the original werewolf curse.

Olga watched the man closest to her. He was the one who had looked like such an odd person before, with his sticky-out lower jaw, bandy legs and flat nose. Now, in the silver light of the moon, she saw what was going on. The man started changing, and as the change happened and he got rid of his clothes, she could see what had happened in his past. Where a funny looking man had stood was now an ugly dog, a British Bulldog. She could still see the flat nose, bandy legs and the elongated lower jaw. The dog looked at her,

whined, and walked over to the nearest tree, where it peed against the tree trunk, marking its territory, becoming the first of the were-dogs to give its scent to the night.

Next to Olga, Hans was watching the neat blond woman who had arrived in the Toyota transform into what could never, ever be described as a werewolf, but could definitely be described as a Labrador. It stood looking at the melee of changing going on around it for a second or two, then bounded off, jumping and running through the crowd in absolute joy of being a dog under the full moon.

Somewhere to their right, the man with the black hair and brown eyes had turned into a Rottweiler, and even though he was not at present appearing to be dangerous or aggressive, some of the smaller breed of canine that were suddenly present on the lawn backed away from him nervously. They needn't have bothered. A young cocker spaniel bitch who had come into heat just that afternoon was taking up all his interest. It soon became clear that yet another cross-breed of were-mutt was going to be brought into the fold within a few months.

By now the moon had completely cleared the brow of the hill to the east, and brother and sister watched in fascination as the lady with the curly white hair changed into a poodle, who immediately started yapping excitedly at the dogs around her, arched her back and had a shit on the perfectly tended lawn. Hans heard Olga give a low whine of disapproval. Well, what had she expected, that they should go find a place in the woods?

It was, however, the man standing next to the curly haired woman that came as the biggest surprise. Here was the man with the small build, who had not looked like any kind of werewolf they had ever seen before. As the moon rose above the hill there stood, amidst the discarded clothing of the werewolves, one small and terrified Yorkshire Terrier. It looked around, took note of its size amongst the creatures that now surrounded it, and pissed in fear, then shot off around the house, ears flat against its head, tail drawn between its legs, a brown ball of frightened fur.

Hans watched it go, hoping that the poor man, or rather dog, would have enough presence of mind not to venture into the village, or at least to come back before the moon set and he turned back into a human.

On the lawn, moving among the dogs that were now sniffing each other from behind in that strange greeting that dogs all around the globe has, a few werewolves were also moving. Olga noticed how they were using just a bit of self-control. They knew they were guests here, and it would be bad manners to start fights with the dogs. They also knew these dogs were different from normal domestic dogs. They were werewolves, even if somewhere in the past something had gone wrong with their breeding.

Somewhere inside the pack now gathered on the lawns, instinct took over and a howl went up, rising into the night and calling something out of all the dogs gathered there. It was quickly taken up by more and more howls, until the air was thick with the deafening howls of more than seventy werewolves and dogs alike. On the veranda, Olga and Hans looked at each other with wolfish grins, turned their heads to the moon and let their howls join the rest of the pack.

*

In his study in the house behind them, in a comfortable chair, Heinrich lay with his face on his paws, looking down at the volume that was now lying on the carpet.

Humans were not all the werewolves had mated with. Driven from villages, towns and cities, they had sought a life of their own, had joined each other to form little packs that would roam the forest. But sometimes a wolf had been alone, there had been no other wolves. And then the urge to mate would become too big, and liaisons would be formed with some of the domestic village dogs.

And if anybody had thought that the curse of the werewolf had brought an abomination, it had been as nothing to what the offspring of the werewolves and the dogs had been. Tonight, three hundred years after the original curse, on his very front lawn,

there stood the end result of the breeding. Heinrich knew that the mixing of breeds would never stop, in fact he was sure that tonight's party would just make things worse.

Soon, he knew, there would be new entries in the book, new bloodlines and breeding. But from now on, the werewolves would not frown upon it. They would think it normal, natural that dog and dog should come together. And it would all be Olga's fault.

He growled softly.

When the howling started he looked up, but managed to stop himself from joining in. Tonight, instead of the proud howl he had always given, the moon could only draw a sad grunt out of him.

Annua Morte

Lizelle waited until her mother was outside, seeing off the guests, then she slipped the little bottle from her pocket. It was one of the little drink bottles that her mother regularly returned home with when she flew out on business. But this one had been opened, and Lizelle had added enough of the castor concentrate to the bottle to kill a human quickly. She replaced the bottle where she had found it, in her mother's drinks cabinet. It was cheating, she knew, but sometimes things had to be helped along a bit. Lizelle turned to the table and started collecting the dishes.

