

“All Hallows’ Eve”

By “Hal L. O’ween”

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Chapter 01

“A Nice Pair of Shoes”

*Sharon Van Orman
Omaha, Nebraska, USA*

“Dammit, Becky. I am getting mud all over my Jimmy Choo’s”

“Then why are you wearing them?” Becky asked, as we made our way through the darkened graveyard.

“Because they look cute with my outfit,” Lisa replied.

“Becky, why are we here?” I asked, weaving between the branches of the pine trees. They grew like sentinels along the wrought-iron fence that marched around the perimeter of the cemetery. The white fire of the moon barely penetrated their dense growth offering us glimpses of a trail that was meant to be trod by day.

“It’s All Hallows Eve,” she said punctuating her words with a wave of her fairy wand. Her fake fairy wings brushed against me, shedding glitter. I sighed, I would never get all that glitter off.

“Becky, if you start with that “tonight is the night that the walls between the worlds grow thin” nonsense I am going to hit you with my matching Jimmy Choo bag.”

“Cute bag, by the way,” I said.

“I know!” Lisa squealed. “And I got it on sale,” she whispered conspiratorially. She was dressed as Marie Antoinette. Well, how Marie Antoinette would have dressed if she had a pimp.

I was still wearing the scrubs from my shift at the hospital. I hadn’t expected to get off work in time to take part in the festivities. I was on call and fully expected to have to go back. Not only was it Halloween, but there was a full moon. Ask any paramedic or police officer about the full moon and they will tell you the same story. It brings out the crazy in people. No idea why, but it does.

I hadn’t been paying attention to where we were going. I had been too busy fighting branches and avoiding spider webs that spanned the distance from one tree to the next like silver necklaces that danced with dew.

I almost collided with the bustle of Lisa’s dress when we stopped suddenly. The un-weathered marble of the tombstone marked this as a new grave. I did not need to read the name to know what it said. I came here often.

“Becky,” I exhaled.

“I know sweetie, but it has been almost a year. You need to deal with your grief and put it behind you.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?” Becky asked shrugging her shoulders which caused a dusting of glitter to settle around the grave. I sighed again. It was getting to be a habit.

“I mean, why do I have to move on? I loved him. Why is a year all I get to mourn?”

“It’s just no good for you to carry all that sorrow around,” Lisa said as she moved to stand on my other side, aerating the soil with the heels of her shoes.

“Listen, I know you two mean well. But it’s too soon. Just give me some time.”

Becky had brought along a huge bag that no self-respecting fairy would have dared carry. She patted me on the shoulder and put the bag on the ground. As she began to unpack it I couldn’t help but think of Mary Poppins. Sweet ways to make the medicine go down began to filter through my brain.

“Great, I will never get that out of my head now,” I mumbled as she continued to unpack.

Becky was a Wiccan. I had known that for a while, but she had never made more than a superficial reference to it. Judging from the items she was pulling out of her bag, she clearly had begun to take it seriously. I wondered when all this had happened. But then, I will not profess to have paid much attention to my friends in the last year.

I watched as she drew a circle around the grave in salt. She placed four black candles on the ground and lit them. Chills ran up my spine as she began to chant. Lisa chanted along with her in a strong confident voice. They had obviously been planning this.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We are going to raise his spirit so that we can find out who his killer is,” Lisa said nonchalantly. “Maybe if we can get him some justice you will be able to move on.”

A wind picked up, scattering the fallen maple leaves that had left their trees barren skeletons. I watched as they swirled and eddied, and yet inside the circle the air was still. The flames on the candles never flickered. The hair on my arms stood on end as I turned back to Lisa and Becky and the ghost of my lover, Brett.

My mouth fell open as I looked at him. He seemed so real. No transparent ghost here, but lifelike, corporeal. “Brett, who killed you? Can you spell it?” Becky asked holding up a Ouija board for him to point to. He didn’t need it. Instead he raised his arm, clad in the suit his mother picked out for him, and pointed to me.

As we stood there the ghosts of all the others gathered around outside the circle. I saw my neighbor who always stole my paper. The guy from down the street that let his dog use my yard as his personal toilet. My old gym teacher from high school. He was my first. I killed him after our final track meet when he caught me alone in the locker room. I was proud of that one. I turned to look at my two friends who were staring at me in shock and horror tinged with dawning comprehension.

“Well, this is really annoying,” I said taking the scalpel from my pocket. “I told you two to leave things alone. But you just wouldn’t listen.”

Afterward, I cleaned the blood of my two friends off on my scrubs. As their ghosts joined the army of phantom onlookers I reached down and slid Lisa’s shoes off her feet, grabbed the matching bag and dumped the contents on top of her.

“There truly isn’t anything like a nice pair of shoes.”

*

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My Blog “Always to the Unknown Friend”: www.nondeplumblog.blogspot.com/

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Chapter 02

“The Unimaginable”

(Excerpt)

*Gretchen Steen
Pensacola, Florida, USA*

‘If only that truck driver had paid attention, I wouldn’t be stuck in this ... this God awful contraption for the rest of my life ...’ Maggie thought as she stared into the computer monitor.

“I’m only fifty-three and dead from my waist down ... DAMN HIM,” she growled and pushed herself backward, away from my cluttered computer desk.

She glared at the piles of papers, scribbled notes, an empty coffee cup and numerous pill vials. The house was a wreck, the roof leaked and the septic didn’t work. She couldn’t fix it, she had no money; and she couldn’t do the repairs anyway.

The computer was her life after the accident, broad-sided by a semi.

‘I shouldn’t have survived ... I wish I hadn’t. But I did and here I sit, watching the world fall apart around me.’

Buzz ... Buzz ... Another text message. It was from Maggie’s only son, Günter.

‘Mom ... I Love You!!!’ was all it said.

They hadn’t finished their conversation, but something was wrong—terribly wrong.

Maggie wheeled herself back to the laptop quickly.

“Why is this taking so long?” she shouted, as she slammed the mouse on the desk. The online TV channel opened and she read the headlines.

It had begun. Why hadn’t anyone listened? Sheep to slaughter, that’s all it was; history repeating itself.

*

THUD ... THUD ... CRASH ...

“Find anyone here and hurry, we don’t have all night,” yelled a deep voice from the front of the house.

I can't hide ... why are they here ... I've done nothing wrong!!! Maggie thought as her crippled body began to tremble.

The intruders fumbled and destroyed each room. They found their target.

Maggie stared into the monitor; her cell phone buzzed away, she said nothing.

A firm, strong hand grabbed her shoulder and forcibly turned her around.

“You are coming with us, Miss Weiss. It has been determined you are an enemy of the state,” the tallest mercenary stated.

Dressed in a black uniform, complete with patent-leather brimmed hat and shiny boots, the one thing that stood out ... a small pin proudly displayed on his lapel.

“Lift her up, I'll get what's here ... MOVE IT!!” another shouted.

Maggie slapped her own face in disbelief, *'is this all a dream?'* She opened her eyes to M16's pointed at her head.

She was snatched up and carried through what was left of her home and out into the yard. Idling in the street was a converted school bus; painted black, a whirling yellow light broke the darkness. One of the men opened the emergency door and two more grabbed her. They hoisted her limp body into the vehicle. The seats were changed; they lined the sides of the bus now.

Cramped together were several others, scooped up by the madmen.

“Do NOT talk to anyone!!” she was instructed firmly.

'I know these people—my neighbors ... my friends ... but WHY?'

The engine revved. The driver sped down the street and out of the neighborhood.

The interstate was crowded, but not with the usual traffic ... only buses ... THESE BUSES!!!

At every exit, some would depart the caravan. Maggie's pressed on. For miles they travelled in silence and fear. Some turned to see where they were; but they couldn't tell in the pitch dark.

Up ahead was another exit. The bus slowed and came to a stop at the end of the ramp.

“Chris ... do you know what's going on?” Maggie whispered to her next-door neighbor sitting beside her. He didn't reply; only shrugged his shoulders. She looked into his eyes. The happy-go-lucky man she knew had vanished. Looking around at the others; they all had the same despondent expression.

They rode on for a few more miles and a well-lit complex appeared. It was surrounded by eight-foot high cinderblock walls, barbed-wire and razor-ribbon. The buildings were strangely familiar.

Maggie's horrified thoughts became clear *'FEMA trailers ... it was true ... ALL OF IT!!!'*

The bus pulled up to the entrance and the driver stopped for inspection. He opened the side door and handed the guard a clipboard filled to the max with paperwork.

"OK, pass through, stop at the first building," the guard instructed.

Slowly the bus moved forward and stopped. The silence had turned into a low moaning.

"Stand and prepare for unloading!!" the driver shouted.

All but one did.

"I said STAND, bitch!!" the driver shouted as he looked back at Maggie.

"Sir, I can't, I'm disabled, paralyzed from my waist down."

Suddenly she was shoved to stand and fell off the seat to the floor.

"I CAN'T STAND. YOU ALREADY KNEW THAT ... WHY DIDN'T YOU BELIEVE ME???" she screamed, her eyes filled with tears.

"Get her up ... NOW" the driver retorted, disgust evident in his face.

"She'll be the last to go, get the others out of here and process them."

Everyone moved forward except Maggie.

'My heart is racing ... my meds ... I only have a few days worth in my pocket ...'

The bus was now vacant as Maggie watched her friends through the window being led away. She looked at the buildings; they stretched out into oblivion. The area was well lit, but the buildings were dark and deserted.

The driver slammed the side door shut and hit the gas. Quickly they passed the white aluminum structures, one by one, she lost track at fifty. The bus stopped, the door swung open and two men entered.

"She's back there, says she's paralyzed. She wouldn't stand when ordered. Take her, she's ALL YOURS!" the driver stated with a vicious grin.

Two uniformed men strode down the aisle, their boots clicked as they walked.

"What's your name?"

"Margaret Weiss, sir. What am I doing here, have I no rights?"

The men's laughter echoed.

“NO!! None at all and because of your opposing voice, you never shall again. All those you have contact with *will be* confined as well. Your cell phone and laptop have been confiscated—vital information to put you on trial ... as a civilian terrorist!”

“BUT I’M NOT! This country was once the greatest on earth. Don’t you remember? We had rights and liberties granted by the Constitution and Bill of Rights ...”

“Those days are gone ... your precious country has fallen!” one said brusquely.

Maggie was removed from the bus and paraded toward the compound.

Her eyes strained into the distance. Tall stacks spouted smoke and choking ash ...

‘All my pink pills at once ... YES! My heart will stop ... this nightmare OVER ...’

*

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” ~ George Santayana

*

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Chapter 03

“A Witch’s Kiss”

*Katrina Jack
Liverpool, England, United Kingdom*

Against a backdrop of midnight blue, sprinkled with the tiny lights of a million, billion stars and planets, Celandine flew. Perched “side-saddle” on the narrow wooden pole, she breathed in the heady fragrance of autumn, drifting up from the night-shrouded ground below.

A gentle breeze ruffled her raven-dark curls, spilling out from beneath the brim of her hat. Albert, her green eyed, black furred cat, regarded her wisely from his place nestled amidst the bristles of the enchanted besom.

High above the earth Celandine soared filled with the peculiar joy that only Halloween could bring. It was the time of year that witches were at their most powerful; when spells could be cast with the sure certainty they would work.

Celandine clicked the heels of her boots together and increased her speed. Beneath her the stream of traffic on the motorway became a continuous blur of light. She squinted into the distance and spied the houses of the town. The sodium glare of streetlights dotted the edges of the roads. Celandine slowed the broom, until she was cruising above the rooftops.

She watched as human children progressed from door to door in search of “trick or treats.” Her lips curved in an indulgent smile and her heart, usually so cold, warmed at the sight of their rosy cheeks.

She flew on until at last she saw him, walking alone, head down and hands shoved into his pockets. She’d watched him for a long time now and coveted him, body and soul. Celadine’s pulse beat loud in her ears and she almost lost control. Albert hissed at her carelessness, before settling back again.

She brought the broom down, landing silently in an alley, where she dismounted, took off her hat, and shook out her hair. Albert watched her, as she headed off towards the street.

As she neared the head of the alley, she paused. Her Beldame had cautioned her against what she was about to do, warning her that at best she could lose her powers, at worst her life. Phh! What did the old know about love?

Footsteps echoed along the road and Celandine stepped out, almost colliding with the man she’d chosen. As she gazed up into his startled face, she knew she’d been right. He was so handsome and there was kindness in those eyes. She muttered the carefully prepared spell and a white mist,

filled with twinkling dots of light, rose up, surrounding them both. As the charm took effect, the young man reached out for her and took her in his arms. Celandine offered up her lips to him.

The kiss was everything she'd hoped for and its sweetness permeated her from head to toe. Then pain burned through her and she opened her mouth in a wordless cry. The face now looking down at her was hard and cold, the eyes narrowed and the lips a thin, tight line.

As she fell to the ground, her life blood ebbing around the blade of the knife stuck between her ribs, Celandine realised her Beldame had been right.

'Do not think that witch-hunters are extinct my dear. Even in this, the 21st century of mortal man, they still exist. Beware the hunter, for he will have no mercy. Is it not written that thou shall not suffer a witch to live?'

The young man looked down at the fallen girl and a sigh of almost regret escaped him. Such a beautiful creature, but beneath that beauty lay evil and he must never forget it.

*

He glanced up at the star strewn sky, until the sound of children's laughter sounded nearby. With a deft movement, he scooped the body into his arms and walked off towards the local crematorium, where he worked. There was a cremation scheduled for tomorrow.

No one would notice a few extra ashes.

*

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Chapter 04

“Soul Mates”

*Jaleta Clegg
Pleasant Grove, Utah, USA*

Silence reigned in Teremun’s tomb, as it had for a thousand long, dry years, since the last mummy had been deposited and the crypt door sealed. Sand filtered into the hot darkness, trickling over the sarcophagus in amber waves that piled on the stone blocks of the floor.

Munahmunah the rat longed to flick his ears clear of the sand, but the mummification spell held tight. He lay on the carved face of Teremun, one haunch resting on the Ankh of Termuthis. Munahmunah wished to die completely. The Ankh prevented his spirit from leaving his desiccated body. He would have sighed in frustration, had he breath.

Sand was the least of his irritations. Maibe, the virgin sacrifice, faced Naeem, the undead defender, across the chamber, two mummies locked in eternal longing, unable to touch, to consummate the desire born and nurtured in silent death. Munahmunah lay between them, their raging lust pounding in his bones.

The entrance block slid, grating on layers of dry sand. A thief slipped through the gap, a burning torch clutched in one fist.

The Ankh of Termuthis flared into heated life, the spells of protection invoked by the intruder lending movement to dry muscle and bone. Munahmunah the rat squealed, leaping away from the angry glow of the Ankh. The hair on his rump burst into flames. He launched himself in angry attack at the face of the thief. The man screamed, clawing the dead rat free as he fled the tomb.

The magic of Termuthis surged through the burial chamber. Munahmunah chattered his rage at the unjustness of death and accidental mummification.

Maibe shifted, her tightly wound form lurching from the wall. One hand tore free of her wrappings to beckon Naeem forward, seduction in the tilt of her head.

Naeem, a bundle of ancient rags, inched towards the object of his desire through the sand drifts. His wrappings writhed as he worked muscles desiccated and decayed by desert heat.

Maibe hopped once, twice, gaining ground toward the object of her thousand-year desire.

Munahmunah showed his teeth, disgust wrinkling his lip. The dead flesh cracked, flaking away to leave his jawbone bare.

The newly animated lovers ignored the smoldering rat in the doorway. The Ankh glowed, shedding a greenish light in the tomb. Power throbbled, giving temporary life to the dead. Naeem's wrappings caught on the corner of Teremun's sarcophagus. He sprawled in the sand, tripped by trappings of his death.

"Ah." A faint breath of sound from Maibe as the defender sprawled, one abnormally short leg breaking free to roll across the sandy floor. Maibe's linen parted as she strained arms against ancient bindings. Her beckoning finger crumbled to dust.

Naeem rolled to his back. Maibe toppled, body pressed to his. A thousand years of watching, sensing his spirit, she would not waste this moment. Virgin in life, she would not remain so in death. Breathing a prayer of thanks to Termuthis for her Gift, Maibe tore at Naeem's linen wrappings with mummified hands.

Naeem arched his back, responding to her urging. His arms came free. She paused only a moment to note the shortness of his arms. Physical deformities did not matter, not to one who loved his spirit from afar. Until now.

His claws tore the linen strips imprisoning her dead flesh. She shivered with delight as his skin touched hers. He pulled her closer, limbs wrapping her torso. Maibe ripped at the face coverings. She must look on her beloved, kiss his lips, feel their passion burning bright.

He grunted beneath her. She writhed, wishing only for a moment that she still lived in truth. She pulled the last of his facial wrappings free.

Naeem's long snout opened, fanged jaws crushing her skull. Both mummies crumbled as green magic exploded from Maibe's decapitated body.

The Ankh's light faded, taking life with it.

Freed of their mummified servitude, the spirits of Maibe and Naeem rose from the tangled bodies on the sandy floor.

"A crocodile?" Maibe's spirit voice echoed through the chamber.

Naeem snapped his spirit jaws in a reptilian smile.

"Virgin in life, virgin in death. Horus the Vulture-headed better have a good reward waiting." Maibe's voice faded as her spirit rose from the tomb.

Munahmunah gnashed his teeth as Termuthis gathered him to her Ankh. At least his eternity of sitting between unrequited lust and hunger was at an end. He had suffered for his inadvertent intrusion into Teremun's eternal rest. But now, peace filled his soul as his body crumbled to dust.

Silence reigned in the tomb of Teremun, as it had for most of the last thousand years.

*

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Another Blog “The Far Edge of Normal”: <http://jaletaclegg.blogspot.com/>

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Chapter 05

“Truth or Dare”

*Carol Bond
Adelaide, South Australia, Australia*

It had started as a dare, nothing more than that, so who could have known it was to end this way.

Poppinac reached into her pocket and pulled out a handkerchief; it was a pretty, embroidered piece from her sister's drawer. Lying and thieving took first place in her young life. It pleased her to take what she wanted. Grinning the young girl mopped her nose, and silently called her sister a fool.

“Psst Rolen. Get in ‘ere, I am not going to walk these stairs on my own.” She hissed the words, a little fearful at the echo that bounced back at her from inside the darkened gloom. Cobwebs tattered and torn rippled in the musty stale breeze from the door pushed open. Dark shapes sat in wait for the pair and goodness knows what else.

Rolen was short for his age, everyone told him so, everyone that was except for Poppinac. He stepped up close, breathing heavily from the jitters he felt about entering the old man's lodge. The window's winked at him, the darkness of its empty belly within smelt like old man's dirty socks, at least that was how he saw it. The old building had been empty for decades, not a soul had stepped foot inside forever and a day and the stories that floated around town were thick with horror.

“Why can't you just leave it alone.” He knew he was whining but he also knew Poppinac and the stubborn streak that rose above good sense. “All we have to do it say that we went inside and if we hide for a bit, the rest won't know. I swear it Poppinac we only have to say we went inside.”

She shot him a withering look, “For God's sake Rolen. How can we do that without grabbing a trophy to say so. Those out there, with their knees shaking and their pants wet from the very thought of doing what they dared us to do, won't accept the truth of it without a trophy.” Poppinac turned back to the yawning hole. “Well here goes.”

Rolen hung his head; he knew that the time for talking was done. Swallowing hard the young boy followed.

*

The man knew he was a ghost, knew that he was half mad with anger and grief. He felt so alone. He had a name once, all those years ago when he had walked with the living, it had been Charles Baron Wentworth but his mother called him Bert. Now names didn't matter, nothing mattered in

the endless shift of time. Not even the clock ticked anymore, its battery was long dead, just like him, a useless thing from a past long gone.

Over the years, he had learnt to manipulate the living world, little tricks to pass the time. The switching on a light, the slamming of a door and the one noise he had managed to conjure into the dead air. The word ‘Promise.’ He never expected to use it but if he pulled in the energy around him and stood very still, pushing all of his will into this word, upon release it bounced about the house like a song. It pleased him sometimes to call it out.

Tonight on Halloween where the boundaries of the living and dead met, Bert sat brooding.

*

“Poppinac?” The young boy’s hand shook as he clutched for her shoulder.

Freckled faced with a shock of orange hair gave Poppinac an almost ethereal expression. “Well what is it?” and she pouted “Look all we have to do is walk the stairs and take something that used to be his. Rolen, I promise.”

Even whispering her voice rang in Bert’s ears like a hammering anvil. His ghostly head lifted from his hands. Someone was here, in his house, talking as though they had a right. “They dare come into my home. They dare walk the same steps I did as a young man.” Empty words coming from a dead man, still it was his house even if his corpse laid in a coffin some miles down the road.

Soft footsteps drew him to his feet. Anger bubbled in an empty breast, real enough for this ghost.

“Rolen don’t step on my heels. There’s nothing here to worry about. It’s just an old house with the lights turned off.”

The sun was setting and the lengthening shadows twisted into shapes on the walls as the sun weakly pushed it will through the broken glass windows and discolored curtains. Rolen could hear his heart thumping in time with the breaking of sweat of his forehead. It dripped down the back of his neck, snaking its way to the soles of his shoes. He was a fearful mess.

From the corner of his eye, Rolen saw Bert. The ghost had pushed his head out of the wall just above the next step and Rolen screamed. He hadn’t meant to but what would you have done in his place. Poppinac missed her step, she had jumped on that scream, and as the poor girl slipped her body crashed into her friend. Down they both went, all legs and arms as they bounced off each other on the way down.

Bert stepped through the wall, he pulled on his most hideous face and lifted himself into the air to greet the banged up pair. The lights flickered and upstairs several doors opened and closed in resounding bangs. All of it a spectacle to alarm, he wanted those children gone. How dare they walk his house as if they had a right.

*

Rolen lay under Poppinac. She opened her eyes, nothing broken, but she had the makings of some pretty bruises and a nasty headache. Pulling the handkerchief from her pocket, Poppinac wiped her face. It was then that she realized she was sitting on her best friend.

“Rolen are you alright? I’m sorry but you scared me.”

Rolen laid so very still.

“Rolen please get up.” Her voice took on a begging tone. It was fretful for she was only a young girl.

Blood crept towards her feet from underneath his head and his arm, bent at an impossible angle pointed to the top of the stairs. Hanging in the air some feet above the ground was Bert. Oddly enough, he wasn’t angry anymore. Wonder filled his dead eyes at the sight of Rolen’s corpse on the floor.

Tears fell and Poppinac dropped to her knees. “Oh what have I done? It was supposed to be a dare, that’s all.”

It all stopped, the door banging and the flashing of lights and in its place stood another ghost. Rolen looked at Poppinac, his dead eyes questioning, sadder than anything she had ever seen.

“Oh Rolen I am sorry. I didn’t mean to fall.” She hiccupped in her grief.

Rolen’s ghost looked on, as silent as the dark house he was now chained to. Bert held out a hand and Rolen took it. The ghostly pair made ready to leave, Poppinac was all but forgotten.

“Wait – please.” Entreated the young girl, “Don’t go. What am I to do now, you’re my best friend, my only friend.”

Rolen lagged and Bert stopped, they both turned, ghostly apparitions on a stairwell. The lengthening shadows were long gone, not even the full moon had the sense to send its beams into such a place.

“They’ll blame me and I’ll be sent away to be locked in a prison with bars and no one to keep me safe. Please Rolen what should I do.”

The ghost once called Rolen shook off Bert’s hand and gently walked the stairs back to Poppinac. He reached out and with fingers alight with the last measure of living energy, snatched her handkerchief from her pocket. He looked to Bert, and with a nod Bert opened his mouth. Poppinac felt her heart miss a beat, now it was her turn to sweat.

“PROMISE.” Came a booming voice.

“Promise? What do I have to promise?” She was a little more than scared now.

Rolen smiled and she knew what it all meant.

“Okay I promise.” The handkerchief left his hand and floated to rest nicely on his cooling corpse.

She sniffed as they disappeared through the wall. Now she was truly alone. Rolen belonged to a dare, one that she had foolishly accepted and the promise now made with love for her dear friend, was the one of truth. Straightening her shoulders, Poppinac left the old man's lodge and took to the street. All she had to do was tell the truth. For the rest of her life Poppinac had to walk the path of the straight and narrow, no more stealing, no more dares, just the acts of a good girl doing the right thing. With a sniff and a wipe of her nose with her stolen handkerchief, Poppinac walked the long walk home.

*

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Chapter 06

"The Swamp Vine"

*Matthew C. Nelson
Jacksonville, Florida, USA*

And so the legend goes....

A long time ago, before the land across Europe was greeted by Ponce De'Leon and his crew, smaller shadow-filled swamps surrounded the much larger Okefenokee. In one hidden swamp, a small village lay nestled within a circle of cypress trees, one which the local people called Turtle's Shadow. Along the edges of the village, a little girl by the name of Swamp Flower, used to play for hours. One day, her grandmother, Sand Crane, approached and sat beside Swamp Flower.

"Swamp Flower", Sand Crane looked to her grand-daughter as she spoke, "I know you are growing faster than the vegetables in the garden, and faster than the swamp deer along the edges of our village, but I hope I need not remind you to stay away from Grandmother Cypress."

Swamp Flower looked at Sand Crane directly in the eye and replied, "The large tree that sits with its roots deep within the earth over there?" She pointed to what was perhaps the largest cypress tree in the area, its roots so massive that they began to erupt out of the ground and back in, forming loops all along the ground.

Sand Crane nodded without looking to where Swamp Flower pointed, for she knew better than most of its direction. "Child, only those who are ready to take the first steps towards womanhood are allowed to approach, and you still have several more seasons to go. Though you might think you are ready, trust me when I say that you are not. My sister...your great aunt, Water Weed, thought she was ready and approached well before her time, and vanished without a trace. We have no wish for that to happen to you as well.

Now, "Sand Crane slowly attempted to rise, "help your dear, old grandmother up, would you?" Swamp Flower placed her hands beneath her grandmother's arms and slowly lifted her up to her feet. Turning to head back towards the center of the village, Sand Crane looked back at her granddaughter one last time. Removing a freshly picked flower from her pouch, she gently placed it within Swamp Flower's hair.

Swamp Flower silently watched in amazement as her grandmother headed back towards the village. How did she always have the knack for reading her mind? Why, also, was it possible for her grandmother to say something that always made her frustrated? She slowly began to count off her fingers until all of them were stretched outward. That, plus a few fingers, were how many seasons she had already seen pass by. How was it, then, that she was not ready? She had heard

rumors of women as young as two hand's worth of fingers, and almost one other complete set, had gone before Grandmother Cypress, and successfully completed their steps towards being a woman. Surely, one or two years shy of that was good enough...right?

Swamp Flower looked at the grand tree, and slowly found her feet walking towards it, all the while thinking about her grandmother's sister, Water Weed. Maybe she was just not ready. Maybe she had performed the ceremony wrong. Yes! That had to be it! Smiling, her feet began moving faster towards the tree, her gait increased to match her steps. Within minutes, she stood directly beneath the branches of the massive tree... and stopped.

Slowly getting down onto her knees, she looked up above into the hidden branches and tried to follow with her eyes all the patterns of the vines that wove into and out of them...that is, until one of them moved.

Swamp Flower blinked several times and directly stared at the odd-shaped vine. It was no false sight, or trick of the eye; the vine really moved. Then, having unfurled itself a bit from the branches, a set of reptilian eyes opened and gazed at her. Beneath the pair of eyes, the vine gave way and appeared to crack in half, only to reveal a matching pair of glistening white teeth shaped in the way of a half-smile.

Opening wider, the mouth yawned a few times before speaking. "I know your name, child...just as I knew your kin before you...Water Weed. Are you prepared for the ceremony, or will you succumb to the same fate that Water Weed did? Hmm?"

Swallowing once before speaking, Swamp Flower whispered, "I am...ready."

A chuckle erupted from the alligator's mouth before speaking, "We shall see...we shall see." The "vine" slithered down and appeared along side Swamp Flower. "Before going before the great spirit, Grandmother Cypress, you must give up something of great value...a sacrifice. What will your sacrifice be, child?"

In that moment, Swamp Flower understood why her grandmother had given her that flower. Try as she might to persuade her granddaughter to not go before Grandmother Cypress too early, Sand Crane realized that Swamp Flower had already made her mind up. So, Sand Crane gave her the gift of a swamp flower, in hopes of ensuring her granddaughter's success.

Picking the swamp flower gently from her hair, she set it down before the "vine". "I give you this token of my faith, as well as my belief, that I am ready."

The "vine" looked to child's sacrifice and nodded before leveling its eyes back at Swamp Flower. "You offer a token of love and family. It is accepted, child. Let me lead the way."

Turning back towards Grandmother Cypress, the alligator guided Swamp Flower towards a small opening within the tree and entered it...and vanished.

*

Resting now back at her hut, Sand Crane sat brewing some tea near the fire, when a lone, damp cypress leaf came fluttering in through the window, and gently stuck to the side of her face. Reaching up to grab it, Sand Crane gently smiled at it as a long tear rolled down her cheek.

"Good luck Swamp Flower...good luck."

*

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Chapter 07

“This Old House”

*Paul Freeman
Dublin, Republic of Ireland*

The old house looked the same, all crumbling mortar and rotten timbers, even the overgrown ivy appeared no different. He allowed himself a self-satisfied smile, who would have guessed, he thought to himself, that he would come back after all these years and buy the old heap. His eye was automatically drawn to an upstairs window, a dark gaping hole in the off-white wall.

Somebody had boarded up the front door and downstairs windows, they needn't have bothered, nobody from around here would set foot inside the place. He remembered growing up in the area, none of the kids would come near this place, even the bravest of them were petrified of the old house. It was still considered 'the old house' back then, he smiled as he remembered.

The place was haunted, they said. 'Don't go down there or the White Lady will get ye.' Some swore they had seen her, looking out from that top window, dressed in white. There were countless sightings and rumours, 'walk three times around the house at midnight, on the night of a full moon and she'll appear,' they said. 'Old Mick saw an English man do it back in the fifties. The man was never seen again.'

All nonsense of course, superstitious rubbish. He believed it as a kid though. He even thought he had seen her himself. He had accepted a dare to go into the house, he didn't want to but he was thirteen and there was a girl to impress, he could not turn down the challenge. He got as far as the front door when he heard a creak, he imagined a rope swinging from the rafters, when he looked up there she was. Her white gown floating in the breeze. She was staring at him, two black pits for eyes, that look turned his insides to ice. He ran and ran, to hell with impressing girls. He cried all the way home. He could laugh now.

They even had a name for the ghost, Mary McGuire, maid, married and widowed all in one day. The story goes, it was during the Irish civil war, the Irish rebels had fought the British army to a standstill and a ceasefire was declared. The Irish sent a contingent to London to negotiate a peace treaty, that treaty resulted in the island being divided, twenty six counties were set free, six remained under the control of the British. This sparked a civil war between pro-treaty and anti-treaty factions. Setting brother against brother, father against son. Ironically the pro-treaty side who formed a government used British guns against their former comrades.

The story doesn't say which side Mary McGuire's new husband fought for, only that on the evening of her wedding he was called away, there was an ambush and he was shot dead. So, a widow on her wedding night. They say she was distraught upon hearing the news and was found

hanging from the ceiling of the bridal chamber the next morning. Every night since she comes down off the rope and comes to the window searching for her lost love.

He shivered at the memory of the old ghost story. She's going to have to find somewhere new to live, he thought to himself, his construction firm had big plans for this place and there was no room for ghosts in the new development.

He kicked in the door and stepped inside into the darkness. It smelled of decay and neglect, the staircase in the hallway was rotten away, even the ceilings had gaping holes, he could see right through them. It's about time this place was demolished, he thought.

He heard a creaking noise, a shiver ran down his spine. He felt a breeze on his face, he swung around his eyes opening wide in shock. He couldn't breathe, his chest felt as if someone had stabbed him in the heart with an icicle.

Falling...falling...blackness.

*

The old house looked the same. The estate agent felt an odd, unpleasant sensation every time he came out to the place.

"So what happened to the previous owner?" A voice interrupted his thoughts.

"It's a strange story, he was a local lad, made it big up in Dublin with his own construction company. He came back here a few years ago with big plans to develop this site into a shopping centre. Then he just disappeared," the estate agent answered the young couple.

"How very odd," the woman said.

"Hasn't been sight nor sound of him in years. The company just want to get rid of the place now," the estate agent shrugged.

"Well that's to our gain so, we really like this village and plan to start our family right here," the man said, smiling at his wife.

"Well, she's all yours, come by the office later and we'll sort the paperwork." They shook hands and the estate agent left the couple to wander around their new property.

As he walked from the overgrown garden he glanced back. What was that in the window? He knew all the old stories about the house, every local did. He wondered should he have said something to the new owners... and have them laugh at him for spouting such superstitious nonsense? He shook his head at his own foolishness and with a wave left them to it.

*

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Chapter 08

“Marker”

*Brian Bigelow
Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA*

Bump!

Bump!

The noises woke him up from a dead sleep and that wonderful dream. What a nice one it was too with that brunette who was so damned hot! The sun, the water, sailing along and making love on the deck. Hmm hmm! He smiled a few moments as his thoughts revisited the dream.

Even better, in the dream he didn't have any gray hair which was so nice. Wish I could have that in real life.

Bump!

Hearing the sound again caused him to sit up in the bed and look around the room. The French doors into the bedroom looked just like they did earlier in the day except for the hallway shadows.

I've got to get some curtains for those doors soon.

That was something the realtor had mentioned when he was looking at the house he remembered. After several weeks waiting for the closing it was one of the things he didn't focus on. Somehow they went from looking charming to something that was kind of disturbing especially with that applique spider web attached to them.

Getting up Josh went to the window and looked out. Nothing was there! The October chill however was very noticeable, he had to get a bathrobe soon.

First night in a new place, I'm sure I'll get used to it and what in the hell is making those noises I'm hearing?

Making his way back to the bed he heard it again.

Bump!

Bump!

The hair on his arms and the back of his neck stood on end. This was definitely getting on his nerves. Rousing himself from the bed he made his way over to the window once again. An eerie feeling came over him, his stomach twisting within him. Just before he reached the window he heard the sound once again.

Bump!

Bump!

Pulling the curtain back he peered out of the window. Noticing the branch blowing back and forth eased his concerns. Seeing it hit the window casement eliminated it almost completely for the moment. He let the curtain fall back in front of the window then he headed back to bed.

Sitting down on the edge of the mattress he still felt on edge. His stomach hadn't quite completely calmed down yet. Willing it to stop churning just wasn't working.

Bump!

His ears pinpointed where the sound was coming from this time. Groaning, he rose to his feet and stepped over to the window to look out again. Man, this is getting tedious!

Pulling back the curtain he was seeing some kind of glowing ball that was floating. It faintly lit the concrete of the driveway and the light fog. Attention riveted, he watched it float on by. He wanted to go out to touch it but yet was frozen in amazement. Slowly, it moved along to the garage door and then over the privacy fence.

Josh stood there a few minutes to see if anything else would happen but it didn't. Mystery temporarily solved he went back to bed. Laying down he fell into a dreamless sleep for the rest of the night.

Waking to a bright shining morning the events of the evening were still fresh in his mind. Dressing quickly he went out to the driveway past the plastic carved pumpkin by the door. He followed the path of the glowing ball to where it went over the fence. Peeking over it to the other side he now could see something that he didn't notice when he looked at the house.

Why didn't I see those before?

Row upon row of grave markers greeted his vision. The graveyard was accented by the fall colors of the trees surrounding it. He realized he might have quite a few more rather unwelcome visitors if he stayed.

Why did I have to move in the day before Halloween? Is it too late now to get out of that contract?

*

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Chapter 09

“The Captain’s Inheritance”

Bruce Hesselbach
Newfane, Vermont, USA

Remembering how Emily had raved about her five brothers during her bouts of fever, Brian inquired of the elders of the town whether Emily had any living relatives at all. They took his inquiries as fear and reluctance to visit the witch’s cottage, and yet they honestly had to assure him that no, there were no relatives whatsoever.

And so, late one day in fall, Captain Brian Aille rode up to Dedman’s Mountain. The land was spectacular with all the trees in yellows, reds, and browns, with the air so light and fresh, and the sky so brilliantly blue. The trails on the mountain seemed somewhat overgrown. Bindweed flourished as a groundcover under the stately trees, as if to grasp the mountain in its grip and pull it underground.

The clearing, once full of flowering magical herbs and plants, was being choked by weeds, and looked rather blighted. The house, once so like a tower, had the door ajar and two windows broken. Inside, the art and calligraphy had all been removed, either stolen or burned.

“This is terrible,” Brian thought. “It was once a beautiful place, and the old woman who lived here was a good person.”

It being late in the day, Brian decided to spend the night. He built a fire in the chimney and found some blankets. He decided to sleep on a couch on the first floor, not wanting to go in the bedroom upstairs where he had strong memories of the plague that he had helped Emily survive. Yet she was burned in a witch hunt years later during the wars and now she was gone forever. Soon twilight came on, and Brian rested on the couch thinking about the lives of the herbalists. What fine people they were, devoting their lives to healing others.

All the same, the octagonal house had an eerie feeling to it. One could hear the wind in the trees sighing like dead souls. The associations of the house with a reputed witch were somewhat unsettling. Creaking of the house in the wind seemed to give it a life of its own.

Looted, gutted, the poor house itself seemed to have suffered as much as its owner did in the grip of fanatical and evil persecutors. Was there still some spirit left in this remote and darkened place? The sparks of the fire shed a faint dancing light on the old wooden walls and beams.

Suddenly he heard a kind of coughing sound, like someone clearing his throat. Instinctively, he grabbed his snaphaunce pistol and tensed for a fight. Instead, he heard a deep, rather apologetic sound.

“Brian Aille, we mean you no harm. We are the five brothers of Emily Dwergma. We will show ourselves if you are prepared. We do not want to frighten you.”

“Where are you? Come out into the open.”

“Our appearance will resemble spirits, but we are not ghosts. Please understand that we are your friends.”

“Just come out where I can see you,” said Brian, and he laid his pistol on the bed.

Out from the wall across from him emerged a figure. It resembled the transparent outlines of a ghost of a handsome young man, except that nose looked like actual human flesh.

Next came a ghost of another young man, except that the ears looked like actual human flesh.

After that came a ghost of a young man whose eyes looked like normal, non-ghostly eyes.

Next came a ghost of a young man with a normal human mouth.

Last of all came the ghost of a young man with feet and hands that looked like regular, tangible flesh.

“Are you Emily’s five brothers? Are you ghosts? Was she really a witch after all? Am I just dreaming this?” Brian said, his head spinning.

“We are not ghosts or spirits but beings that have existed since the world began. We were created by the curators when this world was first formed. Our duty was to test the living things as they were first created. We reviewed their features by sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell and we discovered which ones were good and which were flawed. When our work was done we were buried under stones and a mountain stream was diverted to flow over us. We slept for centuries.

“Then Emily came. She had great powers of second sight and she knew that we were sleeping below the stream coming off this mountain. She built a dam and moved the stream out of the way. Then she dug through our stony prison and let us see the light again.

“We thanked her and vowed ever to be the brothers that she never had. We helped her to find and grow magical plants and we taught her many things. However, no one can escape destiny, and we could not prevent her from being killed.

“Before she died she asked us to look after you. She said we could help you in many ways.”

“Thank you, thank you,” said Brian, not knowing if he wanted to banish these spirits or befriend them. “What magical powers do you have?”

“We can only be seen or heard by our friends, and, at present, that means only you. We can travel anywhere in the world and back in the blink of an eye. We can walk through walls.”

Each being then introduced himself in turn by pointing to his fleshly part. The one who called himself Eyes said: “Eyes can see for hundreds of miles. Ears can hear for hundreds of miles. Touch can feel the vibrations from feet approaching hundreds of miles away. Taste can detect poison as well as superior food. Smell can tell who is present within hundreds of miles, can distinguish between people, and can even tell if people are related to one another.”

The one with the nose said: “But these are not magical powers to us; they are how we are made. To us these talents are no more magical than the operation of your own senses.”

Brian stroked his chin. “These talents, as you call them, could be very valuable to a military man. One would never need scouts or spies. You would be better than a whole regiment of scouts.”

“We are pleased to be of service, Brian,” Ears said. “When you need us, just pound your fists together. We will see and hear it, and we will be there.”

And, with that, the five brothers vanished.

“Well, wouldn’t you know it,” Brian thought, “I’ve got an inheritance after all, and me an orphan. Who would have thought.”

*

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Chapter 10

“Billy Carver”

*Jason Mueller and C. L. Foster
North Judson, Indiana/Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA*

Billy watched the ghastly scene play out before his eyes in the low light. Halloween was his favorite holiday of the year. He loved costumes, candy, and being scared. His parents had told him he couldn't go trick-or-treating this year because he was fourteen now and “too old”. *How could you be too old for fun?* he thought. He decided a Halloween movie could be fun. Despite what his parents said, he was going to enjoy tonight.

The doorbell rang. He stopped watching the grisly murder-in-progress and stalked to the door. Yanking the door wide open, he was face-to-face with a princess. "Hi," she cooed, standing there in all her glorious splendor. “Trick or treat?”

“Oh look, a beautiful princess!” Billy exclaimed with well-practiced fake happiness, dumping a handful of Tootsie Rolls into the bag she held up to him. Her crown slid forward on her head, causing her to jerk the bag around and spilling the chocolate treats on the porch. Annoyed, but still polite, like any good boy should be, he helped her pick them up and shoved them into her bag.

“Umm, nice costume. You look really scary,” she said as he slammed the door ending the disturbance.

I don't even have a costume on! Stupid little kids always trying to kiss an older kid's ass. Lame, he thought nearly speaking aloud to the empty room out of pure aggravation. How dare she interrupt his Halloween movie?

The movie was immediately unpaused as he stepped back into the living room. The killer wielded a butcher knife and continued finishing off his victims. Billy watched in utter fascination as the killer did his work slashing and cutting, sending blood splatters in crazy patterns. The folks on CSI would give up in confusion or make a case-study out of his work if they saw it. He carved their faces, turning them into human jack-o'-lanterns; the killer was going to make sure they celebrated Halloween too.

Looks like they get a trick and the killer gets a treat, Billy thought with a chuckle.

Billy watched in silent awe as the killer, who he could never quite see, dragged the bodies to the dining room and placed them at the table. The father in his chair at the end, the mother to his left, and another young woman slumped lazily in her chair to the right. Happy little family.

Billy wondered if the young woman had a brother that she treated the same way his sick bitch of a sister always did him. Walking around half-naked, taunting him with comments like, “What are you looking at, perv?” when flashing him, sneaking her boyfriends into the house, and breaking all the rules. When mom and dad were out at the Knights of Columbus, she would screw whatever loser dredges she found on the street anywhere from the couch, kitchen, and even Billy’s own room. The poster child of perfection to her folks, always going to confession and pretending to be their angel, but took every chance she could to walk in on him in the bathroom or randomly touch him in ways a sister should not touch her baby brother. He was never any trouble, but always treated like the bad one. *I bet the killer wouldn’t take that!*, Billy mused angrily.

The killer finally had his project in place and went rummaging through the house trying to find candles. After what seemed like forever to Billy, the candles were lit and glowing on top of their heads. The killer screamed and cursed waving the knife like a conductor of a twisted symphony. Something must not be right with his creation.

He left the family in place and came back with an assortment of tools. In true festive pumpkin-carving technique, the killer hummed happily as he cut a section of scalp off the top of the father’s head, exposing the skull. Then, using a small saw he attempted to cut the top off the skull but the stupid head flopped back and forth. There is nothing duct tape can’t fix! The exasperated killer taped the father’s head to the chair to steady it and went back to work with the skull. Layers of bone seemed to disappear in seconds with the handy saw.

The killer then used a spoon straight from the kitchen to scoop out the insides of the skull. Instead of pumpkin seeds, pulp, and slimy fibrous strands, it was brain matter, blood, and nerves. What once served the family spaghetti or mashed potatoes, now served up daddy’s brains. To complete the job properly, the killer also removed the father’s eyes. With a sickening splat, they hit the hardwood floor, bounced slightly, then rolled under the table leaving a sticky red trail behind.

Once that part was complete, the killer placed the candle inside the hollowed out cranium and stood back to admire his handy-work. Yes, much better. Now the light glowed through like a true jack-o’lantern. The killer moved next to the mother, leaving the young woman to be the finale of his collection of Halloween-themed trophies.

DiiiiiiiiingDooooooooooooooooong!

Dammit!! Another sudden ring of the unwelcomed doorbell disgusted Billy. He had purposely shut off the porch light when the first beggar went away in the hopes of being left alone for the rest of the night. Why couldn’t these stupid trick-or-treaters just go away? Didn’t they realize they were ruining Billy’s Halloween movie?

He stalked angrily to the door and flung it open and there on the porch stood Andrew, one of his sisters many conquests. “Hey douche bag, where’s your sister?” he asked with his usual look of lazy contempt. He didn’t care about anything or anyone. Pathetic loser.

“She’s kinda busy right now, but you can wait for her if you want.” Billy said, stepping back to allow Andrew to enter. Andrew strutted in, the typical jock with his “I’m-better-than-you” mentality.

“Why are all the lights off in here? What are you doing sittin’ the dark? Pullin’ your pud?” the idiot mocked.

“No I was just watching a movie.”

“You don’t even have the TV on dumbass.” Andrew sneered. Billy just wanted Andrew to leave; he needed to get back to the movie. The killer was just getting to the good part. Andrew, standing there like an idiot, was wasting his precious time.

The movie started again much to Billy’s dismay as he watched the killer and the blade dance through the darkness wildly toward Andrew hoping to add to the congregation in the dining room. The killer jumped onto Andrew’s back slashing away in a rage but the brute strength of the football player was too much for him. In a rush of pain and adrenaline, Andrew flipped the killer sprawling him to the floor.

“What the hell!” Andrew screamed at the silent figure on the floor. He staggered to the wall, fumbling in the darkness for the light switch. Light flooded the room, causing him momentary blindness. Once his eyes began to work again, he slowly approached the body on the floor.

“Billy? My God, BILLY?!” With a quivering blood covered arm, he nudged Billy’s shoulder, but there was no movement. Then he noticed the tip of the knife sticking out of Billy’s side.

“Oh shit! Billy, I’m sorry!” Andrew sobbed as he turned the body over and gasped at the horrible damage the knife had done to Billy’s body. It wasn’t nice and neat like on TV or in movies. The knife had penetrated Billy’s little body and the force of the impact caused the blade to slash sideways, skewering him. Billy was a mangled, bloody mess and his barren eyes stared straight at Andrew.

Freaking out, he called for Billy’s sister. “Amy!” he shouted over and over.

He staggered upstairs finding a bloody mess on her bed. Horrified, he made his way back downstairs and headed to the kitchen. When he entered the dining room he found Amy and her parents sitting at the table with mutilated faces and a candle burning in their father’s skull in a macabre tribute to the night of tricks or treats.

“My God, Billy. What have you done?”

Andrew pissed his designer jeans and ran from the house screaming incoherently into the darkness. He tripped and fell onto the lawn. Little trick-or-treaters gathered around watching him curl up in the yard, sobbing and screaming. A miniature Iron Man silently walked up to the older boy; he looked down with vacant eyes behind the plastic mask, with all his might kicked Andrew in the face. Then a little girl dressed as Hannah Montana joined in with tiny swift kicks to his body. Then Batman, Spongebob, the princess, a zombie, and many others descended on the boy.

Within minutes, the swarm disbanded and skipped back off to their night of fun, happily shouting, “Trick or treat!”

Andrew lay dead on the grass. Just another gruesome Halloween decoration.

*

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Chapter 11

“Haunting Irony”

Joseph Alan Gharagheer
Toledo, Ohio, USA

Lacey hated Halloween. The events that transpired in her life on that day were almost unspeakable, and caused her complete and utter ruin. The only thing the poor girl wanted more than to forget about it altogether was to put an end to the thing that made her hate the day in the first place.

In order to have a better understanding of why Lacey felt so strongly about a day that most people associated with fun and happiness, one must first be provided with her gruesome back story. It was several years prior that Lacey’s comfortable life was ripped away from her. Everything she had come to know in growing up, every piece of her padded lifestyle, and every true smile she had ever had no longer meant a thing thanks to this very day.

Two years ago, shortly after Lacey had turned eighteen years old, she still lived with her father. She was fresh out of High School, and she had just begun attending a local college, but she saw no point in moving out just yet. While many adolescents wanted nothing more throughout High School than to escape their overbearing parents, she actually cared deeply for her father, and their relationship since her Mother’s passing had only grown stronger. He singlehandedly raised Lacey on his own, and they had the strongest of bonds, and really, she saw no reason to leave him to loneliness, at least not while she was still practically a child.

Lacey loved her father more than anything else in her life, and she hoped to never lose him. Unfortunately for the poor girl, two Halloweens ago, that was exactly what transpired. Her father was murdered while she was out at a party and it shattered her world. What was worse was that it wasn’t something as simple as being shot. Instead, the man’s body was ripped to shreds as if it had been gnashed apart by some kind of monster. Strips of flesh were strewn about the house when Lacey found what was left of her father, and there was barely enough of his face left for her to discern his identity. His heart was completely gone, with no trace to where it could have been. Seeing such carnage in her home destroyed the innocent girl that she was. As everything she held dear was ripped to shreds around her, she fell into an emotional darkness that she could never truly climb out from again. Despite all of the sarcasm and negativity that most people her age carried around with them, she had been a very positive person, however, her spirit died along with the rest of the goodness in her life.