Late afternoon sunshine fell through the big window, brightening the old farm kitchen. The last of the guests had left, and except for the quiet voices of Aunt Bethany and Uncle Jeff, the house was quiet. Aunt Grace was sitting at the dining room table, staring into space as she so often did. Lizelle opened the hot water tap and began filling the sink with water. Behind her she heard a chair being pulled out and she looked around. Her mother was sitting down at the kitchen table, lighting a cigarette.

'Mom,' she said, starting to pile dirty dishes into the sink, 'tell me about Annua Morte, and tell me why you hate me.'

'I don't hate you Lizelle, what gives you that idea?' asked her mother.

‘Mom, I’m sixteen years old today, not twelve. The tea-party is over and the guests have left. You’ve hated me my whole life, you can stop pretending otherwise.’

Behind Lizelle her mother sniffed, without looking around Lizelle could imagine the look of sour displeasure on her mother’s face, how her lips would be turned down, her eyes would be dull and her nose would be up in the air, as if talking to Lizelle was just too much trouble.

‘Don’t say I hate you Lizelle, that’s far too harsh,’ her mother said again, but the tone of her voice said otherwise.

Lizelle sighed quietly and closed the tap.

‘Tell me about Annua Morte then,’ she said, starting on the dishes.

This time it was her mother who sighed, a great heavy sigh as though the world had come to rest on her shoulders.

‘Who told you about Annua Morte?’ she asked.

‘Aunt Grace,’ said Lizelle.

‘Fucking bitch,’ said her mother, under her breath so that nobody else in the house would hear. Grace was the bane of her life. Actually Lizelle was the bane of her life, but Grace came a close second. The grey-haired old woman was nobody’s aunt, she had simply been on the farm for as long as anybody could remember. Even though she was no older than Merlina herself, Grace’s eyes were silver with cataracts, her face lined with age and her lips curled around almost toothless gums. She looked twenty years older than she was. The only thing about Grace that still seemed to work was her mind, and once again she had made life difficult for Merlina.

Lizelle ignored the comment, she knew how much her mother hated the woman.

‘Tell me about Annua Morte,’ she repeated, impatiently.

‘Annua Morte is one of the most difficult potions a witch can brew. The person who has a draught of the potion is doomed to cause, by apparent accident, the death of a person once a year, for the rest of his or her life.’

Lizelle could hear laughter in her mother's voice, as if she was enjoying telling the story.

'Somebody, nobody knows who, slipped you a draught of the potion on the day of your birth. The potion works in a strange way. Somebody in your close vicinity will be killed and it will seem like an accident. Nobody in their right mind would hold you responsible, but everybody will know that it was your actions that led to the death.'

The dishes in the sink clinked together as Lizelle washed them, her mind on what her mother was saying.

'And it always happens two days after my birthday?' asked Lizelle.

'Just about. If you are alone on that day it might wait a few days, but somebody will always die.'

'So who all died because of things I did?' she asked.

'Come on Lizelle, you know all about the deaths,' said her mother.

'Humour me,' said Lizelle, with no humour in her voice.

There was a long, thoughtful pause before her mother spoke, as if she was making up her mind about something.

'Your father died two days after your first birthday,' said her mother, and now Lizelle heard a note of bitterness in her mother's voice. 'He was working on the car in the garage, and he'd left the engine running. You were only a year old and he was looking after you while I was out shopping. He'd put you on the front seat. You must have somehow crawled out of your blanket and then kicked the car into gear. When I got back from shopping the car had crushed your father's skull against the wall, and you were lying on the floor of the car, sleeping as though nothing had happened.'

At the sink Lizelle frowned. She had heard this story before, but this was the first time she understood that there was a reason, the *Annua Morte* potion, why she had kicked that car into gear. When other people told the story they left out the details, glancing over

how exactly her father had died. When her mother told the story she made sure Lizelle was left in no doubt how gruesome a death she had caused her father.

‘And the year after that?’ she asked.

‘When you were two years old you somehow managed to open a tap connected to the hose. There used to be an old, cracked pond behind the house. You filled that pond with water, and your cousin Mary drowned in it. She was only two years old herself, and hadn’t learned to swim yet. Her own father took her dead blue body out of that pond. Their family left this farm that day, and they haven’t been back or spoken to our family since.’

At the sink Lizelle nodded as she pulled the plug to let out the water. She was glad she’d only been two years old at the time, at least this was one of the deaths she could not remember. She could feel her mother’s eyes on her, burning, waiting for Lizelle to ask about the next death. She could hear the laughing accusation in her mother’s voice when she spoke.

‘And after that?’ she asked, keeping her back turned on her mother. ‘What happened next?’

‘When you were three you were standing up in a trolley at the shop. You reached up and tried to grab a bottle of mayonnaise off the shelf, but the bottle was too heavy for you, and too big for your hand. It dropped, landing on the head of a little boy innocently standing next to our trolley. His head was smashed open by the bottle.’

The dirty grey water swirled in the sink before her, but in her mind’s eye Lizelle saw the death of an innocent young boy.

‘And then?’ she asked, keeping her head bowed, watching the water.

‘When you were four you bumped into a coat stand which fell onto a young girl, knocking her down a flight of stairs, killing her. When you were five a pastor man came here to talk to us about religion. You accidentally electrocuted his wife with an old lamp we should have thrown out years ago. When you were six you started school. I’m not sure

what happened that time, but two days after your birthday a school-friend lay dead, and the teachers were trying to hush it up. Make no mistake though, it was your fault.'

Lizelle watched as the last of the water drained out of the sink, then washed out the sink and turned to face her mother, her face suddenly frowning as a curious question came to her.

'Is that why you hate me, because of all the deaths you've had to deal with?' she asked.

Her mother shook another cigarette out of the packet and lit it with the first one, then crushed out the butt in the ashtray.

'I told you, you shouldn't say I hate you,' she said, but her eyes were cold as ice. 'But I won't deny that it has been difficult, living with you and your curse.'

Lizelle filled the kettle and switched it on, then took two of the freshly washed cups and started making coffee, her back once again turned on her mother.

'The next deaths?' she asked.

'You should remember all the deaths since then, Lizelle, you were old enough to remember,' answered her mother.

'But tell me, remind me again,' said Lizelle, a bitter edge starting to creep into her voice.

Merlina's eyes narrowed for a second as she looked at Lizelle, wondering what the child was playing at.

'When you were seven it was the boy who got killed with the chain saw.'

'I tried to save his life, though,' said Lizelle.

'Yes, you did. But he got that saw going, meaning to cut some firewood. If you had let him be, he would have been fine. But no, you had to try and grab the saw from him. It was the most gruesome death I've seen in my life.'

Once again Lizelle nodded. Her mother was right about that, it was the most gruesome death a person could imagine. She had never quite managed to get the picture of the headless corpse out of her memories.

‘At eight you tried to make your own potion for the first time. It was supposed to be Angel’s Kisses, which is supposed to make people feel great. But you were too impatient to wait for full moon, so you stirred it under the moonlight while the moon was gibbous. Everybody told you to throw the potion out, but you left it in a vial in your drawer. One of your friends, I think her name was Annabelle or something stupid like that, got hold of it and drank the whole lot. She got so depressed she killed herself hours later.’

The memory of poor Annabelle stirred in Lizelle, but her death did not raise much feeling in her. The stupid girl had stolen the vial of potion out of her drawer and drank it. She almost deserved to die. Still, the death had been caused by *Annua Morte*, not by Lizelle.

She stirred the coffee and turned around. Handing her mother a cup and taking one for herself, she sat down at the table.

‘At nine?’ she asked.

‘At nine you lost your balance on a ski boat when friends of ours took you out on the dam. You knocked Jimmy Johnson over the side and he got entangled in the ski rope. He died before they got him to shore,’ said her mother, taking a puff from her cigarette and blowing blue smoke through the kitchen. ‘At ten you and Pansy were supposed to sweep up the glass from a window your cousin Frank had broken. You tried to be helpful by taking the rest of the glass out of the window pane. A piece fell out and cut almost right through Pansy’s arm. She bled to death in three minutes. I’ve never seen so much blood in my life. That was when…’ her mother started, but stopped.

‘When what?’ asked Lizelle.

‘Nothing,’ said her mother, sounding irritated.

‘No, not nothing. Then what?’ insisted Lizelle.

Her mother took a deep breath and looked at her directly for the first time. ‘That was the first time I suspected that something was wrong with you. Remember the day we went to see that old witch who lived in the stinking flat in town?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I remember.’