It wasn’t long before Lacey dropped out of college and got an apartment of her own. It was tough, but she couldn’t live in that house any longer. The memories she had were too painful, and it was bad enough with the vivid images of what became of her dear father burned into her

mind without passing through the room. She could still imagine the bloodstained walls and carpet, and calling that haunted place home wasn't something she could bring herself to do.

The following Halloween she spent her time with her childhood friend Rachel. Although she had alienated herself from just about everyone that she had associated with before her traumatic experience, Rachel still stood by her. They had been friends for so much of their lifetime, and she agreed to give up having any fun on Halloween night and instead of going out with other people their age, she stayed over at Lacey's place to keep an eye on her.

*

The trauma had many negative effects on Lacey, but it didn't make her unreasonable. It wasn't like she was necessarily frightened that she was in any danger by being alone. She didn't think that there was someone out to get her, especially because the attack on her father was so clearly caused by some kind of animal. She didn't fear that anything would happen to her, but her own mind was scary enough that she would rather have someone she trusted nearby to distract her. As the day had drawn nearer, she felt herself being pulled closer and closer to the axis of insanity and she needed to keep her emotions and mind intact if she wanted to successfully make it through the horrid holiday.

*

Her mind did get the best of her, however, and images of her frayed father filled her mind, giving her migraines to accompany her emotional pain. She ended up laying down to rest while Rachel promised to remain in the living room in case she was needed. Lacey filled her feathered pillows with tears much like those they had grown so accustomed to throughout the year since her patriarch's passing. Memories of the man who raised her carried her off into a saddened slumber, and she slept for several hours before waking.

Lacey woke up knowing her life couldn't get any worse, and she would have been a lucky girl if that had only been the truth. At midnight she fell to her knees in her living room, her psyche in shambles, viewing a repeat of what had happened to her the previous year. Rachel's golden blonde hair was the most recognizable thing, strewn about the room, stuck to different furniture and walls by chunks of bloodied scalp. Lacey fell forward, her hands shaking above Rachel's open ribcage. Despite the gore, Lacey had to search. She had to know. Through everything, all of the torn flesh and bloodied, broken bones, she couldn't find her old friend's heart anywhere. She simultaneously vomited and cried uncontrollably until help arrived.

This year was going to be different. Whatever monster haunted her, she wouldn't let it get away with it again. She had left her old town for a year after the incident with Rachel, only just now returning on her least favorite day, Halloween. She made her presence known, certain that whoever it was that wanted to continuously torture her soul would come for her. She was counting on it anyways. She checked into a motel room and she waited. After everything she had been through, her mind had become her enemy. She tried to keep herself steady, but the smallest of triggers had the capability of tossing her into a relapse. On this day, however, she vowed to keep herself together. She had to get revenge. For her father, and for Rachel, she had to exact vengeance. It wasn't an option. She would end this monster's reign this year no matter what.

She sat on the edge of her bed, waiting for something to happen. It was Halloween. Something had to happen. Anything else would be inconsistent. The silence was deafening to her ears, but it was important that she concentrated, or at least tried.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Three short knocks came at the door very suddenly, which made Lacey jump from her seat. She got up, feeling for the knife handle sticking up out of her boot to be sure it was still there and made her way to the door. Seeing that it was the sheriff, she opened the door. She let him in, and tried to listen as he explained that he was coming to check on her. He also tried to tell her that returning was a bad idea, but her mind was becoming clouded. She instantly got a terrible migraine and just as she thought she would pass out, clarity fell upon her instead.

Lacey suddenly remembered everything. She remembered how she used nothing more than her own teeth and nails to rip her father and friend to shreds. She remembered the feeling as her fingernails dug into their chests, ripping apart their warm flesh. She remembered the tears that left the eyes of the people who thought her a loved one. But most of all, she remembered the feeling of warm, beating hearts between her teeth. She licked her lips and a sickening smile spread across her face as she pounced on the unsuspecting sheriff.

Hours later, Lacey woke up on the bathroom floor of the motel room. She didn't remember passing out, but it must have been after a shower, as she was completely clean. She walked out and what she saw destroyed her. She had missed it again. She failed herself. She failed her childhood friend. But most of all, she failed her loving father. Unable to live with what she was witnessing, she grabbed her knife and raised it to her throat. With a swift swipe, she spread her own flesh, bleeding herself out in hopes that she could finally end the terrors that haunted her. She fell to the ground, a final tear emerging from her eye as she crashed. While she viewed her suicide as a failure, she had no idea that she was actually avenging her father's death by finally killing the monster- herself.

*

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Chapter 12

“Night Cache”

*Cheryl C. Ramirez
Cisco, Texas, USA*

She knew it would be dark by the time she got to the last cache but she had her flashlight and was going to give it a shot.

She had found a Geocache near the cemetery at Taylor Chapel. It was a small ammo box that another geocacher had hidden and then published the coordinates online. It had been there for a few years and several other geocachers had tracked it with their handheld GPS devices. They all logged their find in the little journal inside the box. It was like a treasure hunt but without any objects of value. Just the challenge of the hunt and an "I was here". Geocaching was a little-known past time that had quickly spread all over the world for those who knew about it.

She left Taylor Chapel and took a back road toward Sipe Springs. The road deteriorated until she thought she had accidentally wound up on someone's pasture road. There were just two tire trails in the sand with grass growing between, a fence to the left, and large trees stretching over the passage to form a dark tunnel. Her GPS device still showed that she was on a marked road. She kept driving but had her doubts.

The sky was completely dark now and what would have been a lovely country drive in the day began to seem more like a mistake.

There was a thumbnail moon low in the West. She had already decided to skip a particular cache because of the creep factor of finding it alone in the dark. She thought she was headed for the one at Sipe Springs but when she rounded a corner, she knew she had come upon the one she had intended to avoid.

The cache was called "Pains of the Wagon Train". It was near a grave from 1870, right next to the road. It was where a wagon train had passed through and a three year old girl had died on the journey. They had buried the little girl and had moved on.

She imagined what it must have been like for the family to leave their little girl behind. To drive off in the wagon toward their destination and leave her body buried alone in the woods. She could picture the mother staring at nothing with empty eyes from the wagon seat.

There was no cemetery and she had been expecting just an old grave marker near the road like the one she had seen on the way to Moran. Neither grave had ever been moved. They both remained in their original locations as part of history.

When she rounded the corner and the jeep lights panned across the darkness, she saw more than just a grave marker. Several stones outlined the tiny grave and over the many decades people had left things; tokens of memorial that now covered the grave. There were Virgin Mary statues, tilted or fallen completely, weathered and dark. Old dolls in various stages of decay, a small chipped cherub statue, silk flowers faded and torn, and rosaries draped over everything. These things seemed to burst from the road in black and white, illuminated by the stark headlights, shadows thrown deep into the darkness beyond.

This would have been an interesting stop in the daytime with other geocachers. They would have looked over all the things that had been left; taken the time to make out the dates on the lichen covered stone. But alone at night in the back-country, gooseflesh slipped down her spine.

Part of her wanted to say "Forget the geocache. I'm not getting out of this jeep." But she didn't; she would have felt silly. There was nothing out here but trees and dust covered toys.

She dug out her flashlight, left the jeep running and found the cache across the road under a fallen fence post. The night was still and quiet as she retrieved the little log book from the metal box. She took it to the hood of the jeep to note her geocacher's handle and the date. She turned to replace the log book but was halted by a glance at the grave. The hair raised on the back of her neck. The Virgin Marys were upright and all facing her.

She felt a strong urge to drop the log book and get in her jeep. She thought the statues had been toppled over and disheveled when she pulled up. She wasn't sure now. She forced herself to walk back to the cache and replace the log book. Her hands trembled and she fumbled with the latch. She just wanted to be done and gone. She shoved the box back under the fence post and stood up, patting her pocket for the reassurance of her cell phone. It wasn't there. She had left it on the hood of the jeep. Panic quickened her heartbeat and shaking legs nearly betrayed her as she stumbled back across the road.

She didn't want to look at the grave again. She tried to focus on the jeep. But something had changed. She clenched her jaw and turned her eyes to the grave. The dolls were sitting up, their arms outstretched toward her.

Her heart pounded. This was a sick joke. Who would do this? Who *could* do this so quickly and silently? She slapped the hood of the jeep with both hands. No cell phone. She was so out of breath that she was getting dizzy. She searched the ground but could barely see anything now. Inside, she must have left it in the seat. She yanked open the jeep door. A small cry thrust from her mouth and the heat drained from her body. A dirt-covered doll lay in the seat.

She stumbled back a step. She was losing her senses and felt like she was no longer completely there, as if in a dream. She spun around off balance, arms out, her breath jerking in and out in gasps. Something else had changed. She felt faint. A dark shape lay in the ditch by the fence post. She had just come from there. She stared until realization settled over her. She was looking at her own body, her own blond hair soaked in blood, draped over a rock.

Her heart stilled. The cold night air stole through her soul. She felt thin as a wisp of wind. A hand slipped inside hers. She looked down and the solemn girl looked up. Her mouth did not move but her words crawled into the woman's mind. *Don't ever leave me again.*

*

It is Geocache #GCTM7K. Stop by if you're ever in Texas. Any time. Day or night.

*

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Chapter 13

“Linda Vista Hospital...In Memoriam”

*Martin Reaves
Auburn, California, USA*

Beyond the door, in shadowed hallways where paint slowly peels itself from the walls to expose what never should have been hidden, dust motes almost form something recognizable as shredded curtains stir in the absence of breeze. On the memory of my skin sensations prickle, invisible breath stirs unseen hairs on my neck, calling forth phantom gooseflesh.

They are in the hall, at the far end, their heavy footfalls and artificial light shattering the calm.

Abandoned here in a time that was but is no more; once comatose, then awake, then away again. And later the straps—restraints, they said, for my own good, for my safety and the safety of others. But that was then, long before the doctors fled and the others begin to scream their pain into the plaster walls and ceilings, those screams turning to pathetic cries of grief and finally to pleading whimpers that someone, anyone, if there’s a God, please let it end.

For some it did end, a flame extinguished, a final exhale, release. And for some of us that flame sputtered but did not die; we found ourselves suspended in the space between breaths, just past some cruel tipping point, over-balanced and falling but never landing. Lodged between a life of horror and a deferred eternity.

Out there...whispers in the dark, calling for reply, like a hesitant liturgy, their call at once hoping for and fearing response...the probing voices, scuffling shoes, jittery bouncing lights stabbing into darkened rooms. Their queries shatter the silence, becoming more insistent with each step: *Is someone here? Anyone? Can you hear us? Please make yourself known if you can hear us.* Two doors down now, shambling closer, their ragged breath propelling a cushion of distress ahead of them, that terror they push forward like a desperate barrier that will keep them safe or somehow prepare them if their entreaties should be answered...closer now, nervous giggles jaggling on the air.

In the dusty murk, long ago hidden away from hurting hands, away from dirty needles and barbed straps, away from the taunting scalpels, safe in my small shadowed corner—apart from it all, I crouch, but no longer cower. Huddled into myself, I wait.

They are closer now, closer to my space, my sanctuary. One door away, the dread clear in their childish words of bravado, *Come out, come out, wherever you are.*

I will not disappoint them.

*

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Chapter 14

“The Voice Beckons”

Erik Gustafson
Story City, Iowa, USA

Stacie had lived with voices inside her head for her whole life and it was exhausting. A shrill, echoing voice that didn't command her to hurt herself, or even to kill her friends as one might assume is the nature of auditory hallucinations. This eerie murmur deep inside her core beckoned to be found, begging Stacie to rescue her, to save her.

When she was a child and quite a literal person still, she searched for this imaginary person high and low. Instead of being afraid of closets and dark spaces like under her bed, she always checked for the mystery person calling out to her. She peered down into storm drains—whenever she could get close enough to one without her mom flipping out, that is. The darkness seeped out from the opening, but there was, of course, never anyone down there. Once she about had a heart attack when a family of raccoons—a mother and three tiny babies—came scurrying out and hurried across the street. She stopped checking gutters after that.

An overweight, bald therapist had once tried to help. Even gave her pills. Not a bit of relief.

As a teenager, she was embarrassed by the voice and did her best to pretend she didn't hear the woman. She was sure it was a female voice but regardless of who it was, her little follower had no business in her active social life. There was no way she was going to let on to her real friends that she had an imaginary friend. She would be mortified and everyone would surely avoid her just as sure as they avoided the girl who picks her nose and eats the gooey snacks that she pulls out. So Stacie became fairly adept at snubbing the inner turmoil.

Ignoring the voice did nothing to ease her burden. In fact, it probably made life more stressful. Made her feel crazier than she probably already was.

She went off to college, not with a career goal in mind or to pursue higher learning but with the hopes that moving far away might quell the demon screaming to be saved. It didn't, but she made friends and managed to cope. Managed to pass her classes and squeak by. The availability of alcohol in the dormitory helped a great deal, much more so than the anti-psychotic medication she used to take.

Stacie was pretty loaded on energy drinks and vodka, in fact, on the night she went with her new friends to a haunted house located clear on the other side of the city, on the outskirts of town. An abandoned farmhouse.

The haunted house started at the side of the house, descending concrete steps into a pitch black cellar that looked like a angry mouth. There were plenty of twists, turns, and other frights. Stacie heart was racing from the spirits jumping out at her and her head was spinning from the spirits she had drunk earlier. Happily, the voice was silent.

Until the end.

Somehow, the journey had led them into a large barn. The expansive structure reeked of old hay. At the final turn, they had to run through chickens were hanging from the ceiling. The chickens were wet and somehow kept warm, which grossed out the girls as they pushed the dangling birds out of their way to get to the exit. As she pushed away the final rows of chickens, she was confronted with a large mirror that someone had written in red lipstick-looking paint: "What does fear look like?"

People were staring at themselves and making faces and giggling, then exiting.

When it was Stacie's turn, however, she stopped cold and her chest felt like her heart stopped. There in the reflection, stood an emaciated figure in tattered clothes that hung off bony limbs, pressed up to Stacie's side, stroking her hair, as if she were a lover. The figure had thin messy hair and wide yellow eyes.

"Why won't you help me?" The haggard form in the mirror shrieked out. Stacie felt spittle on her cheeks from the creature's coarse words, as if it came through the mirror. Its eyes were not glaring out at her; they were burrowing into the eyes of Stacie's mirror image.

Her skin went cold and drained of color.

Stacie bolted from the barn, past her chuckling friends.

"Did you guys see that?" She asked when they finally caught up to her.

"See what? You running in a panic?" One girl said and they all roared in laughter.

Stacie tried to ignore them, but her face burned with shame. She would never be free of the voice, free to be herself and enjoy life. It just wasn't meant to be. Her shoulders drooped like dead flowers and she turned toward the car. Her stomach lurched and she vomited on the gravel.

She wiped the hot liquid off her chin and stood. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was the years of only hearing the voice and never actually seeing the speaker that drove her, but Stacie took a deep breath, pulled her hair back, and marched past her friends into the barn.

Someone in dark overalls tried to tell her that this was the exit, that she had to go around, but Stacie ignored him and pushed through the door into the gloom.

Eyes tightly closed, she faced the mirror. Deep down, she knew it had been her imagination and when she opened her eyes she would only be staring at a pathetic loser.

But she wrong.

The poltergeist waited in the reflection, grinning. What teeth weren't missing were brown and cracked. "Save me, Stacie!" Its words drifted from the mirror like an icy breeze.

"What do you want from me?" Stacie shouted. People around her were keeping their distance, avoiding her by walking in a huge arc. Stacie figured they probably thought she was part of the haunted house.

The woman's arms reached out for her.

Stacie found herself reaching back, but her efforts were blocked by the surface of the mirror. She half expected her hands to pass through.

"Save me!"

"Shut up!" She screamed, making fists.

She pounded the mirror and the entire wall wavered briefly and then everything shattered. Silver shards of mirror exploded, showering her feet. She was crying, staring at a brown plywood wall. She looked at her hands, blood coated them. She could feel the stings of glass embedded in her face and legs; could feel the soft tickle of blood.

People around her were gasping and fleeing for the exit.

She continued staring at her hands as fingers became blurry. She saw two sets of hands, oscillating from her wrists. She felt sick and knew she was about to vomit again.

The double image of her hands solidified and an extra set of arms extended down from the extra hands. She fell to her knees, barely aware of the glass tearing into her.

A ghostly image was yanking its way out of her.

The hands clasped around Stacie's wrists and pulled. She sat helpless on the broken glass, feeling the stretching and struggling of this thing jerking its way out of her body. When it was completely out of Stacie, it continued to clench her wrists.

It was the woman from the mirror.

"Hey, sis," she chortled. It was the voice from her head coming from person standing before her.

The woman stank of putrid flesh. Her eyes widened and her shoulders rose as she pulled on Stacie's wrists. Hard. Stacie spilled forward, tumbling *inside* the woman.

Stacie vanished.

People rushed past the old lady in the torn garments as she shuffled out of the haunted house, smiling. She heard a few of them calling for Stacie and chuckled at the irony. She savored the crisp night air and headed for the fields.

*

I wrote this down for all those who continue to search for Stacie. She is safely tucked away deep inside me. I hear her screaming sometimes, begging me to let her out. I love the sound of her voice.

*

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Chapter 15

“The Fog Cemetery”

*Matthew C. Nelson
Jacksonville, Florida, USA*

The fire was the first thing built when the Tallow's finished setting up camp. Having heard about the campfires that got out of hand several years back encouraged them to even take a class the week prior instructed by one of the rangers. Before the class ended, Mr. and Mrs. Herb and Willow Tallow, along with their daughter, Jasmin, all knew the proper ways of fire construction, as well as the proper way to put it out.

The Tallow's had been looking forward to this weekend camping outing for about three months. The plan had been originally to go during the summer, but rethought that after they factored in mosquitoes and erratic weather fronts. After one night's discussion around dinner, they all agreed to go the first weekend in Autumn. They had originally planned on camping down by the river, but were told about a campsite through a friend of theirs. The campsite, called Fort of the Forest, lay about a day's journey up the side of Blackburn Mountain, one of the smaller peaks found within the Rockies.

With the fire made, the tents were set, and dinner eaten, they all decided to go on a small nature hike around the area, to familiarize themselves with the terrain. They'd heard that in the late 1800's, the area had been frequented by man a person hoping to strike it rich on gold. In fact, the ranger told them that quite a few gold mining shacks dotted the park, all of which, sadly enough, were off limits mainly due to the fact that they were probably no longer structurally sound.

As they made their way through the wooded path, they came across a small brook that grew deeper as they followed the trail. By the time they'd come across one of the gold-mining shacks, the river was about waist deep. They were a bit startled when they came up to a burly-looking man crouching over the ground with his back to new-comers. "I can hear you behind me. If you knew what's best for you, you will leave this mountain," the old man hoarsely called over his shoulder. "We appreciate the warning", Herb offered up hesitantly, "but my family and I are camping up here. We don't mean any harm." "You may not 'mean any harm', I don't care...leave now or suffer the consequences!" the man snapped. Quickly gathering his family together, they pushed onward down the trail. At the slightest word from either his wife or daughter, he hushed them.

About an hour later, the incident had been forgotten as the family began to see more and more signs of animal life. It was especially beautiful, definitely the kind of place they were looking to find. Time passed quickly by and daylight began to slowly descend over the trees, with the setting sun steeping the land in a golden glow. As they began to make their way back to their camp, a thick fog had rolled in from out of nowhere. As the fog thickened, everything became

covered in dew. As it grew darker, it got increasingly cold, so cold they could begin to make out the outlines of their breath. Realizing that up ahead is where they'd ran into that rude man, they all stuck together.

Coming into the clearing, the man wasn't there. "So much the better" was the general consensus by the family as they pressed on. All of a sudden, some of the fog revealed grave stones all around them. There must have been well-over fifty of them. "Daddy", Jasmin whimpered, "I'm scared. I want to go back to camp...now." "We are honey. Daddy won't let anything happen to you. We're not that far. One we get there, we'll make some popcorn and play some games. Isn't that right?" She turned to look at her husband, but he had vanished.

Welling up with a tightness in her chest, Willow cried out, "Herb? Where are you?" She and Jasmin screamed this as they scanned the area. Stepping out of a tree, one hand behind his back and displaying an odd smile, Herb spoke, "Dear....you really should have listened to the man." He pulled a hand axe from behind his back.

"Now relax, this will be painless. The both of you should be feeling quite sleepy right...about...."

Mother and daughter dropped to the forest floor.

"...now."

*

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Chapter 16

“Hippity Hoppity”

*Adam Sifre and Splinker
Wayne, New Jersey, USA*

Charlene remained flat on the ground, her back pressed against the outside wall of the Kansas Children’s Home, hidden by a gigantic holly bush. She did her best to ignore the thorny leaves scratching at the back of her neck and legs. The rule was no moving until the third Easter egg was thrown. She couldn’t see Eddie or the remaining children, but the occasional sound feet scraping on tarmac confirmed they were still on the roof. Wilbur, however, she could see just fine.

‘This whole thing is just... stupid.’

Wilbur stood about sixty feet away, just in front of the rusty swing set. He swayed back gently back and forth with what was left of his face turned up to the sky. Charlene had seen them do this kind of thing before. Eddie called it “tuning out,” but Charlene called it “Z” time. Partly because she thought this was the closest thing zombies did to sleeping; but mostly because she knew it drove Eddie crazy. Eddie always had to be right about everything.

‘He thinks being fourteen makes him king of the Home.’

It was Eddie’s idea to celebrate Easter with the egg hunt and to Charlene’s surprise the other kids didn’t say no. That’s not true. They liked the idea.’ Eddie would never have gotten away with it two weeks ago, but things had gone from “Night of the Living Dead” to “Lord of the Flies” since then and Eddie was no longer just a 14-year old jerk. Eddie was trouble.

Charlene sucked in her breath as the third and last “egg” bounced off of Wilbur’s leg and rolled just a few feet away. It was painted bright yellow with little blue circles.

“Shit.”

Wilbur remained in Z-time and paid it no mind. He’d been a short, chubby, mean man before. Now chunks of Wilbur were missing and Charlene guessed he weighed a few pounds less. Her eyes fixed on Wilbur’s hands. Fingernails kept growing on the undead and Wilbur was sporting some beauties. They must have been two inches long, all of them. Not a broken nail in the bunch. They looked like weapons.

Three eggs: One at Wilbur’s feet; the bright red egg on the grass by the tether ball pole (no ball of course) at the far end of the playground; the third, out of sight somewhere to the left. They weren’t real eggs. Eggs were a rarity at the orphanage even before the zombies. Now they were more precious than gold. These Easter Eggs were just painted rocks.

Three eggs, one tuned out zombie and a lot of open ground. ‘That’s not so bad. Easy peasy.’ But in the back of her mind, Charlene kept thinking: ‘Stupid.’ Stupid for opening her big mouth and showing Eddie up in front of the others. But not stupid for wanting to leave.

They couldn’t stay here forever. Wilbur might be the only zombie in the playground at the moment, but he wasn’t the only shambling neighbor – not by a long shot. Others came and went, and more seemed to be sticking around lately, some wandering in the visitor’s parking lot (getting more use after the apocalypse than before). At least they hadn’t seen any undead children lately. Charlene shuddered. The children were FAST. They didn’t shamble, they ran. Most of the undead orphans left with the group that had attacked the orphanage, including Emma. Charlene blinked away unshed tears and put Emma out of her mind for the moment.

Charlene wanted to leave, so of course Eddie wanted to.

“We have beds, food and the doors lock. We should stay and wait for help,” he’d insisted. Charlene wanted to smash his face in.

“We don’t have a lot of food. And every day more of those things pop up. If we leave now, we can be in Little Falls in three hours, maybe four. There’s a supermarket there. And police, probably.” She wasn’t sure about that last part, but she wanted to believe it. Had to believe it.

They argued until Eddie tumbled upon the idea of the egg hunt. If she could grab all three eggs and make it back to the dormitory, Eddie and the others would go. If she didn’t make it...

Charlene was horrified to hear herself saying “Deal!” although the shocked disbelief on Eddie’s pimply face almost made it worth it. Almost.

‘Stupid’.

“Let’s go!” Eddie’s voice from somewhere on the roof.

Before she could talk herself into living underneath the Holly tree, Charlene sprinted onto the playground.

More shouting from the roof behind her. Charlene sprinted to the tetherball pole, giving Wilbur a wide berth. She could see the front of him now. His collared shirt unbuttoned and stained with God knew what. Something dark hung over his belt and Charlene almost lost her footing.

‘That’s intestine.’

She reached the grass at the far end of the playground and something bounced off the asphalt to her left.

“Almost!” Eddie hooted. “First one to hit her gets pudding with dinner tonight!”

Still running, she bent and snatched the red ‘egg’, shoved it into her pocket and started for the egg by Wilbur’s feet. With all the yelling – ‘what a douchebag’—she was terrified Wilbur would

wake up. Wake up and start moving. Better to get the one by him now and then take her time looking for the last egg.

Wilbur stood, quiet as a lamb, 30 feet away.

“Easy peasy.”

Charlene circled a bit and approached from behind. She stopped a few feet from the egg. If Wilbur took it in what was left of his mind to start shambling, she wanted it to be now, with his backed turned to her, rather than with her bent over with her back turned to him.

More rocks landed around her, but she ignored them. They’d have to get pretty damn lucky to hit her from here.

“Hey. Wilbur. Hey.” Nothing.

She took a deep breath and went for the egg. She grabbed it easily and kept running. Then someone got lucky and Charlene fell to the ground like a sack of dirt.

*

It was full dark and Charlene wandered aimlessly, from swing set, to dormitory, the yellow rock still clutched in her hand. It was dark and she smelled food in the building. It smelled good. It smelled like Eddie.

She was so hungry.

And she was fast.

*

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Chapter 17

“Last Will and Testament”

Jiva Fang
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

Leanna’s face is smiling and serene, nothing like the look she’d had when I killed her. Of course it’s kind of hard to achieve that damn passivity when someone is beating the shit out of you with a crowbar. Not that Leanna was ever a calm one then. If she was, she’d probably still be alive, but hey, that’s another story. Right now I just wanna know what the hell she’s doing staring at me from my cup of hot cocoa.

I’m sitting in one of those overpriced coffee shops. It’s getting hard to ride around without running into one of these damn stores. Even though I don’t drink the fancy stuff with the stupid names, I needed something hot, and cocoa was just about the only thing I recognized on the menu.

I’m getting distracted again, where was I? Oh yeah. Leanna’s in my cup. She did promise me she was gonna make me suffer but I was already suffering, that’s why I snuffed her.

Leanna’s been dead a good nine years so I figure maybe I’m just tired. I been on the road for days this time, and my head’s about as numb as my ass from riding that damn Hog. I really just wanna stir this cup of cocoa, but in the back of my mind I’m wondering --what if she’s still there when I’m done.

I’m not one to flip out over shit. You can’t be in my line of business if you’re high strung. So I figure I’ll just ask the right questions. I flag down a girl who’s walking by, wearing the store uniform.

“Hon, is it me or is there a face in my cocoa?”

The kid laughs for a quick second, (that laugh you give old folks who can’t find the power button on the computer) and then says to me, “Yeah, my brother Vinnie does that. He’s good, too bad we can’t afford art school.” She points at the kid behind the counter and I look over in time to see him playing in another cup with a coffee stirrer.

“Any idea who that’s supposed to be?”

The girl looks at my cup real hard and then shakes her head.

“Nah but I’ll ask him. He usually does someone who’s in here.”

Some guy walks in the store right then and gives her the 'hurry up' face, so I figure I'll let her get on with her life.

"Never mind, I'll ask him myself."

I pick the cup up and walk over to the counter. Vinnie is handing over a fancy-pants-achino or whatever, to a customer and I'll be dammed if the face in the cup ain't his homely ass wife. She's standing there beaming at him like she seen the Mona Lisa in the mirror.

I gotta give him credit, the little Em-Effer has talent. I put my cup down in front of him so he can get a good look at it.

"This here's a real good job, son." I smile and he smiles back, a young kid, still got life in his eyes.

"Thanks Mister. Glad you like it.. but I didn't want you to like it too much to drink it."

"I just wanted to know who this was supposed to be, If I drank it I wernt sure you'd remember as good."

The kid looked a little confused. He checked around the store right quick and then looked back to me.

"She's not with you, sir? I thought I saw you come in together."

"This lady is in the store?"

"She was right next to you in line. Kept looking at you real sweet like. That's why I did it."

"What's your last name kid? So I can say I knew you when?"

"DiNetti." The kid blushes, obviously he don't get compliments often.

I tip Vinnie a couple of bucks and then sat back down with that damn cocoa. I stir it real good and real long until Leanna's face is gone, then I drink that cocoa like it's the last thing I'll ever taste. It just might be.

I write myself two letters, right then. One of them is instructions on how to find my stash, all eighteen million dollars. I stick a key in that one. The other one is to my lawyer telling him if anything happens to me, he needs to mail out my first letter.

When I'm getting ready to leave Vinnie comes over to me.

"Hey mister, that lady?? She's out there sitting on your Harley."

I walk out the door and cross the street to the mailbox. I wish I could be around to see Vinnie get that letter. That kid deserves to go to art school. Leanna has never looked better than she did in that cup.

*

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Chapter 18

“The Sleeper”

Pamela Griffiths
Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England, United Kingdom

Jenny had only been eighteen years old for two months, she was now allowed to drink alcohol legally, she was really looking forward to the Halloween party with her friends. The party had been arranged by her best friend Christine, they were going to use the old barn at the bottom of her garden.

Christine's parents had agreed to it, they had arranged to out for the evening themselves. The girls and their partners would be able to enjoy the party without the worry and stress of keeping things tidy, they could clean up afterwards and not have too much pressure on.

'I can't wait, it's going to be a brill party' Christine was excited as they were arranging the decorations.

'Yeah, it'll be really cool, the others are bringing some booze as well so we can get rat arsed and no one will be there to tell us off' Jenny said as she swung from a wooden beam hanging a jack o lantern.

They had spent a whole week getting the barn ready for the party. Christine, Jenny and a few other friends had decorated the barn and turned it into an eerie, spooky place. They had managed to hang bunting from the wooden beams and there were a few skeletons hanging around too. They had put a table in the far corner of the barn which they would use as a bar.

A large pasting table was covered with plastic Halloween themed table covers ready to display the buffet food when the time came. They had set up the electrics via an extension lead from the mains socket outside which was set up for the outdoor tools. They had electric lights set up which were in keeping with the Halloween theme. They would bring out the music centre shortly and then it would be all set up.

Jenny and her boyfriend Danny were invited; Christine had invited her boyfriend Steve too. There would be five couples attending the party, they were all friends. Christine had invited Stuart and Elli, Johnny and Gemma, Carl and Bella. The boys had decided it would be good if they could bring their own drinks and not have to rely on what the girls decided on. So they had pooled their resources and bought a few crates of lager to take to the party.

Christine and Jenny made lots of sandwiches and buffet finger food. They made some alcoholic punch in a large bowl. Everything was now ready for the party. It was Halloween and the party would begin at seven.

'Make sure you behave yourselves girls' Christine's mum told them.

'Come on Sandra' Christine's dad said as he ushered her towards the waiting taxi.

The girls waved them goodbye. It wouldn't be long now. They took the food out to the barn, let the party begin.

*

The sleeper was beginning to wake up, it was Halloween and it was time for him to come alive.

Once a year he would be let loose for a few hours, before having to return to his long sleep again.

Many, many years ago, the sleeper was hanged for raping the daughter of an old woman. The old woman unbeknown to him was a witch, she had put a curse on him just as he was hung from the gallows, the spit second before he died. His soul never went away and now he was doomed forever to the Halloween curse.

The sleeper was doomed to return every year on the 31st October, All Hallows Eve, to claim the souls of the young. He would stalk and suck out the life of at least one youngster; then he would return to his own private hell until the following year.

As the sleeper awoke, he relived the moment of his demise, he saw the gallows from years gone by and felt the noose around his neck, a hood was placed over his head. He could feel the noose tighten just before his light went out. He felt the drop and at that point he felt the curse enter his body. It was a jolt after the initial jolt of the drop, as his neck broke his spirit was whisked away and darkness enfolded him. His spirit was taken somewhere, but he didn't know where the witch had placed his soul in limbo. He was doomed for all eternity to return to earth once a year. He had no choice but to fulfill the curse that had been bestowed on him. He had no life and no death, his soul was forever taken by the curse.

It was beginning to get dark and he could see children dressed in their costumes. He saw this every year; he was getting bored of picking one or two of these brats to feed on. He wanted something different this year. He wanted to frighten, kill and feed; he would have his fill before this night was over. The sleeper hid amongst the shadows, watching and waiting.

*

Bella, Gemma and Elli came first then the boys arrived carrying the crates of lager. Christine and Jenny had arranged the food on the pasting table and set up the music which was playing through the speakers they had placed in the corners. The eerie lighting of the jack o lanterns and a few low powered bulbs gave out a subdued illumination which added to the Halloween scene.

They had all dressed up in various fancy dress costumes. Christine had dressed as a witch, Jenny was a zombie and Elli was Morticia from the Adams family. Bella had dressed as a green witch and Gemma went as a vampire. The boys had all dressed as vampires with various versions of the Count Dracula look.

'Hey this is great' Danny said to Steve as they set up the bar.

Johnny, Carl and Stuart agreed. This was going to be a party to remember. They had already taken a few photos on their mobiles and uploaded them to their facebook accounts.

The party was lively, the music was playing; they were all eating, drinking, dancing and enjoying themselves...until the sleeper arrived.

*

The sleeper heard the sound of the music coming from the barn, he was drawn by it. He knew this was going to be fun, he didn't get much fun. He moved from his hiding place in the shadows and he walked through the barn wall and mingled with the young people. He was really going to enjoy this. He was spoilt for choice, which one of these spirited souls would he choose first?

Danny saw the shadow whisk past him and felt the cold chill as the sleeper entered. The others felt the cold chill but didn't take much notice. They were too busy drinking and dancing and laughing to worry about it. Danny was the one that the sleeper had chosen, he was drawn to the corner of the barn by the sleeper.

Danny collapsed and the others thought he had been drinking too much, even though the party had only just started. Jenny went over to Danny she shouted Christine and Steve over. Danny didn't move when they tried to revive him.

'What the hell's up with him?' Christine asked Steve, she didn't want any trouble or they wouldn't be allowed to do this anymore.

'Something's happened to him, he isn't moving, he looks dead'. Jenny screamed out.

They stopped drinking and dancing and Elli turned the music off.

'Someone call an ambulance' Gemma shouted above Jenny's sobs.

Johnny dialed 999 on his mobile, an ambulance was on its way.

The sleeper was feeling good now; he had sucked the life out of Danny. He had done what he set out to do. Danny's soul was inside the sleeper along with all the other souls he had collected over the years. He hadn't finished yet though, there was still time to get at least one more soul before he had to return to his infinite hell.

The sleeper picked Elli, she was unaware of what was happening, she was drawn to the other corner of the barn. She couldn't resist, she felt the sleeper as he invaded her body with his cursed soul, he dragged her soul out through her mouth as he sucked her breath away, Elli collapsed in a corner of the barn.

The two dead friends were beyond all help and hope now. Nothing would bring them back. Their deaths would probably be reported as death by misadventure, caused by too much alcohol, even though it wasn't...

The high pitched sirens of the ambulance shattered the sleeper's calm; he drifted back into the shadows. The sleeper knew that he would have to return from whence he came, he was happy but cursed. This was his lot. He was saddened that he had to leave this world until he could return again next Halloween.

*

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Chapter 19

“Cursed` Me”

*Kay D. Ziegler
Bedford, Indiana, USA*

Morning rose like any other day for priestess Medusa. No sun greeted her as she bathed in the river Ameles. No warmth to stroke her cheek as she dried and dressed herself on boulders that had settled on the pebbled shore. With no light, no birds knew to come and greet her as she stumbled, sandal-footed, up a well-known path back to her chambers, where Medusa was anointed with lavender-infused olive oil by none other than Athena herself.

“Autumn solstice is upon us, young one,” remarked the golden-gowned goddess as she ran a brush through Medusa’s long, dark locks.

“Indeed, mother goddess,” replied Medusa as she looked down at the olive silk that today’s outfit was made out of.

“You do not seem pleased with this, Medusa. Tonight is a time for celebration! Your heart should be light and filled with mirth.”

“I do not look forward to the sacrifice.”

“It is your firth! What an honor.”

“I do not even want to go.”

“What would you rather do?”

“Travel south. I wish to see the sun and hear the birds. I do not recall the last time I saw such a sight.”

Athena stopped brushing the younger priestess’s tresses. “Absolutely not,” growled the yellow-haired woman. With her anger, thunder boomed outside Medusa’s window.

“Why not?” demanded Medusa as she stood and faced Athena. She planted her fists on her hips. “You’re just jealous of my looks and want to hide me away. Is that it?”

“Shut up, you insolent little girl! You know that not to be true,” shouted Athena as the woman’s eyes flash in anger and rain began to pound against the window. “The southern wilderness is dangerous! It’s filled with lustful men and vile beasts who’ll rip their pray to shreds.

Medusa glared at her mentor, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she strode from the room into her walk-in closet. Looking at her costume, the priestess sighed and fingered the white silk of the bodice and skirt. *I'll look like a dove*, thought Medusa, after examining the gossamer wings attached to the garment as well as the feather-covered mask. Although she had never met one in person, she had seen drawings of them in the scrolls and tomes held within Athena's library.

*

Dressed in the dove costume, her dark hair cascaded over her shoulders and settled amongst her wings. Behind her disguise, she stared at the people who gawked at her. "Why are they staring, Athena," she whispered to the Goddess, who was dressed as a warrior.

"Shouldn't they? You look ravishing," said the woman as one of the guests took her by the hand and led Athena onto the dance floor just as the musicians began to play.

Wandering around the party, she examined the gods and goddesses and the priests and priestesses all dressed in the Autumn solstice finest. They dressed as ghouls and goblins, faeries and pixies, birds and beasts of all kinds, and as moral soldiers and healers.

Medusa stopped at the table piled high with festive treats. After choosing candied figs and finger-shaped cookies decorated with almonds and fruit jell, she poured herself a glass of spiced cider. Sipping on it, the young priestess looked out at the crowd, but saw nothing.

"My, it must be Aphrodite herself! Never before was there a glorious and more ravishing woman than the dear goddess of love," boomed a young man from behind her.

Medusa jumped as she turned to face the speaker. He was dressed as a lion, although the only clue to his costume was that his mask had a mane. This man was gorgeous. Dressed in only a waist wrap, she noticed as firm and formed his body was. Tight, golden curls peeked out from under the sides of the disguise and his sparkling blue eyes peeked out at him from behind the mask.

"I am not Aphrodite. I'm not even a goddess," Medusa corrected.

"Oh, really? You should be! What is your name, fair maiden," asked the young man.

"Medusa."

"A fine name for a fine girl," replied the lion. "So, shall we go bob for fruit? Or would you care to carve a gourd? Or, would running your fingers through food while blind-folded be more to your liking?"

With each of those suggestions, she shook her head. None of those things interested her. She told this man so.

"You don't want to be here."

"No."

“Where do you want to be?”

“Not here.”

“Then, where?”

“Nowhere.”

“There’s got to be a place, Medusa” said the young man. He smiled at her as he placed a hand upon her upper arm and rubbed it gently. “Where is that place? I can take you. Just tell me.”

“I can’t. I’m not allowed. Athena will be furious!”

“We’ll be back before she knows you were gone. Now, tell me, where is this place?”

“What’s your name? I don’t travel with strangers.”

“Zeus.”

Medusa raised an eyebrow. She wasn’t quite sure she believed him. “Well, Zeus... I’d like to see the south,” she replied slowly. When he offered her his hand, she glanced at Athena, who was enjoying herself and then took his hand in her own. Dashing outside, they climbed atop his Pegasus and flew off into the night.

*

Landing on a shore, Medusa walked through the wet sand up and down the reef. Her eyes were closed as she let the sun bathe her face. Listening to the gulls and the waves crash against a rocky cliff, the priestess smiled. “This is gorgeous,” she said to Zeus, who walked hand-in-hand with her.

“You are gorgeous,” retorted the god as he pulled her close to him.

She gasped and opened her eyes. She stared at him and began to quake as he picked the dark-haired priestess and kissed her lightly upon the lips. Medusa pressed her hands against his chest to push him away. “I can’t,” whispered the woman as she slipped from Zeus’s grasp and headed up the beach.

“You can. You will,” Zeus said in a firm and serious tone.

“No, I won’t. Take me home...” Medusa snapped as she headed towards the Pegasus.

“Now, now, you wanted to come here. I did something for you. You do something for me,” purred the man as he grabbed her arm and squeezed.

Medusa’s knees gave way as Zeus forced her down so she was lying in the sand. As he straddled her, the wings of Medusa’s costume snapped. “Get off of me,” sobbed the priestess as he slipped her dress up and kissed her neck, arms, and chest.

*

A few hours later, they returned. Medusa was pale and dirty. Her costume hung from her shoulders and the wings were limp and torn. As she walked back to the temple, she glared at Zeus, but did not say a word.

Athena was the first to see them. “Where did you go?” demanded the goddess. She crossed her hands over her chest as she stared at the young woman.

“It doesn’t matter,” Medusa spat.

“What happened?”

“He raped me!” the broken girl screamed, pointing at Zeus.

“I did something for her and she did something for me,” replied the god in a calm voice. “She was quite the alluring lady out upon a beach of the south.”

“Not only did you disobey my orders, but you let a man invade you! You are no longer welcome here, you dirty thing. You monster,” shouted Athena. Raising her hand, she transported the Medusa and herself away from the temple.

In the midst of desolate island, the two appeared. The sandy landscape was littered with dead trees and dark rocks. No sun shined on this corner of the world.

“You are banished her forever more for you do not deserve the presence of man or god. No longer are you pure, but a monster,” growled Athena. She held her hand up again and with palm out, the goddess chanted a curse upon Medusa.

The woman screamed as he hair fell out in chunks and snakes replaced her dark locks. “Oh gods,” she moaned as her skin tightened and cracked. The woman fell to her knees as Athena left. Looking up, she discovered her horrific power. A bird flew overhead and as it glanced towards her, it fell to the earth as stone.

“Cursed` me,” whispered she.

*

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Chapter 20

“Lost Cause”

*Ellen McKinney
Plano, Texas, USA*

Autumn was my favorite time of the year. I loved the aroma and sounds. I can hardly use any of my senses. I do so miss feeling fabrics and the softness of a kiss, to taste a candy apple, smell pumpkin spice, and see the wonderful colors and to hear the crackling of a warm fire.

I lie dormant all year except for the month of October. My name is Maria Alonzo-Hudson. Who am I? The real question, one might ask what are you? I am a specter, a ghost, an apparition, spirit or a presence of one's imagination. Most pass my ghostly presence as Halloween fun.

How did I die? I was raped and stabbed repeatedly with some sort of sharp object. An object that was never found nor was the murderer caught.

My case was noted as a lost cause, but I want to think one day it will be solved so I can rest in peace. My husband Detective Rabb Hudson tried to solve my murder, he gave it his all, did his best, but I became a cold case. I am cursed to roam in limbo and only in October. My reasoning was because I was murdered on the thirty-first.

If only I could reach my husband, I want to help him solve my case. I was able to haunt the people around him, but I cannot reach him. What sight I do have was because I got a glimpse of the perp who killed me and when I say glimpse they were dressed in black and I did not see a face.

My little daughter Brie liked to dress up for Halloween and I miss making her costumes and taking her trick or treating. I did pass tradition to her, now she does for her own daughter, my granddaughter. I would always remember her as a small child and she would remember me as a young woman, she was still quite small when I was murdered.

The years have flown by and my ghost was still around, but my case was no closer to resolution. It was a terrible curse for me to still be here.

Brie also became a detective such as her father maybe my lost cause would be found again. But, events happen and I am unable to reach her either. What events you ask?

I am limited as to where I may roam the nature of the beast I suppose or I am doomed to walk the earth in limbo. I get caught up haunting one person and until they hear me I cannot move on, a person in particular was someone close to my heart or was.

I came up behind her, she was my best friend when I was alive, Mallory Chestnut she was sitting at my kitchen table or what was my kitchen table having breakfast with my husband. I cannot cite them for being a couple. My death brought them together, but she left her husband for mine.

My breath was like a whisper and I could see the hairs on the back of her neck stand up and she was feeling coldness only a specter can bring.

“Did you feel that?” she asked Rabb.

“Feel what?” he replied as he placed a plate of eggs and bacon in front of her. He was always one for cooking. I was not my talents lay elsewhere or did.

“The briskness in the air,” she replied.

“The weather is changing.”

“It was more than that. I think Maria is trying to reach me.”

“A ridiculous notion, the dead don’t contact the living. Plus she’s been dead for fifteen years why now, why would she try and contact us now?” I had been calling out from the grave, he just cannot hear me.

“The notion is not so ridiculous if you make a statement such as that. Her murder was never solved and she is not resting comfortably.”

“Are you listening to us? She’s dead and buried.”

“It makes perfect sense,” she said sugary as if a light bulb lit up over her head. Yes, I was putting the idea there for her.

“Does it?” he asked.

“Sure it does, tomorrow is the anniversary of her death.” Of course it was the anniversary of my death and it took you long enough to realize it, I was being a very sarcastic ghost. Okay, I have every right to act as I do, I was murdered give me some credit.

She was so on the right track and I was reaching her, it had only taken years wasted on her every October.

“I have exhausted every avenue my on trying to solve this case.”

“Get a fresh pair of eyes to look at her file,” Mallory said with a seeming knowledge of how a detective worked.

“Like who?” Rabb questioned, “No one wants to take on this lost cause least of all me.”

“Lost cause,” Mallory hollered out, “How can Maria be called a lost cause? She was someone dear to so many people including me.” I was putting words in her mouth. Whether or not she wanted to mean what she said was altogether a different story.

He gazed at her stunned she was yelling at him. He then said something that came to a shock to me. "I thought you wanted her out of the way so we could be together?"

I said such wonderful things about him looking for the killer and the killer was haunting me. The blame should have been directed to him all along.

The newspaper the next morning said it so clearly, "Yes, the husband did it. Detective Rabb Hudson was arrested on October 31st the anniversary of his wife's murder along with his accomplice Mallory Chestnut. His daughter Brie Hudson-Macon set a hidden camera and was able to get a full confession."

I wish I could thank my daughter for what she did for me. I was resting comfortably and when I saw Brie set flowers on my grave was my curse lifted. I was no longer a lost cause.

*

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Chapter 21

“Spider Face”

*Mel L. Kinder
Livonia, Michigan, USA*

Did I wake before the scream or was it the scream that woke me? I must have knocked everything off of the nightstand scrambling to turn the lamp on. When I realized I was gasping for air I held my breath. If they were crawling on me I didn't want to inhale them. Just the thought made me shutter.

"Jim!" my wife, tired of the new habit scolded me. "There are no spiders. Go back to sleep. Gees, I'm on day shift tomorrow." She turned over and muttered, "Damn those little heathens!"

I splashed water on my tired aging face. "I'm not crazy," I said to myself. A few days ago I overheard the neighbor boy messing with his sister. With her fingers stuffed in her ears she begged him to shut up. But he kept repeating it: In your mouth and out your nose that's where the spiders go! I chuckled and thought of my sister. The rhyme reminded me of a tale about spiders, how they live inside of our lungs and stomach. At night while we're asleep they come out to dance on our faces. The boy's voice repeated in my head so many times I was beginning to sympathize with his sister. The day was a blur even as I watched the clock.

"I made you some sleepy tea. It's soothing," she said setting the over-sized mug in my hand. "Oh and don't worry, I won't tell your friends if you like it." There was humor in her voice. What a wonderfully patient woman. I hadn't even bothered to ask her about her day. What a schmuck.

As I set the empty mug on the nightstand I thought, "Maybe that's not the best place for it." With that I scooped everything but the lamp into the drawer of the nightstand. I don't know how long I sat at the bed's edge before giving in. I had to sleep some time.

Sleep came fast. Maybe vanilla tea was the answer. Who would have thought tea without caffeine served a purpose? The moment didn't last. The crawling sensation tickled around one nostril and traveled across my face. I wanted to brush it away but sleep paralysis prevented it. Was my mouth open? I couldn't remember. The crawling was on both sides of my face now. I could feel this happening on a layer above dream. This was real. Unable to move or make a sound drove me mad. All I could do was focus on the prickly legs as they went. What were they doing? It felt like they were marching down my face. There had to be dozens of them.

Finally, I launched from the bed, as usual but this time without the clattering. Ah, good thinking Jim. But the anxiety was gone and I felt disconnected. "Jim! No! Jim!" I had done it again and Jewel was screaming at me. There was something wrong with her voice. This time was different.

I tried to talk to her but she didn't listen. It was just like being frozen with the urge to brush away the spiders.

My perspective changed and I was beside her as she yelled, not at me but a man kicking, screaming and clawing at himself. Jewel arm wrestled the man for something he was holding. I wanted to help her but all I could do was stand there. I saw it as if in slow motion, her fingers slipped from the man's wrist. I recognized the scar on his arm. I could see the immense force he used to pry it free. It was too late to stop myself. All I could do was watch as I drove the writing utensil into my own eye until no longer visible. I saw nothing after that. The spiders may have been real or it could have been blood running down my face from the clawing. I guess I'll never know.

*

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Chapter 22

“The Coffin-Cage”

Sherrill Willis
Rhineland, Wisconsin, USA 2-24

Darkness. I lifted the lid, a useless enterprise since I knew I couldn't reach the lock, even with my mind, damn them! But this night was different, because I could smell people approaching, getting closer, I could hear their axes clinking against the chains they carry with them to do their dark deed. They do not know what they are releasing, thinking only of the money my limbs, my organs will bring them. Smiling, I welcome their hushed reminders to do this quietly and quickly.

“I think I got the lock off, here, take one side and we can lift it off. Did you bring the other lock?”

“Of course I did! On three – one, two, THREE!” the man grunted, and the sound of metal screeching rent the air as the iron cage was lifted and scraped across the lid of my coffin.

I threw the lid off, catching the two men by surprise. I launched out, catching the first man and tore his throat out with my teeth, his warm blood spraying his companion. The first man was not my evening meal. His friend, however, would do nicely.

“Thank you for releasing me, I have missed human...companionship,” I said, entrancing the other man as he reclined, still, on the grass before me. I reached down, and grabbing a fistful of his jacket, pulled him to eye level. I licked my fangs and his fear was intoxicating, it made his heart beat faster, and the smell of him was as delectable as the finest Swiss chocolate. “You didn't expect a woman, now did you?” I asked, glancing at the faded headstone. “They never did get my name right. Hear my name before you die, for it will be the last sound on this earth you shall hear. I am Vladamira Dracul,” I said, closing my eyes as I bit his neck, almost delicately, and sucked him dry.

Wiping the back of my hand across my face as I dropped his desiccated body to the ground, I took in my surroundings. An older graveyard, with few new bodies – the smell of decay was light – but where? I searched my memories and couldn't place why I was here, wherever here was. Then I took stock of my clothes, or rather, what was left of them. Apparently I had put up a grand struggle from the sight of the rips and tears in my bodice and skirt. *Right, clothes first, terror later.*

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Chapter 23

“First Day on the Job: The Hunter”

*Gerald D. Johnston
Corunna, Ontario, Canada*

It's 3am and several mounds of half devoured tacos and take-out wrappers litter the pavement in a trail leading up to the cardboard box she calls home. From within you hear a series of feral grunts punctuated by a blend of belches and groans. You want to throw back the scrap of threadbare carpet covering what you assume is a door, but once you've seen what lies beyond, it can never be unseen and you can only pray for death or early Alzheimer's.

Throwing caution to the wind, you tear the door flap back and peer inside. At first, your eyes war with your brain - This can't be! It has its naked legs wrapped tightly around the head of a barrel-bellied bald man, who, for his part, is attempting to untangle his arms and remove his head from the gaping gash that seems bent on performing a birthing in reverse. His attempts are futile. And soon his only movements will be the twitching of his extremities as his brain backfires in the final seconds before death.

Suddenly, its head lolls to the side and one glazed eye finds you. From a slit beneath its fuzzy upper lip, it issues a moan, then it speaks: "ang on an wait your turn, luv, an oi'll letcha bounce a few polliwogs off the back of me troat."

You turn to run, but as you rise an arm snakes out and snags your leg. You scream but no one hears. You beg but your tearful pleas fall upon only one set of ears (or ear, actually, since one was lopped off during a fight with seven Danish Sailors), and they don't care for your tone...

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Chapter 24

“Chaos Theory and the Clown”

*Neil Leckman
Denver, Colorado, USA*

Jason Albright had always wanted to be a clown as long as he could remember. In grade school he was the class clown, which ultimately meant he was hated by most teachers as a disruption to the learning process. Girls loved to laugh at his antics but would never go out with him on a date because he was a bit of a fool and they didn't want to be made fun of. Jason was oblivious to all of this though as his one thought was to leave everyone he met with a smile on their faces. At first his jokes fell flat since he didn't know the first thing about humor and timing, people laughed at him, instead of with him. Over the years he learned to fine tune the humor so that he got the timing and punch lines down to a fine art, the future looked bright.

Jason's other passion was physics, which would seem to be at odds with a sense of humor on all levels. Jason believed there was a basic theory that could tie the two together, teachers tried to discourage him from trying to link two things that were so dissimilar. Late at nights when he sat in silence and the loneliness ate at him like cancer he would totter on the brink of comprehension and panic. At those moments he would get up and turn the stereo or television up real loud to push the panic back before it engulfed him. After the moments passed he would laugh at his own failings and fall asleep exhausted by the effort it took to once again escape the madness that hungered for him as much as he hungered for laughter.

Nobody realized what lay behind the constant smile and jokes. The only one who came close to the truth was his physics teacher, the one who committed suicide in his garage by sucking on exhaust fumes. His eyes were wide open with a look of terror, yet he had a smile on his face. The detectives that took the case came to the conclusion there was no foul play involved since the teacher left a letter explaining how he lusted after several students both boys and girls. He knew that his passions would eventually disgrace his family and hurt his wife of twenty years so he took the 'noble' way out, with a smile. The ligature marks on his neck looked to be from a failed attempt to hang himself earlier that same day. The frayed rope lay beside the driver's side door on the oil stained garage floor.

Jason went home bruised and sore and laughed himself to sleep the day it happened. He stayed home sick for four days and hoped the hand shaped bruises on his arms would fade before he went back to school. The teacher had fought back fiercely in the final moments as the subtle poison, not exhaust fumes, took the last of his life. It wasn't the first life Jason took; in fact it wasn't even one of the first one hundred lives he took. Each one of those deaths ate at his humanity a little. Now that humanity had been stretched so thin all he had was lifeless eyes and a big smile. So when he graduated he decided to enroll in clown school thinking he could find

himself there. Instead what he found was a school about chaos and the people who dealt it out a little at a time. His first lesson was the tiny car that clowns pile out of. If ten clowns piled out that meant that twelve went in, two paid the price so ten could come back out. Chaos would let you bend the laws of physics, but only at a price. The first time they piled into the car he heard blood curdling screams as the first two clowns went in and a fountain of blood erupted covering the other clowns in red. It all faded except for their noses and lips. Chaos had a price for happiness and it was souls, lots of souls. Tonight was a special performance that would feed chaos for a long, long time, at least Jason hoped so. At random spots under the portable bleachers he had planted cylinders of poisonous gas that were odorless and almost instantly fatal. Each one was set with a timer that would open up the valve twenty minutes into the big show. That would be right after Christine came out and did the stunts on the back of her horse Wilbur. Just long enough for the “Flying Wilanskis” to come out and climb up to the high wire. Once there the clowns would roll out in their little car and pile out to entertain the crowd while the Wilanskis prepared for their act. Juliette Wilanski had laughed at him when he told her that he was in love with her. Well now he was going to have the last laugh.

He had taken one of those cans of oxygen you could buy for trips into the mountains and jury rigged a small facemask. It would only last long enough for him to watch his handiwork, but that was all he wanted. As the Wilanskis were climbing up the rope ladders to their perches people in the audience began to slump in their seats, dead. Soon panic ensued, but that only hastened the deaths as people breathed quicker. Jason sat in his tiny car, mask strapped to his face as people all around him fell down, gasped and died. He could feel the chaos reaching out and plucking their souls away. He waited until Jake Wilanski fell from the high wire and snapped his head at an impossible angle. He climbed out of his car and looked up at the remaining members of the Flying Wilanskis and waited. In panic they crawled around looking for an exit, but there was only thick tent fabric everywhere they looked. Tim fell next, his leg snapping when he hit a platform part way down, the bone sticking out as he hit the ground unmoving. Tony reached out for Juliette, his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell forward, bouncing off the tight rope, spinning as he plummeted to the ground. Juliette held her breath, but it was silly to think that would stop the inevitable from happening. She slumped across the tight rope and slid off, arms limp at her sides. Hitting the edge of the net placed below her in case she fell, it bounced her over next to the dead horse Wilbur.

Jason ran over and laid down next to her, removing the tiny mask he wore and throwing it into the crowd.

When the detectives got there one of them looked down at Jason and said, “Leave to a freaking clown to think this was funny!!”

Chaos was happy too, and for one day random deaths didn’t happen, but only for one day.

*

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Chapter 25

“Dead for Good”

*Rosemary Lynch
Wiltshire, England, United Kingdom*

“Get your butt off my desk,” a voice ordered sharply as he walked through the door into the dimly lit office.

“Sorry Sir,” Eric replied, giving a cheeky smile but immediately jumping off.

“I have a mission for you, it’s worth eight hundred credits,” Sir announced. An approving smile spread across Eric’s face.

“You are to watch a young woman tonight. You will have to transport fast, Toracs are after her.”

“Toracs, why the hell are Toracs after her?” he asked shocked.

“We believe she’s the last known descendent of the Martorgorn. They want to use her to....”

“Open the slip-stream,” Eric finished, thoughtfully.

“Yes. You know what night it is?”

“Halloween,” Eric replied grimly. “The one night the gate is open and the Toracs can get through.”

“You are the only one who can stop them.” Eric nodded, he needed the credits badly.

Jessie’s head spun as she hurried on wobbly legs down the back alley. She knew she shouldn’t have come this way, but it was late and she had drunk too much, drowning the sorrows of her lonely single life at her mate’s Halloween party. An icy shiver suddenly flooded her body, her heart beating fearfully, she glanced over her shoulder her eyes locking onto a huge black shadow darting towards her. She screamed raising her hands defensively. A silhouette of a man jumped between them, and Jessie’s very soul trembled.

She woke up in bed still wearing her witch’s outfit, not entirely sure how she had got back, her mind vaguely remembering some man helping her. Glancing at the clock, she yawned, it was four in the morning. Her throat dry from too much alcohol she went downstairs and switched the kettle on. Her heart stopped, he was behind her she could feel him. Spotting a knife poking out of the washing up bowl and panic taking hold, she grabbed it. Spinning around she screamed.

“Get out of my house!” The man nearly fell over with shock almost as if he thought she couldn’t see him. Her eyes widening with fear she lifted the knife pointing with it, but she was not looking at the man, it was what was behind him. A huge, two armed, drool snarling creature came out of the shadows, lashing out the creature sent the man flying backwards and he fell hard against Jessie.

Launching himself to his feet and snatching the knife from her hand he swiped the creature through its belly. Grabbing its throat, he said something and in an explosion magical light it was gone.

He stood leaning against her fridge-freezer breathing heavy, glancing over to her he caught her eyes; Jessie’s heart shook, he was gorgeous.

“Who are you, what was that ‘thing’?” Strangely she wasn’t afraid of him.

“A Torac,” he replied. His dark eyes settling on her, he felt his heart begin beating for the first time in years. He smiled.

“What are you doing in my house,” she whispered. “Was it you in the alley?” He nodded. They both jumped at the hammering on the kitchen window. It was her neighbour, Richard.

“I’ll get rid of him.” She tried the door. “I can’t open it, it’s stuck.” Richard peered through the kitchen window, looking down to the floor horror flooded his face, and he was gone.

“Why didn’t he see you?” she whispered fearfully. He walked towards her.

“Because I am dead,” he replied. Her eyes wandered all over him.

“You’re a dead?” Jessie managed.

“Well, temporarily anyway,” he said. “I’ve been sent from between worlds to protect you from the Toracs.”

“What that ‘thing’?” she asked, confused. How could he be dead? He nodded.

“I don’t understand how you can see me. It’s impossible for a human,” he informed her, puzzled. She held her hand to her head feeling dizzy.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concerned. She shook her head just as her legs gave way. Catching her he carried her into the lounge, and sat down with her. She leaned against him, feeling him, hearing him breathe. How could he be dead?

“But I can hear your heartbeat,” she whispered. He smiled.

“Perhaps it’s because it’s Halloween?” he suggested.

“Why were you following me?”

“You are a descendant of the Martorgorn, the creators of the new world. The Toracs want to get to the new world and destroy it. They want to use you to open the slip-stream.” He lifted a strand of hair from her eyes.

“What are they, aliens or something?”

“Or something being the better description,” he said, raising an eyebrow. She looked at him.

“How would I open this slip-stream?” she questioned.

“Just by stepping into it,” he replied.

“Really it’s that easy?”

“It’s not easy, believe me. I have thought about it a hundred times.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I have four months left in between worlds.”

“And then what?”

“If I don’t get enough credits, then.... I’m dead for good.” She turned to him.

“Dead for good, what does that mean?”

“There would be it no afterlife, just dead for good.”

“What are credits?”

“I get credits when I help a human. I need six thousand to get into the new world.”

“How many do you have?”

“Five.”

“How much am I worth?”

“Eight hundred,”

“What’s the new world like?” Wandering over to the window, he looked out.

“It’s wonderful,” he turned, smiling at her, “it’s a happy place.”

“Do you have to be dead to go there?” she asked. He nodded, glancing at her, she was so beautiful. She sighed disappointed.

“Can I touch you?” he asked.

“Touch me?” she questioned, surprised.

“Sorry,” he apologised, looking back out the window. Standing up she held out her hand. His eyes meeting hers, he took it, rubbing his thumb on her soft skin.

“I haven’t felt anyone for nearly twenty years,” he whispered. Her heart shook as he moved in closer to her, before she knew what was happening he was kissing her. He broke away.

“I’m sorry,” he apologised, flustered.

“Don’t be. What’s your name?” she asked, trembling.

“Eric,” he replied. Her chest heaved at his name, dead or alive, who cared? They kissed again and for a moment she thought she had died and gone to heaven.

“Eric?” she cried, as sheer panic shot through her, he was gone.

“Send me back!” Eric yelled furiously.

“Send you back, you’ve got to be joking. That’s it for you, your last chance,” Sir growled.

“Send me back now or she’s going to die!”

“She’s already dead, you failed your mission.” Eric’s face froze, a frown creasing his brow.

“What do you mean she’s dead?”

“Exactly that, I don’t know what you’ve been playing at, she went off the chart an hour ago.”

“Impossible I was just with her.” Sir frowned.

“She doesn’t know she has passed, damn it, bloody Halloween. I’ll have to bring her in.” Eric shook his head.

“No, I’ll do it,” he insisted.

“No, she belongs to me.” Eric rubbed a worried hand across his face glancing towards the control panel it was still set for Jessie’s. He dived for the switch, whacking the button down into reverse he jumped into the beam.

“Where did you go?” she cried, throwing herself at him.

“No time,” he whispered, hugging her. “They pulled me back, they said you were dead.”

“I’m dead,” she said, shocked. He nodded, frowning in thought. Taking her hand they went back into the kitchen.

“Oh my god,” she screamed. Her body lay against the kitchen units, blood seeping from her chest.

“I killed you,” he stuttered, glancing to her, “when I fell on you, the knife must have stabbed you!” Her heart lifted at his words.

“Eric, if I’m dead, I can go with you to the new world.”

He smiled astounded.

“You want to be with me?”

“Yes,” she whispered desperately. Grabbing her in his arms his kissed her.

“We have to go between worlds, when we get to the other side don’t let go of me, not for a second.”

“You are sure I can open the slip-stream?” He touched her face.

“Yes.”

Taking her hand they slipped, reappearing in the control room. Sir looked at them startled. Eric launched himself at him, knocking him out. Hurrying to the control panel he turned a number of dials, his hand hovering over one button.

“This is it.” She nodded. As his hand rose and slammed down hard they dived into a beam of light. Eric pulled Jessie tight against him, her body shaking as she enveloped them in light.

“Did we make it?” she whispered, opening her eyes, and looking onto a beautiful city. Eric nodded, turning to her.

“I love you,” he said, smiling. It was good to be dead but not dead for good.

“I love you,” she whispered happily, snuggling into his arms.

Richard sobbed as the police broke down the door, heartbroken as Jessie’s dead body was lifted into the ambulance. He hated Halloween.

*

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Chapter 26

“Unlucky”

*Gretchen Steen
Pensacola, Florida, USA*

“The dew on my skin, lying under the predawn sky, I wait for the warming sun. It’s a beautiful day amongst my friends, the brisk air and sunshine. I do remember the brief saffron flower that shriveled and swiftly fell away. The open spaces have become cluttered and my family is growing ever faster.

Oh, not the evil crows again, to peck, scratch and devour. There must be something out there, to relieve this weary soul. My shiny curves and broad middle will surely please someone; but here, they will not find me.

Here he comes, machete in hand, I guess it’s time to go. Brush my bottom; my vine-like arms lay wasted. Off we go to the big, wide world, I’m so very happy! Now I see I’m not alone, ‘Hello Fritz and George and Manuel’. Off we go, on a bumpy ride, to where I’m still not certain. One by one we’re carried away, and put in a disheveled heap. They come to probe and prod us, but we don’t utter a peep. Then up I go, oh joy I’m saved, away from that rowdy bunch. A little boy named Tommy has taken me for his own. His sister Lil cried and sobbed until Fritz was taken too. ‘Hurry now, time is wasting’ I heard a voice chime behind me. With that voice, a strange satisfaction did come. Quickly, and with precision, the scalpel does its deed. In and out, its blade-cuts repeated into my lustrous skin. I feel no pain only pleasure. I’m scraped and gouged, my insides are gone! How can I possibly go on?

One, two, three ... the easy stuff was done, but now for the ragged, jagged number four. Oh, stop, please STOP!!! That tickled too much, you must be finished soon.

You stepped back and grinned; the children jump up and down, ‘Light it, please, PLEASE!’ I patiently sit and watch and wait, to see what’s in the offing. I feel inner warmth and smile with an unnatural, pleasing glow.

The spooks and hobgoblins came; the witches and fairies unparalleled. They passed and never took notice.

My inside is scorched, my eyes grow weary and my smile has dropped to a frown. My skin is dark and puckering, like that of ‘ole man Brown’.

Soon I’ll be cast aside as mere garbage; a stinking, rotten shell. But then, what did I truly expect ... it always turns out the same ... for us, the ‘Happy Unlucky Jack-O-Lanterns!’

*

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Chapter 27

“The Band Marched Through”

*Erik Gustafson
Story City, Iowa, USA*

The marching band streamed down the hill in perfect lines. As they approached the grandstand, the drum major cued the players. The drums, trumpets, clarinets, and all the other instruments those high schoolers held proudly in their hands, burst into song. But it wasn't an upbeat version of some popular pop hit or even an inspirational patriotic piece: They began playing the dark bars of a requiem.

My son was somewhere in that formation with his saxophone. It was always hard for me to pick him out, what with them all dressed in identical white and orange band uniforms—barrel-chested coats and over-sized hats with orange and yellow plumes waving off the tops.

Even though I knew that my son had never practiced such a dismal tune, at first the haunting music didn't seem out of place. It was a week before Halloween, after all. The streets were lined with proud parents, sitting on blankets and colorful folding chairs. Kids were playing in the nearby swing set and slides. Dads and moms held their cell phones out in front of them, recording the bleak tune.

But as I watched the crowd turn from cheering and excited to quiet and confused, I knew my hunch was right on the mark.

The slow, low dirge rolled through the leafless trees and chilled the fall air. Dead leaves danced around me, some prancing into the streets. The animated leaves somehow seemed ominous and I was oddly drawn to the lazy arcs they made in the breeze.

The leaves acted panicked, or at least alarmed. I doubt the leaves were retreating, fleeing the scene, desperately trying to catch a tail wind out of the park—but they might have been.

What a silly thought to have when I should have been focusing on my performing son.

I was near the edge of the street, anticipating being a good dad and videotaping as he marched by. But my cell phone dropped to my side as I watched the leaves and the eerie song filled my head. It had a puffy, hypnotic effect.

My wife stood beside me, her long black hair was bunched up in the hood of her orange sweatshirt, spilling out the sides. She had been beaming moments earlier, but now her expression was flat. I could tell she was trying to discern what the hell kind of music they were playing. My

ten-year-old daughter, none the wiser, jumped up and starting clapping along, pigtails wildly bouncing out of tune.

The two lead girls holding the school banner marched past us and I barely noticed them. The half dozen or so flag girls paused right in front of us after that, and I noticed them. And no, I don't mean I was ogling over them in their leotards, but I wasn't captivated by a stunning flag show either. I was transfixed by their eyes.

Ovals of gray.

That's the only way I could explain what I saw. No pupils. No irises. Just cloudy voids, staring at nothing, probably. I looked at my wife, but she was too busy trying to locate her son, still being the proud parent.

I had checked out of that role.

The girls were twirling and spinning their flags while the band belted out the musical lament.

I nudged my wife. She had spotted Stephen and was waving, so I got the annoyed look. "Cindy, look at their eyes."

"What?"

Before I could explain, the tall thin blond, not four feet from us, flipped her flag over, gripping it like a lance, and charged. The pointed tip sunk into the chest of an elderly man sitting two people away from me, the silver staff tore through his green canvas chair back. The man choked and crumpled over.

The girl withdrew the makeshift spear; the flag was wet and clung to the slick pole. Her expression was unchanged. I jerked my daughter into my arms and pushed my wife away from the band. The music died off and was replaced by screaming families.

The band dispersed; each member on a hellish quest. Chaos exploded in the park.

I saw a brass tuba crumple as it struck a woman in the head, her body abruptly falling to a sitting position. Cymbals became spinning blades, slicing into victims. People were fleeing, hustling toward their cars or anywhere but the park.

The possessed killers didn't have any expression on their faces-no remorse or even rage. I surmised the kids had to be under a hypnotic spell.

That's when I noticed the drum major, still standing in the center of the road, still conducting. It was a chilling sight. He was like a statue with moving arms. I knew he had to be the key to all this insanity, but what could I do?

We fell back. I tripped over a toppled wheelchair. There was blood smeared on the seat and backrest.

To my right, a flute player sat perched on a large woman. At first glance, I thought he was performing CPR on her, but I hurled my breakfast when I realized he was driving his silver weapon into her chest over and over.

Vomit spewed all over my daughter, who was clinging to me, head pressed deep into my chest. I grabbed my wife by the arm and tried to take off. But she stopped, causing my arm to jerk.

“Stephen!” She screamed and looked back at the carnage.

I was so busy trying to save my family and get the hell out of there, I forgot one member of my family. My son. Where was he? Better still, what was he doing? I didn’t really want to know, but I scanned anyway.

People in white pants and orange coats were spread everywhere, swinging and stabbing with their instruments. Bodies were all over the place; like so many dead fish washed ashore.

My heart was pounding.

“Take Kelly,” I ordered, thrusting my daughter into my wife’s arms. “Get to the car.”

I ran into the crowd without another word. Ducking, I barely missing a bent, twisted trombone arching across my path. I stumbled on the road. Catching myself, my hand slopped through a thick wetness. I wiped the hand on my jeans but still my hand was coated red and peppered with gravel.

For a crazy, heroic moment, I considered tackling the drum major. Somehow, I could take him out and stop all this madness. Maybe that wouldn’t have worked. I wouldn’t know, because I chickened out. I told myself it was more important to rescue my son.

Shake some sense into him; snap him out of his trance. Get him home.

A body rolled in front of me. A bone was jutting out of his throat. A black bone. As I stepped over him, I realized it wasn’t bone at all. It was a broken off piece from a clarinet.

Another man, wearing a torn drum as a straitjacket, ran past me screaming.

I tracked him for a moment until my horrified eyes stopped cold.

There was my son, grayed-out lifeless eyes and all, glaring at me. Blood splattered band uniform. He gripped his saxophone like a baseball bat and was panting. Most of the keys were missing and the opening was bent inward, stuffed with glistening patches of hair. He wouldn’t be making music with that any time soon.

“Stephen!” I cried, holding out my hands. I had no idea what to do next. “Stevie!”

He marched forward, closing the space between us. Yes, I said marching, as in boot-top high and perfect cadence.

He swung the sax; I dropped, feeling the whoosh just above my bald head. I sprung from my crouch and pummeled him. His expression didn't change. Sitting on his chest, I stared into his soulless eyes and saw nothing I recognized.

God help me, I punched my son. Nothing happened. His baby blue eyes didn't come back. The haze remained like a hard frost on a cold morning. I punched him again and he at least stopped resisting. I hurled the saxophone as far as I could.

I wasn't leaving him behind, so I slung my unconscious son over my shoulder and hauled ass through the rampaging monsters destroying the patrons of our peaceful park. My only prayer was that my son didn't wake up before I got him back to the car.

I threw him in the trunk, while my wife jumped out and began protesting and cussing. I slammed the lid closed and got in the car without a word. She stopped yelling, climbed in, and we sped away.

That was the first hour.

By the third hour, most of the band members had vanished, gone hunting for greener pastures perhaps. Searching for more victims. But that wasn't the biggest problem. No, the worse thing was that the dead started waking up.

*

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Chapter 28

“Mirror Mirror”

*Debra Elliott
Chalkville, Alabama, USA*

Mirror, mirror.... Jax watched and listened to the pretty teenaged girl recite her request into the antique mirror.

Mirror, mirror in my bedroom, send forth a handsome bridegroom. Silly girl, he thought. The mirror had been in his family for centuries. He was charged with the task of guarding the mirrored portal and whoever possessed it.

The reflective glass fell into the hands of seventeen-year-old Megan, a flitty teenager who believed in Ouija Boards and Bloody Mary. She and her girlfriends were constantly in front of the mirror asking for something.

Jax wasn't thrilled. There was nothing he could do; after all he was a ghost. Jax wasn't allowed to enter the human world unless something evil happened or Megan summoned him directly.

He continued to spy on the pretty Megan as she primped for school. She pulled her long brown hair into a ponytail, applied lipstick to her full lips, and kissed the mirror leaving behind a bright, hot pink stain.

Jax touched his lips to the spot where hers had been. He had gotten too close to this charge and in his world that meant danger and possible death for Megan. It also meant he could be banished to another realm.

"Spying on her again Jax?" A foreboding voice startled him.

"Slag, what are you doing here?"

Slag had been sent to Wormwood as punishment. He was accused of killing a group of trick-or-treaters. A purple, jagged scar marked his ashen face to distinguish him from white ghosts.

Jax knew Slag was trolling for young girls. How was he going to protect Megan from the monster that lived inside Slag?

"Just looking, just looking," he smirked.

"Like hell you are!" This girl is off limits and you know it Slag."

Slag let out a sinister laugh. "We'll see about that Jax."

He was gone before Jax could warn him again to stay away from Megan.

*

Megan slung her back-pack over her shoulder and headed home from school. It was Halloween and tonight her girlfriends would come over. She had everything planned for a night of frightening fun. Megan planned to summon the ghost in the mirror.

Ding dong. Megan ran downstairs to answer the door. Her girlfriends entered.

"Hi ya Megan," they chimed. "Got everything ready," they giggled.

"Yep, upstairs."

Her room was dark, except for a few black lit candles. The mood was eerie.

"Cool," one girl said.

Megan filled orange plastic cups with tomato juice.

"Here," she handed each girl a cup. "Drink this blood and we shall begin the séance."

The girls giggled as they drank the liquid concoction.

Four girls stood in front of the mirror and joined hands. Their reflections were shadowed by the glow of the candle light. The girls chanted in unison, "Bloody Mary, Bloody Mary bring forth something scary."

The mirror shook, they jumped back.

"See, I told you we shouldn't play around like that," Regina said. "I'm going home. See ya tomorrow Megan."

"Regina, wait. It's only a game silly."

"My mom said..."

"Whatever, go on home then. The rest of you want to leave too?"

The other girls shook their head and followed Regina's lead.

"Be a bunch of wussies then. See if I care!"

Megan slammed her bedroom door, blew out the candles and crawled into bed. She didn't notice the miniscule crack in the mirror.

*

Jax watched and listened as the girls summoned evil. He knew what would happen next if Slag got through the portal. Jax scanned the mirror for cracks, but didn't see anything visible. He breathed a sigh of relief and waved his hand to release the mirror's powers. Megan was safe for now.

*

Slag had been waiting for his chance to enter Megan's world. The tiny crack in the mirror provided the perfect opportunity. She and her friends had summoned him. He waved his hand and the mirror illuminated. Slag still had power, but only when someone conjured evil. He slipped through the portal and into Megan's bedroom. The girl was asleep, her breathing soft, at least for the moment.

Slag hovered over her, ready to attack. He weaved his evil spirit into her dream. Megan's breathing labored, her body broke out in a sweat. Excellent. Slag savored this moment. Her body began to writhe. She would soon be his. Innocent Megan would soon become an evil spirit.

*

Megan had the breath knocked out of her by something heavy. She tried to scream, but her voice was muted. Help me.... She panicked. Evil was in her room. How? It was only a joke. Then she remembered how the mirror shook. Oh my God! Somehow I summoned something scary.

Her body twisted and her arms flailed. Help me!

*

Jax heard a frightened voice that sounded familiar. Megan! Where was Slag? Jax hurried to the mirror, waved his hand, and saw the tiny crack in the portal. Slag was with Megan....

He had never been through the portal unless summoned. He knew the proper protocol, but there wasn't time, Megan's life was in danger. Jax entered the portal. Slag was hovering over Megan.

"Slag, get away from her now!"

A maniacal laughter escaped Slag's throat. "Never! She summoned me, not a white ghost."

Jax lunged toward Slag and pushed him into the mirror. Slag reached for Megan, but Jax threw himself on top of her.

"My handsome bridegroom?"

"Yes, I'm Jax." He kissed her lips and took his human form.

"You're beautiful," she stammered.

Jax chuckled, "so are you my beautiful Megan."

Jax reached for the mirrored portal and shattered it into a million shards.

"From this day forward I'll never leave you Megan, I promise."

"And," she placed her arms around his neck, "from this moment Jax, there won't be any more Ouija Boards or séances, only us."

*

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Chapter 29

“Give Me Something Good To Eat”

*Pamela K. Kinney
Chesterfield, Virginia, USA*

“Trick or treat! Smell my feet! Give me something good to eat!”

Halloween again, when all those damn kids rang his doorbell and asked, no, demanded, candy, money, and other assorted treats. But he'd be double-damned if he'd break down and give the little hellions anything. In his opinion, these days the only thing the brats deserved was nothing. Nothing at all.

The noise escalated, changing to a persistent pounding at his door instead. Jonas Perkins flung open the door and found two small children, maybe five or six, standing on his porch. One was dressed as a witch, the other a Power Ranger. Their loud, obnoxious father, Pete Quarters from next door, stood next to them like the glowering Neanderthal he resembled. Jonas felt pretty sure it had been him and not the kids that had been doing the knocking. The man inched closer so that Jonas and he stood practically nose to nose. Bile threatened to rise in Jonas' throat as the odor of cheap beer lacing the other man's breath slammed into his nostrils.

“Hey, Perkins!” said Quarters. “Didn't you hear Jenny and Parker ringing your doorbell? It's Halloween, you know.”

Jonas snorted and glared at Quarters. “Yeah, I heard. But I decided not to give out candy to any kids this year. I thought the Dental Association would have one less idiot handing out sugar products and causing cavities. Felt it was my civic duty.”

Quarters' piggish eyes narrowed. “Are you going highbrow on me, Perkins? It's Halloween and I'm sure that my kids' dentist won't mind them having some candy. I should know, as he gave them a few Snickers bars when we stopped at his place, so why should he care if you give them anything?”

“Well, I didn't get any candy so I am not giving them, or any other little monster, anything tonight. And that's that. So no one better play a trick on me either, or I'll call the cops. Now get off my porch!”

Jonas slammed the door shut on Quarters and his kids, locking it.

“Stupid idiots and their brats,” he muttered, as he stalked into the living room and thumped down in his favorite chair in front of his television. Picking up the remote, he surfed through endless channel after channel, but only found monster movies, how to make Halloween treats on the

Cooking Channel, and the history of Halloween on the History Channel. With a click, he turned off the TV and tossed the remote onto the coffee table with disgust. Nothing but Halloween crap.

And nothing but more Halloween crap to his thinking as the door bell sounded again and he answered it. Kids dressed in costumes of all types, from vampires and werewolves to ghosts, super heroes, and simpering princesses stood with their bags held up, the light spilling onto their masked or made up faces. Their parents waited just outside the reach of the porch light, hidden in the shadows of the night. He screamed at the little monsters, making them run and their mothers and fathers curse him, but he slammed the door on them all, switching off the porch light. After a while he sat in the darkened living room, ignoring the persistent bell. Finally, he got up and went to disconnect the doorbell to get some peace. Snatching a book from a nearby bookshelf, he relaxed in his chair under the light from the floor lamp as the laughter and screams from the children faded to silence around nine o'clock. After a while he began to nod off, so he laid the book on his lap and let sleep overtake him.

The blare of the doorbell woke him. He leaped from his chair, the book falling to the floor and almost knocking over the lamp. Blinking the slumber from his eyes, a glance at the clock on the wall revealed it was midnight.

Hadn't he disconnected the doorbell earlier? Maybe he hadn't done the job right as he'd thought.

And what fool trick-or-treater would be out this late anyway? He gritted his teeth. Must be teenagers running around while their asinine parents were getting drunk at some Halloween party.

At first he wasn't going to answer the door, but when he spied something on a table near him he flashed a grin. He picked up a horn that he kept to bugle at birds in the spring when they tried to get the grass seed that he sowed his front lawn with. With his fingers curled around it he crossed over to the door.

"I'll give you a treat!" he yelled as he flung open the door.

A trick-or-treater about his height stood silent in the night-filled porch. Jonas had been right—some dumb-assed teen. His fingers pressed the button on the horn and a loud high-pitched sound screamed out of it. With another press of the button, he cut off the blast. The figure didn't move or appeared fazed.

Dumbfounded at first, the heat of anger replaced that feeling. "Aren't you a little old to be trick-or-treating, you stupid nitwit?"

The costumed figure didn't answer. Jonas took in the costume. Tall and gaunt, threadbare iron gray pants hung loosely from the hips and the person also wore a shirt rotted away in places, leaving dirt crusted holes. Dust covered most of the clothing and the large shoes on the feet looked like those that a clown would wear.

The skin gleamed the same pale, chalky color as the crescent moon that hung in the night sky above. Long hands ended in long black nails, sharp like claws, and they grasped an extra large bag, like the kind that held grain or seed in the hardware stores. But it was the make-up job that

impressed him the most. The flesh masked over the skull like a second skin. Not a speck of bright color touched its lips or cheeks, just dull gray.

And the eyes! They dominated the features, like large black holes, no consciousness peeping out of them.

Must be FX contact lenses, thought Jonas.

The lips parted in a dark smile, revealing a mouthful of cannibal-sharp fangs.

Jonas shivered, but not from the cool autumn breeze that drifted into his house. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to shut this door now. No tricks either, because you’re not getting any damn treats from me.”

He shut the door on the its face.

When he turned around, he found himself eye to eye with the strange trick-or-treater. It stood there, blocking Jonas from the living room and access to his phone.

“What the hell?” Jonas backed into the door. “How did you get inside?”

The figure silently held up its bag.

Suddenly angry, Jonas snarled. “You want a treat, do you? Well, I’ll give you a treat. A treat like a smack from this horn.”

He raised the horn up and brought it down. With no warning, the trick-or-treater grabbed the arm holding the horn and with a twist, broke it. Jonas yelled from the pain as the being let go. The horn dropped to the floor, making a loud clatter. The trick-or-treater kicked it to the side.

Fear twisted Jonas’ guts as he cradled his useless arm with the good one. “Oh, God. What do you want?”

“You.”

It snatched at him quickly, not giving him time to escape, and after snapping several more bones to bend the body easier, it shoved a dying Jonas into the bag.

*

The ghoul cackled as it flung open the door, stepping out into the night air. The pungent odors from burnt jack-o-lanterns on door steps and lawns, along with half-eaten candies grounded into the pavement from the feet of countless children wafted to its nostrils. But it didn’t think of those things, only of the meal it would enjoy tonight in its home in the mausoleum. Nowadays, Halloween made it so easy to hunt humans. They just thought of it as another costumed trick-or-treater. No one believed that real monsters stalked among the fake ones.

It skipped down the street to the town cemetery as it sang, swinging the heavily loaded bag at its side.

“Trick or treat, smell my feet, and give me something good to eat!”

*

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Chapter 30

“Imaginary Friends”

*Kay D. Ziegler
Bedford, Indiana, USA*

Tom Wooden drove down the road with the truck windows down and music blaring. "Make your own kind of music," he yowled along with radio.

Autumn air surrounded him. Dried leaves, wood smoke, and musty foliage were the fragrances of the day. There was something quaint and old fashioned about the smells. They contrasted sharply with the day-glow purple, green, or orange and black blow up spiders that had popped up all this week. *A modern invention that should never have been created*, Tom thought. *We sure as hell didn't have those things growing up and we did just fine. What's wrong with plain ole' jack-o-lanterns?*

The ex-hippie, with his graying ponytail, flannel shirt, and paint-splattered jeans hit the break peddle when he saw something in the middle of the road. "What the..." Tom muttered as he turned the truck off and pocketed the keys.

Sliding from the rat-trap truck, Tom lumbered around the vehicle with the grace of a seasoned cowboy. He came to an abrupt halt when he saw what was in the middle of the road.

"Hey, kiddo, whatcha doing?" he asked as he crouched in front of the child.

She was no more than five-years-old with strawberry blonde hair and big, round eyes. Her freckled face was scrunched up in a giggle and her knees were drawn up under her floral nightgown.

"Now, Percy, you know mummy and daddy wouldn't let me try that," she said after the giggles had subsided.

"Hey, kiddo, who you talking to?" Tom asked.

This seemed to get her attention. She looked right at the concerned man instead of through him, as she had been doing previously. "Percy," the girl replied.

"What does this, uh, Percy, want you to do," asked Tom.

"To climb up that tree and jump," she said, pointing to the dead oak tree in the cemetery.

Tom shivered; jumping from that tree could kill her. "You're right, your mom and dad wouldn't want you to try that," he said.

"Percy said he'd protect me."

"Uh-huh...so kiddo, what's your name and where do you live?"

"Ruthie Jamison. I live in the red house."

"OK, Ruthie, let's get you home. It's kinda cold and I bet your parents are worried sick," Tom said, offering the girl his hand.

When she took it, he led her to the red house. Looking down at her, he noticed that she was covered in scratches and bruises. One spelled "liveD".

"Hey, where did you get those?" he asked, pointing to her hand and neck.

When asked, Ruthie shrugged. "Don't know. They just showed up," she replied, climbing the steps with Tom.

Tom knocked on the door and a minute later a bleach-blonde woman wearing jeans two sizes too small and a midriff revealing shirt. "Yeah? What do you want?" she snapped, her eyes rimmed red.

"Are you Ruthie's mother? I, uh, found her in the street?" Tom asked, feeling awkward and apprehensive. He wasn't so sure about this woman.

"God, no! Do I look like her mother?" she said. "What do you mean found her in the street? You're an insensitive jerk."

"What did I do?" he asked. Tom honestly didn't know what he did wrong. He was just trying to bring a little girl home, for crying out loud!

"Like, you didn't know. My sister jumps from a tree, breaking her neck, and you come here saying you found her in the street?" she exclaimed.

"She's dead?"

"No, she's fine and dandy! What do you think? Get off my property before I call the police," she shouted, closing the door in his face.

What had just happened? He found himself feeling a little baffled and unnerved. As he walked back to his truck, Tom tried to figure out why he had hallucinated a dead girl?

"Sleep deprivation," he concluded due to the fact he only slept a couple hours a night and worked two jobs.

A week passed, and as Tom Wooden lived his life, he forgot all about Ruthie. But, as he jogged through the same area of town where he found the girl, the ex-hippie got a sense of déjà vu as he saw a boy, around twelve, standing by a pond in front of a house.

"I can't swim, Randall!" shouted the brunette-haired boy. His dark brows were furrowed over his chocolate eyes as he crossed his arms over his sweat shirt.

"Who's Randall?"

"My friend. He wants me to learn to swim."

"Why don't you tell Randall you'll learn later? Maybe when it's warmer?" Tom suggested, deliberately ignoring the fact there was no one there but this brown-haired boy, who had been yelling at air. "It's kinda cold. I wouldn't want you to get sick."

"Okay, mister!" said the boy as Tom jogged the rest of the way home.

When he got there, Tom picked up the paper from the stoop. His eyes widened when he saw the headline. "BOY DROWNS IN POND" Tom reads.

Opening it up, he saw the photo of the same kid he'd just been talking to moments earlier. Apparently, the boy, Zach Wilson, had been playing outside when he slipped and fell in the water. At least, that's what the paper said.

Tom looked over at his golden retriever as he came to greet him. "Eddie, I sure as hell don't know what's going on," he said, rubbing the dog between the ears before fixing them both some food - for Eddie a bowl of kibble and for Tom a chicken burrito from the blind date dinner the night before.

The next morning, Tom dressed, ate toast, coffee, and turkey bacon (his doc told him his cholesterol was high), before he hopped into his truck. After starting it up, he noticed the old thing was sputtering, but Tom didn't pay any attention to it because he spied a young woman on the side of the road.

Slowing to a stop, Tom rolled his window down. "Hey," he said to the woman in combo boots, jeans, and a sweater. "I'm Tom."

"Hey yourself, the names Annie. Mind giving me a lift? I was supposed to take the bus, but I overslept. I thought another might come by, but it's been an hour..." she said, flipped her ponytail over her shoulder.

"Sure, hop in. Where you going?"

"Fifth and Jefferson. I need to pick up my cat," Annie said, getting in.

"I see," he replied as he started the truck. "Is it OK?"

"He's fine. He got fixed," she explained. Annie slid closer to the driver while talking to him. "So, you have any pets?"

"Yeah, a golden named Eddie."

"Oh, how sweet!" she cooed, getting even closer. "Got a wife? A partner?"

"No, it's just me. Been on a few blind dates recently. I end up with food, but that's it."

"Sounds horrible," Annie said, grabbing the wheel and jerking it. "At least you won't have to deal with those anymore. Bye-bye, Tom."

Laughing, she morphed into a blue, translucent mist in a humanoid shape. Annie hovered over the truck as it veered off the road and wrapped itself around a phone pole. When the police and ambulance arrived five minutes later, she floated off until she saw another child, a girl swinging. She has pigtails and a denim jumper. Landing, the spirit changed into a curly-haired and overall-wearing girl.

"Hi, I'm Margaret...Maggie. What do you want to do? I can teach you anything," she said, going over to the swinging girl and offering her her hand, which she took. As she skipped around the back of the house, the spirit smiled.

*

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Chapter 31

“Harvest Moon”

*Martin Reaves
Auburn, California, USA*

Late Summer...

Night-sounds on the Louisiana bayou blend into one soporific, intoxicating buzz, the air a muggy blanket draped over the ranch house in the middle of the dirt clearing.

The old woman sits in the older rocker on the ancient porch. Creaking, fanning, humming a tune the words to which she forgets, if it ever had words. Mosquitoes avoid her. Lightning bugs dance for her; occasionally she will snare one from the air, smash it on her arm and draw designs on her skin with the phosphorescent liquid, like she did when she was a little girl ... a long time ago.

From inside the house, a crash, a vase probably, then the inevitable pitiful weeping, increasing as he nears the door.

Poor Jeffery. Never very coordinated, neither very bright. And now...

The woman sighs, phlegmy, rattling. *At least he's here.*

From the door: "Momma?" Muffled.

"Right here, darlin'. Come keep your momma comp'ny."

"I--I cain't stand up, Momma."

Exasperation, quickly checked. *Hold the breath; let it seep out, slow like. He can't help it.*

"Well, drag yourself out here. You hafta at least give her a try. After what I done fer you, it's the least you can do."

A pause. Then: "Yes, Momma." He begins to scrabble at the threshold, bumping at the screen door, cursing his lack of control.

Momma smiles. *That's my boy.* She winks conspiratorially at the blue-ringed platinum moon... Harvest moon. Her eyes drape, face tilting to absorb the coolness she feels flowing from the pregnant sphere. Shelley's words fill her mind and whisper from her lips: "That orb'd maiden with white fire laden, whom mortals call the moon..."

Bittersweet this moon, and the memory it evokes...

Harvest moon of twenty years past, middle age no longer a threat, but a reality. Sipping chamomile under a moonlit sky, fanning the heat into her face, watching the shambling figure at the edge of the clearing, lurching toward her, calling her name in a drunken slur. And then he was at the porch, leering, falling on her. Sour breath washed over her and she felt disgust...and then more as he began to pick clumsily at the buttons of her dress. No, she had said, pushing at his bulk, but he slapped her, became violent and she was on her back on the porch, squirming beneath his sweat, and then he was inside of her, stealing the only virtue she'd ever had, and suddenly, in self-loathing, she was kissing her brother's neck, saying, Yes, not knowing what she was affirming.

Later there was blood.

The next day vomiting.

The next year...Jeffery.

Many Harvest moons betwixt then and now. And last week—or was it two weeks—the Accident.

It had seemed like the end. Loneliness would surely consume her. How would she live without her only friend and constant companion? All it took was one hunter with bad aim—or bad eyesight, or both—to snatch Jeffery away from her. Yes, it had seemed like the end...but that was then.

Jeffery is beside her on the porch, pulled and grunted into a hunched-over sitting position.

"My muscles don't work so good no more, Momma."

She runs leathery fingers through his patchy hair. "I know, darlin'. And you're startin' to smell somethin' fierce." A soft smile as she speaks, remembering how Scripture had saved her from a lonely death: *Faith as a grain of mustard seed*. John, was it? Or Mark? One of the Gospels.

Yes, enough faith can heal the sick and hurtin'...

...move mountains...

Tears begin to spill down her cheeks. *Hell, enough faith can raise the dead*, she thinks as she brushes maggots from Jeffery's hair.

He turns his ruined face toward her, eyes shriveled and fallen away, his remaining teeth coated green. His voice when he speaks is brittle and dusty, forced from shrinking lungs through a deteriorating larynx. "Please let me go, Momma."

The rocker stops creaking, crickets and cicadas freeze, the clearing holds its breath. "Whatever do you mean, child?" Her tone dry, sweet.

His head droops and she pretends not to hear the creaking as rigor mortis fights for control. He mumbles incoherently.

"Speak up, child!" Harsh.

"I—I need to sleep, Momma. I kin feel the bugs, their chewin' and nestin'. I'm most filled up with 'em. And they hurt. And—and it hurts 'cause I'm...I'm comin' apart, Momma."

Her hand flutters at her breast—half genuflection, half old-age tremor—and she chews her lips to keep the tears at bay. "You're right, baby. Your momma's been selfish not to see your pain. But you gotta understand something too: I can't let you leave me. The essence of you, anyway. You know, the part that's really you...I guess that's what we call the soul." She pauses to let the lump in her throat sink down. "But if your body wastes away...well, then I've lost anyhow."

She slowly begins to rock, then faster. The crickets sense the change and begin to move, filling the clearing with music as it releases a sigh and the cicadas pick up the tempo. A cacophony of melodies and sounds swirl about the porch, then all abruptly stop.

"I should've thought of this sooner," Momma says, and stands.

"Thoughta what, Momma?"

"Just never you mind. Your momma knows what's best."

She is in the foyer, picking up the phone, Jeffery on the floor, half in and half out of the doorway, wedged by the screen door.

"Who ya callin', Momma?"

She smiles serenely. "Lloyd Paxton."

Realization dawns with an audible crack on Jeffery's decaying face. "No—NO! Momma, please don't!"

"Hush now," she whispers with a frown, and then brightens to the husky Hello in her ear. "Lloyd. How good to hear your sweet voice...yes, it has been a long time...yes. But listen, the reason I called is I think I might have a job for you, that is if you're still practicing taxidermy."

A sound like pebbles on hardwood as more of Jeffery's teeth fall from his black gums.

And Momma says, "You'd best hurry right over, Lloyd."

*

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Chapter 32

“My First Time”

J. A. Cunningham
Kansas City, Kansas, USA

I can remember it just like it was yesterday, it happened 16 years ago. Like they say, you never forget your first. Having studied my great-great-grandpa's diary, I knew what I was and what needed to be done. The problem was, I wasn't old enough yet, so that would have to wait. I was only sixteen, the diary stated you needed to be twenty-one. I figured I would get some practice in. I am so glad grandma gave me that diary, it explained a lot of things I had been questioning. Mom was a little pissed off when she found out grandma had given it to me, but she soon changed her attitude. Maybe I will tell you about that someday. Now where was I? Oh yeah, my first time.

Let me begin by telling you that Tyrone shouldn't have pissed me off at school that day. In a way, this really was his fault. After school let out, I followed him home from a distance, I needed to see where he lived. Lucky for me, he did not live too far from my house. I went home afterwards to read more of the diary. I wanted to make sure I was going to be doing this right, after all it was my first time. After reassuring myself, I grabbed my jacket and headed out the door. Once I was about to Tyrone's house, I figured it was a good time to get prepared. Going into the ghosting state, as the diary called it, was easier than I thought. Focusing on the thought of being transparent, it happened instantly, there was no feeling of the transition happening. The only feeling I had from it was like every hair on my body was standing up, it felt awesome. It was time to party now.

Walking around his house, I peeked in every window to see where he was, and who all was home. To my surprise, it appeared Tyrone was home alone, this was perfect. Now it was time to see if the ghosting state worked. I knocked on his door, stepping back as he opened it. Tyrone looked around; the disgusted look on his face and the way he shut the door, told me it worked like a charm, he never saw me. This was awesome, it was like being the invisible man. I rang his doorbell next, this time when he opened the door and didn't see anyone there, he stepped out on to the porch yelling: "Whoever is messing with my door, knock it the hell off!" I took that opportunity to sneak into his house.

Once inside, I walked over to the corner of the front room. I had to make sure I was out of his way. Ghosting state is misleading, you are still a solid entity. Nothing and no one can pass through you - you were just invisible. Tyrone had returned to the couch where he was sitting when I first knocked on the door. "The movie is about to start!" He yelled. I missed seeing his guest when I peeked through the windows earlier. There was no missing her now, Samantha Bridgers, hips swinging as she walked out from the hallway. She was wearing a form fitting pink

tank top, and tight as hell miniskirt that gripped every curve of her fine back side. You know I always thought she was a cheerleader, but I was wrong. Samantha joined Tyrone on the couch, snuggling up to him as they got ready to watch their movie.