‘Well the reason I took you to her was because she had some good senses about her. It was she who told me about the Annu Morte, how it worked and what it was doing to you. So you see, Lizelle, I never hated you, I’m just scared that I’m going to be the next one to fall victim to the curse that lies upon you.’

Lizelle looked at her mother, and a cold feeling of hatred washed over her. The woman was lying to her. She knew in her heart it had been her mother herself who had given her the potion. And she knew why her mother had given her the potion too. But she wasn’t going to tell the old woman this just yet.

Whether her mother suspected anything was hard to guess, but she didn’t say anything so Lizelle pressed on.

‘At eleven, it was that guy from the farm next to us, wasn’t it?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ replied her mother. ‘It was Harold. He’d come over here because he’d injured himself with the axe, and he didn’t have money for the doctor in town, so he’d come to ask Jennifer if she would work some magic for him. Jennifer was unaware that you had sat down on her wand earlier that day, cracking it. When she tried to heal him the spell blasted him with some serious broken magic. We had to hide the body, the poor man is still buried in the apple orchard out back.’

Lizelle hated that patch of ground in the apple orchard. The four trees closest to it had died within weeks after they’d buried the man there, and nothing grew on the ground there, not even weeds.

Her mother took a last drag from her cigarette and stubbed it out. ‘At twelve I tried to keep you away from people for a week after your birthday, but it didn’t help. The first day I sent you back to school the spell killed that kid who got driven over by the school bus.

The bus driver told everybody how he'd driven over the poor boy because of you, you'd attracted his attention by tugging at his shoulder. That's when I found out that the spell will kill, even a week after your birthday.'

'That didn't stop you from trying again when I turned thirteen,' said Lizelle.

Her mother sighed. 'It was worth a try,' she said, pulling a sour face. 'But then the school inspector came round to check why you weren't at school. I promised him you would be back at school the next day and he died moments later, just outside the front gate.'

'I'm still not sure if his death was my fault,' said Lizelle.

Her mother snorted back laughter. 'You're the one who gave your five year old cousin my wand and told him to hide it.'

'I just didn't want the man to see your wand.'

'And you didn't think Barty would start blasting everything he could see with the wand? No Lizelle, his death might not have been by your hand, but it was your doing, plain and simple.'

'It was the fault of whoever gave me the Annua Morte potion,' said Lizelle.

Her mother sniffed again, as if she firmly believed that Lizelle should be able to stop the deaths despite the curse of the potion.

'Two years ago when I turned fourteen you sent me away with family. Was that because you didn't want to see the death happen?' asked Lizelle, her voice not quite hiding a hint of sarcasm.

Her mother rolled her eyes. It was obvious that Lizelle had been thinking long and hard about the matter.

'Yes,' she answered.

'You sent me hunting with my cousins, knowing that I was a time-bomb waiting to go off?'

‘Yes, I just couldn’t handle it anymore. So I sent you off with your cousins. At least this time the man who was killed was somebody I didn’t know,’ said her mother.

‘Yeah, at least you didn’t have to see it, but I did, didn’t I? I had to be the one who stumbled over the threshold of that stupid old house and knocked down uncle Peter, and he was the one who almost got locked up in prison for falling over with a loaded gun and pulling off a shot, killing his best friend!’

Lizelle’s voice shook with anger, but her mother didn’t seem to care. Merlina stoop up and stepped over to the drinks cabinet, from where she pulled a bottle of brandy, then took a glass from the drying rack and poured herself a drink.

Lizelle looked at the glass and sighed a tired sigh. Always when she became a problem for her mother, there was the brandy. Well, she was almost done for today in any way, she might as well press on.

‘Last year, when I was in hospital, you left me alone the night, knowing full well what might happen. I was at death’s door myself, delusional and deranged, and you left me in a ward with four other very ill people. Did it never occur to you that I might get out of my bed and *accidentally* pull the breathing apparatus from the woman lying next to me?’

‘How the hell should I have known that would happen?’ her mother asked sourly, taking a gulp of brandy and shuddering. ‘Besides, I was worried about you. Nobody knew what was wrong with you, why you were so sick. I thought you were going to die.’

Lizelle looked away from her mother, tired of listening to her lies. How could this woman sit there and lie to her like that, telling her that she was worried about her dying, when the woman obviously hated her?

‘I almost killed myself that time,’ said Lizelle.

‘What do you mean?’ asked her mother, surprised.