I let them get just past the beginning of the movie before it was time to have some fun. I have always been able to manipulate electronics: mainly radios, TV's, phones, and light bulbs. I focused on the TV - making small electric static wakes roll up the screen. As Tyrone tried to make adjustments through the TV and DVD settings menus, I increased the amount of static to the point of producing a strong buzzing sound. It sounded like the noise you get when you put a cellphone by older TV's and PC monitors, only more intense. Tyrone turned the TV off and then back on again thinking he fixed it. That was until I overloaded the projector bulb to the point that it blew. You should have seen both of them jump, oh it was too good.

With the TV out of commission, Tyrone and Samantha headed back to his room. Of course I followed. I waited for them to undress each other before leaving the room. I went to the front door, knocking on it several times. Tyrone came running out with a blanket wrapped around him, peeking through the peephole before opening the door. "For crying out loud, who the hell keeps messing with my door?" He bellowed, slamming the door shut. As he turned to rush back to the bedroom, I stuck my foot out causing him to trip. He looked so confused as he got back up, looking around trying to figure out what tripped him. Man this was too fun.

I could hear them going at it in the bedroom as I made my way to the kitchen to knock over a vase of flowers sitting on the table. Man, the words that came out of his mouth when he heard the glass break, I could hear them all the way from the bedroom. I kept this going for a while: breaking things, knocking things over, you know typical haunting stuff.

Samantha went to take a shower and Tyrone got out his dad's handgun, 'To protect her.' That's what he said anyway. While he made his trip around the house looking for the cause of all the commotion, I made my way to the shower to see Samantha. I allowed myself to refract the light causing a shadow to be cast on the shower curtain. Samantha giggled playfully as she pulled back the curtain. Her giggles faded when she saw that nobody was there. I waited for her to pull it shut again before casting my shadow once more. She quickly flung the curtain open hoping to catch Tyrone on the other side. Again, there was nobody. Before she shut the curtain again, I reached out squeezing both her breasts. Her scream was freaking loud, but I expected that. Tyrone came running to her, gun in hand.

Before I continue, one of our other powers is the ability to make someone see whatever we want them to see. I have only played with this once, and it takes a lot of energy to do at my age. Speaking of energy, this ghosting effect takes quite a bit as well, the dairy said: one who is not fully manifested must feed immediately after prolonged use. Let's just say, I was feeling the power drain. Alright, back to where I was.

Tyrone came flying in to the bathroom, gun in hand. Samantha jumped from the tub hurrying to get to him. As she wrapped her arms around him in fright, Tyrone shoved her away. "What the hell are you?" he screamed as Samantha tried to approach him again. "Stay the hell back or I will shoot!" Samantha tried to tell him it was her, he never heard a word she said as he pulled the trigger, killing the hideous monster that was coming at him.

As he stood there breathing heavy with fright, I released the vision I had given him. You should have seen how quickly he dropped to his knees when he saw that he shot Samantha. Man, did he turn pail. I didn't know a dark skinned person could turn that white. "What the hell is going on?" he cried "Samantha, what have I done?" I let him cry for a minute before reaching down, putting my hand on his shoulder. He quickly jerked away about falling over. "Who the hell is in here?" he asked with a shaky voice.

"BOO!" I hollered as I released the ghosting state.

"Eli..." Is all he got out. I frightened him so bad he passed out, hitting the floor.

It was time to feast. The diary said it would come naturally, man, it was right. As I rolled him onto his back, I could feel the demonic instincts kicking in. The nails on my fingers grew long, thick and sharp. Instinctively, I thrust my hand at his chest, ripping through his skin, breaking his ribs and sternum as I grabbed and ripped out his still beating heart. Holding it in my hands and watching it beat, I had never felt more alive. As I feasted on his heart and soul, I could feel it replenishing my spent energy. The feeling of taking ones soul is un-describable, but so enjoyable.

That is the story of my first time. The first soul feast, first kill, first haunting, and first time that I, Eli Rye 'The Soul Eater', truly felt alive.

*

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Chapter 33

“Sleeping Beauty”

*Katherine Rochholz
Waterloo, Iowa, USA*

Once upon a time there was a vain Queen and King, they had a child who was as pretty as can be. They hired three witches to bless the child with beauty, grace and pose.

But there was a fourth witch that was not invited. She came to the christening and gave this proclamation. “This beauty, Twila, shall have her beauty, grace and pose, as long as her heart beats within her chest. The moment her heart stops beating, she will lose all three. Her body however shall never die!” The witch, bent and kissed the sleeping beauty on the head.

She turned on her heel and disappeared from the castle, leaving them to ponder her words, what she meant. The Queen bent and picked up her child; they found the note left by the witch. “Twila shall prick her finger on a spinning wheel on her eighteenth birthday. That shall stop her heart from beating, bringing about the curse.”

The Queen and King were worried about the curse; though unsure of how it would be possible. They sent the baby to live with the three witches. The years went by and the young Twila grew up with a normal childhood, never once told that she was the heir to a mighty kingdom, which meant that one day she shall be Queen. She grew up as Twila, the ever loving peasant girl, who had the beauty of a queen.

On the morning of her eighteenth birthday she went upon her day as she normally would have; she got up, picked flowers, feed the animals, and went about her day. The witches went to her after lunch as they needed to fit her for her new gown. One that was fit for a princess; as she was now of age, she would now go home, it was time to return to the world of royalty. They did the fitting and left to get some much needed supplies for the birthday celebration that was to happen that night.

Well they were gone; the other witch took her opportunity to lead young Twila to the spindle of her curse. With a bit of magic, she had Twila follow a small bird to the spindle that spun on its own accord, it weaved a string that was black as sin.

The witch spoke in a soft tone; she instructed Twila to prick her finger on the spindle needle. The young princess did without hesitation. In that very moment her heart stopped beating. She fell to the floor. The three witches appeared instantly, they were too late to stop the curse. Instead they froze time, they froze her and the kingdom in an endless sleep, that could only be undone by true love's first kiss. They protected the sleeping kingdom until they could find a cure for the curse on the young princess, however they never found one. For many decades, the kingdom was frozen

in time. Many princes came 'save' the sleeping princess, however the witches prevented anybody from reaching the sleeping princess, thus they left her in the frozen state.

One day a prince from a far away kingdom heard of the sleeping kingdom and thought of the land to be gained from such a union. So he set out across the many lands to get to the kingdom. Once there he faced the three witches, the first put up a field of knives and spikes, that had to be carefully navigated, and could not be torn down. However this Prince, upon his birth, had been blessed by witches, with the smarts, and a sword that could cut down any object within its path. He cut through the maze of blades, and made it to the second task set forth by the witches.

He reached a room of fire. The flames would burn through anything. The witches were sure that the prince would never make it through. However, also upon his birth, he was given a shield that would protect him from any supernatural danger. It allowed him to cross the flames of the witches' passions. It allowed him to face the third and final task.

A monster of the worse sorts, part dragon, part Griffin, colored the deepest of blues with eyes the color of a sunset. A creature that was sure to kill the prince. The prince knew he would defeat it. He was gifted strength, brains and pride upon his birth. He fought though the flames of the creature dodged the spikes upon its tail, evaded the razor sharp teeth that tried to chop down on him, but in the end his sword met the creature's heart, and it turned to dust.

The three witches looked on in shock as he stood by the bedside of the cursed Princess Twila and he leaned down and kissed her. The moment the kiss ended, she awoke. But she was no longer human, her pale skin, had long ago shrunk. Her beauty she once held was gone; in its place was death. The prince's kiss had broken the spell which froze time, but not the curse.

The Princess opened her eyes, she got up and then Twila did the unthinkable. She attacked the prince! She bit him. He stabbed her with his sword, but still she came at him. He ran from her, and fell down the stairs and broke his neck. The witches waited, their breaths held. They waited to see what would happen now as the undead Twila started to move. Her beauty, her grace, and her pose all gone from her once lovely soul. She did not grow up royal; yet she is the one that paid for the sins of her parents.

The witches watched as the prince's body also started to move. The curse had extended itself to her victims. The witches watched as Twila set the neck of her undead prince and they went off together, to wreak havoc among their kingdom.

The Queen locked herself in her chambers and cried out in pain as she watched her kingdom become the kingdom of the undead. She cried out to the witch that placed the curse upon her daughter, the one they didn't invite because of her views of the world. "Hekate! Come to me! I beg you! Come to me! Make me a deal!" The Queen needed to stop the pain of her soul, the pain of seeing her daughter as a zombie. Her soul was drowning in the pain.

"You called Queen?" Hekate appeared.

"Make me a deal! Anything! Reverse your curse! Allow my daughter a life full of happy ever afters."

“You put you and your family above your people. You hired witches to bless your children, though you know it curses another! You make sure your children know all the comforts of life, while your people go hungry, while they freeze, they know all the hardness and pain, while you and your children know only comfort and joy! And you have the nerve to ask me to reverse the curse? To reset time?”

“Yes! Please I will do anything!” The Queen begged.

“Fine. I will reset time on these conditions and these alone! One, the child will be raised far from you. She shall be raised a poor child, that way when she is queen she will be fair. Two, no longer will you hire the witches to bless the children of royalty. Instead each child born in the kingdom will be bestowed one blessing and one hardship to overcome. And last but not least, your life for hers. You shall die in her place. It is the only way I can reverse time. I need to balance the universe. I took her soul, her life, so yours will be the price to save hers.” Hekate said with a sneer, sure the Queen would not take the offer.

The Queen looked out the window and watched as her daughter took a spoon and scooped out a heart from some poor soul and watched as she ate it. She could not bear this pain. Death would be welcomed for a chance her daughter would live. “Deal.”

Hekate was in shock. “So be it!” Hekate snapped her fingers and time reversed, the conditions now set in blood and soul.

“King! You have a beautiful baby girl! Twila! She was gifted with grace, but cursed with the inability to sing.”

“Fantastic!” The King said with a smile.

“But my King, we regret to inform you the Queen has died in child birth...”

“My wife is gone...?”

“She looked at her daughter and said ‘For you my life.’ Then she decreed that she shall be raised by the three witches away from the kingdom until her eighteenth birthday, when she will marry; she said she shall become the queen she never was, sir.”

“Then may her wishes be fulfilled.” The King walked away from the servant and his daughter, who would never know the curse once bestowed upon her...

*

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Chapter 34

“Curse of the Dryad”

Wolfen Lee McKoy
Leland, North Carolina, USA

Stepping onto my back porch. I breathed in the autumn air. It was thick with the smell of pine. In my hand I carried my father’s old rifle. I heard rustling not far off, which I assumed was the wind in the pines. In the darkness I saw a flash of white in the moonlight. I cocked my gun, aiming it into the abyss before me. I heard a deep rumbling ahead of me and more rustling. It was definitely not a raccoon—maybe a bear.

Suddenly I saw a flash of yellow, and before I could react a large white creature came bounding out of the woods. I struggled to wrap my fingers around my gun to fire at it, but it was of no use. It pressed on me and the shots that I did manage to get either missed it entirely or it couldn’t care less. I attempted to hit it with the shaft of the gun and it yelped, but it did not halt the attack. The wolf’s amber eyes glistened in the moonlight. Its breath steamed over my face as it snorted. It paused for a moment and its heavy paws pressed against my chest. It looked into my eyes, tilted its head, and let out a long howl. I tried to back up but it held me fast. As it lowered its head, it once more returned its gaze to me. In those eyes I saw a strange intelligence, almost human. It drew me in, like a trance.

It growled again, and opened his maw wide, biting into my neck. I choked out a scream, feeling its fangs rake into the skin of my neck. It did it with an almost carefulness, as if each bite was placed deliberately. After a time it stopped and I looked down to see red blood soaking through my shirt. I slumped back against door and gazed up at the moon. I beheld stars that I had never guessed would be there. It was an impossible sky, but it lasted for only a moment before it vanished. After that I fainted. For hours I drifted through an uneasy sleep. My dreams were half-formed, and filled with impossible shapes that bustled about. They shuffled about a land of mist, reaching toward me with misty tendrils of smoke.

I floated in and out of consciousness, and awoke to feel dirt under me and I became aware that I was naked. I felt something within me stir, and the land of dreams accepted me again.

This dream was different. I was still in the land of mist, but instead of the strange shadow creatures there was a wolf which looked strikingly similar to the one that bit me earlier. It lunged at me and jumped into me. Then I was the wolf. It was scary how real it felt. I ran about the land of mist. All the while, there was strange chanting that seemed both far away, yet close at hand. Strange figures flashed in front of my eyes with faces carved of wood, yet still very much alive.

After a while I opened my eyes again and I felt empty. I reached into the emptiness, and a force seemed to stir in response. I let go of the sensation and opened my eyes. Bright light sliced into

my vision. I was sprawled out on the carpet of some unknown home. Outside I could hear the birds chirping. I stood up and looked about the small mobile home. It was scant, with very few pieces of furniture, most of which had been badly ruined, with strange gouges down the sides. I heard footsteps, and a young woman stepped through the door. She wore black jeans, a loose t-shirt and a brown beanie. Her blond hair poked out from underneath it.

“Good morning, sunshine.” she said taking a seat. She patted a hand on it, motioning for me to sit beside her. Cautiously I limped over, my muscles still sore.

“Uhm... hello,” I said, “What’s going on? Where am I?” She chuckled, smiling.

“You’re at pack headquarters, honey buns. You’re one of us now.”

I look at her, my brow furrowing. “Pack?”

Again she laughed. Her laugh was honest, and I could listen to it a thousand times without it getting old. “Babe. This is where we get together at. You’re one of us now, after last night. It seems that the dryads took a special liking to you. Come.” she said standing. She reached behind the couch and pulled out a towel, motioning me to follow her as she exited the trailer.

I jumped up and wrapped the towel around me, and followed her out the door into the woods surrounding the house. All around were similar trailers and not far off there was a small shack which she seemed to be leading us to. I sped up to catch up to her, asking “Dryads? What do you mean, dryads?”

She smiled but said nothing. Again I felt something stir within me. As we approached the shack, she looked through the window, sighed, and walked around to the other side. I walked around to the back side of the shed with her, to a rather peculiar half-circle of trees. Suddenly she began to sing in a clear, high voice. To my amazement, the trees began to move, taking on humanoid shape as I watched. The bark shifted, revealing the wooden faces from my dreams.

“I present to you, the dryads of this forest.” she said.

“Greetings.”, one of the dryads said, its limbs changing into human-like limbs.

“Uh... hi,” I stammered in reply. “So... she says that I’m a werewolf now? Something to do with you guys?”

All of them looked at me and nodded. Another one spoke with a feminine voice, “Yes, and a most curious one, too. We feel the pull of the moon strongly in you. You are destined to do great things, perhaps terrible things. We cannot yet say. However... we have decided to give you a gift.”

“A gift? What gift?”

“We have given you the form of the wolf. That is, it is your true form now. Soon, you shall forsake your human form, and reside in your real form forever more,” she smiled, but her words chilled me to the bone. What did they mean?

They lifted up their limbs and began to chant softly. As they did so, that which I had felt stirring within me suddenly leapt to life, like a flame springing forth from embers. Under the influence of the dryads' magic my body changed. The fur spread, covering my body. My face contorted and lengthened. I felt the bones in my legs assume new shapes. I yelled, feeling my spine lengthen into a long, lupine tail. As my transformation ended, so did the dryads' song. I whimpered, sobbing thick, oily tears.

“Stand,” commanded the tallest of the dryads. I struggled to my feet. I had not become entirely a wolf, but a mix between a wolf, and a man.

“Please,” I begged, “Change me back.”

You have no choice in the matter. We have chosen you, above all others. This will be your new form, from now until your dying day. Forget your days as a human. Forever more, you are a wolf, and you will do great deeds.”

I shook my head, muttering, “No... ” repeatedly. I put my paws over my eyes, sobbing. I felt the young woman put a hand on my band, but I growled at her, biting near her arm. I jerked away, and bounded off into the woods on all fours.

After a couple of hours I found myself behind my home. I kept swiveling my head from side to side to clear my vision of my snout, but it was no use. With a heavy heart I padded into my back yard. Standing on two legs I reached to the door handle, struggling to grasp it with my paws. It took two hands to do it, but I managed to open the door. I sighed and shook my head, locked the doors, and padded back the way I had come.

In the coming weeks, I would learn about the strange world in which I had come to reside, one of shape-shifters, and magic. However, what the dryads had said was true, I was stuck this way. I did visit my home now and again, and eventually, the police arrived. I'd overheard one of the officers saying that my boss had called me in, after not hearing from me for a few days. However, I'd gotten too close. He saw me. Bullets whizzed past my ears as I trotted away into the shadows, but I did stop to mark against the side of my house for good measure. I've not returned to my home in nine months.

*

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Chapter 35

“Beware of the Halloween Spirit”

Pamela Griffiths
Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England, United Kingdom

The daylight was beginning to fade. Elaine turned on the light and carried on with her writing. A large ornamental fireplace gave off a warm amber glow as the night descended on a grey shadowy Halloween evening. Inside the little house, the sitting room was cozy and warm; Elaine had her laptop on a cushion tray resting on her knee. The cat was sitting in front of the fire in his usual place, stretching out and rolling over to soak up the heat from the fire.

Elaine was busy writing a short story about an old woman who was being haunted by an evil spirit.

She read through her story, editing as she went along. In her story the old woman had bought a house after her husband died; a smaller place to spend the rest of her years. The house was perfect, it was warm and cosy, although she was missing her husband terribly, this house was making her life much easier.

There was a lovely little garden to the rear where she spent the spring and summer months planting and tending to the many colourful blooms. In the winter she would stock up with food and spend most of her time inside the little house in front of a warm cosy fire.

On the first Halloween after Iris had moved into the house, strange things began to happen. Iris Waltham, was sitting in front of the fire reading a book when the lights dimmed, flickered then went out. After a few moments the lights came back on again. Iris heard an eerie moaning sound coming from the kitchen, she went to investigate. On entering the kitchen, to her horror and surprise, all the chairs were stacked up at weird angles on top of the little table. Iris struggled to get the chairs back down, then she returned to where her ginger cat Thomas was lying on the rug in front of the fire.

'Oh my, I don't know what's happening in this house tonight, Thomas, but it's very disturbing'.

The cat stretched out in front of the fire.

'I really ought to tell someone about this, but there's no one to tell, only you Thomas'.

Everything returned to normal, nothing unusual happened until the following Halloween. Each year in the evening of Halloween, disturbing things happened, which progressively worsened with each year that passed.

The rest of the year was so peaceful, the house returned to its cozy calm, Iris put the trouble out of her mind. It was forgotten until the next year on the 31st October when the terror would inevitably return.

On one Halloween, the gas hob had turned itself on and the automatic ignition clicked in and lit the flame. Another year Iris witnessed not only the activity, but she saw an apparition walking through the kitchen and straight through the wall into the pantry. The apparition looked menacing as it invaded Iris's kitchen. The temperature had dropped so much that her breath came out as a vapour, she shivered as the evil was almost palpable.

On another occasion, a set of knives rose from the rack on the worktop, they flew across the kitchen towards Iris, she had to duck quickly to avoid being hit by them. Cupboard doors flew open, spilling out contents, the paranormal activity was active in her kitchen, she hadn't had it anywhere else in the house, it only happened on one night in the year, Halloween.

Every Halloween the activity grew more menacing and more intense, the evil power was increasing with each passing year. Iris knew something evil was happening, she knew that whatever it was would go away once Old Hallows Eve had passed.

*

Iris was sitting in her favourite chair stroking Thomas who was sitting on her knee, the cat purred as his cheeks were being tickled.

'I don't think I should go into the kitchen this year, I'll try to get through this evening without venturing in there' Iris told Thomas who kept purring as she stroked him.

The cat suddenly sat upright on Iris's knee, his ears bent back and his fur bristled up, his size had increased with the thickness of his bristled up fur.

'Beware of the Halloween spirit' the cat spoke, in a feline raspy voice.

Iris jumped in surprise as the cat spoke, Thomas sprang off her knee.

'Beware of the Halloween spirit' the cat repeated.

'What on earth is happening, that can't be you speaking Thomas, what's going on here?'

Iris was now doubting her sanity, was she going slowly mad living here on her own? She missed her husband so much and she only had Thomas for company.

Unbeknown to Iris, her late husband's spirit had entered Thomas and tried to warn her, but his warning had not had the desired effect. Iris Waltham was still in shock from hearing Thomas speak, she backed away from the ginger cat and into the kitchen, that turned out to be a bad move.

The evil spirit terrorized Iris, it conjured up images that her mind couldn't comprehend, Iris was terrified and couldn't do anything to save herself.

*

The evil spirit loved Halloween, this was the only time he was released from his living hell. He was earthbound and doomed to stay here in the grounds where he had once murdered a family. He had murdered his brother, his brother's wife and their two children. He had been jealous of his brother who had everything, the evil spirit had nothing. It was right here on this spot in a house many years ago, where he had murdered his brother's family before this little house had been built, where this kitchen now stood.

His supernatural power had built up over the years gaining in strength as the years went on. He was more powerful and more evil than he had even been while he had been alive. When he was alive he was Alfred Cox, a murderer who had been executed for his evil crimes, now he was an entity to be reckoned with, no one could stop his increasing powers, no one knew he existed.

He would finish this old woman off tonight, this was the grand finale. He rattled drawers, opened and closed cupboards, windows flew open and shut. The kitchen became a hive of supernatural activity. Alfred Cox was evil and very angry, he hadn't deserved to be condemned forever to an eternity of hatred, to an infinity of being undead. He was kept in a limbo state until Halloween when he was allowed one night to inflict whatever he wanted on whoever he pleased. This was pure evil, overshadowed by the devil himself.

'Old woman you are going to die tonight'.

'Go away, leave me alone, you can't be real, leave me alone'.

'Old woman I have you now, you will die tonight'

'Leave me alone, go away, go away....'

Iris Waltham's body was discovered a few days later when the postman alerted the police.

Thomas the ginger cat was lying beside Iris, on the kitchen floor. Iris had died of a heart attack but she had a terrified expression imprinted onto her face.

Iris had left a will, the little house to her niece, Iris's niece loved the place and had adopted Thomas the ginger cat. Thomas was happy, he still had his place in front of the warm cozy fire. This little house was just what Iris's niece had been looking for after splitting up with her husband, she even had a cat for company.

*

Looking at the clock Elaine stretched and yawned, time always passed quickly when she was writing. She was so lucky to be here, this little house was her salvation at a time in her life when she needed a little luck. The cat was lovely, her loyal friend, cats don't argue they don't talk back. Elaine gave a sigh, looking back on her life it hadn't been ideal, but now things were beginning to look up for her.

The last book she had written had been published and she had sold many copies, it was a great start to her writing career. Elaine felt truly blessed.

'It's Halloween and we haven't had anyone come trick or treating tonight have we Thomas, it must be raining outside that would put the children off. I'll just finish this chapter and then we can watch a bit of TV. How does that sound Thomas'?

Thomas stretched out on the rug in front of the fire. The light suddenly flickered on and off, on and off, on and off. Thomas stirred, Elaine was startled.

Elaine Waltham stopped writing, she was certain she had heard something in the kitchen. Thomas had heard it too, his ears went back and his fur stood on end.

'Beware of the Halloween spirit' Thomas warned.

*

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fReado: <http://www.freado.com/users/1064/pamela-griffiths>

My Blog "expressions-of-life": <http://expressions-of-life.over-blog.com/>

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Chapter 36

“A Tasty Twist”

*Stephen L. Wilson
Eugene, Oregon, USA*

I was waking up. “Coming to” was more like it. My head throbbed, and my mouth was dry. What was that horrible smell? An organic, deathly permanent smell.

Where had I been? Memories were fragmented, flashing in my mind like bits of archaic newsreel. My lifelong friend, Jason, was taunting the old woman, laughing as he pushed her against the dumpster in the vacant alley.

“Who’s your daddy, Rumpelstiltskin?”

Rumpelstiltskin. That was the name given to the woman by the kids in the neighborhood. She moved, broken and bent, with a cane. She always wore that stained brown pea coat covered in cat hair, and a drab, yellowing scarf wrapping her ancient head. None of us remembered her ever speaking; only glowering at our hateful antics with cold, black eyes which pierced our very souls. Oh, we would laugh and taunt, but with a nervous fear to drive our actions. Usually Rumpelstiltskin would stay close to her home, which was a tiny shack of an A-frame, hiding in a jumbled, foreboding nest of overgrown shrubbery and a few tired trees with branches dangling precariously over the withered and dismal dwelling. On the few occasions when one of us would boldly approach her, she would skitter to her sanctuary with surprisingly quick movements, staring; staring back at us with those shiny eyes once she was in the safety of her surroundings.

Another memory flashed through my mind. Rumpelstiltskin, bouncing off of the dumpster, losing her balance. As she stumbled forward, she was unable to avoid a bar extending from the receptacle. Her head met the protrusion with a sickening crunch. As her body sagged and fell toward the Earth, her face held her up, as if in proud defiance. After a moment, it too gave up, and released her to the ground. She was moaning softly, making helpless motions with her legs. It was as if she was running in slow motion.

I looked at Jason, who was clearly shocked. I turned back to Rumpelstiltskin, noticing first those eyes. Wide and glossy; hurt and accusing, framed by the black paint now covering her face. As she writhed, and the moonlight captured her expression, I saw that it was actually blood, which was now pouring from a cavernous dent just above her eyebrows. For the time, I heard her voice. It was raspy and crisp, like the clicking of a playing card in the spokes of a bicycle wheel.

“Tasty...flies! Tasty...flies!”

What the hell? Unless I was not hearing her right, that knock to the noggin must have been worse than I thought. Apparently it was, because no sooner had I thought this, than Rumpelstiltskin had expired. There was no need to check her pulse, or perform any type of test to prove it. Jason and I both just knew. Her legs had stopped pumping, and her black, glistening orbs remained open to the world, staring through us even in death. Maybe it was my imagination, but I swore I saw the reflection of both of us in those deep pools of ebony, framed by the crimson of her lifeblood.

Neither one of us spoke during the walk home. Jason was a specter, his face so white it was almost transparent. I couldn't believe that we had just killed Rumpelstiltskin. I wondered what our fate would be, if the cops would know it was us, if I would ever live past this gruesome moment. When we walked up to my house, we looked at each other one last, grim time, and then I went inside. I quietly and slowly trudged upstairs to bed. Despite my experience, I fell asleep quickly. I must have been drained.

And now I am awake. Again, that smell. That putrid, unhealthy, rotting and eternal smell. For the first time I realize that I cannot move. I cannot open my eyes. My arms are pinned to my side; my legs bound together. Where am I? Am I in bed?

I am now alert and frantic. I feel like I am on some kind of trampoline. My body bobs in rhythm, as if to a slow, gentle imaginary beat. What is going on?

There is a guttural noise to my right. Is that Jason? I feel the trampoline quivering, and a louder, more distinct groaning sound. Yes, it is Jason, but he is not saying anything; only making loud, indistinct noises. At once the trampoline bounces wildly and I thought I was falling. As suddenly as it began, the bouncing settles, and once again I am bobbing to that imaginary beat. Still, that God-awful smell, so unfamiliar to me, permeates my senses.

I have to find a way to see what is going on. I realize that my face is covered with rope or gauze of some kind. Maybe there is some way to loosen it or at least peek around it. Even though my body is tightly bound, I discover that I can move my head a bit. Maybe I can work the rope loose enough to catch a glimpse of my surroundings.

As I writhe my head around in an attempt to free my vision, I hear crusty words being whispered. I can't quite make out what they are saying, but my heart quickens, and I increase my movements. The trampoline jerks suddenly, and I hear a crunching sound. Jason gurgles an unintelligible scream, which quickly fades to silence. Not exactly silence. His desperate wail is replaced with a steady slurping, which sounds like Jell-o being sucked through a straw. I close my eyes tight and increase my efforts to break free, my head now a wild, whiplashing metronome, moving to the frantic beat of an internal *Danse Macabre*.

After a moment I lay still, my body gently bobbing on the trampoline. The ghastly slurping sounds have stopped. I open my eyes, and find that my efforts have paid off. The rope has slipped somewhat, and I see a couple of pinhole lights, which are stars in the black sky. I roll my eyes to the right, and see a long, tubular bar with rows of hairy protrusions. Before I can process this information, the trampoline bounces viciously again, and my eyes slam shut in reflex.

The bouncing gently settles into the now familiar pattern of bobbing in time to a slow, silent waltz.

“One-two-three. One-two-three.”

I open my eyes. Directly in front of me are two long, yellow, pointed shafts, about a foot apart. As I focus, I look to the top of the shafts. I see what appears to be dozens of hemispheres in a variety of sizes, each one neatly imitating the next, arrayed in geometrical rows. They look hauntingly familiar. Then I hear the raspy, creaking whisper:

“Tasty...flies. Tasty...flies.”

I don't know if my scream was audible. I just know I shrieked with my psyche and every fiber of my being as the fangs plunged into my chest. My fear became agony as I realized that the crunch I heard was my ribs breaking and shattering. I could feel the pain and pressure as Rumpelstiltskin withdrew my internal juices with her strong vacuum. The newly familiar slurping sound was all I could hear. As the life faded from my body, my last sight was the visible dent above those rows of eyes. Those probing, knowing, glassy eyes, shrouded by the smell of eternal death.

*

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Chapter 37

“Written For and During”

Bruce Hesselbach
Newfane, Vermont, USA

Take a look at yourself! I'm talking to you, Miss Victoria Smith! Your eyes are baggy; your hands are red and clammy; your tongue tastes like cotton; there's stringy hair in your face; why, your very breath is evil! How long has it been since you've had a bath?

Get a hold of yourself, girl; grab that pencil tightly; sit up; close mouth; wipe away that -- Now, now girl! Chin up! You're shacking up at the old man's. Cold – cold – Oh the hell with it!

Goddam mirror never worth a shit anyhow.

Funny story how I got here. Tell the story, girl! Oh, well, you know, I'm weird. So my old man says. Isn't that strange when you look in the mirror and you can see two faces inside your eyes looking out at you, all distraught and pale, just faces disconnected? Well, never mind that.

I was feeling pretty bad. No sleep, no food, no water. Threw up once into a paper cup laying outside an ice cream store. Nobody even wanted to look at me, I could see that. It was terribly cold, though I couldn't stop sweating; it felt like it was freezing on my back. What a mess. Then I went over into the lobby of the Manchester Hotel. Cramps, as if I was having my period two weeks early. I could hardly walk for being drug down, yanking at me all inside.

The paper boy was there. “Hey P-P-Powlo,” I siz, “throw me a f-f-few pills for Chrissake, anything.”

“No go, Vicki. I'm broke.”

“You can get me s-some, Powlo.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Sorry my ass.”

So I got out of there fast. Crummy place. The bar there sucks. Mostly only bums go there, cheap as all hell. But outside the hotel was what I wanted. Cabs usually come down there at nights. A cold wet night like that, nobody there but me. Coat I had on was too short. Shoes pinched, gave me a sore. The room I live in is so lousy I use my shoes to kick the big rats when we had them but they all died they starved to death.

Waiting seemed like hours for a cab. Hell it was about 12 midnight the Phone company gets off then and cabs go away. Felt very cold and wet. I was shaking and sat on the sidewalk. God I wished I had some prune juice at least. That was colder and it hurt my back. Maybe I should go back inside the Hotel. If they threw me out it would be worth it and not freeze my ass off. But just then a cab came. Young cab driver, pretty good looking, so I said, get up, kid, do your stuff.

“Okay, Lady, get in! Where ya going?”

He had this long black hair, combed back at the sides. Out of the 50’s, you know. His face was cute and he was young for a cabbie.

“Take me down ta Furrows Road in Goodwich.” The car had already taken off. Then he had to call up because Goodwich was far out of the city limits. A set rate to go there. I forget how much. I was just wishing I could fool around with his hair from the back and I would too if he’d stop talking and trying to get me to talk. Hell, I couldn’t follow what he was saying, the motion of the car made my stomach too tied up I could puke. Something about a new road needed in Goodrich to cut down on consumer traffic or something. I siz, “Yeah.” “Yeah right.” “Yeah sure.” Eventually we started getting close to where I wanted.

I siz, “Juh-just over dis hill.”

“Okay, where’s the house?” he siz, stopping quickly. Then he stared at me like I was some kind of nut.

I stared right back.

Then I siz, “You can let me out here if ya want.”

He dint know what to do. It’s so many dollars, he siz, repeating what he said before. He was getting nervous and afraid.

“I can’t pay you,” I siz. “I ain’t got no money.”

Now he started to act sore, like rays of lightning and fire shooting out from his mouth.

“Listen,” I siz, “you’ll get paid if you take me down ta the other side of the cemetery. I ain’t got no money on me.”

He pulled the car up to the front entrance of the almost endless, rotted cemetery. It was black as hell in there. No stars were out because of fog and clouds, and in Goodwich it gets so dark you can’t see in front of your face although you think you can. The graves were all white and shadowy and the highbeams showed trees with no leaves, they died too, and no sounds except a little from toads and stuff. There are some snakes and birds and raccoons in the cemetery that people will mistake for stiffs that were just buried there by accident and hadn’t really died yet. They revived and broke out, though not in their right minds of course.

This happened years ago to my twin sister.

And then there's some kids in Goodwich that hitch around in the dark and one kid got drunk on a bottle of straight Southern Comfort and slept on a grave all night then he woke up and thought he was dead because he was so stiff and couldn't move, his body was asleep and numb.

There's things in the cemetery by and by that nobody ever sees. Nobody lives long enough to, it happens very slow, from year to year. All the people taking out what's not theirs for laughs or else putting in things that they want to get rid of, like dead babies and five year olds beaten to death and dogs run over by cars with their guts bashed out and strangled cats and suicides go there and they sort of decay while the animals get to them and spread things around in the leaves and the mud, where the greenflies, the slugs, the maggots, the millipedes, the ants all live in the stinking purple flesh like spaghetti.

It's all a big mystery with three or four skeletons exposed by erosion running through a little grove, the skulls have graffiti on them and headstones back from the 1700's where the bodies were dug up and now there are no names on those headstones.

I ain't superstitious you can tell. Most people are really scared as hell to go in there at night because the knotted trees and branches look like they're half alive and then you think of ghouls and partly rotted flesh and dried up brown blood like shit, and the darkness all surrounding with no ending as if you could never find your way back out again; but that's only how it looks to a corpse.

After some time the young cabbie made up his mind. He probably worked hard for his money, for his family, who knows? He wasn't old enough and didn't have enough guts to go back without the money.

"Okay, I'll take you to the other side," he said and jammed down his foot and leaves a patch. This cab whips through the cemetery from zero to sixty in ten seconds and it was a narrow bumpy little road and he lops off a few branches as he goes through.

Then way at the end of the cemetery he saw a little light; it was a very little house, and he slammed on the brakes, and some more lights went on outside the house. An aging balding man came out.

"I'll pay you the fare," the man said. "She lives here with me. I'm her father. She's on drugs and when she runs out of money she comes home. I think she likes to make fun of cab drivers this way."

"You mean, for kicks?"

"Yes, I think so. If she knows what she's doing."

*

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Chapter 38

“The Call”

*Rahima Warren
San Francisco, California, USA*

My hand shakes. Too cold to continue, I contemplate the canvas. Silken-dark waters, a shimmering path, faint stars. Who will complete this one? The Mistress must be satisfied before I will know, but She is gone. I must wait upon her return. Until then, I must sleep.

Hearing the faint beginnings of the Call, I stir, but the Mistress is weak yet. I return to uneasy somnolence.

Gaining strength, She wakens me gently with her subtle silver touch. Undeniable now, the Call pulls me forth from my redoubt.

Pale faces peer at my sleek black automobile with its darkened windows, wondering which celebrity is inside. Somewhere near this glittery, narcissistic place, there is one who awaits me.

The Call leads me to quieter streets, dimly lit by street lamps shadowed by tall old trees, an occasional porch light, the garish flickering of entertainment screens. Circling slowly, I slide through these streets of simple homes. The engine purrs peacefully, but I pay heed only to the Call, as it fades, returns, grows stronger.

Ah, it is this house, huddling behind overgrown lilacs, with a few pots of drooping geraniums on the stoop. She is inside, alone. Her ripe despair washes over me in an arousing tide. She is not ready to come to me. I will return each night until she is.

A shabby pickup truck turns into the driveway. Reeking of stale anger and tobacco smoke, a man stumbles out of the truck and enters the house. Her fear increases but she covers it with appeasing lies. Soon he has reduced her to hidden tears with his cutting words. He raises his fist. I do not need to witness what comes next. It is always the same – crude, brutal, needless.

This holy night, the Mistress is full and strong, the Call incontestable. I drive through the darkening streets. Jack-o-lanterns glare from porches. Ghosts and goblins haunt the sidewalks. People playing with darknesses they don't understand, reducing them to child's play to keep them at bay. I smile, imagining how they would scatter if I walked among them.

Ah. Here is the woman's house No yellow light glares from her windows, no garish colors flicker. She sits alone in silent darkness, as I wait outside in mine. Life means nothing to her now. He has murdered her will, her soul. I select music for her, sad and languorous. I get out and stand beside the car, leaving the door open, the music playing.

Heavy with emptiness, she walks out of the house. I bow to her and swing open the passenger door. She looks at me, at the dark interior of my luxurious conveyance, shrugs and slips inside.

I am roused to tenderness by her numb despair. She is my bride for the night. She longs for surcease. I am an artist. I will create for her an ending better than any she could imagine.

In an overly-precious village, we stroll a street of stylish shops. In one of these, she uses a piece of plastic to buy the kind of dress she never allowed herself – ruby satin, draped low in front and back - with jeweled sandals for her feet, and a fur wrap. She returns to me transformed, unknown to herself. In a restaurant full of dark glass and feverish chatter, I order a lavish dinner and watch her take neat bites with white teeth.

We return to my vehicle. I cover her neck with lingering kisses, tantalizing myself with the salty taste of her. She smiles distantly, far from the life she has known. We leave behind the smug little town whose people ignore the howling of their dogs.

As we drive on, our darkneses merge. The Mistress paints the slender road silver as it winds through the soft hills toward the sea's shore. Yellow light from a foreign land shines in occasional farmhouse windows. Unsubtle music, clumsily sensual, booms and fades as we pass a rowdy saloon.

The silver path takes us along bluffs overlooking the sea, far beyond any cottage or tavern. The slow pulse of the Mistress surges through me, relentless as the unseen waves swelling and receding below. I drive the curves and twists recklessly. My bride clings to me, uncaring, caressing her fur-draped, satin-clad body in absent surprise.

I stop at the cliff's edge. The Mistress turns the fog-clad ocean below us into land of silver mysteries. My bride follows me out of the car without protest or question. With cold, trembling hands, I wrap her new fur about her warm body. Soon, I too will be warm. The fog enshrouds us as we descend the path to the hidden beach at land's end. Now we can hear the ceaseless voice of the Mistress's vast slave, feel the cold wet touch of sea mist.

I brush her fog-bejeweled hair off her face. She kisses my hand and turns empty eyes toward the restless waters. The Mistress's cold fire rises within me. I am desperate to please her, but I am an artist.

I carry my bride across the sands into the waiting circle of heavy chain. In the center, I spread her fur on the sand and lay her upon it. I caress her face, her arms, her breasts, her thighs. Her passion mounts and I am hard with hunger, yet I await her summons.

“Please,” she begs. “Please.”

Invited, I enter. The Mistress's demand pulses through me, yet I take my time. When my bride reaches fulfillment, I plunge my fangs into her arched neck. Her bliss-sweetened blood pulses raw and hot through my veins, exquisite agony flooding me with urgent life, raging desire. I climax, howling my praises to the Mistress.

I clasp her limp body tenderly, thanking her for her gift, whispering blessings for her journey. She smiles a small, grateful smile as she slowly grows cold. The Mistress breaks through the fog and looks down, satisfied.

*

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Chapter 39

"The Corn Maze"

*Matthew C. Nelson
Jacksonville, Florida, USA*

On the outskirts of a small village along the Texas-Mexico border...

Mike had just finished his late Friday night shift at the diner and wasn't ready to go home and spend the evening with his parents and little brother. He'd just gotten a car the week prior and he was aching to pick his girlfriend, Rachel, out and do something fun.

As Mike punched out of the time clock, he looked up to see Rachel waiting outside with the rest of his friends. He smirked as he got to the door.

"I see how it is. You guys are only capable of showing your asses when I get a set of wheels, but just last week, you all were unable to return my phone calls?" Mike teased as he wrapped his arms around Rachel and planted a firm kiss on her lips.

Letting out a slight purr, Rachel replied, "So, it's Friday night, we have absolutely nothing planned tonight. What are we doing, oh darling?"

Pulling out a piece of paper, Mike unfolded it from his back pocket and handed it to Rachel as he spoke. "I want to go here!"

Mike's best friend, Craig, leaned over the side of the truck and looked over Rachel's shoulder and read aloud.

"S. Hain Farms' Corn Maze....come experience the fun and terror of the Haunted Corn Maze...with Hay Rides...admission is just three bones. Sound's cool to me!"

With unanimous cries of "Sounds awesome", Mike nodded as he and Rachel got into his truck with the rest sat in the bed of the truck. "The Corn Maze it is."

It took about three hours to get there, with the last stretch being a long winding dirt road. Marking the exit was a sign that said "S. Hain's Corn Maze". Mike maneuvered his truck and navigated the side road until he finally came to an old white barn with an older gentleman sitting in a rocking chair smoking a cigar.

"You youngun's must be here fer the maze, right? Well then, park yer car and pay the devil his due boys. Just three dollars a person...except the pretty little gal, she can go fer free."

Blushing, Rachel blurted out, "Why thank-you. I guess I have an admirer."

"Since I just got paid, let me pay for you all...my treat." Mike smiled proudly as he spoke. Looking back at the old man, he replied, "So, I guess I owe you twelve bucks." He reached in and pulled a ten and two single bills.

Smiling, the old man accepted the money and slipped it in his shirt pocket. "Go have some fun." Mike and the rest of the gang ran off down the road and stepped into the corn maze.

The old man walked over to Mike's truck and nodded. He lifted up a walkie-talkie and spoke, "OK, Jim, you can tow it away." Moments later, a massive tow truck drove up, hooked Mike's truck to it, and hauled it away.

Smiling, the old man mused, "They won' be needing it anymore." He turned and walked towards the corn maze as well. The moment he stepped foot into the corn maze, he vanished into the earth.

Mike and the rest of his friends eventually made it to the center of the maze that night.

The prize for it? The ground beneath their feet opened up all around them and swallowed them whole.

Such are the events of S. Hain's Farm....Samhain's Farm, that is.

*

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Chapter 40

“Spider”

(Excerpt from “Inside My Shorts: 30 Quickies” © 2011 Adam Sifre)

Adam Sifre
Wayne, New Jersey, USA

"JAY!!"

Just the sound of her voice made him want to hit something. Lately, it seemed Wanda had only three ways of yapping -- loud, bitchy and irritating. When it came to pissing him off, Wanda was a multi-tasker.

"Jayyyy!! Get up here!" It had been one grade-A bitch of a day. Triple digit temperatures and a dying air conditioner at the office left him moist, stewed, and raw. Receiving his first paycheck reflecting garnished wages for the ex was the cherry on the fucking sundae.

He trudged up the stairs, cursing himself for trading jerking off to the playboy channel for shacking up with the built Harpy.

Wanda was standing in the bedroom doorway. Jay had a few seconds to appreciate her finer aspects, mainly a sweet ass framed in black and white polka dot panties, and a perky set of titties that defied gravity just fine. If she could just keep her mouth –

"JAY!! Get up here!"

"Jesus, Wanda –"

Wanda whirled around in surprise and he marveled at the effect she still had on him. Even when he wanted to kill her, he wanted to fuck her.

"Just kill it!"

"What are you talking—?"

She grabbed his hand and half pulled, half twirled him into the room, at the same time putting Jay between her and the bed. His foot caught on the door jamb and he stumbled the rest of the way. Being the proud owner of a recent ex with a decent lawyer, Jay's bedroom, like the rest of his life, was sparsely furnished. There was the queen bed directly in front of him, flanked by two IKEA end tables, and that was it.

Completely off balance, he had little choice but to let inertia carry him to the bed. He hit it, arms outstretched, the frame catching him just below the nut sack, thank Christ.

Just before arms and head met goose down, he saw it. Smack dab in the middle of the bed; a big, hairy, alien-looking spider. It had lots of brown hair, gray spots and legs, legs, legs. He let out a small yelp which was drowned out by a screeching Wanda.

Jay hit the bed, and the Spider flew into the air. He saw it pull its legs together, getting ready to tuck and roll, for Christ's sake. And then he thought he heard –

No, spiders don't scream.

It landed on his hand and, while spiders may not scream, sometimes a 230 pound divorcee with a thumper of a headache and a dwindling hard-on screams like a little girl.

He snatched his hand away like he'd leaned on a hot grill. The spider began its second flight of the night, this time landing at the beautifully pedicured feet of Harpy Wanda, who let out a scream that made her previous yelling sound like a lover's whisper. Jay would be lying if he said he didn't enjoy that one.

Wanda kicked at the bloated bag of legs and tried to back away at the same time, screaming the whole time. The spider, now air-borne for the third time that night, made a bee-line for Jay's chest. He jumped back in revulsion and smacked his head a good one against the window air-conditioner beside the head of the bed.

He woke up some time later. In fact, he jumped up, swatting at his chest and legs and -- well, not screaming; definitely not screaming. Satisfied he was spider-free, he took a few seconds to catch his breath. His head felt like someone had taken a hammer to it.

How can something so fucking big disappear so fucking fast? He asked himself, rubbing the back of his head and grateful to find no blood.

"Wanda?" Jay called out. Where the fuck did she go?

"Wanda?"

He swatted instinctively at his arms again, sure he felt soft, alien legs skittering across his skin.

He found Wanda when he went to look for a frying pan or a howitzer to take care of the spider. She was lying at the bottom of the stairs, her left leg twisted at a funky angle, eyes staring up at nothing. The spider was nestled between her breasts, which were no longer defying gravity.

Jay stood there, transfixed, for how long, he didn't know. But it was light out before he moved. He slowly made his way down the stairs, his eyes never leaving the spider and, he imagined, the spider's eyes never leaving him. To Jay, it looked like it had staked its claim and was willing to die defending it.

He nearly pissed himself when he had to jump over Wanda's body, expecting the thing to leap at his crotch. He'd call 911 and tell them -- tell them what? A Spider murdered his girlfriend? Well, never mind. He'd call 911.

The phone sat on the kitchen table. A fat, bloated wasp crawled back and forth over the receiver, its soft, alien buzz filling the room.

"Fuck."

*

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www.amazon.com/Adam-Sifre/e/B007RWY92E/ref=ntt_athr_dp_pel_1

My Blog "I've Been Deader – Oh, you know": www.ivebeendeader.blogspot.com/

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Chapter 41

“A Mother’s Confession”

*Joseph Alan Gharagheer
Toledo, Ohio, USA*

My name is Rachel Maddox, and it was on this day, October 31st, 2012, that I killed four people. Not hours after committing these crimes, I now sit down to write to you my official confession, hands still stained scarlet from the deeds I’ve done. My lip still quivers, unable to shake the vivid imagery from my mind. It is not my intention to absolve myself of any guilt, but rather to explain my actions, so that my children aren’t left to wonder what could have driven their mother to commit such heinous crimes. It was in fact because of my children that I forced myself to muster enough strength to do what had to be done in the first place. I hope that one day they can understand why I did what I did. Now that that has been established, I can continue with the details.

It all started at a Halloween party. Looking back, it was foolish to go to this party in the first place, but I needed a night out, and it was the children’s father’s turn to take them trick or treating anyways, so they were staying the night at his house for the evening. I took advantage of the situation and allowed myself to get fairly intoxicated, so intoxicated in fact that I didn’t even notice when I was drugged. At first I thought that my drowsiness was just a side effect of the drinking, but before I knew it I could no longer concentrate, and the next memory I have is waking up.

When I finally came to, it was the tight metal chain around my throat that woke me in the first place. I felt it being tugged against my skin, and I choked loudly as I opened my eyes. Even whilst being choked, my surroundings still took a minute to come into clarity. I tried to reach up to grab at the cold chain that continued to constrict around me, causing me more and more pain the longer it held on, but I realized for the first time that my hands were shackled to the table I was leaning back against. I attempted to struggle but found that I couldn’t move as my feet were also shackled. I looked around me at my surroundings as I continued to choke, tears dripping from my eyes, and my heart began to pound when I saw the others. There were two more people shackled just like me, a young man in a pirate’s costume, and a girl in a black dress with cat ears on her head. Neither of them looked any older than 25. On the other side of the room was the scariest part, however. A bearded man sat in a chair, simply staring at us, watching us squirm, with a sick smile on his face. He had a glass of something in his hand, which he sipped on, legs crossed in front of him as if he was watching some kind of show for his entertainment.

I only had one thought in my mind. I had to get out of this sick situation. I had to see my kids again, whatever it took. That’s what I kept thinking to myself when the man finally pressed a button loosening my chain around my neck. I was finally able to breathe, and I heaved and cried

for several seconds, but ultimately calmed myself down. I had to remain calm for the children. Getting home to them was my top priority, so when the man finally spoke, explaining to us what he wanted from us, I knew I would comply. Years ago I would have never gone through with the things he asked of me, but becoming a mother changed everything.

When the man spoke, he kept it simple. He got straight to the point in telling us what we wanted. He said that whichever one of us was brave enough to murder the other two would be allowed to leave in one piece. He asked each one of us if we could do it. First, was the Pirate. That poor man thought that surely there was no way that any one of us would comply, and so he told the sick bastard to go to Hell. Following his lead, the Cat said something similar to the man, with much fouler language. And finally, the man asked me. He referred to me as "Nurse" as that was the costume I had chosen for the party. Once he asked me, I wasted no time. I felt remorse for the other two, but they were nowhere as important to me as my children were, and they needed their mother. I told the man that I would do it, and he smiled, pressing another button. This one released my shackles and I stepped down from my table, following his instructions.

The chain remained around my neck as I walked to the table in the center of the room containing the tools. It seemed to be unraveling from somewhere behind the table that I had been on. The man told me I could use whatever was on the table, but that I had to be creative, and if he was pleased with my "work" then he would release me. The Pirate and the Cat begged me to stop and consider what I was doing. I couldn't stop. I couldn't think about it. If I did, I might not have had the courage to go through with what needed to be done.

I went to work on the Pirate first, using an ice cream scooper to remove his eyeballs from his skull. It was one of the metal ones, with the lever to help slide the ice cream, or in this case the eye ball, out of the scooper. I drowned out his screams with a power drill, which I used to slowly disconnect the flesh and bones on the man's arms from the rest of his body. Blood, chunks of flesh, and bone dust littered my costume, making it look like I was meant to be some sort of zombie nurse. I used a large mallet on the man's kneecaps, and just when he was almost dead, I finished the job by burying a hatchet into his forehead.

When it came to the Cat, I got more personal with it. I personally reached my hand into her mouth and sliced her tongue off with a switchblade. I wrapped a long lock of her curly hair around the head of a hammer and pulled until I ripped it from her skull. I dug my fingernails into her sides and ripped them open by repeatedly scratching away at her flesh. I sliced a line down her abdomen and then stuck the claw of a hammer and a screwdriver in her open wounds, tugging her meat to the side and ripping it off of her body. She panted, open, as she died a hideous creature, a sad shadow of the beautiful girl she once was.

This was when the man told me I needed to use the tools on myself. After everything I did for him. After the horrors I caused. He was going back on his word. I grabbed a hold of the hatchet and quickly hacked away at the chain that bound me, cutting myself loose. I grabbed the dragging chain and ran towards the man. He hadn't expected this, and fell backwards in his chair, where I had the perfect opportunity to wrap the metal chain around his own neck. I knew nothing about this man, yet we shared the intimate moment of staring into each other's eyes as I extinguished his life. After his last breath, I began to heave. I freaked out and lost it for several hours, until I finally pulled myself together long enough to get to this pen and paper.

Ironically, even though I did what I did to see my children again, I can't drive the screams from my head. The images of what I've done are burned into my memory and the tears keep flowing. To have my children see me this way would poison their memory of me, and honestly, I don't think it would be safe for them. So, even now, I'm doing what I think will be best for them. As I write this final paragraph, I am grabbing the gun that I found in the man's cabinet with my left hand, and I'm holding it up to my temple. To my children, I love you, and I hope one day you'll understand.

"I don't get it," Mark said, setting down the letter. "We searched four times and other than her strangled ex husband, there are no bodies."

Jason hung up his phone. "They just searched the bitch's house. They found her children brutally murdered, still in their Halloween costumes. Get this. Her son was a pirate, and her daughter was a cat."

*

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Chapter 42

“Embracing the Beast”

(Excerpt)

Mel L. Kinder
Livonia, Michigan, USA

The breeze from the heavy liquor store door blew past my face as I fumbled with a fresh pack of smokes. It was going to be another sleepless night. Was it withdrawals from the medications? Maybe. Regardless, I was becoming a night-owl. This will not serve me once I return to work—if I return to work. Battling a terminal disease gave me the confidence to walk fearless in the shadow of night. I hadn't realized how reckless I'd been. Walking the streets alone late at night, leaving the windows open, leaving the doors unlocked. Was I tempting fate? Have I given up on life after coming so far in my treatment? I hardly sleep, eat or drink, yet I feel stronger than ever—almost manic. I have nothing left to lose but my life and if that were my destiny the treatment would fail.

The subtle sound of footsteps came out of nowhere. The two men dressed in black stood taller than I even if I were wearing my tallest heels. My arms and legs went cold. I never encountered a situation of immediate danger before—not like this.

One of the men yanked the cigarettes from my hands. “Don't you know these are bad for you?” he said condescending as he shoved them in his back pocket. The other man laughed a deep congested cackle. “You know what else is dangerous?” he antagonized. “Dumb little bitches walking alone at night.” The both laughed.

Time stood still as I felt the change within me. It wasn't the fear and anxiety I expected but the adrenaline everyone talks about. I felt like I was about to do something hasty. I couldn't move. I didn't know what I planned to do. Run, scream, fight back?

I knew no one would hear me and even if they did, they would pretend that they didn't. My mouth was trembling as if to say something but no words came. My mind was blank as if I had no language database to pull from. There would be no reasoning with these guys. They weren't the type to take your money and leave. Somehow I could sense that.

The congested burly man shoved me against the wall and dug into my pockets. His breath smelled of whiskey, sweat and cold cuts. I couldn't believe I was still conscious. I should be more afraid but I was something else. I was anticipating something. Not sure what it was, I continued to stand there defenselessly as my brain remained a blank canvass. Finding nothing in my front pockets, he reached around back. He caressed my ass before working his way up to the flap of the pocket. Now I could hear my heartbeat inside my ears which began to burn.

He pulled my wallet out and threw it to his accomplice without so much as a glance in his direction. He caught the wallet like some practiced routine. These guys were regulars. How many defenseless women have they assaulted in this alley? Though my mind was as black as night, I knew where this was headed. I felt tension in my bones as I anticipated the man's next move. His cold fat fingers crept up my shirt. I felt them on my abdomen which made me shiver. Why wasn't I doing anything to stop this? I didn't want his grubby hands on me and yet I let it go on for far too long. Perhaps I wanted to feel justified in the actions that would follow. As if subconsciously I knew what I would do next. I felt no warning within me when it took over. The secret beast within me waited until the man was distracted by his confidence and anticipation of his next moves—easily brutalizing another woman. One so helpless she didn't so much as fight back.

His eyes turned wide on me, body paralyzed and silent. His friend didn't know anything was amiss as he waited patiently, smoking my cigarettes. Asshole! The adrenaline pulsed within every cell of my body. There was a need to quench something deep in my soul. The longer my left fingers were inside of him—between the ribs—the more delicious the smell seeping from his pours. The sweat leaking down his face became an appetizing sight, like the juices of a sweet citrus fruit. I felt compelled to lick it from his face but fought the urge. I didn't understand what was coming over me. Like I were outside of myself watching it all unfold. Finally, my right fingers mirrored that of my left as they pierced his skin like butter and slid between the man's ribs. The siphoning of his life began and I felt it pour into me through up my arms and spreading throughout as it reached my shoulder. His life force tickled my senses and quenched the empty pit of my soul. It was better than a good night sleep, better than a fantasy and euphoria barely captured the essence of what it was to drain him of his undeserving life. It was over in seconds but in the heat of the moment it felt I had escaped to my own paradise island. It was better sex and cigarettes.

I released my fingers from his weightless corpse, drained of all moisture. Thin leathery skin pulled tightly over his bones like a drum. It fell to the ground as quiet as a handful of sand. His buddy was still smoking my cigarette facing away from the action. Conscious thought would slow my actions. Animal instinct fueled me now. I drained this man as I did the last but I had to drag things out because killing him wasn't the same. It was less satisfying. Perhaps his death was less justified.

Dropping the corpse reality set in. What have I done? It was self-defense June. They would have killed you. The air was silent and brisk. No witnesses. What do I do with the bodies? I searched in all directions frantically, unable to think straight. As I reached for the corpse lying before me I noticed a symbol etched in the forehead of my victim. I yanked the skeletal wrist close to position the symbol into moonlight. With the sound of crumbling rock the torso detached from the man's waist and crushed into ash-like dust. Before the remainder collapsed I managed to get a better glimpse at the symbol etched in his leathery skull. It looked like some kind of arrow pointing downward. I hadn't noticed it before the man became meat. I searched the wall where the assault took place but the man was gone. Well, I guess that solves one problem. I looked to the hand which held the wrists of the bastard who stole my cigarettes. Nothing but dust remained. Ash-textured dust.

*

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Chapter 43

“Borne of Pain”

*Patrick Ottuso
Vero Beach, Florida, USA*

"Phillip, come down NOW!"

Uh oh, what did I do now, thought Phillip Rauther. He approached his father cautiously as he saw his angered red face staring at the kitchen floor. The crushed cheerio was alone on the smooth polished kitchen floor, awaiting recognition.

"Yours?" his father asked.

"I'm sure it is", replied his unprotective mother, pointing her spindly finger at him. Phillip removed his shirt in the customary fashion, revealing multiple purple raised linear scars along his entire back. He bent over, knowing what was to come next. His father's leather belt didn't sting anymore, the scars too thick to allow his nerve endings to feel the whipping. Only when the brass buckle bit into the deeper skin or hit the bone of his spine did he feel pain. His mothers wooden spoon made even a lesser impact.

He ran upstairs after the beating, showered away the peeling scar tissue and blood and wrapped his back in a towel. Sleep was his only solitude. On the way to school the next day, the two mile walk, though tiring, allowed Phillip to think. For the thousandth time, as he passed the community fountain with the statue of Michael the Archangel, he flipped in a shiny penny and wished for a brother. He needed SOMEONE.

The bright flash of lightning startled Phillip as the penny entered the water. Odd, thought Phillip, lightning with blue skies. He made a mental note to google that when he got home and continue on to school.

Math class was boring...he hated fractions and decimals. The burning pain near his shirt collar startled him from his daydream. A small lump was forming on the back of his neck just below the hairline. Must be a bite, thought Phillip.

By the time Phillip got home from school. the lump had grown bigger and more tender. "Not telling mom about this", he swore! He stayed in his room for the rest of the day; Tuesday was an "off day" for dinner. They couldn't afford nightly meals. Before bed, Phillip placed a hot hand cloth on the lump, hoping that it would drain. The throbbing was getting worse but he managed to fall asleep, praying that the pain would fade. In the early morning hours, Phillip felt a pop; the pain in his neck had gone. He fell asleep knowing that he would be better in the morning. He didn't see the small round sphere drop from the bed and roll near the bedroom door.

Phillip woke and thought he was looking in the mirror! No, it was an image of himself sitting on the bedroom floor. "Hello Phillip, how do you feel?" "Whoooo aaarreee yyooooou?" stuttered Phillip in fear.

"I'm Stephen, your new brother. You don't have to worry about your folks anymore" the new addition said with a wry smile.

Phillip followed his new (newly created) brother down the hall, his parent's door slightly ajar. Steven nodded his head, urging Phillip to enter. The room was bright red (wasn't their room painted yellow? thought Phillip), splattered walls revealing the slaughter. His father, shirtless, hung from the ceiling fixture by his leather belt. The bright shiny brass buckle positioned perfectly under his chin. Deep red whip lines all along his back dripped clotted blood on the parquet floor.

His mother appeared to be watching the swinging corpse as she sat in the corner of the room. The staring eyes though, did not blink. Her mouth was agape, the wooden spoon jutting from the back of her throat.

Phillip turned to Steven and smiled. "Let's go out and play," he said to his sibling.

*

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Chapter 44

“The Storm”

*Gerald D. Johnston
Corunna, Ontario, Canada*

What the...

Where am I?

I awoke to the distant rumble of thunder, along with a gentle breeze that precedes summer storms. Stretched out, face up, my hands were in the river, feet back up on the bank. As I pulled my hands out of the water, my fingers brushed something slimy and yielding. Jerking back from the touch, I rolled away from the bank. The sky was thick with stars, aided by a lop-sided lunar grin, so it was easy to see what it was. It was a hand. There was a man floating dead in the water.

I'm no doctor – and he was face-down, thank God – but he'd been there long enough that he'd begun to bloat, so he had to be dead. The one hand I could see reminded me of uncle Erne's fingers that time he got stung by a bee and had to have his wedding ring cut off with a pair of bolt cutters. The way he screamed, you'd think my Dad was taking the finger too.

Like me, this fellow didn't wear any rings.

The body had been mere inches from my outstretched hands – pinned between a half-submerged rock and a tree branch that had likely fallen into the water sometime in the spring – it rocked lazily with the flow of the river.

I was with Bob last night, out drinking at The Stubborn Mule, but he has blonde hair; this guy's hair was dark like mine – brown or maybe black; too hard to tell, what with it being wet and caked with river mud.

As an image of a movie I'd seen in my youth played through my mind, I fought the sudden overwhelming urge to poke it – him, sorry – with a stick.

I shucked my cell from my front pocket and touched the screen. Nothing. It was either dead or had gotten wet. Shitty. A thought occurred to me as I shoved the phone back in my pocket: I should've been way more freaked out than I was, what with waking up next to a corpse and all.

I was in shock, that's what it was. Had to be.

Off in the distance, lightning squirted across the horizon like a neon herald for the thick clouds at its back. The storm was heading this way, and, for some inexplicable reason, panic rose in me. Each strike sent a wave of pain through my body, and my head throbbed in time with my heart.

After a glance toward the floater – a word I never thought I'd use outside the men's room – I stood, turned, and walked to the edge of the trees that flanked the river. The moon, still ahead of the approaching storm, cast enough light for me to see past the woods. Barely visible, blue under the glow of the moon, was the highway.

A flash followed seconds later by a chest-booming crack of thunder told me the storm was almost upon me. I had to move.

I took a step past the first tree and stumbled...

As I fell, the breeze turned cool and carried with it the pat-pat-patter of raindrops as they pelted the leaves. Closer now, I sensed it as a living thing and tasted its foul breath on my neck.

The ground came rushing to meet me, then began to lose cohesion and bleed away. I tumbled past the forest floor and into a void.

*

I awoke to the after-image of lightning overhead, followed closely by a boom of thunder. Stretched out, face up, my hands were in the river, feet back up on the bank.

What the...

Where am I?

A strong breeze filled my nostrils with a blend of ozone and rot. Above me, the moon hung, poised at the jaws of the star-eating storm heading its way. Beneath the advancing storm, the trees and undergrowth disappeared before a darkness so absolute that it seemed more a wall than a storm-front.

Lightning filled the sky and thunder rolled – and I bolted to my feet. Below me, a body bobbed in the water.

I should care.

I should do something...but can't.

Whoever they were, they were dead and there was nothing I could do for them. I had to get away, had to leave before the storm reached me. I backed away from both body and storm, turned, and ran.

Lightning split the sky and thunder followed fast and hard, shaking the ground at my feet. I chanced a peek over my shoulder, and tripped over a tree root...

*

I awoke in the eye of a storm; no breeze, no sound, and all colour had bled from the world. Above me a funnel rippled, and a form swathed in a flowing white hooded robe descended toward me.

To my left, a body floated face-down in the river.

*

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Chapter 45

“Remember Me!”

*Shannon Marie Mead
Jacksonville, Florida, USA*

In the days before my birth I remember the doctor telling my mother that she wasn't sure if my life would be long and without difficulty. I have a heart that is never going to work correctly without a transplant, and one of my arms is missing a hand. My parents were told keeping the pregnancy was not wise but my mother would not hear of it. She stood by her belief that even a few years were better than nothing.

I was born on a very stormy night so bad in fact that the lights went out just as I let out my first breath. Upon my birth the earth shook and the walls rumbled, every time I cried people would cover their ears as my shriek was enough to make a hearing person deaf. The hospital chaplain came to see my parents and confer with them about what they thought God was doing when he blessed them with a soul such as mine. Mom was dumbfounded she had no words. My father said that he was sure it was punishment for his past indiscretions.

I slowly discovered that as each day ticked by my world became more wicked and dark. By the time I was two months old both my parents lost a parent within two weeks of each other. My grandmother suffered a stroke from which she could not recover from, and my grandfather was killed by a drunk driver coming home from the grocery store. My father started going back to church he swore that all that was in me was pure evil. My shrills seemed to be less irritating though my mother had to wear ear plugs in order to be around me as she developed an anxiety condition brought on by my crying. The doctor wanted to admit her for testing but my father refused to hear of it.

The neighbor's dog mauled six feral cats and buried their remains in a hole dug under his dog house, causing an increased number of buzzards to stake squatters' rights on our roof top. I had difficulty breathing so I was forced to wear oxygen all day every day; something mom always made sure was in abundance so that I could live though deep in my soul I knew something was different about who I was and who I was meant to be.

At six months old I started to crawl and anything within my grasp was fair game and I found candles were a toy of choice. My mom stupidly always kept them lit and what's worse down where I could reach them. I set the couch cushion and the cat's tail on fire and for some strange reason it gave me pleasure in hearing the cat howl in pain.

My poor mother was beside herself. She had no idea how to handle either situation. It drove her crazy not wanting to admit it was her fault for each event as she was the one who left the fires burning. My father at this point did all he could was stay away from home for he feared me; just the look in his eye was enough to see that. My mother would discover later he had a woman on

the side and they had a child the same time I was born so was my sister though she was healthy a relief to my father.

At age two I was crawling out of my crib in the middle of the night and see what kind of chaos I could create, By this time my father had left us he could stand it no longer he had a healthy child that he could be a father too without fear of losing her at an early age. My sister and I would never meet but I learned later she was became a doctor for children with autism. I'm proud of her being her older brother just wish I had been there to see it all unfold.

My mother began to slip into a state of mental illness and she started telling family members she saw the devil in me and that I was evil and mean spirited. She may have been right as more dead creatures became visible around our home. I found it pleasing to hurt innocent creatures, and watch as they anguished till the life drained out of them. I was taken to a child psychologist who determined that I was just a normal toddler with a touch of ADHD. I was sent home with a prescription and a wish of good luck to my mom. Dad had stopped coming around all together and eventually they divorced which was even worse for my mom's illness.

I think mom really did start to see the worst in me, as she herself was afraid to be alone with me for extended periods of time. One night the storms started again and she leaned over to give me a kiss good night and she began to scream that my eyes were a shade of red, and that they were glowing. She ran to the bathroom and slammed the door and crouched in a corner and cried. She prayed for God to help her to know what to do as she was lost and needed guidance.

That night the storm grew worse and worse just like the night I was born, and all of the sudden the walls began to shake as if an earthquake was right under my house. I was thrown out of my bed and up against the wall. Mom came running out of her room screaming that the devil was coming to get her and it was my fault and she once again locked herself in the bathroom. The storm passed just as quickly as it came and it was if it had never come at all.

That night mom emerged from her cocoon of salvation and fixed my bed, tucked me in, kissed me good night and began to sing Jesus Loves Me. She ran her fingers through my hair till I fell asleep. Then as if something had overcome her she took the spare pillow off my bed, and without hesitation covered my face until all the life had disappeared out of my tiny body. A few days later my father received a phone call telling him that I was dead and that he needed to come and identify our bodies. Yes I said our bodies. A week after my mother had taken both of our lives a neighbor called reporting a foul odor emanating from our home.

The police entered our home to find my mother lying in a pool of blood on my bed room floor. After she had smothered me she slit her wrists, took me out of bed and held on to me while every last bit of blood left her body. Two bodies molded together as one once alive now dead and gone. My father went back to his other family and never looked back, never speaking of us again.

In all this story telling I realized I forgot to introduce myself to you. My name is Damian and I am an angel sent to earth by Lucifer himself to cause chaos and destruction. I have been reborn in any forms and always do my job to make the world a hated place to live. So what do you think are you game to try and beat me? If I'm able to I will try to make my way to you so we can play.

*

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Chapter 46

“The Collectibles”

*Devin Berglund
Brisbane, Queensland, Australia*

Four were still needed to complete his collection. He had already collected a few. They looked at him from on top of his desk. He gently tapped each of them on the head with his crooked finger. Their heads bobbed back and forth to life until they weren't moving anymore. He laughed and grabbed his white phantom mask and his black cape before leaving the house.

*

Earlier Adriana, Justice, and I helped Mom string the fake cobwebs from one side of the room to the other, but some had to be real, because this house had been vacant for a long time. The wooden steps creaked as I made my way down the stairs. The Jack-O'lantern in front of the door reminded me of my last Halloween Party many years ago. One could barely compare it to this party though because my last one was a 5th grade party in our classroom where three of my classmates came wearing the same costume as me.

Most of my childhood memories were of playing with kids we had just met in RV parks and studying on the road. I think that is why Dad decided to have a Halloween themed house warming party. He felt it would be an exciting event for us. He was right, but I think he felt bad we hadn't had the pleasure of slumber parties with friends and school plays like most other children had. My cat sneaked up and rubbed her head on my leg while looking at me before disappearing down the steps.

I looked over the banister and tip toed down the rest of the steps into the music room where Adriana's harp and Justice's guitar sat in one corner. Mom had placed some new furniture in the other corner just to make sure that people wouldn't think our house was empty. The pumpkin pie scented candles flickered. Where did everyone go? I asked myself. Suddenly loud music started drumming through the door leading to the backyard patio.

Oh, maybe they are outside. I answer my own question. My high-heel shoes clink on the wooden floor as I reach the kitchen. A knock came from the front door.

“I'm coming.” I pulled the door open to find a tall slender man with a black cane in his right hand. He resembled the Phantom of the Opera with a black cape, white gloves, and a matching mask.

“Uhh, hi!”

“Hello Tessa! How have you been” his voice was deep. He leaned in while speaking to me.

“Hi...uhh, good...” I tried to hide the uncomfortable feeling that was rising inside of me, so I bit my lip.

“Who are you?” I cocked my head to the side. His eyes were surrounded by the darkness inside his mask.

“I was the music and choir teacher at Lake County Middle School. Your brother attended many of my classes.” He offered his hand for me to shake. The hair on the back of my neck stood up straight. I was experiencing the same instinctive feeling that I imagined the cave men in my history book had felt when a saber-tooth tiger stalked them. Fight or Flight. I shook his hand. He gripped my hand tightly while smiling, and didn’t let go.

“Yes, that sounds a lot like Justice.” I said while shaking his hand awkwardly. I resisted the urge to rip my hand from his clutches and slam the door in his face. I need to be polite, but something is strange with this man, I need to find everyone else.

“Speaking of which, I need to go find him and my sister.” Chills crawled up my spine as he let go of my hand.

“But it was nice meeting you again. I think they’re on the patio.” I smiled while pointing towards the door. I heard him behind me as I slid the patio door open, my cat ran out.

I escaped to the patio after my cat while covering my eyes from the blazing torches on the edge of the grass. The music was blaring so loudly, that my ear drums were ringing. I hit the power button as silence filled the patio.

“How can you all stand the music this loud?” I said as everyone sat around the table quietly as though they didn’t hear me. I recognized my mom in her Cruella de Vill costume, but something was wrong with her face. Her mouth was gaping open; her cheeks were hollow under her skin. Her eyes were blood-shot and her skin was pale and it wasn’t from the make-up on her face. I ran up to my mother and set my head on her chest.

No heart beat.

“Mom! Come on, you can’t do this to me!” All the others around the table had the same sullen and frightened look on their faces. I wiped a tear from the corner of my eye. No one was moving. Who are all these people, I wondered while I backed away from the table. Someone did this to them. Where is everyone else? I looked around for the Phantom, but he was nowhere to be seen. I thought he followed me out here.

My heart pounded faster. It felt like the world was shrinking around me, entrapping me like a snowman in a snow-globe. I couldn’t see anyone moving or hiding in the trees, but as I turned my head I saw a shadow run across the yard toward the garden shed - it was my cat. I jumped when I heard the steps creak and ran toward the shed where my cat was sitting.

“Kitty, Kitty...” I called. My cat would have usually responded when I called her, but she didn’t. Instead she sat there with her fur on end, while oddly purring calmly. Her tail went slowly back and forth without shifting her tranced stare from the second storey bedroom window.

“Psst...” a quiet voice from behind the shed called to me. I turned to see who it was.

“Jason? Is that you?” I remembered him, but his face had changed a lot since the last time I had seen him. He became my first crush when he helped me hide my string-beans in my milk container at the cafeteria for lunch.

“Yes, it is me. Come here!”

“What is going on?” I kicked off my high heel shoes and ran toward him, “Do you know where my brother and sister are?”

“No, but someone here cannot be trusted.”

“Do you know who?”

“Not really, but he had a white mask and gloves.”

I gasped as the face of the Phantom came to my mind. He was the last person I had spoken to and fit Jason’s description perfectly.

“So what are we going to do now?”

“Escape?”

“What about my brother and sister?”

“They probably already escaped with some of the other people, while I hid here.”

“Do you know what happened?”

“Just a little. I hid to see what was happening, and wish I hadn’t seen it. The Phantom was back here. When he lifted his cane, everyone around the table screamed, but it was covered with the blaring music.”

The patio’s door slid open as I hid behind the shed with Jason. I peeked out and saw the Phantom. He walked to the table and chuckled at the people. He started humming to himself and turned to look the other way. Jason and I ran to another clump of trees when all of a sudden pain shot through my legs and I couldn’t move them anymore. Jason grabbed one of his legs too.

“I can’t move.” He whispered.

“I know... I can’t either.” I felt like I was running in a nightmare, but couldn’t get away from the evil that was chasing me. I peeked to see if the Phantom was still on the patio.

“He was no longer there!” I gasped, “Where did he go?”

“Right here, dearie.” A hauntingly familiar voice responded as I looked back at Jason, who was now in the Phantom’s arms. His white gloved hand covered Jason’s mouth muffling his screams.

“Oh silence.” The man spoke.

“What do you want?”

“You... Tessa. All of you kids.” He stretched his cane out towards me, my head spun. Everything around me became larger. I must have been thrown into my snow-globe after all.

*

His collection was finally complete.

“It’s a pity you don’t know how talented you are.” He spoke to them.

But the time would come for them to know their destiny, but for now they were mere collectibles that sat on his desk approving his future plans whenever he’d bobble their heads. When he’d need them, he’d call on them and they would obey.

*

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Chapter 47

“The Dollmaker”

*Michelle Patricia Browne
Calgary, Alberta, Canada*

My grandmother bounced up the steps of the shop with her usual false gaiety. “You’ll love this little place,” she said. This is what I did not say: yes, I like antique shops too, but this place is very out of the way. I also did not say: Grandpa looks like he needs to be shot.

It was quite a peculiar place, but then, that describes more than fifty percent of Nova Scotia. It was a farm on the mainland, far enough from the ocean that it wasn’t in sight, yet close enough to catch brine on the air. It was painted the same shade of blue as a cloudy day, and the windowsills had white trim. Antique Shop, said the signs outside. Please come in.

With an invitation like that, how could I resist? I followed, not grumbling, because the little I could glimpse behind the windows looked exquisitely promising. The curtains were the prerequisite ivory lace, real Irish, from the looks of it. The door chime tinkled with a sound like the tines of a fork playing on a wooden xylophone. My grandmother, chattering incessantly at my grandfather (who grunts occasionally, blinks in a thick, sleepy way behind his camera-thickness lenses), proceeds into the den immediately to inspect the pricey antiquities of her youth: the gold-leafed plates, the china, the relics of a time when washing machines were rare beasts and cars were tinny matchboxes. I am frozen in the chandeliered entranceway. The ceilings in this house are low, and if I were just a few inches taller, I could easily reach up and remove one of the crystals, tuck in my pocket like a thief. But the golden chandelier doesn’t hold my attention for long. The next thing I see is the dolls.

They are such dolls as I have never before seen in my life. These are not the dull, daft-eyed Victorian creations my mother and grandmother had. No. Perched there on the dark violet brocade, above the intricately carved, darkly shining wood, these are dolls with a curious soulfulness. I step over to them, ignoring the entranceway to the rest of the house-cum-Antique shop. There are half a dozen here, bodies soft, slender, flowing, covered with thick, cushiony silks and velvets. They have lace at their wrists and necks, beautiful small charms stitched below their necks and in other places like jewelled embroidery. They are all dressed the way jesters are, in dramatic colours. The clothes alone would make them remarkable, but it is their faces and hands that intrigue me most, force me to kneel before them in amazement.

Their hands are smooth, more like mittens than the proper, familiarly built, five-fingered ones I am used to. The faces are smooth and flowing, as if a proper person’s face had been wrapped in a layer of misty gauze. Arching, smooth brows, pointed, vague noses, hollow eyes with painted, expressive shadows within. The mouths are lipless, the hair, painted in curling brushstrokes.

They are blurred, formless, and yet oddly, frighteningly expressive, like Greek statues twisted in ecstasy, yet missing limbs. All are made of smooth white porcelain.

One is a jester; he's laughing silently at a joke I don't understand and have no wish to. His face is oddly brutal. Two are ladies, in flowing skirts with wistful expressions, unspeakable sadness. One is twisted, with doubled hands and two different faces. He frightens me. One is a gentleman. The last is Death. Death holds a dainty, elegant scythe, and smiles ambiguously. He is not cheerless, but his face reveals nothing, answers no questions. I stare at him for a long time before I drift after my grandparents like a ghost.

There is a cheery tour guide here, who babbles on absently. I feel as though the sightless eyes of the dolls are following me, that the creaking of the wooden floor beneath my feet is merely the house conversing with them, that the soft sloughing of cloth brushing against itself is not their whispered conversation about the strange, pale, plump girl watching them with such intensity. There is no relief among the delicately lettered price tags on the items in here, the stained bureaus and old books. There are more dolls, one with the face of a lapdog, more jesters, more two-faced men, a king of spades. I want to laugh at some, others make me shudder in fear. These are not the dolls children cuddle and slowly destroy with their brutal affection, these are something else, people and creatures photographed in clay in their unsuspecting moments. Tolkien's craftsmen couldn't have created more exquisite clothing, rendered the insignificancies of buttons and lost earrings more intimate and expressive.

I leave and circle through the rooms, seeing more of the dolls each time, and finally find my way to a staircase I hadn't noticed. It is slender, tucked right in against the wall, and the ceiling gets lower and lower as I ascend. I follow it, and a bending, low hallway—painted white, now that I've noticed; all the rooms had been egg-shell white—leads me around a corner. There is a tiny set of steps, and more rooms than any house should be able to hold, all crammed against each other and unexpectedly spacious. I peer through doorways—children's toys, more antiques, a washroom. Old rocking horses, well-loved, tiny houses, teddies, a baby's nightgown. Suddenly, a vague instinct grows stronger and directs me **THAT WAY**. And I follow it, and there it is. The room.

This is where nightmares are made and dreams are given the fearful dignity that makes even the most light-hearted, pleasant ones oddly captivating. There is a modern sewing machine on a disappointingly pedestrian desk, and on other tables around the room, bits of fabric, chests of buttons, of worthless jewels, of thread and gleaming silvery scissors and needles. And then I see them, the dolls' heads.

The clay is shining, still moist above the newsprint marked darkly with wet spots. One head is there, perfect, smooth, perched on a stand. On the face is an expression of incredible agony and heartache, and the strangely joyful acceptance of a finite existence. It is impossible to describe, except as a concept, as emotion. There are other heads there, rounded shadows beneath cloth. There is a leather book, thick, old, Victorian-looking. I have expected it. In chipped, peeling gold leaf on the cover, it says, simply, *Doll Making*. I hear footsteps and turn, too late, too late. There is a woman in the doorway.

She is not an incredible beauty, nor is she incredibly old. There is little incredible about her. She is entirely unexpected nonetheless. Do that I don't have to meet her gaze, my eyes travel over her forehead first. Her hair is curly, and the fawn-coloured ringlets are looped with grey; her clothes are nondescript. Her eyes are keen, observational.

"I see you've wandered up to my workshop," says the dollmaker. I nod. My words are gone.

"They're amazing," I say. She nods. It is an old art, doll making. Goes back to the first hex-figures, fertility gods, comfort objects. The fire in her pupils bespeaks shaman around their smoky fires, holding up buffalo manikins, African witches, dressmakers' sightless dummies, mask makers' sightless, hollow-eyed wooden visages. I am wordless. I can hear my grandmother clomping around below me, distantly, distantly, as if I were inside a glass ball. Inside a porcelain shell.

The dollmaker smiles, sits down at the chair before the Christ-head, begins sculpting it. I am dismissed.

I run downstairs, back to my grandmother's chattering and my grandfather's silence, and I am peculiarly quiet on the drive home. That night, it takes me a very long time to get back to sleep. All I can see is the face of the dollmaker—the smooth, blurred flesh of a burn victim.

*

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Chapter 48

“Tommy’s Decorations”

*Gretchen Steen
Pensacola, Florida, USA*

Tommy Watson loved Halloween!

His mother, Janet, did her ‘magic’ and whipped up his bizarre costumes from scratch. His father, Randy, never missed trekking through the neighborhood on ‘trick-or-treat’ rounds.

Janet and Randy Watson died on Halloween ... Tommy was thirteen ...

*

The unmarked police car lingered at the curb of 13666 Compton Drive.

“I hate this job!” Officer Mitchell said to himself. Shoving the gearshift into park, he turned off the ignition and jammed the keys into his jacket pocket.

He straightened his uniform, slicked back his graying hair and cleared his throat. Stepping out of the car, he stuffed his clipboard under his arm and swallowed hard.

Floodlights whirled, alternating greens and yellows that bathed the cobweb-draped house. Sinister pumpkins, with their evil candle-lit smiles, lined the old wooden porch. Unearthed coffins, their lids ajar, complete with mottled skeletons were scattered over the front lawn. Some appeared stark white; others were in various degrees of age.

Mitchell surveyed the grounds and thought, *Damn—decorations look so real ... they’ve improved since I was a kid! Just too creepy!*

Perched boldly on the lone windowsill a sleek black cat with fluorescent yellow eyes; its tail twitched in time to the haunting music.

“This place makes my skin crawl,” Mitchell whispered to himself as he approached the front door.

I’m supposed to be brave, yeah right ... freaked out by decorations? People trim their houses to the hilt for Christmas. I guess others do it for Halloween. What’s my problem?

Mitchell shrugged his shoulders; he didn’t have an answer. He looked up into the night sky trying to locate the off-pitched screeching sounds that surrounded him and echoed in his ears.

“What’s wrong with me?” *Shake it off man!*

The dirge-like music poured from the rooftop speakers as he opened the screen door and pressed the doorbell.

*

Tommy’s eyes darted back and forth, startled by the deafening sound of the long silent chimes. As he lit the last candle in the sitting room, they filled it with wavering shadows.

He sauntered to the door, looked through the peephole and turned the doorknob. It clicked like old arthritic bones.

“Trick or Treat ... your choice, man!” Tommy greeted.

Something about this lanky young man was unsettling. Was it his Mohawk haircut? Or all the heavy chains that hung from his belt loops? Maybe it was the tattoo sleeves that covered his arms? Blake wasn’t sure.

“Thomas Watson? I’m Officer Mitchell. Sorry to bother you, but you need to tone down your music a bit. We’ve received a few noise complaints ... I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Tommy’s frame grew rigid as he gave Mitchell a blank once-over look and replied, “Yes ... Noise? I never thought of it that way. Would you like to come in and join my party?”

*

Dressed in white from head to toe, the attendants’ cold, unfeeling faces greeted Tommy when he arrived at ‘Driscoll Hall – Children’s Home for Boys.’

It appeared pleasant enough—from the outside.

*

“Master Thomas Watson?” asked the portly woman at the front desk.

Struggling against the orderlies, Tommy yelled back, “I’m not staying here! You can’t keep me locked up!”

The matron clenched her teeth, then burst into an evil grin and glared back. “You don’t have any choice. You’re *ours* until you reach eighteen—no ifs, ands, or buts!”

Tommy fought against the tightening grip of his restrainers, but he didn’t have a chance.

“Take him to his room and make sure the windows are locked as well as the door. If he doesn’t settle, just throw him in solitary ... that’ll quiet him ... it always works with these hooligan-types.”

The ill-tempered voice echoed down the long hallway and rang in Tommy's ears. He kicked and screamed louder and louder. He spit on one attendant and tried to bite the other as they approached Room #1031. The number stopped Tommy in his tracks ...

His tense body relaxed and the attendants' grip loosened. Tommy silently stepped into the dreary room and looked around.

Paint peeled from the old metal bed frame. The linens were tattered and wrinkled; there was no pillow. In the corner sat a small table with rickety legs. A small lamp with a torn, gray shade sat next to a stash of books. The worn out desk chair, with a missing a wheel, leaned up against a dull stainless steel toilet.

He moved toward the barred window and looked up at the full moon. He closed his eyes and envisioned his parents' faces.

Tommy turned toward the door; his eyebrows furrowed as he grunted, "Go away ... leave me alone ...". He sat down on the edge of the bed as the door closed. He listened carefully and heard the lock click.

The rattling of the keys and the heavy footsteps in the hallway soon faded.

You'll all regret this ... he thought.

*

"Do you like my decorations, Officer Mitchell? They seem to multiply every year. People used to come ... and those I recognized hated to leave; they're mingling right now. Come ... Mom and Dad would love to meet you ...". Tommy stuttered with a broken-toothed smile.

The hair on Mitchell's neck bristled as a razor-sharp chill crept up his spine. *No, it can't be ...* He thought as he followed Tommy's lead and stepped through the door. *Trick or Treat?*

"Do you live here alone?" Mitchell asked.

Tommy turned and winked as he pushed open the sitting room door. "That shouldn't be a problem. I'm *not* a kid anymore!" He hesitated. "Do I know you?" A glint of memory surfaced, "Of course I do!" he sneered. "Mom ... Dad ... we have another visitor ..."

The essence of the candlelight and the lingering rotten stench grew in Mitchell's mind. He stepped into the shadow-filled room and his stomach lurched. His eyes fixated on two coffins atop a black-draped table. *This is sick!*

"Look at me, Tommy," Mitchell said as he dropped the clipboard and grabbed the young man's shoulders with his trembling hands. "NO! Listen to me, they're ..."

Tommy's eyes glazed over as he vehemently interrupted, "Celebrating Halloween with me, it's our favorite holiday. You *will* stay and join us, won't you?" he urged through a demented grin as he slashed away at the polished badge.

*

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Chapter 49

“Bitter Cold”

*Richard A. Wentworth
Cathedral City, California, USA*

On a night of bitter cold, you know the ones, where your bones feel like they are going to shatter?

Our watchman makes his rounds. Step by step, the cold seeps closer; he tries to walk faster but the cold strengthens its grip. He stops to rest—eyes searching for that point of light, that he knows he can find relief from the cold.

One foot starts to twitch, the muscles seizing up. He stretches that foot, but to no use, ‘move man or you will freeze...’

His will is strong, however, when he stretches that foot to take a step, it buckles and he is on one knee. The ground is frozen and irregular; tiny needles probe and penetrate past the jeans and inject the cold into his leg.

A feeling of relaxation—not giving up—an acceptance of what... And that feeling lifts his spirit, a slow tingle that spreads from his knee in all directions. His breathing is shallow—accepting the change.

No light appears nor any flash of his life but a new beginning. He laughs as the cold spreads, consuming the warmth from his body, but he feels no pain. Yes, new warmth spreads into every pore of his body, until the change is complete.

He rises to his feet, and it feels good to stand. A few stretches, moving his body in a regular manner and he feels like a new man. The coldness fades and warmth spreads. He spots the saving lights and starts out, ‘hum, about half a mile and I’m safe.’

Each step carries him closer to salvation, his mind thinks, as he draws near the shack. He can smell the warmth; inner alarms sound in his head and he stops. He cocks his head and surveys the shed. His eyes search until he stops.

With a gentle wave of his hand, the shed, in a shriek, the wood freezes instantly, and a new glow of ice encases the shed. He glares at the shiny shed and a smile radiates.

‘Shrink to pebble size,’ he whispers and before his bewildered eyes, the shed reduces to the size of a small pebble.

He walks slowly to the pebble, nudges it and kicks it away.

His clothing starts to chafe, rubbing in an irritating manor and he starts to remove them. As the skin is exposed to the elements, a surge of power floods through him and he realizes that he... YES... him! Is a new force from nature.

*

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<http://www.lulu.com/shop/richard-wentworth/caught/paperback/product-18905610.html>

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Chapter 50

“Iguana at Halloween”

Denise Hemphill
(translated from *Iguana* by Zantippy Skiphop)
Kissimmee, Florida, USA

I am Iguana, and this is my swamp. My life is made of misty mornings, sunny naps with crickets singing, evening stillness that hangs between light and dark. And my favorite time, the night, when I sleep on a rocking branch, listening to frogsong. The stars wink at me, knowing this is iguana Heaven.

In a house behind my tree lives my human. She speaks Iguana and her name is Polly. She climbs my tree and says hi to the owls, she brings me tomatoes, and a cracker for Nimnog the woodmouse. Polly is my most favorite human.

I never thought she'd be taken from me.

Last night began wonderful as always. Nimnog poked his nose out of a tree hole, sniffing for crackers. We watched the moon together, waiting for Polly. I was full of contentfulness.

Then the owls landed, covering the tree. They rattled to each other, and not in the pleasant way. It was the rattle they sing before the hunt. And they were watching Polly's house. Nimnog ducked inside his tree hole. My tail started twitching.

I heard a creak. The owls rustled their wings and grew silent as Polly walked through her gate. She was wearing her speckled owl costume, and she carried a pumpkin. I didn't see a tomato. Was the pumpkin for me?

I ran down the tree trunk to greet her. The pumpkin looked very tasty, and I gazed up at Polly, thanking her with my smile. She put the pumpkin down and I tasted it. But it wasn't nice to eat. It was just the crunchy shell, filled with candy wrappers. Plus, it had a bucket handle. I looked at Polly, sad to let her know I didn't like it. She laughed, and pulled a tomato out of the pumpkin. I licked it, to see if it had gone the way of the pumpkin, turning hard and hollow. But it was very yummers.

I took my tomato under the tree, and felt a wind pass my tail. Polly shrieked, and I turned an eye to see.

The owls were flying at her, swirling in a cyclone. She screamed as she disappeared behind the living, spinning wall.

Then her screaming stopped. The owls left their vortex and flew back to the tree. They left a tiny screech owl in the grass, a screech owl with a pumpkin bucket hanging on her wing. My Polly was gone.

I ran around the tree and up it, looking for my friend. All I wanted was Polly back. I hardly saw the barn owl who swooped in and carried off the screecher, pumpkin and all.

Nimnog poked his nose back out, his whiskers trembling in the moonlight. We watched as the owls flew away.

“What does this mean, Moon?” I asked.

But the moon only lit up the bronze feathers of the owl pack, and glowed without blinking. The moon had no answers.

I felt more feather-wind behind me and slashed my tail around. No owl would take me! Then I saw the bird, and stopped breathing. It was a vulture. Had they expected death?

The vulture said, “Be calm, green one. We're here to help”.

We? And then I saw throughout the tree an army of vultures, with bats hanging around them.

A parrot flew past my ear and landed by Nimnog.

“Do you know what happened?” I asked the talking vulture. “Where's my Polly?”

The vulture said:

“Polly has been pulled into an ancient ritual that started long before we were hatched. Every Fall, a new owl queen is chosen. A long time ago, many owls would die trying to claim the Queen's Nest. So now, no one born an owl is allowed to be the queen.”

The vulture bowed her head.

“Owl spirits live in dreams and visions. They send the owl image to human children while they sleep, then watch. The child who makes the strongest connection with owls is taken, and turned into an owl. She will be Queen for a year. This is what happened to Polly.”

Yes, Polly loved owls. She covered her walls with their pictures. She wore her owl costume to sit in my tree, and not just on Halloween. But her owls had just betrayed her.

“I am trained as an iguana samurai,” I said. “I want to rescue my Polly.”

The vulture almost smiled. “Come on, green one. Let's go find your friend.”

I swam through the swamp, following the vultures and bats as they skimmed the clouds. We headed for an island where the trees look unfriendly. I've always stayed away.

At the top of the biggest oak was a nest. It was bigger than an alligator wallow. The Queen's Nest.

That's where Polly was.

Something landed in my stomach. I think it was my heart.

The vulture flew to me. "Green one, remember this: Polly must not eat mice tonight, or she will be an owl forever. And to become fully human again, she must remember herself before dawn." I nodded, and set off through the tree tops.

It felt like forever till I reached the nest. I could hear gagging, and an owlish whimper. This time I knew it was my heart that swallowed my throat. Would the owls be mean to their queen?

I started to climb the nest, but was slammed back down by an owl with a mouse in his beak.

The owl squawked and flew away, chased by the rescue bats.

Another owl saw me and attacked, but the vulture landed on him and they went tumbling past.

Before anyone else could stop me, I leaped for the nest, scrambled up the side and jumped in. Owlet Polly was sitting on a downy bed, a mouse tail hanging from her beak.

I was too late. She'd had her first mouse meal.

Overhead, the bats were dive-bombing any owl they saw carrying a mouse. Then all the vultures arrived, driving back most of the owls. Why were they still fighting? We'd never get Polly back now. She had eaten a mouse meal, and the sky was beginning to lighten. Dawn. Polly was now an owl forever.

But Polly the owl didn't look happy. Maybe she would be, if she could swallow that mouse tail.

Polly screwed her face up, and vomited the mouse. An owl overhead screeched in fury, then swooped in with another mouse. I ducked as bats followed the owl, trying to knock the mouse out of his beak.

"Why are you smiling, silly lizard?" squeaked a bat.

There was still hope. Polly hadn't had her mouse meal. She couldn't keep the mice down. A lot of her friends were mice.

But Polly still didn't remember herself, and dawn was coming.

The owl dangled the new mouse over Polly's eyes, and she looked curious. No! And then I saw what she saw, this mouse was alive.

His whiskers were trembling, he was screaming in fright. And when he saw Polly, he screamed all the louder. He wanted to go to Polly. He called out for her.

“It's Nimnog!” I yelled.

The owls were trying to feed Polly one of her best friends!

I am a trained iguana samurai. I don't act in anger. But I almost knocked that owl out of the nest. I wanted him to hit the forest floor. But before my tail slashed out, I remembered:

Nimnog was still clasped by the owl, hanging by his tail.

The owl lowered Nimnog to Polly's open beak. Her owl senses told her this was a good meal, but her big owl eyes were filling with tears. She didn't seem to know why.

A green and purple thunder streaked past me, and attacked Polly's head. “Nimnog! Nimnog!” the parrot screamed. He landed on her head and shouted right in her ear, “NIMNOG!”

Polly's eyes fixed on her mouse friend. Nimnog quieted and gazed back, into her mind. Something shone in her eyes, something beyond the raptor. Nimnog reached a tiny hand to her.

The owl shook him.

And Polly let out the biggest screech of outrage ever known to owldom, and bit the owl on his feathered leg.

The owl dropped Nimnog. Polly's feathers fell out. She floated into the air, then landed back on the nest, a girl in an owl costume.

And we all were lit in a pink glow. Dawn had arrived.

*

That night, back in my tree, Polly came to visit.

“Was I an owl last night, a real owl?” she asked me and Nimnog.

I smiled and ate my strawberries. She said, “I remember being sad, and really scared. Not scared for me, though. For Nimnog? It was all so upsetting. But still...” She thought for a moment. “I'm glad it happened.”

*

Zantippy Skip-hop Amazon Author Page:

http://www.amazon.com/Zantippy-Skip-hop/e/B008BN7204/ref=ntt_athr_dp_pel_1

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Chapter 51

“The Final Resting Place”

Pamela Griffiths
Sheffield, South Yorkshire, England, United Kingdom

Dr. Mark Matthews was working late that evening, he was the surgeon on call, so far he had performed two operations. It was Halloween and there would be people dressing up, going out drinking and having fun.

Dr. Matthews decided to get some rest now in case there was a rush later. He picked up his cardboard cup of coffee and made his way back to his consultation room. He shut his eyes and let himself drift away, he had one ear open listening for his bleeper.

The hospital was fairly quiet now, the day staff were finishing off and the night staff were drifting in. They would have a quick handover meeting then the day staff would leave. There were three mens surgical wards on the floor where Dr. Matthews worked. One of the three wards had been closed for deep cleaning.

Marion Sharpe was the night sister in charge, she was looking after the two mens surgical wards. Sister Lucy Bracken was also on duty that evening. A few junior nurses were manning the wards making sure all the patients were comfortable and stable.

Dr. Matthews stirred uneasily in his sleep, as he awoke he heard a noise which came from the general direction of the deserted ward. He sat up and checked his bleeper, no calls, he set off in the direction of the deserted ward. He would check it out in case something was wrong in there.

'Hi Marion, any problems with the closed ward'?

'No Mark, not to my knowledge, why do you ask'?

'I thought I heard a noise coming from in there'

They went to investigate the ward together, Dr. Matthews punched in the numbers on the keypad and the door lock released. They listened carefully before turning on the lights, they checked out the side rooms and toilets.

'It appears to be ok, I haven't seen or heard anything unusual, are you sure the noise you heard came from in here'?

'I was certain that it had, oh well'.

*

In the empty ward, the spirits of the dead were wandering around, the wayward souls were trying to find peace but not knowing where to look for it. They were lost souls, they didn't want to hurt anyone, they just wanted to find a way to pass over to a better world. In their quest to find the light, the spirits had gathered together, they had been lingering around for many years. They were waiting for something or someone to help them.

During their long quest to find peace, the spirits had called upon a higher power, hoping that the powerful entity could help them to find their way. This wasn't the case, the entity was an evil demonic spirit that had been brought through the gateway into this world.