‘I knew my fifteenth birthday was coming up, and by then I also knew about the *Annua Morte*. I tried to make the cure, but you know I’ve never been any good with

potions. I tried to make Dulcimer's Song, but I got it wrong. That was what landed me in hospital.'

For the first time her mother looked at her with something that might have been concern.

'Lizelle, even I won't try to make Dulcimer's Song, if you get it wrong the consequences would be catastrophic!'

'Didn't I just find *that* out the hard way!' said Lizelle and laughed. 'You were almost rid of me and my curse.'

Across the table her mother shook her head in disbelief and took another sip of brandy, smaller this time.

'And what happens this year?' asked Lizelle, a sarcastic smile playing on her lips. She already knew what was going to happen this year, she had a plan.

Her mother looked into the glass of brandy and pursed her lips for a few moments before looking up again.

'We will see what happens this year,' she said.

*

In the privacy of her bedroom Lizelle closed the great leather-bound book she had been reading. This was a book of spells, one of her many books containing information about spells and incantations, potions and poisons. This one had been handwritten by witches over many years, and was probably over two hundred years old. But it contained information about *Annua Morte*, the potion she had been cursed with. If her mother knew it contained this information, she would never have let Lizelle near the book, she was sure of that.

The language in the book was ancient and sometimes almost impossible to read, but after weeks of reading and studying Lizelle had figured it out, and the truth had dawned on her. She could use the *Annua Morte*. Nobody had told her this before, and that probably meant that nobody else in the family knew, but the book said it clearly. She could

control the curse, she could decide who would be the one to die each year. And this year, Lizelle had already decided, it was going to be her mother. Because there was another bit of information hidden in the book, and the information was this – that when the person who gave her the potion was dead, the curse would be broken.

This year, Lizelle had decided, the last of the deaths would occur.

She stood up from the chair and climbed into her bed, pulling the soft covers over her. When she closed her eyes she could see the symbols from the book dancing in her mind's eye, drifting in the air. She concentrated, and the thoughts started forming in her imagination.

Let the one who gave me the potion be the next to die.

She didn't think of her mother, or see her mother's face, instead she kept her mind focussed on the symbols that were swirling in the dark behind her closed eyelids. *Let the one who gave me the potion be the next one to die.*

She kept repeating the incantation, until at last she felt sure she had gotten it right, then she turned on her side, a smile on her face. Sleep felt miles away, but she kept concentrating her mind on the spell.

*

Lizelle swung her feet out of the bed and yawned. She was tired, dead tired. It had been a long night, and she'd spent most of the night waking from nightmarish dreams. Every time she would fall asleep again, and dream about all the people who had died the second day after her birthday, on her Annua Morte.

It was still early, but Lizelle could not stay in bed any longer, she needed to get up, needed to move around, to keep busy. It was no use trying to think about when the death would occur, or to try to make it happen, or to stop it from happening. The curse would take care of the death, she had to take care of her life.

In the kitchen she made coffee, then sat down at the table, waiting for the rest of the household to wake up. Her mother would be there first, she was an early riser, always heading to the kitchen for her first morning cigarette.

She was wrong, Aunt Bethany came in first, greeted her with a yawn and made coffee, then left the kitchen again. Nobody in the family apart from her mother knew about the Annua Morte, Lizelle was sure about that, or they would have been sure to be well out of the house since yesterday. Well, Aunt Grace knew about the Annua Morte, and she was out of the house today, she had left early in the morning to visit a friend. Lizelle didn't worry about her, she was nearly dead in any way, she was so decrepit.

Her mother hadn't gotten up yet, she was sleeping late for a change.

For a long time nothing happened, then Aunt Bethany came back, made more coffee, including a cup for her husband this time, and took it through to the living room. Lizelle could hear their voices. She ignored them, she was waiting for her mother. She felt mildly curious, this was the first time she would be waiting for the death to occur, she wondered how it was going to happen. Would her mother realize that she was going to be the one to die? Would she guess what Lizelle had done? Was that why she was staying out of the kitchen this morning? But today was only the day after her birthday, she reminded herself, her mother was not due to die before tomorrow.

Time crawled by, after an hour Lizelle left the kitchen to go have a shower and get ready for school, still waiting for her mother to get up. When she came back into the kitchen half an hour later her mother was still not there, the ashtray was still devoid of any cigarette butts.

'Have you seen my mother?' she asked Aunt Bethany when she brought back the empty coffee cups and placed them in the sink.

'No, but she's going to be late. I'll go kick her out of bed,' said her aunt and walked down the passage. Moments later there was a loud and terrified call from her mother's bedroom.