The evil spirit left the empty ward and made its way to the operating theatre it lurked in a corner waiting for the chance to steal a few souls. The good spirits were afraid, unwittingly they had let the evil one through. Unless the spirits could put things right by getting the entity back to its own realm, they had no hope of moving on.

An angel appeared before the good spirits. He was surrounded by a bright white light, spreading out his giant wings, he spoke.

'You have brought forth an evil spirit through the forbidden gateway, you must stop this evil spirit by sending it back, follow my instructions, when it is done, I will show you the light to cross over'.

The angel instructed the spirits on how they could reverse the process and remove the evil entity.

*

Dr. Mark Matthews had been bleeped, called in to operate on a young man who had been involved in a motorcycle accident. The motorcyclist was prepped then taken to the operating theatre while Dr. Matthews scrubbed and gowned up.

The evil entity was floating around, waiting in the shadows with the intent of collecting the soul of this man to add him to his collection. The evil spirit was quiet and waiting in case the motorcyclist died.

'Scalpel'

The theatre nurse passed Dr. Matthews a scalpel. He made an incision into the young man's abdomen.

'Clamp'

'Is it me or is it cold in here?' They all agreed it was colder than it should be in the theatre.

As Dr. Matthews worked on young man repairing the damage, the evil spirit was hovering, the young man was strong and his soul was hanging on to his earthly body.

'Stitch him up' Dr. Matthews said as he walked out of the operating theatre peeling off his surgical gloves.

Dr. Matthews heard the noise again, this time he was sure it was coming from the empty ward.

'Marion, I've just heard that noise again it was definitely coming from the ward'

'Ok Mark let's go and take another look'

*

The evil entity was being mischievous, causing mayhem in the operating theatre, it was scattering surgical instruments and terrorising the nurses that were cleaning up after the operation. The nurses fled in fear.....

Dr. Matthews and Marion went onto the ward and knew instantly that things were not right. The ward was extremely cold and they could feel something strange and abnormal in there.

'I'm going to get Lucy Bracken in here, she's a bit psychic, if theres anything paranormal happening she'll pick up on it' Marion said as she went to fetch her.

Dr. Matthews knew that there was something happening on this ward, he didn't know what, but he remembered something that he had been told years ago when he had first started working at the hospital.

He recalled the tale of the human remains that had been discovered when the hospital had been built. Apparently a few skeletons had been re-buried in the hospital grounds after they had been unearthed while the foundations for the hospital had been dug out.

*

'I can sense a lot of unrest here' Sister Lucy Bracken said as she went onto the ward.

'This is not anger, it's ... I feel that could be some lost souls trying to find their way into the light'. She went on.

Dr. Matthews told them about the story he had been told when he had first started working at the hospital.

Dr. Matthews called a good friend of his, Father Graham, he agreed to come and try to put the lost souls to rest.

Meanwhile, in the operating theatre there was mayhem, the evil one was doing its own thing in there. Total chaos ensued, the terrified nurses informed security, but the security officers didn't know how they could possibly throw out intruders that they could not see.

'What the hell is going on here'? Greg said to his mate Imran.

'I don't know but we really need to get out of here' Imran replied as the scalpels and the kidney dishes flew across in front of him, circling the operating theatre.

Father Graham Carter arrived soon after the phone call, armed with holy water and his trusty bible. He was summoned into the operating theatre first, to stop the agitated demonic entity.

'This is so unreal, I've never ever seen anything like this before. I must admit I'm very afraid, I'll have to push my faith in God to the absolute limit, I hope my faith is strong enough'.

Father Graham recited verses from his bible and sprinkled holy water at the floating surgical instruments. The evil entity let out an almighty shriek and shrank back.

*

The good spirits had been told what they had to do by the angel, they all worked together to reverse the process that had brought this demon here. It was hard work and it drained all the strength from them but they did as they were instructed.

Father Graham thought that his holy water and holy words were working, but it was the good spirits who had helped him.

Once the evil spirit had been dispelled, Father Graham went to the unknown grave in the grounds of the hospital and recited a few words of blessing for the lost souls.

Dr. Matthews, Marion and all the other night staff had been extremely traumatised by what had happened.

'What a night' Marion had said as the staff all gathered in the empty ward.

'It's Halloween, I'll never feel the same way about Halloween ever again as long as I live'.

The lost souls were still there in the empty ward, they were all gathered together when the intense, bright white light shone down on them. One by one the spirits went towards it, they disappeared into the light. Peace at last.

Father Graham had reassured the hospital staff that the evil spirit had gone. The souls of the corpses that were buried in the hospital grounds were at peace now, they had crossed over and were now in their final resting place.

*

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Chapter 52

“Out with the New, in with the old Ones”

*Matthew C. Nelson
Jacksonville, Florida, USA*

Aaron was overjoyed as the day of his departure arrived. He'd been working and studying long and hard for this day to arrive. Sure, it would mean that he'd be away from his fiancé, friends and family for awhile, but this was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and he was sure that they'd understand.

Striding with a bit of a jump in his step, he wandered from his bedroom and into the bathroom to begin the routine that would start his day. He reached for his toothbrush, prepped it with the usual "rinse with water for a minute, apply the toothpaste in an even fashion, rinse one more time for good measure, then begin brushing" routine, and set it to motion.

Aaron looked up into the mirror as he began brushing and he froze. Behind him in the mirror was a horrific looking man staring at him. The man's eyes had been torn from their sockets, his lower jaw just about torn off and dangling on but one strand of skin, and his skin looked the way chicken did after it had been on the grill for far too long.

Frightened, Aaron dropped the toothbrush and spun around, only to find that nobody was there. Looking around frantically, he realized that there was nobody there. By this time, his breathing was strained and his body began to sweat profusely. It took some time before they returned to normal. Chuckling to himself, he resumed brushing.

"It's just the nerves," he repeated over and over in his head. Finishing up, he quickly hopped in the shower and continued getting ready. The fact that he never saw the apparition again only supported the idea that his nerves were indeed on edge.

Getting out of the shower a few minutes later, he went over to his bed and began to dress. He looked up at the sound of his phone ringing. Flipping it open, he responded.

"Well, hi honey. I was hoping to talk to you before I left. I don't have time to talk right now, but I will later on tonight, ok? I love you." He ended the call and finished getting dressed.

The two hour drive was rather uneventful, aside from the fact that his stereo cut out for a few minutes. The only other sound in the car, aside from his voice and the news correspondent on the radio station, was the voice that called out his GPS locations to him.

As he pulled up to the naval dockyard, he smiled and let out a whistle. Looking out at the end of the pier was the ship that was going to take him and his research team out to begin testing on the

new deep sea submersible he was chosen to pilot. Aaron has spent fifteen years in the navy as a navigational officer aboard a submarine.

As he exited and walked up, one of his fellow scientists approached him and returned his handshake.

"We were wondering if you were ever going to arrive. The crew is all itching to get this rolling."

"Hey Jim," replied Aaron, "yeah, I got stuck in some traffic. I wouldn't miss this opportunity for anything. Is all the equipment and personnel onboard?"

Jim nodded, "Ready and awaiting the arrival of its captain." The two of them turned and headed towards the naval vessel, the USS Lovecraft.

After several hours of reviewing the pre-launch, the naval vessel pulled away from the dock and headed out to sea. After several more hours, the captain signaled to all aboard that they had arrived. Jim and Aaron stared in amazement at the submersible. It measured thirty feet long and about five feet wide. It was covered in a material that reduced the drag and the effects of depth pressure. There was a sphere at the top that allowed the pilot the ability to see three-hundred and sixty degrees. It also was coated in a material that polarized the light, to offer them the ability to see clearer and farther.

Once he took his place in the submersible. After running through one last checklist, the sub launched itself from the USS Lovecraft. All ran with textbook precision. That is, for the first hour. A few minutes after, the entire cabin lighting, as well as all the command and navigational consoles went dead and the sub began to sink.

Aaron was a very cool-headed person, and actually thrived in these sort of situations. However, after about an hour of doing everything he could think of, he knew that he was in trouble. He knew that he was at the mercy of the ocean, and that he was going to hit the bottom far below.

Hours passed by. Without anyone else aboard, the vessel was extremely quiet. Aaron just stared out the bubble and watched as his world plunged into darkness. He knew that this would be his tomb.

-THUD-

The front end hit first, followed by the back end. The vessel hit something so hard that it jarred Aaron out of his seat. He went to stand up, but he never got the chance. He heard the sound of metal scraping on metal under water, and that sound sent him running. He immediately dove straight forward and lunged for the submersible suits. Tim was of the essence, and he realized that if he got it on, there might actually be a chance of survival. As slim as that chance was, he had to take it.

Aaron had just finished putting the suit on when the aft of the sub was torn apart. Aaron scrambled to get out of the way of the walls as they began collapsing inward. He was completely caught off guard as something massive wrapped itself around his waist several times and began pulling him out of the submersible and into the deep depths of the ocean.

The suit's auto-light turned on, bathing everything in a light that shot out for about forty feet. This was a place where light had never been seen. All the sights that Aaron saw were bizarre. However, he didn't have the luxury of looking around at his leisure. He was at the mercy of whatever had dragged him out of the sub. All he could make out was that it was a greenish-grey tentacle that had the texture of stone. It looked like it was covered in thin black lines that criss-crossed and spiraled outward.

His body was being pulled at such an amazing speed as he bounced off the ocean floor. He bounced a few more times and then darkness. He had the split second to look around at his surroundings. Whatever had him was dragging him into the deepest regions of the Marianas Trench. His mind went numb when he realized that. Nothing man-made could withstand the pressures of the Marianas Trench...nothing.

Miracle of miracles, he was still alive. As he was being pulled, he saw something floating past him....he bumped it and it was snagged in his arms and legs long enough for him to see what it was.

It was a body....it was the body he saw this morning, standing behind him, staring at him in the mirror.

Aaron screamed inside the suit.

The waterlogged body wrinkled its face as it spoke. Aaron was even more shocked when he could hear the words inside his head.

"You have been chosen. You are the six thousand six-hundred and sixty-sixth soul to be collected. The Old Ones have chosen you to be the last one....the last one that leads to their beginning....you have broken open the seal....you are in the arms of the great and insane lord, Cthulhu....all praise him."

The Old Ones had come.....Aaron had been the way....Aaron had made a name for himself after all.

The End?

*

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Chapter 53

“Zombie Brains”

*Katherine Rochholz
Waterloo, Iowa, USA*

“But mom, I want to eat my candy!” Suzie, my five year old, cried at me.

“I have to check the candy first my lovely little witch.” I told her as I dumped her Halloween candy in the middle of my table.

“Mom, can’t we have one piece?” My twelve year old, Greg, asked.

I sighed. “Pick one piece and I will check it.”

“This one!” Suzie said; she held up a very large lollipop.

I sighed she would be bouncing up and down the walls all night; just what I needed. I quickly checked the lollipop; I figured at the very least it would keep her quiet for hours. “Here, Suzie, go put your cartoon in and stay in my sight.” I said and handed her back the candy. “Greg?”

“Can I have the liquid candy?” He asked; he handed me what looked like a blood bag.

“I suppose.” I said. I took the bag and checked it for holes or nicks. “Here” I said; I handed him back his candy. “Finish your homework and keep an eye on Suzie.”

“Yes, mom!” Greg went into the living room and pulled out his math book.

I sat down and started to sort the candy, we lived in a good neighborhood, but since my husband was killed in the line of duty three years ago I was a bit more protective than I once was. I threw away some candy called “Zombie Brains.” It was a good candy, but it looked tampered with and there was no way I would let my children ever eat something that even hinted at being tampered with.

After a couple of hours, Suzie fell asleep in front of the T.V. and Greg was dozing next to her. I piled their candies in their bags and marked them and put them up. I put them to bed and sat down to work. I worked from home doing something I never thought I would, but it paid the bills and allowed me to make ends meet now that my husband was gone. “Hello, this is Natasha.” I said as the phone beeped in my ear. I don’t know how I came up with my phone name, but Judith just didn’t sound like a phone sex agent’s name.

I went to wake my children at eight the next morning. I would sleep while they were at school. I am glad I stopped to get the paper first. I opened the door, this child stood in front of my door. At first I thought the child was just wearing their Halloween costume, until they charged at me. I didn't think, I just slammed the door in its face. I went and checked all doors, and the three windows in our house.

"Mom." Greg was up. "What's going on? I heard a crash?"

"Nothing, go back to bed sweetie, they canceled school."

"Why?"

"Because you are going to spend the day with your mom." I tried to smile. It must have fooled him.

"Okay." He said with a yawn and went back to bed.

I was suddenly very happy there were not windows in the bedrooms. I turned on news, and was shocked.

"This is just in! A madman is claiming he created the zombies, he poisoned a candy called "Zombie Brains" and then proceeded to give it out to the children in his neighborhood. We have footage of the neighborhood. Just stay inside and lock your doors. Bullets to the head do seem to work, if one gets in." The news anchor reported.

The camera shot to what I knew to be footage of our neighborhood. I am so glad I disposed of that candy last night. There was a young child in the middle of the world. It looked to be Suzie's friend, Janey. She had half her jaw ripped off and her eye hanging out, she was dragging her broken foot and she moved down the middle of the street. Then I saw Maggie, Janey's mom.

"Janey!" Maggie ran to her; she stopped and looked at her child. "NO!"

Janey charged at her mother, with a speed I never thought of when it came to zombies. Soon Janey had her mother on the ground and she had bitten into her neck, she left a gaping hole.

I didn't want to watch. But I could not turn away as she ripped into her mother's body and started to eat the organs. I was going to be sick. I barely made it to the toilet before I lost last night's dinner.

I went to my bedroom and opened up the safe I swore that as long as I lived I would never open, my husband's gun safe. Then I woke up the kids. "Babies, get dressed."

I moved quickly packing food and water. I packed all the bullets and the handguns. Greg and Suzie were at the kitchen table eating their cereal. "Greggy, you remember when dad taught you to shoot?"

"Yeah why?"

“Baby, look there has been an outbreak. Zombies.” I said and flipped on the news, I prayed that it no longer showed Janey.

“Whatever mom.” Greg said but looked toward the T.V.; thankfully it was the news anchor.

“The virus seems to be spreading rapidly. It has spread to the whole town. At nine o’ clock this evening the county will be bombed, and the zombies destroyed. If you are a living citizen, without any bite marks, or bleeding eyes you have until eight fifty-nine tonight to get out of the county. This concludes the news.” The screen went fuzzy.

“We got to go kids. Stay here while I get the car; do not open the door.” I left the house; quickly I closed the door behind me. I keep an eye out for the zombies. Most of them kids. I got to the car; I saw one, it on the hood and munched on what looked like a string of intestines. I raised my rifle, took aim and fired. The head exploded. I ran to the car, unlocked it and jumped inside, just as a group of zombies descended upon me.

I turned on the car, backed up quickly and then moved forward and ran over the zombies. I kept backing up and driving forward until they are all nothing but splotches of blood on my driveway. I drove the car up to the door; I climbed over the driver seat and pulled open my house door and grabbed my children.

I threw them in the back seat and slammed the door. I got back into the driver seat and took off; as I ran over a dozen or so more of the miniature zombies. Mentally I had started to call them mini zombies, rather than acknowledging that they are children.

I just drove; but about three miles from the county boarder and only an hour to go, the car died. I wanted to cry. I looked at my babies in the back seat. Fear in their eyes, their faith in me to make sure they lived.

“Babies, we are going to have to run for it. I want you to stay next to me.” I got out of the car did a sweep of the area; there were so many abandoned cars, which can only mean the zombies are around. “I want you to take this gun Gregggy, and stay in front of your sister; I will stay behind, you both. We have to move quickly.”

“Mommy, I am scared!” Suzie cried.

I knelt down. “Suzie Q, I know. I am scared as well, but we have to make it out of the county sweetie. Stay behind your brother and don’t look back.”

“Mom...”

“Greggy, it will all be okay. Let’s go.”

For most of the trip nothing eventful happened and we could see the blockade. We had fifteen minutes to make it to the blockade, then they attacked.

There were hundreds of them, and they all ran towards my babies. I fired; I didn’t care where I hit. I did what I could, but I knew that we could never beat them. I tried; I needed to save my

children, I tried to clear a path. But I couldn't. They were able to divide us. I could barely move; my soul died as I saw my Suzie Q bitten, and another group took my son from me, as they ripped him apart in front of me. I was surrounded. I had used all my ammo except for one bullet. I looked at the thing that was once my Suzie Q, now a brain hungry zombie, an undead creature... I took aim as I heard the planes over head, and I shot... I killed the zombie that was once my child. I heard nothing, as the first bombs hit. My last thought was it was strange that I barely felt the heat, as I headed into the darkness that promised a peaceful, painless oblivion...

*

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Chapter 54

“Candyman”

*Neil Leckman
Denver, Colorado, USA*

Every Halloween Scott Turly gave candy to the children who came trick-or-treating at his house. He was always very generous with his candy but what everyone talked about for weeks afterward was how fantastic it was. There was no store-bought fare that could match what he handed out. Speculation was that he made it at home, but nobody could ever prove it since he was never seen out of his house. Maybe he made midnight runs to some far off store that nobody knew about.

However he did it, every year he had fresh candy and it was so good kids had been known to fight over a couple of pieces. Jesse, Frank and I were going to sneak over to Mr. Turly's house and see if we could figure out where he got the candy, or maybe find a package with a name on it. We made our plan to perch in the old oak tree that looked down on the windows on the south side of his house and hoped we'd be able to see something come night.

As the kids lined up to get candy from Mr. Turly, we watched expectantly through a gap in the curtains at the windows to his living room and kitchen. There was nothing that helped to reveal anything new to us except the fact that he had a lot of candy ready to hand out. Finally the lines got shorter and the night darker and it looked like he might be running short of candy. The three of us began to get excited about the prospect of learning his secret.

Lindsey Colhan was walking alone up to the porch, a big smile on her face. She rang the doorbell and waited for Mr. Turly to open the door.

He looked down at Lindsey and then quickly looked up and down the street, which was empty.

“Come on inside and I'll get you some of my candy, Lindsey. I thought everyone was done for the night so I need to get something for you.” He put an arm around her shoulder and hustled her inside. Once again he looked either way down the street, then, smiling, he followed her inside and shut the door.

He walked her over to his couch and had her sit there while he went to the kitchen. I took the binoculars hanging around my neck and watched him open a closet. He was doing something but I couldn't tell what because his back was to me, then he stepped away to grab a small bowl. Inside the closet some strange slug-like creature hung from the bar that you put clothes on. It was oozing a brown liquid from open sores along its body. He walked back over, squeezed one of the open sores and something pink slid down its body onto the plate. He picked it up, wiped off the goo and wrapped it in paper like candy.

“Holy shit!!” Frank said. He almost lost his grip on the branch he was hanging from, Jesse grabbed him.

In the kitchen Mr. Turly stopped and looked towards the window, then set the plate down and walked over and peered out into the night. We had all shifted out of sight but only just. I didn't like to think what he would have done if he'd caught us.

He walked back over and picked up the plate. He took it into the other room where he held it out for Lindsey. She took the candy, unwrapped it and placed it in her mouth. That familiar dreamy look came to her face and I almost vomited. A couple of moments later a puzzled look crossed her face and she curled up in agony. Pustules formed all over her face and neck and began to ooze a clear liquid. She began to twitch as the rapid forming spots began to come to a head.

Frank looked like he was getting sick as he turned away. Jesse, like me, was too enthralled to look away as the pustules began to pop and familiar shapes plopped out of them. Lindsey began to look smaller as they formed in greater numbers, covering every inch of her visible body. Soon all that was left was a lumpy pile of skin and hundreds of candies. Mr. Turly walked over, rolled up Lindsey's skin and went into the kitchen. He opened the closet again, fed it to the slug and closed the door. A little later he turned off the lights and went up to his bedroom. When the light came on we crawled down from the tree, shaking.

“What do we do?” Jesse asked.

“Call the cops?” Frank suggested.

“No, we keep our mouths shut. Nobody will believe us, there's no evidence except all that candy. If we say anything we might be next year's treat!!” I said, firm in the knowledge that saying anything would be a very bad idea.

I chugged down the last of my beer, set the bottle down and got up to leave. “That's why I don't do the whole Halloween thing anymore, but you can do whatever you want. Remember, though, that sometimes the treat you get was last year's trick on someone else.”

*

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Chapter 55

“Lug Nuts”

*Adam Sifre
Wayne, New Jersey, USA*

Trauukh shifted uncomfortably on his haunches. His paws sunk a good way into the muddy earth and small stones and twigs dug into the hairy pads. The cold October rain caused his fur to mat in places he would rather have unmatted. Real Halloween weather.

Trauukh’s nostrils flared and the sweet smell of oil, rubber and metal came in strong, making him feel pleasantly woozy. The only thing he liked more than feeling woozy, was feeling full, which was a shame. Even though he weighed only 400 stones – practically a runt by troll standards, Trauukh was always hungry. But the night held promise.

Trauukh pushed a dirty pinky into his nostril. No surprises there. That particular boogey mine had been played out long ago. Despite the cold and the wet and the mud, it was all he could do not to bounce up and down with excitement. Tonight at moonrise was Trauukh’s 50th nameday. Tonight he went from runt cub to hunter. He’d still be puny but there’d be no more teasing for the likes of Grath and the other cubs. Being a hunter was serious business and hunters were treated with respect, or at least indifference.

His large troll eyes shined silver in the night. He could see the car lot from across street, clear as day. Well, real clear, anyway. Trolls never, ever go out during the daylight and if they did, they wouldn’t see anything clearly. Not for long.

Trauukh suffered from the same thing that all trolls suffered from. He hated humans. They all smelled like soap and garlic and exercise; and they were squishy and moist. Just the thought of them made him queasy. Bleh. Like all trolls though, Trauukh LOVED lug nuts. Sweet, oily, crunchy lug nuts. He couldn’t get enough of them. Lug nuts, lug nuts, lug nuts LUG NUTS! Yay!!! His thick orange tongue hung lazily out the side of his mouth in silent agreement. Unfortunately, where there were lug nuts, there were usually humans.

‘I only need four. Four for my nameday.’ Getting four lugnuts would be easy. Not eating them would be hard. But when he returned to the barrow with four lug nuts for all to see, Trauukh would be a hunter! And then he would really grow! Maybe even into a mountain! Mom told him stories of the mountain trolls practically every night. He pretended not to believe them, but in his heart, Trauukh wanted to believe. Most trolls, meaning every troll that he could think of, ended up as large rocks when they were done. The stories of trolls turning into hills and mountains were nothing more than fairy tales. Hmm....fairy tails. Trauukh liked fairy tails almost as much as he liked lug nuts, even though they gave me terrible gas.

The thought of terrible gas made Trauukh want to fart terribly. But troll farts were really loud, like bad thunder, and he couldn't risk it. Humans were always out and about somewhere on Halloween and the last thing he needed now was to attract the attention of horrible children.

'I only need four, but I can't eat them.' They had to be presented at the circle of stones, which made him a little angry. Stones wouldn't eat lug nuts. They would just lay there on the ground, wasted. But that's the way things worked. If you wanted to be a troll, you had to go along to get along. That's what Pop always said.

When he was certain nobody was watching, Trauukh gave a great push and leapt into the air, straight to the parking lot and landed in a field of cars. LUG NUTS! So many lug nuts! So little time!. Trauukh only need four. And he only needed to make sure he didn't eat them. Just four.

*

The next day, Bob Baxter, (yes, THE Bob Baxter, of Baxter's Volkswagon dealership ["We take PRIDE in your RIDE!"]) was so mad his face turned an angry shade of red and he ran out of curse words before breakfast. But that was okay because angry Bob didn't mind using the same ones again and again. Every single lug nut in the entire lot was missing. It was the weirdest act of Mischief Night vandalism he'd ever witnessed. And if that wasn't bad enough, Bob got lost driving home that night. He'd been driving home from his lot for seventeen years and never got lost once. What a day! It took poor Bob almost an hour to find his way around some stupid mountain – and how in blue blazes did I end up here?? --and back to Route 46.

The End

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Chapter 56

“The Box”

*Kay D. Ziegler
Bedford, Indiana, USA*

While October was warm, the wind was blustery. It sent golden and fuchsia leaves shivering to the ground. Orbs of sweet, juicy persimmons hid amongst these leaves as if to fend off hungry opossums, desperately starved dogs, or industrious humans who wanted to mash the fruit into pulp for puddings, cakes, and cookies.

Hands stuffed into the pockets of her denim jacket, Dana wandered through the grove with a bucket, half-filled with the fruit, hung on the crook of her arm. The gusts rustled through the trees, sending more leaves and persimmons plopping down. Looking up at the sky, Dana yelled, "Stop it!" As if giving a response, the winds blew again, sending more fruit falling.

Grumbling, Dana headed to the hallow, where the persimmons rolled. As she wandered along, her toe caught on something. The pony-tailed woman went flying. "Oomph," Dana gasped as she landed. To her dismay, she watched as her bucket rolled, leaving a trail of persimmons in its wake.

"No," she moaned. Sitting up, Dana looked behind her. Sticking out of the ground was the a wooden box's corner. "Where'd that come from?"

The summer had been hot and dry. The drought conditions caused much of the top soil to blow away, thus revealing all sorts of treasures. That's probably why the box had shown up.

On all fours, the brunette cleared the dirt and brittle leaves away. Dana managed to tug the box from its grave. In the fading light, she stared at the shoe-box shaped item. It was a plain thing; the only ornamentations were a brass latch and lock and a snake eating its tale with three stars settled into the circle carved on the lid. "Wow," breathed the young woman.

A screech owl hooted in the distance, making Dana jump. Seeing the bird sitting in a stripped elm, she sighed and stood. With the empty bucket in one hand and the box in the other, the woman headed up the hill to the house she shared with her parents, Robin and Marissa, and younger brother, Jeremy.

Feeling eyes trailing her, Dana glanced around. The neighborhood was a quiet one. Little crime happened on this block, as far as she knew. The kids were friendly, if not a little rowdy. It was a picture of suburban bliss.

But, whenever she passed one of her neighbor's homes, a small square thing covered in peeling white paint, Dana would involuntarily shiver. It didn't help the shack's owner always seemed to be lurking on its steps.

He never said anything; not even, 'Hi, my name's Bob' (or whatever his name was). He never smiled. He just blankly stared out at the field. Dana had tried to be friendly. She'd often said, 'Hello' to him. She usually waved, if he was looking in her direction. The scrawny, blonde-headed man never reacted.

Again, Dana caught him looking at her. She raised a hand and waved. Not staying to see if he waved or not, left the bucket at the door, she entered the house and found her dad eating dinner.

"Hey, where's mom and the brat," she asked.

"They went out. I think they were going to the movies for Jer's history class," Robin replied after swallowing his bite. "You find any persimmons?"

"Yeah, but I dropped the bucket. I lost 'em all. It was too dark to pick 'em back up," Dana said. "But, look what I tripped over!" She brought the box over to the table and sat it down in front her dad.

"Cool. You okay?"

"Yeah," she said. "I'm gonna go do some homework."

"Have fun," Robin said as Dana went to her room.

Placing the box on the desk next to her laptop, she grabbed the anthology for her class, a pad of paper, and a pen. Sitting down, she flipped on her reading light and opened the book to an Emily Dickinson poem. Halfway through the piece, the lights began to flicker.

"Great," Dana whispered, turning to the door. "Hey dad!"

"Yeah?" Robin called from the kitchen. "I know. I think we might have a loose fuse. I'm gonna go take care of it."

"OK," she said. About to go back to her reading, she saw a shadow. It was a flash of movement in the shape of a girl. Swallowing, the woman placed her reading down and slid off the door. Seeing another zip of movement, Dana went to the door.

"Hello," Dana called. No answer, but she saw the shadow again. Repeating the greeting, she jumped as the lights went completely out and then came back on a moment later. With the light, the shadow was gone.

"All fixed!" Robin called.

“Good,” Dana said, lying down on her bed. Grabbing the book, she started reading the poem again, but she soon fell asleep and only woke in the morning.

Choosing a sweater, jeans, and fresh under garments, Dana went to the bathroom. She heard her brother rattling around in the kitchen as her mom did her morning workout in front of the television and her dad worked on a model airplane. It was the typical Saturday morning.

Stripped from her clothes, she turned on the shower and soaped up. After fifteen minutes under the hot water, Dana got out. Drying, she slipped into her clothes. At the sink, she grabbed her toothbrush and toothpaste. Running the bristles under the water, she looked at the foggy mirror. Gasping, the woman dropped her things. Written in the steam was, “HELP ME”.

“You little twerp,” Dana screamed after going into the kitchen.

Jeremy looked up from his bowl of day-glow colored cereal. “What did I do,” he asked.

“What do you mean, ‘What did I do?’ You wrote ‘help me’ in bold letters on the mirror,” she retorted.

“I didn’t do it. I’ve been in here the whole time, making breakfast. Besides, what do I need your help with? Maybe we’ve got a ghost?”

Dana rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she said, grabbing a banana and toasting a waffle. Eating the food in haste, she went back to the bathroom, put her touch up on, and brushed her teeth. Just then, there was a honk. “I’m going out with Sandy,” she called to her parents as she threw on her jacket and grabbed her purse.

After a day of shopping at the mall, study time at the library, and lunch of pizza Dana came home. Sitting in front of the TV, she listened to the local news and studied *The Raven*.

“Halloween will be crisp and clear, folks, but make sure you wrap up your little ones. It’ll be cold,” said the weatherperson. “There will be a 10 percent...” In the midst of the weather forecast, the program went off. Black and white snow and a loud screeching sound filled the air. Clicking the sound volume down, Dana stared at the TV.

In front of the snow was a girl dressed in a sundress. Her hair hung around her shoulders - limp and stringy. “I want to go home! Help me,” she screamed, her arms hanging at her sides. With that, the picture came back.

Heart pounding, Dana went to her room. Her loose leaf papers were covered in scrawls of ‘Help Me!’ She grabbed the box and a screwdriver. Forcing the lock off, she opened the lid.

Pasted to the inside was an address with the name Charlotte Porter – she lived a block away. The contents of the box were a cross, a decorative comb, a rock, a drawing of an owl, and a faded photo of a girl. She pushed the box away, but continued to stare at the picture. It was the girl from the television.

Closing the lid, Dana headed to the front door. "I'll be back," the young woman called. Running down the street, she found the address easily. It was a brick home with mums in the front. Climbing the stairs, she knocked.

"Hello," called a confused woman after she opened the door. "Who are you?"

"I'm Dana Miller. Does Charlotte Porter live her?"

"She's dead."

"Dead? I...I found something hers," Dana said, offering the box.

"I remember when Charlotte buried that. Soon after, she disappeared and was never found. Where did you find it?"

"In the persimmon grove behind my house," she explained after the woman took it.

"She played there often. Thank you for returning this too me," the woman said, closing the door.

Dana ran home, but before entering, she looked out. Men in black suits, with flashlights and shovels, were at the white house. Going closer, she saw graves unearthed. She watched as the blonde-headed man was brought out in handcuffs.

Feeling a hand upon her shoulder, Dana turned, but saw no one. "Thank you," someone whispered. It was so quiet, it could've been the wind that rustled and leaves fell. But she knew in her heart that wasn't the case.

"You're welcome, Charlotte," Dana said, entering her home.

*

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Chapter 57

“In Space ... No One Can Hear You Scream”

*Lisa Williamson
Barrie, Ontario, Canada*

They tell you in space they can't hear you scream. Yeah right. Tell that the Joe. Poor guy didn't pay attention to the rule book. Everybody knows you don't bring alien vegetation onto a space station but well, he did. He bought some seeds and slipped them into the hydroponics tanks. Now that might have been harmless if the seeds were what he thought they were but, well, he got rooked.

See, he thought he was getting pumpkins. Yeah those big orange gourds that taste good when cooked. He had a hankering for a pie and nothing from the synthesizers tasted right to him. So he traded some useless chips when he went down world and snuck into where the plants were growing. He hid his precious seeds in the back where they wouldn't be seen. Little did he know that Earthly soil and water was like insta-grow to his seeds.

They grew almost overnight into these big orange pumpkins. Now if they had just been pumpkins it would have been a fine and tasty treat but when he went to check on them he got the surprise of his short life. There, eating its way through the other plants, was his pumpkin. Oh it was at first a lovely sight, big and round and firm but when he reached out to pat it the thing spun about, growled and snapped at him.

Oh my, did he let out a screech. Really, a big man like that screaming like a little girl. I still laugh when I think about it. He fell on his big...oh right kids. Well let's say it was a good thing that 'pumpkin' was rooted. I obviously had to go to his rescue.

When he got it through his head that it couldn't chase him he started babbling. Telling me all about where he got the seeds and begging me not to tell the Captain. Now why would I do that? After all it is just a piece of hungry vegetation.

Once I got him calmed down and out of my hydroponics lab I turned my attention to the noisy foliage. It was still thrashing and gnashing its teeth and waving its leaves about. I am not the type to be afraid of a plant, so it just made me laugh. I mean really? A plant is a plant, no matter if it has teeth or not. I stood back and looked it over, big, round, firm and fleshy. Other than those teeth it was the perfect plant.

Well now out here in space we don't have the normal calendar like the planet bounds do, but I knew it was near that holiday where things were supposed to get all spooky and scary. I had a thought that made me grin and waved to the plant before putting my plan into action.

What plan you ask? Well I set up a party of course! After all I might be the guy in charge of all those plants but I had another job, Morale officer. Got things together and sent out the call to my buddies to come down to hydroponics that night. The party was great and the look on Joe's face when he saw his prize pumpkin was hysterical.

Yeah it was still there, a bit different but then setting out those big pies in front of what remained of the thing was perfect. After all if you are gonna have a Halloween party you need a jack-o-lantern right?

*

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Chapter 58

“Halloween”

Richard Cotton

Northampton, England, United Kingdom

Ian Jones walked along the path on Ferndale Road it was a cool Halloween night and the stars were out. He had his vampire outfit on for the party he was heading for. Even now at fourteen he still enjoyed the party at Thomas Evens houses. He wondered what the wound do to the house this year. They were a riot last year they had turned the outside of their house in to a pyramid and dressed up as mummies. His dad John Evens had the full bandage across him down to his feet and Ian laughed when watching him eat the party food dropping lots on to the cream coloured floor. His mum Jane Evens didn't laugh much as she had to clean it up, but played along. The white street lighting here was nice and bright has they didn't live too far for the centre of town. Ian wished he could live closer like them. He didn't mind them walk apart from the odd person whom tried to take his sweets now and then. Last year he lost the whole lot before he reached the house number twenty five. It had a long front garden and even a bigger back one. He turned the corner of high street into Ferndale road. Only to be stopped by the white and blue police tape stretching from the lamp post on this side of the road to the other. Ian looked around but couldn't see any police around. He knew that Thomas dad worked in the police force but didn't think they were allowed to use tape from work and he also knew that the local supermarket sold the tape but it didn't look like really police ones did. Then he noticed that all the lights were off in the street even the houses. The only light he could see was a red one above number twenty five. This was getting stranger by the minuet. He glanced around to make sure there was no police, but there wasn't, so he ducked under the tape knowing he was breaking the rules but needing to find out what was going on. The street was dark apart from the light from that red glow making it feel very eerie. He couldn't see any people around the houses. Normally they were lit up like Christmas trees, but not this time. He started counting the numbers with one been on this side and all odd ones would be here too.

He looked over to the other side of the street it looked so eerie. He soon reached thirteen. Last time he walked past there the cat jumped out and scratched him on his leg. He didn't even look like a mouse yet this cat hit him like one. Yet tonight it was missing not even a twitch from the bush. He wanted it to jump him so much he missed seeing the double tape in front of him which caused him to trip slightly. But he didn't fall luckily. He had broke the tape though which now flapped loosely in the slight breeze. He pressed on number nineteen was the two nice old ladies that always gave him sweets every year without fail, but even their house was dark. From here he could just see the front garden of twenty five. The garden was red from front door to the gate. It was a eerie red like a fire from the pits of hell and above the house stuck out two horn shapes that also glowed red and flickered like flames. The red streamed like blood down the garden he wondered how they did that. He reached the gate the blood rivers running either side close to the

well cut grass and hedges. He opened the gate to the sound of creaking. The evens had made it do that every Halloween on purpose. This year it seemed to fit in with what was happening. He was startled to see the windows light up red and in the shape of two evil eyes flickering. Then he noticed the small daemons dancing on the grass they couldn't be fake or could they he thought. He was starting to shake uncontrollably.

The sound of the trickling blood and wail was enough to turn any ones hair white early. The doorway was black, but not normal black but that of the horror films it looked like it could suck you in and never spit you out. There was one red flicker of a dot that was the door bell. Ian thought the evens had outdone themselves this time and gone to a special effects film set to get it to look like this. He didn't know if he should go to the door, but he had gotten this far and so wanted to get to the party if there was one. He walked slowly to the door and pressed the doorbell ringer. The tune Toccata played out making him jump. The door creaked open and a creepy voice like that of Christopher Lee said Beware enter at your peril. He pushed the door open feather to get in. The hallway was lit with flame red lights all flickering. The stairs up were dark and cold. Full of spider webs hanging down. Then he glanced down to his left and saw the body. Blood pouring from the chest out of the door and along the ground. The arm was missing and blood went along a tube up the door frame and along the door fame. The chest was slowly rising and falling on the body yet the person couldn't be alive. There was classical music playing the ride of the Valkyries was blasting from the front room. Yet still there was no one around. He looked to the kitchen area there was fresh food in there bowls of crisp, jelly, cakes. There was even a turkey. So someone had cooked here. Where were they? He went into the kitchen to look there. On the table there were several glasses of red liquid with Gray fog frothing out of it. It wasn't something he would drink. The turkey was still warm and there was potatoes made to look like ghost on the side. The peas had been turned into eyeballs somehow which surprised Ian. He didn't know Thomas mum had it in her. He looked to the serving hatch that stood open the music was louder here and there was a plate of steaming hot food balanced just between each room. He went to the front room door not knowing if it should be opened without the police been here. He pushed it open the room was empty apart from the music, food and drink. The television was on its screen fall of swirling colours that flashed in time with the music. He walked in there in front of the sofa was another body. Blood streaming out of the throat towards the back door. His party looked like it was more like a murder scene now, yet somehow those bodies didn't seem real. He stepped over it carefully to look out of the French doors onto the large back garden. It glowed red with a flickering flame and the music out there was classical but one called The hall of the mountain king. Little daemons danced out there on the grass and some swam in the pool. He had to give it to the evens they had gone the whole hog this year. He turned there was only upstairs and outside plus the garage to look in now. He went back into the hallway. The stairs didn't seem a good idea but he would never know if he didn't look. He placed his foot on the first one to hear the creak that was loud enough to cover the music. This went on all the way to the top. He looked around the landing here the light was dull but he could clearly see three bedroom doors and a bath room door. He could hear a sniggering up here it was light yet strangely he felt like he knew who was giggling. Yet there was no one around to laugh. He went to the bath room door were the sound was coming from. He put his hand on the door handle and the laughter stopped and silence fell. He was too nervous to open the door just in case there was another body there. He pushed the door open. The light flicked on to show the Evens all five of them smiling broadly at him. Not the nice smile but an evil smile and blood pouring out of their clothes.

*

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Chapter 59

“Away With the Faeries”

*Russell Cruse
Kent, England, United Kingdom*

*‘For tonight is Halloween
And the Faerie folk ride.’
Tam Lin*

Most pubs have one: an individual who has for reasons best known to themselves, arrested their own development. In The King’s Arms, it’s the old rocker with his greasy hair and leathers that haven’t trembled to the throb of a Norton in thirty years; in The Wheatsheaf, the punk with her torn fishnets and spiky hair whose inky blackness is at odds with the lines on her face and the liver spots on her hands.

And in the Crown & Anchor, it was Rosie.

From her flowing hair to her leather sandals, by way of a diaphanous flowered skirt and velvet waistcoat over a purple silk blouse, she was every inch the ageing and raddled hippy chick. It was said she could be reasonable company when sober but I didn’t often see her in that state. Usually, by the time I got to the Crown, she’d be away with the faeries; and so it was, that evening when she plonked herself down at my table, her pint swilling onto her hand and dousing her match-thin roll-up.

‘Fuck. Got a light?’ she said, flicking beer over my book.

‘I don’t smoke, Rosie.’

She shrugged and put the cigarette into the cloth bag that always hung about her shoulders. I returned to my book and Rosie fiddled with her phone. As she did so, the heavy bracelets on her wrist clattered on the oak table, creating the only sound in the place. Presently, as I knew she would, she spoke again.

‘I expected there’d be more people in here tonight,’ she said.

‘Why’s that?’ I asked, without looking up.

‘It’s Halloween.’

‘Is it really?’ I replied, underwhelmed. Rosie spread her hands, saying,

‘Why doesn’t anyone celebrate Halloween any more?’

‘You’re three days early,’ I said, jerking my thumb over to the bar, above which a chalkboard, complete with badly-drawn pumpkin, bat and witch’s hat, announced: “Halloween Night. Sat. LATE BAR!”

‘They’re three days late,’ she said and called over to the landlord,

‘You’re three days late with that, Jack! It’s Halloween tonight!’

‘Not everybody’s prepared to stay up ‘til all hours getting pissed on a Wednesday night, Rosie,’ Jack called back.

‘People have lost touch with the earth,’ Rosie said. ‘Nothing seems to chime with the grain of life anymore.’

‘That’s very poetic,’ I said and immediately wished I hadn’t.

Now, I’d spent a fair bit of my youth in cheesecloth and velvet pants but even back then, I thought the whole nature thing a bit wet. Unless I reckoned there might be a chance of sex at the end of it, I steadfastly refused to go along with anything that involved standing around barefoot in long grass, holding hands and communing with Gaia.

Rosie smiled, rested her chin on her hand and for the first time in... well, ever, she made and maintained eye contact. I flattered myself that she had begun to flirt with me. Mind you, she flirted with lots of people, but I hadn’t been flirted with in a long while so I let her knock herself out. Suddenly, she said,

*‘Up then spake the Faerie Queen
And O an angry Queen was she.
“Pay me my tithe this Halloween
Or an ill death ye shall die!” ’*

Not quite knowing what she expected me to say, I went with, ‘That’s a very impressive Scottish accent.’

‘I am Scottish,’ she replied. ‘Did you not know that?’ She’d evidently decided to employ this accent for the remainder of the evening. ‘My old grandmother taught me that ballad. Do you know it?’

‘Can’t say as I do,’ I said and, hoping to forestall the second verse, I stood up to go to the bar. Immediately, I realised that I’d have to ask Rosie if she wanted one. She still had plenty in her glass so it mightn’t be too painful.

‘Can I top you up?’ I asked.

‘I’d prefer a Scotch.’

‘Sure,’ I said and mouthed ‘Fuck!’ at Jack, who gave me his best beaming landlord grin.

‘It’s about a girl who falls in love with an Elf,’ she said, as soon as I’d sat down again.

‘An elf.’

‘Ah! You don’t believe,’ she said. She leaned forward with her chin almost resting on the table and looked up at me.

‘You know, I’ve seen Elves,’ she said. ‘And faeries.’

‘I’ll just bet you have,’ I said.

I’d assumed that people like Rosie were pretty thick-skinned but I knew I’d upset her. She’d been trying to strike up a conversation; she hadn’t been rude, unpleasant or even mildly irritating and my contribution had been to make a crack about her mental health. Without a word, she downed her Scotch in one. I felt wretched – like I’d slapped a child. Keen to soothe my raw conscience, I asked if she’d like another. She stood up and said,

‘It’s all right. I’ll get these.’

From then on, I suppose I indulged her. I listened to her stories, made an effort to look interested: even asked the odd question, and after an hour or so, it dawned that I’d reached That Moment.

That Moment: when the woman you find yourself with at the end of a particularly dull evening begins to look... all right. Sure, she carried some of the scars of dissolution but I reckoned in her day, she would have been a looker. And let’s face it, I’ve not exactly aged well myself so when, around eleven, she suggested I might want to help her finish a bottle of Laphroaig at her place, I readily agreed.

She lived in the village so we didn’t have far to go. Or so I thought. As we walked, she continued to regale me with her faerie crap. I wasn’t really listening until I heard the word, ‘Naked’.

‘What?’

‘I said you have to be naked to dance around a Faerie Ring.’

‘Hang on... what? Where do you live again?’

‘Walden,’ she said. It’s a hamlet about mile out of the village. I looked about and saw we were in the sunken lane that leads to Walden. She took my hand and clambered up the bank.

‘Come on; this way.’ And then I began to realise that That Moment was beginning to pass. It was midnight, cold, decidedly damp and I was a mile and a half from home, being dragged through brambles to dance naked round a Faerie Ring.

‘Rosie,’ I said, ‘I think I’d best be getting back.’

‘We’re here,’ she said, laughing and flinging her bag to the ground. It was swiftly joined by her entire outfit and I began to sober up.

She began to dance. I’d seen her dance once or twice in the Crown: hair flying, arms flailing, skipping, gyrating... fully clothed.

She sang:

*‘At the turn of seven years,
I must pay my tithe to hell
A Man I’ll bring for the Faerie Queen
And seven more years on Earth I’ll dwell.’*

The first thing I remember about them was the smell. Not the blue-green light, nor the metallic taste in my mouth, but the smell. It was like fox shit only worse. It rose around me: a miasma of stink that made me retch and sent twenty-six quid’s worth of whisky, ale and the odd bit of carrot swirling about my feet. When I looked up again, Rosie was no longer alone.

Around her, faeries frolicked. At least I supposed they were faeries – it was faerie ring, after all. But these weren’t tiny, lace-winged creatures from a Victorian picture book; these were big, muscular, grey-skinned and malformed monsters; and they had teeth. Fuck off big giant teeth, sticking out of their pig-ugly faces in every direction like steel chrysanthemums.

Rosie really didn’t seem to notice until the first one was upon her. A look of puzzlement crossed her face before being swept away by terror as first one, then another of the faeries sliced into her with their claws. This way and that they tore, in a frenzy of arms, legs and jaws. But even as the flesh was ripped from her with every stroke, it re-grew to be gouged away once more. Her screams sounded faint - as though she were miles away.

I suppose that was why I was able to hear the Faerie Queen whisper my name.

She looked like one of those bats with the flat noses and had she not been buried to her waist in the earth, she would have towered above me. She stretched out a flayed, bony arm and pointed back to the village. When she spoke, every sound was like fingernails on a blackboard.

‘I have my tithe and you are spared full seven years,’ she growled, her breath rank as the tomb.

I should have run like fuck but instead I said ‘I thought she said the tithe must be a man!’

‘I fancied a change,’ said the Faerie Queen.

*

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Chapter 60

“#28: Interchangeable”

Jiva Fang
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, USA

“Goodnight loves. Won’t be out long”, Elsie whispered as she locked up. Her pets mewed quietly in response from behind the closed doors. Elsie walked into the foyer and stepped into the coat that Marco held open for her.

“You look beautiful.” Marco commented as he reached for the outside door.

Elsie smiled happily to herself. The women in the office loved to taunt her about her plain appearance and quiet mannerisms. Martha Nelson who’d exalted herself to Queen Bee status --she was dating the office manager-- had taken an instant dislike to Elsie and often initiated the torment. Elsie bore it all, quietly and efficiently focusing on work, but this only seemed to stoke the hatred. In the weeks before tonight’s Halloween party, there had been many jokes about her RSVP being “minus one”, and her lack of real prospects.

Walking the street in search of a cab, Elsie took stock of her date. Marco was a stereotype, a Latin Lothario; square chiseled jaw, immaculately combed jet black hair, pencil thin mustache and impeccably dressed in a new tuxedo. Like all the men in her life, at first he’d found it impossible to keep his hands off her. Eventually he’d come to realize that he simply could not escape her charms and that had led to him being the most attentive of boyfriends. Handsome looks and doting ways; Marco was the perfect choice to accompany her to the party. He was the kind of man the women in the office would drool over; exactly the kind they were sure she could never have.

At the party, Elsie pretended not to hear the whispers that followed her as she and Marco mingled with the crowd. It was like being the new girl at Bohunk High again, except this was her place of business.

“Is that the mouse’s date?”

“Why is he with her?”

“Do you think she paid him?” The commenter quickly followed with “I doubt she could afford someone like that.” This last was accompanied by a chorus of laughter.

Tonight however, Elsie held her head high and letting the whispers roll off her back, resigned herself to having a great time. Soon, thanks largely to the friendliness of the other store

employees and the general reaction to Marco, she confidently left the comfort of his orbit to go mingle on her own.

---There is a cosmic joke played upon the unwary at all office parties. In a moment predetermined only by fate and alcohol, any given reveler will find themselves the object of a co-worker's unwanted and often embarrassing attentions.

It was this humor of Chaos' that led to Elsie being trapped in the manager's office, under attack by Mr. Briggs.---

"Show me what ya do to keep a man like him."

"Mr Briggs, you really don't want to do this."

"Comeon, girlie."

---Had the music been less loud, Briggs' drunken advances would've been witnessed; Elsie's repeated curses would've been overheard; and the screams coming from the manager's office would never have gone unnoticed.---

Finally able to escape Mr. Briggs' sweaty attentions, Elsie picked her purse up from the floor and went looking for Marco. The tiny clutch purse, which had been so delightfully whimsical earlier on that evening, dangled heavily on its thin leather straps. It now felt like it weighed a ton and banged against her side as she half walked, half dragged her exhausted body in search of her date.