‘Jeff! Jeff come quick! I think she’s dead!’

Lizelle felt her mouth fall open. She had expected her mother to get up, to walk around today. The *Annua Morte* always made sure that it killed its victim by some direct action of Lizelle, so how could her mother be dead in her bed without even coming close to her? She could not think of anything that she’d done that might have directly led to the death of her mother, and it was a day early. But then the answer came to her. It must have been because of the spell she’d done, it had killed her mother in her sleep. She must have run out of brandy last night, and found the bottle to which Lizelle had added the poison!

Lizelle smiled. It was sad to think that she had killed her own mother, but it had been necessary. Too many innocent people had died over the years, it had to end. And the old woman had hated her, it was not as if Lizelle was going to miss her much. She had hoped she would feel the curse lift, the book said she should feel it, but there had been nothing. Maybe it had happened while she had been asleep the night before, when her mother died. That, Lizelle thought, might be what had caused all the bad dreams. A rush of gooseflesh crawled over her.

She got up from the kitchen chair and started walking down the passage to where she could hear the shocked voices of her aunt and uncle coming from her mother’s bedroom. She tried to set her face in what she hoped was a look of shock, but she wasn’t sure she was succeeding. She had to try though, for the look of it.

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Thunder rolled through the sky as Lizelle sat down at the dining room table. It had been a long day, starting with the doctor coming to the house to confirm the death of her mother, then the body had been removed and family members had been notified. The family arrived and, amidst the commiserations, the funeral arrangements had started taking shape. Lizelle had tried to keep a low profile, smiling wanly whenever a family member or friend had commiserated with her. Aunt Grace had returned during the

afternoon, no doubt feeling safe in the knowledge that the Annuia Morte had claimed its yearly victim, adding her sorrowful voice to those already filling the house.

Now all the guests had left, and Aunt Bethany and Uncle Jeff had joined Lizelle and Aunt Grace in the dining room for the first bit of quiet the family had had all day. Lizelle glanced up at the clock over the mantelpiece, and wasn't surprised to see that it was almost midnight.

'Are you OK, dear?' asked Aunt Bethany, her voice radiating concern.

'I'm fine, really,' said Lizelle as more lightning flashed outside.

'I haven't had time to tell you this myself, Lizelle, but I'm really sorry about your mother's death,' said Uncle Jeff, reaching over and squeezing her hand for a moment.

'Thanks Uncle Jeff,' said Lizelle, smiling at him.

'She wasn't your mother.' The words had come from Aunt Grace, who had been quiet up to then.

'Grace!' cried Bethany in shock, looking at the blind woman.

Lizelle also looked at Aunt Grace in shock. What did she mean?

'It must out!' said Grace, her voice filled with anger.

Aunt Bethany made a noise like a snake hissing and looked at the blind woman with anger burning in her eyes.

'What do you mean?' asked Lizelle, utterly confused.

'That woman wasn't your mother, Lizelle, I mean exactly what I say!'

'Grace!' interrupted Bethany. 'We talked about this, you know what the decision was!'

'And Merlina is dead now, and Lizelle deserves to know the truth.'

Lizelle could see the anger burning on Aunt Bethany's face, but she knew that whatever Aunt Grace had wanted, she had won, because the truth was out, and Lizelle was going to find out everything whether or not Aunt Bethany wanted her to.

‘Tell me,’ said Lizelle angrily, sitting back with pursed lips and staring at the people around the table.

Across from her Aunt Grace chuckled, and then started talking, her blind eyes staring unseeing at Lizelle.

‘I heard you and Merlina talk about the deaths the other day, Lizelle. But Merlina was lying. Merlina did not want you to find out, but the first death caused by your Annua Morte was that of your real mother.’

Bethany hissed again, and Grace turned her blind eyes towards her. ‘Yeah can hiss all you want to, Bethany, but the truth must out. The girl must know!’

‘Let her tell me,’ said Lizelle to Bethany, holding up her hand to stop any further interruptions.

‘Your mother died two days after you were born,’ said Aunt Grace

Lizelle sat back in her chair, stunned.

‘What happened to her?’ she asked.

‘You were a tiny baby, Lizelle, as tiny as a baby could be. Your mommy was very worried about you, worried that you were too small and that something would happen to you. On your second day she decided that you were not warm enough. She climbed on a chair to get another blanket out of the top cupboard. While reaching up she heard you start to cry, and she turned around with the blankets still clutched above her head. Her leg twisted and she fell from the chair. With her hands above her head she had nothing to stop her fall with, and she hit her head on the table in the room. She was dead almost instantly.’

Lizelle sat looking at Aunt Grace for a few moments, thinking. Across the table Aunt Bethany was looking at the blind woman with daggers in her eyes. From the gleeful expression on Grace’s face Lizelle could almost swear she could see the expression on Aunt Bethany’s face.

‘How do you know what happened in the room?’ asked Lizelle at last.

Aunt Grace chuckled. 'We're a witching family, Lizelle, think! I simply went to my crystal ball and had a look.'

Lizelle nodded. That was true, the crystal ball was an easy way of keeping up with events. But her mind was racing, and she was putting two and two together now.

'So that is why my mother hated me so much, because I wasn't really her daughter,' she said at last.

At this Aunt Grace burst out laughing. 'Oh no, that is not why Merlina hated you, although that is part of the reason. Merlina had met your father before your mother did, and she was furious that he had asked your real mother to marry him, instead of asking her. She thought that he should belong to her, by rights. He was a very handsome man, was your father. Six months after your real mother died Merlina convinced your father to marry her, telling him that the child, you, needed a mother. He fell for her trick and married her, but then he died two days after your first birthday. That left her without the husband she had fought so hard to get, and she was stuck with a daughter she had never wanted.'

When she had finished speaking there was silence around the table while Lizelle thought this over.

'She should have known my father might die if she gave me Annua Morte,' she said.

Aunt Bethany and Uncle Jeff's mouths fell open.

'What are you speaking about, Lizelle?' asked her aunt.

Lizelle looked at her aunt and sighed.

'You don't know about it, but on the day I was born, Merlina gave me a dose of Annua Morte. Do you know what that is?' she asked.

'I know full well what Annua Morte does!' cried Aunt Bethany. 'But your mother, Merlina I mean, would never have given you such a potion!'

'And she didn't,' said Aunt Grace before Lizelle could say a word.

Lizelle goggled at her blind aunt. 'So who did?' she asked, curious to know what Grace would say.

‘I did, I gave you the Annua Morte.’

‘You!’ cried Lizelle, her face a mask of horror. Aunt Bethany’s mouth fell open and Uncle Jeff looked as if someone had punched him in the face.

‘Yes, Lizelle, it was me. Have you never noticed how I disappear for a few days after each of your birthdays? I went because I knew about the curse, and would not permit myself to be near you.’

‘Why? Why would you have given me Annua Morte?’ asked Lizelle, feeling stunned.

‘Because your mother stole your father from me. Merlina only thought that she and your mother had met your father first, but it had been me who brought him here in the first place. With my bad eyes and dumpy body your father was not going to fall for me though, not when those two arrived and your mother twisted him around her little finger. So when your mother stole him from me I took revenge, and gave you Annua Morte.’

On the other side of the table, unseen by the blind eyes of Grace, a smile was starting to form on Lizelle’s lips. She tried to stop it, worried about what Aunt Bethany and Uncle Jeff would think. Her mother, or rather Merlina, had not been near her when she’d died. Lizelle had not felt the curse leave her, and the book said that she would feel the curse leaving her when the person who placed the curse died. And now, opposite the table, Grace had just admitted to placing the curse. Lizelle thought back to the night before. She had not visualized the face of Merlina when she’d told the curse who to kill. She had told the curse to kill the one who had placed it.

Outside, a bolt of lightning earthed itself close by, sending a deep rumbling through the house. Lizelle placed her hands on the table and pushed herself up.

‘I’m going to make a cup of coffee,’ she said, and walked through to the kitchen. She looked at the kitchen clock. It was three minutes to midnight, three minutes to the start of her Annua Morte. For the moment, she had to get away from Grace, she needed time alone to think everything over. She had to stay calm. Let the curse do the killing, there

was no reason for her to go for her wand, to strike the woman down. If what Grace had said was true she would die without Lizelle having to lift a finger.

She checked the drinks cabinet, the one where her mother stored her bottle of brandy. The little bottle of poison was gone. A sick feeling washed over Lizelle. She should have made sure, she should have checked if it really had been her mother who had given her the *Annua Morte*. She had killed an innocent woman, her own mother. Well, not her real mother, if what Aunt Grace had said was true, but the woman who had brought her up as her own, in any case. She sighed deeply, closed the cabinet and forced back the tears.