Pushing through the crowded party, she found Marco in the corner closest to the food, hemmed in by the other ladies from the typing pool. He smiled widely when she appeared, grabbing her hand and pulling her into his broad chest.

"Ready to go?" He asked, always in tune with her slightest moods. Elsie nodded mutely and Marco made his excuses to the women gathered around him. Martha Nelson could not let the moment pass without a snide comment.

"Marco, you should call me up when you want a real woman."

Marco barely glanced at her in response, "My heart beats only for Elsie."

The women exchanged jealous glances as the couple walked to the elevators. Once in a cab, Elsie rested her head on his perfect shoulders and drifted off.

Marco woke her when the cab reached her house. Supporting her, tired from her encounter with the office lecher, he walked her through the house and into the bedroom.

"I heard him screaming. You did the spell again, didn't you, Elsie?"

"He tried to force me. I had to protect myself. Get comfortable Marco, you're welcome to stay on tonight."

The handsome man smiled and started to undress. It was very rare that Elsie allowed any of her pets to sleep with her. He watched her as she made her way to her closet, purse still in hand.

“Hello, Loves. I’m back and I brought a new friend.”

Elsie removed an impossibly large and heavy object from her tiny clutch and placed it on the dresser.

“This is Mr. Briggs”, she said, shifting disembodied heads around to accommodate the newcomer.

“He’ll have to resign from work tomorrow, but after that he’ll keep you company until he learns to respect me. Like you have.”

The heads on the dresser smiled at her, mewling in mute agreement. Briggs just looked at her in distress, futilely trying to form words.

“Hush you! You had your chance to save yourself.”

Closing the closet on her collection, Elsie crossed the room and dropped into her bed.

“The house needs some maintenance, Marco. Remind me to bring another mannequin home tomorrow.”

Marco nodded, but did not move to join her.

“Oh! Lie down, Marco. I’m going to sleep, that spell always takes a lot out of me. ”

*

Henry “Marco Marelli” Zuph, former grifter and fortune hunting gigolo, lay on his side of the bed listening to Elsie breathing. As her magic faded, he contemplated reaching out and choking the life from her exhausted body. The thought was quickly squashed as his heartbeat faded with her powers and he was once again just a head attached to a department store mannequin.

“Well,” he thought, “at least I’m not in the closet.”

A silver lining to be sure, but if he had to do Monte Carlo all over again, he would’ve found some other lonely, unattractive woman to con--anyone other than this deranged and powerful witch.

*

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Chapter 61

“When Beauty Meets Morbid”

*Debra Elliott
Chalkville, Alabama, USA*

Joe hovered over Michelle, doting on her like a lost puppy. He'd fantasized about this very moment when he'd have her all to himself. Now she was there and his alone. In high school Joe had always worshiped Michelle Collins, but she was a cheerleader and he was a science geek.

The two didn't socialize, not in high school anyway. Not anywhere really, except here in the morgue. She lay on the metal table, her perfect and pristine form unaware the science geek she made fun of all those years ago was about to tear her beautiful body apart. The corner of his pencil thin lips curled into a smirk. Finally, after twenty years he had her right where he wanted her. Joe gathered the necessary instruments to perform his duty, after all he was the town's only mortician.

He washed her in the sterile solution before proceeding. The morgue reeked of death, but Joe savored the smell. It was "her" smell. Next came the daunting task of organ removal. His mind was clouded. Joe needed fresh air. He needed a cigarette Joe grabbed a fresh, starched white sheet and placed it over his high school crushes body before exiting the morgue. Once outside he lit up the strong menthol cigarette and took a few puffs. He snubbed the rest on the brick wall and went back inside to finish Michelle Collins.

She was still lying on the table. Of course she would be, he thought. She's dead as a doornail. He shook his head. "Michelle, Michelle, Michelle... why did it have to come to this?" He half expected her to answer.

If only she had agreed to dinner, she wouldn't be lying on the slab of cold steel. And he wouldn't have had to kill her. Why did it have to come to that? Beads of perspiration formed on Joe's brow. He probed her insides until he had removed all of her vital organs. He threw them in the metal bucket at the foot of the table, except for her heart. Joe had a special place for it prepared.

He held up her cold, dead heart. His face grew dark and a morbid laugh escaped his mouth. "I told you one day Michelle you would be mine."

Joe took her heart and placed it in a formaldehyde filled glass jar, sewed her up and went home with her pickled heart in a jar. It was like carrying moonbeams around....

*

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Chapter 62

“Daddy’s Little Girl”

*Martin Reaves
Auburn, California, USA*

Eddie cowers in the corner, his mind fuzzing in and out from terror, and the sheer impossibility of what he has witnessed. He’s soiled himself but is no longer aware of the smell or shame.

The body lies naked and spread-eagled a few feet away, fingernails ripped to the quick, eyes gouged out and forced into...he shakes his head. That didn’t happen, he thinks, I didn’t see that.

But he does see the black-shadowed female form hovering just to the left of the darkened window and to the right of his bed, feet dangling several inches above the floor. She is like a woman-shaped hole punched in the fabric of reality, swaying slightly left and right with a non-existent breeze.

His mind rebels. She can’t be floating like that. She didn’t just do what she did. She didn’t really use those long blackened nails to rake the body’s flesh and eyes away...she can’t have done those things with animal frenzy and then drifted above the body to rictus-grin her delight through blood-stained teeth.

She begins to sing-song, her voice a dual-tone of sweet innocence layered underneath with something ancient and without mercy. “Hush little baby, don’t say a word...”

Had it been just this morning that he’d laughed off the whole situation as pre-Halloween weirdness?

~~ before ~~

“Daddy, will you kill someone for me?”

Eddie glanced at his daughter. She’d always had a talent for strange questions. Now she stood with fish-netted legs descending from a too-short witch’s skirt, face painted green, lips black and some sort of filmy white contact lenses covering her eyes, asking him to do something she appeared more than capable of accomplishing herself.

He looked away and finished buttering his toast. “Just tell me who, baby. I’ll call my boys and whoever it is will be six feet under by lunch.”

Amber cocked an eyebrow. “Dad.”

“Baby, you gotta know I can’t get the boys into action before lunch. We got that thing to take care of downtown, and then there are the bodies in the trunk from the thing last night.”

She made a noise of disgust and plopped into a kitchen chair. “Okay, forget it, if you’re just gonna make fun of me.”

“Amber, you asked me to kill someone; what do you expect me to do?”

“I didn’t ask you to kill someone, I asked if you would kill someone.”

“Oh, well that’s different.”

“Daddy, I know you think I’m stupid because I’m only, like, thirteen, but I can actually hear it when you get sarcastic, you know?”

He opened his mouth, ready with the next zinger, and then felt a chill. She was serious. No...that was impossible. Amber—lover and protector of all things living—actually wanting someone dead? No. Ridiculous. And yet—

She drummed her three-inch-long black plastic witch-nails on the table. “This is why parents are always wondering why their kids won’t talk to them, you know? Like anytime we actually have something important going on...forget it, I guess I have to do it myself.”

She swished up out of her chair in a huff and left the room. Eddie watched her go, wondering who it was she thought she wanted killed, knowing it was more than likely some petty offense, and that actually committing murder was the furthest thing from her mind. He listened as she ascended the stairs, the soft knock on his bedroom door where his new bride, Celia, was probably knitting or reading. Funny, he thought, Celia had been trying to gain Amber’s affection since assuming the mom role. She’d made it clear how she feared being perceived as the evil step mother. He tried to ease her mind, assuring her that Amber would come around eventually.

And now Amber was knocking on her door...maybe to ask if Celia would kill someone for her. That’ll cement the daughter/step-mom relationship, he thought.

He smiled. Easy to see how absurd it was when you talked your way through it.

~~ now ~~

“...Momma’s gonna by you a mockingbird...”

Eddie wishes he could go back to this morning, back to a time of sanity...to sit with Amber and ask—as crazy as it seemed then—who she wanted killed. Find out why. Of course he knows why now. But Amber had known then...he should have listened.

Now it is over, blood has been spilled, skin stripped and organs removed. And it was more than a killing...it was a hellacious and bloody feast.

The sing-song halts. Eddie lifts his blurred gaze from the ruined body—so small, so helpless—to the floating horror. The dead-white face is turned in his direction. The head tilts as she—Celia, my dear Celia—floats toward him, her tongue darting, flicking small droplets of Amber’s blood into the air, onto his face.

One last glance at Amber’s ruined, lifeless body, and then Celia is upon him, that dual-voice a guttural hiss. “...Darling...I’m hungry.”

*

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Chapter 63

“Hide and Seek”

*Tracy Lesch
Fern Park, Florida, USA*

Night has fallen, and soon they will come again to murder me.

Once more, I must run. Run, or die.

How did my existence become this waking nightmare? I live each second in desperation, the space between them woven in fear. If only I could rest or feel safe again, even temporarily, I would be blessed. That life disappeared with their arrival.

No one noticed their coming. Ours was a peaceful and happy community. We cared for each other, sharing all we had. More than citizens, we were a family, leading lives of love and fraternal harmony. But lurking outside our homes was a malevolent evil. It watched us jealously, hungrily, from the shadows. Waiting.

Then, the disappearances started happening. One male of our commune simply vanished. Hearing the distress of his wife, we initiated a search, but no sign of him could be found. After a time, we had to relent. Perhaps he had abandoned his family for some reason the rest of us were not privy to. Without clues, there was no point in looking anymore. We comforted those left behind as best we could. Behind our masks of silent sympathy, we wondered what really happened.

When another of our number went missing, we began to suspect foul play. Again, we combed every area we could cover, determined but sorrowful. And more than a little panicked. Fear followed us, as we looked for— what? A body? A captive? Or the murderer who could strike any one of us next? I wish I could say that our search was unfruitful once more, but that was not to be. We found blood. Too much blood. We recovered no body.

Over weeks, the attacks increased. Sometimes there were survivors, frightened witnesses who conveyed tales that seemed mythical to the rest of us. They reported glimpses of ravening creatures of fang and claw, supernaturally fast and deadly, materializing from nowhere to kill and maim. These beast-like demons moved about in total darkness like daylight. The black of night could not impede their gaze, as if they could track us by scent alone. Maybe they smelled our fear.

We became afraid to leave our homes, besieged by the hungry creatures that now stalked our members as prey. Hiding saved us, for the monsters never attempted to enter our havens. They lurked on the fringes instead, patiently watching for their opportunity to murder. And devour. I

never vocalized that last part, I didn't have to. The horrible realization shone in each of my neighbor's eyes.

When provisions began to run low, we had to reconsider our position of safety for sustenance. Our families were slowly starving. We had to eat. I felt the gnawing pain in the pit of my stomach as I gave my food to my crying children. The males met in secret, formulating plans to provide for the survival of the others. We mapped routes to avoid the usual hunting spots of our attackers, those paths that would allow us to make foraging runs for any morsel to fill our bellies.

Sneaking out in the dead of night, keeping to what cover we could, we met with some success. Then, the wily beasts began to discern our patterns. We varied them, which would quell the carnage for a time, until the monstrous minds found us out again. This game replayed itself day after day, but it only seemed to stave off the inevitable.

They have taken us one by one. They are eating us.

So again, I stand here alone. I tread carefully lest they hear the slightest footfall. I will my body not to sweat, lest they catch scent of it. The more I attempt to quiet my breathing, the more I seem to gasp for air. My heart pounds in my chest. Oh, God, can they hear it? I try to become one with every shadow, every stick of concealment I can find. I must. There is no alternative.

Out there waits the very thing that will allow my mate, my babies to live another day. I cannot fail them. But, out there also wait the things that want my flesh, my life. I cannot let them win.

I exist to avoid, to evade, to escape. I live to run. To run from death. I hide, but they seek.

Tonight, I hope they will not find me in the dark.

Night has fallen. Once more, I must run. Run or die.

I pray I can make it back to my mouse-hole.

*

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Chapter 64

“Playing with the Dead”

*Toy Davis
Merced, California, USA*

Ricky walked into his clubhouse and shut the door. It had been another rough day at school. Once again, the other students had made fun of him because he was weird. He didn't think he was weird, but they didn't care about what he thought. Eight year olds were stubborn that way.

His parents got him this clubhouse years ago, so he would have somewhere to play that was out of their way. He had decorated it with dap pictures; boxes for furniture, a bookshelf for his Dr. Seuss, and of course his friends

His only friends consisted of dead animals he found around town. He had birds, squirrels, little dogs, and cats. When they started to smell or fall apart he would say his goodbyes, and gave them a proper burial.

He sat in the middle of the room and told his friends of his day. They agreed the students were jerks, and Chi, the dog, vowed one day they would get their due. He was always threatening to bite the mean people but he never did. Ricky smiled as he shook his head.

He knew his friends loved him. He wished he could take them to school. But since no one else had their special connection only he could hear them speak.

His friends watched as he played his imaginary games. This time he was a great wizard. Nutty, the squirrel, jumped up to help him fight the dragon. Ricky laughed as Nutty knocked Chi off his feet. The dragon had once again been defeated.

“Yay,” he exclaimed as he spun in spot. “No one can beat the Great Lord Ricky.”

“Or Nutty the Dragon Slayer,” Nutty added as he crossed his arms.

He bent over to meet his eyes. “Oh yes, Nutty the Dragon Slayer as yet to be defeated as well.” The squirrel nodded with approval.

“One day I will win,” Chi said. He sadly bowed his head.

Ricky dropped his stick wand as he scooped the dog into his arms. His fur was rough against his flesh. “I'm sure you will.” He gave him a hug. He was used to the feel of bugs crawling on his arms. Every time he picked up one of his friends the creepy crawlies would come out of their body to visit him as well. He was a true animal lover so he refused to kill them.

“Ricky!” his mother called.

His shoulders drooped with disappointment. It was time for him to go in. “I’ll come by later,” he promised before he ran to the house.

*

Inside, the house was bright and warm unlike his beloved clubhouse. His mother removed the cobwebs from his hair. “Ricky, one day I am going to go in that clubhouse and clean it,” she told him.

“No!” he cried out as he stepped away from her. Fear wrapped its cold grip around him. He knew his mother would get rid of his friends and then he’d have no one. He swallowed the pleas he wanted to make and went to the restroom. Dinner was done and he had to wash his hands. All good boys kept their hands clean.

At the table they ate dinner as a family. His mother and father talked of re-doing the house. Ricky didn’t care for change, life was good the way it was.

“How do you feel about a play date with the boy down the street?” his mother suddenly asked him. He stared at his fork. “What is a play date?” he asked, quietly.

He stared at his fork. “What is a play date?” he asked, quietly.

“You know,” she beamed at him. “It’s where you meet up with a kid your own age, and play games.”

“Sounds fun,” his father crimped in.

“Sounds horrible.” He dropped his forks, no longer feeling hungry.

His mother sighed as she looked at her husband. Her blue eyes pleaded with him to help. He wiped his mouth before he set his cloth napkin aside. “Hey bud,” he gently grabbed his arm. “Having friends is a good thing.”

“It teaches you how to fit in,” his mother added.

He sulked in his seat. “I don’t want to fit in.” His lips pinched together in a small pout. “Besides, I have friends.”

“Really?” she perked up. “Bring them over some time so we can meet them.”

“Yeah buddy, we want to see who these awesome friends are.” His father picked up his fork to continue eating.

Ricky licked his dry lips. He wanted to be in his clubhouse, his friends never made him explain himself. “You wouldn’t like them.”

“Why not? Are they troublemakers?”

“No it’s just...” How could he explain it so his parents would understand? “The living do not understand me dad, but the dead do.”

His thick brows frowned at him. “What does that mean?”

“If you speak in riddles no one will understand you dear,” his mother pointed out.

“It’s not a riddle mom; it’s the truth.”

“It’s silly, that’s what that is,” his father corrected. “You are going on that play date, and you will learn how to be normal.”

“Or at least learn to pretend to be normal,” his mother added as she shook her head. “Where did we go wrong Shawn?”

Uncertainty darkened his handsome features. “I don’t know hun; I just don’t know.”

Ricky bowed his head with shame. Why couldn’t he make his parents happy? “May I be excused? I wish to take a bath.”

“Go ahead,” his mother dismissed him.

*

That night, while his parents were asleep Ricky snuck out of the house to be with his friends. He had to tell them of dinner and his play date.

“This is not good,” Chewy, the cat, said. Its eyes were milky. “Not good at all.”

“Why do you need to go on a play date when you have us?” Nutty asked. If he had eyes Ricky knew there would be sadness in them.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. My parents are making me go.”

“Parents,” Chi huffed. “My dad was never around and my mother lost interest in me the moment I could walk.”

He eyed the dried blood on his fur as he thought about what he had said. “But I’m a human.”

“Humans are animals,” Chewy pointed out.

He let out a heavy sigh as he stared at his hands. They were so small and delicate. “They just don’t understand me.”

“But we do,” Chi replied.

“The dead always understand you,” Nutty purred.

“Always,” Chewy said with a smile. Its thin fangs hung over its lower lip.

“The dead,” he whispered. The dead understood him. “But they are alive.”

“That can be changed,” Chi said. Ricky stared at him. The mutt’s black hollowed eyes stared into his. “They can join us here.”

He licked his lips as he rose to his feet. They could join us here, repeated in his head as he walked back to the house.

That night, while his parent slept, Ricky set their room on fire. He heard their screams of pain as they lost their lives. The flames consumed their flesh so Ricky was not able to add them to his clubhouse, but he knew their spirits finally understood him.

He hid in his beloved clubhouse when the fire truck came. The officers found him speaking to his friends, and sharing stories of the fire he had caused. They took him to the mental hospital so he could receive the help he needed, and be taught not to play with the dead.

*

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Chapter 65

“Together for Eternity”

*Bella Doerres
Tempe, Arizona, USA*

“It isn’t about whether I love you or not.” Nathan was telling me. “It’s just that I am not the kind of guy, well, that you should be involved with on a permanent basis.”

“I know it’s you not me.” I said. Dang, I was so tired of that line. Nathan was so cool. I enjoyed his company. We had so much in common. I had really hoped this relationship would go further and not end so abruptly. It was almost Halloween and I had hoped we could catch some of the gangs’ gatherings together. Now here I was again another break up.

“No it’s not that.” He said. “You’re great. See it’s me. I just can’t stay involved for very long. I actually really like you a lot and I don’t want you to change. I like you the way you are. You’re so normal. We have had a lot of fun. I love the way we like the same books. I mean you’re the first girl I have met in a long time that has read the old classics. You even like to walk through the graveyard at dusk. No one ever did that with me before you. I just don’t want you hurt.”

“Well I am hurt because you are breaking up with me.” I couldn’t think of anything else to say to him. “Why can’t we stay together if you like me? I just don’t get it.”

Nathan got looked at me with those dark eyes of his. I mean they were, are literally to die for. It was obvious to me he was thinking.

“You need to understand, being with me long term would work into very long term and I can’t ask that of someone.” Nathan got quiet and was looking at me.

“Nathan I just don’t want to lose you. I had hoped, well that we would be together, together and it would be for our lives. I really think I am in love with you.” I told him. “I am talking the love that spans eternity.”

He was looking at me very seriously at that moment, “You got that part right.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The eternity part,” He responded. “Can you really imagine spending eternity with a guy like me? Seriously, think about your answer carefully.”

“Actually, Nathan,” I said. “I have thought about that. I just didn’t say it. I have just enjoyed our time and hate to see it end, I really, really like you.”

“Tia, do you like it enough to spend eternity with me?” He asked.

“Actually I do.” I responded.

With that he leaned over and kissed me gently on the cheek, pulling me into his arms. The kisses moved down my neck and then I realized there was something different about Nathan I hadn't noticed before. Holding me closer than ever I felt something at my neck. He held me and I realized he was drinking my blood. I was at first shocked, scared, I don't know but this was Nathan and I loved him. I remember feeling dizzy; weak he pulled back and said; “Now we will be together for eternity.”

The Halloween parties that season were the best. I had never had so much fun. Nathan and I were together. No one noticed anything strange about us. My two best friends thought it so cool I now had a steady boy friend. If they only knew how steady. I now knew what together for eternity really meant. Nathan told me later that he wouldn't have changed me except I had told him I wanted it. I really didn't grasp the whole thing until it happened but it really is cool. We get to spend a lot of time together now. I have moved into his place up on the hill. Spooky well maybe but I don't think so because I have the guy I wanted forever.

*

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Chapter 66

“Escape!”

*Joseph Alan Gharraheer
Toledo, Ohio, USA*

Keep running Ron, I thought to myself as I continued to push my physical boundaries, running down the dimly lit main street in my small town of Deshler, Ohio, doing my best to ignore the vicious crack of the winter wind's whip against my red, unsheltered face and the glaciating snowflakes that fell upon it, numbing my exposed extremities and allowing me to almost ignore the pain of the impending frostbite, a minute pleasure that may have been the only upside in the otherwise absolute worst and most sickening night I had experienced in the entirety of my short-lived life.

The massive amount of liquor I had ingested earlier in the night dominated my system, allowing me to push through the impossible and idiotic conditions I was trekking through by running in freezing temperatures, which was more than I could say for my poor daughter, Michelle, who clung tightly around my neck, teeth chattering in a never ending shiver and body shaking from the cold her delicate frame was unable to withstand. Her eyes were closed tightly, though her warm tears still managed to dedicate a steady stream towards reaching my face, which was almost a blessing for in the brief moment of impact they at least offered a small pinpoint of warmth, however fleeting that may have been. Frightened, she rubbed her own soft and rosy frostbitten cheek against my rough beard, the prickly feel of which she normally hated, but which seemed to serve as a reminder of something familiar and memorable from before this haunted night in an attempt to lead her to some happy nonexistent place in her mind where she could find a smidgeon of comfort to hold on to as her world came crashing down around her. Her lip quivered in an attempt to make out some phrasing that couldn't be understood over her sobs and the sound of my heart echoing within my head. With each massive pound against my chest, I expected it to finally make its way out of the cavity it resided in, which would have been a blessing had it gotten me out of dealing with my current situation, but I had to be sure my daughter was safe.

“Everything is going to be fine, honey,” I whispered in a feeble attempt to console her, hoping to quell some of her fear. The smell of freshly ingested Jack Daniels rolled past my chapped lips alongside my words as they left my lying mouth.

Close to my side ran Annabelle, the young babysitter who had been watching Michelle when I returned home from the bar, hammered and in a hurry to protect my daughter from impending doom. She had been following me since, in an attempt to reach safety from the dangers that approached, hoping not to reach the same sad demise as the other townspeople, but she wasn't

my responsibility, nor was she my concern. The odds were already against me getting Michelle to safety, but I was going to do whatever I could to tip them back in my favor.

I wasn't sure how much longer my feeble body was going to be able to hold out in the conditions that were thrust upon me, as I felt my spaghetti noodle legs begin to give out. I couldn't allow myself to drop here in the middle of the street, so I looked around the abandoned road for some sign of shelter where I could hide and attempt to protect my child. Going inside a building was a bad idea, for I could still picture what happened to the people trapped inside the bar, with nowhere to run to as the beast ripped them to shreds while I snuck out of the bathroom window. It made such quick work of the dozens of people in there, I could only imagine how easy it would be for it to rip the three of us to shreds. I was frantic and beginning to panic, unable to think straight due to my brain's inebriated state and I thought I was going to vomit when I finally laid eyes upon my safe haven.

I hurried across a wooden bridge which hung above a ditch that I had once gotten my truck stuck in while driving home intoxicated, hence the reason I didn't have any vehicular transportation in this awful situation, though if I had I would have been more than likely to crash it before getting out of town anyways. I could see the remote shack in the middle of the field on the other side of the bridge, the purpose of which I had never been entirely certain, but I remembered seeing it in the distance when I crashed my truck years earlier. It was far enough away from any street lights that if I could get us there, we could potentially hide on top for as long as we had to in order to become safe.

I looked back over my shoulder and saw the beast approaching in the distance, still hungry after devouring the rest of my unfortunate community, and ready to finish its meal. I needed a distraction if I was going to get away from it and out of its sight, and I didn't have to think for very long before realizing what I had to do. I threw all of my weight to the right against Annabelle's small frame, catching her off guard and managing to knock her over the edge of the small bridge. She screamed out in surprise and when she reached the bottom she landed hard, probably breaking multiple limbs. If my face wasn't too numb to form an expression at this point, mine would have been apologetic as I looked down at the poor high school girl I left to die. But a moment was all I merited her, and I quickly continued across the field towards the shack.

"Don't open your eyes, baby," I whispered to Michelle as I continued my attempt to get her to safety. I looked back to see the beast leap into the ditch with her and shortly after I heard screams of fear quickly turn into screams of anguish. It roared as it ripped into her flesh as if she were just another meal and while these sounds may have sickened anyone else, I gladly accepted them with relief that the beast took the bait.

When I reached the shack, I ran around to the back of it so that the beast wouldn't see us if it did head in this direction. After a small struggle, I finally managed to pull the sobbing Michelle from gripping me, and I sat her down on a crate. I climbed up to it, and then lifted her high to the safety of the building. Once she was up there, I grabbed onto the roof and pulled myself up alongside her. I looked into the distance and saw the beast retreating, and for the first time in over an hour, I began to feel like I had an actual chance of survival.

“It’s alright now, sweetie. We’re safe here.” I held my daughter close to me as we huddled for warmth under the night sky, heavily littered with stars and plump full moon, as round as I’d ever seen it. For some reason, I suddenly became transfixed on the object. I had never been interested in the moon, and now was certainly not the time for its admiration, however, I couldn’t manage to pull my eyes from it. That’s when I began to feel different. The alcohol and the fear no longer dominated my body, but instead, it was as if instinct took over.

“Daddy, what happened to your leg?” Michelle asked, finally noticing the four gashes I had from when the beast managed to claw me on my way out of the bathroom window. They had been the least of my worries, until now.

My back cracked as it arched straight up and I felt like every bone in my body was breaking. The pain was unbearable, as my shape shifted into something bigger, something stronger. I let out a small cry as fur exploded from my body. My jaw extended into a snout, and my ears sunk into the sides of my head, reshaping themselves towards the top of my skull. I fell forward on hands which had formed themselves into furry paws. I howled once more at my mistress in the sky, ready to serve her.

I no longer felt the pain from the gashes on my leg. I no longer felt the heavy cloud of intoxication weighing upon me. I no longer felt the cold underneath my new coat of fur. I no longer felt the guilt of sacrificing Annabelle. Mostly, I no longer felt the need to protect the child who cowered before me. I had escaped all of these things, and I simply felt the need to feed. With one final howl, I pounced.

*

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Chapter 67

“The Choices We Make”

*Michael L. Turner
Crestwood, Kentucky, USA*

That’s what it all comes down to. It’s the choices we make, the ones we don’t, and the ones we allow to be made for us. Then at the end, it would all be balanced on some cosmic scale of good and evil. Hopefully on that day, you find yourself leaning more toward the good, rather than the other.

Jared Evers knew that there were good men in this world. He had long accepted that he was not one of them. Neither had he believe that his scale leaned the other way. What he was, he didn’t exactly know, and ten years of thought did not make it any clearer. Jared shook his head in frustration, and then lowered it in disgust. Looking at the solitary walls of his jail cell, his thoughts were now his only companion.

Over the years, Jared watched closely where his choices landed him on the scales. At the close of this day, it was his choice that put him in this jail. Three nights of his life would be spent here, alone. There was no judge to plead his case to, and no sheriff held him. Slaton West Virginia had neither. The coalminers, who built this town, had also long abandoned the place. Most of this isolated town had fallen into ruin, crumbling under its own rotted weight. The old jail, with its walls of bricks and bars would outlast it all. This had been the perfect find for Jared.

He held the keys to the cell in his right hand. His eyes repeatedly passed from them, to the scar on his forearm. That mark was the last, his body would ever have. The scar was why he was here. It was the balancing mark on his scale. After ten years he could still feel the flesh of his arm being torn. It all happened on that wooded roadside, just outside Liberty Virginia, of all places.

Jared had only stopped to change a flat that night. He was tired, it was raining, and he never saw it coming. The creature was right there. Jared knelt, working on the tire. Then the fangs sank into his arm. He was helpless, as the beast dragged him about like a ragdoll. With the tire iron still in his other hand, Jared tried to fight back. Jared hit it with the tool, over and over, but it never even flinched. Somehow, they must have ended up in the road. That was when the pickup clipped him, but hit the beast full on. He heard shattering glass, and felt a sharp pain in his shoulder. The truck’s side mirror had hit him. Jared awoke the next day in the hospital. The police report said whatever attacked him had run off, even after the mess it made of the farmer’s truck.

Over the next week, one doctor remarked, that Jared’s recovery was nothing short of miraculous. Within a few days all the marks left by the animal, except the bite mark, had healed without scarring. By the end of the week, even the broken collarbone had completely mended. The

doctors wanted to run more test, but Jared had tired of their company and left. Looking back, maybe he should have stayed. Then again, he really just wanted to stay so he could see again, the doctor who called his recovery a miracle. Then he planned to rip the man's throat out.

It was dark thoughts like that, which started to cross Jared's mind after that night. He found himself looking at people around him, and thinking about all the things he could so easily do to them. Friends had started to notice the evil grin that was often on his lips. When they spoke their concern, Jared became horrified by the thoughts they had interrupted. The realization of what he was pondering would suddenly dawn on him.

Each night, Jared stared up at the moon. Somehow he always knew its position and phase now, even with a dark cloud cover. It was almost full now. He hadn't known what it meant at the time, or was that just a lie he told himself. At night a small fire burned beneath his skin, growing in strength with each moonrise and moonset. The dark thoughts continued to float with ease through his mind, beckoning his submission.

"It's wrong!" He yelled out. Then a small voice would answer, saying, "Don't worry. It's okay... It'll just be this one time."

"Shut up!" Jared angrily snapped back. Right from wrong seemed like a fading memory, but he still knew the difference.

"Do you?" the voice seemed to ask.

By sunset on that final day, Jared was nothing more than a quivering mass of spent nerves. Darkness filled his mind, and his body was burning. Jared shuttered in pain, and by the end he simply blacked out.

Jared awoke the next morning. He was face down on the couch, and absent of any clothes. He didn't really care. All that mattered was the fact that his mind was clear and the pain was now gone. He felt refreshed, full of energy.

Jared simply dismissed the previous evening to illness, a fever maybe. He jogged five miles that morning without breaking a sweat. Heading for work, he skipped breakfast, feeling oddly full. On his way he flipped through the radio presets, until he settled on a news station, hoping to catch the morning stock report. What he caught instead, was the local news. There had apparently been several animal attacks in Veteran's Park last night. The deaths of a woman jogger, and a homeless man were listed.

The news hit Jared like a brick, as he veered off into the emergency lane, and skidded to a halt. Images flashed into memory, and coldness ate into Jared's soul. He clenched his eyes shut, as strange images seared the back of their sockets.

He was in the park, lit brightly by street lamps and a full moon. He stood over a park bench; a dirty looking man lay there, clutching a recently emptied bottle of what smelled like not-so-fine whiskey. Jared reached for the man with a hand covered in fur and sporting inch long claws. The bench had been beside one of those jogging paths, unfortunate for the runner who came

across him and his prey. She had screamed as he looked up at her, warm blood dripping from his long snout. The rest was blurred, and yet so clear.

Jared's eyes shot open, as someone tapped on the car window. He looked up into the face of a highway patrolman.

“Are you all right sir? Do you need any help?” The officer had asked him.

Jared was drenched in sweat, and couldn't keep himself from shaking. He indeed needed help, but who could offer it. He looked down at his hands gripped tightly in fists at his lap. He studied the backs of them, and then forced them open to see the palms. They were his, but those in the park he could not deny, were also his. What was happened to him? What was going to become of him?

Those two questions he would continue to ask himself over the next ten years, and neither had truly been answered. The myths and legends proved useless, but he had learned one thing. He really wanted to hurt whoever had come up with the idea that a silver bullet would kill a werewolf. It didn't, but surely burned like hell. His life could never be normal again, and he had finally resigned himself to three nights a month, locked in this old jail.

Jared looked down to his scarred right arm again. Darkness plagued his mind. It did not come from the beast though, as he originally thought. The bite had merely unleashed the animal already within him. The thoughts that made him cringe, were his own. The beast only brought them to the surface. In his heart, Jared was that monster, a creation of his darkest thoughts. This would put him on the latter part of the scales. That thought filled him with disgust.

“There is no balancing the scales,” he growled, knowing this fact. “This is who I am!” he shouted to the winds. Jared's mind fell to the darkness. He was tired of living this confined life. He craved the free air, to live his life his way, and to enjoy the hunt that called to him.

He looked at the keys in his hand, and tossed them aside. Jared laughed, as he walked from the cell, and building. He was free.

A few minutes past, and Jared silently walked back in. After retrieving the keys, he locked the cell, and sat quietly until sunset and moonrise.

Good and evil are in the choices we make, the ones we don't, and the ones we allow to happen. Tonight, Jared Evers chose to be a good man. Tomorrow, the decision will have to be made again.

NEVER THE END.

*

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Chapter 68

“Cumberland Road Ghost”

*Sharon Van Orman
Omaha, Nebraska, USA*

I ran out into the rain, not caring that I was soaked to the bone in a matter of minutes. I was hurt that he had said such a thing to me. And angry with myself that it wasn't the first time, but determined that it would be the last.

The rain pounded on the roof of my old Ford as the windshield wipers, that I had been meaning to replace, smeared the rain around rather than clean it off. I swiped at my face hoping to clear my vision enough to see the road that wound its way out in front of me like a glistening snake.

Cumberland River Road had seen many incarnations. Each following along the Indian trail that first breached the dense forest of Pulaski County, Kentucky.

And just like the leaves on those towering sentinels, ghost stories abounded, propagated by a population that loved that sort of thing. Their whispers keeping the old stories going. The names of the people and places changed, but the stories never died. I told myself I didn't believe that sort of thing. I had told myself that a lot over the years. I expected any day now I would believe it.

As the road began its descent I could see the old Cumberland highway veer off to my left. The river claimed it now, giving it back on its western shore. Why that road wasn't blocked off I would never know. But then no one came this way unless they knew where they were going. And if they happened to be lost on this road. Well, prayer was about your only option.

A chill ran up my spine as the story my mother told me decided to rear its ugly head. The year was 1940. Dan and Eloise Tate were headed out of town on their honeymoon. Just like this night the rain was pouring down. No one really knows what happened, aside from the Tate's. And they ain't saying. Their old Ford took the river road. The original one. The one that ran along the bottom of the Cumberland river.

His body was never found. They fished her body out of that river still wearing her wedding gown. The story goes that she looks for him still and on nights, just like this, she wanders the road. If you see her, she'll hitch a ride. Sitting in the backseat until you crest the hill or arrive at the bottom. Then she will get out, disappear into the woods, looking for Mr. Tate.

It was just a story I told myself. So, why were the hairs on my arms standing up like that? I laughed nervously, pulling my eyes away from the black waters of the river that churned below. A flash of white caught my attention. Out of instinct I hit the brakes with both feet, not even

bothering to downshift. My old truck slid, coming to a stop sideways across the road. My headlights shone out across the water, my left tire spinning in space, the pavement no longer lay beneath it.

The drumming of rain on sheet-metal, and rubber swiping at glass in an uneven tattoo was the only sound to be heard as I slowly looked in my rearview. I swallowed, it was as loud as buckshot in the quiet.

There she sat, in her wedding dress, pristine as the day she bought it, looking at me with eyes that seemed to hold the sorrows of the world. I stared at her, terrified to look behind me. I saw her in the mirror, did I really need to confirm it by turning around? But just like all those silly girls in the horror movies, I guess I did. I looked.

She was beautiful. Pale blond hair that would have shown like spun gold in the sun was pinned up under her veil. Green eyes that questioned me without words regarded me as I regarded her.

I looked away, and that was when I noticed that I stood outside my old Ford. The front end that had stretched out into space, now embraced a live Oak like an old lover. And there, laying over the steering wheel, was a woman that looked a lot like me.

A scream bubbled in my throat. I turned back to the woman, but she was gone. A pale dot disappearing into the woods. I looked down as my hand brushed the beading of my dress. Not my dress, her dress.

I knew then that those old stories were true, not because they happened but because people believed them. There never was a Mrs. Tate. Just some girl who had met the same fate I had along Cumberland River Road. And just like her, I would ask for a ride until the last one came for the next girl that drove this road, on a night just like this.

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Chapter 69

“Meet the Parents”

*Merita King
Hampshire, England, United Kingdom*

Oh I'm so tired, I can hardly keep my eyes open. I feel I need to close them, to allow my mind to drift off, somewhere. Where? I don't care, anywhere but here. Hey there little fella, where did you come from? It's so nice to have company at last. What's your name buddy? I'm Brandy, pleased to meet ya. How long have you been sitting there? I didn't notice you when I arrived but then I was so happy that I didn't notice lots of things I should've noticed. Hey you know what? It's my eighteenth birthday today. My boyfriend Dexter said he was going to throw me a party at his grandparent's house to celebrate my special day and to introduce me to his folks at last. I was so excited and felt really grown up to be finally getting to meet Dexter's folks.

Dexter's family keep themselves to themselves. They're very private y'know? I met him while I was walking my dog Eddy through the woods six months ago and he was walking his own dog. First time I saw him I thought, wow this guy's gorgeous and when his dog came running over to meet Eddy I was so blown away by him that I got all tongue tied and blushed like a silly kid. He was nice though and pretty soon we were chatting like old friends and he asked if I'd mind if he joined Eddy and me on our walk. Would I mind? Are you crazy?

After that I used to walk Eddy in the woods every day and it became a habit for Dexter to meet us there and walk with us. I looked forward to those walks and pretty soon I was beginning to wonder if anything would happen between us. The boys at school are nice enough but not a patch on Dexter and I used to daydream about seeing all my girlfriend's faces when they met him for the first time. You know it took him a whole month before he tried to kiss me? How cute is that? After that he would hold my hand while we walked and I felt like his real girlfriend, it was awesome.

Three months after our first meeting, he asked me if I would be his girlfriend and I said yes. He kissed me with his tongue for the first time and my insides did a flip flop. Man I was so happy that day. Have you had something like that happen buddy? No? That's a shame, that's a real shame. I asked him to come to the diner with me one weekend and meet some of my friends but he said no. He must've seen I was upset as he held me in his arms and told me he loved me for the first and said he didn't want to share me with anyone just yet, that he wanted me all to himself for just a little longer and that he'd like me to meet his folks. I was okay with that because Sandy told me that if a boy takes you to meet his folks, then it's a serious relationship.

He knew my eighteenth birthday was just a month away so he said him and his folks were arranging a party for me, so they could all meet me and we could celebrate my birthday together and be like a family. I was so nervous this afternoon when I was getting ready. I'd never been

taken to meet a boyfriend's parents before and I wasn't sure what I should wear. Normally I'd wear something real, y'know revealing, but I reckoned that if his folks were anything like mine, then they probably wouldn't approve of me having too much bare flesh on show. Parents can be such old farts can't they? Are yours like that?

I finally settled on a bright red dress with a sweetheart neckline and tight skirt that came down to just above the knees. I'd seen a movie where the heroine wore an identical dress and then a week later I saw this in the boutique on main street so I bought it. Mom took the hem up for me and Cassie from next door did my makeup. Her older sister is at beauty college so she gets to use all the top brands of cosmetics and Cassie always looks a million dollars as her sister taught her how to do her own face properly. I wore my sneakers and carried my red heels, as I was going through the woods to meet Dexter and didn't want to get them all muddy and Mom said that kind of shoe is made for posing, not walking. My dad bought me a second hand car and I was totally blown away by it and Mom said she'd pay for me to have lessons and get my driver's license. I was so happy when I left the house this afternoon and set off through the woods and when I saw Dexter waiting for me in his dark suit and bow tie I was like, wow.

He told me I looked beautiful and kissed me and I thought this was the happiest day of my life. Then he handed me a small box and said happy birthday baby. It was a solid gold necklace with a big heart shaped red stone that he said was some kind of ancient crystal that had magical properties in the country his grandparents came from. We walked holding hands and every so often he'd stop and pull me close and kiss me and say thank you for giving yourself to me and making me so happy. I was hoping that tonight was gonna be the night when he'd finally, y'know, do it.

It must've taken nearly an hour of walking before Dexter pulled me off the path along an almost invisible track and then there it was. The house wasn't quite what I'd expected his folks to live in. It was old and looked like it needed a paint job and a few repairs here and there but the lights shone in the downstairs windows and he led me up to the front door where a huge banner hung outside. I couldn't read what it said but my name Brandy was in the middle so I guessed it was some kind of happy birthday greeting. Dexter said it was the language his grandparents used before they came to this country and he said it was a greeting to me.

"Brandy?" he smiled at me. "It's traditional in my grandparent's culture for the girl to knock the door and ask to come in."

"Really?" I blushed and he nodded.

"Yeah. It's okay baby don't be shy. Just knock and when they answer the door, say I'm Brandy and I want to come in and give myself to Dexter. It's just an old fashioned thing that brings luck on a relationship and it would make them so happy. They're a little shy since they're foreigners here and they'd love it if you showed them you don't think they're traditions are weird or anything. Please baby, for me huh?" He kissed me and I couldn't refuse him, even though it seemed mighty weird to me so I knocked and waited. The door was opened by a little wrinkled old lady with the strangest glow in her eyes I'd ever seen. She said something in a language I didn't understand so I smiled and held tight to Dexter's hand.

“Hello, I’m Brandy and I want to come in and give myself to Dexter,” I blushed and looked at him. He winked at me and the old lady smiled and opened the door and waved us in. The inside of the house was warm and smelled of spices and I could hear a fire crackling somewhere. A man appeared and come up to me and smiled as he introduced himself as Dexter’s grandfather. He thanked me for accepting their traditions and asked me if I was happy to be Dexter’s chosen girl. I smiled and nodded and he offered me a drink which tasted funny but I didn’t want to be rude and say I didn’t like it so I just drank it down.

That’s where it all begins to get a bit hazy for me. I must’ve fallen asleep or something because I remember a really vivid dream of being chained to a table. I was naked and had symbols painted on my skin and I could hear voices chanting and singing all around me. Then Dexter appeared in the dream and he was naked too and he climbed on top of me and started to make love to me. I was just beginning to enjoy it when he started talking in my ear as we were, y’know, doing it. I couldn’t understand what he was saying but his voice became different somehow, scary. I looked at him and this is where the dream gets seriously crazy. His eyes weren’t like they normally are. They were bright orange and as I looked at him, he changed from the gorgeous brown eyed young man I knew, into this orange eyed, hairy creature with huge fangs and as his body started jerking, he bit down into my neck. It hurt so much and I screamed and then the dream must’ve gone because I don’t remember any more until I woke up here chained to this bed and saw you here. I’m so tired, I think I’ll just sleep awhile. You will be here when I wake up won’t you? It’s so nice having you to talk to.

The door opened and the old lady entered, followed by the elderly man. She looked at the imp guarding the chosen one and raised her eyebrows questioningly. The imp bowed his head to the old woman. “Her time is near, Mistress. I can feel the dark lord’s successor preparing to make his entrance into this human world at last.”

“Good,” the old woman nodded. “It has been too much trouble keeping her alive this past year. When will he be with us?”

“Before the sun rises Mistress, the dark lord will have his successor at last.” The imp bowed again as the old woman smiled and left the room to make preparations.

Throughout the long hours of the night the body of the earth female lay writhing in its agonies as the dark lord’s successor fought its way out. The old woman and old man stood impassively watching, unmoved as her screams split the night air. Just before the sun rose over the distant horizon the dark lord appeared and waited for his newborn son to arrive. The old man and woman bowed reverently to him and stepped aside, allowing him to come forward and wait to receive the child into his own hands. The body of the female began to writhe and scream afresh as the belly began to tear open. Blood gushed onto the bed as a tiny clawed hand appeared from within the gash.

“Welcome my son,” the dark lord cried. “Welcome into this world where you will have dominion over all.” He leaned forward and reached out his hands as the tiny claw ripped the belly of its host open. The head appeared from within the bloody rent, its tiny horn buds glistening with blood and let out a loud wailing cry. The dark lord smiled as he took his newborn

son into his arms and looked down at him. His tears fell upon the newborn's face as his old heart swelled with love.

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Chapter 70

“A Heated Situation”

Kincaid Savoie
Syracuse, Utah, USA

As Al saw it, there was only one solution. He sighed, disgusted with his current situation. She doesn't deserve this, he thought to himself, no one does. Slowly, he turned around... And dropped a handful of change on the counter, next to the register.

“Sorry. I forgot my wallet, and I really need this card,” Al apologized. The clerk merely rolled her eyes, and began counting out the amount needed for the card. Al awkwardly attempted to make conversation with the young woman, but had no such luck. Between being stuck on the graveyard shift, and having to count out the change for a ninety-nine cent card, in pennies no less, she was more than a little irritated.

After the clerk finished counting out the change, Al thanked her and made his way outside. He tried to unlock his old Toyota pickup truck, but ended up dropping his keys on the pavement. He ended up fumbling in the dark for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he found the keys and got the door open.

Al started the old truck, and pulled out of the parking lot. Strangely, there was no traffic out. As he was driving, he couldn't help but look at the card he had bought. His eyes flashed down to the last minute gift. It had “Happy Anniversary!” printed on the front, in large, gold letters. The word was surrounded by an assortment of roses and other flowers. How could I have forgotten!? he kept thinking, over and over again.

Distracted, he looked back up at the road. To his surprise, a cat was ambling across. Cursing, Al attempted to swerve around the animal. Though he managed to miss the cat, he also ended up missing the road, and didn't manage to miss the tree that was just off it.

Al looked around, his vision blurry. The world began getting darker and darker, despite the flames coming from the front of the car. Al tried to move, but couldn't. Finally, the world faded completely black.

It was warm now, but not like the car had been. Al looked around, and saw that he was in a room, a small room. It looked sort of like a hotel room, except with a few more furnishings, and decorative touches. A door was on the opposite side of the room from him. As Al started to get up, the door opened. A small old woman walked inside.

“Oh, you're awake. Are you alright dear? You must be feeling pretty tender,” the old woman said.

Slightly confused, Al replied, “Uh... Yeah... A little bit. Er... could you tell me where I am?”

“Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot,” the old woman began, “I found you in a wreck last night. You looked hurt, so I brought you back here. This is a little inn I run,” she finished.

“Oh, thanks,” Al replied. Something seemed strange about the woman. He could hardly believe that she pulled him from that wreck. And, why would she bring him back to an inn instead of to the hospital? Al sat for a moment, taking in his surroundings, and the strange old woman.

“Are you hungry, dear?” she asked. Strangely, Al found that he actually was hungry.

“Yes, I suppose so,” he replied.

“Well, the other guests are downstairs for dinner. My daughters are also there. I'm sure they would like you to join them.”

“A-Alright,” Al stuttered, still dazed.

“Hmmm... You should probably bathe first, though. You look a bit shabby,” the old woman said. Al looked down. He was still in the clothes he had been wearing when he was driving. They were badly torn, and a bit stained from his wounds.

“The bathroom is down the hall and to the right. Oh, and I brought you some tea,” the old woman set a small cup down on the nightstand.

“Alright, I'll be down in a minute,” Al said, finally feeling better.

“Good. I think my daughter Lucy will especially like you,” the old woman said, walking out of the room.

Confused, Al sat up. He suddenly found that he was very thirsty, so he drank the tea the old woman had left. The warmth it brought him added to what he already felt, but that was alright. He left the room and began walking down the hall.

When he was almost to the bathroom, a cat strutted around the corner of the hallway. Strangely, it looked like the cat that he had seen the night before. Al crouched down in front of it. The cat, glad to have some attention, walked up to Al and began rubbing against his legs. Al, as if in a daze, reached down and examined the cat's collar. It read Lucy. Isn't that her daughter's name? Al thought.

Al entered the bathroom. The bath, to his surprise, had already been filled with water. He undressed and got in. For some reason, he began to feel extremely drowsy. Not only this, but the water kept getting warmer. It seemed like the more tired Al got, the warmer the water was. Finally, Al could no longer resist, and fell asleep.

Down the hall, the old woman turned the heat up. Lucy and the others will definitely love him, she thought to herself cheerily.

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Chapter 71

“Dark Winds”

*Wolfen Lee McKoy
Leland, North Carolina, USA*

A harsh northern wind blew, wiping its wet back between the buildings, like so many eels. Mists gathered on the pines, whispering crystalline secrets of the winter to come. While life in the harbor went on, the people of Innsbrock were ignorant, because old things were rising. Dead things.

Almost all were hidden indoors, away from the foul, portent-riddled breeze. That is except for the group that gathered near an old oak tree by the shore. Dressed all in black, they bade farewell to their beloved leader.

A flash of steel, the red of blood.
And then the deed was done.

And so those dressed in black once more found themselves lost, the carriers of secrets gifts that they had not expected, least of all wanted. Some sang in voices discordant, and another let out a long howl, like a wolf. Another yet said nothing but to murmur a silent prayer, knowing what was to come.

For a while, these people returned to their normal lives. Secretly, though, they worried about the dread forces which were rising. They had been told that whatever had been awoken, good or bad, the world would never be the same. For some, they bore the knowledge that they never would be human again. Their essence had been forever and irrevocably changed, and soon, the whole world would know. The old powers were returning, magic revenant, but none knew why.

As their song ended, the waves watched in with numberless eyes. The currents shifted, tugging at the sea floor. The ocean heaved, and a sphere of clear crystal washed up on the shore.

And on that grey November day,
a passerby strayed.

A child, borne upon that fair providence of youth, a reckless curiosity. He carried it home, ignorant of the great forces with which he had come to play a part. Within a week, he would find that he had strange new abilities. However, all those to which he showed his powers would be found dead shortly thereafter. But the torment wouldn't stop there... Even after their departure, his dear friends would visit him, screaming, tearing at his mind with ethereal fingers. They cursed him, telling him to make the pain end, to give them their bodies back. All the while, the grey winds laughed.

At the university, a fire awoke in the dark. What was thought to be a fossilized remnant of a dinosaur egg was actually much more. It harkened back to a forgotten past, where the old magics still wrought great and terrible things upon the earth. The young dragon set the basement afire, and flew away into the clouded skies.

It was on the twenty fifth of November when the bodies began to rise. They rose from graves, from morgues, from where they lay undiscovered in their homes. However, it was those who had not risen who were the most dangerous, for they were powerful enough to assume the form of a wraith. Many of the citizens of the town fled, or huddled in their homes. Most of those that stayed were those too elderly or weak to go elsewhere, and they were already well acquainted with the thought of death. To them, they were simply fated to die, for they could feel the coming doom. Day by day, the waters ascended, wrapping its cold fingers around the town, choking it.

But all was not lost. The dragon had brought his fire with Heaven, and with it his warning. It came to pass then that the archangel Michael summoned his forces, and made ready to march on that place called Earth, where dark forces were gathering. He wept for the children of God. For while they were granted new powers, the cost was dire. They were being remade, sometimes into creatures not even human, and not even God still held the key to fix it. His son's sacrifice, it seemed, had been in vain. His creation was forever marred, not by that angel Lucifer, but by a much older force. Hell's fires held wrath, but it did not compare to the insanity which the old gods brought, for Hell brought redemption, in time. Eternity was not quite so long. Even a man cursed to the farthest icy bowels of Hell's chambers could be brought back to God's glory, if he repented. However, once he was lost to the madness of the Old Ones, there was no hope.

Hope, though, had its own secret power. Hope looked to the future, and in that, one might draw upon it, and shape it. God, above all, wanted Man to be able to shape and govern his world. Magic had been in ages past the supreme way that his dreams might take shape in the corporeal form, but something had happened. It made God think back to days ere the other gods such as him had died, before the world had been reborn in fire. He remembered also how Sutyr, the god of fire had corrupted his fair angel Lucifer, and God's only choice had been to cast him into Sutyr's realm, forever a tempter and tester of Man. Here, he took on Sutyr's name, and was known as the Satyr - Satan. Although they were powerful, these forces were not evil in themselves. Their goals were simply in conflict with those of God's vision for this new world. However, that being which had been reawakened in the dark, the being whose sole purpose was to bring about ruin, it came much closer to being called "evil".

With ancient bells, oh hath Death's knell
cast fair Micheal into Hell.

An angel almost never dies. However, in the town of Innsbrock, where all the world seemed amiss, the death of Micheal was witnessed. Ground zero for the war between Heaven, Hell, and whatever forces still lie dormant within the earth, Innsbrock would become a battlefield. From there, great waves would course over the world, bringing with them magic. but magic comes at a great price. However, a prophecy foretold of a man who was neither man nor beast. His coming was heralded, and things were set into motion for his arrival.

But demons and gods were not the only ones who would set their wills against him. An ancient order of the Magnari still waited, holding secret meetings throughout the world, sometimes even within the shadow of the Vatican. they knew that magic would return, and they prepared, for they knew that if they were patient, they would be great rulers of men once the dust settled.

These are the days when hope dies. For death follows life, and life death. All things must perish, to be reborn.

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Chapter 72

“Dead End”

*Melissa Blume
Clinton, Utah, USA*

It was a full moon on a cloudy night. Two best friends, arms linked, strolled through a corn maze. A single lamp in the middle of the maze barely lit their way. A slight breeze rustled the empty stalks.

“What was that?” gasped Melanie.

“Just the wind,” answered Danika, “Do you want to go back? Seriously, I don’t want you to have nightmares over this.”

“No, it’s okay, I can get over it. I just wish I could be more like you. You don’t scare as easily as I do. Every little sound makes me jump.”

“To tell you the truth, I’m a little jittery myself, but just think of it as a fun thing to do; something to get us away from all that homework.”

“That’s true. I just don’t like walking around in the dark not knowing if anything else is out there.

The girls went silent, grasping each other’s arms for comfort. Danika stopped, looked at Melanie with compassion, and drew her into a hug. She could feel her trembling like a newborn kitten. Danika was Melanie’s best friend, and Melanie knew she could count on her to be there for her no matter what. Danika felt sorry for her; Melanie had such tender emotions.

“Melanie, it’s okay. It’s just us in a maze, doing something out of the ordinary. We’ll be fine, I promise.”

Danika pulled out of the hug. Melanie nodded her head, still trembling, and linked Danika’s arm again. She thought of a few of her favorite songs, and began to sing:

“When I am down, and oh, my soul, so weary; When troubles come, and my heart burdened be...”

Danika smiled, silently agreeing with Melanie that music would calm her nerves. She joined in with her high soprano.

“Then I am still, and wait here in the silence, until you come and sit awhile with me.”

A girl's scream rang in the distance. Melanie abruptly stopped, nearly causing Danika to trip.

"Danika, we need to go back. Now!" Melanie's voice was shaky with panic.

"Hey, it's probably just some stupid kids playing pranks. It's okay." Danika tried to sound soothing. They resumed their singing.

"You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains; you raise me up to wa-"

"No! Please! Leave me alone!" the girl's voice sent a chill down Danika's spine. They walked faster, turning down a new path.

Melanie was terrified now. That sounded nothing like a prank. The girl sounded genuinely hurt. Something was following her, and Melanie wanted out of the maze. She walked faster; completely unaware of anything at all. She couldn't feel anything. It was like her mind was no longer in control, as if her body had become a puppet, and her fear was the puppet master. In her daze, she didn't hear the footsteps behind her, nor the intense rustling of corn stalks closing in.

"Melanie!"

Melanie snapped out of her reverie. She was at a dead end. Danika was gone. Where did she go? How long had she been walking by herself? What was happening? Melanie heard a grunt behind her. Covering her eyes with her hands, she turned around.

"Danika, this isn't funny. Come on, please come back."

Slowly, she peeked through her fingers.

"Danika? Are you there?"

Nothing.

Melanie felt something push her. Her legs started running on their own. She was turning, turning, turning, not knowing where she was going, as long as it was to an exit. Her mind was void of any thought other than finding Danika and getting out of the maze. She could see the light from the solitary lamp post getting brighter, closer. She wasn't anywhere close to the end. Melanie tripped; face planting herself on something soft. Breathing heavily, Melanie looked behind her. She had flown over a mound of freshly dug dirt. Still on her hands and knees, she felt skin, hair, something warm and wet. She glanced all around her. She was in a pit. Melanie could feel the adrenaline wearing off, so she leaned down, trying to focus better on what was inside the pit. She noticed something familiar...she got as close as she dared, squinting her eyes to see better...

"Danika?" she gasped.

Slowly, she looked up.

A man, silhouetted by the lamp post, stood in the pit carved out of the middle of the maze. Something gleamed in his hand.

A young girl's scream was heard throughout the maze.

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Chapter 73

“At the Movies”

*Pamela K. Kinney
Chesterfield, Virginia, USA*

The mummy dragged its foot as it came closer and closer.

“Oh God, Chessie, you spilt your drink in my lap!”

Shushes filled the theater. Chessie cringed as her sister leaped to her feet, her seat banging loudly as it hit the back. More shushes.

“I’m sorry, Jan. I’ll grab some paper towels from the restroom.”

Chessie jumped out of her seat and bolted out of the theater into the lobby. She raced into the women’s restroom and tore a handful of paper towels from a dispenser on the wall, soaking one with water. Back in the theater, she shoved them at her soda-soaked sister. Jan’s boyfriend, Bill, snorted with amusement.

Chessie sank into her seat. “I’m sorry, Jan. That scene in ‘The Mummy’s Hand’ scared me.”

Bill shook his head as Jan pat-dried her pants.

“You’re such an idiot, Chessie. I don’t know why Jan had to bring you.”

Jan said, “Because my mother said I had to. If the freak here would get some friends then I wouldn’t have to take her with us.” She glared at her sister. “She’s such a loser that no one likes her.”

Chessie stared at the big screen and willed herself not to cry. She watched the mummy stalk a pretty girl in a long dress that apparently was some reincarnation of a dead Egyptian princess. She hadn’t wanted to spend part of her Halloween watching some dumb classic horror movie at the Majestic Theater anyway. Even if the costume she wore was a mummy. Strips of white cloth made the cheapest costume, or so her mother told her. She’d wanted to be a vampire or something way cooler, but no, she got to be a stupid mummy instead.

Because Jan had taken her to her middle school’s Halloween party, she let her sister bullied her to see the film afterwards. Bill and Jan rather have gone to see some gory horror flick at the Regal Cinema near them, but Mom told her no, because of Chessie. Mom had seen the Majestic, a second-run movie theater, was holding a Halloween Classic Horror Film Festival. Her mother

had picked 'The Mummy's Hand' being early enough to get Chessie home before eleven o'clock.

Worse, she couldn't eat any of the treats from the bag of candy she'd gotten at the party. Because she was scared one of the workers might see her munching on it, she hid it beneath her costume. It made her look like she had a pot belly.

"Aw crap, this ain't workin'," whined Bill. "Who cares about some old, cheesy black and white film about a mummy covered in dirty rags? There's no gore. Let's go over to my house and we can either play video games on my PlayStation or listen to some music CDs. Or better yet, watch some Halloween stuff on TV. I think they got 'Hellraiser' on one of the channels." He stood. Jan joined him, throwing the bunch of paper towels wadded up into a big ball at Chessie. Bill leaned over and dug under Chessie's costume, snatching a chocolate bar from the hidden bag. "And Chessie, you not invited, either."

Chessie huddled deeper into the seat as Jan and Bill headed to the back of the theater. She'd be damned if she let even one tear fall.

"I'm going to finish watching the movie, Jan. I'll head home after it ends. Don't worry about me."

"Like you even would," she mumbled under her breath.

The girl watched the film, pretending interest and after a while, found the movie not half bad. No one dare push the mummy around. Actually, no one ever push any of the monsters around. If some human tried, the monster either ate or killed the dummy! Chessie thought how she'd like to be like the mummy, big, scary, and taking nothing from no one.

I wish I could be an undead mummy. Then let my sister and everyone else try anything. I would . . . rip their heads off!

That's when she noticed something odd about the film. The creature suddenly changed direction and picking up speed, looked like it headed for the audience. Which was absurd.

Chessie sat up. In another second the scene would change and the mummy would be back on track, attacking the movie victim it had been stalking.

But in slow motion, as if time had slowed down, the monster tore through the screen and landed on her. A musty odor shoved up her nostrils as she stared up at the bandaged face, noticing twin red lights. Not lights—had to be the mummy's eyes. The mustiness changed to a cloying perfume that drifted into her nose and mouth. The mummy placed a bandage hand around her throat and began to squeeze. Her heart pounding inside her chest, she began to thrash as she tried to throw up the creature. She couldn't understand why no one came to her aid.

Chessie screamed, wetting herself.

As suddenly as she'd been attacked, she found herself standing on her feet, her scream fading in the theater and others telling her to be quiet. She touched her throat and rubbed it, but it didn't

feel bruised. The perfume smell had disappeared. A glance at the movie screen and she saw the mummy back in the movie.

Embarrassed, Chessie raced out of the theater, keeping her eyes glued to the floor so she wouldn't see the pity and anger in everyone's eyes. Once again, she had been nothing more than a moron and a wuss. And she peed in her pants like a baby! She'd let her imagination get the better of her.

She took her bag of candy out and carrying it, walked away from the theater. After a while, the lights of downtown became darkened streets of homes. The only light—other than street lamps—came from the full moon riding the night sky like a bright diamond against black velvet. Its creamy whiteness grew even more brilliant, almost blinding her. She took her eyes away and focused, determined to get home where she could hide in her room and pig out on candy.

Out of nowhere, pain slammed into her. The bag of candy fell from stiffened fingers to the sidewalk. Raging heat washed over her. She screamed, clawing at the bandages covering her face. The agony grew so unbearable that she dropped to her knees and crawled over to the edge of the sidewalk next to the street and rolled over onto her back. The moon shone at her eyes, diamond-sharp in its brilliance. The light burned and she wanted to cover her eyes, but couldn't move her hands or any other part of her body. Suddenly, her vision went black. The pain gone, instead her eyes felt soothing cold. She rolled over onto her stomach and stood. Still blind though. Her arms stuck out in front, taking one step, then another; suddenly she stumbled into a wall.

A wall? There'd been no wall that she remembered. One side had held fences and lawns of homes, the other was the street. She pressed her hand against the 'wall' and felt the surface give. Not made of brick or anything a wall might be made of. Where was she?

She called out. "Hello?" Her hello came out like a growl.

What the—?

She whipped around and yelled.

"Arrrgghhh."

"Shoot it! Shoot that thing!"

Her vision returned. Two men, one with a gun, stood before her. A woman with long black hair and in a long dress hovered behind them. Fear masked the men's faces, but not the woman's. Chessie took noticed that the people's clothing were with black, white or gray. That's when she saw everything around her, the woods—woods?—had no color, looking like a black and white movie.

The woman held out her arms. "Klaris!" She took a couple of steps, but the man without a gun grabbed her. She struggled in his arms.

“Shoot the mummy!” he yelled at the other man. “She thinks she’s some long dead Egyptian princess.”

What’s going on here? And why couldn’t she speak, only uttering growls?

Something zipped past her. Oh God. The man with the gun. . . he was shooting at her for real!

She wanted to turn tail and run. Only she lurched forward, dragging her one foot behind her.

Like the mummy in the old movie. She couldn’t make herself stop either. Just keep making for the men and the woman. Worse, the man with the gun kept shooting at her.

This has to be a nightmare.

Her foot struck a rock in her path. It hurt.

No, not a nightmare, but real. She remembered the wish she had made, that she could be like the mummy. But wishes are the stuff of fairytales and can’t come true.

This one appears to, otherwise explain being a mummy in a forties film.

Please, please, please. I wish to be a normal girl again.

The light appeared, blinding her, and then her eyesight returned. She stared down at her hands and saw normal hands of a girl. Checking herself over, she found that her fake mummy bandages vanished and she wore a long dress instead.

On hearing gunshots, she looked up and saw the mummy lurching toward her and the men. Sweat beaded her forehead and her heart began to beat against her chest.

She’d gotten her wish. Human again, but this time the wish made her Anaka. She moaned. She was going to die unless she wished again. This time, word it right.

Just as Chessie opened her mouth to wish, the air grew hot. She glanced up at the sky and saw fire the colors of a burning pumpkin blazing across it. The tang of smoldering celluloid filled the air. She coughed. The cough switched to a scream as fire danced across her arms and crackled in her hair. Pain clawed along her nerves.

She screamed.

The next morning, the theater manager at the Majestic found the back door ajar. Worried that someone had broken in to steal, he rushed inside, only to find nothing disturbed. Not until he entered the projection room. He bent over to pick up the strip of a film, ‘The Mummy’s Hand,’ lying on the floor, blackened and withered.

Halloween pranksters?

But why just that film and nothing else burned or stolen?

With a sigh, he tossed the entire ruined film into the trash and walked away. He paused for a moment, listening, and then shook his head. His own imagination had been playing tricks with him lately, making him think that he heard ghostly voices in the old theater.

There was no one else in the building but him. And the only ghosts came from the old films he showed here.

*

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Chapter 74

“Monster Bash”

*Jason Mueller and C.L. Foster
North Judson, Indiana/Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA*

Drac was frantically running about very worried. His annual Halloween Monster Bash was turning out horribly! Many guests had not yet arrived in attempts at being fashionably late and the other guests were just sitting in awkward silence, lost in their own little worlds. Why wasn't anyone talking or dancing? Was it bad music? Doesn't everyone like Culture Club? Surely they can find common ground and mingle like they have each year Drac had thrown this little soiree, but now they were acting like they were at some social gathering for outcasts.

The place was a mess already! Cups and plates were everywhere and the remains of Frank's wife, Elizabeth's confetti and glitter concoction were littered all over everything. Evil woman! Being Franky's "Bride" for so long made her do stupid things. How dare she get Drac all covered in the tiny shards of sparkly things? Did she not know that vampires are virile and strong and should never be glittery? Really *I am not a sissy, for crying out loud!* he wanted to scream at her. Women!

And his carpet, his beautiful carpet! Blast that minion for dropping his favorite chafing dish full of Lil Smokies and BBQ sauce. Drac had asked that Renfield hire some help, but the least he could do would be to find some people with adequate knowledge of party service and proper balance. Was that asking too much? Seriously. He so loved the whole BBQ sauce thing since it reminded everyone of blood and who doesn't like tiny finger-foods? It looked like a bowl full of appendages and, truly, theme is important at those types of things, but now his flooring looked like a blood and sparkle contest or some grotesque art sloshed across his antique rug. The carpet matched Drac's feelings about the evening so far.

Drac took pride in his castle and especially wanted to make a statement for this particular year. Special occasions aren't typically celebrated among this sort of crowd, but Drac appreciated the longevity of his annual shindig and 50-years was a nice number. Half of a century of enjoying the same company could either be completely boring or thrilling, depending on the host and setting, so Drac always put his best foot forward.

“Do you really want to hurt me?” Drac grinned to himself realizing the lyrics were so apropos for this particular bunch of guests.

Every year he put out the finest cobwebs and spiders - if he could get Renfield to stop eating them. He also had the cemetery out back spruced up and imported exotic ravens so that at the end they could all enjoy a raven releasing party. Nothing but the best for his prestigious guests!

Although, if those damned birds pluck out any eyes this year it would be the last year he ordered those Chinese crows!

The kicker this year so far was that Wolfy was already drunk on Mad Dog 20/20 and he was hiking his leg and piddling on everything in sight. To make matters even worse, he tried humping the Phantom's leg. Oh how he had a French snit! No wonder they didn't like him there at that opera house in Paris and Christine had broken up with him! *Really that guy is kind of high maintenance, so I don't blame her really*, Drac chuckled half-hearted as he headed into the castle kitchen to check on those wretched new minions that Renfield had hired. It's not that he had a problem with wretched, in fact he rather liked wretched, but when they started dropping his best chafing dishes and ruining his favorite day of the year, it just rubbed his fangs the wrong way.

The kitchen was bustling and everything looked in order. Finally, something was going right! With a toothy smile, he started to make his way back to the living room, to continue his hosting duties.

Ding, ding, ding, DOOOOONNNNGGGG. "Ahh, another guest!" he announced to everyone as he clapped his hands happily and glided to the massive door to greet his newest guests.

"Velcome vriends" his best Southern drawl fluttered toward the door as he opened it with a bow.

Drac snarled as he overheard Wolfy ask Swampy, "Why's he talking like that?"

A frightened look was smeared across the face of a boy wearing a Transylvanian Pizza Palace uniform shirt. "Umm, that will be fifteen dollars sir."

Drac glared at the slouchy form of the pint-sized irritation at his door. "I'm sorry, but I believe you have the wrong house, my dear boy," Drac seethed.

"I ordered it Drac, let the boy in." Griffin, the Invisible Man, slurred in his ear.

Drac hated it when Griff snuck up on him, once when they were kids Griff had snuck up and stuck a clove of garlic down his shorts and had laughed himself silly as Drac frantically tried to pull the clove out of his underwear before he repulsed himself right into oblivion. Drac had given him a little bite in return but Griff ran home and told his mother and she called Drac's mother who was so mad that she fed him an Irish man for supper.

"Fine," Drac said as stalked away in a huff, trying not to sulk when he overheard Griff tell the young man, "Come on in and meet my friend, Wolfy!"

At this Drac's fangs came out and it was everything he could do to not bite that delivery boy or tell Griff where to stick it, but being the gracious host as always, he kept it to himself. *The more, the merrier*, he supposed. Realizing that no one had bothered to shut the door he went back indignantly, but it was lost on the others. As he shut the door, he turned around and slipped on something wet on the floor. *Really Swampy!? This is not the Black Lagoon! Must you drip all over the place? What if someone falls? What if they sue? My homeowner's insurance is already astronomical!* That would ruin his party in a big way.

Well, at least things are picking up a little bit now, Drac mused as he took a seat and surveyed the room silently. Griff and the pizza boy looked like they had some kind of herbs in a baggie. Drac absently hoped it wasn't wolfsbane or something illegal like that. Wolfy was slow dancing with Elizabeth now. *No more Sade on the playlist,* he decided. The Stein's were an unlikely couple, most folks thought that Frank wasn't all that into girls and she well, she was a bit on the loose side and it had nothing to do with her stitching, but even with their differences they still managed to keep up appearances.

Phantom and Swampy were now over by the fireplace playing quarters and it was hard to tell who was winning. Mummy was shambling toward them with a piece of toilet paper dragging along. Drac chuckled to himself as he perched on his new sectional that he was hoping at least someone would notice or mention. He suddenly regretted his choice of seats while trying to ignore the dampness soaking through his pants. He kept the look of alarm from his face and he quickly stood and discreetly examined the damage while hoping that Swampy had sat here before and it wasn't more of Wolfy's marking. His maid service bill was going to be ridiculous this week.

He looked over at Wolfy and Elizabeth contemplating the issue their closeness was going to cause. He watched, stunned as she dirty danced with him and then broke out doing the Wobble. *This is not going to be good. Seriously can Wolfy be anymore of a dog?* he cringed. If Frank saw this, there would be Hell to pay.

I wish the rest of the guest would get here. With a gleeful smirk, he thought about the swag bags he had to give out when the party was over. What an epic finale to the night!

The evening went on and everyone seemed to be having a good time and more guests had arrived and the party was in full swing. Wolfy and Elizabeth disappeared. Since Wolfy shed everywhere and Drac was a little allergic to animal dander, he had just anticipated and taken a Claritin before the party to ease his symptoms. *Where have they disappeared to now? I hope they aren't in my bed,* he grouched.

Dr. Death was chatting up one of the wretched minion chicks. The good doctor was always doing something droll and rather commonly so it didn't really surprise Drac. The Wild Woman was flirty with Phantom. She was really laying it on thick and trying to get him to go home with her so she could find out what really awaited behind the mask. The dreadful delivery boy was in a twenty-minute lip lock with Paula Clayton Reed. Drac shuddered, *Man, that is one Weird Woman!*

Three hours later everything was winding down. Guests were beginning to head for the door where Drac stood proudly with a stack of swag bags ready to be passed out in thanks to everyone for coming and making it a lovely evening. Even though things weren't perfect, the party was still a huge success.

A few of the monsters had been a bit of an embarrassment. Wolfy was still not back with Elizabeth. *Thank the heavens Griff is invisible,* Drac thought, glancing over to where the man lay face down on his beautiful BBQ-stained carpet covered in glitter and sauce with his pants down

around his ankles. Apparently Mummy had snuck up behind Griff and depantsed him. Griff then tripped over his own pants and fell to the floor where he promptly passed out, good ol Mummy!

Dr. Death walked out with a smile and nod. A swag bag in one hand and the minion in the other. Drac learned her name was Susan, *That sounds familiar for some reason*, Drac pondered momentarily.

Suddenly, a commotion broke out as the rest of the guest snatched their swag bags out of Drac's hand and ran out the door.

“Noooooooooo, you can’t do this to me, you can’t leave me for him! What will people think? I will be the laughing-stock of the country club,” Frank wailed with tears running down his cheeks, sending sparks as the drops hit his neck bolts.

“Frank, you know I’ve been miserable and falling to pieces for a long time, you don’t excite me anymore. Wolfy makes me want to howl at the moon, you don’t do that for me anymore! I hate to drop this on you like this, but I’ve known for a long time that I wanted to have Wolfy’s litter. It’s over Frank. Goodbye.” With that the new couple grabbed their swag bags and was out the door without another word. Drac watched the two head for Wolfy’s VW MiniBus, he rolled his eyes as Wolfy marked every tree and bush on the way, it got really ugly when Elizabeth tried to mark a bush also. *She’s doing it wrong. Bless her heart.*

Frank was a blubbering mess. Everyone was gone now leaving Drac to deal with the heartbroken sap. It was more likely that Frank was embarrassed that an upper-class guy like himself would be dumped by a has-been like Elizabeth.

Drac made Frank a cup of peppermint tea, knowing that the big man would end up with a headache, like he always did after a good cry. Peppermint tea always seemed to help calm Frank down. For such a big guy, Frank really was a fragile and genteel soul.

Drac sat down on another spot on the sectional and again found a wet spot. He touched the spot and sniffed his finger. *Ugh, it wasn't Swampy, it was Wolfy!* he mused disgustedly. He sat, stirring his own cup of peppermint tea and stared off into space wondering to himself what next year might bring.

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Chapter 75

“Monsters In White”

*Devin Berglund
Brisbane, Queensland, Australia*

Where am I? I can't move! She looked down at leather straps holding her hands to the table. The memories flashed across her mind of men and women holding her down. They poked and prodded her with sharp silver instruments. Some also injected her with insulin which had thrown her into a coma. Rows of empty surgical beds filled the room. She breathed deeply, *How am I going to get out of this?*

The doors flung open as two nurses rushed into the room with a squeaky wheeled silver table. They hastily pushed it to the foot of her bed. The large machine to the right of Claudia squeaked and beeped. One nurse was writing on a clipboard. The scratching noise of the pen meeting the paper sent Claudia squirming. *I doubt she knows how much louder things like that are for me compared to her.* Claudia wrinkled her eyebrows wishing the screeching pain from the noise would leave.

“It took three months for this one to come around...” The one with the clipboard spoke to the red head.

“We should start the third stage test on her.” Said the red head while she bulged Claudia’s vein by tying an elastic band around her arm.

“The arm straps are still tight, right?”

“Oh don’t worry! She should be weak, still.” The redhead smiled.

I won't let them do it again, Claudia thought.

The nurse turned to the table filled with a silver operating scalpels, tongs, and syringes. She picked up a long thick needle and stabbed it into a vile of bubbly chemical and drew it into the syringe.

“This chemical will have a severe affect on her.” The nurse with the clipboard giggled.

Claudia’s heart raced while pumping faster as adrenaline filled her muscles with strength. The red head came at her with the syringe, Claudia’s eyes stretched open wide with fear. She started shaking as her instinctive defensive nature took control over her - she ripped her hands free of the restraints. The other nurse screamed into the walkie-talkie for help and then assisted the redhead to try force Claudia back onto the table. Claudia pushed one nurse away and grabbed the

redhead by the throat. The other nurse ran out the doors. Claudia's heart raced as she squeezed the woman's throat and watched the life drain from the nurse's face and then dropped her to the ground. Mixed emotion filled Claudia's heart as compassion flashed through her eyes. *I didn't want to kill her, but she was going to hurt me.* Cuts, bruises, and burn marks were scattered all over her body. She got up and knocked down a locked door on the opposite side of the hall. She ran to the end of the narrow hallway and turned right into another passage. She entered the first door on the left. *It must be the storage room.* The slightest sound made her jump as low rumbles and high pitched barks echoed through the passageways. She hid behind some boxes stacked in the corner.

Leaning over in pain, she sat down while whispering a song her mother had sung to her.

"Hush little baby... don't you cry... Momma's going to buy you a mockingbird." The floodgates of her eyes opened. Footsteps echoed on the ground in her hallway. The men yelled as the dogs barked. They opened the door, while the light from their torches leaked into the room reflecting off the damp floor and walls.

"I don't see her in here!" a male nurse spoke to the other two while the dogs were barking and jumping up and down on the wardrobe's door.

"Is she in there?" The other pointed his plastic glove covered hand in that direction.

"Stupid dogs...No, that is where Test subject 48's remains are kept, besides this room is filled with wolfsbane," the first man replied.

Test 48? Who is that? She thought as the nurses and dogs made their way back into the hallway. Claudia's heart beat faster as she pushed herself upwards. Everything went foggy as she grabbed onto the wardrobe, that the dogs had been barking at, for support. She fell forward on all fours after realizing she had accidentally pushed opened the wardrobe's door.

Why am I feeling so sick? She thought while her memories started answering her own questions. *It is wolfsbane!* She thought back to how at one time the vases of pretty purple-blue flowers held her to the bed stronger than the wrist restraints. To an outsider's eye it may have seemed like a few visitors had dropped off some flowers for her, but it wasn't from a visitor, as she had never had one. She couldn't stop sneezing as her eyes watered, her airways started closing, and her strength became nonexistent.

"It seems to be working." One doctor spoke. Another doctor quietly spoke with a nurse and pointed at her notes on the clipboard.

Several doctors stood above her and stared. One doctor with giant black-rimmed glasses pressed a silver bullet into her waist. She could feel it burning. Her skin made sizzling noises upon contact with the silver. She screamed and howled as her back arched off the table. Beads of sweat poured down her forehead.

"Please! You're hurting me! I am not a bad person!"

Another doctor answered, "You? You are no person!" The doctors laughed as tears dripped from

the corners of her eyes.

“Dr. Frankenstein, can I have a second opinion?” the doctor with glasses asked.

“Yes, you may!” the man looked up from the clipboard and sat down next to him.

Even now the scar on her waist hurt just thinking about it. Inside the wardrobe doors, test jars and tubes filled the shelves. Body parts floated inside them.

A heart floated in some clear liquid inside the largest jar. Claudia leaned in closer to inspect the heart. Something looked strange - a silver bullet was lodged inside the heart. Her stomach jolted as she slammed the doors of the wardrobe shut in disgust.

I need to get out of here, the wolfsbane is making me weak, she thought while crawling to the door. She paused when she felt wetness on her knee. Looking down she couldn't see what it was in the dark, but it burned. She pulled the door open while crawling into the hallway. She stood up and leaned against the brick wall. She breathed in deeply and saw the blood dripping from her knee. But why does it burn my skin just like the silver had? After rubbing the blood off with her nightgown. Silver specks shown in the low light. Oh no! it looks like this might be test subject 48's blood. They must have filled her bloodstream with silver and it must have caused a lot of pain, so they shot her. Such a high dose of silver would kill any werewolf in the matter of seconds. She closed her eyes while holding her breath, which cleared her senses. The throbbing pain in her head disappeared.

I have to get it together. Let me see, which way did they go? Claudia raised her nose in the direction she heard them and breathed in deeply. She couldn't smell them, but she could definitely hear them ahead of her. They must be using the anti-werewolf scent serum, which prevents me from smelling them. She tip toed past different cell doors, but one caught her attention. Inside a giant man with bolts in his neck and stitches in his skin moaned at her and dragged his leg toward her. He pointed in the direction they went.

“I am sorry they have done this to you, too.” Claudia spoke, “They've been torturing us.” The big man nodded his head in agreement.

“Thank you for your help! I hope that you get out of here soon, I would help you if I could, but I must go!” she was met with a smile. *I never knew something so huge and ugly could have such a kind smile.*

“Bye!” she waved. She walked toward a door leading to a spiral staircase. Moonlight shown through the narrow windows lighting up the stairwell. *Not much longer now, She thought. After reaching the top she pushed the door open. Before stepping out she looked both ways and then stepped into the hallway. This is near the front door. I remember walking down this hallway when I was admitted.*

The cool air bit at her bare ankles, as she tip toed down the white washed corridor stretching out in front of her toward the exit door. She moved at a quick pace past the thick iron doors leading to some padded rooms, the laundry room, and the cafeteria. Her nose twitched at the overwhelming smell of antiseptic and chemicals. She jumped and stood in a fearful stance while

suspiciously averting her red eyes from one end of the hallway to the other - just to make sure no one was watching her. She raised her finger to her mouth and bit on her knuckle anxiously while breathing deeply. She continued forward to an office area and on the front of the desk a sign read "Nurses Station". No one was there at the moment.

Claudia sighed deeply. *Is this for real? Am I escaping?* She thought as she made silent leaps toward the door and pushed on it. The thick steel door didn't budge.

"Oh crap!" She yelled.

She ran to the nurses station. She shuffled through drawers piled with papers and personal items. Pulling another one open to find a huge ring of keys. *Yes!* A breeze blew the blinds away from the barbed windows, filling the room with moonlight momentarily. Her fingers thicken and her fingernails lengthen. She dropped the keys.

"No, not just yet!" She said while clumsily picking up the keys. "The dogs have her scent, she is this way!" she heard yelling echoing through the hallways close by.

She ran to the door and tried the first key. It didn't work, so she stuck the next one in. After a few that didn't work she fumbled to try the last one. Panic set in as the growling pack of dogs rushed around the corner leading the mob of doctors and nurses.

"She is trying to escape!" the doctor with the wide rimmed glasses screamed while pointing at her.

"Get the silver bullets." Another one yelled.

She pushed the last key into the hole without complication. It fit perfectly. She twisted the key, time slowed down as a doctor stopped running and lifted a rifle toward her. The door clicked. She pushed the heavy door open and ran into the yard enclosed by a huge black iron gate.

"She won't be able to get out." Doctor Frankenstein yelled.

Claudia felt like the sun was warming her soul, except it was night. She ran toward the gate - the moon's gentle beams settled her anxious nerves as she leapt over the gate. She landed on all fours, but they were no longer her useless clumsy human limbs. Instead they were her furry paws that she'd choose over feet and hands any day. Turning she growled and then bolted into the forest. *Freedom!*

"No! Open the gates..." the Doctor with the glasses yelled, "Send the dogs after her!" They opened the gate, but the dogs cowered in fear.

"Stupid dogs!" he kicked the dog closest to him.

"Dr. Frankenstein, what are we going to do now? She was our only hope to figuring out the werewolf infestation."

Dr. Frankenstein looked up and frowned, "We have to call into action Plan B, call the werewolf

hunters. She won't be safe for long. They will find her and then..." He grinned evilly, "We will finally find a way to exterminate their race." he stared at the full moon as a long deep howl echoed through the surrounding mountains.

*

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Chapter 76

“Eidolon Hunter”

*Rob Holliday
Georgetown, Texas, USA*

William hungered as he watched from the wood line. His pulsed quickened as The Ache Inside confirmed he'd quench his desire tonight.

You've been good, you've been patient, William. You deserve your reward. Reap it. A smile smoothed across his face.

He locked his eyes on the house through the Bushnell binoculars, the directional microphone telling him the story unfolding within the house.

“Jilly, you're in charge tonight, you're a big girl now.”

“I know, Mooom, I turn 13 next week,” the daughter quipped.

“Oh, don't we know it, honey. There's some dinner in the fridge for you and Theo, it's ready to go, just cold cuts and stuff. Theo?”

A small voice returned, “Yes, momma?”

“Come on down, buddy, Daddy and I are getting ready to go.”

“Aww, mom, I've got Bink out of his cage, he hasn't had anytime out today.”

“Bring him with you and come down, please.”

Quick and light feet bumped down the stairs. “See, Mom, he's happy now.”

“Theo, that's fine, honey. Now, you two listen to me. You can answer the door for the trick-or-treaters. Keep the lights on when you answer the door and no one comes inside.”

Except me. The smile broadened even more as his tongue snaked over his lips.

“Yes, Mom, we get it. Don't let the Boogey Man get us, “the snark rolling off Jilly's tongue.

Oh, you're going to learn respect tonight, Jilly. Before I'm done, you'll be wanting to please me. And you'll beg me to taste your sweet spot but it won't do you any good, but you'll learn to be respectful.

“You’re such a smarty pants.” Laughter cut across the microphone.

“After the trick-or-treaters, can we watch a movie in the movie room?”

A different voice, a man. “You what? You want to watch a movie in MY movie room?” The kids all laughed, as their father ribbed them. “Yes, you can watch a movie. What are the rules?”

“We know, Dad, only watch, don’t touch your goofy stuff.”

“Goofy, huh? I’ll show you goofy.” More giggles and snorts. “Yes, you can watch a movie, just don’t call us because you’ve scared yourselves. We’re going across town and it’ll take us a bit to get home, so no crying wolf, got it?”

“Yes, sir,” the children in tandem.

“Alright, well, we’re going. You two have fun. Oh, and don’t forget to feed the pets. That was the agreement, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

William spied the garage door lifting from his perch and watched the parents’ departure.

About time.

He inventoried his kill bag- flex cuffs, braided wire, mallet and flooring nails. Night vision goggles with soft mount. Gerber pry bar, duct tape, gauze and rubber tubing. He unsheathed the polymer-gripped deer skinner at his belt. He admired the scalpel-honed blade, ending in a beveled hook at the top. The voices from the house brought him back from his crimson envisioned evening.

“You hungry yet?”

I am, Jilly.

“No. Want to hold, Bink? Be careful, he’s a little molty.”

“Uh, no, he’s gross and I don’t want to hold you’re lizard. Whatcha wanna watch tonight?”

“He’s not just a lizard, he’s a bearded dragon. Sheesh, don’t you know anything about our pets. Do we have to watch one of those freaky ones you like?”

“Whyyyy? You gonna be scared?” the sister teased, her brother laughing.

“No, they’re just boring. Can I watch two since mine are short? I wanna watch “*Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman*”, Frankenstein and Wolf Man are epic.”

“Sure squirt. Oooh, wanna watch “*House of Horrors*” too? The Creeper is freaky!

“Ha! Yeah, that’s a good one. I was hoping you wouldn’t pick one with that overdone herky-jerky black-haired girl, those are stupid.

Go ahead, carry on. You two won’t be able to speak to each other after tonight, though you’re going to be together in ways you never imagined.

As the evening set in, William’s Ache grew, seeing the coltish blonde girl and her ginger brother greeting each trick-or-treater with no idea of what was to come. They dressed up too- the older girl, a candy corn witch *I know you wore that for me, you know you did* and the boy, a wizard. *You’re gonna squeal, little piggie, as I cut off those toes.* His palms glistened, his senses heightened, his Ache hardened.

The parade of goblins and superheroes dwindled and his time had come. He adjusted in his perch and put the earphones back on his head and scanned the house for them.

“You getting hungry, Teddy?” the sister asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to eat too much- can we have popcorn with the movies?”

“Sure. I’ll go get dinner and come back up and we can eat. Keep watching, okay?”

“Thanks, Sissy. Hey, remember we gotta feed the pets tonight or Mom and Dad are doing to make us get rid of them”

“Yeah, I know, we’ll do it in a little bit.”

William grabbed his bag and shimmied down from his perch. He inspected the area around him to ensure he left no trace.

He left the woods and crossed the street. He’d cased the house ever since seeing their picture in the paper in the city section, “*Wallace Family to Host Halloween Charity Ball*”. They looked idyllic.

Oh, I’ll smash that picture tonight. There’s no safe place, not with me in the dark, in the shadows.

William moved to the back of the house and let his ears adjust. He heard muffled starlet screams from the movies in the upstairs room. He peeked through a window. The refrigerator light shone dimly, casting the girl’s silhouette, highlighting her body against her cotton gown.

You dirty little whore, you got ready for me, I see.

Jilly turned abruptly and he snapped back and held his breath. He heard her talking, hoping it wasn’t a call to the parents or police.

“I know babies, here’s a little snack. When I come back, I promise, Teddy and I will feed you.”

Dogs inside. He felt for his small chloroform bottle and shook it, the capsules winking against the glass. *Pop a couple of these and they’ll go down.*

He peeked back in and the kitchen was dark. He caught the swish of her gown as she turned up the stairs. *Go time.*

He moved to a sliding door and slipped the pry bar under the jam, lifted, flicked the catch with his knife. The door slid open. He turned on his goggles, bathing his view in green glow. He scanned the room, *no animals*. Satisfied, he slid the door closed and angled for the stairs.

When he mounted the stair landing, the TV glow from down the hall told him his prey was near at hand. *You're gonna love it, Jilly, when I stuff it in while Theo watches.* He calmed himself and pushed the door open.

Jilly and Theo sat eating, watching the movie, not noticing William in the doorway.

“Hello, meat pies.”

The children jumped up and reeled back away from the voice in the doorway.

“Please, don’t get up. Love the gown, Jilly, go ahead pull it up and show Willie what you've been dying to show me.

Theo came from behind his sister’s shielding body, “Mister, you better leave or you’ll be sorry.”

William unsheathed the skinner, “Nah, I don’t think so. I’m gonna have a good time tonight. Starting with you, Theo.”

The two children looked at each other, their look of surprise turned to something else. They looked back at William, a familiar look in their eyes. He knew the look. It was the look of predators.

Jilly looked past William, “Get him, babies.”

William turned and saw three diminutive sets of eyes below knee height, eyeshine glowing in the hallway. “What is this, attack of the Chihuahuas? How ‘bout if I slice and dice them to go with the cold cuts?” he guffawed, turning back and moving toward them. His face went dead. “No more games.”

Jilly menaced, “No, no more games.”

A shadow fell across the children, William in its penumbra. He turned back to see a shadow with crimson eyes *five sets of eyes?* looming above him. It crashed down upon him, sending him into the darkness.

*

“Wake up, mister.”

William woke, laying on concrete, his arms and legs secured in cruciform by his own braided wire.

William glanced around, his mind searching but still foggy in the candlelight. Shadows on the wall with scarlet eyes stared back at him, their mouths jagged maws. He twisted his head, counting at least eight sets of eyes. His breath grew ragged and panicked.

“What, what the hell... what the hell are those?” He jerked at the wire with little effect. “You let me go right now and I’ll let you...”

Theo shushed him, crouching down beside him, “Mister, I warned you to get out of here.”

Jilly came over and squatted down on the other side of William. “You see, William, you think you’re the scary thing in the dark. But you see, you’re *not*. Remember when you were a kid, and everybody said there’s no such thing as monsters in the dark, they’re just shadows. Well, that’s not true. What most kids don’t know is those shadows, those monsters that *are* in the dark, once you embrace them, they’re the best protection we have against real monsters, like you”

She sniffed at his face a bit, “You stink, William. My babies smelled you in the woods for the past week and they’ve been chomping at the bit to get a hold of you.” She stood back up. “Theo, let them off their leashes.”

“Can I, Sissy? Thanks!” Theo gathered the candles and headed toward a door, Jilly joining him. She looked back at William, “You should never have come after children, William. Go ahead, Theo.”

The boy grinned and began blowing out the candles, one by one, the beasts circling closer with each extinguished flame. William whipped his head back and forth, “Please, I... I understand now. I’ll... I’ll go confess--”.

“No, no, mister, now none of that,” Theo tsked, as he picked up the second to last candle. “And for what you said out there in the woods, *I’m* gonna have Beatrice start with *your* little piggies.”

Theo blew it out and a shadow emerged from the wall near William’s feet and set upon his legs. William gasped as the darkness inched upward, arterial spray misting the room in black.

“Goodnight, mister. Don’t let the monsters get you. Oops, too late,” Theo snickered. “Eat up, babies, make him all gones.” With a wink, Theo blew out the last candle, plunging the room into pitch.

The last things of William’s life were crimson eyes, the mirthful growls of a pack ripping into fresh prey and agony.

*

“Should we wake them?”

“Nah, they’re comfortable. And look at them, they’re so sweet cuddled like that on the couch.”

“Okay, well, let’s at least turn off the TV. Oh wait, before you do, let me get this candle over here.”

Their mother lit a candle and as their father turned off the TV. He noticed the movies lying about. He laughed softly, “They do love these old movies.”

She chuckled, “They love monsters.” The candle cast soft light about the room. Anywhere the light cast a shadow laid a slumbering beast. One craned its head and thumped a tail.

“Did my babies have a good night?” More shadowed heads popped up, sleepy fuschia eyes slitting open, the whisper of ethereal tail wags. Theo and Jilly stirred on the couch. The boy’s whisper fell into her ear, “Hi, mama”.

“Hi, sweet boy. Did the babies get fed?”

As Theo nodded, Jilly turned toward her mother, “Yep, they sure did. They’re nice and full.”

“Good. Good night, sweeties.” Their parents turned to leave.

In tandem, “Good night.” Falling back asleep, Theo requested, “Momma, you can blow out the candle, we don’t mind the dark.”

*

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Chapter 77

“Just a Deer”

*Rylee Hales
Utah, USA*

I walked out of the cabin into the cold night of the forest that surrounded me. The trees had just begun to change colors and fall off their branches onto the side of the road. Every step I took I could hear the crunch of leaves under my boots.

Wrapping my coat around me, I followed the gravel road to my Aunt's house on the other side of the woods. As I walked, I could smell smoke coming from a campfire somewhere in the distance. I could hear crickets and the light of the full moon shined on the pathway. I kept walking, deep in thought.

Suddenly, the sound of a small branch broke from behind me, causing me to turn around with a sudden jerk. I saw no one in the distance; though, I was positive I could hear someone breathing.

Just a deer, I told myself and kept walking, deeper into the forest.

I listened to the sounds around me for any kind of noise, but nothing happened. I shook it off and kept walking.

The second I relaxed, a noise came from behind me again. I breathed in with a gasp, but not loud enough for anyone to hear. I could hear shoes of some ones feet dragging against the leaves, crunching under their feet. Whoever it was, walking was slow, and the feeling was sinister and cold.

I made a quick decision and jerked my head around, but again, I found no on in the distance. The shuffling of leaves hushed, coming to a stop. The second I saw leaves in the middle of the road move, I turned back to walking, pretending to ignore. But again, instantly the steps of an unknown being began creeping behind me. The steps began to walk fast.

I could see the dirt pathway to my Aunt's house and I began to run. Still hearing the footsteps behind me, they began to run as well. This part of the forest was dark with barely any light and I strained my eyes to see where I was going.

A shadow moved across the path in front of me. My heart pounded and I stopped ready to turn around and run back. Another shadow, which could've been the same one, passed across the road behind me too.

I hesitated. My Aunt's house was closer. No one would hear me if I didn't get close enough. So I ran again, towards my Aunt's home. The clouds moved in the sky, shining moon light onto the path. I kept running with all my strength. With one glimpse into the forest I saw many other figures. This time there were at least four. Human, but with no face.

"You've got to be kidding me," I breathed.

So that's how it's going to be? I thought.

I ran harder. The other side of the forest had just as many shadows from what I could see. I was surrounded. As I looked back to the pathway, a bus, which kept getting taller, began to block my path. Weird, I thought.

There was no way I was going to make it in time. I was too far away.

I slowed down and started to head back to find another direction. Then, all around me these hedges grew higher around me covering my way. I stopped in the center, breathing heavily.

I was trapped; there seemed to be no way out. The shadowy figures began to get closer. Their figures seemed to transform and it looked as if they were crawling. I didn't understand what was going on. Before I knew it, I was surrounded; and they definitely were not human.

They crawled like dogs, on all four legs. Their bodies were full of hair and they snarled at me, saliva dripping from their mouths. I knew exactly what they were.

Then the wolves pounced.

It all happened within seconds, but the next thing I know, I'm wrestling beasts. I threw my hands out in front of me hitting one animal in the jaw. I could hear a loud cracking sound. Claws dug into my back and slashed on my arms. Blood covered me everywhere. But I kept fighting.

Their growls filled my ears. I heard someone scream. It could have been me, though I'm not sure. My body ached everytime I moved, but I couldn't stop. I wouldn't stop.

I slashed, punched, and kicked whenever I could. I dug my nails in the side of one wolf's neck, before his comrades nails did the same to my shoulder. That time, I knew the scream was mine. The pain went through my entire body and I could feel the blood run down my back.

And then, something hard hit the back of my head, and the world began to spin all around me.

With a sudden, swift, yet hard movement, I was lying on my back. Claws held my legs and arms against the floor of the forest. I could barely move. They still snarled at me as I layed there, helpless. The world still spun around me.

It took me a moment to realize that someone was whistling in the near distance. I could tell it was getting closer.

"Heal," the familiar voice said.

It was a woman, I could tell that much, but I didn't understand why she sounded so familiar.

"Heal," she said again. This time the dogs obeyed and relaxed their grip on my body.

The moon was hidden behind clouds, and when she stepped towards me, her boots within touching distance, I couldn't see who she was. I could tell she was small, her hair ran down to her waist, and her fingers were long. The crazy thing was, she still seemed familiar, even though I couldn't see her face; I just couldn't place it.

"Look what you've done," she accused. I couldn't tell if she was talking to me or if she was talking to the wolves.

They seemed to move everytime she spoke. As if they were waiting for a certain command. *She's the Alpha*, I thought. *What is going on?*

"Well, you've gotten yourself into a big mess," she said, kneeling closer to me.

Her head seemed to move up and down me, as if she were examining what happened, though I could not see her eyes.

She stood up and put her hands on her waist. "Damon," she said. Her voice was strong and the wolf next to me, holding my left hand to the ground, tensed. His head moved to the direction where she stood. "Let it be done."

The wolf, obviously named Damon, turned his head back towards me, snarling. As he barked, he leaned in and bit my neck; faster than I could blink. I could feel a warmth run down my chest; pain shot through my body.

It all happened so fast, but suddenly, I could see the clouds in the sky move, revealing the moon. Light came down into the forest, illuminating everything. My vision began to blur as I looked up to the woman standing before me. The shadows fell from her face and I could see who she was. Her image blurred a little, but at that moment, I knew exactly who she was.

The last thing I saw was the golden eyes of the dog biting me, a hint of a smile twitched on the side of my Aunt's face, and the full moon on that cold Halloween night, as all went black.

*

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Chapter 78

The End ~ Thank You!

Let us, the collective group of writers, thank everyone for your support of this Halloween Anthology.

We hope that we've given you some horror tales that'll have you 'looking under the bed', 'seeing creepy shadows', and 'hearing the whispering voices'.

Don't be *too* afraid ...

Until next time ...

“Hal L. O’ween”

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