Lizelle opened the kitchen door just as the first fat drops of rain started drumming down on the flagstones outside. It sounded as if a row had started up in the dining room, she could hear the raised voices of Grace, Bethany and Uncle Jeff above the noise of the raindrops on the tin roof. More lightning flashed down, followed by rolling thunder. The kitchen light spilled out into the night, onto a patch of the patio where water was dancing, beating back the heat of the day.

She had been careless, she thought as guilt washed over her, and a tear finally escaped and rolled down her cheek. The woman who had taken care of her for almost sixteen years, killed by one purposefully placed bottle of poison. Yes, the woman had hated her, but now that Lizelle knew the truth that did not matter anymore. The woman had brought her up, in her own house, and there had never been anything but hate between the two of them. She tried to push the thought of what she had done away, tried to concentrate on the one thing she had never known before, that she had another, a real, mother.

This only caused her grief to deepen, and the tears to run faster, almost as fast as the raindrops that were now thundering down on the flagstones outside.

Then, from the dining room, Lizelle heard a massive crash. There was a loud thumping sound, followed by the sound of cups and saucers landing on the floor and breaking. Then Aunt Bethany's voice cried out in concern.

‘Grace!’

Lizelle frowned and looked up at the kitchen clock. The second marker was still thirty seconds away from midnight, away from the day of her *Annua Morte*. It didn’t matter, because in the anguished voice of Aunt Bethany two things had been very clear. The first was that Aunt Grace was dead, and the second was that the kitchen clock was thirty seconds slow.

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She hurried through to the dining room and stopped in the doorway, staring at the mess in front of her. Aunt Grace had slipped sideways off her seat, evidently clutching at the tablecloth on her way down, dragging everything down with her. Aunt Bethany and Uncle Jeff had risen out of their seats, and were gaping at the still form of Grace. Without a word Lizelle walked around the table and checked Grace’s wrist for a pulse, but there was nothing.

‘Call an ambulance, I think she’s dead,’ she said calmly. When neither Bethany nor Jeff moved she sighed and pulled her phone from her pocket. She would call the ambulance herself. The call took only a minute or two, then she cut the connection and pulled out one of the dining room chairs to sit down.

Aunt Bethany seemed to have unfrozen at last. She walked around the table and kneeled next to Grace, checking for herself if the woman was really dead. When she stood up again her foot kicked something, and a small empty bottle rolled over the floor. Bethany turned to pick it up, and suddenly Lizelle’s eyes went wide. It was the little liquor bottle she had kept the poison in, the bottle of essence of castor.

‘Grace always did like a bit of kick to her coffee,’ said Bethany absently. ‘I see she’s been at your mother’s stock again. Oh well, can’t blame her really. It was a tough day, she probably needed a drink.’ With this she walked through to the kitchen, where Lizelle heard her drop the empty bottle in the dustbin. Bethany came back a few moments later and took her seat at the table again. There was nothing to do but wait for the ambulance.

A strange tingling feeling took hold of the base of Lizelle's spine, she felt a flush creeping through her body. A wave of warmth swept her body and seemed to gather in her mind. When she closed her eyes she could see a beautiful woman standing in a field of green grass, waving at her, then the image faded and the heat left her, seeming to drift through the top of her head. Immediately another flush started, again the wave of heat swept through her, gathering in her head. This time there was the image of a handsome man, he also waved at her.

Tears rolled out of Lizelle's eyes. She knew these people, because both of them bore some resemblance to herself. They were her mother and father, both killed by the curse of the Annuia Morte. She barely had time to register this when the heat was building up again, and again. More faces, young kids, friends, killed because they had been close to her on that day, the second day after her birthday. Fifteen times she felt the warm flush gather in her and rise, fifteen faces turned to look at her, and then left her. Merlina, she noticed, was not amongst those faces.

Coldness settled over her. The other souls had felt like love, warmth, but suddenly she was gripped by hatred, hatred so deep that it shook her. She saw another face, the blind eyes and cold baleful stare of Aunt Grace, who was looking at her from the other side of death, and whose face recognized what Lizelle had done, and where her soul was heading. The coldness did not gather in Lizelle's head, but seemed to evaporate from her body, until at last the heat returned.

When the feeling had left her Lizelle stood up and walked to the kitchen. 'I'll make us more coffee, we're going to need it,' she said, glad to have her back turned on Aunt Bethany and Uncle Jeff.

Her face had broken into a grin.